



Lachlan (Snow Dragons Hunting #1)

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LACHLAN (Snow Dragons Hunting 1) is the first book in the NEW paranormal dragon shifter series by Amazon #1 and International bestselling author, Carole Mortimer.

Being invited for a visit to Scotland at the end of December, to stay with the family of one of the other students Belle shares a house with in London, gives her the ideal opportunity to search for evidence that dragons really did once exist.

Belle is a student of mythology, and the old journal she found at the bottom of a box of old books she bought at a house sale, spoke of men being seen in that area of Scotland who could shift into magnificent dragons.

Getting lost on a Scottish mountain during a blizzard, and having to take shelter in a cave, wasn't part of Belle's plan.

Nor was hearing the terrifying roar of a feral animal reverberating around those cave walls.

The man who rescues her, the very tall, imposing, and heart-poundingly handsome Lachlan Drake, is a man who holds secrets in his icy gray eyes that also occasionally seemed as if they carry fire in their depths.

When the old journal goes missing, it becomes obvious that Belle isn't the only searching for dragons.

Total Pages (Source): 13

CHAPTER ONE

January 4th,

Drake House, The Scottish Highlands

“There’s a girl missing from the village.”

Lachlan looked up from where he had been about to move one of the exquisitely carved chess pieces on an equally uniquely carved chessboard.

Instead of making the move, he watched his brother Hunter as he threw himself into a chair beside the blazing fire after making that dispassionate announcement.

Hunter raised his eyebrows at the partly played game on the chessboard, having commented more than once about how sad Lachlan was for playing chess against himself.

Lachlan ignored the derisive glance. “How do you know that?” he prompted his youngest brother.

“I overheard two men talking about it in the local tavern.”

“I thought we had agreed you have to stop going there.”

The brothers were dragon shifters and had been born of the same clutch twelve hundred and ten years ago. Lachlan first, then Ranulf, and finally Hunter.

They had stopped physically aging at the age of thirty-three, eleven centuries ago.

They were capable of masking their presence, if necessary, but Hunter liked to go to the public house in the nearest village five miles away and enjoy a pint of beer and a chat with the locals.

Having lived for so long meant the brothers had to disappear for a couple of generations every century. The break was necessary to add authenticity when they returned and claimed to be ancestors of the previous members of the Drake family who had lived in Drake House.

The time for that break this century was fast approaching.

The brothers knew it, and each responded in their own way.

Hunter became morose at being completely cut off from humanity.

Ranulf welcomed it.

Lachlan usually dealt with the approaching solitude pragmatically. It was something that needed to be done, so he did it.

But for the past few days, he'd been feeling restless. As if there was something he urgently needed to do, but he had no idea what it was.

Very soon, the house would be closed, the windows shuttered against intruders, and the brothers would withdraw to the safety of the network of connecting caverns in the mountain behind Drake House.

Their hoards were there anyway, so it was no hardship to spend a few decades guarding that treasure in their dragon form. That lack of exercise meant they weren't

hungry as often either. Even when they were, they only left the caverns on the nights there wasn't a full moon, which would have made it possible for them to hunt for food during the hours of darkness without detection.

The existence of the internet in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was making all that more and more difficult to achieve. Too many people took photographs with their mobile phones nowadays, which they immediately uploaded to social media platforms.

It had its benefits too, of course. Hunter was the technical expert in the family, and he had been able to add to their considerable wealth with the many investments he had made online, both in business and property. Online banking also enabled him to access their many bank accounts without having to appear in person. Again, for the purpose of it not being noted that the brothers weren't aging.

Once the brothers were hidden in their caves, Hunter had set things up so those investments would simply rumble on for another fifty years or so, increasing in value and adding to the billions of pounds they already had. That was without the value of the hoard of jewels and gold they had stashed away in their caves over the past twelve hundred years.

Hopefully, this strange restlessness inside Lachlan would also have dissipated by the time it was safe for them to reappear.

"You said soon, not immediately," Hunter defended. "Besides, I didn't go into the tavern, but masked my presence as I stood outside looking in," he explained wistfully. "That's when my acute hearing allowed me to overhear two of the local men talking about the missing girl." He shook his head. "It made me nostalgic for the days when the villagers used to leave out a virgin sacrifice for us at the bottom of our mountain."

Hunter threw one of his jean-clad legs over the arm of his chair before taking a large, unconcerned bite of the apple in his hand. His teeth were very white and even and nothing like the two rows of razor-sharp incisors the brothers could bare as dragons.

A thousand years ago, the local people had believed that leaving the sacrifice of a virgin every spring as an offering to the dragons guarding the mountains would prevent those fierce creatures from eating them if game should become scarce in the area.

What was one virgin against the welfare of the rest of the villagers?

They had also, illogically, believed that the virgin sacrifice would secure their own successful hunting for another season.

Lachlan had never understood the correlation between those two events.

Despite Hunter's supposed nostalgia for those bygone days, the brothers had never eaten the virgin as dragons nor seduced her as the men they could shift into. Instead, they usually helped the girl find somewhere else she could live and flourish, knowing she couldn't return to the village for fear of being slaughtered by the superstitious villagers, who would probably have thought she had returned from the dead.

The offering of a virgin sacrifice had, thankfully, died out as the centuries passed, along with the superstitious belief that dragons existed at all.

"Which girl is missing?" their brother Ranulf prompted, his voice gruff from lack of use.

Of the three Drake brothers, Ranulf was the one who had become more and more reclusive and less talkative as the decades and centuries passed and their humanity became less and less with each passing year. Lachlan feared that one day, his

brother's ability to shift into a man would disappear altogether.

After all, they were first and foremost dragons, not men.

Hunter shook his head. "I didn't mean one of the girls who lives in the village is missing," he assured once he'd finished chewing and swallowed his mouthful of apple. "This girl was a visitor."

"Ah." Ranulf gave a satisfied nod before returning to concentrate on whittling the piece of wood he held.

Ranulf was a master carver and had been for centuries. Initially, he had carved furniture for the wealthier households to buy, but as time passed, his realistic carvings of animals had become in great demand and nowadays sold for seven figure numbers. He still carved bespoke furniture, and he had carved the beautiful chessboard Lachlan was playing on.

"Was?" Lachlan was now the one to echo sharply.

Hunter shrugged. "She's been missing since yesterday, and you know how low the temperature fell in the Highlands last night."

Lachlan's nostrils flared at his brother's easy dismissal of a young girl's life. Another part of having been alive for so long, unfortunately, was that the paltry years of a human lifetime had taken on less meaning. "If she isn't a girl from the village, then who is she?"

"Her name is Belle, and she's a friend of the youngest McGregor boy."

"Belle?"

“It means beautiful.” Hunter nodded. “I wonder if she lives up to her name?” he speculated.

A speculation Lachlan didn’t like in the slightest. “Ben McGregor has a girlfriend?” It seemed only yesterday that the youngest McGregor bairn had been born.

Time really had lost all meaning if Ben was now old enough to have a girlfriend and possibly starting to think of having children of his own.

Hunter finished chewing another bite of his apple before speaking. “I don’t think she’s his girlfriend, as such. He invited a group of friends who share a house with him near the English university he’s attending, males as well as females, to spend an authentic Scottish Hogmanay with him and his family. This girl apparently went for a walk on her own yesterday morning, when everyone else in the household was still recovering from the excesses of the previous two days and nights. No one realized she was missing until Mrs. McGregor called them all together for dinner yesterday evening.”

Lachlan scowled at hearing this girl had now been missing for thirty-six hours. “Did they send out a search party?”

“No.” Hunter grimaced. “It had already been dark for several hours by the time they realized she was gone. Plus, they decided the fresh covering of snow that had fallen during the day would have covered any tracks she might have left. Ben and his father went out to look for her first thing this morning.”

“As it’s now late afternoon, I’m guessing they didn’t find her?”

“No.” Hunter shrugged. “Which is why I used the past tense a few minutes ago when referring to her.”

Lachlan snorted his frustration, agitation churning inside him. “You don’t seem at all concerned that a young girl might have lost her life last night while the three of us were safe and warm inside this house.”

His brother shrugged. “She isn’t the first and she won’t be the last to perish in the severe winter weather conditions in the Scottish Highlands.”

“Which doesn’t make it right for this girl to be left to die too,” Lachlan snapped.

Hunter released a heavy sigh. “If you’re that concerned, then go and look for her yourself.”

Lachlan knew that his youngest brother wasn’t as callous as he sounded. It was just that they had seen so much death during their long lifetimes that, in some ways, they had become inured to the inevitable human plight.

The past couple of centuries had been hard on all of them.

They were now the only three remaining dragons of their clan. Their uncles and aunts had died without offspring. Their own parents had died six centuries ago. But not before they had both reached the age of three thousand years old.

Their parents had met and were mated by the time they were both a thousand years old. The brothers were now two hundred years older than that and more than ready to find their true mates.

Except there were no female dragons left in the world.

Hunter, the brother who roamed the farthest, had recently visited Wales and learned that a family of male dragons living there had taken human mates within the last five years. That they now all had young too.

But those male dragons had been born to eight Welsh goddesses from the sperm of a specific single human male. This made them very different to the Drake dragons, who had been born to dragon parents.

Because of that difference, the brothers had no idea, if they attempted to mate with a human female who wasn't their true mate, whether or not the mating would succeed or be the death of the female.

The Drake brothers had all agreed it would be unwise to even attempt to do so. None of them had ever been celibate by any means. They often had sex in their human form with willing human females. But none of those women had tempted any of them to bite them as they mounted and mated her.

Their parents had told them they would instinctively know when they met their true mate. That the connection would be instant with the female, dragon or human, who was perfect for each of them.

The three brothers had clung to that hope for several more centuries after their parents' deaths, but as time passed, they'd had to face the fact that they were never going to find the female meant just for them.

The brothers' lives had become bleaker and bleaker without the love and intimate connection a true mate would have brought to their long lives.

As a consequence of that fading and now lack of hope, it was becoming more and more difficult to continue living this singular existence. For them to be able to shift into men at all when the lure of being dragon pulled on them so strongly.

Lachlan knew they would probably have considered ending their existence long ago if they hadn't each had the company of their two brothers to sustain them.

But just because life had become black, white, and varying shades of gray for the three of them, that was no reason to fail in their inborn duty to protect humans. Even the ones who didn't come from their village.

Lachlan rose abruptly to his feet. "As you suggested, I'm going out to look for the girl."

"Want company?" Hunter offered, always eager to live up to his name.

"No." For reasons he didn't understand, Lachlan felt that he needed to do this search alone. "But keep the fire burning and warm the venison stew for when I bring her back with me."

"If," Ranulf put in softly, raising his head when neither of his brothers responded. "You should be prepared to find that the girl will have frozen to death by now."

Lachlan threw back his head, and without premeditation or forethought, he partially shifted into his beast, his features no longer human as his dragon roared his fury.

CHAPTER TWO

Belle trembled with fear and shivered from the extreme cold as she heard a roar echo around the mountains outside the cave she'd been huddled in for hours in an effort to keep warm.

It had been an animalistic and primal roar the likes of which she had never heard before.

Perhaps it had been made by a dragon, she inwardly mocked herself.

If getting lost on a mountain in heavily falling snow and then ending up taking refuge in this small cave overnight when that snow turned into a blizzard had taught her anything, it was that her determination to prove that dragons had existed or still did exist was going to get her killed from hypothermia.

Without her having proved a damned thing!

She had brought a bottle of water with her, which was something, but she didn't even have a cereal bar she could eat.

Unsurprisingly, when she'd checked, there had been no reception on her cell phone, and the light function had run out of power hours ago. Leaving her sitting in complete darkness through the night. It was light again now, but with the blizzard still raging outside, the cave was enshrouded in a gray half-light.

Everything that had happened to her these past few weeks was because she'd found

those archaic journals in a box of books she'd bought at a house auction several months ago.

She was a student of mythology and often went to those auctions on a weekend if she wasn't working a shift at the coffee shop. Something the other students she shared a house with found highly amusing, both the working in the coffee shop and the buying of old books.

Belle ignored their remarks on the subject.

She loved books, especially those on mythology, and after the elderly owner of a country house died, there were often some bargains to be had in those random boxes of books in the sales that followed. The box Belle had bid on that particular weekend had included a beautifully engraved copy of *The Odyssey*.

Once Belle arrived back at the house, she'd had a chance to look through the rest of the box's contents. That was when she'd found a series of worn leather-bound journals tucked beneath the much-heavier tomes.

The date and name inside the front covers claimed they had all been written eight hundred years ago by the same nun, a Sister Agnes.

Most of the journals' contents were mundane to say the least. But in the journal with the first date, the one that dealt with the nun's life before she entered the convent and shortly after, Sister Agnes had written that dragons really did exist.

At least she'd claimed they had existed eight hundred years ago.

The nun wrote that three of them had been living in the Highlands of Scotland at that time. And the reason the woman knew this was because she claimed the magnificent creatures had spared her life when her family and the other people who lived in the

village near the dragons' mountain had left her tied to a tree and naked as a sacrifice so that the magnificent beasts would take her and protect the villagers from other predators, men as well as animals.

Even more miraculously, the woman claimed they had all landed as dragons beside her, before they shifted into large and lethal-looking human warriors with swords strapped to their broad backs, which they had used to cut the strips of leather tethering her to the tree.

Instead of the killing or ravishing she'd feared would follow, those men had covered her nakedness with a cloak before flying her, once again as dragons, to a convent many miles away from her home in Scotland.

She'd written she had been taught to read and write there, which in turn had allowed her to write these journals of her life. Most especially, of the time she had met those Highland warriors who could shift into dragons.

Belle wasn't sure about that last claim. It seemed a bit too farfetched. But the dragon part she really wanted to believe and prove, if she could.

Aged twenty, she was in her third year of studying mythology at university, with the intention of teaching it once she had attained her initial degree and then going on to take a master's degree. Possibly even a PhD.

Finding the journals, most especially the one that had also hinted at the general area where the dragons had been living eight hundred years ago, had offered the perfect opportunity for Belle to prepare and present a unique end-of-year paper. One she would hopefully be able to use later as the focus for her advanced degree.

The language in the journal was as archaic as the time Sister Agnes made those notations about. The writing was also very small, as if the nun had been trying to

conserve paper. Which she perhaps had. Paper would have been scarce in the thirteenth century.

It had taken some time for Belle to translate enough of the tiny writing and to then go online and discover that the place Sister Agnes claimed the dragons had taken her to was now called the St. Francis convent, and it was situated in Worcestershire.

She'd contacted the Mother Superior immediately and been permitted to visit for an afternoon.

Once there, Belle had also been allowed to search through the convent's records, after promising to take very good care of them.

From those often badly written records, Belle had been able to establish that there had been a Sister Agnes living in the convent at the time the journal claimed she had. Those internal records went further and revealed that Agnes had been Mother Superior of the convent from the age of forty until her death at the age of eighty-two.

There was nothing in those other records, written by a number of different nuns over the years, to ever indicate or imply that Sister Agnes had been in the least deranged.

Which must surely mean that the female sacrifice, who had later become a nun and in charge of a convent, must have at least thought she had been in the presence of real dragons.

Belle had hardly been able to restrain her excitement at the possibility of dragons having once existed. That those magnificent creatures weren't a part of mythology at all, but had once been very real.

The nun's claim that the dragons she had met had the ability to change into human men was something Belle was willing to overlook as the woman's hysteria after

thinking she was about to die.

Belle's only interest was in finding evidence, any evidence, that would confirm dragons had once existed.

With that in mind, she had decided the next step would be to arrange for a visit to Scotland during her Easter break. The weather would, hopefully, be milder and the snow all melted by then.

Ben McGregor's invitation for her and the other four students who shared their house to join him and his family in the Highlands for a traditional Scottish New Year had been fortuitous. Even more so when Belle discovered the McGregor family lived in one of the villages very near to where the nun had claimed to have been rescued by the dragons who could shift into men.

Belle had spent Christmas alone, as she usually did, having no family of her own to spend it with. After which, she'd excitedly boarded the train that would take her up into the Highlands for the New Year.

She'd brought that one journal with her, of course. She'd been carrying it around in her backpack since she'd managed to translate it and realized its importance.

To her, at least.

No doubt, if someone else had bought that box of books, they would have simply decided the journals were of no value and then thrown them out.

Her stay at the McGregors' home hadn't gone quite as smoothly as she had hoped it would.

After escaping the New Year revelries the evening before, she had returned from

using the bathroom down the hallway to find Ben stretched out on her bed waiting for her. He left her in no doubt he was expecting to share her bed for the night.

