



DRAGON'S
REJECTED
MATE

A ROGUE SHIFTERS AND HUNTERS

BRITTANY
WHITE

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CONTENTS

1. [Jamie](#)
2. [Luke](#)
3. [Jamie](#)
4. [Luke](#)
5. [Jamie](#)
6. [Luke](#)
7. [Jamie](#)
8. [Luke](#)
9. [Jamie](#)
10. [Luke](#)
11. [Jamie](#)
12. [Luke](#)
13. [Jamie](#)
14. [Luke](#)
15. [Jamie](#)
16. [Luke](#)
17. [Jamie](#)
18. [Luke](#)
19. [Jamie](#)
20. [Luke](#)
21. [Jamie](#)
22. [Luke](#)
23. [Jamie](#)
24. [Luke](#)
25. [Jamie](#)
26. [Luke](#)
27. [Jamie](#)
28. [Luke](#)
29. [Jamie](#)

[Thank you for reading!](#)

[The World She Never Knew Existed \(SNEAK PEEK\)](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Also by Brittany White](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Exclusive Offer](#)

JAMIE

“**M**om, how do I look?” Jamie asked as she modeled her wedding dress.

“Beautiful,” her mother, Georgia assured her, as she coughed into a handkerchief.

Jamie immediately sat down on the bed beside her mother and put her arm around her.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “Can I get you some water or something else?”

“No, darling, I’m fine. I just had something caught in my throat.”

Jamie searched her mother’s face and then nodded. Although Georgia had never smoked a day in her life, she somehow managed to be attacked by stage four cancer. Her strongest wish had been to live long enough to see Jamie, her only child, get married.

“Do you have everything you are supposed to have?” Georgia asked.

“I do. I have the diamond necklace and earrings that I borrowed from you. My garter has blue lace woven into it. Then, I have grandma’s ring, which is old, and Jenna gave me a bracelet, which is something new.”

Jenna turned around so that Jamie could zip up her maid of honor’s dress.

“You look beautiful,” Jamie said.

“So do you. I’m still amazed that we were able to get your hair to hold those curls like that,” Jenna said.

“Not a problem that a little hairspray can’t solve.”

“You mean a lot of hairspray.” Jenna laughed.

The three women made their way out to the car that was waiting to take

them to the park where Jamie was going to marry the man of her dreams.

She had met Ryan in college and had fallen quickly for him. He was tall and blond with the bluest eyes that she had ever seen. He was incredibly intelligent and had a great sense of humor. The two of them had bonded over a particularly difficult algebra class in high school and had been inseparable since then. They even applied and got into the same university together. Ryan had proposed to her a year ago, and the couple had set the wedding date for a month after the both of them graduated from the university with their degrees.

It seemed to take forever for them to travel from Jamie's parents' house to the venue. A little cabin was beautifully decorated where she would wait for the signal.

Jamie sat in a comfortable chair and crossed her legs. Then, she recrossed them in the other direction. A few seconds later, she stood up and paced around the cabin.

"You're going to wear yourself out and have no energy for your wedding night." Georgia laughed.

The clock on the wall indicated that it was time for the ceremony to begin, but there was no sign of Jamie's father. Jamie could hear the ticking of the clock as minute after minute passed.

Almost an hour later, there was a knock on the cabin door. Her father entered with a grim look on his face and wordlessly handed Jamie a note. She read the note aloud.

Dear Jamie,

I don't know how to tell you this, so I will just be blunt. I cannot marry you. I've been seeing Amber for the last several months and I have fallen in love with her. There is no way that I could make you happy. I hope that you will forgive me and that one day you will find love and happiness.

Ryan

Jaime pressed her lips together, refusing to cry.

She sat down on the chair and said, "Well, we have a ton of food, a good DJ, and we've already paid for the room at the community center. We may as well not let it go to waste."

Her father patted her on the back and said, "That's my girl."

Jamie changed into a different dress and headed to what would have been their reception. She didn't feel much like partying, but her pride wouldn't let anyone see how devastated she was.

During the evening, she told herself that she should have seen this coming. Ryan had been distant lately, but she had blown it off, contributing it to stress, final exams, and getting ready for graduation. There had been a niggle in the back of her mind that suggested that he might have been seeing another person. Amber's sideways looks and giggles whenever she walked by should have been a clue, too. Amber was a first-class bitch, who would take delight in another person's pain.

Jamie didn't have time to mourn for her lost love. Her mother was getting weaker every day. Georgia had decided that she wanted to die in her own bed, so Jamie took it upon herself to be her nurse.

One afternoon, when the winds were howling and the sky was full of gray clouds, Georgia opened her eyes to see Jamie sitting by her bedside.

"You know how very proud I am of you."

"I know, Mama."

"I love you so much. No matter what happens, I'll always be with you."

Tears streamed down Jamie's face as she called her father into the room. He held Georgia's hand and cried. They both wept as Georgia took her final breath.

Jamie felt as though her world had fallen apart. Her mother had always been her rock. She felt lost without her.

Georgia and Amos, Jamie's father, had been together since they were fifteen. Their love was a testament to what every young girl dreamed of. They had both lived and breathed for each other.

It was no surprise to Jamie when her father followed Georgia into the after-life six months later. Jamie was positive that her father had died from a broken heart.

Jamie was between jobs when her father died. He had been so ill that Jamie had decided to take care of him and worry about a career later. She was so lost when her father took his last breath.

Jenna, who had since married her fiancé and moved to Colorado Springs, told Jamie that she should move there. The city was growing and there were a lot of jobs. She would have a place to stay until she got herself established.

Jamie decided to stay in Ivy Springs, at least for the time being. She sold her parents' house and most of their belongings to pay off the remaining hospital bills and found a small bungalow to rent. It seemed almost fate when she ran into Clara Montgomery, who had just bought a popular café and was looking for a manager. Jamie liked her, and Clara's son, Zeke, right away. It

didn't take long for the two of them to become close friends.

Clara was completely surprised when she, a human, was introduced to the shifter world. Jamie had to laugh when she shifted into her bear form in front of Clara. Jamie was pretty sure that Clara was going to pass out from shock. Jamie explained to her that there were shifters for practically every animal species in existence.

Clara soon became enamored with Dillon Adams, the wolf shifter who owned the general store next door.

"I really like him. There is just something about him that draws me to him," Clara confided over coffee and danishes one day.

"Dillon is a great guy. If you have feelings for him then you should pursue them," I encouraged.

She hesitated.

"You know that I just got the divorce from John. I'm not so sure that I'm ready."

John was her abusive ex-husband.

"What does your heart tell you?"

"That Dillon is nothing like John."

"Then, I say go for it."

She nodded and then changed the subject.

"What about you? Have you ever been in love?"

Jamie was quiet for a minute and nodded.

"I thought that I was, once. But it didn't work out."

Jamie knew that Clara wanted to know more, but she didn't want to talk about it. Even after five years, Jamie still felt the humiliation of being left at the altar on her wedding day because the man she loved and trusted had betrayed her.

Clara sensed that Jamie wasn't in the mood to discuss it, so she changed the subject.

Life went on for Jamie. She was satisfied that she had a great job with a close friend. Clara's son, Zeke, and Zeke's chihuahua, Reno, made Jamie smile. Every once in a while, though, she wondered what it would be like to have her own child to love. She quickly pushed those thoughts away any time they came up though. It was out of the question.

About a month after Clara and Dillon finally tied the knot, everything got back into a routine. Jamie appreciated that because routines were comfortable.

One morning, the bell on the door jingled, letting Jamie know that there was a customer. Her jaw dropped when she saw that Luke Abrams was back in town. The last she had heard about him was that he had joined the military and was part of some elite unit that was busy saving the world from terrorists.

The man who had joined the army was not the Norse god who walked into the café. He had been a skinny, gangly teenager. Jamie had never paid much attention to him, since she had been so enamored with Ryan.

“Luke?” Jamie asked in disbelief.

He gave the sexiest grin that Jamie had ever seen. She was certain that her heart started beating a little faster.

“In the flesh,” he said. “How have you been?”

There was no recognition in his eyes at first. Jamie was sure that he had squinted at her name badge so that he knew who she was.

“Terrific. I didn’t know that you were back home. Is it permanent or are you on leave?”

“It’s permanent. I decided that I had enough fun to last me a life time.”

“Are you sure that you won’t be bored in Ivy Springs?”

“I’ve learned that excitement isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be. Excitement is very,” he said. “Boring is just what I need.”

Luke handed Jamie his debit card and their hands touched for just a moment. Jamie’s hand tingled with a shock of electricity. She dropped the card onto the counter and stared up at Luke for a brief second. His blue eyes sparkled and Jamie wondered if he felt the same bolt of lightning.

He looked at Jamie and said, “You’ve grown up a lot. Where is that gawky teenager I used to know?”

“Well, you know, people do that. They grow up. They change.”

“They get a hell of a lot prettier, too,” Luke said.

Then, as if he realized what he said, he added, “Not that you weren’t beautiful before.”

Jamie grinned at him.

“I really doubt if you noticed, one way or the other. You always had girls dripping off of you. You were a star in every sport and the prom king.”

Luke laughed and said, “That time seems like so long ago. A million years ago.”

“It does seem like forever. I can’t believe how innocent and naive I was about life.”

“Growing up has a way of changing us.”

He smiled and gestured at the debit card that she was still holding.

“Do I get that back?”

“I don’t know. I was thinking that I could do some shopping later,” she quipped, handing him the card.

Once again, her hand buzzed with warmth and electricity as their hands brushed.

“I guess I should be getting back to the store,” he said. “It was good to see you again.”

“You, too. Come back soon,” Jamie replied.

He smiled at her as he left.

“Girl, what was that all about?” Clara asked.

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“If you flirted any harder with him, you would have had him laid out on one of those tables.”

“I was not flirting. I was merely having a conversation with an old classmate who I haven’t seen for forever.”

“Sure, you were. Just a conversation,” Clara said, laughing as she walked away.

LUKE

Luke smiled as he walked out of the café. It felt good to get back to regular life, especially if that meant spending a little bit of time flirting with an old acquaintance. He had to admit that she was right about the fact that he hadn't remembered much about her from when they were younger. She had always been wrapped around some kid named Ryan. She sure was a beauty now.

He winced as he put his foot down. His knee still hurt from the injury he had suffered from an IED. Although most people didn't know it, there were still specialized units operating all over the world, working hard to take out terrorists, drug cartels, and a whole host of other bad guys. Luke had been a part of a special unit, comprised of shifters, that took missions all over the world. During his last mission, he and his fellow soldiers took out a particularly violent group of human traffickers somewhere in Asia. As they were leaving the compound, however, their vehicle hit a mine and Luke, along with several others, were injured. Two of his companions were killed.

Although shifters do heal faster than humans, the injury was extensive and was still sore. It was time for reenlistment and Luke had struggled with a decision.

He loved knowing that he was making a difference in the world. Luke savored every victory like it was a delicious meal. However, he had suffered a number of wounds and still had a bullet in his back that was too close to the spinal cord to operate on. His parents were getting older and both of them had repeatedly asked Luke to come back home. His dad, Carl, seemed to be particularly excited at the prospect of Luke joining him at the hardware store

that Carl had built up.

The conversation with his commanding officer replayed through Luke's mind, occasionally, when Luke wondered whether he had made the right choice. Jamie was right – it would be very hard to settle down into a normal life after everything that he had experienced.

“Are you sure this is what you want, son?” Luke's CO had asked.

“It is,” Luke replied with more assurance than he felt.

“You'll be missed. You've done some great things in this unit.”

“Thank you, sir. There will be plenty of other eager young pups to take my place.”

After giving Luke another hard searching look, he nodded his head and said, “You'll always be welcome if you change your mind.”

“Thank you, sir.”

That conversation had taken place just two days ago. Although he was sure that he had made the right decision, doubts still lingered in the back of his mind.

Carl was waiting, impatiently, for Luke to return.

“Did it really take you that long to go out on a couple of errands?”

“Yep,” Luke said, used to his father's brusque way of addressing pretty much everyone in the world.

Then, Carl sighed and said, “Sit down. I need to talk to you about something.”

Uh-oh. This never means anything good.

“You know about the legend of Ivy Springs. There was a time, eons ago, where humans and shifters were able to live somewhat peacefully together here – at least until the billionaire decided that he didn't like shifters. You know that his daughter fell in love with a dragon shifter and because of that, the old billionaire and his people decided to wage war on the shifters. The dragon king worked with the witches to create a shifter world. The portal to that world can only be seen by shifters. A lot of the shifters, including the dragon shifter, moved to the shifter world. The billionaire's daughter followed, and there has been war between the two groups ever since then.”

“Of course, I know the story,” Luke said, impatiently. “I've known the story since I was a child. That is why all of the shifters left in Ivy Springs have to be extra careful about who they reveal their identity to.”

Carl sighed heavily and said, “What you don't know is that the situation has heated up. Over the last couple of years, the Faisons have become

increasingly aggressive. They actively, and pretty much openly, hire hunters to go after shifters. It is my understanding that they offer up bounties for each shifter that they capture or kill. We've lost quite a few people recently."

Luke ran his fingers through his hair and groaned.

"Do you remember Noah Williams, who owned the large ranch outside of town?"

"Owned? His family has been there forever."

"The hunters that the Faisons hired discovered that he was a bear shifter. He had hooked up with a human woman and she got him exposed. There was a huge fight and a couple of the hunters were killed. Noah and his woman had to flee to the shifter world."

"Damn," Luke said in disbelief.

"There have been some other shifters who have been killed as well."

If he had known that all of this drama was going on, he might have made a different decision about staying with his unit. He liked being able to go out into the woods and shifting without having to be afraid that there would be a hunter lurking behind every tree. Luke usually went deep into the woods to shift anyway, because a dragon wasn't the usual forest animal that could easily be explained away. However, if what his father said was true, not even the deep forest would be safe.

"So, what do the shifters in the area do? Shifters have to shift every once in a while."

"Usually, they take the drive to Pike's Peak, Phantom Canyon, or one of the other heavily wooded areas to shift."

"Shifters here are so afraid of the hunters that they will drive an hour just to shift, get their exercise, and then drive an hour back home?" Luke asked in disbelief.

"Yes."

Luke sat in shock. There had always been tension between the Faisons and the shifters, but it hadn't been an out and out war like it seemed to be now.

"It's bad enough that a lot of the older shifters have left. Greta and Frank sold the café and their house and moved to Florida. Some of the other older folks have decided to either move to another place in the country or just go the shifter world. They feel like they are too old to fight."

Luke looked at his aging father.

As though Carl could read his son's mind, he said, "I'm not going to be

forced out of my home. I'm a dragon shifter, and we are the top of the food chain. I will not be intimidated by mundane humans, whether they think that they are big bad ass hunters or not."

His father crossed his arms over his chest and raised his head high. There was nothing humble about Carl Abrams' character.

The doorbell peeped, letting them know that someone had just come into the store. It was an old friend of the family who had heard that Luke was back for good.

"I'm so glad to see you, Luke. Your dad will be glad to have you around. It's all he ever talks about," Jasper, an aging wolf shifter, said.

"It's good to be back," Luke said.

It seemed that Luke's return had gotten out to everyone in town and people flocked to the hardware store to say hello. Luke was pretty sure that his arm was going to fall off after he spent the day shaking everyone's hand.

The store was just about to close when his best friend Josh, a panther shifter, came into the store.

"I was thinking that you might could use a couple of drinks," Josh said.

"You were thinking right, my friend. Let me finish closing up with dad. I'll meet you at that club that's downtown."

"Sounds like a good plan to me."

Josh was there waiting with a beer for Luke.

"How does it feel to be back?"

"Crazy. Dad told me about all of the drama that has been going on in Ivy Springs since I've been gone. I've got half a mind to call up my old commanding officer and tell him that I want back in."

"I wouldn't blame you if you did. There are a lot of terrified people here. The hunters have managed to get a couple of the shifters to talk. One of them even named a couple of names not too long ago. The rumor is that the Faisons are torturing them."

"That's barbaric. Something needs to be done about them."

"I agree," Josh said, taking a long swallow. "The question is what. Even if someone killed the Faisons all at once, the trouble would increase. It would just prove to the rest of the world how dangerous shifters are and the fear, hatred, and subsequent war would spread everywhere."

Luke acknowledged that Josh was right. Violence wasn't going to solve the problem.

"Speak of the devil," Josh said.

Turning his head toward the door, Luke saw Alexis Faison saunter into the club. Outwardly, she was a stunningly beautiful woman with the perfect figure. However, her incredible outside hid the evil that lurked inside.

“What is she doing here? She has her own place that she reigns supreme over.”

“Maybe she feels like slumming it tonight,” Luke said.

She paused at the entrance as though she was waiting for all of the loyal subjects to bow down to her. However, most of the people in Ivy Springs didn’t care one way or another if she was a billionaire who was partial owner of the Forest Resort. The arrogance she carried about her like a sticky aura and the condescending way she treated other people made them dislike her.

Alexis’ eyes lit up when she saw Luke. Swaying over to the table, she put her hand on Luke’s shoulder.

“I heard that you were back in town,” she cooed. “I couldn’t wait to see you.”

“Hello, Alexis. I hope that you are doing well.”

“I am now,” she said in a sultry voice.

She didn’t even acknowledge Josh’s presence. He was sitting back in his chair with a huge grin on his face. Luke had the sudden urge to kick him under the table.

Alexis squeezed his arm and said, “Wow. You are so muscular. I bet that you work out every day.”

“Something like that,” Luke said, gently pulling his arm out of her grasp.

“You could buy me a drink,” she said, pulling a stool closer to him and sitting so that their knees touched.

Never mind the fact that she could afford to buy everyone in the entire club drinks all night long, Luke had no interest in buying her a drink or even having a conversation with her.

“You know, Alexis, it was good seeing you again, but I’ve had a long day and I’m tired. I hope you have a good night.”

Luke downed the rest of his beer, grabbed his coat and carefully pushed past the stunned Alexis who stared after him with her jaw hanging open.

Josh stood up, nodded to her and said, “Ma’am,” and followed Luke out the door.

“We could go back to my place,” Josh offered. “I’m pretty sure she doesn’t know where I live.”

“I’ll take a rain check. I actually am pretty tired. I’m still adjusting to the

time difference. I think I'll call it a night."

"I think that you're just getting soft on me, old man. I remember a Luke who could stay out all night and party."

"You might be right about that." Luke laughed. "With my aches and pains, I sometimes feel like an old man."

As Luke headed home, he thought that he might just drop back into the café the next morning. There was just something about Jamie's genuine smile that reached her chocolaty brown eyes that had captured his attention.

JAMIE

Jamie looked up when the doorbell rang and was excited to see the tall blond man with oceanic blue eyes striding into the café. Her heart skipped a beat even though she told herself to knock it off.

“Good morning.” Luke grinned at her. “How are you this morning.”

“Groovy, I hope you are.”

“I will be as soon as I get some more caffeine in me. I drank almost a pot this morning and I find that I need a little more.”

“Large coffee?”

“Black, and one of those cherry cheesecake danishes,” Luke replied.

“Coming right up.”

“Are you always so bright eyed and bushy tailed this early in the morning?”

“Not always, but usually. I like mornings. I like to wake up when the world is still calm, the air is fresh, and the sun is perfect. Plus, it helps that I have all the caffeine I need to wake up. Are you enjoying being back home?”

“I don’t know yet. There have been a lot of changes since I left. Some bad. But some are pretty awesome,” he said, looking into her eyes.

Jamie noticed that Luke glanced at her left hand as though he was looking for a wedding ring or some other sign that she was with someone. She was suddenly grateful that she wore her parents’ wedding rings on her right hand.

Luke leaned on the counter toward her. Jamie looked into his eyes for a minute and then glanced away, suddenly shy. She had never been shy her entire life.

“Uh, your total is four dollars even,” Jamie almost stuttered.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a five and pressed it into her hand. The warmth from his touch seemed to spread through her entire body.

“Put the change in the tip jar.”

The bell for the door jingled again and Luke pulled back, standing up straight. He put his hand over Jamie’s for a second and said, “I’ll see you later,” before taking his coffee and danish and heading out the door. Jamie watched him go.

With a smile, Clara nudged Jamie out of the way as she took the next customer’s order. The café suddenly got busy and Jamie didn’t have time to process her interaction with Luke. Finally, after the café cleared out, Jamie busied herself cleaning up.

“I didn’t know you knew how to flirt,” Clara teased. “Thousands of men, some extremely good looking, have come in here. Some of them have hit on you so hard that it was embarrassing to watch. You didn’t pay a bit of attention to him. Then, this tall handsome fella comes in here and you are acting like a school girl.”

Jamie blushed and said, “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Mm-hmm. I’m all for it,” Clara said.

“Next you’re going to have us married when all that has happened is that he’s come in for coffee.”

“Sometimes it just starts with a little coffee. Look at Dillon and me.”

“You two are special,” Jamie said, brushing Clara off.

However, she couldn’t deny that she had an unexpected reaction to Luke. It wasn’t like they had even been especially close in high school. Jamie was, quite frankly, surprised that Luke even remembered her enough to know that she had changed a lot in the past several years.

The rest of the day went by quickly. Jamie was tired and her feet hurt, and wanted nothing more than to just go home. Unfortunately, she reminded herself, her refrigerator and cabinets were empty, and she did need to eat. The thought of ordering another pizza or some Chinese take out just didn’t sound appetizing.

The grocery store was mostly empty so Jamie was able to get in and out quickly. She groaned loudly when she got back to her car. She had a flat tire.

Sighing heavily, she stowed her groceries in the back seat and popped her trunk. Pulling out her spare, the lug wrench, and a jack, she got to work.

She almost had her car jacked up when a voice behind her asked, “Do you

need a hand with that?”

Squealing, she whirled around, her heart pounding a million miles an hour.

“Luke, you scared the daylights out of me.”

“Apparently,” he said. “Sorry about that.”

The grin on his face made it seem as though he wasn’t very sorry at all.

“I was leaving dad’s store and saw you over here. I thought that I could help.”

Jamie was perfectly capable of changing her own tire, but stepped aside so he could finish jacking up her car.

“Are you my knight in shining armor coming to save me?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. I’m just a helpful guy.”

Luke had the tire changed in no time. He stowed her ruined tire and tools in her trunk.

“I really appreciate your help.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Luke said, leaning against her car.

Jamie leaned against the car in front of him, close, but not too close. She looked into his eyes. She felt that she could get lost in the blue depths of them.

“What do you do when you aren’t dishing out coffee and changing tires?”

“I like to go hiking. I love true crime shows. Once in a while I break out a canvas and do some painting. What do you do when you aren’t out saving the world?”

“Like you, I enjoy hiking. Now that I’m home, I can work on that old Shelby Mustang that I bought right before I joined the service.”

“That’s cool. Maybe we should go hiking together some time,” Jamie said.

She bit her bottom lip, not believing the words that just came out of her mouth.

Luke touched her arm briefly and said, “I would like that. Do you snow shoe?”

“Of course.”

“Terrific, then we won’t have to wait for spring.”

Luke glanced over at the hardware store next door and saw his father locking up.

“I need to be going, but I’ll see you soon,” he said.

“Thank you again for the help with the tire.”

Without even thinking about it, Jamie hugged Luke. He seemed surprised by the gesture but returned the hug before heading back over toward his father.

A jolt of electricity flowed through Jamie's body. She could still feel his arms around her as she opened her door. She inhaled deeply as a hint of his scent lingered on her shirt. Jamie was at a loss to explain why Luke had such an impact on her.

She glanced around and happened to see Alexis staring at her from the parking lot of the spa across the street. All of the good feelings from her interaction with Luke was replaced with a shot of coldness and hatred. Any encounter with Alexis was never a good thing, and the fact that she had been watching Jamie made her upset.

The next morning, Jamie told Clara about the incident with the flat tire.

"Ooh, it seems that fate is pushing you guys together," Clara said, teasingly.

"I don't think that it's fate. The hardware store that his dad owns is right next door to the grocery store. He just happened to be leaving the same time that I was changing my tire."

"And the hug?" Clara asked, her eyebrows raised.

