



# Hunter (Snow Dragons Hunting #2)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Hunter Drake is a dragon shifter who has lived secretly in the Scottish Highlands for hundreds of years with his two dragon shifter brothers.

When they learn that a young man from the local village has gone missing, with a journal in his possession that reveals exactly what Hunter and his two brothers are, they know that he, and that evidence, have to be found as soon as possible. Within hours the young man's dead and broken body is found on the side of a local mountain, the journal no longer in his possession.

Hunter uses his heightened senses to track down the man he believes to be responsible for killing the young man and stealing the journal. That search takes him to a house perched on a rocky cliff on the wildness of the Cornish coast.

But before Hunter can confront the murderer, and take back the damning journal, a young woman arrives. The moment she steps out of her car and onto the driveway Hunter's senses tell him that she's his fated mate.

What connection does she have to the man Hunter knows is hunting him and his brothers? A man who isn't afraid to kill in his determination to find and expose the Drake brothers as being dragon shifters?

**Total Pages (Source):** 16

## CHAPTER ONE

Tregarthen House, Cornwall

Early January

Hunter watched through narrowed lids as a bright red Mini, with a white stripe down the center of it, from the bonnet to the trunk, was driven down the long driveway toward Tregarthen House.

He had been watching this three-storied gray stone house, perched alone on a cliff above the churning of the turbulent Celtic Sea, for two days and nights now.

After only a fraction of that time, and in his biased opinion, he had decided Cornwall was nowhere near as beautiful as his own home in the Scottish Highlands. But he could appreciate how this stark beauty would appeal to the many who flocked here for their summer holidays every year.

There was no snow on the ground here, not even a dusting of it, but the cold Cornish winter wind would no doubt still cut through any number of layers of clothing worn by a human.

It couldn't penetrate the skin of a twelve-hundred-year-old dragon shifter, though, which Hunter and his two brothers were. Despite the fact they looked to only be aged in their early to mid-thirties in their human form.

But whether as man or dragon, all their senses were heightened, especially sight and

smell. If it became necessary, they also had the power to control the elements of earth, wind, fire, and water.

Something Edgar Wallis, the owner of this gray stone home named Tregarthen House, was shortly going to be made aware of.

But not until after Hunter had retrieved the journal he believed was now in Edgar Wallis's possession and in which it was stated that dragon shifters existed.

Or, at the very least, that they had done so eight hundred years ago.

The retrieval of that journal was paramount to the continued anonymity and safety of the three dragon-shifter Drake brothers.

For the moment, Hunter had settled for merely observing the comings and goings of the household, Edgar Wallis, as well as the workers in this remote house. He had done so mainly because when he did confront Wallis, he wanted there to be no surprises. For Hunter, at least.

Hunter now knew there were only two full-time members of staff who had their own apartments inside the house, a cook/housekeeper and the butler/manservant.

Other people working in the house were the three people who arrived at seven o'clock every morning and left again at four in the afternoon.

One of them was a young man, whom Hunter assumed assisted the butler during the day.

The other two were middle-aged ladies. Hunter believed they were here to light the fires, the smoke of which Hunter could clearly see coming from two of the chimneys shortly after they arrived, before the two of them then cleaned and tidied the rest of

the large house.

There was also an elderly gardener and a younger one, probably an apprentice, working in the extensive grounds surrounding the house.

This time of year, the two men mostly spent the mornings gathering the fallen branches and leaves from the storms that blew in regularly across the churning sea before battering the house and trees.

In the afternoons, the two men had been burning the debris in specially designed metal bins.

The younger gardener seemed to especially enjoy that part of the proceedings.

There were stables at the back of the large house, but they mainly seemed to be used for storage because there were no horses inside nor grooms employed to care for them.

Wallis, a wealthy man aged in his fifties, liked to think of himself as something of a historian. Hunter had a much harsher name to describe him.

There was a covered helicopter sitting on the private helipad within those grounds, but Wallis hadn't left the house in the two days since Hunter had begun observing the man's remote residence. Nor had there been a single visitor.

Until now.

Which brought Hunter's attention back to the red Mini now being parked directly in front of the house.

He watched as the driver opened the car door and climbed out in a flash of bright

colors before bending to reach back inside to take a black garment from the back of the vehicle.

The coat, when pulled on, covered the young woman from shoulder to ankle once she had straightened to her full, but diminutive, height.

The brisk wind immediately whipped her long red hair into a frenzy of straight russet, gold, and cinnamon-colored tresses that, when not being tossed about by the wind, reached to the middle of her back. At the moment, they were preventing Hunter from being able to see her face.

But the fact that Hunter was able to see all of those colors was something of a revelation when his ability to see and appreciate the vividness of colors had slowly been diminishing over the past couple of centuries.

Oh, he still saw colors, but not with the same vibrancy he once had.

Or in the way he was now seeing various shades in this woman's hair and the multitude hues of her clothing before it was covered by the warm coat.

Hunter's nostrils flared as the delicious scent of Lily of the Valley was carried to him on the breeze, hitting and then invading his acute senses with the force of a wrecking ball.

Mate , his dragon immediately growled.

Mate? Hunter's shocked thoughts echoed.

Mate , his dragon repeated triumphantly.

Zoey appreciated being able to stretch her legs and breathe in the crisp, clean Cornish

air after an early start and then the long drive here from London. Even so, she hurried inside the house before the cold wind could penetrate the thickness of the coat she'd wrapped around herself.

"Miss Zoey," Penrose, the butler of Tregarthen House, greeted her warmly the moment she entered the cavernous wood-paneled hallway. "Mr. Wallis made no mention of you being here today," he added with a frown.

She grimaced. "That's because he doesn't know yet."

"I hope you will be here for luncheon, at least?" the butler encouraged. "Mrs. Chenoweth will be so pleased and is sure to make your favorite meal of shepherd's pie."

Zoey laughed for what felt like the first time in forever, the bleakness of the past ten days having not been conducive to humor. "That would be lovely, thank you, Penrose. Pass on my best wishes to Mrs. Chenoweth, please," she requested as she took off her coat and handed it to him.

"I will." The butler smiled warmly.

"I'll probably stay overnight," she added, knowing that by doing so, it would guarantee another one of her favorite meals being cooked for dinner, and probably breakfast too.

"Mr. Willis is in his study, Miss Zoey," Penrose informed her before leaving to put her coat away.

Of course Edgar was in his study. He was nothing if not predictable.

But perhaps she needed that predictability after the recent traumatic events in

Scotland? Something had definitely compelled her to come to Cornwall.

Being invited to spend Hogmanay in the Scottish Highlands, with the family of a fellow student and housemate, was supposed to have been a fun time.

And it had been, until it ended in disaster.

Ben McGregor was one of the people she shared a house with in London. There were three girls and three guys, but none of them were romantically involved. They shared the house out of financial necessity.

Ben had gone home to Scotland before Christmas, but the other five of them had traveled up by train before the New Year after spending Christmas with their own families.

Except Belle. She was another one of the six students staying in the London house, and because she didn't have any family, she had decided to remain at the shared house on her own.

Zoey had thought about inviting Belle to spend Christmas with her in Cornwall, but Edgar wasn't the most hospitable of people at the best of times.

Having a third person in the house, someone he didn't know, would probably have sent him into a spiral of behaving even more rudely than he usually did.

Goodness knows, Zoey had been relieved to make her own escape from his company the day after Boxing Day.

The Hogmanay celebrations in the Highlands had been everything Ben had told them they would be, with lots of the people in the Scottish village enjoying copious amounts of food and drink over two days and nights rather than just New Year's Eve.

But all that revelry had come to an abrupt end on the third day when Ben had fallen to his death off one of the mountains near his home.

Ben, like several other local men, had been searching for Belle after she had gone for a walk and then become lost in the majestic mountains surrounding the village.

Belle had been located, safe and sound inside the cave where she had taken shelter, thank God, by another one of the locals shortly after Ben's broken body had been found.

It hadn't felt right to continue staying with the McGregor family after Ben's death, but the nearest place to stay was ten miles away, in a nearby town.

As none of them had hired a car and there was still snow on the ground, it had been encouraged by Ben's family, after they had announced that Ben's funeral would be very small and private, for Zoey and the other remaining housemates to immediately travel back to London by train.

Belle had decided to stay in Scotland a little longer so that she could fully recover from her ordeal. She had accepted the invitation to stay in the home of the Drake brothers. One of whom was responsible for finding and rescuing her.

Not that Zoey could blame Belle for choosing that option.

The Drake brothers were something else. Well...

the two Zoey had met when she said her goodbyes to Belle were.

The impressive Lachlan and Ranulf Drake had been present that day, flanking Belle like two huge, impenetrable and protective sentinels.



## Page 2

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Both men were easily six and a half feet tall, with powerfully wide shoulders, tapered waists, and long, long legs.

They were probably aged in their early to midthirties, their handsome faces appearing as if they had been carved from one of the sheer rock faces of the mountain behind their home.

Lachlan had piercing silver-gray eyes; Ranulf's were a deep, dark green.

Zoey knew what color the men's eyes were because she had found herself unable to look away from either of them as she said her goodbyes to Belle. There was something about the two men that held Zoey enrapt.

Something more .

It was hard to explain, but the longer Zoey had stared at the Drake brothers, the more she had become aware of the aura of power that surrounded them.

As if, despite their already impressive height and size, they were somehow bigger still.

Zoey had felt as if there was something more to both of them than what could be seen with the naked eye.

Having met two of the Drake brothers, Zoey was no longer surprised that Belle, who until now she had always thought of as being a little prudish, had accepted the invitation to recover in the home of such overwhelmingly gorgeous men.

Lachlan, of the silver eyes, the brother who had rescued Belle, had seemed especially solicitous toward her.

Zoey's decision to come down to Cornwall a week after returning from Scotland had been completely on impulse. Possibly because the London house had seemed so very empty without Belle's and Ben's presence.

The latter was very much a painful reminder of the recent tragedy, although Belle had sent a text letting them know that the funeral had taken place, quietly and privately as the family had wished, three days ago.

Hopefully, this would now allow the McGregor family to start the process of closure and healing from their terrible loss.

Zoey couldn't claim that she and Ben had been close friends. But it was impossible not to feel some degree of mourning after the death of one of the five other people she had shared a house with for the past year.

During term time, at least. Zoey usually spent all the holidays in Cornwall. Although this year, it had been a relief to escape the stilted atmosphere of Tregarthen House to take the train to Scotland for Hogmanay.

Ben's death had been a tragic end to that holiday, and returning to the house in London had felt just as oppressive, which was why Zoey had decided to come to Cornwall, if only for a day or so before uni started again.

"Come," was the abrupt, and predictable, response seconds after Zoey had knocked on the study door. Knocked and waited, because she knew Edgar did not appreciate people bursting into his study without an invitation.

The study smelled of the familiar pipe tobacco and leather.

The former was because Edgar Wallis allowed himself precisely three pipefuls of the sweet-smelling tobacco every day.

The latter because the chair behind the imposing desk and the couch in front of the window were both upholstered with a dark brown leather, which Mrs. Chenoweth made sure was dusted with a soft cloth and appropriately conditioned every few months to keep the leather supple.

Leather-bound books also lined three of the walls, with a huge bay window dominating the fourth one.

“Goodness, it’s dark in here,” Zoey exclaimed, noting the only light in the gloom of the room came from the green desk lamp as she hurriedly crossed the room to roll up the blind covering the window. It immediately let in the soft gray light from outside.

She turned to face the man behind the desk. A man, despite the fact that he was sitting, she knew to be a couple of inches short of six feet tall. He had light brown hair turning to gray at his temples, and faded blue eyes behind the glasses he wore.

At the moment, he was looking up and over them at her. “Good God, Zoey, is there a color of the rainbow you aren’t wearing today?” He closed the small book he had been reading and slipped it into one of the side pockets of his tweed jacket.

There was no how wonderful to see you, what a lovely surprise or I wasn’t expecting you, is there a problem or possibly you’re looking very pale, my dear, is there something wrong , or even just the is there something wrong would have done!

But, raw as her emotions might currently be, Zoey knew she was being silly to expect any other reaction from the man in front of her.

Edgar Wallis didn’t do ‘concern.’ He only dealt in facts, and the fact was, Zoey

hadn't let him know she would be coming down today. Nor had she chosen to wear the more traditional clothing she usually did when visiting Tregarthen House.

But she was very pale. She dared anyone who had very recently witnessed the heartache and shock of the death of someone as young as Ben not to be.

As for the colorful clothing she had on, after those few days of wearing the most somber clothing she had taken with her to Scotland, out of respect toward Ben's grieving family, Zoey had been wearing the most colorful clothing she possessed since returning to London a week ago.

Today, she had chosen to wear violet-colored dungarees with yellow daisies and green leaves on the bib, with a bright orange sweater beneath, along with blue high-top Converse. All colors which clashed abominably with her red hair.

"It's lovely to see you too, Uncle Edgar! But if we're being pedantic"—which she knew Edgar invariably was—"then I believe I'm missing indigo from the rainbow spectrum," she added brightly as she bent slightly and he allowed her to kiss him on one of his thin cheeks.

### CHAPTER TWO

Hunter, having moved to stand outside the window of the study where Wallis and his visitor were talking, now wanted nothing more than to gather Zoey up in his arms, breathe in her alluring scent before shifting into his dragon, and fly them both back to his beloved Scottish Highlands.

Once there, he would introduce her to his brothers and Belle, before taking Zoey through to the caverns in the mountain at the back of their Highland home.

It was where the three brothers kept their treasure hoards, and although she didn't know it, Zoey had just become the absolute center of Hunter's universe and the pinnacle of his treasure.

He might wish to do that, but he hadn't lived to be twelve hundred years old by acting without due regard for the consequences of his actions, to his brothers as well as himself. And shifting into a dragon before abducting a then terrified young woman would not go unnoticed.

He would ensure Zoey didn't remain terrified for long, of course. But even so, Hunter believed it might take a little time to encourage her into seeing him as the true life mate he now knew her to be for him.

Besides, Zoey's connection to Edgar Wallis was cause for concern. Very much so. Because Hunter was certain that Wallis was responsible for not only stealing a revealing journal from Ben McGregor, but also for the young man's death.

The three brothers had survived living all these centuries because they always acted with caution. To do anything else now, even though Hunter knew Zoey was his true mate, would put them all in danger.

From his position standing to one side of the bay window of Wallis's study, Hunter's sensitive hearing allowed him to overhear the conversation taking place inside the room.

Which was how he had now learned that Rainbow Girl, as he had already dubbed the young woman in his mind before the butler revealed her name as being Zoey, was Edgar Wallis's niece.

Which didn't make any sense because he knew Wallis was an only child.

So who or what was Zoey, really?

Mine , his dragon purred.

Oh, Hunter had absolutely no doubt, and nor did his dragon, that Zoey was his true mate. Their nostrils were still filled with her mating scent of Lily of the Valley.

Hunter's body also thrummed with a primal need to take and mate her, just as his dragon was eager to shift and show her his full magnificence.

Plus, there was the euphoria bubbling up inside Hunter and growing stronger with every passing second. He had found his one true mate, and he wanted to shout it from the rooftops and into the atmosphere!

It was incredible.

Unbelievable.

Miraculous.

Hunter had absolutely no doubt that was who and what Zoey was to him. Or that, when the time was right, he was going to take her into his arms and never let her go. Stopping from doing so now was taking every bit of his self-control. Even if he knew it was very necessary.

He would first need to explain to Zoey that he and his brothers were dragon shifters. He could only hope that Zoey would be as open-minded about that as Belle had proven to be. Much to Lachlan's relief and future happiness.

It had helped in Belle's case that she was a student of mythology and so very much predisposed to wanting to believe in magical creatures, most especially dragons.

Thank God. Because, after being alive for over twelve centuries, the brothers had slowly begun to despair that any of them would ever meet their one true mate.

They had heard of, but didn't know, a family of brothers in Wales, who, it was said, had found all their mates in human women. But never, even in Hunter's wildest dreams, had he thought he would meet his own true mate. Or that, like Belle, she would be human.

The fact that Lachlan had met his mate in Belle had started to give him and Ranulf hope they too might find a mate. Although Ranulf was being far more reticent on the subject.

But now, Hunter had seen and breathed in the scent of his Rainbow Girl. His Zoey. His one true mate.

It was... Euphoria couldn't even begin to describe the ecstasy building inside Hunter.

But there was still that troubling connection Zoey appeared to have to Edgar Wallis. The man Hunter believed was responsible for killing one of Zoey's housemates.

