



Dragon's Mate

Emma Petersen © 2006

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## **Dragon's Mate**

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### **Dragon's Mate**

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**Emma Petersen**

**DEDICATION**

Deanna, Sable, and Brandi. Thank you for providing a nurturing, loving outlet for the love of my life.

Sunny, for just being fantastic.

Shelli, Crystal, and Eden. This journey wouldn't be as special as it has been without you.

Romance Divas-The sisters of my heart.

And as always, for my mother, my sisters and nieces and nephews.

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### Chapter One

"Did you really think you could hide from me?"

The deep, familiar voice jerked me out of my sleep. Sitting up, I looked into the electric blue eyes of the last person I expected to see. *Eric*. How the hell did he find me?

Trying to act nonchalant, I eased back the covers and swung my bare legs over the bed. I didn't bother to ask how he got into my room.

"What are you doing here?" It was a stupid question. I knew the exact reason he was here. Eric Dogori, Second to the *Primul* Leader of the *Born for Water Dragon Clan*, stood between me and the only exit. Almost a month ago, I'd come to Chile and holed up in this posh Ritz-Carlton suite to wait out my breeding time.

I may be small, only five foot two to his six foot six, but don't let my small stature fool you. I'm tough. I had to be to survive as *Primul* Leader of the *Born for Earth Dragon Clan*.

For thirty days, once every century, I come into my breeding time. At this time I am at my most vulnerable. My kind seek me out with two purposes in mind: to procreate or kill. Because most *Dragon Kin* are trapped in human form, females are more vulnerable, no longer having wings, teeth and claws to protect themselves. In my ancestors' time this made it easier for unmated males to steal mated females, so came the habit of hiding during our breeding time.

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Times were a different now, not only had we evolved physically, there was also a mental evolution. Many centuries ago it would have been quite a coup to steal a mated female, now in many Clans it was punishable by death.

Since I was *Primul*, I didn't have to worry much about unmated males, I worried more about ambitious *Dragon Kin* looking to take my heart and title. And being accustomed to treason, I knew very well I wasn't safe even among the female *Kin*. Trusting the wrong person during my breeding time could cost me my life.

When Eric had sought me out a hundred years ago he'd come close to killing me, too close for my comfort. That was long ago, when I was foolish enough to believe he cared for me. I knew better now.

"You're in season." He took a step toward me.

Instinctively, I began to take a step back and stopped myself. If I backed away he would think I was afraid of him. Nothing was further from the truth. During my breeding time, I was at my weakest, but I could still fight, would still fight, to the death if need be, before I let him or anyone else take my Clan from me.

"That doesn't explain what you're doing in Santiago - in *my territory* - without my permission."

All of the Americas were mine. Eric knew that, yet he still dared to come onto my lands without proper sanction.

"Where else would I be? You are my mate."

I shook my head, denying his claim. "You were trying to kill me, marking me as mated was an accident."

"Our laws say differently," he reminded me.

"So you are big on laws now? I guess a hundred years as the *Water Primul's* lackey will do that."

His jaw clenched, but he made no move to attack as I thought he would. He didn't like to be reminded he was second to anyone, even the *Kin* he was raised with as a brother.

"*Următor*... Second is an honorable position."

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"It is," I agreed, "but not for an alpha with your illustrious lineage." I was baiting him now. If he was here to try to kill me, I wanted it over with.

My eyes widened as he chuckled. It was the first time I'd ever heard him laugh, and it washed over me like thick, hot honey. *Shit.*

Leaning back against the wall that led to a sumptuous bathroom, he folded his arms over his massive chest and studied me. "Your tongue has not dulled, I see."

Try as I may, I couldn't help devouring him with my eyes. Time had not changed him. He was still the perfect physical specimen who had taken a rather large bite out of the area right above my collarbone. He towered over me then and now. His shoulders were broad and easily blotted out everything when he was above me, inside me.

I shook my head again, rejecting the feelings the image provoked, and the waking fire they sent skating through me. Angry more at myself than him, I headed toward the door, needing to put distance between not only him, but also the memories.

He yanked me back as I attempted to walk past him. I brought my fist up. He effortlessly dodged the oncoming blow, then grabbed and held my wrist like I was an errant child. Growling, I swung my free fist with all my strength, anticipating the satisfying sound of crunching bone when I connected with his nose. He grabbed that one too. Pushing me backwards into the wall, he pinned my arms above my head.

Closing my eyes, I blew out a frustrated breath. "Let go." I counted to ten and tried to ignore the helplessness I felt. I'd faced Eric before and walked away from it, and I'd do it again.

"I'm sorry *mita wicu*, I can't do that."

I flinched, *mita wicu* being the words for *my wife* in Lakota.

"I. Am. Not. Your. Wife."

He pulled down the collar of my T-shirt to reveal a jagged bite mark. *His* bite mark. It was throbbing.

"Your body says differently," he taunted.

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I prayed it was the pulsing bite mark he referred to and not the languorous heat that began to seep through my veins the moment he touched me.

My eyes popped open as I felt him grow against me. I clenched them shut again, like a child wishing the monster beneath her bed would go away. I moaned as I resisted the urge to tilt my pelvis into what felt like the beginnings of an impressive erection.

He kept my wrists pinned as he bent down to nuzzle the mark on my neck, making it tingle even more. He lifted his head and as our gazes met his nostrils flared. He flinched as I leaned forward and did what I had wanted to do since I woke up to find him standing in my room. I licked his bottom lip and his pupils bled black. Letting go of my wrists, he gathered handfuls of my T-shirt and ripped it down the center, exposing my breasts.

The action was so sudden and violent, all I could do was gasp. My nipples instantly beaded as they met the cool air and his hot gaze. I moaned as he filled his hands with my breasts.

When he went for my panties, I protested. "No. No, your shirt goes first."

Surprised I was able to form a coherent thought let alone a sentence, I braced myself against the wall as he stepped away to pull his shirt over his head. His onyx eyes never left mine as the shirt came up to reveal his battle-scarred chest.

The long, thin knife wound two inches below his heart was mine.

As he came back toward me, I leaned over and followed the long-healed cut with my tongue. I could feel his heart pounding beneath my mouth as I swept my tongue over his skin. My own heart beat like some trapped wild thing in my chest as I tried to control the shaking of my limbs.

I grabbed handfuls of his lush black hair and pulled his mouth toward mine. He didn't resist, but came into the kiss willingly, crowding me against the wall. He brought his thigh up and lifted me, forcing me to ride it.

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I knew after he fucked me senseless he would kill me, but all I could think was, *What a way to go*. I should have felt scared, but all I could think, feel, was the heat of his body and the taste of his kiss. Moaning into his mouth, I ran my hands down his back, marveling at the feel of corded muscle and the slight scaling beneath his skin. It was one of the physical traits that marked him as *Dragon Kin*. It was warm to the touch and gently abraded my fingertips. He wasn't human, nor was he dragon. He was both, the same as me and the rest of our kind.

His hands went to my waist and as he lifted me I wrapped my legs around him. His hands moved to my ass, titling my pelvis into his. As my softness met his hardness, I melted.

He carried me farther into the room and dumped me onto the recently abandoned bed. Staring down at me, he was completely still, as if looking at something he'd never seen before. Suddenly and absurdly shy, I resisted the urge to cover my breasts with my hands. I flinched as he leaned down and splayed his hand against my belly, resting it for a moment against the tiny swell, before taking a deep, shuddering breath and stepping back.

He didn't touch me. He just stood watching at me. I wanted to know what he was thinking that had him looking at me so intently. Afraid, I remained silent rather than break the spell that seemed to capture us. Minutes, years later, he began to unbutton his pants.