"It was nice. I had to admit that there might have been a few butterflies in my stomach. He is a gorgeous man, after all."

"What is it about Luke that is different from all of the other men who have flirted with you?"

"I've not really paid attention to the other men. I don't know. Maybe it's just the excitement of seeing an old acquaintance again after so many years and seeing how he's changed."

"Mmm-hmm."

A couple of hours later, the bell on the door jingled. Jamie looked up, secretly hoping that it was Luke. Her hopes were instantly dashed when she saw who it was. Her hackles were raised when Alexis approached the counter and stared down her nose at Jamie.

"I saw you yesterday with Luke."

"Did'ja now?" Jamie asked, drawing out the words.

"Luke is very hot."

"What would you like to order?" Jamie asked.

"You know that he is out of your league. He is a hero. He is gorgeous. And you are, well this," Alexis said, waving her hand up and down at Jamie.

“He deserves to have someone with more class on his arm.”

Jamie didn't say anything or give any indication that she even heard Alexis speak. That seemed to infuriate Alexis. Her face turned red and her fists clenched.

Clara walked up to the counter and asked in a terse voice, “Are you ordering?”

Alexis looked at Clara and back at Jamie, before turning away in a huff and practically stomping out the door.

“What a bitch,” Clara declared.

Jamie looked at Clara in shock. Clara seldom, if ever, cursed.

Clara caught the look and said, “What? She is.”

“You aren't wrong,” Jamie said, laughing.

“Something needs to be done about that woman. Somehow, she needs to be knocked off her high horse and end up with her face in the mud.”

“There is no one to do it,” Jamie said. “Most of the people in Ivy Springs are either in awe of her or terrified of her. She is like the queen who could ruin someone's life with a snap of her fingers.”

“Well, I'm not afraid of her,” Clara declared. “She is a bully who continues to act like a bully because no one has ever stood up to her.”

“There is also the fact that she and her family hire hunters who don't seem to care whether they kill a human here and there on their hunt for shifters.”

“I'm surprised that the entire town doesn't just pack up and leave, if everyone is that afraid of her.”

“She ignores most of the people in Ivy Springs. She has no idea they exist so she doesn't bother them. For them, life is normal. The only reason she is on my case is because she thinks that I'm trying to lay claim to something that she wants,” Jamie said. “Besides, people have made their lives here for generations. It's hard just to give all of that up and go somewhere else. That is why a lot of the shifters haven't just gone to the shifter world.”

“I guess I understand that,” Clara said. “I still would like to take her down a peg or two.”

Jamie looked at Clara and smiled. “I do think that you are a little more irritated by her visit than I am.”

“I don't appreciate it when someone insults and tries to intimidate someone I care about,” Clara said.

“Aw, shucks,” Jamie said. “I didn't know that you cared.”

Clara lightly punched Jamie in the arm, and the two women got back to their duties. However, for the rest of the day, every time the bell on the door jingled, Jamie looked up to see who was coming in, half in anticipation and half in dread.

LUKE

Luke was tired. He had spent all day helping his father at the hardware store. The work wasn't hard, even though they had gotten in a truck of rock salt and another of Christmas trees, so he had been moving the merchandise around all day.

What had made him so tired was his father. Luke suddenly remembered why he had been so eager to leave home in the first place. His father was overbearing and wanted to run Luke's life.

He suspected that all of Carl's and Lucy's missives about them getting older and needing Luke's help was exaggerated. He was pretty sure that his father was just annoyed that he didn't have anyone to boss around.

"Josh, what are you doing tonight?"

"Nothing, why?"

"I thought maybe we could go that that dive just out of town and play some pool. I don't think that I can spend much more time in dad's company."

"That bad, huh?"

"Worse."

"I'll see you there in twenty," Josh said.

Groaning at the empty gas gauge when he got into his truck, Luke said, "You had better make that thirty. I have to stop for gas."

The gas station was empty when he pulled up next to the gas pump. He was staring off into space, wondering what in the world possessed him to move back to Ivy Springs, when loud pop music disturbed his thoughts.

He put his hand over his face and growled in the back of his throat.

Alexis had just pulled her black mustang in right behind Luke's truck.

You've got to be fucking kidding me. Is she stalking me? Do I have a GPS tracker on my truck?

She slid out of the seat and glided over to Luke. She was wearing skin tight pants, a low cut blouse that did nothing to hide her assets, and heels that were so high that Luke thought that they looked like stilts.

Alexis smiled widely as she put her hand on Luke's arm.

"What a wonderful surprise seeing you here," she gushed.

Yeah, right. Surprise my ass.

"I'm so glad that you came back to Ivy Springs."

"Thank you," Luke said.

He looked at the numbers spinning on the pump, wishing that they would just click.

"I saw you helping Jamie change her tire. That was so nice of you."

"Thank you."

Luke didn't know what else to say without encouraging Alexis to keep talking. He was hoping that she would get the hint and walk away. No such luck.

"You know, I really need some gas in my car and I just got my nails done. I was wondering if you could help me. I would really appreciate it."

Luke briefly closed his eyes as Alexis batted her eyelashes at him.

He could think of nothing that he could say to get out of helping her that wouldn't sound rude.

Sighing heavily, he said, "Sure."

The numbers finally quit rolling on the pump and he put his gas cap back on. He really wished that he could simply jump in his truck and drive away as quickly as possible, but knew that wasn't an option.

He walked back to Alexis' car and waited for her to insert her credit card and punch a few numbers. Then, he grabbed the nozzle. She watched intently as he opened her tank and put the nozzle in.

Alexis licked her lips and Luke half way expected her to make some kind of reference to sex when she watched him slide the nozzle into the hole. Apparently, while she was acting a little bit like a drunk hooker at a bar, she wasn't that crass.

She bent over the truck of the car, causing her blouse to fall open even more, leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination. Luke knew that she thought that she was being sexy, but he thought it was a little disgusting. He knew that it had more to do with who she was than her actions, although that

kind of blatant behavior had never turned him on.

“Have you had a chance to do much since you’ve been back?”

“Nope. I’ve just been working with dad, and I went to the club that one night. I guess I am still recuperating from the grinding schedule that I’ve been keeping over the last several years.”

She moved closer to Luke and leaned against the car.

“I hope that you will be able to come up to the resort. I’d love to have dinner with you. We have a terrific chef who makes a steak that practically melts in your mouth.”

“Perhaps some time,” Luke said, staring at the pump, willing the numbers to click.

Finally, the pump clicked, indicating that Alexis’ tank was full.

“Thank you so much for helping me. I don’t know what I would have done if you weren’t here.”

You probably wouldn’t have come to the gas station at all. You had plenty of gas.

Luke shook his head at his thoughts.

“Let me repay you and buy you a drink or two. Come back to the resort with me,” Alexis said, staring up at him underneath her eyelashes.

“Thanks for the offer, but I need to be going now.”

“Oh, pooh. Maybe tomorrow then.”

“I’ll have to check my schedule,” Luke said, walking back to his truck.

He just hoped that Alexis wouldn’t decide to follow him to the dive.

Luke pulled onto Main Street and watched in his rearview mirror. She sat for a couple of seconds before she pulled onto the street, heading in the opposite direction. Breathing a sigh of relief, he headed to the bar.

Josh had a half drunk beer sitting in front of him. The waitress hurried over.

“What he’s got and keep them coming,” Luke said.

Josh raised his eyebrows at Luke.

The waitress set the beer down and scurried away.

“Was it something I said?”

“No. You have a look on your face that says you are going to cut the throat of the next person who looks at you wrong.”

“I thought I was hiding my feelings so well.”

Josh laughed.

“Dad was a pain in the ass today. I thought I would have a break since we

got a shipment in. However, he did nothing but micromanage everything, to the point where all of the bags had to be stacked perfectly.”

“Sounds annoying.”

“He started talking about me finding the right girl and settling down. He said he knew a few dragon shifters from Colorado Springs, Monument, Denver, and a couple of other places who had daughters who were the right age. He suggested that we have a party so that I can meet them.”

“Your response?”

“A flat out no. He looked a little shocked that I would talk to him that way. He said that he and mom weren’t getting any younger and that they would really love to have some grandchildren to spoil. He promised that he would give the store to me and my wife as a gift.”

Josh grinned and shook his head.

Luke downed the rest of his beer and motioned to the waitress.

“I simply said no again. I looked him straight in the face and said it in that tone of voice I use when I am dead serious about something.”

“What did he do?”

He just looked at me for a minute and walked away. I’m not an idiot. He isn’t done with the topic by any means. Dad was taking the time to figure out some other way to get me to do what he wanted.”

Luke’s other beer arrived.

Taking a gulp, he said, “The man doesn’t understand that I’m not a scared thirteen-year-old boy any more who is going to bend to his will.”

“That does sound frustrating. My parents gave up on me a long time ago,” Josh said.

“That’s not even the half of it,” Luke said. “You’ll never guess who showed up at the gas station.”

Josh waited for Luke to tell him.

“Alexis pulled her car in right behind mine and then asked me to fill her tank for her because she just got her nails done. She damn near pulled out her titties and shoved them in my face.”

Josh laughed, picturing the scene.

“It wasn’t funny. The woman laid over her car so that her shirt would open, exposing everything.”

“And?”

“I wasn’t impressed. I’m sure they are nice, but it made me want to throw up in my mouth.”

“Ouch,” Josh exclaimed, laughing.

“It’s not only that she was acting like a two bit hooker trying to get my attention. But because I know who and what she is, it is nauseating. Anyone who has that much darkness in their heart and soul is hideously ugly, no matter what they look like.”

“I can’t argue with you on that one, brother,” Josh said.

He looked across the room and said, “It looks like the pool table is open. Feel like getting your ass kicked?”

Luke felt a lot better after a couple more beers and several rounds of pool. He won about half the games, so the night wasn’t a total loss.

He hoped that his father was asleep when he got back, although he half expected the older man to be sitting in the living room, waiting on Luke to get home. Luckily, the coast was clear. Luke jumped in the shower and then was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow.

Carl looked up at Luke as he came into the hardware store late the next morning.

Looking pointedly at his watch, Carl said, “Nice of you to show up.”

Luke wasn’t in the mood for his father’s sarcasm, so he simply ignored him.

“You were out late last night. What were you getting up to?”

Pressing his lips together, Luke really wanted to tell his father that it was none of his business.

Biting back the words, Luke said, “I was out with Josh.”

“It was after two when you came in.”

“I’m a grown man, Dad. I don’t have a curfew.”

“No, but you could still have the courtesy of coming in at a decent hour. Your mother and I were worried about you.”

Luke knew that it wasn’t that they were worried about him so much as his father wanted to be in his business.

“You need to think about coming in around midnight.”

Luke simply looked at his father with a fixed stare. A customer came in, so Carl turned away.

“Josh, do you know of any places for rent around here? There is no way that I can stay with my parents.”

Josh laughed on the other end of the phone and said, “I’ve got some connections. I’ll see what I can find for you.”

About an hour later, Josh called back with the good news. His landlord

had a small cottage that was for rent.

Luke made arrangements to move in that day.

His father hit the roof when he found out.

“This is going to kill your mother. You just came back and you are already moving out?”

“Dad, I can’t live with you guys. I have my own life to live. I’ll still be in town, and I’ll still help out at the store.”

Carl grumbled the entire day. Luke headed out to get the keys, pay the deposit and first and last month’s rent, and then went home to pack. His mother didn’t say anything to him. Luke suspected that she understood. That afternoon, he ordered some furniture to be delivered and bought a big screen television. By the end of the day, he had the electricity turned on, water, and the Internet.

He ordered a pizza and sat on the floor watching a game on his television, since the furniture wouldn’t be delivered until the next day. His mind wasn’t on the plays, though. Luke was wondering whether he had made a huge mistake by moving back to Ivy Springs and wondered whether he would be able to stay.

His father was just part of the problem. There was also the increased friction between the shifters and Faison. On top of that, Alexis was trying to get her hooks into him, and Luke knew that she was like a bulldog with a bone. On top of all of it, he couldn’t even shift and fly to release stress. He would almost rather be in the jungles of some tiny country rescuing hostages and getting shot at.

JAMIE

Jamie’s heart skipped a beat when Luke stopped by the next morning. His face broke out into a broad smile when he saw Jamie standing behind the counter. Jamie noticed the mischievous look in his blue eyes.

He was only wearing a hoodie in spite of the chill in the air. The fabric was stretched across his broad chest, and his arms filled out the sleeves. Jamie couldn’t help but notice the blue jeans that fit him perfectly. She found herself licking her lips as a cat would do before devouring a warm bowl of milk.

Luke sauntered confidently over to the counter, snapping Jamie out of her reverie.

“Did you order all that snow outside?” he asked, playfully.

“I sure did. I thought that it would bring in some more customers, so they can get all warmed up inside and out.”

“I’ll take your bait and let you warm me up. I’d like a coffee. Two if you care to join me for a few minutes.”

Jamie smiled shyly and said, “I would love to.”

She made a large black coffee for Luke and a cappuccino for herself. Grabbing two cherry cheesecake danishes, she and Luke walked over to one of the tables.

He looked around the café and asked, “Why isn’t the place decorated with your masterpieces?”

Jamie was flattered that he remembered that she liked to paint.

“I don’t have a lot of them. I mostly just hide them in the closet.”

“You’ll have to show them to me sometime,” he said.

Jamie smiled at him and said, “I’ll have to put on a show just for you.”

Then, not knowing what else to say since she never knew how to flirt, she asked, “Are you having fun since you’ve been back?”

“It’s okay. Seeing you has been the highlight of my stay so far,” Luke said.

Jaime’s heart skipped a beat.

“It was the flat tire that got you all excited, wasn’t it?” she joked.

Immediately she blushed, thinking how dumb that sounded.

“Well, it was one of the first interesting things that has happened,” Luke replied. “But it is nice to see a familiar face, especially one so beautiful.”

Jaime felt the heat flush her face even more.

“Aw, shucks,” she said. “It’s just the coffee talking.”

“I do have to admit that you do make some good coffee,” he said, leaning closer to her.

“I’ve had a lot of practice. Good coffee is a must since it makes the world go ‘round.”

Luke grinned at her, nodded, and looked into her eyes and said, “Well, it’s one of the things.”

Jamie was dying to know what else he thought was important. She inhaled the subtle scent that was Luke. He reached out his hand as though he was going to grab hers, when his phone rang.

He listened for a few minutes and then said, “I have to be going. They are going to deliver my furniture to my place in about ten minutes.”

Jamie gathered the cups and stood, disappointed that he had to go.

Luke hugged her briefly. Jamie’s body tingled at his touch. He smiled at her and started toward the door, handing Clara a twenty to pay for the coffee and danishes.

Clara was grinning ear to ear.

“What? You look like the cat that just ate the canary,” Jamie said.

“I’m just so amazed. I’ve never seen this side of you,” Clara said. “I’ve never seen you so flirty.”

“I’m actually a little embarrassed. I feel like Baby from *Dirty Dancing* when she announces that she carried a watermelon. I don’t think that any man has ever made me feel flustered like this.”

“From what I could tell, you did a good job flirting. He certainly looked interested in you.”

“He wasn’t that interested. He didn’t ask me out on a date.”

Clara shrugged her shoulders and said, “So ask him out on a date.”

Jamie looked mortified.

“There is no way that I can do that.”

“Why not? This is the twenty first century. It is perfectly acceptable for women to ask men out,” Clara replied.

Jamie’s eyes got wide and she shook her head.

“I’ve seen the way that you look at him,” Clara said. “You are definitely attracted to him.”

“Have you seen the man? A nun would be attracted to him. He is like a Norse god that stepped out of one of the old art books and landed in front of me.”

Jamie wiped an invisible crumb off the table and said, “Besides, what if he said no?”

“I doubt that he would turn you down. I may or may not have been eavesdropping. But if I was eavesdropping, I would have heard him invite himself over to see your paintings.”

Shaking her head, Jamie replied, “You’re terrible.”

“I might or might not be. I’m admitting nothing. Woman, the man is interested in you. He isn’t coming in here just for the coffee. He invited you to sit down with him. He flirted with you.”

“I don’t know,” Jamie said.

“Ugh. You’re impossible,” Clara groaned. “Who knows, this could be love at first sight – or in your case, second sight since you guys have met before.”

“I don’t believe in love at first sight. I don’t even know if I believe in love, period,” Jamie said.

Clara looked at her, questioningly.

“I told you that I was engaged once. His name was Ryan. We dated all through high school and college. He left me at the altar. He didn’t even have the guts to face me himself. He sent a note by way of his best friend, saying that he was sorry but he found someone else to fall in love with,” Jamie said, both hands pressed down on the counter, the humiliation she felt still flooding through her.

“You can’t give up on love because of that. Look at what happened with me. John tried to kill me. I was afraid of love and almost lost Dillon because of it.”

“I think that you’re jumping the gun here. Luke and I have only talked a couple of times. Sure, he flirted, but he probably flirts with every half decent looking woman he comes across. Men who look like him can have any woman he wants, and probably has.”

“Wow. Someone is a little jaded and judgmental,” Clara teased. “Just because things didn’t work out the first time doesn’t mean that they won’t work out ever. The next time that he comes in and flirts with you, suggest that he come over for dinner and to look at your art.”

“And what if he laughs in my face?” Jamie asked, crossing her arms.

“He won’t. But even if he does, what have you lost? Nothing,” Clara insisted.

“My self-respect.”

“Eh, you’ll be alright,” Clara said, waving her hand at Jamie.

“I’ll think about it,” Jamie said, insincerely.

“Grrr. You’re impossible.”

The afternoon was slow, so Jamie asked Clara if she could take off early.

“Go for it,” Clara said.

Jamie had her snow shoes packed in her car so she locked in her all wheel drive and headed up the mountain. She needed some fresh air and time to think. She really wanted to shift and ramble through the forest, but she didn’t feel like driving the hour or so to some place where it would be safe. Dillon, Ethan, and several other shifters were trying to come up with some kind of solution that would make it safer for shifters in the area, but short of taking out the Faisons, no one had come up with a viable solution.

After strapping on her snow shoes, she headed up through the trees to one of her favorite places to shift. She knew that it was extremely dangerous, but the aching need to recharge her batteries was overwhelming.

She told herself that she wouldn’t shift. She would just look around and then get some more snowshoeing in.

Jamie was startled to see that the area was covered in boot prints and snow shoe prints. Some of the prints were covered in a light dusting of snow, so people had been up there on different days.

Curious, Jamie made her way over to another spot that had been popular for shifters to hide their clothes and transform. It, too, was covered in tracks.

Have all of the shifters’ favorite places to shift been discovered? It’s not like they were in easy to find places. They were way off the normal trails. Someone would have to know that they were there in order to find them. Is

there a traitor who is feeding the Faisons and their hunters information?

The next morning, after the coffee rush was over, Jamie walked over to the general store next door. Dillon greeted her cheerfully, especially when he saw that she brought coffee for him and Ethan, who helped run the store.

“Thanks,” Dillon said, gratefully accepting the coffee. “However, I suspect that this isn’t a social call.”

“You’re right. I was up on the mountain and visited a couple of places where I used to like to shift. They both were covered in human prints. It could be shifters who went up there to use the area to shift, but I don’t think so. There were no animal prints,” Jamie said. “It made me wonder whether there is a shifter who is spilling some secrets.”

“I’m pretty sure that they have at least one source of information who is giving them tidbits of intel, but not enough to hurt anyone – yet. I could just be being paranoid and the hunters are simply being diligent, or more than likely, it is both,” Dillon said.

“Do you have any idea who it might be?”

Dillon shook his head and said, “I don’t. I wish I did. For now, the shifters will have to make the drive to some place safe to shift.”

“That stinks. That is a long drive, especially in some of the weather that we’ve been getting.”

“I agree, but I don’t think that we have any other options,” Dillon said.

Jamie nodded and headed back over to the café.

Zeke, Clara’s son, had the day off from school, so he and Reno, Zeke’s chihuahua, were hanging out at the café.

The little boy lit up as soon as Jamie walked into the café.

“Dillon put up a tree. Mama said that I could decorate it. Will you help me?” he asked excitedly.

“Of course. I would love to,” Jamie said.

Clara had an incredible amount of ornaments for them to choose from. Jamie and Zeke laughed and had a great time as they decided which of the decorations should go on the tree next. Reno cuddled up in the corner, watching them with a careful eye. When the tree was decorated, the icicles were on, and Jamie turned the lights on, Reno barked his approval.

“See, even Reno thinks that it is awesome.”

“The dog has good taste,” Jamie said, hugging Zeke.

The little boy and his dog went back to the section of the café that was set aside just for them to hang out. Jamie watched them for a few minutes. She

had always wanted a family and thought that it would be great if she had a little boy or girl of her own.

Slow down there, girl. You need a good man in your life first. Although there are a lot of single mothers out there who do an incredible job, I don't want to be one of them.

Luke's image flashed in her mind, but she quickly pushed it away. It was way too soon to even think about that possibility. But that didn't make the wish go away.

LUKE

Carl was out running errands so Luke was manning the counter. Josh popped in to say hi for a few minutes.

“Things at the fire station slow? Luke asked.

Josh was a firefighter and was a certified emergency medical technician, and was usually kept pretty busy when he was on duty.

“Don’t jinx it. We haven’t had a call all day. That doesn’t mean we won’t be slammed tonight,” Josh replied. “That’s when people get sick, or overdose, or wreck their vehicles.”

“Stressful when everything happens at once,” Luke said.

“It is. But I do like the idea that I’m making a difference in the world. I’ve saved a couple of lives here and there, so it’s worthwhile,” Josh said.

“I bet it is,” Luke said. “Are you guys hiring?”

“You miss the excitement of your old job? What we do can’t compare to that.”

“I miss the action. Standing behind the counter all day just isn’t going to cut it for me. I’ll have to figure something else out to do with my life.”

“You’re going to break your old man’s heart,” Josh said.

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Luke noted. “It most likely won’t be the last.”

“What a terrible son you are.” Josh laughed.

“I know, right?”

“Come in and talk to the chief. I bet that he can find a place for you. You’re a bit of a local legend,” Josh said.

“I will do that.”

Josh started to leave but the door opened. Raf and Xavier Faison, Alexis' brothers, walked in.

Luke felt like a rock dropped into the pit of his stomach. They were the last people he wanted to see.

"Hello, Luke," Xavier said, holding out his hand to Luke.

As Luke reluctantly shook his head, Raf said, "We just thought that we would stop in and say hello."

"Hello," Luke said, wishing that would be all they had to say and leave.

"Josh, it's good to see you again," Xavier said, insincerely, holding out his hand.

Josh simply shook the other man's hand and nodded. Raf didn't acknowledge Josh's presence at all.

He knew better though. They had some kind of agenda. He hadn't been close to either of the brothers before he joined the service and he had no intention of being close to them now.

"Are you glad to be back in Ivy Springs?" Raf asked.

"It's always good to come back home, at least for a while," Luke replied.

"You're surely not thinking of leaving again, are you?" Xavier asked.

"I don't know yet. I haven't made up my mind."

"It would be a shame to see you go," Raf said. "I'm sure that your folks are happy to have you home."

"I think so."

Luke was trying to keep his answers to a minimum while being polite at the same time. There was no point in tipping his hand, letting the two men know how much Luke despised them and everything that they stood for.

"Alexis said that you helped her out. That was nice of you," Raf said.

Luke simply nodded.

"She said that she invited you up for some drinks," Xavier said.

"Yes, she did."

"I second her invitation. You should come up for some drinks and hang out for a while," Raf said.

"Perhaps sometime. Right now, I'm just hanging out at home and getting settled in. I like the peace and quiet of home."

"I see," Raf said. "If you change your mind, the invitation stands."

"Thanks."

They didn't seem to have much else to say, so Raf said, "We'll see you later. You take care, now."

“See ya,” Xavier said.

Both of them walked out the door without saying a word to Josh or even looking at him.

Luke raised his eyebrows at Josh and asked, “What in the hell was that all about?”

Josh shrugged his shoulders and said, “Search me. Maybe they were just checking out the person their sister has taken an interest in.”

