



DARK FLAME

PARANORMAL HUNTER



GENA D. LUTZ



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By
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Dark Flame: Paranormal Hunter, book #4

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Chasing Magic
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Paranormal Hunter Serial

Sonnet Vale: Paranormal Hunter, book #1
Phantom City: Paranormal Hunter, book #2
Demon Touched: Paranormal Hunter, book #3
Dark Flame: Paranormal Hunter, book #4

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About the book:

If you hunt paranormal creatures for a living, life can get pretty complicated. Just ask demon princess and paranormal hunter, Sonnet Vale.

Sonnet has escaped demon-hell, and is now faced with her biggest challenge yet—raising a rapidly growing dragon-shifter in a city full of magic and mayhem.

Dark Flame

(Sonnet Vale, Paranormal Hunter, Book #4)

By
Gena D. Lutz

Chapter One

One year after Sonnet's escape from Demon-hell

Sonnet Vale stared at charred remains that lay face down at the base of a tree in front of her. The body had been found on the outskirts of Phantom City, on werewolf territory, burned beyond recognition; its magical signature the only indication that the deceased individual was of male descent, and also a werewolf.

Judging by the magical essence surrounding the victim, and the mystical strength of his murderer, Sonnet knew for certain that this was a fresh kill. It didn't take her long to recognize what brand of supernatural species had done him in, and for once, she hadn't needed the use of her hunter abilities to figure it out. The killer was a dragon-shifter. Nothing else—that she knew of anyway—had the strength of magic-fire needed to blaze that searing hot without the aid of a manmade source.

“So what do you make of it?”

Sonnet scowled at the shrill masculine voice coming at her from behind. “This is bad, real bad,” she said, pulling the tarp back over the upper half of the dead wolf's body. “Have you had any dragon sightings lately?”

Detective Sonnet had already forgotten his name, from the PCPD, froze in all-out fear. “You think a dragon did this?” he stammered.

She nodded. “I know for certain one did.”

His eyes went wide. “It's because of that crazy tracking thing you can do, isn't it?”

Sonnet rolled her eyes. “Yeah, it has something to do with that crazy stuff I can do.”

His head began to bob nervously. “And you’ll be able to track the scumbag killer down, huh?”

“Yes, I most definitely can.”

And she’d do it later that night, she resolved. The trail was strong and wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon, so she was confident that she would track the dragon down easily enough.

He nodded enthusiastically at her response, as if he’d answered every question from *Jeopardy* correctly and was mighty proud of himself for it, and then moseyed off toward his patrol car parked several feet away from the crime scene.

Truth was, by now, everyone in Phantom City knew who she was, and what she could do with her inherent gifts. That fact was the reason why the PCPD had called her in on this particular murder case. And why she’d skyrocketed to top billing on the chief’s consultant list.

She cringed at the thought of having to hunt not only in her hometown of Vanier, Alabama, but within Phantom City as well. There was a fine line between protecting innocent people, and running herself into an early grave. And she wasn’t thinking only of herself anymore; there was Poppy’s well-being to consider.

Speaking of, Sonnet absently rubbed at a flaring muscle in her shoulder and let out a long yawn.

“Can I help you with that?”

Sonnet’s hand paused in mid-rub, and she turned to face Bane. She smiled at him, and said, “If you so much as touch me with those magic hands of yours right now, I’m liable to pass out.”

Sonnet's heart warmed at the sight of her boyfriend. He was a handsome devil, with luscious caramel-colored hair that draped in a silky curtain down his back, stopping at waist level. He was wearing his favorite black button-up shirt, left untucked to hang over a pair of tight-fitting jeans. His pale blue eyes gleamed with mischief as he ignored her amusingly heated words and started rubbing her shoulders.

"When's the last time you managed to sleep through the night?" he asked.

She shrugged and dropped her hand, sinking into his tender ministrations. "Who knows...probably the last time I stayed the night at your place."

"That's not healthy, little fox."

She nodded sluggishly. "I know."

And just as she was beginning to relax, they were interrupted.

"Are we finished here?" the coroner's assistant asked, looking between her and the body. He winked. "I need to zip him and ship him, if you know what I mean."

Shaking her head at the guy, she mumbled, "Yeah, Crux, he's all yours."

Crux smiled and signaled his crew to bag up the dead body. And then the clueless young man waggled his brows at them, and said, "You two should grab a room and have some fun. I wish I could."

Sonnet's brows rose.

Bane's canines lengthened; she didn't actually see it happen, but she knew by how fast the young wolf's complexion went from tan to washed out in about 2.2 seconds. Without another word, he turned and scurried away.

"You almost made that kid crap himself." She couldn't help it, she laughed, and then her body swayed as Bane stopped rubbing her shoulders.

“That young whelp needs to be taught some manners,” he snarled.

Sonnet stopped giggling and watched as Crux, the whelp in question, stepped over the dead body, and then leaned forward to zip the bag around it. He wore a dark brown jumpsuit that fastened from crotch to collar, the words across the breadth of his back reading Phantom City Mortuary. And she realized, much like herself, he had to deal with death on a regular basis. She didn't know anybody society would deem “normal” after constantly having to be around the macabre reality of that.

“I have a feeling his problem is more of the social awkwardness flavor, than anything else,” she said in a softer tone.

And boy, could she relate.

Bane shrugged. “Even still...boundaries.”

“You got a point.”

Suddenly Sonnet went still, her senses trying to pick up on something. Her gaze scanned the area, and then a familiar sensation reached out to her from the bushes next to the tree, where the body was found. She honed in on it, moving, following the magical pull.

When she reached the bushes, she knelt down and spotted the object that was calling to her hidden within the branches. Moon glare jumped off of what looked to be a silver, thick banded collar, the light hitting her straight in the eyes. She squinted and reached for it. And holy hell, magic that almost burned skittered across her skin upon contact.

“Detective...” *Damn it, what is his name?*

Before she could figure it out, the detective walked up behind her. He peered over her shoulder and asked, “What in tarnation is that?”

She abruptly stood and turned to face him, handing him the collar. “It's your one and only lead, is what it is. Take this to your mages; see if they

can figure out exactly what the hell it is. I'll come into the station later, before I start my hunt, to see what y'all came up with."

He nodded, pulled an evidence bag out of his jacket pocket, and bagged the collar. "Will do."

Bane waited until he and Sonnet had walked to her vehicle before asking, "Was Friday really the last time you got any good sleep?"

On a yawn and a slow nod, she mumbled, "Mm, hm."

People came first. That was the rule. But she was so tired she felt as though she would tip over.

"That was three days ago, little fox. Which means one: I'm not about to let you drive; and two: you're coming home with me."

"I'll tell you what. You can definitely do the driving, but I can only take a nap over at your place. I have to work tonight, handsome."

"If that's the best you can offer, I guess I'll have to live with it."

Sonnet heard the rumble of thunder. Closing her eyes, she tipped her face up and sniffed the air. It smelled cool and damp. Perfectly normal weather for April. She shook her head; was it Spring already? It seemed like only yesterday she'd returned home from demon-hell. But in reality, it had been a handful of months.

She gazed down at her watch—two thirty. "I have to pick up Poppy from school."

"We can go together." Bane started for the driver's side door.

She nodded and they both climbed in.

"What grade is Poppy in now, anyways? That girl's been growing like a weed."

He didn't know the half of it. In one year's time, Poppy had blossomed into what appeared to be a beautiful, free-spirited teenager, with the intellect

of an adult. No one would have guessed she was only a year old.

Apparently years and age were relative things to dragons—or were they?

She sighed and buckled her seat belt, wishing she knew when Poppy would hit her peak. And she worried that maybe it was the she-dragon's prolonged absence from the dragon realm that had something to do with the rapid growth spurts. It was a question that would haunt her if she let it.

Even though she hadn't talk to him in ages, Sonnet figured she needed to contact Brecon for some real answers.

Sonnet met Bane's gaze. "She should be finishing up high school by the end of this semester."

"That didn't take her long."

She shook her head and let out another sigh. "That's my girl—gifted in every way."

Chapter Two

Poppy Vale sighed heavily as she sat on a bench reading a book, waiting for her mom to pick her up. She shut the book when she heard her friend call out to her.

“Is this seat taken?” Quinn asked, jogging over to where she sat.

Poppy looked up into a set of hazel eyes that were half hidden underneath thick chunks of blond hair. A slight breeze carried his crisp, earth-laden, scent to her—it was reminiscent of a cool windy day in the forest. She smiled at the young werewolf as he approached.

“Nope...” she said, and scooted over to give him a little more space.

He sat and leaned over to catch a glimpse of the book in her hand.

“You’re interested in Henry the Eighth?”

“Yeah, all the ruling monarchs of that era intrigue me.”

“Is that so?”

She nodded. “Uh-huh, everything was about overindulgence, power, and high birth.”

“And sexism,” he added.

Poppy bent over and shoved the book inside her bag. “I’m surprised you’d point that out.” The strap on her tank top slipped off her shoulder.

His thick brows pulled together. “Why?”

“Because you’re a man, teen wolf, and all of you knuckle-draggers certainly got the better end of the gender stick, don’t you think?”

She was only being half sarcastic with that remark. And she absently snorted as she pulled her strap back in place.

Ignoring the jab, Quinn pulled a small book from his back pocket. It looked well used, worn at the edges. “I prefer Shakespeare.”

Her brow rose. “So you enjoy love stories that end with death. Interestingly morbid in a sad, romantic way.” She winked at him. “I approve.”

Before he could respond, Sonnet’s jeep pulled up to the curb. Poppy sprang up and hurriedly buckled her pack, and in the same motion, turned to Quinn and said, “See you tomorrow, teen wolf.”

He laughed at the nickname she’d given him sometime during the first week of senior year, when they’d met in the library after school. They’d both been after the same reference book on eighteenth-century literature. And after he’d graciously forfeited the tome, she’d decided he was worthy of her friendship.

She walked to the back door of the jeep and tossed her bag inside the open window.

“Hey, Poppy...hold up. I want to ask you something.”

She hopped inside the vehicle and looked over at him through the window. He’d already stood from the bench and was walking toward the back of the jeep while shoving the small book back inside his pocket. As he moved, she absently skimmed over the black football jersey he was wearing. The team’s mascot was a silver fire-breathing dragon, and the name under that was Phantom High Blazers. Each time she saw the image around school it made her chuckle on the inside.

“A bunch of us are meeting at the Dungeon tonight. Wanna come and hang out?”

Inviting a dragon to a dungeon...dungeons and dragons? She giggled. *Cute.*

And then all jokes aside, a constricting feeling consumed her chest in the space over her heart. Her limbs and tongue began to tingle, going numb. It was a curious feeling, one she'd never experienced before. One second she was about to go home, and the next, Quinn's eyes weren't just a dull hazel color anymore—they now sparked with flecks of green that reminded her of shimmering emeralds.

And damn it, the thing about dragons was, they were stubborn and prideful—and above all else, they adored precious gems.

She also couldn't help but notice how his hair didn't *just* fall limply across his face anymore, it flowed gloriously around his chiseled features like swaying strands of golden silk.

Emeralds and gold—*purr*.

What the...? No. Stop thinking. Just answer him. And what the hell was that sound I just made?

Pushing everything out of her mind, she nodded. “Yeah, sure, sounds fun.”

There. That sounded normal.

Quinn let out the breath he was holding, and smiled. “Cool. See you there around seven?”

She somehow managed a couple more words, even though her brain was sputtering like a car running out of gas. “Um, yeah...okay.”

He gave her a nonchalant half smile and swiped hair from his eyes. “Bye, Poppy.”

Oh my God. Look at those dimples. Ack. Stop it!

Poppy watched in silence as Quinn waved, and then strolled off with a confident gait.

For the life of her, she couldn't imagine why all of a sudden her hands were clammy, and her tongue still didn't want to work properly. She raked

her fingers through her red curls and sat back heavily in her seat. The entire encounter had left her unnerved.

She absently caught her mother staring at her in the rearview mirror, and her features scrunched up with embarrassment, but mostly irritation.

“What?”

