



# Dragons Live Forever

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF FANG CHRONICLES

*D'Elen McClain*

## Chapter One (Sample, Dragons Live Forever)

### ***Hera's Curse***

*One hundred thousand years I curse your kind*

*Each century you will find*

*One human woman, not your mate*

*This curse is now your fate*

*Tahr*

Alone.

This should be easier after losing so many brides, but it's not. Each memory presses harder into my soul and I drown a bit deeper with each one. I can't even walk through the halls of my castle without remembering Meagan's sweet giggles. Meagan never lost her sense of humor even at her advanced age when death finally claimed her. I miss her laughter, her smile, her sense of humor and ability to brighten my life. It's only been six months but each wretched day feels like a lifetime of loneliness.

A noise to my right has me turning my head. I catch a glimpse of just the top of a human head. Pepper. I'd recognize that crazy gold headpiece anywhere. Meagan gifted it to her when Pepper was a young child. She's a strange girl, or I guess a strange young woman now. She lost her hair as a child before she left the earth realm, but that's not what makes her strange. I avoid her whenever possible because she unsettles me. I first noticed it when I took her to see her parents. Every ten years, the humans from the earth realm are returned for a short visit with their families. Most never return to their home realm after that first time. Pepper will be one of those. In my mind, I picture her large pain-filled eyes after only three days. No, she will not return.

A slight smile curves my lips. I swear Pepper is part wood-nymph. Now that Meagan's gone, I catch only a flash of Pepper's headpiece or cloth from

her simple gown whenever she's around. I sense her though. And that's what unnerved me at the crossing. There's something different about Pepper and I'm a dragon. Dragons like a neat and orderly life without... strange.

Meagan spoiled the humans terribly, especially Pepper. Meagan always loved the children and spent entirely too much time in their section of the castle. No matter how long and loud I complained, she refused to give into me. She was determined to educate the young ones and make their lives better.

She would roll her eyes when I explained for the hundredth time that the humans wanted only to serve me and they had no reason to be educated. Making me happy is the only joyous fulfillment they need. The good fortune in their lives was being saved by a dragon and they knew it.

What I didn't say to Meagan because I'm dragon and bury my heart so it's practically untouchable is that humans live a normal lifespan unlike the eternal life of a dragon. Losing a bride each century is nearly impossible to bear. Forming friendships with humans would only add needless suffering. I have never gone there. I can't.

The small smile on my lips broadens with thoughts of the petty arguments I had with Meagan. Her selectively deaf ears ignored my complaints and she did what she pleased. Her biggest accomplishment regarding the humans was inventing silly hand signals that allowed them to communicate with her. It was all beyond my comprehension. After their hand language became seamless, Meagan had no problem telling me all about the internal workings of the human side of my castle. I could have done without knowing their day to day habits.

Insufferable. And maybe that's what I miss most about Meagan—she challenged me to be a better man. She had trouble understanding that I'm all dragon with only the occasional outer shell of a man.

I gave into most of her demands, though I grumbled incessantly. I liked to call the humans her pets. She hated that. Tempting her wrath was always

challenging, but so much fun when her face went pink with anger and her small fists clenched. When Meagan was younger, making up was the best part after one of her fits of temper. She could never stay angry with me for long; a stolen kiss and small caress had her back in my arms.

I sigh heavily and my smile disappears. These thoughts have my mood darkening again. I would give anything to cuddle in bed with my bride once more and listen to her demands for the humans. A painful ache swells low in my gut and my head throbs. I can't sleep for more than a few hours without waking up after dreams of Meagan. I reach out for her and she's gone; her place beside me cold. I've been here before. Meagan held on longer than any previous bride. She knew I'd suffer without her. I have twenty-three years before the next claiming and it all starts over again. I run my hands through my hair and decide to fly myself into exhaustion. I must sleep tonight.

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My muscles are sore even after drinking a bottle of wine. I lie down in bed and resolve to keep Meagan from my dreams and sleep through until daylight. My mind fades quickly and sleep steals my lonely thoughts.

