



Burn Dragon Burn (The Dragon Guard #34)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: The Dragon Protection Agency- Shiny badges, rock-hard scales, and a whole lotta fire they know how to use.

Six murders in eighteen months. No clues except the bodies he leaves behind. The murderer in all the papers is called the Yellow Ribbon Ripper, and he's due to strike again. But who will be the next victim? Where will he leave the body?

The clock is ticking. The killer is on the hunt.

Can Nat see where he is? Can Rafe blaze the trail in time?

Fate Will Not Be Denied...but then again, She's never been chased by a serial killer.

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PROLOGUE

B uzz! Buzz-Buzz-Buzz!

“Who is it?” She screamed from under the covers where she’d fallen asleep on the couch, promising herself to disconnect the stupid doorbell on her first day off.

“Your partner. We’ve got a case,” came Fitz’s gruff reply.

Pulling the blanket from her head, Donatella Hale, known as Hale since she’d joined the police force ten years ago and Nat to her friends for most of her life, groaned aloud as she realized not even the sun was up yet. Throwing her feet onto the floor and making her body follow, she grabbed her robe and threw it on as she made her way to the front door.

Looking through the peephole just to be sure, she unlocked the door and turned the knob, before opening it all the way and grabbing Fitz’s cup of steaming coffee.

“Hey! I just bought that,” he snarled.

“I can tell. It’s still hot and doesn’t smell like your nasty cigarettes.”

Taking a sip as she started up the stairs to her room to get dressed, she called over her shoulder, “What the hell time is it anyway?”

“Four a.m., your Ladyship. Got any food in your fridge?”

“Yep! Stopped at the store last night.” Stepping onto the second floor, a cold chill raced down her spine. The kind a person gets when someone rakes their fingernails down a chalkboard or walks over their own grave. Stopping at the railing and looking down, she asked, “What and where?”

Having worked together since Nat became a detective three years ago, Fitz knew what she was asking and answered, “DB in the Park.”

Closing her eyes, knowing what the answer to her next question was going to be, but needing to hear him say it, she asked, “It’s a girl?”

“Yes.”

“In Manlowe Park?”

“Yes.” Fitz walked into the foyer holding half a ham sandwich and looked up at her. “And?”

“And she’s twenty-one. Her neck’s been slashed. No signs of sexual assault. All her belongings are with her and she has a yellow ribbon wrapped around her right wrist.”

“Yes.” He took a bite of his sandwich. “And?”

“And she’s missing her heart and her liver.”

“You are right again, but then, I never doubted otherwise.”

Blowing out a long breath, she turned towards her room, crossed the threshold and closed the door. Leaning her back against the wood, she ran her fingers through her hair, pulling the scrunchie out as she went, and looked at the picture of her mom and dad she kept by her bed.

Taking a deep breath and slowly exhaling, she crossed the room and picked up the frame, running the tip of her index finger over their faces. Setting it back on the bedside table, she walked into the closet and grabbed her last clean suit.

Laying it on the bed, she looked back at her folks and smiled. “I know it’s not your fault I can see all this shit. Hell, it even helps with my job, but the dreams with the hot guy and the Dragon, those are seriously freakin’ me out.”

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Come on, Hale. There's nothing you can do right now."

"Nothing I can do?" She snatched her arm from his hand and narrowed her eyes. "I can damn sure stand right here until they load her into the bus, Fitz. No one was here to save her. We weren't good enough. But I can stand here and make sure she'd taken care of. It's called respect and you used to have some."

Holding up his hands in a sign of surrender, the fifty-something, dumpy detective with more gray hair than dark and yellow teeth from too much coffee and too many cigarettes, acknowledged, "Okay, all right, I'll have a smoke and wait for you to go back to the squad room. I'll pull out the other files as soon as we get back. Maybe we'll get lucky and he's made a mistake this time."

Nodding as she looked at the black plastic bag containing the twenty-one-year old's body, she couldn't get past the fact that once again her 'gift', that's how her parents had referred to it, had let her down. Why couldn't she see this shit before it happened? What good were her visions, if she couldn't use them to help?

Following the morgue attendants as they pushed the gurney towards the huge, dark blue and white van marked Tarrant County Coroner's Office, Nat waited until Misty Blake was safely inside before heading for her car. Stopping next to Fitz as he put out his fifteenth cigarette of the day, she bumped his shoulder with hers and blew out a long breath.

Looking over her shoulder, the light of the newly risen sun glittering on the water,

she asked, “Hey, can you get a ride back to the precinct?”

“Yeah, sure, but where are you goin’?”

“Gotta see Nona.”

“See if she’s got any of those little lemon cookies that look like a figure-eight.”

“You mean Italian Lemon Cookies.” She raised her eyebrows and shook her head.

“Yeah, those. And stop bustin’ my balls, will ya’? I’m not Italian but your Nona loves me just the same.”

“Never,” she laughed, getting into her car and shutting the door.

Nona aka Grandma Angelina was old as the hills, feisty as a snake, and the only other person still alive with the ‘Sight’. That’s what she called the freakier than hell extra sense that allowed the first-born daughter of every DeBenedetto to see either the future, or the past, or the combination of both.

There was also a family secret that one day this very special DeBenetto woman would be able to see forward and backward and here comes the really ‘fun’ part...it is rumored that she would be able to ‘touch evil’. That’s where Nat came in, or so she’d found out when she was ten years old.

Walking home from school with the regular group of kids, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something very wrong was about to happen. Seeing the past and the future was old hat, she’d been doing that for almost three years, and had gotten really good at tuning it out most of the time. However, the feeling of dread and darkness was all new.

Her dreams had been different than ever before for nearly two weeks, but when she finally calmed down after being frightened awake, she couldn't remember anything but fear and darkness. When she'd finally told her mom, Cleo had immediately called Nona and that was when Nat found out she was the grand prize winner of the Universe's most effed up shit sandwich.

Nearing the park at the crossroads where each of her three friends, the stupid boys that always hung around, and Nat went their separate ways, it felt like someone was watching her. Brushing it off, she hugged all her friends, said she'd talk to them later, and headed down Wurzburg Drive to her house.

The next day when she got to the four-way stop, no one was there – not even the stupid boys. Waiting as long as she could before she knew she'd be late and get a tardy slip, she ended up jogging to school.

Once inside and in her seat, she turned around to find Stacey's seat empty. It wasn't like any of her friends to miss school, but especially Stacey. She prided herself on five straight years of Perfect Attendance Awards, loving to brag that she'd even won in kindergarten.

Where could she be? Her dad was a doctor, her mom a nurse, and together, they made sure all three of their children were always well taken care of. Nothing made sense, especially in her way-older-than-her-years mind.

At lunch, she sat down beside Jill and Marion and immediately asked, "Where is Stacey?"

"You haven't heard?" Marion, the tiny girl with long blond hair and big blue eyes, started to cry. "She didn't come home last night. Her mom called my mom at nine and asked if she'd come home with me."

“Yeah, she called my mom, too,” Jill jumped in, her big brown eyes open so wide her eyebrows disappeared under her short red bangs. “Didn’t Mr. Calhoun call your mom and dad?” She took a drink of her milk before adding, “The police started looking first thing this morning.”

Sliding down the bench, stopping when she was uncomfortably close to Nat, Diana Blake, the coolest sixth grader in all of Sycamore Elementary School, plopped her bag lunch on the table and leaned in. “Here about Stacey? They think that creepy dude who whipped his wang out in front of the Rest Home took her.”

Gasping in unison, the three friends looked at one another then back to Diana who was already adding, “Guess he’s not who he says he is. Got a fake driver’s license and a truck with a camper that got no plates.”

“How do you know?” Nat had challenged. “Did you hear your dad talking or are you making this up to scare us?”

Always the leader and the protector of their little group, Nat knew the older girl’s dad was a Detective for the Tarrant Sherriff’s Department, but she also knew from her dad, who happened to be a Circuit Court Judge, that Jeremy was a good cop. He didn’t share information, kept his head down, and had cleared more cases than anyone else.

She also knew that Diana was sneaky, liked to embellish the truth for attention, and had sticky fingers when it suited her purpose. Waiting for an answer as the older girl dumped her sandwich, chips, apple, and juice pouch on the table, Nat once again got the feeling she was being watched.

It took nearly all of lunch period, but Diana finally fessed up that she was listening at the door to her dad’s home office. It figured? Of course, the worst news Nat had received in all of her ten years was the truth. Her friend was missing, and a creep

lived in their quiet little neighborhood.

“And that was my first lesson in ‘nothing is ever as it seems’,” she scoffed, shoving her key into the ignition and starting her department-issued Mustang, she added, “The creep was just a bum and the well-respected teacher was a pedophile, kidnapper, and murderer. People just suck.”

Pulling out of the park and onto Hulen Blvd, she made a quick right and jumped onto the highway. Driving to the suburbs of Dallas, she thought about the young woman who’d lost her life the night before. That made six in eighteen months. One every three months to the day.

“How did I forget that?” Her voice echoed in the empty car. “Because this is only the second one in Ft Worth.” She answered her own question, thinking out loud. “The bastard has left a string of bodies from Dallas to Arlington through Hurst-Euless-Bedford and nor Ft Worth.”

Taking the exit for Nona’s house, Nat slowed at the stoplight at the end of the ramp, deciding to make a right and grab her grandma’s favorite treat, Starbucks Iced White Chocolate Mocha. Her doctor would be pissed and if Nat’s mom was still alive, she’d lecture.

“But at ninety-nine and counting, I’m thinkin’ she deserved whatever the hell she wants.”

In and out and back on the road, with Nona’s drink and one for herself with two extra shots of espresso, Nat zoned out until she pulled into the circular drive of Nona’s stone-covered ranch style home. Hitting the button clipped to her visor, she pulled into the garage.

Clicking the button for the door to close as soon as her car was inside, she shut off the

engine, grabbed the coffee from the console, and headed into the kitchen. Something about Nona's house had always felt so warm and inviting. It had been Nat's haven from the horrors of puberty, the loss of her parents in a freak accident, and every other weird thing that she'd ever endured.

Slipping out of her leather jacket and letting it drop into the antique telephone table in the hallway, she called out, "Hello! Nona!"

"In here, Donatella," came her quick reply as clear as a bell and just as strong as the lady herself.

Walking over the threshold of the library, her grandmother's favorite spot in the house and absolutely the most lived in, Nat went straight to the lace-covered table sitting in front of the five floor-to-ceiling bowed windows that gave Nona a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view of the neighborhood. Taking the chair that had been hers for as long as she could remember, she handed her grandmother her cup then sat back with a sigh of relief.

Sipping her white chocolate mocha from the long green straw, Nona looked through the thin lenses of her red and black cat-eye-framed glasses – blasted woman still had great eyesight – with a knowing expression. Raising her eyebrows when Nat looked away, the older woman set her coffee on the table and just as blunt as she always was, asked, "So, are you gonna tell me about the girl, your dreams, or the man in those dreams, first?"

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“ Y es, I know what I’m doing. No, I don’t need you stepping and muckin’ it up. You’ve got enough on your plate.”

Rafe held the phone away from his ear as he scratched at the three-day’s worth of stubble on his chin. Glad his brother, Gil had called to bitch and moan instead of using their telepathy, Rafe sat down behind his desk and put the phone back to his ear just in time to hear, “You know you have to go in soft. Be nice. No grumpin’ or growlin’.”

“Yes, Gil.”

“You’re a Fed, they’re Local. There’s no love lost.”

“Yes, Gil. This isn’t my first rodeo.”

“Yeah, well, let’s just say after your last cock-up, I’m just covering all my bases.”

“I did not ‘cock-up’. I did what I was sent to do – rescue three POWs from a fuckin’ hole in the sand.”

“And blowing up an entire camp of insurgents?”

“Just a happy coincidence.”

“Yeah, well the DOD didn’t see it that way. They wanted to take at least a couple

alive for questioning.”

“And...I made that happen to...kinda.”

“If you consider the guy was burnt over forty-percent of his body and it took three months for him to wake up a success then...”

“If I say yes, will you shut up and move on?” Rafe cut in, biting the inside of his cheek not to laugh out loud when his older brother growled, “Damn you.”

Pulling up his email while his brother went back to giving orders, Rafe’s eyes nearly popped out of his head when he got a look at the female detective he would be meeting later that day. Sure, the picture was out of focus and farther away than he’d like, but her long dark hair laying softly on the back of her leather coat and the hard set of her shoulders told him she was tough, intelligent, and able to stand her ground.

“Are you listening to me, Rafe? I swear to the Heavens...”

“Yes, I am listening. You’ve only repeated yourself five times. Can you let it go? I promise, I’ll do as I’m told and call for backup if there’s any sign that these murders have a supernatural element, okay?”

“Alright.”

Gil sounded less than thrilled, but since he was in the mountains helping find a Wendigo who’d gone off the deep end, there wasn’t much he could do. Almost thirty years ago when they’d started the DPA – Dragon Protection Agency – with three of their other brethren - none of them could’ve imagined how many cases they would end up being called in to work.

Only very few, very high-ranking officials in the government, specifically the CIA

and the DOD, knew of their existence and more importantly, knew what they really were. Rafe had always thought their name was funny and the acronym even funnier. But it was essential to their cover that they be able to say DPA, flash official credentials, and that all important gold badge to the local LEO's – law enforcement officers – when they were sent in.

Most of the time, the cases they were called in on did actually have a paranormal element that only the Director was aware of, just like the one he was part of in Iraq. Gil knew, just like Abe, Ben, and Oz – the other members of DPA – that Rafe had no choice. If he hadn't blown that bunker an entire pack of newly turned werehyenas would've emerged that very evening and torn every human for a hundred miles from limb to limb.

When Gil said nothing else, just sat on the line breathing, Rafe asked, "Anything else?"

"I just don't like any of us goin' on a job like this without backup."

"Then I suggest you find a sixth member."

"Yeah, I keep thinkin' I will, but..."

"But, you're crazy neurotic with control issues and the need to be the boss twenty-four seven and you haven't found anyone you know or like well enough, and," Rafe took an exaggerated deep breath. "You promised yourself when we broke off from the Clans all those centuries ago that you would never go back, but now, you're wondering if you should."

"Okay, I give. I've been singin' the same song for a while now. I'll be seeing Max on this trip. Maybe it's time we bring in some Big Cats, or even a couple of Wolves. What do you think?"

“You know my thoughts. Paranormal bad guys have been around waaay longer than anyone but us realizes and they are only getting worse. The more, the merrier. Director Whatever-His-Name-Is said hiring was at your discretion, so discretion away big brother.”

“First of all, you know his name all too well. He’s tattooed it on your ass with the tip of his expensive shoes. And, I’m gonna to sit down with Max and Marrok, the Alpha from Florida. It’s long past time and I need to get over my own BS. I have the freakiest feeling shit’s about to hit the fan.”

“Abe’s been telling you that for almost five years now. He keeps having weird visions and even crazier dreams. I’m glad to hear you finally listenin’.”

“I know, I’m an asshole.”

“And a pain in the ass, a rigid SOB, and a damn fine leader.” Rafe threw in the compliment to ease his brother’s mounting tensions. There was no one in God’s green earth that was harder on himself than Gil, and yes, it’d saved their asses more times than Rafe could count, but it was time for the old boy to loosen the reins.

“Thanks, Sparky,” Gill snickered, using the nickname Rafe’d had since he was a teenager.

“Burn down one barn and ya’ never get to live it down.”

Laughing out loud, Gil teased, “That’s how it goes. Now, get to work, dammit.”

“Aye, aye, Captain Asshole.”

Chuckling as he laid the phone on the desk and went back to ogling the picture on his laptop, Rafe couldn’t shake the feeling that the woman on the screen was so much

more than she seemed. No doubt, she was the looker. Out of focus, covered in an oversized jacket, pulling keys from her pocket as she looked down, Detective...what's her name had some killer curves.

Shuffling through the papers in his file, he ran his finger down the page, answering aloud, "Donatella Hale."

Eyes back to the screen, his eyes narrowed trying to see more than was there. "Well, hello, Donatella. See ya' soon."

"Would you like coffee, tea, or soda?" The flight attendant smiled. "Or maybe something stronger?"

"Just water, thank you," he answered, wondering if there would ever be an airplane seat that fit his six-foot-ten frame. Even in first class, he felt squished, squashed, and stuffed into the tiny compartment.

Would've been better to fly myself, but Gil would've busted a vessel.

Taking the cold bottle of water and tiny cup the attendant handed him, Rafe thought about how much money they wasted trying to 'act human'. He understood it in the beginning. The 'powers that be' had to be slowly introduced to the idea of Shifters in general, and the Dragons' enhanced abilities specifically.

Shifting his butt one more time and stretching out his legs as far as he could, Rafe reclined his seat and closed his eyes, remembering the first time the five of them had met with the Director. Fresh home from Desert Storm, each part of Delta Force – at least for that specific conflict - were called into the Director of Defense's office very late in the evening.

Sitting in a large conference room staring at one while using the mindspeak of their

kind, every Dragon had an idea why they were there. Abe, the oldest and roughest of them all was sure they would have to fight their way out. Ben, the techie of the group, and by far the calmest of them all, was sure it was another form of recognition for their exemplary service then came Oz – their munitions expert.

Known as Oscar Tomas to his momma, and only his momma, had been blowing things up since he could walk and talk. More times than Rafe could count, the man he'd known as OZ for two hundred years had made bombs out of everything – to and including a pair of lady's knickers and cow patties.

“You sure you don't know what's goin' on, Chief?” Abe grumbled to Gil. “Ever since we broke out on our own you've been a step and a half ahead of everything.”

And he was right. Over three hundred years ago, a strange evil swept through the world. Shifters of all kinds disappeared in the blink of an eye. There was no rhyme nor reason. One moment they would be there, the next simply gone.

Males, females, children, old, young – it didn't matter, and the Dragons seemed to be the hardest hit. All the Berserkers – a special sect of Guardsmen who'd been blessed by The Morrigan with a Warrior form unlike anything they'd ever seen – disappeared without a trace. They were the only breed of Shifter to completely vanish.

How does something...anything, take out those fightin' mo fos?

Gil and Rafe had disagreed with the Elders decision to wait for the dust to settle before searching for the Berserkers. It was their belief that the sooner they got to the bottom of the disappearances, the better off Dragon kin would be. However, the Council of Elders would not be swayed, and within a week the five Brethren had separated from their Clan and for the most part, Dragon Kin all together.

