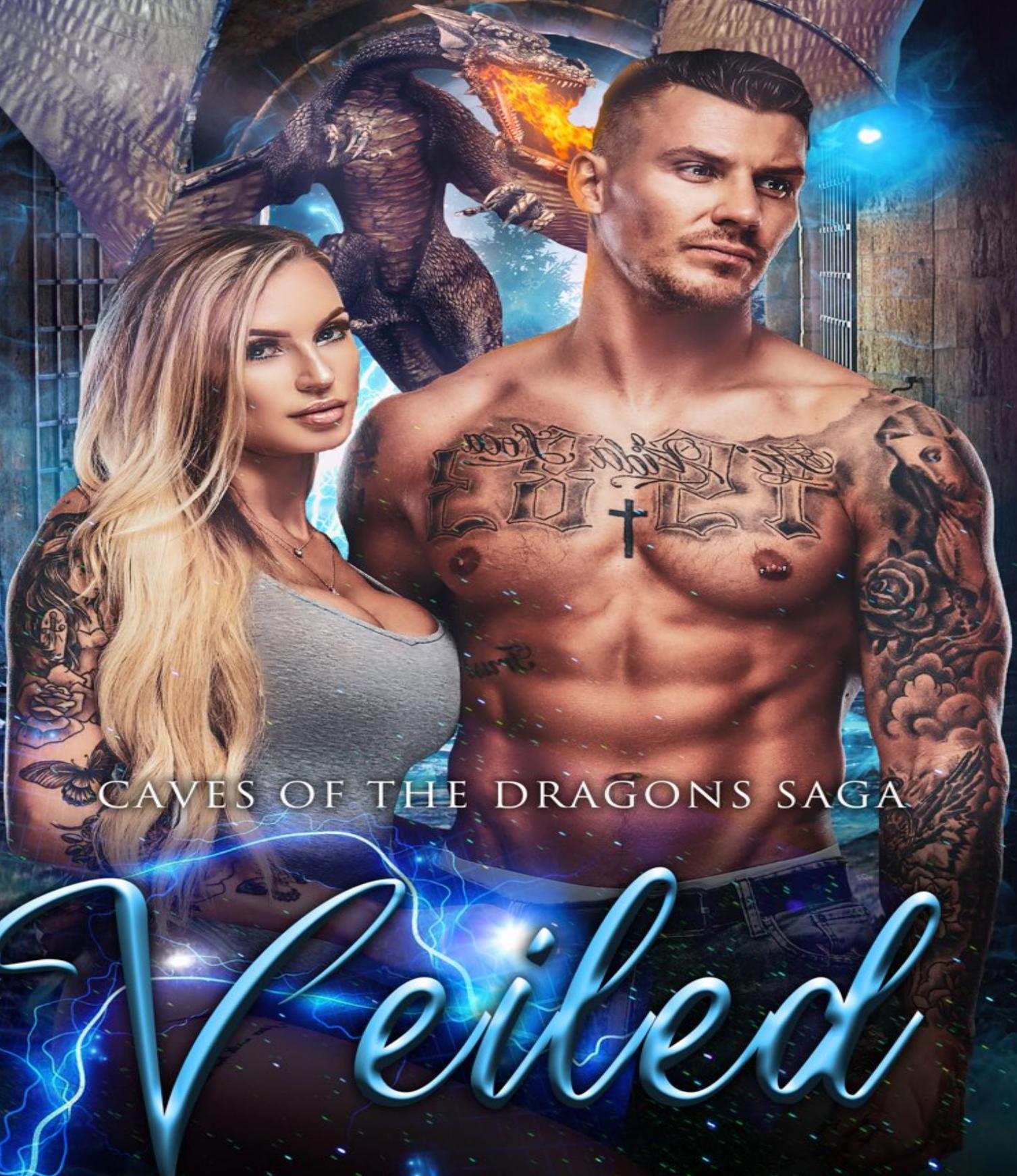


DAMIAN LA FLEUR



CAVES OF THE DRAGONS SAGA

Veiled

BOOK ONE

DAMIAN LA FLEUR



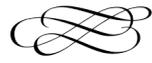
CAVES OF THE DRAGONS SAGA

Veiled



VEILED

CAVES OF THE DRAGONS SAGA: CHAPTER ONE



DAMIAN H. LA FLEUR

REDD ARROW PRESS

*Pou Fanmi mwen
Julian Dwann
Nou renmen ou pou tout tan*

CAVES OF THE DRAGONS

Continue the Series:

A Dragon-Shifting Romance

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LOGO



Hello!

Welcome and thank you so much for taking the time to purchase 'Veiled'.

I hope you'll enjoy this short read.

I look forward to keeping you up-to-date with the upcoming release of my new series, Caves of The Dragons, and all the other books I have planned.

Meanwhile, thanks again for being here and enjoy this time to yourself for a brief escape!

Warmest wishes
Damian La Fleur

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BEGINNINGS



Staring ahead, right at the very place that once brought me joy as much as it caused me pain, I inhale sharply in an attempt to control myself from bursting into tears, in front of my clever son. Even with my hands gripping the steering of my bright yellow, hand-me-down sedan car, I still struggle with control.

Part of me wants to scream at being back here. Another part that has discarded its shame a long time ago wants to turn the car back around and drive as far away from this miserable town as possible. The part of me that managed to instill enough courage in me to bring us back here wants me to suck it up since I literally have no other choice.

I'm seriously contemplating listening to the part of me that wants me to run and never look back when I feel a hand rest on my tense one.

"It's okay; we can go back if you want." The angelic voice that yanks me out of my nightmares every other night whispers to me.

I turn, coming face-to-face with striking blue eyes, the same ones that haunt me, but I know these are different as

much as they are the same. This is my son, not my enemy.

I manage a smile that I hope doesn't make me look constipated and wipe the sweat from my brows while squeezing his hand in reassurance with my other hand.

"No, Baby, I'm fine. We are going to be just fine," I promise, not just to him, but to myself as well. I'll be damned if I let this town break me again as it did before. "Come on," I urge him out of the car and step out after him.