Sonnet winked at Poppy. “You scored your first date, princess. And he’s pretty cute, too.”

Poppy’s face went three different shades of red, the intense warmth in her cheeks another first for her. “Cut it out, Ma!”

“I’m going to need that boy’s name, phone number, and his address,” Bane added.

Poppy’s eyes jumped to the back of the vampire’s head. “You’re going to do your damndest to humiliate me, aren’t you?”

A full head of caramel hair bobbed up and down. “Just remember for future guy reference—I’m not out to hurt you, I’m only trying to protect you.” The same head then shook. “There are some real nutsos out there.”

She crossed her arms and threw herself back against the seat in a huff. “Damn it,” she mumbled. “You two are the only nutsos I see around here.”

“Watch that mouth of yours, young lady,” Sonnet warned.

“Whatever.”

Chapter Three

Sonnet didn't know what had woken her, but was relieved when she realized that she'd finally gotten some sleep, even if only a short nap.

The phone on her nightstand rang, and then went quiet. Two seconds later, it began to chirp at her again.

"That's what woke me," she grumbled, pawing for the phone. "Vale here."

"Ms. Vale. It's Captain Carver. Got a second?"

She rolled up, yawning. Domino Carver had been the bane of her existence ever since he'd learned that she'd moved to Phantom City. Her first home, which she had to all but abandon for Poppy's safety—or more accurately, for the town's safety from a rapidly growing dragon-shifter—was in Vanier, Alabama. The small rural town was where her neglected business, Fang Squad Inc., was located. Even though she spent most of her time in Phantom City now, Sonnet still helped out with the cases FSI brought in, but for the most part, her best friend and field partner, Emely Jordan, was picking up the slack.

Sonnet swung her legs over the edge of the bed. With a slow exhale, she looked over at the clock on her nightstand. It was six fifteen. Her daughter's first "kind of date" was in a little less than an hour, and she really wanted to see her before she left the house.

"I can spare a few. What's up, Dom?"

"Another body has been found."

Damn it.

"Was it in the same condition as the first one from earlier today?"

“No. A Stratos demon stumbled upon this werewolf in the men’s restroom at Demon Dolls, and called it in. Only part of the vic’s body was burned this time.”

There were a few beats of uncomfortable silence.

“Okay, I’ll bite. Which part?”

“His manhood was charred to nothing, and the area surrounding it was seared to the bone.”

Well shit.

She cleared her throat. “Let me get this straight. You’re telling me that some guy got his weeny roasted at the strip club?”

“This isn’t funny, Vale.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

There was another stretch of silence. And within it, she couldn’t help but think how weird men got when it came to their southern bits. Even the captain, who was one of the most professional guys she knew, was acting all sorts of sketchy about the subject.

“I can be there in thirty,” she said.

“Why can’t you come now?”

Sonnet stood and balanced the phone between her shoulder and ear so she could shimmy out of her jeans.

“Well, because I have an important matter to attend to first.”

“Is this *matter* more important than innocent lives?”

She paused, as a clear picture of Poppy’s face sprang to mind. After a few short seconds she nodded, even though the captain couldn’t see it. “See you when I get there, Dom.”

The Vale residence...20 minutes later.

Poppy yanked the black skirt down and scowled at her appearance in the mirror. A bunch of thick red curls bounced around her body as she moved from side to side, completely untamable, so she'd left them loose to fall halfway down her back. Her too-white shoulders were left bare, on account of the green tank top she'd chosen to wear after she'd exhausted any other options trying on everything in her closet. Her face was made up with the bare essentials—a quick flick of the mascara wand, and a glistening swipe across the lips from her favorite strawberry and kiwi lip gloss.

She shook her head, and then whispered on a breath. “That’s about as good as it’s going to get, I guess.”

A quick knock on the inside of the wall by the open bedroom door had her spinning around.

“Poppy, you look absolutely gorgeous,” Sonnet said, with her heart in her throat.

Poppy blushed, not a faint pink color like most people would, but a bright red gush across her cheeks and forehead, brought on by an inherent temperature rise when experiencing these kinds of emotions. You know; the embarrassing ones.

Sonnet entered the room, rubbing her arms, and then she crossed them.

Why is she the one acting all nervous? Poppy wondered.

“What’s up, Ma?”

“I just wanted to see you before you left to go meet up with Quinn. And also...” Sonnet’s features tightened, her eyes darting all over the place.

Then she gave Poppy a quick nod and said, “Ah, heck. There’s no other way for me to get through this other than to just come out with it.” She cleared her throat. “You see. There are birds and there are bees...”

Oh...my...God.

“Just stop whatever it is you’re about to say,” Poppy interrupted.

Sonnet's eyes narrowed. "But it's my job to educate you about boys, and what happens when a boy likes a girl. And—"

Poppy palmed her forehead. "I already know about sex, Mom."

This time, Sonnet's eyes went wide. "How on earth would you know about that, young lady?"

Poppy gritted her teeth and fought down the urge to jump inside of her closet, hide behind the clothes hamper, and stay there 'til she died a thousand mortified deaths. But this dragon would never cower, not even in the face of her overprotective parent. This conversation had to end.

"I've read almost every book offered at the city library, Mom. I know the technical terms and all sorts of variations on the subject. And to be honest, it all grosses me out. So can we please talk about something else?"

Sonnet's features softened and her arms dropped to a more relaxed position. "I'm sorry. I just don't want to screw anything up with you. You are the most important person in the world to me."

Poppy felt a momentary flash of shame over giving her mother so much grief. As parents went, she'd hit the jackpot with Sonnet Vale, and she was over-the-universe grateful for her.

She gave Sonnet a half smile and bent over to swipe a hairbrush off the carpet. She tossed it at her mother and asked, "Do you mind helping me tame this wild mess of curls?"

Without missing a beat, Sonnet plucked the brush from midair like a ninja hairstylist. "I'll try, but that mop looks pretty raggedy, sweetheart." She grabbed a clip from the dresser while strolling past it to get to her daughter.

Poppy's mouth dropped. "Mom...seriously?" she said, reaching for her hair.

Sonnet chuckled, turned Poppy around by the shoulders, and went to work.

A few seconds passed, and then Bane walked into the room. He stood by the door for a minute, and watched the tender mother-and-daughter moment before checking his watch. The two of them needed to leave in a couple of minutes to drop Poppy off at the dungeon.

He let out a breath as his stomach knotted; it was hard to believe that the little dragonling he'd help to raise was already going on her first date.

Chapter Four

The clinking of jail doors slamming shut greeted Sonnet as she entered the Phantom City Police Department. She'd walked these linoleum-tiled floors many times before, and like the three metal-and-wood desks off to the left, and the police officers sitting behind them stoically typing away on their keyboards or talking on the phone, she was beginning to feel a part of the scenery.

She stopped in front of Dom's office at the back of the room and knocked once before pushing through the door to enter.

Police Chief Domino Carver looked up from the yellow legal pad he was holding. His black hair, streaked white from root to tip in thin layers, was draped over one of his shoulders. Normally he wore a nice shirt and slacks, but today he was dressed in a fancy suit. Which explained the reporters out front, packing up their gear as she'd walked by them on her way inside the precinct.

"Why do you even bother knocking, Vale?" he asked with an irritated gaze that showed off his snow-white irises, thinly encircled with black. The effect was off-putting. She'd never met anyone with eyes quite like his before.

She shrugged. "How did the interview go with *Phantom City News*?"

"You saw the reporters out front?" Dom asked.

"Yeah."

He sighed, setting the pad down. "We found another victim."

Sonnet felt her pulse pick up. "Where did you find this one?"

"Here."

Her brow rose. “Are you saying that we have a cop killer on our hands?”

Dom shook his head. “No. The vic was a vampire this time. He came into the station on his own, *after* his wounds healed. He was going on and on about a dragon-shifter.”

Sonnet’s thoughts roamed over the other two victims; both of them were supernatural, just like the vampire, and all three were men. But unlike the latter of the three, the first two couldn’t heal themselves and were dead as a doornail.

She smirked. Being a vampire could be extremely beneficial at times.

“Did Detective...Azra something...” Damn it, why couldn’t she remember his name?

“Azuela is the name I think you’re searching for.”

“Yeah, Azuela. Did he find out anything about the collar?”

Dom nodded. “The mages down in the alchemy lab are having a hard time coming up with anything definitive. Although, they did mention that the band itself is made from some pretty ancient stuff, shit you can only find in demon-hell.”

Sonnet’s eyes narrowed. “Interesting.” Her body jolted on the inside from hearing the name of that place, shook her to the core. But on the outside, she remained calm.

Sonnet pulled out her phone and called Anya, her closest friend in Phantom City, who also happened to be a little, sexy blue demon who worked at Demon Dolls.

Instead of answering her phone, Anya’s voice invaded Sonnet’s head.

Why are you calling me in the middle of my shift, doll face? You know my hands are too busy doing other things, there’s no way in hell I can answer a damn phone.

Sonnet dropped her cell back inside her pocket before turning to leave.

Dom pushed the folder aside and stood. “Are you heading over to check out the crime scene?”

Sonnet looked over her shoulder. It was hard concentrating on two conversations at once, but when your BFF’s a telepath, you learn to adjust real quick.

“Yeah, I’ll call you as soon as I find the murderer,” she told, Dom, and then shut the door behind her.

I’m heading your way.

Are you coming down to see me, or to track down that pissed-off she-dragon who tore out of here like a bat out of hell after singeing the dick right off one of my customers? Anya asked, her inner voice sounding low and jumpy, as if she was moving around and out of breath.

She must have been in the middle of giving a private lap dance, or more accurately, air dance. Sonnet shoved the picture of Anya twirling and grinding her hips in midair in the face of a random customer out of her mind, and at the same time, Anya’s chuckle echoed in her skull.

I saw that. You have a very vivid imagination.

How she could still get embarrassed by anything Anya did, or said, she would never know. But every time Sonnet was caught thinking about something suggestive or crazy, she did.

Shut it, demon. And yes. I’m on the job. Be there in five.

The scent of sweat and blood hit Sonnet as she walked passed the doorman to enter Demon Dolls.

A waitress walked by her, depositing a tequila sunrise in her hand, one of Sonnet’s two usual drinks. She also preferred Midori sours. The Stratos

demon had zipped by so fast, she didn't get the chance to turn the cocktail down, let alone voice a preference. Sonnet raised a brow. Pretty sound marketing strategy, now that she thought about it.

She gazed down at the drink in her hand and shrugged. *Screw it.* She was an independent contractor for the PCPD, not an on-duty cop, so she could do as she pleased. After taking a long pull from the straw, she almost purred her pleasure over the sweet and tangy cocktail.

I thought you were on the clock?

Sonnet's gaze lifted to meet a set of black eyes that were only a smidge larger than the size of a dime. Long black hair shifted in waves around a light blue slender body, the strands riding the gentle winds caused by the flapping of the demoness's wings.

"Use your outside voice, she-devil," Sonnet managed to get out over another mouthful of mostly tequila with a splash of juice. Her eyes roamed over the demon's naked body. "And could you please put some clothes on?"

Lifting both arms, Anya raked her fingers through her hair, pulling it upward. With wings barely beating, she did a slow twirl in the air, and then she laughed after a full turn that left her facing Sonnet once more. She dropped her arms and shrugged. "It's just a flesh bag that helps to pay the bills. So cut the prude bullshit, demon princess. Besides, I'm the norm in here—you're the exception."

"Excuse me?" Sonnet said, setting down her drink on a nearby table, both eyes narrowing on Anya.

Anya's head tilted sideways. "What?"

"You can call me prude all day, even demon. But drop the *princess* crap. You know I hate that."

"You seem to have a chip on your leather-clad shoulders, *Princess*."

Sonnet blinked, and then blinked again, a slow smile spreading across her face. “You’re such a bitch.”

Anya smiled back and winked. “Thanks.”

Sonnet paused for a beat, reading the room. After a few more seconds, she picked up a magical charge that she quickly recognized as dragon. The largest concentration of it was throbbing at the back of the club where the restrooms were located, near the rear entrance. She pulled a hair tie out of her pocket and scraped her long dark locks back into a ponytail—it was go time.

