



Shifting Winds

Book One
Tales of the Darkworld



PPB

Lex Valentine



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TALES OF THE DARKWORLD BOOK 1: SHIFTING WINDS

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Tales of the Darkworld Book 1: Shifting Winds

By Lex Valentine

Vampire Elysia Granville gets more than she bargained for when she attends the Undertaker's Ball on Halloween. She's looking for a one night stand, but the man she chooses is Declan Antaeus, a home and hearth black dragon who has had a secret crush on her for years. Can the powerful dragon make the commitment shy vampire extend one night into forever?

Her lips curved into a seductive smile. Maybe she would just have to discover the truth of that old adage about big men. Declan was certainly handsome enough. Black hair that shone like a raven's wing. Golden eyes that glowed as if lit by a fire within. Sun bronzed, supple skin. Beneath the baggy robe, she knew he had a tall and muscular body, the kind that looked best in a faded pair of jeans and a tank top that showed off his biceps.

"Buy me a drink?" she purred, deciding to start as she meant to go on. She was horny. He was hot. Seemed like a match made in heaven to her.

One dark brow winged up. "It's an open bar. I'll get you whatever your heart desires," he told her in a voice filled with innuendo.

Deciding the drink wasn't necessary; Elysia stopped him from turning away by putting one hand on his arm. He looked back at her with a question in his eyes.

"What if my heart desires something other than a drink? Will you get me that?" Her eyes held his boldly.

Declan's face became a mask of pure masculine desire. He cupped her elbow, just as he had three years ago at the convention, steering her toward the lobby. Once they were away from the crowd, he pushed back his hood and bent toward her. "Do you know what you're doing, Elysia? What you're inviting?" he growled softly.

Elysia smiled at him, reaching up to stroke her fingers over his hard jaw line. His skin felt hot to the touch. Her whole body tingled and she could hear his heart beating, feel the rush of his blood in his veins. She drew in a breath, the scent of his blood tart and crisp in her nostrils, like biting into a Granny Smith apple... Her fangs slid from their sheath as her panties grew damp. Yes, Declan Antaeus was definitely the right choice. Her body already wanted him fiercely. None of the men at the ball would satisfy her now. Besides, backing down after coming on to a man like Declan wasn't wise because he was easily the most powerful man at the party, both professionally and physically.

"I'm not a child, Declan. I know exactly what I'm doing. Do you need me to spell it out for you?" She tilted her head to one side inquiringly, wondering if he would take her up on her offer or if this was just a game to him.

His lips quirked. "Yeah. Maybe I do. After all, I've wanted you for a long time."

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PPB

Dedication

For The Bar Bitches – Jen, Mary, and Laurie. You were all there when I began this part of my writing journey, when I stepped foot into The Bar. You taught me about dragons and working together to make something great. Thank you for always having my back.

And to Mary W. for taking a chance on a woman who doesn't like cowboys.

Prologue

Austin's words rang painfully in her ears, all the more so because they'd been crafted with an eye to Elysia's public humiliation in front of her peers. Elysia stalked from the convention hall, her head held stiffly high despite the suppressed tears that made her shake uncontrollably. A warm hand cupped her elbow, steering her to an exit. Once out of sight of the staring crowds, she looked up to find a black dragon in human form, watching her with sad amber eyes.

"He deserves to be horsewhipped for treating you like that," Declan Antaeus said in a low voice filled with barely leashed emotion.

Elysia shrugged. "Whatever. It doesn't matter. He doesn't want me and any way you slice it, those words hurt," she mumbled, a haze of pain numbing her.

"He's a stupid ass. His brother got all the brains, which is why Austin cut you loose. He's too dumb to realize what he had. Every man in that convention hall is simultaneously glad and angry that he did this," Declan declared.

Elysia turned and stumbled away from him, headed for the elevator. "Thanks. I have to go now before I throw up," she said dazedly. "I appreciate your help."

She stepped into the elevator, her anguished, tear filled eyes meeting his before the elevator doors closed. Declan's expression was fierce, determined. Briefly, she wondered why, but then her pain took over and the black dragon receded from her thoughts.

Chapter One

The huge vase of tulips hid the face of Granville Cemetery's receptionist as she carried the flowers into the elegant office of the Chief Financial Officer. At least they weren't red roses, Elysia thought as Marnie set the vase on the corner of the rosewood executive desk, pushing it closer to Elysia's morning cup of coffee.

"You'd think they'd be roses," the receptionist sniffed, unknowingly echoing her boss's thoughts. "You're the CFO here, Miss E. You deserve the best."

A choked chuckle emerged from one of two leather wingback chairs across the desk from Elysia. Marnie stepped closer to the occupied chair and swatted the tall blonde man on the back of the head.

"That's what *you* deserve, Mr. Colin. You're always in here bothering her. Don't you ever work?" she hissed at him sarcastically before walking out. The door shut softly behind her.

Instead of smirking at the way their receptionist goaded her younger brother, Elysia turned an evil look on Colin. "Don't say a word," she ground out, shifting her glare from her sibling to the card peeking from between a couple of purple tulip buds.

"Obviously, you know who they're from without opening the card," Colin observed.

"Yeah, I know who sent them." Elysia snatched up the card before Colin leaned over the desk and grabbed it. She stared at the expensive vellum, afraid to open the small envelope and have the sender confirmed.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" Leather creaked as Colin sat forward in his chair. "C'mon, Lys. You always tell me your secrets. I never spill them to Marius."

Elysia winced at the mention of their older brother. The last thing she needed was for Marius to find out about the flowers. Not that Colin would tell. She always confided in him and he always kept it to himself. If not for Colin, she probably would have died of stress years ago. She had difficulty keeping her emotions bottled up inside her. This time, what bothered her was something Marius would want to know... and exploit. And since it was something intensely personal, Elysia didn't want Marius to have even the tiniest inkling.

"Lock the door," she muttered grimly, turning the small cream-colored envelope over in her hands. She recognized the florist. They were the best in the county. "I can't have Marius walk in on this conversation."

Colin shot out of his chair with lightning fast reflexes that were a blur to human eyes. Fortunately, Elysia was no more human than Colin. In the blink of an eye, he returned to his chair, his mouth quirked in a grin that showed off the white points of his fangs. He must really be excited to hear her gossip if his fangs were out.

"So where were you last night?" he asked. "Is it related to the flowers?"

Elysia nodded. "I went to the Undertaker's Ball."

Colin's dark blue eyes widened. "You're shitting me. You really went to that thing?"

She sighed and ran a hand through her long honey blonde hair. "Yes. Marius bugged me about it for a solid week. I agreed to go just to get him off my back. I don't know why he

couldn't have sent you. I'm sure you would have enjoyed it much more than me. You like dressing up on Halloween."

Colin laughed. "Of course, I do. I find it ironic to dress as Dracula or Nosferatu on Halloween. Last night, I did Nosferatu. I was scarier than Max Schreck, but that skull cap thing itched. And I had trouble getting the makeup off."

Elysia cocked an eyebrow up as her brother ruffled his dark blonde curls. She noticed tiny little bits of latex and glue in his hairline along with faint smudges of grey white makeup. "You've still got some on your face. Go upstairs and use that stuff Callie has in the prep room," she said. "That will take it off."

Colin nodded absently, his envious eyes on her coffee cup. "Yeah, I planned on it, but I had to stop here first to find out where you disappeared to last night. It's not like you to miss my Halloween party." He shook his head. "I can't believe you went to the Undertaker's Ball. For one, it's an industry thing. You don't like industry events. For another, I can't believe you caved in to Marius. You never do."

"I know. I know. Believe me; I hadn't intended to give in." Elysia sat back in her chair, placing her hands flat on the leather blotter on her desk. She stared at her long fingers for a moment, their plain unadorned expanse, short oval nails, uncolored, unexciting... except that last night they had been excited... in a frenzy of touching...

She jerked her mind away from those thoughts and looked up, meeting her brother's eyes. "Declan Antaeus was there." She said the words casually and watched her brother's eyes widen.

"Really?" Colin sat forward a little. "Did he talk to you about business? Marius said he's been angling for a meeting for six months."

"We didn't talk about work much," she mumbled, thinking they hadn't talked much at all.

"So what did you go as?"

Elysia rolled her eyes. "Elvira. I know, I know. Predictable and boring, but you should have seen Declan. He was worse."

Colin began to laugh. "Oh, no. He didn't. Tell me he didn't."

Elysia nodded. "He did. It was an obvious choice for a man of his height, but still, coming as the Grim Reaper was totally predictable and dull." She smiled at her brother as she recalled Declan stalking through the crowds dressed in the long black robe. "He was the only Reaper too."

Colin snorted derisively. "Of course. Everyone else had more creative costumes, didn't they?"

"Yes. He and I were probably the most boring costumes there, barring Alfred in a white sheet," she told him with a reminiscent smile.

"You're kidding. Alfred Stone wore a white sheet?" Colin's eyes danced with laughter at the thought of the head of the Funeral Director's Guild dressed as a ghost in a plain white sheet.

"He did. And he had that same shiny black suit on underneath. You know, the one you call his undertaker's suit."

The two of them laughed at the old-fashioned way of dressing that Alfred Stone of Stone Mortuary Services had cultivated. Alfred was a techie. He loved all things technology based, but when it came to clothes, he always looked like an undertaker from 1900. Elysia usually loved talking to Alfred because she was the computer geek at Granville Cemetery and they had a lot in common. However, she didn't like industry events. At least, not since she'd been rather spectacularly dumped by Alfred's brother Austin at the Darkworld's annual Funeral Director's convention three years ago. That experience taught her that the immortal world was just as hungry for gossip as the human world. Their hunger meant no one ever forgot the most humiliating and painful moment of her life.

Colin let out a sigh, his eyes meeting Elysia's. "So the tulips are from Declan Antaeus?"

"I think so." She opened the card that lay on her desk.

You are so much more beautiful than these flowers, but the texture of their petals reminded me of your skin. Dinner tonight? You and me and that gorgeous skin of yours...

I'll call you.

Declan

Elysia sucked in a shaky breath. The man definitely had a way with words. Her heart pounded so hard that she wondered if Colin could hear it.

He stared at her with an arrested expression. "Holy shit, Lys. Don't tell me you slept with Declan Antaeus!" he said in a low, astonished voice.

Her lips tightened in annoyance. "Okay, I won't."

Colin flopped back in his chair, his expression concerned. "What possessed you to do such a thing?"

"Oh, I dunno, Colin. Hormones?" she quipped, her words just a touch angry. Her irritation grew. Colin acted as if she'd done something completely out of character. Declan Antaeus wasn't the first man she'd had a one night stand with, and he probably wouldn't be the last either. Although, as far as Colin knew, he was the first man she'd been with since Austin had dumped her three years before. Maybe that was what had Colin's brows in a bunch. Luckily, the two other quick encounters she'd had in the last year hadn't been with anyone her brothers knew. "Declan is a good looking man," she admitted with a nonchalant shrug.

"He's a freaking shifter, Lys. A dragon. Not one of us." Colin's words were exasperated.

She gave him a sour look from her violet eyes. "I never realized what a prejudiced snob you are," she said stiffly, still wondering where her brother's weird attitude came from. She'd never noticed that he disliked dragons before.

Colin ran a hand through his hair, ruffling the golden curls. "I'm not! I swear I'm not. It's just that Marius has this fucked up notion that the reason Declan wants to meet with him is that Antaeus International intends to suck us up."

Elysia's eyes widened in surprise. Antaeus International was a huge conglomerate. They bought all of the little mom and pop mortuary and cemetery operations they could get their hands on. Afterward, they turned them all into highly profitable cremation based ventures. Granville Cemetery was very old and catered to the elite in the vampire world. They offered cremation, but vampires tended to not go that route. There was something about being

reduced to a pile of ash that vamps didn't care for. They were influenced by too many cheesy movies about the undead, Elysia thought wryly.

"So Marius thinks AI is after us?" she asked aloud.

Colin nodded. "He said the only reason Declan would want a meeting is because AI wants to buy us out."

Her brother frowned ferociously. Obviously, Colin didn't favor the idea of being bought out. She didn't either, but unlike Colin, who rarely stuck his head into anything related to financials, she knew that the company's fiscal strength would withstand any buyout attempt by AI. However, she now wondered if Declan's plans for Granville Cemetery had fueled his easy acquiescence to her come on last night. She bit her lip.

Colin, seeing her expression and knowing her better than anyone, leaned forward and grabbed her hand. "I'm sure that's not why he slept with you, Lys," he said gently. "Every man in the Funeral Director's Guild, married or single or gay, wants to fuck you."

Elysia smiled. Colin exaggerated, but not by much unfortunately. It was one of the reasons Marius dealt with industry stuff instead of her, even though finance was her area. The fact that men didn't take her business acumen seriously had always been annoying in the past. For some reason, last night at the Undertaker's Ball, she just hadn't cared. She'd wanted to find someone who could take away the ache in her gut and Declan Antaeus fit the bill perfectly. Now, however, she had to figure out what to do about him. Obviously, he wanted to continue on from where they'd left off, but Elysia just wanted to forget it happened.

"It's hard to fake a hard on," she joked. "I'm pretty sure he wasn't thinking about mergers last night."

Colin let go of her hand and sat back, looking at the tulips. "Did you go to his place?"

Elysia made a face. "Yeah, after the first time."

Her brother's eyes registered shock. "Don't tell me you fucked him in the cemetery, Lys. That's just... just..."

"Too Halloween-ish even for you?" Elysia's expression turned wry.

"Well, yeah." Colin let out a deep sigh. "I know you don't listen to my advice very often, but Lys, have you thought about what you're getting into here? Declan Antaeus isn't the kind of guy you just have fun with."

"No worries, Colin. I'm not seeing him again."

Now, Colin gazed at her stupefied. "You're completely off your rocker, Elysia. You want a one nighter, but you pick up the man least likely to be interested in one? On top of that, the man is interested in buying us out. He's ruthless, dear sister, with a reputation for always getting what he wants. And you've now stepped right into his cross hairs. This is not going to go well."

Elysia bit back a sigh. She had a bad feeling that Colin was right. She glanced down at the card again and suppressed a shiver. She looked up into Colin's worried midnight blue eyes. She loved him to death, but she needed to think without the distraction of his questions and concerns. She pushed the vase of tulips toward him.

"Put that in the small visitation room," she ordered.

“That old vamp is in there. The one with no family.” Colin’s voice sounded puzzled.

“Exactly. No one sent any flowers. He pre-paid for his visitation and service and no one’s come. Put the flowers in there. It won’t look so sad then,” she explained.

Her brother got up and picked up the vase. “You’re making a big mistake with Declan Antaeus,” he warned her as he strode to the door.

“You have no idea what I’m going to do, Colin.”

Colin snorted in disgust. “Doesn’t matter what you do. It’s all a mistake. There is no winning with a man like him. Mark my words.”

After Colin left, Elysia spun around in her chair, to gaze out the window at the expanse of green grass marked with upright tombstones. She didn’t want to replay the night before, but after her conversation with Colin it was inevitable...

Chapter Two

The Elvira costume made her look even more top heavy than usual. The black dress clung to every curve of her body and bared her chest almost to the navel. It had been a mistake to wear a sexy costume to the Undertaker's Ball, but for some reason she hadn't thought of that when she'd chosen the Elvira costume over the pixie costume, the only two costumes left in the shop in her size. Luckily, the thigh high slit in the front of the skirt allowed her legs to move or she couldn't have walked. She could barely breathe in the tight dress and if it wasn't for double sided tape, her breasts would have fallen right out of the almost non-existent front.

