

DRAGON'S GUARD

THE DRAGON SHIFTER'S MATES #1



EVA CHASE

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Dragon's Guard

Book 1 in the Dragon Shifter's Mates series

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CHAPTER 1



Ren

“ARE YOU WAITING FOR SOMEONE, HONEY?” the bartender asked.

It was a reasonable question, considering that I’d been perched on one of the leather-cushioned seats at the bar for ten minutes without ordering anything. If the place had been any busier, he’d probably have pushed me a lot sooner. But there was only one other patron down the counter from me, a grizzled dude who was glued to his beer and the burble of the football game, and a handful of people scattered around the wooden tables in the rest of the room.

I’d picked this bar for exactly that reason. If she came, it’d be somewhere low key, not too noisy or crowded. At least, that had felt like the right idea. It wasn’t as if she’d shown up anyway.

“Not exactly,” I said to the bartender, leaning my

elbows on the counter. The smell of wood varnish and booze tickled my nose. “And if you’re going to call me anything, call me Ren.” Most of the times I’d heard “honey” in the last seven years, it’d been followed by a leer and a grope.

The bartender didn’t take offense, just grinned. “No problem, Ren. Can I get you anything, while you’re ‘not exactly’ waiting?”

I was feeling too restless to want a drink for pleasure, but maybe that was why I should have one. It’d take the edge off my nerves. “I’ll have a Bloody Mary.”

“That I can do.” His grin turned apologetic. “I do have to ask for ID. Take it as a compliment?”

I shrugged and pulled out my wallet. When I flashed the card at him, he chuckled. “Birthday girl, huh? It’s an honor to serve your first drink.” He raised an eyebrow. “Or at least your first legal drink.”

Yeah, we wouldn’t get into the amounts of cheap vodka and rum I’d gulped for a buzz over the last several years. When you were crashing on the streets, there was always someone passing around a bottle in a paper bag. But I was done with that part of my life now.

There was only one thing still missing.

“Make it extra bloody,” I told the bartender. He saluted me and grabbed a glass. As he mixed the cocktail, I looked toward the door. Beyond the window, the headlights of Brooklyn traffic streaked by through the darkening evening. No one walked in.

My hand rose to the locket that dangled just below my collarbone. I traced the delicate vine pattern etched in the warm gold. My chest still tightened a little when I

flicked the locket open, even though I'd done it already a dozen times today.

The necklace was the last thing my mother had given to me. Seven years ago, but I could remember so vividly the way her dark eyes had shimmered with a hint of tears as she'd pressed the locket into my hands. She'd clasped her fingers over mine and leaned close. The perfume she wore, like smoky roses, had filled my lungs.

"I have to go," she'd said. "If what I'm about to do works out the way I hope, I'll be back before you know it. But if I'm not... You hold onto this locket. Don't take it off for an instant. And keep it closed until your twenty-first birthday. Then, if I'm not here, you open it."

At the time, turning twenty-one had felt so distant I'd hardly processed what she was saying. She'd left before on her little trips, but she'd never been gone more than a week or two. When she'd pulled me into her arms, I'd hugged her back a little harder than usual, but I hadn't really believed she wouldn't come back. She was the one sure thing I'd always had.

But she hadn't come back. And here I was, twenty-one. I snapped the locket closed, nudged it open, snapped it closed again. There was nothing inside but another etching, this one a symbol like an upside-down flame at the heart of a spiraling line. It didn't mean anything to me. I wasn't sure if it was supposed to.

Somewhere in the back of my head, I'd had the idea that the second I'd open the locket, Mom would know. She'd know, and she'd come find me. Whatever had been stopping her before, it'd be over.

I'd braced myself and popped it open for the first

time twelve hours ago. And here I was, still twenty-one, sitting alone in a half-empty bar on a Thursday night.

Not alone for long. The bartender set my Bloody Mary down in front of me, and a guy who'd been sitting at one of the tables ambled over. He plopped onto the stool next to mine, called to the bartender for a gin and tonic, and looked me up and down.

"You seem to be a little lonely tonight, sweetheart," he said. His voice sounded as greasy as his hair looked. The armpits of his dress shirt were ringed with sweat stains. "Maybe I can help with that."

Hard pass on that one. "I'm good, actually," I said. "No assistance required."

He shuffled a little closer. He smelled like sweat too—sweat and the three to four drinks he'd already downed. Ugh. "Aw, come on. No harm in a little conversation."

I wouldn't be so sure about that, I thought. The truth was, even if he'd been remotely appealing, I'd have steered clear. Me and guys didn't seem to mix well. I'd had a few hook-ups over the years, but nothing that had gone past second base. As soon as things took a hot and heavy turn, a strange sensation rose up inside me. Like claws digging into my innards. And I'd suddenly feel as if I could rip the guy apart.

