

## Red Inferno

*Book 4, S.T.O.R.M..*

One kiss was all he wanted. And one kiss was the only thing she denied him.

Dragon shape-shifter Ricardo wakes in a sweat, knowing he has telepathically contacted a woman in trouble. The same trouble he got into a year ago. With the help of STORM, he tracks her, the latest victim of the evil Dr. Bennett.

But Kristen is no pushover. A bodyguard for the first openly Talented senator, Ricardo's brother Sandro, she's used to looking after herself and doesn't wait for someone else to rescue her. She escapes, and Ricardo finds her naked and shivering on a crowded New York street.

Need sparks between them; they can't resist each other. They set the night on fire and Kristen loves Ricardo's sizzling passion, even as she resists loving *him*. But Bennett wants her back...which means the lovers could lose everything.

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## Chapter One

*When I get out of here, I'll kill every last one of the bastards.*

Ricardo Gianetti woke up gasping for breath, his psi barriers slamming down in an automatic response to the nightmare. The sheets clung, sticking to his sweaty body.

No, not a dream, it wasn't a dream. He'd connected telepathically with someone in trouble. The kind of trouble he knew about, because he'd been through it too.

He grabbed the cell phone next to the bed, hit Sandro's speed dial number and only then thought to check the time. Five a.m. Fuck. He'd have to risk annoying his brother.

Sandro picked up after the third ring. "Yeah?" He sounded pissed.

The female voice murmuring plaintively in the background at the other end of the line told Ricardo he might have interrupted at an inappropriate time. "Sorry, bro. Shall I call back?"

He got a heavy sigh in response. "No, spill. Why are you awake at this time?" A pause as the woman spoke. "Megan says hi."

"That's good of her, considering you were—"

Sandro interrupted with a quick, "Don't even go there. Talk to me, Ricardo."

Ricardo wondered at his impulse to call his big brother. He thought he'd grown out of that a long time ago. Maybe not. But the experience was so similar to what happened last year he'd wanted to contact Sandro to check his instincts. Sandro had been involved in his rescue and rehab. That must be it, he needed to check with someone else. *Yeah right.* "I had a dream, only I don't think it was a dream now. I saw the room where they held me captive last year. Remember it?"

"Hold on. I'm putting this on speaker."

Remembering that Megan had shared some of his agony, Ricardo winced. "Are you sure that's wise?"

Megan's voice came loud and clear. "Ricardo, you suffered it, I only tapped into it. I'm glad to help if I can."

Thank Christ for brotherly love. Ricardo had obviously interrupted something hot between his brother and sister-in-law, and here she was offering to help. In the same situation, he'd have told a caller to fuck off.

He'd do his best to make it fast. The vivid horrors brought back were fading in his mind. He felt like an idiot for calling Sandro at this hour, but he couldn't go back now, mumble an excuse and hang up. "I saw the room where they kept me. Megan saw it too."

"I remember." Megan's voice sounded somber.

"I shouldn't have called you."

"It doesn't matter, it's over now," she said. Her cool English tones calmed him as they had before. They'd persuaded him he wasn't dreaming at the time because why would he, an Italian American, dream an English accent?

He'd suffered and she'd watched, unable to do anything to help him. He wasn't sure which was worse—having his veins ripped open and unknown substances dripped into them, or watching it happen.

Who was he kidding? He could still feel the burn. It had taken the scars months to fade, something almost unheard of in a Talent. "It's not over. There's someone else in that room. Either that or it's a nightmare. And now I feel totally fucking stupid." He saw it now, the steel hospital bed, the plain gray walls, the trays of surgical instruments...

He wrenched his mind away from the recollection and back to the vision he'd suffered tonight.

“There’s a woman there. At least there is in my dream. She’s not strapped to a bed like I was. There’s no bed there now, but when I fought them one time, I put a dent in the wall. It’s still there. And on the floor I saw a light shadow on the wood in the shape of the bed. If I dreamed it, wouldn’t I see the room as it was?”

“I don’t know, Ric.” Only Sandro called him Ric, and then not always. It took him back to his childhood when they were safe and happy.

Ricardo ran his hand through his hair. Once he’d worn it long, but recently he’d had a buzz cut to signify his change in mind, in life, in attitude. It was growing long again. Too fucking long. Maybe he’d get the razor out and shave it off completely. Artists had long hair and he wasn’t one of those anymore.