She stood, a few feet from the door, wondering why she'd let Marius talk her into this event. He'd been far more insistent than usual and she just got tired of telling him no. She'd been fighting off the onslaught of sexual tension for about as long as Marius had been bugging her to go to this event so she figured that maybe she could kill two birds with one stone and find someone to ease her stress.

Her eyes flicked around the room and landed on a Robin Hood. She recognized him as Roy Salinger, owner of a company that made embalming tables. Newly divorced, about her age, and a vampire like herself, Roy in green tights wasn't nearly as appealing as in jeans and a polo shirt. She figured it must be the skinny little bird legs. Tights were a tough costume to pull off. Roy hadn't managed it and she felt a little sorry for him.

Over by the bar, a swarthy Batman did manage to pull off tights. He had nicely muscled legs, a tight ass, a great package, rock hard abs... and a boyfriend dressed as Robin clinging to his arm. Elysia bit back a sigh. Bi-sexual Nestor Garcia had hit on her before, in the years before she'd become engaged to Austin. These days though, his little boyfriend, a cemetery broker named Josh Lloyd, kept him from touching women. Apparently, Josh was all woman... and man. At least enough of each to keep Nestor and his famous Roman hands in line.

Speaking of Romans, Elysia spied some nicely tanned, muscular thighs in a short white toga near the champagne fountain. Brian Dumont, a werewolf on the management team at Antaeus International, stood beside a woman in a pink tutu. As she watched them, trying to remember Brian's marital status, a tall man in a black robe walked up to them and handed the woman a drink. Easily six foot five, the man towered over everyone in the room. The hood of his Grim Reaper robes obscured his face and from the glint of light on its blade, he held a real scythe.

Elysia's heart began to pound. Only one man stood that tall—Declan Antaeus, one of the Antaeus brothers who owned Antaeus International, the biggest conglomerate in the Darkworld's death care industry.

Her attention caught by the black robed figure, she tensed when he turned. Their eyes met. Even across the crowded room, she could see how his gaze flared with heat. As she watched, he cut a path through the crowd toward her, his long fingered hand clutching the scythe. Her stomach clenched and she wondered if everything about him was big..

"Elysia Granville."

His voice rumbled quietly from the depths of his wide chest. She looked up into his amber eyes and found them to be two golden flames, filled with lust and something else she couldn't put her finger on.

“Declan Antaeus.”

Her lips curved into a seductive smile. Maybe she would just have to discover the truth of that old adage about big men. Declan was certainly handsome enough. Black hair that shone like a raven’s wing. Golden eyes that glowed as if lit by a fire within. Sun bronzed, supple skin. Beneath the baggy robe, she knew he had a tall and muscular body, the kind that looked best in a faded pair of jeans and a tank top that showed off his biceps.

“Buy me a drink?” she purred, deciding to start as she meant to go on. She was horny. He was hot. Seemed like a match made in heaven to her.

One dark brow winged up. “It’s an open bar. I’ll get you whatever your heart desires,” he told her in a voice filled with innuendo.

Deciding the drink wasn’t necessary; Elysia stopped him from turning away by putting one hand on his arm. He looked back at her with a question in his eyes.

“What if my heart desires something other than a drink? Will you get me that?” Her eyes held his boldly.

Declan’s face became a mask of pure masculine desire. He cupped her elbow, just as he had three years ago at the convention, steering her toward the lobby. Once they were away from the crowd, he pushed back his hood and bent toward her. “Do you know what you’re doing, Elysia? What you’re inviting?” he growled softly.

Elysia smiled at him, reaching up to stroke her fingers over his hard jaw line. His skin felt hot to the touch. Her whole body tingled and she could hear his heart beating, feel the rush of his blood in his veins. She drew in a breath, the scent of his blood tart and crisp in her nostrils, like biting into a Granny Smith apple... Her fangs slid from their sheath as her panties grew damp. Yes, Declan Antaeus was definitely the right choice. Her body already wanted him fiercely. None of the men at the ball would satisfy her now. Besides, backing down after coming on to a man like Declan wasn’t wise because he was easily the most powerful man at the party, both professionally and physically.

“I’m not a child, Declan. I know exactly what I’m doing. Do you need me to spell it out for you?” She tilted her head to one side inquiringly, wondering if he would take her up on her offer or if this was just a game to him.

His lips quirked. “Yeah. Maybe I do. After all, I’ve wanted you for a long time.”

“Good. Then let’s get out of here so you can fuck me.”

His eyebrows shot up at her blunt speech. “So I’m the only one to do the fucking? You’re not going to fuck me?”

Elysia’s lips curved slowly into a smile. “I can if that’s what you’re into. Fingers or dildos?”

Declan sucked in a breath and his eyes turned even hotter as they gazed down at her. “I think I’ve died and gone to heaven,” he growled as he took her elbow again and steered her out the door. “Where’s your car?”

Elysia laughed softly. “Round one in the car?” One of her arched brows rose inquiringly.

“Works for me,” he muttered.

She shook her head. “My car’s over there.” She pointed to a little BMW Z4 Roadster.

Declan eyed the little silver car and grunted. "I can't even get in that toy."

"Yours?" she asked breathlessly, as his fingers caressed her arm though the thin material of her dress.

He hit the remote on his vehicle and the lights of a black Mercedes convertible flashed. Elysia made a face. "It's not much bigger than mine," she complained.

Declan ignored her words. He stared at the granite of a mausoleum that had been illuminated by the headlights of his car. "C'mon," he whispered, heading toward the imposing structure.

Elysia felt a rush of excitement flood her veins like adrenaline. Her panties were sopping now. She'd always wondered what sex in the cemetery would be like, but she'd never had the opportunity to do it. In the past, her lovers had been horrified at the thought, even though her family owned the cemetery and getting caught wasn't really a risk. Now, she was in another cemetery, on Halloween, at the Undertaker's Ball where all her peers were partying, with a man she didn't really know, and the risks were much higher.

They slipped into the huge granite structure and Elysia tried to walk without her heels clicking on the slabs of polished stone. Declan had a good grip on her arm so she wasn't worried about falling. She shuffled along beside him as they looked into corridor after corridor of the mausoleum. Finally, they found one where a bulb had gone out, leaving the farthest corner of the corridor in shadows.

Once they reached the dark corner, Declan pressed her back against the marble crypts. A bronze marker dug into her hip, but she ignored it as his hands slid up her bare thighs under the Elvira dress. His mouth pressed against the side of her neck, licking her skin. A moan escaped her mouth, and he hissed in a breath, turning his head until his lips met hers.

"Sssh," he murmured, his tongue sweeping out to lick at her bottom lip.

Heat enveloped her at the touch of his tongue. Hell. She hadn't been this turned on in years. Even Austin hadn't made this big a sexual impact on her. Her knees shook. Her heart raced. Her breathing was totally out of control. She clutched at the sleeves of the long reaper robe thinking he had on way too many clothes. He must have had the same thought because he pulled at the Velcro fastenings down the front of the robe, exposing his jeans and tank top.

Elysia looked at his clothes in astonishment, thinking that her earlier thoughts had been so right. He looked better than a double cheeseburger and fries in the thin tank top and well-worn jeans. The Levis molded to his muscular thighs and she noticed a threadbare spot near his knee. The plain black tank top did nothing to disguise the muscular strength of his arms and chest. She reached out and pulled the hem free of his jeans, sliding her hands beneath the thin cotton to touch his rock hard abs.

Declan hissed in his breath again and she could hear the rough pounding of his heartbeat. "Oh, Elysia." His words were barely audible even to her sensitive ears.

He bent his head, burying his face in her ample chest. Easing the double-sided tape gently from her skin, he freed her breasts. His tongue licked a trail of fire from the space between them to her collarbone. She shivered and his hands traveled the final few inches from her thighs to her ass, lifting her slightly against him so that their bodies aligned better.

Now that he'd uncovered the tiny triangle of her satin thong, she rubbed herself against the hard bulge behind the button fly of his jeans. She could feel the muscles of his arms flexing as he held her against him. One hand gripped the satin ribbon of her thong and his fingers easily snapped it. The thong sagged and the scent of her arousal filled the space between them.

"Elysia. There's no turning back," he whispered into her ear, his tongue tracing the delicate fluted edge.

"Good," she replied, her fingers sliding into the waistband of his jeans. She popped the buttons, thankful for whoever created the button fly.

Declan's amber eyes glowed like two flames in the darkness. She stared into them as her hands pushed aside the soft denim and delved into his boxer briefs. Her fingers closed around his straining shaft and his breath stopped for a moment. She smiled to herself, realizing that at least as far as Declan Antaeus was concerned; the old adage about big hands, big feet, big dicks was true. Squeezing him gently, her thumb found the slit at the end of the velvety head. Moisture seeped from it and she rubbed the sticky fluid over his heated flesh. His breathing returned with an audible rush. As she stared into his eyes, the pupils elongated.

The faint acrid scent of smoke reached her and she saw that a tiny trail had escaped his nostrils. She gazed into his glowing eyes, the strange elongated pupils reminding her that he was a shifter, a dragon. The heat and strength of his body gave it away just as much as those unusual eyes did. When he bent to kiss her, his lips mashing against hers, she felt the fangs in his mouth. Her tongue flickered over them and she could tell that while they were longer and more curved than her own, they were just as sensitive.

Declan's arm wrapped her hips, holding her up against him. The iron band of his forearm cut into the soft flesh of her ass. She didn't care. She let go of his thick cock and ground herself against him, her wetness sliding along his hard length. His golden eyes glittered feverishly into her violet ones.

"This time quick and hard. Then we'll go to my place. I want to savor you for hours," he growled.

"Shut up and fuck me already, Declan," she panted, pulling his head down.

Their mouths slid together, tongues and lips and fangs meeting in a sensual dance while Declan pressed Elysia's shoulders against the cold marble of the crypts. His hands tilted her hips and he pressed his cock deep within her in a single thrust. Elysia's eyes rolled back in her head as the head of his cock hit her G-spot. He held her at the perfect angle and she wondered how many women he'd fucked in this position.

Her legs wound around him, her entire weight resting on his arms. She pulled up the tank top, her full breasts rubbing against his chest. He sucked on her tongue and rotated his hips. Her clit ground against his pubic bone and she moaned. Sounds of pleasure emerged from her with every rough twist of his hips and thrust of his cock.

He tried to silence her with kisses, but she was desperate to touch him. Her mouth and hands feverishly roamed every part of him that she could reach. She couldn't stop touching him as she rode his cock, thrusting against him, her pussy gripping him tightly, her lust-swollen flesh aching for release. He nipped her throat and a loud groan escaped her.

“Holy fuck!” he whispered as he thrust into her. She instinctively clamped down on his pistoning cock at his words, making it even tighter for him.

Another moan burst from her, but this time it was punctuated by the sound of footsteps echoing in the distance. Elysia blinked up at Declan. They couldn’t stop now! She grabbed his hood and pulled it down over his head. He leaned into her body, the black robe covering most of her. Declan bent his head to her face, taking her mouth in a deep kiss, the hood concealing both their faces.

The footsteps drew closer, but filled with adrenaline and lust, Elysia ignored them, pushing herself against Declan’s hard body. The sound of his rough breathing filled her ears and she moaned again as he flexed within her. His pelvis rocked against hers, pressing on her clit. Heated waves of pleasure lashed her and as the footsteps neared the end of the corridor where they stood twined around each other, she felt the ripples start within her. Declan’s cock swelled and he thrust up into her hard.

With a loud groan she came, her body jerking in orgasm as the shadow of a man fell across the end of the corridor. Declan leaned into her, pushing her against the crypts as he pumped his cock into her pussy one last time, his orgasm bursting over him. He growled loudly as his cum bathed her spasming pussy. Her flesh clutched at him and she felt his skin ripple with the force of his orgasm.

“Madre de Dios! Es la Muerte!”

The frightened whisper interrupted their mutual orgasm, but neither of them could look at the terrified cemetery worker. Moments later, he was gone, running from the building, howling again to the Mother of God about seeing Death.

Elysia shook from the force of her orgasm. She could feel the warm gush of fluids down her thighs as her legs slid down and her feet hit the floor. She wobbled on the spike heels and Declan steadied her, pushing her against the crypts and leaning in to snatch another kiss from her.

“Let’s get out of here before we really get caught,” he murmured, catching her ripped thong as it slid toward the floor.

She stepped out of it and he thrust it into his jeans pocket. She watched as he stuffed his semi hard cock back into his briefs and buttoned his stained jeans. Then he fastened the reaper robe again, hiding the wet evidence of their coupling. Tucking her breasts back into the Elvira gown, Elysia took a couple of shaky steps. Instantly, Declan’s hand caught her arm, pulling her into the curve of his big hard body. He grabbed up the scythe and turned them toward the exit.

Once outside, he walked her to her car and helped her in, leaning down into the open door. “Follow me to my place. We’ll be a lot more comfortable there,” he said in a low, deep voice.

Elysia smiled up at him. “Oh, yeah. It’s my turn to fuck you, isn’t it?”

Declan growled and she smelled the acrid scent of his smoke again even though she couldn’t see it. “Whatever you want to do, Elysia, is fine by me.” He pressed a hot open-mouthed kiss to her lips, his tongue flicking over her fangs. “Just follow me.”

He shut her door and waited for her to buckle her seatbelt. Then he got into his Mercedes and pulled slowly out of the parking space. Elysia knew he kept looking for her in his rear view mirror on the drive to his condo. With her acute vampire eyesight, she watched the flash of his eyes in the mirror every time he glanced into it. At his condo, he had her park her car beside his in his garage. It was a simple act, the logical thing to do under the circumstances, but there was an intimacy to it that made Elysia wonder crossly how many other women had parked their car next to his.

When Declan closed the big garage door and led her to the access door, she felt a strange frisson run down her spine. The feel of his hand in the small of her back, the scent of sex on them both, and the sight of the narrow white painted door with tools on hooks along one side of it... all combined to give her a strange sense of déjà vu.

Declan glanced at her with an odd expression on his face, as he opened the door. Elysia could see a white tiled kitchen beyond it. "Are you okay?" he asked with a frown. "You shivered."

She smiled up at him, trying to ignore the odd sensation of having been in the house before. "I'm fine. Just anticipating another round of orgasms when I fuck you," she teased.

Shoving aside the wild pinging of her vampire senses, she followed him up the stairs. This night was for releasing her pent up sexual tension, not questions about why she would feel so instantly at home in the black dragon's house.

Chapter Three

Declan stared out the plate glass window of his office at Antaeus International, his eyes on the coastline that stretched as far as he could see. He hadn't been good for a single thing today. His mind had been on Elysia ever since she'd left his house just before dawn. He gazed in the direction of Granville Cemetery, seeing the distant patch of green that signified the park like acreage. Gods, he had been two thoughts away from a full hard on all day. He'd showered, but he swore he could still smell her on him. It was as if she had marked him with her scent.

Life played out so strangely sometimes. He hadn't wanted to go to the Undertaker's Ball. Ever since Elysia stopped going to industry events, he'd had no interest in them himself. This time he'd had no choice. His older brother Sean had slapped the ticket in his hand, given him a hard look from his golden eyes, and demanded that Declan represent the family and the company at the ball. Knowing that Sean's lethal gaze meant business, Declan caved in.