“What sin did I ever commit to deserve that punishment?”

Josh laughed.

“Is it just me, or are they a little more pompous than they used to be when they were younger?”

“Ever since their parents were killed in the car crash and they inherited all that money, they’ve gotten a lot worse. They walk around like their shit don’t stink and treat the rest of the world like they are lucky to be breathing the same air as them. They didn’t even seem to care that their parents were dead. They were just happy to get their inheritance.”

“Gee, I didn’t know you were such a fan.” Luke laughed.

“Lately, it’s not only their attitude that has gotten so much worse, but so has their hatred toward shifters. When their parents were alive, the shifters didn’t have to worry so much. They could go out on the mountains and do their thing. Of course, no one announced that they were shifters, but they didn’t have to be terrified that someone would find out. I have no idea what sparked such hatred, but the Faisons, at least the three men, are now actively hunting shifters and don’t seem to care who knows it. I think that all Alexis cares about is looking good – and now you.”

“Lucky me. I wish she didn’t like me. That woman is dangerous.”

“In a million different ways,” Josh agreed. “Why don’t you stop by the station after work, about six. As long as we don’t have any calls, we can play some basketball. Some of the other guys I hang out with will be there.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Carl came back in a few minutes after Josh left.

“Anything interesting happen while I was gone?”

“Xavier and Raf stopped by.”

“Why? I can’t imagine that either of those two men would know what to do with a single item that we have in this store.”

“They said that they wanted to come by and say hello since they heard that I was back in town.”

Carl frowned and said, "I didn't know you guys were friends."

"Trust me, we aren't."

"Why would they even know your name then?"

Luke sucked in a huge breath of air and wished that he hadn't said anything to his father, because he knew exactly how the old man would react.

"Alexis has decided that she has a thing for me."

His father stared at him in disbelief.

"Damn. That's unfortunate."

Luke was a little surprised that was his only reaction. He figured that his father would go off about how much danger he was putting the family in and that he had better figure out a way to fix the problem.

Carl didn't say much for the rest of the night, for which Luke was grateful. He just didn't have the energy to deal with his father's attitude.

Luke was tense the rest of the afternoon, because he half expected Alexis to come in and trap him into a conversation. He was relieved when it was time to go.

Josh introduced Dillon and Ethan, as well as a few other guys to Luke. They had enough people to play a five on five basketball game. Luke was pretty proud of himself. It had been years since he had picked up a game, but he made several baskets and did a decent job at defense.

After the game, Dillon looked at his watch and said, "I need to head out. Clara and Zeke will be waiting for me."

He gave Josh a meaningful glance and a nod before taking off. The rest of the crew followed.

Josh went into the kitchen and grabbed a couple of Gatorades.

"Let's sit in the back room for a few minutes."

Luke followed Josh to a small room with a tiny table and a couple of uncomfortable chairs.

"Are we about to break up or something?" Luke joked.

"I didn't know we had a thing." Josh laughed. "Seriously, though, the basketball game was more than just hanging out. I wanted you to meet the crew, especially Dillon and Ethan. They trust me and I trust you, so they gave me the greenlight to talk to you."

"Okay," Luke said, thoroughly confused.

"All of them are shifters. Dillon is the head of a group, sanctioned by the dragon king, who tries to keep the shifters in the area safe, which, as you know, is difficult. I told you about Noah and April, who were cornered by the

shifters and were almost killed. There have been several other shifters who were either killed or just went missing before and after that attack.”

Luke shook his head, wondering again whether he had made a huge mistake coming back to Ivy Springs.

“Dillon and Ethan and the rest of the group make an effort to check on all of the shifters in the area to make sure that they are okay. They also keep reminding all the shifters in the area to go out of town when they need to exercise. The group also patrols the mountains, watching the movement of the hunters and trying to track stray shifters, like tourists, who sometimes wander onto the mountain without knowing the danger,” Josh explained.

“It sounds like they spend a lot of time spinning their wheels,” Luke said.

“They feel that way. They were wondering if you would like to join the group and spin your wheels along with them. As a dragon, you can fly over the forest and keep a close eye on what is going on, while covering more territory than a wolf, bear, panther, or any of the rest of us could do,” Josh said drawing in a huge breath. “Of course, on the flip side of that, there is a lot more danger to you. A bear or wolf and most of the other animals could be explained if they are seen in the woods. A dragon, not so much.”

“A panther in the woods is just as odd as a dragon in the woods,” Luke said, raising his eyebrows at Josh.

“True, but it is a lot easier for me to hide in the brush and shadows.”

“If I was caught by hunters, I would just roast them, literally.”

Josh laughed and said, “I envy that particular talent.”

“If I join the group, would I be able to meet the dragon king?”

“Only Dillon is allowed to go into the shifter world and come back out again. You know the rules – once you cross over, you are there for good. No going back and forth.”

“Bummer. I would like to meet him.”

“What do you think? Do you want some time to ponder on it?”

“Nah, I’m in. A little danger is just what I need in my life.”

“You should stop in and see the chief when he’s here. I know that he would love to talk to you about joining the team,” Josh urged.

“I’ll definitely think about it.”

Luke yawned and stretched.

“I’m exhausted. I think that I’m going home to sleep in my brand new bed.”

Luke thought about the shifter war all the way home. He nuked himself a

TV dinner and went straight to bed. His last thought as he went to sleep was a brown eyed beauty.

Jamie was working the next morning. He was sure that her face brightened when she saw him walk in.

“Good morning,” Luke said. “How is my favorite barista this morning?”

“Groovy,” Jamie said. “You?”

“Groovy?”

Jamie shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

“I watched a lot of *Scooby-Doo* when I was a kid. What can I say?”

“I liked that show.”

“Would you like your usual?” Jamie asked.

“I would, please.”

Jamie made him a large black coffee and grabbed a danish for him.

He paid for it and then asked, “What are you doing tomorrow night?”

“I have no plans,” Jamie said.

“Would you like to go out on a date?” Luke asked, feeling awkward.

It had been a long time since he had asked a woman out.

“I would love to,” Jamie said.

She wrote her number down on a piece of paper and slid it over to him.

“Text me or call me.”

“You bet I will,” Luke said.

He shoved the paper in his pocket and left the café with a smile.

JAMIE

“**A**re you happy now? I have a date with Luke,” Jamie said, smiling at Clara.

“It doesn’t matter whether I’m happy about it. I’m not the one going out with him, although I am a little disappointed that you didn’t take my advice and ask him out first,” Clara teased.

Jamie grimaced and rolled her eyes exaggeratingly at Clara, who laughed.

Her enthusiasm over the prospect of the date was quickly replaced by worry. She frowned and tapped her fingers on the counter.

“What’s wrong?” Clara asked.

“I haven’t been on a date for so long, I don’t know how,” Jamie fretted.

“First you get dressed. Then, you either wait for him to pick you up or you meet him there. After that, you eat dinner and talk. What happens after that is entirely up to you.”

“What do I wear?” Jamie looked at her jeans and t-shirt and said, “I haven’t worn anything but something like this for ages, unless you count sweats.”

“He obviously thinks that you look good in jeans,” Clara teased.

Jamie started to protest, but Clara raised her hand.

“Do you have a cute skirt and a blouse? Something that would work for just about any place that he might think about taking you? You don’t want to be too dressed up in case he takes you some place low key, but you don’t want to be underdressed if he takes you to a nice place.”

“That makes sense. I have a black skirt, that reaches right above the knees, that still fits, and a white, button down blouse with ruffles.”

“That sounds perfect. Do you have a pair of high heeled boots that would go with the outfit? For some reason, high heeled boots with skirts seem to drive men crazy,” Clara said.

“Actually, I do. I think that I’ve worn them once. I may have to practice walking in them. I don’t want to twist an ankle and fall flat on the floor. I’m pretty sure that isn’t a sexy look,” Jamie said.

“It will give him the chance to play the knight in shining armor as he picks you up and dusts you off.”

“Ugh.”

“You have really pretty hair. Leave it down. You don’t need make-up, but your usual eye liner and eyeshadow is good. Maybe a touch of lip gloss if you feel like it. You have a beautiful complexion, so you won’t need any foundation or blush,” Clara advised. “I have some red nail polish that you can borrow.”

Jamie looked down at her fingernails. They were short, although well-manicured.

“At least I’m not a nail biter,” she said.

“True.”

Jamie laughed and said, “I can’t believe I’m acting all girly, talking about clothes and make up.”

“Didn’t you used to play dress up when you were a little girl?”

“That was a long, long time ago.” Jamie grinned. “And I’m pretty sure that Luke wouldn’t be all that excited to see me wearing a pink tutu, halter top, lipstick smeared across my face and mascara in my eyebrows, with eyeshadow from temple to temple, wearing high heels that are about six sizes too big for me.”

“Well, you know, there’s no accounting for taste. It just might turn him on.” Clara laughed.

Jamie laughed.

“I love seeing you so happy,” Clara said.

“I’ll admit that I am a little excited. Luke is hot and my stomach does flip flops whenever he’s around.”

“I’m telling you...”

“Stop right there,” Jamie said, putting up her hand. “It’s way too soon to even *think* about that word.”

Jamie sighed and said, “There is another problem.”

“What’s that?”

Jamie looked around the café to make sure that there was no one still hanging around.

“When do I tell him that I’m a bear shifter? If things do happen to get serious, he’s going to need to know. The only people in town who know my secret are you, Ethan, and Dillon. I just can’t trust other people. I know that I’m not the only one who feels this way, because I have no idea who the other shifters in town are.”

“I think that you will know when it is the right time to tell him,” Clara advised. “You knew that you were able to trust me with your secret.”

Jamie nodded.

“I would just wait until the relationship does get serious, because, at that point, you obviously will trust him.”

Jamie nodded and replied, “That makes sense.”

Clara left to go pick up Zeke from school and stop by the house for Reno. By the time she got back, the café was busy. It seemed that every person in the area suddenly had a need for some hot drinks and sweet treats.

At the end of the day, Jamie looked around the café and wiped her forehead.

“Wow. They left us a mess.”

“Yes, they did,” Clara said.

She smiled as Zeke got up and started collecting the trash and dishes from the tables.

“You’re going to have to put him on the payroll,” Jamie said.

“Right now, he’s happy to work for pizza, ice cream, and the occasional video game.”

Zeke brought some dishes to the counter and asked, “Have you been good this year, Jamie?”

“I think so, why?”

“Because Santa has been watching all year long and will bring you a nice present if you were good,” Zeke said.

His face was very serious as he told Jamie about Santa.

“It also helps if you leave him a snack. A lot of people leave cookies, but I like to leave cheese and crackers. If you eat too many cookies, you can get sick, and I don’t want Santa to get sick.”

“That is very true,” Jamie said. “I never thought about leaving a snack besides cookies. Do you leave anything for the reindeer?”

“Mom has some oats that we leave. I’m happy to give those to the

reindeer because I don't like oatmeal," Zeke declared.

"Is Reno going to get a present from Santa Clause, too?" Jamie asked.

"He's been a very good boy. He learned to potty outside in just a couple of days. I think that Santa should give him a present."

Zeke looked up at his mother as he spoke.

Clara smiled and nodded.

"I think that Reno should get a present from Santa."

A huge grin covered Zeke's face as he went back to his appointed duties of collecting dishes and trash with the tiny chihuahua right on his heels.

"You are so good with him," Clara said. "He adores you. He talks about you all the time."

"He is an easy kid to love."

"Who knows. Before too much longer you can have a ton of kids of your own running around."

"I think that you're moving a little too fast there. We haven't even been on our first date. We might go out and I find out that he chews with his mouth open or that he picks his teeth with a steak knife."

"I could definitely see where that would be a deal breaker." Clara laughed.

Jamie's laughter died out abruptly when the bell on the door alerted them that someone had come in. Her face went completely white and her eyes got wide. She dropped the cup that she was holding. The sound of it shattering echoed as the warm liquid inside splashed everywhere.

"Jamie, what's wrong?"

She didn't reply. She simply stared at the man who walked toward her with a huge smile on his face.

"Jamie. I had heard from a friend that you were working here. It's been a long time. How are you doing?"

"Not long enough."

"You have every right to hate me. You have no idea how sorry I am that I hurt you. I've thought about you a lot over the last few years," the man said.

"What do you want?"

"I wanted to apologize. Amber and I split up. She left me for another man a couple months ago and our divorce was final yesterday. Part of the problem with our marriage was that I never stopped loving you."

Jamie pressed her lips together. She stood rigidly behind the counter and narrowed her eyes.

“That is just too damn bad. That ship has sailed. I’ve moved on,” Jamie said, her voice tight.

“I’m going to prove to you how sorry I am and how much you mean to me. I’ve decided to move back to Ivy Springs.”

“You may as well stay in Denver. I don’t want anything to do with you.”

The man nodded and said, “I knew that you would say that, but I will do whatever it takes to get you back.”

“Go away.”

He looked at Jamie and then walked out the door.

Jamie released a huge breath and started shaking.

“Are you okay? Who was that?” Clara asked.

“I’m fine,” Jamie said. “He just took me by surprise. That was Ryan.”

“Do you want me to go after him and kick his ass?” Clara asked.

Jamie stared at Clara for a second and then laughed.

“I do believe that you would do exactly that. Thanks for the offer, but I’m good.”

“Suit yourself,” Clara said with a grin.

“I was very shocked to see him. The last that I heard, he was an engineer in Denver, making big bucks, along with his socialite wannabe wife. She always wanted to be a part of the set that ran with people like the Faisons.”

“Apparently, he wasn’t good enough for her, since she left him for someone else.”

“Sucks to be him,” Jamie said. “You want to know what was really surprising, though?”

“What’s that?”

“When I got over the initial surprise, I didn’t feel anything toward him. All these years, I have felt the humiliation of being left at the wedding and the hurt from being betrayed. I had all of those negative feelings toward him and the situation. But when I looked at him, I didn’t hate him. I didn’t feel any kind of residual love, or other feelings. I felt absolutely nothing. Complete indifference.”

“That is a good thing. Maybe between realizing that there are no feelings of any kind left and letting yourself feel something for Luke, you will heal and be able to find true love.”

“Maybe so. It looks like the biggest challenge, though, is going to be convincing Ryan that I feel completely indifferent to him, that I could never have any feelings for him, and that he needs to go back to Denver.”

“If that fails the offer to kick his ass still stands,” Clara said.

LUKE

Luke was pleased that Jamie had accepted his invitation for a date. She seemed to be a sweet woman and she was definitely beautiful. There was something magnetic about her. He sent her a quick text, letting her have his number and telling her that he would pick her up about six the next night.

Sounds good.

She texted her address, and that was it. Luke had heard about those women who needed to be in constant contact and sent a barrage of texts, but apparently she wasn't one of them.

He stopped by the fire station to say hello to Josh.

“What are you grinning about?”

“Would you believe that I have a date? I asked Jamie out.”

“I like her,” Josh said. “She is very pretty. How long has it been since you've gone on an actual date with a woman?”

“I have no idea. I've not stayed in one place long enough in the last several years than to do more than the occasional hookup.”

“This will be a change of pace for you.”

“That it will,” Luke said. “This whole tamed down life in Ivy Springs has been a huge adjustment.”

“Compared to the excitement you've been living, I imagine that it is. I'm surprised that you aren't bored out of your mind.”

“Now that you mention it, I am,” Luke said. “I've stopped answering any calls at the store because if I have to say *thank you for calling Abrams Hardware, how can I help you* one more time, I may just shoot the phone.”

Josh laughed.

“You think it’s funny. Just wait until I keel over from it. I’m seriously thinking I need to call the commander and tell him that I made a huge mistake,” Luke said, seriously. “My knee has healed up nicely.”

“What about the bullet in your back?”

“It never stopped me before. It’ll either work its way out, or be so covered in tissue that it’ll never move. Even if it kills me, at least I’ll be doing something besides stacking salt and sweeping the floor.”

“I hear your frustration. You had to know that it wasn’t going to be easy.”

“I did. I’m just grouching,” Luke said.

“Something to make life a little more interesting is a poker game tonight at Dillon’s shop. You should be there around seven.”

“Should I bring peanuts and pretzels, or cash?”

“Cash, of course. Be prepared to lose, brother. Ethan is a card shark,” Josh warned.

“Thanks for the warning,” Luke replied. “I had better get back to the store before my father has a heart attack because I’m not exactly where he thinks that I should be.”

“Have fun with that.”

When seven finally rolled around, Dillon welcomed Luke to the group.

“I’m glad that you came. Josh speaks very highly of you.”

“Thanks for the invitation,” Luke said.

Dillon introduced everyone seated around a large round table in the back room. He had already met Ethan, but hadn’t met Daniel, Jessie, Bernie, and some of the others.

“Why the façade?” Luke asked, motioning to the cards and chips on the table.

“Why not mix a little business with pleasure?” Dillon asked. “However, the truth is that while I trust every single person here, there is no telling what eyes and ears are hanging about. If someone peeks in the back room and sees the set up, then that is all they have to report back to the Faisons. Raf has already hit me up a couple of times, wanting to be a part of the game, so he knows that we’re meeting here.”

“That makes sense.”

Luke looked around the room at the men and women assembled at the table.

“You are all shifters?”

Dillon nodded.

“I didn’t know that there were that many shifters in the area. I would have thought that almost everyone would have bailed by now.”

“To be honest, a lot of shifters have. However, everyone here feels like Ivy Springs is their home and they don’t want to leave. Some of their families have lived here for several generations.”

“Josh told me what happened to Noah. His family had been here forever,” Luke said. “It’s a damned shame.”

“Yes, it is. The good thing is that he’s happy in the shifter world, although he does miss his ranch,” Dillon said.

“I understand that you are a dragon shifter,” Jesse said.

“I am, sir.”

The older man nodded and said, “That’s good. Dragon shifters are helpful. We had one who was working with us, but he decided to go to the shifter world. He had enough of war. He felt like he was in prison here.”

“What does this group do, exactly?” Luke asked.

“We mostly watch. We keep an eye on the hunters so that we have an idea of where they are looking for shifters. Although the locals know better than to shift on the mountain here, we get a lot of tourists who don’t, especially in the summer and fall. Unfortunately, we’ve had some go missing because we can’t be everywhere at once to protect them,” Dillon said. “The good thing about having a dragon shifter on our team is that you will be able to see more.”

Luke nodded.

“Sometimes, our job is simply damage control. Occasionally, the Faisons get wind of the identity of a local shifter. We have some people who work at the resort and let us know when that happens. We try to alert the family before the Faisons or their hunters can get to them,” Ethan said.

“What happens if you happen to find some hunters when you are on patrol?” Luke asked.

“For the most part, we leave them alone. The dragon king doesn’t want any unnecessary killings because that would just make the situation worse. However, if you have to take out a hunter because of self-defense or you are defending someone else, then you do that,” Dillon replied.

Dillon looked pointedly at Daniel and Bernie as he said this. Luke got the idea that Daniel and Bernie were among the shifters who were in the camp that all hunters should be killed and their bodies hidden so they were never

found.

Luke had to admit that there was something fundamentally wrong with a person who was willing to kill someone else for the sake of killing them or just because they were different. However, vigilantism was never a good idea and if the shifters took this tactic, the situation would only get a lot worse for shifters all over the world.

“I understand the frustration,” Dillon said, continuing to eyeball Daniel and Bernie. “We all feel like our hands are tied. There isn’t a whole lot that we can do to be proactive. Most of what we do is reactive, which means that we are always a step behind.”

The next morning, Luke headed out to the mountain. There was a very small cave that very few people knew about, not even local shifters. Josh and Luke had come across it when they were kids and hadn’t told a soul about it. As far as they could tell, they were the only ones who visited it. It was covered by thick brush that made the entrance practically invisible.

He carefully studied the area and figured that hadn’t been found. The brush hadn’t been messed with in a very long time and there were no footprints. He slipped behind a small opening between the brush and the cave and went inside. He stripped off his clothes and hid them. Then, stepping back into the open cold, he quickly shifted into his dragon form and took off.

Luke flew above the tree line for a couple of hours. At first, he didn’t see anything. Then, just when he was about to head back, he spotted a couple of people trekking through the woods. They seemed to be heading in the direction of one of the spots that had previously been used by shifters because it was so secluded. He flew in that direction and hid in a tree, far enough away that he wouldn’t be spotted. Sure enough, in half an hour, the snow shoers appeared. They seemed to be inspecting the ground. They checked the trees as though they were looking for clothes. Then, they moved on in the direction of another spot.

The hunters have to be some kind of idiots if they think that the local shifters haven’t figured them out yet. The shifters aren’t deer that make their rounds to the same bait areas each time.

If this was their plan for finding shifters, the only way that the hunters would come across one would be they came across one by accident. They were the laziest hunters he had ever seen.

Luke headed back to the cave, shifted, dressed, and meticulously erased any sign that he had been in the area as he walked back toward his truck.

The general store was empty when Luke arrived.

“All I saw were a couple of hunters walking from one previously popular shifting spot to another. They weren’t taking the initiative to do any kind of real searching. They are going to be very disappointed if they thought that they were actually going to find anyone.”

“That is basically what we’ve all found. Like I said before, no one local shifts on our mountain any more. They either go to Phantom Canyon or Pike’s Peak.”

“And it’s the wrong time for tourists,” Luke said. “Do you ever feel like your efforts are wasted?”

“Unfortunately, yes, but we really don’t have any other options.”

“At least I had the opportunity to spread my wings, so to speak,” Luke said.

“There is that. Let me know when you have time to go out again.”

“Will do.”

Luke checked the time. He could go to the hardware store for a couple of hours, but he really didn’t want to deal with his father. He had already told his dad he wasn’t coming in, so Luke went home. He took a nap until it was time to get ready for the date.

He wasn’t thinking anything too fancy for the date. He pulled on a pair of jeans and a black, collarless, button down shirt. He pulled on his boots and called it good.

Jamie didn’t disappoint him. Luke stared at the woman who opened her door. She had been beautiful in jeans and with her hair pulled back into a bun. She was absolutely gorgeous now.

She grabbed her purse and stepped outside, making sure to lock her door.

The steak house wasn’t too busy and they were able to get a table right away. They were seated at one of the booths that afforded them a little bit of privacy. The candle and rose in the center of the table were a nice touch.

“I haven’t been here in ages,” Jamie said, looking around. “I don’t think anything has changed in forever.”

“It’s exactly the same as when I was a kid, I think,” Luke remarked.

The waiter came and took their orders. Luke liked that Jamie knew exactly what she wanted and didn’t hesitate to ask for it.

Luke accidently stretched his leg out too far and rubbed against Jamie’s boot.

“Sorry about that. I take up a lot of room.”

“Ah, gee. I thought you were flirting with me,” she said, laughing.

“You caught me,” Luke replied.

He stretched his arm out on the table and touched Jamie’s. He was surprised that little touch jumpstarted a little fire inside of him.

“Zeke, Clara’s son, asked me if Santa was going to bring me any presents this year,” Jamie said.

“Were you a good girl?” Luke asked.

“I was a very good girl,” Jamie said. “What about you? Is Santa going to bring you anything?”

“Mmm, I don’t know about that,” Luke said.

He enjoyed the light banter that followed. There were no awkward moments of silence between them.

Their dinner was brought to the table and he noticed that Jamie ate with relish. He was glad of that, because it drove him crazy to see women pick at their food like birds.

The waitress brought the dessert menu and they both ordered some cheesecake.

Luke leaned over and started to ask Jamie a question, but was interrupted.

“Luke. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

He cringed. He didn’t even have to look up to see who had interrupted their evening.

“Alexis.”

“I was having dinner with one of my good friends and saw you over here. I just had to say hello. I was telling her all about you,” Alexis gushed.

You don’t know anything about me.

Alexis pointedly ignored Jamie. She moved close enough to Luke that his arm was touching her torso. He thought about moving over so that he wasn’t touching her, but didn’t because Alexis would take that as an invitation to sit down.

“The food here is terrific, but not quite as good as it is at the resort. I just needed a change of scenery, you know.”

“I know how that is,” Luke replied.