I closed my eyes. I knew I didn't have to do this. I would have fought him if I didn't want him to touch me, but the truth was, I wanted him to. With every fiber of my being, I did.

The bed dipped and I could feel the heat radiating off his body as he lay beside me.

Opening my eyes, I turned toward him and ran my hand down his chest. His hair, which fell in an inky black wave to his waist, obscured part of his face. Because of the shape of his eyes, many mistook him for being of Asian descent, but he wasn't. His people had lived on the plains of Northern America centuries before Columbus had talked his queen out of her panties and the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria. Eric was the last of his *Dragon Kin* bloodline, but not of the Lakota Nation.



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Hungry to memorize his features, I traced the contours of his sharp cheekbones before I leaned forward and covered his mouth with mine, his tongue met mine, his breath my breath. He tasted familiar, like an exotic sweet I had once had and craved every day thereafter. He rolled me onto my back and made a place for himself between my thighs. Only my panties separated us, and I could feel him hard and hot resting against me.

“Admit it.”

The two words should have been like ice water tossed in my face, but I was too far gone. I wanted him, but I wasn't ready to say the words out loud.

“Please –” I choked out, hoping the word I rarely used would satisfy him.

It didn't. He leaned over me and took my nipple into his mouth. Worrying it between his teeth before soothing it with his tongue, he repeated his demand.

“Admit. It.” He sucked my nipple fully into his mouth, and heat pooled between my thighs. Grinding myself against his erection, I said nothing.

Taking my crest into his mouth while he palmed the other, still wet from his mouth, he growled low in his throat, “Stubborn to the end.”

He reached for my panties and I lifted, eager to help him ease them off.

He didn't enter me, but instead leaned over and tongued the bite mark. With every pass of his tongue pleasure echoed between my thighs.

“Eric.” I only said his name, but there was a world of pleading behind it.

Over and over he licked and nibbled at it until his entire mouth covered it and sucked.

I screamed as pleasure so intense it bordered on pain shattered through me. My pelvis rocked forward as I searched for something to ease the unrelenting ecstasy that hammered through me. The harder he sucked, the harder the currents pulsed through me. Tossing my head back, I convulsed as wave after wave crashed into me. I continued to sob his name, begging for mercy and receiving none.

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When I came back to myself, I was limp, exhausted, and more than a little surprised. If pleasure like that could be elicited from a bite mark, no wonder my kind mated for life.

I opened my eyes to find him staring at me with an intensity that scared me. It was difficult for me to meet his eyes, knowing he was the only person on Earth who'd ever be able to bring me to such heights. I refused to think about how it made me feel because if I was honest with myself, I would start sobbing for a reason that had nothing to do with pleasure.

"Eric." I didn't know what else to say, I wanted more of him but I was still too proud to ask.

I nearly wept as I felt his hand part the folds of my wet pussy, searching for and finding my clit. I was close, I could feel another orgasm gathering deep in my belly, but I didn't want to come alone. I wanted him with me, inside of me. I grabbed his hand and brought it up to my mouth. Looking into his eyes, I slowly licked my juices from his fingers, sucking each one into my mouth until he groaned and shuddered.

I pushed his shoulders back until they met the mattress and mounted him. Lifting me, he sat me back down on his length. He grunted as my moist heat slid slowly over his cock. I wanted to move, but he held my hips still until I cried out, needing him deeper. Withdrawing until he was at my entrance, he sank inside of me until he reached the mouth of my womb.

I bit my lip to hold back a gasp as he began to thrust. It had been so long. "Harder."

Wrapping his arms around me, he turned until I was on my back, open, vulnerable. I pushed at his shoulders, wanting to be on top again. Being beneath him reminded me too much of our first time, *my first time*, and it shook me. I cried out as his mouth passed over the bite mark again, sufficiently distracting me so that I didn't protest when he captured both of my wrists, pinning them above my head.

His body continued to move over mine and low, husky words in Lakota matched his rhythm. I understood very little of the language, but

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my body recognized the words, the tone. I knew he was promising dark, sexual ecstasy if I gave in.

Unbidden, my hips rose to meet his. He let go of me, knowing he had me where he wanted me. I wrapped my legs high on his waist in an effort to bring him closer, as he began to stroke into me deeper, faster.

My eyes stung as I recognized the Lakota word for heart. I needed to silence him, for every word he spoke flayed me open and left me hoping for the impossible, I pulled him down and his mouth met mine. Too close to the edge not to surrender, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine myself with someone else, but I couldn't. I was his; if he had commanded my heart to stop beating, it would have.

I screamed as my orgasm hit me. He continued thrusting hard and fast until he propelled me into another. Pain coalesced into pleasure as our bodies became one. I held onto him and forgot about everything else. As he shuddered and spilled himself inside me, I buried my face in the crook of his neck and prayed that if he felt moisture on his skin he'd assume it was sweat from our exertions and not the tears that ran unchecked from my eyes.

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### Chapter Two

The last time we were together, Eric had spared me the awkward morning after conversation by disappearing before the sweat had cooled on my skin. No such luck this time. Sometime during the night he had gathered my body against his, my back to his front and cradled me into his embrace. I'd never slept with another person before so I wasn't used to such intimacies. Before Eric, touching another being was a rarity and the times I was touched, it had never been in kindness.

I stifled a groan as heat suffused my skin. God, I was blushing! What was next? Writing our initials and circling them with a heart? I tried to quiet the berating voices in my head, the voices saying that I was too comfortable in his embrace, that the entire scene was too comfortable. It didn't matter that we had sex. Amazing, mind shattering, bone melting sex so many times the numbers blurred, the facts were still facts. Eric had come to kill me. *Again.*

It wasn't personal. My sire had taken the Clan from Eric's family centuries ago. My father had been a bastard, not only by nature, but also by the circumstance of his birth. His mother had been the only female in the history of our kind who had dared to conceive a hatchling without being mated, without the protection of a mated bite mark, the *Dragon Kin* equivalent of a human wedding ring and marriage certificate.

And my father had suffered for it. My paternal grandmother was the first female *Primul*, a position and title she would have passed through

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the generations of our family, from my father to me and my offspring, if he had been born on the right side of the blanket. Like most shifters, strength kept the title, but since my grandmother had been a descendant of *Strāmos*, the Originator, she was given preferential treatment.

When she refused to name the father of her hatchling, her Clan chose to take the title from her and give it to Eric's father, an event that shaped my father's every action as he had grown up, even though he hadn't been born when it occurred. He never let me forget that it wasn't just an embarrassment for our family; it had stripped us of our honor because no other *Primul* had ever had their title taken from them without an enemy taking their heart first.

To my father, regaining the title of *Primul* gave us back our honor. I wasn't proud of his actions but I was my father's daughter and I was determined to hold on to what he had taken with cunning and treachery.

I would have expected Eric to try to take it back the same way, but he hadn't. Instead, he chose to seduce me. Maybe he was stupid enough to believe if he got me pregnant I would surrender the Clan. Not fucking likely. Hatchlings were prized among our kind, but not even for a much-wanted child would I surrender my Clan.

"Stop thinking so hard."

Jumping at the sound of Eric's voice, I tried to scramble out of the bed. It was one thing cuddling with him when I thought he was asleep and quite another knowing he was awake.

"You have to quit running Maya." He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me back into the bed.

"I'm not running." Lying didn't count if the lie was told to the enemy did it? "I was going to take a shower."

"Of course you were," he agreed. "You always shower at the crack of dawn?"