Chapter Five

Sonnet pushed through the men's room door, then slammed it shut behind her. She hooked a thumb over her shoulder and said, "Everyone out. I'm on official police business."

One man rolled his eyes while shaking his junk—more than twice—and then stuffed his bits back inside his pants before leaving. Another guy, with thick dark brows and matching hair, took his sweet time by slowly zipping up his jeans. Holding Sonnet's stare in the process, he asked, "Do you like what you see?"

"Nope," she said, strolling by him to get to where the two paranormal beasts' magical essences were strongest.

The crude jerk snorted. "Yeah, right."

"Look," she said, throwing the guy an annoyed look over her shoulder, "no offense, but you're a creep. And no self-respecting woman will ever want to see, or play with, that little worm between your legs—especially if that's the way you talk to 'em."

His face scrunched up, and he growled. "I nail my fair share of bitches."

Oh, so Mr. Wrong was a wolf. She should have known. Most werewolves were more animal with their instincts, instead of human.

She ignored him, and after a few awkward moments of the a-hole staring at the back of her head, she heard a muttered curse and then the door open and mercifully shut.

"You bring out the best in people," Anya said, flying to hover above the kill spot.

Sonnet shrugged, and then knelt down. “It’s a gift.” She floated a hand over the space where the body had been less than a couple hours earlier. She could feel the killer’s and the victim’s paranormal signatures swirling together in a metaphysical cyclone of energy. “You said you saw a she-dragon storming out of here?”

Anya nodded. “I tried to read her thoughts, but they were blocked with a crap load of fear and anger.”

Startled, Sonnet stopped what she was doing and gazed up at the demon. “You couldn’t read her thoughts? That’s a first. Isn’t it?”

She could almost see the concern spinning around Anya’s head. “I have trouble reading Poppy’s thoughts sometimes, too.”

Sonnet sat back on the heels of her boots. “You never mentioned that to me before.”

Anya shrugged. “I didn’t think it mattered, just figured it was a dragon thing. Besides Poppy, and the new she-dragon in town, I have only met one other fire breather. And he was a cuddly, albeit huge and muscly, mountain of a man.” Her stare wondered off for a moment. “Come to think of it, he was one of very few men who made me wish I was of average humanoid height. Anya wagged her brows suggestively. “If you know what I mean.”

“Is sex all you think about, Anya?”

Her tiny brows scrunched together in thought. “There are a few other things, I suppose...like whipped cream and chocolate.” Her eyes widened and her red lips parted, pulling up at the corners. “Take a guess at what tastes extra yummy covered in whipped cream and chocolate sauce. A massive, throbbing co—”

“No need to finish that thought. Trust me, I get it.”

She shrugged. “Well, you asked.”

Sonnet stood, and then glanced around the room. “I can tell you one thing for certain, the victim put up one hell of a fight. The energy trails in here are jumping all over the damn place. I’ll have to start my search for the dragon at the exit, where I can pluck at a stronger thread to guide me.”

Five minutes later, Sonnet found herself tethered to a glowing, purple-colored energy strand that was invisible to all but her.

As she stepped within the mouth of a dark alleyway that seemed to stretch the length of almost half of Phantom City, she shook her head. “Seriously? Just once could one of these damn hunts lead me to an ice cream parlor, or a place flooded with light?” She reached up and tightened her ponytail while mumbling, “I totally need to rethink some of my life choices.”

After steadying herself, she strolled forward. The she-dragon was close, she knew by how the connecting thread strummed wild with an overload of magic. She’d learned from being around Brecon, and his clan’s men, that the dragon species was inherently infused with more magical energy than any other. So this hunt was especially dangerous, and was the reason why her heartbeats were skyrocketing in her chest.

A feminine voice slithered out of the darkness. “I don’t want to hurt you, but if you come any closer, I will.”

Sonnet jerked to attention. Her eyes roamed over every inch of the alleyway, her stare trying to latch onto anything that moved, but all she could see was the concentration of magic she was following as it rapidly turned into a swirling mass of energy, branching out in every direction. Something was messing with the metaphysical frequency, making it jumpy.

How in the hell could the dragon do that?

“I just want to ask you a few questions,” Sonnet answered in a calm tone, while at the same time easing deeper into the alley. Probably not the smartest thing she’d ever done, but her days of running away from danger were over. She was paid good money to face it head on. And face it she would.

The creature slid out of the shadows; she was in her human form, six feet of lean muscles, but with ample curves in all the right places. She had long, straight red hair that flowed like a shimmering wall of fire down her back, draping over a black one-piece, sleeveless shorts-jumpsuit. A silver belt was cinched around her waist. The belt had an emblem attached at the front, a symbol, maybe the elemental rune for fire.

The she-dragon slunk forward, and Sonnet had to fight the urge to stumble back a few steps.

Sonnet glared at her and pulled her gun from the holster at her back—Ruby was tucked away inside her jacket, but the stake wouldn’t be useful against a dragon. Unless... She shook her head. No...the situation wasn’t yet dire enough for her to rely on the mysterious magic of the stake. Besides, she didn’t even know how it worked. Ruby definitely had a mind of her own.

The dragon glanced at the gun pointed at her. “Are you looking for a fight?”

Sonnet shrugged. “Not necessarily. I’d rather you come with me peacefully.”

She tilted her head to the side, an inquisitive gesture. “Come with you? Why on earth would I do that? I don’t even know who you are, or why you have foolishly hunted me down.” Her head stretched forward and she sniffed the air around her. “You are both hunter and demon,” she sniffed

again, this time deeper, “with royal blood flowing through your veins. What’s your name, hunter?”

Her jaw clenched. “Sonnet Vale. And you are?”

“I am Mauramaze, from the Dark Flame clan.”

She took a deep breath and gave the dragon a forced smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Mauramaze.”

“Call me Maze. Now, why have you tracked me down like some kind of rabid dog?”

The breeze picked up Maze’s flame-red locks. The tresses licked the air much like a blazing inferno would do. Damn, Sonnet could almost smell the fire churning within the she-dragon, and it was a frightening thing. So as much as she knew she had to bring the woman into the station, Sonnet was so-o-o-o not looking forward to it. Nervous as hell, Sonnet shifted her stance.

“You have murdered two Phantom City werewolves, and seriously injured a vampire. You do understand that I have to bring you in for that.”

Sonnet’s answer was a blast of the dragon’s magic. Her head swung down and her arm went up to protect her face from the heat. And then Maze said, “I killed the men who kidnapped, raped, and held me captive for years! So no, you will not be taking me anywhere. Those vile mutts deserved everything they got, and more.” The last part ended on a growl.

Adrenaline pulsing, Sonnet looked through the heat that was moving around both of them in fuzzy waves, and into the dragon’s brutal stare. The magic was hot, but not scorching enough to burn, so she dropped her arm. “If that is true then plead your case with the authorities. It’s the right thing to do.”

Her jaw clenched, along with the fists at her sides. “No!” Her roar came with a stream of bright red fire on its heel.

Sonnet jumped sideways, but not in time. Her arm was caught by a shooting flame; her leather jacket burned away, the flesh underneath seared to the bone.

Oh. My. GOD! Pain, unlike anything Sonnet had ever experience, ripped through the bottom half of her arm without mercy. Her body trembled, and then tucked into the fetal position on the ground. She was unable to move, breathe, or even open her eyes. Other than pain, all she could feel was wetness pooling around her eyes to stream down her face.

“I didn’t want to have to do that.” A soft, almost remorseful voice slipped through the agony and into Sonnet’s awareness. “You see, if you take me in, I will be unable to find my daughter. And I can’t allow that.”

Daughter? Sonnet tried to pry open her eyes, but failed.

“I will call for help. But that’s the best I can do. I fear if I heal you, you will continue your hunt. I’m sorry, Sonnet. I hope you understand.”

Sonnet only heard the last part, and as her body and mind gave up the fight against the agonizing pain assaulting it, she had one last thought before lights out.

I have to find Poppy.

Chapter Six

“Ghosts?” Poppy suppressed a groan. “You really think there are ghosts down here? You guys have lost it big time.”

Her friend, Gwynn—a beautiful blonde she-wolf—as well as Harvey—a little blue he-devil—and Quinn, all gave her a grim look.

It was Gwynn who spoke up. “I’ve seen them. Two human women dressed in all white. They say that the girls were kidnapped from a neighboring city by vampires and then brought here, where they met their untimely demise.”

Poppy’s response to that was an eye roll. “Why on earth would vampires bring their prey to an arcade? Seems ridiculous to me.” Turning away from the group, she walked over to a shoot-em-up game that had zombies ambling and grunting across the screen within a gloomy graveyard. “Let’s just play, okay?”

Quinn grinned and slid in next to her, picking up one of the two red plastic guns connected to the machine. He was the one who’d started all the ghost talk. And for some reason, the thought of creepy specters flying around her, beings that could see, hear, and maybe even touch her, without her being able to do the same in return, freaked Poppy the heck out.

But that was information she would keep to herself. After all, dragon-shifters were supposed to be at the top of the paranormal food chain. Not weak and scared of ghosts. She shivered, her eyes scanning the area around her.

Not cool guys, she thought. Not cool at all.

“Okay, maybe I’m messing with you a little bit.” Quinn said.

Poppy shrugged. A tingling sensation traveling up her flesh as the nonchalant movement brushed her arm up against his. “Whatever.”

She turned her head, and their eyes met and held in a moment that took her breath away...

And then out of the blue, Bane rushed up to them.

You have got to be kidding me!

She felt a momentary pang of annoyance, until she saw the panic ripping across the vampire’s features.

Her hand tightened around the plastic gun she held, sending a hairline fracture up the handle. “What’s wrong?”

Bane’s blue eyes were way too stormy for her liking. Whatever had him on edge couldn’t be good—the metaphorical gavel lifted as she waited for him to say the words.

“It’s your mother...she’s been hurt.”

And then it slammed down.

“Where is she?” Poppy’s voice broke.

“She’s at the hospital. We need to go to her, now.”

In a daze, she frowned at Quinn. “I have to...”

“I know. Go. I’ll call you later.”

With a nod, she ran out of the arcade.

Soft mewling sounds slipped from between Sonnet’s lips.

“Mom...Mom, I’m here, can you open your eyes?” Poppy turned to Bane. “Help her!”

The doctor closed the folder in his hands and walked around to the foot of the hospital bed, where he hung it from a hook. “She’s on a morphine drip for the pain and intravenous fluids. So she’ll be out of it for a while. Her right forearm sustained third-, almost fourth-degree burns, and second-

degree burns on the upper half of the arm that reach to her shoulder. She also sustained trauma to the back of the head, most likely sustained from a fall.” He shook his head. “It’s a miracle we’re able to keep her this comfortable.”

At her bedside, Bane moved closer to Sonnet. His features were tight, his eyes wide with worry as he looked down. Letting out a deep breath, he said, “She’s tough, that’s why.” He brushed the tips of his fingers across her forehead. “What happens next?”

The doctor walked over to a dry-erase board that was mounted on the wall across the room, and then scribbled some quick notes. As he finished, he turned to face them both with a detached look, the kind of look all doctors plastered across their face right before delivering unfavorable news.

Poppy wiped her palms on her skirt and braced herself.

“Worst-case scenario, she’ll be admitted into the burn center. Everything depends on how fast a demon with her bloodline heals; she’ll more than likely need to stay for a week, maybe even two. Unless we have to schedule surgery—”

“She has to have surgery?” Bane interrupted. “For a burn?”

He nodded and then continued, “She has a full-thickness burn. This means both layers of her skin were singed away. Like I said, it all depends on her healing ability.”

Poppy’s eye involuntarily twitched, and then her lavender gaze moved over Sonnet’s wounded arm. “How did this happen?”

The doctor put a pen into his breast pocket. “Captain Carver, who just left a few minutes ago, actually, said that your mother was hunting a dragon-shifter when the injuries occurred. Judging by the wounds she sustained, I’d say that she found who she was looking for.”

