

Dragon Queen Book One: Mating Call

by

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Freya's Bower.com ©2006

Culver City, CA

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Editor: Marci Baun

ISBN: 1-934069-39-6

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P.O. Box 4897
Culver City, CA 90231-4897

Printed in The United States of America

Chapter One

“You’re the *evil* twin!”

“We’re not twins.”

“Facts have nothing to do with it,” Cora muttered into the hammering beat of an industrial song she didn’t recognize. Trapped by a crush of bodies, fishnet and velvet limbs thrashing to the music, she silently cursed her sister Diane. As the good sister, Cora wouldn’t have hauled Diane off to a day spa with full-body waxing. She wouldn’t have dreamed of making the whole affair a mother-daughters outing, either. Only an evil twin could conceive of that kind of torture, and then top it off with an excursion to a solstice masquerade so pretentious the air itself bordered on velveteen.

Cora leaned close to say as much, but something caught Diane’s attention, and she melted away into the velvet crowd. Cora tried to follow, but the music surged and the crowd boiled up with it, pinning her against the padded wall at her back. She clutched the stem of her wine glass and sought refuge in the dark and dimpled upholstery, which covered every wall in the Manhattan flat and transformed the private residence into a hellish imitation of a nightclub. The wall fabric reflected the strobe lights, and Cora couldn’t focus her eyes.

She finished her wine and broke away from the wall to search out a bathroom. Cora had just established herself at the end of a snaking line when Diane resurfaced. She shouted something Cora didn’t catch, grabbed her hand and dragged her through a curtain of synthetic cobweb. They emerged into a kitchen. Cinnamon and alcohol permeated the air, but the acoustics of the building’s architecture made the kitchen a small pocket of blessed quiet. Well, almost-quiet: she could still hear the music, but she could hear herself think for a change as well.

Inside the kitchen, half a dozen masked figures stood around a stainless steel island, watching an attractive Asian man, himself sans mask, lean over a wooden pasta bowl. A dark shock of hair fell over his eyes, which were intent upon the bowl’s contents.

“He’s reading their fortunes,” Diane said in a stage whisper. “Greg Cho. He’s the *best* reader.”

“What’s he reading?” she asked beneath her breath, noting the lack of palms, tarot cards, and teapots. Those were the tools diviners used when she still traveled in these circles. Diane shushed her, and Cora edged closer for a better view. She glimpsed a half-empty bottle of Goldschlager between elbows.

As she drew up to the table, a slender man wearing a spandex cat suit and feathered domino wordlessly reached for the bottle and poured a measure of liquid into an empty bowl. He pushed it into Cora’s hands. She accepted it automatically, glancing down into a swirl of gold flecks and a waft of sharp cinnamon. On the other side of the cobweb, the music shifted from metal to house.

“I see the hawk in your life,” the Asian man said. His accent was very neutral East Coast. He glanced up at a woman in red velvet and a leather bodice, devil horns peeking from her gold-glittered hair. “The hawk is Horus’s symbol, among other things. Jealousy as well.”

The devil shot a look to her left, eyes narrowed on a very angelic blonde woman. She didn't say anything, but that look gave it all away. Cora watched Greg Cho absorb the cues that came his way. He ducked his head over the bowl again and went on. "You're insecure about the extremity of your opposite natures."

"What else?" the devil asked.

He shrugged and pushed the bowl aside. "Nothing else. Your flakes were very specifically concentrated. There's only one message there."

"Gold flakes?" Cora murmured. "Isn't that a little more appropriate for a jock party?"

"Need beer foam residue for that," Diane replied.

"But what can be done about her jealousy?" The blonde, this time.

"You could go to a counselor."

A murmur of laughter made its way around the table. Cora ignored it and focused on Greg Cho instead. She didn't detect so much as a hint of insincerity or charlatanism in his manner. Still, he made her uneasy—or, rather, the divination made her uneasy.

Somebody else pushed a bowl toward him, but Greg shook his head. "I want to see hers." He looked directly at Cora.

His eyes were shockingly intense blue. She hadn't expected those eyes, nor had she expected to be singled out.

"Just observing." She offered her bowl to Diane. "You can take it."

"Not hers, yours," Greg said.

Cora flushed, realizing everyone in the kitchen was watching her. Even with her own mask, a gold foil thing encrusted with faux pearls, she felt exposed.

"Not interested," she insisted and slid the bowl onto the table. Some alcohol sloshed over the edge, and cinnamon blossomed anew.

Greg silently reached for her discard and pulled it close. Cora frowned.

"Don't you need permission for that or something?" she asked sharply. "I said I'm not interested." She spent enough time with her monsters in bed and wasn't about to welcome them out.

"I am, though." Greg turned the bowl in his hands, ignoring the murmurs of interest making their way around the table.

"Nobody else is, Greg," Diane interjected. She moved up to his side and drew a lock of black hair away from his temple, winding it around her index finger. "We all know where to find you when we decide we want you."

“But you never decide you do.” Greg reached to pour the Goldschlager into a basin set in the island.

“You don’t really want me,” Diane said. “Not enough. If you did, you’d have me.”

Cora eyed her sister, who even looked the part of the evil twin, right down to the “seductress” part. She was torn between dismay at her situation, 31 years old and relying on her little sister to defend her against the big bad man, and relief that Diane’s interference worked.

“Yes, I would,” he answered.

“Mmm.” Diane released his hair. Cora glanced at Greg’s face and into his eyes a second time. Something in them made her breath skip. Arousal settled itself over wariness.

“Flirt another time, Di. The rest of us need to convince him to continue reading despite the denial of his heart’s desire,” a man’s voice interrupted. Cora welcomed the opportunity to look away from Greg. She placed the voice with an amused figure garbed in peacock shades and a green-feathered mask. “I, for example, have deep and pressing concerns that can only be addressed with the aid of just such a seer as our Mr. Cho.”

“Drink up and give over, then,” Greg said. The peacock complied. The atmosphere changed tangibly once Greg’s attention focused elsewhere.

“Drinks are a good idea,” Diane announced, returning to Cora’s side. “Let’s go convince the bartender that pink umbrellas really do have a place at this party.”

“You only come to these events to exercise your persuasive skills.” Happy to put Greg Cho behind her, literally as well as figuratively, Cora ducked through the cobweb curtain and into the crowd. The mood had changed since she entered the kitchen a mere few minutes ago. Trance took center stage, and instead of thrashing, the partygoers were swaying together in sinuous tangles of black and jewel tones.

“What was that all about?”

“What, Greg?” Diane sidled up to the bar. Dark, polished cherry gleamed in strange patterns beneath the strobes. “He runs a little place in Chinatown. Oriental medicines, fortunetelling. I think an acupuncturist comes in once a week.”

“So does every other incense-peddler in the city. How’s that make him the main event tonight?”

“You know how these things go. Every season has a new novelty.” To the bar service she said, “Two of your pinkest drinks. With extra umbrellas.”

“And this season it revolves around drunken fortunetelling.” Cora rolled her eyes. “I’ve been away just long enough. Everything seems ridiculous all over again.”

“You’ve simply never developed a fine appreciation for the ridiculous. Your absurd is my high entertainment.”

“I—”

Diane moved away, calling over her shoulder, “I see someone I need to talk to. Drink one for me, would you?”

I wish I still understood it, she finished silently to herself. Disinterested in Diane's pink drinks, she turned away and ran into a muscular chest. She muttered "sorry" reflexively and tried to retreat, but he slid one arm firmly around her waist and held her immobile against his body.

"I have the best luck," he said above her head.

Cora looked up into Greg's eyes. Her stomach lurched. "I apparently have the worst."

"You will if you push me away without asking questions first." His arms tightened. "See that man over there? With the executioner-style hood and the...good, you do see him."

Greg drew her away from the bar, giving her a choice of remaining stiff and resistant, or falling. Reflex kicked in once more, and she slid her arms around his neck.

"What about him?" she asked, annoyed.

"He's been watching you the entire time you were at the bar."

"All thirty seconds? That's not watching; it's glancing."

"Trust me. I'd give him another two minutes of watching before he approached."

"...and?"

"And unless you're into dungeons and cat-o'-nines, I don't think you want him to approach. He won't take no from you," Greg said against her ear, "but he wouldn't dare ignore it from me. Relax."

He led her out of the din of music and into a smaller room, still crowded but shielded from the noise by yet another padded wall.

"Well, I'm safe now," Cora said when they turned the corner. She pushed against his shoulders, attempting to break his hold. "Thanks for the heroics, but I don't need a white knight."

Especially not a white knight with a talent for spotting the hawks in a woman's psyche. Cora remembered the way the woman with devil horns had jerked when Greg gave her reading, and she cringed to imagine her own inner heart bared to entertain a crowd.

"I'm trying to figure out how I can start over with you. Do you believe in second chances?"

"Look," Cora said abruptly. "I'm not here because I believe in the powers of the dark or even any powers at all. I don't own a deck of Tarot cards or keep an altar in my spare bedroom. This isn't my kind of gathering. I'd appreciate it if you don't assume I'm okay with invasive readings. If you're curious about me, ask me questions." She took a breath, surprised at her own forcefulness, and finished with, "Consider this your second chance."

"Thank you." He loosened his hold on her waist. "Ready for my first question?"

She nodded. Greg ducked his head and smiled against her temple. "Do you always find the most obnoxious freak in a gallery of freaks?"

She couldn't ignore the good humor in his voice and smiled. "Why start small?"

"For the same reason you dip your toes into a pool instead of leaping in headfirst. So you can make an informed decision before you commit."

"I'm not interested in commitment." No commitment, but she wasn't completely against the idea of re-establishing her sex life. Greg was warm and solid. It felt good to embrace him. "Nothing more long term than a dance."

"Sensible woman." He moved them in an uncomplicated step, a lazy shuffling circle most often found at high school proms during the slow songs. Cora appreciated the easy movement and its low-pressure intimacy. Her ears also appreciated the muffling of music. She could hear him breathe if she tucked her face into the curve of his throat.

"An anomaly, though," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I thought sensible women didn't wear red dresses."

Cora laughed. "Old wives' tale...every woman should own and wear at least one red dress."

"Why's that?"

"It's clinically proven that a woman in a red dress has more conversations at social events than a woman not in a red dress."

"So a red dress is a man-catching tool?"

"A red dress is a *networking* tool." She had to fight to keep her smile under wraps and maintain a prim façade.

"Networking involves an exchange of names. Usually an exchange of business cards as well."

"I'm fresh out of business cards," she said, surprised at how much fun she was having now that she had established some ground rules. She finally let the smile out. "I could write my number in lipstick on your shirt collar."

He dipped his head and kissed her so suddenly that Cora stopped dancing altogether. She didn't have time to react, even if she had a reaction in mind besides dumbfounded gaping, because as quickly as the kiss begun, it ended. Her enjoyment ended much the same way.

"You're not wearing any lipstick," he said, touching her bottom lip with one finger, "so I presume you don't have any in your bag and I have no chance of a phone number."

"I should slap you and tell you any chance you might've had before is gone now." The indignation in her voice wasn't contrived. She didn't like surprises.

"You should tell me your name because I like you."

When she didn't answer immediately, he drew her close again and resumed dancing as if nothing had

happened. Cora chose to move with him rather than compound the awkwardness by stumbling.

“Pendant for falling into the arms of obnoxious men,” he said. “If I were a gentleman, I’d deliver you to somebody who could rescue you from me.”

And if she were smart, Cora knew she should excuse herself and work on regaining some composure. Before she could do so, a high-pitched bell rang out from the breast pocket of his jacket. He loosened his hold and extracted a pager long enough to check the number.

“I hope your own short-term commitment sensibilities mean you won’t take it personally if I excuse myself,” he said.

That threw her off all over again. She shrugged, hoping it came across as nonchalant. “Of course not.”

He drew a business card from the pocket of his jacket, soft leather she had touched only moments earlier. “What’s your name?”

“Cora.”

“Cora.” He smiled, took her hand, and pressed the card against her palm. “Call me.”

“I’m only in the city until January,” she said.

“My phone will work up to and through January. Call,” he said again and put his hands in his pockets. “We’ll talk. Over lunch or over coffee or over anything you’d care to talk over. Perhaps about your name.”

Greg grinned. “You look far too charming to leave, but I do need to run. Will you be all right here? Would you like me to see you out?”

She considered his offer. His ability to turn flirtation into an extreme sport gave her pause, but it thrilled her as well. There was something to be said for fantasy, and she could definitely see herself playing the naïve lady to his devilish womanizer. It would be very romance-novel. Altogether, she could make worse decisions in choosing the company of a man.

“I’ll stay a bit longer, even though I’m sure I’ll pay for it later,” she said finally. “Thank you, though. And maybe I’ll call.”

“If ‘maybe’ is all you’ll give, I’ll keep my fingers crossed. Goodnight, Cora.” He touched her shoulder, a brief and politely intimate farewell, and walked away.

She fingered the edge of his business card until he was out of sight before glancing at the type. Gregory Cho, proprietor of an apothecary in Chinatown, was, she decided, worth pursuing. She tucked his card into the little patent red leather clutch she carried. The bag’s only other contents were a \$100 bill, her driver’s license and cell phone, and a string of condoms, pressed upon her by Diane before they left for this get-together.

Armed with the adventurous woman’s survival kit and Greg’s phone number, she rejoined the crowd. Her shrinking-violet shroud had vanished. A little smile clung to her lips. Tomorrow, she might even convince Greg to invite her to dinner.

Chapter Two

The next day, Cora's mother and sister ganged up on her a second time and hauled her off to The Spa Part Two: the Torture Continues. The dialogue hadn't changed between Part One and Part Two.

"You can't sleep anyway," Diane reasoned, while she and Cora were stretched supine on side-by-side massage tables, "so why toss and turn in bed when you could be dancing? My neighbor a few floors down is hosting. You can leave whenever you want and don't have to worry about a cab."

"I went out with you last night. Would it be such a waste of an evening to stay in with rented movies and boxes of chocolate and gossip about everybody we know?"

"You do that when you don't have any other options. Tonight we have options."

Cora could think of a dozen reasons why she would rather be in bed not sleeping than at a party not sleeping. She didn't get a chance to voice them before her mother, enjoying the full-body treatment on Cora's other side, seconded the motion.

"I think a party would be absolutely lovely. Where else can a woman meet a man? And, honestly, you really *do* need to find a man. Or three, for that matter. Cora, darling, you're on a quest *to rediscover* yourself and rediscovering yourself includes rediscovering your sexuality. Diane, tell your sister to find a man. She never listens to me."

Cora cringed into the terrycloth pillow beneath her head. Miranda Phillips was the socialite's socialite. "Glad I'm not paying either of you for professional advice."

Diplomatic Diane cleared her throat. "She met a man last night."

Cora groaned. "Would you two stop?"

"What? I'm concerned about my daughters. Diane can't decide whether she prefers men or women. Not that I care one way or the other, but honestly Diane, make up your mind. And Cora, you don't go out at all anymore. Not since the fire."

"Don't get into that, Ma," Diane said.

Cora pressed her face harder into the pillow. Every conversation had to come back to that in one way or another. She would give her right arm for life in a silent film, even if only for a little while.

"Music does have a healing quality," Diane said, steering the topic back to socializing and away from psychoanalyzing. "I've said it before. It has a way of finding the beat in your soul and bringing it back into alignment when it's lost its own rhythm."

"This from the woman who, not 24 hours earlier, entertained herself with vapid witticisms and pink drinks?"

"Diane, you *didn't*."

Diane groaned. "Didn't what?"

"Behave like that in public."

"Like what?"

"Catty. I taught both my daughters better than that. Catty is for private, gracious is for public, regardless the company you're keeping."

"I've heard the music you listen to," Cora mumbled dryly into the pillow after Diane and Miranda stopped going back and forth. "Trance seems more likely to put me to sleep than to enliven my soul."

"Different music for different illnesses," Diane countered.

"Forget the music and tell me about the man."

"You're ruining my massage," Cora complained.

Miranda snorted. "Many things in life are better than massages. Orgasms are one of them. Tell me about the man."

Cora sighed. "I wouldn't exactly call him a man."

"Either he has a penis or he doesn't."

"Ma!"

"What? It's biology."

Cora shifted so she could glare at Diane, who shot back an innocent, wide-eyed, "what do you want me to do about it?" look.

"Make her stop," Cora mouthed.

Diane pantomimed cutting her throat and hooked a thumb in Miranda's direction. She raised her eyebrows to punctuate it as a question. Diane's masseuse coughed. He may have thought it amusing, but Cora gave the suggestion a moment of serious consideration.

Miranda was not only a socialite, but also a witch. Somewhere along the way (around the time New Age and alternative religions came in vogue) she had decided that, as an inherited witch rather than a self-styled witch, she should approach life in a manner suiting her heritage. Her big thing right now was an obsession with marrying her daughters off properly and breeding them true, and Cora felt like she was trapped in a medieval novel on the thankfully rare occasion she had to spend lengths of time alone with her.

Keeping Miranda's snobbish regard for station in mind, Cora shifted once more and looked at her mother sidelong. "He was performing party tricks in the kitchen when I met him," she said. "Using Goldschlager as a tea substitute and reading guests' gold flakes."

Miranda flinched. "Diane, doesn't the set have any class these days?"

“Fun and games, Mother,” Diane murmured.

The hairs on Cora’s arms stood on end. She could feel Diane’s glare on the back of her head. Well, so what. Diane was ready to throw her to the wolves at that party and she had no qualms about throwing her to the Mother Wolf while Cora was helpless and naked save a white towel. Diane deserved a little of the heat herself.

Miranda huffed. “I can see my concern for your future is unwelcome. I only ask, Diane, that you refrain from allowing your sister to get involved with some common poseur.”

“Christ, Ma—”

“Coraline!” A horrified Miranda jerked up, clutching her towel to her chest. “When did you start using language like that?”

Cora’s mouth tightened and she sat up as well, gathering her towel and swinging her legs off the massage table. “You know very well when. I respect your beliefs. You should do me the courtesy of respecting mine.”

She slid off the table before Miranda could gather the sense to do the same and made a dash for the door. She knew Miranda wouldn’t follow her back to the spa’s showers. Cora had gotten to the dramatic exit first, and Miranda wouldn’t take second-best for dramatics. That suited Cora fine. She wanted to escape her mother, anyway, not move the issue to another location.

The shower wasn’t far enough. Cora didn’t linger over scrubbing massage oil from her skin and hair. She finished the shower, dressed, and left Diane a note explaining that she had to get away for some fresh air. *We’ll have dinner*, she wrote. To her relief, she managed to escape the spa before either Diane or Miranda caught up with her.

She plunged down the stairs to the first subway station she came to without bothering to read the sign. The flow of New York commuters carried her to the token booth, where she slid the woman behind the glass a \$20. Armed with enough tokens to carry her around the entire city and back again, she moved through the turnstiles and onto the waiting train just before its doors closed.

This isn’t running away, she told herself. It’s getting away. There’s a significant difference.

The train jolted into motion. Cora sandwiched herself into the crowd and latched onto a length of overhead handrail. She tried to rely on the rail more than her fellow passengers to keep herself steady. New York wasn’t like the metro in D.C., which was one of her only other public transportation experiences. In D.C., everybody on the subway became friends fast, figuring if they were going to be hanging off metal bars and practically spooning one another during rush hours, depending on the train route, then they should at least be willing to smile at one another. The MBTA in Boston was more like New York, with its passengers slanting sidelong glances and looking away again quickly when the object of their examination looked up.

Cora’s skin tingled. She raised her head a fraction despite knowing well that she wouldn’t find the person watching her. An expert train rider was reading a newspaper while hanging from the handrail, and a young couple nuzzled nose to nose, jostling and giggling. They weren’t paying attention to anything but themselves.

The young couple should have made her envious. They were happy and in love, cheeks and noses bright from the wind up on street level. The train hit a rough patch, and the young man caught his girlfriend around the waist to keep her upright. Nobody caught Cora. Instead, the passenger behind her lurched forward and jabbed her shoulder with the corner of a book.

She wasn't lonely, though. It didn't hurt to see people in love. She couldn't convince her mother that she was happy as a single, successful woman. Between her friends and casual dating, she had everything she wanted. If Miranda really wanted to help, she'd focus on curing Cora's insomnia.

Hell, she could even live with the insomnia if Miranda had a weapon to use against the dragons that terrorized her when she did manage to sleep.

The tingling of being watched didn't abate. Cora shuffled around so she was facing the other direction, toward the end of the train, and peered around the bend of her elbow. As she shifted, the train began to slow in anticipation of the next stop. A polished woman in a black wool peacoat, one of the lucky few who had boarded when a seat was available, flipped her notebook computer closed and tucked it away into a briefcase-style bag. The teenager sitting thigh-to-thigh with her stopped perusing his CD collection and tucked the vinyl case into the front pocket of his hoodie. An elderly couple jostled for position to peer at the sign tacked over the door. A dozen other people went about their business and not a single eye turned toward Cora.

She frowned at her paranoia. Spending time with Miranda and Diane had made her overly susceptible to suggestion. Cora had no more sensitivity to being watched than any other person. The slight chill she had taken was merely a result of cold air moving around in the train.

Still, she joined the crowd of exiting passengers shuffling toward the door as the train stopped and the doors chugged open. The station emptied out onto Canal Street. As soon as she hit the sidewalk, Chinatown rose up to greet her.

Chapter Three

Cora dug through her purse looking for a pair of sunglasses to protect her eyes from the few minutes of bright winter sunlight that remained in the day. She came across Greg Cho's business card during her search and frowned at the Canal Street address. Coincidences made her uneasy. She considered backtracking and returning to board the next train, but she remembered the sensation of being watched stayed her retreat. Besides, she didn't *have* to visit just because she was in the area.