“Thanks for that Abe.” Gil nodded. “But this time I'm as in the dark as you are. The

MPs showed up to get me the same as they did the rest of you.”

“Could they know what we are?” Oz asked, chewing his gum with such vehemence that the cut of his jawline was sharp and defined.

“No way,” Ben chimed in. “If they did, we’d be downstairs in lockup with silver shackles and twenty-five-thousand volt bars all around. We’re the shit of their nightmares, remember?”

“I’ll be there worse fuckin’ nightmare if they piss me off any more than they already have,” Abe growled.

“Let’s hear what they have to say before we pull scales and start the place on fire,” Gil instructed. “We’ve been in the military in one form or another all over the world for four hundred and some years. If they’d wanted to get rid of us, they would’ve.”

The sound of footsteps just outside the door had them all sitting up straight in their seats just before the tall, commanding figure of Director Isaacs walked into the room. Walking the length of the room, not even glancing at the guys sitting around the table.

Taking his seat at the head of the table, the retired five-star General unbuttoned his jacket and finally looked up. Taking a moment to make eye contact with each of the Dragons, he sat back in his high-backed chair, set his elbows on the arms and steepled his fingers in front of his chin.

The huge LCD behind him blinked to life. Each of their names flashed on the screen right before pictures began to carousel from left to right. Photos of each man in the throes of battle. The longer it played, the older the photos got until the screen returned to black.

The silence was deafening. Rafe could hear the thoughts of his Brethren, knew they were all playing the ‘he-who-speaks- first-loses’ game. Tired of the bullshit, needing to know if he was fighting or flying, Rafe opened his mouth at the exact moment that Director Isaac’s eyes turned a glowing yellow and the pupils merely a vertical black line.

Grinning like the Big Cat that messed with the Dragons instead of the birdie, the Director chuckled, “Now that that’s out of the way, how about we talk about you boys coming to work for me?”

It's different this time. It feels personal. Almost..." She stopped, not sure whether to say what was really bothering her or make up something to satisfy her grandmother. Unfortunately, or maybe it was fortunately, Nona took the decision away from her.

"You're seeing the victims through his eyes, right? But not while he's doing, but rather afterward when he's reliving it?"

Nodding because her mouth was suddenly so dry she couldn't speak, Nat's eyes met Nona's as she took a huge drink of her iced coffee. It wasn't surprising that the older woman knew what was going on in her granddaughter's mind, but instead an uneasiness of what she might uncover.

"Don't be ridiculous, Child. These are not your feelings," Nona snapped, having already known what Nat was trying to hide. "This man is sick, deviant, and absolutely perverted. Death, love, lust, flesh, and oh yes, parts of the body feed his deviance."

Reaching across the table, she laid her thin, wrinkled hand over Nat's. "He is also very smart and incredibly cunning. To catch him, you will have to follow where your gift takes you – no matter how gruesome."

Mesmerized by Nona's words, Nat jumped when the alarm on her phone beeped. Grabbing it from her pocket, she looked at the time and jumped to her feet. Rounding the table in three strides, she kissed her grandma on the cheek. "Thank you, Nona. I'll be back on Wednesday for dinner."

“See that you do, Donatella,” the older woman called out. “Don’t be late and don’t forget the wine.”

Chuckling as she shut and locked the front door, Nat repeated her grandmother’s words, “And don’t forget the wine,” before scoffing, “How could I forget the wine? Drunk is the only way I can deal with Beth and Bert.”

Just the thought of her cousin and her cousin’s husband set Nat’s teeth to grinding. Not only were they overly cutesy and always rubbing noses and giggling at one another, but heaven help them all, they were expecting their first child.

Not one dinner, holiday, or family get together had passed since Betsy found out she was pregnant that Nat had not been subjected to talk of morning sickness, back aches, constipation, and a menagerie of paint swatches in every pastel color that had ever been created. It was sickening and there was no other way to look at it.

Once in her car, she maneuvered through the old neighborhoods and the historic district before coming up behind the precinct and pulling into her parking spot. Walking towards the back doors, something akin to an anvil falling on her head like always happened to Wile E. Coyote in her favorite cartoons made her stop and turn to the left.

Unable to move, barely able to breathe, Nat’s eyes were glued to the biggest, broadest man she’d ever laid eyes on. If he wasn’t a football player, he should be and if he wasn’t there for her, well, she’d find a way to get in front of him.

Watching until he disappeared behind the brick and mortar of the front of the building, she shook her head and blew out the breath she’d been holding before heading into the station. Throwing her empty Starbucks cup in the trash and grabbing a bottle of water, she walked straight to the Incident Room and stood before the row of white boards and cork boards.

Looking at the smiling faces of the serial killer the media were calling the Yellow Ribbon Ripper, Nat sat her butt on the edge of the table and let her mind wander. It was the only way she could conjure up the images from her dreams and sort them in such a way that she would make sense out of them.

Six girls, different body types and hair colors, all between twenty and twenty-two years of age, all killed in the same brutal manner, all missing their heart and liver. The yellow bow was a clue, but to what?

The immediate connection was made between the yellow ribbon and the military and the DOD had been very cooperative in giving them access to all the records, past and present, that they needed. Nothing had come of it. Every person with even the slightest blip on their psych evaluation had been interviewed. No one stood out or even made her raise an eyebrow.

It seemed as if every 'normal' avenue had been checked. Now, it was up to Nat to check the not-so normal ones. Thank the Goddess Fitz knew about her 'gift' and whole-heartedly supported her using it. He'd even kept a level head when they'd raided a coven of Witches and had even broken a sweat when he witnessed Werewolves up close and personally.

He was old school, there was no doubt about it, but he'd also grown up with a rather eclectic bunch of foster parents and had experienced firsthand that things are not always as they seem. It was one of the hundreds of reasons that Nat loved and trusted her partner. He had her back no matter what.

Grabbing the full-body crime scene shots from the board and laying them side-by-side on the long, beat-up, conference table, she zeroed in on each girl's left wrist. There it was, so small human eyes couldn't see and a magnifying glass would miss it – an upside-down cross with an additional, longer line through it and the top bisecting an infinity sign.

“But what does it mean?” She murmured.

“It means you’ve got trouble.”

Jumping up and squeaking as she spun around like a top, Nat spat, “What the fu...?” Her words trailed off as her eyes landed on the man she’d been ogling in the parking lot just a few minutes before. Up close and personal he was damn near too much to handle.

Taller, broader, just more of ab-so-lute-ly everything within reach. Dark and wavy, his hair was long enough to touch the collar of his blue cotton shirt, but not so long as to make him look feminine. Icy blue eyes with laser sharp focus, she felt as if he was looking right into her soul as the corner of his perfectly shaped lips curled up at one corner and he snickered, “Sorry about that. I should’ve knocked or cleared my throat to let you know I was here.”

Forcing herself to look away, her hands seemed to have a mind of their own as they moved up then down then finally landed on the crime scene photos. Scooping the enlarged prints into a messy stack, she held them against her chest like a shield as she forced her embarrassment into anger and scowled, “You shouldn’t be in here.”

“Oh, sorry. I should’ve introduced myself.” Dropping his bag while reaching behind his back with the other, Nat had to look away before she hyperventilated when the fabric of his shirt pulled tight across his chest, outlining its near perfection.

Whoever this guy is, he sure packs a punch...

Opening his wallet, he held up his government credentials along with a gold badge at the same time that he explained, “Name’s Rafe O’Rhordan. I’m with the DPA. Director Isaacs received a call from your Commander for help with a case.”

His last comment hung in the air, an unasked question he was looking for an answer to. Anger turned to rage as she stomped past Special Agent O’Rhordan and straight into Captain Rogers’ office.

Slamming the door, she ground out through gritted teeth, “What the hell, Cap? The Feds? Really? This is my case and I don’t need some frikkin’ uptight ‘Special Agent’,” she threw up air quotes with her left hand, “gettin’ in my way.” Stepping forward, leaning over his desk the best she could, she added, “And you know how I hate surprises.”

Leaning back in his chair, he tossed his pen on his desk and sighed. “Last time I checked, I was still the Commander of this Unit, Detective Hale.” Propping his right elbow on the wooden arm of his chair, he rested the bottom of his chin on his fist and added, “And as such, it is my case and at my discretion who works on it. My suggestion to you is to calm the fuck down, do an about-face, and welcome the Special Agent to our station.”

“But...”

“But nothing, Hale.” The sting of anger and disappointment in his voice was worse than being kicked in the teeth. She respected Commander Rogers, had followed his career from the time she decided to be a cop when her friend Stacey had disappeared. He’d been a detective then and had questioned all the girls more than once.

“You will play nice, or you will take a mandatory vacation until this case is over.” The old, worn springs of his desk chair squeaked as he leaned forward, putting his elbows on the desk. Shaking his head and taking a deep breath, his chuckle was forced but the fatherly look in his eyes was what she’d come to expect from him as he cajoled, “Give this guy a chance, Nat. He’s got an exemplary service record the length of both my arms and a leg and during his time with the DPA, he’s got a ninety-five percent close rate.” Shrugging, he went on, “Work with him. Who knows, maybe

together you can catch this stupid son of a bitch before he kills again.”

Knowing that was his final word on the subject, she gave a quick nod as she reluctantly agreed, “Yes, Sir.”

Turning around as quickly as she could and striding across his office, her hand had just landed on the doorknob when Rogers added, “Play nice, Hale. I won’t like it, but I will suspend you if I even get a wild idea that you’re running this investigation around him.”

“Yes, Sir,” she muttered before opening the door and all but flying out of the office.

Making a beeline for the ladies’ bathroom, refusing to subject herself to the ‘wham-bam-sexy-vibe’ that Agent O’Rhordan exuded, she raced into the farthest stall from the door and kicked the door shut. Leaning against the side wall, she blew out the breath she’d been holding and let her head fall forward.

With her eyes closed, trying to make sense of her undeniably crazy attraction to a man she’d only just laid eyes on that very day, she groaned under her breath, “Wonder if Nona has a chastity belt, ‘cause whatever this dude’s packin’ is powerful shit.”

4

O h, yeah, this is gonna be fun,” he snickered, turning back to the murder board Detective Hale had set up.

Pretending to be studying the pictures and notes hanging in the order of the murders, Rafe used his enhanced hearing to eavesdrop on the irresistible woman who with any luck, he’d be working with in some capacity or another for all eternity. He’d wondered if she was his mate from not only his reaction, but that of the Dragon King with whom he shared his soul. Then he met her, and there was absolutely no doubt she’d been made for him.

Drawn to her like bees to honey, Rafe felt her intuition and powers of perception slide alongside his magic, testing the waters, happy to settle with his. The look in her eyes was sharp and direct, the speed of her thoughts momentous, and her determination damned near as unstoppable as his own.

In a word – perfect.

However, Detective Donatella Hale was no pushover. There was no denying she’d felt the attraction between them. Her heart had raced. Her blood whooshed through her veins. Her body warmed, filling Rafe’s senses with a succulent multi-dimensional scent that made it hard for him not to trail behind her like a hound dog after a bone.

The moment he’d crossed the threshold, the sweet scent of treacle tart had tickled his nose, immediately followed by an undertone of bold, earthy truffles then finished off

with the sharp bite of a strong cup of java. Feeling like he was floating, it had taken everything in him to stop at the side of the table and comment to let her know he was in the room.

Working hard not to laugh when she nearly jumped out of her skin and squeaked like a mouse, he'd witnessed her amazing ability to control her emotions when it took only a split-second for her to grab hold of her irritation and growl at him.

And, dammit, if I don't want her growling at me in the sheets...

"Enough of that for now. Heaven knows Gil will descale my hide if I mess this up," he muttered under his breath, forcing himself to focus on the boards before him.

Walking the length of all three boards, he committed everything to memory, even the Leviathan Cross the nasty bugger had tattooed on the wrist of each of his victims. Not only was it the sign of the Devil himself, but the killer had used mercury as the ink for his glyph. The two together meant he knew both alchemy and the dark arts. He marked them as virgins and sent their souls to old Lucifer.

"What was the date of...?"

Talking to himself as he pulled the notecard size leather-bound pad from his bag, he wrote down the date of each murder. Pulling out his cellphone, he looked up the dates on the calendar, the information making the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"Every damn one was killed on a Wednesday."

"But we didn't find them all on Wednesdays," Nat interjected, strolling back into the room with her pictures still clutched to her chest and her spine so straight Rafe wondered if it was hard for her to walk.

But she was talking, that was a step in the right direction.

“Yeah but look at the estimated times of death.” Pointing at each of the M.E. reports hanging under each victim’s photo. “Each one could have been on a Wednesday and that means we are looking for not only a serial killer but one that knows alchemy and witchcraft and is trying to send his victims’ souls to the Devil.”

“You mean Hell.”

“No, I mean the Devil, Lucifer, the Grand Poobah of bad guys.” Once again walking the length of the freestanding boards, he popped the tip of his index finger on the tattoo on the inside of each girl’s wrist. Stopping at the last picture which belonged to the first victim, Jean Smith, he left his finger just below the mark and asked, “Do you know what this is? What it stands for?”

“No, I have no idea.” The perfect mix of curiosity and agitation colored her tone. “But, I’m guessin’ you’re gonna tell me.”

If he wasn’t mistaken, which he rarely was, Det. Hale was poking at him. He was making headway at winning her over. Put a tick in the positive column and keep ‘em comin’. “I will if you want me to.”

Leaning her hip against the table, still using it as a barrier between them, he first turned to completely face her and held out his hand. “I know your name from the file I was given when they shoved my ass on the plane, but I’d feel a whole lot better if we did this the right way.”

Making himself not react when she reached for his hand, Rafe went on, “Name’s Rafe O’Rhordan. You can call me Rafe. I don’t do ‘agent’, ‘special agent’, or ‘sir’.” Skittering up his spine the instant her hand touched him, he cleared his throat, praying she didn’t notice the pounding of his heart as he hurried on, “This is your case. I’m

only here to assist. Point and tell me what to do, okay?”

Slowly nodding with her eyes narrowed and the slightest of smiles on her gorgeous lips, she began, “As I’m sure you know, I’m Donatella Hale, but if you call me that, I might shoot you. Only my Nona gets away with calling me by my Christian name. Around here, they call me Hale. I also go by Nat outside of work. Either’s fine.”

Pulling her hand from his, she continued, “We’ll get along fine as long as you keep me in the loop, don’t upstage me, and don’t make me look like an idiot. I have a partner. Don’t need another.” Pushing away from the table, she walked to the first whiteboard and looked at the photo of Jean Smith’s wrist. “Now, tell me about this whole alchemy – witch connection, and while you’re at it, tell me how I can sell that shit to Captain Isaacs.”

Unbuttoning his cuffs and rolling up his sleeves, Rafe crossed the room, grabbed his briefcase and pulled out an old grimoire that had been in his clan for centuries. Laying it on the table, he opened it and began thumbing through the pages.

“Exactly how old is that thing?”

Looking up with only his eyes, he winked. “Do you really want to know?”

Without an answer, Nat turned and headed towards the door. For a second, he thought she was leaving again, but the click of the latch and her returning footsteps calmed his fears. Waiting until she stopped beside him, he looked up just as she asked, “What are you...really?”

Seeing she had more to say but was still thinking about how to say it, he stood up, turned to face her, and crossed his arms over his chest. The moment the light shined in her eyes and her mouth opened, he had to smile. His mate was nothing, if not blunt.

“I’m what most people call psychic, but it’s not really that, and we can talk about that later, maybe. The Captain knows and Fitz knows, other than that, I don’t share.” She looked over his shoulder and bit her bottom lip which made not only his Dragon roar but his cock jump to attention.

Down boys. She’s nowhere near ready for that yet...

Looking back just as he’d schooled his features, Nat went on, “I don’t want to presume anything, and I need to trust you. So, I’m gonna tell you what I can see.” She lifted her hand and imitated washing a window or erasing a chalkboard which he immediately knew meant his aura.

Uncrossing his arms and letting them fall to his sides, trying to look as open as he could, he nodded and waited. It didn’t take long until she explained, “Aside from the normal colors I would expect for what I know of you, there’s a strong brassy outline filled with a lighter but still very prominent scale design in the shape of a Dragon.”

Looking over her shoulder at the door then out the window that looked out onto the Squad Room before turning back around, Nat added, “Now, I know there are a lot of things out there in the world, people like me, people like the asshole who’s killing girls I’ve even met some of them, but if you really are a man who can shift into a Dragon, then I owe my Nona a hundred dollars.”

Giving a dramatic pause, just because he could, and because he was sure it would irritate Nat at least a little bit, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, gave her a hundred-watt smile, and chuckled, “You better stop by the ATM, ‘cause you owe your grandma some money.”

Sitting at the last stoplight before her favorite Chinese takeout joint, Nat thought over all she'd learned in the last six or so hours and wondered if she'd been dropped into an alternate universe between her visit with Nona and arriving at work. Dragon Shifters were a real thing. The lunatic killing girls was using Witchcraft and Alchemy, and tomorrow, she would meet the honest to God, King of the Big Cats.

"I can't wait to hear what Nona's got to say about that?"

Reminiscing about all the bedtime stories her grandmother used to tell, it finally clicked. "Every damn one of them was real." Her voice echoed through her empty car. "She was telling me the truth. Using her amazing ability to wave a tale to tell me about the world she'd grown up in."

Parking in front of Hot Dumpling Hut, she was out of the car, in the store, and back in the car in less than five minutes. Placing her bag on the passenger seat, she got out a fresh, hot crab rangoon before pulling into traffic. Blowing until it was cool enough to eat, she headed towards her grandmother's for the second time in the same day.

Pulling into the driveway, in one way it felt like she'd never left and in another it felt like it'd been years since she was there. So much had happened, so many things she needed to sort out in her mind, but in that very moment all that mattered was finding out why she couldn't stop thinking about that exasperating, frustrating, totally irresistible Special Agent Dragon Man.

Setting the bag on the table without looking up at her grandma, Nat got out the

containers of food, the chopsticks and the sauce packets, basically fell into her seat, and blowing out a huge breath, let all the tension she was feeling float away. Feeling Nona's stare, she looked up and deadpanned, "So, I'm sure you know this, but let me throw it out there anyway. The big, hunky Fed is also a Dragon and tomorrow I get to meet a guy who can not only turn into a Black Panther, but is also the King of the Big Cats."