Five minutes later, Poppy was at the nurse's desk, signing her mother's admittance forms. The super-sized, overly muscled nurse gave her a phony smile that didn't seem to reach her rosy, too-round cheeks or her huge Colossal demon eyes. She then said, "Will that be cash or charge?"

Apparently, Phantom City General didn't deal with insurance policies. Which Poppy figured wasn't an issue in her case anyways, considering she had none of the above. "Do you take I.O.U's?"

The demon's face scrunched up into a grimace. "Look here, you little twerp—"

"Ms. Vale's stay has already been taken care of," said a rich male voice.

The nurse bit the inside of her lip and her eyes dropped as she dipped her head into a slight reverent bow. "Yes, of course. I will be sure to make a note of that, my king."

A shiver ran down Poppy's spine, and she twirled around to find Remy, ruler of Phantom City, strolling into the ER.

Intensely strong, tall, her uncle was wearing all black—as usual. His onyx hair was tied back, away from his broad shoulders, but still the shiny strands framed a chiseled, masculine face, one that, if it were softer in features, would closely match her mother's.

A hard breath left her with a rasp, and she ran to him, throwing herself into his open arms.

"There, there, sweet child. Everything will be okay." Remy stroked her red curls. "Your mother is one hell of a fighter. A stupid burn won't keep her down, not for long, anyways. You just wait and see."

"I'm going to find the scumbag that did this and make her pay," Poppy hissed into her uncle's silk shirt.

"There's no way in hell I'm going to let you seek vengeance alone, Popcorn, your mother would skin me alive."

Popcorn... Emely! Thank God.

Emely Jordon, Sonnet's best friend and partner at Fang Squad Inc., pushed off the wall where she'd been leaning.

Poppy pulled away from her uncle and bolted for Emely, who pulled Poppy close and held her for three full minutes, letting her cry until her eyes went dry.

Lightheaded and infuriatedly pissed off all at once, Poppy gazed at Remy, and then back at the she-wolf. Remy strolled over to stand next to Emely at the ER entrance, their attention completely on her.

Remy gave the she wolf's arm a gentle nudge with his elbow. "Hi, Em, it's good to see you, even though it's under the worse kind of circumstances."

Her hard gaze softened for a moment, as she said, "It's good to see you too, demon king. How's our girl?"

He shook his head. "I haven't seen her yet, but from what the doctor told me over the phone, the princess has seen much brighter days."

Out of the blue, the earth beneath Poppy's feet began to shudder, followed by a deafening roar that raged throughout the sterile halls of the hospital, a sensory shock to the body.

Everything around her sped up as if a fast-forward button had been pressed.

Remy ran for the door and disappeared through it. Emely jumped in front of Poppy.

"What the hell is that?" Poppy yelled over another blaring rumble.

Alarmed, she scanned the area. The doctors and nurses, hell, everybody in the emergency room, ran around as if their asses had been dipped in fire.

"Seriously, what is that?"

Emely shifted her stance to face Poppy. “That is the sound of one pissed-off dragon, Popcorn.”

“Oh.”

After a long blink and a pause for thought, Poppy let out a determined breath. “Maybe it’s time to fight fire with fire.”

Emely shook her head, her hands coming down on Poppy’s shoulders. “You’ve never fought before. It would be suicide.”

The doors slid back open and Remy ran inside, over to the nurse’s desk. The female giant behind the counter was all nerves, her hands and body turning and flying every which way, none of them helpful.

“Call the PCPD; tell them the king has issued a code red!”

Her eyes darted around, her hands and teeth clenched, but still she didn’t move.

Another roar, the ground quaked.

He stepped back and sent a wild burst of energy at the receptionist.

“Now, woman!”

That helped. The magic jolted her into action.

“What’s a code red?” Poppy asked.

Remy swallowed hard. “I’m informing the police that Phantom City is in immediate, life-threatening danger.”

She gulped. “Oh.”

Chapter Seven

Sirens blared throughout the city.

“Secure the hospital’s perimeter,” Captain Carver shouted to a group of men that was gathered in front of the building. “Vane, Pike, Crystal... canvas the interior of the building. Make sure there aren’t any threats hidden inside.”

Three uniformed vampires hurried through the sliding doors. One veered left, while the other two made hand gestures at one another, ones that Poppy couldn’t understand.

The female officer spoke in a thick southern accent. “I’ll take the top two floors, and you go on and search the lower levels. I’ll radio you if, and when, everything is clear.”

The male officer nodded, and they both rushed deeper within the building.

Poppy’s hands clenched into fists at her sides, her gaze sweeping over the mayhem all around her. She didn’t like standing off to the side, out of the way, still, useless, while others did all the heavy lifting—a personality trait she’d just learned the extent of. She was a predator—not prey. She was deadly—not some kind of docile creature. And she also happened to be the only other dragon-shifter in Phantom City. In her opinion, that put the safety of the city’s inhabitants—most of all her ailing mother’s—squarely on her shoulders.

In the next moment, she didn’t think, just reacted. Surging forward, she ran from the building before anyone could see or stop her. As the doors swished shut behind her, she could hear the roars from the incensed dragon

flying high in the moonlit sky, and watched the fiery creature as it circled the building, her flames blasting throughout the atmosphere. Luckily, her fury had yet to be released on any of the creatures, alive or undead, that scurried across the ground below.

Poppy moved away from all the people, her strides lightening swift as she leapt over police lines and sprinted across the blocked-off street. She finally stopped running when she reached the middle of a deserted park about a half mile away from the hospital.

“This will do just fine,” Poppy whispered staring up at the star-studded night. The moon hung full in the sky, a brilliant orb that never waned. It was one of the things she truly loved about her city.

She closed her eyes and relaxed, willing her true nature to cascade over her. Her clothing vanished, mystically altered until compelled to return when she was human once more. Fire was a sweet burn as it seeped into her lungs, the pull of the magic rapidly shifting and extending her bones, sinew, and muscle mass, to accommodate her much larger creature form. Two wings, the color of dark rubies, jutted from her back, the leather-like appendages beating vigorously, lifting her from the ground.

The chilled night air and the panic of the city flooded her senses. Chaos was all around her, another dragon was reigning terror upon her city. This, the beast didn't like. She roared, a loud reverberation meant to draw in her foe, and lure it far away from the innocent townspeople.

Poppy surged forward, her dragon body cutting through the winds with well-practiced ease.

Screams, shouts, the continuous whirring of the city's alarm were all around her—and that's when the scent of something familiar pulled her up short.

Hovering in the air, she watched as the other dragon spotted her, and using preternatural speed, was on her in an instant, circling her much like she had the hospital. The scent of the other dragon grew stronger with each pass, pulling at something deep within Poppy.

Suddenly, she instinctively knew why her body was reacting to the creature so severely—because like called to like, and there was nothing stronger than a blood bond between dragons. A terrible tightness constricted her chest at the realization.

The murdering dragoness playing cat and mouse with Poppy was none other than her very own mother.

And for some reason, this pissed her off even further.

Poppy plunged toward the earth, pulling up short just before impact, her scaled belly skimming the grass, her nostrils flaring as smoke began to barrel in thick plumes from her nose. Her fire was building. She then shot straight up, filled her lungs with molten fury, and released a warning shot that missed the dragon's snout by an inch.

Go away!

Poppy's mental command made her estranged mother visibly flinch, and she felt a spike of sadness and pain emanate from her.

The dragon's features fell. *My only wish was to find you, sweet Aisha.*

Well you have, and in doing so, have harmed the one person I love most on this earth. And my name isn't Aisha. The false name was inflicted with a hissing sound. *It's Poppy Vale.*

The dragon veered left and did a complete turnaround, leaving her face-to-face with Poppy. The creature's purple eyes, a color that matched her own, went wide with shock. *The female hunter? She is who you speak of?*

Poppy let out an infuriated roar then glanced down at the hospital, where Sonnet lay badly burned. She saw Remy, the entire vampire squad,

Emely, and even Bane, all gathered in the parking lot in front of the building, watching their interaction.

Her family looked worried, Bane above all else.

Aisha!

Poppy—I already told you, my name is Poppy!

She did a backflip for redirection, and then shot like a bullet through the air in the direction of the woodlands that bordered the outskirts of town.

Chapter Eight

The ground trembled underneath thick, sharp claws as Poppy landed in the middle of the woods, in a grassy clearing large enough to accommodate her length and girth. As expected, the other dragon followed suit.

Taking a deep breath, Poppy shifted back into her human form, as did the second dragon, almost at the same.

Poppy blinked in surprise at her mother's outward appearance. Long red hair, purple eyes that sparkled underneath a set of thin eyebrows, high cheek bones, sharp nose; Poppy was almost the spitting image of her birth mother.

Suddenly, the woman's eyes gleamed with curiosity, and a visage of long-awaited joy reflected in her features and in her beautiful smile. "My name is Mauramaze, and I am your mother. I've finally found you, Ai—er, Poppy—my heart is now complete."

"I'm sorry," Poppy replied with a shake of her head. "But I'm not looking for another mother. I'm fine with the one I have. You had your shot but chose to abandon me to another dragon clan. Now can you please just leave here, go somewhere else, a place where you're not wanted for murder, maybe?"

That was the best she had for the woman who was a stranger to her, but not.

The dragoness stepped forward a few paces, and Poppy held up her hand to halt her. "Please, don't make this any harder than it has to be."

Her head fell in defeat. Long silken tresses spilled forward as Mauramaze took a step back. "I can heal the hunter. Will that make you

happy?”

Poppy’s brows slid together. “You can do that? How?”

Then she felt a power build around her mother, an influence that pulled at something deep inside her very core.

Mauramaze’s head lifted, and she smiled once more, but with a thin-lipped grin that wasn’t welcoming—it screamed confidence, pride and supremacy.

“We are of the Dark Flame clan, our fire is more powerful than any other. Our flame not only burns, it can heal.”

“Our flame heals...mm-hmm, you really expect me to believe that?”

Mauramaze’s words were hard to swallow. A dragon that could heal? Poppy had never heard of such a thing. Granted, she was the only other dragon-shifter residing in Phantom City, and only had what she’d read and the word of her family to rely on when it came down to the brass tacks of her true nature. All of it she took as gospel, because her family was honest, and had been very forthcoming with her about all they knew about dragons.

And then there was the fact that she could research like a sonofabitch. And within all the information she’d dug up about her kind, she’d never once heard of a dragon’s flame healing a single soul—other than a dragonling’s first fire. But even then, the healing power wasn’t infinite.

Mauramaze nodded emphatically. “It’s true. I can heal her.”

Poppy shifted her stance, kicking her leg out and crossing her arms defiantly. “If what you say is true, and our bloodline can heal the wounded, then why would I need any help from you?”

Poppy saw features that mirrored her own fall in contemplation.

Mauramaze let out an exhausted breath before she said, “Because, dear, you have been away from me your entire life, so I haven’t been able to teach you how to use, let alone control, your most powerful magic.”

Poppy's chin jutted. "And whose fault is that? You didn't want me, you abandoned me...remember?"

Mauramaze didn't respond to Poppy's outburst right away, instead, she inhaled the night air and stared out into the dense forest that surrounded them. Something out there had her lavender eyes shifting to red, and her hand jumping to a short metal staff that hung by a leather loop at her waist.

Mauramaze took a quick look at her daughter, and said, "I've always wanted you, Aisha. I left you with the Blackstone clan to keep you safe. And as far as I can tell, it worked."

"Exactly who were you keeping me safe from?"

She didn't answer. Her red eyes shifted back to the perimeter. "We have company."

Poppy turned to get a better view of what Mauramaze was freaking out about, but saw nothing. And then, she too, picked up the distinct scent of wolf.

She turned back around. "There's nothing to worry about. It's probably just a Woodland pack member. All of them know me, and my signature scent, they won't harm us."

"They couldn't even if they tried." Mauramaze said the words with a menacing growl.

Dang, Poppy thought with a building sense of respect for her birth mother, *she's pretty bad-ass. Cool*. The sentiment was quickly followed by a pang of guilt and a quick reminder, lest she let it happen again. *Remember what she did to Sonnet*.

In the next second, she felt the presence of a familiar werewolf as he slipped from the cover of trees and into the clearing.