He'd been making small talk with two of his managers when he spotted Elysia. Instantly, his cock had wanted to go meet her. Luckily, the reaper robes had hid his eagerness. As he strode across the room toward her, every meeting he'd ever had with her flashed through his head. True, that was a sum total of three times, but each one was memorable to Declan.

The first time he'd met her had been at the big party Sean had thrown when Declan returned to the family business after having been away in Europe. Declan had instantly been attracted to Elysia's cool beauty. Her violet eyes lit him on fire. She'd smiled at him, shook his hand, and then turned away to nuzzle Austin Stone, that pretty boy fuckhead. Austin had had the gall to smirk over the top of her head at Declan as if to say, 'I've got her and you've got nothing but a stiff dick, loser!' Elysia had been so lost in Austin that she'd never noticed his attitude toward Declan.

The second time he'd met Elysia had been at her engagement party. Declan didn't know how Sean had managed to drag him to that event, but Declan figured it had something to do with the bender he'd been on ever since hearing about Elysia's engagement to that rat bastard Austin Stone. Declan vaguely remembered Elysia being concerned about him being too drunk to drive and Sean assuring her that the company limo would take his brother home. At least, he hadn't puked on her shoes or anything.

Declan grimaced as he recalled that episode. He was a thrice damned fool. He always had been when it came to Elysia. The moment he'd met her, he'd wanted her for himself. Something inside him had just clicked and all the pieces of his life had fallen into place when he'd looked at her. Her relationship with Austin, something that had started long before he arrived on the scene, had grated on his nerves.

The third time he'd spoken with Elysia, Austin had dumped her at the convention three years ago. He had been torn between taking care of her and tearing Austin limb from limb for hurting her and humiliating her. Taking care of her had won out. When she'd spun away from him saying she needed to throw up, it had broken his heart.

In the three years since her public breakup with Austin Stone, Declan had only seen her a couple of times in the distance, always surrounded by her brothers, always cold and aloof. Tonight, was the first time he'd seen her alone in years. She looked very obviously unattached and looking for fun. The defiant expression in those violet eyes did something to his stomach

and his head. Now that her overprotective brothers weren't around, he had a chance to get close to her and he wasn't going to screw it up.

Declan leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. Oh, man had he not screwed it up.

Instantly, his thoughts were assaulted with memories of the night before. If someone had told him that his first sexual encounter with Elysia Granville would be in a mausoleum while both of them were dressed in absurd Halloween costumes, he would have laughed himself silly. For more than four years, he'd had a fantasy of making love to her in his bed, of spreading her hair across his pillow and spending hours worshiping her body. He never would have thought that lust would ignite between them to the point that it didn't matter where they were so long as he could bury himself in her hot depths.

"What's wrong with you?"

The annoyed voice of his brother Sean broke into Declan's thoughts. His eyes flew open and he spun around in his chair, grateful for the desk that hid his lap and the huge hard-on he sported as a result of his thoughts.

"What are you talking about?" he said gruffly, avoiding his brother's sharp eyes. He shuffled some papers on his desk, trying to order his scattered thoughts.

"You've been in here all day, but you haven't been here. You don't answer your phone. You're not checking your email. You didn't order lunch or go out." Sean planted his hands on the surface of Declan's desk, leaning in and capturing his brother's gaze. "What's wrong?"

Pinned by the all-knowing eyes of his older brother, Declan sighed. "It's all your fault," he admitted.

Sean blinked, then his mouth turned up in a slow smile. He straightened and walked over to the door, shutting it. He sat down across the desk from Declan and asked, "What happened at the ball?"

Declan got the distinct impression that Sean was hugely pleased with himself. Which made no damned sense at all. "If you must know, I met Elysia Granville," he grumbled.

Sean grinned openly. "Actually, I do know. Everyone we know knows. If you had bothered to come out of your office and out of your sexual stupor, you'd know the entire office is buzzing about you and her," he said smugly.

Declan's eyes widened. "Shit. I should have known."

His brother nodded. "Yeah, you shoulda." He sat back in the chair, his rugged face wreathed in an expression of wry amusement. "One minute, you were standing with Brian and Maire and the next you made a beeline for Elysia like the two of you were magnet and metal. Everyone in that room saw you head right for her, saw her flirt with you, and watched the two of walk out of the ball minutes later and not come back. It's stirred up a helluva lot more gossip than Austin Stone dumping her at the convention ever did."

Declan groaned and rubbed a hand over his face. He just could not catch a break some days. He had a feeling Elysia would be severely pissed at this new turn of events. "I never thought of that," he muttered.

"Obviously not," Sean said. "You realize that our whole world knows what's going on. Austin Stone never did anything privately. He's a PR guy. He lives for the spotlight. When he decided that his career could be best fostered by hooking up with the most attractive and

powerful woman in our industry, he slammed Elysia with his megawatt public persona. She never had a chance. Austin made sure that they attended every event no matter how small. He took every opportunity to show off the fact that Elysia Granville was his. When he decided to jettison her for Laurie Valetta, he did it the same way he does everything... in a classless public display. Only that time, it was guaranteed to humiliate Elysia in front of every one of her peers.”

Sean looked at his brother with a speculative gleam in his eyes. “You think that after what happened at the convention that Elysia could ever walk into an industry event unnoticed? For three years, she’s stayed away. When she did attend an event, she was flanked by brothers who would tear anyone to shreds if they came near her. Last night, the gossip mill fired up the instant she walked in alone. Then you made a beeline for her and minutes later, the two of you leave and don’t return. Didn’t you stop to think about how that would look to every person in the room?”

Declan’s stomach roiled. “No,” he admitted, feeling slightly sick at the thought of how Elysia would take all the gossip. “I walked up to her and she came on to me and my brains took a hike.”

Sean chuckled. “I don’t blame you for thinking with your pants. She’s smart and gorgeous. Besides, I know you’ve always had a thing for her.” His eyes sharpened then as he stared at his brother. “Tell me this, was it worth it?”

A long deep sigh escaped Declan. “Oh, God. A thousand times yes,” he groaned, closing his eyes briefly. He’d never been one to keep secrets from Sean. Mostly because Sean always found them out anyway. “I sent her flowers and asked her to dinner tonight.”

His older brother nodded. “Then you’re serious about her?”

“When have I not been?” Declan replied, his eyes widening a little at the fact that Sean even had to ask. Sean knew that Declan wasn’t the type to have a thing for someone for years without it being serious. “The first time I ever saw her something tugged inside me. You saw how her engagement affected me. I couldn’t face that party sober and I barely knew her. She’s always profoundly affected me.”

“So after years of waiting, how did you hold up last night?” Sean asked, one brow quirked up inquiringly.

Declan made a face. “At first, about as well as a sixteen year old losing his virginity,” he said in a self-deprecating tone. “The instant she touched me, I thought I was gonna come. I don’t know how I stopped myself. We never even made it out of the cemetery.”

Sean’s face went slack with shock. “You’re kidding me.” Declan shook his head and Sean started to grin. “Holy shit. I’ll never be able to look Marius and Colin in the eyes again. You banged their sister in Todd’s cemetery.”

Declan bristled. “I didn’t do it on purpose, Sean! Jesus! Don’t you think I’d rather have taken her home? God only knows what she thinks of me today.”

Sean laughed and stood up. “Hopefully, she’s just like you and can’t think.”

“Even if what happened between us didn’t leave her head as muddled as mine, I think I accounted myself pretty well. At least, I hope I did,” Declan sighed, a little grin curling up the corners of his mouth.

Sean laughed harder. "Good for you, little brother. If she's that special to you, I'm rooting for you." He put his hand on the door handle, about to leave, then turned back to look at Declan with a slight frown. "Dec, do you think... I mean, do you know... is she your soul mate?"

At Sean's words, Declan felt like he'd been hit with a wrecking ball. He hadn't wanted to think that Elysia might be his soul mate, but after last night, the way she made him feel, the way he responded to her, the way his inner dragon demanded to have her... as much as it scared him to admit it, he almost certain of it. His brother saying the words out loud was especially frightening. He shook his head at Sean, not ready to expose himself. "I'm not sure. Part of me says yes, but another part of me is in total denial," he admitted.

Sean nodded understandingly. "I know the feeling. I went through the same with Careen. You'll get it sorted out," he said soothingly.

As the door closed behind his brother, Declan spun around in his chair, his eyes seeking that little patch of green in the distance outside his window. "Yeah, but does she want to be sorted out?" he murmured with a frown.

Elysia had been everything and more than he had ever dreamed of once they'd gotten to his condo. He was fairly sure of his own feelings, but Elysia's were a mystery to him. Since he was alone once more, he gave his memory free rein, reliving every moment of the night, trying to figure out her motivations and where he stood with her...

Chapter Four

Elysia in his bedroom was a dream come true. She looked around the room and seemed pleased with it, something that made his stomach tighten. Since neither of them needed the lights, he didn't turn them on, but he did open the blinds and let in the moonlight. Elysia turned toward him and a shaft of light turned her hair silvery. She reached for him with one hand, grabbing a fistful of the reaper robe. Heart thundering in his chest, he let her pull him close. She slid her hands up to his shoulders. Thrusting her fingers into his hair, she pulled his head down to hers.

Declan kissed her leisurely, his mouth moving firmly over hers. When her lips parted on a sigh, he cupped her head in both hands, his palms against her neck, his fingers speared through her hair. He deepened the kiss, his tongue teasing the wet flesh of her lower lip. A soft moan escaped her and she twisted her body against his, her hips moving restlessly. He dropped one hand to her back and slid down the zipper of her costume. Gravity took over and the slinky black material sagged, then landed on the floor. Elysia kicked it away.

His hands skated over her naked skin, his fingertips learning its fine texture. It was warm and plush, the exotic scent of frangipani rising from it as he touched her. Declan was on sensory overload. The woman he'd wanted for years was in his arms, and now that his overwhelming lust had been banked a little by their first encounter, he was ready to spend hours learning her body.

"I'm naked and you're not," she complained softly against his mouth.

Declan lifted his head. Her honey colored hair spilled over his arm as she looked up at him. Her violet eyes were filled with desire. It was a pure emotion, nothing else clouding her expression. She wanted him. Elation raced through him. This was better than any fantasy he had ever dreamed up about her.

"Your wish is my command," he told her truthfully.

She flashed him a brilliant smile, filled with amusement and passion. Her fingers slid down his chest, pulling open the Velcro fastenings of the reaper robe. She smoothed it over his shoulders, pushing it off of him. Declan sucked in a breath as she delved beneath the hem of his tank top, her fingers brushing his ribcage as she pulled the shirt up. He ducked his head and she yanked the shirt over it, tossing it in the same direction that she'd kicked her costume.

For a moment, Elysia stared at his naked chest, her eyes flickering over the black lines of the tribal style dragon tattoo that stretched from his right pec, over the point of his shoulder and upper arm and down to his deltoid in back. Her enigmatic expression made Declan clueless to her thoughts. He started to feel uneasy when suddenly she smiled again and her fingers reached for the waistband of his jeans. He held his breath as she popped the button fly and slipped her hands inside the denim to curve over his ass. He watched her with narrowed eyes. Her lower lip caught between her teeth as she gazed at the parts of his body she uncovered.

The jeans fell to the floor and he kicked them away. Now, clad only in black boxer briefs, his erection full and straining at the front of the cotton underwear, he waited for her to strip away that last barrier. She rubbed her knuckles against his erection through the briefs. Declan prayed silently for control as his cock jerked. No other woman had ever created such a

firestorm of lust within him. Keeping his dragon under control around her was difficult under the best of circumstances. In a sexual situation, it was sheer torture. His mind thought only of tossing her belly down on the bed, taking her fiercely from behind, and enveloping them both in his dragonfire as they came. Of course, sharing his dragonfire with someone meant taking them as mate. In the century he'd been alive, he'd never had the urge to do that until the day he'd first seen Elysia.

Declan's breath came out in a whoosh as she slipped her hands into his briefs. All rational thought left his brain. He barely hung onto his control as her hands brushed over his hips and ass, pushing the briefs off. His erection sprang free, the thick head already wet with a copious amount of pre-cum. She wrapped the fingers of one hand around him and he closed his eyes, fighting not to make a fool of himself in front of her.

"Is it true what they say about shifters?" Elysia murmured, her fingers spreading the wetness over his turgid flesh.

"What's that?" he grunted trying to get his breathing under control so he could speak.

"Their recovery time is much shorter." She gazed up at him, her expression curious as her fingers tortured him with slow strokes.

"Yes," he hissed, wishing he could just show her rather than tell her. "A dragon's sexual metabolism is very different than that of any other immortal being in the Darkworld." Deciding to stop being so cautious, he said boldly, "I could take you a half dozen more times tonight if that's what you want."

Elysia sucked in her breath sharply. Her violet eyes went black as a slight flush mounted her cheekbones. "It is what I want. Please?" she whispered, her voice a passion laced thread of sound.

Declan broke from her hold and strode over to his bed, tossing the covers back. The plain white sheets gleamed in the moonlight. He beckoned to her and she walked toward him. His blood raced as he stared at her body. She was tall and long legged, but her hips were full and curvy, her waist tiny, and her belly flat. A tiny jewel glittered in her navel. His eyes skittered over her lean ribcage to the full, round globes of her breasts. They jiggled a little as she walked, the hard cotton candy pink nipples thrusting toward him. He licked his lips in anticipation of tasting their sweetness.

When Elysia reached his side, he pushed her down on the bed. Caught off guard, she sprawled, her thighs opening. Spying the wet pink flesh, Declan dove between her legs, his knees denting the mattress. His shoulders pressed her thighs further apart. She moaned loudly as he looked at her pink pussy, his fingers spreading her open, brushing at the hairless swollen lips.

"Oh, Declan!" she gasped as his mouth sought out her swollen clit.

He swirled his tongue over the sensitive nub and she shivered. The sweet salty flavor of her burst on his taste buds, and he drew in a deep breath. Between her scent and her taste, he was in heaven. He rubbed his face in her wet flesh, making her cry out as he stabbed his tongue deep inside her. His fingers and tongue teased and stroked her. His ministrations were rewarded with little mewling sounds that caught on a gasp every so often. Her hips pressed into his face as he finger fucked her and licked her clit. Pushing two long fingers deep into her

and pressing upward to catch her G-spot, his mouth sucked hard on her. The simultaneous stimulation sent her over the edge.

Elysia's fingers pulled on his hair as she cried out, her body seizing in a paroxysm of pleasure. He saw her skin ripple with tension, prickling with goose flesh, as she jerked uncontrollably beneath his mouth and hands. Thick, sticky moisture gushed onto his fingers.

"Ohmigod," she groaned, her head thrashing on the white pillow.

Declan kept right on licking her, even though she'd already come. His tongue lapped at her honey. He couldn't get enough of her taste. When he flicked the very tip of his tongue over her sensitive clit, she cried out.

"Declan! I don't know if I can take any more," she moaned.

He lifted his head, his eyes meeting hers. "Yes, you can. Whatever I give you, you can take, Elysia. I'll prove it to you."

His mouth ravaged her, continuing to suck and lick her already over stimulated clit. She writhed beneath his ministrations, her body slick with sweat, as he brought her to orgasm a second time. She trembled, her eyes wide with surprise and a wealth of passion as he crawled up her body and took her in his arms. He felt those hard pink nipples press his chest and a sense of possessiveness like none he'd ever known came over him. This woman was meant to be his...