I have no idea how long I've slept when Meagan's soft hand travels lightly across my chest. The fluttery softness is so real. I turn toward her warmth to pull her into my arms. The edge of the bed gives way to air. Meagan's not there and I nearly fall to the floor. My eyes snap open and after rubbing them, I gaze around the dark room. I was dreaming again, though her touch felt so real. Why would I roll toward the door and away from Meagan's side of the bed?

From the glow of the moons shining through my window, I know it's somewhere around three in the morning. I close my eyes, but sleep evades me. I step from the bed and open the double doors that lead out to the large perch that overlooks my territory. My room is located at the top of one of

four castle towers and high enough to see for miles. Each tower has a perch for me to fly to. I rarely use the one atop the human tower, but for some reason it's what draws me now.

I call the magic and feel the thrill as the power runs through my blood. My dragon bursts from my flesh and the silver in my wings casts colorful light as it reflects off the two moons. There is no one here to praise my beauty, but it matters not. I am the last of the silver dragons and that is the reason I am forever damned. My anger at this unfairness sparks, so I pull it in and bury it with all the other heartbreak I carry.

Everything is more alive in my natural form—colors, smell, touch. My scales stay soft and sensitive to the world around me unless I'm in danger. Then they turn harder than steel. I gaze out over my kingdom—the human tower calling to me again. I launch from the perch with a flap of my wings and fly around my lair trying to deny the odd summons. I circle several times before deciding to appease my curiosity and land on the humans' tower perch. I shift forms with the same burst of energy it takes to call my dragon and walk through an unlocked door to enter the darkened hallway. My human eyes are but an extension of my dragon and I can see clearly throughout the shadowed tower. I also know the layout—the top floor is the single men's ward, the women are a floor below, and couples live on the next floor down. Children are housed on the ground floor so there are no falling accidents. The children are assigned caretakers until they are old enough to sleep in the adult wards.

All my humans came here to escape terminal illness. The crossing into the dragon realm saves them. It usually takes several weeks after they arrive to fully recover. Then, to their delight, they are able to grow up and serve me. Only two drawbacks mar their life here—they can't procreate and they lose the ability to speak. Serving me is their life.

I glance inside the first room and see a man sleeping in his bed. I continue walking past other rooms as I head to the winding stairs that lead to the

women's quarters. I think it's catching sight of Pepper earlier that's given me this compulsion. I'm surprised when the fourth room in the women's quarters is empty. Or at least I am until I inhale a mixture of sweet earthy spice that awakens my memory. This is Pepper's chamber and only a short while ago, she was in mine. Touching me.

Why?

## Chapter Two

### *Pepper*

My heart is beating rapidly and a fine sheen of sweat covers my skin. The dragon almost caught me in his room. My fingers hum where I ran them across Tahr's chest. I bring my fingers up and run them over my lips while I inhale his scent to calm my nerves. He's incredibly alluring even in sleep. I could bypass his silky shoulder-length brown hair, strong jaw, blue eyes that change to the most stunning silver, a single dimple in his cheek that I saw one day when he smiled at Meagan, and a body that no human male could ever rival... if not for the inexplicable energy.

It's the energy that attracts me.

I'm hidden within an alcove in the dragon's main wing. It's one of my favorite tucked-away spots to observe him without him knowing. Meagan asked me to watch over him after she died, she was most adamant about it. I owe her everything and never told her that I would have done it anyway.

I think about the day Meagan and the dragon brought me here as a child. I'd lived in constant pain for years. Leaving everything I knew behind was terrifying. But that's when my amazing life began. A life free of pain in a world of magic.

Most humans in the dragon's realm are brought over as babies and remember little of their earlier years. I was six when the magic of this realm healed me, and I have memories that the other children don't live with. White walls, painful procedures, and dreams of a far off fairy tale land where a magical prince saved me from the wicked witch called cancer.