Something, once Belle had recovered from the shock, she had very quickly disabused him of.

She didn't know him any better than the other two boys and two girls her fixed budget allowed her to share accommodation with. Ben had definitely never shown the slightest interest in her when they were in London. Not that he wasn't good-looking, because he was, but the two of them had absolutely nothing in common.

Belle had been orphaned at the age of three and spent the rest of her childhood either in care or fostered by a couple that was more interested in the money they received to keep her than they were in actually spending time with her. When she'd reached the age of fourteen, they had decided they didn't want the hassle of a teenager in the house and sent her back to the orphanage.

She'd attained good grades on her exams. Her application to a London university to study mythology had been accepted. But in order to pay some of her living expenses, she worked weekend and evening shifts in a coffee shop. The rest of the fees she'd needed had been taken out in student loans.

All the other students in the house had their fees and living expenses paid by their parents.

The high cost of living in London meant Belle didn't go out much. Instead, she read a lot and mainly kept to her room in the evenings when the others watched reality television while drinking beer and wine.

She always made sure to lock her room and be out whenever the others hosted a party in the house. She usually spent the beginning of the evening at the library, then

moved into an all-night coffee shop once the library closed for the night.

Although the last time there had been a party in the house, a Christmas celebration before the others departed to spend the festive holiday with their families, she'd returned to find that someone had broken the lock on her bedroom door and gone into the room.

Her clothes and books had been scattered over the floor, and she didn't want to even think about what they might have done in her bed. Just in case, she'd immediately stripped off the bedding and put it in the washing machine.

Her housemates had denied knowing anything about the break-in when she'd questioned them the following day.

Frustrated and annoyed, Belle had gone out and bought a new lock and an extra padlock to stop anyone from going into her bedroom uninvited again.

She definitely hadn't been expecting Ben to assume he could share her bed on the second night after her arrival in Scotland!

Ben hadn't taken her rejection graciously. He'd called her a cock-tease before noisily leaving her bedroom. Belle had felt uncomfortable at this unexpected development, but she'd genuinely had no idea Ben had a romantic interest in her.

Well, perhaps romantic interest was stretching things a bit. Ben obviously just wanted into her panties.

The following morning, she'd set out to walk up the mountain in search of evidence that dragons had once lived in the area.

It had been impossible for her to get away from the McGregor household before that,

Ben's parents having arranged a large drop-in party that many of the villagers had attended. They had all drunk and eaten copiously for hours before returning to their homes to begin the strange practice of first-footing.

Belle didn't drink, and, having met the majority of the villagers already, she had no interest in visiting any of their homes for the tradition of first-footing.

Or joining in the even more drinking and eating that had then occurred throughout that night and into the following day.

It had been very frustrating and hard for Belle to keep smiling when she could literally see the mountains in the distance that she wanted to explore. Once she was closer to them, she hoped it wouldn't be too difficult to find the mountain Sister Agnes had described in her journal where she believed the dragons had been living eight hundred years ago.

If Belle could just find something, anything, to show that dragons had once existed, then the paper she wrote on that find would ensure her a first-class degree and lead to her being able to do further research when she obtained her master's degree.

Belle had brought sturdy boots with her for that intended trek up the mountain. Plus, a down jacket that the hype assured was guaranteed to keep its wearer warm in below-zero temperatures. She'd also purchased a thermal hat and gloves that claimed to do the same.

What she hadn't considered was how damp the snow would be, rather than dry and crisp, both on the ground and still heavily falling. It was the sort of dampness that seemed to literally enter Belle's bones and freeze her from the inside out.

Nor had she realized wearing jeans wasn't at all suitable for keeping her legs warm or dry when walking through heavily drifting and falling snow that settled on her

clothing before melting.

Or that, having walked several miles from the village and partway up a mountain, she wouldn't be able to find her way back again in what had suddenly become blinding blizzard conditions.

Finding this cave had been a godsend, providing her much-needed shelter from the swirling snow. It was also a little warmer inside the cave out of the biting cold wind.

A thorough search of the cave, while the light on her cell phone still worked, had dashed her hope that this might be an entrance into the network of caves where the nun had claimed the dragons lived. There were just solid, if uneven, walls and no opening to go deeper into the mountain.

Sitting against one of the side walls, shivering from the extreme cold, was when Belle had also realized that because she hadn't intended to be on the mountain for more than a few hours, she hadn't brought anything to eat.

Nor the means to light a fire to keep warm.

Not that there was any visible or dry wood near or inside the cave to put on that fire if she had.

Wet and shivering, her teeth almost chattering loose inside her mouth, she'd also had to acknowledge the stupidity of not telling anyone of her plan to go walking in the mountains.

As that orphan with no close family or friends, she'd never been in the habit of informing people of where she was going or what she was doing.

But she should have made an exception on this occasion.

The primal roar she'd heard minutes ago had only added to her misery. Although, she was pretty sure there were no bears or wolves in Scotland. Maybe once upon a time, but not now.

Once upon a time...

It sounded like the opening line of a typical fairy tale.

One that went, Once upon a time, there was a girl called Belle—no, not that Belle! This Belle didn't have a father who loved her. In fact, she didn't have anyone who loved her ? —

Oh God, this wasn't a fairy tale. It was a pity party!

Could she possibly be becoming delirious from being in the cold and damp for so many hours?

Was she going to fall into a cold-induced coma next, from which she never awoke?

One day, one spring or summer, would an innocent tourist be walking these mountains and find Belle's preserved body inside this cave?

Would it still be preserved once the temperature rose and the snow melted?

She wrinkled her nose at the thought of someone finding her decomposing body.

Unless the animal that she'd heard roar found her first and, viewing her as fresh meat, decided to eat her?

Good God, her thoughts were turning hysterical, not delirious?—

“Don’t be frightened.”

Belle was slow to react to that growly voice.

Firstly, because it was a very deep and growly voice.

Secondly, because she was so stiff from the cold, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to turn her head to look at whoever or whatever that voice belonged to.

Thirdly, and most worrisome of all, the growly voice had come from behind her and not the mouth of the cave she’d been staring at for hours.

Behind her, where there wasn’t an opening that led deeper into the mountain.

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CHAPTER THREE

Lachlan could only stare, transfixed, at the woman sitting on the uneven floor and leaning back against the just-as-uneven wall of the cave.

She wore a pale blue woolen hat that covered her hair, but several tendrils hung loose at the sides of her face, revealing those straight tresses were midnight black, the length probably just below her shoulders.

The rest of her was covered by a long, puffy, dark-blue coat she'd pulled over her knees, no doubt to keep warm, with thick gloves of the same color on her hands.

Lachlan's gaze was immediately drawn back to that heart-shaped face.

Her eyes were a bright sky-blue. Her cheeks were as white as the snow outside the cave. Her tiny nose turned up slightly at the end. Her lips were full and the color of ripe strawberries.

She was beautiful.

Mine , his dragon roared inside him.

Lachlan's dragon had begun to clamor with excitement the moment they'd entered the network of caverns and passages into the mountain through the concealed opening directly behind Drake House.

His beast had become more and more agitated once they had discerned and then

begun to follow the wafting scent of honeysuckle.

Lachlan had followed the allure of that scent directly to this cave.

To this woman.

The woman Lachlan had known, the moment he looked at her, was destined to be his elusive true mate.

He had no idea how she could be when his heightened senses told him she was completely human, and she looked to only be aged about twenty in human years. Yet he knew, without a single doubt, that this young woman was the destined other half of both him and his dragon.

The same woman who was staring at him as if she'd seen a ghost.

Or a dragon.

Belle had finally managed to turn her head and could now see, in light reflecting in from the snow outside, that the man standing at the back of the cave was huge .

He wasn't just tall and muscular, but stood at least six and a half feet tall, with shoulders so wide, Belle was sure he must have trouble getting through normal doorways. His hair was silver. Not gray or white but a pure burnished silver. It was also brushed straight back from a face that didn't look old enough for him to have that color hair.

An arrestingly beautiful face while also being completely masculine.

He had sharp slashes of silver hair for eyebrows. Eerily pale and piercing gray eyes. Cheekbones so sharp, they literally looked as if they had the ability to cut if they were

touched.

A neatly shaped beard covered the lower half of his face, but Belle was pretty sure his jaw would be just as inflexible as his cheekbones.

Unlike her own cumbersome clothing, this man wore a black leather jacket over a black T-shirt, with black jeans molded to his long and muscular legs, and heavy black biker boots on his very large feet.

Well, of course he'd need to have big feet, Belle reasoned. He would need them to support and hold up that huge body.

And...she was becoming hysterical again by allowing her thoughts to dwell on things that were totally irrelevant and not at all helpful to her situation.

Whatever that situation was.

She moistened the cold of her lips with the tip of her tongue before speaking huskily. "Where did you come from?"

For a moment, it seemed as if a fire flared in the depths of those pale eyes.

A fire Belle convinced herself she must have imagined after she had blinked and now saw those eyes were still their normal icy gray.

The man bent slightly to step into the middle of the cave. He immediately dwarfed the space when he once again straightened to his natural height. "There's an opening back there that goes through the caverns and passageways inside the mountain before opening out onto the other side."

God, that voice!

Belle'd never heard anything as powerful as that deep growl.

A growl that caused her body to tingle, her nipples to harden, and between her thighs to warm.

What the hell...?

Belle had never been aroused by a man's appearance before, let alone the sound of his voice!

In this man's case, an appearance that was as imposing as his voice was sexy.

Well, she'd definitely been aroused by both those things now!

She'd been sitting in this cold and barren cave for a very long time, during the long, dark hours of the night and this morning, all the time afraid she must be slowly freezing to death.

Yet after hearing this man's voice and glancing at his sharply mesmerizing features, every part of her had heated and responded in ways that made her bra chafe uncomfortably against her swollen nipples and her panties feel wet from the release of arousal between her thighs.

Which, considering how dire her circumstances were, was totally illogical.

And Belle had always been very logical in everything she did.

Except for believing in dragons , a voice mocked inside her head.

Okay, yes, that was a little illogical. But so was believing in unicorns, and a lot of so-called normal people believed those magical creatures had once existed too.

Belle frowned, shaking her head as she continued to look at the tall and imposing man. “I checked when I first came in here, and I didn’t find an opening in the back of the cave.”

“But of course there is,” the silver-haired man dismissed. “Otherwise, how would I have been able to come through that way and find you?”

How indeed?

But Belle had searched this cave thoroughly yesterday when she’d first stumbled across it and still had the light on her cell phone to look around. The wall at the back had been uneven, yes, but also unbroken by any sort of opening or entrance, let alone one big enough to allow this huge man to pass through.

“Come and see.” The man bent slightly to hold out one of his large hands, palm upward, for her to take.

An assistance to stand Belle knew she was going to need if she was going to be able to move at all, her extremities feeling as frozen as the rest of her.

The fingers of her right hand, even though they were inside a glove, felt as if they had frozen in place where they gripped her backpack to her chest. The backpack held all her worldly goods, most especially Sister Agnes’s journal.

Belle stared at the large hand this man held out to her, the fact he wasn’t wearing a glove allowing her to see how long his fingers were, his palms slightly calloused.

“Please,” the man encouraged softly.

Belle was filled with a compulsion to do as he asked.

A compulsion ?

Ridiculous.

Obviously, being outside for a day and night, exposed to the severity of the elements, must have given her brain freeze.

She kept her gaze lowered as she reluctantly held out her free hand. She was already sure this man's overwhelming presence was adding to her mental confusion. Touching him might just blow the top of her head off.

"Take off your glove first."

Belle blinked as she looked up at him quizzically, only to immediately become lost in the depths of those enigmatic silver eyes.

"Give me your bare hand," Lachlan encouraged again softly, needing to feel the touch of this young woman's skin against his own. To know with absolute certainty through that touch that she really was his mate.

True mate . His growling dragon let him know it didn't have any such doubts.

The moment Lachlan's bare fingers came into contact with the young lady's, any lingering doubt he might have had instantly disappeared.

The ecstasy he felt was so intense, he almost fell to his knees.

His fingers tightened about hers, her hand tiny in his much-larger one, her skin velvety soft to the touch.

He pulled her to her feet, his senses instantly assailed by a deeper waft of

honeysuckle. The same scent Lachlan had followed through the caverns in his search for her.

“Who are you?” she prompted shakily when a pull of her hand failed to release it from his grip.

Lachlan couldn't have let her go even if he'd tried. The moment their flesh touched, it had been as if their skin burned, searing them together, so there was no her or him, only the single entity of us .

He knew Belle had felt that fusing heat too, had seen it in the widening of her eyes and the sudden flush of her cheeks.

Her other hand continued to maintain a tight grip on the backpack she'd been holding so fiercely against her when he entered the cave.

“I definitely checked the back of this cave when I stumbled into it yesterday, and there wasn't an opening then.” Her accusing tone was full of suspicion.

“I assure you there is one.” Lachlan gentled his voice, sensing Belle was on the verge of what might be a full-scale mental meltdown.

Not surprising when she'd become lost up on the mountain, then sat alone in a dark and freezing-cold cave for hours with only her own thoughts for company. She must have been terrified. Had possibly even thought she was going to die alone up here.

“Lachlan Drake,” he introduced belatedly.

“Belle Brown,” she returned as economically.

Belle . His dragon savored the name.

Beautiful Belle.

Delectable Belle.

Delicious—

Enough , Lachlan instructed his dragon harshly. Hunter might have speculated about Belle living up to her name, but Lachlan could now see how beautiful, delectable, and delicious Belle was. Every inch of his body was thrumming in acknowledgment of that fact.

He had never physically reacted to a female as strongly as this before, the blood having rushed so instantly to his cock from the rest of his body that he was feeling slightly lightheaded. Or perhaps that was just from the euphoria of realizing he was in the presence of his true mate.

We have a true mate , his dragon preened.

It seemed they did.

A human true mate.

A human female who had probably never thought of the existence of dragons, let alone ever considered she might be the true mate of one.

Which meant it was going to take some delicate explaining.

And would require a patience Lachlan wasn't sure he possessed.

Then he would have to make himself possess it!

Now that he had met her, breathed in her scent, Belle was everything to him. The sun, the moon, the stars, the very galaxy itself. Nothing and no one else would ever come close to knowing the love and devotion he would feel for her.

“Let me show you the opening into the mountain, Belle,” he encouraged lightly, continuing to hold her hand prisoner in the warmth of his, binding her to his side as he walked to the back of the cave. “See?” He indicated where the rock of the cave wall slightly overlapped, revealing an opening behind it that was just large enough and high enough for Lachlan to get through.

Deliberately so.

As snow dragons, the brothers could bend the elements of earth, wind, water, and fire to their will.

Which was how, once he’d walked through the passages and caverns through the mountain, to the back of the cave his senses told him Belle had taken shelter in, Lachlan had been able to form that opening with just the sweep of his hand.

An opening that, as Belle had claimed, hadn’t been there before he’d walked through it a few minutes ago.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Belle could have sworn there hadn't been an opening...

Well, there was one there now, so it must have been there before too. Openings in solid rock didn't just suddenly appear. They took years to form.

She'd been exhausted by the time she found the cave the day before, she reasoned, and her fingers had already been numb from the extreme cold, despite her wearing gloves. She must have somehow missed this opening.

Not that she would have attempted to go through it once the light on her cell phone died. For all she knew, there could be a sheer drop on the other side.

Obviously, there wasn't, or Lachlan wouldn't have been able to step into the cave and find her, but she'd had no way of knowing that last night.

Which reminded her... "I hope I haven't inconvenienced too many people by them having to go out looking for me in this foul weather."

"There's only me," Lachlan told her. "And inconvenienced is the last thing I'm feeling," he assured gruffly.

Belle tried once again to pull her hand from inside his much larger one, but failed to release herself when his fingers tightened about hers. Not enough to hurt, just enough to prevent her from pulling free.

The first touch of Lachlan's hand had made her feel as if she'd received an electric shock. One that sent heat roiling through her whole body.

That heat had dulled slightly now, but there was still an underlying hum to her senses that made her totally aware of everything about this man.

Most especially what she could describe as an animal magnetism. It held her completely captive and had caused that uncharacteristic arousal.

She kept her gaze lowered, her physical response making it difficult for her to meet the hungry intensity she'd seen in those icy gray eyes.

Hungry, as if this man wanted to eat her?

Or hungry in that he felt the same physical draw toward her as she did toward him?

Of course he wasn't feeling either of those things, she inwardly snorted.