The same man, once Hunter had retrieved the damning journal Wallis had acquired from Ben McGregor before murdering him, Hunter had every intention of killing.

Eight hundred years ago, Hunter and his brothers had rescued a young woman who had been tied up and left as a sacrifice to the dragons the local people believed could determine whether they had a good harvest and hunting that year.

As Hunter, Lachlan, and Ranulf were those dragons, and they didn't require any sacrifice, nor could they guarantee a good harvest or hunting, they had untied the girl and delivered her to an English convent, far from the villagers who had so callously offered her up as a sacrifice and would probably kill her themselves if she attempted to return to them.

Superstition of witchcraft had been rife in those days.

What none of the brothers had known until recently was that Sister Agnes, as the girl Ailsa had later become, had been taught to read and write at the convent.

As a consequence, she had written several journals about her life.

In one of them, she had written about being rescued by three huge dragons that could shift at will into large and powerful warriors.

Before this most recent Christmas, Belle Brown had accidentally acquired several of the nun's journals at the bottom of a box of old books she had bought at a house auction.

Hunter now knew, from the emails he had managed to retrieve from Ben McGregor's



retrieved and damaged laptop, that the young man had been paid to steal one particular journal from Belle. It was the same one in which Sister Agnes had described meeting those three dragon shifters.

Which Ben had duly done.

But instead of being paid for the task, as promised, Ben had been murdered and the journal taken from him.

Those emails discussing Ben stealing the journal and the time and place for a meeting and exchange of the journal for money had all originated from the IP address of Edgar Wallis.

The man Zoey had just called uncle.

Edgar Wallis wasn't Zoey's real uncle, of course.

He had been her father's best friend. But her parents had been killed when the small plane they were traveling in had crashed into the Irish Sea.

Their bodies had been found two days later, but the light aircraft still remained at the bottom of the deep gray sea.

Edgar, a man she hadn't remembered ever meeting before meeting him at her parents' funeral, had been named as Zoey's guardian in her father's will. Very soon after that, Zoey's home in London had been sold, and she and Edgar Wallis had moved into Tregarthen House in Cornwall.

As a lawyer and a stickler for what he believed was correct, Edgar hadn't been able to accept a girl of eight calling him by the familiarity of his first name. Instead, he had grudgingly accepted the title of uncle.

Not that Zoey had spent all that much time at Tregarthen House, having been shipped off to boarding school almost immediately after she and all her belongings had been moved into the house.

She'd usually been left to her own devices in the holidays too, and, if she did go outside, had preferred to spend most of her time on the beach with the local children.

To say Edgar was something of a cold fish would be putting it mildly. He rarely smiled, let alone laughed, and the only passion he ever displayed was for the history books he studied with an intensity that bordered on obsession.

Quite what he was looking for, Zoey had no idea, and he wasn't the sort of man who had ever invited her curiosity, let alone her questions, about anything.

Which meant the past twelve years had been something of a trial for both of them. Zoey had always been a gregarious and outgoing child who liked to draw and paint rather than read anything as boring as history books.

Edgar didn't understand art at all, and Zoey was pretty sure that the only reason he had allowed her to go to university to study for an art degree was so that she wasn't constantly under his feet after she left boarding school two years ago.

They had become even more estranged during those two years.

Which made it doubly strange that Zoey had felt drawn to return to Cornwall today.

Oh, she had an affection for Edgar. After all, he had accepted guardianship of her after her parents died. He had even cared for her in his cold and distant manner.

Even so, Zoey had missed her parents' love and affectionate attention all these years. Edgar didn't seem capable of giving either of those softer emotions.

If Zoey was being completely honest, she found it surprising that he and her father had been friends at all. She remembered her father as being very much like her: always smiling and never taking anything too seriously. The exact opposite of Edgar.

Her father had been a hit-or-miss investor in business, meaning that sometimes they were rich and sometimes they weren't.

Her mother had been the more practical one in the marriage, always ensuring there was enough money put by for those times when an investment didn't pay off.

But Zoey remembered her mother as also being smiling and indulgent with both her husband and her daughter, which had added considerably to the family's happiness.

Because they were so different, Zoey had once asked Edgar about his friendship with her father.

He had explained that they'd met at university, where they had shared a dorm room for a year.

They had kept in touch, from a distance after university in the years that followed, and more recently, Edgar had become her father's lawyer.

"I thought you were in the Highlands celebrating Hogmanay with your friends?"

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

Zoey shook off her thoughts of the past to look across the desk at Edgar. “It came to a tragic end, unfortunately.”

“Oh?”

She grimaced at the lack of emotion or interest in his voice. “Ben, the guy whose family we were staying with, fell to his death from a mountain nearby.”

Light brown eyebrows, speckled with gray, rose over Edgar’s pale blue eyes. “How awful for you.”

Zoey snorted. “I believe it was more awful for Ben and his family.”

“Well...yes,” her uncle conceded briskly. “But somewhat disturbing for his guests too.”

“Of course,” she conceded, knowing it would be useless to point out that she found Edgar’s reaction to be more than a little emotionless.

But it was Edgar’s nature to be emotionally cold. It always had been. Not just to her but to everyone.

“I—” She broke off what she had been about to say when Penrose, having knocked briefly on the door and been invited to enter by her uncle, now stood in the doorway.

“Yes?” Edgar prompted tersely, obviously irritated by this second interruption to his morning.

“A gentleman has arrived at the house, Mr. Willis,” Penrose answered mildly, used to his employer’s abruptness. “His car has broken down some half a mile away, and so he walked here to ask if he might use the telephone to call for assistance.”

“Doesn’t he have a cell phone?” Edgar bit out.

The butler shrugged. “Apparently, it is in need of charging.”

Edgar’s nostrils flared as he muttered under his breath about “so-called modern conveniences” and the “incompetence” of the people who used them.

“I didn’t like to just say yes without asking your permission first,” the cautious Penrose added.

“You have it,” Edgar dismissed impatiently, obviously already tired of the subject.

“I’ll come with you, Penrose.” Zoey stood up.

“Perhaps our visitor would like a cup of coffee while he’s waiting to be rescued,” she added as she followed the butler out of the study and closed the door behind her.

“I think my uncle’s social skills are getting worse,” she joked dryly to the butler as the two of them walked down the hallway toward the front of the house.

“He has been more distracted than usual of late,” the butler conceded.

“I trust you at least asked our visitor to wait in the sitting room rather than leaving him standing outside in the cold?” she teased.

“I did, yes.” Penrose smiled. “Shall I bring through coffee and biscuits for you both?”

“Perfect,” she approved before veering off to the right of the main entrance hall in the direction of the sitting room, while the butler headed left toward the kitchen. “I am so sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr.—”

Zoey, having entered the room where their visitor was waiting, had come to an abrupt halt, both verbally and physically, the moment she set eyes on the man standing by the window.

He was exceptionally tall, standing at least six and a half feet.

He had very wide and muscular shoulders that were barely contained by the black T-shirt he wore beneath a black leather jacket.

He also wore black jeans with biker boots.

Not exactly suitable attire for the cold weather outside, but probably warm enough for traveling in a car.

His dark hair was shaved short at the sides and longer on top, his handsome face appearing as if it were hewn out of rock, and he was staring back at her with the most piercing dark eyes Zoey had ever seen.

But what was even odder about those eyes had been the flash of silver flame Zoey was sure she had briefly seen in those dark depths. Not gray or pale blue, but an actual glittering silver. Except his eyes were dark, and flames weren’t silver in color.

Were they...?

There was also something vaguely familiar about him. Not that Zoey believed for a moment she had met him before now, because there was no way she would ever have forgotten meeting such a powerfully handsome man.

No, it was more a case, despite his already powerful build and impressive height, of him somehow seeming more ?—

It wasn't the first time she'd thought that about someone she'd recently met...?

It was on the very edge of her consciousness where and when she'd had this same feeling of more . Or been hit with that invisible aura of size and power?—

Zoey stilled.

Dear God, the last time Zoey had thought this about someone, well, two someones, it had been in Scotland a week ago when she couldn't stop staring at the two tall, muscular, and very handsome Drake brothers.

Zoey's gaze sharpened as she continued to stare through narrowed lids at this unexpected visitor to Tregarthen House. The man who claimed his car had broken down and was now asking to use the telephone to call for assistance.

His coloring, being dark-haired and dark-eyed, was different to the two Drake brothers she had met. But otherwise, he possessed that same powerful aura Zoey had only previously sensed in Lachlan and Ranulf Drake.

Could that possibly make him Hunter, the third brother she hadn't met in Scotland?

The possibility of that being the case was so far removed from probability as to be laughable.

But the evidence in front of Zoey, of her sensing this man's unusual but unmistakable power and majesty, was just as undeniable.

### CHAPTER THREE

“This might sound a little strange if I’m wrong, but would you happen to be Hunter Drake, brother of Lachlan and Ranulf?”

Hunter was finding it difficult to concentrate on anything except the totally enthralling beauty of his mate. And breathing in the heady perfume of Lily of the Valley, Zoey’s mating scent, had caused his cock to harden and his balls to contract.

Because this was his mate . His one true mate. The woman Hunter knew he would cherish, love, and worship for the rest of their long lives together.

She was perfection.

Her long, straight hair was the myriad colors of a living flame.

Her eyes were the color of the purest emeralds in Hunter’s hoard, and they were surrounded by thick, dark lashes.

Her face was creamy and smooth, with a small, uptilted nose and full red lips.

Her neck was long and slender. Her hands, small and delicate.

And the perfection of her figure was clearly outlined in the colorful clothing she was wearing.

As far as he was concerned, Zoey was exquisite.



As Hunter had known, if she ever appeared, his one true mate would be.

The astuteness of her question revealed she was also highly intelligent to have so quickly made the connection between himself and his brothers.

Hunter was unhappy at the thought of even starting to practice any sort of deceit where she was concerned.

Although her connection to Wallis brought into question whether or not she was the one being deceitful.

The fact that she had been in the Highlands when Ben McGregor fell to his death was also worrying. It also posed several questions.

Such as, had she been involved in stealing the journal from Belle?

More importantly, could she have been complicit in Ben's death?

The conversation Hunter had overheard between her and Edgar Wallis didn't sound as if she had, but Hunter would need to be absolutely sure before he dared to completely trust her.

"Is that who you want me to be?" Hunter now deflected.

She smiled, revealing straight white teeth between those delectable cherry-red lips. "Ooh, you're good," she admired before sobering. "You also managed to not answer my question."

Because Hunter was somewhat at a loss to know how Zoey had so quickly made the connection between himself and his brothers, whom he now realized she must have met at some time before she left Scotland a week ago.

Neither of his brothers had mentioned the meeting, but then, to them, she would just have been one of the group of young people in the Highlands to celebrate Hogmanay with the McGregor family. Lachlan and Ranulf would not have known that Zoey was his true mate.

Still, Zoey's astuteness in making that connection was admirable.

Yes, the brothers were all tall and muscular, but otherwise, their coloring was vastly different.

Hunter also liked to think, with his hair cut in a modern style and his biker clothing, that he had at least attempted to look as if he was part of the twenty-first century.

Zoey's question said he hadn't succeeded as far as she was concerned.

Was that because she saw something in him others didn't?

Did she recognize him as being her future?

It was a little hard for Hunter to think at all when her heady scent had now permeated all his senses.

"Because if you are their brother Hunter," she continued lightly before he replied, "then your appearance here in Cornwall, specifically at my uncle's house, is far too much of a coincidence to actually be one."

She was right. It was.

But no less so than her own presence here in the home of Edgar Wallis, the man she called uncle, and whom Hunter knew to be involved in the theft of the journal from Belle followed by Ben McGregor's death.

Much as Hunter disliked the idea, he couldn't dismiss the possibility that Zoey might somehow be connected to both those events.

Although her earlier conversation with Wallis and the reason Hunter had decided to make his presence known didn't sound as if Zoey had been part of the theft or murder.

Hunter would need to be sure of that before he could reveal his true self to her.

"Would you—" He broke off what he had been about to say when the same butler, who had answered the door earlier and admitted him to the house, now came into the room with a tray laden with a pot of coffee, cups, and plate of biscuits.

The man placed the tray down on the coffee table in front of the couch. "Your uncle has asked not to be disturbed again this morning but said he will see you at luncheon," the butler informed Zoey.

Hunter already knew from having watched the house the past two days, and listened to conversations within it, that Wallis was a man who tended to be rude or condescending to the people who worked for him. Either that or he ignored them completely as being beneath his notice.

But Zoey was his niece, and she had driven all the way from London to see him. She was also obviously still traumatized by the untimely death of Ben in the Scottish Highlands. Only to now be informed her uncle was not to be disturbed.

Unfeeling bastard!

But also, Hunter hoped, confirmation that Zoey wasn't in cahoots with her uncle.

"Don't ever play poker," Zoey told him once the butler had left the sitting room and

closed the door behind him. “Because you really don’t have the face for it.” She chuckled.

Hunter scowled. “Your uncle sounds like a selfish bastard.”

“He is,” she confirmed without hesitation as she sat down on the couch to pour the coffee into two cups.

“But he was my father’s best friend, and no matter how inconvenient it was to him, he did choose to accept guardianship of me after my parents died twelve years ago.

” She shrugged. “So, he must have some kindness inside him. Very deep inside him,” she added wryly when Hunter eyed her skeptically.

“Or my father wouldn’t have liked him enough to have named him as my guardian. ”

“So he isn’t your uncle by blood?” It would explain why Hunter hadn’t known of Zoey’s connection to the other man until today.

She eyed him quizzically. “That’s a strange way of putting it.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. Please sit down and help yourself to milk and sugar,” she invited after handing him one of the cups of coffee.

She tried not to outwardly wince when the chair he sat in gave a protesting creak at both his weight and size.

“Wow, your blood comment made me think of something.” She sat forward on the couch.

“You and your brothers aren’t vampires , are you? ”

Hunter drew back. “Vampires...?”

She nodded eagerly. “You’re all so big and muscular, and there’s something...different, about all of you. It would also explain your comment about blood.”

What the hell did she mean, there was something different about them?

Could other people see this strangeness, or was it only Zoey? And did she see it because she was his mate?

“You all seem slightly...otherworldly,” Zoey said in answer to his unasked question. “So large and muscular, and yet there’s an aura that says you’re even bigger than you appear. Larger and more powerful than anything I’ve ever known or seen before,” she added curiously.

Well, she wasn’t wrong. But it was the first time Hunter had heard the dragons the three brothers carried inside them being described in quite that way. It was the first time anyone had said they could sense the power they kept tightly leashed so that they could fit into the human world.

Perhaps his dragon was closer to the surface, and so detectable, now that he was in the presence of and breathing in his mate’s distinctive scent?

Mine , his dragon confirmed.

Zoey gave a self-conscious laugh at Hunter’s continued silence.

“Just ignore me. Of course there’s no such thing as vampires.

Put it down to my artistic temperament.” She grimaced.

“Speaking of which, I would love to paint the three of you. Or just you,” she amended after Hunter was unable to completely suppress the growl that escaped from deep inside him.

An irrepressible growl of jealousy merely at the thought of Zoey painting or being alone with his brothers. Not that he thought either of his brothers would ever treat Zoey as anything other than Hunter’s mate. It was more the thought of any male who wasn’t Hunter being near her.

“You’re an artist?” He didn’t take his eyes off her as he swallowed down the unsweetened black coffee before placing the empty cup back on the tray.

She nodded. “It’s what I’m studying at university. I’m also currently applying to galleries to see if they’ll take some of my paintings,” she explained. “I’m pretty sure a painting of you and your brothers would help in that endeavor.”

Hunter believed that financial backing from her wealthy “uncle” would achieve the same effect. Except, as Hunter knew from his observations over the past few days, Edgar Wallis was only interested in what he wanted.

Besides, all three of the Drake brothers would need to agree to being painted, whether that painting was of all of them or just him. An agreement Hunter doubted his brothers would give.

It had become more difficult to avoid having photographs taken of them in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when those photographs could be taken on increasingly smaller devices and then displayed instantly to the world on social media.

But as much as they were able, the Drake brothers preferred there not to be any photographic evidence of their existence, either as men or dragons.

A painting was so much more than a photograph, which could be erased if necessary. Besides which, Hunter knew he would never be able to bring himself to destroy anything that Zoey had created.

“I did not confirm, nor did I deny, that I have two brothers called Lachlan and Ranulf,” he reminded.

“Oh, I think your lengthy silence on the subject did that for you.” She sat back on the couch, coffee cup in hand, as she stared across at him with those beautiful, deep green eyes. “So, what are you doing in Cornwall?”