From the ages of six to sixteen, I lived part of my dream, minus the prince of course. After my sixteenth birthday, which Meagan and my friends celebrated with me, the dragon took me back to the earth realm for a short visit with my parents. I wasn't the only human Tahr transported through the realm crossing. There were twelve of us. A team of oxen pulled us in a

wagon until we reached the unseen barrier. I was terrified because I remembered the pain of crossing from ten years earlier. Tahr shifted to his human form and one by one, he took us over. When it was finally my turn, he grabbed my hand and walked me forward. It was the first time he had touched me since my original crossing. At the point where our skin connected, a slight buzzing sensation traveled up my arm. I squeezed my eyes shut as he gave a gentle tug. I concentrated on his touch and only a dull ache traveled through my head as we crossed the boundary. It felt strange when he released my hand and severed our connection. He looked down at me with the oddest expression on his beautiful face. I wanted to touch him again, but of course I didn't. He intimidated me as well as all his humans. To us he's a god. We live to serve him. We are the worker bees in the background that keep his castle running smoothly. At sixteen, I knew my place, but that didn't mean I accepted it. I wanted more. The dragon was my prince.

After Tahr brought everyone through, a large van delivered us to our parents. The youngest among us had no memory of the strange world we were delivered into. As we drove through the streets, my memories kept me from the terror some of the others experienced. It didn't keep my anger at bay. I understood the promise made by the dragons to allow the ten-year visits. I didn't understand our parents' desire to inflict this trip on their children.

My mother had cried almost the entire time I was there. I could see the love in my father's eyes, but he was wary too. Three siblings came after I left my parents' care. Those children were my father's primary concern, not the strange teenager who could barely speak. My voice returned when I crossed into the earth realm, but I didn't know how to use it properly. I managed a few croaks, which my sister and brothers laughed at, so I stopped using my voice. I knew within a few hours that I was no longer a part of the family or the earth realm. I couldn't wait to return to my quietly regimented life in the dragon realm.

The three days seemed like weeks. By the second day my joints ached and I felt nauseous. It was the illness from my early childhood. Meagan explained to us that our visit would be short because whatever disease we left behind would return. By the third day, I was exhausted and just wanted my real home.

I hugged my mother and father goodbye for the final time. I would not return. I could see it on the faces of my friends too. This was no longer our world and we needed the magic to keep us whole and allow us to flourish. We all had the choice of staying. It would mean death, but we still had a choice. Our decisions were easy. Our destiny was to serve a dragon.

When Tahr grasped my hand for the return crossing, the tingling was stronger. He looked down at our hands and shook his head. His magic took away the anxiety I'd experienced during my three-day visit. It buzzed along my skin and comforted me. He didn't look at me, but he gave my hand a slight squeeze before releasing it. Since that day, I've felt a kinship with his magic.

I shake my head to dislodge memories of the past.

I've stayed in my hiding place long enough and need to return to my room in the other tower. I head down the stairs, run through the large courtyard and make my way to the human living quarters. It's quite a hike, but I've done it so many times and my body is accustomed to it. I creep up the stairs, thankful when I make it past the children's ward monitor. Charlotte is a few years older than I am and she has found her permanent job within the castle. She's kind and softhearted, especially with the children, but she would not approve of me going anywhere near the dragon's tower now that Meagan is gone.

She also knows it's far past time that I find my place within these walls and settle into a job. Meagan was the only person who never rushed me into a decision. I miss her tremendously. With a small sigh, I begin climbing the stone tower stairs and for the hundredth time think on the options open to women. I could work in the kitchens, which are hot and uncomfortable most of the year. I could ask for a cleaning assignment, which would be incredibly

boring. I could even work with the children or the elderly, which I've given serious thought. There are a few caretaker positions open to feed and water the animals, but those are usually held by the men. A few of the women milk cows each day, but I don't think that's for me either. I'm not lazy, I just want a duty that gives me an exciting reason to wake up each day. Something that will expand my mind and make life interesting.