Resolutely, Cora settled her sunglasses on her nose and checked her reflection in a seafood shop window. She grimaced at her hair, damp and flat from her shower. A large fish swam up and grimaced right back. Cora's stomach rumbled. She grinned at the timing. Chinatown would suit her for sightseeing and lunch.

Passersby talked back and forth in Chinese and English, flowing around Cora as she strolled past storefronts and street vendors. Glitter caught her eye, and she lingered in front of the display window for a jewelry store, where pearl and jade were the theme pieces. The proprietor wasn't afraid of setting the pieces in yellow gold, either, despite the current trend toward white gold.

An intricate collar caught her eye. She fanned her fingertips against the glass, trying to gauge the true size of the pearls featured in the design. As she tilted her head to get around the reflection of traffic blurring her view, she caught sight of a face transposed over her own. The second she noticed it, oval and dark with burning eyes, it disappeared. She didn't even have time to scream.

Cora whirled around, pressing her shoulders back against the window, and scanned the street. A few people gave her odd looks, but none of them stopped or slowed to indicate more than passing interest. Half a dozen children, bundled up in parkas and knit hats, ran past. They slowed when they caught up with a balloon vender near the subway entrance. The sensation of being watched returned in full force.

Driven by instinct alone, Cora hurried deeper into Chinatown, leaving the subway station behind. She passed grocers without so much as glancing at the stacks of fruit priced to go for a steal and dodged around a crowd gathered on a bakery's doorstep before she found what she was looking for and ducked into the building.

She came face to face with Greg and another man, both looking up upon her entrance. Greg stood behind a low counter covered with small colorful pots. He had a ceramic spoon in one hand and an ounce-sized jar in the other. Three other similar jars had already been filled with what looked like herbs, from where Cora stood. Greg's customer, a tall man with curling black hair pulled back in a ponytail, narrowed his eyes.

"Hello," Greg said, raising his eyebrows.

Cora flushed and stammered an apology, trying to gather her wits to take stock of the situation. She was obviously interrupting; the tiny shop didn't have room for more than three people, and fit two better. Three made it an intimate space, and there was no way Cora could retreat without leaving the shop altogether. She didn't want to leave, besides. The stranger and his intent visual inspection put her on edge, but the nerve-wracking sensation of being watched had vanished. His human eyes were easier to deal with than the glowing orbs in the window.

Neither man pointed out that she'd interrupted, but Cora could see it in the stranger's body language. He stepped away from the counter and drew himself to full height, which put him head and shoulders above both Greg and Cora. She tried not to stare, but he was fascinatingly, criminally beautiful. His face—full lips, strong jaw, perfect Roman nose, dark eyes framed by thick, spiky lashes—belonged on the pages of *People Magazine's* 50 Most Beautiful People edition. His attire, on the other hand, belonged on the broad shoulders of a wealthy mob boss. Cashmere overcoats, white silk shirts and camel hair trousers were the costumes of "neighborhood protectors" in those kung fu movies she only ever watched long enough to determine that they were, indeed, kung fu movies. Cora glanced at the counter to be sure she hadn't walked into the middle of a protection fee payment. No cash, good. She couldn't be killed as an accidental witness, at least. She looked back to the boss to find his gaze still fixed upon her.

"If you scheduled a late appointment," he said to Greg without looking away from Cora, "I suggest you cancel it."

She considered retreating, thought really hard about it. There weren't any mobsters outside, but there weren't any glowing nightmare eyes inside. Her nightmares frightened her more than the mob, she decided, and returned his narrow-eyed look with one of her own. Several smartass comments came to mind, but Cora imagined a big black gun tucked into a holster under his arm and decided she'd have less chance of getting shot with a defiant look than anything that might come out of her mouth.

"I hope you won't mind waiting a moment in the back," Greg said, rescuing her from embarrassing silence and certain death or both. He moved from behind the short counter and opened a mesh screen door that led to the back of the building. "I wouldn't want you to stand outside with the wind picking up and the sun going down," he explained, and ushered her through before his customer/exploiter could object. "Make yourself comfortable."

Greg left her alone in the back room, which resembled a living room more than an office or storage area. The room wasn't huge—big enough for a loveseat and a rocker, a low table and a bookcase—but it was warm and comfortably roomy. A single lamp provided soft light, tinted gold due to filtering through the lampshade. Another screen door led deeper into the building. Cora ventured in a few feet until she could make out the shadow of a banister that gave away the staircase on the other side of the door. Fabric rustled behind her. She jumped, whirling to catch a swish of curtain as Greg drew one across the screen that led into the shop. Frowning, she moved to mash her ear against the wall to hear what was so important that it warranted this much secrecy.

Greg and his guest must have moved to the front of the shop because Cora couldn't make out distinct words. She heard both men's voices as muffled murmurs and thought she heard "Is that her?" or something similar, but that was the extent of what she made out. It was enough to know she was the topic of conversation. Cora mentally kicked herself for not paying more attention to the exterior of the building. She would do well with an escape plan. For that matter she would be doing better if she hadn't come at all.

Cora bit her lips and hugged herself. She had no idea what she was doing here. Now that she was away from the street with its winking headlights and streetlamps sparking to life, she felt stupid. She had run from imagined glowing eyes to potential murder at the hands of a mob lackey. What possessed her to panic like that?

What would she tell Greg when he came back in and asked what she was doing here? "I was spooked by a shadow in a window" seemed silly, even to her. She said it out loud, mocking herself in a high ultra-feminine voice, just to reinforce the absurdity of her fear.

"Shadows are frightening things. My grandmother believed shadows were evil spirits. It's not an uncommon superstition," Greg said, twitching the curtain aside.

Cora jumped. He stood with the screen door propped open, one foot still in the main area of the store. "I'm going to lock up the front and I'll be right with you. Unless you'd rather go out?"

He asked the question as though it were perfectly normal that she had, not five minutes ago, burst unannounced into his place of business and interrupted a criminal transaction.

"I didn't mean to barge in like that," she confessed. Greg might be able to overlook her abrupt arrival, but Cora felt a need to make excuses for her behavior. "It was—"

"The shadows?"

As much as she wanted to deny that she ever did anything based on a shadow, Greg already knew the truth. He didn't seem to find it unusual at all, either.

"I was going to have dinner soon," he said, coming into the room and moving to turn on a tall lamp positioned in the corner. "Tomato soup and grilled cheese. I'm not a great cook. You're welcome to join me."

Cora watched him move around the room, lighting three more lamps and chasing the shadows away from the parameters. "I don't want to interrupt your evening any more than I already have."

"I don't call the unexpected company of a woman an interruption. More like a blessing. If you want to stay, I would enjoy your company. If you don't, I'll see you back to the train station and make sure you get on safely."

He shrugged out of the short, black satin robe he had been wearing when she came into the store, revealing jeans and a turtleneck beneath it. Cora chewed her bottom lip, trying not to remember the way his lips had felt on hers during their brief kiss the night before. She also tried to ignore the tiny shoot of desire sprouting up in her belly at the memory.

"Throughout the term of my mother's pregnancy with me," she said abruptly, "she bought 47 different lipsticks. The only one she found that she thought looked good with her pregnant-woman complexion was an orangey shade called 'coraline.'"

Greg gave her a bemused smile. "Women are complex. Are you legally Cora or Coraline?"

"Coraline. That reminds me of lipstick, though, so I prefer Cora."

"Well, Cora." He dropped the robe over the arm of the chair. "Shall it be dinner or an escort back to the train?"

Going back to the train meant she would have to go back to Diane's apartment, since she was staying with her sister for the next several weeks. It would also mean that she risked running out into an ambush set by the mob lackey/crime boss/whatever he was. Cora wasn't crazy about her prospects. Even if she survived the ambush, she would have to see her mother, almost guaranteed to be in attendance at Diane's.

"Dinner," she decided. "I'm starving." She moved to drop her handbag on the couch and unbuttoned her coat. "Not crazy about the tomato soup, though. Is it possible to get a pizza around here?"

"Have a seat and I'll see what I can find for you." Greg headed through the mystery door and up the stairs.

Cora listened to his footsteps as he moved around on the second floor, trying to imagine the layout of the upstairs apartment. It probably had another living room. This room, she decided, was too impersonal to be an actual living space. Greg had art on the walls, but no pictures. He had his work uniform draped over the arm of the chair, but no shoes kicked off just inside the door or paperback opened up pages-down on the coffee table. The books in the bookcase, titles covering topics such as European and Asian history, travel, and mythology, could have either been a reflection of his personal interests or his professional interests.

Everything she knew about him came down to his activities at the masquerade and his business, both of which named him some sort of mystic. She didn't know if he had any genuine talent, but he seemed to do well at parties and on the business front. Cora wasn't sure whether she preferred that his abilities be genuine or show. Miranda and Diane had genuine gifts, Miranda for Finding and Diane for Prediction. Cora didn't have talents in that vein, nor did she want them, but even in not wanting them, she didn't want to see the talented or their believers exploited by a charlatan. What if the mob fellow knew about Greg's talents and blackmailed him for protection?

“Vegetarian okay with you?” Greg called from upstairs.

Cora smiled wryly. Everybody had to eat, genuine talent or not. She moved over to the screen door and leaned into the stairwell so she wouldn't have to shout her affirmative answer. She peered up into the dark and froze before she could get the words out. A pair of eyes glowed at the top of the stairs, high near the ceiling, and her stomach turned to ice. Those were the eyes in the window out on the street.

Afraid to draw attention to herself, she hugged the banister and held her breath. The eyes didn't move. Cora didn't look into them. She squinted, trying to make out what was behind the eyes, but in the dark she couldn't define the shape of the background edges. Up until this point, she had entirely forgotten about being watched. The tingling didn't return to her skin, but she still couldn't look away from those eyes. They seemed to suck every available particle of light into their pupils, setting the yellow-hazel irises afire.

She eventually worked up the courage to breathe, and then to look into the eyes. Her heart thudded, but it remained steady and didn't diverge into the erratic pattern of panic. She shifted her weight to allow some light to move from behind her up into the stairwell, casting the eyes into a less black shadow, and she was able to make sense out of dimensions. The eyes weren't real; they were part of a flat wall hanging. Nothing was going to lunge down the stairs at her or hunt her down in the streets.

Cora sighed and sat on the bottom step. She called up to Greg, “Vegetarian's fine. Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Why'd you want to do a reading on me so bad that you nearly made a scene over it last night?”

Greg didn't answer immediately. Cora frowned at the delay. Delayed responses meant the person was thinking, preparing an answer, and that the answer therefore wouldn't be completely honest. A moment later, she heard his voice, muffled, probably finalizing the pizza order, and silently chastised herself. Automatic suspicion was uncharitable.

“Honestly?” Greg asked once he finished the pizza order. He came back to the stairs, carrying a tin pail.

Cora tilted her head back to see him. “Honestly.”

“I know who you are. I didn't mean that to come across that way,” he amended in a hurry when Cora frowned. “I mean that I know of your sister and your mother, and as a result of your background. I also know that you're almost never seen in the same circles as either of them. Everybody knows. Nobody knows why, though. When you showed up last night, it was an opportunity for me to find out.” He held up the pail. “I don't have champagne to go on ice. Will beer work?”

She nodded and decided to refrain from asking about the strange business she'd walked into earlier. The less she knew, the better, and the less curiosity she displayed, the less likely Greg would be put in position of having to kill her or something. Who knew how the mob dealt with people knowing their faces in the real world?

“Good.” He came downstairs, and Cora stood, returning to the sitting room.

Cora shuffled her coat and purse aside and sat in the corner of the couch. “I don't believe,” she said.

Greg raised his eyebrows. "In aspects of the talent?"

"In my own capacity for it. Some of the women in my family have it, some don't. I'm one who doesn't."

"Ahhh," he said, settling on the cushion beside her and fishing out a pair of beers. A question lingered on the edge of the sound but he didn't ask it.

Cora called him on it. "That explanation didn't satisfy your curiosity."

He smiled. "It opened up more questions."

"Such as?"

"Why you were there at all if you don't believe. I could have understood if you claimed living out of the city as an explanation."

"But you can't understand with a different answer?" She accepted a bottle when he offered it. "Never mind. I'm here because almost a year ago I technically died of smoke inhalation in a house fire. Ever since, Diane and my mother have been trying to convince me to revive my interest in faith."

"Why are you here trying now?"

Cora laughed. "You're like a two year old, with the why why why."

"You're beautiful. I'd like to know you. Anyone who's ever dabbled in high school journalism knows to ask the H and W questions."

Cora flushed at the compliment. The last time she had felt remotely pretty was New Year's Eve the previous year. The evening was wonderful, filled with good friends, great food, and forgettable drinks, which were, of course, the best kind of drinks. She'd taken a taxi home and promptly passed out. She woke up on a stretcher, rain on her face, and a firefighter administering CPR.

The months of nightmares, insomnia and depression that had followed the fire left her feeling like a troll. The depression had led to more close encounters with gourmet ice cream than with men, and her new size 18s told the tale.

She didn't say any of that to Greg. Instead, she tried to encapsulate. "Ever since the fire, I've had insomnia issues. Nightmares. Pretty common after a stressful event, if TV can be believed. I don't want to take depression meds, and I'm not thrilled with my psychiatrist's suggestion of hypnosis, so here I am trying the natural remedy of faith."

"Not much of a remedy if you don't have any."

Cora shrugged and crossed her legs. "Doesn't hurt to try, does it?"

"Not at all. Can I ask why you're opposed to hypnosis?"

"I watch TV. Hypnosis always ends with the patient committing murders and not knowing it, or the hypnotist smuggling cocaine in his target's underwear, or something. It seems shady to me."

Greg laughed. "But witchcraft and goddess worship doesn't?"

"No, that seems shady too." Cora smiled, glancing at him. "Since I grew up with those, though, they seem a little less over the top. It's a familiarity thing."

"What if you were more familiar with hypnosis?"

"What do you mean?"

"One of my services is hypnosis. My clients are interested in it for relaxation purposes, for motivational purposes, for memory recollection. I've helped several stop smoking through hypnotism."

Cora grimaced. "I don't think so."

"What if I promise not to put any heroin in your underwear?"

"Will you make sure my murder weapon matches my shoes?"

"Baby, I'll give you the classiest lead pipe in the city." Greg winked.

Cora smiled, but she didn't say yes or no. Despite Greg's charm, she still had misgivings about hypnosis, and it didn't all have roots in fictional drama. Part of her was afraid of what would she would reveal. Her psychiatrist had referred her to a handful of hypno-therapists, all of whom Cora rejected on grounds of not wanting any delicate family secrets to make it into the hands or notebooks of the ungifted. Even though the Phillips women didn't make a secret of their talents, Cora was unwilling to dish to the entire medical community about her mother's ability to locate things and her sister's ability to pick out impending disasters.

She didn't have a foundation for such fears with Greg, however. He already knew, and had his own talents to protect. Cora worried the inside of her lip, weighing the consequences of experimenting with him. She desperately wanted to sleep at night. If Greg could help her do that, where nobody else had been able to thus far, she would love him forever. Well—perhaps not literally. She would certainly appreciate it.

"How would you do it, if I agreed to become one of your clients?" Cora asked, making a decision.

"The actual presentation?"

"Yeah. Gold watches? You're getting sleepy? What?"

"It depends on the person. Some people respond well to eye fixation approaches. The gold watch," he explained when she started to ask.

"Other people?"

"Other people respond well to a soothing voice talking them to sleep. If you've ever taken a yoga class, it's something like the end of the class where you're stretched out and breathing and concentrating on the relaxation of every limb while the instructor tells you to breathe and direct oxygen into your toes."

"So if I decide to make an appointment with you, I should come dressed in a leotard," Cora quipped.

“However you can achieve maximum relaxation is how you should come.”

Cora thought he emphasized the last word, infusing it with sexual suggestion. She glanced at him sidelong, looking for a sign that he was alluding to intimacy. Greg sat relaxed against the back of the couch, one ankle on his knee and his beer bottle resting against his thigh. She skimmed his torso, trying not to think about the muscled lines of his abdomen, and met his eyes. She suddenly recalled the intensity of connection when she’d met his gaze at the party the night before.

“But how would you do it with me?” she asked, holding his gaze and feeling for the return of electricity at the edges of her awareness.

Greg’s lips quirked slightly. “Do you respond better to gentleness or forcefulness?” he asked.

“Depends on the situation.” The electric jolt finally came, sparking in her abdomen.

“I think you need soothing first in order to open you up to the possibilities of aggression.”

“So...gold watch?”

Greg nodded. “Or anything that you can focus on.”

He held up the bent, dull foil cap from his beer bottle and rolled it from finger to finger. “Doesn’t have to be shiny at all.”

Cora eyed the bottle cap, reminded of a grandfatherly coin trick. She couldn’t imagine something so simple as bouncing a bottle cap from knuckle to knuckle would put her to sleep, let alone cure her insomnia.

“While you focused,” Greg said, “I’d talk to you. Assure you that you’re perfectly safe, that my sole interest is in helping you. Promise you there won’t be any embarrassing scenes of clucking like a chicken.”

Cora imagined herself under his spell, and warmth spread through her body. She wasn’t sure she wanted to experience such ultimate vulnerability, more intimate than sex, with Greg, but she allowed herself to entertain the prospect. It would be a relief to tell somebody about her nightmares. She often lay awake in the middle of the night wishing she had somebody she could call, somebody who could tell her that the dreams of dragon fire charring her hair and skin were simply that—dreams. She wished somebody would assure her that he would be her knight, despite her defensive allusion to the contrary the night before. She needed somebody to slay the monster that kept her awake, that reminded her the fire had taken her once and could take her again at any moment. Maybe Greg really could do that for her.

“Not tonight, though.” Greg palmed the bottle cap, and the daydream of safety dissipated. Cora frowned at its absence. “We’ll make an appointment,” he said, “when you can come in expecting it. Besides, dinner’s here.”

Cora glanced toward the front of the shop. “How do you know? I didn’t hear anything.”

“You’re not used to the normal sounds.” Greg smiled sheepishly, pushing off the couch. “And I order a lot of pizza. I know my driver’s car.”

He headed into the front of the shop to head the delivery driver off. Cora sipped beer from her bottle

and tried to convince herself that food was a good thing. She needed time to get used to the idea of being Greg's client, and to weigh the consequences, before she decided. The delivery driver's interruption had saved her from impulsive decision-making. She should be thankful, rather than annoyed, at the interruption.

"Diane's trying to get me to a New Year's Eve party with her," Cora said when Greg returned. "A costume thing. It seems all her social events are in costume."

"Dress up is fun." Greg smiled. "I enjoy it when I get a chance."

"Do you know about the party?"

He nodded, sliding the pizza box on the table in front of the couch. "I'm not sure I'll be attending, however."

"Oh," she said, disappointed. "I'm not thrilled at the prospect, but Diane is pushing a social life on me while I'm here."

"You should go." He sat beside her and popped the box open. Fragrant steam, spicy with garlic, oregano and tomato, wafted from the box. "That's not about belief; it's about being with people. Might do you some good to be with people."

"I'll think about it," she said. "And about making an appointment with you."

"Good. Enough business, though. I'm starving. Tell me what you do for a living."

Chapter Four

December sped by in a blur of activity. Miranda's presence was minimal, to Cora's relief, and she didn't once get grabbed and dragged into an alley by a member of the mob. Diane didn't ask where Cora went after the spa incident, and Cora in turn agreed to accompany her to an endless parade of parties. This one was only a few floors down in Diane's apartment building. Cora didn't object as much because she could escape any time. She remembered Greg's encouragement to socialize, and used that encouragement, as well as the prospect of running into him again, as motivation to squeeze into a too-small burgundy corset. For modesty's sake, she draped her shoulders with transparent black lace.

Classical music, with dark undertones to the melodies, made the event more agreeable than the last heavy metal affair. By the time Cora had circled the room twice, avoiding darker corners and the fetish bloodletting going on in them, she had picked up the pattern of clique clusters. Her eyes even adjusted to the flicker and stretch of candlelight, allowing noses and chins to come together into whole faces.

Cora wasn't new to this kind of party. Her childhood was filled with Samhain and Winter Solstice instead of Halloween and Christmas, and as teenagers, she and Diane had both wrapped themselves in velvet and lace and flocked to the goth subculture. That ended, however, after Diane discovered that her affinity for the goddess wasn't merely a reflection of their home life, and Cora decided that she simply had no affinity at all.

What she remembered most fondly about the velvet-and-eyeliner set (the “fashionably witchy,” as she and Diane referred to them) was the endless parade of beauty. Even people who wouldn’t ordinarily be called anything close to pretty were beautiful when they donned their nightlife costumes. The general atmosphere, the mood of the crowd, was sexually charged.

Hovering on the outskirts of an intellectual clique, wine in hand, Cora listened in on a conversation that listed into a dissection of a Poppy Z. Brite novel she had heard about but not read. She murmured an occasional vague response, but the group was low pressure because nobody knew her and nobody looked to her for an opinion. Invisibility suited Cora. She became so comfortable with it that she nearly jumped out of her skin when somebody brushed against her back. She turned her head slightly, caught a vague male shape in her peripheral vision, and moved to give him room. He followed her, though, pressing close and stopping her retreat by gently claiming her elbow.

“We need to talk,” he said into her ear. Cora quailed; a hundred responses tripped over one another in her head. None of them penetrated the sudden shock brought on by his voice, by the heat of his body against her bare back. She had no idea that a mob boss would radiate so much heat. If anything, if she had to guess the temperature of a criminal, she would have gone with ice cold.