Quinn, in wolf form, slunk slowly forward, his belly almost touching the ground. She'd never seen him in his true nature, and his beast was

remarkable, covered mainly in white fur with patches of black that made his left ear look like the tip of it had been dipped in ink, and his left paw the same. He watched her, his golden gaze cautious and powerful.

Poppy blinked slowly as her heart rate picked up speed. "It's Quinn."

What is he doing here?

Mauramaze watched her, confused. "The wolf is a friend of yours?"

Good question. If she'd asked Poppy as early as yesterday if Quinn was just a friend, she would have said yes without hesitation. But now, after all the feels had pummeled her insides like a prizefighter going for the belt, all she knew for certain was that she now felt *more*.

"Well?"

It took her a second of mind shuffling to figure out how to answer. "Yes, he's a close friend." There, that was easy.

The sneer that followed was unexpected. "Werewolves are mindless beasts that are worse than scum. You need to stay away from their ilk!" She reached for Poppy's arm, but pulled her hand back at the last second.

"Come now, with me. We'll go someplace safe."

One dark red brow arched, and a teenage attitude that could rival the biggest diva that ever lived came alive within Poppy. "If you think even for a second that I'll go anywhere with you, well then, you need to get your head checked. That wolf over there," her arm swung around and she pointed at Quinn, "he's smart, kind, pretty much the opposite of what you think of him," her fingers went up in quotations, "and his 'ilk'."

Mauramaze's free hand turned into a white-knuckled fist at her side, while the other remained on her weapon. Poppy could tell that it was taking everything the dragoness had to rein in her temper. "If you only knew what they are capable of."

Quinn slunk closer, but still maintained a safe distance.

The shakiness in her voice caught Poppy off guard, and at the same time, softened her resolve. “Then tell me. Why did you leave me at the base of Blackstone Mountain, even before my hatching?” She took a step forward, her voice lowering. “Who are ‘they’, and what did they do to you? Whatever happened, I need you to tell me.”

The look that came over Mauramaze’s face was heartbreaking. She hesitated, but then cleared her throat. “It happened about a decade ago. Two wolves from the Wildlands cornered me, and your father, while we swam in human form at our favorite lagoon within the realm of dragons. We were both young, naive, and caught up in the moment, so we didn’t notice that we were being stalked...”

A long howl tore through the cool night, jogging the dragoness out of her thoughts and throwing her right back into attack mode.

Quinn lifted his muzzle and answered the wolf call.

Mauramaze’s jaw tensed visibly and she backed up several paces. “They’re coming!”

Poppy shook her head. “Wait—”

But it was too late; Mauramaze shifted into creature form in an instant and threw a look over her shoulder at Poppy. *Come with me.*

“I’m safe here. It’s you who needs to stay and make amends with my mother, and Phantom City. Please, turn yourself over to the police. I’ll go with you and stand by your side, come what may, I promise.”

And she meant that promise.

The dragon thought about Poppy’s offer for a moment, but then her anxiety visibly got the better of her after another howl sounded. She lifted her snout and let out a mighty roar of her very own, complete with a long stream of fire that crackled through the wind.

Mauramaze blinked at Poppy, and then leapt high into the moonlit sky.

Chapter Nine

Sonnet brushed a thick strand of damp, dark hair off her forehead and let out a painful breath. “Where is Poppy?” Her voice came out with a hitch.

Bane was seated next to her bed in a chair, elbows balanced on his knees. He lifted his head from his hands at the sound of her voice. “You’re awake. Thank God!”

She swallowed hard, glanced over at her arm and scowled. “That fire-breathing bitch...just look at what she did to me.”

The two glanced at each other.

Sonnet saw heartache rush over Bane’s features, and she didn’t like the fact that she was in any way responsible for it. “Don’t worry, love, I’m okay.” She lifted her injured arm, and after covering up a wince with a smile, she continued, “It’s nothing a few days of rest won’t fix.” Her eyes moved over the room. “Where’s my daughter?”

The fact that Poppy wasn’t there with her during her convalescing struck her as odd.

He finally answered, “She flew off toward the woodlands about twenty minutes ago. Emely and Remy went after her. I stayed behind to take care of you.”

She sat up, the tiny intravenous tube pinching her in the process. “Why would Poppy go on a joy ride right now? And why on earth would Emely feel like she needed to chase after her? Is everything okay?”

Sonnet supposed Poppy could be flying off some stress and frustration after hearing about Sonnet’s injuries, but she hadn’t died or anything, so there really was no reason for everyone to act like she had.

He frowned. "She didn't go alone. The red dragon was with her."

His words caused her heart to spasm in fear. On a gasp, Sonnet ripped the tube from her arm and shoved the covers down her body. She pointed toward the light wood wardrobe in the corner of the room. "Get me my clothes and weapons, now, please."

Bane jumped up. "Get back into bed, little fox, you're not well enough to stand, let alone fight a dragon."

She stumbled from the bed, the meds they had her on making her lightheaded and woozy as she tried to gain her footing.

Bane eased his arms around Sonnet to help steady her. She leaned into him for a moment, but then pushed out of his hold and spun on him, her eyes glistening with tears.

"How could you!"

"You're mad at me because I stayed here with you, instead of running after your daughter." It wasn't a question, but a dead-to-rights statement.

Her glare intensified. "Fuckin-a right, I am. You know the rule, Bane. If it ever comes down to saving me, or someone I love, you are to always choose the one I love. And that goes triple for Poppy!"

With wild eyes and unsteady strides, Sonnet made her way over to the wardrobe. Once there, she swung open the wooden door and yanked out her belongings.

All of a sudden, the Earth rocked and the room began to spin. Her shoulder slammed into the cupboard, the side of her head quickly following.

"I'm going to need your help with this," she said with a voice softened by pain and disorientation.

Bane rushed to her side. "Of course, let me do it for you."

He held her in one arm while he pulled her clothes off the shelf with the other hand.

Sonnet nodded lethargically into his chest. “I’m still mad at you, but thanks for helping.” She blinked down at her hospital gown, and then gazed up into Bane’s eyes and slurred, “This is going to be tricky.”

An innocent smile spread his lips. “I can handle undressing you. Trust me.”

She nodded and then leaned heavily against him. There was no doubt in her mind that Bane would need to do most of the work in dressing her. She was going to need a lot of help—that was, until she could get ahold of something to counteract the drugs in her system.

And she knew exactly how she was going to accomplish that. But she had to admit, she wasn’t looking forward to the pain that would inevitably occur after she flushed her system.

Her breath left her lungs slowly, and she concentrated as hard as her muddled mind would allow, sending out a psychic call to her best friend, Anya, using the preexisting connection that they’d established between each other a long time ago.

She-devil, can you hear me? I need you.

It worked quicker than Sonnet had expected.

Anya’s voice speared through her mind. *I’m right outside. See you in less than a minute.*

She turned at the sound of a chirpy but lush voice echoing out in the hall. “Get out of my way, peckerhead.” There was a pause, then... “Oh yeah, well screw you too, buddy!”

Then the door to her room flew open, and Anya strolled in.

Sonnet’s brows scrunched together in confusion. It was the first time she’d seen the she-devil walk on two legs.

A mischievous smile slid across her face. “Who the fuck do I need to kill?”

With a sigh, Sonnet tried her hardest to maintain eye contact with Anya. “I’m feeling a little wonky at the moment. Got anything to sober me up?”

Anya pursed her lips determinedly as she watched Sonnet struggle to speak.

“Not on me. But I’m sure I can scrounge something up.”

“Or,” a new voice entered the space, “she can hop her stubborn ass back into bed where she belongs.”

Damn it!

If there was one person on this earth she couldn’t persuade to help her escape the hospital, it was the man walking into her room.

Everyone went quiet.

Remy smiled at Sonnet. “Get back into that bed, sweetheart. I have everything under control. Poppy is safe.”

Her eyes widened with hope. “You’re not just saying that, are you?”

He solemnly shook his head. “I wouldn’t lie about something so important.”

And then it was as though all the fight and adrenaline in Sonnet’s body left her all at once. She slumped over. “I think I’m going to be sick,” she said.

Bane hefted her limp body into his arms and carried her across the room. After tucking her in, he said, “I’ll go get Poppy and bring her back here to you.”

“That’s not necessary. She is already on her way.” Remy added.

Sonnet’s lashes fluttered softly. “Wake me when she gets here.” And after releasing a few weary breaths, she was out cold.

Anya jumped into the air and flew over to Sonnet. She hovered a few inches from her face. After staring at her closed eyes for a minute, she zipped backwards. “Do you think she still wants me to get her that potion?”

Bane and Remy shook their heads at the same time. It was Bane who said, “No.”

“Alright, then. But just so you know, if she wakes up all pissed off and whatnot, that shit’s on you.”

After Anya left the room, Bane walked over to stand in front of Remy. He paused to look over his shoulder at Sonnet, checking her breathing and heart rate with his preternatural hearing to make sure she was indeed fast asleep, before saying, “Did the other dragon harm our girl in anyway?”

Remy eyed him with sincerity. “Last I saw of her, not even a hair on her head was out of place.”

Bane nodded, and with the movement, stray locks fell into his face. He pulled out a leather strap from his pocket, scraped all his hair back tight, and then tied it off. “Did Emely stay behind with Poppy?”

Remy shook his head. “We kept watch from the forest. Poppy never saw us, never even knew we were there, or if she did, she didn’t let on.”

“I see.” He turned to walk back over to the chair he’d practically made his home since Sonnet was admitted to the hospital. “Wait,” he said, turning back around. “You left her alone then?”

Remy was almost out the door, but stopped. “No, her friend was with her. You know, the one she calls teen-wolf.”

Bane bit his lower lip to keep from yelling, and scowled. “You left Poppy with a teenage boy, alone, in the forest without supervision?”

He shrugged. “He seemed harmless enough.”

Bane’s mouth dropped. “Name one harmless teenaged boy you’ve ever met in your life. You may as well have thrown Sonnet’s daughter to the wolves. Oh, wait. You did.”

Remy’s lips spread into a smile as he watched the fuming vampire for several heartbeats.

His face reddened and his scowl grew deeper. “What?”

“Don’t let this go to your head, but Sonnet couldn’t have picked a better man to help raise that girl of hers.” He glanced down at the floor and then back up. “Thanks, man, for taking care of Poppy, and my sister.”

After a quick glance at Sonnet, Remy left the room.

Bane shook his head. “Well I’ll be damned.”

Chapter Ten

As Poppy watched her birth mother fly away, there was a subtle twisting in her gut that left her feeling as if something inside her was missing. The pain was unexpected; after all, she hated the she-dragon for what she had done to Sonnet, didn't she?

Poppy shook out of those thoughts. They were the kind that made her feel as though she was being disloyal to her mother in some way. Which was absurd; she loved Sonnet.

She turned around to see Quinn moving in her direction. He stopped next to a tree and began to paw at the earth at its base. After digging for a while, he shoved his nose into the newly turned earth and hauled out a knapsack, securely gripped between his fangs. He paused, and then the space around him shimmered, leaving a naked young man kneeling next to the hole. He looked over at Poppy and winked at her.

Her face warmed and she blushed so deep that she had to turn her head. She shut her eyes and took a few calming breaths before opening them back up to see Quinn pulling a shirt over his head, dragging it down a muscular chest. Admittedly, she let her eyes linger a little too long on his abs. His pants were already up around his hips, but left undone.

After slipping on a pair of socks and shoes, he straightened and lifted the hem of his shirt so he could zip and button his jeans. She swallowed hard; there were those abs again. Once he was dressed, he kicked most the dirt back into the hole, picked up the bag, and jogged over to her.

"Hi," he said, a little out of breath.

She grinned at him. "Hi, Quinn. How did you know I would be here?"

He looked down shyly, and then with a tilt of his head, he gazed back up at her with a sideways grin that made his hazel eyes light up and dance under the moonlight. “I was worried when you left the Dungeon with your stepdad. I’d never seen you so upset. So I tracked you down to see if you were okay.”

Her eyebrow rose in surprise, and then he continued.