I've watched the dragon since I was six. He flies overhead in a spectacular display of strength and beauty. I envy his freedom. I will never be more than a human servant, but I can't stop my fantasies from taking over my thoughts. I want wings and fire and freedom. I want a kingdom to call my own and a life filled with adventure.

More fool I—I want Tahr and everything that goes with being the mate of a dragon.

And I loved Meagan, so the guilt of those thoughts eats at me. Her life revolved around Tahr. She spoke of him constantly—idealized him. On a small level, I think she knew of my secret desires. Every so often she would look at me and I would swear she could see clear to my soul.

I continue climbing the dark stairs. I've done it so many times, I don't need light. I'm lost in thoughts of the past when I'm jerked off my feet and lifted high. My mouth opens in a silent scream as my back hits the wall and my feet dangle. Shining silver eyes send fear slicing through me.

“What were you doing in my bedroom, human?”

I can't answer him and even if I could use my arms, he doesn't understand our human hand signals. His fingers are hot where they touch me and even in my terror, I notice the zing that travels across my skin. His breath is warm against my cheek. He's so angry I can see sparks of fire in his silver eyes. He's unclothed, which is normal when he's in human form. His arms bulge and if I could reach, I would touch his chest and explore the muscles there. He holds my arms tightly for several minutes, giving my nerves a reprieve from the terror of him grabbing me in the dark. His angry gaze remains locked on

mine as he receives no answer to his question.

Finally he lowers me to the floor and leans in close to my neck. He inhales and it unnerves me. When he exhales, it tickles my skin. His scent and nearness make me dizzy with some unrecognized need. He moves back slightly, continuing to hold me still, and locks his gaze with mine once more.

“I will see you punished for entering my room.” He punctuates each word with a harsh squeeze to my arms. “You are no longer welcome in any part of the castle but the human area. Meagan spoiled you and it’s over now.”

Devastation crashes my world at his words. Doesn’t he feel our connection? This energy that swells between us whenever we touch?

No. I read the answer in his angry gaze. Condemnation fills his beautiful eyes. Of course he feels nothing for me. I am but a human brought to his realm to ease his life. My fantasies come crashing down. Even if he sensed our connection, I am an ugly bald female and no comparison to Meagan. No voice and no hope of anything other than the right to live a life of servitude in this realm.

I am nothing.

His hands slide down my arms and he turns me none too gently. He releases me and shoves me in the direction of my room. My shaking legs cause me to stumble slightly. Using the wall for balance, I glance back unable to stop the tears running down my face. The dragon is gone and so are my dreams.

I enter my room, remove the headdress, and lay it upon a small wooden dresser. I run my palms over my scalp and gently massage the soft skin that grows tender when I wear the headpiece too long. The ornate covering was a gift from Meagan and I treasure her thoughtfulness. I stare at the green jewels encrusted in the gold. I long for Meagan’s comfort even though she would hate me if she knew the depths of my feelings for her dragon. I deserve my destroyed dreams and feel such shame that I’ve held onto them for so long. I shudder as I recall his angry words. Meagan mentioned years

ago to avoid his temper. I never understood because when I saw them together, he treated her like the precious jewel she was.

I rub the bruises forming on my arms and take a shaky breath. I should not have touched him. It was inevitable that I would be caught. I can't resist feeling the tingles that shoot across my skin when our flesh meets. I'm addicted to his energy and I've become more daring each time I enter his room. It all began as a caress of his hair. So soft and inviting but I stopped there the first time. Then I ventured to the side of his face and the next time his shoulder. Tonight I gave into the very strong temptation and ran my hand over his chest. The strength that lies beneath his skin is evident in each rippling wave of muscle but his flesh is actually soft. I can still feel the strange tingles that travel across my skin when touching him. Why can't he?

I slip my plain sleeping gown over my head and pull the covers up high as I silently whisper Meagan's name in my head. "I'm sorry for loving your dragon." I curl into a tight ball and await my punishment. I deserve whatever comes. My tears fall as I huddle in misery while a deep ache of what I've lost crushes me.