Cupping her taut ass in his hands, he ground his cock against her. She whimpered, her hands framing his face as he kissed her deeply. She sucked his tongue into her mouth, twining hers around it. Their kisses were deep and hot and hungry. Declan was in a delirium, tension coiled tightly within him. He ached to bury himself in her wet pussy, but was determined to drive her to the edge one more time before he fucked her. She tore her mouth from his, reaching for his cock. "I need to suck you," she panted.

"Oh, gods, no." He rubbed himself against her. "I would never last."

He pried her off his body and flipped her onto her belly. Gazing down at the smooth expanse of her creamy skin, he stroked his hands over her, squeezing and kneading her ass. Her moans started up again as he lifted her hips toward him. Almost cross-eyed with lust, he looked at her lush ass with the wet pink slit beneath. He pressed her ass cheeks apart and stared at her tight pink asshole. He blew on it and she jerked.

"Are you gonna fuck me in the ass?" Her voice came out breathy, excited, and just a tiny bit afraid.

He smiled and stroked one hand over her hip and buttock, then over her silky back. "Do you want me to?"

"I... I've never... I... yesssss," she stammered, ending on a hiss as he blew on her tight pink anus again.

Declan chuckled and rubbed the pad of his forefinger over the spot he'd just blown on. Elysia's corresponding moans told him everything he needed to know. He leaned over her back, rubbing his throbbing cock between her ass cheeks. Nipping at her ear, he whispered, "I'll make a deal with you. If you fuck my ass, I'll fuck yours."

A tremor went through her and raising her torso off the mattress with her arms, she looked over her shoulder, her eyes meeting his. He could see the dark desire on her face and

ground his aching cock against her tight asshole. It was torture to hold back and not thrust himself into her tight virgin hole, but he knew she wasn't ready. Besides, no way he could last if he fucked her ass right now.

Her eyes glittered. "Deal."

Declan's body covered hers and his hips pulled back so he could position his cock to thrust full tilt into her wet pussy. Her flesh gripped him tightly and he closed his eyes for a moment, resting his forehead on her shoulder. The feel of her pussy clenched around his cock sent waves of sensation through his big body. He licked her shoulder, growling roughly as he fought to keep his dragon at bay and keep from exploding in orgasm in her wet heat. Smoke wreathed their heads as his dragonfire awoke within him.

Elysia's hips pushed back into his. He hissed in pleasure. She rocked her ass against him and he raised his head, grabbing her hips in his hands so he could thrust into her. She began moaning loudly, and Declan lost it. He turned his head slightly so he could see their reflections in the mirror on the closet door. Elysia was on all fours, her magnificent breasts jiggling as she pushed her ass against his hips rhythmically. He knelt behind her, his thighs and buttocks clenched tight as he thrust roughly into her pussy. His big hands looked dark on the creamy skin of her hips, and his tribal dragon tattoo looked alive as his arm and shoulder muscles rippled. He fucked her hard, pushing her head ever closer to the headboard as he slammed into her repeatedly.

Reaching between her thighs, he found her drenched with fluid, to the point that it oozed down the insides of her thighs. His cock had her stretched tight and he knew she'd never taken someone as big as him before. Instead of that thought making him ease up, it had the opposite affect, and he pounded his cock into her, determined to mark her as his. With a growl, he sank his teeth into her shoulder and she cried out, shuddering as she flashed over into yet another orgasm.

Declan couldn't take any more. Her pussy squeezed him like a juicer squeezed oranges. His balls tightened unbearably. Shouting her name loudly, his cock erupted into the most intense orgasm he'd ever had. He shook with the force of trying to contain his dragon who experienced the orgasm too and wanted to consume them both in a mating fire. He felt himself throbbing inside her, pulsing with each gush of his seed.

Even though his legs were trembling from the effort of holding his body upright, Declan knelt behind Elysia, trying to catch his breath. He wanted to just collapse on her and gather her close, but he feared crushing her so he eased his softening cock from her still clutching pussy. Glancing down he saw that her thighs were streaked with semen and pussy juice. She rolled onto her back and he sank down beside her, pulling her close to his chest as they fought to still their breathing.

"I'm speechless," she whispered in a shaky voice, nuzzling her face into his chest.

Declan held her protectively, his dragon setting up a howl in his head that this woman was his. "Me too," he laughed unsteadily.

She pushed him onto his back and sprawled on his chest, licking her way from his tattoo up to his neck. She nuzzled him. "You taste so good, like green apples," she murmured.

"Gonna eat me right up?" He quirked a brow at her and she stopped licking him long enough to meet his eyes for a moment.

“I feel like it. My instincts are telling me to bite your neck. I’ve never felt like that before. It’s weird,” she admitted with a little frown.

Something soared in Declan’s chest and he was very much afraid it was his heart. “I thought vampires didn’t take blood from the jugular unless they were mating?”

Her nose wrinkled. “Old wives tale. It’s the exchange of blood or biting during sex that creates the mating,” she explained. “And even then, if the person isn’t meant to be your mate, the bonding doesn’t occur. How is it for dragons?”

Declan shifted restlessly beneath her. This was dangerous territory. His dragon was already convinced that Elysia was his mate. Talking about the subject while hiding his feelings from her would be difficult.

“You have to have a very strong physical connection to your mate. When you meet them there’s a feeling of recognition, a tugging inside you,” he said cautiously, knowing as he spoke the words that they were exactly how he felt about her. “There isn’t anyone else you really want to be with sexually. You can have sex with others, but it never feels quite right. Dragons have the most staying power sexually with the person who is meant to be their mate. I suppose the reason is based on procreation although dragons can take either sex as a mate.”

Elysia’s tongue stopped licking his neck. “Your younger brother is gay, isn’t he?”

Declan stiffened slightly. “Not exactly. Garret Renquist is Holden’s mate, and my brother loves him, but other than Garret, Holden’s never been interested in men,” he said carefully, not wanting to give her a wrong impression of his younger brother. “My sister Eden and I are the only ones unmated. Sean, Holden, and Diandra all have mates.”

She traced a circle on his shoulder, near his collarbone, with her finger. “So you know all about dragon mating then.”

Declan’s stomach sank. This was the wrong conversation to have with her. At least, tonight was the wrong time to discuss mating with her. They’d only just gotten together. He needed to cement things better between them before talking about commitment and mating. It felt right to him, but he didn’t know her feelings about mating despite her questions. Everyone knew that Elysia was skittish with men now. In fact, he wondered if she’d been with anyone else since Austin.

His fingers came up under her chin, tilting her face up so that he could look into her spectacular violet eyes. “Elysia, I need to know something, and I’m afraid you’re gonna bite my head off for asking but... have you been with anyone else since Austin?” He swallowed hard, waiting for her to explode on him.

Instead, she sighed heavily, looking at him with sad eyes. “Yes. A few one nighters,” she admitted. “No one you know.”

Jealousy sparked inside Declan. Some nameless faceless man had touched her...And not one, but several. His possessive side, his dragon, raised its head and tried to roar, but he tamped it down. The only sign of his distress was the trickle of smoke that trailed from his nostril. He saw Elysia eye it curiously and tried to deflect her attention. Everyone knew that a dragon’s smoke escaped when they were under pressure emotionally.

“I just didn’t want to do something you might not be ready for,” he said rather lamely, mentally kicking himself for not being able to think around her.

Her lips curved into a wicked smile and her fingers curled around his cock. At her touch, it began to stiffen once more, proving that dragon shifters did indeed recover very quickly. “Oh, but I have a deal with you, mister,” she purred, her eyes turning dark once more. “Where’s your toys?”

Declan hid his surprise. He hadn’t thought she’d take him up on his offer to let her fuck him, let alone want to do it. After all, the fact that he liked a little anal stimulation wasn’t something he wanted bandied about at the next convention either. Not that he thought Elysia would fuck and tell. She wasn’t at all that kind of person, but once one person knew, you never knew what could happen.

Feeling a little exposed, he twisted around, opening the drawer of the bedside table. He pulled out a good-sized bottle of lube, and a thick vibrator, about the size of his own cock. Elysia’s eyebrows shot up and Declan squirmed beneath her gaze. She reached for the vibrator, her eyes glowing.

“You weren’t kidding about being fucked were you?” she asked softly.

“No.” Declan thrust his chin up a little defiantly. He knew men had hot spots that could only be stimulated anally. When he’d first explored them, it had been all about ratcheting up his pleasure in every way possible. His sexual orientation had never come into question. However, when his brother Holden discovered his mate was a man, Declan thought about how much he liked ass play, which turned into some doubt about his own sexuality for a short while. A conversation with Holden about Garret and whether they were gay quickly dispelled any questions Declan might have had about being anything other than straight. However, sharing his private kink with Elysia was unnerving.

Her smile widened and she leaned over him, kissing him leisurely but with intense heat. “I like it,” she murmured against his lips. “I think it’s really hot.”

Declan’s nostrils flared as he caught the renewed scent of her arousal. “You do?” he rasped.

She nodded and licked the head of the vibrator. “It turns me on a lot.” She straddled his thighs and bent to his cock, licking the head like she’d licked the vibrator. “This is sooo hot, Declan. I can’t believe you’re gonna let me fuck you.”

Her eyes glowed with pleasure and Declan relaxed, realizing that somehow he had lucked out. This woman was totally turned on by his kink. He stretched out on the sheets, letting his thighs fall open. Elysia’s eyes roamed over his cock and the heavy round balls beneath. She cupped them in her hand, kneading them gently as they tightened in her grasp. With her other hand, she pulled his thick erection upright, then slid her tongue down it, tasting herself on his flesh. Her eyes narrowed as she stroked his cock and licked the head. She looked ecstatic.

Moments later, Declan discovered why she’d looked so happy. Her mouth slid over his cock, her tongue twirling down its length as her lips glided down to the base. He stared at her in surprise as her velvety throat muscles massaged his dick head. Elysia Granville was a master cock sucker. She slurped and sucked and deep throated him. She worked his cock like it was a popsicle she couldn’t get enough of. He’d never had anyone suck him so well. In fact, if she didn’t stop soon, he would lose control and fill her mouth with his cum.

She looked up at him. Between the expression on his face and the reaction of his body, she must have known his thoughts. She raised her head slowly, her tongue dancing on his flesh the whole way. When his cock popped free of her mouth, she licked at the wet corners and said, "I swallow."

Lust streaked through him like a flame. Holy fuck! A statement like that made a man want to test her honesty. He breathed deeply a few times, striving to control the dragon inside him that roared with pleasure at her words.

"You looked like you were wondering," she explained with a chuckle.

He shook his head. "Whatever you wanna do to me is perfectly fine. Suck me dry. Spit it out. I don't care. I'm putty in your hands, Lys," he muttered.

She started slightly when he called her Lys, but she didn't say anything. She just smiled at him and reached for a thick pillow, stuffing it under his hips. Then she picked up the lube, squirting some onto her fingertips. She let it warm to her skin as Declan spread his thighs, raising his knees and tilting his hips so that his ass was on display for her. Her hands reached for him, lifting his balls. He hissed in a breath as her slender fingers rubbed the lube onto his anus. His cock jerked and her smile widened. She squirted more lube onto his ass and her fingers, working it in until she slid one finger deep inside him, then two.

Lightning must have hit him. That was the only coherent thought in Declan's head. His body was like a lightning rod, electricity rushing through him from her fingers, into his ass, and through every part of him. She pulled her fingers out and he whimpered, thrusting his hips up while his cock strained against his belly, leaking a puddle of pre-cum onto his ridged abdomen. His eyes watched as she lubed up the vibrator with swift twists of her fingers. His breath came in shallow pants as he watched her position the vibrator at his anus.

Her eyes caught his and she rubbed one hand over his cock and balls, making him want to scream with pleasure. "Oh, baby. It's my turn to fuck you now." Her teeth caught her bottom lip for moment then she went on. "You have no idea how much this turns me on," she whispered.

She reached down and rubbed her pussy, causing her neck to arch, and her stiff nipples to tilt up toward him. A little moan escaped her. When her hand reappeared her fingers were glistening with her juices. Declan groaned out loud when she slowly licked them clean. She bent over him, squirting more lube onto his ass as the head of the vibrator pressed against him. She rubbed her free hand over his cock and balls again.

Declan felt the pressure of the vibrator's big head at his anus and took a deep breath relaxing his muscles. He moaned as the head popped in. The pressure continued and Elysia's eyes held his as she slowly worked the thick vibrator into his ass. When it was completely seated, Declan let out a breath feeling the exquisite fullness inside him. Elysia rotated the vibrator a little and when the head hit his prostate, Declan's eyes rolled back in his head at the white hot heat of pleasure that ripped through him.

"Oh, gods, Lys! Fuck me!" he moaned, his hips thrusting in time to the shallow strokes she initiated with the vibrator.

He opened his eyes to find her shifting her position until she knelt beside him. One hand worked the vibrator in his ass and the other reached for his twitching cock. He bit back a scream as she took his cock into her mouth. She sucked him while fucking him with the

vibrator and Declan thought he'd died and gone to the Afterlife. Bolts of pleasure ripped through him every time the vibrator stroked over his prostate or her tongue swirled over the spot beneath the head of his cock. He could barely breathe. His balls tightened and the ache in his gut spiraled out of control. He needed to come. His body cried out for it. Sweat dampened his skin and his muscles twitched involuntarily.

He could feel a burning at the base of his spine foretelling his impending orgasm. Suddenly, she turned on the vibrator as it passed over his prostate. The pleasure he thought couldn't get any better cranked up about ten notches as the vibration electrified his groin at the same time that she deep throated his cock. Declan lost control, shouting her name loudly as she thrust the entire vibrator into his ass while turned up high. His cock erupted in her mouth jerking and throbbing like it never had before. Lights and stars exploded behind his eyelids and his hands clutched her head convulsively. The fullness in his ass, her tongue lashing his cock as he filled her mouth with his hot cum, was more than he could stand. He shook like leaf in a hurricane force wind.

Elysia licked his twitching cock as it finished spurting, finally pulling her mouth free as it began to soften. She turned off the vibrator, easing it from his spasming ass. She set it on the bedside table and draped herself on his chest, kissing him deeply so he could taste his cum on her tongue.

Declan couldn't stop shaking. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had such an earth shaking orgasm. Elysia rested quietly on his chest even though he could feel her heart racing and smell her arousal. As his breathing slowed, the sense that he should mate her grew stronger inside him. His dragon was totally in love with her and so was he. He couldn't imagine being with another woman after her. Of course, that thought scared the shit out of him too.

He thrust it aside, ignoring the roaring protest his dragon made inside his head. Right now, the need to mark Elysia overwhelmed him. Even if he wasn't ready to mate her, he wanted to fuck her so hard and so many times that she would barely be able to leave in the morning. The possessive thought filled him with satisfaction and he rolled over, trapping Elysia beneath him.

His hands swept over her curves and she arched into his touch. "I'm gonna fuck you so hard and so long, you're gonna forget that any other man ever touched you," he growled.

She laughed, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his hips. She rubbed her wet pussy against his already recovering cock. "I love it that you can come like a freight train and then be ready again in a matter of minutes," she purred, throwing her head back so that her body pressed more tightly to his.

Declan licked the side of her neck then sucked on a spot beneath her ear. She moaned and he sucked harder, knowing he'd leave a small mark there. He rubbed his half-hard cock against her pussy. "I told you dragon shifters had that ability. We'll just see how many more orgasms you have in you..."