It's a good thing the house we're about to settle in still has everything we need, and we have my small car, or we'd be living in a barren house with nothing but our measly clothing.

"Wow, it's beautiful," Sam exclaims, as he pushes up his glasses a little.

I can't help the pang in my chest every time I look at him and realize he is becoming more and more of his father's spitting image. Except for his pale skin, which is beginning to even out and become more tanned, everything from his thick dark curls, searing blue eyes, and strong tall build—even at the age of eight—is all his father: the very man whose atrocities had me running from here in the first place.

I shake my head; I refuse to allow him into my head, not this time and not ever again.

"I know," I reply to my son with a nostalgic grin, as I take in what he's seeing.

The house I grew up in looks no different than how my father and I left it. Sturdy and homey, its beauty is incomparable, even though it stands alone in the deep of the town, just miles away from the dangerous mountains and caves up ahead.

I have heard stories about screams and screeches being heard from those caves, where no sane human dared to venture, but instead of being frightened when my dad warned me against ever going that way, I had imagined what it would be like to go on that adventure. However, I'm older now and know better. Those tales have been told to every child in this town to discourage them from going up the steep mountains and falling to their ultimate death.

“Can we go up there?”

My smile falls when I realize Sam hadn't been talking about the house but the mountains and caves encased in thick fog, illuminated by the full moon. “No, Baby, it's too dangerous up there. The slopes are too steep and slippery for anyone to reach even half the way.”

He pouts in disappointment but nods anyway, and I know he will obey me. That's one of the things I'm grateful for in my son—he always listens. Even at a tender age, he seemed to understand how much of a burden I carried on my shoulders, and he always made things easier, one way or the other. I couldn't have asked for a better son.

“Come on, let's go in.” I lead him onto the porch, and he breaks his gaze away from the entrancing mountains.

“What about the boxes?” He turns towards the car.

“Don't worry about them; we'll get them tomorrow. Right now, Mommy is tired from the drive and needs to rest.” Thankfully we ordered a large pizza on our way here when it was becoming clear we wouldn't arrive until late in the night.

My handsome boy shrugs. “Okay.” He then turns to me with a devious smile, and I already know what he's about to

say, so I beat him to it.

“Dibs on the biggest room,” I cry out in laughter.

“Mom,” he whines, his voice echoing through the woods.
“No fair.”

“Sorry, buddy, but I win.” I ruffle his hair, because unlike most growing kids who loathe the gesture, it calms my Sam down.

“No, whoever gets there first wins,” he says, sticking his tongue out at me, as he takes to his heels and runs into the house.

Of course, I run after him too, the clatter of our feet and raucous laughter filling the empty house with the warmth it has been denied for so long.

“I’m going to get you,” I growl playfully and run after him into the master bedroom, tackling him on the king-sized bed, as I tickle him without holding back. Soon we’re both filled with exhaustion, and we lay, side by side, trying to catch our breath.

“Is it okay if I sleep beside you tonight?” Sam asks, his blue eyes pleading.

“Of course, Baby,” I smile with relief because I know if he hadn’t asked, I would have. Without my father here to protect me, my fear of this town threatens to devour me. “We’re going to be just fine,” I mutter to my already sleeping child.

Eyes fixated on the ceiling, in the room that once belonged to my father, I decide to face whatever ridicule I know is coming for my son and me.

NIGHTMARES



I know I'm having a dream, and I know it'll end with me screaming my lungs out and jolting awake, covered in my own sweat, but I am unable to do anything but watch it play out.

The glare of the rainbow does not succeed in discouraging me from taking in all its glory, instead, I revel in it, smiling and hoping it's my mom watching me from heaven. Even though I have never met the woman, seeing as she died during my birth, I know from the way my dad speaks about her that she was a woman filled with love and joy.

I'm still daydreaming and fantasizing about what it would be like to have my family whole again, when a ball flies right at me, hitting me in the arm. I am thankful for my quick instincts in blocking my face. I'm about to tell off whoever was careless enough to throw the ball when I am stunned into silence.

Zion Braxton stands before me, all smiles, and my anger deflates into a flicker of useless nothingness. He pushes his hair back, a gesture I have come to realize as habit after years of watching him, like a creep.

“Hey, I’m sorry. Are you okay?” he asks, and I think I’m melting. His eyebrows furrow in confusion “I’m Zion. I don’t think we’ve met.” He stretches out his hand for me to take.

Of course we haven’t met, I think. Boys like him don’t talk to nerdy, unpopular girls like me. It takes me a lot of fumbling—and an embarrassingly red face—to reply, “No, we . . . uh . . . haven’t. I’m Nora, Nora Payne.”

The dream, memory, or nightmare . . . I have no idea what to call it anymore, shifts into another scene: the very one that makes me feel like I’m drowning, and there’s nothing to hold on to.

Heavy breath on my face, as well as the crushing weight on me, causes me to panic, but as much as I try and struggle, I can’t fight it off. . . . I can’t fight him off.

“Zion, please . . . no . . . help,” I scream, pushing the boy I once deluded myself to be perfect away from me, to no avail. With tears streaming down my face, I am powerless against his inhuman strength as he has his way with me . . . over and over again until I am nothing but a shell of myself.

“Mom!”

Sam’s voice is my savior. Somehow, I find myself off the hard bed and away from the monster, my son’s hand in mine, but things don’t go according to plan . . . they never do.

Our escape is cut short by a loud, scary screech that shockingly projects from Zion’s open mouth.

“Run, Sam, run,” I scream at my son.

“Mom, Mom . . .”

“Mom, wake up . . . please, wake up.”

I jerk awake, wide-eyed and covered in sweat, and when I meet my son’s worried gaze, I don’t hesitate in wrapping

him in my arms, no doubt close to crushing him in relief. “You’re safe, Baby,” I say, as I cover his face in kisses.

“I heard scary screeches coming from the mountains,” Sam mutters.

“Oh, it’s okay. It’s just the wind. There must be a storm coming,” I assure him. I heard sounds coming from the mountains back when I lived here with my dad too, so I know it’s nothing to be worried about.