“I saw the room and the woman. Tall, slender and muscular, a dragon shape-shifter. I saw the mark on her thigh.” Every shape-shifter bore the mark of their other form. To inexperienced eyes it could pass as a tattoo. This one was very beautiful, with details even the finest ink artist would find hard to achieve. “The mark was blue-green and it shimmered silver when she turned into the light. She had short dark hair and green eyes. Emerald eyes, an unusual shade. She was pacing, walking around the room.”

Sandro interrupted him, his voice sharper. “How did you see the mark?”

“She was naked.” That part shamed Ricardo. His cock had risen when she’d turned around and he’d seen her. Small, firm breasts, slender hips that made her appear almost boyish, but the patch of dark hair between her thighs belied that notion. Her smooth skin, although grubby and marked by bruises and scratches, urged him to touch. She was helpless and all he’d thought about for the split second when their eyes met was fucking her. He must be some kind of bastard.

She’d seen him. Her amazing eyes were dilated, but the gleam of emerald told him their color.

Sandro caught his breath. “Can you describe her more? Distinguishing marks?”

“No. She seemed Caucasian despite the hair, so dark it was almost black and cut short. But her skin was very pale, like moonlight.” He snorted. That sounded too poetic for him these days, reminded him of the romantic sucker he used to be. “She called to me. ‘Help me, help me please. I don’t know how long I’ve been here, or where I am.’ Then I woke up.”

“Kristen,” Megan said.

“Yeah,” Sandro agreed. “Listen, Ricardo. That sounds like one of my bodyguards who just disappeared a couple of months ago. Those eyes, that cap of dark hair and the mark on her leg make it sound like her. Kristen Turner’s a dragon shape-shifter, good at her job. Calm, quiet, efficient, never lost her cool and worked smoothly with everyone. Then she just disappeared.

“I had a letter from her. It said her mother was ill and she’d gone home to see her. I traced the story and it seemed true, but the whole incident didn’t make sense. Kristen might have gone, but she’d have kept in touch to tell us if she was coming back or not. I should have tracked it better, but I’ve been so fucking busy. Can you draw her and her sigil and send it to me? Fax, email or something. Get it here fast.”

Ricardo’s body stiffened. “I don’t think so.” He hadn’t picked up a pencil in well over a year and never intended to do so again. The price of his captivity had been the loss of his artistry, previously the driving force of his life. No more. It had gone. He accepted it and moved on, but he hated the reminder.

“It would help identify her. Help us discover if you’re in touch with Kristen, or if it’s a dream, or maybe you contacted some other Talent in trouble. Don’t you want to find out?”

“Of course I fucking do.” He sighed. “Yeah, I’ll do it.”

“If it’s her, we’ll go from there. If it’s not, you should tell Ann Reynolds anyway. She has lists of

all reported missing Talents. I believe you, Ric, so does Megan. We have to get this thing moving. Believe in yourself. Believe in her.”

“Sure.” He believed in nothing these days, but he wouldn’t tell his brother that. He’d told Sandro he’d decided to change direction with his life, not that the horrors haunting him had stopped him putting pencil to paper or paint to canvas.

After hanging up, Ricardo flung back the covers and climbed out of bed. He’d get no more sleep tonight. He opened his closet and grabbed a pair of jeans, but then dropped them. Perhaps a flight would help, get some cool night air under his wings. There wasn’t any need to hide anymore. Not like the old days. He grimaced. The old days being last year.

Sandro had bought this apartment because it contained a living space large enough to fly in, once he’d reduced his size to that of a bird rather than a dragon. It was for the same reason that Ricardo had bought his apartment in TriBeCa. But he’d left TriBeCa behind, abandoned it and his life as a poet and artist. That had died the day he’d watched someone dig a scalpel into his arm and reveal all the sinews, veins and muscles. Without anesthetic. After all, they said, animals didn’t feel pain, did they?

It took him some time to track down drawing materials. He’d left his canvases, his charcoal sticks, his paints, every fucking reminder of his previous life, in his TriBeCa apartment for the next lucky occupant to deal with. He made do with all he could find, a fine-tipped pen and a pad of yellow legal paper.

For the first time since his captivity, Ricardo Gianetti began to draw.

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