She pulled away and got on all fours. "Uh uh. You're not fucking my pussy until you fulfill your promise. Get the lube," she commanded.

Declan's cock rose to its full length. Gods! How could he have forgotten her virgin ass? He looked at her dazedly as she wagged her smooth buttocks at him. He grabbed the lube and crawled up to her, squirting the liquid into her crack. His long fingers rubbed it into her pink

anus just the way she had done to him. When the tight ring of muscles loosened a little with her arousal, he thrust one long finger into her. She gasped, her breath catching. Declan waited, wondering if it had hurt her. Moments later, she pressed back against his hand and the finger sank the rest of the way in.

He began to thrust into her and after a little bit she started moaning. He squirted more lube on her and his hand then slowly inserted another finger. He looked at her with a little frown. Her hole was so small and his fingers so big. He wasn't sure he'd be able to even get his dick in such a tight little channel.

His finger thrusts must have become hesitant once he'd gotten the second finger in because she looked back at him, her face flushed, her eyes glittering with lust. "Don't you even think about not fucking my ass," she gritted out.

Declan blinked at her then grinned. "Baby, I will fuck whatever part of your body you want me to," he murmured, stroking his free hand over the curve of her buttock.

"Good, because I want your cock in my ass now!" She punctuated her words with a thrust backward so rough that it nearly knocked him over.

He pulled his fingers free and began to lube up his cock. Elysia wriggled her bottom at him suggestively, her wet pink hole beckoning him. He knelt behind her, rubbing the head against her anus. She pushed back and he thrust forward. The head of his cock burst through the tight ring of muscles and she yelped, her fingers convulsively gripping the sheets.

"Lys? Baby?" he asked, afraid he'd hurt her.

"Holy crap!" she panted. She glanced back at him and he could see the pain and pleasure etched on her beautiful face. "Don't you dare stop!" she ordered.

Worried, he squirted more lube on her ass where his cock was embedded and rubbed more onto his shaft. Then he slowly pressed inward. He thought he might pass out from her tightness and heat. She gripped him like a vise, the wet slippery lube creating an exquisite friction so intense that he knew he wouldn't last long. The moment his balls slapped against her ass, he reached down with the hand that wasn't lubed and inserted his fingers in her wet pussy.

Declan pulled back and then thrust into her, using short powerful strokes. He gripped her hip with one hand and stroked her pussy with the other. His thumb brushed her swollen clit, making her shiver. For long minutes, he let her hot ass milk him with every thrust. He became mindless with the need to speed up his thrusts and shoot his hot cum into her tight channel. His thumb rubbed her clit harder and she thrust herself back onto his cock. That was all he needed to step up the tempo.

By the time his balls tightened, indicating his coming orgasm, his thrusts had become rough as he fucked her virgin hole. He bit her neck beneath the ear as his fingers teased her clit. She screamed and her ass clamped down on his cock as she came. She gripped him so tightly he could barely thrust, but he managed a few more. Then his cock swelled and jerked, lashing her hot anal passage with his cum. The extra lubrication allowed him to get in another couple of thrusts as she moaned and writhed beneath him, tossing her head like a mare being mounted.

Finally, they both stopped shuddering and Declan pulled free of her. She collapsed on the bed, gazing at him with dazed eyes. On wobbly legs, he got up and went into the bathroom.

He turned on the water, filling the Jacuzzi tub. He took a couple of calming breaths then went into the bedroom after her. Bending at the waist, he picked her up easily.

Elysia curled her arms around his neck, laying her head on his chest. He carried her into the bathroom and set her in the tub. He got in behind her, pulling her back against him so that she sat between his thighs. He turned on the jets and the bubbles swirled around them.

“You’re not used to all this so we’ll soak for a bit. Afterward, I’m going to fuck that pussy of yours a couple more times,” he whispered in her ear, nipping at the edge.

She arched back against him, running her hands down his muscled thighs. “Okay,” she agreed calmly.

He saw her eyes close and she murmured, “I’m so glad you’re a dragon.”

A wicked little smile curved her lips and Declan’s gut tied itself in knots. Despite his inner dragon’s protests, he didn’t want to admit that in all probability his heart was completely lost to her. He almost dreaded what the morning would bring.

Chapter Five

When Elysia's cell phone beeped, she didn't think anything of it. She just wondered who had sent her a text message. When she opened the text message that her face flamed and her heart began to thud.

I can still smell you on me. I've been worthless today because of it. All I can think of is you.

Elysia closed her eyes and tried to calm herself. Her heart pounded and her blood raced in her veins. She began to throb between her legs. She looked at the clock. Almost five. Pretty much quitting time for her. She looked at her phone again. What the hell was she going to do about Declan? She hadn't responded to his flowers or his note about dinner. The note said he would call, but he hadn't. Now, she had a text message that made her ache with desire.

She got up, leaving her phone on the desk, and walked over to the window, closing the blinds. Every step she took reminded her of what had happened the night before. She now knew that shifters really did have incredible staying power and amazing recovery time. She'd been really sore when she'd stumbled into work. However, being immortal meant she healed faster than a human would. The soreness that made her walk funny that morning had subsided to a vague ache. If she hadn't been immortal, she would have been in serious trouble that morning.

The cell phone lying on her blotter mocked her silently. She couldn't deny that the text message turned her on. If she were totally honest with herself, she would admit that Declan turned her on. She sat down at her desk and took out the card that had come with the flowers. The bold, dark handwriting had to be Declan's. He'd chosen the flowers and written the card personally. He hadn't done what Austin had, sent his assistant to order the flowers and write some cheesy over the top sentiment. No, Declan Antaeus was nothing like Austin Stone, in bed or out of it. He outclassed Austin in every way. He was more genuine than any man she had ever been with.

Elysia sighed heavily. She still didn't want to get involved with Declan. Unfortunately, her head drug its feet while her heart and body anticipated her next encounter with the dragon. She shook her head, trying to clear it so she could analyze the situation.

On the plus side, she had had the most amazing sex of her life. She'd never known she was multi-orgasmic. Declan had forced orgasm on top of orgasm from her. And she now felt like the queen of decadent sex. Nothing had seemed out of the question last night. Spankings, sex toys, handcuffs, anal sex...

Her eyes closed on a shudder. She'd never done that before, but by the gods, she'd loved it with Declan. Twenty four hours ago, if someone had shown her a photo of his erect cock and told her that it would fit in her ass like a hand in a glove, she would have thought they were insane. But not only had his cock fit in her ass, he had made her love it there. Her face flushed pink when she thought of how she had thrust herself backward onto his thick rod of flesh. She had never known that she could be so wild and uninhibited. She had shocked herself by letting go and then shocked herself again by enjoying it far beyond anything she had ever done before. Now, her previous sex life seemed staid and boring.

Another thing on the plus side was that Declan had no hang-ups about being with a strong, intelligent woman. When she'd said she had an early meeting with an attorney, he not only believed her, he'd complimented her on her business acumen. Austin had always tried to

put her in the “little woman” role, even though he’d apparently chosen her because of her professional standing within the death care industry. Elysia couldn’t imagine Declan ever doing that. His mate would always be his partner whether she was his equal in business or not.

Mate. Now there was a big fat minus. After her experience with Austin, Elysia didn’t want to get married, didn’t want a bloodmate. Declan obviously wanted everything his siblings had and then some. Dragons were notorious for being partial to home and hearth. Elysia was so not a home and hearth kind of girl.

Before she could run through any more pluses and minuses, her desk phone rang with an internal call.

“Lys, the computer down at the crematory is on the fritz again. I need you to fix it before you go home,” her older brother Marius said in an exasperated tone. “And if you need to replace the damn thing just do it. You’re such a penny pincher sometimes. The cost in frustration and down time is more than the cost of a new machine.”

Elysia rolled her eyes even though her brother couldn’t see it. “Okay, I’ll order a new one. And I’ll check the computer right now. I won’t go home until it’s working,” she soothed him.

“Perfect,” he said and hung up.

With a sigh, Elysia turned to her computer, clicking on the program that would allow her to take control of the crematory computer. When it wouldn’t connect, she tried again. That’s when she realized it really wasn’t responding. She grabbed her cell phone and a small computer tool kit and headed out to the mortuary lobby where she picked up a golf cart key.

Pushing open the front door of the lobby, she squinted in the fading rays of sunlight. The weak light didn’t bother her at all but her eyes were sensitive to it. Two steps out of the door a movement to her left caught her eye. A tall, muscular form holding a smart phone leaned against the side of a black Mercedes convertible. He looked up from his texting and his eyes widened in pleased surprise.

Elysia’s breath caught in her throat at the same moment that her phone beeped in her pocket, telling her she had a text message. Declan came toward her, his golden eyes crinkled at the corners, his mouth turned up in a welcoming smile.

“I just texted you,” he murmured as he came to a stop two feet in front of her.

“I know,” she replied. “Why are you here? I thought you were going to call?”

He grinned. “Good. You got the flowers.”

He looked so pleased that Elysia felt guilty for giving them away. “Yes, I did. They were lovely and the note very surprising,” she told him.

“Surprising?” He quirked a brow at her inquiringly.

“You wrote it yourself,” she said dryly. “Look, Declan. I was going to call you...” She broke off when her brisk tone of voice made his face fall. The pleasure in his expression leeches away and she felt like a monumental asshole. Helplessly, unable to hurt him when he’d been so happy to see her, she gestured lamely toward the golf cart. “I have a computer down. I have to fix it.” She held up the little toolkit.

Instantly, Declan's expression changed. He smiled again, but this time with a hint of caution in the back of his golden eyes. "Okay. Do you mind if I tag along?" he asked carefully.

Knowing that leaving him hanging around the mortuary was a bad idea because Marius hadn't left yet, and despite the fact that her panicked brain screamed "Yes! I mind! I mind!" her mouth opened and she said, "Not at all. Let's go."

They got in the golf cart and Elysia drove all the way across the cemetery to the crematory, situated in the farthest corner of the grounds. She was acutely aware of his tall form beside her in the tiny cart, his long hard thigh pressed against hers. When they reached the crematory, she jumped out and quickly led the way inside. She knew that Ray, the crematory operator, was on his dinner break so she went straight into his office.

Elysia sat down at the desk and checked the computer's connection to the network. It showed offline and she frowned. Declan shifted restlessly beside her. "Mind if I check out your retort?" he asked, gesturing toward the big cremation oven.

Despite herself, her lips twitched and her brows lifted. Seeing her expression, Declan grinned. "Sounds like a cheesy pick up line, doesn't it?" he chuckled.

She nodded. "All it needed was the 'Hey, baby' in front of it." She smiled and waved a hand toward the retort. "Help yourself. Ray's done for the day. He was just doing paperwork when his computer went down."

Declan nodded and walked around the retort, out of her eyesight. She went back to the computer, checking all the connections then checking the modem and firewall. Declan returned to her side as she rebooted the firewall. He looked over her shoulder at the setup. "This building isn't hardwired to your main building?"

"No." She rechecked the connections on the firewall and modem, then sat at the desk again to reboot the computer. "It was too expensive to do that. Instead, it has its own DSL line, hence the modem. The firewall allows this computer to be on the company network via a VPN. It sounds complicated, but it's not. And it's a lot less money than digging up the cemetery to lay cable."

Declan thrust his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "You really do know your stuff, don't you?" he murmured.

At the odd tone in his voice, she glanced up to find his wide shoulders hunched a little. She noticed that he wore pressed jeans and a plain white button down shirt with a black suede suit-style jacket. He looked ready to go to a casual dinner. Guilt assaulted her again. Her eyes met his. The golden irises with the elongated pupils were guarded. That and the hunch of his shoulders told her that he wasn't feeling very sure of himself. For a man of Declan Antaeus' caliber, that was very odd indeed.

"The network is my baby," she explained as the computer reconnected. "Yes, I have a degree in finance, and I'm in charge of that department here, but it's the network stuff that I love."

When she saw that the computer had reestablished a connection with the network, she stood up, her shoulder brushing against his thigh. Heat flared through her body and she hissed in a breath. Involuntarily, her eyes met his. The twin amber flames in their depths told her that his desire matched hers.

Declan's hand came up and cupped her cheek. Instinctively, she leaned into his touch. His body angled closer to hers and he tilted her face up to his. Elysia shivered as his mouth covered hers. Scenes from the previous night flashed in her head. Both her body and heart ached for him. Only her brain put up a fight and at the moment, with his tongue teasing hers, her body completely overruled her head.

Elysia slid her arms under his jacket, seeking his warmth. His green apple scent overwhelmed her senses and she dug her nails into his cotton covered back, feeling the ripple of muscle beneath. His lips left hers to travel down her throat. She arched her neck, loving the feel of him pressed against her.

"Oh, Declan," she moaned.

"Lys. Baby, I've been starving for you. I want you so much," he murmured against her throat.

He bent her back over his arm as his lips and tongue traced the vee neckline of her sweater. His hips pressed hers, and she found herself sprawled on the desk as he slid his hands inside her sweater to touch her skin. When his fingers found the front clasp of her bra, her breasts sprang free, the hard nipples grazing his palms. Frantic to touch him too, she fumbled with the buttons on the front of his shirt, kissing every inch of his chest that she exposed.

Declan bent his dark head, sucking one of her nipples into his mouth. She cried out at the exquisite sensations rocketing through her body and cradled his head closer. He ground his hips against her, his thick erection rubbing the damp place between her thighs. She wanted to rip his clothes off and push him to the floor so she could straddle his hips... She wanted to take him home and handcuff him to her bed... She wanted to...

Holy mother of vampires!

Elysia's breath caught in her throat as she realized that she could hear Declan's heart thundering. She could hear the rush of blood in his veins. She could smell his unique green apple scent and the scent of his blood and smoke. She could taste the salty tartness of his skin on her tongue. With Declan, every one of her senses magnified the moment she was with him. The night before, more than once, she had intuitively known his thoughts, his actions and reactions. And overriding it all, stronger today than last night, was the overwhelming urge to sink down onto his cock and bite his neck, taste his blood, and feel his fire.

Dear gods. Could he be her bloodmate?

Stark fear swamped her, trumping the white-hot desire that consumed her. She pushed at Declan's chest, squirming out from beneath him, reaching to refasten her bra and yank down her sweater.

"Elysia?" Declan's voice sounded breathless and confused.

She looked at him. Her fingers had rumbled his raven hair. His white shirt hung open, showing his heaving chest. His mouth was moist from her kisses. His amber eyes with the elongated pupils glowed like flames, their expression one of barely leashed desire. His cock strained at the front of his jeans... tempting her... She took a deep breath and the scent of his blood filled her nostrils...

She shook her head, panic setting in. "I can't do this, Declan," she said hoarsely as fear rose in her. "I... I... work here!" she stammered, grasping at straws.

His expression turned gentle. "Baby, it's okay. I understand," he murmured. He set his clothes to rights then leaned toward her to brush a kiss over her lips. At the last moment, she turned her head to the side and his mouth brushed her cheek.

He straightened, giving her a narrow eyed look. "Elysia? Is everything okay?" he asked cautiously.

She shook her head again. "No. It's not," she choked out, wanting to run away and hide in her bed and cry. "I really can't do this, Declan."

He straightened to his full six foot five, towering over her. "Do what, Elysia?" he asked in a low voice, his amber eyes clouding. "Us? Is that what you mean?"