He noticed that Jamie was sitting stiffly in her seat, not looking at the brazen Alexis.

“You should come have dinner with me tomorrow night.”

“I can’t. I have plans,” Luke said. “Please excuse us. Our dessert is here.”

“Of course,” she said. “I’ll see you soon.”

She cast a dirty look at Jamie and slid away. She probably thought that it was a sexy glide, but Luke thought that she looked more like a slithering snake.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

“You had no control,” Jamie said. “Alexis does exactly what she wants to do.”

They hastily finished their cheesecake and walked outside. Although there was a chill in the night air, they walked, hand in hand to the park that had a couple of trails running through it.

Luke was relaxed and happy. They made comments about the stars and moon, the snow, and traded light banter. There were also moments of comfortable silence.

He wasn't ready for the night to end when he drove them back to her house.

Luke was very glad when she asked, “Would you like to come in?”

She made some coffee and turned on some music. He smiled when he heard some of the slow ballads from the '80s and '90s.

“Care to dance?” he asked.

“I would love to.” She giggled.

He pulled her close to him and they danced together in her living room. She looked up at him with a soft smile. He couldn't help himself as he leaned down to kiss her.

JAMIE

A fire shot through Jamie's body when Luke pulled her into his arms and their bodies pressed together. She almost melted as she felt his hard chest against hers. All night long, Jamie had been trying not to stare at the way his shirt seemed to stretch against his hard muscles. She was certain that he was about to burst the seams every time he moved his arms and his biceps flexed. Everything about him screamed perfection.

At first, his lips were tender as they brushed against hers. They were soft and warm. Jamie closed her eyes and allowed herself to just feel the sensations that swept through her body.

His arms tightened around her and the kiss became more insistent, more demanding. He pushed his tongue against her lips demanding entrance.

Jamie's breathing became heavier as his kiss deepened and a fire that she had never known existed kindled deep inside of her. She wrapped her arms around him, feeling the hard muscles under her fingers. Luke tangled his hand in her hair, as his other hand held her close to his body.

She inhaled his scent which was a combination of pine and something she couldn't identify that screamed Luke. It was a scent that flooded through her senses, making her hungry for more.

He pulled away for a second, his blue eyes staring deeply into Jamie's. For a second, she was still, not sure what to do or say. Then, on its own, a small smile crept onto her lips. He grinned back. It was a sexy look that made her heart thunder in my chest even harder.

Jamie bit her bottom lip as she reached up and gently touched the side of his face, tracing the contours of his jaw line, his cheeks, and his brow. The

roughness on his chin tickled her fingers. Luke closed his eyes as she touched his face and moaned slightly.

“You have no idea what your touch is doing to me,” he breathed heavily.

He lowered his head and their lips met once more. The kiss was so gentle at first, just the barest hint of a kiss. Luke’s hands wrapped around her tightly and the kiss became more insistent, more demanding.

The heat between Jamie and Luke grew. The embers that had come to life from the first kiss burned hotter. Their bodies swayed together. He traced Jamie’s lips with his tongue and nibbled gently on her bottom lip.

Their arms wrapped around each other, desperate to close any space between them. His tongue pressed into her mouth. He stroked the top of her tongue and then began a slow waltz. A hunger that Jamie had never felt before flooded her body.

Luke pulled away from the kiss and said, “I had better go, because I don’t want to stop with just a kiss.”

Jamie held tighter to him and said, “I don’t want you to stop.”

He searched her face and then lightly touched her cheek.

“Are you sure? Do you know what you are asking of me?”

“I’m sure,” Jamie replied, simply.

Jamie knew that she hadn’t ever wanted anything so badly in her entire life.

She held his hand and led him to her bedroom. He captured her lips once more, tasting and exploring her. His fingers found the top button of her blouse and he slowly unfastened each one, and then slid her shirt off her shoulders. It fell in a heap on the floor.

Luke reached around and unzipped her skirt, and it dropped to the floor as well. Jamie felt shy standing in front of this sexy man in only her bra, panties, and boots. Her lips were tingling when Luke raised his head and smiled at her.

“You are so incredibly sexy,” he said.

His voice was deep with a desire that even Jamie, in her innocence, could recognize.

With trembling fingers, she began to unbutton his shirt. He shrugged it off as she unfastened the last one. Jamie spread both hands out across his chest, just as she had been aching to do all night. She loved how his hard muscles felt under her fingertips. Jamie traced the trail of smattering hair to the top of his jeans. Biting her bottom lip, she let her need overcome her

shyness.

It didn't take long for her to unfasten his pants, which he kicked off, along with his shoes and underwear. She sucked in a huge breath as she looked at his huge shaft. Jamie had never imagined that it would be so huge.

Luke reached around and unfastened her bra. He hooked his fingers in her panties, pushing them down. She pushed them past her boots and let them fall.

"These are perfect," Luke said, cradling her breasts in his hands. "They aren't too big or too small."

He rubbed her nipples with his thumb, sending currents of electricity racing through her body.

Luke walked her backward toward the bed. She pulled down the coverlet and blanket before she sat on the soft Egyptian cotton sheets. Jamie was about to unzip her boots, but Luke gently pushed her back so that she was lying on the sheets.

He squeezed her breasts gently, running his thumb over one hard bud. Dipping his head, he sucked her other nipple into his mouth.

Jamie moaned loudly when he flicked her nipple with his tongue. In an instant, her entire body was on fire. He lightly pinched her other nipple between his thumb and forefinger, pulling on it just a bit.

With just those simple touches, Jamie's body was on fire. A burning need between her legs exploded and she hungered for more.

Luke licked the nipple he had been sucking on and turned his attention to her other one. Jamie panted as his tongue circled her nipple. A sound, between a squeak and a moan, escaped from her lips.

He looked up and smiled at her. She touched his face and traced his lips with her fingertips. Then, she ran her hands up and down his arms, feeling his biceps and forearms flex. She touched his chest and thought that she could explode just from caressing him.

"You are like some Norse god that fell out of the sky," she said.

Luke grinned and said, "I've never heard that one before."

He leaned over and pressed his lips against hers, consuming her mouth. Luke reached between her legs and slipped a finger inside of her.

"Mmm, your wet," he said.

"That's what you did to me," Jamie said.

"Let's see what else I can do to you."

He nuzzled her neck as his finger slid in and out of her. Luke pushed in

another finger and spread them apart stretching her, preparing her for him. A sexy grin spread across his face as she moaned and spread her legs a little bit for him.

Luke pulled his fingers out and found her clit. He gently rubbed her, sending a burst of fiery waves roaring through her. Leaning over, he sucked on one of her nipples.

Jamie felt as though her breath had been stolen away as her heart thundered a million miles an hour inside of her chest. Her entire body shook as he continued to gently rub her hard pebble.

“Oh, my,” she whispered.

Her body shook and she felt wave after wave of pure fire explode out of her.

When she was able to breathe again, Luke kissed her and straddled her. He positioned himself at her entrance and slowly pushed his way in.

Her eyes widened as she felt herself stretching around his massive girth. She bit her lip as a little bit of stinging merged with the most incredible sensations she felt. Luke pushed past her maidenhood, burying himself deep inside of her.

Luke’s blue eyes peered deep into her own, as he was completely sheathed inside of her. She smiled at him.

He slowly pulled almost all the way out of her, until just the apple sized tip tantalized her. Then, just as slowly, he pushed back in, until all ten inches of him was buried.

“Oh my heavens,” she breathed.

She spread her legs even further, bending at the knees, giving him full access to her. Jamie stroked his chest as he continued to move in and out, moving against her silken walls.

Luke tilted his head back and moaned.

“You feel so good wrapped around my cock.”

Jamie licked her lips as she lost herself in the millions of sensations that coursed through her body. The tingling of electricity lit up every cell. A raging fire burned through her.

The heat from their bodies and the cool air from the room collided. Thunder and lightning flashed around her.

Luke was sliding in and out of her a little faster. Jamie panted as she watched the gorgeous man above her. His blue eyes were clouded with the same passion she felt. He moaned low in his throat as he once again pushed

hard, filling her.

He was moving faster, pulling almost all the way out and thrusting hard and deep inside of her. Jamie was sure that she was going to die from the powerful sensations that moved through her.

She lifted her hips to meet his as he drove hard inside of her.

“Yes. Luke, oh, yes.”

He moaned loudly as he continued to move, pulling almost all the way out and driving hard back inside of her, her hot, wet walls, massaging him.

Jamie cried out, “Luke,” as her body began to tremble uncontrollably. A searing fire burned out of control. She panted, her heart thundered, and she was sure that she was going to pass out from the indescribable feelings that rolled through her.

Wave after wave of hot liquid exploded over Luke, and he thrust hard and deep inside of her. Luke sucked in a huge breath and she felt him begin to throb. A geyser of his seed exploded inside of her.

When they were both able to breathe again and their heart rates had returned to normal, Luke rolled onto his side.

He gently stroked her cheek and asked, “You good?”

“Oh, yes. So good. You?”

“Most definitely.”

LUKE

Luke cuddled Jamie. Her faint scent of vanilla and something else, just as tantalizingly sweet, was enticing. She sighed as she pressed up against him. Luke stroked her hair and studied her face.

She had a slight smile and let out a soft sigh. She put her hand on his chest as they lay entangled together on the bed.

Luke wasn't sure what to say. He hadn't ever been with a woman who he liked and wanted to see again. Always in the past he had been with a woman and they had a mutually agreeable good time, released some stress, and then went their separate ways.

There was also the fact that Jamie had been a virgin. He had never been with a virgin before. He knew that it meant something when a woman gave her innocence to a man.

Jamie was the one who broke the silence.

"I had a great time tonight. Thank you."

"Me, too."

"I didn't quite expect things to go the way that they did, but I'm glad it happened," Jamie said.

Luke could tell that she was feeling awkward about the situation and probably had no more of an idea as to what to say than he did.

"You are a very beautiful woman," Luke said. "I would never have guessed that under those jeans and t-shirt you wear that there was such fire."

He cringed and immediately regretted the words. But it wasn't like he could say, *You were a good lay, especially for a virgin.*

Jamie seemed to sense his problem and said, "You don't have to say

anything. I'm a big girl and made a big girl decision. I'm not sorry, and I won't regret anything in the morning."

Luke was relieved. Jamie didn't expect any kind of promises from him, which was a good thing, because he had none to give, although he did want to keep seeing her. He was interested in her. She was sweet, had a good sense of humor, and he enjoyed her company.

After about half an hour, he pulled his arm out from under her because the tingling in it wasn't from any kind of pleasure. It had fallen asleep.

He rubbed his hand and fingers.

"Sorry about that." She giggled.

"It was worth it," Luke assured her.

"Are you going to stay the night? I can cook a mean breakfast," Jamie shyly asked.

Luke hesitated. He had thought about this question because he had never stayed the night at a woman's house before. Luke wanted to, but he didn't want to give Jamie any false hopes or ideas, although she had let him know that she didn't have any. He also didn't think that he was ready to wake up and find a woman next to him.

"As much as I would love to, I have an early morning tomorrow," he said.

"I understand."

He thought that Jamie sounded disappointed. Luke kissed her on the forehead and slipped out of bed. She dipped into the bathroom and came back with a warm, wet washcloth. Her cheeks were pink as she handed it to him.

"Thanks."

Luke got dressed as she pulled a long shirt over her head. She followed him to the front door and smiled up at him as he turned around.

He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, his tongue sweeping her mouth. He felt something stirring inside of him and knew that she had aroused his passions once again.

"I better go. I'm not sure you are ready for twice in one night," he said, smiling.

"I think you are right about that one," Jamie said. "Although the thought of it is very tempting."

He laughed and stepped onto the porch, waiting until he heard her lock the door.

Luke jumped into a cold shower when he got home. Her scent had stayed with him, and it tempted him to go back to her. He smiled when he thought

about their night together. She had been fun during dinner and their date. She had been passionate during the sex. Jamie was herself and didn't hold anything back from him. He couldn't remember if he had ever been with a woman like that. Every other woman he had ever dated or fucked seemed to hold a part of herself back, hiding it from him.

Sliding into bed, he was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Jamie was his first thought the next morning. As he walked into the kitchen he remembered her offer of breakfast, and he wished that he had some eggs and bacon that he didn't have to cook. He started the coffee and got busy frying bacon and cutting up the veges for an omelet.

He took his time eating. He knew that he was just dragging out the inevitable. The idea of spending another day at the hardware store, especially with his father, made him want to stab himself in the eye with a fork.

"At least I would have a legitimate reason for avoiding him." Luke laughed to himself.

Unfortunately, he could only prolong the agony for so long. He drank the last bit of coffee in the pot and washed the dishes. Then, with a heavy sigh, he headed out.

Luke thought about stopping by the café for another cup and to see Jamie, but he wasn't sure if he should. He didn't know how weird it would be for her.

"The hell with it," he muttered under his breath.

Jamie's face lit up in a huge smile when Luke walked in.

"Good morning," she called, just as she had every other morning. "How are you doing this morning?"

"I'm doing terrific," he said. "And you?"

"The best ever. Did you come to be graced by my presence or did you want some coffee?" Jamie asked, teasingly.

"All of the above."

"Coming right up," she said.

Luke was relieved that there didn't seem to be any weirdness between the two of them. He paid for the coffee and leaned over the counter to kiss her cheek.

"I need to be going. I'll see you later."

"I hope so," she replied.

Luke's mood dipped as soon as he walked into the hardware store. He loved his parents and honored them, but his father could be overbearing. He

seemed to have trouble realizing that Luke was a grown man.

Carl started in on Luke as soon as he set his coffee on the counter.

“You’re late.”

“Didn’t know I was on a time schedule. I’m here doing you a favor until I figure out what is next for me.”

Luke wasn’t in the mood to play nice or to coddle his father.

Anger flashed across Carl’s face, and Luke knew that he had hit a nerve. Luke waited for his father to strike back, but he didn’t.

Luke took off his jacket and looked through the delivery schedule that was posted behind the counter. There was nothing on the agenda. Damn. This was going to be a long day.

Dad cleared his throat, and Luke looked up at him.

Here it comes.

“I had a customer in here this morning who said that he saw you out on a date last night.”

“Your customers need to mind their own business,” Luke replied. “Yes, I was on a date last night.”

“Who was she?”

Luke glared at his father before answering. He didn’t care to be interrogated about his private life.

“Her name is Jamie.”

“I don’t know her. She’s not a dragon shifter and you don’t need to be dating her,” Carl said. “At best, she’s a human, and even then she would weaken our blood line.”

Luke growled and said, “I’m a grown man. I’ll date whoever I damn well please. I don’t need your permission or your approval.”

“You dishonor your heritage if you are with anyone besides a dragon shifter.”

“I’m going to say this one time, Dad. Back off.”

Carl pressed his lips together and his face turned bright red. The vein in the side of his neck was pulsating rapidly, and Luke was afraid that his old man was about to have a stroke, but Luke wasn’t going to appease his father in any way.

“I need to go,” Luke said, grabbing his jacket.

“Where are you...”

Luke didn’t hear the rest of the question as the door slammed shut behind him. He thought about going up on the mountain, but it was too risky and he

didn't want to deal with that stress. He drove the hour or so to Phantom Canyon and hiked to a secluded spot. He shifted and for the next several hours, he flew all over the mountain, enjoying the freedom and the release of energy. The snow sparkled in the sunlight and the fresh air was invigorating. He appreciated the raw beauty of the mountain.

On the way back to Ivy Springs, he once again thought about where his life was going and wondered whether he should go back to his old military life. That was why he hadn't talked to Josh's chief yet. He didn't want to make any commitments until he decided what he wanted.

Josh was off that night so they hung out and had a couple of beers. Josh listened attentively while Luke told him about his encounter with his father.

"Eventually he'll figure out that he can't control your life."

"I'm not sure that he will. He's too damn stubborn."

Josh laughed and asked, "How was your date?"

"It was good. I really like Jamie and we had fun. Alexis was at the restaurant though, and had to come over and be a pain in the ass."

"Is she following you?"

"Sometimes I wonder. She said that she was just there having dinner with her friend and just happened to see us."

"Well, there are only two steakhouses in Ivy Springs. It *could* be a coincidence," Josh joked.

"Ha, ha. You a funny man."

"Are you planning on seeing Jamie again?"

"Yes, I am," Luke said. "I like her and we'll see where this goes."

JAMIE

After Luke left, Clara looked at Jamie questioningly, but before she could ask any questions about the date, a ton of people poured in. Once the café was empty, they were both too busy cleaning up, baking new goodies, and restocking to talk. Jamie was relieved, because she wasn't ready to talk to Clara about it, anyway.

Once the lunch rush was over, when everyone came in for their favorite soup and sandwich, Jamie asked, "Clara, do you mind if I take a couple of hours?"

"Of course not," Clara said.

She stopped by the flower shop and bought a bouquet of different types of flowers. Her mother had never had a favorite flower. She loved all the different colors, scents, and patterns of all flowers.

She brushed the snow away from the headstone and the grave and knelt down.

"I brought you some flowers, Mom. They're your favorites – a little bit of everything," Jamie said.

"I'm sorry that I haven't been by lately. I don't have a good reason."

Jamie waited for a second and then sucked in a huge breath.

"I met a man. I really didn't meet him, because I knew him from high school. I guess that I ran into a man recently. I don't think that I ever told you about him. We weren't close in high school. His name is Luke Abrams."

"I really like him, Mom. He's the first man I've been out with since Ryan."

Embarrassment flooded Jamie when she said, "I slept with him. I didn't

plan on it at first. But we went on a date, he came back to my place, we danced, he kissed me, and we had sex.”

She paused, collecting her thoughts.

“I’m not sorry. I enjoyed it. I always thought that I would save my virginity for my wedding night, but it felt right.”

She laughed and said, “Luke is practically a stranger to me. We knew each other in high school, but we weren’t close. Even if we had been, people change a lot over the years. I know that I’m definitely not the same person that I used to be.”

Jamie drew random lines in the snow as she sorted out her thoughts and feelings.

“I don’t know where the relationship is going to go, but I think he wants to go on another date with me. I like spending time with him. He’s a great guy, and hot, too.”

Jamie laughed.

“I wish you were here so we could really talk. I miss you so much. I’ve felt so alone since you’ve been gone.”

She didn’t really expect an answer. Jamie knew that ghosts existed, but she was confident that her mother had gone to heaven or whatever paradise there was after death. Jamie did feel a lot better after she got everything off of her chest, even though her mother didn’t reply.

Jamie sat for a couple more minutes, missing her mother so much that her soul ached. She was just about to leave when a warm breeze suddenly circled around her, enveloping her. It was gone as soon as it had come.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she went back to the café and the familiar smell of coffee.

“Are you okay?” Clara asked.

“I am.”

She was just about to ask another question when the door flew open and Alexis flooded into the café.

“Damn,” Jamie muttered to herself.

She put both hands on the counter as she prepared herself for what she knew was going to be another unpleasant confrontation.

Alexis reeked of expensive perfume, making Jamie gag. She had overdone her make up this morning, giving her face an exaggerated look. Her tight clothes left nothing to the imagination. Jamie wanted to ask her whether Alexis was aware of how ridiculous she looked, but decided not to start a

confrontation.

“What can I get for you?” Jamie asked.

“I saw you with Luke last night,” Alexis snarled.

“Did you, now. I didn’t think that you noticed me at all.”

Clara took a step toward Jamie and Alexis, but Jamie subtly lifted her hand, motioning for Clara to stop.

“You need to back off. You are pathetic and certainly not good enough for him. Someone like you could never make a man like him happy. You don’t have what it takes.”

“I guess that would be for him to decide,” Jamie said, keeping her voice calm.

“I want him. You need to learn your place and step aside.”

It doesn’t seem to me that Luke is interested in you at all.

Instead of voicing her thoughts, she said, “Luke is a free man. If he would like to be with you, then he just has to tell me. So far, he hasn’t said anything like that.”

“You are stupid. He’s too wrapped up in whatever you are putting out to understand how great he and I will be together. Walk away, Jamie.”

Jamie wasn’t a violent person, but she really wanted to throat punch Alexis. However, she knew that wouldn’t go over too well and she really didn’t want to go to jail, so she kept her cool.

She kept her face and voice emotionless when she said, “I like Luke. He is sweet and a lot of fun to hang out with. I intend to keep dating him and getting to know him better, unless the time comes when he lets me know that he really isn’t interested anymore.”

Alexis’ face turned bright red and glowed under the pound of make up she wore. She clenched her hands into fists until her knuckles were white.

She gnashed her teeth when she said, “I’m warning you. Back off, bitch, or I will make your life miserable.”

Jamie sucked in a huge breath of air, stood up straight, and held her head up high.

“You are not going to bully me. You think that just because you have money that you are better than everyone else and that you can force people to do what you want. The fact is, you don’t scare me. I will see who I want, when I want, including Luke, and there’s not one thing you can do to stop me.”

Alexis started shaking and Jamie was sure that the woman was about to

explode.

She pointed her finger at Jamie and said, “We’ll see about that. You watch your back.”

Alexis swept her arm across the counter, knocking everything off. She turned on her heels and stormed out the door.

Clara looked at Jamie in amazement and admiration.

“Wow. I’ve never seen that side of you before. I’m impressed.”

“I don’t like confrontation and will avoid it when I can,” Jamie said. “But I’m not going to let that woman push me around just because she is like some spoiled rotten kid who thinks that she can have anything that she wants.”

“Good for you.”

Jamie was still fuming. She was shaking and her face was red. A low growl escaped.

“It’s one thing to be afraid of her and her brothers because they hire hunters to kill shifters. But it will be a cold day in hell before I let anyone, including her, *especially* her, interfere with my personal life.”

“Alexis said that she was going to make your life a living hell. What do you think that she is going to do?”

Jamie ran her fingers through her hair, messing up her bun, and sighed.

“I have no idea.”

“Whatever she tries to get up to, I have your back. So will Dillon.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

Jamie was starting to calm down. Her heart rate was returning to normal. She unclenched her jaw. It hurt a little because she didn’t know that she had clamped her teeth together so hard.

She ran her hands over her face and took in another deep breath. Jamie fixed her hair bun and pressed her lips together.

“I can’t remember when I’ve been that mad. She’s lucky that I have great control over my temper and I didn’t turn into a bear and shred her.”

“Thank you for not doing that. I really would hate to clean up that much blood and figure out how to hide a body.”

Jamie coughed out a laugh.

“You’re welcome,” Jamie replied.

“Are you going to tell Luke?”

“Nope. Men hate drama, and right now it is a drama between me and Alexis.”

“A drama that he is starring in.”

“He might be the source of her conflict, but there is no need for him to know anything about it. If things get worse, I might mention something to him, but for now, I’ll keep him out of it.”

“By the way, we didn’t have a chance to talk this morning. How did your date with Luke go?” Clara asked.

Jamie’s eyes lit up and a slow smile formed.

“That good, huh?” Clara asked.

“It started out great. We went to the steak house to have dinner. We were laughing and having a great time.”

“But…”

“It was interrupted by Alexis, who, by some weird coincidence, just happened to be hanging out with her friend at the steakhouse. She came over to talk to him, gushing over him. I’m surprised she didn’t sit in his lap. She didn’t even acknowledge my presence – didn’t talk to me, didn’t look at me, nothing. Which, I was okay with.”

“Luke sent her on her way, politely. We had dessert and then went for a walk, even though it was a little cold outside.”

“A nice romantic walk under the stars and moon is always a good touch.”

“It was. We went back to my place. I turned on some music. We danced.”

Jamie’s smile got even bigger at the memory.

“We had sex. It was my first time, actually.”

“How was it?”

“Great. He did everything right. You know, I never thought that I would have sex with anyone, let alone a man on a first date. I never had the urge to have sex with Ryan. But last night was magical and I don’t regret it at all.”

“Are you falling in love with him?”

Jamie shrugged her shoulders.

“I like him a lot, but I’m not anywhere near ready to say that I love him or that I’m heading in that direction. I want to take everything nice and slow and just see where the relationship goes.”

“Good idea,” Clara said. “I’m just really glad that you had a nice time last night.”