"Maximillian is coming to town?"

Flying forward in her seat, all pretense of nonchalance gone, Nat yelled, "You know the guy?"

"Well, of course, I do, Dear. What kind of Seer would I be if I didn't know the Others of our Community?"

Her tone was normal, her expression serene, but the words coming out of her mouth were making Nat's head spin.

"We have a name, like a title? There's a Community? With a capital 'C'? Like an organization?" Smacking her forehead with the tips of her fingers, she added, "When were you gonna tell me? Have I not passed the initiation or something?"

"Do not use that tone with me, Donatella Angelique. You are not so big that I can't turn you over my knee." Nona's tone left no room for argument. Her dark brown, almost black, eyes glowed with an inner light Nat had never seen before and that quite frankly, scared the living bejesus out of her.

Speaking as if she were coaxing a kitten out of a tree, Nat cajoled, "Sorry, Nona, it's just that I'm..."

"A brat, plain and simple," her grandmother interrupted. "You have not been left out

of anything. I simply wanted to see if you could live a life separate from the Supernatural and Paranormal.” With every word, her tone softened to the normal, calm Nona Nat knew and loved. “When you decided at such a young age to be in law enforcement, I decided it would be better if I helped you learn to use your Gift, the Sight you inherited from our ancestors, to help you with your job, and more importantly, to keep you safe.”

Trying not to look like she was hanging on her grandmother’s every word while in all actuality hanging on her every word, Nat nodded and sat very still. It took Nona a moment to begin again, but when she did, it rocked the younger woman’s world.

“Today you met a man who can shift into a Dragon. You saw his aura, witnessed the Dragon King with whom he shares his soul. Meeting him, being near him, learning that there are Others with special abilities you never imagine opened your mind more than you ever dreamt possible, yes?”

Thinking about her grandma’s words, hearing her Olde World accent growing more pronounced with every word, Nat quietly agreed, “Yeah, that about sums it up.”

Leaning forward, reaching for her hand, Nona smiled, the brilliance of her unconditional love shining so brightly it made the young detective smile. Feeling the warmth and affection in her touch, Nat held tight as her grandmother went on.

“The man you met, that Dragon who is driving you crazy in the best ways, is your mate. He was made especially for you by the Universe and the Goddess. He is meant to be your partner in all things, and just as importantly...” Nona paused, her head tilting to the side as Nat was holding her breath just about to pass out before adding, “You are the light of his soul. You, my sweet girl, have met the one person who will complete you in ways you never ever dreamt of.”

Opening her mouth and shutting it so many times her grandmother chuckled under

her breath, Nat finally got it all together and with a throat that was as dry as the Sahara and her heart in her throat, she squeaked, “Are you off your meds?”

Laughter filled the living room as Nona sat back in her chair, clapped her hands and then took out the embroidered hanky that was never out of her reach and wiped the tears from her eyes. “You never cease to amaze me, Donatella.” Sighing happily, she went on, “Now, you see why I had to be sure my visions were correct before telling you. I can’t imagine how you would’ve reacted if I’d told you when you were sixteen.”

“You’ve know all of this crap since I was a teenager?” Up on her feet, needing to pace off the excess energy pulsing through her body, Nat walked from one side of the huge room to the other as Nona explained, “Of course, I knew. I’ve known all my life. I’m not only your grandmother, but the strongest Seer of our lineage...well, until you.” Giving a perturbed tsk, she continued, “You were going through puberty, your interest in the opposite sex was voracious, and you were dating.”

“My what?” Nat threw her hands in the air, her voice racing towards raving with every syllable. “Voracious? That’s the word you just used? Voracious interest in the opposite sex? I think I might throw up.”

Mind spinning and her heart racing, she stopped right beside Nona’s chair and demanded, “Oh my Goddess, is he gonna knock me over the head and drag me to his cave where I have to take part in some blood-letting or freaky sex thing?”

Unable to speak as her shoulders bounced with captured laughter and she held her handkerchief over her mouth, Nona sputtered, “Sweet, sw-sweet, D-Donatella.” She took a breath, working to stop laughing and hiccupped, “Y-you are one of a kind. He isn’t a Caveman, he’s a kinda human man , who just happens to be able to turn into a Dragon.”

Back to pacing and freaking out, Nat started firing questions. “Does the moon have to be full? Does he breathe fire?” Spinning when she reached the opposite wall, she stopped mid-stride. “Will he set me on fire when we kiss? Can I even kiss him?” Pacing even quicker, her hands flying out to the sides, “Will he leave scales on the bathroom floor? In the laundry? Does he molt? Does he growl?”

Whipping around to face her grandmother, she whispered, “Is everything as it should be?” She waved her hand between her waist and her crotch. “Is he, you know, just like any other guy there ? Come on, don’t make me say it? You know what I mean.”

Once again laughing so hard that tears ran down her face, Nona slapped her knee as she rocked forward and backward. Wanting, needing answers to her questions, Nat couldn’t just stand still and was seriously over being laughed at, so, she grabbed her coat and her phone and headed for the door.

Her hand had just touched the knob when Nona called out, “Come back here right now, Young Lady.”

Knowing she could walk right out the door and her grandmother wouldn’t try to stop her, Nat let her head fall forward and huffed out a breath that made her bangs blow off her forehead. Dropping her hand to her side and slowly turning back the way she’d just come, she stopped at the threshold of the living room, and waited.

Sure enough, Nona looked right at her, her lips still curved in a smile while steely determination burned in the depths of her eyes. Motioning at the chair across from her, she assured, “I promise not to laugh so hard, if you promise not to ask such silly questions.”

Stomping towards her seat, knowing she was acting like a dejected child and really hating that she’d been less than an adult, Nat threw back her shoulders and raised her head. Sitting down, she nodded. “Alright, I’ll try, but I make no promises.”

“Then you can’t get mad at me for laughing.”

“Right, but I have to get a few things off my chest really quick then our truce is in effect, ‘kay?’”

“By all means,” Nona snickered, already holding her handkerchief up to her chest.

“Is he gonna turn me into a giant lizard? Is this shit written in stone or is there a get-outta-mating- a-big-fiery-beast card? Do Dragons believe in divorce? What if we do this hocus-pocus-BS and he leaves the toilet seat up or throws his dirty underwear all over the place? Can you hide me until all this is over? Make it go away?” Taking a breath, she fell back in her chair and groaned as she asked her final question, “Can he fly? ‘Cause, ya’ know I’m scared shitless of heights?”

Gasping as she once again jumped to her feet, Nat yelped, “Oh shit, shit, shit! You can’t make it go away and neither can I. That’s what you think is so damn funny, isn’t it? I’m up Shit’s Creek without a paddle and you’re laughing your heinie off.” Falling back into her chair, she snapped, “Son of a bitch! Is it wrong to pray I get shot in the line of duty?”

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6

“So, I have some news.”

“Good or bad? Please say good. I could really use it right now?” Gil sounded tired, frustrated, and badly in need of letting his wings hang out.

“Yeah, it’s good. I met the Detective in charge of the case, she wasn’t thrilled but after a bit she warmed up and we got some work done.” He paused and took a drink of his beer. “There is no doubt it’s a case for us. The guy is using alchemy and black magic.”

“Is he a wizard?”

“No clue yet. We’re going to the morgue first thing in the morning and then interviewing a few suspects Det. Hale found who intersect with all the victims.”

“Det. Hale?” Gil question, the snicker evident in his tone. “You usually have a snarky nickname for the local LEOs you’re working with. Why all the formality with this one?”

Not realizing his faux pas until his brother called him out on it, Rafe just told him the truth. “She’s my mate. Knew it the minute I walked into the room.”

“What? How? She’s human?” Suddenly serious, Gil fired off questions.

Answering in the order his brother asked, Rafe spoke very slowly just to rile Gil up.

“She’s my mate. The Universe made it so. No, from what I can tell she’s an honest-to-God Seer. Picked me out as a Dragon straight up.”

“Congrats, Brother. I’m truly happy for you. Just don’t let it get in the way of the investigation.”

“Pfft, damn Gil, don’t gush. I’d hate to have to tell anyone you had a heart.”

“Shit. Sorry, Rafe. I really am happy for you and we’ll celebrate and all that happy horseshit as soon as this case is over, promise. Hell, I’ll even foot the bill for the liquor.”

“Isaacs on your ass again?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just...yeah, it’s just.” Out of sorts, that’s the only way Rafe could think of the way his brother was acting, and Gilbride O’Rhordan did not do out of sorts.

As if a switch had been flipped, Gil was alert and all business, as he asked, more than a little surprise in his voice, “Your mate is a one-hundred-percent Italian from the old country Seer? As far as the Council knows there is only one and she is very old.”

“Yeah, I have a sneaky suspicious the one you’re talking about is Nat’s Nona.”

“No shit? Well, tread lightly. If she is your mate and a Seer, she’ll cut right through your bullshit before it’s even outta your mouth.”

It was good to hear his older brother laugh, even if it was a bit forced.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’ve got no doubt about that.” After taking another drink of his beer, he went on, “But something tells me she’s been raised almost completely as a

human. She missed the mercury tattoo inside the victims' wrists and had no idea the symbol was a Leviathan Cross."

"The mark of Satan?" Gil's voice was a deep rumble, more Dragon than man. "And there were organs stolen from the bodies?"

"The same organs from each body – heart and liver."

"Son of a bitch!" Gil spat, "He's..."

"Sacrificing them and sending their souls to Hell," Rafe interrupted, rolling his eyes even though his brother couldn't see the gesture through the phone. "Yeah, I got that, Bro. Not my first trip down this rocky road."

"I know," Gil sighed, his voice back to normal and twice as tired as before. "I just hate that you're there without backup."

"Won't Max be here in the morning?"

"He will, but I mean one of us."

"You really gotta get over it. Max might as well be one of us. He seems to be helping us more and more lately."

"Well, I'm gonna get with the Clan Leaders and see if they have any Guardsmen who'd be a good fit for us. I know Rian, you've met him, right? The Leader of the Blue Dragons?"

"Yep, met him a bunch of times over the years."

"Oh crap, that's right. Damn, I need to sleep for about a week." Pausing during which

time Rafe could hear his brother shuffling papers, Gil finally went on, “Anyway, I know he’s got a few guys who’ve not found their mates with military background and great skills that we could use.”

“Let me guess,” Rafe acknowledged. “Declan is top of your list?”

“Well, yeah, but why was he your first guess?”

“‘Cause you’ liked him since we worked with him in the desert. He’s your kinda no-shit-straight-to-the-point-get-the-job-done Guardsman.”

“And what is wrong with that?” Gil growled.

“Not a damn thing. Simmer down, I’m not criticizing, just statin’ the facts. He’ll work well with Abe and Ben, no doubt about it.”

“I think so, too. There’s also a couple others that are floatin’ around, not really with a Clan, but still pitchin’ in where they can that I want to talk to.”

“Anybody else I know?”

“No, I only know them in a friend-of-a-friend kinda way. Got their military records from the DOD. One’s an intelligence expert, did some work for the CIA and has extensive undercover experience.”

“Now, that’s one area we seriously need some help in.”

“That’s what I was thinkin’, too.” A beep broke into their conversation prompting Gil to add, “Director Isaacs is callin’. I gotta take this. Keep me informed and stay safe, Brother.”

“You know it.” Rafe pulled the phone from his ear, pushed the red button to disconnect the call and laid his phone on the counter.

Grabbing the case file Nat had given him, he looked over the information on the three men and one woman they would be interviewing the next morning. He doubted the woman was involved. Not because women can’t be serial killers, but from her size and weight, he doubted she could’ve moved the bodies from wherever they were murdered to the piers. It just didn’t seem feasible, but he would follow Nat’s lead, and Max would be watching from the other room.

“And he can smell deceit at a hundred yards.”

The more he read about each ‘person of interest’ the more he doubted the killer was in the bunch. Checking through financial records, employment history, known associates – the whole ball of wax, he couldn’t find anything that linked any of them to the Occult, Witches, or even anything remotely Supernatural.

“But that means exactly bupkis,” he muttered. “Getting away with it for this long, he’s had to be careful. Wonder if Gil’s called Calysta?”

Looking at his phone across the living room of his rented condo, he decided to ask Max tomorrow morning about calling the Grand Priestess of All Earthen Witches for her advice. Flying under the radar and involving as few people as possible was how the DPA operated, and Rafe wasn’t about to rock the boat. He’d let the King do it.

Parked outside the DFW airport, he waited for the King of the Big Cats. Waking up to a text that Max took an earlier plane had meant Rafe had showered, shaved and dressed in less than ten minutes to be able to grab a coffee on his way. After staying up half the night studying the victims’ profiles and the witness statements, there was no way he could fight the busy airport traffic without a large cup of hot java.

Grinning as the tall, sleek, always suave, never bothered by anything King sauntered out of the electronic doors, Rafe couldn't help but snicker, "Damn it, if he doesn't look like he just stepped out of an ad from a men's magazine.

South American, fluent in four languages aside from his native Spanish, Maximillian Prentice was just three days younger than dirt, sharp as a tack, and fierce as a lion. He'd been allied with the Dragons from the very beginning and had contacts in every nook and cranny of the world.

Popping the trunk open and jumping out of the car, Rafe met Max at the back of the car with a hearty handshake.

"How's life been treatin' ya, Old Man?"

"Fine." Max's posh accent and knowing smirk guaranteed he had more to add and sure enough, he raised a single eyebrow and nodded. "At least until you called me an old man."

Chuckling as he released the other man's hand, Rafe teased, "I call 'em as I see 'em."

"Remind me of that the next time I have my tail in a trap while trying to save your scaly ass."

With his chuckles turning to laughter, Rafe guffawed, "Never gonna let me live that down are ya'?"

"Not a chance, mi amigo ."

Shutting the trunk after Max's luggage was stowed, Rafe got back in the car, hooked his belt and once the King was ready, took off towards the exit.

“You eat on the plane? Need coffee? Anything before we head to the police station?”

“No, thank you. I really want to get up to speed on this case. If all that Gil told me is still accurate, we don’t have a lot of time before this mad man will be looking for his next victim.”

Handing Max the files he had reviewed last night, Rafe asked, “So, you agree that this killer is taking them long before we find them.”

“He must be, even though they are not being reported missing right away.” Max laid the manilla folder on his lap, opening it to the middle and asking, “I am right in assuming that they all lived alone, and if they were students, they were loners.”

“Yes, and from the details on their cell phone usage, all received texts were returned stating the vic had taken a trip of some kind.”

“All to the same place?”

“No, he’s smarter than that.”

Sitting so still and so silent Rafe wondered if he was even breathing, Max suddenly asked, “And you have not released the information about the texts to the public?”

“No, the police haven’t. To be honest, they haven’t released much. The detective in charge, Donatella Hale, is playin’ it close to the vest.”

“Gil says she is a true Seer.” There was an unasked question sitting like an elephant between them. One that Rafe was not going to answer until Max asked.

True to form, too perceptive for anyone’s good, the King questioned, “And this detective , she is your mate, mi amigo ?”

“Talked to Gil last night or just knew ?” Rafe raised his free hand and wiggled his fingers while making a “wooooooooooooo” sound. “Those freaky senses of yours truly freak me out sometimes, ya’ know?”

“It did not take any of my ‘freaky senses’, as you call them, to know that you have found the woman who completes you.” He motioned by barely lifting his index finger from the papers in his lap. “Your aura is glowing, your Dragon King is content, and you are truly happy, fulfilled.”

“Alright, I’ll take your word for it,” Rafe scoffed.

Pulling into the parking lot behind the Police Station, he pulled into one of the visitor’s spots at the very end of the front row of cars and turned off the car. Looking directly at Max, he warned, “Just don’t say anything. I haven’t said anything to Detective Hale, Nat. We just met yesterday and from what I can tell, her knowledge of our world is limited.”

A knowing smile spread on the King’s lips as he nodded. “I happen to know the Hale family very well, and I can assure you that with Angelique as her grandmother, your mate already knows more than you can imagine.”

7

Tossing and turning, unable to sleep longer than fifteen minutes at a time, Nat finally sat up, put her feet on the floor and grabbed her cell phone to see what time it was.

Four-seventeen am.

Running her fingers through her hair, she looked back at her pillow then at the shard of light from the streetlight just outside her window shining across the foot of her bed. Blowing out a breath, she pushed off of her mattress and shuffled down the stairs to the kitchen.

Turning on the light over the stove, the dimmest bulb in the house since her eyes were already burning, she popped a pod of dark brewed java into the coffeemaker, gave the flashing button a punch with her index finger, and stood watching the precious liquid fill her cup. Holding the mug with both hands, she turned around and leaned her backside against the counter.

Sipping the hot coffee, she thought about everything her grandmother had told her. Most of it made sense. Nat did feel kind of weird and really wonderful things from the moment she met Rafe that made absolutely no sense. And, she could see his Dragon as plain as day, but how could Nona think it was okay for the Universe or the Goddess or God himself to dictate who she was supposed to love – who she was supposed to spend the rest of her life with?

What about free will? What about dating? What about getting to know the dude before committing to eternity?

Eternity!! Oh. My. Goddess. Thanks for the curveball, Universe. Way to freak a chick right outta her skin...

What if she couldn't stand being near him after a couple of years? The facts were the facts. She hadn't had a relationship last longer than a couple of months... ever .

Something always happened. The guy would complain about her work schedule, or not like the way she talked everything over with Nona. There was even a time that one of the guys she was dating looked her right in the eye and said, "I want a woman who will stay home, have dinner on the table every night at six, and have my babies."

"And I ghosted that son of a bitch. Didn't answer a single call, text, or email. Threw away the flowers he sent and mailed his shit back to him in a box marked 'Go Away' ." Her voice sounded hollow as it floated through her dark, empty kitchen. "What if Rafe is the same? Everything I know about Dragons, which wouldn't fill a thimble, says they are Alpha to the core, headstrong as a mule, and demanding as all get out."

She pushed off the counter and walked towards the living room. "I can see us butting heads before this whole 'eternity together' thing ever kicks off. He's gonna pull some Caveman bullshit and I'm gonna shoot him in the...well, umm, knee with my Sig Sauer." She stopped mid-step. "Do bullets hurt Dragons? Can a Dragon be killed?"

