



A GRIFFIN  
SCORNED

AN EXTRANORMAL NOVEL

Veronica R. Calisto



a just ink press novel



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# CHAPTER ONE

It didn't really matter what the other men were doing, the chains linking his ankles, wrists, and ring around his neck said the red-haired man was less than excited to be involved. He seemed too clean-cut for his walk in shackles up a skinny mountain path in the middle of the night to be a common occurrence.

The softness of his palms was noticeable even as I dodged from one tree to the next. It gave away as much as the rest of him did. The fear in the man's eyes spoke volumes. His jeans worshipped his legs without vacuum sealing and leaving nothing to the imagination, like the ridiculous skinny-jeans did. The satiny blue shirt may have been clean before his captors got their grubby hands on it.

The men around him apparently didn't care. They didn't speak to him. Didn't even look at him much, except to prod him with an elbow or well-placed foot when he wasn't moving fast enough for them. When he tripped, the barrels of several guns pointed his way motivated him to crawl back to his feet. The sight nearly pulled a soft growl from Victoria. She clamped down on her reaction before the sound escaped. It wouldn't do to spook these wannabe mercenaries. Not before she knew exactly what was going on.

Despite their pockets-a-plenty outfits, the eight men were obviously not well-suited for this minor tip-toe into the mountains. Their black hiking boots smelled all but new, same as their matching black uniforms. Something in the clunky way they moved hinted that they had Kevlar vests on underneath their shirts – black ones, more than likely. Wheezing, gasping breaths signaled their vulnerability to every living creature in the trees around them. Even the students in the college on the other side of the mountain's peak would scoff at the display of unfitness, then offer to spark up a communal bowl. Boulder, Colorado, where hippies abounded.

If they weren't in such a large, armed group, every single one of them would have been picked off by something. And quickly. That was the problem, though. The group and the guns. The chained man was taller than the lot of them. He could break free if he only had one escort. One unarmed escort. And he had no chains binding him.

Victoria itched to pounce on the lot of them, but she held back. He may have done something worthy of this kind of treatment. A court of law was the right way to deal

with disputes, even when it involved extranormals. The courts weren't always the best or fastest method, granted. That didn't mean one could hop up and make their own justice.

Though, after what she walked in on tonight, she understood how someone could snap. She barely managed to keep her anger from overtaking her senses. How lucky for this captive man that she had controlled herself and tore out of her home instead. His predicament could have gone unwitnessed while she basked in squishing the squirming, sniveling sack of louse manure also known as her ex-boyfriend, instead of simply kicking him out.

The beautiful seed of anger warmed her to the tips of her bare toes, propelling her from tree to tree along the path as she mirrored their progress. Where did the men think they were going, anyway? An ATV couldn't negotiate the tiny trail, but this was an awful lot of effort to move away from civilization.

A scramble up an aspen revealed one of the scenic overlooks the Flatiron Range was known for. None of the men looked her way when she dropped back to the ground, knocking a few branches down in the process. Of course they wouldn't. She was as quiet as could be. Spying on men who had clearly gone out of their way to hide in the mountains required silence and camouflage, but their inexperience meant she didn't need to over exert her ability. With all the noise they made, even on the well-trodden path, she didn't need to do much extra to hide herself. They didn't exactly have her senses, and the idiots weren't looking for potential observers. Still, directing energy to remaining silent kept her from losing hold of her temper. She wanted to be absolutely certain attacking the man's captors was a good idea.

One of the eight men tripped their captive and laughed as he tried to catch himself. Another one of them kicked him in the backside when he struggled to get up. Victoria bit her lower lip before a growl escaped. Good people didn't kick others when they're down. Not unless they had a good reason.

"You guys have the money he owed you. I don't even want to know the details of why he owed it." The chained man pulled himself halfway upright. One of the black-clad men pressing a gun barrel to his shoulder pushed the chained man the rest of the way up. "Can't we just call it even?"

That sparked it. Those were not the words of someone who deserved this kind of treatment.

With a breath, Victoria dashed from the trees and tackled the last two people in the group. She didn't bother keeping them quiet. Dodging in and out of their attempts to hit or grab her took most of her concentration. Her camouflage commandeered the

remainder. The shadows of the trees did most of the work; she used what was already available.

She made sure to shift constantly. Not sticking to one pattern. Moving in ways a normal person shouldn't be able to do. Always, always, punching and kicking the captors in their most sensitive places.

A shot to the groin was predictable, especially when coming from a woman. These men didn't know what they fought, but men tended to guard their privates dearly. And their uniforms may have come complete with cups. No one ever thought to cover the fragile sides of their knees, or protect their skinny clavicles. Their skinny, breakable clavicles. A simple peck to the collar bone with her pinched fingers brought the tallest attacker to a knee.

One punch to a man's kidney confirmed they wore bullet-proof vests. It would make her work a little harder to hurt them, but she would manage. Unfortunately for them, the vest's specifications didn't cover the wrath of an angry woman, let alone an angry griffin. Kevlar was virtually useless against knives and blunt forces. Who needed knives when belligerence bubbled over? And these men had offered themselves up to help her work through some of her aggression. So obliging. She would have to make sure to thank them. Possibly with a jab to the throat.

A smile curved her lips as she dropped one man – the one who had kicked the captive – with a solid kick to the stomach. Victoria was too busy punching the next two attackers to make certain he stayed down. Someone caught her left thigh with a lucky fist. She caught it, mashed it into his own face, then rode him down with a kick in the gut. His groans of pain were so tasty. Such a feast here.