An hour later, the boxes are all in, and we have managed to rid the house of dust and cobwebs that have gathered over the years. I decide against ordering more takeout food, partly because I’m trying to reduce Sam’s intake of greasy foods, and partly because the minute the delivery man brings our food, everyone in this darn small town will know I’m back.

After successfully convincing a grumpy Sam to follow me to the grocery store, we head out, me in my black hoodie, dark ripped jeans, and black boots, with the hope that I’ll blend in enough to not be noticed. Of course, I momentarily forget the kind of attention my bright yellow sedan draws.

I spot at least five familiar faces in the middle of my sing-along with Sam, as I drive us to the store, but I refuse to be agitated, secretly grateful that my son isn’t too cool for dorky car sing-alongs that distract me from anxiety-inducing situations.

My hope that everyone is now at their various workplaces and not at the familiar store since it’s Monday. That vanishes when I spot Maya Reid—one of the petty girls who made my life miserable back in high school—at the counter, a baby strapped to her, as she chatters obnoxiously to the girl behind the counter.

I roll my eyes and dash quickly behind one of the tall shelves after grabbing a cart. Sam stares at me like I've gone crazy, the same way he did when he saw me in my "ninja" outfit.

"Shut up," I retort childishly, and he grins, shaking his head at my quirkiness.

As soon as Maya exits the store, I heave a sigh of relief and start to get the things I need. I'm so lost in shopping that it takes me a while to realize that Sam is no longer beside me.

Great. I have lost my eight-year-old child.

"Sam, Sam . . ." I whisper-yell, trying to draw as little attention as possible from the few people in the store, "Sam, I swear—"

"Hey Mom, look what I found!" The "missing child" appears out of nowhere, clutching a carton of his favorite cereal in his hands.

I glare, unimpressed at him, before sighing and taking the box from his hands and transferring it into my cart. I am never able to resist those dauntingly beautiful eyes of his.

He starts to run off again, and I try to make a grab for him, but fail. Thankfully, he doesn't go far, as he runs into a man, who saves him from taking a fall.

"Oh my God, thank you," I say, with my head down. "Sam, I told you to stay put," I go on, to chastise my overexcited son.

"Nora?"

That voice . . .

Every bone in my body is against me lifting my head, but for some reason, I fight against them and come face-to-face

with the very blue eyes that destroyed me completely.
“Zion.” My voice drips with venom.

OLD WOUNDS



“MATE.”

The beast in me rouses, yelling that same word with so much vigor and joy that I don't realize the very word pops out of my mouth.

“What?” The beautiful woman standing before me tilts her head in confusion, and I quickly shake mine, in an attempt to calm my overexcited monster down.

I dip my hands in my pockets, trying to quell my nervousness, as I take in the perfection that is Nora Payne. My first love—and the very woman that ruined me. How is it possible that after eight years of searching for my fated mate, she turns out to be Nora?

“Uh, I . . . what are you doing back here?” I ask, like a dumb fool.

“What are *you* doing back here?” she retorts, placing her hand on her hip, a gesture that momentarily distracts me and has me focusing on the delectable curves Nora seems to have developed over the years. “Answer me, Zion,” she demands.

I raise a brow. It seems the once stick-thin tomboy has also developed an attitude. She seems nothing like the sweet

girl my world once revolved around. “This is my town,” I deadpan. “And I’ll be damned if I let you run me out of it again,” I add silently, the anger from the past years rising within me, despite the fact that she is my mate.

Her beautiful golden curls fall reverently around her delicate face and brown eyes pierce into my soul—mirroring the same hatred and fear they once held for me. Even to this day, I have no idea what I did to Nora Payne that changed the look of love she once had for me into this. Then again, maybe I had a mistaken teenage infatuation with something more, the powerlessness my love for her made me feel.

She’s about to curse me out; I can tell because she’s always had an expressive face. That’s how I knew back then that she truly wanted nothing more to do with me. Her hurtful remarks are interrupted by a voice . . . the voice of the boy that ran into me.

“Mom, is he a friend?” The boy tugs at her hoodie, and I slowly take a look at the little bespectacled thing.

“Ours!” the beast shouts again, and I feel the world crumbling at my feet.

My beast is right, and as soon as I turn to look at Nora in disbelief, her expressive brown eyes confirm my suspicion.

“How dare you?” I scream at her, unbothered by the fact that we were standing in the middle of a grocery store, even though it’s cleared out, and we’re the only ones in here except the cashier and Alana. “How dare you keep him from me? My son . . . and don’t you even deny it because we both know you can’t.” Even without my beast screaming in my head that he’s ours, the boy is a spitting image of what I looked like when I was his age.

Contrary to a hysterical state, the woman before me remains composed, like I didn't just discover she has kept my son a secret for the past eight years, and I'm convinced she is the devil herself.

How is this woman my mate? I ask myself again, and get no answer.

“No, Baby, he's not a friend. He's a monster.” She glares at me, disregarding my question: her child . . . my child . . . our child?

Everything within me deflates, and I'm taken back to the day after Nora and I made love for the first time. I had been shocked to see her and her father at my parents' home, but happy at the same time, because of what we had shared the previous day and how it would change our relationship for the better.

What I hadn't expected was the fear that clouded her eyes the moment she set them on me—how she continuously screamed “Monster” until she fainted from exhaustion. I had never been more scared in my life.

Nothing remained the same after that.

I scoff in disbelief, refusing to let her see how much her word hurt, especially since she was saying it to my son. “Are you still going on about that crap? Even now?”

“Crap?!” she cries, while the boy continues to study our interaction. “You raped me, you bastard.” Her chest heaves, and tears fall from her eyes. “I don't know what I was thinking coming back to this godforsaken town, but seeing as you are a full-grown man now, I'd think you would at least own up to what you did, Zion.”

The sound of my name on her lips is heavenly, but I can't dwell on that. I can only play over what she's saying, a hundred times in my head. "And I'd think you would have stopped spreading fucking lies about me by now, Nora." I take a step towards her, my eyes blazing with anger, and I soon regret it, when she flinches and immediately takes several steps away from me, with my son in her hand.