Refusing to dwell on things that blew her mind, she shuffled across the room and sat in her huge, overstuffed recliner. Putting the footrest out, she grabbed the remote and clicked on the TV. Sandra Kelly with Channel Four Early Morning Report was cheerfully reporting on a four-car pileup on I35 and the ticker at the bottom was reporting the dismal results of the Stock Market from the day before.

Flipping the channels, she landed on the Food Network and half listened to Rachel Ray making brunch as she reluctantly reached for the old, thick, heavy-as-hell book her grandmother had given her the night before. She'd read a good part of the history

of the Dragon Guard when she got home but her eyes had gotten so heavy she was finally forced to go to bed. By all accounts, they were not the evil beasts all the fairy tales made them out to be.

“And that’s because ‘the Others’,” she made air quotes with the first two fingers on her free hand, “perpetuated the stories with the hopes that humans would never come looking for them.” She mimicked Nona’s voice, shaking her head and turning to the page where she’d left off and continued reading about the Dragon Kings, the Knights, and the Mage who’d made it possible for them to become one being.

Lost in the words, wondering how old Rafe really was, she got to the part about the significance of a Dragon’s Mate and how the Elders had prayed for days and days to the Universe. On one hand, it stretched her imagination to its lengths, but on the other, she knew of her own ‘Gift’ and couldn’t discount that there were others, too.

What must it be like to have a lifespan of hundreds or even thousands of years? What had Rafe seen? How had he handled all the changes of the world around him? Had he always been in some kind of law enforcement or in the military? It was all so mind boggling, completely and totally something out of one of the Sci-Fi Fantasy novels Marietta, the Dispatcher was always reading.

Captivated by everything she was learning, wondering if maybe, just maybe, the whole Destined Mate thing was real, she came across a passage that ripped the breath from her lungs – Once the Dragon and his Mate are blessed by the Universe and joined together as Fate has seen fit, the sacred woman will not only share in the longevity of her Dragon, but also his Magic and that of his Dragon King.

Slamming the book shut as she kicked the footrest down and jumped to her feet, Nat tossed the book into the seat that her butt had just vacated and snarled into the empty room while spinning on her toes and stomping to her room, “Dammit Nona, you better be up, cause I’m comin’ in hot.”

Dressing and out the door in record time, she'd just pressed the button her key fob when her cell phone vibrated in her hand. Looking at the number, she slid her thumb across the screen and pressed the device to her ear. "Hale here. Go ahead."

"Hostages taken at 3525 Sycamore School Rd, Albertson's Supermarket. Be advised suspect is armed and dangerous."

"Copy that. Hale in route. ETA 6 minutes."

"Copy that. Be Safe."

It never ceased to amaze her how Marietta had trained all the dispatchers to handle the phone like a radio and to always end the call with the words 'be safe'. It was just an added reminder to watch her ass and get back in one piece.

Flipping the switch that turned on the red and blue flashing lights in the back window and grill of her Mustang, Nat backed out into the quiet street, only turning on the siren when she was on W. Cleburne Rd. Turning right onto Sycamore School Rd, she raced on until she was about a half a block away before killing the siren. Pulling into the far corner of the shopping center parking lot, she whipped in between the two squad cars that were already there.

Out of the car and striding towards them, she caught the radio Officer Tommy Atkins tossed to her. Pressing the button, she advised, "Hale on scene. ETA on Hostage Negotiation?"

"Roger Det. Hale," Lois, the oldest of the dispatchers, responded. "ETA Fifteen minutes for Hostage Negotiator. Five minutes for SWAT."

"Roger that," she acknowledged, handing the radio back to Tommy and grumbling, "SWAT'll shoot first and leave the questions to me."

“You know it. Where’s Fitz?” Tommy’s heated whisper told Nat he didn’t agree with the aggressive stance of Woodrow Long, begrudgingly known as Woody, the new SWAT Commander. He was ex-military, pro-excessive force, and a dickhead with a superiority complex. Nat had known him since she was in kindergarten and he was in third grade, and not one second of it had given her any fond memories. He was an asshole, a bully, and a chauvinist – the trifecta of assholeism.

“It’s his day off,” she responded. “Any contact with the suspect?”

“No, not a peep since we got here. He’s cut the phone lines. Did you hear the 911 call?”

“No,” she replied, searching the huge grocery store in the middle of an even larger shopping center for access points and escape routes.

A terrified, squeaky whisper broke her concentration as Tommy replayed the 911 call. “Th-Ther-re’s a man...I m-mean...Earl, Earl J-Jones and h-he’s g-gotta a g-gun and h-he...he’s got Jason, Mildred, and Tracy in the...in the of-f-fice.”

“What’s your name ma’am?” The dispatcher calmly asked. “Are you in a safe place?”

“S-Sally, Sally Ed-dwards.” A hiccupped sob followed by a long pause was followed by, “Yes...yeah, I’m in the milk c-cooler.”

“Okay good, Sally. You’re doin’ really great here. The police are on the way. Can you see Earl or the others?”

“N-no.” Her voice cracked before she begged, “Please p-please d-don’t make me g-go out there. He said...” she sniffled and sobbed aloud. “He s-said he’d kill us all if he d-didn’t...”

When Sally continued to cry without speaking, the dispatcher assured, “You’ve done really good, Sally. Just stay where you are. I’m gonna stay on the phone with you until help arrives.”

Clicking off the recording, Tommy added, “And Sally’s phone is now going straight to voicemail.”

Letting her Gift search for answers, Nat could see two clear ends to the situation in front of her. Number one, she got Earl to give up and everyone lived. Two, she failed and not only was everyone in the store dead, but so was she.

Plan A it is. Now, what the fuck is Plan A?

Not taking her eyes off the store, she ordered, “Give me a vest and a bullhorn.”

“You sure? Shouldn’t we wait for the Hostage Negotiation?”

Tommy’s questioning, cautious tone had Nat snapping her eyes to his and with what Fitz called her Colonel Beatrice Von Tight-Ass Bitch voice, she demanded, “Give me a vest and a bullhorn, Officer Atkins, or I’ll have you removed from the scene and back on traffic duty. Do you want to tell Jason’s wife, Mildred’s grandkids, or Tracy’s fiancée that you’re responsible for their deaths?”

I hate being a hardass, but damn... Okay, I don’t hate it that much...

Without another word, Tommy marched around the cruiser, grabbed a bulletproof vest and bullhorn from the already open trunk and handed them to Nat. Sliding on the protective Kevlar like it was a second skin, she tightened the straps on the sides and slapped the Velcro into place before taking the bullhorn with a single nod.

“Thanks, Tommy,” she acquiesced.

“Just be safe,” he answered, turning away from her and returning to the side of the car.

Knowing he was only trying to protect her because they’d known each other forever and a day wasn’t enough. She’d had to pull rank. Had to show the other officers that she was in charge and would take no shit. Woman or not, she was a Detective First Class and they would do as she said or pay the price. She’d earned her rank and would be damned if anyone would ever discount her abilities.

Looking at the four First Responders then across the parking lot at the six others who’d just arrived, she turned back to Tommy and his crew before putting the ear bub with a wireless mic in her ear and giving her orders to her backup. “No one, and I mean no one , fires a shot until I give the order.”

Almost immediately the two teams on either side of her responded to the affirmative then came Teams C and D, those covering the back of the building, “Roger that.” Finally, as she was walking out from behind the two sets of four officers that were covering the shopping center exits called out, “Roger Detective. Teams E and F are a go.”

Stopping twenty-five feet from the large glass double doors, she raised the bullhorn and in the calmest, softest tone she could achieve while talking through the most obnoxious mechanical creation, she beseeched, “Earl? Earl Jones? This is Nat Hale. Can you come up to the door and talk to me for a minute?”

No, she wasn’t using all the psycho-babble bullshit the Police Psychologist had told them was ‘absolutely necessary’ to talk to a hostage taker. Nat was talking to Earl Jones, the older brother of Josiah Jones – the first boy she’d ever kissed. Ft Worth may have grown by leaps and bounds over the years since she’d been born, but these were her people and she’d damned sure talk to them like she always had.

An ear-splitting screech of the store's PA system cut through the early morning haze, causing Nat to jump and the little hairs at the nape of her neck to stand on end.

"I got no beef with you, Nat. Never have. You're a good girl, doin' a good job. Call off those boys of yours and go home. Jason and I have some business to discuss."

Surprisingly, Earl sounded calm, cool, and collected, which freaked Nat the hell out and made the two possible outcomes that were running on a constant loop through her head, stop, flash, and take slightly different courses. Unfortunately, what changed was that in both Earl was now dead.

I just can't let that happen...

"Thanks, Earl. I appreciate that." Taking a step forward, she continued, "If you just need to talk to Jason, why don't you let Mildred and Tracy come on out? I'm sure Mil's dying for a cigarette and Tracy's beau is waitin' for her at home."

Eerie silence was the only answer she received. Counting to ten, she had just raised the bullhorn again when Earl called out, "I'll let the ladies go, even Sally. Doesn't matter that she called y'all. But, there's one thing I want, Nat."

"What's that, Earl?"

"I want you to come in here and talk to this asshole for me. He owes me my back wages. He fired me for no reason. It's the least he can do, right? He'll listen to you."

Before she could answer, Asshole Supreme, aka Woodrow Long, shouted, "Stand down, Detective Hale. That is an order. This is now my crime scene. I have command and you will do as you're told."

"Yeah, sure, Woody." Marching forward, she added, "I'm goin' in and getting' these

people out. You shoot me in the back and I'll haunt you 'til the end of time."

8

Racing down the steps, into the parking lot, and into the rented SUV with Max exactly one step behind him, a growl escaped Rafe's mouth as Gil's voice invaded his mind. "Did you see that?"

"Hell yes, I saw that. She is my mate."

Visions of Donatella bleeding out on an over-polished, dingy, tile floor had ripped him from his slumber. Dressed in less than a minute and happy to see Max ready when he nearly pulled the door of the room he was sleeping in from its hinges, Rafe had known what he was seeing was a premonition, but that did absolutely nothing to stop both man and Dragon from nearly having a heart attack.

"I know she's your mate, but you hadn't called to me."

"Holy hell, man, canna guy getta break? You're my brother, not my keeper."

"Whatever, Asshole. I was tryin' to help."

Max's barely contained chuckle instantly made Rafe realize that he was being an asshole and that Gil was just trying to help. Taking a deep breath, he admitted, "Yep, I'm a jerk. Sorry. I know you're just doin' your big brother thing."

"No worries."

"No, I shouldn't have snapped it's just this whole mating thing is..."

Unable to speak as the barely evident mating bond he shared with Donatella flared to life, doubling, tripling, quadrupling in size and strength until he could see what his mate was seeing, feel what she was feeling, and hear her thoughts. Pushing the accelerator to the floor as he watched her raise her hands, flip someone off, and march right into the market where a man named Earl was holding four hostages at gunpoint, Rafe roared, “What the fuck does she think she’s doing?”

“It appears she is saving the day, mi dragon,” Max grinned. “Once again proving, the Universe does not make mistakes.”

“Yep,” Gil’s authoritative tone turned comical as he added, “Ditto what the King said.”

“Shut. Up.” Rafe grumbled aloud as well as mentally.

Tamping down his flaming temper and searing emotions, he slowed the SUV to a roll as he turned the corner and entered the parking lot. Jumping from the vehicle, he caught the eye of Captain Rogers.

Making a beeline towards where his mate’s Commander and another tall, man with graying hair and a paunch he tried to hide by throwing his shoulders back, Rafe broke in, “Excuse me, but what’s the situation? What’s goin’ on in there?”

“Nat,” he cleared his throat. “Detective Hale,” Rogers quickly corrected, “Has gone in to negotiate. We have no updates past that.”

There was something the Commander wasn’t saying, Rafe could smell the Captain’s anger coupled with frustration and a touch of deceit. The noxious concoction stung the Dragon’s nose and enraged the Beast with whom he shared his soul.

Stepping forward just far enough to tower over both men, he looked down his nose

and growled through gritted teeth, “What are you doing to rectify the situation, Commander?” Knowing his last word was laced with derision and an extra push of magic, Rafe added, “Or would you like the DPA to take over?”

“You’re a FED?” The older man with a gut, who also had breath that stunk of stale cigars and cheap whiskey, tried to flex his nonexistent power by leaning forward and jeering, “Who called the Desk Jockey?”

Whipping his clenched fist towards the man’s mouth, Rafe spun to the right as his hand was caught by another and forced back to his side. Glaring into Max’s eyes, he shook with rage as the King’s warning sounded in his mind, “Do not draw any more attention to yourself, Cábron. Let us find our ‘own’ way to help your Companera.”

Turning the rest of the way around without so much as a glance at the worthless men behind him, Rafe barked, “What’s your idea, Max? Speak now, and never, ever...” He stopped, snapped his head to the side and sneered aloud, “ Ever stop me from doing what needs to be done again.”

Holding his hands up in surrender, the cocky half-grin he’d surely been born with still casually curving the right side of his mouth, Max cajoled, “Was it not better to stop your rash actions than have to explain the thousand-pound Dragon reigning fire down on the men and women of the Tarrant County Sheriff’s office?”

Facing forward and storming towards the back of his SUV, Rafe muttered, “I pray your Mate whips that shit-eatin’ grin from your smug face.”

“Oh, but that she hasn’t already tried,” Max sighed with a wistful look that Rafe decided he’d investigate at a later date.

Refusing to analyze the King’s musing, needing to get Nat from inside that building and away from the madman, Rafe took off his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his

light blue dress shirt. Closing his eyes, focusing on his mate's thoughts, the ability to see through her eyes snapping into place, he was so shocked by what he saw, his butt nearly missed the bumper of the SUV.

"Now, Jason, I know you're the manager of this store and you were only doin' what you thought was best, but shouldn't you have at least discussed what Earl wasn't doin' before just leavin' a message on his answering machine tellin' him he was fired?" Patting the younger, still frightened but incredibly trusting guy on the shoulder, she added, "And a message? On the home phone? What's that all about?"

"It was wrong. I know that now." The manager's head fell forward as Nat focused on the man still holding the rifle, but with the barrel over his shoulder and not pointing at anyone.

"And you, Earl, what the hell were you thinkin'? You damn near caused Mildred here to swear off cigarettes and we both know Big Tobacco can't take that kinda hit." Winking at the older woman with a bright pink bow in her gray hair and lipstick to match, she teased, "But maybe a cigarette or two a day might be good for ya', Mil."

Back to the gunman, Nat asked, "Now, can we get the hell outta here? I haven't had a drop of coffee and Woody Long is out there right now thinkin' of ten different ways to storm the doors and put a bullet in your head." Holding out her hand, her confidence so overwhelming Rafe had to smile, Nat tipped her head to the side and wiggled her fingers before adding, "Let's fool that stupid son of a bitch just like we did when we were kids." Listening to her chuckle with people she'd obviously known her whole life was reassuring, cooling Rafe's temper enough for him to think straight.

"Give me that rifle," Nat continued. "Let's walk outta here and see if we can't work this all out peaceably."

Taking a deep breath and almost immediately exhaling, Earl clicked his teeth and

agreed, “I’m sorry, Nat. I had one too many long necks and lost my cool.” Handing the rifle to Donatella, he went on, “How long am I gonna have to serve?”

“I don’t know, Earl, but I’ll do my best to make sure it’s the minimum. I can talk to Carolina at the Prosecutor’s Office, tell her you surrendered peacefully, nobody got hurt, and you admitted you were wrong.” Using her freehand to put her ear bud back in just as the SWAT Team was preparing to break every pane of glass on the front of the store, she advised, “Hang on just a sec, Earl. Let me tell them we’re coming out.”

Speaking into the mike attached to her earpiece, she instructed, “Commander Rogers, Woody, I’m heading out with Earl and the others. I have the gun. Instruct your men to stand down and do not approach. I will be taking Mr. Jones to the station for processing.”

Waiting as long as he could, Rafe pushed to his feet, rounded the corner of the vehicle and glared at Rogers and the man he now knew was named Long as they argued, he stalked forward. Making it exactly four steps, he breathed a sigh of relief as the Captain answered Nat, “As you wish, Detective Hale, but we will discuss protocol and your refusal to follow it this afternoon.”

“Roger that, Cap,” came her cheerful reply that almost made Rafe smile – but just almost. Once again, he was pissed, furious, and damn near ready to pop scales and breathe fire. What the hell was Nat thinking? Putting herself in danger was absolutely a no-go in his book and he planned to let her know about it.

Doing as about-face, using his enhanced speed, he raced to her car and opened the back driver’s-side door. Watching as the dressed in black from head to toe members of the SWAT Team make a path, their guns still trained on the suspect, he waited as patiently as possible as Nat steered Earl Jones towards her car.

Knowing she was purposely ignoring him as she loaded her prisoner into the car, only

putting the handcuffs on as a formality and telling Earl she'd take them off as soon as they were at Central Booking, Rafe waited until she shut the door and had her hand on her own before blurting out, "You can't ignore me forever."

Opening her door, taking off her vest and throwing it in the car, she turned to face him, looked him right in the eye and shrugged, "That's what you think."

O f all the egotistical, asshole, arrogant, pain-in-my-ass men in the world...”

She slammed the palm of her hand against the steering wheel as she sat at the red light grumbling under her breath.

“Who the hell does he think he is?” She slapped her thigh. “No one tells me what to do. I’m over twenty-one with a badge and gun. He better watch out, I might just shoot him in the foot for the shits and giggles of watching him hop around like the idiot he is.” Pounding her fist into her seat, she added, “Or throw him in a holding cell and hide the damn key.”

“That’s right, Girl. Don’t let that man take advantage of you.” Earl’s chuckled remark made Nat jump in her seat.

Slapping her hand over her racing heart, she scolded, “Damn it, Earl. Don’t scare me like that. I forgot you were back there.”

Laughing out loud, her prisoner/long-time friend teased, “You better tighten up. That man looked at you like he was gonna eat you up with a biscuit and some gravy.”

“He wishes,” she grumbled, giving Earl a wink in her rearview mirror. Changing the subject to get her mind off one arrogant, pig-headed Dragon, she asked, “What else is bothering you? I know you didn’t cause all this trouble just ‘cause, Jason President-of-the-Chess-Club-and-Winner-of-Most-Boring-Man-Alive Whitmore fired you. You’re too smart for that, even drunk and stoned you’ve always been smarter than the

average bear, my friend.”

“I didn’t say I was...”