For one thing, he definitely didn't look like a cannibal.

He was also at least fourteen or fifteen years older than her. Which probably meant he also saw her as an irresponsible child for having wandered alone up the mountain, rather than as the practical and sensible woman she really was.

He was dressed casually, but Belle was familiar enough with wearing cheap clothing to know that Lachlan's jacket was made of butter-soft leather and his T-shirt and jeans were also designer label. His feet were so big, she was sure he must have his boots custom-made.

Indicating a wealth that suggested he could be the local lord of the manor, or the laird, which was the Scottish equivalent.

Belle frowned as she recalled his previous comment. “Did none of the McGregor family bother to look for me when I didn’t return to the house yesterday evening?”

He shrugged those wide shoulders. “It was dark and late by the time they realized you were missing. Ben and his father went out for a few hours this morning, but when they found no sign of you and the blizzard worsened, they called off their search.” His eyes narrowed. “They didn’t come out again because Ben seemed to be of the opinion you weren’t enjoying yourself and that you had probably just taken a train back to London.”

She recoiled in surprise. “Without first saying goodbye or thank you?”

Lachlan grimaced. “Ben thought it likely, yes.”

Probably because Ben, annoyed with her for rejecting him the night before, couldn’t be bothered to carry on looking for her.

Bastard!

Ever since someone broke into her room before Christmas, Belle had taken to carrying her most precious belongings around with her in her backpack. Not that she had many of those, but habit meant she’d brought her backpack up the mountain with her yesterday. The one she still gripped tightly against her.

It not only contained everything she’d brought with her to Scotland, toiletries, and several changes of clothes, but also what she considered to be the most important of Sister Agnes’s journals.

Which, she now realized, would have left nothing in the bedroom she’d occupied at the McGregors’ house to indicate she was coming back.

But Ben must have known she wouldn't just up and leave without thanking his parents for their hospitality.

Whatever Ben might have thought happened to her, he could have at least tried to check on her by calling her. Yes, she'd had no reception up the mountain, and her cell would probably have already been out of power by the time he maybe thought of doing it. But the fact he couldn't reach her might perhaps have alerted him to the fact that something was wrong. Somehow, she doubted he had even tried.

She scowled. "Are the trains even running right now?"

"Probably not." Lachlan shrugged.

"Then how the hell did they think— Never mind," she dismissed irritably.

"Was Ben right about you not enjoying yourself?" he probed.

Belle winced. "I don't drink alcohol, and the Hogmanay celebrations were very noisy and went on for a long time."

His eyebrows rose. "You didn't want to spend the New Year with your family?"

She shrugged. "I don't have any family."

"None at all?"

"No." Belle frowned slightly when she again briefly thought she saw that blaze of fire deep in the depth of Lachlan Drake's eerily pale eyes.

Maybe because, she realized belatedly, she was telling this man far too much about herself. Most worryingly, she had revealed that she was completely alone in the

world.

Not a good idea, Belle , she remonstrated with herself.

Lachlan already knew the McGregors believed she had traveled back to London without so much as saying thank you for allowing them to stay with them. Now, she'd also told Lachlan she didn't have any family who would miss her if she didn't return.

No doubt, the other occupants of the house she shared would notice her absence when they returned after the holidays. But then Ben would probably laugh and say she'd probably moved out because he'd made a move on her and been rejected.

Maybe someone on the university faculty might notice her absence when she didn't return to her classes after the holidays. But even then, attending classes wasn't compulsory, and if she continued being absent, they would probably just think she'd dropped out of the course.

It would be a little strange, considering she was fast approaching her final semester of a three-year course, but she'd seen other students leave when the reality of the final exams loomed. Admittedly, most of those students had been like Ben and rarely attended classes anyway. Belle was the opposite, and attended and made copious notes at every lecture.

But that didn't mean she couldn't have still decided to leave.

Even the manager of the coffee shop where she worked part-time would only complain when she didn't turn up for her shift in a couple of days. But he probably had a list of hopeful students just waiting to take her place. London was a transient place, coffee shop employees even more so, and those part-time jobs were always highly sought after by students who were as without funds as Belle was.

She looked at Lachlan Drake from beneath her lashes. There was a dangerous edge to this man, an underlying restlessness she sensed was there, despite his unnatural stillness.

The way he barely seemed to be breathing and was totally unmoving, that pale gray gaze concentrated solely on her, was almost supernatural, Belle realized with a shiver.

“You’re cold,” Lachlan immediately noticed that shiver, even if he misunderstood the reason for it. “I need to get you off the mountain and into the warmth of our house, where we can get some hot broth into you.”

“Our house?” Belle eyed him warily.

He nodded. “I share a house with my two brothers, Hunter and Ranulf.”

Good God, there were three of them!

Were the other two as intensely brooding and panty-meltingly handsome as Lachlan?

“Ranulf is more brooding than I am,” Lachlan provided dryly, immediately alerting Belle to the fact her brain was so muddled, she must have spoken those words out loud. “Hunter is less so, but probably still more than you’re used to. We’re a stoic breed up here in the Highlands.” He grinned, revealing very white and straight teeth. “But, as their brother, I can’t answer as to whether or not Hunter and Ranulf are panty-meltingly handsome,” he added with amusement.

Oh dear God...

“I apologize.” Belle felt the heat of her embarrassment burning her cheeks. “I’m not usually rude, especially to someone I just met. The cold must have frozen the polite

part of my brain.”

He sobered. “Which is why I need to get you somewhere warm as quickly as possible. Would you like me to carry you?”

“Hell, no! I mean... No. Thank you.” Belle’s cheeks burned with embarrassment at her knee-jerk reaction to being carried in this man’s strong arms.

It was bad enough that she was still totally aware of him through their joined hands, but being carried by him, held against that powerful-looking chest, would be a complete overload to her already aroused senses.

“I’m sure I can manage,” she assured.

“Then perhaps I can carry your backpack for you?—”

“No!” Her fingers tightened on the bag. “No,” she repeated less aggressively. “Thank you.”

Lachlan eyed her quizzically for several seconds before nodding. “Here, let me at least help you with this,” he offered when her cold fingers meant she struggled to put one of the straps of the bag over the shoulder. “Tell me if it gets too heavy and you change your mind.” He continued to hold Belle’s other hand firmly in his as he turned and slipped through the gap in the cave wall.

After the briefest of hesitations, but knowing she had no real choice if she wanted to get off this mountain, Belle followed him.

CHAPTER FIVE

She was surprised to find herself standing on a smooth pathway wide enough for two. Not only that, but there was a lit torch, which looked to be made of twigs and moss in a metal holder high up on the equally smooth wall, to light their way.

It was too smooth to be man-made with picks and shovels, a la the seven dwarfs, Belle mocked herself. The passageway was also too narrow for it to have been made with a boring machine.

But it must have been, she chided herself. There was no other way it could have been made so perfectly smooth.

Nevertheless, her uncertainty remained as Lachlan walked beside her along the passageway as it led deeper into the heart of the mountain. He matched what she was sure would be his much longer strides to her smaller ones. Belle appreciated his thoughtfulness. Most men nowadays didn't bother making those sorts of allowances.

The farther they walked, the more she realized the cold and lack of food for the past thirty-six hours meant she was feeling a little weak. Not that she was going to own up to that. Having Lachlan Drake carry her would just be too much.

There were lit torches every ten feet or so to light their way, and yet when Belle turned to look back the way they had come, it was to discover the torches were no longer burning behind them.

Torches didn't go out on their own.

These had!

And maybe the opening in the back of the cave had disappeared too?

No, the opening into the cave would still be there if she went back and checked, and a strong wind blowing through that opening was probably responsible for the torches going out.

That was the logical explanation for both those things.

Any other explanation, such as Lachlan Drake having magically made that opening appear and his having lit and then tamped out those torches behind them with a sweep of his hand, was ridiculous.

No more ridiculous than believing in dragons , the voice of reason once again taunted inside her head.

She really needed to have a talk with her inner self concerning mocking her belief and research into dragons that had, so far, been the most intense and satisfying work of Belle's academic life.

Yes, she believed that dragons had existed centuries ago, but she also believed they had then gone the way of the dodo. Which was why they no longer existed rather than being as common as any other raptor.

But that didn't mean she believed in magic too. That would be taking things too far for a methodical brain such as her own.

Besides, he might be very big and even more imposing, but Lachlan Drake was still only a man. Which meant he was as incapable of creating magic as she was.

Maybe the torches had some sort of sophisticated sensor that meant they flared up and then died down again when the people in the passageway had passed by.

There, a perfectly logical explanation.

Maybe...

Lachlan was fascinated by everything about his mate. How much shorter and tinier than him she was. Her wide-eyed interest in their surroundings as they walked down the passageway together. The trusting way she allowed him to continue holding her hand. The endearing way her upturned nose wrinkled slightly when she was deep in thought.

Troubling thoughts, judging by the frown between her beautiful blue eyes.

“How are you feeling now?” he prompted huskily.

“I’m fine to keep walking, thank you,” she answered primly. “And my backpack still isn’t too heavy.”

But the way Belle had kept such a firm grip on it told Lachlan that it must contain something valuable. Lachlan doubted it would be gold or jewels, but something far less obvious that was of value to Belle but perhaps not to anyone else.

Perhaps she didn’t have many possessions, making what she had in the backpack all the more precious to her.

If she became his mate, she would never have to go without ever again.

If...

“Are you still cold?” Lachlan asked.

She opened her mouth to answer him and then closed it again, a puzzled expression forming on her face. “Actually, no. I seem to have thawed out, and I’m feeling pleasantly warm right now,” she added with obvious incredulity.

Lachlan could feel his dragon’s pleasure was as great as his own for having made that happen for Belle. They had transferred some of their own body heat into Belle through the link of their joined hands.

“Where are we going?” she prompted now.

“I told you, to my home.”

“Would that be the building at the bottom of the mountain?”

He tilted his head. “Drake House,” he confirmed. “You’ve seen it?”

She nodded. “Yesterday, on my way up the mountain. It looks more like a castle than a family home.”

That’s probably because, many centuries ago, that’s exactly what it was. But several decades ago, the brothers decided that Drake Castle was too much of a curiosity to the tourists who had started to flock to the Highlands every year. Together, they had used their powers to redesign the castle to look more like a large manse to the human eye. They had also changed its name to the more innocuous Drake House.

Private Property signs had been placed around the house and the grounds, with strategically placed security cameras installed, monitoring for intruders day and night.

People in the twenty-first century tended not to recognize other people’s boundaries,

certainly that of property. A failing that would once have earned them time in the stocks or possibly death itself for having trespassed against another.

The fact Belle had been able to see the castle in its original glory was interesting. More than interesting.

And confirmation she was his mate?

If Lachlan had needed confirmation!

Which he didn't.

He could feel their connection through their joined hands, telling him Belle could feel it too, even if she didn't yet know why it existed. He could also sense some of her emotions through that physical link, most especially her puzzlement at that feeling of connection with a man she had just met.

For now, Lachlan had a more immediate matter to worry about. Specifically, whether or not he should take Belle through the opening looming ahead of them. The one that led into the main cavern.

Because that cavern contained the individual treasure hoards of the Drake brothers' dragons and those left behind by their parents. Vast piles of gold and jewels, accumulated over centuries, more than any one human would have ever seen in one place before.

Lachlan could use his control of the elements to mask that hoard, of course.

That didn't seem to have been too successful with Belle in regard to Drake Castle.

He could take Belle around the cave rather than through it.

But he could sense his dragon wasn't happy with either of those ideas. Probably because he wanted to show off their extreme wealth to their mate as evidence that they would be able to care for her if she agreed to mate with them.

If.

Because Lachlan knowing instinctively that Belle was his mate didn't mean, despite the connection between them, that she would accept him as being hers.

Mainly because humans didn't have mates. They fell in love and then chose, or did not choose, to have partners or wives and husbands.

Becoming a dragon's mate was something stronger, far more intense, than those relationships. Once they had mated and shared the dragon bite, their bond would last for the whole of their very long lives together.

Lachlan knew from their parents that once a dragon took a mate, even if one of them was human, they would share the same longevity. When one died, so would the other.

Their mother and father had also told them that one of the couple could refuse to accept the mating. If that happened, the dragon who had been refused would live out the rest of his or her life in an emotionally barren wasteland, which would eventually drive them insane before they died.

Belle was human, so that fate would not befall her if she should refuse him.

She might feel, deep inside her, that something was missing from her life. But as she had no idea what that something was, she would dismiss that slight hollowness and live the life she had chosen.

If Belle didn't accept and want Lachlan as a dragon as well as a man, then he would

face centuries of emotional torment before going insane and dying.

Show her our treasure , his dragon encouraged.

Lachlan hadn't known Belle for very long, but long enough to think she wasn't the sort of lass who would be impressed by extreme wealth or rare jewels.

Her clothes and appearance said she was a woman of practicality, not greed or self-importance. The fact she didn't drink alcohol or enjoy parties said she wasn't a frivolous woman either. Nor was she wearing a single item of jewelry.

Lachlan's dragon hoard was immense, as was the rest of his family's. So much so, it took up the whole floor of the main cavern and almost reached the top of its vaulted ceiling.

No, it was too soon to show Belle their treasure.

Just as Lachlan believed it was too soon yet to reveal his dragon.

True mate , his dragon urged fiercely.

Soon , Lachlan soothed his beast.

He hoped, prayed, he was telling the truth, and that Belle would agree to be theirs once she knew who and what he was.

Belle had no idea what thoughts were going through her rescuer's head, only that in this moment, Lachlan's attention seemed to be focused elsewhere. The frown on his face almost looked as if he was having an inner debate with himself about something.

"Are we nearly there?" Belle spoke into whatever those troubling thoughts were.

She just wanted to get away from this mountain. To be able to go to the railway station and board the first train that would take her back to London. Or anywhere but the Scottish Highlands, really. She would investigate Sister Agnes's claims another time. Right now, her only priority was to get as far away from Scotland as soon as possible.

"Not long now," Lachlan reassured as he veered to the right, taking them through yet another opening leading into another lit passage.

The even floor of this one tilted downward, giving Belle the impression they were almost at Drake House.

The bottle of water had kept her hydrated, but she was hoping for a cup of hot tea and maybe a biscuit or two, or possibly even a sandwich to eat when they got there. She was starving.

After eating and drinking, she was going to hope the trains were running and ask Lachlan if he would take her to the station. It was a couple of miles away from Drake House, too far for Belle to walk in the drifting and still-falling snow. She was hoping to catch up on her sleep on the long train journey home.

Come to Scotland for Hogmanay , Ben had invited.

Hah.

When she'd accepted the casually given invitation, Belle hadn't known it would lead to Ben thinking he would be sharing her bed.

Or that she would be lost overnight on a Scottish mountain.

Then rescued the following day by the hugest and most imposing and mesmerizing

man she had ever set eyes on.

If she had known any of those things, even with the temptation of investigating the contents of Sister Agnes's journal to spur her on, then maybe Belle would have quashed her impatience and visited the Highlands in the warmer weather during spring, as she had originally planned on doing.

CHAPTER SIX

Lachlan could feel his dragon's increasing clamoring tension as he and Belle neared the door that would take them through the back way into Drake House.

He knew the reason for it too. His possessive dragon didn't want any other dragons near Belle until they had claimed her. And that included Lachlan's two brothers.

Lachlan felt that same possessiveness, but it was tempered by the human logic that if he wanted to take Belle to his home, that his brothers would necessarily also be there.

The brothers each had their own set of rooms within the large house, into which they could disappear if they so wished. They rarely did except to sleep. Because the only way that Lachlan, Hunter, and Ranulf had survived for as long as they had was by remaining together. Fighting together too, against whatever foe presented itself.

Lachlan knew that Hunter and Ranulf would feel as he did. That far from being a foe, Belle was Lachlan's precious mate, to be cherished and protected. Even at the cost of their lives.

A protection Lachlan readily gave his brothers and would give to their mates too, if or when that time ever came. He sincerely hoped that it would.

He had only known Belle for a very short time, but already, that sense of inner desolation and loneliness, of everything being a combination of white, gray and black, had disappeared.

Colors were more vivid to him now. Most especially the blue-black of Belle's hair and the sky-blue of her eyes. As well as the rosy hue to her pale cheeks and the delicate blue of the veins visibly thrumming beneath that pale flesh.

In his eyes, and his dragon's, Belle was absolute perfection.

"My brothers can be a little...overwhelming when you first meet them." As they approached the entrance to the house, he felt it necessary to attempt to soften the reality of having three powerful dragon shifters in the same space. One of whom was her mate and already fiercely possessive of her.