The man who grabbed her hair received a head-butt.

The click of a trigger sounded just before the first rapport. Victoria dropped, kicked a couple of knees in, and then danced out of the circle. It didn't matter if they aimed to scare her or catch her with a lucky shot. She certainly couldn't count on fortune to keep her unscathed. They would hit her eventually, or wise up and threaten the man she was kind-of-sort-of trying to protect. Then there was the whole issue of the fired shots drawing more men from wherever these scumbags had oozed. Her anger could only handle so much before things got really ugly.

Adjusting the air around her to stop any lucky bullets must have slowed her movement. No one could have grabbed a hold of her otherwise. Instinct screamed to pull away, but he had too solid a grip on her arm. If she bowed to the screeching desire to rip away, he would know she was more than human. The rest, her fighting and evasion skill, could be attributed to good training and luck.

When a normal found an extranormal playing in their sandbox, they started throwing rocks instead of sand. Victoria couldn't risk people wondering about her. Wondering meant more focus, which meant notice, which meant exposure. She couldn't broadcast her existence to the world like so many others. Being a vampire was easy these days. Even bog creatures who ate unwary travelers were populous enough to have a movement behind the preservation of their habitat. Would that she could be as lucky as those hags.

Victoria was well and truly stuck. For the moment. Once one man had a good grip on her, it only took a few seconds before another grabbed her other arm. Victoria struggled to position her torso deep enough in shadow to drop her camouflage without anyone noticing the difference. Fighting with more drama than force, she let them yank her back up the path to where the gibbous moon displayed her in all her glory. As the light draped across her, she curled her arms around herself, pulling the men attached to her closer in the process. She needed everyone off kilter. And, well, she was naked without her camouflage. She really didn't want them seeing the whole show.

"What do we have here?" The man holding her left arm pulled her arm back away from her body.

Without looking, Victoria knew her hair fanned out in all directions except the one gravity urged. It always did when she hadn't flat-ironed it into submission. No one, with the exception of a white Jewish man, could rival a black woman's natural mane in full display. Perhaps she could sell the insanity that matched her outrageous plume.

"Get the hell off my land." Not caring if it was too much, she pushed him with a tad more body weight than she should possess. He stumbled a couple steps to the left, but didn't seem to notice the disparity. Not terribly surprising. She was fat. They expected her to weigh a lot. So long as she kept the percentage of her true weight they experienced below a certain level by lifting the rest, they would remain clueless. It wasn't much different than her everyday life.

Anyway, the push was to determine if he was one of the men whose knee she had injured. No such luck. His nose was bleeding, so it wasn't all bad news.

"Well, well," one of the men still holding the chained man said. "Isn't this interesting? After we toss him, we can see about her."

Victoria didn't like the sound of tossing the man. The last comment didn't scare her much. Even if they could keep hold of her, they clearly wouldn't have the stamina at this altitude to do much. Still, she cast her eyes about for a simple way out of the mess.

"She's not one of the old man's," the man attached to her right arm said. "He won't even know."

Were they asking each other for permission to rape her?

“You guys take care of the Stone.” The man on her left shifted his gaze from his compatriot down the front of her. “Dark meat. Unwrapped and everything.”

Right-hand man grabbed her hair and pulled her head back, exposing her neck. A stomp on his foot and an elbow to his side freed her.

“Go ahead, fight.” He smiled, wriggling his tongue through a missing tooth. His eyes lifted to left-hand man. “I get first dibs on that wide mouth, even if I have to bust the teeth out to fuck it.”

While they talked their way through specifics they would never enjoy, Victoria dialed down her struggles, only to ramp up again when they tried to move her into the trees. If she didn’t figure out how to safely get out of there, they would try to take her right in the open.

Three of the men were down. Two clutched various body parts and moaned. The third didn't move at all. Not one of the five still standing was uninjured. It wasn't enough. And she heard others coming from a nearby building to investigate the gun shots. At least twice as many than the eight she ambushed. It was time to leave.

“Although” – the man’s eyes trailed from her bare toes to her chest and back down again – “she’s not much to look at. It’s almost not worth it.”

That did it.

Victoria dropped her weight to pull the man on her arm within reaching distance, then rocketed her forehead into his nose. She felt more than heard the bone snap. A horrible, satisfying gurgle frothed from his mouth before he fell. She slipped her arm free of his limp grip and punched the other guy in the neck until he let go as well.

A bullet whizzed by her ear. She ducked behind her former captor, his body jerking twice from friendly fire. Curling the air to deflect the bullets around him was a wasted effort. She would have to take him down later anyway. He saw too much of her abilities and was obviously willing to kill at least one man.

A quick peek from between her shield’s legs showed two of the three newcomers pointing their guns at her. The third had his pointed midway between her and the chained man.

After a breath to steady herself and connect with the air around her, she pushed her shield to the side and charged the men still standing. The three continued shooting as she came at them. It didn’t matter. The air happily deflected any projectiles safely toward the ground, or into any men who happened to be lying there.

The man in the chains fell over with a resounding *oof*. She hoped she hadn’t hurt him when she landed on top of him. There wasn’t any time to check on him at the moment. Nor was there time to move the chains digging into her belly. She held her

place while the wind at her back continued her charge, pushing the still standing men off the nearby shear drop.

Victoria surveyed what lay on the ground and shook her head. The other men couldn't be left. Too many questions could be asked and, more importantly, answered, if the bodies remained for the next hiker to find. The courts were the best way to settle disputes, but exposing what she was to the world had to be avoided at all cost.