The book clique’s dialogue fumbled. First one, then another bibliophile glanced her way. Within the span of a dozen seconds, the discussion ceased entirely, and the clique hurried away, leaving Cora alone with him. She still didn’t know what to say.

She was acutely aware of his presence. Everything else became faded colors and background noise. Fresh male sweat and a hint of cologne that she didn’t recognize cut through the twisting clouds of cigarette smoke and heavy perfumes. She should have moved away, stepped aside to establish some space, and bring him into her line of sight. She was rooted to the spot, though. Something more powerful than gravity kept her pinned in the close circle of his body space. It took everything she had to stop herself from turning her head to lick his jaw so she could compare flavor to fragrance. That she even entertained the idea of touching him was a loud, clear warning that lack of sleep was going to kill her.

He didn’t speak, but Cora knew he was examining her. She fought the urge to squirm. Her earlobes tingled, and she imagined him examining her ear, exposed by the thin red ribbon that swept her hair off her reddening face. She held her glass tightly to keep self-conscious fingers from reaching up to pull her hair forward.

Eventually, he ducked his head, his cheek touching hers, and said, “Somewhere private.” His breath warmed the inside of her ear while his lips caressed her skin. “It’s crucial to your wellbeing.”

For a long moment, the only solid thought she could hold onto was that he smelled amazing. She took advantage of his nearness to draw in a great breath of his scent, trying and failing to dissect it. The scent of him appealed to her on a deep, primitive level. She considered pheromones as the logical explanation for her attraction, but upon second examination, decided she didn’t believe biology could have this intense an effect.

Thinking about biology helped her regain a hold on her senses. She played his words over in her head and almost laughed at his audacity, which was typically melodramatic and well-suited to the crowd. She didn’t laugh, though, because she remembered his eyes in Greg’s shop. He had looked at her as if she were a threat to him. Cora did not want to be a threat to somebody who very likely carried a lethal weapon.

“I don’t know anything,” she blurted upon finding her voice. She moved away from him, trying to

establish some distance for her own sanity and, to borrow his word, her own wellbeing. Being well meant not allowing herself to be overwhelmed by either hormones or fear.

“Fortunately, I don’t need information.” He let her go. “I do need to talk to you, though.”

Cora pulled the lace close around her shoulders, visually skimming the crowd for somebody she could ask for help. Every time she met somebody’s eyes, the potential rescuer looked away. Cora realized everybody in the immediate vicinity was watching her—watching her and the mobster—and a chill danced up her spine. She didn’t want to be a New York City victim, assaulted in plain view of dozens of people and left to die.

That wouldn’t happen here. Cora knew that and cursed the thought for even coming to her head. She was frightening herself unnecessarily. “We’ll talk here,” she said, quelling her fears. “There’s a balcony, isn’t there?”

He nodded, took her hand, and pulled her away from the spectators. Cora tried to make good use of the time it took to get to the balcony, figuring she should have something to say to discourage his interest or alleviate his worries that she had overheard anything said between him and Greg. Her brain refused to work, though; touching him sent tiny little shocks to her sensory centers. Her body’s response to him was so intense, so nerve-oriented, that she imagined a kinetic reaction taking place when the grooves of her fingerprints slid against the grooves of his fingerprints.

Two smokers had already taken up residence on the balcony. They were using a large potted plant, leaves wilted and dead on the soil mixture, as an ashtray. Cora wrinkled her nose at the acrid odor of tobacco smoke. A moment of awkward silence punctuated her arrival with the mob boss. One of the smokers pitched his half-smoked cigarette over the balcony and ducked inside immediately. The other managed one more drag, red tip flaring, before he followed suit. Not a word was spoken. Cora hugged herself against the cold, piercing at the thirteenth floor level, and eyed her companion. “I suppose you have a reputation as a badass,” she said.

“People know who I am.” He closed the door behind the last smoker and turned to face her. “I brought you here because the details of our conversation are less likely to make their way into the gossip that’s already spreading like wildfire on the other side of those doors. If you have a better suggestion, I’m open to it.”

He leaned against the doors, and Cora leaned against the balcony rail. She knew he was waiting for her better suggestion, but she didn’t have one. She suspected he knew she didn’t have one, too, and glowered at him. “What do you want?” she asked.

“I want to know why you look familiar,” he said. “I want to know what you’re doing with Cho.”

“I’m not doing anything with him. He’s not even here tonight.” Cora was more annoyed than frightened of him right now, and she didn’t bother hiding the irritation in her voice. “Is there a way this can be wrapped up in the next few minutes? I’m not interested in pneumonia.”

“Cora Phillips,” he said, holding up one finger. “Sister Diane, mother Miranda, grandmother Helen, great-grandmother Elizabeth, great-great grandmother Mary, great-great-great grandmother Rebecca, great-great-great-great grandmother Catherine. Margaret before Catherine and Marie before Margaret. That’s ten.” He demonstrated with his fingers, holding up both hands. “Ten women in the Lune tradition. You and your sister are the first to be born two to the generation; historically, Lune women are either only children or the only girl children born to the generation.

“Your sister is an active presence in New York’s supernatural community, but you have nothing to do with it—well, haven’t for years. Instead, you work in the environmental economics field and live in Hartford.”

Cora stared at him, open-mouthed. She didn’t know what to say. Fear returned to override irritation. What could he do with information like that? Why would he even want it? And where had he gotten it, for that matter? She didn’t care that he knew where she lived or what she studied in college. He knew her mother’s—and her mother’s mothers’—heritage, and that mattered more than anything else.

“Are you going to blackmail me like you do Greg?” she asked, thoughts racing. What if he intended something worse than blackmail?

“My name is Salim,” he said, ignoring the question. “I realize it doesn’t make our awareness of one another even, but perhaps you’ll take the name as a token of good faith.”

“Blackmail or not?” Cora insisted.

“Is that what he told you, that I blackmail him?”

“I asked you first.”

“I cannot tell you details of my relationship with Cho,” he said. “They’re privileged.”

“And you’re pissed off because I know a relationship exists at all. That’s what this is about, isn’t it?”

“This is about you, not him.” He frowned. “I’m going about this badly. My intention isn’t to frighten you.”

“I’m not frightened,” she lied, “I’m angry that you brought me out into the freezing cold to recite my mother’s family tree and grill me on my choice in dinner dates.”

“Don’t be flippant,” he advised. “It’s important that you know you should be cautious with how you involve yourself with Cho. I believe you have something he needs, and I don’t believe he’ll refrain from taking it from you.”

“Great, thanks for the warning,” Cora said. “I’m going back inside.” She reached past him to push at the door, but he caught her up in his arms and pulled her away, deeper into the recesses of the balcony. A shock of electric awareness shot into her fingertips and toes the moment he touched her.

“Who do you think you are?” she demanded, stiff in his embrace.

“Who I think I am isn’t important. Ask them, inside, *who they* think I am.” His lips brushed her earlobe. “You’re real enough to touch, which eliminates you from the ghostly categories I’m familiar with. Tell me why you look familiar, if you’re not a ghost I’ve seen.”

“You’re insane.” Cora squirmed and strained against his hold, but his arms were like vices and he held her immobile. Her heart pounded hard and fast; she couldn’t break free.

“Maybe. I suppose it could have been a dream,” he said, “but I think I’d have written that dream down to remember it, and I never did.”

Desire lurched in her abdomen where their bodies touched. For a brief moment, she couldn't decide whether to push him away or lean into him, which was ridiculous given that he was assaulting her. Did the hostess have the means to infuse the circulated air with a love/lust potion? Maybe it was the popular party favor of the season. That would explain Greg's attraction to her, as well.

She didn't want Salim to find her attractive at all, though; she wanted him to let her go. "Look, blonde women are a dime a dozen. I'm sure I'm not the same one you think I am. Will you *please* let me go?"

Behind her, the balcony door burst open and a cacophony of noise, music overtaken by voices, escaped the building.

"We need to go," Cora heard Diane say from the door. "Emergency."

Salim loosed his hold, and Cora turned to Diane. "What's happened?"

"Nothing yet. We'll be gone before it does." Diane didn't look directly at Salim, and Cora wondered about the nature of his role in the live-action drama play that seemed to dominate Diane's life. She pushed her curiosity aside for a more appropriate time and followed Diane inside.

Chapter Five

Heavenly warmth and a familiar face welcomed Cora back to the party. Greg had arrived during her exchange with Salim and he broke away from a mousey Jane Eyre look-alike to intercept Cora and Diane. He started with a smile, which Cora returned, but his gaze shifted behind her. His expression darkened as she came closer. Cora frowned and glanced over her shoulder to see Salim entering after her. Salim didn't meet her eyes. He had noticed Greg, and his attention focused entirely on the other man.

"Don't stop," Diane said, taking Cora's hand. "We have to leave."

"Why is everybody determined to drag and push me around?" Cora asked, exasperated. She yanked her hand free of Diane's and turned back to Greg and Salim. Every other guest appeared determined to watch the latest drama play itself out; Cora, after freezing her butt off out on the balcony, had earned the right to do so as well.

"It's not safe," Diane hissed and grabbed a fistful of lace at Cora's back. Cora shrugged the shawl away.

"What were you doing with her?" Greg demanded.

Cora stared at him. His features had twisted in fury during her small scuffle with Diane, rendering him almost unrecognizable from the man she'd enjoyed casual dinner with so recently. She glanced at Salim, whose own expression remained neutral, and said to Greg, "He thought I looked familiar."

Salim's gaze flicked to her face and away. He didn't acknowledge her otherwise.

Greg didn't acknowledge her at all. "You're not even supposed to be here. Did you come for her?"

Nobody spoke but Greg and Salim; someone had cut the music. The energy of the room changed. Otherwise uninvolved, spectators and bystanders pushed forward to drink up the tension. Several people studied Cora with speculation in their eyes.

"I came because I have an invitation," Salim said. "Perhaps we should discuss this privately."

"What do you want to hide? Everybody here already knows about you."

"But they don't know about you." A soft threat padded Salim's words.

He was blackmailing Greg. Cora's pulse kicked up in fear. What would Salim do with his knowledge about her family if he held Greg's secrets for a price? She couldn't meet an extortion fee.

Greg clenched his fists until his knuckles whitened. Cora retreated into the dubious safety of the crowd, glancing at Diane. "What is this?" she whispered.

"Men making jackasses of themselves," Diane responded beneath her breath. "Are you ready to leave now?"

Cora nodded. She stole a last glance at Greg and Salim, Greg trembling with emotion and Salim as emotionless as a stick of gum. Ironic that neither had reason to clash over her—she wasn't interested in Greg's inability to control his anger or Salim's capacity for cruelty.

Outside in the corridor, Diane jabbed the Up arrow beside the elevator. "What was that about?" she asked. "Never mind, it doesn't matter. Now you know firsthand why you shouldn't get involved with either of them."

Down the hall, the door to the apartment they'd just left opened. The sound of voices spilled forth. At the same time, the elevator chimed, and the doors slid open. Cora looked back in time to see a man's silhouette before Diane yanked her into the elevator car and mashed her hand against the 14 button.

"You're on 17," Cora said, bristling. She didn't appreciate Diane's dig about her choices in companionship even if she was right.

"We'll walk the other three floors."

Diane pounded on the Close Door button until the doors whooshed, then she leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes.

"He's the Collector," she said a second later. "If I'd known he was coming, we wouldn't have gone."

"Who? Salim? Collector of what?" Cora asked, eyeing Diane. "Something besides blackmail money? What do you know about him?" Her confusion had most definitely become annoyance, no doubt about it.

Diane opened her eyes and straightened when they reached the 14th floor. "He's some kind of monster. I wouldn't leave my worst enemy alone with him."

"Yum, big city melodrama," Cora muttered beneath her breath. She followed Diane from the lift and

toward the stairs.

“It’s not like that,” Diane whispered. “Just trust me, alright?”

The pair climbed the three flights of stairs up to Diane’s floor.

“Stay away from him. He knows you’re protected now, anyway, so he’ll stay away from you whether or not you’re smart enough to do the same.”

“Could you be anymore condescending?” Cora asked as they emerged from the stairwell.

Diane didn’t answer until after they were inside her apartment. “Look,” she said, “I know you don’t get it, and you don’t want to get it. I respect that. You need to understand, though, that there are people who aren’t passive, who are very, very dangerous. The Collector’s one of those people.”

Cora sighed, kicking out of her shoes. “It’s a moot point now, anyway. He knows about us, so we need to figure out what to do about him instead of how to avoid him.”

“Just avoid him,” Diane said on her way to her bedroom.

Cora frowned after her sister. “Are you listening to me? He knows about us. About you and me and ma and—”

“That we’re witches?” Diane called from the other room. “Everybody knows that, Cora. You’re the only one of us who doesn’t talk about it openly. Ma and I don’t hide ourselves from the world.”

Diane’s words struck Cora with the force of a slap. Cora’s tendency to keep her Lune heritage private was a longtime source of contention between all three Phillips women, with Diane and Miranda resentful of what they viewed as shame and Cora resentful that they tried to force their beliefs upon her. She’d never been able to present a solid stand against Diane and Miranda when they got up in arms about her view of the matter, so instinctively shied away from getting into it with Diane over the same tired topic.

“Never mind,” she mumbled to herself.

Diane sailed from her bedroom, whipping her hair—long and dark, unlike Cora’s blonde bob—up into a high ponytail. She’d changed into a pair of sequin-studded jeans and a glittery blue tube top, which she covered with a blue wool half cape. “I’m going to Alissa’s for the night,” Diane said. “She’s waiting for me downstairs. Call if you need anything.”

As soon as Diane closed the door, Cora retrieved a pint of cherry vanilla ice cream from the freezer. She ate it directly out of the container and paced Diane’s apartment. The only light came from the kitchen, itself a small bulb over the sink that shed just enough illumination to keep Cora from running into walls.

The apartment reflected Diane’s flair for the dramatic perfectly, done up in all dark wood floors and naked windows that allowed the sun in to heat the wood during the day and the moon in to cool the wood at night. A rocking chair stood in front of a huge window, in easy reach of Diane’s several bookcases.

Even though she didn’t share Diane’s religious affinity with the goddess, she understood the power of faith. Diane’s apartment reflected her belief. It was a ritual place, a woman place—the rocker was their

great-grandmother's, cherry wood shaped and carved and waxed and worn until it shone blood red by sun and moonlight alike. The antique bed had no known age, and for all Cora knew it was an eternal thing that had taken life as often as it had ushered life from womb to world: countless lives, bloodstains marking each birth on the feather mattress.

Diane had inherited both pieces of furniture. Their ancestor's journal had been bequeathed jointly to Cora, Diane, and Miranda. The private writings revealed the old woman's own reverence of the moon goddess. Cora, then up to her neck in econ courses at NYU, had not been in the proper frame of mind to receive such a legacy with anything but skepticism, especially after weaning herself off her adolescent lifestyle.

Occasionally, she wished she were as secure in faith as Diane. They were both daughters of an ancient tradition, if journals could be believed, and had power in their very bloodstreams. As a child, Cora had believed in it all. Her favorite of her great-grandmother's stories about the first witch, alternately known as the Lune and the Dragonkeeper, was the story that explained how the Lunes became Dragonkeepers.

According to the story, centuries and centuries ago, a human lineage that could shapeshift into dragons became the targets of the Catholic Church's witch hunts. In order to protect themselves until the witch craze died down, the dragons commissioned their mates, women who worshipped the goddess and the moon, to smuggle the dragons somewhere they could not be touched by human society. The witches cooperated, according to the story, by darkening the moon so no individual who could not see in the dark would ever see a dragon. When she was a little girl, Cora had delighted in the trickery of the story. She found it much more satisfying than tales of kidnapped princesses rescued by shining knights.

She wasn't a little girl anymore, though, and she didn't dream about strong women rescuing persecuted, cursed men. She barely slept at all. Nightmares woke her when she did nod off, and the anxiety of impending nightmares kept her awake until her body overrode her mind. She had admitted as much to Diane over lunch early in the day.

"It's the fire," Diane said around a mouthful of loaded New York hotdog while they walked. "You're still terrified, somewhere inside, that it'll happen again."

"And to think I'm spending a fortune on my shrink when I could just come to you," Cora said without rancor. "What neither he nor you have told me, though, is what to do about it."

The psychiatrist suggested sleeping pills and hypnosis, as Cora had mentioned to Greg, while Diane suggested meditation as a solution. Meditation would allow Cora to connect her hidden self with her goddess self, and the reunited pair would banish the fears leftover from the fire that nearly killed her two months ago. No, not nearly—the fire*had* killed her. Dead for three minutes according to the medical files and resurrected by the firefighter who carried her out.

She scraped the last spoonful of ice cream from the pint and let it melt on her tongue. She had nothing left to do with the night than go to bed and lay awake, going over and over the night's events.

Diane's big, ancient feather bed was swathed in crimson satin sheets. The sight of the ruffled bed made Cora pause. It suggested sex and blood and fire; her cheeks heated. Cora imagined her face as scarlet as that bed, but not before she imagined herself tangled up in it with Salim. The image startled her, appearing out of nowhere. She suddenly remembered the electric reaction to touching him, the way her fingertips had tingled. The tense confrontation between Salim and Greg had driven it from her head.

She decided the bed was too much. Neither her nerves nor her nerve endings could deal with the mental

and physical stimulation of satin and suggestion, so she went to the air mattress she'd brought with her for the spare bedroom. She stripped out of the corset and gauzy skirt she'd worn to the party and drew a cotton t-shirt over her naked, spa-sensitized body. She lay awake a long time, alternately counting sheep and practicing breathing exercises that were designed to make her stop thinking long enough to pass out.

She catnapped off and on until she woke from a nightmare sometime before dawn, early enough that the sky still gleamed purple through the bare windows. The dragon dream had left her heart trembling with an erratic, frightening beat. Her entire body shook with that terror-pulse, clear down to her toes. She concentrated on breathing, not to get to sleep, this time, but to make sure that she didn't stop breathing altogether. In the first few seconds of waking this way, she desperately wished she had someone into whose arms she could roll, someone who would stroke her hair and assure her that nothing was chasing her through dreams.

When her pulse slowed, she rolled over. The air mattress groaned its plastic groan and shifted with her weight. Something about the plastic noise sounded a little off; she made a mental note to add more air tomorrow and closed her eyes against the light of the city, still bright even at sometime-before-dawn. The refrigerator hummed in the kitchen, and a siren wailed on the street below. Her cell phone chimed its low battery warning. Every sound would register now that adrenaline had chased away even the slimmest prospect of sleep. Cora got up, wrapped herself in a blanket from Diane's bed, and started a pot of coffee.

She paced while the coffee brewed, looking for something to do. Attaching her phone to its charger only filled about thirty seconds of time. Diane's sparsely furnished apartment offered little in the way of entertainment. It truly was a ritual place. Cora eyed the altar that Diane had set up in the corner of her bedroom, but she didn't go close enough to examine details of its makeup. She considered that too private a thing to snoop through, akin to a diary.

In the living room, she saw more evidence of Diane's belief. Diane had painted a large circle on the floor, close to the window, with familiar markings at five points around the circle. Cora had never noticed it before; the morning light must have hit it at just the right angle to draw her attention. She walked around the circle pensively.

"Get in touch with your goddess," she muttered, imitating Diane's voice. "Sure isn't anything else to do here."

Cora sighed and let the blanket slide to the floor. She snooped a bit and gathered what she would need to close the circle. While she didn't believe like the other women in her family did, at least not anymore, Cora still remembered the motions of faith.

She found a plant pot filled with soil and scooped up two handfuls. As she moved around the large empty room, spilling soil at the circle's five points, memories of the craft returned to her. She marked each point and murmured a short incantation to bless it with its orientation: water, wind, fire, earth, spirit. The circle was simple and predictable, a 5-point star building its foundation. Unable to go any further without sealing it, she stopped and stripped to her skin.

On one level, she felt ridiculous and fervently hoped Diane would not come home to catch her. On an entirely different level, however, she felt herself warming to the possibility. She felt like she was coming home.

Chapter Six

Cora opened the windows wide and moved the rocking chair out of the way. December wind whipped into the apartment and tore through her hair, blowing the blonde tangle away from her face and shoulders. The open window made her feel exposed, as if she were being watched. She returned to the circle regardless, deciding that the feeling of exposure was part of the process of opening up.

With a deep breath, she stepped into the circle and spread a final handful of soil to close it and lock herself, as well as anything she might connect with, inside the ring. She remembered the closed circle as a safety precaution, and the warning her mother had given: even good things belonged in their own realm and should not be loosed into ours.

Cora concentrated on the sky, searching for the moon while the glitter of sunrise worked on chasing nighttime away. Light and shadow vied for attention. She thought she saw a dark streak dip and skate through the line where pink blurred into purple, but she blinked and it was gone.

Her body distracted her from serenity. The cold winter air drew her nipples tight and lent a firmness to her breasts, ordinarily too heavy to achieve that firmness on their own. Her back and shoulders tingled as if they were being touched; her toes curled against the cold floorboards. Cora found herself thinking of Salim again. She wanted to know more about him despite Diane's warning, despite the danger he posed to her family.

Unbidden images danced through her awareness: Salim the Collector languishing in a tent in the desert, naked and hard on silk-covered pillows. The women he had collected bathed the sweat from his body with their tongues. Cora snorted and rolled her eyes at her own insomnia-induced romance novel fantasies. She needed to focus, but she was in no frame of mind for concentration. Rising from the circle, she closed the windows and barricaded herself in the shower until the hot water ran out.