She nodded. "I... I... Oh, gods. It's not you, Declan. It's me. I can't handle this," she croaked, her voice rough with suppressed emotion. "I thought I could, but I can't."

His expression turned to stone before her eyes. "So this is about Austin."

"No. No! It's not about him! It's about me! I can't trust myself anymore. I don't know what I want, let alone what I feel," she burst out, frustrated and feeling so much emotion coming to life inside her that it scared her spit less. "I don't understand this thing between us and it frightens me!"

Anger flickered in his eyes. "What is there that you don't understand, Elysia? You want me. I want you. This is more than just momentary lust. That would have been satisfied last night. But neither of us is satisfied. We're just as hot for each other today as we were last night. In fact, we're hungrier for each other," he said in a rough voice. "It's all I can do to keep my dragon under control. He's aching for you, Elysia. He keeps demanding that I bathe you in my dragonfire and mate you. That's never happened to me before!"

Instead of his words calming her, they had the opposite affect. Her panic took flight. "Oh, no! I'm not your mate! I'm no one's mate!" she exclaimed, her fear running rampant now.

Declan reached for her, but she twisted out of his reach. "Elysia! Baby, calm down. You're blowing this all out of proportion. You're letting your fears and what happened with Austin cloud your common sense," he soothed.

She faced him grimly, her self-preservation in full force as she realized she needed to get away from him. "I can't deal with this now, Declan. I can't deal with you. I don't know if I will ever be able to." She stepped away from him, toward the door. "You need to leave. And you need to leave me alone. I'm not your mate. I don't want to be your mate. I just want you to go."

Emotions warred across his face. Finally, the stony expression returned and he walked toward the door. "This isn't over, Elysia," he warned her.

She shook her head emphatically, her fear driving her to face him with an icy cold demeanor. "It is Declan. Don't call me."

He stared at her for a long moment. When her cold expression didn't change, he shook his head as if to clear it. Then he said softly, "You're wrong, Lys. We belong together. In your heart, you know it. You want to bite me. You want to bond with me. You want me to mate you. You're just afraid and in denial. I'm not afraid, Lys. I'm in love with you. I know what I feel is right and true and it's not ever going away even if you send me away."

He drew a long shaky breath that expanded his broad chest. She swallowed hard, retaining her cold expression, refusing to answer him. He turned away, walking to the door of the crematory. He looked back, and she could see a bruised expression in his golden eyes. "You can make me leave, but you can't change how I feel," he whispered in an emotion-ravaged voice. "I love you, Elysia, but because it's what you want, I won't bother you again."

She hardened her expression more, despite the fact that his words were like razors, shredding her heart. Then he was gone. Elysia walked slowly back to the desk. Out the window, she saw a huge black dragon sweep across the sky and her heart clenched painfully.

Oh, gods. What have I done? she thought numbly and sank onto the office chair.

Chapter Six

The golf cart rolled up to the ninth tee and Marius Granville got out. His two golfing partners waited there for him. Both men eyed him angrily.

“Your sister has totally emasculated my brother!” Sean Antaeus spat out. “He’s worthless. He can’t work. He can’t do anything. I’ve had to move all his projects to other managers and give him time off. She’s killing him!”

Alfred Stone frowned at Marius. “It wasn’t supposed to shake out like this, Marius,” he said accusingly. “You said she was ready to move on with her life. She’s not. Look what she’s done to Declan.”

Marius pulled off his gloves and shoved them into his pockets. They weren’t going to play this hole anyway. “Yeah, well, you can both stop being angry. Elysia is a fucking mess,” he grumbled. “The Accounting manager had to do the financials this month. The only thing she seems able to work on is her computers. She won’t talk to me. She barely speaks to Colin. If either of us brings up Declan’s name, her eyes fill with tears; she gets pissed off, goes in her office and locks the door.”

He ran a restless hand through his dark blonde hair, ruffling the expensively cut waves. “She’s miserable and she knows that no one can fix this but her. I don’t understand why she thinks Declan is not her bloodmate. All the signs are there!” he said in exasperation.

Alfred looked thoughtful, rubbing his chin. Sean looked like Marius felt. Tired and frustrated. He knew what it had been like dealing with Elysia for the past two weeks. He imagined that it was the same, if not worse, for Sean.

“I think this happened because of Austin,” Alfred said slowly. “Elysia doesn’t trust herself anymore, doesn’t trust her instincts, because they let her down with Austin.”

“That makes sense,” Sean allowed with a nod of his dark head.

Marius believed Alfred had hit the nail on the head. His sister could be stubborn and recalcitrant, but this didn’t seem to be about her contrariness. There was a marked dip in her self-esteem these days. Her self-confidence as a professional had never wavered when Austin dumped her. Her break up with Declan had left her personally shattered in such a way that she either had no interest in work or couldn’t concentrate on it. To Marius and Colin, it was as if a part of their sister had died.

“We have to throw them together somehow,” Alfred said. “They need to work this out. It’s obvious to everyone who knows them that they love each other.”

“Declan swims in the cove every sundown,” Sean said thoughtfully. “I have a key to his car. While he’s swimming, I’ll hijack his car, stranding him there.”

The two men looked at Marius questioningly. He rubbed his forehead wearily. “I’ll think of something,” he muttered. “I’ll get her there and make sure she’s stranded too.”

“Declan could fly home, but he would never leave her stranded,” Sean pointed out.

“That’s perfect then,” Alfred said rubbing his hands together. “I can’t believe this has become so complicated. We were all so sure it would be over by now and that the two of them would be bonded.”

Marius made a rude sound. "We're talking love here, Al. Nothing ever goes smoothly when you're dealing with people in love," he replied gruffly.

Sean patted him on the shoulder in a sympathetic manner. "Just because things didn't work out for you doesn't mean they can't work out for your sister and my brother."

"I know," Marius sighed. "Look, I'll talk to Colin about getting Elysia down to the cove. What day do you want to do this?"

Sean looked at Alfred who shrugged. His eyes traveled back to Marius. "Tomorrow?" he asked.

"Sure," Marius sighed. "Can we get some lunch now? I'm starving and I need a really stiff drink."

His friends laughed and got in their golf cart. "Race you to the clubhouse, brother!" Sean teased him.

Marius shook his head. "And I thought being related to the Antaeus family would be a good thing for me," he grumbled as he got in his golf cart and followed the speeding Sean toward the clubhouse.

Chapter Seven

The next afternoon, Colin invaded his sister's office, despite the fact that she'd told Marnie not to let him in. Even the snarky receptionist couldn't resist his charm all the time.

"Colin, I don't want to have dinner with you," Elysia protested.

"Fuck you, Lys. You're going to dinner with me and that's that. I haven't seen you eat jack shit in the past two weeks. You're thin as a rail. If you want me to leave you alone, then you'd better go to dinner with me," Colin insisted, his voice implacable. "Once I see you eat a good meal, I'll leave you alone for another two weeks."

"Fine." Elysia slammed the binder in her hands onto her desk. "I'll go with you. But after this, you better promise to leave me the hell alone."

"Two weeks. I'll leave you alone for another two weeks," he said. "Not forever, Lys, because this issue isn't dead."

"I'm not talking to you about Declan Antaeus, Colin. Not now. Not ever." The resolution in her tone hadn't changed over the past two weeks and wouldn't ever change. She couldn't talk to anyone about Declan. What had happened with him was a bruise on her heart that just refused to heal.

Her brother's jaw tightened. His midnight blue eyes held a fierceness that looked an awful lot like the expression Marius used when strong-arming someone. In fact, ever since she'd broken things off with Declan, Colin had pretty much been Marius' twin. Both of her brothers had been vocal in their disapproval of how she'd handled Declan. Oddly, both of them thought she should have given him a chance.

"You can't keep this up, Elysia. Your work, your health, your piece of mind is all suffering for it. You need to sit down and reevaluate your feelings for him," Colin told her in a stern voice very unlike his usual carefree playboy persona. "Is this really how you want to spend the rest of your life? Feeling like there's a big gaping hole inside you?"

Elysia turned away. She couldn't look Colin in the eye any longer. When she'd first broken things off with Declan and watched his dragon form take flight away from her, she'd returned to her office and collapsed in tears. Colin had found her there an hour later, shaking with reaction and nearly incoherent with fear, pain, and confusion. That's when she'd told him it felt like a great gaping hole had opened up inside her where her heart used to be. Now she regretted ever saying anything to him because he threw those words at her daily, and every time he did, she felt anew how true they were.

"Colin, I said I'd go to dinner with you. It wasn't a tacit agreement to psychoanalyze me. Now, if you want me to go with you, I need to finish this work." She gestured toward the binder without meeting his eyes.

She heard him walk toward her office door. "I'll be back to get you in an hour, Elysia. Then we're leaving whether you're done or not," he declared.

Once he'd gone, Elysia sank into her chair and buried her face in her hands. Every day became worse than the last. Numb with pain, it hadn't taken her more than five days to realize that sending Declan away had been the wrong thing to do. Every day without him made her feel more ill and wretched. On the sixth day, she acknowledged to herself that she had fallen in love with him. She told herself that if he loved her as he said he did, he would

probably give her time to sort out her feelings and then contact her. After all, even though she had told him to go, he had said that it wasn't over.

When a week passed without any word from Declan, she began to think the worst. In those seven days, her rationalizations had gone through so many stages, and veered from hopeful to despondent so frequently, that she didn't know what to think or believe anymore. Declan's silence was the only thing she could believe in. If she was Declan's mate, wouldn't he try to work things out with her even though she'd sent him away? He must have realized that he was wrong when he said he'd fallen in love with her. And that one thought ripped her soul to shreds. When she looked in the mirror, she saw a shell that only looked like Elysia Granville. Her heart and soul resided in the hands of Declan Antaeus, and apparently, he didn't want her after all.

A tear streaked down her cheek and angrily she brushed it away. She had work to do or Colin would be breathing down her neck. For the next hour, she rushed through her paperwork so she would be ready when her brother returned. She didn't need or want any more lectures from either of her siblings. Her emotions were just too raw and close to the surface. Her composure hung by a very fragile thread.

She turned off her desktop computer when Colin appeared, holding her jacket. "Let's go," he said grimly, as if expecting her to argue with him.

Silently, she got up and let Colin help her into her coat. Once in his Lexus, she automatically turned down his rock music and he chuckled.

"Now, that's my Lys." He shot her an amused grin.

A reluctant smile twitched her lips. "Yeah, well, you play your music way too loud."

"If it's too loud, you're too old," he quipped, as he backed out of his parking space.

"I am old," she grumbled, huddling in her coat. Colin liked the temperature in his car at the freezing level.

"Are not," he replied. "We're both still young vamps."

Elysia didn't respond. She didn't feel young. She felt old and ready to die, as if her whole life was behind her rather than in front of her. *Funny what despair did to you*, she thought acidly.

Colin kept up a mindless patter of random industry gossip as they drove down the coast highway. Her mind wandered and her brother's voice faded to a background hum as she looked at the grey waves hitting the shoreline. Something about the ocean soothed her...

THUD.

Blinking, Elysia surfaced from her self-induced trance to find her brother cursing. He pulled the Lexus off the highway onto an access road, stopping the car in a tiny parking lot by a secluded cove.

"What's wrong?" she asked as Colin got out of the car, leaving it running.

"I ran over something metal on the road. I couldn't avoid it because there was a truck coming toward me," he complained as he looked under the car. "I think it might have hit something vital. I think it's leaking fluid."

Elysia got out of the car and bent over, looking underneath from her side. "I don't see anything dripping."

"Check the rear and I'll check the front," Colin told her.

She moved around to the rear of the car and bent to look at the undercarriage. As she did so, she heard a car door slam. She straightened; about to ask Colin what he was doing, when the Lexus rolled away from her, speeding down the access road. It turned onto the highway and disappeared, leaving her standing in the small parking lot with her mouth open in shock.

What the fuck was wrong with Colin? Why the hell had he left her stranded in this remote place?

She turned, looking around her. There were no cars, no people. She looked out at the ocean. The waves were gray, gilded slightly by the rays of the fast setting sun. There was no one on the cove's small beach. However, her sharp vampire eyes picked out a head bobbing in the surf. Elysia pulled off her shoes and socks, leaving them on the curb as she stepped onto the sand. Her toes squished the damp grains as she walked to the waterline.

For a moment, she stood with her eyes closed, feeling the caress of the ocean breeze on her skin. Her life had changed dramatically in the weeks since she'd attended the Undertaker's Ball. The winds of her life had shifted, bringing her love and pain and a whole host of emotions she hadn't ever felt before. In the past, being alone had never bothered her. But now, those shifting winds were about to carry her into a future that frightened her by its very solitude.

She opened her eyes, looking at the swimmer. His torso became visible as powerful strokes carried him toward the cove. Elysia's eyes widened in shock as she made out the curve of his muscular shoulders, one of them covered with the black ink of a tribal tattoo. Declan.

Heart pounding, she waited on the shore as he drew nearer. When he stood up, shaking water from his hair, her eyes greedily devoured his almost nude body. He wore swim shorts that bared his muscular thighs and outlined his impressive manhood. Water ran in rivulets down his washboard abs and broad chest. She shuddered, remembering what it felt like to touch every inch of him.

Declan raised his head, slicking back his wet hair. His eyes met hers and narrowed instantly, his expression becoming guarded. He walked slowly toward her and Elysia's stomach clenched, nausea rising inside her.

Oh, gods. I can't throw up now, she thought wildly.

"What are you doing here?" he asked stiffly, stopping just out of her reach.

"I... I..." She broke off, shaking her head. She swallowed hard, trying once more to speak. "Colin left me here. There was something wrong with his car... we got out to look... and he drove away," she said in a voice choked with emotion.

Tears rose inside her. Her heart thundered in her ears. She began to shake as the desire to throw herself at Declan's feet and beg him to love her overwhelmed her.

His amber eyes shifted from her to the parking lot. He cursed. "My car is gone." His eyes shifted back to her. "It appears that someone, or rather several someones, think we should talk." He gestured toward the parking lot. "The only one with a key to my car is Sean."

Her eyes widened. "You mean our brothers stranded us here on purpose?"

Declan nodded grimly. "Apparently so."

Something inside her crumbled and her heart ached as it shattered all over again. "I'm so sorry." She took a step back from him. "It was wrong of them to force you like this."

One dark brow winged up. "Force *me*?" A rusty laugh laced with derision escaped him. "You're the one who doesn't want anything to do with me, Elysia."

Her eyes flew to his. In them, she saw a wealth of anguish as well as anger. "You s-said you'd fallen in l-love with m-me," she stammered, confused and racked with pain. "I thought that once you'd g-given me some time to t-think, that you would c-call..." Her voice trailed away. "When you didn't, I t-thought you'd changed your m-mind about me."

To her horror, tears welled, one escaping to roll slowly down her cheek. Suddenly, her emotions became too much to handle. Her knees gave way, and she sat down abruptly on the damp sand, sobs racking her slender frame. She pulled up her knees and wrapped her arms around them, burying her face against the denim so he couldn't see her despair.

A rough growl met her ears just before his hands sank into her hair, pulling her head back. His mouth took hers in a kiss so fierce and filled with emotion that she cried out, throwing her arms around him and kissing him back frantically. Fear flooded her, but this time it was fear that he would disappear, that this moment was a dream conjured up by her pain-crazed mind.

You're mine. You will always be mine.