She crawled off the stunned man and got to work rolling the dead or unconscious men to the cliff. Kicking them over the edge wasn't as satisfying as she hoped. They hadn't really deserved her anger, though they were clearly nowhere near saintly. Anyone who would gladly rape a woman who happened along was not a good person. Still, it was unfortunate. Why were people so evil sometimes? What could be worth cutting another person from the inside out?

By the time she finished, their back-up was almost close enough to be heard by normal humans. No time for dashing away, even if chains weren't hindering the movements of the man she had saved. There was only one way to get out of there without the both of them getting caught.

Victoria turned away from the drop. The man stood there with his hands hanging limply in front of him, moonlight gleaming off his deep red hair, and a dazed look on his face. She couldn't blame him for the last. Doing her best not to scare him, she lifted her hands slowly and started toward him.

"I am very sorry, but we don't have time to get the chains off you right now. The men that gunfire rustled up will be on us first. We'll get you free when we get where we're going." Victoria just hoped he retained enough of his wit to have a survival instinct. Or he was far enough gone to be malleable. "So, what I need you to do is stand there and hold your arms out from your body like this." She poked her elbows out into little tea pot handles until he mimicked without a word.

"Very good. Stay just like that."

She swept around behind him, giving herself enough room to change into her other form. It started in her toes as always, stretching like a breeze across a valley, and picked up momentum from there. Blowing up her legs. Then across her torso. Her favorite was her wings tickling their way out from their hiding place beneath her shoulder blades, while her sight and hearing heightened with the shift of her eyes and ears. That first breath always held too much information until her brain adjusted to the influx of new data.

"You're not going to leave me out here are—" He turned around and stopped.

This was exactly what she hoped to avoid by having him face the other way. He could scream and freak out all he wanted once they were in the air and away from the

people who might kill them. It was hard to grab a person without hurting them when they scuttled away and kept flinching from well-aimed talons. She couldn't leave him there. Not after she killed so many men. Whatever trouble he was in couldn't but multiply if they blamed him for the deaths.

But, oddly, he didn't freak out. He stared up at her – blue eyes wide and mouth slightly agape – like he had never seen anything like her before. That much she expected. She was fairly certain he *had* never seen anything like her before. The last adult griffin in this area left when she was eight. Which reminded her, she should message her dad as soon as she was sure she wasn't going to be captured or killed.

The chained man slowly reached a hand out toward her. She dipped her head so he could reach it. His hand, when it finally rested on her beak, was tentative and quite warm.

“Wow.”

She could say the same to his reaction, but there was no time. She shook his hand off gently to nudge his shoulder.

*Turn around and hold your arms out like I showed you.*

He jerked at the sound of her voice in his head, but he did as she asked. On the plus side, since he knew what she was and didn't freak out just then, she didn't have to take off then swoop back down to snatch him mid-sprint. Sure, Tall Dan had eventually forgiven her in high school for plucking him off the ground without warning, but only after he saw the damage the tornado had done to his car and realized it could have been him.

Rearing up on her back legs, Victoria moved forward until she could wrap her front talons around his shoulders and upper arms. Much to her surprise, he reached up and curled his hands around the back of her talons just below her dewclaw, stabilizing the grip between them.

“Hey,” he said. “What's your name?”

*Victoria. Victoria Drayton. Why?*

“Thank you, Victoria, Victoria Drayton, for getting me out of there.”

*You can thank my very recently ex-boyfriend.* With that, she pushed at the ground with her legs, pulled at the air with her wings. They were off.

## CHAPTER TWO

Before the uneasy silence could drop into atomic awkwardness, Victoria asked, *So, do you know enough of where we are to be able to tell me how to get you home?*

She felt him shift under her grip as he turned to get his bearings.

"Not in the slightest."

She thought not. Most people could only identify a few major landmarks from a bird's eye view. The closest, Las Vegas, was thousands of miles away.

*That's fine. I'll just take you back to my house and drive you home from there.*

"You can drive?"

She curled her head under her to glare at him. *Why shouldn't I be able to?*

"I don't know. Stupid question, I guess. Sorry."

Victoria held her stare a few more moments before straightening her neck and continuing. *It's pretty cold up here. I can stop if you need to take a break, but I'm going to try and get you home as soon as possible. Okay?*

"Okay."

As much as she would have liked to fly higher or indulge in some fancy tricks, she refrained while carrying him. Air play wouldn't be nearly as fun for him and she knew it. He handled the flight pretty well, though. No excess fidgeting. Banking himself with her turns just enough to be an asset rather than a hindrance. Everything went completely smooth. Victoria was impressed. She wondered if he had done any hang-gliding in his life; he was well suited for it.

The beauty of the Denver city skyline in the nearly full moon was as lost on her now as when she had left her home in a rampage. She hoped to find peace in it again. She hoped she could find peace in her home again as well.

The house suited her perfectly. In particular, the huge back yard shielded from peeping neighbors with double tall, double thick fences. One moment, one memory of betrayal, shouldn't be able to flush out years of happiness. What she needed was someone to cleanse her house of all the bad energy. Just as soon as she took out the trash that had piled up in the past eight months.

Victoria set her passenger on one side of the second story patio. She shifted to her bipedal form as she landed on the side nearest the sliding glass door.

“Please come in” – she pulled the door open – “and don’t mind the mess.” She slipped inside and darted over the piles of debris to the walk-in closet without looking to see if he followed.

Skirt and camisole on, she stepped back into the bedroom. The man stared at the scene in horror. So, there were a few clothes flung about. And ripped. And some smashed CDs and picture frames. And minor dents in the wall. And the bed had been tossed and tipped on its side.