"You stay away from me, Zion Braxton—you hear me? Stay the hell away from me," she swears, none of us seeming to care that we have an eight-year-old boy as an audience.

"Nora, please . . ." I don't know what I'm begging for exactly, but I just want to erase that look of fear in her eyes badly. Why won't she believe me? "Nora, I didn't—"

"Nora Payne?"

"Alana Sibyl." Nora turns to the redhead that has appeared behind me.

"You're back in town," my girlfriend says, all smiles, as she wraps her arm around my waist.

I see the look of betrayal as soon as Nora comprehends what is going on. Does she even have the right to feel that way? She's the one who betrayed me first.

However, I don't have a chance to tell her that before she turns on her heel and runs out of the store like she's being chased . . . taking my son with her.

FLIGHT



“**S**he’s your mate,” Alana deadpans, with a small frown on her face, and I don’t bother to deny it. She always has a knack for knowing things, even before anyone else does. “What are you going to do?” she asks, with a resolved sigh.

I swallow, pushing my hair back in frustration. “I don’t know,” I turn to her. “We have a son, Alana—a son she’s hidden from me all this time.”

“What?!” Alana’s eyes bulge out of their sockets as she screams at me. “Zion, there’s something you should—” her voice picks up a tone of urgency, but the sound of squealing tires and a shrill scream causes me to tune her out.

I know where that scream came from, and I don’t hesitate in running out of the store, the sight before me causing me to pray to every god I know for the safety of my entire world.

Right on the deserted street, just outside the store, is my mate and son, standing in the middle of it, while an out of control truck rushes at them. There’s no time for me to think or wait for a way out, so I do the one thing I’m sure will cost me later.

I unleash my beast.

One minute, I'm standing there, watching the two most important people in my life almost get crushed by a truck, and the next I'm a full-fledged dragon, screeching in horror, as I fly up to them and whisk them out of harm's way.

The truck hits me anyway, with them in my hands, and we're tumbling onto the ground a few inches away. I don't waste time in breaking their fall with my hard, scaly body. I let out another angry screech and watch, as Nora faints, while the boy stares at me in fascination.

I reel the beast back in, and I'm once again a man, bare skinned this time. I gather Nora into my arms, order our son to follow me, and rush back into the store.

"What the hell were you thinking? Anybody could have seen you," Alana rages at me while the cashier watches me with disapproval.

I ignore the both of them. "No one did."

The two women huff in annoyance. "And the boy?" Alana asks, glaring at my son, who is now trying to shake his mother awake.

I ignore her again and turn to the cashier. "Ester, please . . . do something," I plead, the sight of the bleeding cut on Nora's face causing me more pain than I would have imagined.

Ester sighs, turning the store's open sign to closed and closing the window shutters. After all, as the town witch, she has no choice but to do as I say since her purpose is to serve the dragon alpha. I watch as she gently places a finger on the cut on Nora's forehead and, within seconds, it fades into nothing, leaving only a trail of dried blood.

Alana holds out a pair of shorts for me; she must have gone to the car to grab them. I take them from her and wipe off the blood before putting them on, ignoring Alana's disgusted look.

"Take her home; all she needs is rest. She'll be fine." Ester smiles gently at me.

I nod gratefully. "Go home," I tell Alana, who continues to glare at my son angrily. "Now." I instill enough power in my tone that causes her and Ester to shiver and lower their eyes. My son continues to stare at me without so much as a flinch. Good, he has alpha blood too.

I shuffle out the door with Nora in my arms, our son following closely behind me. The truck that almost killed them lies in scattered ruins from hitting my beast, but the driver is nowhere to be found. Alana must have taken care of it.

"Is my mom going to be okay?" a tiny voice asks me as I proceed to my car; Nora's is too small and would hardly fit all three of us comfortably.

I gently lay his mother on the backseat of my car before turning to crouch before the boy "What's your name?" I ask him.

"Samuel, but everybody calls me Sam. You can too." He shrugs.

A small smile appears on my lips. She named him after her father. "Sam, your mother is going to be alright," I assure him and guide him into the car, by his mother's side.

We're halfway to the familiar road that leads to Nora's family home, when Sam speaks again. "Is that why my mom

called you a monster? Because you turn into a dragon?” he asks innocently.

“No, your mom doesn’t know . . .” I start to say, but come to an enlightening halt.

What if she did? Is that what happened? I start to wonder. Had Nora somehow found out I am a dragon shifter? Was that why she lied about me raping her to everyone back then and kept calling me a monster?

“It’s you on the mountains, isn’t it? Will I be able to turn into one too?” Sam continues to ask, and I start to think the boy is a genius.

If he could have figured it out, only minutes after meeting me, who’s to say his mother hadn’t when we were sixteen?

I am unable to answer his numerous questions, instead, I just tell him to wait until his mother is awake to explain everything to him.

Sure enough, when Nora wakes up, just seconds after lying her gently on the bed in what must have been her father’s room, she screams at me and orders me to leave.

I walk out the door with heavy heart, just as I had the night I snuck into her room to convince her I didn’t do what she accused me of.

Fate is not always a kind “Friend” . . . only I would have a mate that completely hates my guts.

REUNIONS



*I*t's been a week since I angrily sent Zion out of my house, and I'm not sure if that means out of my life too, especially now that he knows about his son. Still, I am unable to get over what I saw in front of the grocery store that day, and I'm still debating whether it was my mind playing tricks on me or if Zion had, indeed, turned into a full-grown dragon.

Unlike me, my subconscious seems to have accepted that it had, in fact, happened, and my nightmares have slowly morphed into Zion becoming a dragon, just at the last minute, before I wake up screaming.

So to speak, I haven't been getting enough sleep, and it doesn't help that Sam is so accepting of everything. He keeps asking when he's going to be allowed to visit his father. How he figured that out is beyond me because I don't think Zion would have disrespected me by telling him while I was unconscious. Then again, I didn't think the man was going to rape me either. Sam must have been paying attention at the store.