As soon as the clock rolled around to a more practical hour, Cora bundled up against the cold and headed to the closest Barnes & Noble. She armed herself with a triple-shot café Americano before staking her claim on an armchair in the New Age section. She carried every book on hypnosis in the store, with the exception of books with cartoon covers, back to her chair and settled in to research. She might not follow up with Greg's offer to introduce her to the wonderful world of hypnotism, especially after the scene between him and Salim, but he wasn't the only hypnotist in the world. Her brief foray into meditation and goddess-seeking hadn't gone very well. Hypnotism might still hold the key to a good night's sleep.

Cora perused the indexes of a few books, tapping the blank page of a spiral notebook with her pen and yawning into her coffee every time she read the word "sleep." She had difficulty concentrating. She'd hoped the coffee would keep her alert in the absence of a restful night, but it wasn't living up to its purpose.

"I guess I won't have to ask you to share those books. You look like you're about to fall asleep." Salim. She tapped the pen too hard, too erratically, and it skipped out of her hand to bounce on the carpet. Her motor skills betrayed her, and she didn't manage to convince her muscles to work in time to catch the pen before it rolled away beneath the chair opposite her own.

Salim crouched and reached under the chair before she could make eye contact. "My fault," he said.

“Please, allow me.”

His face was angled away, and long, curling black hair swung forward to hide his profile. In the fluorescent lighting, his hands were the color of caramel. His eyes, when he looked up, were an amazing velvet shade of brown.

He produced the pen and offered it back, holding it between thumb and forefinger. Instead of thanking him, Cora said, “You followed me.”

“I scared you.”

“You didn’t. Triple shot of espresso.” She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing she feared him. She lifted her paper cup. “Side effect of being awake is being a jumpy wreck.”

“The only people I know who consume caffeine like that are students and investment bankers.” He dropped onto the vacant chair and stretched out his legs, crossing them at the ankle. “I know plenty of people interested in hypnosis, but you don’t fit the profile.”

“You should expand your circle of acquaintances.” She lowered her head over the book on her lap, hoping he would go away if she ignored him. As far as she was aware, that trick only worked in third grade. Still, a girl had to have something.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him produce a coffee table book of fantasy art and open it across his lap. Cora traded out her current book for a collection of essays by psychiatrists who incorporated hypnosis in their practices. She tried to focus, but her attention drifted back to Salim. The cuffs of his pants, black cargos, drew back to show the red and grey diamond pattern of his socks. His shoes were quality leather, but she didn’t recognize the style or manufacturer. She wasn’t a connoisseur of men’s footwear.

Cora followed the legs up to narrow hips, and the book he held on his lap. His thumbs caressed the edges of the glossy, color-splashed pages that he turned. She watched his hands go through the motions of turning one page after another and wondered what his handprint would look like next to her own. Higher, she met his eyes. Even though he turned the pages of his book, he’d been watching her examine him.

She cleared her throat. “Tell me about last night.”

“Here?”

She bit her lip and looked up. On every side of them, people perused bookshelves and chatted with their companions. She wanted to take the request back, wanted to keep secrets secret and not discuss them in an impersonal, fluorescent-lights bookstore that didn’t even have dust on the books to give them a bit of charm. She thought of Diane, though, and the way she always went back around to Cora’s refusal to publicly acknowledge the other part of her family’s life. Being a Lune, a Dragonkeeper, was different for Diane. She had everything to be proud of and nothing to be ashamed of. She, unlike Cora, had been able to receive and hold onto her gifts whereas Cora hadn’t believed strongly enough to receive them in the first place.

She should stop being a coward and allow herself to believe she was enough part of it that she had a right to discuss that different world at all, never mind publicly or privately. Instead, however, she shook her head and said, “No, not here.”

“Where?”

“Nowhere.” Cora bent to stuff her things into her bag and stack the books she’d taken into a neat pile. “I need to go.”

Salim moved, and she jumped. “I’m not going to hurt you,” he murmured. “What happened is I got sidetracked. I intended to make sure you understood the importance of keeping your distance from Cho. You don’t know what he’ll ask of you. You took me by surprise, though. It was stronger than I expected.”

Cora swallowed and straightened, shouldering her bag. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I need to go,” she said, inexplicably shaken. Salim leaned back in his chair, his eyes intent on her face, strange and unreadable. She wasn’t sure she wanted to read what was in them. Diane had called him a monster, which was a powerful label from one familiar with reality beyond the normal rhythm of the world. She didn’t want to stick around long enough to find out how he’d earned that title.

Chapter Seven

Cora stopped at a small Italian bistro for brunch. She positioned herself to face the window and watched pedestrians go by, scrutinizing every face. Salim didn’t follow her, to her relief. Eventually she relaxed and dug her cell phone from her bag. She checked her minutes, an automatic habit, and grimaced at the month’s usage. Fortunately December was almost over and her minutes would reset.

She dedicated some of her remaining time to calling Diane.

“Salim warned me to stay away from Greg,” she told Diane after exchanging morning greetings. “I was thinking about trying a hypnosis session. I need to get some sleep.”

“Have you tried meditating?” Diane asked. Cora heard the gurgle of a coffee pot finishing its perk. She made a mental note to order a cup of her own when her server came around again.

“I tried last night,” she said. “I had a hard time concentrating.”

“Try it again. There’s a portable DVD player in my nightstand and a couple yoga DVDs. Try using the exercise to relax yourself and spend some extra time during the meditation portion at the end.”

“Does that really work?” Cora pulled the phone aside so she could request coffee of the server when he brought her fruit plate.

“Did you just order coffee? No more caffeine; how are you supposed to get any sleep with all the coffee you’re drinking?”

“You’re drinking it,” Cora said defensively.

“I don’t have any trouble sleeping at night, either.”

Cora stubbornly let the coffee order stand. "I'll try the yoga," she said. "When are you coming home?"

"Don't have any set plans. Want me to hang out here so you have some privacy for the day? You can give me a call for dinner or something if you're ready."

She wouldn't have to worry about Diane walking in to find her slack-jawed and drooling in meditation, at least. "Yeah, I'll call you," she said. She was still reluctant, but Diane's suggestion made sense. Even if she didn't connect with any goddesses, the exercise would do her good.

Mindful of her minutes usage, Cora said goodbye to Diane. She picked at her food, avoiding the strawberries and leaving half the coffee in the cup. On her way back to Diane's, she picked up a lavender bubble bath and some candles to create as relaxing an environment as possible for her latest attempt to cure her insomnia.

Cora found Diane's DVD player where she'd said it would be and selected a beginning yoga course to pop in. During her soak, she watched the DVD in a preliminary run-through, making faces at some of the cheesy New Age lines in the script. Once her skin showed sufficient wrinkling, she climbed out of the bath and toweled dry. She hesitated with clothes. Yoga in the nude seemed over the top, especially on the hardwood floors, but she had it in her head that these mystic things worked best without artificial barriers.

She opened the window, as she had before, and spread a blanket on the floor inside Diane's circle. Naked and freezing, she settled down for the relaxation exercise, going through yoga positions as the on-screen instructor indicated. Cora had her doubts about the effectiveness of this exercise and knew she'd be sore the next day, including her nipples from the sharp cold air. She was relieved to reach the part of the DVD where her only instruction was to sprawl out spread-eagled and breathe.

Eventually she sensed a separation, a distancing between her mundane preoccupations and a higher awareness. It felt almost like falling asleep. She tried not to get too excited about the prospect of sleep lest she drive it away. Her skin grew hot despite the cold wind; instead of cooling her nervous body, it made her pulse points burn. She was aware of heat searing her cheeks and focused on that heat. Something somewhere groaned: she realized that it was her own voice. She was dizzy without even moving. Gritty soil clung to her skin, clammy with sweat, as the wind lifted it from the floor and threw it around the room, destroying the earthly definition of the ritual circle. Cora gasped, gulped air desperately, and tried to open her eyes. Panic and self-preservation tried to undo whatever she had inadvertently done, but it was too late. Cold wind suddenly seared her already hot skin and rendered her numb; she wrenched her eyes open against the weight of anxiety and couldn't see anything in the unnatural dark.

Time passed unmeasured until the stun wore off. Eventually, she realized that she was no longer upright, nor was she alone. Her head was at the northernmost point of the circle, her arms and feet splayed to the other directions. The darkness was a scary, solid wall of condensed shadow pinning her to the floor. She tried to raise her knees—suddenly paranoid, suddenly aware of her naked defenselessness—and found her limbs paralyzed.

This was her nightmare, except she couldn't run now. The dragon had caught her, was bathing her in its fire. When the darkness touched her, she whimpered. She felt it moving, exploring her skin. Its touch was not normal: it didn't touch one spot; it didn't stroke; instead, it engulfed her entire foot, her leg, as if absorbing an entire meal at once rather than chewing each bite. Its presence touched between her thighs, where she was wet with fear instead of arousal. A low moan hung in her throat.

Release me.

The words were inside her head.

“What are you?” she croaked. She had no idea what to do, no idea whether she was dreaming or whether she had really done this thing, called something to her. She desperately wished Diane were with her, or that she could reach her phone.

She pushed ineffectually against the darkness, pressing the back of her head down against the floor until her neck ached. The ache reassured her that she was still in Diane’s apartment, still linked to the world.

She inhaled, exhaled, concentrated on the blood in her veins. She’d thought the craft’s gene skipped her during its trickle through the pool, but here she had summoned something—the dragon, her nightmare—and trapped the beast in her circle. She was a Dragonkeeper, deep in her blood. She had power. She tried to wrap her mind around that, to convince herself to think like a witch, like one of the brilliant tricky women who first bound dragons. The dragon/nightmare might think itself in a position to give orders, but it was wrong.

Cora pushed it from her head through sheer force of will. She didn’t want to waste her energy communicating with it; she just wanted it gone. She struggled to make her body move and gained enough ground that she was able to rise up on her elbows, thrusting through the dragon’s viscous heat.

The pressure eased without warning, and Cora found herself completely removed from the floor in one motion, only to be flipped onto her stomach, on the floor again, in the next. Whereas the dragon’s presence had only been a wall, albeit an all-too-close wall, moments before, now it came crushing down on her. The strange lines of its form moved against her, shoving her legs apart and hauling her hips into the air. The dragon brought her up onto her knees and held her head and shoulders down, grinding her nipples hard against the floorboards.

She wondered whether it would fuck her and flushed to the realization that she also wondered whether she would enjoy it. These were not things she should have been thinking about. She should have been trying to find a way to free herself, but instead—

You would not enjoy it.

“Why not?” And, then—“Stop reading my mind.”

The dragon didn’t answer. Not with words, anyway. Instead, it drew her body up more; Cora’s knees left the floor, and her hair swung forward to hang around her shoulders when the rest of her body followed her knees.

She felt pressure against her entrance, but it was gone a heartbeat later, and she fell to the floor. The sound of a roar reverberated in her head. The pressure in the circle intensified. Pain blossomed behind her eyes. Her skull felt too small to contain its contents. Despite the pain, she realized she was no longer being held down and scrambled away on her hands and knees. When she felt grains of soil beneath her knees, she had enough awareness left to cross it carefully in order to keep the circle intact.

The pain in her head abated as soon as she escaped the circle. Sunlight streamed through the windows, temporarily blinding her. As soon as she could see again, Cora bolted for Diane’s bedroom and slammed the door shut. She leaned against it, breathing hard. She couldn’t hear anything through the door, so she assumed the dragon had been unable to escape the circle.

“Or you were just dreaming,” she whispered to herself. She didn’t have the courage to open the door and look.

Her legs felt like rubber. She wobbled over to Diane’s bed and dropped onto the edge of it, eyeing the phone on the nightstand. Her initial thought had been to call Diane for help, but with a door between her and the ritual circle, she started to feel silly. Maybe she*had* been dreaming. Her psychiatrist said the dragon dreams were related to the fire. Nearly dying—no, actually dying—in a fire would naturally arouse a deep-seated fear of it, and fears manifested in interesting ways. She had been hearing dragon tales since birth. It was only normal that the fire-breathing creatures would rear their heads to torment her after a fire-related trauma. Maybe she’d be better off calling her psychiatrist instead of her sister.

No sooner had she flopped back into the luxurious satin nest and covered her face with a pillow than the phone rang. Between the first and second ring, she felt the bed shudder. Cora threw the pillow aside and sat up, afraid the maybe-real dragons had gotten into the bedroom with her, almost hoping that the impossible had happened and an earthquake was rattling New York. She was alone in the bedroom, though. The phone continued ringing but the bed didn’t move again.

Diane’s machine was set to pick up after four rings, so quiet fell over the apartment again a moment later. When the phone started ringing again immediately, Cora checked the caller ID. She hoped for Diane, but the number was her mother’s.

Any witch will do, she decided and picked up the phone.

“Ma, I have a problem,” she said, foregoing a greeting.

“Diane, are you alright?” her mother asked at the same time.

Both women paused to digest the words directed at one another. They started speaking at the same time again.

“Cora, is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me. I have a problem.”

“I know. I could tell. That’s what mothers do, you know, know when their children have problems,” her mother said.

Cora grimaced. Miranda loved her mother’s intuition only slightly less than she loved her daughters, and she absolutely adored having an opportunity to use it.

“Tell me what you’ve done,” she practically crowed. Cora imagined her hunting for her silver bowl in preparation of a scry. Miranda used her Sight so infrequently that she wouldn’t be able to find the traditional bowl. If Cora didn’t hurry up and spill the story, it would play itself out in miniature in some undignified plastic storage bowl.

“I don’t know if I’ve actually*done* anything.” Even as she spoke, the bed shuddered again. Cora watched the alarm clock beside the phone vibrate toward the edge of the nightstand. “Maybe caused an earthquake.”

“What? Of course you didn’t cause an earthquake. Ah, here it is,” she announced. “Now let’s see.”

Cora abruptly realized she was naked, and she dropped the phone to dive for Diane's closet. She grabbed a black satin peignoir from the back of the closet door and drew it over her shoulders on her way back to retrieve the phone. Bone-chilling terror came over her before she reached the bed. She stumbled over a pair of Diane's shoes and cracked her hip on the corner of her sister's vanity. A makeup mirror crashed to the floor, shattering. Broken eyes glowed up at her from the shards; they were the same eyes as those in the Chinatown shop window.

Careless of broken glass and bare feet, Cora ran to grab the phone. "Ma, something's watching me," she panted into the receiver.

"That's me, and now I have to get another inroad since you broke the first one. You really shouldn't wear black, darling. I know it's touted as the in thing and some fashion moguls swear that blondes look best in black, but it makes you look washed out. Don't you have anything blue?"

"You?" Cora choked. "That's what it feels like when you're watching someone? My god..." Miranda drew a sharp breath and Cora added hastily, "...dess. You scared me to death! Don't do that again!"

"You never tell me anything. I have to keep an eye on you somehow," Miranda huffed. "Right now you have bigger problems. That circle is far too small, not to mention too thin, to contain two dragons. What *were* you thinking? Where is your sister? *Iknew* you could do it, you know, it was just a matter of coming into your own and finding your goddess. We'll have a party to celebrate your newfound power."

Cora shelved the spying issue for another day and asked, "What do you mean, *two* dragons? What do you mean, too small? Diane's with her girlfriend."

"I thought she was seeing somebody named Richard?"

"That was ages ago. She's been with Alissa for at least a year."

"You girls never tell me anything."

"Ma, can we focus? Dragons in my living room? Not even *my* living room."

"Well, it's not unusual, or even unexpected. We all call them eventually. I'm surprised you've summoned one before Diane, to be perfectly honest. She's so much more attuned than you are."

Cora couldn't believe what she was hearing. She didn't know where to start asking questions, either, and she wondered at the wisdom of keeping her mother on the phone instead of calling Diane.

"Oh my," Miranda said. "You should see this, Cora. Doesn't Diane have a cordless phone?"

Cora felt panic welling up in her stomach. "See what? I don't know."

"See these two battling for dominance in that little circle. Darling, I understand you're confused and frightened, but you can't leave them to their own devices. They'll tear one another apart."

She went to the door and opened it far enough to press her cheek against the jamb and peek through the crack. "Damn it," she swore into the phone. "I can't see anything from the bedroom."

"Well, trust me, it's rather remarkable. One is red, the other is white. I'll need to review my dragon lore to figure out what the colors represent. Oh my," she said again.

“What am I supposed to do?” Cora hissed into the phone.

“Traditionally, you’re supposed to, well, you know. Mate with it. But of course nobody expects you to mate with *two* of them. There’s been some mistake.”

Cora closed the door firmly, went back to the bed, and hung up on her mother. Before the phone could ring again, she dialed Diane’s cell phone.

“I have a pair of dragons trapped in your circle, and Ma is telling me I have to fuck them. Could you come home please?” she said before Diane had a chance to talk.

“I’ll be right there.” The phone went dead.

Chapter Eight

Cora wanted very badly to remain holed up in Diane’s bedroom until she got home, but the next time the floor rumbled, it didn’t stop for a full two minutes. She had to rescue the clock before it fell off the nightstand entirely. Her mother called back once, but Cora only answered the phone long enough to tell her Diane was on the way and hung up again.

Remembering her mother’s admonishment about leaving them together in the circle, she crept from the bedroom and into the spare room to retrieve her cell so she wasn’t bound to Diane’s bedroom phone. Frowning at the low battery—she could’ve sworn she charged the phone not twelve hours ago—she called her mother back.

“They’re going to tear the whole building down from inside the circle,” she said when Miranda answered the phone. “If I let them out, what will they do?”

“Well, they came to you. So they’re trying to get out in order to reach you. That’s the way these things work if you summon properly. A proper summoning ensures the targets are sufficiently motivated to stay with their summoner instead of gallivanting about in the world.”

“I doubt I did it properly.”

“You issued a mating call, Cora, and they’re male,” her mother said dryly. “They’re sufficiently motivated to remain with you. Go ahead and break the circle. They won’t go far.”

“This is insane,” Cora muttered.

“Nevertheless, it must be dealt with. I’ll remain on the phone with you if you’d like.”

Cora sighed, but she didn’t end the call. Clutching the knot in the sash around her waist, she ventured cautiously into the living room. The circle shimmered darkly as if its circumference marked the boundaries of a force field. She couldn’t actually see anything inside the circle unless she turned her head and watched with her peripheral vision, which strained her eyes. She caught glimpses of translucent red and white writhing around one another. The motion reminded her of a whirlwind. While she watched, the

swirling mass rose up to slam against the ceiling, then down to thunder against the floor. At least now she knew New York wasn't suffering an earthquake.

"You're sure this won't go wrong?" she asked.

"Absolutely. Phillips women have been coping with this for eons. It's our equivalent to the average woman's first menses."

Cora rolled her eyes and moved over to swipe her foot through the circle. She held her breath, but nothing exploded. The fury within the circle seemed to abate as the dragons poured out into the room. Whereas they were intertwined around one another while bound, now they wrapped themselves around Cora. She trembled.

"I really don't know how you managed this, though," her mother was saying. "You acquired the dragon aspects themselves, but you didn't get the men they belong with."

Cora started to ask for clarification, but she was beginning to feel stupid, so she simply nodded and pretended to know what her mother was talking about.

She was spared further conversation by an incoming call on her mother's end of the line. The silence of being on hold was blessed relief.

Besides, she had bigger problems. The dragons were wrapping themselves around her hips and legs like long, large, affectionate cats. One of them hadn't been affectionate at all, earlier. *One* of them had been downright malicious. She'd mention that tidbit to her mother and ask about it when and if Miranda ever managed to return to the pressing matter of her present situation.

The dragons were rubbing her legs with their bodies, massaging her skin with the satin of Diane's peignoir. She remembered the brief, violently sexual encounter in the circle earlier and squeezed her thighs together so hard her hips ached. She realized that she was sweating nervously when a gust of wind tore through the still-open window and raked its icy fingers over her damp skin. Shivering, she crossed both arms across her chest for warmth.

While she waited for either Diane to show up or her mother to come back to the phone, the dragons became more amorous. One, or both, figured out that it could get close to bare skin by snaking beneath the hem of her robe. Cora whimpered when a warm nuzzle teased the backs of her knees. She should have left them in the circle to kill one another.

While one dragon paid homage to her legs, the other targeted her upper body. Her nipples perked at a long caress. She swore and hissed, "*Stopthat!*"

A moment later, Cora heard voices at the door. They were muffled, but female. Two different pitches told her that Diane had brought Alissa along. Terrific, she'd wanted another witness to this spectacle.

Once inside, Diane tossed her keys into her bag and put her hands on her hips. She arched her eyebrows as she took in the scene.

"I thought you said they were in the circle," she said.

"They're obviously not interested in going far, so it's not a big deal that they're out." Alissa shut the door.

“It’s a big deal,” Cora said. She flipped her cell closed and severed the on-hold connection with her mother. “It’s a very big damned deal. I’m pretty sure that if I spread my legs enough to actually walk, I’ll be molested. You know, more than this minor otherworldly feeling-up that I’m getting right now.”

“Isn’t that mine?” Diane asked, eyeing the satin wrapped around Cora’s body. She sat her bag down near the door and pulled a hair band from the pocket of her jeans, which, Cora noticed, were actually cut to fit Alissa’s more ample behind.

“I had to put something on, and your closet was the closest thing I could reach. Is it really an issue that I’m borrowing your clothes right now? Can we possibly be 14 again after I’m out of this dragon-spirit twister cone?”

Alissa went to close the windows. “You need to establish some boundaries,” she announced. “Put them on a pair of leashes.”

“Great, but how do I do that?”

Diane, meanwhile, had retrieved the t-shirt Cora slept in. She dangled it from her index finger. Cora narrowed her eyes. “What?”

Diane grinned. “What’d you do, plop your naked ass down in my circle?”