### CHAPTER FOUR

Zoey knew she could still be mistaken and that the handsome and broodingly charismatic man whose car had broken down nearby could just be what he said he was: a random stranger asking to use the telephone to call for help.

If he was, then he must now be thinking she was the one who was different, and in an odd way rather than a special one.

Okay, she admitted talking about vampires had been a little out there, but she knew she wasn't imagining the powerful aura that surrounded this man and the two men she had met in the Highlands who she still believed were his brothers.

Nor had she imagined seeing that silver flame in the depths of this man's dark eyes a few minutes ago.

She was also convinced there was more to him, whether he was Hunter Drake or otherwise, than was visible to the naked eye. Something dark and primal Zoey could feel lurking beneath all that raw masculinity.

Something that called to Zoey on a visceral level she hadn't even realized she possessed until now.

He was a little old for her, being in his early thirties to her twenty. His clothing, although casual, looked expensive and probably designer label—it might even have been made specifically for him, considering his size—whereas Zoey could only afford to dress like the student she was.



Despite those differences, Zoey knew that a part of her recognized this man as somehow being an important part of her future.

Quite what that meant, she had no idea.

Or maybe she was just allowing her imagination—that artistic temperament—to run away with her after all.

“I can, however, confirm there is no such thing as vampires,” he dismissed.

She gave a self-conscious laugh. She really did feel silly for having said something so outlandish out loud. Imagination was one thing, but that had been a paranormal fantasy. “Well, that’s a relief,” she said, making light of the subject.

“Yes.”

Zoey decided she had probably made enough of a fool of herself for one day.

“Would you like to use the landline or my cell phone to call the garage? We have nothing in the nearby village, but there’s a repair shop in the town ten miles away.

But it might take a while for someone to come out to help. ”

“No, thank you.”

“No...?” she echoed uncertainly.

He shrugged those massive shoulders. “I don’t own a car.”

“But you said... If you don’t own a car, how on earth did you get here?” Tregarthen House was far too remote to be serviced by any of the forms of public transport. “Ah.

Did you come on the train and have a cab drop you off here, or maybe you hired a car and drove yourself?"

"No."

"Then I don't understand...?"

"I flew here."

She frowned. "But the nearest airport is also ten miles away, near to the town, so you would still have needed to take a cab or hire a car to get the rest of the way here."

"And yet I didn't."

"Ah." The frown lifted from her brow as a thought occurred to her.

"You came by helicopter and used Uncle Edgar's helipad to land."

"She chuckled. "He isn't going to be happy when he hears about that."

"Uncle Edgar is a typical only child," she explained.

"Which means he doesn't share or like anyone else touching his things."

"I didn't use your uncle's helipad, nor do I own a helicopter."

Zoey huffed her frustration. "Then I don't understand. You said you weren't dropped off by cab. That you didn't hire a car to drive yourself here. Nor do you own a helicopter."

"That's correct."

“Then why did you lie about your car having broken down nearby?” she demanded to know. “And how could you have flown here if not on a flight into the local airport or by a private helicopter?”

Hunter knew they were all valid questions, given the circumstances.

But he would prefer not to answer any of them in the home of the man he suspected of having murdered Ben McGregor so he could take possession of the journal stolen from Belle. All those things having been done because of Wallis’s obsessive quest to discover if dragons had really existed.

“Is there somewhere more private we could talk together?” Now that Hunter had met Zoey and he knew who and what she was to him, he felt uneasy discussing those recent events in Wallis’s home.

The other man didn’t have Hunter’s heightened senses, so he wouldn’t be able to overhear their conversation, but that didn’t exclude the man from having other means of doing so. Tregarthen House wasn’t just a house. Its isolation and the walled grounds around it turned it almost into a fortress.

It was Zoey’s home too, of course, although Hunter could see little evidence that a second person had ever lived here, let alone a child and now a young adult.

There were none of the obligatory drawings or badly made pieces of pottery in the house usually associated with a child being in residence. Nor was there a worn swing or slide or any other apparatus outside that a child might have played with.

He was also, Hunter admitted, becoming more than a little lightheaded from breathing in Zoey’s scent.

“We could step outside,” she suggested.

Hunter nodded. “Then let’s do that.”

He could sense Wallis was in his study several doors down the hallway, the scratching of a pen nib on paper—he was using a fountain pen, in this day and age?—possibly evidence the other man was studying and making notes from the journal he had stolen.

Hunter could hear two ladies upstairs tidying the bedrooms, perhaps preparing Zoey’s room for her overnight stay.

The cook, her assistant, and the butler and footman were all in the kitchen.

Even so, Hunter felt uneasy discussing Ben’s death, the theft of the journal, and Edgar Wallis’s involvement in both those things while they were inside the other man’s house.

“Won’t you be cold?” Zoey eyed his T-shirt and leather jacket. “You aren’t exactly dressed for winter weather, and the wind can be cold up on this cliffside.”

“I’ll be fine.” Hunter and his brothers didn’t feel the cold like humans. In fact, being snow dragons, they preferred it.

Hunter waited in the hallway for Zoey to join him once she had collected her coat and wrapped it around herself to keep out the icy cold wind she had mentioned.

A wind that slightly dissipated, thank goodness, her mating scent.

Hunter would hate to lose control and have his dragon appear in front of Zoey without warning, frightening her beyond redemption.

“Why did we need to talk privately?” Zoey prompted cautiously once they were

standing outside.

Hunter drew in a deep breath before slowly releasing it. “Because I know how Ben McGregor really died and also the reason he did.”

Zoey gave a shocked gasp, her eyes wide. “Ben fell down a mountain while he was part of a search party looking for a mutual friend.”

“Belle Brown.”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

Hunter shook his head. “Ben fell to his death on the mountain after being pushed out of a helicopter.”

“What!” Zoey looked horrified, her cheeks paling at the horror his words evoked.

He nodded. “For the sake of Ben’s family, my brother made it look as if Ben had fallen down the mountain, but the truth is that someone murdered him.”

She swallowed, her cheeks now deathly white. “Why?”

“Because he had something they wanted.” Hunter deliberately kept his tone even, knowing this news would be hard enough for Zoey to understand without him allowing his own anger over the tragedy to make the situation worse.

She eyed him suspiciously. “Did you or one of your brothers push Ben out of your helicopter?”

“No.”

Zoey stared at him for several long seconds before stating firmly, “I believe it’s time for you to leave, Mr. Drake.”

Hunter’s towering height made him very aware of the difference in their sizes. The top of Zoey’s head barely reached his shoulder, and her frame was so tiny, he was sure his hands could easily circumvent the slenderness of her waist, and his fingers would still be able to interlink.

All of which meant he could easily pick her up and forcibly remove her if he wanted to.

He wasn’t going to do that.

Yes, Zoey was tiny, but the fire in her glittering green eyes warned him never to underestimate her because of that physical fragility.

She is perfect , his dragon purred.

She really was, Hunter agreed, his senses drowning in the look and scent of her, to a degree he found it difficult to stop staring at her.

Which, on top of sensing he was somehow more , was probably why she wanted him to leave.

He forced his expression to soften slightly. “I know this is a lot for you to take in, but there are some other things I still need to tell you?—”

“And you can do that while I drive you into town,” she cut in decisively, her auburn brows high above her challenging gaze as she took the keys to the Mini from the pocket of her coat.

Hunter tilted his head guardedly. “You’re leaving with me?”

She nodded. “If that’s acceptable to you?”

“God, yes,” he assured, totally relieved after thinking she was just going to ask him to leave with the intention of never seeing him again. “Although I might have a little difficulty getting into your car,” he added with a glance at the small red-and-white vehicle.

Zoey grimaced. “It’s going to be fun watching you try!”

Hunter eyed her appreciatively. “You have a weird idea of what’s fun, Zoey—” He broke off with a frown. “What is your surname if it isn’t Wallis?”

“Ashworth,” she provided.

“Then, Zoey Ashworth...” Hunter trailed off, making a mental note to look more fully into her parents.

Their deaths occurred twelve years ago, if Zoey had been eight at the time.

The fact his mate was only aged twenty in human years was a little difficult to comprehend, but Belle was the same age as Zoey, and she was the perfect mate for Lachlan.

Maybe both women, because of their pasts and present circumstances, were old souls, and so those souls melded with those of a twelve-hundred-year-old dragon.

Not that their respective ages would matter, because once the two of them were mated, Zoey’s lifespan would be linked to his own. She would also, and Belle had been thrilled by this, be able to shift into a dragon and fly at his side.

Once the two of them were mated.

Hunter bared his teeth in a smile. “Then, Zoey, it will be my pleasure and my greatest honor to accompany you anywhere you wish to go,” he finished his earlier sentence.

Her brows rose. “Anywhere?”

His gaze continued to meet hers. “Anywhere,” he confirmed huskily.



### CHAPTER FIVE

Zoey was lost in the riotous tumbling of her thoughts as she drove them toward St. Ives. It was January, and the middle of the day, so there were very few tourists and little other traffic on the smaller roads they were traveling on.

The man sitting so uncomfortably beside her, even with the seat pushed all the way back and the back tilted as far as it would go, had now admitted he was Hunter Drake. A man she knew normally lived in the Scottish Highlands, as did his brothers, Lachlan and Ranulf.

The fact that Hunter was now here , in Cornwall, was surreal.

The fact that he had stated that Ben hadn't fallen down the mountain but had been dropped onto it from a helicopter was deeply alarming.

Did the fact that Hunter had come to Cornwall, that he had come specifically to Tregarthen House where Edgar Wallis made his home and also owned and flew his own helicopter, mean that Hunter thought the other man might somehow have been involved in Ben's death?

But what possible reason could Edgar, a man who made no secret of the fact he held most other human beings in contempt, possibly have had to kill one of the students Zoey shared a house with in London? And why would he have waited until Ben had returned to his home in Scotland to do so?

None of what Zoey had learned about the situation so far made any sense.

And yet she also found she couldn't quite bring herself to disbelieve the possibility of Edgar somehow being involved in these strange events.

He was a cold man who had always shut himself away in his study, or he occasionally disappeared for several days or weeks at a time. She had assumed that during those times, he was indulging in the historical research which seemed to have taken up most of his adult life.

Quite what that research was, Zoey had no idea, nor had she ever bothered to ask or show an interest. Edgar had always treated her like a child, even when she became an adult, and he hadn't ever encouraged her to ask him questions about anything, let alone the subject of his obsession.

"Could you turn off at the road ahead, please?" Hunter suddenly bit out between gritted teeth as he indicated the small B-road to the left a short distance in front of the Mini.

Zoey knew that particular sideroad grew narrower and narrower until it was only wide enough for a single small vehicle to maneuver down. The road disappeared completely when it opened out onto one of the many small beaches situated around the rugged Cornish coastline.

A small and secluded beach where there would be no other human beings to see or hear if Zoey called out for help.

Was she going to need to call for help?

Hunter was a stranger, a huge and dominating one, and his presence in Cornwall was also suspect after the things he had told her. Even so, Zoey didn't sense any imminent threat from him toward her, physically or otherwise.

She felt more in danger of succumbing to the insidious seduction of his musky scent.

It was unlike anything she had ever breathed in before. A heady combination of wind and rain, pine needles carpeting a forest floor, all underlined with the smell of the burning of dry leaves in autumn.

Zoey could also still sense that something more roiling, being a turbulence, beneath Hunter's outer shell of calm. But whatever that something was, it didn't feel in the least threatening. The opposite, in fact.

For some reason, Hunter Drake's presence made her feel safer than she ever had before.

Nor had Zoey ever felt so aware of a man as she now did, sitting beside Hunter in the small confines of the Mini.

It wasn't just that he was so present and physically took up at least two-thirds of the space inside her car. He also exuded a brooding sensuality that Zoey was aware of to the very depths of her core.

Along with that heady musk that had now invaded her senses, causing her breasts to swell and her nipples to harden and between her thighs to become plump and wet.

A visceral reaction that was previously unknown to her.

She had dated in the past, and enjoyed the company of the men she went on those dates with, but she'd never had such a physical reaction to any of them.

It was as if?—

She gave Hunter a sharp glance after she heard him give a low and pained groan.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“No.” A nerve pulsed in his tightly clenched jaw. “I need to get out of the confines of this car and breathe in the outside air,” he growled as one of his hands reached out to take a tight grip of the dashboard. It immediately gave a protesting groan at this rough treatment.

Enough so that Zoey feared Hunter’s hand might leave a permanent dent in the plastic molding. “Are you feeling car sick?”

“I can’t breathe!” he gasped.

“Wind down the window,” she advised quickly as she hurriedly turned the car down the lane on the left as he had requested.

Hunter did as she suggested, letting in the frigidly cold air from outside before breathing it deeply into his lungs. “It’s helping, but I really need to get out of this car,” he grated seconds later.

Zoey glanced at him, noting how rigid his body was with tension, his fingers still tightly gripping the dashboard. “To get away from the car or me?”

“Both.”

Zoey immediately bristled. “That isn’t very nice after I’ve offered to drive you into town.”

He gave a shake of his head. “I— It isn’t— Your scent is driving my— me insane!”

She frowned. “I’m not wearing any perfume.”

“I said scent, not perfume.”

Zoey’s hands tightened on the steering wheel as she drove the Mini slowly down the narrow lane.

“Are you saying I have some sort of smell you find offensive?” She might be guilty of being completely aware of his seductive musk, but that didn’t mean she welcomed him saying something similar in regard to her.

“Not offensive,” he quickly assured. “Just— Everyone has their own scent,” he explained. “I find yours, Lily of the Valley, to be— I am so fucking this up,” he muttered as if to himself when Zoey continued to frown.

She snorted. “Only because your attempts to explain yourself sound bloody insulting.”

“Damn it, I’m just going to go for it,” he bit out from between clenched teeth. “Dragons.”

Zoey gave him a quick and startled glance before turning her attention back to looking out the front window at the winding and narrow lane ahead. The hedge was starting to encroach on both sides now, narrowing the lane even further.

“Going a little off track, aren’t we?” she observed lightly, having decided it was probably safer to humor Hunter’s totally unrelated comment.

“You mentioned vampires earlier,” he reminded.

She huffed. “So, you just thought, completely out of the blue, that you would bring up the subject of dragons?”

He gave a humorless grin. “Something like that.”

Zoey was becoming more and more convinced that she had made a mistake in offering to drive Hunter into town. In being alone with him at all. Her physical reaction to him aside, there was obviously something seriously not normal about this man.

He had also blatantly lied earlier, she reminded herself, so that he could gain access to her uncle’s house. After which, he had proceeded to tell her that Ben had been murdered, as well as implying her guardian had somehow been involved in the younger man’s death.

Yet, Zoey had still voluntarily left Tregarthen House with him.

And now, completely unrelated, he had started talking about dragons.

So maybe that meant there was something seriously wrong with her rather than with Hunter?

Whichever of those things it was, Zoey was now alone in a car with Hunter Drake. On her way to a beach no one knew they were going to, where there were no houses, and which she was sure was going to be totally deserted at this time of year.

Hunter knew he was handling this situation badly, but being confined in such a small space with the woman he was now sure was his true mate, breathing in the heady perfume of Lily of the Valley, was driving his dragon’s senses into overload.

So much so that his dragon was now so near the surface, it was in danger of bursting free and terrifying his mate before Hunter had even had a chance to explain its existence.

“Thank God,” he groaned as they emerged from the narrow lane onto a small parking area beside an even smaller beach.

Hunter barely waited for Zoey to stop the car before throwing the door open and climbing out into the fresh sea air. He gratefully breathed it deeply into his starved lungs.

He could still smell Zoey’s alluring scent, but it was now diluted enough by the salty sea air for him to regain the control he so badly needed to be able to talk to her without shifting completely into his dragon and shocking the hell out of her.

He could see the wariness in her expression as she slowly got out of the parked car to wrap that long, dark coat around herself before joining him on the edge of the sand. Her long red hair whipped about her face and shoulders as the two of them stood side by side, staring at the churning sea.

“Why did you agree to the two of us talking outside your uncle’s house earlier, and then minutes later suggest we leave altogether?”

” Hunter finally prompted once he was sure his dragon was under control enough that he could talk without growling like a wild beast. Although, standing next to Zoey, aware of who she was to him, was testing his control to the limit.

Zoey grimaced. “What you were saying seemed a little...incendiary, and I’ve never been sure Edgar doesn’t have some sort of audio system in or around the house, even though I’ve never found any evidence of it.”

Hunter’s brows rose. “But you believe Wallis has a way of listening in on other people’s conversations within and outside the house you grew up in?”

She cringed. “It’s just a feeling I always had as a child.