I started to turn to face him and thought better of it. I felt like a high school girl facing a crush after she had let him feel her up under the bleachers. Only what he and I had done was nowhere near innocent as rounding first base. He had seen, touched and tasted every single inch of

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my body. And I his. *Evolution sucks*, I thought. I would have killed for a pair of wings right then.

Rolling me onto my back, he settled into the apex of my thighs. He hadn't touched me sexually, but already my body started to moisten, readying for him.

"Truce," he said, nuzzling my neck.

I began to speak, only to have him silence me by going for his mark. *Holy shit. When did I start to think of it as his?*

"Eric." My breath hitched as pleasure washed over me.

"Say yes," he ordered, nudging me, his cock sliding hot and slick over my aroused flesh.

"Yes." The word ended on a gasp as he entered me solidly. So full and thick, my overworked muscles protested before clenching on him in welcome. I couldn't gather breath to speak, I could only whimper as his flesh plowed into mine, until only the sound of slick skin meeting slick skin could be heard over the discrete hum of the air conditioning.

There was something so intimate about the position we were in. We were pressed together from breast to groin, heartbeat against heartbeat. Before I could stop them, words in *Sursă*, our Mother tongue, began to come unbidden from my lips. Knowing he didn't speak the language, I felt safe to speak them. I cried, telling him everything. How much his betrayal had hurt me, about our child I had lost, about how I had mourned both him and our hatchling for nearly a century afterward. I needed them said. They were freeing, cleansing and I'd held them inside for so long.

His eyes widened. Whether because of my words or my tears, I didn't know, but it was his only acknowledgement as he continued to fuck me. The harsh rush of his breath brushed my temple as he trembled over me. I hadn't come yet and I knew he was waiting for me. I clung to him, wanting, needing to see his face when he came. All the other times I had been so caught up in my own rapture that I had missed his. Not this time. Running my hands down his slick back, I cupped his ass and arched into his every thrust. Refusing to leave me behind, he clamped his mouth over the bite mark and continued thrusting. I moaned as white lights

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exploded behind my eyes, I held him tight as the room spun and I shook. He said my name quietly, reverently, and shuddered against me.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eric rolled over, taking me with him. I lay on his chest listening as his breathing and heartbeat returned to normal. As I rested my head against him I felt something moist against my cheek. Raising my head, I recoiled as I saw the bloody bite mark already healing on his left pec. In my passion, I had marked him.

“I knew you’d freak out when you saw it.”

I raised my head to find him studying me. He was right, I *was* freaking out. It was one thing to have sex with Eric, but sharing blood, marking him, implied what we were doing was something way more personal than following our baser natures. I couldn’t handle thinking this meant something more right now.

I slid off of him and went into the bathroom to get a damp washcloth. I climbed back into the bed, straddled his waist and began to wipe away the blood. I watched, fascinated, as his nipples beaded as I brushed the mark with the wet cloth. He made a humming sound and I looked up to find his eyes closed. I realized then that the mark bought him pleasure, the same as mine did me. Intrigued, I tossed the rag aside, leaned over and traced the now-healed mark with my tongue. His resulting gasp sent a thrill through me, making me feel feminine and powerful. As I tongued the mark, I continued to straddle his body and I could feel him growing hard beneath me, his body fairly vibrating with arousal.

I created a path from the mark to his erect nipple, laving it before pinching it gently between my teeth. I smiled against his flesh as his groan filled the room. Loving his response, I continued torturing him, trailing kisses down his body before pausing at his belly button. His stomach flinched as I licked it before following the light dusting of hair that led to his cock. I took him firmly in hand, bought the tip to my mouth and licked the moisture that glistened there.

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I took him into the warm cavern of my mouth, sucking the head. He gave a startled oath, reached down and dragged me up to meet his mouth. He kissed me hard, deeply, before flipping onto my stomach.

Before I could do more than gasp he was inside me.

"Who taught you that?" His voice was a growl, it sounded less than human. I smiled into the mattress and resisted the urge to laugh. He sounded jealous. I could only imagine what he was thinking, likely that some ambitious unmated male had ignored his mark and trespassed on what he considered his territory.

"Taught me what?" I asked innocently as I raised my rump to give him better access.

He growled and I felt the sound vibrate through his chest as he covered me, his chest to my back. He growled again before he rammed me hard and so deep I could feel the throb of his heartbeat where his cock was lodged inside of me.

I cried out as he hit my cervix, the feeling a perfect mixture of pleasure and pain. He continued to fuck me hard and fast, as if trying to brand me and erase the imaginary man I'd been with in his stead.

I could hear how wet I was as he continued to pound into me, the moisture creating a suction sound as he thrust and withdrew, thrust and withdrew.

I cried out again and I felt his hot breath in my ear as he hunched over me. His hand covered my mound and I pressed myself down into it, silently begging him to touch my clit.

"This is mine," he said as he found my clit and pinched it between his thumb and index finger. "Mine," he repeated as he hammered into me, hitting just the right spot.

"Oh God!" My body convulsed and I cried out as I felt liquid gush from my pussy.

He continued driving into me and I could only make a mewling sound as my muscles gathered tight and I came again.

"Mine," was the last thing I heard before the darkness rushed up to claim me, as I felt his seed bathe my womb and his fangs penetrate the soft skin of my neck.



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The next time I woke, I was alone. My heart clenched and my eyes stung, but I'd shed too many tears over Eric as it was. I pulled back the covers and shivered. The room was too cool and I tried to convince myself I wasn't shivering because I missed the warmth of Eric's body.

Naked, I padded into the bathroom and started the shower. My sore muscles could have used a good soak in the tub, but a shower was faster. I didn't want any time to linger and think about him. I leaned against the wall and let the water pummel my neck and shoulders. Errant drops of water accidentally fell on the mark, but I ignored my body's reaction.

Shaking off the melancholy, I began to shampoo my hair. Working in the rich, thick lather, I tried to keep my mind on anything besides the last twenty-four hours.

Hands, warm and calloused glided over my breasts. When they slid between my legs, I bit back a sob.

He hadn't left.

I leaned into his touch, turned to face him, and ran my hands down his back. We didn't speak as we bathed each other. Nor did we speak when he gathered my hips in his hands. I wrapped my legs around his waist, arms around his neck and clung to him as he entered me. I kept my eyes closed as he worked me on his cock. I rested my forehead against his, our breath mingling and bodies trembling as we came together. We stood holding each other long as the aftershocks quieted.

The water began to cool, yet still we lingered. When he put me down, my legs were shaky. I braced myself against the shower wall as he turned off the water, got out and wrapped a towel around his waist. Then he wrapped my hair in one towel and me in another.

As he led me out of the bathroom, the smell of coffee and bacon lingered in the room. He must have gone to order breakfast, but why had it been necessary to leave the room to do so? Covered platters of food were laid out on the table, along with carafes of coffee. He led me to the

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table and I sat as he uncovered the food. Eggs, bacon, ham, and Belgian waffles smothered in tropical fruit sat before me. He took the seat opposite to me and poured a cup of coffee. He raised the cup in silent question and I shook my head, my mouth already full with crispy bacon. The food was lukewarm but delicious still. I flushed when I realized why it was cool.

I looked up to find him studying me. I continued to eat, if my mouth was full, I couldn't talk, could I?

After I ate my fill, I leaned back and rested my head along the back of the chair. I was satisfied in every way imaginable.

"Let's play tourists."

I knew we had a truce, but his words were still unexpected.

"Tourists?" I questioned, trying not to sound suspicious.

He chuckled and the sound skittered along my nerve endings. He got up from the table and came to kneel before me, lifting the towel that barely covered my lower region. "Do you have something better in mind, little one?"