“Yes, Diane, that’s *sexactly* what I did. I also scooted around marking it with my scent. You do know you’re going to hell for enjoying this so much, right?”

Alissa laughed, but pressed the issue of the dragons back to the forefront. “Bickering later, binding now. We need to pry them away from you to buy some time for us to figure out a more permanent solution.”

“Alright, alright. Did Ma say anything useful?” Diane asked. She remained out of arm’s reach, Cora noticed.

“I couldn’t make much sense of it all. She wasn’t very worried and seemed to think it’s perfectly natural for me—and you, too, by the way, so laugh all you want now, ‘cause payback’s a bitch.”

Alissa glanced at Diane and pressed her lips together. “We’ll see about that,” she announced. “For now, however, we need items suitable for leashes. Cora, give me the belt on that robe. Diane, find something to serve as a second leash. We have to keep them separated?” she asked, looking to Cora for clarification.

The dragons had not backed off from their amorous attentions. One of them nosed against the underside of her breast and another was busy trying to tease her thighs apart. Cora clutched the knot at her belt. “Find something else. I’m not giving them an easy way in. Is this going to take long?”

“Not too,” Alissa said.

“Alissa’s quite good at binding,” Diane called from her bedroom. “Most amateur witches can sufficiently bind spirit to spirit, but she can bind spirit to material. It’s fascinating.”

Cora, to her dismay, was slowly becoming more aware of the dragons on a mental and emotional level. She could feel faint traces of rivalry and realized they were competing with one another for her affection.

Competition between the two did not reassure her.

“Di, come on!” Alissa called.

A moment later, Diane re-emerged from the bedroom. She had a pair of long silk scarves, one red and one white. She handed them to Alissa. “Use these instead of that belt. The colors might make them stronger.”

“I called Ma back,” she said to Cora once Alissa had gone to work on her spellcrafting. “We have a problem. Two problems.”

“Tell me about it.”

“*Twomore* problems.”

“What’s going on?” Alissa interrupted before Cora could ask.

“The dragons have owners—”

“Yeah, so Ma said.”

“And they’re on their way to pick up their runaway pets right now.”

Chapter Nine

“This is not happening,” Cora muttered fifteen minutes later. Alissa knotted the red scarf around her right wrist and the white one around her left wrist.

“The knots at your wrists will keep them from actually getting to you,” Alissa said, “just like the knots at the ends will keep them from getting away. You know how a short leash marks the limits of a dog’s run space? That’s how the scarves are working.”

“It’ll keep them long enough for me to give them back?” Cora asked.

“It’ll keep them as long as the knots are intact.”

“You can’t just give them back,” Miranda interrupted. Her voice crackled over the living room speaker phone. “They belong to you right now. And don’t you let those men try to take them, either. Make them honor their end of the ritual.”

Cora threw a pained look in Diane’s direction. Diane, from her post at the window, watching the street below for signs that the dragons’ owners—Dragonlords, her mother kept calling them—were on the way, rolled her eyes in commiseration.

“I saw that.” Miranda sniffed. “You should be happy that you’re experiencing this part of the tradition together.”

“I have an idea,” Cora said. “Why don’t you explain exactly what this ritual and tradition thing is all about, since all we’re doing right now is waiting for other people to show up and participate?”

“Explain what? You know this already. The Dragonlords were tricked into an eternal binding by their mates—the Dragonkeepers. Us. Since a great deal of our abilities come from our descent from the Dragonlord bloodlines, we have to maintain contact with them, if for nothing more than reproduction, or risk our own extinction.”

“I don’t think that was ever mentioned in our history lessons,” Cora said. She looked to Diane for clarification. Diane shrugged helplessly.

“Not in so many words. You two were just little girls. I always intended to tell you about it when you got older, but you went off to college and Diane has her own thing.”

“What thing?” Diane asked, exasperated.

“You know, your...thing,” Miranda said.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The dragons were not pleased with their present situation. Cora heard them snapping at one another in her mind, and they strained at the ends of their leashes. The scarves whipped about with wild abandon. Cora caught Alissa watching the red and white ties warily.

“Everybody should relax,” she said. Her fingers tingled where the scarves occasionally cut off circulation to her hands. She rubbed the needles from her fingers. “Take deep breaths. We’ll sit down and discuss this with the, uh, Dragonlords, like rational adults, and then we’ll laugh about it over dinner.”

Tradition be damned. Cora yearned for the not-so-long-ago days when the only magic she could create revolved around a knack for number crunching. City budgets were much safer than women’s moon craft.

“Shit!” Diane said from the window. She jerked back away from it and dived to grab the drapes, yanking them across the glass. “Nobody answer the door.”

Alissa, Cora noted, looked at Diane as if she’d grown two heads.

“What happened?” Miranda asked.

“You won’t believe who just got out of a cab downstairs,” Diane hissed. She ran across the apartment to throw the deadbolt on the door. “Everybody be quiet.”

Cora went to the window, trailing scarves and dragons. While Diane and Alissa carried on a conversation in whispers, she nudged the drapes aside and pressed her nose against the glass so she could see as much as the sidewalk and pavement below the window as possible. The day was approaching noon, and the pedestrian flow was thick with lunchtime urgency. People disappeared beneath the first-floor awnings and reappeared again a few paces later.

Behind her, she could feel the dragons crowding against her legs. Alissa’s binding served to keep them from actually touching her, but the longer she held onto the creatures, the more aware she became. They didn’t have to touch her for her to feel the heat of their presences, warming her even this close to the drafty window.

When the dragons focused their attention on her, their presence was almost soothing. Cora chewed her bottom lip, considering that development. Now that she had space to think, she realized their nearness wasn't unpleasant at all. She felt warm and, strangely, protected instead of threatened. She definitely didn't feel the alarm that Diane was projecting from across the room.

Cora tried to banish her woolgathering and ignore the dragons, squinting down at the ground. She finally focused on a single figure standing still in front of a quartet of newspaper vending machines. The man's face was upturned, and she recognized him. Salim stared back at her.

She pressed her hand against the glass to stabilize suddenly weak knees. The red scarf fluttered against the windowsill. That bright flash of color drew Salim's gaze up to her. She jerked away from the glass, allowing the drapes to fall.

"You have to tell me about him now," Cora announced, interrupting a nonsense argument between Diane, Alissa and Miranda. "The Collector. Diane?"

Diane grimaced. "He collects spirits."

"A necromancer?"

"No, a shaman. He collects familiars. Animal spirits," Alissa supplied. "I didn't realize dragons were in his menagerie."

"Dragon, because the other belongs to someone else," Miranda corrected. "And one does not collect dragons. One either is or is not a Dragonlord. What a Dragonlord does for recreation, however, is another matter."

"Well, that's the rumor." Diane shrugged. "He's a thief, if you can believe the rumors. He doesn't just collect his own spirits, he collects spirits that already belong to other practitioners."

"It's frowned upon, dear," Miranda said by explanation. "Once a spirit becomes a familiar, it becomes part of the witch's soul. If he takes a familiar, he takes part of the familiar's host as well."

Cora presumed the explanation was directed at her. She didn't know what to say. "Oh" seemed small.

"Any news on the other one?" Diane asked in the direction of the phone.

"Nothing terribly detailed. He was parked in a garage down the street." Miranda sounded cheerful. "And he's at the door now."

Miranda hadn't finished her announcement before Dragonlord number one knocked. A knock was the last thing Cora expected. It was anticlimactic. She'd expected a belch of fire to burn the door down, or maybe a half-solid figure to ooze through the panel seeking to reclaim his other parts so he could be corporeal again. The knock, though—it wasn't even angry. It was a polite knock, a knuckle rap.

Predictably, nobody moved to answer the door. Cora counted to thirty before the Dragonlord knocked again. "Is anybody home?" he called through the panel. His voice was slightly muffled, but the words were clear.

Diane and Alissa looked at one another. Miranda was humming a tuneless song on the phone. Cora

imagined her mother waiting patiently, knitting or something while she watched her bowl, the phone tucked between her ear and her shoulder.

She sighed and crossed the room, muttering to Diane, “Rational adults like coffee.”

Diane took the hint and headed for the kitchen while Cora threw the deadbolt on the door and flipped the flimsy lock on the knob. She drew a deep breath, made sure her robe belt was pulled tight, and opened the door.

The greeting died on her lips. Greg stood with pen and pocket-sized notebook in his hand, poised to write a note. When they saw each other, Greg frowned and tucked the pen back into his shirt pocket.

“Cora? I didn’t realize you lived here,” he said. He dropped the notebook into his jacket pocket, looking over her body in a cursory obtaining-information way. “And I got you out of bed. Forgive me.”

She stood dumbly with the door open, staring at him. He had changed his look since the night—two nights? Cora was losing track of her days—before. His hair was short, stylish and tipped with new toasty blonde lights that reminded her of the beach. Neat, creased blue trousers and a butter-yellow silk shirt continued the beach boy motif. He was everything she’d encountered the first time they met and none of the rage that propelled him the last time they met. Nothing in the world, she decided, could appear more harmless than he did without even trying.

And she was staring. She cleared her throat, tried to regain her train of thought, and said, “I’m a guest.”

“I see.” He nodded.

“Are you going to invite him in?” Cora heard from the living room. She flushed, aware that if she had heard, Greg had as well.

Cora fingered her scarf-bracelets self-consciously. Greg glanced over her shoulder again.

“Is this a bad time?” he asked.

“No, not at all,” Cora lied, wondering whether her mother had made a mistake about the Dragonlord knocking on the door. Greg seemed about as likely to swoop in and stuff a dragon spirit into his soul as she to sprout wings and fly.

Bewildered, she stepped back and waved him into the room. The white scarf fluttered like a welcoming banner. “Please. Come in.”

Greg hesitated. “Are you certain I’m not interrupting?”

Cora bunched her scarves up in her fists, nervous fingers crumpling silk. The dragons had stilled. They remained a steady pressure inside her skull, but they weren’t attempting to draw attention to themselves. She wanted to stop and think about this curious development—to stop and think about *anything* at all so long as she could think instead of act—but Greg was waiting for an answer.

Despite a very dear desire to shut the door in his beautiful face and beg a twenty-minute time out, she swallowed a sigh and nodded. “I’m sure. We’ll have coffee. Do you drink coffee?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Trusting Diane and Alissa to watch her back in the event Greg decided to jump her from behind when she wasn't looking, Cora stole a moment to linger in the doorway and scan the corridor. The elevator down the hall flashed to indicate its ascent. When it reached her floor, the doors opened, and Salim stepped out. He met her eyes, his dark and unreadable, but he didn't approach. She didn't invite him in.

Somebody—either Diane or Alissa—cleared her throat and Cora frowned at Salim. She counted another five seconds. He didn't move or otherwise indicate any intent to approach, so she closed the door. Foremost in her mind, now, was the curious turn of events that continued to bring her, Greg and Salim together. Her fingers shook under the stress of the day as she reset all the locks.

She shoved Salim to the back of her mind out of necessity. A spot check of visible corners inside the apartment showed that Diane and Alissa had crowded into the galley kitchen. The line-in-use light on the telephone glowed green; her mother, while silent, was still listening. Somebody had swept away the black soil around the ritual circle, but a broom and dustpan hadn't erased it entirely.

When Cora glanced up at Greg, he looked from the circle to her and raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps we may talk?"

"Perhaps I should get dressed." She fingered the folds of her robe, acutely aware of her nakedness beneath it.

A soft exasperated noise came from the phone. Cora let it pass without comment. Miranda could spout nonsense about mating calls and ritual sex all she wanted, but Cora didn't buy it for an instant. She was determined to find a solution to this mess that involved neither long-term animal—lizard—care nor abandonment of her birth control. She and Greg would begin by talking. And she would be fully clothed for the conversation.

"I'll be back in a minute," she stated firmly, partially for her objecting, eavesdropping mother's benefit. "After I'm dressed."

Greg nodded, but as Cora moved toward the guest room, he started to follow. She stopped, raised an eyebrow. Greg answered with a sheepish smile and a shrug.

"I've spent every hour since the last time I saw you wishing I hadn't let you out of my sight," he explained. "I'd rather keep you in it now."

From the corner of her eye, Cora saw Diane poke her head from the kitchen. Her big sister was making her presence known in the event Cora needed backup, but instead of alarming her, Greg's words and the lopsided smile that accompanied them eased some of her tension.

"Keep your back turned. Or your eyes closed."

Greg followed her into the bedroom. Alone with him, she wasn't sure what to say. She couldn't offer him a seat because the only candidate was an air mattress with rumpled linens, and drinks were out of the question.

"It's messy, sorry." She opted for the apologetic approach.

"Not at all. Do what you need to do." Greg went to the window and stood with his back to her, still wearing his jacket. "And please, relax," he said without looking her way. "I hope the dragon hasn't been

problematic.”

Cora froze, crouched beside her half-unpacked suitcase. She hadn't expected him to be so direct. “I wouldn't use that word,” she replied after a moment of careful silence.

Greg shrugged. “Disruptive, then, or even inconvenient. I can tell from your anxiety, not to mention the state of your household, that the summons was unplanned.”

She answered with a noncommittal noise and stole a moment to concentrate on dressing herself. Keeping an eye on Greg's back—a lean, delicious triangle capping a fantastic ass, she noted—she pulled a pair of panties up over her hips and followed up with faded jeans, completing her armor with a cotton camisole and an oversized sweater. The dragon-leashes made the whole process a little trickier than it should have been.

“You've a remarkable talent,” Greg said. “I've never met anybody who could issue a call of such strength. The dragon didn't even resist it, and believe me, it could have resisted.”

“You didn't have any say in the matter?”

Greg shook his head. He still hadn't turned around, for which Cora was grateful. She would not argue with one fewer set of eyes watching her.

“It doesn't work that way. I'm not the master; I'm a partner.” Greg turned around while Cora was lowering herself to sit on the air mattress. He didn't seem to notice the graceless way her butt sank down to nearly touch the hardwood floor beneath it.

He came over and crouched in front of her, close enough that their knees almost touched. He smelled like soap and coffee. “We respect each other, the dragon and I. And it seems to respect you as well, or at the very least, your ability to summon.”

She fingered her scarves, studying his hands where they rested on his thighs. She hadn't exactly sensed respect from either of the dragons. Resentment, affection, and violence, however—those reactions were blatantly apparent when they surfaced. She suddenly, vividly remembered the first moments after she came to. Whichever dragon had responded to her call first had not been happy to be called. The remembrance of her near-rape made her stiffen.

“Which one is yours?” she asked abruptly. She didn't need to ask; Greg and his dragon shared the same unexpected rage. She needed to know whether he would be honest, though.

It took so long for Greg to answer that she looked up at his face. His eyebrows were drawn together in confusion, but he quickly composed his features. “Which one is my what?”

“Your dragon. I have two.” She held up each hand, lending each scarf a little twitch with a flick of her wrists. “Which one is yours?”

“You summoned two dragons,” Greg murmured. “Remarkable.” He reached to touch the white scarf. Cora pulled her hand back before he could make contact.

“The colors correspond?” he asked, frowning at her retreat. “Mine is the white.”

She made a mental note to pass the info along to her mother. Perhaps research into the colors wouldn't

be a pointless endeavor. Nor would research into the men—no, the Dragonlords' backgrounds.

“Cora, listen,” Greg said abruptly. “It can't be good for you to be in such close proximity with not one, but two dragons. Let me at least take mine off your hands, and free you up to cope with the other one. I'll help you.”

The mattress creaked when Cora shifted to hide both hands behind her back. *They're mine, not yours*, were the first words to come to her lips, but she managed to hold them at bay. They were irrational words. She didn't even *want* the damned things. Still, she refused with a lie. “The bindings can't be released until the sun comes up tomorrow.”

“Ah, right.”

Cora thought his mouth tightened, but she couldn't be sure.

“You should know why they're here, then. I wouldn't leave you alone with them if I had any other choice. Without the choice, though, I want you to be informed.”

“I appreciate that,” she said. She could already feel tension easing. “What do I need to know?”

Chapter Ten

Greg settled down to sit on the floor, crossing his ankles. He sloughed off his jacket. Cora allowed herself to appreciate his physique, but didn't permit herself to crawl onto his lap, tempting as the idea was. She did grant herself the fantasy while he gathered his thoughts. No harm in wondering whether he would be slow and soft or fast and hard.

“You issued a mating call,” Greg began. Cora felt her cheeks heat up. Hearing it from his mouth was worlds different from hearing her mother say it. She just knew this conversation wasn't going to distract her from the urge to slip down and straddle his muscular thighs.

“While the dragons are intelligent creatures, they're also intensely emotional. They're instinct-driven. What you did was the equivalent of any other animal releasing a scent.”

She crossed her legs and drew a pillow onto her lap to mask the fragrance of her body. Greg's voice was low. Cora glanced at his face and decided that no, he wasn't trying to seduce her. He had the vanilla expression of a teacher relating information. Good. If he could be a teacher, she could be a student.

“Since you drew both dragons at the same time, you've become an issue of territory to them. They'll attempt to win your favor, but they will also attempt to best one another and claim dominance.”

So she had found herself in possession of the means to live every woman's fantasy, with two males trying to one-up one another in the pleasure arena in order to gain her approval. The only problem with this scenario was the species of her males. Cora pursed her lips and eyed Greg sidelong. A devilish little part of her said, “Wouldn't mating with me be anatomically difficult for them?”

He paused, his expression startled. She noted with some satisfaction that his manhood had stirred subtly

at the question, its outline growing against the cloth of his trousers. Cross-legged as he was sitting, he couldn't shift to hide his half-hardness. Cora had partial success with suppressing her smile.

"It's very important that you retain a rational, logical upper hand when dealing with them," Greg said, a bit more stiffly to Cora's ears. "As creatures of emotion and instinct, they will attempt to dominate you when you demonstrate actions founded in emotion and instinct."

A girl didn't spend half her life on the fringes of the goth set of NYC without picking up at least a little knowledge of alternative sexualities. When Greg dropped that innocent little word into the mix, Cora's pulse quickened. While she had never considered herself particularly submissive or dominant, she wasn't immune to the titillation of a power exchange. Her aroused hormones, teased to life by the affectionate dragons, stirred up an image of herself tied to Diane's big bed, Greg and the dragons surrounding her.

The moment she pulled the dragons to mind and actively pictured them, they rolled to life at her fingertips. She stopped listening to Greg. She couldn't help it. Before, the dragons had been active while she was distracted by panic and too many people, all with something to say. Now that it was just her, Greg, and the dragons, they pressed against her with the full weight of *real*. She struggled to keep her eyes open. By turns, they whispered wordless promises of intense pleasure.

Cora rubbed her wrists, tangling the white and red scarves together. Heat shot through her body; she gasped. White surged up, overwhelming her vision—something deeper than mere vision. She felt consumed, as she had during those first few minutes of awareness when she and the dragon were in the circle together. Greg faded into the background, his voice as well as his body. Instead of naked on a cold, hardwood floor, Cora found herself spread out on satin-draped stone.

She could see the dragon above her. When shadows shifted in one direction, the creature resembled the fairytale monster, all fiery scales and iridescent wings, intense eyes, clawed hands and feet doing the job of shackles and holding her pinned at wrists and ankles. A heavy, hot weight pressed against her mound, nestled against her clit. She had no defense against it, limbs splayed and anchored as they were.

With the rational part of her brain screaming about abominations and the irrational part humming with excitement at the *rightness* of this, Cora lifted her head to look down the length of her body. When she moved, her vision stuttered, blanked, returned in the same loop, but the dragon had changed. A man hovered above her in the dragon's shadow—part of the dragon, part of its shadow. She couldn't make out his features, just knew that she knew him. He pressed her down with a kiss and whispered something; she strained to hear what he said.

Instead, she heard Greg's voice, the second half of a sentence: "...nothing you can do to reverse it. You must choose one or the other or they'll kill each other trying to win you."

Cora's fantasy/nightmare stopped cold. Her palms were sweaty. Greg was looking at her as if she had two heads. She was not only disturbed at the direction her libido had taken but also at the sinister conclusion to Greg's explanation of her choices. She needed to move, to outrun the throb between her legs, but when she started to stand, he grabbed her wrist.

"Don't touch me," she snapped, yanking her hand back. She was too sensitive after the fantasy... whatever it was—too real to be imagined—after her rendezvous with the dragon, its surprise attack.

Greg let go, but a scrap of white silk fluttered down onto his open palm. One knot remained in the silk. Cora felt her stomach drop.

“You untied it,” she whispered, unsure herself whether it was a question or an accusation.

He folded his fingers around the scarf, balled it up in his big hand. “I didn’t. It must’ve come loose.” He reached to touch her knee with his other hand, said gently, “You have to be careful. I don’t know what happened just now, but I know *something* did.”

She ignored him and put her head between her knees, looping her arms around her ankles. The position was undignified, but she didn’t want to look at Greg, and she couldn’t breathe, so it killed two birds with one stone. He touched her hair, and she flinched. Her scalp tingled.

“Talk to me. I want to help you deal with this.”

“If you want to help, take yours back.”

He wrapped a lock of her hair around his finger, caressing her ear and making her shiver. Goosebumps tingled on her skin. Greg frightened her; his anger, the bizarre possessiveness he’d displayed when they last met, and his connection with the violent dragon, all made her regret allowing him to be alone with her behind a closed door.

“I could,” he said, “but that won’t make it go away.”

Cora broke away from his touch and struggled to her feet. Her knees were weak, and her head swam with the sudden move, but she shook it off and wobbled across the room. “I’m not going to participate in this.”