“Save it and spill, Earl.” She raised as ingle eyebrow and gave him her Colonel Beatrice Von Tight-Ass Bitch look.

Letting his head fall forward, Earl’s sigh was filled with so much emotion a vision of his past couple of days flickered to life in her mind. There he sat, the table before him covered in empty beer cans and liquor bottles with a huge round-bottomed bong right in the center.

The sound of the front door banging the wall behind it as it was kicked open woke him from his stupor and had him trying like hell to get to his feet. Swaying left and then right, he palmed the wall to stay standing. Stumbling through the house, he heard pounding footsteps overhead.

“Thelma? Thelma is that you, Darlin’?”

Appearing at the bannister that lined the hall in the second story of their home, Thelma Lou, the one person in all the world Earl loved more than beer and pot. Her eyes may have been red and swollen from crying, but the look on her face was pure disgust.

“Of course it’s me, you stupid son of a bitch. Who the hell else would it be?”

Stunned into silence by the first curse words he’d ever heard cross the love of his life’s lips, Earl fell to his knees when she added, “Stay down there. I don’t need you in my way while I pack.” She glared, her look so full of resentment and disappointment even the memory of it hurt Nat’s heart. “Damn you, Earl, why did ya’ haveta go and lose that stupid job.” Leaning over the rail, she added, “I told you if

you did I'd leave you like last season's shoes." She leaned back and slammed her fists to her hips. "And ya' just had to push it, didn'tcha. Just seein' if I'd really leave. Well, ya' got your wish, ya' damned fool."

"Wh-Where are m-my girls?" His voice cracked as he tried to hide the tears.

"The kids are with momma. We'll be there 'til I can find us some place of our own." Thelma's voice was hard and resolute. She'd been wading through Earl's shit for nearly twenty years and she was done with a capital 'D'.

"You...Y'all c-can have the house. I'll m-move in w-with..."

"I don't want this house," her voice shook with unspent emotion. "Too damn many memories. Too..."

Forcing herself out of the memory, seriously feeling like a Peeping Tom watching Earl Jones, one tough son of a bitch, crying like a baby. Glancing into her rearview mirror, the poor sap reminded her of an old rag doll left on the front porch to fade and rot.

"Come on, Earl, stop feelin' sorry for yourself." She employed the same tactic Nona always had when she was having a pity party – tough love. "Sure, you fucked up big time, but what one of us hasn't? You just have to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get your shit together."

Looking up, a tiny spark springing to life in the depths of his sad, old, hound-dog eyes. "And how am I gonna do that from behind bars? Thelma will never take me back after the crap I just pulled."

"Look, you screwed up, but that's not what's important. What you do next will define who you are, and the Earl Jones I know and admire would never go down without a

fight.”

Pulling into the station, she let him stew as she turned off the car, got out and took a minute to stretch and take a long deep breath of cool morning air. When she heard a tap on the car window behind her, she looked over her shoulder, gave a now smiling Earl a quick nod and got to work on getting him into the station.

Halfway through the booking process, Special Agent Rafe Pain-in-her-ass showed up with a steaming cup of coffee and her favorite breakfast in the whole wide world – a bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit from Bertie’s Café. The owner and proprietor, Bernita Grist, was in her kitchen every single morning at three am making her homemade biscuits from a secret family recipe and they quite literally melted in your mouth.

Not caring what he was up to, Nat grabbed the wrapped breakfast sandwich and coffee she knew from the smell had hazelnut creamer in it and narrowed her eyes. “Where ya’ getting’ your information from, Slick?”

“Whatever do you mean?” The sparkle in his icy blue eyes sent shivers up and down her spine while his cocky grin made her heart do a strange little flutter thing that Nat adamantly refused to acknowledge.

Stepping up to him, she tilted her head to keep eye contact and grumbled, “You know damned good and well what I mean. You’re up to somethin’ and if I hadn’t been up since 0’dark-thirty with a bite of food or drop of java, I’d tell you to stuff this breakfast up your ass, but as it stands, I’m gonna mind my manners and say thank you.”

Doing an about-face before he could speak, glad that the Duty Officer had taken Earl to be fingerprinted and get his mugshots, she hollered over her shoulder, “We’re heading to the morgue in ten. Hope you don’t have a weak stomach.”

10

Watching Donatella walk away was almost as nice as looking her in the eye. Dammit all, if she didn't have a body made for sin with curves in all the right places.

"Maybe learn how to shield your thoughts better, Dipshit." Gil's voice broke the spell Rafe was under. "Yeah, she's a nice lookin' lady, but I really don't need to know any more than that."

Slamming his mental walls into place, Rafe saw red as he snarled, "Look at her one more time and I'll rip your eyeballs out and feed them to Gus."

Laughing out loud but speaking into his mind, Max appeared as if out of thin air, "How I would love to see you try to feed your brother's eyes to that cantankerous old bull."

"Butt out, Pussy Cat."

"That's King Pussy Cat to you, Lizard Boy."

Feeling his temperature rising and the push of scales against the skin covering his spine, Rafe whipped around and stormed out of the station. Once outside, he gulped in the fresh air, pushing his Dragon King to fall back, needing to stay in control.

He'd never snapped at his brother, Max or anyone for that matter like he just had. This whole mating thing was messing with his head and an unfocused Dragon meant trouble – something Rafe had no trouble finding in the best of times.

Walking to his car, deciding that getting the four blocks to the Morgue was better than going back in and facing a smirking, supremely smug King of the Big Cats, he got in his rented SUV. Driving through the back streets, taking his time, trying to think of anything but Donatella Hale and the way she made him stark, raving crazy, he focused on everything he knew about the killer they were trying to catch.

Not only was the bastard clever, but he was finding a way of keeping his evil mysticism hidden from all the Supernaturals who called DFW their home. “And that’s no easy thing,” he mumbled to himself. “That shit stinks to high heaven and leaves a taint that never goes away.”

Pulling up to a four-way stop, it suddenly hit him like a ton of bricks. “He’s underground.” Going when it was his turn, Rafe sped up, nearly jumping out of the SUV when he saw Nat pulling into the parking lot behind him.

Quick-stepping it to her car and opening the door, he held up his hand as she opened her mouth to speak and hurriedly explained, “The killer is underground.”

Waiting for her to applaud his genius, Rafe instead huffed as Nat furrowed her brow and shrugged, “And...that gets me closer to finding the asshole how?”

Rolling his eyes, tired of playing nice when his feisty mate absolutely refused to do anything but poke at him, he gripped the top of her door until his knuckles were white and slowly ground out every word. “It means, Miss Sass-in-Boots that to do what he’s doing, subdue the girls with black magic, remove their organs and make them look like their sleeping instead of dissecting – he has to be using black magic.”

“Yeah, you said that before. I still have no clue how I can use that to find him.” Getting out of the car, she stared at his hands on her door and raised her eyebrows. “You mind?”

Letting go and taking a step back as she closed the door and locked her car with a beep-beep , started walking towards the entrance to the Morgue. Catching up in three strides, trying hard not to get angry but failing just the same, Rafe grabbed her upper arm and stepped in front of her. “It means, Detective, that I can find him. I can use the heightened senses of my Dragon to track the black magic.”

Pursing her lips and looking anywhere but at him, Nat finally let out the breath she’d been holding and looked him right in the eye. “Okay, I get it. You can change into a Dragon. You’re one of the Universe’s chosen Warriors.”

“How did you...?”

It was her turn to raise her hand and make him be quiet which reminded him exactly how much he was growing to love her need to control anything and everyone in her orbit.

“Nona gave me a book,” she went on without missing a beat. “It was old and musty and contains way more information about things I thought only existed in story books than I care to admit, but I did read the entire section about Dragons, and I get it.”

Waiting as she looked one way and then the other, he was shocked when she added, “What you can do is nothing short of amazing, but I have to be able to write a report that my bosses will buy. I have to be able to explain how we found the asshole. I just can’t...”

Tired of watching her hem and haw, needing to calm her worries and ease her conscience, Rafe cut in, “How do you explain what happens when you use your Gift? I know there have been times when you just got a feeling or a hunch from your Sight and ran with it. What did you put in your reports?”

Her silence only served to make him push harder. “Admit it. You’ve gone through

your entire life hiding who you are from everyone but your family. You have learned to mask it, work it into your everyday life, tone it down and make it seem ‘normal’, right?”

Stepping closer, his hands sliding down her arms until his fingers slid alongside hers, he leaned forward and whispered, “But from now on, you can be exactly who you are, who you were meant to be. You’d be surprised what people don’t see or simply refuse to acknowledge.”

Giving into temptation, he closed the scant distance between their lips. What was supposed to be a small gesture, a promise of what would be, proof that they were meant to be together, caught fire.

Wrapping his arms around Donatella, pulling her body tight to his, craving her more with every beat of his heart, he pushed her against the side of his SUV, and deepened their kiss. Demanding entrance, growling low in his throat as she immediately surrendered, he slid his tongue alongside hers, reveling in the currents of electricity caused by their cosmic connection, pushing their desire higher and higher.

Working his hands across her wondrous curves, gripping the round globes of her ass, he lifted her feet off the ground and rolled his hips to hers. Ecstasy was the only word he could think of to describe what it felt like to finally hold his glorious mate in his arms. His life was complete. He could...

“Ahem.”

Moving with the speed afforded him by the gift of his Dragon King, Rafe ripped his lips from Donatella’s, whipped his head to the side and snapped at Max, his voice more Dragon than man, “Go away.”

Another growl rose from his chest as Nat’s palms slapped against his shoulder and

she wiggled her hips trying to get down. Digging his fingers into her butt, he pushed through gritted teeth, “Stop. Moving.”

Her eyes opened wide, like two coffee-colored saucers as her body became still as a stone and her lips formed a perfectly shaped ‘O’. “Sorry,” she whispered right before thinking, “Oh damn, he’s one big man,” to herself.

Too aroused for tact, Rafe winked as he spoke directly into her mind, “Oh, mo chroí, you have no idea.”

If possible, her eyes got even bigger before she schooled her features and demanded, “Put me down, ya’ damn beast.”

Ignoring the King’s snickers, Rafe let go of her luscious body and took a step back but not before whispering, “Soon, very soon.”

Stopping as she was straightening her shirt, Nat’s eyes snapped to his as she questioned, “Soon what?”

Letting his lips curve into a knowing grin, he once again spoke directly into her mind, “You’ll see what a beast I can be .”

Turning on a dime, he walked towards the entrance of the Morgue, laughing aloud when she stormed past him, grumbling, “Fat chance, Scale Boy.”

Following his mate, he walked alongside Max, just waiting for the smart remark he knew was brewing. True to form, the King jested, “Your Donatella is truly something, is she not?”

Smiling so big his cheeks hurt, Rafe readily agreed, “She damned sure is.”

“Have you met her grandmother yet?” Max’s question was cloaked with more than simple curiosity, making Rafe ask, “No, why?”

Nodding as they went through the third set of double doors and the subtle scent of death and antiseptic turned to nasal warfare, Max simply replied, “The apple does not fall far from the tree.”

Wanting to ask what the hell the King was waxing poetical about, Rafe’s attention was instead jerked to the strange little man in scrubs who was talking to Nat. No taller than her five-foot-six inches, his bald head shone in the harsh florescent lights, his skin was the color and thickness of tissue paper, and the completely round, thick black plastic of his bi-focals made his eyes look like they’d been drawn by a cartoonist.

Looking into those beady black eyes, Rafe saw nothing. No spark of life, no joy, no sadness, no nothing. It was as if they were buttons or marbles placed there by the same Puppet Master who manipulated his strings. Not only was it disconcerting, Rafe wanted the Medical Examiner absolutely nowhere near his mate. It wasn’t that he was jealous, he simply could not bear to think of his lifeless existence being in the vicinity of Nat’s vitality, exuberant spirit, and zest for life.

Crossing the room in four strides, Rafe casually held out his hand and stepped in just a bit closer to the Medical Examiner. Holding his credentials in his free hand, he introduced, “I’m Rafe O’Rhordan with the DPA.”

Something akin to the feel of millions of tiny spiders skittering up his arms and down his spine attacked Rafe as the creepy little man gave him a less than weak handshake and with a nasally whine reciprocated, “Dr. Norman Batterfield, Tarrant County Medical Examiner.”

Glad when he could let go and step back beside his mate, Rafe attempted a smile,

adding, "Nice to meet you."

Raising on his toes and spinning to the left, the doctor scampered, in the eeriest fashion Rafe had ever witnessed, to the side of the closest gurney and pulled back the institutional- blue sheet. Looking at the body of the girl he knew to have been Misty Blake, the Dragon let his senses flow into her corpse.

Examining the sixth and most recent victim of the vicious serial killer from the inside-out, he saw the deliberately delicate, highly skilled traces of the black magic practitioner around her chest cavity and where her liver had once been. So different from the marks left by Dr. Batterfield's scalpel.

"Have you determined the cause of death?" Nat's question snapped Rafe back to reality.

"Yes." The Medical Examiner picked up a green folder from the silver instrument table on his right. Flipping through the pages, he continued, "She was drugged with a mixture of Rohypnol and Gamma Hydroxy Butyrate."

"Date rape drugs?"

"Yes, but that's only the beginning." The doctor quickly responded to Nat's question. "From the deteriorated amount in her blood stream and with the absence of her liver to do enzyme testing, I surmise that after approximately an hour she was given a large dose of Ketamine and the freshest molecules still in her blood tell us that she was given the lethal dose of a finely mixed cocktail of all three approximately ninety minutes later."

"And you can tell all that even after she's been in the water?" Rafe inquired, having seen for himself what the doctor was saying was true, but wondering how mere tests could prove the times with such precision.

“But of course.” Batterfield adjusted his spectacles. “She was dead before she went into the water, therefore she did not ingest it and because of that it was not diluted in her system.”

“Something doesn’t sound right.” Max’s comment in Rafe’s head put words to the Dragon’s thoughts then the King added, “I’m going to call a member of my Pride, a very well-known and incredibly intelligent doctor who’s word I trust above all others.”

“Thanks, Max. I’ll keep Poindexter here busy.”

Forcing himself not to smile when Max’s chuckle floated through his mind, Rafe continued to ask questions. “All six girls were killed in the same fashion?”

“Oh yes, although I did not perform all the autopsies, my learned colleagues provided me with each and every report and I can say without reservation that all six girls were killed in exactly the same fashion.”

“Would that be why they are all so close in body type, height, and weight?” Nat’s thoughts were a jumble of rage, disgust, and frustration, but Rafe had to hand it to her, she could put on a good front and stay professional on the outside.

Strong as hell and determined enough to tackle anything. Damn, she’s amazing...

“Very astute, Detective Hale. That is precisely why he would be looking for victims that do not vary in especially weight, he would be assured of success in subduing, keeping them asleep and then killing them every time.”

“Have all those reports been forwarded to my office?” Her tone was stern but Rafe felt the chaotic emotions within her. Leaning closer, letting his arm brush hers and pushing calming healing magic through their bond, he was glad to see her visibly

relax.

It's the least I can do for her...

"Yes, Detective, everything should be on your desk awaiting your return." The tone of Dr. Batterfield's voice had the same effect as nails on a chalkboard, making Rafe overjoyed when Nat replied, "Thank you for everything, Doctor," and turned to leave.

Following her out the way they came in, Rafe stepped up to her side as they exited the last set of double doors. Holding the stainless steel framed glass door open for her, he asked, "What next, Detective?"

"We interview the suspects Sargent Finley has waiting for us." Coming to a screeching halt, she poked him in the chest with the sharp tip of her index finger as she glared into his eyes and warned, "And by that, I mean, I talk, you listen, and..." Another especially hard poke that ended with her pushing her finger into the muscles of his chest as hard as she could as she added, "If you ever manhandle me again, I'll gut you where you stand."

Staying in place as she spun around and marched away, he waited until she was halfway out the door before chuckling, "The next time I manhandle you there'll be no place to hide your knife, 'cause, Darlin', you'll be naked as the day you were born."

Making a beeline for the coffee machine, she slid her money into the slot and pushed the button to get a double shot of espresso in her very black, as close to mud as she could get it, cup of coffee. Getting to her desk, she set her cup on the desk and plopped into her chair. Leaning back as far as she could and stretching her arms over her head, she groaned aloud when the unmistakable scent of smoky Applewood and the air after a summer rain hit her nose.

Still stretched backward, she turned her head to the side and as Rafe Kiss-her-butt O'Rhordan stopped at the corner of her desk, she scoffed, "Can you not take a hint?"

"Oh, I take hints very well." He gave her the same Ta-Da motion with his hands that a Magician who was entertaining a kid's birthday party would give as he went on, "That's why I'm here." With a wink, he topped off his grand entrance by picking up her coffee, taking a huge gulp then adding, "Let's go talk to those suspects."

On her feet and grabbing the cup the bane of her existence had just set on her desk as quick as her exhausted body could move, she stopped in front of the man she knew to be Maximillian Prentice and held out her hand. "Guess Lunkhead has no manners." She spoke just loud enough to ensure Rafe heard every word as she went on, "Name's Donatella Hale, but everyone here calls me Hale. Family calls me Nat."

Gently taking her hand and kissing the back of it, he looked up through his impossibly thick, long lashes and winked. Standing back to his full height which was maybe an inch shorter than Rafe, Max's accent wrapped around her like a blanket fresh out of the dryer as he demurred, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Detective Hale."

Letting go of her hand as he stepped back, Max added, “You are every bit as lovely as Angelique described you.”

“You really do know Nona, huh?” Shaking her head as she picked up her leather portfolio and the cheap Bic pen she chewed on more than wrote with, she added, “That woman never ceases to amaze me.”

“She has that effect on all of us.” Max’s chuckled reply made Nat smile, but not as much as the frown on Rafe’s face or the way he slid behind her.

Leading two of the handsomest men in existence past the Dispatchers – most of whom were female – Nat just smiled and waved as they ooh’d and aah’d. Stopping in front of Interview Room One where the Desk Sargent had put Malcolm Navetti, Nat stopped with her hand on the knob and looked over her shoulder. “Now, you two are observers.” Looking at Max, she added, “And you just got a demotion, King .” She emphasized his title then added a wink. “You are also a Special Agent.”

Opening the door even though she could feel that Rafe wanted to say something, she walked straight to the table sitting in the middle of the windowless, block-walled room and eyed the suspect as she slammed her portfolio onto the Formica top. Pulling out her chair, sure to make as much noise as possible because it unnerved Wilson Freeman.