Probably because he seemed to know things I hadn't actually told him.

Oh, I know children think most parents or guardians have that ability, as well as being able to see out the back of their head," she added wryly.

"But Edgar really does seem to know things. Besides," she continued briskly, "I believe my initial caution was justified considering the moment we were outside, you proceeded to tell me you think Ben was murdered."

"Because he was."

"Will you stop saying that!" She shivered inside her coat.

"Even if it's true?"

"You can't be sure of that."

"I can."

"How?" she demanded to know.

"Because, as I said, my brother Lachlan found him before the rest of the search party," Hunter told her calmly. "He said the only way Ben could have ended up where he did, as broken as he was, was if he had dropped from above the mountain rather than fallen down it."

Zoey shuddered. "That sounds awful."

"It was," he confirmed grimly.

"It's also a little unbelievable," she added apologetically.



He snorted. "I've been told that so is the existence of dragons, but..."

She snorted. "Dragons again?"

"Yes."

"What about them?" she prompted sharply.

Hunter's jaw tightened. "Wallis's search for the evidence that dragons once existed is the reason Ben McGregor had to die."

Zoey turned to look at him, her expression incredulous. "What?"

"You said you've lived with the man since you were eight years old, so you must be aware of your uncle's...research?" Hunter reasoned.

"Of course I'm aware of it. But I've never known what that research was about."

"Dragons."

"For the love of... Will you please stop saying that?" she snapped her frustration with the subject.

Amusement gleamed in his eyes. "Not saying it doesn't make it any less true."

Zoey's nostrils flared. "So, what you're saying is that the research Edgar has done all these years has been in an attempt to find evidence that dragons once existed?"

"Yes."

She gave a scoffing snort. "I don't believe it. He's far too levelheaded to believe in

mythical creatures like dragons, let alone spend his life looking for evidence of their existence.”

“Is he?”

“Of course he is.” She gave a derisive shake of her head. “There’s also the point that they don’t, nor did they ever, exist,” she added dryly before giving him a concerned look. “You don’t believe in them too, do you? Because dragons are up there on the mythology scale with unicorns and Bigfoot.”

“Are they?”

“Yes!”

Hunter didn’t give himself time to consider whether or not what he did next was a good idea. Instead, he allowed his dragon the freedom to just be .

The result, if he said so himself, was spectacular!

### CHAPTER SIX

Zoey felt all the blood drain from her head, leaving her lightheaded as she stared up at the silver dragon that had suddenly appeared in front of her.

She continued to stare at it as she took several hurried steps backward before tripping over her own feet and falling onto the cold sand, having gone into full fight-or-flight mode and erring completely on the side of flight.

She managed to support herself by putting her hands flat on the sand behind her and pushing hard with her feet as she scrambled back until she was several feet away from the rampant thirty-foot-tall silver dragon as it dropped onto all four of its clawed feet mere feet in front of her.

It had large and majestic wings stretched out at its sides, with spikes on its head and along its spine, and a long tail flicked from side to side behind it.

Zoey knew her heart was beating too loudly and too fast.

Her breathing was merely a wheeze as her lungs seemed to have seized up.

The freezing of her body owed absolutely nothing to the coldness of the January air.

Because there's a thirty-foot-tall silver dragon now standing in front of me!

A dragon!

A dragon !

The same mythical creature Zoey had, seconds ago, scorned as not existing!

“You, of all people, have nothing to fear from me.”

Oh dear God, it wasn't just a mythical dragon. It was a talking one!

Because Zoey had no doubt that deep and reverberating voice she'd heard had come from way down within the dragon's huge chest before being growled from between those two rows of razor-sharp teeth lining its cavernous mouth.

Teeth that looked capable of ripping her apart before swallowing down those bloody pieces as if she had never existed.

Except Zoey's levelheadedness told her there couldn't be a thirty-foot-tall silver dragon standing in front of her. That they didn't exist, nor had they ever.

Did that mean she was having some sort of psychotic episode where she was imagining she was seeing a dragon?

Possibly because of what Hunter had told her? Or perhaps as a result of the strain of the last week after Ben had died so suddenly? Or, according to Hunter Drake, after Ben was murdered?

Talking of which...

Hunter was responsible for having somehow pulled her into this delusion, so where the hell was he when she obviously needed him to pull her out of it again?

Hunter realized within seconds that he had made a mistake in allowing his dragon to

just appear in front of Zoey.

Her face had instantly gone deathly white, and she'd fallen back onto the sand before using her feet and hands to scramble away from him.

Her eyes were no longer that joyful and clear green, but the color of bruised leaves in spring.

Her mouth was slightly agape. Her chest was barely moving up and down as she obviously had a problem drawing air into her lungs.

Everything about her said she was seconds away from either fainting away completely or jumping to her feet and running to her car before driving away from here, and him, as if the devil himself was snapping at her heels.

Or a dragon.

The dragon he now knew he shouldn't have so suddenly revealed to her.

"Could you stay calm and just breathe for me, Zoey?" he encouraged gruffly.

"You know my name? Of course you know my name," she answered herself with obvious disgust. "I'm in the parallel universe where a thirty-foot-tall silver dragon has suddenly appeared in front of me.

No surprise it's now talking to me and calling me by my name.

" Her voice was rising higher and higher in her distress.

"And now it's asking me to remain calm. I don't— Oh. My. God..." she gasped incredulously.

Because Hunter had decided the best way to defuse the situation was to reverse the process that had so alarmed her, and he was now shifted back to his human form.

Zoey's eyes widened even further, and her chest stopped moving as she completely stopped breathing. Her eyelids fluttered as she gave a low groan before collapsing back onto the sand in a dead faint.

At least, Hunter hoped she had only fainted.

Perhaps less melodrama next time? The voice of his brother, Ranulf, sounded clearly inside his head through their fraternal mental link.

Fuck off , Hunter mentally shot back at him, even as he hurried to kneel beside Zoey.

Her chest was moving rhythmically up and down, so she was at least breathing now. But her face was still deathly pale, even her lips no longer having that natural cherry-red color.

Wait until this happens to you , he warned Ranulf.

I can't wait , his brother assured wistfully.

Hunter instantly felt guilty. I know you can't. I apologize.

No need. I'm happy for you. I also look forward to meeting your mate very soon, brother , Ranulf approved before ending the mental link.

Hunter put one of his arms beneath Zoey's shoulders so that he could drape her across his knees and cradle the warmth of her torso against his chest.

Compared to his solid muscle, Zoey weighed virtually nothing at all, and yet Hunter

had absolutely no doubt that he was holding his whole world in his arms.

She felt so soft. So warm.

Ours , his dragon purred in satisfaction.

Yes, that was exactly who Zoey was to them.

Because of that, he could no longer resist the longing he felt to lower his head and place a gentle kiss on her brow. Her skin was smooth and soft as velvet against his lips. Her scent was so deep inside him, it pervaded and claimed every inch of him.

As she would claim every inch of him.

Mate , his dragon purred again.

Hunter's arms tightened about Zoey when she gave a low groan and began to move, indicating she was coming out of her faint.

Hunter could only hope, once she had, that she would give him enough time to explain before she followed her initial instinct to run to her car screaming and drive away from him.

He could follow her, of course. Easily. But he would rather she accepted his dragon than have her run away from him. Not just for his sake, but because of the danger Wallis represented to anyone who stood in the way of him obtaining the knowledge that dragons were real.

The next few minutes after Zoey came out of her faint were going to be vital to the future of both of them.

Zoey could feel there was something, some thought that was urgent and desperate for acknowledgment as it pressed for her attention as the layers of darkness began to part, then evaporated completely, before she came back to full consciousness.

She had never fainted in her life before.

Which meant there had to be a good reason for her having done so now?—

“Dragon!” She pulled away from the arms holding her to shoot up into a sitting position before scrabbling onto her knees so she could search frantically for the huge silver dragon she now remembered was the reason she’d fainted.

Oh God, just thinking that made her sound unhinged.

The muttering under her breath, ‘There wasn’t a dragon, there couldn’t have been, because dragons don’t exist,’ wasn’t helping?—

“They exist, Zoey.”

Her head snapped round so she could stare at Hunter Drake as he knelt on the sand a short distance away. Because he had been the one holding her? Well, of course he had. Who else could it have been when they were the only two people on this deserted beach?

She really did need to calm?—

“Dragons exist,” Hunter repeated softly. “Not in great quantities, I admit, but the dragon you saw just now?—”

“Are you saying you saw it too?” she prompted, feeling cautious but hopeful. Because, dragons .



But if Hunter said he had seen the dragon too, then that meant she wasn't having a nervous breakdown after all?—

“I am the dragon, Zoey,” Hunter stated softly.

Wrong!

She really was having some sort of psychotic breakdown.

Hunter might be bigger and more muscular than any other man she had ever met.

He might give off that intriguing aroma that was a mixture of the water, earth, a summer's breeze, despite it being winter, and the smell of burning leaves.

Zoey also found his presence strangely compelling.

The way he looked, and that sense of more , intriguing.

But, unusual as those things were, none of them made him a dragon.

Except...

Where had he been when she had thought she was looking at and hearing a thirty-foot-tall dragon speak to her?

She—

Hunter had asked her to remain calm.

Could she do that when her hold on reality was still so badly shaken?

She could try!

She drew in several long, calming breaths before she dared look at Hunter again. He appeared just as large and intimidating as before, but she accepted that was normal for him. After all, everyone's normal was different.

Yes, but they didn't all go around claiming to be dragons!

Zoey licked the dryness of her lips, instantly tasting the salt from the sea and a hint of that delicious combination of scents that was all Hunter.

She shook her head. "I've seen the superhero movies, which is why I know your clothes would be ripped if you had changed into a dragon," she blurted out and then instantly felt stupid for even giving Hunter's claim that much credence.

"I shifted, not changed."

She eyed him warily. "What's the difference?"

He smiled slightly. "My body shifts into a dragon. My clothes remaining intact when I shift back to being a man is part of the magic."

Magic.

Right.

Maybe if Zoey had consumed some magic mushrooms by mistake—which she never had—she could accept that explanation. But she hadn't eaten anything since leaving London early this morning.

She licked her lips. "What else?"

Hunter's expression appeared to be one of relief that so far she hadn't fainted again.  
"So, my two brothers and I were born in the ninth century from the same clutch?—"

"You're going to have to do better than that if you want me to take you seriously,"  
she interrupted scornfully.

He frowned. "Better than the truth?"

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*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

“Being born in the ninth century would make you twelve hundred years old.” Anyone looking at this man would see that he was only aged in his early to midthirties and was physically in his prime.

“We’re all twelve hundred and ten,” he corrected.

And Zoey had thought he was probably too old for her to be attracted to when she had thought he was only thirty-two or -three!

“But we ceased visibly aging in our early thirties,” Hunter added.

“You said you and your brothers came from ‘the same clutch’?” Zoey said slowly. “Does that mean the three of you were hatched out of an egg?”

He nodded. “Separate dragon eggs that hatched at the same time, yes.”

“Okay.” Zoey nodded woodenly, already totally overwhelmed by the improbability of what he was telling her. “Rather than me picking up on every comment you make, when I don’t understand or don’t believe you, maybe you should just say what you want to say and we can discuss it afterward.”

She regretted that suggestion almost as soon as she’d made it when Hunter instantly launched into telling her how he and his brothers were all snow dragon shifters, dragons that could shift into men rather than men that shifted into dragons.

That the three of them had lived in the place of their birth, in a house at the bottom of a mountain in the Scottish Highlands, for all the centuries they had been alive.

He explained that their parents, also dragon shifters, were now dead, sadly, but the three brothers remained living together.

He explained they would continue to do so, for protection as well as companionship, even after they had met their one true mate.

He also, for some reason, hastened to assure her that a dragon shifter and his true mate would have plenty of time for being alone together too.

“We had almost given up on any of us ever meeting our one true mate, but Lachlan recently met his and now I’ve met mine too,” Hunter concluded with satisfaction.

“Your one true mate?” Zoey repeated skeptically.

“The one woman destined to be ours and for us to be completely hers.”

“Studies have shown that there isn’t only one woman or man for each of us, that there are always several who?”

“We aren’t human, Zoey, and for us, there is only one true mate,” Hunter insisted.

“And Lachlan recently met his?”

“Yes.”

She eyed him warily. “Can you possibly be talking about Belle Brown?”

“I am.”

“Does she know she’s Lachlan’s true mate?”

“Oh yes,” he assured with a smile.

“And...is she okay with that?”

“Very much so.”

Zoey frowned at him. “Belle has no living family and grew up in an orphanage. It isn’t kind of the three of you to have drawn her into your delusion.”

“It isn’t a delusion?—”

“Of course it is,” Zoey snapped as she rose abruptly to her feet.

“I’ve heard what you have to say, Hunter, and I think it’s bloody cruel of all of you if Lachlan has somehow convinced Belle the three of you are men who can shift into dragons and she’s the mate he’s been waiting twelve hundred years to meet.

” She glared at him, although even on his knees, he was still the same height as her.

Still compelling.

Still utterly gorgeous.

Still making her knees feel weak and her body tingle and ache with a longing she wanted to succumb to.

But it was an attraction Zoey had to fight, to get away from, if she was going to escape from this situation unscathed. She began to walk away, her gaze fixed on her car.

“To be strictly accurate, we’re dragons that can shift into men,” Hunter spoke softly

behind her. “And Edgar Wallis’s research into dragons isn’t just to prove they exist.”

Keep walking , Zoey told herself. Just put one foot in front of the other and walk away .

“What is it dragons are reputed to have in all the legends and books of fairy tales, Zoey?” Hunter continued to reason, his voice slightly raised as she continued toward where her car was parked. “What are they supposed to covet and guard with their lives?”

Zoey gave a derisive huff as she glanced over her shoulder at him. “According to you, their one true mate.”

“Yes, and once we meet her, she becomes our everything and we protect her absolutely,” he agreed, back on his feet. “But what else is a dragon reputed to have in all the myths and legends you’ve read or heard about them?”

Zoey wanted to keep walking. Wanted nothing more than to keep to her decision to get in her car and drive away. Probably back to London, because the thought of returning to Tregarthen House and the company of her Uncle Edgar no longer held any appeal, the temptation of eating cottage pie be damned.

But she couldn’t ignore what Hunter was saying, so instead, she turned to face him. “I have no idea. What is it that dragons covet and guard so intensely?”

“Their treasure.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You mean like emeralds and diamonds and pearls? That sort of treasure?”

He nodded. “Every kind of jewel you can think of, yes. And gold. Lots and lots of

gold,” he added with relish.

Zoey blinked as she saw the sudden blaze of what looked like the appearance of golden flames in the depths of Hunter’s dark brown eyes.

She gave a firm shake of her head, sure she must have imagined it. “It sounds very much to me as if you’re saying the reason my uncle is searching for the existence of dragons is so that he can steal their hoard of gems and gold.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Hunter’s jaw tightened merely thinking of the lengths Wallis was willing to go to in order to achieve that objective. Murder amongst them.

The thought of the other man ever harming Zoey caused a low growl to reverberate around his chest.

“Do you and your brothers have a hoard?” Zoey’s eyes were wide, the green iris completely surrounded by white as she stared at him unblinkingly.

“Both collectively and individually,” Hunter confirmed.

“Where— Sorry.” She winced. “I shouldn’t ask you that.”

Once they were mates, Hunter’s hoard would also be Zoey’s. For now, for her own safety, it was better if she didn’t know where Hunter and his brothers stored their treasure.

“Edgar Wallis has already become a thief and a murderer,” Hunter rasped. “So I’m sure he will feel no qualms about stealing a dragon’s hoard.”

Zoey’s throat moved as she swallowed before speaking. “What did he steal?”



Hunter grimaced. “A journal Belle discovered at the bottom of a box, along with several others, she bought at an auction of a deceased person’s house contents shortly before Christmas.”

Zoey smiled. “I know she likes to go to those. I went with her a couple of times last summer,” she reminisced fondly. “It wasn’t really my thing, but I think she appreciated the company.”

He nodded. “One of the journals Belle accidentally bought at this particular sale had been written by a nun from the twelfth century who claimed to have met three warriors in the Scottish Highlands who could shift into dragons.”

Zoey winced. “Don’t tell me, she was writing about you and your brothers?”

“She was,” he confirmed. “We had rescued her from being a human sacrifice left out by the people of her village as tribute so the dragons would protect their crops and bring good luck to their hunting. We don’t eat, nor have we ever eaten, humans.”

Zoey gave a choked laugh. “That’s good to know.”