Her mouth quirked. "The brooding Ranulf, but the less so Hunter."

Lachlan grimaced. "Well remembered." His dragon preened at his mate's attentiveness to his words.

"None of you are married?" she prompted curiously.

"No," he grated as, out of deference to Belle's human emotions, he continued to hold back his need to state his claim on her right now.

She smiled at him. "As I intend getting on the first train back to London, I doubt I'll be around long enough to be bothered by your brothers' differing levels of brooding."

Mine.

Take.

Now.

After hearing Belle state she was leaving, it was difficult for Lachlan to control the

roar of his dragon, but hopefully, none of that inner struggle showed on his face.

“Are you okay?” Belle eyed him curiously, letting him know that he hadn’t completely succeeded in hiding his inner turmoil at the thought of her leaving him.

“Fine,” he bit out from between clenched teeth. “But, as I said earlier, I doubt the trains are running after the blizzard we’ve had for the past twenty-four hours.”

Belle had no idea if there was a hotel or somewhere else nearby where she could stay until the weather improved and the trains were running again. She certainly wasn’t going back to the McGregors’ house. Or anywhere near Ben.

Not only had he tried to get into bed with her, but apart from that cursory search this morning with his father, he hadn’t even bothered to look for her after realizing she was missing.

Maybe he really had thought she’d gotten on a train and gone back to London without so much as a thank-you or a goodbye?

As Lachlan had just pointed out, the trains wouldn’t be running today, and considering the weather, Belle doubted they would have been running yesterday either.

Which meant Ben really hadn’t cared whether she lived or died.

Belle would seriously have to think about moving into other student accommodation before Ben came back from Scotland. There was no way she could live in the same house with him now.

“You can stay here with us until the weather improves,” Lachlan announced as he opened the door for her at the end of the sheer rock passageway.

Belle momentarily forgot her denial as to the suitability of accepting his hospitality or questioning how he had even known that was what she was thinking. Instead, she groaned her pleasure as the opening of that door meant she was immediately assailed by a blast of heat and the delicious smell of food, luring her to step into the warmth of the huge kitchen beyond.

She came to an abrupt halt, her fingers tightening about Lachlan's, when she stepped into the room and saw two men sitting at the scarred table placed squarely in the middle of the room.

She didn't need to be told they were Lachlan's two brothers. Not that they looked like him, or alike, for that matter, because they didn't. But as Ranulf and Hunter rose to their feet, she could see all the brothers were the same six and a half feet in height, with wide and muscular shoulders and chests, narrow waists, and long, long legs.

One of the brothers had his short dark hair styled shaved on the sides and back and longer on top. His eyes were so dark, they almost appeared black.

The other brother also had dark hair, but it was long to his jaw, a darker beard covering his chin and top lip. His eyes were a piercing green.

Belle wasn't sure if, genetically, it was possible for brothers to individually have gray, dark brown, and piercing green eyes.

Whether it was possible or not, that was what the Drake brothers had.

The two men in the kitchen were also both staring at her with the same intensity Lachlan had when he'd first entered the cave where she'd taken shelter.

She could also see Lachlan more clearly in the overhead light of the kitchen.

If anything, he was even more startlingly attractive now she could fully take in those piercing gray eyes and slicked-back silver hair.

“This is Belle Brown,” Lachlan introduced as he released her hand to stand behind her and help her remove the thick coat. He then placed it and her hat and gloves on one of the hooks beside the door. Belle continued to hold on to her backpack.

Piercing green eyes blinked at her. “My God, is she...?”

“Yes,” Lachlan bit out tersely as he moved to stand beside her, his arm almost touching hers.

“You’re sure?” the dark-eyed one growled.

“Very,” Lachlan confirmed. “Belle, this is my middle brother, Ranulf.” He nodded at the green-eyed man before turning to the dark-eyed one. “And our younger brother, Hunter.”

“Pleased to meet you both.” She stepped forward with her hand politely held out.

Only to come to an abrupt halt, her hand falling back to her side when she heard the soft rumble of what sounded like a dog growling in warning. A glance around the kitchen showed her there was no dog in the room.

“Weird,” she muttered under her breath at the same time as she shook her head.

The cold and fear during the long hours of the night before must have gotten to her if she was now hearing growls that couldn’t possibly be there.

“We’re very pleased to meet you too, Belle.” The brother called Hunter grinned, but made no effort to offer to shake her hand.

“Yes,” Ranulf confirmed abruptly, his hand now back at his side.

An awkward silence fell over the room. Well, it felt awkward to Belle. The three Drake brothers seemed unaffected, or at least not to notice the underlying tension Belle was feeling as, without actually talking about it, they set about the task of producing dinner.

Ranulf moved to stand in front of the huge range along one wall and lift the lid of the large pot on top of it, immediately releasing more of the delicious aromas that instantly made Belle’s empty stomach grumble in appreciation.

Hunter set about laying four places at the table.

Lachlan moved to slice the fresh bread sitting on a board on one of the work surfaces before placing it and butter from the fridge in the center of the scarred table.

To Belle, it looked orchestrated, something the brothers had done dozens of times before, each knowing the part they played without being told.

Having no family of her own, she felt almost envious of their easy familiarity with each other.

“Would you like to serve the venison stew into the bowls while I put out the plates for the bread?” Ranulf invited gruffly after he’d set out the four bowls and a ladle on the worktop beside the range for her to use.

“That’s the most I’ve heard you say for...a while, brother,” Hunter stated with approval.

Ranulf didn’t answer, but his lips quirked into what wasn’t quite a smile, but did succeed in making his features appear less grim.

Belle's mouth literally watered as she served the delicious-smelling stew into the four bowls before placing them on the tablemats at each place setting.

"Would you like something to drink with that?" Lachlan offered.

"Just water, please." She waited until Ranulf and Hunter had taken their seats on one side of the table before pulling out a chair opposite and sitting down. She placed her backpack on her thighs in front of her.

"Please, eat," Lachlan instructed as he placed the requested water on the table in front of her before taking the seat next to her.

The brothers proceeded to eat in silence, as if putting fuel into their bodies was a serious matter and not to be interrupted by conversation.

Despite her hunger, Belle ate more slowly. Firstly, because she didn't want to overload her empty stomach too quickly. Second, because she was still a little unnerved at suddenly finding herself in the company of three such imposing men.

One of whom she was still so very aware of as Lachlan sat beside her.

An awareness she had felt since the moment he stepped into the cave. In a way that made her breasts ache and between her thighs feel swollen and damp. An awareness that had deepened as he held her hand tightly in his while they walked along the passages through the mountain.

In fact, she felt slightly bereft, an emptiness inside her that had nothing to do with hunger, now that she no longer had that physical connection with Lachlan.

Weird.

But then, sitting here, eating venison stew with Lachlan and his two brothers, felt almost surreal. Not just because she'd never eaten venison before, but because she had never met even one man as large and handsome as Lachlan Drake, and now she'd not only met him, but also his two equally as big and handsome brothers.

Lachlan Drake ...

The significance of that name, now that Belle was no longer hungry and freezing cold, suddenly hit her.

In Old English, the name would have been Draca.

In Old Norse, it had been Draki.

But both those names translated to dragon.

Belle stilled before slowly turning to surreptitiously study the three brothers.

Tall. Check.

Stern featured. Check.

There were three of them. Check.

What the fu...fudge, she substituted for the word she'd been about to use to describe her obviously ridiculous thoughts, when normally, she was so pragmatic and practical.

She'd had to be to survive after her parents died. She'd been so young that she no longer remembered what they looked like.

Yes, the Drake brothers were tall and large—very large—and equally as imposing.

Yes, their features looked as if they had been hewn out of a rocky crag on the mountain that abutted their home.

And yes, their name in Old English and Old Norse meant dragon.

But none of those things meant they had any connection or were related to the men Sister Agnes had met eight hundred?—

“What do you have in the bag?”

Belle’s thoughts came to a screeching halt at Hunter’s lightly asked question. She glanced up to see all three brothers looking at her with the same curiosity.

Her arm tightened instinctively about the backpack resting on her thighs. “Just my clothes and toiletries, plus a few books. I brought them with me for my stay at the McGregors’ home.”

“I sent word to Hamish that you’d found their missing lamb,” Hunter told Lachlan dryly.

Sent word when? She and Lachlan had entered the kitchen only a few minutes earlier, and no one had left the room since then.

Lachlan dropped his spoon noisily into his almost empty bowl. “She isn’t their missing anything,” he snapped, his eyes once again seeming to flare with that inner fire as he glared at his brother across the table, his hands now clenched into huge fists on the tabletop.

Belle’s eyes widened in alarm at the sudden tension she sensed in the room.

A fierce and challenging tension as Lachlan continued to glare at his youngest brother.

“Lachlan, Hunter was just being his annoying self,” Ranulf quietly interjected into the rising tension between his two brothers.

Belle was Lachlan’s, damn it.

His true mate.

His Belle.

His!

Ours , his dragon purred.

“It’s okay, Lachlan.” Belle placed a soothing hand on top of his. “I’m not in the least offended by what Hunter said.”

Lachlan couldn’t take his eyes off that small hand voluntarily resting on top of his.

Or, after her down coat had been removed, how slender she was in a fitted blue sweater and black low-rider jeans.

Emphasizing how different their sizes were in human form.

His dragon stood as tall as this house, with fierce eyes and face, a wingspan as wide as a small jet, and razor-sharp teeth that could rip his prey to pieces before he ate it. A terrifying sight at the best of times, but it would probably traumatize a small human female. Even one as brave as his Belle.

“Stay strong, brother,” Ranulf soothed. “For all our sakes.”

Lachlan’s nostrils flared as he drew in several calming breaths. Fate wouldn’t be so cruel as to give him a true mate who would be scared of him. In either of his forms.

The fact that Belle was now touching him in his human form, of her own volition, proved that at least half of that was true.

He turned his hand over to grasp her fingers in his. “I do not consider the McGregors to have been caring or considerate hosts toward you.”

“To be fair, I don’t think Ben was too happy with the way I kicked him out when he came to my bedroom expecting— Ow, Lachlan, that hurts,” she protested as his fingers tightened—obviously painfully—about hers.

He eased his grip a little, but his jaw remained clenched. “He came to your bedroom?”

She nodded. “New Year’s night. I asked him to leave.”

“And did he?” As far as Lachlan was concerned, the McGregors youngest child’s life depended on Belle’s answer being in the affirmative.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “I didn’t come to Scotland for that.”

“Then why did you come here?”

A low growl rumbled in Lachlan’s chest at Hunter’s question and the way his brother was looking across at her from between narrowed lids.

“Calm it, big bro,” Hunter derided. “I’m just curious.”

“How do you do that?” Belle had turned to look at Lachlan with big eyes.

“Do what?” he rasped.

“Growl so convincingly.”

“Because he’s a grump,” Hunter dismissed. “And you, little Belle, are trying to change the subject.”

Was she?

Perhaps.

Because she knew, despite her ridiculous thoughts a few minutes ago regarding these three men and the Drake name, that most people would think she was slightly deranged for believing dragons had ever existed, let alone that the Drake brothers might somehow be related to the three Sister Agnes claimed to have seen all those centuries ago.

Belle still wanted to know how Lachlan could growl so low in his throat it literally sounded like a wild animal. Even if that ability didn’t mean he knew anything about the dragons Sister Agnes said had once lived in this area.

“Which was?” she now prompted Hunter.

“What’s in your backpack that you’re clinging to it as if it holds the crown jewels?”

“I’m not,” she defended.

“You are a little,” Lachlan reasoned.

All three Drake brothers were now watching her with varying degrees of curiosity.

Could she tell them about the journal? About the dragons Sister Agnes claimed to have seen?

If she did, would they politely dismiss it all as superstitious nonsense from centuries ago, maybe even laugh at her? Or would they, like her, want to know more?

None of the Drake brothers looked as if they would be mocking or deliberately cruel.

There was only one way to find out. “Okay,” she sighed. “But I think it will be easier if I show you.” She unzipped her backpack to look through the contents for Sister Agnes’s journal.

To look and look again.

Belle’s movements became more and more frantic as she realized the journal was no longer in there.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Belle?” Lachlan voiced his concern with the increasingly desperate way she was looking through the contents of her backpack, her face growing paler by the second. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s gone!” Her wild eyes appeared a deeper blue against the pallor of her cheeks. “How is that possible when I— That bastard!” Glittering anger shone in her eyes when she looked up at them. “The sneaky, thieving bastard!”

“Who is?” Hunter pressed.

“Ben.” She spat out the name. “It has to have been Ben.”

“What did he do?” Lachlan prompted gently.

“Stole the journal from my bag.”

“He stole your diary?” Ranulf frowned.

Belle shook her head. “Not my diary, someone else’s.” The backpack slipped off her knees and onto the floor, obviously no longer holding the same importance that it once had. “That backpack hasn’t left my sight except for the short time I went down the hall to the bathroom on the two nights I stayed in the McGregors’ house. It didn’t seem like a good idea to take it with me where there was water, so I left it in the bedroom. The second night I returned from my shower it was to find Ben lying on my bed waiting for me. He told me he was there for sex but now I know the journal is

gone I realize that must have just been a cover for my having caught him in my bedroom.”

“I’m sure he would have accepted the sex too if you’d been willing— You’re so damned easy to wind up,” Hunter mocked when Lachlan gave another low growl. “Obviously Ben’s real purpose in going to Belle’s bedroom was so that he could take whatever she was guarding so fiercely in her backpack.” He turned to look at Belle. “What was in the journal that was so important Ben McGregor stole it from you?”

That was a question Lachlan was also curious to know the answer to.

Belle was still in shock, after discovering the disappearance of Sister Agnes’s precious journal, that she couldn’t readily find an answer for Hunter.

Ben had to have taken the journal. She had no doubt about that. There was no one else it could have been.

But, like Hunter, she had no explanation as to why he would have done such a thing.

Ben was a medical student, so what interest could the contents of an eight-hundred-year-old journal, written in Old English by a nun who had long since crumbled into dust, possibly be to him?

Maybe it wasn’t the contents of the journal he was interested in, but the fact that it was eight hundred years old and so possibly of value to someone who collected such things?

Despite receiving money from his parents every month, Ben was always complaining about being broke, so perhaps he thought he could make some easy money by selling the old journal. It was unusual for poorer people to be able to write eight hundred years ago, which probably made Sister Agnes’s journal very valuable.

Its value to Belle was far more aesthetic.

Because, dragons !

But the fact the journal was now missing and Ben the likely candidate for stealing it begged the question as to whether the intrusion into her bedroom during the Christmas party had been as random as Belle believed it to be.

As far as she'd been able to tell at the time, nothing had been taken. So, apart from the fact she was angry at the thought of one of the couples at the party intruding into her bedroom so they could have some privacy to do God knows what, Belle had mainly chosen to forget the incident.

Perhaps too readily?

If it had been Ben who broke into her room and he'd been looking for the journal, then he wouldn't have found it. Belle had taken it to the library with her that evening.

Ben's unexpected invitation for her to come to the Highlands for Hogmanay had to have been for the same reason. The two of them had certainly never been friends.

He'd led her to think, when she came back from the bathroom that night and found Ben waiting for her in her bedroom, that sex was his reason for being there.

She no longer believed that to be the case and now thought it was Sister Agnes's journal Ben had been looking for all along.

"Ben must also be responsible for breaking into my room before Christmas," she stated flatly. There could be no other explanation for his behavior, both then and now.

Especially now, when Ben was the only one who'd had the opportunity to steal Sister

Agnes's journal from her bedroom in his parents' house.

"Ben broke into your room before you came to Scotland?" Lachlan rasped.

She nodded. "We share a house with several other students. And yes, someone broke into my bedroom during a party at the house. But when I looked around, I couldn't see that anything had been taken. I've just realized that was probably because I had Sister Agnes's journal with me at the library that night. Although the same can't be said for the other journals in the box in my wardrobe..."

"There was more than one journal?" Hunter prompted.

"A dozen or so."

Hunter frowned. "Who is Sister Agnes?"

"Damn it, I need to speak to Ben." Belle rose urgently, instantly swaying on her feet at the suddenness of the movement.

A stark reminder that she hadn't had any sleep, apart from dozing on and off in the cave during the long night. Nor had she eaten anything for thirty-six hours before the delicious venison stew just now.

She grasped hold of the back of the chair to steady herself. "I need to talk to Ben," she repeated.