Wondering exactly how many times Wilson had been interviewed by the police for one thing or another since he was old enough to walk, Nat opened her folder, shifted her papers and sighed. Waiting for Rafe to take a seat and Max to get comfortable standing in the corner, she looked up at the forty-three-year-old who looked like he was pushing seventy from years of alcohol and drug abuse coupled with working in the sun, and deadpanned, “Do you even know why you’re here, Wilson?”

Wringing his hands as his eyes darted from her to Rafe to Max and then back to her,

he shook his head. “No ma’am. I just came cause y’all called.”

Well, at least his momma taught him manners.

“Alright, let’s start here.” She pulled out several pieces of paper on which she’d copied the last eighteen months. Pointing to the first date circled in red – March, 29, 2017, she asked, “Where were you on this date?”

Glancing at the paper and then up at her with an expression that was completely and totally blank, he shrugged, “I dunno. That’s been ‘long time ago.’”

“Can you try? Maybe think about it a minute?”

Unable to look away as he squinted his eyes and look at a spot somewhere over her left shoulder, she had to wonder how he’d ever gotten dressed let alone ‘allegedly’ burglarize forty-some homes, shoot his own brother to keep the bastard from beating their mom to death, and cook enough meth to hide nearly a million dollars in mason jars in every backyard he and his kin owned. One thing was for sure, he was crazy like a fox, and if he’d killed these girls, she would be the one to finally put Wilson Freeman behind bars.

Hell, somebody oughta catch this butthead for somethin’ or the other...

“How about these dates?” She pushed the papers across the table. “Any of them? Can you remember what you were doin’ on any of those days?”

“Well, I reckon since it’s a bunch of Wednesdays, that I was down to the Farmer’s Market in the morning, feeding the pigs in the afternoon then off to eat Fried Chicken at the Elks Lodge.”

Ready to move onto the next, promising herself to kick Fitz in the shins the next time

she saw him for pulling Wilson in, Nat asked, “Just for shits and giggles, do any of these names mean anything to you?” Staring right into his eyes, she named off, “Jean Smith, Pat Borders, Tina Reilly, Mae Masters, Dorothy James, or Misty Blake.”

With every name she mentioned Wilson’s eyes grew bigger with horror in their milky green depths. No sooner was the last name out of her mouth than he frantically shook his head and adamantly denied, “No way. No way, Detective Hale. We Freemans got our issues, but we don’t kill little girls and take out their innards. That’s...that’s...that’s just, well, unchristian and demonic.”

“Okay, okay, calm down, Wilson.” The earbud in her ear squawked to life as Officer Billingsley reported, “There’s nothing here but dirty clothes and eight years of old TV Guides and National Geographics. You want us to keep searchin’, Detective?”

“Naw, go on to the next,” she answered, not surprised that Wilson wasn’t the killer. For one thing, he really didn’t have the heart for out and out murder and secondly, she got nothing from him but image after image of him drunk on the couch with his hand down his pants.

Getting up, she nodded in his direction. “You can go, Wilson. Thanks for comin’ in.”

“Yes, ma’am, Detective Hale.”

Walking out of the room and straight for the Ladies’ Room, she stopped and turned towards Rafe and Max. “I promise the next two will at least give us a good show.”

By the time they were done, Rafe had watched Nat interview eight known criminals and come away with nothing. Ranging from the crazy to ludicrous, there were several times he thought about flashing some scales and scaring the shit out of a couple of them just to make the interviews interesting, but then he would've had to apologize to Nat, and well, he was racking up quite a list all on his own.

Watching her read every person, use her Gift and cut to the heart of the person and his actions was nothing less than outstanding. Eliminating suspects was as natural to her as breathing and still, she went through the motions of asking every single one of them the same questions and building off the answers they gave her to interrogate them just as someone without her talents was forced to do.

She may have been freaked out to learn there were Dragons and Big Cats and whatever else she read about in her grandmother's book, but Rafe had no doubt she would thrive and grow when she could use her talents without trying to hide them. Walking to where Max was sitting at an empty desk reading email on the screen of his phone, Rafe sat on the corner and asked, "What did you find out from your doctor friend?"

"She is checking the information I gave her and will get back to me as soon as she has an answer."

"I hope she can give us some insight."

Observing Nat while she made her way through the Squad Room joking and talking

to her colleagues Rafe couldn't look away. He knew she was tired, knew she'd been up since before dawn and was totally consumed with finding the person responsible for the deaths of six young women, but she still took the time to make each of her coworkers feel how very much she cared for each and every one of them.

"Did you hear me, Rafe?"

Snapping his head back towards Max, he apologized, "Sorry, I was...ah..."

"Gazing at your lady love?" The King teased. "Yes, I noticed, however, now that I have your attention, I will bid you farewell until tomorrow."

"Alright, catch ya' later." Getting up to go and see if Nat wanted to get something to eat, Rafe called out mentally as the King disappeared out the huge double doors, "Let me know if you hear from your doctor, please."

"Si, mi amigo. Buenas noches."

"Night, Max."

Returning his focus to Nat at the precise moment that she answered the phone on her desk, Rafe unrepentantly listened in as she made plans to have dinner with her grandmother. More than a little bummed, but completely understanding her need to spend time with family, he slowed his pace arriving at her desk just as she was saying good bye.

"I'm gonna head out."

"Oh okay," she acknowledged, giving him a quick smile as she put a stack of folders as tall as her forearm was long into her brown leather satchel. "I'll see you tomorrow morning, yeah?"

“Yeah,” was all he could say. After all, what was the protocol in saying good bye to your mate when you’d both kiss the breath out of each other’s lungs but had barely had a conversation that wasn’t about death or to pick on the other person? ‘Yeah’ seemed to fit the bill.

Turning away, he’d made it exactly two steps when Nat yelled, “O’Rhordan? Where the hell ya’ goin’?”

“Back to the condo, why?” He asked over his shoulder, praying she was going to ask him to join her at Nona’s.

Holding up her bag, she faked a perturbed look and grumped, “Can’t a girl get some help from a Special Agent?”

Unable to stop the chuckle that bubbled from his very soul, he turned back around, took her bag from her outstretched hand, another stack of old case files from her other hand, and her laptop from the desk. Waiting until she’d straightened her desk blotter and the cracked mug that held her pens, as well as her stapler and tape dispenser, he followed when she winked and snickered, “Wagon train, ho.”

Out to her car quicker than he wanted, he dawdled around getting the work she was taking home loaded, but finally had to give up the pretense and lay the laptop on the passenger seat. Shutting the door, he looked over the top at the same time she did, smiling when she smiled at him, feeling that in that moment he could move a mountain while singing The Star Spangled Banner . Nothing in all his years had ever felt better than a simple look for the woman who held his heart and soul in the palm of her hand.

“Are you gonna come shut my door for me?”

Surprised by her question but jumping to attention and zipping around the trunk of

her car, he had just laid his hand on her door when she fisted the front of his shirt and pulled him towards her as she pushed up onto her toes. Sparks flew behind his closed eyelids. Fire sprang to life in the very bottom of his soul. His heart beat with such fervor that he felt it in his every cell. If their first kiss had been heavenly, the second was pure perfection.

Over almost as quickly as it had begun and leaving Rafe struggling to regain his wits, his eyes landed on hers just before she shut the car door. Rolling down the window as the engine roared to life, Donatella wrinkled her nose and cocked her head to the side. Giving him a little finger wave, she cooed, “See ya’ tomorrow, Slick.”

Grinning despite his raging hard-on and watching the taillights of his mate’s car driving away from him, he reached out to her mind and avowed, “Three time’s the charm, mo ghrá.”

The ride back to the condo was spent trying to come up with a viable suspect from the lists of former convicts he’d memorized during Nat’s monotonous, waste of time interviews. Not one, even the convicted killers that had been released early for good behavior, had the propensity for what the Yellow Ribbon Ripper was doing right under Texas’ finest.

Picking up Thai takeout and a six pack of Max’s favorite imported beer, Rafe hustled up the steps, unlocked the door, and walked into an empty townhouse. Having preternatural senses came in handy for so very many things and in this one case, it was finding out that your roommate was mysteriously absent.

“Oh well, more for me,” he shrugged.

Putting the food and beer on the table, he made quick work of changing clothes and starting a load of clothes before returning with laptop in hand. Wolfing down his salmon with red curry and two black dragon sushi rolls, he cleaned up the table and

stowed the leftovers in the fridge before settling down to do some serious research.

Accessing the DOD, DOJ, CIA, and FBI databases, he searched all known felons with previous violent offenses within a two-hundred-mile radius of Ft Worth. Discarding the ones still incarcerated, dead, or handicapped, he came up with sixty-five possible suspects.

Taking another swipe, he did away with anyone younger than twenty-three and older than fifty-five. “Son of a bitch has to be able to lift a hundred-and-twenty pound of dead weight and carry it not once, but twice.”

Lastly, he eliminated all females. “The marks left by the black magic felt male, right?” He asked his Dragon King aloud, nodding when the magical beast grumbled in agreement.

“Good, that leaves us ten possibles.”

Requesting their files, he watched the thin green line that indicated they were loading until it reached its halfway point before getting up and getting a bottle of water. Wandering towards the sliding glass doors leading to the balcony, he flipped the lock and pushed them open.

Stepping out into the night air, he watched the stars twinkle and glitter as his mind churned through everything he knew about the case. Over and over the pieces of the puzzle turned and twisted, flipped and flopped, never settling, still searching for the one cohesive thread that would tie them all together.

Turning at the same time his phone rang, he walked inside, grabbed the device, and answered, “Rafe here.”

“Rafe?” The elderly woman’s voice was tinged with fear. “Special Agent Rafe

O’Rhordan?”

“Yes, ma’am. How can I help you?”

“Young man, it’s not how you can help me, but how we must help one another.” There was a slight pause in which his Dragon King roared and his free hand involuntarily clenched. When she began again, it was more a command than a request. “I am Angelique Hale. My granddaughter is Donatella Hale and I am sure she’s been abducted by the same man who’s killed those poor girls.”

Fighting the fog swamping her mind, her nose itching so bad it almost hurt, she wiggled and squirmed, trying with all her might to raise her arm and scratch the tip of her nose. Forcing her eyes open and only finding more pitch black darkness, she tried to turn her head to the side and realized she couldn't move that either.

“What the hell is happening? Have I fallen down the rabbit hole? Am I still asleep?” Moving her fingers then trying to lift her hand to pinch herself, she yelled, “Son of a bitch, where in all that's holy am I?”

The click of a switch was the only warning she got before what seemed like a million overhead fluorescent lights flared to life. Closing her eyes so tightly her cheeks felt like they were on her forehead, she screamed, “Not funny, whoever the hell you are? As soon as I find my gun, I promise I'm gonna shoot you in the ass and leave you for the vermin.”

“You always make me smile, Detective Hale.” The nasal, but somehow musical chuckle, was familiar. She'd heard it before. There was no doubt in her mind but try as she might she couldn't place it.

Needing to hear the voice again, she deadpanned, “Glad I can help. Now, how about you lend me a hand and get me outta here.”

The chink and clink of metal instrument hitting metal instrument preceded a tsked, “Oh no, Donatella, can I call you Donatella?” He went on without waiting for an answer. “Why would I help you out of here when I am the one who put you here?”

Attempting to raise her head to see who was playing the world's cruelest joke on her, Nat ground her teeth so hard she felt a molar crack when her upward progress was halted before it began by the thick leather band wrapped around her forehead. Suddenly it all made sense. Not only was her head strapped down, but also her wrists, her ankles, and her tummy.

Why my stomach? What has it ever done to hurt anyone but me? If you ask me, it's a total waste of a strap, but then again, I want them all off of me so I can rip the bastard responsible limb-from-limb.

"Okay," she finally answered. "I can see your point. So, maybe you can explain why I'm here and what you have planned."

More tinkering sounds came from somewhere beyond her feet as she looked up at the ceiling trying to figure out which fallout shelter out of the hundreds of thousands still accessible in the DFW area she was in. Wherever it was, it was huge. Had to be an industrial shelter. One built for a shit ton of people because the ceiling was higher than most and from the way her voice echoed, she knew the area was vast. If it hadn't been for the sprinklers on the ceiling with the Bunker Boys logo on it, she'd have sworn she was in an empty warehouse or at the very least a large storage unit.

Thank the Goddess dad was a DIYer. Without him, I would've missed that little tidbit of information...

"First, I'd like to say how disappointed I am in you. You're the best and brightest detective I've ever seen. Very little, if anything, gets past you. You solve cases without clues, leads, or evidence." His footsteps, the sound of rubber soles on concrete, echoed in the silence, stopping before he began again. "But this Yellow Ribbon Ripper had eluded you at every turn. Why do you think that is?"

Usually by this point in any situation, good, bad, or deadly, her Gift would kick in

and give her the clues she needed to save her own ass. Because her life was quickly spinning out of control, not even her Sight was working. She was tied down, stuck staring at the ceiling and mind-blind, at least that's what Nona called it.

Alright, Hale, get your head outta your ass. Use your skills and kick this guy's ass...

"I'm guessing he's just smarter than I am." She hated saying it but was trying to play to her abductor's ego. If he was the Yellow Ribbon Ripper, she had one shot of getting out alive – Rafe. Hopefully, everything written in that weird old book of her grandmother's was the truth, because Nat seriously needed some magical mojo and raging, roaring Dragon in the worst kind of way.

Maybe there really was something to this whole 'Universe picking out your mate' thing. Thinking about what she'd read while her captor remained silent, she remembered hearing Rafe speak in her mind.

Focusing on the glowing white light shining in the base of her soul, spreading through every fiber of her being, she closed her eyes and thought of the man, the Dragon, who'd captured her heart no matter how hard she resisted his charms. The twinkle in his eyes, the way his hair curled where it touched the collar of her shirt, and the most importantly, the way he made her feel just by being in the same room.

Thinking the words she wanted to say, she whispered, "Rafe? Rafe, are you there?" Waiting a few seconds, wondering why he wasn't answering and where the guy who'd drugged and kidnapped her had gone, she demanded, "Rafe O'Rhordan, answer me now. I need your help." She paused for half a second and then added, "Here's your chance to gloat. You were right."

When the only answer she got was no answer at all, she yelled, "Hey! Guy who tied me to a table, are you still here?"

The rustle of a plastic curtain and squeaky footsteps sounded right before her captor's snickered, "Oh, I'm still here, dear Donatella. I promise not to leave you alone ever."

Great, I'm his George. He's gonna hug me and pet me and squeeze me... Oh, and let us not forget, drug me and kidnap me and strap me to a table...

"What did I do to warrant such an honor?" She asked, having decided to play to his ego in the hopes of stalling him or at the very least, figuring out who he was.

"Do you really not know?"

"No, I really have no clue."

"You are special, Donatella Hale, very special. Not only are you smart and fearless, but you are beautiful and resilient with a special talent that makes you truly unique."

He knows about my Gift? How the hell does he know about my Gift?

"Rafe, where the hell are you? Get your scaled ass over here before things get anymore freaky." Screaming inside her own mind, making her brain shake inside her skull, she turned to pray.

"Look God, I know we've never been real close, but you know I've been a pretty good person. I went back in the store and paid for the tomatoes that were covered by my purse. I always give to charity and take clothes and blankets to the Homeless Shelter. I try not to bother you, 'cause I know you're really busy with all the wars, and conflicts, and don't even get me started about politicians, but right now, I could really use your help. Some crazy..."

"Do you not agree that you're special, Donatella?"

Something about that voice pricked at the back of her mind. She knew him. Had to know him, but something was different, something that was keeping her from putting the voice to the face and the face to the name.

“Answer me, Donatella.” His tone was sharp, demanding, and more than a little maniacal.

“Yes, I’m special, but isn’t everyone. I mean, every life is special and deserves respect and preservation, right?”

The tip of a sharp point striking metal tapped a repetitive rhythm that grew louder and louder the longer she waited for an answer. Opening her mouth to ask again, her need to at least know who had abducted her from the sidewalk of her favorite pizza joint, she slammed her mouth shut when he vehemently disagreed, “No, Detective Hale, every life most certainly does not deserve preservation.”

The tapping grew louder, more syncopated.

“Some lives are wasted. They are a drain on the limited resources that people like you and I, the supreme members of the human race deserve.”

Tapping louder still being accompanied by the squeak, squeak, squeak of his rubber soles on the concrete and he paced.

“Oh, they serve a purpose. They can support the greater good, the continuation of a superior race of humans, not through their lives, but through their deaths.”

More tapping, more pacing, and then came the panting as his steps quickened.

“They are a drain on our resources. All they do is take, take, take. They are lazy and spoiled. They reap the benefits of our great minds, our hard work, and our superior

genes.”

Tap, squeak, pant...Tap, squeak, pant...Tap, squeak, pant...then nothing.

Holding her breath, fearing her fate was a deadly foregone conclusion, Nat stayed perfectly still and stared at the ceiling, her body jumping as far as it could when her captor once again spoke, this time his voice back to calm, cool, and collected. “I always knew this day was coming, but in my original plan, our union was not to take place until December, but that was before...”

Waiting for him to finish, the pounding of her heart the only sound she could hear, Nat missed the final squeak of her abductor’s shoes and shrieked, “Oh my god,” when the round pasty face of Dr. Norman Batterfield appeared overhead a split-second before he drove a needle into her arm.

Almost immediately her vision blurred, and her tongue refused to move. The sting of drugs tore through her veins and her muscles twitched uncontrollable. Stuck staring into the Medical Examiner’s beady eyes, she groaned inside her mind when he smiled sweetly, brushed the hair from her forehead, and finished explaining, “You see, since that stupid Fed arrived, I had to move up our timetable.”

Her skin crawled as he kissed her on the cheek and her heart stopped when he whispered, “Tonight, we die together, and tomorrow, we rise in Hell, servants of the Devil himself.”

14

“What do you mean? I just saw her a few hours ago. She’s with you having pizza.”

“She never made it.”

Four words that alone meant nothing, but together turned his bright future into an apocalyptic nightmare. Moving through the condo at top speed, he reached through the bond he shared with Nat only to find a thick black vortex of nothingness blocking him from touching her mind.

Out the door and into his SUV in seconds, he yelled into the phone, “Can you see her? Do you know where she is? I can’t feel anything.”