It's still funny how he so vehemently denies ever forcing himself on me when the memory is still as fresh in my mind as it was eight years ago. Why won't he just admit it? Could there be something holding him back? Or someone?

It hadn't escaped my notice how Alana Sibyl had wrapped her arms around him possessively back at the store. It figures that Zion's current girlfriend was the most beautiful girl in high school back then, and she still is. The Adonis of a man always got with the prettiest girl; it had surely come as a shock when he showed his interest in me all those years back. I was always waiting for the other shoe to drop, convinced he just wanted to have sex with me and move on—surely enough, it dropped.

It would have helped if his girlfriend was the mean girl from high school or someone I don't know, instead of the one girl in town that had actually believed and supported me when I told everyone what Zion had done.

Well, it would seem she no longer did since she's now with him.

I taste bile in the back of my throat and momentarily hate myself for being jealous that Alana has what is mine . . . or what was anyway.

I had done so well keeping Zion out of my mind until I saw him again. He's still as perfect as I once thought him to be, at least physically, and like a moth to the flame, I can't help but be drawn to him.

Eventually, my son's surly mood convinces me to take him to see his father. Zion and I might have our history, as dark as it is, but our son deserves to know his father, and frankly, I've grown tired of keeping them apart.

So one morning, I drive Sam down the familiar street to Zion's house. I know he still lives with his parents, alongside his other two brothers, because I did a little research of my own. I want to know what I'm getting myself into before I dive in.

I feel my hands shake, as I raise a fist to knock on the door, while Sam jumps up and down excitedly beside me. I don't even have the strength to warn him to behave himself.

The door flies open to reveal a five feet two beautiful woman, dressed in a modest blue gown, with her dark hair swept graciously atop her head.

"Hello, how may I help . . . ?" I know that she realizes who I am because her eyes widen, and she lets out a gasp. "Oh my God, Nora, is that you?" She reaches out for me, and I smile nervously. The last time I saw this woman, she was crying and begging me to take back all I said about her son, unable to believe what he was capable of.

I freeze when she hugs me fiercely; surely she must hate me for ruining her family's reputation?

"Zion told us everything," she says and lets me go. It doesn't take long for her eyes to find Sam, who has suddenly become shy, and is now hiding halfway behind my skirt. "Is this my grandson?"

I nod helplessly. Janet Braxton is a good woman, and I hold nothing against her.

"Oh, he's such an angel," she smiles and makes to hug him, pausing for my permission. I simply shrug.

Damn, where did all my energy go today?

Sam is all smiles when she envelopes him in her warmth and tells him to call her "Nana."

Tears fall from Janet's eyes, and I start to feel guilty, but it soon evaporates when she says, "I forgive you, Nora."

I fume, ready to tell her off and let her know she's the one that needs my forgiveness, but I am unable to because Zion, along with his father and brothers, choose to walk in at that very moment.

"Nora? What are you doing here?" a shocked Zion asks. "I . . . mean . . . you're here," he rephrases.

I sigh helplessly. "I can't let what happened between us stop my . . . our son from getting to know his father . . ." I raise a finger to stop him when he starts to interrupt. "Provided that we, um, have a talk about . . . everything," I say meaningfully. I have no idea if his parents know he can change into a dragon, and for some reason, I don't want to get him in trouble with his family.

"Of course, Nora." He comes to stand before me, but when he moves to take my hand, I pull away.

"Okay," I nod, hoping our "talk" doesn't end up with us screaming in each other's face.

RELAPSE



To say I'm shocked that Nora wants us to talk about everything that has happened is an understatement, but here she is in my room, seated on my bed while the rest of my family keeps Sam company. With their excitement at the sudden existence of a grandson and nephew, I have no doubt the boy is already being spoiled.

I watch Nora take in my room from my standing position by the door. I know better than to sit or stand anywhere close to her, especially since I'm still nursing the hurt of my mate pulling away from me.

"It's different," she says, and she isn't wrong. My room no longer has offensive and childish posters of half-naked woman or sports players. "Do they know . . . that you can change into . . . ?"

It's just like Nora to get straight to the point. "A dragon? Yes, we are all dragon shifters . . . well, except my mom. For some reason, female dragon shifters are really rare."

Nora sucks in a sharp breath; if I had my way, she would have found out in a better manner, but what's done is done.

“For how long—what does this even mean?” she asks, and I can tell she has a hard time believing any of this is real.

I take a seat on the chair by the desk, facing her, pretending not to notice her flinch at my movement, even though it pains my heart. “The world isn’t just black and white, Nora, there are other supernatural beings out there, and my family just happens to come from a line of dragon shifters. Our first change happens when we turn eighteen.” That’s why I didn’t know she was my mate back then; we had left town when I was sixteen due to her accusations.

As if realizing something, panic spreads on her face. “Oh God, does that mean is Sam too?”

I swallow. “Yes, but I promise you that we’ll help him through it.”

She nods, her folded hands gripping her flowing skirt tightly. “Okay.”

“Does he have bad eyesight? Because he’s not supposed to.”

She shakes her head. “He just likes Harry Potter a little too much; the glasses don’t even have lenses,” she chuckles slightly.

I raise a brow. Great, it seems like we’re having a breakthrough. “What happened to Samuel?” I dare to ask but immediately hate myself when her eyes become teary at the mention of her father.

“He died . . . a heart attack,” she snuffles, and I wish I can comfort her. She continues when I think she’s not going to say anymore. “He couldn’t take everyone speaking badly about me anymore, so we moved. Since he got fired and didn’t get any recommendation because everyone thought

we had set out to ruin your family, he had to start working day jobs. We didn't have enough, but the three of us were happy . . . until I got a call one day from his boss. He just fell unconscious and never woke up again."

She's full on crying now, and I don't think twice about it before going to sit by her side to hug her. It doesn't take long for her to relax in my arms, and I revel in the joy of my mate's body pressing against mine. Should I even be thinking about what it will feel like to be inside her again when she's here mourning her father?