“What happened? Were you robbed?”

She felt the ugliness of her smirk. “You could say that. Come on. Let’s get you downstairs in some better light and we’ll see if I can get those chains off you.”

He shuffled cautiously through the destruction. She made sure he made it across the room without any mishap before leading him into the hallway.

There was much less damage in the hall, but the evidence of something ugly was clear. She kicked the last few pieces of a gaming system down the stairs before them. The piece of shit, even with the wires as the only thing stringing the fragments together, was more resilient than she assumed. When no one was watching over her shoulder, she would make certain it was unrecognizable. And enjoy doing so. For the moment, she trailed it to the bottom of the stairs and punted it once more with enthusiasm. Without looking to see the man’s reaction, she turned and led him to the still immaculate kitchen. Her anger had pushed her to the air before she could toss the ground floor.

She caught a glimpse of the man's wide-eyed expression as she headed for the kippered beef jar. He clearly wanted to ask. Better to save him the trouble.

“I got home earlier than I had planned to. A client no-showed.” She ripped at a piece of beef and chewed like it deserved much worse before swallowing. “I guess I should be glad she didn’t show, since she had already paid and I got home early enough to catch my lying, cheating, flaming, ass-ball of a bitch turd ex-boyfriend in *my* bed with another woman.”

Understanding dawned in his eyes and he relaxed a bit. She wanted to be offended by his reaction, maybe bite his pretty head off, but couldn’t find it in herself. Even if a person saved her, if they were also acting angry and erratic like she had tonight, she would be on edge too. A spurned woman was a much less scary way to explain her behavior than simple lunacy.

Victoria swallowed her impulse to attack him and took it out on the next piece of beef.

She waited until the meat and brown sugar took the edge off her hunger before she approached him again. Angry was not the best way to encounter a griffin. Adding the

energy drain from shifting shapes several times in a short period cranked the danger up to eleven. She needed to eat. The longer she waited, the less discriminate she became. He didn't know how close he came to looking worse than her bedroom.

"Okay." She took a breath to embrace the calming effect of food in her stomach.

"Now. What is your name?"

"Mallory Stone."

She nodded. "Good. Mallory, I'm going to —"

"Are you sure you don't want another piece of jerky?"

"What did you say?" He was *not* making a fat joke right now, was he? A man would have to be completely off his rocker to make a fat joke. Especially after seeing her other form and the destruction in her bedroom. Not to mention, witnessing what she had done to his night-hiking escorts. Maybe she should have left him to them. Or better yet, she should have dropped him from just high enough to hurt him badly without running the risk of killing him. The last wasn't completely out of the question. She could grab him once they headed outside to her car. Now that her goal had shifted from rescuing him, it didn't matter where she sunk her talons.

"It looks like the beef jerky is calming you down and I would rather you rip at the jerky instead of me."

She tilted her head, studying him much like the bird part of her tended to. His whole body was relaxed, but he watched her with complete attention in the tensest relaxed stance she had ever seen. His eyes tracked the motion of her hand reaching for the lid of the jar without taking his full gaze from her face. Nice trick, that.

Mallory was a lot more observant than she had given him credit for. Something to keep in mind if she wanted to keep something from him.

Piece of beef hanging from her mouth while she nibbled from the end, she grasped the chain holding his wrist and ankle shackles together. She slipped both index fingers into the same link and tugged. The metal pulled apart like tough, chewy bread, the scent of rusty iron wafting up from the newly exposed metal. The chains between the ankle and wrist shackles were just as easy. Nice. Victoria hoped the rest was as easy to manage.

Squatting, she wriggled the tips of her fingers as far under the shackle as his ankle would allow. Not as good. The metal barely buckled with the same pressure. She leaned into his leg to brace herself and tried again. It peeled back more easily than it had the first time. A small tear on the edge.

"Hmm...." The success gave her an idea. She leaned more of her body against his leg, wrapping her arms around until her hands met again in the front. The metal peeled

like old, damp parchment paper. She started on his other leg shackle, already wrapped around him, and was rewarded with the same.

“What the hell are you?”

She tipped her head all the way back to make sure he wasn't freaking out before she stood. He still towered over her. If she rose up onto her toes like a ballerina, the top of her head might graze the bottom of his chin. She wasn't exactly dainty, but he was huge.

Victoria crossed her arms and leaned back, trying for attitude instead of admitting she didn't want to break her neck looking up at him. “I was under the impression you got a good look at what I was before I picked you up and carted you over here.”

“I did, I just—”

“Didn't know the word? We're in art everywhere. It's griffin. Kind of like Gryffindor, but less Harry Potter and more old English legend.”

Now he crossed his arms. One of his eyebrows rose. “Really?” His tone was rather acidic.

Perhaps she laid it on a little thick. She took a step back, shook her arms out and settled them at her sides. “Sorry. My bullshit meter is all out of whack right now.”

“Ex-boyfriend thing. Yeah, I got it.”

She turned her back to him, cradling his arm against her stomach so she could peel the cuff away. The abruptness of the move did not escape her. She just wasn't at the “being able to handle pity or sympathy” phase of the break up quite yet. The “would love to rip the lying maggot's neck out and bathe in his unworthy blood while gadflies laid eggs in his testicles” phase was still going strong. Mallory did not need to catch the anger backlash.

“So, what—I mean, how are you doing that? I tried everything to pull these apart. There was no give. Not even enough room to slide my hand out if I dislocated my thumb. I don't even feel heat coming off where you're working.”