“Rafe, what’s wrong?” Gil voice burst through his mind at the same time that Max jumped into the passenger seat.

“The bastard’s got Nat!”

Feeling his brother’s fury on his behalf, Rafe focused on Max as he pointed out the windshield and instructed, “Get on the highway. Head west.”

“Did you hear that?” He asked into the phone and mentally.

A unanimous, “Yes,” sounded loud and clear as he took the ramp onto the highway at top speed, rubber squealing against asphalt as he worked hard to keep the tires on the road.

Thankful there was no traffic in the early morning hours, he tossed the phone to Max and shouted, “Talk to Angelique.” Then to his brother, he demanded, “Is Abe with you?”

“I’m here,” came the oldest of their Force’s gruff reply. “I can see a funnel of black magic being conjured about fifteen clicks straight in front of you.”

Trusting his Brethren to lead him in the right direction, he slammed the accelerator to the floor just as Ben chimed in with, “You’re gonna exit the freeway, take a left, and head straight into a huge industrial park.”

“You’re gonna need to check for booby traps,” Oz barked. “From what we can see, most of these warehouses have been abandoned for more than fifteen years.”

Not surprised that in his distress he’d called out to the four men who’d save his ass more times than he could count, Rafe kept his eyes on the road and listened to their instructions. Tuning into Max’s conversation with Nat’s grandmother, he demanded, “Can she pick up anything? See anything? Hell, even if it’s bad news, it’s better than goin’ in blind.”

Liar, liar, she will be fine. She will be fine. She will be fine...

Holding the phone in his hand between them, the King pressed the microphone on the screen to turn on the speakerphone just as Angelique’s clear, concise voice clipped, “Wherever she is, it’s dark and dank. The scent of wet earth, mold, and mildew is almost suffocating, but somehow separated by brick and mortar from where Donatella is being held.”

Cursing under her breath, she added, “And there’s fire – tiny flickering flames in a circle around a table or something just enough off the ground that she can see their light and smell their fragrance but not exactly what’s making the glow.”

“Candles.” He and Max growled in unison with the King continuing, “He’s performing the ritual.”

Coming up on the next exit with the needle of the speedometer pushed well past a hundred-and-twenty-miles-per-hour, Rafe jerked the steering wheel to the right, flew down the off ramp, pushing the SUV to its very limits. The sound of steel scraping concrete filled the air as he whipped the wheel in the opposite direction and the passenger side of the vehicle lifted into the air. One more jerk of the wheel and the SUV landed with a bone-crushing thud.

“Ya’ alright?” He shouted towards Max while careening down the road, blowing through red lights, and following the directions his Brethren were firing off.

“Next light, left then right through the gates,” Ben, always their techie and in charge of direction, was the voice of calm.

“The evil is growing,” Abe snarled. “Your mate has unknowingly erected shields, but if the magic this asshole is conjuring gets much stronger, she’ll not be able to hold it off.”

“Roger that,” Rafe grunted, running the SUV right through the ten-foot high military grade chain link gates.

“Now, that’s how I taught you to do it,” Oz roared just as Ben continued, “Keep straight, left at the dead end, right at the next dead end, and then you’re gonna have to leg it.”

“Copy that.”

Forcing the steering wheel as far left as it would go, the front of the SUV lurched to respond. Loud screeches echoed off the abandoned buildings as the metal of the

passenger's side was forced against the six-foot by ten-foot concrete embankment.

Any other time, watching the King of the Big Cats, a usually incredibly reserved, suave, and debonair diplomat, jump into the backseat via the console between the two front ones as he bellowed curse words in his native language would've been funny, but with Nat's life hanging in the balance, Rafe barely noticed. He would save his mate, or die trying. It was as simple as that.

Almost immediately, he jerked the wheel to the right, focused on the embankment in front of him, and mere seconds before he would've rammed headlong into it, he slammed on the brakes. The back of the vehicle fishtailed. Tires squealed. And with mere inches to go before being reduced to a pile of steel and rubber, the SUV came to a complete stop.

Out of the car and racing towards an unfenced, overgrown wooded area, he could hear Max's footsteps following his as he shouted telepathically, "Where Ben? Where the fuck is she? Why am I in the fuckin' woods?"

"I'm lookin'. I'm lookin'," Ben yelled in response. "There's a labyrinth of..."

"Underground, Rafe. Underground," Abe roared a split second before Oz bellowed, "Metal circle with a thin T-shaped handle. Think manhole cover in the fuckin' woods."

Opening his senses wide, his magic rammed into the King's before comingling and using its strength to boost his own. Running so fast the landscape was a whizzing blur of green and brown, he and Max zigged and zagged around trees, jumped over thick brambles, and ducked under low-hanging limbs until a roar of frustration burst through his chest and flew from his lips.

Daring anyone to chastise him, he growled, "Three seconds to scales."

Lost in a drug-induced dreamland where absolutely nothing made sense and everything stretched and curved like it was on some freaky spindle, she swore she'd heard a ground-shaking roar. Walking through her fantasy, working hard to stay on her feet and shift through what was real and what was fueled by whatever Batterfield had injected her with, she once again reached for Rafe.

"Hey, Dragon Ass, are you there?" Chuckling at her own silliness, feeling a little drunk and a whole lot of out of control, she went on with a snicker, "Aren't you supposed to be my knight in shining armor?" Snickers turning to giggles which made her laugh out loud, "Or did you eat the knight?"

Even though he didn't answer and she heard her words reverberating back and forth like a tennis ball against a brick wall within her own mind, she continued to jabber away. "Ya' know, you really freak me out, Special Agent Rafe O'Rhordan. I honestly never thought about the whole love and marriage thing. Figured, my job was my other half then you appeared and everything changed."

Woozy, her vision blurring and her head thumping, it felt as if she was falling seconds before something hard and dense punched her in the gut. Wincing in pain, trying to lift her arms or kick her feet or anything that would remove what felt like a metal bar from her stomach, she gagged as a musty-smelling rag was shoved into her mouth.

Rage at being manhandled and fury at feeling helpless, pushed away the effects of the drugs and cleared her mind enough to open her eyes and realize she was hanging

upside-down. It wasn't hard to put two-and-two together and come up with Norman Fucking Batterfield. Not only had the bastard drugged and kidnapped her for the sole purpose of sending them both to Hell to be wed by Lucifer, but then he'd thrown her over his shoulder and was presently hobbling down a candlelit tunnel.

Trying to force the rag from her mouth, she instead found herself screaming into it as dirt and rocks rained down when the earth over and around them shook with a vengeful fury. Again and again, over and over, everything shuddered and quaked forcing Norman to his knees and Nat to go flying.

Landing on her back with a thud that ripped the breath from her lungs, she gagged and wheezed, sucking particles of only God knew what from the cloth sliding farther and farther down her throat. Rolling onto her side, feeling as if every bone in her body was cracked or broken, the ground shook again, but this time she heard – “NAT!” And realized it was the roar of her mate.

Rocking back and forth, her arms tied to her sides and her ankles secured so tightly she could no longer feel her feet, she fought the gag in her mouth nearly forcing it out just as a hand closed around her upper arm and she dragged her to the side. Nails biting into her skin, pieces of rock abrading her flesh, and vomit rising in her throat, she once again screamed into the cloth as the top of her head came in contact with the large, sharp edge of something sticking out of the wall.

Warm and wet, blood gushed from her wound, flowing through her hair like the ever-extending legs of some creepy, gory spider. Thinking as quickly as her battered brain could, she threw her legs against the wall and prayed.

All too soon, the sharp edge that had cut her head sliced into the skin alongside her knee, down her calf and then finally, tore through the leather band around her ankles. Knowing it was her one and only chance of escape, she worked as hard as she could to show no signs that she was slowly getting free.

Another roar, closer, eminently more furious, undoubtedly more animalistic whooshed down the tunnel, not only shaking the rafters but sending waves of fiery heat blasting past her. Unceremoniously thrown to the side, she bit her tongue to keep from alerting Norman to the fact that she was awake and listened as he ranted and raved, and God help her, prayed to Lucifer.

“Great god of Darkness, show me the way. Lead your faithful servant out of the chaos and into the fires of your warm embrace.”

Fires of your warm embrace? Norman isn't just psychotic, he's delusional and certifiably bat-shit crazy...

Cracking one eye open, she watched him pace three steps one way and then three steps the other, moaning and praying, repeating the same line over and over. If only she could reach Rafe, tell him where she was, give him direction in his search, but no matter how hard she tried, she was the only one talking in her mind.

Then it happened, heat and flames lit the path behind her. Following Norman with her eyes as he ran back the way they'd just come, she waited until he was out of sight before digging her toes into the earth that made up the walls of the tunnel, pulling her midsection closer to the sharp edge, praying she would be able to cut the thick leather strap holding her arms.

“No, no, no, no, no!” Norman's wails filled the tunnel as his pounding footsteps drew closer and closer.

Running right past her, he screamed, “Fire! Fire! FIRE!”

Throwing her head backward as far as it would go, witnessing for herself the flames racing towards her, following Norman's footsteps, she yelled into her own mind, “The stupid son of a bitch had gasoline on his shoes.”

Pins and needles assaulted her feet and climbed her legs as the circulation blessedly began to return. The sharp edge cut the top of her thigh and gashed at the soft skin of her stomach.

Praying she didn't pass out from blood loss before she got free or was engulfed by fire, she finally felt the tug and pull as the leather band around her waist was cut away. Flopping her still sleeping hand on the ground, falling over just as soon as her palm hit the dirt, she tried again and again until she was finally on her feet.

Blood still pouring from her head, her stomach and various places on her leg, she refused to give up. She would get to Rafe. She would not die in some serial killer's hole in the fucking ground without ever telling him that somewhere since he marched into her Squad Room and that very moment she'd fallen in love with him.

Going the same way Norman had, she stumbled back and forth, bouncing off one wall and then another, screaming for Rafe both aloud and in her mind, and every step of the way her sight dimmed around the edges. Simply refusing to give up, she fell to her hands and knees.

"Hand, knee, hand, knee," she chanted, throwing in a "Fucking Norman" here and there until her butt was literally leaning against the wall so she could stay upright and her forward movement had almost stopped.

"Rafe! Rafe, where are you?" Her voice echoed forward as flames crackled, sizzled, and popped behind her. "RAFE!" Was the last word out of her mouth before she fell forward, unable to move a muscle.

Lost to the madness, the need of both man and Dragon King to find their mate and rescue her from certain harm fueling the frenzy within them, the muscles of his body grew, joints and tendons stretched and bones cracked and reformed. Swamped in white, hot Dragon magic, the smaller, denser deep pewter scales of his Battler Dragon were forced through his skin.

Roaring to the Heavens, pain of his transformation joining with his rage and unfamiliar feelings of helplessness, he tore through the woods. Uprooting trees and ripping great mounds of tangled brush from the earth in search of the door to the underground tunnel, he acknowledged the presence of an ally – the King of the Big Cats in the form of a huge Black Panther.

Digging and pawing, magic popped all around them as the two apex predators frantically searched until Rafe was sure he'd lose his mind. Swinging his nearly ten-foot body, covered in scales, every bit the Dragon King with whom he shared his soul just a smaller, more compact version, covered in battle armor and without wings, he zeroed in a what appeared to be a hollowed-out tree stump.

Moving so quickly, he hardly remembered the action, he grabbed the limbs on either side and with a mighty pull, ripped it from the ground, revealing the metal T-shaped handle they'd been searching for. Ripping open the hatch, flames flew from the hole forcing an anguished roar of, "DONATELLA!" From his stubbed snout.

Jumping into the hole, he landed with a thud, immediately racing through the roaring flames. Balling up his ginormous fists, he knocked down deteriorating block walls

and punched through metal doors, refusing to let anything stop him from getting to his mate.

So focused on his own actions, he was unable to respond as Max's voice slashed through the frenzy of his mind, "Going around to find the exit."

Racing into a huge room that resembled a surgical theatre, the scent of Nat's blood cut through the smoke and flames, permeating his every sense. Speeding from the room, forced to bend at the waist just to fit into the tunnel, his shoulders cut through the earthen walls.

The farther he went, the smaller the tunnel became, but he refused to be stopped. Using the impenetrable scales covering every inch of his body, he removed all obstacles.

Flames licking at his heels, the walls closing in all around him, he opened his jaws to roar her name just as her scream of "RAFE!" cut through the haze of his mind. Picking up speed, forcing his enhanced senses and sight to their very limits, he saw the lifeless body of his mate, face down in the dirt before him.

Scooping her up without slowing, barely able to hear her sluggish heartbeat, he burst through the tunnel and took a hard right. Awash in the fragrance of fresh air and fresh blood, he moved quicker still.

Spying a metal ladder stuck into a concrete passage leading upward, he poured on more speed and the second he ducked under the cement archway, he bent his legs and jumped. Landing in the same wooded area as before, he barely noticed where he was as he laid an unconscious, barely breathing Nat on the ground.

Dropping to his knees, forcing himself to be calm, his scales to recede, and his body to return to normal, Rafe ignored his own pain as he commanded his Dragon King,

“Magic, healing magic, she’s lost a lot of blood.”

Appearing on the other side of Nat, Max also got to his knees as he asked, “May I help?”

A single nod, not only to say yes but to give the King credit for knowing Rafe would rip him apart if he dared to touch Donatella without permission, was all he could manage. His entire focus, all that he was or would ever be, was focused on his mate and keeping her alive.

Closing his eyes and shutting out the chaos of his Brethren’s voices in his head, he focused on each cut, starting with the deepest first. As quickly as he could, making sure not to overload her system with unfamiliar magic and cause any further harm to her delicate system, he knit every single broken vessel and torn vein back together with a meticulous precision he hadn’t known he possessed.

When her heart beat without stuttering or stopping all together, he sat back on his heels, simply watching the gentle rise and fall of her chest. Looking up at Max, trying to hold back the tears burning his throat, he murmured, “I’ve done all I can do. It’s in the hands of Fate and the Universe.”

“She is strong and you have done your best. Now, you must deal with the man responsible.”

Getting up and following the King, it only took a single look at the insignificant piece of shit who’d dared to touch his mate, dared to harm innocent young women, and had dabbled in black magic for Rafe’s rage to return tenfold. From one heartbeat to the next he went from human to Battler Dragon once again.

Reaching down, he closed his massive paw around the quivering waste of flesh and bone and jerked him from the ground. Holding him at arm’s length, Batterfield’s nails

scratched at the scales covering Rafe's hand as he feet dangled in the air.

Squeezing tighter and tighter, reveling in Norman's fear as the little man's face turned a brilliant shade of purple, Rafe shoved his snubbed snout into the psycho's face and snarled, "Today you die."

"No, please, no, no, no," Batterfield's frantic whispers had no effect on the Dragon. The bastard had not only laid hands on Donatella, he'd also left her to die in a fiery tunnel, not to mention, killing and disemboweling six young, innocent women.

"Yes," Rafe hissed through his long, sharp fangs. "Yes, Norman Batterfield, today you die for your crimes."

One final squeeze. The sound of cracking bones and ripping flesh filled the night air. A single loud pop, like that of a helium balloon being stuck with a pin. Blood, gushing like a fountain, covering Rafe's scale-covered face and chest from the gaping hole where Norman's head used to be and it was done.

Dropping the headless corpse on the ground, the Battler Dragon turned without a single backward glance and returned to his human form. Walking back to his mate, he gently lifted her from the ground and cradled her to his chest.

"I'm taking her to the hospital."

"I shall dispose of the body, mi amigo. " The King laid his hand on Rafe's shoulder. "Take care of your mate, for she is all that matters."

Waking up to laughter and her mouth so dry she could only croak, Nat was shocked to find not only her Nona and Rafe, but also Max and four of the biggest, handsomest men she'd ever seen in her entire life. Reaching for the small plastic cup of water sitting on the table that stretched over her bed, she couldn't help but smile as Rafe was right there to help.

Holding the cup to her lips, the love in his eyes was something she'd never expected to see in any man's eyes, let alone one of the Universe's chosen warriors. Taking tiny sips of water until her throat felt like it was no longer on fire, she waited until he'd set down the cup before reaching for his hand and holding it up to her lips.

"Thank you," she whispered directly into his mind. "I just knew you'd come."

"Nothing and no one will ever stop me from coming when you call."

"Alright, enough of that crap." The room erupted in laughter as a slightly shorter version of her mate with a high and tight haircut stepped up to the other side of her bed and held out his hand.

With no doubt that he was Rafe's brother, she slid her hand into his and chuckled as he teased, "I guess I should introduce myself since we're about to become family. Gil O'Rhordan." He motioned at Rafe with his head as he added, "The lunkhead over here's brother."

"Nice to meet you," she croaked, her voice still sounding more like a bullfrog than a

person.

Stepping back, Gil went on, “And the guy with no hair on his head but more than enough on his face is Abe. Beside him is Ben and the last one who looks like a refugee from Hell’s Angels is Oz.”

“Nice to meet y’all.”

“Great to meet you,” the bald Dragon whose voice was deep and rumbly, Abe, she was sure Gil had said grinned. “I can’t tell ya’ how long we’ve been waitin’ for somebody who can jerk a knot in Rafe’s tail.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” Her mate pretended to be offended, but she could see the brotherly love and comradery he shared with the very special group of men.

Looking to her Nona as the older woman cleared her throat, Nat started to speak but instead had a fit of coughing that had Rafe scooping her out of the bed and holding her in his arms. Once she could once again speak, she batted at his chest and half-heartedly chastised, “Put me down, you beast. You can’t just pick me up whenever you please.”

Narrowing his eyes and leaning so close she could see the silver flecks in their icy blue surface, her growled, “I can and I will. You are my mate, Donatella Hale, now and forever.” Giving her a quick kiss on the lips, he pulled back and added, “And I love you with all my heart.”

“But not more than I love you, Rafe O’Rhordan,” she whispered, lifting her head just enough to lay her lips to his.

“Okay, okay, okay, enough of that,” Nona’s voice broke the spell being in Rafe’s arms created. Going on, she added, “Let’s give the couple some privacy.” Rising to

her feet, Angelique crossed the room and stopped right next to where Rafe stood still holding Nat and while patting her granddaughter's arm smiled brightly, "Get better, Dearheart. We have a mating ceremony to plan."