“Me, too. Even if this relationship doesn’t end with wedding bells and a football team of children, I’m enjoying getting out and exploring life. It’s great that I have such a sexy tour guide.”

LUKE

Luke was actually having a good day. His father had asked him about his time in the military and about some of the missions he went on. A lot of the information was classified, so he couldn't tell his father about the people and situations that he encountered, but he was able to tell Carl about the different places that he visited.

"Each place had an incredible beauty all its own, whether it was desert, jungle or whatever. For the most part, the everyday people just wanted to live life and be left alone. They didn't want to be tangled up in whatever war or crisis that was going on," Luke said.

"I can understand that. I think that's what everyone wants," Carl said. "You know, your mother and I talked about traveling. She's been in love with ancient Greece and Rome forever and occasionally mentions that she might like to see the Parthenon or the Coliseum."

"You should take her on a vacation. When is the last time you guys went on one?"

"Heavens, I don't know. It's been a while, that is for sure."

"Now that I'm home, you should take her. Enjoy life for a change," Luke urged.

"Who knows, I might just do that," Carl mused.

Luke almost believed him. He was relieved that as the day went on, he didn't say anything about Jamie. Usually, when his father picked up a bone, he chewed on it until it was completely destroyed.

The day had gone by smoothly and it was almost time to close. Luke groaned when the door opened and he saw who it was.

“Raf, how are you?”

“Terrific. And yourself?” Raf asked, holding out his hand.

“Good. What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to invite you to the resort tomorrow night for dinner. It is Alexis’ birthday and I know that she would love to have you there. It would be a great surprise for her,” Raf said.

“I’m sorry, but I already have plans. I appreciate the invitation, though,” Luke said.

“That’s too bad. I know that she would really love to see you there. She’s going to be very disappointed. She thinks very highly of you and has been singing your praises,” Raf said.

That’s funny, since she doesn’t even know me.

Luke decided the best way to handle this situation was to be honest with Raf – at least as honest as he could be.

“It really wouldn’t be appropriate for me to go, anyway. I’m seeing someone else,” Luke said.

Raf’s face fell and the fake smile that he had plastered on his face vanished.

“I understand,” Raf said. “If you change your mind, you are welcome to come. Dinner is at seven.”

Luke didn’t know what to say so he just nodded.

Raf lingered for a second as though he was waiting for Luke to change his mind. When Luke didn’t say anything else, Raf left.

“That was a little middle-schoolish, for Raf to come by and play matchmaker for his sister,” Luke muttered.

“Maybe he really was just trying to plan a nice surprise for his sister.”

“Maybe so.”

“Son, you need to be really careful around them. It isn’t smart to upset them,” Carl said.

“Surely, you aren’t suggesting that I go to the resort and share a birthday dinner and celebration with them.”

Carl shrugged and replied, “It couldn’t hurt. We really don’t want to make enemies out of them.”

“I can’t believe you. There is no way that I would go. I’m not about to let my life be ruled by fear or by some entitled rich people who think that they can have anything and anyone that they want.”

Heaving a heavy sigh, Carl said, “You should think about it.”

“Absolutely not. Besides, even if I was interested in Alexis, which I am not, what kind of chaos would it cause when she found out that I was a dragon shifter?”

“It could actually be a bridge for peace. It’s not unheard of for the children of enemies to get married to create some kind of truce,” Carl said.

“This isn’t the Middle Ages, Dad. It’s not going to happen. I am *not* interested in Alexis and I never would be. Even if I thought it would end the war, which it wouldn’t, I couldn’t stomach being near her for more than five minutes.”

Carl looked at Luke as though he was completely disappointed in him.

“Besides, Alexis is a human. What happened to your problem with me seeing someone who isn’t a dragon shifter? You were raising hell because Jamie isn’t a dragon shifter.”

“This is different. This situation is entirely different because Alexis is one of the billionaires, and it could help stop the war between them and us.”

“Wow, Dad. I can’t believe you. You are absolutely unbelievable,” Luke said.

Carl didn’t say anything. He just shook his head at Luke and walked away, muttering something unintelligible under his breath.

“Just when I thought there was a connection between me and dad, he had to come up with some kind of stupidity,” Luke fumed.

He took a deep breath and told himself that he wasn’t going to let his father, Raf, or Alexis run his mood.

Luke helped his father close up the shop and left without saying another word to him. He was certain that he couldn’t handle another line that might come out of his father’s mouth.

Josh was busy, so Luke decided to stop by Dillon’s shop to see if there was anything interesting going on.

Dillon and Ethan smiled widely, welcoming Luke.

“It’s good to see you again, man,” Dillon said. “How are things going?”

“Alright, you?”

“Good. Things have been super quiet lately. Daniel and Jesse went out and about for a while yesterday. They pretty much saw the same things that you did. It’s not tourist season so, luckily, there haven’t been any hikers or other out of towners reported missing. No one in town has disappeared,” Dillon said.

“None of the shifters in town have reported any run ins with hunters or

Faisons, either, like they might if anyone had suspicions about their activities,” Ethan added.

“Excellent news. Do you think that maybe things will ease up for a while?”

Dillon shook his head.

“It’s just winter time. The quiet before the storm. It actually makes me a little nervous, because I’m afraid that everyone is going to relax a little bit. I’m afraid that some of them will think that since it has been quiet that they can let down their guard and shift on our mountain,” Dillon said.

“I’ve tried to make sure that they stay aware and go out of town when they need to shift, but I know that people are tired of hearing it. They are tired of this whole mess to begin with,” Ethan said.

“I understand that. It would get old after a while.”

“Anything new in your world?” Dillon asked.

Luke grimaced.

“I seem to have picked up an admirer. If I didn’t know better, I would think that she was stalking me.”

He told them about the encounter at the club, gas station, and the steak house.

“And now today, Raf shows up at the hardware store and asks if I want to come to dinner tomorrow night because it is Alexis’ birthday, she really likes me, and it would be a great surprise if I went. I felt like I was back in middle school when Betty Sue’s best friend asked me if I liked Betty Sue, because if I did, then she liked me back.”

Dillon and Ethan laughed.

“Don’t worry about Alexis. She has a thing for all the hot men. For the longest time, she had a thing for Noah. Then, when that didn’t work out, she turned her attention to me. Now, you are the hot new guy in town, so obviously, she is in love with you. It’ll pass.”

“I think I’m offended. She hasn’t looked twice in my direction,” Ethan protested.

Everyone laughed.

“Maybe you should start talking to her and she’ll leave me alone,” Luke advised.

“Mmm, I’ll pass.”

“Damn, and I thought you were a friend.”

“Not that good of a friend,” Ethan said.

“Isn’t it a little ironic that she keeps hitting on shifters, yet she and her family hates shifters so much?” Luke asked.

“Yep. She’d have a heart attack if any of the men she hit on took her up on her offer and then she found out that she had been with a shifter.”

“Believe it or not, my father was trying to talk me into that. He said that I should get with Alexis, make her fall in love with me, marry her, and then let her know that I’m a shifter. That would make the war suddenly disappear,” Luke said, shaking his head.

“Well, brother, if you were willing to make the sacrifice, it couldn’t hurt,” Dillon said, trying to keep a straight face.

“Sorry. I’m not that good of a person.”

The next morning, Luke stopped by to see Jamie at the café. She smiled at him, handed him a coffee, and a danish.

“It’s like you know me,” he said, laughing.

“Don’t flatter yourself. I get to know all the regulars’ orders,” Jamie said, smirking at him.

“I think you just broke my heart,” Luke teased.

“You’ll get over it.”

“What happened to that sweet woman who looks just like you and used to run this register?”

“She’s in the back washing dishes. I’m her evil twin,” Jamie said.

“Oooh, twins. That’s a fantasy I’ve never acted on.”

Jamie almost choked on her laughter.

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you about that. I don’t happen to know any twins that are available right now,” she replied.

“You got me all excited for nothing,” Luke pouted.

“You’re a dork,” Jamie said.

“Thank you. I’ve been working on adding that to my personality types.”

“Heavens to Betsy, did I start dating a guy with multiple personalities?”

“Did I start dating a woman who says things like ‘heavens to Betsy?’”

“I have all kinds of sayings,” Jamie replied.

“I bet you do,” Luke said.

He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“I’ll see you later.”

Luke was smiling as he headed out the door. He thought about Alexis and Jamie. There was no comparison.

JAMIE

Jamie was smiling as she put the next batch of pastries in the oven. She enjoyed seeing Luke and loved the playful banter. Jamie really appreciated the fact that she felt completely comfortable being herself when she was with him. He seemed to like her personality, her sense of humor, and the way that she looked at life.

Although the “I” word was not on the table right now, because it was simply too soon, she did have strong feelings for Luke and deep down inside of her, she hoped that this was going to be a long term relationship.

She set the timer on the oven when she heard the bell on the door jingle, letting her know that there was a customer.

Jamie quickly washed her hands and was about to open the door between the kitchen and customer area when Clara said, “Hello, Alexis. How can I help you?”

Groaning softly, Jamie tilted back her head and closed her eyes. This was the last thing that she needed to deal with today. She decided just to hide out in the kitchen and let Clara handle Alexis.

“I would like a large cappuccino please and one of those brownie muffins,” Alexis said.

Jamie cringed. Alexis’ voice just grated on her nerves.

“Actually, I didn’t come in here just to order a cappuccino and a muffin,” Alexis said.

“Oh?”

“I wanted to talk to you about Jamie.”

“What about her?”

“I want you fire her.”

“Why in the world would I do that?”

“Because I want you to fire her. I warned her that I was going to do everything in my power to make her life miserable because she is stepping on my turf.”

Clara laughed.

“What is so funny?” Alexis asked.

“That you think that you could come in here, tell me to fire Jamie simply because you have a beef with her, and you actually believe that I would do that.”

“Jamie is a terrible person and is going to make your business look bad. You are going to lose a lot of customers because of her. You need to fire her.”

Jamie peeked through the door to see Clara shake her head. Clara licked her lips and grinned.

“Jamie is an amazing person. She is great with customers and works very hard. My son loves her and so do I. She is a dear friend of mine. There is no way in the world that I would fire Jamie.”

Alexis puffed up her chest and her voice got hard.

“You have no idea who I am and who you are dealing with.”

“I know exactly who you are. You are someone who thinks that just because she has money that she is better than everyone else. You are someone who thinks that just because you have money that you own everyone else and that everyone is ready to do your bidding. The fact is that you are no better than anyone else. You bleed red, just like the rest of us. You will die and be buried with nothing more than the clothes you are wearing, just like the rest of us.”

Jamie grinned wide as she heard Clara put Alexis in her place. She was sure that Alexis was about to pass out from the shock.

“How dare you talk to me like that.”

Clara just looked at her.

“I’m giving you one more chance. You fire Jamie, or I will make your life miserable, too. I’ll make sure that you lose your café because no one will set foot in here.”

“I highly doubt that you have that kind of power, but even if you do, I don’t care. I will not allow you, or anyone else, rule my life. I love Jamie like a sister. She stays.”

“You will regret that,” Alexis snarled and headed toward the door.

“You forgot your cappuccino and muffin,” Clara called after her.

Jamie was sure that she heard a loud growl coming from Alexis as she flounced out the door.

“I’m so sorry about that,” Jamie said.

Clara hugged Jamie and said, “You have absolutely nothing to be sorry about. It isn’t your fault. You aren’t responsible for someone else’s bad behavior.”

“I still feel bad. It’s because of me that she was giving you a rough time.”

“Actually, it felt good to put her in her place. I don’t like bullies. I never have,” Clara said. “But she must have a huge thing for Luke if she is coming after you this hard. I think she flirted with Dillon a bit, but nothing like this.”

“Well, Luke is hot – not that Dillon isn’t,” Jamie quickly added.

Clara laughed.

“What she doesn’t realize is that Luke isn’t an idiot. Even if you suddenly disappeared off the face of the Earth, he wouldn’t have anything to do with her.”

“I almost feel sorry for her,” Jamie said. “She has no idea how desperate her actions make her seem. She also doesn’t realize how ridiculous she looks.”

“It’s because she is used to getting everything that she wants. She points a finger, snaps, and she has it. She reminds me of that spoiled little girl in the Johnny Depp version of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*,” Clara said.

Jamie giggled and replied, “Only instead of picking out a squirrel, she points her finger at a man and says ‘I want that one,’ which just happens to be Luke.”

“That’s who you should be feeling sorry for. I’m sure that she has already made her intentions known to him,” Clara said. “Speaking of Luke, are you going to tell him about this incident?”

“No, and I don’t want you to say anything either. You handled the situation and there is nothing he could do.”

Jamie could tell that Clara wasn’t happy with her answer.

“I don’t want to lose a potentially good thing because of drama. Men hate drama, and he might decide that it’s not worth seeing me if all this is going to happen.”

Clara nodded in understanding.

Dillon dropped by a few minutes later for some coffee for him and Ethan.

He immediately noticed that there was something off about Clara.

He kissed her briefly and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m good.”

Dillon looked at her and said, “Really? You’re going to try that with me?”

Clara looked at Jamie and then explained what had happened.

Dillon blew a gasket.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. She actually had the nerve to demand that you fire Jamie and threatened you when you said that you wouldn’t?”

Clara nodded and said, “It’s not that big of a deal. I handled the situation. I told her that I wasn’t afraid of her and that my business was going to be just fine.”

“I can’t believe her.”

“Please don’t say anything to Luke about it. Jamie doesn’t want him to know.”

“He should know. If she’s this intent on getting to him, he’ll need to be on his guard.”

“Please, Dillon. If things get worse, then I’ll tell him, but for now, I don’t want the drama to interfere with what could be a good thing for me.”

Dillon looked at Jamie for a few seconds and then nodded.

“I won’t say anything to Luke, but if she threatens my wife again, I will stomp her into the ground – I don’t care what the dragon king says.”

He looked at Jamie and said, “I have your back, too. Let me know if she crosses the line.”

“I will,” Jamie promised. “This is embarrassing.”

“It isn’t your fault,” Dillon said. “It is Alexis’ fault.”

“That’s what I told her,” Clara said, smugly, crossing her arms across her chest.

Dillon grabbed the coffee, kissed Clara, gave Jamie a meaningful glance and left.

Jamie slumped against the wall. She felt drained all of the sudden, but she was grateful that she had such good friends.

She gradually relaxed as the day wore on. Clara glanced at Jamie every once in a while, as though she was worried about her.

Jamie, wanting Clara to think about something else, asked, “Have you talked to Charlie lately?”

Charlie, short for Charlene, was Clara’s childhood and best friend.

Charlie had visited Ivy Springs when Clara first moved to the area and had a romantic involvement with Ethan. Charlie ended up pregnant, but didn't want Ethan to know about their little girl because he had made it painfully clear that he wasn't ready for a family and wasn't ready to settle down.

Clara lit up when she talked about Charlie and Luna.

"We went to see her last Sunday," Clara said. "Luna is so smart. You know she was walking and talking when she was nine months old. She knows colors. She's barely a year old."

"Do you have any recent pictures of her?"

Clara pulled out her phone and showed pictures of the little girl.

"Zeke adores her. He plays with her and takes care of her whenever he sees her."

"Is she going to tell Ethan about her?"

"Charlie says that she isn't, although both Dillon and I have told her that she should."

Clara looked meaningfully at Jamie and said, "It's not like either one of my friends know how to take good advice."

Jamie giggled and said, "That's what you get for having strong, independent minded women for best friends."

"You mean stubborn asses."

"That might fit in there, somewhere." Jamie laughed. "But give her and the baby my love the next time that you talk to her."

"I will," Clara promised.

Jamie thought about Charlie.

"I honestly don't know what I would do if I was in her shoes. The baby deserves to know her dad, and the dad should know that he has a kid, but Ethan has made it clear that he isn't interested in settling down. Charlie just doesn't want to force Ethan into a situation he isn't ready for. I understand that perspective."

"I do, too, but I worry about her and the baby." Clara sighed.

"You worry about everyone. That is why you are such a super person," Jamie told her.

It had been a long day and Jamie was glad when it was time to go home. She was looking forward to a relaxing bath and a good book.

As she drove home, she noticed the same set of headlights following her. She frowned as she watched her rearview mirror.

Surely, Alexis wouldn't send someone to hurt me, would she?

LUKE

Luke finished off his pot of coffee, looked at his watch, and groaned. The last thing that he wanted to do was to go into the hardware store. He didn't want to deal with his father trying to run his life. He didn't want to deal with Alexis or any of her brothers if they "just happened to drop by to say hello." The thought made the eggs and bacon he had for breakfast turn in his stomach.

He paced around the house for a minute. He couldn't stand to spend the day cooped up in the four walls. Luke also wasn't in the mood to drive to Phantom Canyon or Pike's Peak to shift and fly.

As his steps took him back by the kitchen, he laid eyes on the now empty coffee pot.

"Jamie," he said.

With a smile, he grabbed his coat, his keys, and he headed to the café. Luke was glad to see that it wasn't too busy when he went in. Jamie greeted him with one of her beautiful smiles.

She grabbed him a cup of coffee and started to pick up a danish, but he stopped her.

"Still full from breakfast. Listen, I was wondering if Clara could spare you today. I was thinking that we could go up on the mountain and go snow shoeing. I am starting to get stir crazy, and I just need to get out for a while. I would love your company."

Clara, who was cleaning one of the espresso machines, said before Jamie could answer, "I'll do just fine here. I have the new barista that we just hired coming in soon."

Jamie grinned at Luke.

“In that case, I would love to go. I keep my snow shoes and snow pants in the trunk of my car in case I get the urge,” she said.

“Hold on a second,” Clara said.

Clara went into the back and returned with some sandwiches and a couple bottles of water.

“Hiking is more fun when there’s a picnic involved, even if there is snow on the ground.”

Jamie hastily took off her apron, hugged Clara, gathered her gear, and hopped in Luke’s truck. He was glad that she wasn’t one of those women who had to play coy or pretend to be hard to get.

The powder snow, topped with just a small amount of freshly fallen snow, was perfect for snow shoeing. Luke watched Jamie carefully at first, not sure what her level of expertise was.

“You are a pro,” Luke said, admiringly.

“Not quite, but I manage to move fairly well without falling down,” Jamie said.

They walked, mostly in silence. She pointed out an elk and a big horn sheep that she spotted in the trees. The large animals lifted their heads and looked at them, but didn’t run.

“I love this place, especially in the summer time. There is no telling what kind of wildlife you might run into,” Jamie said. “I just love being out in nature, I guess. Like you, I get a little antsy when I’m cooped up.”

They stopped for a bite to eat, sitting on a log they had dusted the snow off of.

“These snow pants are the best things that anyone ever invented,” Jamie said.

“I can think of a few other things that I like a little more than snow pants,” Luke joked. “But they do keep my butt from getting cold and wet.”

They were both tired by the time the sun started to set and they made it back to Luke’s truck.

“I make some mean quesadillas if you want to come over for a while,” Jamie said.

He dropped her off to get her car and then followed her back to her place. As she promised, the chicken quesadillas she made were delicious.

They made their way into the living room, and Luke leaned back comfortably on the couch.

“What do you want for your future?” he asked.

Jamie bit her lip as she thought about her answer.

“I don’t know. I haven’t really made any plans. I like being the manager of the café, but that isn’t a forever thing.”

“What did you want to do when you were a kid?”

Grinning, Jamie said, “One of my favorite things to do when I was a little girl was to bake. I would spend hours in the kitchen, making cookies, cakes, bread or whatever else Mom was making. It was so much fun, I told my mother that I was going to open up a bakery. I had the plans made up, including the menu. Mom and I even made everything that I had on the menu and shared it with our family and friends, who always told me how delicious everything was.”

Luke smiled as Jamie reminisced.

“I have a degree in business, but I have to figure out what kind of business suits me. I can’t see myself sitting at a desk all day,” Jamie said. “I’ll figure something out when the time is right. What about you?”

“I’m like you. I’m not really sure what direction I’m heading in. My father would be delighted if I spent all my time working at the hardware store. I love Dad, but there is no way that I can work there for very much longer. Josh suggested that I talk to the chief at the fire station. It would be easy for me to pass all the tests, and it would be interesting.”

“That could be. You might also think about looking into search and rescue, at least part time. You know the mountain. That would get you outdoors, at least.”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Luke said.

They were quiet for a minute and then Luke asked, “If you don’t mind me asking, what happened to Ryan? I figured that you guys would be married and have a couple dozen kids by now.”

“Ugh,” Jamie said.

“I didn’t mean to pry,” Luke said, quickly.

“No, it’s okay,” she said. “Ryan and I went to the same college. We were supposed to get married soon after we graduated from college. I was looking forward to that and having a big family. Our wedding day came. Everyone was there. I was dressed. We were just waiting on the groom. He, on the other hand, had a different idea. He had been cheating on me with a woman named Amber. Ryan sent a note, via his best man, to tell me that he was leaving me for her.”

“What a dick move,” Luke said.

“That was my thought,” Jamie said. “I was humiliated, but we partied, anyway. No need to waste all that food.”

“Good for you,” Luke said.

“I hadn’t dated anyone since then,” Jamie said.

She grimaced and said, “He actually just showed back up in town, like a bad penny.”

Luke wanted to ask her about that, but sensed that she didn’t want to talk about it.

“What about you?”

“You know that I joined the service right after we graduated. I haven’t had time to date anyone.”

He figured that he didn’t need to tell her that he had just occasionally hooked up with a pretty woman to blow off some steam, although she could probably figure that out on her own.

Luke told her about some of the different places that he’d visited and the people that he had met. She listened attentively, delighting in some of the stories. He had the impression that she was genuinely interested in what he had to say instead of just pretending like some women did.

After several hours, he looked at his watch.

“I hate to say that as much fun as I’m having, I really need to be going,” Luke said. “I promised Dad that I would help him with a load that is coming in early in the morning.”

She stood up and walked him to the door. Luke put his hands on her face and leaned down to kiss her. She moaned as his lips pressed to hers. Her mouth opened for him, and he tasted the sweet cappuccino that she had just been drinking. Their breaths mingled as Luke passionately explored her mouth.

He lifted his head and smiled at her. Her lips were parted and slightly swollen from the kiss. Luke brushed her cheek with the back of his hand.

“I think that I had better go before something even more exciting happens. You have no idea what you do to me,” Luke said, huskily.

“You don’t *have* to go,” she said.

“This time, I do. But maybe next time...”

Luke winked at her as his words trailed off.

He stepped onto the porch and listened for her to lock the door and headed to his truck. As he drove home, he realized that he had spent the

entire day hanging out with Jamie and had loved every minute of it. She was a lot of fun.

Ryan was a complete moron to run off and leave her for someone else.

Luke thought about what she had said about wanting a big family. He tried to picture what it would be like to have a wife and a couple of kids running around.

“That seems kind of cool – somewhere in the future. Not right now, though. I have to figure out my life before I even consider a family,” Luke muttered to himself.

JAMIE

Jamie leaned against the door that she had shut after Luke left. She had a huge smile on her face. There was something about that kiss that had made her knees buckle.

She stretched out on her bed, snuggled underneath the blankets, thinking about Luke. She would have loved it if he had stayed with her, even though she had to get up early, too, and it was already past midnight. The thought of his naked body lying next to hers was enough to ignite a small fire in her. The thought of what else he could do to her made that flame burn hotter.

In spite of the heat that flooded her body, she yawned widely. It had been a long day as they traipsed through the snowy woods together and then talked. She didn't even remember falling into a deep sleep.

Jamie was still smiling when she got to work.

"I take it that you had a good time yesterday," Clara asked.

"It was great. We snow shoed all over the place until it got dark. Then, we went back to my place. I made quesadillas and we just talked. It was nice."

"I'm glad that you had a great time. You deserve it. Being able to hang out and have fun together and being able to spend the evening talking is a good start to a great relationship."

"You sound like a fortune cookie," Jamie said.

"Thank you." Clara laughed. "I've been practicing."

The smell of coffee was comforting. The customers were all in a great mood when they came in. They were talkative and fun. Jamie and Clara had a

great morning. Jamie had forgotten about Alexis and all the other stresses and simply enjoyed her morning.