I squeaked and swatted his hands. "No. No, the tourist thing would be great." Standing, I turned to walk toward the closet when he grabbed me around the waist and pulled me back against him, his erection prodding my bottom.

"Suddenly shy in the daylight, Maya?"

"No," I denied, "Of course not." I tried to sound blasé, breezy, like it wasn't the first time I'd ever had whisker burn between my thighs.

He laughed again and my nipples hardened. "We don't have to go out, you know."

Oh boy, did I know. But I wanted to, because at least in public we wouldn't go at it like rabbits on *Ecstasy*. Or at least I hoped we wouldn't.

Reluctantly, I pulled from his embrace. "Just let me get dressed."

I opened the dresser drawer and took out a pair of panties, before pulling a yellow sundress out of the closet that complemented my dark skin. I hesitated before I dropped the towel to dress. It was silly, but I didn't know how I felt about him seeing me naked. In broad daylight. He had no such qualms and started dressing. Finished, he sat back in the chair to wait for me.

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Noticing my hesitation, he got up, "I'll just run downstairs and have them bring my car around."

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I dressed quickly even though I knew it would take him at least ten minutes to get down to the lobby and back. As the fabric of the sundress slid over my skin, I shivered. I didn't bother to blame it on the air conditioning this time. My skin, my entire body, was sensitive, primed and ready for him. "Another reason to get out of this room," I muttered to myself.

I went into the bathroom and pulled my riotous black curls into a ponytail at the top of my head. Grabbing my makeup case, I dabbed on lip-gloss and adjusted the gold *Amphisbaena* charm around my neck.

Taking a step back from the vanity, I studied my reflection. I didn't look like a woman who had fought tooth and claw to maintain her title, I looked like a woman who was on a weekend holiday with her lover.

The door slammed, and I ran to greet Eric. "I'm read—" the words froze on my lips. An unfamiliar *Dragon Kin* stood just beyond the threshold of my suite. He was huge, bigger than Eric. He had dirty blond hair pulled into a ponytail at his nape. A black T-shirt gloved his upper body and camouflage pants rode low on his hips.

"So you're the lass everyone's making such a fuss about." Lust glittered in his eyes. "And I can see why." He took a deep breath and grinned. "And smell why. I could smell your readiness through the door."

"About," I corrected automatically, ignoring the comment about smelling my arousal.

He wasn't of my Clan, but that didn't mean he wasn't here to try to kill me, or from the look in his eyes, fuck me. From the sound of his accent I assumed he was a Scot.

"Make it easy on yerself lass. It'll not be me who'll eat yer heart, ye have me word."

He knew the practice, in which the victor ate the fallen *Primul's* heart after the battle was won, cementing himself as the reigning leader,

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so it wasn't lust that bought him here. And it couldn't be a coincidence that my would-be assassin was *Born for Metal*. I guessed this was Eric's idea of irony. Too bad Eric was too much of a coward to deliver this message himself, because I very much wanted to kill the messenger.

"How chivalrous of you," I muttered. The bathroom was at my back and it was windowless, so I had only one choice.

At first I thought he was looking at my breasts, which were showcased nicely in the sundress, but it was the golden fertility charm that held him captive. Most of the *Born for Metal Dragon Kin* were thieves. It wasn't a stereotype, it was honest truth. There was something in them that made precious metals and jewels irresistible. Most of them would kill their own mothers for a shiny bauble, which made them the most likely assassins of our kind. They didn't let little things like honor get in their way. Couple their less-than scrupulous tendencies with the fact they are often the largest of our kind and you have an unlimited amount of *Dragon Kin* thugs for hire, like the one standing before me.

"Did Brighid send you?" The question was meant to distract. The *Born for Metal Primul* had no interest in me. She didn't want me dead, since she would then be the only female *Primul* left and who needed that kind of attention? Female *Primuls* were targeted more often by the ambitious than males, because like human females, it was thought that we were weaker than our male counterparts. Being the only two female leaders out of five Clans, Brighid and I had formed a quick and lasting alliance.

My unkempt friend was too entranced by the charm to pay attention to me, so I was quick to move. I closed the distance between us and before he could react, I lashed out with my foot. He grunted as the kick connected with his balls. When he doubled over, grabbing his injured bits, I landed another kick to his temple. He went down like a felled tree.

I skirted around him. I needed to get into the main area of the suite. I didn't have time to pack, knowing that Eric would come soon to make sure the job was done. I grabbed my purse and overnight bag, which held everything I would need to wait out the last two days of my breeding time. I hated to leave my suitcases but clothes could be replaced, my life

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couldn't. I crept past *Puff the Fallen Dragon* and opened the door leading to the hotel hallway.

I peeked down the corridor to make sure there weren't any other surprises waiting for me, then I shut the door behind me and headed for the elevator.

Bile bubbled in my throat and I fought the urge to vomit. What did I need? A billboard sign that read, "You're a great fuck but I still want you dead – Sincerely, Eric"? I punched the button for the lobby and tried not to jump out of my skin every time the elevator stopped to let a passenger on. If almost three hundred years on this Earth had taught me nothing, I deserved to die.

*Still haven't learned yet, I see.* The voice was so clear in my head I looked around, expecting to see my father. I ignored his ugly voice and jerked myself back from the painful memory of how he had reacted when he found out Eric had marked me as mated.

My cheek stung as if the slap he'd delivered was minutes ago instead of almost a hundred years. Tears gathered in my eyes as I remembered my pathetic and desperate words.

*But Papa, he loves me.*

My father's laughter had torn at my skin and his words had left me bleeding. *Why would anyone, especially a warrior like Eric, want a scrawny, wretched girl like you? I doubt you'll produce sons and if you are lucky enough to get pregnant you'll probably die in childbirth like your stupid cow of a mother. The only reason why he marked you is because he wants the Clan.*

I was used to verbal abuse and worse at the hands of my father, who had raised me alone, refusing help from the women in our Clan after my mom died giving birth to me. He had never forgiven them for taking the Clan from his mother, and he had never forgiven me for not being the son he so desperately wanted. He was determined to keep the Clan in our family and a strong male child had a better chance of holding on to the title. He had raised me hard, grooming me to be the next *Primul*, and had not let the little matter of my gender stand in his way.

My father hadn't been strong enough to take the Clan from Eric's father in a fair fight, as was the custom. So instead he hired *Born for Metal*

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*Dragon Kin* to murder Eric's Clan members, down to the last elder and infant. Eric had been the only survivor. His mother had hid him away when the attack happened. *Dragon Kin* can take a lot of abuse, but the mercenaries had known that *Dragon Kin* could survive almost any wound except ones to the head and the heart, the two areas that are slow to regenerate and heal among our kind.

Despite all of my father's indoctrinations, part of me had stayed my mother's daughter, more like her than him. My maternal ancestors were the peaceful tree huggers of their day, drawing their magic and strength from the Earth and plants. After my father had died, quite unfairly, of old age after nearly eighteen hundred years, I took over the Clan and turned away from violence, convinced I could keep leadership without using brutality.

I despised my father, but now I had to admit he was right. Eric wanted the Clan and didn't care how he got it. I was tired of this game and tired of handing him my heart in the hopes he wouldn't stomp on it. It was time for this to be over. I *needed* this to be over.

My problem was I was thinking like a human and I wasn't a human. I was a dragon trapped in human form. Embracing the ways of my mother's Clan had made me weak. What would a female dragon have done if her mate betrayed her? Roasted him? I couldn't call fire like *Born for Fire Dragon Kin*, I was strong but I didn't have the brute strength of a *Born for Metal*, I couldn't fly like a *Born for Air* or breathe under water, like *Born for Water*. My magic was benign and none of it would help me kill Eric.