Changing the question saved his groin, if not his life. She wasn't certain what he originally wanted to say, but she was a little too unstable for *her* to predict what she might do. Her precarious state of mind should have scared her. Should have.

“Well, you wouldn't feel heat.” She dropped the twisted metal and moved on to his other wrist. “I'm not a fire creature, though I suppose I'm closer to fire than I am water. As a griffin, which is creature of air, I am completely opposite of earth. Metal is a portion of earth. When I sink deeper into my element and push, earthy bits move away. Like magnets, except earth pushes when I push and pulls when I pull.” It didn't usually smell like anything, but she wasn't accustomed to pulling chains apart.

The last shackle dropped to the floor. She rotated back around to face him so she could work on the metal collar. He looked more than a little confused, so she continued.

“Really, though, it’s because you can’t capture a griffin who does not want to stay. We just slip away.” She wiggled the fingers of her right hand vaguely outward, then returned to the collar. “And it has less to do with being creatures of air so much as it does with us being griffins. It’s why no one’s ever substantiated a claim of a griffin sighting. One of many reasons. Granted, no one’s been looking since the turn of the last century. People started bothering that poor family living in Loch Ness. The evidence of them was more substantial before extras came out of the shadows.”

All of that talking and the collar still wouldn’t budge. The thing really was stuck on him. Victoria didn’t want to have to resort to the bolt cutter. There was no telling what she might accidentally do to Mallory’s neck even if she wasn’t all magoo right now. She had an idea.

“I get that,” he said. “Or I kind of get it, but it doesn’t really explain how you are able to pull these off *me*?”

She shrugged. “I’m not entirely certain. I have a theory, though. Can you hug me? Maybe even lift me little while you do it?”

“What?”

Like she was trying to molest him. Honestly. Not that she would mind molesting him, because *yum*. His eyes were a blue so dark, they were almost purple. How was that fair? He had the height, the deep ruby hair waving just past his shoulders. His shirt cleverly hid the muscles on his arms and chest. Not one pock mark or pimple marred his square jaw. Now was not the time to number how many ways he could melt a candle with his heat alone.

“I think what I’m doing is convincing the chains and what-not that I’m the one chained up. But I need close contact for it to work, hence the hugging. It seems to work without skin to skin contact. If you’d prefer, I could climb on your back. I’m sure it would work just as well. Better, even.”

He paused a moment.

She shifted her weight back on one hip. “Is it really that hard a decision?”

“I’m trying to get a good mental picture of you climbing on my back like a little monkey.”

Shock yanked her mind to a halt.

He covered his mouth, but the shaking shoulders betrayed him. She punched his shoulder. Her expression was probably worthy of a chuckle or two; she wasn’t in a laughing mood. That came later, in the hysterical crying-laughing stage.

She tried. “Ha, ha.”

"Couldn't help myself. You're so short."

"No." She cut through the air with splayed fingers. "I'm five foot nine. Above average for a woman. What are you? Six foot, seven foot twelve?"

"Wow, you wanna pick a real number?"

"What's that?" She put her hand to her ear. "I hit it right on the money? Good, now let's hug it out. Then you can pick me up so I can get that thing off you."

He did so without further ado. Peeling the collar away proved much easier with his arms around her. If she had thought of this sooner, she would have saved herself a lot of effort.

The added height when he picked her up was a bonus. She wasn't particularly short, but in her quadruped shape, she towered over even record-holding normal humans. She loved the advantage that kind of height granted her, especially over men who used their size to intimidate. Mallory wasn't doing so, though he couldn't help but loom over her when she was so close. An impulse to shift so she could have the advantage came and passed. The griffin didn't exactly fit in her kitchen.

"All done."

"That easy?" He set her down carefully.

"Yes, if you call swooping to the rescue, carting you for miles, and freeing you from your chains easy."

He shrugged. "You make it look easy."

"Why, thank you." She swept her hand grandly in a rolling bow, collecting the chains in the same motion. They clinked together as she tossed the first fragments into Mallory's waiting hands.

"Amazing."

A peek up at him showed him twisting the pieces she had peeled apart around in his hands, trying to get a better view. She didn't know what he was so transfixed by. It was just metal, not remarkable in any way. She, on the other hand, was rare.

"It's so crazy you can do this without heating it up." He smiled down at her. "You really are amazing."

That was more like it. "I know." She made sure her smile was turned toward the chains at their feet. Victoria shook her head. "I guess it's one of the perks of being what I am. Not that people regularly try to lock me up, but you get the idea."

He took more of the pieces she offered up to him. "Trying to ground you must have been interesting for your parents."

"It might've been, if they had been around."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean . . ."

She looked back up at him and laughed. "No, it's nothing like that. They're both alive and well. They didn't abandon me or anything. We're just very territorial. Griffins, that is. Especially female griffins. Mother had to leave two weeks after I hatched."

"That's terrible."

"Better than biting my head off. Literally. She managed to stay a week longer than mothers usually do, according to what my dad said. He managed to be mostly there until I was eight, commuting back and forth. It got to be too much for him, especially the jealousy from my mother when he got back." Victoria pulled her lips back from her teeth in an almost smile. "It's biological."

"Hormones," he responded with an understanding nod.

"You would think so, but no. Not completely. It's something in how our voices affect each other. Apparently, a trace is left in someone's mind after we've communicated. Only other females are attuned to it." She shrugged. "Sorry. That was probably more than you really needed to know about griffin social interactions."

"S'all right." His mouth quirked on one side. "I can assure you that you weren't boring me with something I've heard a thousand times before."