As if maybe I wanted to.

There's nothing like visions of gruesome murder to put a damper on your libido.

That wasn't the only time I felt the stirring of those claws inside me. The greasy guy tapped me on the shoulder with a smirk, and a prickle crept up over my ribs. The picture he was presenting snapped together

into sudden focus. I could almost taste his bruised ego in its sauce of desperation.

"I'm not any more interested than your ex is," I said, and took a sip of my Bloody Mary. "So how about you leave both of us alone?"

The guy's face turned sallow. "Bitch," he muttered. He snatched his drink off the counter and stalked away.

I swallowed another mouthful of the spicy, tomatoey cocktail. The bartender had made sure it packed a good wallop, exactly the way I wanted. Enough to wash away most of the discomfort of that encounter.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out and smiled when I saw the name on the screen. "Hey, Kylie!" I said. "Are you really supposed to be making calls in the middle of your shift?"

"I made a deal with my supervisor that I'd cut out early tonight in exchange for an extra long shift tomorrow," my best friend said in her chirpy voice. "Birthday surprise! Where are you, Ren? We need to rock tonight, hard."

I laughed. Maybe this was what I really needed. Mom was long gone, doing whatever had been more important than sticking with her only kid, and of course no piece of jewelry was going to bring her back. But I didn't need her anymore. I'd gotten through the last seven years alive if not completely unscathed, and now Kylie and I had finally scrounged together enough money to put a down payment on an apartment.

It was a crappy apartment, on a street so seedy there were more weeds than concrete on the sidewalks, but it had four walls and a ceiling with no holes. It had a door

with a lock, and only we had the keys. These days, that was heaven.

Kylie normally worked the evening and early night shift cashiering and stocking shelves at a rundown grocery store in the 'hood. I'd be back hauling boxes at my warehouse job tomorrow morning. No fun, but whatever paid the bills. And I could sleepwalk through the job, so I didn't need to worry about a hangover.

I turned around one of the coasters sitting on the counter to check the bar's name. "I'm at a place called Carmello's," I said. "It's on 5th Ave a few blocks from the park. But I can meet you wherever."

"No, no," Kylie said. "I'm coming to get you. And then I'm taking you on one epic adventure, little girl."

"I'll hold you to that promise," I said. Not that I had any doubt Kylie would deliver. She was only a couple years older than me, but when I'd first run into her a few years back, that had seemed like a much bigger gap than it did now. She'd looked out for me as much a big sister as a friend.

Carmello's would definitely be too much of a snore for her to want to stick around here. I gulped some more of my Bloody Mary so I'd be finished before she showed up.

The door sighed open, too early for it to be Kylie already. My heart leapt despite the talking-to I'd given myself. But it definitely wasn't my mom walking in.

The guy looked young, maybe mid-twenties, but there was a confidence in the way he prowled into the bar that seemed to carry the weight of a lot more experience. His round face was broken by the jut of sharp

cheekbones—not exactly handsome, but definitely memorable. His hazel eyes swept the room and came to rest on me.

I jerked my gaze away, realizing I'd been staring. And he wasn't at all the kind of person I wanted to be staring at. Living on the streets had given me a keen instinct for danger. This guy? He was not someone to mess with. A sense of purpose radiated off of him too. I figured it was better not to get in the way of whatever he was up to.

Just my luck, he sauntered up to the bar right beside me. "Give me the best thing you have on tap," he said to the bartender, and turned toward me. "Nice night to be out on the town."

"I suppose," I said noncommittally. How long was it going to take Kylie to get here and give me an easy exit?

Cheekbones cocked his head. "All the early summer energy in the air, it really brings the beast out."

What was *that* supposed to mean? I shrugged and acted fascinated by my Bloody Mary. He didn't take the hint.

"Maybe we could take a walk, get to know each other a little better."

I cut my eyes toward him. He *was* confident, wasn't he? My quick tongue got a little ahead of my better judgment. "Who says I'm looking to get to know you?"

Cheekbones grinned at me, looking unfazed. "I'm just saying, we clearly have a lot in common. This isn't our kind of place, is it? Why not come back to the fold, at least for a visit?"

A lot in common? The fold? Was this guy *on* something? No dilated pupils, no jerky movements, but

you never knew what drugs were making the rounds these days.

I drained as much of my drink as I could in one swallow and set down the glass. The hit of spice and alcohol sharpened my inner claws. "I'm pretty sure we have exactly nothing in common," I said. "For one thing, I know how to take a 'No.'"

Before I had to find out how he was going to answer that, I hopped off my stool and made a beeline for the back hall with its *Restrooms* sign. He wasn't likely to follow me into the ladies'.