It was made even better when Luke stopped by after the morning rush was over for his usual.

“Good morning. It’s been so long since I’ve seen you, I thought that I ought to stop by,” Luke teased.

“It has been forever. I almost forgot what your usual order was.”

“You know that I always order a salted caramel latte and a sugar free muffin,” Luke joked.

“Be careful. I might just make that for you.”

“I had a great time yesterday.”

“Me, too, although I have to admit that I’m a little sore today. It was hard trying to keep up with your long strides. You have those long legs and I have shorter ones,” Jamie said. “What are you, six five to my five four?”

Luke laughed and said, “You exaggerate. I’m only six three.”

Jamie handed him his coffee and said, “It’s on me this morning, since I kept you up all night.”

He dropped a kiss on her cheek and said, “See you soon.”

Clara was grinning ear to ear.

“You two are so adorable,” she said.

“I didn’t give you this much grief when you and Dillon were kanoodling,” Jamie said, laughing.

“What in the world is kanoodling?”

“You know -- what you do before you finally get married.”

Jamie realized what she said as soon as the words came out of her mouth. She held up her finger and said, “Don’t even go there.”

Clara pinched her lips together with her fingers and walked away.

Jamie’s good mood lasted for about another hour. Then, the bell on the front door jingled. Jamie looked up, never knowing if good or bad energy was going to blow in.

She groaned loudly when she saw Ryan.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Is that how you greet all of your customers?” he asked.

“You aren’t a customer,” Jamie said

“I am, too. I would like a large cappuccino and two slices of banana nut bread.”

Wordlessly, Jamie grabbed the bread while Clara made the drink. Jamie

put them on the counter and told him his total.

Ryan paid with a hundred dollar bill and told Jamie to keep the change as a tip.

“Thank you and have a nice day,” Jamie said, starting to turn away.

He reached across the counter and grabbed her arm.

“Don’t be that way,” he said.

Jamie yanked her arm out of his grasp and said, “Don’t ever touch me again.”

“Come on, Jamie. Give me a chance. I know that you still have feelings for me. I’m sorry for hurting you. We can work things out.”

“In order of your statements – No. I feel nothing for you. I don’t care. No, we can’t.”

“What do I have to do for you to give me another chance? I was stupid and I made a mistake. I’ve regretted it ever since,” Ryan pleaded.

“You’re sniveling. Not very becoming for a man.”

Jamie sighed heavily and said, “There is absolutely nothing that you can do. I’m over you. Frankly, I’m glad that you left me when you did, before we both made a big mistake. Otherwise, it would have been too late once I finally opened my eyes and saw what kind of man you truly are. Go home, Ryan. Either fix things with Amber or move on.”

Ryan stared at Jamie. His face hardened, and he clenched his jaw. Jamie could almost see the gears turning in his head as he tried to figure out the next thing to say.

Finally, he said, “I’m not giving up on us.”

“There is no us. Don’t waste your time.”

Ryan ran his hand over his face turned to leave.

Jamie looked at Clara and asked, “Can you believe this man?”

“Persistent. I’ll have to give him that,” Clara replied. “Do you want me to have Dillon beat him up for you?”

Jamie laughed at the humorous suggestion.

“No. If it comes to that, I’ll beat him up myself,” she said. “But seriously, I’m wondering what I could have ever seen in that man.”

“I asked myself that a lot when I figured out what kind of man John was. I seriously questioned my judgement when he tried to kill me. But, as the cliché goes, love is blind. We see what we want to see.”

Jamie nodded and said, “I guess. I’d like to think that since I’ve grown up some, my judgement, especially about men, has gotten better.”

“You don’t have to worry. Luke and Ryan are not in the same category.”

A customer came in and kept Clara, Jamie, and the two helpers that Clara hired, busy. When the end of the day was finally over, Jamie was tired.

“I think there are some frozen taquitos calling my name, and then a hot bath and a good book.”

“That actually sounds nice,” Clara said. “Maybe after Zeke and Reno are tucked in bed and Dillon is watching a game or something.”

“That is one nice thing about being single. I don’t have to worry about making dinner for other people and what other people are up to,” Jamie said.

“There are perks to both sides of the coin.”

Jamie heaved a sigh of happiness when she pulled into her drive way. She made dinner and was about to take that promised bath when there was a loud knock on her door.

She thought about ignoring it because she knew that Luke would text or call before coming over, so a visit this late probably wasn’t going to be fun.

“Mr. Johnson. How are you? Is everything okay?” Jamie asked her landlord.

“I’m okay. Can I come in for a second?”

“Sure,” Jamie said, opening her door wider.

“I wanted to let you know that I had a visitor today,” he began.

Jamie’s heart sank. She had a pretty good idea who that visitor was.

“Alexis Faison came to see me.”

Jamie hung her head and said, “I’m sorry.”

She held her breath, waiting for him to tell her that he was going to evict her.

“Don’t be sorry. It wasn’t your fault. But she did want me to evict you. She told me that you were a terrible person and was going to tear up the house, and that your bad reputation would rub off on me. I told her that I thought you were a lovely person and that there was no way that I would evict you.

“Alexis told me that if I didn’t evict you that she was going to make my life miserable. I told her that I wasn’t going to be bullied by her. I reminded her that I own all of my properties outright, and that she should toddle off.”

“How did she take that?”

“She said that she knew people and could make life impossible for me in Ivy Springs. I told her that I knew just as many people and I wasn’t afraid,” Mr. Johnson said.

“I’m guessing that she didn’t take that too well.”

“No. She just said that I would regret my decision and left in a huff.”

“I’m sorry for the drama,” Jamie said.

“No worries. It felt good putting her in her place. She and her brothers have much too high of an opinion of themselves,” he said. “If you don’t mind me asking, what have you done that has her all hot and bothered?”

“It’s stupid. Like middle school stupid. I’m dating a guy that she has a crush on.”

Mr. Johnson let out a loud, hearty laugh.

“Well, I’ll be. Doesn’t that just beat all.

“I just thought that you should know that she was after you. But don’t worry about anything from my end.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“No need to thank me. I did it as much for myself as I did for you. You could have ten chickens and a sink full of dirty dishes. If she came demanding that I kick you out, you would stay because I didn’t get to be this old just to let some entitled bitch come in and tell me what to do.”

He was cackling as he left.

Jamie sat down heavily on the couch. She was tired. She was tired of the drama that Alexis was causing. She was tired of Ryan. Jamie was very tired of being constantly afraid of the hunters and having to go out of town when she wanted to shift.

“Maybe I should just pack up and leave town. There are a million places in Colorado I would love to live. Or, I could just go someplace completely new and go live in a city near the ocean.”

For just a minute, the thought appealed to her. She could start over someplace completely new and reinvent herself.

Then, she thought of Clara, who was like a sister to her. She thought of Luke, who she was developing a deep fondness for. She also considered the fact that her mother and father were here – at least what was left of their Earthly vessel.

“I’m not a quitter. I don’t let other people run my life,” Jamie said fiercely to herself.

The next morning, Jamie told Clara what happened.

“You know that Dillon and I will always have your back. Ethan and other friends also have your back. And it seems that not everyone is afraid of Alexis or is under her spell.”

“Thank you,” Jamie said, feeling truly grateful for all of her friends.

“You should really tell Luke that she is so fascinated with him that she is willing to go to some pretty extreme lengths to get to you.”

Jamie shook her head.

“No. It’s not his problem. It’s mine. Besides, men ...”

“I know. Men hate drama.”

Zeke, who had the day off, had been watching Jamie and Clara talk. A few minutes later, he brought her a card that he had made for her.

“Reno and I made you a card because you look sad.”

Jamie opened it up.

“We love Aunt Jamie” was written on it with big letters. There was a huge heart drawn underneath that.

“I have some money saved up from my allowance and from working here. I want to take you out for some ice cream. Ice cream always makes everyone feel better.”

“It’s the middle of winter. Wouldn’t some hot chocolate be better?”

Zeke shook his head.

“We can have hot chocolate any time we want. Ice cream is a special treat and is delicious all the time.”

Jamie laughed and said, “I can’t argue with that logic.”

They grabbed their coats and the three of them went to the ice cream shop. She ordered a mint chocolate chip cone, Zeke got a birthday cake cone, and Reno got a vanilla pup cup. Jamie had to admit that Zeke was right. Doing something simple like going out for ice cream in the middle of winter had made her feel a lot better.

While they walked back to the café, Jamie hoped that when she had kids that they would be as smart and sweet as Zeke.

She was shocked by the “when” in that sentence. Jamie realized that her dream of having a family had never really died. It had just been put on hold.

LUKE

“Hey, have you given any more thought to talking to my chief, yet?” Josh asked.

Luke leaned across the counter of the hardware store and yawned.

“I’ll probably go in next week sometime. I’m going to enjoy just a little bit more time off before I have to adhere to a rigid schedule,” Luke said.

“I get you. I could just quit and the two of us could be nomads and travel the world with just what we can carry in our backpacks. We can work when we need to but otherwise, just enjoy life.”

“Sounds tempting, doesn’t it? No bills to pay, no one to answer to. No schedules to keep.”

“The only problem with that is, that while I enjoy camping every once in a while, I do like my bed, my television, and my microwave,” Josh said.

Luke laughed, clapped Josh on the back and said, “You’re getting soft.”

“I might be.” Josh laughed. “Don’t judge me.”

“Oh, I’m judging,” Luke teased. “It took me a while to get used to sleeping on a soft, comfortable bed once I got back. I’ll admit though, that I’m partial to it now.”

“There goes the backpacking adventure idea. We could get an RV,” Josh teased.

“I just can’t see that happening until I’m about eighty years old. And even then, I’m not so sure.”

“Party pooper,” Josh said. “How are things going with Jamie?”

“They are good. I like her. I like spending time with her.”

“Good for you. Who knows, you might just be settling down before too much longer.”

Luke held up both hands and said, “Don’t get too ahead of yourself. We’ve just had a couple of dates.”

Josh laughed and checked his watch.

“I have a training I need to be at in half an hour. We get to practice running up and down ladders in full gear, in a certain time period. Loads of fun. I’ll see you later.”

Luke thought that it actually did sound like fun. He enjoyed a challenge. There was a Spartan race coming up in a few months that he was thinking about doing, just so that he could stay in shape. The extreme obstacle course challenged the strength and endurance of everyone who participated.

He was thinking about the obstacle course and different tasks that everyone had to perform in order to get through it and wasn’t paying attention to anything around him. He didn’t see his father approach from behind one of the shelves that was next to the counter.

“Why are you thinking about joining the fire department?”

Luke jumped at the sound of his father’s voice. He sighed and rubbed his eyes.

“It’s something that I’m interested in. I can help people and keep active.”

“I need you here at the hardware store,” Carl insisted.

“No, you don’t, Dad. You have other people who can help you if it gets busy. And to be honest, I love you, but I really don’t want to work with you. I need some distance.”

“What if your mother and I did go on that vacation? Who would run the store then?”

“You have a manager who would do just fine.”

Carl opened his mouth to argue, but Luke said, “I don’t want to argue with you about this. You aren’t going to guilt me into doing something that I don’t want to do. The fire department is a good fit for me.”

Grumbling, his father crossed his arms and leaned across the counter.

“I was thinking about you and your girlfriend last night, and I remembered something,” Carl said. “I know who she is.”

“Okay. And.”

“I used to know her father. Her parents were bear shifters,” Carl announced, as though it was Earth shattering news.

“So?” Luke asked.

“Did you hear what I said? She is a bear shifter. Not a dragon shifter.”

Luke sighed heavily and said, “I don’t care what kind of shifter she is or if she was a mundane human. I like her for her personality, sense of humor, and everything else about her.”

“It is a disgrace for a bear shifter to be with a dragon shifter,” Carl insisted.

“You really need to pull your head out of your ass,” Luke insisted. “No one cares about that type of thing any more. Maybe a couple hundred years ago people thought that way, but not in today’s world.”

“There are a lot of people, especially dragon shifters, who do care and think that it’s important that dragon shifters stay with their own kind,” Carl said, stubbornly. “A dragon shifter being with a bear shifter is embarrassing.”

“To whom?”

“To your mother and me, for starters,” Carl said.

“I guess that you are going to have to be embarrassed then, and I don’t really care. I will see who I like. End of story,” Luke said.

“It’s your duty as our son and as a dragon shifter...” Carl began.

Luke’s eyes narrowed and he growled in his throat.

“Don’t even try to tell me about duty,” Luke snapped.

Carl took a step back, knowing that he had crossed the line.

He said, as though he had to get the last words in, “You need to think this situation through, logically, son, and not with your dick.”

Then, the older man turned and disappeared behind a shelf that he was stocking.

Luke didn’t know whether to laugh or strangle his father.

He was glad to find out that Jamie was a bear shifter. That would make it a lot easier for him to tell her that he was a dragon shifter. He had known that he would have to if their relationship got serious, but now he could tell her now and not have to worry about it.

Jamie, are you busy tonight? he texted.

No.

I was wondering if I could bring a pizza around seven, Luke replied.

Sounds great.

Luke still appreciated the fact that Jamie wasn’t one to send a million texts. They both said what was on their mind and that was the end of the conversation.

“Why don’t you come home and have dinner with your mother and me

tonight?” Carl asked.

Luke wasn't sure if it was to lecture him more or if the invitation was a peace offering, but either way, he didn't have the energy for it, even if he hadn't just made plans with Jamie.

“Sorry, I can't. I have plans.”

“With the bear shifter?” Carl asked derisively.

Luke stared hard into his father's eyes and said, “Yes, as a matter of fact, it is with the bear shifter.”

He waited for his father to dare say another word about the situation. It took a lot to get Luke angry, but he was at the tipping point.

Carl seemed to realize it and simply walked away.

Luke was on Jamie's doorstep right at seven, with a large supreme pizza and six pack of beer.

She opened the door with a smile and said, “Man brings gifts. I like.”

Laughing, he stepped inside.

At first, they just talked about their day. Luke wasn't exactly sure how to bring up the topic, so he decided to just be blunt.”

“My father told me something interesting today. He said that he knew your father and that your parents were bear shifters.”

Jamie's head turned sharply toward him. She hesitated for a minute and he could tell that she was trying to figure out how to answer him. He hoped that she trusted him enough to tell him the truth.

“Yes. They were bear shifters and so am I. But you can't tell anyone else in Ivy Springs. It's too dangerous. There are people in this town who hate shifters and would kill me if they found out that I was one,” she said. “But I am glad that you know. I've been trying to figure out how to tell you.”

Luke smiled at her and reached for her hand. “You don't have to worry about me saying anything to anyone. As a matter of fact, I've been trying to figure out how to tell you that I'm a dragon shifter.”

Jamie's eyes were saucers and her jaw dropped. Her head tipped to one side and she touched her mouth with her hand.

“You are a dragon shifter,” she said, slowly, in disbelief.

“Yes. Why is that so hard to believe?” I asked, chuckling at her response. “Do you want me to shift in your living room to prove it?”

“Nooo,” she said, drawing out the word.

“But I've always heard that dragon shifters keep to themselves, and that they would never date outside of their own kind. Dragon shifters are top of

the food chain, keep to themselves, and look down on everyone else around them.”

“I think I’m offended,” Luke said, laughing. “I guess that is the impression that a lot of people have. There are dragon shifters, like my dad, who are like that.”

“Is it okay for a dragon shifter and a bear shifter to be in a relationship?” she asked.

“I’m okay with it. Are you okay with it?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Then who cares what the rest of the world thinks?”

Jamie grinned at him, and he couldn’t resist pulling her close to him and kissing her, gently, at first, and then more insistently. She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him close to her.

In an instant, their clothes disappeared. Luke looked deep into her eyes as he reached between her legs. She was hot and wet, ready for him.

He put the tip of his shaft against her entrance and slowly buried himself deep inside of her. Luke moaned as her silken walls wrapped around him.

Jamie lifted her legs and wrapped them around his waist

“You feel so good inside of me,” Jamie whispered.

“Yes, I do.” He grinned.

Luke’s heart pounded as their bodies slowly moved in a beautiful rhythm, igniting the fires that burned inside of him.

Jamie was panting and biting her bottom lip as she looked into his eyes. She touched his chest, spreading her fingers across his muscles.

“You are such a gorgeous beast,” she said, as she explored him.

He started to move faster, pulling out and then driving back in deep.

“Yes,” she said. “That feels so good.”

The wet heat covered, caressed him, as they gently rocked together.

His body tingled with the electricity as he sheathed himself inside of her.

She pressed her head against the cushion and moaned his name. Her body started to tremble.

Luke pulled almost all the way out and then drove hard and deep back inside of her hot, wet, tunnel.

“Yes. Don’t stop,” she begged.

He tilted his head back as he pistoned hard and fast, pulling back and then thrusting hard.

“Luke,” she moaned.

She gasped for air and he felt her walls tighten around him as they pulsated. He felt the rush of heat flow over him.

Groaning loudly, he rammed himself deep inside of her one more time. His whole body shook as he throbbed and his seed shot into her core.

After a minute, they were both able to breathe normally, and he collapsed on top of her, making sure to support himself with his elbows so he didn't crush her.

He gently kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately, intensifying the kiss.

"You are a remarkable woman," he murmured when they pulled apart.

"Thank you. You aren't so bad yourself," she said.

He stood up and looked at the beautiful woman who lay naked on the couch. A twitching told him that he had better go before they had another round. He didn't want to hurt her.

She got up and they found their clothes that were thrown around the room.

"I don't remember doing that," she said.

"Me either." Luke laughed as he found his shirt half hanging off one of the chairs. His pants had landed in front of the television.

He knew that she wanted him to stay, but she didn't ask.

She walked him to the door, and he kissed her softly.

"I'll see you soon," he said.

Luke smiled all the way home. Jamie was an incredible woman. Regardless of what his father thought, he was going to see where this relationship went.

JAMIE

“**Y**ou look like the cat that has just swallowed the canary,” Clara said, as they got ready for their early morning rush.

Jamie shrugged and continued putting a new batch of muffins into the oven.

“I’m glad to see you so happy,” Clara continued.

“Thank you. It feels good,” Jamie said. “I can’t really explain it. I wasn’t unhappy before. This is just a different kind of happy.”

“I understand exactly what you are saying,” Clara said. “My whole world changed when I met Dillon. It wasn’t that I was exactly sad before, although I was dealing with John. I just was able to experience everything through a different lens. I was able to feel things that I had never felt possible.”

“Luke came over last night. He brought pizza and beer.”

“Awesome. You didn’t have to cook.”

“He had texted me because he needed to talk to me. Apparently, his father knew mine and knew that my folks were bear shifters.”

“Oh, what did you say?”

“I told him the truth. I told him that I was a bear shifter, but asked him not to tell anyone because it was too dangerous for other people to know.”

“How did he respond to that?” Clara asked.

“He told me that he was a dragon shifter.”

“Wow. That’s a shock.”

“Yes, it was,” Jamie said. “I guess I looked very surprised because he offered to shift in my living room to prove it.”

“That would be an interesting sight.”

“My living room is small. He would break things,” Jamie said.

Clara laughed.

“I was a little worried because dragon shifters are kings of the shifters. They have always kept to themselves, not involving themselves with the rest of the shifter world unless they had no choice,” Jamie said.

“Luke doesn’t seem to be the kind of person who would be like that. He was obviously interested in you before he knew that you were a shifter.”

“He said that he’s not and I believe him. Like you said, he has been treating me like gold, and he thought that I was a mundane human. I don’t feel like he is with me just to amuse himself until he finds someone better.”

“Girl, what are you talking about. There is no one better.”

Jamie grinned.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’m just really glad that we had that conversation. It is a huge load off my shoulders that he knows.”

“I’m glad. Now you can relax and just see what direction your relationship goes without having to worry about losing everything over a secret.”

“We had sex again last night,” Jamie admitted. “I’m not going to call it making love, because we aren’t at that stage yet, but he made me feel terrific, and not just physically.”

“So that is why you have the huge grin today. It has nothing to do with finally getting your secret off your chest and more to do with the fact that you and he got together,” Clara teased.

“Maybe a little bit of both.”

Jamie was a little disappointed when Luke didn’t come in for coffee but was pleased when he sent her a text that read, *Good morning, beautiful.*

She texted him back, *Good morning. Have a terrific day.*

Thank you. You, too.

She figured that he was busy, so she just went about her day. She was glad that Luke wasn’t one of those men who was constantly texting, and especially wasn’t one that didn’t have to constantly know what she was doing, who she was talking to, and where she was at.

The bell on the door jingled a short time later. Jamie groaned. She was half tempted to run into the back and ask Clara to say that she wasn’t at work today.

Pull your big girl panties on, she told herself sternly.

“How can I help you?” Jamie asked.

“A cappuccino, please,” Ryan said.

One of the baristas got busy making the drink while Jamie rung up the drink.

“That will be five fifteen, please,” Jamie said, keeping her voice as professional as possible.

Ryan handed over a twenty and said, “Keep the change.”

What happened to the hundred that you were showing off with?

Instead of voicing her thought, Jamie said, “Thank you. Please step to the end of the counter and Vickie will have your drink for you.”

“Jamie, please wait,” Ryan said. “I just want to talk to you.”

“There is absolutely nothing to talk about. Please, just leave and don’t come back.”

Ryan looked at her as though he was going to protest, and then nodded. He picked up his drink and left without saying another word.

“Do you think that he’s gone for good?” Clara asked.

“No. I think that he is going to try to figure out another tactic,” Jamie said, wearily. “I wish that he would just go back to Denver and leave me alone.”

“What is it about exes who can’t take no for an answer and just let things go?”

“At least my ex isn’t trying to kill me,” Jamie said. “He’s just being a pain in the rear end.”

“That’s bad enough,” Clara said.

The café was dead that afternoon, and Jamie was starting to feel a little claustrophobic.

“Do you mind if I go for the day? I feel the need for some exercise and fresh air.”

“Go for it,” Clara said. “Just be safe. And no shifting.”

“You have nothing to worry about that.”

Jamie drove to the mountain and slid on her snow shoes and snow pants. She walked for quite a while, relaxing as the smell of pine and fresh snow filled her senses. She heard the occasional rustling in the brush and the call of the winter birds.

She thought about what happened the night before. Jamie enjoyed everything about Luke. Their conversations were fun. They both enjoyed doing the same types of activities. He was incredibly hot and made her feel things that she never knew was possible.

Jamie really wasn't too shocked when she came to the conclusion that she was falling in love with him. That created a problem, because she wasn't sure when it would be the right time to tell him how she felt. She didn't want to scare him away.

A shadow passed over her, and she looked up at the sky. Clouds were coming in and it looked like it might snow. She was tough and knew the mountain well, but was well aware that it wasn't smart to be stuck on the mountain in the middle of a snow storm.

She turned back around when two people stepped out from behind a couple of trees. Jamie recognized them immediately from pictures that Ethan had. They were hunters that the Faisons had hired. Dillon and Ethan had showed the pictures to all the shifters in the area, so that everyone would know who to avoid.

"Jamie, what are you doing here?" Walter said.

"What does it look like. I'm just going snow shoeing," she replied.

"We think that you are up here to shift," Parker said.

"Shift? What are you talking about?" Jamie asked.

She tried to hide the panic from her voice. Her heart was thundering a million miles an hour and her breath was stuck in her throat.

"Don't play stupid with us. We know that you are a shifter. What are you, a bear shifter, a wolf shifter, what?" Parker sneered.

"I have no idea what you are talking about. You actually sound a little crazy," Jamie said.

"I don't believe you. Do you believe her, Walter?"

"Nope. Not at all."

"I came up here for some exercise. I have been snow shoeing on this mountain my entire life. I like the fresh air and it gets me away from life stresses," Jamie said.

She stared at the two men and said, "I've always heard that when accusations are made, the accusers are the ones guilty of the crimes. My guess is that you two are shifters."

Parker started laughing as though it was the funniest thing he had ever heard.

"No, we kill shifters," Walter said.

"Wouldn't that be illegal?"

"No, they aren't human. They are abominations," Walter growled.