Victoria reached out a hand to pat the chains he held. "If I'm your first, we can take it as slow as you need."

He snatched his hands out from under hers, then shook the ball of clinking metal at her face. "Don't make me chain *you* up."

"Go ahead, buddy. You couldn't hold me if you wanted to." Her almost smile fell away when her eyes lit upon something of the plague-ridden rat-fink ex-boyfriend's she had missed. She do-si-doed around Mallory and nearly pounced on her harvest gold refrigerator because of two rectangular pieces of tag board. The pair of small, worthless pieces of paper had held the promise of another evening of so-so music with someone she had been beginning to think she might be starting to love. At least the tickets hadn't been purchased with her money.

She ripped them in half lengthwise, wanting to savor the one hundred eighty two dollars plus tax and processing fees she laid waste to.

"Take that, Asshole." Rip.

"Even if you can get the money back." Rip.

"See if you can get one of your *homeboys*." Rip.

"To sit through this garbage with you." Rip.

"Or maybe you can take your skinny little whore." Rip.

"I'm sure she'd like that." Victoria had a strong desire to throw the ticket confetti on the floor, spit on it, and grind it into the hardwood with her foot. But this was her floor. No point in making an even larger mess for her to clean up. And it was childish. She

didn't want to look immature in front of the gorgeous man she had saved. Victoria did her best to ignore the puerile behavior he already witnessed tonight.

She took a quick breath and forced it out. It didn't help as much as she hoped it would. "Sometimes there just aren't enough trash cans or enough paper to rip or pictures to smash or—"

"I have a fire pit at my house."

The words halted her mashing the ticket remnants between her palms. She swiveled around on the balls of her feet. "Really?" The word poured out of her on a wave of hope and sharp interest.

His chuckle was low, almost like he tried his best to be as non-threatening as he could manage with all his tallness. The strip of kippered beef he held out to her was a nice touch.

She took a careful step toward the peace offering. "Would you mind terribly if I collected a few bags of trash to burn tonight?"

"It's the least I can do." He wagged the dried meat at her until she took it from him. "I'll even help you bag it."

"You are an angel," she mumbled fervently around the beef in her mouth, which drew another low chuckle from him.

The tickets were the first things to go, then she surveyed her kitchen to make certain she hadn't missed anything else. Nothing jumped out, which meant there were seventeen things waiting to pounce on her chest later. Oh well. If and when she got desperate, there was always the garbage disposal.

The hallway was easy. Everything needing to go was already smashed and on the floor. Only half of the large garbage bag was full when she moved on to the bedroom.

"Wow."

"Yes, well . . ." She took a quick glance at Mallory as he got a good look at the mess around them. With a weak circling of her wrist she tried to explain. "It was kind of the epicenter."

"I'm not judging. It's just a lot."

She scratched the back of her neck. "I think the tossed bed makes it look worse than it really is."

"That or the ripped clothes and destruction everywhere."

Her lips curled of their own volition. She wasn't even going to fool herself. The smile was evil. "The clothes are—were—designer. Before I shredded them."

"Remind me to never make you mad." Amusement flickered at the edges of his mouth.

His easy attitude tempered her smile toward something less fear-inducing. She headed for the nearest pile. "If you do, just remember to feed me."

"I can go get that jar if you feel an episode coming on."

She threw a DVD at him. Somehow he caught it in the bag. She narrowed her eyes at him before stooping down to shovel the ribboned clothing and assorted bric-a-brac into the bag.

They worked in silence. Victoria, because she fought to cool her anger down to a dull roar. Every piece of ruined property she came across reminded her of why she wrecked it in the first place. The satisfaction of having destroyed the things was not yet enough to overwhelm her rage. If she let herself say what she wanted, all the ugliness would come out and play. She needed to corral and filter before she gave the emotions voice. At least while someone was present to witness.

Victoria wasn't sure why Mallory was quiet. Probably, his goal was to keep from setting her off again since he didn't have any food on hand to distract her. Smart man.

Four garbage bags later, they had collected just about everything. A cool line of sweat threatened to trail the length of her spine. Mallory didn't have the decency to look winded, of course. Disgust washed through her on a wave of envy. If she could only see him do something wrong. Anything. At the same time, she hoped he remained as perfect as he seemed. What else would give her the faith that some men in the world weren't scum? And maybe, if he could be close to Mary Poppins, she could make her own steps toward being practically perfect in every way.

"Is that everything?" He turned in a slow circle. His eyes danced over the disarray.

Beyond the obviously broken and ripped items, there was no way for him to tell what was worthy to be kept and what was trash. Sorting became a game of "pick up items and gauge their value from her reaction." Victoria was fairly certain Mallory regretted volunteering to tiptoe through her emotional minefield.

Anything that didn't give her a huge, burning need to be rid of it was saved. There was always the next go 'round. Or a quick, illegal bonfire in her own backyard. The blaze crackling and popping on the last of the trash. Yes. Not an image to forget.

"Yeah" — she cast a look around the room — "mostly. The only big thing left is the bed, but it's a whole project in and of itself. Why don't we load all this shit up? I'll put your address into the GPS and we'll be off."

He picked up three of the four bags. "Actually, if you get me to or near the Havana-Parker intersection, I can guide you to my house the back way."

"Works for me." She hefted the last bag onto her back. She paused a moment to let him lead the way, then she remembered. This was her house and he didn't know his

way around. Shaking her head at how unbelievably smooth she was, Victoria pushed herself forward.