Washing my hands, I peered at my reflection. I hadn't put on anything other than my standard mascara and light maroon lipstick combo today. I was dressed casual in a faded Nine Inch Nails tee and jeans. I'd been blessed with a good hair day, my chocolate-brown waves drifting artfully across my shoulders the way I usually struggled and failed to style them, but otherwise nothing extra special was going on. So why were guys honing in on me like flies to a jar of sugar water?

It didn't matter. Cheekbones made me too uneasy. Either he was drugged out or partly insane, and neither would lead to a good outcome. I'd text Kylie to meet me at the all-ages club on the other side of town and grab a cab to be on my way.

I was reaching for my phone as I came out of the restroom, and a pair of arms slammed around me from behind. One clapped a damp cloth over my face. The other wrapped around my waist. A sickly sweet smell washed over me. I swung back my elbow—and the world went black.

CHAPTER 2



Ren

I WOKE up with a muddy feeling behind my eyes and velvety fabric against my cheek. Neither of those sensations felt right.

Blinking, I rubbed my forehead. The room around me came into focus. It still didn't make much sense.

I was lying on a four-poster bed in an elegantly decorated bedroom. Thin sunlight drifted in past the brocade curtains on either side of a wide window. The bedframe, as well as the dresser and the vanity by the walls, looked like mahogany, polished to a shine. Gold flower patterns glinted on the mint-green wallpaper.

The bedspread under me was actually velvet. The soft pile darkened under the pressure of my hands as I pushed myself upright. A sweet lilac scent drifted up from it.

Sweet. The memory rushed up of the arms catching me, the cloth over my nose and mouth. My pulse stuttered. I touched my face as if I could pull that moment out of my past. Make it not have happened.

But it had happened. Someone had grabbed me and knocked me out. And brought me here, wherever *here* was. Apparently my kidnapper had a lot of money and a decadent taste in furnishings.

I patted my pockets. My phone was gone. At least my clothes were all still on and in order. I didn't feel any unexpected aches or pains. No reason to think I'd been manhandled other than that initial assault.

At least so far. Who knew what my kidnapper had planned for me next?

Muscles tensed, I pushed myself off the bed. The window appeared to be at the front of the house. It looked out over a suburban street. A wide lawn led down to the road, and a large Victorian home stood on the far side, maybe a hundred feet away. There was another house in view to the left, beyond a thick hedge. I didn't see anyone moving in their windows or outside, but the sun had just risen over the horizon. I might get a chance to yell for help later.

In the meantime, I treaded across the floorboards to the vanity, looking for a letter opener or hairpin or anything else reasonably stabby. The drawers revealed only pots and tubes of various makeup powders and creams, a brush and a comb, and a mirror in a silver case that was smaller than my palm.

Footsteps sounded outside the door. My hand stuffed

the mirror in my pocket automatically. Spend a few years thieving and it becomes an impulse. I shoved the drawer closed and backed toward the window.

The doorknob turned. There was no click of a key or scrape of a deadbolt. I hesitated despite my thudding heart. The door hadn't even been locked? I hadn't bothered to check, I'd been so sure it would be.

The door glided open. A guy I'd never seen before strolled into the room. I was sure of that, because if I *had* seen him before, even years ago, I definitely would have remembered him. He was the most gorgeous human being I'd ever set eyes on.

A sleekly muscular body, at least a few inches taller than my five-foot-nine, filled out his fitted dress shirt and slacks. His face was sleek too, with deep indigo-blue eyes and a topping of spiky black hair. The only feature that marred its perfect symmetry was a small scar that nicked his left eyebrow, but somehow that only made him look more perfect. An earring gleamed in his right earlobe—a tiny sapphire stud that matched his eyes.

He stopped a couple steps into the room and offered me a crooked grin. A flutter raced through my chest.

Holy hell. I'd been knocked out and carted off into some stranger's house. This was not the time for melting panties, Ren.

And yet they were melting. My heart was still thumping, but it wasn't entirely fear now. The quiver running through my nerves felt more like eager anticipation.

What the hell was wrong with me?

And was it my imagination, or was the guy staring back at me just as avidly?

“Welcome to my home,” he said in a jaunty, melodic voice. “I’m sorry we had to meet under these circumstances. I promise you, kidnapping isn’t my usual style. I was hoping to speak with you in your own territory. My assistant got a little... overenthusiastic.”

He cut a glance toward the doorway. I *had* seen the guy standing there before. It was Cheekbones, from the bar. My shoulders stiffened.

But after all his swaggering in the bar, he now looked totally deflated. He shuffled over the room’s threshold and dropped to his knees, bowing his head.