Lachlan stood too. "You aren't going anywhere until after you've had some sleep. You've eaten, and you're warm, but now you need to rest."

She blinked at him. "You're very bossy for someone I just met."

“My dear Belle, you haven’t even begun to see his bossy side yet— Fine.” Hunter held up his hands in surrender when Lachlan gave a piercing glare. “But the longer you leave it to tell her the truth, the worse it’s going to be for you,” he predicted. “Belle doesn’t strike me as a woman who likes secrets or ulterior motives.”

“I’m not,” she confirmed before looking up at her rescuer and then having to lift her gaze even higher—Lachlan really was extremely tall! “How can you possibly be keeping secrets from me or have ulterior motives for doing so when you didn’t even know me until an hour or so ago?”

“Who is Sister Agnes, and what was in the journal, Belle?”

She looked at Ranulf, the up-to-now mainly silent brother. She wasn’t sure what answer to give him. Any more than she had been when Hunter asked the same question.

Especially after the fanciful thoughts she’d had about the Drake brothers such a short time ago.

She gave a shake of her head, her smile self-derisive. “I would need to tell you the whole story, and if I do that, you’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“Insane is my middle name, and believe me, I need all the company I can get on the crazy train,” Hunter assured her as he leaned back in his chair.

Belle glanced at each of the brothers in turn.

The stoic Ranulf.

The mischievous Hunter.

Lastly, the intense and overwhelming Lachlan, who couldn't seem to stop staring at her, and had a glint of possession in those silver eyes.

She bit her top lip when her gaze was caught and held by those icy gray eyes. "First, let me explain that I'm a student of mythology."

"Unicorns and such?" Hunter drawled.

"And such," she confirmed, not wanting to mention dragons just yet. "I'm actually studying the classics, both Greek and Roman mythology. With the possible intention of teaching the subject in a university in the future." She sighed. "A couple of months ago, I bought a set of journals at a house auction. They claimed to have been written by a nun in the twelfth century. I'm only telling you what happened," she insisted when Hunter snorted and Lachlan's jaw visibly tightened.

"The majority of the population couldn't read or write in the twelfth century," Hunter told her dryly.

"This nun, Sister Agnes, was taught to do so at the convent where she lived." Now that Belle had started to reveal the explanation, she didn't seem able to stop.

Possibly because before now, there hadn't been anyone she was close enough to that she could tell of her amazing find.

She wasn't close to the Drake brothers either, she reminded herself.

Possibly not, but Lachlan had saved her life, and she was so upset about the missing journal she had to tell someone why she suspected Ben of having stolen it.

So, she told them everything that had happened from the moment she acquired the journals. The long hours of translating them. Her excitement when that one journal

had revealed how Sister Agnes had been left as a sacrifice for the dragons by the elders in her village. But instead of eating her, the dragons had shifted into fierce warriors before reverting back to dragons and flying her to the convent where she had spent the rest of her life.

“She became a nun,” Ranulf murmured.

“She was the abbess for many years,” Belle confirmed. “I have to admit that initially I even suspected that the three of you, because you have the surname of Drake—which, incidentally, means dragon in several old languages—of possibly having been related to Sister Agnes’s three dragon warriors,” she concluded wryly. “I can only apologize for that, with the claim that I think the cold and the snow must have given me brain freeze,” she added with a soft and self-derisive laugh.

A laugh none of the Drake brothers echoed.

Instead, they were all looking at her with varying degrees of intensity.

A nerve pulsed in Ranulf’s cheek.

Hunter’s jaw was clenched.

Lachlan continued to stare at her through narrowed lids.

But there wasn’t a hint of humor amongst them.

Her laugh was nervous this time. “There’s really no need for you all to look so worried. I might be thought slightly eccentric for believing in dragons, but I’m not about to become violent if you challenge me on it.” Any violent tendencies she felt were currently aimed directly at Ben for when she next saw him!

Hunter turned toward Lachlan. “You’ll never have a more perfect time.”

He winced. “Yes, but?—”

“Hunter is right,” Ranulf said gruffly.

“Show her something to convince her if you can’t say it,” Hunter encouraged.

Belle turned to look at him. “Show me what?”

“That we aren’t related to the dragon warriors Sister Agnes claims to have seen,” Lachlan rumbled.

“Of course you aren’t.” She chuckled. “I told you, my thoughts have been all over the place, more so than usual, since coming to Scotland.”

“Belle, we aren’t related to them,” Lachlan repeated with a lift of his strong chin. “Because we are them.”

“Now that hurt.” She frowned at each of them in turn. “I haven’t known the three of you for very long, but even so, I chose to confide in you about the contents of Sister Agnes’s journal. There really isn’t any need to mock me because I believe dragons once existed.”

“We aren’t mocking you, Belle,” Lachlan insisted.

“Well, you certainly aren’t being kind,” she accused.

“Show her now , Lachlan,” Hunter bit out.

“Show me wh...” Belle’s words tailed off, her eyes widening, mouth agape, as

Lachlan's features began to change.

His forehead deepened, silver hair turning into a mane that ran from the Widow's Peak on his brow and down the center of his neck and back. Scales replaced the flesh of his face, his eyes gleaming a deep silver, his nose becoming flatter and wider above a slightly open jaw that revealed two rows of long and pointed teeth.

To all intents and purposes, Lachlan Drake's head had shifted into that of a savagely beautiful silver dragon!

Belle stared at him wordlessly for several long seconds before black shadows started to appear at the edges of her vision.

Shadows that deepened and grew darker still until she felt herself falling, and everything turned completely black.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Not your finest hour, brother,” Hunter drawled as he went ahead of Lachlan up the stairs to where their rooms were situated.

Lachlan carried an unconscious Belle in his arms. His face had shifted back to normal, but he retained his powerful dragon strength in his human form. Not that Belle was heavy to carry, because she certainly wasn't. Lachlan could feel his dragon's restlessness at realizing how little she weighed.

“You encouraged me to show her the truth,” he now defended.

Hunter winced. “Yes, but I thought you might reveal a talon or two, not just shift the whole of your face in front of her and almost shock her to death.” He pushed open the door to Lachlan's suite of rooms before standing back and allowing him to enter first.

Lachlan felt his dragon's purr of pleasure as he carried Belle into his personal space. A pleasure he echoed.

“Find Ben McGregor,” he instructed Hunter after his brother had pulled back the duvet, allowing Lachlan to place Belle in the center of the huge four-poster bed. He debated removing her jeans, sure that they must still be slightly damp from being exposed to so much snow. Her jumper and underwear should have remained dry. “Turn around,” he instructed his brother.

Lachlan waited until Hunter had turned away before unfastening Belle's jeans and pulling them down her legs. He efficiently removed her socks at the same time before

tucking the duvet around her shoulders and neck to keep her warm. He did so without allowing his hungry gaze to linger too long on Belle's bare legs or the pink cotton bikini panties she wore.

Lachlan straightened, but his possessive gaze remained fixed on Belle as she slept. "I want that journal back in our possession before Belle wakes up."

Hunter still stood on the other side of the bed. "Your mate is beautiful, Lachlan," he murmured.

"She is," Lachlan agreed proudly.

"I think," Hunter continued slowly, "that she's also open-minded where the existence of dragons is concerned. But maybe go a little slower next time, hm?" he added ruefully.

Lachlan sighed. "My partial shift earlier also proves that her belief in the myth of dragons and then actually finding herself face-to-face with one are two distinctly different things."

His brother grinned. "Yeah, that was obviously a bit of a shock when Belle only thought we might be related to the dragons in Sister Agnes's journal."

Lachlan smiled slightly. "It's good to know that she became a nun and eventually abbess in charge of the whole convent."

Too often, the people they helped either to escape becoming a human sacrifice or from some other life-threatening situation went on to live their lives without the Drake brothers ever knowing what had become of them.

It was so long ago, and Sister Agnes had been dead for centuries, but at least they

now knew that young woman had chosen to live out her life at the convent they had taken her to, and that she had made a success of it. At that time, becoming an abbess in an English convent was very much a success for a young girl from an obscure village in Scotland.

Hunter nodded his satisfaction. “I wonder what Sister Agnes wrote in those journals.”

Lachlan scowled. “You heard what Belle said earlier. She’d translated enough of those other journals to realize they mainly noted day-to-day events in the convent.”

“They could still be of interest to us, though,” Hunter said wistfully. “Especially the one where she wrote about warrior dragons.”

Of course they could, because Lachlan and his brothers had lived through that time. They had also known the author of those journals, if only briefly. They were the warrior dragons.

Lachlan looked down at Belle. She appeared so serene. So calm and warm and happy snuggled beneath the duvet.

Would she still be any of those things when she woke up and remembered what she’d seen?

When she remembered that Lachlan had partially shifted into a dragon in front of her?

“She might sleep for some time considering the night she spent terrified and alone, as well as cold and hungry on the mountain,” Hunter murmured. “When she wakes up, I suggest you go easy on the dragon-shifter-and-true-mate thing.”

“Before she wakes up, I want you to find McGregor and bring him and the journal to

me,” Lachlan repeated harshly.

If that boy had damaged a single page in Belle’s precious journal, then he would answer to Lachlan for it.

With his life, if necessary.

No one, absolutely no one, would ever hurt Belle and get away with doing so.

Ours , his dragon growled.

Theirs, Lachlan agreed with deep satisfaction.

Belle woke slowly, aware she was still feeling tired, her body so heavy, it took several seconds for her to even be able to lift her eyelids.

She felt totally disoriented when she looked around the unfamiliar room aided by a single dimmed wall light. Enough so that she could make out the heavy, dark furniture and a dark blue carpet.

The four-poster bed she was lying in was much larger than anything she had ever slept in before. The mattress was so comfortable, it felt as if she was lying on a cloud. The duvet covering her was so thick, she felt toasty warm.

But it was still a bedroom Belle knew she had never been in before now.

A glance toward the window showed the heavy blue velvet curtains weren’t drawn and that it was already dark outside. Still dark? She had no idea how long she’d been asleep. Nor did she have any idea where she was or how she came to?—

Dragon!

Belle bolted upright as that word screamed in her brain. Her fists were clenched on top of the duvet. Her eyes were wide, but also wary as she frantically searched the room for a sign, anything, that might tell her where Lachlan Drake was now?—

“I’m lying right here beside you, lass. On the duvet rather than under it because I don’t want you to think I’d ever take liberties. But I’m right here, Belle.”

Belle had frozen in place upon hearing the first word Lachlan spoke.

She literally felt as if she had turned into a block of ice, despite her previous warmth. She was so cold, in fact, she wasn’t even sure her heart was still capable of beating. Her mouth had also gone dry, preventing her from speaking even if she wanted to. Which she wasn’t sure she did.

What could she possibly say?

Maybe if she ignored the elephant—no, dragon—in the room, it would disappear.

“Can you look at me, Belle?” that familiar voice rumbled.

No, not gone yet.

Was she capable of turning to check if Lachlan was actually there or, as she suspected, just another figment of her imagination?

No, probably not.

Because what if she turned and Lachlan’s handsome face morphed into that of a dragon again?

Only in her mind, of course, because it couldn’t have been real. No, it had to have

been a hallucination brought on by the hours of stress she'd suffered through when she believed she was going to freeze to death alone on a Scottish mountain.

A hallucination that had begun the moment she'd thought Lachlan had somehow appeared through an opening in the back of the cave. An opening that hadn't been there when she'd searched the cave the previous day after taking shelter there. Which meant that Lachlan didn't really exist either.

No, the logical answer to this situation was that she was still on that mountain, huddled in the cave, and about to die. That the savagely beautiful Lachlan was no more than an illusion as she died.

Why she would be fantasizing about lying in bed next to such a savagely gorgeous man, and self-consciously aware she only wore her panties below the waist, was a question she needed to ask her obviously overactive imagination!

"I would rather cut off my own arm than ever hurt you," Lachlan assured her gently.

Her throat moved as a rush of saliva suddenly flooded her mouth and forced her to swallow.

"Look at me, Belle."

"I don't want to."

She needed this hallucination to stop.

Now.

It might be too late to save her life, but she'd like to hold on to her sanity?—

“I’m not going anywhere, and I’m pretty sure you’re going to need to go to the bathroom soon after all the water you drank with your dinner earlier.”

She turned to glare at the owner of that annoying and persistent voice.

Then immediately wished she hadn’t when she found herself looking at a sleep-tousled Lachlan Drake as he sat up against the ornately carved headboard.

He was just as big and powerful-looking as she had previously imagined him to be.

He’d removed the leather jacket and heavy boots and now wore only the black T-shirt and black jeans. His silver hair was loose about his jaw and shoulders. His face was still as harshly beautiful and compelling as she’d imagined, but also, thankfully, completely human.

Because she had hallucinated everything from the moment of “meeting” this man, that’s why!

Lachlan wasn’t really here, and neither was she.

“You aren’t imagining anything, Belle,” he told her softly. “I’m not sure if you remember, but I already told you we aren’t related to the three dragons Sister Agnes wrote about?—”

“Because you are them,” she stated flatly.

She didn’t care what Lachlan was saying. She had to still be up on that mountain, caught up in the last fanciful imaginings of her befuddled brain before she fell into unconsciousness and then died.

“Yes,” Lachlan answered her.

She swallowed again. “But that would make you centuries old.”

He nodded. “Twelve centuries and ten years more.”

“In that case, you’re looking very good for your age!”

“Belle,” he reproved.

She shook her head in denial. “You can’t be twelve-hundred-and-ten years old. That’s imposs?—”

“I assure you it isn’t. I can also shift into a dragon. More importantly, you’re my mate,” he stated firmly.

She recoiled so far away from him, she almost fell off the edge of the bed. “Your mate...?” She was hoping the question would divert his attention as she slipped from beneath the duvet and placed her feet on the carpeted floor before running.

She could run in a hallucination, right?

The way her luck had gone these past few days, the answer to that question was probably a resounding no. She wouldn’t be able to run when the time came. That even in death, she would be forever caught in this wild spiral of unbelievable imagery.

Besides, now that she’d slipped from beneath the duvet, she remembered she was no longer wearing her jeans or socks.

She didn’t remember taking them off, so had Lachlan been the one to undress her?

No, of course he hadn’t, because this, he , wasn’t real.

Then this had moved from a delusion into a sexual fantasy!

Lachlan's expression remained calm. "The moment I breathed in your scent, I began to hope. Then when I looked at you for the first time, I knew you were my mate."

"Breathed in my scent?" she repeated irritably. Even in her dream, she knew it wasn't polite for someone to tell her she smelled. "Of course, I have a scent . I've been stuck up on a mountain for hours, with nowhere and no way to wash or freshen up?—"

Lachlan chuckled. "Not that sort of scent. You smell like honeysuckle."

Her eyes widened. "I do?"

He smiled. "Heady and sweet."

"This doesn't make any sense." Dreams never did, she reminded herself. "What are you even doing lying here, in the same bed as me?"

"To be fair, I'm lying on it, not in it, and I stayed because I thought you might be frightened if you woke up alone and disorientated."

She stared at him incredulously. "You thought my waking up no longer wearing my jeans, next to the man I saw partially shift into a dragon and who claims he's twelve-hundred-and-ten years old, who also says I'm his mate, would be preferable to me waking up alone?"

He winced. "When you put it like that..."

"That's exactly how I'm putting it," she challenged.

She could be brave and say exactly what she pleased in a dream, couldn't she?

Could she even question this huge man who claimed he was centuries old and could shift into a mythical creature?

That she thought she'd actually seen partially morph into exactly that!

Instead of dragons, she should have become obsessed with unicorns, she chastised herself. They were beautiful and ethereal and gentle.

Maybe not so gentle, considering they had a vicious horn on their head that could gore someone to death.

Okay, she'd stick with dragons. But they were her dragons, and that meant they should damn well behave how she wanted them to behave.

"And just how many mates have you had?" she scorned.

"I only have the one tr—" His brow cleared. "Ah, you were asking how many women I've had sex with."

"Same thing," she muttered.

"Not in any way, shape, or form, lass." Lachlan stood, every bit as tall and muscular as Belle remembered him to be as she raised her gaze up and then up again so that she could look at his sculptured features.

As she imagined he looked, she corrected herself, because none of this was real. It couldn't be.

Lachlan walked round to the bottom of the bed before sitting, now only feet away from where a poised-for-flight Belle stood. "I've had sex. Of course I have. Although probably not as much as you might think, considering how long I've been alive," he

added ruefully. “Truth is, the last few centuries, I lost all interest in meaningless sex and just longed to find my true mate.”