The hall felt so much freer than the bedroom. The miasma of betrayal hadn't quite spewed its full weight past the threshold. It would ooze out eventually. The respite was nice. It would have been nicer if she didn't need the cleaner air. She didn't know what she was going to do, but she would make sure her house and bedroom were sanctuaries again.

Victoria turned the radio down to a polite listening volume before starting the car. Without thinking about it, she already knew she had blared the last song as loud as it would go. Nine times out of ten, she did. The few times she wasn't, some extremely rude person had deigned to call her when she was in the car. It always happened when one of her favorite songs came on. An uncanny occurrence having nothing to do with loving so many songs.

When another of her favorites came on, she twisted the volume up a little. So long as Mallory wasn't going to talk, she would enjoy the ride. She held back from dancing in her seat and conducting to the music. Some things needed to wait until a second meeting to reveal. Mallory already knew more about her than a lot of people ever would.

He got his bearings before they came to the Havana-Parker intersection. Victoria was happy to take his direction. She even dropped her singing to *sotto voce*. After a few turns, she caught the general area of where they were heading.

## CHAPTER THREE

“If you had just said you lived in the Lowry, former Air Force Base, area we could have shaved off some driving time.”

“And miss the private concert you’re giving me? Not a chance.”

She socked him in the shoulder hard enough to mean business without causing lasting hurt. “Yes, well . . . former choir nerd and current music snob. Both, because I have perfect pitch. Not bragging or anything. It’s because I’m a griffin – a creature of air and all that comes with it. The nerd and snob come out more often than most people would hope.

“I hate a lot of music. A lot.” Inhaling sharply, she pinched her lips to shut herself up. Several silent moments made her release the breath. She added, “And I’m not exactly quiet about my distaste,” lest he think her a total basketcase.

The low chuckle rolled out of him. “I have no problem with any of it. Sing as you will. Don’t let me, or my listening – and judging – stop you.”

A glance out the corner of her eye showed he was all smiles, waiting for her reaction. If she wasn’t sure he could walk easily to his house, grinning the whole way, she might have forced him out of the car. Maybe she could turn around and send him on his way from a lot further away. Of course, it would mean she couldn’t use his fire pit. Perhaps some other time.

The houses grew larger and farther apart the deeper they drove into the Lowry area. There was no way any of the residency lots from the Air Force base were this big. On nice land, too. A few hills, but nothing too drastic. She shouldn’t have been surprised the government had latched onto some mighty fine real estate and held it for so long. That the land ran adjacent to one of the oldest cemeteries in Denver took nothing away from its beauty.

One of Victoria's friends lived in this general vicinity, in one of the new-ish apartments constructed on the fringes of the former base. She would have to mention this adventure into the depths of Lowry to Jessica – when she found a moment not brimming with fury. Or distracting herself from being furious.

The frequency of the houses dropped down to nothing. Victoria snuck a look at Mallory. He didn’t look worried. Whatever anticipation vibrating off him could be

explained by excitement from being close to home. Or getting her to an isolated area to chop her into little pieces. Of course, if things shifted that direction, she had a multitude of things she could do before things got too far. Shifting into a griffin was only the most visually explosive. Snatching the air from someone's lungs didn't have the flair of a shape change. It didn't need to.

A house emerged from behind a screen of trees. The thing was humongous. Pieces of it peeked out here and there, making it seem much larger.

"I take it that's your house?"

Mallory's "Mmm," was barely audible, even to her sharp ears.

She guessed that was a yes. Mallory was distracted, looking for something in the sky above the building to pay much attention to her. She took a quick look as well, but nothing unusual graced the sky.

"Go ahead and take the fork to the right all the way around and park when it runs into the house."

He wasn't too focused on *whatever* to not know where they were, apparently. She followed his directions and parked next to the house. Mallory jumped to help her grab the things out of the car. Victoria had no problems hefting the bags. Still, she left all but one to him.

Once everything was out of the car, she clicked the locks.

He twisted around to face her with an exasperated, "Really?"

"What?"

"I don't think you need to worry about anyone coming all the way onto our property, passing all of the other cars – BMW's and Ferrari's – and ignoring everything in the house to steal your car."

"Maybe, maybe not." She shrugged. "It's a good habit wherever I am. I'd be able to find my car if it was stolen, but the police aren't big fans of vigilantism."

"You would turn vigilante?"

"In a heartbeat." Victoria always thought The Griffin would make a better hero than Batman, but it would require divulging too many of their secrets to the world. Not to mention The Griffin would probably end up a skinny, and somehow still busty, blonde woman with wide hips wearing little more than two pasties, a g-string, and boots with ten-inch heels. Comic book artists really knew how to get in touch with women outside their own wet-dream fantasies.

Mallory smirked and started down a black flagstone path set into the grass. "Why am I not surprised?"

She tossed her trash bag straight at the middle of his back . . . and missed as he darted to the side like a snake. Even more impressive was how he snatched the bag out

of mid-air when it would have whizzed by. He was quick. Real quick. She filed that away.

The foot path he led her down passed through the large trees she had seen as they drove up. Not quite the majesty of the redwoods gracing the west coast, but nothing to scoff at. They had to be hundreds of years old. Evergreens of several different varieties mixed in with deciduous in no kind of pattern. She couldn't name a specific evergreen to save her life, but she could identify a few of the angiosperms. Oak. Silver maple. Aspen. The different shades of green had to be gorgeous in the light of day. She could only imagine how beautiful it all was in the fall.