Hiding her shock until she was alone with her mate, Nat let herself be laid back in the hospital bed before she asked, "What happened to Norman? Did you get him?"

"He died in the fire." Rafe's answer was quick and clipped, anger springing to life in his eyes.

"That's it? He died in the fire? That's all you're going to tell me?" Each word louder than the last, her voice raspy and her throat burning, she demanded, "Tell me what happened or get the hell out."

Returning Rafe's glare, refusing to back down, she watched a myriad of emotions cross his face until finally he sighed. "Alright, if you insist. Max caught him coming out of the tunnel, running like the coward he was, and leaving you to die."

Pulling a chair up to the side of her bed, he took a seat, and wrapped his hands around hers before continuing, "Once I knew you were okay, I killed him and Max threw the body into the burning fallout shelter. It's as simple as that."

"So, the girls' murders go unsolved." She knew she was sulking but couldn't help it. All she could think of was six families, six sets of parents who would never know peace.

"Not exactly."

Sitting up, gripping his hands as tight as she could, she hopefully asked, "What do you mean 'not exactly'?"

“I mean, that after an anonymous tip, the Tarrant County Sherriff’s Office found a storage unit full of incriminating evidence proving that one Dr. Norman Batterfield was indeed the Yellow Ribbon Ripper.”

“Really? We closed the case?”

“Yes, ma’am, you closed the case, and according to Captain Rogers, when you return to work – after our honeymoon – you will be receiving a commendation for your tireless pursuit of justice.”

“But, I...I mean, I was...well, I was unconscious. How...?”

Opening her mouth, she threatened to bite his finger when he dared to shut her up by laying his index finger to her lips then quick as a whip, she was laughing out loud when he pretended to be scared. Swatting his arm with her free hand, she begged, “Tell me, please .”

“Alright, since you asked nicely,” he chuckled. “According to my report and that of Special Consultant Maximillian Prentice, you only collapsed after you received the anonymous tip and sent us to check out the storage unit.”

Never in her entire life had she felt more loved and most importantly, more understood and respected. That old book of Nona’s was right, the Universe makes no mistakes. Yes, she still wondered why Norman had done what he’d done, but that would wait, right now her happily ever after was staring her in the face and there was no way she was letting it get away.

Happy, thrilled, and overjoyed, unused to feeling so much because of one special person, she batted her eyes and teased, “So, what was that Nona said about a mating ceremony?”

The day had finally come. It had been two weeks since he'd rescued Nat. She was healed, thanks to his Dragon and ready to become his mate, as Fate and Destiny required.

All of his very long life, Rafe had heard about the grandeur of an official Dragon Guard Mating Ceremony, but when it came time for his, he decided it should reflect he and Nat. Besides, he had no clue where his surcoat, woolen pants, and knee-high boots even were.

Standing in the garden behind Angelique's home, he waited alongside his Brethren for Nat to appear. Nearly as excited as he was, Ben loudly whispered, "She's here. She's here. Max is showing her and her grandmother to their seats."

Grinning when Gil's hand landed on his shoulder, Rafe snickered as his brother quipped, "See ya' on the other side."

Waiting as Abe, Ben and Oz, dressed in jeans and matching deep gray shirts nearly the color of his Dragon, walked out from behind the bamboo screen, Rafe took a deep breath, slowly let it out then followed in their footsteps. One look at Nat dressed in a knee-length, pewter silk dress, her long dark tresses held up on either side of her head with jeweled barrettes, and he wondered if anyone would mind if he simply threw her over his shoulder and took her to their new home where they could be alone.

Fighting the temptation to be alone with his mate, he took his place beside his brother and waited until Gil began...

“Long ago, when Knights and Dragons fought side by side for King and Country, it became apparent that Dragon kin was no longer safe from those who would expose, exploit, and destroy them. Seeking to remain hidden but also needing to continue the mission of the Universe to preserve not only their species but human kind, they sought to join with the Knights who had so valiantly fought by their sides for so very many years. Thus, through magic and the will of both Dragon and Knight, the Dragon Shifters were born.”

“In the infinite wisdom of the Universe and our Founding Elders, Clans were set up, one for each color of the Dragon Kings whose soul we carry within our own. Each was assigned a region in which to make their home and to protect their families. Over time, some have flourished, some have ceased to exist, and others have been born from the joining of many. As the Leader of the O’Rhordan Clan of the Pewter Dragons also known to our kin as the Dragon Protection Agency, it is an incredible honor to stand here today among those I am proud to call family. Fierce protectors and allies of the Light, we have always lived by one simple rule, Preserve life. Abolish evil.”

“Today, in the place the Hale’s have called home for centuries, I can feel the Universe’s unconditional acceptance of a true Seer, one’s whose power and Gift have reached for her Dragon’s in love, Donatella Hale.” Looking at Nat still sitting by her grandmother, Gil added, “Welcome to the family sister. You are just what Rafe has needed for longer than I can remember.”

“We, the whole of Dragon kin and my Clan in particular continue to be astounded as we continue to be blessed with extraordinary mates for the best among us. Every Dragon who finds the half of his Soul, the one woman in all the world who completes him as no one else, knows how very sacred his True Mate is. It is an incredible honor to witness the power of what the Universe, the Holy Father, Fate, Destiny, and our Elders put into place at our inception. We acknowledge and bless the mating of Rafe O’Rhordan to the One the Universe made for him, Donatella Hale. Will those seeking

to witness this union please step forward?”

Getting up from his seat next to Angelique, Max stepped forward, his usual suave expression in place as he spoke. “I have waited many centuries to be allowed to witness the joining of a Dragon with his mate, and I am overjoyed that one I revere as a true brother is the first I am able to not only see, but to also be a part of. From the bottom of my heart and that of every member of my Pride, I offer you the Blessing of Panther – By her side may you always be. Love her without end. Honor in your every action. Be the man she needs and wants. It is the wish of the Father and the Mother Panther that you live every hour of all your tomorrows in happiness and love.”

Only able to nod as emotions clogged his throat, Rafe wondered if he would ever be able to thank the King for all he’d done to help him. There was no one quite like Max, and Rafe was glad to call him Brother.

The shuffling of feet pulled his attention to three men he’d been lucky enough to call Brethren for centuries. Stepping forward, Abe cleared his throat and winked before saying, “May your worst days be behind you. May your heart always skip a beat when you gaze into each other’s eyes. May you only know true love and may your children and their carry the traditions of family and hope they’ve learned from you.”

Getting to her feet before Abe was back in line, Angelique spoke from where she stood. “From the moment you were born, I knew you were destined for great things. Because we can see the past, the present and the future, I thought I would always be able to keep you safe. But, having now felt the helplessness of being blinded by wicked magic and evil intent, I find it hard to truly express how very, very happy I am you and Rafe have found one another. May God always bless you. May the Goddess always shine light on your path, and may you both hold each other tight, for after all, love is the tie that binds us.”

“The witness and blessings of Family, Dragon and Panther have been acknowledged,

not only by myself, but by the Universe, the Holy Father, the Goddess of all and the Ancients for whom we owe our very existence. It is truly a blessed event to have witnessed and officiated the Mating Ceremony of my brother and now, sister-in-law.”

Rafe snickered as Gil winked at Nat then raised his eyebrows before continuing, “The Pewter Dragons were born of the flawless combination of Ice and Fire. They are the largest and strongest of all Metallic Dragons. Their impenetrable scales protect them in battle and their ability to take the form of the Battler Dragon makes them fierce in battle and nearly unbeatable. Honor of Clan and Family lie at the heart of a Pewter Dragon and will always be the guiding light in his effort to be all that his mate ever needs. To mate a Pewter Dragon is to accept all that they are and honor the power shared between mates.”

“As a true Seer and the granddaughter of Angelique Hale, Supreme Seer, do you Donatella take this man and his Dragon as the mate of your heart and soul?” Gil asked, authority and reverence ringing in his tone.

“With all that I will ever be, and all that we are together, I accept Rafe and his Dragon King into my heart, my soul, my life, and my spirit. I will share everything that I am with both of these extraordinary males every day of our lives together, both here and in the Heavens.”

Turning to Rafe, Gil asked, “As a Pewter Dragon, my brother and the Prince of our Clan, do you Rafe take this woman with all her talents and magic as not only your mate but that of your Dragon King?”

“Donatella is the completion of my soul, the love of my life, and the light to my darkness. I will love her, honor her, and cherish her with every single fiber of my being for all eternity. She will always be my focus, my true partner, and the love of my life.”

“Now is the time of the marking. It is my understanding that Rafe and Donatella will be leaving us at this time. Help me wish them all the happiness as we retire to the house and eat and drink in celebration of their union.”

As soon as everyone was gone and he was alone with his beautiful mate, Rafe kissed her until they were both breathless, lifted her into his arms, and making his way towards their brand new black Expedition, whispered, “Ready for your surprise, Mrs. O’Rhordan?”

Stepping up onto the porch of the home they would be sharing as man and wife, Dragon and Mate, or whatever they were called, Rafe made quick work of the front door even though he insisted on holding her in his arms. Crossing the threshold, she chuckled as he kicked the door shut before stopping and letting her slide down his body. Drowning in his brilliant blue gaze, Nat slowly slid her fingers into his hair and pulled his mouth to hers. Their kiss went from soft and passionate to hard and fiery in a single beat of their combined hearts.

Moving so quickly she barely realized he'd done it, Rafe's hands were on her ass and once again her feet left the floor as she fisted his hair. With her back touching the wall, her dress rode up her legs as she wrapped them around his waist, welcoming his aroused cock against her already wet, silk-covered pussy. Rolling her hips, trying to satiate the earth-shattering need she knew would always come from the touch of her Dragon, she tore her lips from her mate's and gasped, "Rafe, yes, oh my God, I need you. I need... I need to feel you... all of you."

No sooner had the words left her mouth than he was stalking into the living room, coming to a jarring halt in the center of the room. When her toes touched the ground, his hands left her waist, immediately unzipping her dress while his lips nipped and tasted across her décolletage.

Tearing at his clothes, she pulled the buttons from his shirt until it was completely open, throwing the offending material over her shoulder while squirming out of her dress. Hands and lips and fiery passion, their foreplay was frantic and forceful and blessedly over in less than a minute.

Using his enhanced speed, Rafe grabbed the quilt from the couch and spread it on the floor, laid her atop and knelt at her feet. With his hands around one of her ankles, he kissed up the inside of her leg, leaving tiny love bites, and soothing with long, slow licks until her pussy was slick with desire and she was crazy with need.

Laying down, his wide shoulders pushed open her legs, spreading her wide as her clit throbbed and her hips raised of their own volition. Smiling a smile that was all male pride, he looked her right in the eye as he slipped first one and then another finger into her shivering body, asking “Does my gorgeous mate need her Dragon, yet?”

Gasping at the overwhelming pleasure just his fingers could give her, she was unable to speak, only able to nod and mewl as he pushed in a third finger before leaning down and repeatedly flicking her swollen clit with the tip of his tongue until she was screaming, “Rafe... oh Rafe.... Yes...”

Passion burnt through her veins as he removed his fingers, replacing them with his tongue. Deep inside her, licking her pussy and sucking her clit, he set a miraculous rhythm that hurtled Nat into her first orgasm in mere minutes. Fisting his hair, she held her mate tight to her body as flames of passion threaten to burn her alive.

Barely coherent, she opened her eyes just in time to look at the miracle that was her mate as his cock entered her wanting body in one fluid motion. “You are mine and I am yours,” he growled. “Now and forever, Donatella O’Rhordan. Never shall we part.” Exhaling as the tip of his cock touched the bottom of her womb, he ground out, “Eternity is ours. I love you, mo cheann agus grá amháin .”

Leaning forward, he placed his hands on either side of her head, lifting her hips off the quilt with his own and holding utterly still. Filling her so completely, she felt his cock throbbing within her, knowing in the depths of her that they were finally, truly one.

Moving out of her and right back in over and over, picking up speed with every pass, stroking her sensitive bundle of nerves and bumping her clit, Rafe leaned even farther forward, sucking her hardened nipple into his mouth. Working it with tongue and teeth to the same perfect rhythm and speed as his erection worked in and out of her slick channel, the sensations were mind-blowing, unlike anything she'd ever experienced.

Each slap of his flesh to hers reaffirmed the absolute perfection of their union. Her pussy tightened. He drove harder. Her nails bit into the skin of his shoulders and back. He thrust with unwavering precision, driving the air from her lungs.

Letting her nipple fall from his lips Rafe snarled, "Say it, Donatella, say you are mine."

She loved being possessed, loved belonging to her Dragon as magic filled the room and the pewter scales of his Dragon covered the back of his hands as she shrieked her answer, "Yours... I am yours, Rafe. I will always be only yours."

"Mine." He thrust over and over.

"Yours."

Perched on the edge of the most extreme pleasure she could have ever imagine, a gift only Rafe could give her, she let her head fall to the side a split second before he pressed his teeth to her shoulder and while growling, "Mine," over and over from his mind to hers, he bit down, breaking her delicate skin and marking her for all time.

Nat shattered into millions of pieces. Everything moved in slow motion. Fireworks burst behind her closed eyelids. Rafe was her only focus as she wailed until her voice was scratchy and joy filled her body and soul so completely she was sure she'd lost consciousness and shocked that their consummation wasn't over.

Rafe's cock thickened within her. His movements became frantic. She orgasmed again, this time in perfect unison as he emptied himself into her. Fire and desire filled his eyes when finally, he raised his head and smiled down at her.

Cupping his face, she whispered, "I am yours, now and forever, just as you are mine." She gave a raspy chuckle through her abused throat, "And I can feel that you made sure your mark on my neck could be seen from Google Earth."

Pulling himself from her body, Rafe laid down beside her, looking as only an incredibly satisfied man could look as he pulled her across his chest and said, "When we are mated in the way of my ancestors. The mark of my Dragon Scale with our beautiful brown eye in the center is our gift from the Universe, given to us at the perfect moment of our union."

Rubbing the mark on her neck while looking at the matching one on his neck, she teased, "But I didn't get to bite you."

Making a show of growling and nuzzling her neck, his cock-sure tone sounded in her mind, "Oh baby, you can bite me anytime you like, but first..."

Pulling away, he handed her a gray silk pouch that hadn't been in his hand before and coaxed aloud, "Well, open it, silly woman."

"You said no gifts."

"Yeah, well, I broke my own rules. Just open it."

She loved messing with him. She'd never felt so comfortable and open with another person and it was just one of hundreds of things she loved about her Dragon.

Pulling the strings, she tipped over the pouch, gasping as a perfect fiery opal set in an

intricate gold setting surrounded by diamonds fell into the palm of her hand. Picking up the ring while she sat speechless, Rafe slid it onto her left ring finger and explained, “This was my great, great grandmother’s ring. She was the original Pewter Dragon Queen and nearly three thousand years old when she joined her mate in the Heavens. I was a very small boy when she gave this ring to me, but I will always remember her words – ‘Rafe, one day, when you are much older, you will find the woman you cannot live without. She will make you feel things you never thought possible and give the future that without her you would never have’.”

He kissed the tip of her nose then added, “That is you, mo chrói and I will spend every day proving how very much you mean to me.”

Rolling over Nat propped her chin on her hand on Rafe’s chest and after a moment of just staring at the man she loved more than life herself, she beamed, “Thank you for loving me, Rafe. You know I won’t be the easiest to live with but know without reservation that I will always adore you as no woman ever could and will do everything in my power to make you the happiest Dragon in the world.”

Crawling across his chest until her lips were almost touching his she added, “Thank you for putting up with my bullshit and nasty attitude.” She laid her lips to his and finished her thought in his mind. “I adore you and cannot wait for every second of our forever.”

Chuckling as his arms wound around her and he deepened their kiss, Rafe teased, “Can I get that nasty attitude line in writing?”

Loving the ease of their relationship, opened completely to her mate, Nat chuckled while waggling her eyebrows, “Nope. Never, but I can put lots of other things in writing, Sparky.”

Laughing out loud, he declared, “Oh my Heavens, that’s it. You’re never speaking to

Gil alone again.”

“He said you’d say that,” Nat laughed. “Besides, you own me a Dragon flight and a...

“I do so love the way you think, mo ghrá . Oh, hell yeah, almost as much as I love you .”

Until next time, spread your wings and fly, my friends...

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:32 am

He could sense her standing on the bank. The sweet scent of honeysuckle and vanilla permeated the murky waters of the swamp, danced a dangerous tango over his senses, igniting a fire in the belly of his Beast.

Being the newest agent for the Dragon Protection Agency, he was happy to finally have a job that helped him deal with the bullshit he'd carried home from his days of active service as a Navy Seal, and the fact that Gil allowed him to work alone was all the better. Undercover, looking for the Congregation of Gator Shifters responsible for using Voodoo to steal magic from other unsuspecting Paranormals, he'd been swimming through the gloomy, but somehow no less beautiful, bayous of Louisiana for a couple of months and was beginning to wonder if his boss' intel was nothing but a pile of crap.

Swimming as close to the surface as he could without being seen, he watched the gorgeous redhead while trying to decide if she was human or Other. Her long curls hung perfectly around her heart-shaped face, framing her petite features to perfection.

Watching as she sat down on the grassy bank and slipped the tips of her toes in the cool water, his Dragon roared and his heart beat like a bass drum when her pink, puffy lips drew into an 'O' of surprise as she gasped. The need to jump from the stream and kiss her until she was breathless and as turned on as he was rushed through his body like a runaway train.

There was something about this redheaded beauty that made both him and his Dragon roll over and purr. Then it happened. Just like an anvil on Wile E. Coyote's head in those old cartoons his brothers liked to watch. The word Mate echoed through his mind.

Nope! Mnm – mhnmm. No way. Not happening. I'm not doing that whole lovey-dovey bullshit. I am Dragon hear me roar. I have control. I am the master of my own destiny. Fate and the Universe know better than to mess with me.

Turning tail and swimming away, he had just made it to the bend in the shore under the low-hanging branches of a Bald Cypress tree before looking over his shoulder. Caught in the deep, mesmerizing gaze of the woman's dark brown eyes, his long, scaled body did a U-turn of its own volition.

Slowly coasting towards the exact spot he'd just vacated, the Dragon came to a screeching halt when a smoky, contralto gently brushed a sweet Southern accent that made his tail swish in the water, whispered directly into his mind, "I wondered if you were coming back. I've been looking for you for a long time, Dragon Man."