“Oh, I’m a true mate now?” Belle taunted.

He frowned. “Dragon shifters have one true mate, yes.”

“And I’m yours?” she scoffed.

Lachlan’s eyes narrowed until they appeared as icy slits between his lids. “I’m not accustomed to having what I say doubted nor questioned.”

“Really?” she derided. “Well, if I’m going to be stuck in this torment of what seems to be my idea of hell with you for the rest of my eternity—although quite what I did to deserve going to hell is beyond me!—then we should probably set some rules from the onset.” She gave a decisive nod. “Rule number one is that I don’t give a damn what you’re accustomed to. This is obviously my version of what my afterlife in hell looks like, and as such, I should have a say in how you do or don’t get to behave in it.” She lifted her chin in challenge.

That had told him.

Well...that had told the man she only imagined was sitting a few feet away from her when she was only wearing panties below the waist, and he was looking sexier than even a sexual fantasy had the right to look.

CHAPTER NINE

Lachlan stilled at the realization Belle thought that he and all their interactions to date were nothing more than the tormented imagining of her brain as she prepared to die alone, frozen to death, in a cave up on the mountain.

There were two ways he could think of that would ensure she realized this was all very real.

One, he could kiss her.

Two, he could throw her across his thighs and spank her arse for being so scornfully disbelieving.

Appealing though the latter was when only those thin cotton panties would be between his hand and her bare arse and when his mate was looking at him with such scorn, he didn't think it was the right thing to do when he was hoping to convince her that she wanted to be his one true mate.

But he reserved the right to change his mind if the kissing wasn't successful!

Lachlan reached out to lightly encircle one of her wrists with his fingers.

"What are you doing?" she demanded after Lachlan had tugged on that wrist so that she lost her balance and ended up sitting sideways across his thighs. "Now look here." She glared at him. "This is my fantasy and— Umph!"

Lachlan was tired of being reasonable, of taking Hunter's advice to take things slowly.

This was his reality: Belle was his true mate, and he couldn't wait a moment longer to taste her sweet lips.

He kept one arm about her waist to hold her in place as he gripped her stubborn chin firmly between the thumb and index finger of his other hand before lowering his head and claiming those lips with his own.

Belle was initially so surprised that her hallucination now included having Lachlan Drake kiss her, when she'd never fantasized about any man kissing her before now, that her lips parted instinctively, and her arms moved up about his shoulders. She gave a low moan as she entangled her fingers in the silky softness of his unusual silver hair.

Still lost in the pleasure of those kisses, she moved so that she straddled his thick and muscular thighs, her pussy pressed against the throbbing hardness of his engorged cock.

Belle began to press and rub her aroused pussy lips and swollen clit against that hard length as their kisses grew hungrier still, teeth biting, tongues licking. Lachlan thrust his tongue deep into the heat of her mouth as he claimed her there.

Her arms tightened around his neck, and she continued to return his kisses as he rose easily to his feet, the firm grasp of his hands on either side of her bottom keeping her pressed against him from his hard chest to her parted thighs.

He placed her carefully down on the bed, and Belle watched him as he slid down her body until his face was level with her parted thighs.

She gasped as his head lowered, and he grasped hold of her panties between his teeth before ripping them from her body. Cold air brushed briefly over her exposed pussy.

“Ye’re sae wet for me,” he admired as his large fingers parted her folds before scooping up some of her release to stroke it all over her pussy and clit. “Delicious,” he groaned as his tongue lapped up all those juices for long and pleasurable minutes.

Belle groaned as he sucked her throbbing clit into his mouth, the flat of his tongue pressing and then licking that sensitive bundle of nerves until the pleasure grew to be too much, and her climax exploded and crashed over her.

She felt the muscles in her empty channel contract and release, wanting, wanting—“God, yes,” she encouraged breathily as one thick finger thrust into her wetness, then another, filling her, stretching her as a third finger joined the first two and thrust deep and hard inside her.

One of those fingers bent, pressing and stroking against a bundle of nerves inside her in the same rhythm as he sucked her clit.

Her second climax was even stronger and harder than the first, her contracting channel tight about those three thrusting fingers.

“Again, my beautiful Belle,” he encouraged thickly, his breath a warm caress against her aching flesh before he lowered his head and sucked fiercely on her oversensitive clit, tongue pressing hard against that exposed nubbin.

Her third climax hit with the force of a tornado, lifting her higher and higher until she felt as if she were floating.

“Do ye believe I’m real now, Belle?”

Belle crashed back to earth at the sound of the arousal in Lachlan's voice. Which was when she realized she was lying back on the bed, her limbs as limp as noodles while the rest of her body was aching and satiated.

Lachlan was directly above her, supporting himself on his elbows as his hands cradled either side of her face.

Belle had no idea what she believed and could only stare up at Lachlan as she continued to revel in the pleasure from his hands, lips, and tongue.

Tears burned her eyes as she once again accepted this had to all be a figment of her deluded imagination.

Lachlan didn't exist except in her dying mind.

She could never remember fantasizing about a man who looked as gorgeous as Lachlan, but she must have done for her to have imagined him being here with her now so vividly. Not just with her, but being kissed and made love to by him.

None of it was real.

But oh, how grateful she was for the fantasy of him being with her now. His presence, his kisses, and the intimate way he had touched her and given her pleasure. They all made her feel cherished and cared for. Something Belle now realized she had ached to feel since she had been left alone at such a young age.

Which was probably why she was having this fantasy when she was about to die?—

"I can see I'll have to go with the other alternative after all," Lachlan grumbled as he rolled to the side before sitting up on the side of the bed.

He once again pulled Belle across his thighs, but this time, he positioned her so that she was lying facedown.

“I didna want to have to do this, my mate,” he grumbled. “But refusing to believe in me or our mating means ye’ve left me with no other choice.”

This, Belle learned only seconds later, was to feel the hard smack of Lachlan’s palm on her bare backside. Then another. Followed by another. And another.

The pain of each one reverberated throughout her whole body. A pain that left Belle with absolutely no doubt this wasn’t a hallucination after all.

Which meant that both her rescue and Lachlan were all too real.

Did that mean twelve-hundred-and-ten-year-old dragon shifters were real too?

That she , as Lachlan had claimed, was his one true mate?

Lachlan was aware of the moment Belle stilled across his thighs.

Quickly followed by him almost being able to hear her thoughts processing and accepting the information—and the pain of being spanked—of knowing that she really wasn’t still alone and dying in a cave on the mountain. That she was very much here, in Lachlan’s home, having her arse smacked.

When they were fully mated, Lachlan would be able to clearly hear the thoughts Belle wanted to share with him, as she would be able to hear his. Because they were true mates. Lachlan had no doubts about that after kissing and touching Belle and glorying in the beauty of watching her as she climaxed again and again.

Something he wished to see again at the earliest opportunity.

The taste of her was almost enough to make him come in his jeans as he reveled in the taste of that nectar on his tongue.

But here and now, he needed to deal with what Belle had realized was indeed reality.

Her new reality.

She slowly placed her feet on the carpeted floor before carefully standing, gasping her dismay when she realized that she was now completely bare from the waist down. Her ripped panties lay on the carpet, feet away from the bed, where Lachlan had thrown them before devouring her.

She kept her gaze averted as she quickly grabbed her jeans from over the back of the chair in front of the dressing table before hopping from one foot to the other as she pulled them on and the zip up before fastening the single button at the waist.

Lachlan watched her every move like the predator he truly was. At the same time as he was fighting the urge he felt to throw Belle over his shoulder and carry her off to his cave, where he would then lay her down among his other treasures. Belle was far and beyond the most precious jewel he had ever imagined, and he would guard her with his life.

Belle's cheeks were once again as white as the snow outside, but she held her chin at a challenging angle. "You're real."

Lachlan surged to his feet, pleased when Belle stood her ground. "I am," he confirmed, although it was more a statement than a question.

She moistened her lips. "And a dragon shifter."

"Aye."

“A twelve-hundred-and-ten-year-old dragon shifter.”

“One who looks pretty good for my age, apparently.”

She swallowed. “And you think I’m your true ma?—”

“I don’t think anything, Belle. I know ye’re my true mate,” he growled.

Her knees buckled, and she put her hand out to grasp one of the four wooden posts to steady herself before scrabbling to sit on the bottom of the bed, looking up at him. “You really knew Sister Agnes.”

“She was called Ailsa when we met her and took her to the convent, but aye, we knew your Sister Agnes.” He grimaced. “Probably not a good idea for her to have written that meeting down for someone else to read centuries later, but I’m sure she had her reasons.”

“She was probably as awestruck by the event as I am and just needed to write it down so that she could read it occasionally and know that it really happened. Besides, I wouldn’t have come to Scotland if she hadn’t written her journal and I found it and read it. Then we would never have met.”

Lachlan felt his chest tighten just thinking about never having seen or spoken to Belle. Never making love to her, which had been the single most erotic experience of his long life. Of how the years he had left to live would have continued in that monochrome of black and white and varying shades of gray instead of all the multitude of vibrant colors he could now see.

He gave a fierce shake of his head. “I couldna have born that.”

Her head tilted. “Your Scottish accent deepens when you’re upset or—” She broke

off, her cheeks blushing a fiery red.

“Or aroused,” Lachlan finished huskily. “Aye, it seems that it does.”

“Didn’t you already know that?”

“When I’m upset, or during anger, yes, but when I’ve been aroused, no. I believe that is unique to you, my mate.”

Belle moistened her lips before speaking. “Does the true-mate thing mean that you would be faithful to me, and only me, for the rest of your life?”

“Yes, it does, and I will be honored to be so. And it’s our lives, Belle,” he added gently. “Because once we mate, you would be completely faithful to only me, and your lifespan will be matched with my own.”

“Which is how long?”

“Both my parents were over three thousand years old when they died, so I’m a mere babe compared to them.” He chuckled as he guessed Belle’s sudden frown was due to the calculations she was currently making inside her head. He sobered. “However long we live, neither I nor my dragon will ever want to be with anyone else but you. Once the two of us are mated, we will dedicate our lives to only you and your happiness.”

Lachlan could see the tears glistening in Belle’s beautiful blue eyes. It wasn’t difficult to guess the reason for those tears. Belle had been on her own all her life, and the thought of having someone totally devoted to her happiness must appear to her as elusive as that unicorn Hunter had mentioned, waiting for her at the end of a rainbow.

She eyed him cautiously. “Does...what we did earlier”—her cheeks flushed a deep

red—“does that mean we’re mated now?”

“No. I would never mate with you without your permission. Besides, you’d know if we’d mated.”

Her eyes widened. “Why, what does the mating involve?”

“Well—” Lachlan broke off, a frown marring his brow as a loud knock sounded on his bedroom door.

He knew before answering it that it was Ranulf standing on the other side of that door.

He could also sense his brother was far from happy.

Whatever Ranulf’s reason was for disturbing them, and Lachlan was sure it must be an important one, now that he had kissed and tasted Belle, intimately touched and caressed her, he didn’t want another man or dragon shifter anywhere near her until their mating was complete.

Probably not even then.

“Wait there,” he told Belle abruptly before moving to open the door.

CHAPTER TEN

Belle instantly bristled, her snort indignant, after hearing Lachlan's harshly issued instruction.

Bloody arrogant dragon shifter.

Oh God, Lachlan and his brothers were all men who could shift into dragons!

That was going to take a lot of getting used to. If she ever did.

In the meantime, she certainly wasn't prepared to remain obediently sitting on the bed once Lachlan had opened the door and spoken softly to whoever was outside before then stepping out into the hallway and closing the door behind him.

No doubt as a centuries old dragon shifter, being an alpha male as well as an apex predator, he was used to issuing instructions and having them obeyed.

But Belle was a twenty-first-century woman, one who had determined her own actions and decisions since she was eighteen years old. As such, she had no intention of meekly sitting there waiting for her lord and master to return.

Even so, she was also a twenty-first century woman who made sure her ripped panties were safely stowed in the back pocket of her jeans before she wrenched open the bedroom door to look questioningly at two of the Drake brothers, Ranulf and Lachlan, standing in the hallway.

Finding herself the focus of the sheer intensity of two such powerful males made Belle want to step back into the bedroom and close the door.

Instead, she forced her fingers to tightly grip the side of the open door and remained standing exactly where she was. “Does what the two of you are talking about concern me? Because if it does, I think I should also be present, don’t you?”

“Strong-willed,” the gruff Ranulf admired.

“I prefer to think I’m in control of my own life and actions,” Belle corrected before turning to Lachlan. “Well?”

His smile was rueful. “I’m sorry I ever thought of excluding you.” He sobered. “Ben McGregor has disappeared.”

She stilled. “What do you mean by ‘disappeared’?”

“Gone. Left. No longer visible to the human eye.” Ranulf snorted. “Or the dragon one either, for that matter.”

Belle decided to ignore that reference. She was still having trouble coming to terms with what she’d seen and been told on that subject. For now she needed to concentrate on what was happening now and not what could be. “How do you know Ben has disappeared?”

“Hunter paid a visit to Ben’s family home.” Lachlan once again took up the narration. “He didn’t knock on the door or make them aware of his presence in any other way, but with his heightened hearing, he was able to?—”

“You all have heightened hearing too?” Belle prompted eagerly.

“I’m pretty sure it’s normal hearing for dragons,” Ranulf explained.

“You’re being pedantic?—”

“Yes, we all have heightened hearing compared to a human’s.” Lachlan cut in to what was looking to become an argument between the fiery Belle and his introspective brother.

“Do the three of you also have some sort of...mental connection so that you can read each other’s thoughts?”

“Yes.”

“But our connection will be separate to the one between the two of you once you’re mated,” Ranulf assured.

“If we’re mated,” Belle insisted.

Ranulf gave a derisive snort. “I seriously doubt that a strong-willed and intelligent woman like yourself would be able to pass up the opportunity to learn more about dragon shifters by refusing to mate with one.”

“You choose now to find your voice and become chatty?” Lachlan glared at Ranulf.

His brother shrugged. “I meant it as a compliment.”

Lachlan scowled. “Well, it sounded as if you were saying the only reason Belle would consider mating with me is because it will aid in her research into the existence of dragons.”

“How can you possibly think that after the way we just— Never mind,” Belle

snapped, warmth coloring her cheeks. “Could we return to the subject of what Hunter overheard at the McGregors?”

Ranulf nodded. “Hamish and Morag were discussing Ben having gone out shortly after he and his father returned from looking for you this morning. He hasn’t been seen since.”

Belle considered this information. “Do you think he can have gone back to London?”

Lachlan shook his head. “The trains aren’t running,” he reminded. “The roads haven’t been cleared yet either.”

“Then where is he?”

“A helicopter was heard in the vicinity around midday,” Ranulf put in. “It landed just before Ben went out and then took off again shortly afterward. Ben hasn’t been seen since.”

Belle gave a baffled frown. “Ben’s a student, so I’m pretty sure he doesn’t own a helicopter. I doubt he knows any millionaires who do, either,” she scorned.

Lachlan grimaced. “That might change if he’s managed to find a buyer for Sister Agnes’s diary.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

Lachlan could see that she didn’t.

Probably because she hadn’t spent the last twelve centuries keeping herself hidden from the greed of treasure hunters and the savagery of dragon hunters.

It had been difficult enough to do during those earlier centuries, when superstition had been rife across the land. Even more so during the Victorian era when, for some reason, the idea of dragon and vampire hunting had become fashionable.

But during the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when technology and the internet had become so intrusive and instant, keeping their identity as dragon shifters had become increasingly difficult. It would be a relief, in some ways, to disappear for the half a century or so necessary to hide their existence.

“Think, Belle,” he encouraged gently when she continued to look confused. “What is a dragon supposed to have and value above everything else?”

“I don’t— Are you referring to the fable of a dragon’s treasure?” She chuckled at the idea, then sobered when she saw that neither Ranulf nor Lachlan were joining in her humor. “You can’t be serious.”

“When we came through the mountain earlier, I diverted our route around the center,” Lachlan said softly.

She frowned. “I assumed that was because it was solid rock.”

He shrugged. “It isn’t. I made that decision because I didn’t want to overwhelm you by showing you too much too soon.”

She snorted. “The partial shift you did earlier wasn’t too much too soon?”

Lachlan grimaced. “It was,” he conceded heavily. “And I apologize. But our dragon treasure is very real too, Belle. Not just the physical treasure we’ve accumulated during our lifetimes but also the vast hoard left to all of us by our parents.”

“Define vast hoard,” she said slowly.

“Billions of pounds in jewels and gold.”