Even though I hadn't made a conscious decision, I knew it was my only choice. If not, he would keep coming after me until one of us was dead. And since I ended up flat on my back every time I came face to face with him, it would probably be me.

I stepped outside the hotel and the humidity slammed into me like a living force. If Eric could track me here, he probably could track me anywhere. So why not go home? I had a better chance in my own surroundings.

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I approached one of the cabs lined along the main street that led to the hotel. I didn't wait for the driver to open the door for me. "*Aeropuerto Santiago, por favor.*"

Soon we were zipping through the streets of Santiago. I tried to keep my mind blank. If I started thinking now I would shatter into a millions pieces.

The bite mark began to throb and I shivered. Eric was looking for me.

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### Chapter Three

As the plane touched down at LAX, I was more than ready to get off. It had been a rough trip from Chile to California. My queasy stomach wasn't helping. I grabbed my purse and carryon and began to disembark. I flipped open my cell phone and dialed my *Următor's* phone number. I didn't identify myself. There was no need to; Kaida knew my voice better than her own mother's. "I'm at LAX. Dogori's hot on my tail. Meet me at the *Heisler Park* house in two hours. Bring my weapons." I closed the phone and walked toward long-term parking.

As I walked I tried to keep my mind steady, silent. I knew my nausea wasn't a result of the jet lag. My nights in Eric's arms had had a consequence. It was rare for a *Dragon Kin* female to get pregnant and the possibility of delivering a live hatchling was slim. I knew the statistics better than most.

The first time Eric and I were together, I had gotten pregnant. I had been young, naïve and idealistic. Over the moon, I hadn't taken my grandmother's advice and had suffered as a result. My maternal grandmother was a healer and had studied the birth rates of our kind. She warned me that first pregnancies amongst our kind often resulted in miscarriage. It had something to do with the way our bodies had changed and adapted after becoming trapped in human form. Thousands of years ago, when *Dragon Kin* had first hidden amongst the humans, we began



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shifting less and less to our true form until too late we realized only very few of us could shift at all.

I had refused to believe her. I was in love and carrying the child of my mate. A couple of days after I found out the real reason Eric had sought me out was to take the Clan, I woke in a pool of blood and my hatchling's life had been over before it ever began. My father had only shaken his head disgusted, before muttering, "I told you so."

I splayed my hand against my belly and prayed it would be different this time. Even in the face of Eric's scheming, I still wanted this baby. No matter what its father did, my child wouldn't suffer because of it. It would know it was loved and created in love. Despite the fact I was planning on killing its father.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was stuck in traffic on the 405 freeway, right outside of Huntington Beach when I had to pull over to vomit for the second time. I was only a day out of my breeding time, but the gestation rate among *Dragon Kin* was accelerated because of our physiology. Babies were carried for five months instead of the nine months humans carried their offspring. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and pulled back onto the freeway.

My eyes welled with tears. I slammed my hand against the steering wheel and it jerked, causing the car to swerve into the lane beside me. Red and blue lights flashed and a siren sounded.

*Fuck!*

Bile gathered in throat and I had a hard time seeing past the blood haze gathering in my eyes. I took a deep breath. My instincts had kicked in and now everything was seen as a threat to my hatchling, probably a throwback to the time when humans hunted us and destroyed our eggs without provocation.

I pulled over and told myself it was just a basic stop for a traffic violation, the baby was in no danger. The haze retreated and I heard the steering wheel crack. I looked down and realized how hard I was gripping

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it. I released it, my hands trembling, and fought the rage that tore at my skin. The *Kin* side of my nature was convinced that the man approaching my car meant danger, while the reasonable side of me knew that the days of marauding, dragon-slaying humans were long gone.

Fighting the urge to vomit again, I plastered a serene look on my face as the CHP officer approached my car.

"Ma'am, do you know why I'm pulling you over?"

I didn't get a chance to answer before I leaned out the window and vomited down the front of his pants.

Cursing, he reared back.

Sobbing, I swiped at my mouth with the back of my hand as he looked at me like I like I was crazy. I *felt* crazy. Everything I felt seemed magnified. I thought back to my first pregnancy, and couldn't remember if I had experienced this.

"Morning sickness," I choked out.

He stood looking at me and then looked at his pants. When he pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket I fought the absurd need to laugh.

"Do you need to go to the hospital ma'am?"

I had to hand it to him; he handled the situation better than most men. A crying, hysterical, pregnant woman tends to send men scurrying for cover, no matter what species they are.

"No officer, thank you. I'm almost home."

He gave me another strange look before he walked back to his motorcycle.

\* \* \* \* \*

As I headed south on Pacific Coast Highway, I ignored the shoreline that peeked through the structures crowded along the two-lane highway. Views of the ocean normally soothed me, but today my mind was filled with determined purpose. I wanted to end this, and concentrate on my unborn child.

When I reached the house I pressed the garage opener on my visor, but didn't get out of the car right away. The house was silent and I waited

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for Kaida to come and greet me. When that didn't happen, I took a deep breath and got out of the car after the garage door closed fully. I stood quietly, trying to sense the presence of other beings, but felt nothing. I left the keys in the car and grabbed my overnight bag and purse before entering the door that led to the house.

Startled, I almost tripped as I walked into the kitchen to find Eric and Kaida sitting together at my breakfast table. The same table at which I had shared many a meal with Kaida.

Eric must have put up a block so I wouldn't be able to feel either of them. It was the only explanation I could think of for the mark not throbbing in this close proximity to him.

Sunlight peaked in from the bay window overlooking the jagged shoreline. It made Kaida's sandy brown hair look as if it sparkled with jewels. Her head was bent as she spoke quietly to Eric. I cringed as I realized how good the two of them looked together. His dark good looks suited her delicate pale beauty.

Nausea churned in my stomach. How could I have ever thought Eric would want me when he could have Kaida? And of course he wanted her. All men did. Where I was short and brown, Kaida was tall and golden. Born of a Japanese father and a Haitian mother, her looks were exotic but worked very well for her. I had always secretly envied her height and as a little girl I had cringed when my father had complimented her beauty. I had often wished he would say just one of the nice things to me that he had said to her.

Even though she was taller than the average female, *Dragon Kin* or human, she still seemed dainty. Fury crept up my spine as I watched a frown mar her brow. She bit her full bottom lip, looking beautiful, guilty and worried as Eric, so intent on their conversation he hadn't noticed me standing in the doorway, patted her hand as if to comfort her.

A snarl rose in my throat. It felt as if the anger I attempted to control would split my skin in an effort to get free. My heart thundered in my chest as my mind refused to comprehend what stood before it. Kaida was alive, and from the smile I had seen on her face when I walked in,

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more than a little well. And Eric was in my house. It could only mean one thing. Kaida had betrayed me.

A shriek pierced the silence and it took a moment before I realized the sound came from me. Kaida jumped up from her chair, the hasty movement knocking it to the floor. A becoming blush climbed her cheeks; her mouth opened but no sound came out. Before she could she could speak I grabbed the object nearest me, and threw it at her head. The vase shattered against the wall, about a foot from her face, and I raced to close the distance between us, determined to get my hands on her.

"You betrayed me!" It was a scream of anguish.

She flinched, backed up and held her hands up as if she to show she was unarmed. Eric grabbed me around my waist before I could reach her and held me. I fought like a madwoman, kicking, screaming and clawing as growls erupted from my throat.

"Go," I heard Eric say.