“I am so sorry. I overstepped.”

“By a *huge* margin,” the first guy said dryly.

“By a huge margin,” Cheekbones leapt to agree. “It was completely my fault. I wasn’t even supposed to talk to you. I— Again, I’m sorry.”

“All right,” his boss said with a flick of his hand. “Get going. I’m sure she doesn’t want to see your face any more than she has to. You can get started with your new job.” He turned back to me with that slanted smile. “I’ve assigned him to cleaning duty for a month, which seemed to make sense, considering what a mess he made of things.”

“I’m confused,” I said. “I— So you didn’t *mean* to kidnap me?” It was a little hard to wrap my head around that idea.

“Like I said, not my style. I’d have told Leonard to bring you back to your home if I’d known where that was.

Since I didn't"—he motioned to the room—"I tried to make you as comfortable as possible in the meantime."

He hadn't come any closer, still giving me plenty of space. But he was standing between me and the doorway. I wet my lips.

"So, if I wanted to, I could go home right now?"

The guy's eyebrows lifted. "Well, of course. Be my guest to stop being my guest." He sidestepped to open the way to the door. "We're only a half hour from Brooklyn, and there's a train station a ten minute walk down the street. But maybe you'll consider accepting my hospitality for a little longer, now that you're here and all? I've been waiting a very long time to get the chance to talk to you."

I'd already crossed half the room. At that comment, my body froze up. I stared at him. "What do you mean? You said that before: that you wanted to talk to me. Talk to me about *what*? Who *are* you? Why were you—and your 'assistant'—poking around in my life at all?"

"Let's take those one at a time, starting with the simplest. My name is Marco. Pleased to meet you." He dipped his head in a playful half bow. "I'd like to talk to you about pretty much everything, but maybe starting with what you've been doing for the last sixteen years. And do you really have no idea why I'd be interested?"

Marco said the last bit lightly, but his indigo gaze held mine intently. That shiver of anticipation ran through my nerves again. Randomly I found myself wondering what one of those agile hands would feel like tracing over my skin—

Okay, Ren, mind out of the gutter. You've known this guy exactly five minutes, and you can't even be sure this whole kidnapping thing was really accidental.

Other than the fact that I *believed* him, right down in the core of me, for reasons I couldn't explain. *He wouldn't lie to me*, my gut said. How the hell could I know that?

None of those reactions answered his question, though. "No," I said. "I haven't got a clue. This isn't some kind of birthday prank that Kylie set up, is it?" It seemed awfully elaborate—and freaky—even for her.

Marco shook his head. "No. Definitely not a prank. I'm just trying to make things right."

"With *me*? But I've never met you before. I've never even seen you before."

"Haven't we met? Your name is Serenity, isn't it?"

I hadn't thought I could tense up any more than I already was. It turned out I was wrong. My back went completely rigid.

No one used that name. No one had used it except my mother, in the quietest whispers when I was sick or drifting off to sleep, in as long as I could remember.

"My name is Ren," I said. My voice came out in a rasp.

"Short for Serenity," Marco said. "You don't need to hide it with me. I'm not going to hurt you."

Why would he say that? My thoughts were spinning. I pressed my hand to my forehead. Marco stepped toward me.

"I don't understand any of this," I said. "I really don't."

His expression softened. As I dropped my hand, he raised his to touch my cheek. My pulse hiccupped, but with the urge to lean into his touch, not to pull away. My skin tingled beneath his fingers. A rich, spicy smell like cinnamon-spiked coffee wafted off of him. Delicious. My gaze dropped to his mouth.

His Adam's apple bobbed. "What did she do to you, my Princess of Flames?" he murmured. "How has she shut you away?"

"No one shut me away," I said. "I'm right here. Who are you talking about?"

"Your mother. It had to be her. To protect you, of course, but—"

I jerked back, my eyes widening. "What do you know about my mother? *How* do you know anything about her?"

Marco looked just as startled by my outburst as I felt. "You could say we ran in the same circles a long time ago. I've been looking for her just as much as you."

The hope that had started to bubble up inside me burst. "Then you don't know where she is now."

He frowned. "No. Don't you? Ren, I think you'd better—" He drew in a sharp breath and summoned his earlier jaunty tone. "I'm being a horrible host. All this talk over breakfast time and not offering you a single thing to eat. I'll bring something up for you. Why don't you take a moment to clear your head? It seems we have more to talk about than I realized."

He lifted my hand to give it a peck on the back. The brush of his lips left my skin burning. Then he swept out of the room without waiting for my response.

EVA CHASE



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What lies ahead for Ren? Pick up *Dragon's Guard* to find out! <http://smarturl.it/DragonsGuard>