Jamie sighed heavily and said, "I'm tired of this stupidity. I need to get

home.”

She turned to leave but Parker grabbed her arm and squeezed tight. Jamie pressed her lips together to keep from making any sound.

“You know that Alexis doesn’t like you,” Walter said. “Neither do I.”

“I’m really sorry about that, but neither your nor Alexis’ likes and dislikes are any of my concern.”

“Actually, it is your concern right now. I’m positive that Alexis would give us a huge reward if you were to have an accident while you were out here, alone, snow shoeing in a dangerous area,” Parker said.

“Don’t be stupid. Just leave me alone,” Jamie said.

“I don’t think that we could do that. Alexis showed us your picture and told us that if something should happen to you, she would be pleased,” Walter said. “That means money.”

“You do realize that the beef that Alexis has with me is that she wants the man who I am dating. You are willing to kill someone just because another person is jealous?”

Parker laughed. The evilness of the sound echoed in the trees and sent a cold shiver of pure terror down her spine.

“No, we don’t care why Alexis doesn’t like you. We only care that there is money involved. A lot of money,” Walter told her.

“This is stupid,” Jamie said.

Once again, she turned to leave, but Parker grabbed her arm and pulled something out of his pocket. Jamie froze as she stared down the barrel of a gun.

LUKE

Luke was stacking salt on the front sidewalk. The forecast had predicted that there could be more snow. His mind was a million miles away as he thought about his last mission and the friends who he had lost. He wondered whether he should visit their families, but he had no idea what he would say if he did. Luke wouldn't be able to brag about the brave accomplishments the men had as everything was classified.

He sighed heavily and thought, *I would probably just make things worse.*

After he dropped the last bag on the stack, he surveyed his work.

If Dad comes out here and says anything about the bags not being perfectly aligned, I'm going to tell him to do it himself.

Luke felt a little guilty for his thought because his father had actually been in a good mood today, and the two of them had a good conversation about philosophy, of all things, before they got to work.

Alexis pulled into the parking lot and called Luke's name before he could escape and hide inside.

"Good morning, Luke," Alexis said. "I was hoping to see you."

"Good morning," Luke replied.

"It was my birthday the other day. I was sad that you weren't at my party," Alexis pouted.

"I had other plans," Luke said.

Then, he decided that he was tired of making excuses.

"I think that you know that I'm seeing someone else," Luke said. "It wouldn't have been appropriate for me to go to your party."

A flash of anger crossed her face for a moment, and then she plastered the

sweet look back on.

“I know that you’ve taken Jamie out on a couple of dates, but I know that you can’t be serious about her,” Alexis said. “A man like you needs someone with a lot more class.”

She took a couple of steps toward him. Luke thought about stepping back, but didn’t want to give her the impression that she intimidated him.

“I don’t work like that,” Luke said. “I’m a one-woman man. When I am seeing a woman, I don’t step out on her with someone else.”

“We both know that you can’t be serious about her,” Alexis purred. “You need a real woman who knows how to take care of a man like you.”

Luke dodged her hand that she had raised to put on his arm.

“I’m sure that there is some lucky man out there who would be lucky to have you. I’m sure that you would make him extremely happy. I am not that man. I’m flattered that you like me so much, but I am not the man for you,” Luke said.

“You don’t know until we spend some time together,” Alexis said.

Luke was certain that he saw her bottom lip poke out a bit for half a second.

“Sorry, Alexis. I need to get back to work. You have a good day,” he said, and walked back into the store.

He didn’t turn around to see her reaction.

Carl had been standing at the window and saw the interaction, although he couldn’t have heard anything.

Luke just looked at his dad, who didn’t say a word.

Maybe the old man is finally learning.

They sold out of rock salt by mid-morning and then business slowed down.

Luke was suffocating and needed to get out.

“Dad, I’m going snow shoeing on the mountain. I need some fresh air. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Carl simply nodded.

He thought about stopping by the café for some coffee, but decided not to. As much as he would have liked to see Jamie, he really just wanted to shift and fly.

The area around the secret cave was undisturbed, so Luke slipped inside and undressed. Peeking around the brush, he saw that the coast was clear, so he shifted and launched into the air.

When he started out, the sun was shining and there weren't very many clouds in the sky, although he was aware that could change at any moment. He felt a little guilty because he told himself he should be patrolling, but he went to the north side of the mountain just to be able to relax. There was no way that the hunters could cross over the top of the mountain unless they had been out camping for several days.

Finally, the tension had eased out of him, and he decided that he would take a couple of passes over the south side of the mountain to see if there was anything interesting going on.

At first, the only thing that he saw were a couple of elk and some big horn sheep rooting around for food.

The clouds started to roll in and Luke decided that he should probably head back.

Suddenly, he spotted something in a small clearing. He stared down and saw that there were three people.

I had better check it out.

He dove down as low as he could go without making noise or causing a downdraft. Luke's heart sped up when he realized that one of the people in the clearing was Jamie. The other two seemed to be giving her a hard time. Luke thought he saw one of the people holding a gun.

Luke dipped a little lower and saw that the man was pointing a gun at Jamie. Without even thinking, he landed right next to Jamie. He recognized the men from Dillon's poster. They were hunters.

Surprised, the man with the gun swung the weapon at Luke and fired. The bullet bounced off of him.

Taking a huge breath, Luke breathed fire at the man who had shot at him. He dropped down to the ground, dead. The other man was trying to pull something out of his coat pocket. Luke let out a hot breath of fire, and the man screamed and collapsed to the ground.

Jamie was frozen. She didn't move or even seem to breathe. Her eyes were wide open as she stared at the two burned men laying curled up in the snow.

Luke shifted into his human form.

"Jamie, are you okay?"

Her face was ghostly pale and she was shaking as she looked at him and nodded.

"I'm okay. They didn't hurt me."

“I need you to stay here, okay? I have to take care of them.”

She nodded, silently.

Luke grabbed both of the men in his claws and took off. There was a cave toward the top of the mountain that had a huge dark ravine inside of it. He dropped the men in without feeling anything. This was war, and someone always lost when there was a war.

He was tired. It had been a long time since he had flown this much, but he couldn't afford to slow down.

Jamie was just where he had left her. She had already started to bury the ashes from the men's bodies deep into the snow and then used a pine tree branch to cover up the area.

Luke landed next to her. He cupped her chin and turned her face toward him.

“Are you sure that you are okay?”

“I am,” she assured him.

“It's a little cold to be standing out here naked. Can you finish covering up everyone's tracks except for your own?”

“Yes.”

He kissed her quickly and said, “I'll see you back at your place,” then shifted and took off.

Luke shifted, dressed, and made sure that his tracks were covered up near the cave and started the long journey back down the mountain to his truck. His arms and legs were aching and it seemed like it took forever. The snow had already started to fall softly and covered his hat and coat. He had never been so glad to see his truck in his entire life.

A hot shower and his soft bed were screaming his name. He wanted nothing more than to head to his place. He realized that he needed to talk to Jamie, and groaning loudly, he turned his truck in that direction.

The house smelled delicious when he walked in. She had already started dinner.

“I'm starving. You're an angel,” he said.

“You're my knight in shining armor, again.” She smiled. “You saved my life.”

“What happened up there?” he asked.

“I saw that the clouds were coming in and decided to head home. They came out from behind the trees and accused me of being a shifter.”

“What did you tell them?”

“I played dumb. I told them that I had no idea what a shifter was. I insisted that I just enjoyed snow shoeing and that I was out on the mountain for some exercise. They kept telling me that I was a shifter, so I told them that since they were accusing me of being one, then they had to be one,” Jamie said.

Luke laughed and said, “I bet that went over well.”

“One of them got offended and told me that shifters were an abomination and that all shifters had to be killed.”

She pointed to one of the chairs at the table that had a plate and a glass of orange juice in front of it. Pulling a pan off the stove, she put it on the trivet that was between their seats. She handed him a spoon.

“I hope that you like stir fry.”

“I love it. I’m starving.”

They ate in silence for a couple of minutes. Luke was glad to see that the traumatic events of the day hadn’t affected her appetite in any way. She was a tough woman, which made her even more attractive.

“I hope that their disappearance doesn’t make things worse for the shifters,” Jamie said. “Although, to be honest, I don’t know how it could get much worse.”

“Shh. Never say things like that and tempt fate.”

“You’re right. I take it back,” Jamie said, smiling.

“I hope that it won’t escalate things, but you never know. It won’t be too long before the Faisons and their crew figure out that they are missing a couple of men,” Luke said.

He knew that he should tell Dillon right away about what happened, but he was really tired.

“Sit there while I take care of everything,” Jamie instructed.

Luke discovered he wasn’t as tired as he thought he was after Jamie put the leftover food away and washed the dishes.

She walked over to him and straddled his leg. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hungrily pressed her lips to his.

JAMIE

Jamie grabbed Luke's hands and said, "Let's go in the other room."

He followed her to her bedroom.

She smiled as she unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it into the chair.

Jamie's tongue flicked out as she tasted his chest. Then, she trailed kisses across his pecs.

"You are incredibly sexy," she said.

Jamie unbuttoned his pants and pushed them and his underwear down to his ankles. He kicked off his shoes and stepped out of his clothes.

"Lay down on the bed," Jamie ordered.

Luke did as he was told. Jamie quickly undressed and walked over to the bed, hardly believing that she had the courage to take charge.

She knelt down at the foot of the bed and massaged his right ankle, and then gently placed a kiss where her hands had been. Jamie moved up to his calf, her fingers gently pressing into his muscles.

"You are a little tight here," she said.

"I might say the same thing about one of your body parts," Luke said, mischievously.

"You're terrible," Jamie said.

"Just saying," Luke replied, laughing.

She continued to knead his calf until she felt the muscle begin to relax. Jamie kissed his calf and then moved up, letting her mouth trail along his leg, tasting him.

Her fingers caressed the muscles around his knee for a moment. Then, she moved up his leg.

Luke moaned loudly as she massaged his thigh, tasting the skin where her fingers had been. His cock was hard and thick, letting Jamie know that she was making her lover feel good. She wanted to ignite the same embers that burned inside of her.

Jamie was careful not to touch him, wanting to tease him a little. Instead, she moved back down to his left ankle, and slowly massaging him with her fingers, kissing him and tasting him, she moved up his leg.

Her tongue traced from his knees to the inside of his thighs. Luke's moans made the embers inside of her burn a little hotter.

She looked at his cock and licked her lips. Jamie had read about blow jobs and how much the men in the stories liked them. She would like to pleasure her man the same way.

Jamie leaned over him and licked him from the base of his cock to the tip. Luke sucked in a huge breath.

"Yes," he said.

Encouraged, Jamie tasted every bit of him, licking him with the flat of her tongue the same way that she would lap an ice cream cone. Luke moved slightly, his breathing heavy.

Jamie licked around the ridge that encircled the tip of his cock.

"Oh, yes," Luke moaned.

She flicked the tiny opening at the very end of his cock, licking the tiny glistening drops that formed there. Opening her mouth wide, she took the apple like head of his cock into her mouth, her tongue circling around it.

Luke reached down, tangling his fingers in her hair. He gently thrust his hips up, encouraging her to take more of him in her mouth.

She wrapped her hands around the base of his cock and slowly stroked him. Her hands moved up to meet her lips as she went down on him, and then slid back down as she pulled her head back, sucking and licking on the tip. Then, she slowly moved back down, taking as much of him into her mouth as she could, the end of his cock touching her throat.

Jamie continued licking and sucking him while she stroked him. His loud moans and panting were incredibly erotic and she felt a hot wetness between her legs. There was an aching need to feel him deep inside of her. As much as she wanted to feel him stretching her, the idea that she was giving him so much pleasure was addicting.

Luke moaned and cried out her name, "Jamie. Your mouth feels so good on my cock."

After another moment, he said, “Baby, you’ve got to stop. You are going to make me cum, and I want to cum in your hot, tight, pussy.”

She moved as Luke sat up and pushed her back on the bed.

“My turn,” he said, with an evil grin.

He sat between her legs, spreading them wide, bending her legs at the knees.

“What a sexy sight,” he said.

Jamie blushed, a little shy at being so exposed to Luke. It felt naughty, which made her even hotter.

Luke laid down between her legs and licked her pussy entrance from the bottom to the top. He pushed his tongue inside of her, tasting her.

Jamie closed her eyes and moaned.

His hands moved up to her breasts. He pinched her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, gently pulling on them and rolling them. Lightning bolts exploded throughout Jamie’s body.

“Oh, heavens,” she said.

Luke sucked her hard pebble into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue.

“Lord,” she breathed.

She had pleased herself in the past, but rubbing her clit with her fingers or pressing a vibrating toy against it was nothing like Luke’s mouth, flicking and sucking it.

Jamie closed her eyes and let herself feel the incredible sensations that exploded throughout her body. Her body tingled with electricity as he pinched and pulled on her nipples and lavished her clit with his tongue.

An overwhelming heat built up inside of her. Her heart pounded and her breath caught in her throat as her body began to tremble.

“Luke,” she whispered as her pussy quivered and a tsunami of hot liquid exploded out of her body. He didn’t stop until every drop of cum had been milked out of her.

He rolled over on the bed.

“Mount me,” he ordered.

Jamie straddled the Norse god that lay below her. The tip of his large cock pressed against the entrance of her pussy. Slowly, she slid down the hard pole until she was completely impaled on him.

He reached up and squeezed her breasts.

“They are gorgeous,” he said, rubbing his thumb over her nipples.

Jamie was sure that her entire body was going to explode from the heat

and electricity. She lifted up until he was barely inside of her, and then slowly lowered herself down his cock. Jamie slowly moved her hips in a circle, pressing her clit against him.

She tilted her head back and moaned, loudly.

The cool air in the room caressed her hot skin. The feeling of his cock deep inside of her, stretching her, was intoxicating.

Jamie leaned over him, her breasts pressing against his hard chest. The smattering of blond hair across his chest tantalized her nipples.

She moved up and down, stroking his hard cock with her hot wet pussy. Jamie loved the feeling of his thick apple head stretching the entrance to her pussy, and then her insides as she slowly moved down, bit by bit, feeling herself wrapping around him.

He reached around and cupped her ass, squeezing her cheeks as she started to ride him faster. She rose up until just the tip was inside her again, and she dropped down hard and fast on his cock.

“Luke,” she whispered.

“You like that?” he asked.

“Yes,” she moaned.

“Fuck me. Hard and fast,” Luke told her.

Jamie put her hands on his chest and sat up on her knees, straddling his cock. She could imagine the scene as she knelt above him, part of him embedded inside of her, like a pole on a carousel horse. She licked her lips at the thought.

Her body trembled as the images of their sex flooded her mind while his cock caressed her pussy walls.

She moved faster, lifting up and sliding back down, hard, driving him deep inside of her.

“Yes,” she cried out.

She continued to move, stroking his dick, massaging her inner walls. The heat and wetness exploding.

Jamie was breathing heavy, her heart was thundering in her chest. Lightning flashed and thunder exploded around her as the world disappeared. There was nothing in the universe but her and Luke.

A kaleidoscope of a million different colored gems danced around her. The fires raced through her, devouring her.

Luke ran his hands over her arms and then her breasts, touching her everywhere.

She lifted up one final time and slammed back down on him, crying out. The world shook and wave after wave of hot wet liquid exploded out of her, covering Luke's cock.

"Don't stop, baby," he cried out, hoarsely.

Jamie lifted up her hips and let them fall back down, driving his cock deep inside of her pulsating walls. She pounded against him again and again. Then, Luke cried out.

"Yes," he yelled.

His cock throbbed and he sent a fountain of hot seed deep into her body.

Jamie collapsed onto Luke in an incredible feeling of ecstasy.

She laid there for a minute, with Luke's arms wrapped around her. Then, she lifted herself off of him.

"I don't have any clean clothes that would fit you, but how about a hot shower?" she asked.

"I always have an extra set of clothes in my truck and a shower sounds delightful," he said.

He pulled on his jeans and shoes to grab his clothes and came back.

Jamie was already in the shower, the hot water cascading off of her.

They tenderly washed the day's stress off of each other, letting the tension go down the drain with the water, at least for the time being.

Luke and Jamie touched each other all over, exploring and teasing. Luke lifted Jamie up and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he slid deep inside of her pussy.

Their bodies moved in a slow sensual dance beneath the streaming hot water. Their chests were pressed together, and his cock filling her pussy ached for him to complete her.

Jamie moaned loudly as he massaged her pussy walls, sliding in and out of her.

"Yes, Luke," she cried out as he thrust hard and deep inside of her.

She exploded over him as he released another load of his hot seed into her body.

Luke let her down and kissed her deeply.

LUKE

Luke held Jamie close to him as they lay in her bed. He could tell that Jamie was having a hard time sleeping. Once they were done with their shower, the sheets were changed on the bed, and they were ready to climb in, the reality of the day's events seemed to set in.

"They are dead because of me," Jamie said. "I shouldn't have been on the mountain alone."

"They are dead because of themselves. They were willing to kill you and hide your body just because they thought you might be a shifter. There is no question as to their intentions. I'm sorry that they are dead, but I don't regret my actions. Neither should you," Luke said.

"I know," Jamie said.

He could tell that she still felt guilt about what happened. He hoped that she would be able to get over that and understand that the situation wasn't of her making. It took a while, but finally, she was breathing evenly.

Luke was exhausted, but he was having a hard time sleeping. Unlike Jamie, his problem wasn't with the fact that he had to kill two hunters and dump their bodies. He was defending Jamie and himself, and it was a do or die type of situation.

What bothered him was that they were willing to kill Jamie just because they *thought* that she *might* be a shifter because she happened to be on the mountain near one of their targeted areas. That meant that anyone in town could be prey.

He closed his eyes and pulled Jamie even closer to him. He had almost lost her today. That thought made his stomach clench. Luke wasn't ready to

admit that he loved her yet, but he did acknowledge that Jamie was important to him and he cared deeply for her.

She moaned in her sleep. He wondered if she was having a bad dream. He stroked her hair and she settled back down into a peaceful sleep.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, Luke felt his muscles start to relax. He hadn't realized that he had been clenching his jaw as he focused on loosening that muscle. Morpheus took mercy on him and Luke fell into a deep sleep.

He woke up the next morning to the smell of coffee brewing and bacon frying. Shocked to discover that Jamie had been able to slip out of bed without him noticing, he hastily pulled on his clothes.

Jamie was wearing her standard uniform of jeans and a t-shirt. Her hair was pulled up in a bun and she wore the barest hint of makeup. Luke thought that she had never looked so beautiful.

"Good morning," she said. "I got up late, so I'm not making anything fancy. I hope that you like bacon and scrambled eggs."

"Sounds perfect to me. What's even better is that I don't have to cook it."

"That always does improve the taste of a meal, doesn't it?" she asked.

"How are you feeling this morning?"

Jamie knew exactly what he was talking about and didn't try to pretend otherwise.

"I'm okay. You were right. I have been snow shoeing on that mountain my entire life. They had no right to attack me, whether I was a shifter or not. They were going to kill me and if you hadn't come along when you did, I would be dead right now and my body would be someplace where no one would ever find it," she said. "They shot at you and tried to kill you. I would never say that they deserved to be killed, but I will say that what happened was justified. It was their actions that caused the situation, not mine and not yours."

"That is a very healthy way of looking at it," Luke replied. "I know that it is hard to watch someone be killed."

"It was, and I'll probably have those images in my mind for a while. At the same time, the logical side of my brain says that it was the only way to protect me and you. And the fact is, if it comes down between us and them, I choose us," she said.

"You are a very smart woman," Luke said.

"Thank you." Jamie smiled.

Luke helped Jamie with the dishes. They stepped outside and the crisp morning air stole their breath away for a moment. A fresh powder of snow covered the steps and their vehicles.

Jamie pulled a snow brush out of her car and Luke took it from her.

“I got this. You just get your car started.”

After starting his truck, he brushed the snow from all her windows and off the top of the car. It always amazed him that people left snow on the top of the car, and then when they stopped, the snow fell down on their windshield.

Jamie hugged Luke and said, “Thank you. That was very sweet of you.”

“I’m a very sweet kind of guy,” he replied, cheekily.

“And humble, too,” she joked.

“Just honest. I’ll tell you all about my other admirable traits if you want me to, but we might freeze to death if we stand out here talking that long.”

Luke leaned down and kissed her, then opened her car door for her.

“You have a terrific day dishing caffeine and calories,” he said.

“It sounds so sexy when you put it that way.” She laughed. “You have a fun day, too.”

“As long as I’m with me, I always have a good time,” Luke said, sticking his nose in the air.

Laughing, Jamie hopped in her car and carefully drove away.

Luke smiled. He really loved spending time with her. She made him laugh and put him at ease so he could relax and be himself.

His smile faded as the events from the day before reminded him that he needed to talk to Dillon.

The store had just opened when Luke stepped inside. There were already a couple of customers browsing through the merchandise. Dillon took one look at the seriousness on Luke’s face and knew that there was a problem.

“Ethan, can you handle everything here for me?” Dillon asked as he beckoned Luke into the back room.

“We have an issue,” Luke said.

Dillon listened intently as Luke explained the situation he had encountered the day before and what had ensued.

“You are sure that their bodies won’t be found? Hunters attacked by a bear or wolf could be explained, but bodies that look like they spent too long in a deep fryer is another story.”

“They won’t be found. I dropped them down a very deep hole in the back

of a huge cave near the top of the mountain. I don't see anyone ever spelunking that far. By the time anyone did, they would simply be skeletal remains."

Dillon nodded and said, "I'm sorry that you had to do that, but I understand why you did. I would have done the same thing. I guess I'll take a trip to see the dragon king and give him an update. He likes to keep apprised of everything significant that happens around here."

"Please assure him that I had no other option," Luke said.

"He'll understand. You aren't the first shifter who has had to deal with the hunters and their unfortunate consequences," Dillon replied.

"I just hope that it isn't going to escalate the situation here."

Dillon sighed heavily.

"To be honest, I'm not sure how it could be escalated. If they are out there willing to kill someone because the hunters assume the person is a shifter, it's bad."

Luke nodded in agreement.

"How is Jamie?" Dillon asked.

"She says that she is okay. She knows that what happened wasn't her fault and that what I did was necessary for our safety."

"Good. I'm sure that she'll talk to Clara about it," Dillon said.

Luke figured that he did all that he could do about the situation and hoped that the dragon king would understand. He didn't live in the shifter world, but he still didn't want the man angry with him.

As he got closer to his father's store, he had a sudden urge to drive away. However, he had left early yesterday, so he needed to make an appearance.

About an hour after he arrived, the doorbell jingled and Alexis walked in.

Doesn't that woman ever give up?

She smiled and said, "Look, I know that you said you were dating someone else. But there is just something about you that gets to me. I don't know what it is or how to explain it. It isn't anything that I have ever felt before. I know that if you just hang out with me for a while and get to know me, you will feel it, too."

"Alexis, I am sure that you are a wonderful woman. However, I'm just not interested in pursuing a relationship with you. I'm sorry. I know that there is an incredible man out there who is going to make you the happiest woman in the world. Unfortunately, it can't be me."

Her face turned red and she looked at Luke for a minute with an

unidentifiable look in her eyes.

“You are being blinded by Jamie. She is keeping us apart,” Alexis said.

“I’ve been trying to be nice, but it has nothing to do with Jamie. I’m just not attracted to you. You are not the woman for me,” Luke said.

She pressed her lips together and left. He hoped that she wasn’t going to try to cause trouble for Jamie because of him.

JAMIE

Jamie looked at the clock impatiently.

Where was Clara? She should have been here by now.

Then Jamie remembered that Zeke had a program at school and Clara was going to be late.

A jumble of emotions coursed through Jamie's mind and she wasn't sure she even knew which side was up. She had feelings for Luke. She knew that she loved him, but didn't want to scare him away by telling him so. Then, there were the events from the day before. She had told Luke that she was okay with everything, and she was, but she was still shaken up. Jamie also hadn't told Luke the entire truth. She hadn't lied to him, but she didn't mention that the reason they were planning on killing her whether she was a shifter or not was because of Alexis.