Kaida looked as if she wanted to say something but instead scurried from the room like the rat she was. Treacherous bitch, I was going to rip every perfect strand of hair from her head as soon as I got free. I continued to struggle against Eric and he easily restrained me, enraging me further.

Leaning down, he whispered in my ear, "All your struggling is going to hurt the baby."

Nothing else he could have said would have penetrated the fog that clouded my mind. I crumpled against him, as a sob tore from me.

He knew. Of course he knew, he'd probably known the exact moment we'd conceived and no doubt would use it against me. That was it, I couldn't take any more. This man had the power to destroy everything I held dear. He had convinced my *Următor* to betray me. Kaida hadn't only been my Second, she had been my best friend and the only companion my father had allowed me growing up, and only because she was being trained to serve me.

Grief rose up in me and I wanted to howl with it. Kaida had no way of knowing I was pregnant, no way of knowing she had delivered not only me, but also my child into the hands of our enemy. I thought fast.

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I had a choice; I could surrender my Clan, or I could fight him and as a result, possibly lose the baby I carried. There was no choice to make. I would do whatever I had to do to protect my child, even from its father.

Tears ran unchecked from my eyes as I slumped against him. I didn't protest as he swept me up and carried me from the kitchen. I continued to cry, silently cursing myself as pathetic and weak. My father had been right.

As my back met the surface of the bed I curled into a protective ball and continued to weep. I felt the bed dip and flinched when Eric's hand touched my shoulder.

"Maya, you have to calm down. You are going to make yourself sick." He stroked my hair away from my face. His touch made me sob harder because I wanted so much to take comfort in it. "Kaida didn't betray you. She did what she thought was best for you."

When I refused to acknowledge him, he picked me up and cradled me on his lap. "Baby, you have to stop crying."

Realizing how hoarse and pleading his voice was, I looked up at him through swollen eyes. He returned my gaze before bending over to rest his forehead against mine.

"Do you know how it felt for me to come back to that room and find it empty? There were droplets of blood on the carpet and I nearly went out of my mind with fear. I thought something happened to you." He closed his eyes, but not before I saw the emotion in them.

"I'm not good with words, Maya, so I tried to express myself physically. Everything I felt and needed I put into every touch and caress, but I still wasn't able to convey my feelings. You still left me."

A tear slipped down his cheek. Fascinated, my gaze followed it until it dripped off of his chin.

"It's true, the first time I came after you, I did it in hopes of wresting the Clan from you." He opened his eyes, paused and swallowed hard. "But there you were, this tiny slip of a girl with a tongue that could shred a man to pieces and make him beg for more. All of a sudden I didn't know which I wanted more, you or the Clan. I felt so guilty, having these strong, undeniable feelings for my enemy."

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"The first time I touched you, I thought I could seduce the Clan from you but something went wrong. The feel, the taste, the smell of you crept into my bloodstream and my seemingly brilliant plan turned on me. Here I was falling for the daughter of the man who took everything I loved from me – my family, my destiny – and I didn't know how to react."

He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against mine again. He was silent so long I feared he wouldn't continue speaking. "When I was inside of you, your legs wrapped tight around me, it was if I could feel and see everything so much more clearly. Something came over me, something feral and possessive. The next thing I knew, I was claiming you, marking you and daring anyone to try to take what was mine."

When I tried to speak he placed a finger against my lips and shook his head.

"I wasn't trying to kill you, Maya. The night I marked you, it wasn't an accident. I knew exactly what I was doing, whether I wanted to admit it to myself or not."

As I listened to him speak, I prayed it all wasn't a dream. A product conjured by a feverish brain desperate for the sight, feel, and want of him. I reached up to touch his face, his hand covered mine and we sat silently.

"I don't want us to have to pay for the sins of our parents, for things that happened long ago."

"I don't either." I paused, remembering the *Dragon Kin* who'd broke into my room in Chile. "Eric, there was a man in my room back at the hotel. He was *Born for Metal*." I hesitated before I continued, "He was there to kill me...I thought you sent him."

He growled and his nostrils flared. Shaking his head, he said, "There's a plot stirring somewhere. Someone who knows our history is scheming, looking to kill two dragons with one stone. He was lucky the room was empty when I got there. If anything would have happened to you..." He took a shuddering breath, "I've been a coward. I should have come to you when I found out about our baby."

Another tear ran unchecked down his face as he flattened his hand against the soft curve of my belly. "I tried to convince myself it was all for

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the best. Kyran's father made me *Urmätor*, hoping to distract me, and he forbade me to come near you, but even then I couldn't stop myself from seeking you out. I came to you one night and watched you cry in your sleep and I promised myself I would never hurt you again."

"I know you didn't mean to hurt me."

"I know that now too, but then I was so consumed with guilt that I thought I was doing the right thing by staying away from you."

"I needed you."

He flinched, then nodded and I almost wished I could take back the words. "I don't know if I will ever forgive myself for being such a fool. My family is gone and nothing I say or do will ever bring them back. And I hated myself for wanting you more than I wanted to avenge their deaths." He paused. "I don't want to be *Primul*."

The words were so soft I thought I'd imagined them.

"I don't want to be *Primul*. I don't even want to be Kyran's Second. I stepped down a month before I found you in Chile. I knew what I wanted... I just didn't know how to get it."

"What *do* you want, Eric?" My heart beat so hard I thought it would burst.

"This," he said as he caressed my stomach, "You are what I want, what I *need*. I want to wake up every morning next to you and go to sleep wrapped in the scent of your sex as our sweat cools upon our skin. I want to keep you and our hatchlings safe and happy. I am willing to do whatever's necessary. I love you."

I choked back a sob as I clung to him, "I love you too, Eric. I've loved you from the first moment I laid eyes on you and I loved you even when I thought you were using me to gain control of the Clan. And I want what you want too, more than anything, more than I want to be *Primul*, more than I want the Clan."

I settled deeper into his embrace, content and at peace for the first time in a very long time. "How do you say my husband in Lakota?"

"*Mi higna*."

"I want you to be *Primul*, *mi higna*. It is your birthright, one my father stole from you."

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He shook his head, "It doesn't matter anymore. Our child will become *Primul*, she or he will be raised to lead our Clan."

"Then we will share leadership of the Clan until it's time for our child to take over the responsibility." I covered his hand, which rested against my belly. "We will share it like we will share everything else."

"Okay *mita wicu*, it's perfectly fitting," he said as his mouth covered mine.

I forgot about everything else except for the man who held me.



## Chapter Four

“Oh God!”

Eric was so deep inside of me I imagined I could taste him on the back of my tongue. He had me pinned against the bed, my legs draped across his shoulders. He didn't withdraw, only thrust deeper, tunneling into me with short digs of his cock.

The feel of him so unyielding against my cervix bordered on painful. My hands were manacled in his on either side of my head. I couldn't move, could barely breathe as his body plowed repeatedly into mine.

The pressure grew, gathering in my womb and I didn't know if I'd survive it. I threw back my head and cried out as the first wave crashed into me, but Eric didn't let me off so easy. He followed me into it, working me, pounding into me as spasm after spasm drew the muscles of my vagina taut.

He groaned as my pussy gripped him fist tight. I could feel his stomach tense against mine, his orgasm rolling in, but he fought it. I lifted my head off the pillow and licked the mark just above his left pec and smiled, satisfied when he groaned and began to tremble. He tried to pull back so the mark would be out of my reach, but with my ankles practically around his neck, it made it hard for him to get very far.

I laughed and then cried out again as another wave hit me. It felt as if my entire body shimmered as my orgasm began to pulse through me.

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My climax triggered his and he joined me. His back bowed as he buried his face in the curve of my neck to muffle a growl of satisfaction.