Hunter sobered. “Ben stole the nun’s journal from Belle at Wallis’s behest, in exchange for the promise of a hefty monetary payment. We think he was able to discover that she had the journal because she had carried out most of her research on the free Wi-Fi of a local library.”

Zoey frowned. “I didn’t know my Uncle Edgar had those sorts of hacking skills.”

“I think there’s a lot you don’t know about Edgar Wallis.

One of those things being that after Ben had handed the journal over to him, and rather than paying the younger man, Ben was then thrown to his death.

Murdered. Probably not just because Wallis didn't want to pay Ben, but also because he didn't want anyone else knowing about the existence of dragons. ”

“That would have required Edgar being in the Highlands just after New Year,” Zoey reasoned.

A nerve pulsed in Hunter's tightly clenched jaw. “If you question the household staff at Tregarthen House, I'm sure they will confirm that he wasn't at home during that time.”

Her brow creased in thought. “My uncle was studying a small brown leather-bound notebook when I arrived at the house earlier today and went to his study to say hello,” she recalled tensely.

“He closed it and put it away in his jacket pocket the moment I entered his study. Could that be the journal you're referring to? ”

“From Belle's description of it, it sounds like it, yes.

From my observations of him and the house the past two days, he keeps a notebook of some kind on him at all times,” Hunter bit out.

“He even takes it up to his bedroom at night and puts it under his pillow before he goes to sleep. Which is the reason I haven't been able to get a good look at it yet. ”

Zoey shook her head. “If you are what and who you say you are and already know all this, I don't understand why you haven't just confronted Edgar, taken the journal from him, and returned with it to the Highlands.”

“I need to be absolutely certain I've tracked down the right person. Until I can actually have a physical look at the journal, I can't be one hundred percent certain

I've done that."

Zoey nodded. "I've now confirmed to you that the journal you've described is exactly the one I saw my uncle studying when I arrived earlier."

"And I believe you," Hunter assured smoothly. "But now I can't leave, with or without the journal, until I can persuade my own one true mate to leave with me."

### CHAPTER SEVEN

Zoey eyed the man—dragon?—warily as he stood a short distance away from her. Unfortunately, not far enough away for her to be able to outdistance those much longer legs, get in her car, and lock all the doors before putting the key in the ignition and driving back to London.

Hell, he looked strong enough to rip the door off the Mini even if she managed to do the first three of those things. To rip the roof off too, if it became necessary!

She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. “You mentioned your one true mate?”

“You,” he confirmed with satisfaction.

Zoey gave a scornful laugh. “You met me two hours ago at the most?—”

“And I knew the moment I saw you and breathed in your unique perfume that you are my one true mate. My dragon knows it too,” he added happily.

Zoey opened her mouth to dismiss his ridiculous claim.

But then she remembered that the dragon in her delusion had said she was the last person it would ever hurt.

Was that for the same reason that Hunter, the man, had just told her he couldn’t leave Cornwall without his mate?

Because she was the true mate of both Hunter and his dragon.

Was she really starting to buy into this fantasy?

Hard to continue dismissing it when she had definitely seen a thirty-foot-tall dragon, and Hunter had now insisted that dragon was him. There was also no disputing that he hadn't been around when the dragon was, and vice versa .

She swallowed. "Are you able to...I don't know, maybe partially shift?

Not to your full dragon," she hastened to qualify her request, not sure she was up to being confronted by a thirty-foot-tall silver dragon for a second time in a matter of minutes.

"But maybe just your mouth or—or hands? Claws? Is that possible?"

She had barely finished speaking before Hunter lifted what had been his hand but was now a huge dragon claw, with long curved talons extending from what had been his fingers.

Scary, yes, but also incredible. Miraculous, in fact.

Zoey kept her fascinated gaze on Hunter's clawed hand as she took a step forward, followed by another, then another, until she was standing directly in front of him.

She half lifted her own hand as if about to touch one of those talons, but stopped several inches away. "Does it hurt when you do that?"

He shook his head. "It's as natural to me as growing fingernails is to you."

"Amazing," she admired. "Can I—" She glanced up at him. "Can I touch?"

Hunter smiled. “My darling Zoey, you’re my one true mate. You can touch me anywhere and at any time you wish.”

She gave him another lingering glance. “You like saying that, don’t you?”

He bared his straight white teeth—the same ones that could shift into a mouthful of large, pointed ones—in a grin. “That you’re my one true mate?”

“Yes.”

“I love saying that, almost as much as I love?—”

“Please don’t say me,” Zoey cautioned. “You don’t even know me, and the last thing I want is to be loved because of what I am to you, not who I am. No one has loved me since my parents died twelve years ago,” she added huskily.

Hunter respected the hell out of Zoey for telling him that. He also, much as she might not believe him yet, knew he already loved her for who and not what she was.

He knew that Zoey was a young woman who had grown up strong and true to herself despite having lived with a fucking monster since she was eight years old.

Hunter no longer had any doubt that was exactly what Edgar Wallis was.

Behind Zoey’s outer strength was kindness and caring, and a desire to help people while continuing to follow her dream of becoming an artist.

Hunter could only imagine how disapproving a man like Edgar Wallis would have been when, after Zoey left her boarding school, she had told him she wanted to go to university to take a course in the art she obviously loved.

Or perhaps the other man had just been glad to be rid of her for another three years?

That sounded much more like the cold and selfish man Hunter had been observing for the past two days.

“My Zoey.” Hunter lifted his other hand, the one that wasn’t a dragon’s claw, to gently touch the side of her face.

“How could I not fall instantly in love with such a strong and beautiful woman? How can I not wish to gather you up in my arms and fly us both back to Scotland? To offer myself to you as your mate and?—”

“Husband?” Zoey broke off abruptly, color blooming in her cheeks. “Sorry. I just... If we ever do become...mates, then you need to know that I would want to be married in the human world too.”

“I would be truly honored to be your chosen husband.”

She frowned. “Did I use the correct phrasing when I said human world? I don’t want to insult you.”

Hunter chuffed out a laugh. “I am not insulted, and yes, that is the correct term. You should know,” he said, sobering, “that once we are mates, you will no longer be completely human either.”

She blinked. “I won’t?”

“A snow dragon’s mate also has the ability to shift and fly beside him,” he announced with pride.

Her eyes widened. “Once we’re— I would be able to shift into a dragon and fly?”

“Yes.”

It all still sounded incredulous to Zoey. Especially the part where Hunter had just confirmed she would be able to shift into a dragon if she became his mate. Just thinking of the changes necessary in her human body to achieve such a thing was mind-boggling.

At the same time as it all sounded utterly amazing!

Hunter glanced at her hair. “My instincts tell me you will shift into a magnificent red dragon,” he admired.

“Can Belle— Are she and Lachlan already mated?”

“They are, yes. Lachlan told me her dragon is black, the same color as her hair.”

The things Hunter was now sharing with Zoey were unbelievable. And yet...not as much as they had been when he had first shifted so suddenly.

She glanced down at his clawed hand before moving her hand the rest of the way necessary to be able to touch him. The moment her fingers came into contact with one of Hunter’s talons, he pulled back with a hiss.

Zoey frowned when she saw how pained his expression now was. “Did I hurt you? I didn’t mean to. You did say I could touch you,” she reminded wistfully, sad that she could no longer feel even that brief physical closeness. For a second or two, it had felt incredible.

“You can,” he assured gruffly. “It was just— The emotional link I felt between us was so intense that it resulted in me seeing such a kaleidoscope of colors that for a moment, it blinded me.” He gazed at her with open adoration.



“Over time, the vividness of colors has faded for me. Meeting you, my mate, has brought the world back to a maelstrom of bright and beautiful colors. As bright and beautiful as you are. My senses are so sensitive, and I am so physically aware of you, that a single touch from you almost caused me to climax.”

Zoey blushed at this revelation. Possibly because one touch of that single claw had felt wonderful to her too.

Her nipples were so swollen and sensitive, she could barely stand having them brushing against the inside of her bra, and between her thighs was so wet, she was sure her panties would be damp.

It had also opened up an emotional and physical connection Zoey hadn't even realized was missing from her life until that moment.

As if, for those same brief seconds, she had become completely whole for the first time in her life.

As if all the painful black holes inside her, the ones that, when she was a child, had longed to be loved, had suddenly been filled.

Because she and Hunter were mates?

Zoey was slowly starting to believe, to accept, from the power of her reaction to that single touch, that was exactly what they were.

Quite what that meant for them, for her future, she had no idea.

But the one thing she felt absolutely certain of was that Hunter would never, could never, hurt her.

She moistened her lips a second time. "I... Would you kiss me?"

Fire instantly flared in the depths of those dark eyes, telling Zoey that she hadn't imagined seeing that blaze of gold in his eyes earlier when he spoke of the gems and gold in a dragon treasure.

"What is that?" she whispered as she continued to watch his eyes in total fascination.

"I saw red flames flare briefly in your eyes just now. Earlier today, they were silver," she explained at his questioning look.

"Ah." He nodded. "My brothers and I have the ability to control the elements of fire, earth, water, and air. I am also a snow dragon, which would explain the silver flames you saw earlier. The red flames of just now are because we can all, if necessary, breathe actual fire."

"Like the dragons depicted in myths and legends?"

"Yes."

That ability probably also explained why, to Zoey, Hunter's scent was of pine needles on a forest floor, burning leaves on an autumn day, and a brisk salty sea breeze.

Well, at least she hadn't been imagining that!

Even if she still wasn't one hundred percent convinced about the existence of dragons.

"May I kiss you now?" Hunter requested in a deeply husky voice. Both his hands had returned to normal now, with fingers rather than talons.

“How do we... I know I was the one to ask for this, but...do we just kiss? Or is there something I should do or that I need to know before we—” Her words were cut off the moment Hunter swept her up into his arms and his mouth claimed hers.

Earth-shattering.

Zoey could think of no other word to more accurately describe how it felt to have Hunter’s mouth on hers as he kissed, ravished, and thoroughly explored every inch of her mouth with his relentlessly hungry lips and probing tongue.

She wasn’t sure if it was her imagination, but Hunter’s tongue seemed longer and rougher than a normal one as it licked and claimed her mouth.

As he tasted.

Possessed.

But it also felt as if she were claiming, tasting, and possessing Hunter.

As if, in that moment, he became just as much hers as she became his.

Mate.

Zoey jolted back as that word, spoken in that rough and yet purring voice, sounded inside her head. “What the hell was that?” she gasped as she pulled out of Hunter’s arms.

Hunter gave an apologetic grimace. “My dragon has no doubts as to exactly what we are to each other.”

“But I heard him speak inside my head!”

“And I apologize. That was unforgivable.” He released a long sigh. “My dragon is impatient for his mate. But that is not an acceptable excuse for an intrusion of such intimacy.”

Zoey’s gaze moved searchingly over Hunter’s face, once again overwhelmed by how strikingly handsome he was: his face was all sharp angles, and his eyes were that intense brown bordering on black. “Will we—will there be that mental link between us if we become mates?”

“Yes.”

That sort of connection, intimacy, sounded incredible to someone who had felt so emotionally alone and isolated since her parents died.

Edgar was a cold man, and although the household staff had tried to be kind—such as making her favorite meals when she was home—they couldn’t replace her parents or fill that gaping hole in her chest that wanted someone to love her.

“What else?” she prompted, eager now to know exactly what mating a dragon amounted to. She very much liked what she’d heard and felt so far.

Hunter smiled. “Once we are mated, we will be able to sense each other’s emotions through that same link. To know whether either of us is in pain. Whether we are feeling pleasure.” His voice had become gruff.

Zoey felt the heat bloom in her cheeks. “But we aren’t mated yet, and perhaps we never will be, so how was it possible for me to have heard your dragon— Hunter?

” she questioned warily when she heard the unmistakable thunder of a growl vibrating in his chest. “What did I say?” she prompted as Hunter once again began to shift into a fierce dragon in front of her eyes.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

Hunter was unable to prevent the pained roar from leaving the huge barrel chest of his dragon. Or keep from throwing back his dragon head as he continued to roar.

His fury caused the sky to darken before streaks of lightning reverberated across that wide expanse to fork down into the now roughly churning sea. A fierce wind howled around the two of them.

What had Zoey said ?

She had suggested— Put forward the idea— No, she had said outright that “perhaps they never would be” mates.

Hunter’s dragon couldn’t accept that.

Hunter didn’t like it either.

Zoey was his one true mate. His only one. Without her, he would?—

“Hunter, what did I say?” Zoey shouted to be heard above the howling of the wind as she stepped forward to wrap her arms about one of his dragon’s front legs. “Speak to me, dammit,” she demanded. “Tell me what I did wrong?”

The way she had stepped forward to grasp hold of his dragon said she was completely fearless, even when confronted once again with his towering, and this time furious, dragon.

It was because of this evidence of Zoey's courage that Hunter knew he could never tell her what would happen to him if she refused their mating. He would not, could not, use any coercion to force her to become his mate. Even if her not doing so would be the end of him.

Because once a dragon shifter met his one true mate, fell in love with her, if she then refused to mate with him, his life, as both dragon and human, would slowly drain of all color, until one day it was completely black and white.

Without the grounding of their mate and their mental and physical connection, Hunter would eventually go completely insane and have to be put down by his brothers.

Zoey had already spent the last twelve years of her life, since her parents died, not having the freedom to make any choices of her own. Perhaps when it came to her university course, because Hunter couldn't see a man like Edgar Wallis approving of an art course.

But even then, Wallis had probably only allowed it because it had suited him for his ward to live in London rather than having the inconvenience of her presence in Cornwall when she left her boarding school when she was eighteen.

Hunter had no doubt that, where possible, Wallis had engineered Zoey's life so that it was always of the least inconvenience to himself.

In those circumstances, it would be unfair of Hunter to ask Zoey to sacrifice the rest of her life, to mate with him, because of the repercussions to him if she didn't.

And because he had already fallen in love with her courage and beauty, although he doubted she would believe that when they had only met a matter of hours ago. Hunter and his dragon knew she was his mate, and they had both fallen in love with her.

As a human, Zoey, if she ever did fall in love with him, was going to need more time.

Do not do this to yourself, brother, Ranulf warned through their mental link.

I have to , Hunter answered him, knowing his brother would have picked up on his mental and emotional anguish. Otherwise, I will be no better than Wallis.

The mental link the two of you have says the mating has already begun , Ranulf protested.

If that truly is the case, then I have to stop it from going any further until, or if, Zoey feels the same way, he said grimly.

You—

No! Hunter ended the mental link with his brother.

Hunter? Zoey's voice sounded uncertain through their own newly formed mental link. Who were you talking to?

MINE! his dragon roared.

Is that— Is that your dragon again? Zoey sounded wondrous.

YOU ARE MINE, MATE , Hunter's dragon roared furiously. MINE!

Well, using your manners might go a long way to achieving that goal , Zoey chided before adding, and in my world, it's usually polite to ask, not tell.

Hunter could not only feel the rage rising inside his dragon, but he could see and hear it in the increased fierceness of the forks of lightning hitting the surface of the

churning sea and the howling of the strong wind that was whipping up the sand in swirls and almost knocking Zoey off her feet.

Hunter could not allow any harm to come to Zoey.

Stop this , he instructed his dragon. Immediately.

The wind and lightning instantly stopped. The sea no longer churned. The sand no longer whipped painfully about their faces. The sky cleared, leaving only wispy clouds. Now there was only a gentle crash of the waves against the shore to be heard.

Hunter shifted back to his human form before taking Zoey into his arms. "I'm sorry," he groaned. "So sorry. That should not have happened."

Zoey put her arms about his waist, her head resting against his chest. "Why did it?"

He drew in a ragged breath. "My dragon is impatient and did not like the uncertainty you voiced about our mating." Which was true, even if it wasn't the entire reason for the shift into dragon and the raging outburst of emotion. "As you say, he needs to learn some manners," he teased.

Zoey lifted her head to look at Hunter, not reassured by his words in the slightest. She sensed there was more he wasn't telling her, and that whatever that something was, it was important. To both of them.

The rigid set of Hunter's jaw told her he wasn't going to share that with her. Not yet, at least. If they became mates, she was going to have to insist there were no secrets between them.

Was she seriously thinking of accepting Hunter as a dragon-shifter mate?



The fact that it was even a possibility was still incredulous to her.

And yet...

There was no denying that, despite everything Hunter had told her, all he had done to prove what he said, she still felt safe with him.

Protected in a way she could never remember feeling in the years since her parents died.

She knew instinctively that Hunter would guard her with his life.

That he and his dragon would protect her with their life.

She also couldn't deny her physical response to Hunter.