She pulls back before my lustful thoughts go any further, but not completely away, so I'm able to caress her hair and wipe the tears away from her cheek.

Electricity sizzles, as we stare into each other's eyes, and neither of us is able to deny the connection we feel. Before I know it, I'm leaning towards her, and when I see no show of resistance; I let my lips find hers.

The kiss starts slow at first, but soon enough, I am completely bewitched by the softness of her salty lips and the gentle moan she's trying to keep from rising at the back of her throat. Her hand reaches up to tug at my hair, and I feel myself growing in my pants.

Suddenly, I can't get close enough to her, and I'm hoisting her up onto my lap.

Her moans are becoming louder now, as she slowly rocks against me, while my hand travels up her skirt, lifting it up to graze her milky thighs. I don't have to check, but when my fingers find her panty-covered crotch, I confirm that she is soaking wet for me.

"God, I've missed you in my arms, Nora."

The connection breaks, and she jumps out of my lap, as if she can't believe she was ever in it.

"Nora," I reach for her, and she takes three more steps back. I shove my hair back in frustration. "Why won't you let me near you, Nora? Please, this . . . this is killing me," I bare my soul to her.

She stares at her feet. "You have a girl . . . Alana . . ."

Oh. "Alana is nothing." I should feel bad for saying it, but I don't—even Alana knows she can't compete with a dragon's fated mate. "You, Nora, you're everything to me. Every dragon shifter has a fated mate, Nora, and that's who you are to me. I didn't realize it back then because I hadn't made the shift yet, but I know now. That's why I never seemed to be able to stop loving you."

She looks shocked, and I know it's because I just told her I've never stopped loving her. She takes a step towards me and then another before coming to a halt.

"Be honest with me, Zion, please . . ." I know what's coming. "That night . . . you raped me, didn't you?"

I close the distance between us and place both palms on her cheeks. "Nora, I would never do that to you." I hope she can see the truth in my eyes, but as soon as I say those words, I know I've lost her . . . again.

"I'll try to be civil with you, Zion, for the sake of our son. That's all there's ever going to be between us," she says with resolve, before marching out of the room, stomping on my bleeding heart as she goes.

WHISPERER



The following days go by, and nothing much has changed between Zion and me except that I drop Sam off to his parents' manor every weekend so that father and son can spend quality time together.

We barely speak. There's nothing to talk about unless he admits what he did in the past. However, the memory of his eyes holding mine and begging me to believe him flashes briefly in my mind.

Why is he so insistent on the fact that he didn't do it? Had Zion suffered some sort of memory loss between that night and the following morning? It is highly unlikely, and I'm beginning to hate him more for almost convincing me that he is innocent.

Still, every time I see him, I can't help but want to be close to him. Our kiss is still fresh in my head, like it happened just seconds ago, and I can't deny that he is an incredible father to Sam; I've seen them together. If only he will just admit what he did, then maybe we could . . .

No, Zion and I are done, and as much as he insists that he and Alana are over, I still want nothing to do with that man.

Despite the fact that I still crave his touch, I know it'll only dredge up my fear of him and memories of what happened that night.

I heave the grocery bags out of my car and start to head up to my empty house, as it is one of those weekends when Sam is at Zion's, when everything suddenly goes silent.

A weird feeling overshadows me, and I'm sure I've felt this way before, but I can't put my finger on it. I am suddenly immobilized, lost in a trance, and can't help but obey the mesmerizing voice that pierces the silence and orders me to follow.

The bags fall from my hands, and before I know, I'm going in a different direction—right into the woods and towards the same dangerous mountains I've warned my son about. Deep into the thick woods, the mountains closer to my line of sight than ever, I see a puffing dragon, laying flat on the thorny ground, but somehow, I know it's not Zion. Still, I continue towards it, and it doesn't take me long to see a redhead, Alana, standing by its side.

“Get on.” I quickly recognize her mesmerizing voice as the one that urged me to come into the woods.

I don't have it in me to defy her; I'm completely powerless, and I do as she says, climbing onto the dragon while she follows behind. Before I know it, we're flying in the air, towards the caves in the mountains.

It isn't until we're inside one of the caves, the dragon long wandering off, leaving just Alana and me. I'm released from the trance, and I begin to panic.

“What . . . what did you do to me?” I ask, fearing what her answer might be and watch, as she throws her head back in

tinkling laughter, her fiery red hair falling delicately around her gorgeous face.

“I take it Zion didn’t tell you about me?” She grins. “Well, that all works out for me then, don’t you think?”

“What?” I repeat, wondering if this woman has suddenly gone crazy.

“I’m what they call a whisperer. All I have to do is whisper the words to you, and I’ll have you doing whatever I say,” she explains with pride, and my eyes widen in understanding; I hadn’t come here on my own accord.

“What do you want with me?” I boldly demand.

Her grinning face turns into a glare, and she walks towards where I’m crouched in the dark corner of the cave. “If only you had just stayed away, I would have had him all to myself. Instead you came back with his son—as his fated mate—when you can’t even appreciate an alpha dragon.” She bares her teeth at me, rage and pure hatred shining in her clear gray eyes.

“You can have him all to yourself, Alana, I don’t want him . . . not after what he did,” I say, more to myself than to her. Do I really not want Zion? The mocking voice in my head loudly disagrees, reminding me of how I had brought myself to orgasm last night whilst thinking about him.

She shakes her head and sighs. “Oh, I wish I could believe you, I really do, but now that he knows you’re his mate, it’s only a matter of time before you’re back together, and not even my whispers will stop you this time. The only solution is to get rid of you.”

My brows furrow. “Wait, what do you mean by ‘this time?’” I vaguely remember getting a déjà vu feeling when

she used her powers to call me into the woods. I have definitely felt her use them on me before, but I can't . . .

Alana is grinning widely now, her set of white teeth bared at me, as she claps and jumps in excitement, waiting for me to figure it out.

“You silly trick!” I scream at her.

With a smirk, she says, “It took you long enough.”

And suddenly, like a veil is lifted, I remember everything.