I didn't think I was going to be able move, let alone get my legs back into a normal position. His face was still buried in my neck and I could feel his heartbeat begin to slow. He nipped my neck and said something but I couldn't make out the words.

"Momma!" I flinched as the voice squawked from the baby monitor we had knocked to the floor during our bed play. "Momma! Out!" the tiny voice demanded.

Eric lifted his head, "Ania's awake."

I chuckled, "I noticed."

A barrage of baby gibberish flew from the monitor when Ania's command wasn't obeyed as quickly as she wanted. I laughed again as Eric paled. Ania had her daddy's temper and she was working herself into a fine lather.

Eric reluctantly got up from the bed and gave it and me a longing look. "I better go get her."

I smothered a giggle as he pulled on the sweats crumpled near the foot of our bed. It was amazing to see the mighty and powerful Eric Dogori cowed by a little girl who weighed less than thirty pounds. He gave my naked body one last gaze before heading for the door.

I stretched; my muscles were sore but my entire body hummed with satisfaction. I swung my legs over the bed and was heading for the bathroom when the phone rang. I shrugged into my robe before picking it up.

"Hel—" I barely got a syllable out of my mouth before the voice on the other end demanded to speak with Kaida. I took a deep, calming breath. I recognized the voice; it was Ry, Kaida's brother. I didn't want to say her name. I didn't want to talk about her. It had been almost a year, but her betrayal still lingered fresh in my mind. And though Eric had tried to convince me more than once that her reason for betraying me had been an honorable one, I still couldn't bring myself to agree with him. She had been my best friend, my Second, and no matter how she felt about my

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relationship with Eric, she should have come to me first. The thought was unreasonable considering how things ended, but...

"Momma!"

I looked up to see Eric standing in the doorway with Ania on his hip. She squirmed, wanting down, but Eric saw the look on my face and held her fast. I ignored my daughter's squeals of protest and tried to concentrate on what Ry was saying.

"Ry," I said, finally breaking in when it seemed like he was going to take a breath, "Kaida's not here. She hasn't been here for more than a year." I held the phone away from my ear when he started shouting. Since most of it was in Japanese I could only make out certain words. Kaida obviously hadn't told him she was no longer my *Urmator*.

"Ry," I tried again. "Ry, please." The torrent of words stopped finally and I spoke quickly before he caught a second wind. "In English, please."

I listened as he told me he had received a package with a lock of Kaida's hair and *Amphisbaena* charm in it. He had called her home and when he received no answer, he went there to find it ransacked.

My chest tightened and I blinked back tears. The women in our Clan wore their fertility charms until death; only then were they removed, to be passed on to the next female in the family. This didn't mean Kaida was dead, but if she wasn't she was in serious trouble.

Eric, sensing my distress, came up behind me. Holding the baby in one arm, he wrapped the other around my waist and pulled me back against his chest. I took comfort in the solid strength of him as my baby girl patted my cheek. I realized I was crying when I saw her little hand come away wet from my face.

I ended the conversation with Kaida's brother and hung up the phone.

Eric and I stood silent for more than five minutes. Even Ania was still, a minor miracle. More than likely she had picked up on my distress. Eric's arm tightened around my waist and I shuddered. Kaida had been my *Urmator* since before I had become *Primul* and now she was missing.

"What are we going to do?" My voice was hoarse.

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"Well find her," my mate assured me.

And we would. We had to. I needed to apologize to her and thank her for my mate and my hatchling.

THE END

## **Emma Petersen**

### **Author Bio**

Emma Petersen wrote her first romance in high school after falling in love with historical romances and has been writing ever since. She lives in sunny California with a cool cat with named Toussaint and is working through an addiction to shoes.

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### Prologue

The house was finally empty. Big Ty's city relations had beat a hasty retreat back to their gated communities and mini mansions. The will had been read, and his only son had stayed silent throughout the entire ordeal, not really caring who got what or why.

Tyson Parsons, Jr. loved his father and, over the years, they'd become close. The first couple days after he arrived at the ranch following his mother's death, he'd hated his father and what he'd done to his mother. His mother had never said a bad word against Big Ty, but he knew the story behind his birth. How his incredibly wealthy father had chosen to abandon his pregnant mother rather than risk being disinherited.

If his mother had had her way, he never would've learned the truth behind the circumstances of his birth. He found out accidentally when he overheard her brothers talking about how his mother had come home to Standing Ridge heartbroken, pregnant, and alone—how she refused to name the father of her child. The only thing her brothers knew about the man was she'd met him in Parsons' Pass, where she'd been working as a substitute teacher.

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Ty's heart broke at the news. From the time he was old enough to remember, his mother had told him stories about his handsome father who'd died before he was born. The day after overhearing his uncles and, despite the feeling in the pit in his stomach, Ty asked his mother for the truth. And she gave it to him, holding him while he cried.

Ty had sworn he'd never forgive the man who fathered him. But here he was, more than twenty years later, mourning the man he'd sworn to hate.

He had spent more than half his life in the huge house that set at the foot of Parsons' Pass. He'd laughed and cried in the house, and it had never been so silent. Memories filled him as he went room-to-room closing doors and shutting off lights. He remembered the lamp he'd knocked over racing to watch a ranch hand break in a new horse. It had been his second day at the ranch, and he thought the huge blond man with the cold blue eyes would punish him for his carelessness. Instead, his father had picked up the lamp's mate and tossed it to the floor, saying he had always hated the lamps anyway.

Now, as he opened the door to his father's study, he thought about his wedding, which was scheduled for less than a month away. When he spoke with Shanna earlier, he asked if they could postpone it, since a wedding should be a celebration, and he didn't feel much like celebrating. He backed down when she'd thrown one of her increasingly familiar temper tantrums, and he remained unsettled as he recalled how her tone changed when she found out Big Ty left him everything. The house, the ranch, the land, and some property in a few cities he hadn't been aware his father owned. The uneasy feeling grew when she promised to cut the shopping trip with her mother short and fly back to be with him. The night he called to tell her his father had died, she hadn't volunteered to return early; she'd said instead that she couldn't miss the last fitting, or her wedding dress wouldn't be ready on time. So he'd had to face his father's relatives and the reading of the will alone.

Alone. For the first time since his mother's death, he felt alone. The thought weighed heavily on him. Ty couldn't bring himself to go into his father's study. Instead he stood in the doorway and tried to ignore the

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pressure behind his eyes. Some of the best times in his childhood had occurred here. Like the talking to he'd gotten after his father caught him and Jenny Gardner playing doctor in the hayloft. Or when Big Ty had given him the keys to his first car. God, it had been an ugly, beat up hunk of junk, but the time he and his father had spent restoring it had made it more valuable than any high-end automobile Big Ty could have bought him.

Closing his eyes, Ty thought back to the video-recorded will his father's lawyer played for the gathered family members earlier. His father had concluded the tape in typical Big Ty fashion, by telling his family to kiss his ass and get the hell out of his son's house. Ty had sat stunned, unmoving long after the video ended and the house cleared. The questions he longed to ask his father would now go unanswered. He wanted to believe his father left him everything because he loved him but, after years of thinking he was merely an obligation, it was hard to believe otherwise.

Especially since his father had come into his life only after his mother's death. Ty's mother had been killed instantly when a car driven by a drunken teenage boy had slammed into hers on the way back from the airport in Rapid City. He'd never forget how he felt the day before the funeral when his father arrived. It had been eerie looking into the same blue eyes that so often looked back at him from the mirror. He had cried and begged his grandmother to let him stay with her, but she told him that his mother had left instructions to call his father if anything ever happened to her. She had held him tight and told him it was important they respect his mother's wishes.