“I followed your scent all the way to the hospital, just in time to see you shoot off toward the woodlands. After that, I was about to call it quits and head home—until I saw that other dragon hightail it after you.”

Poppy nervously smoothed down her skirt, her gaze jumping from her hands to him.

Quinn gazed into the sky, in the same direction Mauramaze had disappeared. “So she’s your real mom?”

Poppy’s hands dropped. His words made her feel embarrassed, nervous, and a bit perturbed. “How on earth did you know that?” She crossed her arms. “And *Sonnet* is my *real* mother, thank you very much.”

He caught the edge in her tone and smiled at her coyly. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She let out a breath, and said, “It’s alright. Apparently, that wound is still a little raw, I guess.”

Quinn nodded and took a step forward. “And as for how I knew she was your mother?” He tapped the end of his nose with the tip of a finger. “This schnozzle of mine is the envy of my entire pack. It’s how I found you so quickly. And I have to say it wasn’t easy; you speed through the air as fast as a rocket.” He leaned in. “Your true form is beautiful and majestic when sailing the sky.”

Things began to heat up inside of her pretty quickly after that. And because of it, she reached between them and grabbed his hand. “Thank you

for looking out for me. You're a good friend."

His brow rose, and hung. "About that..."

Poppy didn't so much as breathe as he prepared to say his next words. She knew what she wanted them to be, but didn't dare hope.

"You see, uh, about that friend thing. I was kind of hoping you'd consider being more." He swallowed. "I really like you, Poppy, as more than just friends."

Poppy felt the same way about him, and she wasn't about to deny it. She sighed. "Why do you like me, anyways?"

Geez... idiot. That sounded insecure, she thought, but it was too late to take it back. And the truth was, she was a complete novice at attracting the opposite sex, which left everything uncertain. So his answer was important to her.

He gave her a half smile. "That's easy. You're kind, funny, damn smart, and pretty. Prettier than anyone I've ever met."

Her lavender eyes showed relief, and she smiled coyly. "Okay. I'll consider it."

Consider it my ass...he's all mine.

Quinn gave her a devastatingly handsome, wicked smile. "Really?"

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, and placed a hand on his shoulder as she whispered in his ear, "Really."

This time, it was the wolf's turn to blush. He reached down and gripped her fingers in his, and said, "Let me get you back to your mother."

She smiled and nodded.

Chapter Eleven

“Someone’s on the phone for you.” A voice inside Sonnet’s ear rolled low. “She said it was urgent.”

Holding a medical chart in one hand and a cordless phone in the other, Sonnet’s doctor hurried over to her.

Bane stood and intercepted the phone. “Is it her daughter?” he asked in a husky voice.

The doctor shrugged. “She didn’t say.”

That got her attention. Sonnet’s eyes flew open and her hand sprang out. “Give it to me.”

Racked with impatience, Sonnet almost fell out of her hospital bed and onto the floor as she tried grabbing for the phone. Tears welled as Bane helped her into a seated position. She felt humiliated, frail and, worst of all, helpless. She choked back tears and lifted her chin. “Can I please have the phone?”

Bane handed the phone over and Sonnet held the receiver to an ear that was covered by sweat-soaked hair. “Poppy? Is that you?”

“No, hunter, it’s Maze.”

Sonnet’s throat tightened. She wanted to start screaming bloody murder at the she-dragon, but instead she kept her calm and asked, “What do you want?”

“I just left my daughter. It seems she is mad at me because of what I did to you.”

A little surprised by what Maze said, Sonnet sat up straighter. She looked down at her arm. “Let’s get one thing straight before we continue.

Poppy is *my* daughter. And of course she is upset. You're dangerous, a loose cannon, and you need to turn yourself in to the authorities."

"That's why I've called you. So I can do just that. But first, I must do something for *you*, or my daught— I mean, Poppy, will hate me forever."

What a strange turn of events, Sonnet thought, and then asked, "What could you possibly do for me?"

"I can heal the burns I inflicted upon you."

She sucked in a breath of surprise. "That's really hard to believe."

But then Sonnet thought back to the day in demon-hell when Poppy had hatched from her egg. The baby dragonling had healed the web of scars that covered her hand and wrist, using her very first breath of fire. So the idea wasn't entirely ludicrous.

"I can and I will." Her tone resonated true.

Sonnet's gaze moved to Bane. He was watching her intensely, so she knew that he was also listening in on the conversation. She could read his mood easily; anxious, cynical.

"What would it hurt to let her try?" she asked him.

He eased closer to her, and after a gentle kiss to her dry, chapped lips, he took the phone out of her hand and put it up to his ear.

"Why should we trust you? You're the vile creature who attacked her in the first place."

It didn't seem to faze the she-dragon when Bane took over the conversation, or that he'd insulted her, she just continued on like nothing had changed. "Because if I don't help her, the magical properties in my fire won't allow your female's wounds to heal...ever."

Bane gritted his teeth and looked down at Sonnet. She was already fast asleep, half of her body limp in his lap. If what the she-dragon said was true, then Sonnet's agony and prolonged fatigue made a lot more sense. She

was a royal demon in Phantom City, after all, that fact alone should have amped up the healing process by degrees. But instead, she only seemed to be getting worse. And then there were the surgeries she faced in the near future, surgeries which, if the dragoness spoke the truth, wouldn't help anyways.

He frowned. "Then it seems you have left us with little choice."

"None, actually. Please inform your security detail that I will be there within the hour."

And then the line went dead.

Thirty minutes later, Mauramaze of the Dark Flame clan stood in the middle of the room, looking like a flaming-haired goddess who wore too much leather. Her red halter top that buttoned in the front, black skin-tight pants, and her lace-up knee-high boots were all made out of the durable material.

Before the dragoness arrived, Sonnet had insisted on being dressed for the visit. Her ripped blue jeans fit snug and comfortable, like a well-worn glove. She wore a pink Demon Dolls t-shirt that Anya had zipped down the street to the strip club and grabbed for her, because the shirt she'd been brought into the hospital wearing was burnt to ruins. She'd managed to scrape her hair up into a messy bun, and pilfered through a kind and generous nurse's makeup kit for some lip gloss and blush, so she could add a little color to her pale complexion. Maze may have taken Sonnet's health, but she'd be damned if she let her steal her dignity.

Maze sniffed the air. "Your wound is still enflamed. Show it to me and I will fix it."

The fingers on Sonnet's wounded arm began to tingle, the sensation shooting straight up the entire limb. It was as if the dragon's residual magic

was coming alive in her presence. Sonnet scowled at the taste of bitterness on her tongue, and rubbed at her arm—intense pain sizzled. She ignored it.

“No pleasantries, just right down to business,” Sonnet remarked.

Maze nodded once. “I figured you’d appreciate that. Besides, we can talk later.”

Sonnet’s brow rose. “Actually, we have your surrender to discuss.”

The dragoness shrugged. “What’s to discuss? After I heal you, I’ll turn myself over to the proper authorities.”

Suddenly, the door swung open, and Remy sauntered in. He waved a hand, using his telekinetic power to close it behind him.

Maze turned on him with a furious growl. Her hair lifted, carried by an influx of heat radiating from her body. “Who are you?” she asked.

Heart pounding, Sonnet hopped from the bed, landing between the two deadly creatures.

“Listen to me, both of you. I do not have time for this nonsense.” And in the next second, she was scrambling for something to hold on to.

Bane ran forward and put an arm around her waist. “I really wish you’d keep your ass in bed, little fox.”

She smacked at his hands and moaned. “I’ll do as I please.”

“Not this time.”

The sound of growling pulled her head up and around. “I didn’t know dragons growled,” Sonnet commented with a chuckle.

The giddiness reminded Sonnet that she was loaded up on drugs, and that fact reminded her of how badly she was hurt. Her body sank against Bane’s. *Thank God for Bane.*

“Tame your dragon, woman, or I’ll be forced to unleash my own inner demon.”

Maze must have recognized something in Remy—maybe it was his nobility, or the power with which he held sway over the entire city—because she pulled back her magic and refocused on Sonnet. With a slightly perturbed look, she quirked her lips, held out her hand, and said, “Let me see it.”

Sonnet looked at her arm, her brow furrowed. “It won’t move,” she said.

Bane smiled, showing his fangs, long and sharp. She giggled once more. “Let me help you,” he offered.

She nodded, letting her head fall against his chest.

He gently lifted her wounded arm and placed it into Maze’s hand with a scowl. “Be careful,” he warned.

Maze nodded and let her free hand hover over the wounded area.

Remy stood on the other side of Sonnet, sandwiching her between himself and Bane.

And then magic streamed from Maze, filling the room, turning it into a lung-constricting oven. After a few moments of complete concentration, the power pulled back, and she focused every ounce of it on the burn. Her head flew back and her mouth gaped open, and in the next instant, her chin fell forward and she made a blowing gesture.

But instead of wind slipping from between the dragon’s ruby lips, a slow trickle of black flames rolled out, stretching like tiny tentacles, reaching for Sonnet’s arm. Once there, the obsidian fire crawled across the bandages, burning the material away on contact as it searched for the seared flesh underneath.

Maze gripped Sonnet’s arm tightly and her eyes darted from Bane to Remy. “This next part is going to hurt like a son of a bitch. Hold her down.”

Bane wrapped his arms around her, while Remy squeezed her hand and pulled her head into his shoulder. Between both strong males, Sonnet wasn't going anywhere.

As soon as the flames reached the devastated flesh, Sonnet shuddered and screamed.

“My god!”

Bane stared at Maze, features brutal with agony. “How long will this take?”

Maze released Sonnet's arm. Stumbled back and ran a shaky hand through her damp hair. “It is already done.”

And then without warning, she collapsed to the floor, her last glimpse of awareness that of her daughter bursting into the room. Her final conscience thought—*now she won't hate me.*

Chapter Twelve

A perpetual full moon hung over Phantom City, casting ribbons of light across the hospital bed Sonnet sat upon. She pulled on a pair of soft leather boots and zipped them up and over her jean-clad calves. Her heart rate was even, her breathing calm.

She rose and took a long, hard look at Poppy, who stood across from her by the utility closet, and couldn't help but notice the air of concern within her daughter's features when she handed over the gun holster that held Sonnet's 9mm buckled inside of it.

"Are you sure you're well enough for discharge?" her daughter asked.

She nodded. "I'm right as rain, darling. Maze did as she promised."

Poppy's relief was evident as she smiled. "Good. I'm glad to hear that."

Instead of leaving her hair in the messy style of hospital chic, Sonnet ran her fingers through it and then pulled it back into a thick braid. She then threaded the gun belt through the loops of her jeans, bent over and picked up the leather shoulder holster she'd taken up using to conceal Ruby, her wooden stake, underneath her jacket, and put that on, too.

Speaking of jackets—hers had been ruined in the attack, toast, quite literally. "Damn it."

A voice drifted between them. Bane had his cell phone to his ear, making arrangements for Maze's imprisonment. The she-dragon was still out for the count, laid up in a heavily warded room that shared a wall with Sonnet's, until the appropriate runes and wards could be crafted inside, and around the perimeter, of one of PCPD's holding cells.

Bane hung up the phone and turned his gaze on Sonnet. “The mages are getting the dragon’s cell ready for containment. We should probably drop Poppy off at your place and then head on over there to meet up with everybody.”

Sonnet glanced at him. Their stares connected, and she said, “Alright. I can grab a jacket while I’m there, so it works out.”

“Oh, and apparently the head mage has some news about that collar you had him check up on. He said it was heavily cursed using some pretty potent and nasty voodoo, of the New Orleans variety.”

Sonnet shook her head. “Voodoo magic?” She slid her ruby phoenix ring back on her left ring finger, and cringed. “I think it’s time I start charging triple for hazard pay.”

Sonnet surveyed the jail cell that held the sleeping dragon, from several feet away. Even at that distance, she could feel and hear strong magic emanating from the bars spanning its circumference. The mages had done an incredible job of fortifying the space. And well they should have, because Sonnet had a feeling once the beast it contained awoke from her slumber, she was going to be pissed off enough for them to need every drop of that magic.

“What are they going to do with her?”