Once again, Belle found herself reaching out for help to steady herself as she staggered slightly, one of her palms now planted flat against the wall to help keep her on her feet. “Billions...?”

Lachlan nodded. “We also own land and real estate in England, Europe, Asia, and America. Plus, shares in businesses around the world.”

“But it’s the tangible wealth that treasure hunters tend to focus on.” Ranulf scowled his displeasure.

“The jewels and gold worth billions of pounds,” Belle said hollowly.

“Exactly.”

“There are really people in the world who think dragons and their treasure exist?”

“People besides you, you mean?” Lachlan teased.

“I only hoped dragons had once existed. I didn’t think the three men Sister Agnes described as dragon shifters would still be alive. Nor did I give the fabled dragon treasure a second thought.”

“That’s because your heart is pure and you’re my one true mate.” Lachlan’s chest expanded with pride as he looked at her.

Belle’s cheeks warmed. “You think I am.”

“I know you are.” The way his gaze held hers was enough to remind her of their shared intimacies just a short time ago.

She narrowed her eyes. “There’s a lot more you need to tell me before I can make a considered decision as to whether I should agree to mate with you.”

“Such as?” He was willing to tell Belle anything and everything if it meant she agreed to become his mate.

“Besides this heightened hearing you say you and your brothers have, can you also make an opening appear in a cave wall that I’m pretty sure hadn’t been there the previous night?”

“Ah.” A nerve pulsed in his clenched jaw. “Yes.”

“And light and then put out torches with a sweep of your hand?”

“It’s with a thought,” he corrected. “But yes, we can all control the four elements of earth, wind, fire, and water.”

“Does this...telepathic connection you admit the three of you have allow you all to converse or perhaps guess each other’s thoughts and emotions, no matter how far apart you are?”

“We’re from the same clutch, so yes,” Lachlan confirmed. “But as Ranulf said, if we were mated our own mental link would have priority over my connection to my brothers,” he assured. “Nor would they have access to any mental exchanges we might have.”

“Believe me, brother, I have no wish to be a party to any of your future intimacies with Belle,” Ranulf scoffed.

Belle ignored him. “So, the three of you are billionaire dragon shifters with heightened senses, you share a mental telepathy, and you also all have the ability to

bend earth, wind, fire, and water to your will?”

Lachlan winced. “Yes.”

“I need to sit down before you tell me any more.” She crossed the room to once again sit on the side of the bed. Lachlan and Ranulf followed her, but didn’t sit down. It was like having two giants looming over her. “Where is Hunter now?”

Lachlan shrugged. “Doing what he does best.”

“Which is?”

“Hunting.”

She frowned. “Hunting for what?”

“The whereabouts of Ben McGregor.”

She huffed. “If a helicopter really did land and take off again, and Ben hasn’t been seen since, I doubt your brother will find him anywhere in the vicinity.”

“One thing we’ve learned about treasure hunters over the years,” Ranulf put in softly, “is that once the treasure is within their grasp, they don’t like to share.”

“What do you...” Belle stilled, her eyes going wide. “Do you think something’s happened to Ben?”

She might think he was a bastard for breaking into her room in London, stealing Sister Agnes’s journal from her since their arrival in Scotland, and then leaving her to possibly freeze to death on a mountain during a blizzard.

But that didn't mean she felt that same callousness toward any harm befalling him as he had to her.

Lachlan shrugged. "I think we should stop hypothesizing and wait for Hunter to come back." Although he didn't hold out much hope for a positive result even after his brother had returned.

Ben had obviously been trying to steal the journal from Belle for some time. At least since several weeks before Christmas, when he had broken into her locked bedroom.

A room Belle would not be returning to, whether she decided to accept their mating or not. As far as Lachlan was concerned, Belle was his true mate, and he would provide for her for the rest of her life, no matter what she decided regarding the two of them.

He also, if he was being bluntly honest with himself, couldn't stand the thought of Belle living in a house with other males. God knows what he would do if she refused their mating and then, sometime in the future, fell in love with and married a human male who could give her a normal life.

He would have to ask his brothers to put him down if that should happen. Because Lachlan had no doubt he would want to rip the world apart, and a dragon his size would be able to do a lot of damage before anyone was able to stop him. It would also reveal the existence of dragons, which he could never allow.

"Hunter has returned," Ranulf announced evenly.

Lachlan immediately centered his attention on their familial connection.

He sensed Hunter landing behind the house as dragon before shifting into a man and then entering the kitchen.

It was only too easy to read the grimness of Hunter's emotions through all those actions.

And to guess the reason why.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The moment she set eyes on Hunter, as he stood in the middle of the kitchen with blood on his clothing, Belle knew that something terrible had happened.

His eyes no longer held a hint of their previous mischief as he threw whatever alcohol was in the glass he held to the back of his throat. He swallowed the fiery liquid before acknowledging the three of them had even entered the kitchen.

His expression was grim. “Far as I can tell, the bastards took the helicopter up to about ten thousand feet before throwing him out.”

“Throwing who out?” Belle gasped in alarm.

But she knew. She knew , damn it.

“Young Ben McGregor,” Hunter answered her. “He died on impact.”

Belle was so shocked, she let out a keening cry.

She might have been angry with Ben, furious, in fact, but what Hunter was describing was a horrible way for anyone to die. Belle didn’t even want to imagine the terror Ben must have felt as he dropped through the air, knowing he didn’t have a parachute to aid with his landing.

But... “Wouldn’t the deep snow have helped to soften his landing?” Ben would probably have still suffered multiple broken bones, but surely he might have

survived.

“What are you trying to say, Belle?” Hunter challenged.

Yes, what was she trying to say?

Lachlan stepped forward so that he now stood partially in front of her.

As protection?

“Take a look at yourself, Hunter,” he rasped. “You announced McGregor is dead, and your clothes are covered in his blood.”

“Sorry.” Hunter shot Belle an apologetic glance as he dropped onto one of the kitchen chairs around the table. “We watched that boy grow up, and finding him like that...” He sighed heavily before looking at Belle again. “To answer your question, yes, the snow might have softened his landing if they hadn’t dropped him so that he hit and bounced off the side of the mountain several times before he hit the ground.”

Belle winced at the horrible death given to Ben. No one deserved to die like that.

Hunter looked at his brothers. “I made the decision to clear up the places of impact and the spot where he finally landed before moving him to the bottom of a sheer drop on the other side of the mountain. It will explain the extent of his injuries. Hamish and several men from the village will find him there when they go up the mountain to look for him.” He glanced at Belle. “They believe he went searching for you on his own.”

She swallowed. “Which means they’re going to hold me responsible for his having died while doing so. Probably because I am,” she added aching.

“You are nothing of the sort!” Lachlan reached out to grasp the tops of her arms. “You are not responsible for McGregor’s greed in accepting money for stealing Sister Agnes’s journals from you.”

“But—”

“What happened to him after he entered into that agreement was entirely on him,” Hunter agreed. “Is it sad that he’s dead? Of course it is. His family will no doubt miss him terribly. But he made his own choices and brought about his own death through greed, along with a hearty dose of a lack of concern for the welfare of anyone else involved.”

Lachlan nodded. “Considering he left Belle for dead on the mountain, I personally can’t summon up a bit of sympathy for him. For Hamish and Morag for the loss of their son, yes, but not for the greedy young man who treated you so dishonorably and was then murdered by the same treasure hunters he had decided to do business with.”

“How did they even know you had the journals, let alone what was in any of them?” the quiet Ranulf prompted.

Belle had wondered about that too, since she’d realized the journal was missing from her backpack.

The only explanation she’d been able to come up with was that the thieves must have been alerted by the searches she’d made online. They had been extensive, especially in regard to the location of the convent where Sister Agnes had lived and any connection she might have had to dragons or dragon shifters.

If the hunters had red-flagged certain words online, it would have been easy, once alerted to her searches, for any decent hacker to follow that digital trail back to her. Especially when she’d done most of her online searches at the library, which was an

unsecured connection and so could be hacked. It would have been an easy step from there for the hunters to be able to learn her name and home address.

Which was probably where Ben had entered into their plans. Despite living in the same house, he and Belle weren't friends, and the temptation of the money the hunters had offered must have been too much to resist.

Besides, it had probably seemed like an easy task to Ben at the time: break into Belle's room, steal the journals, and then collect his money.

It had been some time since Belle had even looked at the other journals in the box at the bottom of her wardrobe. Now that she knew of Ben's involvement, she was even more convinced that he had stolen those journals from her room before Christmas.

Unfortunately for Ben, whoever was looking for dragon treasure would have quickly discovered that, although the journals were written by Sister Agnes, not one of them had anything written in them about the dragons Belle had so thoroughly researched online.

Which was how the treasure hunters must have realized there had to be another journal.

A journal Ben had found a way to steal after she joined him and his family for Hogmanay in the Highlands.

Lachlan was right. During none of those actions had Ben seemed to give her continued well-being a thought.

He certainly hadn't seemed in any hurry to tell anyone or rescue her once he realized she'd gone off on her own up the mountain.

She accepted Hunter and Lachlan were right, and Ben had been complicit in his own death.

“I’m sure you’re right.” Hunter nodded after Belle had shared her thoughts with the three brothers. “I took this from Ben’s backpack.” He held up a mangled laptop. “It’s pretty damaged from the fall too, but if I can save the hard drive, it might give us a lead on who these treasure hunters are and how to find them.”

The laptop looked pretty beaten up to Belle, but that didn’t mean the hard drive wasn’t salvageable.

Hunter huffed. “I doubt any of them realized that the dragons they were seeking live only a couple of miles from the village where Ben resides with his family.”

Belle grimaced. “They might once they’ve translated and read that missing journal.”

Ranulf nodded his agreement. “Which is why we will have to seriously consider bringing forward our need to disappear for five or six decades.”

She gasped her alarm. “You’re going away?”

“We have to do so every fifty years or so,” Lachlan confirmed gently. “Our interaction with the people in the village is minimal, but it’s their belief different generations of the Drake family have lived in this house for centuries. If we don’t disappear, sooner or later someone would realize we aren’t aging.”

“I don’t want you to go.” Belle was surprised at how much even the thought of never seeing Lachlan again made her heart ache.

“We can’t go anywhere until after we’ve found the people who killed Ben and taken back Sister Agnes’s journal,” Hunter reasoned. “We also have to be prepared for the

fallout in the village once Ben's body is discovered. Which it will be, because I left it so that Hamish and the other men from the village could easily find him. I didn't want to risk anyone else losing their life in this weather," he explained.

"You did right, brother," Lachlan assured him.

"Belle will need to bring herself down from the mountain too; otherwise, the villagers are going to keep searching for her or her body," Hunter pointed out.

"Can you do that?" Lachlan looked at her searchingly.

"I can." She had never been one for subterfuge. But keeping the identity of the Drake brothers as dragon shifters who were twelve hundred years old was far too important for her not to play her part in preserving that secret.

Besides, her responses to Lachlan, the way she felt as protective of him as he did of her, told her that Lachlan was her true mate just as much as she was his.

Lachlan nodded. "At least this way Hamish and Morag will think their son died a hero. Rather than as a thief, paid to betray and steal from the young woman he shared student accommodation with, and later brought to his family home under false pretenses."

Belle placed a gently soothing hand on Lachlan's forearm after hearing the displeased growl in his voice. "I rarely saw him, and I had my own bedroom."

He bared his teeth. "You've still been sharing a house with the wee bastard?—"

"Lachlan," Hunter warned softly.

Because Lachlan's face was once again more that of a fierce dragon than a man.

Belle wasn't alarmed or frightened this time. Instead, she was fascinated.

Lachlan's eyes, normally a pale gray, once again gleamed silver beneath the heavy dragon brow. It was still recognizable as his face, but his sharp features were now covered in small silver scales that seemed to shimmer from the glow of the overhead light. His hands had become claws and were much bigger. The backs of them were also covered in scales. But the sharp talons at his fingertips remained sheathed rather than digging painfully into her flesh.

In a word, he was beautiful.

Belle's thoughts had been racing these past few minutes, and she now had absolutely no doubt that Lachlan was also hers .

That her life, such as it was, had all been leading her to this very moment.

To Lachlan.

There was no other way to explain her absolute certainty in believing dragons had once existed, despite having received ridicule all her life for it.

She now knew they still existed. That one of them, the magnificent Lachlan, the eldest brother of the Drake family, wanted her to be his true mate.

Belle wanted him to be her true mate too.

She longed to see Lachlan when he was fully shifted. "How tall is your dragon?" she asked softly.

"As tall as this house," he growled in answer.

Belle drew up every ounce of courage she possessed before speaking again. “Then can we go outside now and you can show me all of your dragon?”

Show our mate how magnificent we are , Lachlan’s dragon urged eagerly.

Lachlan was a little more reticent. The last thing he wanted was to completely shift and frighten Belle so much that she ran away screaming.

She is our one true mate , his dragon reminded.

Yes, that’s exactly what Belle was. As his true mate, she would need to see all of him. To love all of him. The dragon as well as the man.

Lachlan knew, from centuries of observing the couples in the village, that humans took much longer to fall in love. His own heart had been filled with love for Belle from the moment he saw her sitting in that cave halfway up the mountain. That love had only grown stronger in the hours since.

But it had been only hours. Far too soon for Belle to even begin to return his feelings...

Lachlan’s thoughts ceased, his heart stuttering and then stopping when Belle lifted her hand to cradle one of his cheeks. Her fingers were a light caress against his silver scales.

“You aren’t frightened of me,” he realized.

“I was at first, obviously,” she admitted self-derisively. “But not anymore. Your dragon is beautiful, Lachlan. Magnificent beyond my wildest imaginings.” A strong emotion glowed in her shining blue eyes. “Although I’m still having difficulty believing you’re a beautiful dragon and that I’m your one true mate,” she added

shakily.

“We knew it from the moment we set eyes on you,” he assured.

“We?” she echoed, her head tilted curiously. “Are you and your dragon separate entities, then?”

“It’s difficult to explain,” Lachlan mused. “We’re the same and yet not. As a man, I can use reason and act logically, but my dragon isn’t quite as reasonable,” he acknowledged ruefully. “My dragon is...more. He can also be feral. For instance, he’s been urging me to mate with you since the moment we scented you and followed that scent until we found you in the cave.”

“But I would be mated to both of you?”

He nodded. “You would mate with the man, but my dragon and I are one and the same. We would both be honored to have you as our beautiful true mate.”

“Then would you please show me all of you, the man and the dragon?” Belle pleaded with him. “I promise I won’t freak out on you like I did last time.”

Lachlan believed her. Because he knew, from the things Belle had told him about her life so far, that from being an orphaned child she had become a brave and resilient woman.

But finding herself in the presence of a thirty-foot-tall silver dragon with twenty-meter-wide wings would surely push that bravery and resilience to their limits.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Belle could hardly contain her excitement as she stood in the snow at the back of Drake House, waiting for Lachlan to shift into what she knew was going to be his beautiful silver dragon.

Hunter and Ranulf had offered to accompany them outside in case Belle became frightened, but she had assured them there was no need for that. It felt important that for this first shift, she had Lachlan completely to herself.

A calm had come over her the moment she stepped out of the house at his side. An inner unshakable certainty that she had been born for just this purpose.

That everything that had happened to her up to this point really had been leading her to here and now. To Lachlan. To being the one true mate of both the man and his dragon.

She'd always hated being emotionally alone after her parents died. But she now appreciated that if she'd had a family, it would have made it far more difficult for her to just disappear. As she surely must if she was to be the mate of a dragon shifter who had already lived for twelve hundred years.

The same went for having close friends who might question where she was.

Belle had neither.

What she'd always had during her childhood and her years at university was an

absolute belief that dragons had once existed in the world.

It was the reason she had chosen to study mythology at university.

She now thought randomly finding—if it had been random—Sister Agnes's journals at the bottom of the box of books had to have been meant to be too.

As had her having come to the Highlands in search of evidence that the dragons Sister Agnes claimed to have seen really had existed.

All those things, Belle now deeply believed, had happened to bring her to this man.

Her mate.

Her one true love.

“Ready?” Lachlan prompted hesitantly.

“Don't you have to remove your clothes before shifting?” Her cheeks heated in what she knew would be a visible blush, her heart pounding at the realization she'd just asked Lachlan to strip in front of her.

In the freezing cold!

Although she had a feeling Lachlan and his brothers didn't feel the cold like she did.

She'd pulled on her own coat and boots before stepping outside, but Lachlan still wore only the T-shirt, jeans, and boots he'd been wearing inside.