A reaction that was more heated, more urgent, and seemed to increase every minute she was with him, than she had ever experienced before.

Nor did she believe she would ever feel that urgency again except in Hunter's arms. The depth of their connection felt unique to them.

Despite all that, Zoey hadn't forgotten Hunter's reason for coming to Cornwall in the first place. If he was correct about Edgar's intentions, then they needed to stop him from harming anyone else.

She pulled back slightly. "We need to go back to Tregarthen House."

Hunter looked taken aback. "Why?"

"So that we can get a proper look at the notebook Edgar is coveting. To see if it really

is Sister Agnes's journal." The thought that Edgar might somehow be involved in Ben's death caused an aversion inside Zoey to ever again call him by the familiar title of uncle.

Hunter's eyes narrowed. "When did this mission become a 'we' situation rather than an 'I' one?"

Zoey grinned at him. "The moment you told me I'm your mate and showed me your dragon to prove who and what you are."

Hunter's nostrils flared, and for a moment, Zoey thought he might even breathe smoke through them.

Her thoughts immediately turned to wondering if he could do that. How cool would that?—

Concentrate on the situation at hand , her conscience rebuked.

After all, there would be plenty of time when this was all over for her to learn exactly what her warrior dragon mate was capable of.

Even thinking of Hunter that way caused a quiver of anticipation to thrill down Zoey's spine.

"Do not fear, Zoey, we will protect you with our lives in both our forms," Hunter reassured, obviously having misunderstood the reason for that trembling.

A blush warmed Zoey's cheeks. Not because she wanted anything to happen to Hunter or his dragon, ever, but because the thought of being so wanted and protected filled her with joy and happiness.

“Then, for now, I think you should protect me by coming back to Tregarthen House with me,” she encouraged huskily.

Hunter tilted his head in a questioning gesture very reminiscent of his dragon. “What reason will we give for me having accompanied you back to Wallis’s house after you supposedly drove me to the nearest garage earlier?”

She thought for a moment before answering. “I’ll say that it’s going to take the garage until the end of the day to fix your nonexistent car and that I invited you back to lunch and to spend the rest of the day with me at Tregarthen House before I drive you back to the garage this evening.”

A frown creased Hunter’s brow. “Wallis will believe that?”

“If he is who you say he is and he’s done what you said he did, does it matter what he believes?” she dismissed in a hard voice. “The important thing is for you to have access to the notebook Edgar has been studying so intently. What?” Zoey prompted when she saw Hunter’s doubtful expression.

Hunter knew that merely taking back Sister Agnes’s journal wouldn’t, and shouldn’t, be an end to this situation.

In the more recent past, he or one of his brothers had always wiped the memory of or eliminated anyone who knew of the existence of the dragon shifters and intended to use that information for their own gain.

Until a few centuries ago, it had not been necessary, because anyone claiming to have seen a dragon would have been branded a witch and treated as such.

If he and Zoey didn’t mate, then much as it would pain Hunter to do so, he would have to wipe away any memories Zoey had of ever having met him. He would never

forget her, but he could save her the heartache of remembering him and the abyss his absence had left in her life.

But if what he believed about Wallis proved to be true and the other man had murdered Ben McGregor in cold blood, then Wallis couldn't simply have his memories of dragons removed. He would need to be eliminated.

"What do you think happens once I have the journal in my possession and prove that Wallis is responsible for Ben McGregor being murdered?" Hunter hedged.

She shrugged. "You kill him, of course. What?" she prompted again as Hunter staggered back a couple of steps.

"I had not expected my mate to be quite so bloodthirsty," he mused.

"I'm certainly not naive enough to think you intend to have Edgar arrested and charged with murdering Ben," she scorned.

"Especially when the reason for that death includes Edgar's search for proof of the existence of dragons.

"She shook her head. "The police would never believe such an accusation, and there is no proof that the two of them ever met, let alone that Edgar is responsible for what your brother ensured would appear to be Ben's accidental death. "

"None," Hunter confirmed.

She nodded. "You also said you're over twelve hundred years old, and as far as I'm aware, no one in all that time has ever conclusively proven that dragons exist. Ergo, you must have removed the people who did know before they could proclaim it to the rest of the world."

“Or they had their memories of seeing them wiped.”

Zoey eyed him curiously. “Is that something else you and your brothers can do?”

“Yes.”

“Will you do that to Edgar?”

His jaw tightened. “Not if he really is guilty of murdering Ben McGregor. The police might not be able to arrest and charge him, but we can’t allow him to get away with killing someone in such a cold and cruel way.”

Zoey nodded. “So, he’ll be one of the ones to be eliminated, then?”

Hunter chuckled softly. “You don’t seem concerned by that possibility?”

She moved her shoulders in a shrug. “Murder is murder, and the penalty for that, in any culture, should be death.”

“O-kay,” Hunter murmured slowly at the cool certainty in her tone.

Her expression darkened. “Ben was only twenty years old, and even if he did steal that journal from Belle, he didn’t deserve to die in that horrible way.” She gave a shudder. “I don’t even want to imagine how terrified he must have felt as he hurtled through the air toward that mountain.”

Hunter stepped forward to once again take Zoey into his arms. Primarily to offer her comfort, but also because he couldn’t seem to stop himself from wanting to touch her. The purr of his dragon told Hunter it felt exactly the same desire to hold and touch her.

Hunter's chest ached at the thought of her refusing their mating.

She pulled back slightly. "This memory-wiping thing..."

"Yes?"

"Don't even think about using it on me. For any reason. Ever," she warned fiercely.

"Do you understand?" she demanded, her eyes glittering like twin emeralds.

Hunter understood. He just wasn't sure he could keep such a promise if he made it. What he'd really hoped was that Zoey would never ask him this question. He should have known she was far too intelligent and forthright not to.

"Hunter?"

He drew in a ragged breath before answering. "I...will discuss it with you first if it ever becomes necessary."

Her eyes narrowed. "In what circumstances would it ever become necessary?"

"We will only know that when those circumstances arise," he avoided.

"Hunter—"

"Zoey," he bit her name out between a jaw and teeth that had started to shift into those of his dragon.

"We'll discuss it first, yes?" she pressed urgently.

"Yes." Much as it might cause him pain, Hunter knew that he would keep his promise.

### CHAPTER NINE

“You’ve arrived back just in time for lunch, Miss Zoey,” Penrose greeted warmly when Zoey walked in after driving herself and Hunter back to Tregarthen House.

“And I see you have brought our earlier visitor back with you.” The butler beamed with approval.

“Will you be joining Miss Zoey for luncheon?” He directed the question at Hunter.

“I—”

“Is my uncle still in his study?” Zoey interrupted. Much as she liked Penrose, her priority right now was to talk to Edgar as soon as possible.

“Mr. Wallis?” The butler’s eyebrows rose. “I’m afraid he left shortly after you did.”

“Left to go where?” she demanded.

Penrose’s brows rose even higher at the aggression in her tone. “He didn’t say.”

“Any idea when he will be back?”

“He didn’t say that either.” The butler winced at his lack of knowledge of his employer’s movements. “He did take an overnight bag, his briefcase, and the helicopter, though, so presumably, it’s not somewhere close enough for him to return tonight.”

Zoey was stunned to learn Edgar was no longer here. That he had left shortly after she and Hunter had.

Dear God, was it possible Edgar had gone back to Scotland, taking the journal with him, meaning he was armed with the evidence of the existence of dragons? If so, then she and Hunter needed to get back there as quickly as possible too?—

“Thank you.”

Zoey looked up to see Hunter giving the butler a charming smile to accompany those obviously dismissive words.

“And I am very much looking forward to joining Zoey for lunch,” Hunter added smoothly. “Cottage pie is on the menu, I believe?”

“It is indeed, sir.” Penrose returned the warmth of that smile. “Can I instruct Cook that you will be ready to dine in ten minutes?”

“I—”

“That sounds wonderful, thank you.” Once again, it was Hunter who answered the older man.

“What are you doing ?” Zoey hissed the moment the butler had disappeared down the hallway leading to the kitchen. “We don’t have time to sit and eat lunch if we’re going to be in time to stop Edgar from hurting anyone else.”

“As soon as Penrose told us Wallis was no longer here, I warned my brothers through our telepathic link of the possibility of Wallis arriving in the Highlands, specifically at our location, in the next few hours,” Hunter told her grimly.



“In the meantime, you are human, and as such need to be fed every four hours or so to maintain function and strength.”

“And you don’t?” she accused.

His wide shoulders moved in a shrug. “Dragon shifters can sometimes go days without food if we have to. But today we don’t need to, because your cook has made you a cottage pie.”

Her brow lowered in a frown. “How did you know that?”

“Because I was outside listening earlier when you arrived and spoke to both the butler and Edgar Wallis.”

“Because a dragon shifter’s hearing is enhanced too,” Zoey acknowledged.

“Exactly.” He smiled before sobering. “In the meantime, we have a little under ten minutes before luncheon is due to be served. I suggest we use that time to search Wallis’s study for any clues as to whether or not he really is off chasing dragons and, more accurately, their treasure.”

Zoey inwardly admitted this plan sounded far less chaotic than her own proposal as to what they should do next. Besides, Mrs. Chenoweth’s cottage pie really was delicious.

She chewed briefly on her bottom lip. “How are we going to get to Scotland?” Hunter had a severe problem fitting into her car, so she couldn’t see them driving all that way. She also couldn’t imagine those wide shoulders fitting into the seat on any of the trains or planes used for domestic travel.

“Guess.” Hunter’s answer was voiced as a challenge.

The longer Zoey stared at him, the more convinced she became that she could once again see those flames flaring and dipping in the dark depths of his eyes.

She swallowed. “We never did finish that conversation... When you said earlier that you flew here, did you mean as a dragon?”

Hunter grinned. “I did.”

“And are you expecting the two of us to fly back there the same way?”

“I am.”

“Will we get there before Edgar?”

His jaw tightened. “Well before.”

“How would that even work?” It boggled her mind even trying to envisage herself perched precariously on the back of a dragon as it flew them both to Scotland. “And don’t laugh at me,” she warned when she saw the humor in his eyes.

Hunter dampened that amusement when Zoey continued to glare at him. “Your car will be safe if left here?”

“Yes.” Her glare didn’t lessen in the slightest.

He nodded. “Then we ensure you are warmly dressed, I pick you up in my arms and cradle you against the warmth of my dragon chest, and then I fly us both to my home.”

Zoey liked the idea of being snuggled against his dragon chest. “Won’t someone see us... You have the ability to shield our presence from the people below or in planes

flying nearby,” she guessed when she saw his raised eyebrows.

“I do,” he confirmed mildly.

It was impossible. Insane. And yet...

A yearning had begun to grow inside Zoey. It increased and grew at the idea of Hunter flying both of them, as his dragon, up to the Highlands of Scotland.

How amazing would that be!

Scary too, but amazement easily won out over any negative emotion.

Instead of looking overwhelmed, as Hunter had expected Zoey to be, her eyes had begun to glow and there was an excited flush to her cheeks. Because she was excited to fly back to Scotland with him in his dragon form?

Hunter really hoped that was the case!

“We have limited time,” he reminded briskly. “We should search Wallis’s study now that he is no longer here to stop us.”

“Of course.” Zoey shook her head as she broke eye contact with him. As if, for several moments, she had become lost in the flames Hunter knew were dancing in the darkness of his eyes. “It’s this way.”

Hunter allowed Zoey to lead the way down a hallway to Wallis’s study. Although, after watching the house for two days and nights, Hunter already knew exactly where that room was.

The book-lined study held the aroma of pipe tobacco and the musty smell of old

books. The desktop was completely bare, and when they tried to open the drawers beneath it, they found they were all locked.

It took Hunter a matter of seconds to establish that the top two drawers were for ornamental purposes only. He easily opened the remaining six.

“I’m not even going to ask how you did that,” Zoey dismissed wryly.

Hunter grinned at her before they did a thorough search of all six of the available drawers. There was no laptop in any of them, which meant it had probably been in the briefcase Penrose mentioned Wallis taking with him.

Nor was there any sign of the brown notebook Zoey told him she had seen Wallis looking through when she arrived earlier, which Hunter had also seen in the man’s possession. Hunter believed the notebook must also have been in Wallis’s briefcase.

“Does this seem odd to you?” Zoey’s query broke into his thoughts.

Hunter turned to find her standing behind the desk looking at the drawers either side of the foot well.

He moved to stand beside her, assessing the two sides of the desk before speaking.

“It does seem a little odd that the top two drawers were only for ornamentation—What are you doing?” he prompted when Zoey began to feel under and along the ledge at the back of the desk.

“Ah-ha.” Her cry of success was accompanied by a click, and then the whole top of the desk silently lifted on hinges at the front of the desk.

Zoey pushed it open the rest of the way, the ease with which it did so telling them

that the desktop was lifted often.

“I knew it! I damn well knew it!” she accused when the completely open desktop revealed a laptop, three surveillance screens, and listening equipment in the compartment beneath.

“That sneaky bastard has been watching us all for years .” She looked at Hunter with pained eyes.

“Why would he want to spy on everyone in this way?”

Hunter would take a guess that Wallis’s years of hunting for evidence of dragons had resulted in him becoming completely paranoid, even within the confines of his own home.

But those cameras also posed the question whether the reason for Wallis having departed so hastily earlier was as a direct result of his having listened to Zoey and Hunter’s conversation.

As the tech expert in the Drake family, Hunter was quickly able to turn on the laptop and gain access to all three recordings on the surveillance screens.

The first one allowed the viewer to move between cameras placed in all the bedrooms.

The second one covered the rooms downstairs.

The third one had screens that surveilled the outside of the house.

“There is nothing else on the laptop other than the recordings for twenty-four hours before those memories are wiped and then started again,” he told Zoey as he pressed

the necessary keys to bring up the recordings from earlier today.

The pictures were in black-and-white, but there was no doubt they were looking at and listening to Hunter and Zoey talking in the sitting room before Zoey had suggested they move outside.

The voice recording of outside was a little more patchy, but even so, Hunter was able to hear them discussing the way in which Ben McGregor had died.

Showing Edgar Wallis that Hunter's arrival at Tregarthen House wasn't accidental but deliberate.

As a direct response to that, Wallis had boarded his helicopter and left this house and Cornwall almost immediately afterward.

### CHAPTER TEN

I'm sure this was only a large manor house when I saw it last . Zoey spoke to Hunter through their mental link as the huge silver dragon circled and then began to descend toward where a castle backed directly on a huge mountain.

The same mountain Belle had become lost on at New Year's? Zoey wasn't sure, but she believed so.

Don't tell me , she huffed. You and your brothers have the ability to put up a shield to stop the local humans from seeing you actually live in a gigantic castle!

Zoey was wrapped up warm in her thick coat, a beanie, and gloves, but Hunter's dragon gave off such a tremendous amount of heat that she hadn't felt the cold at all, despite being thousands of feet up in the air.

Okay, I won't tell you that. The sound of Hunter's laughter echoed through their link. Even if it's true.

Zoey knew it was almost nine hundred miles from Cornwall to the top of Scotland, and yet they had arrived here within an hour of leaving Tregarthen House.

At first, she had been afraid to lift her head from the safety of nestling against the heat of Hunter's chest, but eventually, curiosity had won out over caution, and she had looked over one of Hunter's huge dragon front legs.

Instead of seeing the ground beneath them, there was a blanket of fluffy white clouds.

They appeared so thick and substantial, it looked as if they could be walked on. Except Zoey knew that if she attempted to do that, she would plummet to her death.

A graphic reminder of what had happened to Ben.

That realization made Zoey feel so sick that she couldn't help but think that anyone who did that to another human being deserved to meet the same fate. That Edgar deserved to meet the same fate.

He might have been her guardian for twelve years, but he hadn't been a loving or kind one.

Consequentially, it was hard for Zoey to feel affection for someone who she knew deliberately kept his distance from her, physically and emotionally.

From the start, there had been no hugs or words of comfort to help ease her pain after her parents died so suddenly.

Once again, Zoey wondered why Edgar had ever agreed to become her guardian. It certainly hadn't been because he felt any affection for her.

What are you thinking about? Hunter prompted.

Can't you read my mind? she teased.

I could , he confirmed. But I would rather not unless you have given me permission to do so.

Oh. Okay. So, I was wondering why Edgar even bothered to accept guardianship of me when he obviously didn't, and doesn't, care for me at all.



I've been wondering the same thing myself, and for the same reason.

Please don't sugarcoat it. Just say it like it is! Zoey was laughing as Hunter-as-dragon landed softly in the thick snow behind but within the walled grounds of his castle home.