“Then let them kill one another.” Greg’s voice was neutral. “I wouldn’t like to lose this part of myself, and I doubt the other—what did you call us? Dragonlords?—the other Dragonlord would be happy with the demise of his dragon. It is, however, your choice.”

She cast a withering look over her shoulder. “I don’t appreciate the amateur attempt at guilt-tripping me, and you’d have to mean a lot more to me than you do for that to work.”

Greg ran a hand through his hair. “Do you think I don’t understand how precarious your position is? You made a mistake and stumbled into something you wouldn’t have voluntarily gotten into had you known the facts. Now you have to deal with it, but the solution requires a sacrifice you’re either not willing to make, or not ready to make.”

When she didn’t say anything in response, Greg went on. “Traditionally, courtship with a dragon spans years. You undergo very specific instruction as to methods of control and self-preservation, yes, but you also learn about history and legend. You engage directly with the dragon, as well as with its lord, and work to form a bond together.”

“This is so medieval,” Cora said, grimacing. She saw Greg’s reflection in the window shrug.

“You say medieval; I say traditional. It’s a matter of perspective. Cora, you have choices. You can choose one of the dragons and alleviate their inclination to destroy one another, or you can refuse to make a choice and let them do what they will. I can’t speak for the other Dragonlord, but if you choose mine, I’ll promise you the courtship time as well as the education before pressing you into contact with myself or the dragon.”

Greg rose from the floor and she turned around to face him. "I'm not interested in a mate-for-life kind of deal," she told him. "I'm not even interested in a mate-for-temporary surrogate mother thing. I'm interested in *my* life, and making choices about who I want to spend any of my time with, let alone all of my time."

"I expect that from any normal woman. You're not normal, though."

She narrowed her eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He gestured toward her wrists and flapped the red scarf in her direction. "You have a connection with dragons, and it doesn't have anything to do with bedtime stories. I think you know what the connection is, or at least have some idea, if only because you haven't yet rejected this for lunacy."

Cora heard a shuffle of footsteps outside her door, a reminder that she and Greg weren't alone. More, it was a reminder that she had another resource besides this veritable stranger. He was right. She did have a connection, if the family old wives' tales could be believed. She had to investigate those tales before she proceeded any further. It would be too easy to reject Greg, the dragons, the entire affair, out of hand, but a small part of her, the part of her that hadn't been stripped of the ability to dream, was reluctant to decry all involvement. So, while her mother and sister might be certifiable in their own rights, Cora decided to consult with them before she made any decisions.

To Greg, she said simply, "I need to think about this. About everything. I'll keep both the dragons with me for now." She held her hand out.

He moved closer and re-knotted the scarf around her wrist. With the return of the scarf, she felt a surge of warmth.

When he finished, he turned to look out the window. Cora half-turned to keep an eye on his profile and another eye on the street. Part of her didn't want Greg to take her decision to remain undecided as a cue to leave. Even though they hadn't been sitting quietly, shut away with Greg was the most quiet she'd had all morning. She finally had enough space to think.

The first thing she had to address, right after every other "first thing" that needed addressing, was the issue of the hostile dragon. She wanted to ask Greg about it, but didn't know how to proceed.

"You have a question," Greg said abruptly. Cora blinked, looked up to find him watching her. He was leaning against the windowsill, his arms folded across his chest in a casual pose. She didn't remember him turning around at all.

"I do," she hedged, trying to decide which question she wanted to ask. Instinct told her to play her cards close, so she went with, "When they first came, I was able to talk with them. Now I don't have that same level of communication."

Something flashed in Greg's eyes. He, she surmised, was playing his cards close as well.

"What'd they say?" he asked.

"It. Only one of them talked."

"And?"

“It wanted me to release it.” She canted her head, watching him. Except for the brief glimmer of darkening in his eyes moments ago, he was the picture of neutral. He hadn’t been five minutes earlier, though, when they were sitting on the floor. That first stiffening of his cock had marked him as interested in more than an academic sense, and she took it as proof that he had more invested in his dragon and her involvement with both dragons, than he was letting on.

“What if I had released it? What if it was yours demanding release?” she asked.

His neutrality didn’t budge. “Then we’d be in a different situation than we are now,” he answered. “I wouldn’t have come to you. I would have followed it to its alternative destination.”

“Would you be having this same conversation with somebody else?”

He hesitated. She marked his hesitation for future consideration and waited patiently for his answer. He seemed to be searching for the right thing to say. She pictured his mind kicking into rewind, going back over everything that had come before. Finally, his neutrality broke, and he sighed in frustration.

“I don’t know whether I’d be here or not. You called it. Everything I know about dragon essences, especially mine, and their commitment to their summoner, says they won’t leave a summoner. Especially not a summons to mate.”

“Then why—”

“I don’t *know* why it wanted freedom!” he snapped. Anger, then horror, slid across his face, ending on disbelief. “I’m sorry,” he all but whispered. “You’re asking questions I can’t answer.”

They stood together in silence for a long time, Greg looking out the window, Cora studying her hands. She didn’t know what to say to him. If this were any other situation, she’d apologize for driving him to lose his temper. She made a point to avoid emotional upsets of any kind, to strive for neutrality. At least, she’d been more aware before her nightmares and insomnia began.

Remembering the nightmares, she shuddered. With every passing minute, she grew more convinced that nothing was coincidence—not the fire, not her subsequent nightmares about fire breathing monsters, not meeting Greg and Salim, not the dragons tied to her wrists. If not coincidence, though, what else?

The conversation didn’t revive itself. Eventually, Greg murmured a need to return to his office. Cora walked to the door with him. Neither Diane nor Alissa were anywhere in sight.

She didn’t want to open the door for fear that Salim would be in the corridor waiting. Her strength was flagging, her muscles trembling as if they’d been rung out to dry. She felt, justifiably, as if she were going insane.

Greg touched her arm, and she bit back a scream.

“It’s not about being a surrogate mother,” he murmured. “It’s about keeping a legend alive.”

She stared at him.

He flushed, but didn’t step out into the hall. “I’m worried about you.”

Her eyes stung with tears. She tried to fight them back, remaining silent with the effort, but the change in

Greg's expression told her how unsuccessful she was at hiding it.

He arched his eyebrows. She hesitated before shoving her hand toward him, the white scarf offered up. "Take it with you. I know it won't make this go away for good, but I need some relief."

For a moment, he looked as if she had slapped him. His expression smoothed, though, before she could take it back. He slipped his fingers beneath the knotted bracelet, his skin warm at her pulse point.

"How's this work, exactly?" he asked.

"The knot against my skin is a barrier to keep it at bay, while the knot at the end serves to keep it within reach." She grimaced. "It doesn't make sense, does it?"

"It makes sense." He slid the white tie free and folded it into his pocket, then reached for the door. "Call me if you need anything."

After Greg left, Cora locked the door and sat down to lean against it. She buried her face in her knees, trying to stave off both tears and hyperventilation. It wouldn't do to break down when Salim showed up.

Chapter Eleven

He gave Cora more time than she'd anticipated. The dragon, however, didn't give her much time at all. It was more active than with its companion/rival. While she sat huddled on the floor, she felt the dragon-essence fold around her like a blanket. It nudged at her awareness the way a cat butts its head against a friendly hand. She sniffed, rubbed her eyes hard with the heels of her palms, and opened her eyes. Even though sunlight poured through the big living room window, the apartment felt dark. Her sister had yet to emerge, and the speakerphone light was dark.

She and the dragon were completely alone. How did one entertain a magical creature, anyway? Tea seemed too dainty, and far too proper, given recent mental plays. The memory of that, of her naked vulnerability and the strangeness, the intimacy, of the monster-myth, made her shudder. The dragon recoiled when she did, leaving her to wonder at its queer reaction while she got up to splash her face with cool water.

In the mirror, her cheeks were red and her eyes fever-bright. For a moment, she considered the possibility that she was having fever dreams, and even went so far as to pop the end of Diane's mercury thermometer beneath her tongue. Without a watch, she had to count the time off in her head by approximating the seconds. It gave her more needed time to think.

Giving the white dragon over to Greg didn't seem like a terrifically logical choice now that the decision was made. Sure, there was some relief. One is always easier than two, anyway. But what if she'd chosen the wrong one to keep near? She still didn't know how *totalk* to it, and if she did, what would she say? *Hey, did you try to rape me this morning?*

The dragon thrust against the backs of her legs, jostling her against the sink and dislodging the thermometer. Cora caught it before it broke in the basin and glanced over her shoulder warily, albeit to no avail. It was habit. She couldn't actually see the dragon.

“Stop it,” she muttered and turned her attention to the thermometer. Normal temp, great. She couldn’t blame it all on feverish hallucinations. Disappointed, she shook the mercury down and replaced the thermometer. The dragon didn’t bother her again while she splashed her face with cool water, and it remained docile when she went out to the kitchen.

She managed to pour a big cappuccino mug of coffee and get cinnamon and vanilla from the cupboard before Salim tapped at the door. She knew it was him and knew without a doubt that the red dragon was his, as she felt it perk up at his proximity. Reluctant to put an end to her respite, she rested her forehead against the base of the cupboard door and waited for a second knock. It didn’t come. He hadn’t left, though; the dragon told her that. It practically vibrated with awareness that Salim was close.

Leaving the coffee on the counter, Cora paced to the door and flung it open. “Tell me how to talk to it,” she demanded immediately.

Salim didn’t bat an eyelash. “Tell me who told you how to call it.”

That drew her up short. He reached out and enfolded her wrist in his hand, the scarf trapped between them. “You need to address it properly, but there aren’t any words for it. If you ask again, I’ll show you.”

Opting to proceed with caution, she tugged her hand away from him. “I’ll think about it.”

“They aren’t about thinking.” He moved into the apartment, pressing her backward without so much as a single touch. It was his presence alone, the danger she perceived in the prospect of touching him at all.

He closed the door, and she felt her stomach knot up with returning anxiety. She didn’t know what questions he would ask, or what answers he had already pieced together for himself. Neither Diane nor Alissa were in the background making themselves a buffer for her, and her mother wasn’t on speakerphone anymore. Cora was utterly alone with him—and to her sinking horror, her body began to sizzle. She couldn’t be near him without her body responding, so she fled across the room to establish some distance between them.

Salim, thankfully, did not follow her. He did watch her go, though, a slight quirk to his eyebrows displaying his curiosity about her retreat.

“I need some air,” she announced, hoping fresh air would provide some relief to the stew of anxiety and arousal bubbling in her stomach.

“You’ll need shoes.” Salim moved to crouch outside Diane’s ritual circle and made a study of the circle’s relation to the window. Finding no reason to disagree with his assessment, she fetched a pair of running shoes. He was still squinting at the ribbons of sky peeping between buildings when she finished tying the laces.

She stood up, and suddenly he was in front of her, catching her face between his hands. She stopped breathing. Salim tipped her head back, searched her eyes. Anxiety and arousal reached the critical point and exploded inside. Cora wrapped her fingers around his wrists and surged up on her toes to mash her mouth against his, taking advantage of his surprise to push her tongue past his teeth.

Salim clutched her nape and pulled her high against his chest, speaking readiness with his body instead of his mouth. She wanted more of his body. Her dance floor fantasy resurfaced, along with the wild urge to

impale herself on his cock. While Salim devoured her lips, Cora groped for the zipper that would give her access to his manhood—already hard against her abdomen. She scraped the backs of her knuckles on the metal teeth, but the sting only just penetrated the suffocating fog of desire. Eventually, she wrenched the zipper down far enough to push her hand into his jeans.

She couldn't summon any finesse, didn't want lovemaking. Salim seemed to sense her need for fucking. He sucked her lips hard enough to make her whimper, then ducked his head low and pushed her chin up with his nose, closed his teeth around a muscle in her throat. His hands fell to her hips, fingers spreading over her ass and lower until he could grab the backs of her thighs. She lost her balance, stumbled when he pushed his fingertips up against her heat from behind, and used the motion to bring her up against his groin.

Her whole body quivered, muscles tense and wary and trembling with need all at once. The teeth at her throat gave her pause, and she squeezed her eyes shut while squeezing her fingers around his shaft. Anticipation held her still, her heart racing toward escape velocity. This was dominance and submission, and she knew it. He had her by the throat, and that gave him all the power in the world.

Salim responded the minute she made the realization; his soft growl sounded like approval to her ears. He rubbed the whole of his hand between her legs, squeezing denim and satin and delicate flesh, and he didn't let go. He used his grip on her neck and her pussy to hold her. She felt like a caught kitten, helpless to move.

The dragon was trapped between them. It vibrated with excitement. She saw herself again, spread out on her back and held down, and it excited instead of sickened her now. Salim's cock twitched in her hand, thrusting a new spear of arousal into her core.

He used his body to walk her backward. The rubber soles of her sneakers squeaked on the waxed wood floor, and a pulse in her abdomen fluttered with want of him, with desire to be spread open and filled. Dreamily, she watched the ceiling reel past as Salim bore her backward into Diane's empty bedroom. He bit her throat, pulling skin taut and making her stomach clench in a heady blend of fear and curiosity – would he bite until blood welled into his mouth, or leave her skin unbroken?

She didn't bleed. He sucked hard nips down her throat, pausing to open his mouth wide over her pulse. Every time his mouth pulled on her skin, he squeezed her mound. She groaned, grinding her crotch against his hand, weak-kneed and ready to come. Before she could build to that crescendo, he lifted his head, moved his hand to her hip and spun her around to push her onto the bed. She knelt amidst a luscious, red expanse of tangled satin sin and the big dark man behind her, with his hand spread across her stomach, beneath her sweater and climbing to squeeze her breast, was going to fuck her until she screamed into the red pillows. She couldn't wait, tore at the hem of her sweater to wrestle it up and over her head.

There were questions to be asked, but she couldn't remember what they were. Salim bit her shoulder, bumped his erection up against her ass, between her thighs from behind. He explored the curve between her shoulder and her ear, and she slid her fingers down over her own fly and groped until she found the head of his cock. He groaned into her ear, rocked forward to plant himself in her hand.

“This,” he rasped, his breath harsh and erratic as he gripped both her breasts and rolled the hard nipples between his fingers, “is how you talk to it. You *want* it. It's the only thing in the world you receive by wanting strong enough.”

He squeezed her breasts one last time, and they swung heavily when he released them to reach for the

snap of her jeans. He moved and bucked free of her hand, pushed jeans and panties down past the swell of her hips and over her thighs.

“That doesn’t make any sense.” But she didn’t care. She could see herself, with Salim behind her, reflected in the mirror on the back of the closet door. Her body was round and pale and smooth, every inch, except the glistening slit between her thighs. She watched in panting fascination as Salim’s fingers returned to her stomach, as he traced the gleam of wetness with a single fingertip.

“It’s not supposed to,” he murmured, flicking his fingertip across the tight bell of her clitoris.

Her breath lurched and wheezed, and her head lolled against his chest. She couldn’t bear to watch it, his hand roaming her groin. She met his eyes in the mirror and flushed. He was watching her examine herself, all the while petting her slippery lips. Cora shifted restlessly. Where was her hard, mindless fucking now? The pace had changed, and she wasn’t sure what to do about it. Scarlet fluttered at her waist, the dragon scarf spilling down to obscure the obscene color of her desire. She held Salim’s hand still, angled her head to see his face, but he swooped to kiss her again.

Right became left and up down when he stole her breath with his lips. Salim turned her and satin slid against the backs of her thighs, beneath her shoulders as she tumbled backward into the sheets. One by one Salim lifted her feet, popped her sneakers off and let them drop to the floor. Her stomach, soft when she was upright, flattened and hollowed as she stretched across the bed. She was embarrassed by the way gravity pulled her breasts and sought to cover them while Salim pulled her jeans down over her feet and tossed them aside to join her sneakers.

Suddenly, he was on the bed with her, hands and knees straddling her. Her toes grazed the floor, feet still hanging over the edge of the bed. Salim crawled up and touched her wrists. “Stop thinking,” he instructed and fanned her arms away from her chest.

She glanced down, past the swell of her breasts, nipples soft and pink and pale, past the hill of her ribcage, and saw that he still jutted from the fly of his jeans. She curled her fingers close, remembering the weight of him in her hand, and dug the back of her head down into the comforter.

He wanted her to stop thinking, and she wanted him to stop stalling. She squirmed, slipping easily on satin, until she got her feet up onto the edge of the mattress and lifted her hips to bump his cock. She watched, fascinated, as his hardness bobbed above her. “I’m not thinking,” she promised.

And she wasn’t. Too much had led her to the precipice of saturation. Too much anxiety, too much confusion, too much frustrated arousal, too much time awake without sleep, too much time alone without sex. Everything would right itself here and now. Cora almost started crying when Salim leaned down and licked the soft, flaccid center of her nipple. His ponytail fell to fan into her armpit, a sensual rather than ticklish touch.

Propped on his forearms, caressing the outermost curves of her breasts, his lips pulled at her nipple patiently. She was rewarded by his weight when she finally responded to his mouth, when the peak stiffened. Every nerve ending across her chest tingled; she felt her ignored nipple respond to its twin’s treatment as her breasts swelled to a firm, begging roundness. Salim stroked up the hollows of her armpits, up tender triceps, from her elbows to her wrists and held her hands down while he worshipped her body.

She didn’t even notice when he untied the red scarf, not until the ends trailed past her ear, not until he wrapped it around his fingers and reached between her thighs.

Chapter Twelve

Cora's eyes flew open, searching for explanation in Salim's face. He hung back, watching her while he drew a silk circle around her entrance. She shuddered, pressed her hips into the bed, wanting him to go on more than she wanted him to stop.

"I'm going to take it back," he explained, voice low and thick with sex, "but it's still yours. The way you have it now, it's only half a thing. I want you to know the whole thing."

"I'm not choosing you." Her own voice was too harsh, too vehement; her body too invested in his to present a united front.

For his part, he smiled. "You don't have to."

He moved away and, leaving the splash of red to nestle into the dip of her navel, divested himself of his clothing. Cora didn't bother covering herself; her arms remained outstretched where he'd placed them. She relished her own open vulnerability, wanted to wallow in the intensity of feeling so irrevocably feminine. She only briefly considered pressing her thighs together to disguise her own scent, unmasked by soap or perfume. In the end, she decided he wasn't a man for perfume and splayed her thighs wider, until she could feel cool air stirring against her sodden heat.

When he was naked and kneeling on the bed again, between pale thighs, he finished freeing the dragon from its binding. Cora held her breath, watching the change in him. Everything—*everything*—became bigger, more powerful, more commandingly *present*. He was beautiful on his own with desert-dusky skin, dark body hair lending a fine shadow to his limbs. When the dragon returned to him, though, he became more than beautiful. It was like watching the earth suck up rainfall after a drought. Her mouth went dry.

"I'm not choosing you," she whispered. "I didn't *call* you—didn't try to steal from you."

His mouth came down on her stomach, kissing and nipping as he cupped the backs of her thighs and raised her knees until her feet came to the mattress. "Haven't you figured it out?" he asked against her skin.

He used his thumbs to open her up, to stretch the edges of her core, and when his tongue delved inside, she forgot the question. She wouldn't have been able to answer it anyway. His tongue seemed to go forever; he tasted pleasure spots that made her ears and toes tingle. She saw stars, and then she saw the dragon.

Salim didn't change, nothing beyond subtle physical shifts. The dragon emerged behind him like some manner of guardian. She clutched her breasts, stiff peaks pressing into her palms, unsure why she sought to cover herself. The dragon reached for her, and her whole body jerked. It was like being touched by a thunderstorm, sent her nerves into electric spasms and made her blood boom in her ears. Salim's fingers slid easily, deeply into her heat, curled and scissored against the knot nestled up in its secret place. He touched his tongue to her clitoris and thrust his fingers, wetly pistoning. Her back bowed, and she thought she would come off the bed.

Cora clutched handfuls of satin and prayed that she wouldn't go up in smoke. She couldn't hold her body still anymore. Distantly, she knew the bedsprings were creaking and the movement was all her, but immediately she was far more concerned with the dragon and the man. She twisted wildly beneath Salim, thrusting her pussy against his face. She reached not for him, but for the dragon.

Salim rose up and came down between her legs to fill her. She gasped. It felt like the first breath she'd taken in hours, filling her lungs and rejuvenating her ravaged nerves. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, hitched her thighs up high around his hips, and let Salim fuck her while the dragon's talons drew through her hair, while it held her gaze and swallowed her up in blazing eyes.

The man pounded the forgiving softness of her body, bit her shoulder and her bicep and her breast. The dragon soothed her, stroked the teeth-bruises away as soon as they appeared. Dimly, she realized they were about balance; the dragon allowed Salim savagery, and Salim allowed the dragon tenderness.

Understanding confused her. Her body continued to respond, meeting Salim thrust for thrust. He came, and she felt every twitch of his cock spending itself. She shuddered with him, a pleasure so intense it numbed her skin. She strained to hold both Salim and the dragon at once. As Salim softened, the dragon returned to him. He slumped panting between her breasts. His hair had come loose and lay tangled across her shoulders, the crown of his head nestled beneath her chin.

Dark had fallen outside, an entire day lost in the recesses of Diane's bed. Cora watched the moon behind the jagged skyline, stroking Salim's back from shoulder to hip and back again. She was angry with herself. Physically, she'd been there with Salim until the very end, and tiny deep muscles continued to throb with aftershocks. Mentally, however, she'd allowed herself to be distracted by the puzzle of the dragon. She wanted to apologize for her distraction, but firmly made apologies off limits.

"Tell me the dragon's name," she said, instead of apologizing.