The possessive words filled her mind and she felt a strange electrical current run through her. She realized she'd heard Declan's thoughts. Hope began to creep into her veins. By the gods! She wasn't wrong! He *was* her bloodmate. His green apple scent mixed with the salty scent of the ocean, swamping her senses. Her tears seeped between their lips and Declan's hands tightened on her, as he tasted them.

He broke the kiss, looking down at her pain-ravaged face. "Lys, you sent me away. I said I wouldn't bother you again."

"I thought... I just ..." She blinked back tears trying to get control of her emotions, but she felt so shattered she just couldn't pull herself together. "I didn't think you were the kind of man who would give up..."

Realization dawned in his amber eyes and he groaned, pulling her closer to his wet chest. "Oh, baby. I'm so sorry," he murmured into her hair as he held her tightly. "You're such a strong woman. Your rejection of me just sucked away my soul and my will. I haven't been able to string two thoughts together, let alone figure out what to do about you."

Sobs caught her up again and her body shook against his. "I'm sorry!" she wailed softly, her fingers clutching him. "I was scared!"

Declan cradled her against his hard body, sliding his hands beneath her jacket and shirt to touch her bare skin. Desire flared instantly between them and Elysia sank back onto the sand pulling him with her. They kissed urgently, the soul deep kisses of a couple who thought they had lost each other.

Elysia cradled him between her thighs, her hands running over his hard torso, barely able to believe he was with her. When he touched her breasts, her nipples peaked beneath the lace of her bra. She sucked in a breath, a shiver going through her.

Suddenly, Declan raised his head. His chest heaved as he sucked in air. He shook his head and Elysia's heart stopped with fear. Seeing her face, he leaned down, brushing her hair back and pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"Baby, we need to clear the air before we go any farther. I don't want any more misunderstandings."

Elysia reached up and touched his cheek with her fingertips. He turned his head and kissed her fingers. "I love you, Declan. You're my bloodmate. I want to bond with you, right here, right now. I don't want anything to come between us again. Not people nor fear nor misunderstandings. Nothing," she whispered urgently. "I was afraid of what was happening between us. Afraid of making another mistake. I pushed you away instead of talking to you. I was wrong and I'm so sorry."

Declan kissed her hard, his tongue sweeping over her lower lip. She melted against him. He lifted his head, smoothing his thumb over her lips. "I pushed you too hard. I should have waited to tell you I was in love with you. I knew you had to be at least a little afraid after what you went through with Austin, but I was arrogant. I thought what we'd shared would carry more weight than the past," he said, his voice low and troubled. "I was wrong too. I'm sorry, love."

Elysia searched his golden eyes, her fingers stroking his face. "Can we put it behind us now? I don't want to dwell on the pain. I just want to know what it's like to be truly happy."

A grin flashed across Declan's face. To Elysia, it was so bright and joyful that it seemed as if the sun had come out from behind a cloud. "I'm going to make you so happy that even when you're angry, you'll still be smiling," he teased.

Elysia laughed breathlessly. "I can live with that."

She pulled his head down, nuzzling his throat, her nostrils flaring at the scent of his blood. She licked his neck, her fangs elongating as the ocean salt hit her tongue. She let them trail along his skin as he pressed his hard cock against the vee of her legs. Rocking her hips against his erection, the delicious friction made her pussy even wetter.

Declan began pulling her clothes off. In a matter of moments, her clothes were tossed aside and his swim trunks tossed after them. He rubbed his hard cock against her wet pussy as the tide came in, the waves rolling up onto them. They ignored the cold water, their focus solely on each other.

Clutching his heated flesh, she guided him inside her. As he filled her, she arched her back, her torso pressing against his. His hips flexed, his thrusts short, shallow, and hard. Elysia tilted her hips up, her legs coming up around him. The movement caused her swollen clit to brush his pubic bone. She shuddered with every thrust. The head of his cock pressed against her G-spot, his pubic bone grinding against her clit.

Despite the icy water swirling around them, she was on fire. That's when she noticed smoke streaming from Declan's nostrils in a thick cloud. His skin glowed and was hot to the touch. He kissed her possessively, his tongue twining with hers. He thrust into her, their hips slapping noisily in the water.

Elysia whimpered as her orgasm came on her suddenly. She jerked beneath him, clutching his shoulders as her pussy clamped down on his cock. He continued to thrust into her and she felt the heat rising swiftly in her again. His fingers flicked over her clit and she

cried out as she came once more. She bit down on his neck, her fangs sinking into his jugular vein.

There was a roaring in her ears as his essence filled her. His thoughts rushed into her consciousness like the waves crashing on the beach. She drew on his vein; drinking from him and feeling her body come alive as her bloodmate fed her. The most incredible heat enveloped her as Declan cried out, his cock spasming within her. She retracted her fangs as his cock throbbed in her pussy. Licking his neck to seal the bite holes, she turned her head just as his mouth came down on hers. Golden light bloomed and she felt flames licking at her, pushing her toward a third orgasm. His mouth swallowed her cries of bliss, as his dragonfire surrounded them, bathing them in a pleasure so intense Elysia thought she would fly apart.

Elysia! My sweet, Lys! My mate, I love you...

Oh, Declan! I love you so! You're everything to me...

Their thoughts mingled, words of love and commitment flowing between them effortlessly, their emotions completely bared to one another. They held each other tightly as the waves crashed around them, hissing and turning to steam as it hit their heated flesh. As their skin cooled and Elysia's bite faded on Declan's neck, they came down to earth. They lay in the surf, locked together, their breath slowing and their bodies becoming lax.

Declan's cock slipped from her pussy and a little mewl of pleasure came from Elysia's throat. He smiled down at her and pressed a quick kiss to her swollen lips. A long sigh escaped her and she shifted in the wet sand, sitting up.

"Oh, yuck," she murmured, looking at the wet sand that streaked her body.

Declan got to his feet and reached down to help her up. He pressed her against him, kissing her again. "I can't get enough of you," he said as he nibbled on her lips.

"I can't get enough of you either," she smiled, curving her arms around his neck. "But we're naked on a public beach and we're stranded."

He glanced over at the parking lot and then grinned. "No, we aren't. My car is back."

Elysia turned and looked over her shoulder. Sure enough, the Mercedes convertible sat at the curb where she'd left her shoes. Her eyes flew to Declan's. "Do you think your brother saw...?"

Swiftly, he shook his head. "Sean wouldn't look. If he didn't see us standing here he would have assumed, and rightly so, that we were lying on the sand. To Sean, that would have been a positive sign. I'm sure he just left the car and took off."

"Okay." She looked down at herself and grimaced. "I'm gross." She looked at him and flicked sand off of his ribs. "You are too."

Declan laughed. "I have towels and plastic bags in the car. We'll dry off and go to my place."

They gathered up Elysia's clothes and Declan's shorts. At the car, they towed off the worst of the sand and put the wet clothes in a plastic bag. Declan wrapped her in one of his sweatshirts, which came to mid-thigh on her, and pulled on a clean pair of shorts and a t-shirt. They drove to his condo, and tossed the wet sandy clothes in the washer before heading inside. In his bathroom, they stood in the shower stall and washed the sand off each other, which of course, led to another round of lovemaking.

Later, they lay in Declan's bed, eating leftover Chinese food and testing their new mental connection. Declan would tell an off color joke in his head just to see if Elysia heard it. If the joke was especially bad, she pretended she hadn't heard it. Their fragile bond grew as the hours passed.

Finally, just before dawn, as they were catching their breath after making love again, Elysia said, "You realize that I am bonded to you now. I cannot drink the blood of any other creature."

He nodded, stroking his hand over her silky back. "I know. It's okay. I don't want you running around biting anyone else." He kissed the top of her head and she rubbed her cheek on his tattoo. "You know, fire won't affect you now that you're mated to me. Look at your shoulder."

She glanced down and noticed a faint tracing of lines on her shoulder in the same place as his tattoo. "What's that?" she asked in surprise.

"Your mating mark," he told her. "Did you think the mark on my shoulder was a tattoo?"

She nodded, her eyes widening in shock as the lines on her shoulder grew darker before her eyes.

"It's not a tattoo. It's a clan mark," he told her. "Each of us has a variation on our clan mark. It appears when we come of age. When we take a mate and bathe them in our dragonfire, the clan mark begins to etch itself on our mate's skin. In a couple of days, your mark will be as dark as mine."

She frowned. "I never knew that about dragons." She twisted her head this way and that, trying to see the mark. "What if I don't like looking like I'm tattooed?" she asked with an arch expression.

He tackled her, pinning her arms to the mattress as his hips rubbed against her sensuously. "You'll like it. It's a tangible sign that we belong to each other. Look at mine. It used to be a single dragon. Now there are two entwined dragons. Anyone who sees that will know that I am mated."

Elysia swallowed hard as tears filled her eyes. "Declan?"

"What, love?" He brushed her hair back from her face with loving fingers.

Her eyes held his. "I'm so happy I found you. You honor me by taking me as your mate," she said, her voice unsteady with emotion. "I will never dishonor you. I love you."

Declan bent and kissed her. He pulled back and smiled down at her. "You honor me by bonding with me. I will never dishonor you. I love you, Elysia."

She smiled, joy bursting within her. "That sounds like wedding vows."

He shook his head, rolling over and taking her with him so that she lay on his chest. He licked her new mating mark. "No, those will come later." He framed her face with his hands. "You will marry me, won't you?"

"Try to get out of it, buddy," she joked, kissing the point of his chin. "This tattoo thing on my shoulder is about as binding as a legal contract. You back out and I'll sue your ass."

Declan burst out laughing and Elysia grinned at him. "This is what I get for picking the most powerful woman in our industry to fall in love with."

“You love it and you know it. I’ll have your finances in order in no time,” she said, slipping her hands beneath his hips to caress the hard curves of his bare ass.

“Finances? I was talking about a lifetime of us fucking each other,” he laughed.

She slipped a finger into the cleft between his buttocks, teasing his tight anus. He sucked in a breath. “That sounds like heaven,” she murmured, and took his mouth in a long, lingering kiss.

Epilogue

Eighteen months later

Crowds packed the convention floor. Elysia kept trying to stick close to Declan but the ebb and flow of the crowd pushed them apart more often than not.

“Ow!” She winced as someone stepped on her foot.

“I’m so sorry,” a man said.

Her eyes widened at the sound of his voice. “Austin?”

Austin Stone stiffened, shifting to his right so he could see her.

Elysia smiled at him. “How are you?”

He nodded awkwardly. “I’m good. And you?” His eyes took in the huge yellow diamond ring she wore on her left ring finger. Then his eyes flicked over the mound of her belly.

Elysia rubbed her hand over the hard round bulge that was her son. “I’m great. Did you get here in time for Declan’s keynote speech?”

Austin shook his head. “No, but my brother told me he’d asked Declan to give the speech since this year’s theme is cremation trends,” he replied.

Elysia nodded. “I was so pleased that Alfred asked him instead of Sean. It just solidifies his promotion and all.”

Earlier that year, Sean Antaeus had stepped down as President of Antaeus International, naming Declan as his successor. Sean was still head of the Board of Directors, but the day-to-day operations were now in Declan’s hands. It had been a feather in her husband’s cap to have Alfred Stone ask him to give the keynote speech at the Darkworld’s annual Funeral Director’s Guild convention.

Elysia herself had headed up two panels, one on the use of computers and cemetery software and another on finance, which she’d co-chaired with Garret Renquist, Holden Antaeus’ mate. Garret had become an AI vice president when Declan had been promoted. He and Elysia had a lot in common and the two couples often went to industry events as a foursome.

A warm hand slid around Elysia’s waist, coming to rest on the bulge of her pregnant belly. “How are you, Austin?” Declan’s deep voice was tinged with a bit of amusement.

Don’t make him uncomfortable.

You spoil all my fun, Lys.

No, I don’t. What about those handcuffs during the afternoon break?

Declan began to grin broadly and Austin shifted uncomfortably. “I’m good, Declan. Congratulations on the keynote speech... and you’re... er... personal events.”

“You mean our wedding and the coming birth of our son?” One black brow winged up, but Declan’s white teeth continued to flash in a smile.

Austin paled a little and took a step backward. “Y-yes. Congratulations on t-that,” he stammered. “I have to go. I see my brother waving to me.”

He vanished into the crowd and Declan looked down at Elysia. She noticed that his fangs had begun to extend, their curved lethal sharpness glinting in the overhead lights. Elysia smacked him on the arm.

“You scared him on purpose, Declan! Alfred’s not even nearby. He lied to get away from you and your dragon fangs,” she scolded, but her grin was just as wide as his.

He tucked her close to his side as they walked toward the exit. “He deserved to be scared. He’s lucky I never hit him after what he did to you.”

“Pffft,” Elysia said scornfully. “You should be glad he dumped me. Look what you got out of it.”

Declan stopped, and right there on the convention floor, in front of all of their peers, he took Elysia in his arms. He bent his head and gave her a long, leisurely kiss that sent smoke trailing from his nostrils to encircle their heads.

“Damned newlyweds,” a sardonic voice said.

“They should know better than to do that in public,” another voice chimed in.

“Fuck it. Leave ‘em alone,” a third voice replied. “They deserve all the happiness they’ve found.”

Elysia and Declan turned their heads to find Marius, Sean, and Alfred Stone standing behind them grinning in a very self-satisfied manner. Marius had spoken first, then Sean, and finally Alfred. The F word coming from Alfred Stone was about as astonishing as the time he’d worn a sheet to the Undertaker’s Ball.

Alfred winked at them. “There’s about two hours before the closing dinner. I don’t think anyone will miss you here on the convention floor.”

Elysia stifled a giggle behind her hand. Declan laughed out loud, grabbing her by the hand and pulling her toward the exit. “C’mon, honey. When the convention chair tells you to do something, you’d better do it!”

She glanced back at the three men as she followed Declan out of the convention hall. “Thank you!” she called out to Alfred.

He waved, saying, “You’re entirely welcome!”

At the elevator, Declan grinned at her. “You don’t feel like throwing up this time, do you?” he joked.

She shook her head. “Nope. I’m so happy I could...”

Her words were cut off as Declan kissed her again.

I love you, Elysia. I have from the first moment I saw you.

I love you too, Declan. The winds have shifted. I have my dragon now, and you’re all I will ever need.

About the Author

Lex has been writing stories and poems ever since she could hold a pencil. A few years ago, she got caught up writing in an online paranormal serial story. The story was very intense and a challenge to her writing skills. As she began to write more and more, fans of the story and her blog readers began to encourage her to submit her writing. Lex lives in Orange County, California with her long haired musician husband and her teen aged daughter. Lex loves loud music, reading hot stories, reading her friends' blogs and hanging out with them, enjoys building her own computers, and has a propensity for having very weird vivid dreams about Nikki Sixx.

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She needed a drink before she contemplated the choice of partners offered by the club's patrons. As she elbowed herself a space at the end, her nose twitched. The scent of vanilla filled her senses, and her dragon suddenly itched to break free. Holy shit. Who the hell would walk into a social meat market smelling so innocent?

The smell came from her right. She wriggled in the tight quarters, trying to turn. Based on the sweet scent, she expected to see a woman. Instead, she found a tall man with midnight blue eyes smiling down at her.

"You just go right on trying to move," he quipped. "I'm enjoying it tremendously."