He immediately shifted back to his human form, still cradling her in his arms and once again dressed in his black clothing and boots. "I apologize for being too blunt. And I love the sound of your laughter."

A blush warmed her cheeks. "You're forgiven. And I love seeing you smile."

They continued to stare at each other for several long minutes, dark eyes gazing into green ones, before the sound of a throat clearing nearby caused them both to startle and turn in that direction.

Zoey instantly recognized Ranulf Drake from when she had seen him before she left Scotland at New Year.

She knew his eyes were even greener than her own, his dark hair chin-length, his full beard even darker than his hair.

He was dressed very much like Hunter, in a black leather jacket over a black T-shirt, black jeans, and black biker boots.

Unsuitable clothes for the coldness of the climate, but, like Hunter, Ranulf didn't seem affected by how icy cold it was here.

He didn't speak as he continued to look at the two of them, merely raised one questioning eyebrow.

Which was when Zoey realized Hunter was still holding her in his arms. “You need to put me down,” she hissed under her breath, only to immediately feel stupid at the realization Ranulf’s enhanced hearing meant he would be able to hear her no matter how softly she spoke.

“I like holding you in my arms,” Hunter objected.

And Zoey liked being there, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t feel more comfortable, for now, if she were standing on her own two feet. “Please,” she encouraged softly.

Hunter reluctantly put Zoey down, but kept his arm securely about the slenderness of her waist. Because what he really wanted to do was hold Zoey in his arms for the rest of their forever. For centuries. Millennia.

For now, he would settle for doing as she asked while still maintaining physical contact with his arm about her.

It was curious that Zoey hadn’t been fooled by the impression of a manse house, which was what most human’s saw, and instead, she could clearly see his castle home for exactly what it was. Belle had been able to see the same castle when she came here a week earlier, and she was now Lachlan’s mate.

Another confirmation, for Hunter, that Zoey was his own one true mate.

Not that he had a single doubt that she was the mate he now desperately wanted to claim and protect.

Much as it irked him, for now, he would have to settle for merely protecting Zoey. They all needed to deal with the problem that was Edgar Wallis before doing anything else.

“Any sign of him?” Hunter prompted his brother.

“None,” Ranulf dismissed, his voice gruff from lack of use, before he turned to Zoey. “I’m Ranulf Drake.” He didn’t attempt to put out his hand to shake hers.

His brother knew, from the discernible rumbling in Hunter’s chest, that his dragon was too near the surface to accept another dragon touching his mate.

Zoey nodded. “We met briefly last week. I’m Zoey Ashworth.” She didn’t offer her hand to shake either. No doubt because she was aware of the tension and growl emanating from Hunter.

Ranulf turned his gaze toward him. “When I said there had been no sighting of Wallis, that’s exactly what I meant. He didn’t log in a flight plan with the authorities, nor has there been a single sighting of him since he took off in his helicopter from Tregarthen House late this morning.”

“What does that mean?” Zoey frowned. “Did he crash?”

“There has been no report of any helicopter crashing or making an emergency landing anywhere either,” Ranulf dismissed. “The latter probably because it’s possible to land a helicopter almost anywhere.”

“So we have no idea where Edgar is right now?”

Hunter wasn’t sure if the shiver Zoey gave after asking that question was from the cold or because they were talking about her missing guardian. A man she now had every reason to fear was responsible for the murder of one of her friends.

“Let’s all go inside where it’s warmer,” Hunter suggested briskly, aware that his mate was becoming colder by the second now that he was no longer protecting her with his

warmth.

Zoey couldn't stop looking around at her surroundings after they entered the castle through a door that then went directly through the huge stone kitchen and then into a grand hall with a cavernous roof stretched up to the rafters above.

There were several suits of armor attached to the stone walls.

There was also a log fire burning in a fireplace large enough for a man, several men, to stand up in.

The aesthetic was like something from the medieval or Viking times.

Probably because that was the time when the three Drake brothers had been born.

Or more accurately, Zoey reminded herself, hatched from their dragon eggs.

Which... No, she was still trying to absorb that information.

Best to concentrate on her surroundings for the moment.

There were no paintings on the stone walls, but Zoey's attention was immediately caught and held by the huge carved panels, one the length of each of the four walls. They were easily six feet tall by fifteen feet wide, with intricate carvings of different battles depicted in each of them.

It was the style of the carving, one that Zoey recognized, that held her attention as she slowly moved from wall to wall studying each of the panels.

"Oh. My. God." She finally stood back from the last panel before slowly turning. "You're Ranulf," she breathed in absolute awe.

He looked uncomfortable. "I already told you that is my name."

Zoey slowly shook her head, her gaze moving instinctively back toward the carved panels.

"I'm talking about the Ranulf whose identity everyone in the art world has been speculating about for years now.

Decades. Centuries, probably," she pondered, now that she was aware of the longevity of the Drake brothers' lives.

"Your carvings are amazing. I studied them in books and the real deal in galleries and museums during my first year at university."

Ranulf looked alarmed. "They have a book of my carvings?"

"Books," she corrected. "Many, many books. All of them fascinating." She gave a dazed shake of her head. "I can't believe I'm now standing in the same room with you and looking at these incredible carvings the rest of the world has never had, nor will ever have, the privilege of seeing."

"Thank you," Ranulf accepted gruffly, obviously uncomfortable with her effusive praise.

Zoey's gaze moved to the chessboard set up on a square wooden table beside the fireplace. Each piece had been individually crafted. As had the two huge chairs, purposefully placed either side of the table.

She didn't need to ask to know that Ranulf had carved those too.

All the furniture in the room, four huge chairs in total, and obviously all purposefully

designed to accommodate the size of the Drake brothers, along with the dining table and chairs at the other end of the room, were just as ornately carved, many of them with woodland creatures.

Ranulf's talent, along with the mystery of who he was, meant that a single piece of this furniture could be sold for a seven-figure number. Each of the panels on the walls for double, possibly triple, that amount.

"I feel so privileged to be allowed to see these and to meet you," Zoey told a still slightly blushing Ranulf. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He nodded awkwardly before his expression turned to one of humor when he looked at Hunter. "I think that's probably as much admiration from you toward me that my brother can tolerate."

Zoey looked at Hunter, easily able to see the heavy scowl on his brow and the tightness of his jaw. He wasn't exactly growling right now, but there was definitely a displeased rumble going on in that huge chest. His eyes had that fire in their depths.

"Calm down," Zoey teased. "I was just paying homage where homage is due. Ranulf is a legend in the art world."

"As he should be," Hunter agreed gruffly.

She turned fully to look at Hunter. "Does this mean I'll still be able to carry on with my painting when we're mated?"

I'm not in Ranulf's league, but it is something I enjoy doing.

"She eyed him curiously when she saw the fire flare in the depths of his dark eyes.

“I said when,” she realized, a blush warming her cheeks.

Hunter’s eyes glowed. “You did.”

“Are Belle and Lachlan here?” she prompted to divert attention from the sudden longing she felt—inappropriately, when they were talking to his brother!—to begin their mating right now. That feeling had been steadily increasing since they left Cornwall.

“They aren’t in the castle, but they are still somewhere close,” Ranulf answered her cautiously.

Zoey studied him for several moments before assuring him, “Hunter already told me the two of them are true mates.”

Ranulf nodded. “As are you and Hunter.”

She tilted her head to the side as she studied him further. “Why did you say that so forcefully?”

“Because—”

“Don’t,” Hunter cut his brother off. “If Zoey decides to become my beloved true mate, then she will do so without any pressure from anyone else, including me.”

“But—”

“It will be Zoey’s choice, Ranulf,” Hunter cut in firmly.

Zoey’s eyes narrowed as she sensed there was something Hunter wasn’t telling her, something important and which Ranulf disapproved of him keeping from her.

“As I’m the tech expert in the family, I need to go to my suite and do a more in-depth search to see if I can discover where Wallis might have disappeared to,” Hunter stated briskly.

“Of course.” They all needed to know where Edgar had gone. “I’ll come with you, if that’s okay?” she added shyly.

“Of course.” Hunter nodded. “But first, we’ll go to the kitchen and get you something warm to drink and some snacks to take with us.”

“While you’re doing that, I’ll prepare something for our dinner,” Ranulf announced before striding away, that disapproving scowl still lowering his brow.

Zoey moved closer to Hunter. “What aren’t you telling me that is making Ranulf angry?”

Hunter huffed out a laugh. “The things that I have experienced in my lifetime, and that people born in the twenty-first century never will know, would fill many more journals than the ones Belle bought by accident.”

Zoey had lived with Edgar for years, and after all that time, she knew when someone was trying to distract her. And Hunter was clearly avoiding answering her question.

When they were mates, they would have all the time in the world for Hunter to answer all her questions.

When they were mates.

Because, yes, Zoey had already made up her mind about that. As man or dragon, Hunter was...amazing. He was protective and caring, toward his brothers as well as toward her. He was totally dedicated to what was right and eliminating what was



wrong.

He was also the sexiest man she had ever met, Zoey inwardly admitted, her cheeks feeling warm at her own physical and emotional reaction to him.

Oh yes, she and this gorgeous man were going to be mates.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Nothing?” Zoey prompted when she heard Hunter give another frustrated sigh from across the room.

“No,” he confirmed impatiently.

So far, he had spent two hours before dinner, and now several more after it, searching every available security feed in the UK, as well as hacking into satellite ones. Without any luck. It was as if Edgar Wallis and his helicopter had totally disappeared into the ether.

Zoey sat up from where she had been lying back against the pillows on Hunter’s huge four-poster bed. Hunter had offered her the use of one of the guest suites farther down the hallway, but she had wanted to stay wherever he was. It had felt almost painful to consider doing anything else.

Which was when she had realized that, in a very short time, Hunter had become as necessary to her as breathing. Or, to put it another way, as necessary as she now was to him as his one true mate.

And it felt right.

So very right that Zoey had no doubt being Hunter’s mate was the reason for her existence.

Hunter’s suite was like something out of a medieval movie, with its stone walls and

colorful tapestries.

All the furniture, the bed, a huge dresser, and an ottoman placed at the bottom of the four-poster, were carved from dark oak.

Ranulf's work again, Zoey would guess from the beautiful craftsmanship.

The central heating, and laptop and three screens on the large desk near one of the windows where Hunter was seated in front of the latter, working, were the only incongruous things in this room.

The adjoining marble-tiled bathroom was also modern, with a huge glass shower along one wall, a big clawfoot bath, and a double vanity and sinks.

It had still been light outside when Hunter began his search, but it had been dark by the time they returned downstairs to eat the dinner Ranulf had cooked for them all.

After dinner, Hunter returned to his search, and Zoey took a twenty-minute shower in the glass enclosure in the adjoining bathroom. It had been a relief to remove the clothing she had been wearing since she left London this morning.

What a difference a day made!

Just this morning, she'd had no idea that dragon shifters existed, and now she knew she was the true mate of one of them.

She hadn't wanted to put on the same clothing after taking her shower, so Hunter had offered her one of his T-shirts to wear.

Despite being clean, it still smelled intrinsically of him.

It was also long enough to reach down to her knees, and so big that the shoulders hung to her elbows, meaning what should have been short sleeves actually reached down to her wrists.

Wearing it made Zoey feel as if she was surrounded and protected by Hunter.

Until she'd met him, she hadn't realized how much those feelings of security and acceptance had been missing for most of her life.

Now she never wanted to give them up.

Or Hunter.

She stood to cross the room to where Hunter was sitting. "I think you've probably spent enough time on that for one evening, don't you agree?" she cajoled as she placed her hand lightly on his shoulder.

Hunter's lack of success in locating Wallis, after all these hours of searching for him, had left him feeling frustrated as well as impatient. But those emotions vanished the moment Zoey put her hand on his shoulder.

Overwhelming heat and desire took their place.

He turned in his seat, and Zoey immediately stepped between his parted legs before she rested both her hands on his shoulders. The flush in her cheeks and the brightness of her eyes, the pupils blown, told him she was as affected by their physical closeness as he was.

Hunter's self-control had already been severely tested by being in the same room with her and her delicious scent for all these hours.

It was tested even further by the fact that she was wearing one of his T-shirts and nothing else beneath it.

It was huge on her, but even so, he could now clearly see the outline of her engorged nipples pressing against the soft cotton material.

His eyes widened when she held his gaze as she slowly bent toward him, her intention of kissing him clearly shown in the focus of her eyes on his lips.

The moment their lips touched, Hunter was overwhelmed by a kaleidoscope of colors and emotions. Zoey's gasp told him that she was equally affected.

Hunter's arms moved about Zoey's slender waist as the kiss deepened, becoming wild, more desperate, hungry.

They were both breathing hard by the time she pulled back slightly to look at him. "Can you...have normal sex?"

Hunter's eyebrows rose. "As opposed to what?"

"Mating sex." Heat colored Zoey's cheeks. "I fully intend for us to get to that too." She smiled when Hunter's dragon gave a low growl of approval. "But I thought maybe for my first time, we should just have...normal sex?"

Her first time? Hunter didn't need to hear his dragon growl again to know how possessive the thought of being Zoey's first and only lover made him feel.

Zoey began to chuckle. "It sounds silly when I actually put that into words. But the truth is, I really want the closeness of having sex with you, and the gentle aftermath, and I'm guessing mating sex is a little more intense than that?"

Hunter's arms tightened about her waist. "Yes, I can have normal sex. But whether it's normal or mating, the two of us will be making love, not having sex." His brows lowered. "Although you're quite correct in assuming our mating will be very intense."

"Tell me," she encouraged softly.

"The mating ritual calls for me to mount you from behind, and that I then bite you as I come so that our essence and blood can mix and unite us as mates."

"That sounds...highly erotic."

"But maybe not—did I understand you correctly?—for your first time?" Hunter looked at her searchingly, desperately hoping that was the case.

Her blush deepened and her gaze avoided meeting his.

"I'm one of those people who needs to care deeply about the person I'm going to have something as intimate as sex with.

Which has been difficult, because I really haven't trusted anyone enough to fall in love with them. Until you," she added shyly.

Hunter stilled. He had already been overwhelmed and grateful that he would be Zoey's first lover, but hearing her say these words totally stunned him. "You love me?"

She nodded. "Not only do I love you, but I trust you too," she stated without hesitation. "And I can't tell you how wonderful it is to finally have the freedom to feel that way about someone after so many years of living with a man who clearly doesn't know how to feel either of those emotions."

“Don’t give him the power to even begin to make you feel sad,” Hunter encouraged as he captured her gaze with his own.

“I love and trust you too, Zoey, and not just because we’re mates.

That you are beautiful is beyond dispute, but I also know how strong you are, how kind.

That you are also a happy person, despite the losses in your life.

I also know that you cared enough to protect a complete stranger, me, from any unpleasantness you feared might emerge from the man who has been your guardian for the past twelve years.

” Hunter fully intended to look further into that situation, because something about it didn’t quite ring true to him.

“I love you, Zoey. Completely and utterly.” A purring sound rumbled in his chest. “My dragon loves you too.”

“I love you and your dragon too!” Zoey laughed, a totally joyful sound.

“Will you marry us?”

“Oh yes,” she accepted happily.

Hunter kissed her long and deeply. “We can choose our rings once we’re with my treasure hoard.”

“Which is where? Sorry.” She grimaced. “I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“Of course you should. What’s mine is now yours.” Hunter kissed her gently. “Our dragon hoard is inside the mountain at the back of the castle.”

“Inside it?” she echoed.

He nodded. “We hollowed out the mountain so it could accommodate the bulk of our combined treasures. We also have smaller caverns where our more personal treasure is stored. When the time comes, the two of us will go there to mate.”

“Is that where Lachlan and Belle are now?”

“Yes. But our personal caverns are completely private from each other,” he reassured.

“That sounds amazing, and I look forward to going there with you, but for the moment... Can we just have normal sex—make love now?” She looked at him expectantly.

“It will be my absolute pleasure.” Hunter stood to lift her into his arms and carry her across the room to place her on top of the bed. “I hope that it will be yours too,” he murmured before joining her, and his mouth claimed hers.

“Whoa.” Zoey was surprised when she looked down minutes later to see they were both naked. “Don’t tell me, you can disappear clothes too.”

“I can do many things I haven’t yet told you about. Did I go too far?” A frown creased Hunter’s brow. “Would you rather I had asked first?”

She laughed. “Absolutely not. I’ve always thought how awkward it looks in films and TV when people try to continue kissing while attempting to rip off their clothes so they can be closer still.



Besides..." She looked at him from beneath lowered lids.