"When he was younger and still part of legend, his subjects called him *Da'arEs Saleem*. He was the father and the protector." Salim lifted his head, kissed her breast, and moved to sit on the edge of the bed. Rolling onto her side, Cora watched him dispose of a condom. She didn't recall him donning one in the first place, but was silently grateful that he, at least, hadn't been stupid with lust.

"Stay here," he said and rose from the bed. He left the room, still naked. Cora watched him leave. His testicles were a shadow between his thighs, reminding her of their joining all over again.

Straightening herself on the bed so her feet weren't hanging off, she rolled onto her side and hugged her cheek into a pillow. Sleep pulled at her eyelids; she didn't have the energy to worry about nightmares. Salim would return soon, anyway, and wake her before any of her monsters had the time to get too worked up. Reassured by his presence, she stretched deep under the comforter and curled her toes into the welcoming warmth.

"Who are you calling?"

Salim's voice jolted her awake but she didn't want to wake up. She squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm sleeping," she mumbled. "Let me sleep."

Hands pushed on her shoulders; Cora shrugged the touch away. "Just a little while."

"You can sleep or you can make a call, but you can't do both." Salim tugged on her wrist. Cora pulled

away from him, balling her hand into a fist. Salim didn't relent. She whimpered when he pinched the tender place between her thumb and forefinger. "Let go, Cora."

Angry that he'd hurt her, Cora bolted upright and wrenched her hand from his grasp. "I said leave me alone!"

Salim let her go. He leaned to put the telephone receiver back on the receiver. Diane had an old-fashioned rotary phone; the bell inside chimed as Salim accidentally rattled it. "Who were you trying to call?" he asked, twisting on the bed to face her.

"I wasn't trying to call anybody. I was trying to sleep. *I was* sleeping until you came in," she complained. She tried to slink down into the blankets again.

"Cora—"

"Please," she said into her pillow. She wanted to return to the quiet darkness so badly she could taste her own yearning.

Salim's weight left the bed. Cora slitted her eyes to watch him leave the room. The breeze of his passing fluttered a slip of white paper that was stuck to the outside face of the bedroom door. She sat up, and squinted at the writing on it, but couldn't read the words. How had she missed it before now? Something instinctive warned her that the note was more than "out for milk, be right back." Worry gnawing at her stomach, she willed the ache of exhaustion to recede and slid off the bed. She struggled into her discarded panties and camisole, not bothering to turn either right side out, and wobbled for the door.

Don't sleep with either of them!! D.

Great. Now what?

Salim stopped on the threshold and raised his eyebrows at the note. "Timely," he murmured.

"Did you see this?"

"I only saw you."

She snatched the handwritten note off the door, tape coming away with flecks of wood varnish imbedded in the adhesive. Diane hadn't written anything else on the other side; no clarification, no time for when she'd be back, no nothing. Worry morphed into anxiety and sat heavy around Cora's heart. She had to make an effort to breathe. What had she done? She'd told Salim she wasn't choosing him, and he in turn said she didn't have to. What did that mean?

Salim radiated heat and the longer she stood beside him, the warmer she became. When she realized the warmth was more than mere surface temperature, she slapped the note back on the door and backed away. "You have to leave," she said, not looking at him. She reached for the rest of her discarded clothes.

"Why? Because you're frightened?"

"Yes." She dressed quickly. "Because I still don't know what to do. Because there was one thing I shouldn't have done, and I did it anyway."

Salim caught her elbow while she was trying to right her jeans and pulled them from her hands. "Tell me who you were talking to."

"I wasn't talking to anybody!" She blew an exasperated breath. "Why do you keep asking me that?"

He tightened his grip on her elbow and cupped her chin with his other hand, lifting her face toward his. He'd lost his glasses during their lovemaking. Without them, his pupils dilated until only a rim of brown remained. "I left you to clean up and when I came back, you had the phone at your ear and you were dialing. That's why I keep asking."

"You must've seen it wrong," Cora said. She had no recollection of making any phone calls. She remembered the blessed heaviness of sleep, though, and wished she could return to it. "Who would I have been calling, anyway?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out." He let her go and reached for his clothes.

His hair was still loose and mussed. Cora thought his cheeks were flushed, perhaps feverish, but the longer she examined him, the more certain she became that the flush was the physical manifestation of his dragon aspect while it was laying dormant. A foolish romantic part of her wanted to crawl into his arms and stay with him forever. The sex had been amazing, the dragon was fascinating, and Salim seemed well-adjusted enough for having lived with a dragon his entire life, and had gone on to build an entire menagerie for himself.

"People call you the Collector," she said, remembering.

The comment caught him off guard, and he raised his eyebrows. "They don't understand what I do."

"What—"

"Shh." He put his fingers to her lips and finished dressing. He spent some time looking for his glasses before finally locating them under a carelessly discarded pillow. Cora heard the sound of Diane's key in the lock. She jumped to scramble into her own jeans. Diane's return reminded her of the note, the warning to keep her pants on, and the romantic fancies of happily-ever-after with Salim dissipated.

Chapter Thirteen

"I can't believe you slept with him," Diane said, exasperated. "At least it was good." She examined Cora with a critical eye while untying her scarf.

Before Cora could respond, Salim emerged from the bedroom behind her. Diane's eyes widened. "I *really* can't believe you slept with *him*," she hissed.

Cora resisted an urge to look over her shoulder and make sure she and Diane were talking about the same person. She couldn't figure out why the loathing for Salim. Sure, he had a rep for dipping his fingers in other witches' cookie jars, but there had to be worse things. He could create voodoo dolls and torture people, or sacrifice children, or indulge any number of other despicable perversions.

“Didn’t you see my note?”

“Yeah. After.”

“Where’d Greg go?”

It seemed like forever ago that Greg had left the apartment. Cora frowned, trying to come up with an answer for Diane. She didn’t want to talk about this right now. She wanted a nap, a shower, the coffee she still hadn’t managed to consume, and another go beneath Salim. Maybe on top, this time, actually. Diane was moving to insert herself between Cora and Salim, though; the odds of an encore performance weren’t looking good.

“Hopefully not anywhere where he can tell anybody what’s going on,” Diane said.

“I can’t believe I’m stuck in a goth~~ton~~ scandal,” Cora said. She went to nuke her long-cold coffee.

Diane followed her into the kitchen. “Alissa and I went to do some private eye stuff,” she said. “Trying to dig up some information about connections between Greg and Salim. I wouldn’t have left you alone if I’d known Salim would come back. He was nowhere in sight when we left.”

Cora shrugged. “What did you find out?”

“Nothing. Just a retelling of the scene they made the other night,” Diane admitted. “Mom said it doesn’t have anything to do with them, though. Apparently it’s all related to the moon, but what isn’t when she’s involved?” She made a face.

Cora took that as a rhetorical question. Toting her too-hot coffee, she moved past Diane and went to the living room window. Salim apparently had the same idea.

“Some things are entirely sun-bound,” he said when she drew near.

Behind her, Diane huffed annoyance. “Eavesdropper.”

“Stop it,” Cora said. To Salim, she added, “You have to go.”

He turned away from the window and gathered up his jacket, gone before Cora had time to decide whether to ask how to contact him. He took the dragon with him. She’d spent mere hours with both his and Greg’s dragons; most of that time had been divided between fear, panic, and confusion. She already missed the brief time of connection; the absence of the dragons, now that she had known and experienced them, left an acute sensory void. She’d grown accustomed to them. Hell, she even *missed* Salim’s dragon aspect. Sighing, she left the wide-eyed moon to stare at the city and went into Diane’s bedroom to strip her sheets. Diane

followed.

“What about you?” she asked. “What did you find out?”

Cora crumpled the sheets into a ball and stuffed them into a wicker hamper, watching Diane from the corner of her eye. “I saw the dragon. I want to read the diary,” she said.

Diane retrieved fresh linens—soothing neutral cream—from the bathroom linen closet. “This is

dangerous. I can feel it. And it's my fault, telling you to find your spiritual side and dragging you here."

"I don't think it's your fault. Ma seemed to think it was inevitable."

"Yeah, well, she's who she is."

"And suddenly you don't believe?"

"I didn't say that," Diane protested. "Just saying that everything can't be taken literally. The myth, the diary – they're symbolic, not truth. Who knows if there's any real truth in the Dragonkeeper legend at all? I certainly haven't spent my life preparing to be the virgin sacrifice, and besides, Dad isn't exactly draconic. Neither was Granddad."

"I don't think it's something you notice unless you know it's there. Not consciously. I guess Ma could be withholding information, though."

"Do you think maybe she's not telling us something?"

"Possible. Probably. We need to get her to talk. And I think I should talk to Greg again. He said he could help me learn about the dragons."

"I don't even know how he got involved in this. Or how he's been in New York this long without anybody noticing his spirit affinity. You realize *nobody* I know has any idea that he's got his fingers in more than that apothecary of his?"

"Good at secrets." Cora shrugged. "Whether or not anybody knew about it, one of the dragons is his. Once a Dragonlord, always a Dragonlord. Didn't Ma say something like that?"

"Yeah, but I *heard* about Salim. Greg just came out of nowhere."

"You're the one who introduced us."

"Not *nowhere*, nowhere. He's been around a few years with his apothecary and his parlor tricks, but that's all it's been. Salim showed up with his reputation on his sleeve. Everybody knows he's a shaman, and his most powerful aspect is the dragon."

Cora helped Diane wrestle a fresh set of sheets over the mattress and smooth the comforter into place. "You said Greg was the favorite of the season. Or something like that."

"He started turning up with invitations to every event is all. Not sure who he impressed." Diane took up a pillow into a pillowcase. A few downy pin feathers puffed away from the seam and drifted away.

"Maybe he hid it," Cora suggested. She frowned as a thought occurred to her. "Maybe Salim isn't the only collector around."

"Who, Greg? Not strong enough. He's too much of a flake. He doesn't have the right—I don't know. Presence? Yeah. Not the right presence about him." She fluffed the pillow and dropped it on the bed. "I guess we could just ask him what's going on. You said he volunteered information?"

Cora nodded. She didn't tell Diane that he'd offered her a gentle courtship. "Said he could educate me."

Diane snorted. "Egotistical of him."

"Well, maybe he can. Maybe he knows what we don't."

"You want to see him again." Diane didn't phrase it as a question.

"No, I don't," Cora said, and meant it. Likeable and attractive or not, his public outburst had put her on edge. His intensity was different from Salim's: scary. "I don't want to see him again. I want to sleep for a week. But I need to find out what he can tell me. The bottom line is I've somehow bound two dragons. I don't want..." She stopped, about to say that she didn't want either of them, but that was a lie. She had seen Salim's dragon, had made love with it. She wanted it again. "I don't want to screw up," she amended.

"Have him come over tomorrow?"

"I want to know tonight. I won't be able to sleep anyway. I almost drifted off, but Salim wanted to talk. Something about phone calls. Didn't make any sense."

"Why don't you call Greg instead of seeing him?"

"Phone isn't the right way to do it. I can't see his face or make a truth versus lie judgment."

"Yeah, but you also can't get beaten to death or eaten by a monster."

Cora rolled her eyes. "I'll take my phone."

Forty-five minutes later, Cora exited a taxi in front of Greg's shop in Chinatown. Her hair was still damp from the shower, and her body still tingled from Salim's touch. She felt more alive than she had in forever, despite sleep deprivation. Yet, Greg and his dragon made her apprehensive. She didn't want to provoke either of them to hostility.

Greg answered shortly after her knock. Cora took a step back, alarmed by his appearance. He looked like he'd raked his hands through his hair over and over again, and his eyes were red and wild. The wildness seemed to pull back, though, even as she stood there debating whether or not to run, and she would swear his breathing calmed as well.

He reached for her hand and, with a hint of breathless desperation, murmured, "Come in."

"What's happened?" she asked, concerned.

"I was worried when you didn't call." Greg led her inside and closed the door. "Come upstairs?" he asked.

Cora frowned, wondering if she'd heard him correctly. She talked to him on the phone before she left Diane's in order to let him know she was coming. He'd sounded anxious then, too. "I needed time to think," Cora explained. "It's why I didn't contact you earlier."

Greg didn't answer. Cora followed him through the back of the shop and up the stairs, avoiding the eyes of the owl at the top of the landing. His apartment was different from Diane's—cluttered with books and plants and strange artwork. Through a door off the main room, she caught a glimpse of an easel, and wondered whether the bizarre paintings were his doing. She thought, again, of leaving, but Greg held her

hand tighter.

“The dragon’s restless,” he said lightly, dismissively. “Can I get you a drink?”

Where he touched her, she could feel the dragon crowding close. It flowed from Greg’s hand to hers. Cora shivered and pulled her fingers from his grasp. “I’m not thirsty. I just need to know—”

“Anything you need.” Greg reached for her again; she backed around the corner of a chair. He didn’t give chase, to her relief.

“I think your dragon’s dangerous,” she said bluntly.

“It’s...not so easy to categorize. You called it, and it wants to be with you. It’s fighting my hold because I’m keeping it away from you. I don’t have the same control you have—I can’t command it to me the way you did.”

Greg’s reminder that she had some control over the situation did Cora good. She forced herself to calm down, suppressed the urge to run away, and moved to sit on the edge of the sofa. She rested her purse on her lap. Its weight was comforting.

“You said you could help me learn,” she said finally. “That you’d let me get to know your dragon.”

“I did. I will.”

“Then you have to tell me the truth. Why does it want to leave you?”

“What?” Greg asked, startled.

“It talked to me. It said ‘release me.’”

Greg rubbed his eyes with his knuckles and shook his head. “Because it wants *you*. There’s no other answer besides that, Cora. It wants you. It *belongs* to you, not to me. I’m a guardian. A caretaker. You’re its—I don’t know. Owner, for lack of a better word.”

He knelt in front of her with his hands on her knees, beneath the skirt she’d chosen after her shower. Her skin blazed into a feverish heat where he touched, and she recoiled. Greg held on.

“You can feel it,” he murmured, watching her face. “The air itself changes when I touch you, when the dragon can feel you.”

Even while her thighs flushed, while the heat spread along her legs, toward her toes and between her thighs, Greg’s features smoothed into peacefulness. He wasn’t the wild-eyed man who’d opened the door moments ago. Cora held still for the sake of keeping him this way.

Greg leaned over her thighs, buried his face in her lap. His back rose and fell as he drew a deep breath and exhaled an intimate heat. She touched his hair, tentatively, trying to ignore the dragon’s essence as it wound around her legs and rubbed itself through her hair, across her breasts. It was unashamedly trying to arouse her, and even though she’d been practically purring with contentment an hour and a half ago, her body responded.

“You smell amazing,” Greg said against her stomach. He slid his hands up beneath her skirt to cup her

hips, and before she knew it was coming, he pushed his thumbs beneath the elastic of her panties. Cora jerked, brought her knees up, and shoved herself backward.

“Greg—”

He dug his fingers into her flesh, bruising her hipbones, and put his weight into pinning her against the back of the couch. His face was twisted when he lifted his head, and his eyes were frightening in their intensity. “It’s going to destroy me if you don’t control it. Help me.”

“Let me go,” she said, fighting panic. She didn’t want to incite him to violence, but she wanted to run as fast and as far as she could. This wasn’t the same man she’d met twenty-four hours ago. Cora didn’t consider herself an impeccable judge of character, but she likewise didn’t consider herself an idiot. Greg was safe then; he wasn’t anymore. She had to get away.

“Take it from me and bind it again. It’s easy—you just concentrate on desire. You just want it.”

Cora squirmed on the couch, trying to squeeze from his grasp. He reminded her of Salim, who had told her all she’d had to do was want the dragon bad enough, and it was hers. She wished she had never wanted either of them at all, wondered whether Greg would rape her or worse.

He pushed up from the floor, trying to straddle her hips. Cora grabbed fistfuls of his hair and shoved his face away. Crimson blossomed on his bottom lip, where she scratched him with her wristwatch, and he let her go long enough to touch the injured spot. She took advantage of his distraction to roll off the couch and dart for the door, but stumbled over her handbag and fell on the floor. She heard an awful sound and, for a moment, thought she’d smashed her head on the corner of the end table. She didn’t feel any pain, though, and she could still move, so she snatched her bag and climbed to her feet. As soon as she was upright, something lifted her and threw her into the air. When the ceiling became the floor, panic set in.

Her arms and legs were caught in a hot vice. The apartment reeled recklessly. One second she was looking at the door from too close to the ceiling, and the next paintings and furniture hung upside down. Greg’s sprawled body spun in her vision, and her face was mashed against a rough, hot surface. A scream choked in her throat. Greg had lost control of the dragon, and she didn’t know how to control it herself.

It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. Greg had promised to teach her how to deal with this, not thrust her into it without any protection at all. She didn’t even have the protection of the circle this time. What she did have was absolute certainty that this was the creature that had projected such hostility and invaded her head. She felt it again, now; the dragon sifted through her mind with terrifying ease. She braced herself for something horrific, expecting to feel her mind ripped apart or something equally gruesome. The pressure inside her skull increased, and then it popped. Cora felt her bladder let go.

The dragon gave no sign of noticing. *You already chose the other*, it said in her head. *You’ve left me to this*.

Greg’s body jerked on the floor, as if kicked. She felt the dragon’s anger; dismay and sorrow came with it. Something clicked into place, and she abruptly realized that the dragon’s fury and hatefulness had never been aimed at her. When it had raged for release in her circle, it wanted release from Greg’s custody and into her own, not absolute freedom.

Something fell and shattered. Greg moaned. Abruptly, the dragon let her go, and she dropped, dizzy,

onto Greg's bed. Pillows smothered her in her disorientation. She heard glass shatter again somewhere nearby, and the noise of traffic in the city became louder. It sounded like the apartment was being torn apart brick by brick. She guessed Greg was fighting with the dragon, somehow, but lost all curiosity in the affair when she spotted the telephone on the nightstand by the bed.

Chapter Fourteen

Cora carefully slid onto the floor and pulled the phone with her. A stack of cassette tapes slipped, got tangled in the cord, and fell off the nightstand. Cora pushed them out of the way. The carpet was grainy beneath her knees, and glass glittered not far away. She tried to fit beneath the bed, but the frame sat too low, and she had to settle for squeezing up against the side beneath the overhanging comforter edge. While some sort of battle raged in other parts of the apartment, Greg screaming a madman's curse and the dragon roaring, she willed her hands to stop shaking enough to dial Diane's cell phone.

Diane answered on the second ring. "Why didn't you tell me you've been talking to Greg?" she demanded.

"What? I told you an hour ago." Cora heard the ring of another phone in the background.

"Every night for hours for the last week. Hold on."

"Diane, stop. I don't know what you're talking about. I need help... I need help," she said again, whispering. Diane didn't answer; she'd put the phone down to answer the other ringing line. The bedroom walls shuddered, the bed frame trembled against her back, and the spilled pile of cassettes bounced like little jumping beans. Cora groaned. She remembered that atmospheric disturbance.

She watched the tapes vibrate, waiting for Diane to come back to the phone. They were homemade cassettes with hand-written labels. Cora squinted to make out the labels in the dim bedroom, which was illuminated only by the living room light angling through the door. She thought she saw her name.

"Salim wants to know where you called his dragon," Diane said, coming back to the phone. "What's going on?"

Greg's building sounded like it was under siege because it was. The last time she saw him, he was face down on the floor, not moving. There was no way he would be all right in the middle of a fight between the two rampaging dragons. She had to do something, for his sake as well as for the safety of the dragons. The prospect of leaving her hiding spot terrified her, but the thought of a world without the being she'd seen while in Salim's arms made her sick to her stomach.

"I didn't *call* it anywhere. It's just suddenly here. I guess Greg lost control— something happened. Maybe the dragon's too strong for him or something. I don't know. But now they're *reboth* here, and I don't know what to do with either of them."

"If this is going to start happening on a regular basis, we have to find a how-to book on dragon ownership. It can't be much more challenging than dog ownership, right?"

"Very funny." But she wasn't at all amused. A thin wall separated her from two very violent, very

powerful, and very loud beasts. One was in the process of building up an enraged scream; it sounded like a train coming on, louder and louder until she couldn't hear herself think. Cora willed herself to lose 20 pounds so she could hide under the bed. Diane shouted something. Cora couldn't hear it over the peak of the dragon's roar. She thought her ears would fall off before the sonic wave broke, but she had no such luck. They were still attached to her head, now with an added ringing, when quiet fell over the apartment.

"Diane?" she whispered.

"What the hell was that?"

"You heard it?"

"It sounded like a tornado. Remember that year Dad lived in Alabama and a tornado came through while we were there?"

"Hiding under the beds." The steel edge of the box spring frame dug into her shoulder. Cora tried to shift but only made it worse. "Yeah, I remember."

"You should hide under the bed."

"Way ahead of you."

"What does Greg keep under there?"

Cora blew an exasperated breath. "How should I know? I'm not cleaning, I'm hiding."

"Well, look around. Maybe you'll find a clue."

"This isn't an episode of *Scooby Doo*," she said. Remembering the tapes, she lifted the edge of the comforter and slapped her hand down over the nearest cassette. She slid it close, flipping it over and squinting to see the whole label. It was dated back to a week earlier. Just her name and a date.

"Stop thinking like a helpless girl and—"

"You're the one who told me to hide under the bed!"

"Look for something that'll tell you how to control it. People like Greg keep notes about that sort of thing. Look for a dusty old book."

"Are you seriously telling me to dig around under Greg's bed for a grimoire?"

"You're rolling your eyes at me, aren't you?"

Cora rolled her eyes. "No. I'm just clarifying."

"Phone's ringing again. Hang on."