Everything looked pretty under moonlight, even as dappled and shadowed as it was beneath the trees. The remains of last year's leaves and needles crunched pleasantly underfoot, perfuming their progress through the small forest. A small breeze dancing through the tree trunks and low shrubbery took a moment to twirl around her before it moved on. This was a place a person could grow addicted to very easily. She loved it already, excited to see what every new step revealed.

She wasn't paying enough attention to Mallory. If the heated air in front of her hadn't warned her, she would have run right into him where he had stopped, instead of halting close enough to smell the detergent from the back of his shirt. And a little of the man beneath it.

"Are you okay?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay." His chin dipped in an almost nod. "Then what did I just tell you?"

"No clue whatsoever."

Victoria caught a flash of a smile turned halfway back at her before he commented, "At least you're honest."

She tried to be. It wasn't fair to indulge in lying when no one around her had the luxury. Rather than blurt out another griffin secret, she shrugged at his back. Honest, yes, but she had a lifelong habit of discretion.

His head shook lightly before he continued. "What I said is, you might want to watch where you step up here. The first few tiers on this side have a lot of loose pieces and uneven ledges."

"First few tiers of what? I thought you were taking me to a fire pit."

Mallory answered her question by stepping to the side and moving the low hanging branches out of the way.

The contrast of the crater before them to the trees they had just passed through struck her first. She couldn't think of another word for the large divot in the ground. If

it contained water, it would have been a fair-sized pond. Even empty, it was anything but unadorned.

The whole of it was tiered rock, like the Red Rocks Amphitheater, except the tiers were supersized and nowhere near the magnitude of the concert venue. Not one of the tiers was composed of the same material the whole way around. Granite, both smoothed down like glass and boulders the size of her quadrupedal form. Sandstone slabs. Flagstones. A bed of river rocks. Pumice and volcanic glass. A gradient of stones she couldn't identify composed the wall of the crater below them. Griffin-sized boulders topped the edge they stood on, the rock sizes trickled down to sand at the bottom.

On the base floor of the whole thing rested a pit with the remains of past fires.

Once Victoria had taken the whole of it in, she turned to Mallory with a little more attitude than absolutely necessary. "A fire pit?"

"It is a fire pit."

"No. That" – she pointed to the charred ditch in the center – "is a fire pit. The rest of this is. . ."

"A playground."

Her fingers jerked outward in no specific direction. "A kind of playground, I'm sure. I'm just not entirely certain what kind yet."

"Why don't you get back to me when you've figured it out?" He nodded, with a cryptic look. "As I said, watch your step."

With that, he rotated on one heel and started hopping nimbly down the decline. No, "Here let me help you down," or "Let me show you the best way down." Merely a smile which may have been a challenge.

She wanted to wipe the smile off his face and didn't have any bags to throw her off balance. No one was more agile than a griffin.

Victoria bounded down like a kitten chasing catnip. She passed him without exerting herself or causing any major sand avalanches.

When he finally joined her, his raised eyebrow screamed, "Was that really necessary?" without him speaking a word.

Victoria ignored it and took the two trash bags from his nearest hand. The fire pit was a lot larger than it had appeared from the edge of the crater – big shocker there – but the lip was fairly shallow for the size, coming to the bottom of her knee. Most of the charring in the base was toward the center, so the railing was more a guideline than a real physical barrier. Still, she paused at the edge until Mallory stepped over it like there was nothing there. Him and his long legs.

Victoria stepped over, with a little more effort, and joined him in dumping out the remnants of her relationship. The finality of it was a little sad. It would be a lot worse once she let herself feel the brunt of it. Even with the anger already expended, this was still the shock phase. The crying phase would be ugly, except the far end of it. She wished she could fast-forward through the mourning.

“So.” She settled her fists on her hips. “Do you have some super fancy, rich-boy fire starter contraption to go with all of this?”

“Something like that.” He jerked his head toward the fire pit's edge before following his own direction.

Something about his strut made her hop out of the pit before he made it out.

He smirked. “Here, could you tuck these under one of those rocks over there?”

She took the bag from his outstretched hand with extreme care, and backed away several steps before turning her back on him to tuck the bags quickly. On the one hand, the sparkling mischief in the curve of his lips stirred the same in her. On the other, the stir could be the beginning of her breakdown. But she couldn't do it now. Not here. Not in front of Mallory.

“Now, where is this fancy, schmancy –” Twisting around, brought her face-to-face with a huge reptilian head right where his human head had just been.

“Well, shit.”

His chuckle rumbled deep in his chest and trickled from his nostrils in puffs of smoke. “Not exactly the reaction I was expecting.”

He was huge. Much larger than she was as a griffin. He won again. And he was blond. She had never heard of a blond dragon before, but there he stood. Blond scales with a slight shift to a red-ish gold toward the tips of his larger scales and in the creases. The small horns along the ridges of his eyes were almost gold. They grew darker and larger as they crested over his head and trailed down his body to his tail. His claws were gold-tipped, black and large. Much larger than hers. Of course, his claws didn't look like they retracted like hers. She couldn't tell if they dulled as he walked over the rocks, or if they were hard enough to cut through just about everything, like hers.

His breath smelled of charcoal grills and wood-burning stoves. The scent probably wasn't supposed to be pleasant. She couldn't help but take the deepest inconspicuous breath possible before she spoke up again.

“What?” She quirked an eyebrow. “Did you expect me to faint dead away like you did?”

“Point well taken.” He nudged her with a nose as broad as she was at the shoulders. “You should take a few steps back. It'll be hotter than you think.”

~ Thank for viewing a sample of *A Griffin Scorned* ~