“I don't,” he dryly answered her question. “My clothes evaporate as I shift into dragon and reappear when I shift back to a man.”

“That’s...magical.”

“It also saves on the clothing bill!”

“Did you just make a joke?”

He winced. “I am sorry that this situation with the dragon hunters has not allowed the opportunity for levity.”

“You have nothing to feel sorry for,” Belle reassured. “You aren’t responsible for the greed and inhumanity of those men.”

“Nevertheless, I wish we had met under different circumstances.”

Belle doubted there were any other circumstances under which they would ever have met.

“Are you ready to meet my dragon?”

She drew in a long breath before nodding. “I am.”

The shift happened in the blink of an eye. One second, Lachlan was standing in front of her as the six-and-a-half-foot-tall man who made her heart pound and her body tremble with arousal, and the next, there was a thirty-foot dragon in front of her, his silver scales shimmering from the reflective snow.

She would be lying if she didn’t admit to instinctively taking a step back from the ferocious-looking beast.

Silver eyes seemed to glow in a narrow and scaled face, the nostrils wide, two rows of long, thin teeth gleaming in the dragon’s maw. Its body was immense, almost as

big as the house itself, and the spreading of wings revealed they stretched to at least sixty feet on either side of that massive body.

Belle didn't doubt that the dragon could easily kill her with a single sweep of one of those powerful wings or the snapping of those razor-sharp teeth.

"I would never hurt you, true mate."

"You can talk as a dragon!" Belle gasped, easily recognizing that deep voice as belonging to Lachlan.

The huge head lifted proudly. "I can. I will," he added mischievously. "You are beautiful, our mate. You will be a fitting queen of dragons."

"Qu-queen?"

"We are the last of the Drake dragons. I am their leader; therefore, you will be my queen."

Belle realized now exactly what Lachlan had meant when he said his dragon was more . Lachlan would never have sounded so arrogant and proud. "Will I be able to shift too, once we're mated?" It had never even occurred to her that might be possible. "Will I be able to fly?"

How wonderful would it be to have the ability to shift into a dragon in the blink of an eye, to take to the air and fly?

"Yes."

Oh God...

Belle felt dizzy at the possibilities that opened up?—

“Once we’re mated?” Again, it was Lachlan who stood before her, dressed in the same black T-shirt, jeans, and boots, just as he’d said he would be. “Does that mean you’re seriously considering mating with me?” he prompted hopefully.

She nodded eagerly. “I want to mate with you and your dragon.” She frowned slightly. “But I also want you to know that I have absolutely no interest in your dragon treasure. I’m not, nor will I ever be, in the least materialistic. As such, gold and jewels hold no interest for me.”

“You will be my greatest treasure,” Lachlan assured her.

Tears stung her eyes. “That’s all I’ll ever want to be. I totally believe that the years I spent alone during my childhood, and then again at university, were all bringing me to here and now. To you.”

She really is our true mate and beloved queen, Lachlan’s dragon announced with pride.

Much as it warmed Lachlan’s heart to hear those words, he needed Belle to know how much she would be giving up of her past and how fully her future would belong to the two of them. “As my mate, your long lifespan would mean you will have to leave behind any and all family and friends?—”

“I’ve already thought about that,” she assured. “There isn’t anyone I would regret leaving behind. I would like to finish my degree in mythology,” she added with a frown. “But I could do that remotely, if necessary.” She grinned at him. “I wouldn’t need to travel for research anymore either, because I’ll be living with real dragons.”

“You understand my brothers will always be an integral part of our lives?”

“I can hardly be a queen without any subjects.” Belle burst out laughing as Lachlan winced.

She appeared more lighthearted than he’d ever seen her, and her bubbling happiness was wondrous to behold.

“I really do understand, Lachlan.” She placed a reassuring hand on his arm, her gaze fiercely intent. “I sincerely believe I was meant for this, born for you.”

“You were.” Lachlan fully believed that too.

“Perhaps, now that you’ve found your true mate, Hunter and Ranulf might do the same?”

It was Lachlan’s dearest wish that they would.

In the meantime... “When would you like to mate with me?” His voice shook slightly at the enormity of the changes—most certainly for the better!—having Belle as his mate would bring to his life.

The most important one being that their mating would result in a bond between them that was so strong, neither of them would feel unloved or know a moment of loneliness ever again.

“I would love for that to happen right now, but I realize it isn’t possible.” Belle grimaced. “I need to be ‘rescued’ before I can disappear again without the McGregors asking questions. I should stay long enough to attend Ben’s funeral too, before seeming to leave. Otherwise, they’ll think it odd I didn’t stay and pay my respects to the young man who supposedly died trying to rescue me,” she added with a frown. “I’ll also need to officially give up my room in the house in London. I’m sure the others will understand, perhaps even be relieved, at my doing so.”

“They might stay on to attend Ben’s funeral too, so that you could tell them, then. Would you like me to accompany you to the funeral?” Lachlan offered.

“I would love it if you could, but won’t the villagers think it odd if I turn up to the funeral with one of the Drake brothers?”

Of course they would.

Lachlan and his brothers might keep their interaction with the villagers to a minimum, for the obvious reason it made it easier for them to disappear for decades before returning, but there was only one way to explain his presence at Belle’s side.

“Not if I’m the one to rescue you,” he decided. “That way, I can also say you’re staying at Drake House until you’re fully recovered from your ordeal. Then we can spend as much time together getting to know each other as we want.”

Lachlan seriously doubted that either he or his dragon would have been able to let Belle out of their sight until their mating had been completed anyway.

His heart soared in the knowledge that, in a very short time, Belle would become both his mate and his queen.

Although he had a feeling the time would pass exceedingly slowly for him until that became possible.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next week turned out to move as slowly as Lachlan had predicted it would.

Ben's body was found, with no one any the wiser as to his having been murdered by being thrown out of a helicopter.

Lachlan "rescued" Belle and informed the grieving McGregors that she would be staying at Drake House with them until she had attended Ben's funeral. He made no mention of what would happen to her after that, and they didn't ask, too consumed with grief for the death of their son.

Hunter had successfully recovered the hard drive from Ben's laptop, only to find that some of the contents had been irretrievably corrupted. This was making it more difficult to find the information that would give them the identity of the treasure hunters.

It had been that endeavor that caused Belle to put forward the idea they should turn the tables on the treasure hunters who had killed Ben.

She suggested that, instead of eliminating all evidence of their own existence as they would normally have done in these circumstances, the Drake brothers should instead consider becoming the hunters rather than the hunted.

No decision on that idea had or would be made, unless or until Hunter managed to salvage the information they would need to go forward.

In the meantime, Lachlan and Belle spent every waking moment together, getting to know each other.

Every sleeping one too, because Belle refused to sleep anywhere else but in Lachlan's bed beside him.

This meant Lachlan and his dragon's self-control had been stretched to its limits. Because he was determined Belle would know him and the life she could expect to lead as his mate before their mating took place.

Which didn't mean that they hadn't explored every other sexual pleasure together except a full mating.

Lachlan now knew every silken inch of Belle's body, inside as well as out. Just as she had explored and now owned every part of him.

Belle felt slightly guilty for the feelings of excitement bubbling inside her as she attended Ben's funeral with Lachlan sitting beside her in the church and holding one of her hands in his much larger one. His brothers sat on her other side.

Guarding the woman destined to become their dragon queen to Lachlan's dragon king.

The thought of their mating was the reason Belle felt only slightly guilty for her thoughts being of Lachlan today rather than Ben. Lachlan made no secret of his devotion to her, whereas Ben had betrayed her, not once but several times, and then been killed by the people who were paying him to do it.

So she couldn't claim to be mourning Ben's death, except in a manner she would feel for the loss of any young person's life.

She did feel sympathy for the McGregors. The whole family was obviously

devastated, making it far easier for Belle to continue with the lie of how Ben had died. Far better that the McGregors should believe Ben had died a hero rather than as someone who had been willing to steal from her, and let her die, for money.

She accepted the deceit of Ben having been a selfless hero was best for all concerned.

Belle was outwardly sad, but the excitement bubbling inside her was because today was also the day Lachlan had said they could become mates. If she was still agreeable to the idea.

If!

Belle didn't have a single doubt in her head or heart about becoming Lachlan's mate. On the contrary, she had been willing the hours away until the two of them could disappear together for the few days of privacy Lachlan had explained they would need to complete that mating.

And the reason Belle had no doubts was because she knew she had fallen in love with Lachlan this past week of them getting to know each other.

Fallen deeply.

Irrevocably.

The glimpses he had allowed her of his dragon told her that she had fallen in love with that magnificent beast too.

Both Lachlan and his dragon were fiercely protective and possessive of her. Emotions that had been sadly missing from Belle's life before now.

She felt seen and cherished for the first time in her life.

Honored too, at fate having chosen her to be not just Lachlan's one true mate, but also his queen.

The air stirred about her as Lachlan tilted his head until his lips were only centimeters away from her ear as he murmured, "Are ye wet for me right now?"

Belle glanced around them self-consciously, knowing by the smirk on Hunter's lips and the wry expression on Ranulf's face that the two men's acute dragon hearing meant they had heard that remark too.

She moved up on tiptoe until her lips were almost touching Lachlan's ear. "As much as you are hard for me." She bared her teeth before biting into the softness of his earlobe.

Hunter gave a snort of repressed laughter at the sound of Lachlan's pained, indrawn hiss of breath. Humor Hunter instantly covered by placing one of his hands over the bottom half of his face after several heads had turned in his direction.

Lachlan's expression told her he would retaliate the moment they were alone together.

Which couldn't come soon enough, as far as Belle was concerned.

She was grateful for this past week of the two of them getting to know each other. Of lying in bed in the darkness of Lachlan's bedroom—now her suite of rooms too, he had declared—their arms wrapped about each other as they shared their secrets and hopes for the future. Their bodies were sexually attuned to each other in a way Belle had thought only happened in books, a single touch or kiss from either of them resulting in more of that explosive lovemaking.

Much as she appreciated that week of spending time with Lachlan as lovers, she now dearly wanted to become his mate.

“We’ll see the two of you in three, maybe four days,” Lachlan told his brothers after they had said their condolences to the McGregor family, refused their invitation to attend the wake, and instead they had all returned to Drake House. “Make that a week,” he added after glancing at Belle.

Hunter chuckled. “Don’t be surprised if I’ve got the information I need and gone hunting by the time you resurface.”

“Take care, brother,” Lachlan warned. “Whoever they are, they have already murdered one human.”

“Then it’s as well a dragon is far harder to kill,” Hunter dismissed.

“I still want you to take care,” Lachlan repeated.

“I’ll ensure that he does,” Ranulf assured.

To Belle’s surprise, Lachlan walked in the direction of the back of the house rather than up the stairs to their suite of rooms. “Where are we going?” She frowned as Lachlan threw open the back door and pulled her out into the still-falling snow. “Don’t I need to pack a bag if we’re going away?”

Lachlan’s eyes burned like liquid silver as he looked down at her with brooding intensity. “You aren’t going to need clothes for the next week,” he assured her as they entered the mountain through the private entrance at the back of Drake House. “Neither of us are.”

“Won’t we be cold— Ah, dragons who can control the elements of earth, water, air, and fire.” She nodded her understanding as the temperature in the tunnel instantly became warmer.

“Exactly.” Lachlan bared his teeth in a satisfied smile. “There’s only one place I

could possibly think of taking you as my mate.”

Her brow cleared. “With your hoard?”

“On top of my hoard,” he stated with satisfaction. “I need to make you completely mine, surrounded by the treasure that has been replaced by the love I feel for you, my darling Belle. Because you are, and will always be, my greatest treasure.”

She blinked. “You love me?”

“With everything that I am or ever will be,” he vowed.

She smiled shakily. “I love you too.”

“You do?”

Belle hated to see that look of uncertainty in the eyes of this fierce rock of a man. “I love you with everything that I am or ever will be,” she repeated the vow.

Lachlan’s closed his eyes briefly before opening them again to hold her gaze and taking one of her hands in his as he sank to one knee in front of her. “In that case... Will you marry me, Belle?”

“Yes, of course I will,” she choked, moved beyond expressing how much she appreciated Lachlan wanting to marry her in the human world as well as mate her in the dragon one.

Lachlan kissed the back of her hand before rising to his feet. “I don’t have a ring on me. I thought you could choose one for yourself from my hoard if you said yes.”

Belle choked on what was a combination of a gasp and a laugh. “Never doubt I want to belong to you in every way possible and for you to belong to me in the same way.

Do you have male rings in your hoard?"

"I do," he confirmed with a smile.

She nodded. "Then we'll choose our rings together."

Lachlan took her in his arms. "I love you, Belle, and I swear that you will never regret agreeing to become my wife and my mate."

"I believe you," she murmured before the two of them kissed for long and pleasurable minutes. "Now, more doing and less talking," she demanded the moment those kisses drew to a reluctant end.

Lachlan chuckled, knowing his love for this woman surpassed anyone and everything he had ever loved or cared about before or now.

"My God..." Belle gasped beside him a few minutes later as they entered the main cave to look down and then up at the treasures stored there.

Lachlan's chest puffed with pride. "A third of all this now belongs to you too, my mate."

She shook her head. "Beautiful and wondrous as all this is, I only want you, Lachlan." She placed her hands on his chest. "Nothing else, just you."

Lachlan knew, by the sincerity in her deep blue eyes, that she meant every word.

Ours.

Ours, Lachlan inwardly echoed his dragon's possessive claim.

A claim that became a physical reality just minutes later, after they had chosen and

exchanged rings and Lachlan had made a space in amongst the treasure for the two of them. He threw several large tapestries on top of the gold and jewels for their comfort before lifting and then laying Belle down in the center of all the glittering treasure that paled into insignificance in comparison to her beauty and the love shining in her eyes as she looked up at him.

Being at the heart of his treasure enhanced Lachlan's abilities, which he now used to quickly make their clothes disappear.

Gazing down at the beauty of Belle's naked body wasn't new to him, but it was a vision he knew he would never grow tired of or take for granted.

"Mine," he growled.

"Yours," she confirmed.

"As I am yours," he told her huskily before lowering his head to claim her lips with his own.

Their lovemaking was almost balletic after their shared intimacies this past week, both of them now knowing what gave the other the most pleasure.

Lachlan used that knowledge to bury his face between Belle's thighs and bring her to climax after climax. Until she was dripping wet for him, as he needed her to be for their mating.

"Please," Belle groaned. "Lachlan, I need you inside me now."

He moved up to kneel between her parted thighs, his beard and chin visibly wet with her juices. "I'm going to need you to turn over and get onto your knees and elbows. I have to mount you, Belle," he explained at her puzzled frown. "I'm human right now, but a part of me is always dragon, and we take a mate by mounting her. When you

come, and I start to come inside you, infusing you with my essence, I will also bite the back of your neck, and my dragon's blood will mix with your blood. The two combined will complete our mating. After that, you will start to feel the changes inside you that will make it possible for your longevity to match my own and for you to shift into a dragon."

If anything, Belle's excitement grew at knowing this, and she quickly turned onto her stomach and then rose up on her elbows and knees. After the intimacies they had already shared this past week, she didn't feel an ounce of shyness at presenting her bottom and dripping-wet pussy for her lover to make his own.

She drew in a sharp breath when she felt the stretch of the tip of Lachlan's long, thick cock breaching her opening.

"Breathe, my love." Lachlan's hand rested at the base of her spine to hold her in place as he pushed his cock in farther still.

Belle gasped as she felt Lachlan's cock pushed in even deeper.

Only stinging a little, that magnificent cock now entered her one inch at a time until it was fully inside her.

Until Lachlan was fully inside her.

The other half of her.

Making her feel complete for the first time in her life.

She swayed forward and then back as Lachlan began to thrust inside her, meeting each of those thrusts, her pleasure growing and then rising higher still as Lachlan thrust harder and faster.

“Now, Belle,” he eventually groaned. “You are going to come.” His fingers stroked her clit. “I’m going to bite you and then come inside you. All at the same time. Are you ready, Belle?”

“Yes. Do it now, Lachlan. Please,” she gasped as her channel began to contract with her release.

Lachlan groaned as the warmth of his hot release began to spurt inside her.

Belle’s back arched when she felt the sharp sting of Lachlan’s incisors piercing her nape before she felt the strange sensation of an equally hot essence entering her veins.

Mine . Lachlan spoke the word inside her head.

Yours , Belle returned through their new mental connection.

Always , they said together.

The second book in the Snow Dragons Hunting series will be HUNTER . Preorder available soon.