"Who is it? Diane, wait!" Too late. Cora heard the click of the cell phone landing on a table. She was left with wood grain swirls to keep her company. The dragons were silent. Cora put her head down on the carpet, which smelled like floral vacuum powder, and peered beneath the edge of the comforter. She

couldn't see the doorway to the living room, but the remaining cassette tapes were no longer vibrating. The calm before the storm, she guessed, and reached out to gather the rest of the cassettes close. She turned them so she could read the dated labels. There were seven total, some of them with multiple days written on them.

Despite her flippant response to Diane's suggestion she look for clues, Cora started to suspect she'd been caught in the middle of a big puzzle. Some kind of game. Salim had asked who had told her how to call the dragons. Greg who had stated up front that he could teach her how to deal with her ability and had flattered the strength of her ability?

Diane came back to the phone. "That was Ma."

Cora ignored her. "What did you mean about me talking to Greg? Earlier." she asked, not entirely sure she wanted to hear the answer.

"What? Oh. The call records on your cell. Most of the recent calls were to Greg."

"Tell me dates."

"Right now?"

"No, not right now. Don't worry about it. Did you tell Salim where I am?"

"You shouldn't add him to your problems. What you *should* do is climb out a window or something. You *are* working on an escape plan, aren't you?"

Cora ignored that. "Tell Salim if he calls again. No—try to reach him. I need him to help. He needs to take Greg's dragon."

Diane was silent as death, but she didn't voice the objection Cora knew was on her lips. She only said, "I'll have him to you as soon as possible."

"*Da'ar Es Saleem*," Cora said beneath her breath, hanging up the phone. As she said it, the building shook. A large picture frame fell off the wall, bounced on the bed, then onto the floor. She winced. Her hiding place wasn't that safe anyway, she told herself, so no point staying there. She snatched up the tapes, every single one. She had no idea what information had been recorded on the cassettes, but she was going to find out. Holding them against her chest, she crawled awkwardly toward the door. *Da'ar Es Saleem*. The protector, Salim had said. It made sense that the protector would find her when she was in danger; she and it—he—were connected now. She silently thanked Salim for telling her the dragon's name.

Everything she knew about magic said that names were power. She could get one dragon's attention by name, but she didn't have that advantage with Greg's dragon. He'd never shared that information with her. To her knowledge. For somebody who wanted to relinquish power so desperately, he had been remarkably unforthcoming with information that would help her protect him. When this was over, she would have to get some information out of Greg, no more hedging about what he knew and what he could teach. If she was alive when it was over, anyway, and if he was alive.

She hadn't heard Greg in at least a couple of minutes and began to wonder whether he'd been caught in the crossfire between the two territorial dragons. Her fear spiked anew when Greg screamed. It was a long sound that seemed to go on forever. Cora tried to calculate her odds of finding some useful tools in

Greg's bedroom—he was a witch in his own right, after all—but his anguish dashed all hope that she had any time left.

She scrambled off the floor and stumbled into the living room, tripping over an accent pillow that had been torn and hurled to the floor. An enormous antique candlestick soared past her head as she went down, missing her by mere inches, and she decided to stay where she was. She found her purse half hidden beneath the couch and retrieved it, stuffing the tapes inside. As she did, horrible cold washed over her; her mother. She would remember the awful feeling of being scryed as long as she lived. Terrible or not, she closed her eyes a moment to say a silent thanks for her mother's watchfulness. Knowing Miranda could see her and report back to Diane, even if neither of them could be with her in person, made her feel less alone.

Cora peeked around the arm of the sofa. Greg's apartment wasn't a huge space. It was nicely appointed, with select eccentric accessories—the accent pillow, for instance, with its scarlet tassels, and the tarnished silver candlestick holder that bounced off the wall and rolled up to her knee—but it wasn't huge. Or even big, for that matter. The dragons filled the space not taken up by furniture, and Greg was small between them where he lay twisted on the floor.

Salim's dragon—*Da'ar Es Saleem*—she had seen before in his full beauty. She had never seen Greg's, though, had only felt its phantom touch against her skin, and its massive presence both times it tore free of Greg. Where Salim's dragon glowed with the red beauty of life, Greg's gleamed a pale ghostly pearl and gold. The pair were locked in a strange immobile combat. Neither dragon moved while she watched. They looked as if they were embracing, and Salim's dragon had nuzzled its nose up beneath the white dragon's head. Their wings were folded around one another in strange, unexpected peppermint candy striping, albeit nothing so gentle about them. They looked like art—no, like the wild. They looked like something raw before an artist had a chance to humanize it and make it art.

The floor shook even though the dragons didn't move. Their combat, Cora surmised, existed on a plane she couldn't access. No, she corrected herself. She could feel it, so she could access it. She only needed to figure out how.

Trembling, she inched closer. The dragons radiated heat. She marveled that her skin didn't melt away before she got close enough to jam her hands beneath Greg's armpits and drag him a short distance. Trusting that the red dragon would shield her from the other, Cora straddled Greg's waist. His face was purpling with bruises; blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. She didn't care. He was breathing, and that was enough. He deserved bruises.

She slapped him. "Wake up!"

Greg groaned. Cora snatched a fistful of his hair and pulled hard, trying to rouse him. "Greg. Wake up. I *will not* feel sorry for you."

He grunted and flapped a hand at her thigh. "Stop," he mumbled.

"Tell me its name," she said, pinching the inside of his elbow, hard.

Greg swore, jerking his arm away. "No. It's mine."

"Not anymore. *Tell me.*"

"Weren't supposed to take *mine*, just his," Greg said. His jaw was swelling; the words came out

muffled. Still, Cora heard them.

“That’s what this was. You were telling me how to summon the dragon so I’d take Salim’s away. *Bastard*.” She pounded her fists on his chest. Greg coughed and gasped. Cora shoved herself up, stepped over him, and ran back to the bedroom. She tore through the drawers of the nightstand, emptying them of cold medicine and reading glasses, condoms and nail clippers. A double-headed dildo—lime green latex—gave her pause. She slammed the drawers back into place and crouched to look under his bed. Nothing useful; shoes and a dirty balled up sock. Cora sank onto the bed, remembered the dildo, and jerked up to her feet, thanking the powers that be that she didn’t sleep with Greg.

Fine. He didn’t have a grimoire. She didn’t need one. Wanting was the key, if Salim could be believed, and with the memory of Salim and his dragon still fresh, she *wanted*. Salim had given her want, and Greg had given her an appreciation of the value of these two creatures. They were myth and few left to the world, and she wanted them both in her life—yes, even in her bed—again.

She concentrated on channeling that want through her body and into the dragons. Greg’s dragon had been able to come into her mind, so she pushed to get into his mind as well. Pain exploded inside her skull as she strained to forge a telepathic link. Tears leaked down her cheeks, and she had trouble breathing. It was working, though. She was able to get through. The dragon roared its rage at her violation, setting her nerves to vibrating between her ears. The dragon thrust her out, and she had to do it all over again.

Distantly, she heard Greg shout her name. Arms wrapped around her waist, but she couldn’t tear herself away from the spellbinding between herself and the dragon. It came on too fast. She tried to penetrate, and it flung her away. She entered some strange state of unreal, and the sequence of events didn’t make sense—one moment she was a robed woman with a large egg cradled in her arms, and another she was a naked woman with burning skin, pulling a man’s burnt body from a fire. She choked on black, billowing smoke and felt her lungs fill with water in the next breath, and soon she found herself praying she would black out. She lost account of the passage of time, became disoriented with it.

Something shook her away from death, and she struck out with a fist. Death was nice; it didn’t have that awful headache, or the noise of fire engines. It didn’t have Greg screaming or the dragons roaring, or Salim calling her name over and over again. She gasped for breath, and her lungs burned.

“Salim?” she asked, trying to see through the smoke. A hand on her head pushed her down low against the floor.

“I’m here. Stay down where you can breathe,” he said. She didn’t know how long she’d been unconscious, but everything looked different—what she could see from her position on the floor. The apartment was a blazing wreck and the dragons—she squinted through the smoke, trying to make out details of Salim’s features. She thought he glowed with a pearl luminescence, but she could have been hallucinating.

“Wake up,” Salim said roughly, when she tried to close her eyes to make the glow go away. “You have to walk out of here. Cora—wake up.”

“I’m tired,” she mumbled. Her throat felt raw, her eyes sticky.

“You can sleep for a week if you stay awake now. Come on. Diane’s outside.”

She groaned and tried to roll over, to bury her face in the accent pillow, but when she drew it up the pillow flaked into charred ash feathers in her hands. The sight was like a slap, and she jerked away from Salim, horrified by the inferno blazing around them.

“We have to go,” she said, and then screamed it. Salim said something that she couldn’t hear over her own shrieking and pulled her away from the door when she tried to go that way.

He held onto her wrist with a vice grip and bent over something on the floor— Greg’s body. Cora sobbed, pulling against his hold. She had to get out, and he wouldn’t let her leave. She tried to grab the candlestick to drive him away, but the silver seared her fingers. Salim straightened, wrenched her close, and twisted her arm behind her back.

“Stop,” he commanded, holding her against his side. “We’re going to walk out of here, but you have to wait and come with me. And you have to let me get him out of here with us. I need you to calm down, and count to fifteen out loud, and when you’re done, we’ll be leaving.”

Shaking and crying, she counted down and watched Salim haul Greg up over his shoulder. He had to let her go to accomplish the lift. She considered running, but one look at the determined set to Salim’s jaw and she decided that he would walk her out of the fire. She couldn’t stop crying, though, despite her conviction, and was ashamed of herself when Salim had to lead her out, sobbing, by the hand.

They passed teams of firefighters in the stairwell on their way down to the street. Cora tripped over her own feet several times, trying to take too many stairs at once in her panic. The fire hadn’t spread to Greg’s shop on the first level, but the firefighters coming through had knocked over jars of scented oils. The whole place reeked of clashing florals, spices and smoke. She and Salim eventually emerged onto the sidewalk, crowded and chaotic with residents of the building as well as emergency workers. Diane exploded from the crowd and snatched Cora into her arms. Salim dropped Greg into the care of paramedics and pulled her away from Diane despite her sister’s protests.

“You have to go to the hospital,” Salim said, holding her face between his hands. She couldn’t see his eyes; the lenses of his glasses reflected fire engine lights. He pitched his voice low, so nobody else could hear. “But when you’re out, I need you. We have to talk about what’s happened, and I need your help with his dragon. And I need you,” he said again. “Promise you’ll help us.”

Diane hovered nearby. Cora saw her, saw her mouth form an objection, and saw her silence herself before she could interrupt. She clutched a leather bound book to her stomach—all the secrets in the world between its pages, Cora presumed. She decided she wanted to know what all those secrets were.

“Don’t say you love me,” she said to Salim, looking back to him. His face was black with smoke. Hers probably was, too.

“I don’t need to say it.”

“And don’t say we were meant to be together.” She coughed on the end of the fierce order, and couldn’t get her breath again.

Salim steered her toward another EMT and pushed Diane along as well. “I don’t need to say that, either,” he said. “Call me.”

She couldn’t manage “I will” around the smoke trying to evacuate her lungs, and then there was an oxygen mask hindering her ability to answer anyway.

Chapter Fifteen

Cora spent three hours in the emergency room waiting area staring at CNN on a small television. She couldn't recall a single topic of discussion. Congress's dry old men didn't stand up next to the new issues in *her* life. Her purse, a fashionable square of wool as red as holly berries, was all hard edges on her lap; the corners of more than half a dozen cassette tapes jabbed at the felted mat.

It'd only taken fifteen minutes for her to match up the dates on the cassettes from Greg's apartment with the outgoing call records in her cell phone. Cora didn't remember talking to him on any of those occasions; she had no idea what they'd talked about, either. Somehow, he'd hypnotized her without her knowledge. That was the only explanation she could dredge up, the only reason why she would have talked to him on repeated occasions without remembering them. Despite her insomnia, she had never resorted to sleeping pills or drinking.

"Violated" was a mild word and didn't come close to describing the way she felt. It was too clean, too PG-13. The correct words didn't exist in her vocabulary; she couldn't articulate the feeling succinctly. Sliced open, skinned, her private self groped and picked over like so much emotional and intellectual meat—but only if it stopped at phone calls. What else didn't she remember? Had Greg arranged physical encounters that she didn't recall?

Diana came back in from her seventh cigarette since their arrival at the hospital. She wore her hair in a sloppy ponytail and her makeup, under any other circumstance impeccable, was smudged and streaked. If Diane looked like hell, Cora couldn't imagine what *she* looked like. Grey half moons punctuated her fingernails, little commas of dead skin and dirt and grime from rubbing her smoke-stained skin. She wanted a hot shower, and even considered drug-induced sleep. At the very least, she needed something for the headache pounding between her ears.

"Still haven't called you back?" Diane dropped onto the next chair over. The waiting room furniture was hard plastic and dreadful, dirty wilted-lemon yellow.

"I'm the least of their worries. I haven't died of oxygen deprivation yet, so no hurry to get to me. I think it's a game of out-waiting. If they leave me here long enough, I'll decide I don't need treatment and remove myself from the queue."

"I'll see if I can hurry them up." Diane started to stand. Cora waved her back down.

"Don't. I'm not dying. I don't need oxygen treatment; I need a shower and some sleep. Let's just go."

"The last time I let you do something against my better judgment, we ended up here."

"That's dangerously close to 'I told you so.'"

"Well, *Idid* suggest just giving Greg a call instead of going over in person."

"We're not discussing Greg right now. And I'm not going to sit here all night." Cora stood, pulling her wrinkled and dirty skirt into place over her stockings, which she discovered were torn. She'd have to

soak in a hot bath to make sure she got rid of any glass that might have imbedded itself in her skin while she crawled around on Greg's carpet.

"You'd better make sure Ma knows it's your fault and not mine if you wake up dead."

"I'll send you to the funeral with a written excuse." Cora shook out her coat and a book fell on the floor, landing with its pages askew. She'd forgotten about the journal, which had belonged to Helen Phillips, Cora and Diane's great-grandmother and the last lore keeper of the Lune tradition. Almost everything Cora knew about dragons and Dragonkeepers came from Helen's stories. Almost everything. Helen never mentioned the part about taking dragons as lovers, or even the part about summoning them. She and Diane had been too young then. Some preparation would've been nice, though; *anything* would have been better than the accidental summons that, in a roundabout way, dropped her in the ER for a three-hour wait.

"Do you think Ma keeps one of these?" Cora asked, bending to pick up the book and smooth its pages back into place.

"I think her version more closely resembles a social calendar."

Cora started to tell Diane to get it for her. The clack of plastic on plastic when she shouldered her purse, however, distracted her. Journals could wait; so could forgotten conversations. She wanted to go home. Home-home, not Diane's apartment. Back to Connecticut with her professional relationships and her tiny office with its perpetually frosted-over window, back to her polite but busy neighbors and her small Cape Cod with its ancient princess phone in the kitchen. Winter was a good time to be in Connecticut, too; piles of fluffy snow afforded insulation that Cora needed.

She needed filing time, time to close her mental office and organize recent events into manageable systems of reference. Time for reflection wouldn't be amiss, either. In the course of a few weeks, she'd gone from nightmare-afflicted insomniac without a speck of paranormal talent to this—whatever *this* was. Dragon-summoning accidental witch with talent that might not even be natural, might, instead, be little more than instructions implanted in her brain by a vile weakling of a man.

"Where's Greg?" Cora asked. She shoved the journal down into a deep pocket of her coat.

"I don't know. In an examination room, probably getting treated for injuries. When the paramedics wheeled him by, he looked roughed up."

"Any police?"

"Not yet. What's he going to do, press charges against spirits?"

"I guess not." Justice happened differently when it concerned the supernatural. Witches tended to police their own, although Cora didn't know what kind of policing took place, or how. She'd never known anybody do something to warrant policing. She wouldn't stick around to find out. Hartford wasn't the other side of the world, but it was far enough away that she'd be comfortable in her own skin while sorting out everything that had happened. "Did you park in the garage?" she asked, buttoning her coat.

"Yes. I'll bring the car around front, if you're sure you don't want to get checked out." Diane fished her keys from the recesses of her purse.

"I'm sure. Go on, I'll take my name off the list and meet you outside."

Cora headed for the ER reception desk. She got lost once and had to double back; as she rounded a corner, she came face to face with Salim. The shock of seeing him made her stumble. He reached out to steady her.

“You’re not in an exam room,” he said. He’d had an opportunity to go home and shower; his face was clean and his hair appeared damp. She looked for the pearly glow she thought she’d seen earlier, but it had either been a figment of her imagination, or it was hiding from the hospital fluorescents.

“Nothing wrong with me that a shower and some sleep won’t fix.” She didn’t even try a smile. “I’m going home tomorrow.”

“Looks like you’re on your way out now.”

“No, I mean my home. I’m cutting my visit short.”

His jaw tightened. “Tomorrow.”

Cora shifted her gloves from one hand to the other, tugging at the soft leather fingers. “I can’t stay here. I need—”

“I need your help. You’re part of me now.” He said it quietly. “I remembered where I saw you before. Why you look familiar.”

“And I need to be home. I can’t do anything for you. I couldn’t even do what I’ve already done. Not before Greg told—did whatever he did.”

Salim’s eyes narrowed. “What did he do?”

“It doesn’t matter.” She couldn’t say it out loud—didn’t know if her suspicions were even true. Even thinking it, right now, made her nauseous. “I just know I can’t stay here. I can’t help you.”

“I think you can.”

“I don’t . I need to go,” she said before he could voice another objection. She edged around him. “Diane’s waiting for me. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not going to stop dreaming about us,” he said behind her.

The automatic doors whooshed open when she got near. Cora fled, hoping he didn’t have the power to turn a pronouncement into a curse.

The End

Excerpt from

Dragon Queen: Book Two: Dragon Dance

by
Emily Ryan-Davis

An Erotic Paranormal Novel

Cora jerked from nightmare to nightmare, leaving dreams only to find her image reflected in a monster's eyes. Dragon eyes. They glistened gem-red in the dim glow of the bathroom nightlight. She screamed. Da'ar Es Saleem covered her mouth.

"You're needed," he said.

Sharp, wicked teeth caught a gleam of light. She couldn't process the shape of him, the very human sound of his voice, the fact of his presence in her Hartford, Connecticut bedroom. Dragons were in New York. She was in Connecticut. She left New York to establish distance. In one place, her in another. That's the way she wanted it to stay.

"Go away," she said. His palm was warm and dry against her lips. Damn it. His form was solid. She sighed. That couldn't possibly be good. "You're not safe here, and we need you," he reiterated. His gaze moved away. He settled back on his haunches. The floorboards beside her bed creaked. Cora couldn't make out small details of his appearance in this unfamiliar form and decided not to push her luck by turning on the bedside lamp. She didn't need dragon visuals right now. His eyes were startling enough. "Salim is perfectly capable of coping with whatever problems you boys have. He's the Dragonlord. I am not. That's why I'm here, and you're there. Go away," she repeated.

Da'ar Es Saleem's breath warmed her face. "Is that a command?"

"If it's a command, will you obey?"

"Unwillingly."

"Did Salim send you?"

She knew the answer to that. He wouldn't have sent the dragon after her. He would have come in person. Hypothetically. In reality, he wouldn't have come at all. He'd made no attempt to contact her since she walked away from him in the hospital emergency room more than a year ago. That suited her fine. She didn't need dragons in her life. Or the delicious, dark man who kept them.

"I should send you away." She threw off layers of blankets and swung her feet to the floor.

"Please don't."

"Why now?" She sighed. "It's been a long time."

"Because we need you." He touched her hair.

Cora shivered. “You don’t really need me. You have Salim. He’s as good an incubator as any.”

“Incubator?”

“Nevermind.” She wasn’t about to get into a discussion of her grandmother’s writings on the dragon-dragonkeeper relationship. Sure, the symbiotic relationship had been necessary eons ago, but the dragons had no hunters anymore. They didn’t need keeping. They didn’t need reproducing, either. Cora believed in animal population control. How would the current world support a surplus of dragons, anyway?

“Look,” she said, feeling around for her slippers. “I summoned you by accident. I was under a lot of pressure. I’m not a dragonkeeper. My life’s finally back to normal. No insomnia. No nightmares.” No invisible dragons rubbing between her legs and tempting her to very surreal, very amazing sex.

Da’ar Es Saleem shifted his weight, allowing her to leave the bed. She pulled her nightie down to cover her butt, grateful for the dark that hid the skimpy sleepwear.

“Where are you going?”

“To call Salim.”

“He had no control over my coming to you. He has no control over my return to him.” The dragon’s talons curled around her ankle. His palm slid over her calf, not stopping until he held her knee. “Cora, please.”

He touched her leg. Her pulse increased by about a million beats per. She didn’t wear panties to bed, and it would be nothing to spread her feet a few inches and encourage him to touch her higher. Her body didn’t like the year of celibacy she’d imposed upon it and sent a hot, moist signal to indicate its objection.

“I know you don’t want this distance.” He squeezed her knee gently.

She closed her eyes. “You’re wrong. I want it very much. I’m not the kind of person who likes the life the twoN”

“Three,” he corrected, reminding her of the white dragon, the difficult one without a name.

“The three of you lead.”

“You assume this is a choice, and it isn’t. You can’t escape from it. You can turn away, but the connection will be here, and we’ll all be drawn to you. More of us as your strength grows.”

“More of you?” She shook her head and pulled against his hold. “No way. Let go.”

“We can’t.” He tugged her against his body and rose to his feet. She expected him to be bigger than a man, but in this form he’d chosen, he was just the right size. Strong. He could lift and take her easily. It might be the only opportunity she ever had to have sex against a wall. “You believe you’re safe, but you’re not. He’s losing control. Nearly lost control. He can’t reach that point.”

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