Dom uncrossed his arms and motioned for Sonnet to follow him. As they moved away from the cell, he said, “About that. I was hoping that you could sit in on the perp’s interrogation.”

“Really? Isn’t that a little unorthodox, considering I’m not one of your detectives?”

He smirked. “Even though it’s not official, you’re the best officer I got.”

Her cheeks warmed at the compliment, because no matter how neutral a person could seem, being appreciated counted. “Thanks.”

They entered an elevator that only offered a down option, and within seconds were strolling into a room bursting with energy that occupied the entire basement of the police department. To Sonnet’s senses, it felt like the fourth of July in there—magic popped, sizzled, and surged with all sorts of brilliant colors around her, and all of it with an ebb and flow of varied potency levels that confused and delighted all at once.

She looked around in awe. “What is this place?”

Dom’s eyes widened, taking on an air of pride. “This, Vale, is PCPD’s Alchemy Division, led by Laszlo Edgemont; he’s our head mage.”

“You called?”

A deeper voice than Dom’s entered the space, quickly followed by a tall man who wore a wide and quirky smile plastered on his ruggedly handsome face. He nodded once at Sonnet, sending his shoulder-length, powder-white hair drifting over high-set cheek bones. The mage was imposing, brutally frightening, with an insane amount of power that flexed from his person in waves like well-used muscles. And the scariest part still—he wasn’t even trying to use it or even show it off; the magic was just there, lying dormant, waiting to be unleashed on some poor unsuspecting fool who gave him cause.

She scanned the room once more; even the wild and colorful magic that once bounced erratically around the space was now simmering within the ether, brought to heel by this man’s presence. And was it mentioned—he was smiling at her?

It took a fraction of a heartbeat for Sonnet’s eyes to adjust to the brightness of the room and for her nerves to settle long enough to anxiously say, “Uh, hi.”

Dom gave her and her nervous tone the side eye.

Laszlo strode across the stone floor, snatched a plastic bag from one of the two workstations in the room, and continued toward them. She assumed they were workspaces because of the apothecary cabinets perched on top of the tables, each one opened and filled to bursting with fancy amber, clear, and dark brown bottles, each labeled in old-timey lettering, some of them etched with markings she couldn't decipher.

"Hi, Captain."

Dom smiled and nodded at the mage once as he stopped in front of them.

"And you must be Sonnet Vale." His silver eyes met hers and held as he extended a hand. She took it. "I'm Lászlo. It's nice to finally meet the princess of this bat-shit crazy city."

They shook, and then she let her hand fall into a loose fist at her side. Energy coated her skin, and in a futile attempt to shake the residual magic from her hand, she flexed her fingers a few times. He was that powerful.

She smiled and did her best to play it cool. As if the mage who spoke so nicely wasn't deadlier than a venomous snake. "It's nice to meet you, too, Lászlo."

In response, he turned the wattage up on his own smile by degrees. "I've heard so many stories. I must say, it's great to put a face to the legend."

Her brows drew together at that. "Legend?"

Silver eyes that pulsed with mystery shined underneath the overhead lights as Lászlo chuckled, lifting a curious brow of his own. "Aren't you supposed to be in the hospital? Suffering from a dragon burn?"

Ah, she got the point. He thought she was indestructible, or something of the like, but what she really was, was one lucky son of a gun. "The same

dragon who attacked me found reason to heal me. There's nothing more special goin' on than that."

He leaned in and winked at her. "Sure, if you say so."

Dom glanced at the bag in Laszlo's hand. "What do you have there?"

Laszlo bit his lower lip and broke eye contact. It was a gesture that, if she weren't happily ensconced in a serious relationship, she may have thought was sexy.

Sonnet thought about Bane's light blue eyes and sensual, long, liquid-caramel-colored hair, and smiled—he was gorgeous. And not in an overly pretty, flashy, or even cocky sort of way, but in a way that made your heart melt when you looked at him, your knees wobble, and your panties drop as if they had a mind of their own. Laszlo was hot, but he couldn't hold a candle to Bane.

"Did we lose you?"

It was Dom's voice.

Sonnet's cheeks warmed, and she cleared her throat. "Sorry, where were we? I lost my train of thought for a minute."

Dom chuckled. "Laszlo was telling us what he'd learned about the collar we gave him."

She glanced down at the mage's hand; he was holding the plastic bag out in front of him, and inside of it she could see the silver collar. She took it in one hand and held it up to the light. Focusing hard, she fought to glean a read from it, but like before, it registered as ordinary magic—nothing special.

Without looking up at the mage, she asked, "What is its purpose?"

"I'm going to give you the CliffsNotes explanation. It's a nullifier of magic; specifically targeted at Dragon magic."

"Can you destroy it?"

He shook his head. “Maybe, if I had some more time with it. And I’d have to call some of my contacts in New Orleans to see what they know about this kind of voodoo magic.”

After a long pause for thought, a moment during which she considered the fact that she had in her possession a magical instrument that could harm the one person in her life that she cared for more than anything, Sonnet pocketed the plastic bag.

There was no way in hell she was going to let something that could harm Poppy float around Phantom City, all nilly-willy, without her personal supervision. In fact, after she was finished consulting on the murder case, she was going to figure out how to destroy the miserable object, even if the solution led her to a voodoo doctor’s doorstep in New Orleans.

She nodded. “I’ll keep it until you find out more.”

Her answer gave him pause. “You don’t trust me alone with it?”

She crossed her arms and cocked her hip. “No offense, but I just met you.”

Even though she could feel Laszlo’s reluctance to forfeit possession of the cursed item, he gave her a patient smile. “I assure you, none taken.”

A few minutes later, Sonnet and Dom were heading back up to the hub of the precinct to see if Mauramaze had awakened. That’s when an urgent message from a certain she-devil invaded her brain space.

I thought you might like to know that your daughter is with me—inside the club.

The elevator door pinged open and Sonnet stepped onto the main floor of the precinct. With more than a little irritation in her words, she mentally answered, *Why haven’t you kicked her little butt out of there?*

She could almost hear a hint of a smile in Anya’s reply.

Well, because she is trying to talk me into going with her to see you over at the PCPD. So, momma bear, what should I tell your little cub?

At this point, Sonnet would rather have Poppy by her side than anywhere else.

Tell her I'll see you guys shortly.

Sonnet glanced toward Maze's cell. The she-dragon was awake, sitting on her cot, staring daggers at her. And then Maze's gaze darted to Sonnet's jacket pocket, the one she'd stuffed the collar into, as if she knew what was in there. After a few seconds her lavender eyes went wide with fear, her knees went to her chest, and she scooted back until her body pressed tight against the stone wall.

Two facts struck Sonnet instantly: First, the collar in her pocket had been hoodooed to drain a dragon of its magic, and said item was discovered at the first crime scene, where Maze just so happened to annihilate a werewolf with her fire. Second, Maze was obviously scared shitless of the thing, which led her to believe that there was a strong possibility it had once rested around her neck.

Sonnet suddenly found herself anxious to speak with Maze.

"Do you mind if I talk to Maze before you interrogate her?"

Dom frowned and studied her. He mustn't have found anything too off-putting about her request, because he finally shrugged and said, "Sure, just come and get me when you're finished."

She nodded, and said, "Thanks, Dom."

Chapter Thirteen

The world as Poppy knew it had become a foreign and heartbreaking place. She'd been sitting, pacing, and chewing her nails in her room for the last half hour, wondering what she could do to make things normal again. She felt like everything that had happened was all her fault—the murders, Sonnet getting hurt. If it weren't for her birth mother's arrival, none of it would have happened. Which proved—her fault.

She swiped a finger across her brow, brushing away the sweat that had formed there. The phone rang. A shudder ran down her spine...was it Sonnet? Poppy rushed into the living room and picked up the receiver by the third ring.

“Hello?” She sounded a bit breathless.

“Poppy, it's me, Quinn. I was worried about you, so I thought I'd call.”

She sighed through her nose, smoke expending with the air. Of course she was happy to hear Quinn's voice, but at the moment, what she really needed was to hear from her mother.

She eased into a seated position on the couch, and said, “Hi, Quinn. I'm okay I guess. Thank you for asking.”

She cringed at her own politeness. It was as if a robot had taken over her responses, making her sound like a Stepford dragon, quieting the more ruthless and wild, devil-may-care part of her personality—the best parts, in her opinion.

“You sound different,” he said.

Feeling too agitated to remain seated, Poppy stood. “I'm just worried about my mother.”

There was a pause, and then he said, "I can come over and keep you company."

She closed her eyes and took a few calming breathes. His offer was tempting and sweet, but regretfully, not at all what she needed at that moment. When she reopened her eyes, they were filled with resolve.

"No, I'm fine, really. Can I take a rain check?"

Even though his voice sounded uncertain, he said, "Sure. I'll give you a call tomorrow."

"I'd like that."

Five minutes later...

"What in the hellcat are you doing here?" Anya asked, her arms shooting crossways over her bouncing, naked breasts.

Poppy pushed a red curl out of her face and said, "I need a favor."

Anya motioned her off to the side with a slant of her head, away from the demons gyrating in the buff onstage.

Sonnet's gonna rip my wings clean off for this. Or give me an ass chewing like I'm a piece of watermelon Hubba Bubba.

"Where's your mom?"

"She's over at the PCP, with my birth mother."

Anya's black eyes went wide and her wings stopped beating. She dropped several inches before catching herself and darting back up. With modest arms still wrapped around her chest, she hissed, "I don't have enough life insurance to be dealing with you right now, young lady. Now be a good girl and run on home before you land us both in a world of trouble."

Poppy's chin tipped up, and she crossed her arms. "Nope. I'm staying right here until you agree to help me," she said.

Anya narrowed her eyes. "You're as stubborn as your mother."

“Thank you,” she replied, walking over to an empty table to take a seat. “I’ll wait here while you get dressed.”

The she-devil raised a brow. “You also rival her in nerve.”

A thin smile spread across Poppy’s face, and she winked at Anya. “It’s a dragon thing.”

Sonnet stood in front of Maze’s cell with the evidence bag dangling between them in the air. “Why are you so afraid of this? Huh?”

Maze unraveled herself from the tight ball she’d curled into, and then stood from the cot. She planted a fake smile on her face, while at the same time not taking her eyes off of the collar. “If you put that fucking thing away, we can talk.”

Sonnet nodded and stuffed the bag inside her jacket pocket. Once the collar was safely tucked away, she said, “Well, come on, spill it.”

After releasing the breath she was holding, Maze murmured, “It’s not an easy thing to talk about.”

Sonnet took a step closer to the bars. “Take your time.”

“Mom?”

Sonnet glanced over her shoulder to see Poppy hustling toward them, with Anya hot on her heels. Her heart leapt at the sight of her daughter. The tender feeling, however, was quickly followed by an innate need to protect her.

“Poppy, can you wait in Dom’s office? I’d rather you not be here for this.”

“Maze rushed forward at the sight of Poppy, her hands gripping the bars tight. “You came to see me. Just like you said you would.”

Sonnet’s head snapped back around. With a crazed look at Maze, she hissed, “Don’t talk to her. Don’t even look at her.”

Maze glanced at Sonnet as if she were daft. “She’s my blood.”

Sonnet lunged at Maze, reached through the bars and grabbed a handful of leather halter top. She yanked until their noses almost touched. And then a deadly growl, a warning sound unlike any other Sonnet had ever made, rolled out, before she said, “I am her mother.”

The air in the room heated up like it was on fire, and then a light sheen of warmth coated Sonnet’s fingers and began a slow crawl up her arm.

A low, menacing hiss escaped the dragon’s lips, her eyes flashing red. Sonnet released her hold and took a quick step back. She looked at her hands, flexed them. “You shouldn’t have use of your magic.”

Flames danced across Maze’s fists, and then sputtered out. “Your wards, that collar. Don’t you see? You all try to take from me what’s mine, but you can’t, not fully.”

“What do you mean?”

The question came from Poppy.

Two sets of matching liquid lavender eyes met, and Maze instantly settled down. “Our clan magic is how I kept you hidden for so long, how I finally escaped my captors so I could find you.”