Eden's eyes narrowed. Every time she moved, her body rubbed up against his. Her hip dug into his groin and she could feel a slight telltale swelling there. Despite the fact that the man smelled all girly like a sugar cookie, the bulge held promise. She sniffed again. Sweet smelling. Smiling easily. No display of arrogance. A mellow and amused expression, eyes dancing with humor. Beta. He had to be. Her dragon stretched inside her, urging her to take him.

"Oh, really?" She raised one brow and wriggled against him again. The size of the ridge against her hip increased. Oh, yeah. He just might work out after all, she thought as she realized his more than adequate proportions weren't fully erect yet.

He nodded, his dark blue eyes gleaming as they raked over her from the top of her raven head to the tips of her designer boots. "Of course, we'd both enjoy it a lot more naked in my bed," he told her candidly.

Eden's pupils elongated as Blue Eyes roused her dragon. The scent of vanilla intensified.

"You don't believe in wasting time, I see." She turned, deliberately rubbing against him, breast to chest. In her boots, she almost matched his height.

He quirked a dark blond brow at her. "And you do? You can't tell me that the dragon in you isn't clawing to get at my cock."

Eden began to smile. He might not be a dragon, but he obviously knew them intimately. Good. One less thing she'd have to train him on. "You're a bold young thing, aren't you?"

He laughed. "I'm not as young as you think." His smile revealed vampire fangs.

Ghost Redeemed

By Mary Winter

Available Now from Pink Petal Books

<http://www.pinkpetalbooks.com/index.php/Bookstore/Mary-Winter/Paranormal-Romance/Ghost-Redeemed.html>

Shay's stomach flip-flopped. Looking at Kyle standing just outside her bathroom door, a boyish grin on his face, made her wonder what would happen if she invited him to join her. She'd planned on taking a shower, figuring that would be the easiest way to wash the wound on her back. But with Kyle there, she wouldn't need to go to such lengths. Then again, maybe she would anyway.

She stepped back and opened the door, suddenly nervous about her plan. "I guess you're right," she said, trying not to sound too eager. "I will need some help." Turning from him, she pulled her shirt over her head. She swore she heard Kyle's swiftly indrawn breath. She glanced into the mirror and saw the angry red gash start just below her shoulder blade to disappear beneath her bra clasp. She reached around her and unfastened the hooks. Her peach lace bra hung loosely on her shoulders, and she noticed Kyle trying hard not to look at her breasts in the mirror.

She slipped the lingerie from her shoulders. "The peroxide and some antibiotic ointment are in the medicine cabinet."

Kyle opened the mirrored panel. She watched, noticing the light glow surrounding his skin. If it weren't for that, he'd look completely normal standing in her bathroom, reaching for the brown plastic bottle of peroxide. He grabbed several cotton balls and turned his attention to her back. His movements seemed slow, as if he had to think about each action.

"This is going to sting a little. There's not much I can do about that." He unscrewed the lid of the peroxide bottle and doused a cotton ball. "Are you ready?"

"I'll be fine," she said. His fingers brushed her skin, and tiny shivers darted from the touch. Her nipples pebbled, and she resisted the urge to cover her breasts with her hands. A soft fizzing sound filled the bathroom, and then the wound stung. Shay sucked in a quick breath and gritted her teeth.

"I'm sorry." Kyle continued to dab the cotton ball on the wound.

"It's okay," Shay ground out. She reached in front of her and wrapped her fingers around the towel rod on her shower door. Clenching her fingers around it, she focused on breathing in and out to distance herself from the sting of disinfectant on her wound.

His motions slowed, and she heard the soft clunk of the bottle on the counter. The trash bag rustled as he tossed the cotton ball into it. The room closed in. She became aware of Kyle standing behind her, his body just inches from her. The thudding of her heart sounded loud in her ears. She longed to turn around and see him, but didn't, afraid of the desire she would see in his gaze. Keeping her eyes down, she waited.

He touched her. His fingers slid across her shoulder, a feather light touch against her skin. Tiny sparks danced at the contact. Telling herself he was a ghost did little good, as heavy warmth filled her limbs. His hand skimmed her side, barely touching the side of her breast. She wanted more. Him. His cock. Her lips parted.

"Kyle," she breathed.

"Shay." His other hand reached around to palm her breast, a light touch that soon had him standing against her. The ridge of his cock pressed against her buttocks.

Her knees went weak. She leaned against his strength, not wanting to get used to his warmth surrounding her. The fact he was a ghost mattered little. Some part of her mind rebelled, but she

refused to listen. Right now, still aching from the fight and heart-sore from her best friend's death, she wanted his warmth, his strength surrounding her.

She shifted her weight. Her ankle protested, and she quickly moved her weight to her good foot.

"Let me help you." His hand slid down her back, to her hip. "Turn around and wrap your legs around me."

Shay started to turn. "But you're a gh—" Words died when she saw the naked hunger in his eyes. He wanted her, his gaze sweeping over her bared breasts.

"Perfect," he whispered, covering one with his hand. He brushed a thumb across a distended nipple, and Shay closed her eyes. His free hand slid over her back, down to her ass. Pulling her against him, he urged her to wrap her leg around his waist.

She complied. The first touch of his hard cock against her coaxed a low moan from her throat. She wrapped her arms around him and brought her other leg around his waist. He easily lifted her, carrying her out of the bathroom.

"Where's your bedroom?" He glanced down the hall, before looking back into the living room.

The Purrfect Man

By Mary Winter

Available Now from Pink Petal Books

<http://www.pinkpetalbooks.com/index.php/Bookstore/Mary-Winter/Paranormal-Romance/The-Purrfect-Man.html>

“I’m sorry.”

The masculine words sounded truly remorseful, and it took Althea a moment to realize she was dreaming. “It’s okay,” she automatically replied, though she knew not who this man was or why he apologized to her. In fact, she couldn’t really see him. Instead, it seemed as if she still lay in bed, though the edges of the room seemed fuzzy. An effect of the sinus medication, she wondered, but she’d never had dreams like this before.

Gradually, her surroundings became visible. A man sat on the foot of her bed. Though he didn’t move, she sensed an inherent lithe grace in his form.

“Wha--?” she asked, coming out of a medicine-induced fog. “Who are you?”

Tawny hair crowned his head and feathered over his shoulders. His brilliant blue eyes held warmth. A straight nose divided his face, leading to the fullest, most sensuous pair of lips she’d ever seen on a man. He wore no shirt, and the view of his chest nearly took Althea’s breath away. Matching tawny hair dusted his pectorals, and then arched over a work-hardened set of abs and disappeared beneath the waistband of a gray pair of sweat pants. His feet were bare.

She blinked at the sweat pants. Until that modern piece of clothing, she expected him to be dressed in historical clothing. She didn’t know why. She saw only his body; he hadn’t even spoken yet. Still, something about his manner, the way he sat with his hands resting on his muscled thighs brought back images from a bygone era. She chalked it up to the timelessness of the dream state.

He moved closer, the efficiency in the way he inched toward her pillow reaffirming her belief that this was a man unlike any she’d met. After settling himself next to her hip, he trailed his fingers over her arm. The caress, so light, reminded her of the way she’d petted the cat on her porch.

“I’m Dante,” he said. Reaching out, he brushed his thumb against her lips. “So beautiful. So warm.” He bent over, replacing his thumb with his lips. Gently he kissed her, drawing her deeper into the dream, into him. His lips coaxed, nibbled, ate as daintily as a cat enjoying a tasty morsel. With his tongue, he traced her lower lip.

Althea parted her lips to allow him entrance. Dante’s answering moan sent warm shivers darting through her body. She wrapped her arm around him, tangling her fingers in his silky soft hair. His hard body pressed against hers, and arousal drew her nipples into tight beads. She wanted to be devoured by him, to feel his lips on every inch of her flesh. Allergies forgotten, she clung to him and slid her other hand down over his muscled back to his buttocks. This was a dream, after all.

And thank goodness it was a dream. Her body hungered for the touch of flesh against flesh. Reaching for him, curling her fingers around his biceps, something awakened deep inside. She’d ignored the months of celibacy, hadn’t really thought about them, but now, the need to make up for lost time drove her. She moaned as he deepened the kiss. Passion flared in her blood. She wanted him—her dream man. *Now.*

A quick tug pulled her shirt free of her jeans. His hand splayed across her abdomen. His touch branded her. He laid her back on the bed, tugging at her T-shirt. She released him long enough for him to pull it over her head. He unfastened her bra and slid it off her shoulders.

Althea reached for him once more. She wrapped her fingers around his hard biceps and pulled him to her.

Dante lowered his head and nibbled along her collarbone. He laved each kiss, each love bite, with a long sweep of his tongue that had her shuddering to her toes. The crisp whorls of his chest hair tickled her nipples and stomach.

She arched beneath him, her breasts begging for his touch. "Please," she whispered, unaware she voiced her plea.

Keeper

By Shaunta Grimes

Available Now

<http://www.pinkpetalbooks.com/index.php/Bookstore/Shaunta-Grimes/Paranormal-Romance/Keeper.html>

Jude Felini carefully removed all the thorns from a single, perfect yellow rose before biting the long stem. He surveyed the tree-lined street, the rows of neat four-plex apartments, making sure he was alone before his body shimmered and contracted into that of a large orange tomcat.

Clutching the rose between his teeth, he hopped from the ground onto an iron balcony railing, walked across it, jumped to a tree limb, and then up to a second story balcony. Potted plants and flowers turned the small space into a tiny rain forest. Jude loved being here and he often snuck up without the balcony's avian owner knowing.

The sexy little bird in question had once again jumped headlong into a boatload of trouble. From his position under her window, Jude watched Avery Dove wrap her arms around her slender waist and gaze at the sky. Her up-tilted heart-shaped face was unguarded, and breathtaking in its beauty. She opened the window and Jude leapt onto the sill.

Avery stumbled backward several steps away from the window, upsetting framed pictures off the table behind her, and then let loose with a string of swear words all the more colorful for coming from such a delicate woman.

Laughter rang in his head. He drew altogether too much enjoyment from yanking her chain. If he could get that personality quirk under control, maybe he'd be in Avery's bed instead of standing outside her window. He took on his human form again as he jumped from the sill to the floor. As he transformed, the rose was tossed in the air. It spun in a slow arc before it landed in his hand. He presented it to her with a formal bow.

She stood with her hands fisted on her hips, her cheeks flushed. Though she struggled to keep her gaze resolutely on his face, he caught the sweep she made of his nude body. "I swear to God, one of these days I'm going to put a collar around your neck and take you in to be neutered, Jude Felini."

Jude laughed out loud. "You don't want me neutered, Sweetheart. Trust me."

"Maybe neutered you wouldn't be such a pain in my ass." She took the flower. "Where the hell are your clothes?"

Jude raised an eyebrow and tilted his head toward the window with the tree outside, under which rested his jeans and t-shirt. "Being a pain in your ass sounds fun. Maybe we should give it a try."

"I hope you aren't here just to gloat, because I'm really not in the mood." Avery stuck her nose in the flower, but Jude saw the blush rising up from her elegant neck. No woman had ever done angry as beautifully as she did. "Go get dressed."

He leaned against her clean, white wall. Everything in her apartment was airy and light, perfectly suited for a bird. "Don't you think it'll cause a sensation if I walk down the front stairs nude?"

“So go back down the balcony. You need clothes.”

“Or you could take some of yours off.” He let his eyes slide down her body. Her hands were fisted on her hips and she was teetering on the edge of more angry than sexy. “And I’m not here to gloat. I’m here to lend support.”

Avery looked down her nose at him over the rose. “Sure you are. Stay there.”

She put the flower in water and then stalked off. Maybe needing some air, because it wasn’t like her to give into this particular argument so easily. She’d spent an entire evening pretending that he wasn’t naked before, just to keep from going down and collecting the clothing that he shed during his transformation.

Once he was dressed, Jude sat on Avery’s couch and closed his mouth before sexy-angry turned to really-angry. Avery sat next to him. He couldn’t take his eyes off of her. She was beautiful, fine boned and delicate in a way that made him want to take her in his arms to hold and protect her. But also fiery, she was a small package of dynamite with no fear, no hesitation when she went after something she wanted.

That rebellious streak was how she got into trouble this time.

King of Cats

By Jessica Quinn

Available Now

<http://www.pinkpetalbooks.com/index.php/Bookstore/Jessica-Quinn/Paranormal-Romance/King-of-Cats.html>

Rita was still on the phone when she marched out to the front desk and deposited the vase onto her desk with a thud. “Get rid of these ASAP, will you?” Mel asked. “I don’t care if you take them to the nearest cemetery or throw them in the dumpster, but I don’t want to see them when I come back out here.” Rita nodded and Mel turned and marched back into her office to retrieve their latest guest for his bath.

The bronze-furred cat was nowhere to be seen when she stepped back into her office, and she frowned. *Hiding under the couch, maybe? Most folks would be surprised at how many cats learn to recognize the word ‘bath’.* She took a few steps forward, shutting the office door behind her without a glance back so he couldn’t get out that way, and knelt down on the floor to peer under the sofa.

“You don’t really want to let the old man neuter me, do you, sweetheart?” came the purring voice from behind her. A tan, lithely-muscled arm wrapped itself around her waist even as she half-turned, ready to scream.

The eyes she found herself staring up into were copper-gold, brighter than any she’d seen outside of contact lenses. Long, straight, golden-bronze hair spilled over impossibly wide shoulders, gone the color of butterscotch from the summer sun. The broad, hairless chest was equally muscular and tapered downward to a trim, narrow waist, lean hips and a very nice—*Oh. My. God. He’s completely naked.*

Before she could force a scream past her parted lips, he grinned roguishly, eyes twinkling, and swooped in, mouth closing over hers. His tongue speared straight into her mouth to tangle with hers, his lips roaming possessively over her own. A flush of heat shot from her lips all the way down to her groin, igniting an ember of liquid flame there that slicked her panties. Eyes wide, she watched the stranger’s nostrils twitch, almost as if he could smell her arousal, and even as she turned the rest of the way to face him, he lowered her to the floor.

Her nipples had gone hard enough to cut diamonds, pressing achingly against the white lace bra she wore. He undid the buttons on her blouse with eye-watering speed, fanning the lapels of the shirt open.

“Wait, no!” she gasped, pulling free for a second. Her knees went weak, and she swallowed hard at the rush of heat through her body, consumed by a white-hot lust she hadn’t felt since...well, ever. *Jason never made me feel like this!* Something hot and hard nudged her thigh and she glanced down, stifling a gasp at the sight. His erection was huge, large enough to nudge the soft flesh of her belly.

He leaned in close before she could get a better look, arrowing in to nip her shoulder and the side of her throat. She could feel his hands slip below her waist, working to undo the button and zipper of the slacks she wore, and she grabbed his hands, temporarily stilling them.

“Who...who the hell are you?” she gasped, desperately trying to maintain even a thin façade of sanity against the sensations that swirled turbulently through her hungry flesh.

He grinned again, wide, licking his lips, those emerald eyes hot with desire. “Don’t you know, sweetheart?” he teased, sliding one finger under the waistband of her panties and drawing a fiery line from her left hip to the right. “After all, *you* were the one who saved me when that car hit me.”

It made no sense whatsoever. She spent half a second trying to puzzle out the mystery behind his words; then his mouth sought hers again. With waning determination, she grabbed his hands—again— pulling them away from her pants. She could hear the stranger making a deep rumbling sound in his throat and chest. It took her a second to realize what it meant.

Purring. He’s purring.