FATED MATES



*N*ora Payne is a goddess, unlike anyone I've ever seen before, and I've been dating girls since I turned fourteen. Still, none of them hold a candle to her, and I love how she's shyly trying to cover her body from me with her hands.

"You are so beautiful, Nora Payne." I stare into those pretty eyes, brushing her hair slightly away from her face, hoping she will continue to smile at me the way she now is forever. "Are you sure about this?" I ask her for the umpteenth time, when she gently cups my jaw, and she nods.

"I want you," she whispers.

We've been dating for six months now, and with any other girl, I definitely would have had sex numerous times, but Nora is different. Somehow, I can feel it, and I don't want to ruin what we have by forcing her into something she isn't ready for.

Neither of us expected to end up in bed now, but we have been heavily making out since the start of Maya Reid's house party, and somehow, we have ended up in one of the pretty head cheerleader's guest rooms.

If it was up to me, the first time I make love to Nora will be in a place that means something to both of us, not Maya's parents'

impersonal guest room; but when Nora's hips impatiently rise up, lining her body against my body, I know it is no longer up to me.

I lower my eager lips to hers, and we kiss each other with a slow burning passion like I have never experienced with no other person before now. Just holding Nora sets my entire soul on fire and my emotions are running wild like unbridled horses on the open prairie. As a man, I am supposed to have complete and utter control of myself but right now I feel utterly and completely helpless in Nora's arms. There's absolutely is no other place on earth I want to be other than right here with "My Love...Nora."

With each passing caress of her physique, tons of stress just seems to evaporate right of out of my person. For once, the problems of the world do not exist or at least are of no consequence to me while my beloved Nora showers me with her affection and attention. Man...if this not heaven; then I do not know what one would call heaven.

SUDDENLY, I hear "Zion . . .

I LOVE YOU,"

She tells me, and I don't hesitate to say it back to her. I'm going to spend the rest of my life with this girl, I tell myself. I don't care if I might have a mate out there; Nora Payne is everything I want—and more.

I don't know when I doze off, but when I wake up, Nora is gone. At first I think she must have left for home since it's close to her curfew, and her dad tends to worry; until I see her the following morning at my parents' house, with pain and hatred in

her eyes, as she ruins the memory of our beautiful night together with her accusations.

Nora is in trouble. I can feel it.

That's the thing with fated mates. We may not have bonded by me giving her my mark and tying her to me forever, but I can still feel her emotions like they are mine. Right now, Nora is apprehensive and afraid.

I pick up my phone and make a call to my brother, Logan, who I have ordered to keep watch over her since I knew she was back in town. That way, I know she's always protected.

"Brother, she's gone." Logan's words travel with searing pain into my heart, and before I know it, I'm screeching like hell, so close to burning the whole manor down into ashes with my beast's flame.

Thankfully, Sam is in the garden with my mother, helping her tend to her flowers.

"Zion, what is it?" My father asks in panic, as he approaches me alongside Reagan, my younger brother.

"My mate is in trouble," I growl. I'm pretty sure my blue eyes are glowing now, which means my beast is close to the surface.

They don't ask me anything else; instead, all three of us walk out and take flight as we track my mate's scent to wherever she is. My dad must have communicated to my mom through their mate link about what is going on because she doesn't come to us.

"I'm coming for you, Nora," I whisper into the wind before turning and taking flight alongside my father and brother.

Please, let her be okay . . . I can't lose Nora again.

UNVEILED



I stare unbelievably at the woman before me. The very woman who had turned me against Zion and somehow disrupted what should have been a treasured memory into one filled with pain and fear.

“I got up to get water after Zion fell asleep because I was really thirsty, but I ran into you on my way, and you told me . . . you told me those horrible things. Why? How?”

“I did drain myself that day, using most of my powers to make you believe Zion had done something as terrible as that to you—and was able to for this long too. I’m pretty impressed with myself, actually.” She smiles proudly.

I’m crying now. “How could you do that to us? You made me say all those things to him; they had to move because of me, and my son didn’t get to know his father because of you.”

She shrugs uncaringly. “It was all you, Nora. My powers don’t work unless there’s a bit of doubt in a person’s mind, and you must have felt so insecure that night, wondering what Zion could possibly want with a girl like you.” She isn’t wrong, and she knows it. “It’s why my whispers worked

perfectly. How could you believe that Zion would ever do that to you—didn't you know him at all?"

I gasp at her audacity, "You made me believe it, you did this to me . . . I had no . . ." My shouts morph into uncontrollable sobs. "I ruined him."

"Yes, yes you did." She kneels before me. "Now, you're going to make everything right." She rises to her feet, and once again I'm lost in a trance. "Follow me." Her undeniable voice clouds my mind, and I follow her helplessly out of the cave and to the very steep edge of the mountain.

Fear grips me when I realize what she's about to do to me. "Please, don't do this. My son—"

"Silence," she yells, and I can no longer speak. "This is the right thing to do. If only you had just died in front of the store that day after I whispered to the driver to hit you, we wouldn't be here. I won't harm your son, in fact, I'll take care of him like he's mine, and all three of us will be one big happy family."

The tears that fall from my eyes don't stop, and my vision becomes blurry, but I don't stop calling out to Zion in my head. His mother had once told me mates could communicate through their minds on one of my visits to the manor, after I had witnessed her turning to hand something over to her husband, without him even asking.

Zion and I aren't bonded, but I hope with all that's inside me that it works because I'm not ready to die—I can't lose my son or Zion. Now that I know the truth, I want more than anything to make things right between us.

Alana speaks again; reminding me of how powerless I am against her "You will jump—"

“No, she won’t. . . . Kneel, Alana,” a voice booms, just inches away from us, and I turn to see Zion standing in all his naked glory, flanked by two large black dragons. I want to run into his arms, but I can’t move, neither can I speak.

“Zion, how did you . . . ?” a shocked Alana starts to say.

“Kneel,” Zion booms again, and this time, I feel the pure, unfiltered power behind his voice.

Alana falls helplessly to her knees, and Zion looks at me, waiting for me to come to him. However, when I continue to stare back with tears in my eyes, he seems to understand what is going on.