"The fact that you're so breathtakingly gorgeous when you're naked completely nullifies any awkwardness I might have felt at also being naked. "

Hunter had defined muscles in his shoulders and arms. His chest was as beautiful as a carved slab of marble, each ridge of muscle and the hollows in between clearly defined on the eight-pack revealed by his nakedness.

Zoey's breath caught in her throat at her first sight of his cock jutting up from the dark curls surrounding its base.

Her first sight of any cock.

Hunter's was long and thick, with a slight inward curve and pulsing blood vessels along its length. The balls beneath were lightly furred and drawn up tight beneath his cock.

His waist and hips were narrow, his legs long and as muscular as his chest and arms.

In other words, Hunter had the appearance of a marble statue and was just as breathtakingly beautiful.

Zoey wasn't sure how her own body would measure up to such perfection. But one glance at Hunter's heated and mesmerized gaze as it ate up every inch of her naked body was enough to reassure her that to Hunter she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

That was a huge compliment considering Hunter was twelve hundred years old and admitted to having had "normal sex" during that time.

“Your breasts are perfect, my mate,” Hunter murmured throatily, his hands cupped beneath those twin mounds as he lowered his head to capture and then suck one of her ruby-colored nipples into the heat of his mouth.

His tongue was a rough rasp across that sensitive flesh as he suckled deeper and harder, the soft pad of his thumb caressing her other breast.

Zoey arched her back, feeling even more pleasure by pushing her nipple deeper into that heat. Hunter squeezed its twin between his thumb and index finger, Zoey becoming even more lost as that pleasure shot straight to her clit.

She let out a protesting groan when Hunter lifted his head, releasing her nipple. But she needn't have worried because he immediately turned his head and captured her other nipple, sucking on it hard and deep.

The hand previously squeezing her nipple now slid down over her belly, fingers seeking the slick nubbin beneath the auburn curls covering her mound.

One of those fingers pressed down on her swollen clit, before stroking along one side and then the other, not quite touching that swollen nubbin again but still awakening previously unknown nerve endings and causing her clit to pulse and ache.

“Please.” Zoey lifted her hips up to meet the caress of those now-slick fingers. “Please, Hunter,” she pleaded.

Hunter lifted his head to look at her, revealing his gaze as being hot and fierce and his lips swollen, before he began to slide his body down hers. His lips and tongue kissed, sucked, and laved against her flesh on his journey down to where her restless thighs were already parted in invitation.

Zoey let out a soft scream when Hunter's fingers parted her curls and his tongue

licked against her pulsing clit. That scream turned to soft groans of pleasure as he sucked and licked that nubbin for long and pleasurable minutes.

The tension built to an unbearable pitch before it exploded in a climax so intense it was painful.

“Again!” he demanded gruffly before taking her to that height of ecstasy again, and then again. “So wet and ready for me,” he murmured his satisfaction long minutes later, his fingers stroking through that wetness.

“Yes, please,” Zoey begged, wanting him inside her, claiming her. She wanted to be physically joined to him and for him to become a part of her.

Hunter moved up onto his knees between her parted thighs, the top of his cock a fierce red and glistening with the release of his juices. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he admitted gruffly.

“It will be one little pinch of pain and then so much pleasure.” She chuckled softly at the realization she was the one reassuring him. “I want you inside me, Hunter.” She reached up to curl her fingers about and then stroke his jutting cock. “I want that now.”

He grimaced. “Much more of that and I’m going to come before I’m inside you.” He removed her fingers and replaced them with his own before guiding the bulbous tip to the entrance to Zoey’s channel. “Ready?” His voice sounded strained.

Zoey watched the silver flames in his eyes as they turned to red and then a bright gold. “I love you, Hunter.”

His expression immediately calmed. “I love you too, Zoey. My mate.”

Zoey was right. It was a twinge of pain, followed by a fullness, a feeling of completion as she grasped hold of Hunter's shoulders and he began to thrust inside her, igniting nerve endings of ecstasy she hadn't known existed.

"Come with me, Zoey," he rasped. "Come with me now!" he instructed as his cock began to throb and his release pulsed into her channel.

Zoey's climax wasn't only bone-deep, it was light and color, and a feeling of finally belonging.

With Hunter.

With her mate.

"You were right," she murmured sleepily minutes later, after Hunter had been to the bathroom and brought back a warm wet cloth to clean them both, Zoey now drifting to sleep in his arms. "Absolute ecstasy."

"Absolute," Hunter confirmed gruffly.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

“Any luck finding him?”

Hunter’s fingers paused on the keyboard on the desk in front of him, but he didn’t—couldn’t—answer Zoey for several long seconds.

Mainly because he had been immediately distracted by having Zoey lean against him, once again wearing his T-shirt, as she looked over his shoulder at the three computer screens in front of him. She also smelled of him, of both their mingled scents.

Having Zoey near, touching him, increased his need to claim her as his mate. But he could also appreciate how, after their night of lovemaking, she now felt completely at ease touching him.

She looked tousled and well-loved this morning. No doubt because that’s exactly what she was and always would be.

Their normal lovemaking last night had been beyond anything Hunter had ever experienced before. He knew that their mating was going to be even more profound.

Which, hopefully, could happen once they had dealt with Wallis. “I still haven’t been able to find any evidence of a helicopter landing, or the whereabouts of Wallis himself.”

“Then maybe he isn’t still in England?”

Hunter turned to look at her. “Do you have a reason for thinking that?”

“I’m not sure.” Zoey grimaced. “On those occasions Edgar disappeared for several days at a time, I had always assumed he was in London on business. But what if he wasn’t? What if Edgar has another home, another life, somewhere else, possibly even in another country?”

“Hell!” Hunter swore softly under his breath, intending to start looking into that possibility immediately. Zoey’s hand on his shoulder, her fingers digging into his flesh, stopped him. “What is it?”

“What is that you’re looking at right now?” She frowned at the columns of numbers he had on the screen in front of him.

Hunter released a ragged but controlled breath before answering her honestly. “These were your father’s bank accounts.”

She looked at him in surprise. “My father has been dead for twelve years.”

“But his accounts were archived.”

“And just how did you get into the bank’s system to look at those archived accounts? No, more importantly, why are you looking at them?” She removed her hand to instinctively—whether she knew it or not—fold her arms protectively about her waist.

How did Hunter explain his feelings of disquiet after searching more deeply had revealed the manner in which Wallis had become Zoey’s guardian?

Of how, the first chance he had, Hunter had felt compelled to look into those details? Zoey remaining in a deep sleep after he had woken up at five o’clock this morning

had given him both the time and opportunity to do that.

Zoey unfolded her arms as she bent closer to the screen, her eyes widening. “There’s an awful lot of noughts on there.”

“Your father was a billionaire at the time of his death.”

“No, he wasn’t.” She drew back, laughing softly.

“I loved my father, and so did my mother, but he was such a terrible businessman, we became used to our fortunes always being up and down,” she explained with affection.

“My mother always put money by in the good times to sustain us through the bad ones.”

“Well, at the time of your father’s death, it was definitely on an up,” Hunter told her evenly. “He had given financial backing to a small company developing a travel app and several others that went viral worldwide and gave him a return on his initial investment many, many times over.”

“A billion times over from the look of those noughts,” her voice sounded hollow.

“Yes.” Hunter chewed on the inside of his lip before speaking again. “Tell me, did you see much of Edgar before your parents died?”

She shook her head. “I’d never met him before Edgar came to see me at the house of the schoolfriend I had been staying with when my parents died, and he told me he was now my guardian.

He also told me that he and my Dad had shared a room for the first year they were at

uni together, that they remained friends, that Edgar became his lawyer— What do you mean no?

” she prompted when Hunter gave a firm shake of his head.

“They were at uni at the same time, but they never shared accommodation. They didn’t even have classes together,” he explained. “Wallis studied law, and your father took a degree in economics.”

“Edgar told me they were friends at uni and remained so during the years afterward, and that’s why he became Dad’s lawyer,” she insisted.

“And yet you never saw him or even met him once during that time?”

“Not that I recall, no…”

Hunter nodded. “That’s because during those university years, they were acquaintances at best. It is true that Edgar Wallis became your father’s lawyer shortly before your parents’ death.

But I believe, after he discovered how wealthy your father was, that Wallis might have approached your father with that suggestion rather than the other way about.

Wallis worked for a prestigious London law firm, but only as an associate. ”

Zoey frowned. “I didn’t have any living grandparents, and Mum and Dad were only children, so Edgar, as Dad’s friend, was named as my guardian in my father’s will.”

Hunter was already aware that Zoey didn’t have any close family. “Wills can be tampered with, especially when you’re the lawyer who drew up that will.”



Her eyes went wide. “You think that’s what Edgar did?”

“I’m sure of it,” Hunter confirmed grimly.

“If that’s so, what happened to all that money— No!” she gasped as realization hit, her face paling as she stepped back. “No, no, no, no, no!”

Hunter stood to turn and face her, knowing that his mate deserved to know the truth.

“The money was put into a trust for you, but as your father’s lawyer and trustee of that account, Wallis was able to access that money.

Since your parents’ death, he has been systematically stealing from what is legally your money put in trust for you until you’re twenty-one.

Initially with the purchase of Tregarthen House on the basis that he needed a suitable home for you to live in.

In the years since, he has given himself an allowance of a million pounds a year to care for you. ”

Zoey gasped again. “A million... That is obscene,” she protested, tears welling in her eyes.

“There is no way he needed that amount of money to care for me. The only things he paid for were a nanny and food for the weeks when I was home from boarding school, and the school fees. He also paid my uni fees and gave me a strict allowance to live on. But he always implied I should be grateful to him for caring for me at all.”

Hunter grimaced. “There’s more, Zoey.”

“Worse than stealing from my parents?”

What Hunter had to tell her now was much, much worse than what he had already shared with her.

Zoey was still stunned, speechless, at learning that her beloved father had finally managed to invest in the right company, only to die before he could fully appreciate?—

“Oh my God. No.” She stumbled back until she was able to drop onto the chair behind her.

“Are you working your way up to telling me that Edgar had something to do with my parents’ deaths?”

” It wasn’t such a giant leap for her to make when Hunter had already told her Edgar was responsible for killing Ben.

“And please don’t attempt to lie to protect me,” she pleaded when she saw the indecision in Hunter’s expression.

He nodded. “In that case, I’m saying I believe he had everything to do with your parents’ deaths.”

She swallowed audibly. “How?”

“According to the flight plan your father registered that day, he was flying the two of them, in his plane, from a small private airport near London to another private airfield near Paris.”

“It was their wedding anniversary.” Zoey had been attending the local school that

day, but she was due to have a sleepover with one of her friends—the same friend at whose house she had remained for several weeks after her parents died—the idea behind that being to allow her parents to celebrate their anniversary with an overnight stay in Paris while Zoey enjoyed being with her school friend.

The plane had crashed over the English Channel, killing both her parents. Their bodies had been recovered two weeks later. The plane was still at the bottom of the sea.

“Wallis was learning to fly a helicopter at the same airfield where your father kept his plane,” Hunter continued evenly.

“It’s my belief, in view of what happened afterward, that he somehow sabotaged your father’s plane.

It’s also my belief,” he continued when Zoey lifted her hand to cover her second gasp, “that he arranged for the accident to happen on a day when you wouldn’t be with them.

That had to happen; otherwise, he couldn’t become your guardian and have complete access to your father’s fortune.

Wallis immediately resigned from the law firm he worked for and moved the two of you to Cornwall.

Far away from anyone who might ever question his motives or actions. ”

“Because he was already obsessed with searching for the existence of dragons, mainly so that he could steal their fortune too,” Zoey said dully.

“Yes,” Hunter confirmed. “We will find him, Zoey. I don’t care where he is,

whatever country he's in, I promise you we will find him. And when we do, we will ensure Wallis pays for all his crimes."

It was a lot for Zoey to take in, and yet the more she thought about it, the more convinced she became that that was exactly what had happened. To her parents as well as to her.

As well as being a thief, Edgar Wallis was a murderer several times over.

Another thought occurred to her. "I'll be twenty-one on my next birthday." She moistened the dryness of her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Do you think if I hadn't met you, that I would have lived long enough to see that birthday— It's okay, Hunter," she quickly soothed when he began to growl.

*Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:24 pm*

His face was already starting to shift into his majestic but dangerous dragon, his hands clenching into fists, the talons that had sprouted from his fingertips piercing his palms and causing blood to drip onto the carpet.

Zoey curled her hand around the top of his arm. “I’m with you now, Hunter. I’m going to be your mate. And I know you will never allow anyone or anything to ever harm me again.”

His eyes glowed as he stared down at her.

“Being a dragon’s mate is forever. Many human lifetimes.

You must be very sure before making that decision.

” His nostrils flared, releasing those wisps of smoke Zoey had seen at the beach yesterday.

“You also have to make that choice because you want to be with me. My brothers and I will make sure Wallis is punished for what he’s done to you and others, no matter what you decide about our mating. ”

Zoey’s gaze met his unflinchingly. “I made my decision when you cradled me in your arms on the flight up here, ensuring I was warm and safe. I made it again when we arrived here, and I saw the deep love and respect you and your brother have for each other, and for Lachlan and his mate. Only good men—or dragons,” she teased, “incite that sort of deep regard for each other. I confirmed that decision when the two of us made love last night. Which is why,” she added huskily, “I also know you are the

sexiest man or dragon it has ever been my good fortune to meet.”

“Thank you,” he accepted gruffly. “But is that enough for you to decide to spend centuries with me?”

“I love you, Hunter.” Her cheeks felt warm.

“I feel that love here.” She placed her hand against her chest directly over where her heart lay.

“I also know it here.” She touched her head.

“I feel it again here.” The heat in her cheeks deepened as she placed one of her hands over her breasts and the other against her mound.

“I believe we’re meant to be together. That you are destined to be my one true mate as much as I am meant to be yours.

And I want that to happen before any of us continue looking for Edgar.

” She released a heavy sigh. “He’s already taken so much from me.

I won’t allow him to take anything else. ”

“I love you, my Zoey,” Hunter murmured before lowering his head to capture her lips with his.

Zoey kissed him back, knowing she would never be able to get enough of Hunter’s kisses or the depth of his love for her.

She pulled back after several minutes. “Now that’s settled, I want you to tell me what it was Ranulf was going to say earlier and you stopped him.”

Hunter's smile was rueful. "You picked up on that, hm?"

"I did, yes," she assured dryly.

He nodded. "If you refuse me and our mating, I would go insane and eventually die."

"What the hell!" Zoey stared at him in horror. "And if I hadn't told you I love you and want to be your mate, if I hadn't asked, you weren't going to tell me this?"

His jaw tightened. "No."

She pulled completely out of his arms. "Why the hell not?"

"Because it would not be fair to put that burden on you?—"

"Now you listen to me, Hunter Drake." She poked him in the chest. "You do not get to make those sorts of decisions for me. Which is why, in future, you will not keep something as important as that from me. Do you understand? I don't need that sort of protection. I want to be your partner. Your equal."

Zoey looked every inch Hunter's mate in this moment. Strong. Fierce. Proud. Magnificent .

"I understand," he confirmed.

Her eyes flashed a deep emerald green. "Then you will also promise me not to do anything so stupid ever again."

He huffed a chuckle at her fierceness. "I promise."

She gave a satisfied nod. "In that case, let's forget all this"—she waved in the direction of the computer screens—"tell Ranulf where we're going for...however

long it takes, and then disappear into your mountain lair.”

Hunter felt as if his heart had leaped in his chest as he witnessed the absolute certainty in Zoey’s expression. “However long it takes,” he echoed lightly.

“Enjoy teasing me while you can,” she taunted. “Once we’re mated and I can also shift into a dragon, I might just be able to kick your arse.”

She wouldn’t, because Hunter was a born-dragon and so would always be stronger than her. But Zoey looked so buoyant, so happy at the thought, Hunter didn’t feel the need to tell her that.

Omission wasn’t lying, was it?

He had a feeling Zoey would think it was, he conceded with an inner wince.

He would tell Zoey, but after they were mated. Maybe once they took their first flight together.

Together.

It was a word Hunter had never thought he would ever be able to apply to himself.

But, like Zoey, he had absolutely no doubt that they were meant to be together.

Forever.

Fated and eternal true mates.

The mystery of the missing journal began in LACHLAN (Snow Dragons Hunting 1)  
– Lachlan and Belle’s story.



It continues in HUNTER (Snow Dragons Hunting 2) – Hunter and Zoey’s story.

And concludes in RANULF (Snow Dragons Hunting 3) – Ranulf and Sophie’s story.