Ty sighed and tried to shake off the old memories that still left fresh pain.

He hadn't locked the kitchen door, so when he heard it open he feared it was Shanna making good on her threat to come home early. He felt guilty and tried to relax the sudden tension in his muscles. Shanna coming home early was a good thing; he should be glad that she wanted to be here for him when he needed her. *So why do I dread the thought of seeing her right now?*



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Soft footsteps made him turn, and he looked straight into the eyes of Jenny Gardner.

Ty swallowed, guilt and lust warring for control. His heart pounded as she walked toward him.

She wore the same hip hugging, black, ankle-length skirt she'd worn to his father's funeral. The matching black sweater didn't show any skin, but the way it clung to her breasts made it more arousing and provocative than if she'd been wearing something low cut.

He took a deep breath and stepped back.

"Ty, I'm so sorry about your daddy." Her sympathetic words washed over him, dampening some of the fire that burned in his gut. He knew she was only there to offer him comfort, the same way she often had when they were children, but the thoughts he entertained now were far from childlike.

"Thank you."

"I bought you some beef stew and fry bread. Momma sent them over along with an apple pie. She was worried you might starve to death in the time since she left."

Ty chuckled as he thought of how Mrs. Gardner had fussed over him and practically force-fed him at the wake.

Jenny smiled. "You don't look like you're starving, Ty."

*If you only knew*, he thought, but instead took her arm and said, "You shouldn't be out so late, Jenny. Let me walk you to your car."

She pulled away from him. "I'm not leaving. You need me."

He closed his eyes. Her words were innocent, but they affected his body in ways that were far from innocent. His mind and body interpreted them as something all together carnal. He wasn't in the right state of mind; his emotions were too fragile, too close to the surface. Being alone with her now would be tantamount to throwing gasoline on a fire.

"Jenny, please. I really need to be alone."

She looked hurt, but nodded her head. "Okay, Ty. Goodnight."

He waited until he heard the door close behind her, before going to his room to grab a couple of blankets. He'd never be able to sleep in the house tonight.

## Dragon's Mate

Walking to the barn, he looked up at the star-filled sky and said a silent prayer for his parents. He turned the light on in the first stable stall and made his way back to the place he'd spent plenty of nights as a child, camping out and pretending he was a desperado on the run from the law.

It was the same place he'd met Jenny that first day he'd come to the ranch when he was twelve. She'd found him crying for his mother.

He shed no tears tonight, however, as he lay for about thirty minutes, the blanket beneath him not enough to stop the hay from poking and scratching his back. The smell of hay and horses comforted him as the memories of the day continued to torment his mind. Throughout the entire day, he stayed dry-eyed, even as he watched his father's casket being lowered into the ground. He'd been numb; only looking into the sorrow-filled eyes of Jenny Gardener had elicited any type of feeling. The sight of her upset wrenched at his heart, but his own tears still failed to come.

Until now.

One moment he was thinking about her, and the next he was sobbing so hard he couldn't catch his breath. As if his thoughts brought her back to him, she stepped into the barn, the creak of the door signaling her presence. When her hand touched his shoulder, he went into her arms gratefully. She held him while he cried, neither one of them speaking.

His tears turned into the occasional hiccup, and she snuggled against him, the same way she had when they were children. But there was nothing innocent in the feelings her breasts provoked as they pressed against his chest.

"I'm so sorry, Ty."

He looked into her pretty round face and tried to remember a time he hadn't wanted her. Their eyes met, held, and the next thing he knew he was kissing her as if his life depended on it.

She didn't protest, but engaged in the kiss eagerly. Everything they had avoided for almost two years flared up between them, hot and wild. His hands were rough as they pushed up her shirt and shoved aside her bra, but Jenny didn't seem to mind. She arched into his touch and moaned

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as he buried his face in her breasts, inhaling the intoxicating scent of her skin.

Over the years he'd lain awake more than one night trying to figure out what perfume she wore. Alone and aching, he'd get so hard thinking of her. The only way he'd be able to sleep was to take the situation into his own hands.

Now, he was aching and hard, but he wasn't alone. It seemed like a dream, the feel of her restless hands running against his back, clutching him, and pulling him close, but this was better than any dream. Jenny was warm flesh and soft sighs beneath him. She bit back another moan as he ran his hand over her nipple before he bent over and latched onto it, suckling hungrily.

Her surprised gasp spurred him on. He sucked and gently bit at her nipples until she arched against him, crying out his name. Her clothes were gone and his soon followed. Sweat slick, he lay against her, flesh against flesh, the tip of his cock poised at her entrance, brushing the damp heat between her thighs.

"Ty! Please. I ache, Ty."

He drowned in the passion and promise he saw in his eyes, but what he also saw there was enough to bring him back from the brink. Trust. She trusted him with her body and unwittingly with her future. Had his mother looked at his father with such unquestioning faith?

"Jenny, I don't have any protection."

She looked at him, uncomprehending at first, but he knew the moment she understood the meaning of his words. The blush started in her cheeks and worked its way downward until it bloomed scarlet on her bare breasts.

She took a deep breath, as if she was steadying herself. "It's okay, Ty. I want you."

Ty groaned and rested his forehead against hers. He wanted her, too, more than his next breath. He wanted her so bad that he considered making love to her despite the risk. He nuzzled her neck before kissing her trembling lips. He shook his head. He couldn't do it. What if he got

## Dragon's Mate

her pregnant? The last thing he wanted to do was repeat his father's mistakes.

He knew another way, however, to soothe her ache, a way that wouldn't get her pregnant. He deepened the kiss and reached between them to touch her moist flesh. The first touch was hesitant, unsure and merely skimmed against her skin.

His touch became firmer, and Jenny moaned low in her throat before opening wider for him. He peppered kisses down her throat, stopping to lave the taut crests of her breasts, before dipping his tongue into her belly button.

She was moving with him, writhing and whimpering beneath him until he arrived eye-level at her the apex of her thighs. She protested as he spread her legs, and she tried to cover herself with her hands, but he nudged them aside and buried his face in her drenched flesh. At the first pass of his tongue she gave a strangled gasp and tried to push his face away, but he persisted. Stroke after stroke he devoured her, driven by the way she pulled him closer and sobbed his name. Her thighs clamped on his head as her breathing became harsher. She fisted her hands in his hair, arching up, and pushed his face harder against her pussy.

Her cries took on an urgency. Trembling, she cried out with every insistent pass of his tongue. She begged for him to stop, begged for him to continue, and then she was screaming, exploding, and shuddering sweetly against his mouth.

Ty crawled up her body, loving the way his body glided against her sweat-sheened skin. His lips brushed hers once, twice before she pulled him down and kissed him sleepily. His flesh throbbed, but he ignored it as he covered them with the extra blanket. He held her tight, her flushed face buried in his neck. Long after she fell asleep he replayed the scene in his mind, reliving every movement. The taste of her, the feel of her, and the sound of her cries. He'd never forget them; they were imprinted on his soul.

He didn't remember falling asleep, but as he drifted off with Jenny lying beside him, warm and secure, he knew without a doubt there would be no wedding. From the moment he'd met Jenny he tried to run from the

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truth. He was tired of running. As he lay holding her, feeling her soft breath against the crease of his neck, he knew without a doubt what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. He wanted to spend every night falling asleep next to her and waking up holding her, ready to quench the insatiable need for another taste of her. He dreamed of his future with Jenny.

The sun shining through the barn window woke Ty. Reaching for Jenny, he found the space beside him empty. He opened his eyes. He was alone.