He growls, turning his gaze back to Alana, “You will release your hold on her,” he commands, and as much as she resists, her powers seems useless against him. Immediately, I’m free.

I run unashamedly into Zion’s open arms, sobbing into his chest, as I tell him how sorry I am, over and over again. He doesn’t seem to care, seeming content in holding me in his arms and gently caressing my hair.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the two dragons begin to stalk Alana, and as soon as they get close enough to her, she whispers.

“Fight,” she says to them, and the two dragons suddenly turn against each other and start battling.

Zion quickly yanks me behind him, making sure he has a hold on me so I won’t slip and fall. “Alana . . .” he bellows, and his mouth opens wide to release a burst of flames, but it’s too late.

The dragon, who I recognize to be the one that brought us to the top of the mountain, suddenly swoops in and flies her

away, the flame doing nothing to harm him.

“No, don’t go—please,” I beg, pulling at Zion’s arm when I feel the tremors in his body indicating that he’s about to change and chase after them. “Stay.” He listens.

“Stop fighting,” he growls at the two dragons still tearing at each other, and they immediately stop. “Leave us,” he orders, and they fly away. The question must be so obviously brewing in my eyes because he answers without me even asking. “Alana’s whispers don’t work on me because I’m a dragon alpha.”

“Does that mean she must have whispered to the dragon helping her too?”

He stares ahead in the direction they went. “It’s a possibility.” He pulls me into his arms again. “I’m so glad you’re okay, Nora. I don’t know what I would have done if you . . .” He swallows, unable to get the rest of the words out.

“I’m sorry,” I burst out and watch his face crease in confusion.

“For what?”

“Everything.” I choke on a sob. “I should have believed you, Zion. I should have known that you could never do something like that to me. Alana, she’s the one who—”

“Shh, shh, it’s okay. If Alana had anything to do with it, then there was nothing I could have said that would have made you believe me.” I make to speak again, but his hands cup my face. “I love you, Nora Payne. I loved you then, and I’ve never stopped. If possible, I love you even more now.”

“I never stopped loving you, Zion,” I declare, and it’s the truth. Even amidst everything I believed he had done, I was

still irrevocably in love with him. That's why it hurt so badly when I thought he had done something so terrible to me.

His face splits in a gorgeous grin. "Be mine then—my mate—my everything."

I nod eagerly, laughing through my tears. "Yes, yes, Zion," I yell, into the wind.

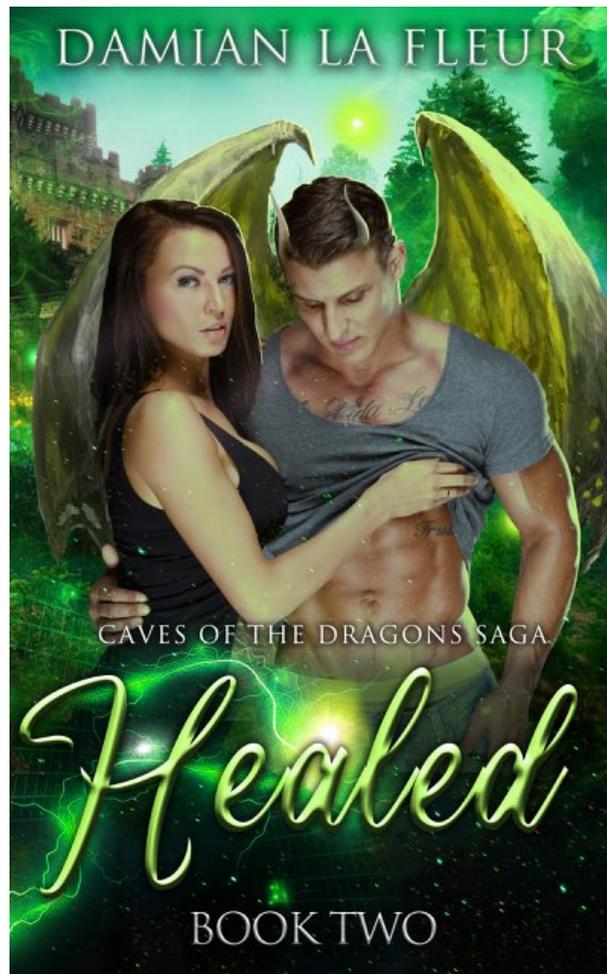


The End

BOOK TWO: HEALED

SUMMARY

Series Overview



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Emma Rose should have listened to her parents. Now running from the nightmare of her life with Dorian Black, she has broken free from the abuse he inflicted on her. The only place she feels she can go is to her friend, Nora Payne's home. But hopelessly lost on her journey, she runs into something quite unexpected in the woods . . . a dragon. Frightened out of her wits and traumatized from the situation she was fleeing from, she immediately faints, erasing the memory of what she just witnessed.

Gabriel Braxton shifts to his human form and brings the battered and unconscious woman to the only place he can think of—his home he shares with his family. Zion and Nora are present, and Nora immediately recognizes Emma as her friend. Gabriel immediately falls for the woman he rescued. Taking in Emma to heal, Nora hopes to bring Emma back to the person she once was before the abuse. Can Gabriel convince Emma that he can be trusted and that not all men have wicked intentions?

Healed is a journey in mending the heart and learning to love once more. It encompasses the issues of self-worth and confidence in yourself and others, and how to navigate when you believe that your trust has been broken and the truth of who we are remains hidden to the ones closest to you.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Damian La Fleur is a #1 Amazon bestselling Author of Caves of The Dragons Saga.

He loves to write epic romance stories featuring strong independent lead characters within the Paranormal and Sci-Fi genres.

Damian grew up reading DC Comics first then transitioned to Marvel Universe where he fell in love with the sheer ruggedness and machimo of Wolverine of the X-Men. His two favorite dishes are Curry Goat and Chicken Tikka Masala.

He is married to an "Island Gyal" and has three little rambunctious boys to keep him busy in-between publishing short stories.

Damian loves spending time cooking with family and friends.