Her eyes momentarily moved to Sonnet’s arm, and then returned to Poppy. “The fire we conjure follows our every whim. We can make the flames harmless, or as deadly as acid, and as you already witnessed, they can even heal. Even with that damn collar around my neck, I was able to hoard enough magic to keep you hidden inside of my womb, long after you should have been born, until I could stash you someplace safe. After that, it took me a while to store up enough of it to finally escape those bastards.”

Poppy gasped, and then took a couple steps forward. “This isn’t real. This can’t be happening.” Sonnet’s hand settled on Poppy’s shoulder, and

she immediately shrugged it off. “I need to hear this, Mom, please don’t try to keep me away from her.”

Anya flew up to them, into the tension, and she nodded at Poppy in a way that hinted to anyone watching that the two of them were in on a secret. “All of us need to hear this—or rather, *witness* it. Because what I’ve plucked from that she-dragon’s gray matter will make you think twice about pressing murder charges against her.”

Sonnet’s eye’s narrowed. “Are you trying to say she’s innocent?”

Hope sprang into Poppy’s eyes. “Maze, is it true?”

The she-dragon gave her a soft, loving look. “I only did what I had to do.”

“I need a moment to think about all of this.” Sonnet said.

The truth was, she was being jealous and stubborn. And what she needed to be, what Poppy needed from her, was kindness and understanding.

Before anything else could be said, Anya zipped over to hover face-to-face with Sonnet. Her tiny blue face leaned in so close that Sonnet could see the demon had one miniscule little freckle at the tip of her nose.

“The way I see it, you have two choices. You can either fight the connection between your daughter and her birth mother, or you can work with me here to find out the truth.” Anya’s voice took on a more serious tone. “You don’t want her to end up resenting you for this, do you?”

Sonnet gritted her teeth, and shook her head in response. No matter how much Maze infuriated her, she saw the wisdom in her friend’s advice. After eyeing the proximity of the two dragons, Sonnet sighed. “What do you need me to do?”

“Let her out of that cell.”

“What!”

Anya looked around them, and then said, “It was hard enough to get a read from the dragon behind those damn wards. I’m going to need an unimpeded connection between you, Poppy, Maze, and myself, if I’m going to be able to do this.”

Sonnet snorted and rolled her eyes. “Dom’s not going to agree to that.”

Anya’s gaze went dead serious. “If you want the truth, you’ll need to convince him.”

Sonnet turned from Anya, and watched her daughter. For the first time, she didn’t feel like ripping away random limbs at the mere sight of Maze breathing in the same vicinity as Poppy. But she did feel a pang of jealousy shoot through her gut. All thoughts of murder, and magic, left. And in its place, fear blossomed.

She glanced over at Anya, who had zipped closer to the bars. It looked as if she were testing the strength of the wards. When the she-devil was finished, she swore at them, and then flew back, stopping a whispering distance from Sonnet.

“Why haven’t you left yet?” she questioned.

Sonnet’s head fell, and she mumbled, “What if I lose her?”

With a sigh, Anya placed a hand on Sonnet’s shoulder. “That could never happen. She loves you.”

As Sonnet headed toward Dom’s office, she listened to Poppy and Maze talk in civil tones. It hurt, pierced, like a giant needle had chosen her heart as a favorite pin cushion.

Remember, she told herself. *You will always be her mother. Nobody can change that.*

Chapter Fourteen

“Poppy. You take your mother’s hand, and I’ll take the other. Maze, grab Poppy’s free hand, and I’ll begin the memory transfer just as soon as we’re all connected.”

As Anya spoke, everyone followed direction. All four of them were locked inside of an interrogation room, with Dom and his elite vampire squad just outside. The arrangement was the best Sonnet could manage. And to make even that much happen, she had to promise Dom she’d take the next case he threw her way, no questions asked. As long as Anya was able to bring to light what happened with Maze and the murder victims, Sonnet considered the obligation worth it.

There was silence—and then the images came flying at her.

For a split second, all you could see from Maze’s mind’s eye were clear skies, lush greenery, and a body of clear blue water. A gorgeous male specimen—that Sonnet quickly noticed had a dimpled chin and high cheek bones, which resembled her daughter’s—reached out to her.

Poppy’s fingers constricted around Sonnet’s. “That’s my father, isn’t it?” she asked with no breath.

With a nod, Sonnet whispered gently, “I think so, yes.”

“Yes, little one. That is your father, Gaelen.”

“Hush now, save the questions for later, I need to concentrate,” Poppy instructed.

In the next moment, Mauramaze’s memories flashed into something straight out of a nightmare. Utterly terrifying, within a reality you prayed to be awoken from.

A man with golden eyes, long blond hair matted with blood, beaten to within an inch of his life, was down on his knees, arm muscles trembling with the exertion of trying to lift himself back to his feet. Two wolves crouched before him, teeth bloody from attack, bared and ready for another go at the battered man. It was Gaelen.

Maze's desperate voice echoed loud in everyone's heads.

"I will go with you willingly if you just leave him be!"

A deep laugh and harsh words answered Maze's plea. "You will come either way."

And then she was yanked backwards by the hair.

The muscles in her long neck strained as she hissed with wild eyes at the vampire holding her captive against his body, while his lackeys threatened her mate.

Her voice dropped to a low, menacing hiss, and she said, "Then let me put it to you this way. If you harm him, I *will* kill you."

The vampire pulled harder, sending bolts of pain through her neck and down her shoulder. "You'll be useless to do anything to me, or anybody else for that matter, after I'm finished with you, you scaly bitch."

The last words splashed spit across her flaming cheeks. The small amount of liquid sizzled on contact, which could only mean one thing—burgeoning fire.

His arm banded tighter around her waist, stealing her breath. "Oh no you don't, bitch."

In the next moment, the vampire clamped down on her hair harder, pulled a collar from somewhere that Maze couldn't see, and then snapped it around the dragoness's neck. All of this happened within a matter of seconds. He then released his hold and she toppled to the ground.

Against the cool grass, her cheeks instantly washed white, the fire churning in her lungs and creeping up her throat extinguished. All she was left with was a feeling of utter defeat, useless to protect the child growing within her womb, and her mate dying only feet away from her.

The vampire stepped away from Maze and ran a hand through his short blond hair. His brown eyes filled with satisfaction.

“Finish him off!”

The wolves leapt forward in unison, landing with fangs tearing and claws shredding the flesh from the rapidly dying man, who managed to choke out a few words with his final breaths.

“I love you, Maura.”

“Oh. My. God!” Poppy’s hands flew over her mouth. Tears welled, and then streams of liquid rolled from her eyes, spilling over her shaking hands. “They killed him! They killed my father!”

Sonnet folded her arms around Poppy to soothe her, and then cursed herself for letting the poor child watch that dreadful scene unfold. She’d tried breaking the psychic connection the moment the wolves attacked Gaelen, but to her utter horror, had been too late.

A haunted expression moved over Maze’s features. It was a look that was creepy and heartbreaking all at once. “It’s okay, sweetheart, Mommy killed the wolves responsible for taking him from us.”

It was a by the book sentiment mother’s told their children to try and make them feel better, even when it wasn’t okay.

Sonnet frowned while she thought about what Maze said, “The two wolves in your memories, they’re the same men you killed here, in Phantom City, aren’t they?”

Tears spilled from her eyes. “Yes.”

“And the vampire, the one who seemed to be orchestrating it all, where is he?”

Her gaze fell. “I had him, but he got away.”

“Do you want to call Dom in, or should I?” Anya asked.

“You do it.”

Sonnet moved next to Maze, with Poppy still tucked within her arms. She reached out to the she-dragon, who in turn accepted the embrace.

Never in a million years would Sonnet have believed she’d be in this position, with her arms wrapped consolingly around Poppy and her birth mother. But there she was, trying to be a rock for two of the most powerful creatures she’d ever encountered.

“Don’t worry, ladies. This isn’t over, not by a long shot,” she said.

Poppy tipped her head up enough to gaze deep into Sonnet’s eyes. “What do you mean?”

She kissed the tear-drenched curls plastered across her daughter’s cheek, and said, “I’m going to hunt down the vampire who did this to your parents, and I’m going to make him pay.”

Poppy pressed a hand to Sonnet’s cheek, and as a single tear rolled down her flushed skin, she said, “You’re the best mom ever.”

Maze straightened from the group hug, and settled a hand on Sonnet’s shoulder. “You’re right, Poppy; she really is.”

Epilogue

Thirty seconds later, Anya and Dom pushed through the door. The vampire squad, and Bane, had been left in the hall, which was a good sign; it meant none of the otherworldly creatures in the vicinity felt threatened by the uncaged dragon. And after what Sonnet gleaned from Maze's memories, if they—hell, the entire city, for that matter, including herself—had stayed out of Maze's way, they never would have had to be.

The only beings who'd had anything at all to fear from the riled dragon seeking vengeance, was the vampire and the two werewolves who'd hurt her.

"Anya said you needed to speak with me."

"Yes," Sonnet said, leaving the two she-dragons sitting next to each other at the interrogation table.

It was about time the newly reunited mother and daughter had a few seconds together that weren't tense-laden.

"We've made a grave mistake, Dom."

He raised a black brow. "Is that so?"

She nodded. "Maze is innocent."

"Can you be more specific?"

She held his stare. "What Maze did, those killings, they were done in self-defense."

Dom glanced over at the dragon in question. "Do you have proof?"

She nodded. "If you trust the mind power of a she-devil, and my word, then yeah...I do."

A deep groove formed between the captain's eyes as he mulled things over. "Can you show me what you saw?"

"Yes."

After Anya gave Dom a mind-visual rundown of events from Maze's memories, he moved across the room and opened the door. "Go grab me the incident report from earlier today, the one labeled 'Lax Core'." He then made a dismissive motion to whoever else was on guard out in the hall. "All of you can go now. I have everything in here under control."

In an instant, the room jumped in degrees, and with it, a warm flush in Sonnet's cheeks. You'd think she'd be used to Maze's temperature fits by now, but crap, was she getting tired of feeling like a half-baked cookie.

"How do you know that name?" Maze growled the question at Dom.

A bead of sweat formed at Dom's hairline and streamed down to disappear within a thick brow. "A vampire using that name came into the station today. Seems he was attacked by a dragon-shifter outside of the hotel he was staying at."

Sonnet's curiosity piqued at that important bit of information. "Which hotel?"

"Eternal Slumber," Maze supplied.

The door swung open and detective...uh, what's his name...waved a manila folder at the captain. "Here's the report you requested."

Dom swiped it from his hand, and nodded. "Thanks."

"Yup," he said, shifting his feet, and then with a quick, nervous look over at Maze, he left.

Dom opened the file. "Ignore him. He was at the hospital when Maze performed her fire-breathing-dragon act in front of the entire town. It was

his first time seeing a dragon-shifter in true form.”

Poppy gave him a wry smile. “Then it must’ve really freaked him out to see two of us flying the friendly skies.”

He drew a hand through his long, black-and-white hair, and chuckled. “I thought he was going to piss himself.”

Sonnet strolled over to Dom. “So you think this is the guy who attacked Poppy’s parents?”

He nodded. “I know it is, recognized him from the vision Anya stuffed into my head.”

“Really? That’s helpful. Mind if I take a look?”

He handed the folder over and Sonnet read the report.

Full name: Lax Core. DOB: 3-05-1903. POB: Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
Last known address: New Orleans, Louisiana. Species I.D: Vampire.

“It’s not a lot, but it’s enough.”

Everyone’s gazes locked on her, but it was Poppy who asked, “Are you going to hunt him down?”

She grinned at her. “I hear New Orleans is pretty lively this time of year.”

“I love you,” she said as she ran over and gave Sonnet a dragon-sized hug.

The End

Author BIO



Gena D. Lutz lives in the blistering heat of Arizona with her husband, four kids, and two high-maintenance dogs— a Chihuahua and an Australian shepherd. When she is not busy writing, Lutz can be found watching the classics, like *Charmed* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, marathon style. Lutz enjoys reading, riding horses, and playing poker, and she looks forward to the day she can travel the world.

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