"How do you tell someone something like that?" she muttered to herself. "They really wanted to kill me because Alexis wants you. They thought that they would be rewarded if something happened to me, leaving you free to date her."

The entire situation was ridiculous. In Jamie's world, if you had a crush on someone who didn't reciprocate, you moved on to someone else or just dealt with having a crush.

However, Jamie and Alexis didn't live in the same world. In Alexis' universe, what Alexis wanted Alexis got, by whatever means were necessary.

Clara finally came in and got settled.

A minute after she had put her purse and coat away and had fixed herself a mocha, she looked at Jamie and asked, "What's wrong?"

“I can’t hide anything from you, can I?”

Clara just grinned at Jamie.

“Yesterday, while I was out snow shoeing, a couple of hunters confronted me. At first, they accused me of being a shifter. Then, after I insisted that I wasn’t a shifter, they said that they knew who I was and that Alexis didn’t like me. They said that Alexis would reward them if they could make me disappear. At least one of them had a gun and pointed it right at me.”

Clara’s face turned white and she sat heavily on a stool behind the counter.

“Oh my heavens,” she gasped. “What happened?”

“Luke happened. He was flying around and just happened to see the altercation. He roasted the two men and did something with their bodies. I hid the tracks that were in the snow.”

“Are you okay?”

“I am. I know that Luke had to do what he did. The man actually shot at Luke and would have killed him, too, if he could have. It was self-defense and in defense of me.”

“I’m so sorry that you are having such a rough time just because one woman is throwing a temper tantrum because she isn’t getting her way.”

“I don’t get it,” Jamie said. “It’s so stupid. She is mad at me because she wants Luke.”

“She wants what she can’t have. Plain and simple. Alexis is throwing a major temper tantrum because she doesn’t understand that the world doesn’t revolve around her.”

“I can’t believe people get that mindset.”

“It’s not that uncommon. How many murderers have killed other people because they wanted something? Belle Guinness killed rich men to get their money. Susan Smith killed her two sons so that she could get with a man, and he had said that her kids were getting in the way of their relationship,” Clara said.

“What is wrong with people?” Jamie asked.

“It’s just a few people out of millions of great people,” Clara said. “It’s just the bad ones who get all the attention.”

After a minute, Clara asked, “Do you think that the other hunters or the Faisons are going to come after you for this?”

“No. There is no way that Walter and Parker would be able to tell anyone that they had me cornered. They never took out their phones to contact

anyone. No one but you and Luke know that I was even on the mountain. Their bodies won't be found. There is no way to connect their disappearance to me," Jamie said. "Even if there was, it doesn't matter because I learned my lesson. I'm never going back up those mountains alone again. It sucks that I have to be that way about a place I've explored my entire life."

"I hate that for you. I'm sorry."

After a few minutes, Clara said, "I have some news, too."

Jamie looked at the huge smile on Clara's face and she had an idea of what that news might be.

"Tell me," Jamie said.

"I'm going to have a baby," Clara announced.

Jamie jumped up and hugged her.

"I'm so happy for you," Jamie said.

"Thank you. I'm going to have to see a shifter doctor in Colorado Springs. There aren't any left in Ivy Springs anymore."

Clara sighed and said, "I'm a little nervous. I have no idea what it's like for a human to carry a shifter baby."

"I think that it is pretty much like you having a human baby, except that they are born a lot sooner."

"That is what I heard," Clara said. "But it's different to hear that than it is to experience it."

"True enough," Jamie said. "You'll be great."

"I'm not going to let a lot of people know that I'm pregnant. I'll wait until it really starts getting noticeable and let people think that I'm further along than I really am. The last thing I need is for anyone to get the idea that I'm going to give birth to a shifter baby. I hate all this hiding though," Clara said.

"Welcome to my world," Jamie said. "Everything will be okay."

"I know."

"I bet that Dillon is over the moon."

"He was so excited that we were going to have another baby. He looks at Zeke as though Zeke is his own son."

"Dillon is a good man. How does Zeke feel?"

"He is pretty excited, too. He has let us know that he will be taking his big brother duties very seriously. He will play with his sister and protect her. He has informed us that he will not be changing any diapers though, because that is a grown up job."

"Sister?"

“Zeke is convinced that I’m having a little girl.”

“Who knows? Maybe he has some kind of second sight or something,” Jamie said.

“Dillon and I will be happy regardless of whether the baby is a boy or girl. The child will be spoiled to death by her father and brother.”

“Hopefully not Alexis spoiled.”

“Not a chance.” Clara laughed.

As though speaking her name conjured up the devil, Alexis walked in the door and marched up to the counter.

“I want a coffee and danish,” she said, pointing to one of the sweets in the display.

“Jamie, would you mind taking the muffins out of the oven for me?” Clara asked as she stepped in front of the register.

She could hear the conversation as she stepped into the back.

“You are welcome to come in here as a customer, but I will not allow you to come in here and bully Jamie. Is that clear?” Clara said.

“Don’t come after me. I’ll make sure that you lose your precious café,” Alexis said.

“I really don’t think so. I know people in Colorado Springs and other places that are just as rich and powerful as you and your brothers, and they have my back. If you think that you have the monopoly on having tons of money, then you are sadly mistaken,” Clara said, calmly. “Do you still want your coffee and danish?”

Alexis growled and left the café just as the timer on the oven went off, telling Jamie to take out the muffins.

“Thank you,” Jamie said.

“You are like a sister to me and sisters stick together.”

“Do you really know rich and powerful people?” Jamie asked.

“Not a single one, but Alexis doesn’t need to know that.”

Jamie and Clara laughed.

Changing the subject, Jamie asked, “Did you guys talk about names yet?”

“We both threw out a couple of names, but we haven’t decided on anything definitive yet. We have a little bit of time.”

“Six months is going to go by faster than you think it is. Don’t wait too long to decide on a name and then when the baby comes, you have nothing. The baby will be called “baby” for another six months,” Jamie teased.

“I really don’t think that it will come to that,” Clara said.

Jamie was a little wistful as she thought about Clara and Dillon's baby. She had always wanted a family with at least a couple of kids. She wondered what it would be like to have Luke's child.

Will it be a dragon shifter, a bear shifter, or a chimera?

A chimera, where the baby could shift into either form, was rare, but it did happen.

She shook her head as though she was shaking the thoughts out of her brain. Jamie and Luke had only been dating for a few weeks and he hadn't given any indication that he was in love with her.

He had saved her life, but he would have done that for anyone. They had sex three times, but he obviously had been with other women before her, so the act didn't mean anything. As far as Jamie could tell, Luke liked her and enjoyed her company. However, the same could be said for any of his friends, like Josh. The only difference was Luke didn't sleep with Josh.

The thoughts were a little depressing, so Jamie focused on the fact that she and Luke did seem to be getting a little closer and they did enjoy being together.

That was the first step to love, right?

LUKE

Luke looked at his watch again. He was pretty sure that the day was never going to end. He had called the fire chief and made an appointment to meet with him the following week, so that Luke could take the paper exams. Once he passed those, he would take the physical exam, which wouldn't be a problem. He figured that he would wait until he passed the paper exam before telling his father that he wasn't going to be working at the store anymore. It would be that much less time that he would have to deal with the pouting and guilt trips that his father would throw at him.

"You can get through a few more days," Luke muttered under his breath.

"Get through what?" his father asked.

"Nothing. Just talking to myself."

"Mmm-hmm," Carl said.

Luke was tempted to tell him and then not bother coming to the store at all for a week, but decided to keep his mouth shut.

The doorbell chimed, letting them know that they had a customer. A tall blond man came up to the counter.

"Are you Luke?" the man asked.

"I am," Luke said.

"My name is Ryan. I wanted to talk to you about Jamie," he said.

Luke noticed that the man had a hard time looking him in the eyes.

"What about Jamie?" Luke asked.

"I wanted to ask you to break up with Jamie. I love her. She and I were engaged a long time ago, but I made a mistake and left her for another

woman. I've regretted it ever since. I want to try to make it up to her and get her back," Ryan said.

"Sorry, buddy, but that isn't a me problem. Jamie is a big girl and old enough to make her own decisions. If she wants to be with you, then she will. If she wants to be with me, then she will," Luke said.

He was waiting for Ryan, who was also a big, well-cut man, to posture for a fight. However, Ryan just stared at him for a minute, as though it would intimidate Luke. Shaking his head slightly, Luke crossed his arms and leaned against the counter.

"You should know that I do love her and I'm going to do everything that I possibly can to get her back."

"You do what you gotta do," Luke said.

He smirked at Ryan who looked as though he was trying to find something to say, but failed. Ryan simply left the store.

He almost felt sorry for the guy. He looked like a man who had just had his ass handed to him, and Luke hadn't said or done anything to the guy.

An amusing thought did cross his mind. Perhaps Ryan and Alexis should hook up. They were both actively looking for a relationship and both had the idea that someone else was in their way of getting what they wanted.

Once again, Luke wondered if he had gone back in time to middle school.

What was with these grown folks acting like a bunch of children?

Carl, who had clearly heard the entire conversation asked, "What was that about?"

The last thing that Luke wanted was to deal with his father's comments so he said, "It was a personal matter. Nothing for you to worry about."

"It was about Jamie, wasn't it?"

"You know it was. It's not important," Luke said.

"That woman is causing a lot more trouble than she's worth," Carl spat out.

Luke glared at Carl until the older man decided that he should leave it alone. Trying to keep busy to help the time go by a little faster, Luke rearranged the back room.

He had just returned to the front when a tall, thin woman with a pock marked face came in. Luke recognized her immediately from Dillon's posters, although he didn't let the woman know. Her name was Crystal and she was one of Faisons' hunters.

"Welcome. How can I help you?" he said, plastering a pleasant smile on

his face.

She handed Luke a flyer and asked, “Have you seen either of these two men around?”

Luke pretended to study Walter and Parker’s faces and then slowly shook his head.

“I’m sorry. I haven’t.”

“They went up on the mountain to go hiking and never returned. Everyone is starting to get worried about them.”

“I hope they didn’t get lost, which is easy to do, especially in the winter time. It would be too easy to get turned around and freeze to death,” Luke said, with what he hoped was a sympathetic tone.

“Do you mind if I hang one of the flyers in your window in case someone knows what happened to them?”

“Sure, go right ahead,” Luke said.

He watched as she taped a flyer to the window and left.

“Dad, I have some errands I need to take care of. Mike is here to help you close up. I’ll see you later.”

He grabbed his coat and keys before his father could say anything to him.

Jamie was at the café. She finished helping a customer and then smiled at him.

“Luke. I didn’t expect to see you here,” she said. “Isn’t it a little late in the day for coffee?”

“Actually, I didn’t come here for coffee,” he said. “I wanted to tell you about a visitor I had today at the store.”

“Uh-oh,” Jamie said. “This doesn’t sound good.”

“Ryan came to visit me.”

“Ryan? What on earth for?” Jamie asked, startled.

“He wanted me to step aside to give him room to pursue a relationship with you.”

Jamie’s mouth dropped open and she stared at Luke wide-eyed for a moment. She made a sound that was half a growl and half a sigh.

“I’m so sorry. I hate drama. What in the hell was he thinking?”

“He was thinking that if the current object of your attention was out of the way, then he could step in and pick up the pieces where he left off,” Luke said. “Don’t worry. I’m not upset about it.”

“I can’t believe him,” Jamie said.

“It doesn’t look like he’s going to give up on you,” Luke replied. “I’d feel

sorry for the man, but he's the one who created the mess."

"It's ridiculous," Jamie said.

Luke leaned across the counter and said, "I'm sorry that you were hurt, but I'll be honest. I'm glad that Ryan was such an ass and did what he did. Otherwise, you and I wouldn't have had the opportunity to get together, and I'm very happy that we are together."

He brushed a kiss across her lips as another customer came in.

"I'll let you get back to work," Luke said.

He was very glad that he and Jamie were in a relationship. He cared deeply for Jamie. He looked forward to spending time with her, whether they were hiking, hanging out and talking, or having sex. Luke wasn't about to admit that he had fallen in love with her, but deep down inside of him, he knew that he did love her. Luke just had to come to terms with his feelings and then figure out what to do about the relationship.

Dillon's store was right next door, so Luke figured he would go talk to him. As he walked in the door, he noticed that one of Crystal's flyers was in the window.

"She hit you up, too?" Luke asked.

"Yeah. She came in here a few hours ago asking if I had seen them or heard anything about them. I assured her that I did not and that I didn't even really know who they were," Dillon said.

"I think that it's strange that she would bother handing out flyers, looking for them. I didn't think that hunters gave a damn about anyone but themselves."

"I don't think that they do. Crystal would know that they were on that mountain looking around for shifters. They probably figured out that the hunters ran into a shifter and were taken down. She's looking for trouble."

"Like we talked about, I'm not sure that they could escalate the situation any more than they already have. The only thing that they could do more is go door to door, testing every person in Ivy Springs to see if they are shifters and killing them on the spot. I don't think that even the mundane people would stand for that," Luke said.

"I wish I knew what their end game is. I doubt if they know," Dillon said. "They are letting blind hate and greed lead them around by their noses in circles."

"What did the dragon king say about the situation?" Luke asked

"He understood what you did. You were defending another person and

yourself,” Dillon reported.

“Good.”

“I have some news. I’m going to be a father again,” Dillon said.

Luke broke out in a huge smile and said, “Congrats. That is awesome.”

He knew that Dillon wasn’t Zeke’s biological father, but he treated the young boy as though Zeke was his son. Luke had the utmost respect for Dillon because of that.

“She’s due in about six months,” Dillon said.

“That is terrific. Give Clara a huge hug for me,” Luke exclaimed.

Luke again thought about the idea of having a family as he headed home. He knew that Jamie would make a terrific mother.

Who knows. Maybe someday.

JAMIE

“Can you believe him?” Jamie fumed to Clara as they closed up the café. “He actually went to the hardware store to ask Luke to break up with me. What the hell? Is he twelve?”

Clara laughed and shook her head.

Jamie looked at her sharply and Clara said, “I’m sorry. I know this is all crazy and stressful for you, but you and Luke have two people running around Ivy Springs acting like a couple of idiots.”

“It’s annoying and embarrassing. If I didn’t care about Luke so much, I would just end the relationship and tell Alexis that she could have him.”

“No, you wouldn’t. The Jamie I know wouldn’t give up a fight that easy,” Clara said.

“You have no idea. It’s getting tiring. The other day I thought about packing everything up that I could fit in my car and disappearing in the middle of the night, and just tell you where I was.”

“Yet here you are.”

“I know,” Jamie groused.

Changing the subject, Jamie asked, “How are you feeling?”

“Pretty good. I’m a little surprised that I haven’t had morning sickness like I did with Zeke. I have an appointment with the doctor next week, so you’ll have to run the show for me,” Clara said.

“I’ll be happy to. I bet that Charlie is over the moon that she is going to have another little niece or nephew,” Jamie said.

“She hopes that it is a girl. She kept all of Luna’s cute baby clothes and things that she’ll give us.”

“That’ll come in handy. I’ll just buy you all of the diapers and wipes that the store has. I’ve heard that you can’t get too much of that.”

“That is the truth,” Clara said.

They looked around the café once more and locked the door. Jamie gave Clara and Zeke a quick hug and walked to her car, while the other two went over to Dillon’s store.

Jamie had just settled down to eat some homemade tacos, complete with lettuce, tomatoes, avocados, onions, and cheese, when her doorbell rang. She looked at one of her favorite meals disappointingly. She was half tempted to ignore the door and just eat. She was famished.

Sighing heavily, she decided that it might be important. Groaning loudly, she regretted her decision as soon as she peeked out her window to see who was standing there.

“What do you want?” she asked as the door swung open just enough to talk to the man standing on her porch.

“Can I come in?”

“Nope,” Jamie said.

“I bought you some flowers,” Ryan said, handing them to her.

She automatically took them and laid them on the couch.

“Thank you. Bye,” she said.

She started to close the door and Ryan said, “Wait.”

“What?”

“Please, just hear me out. I’m so sorry that I ever hurt you. I have regretted it from the moment that I did it. Please, give me another chance. I will never hurt you again,” Ryan begged. “I swear on everything that I hold holy that I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you.”

“It’s way too late for that. I wouldn’t have taken you back if you had come crawling on your knees five minutes after I got the note. Once bitten twice shy and all that. Second, I have feelings for someone else, and they are more powerful than anything that I ever felt for you,” Jamie said. “And while we are on that subject, leave Luke alone. You look like a pathetic twelve-year-old when you went to him, begging for him to break up with me.”

Ryan’s face hardened.

“You’re going to regret this You are making a huge mistake,” he said.

“It won’t be the first and probably won’t be the last,” Jamie said.

He glared at her for a minute and then walked away. Jamie shut and locked the door behind him.

She started to throw the flowers away, but then thought about it.

“You’ve already been cut and it isn’t your fault that some idiot gave them to me.”

Jamie shook her head. Ryan hadn’t even remembered that she preferred live plants to cut flowers because plants kept living. The second that flowers were cut, they died.

She put the blooms in a vase and finished her meal. With her stomach full and the dishes washed, she was about to sit on the couch and enjoy some true crime shows on the television when there was another knock on her door.

Annoyed she went to the window. Luke.

“Hi. Why didn’t you text?” she asked.

“I was actually in the neighborhood a couple doors down visiting a friend and saw your lights on. I should have texted,” he said.

“Come in,” she said.

“Nice flowers,” Luke said.

“They are. Ryan brought them to me, trying to talk me into taking him back. I sent him packing but didn’t want to throw the flowers away because I didn’t want them to have died for nothing. I can toss them if it bothers you,” Jamie said, anxiously, wondering if she had made the wrong decision about keeping them.

“No, they don’t bother me. I agree that it would be a shame to waste them,” Luke said.

“The funny thing is that he was trying to convince me how much he loved me, but didn’t remember that I prefer live plants instead of cut flowers,” Jamie said. “I honestly don’t think that he wants me back because he loves me. He wants me back to salve his wounded pride.”

“It’s possible,” Luke said.

“I’m so embarrassed that he harassed you today,” Jamie said.

“He’s the one who should be embarrassed,” Luke replied.

Luke moved closer to Jamie on the couch and pulled her close to him.

“What are we watching?” he asked.

“*Forensic Files*. I like the science behind solving the case,” she said.

“You just want to know how to get away with something,” he teased.

“I’ll never tell.”

They hung out for a while, watching television, making comments on the cases and just relaxing in each other’s company. The times when they were silent was comfortable. Jamie liked the fact that neither of them felt like they

had to keep up continuous chatter.

After a couple of hours, Luke said, "I need to be heading home. I'll stop by and see you tomorrow."

He pulled her close to him and kissed her deeply, before grinning at her and leaving.

Jamie watched him drive away through her window.

If only he knew that he was leaving with my heart.

Jamie looked at the flowers and wondered again if she had messed up by keeping them.

"You know what? If Luke had a problem with them, he should have said so. He has nothing to be jealous about, so that is that."

Jamie told Clara about the situation the next morning. Clara agreed with Jamie. It was okay to keep the flowers for the flowers' sake. If Luke had a problem with it, he should have said so.

"Do you think that Ryan finally got the hint?"

"I honestly have no idea. He told me that I was going to regret not taking him back and that I was making a huge mistake."

"What do you think he meant by that?" Clara asked.

"I don't know," Jamie replied. "Maybe he's going to try to get me fired and get my landlord to kick me out of my house."

Clara laughed.

"I'm pretty sure that I know how that will work out for him," Clara said.

"I'm over all of this," Jamie said. "Why can't life just be normal? You know, guy meets girl, guy and girl go out on dates and have fun, everyone else in the world leaves guy and girl alone. What did I do to deserve this type of karma?"

"I don't think karma has anything to do with it. Karma will come around and reward you for your patience and good nature with happiness and a fulfilling life full of love."

"You've been practicing your fortune cookie writing again, haven't you?"

Clara laughed and said, "Is it that obvious? Seriously, though. I know that you are going through a stressful time right now, but you'll get through it. Alexis will find some other shifter to crush on and annoy him and whoever he's with. Ryan will figure out that you aren't interested and that ship has sailed. He'll go back to Denver and find some other woman to stalk. You and Luke will continue to see each other, admit that you're in love, have a football team full of kids, and live happily ever after."

“From fortune cookie to fortune teller, huh?” Jamie teased.

Clara shrugged her shoulders and said, “I’m a woman of many talents.”

Luke dropped in mid-morning.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he said.

“Good morning, to you,” Jamie replied. “You know, if I didn’t know better, I would think that you are just using me to get delicious coffee and a yummy snack.”

“Damn, you caught on to my evil plan too soon,” Luke said. “How did you figure it out?”

“When you said ‘good morning, beautiful’ you were looking at the danish and not at me. I’m pretty sure I saw a little bit of drool come out, too.”

“I thought I hid it so well,” Luke said.

He put the money on the counter and dropped the change into the tip jar, as usual.

“Thank you, kind sir,” Jamie said.

He kissed her briefly and headed out into the cold air. Jamie smiled, relieved that everything seemed to be normal.

LUKE

The poker chips and cards were spread out on the back table. Chips and dip were on the counter along with sodas.

Everyone was gathered around, looking at Luke while he explained, again, what happened on the mountain when the hunters ambushed Jamie and he smoked them. He assured everyone that they wouldn't be found.

"Crystal has been to all of our businesses with her flyers, asking whether we've seen them or know anything about their disappearance," Jesse said.

"I hope that they are paying her for her time," Daniel said. "I think that at this point, even if the mundane humans knew what happened to the hunters, they would simply shrug their shoulders and plead ignorant."

"I don't like taking a life, but Jamie's life was in danger, they shot at me, and so I would do it again if I had to," Luke said.

"The dragon king has acknowledged the situation and said that you did the right thing," Dillon said.

He looked at Daniel and then Bernie and said, "It was a matter of self-defense. The dragon king still doesn't want anyone to make an offensive strike."

"We get it," Daniel said, clearly exasperated by Dillon's constant reminders. "Neither of us is going to go off half cocked."

Dillon nodded.

"Shifters are on edge because they know that the Faisons are going to blame the missing hunters on them. But, as we already discussed, there isn't much more that they could do. Even if the hunters had been killed by a bear

or wolf and their bodies were found, there is nothing to say that a wild animal isn't responsible. They could have disturbed a sleeping bear or come across a hungry wolf," Jesse said. "What have you heard, Brent?"

Brent was a shifter who worked as a bartender at the Forest Resort. The Faisons acted like he was invisible and talked freely around him.

"They think that a shifter is responsible. Jerry thinks that the shifters are getting tired of having to be on guard all the time and had suggested that they back off, at least for a while."

"I'm guessing that the others found his comment to be laughable," Jesse said, dryly.

"They did. Jerry said that he was tired of it all and left the table," Brent reported. "Raf asked if Jerry was getting soft. Xavier said that he wasn't getting soft, but thought that the whole war was getting out of hand. It was over something that happened a long time ago, and Jerry thinks that his time and efforts could be focused on something more productive. There was no point to it. Raf stared Xavier down and asked if that was how he felt. Xavier just shrugged but didn't say anything."

"I bet that went over well," Dillon said.

"Raf was pretty pissed," Brent said.

"It's interesting that there is trouble in the ranks. My guess is that Alexis doesn't care about anything but spending money and chasing Luke," Ethan said. "That leaves Raf as the biggest problem."

"It doesn't really matter if it is one or all of them, the war will still be ongoing. And if it came down to it and their hands were forced, both Jerry and Xavier would stand with their brother," Daniel said.

"This whole issue is tiring," Luke said. "They are picking off shifters one or two at a time on the mountain, but they aren't even getting the shifters they are after, because all of the local shifters go out of town. It's pointless."

"I wish the Faisons would realize that," Dillon said. "Then, we could all relax."

"Maybe one of them already has. It's a start," Jesse said, optimistically.

Josh and Luke headed out for the bar to play some pool once the meeting ended. Luke told Josh the latest about Alexis and his visit from Ryan.

"Sucks to be you," Josh said. "I wonder what it is about you that makes Alexis want you so badly."

"I don't know. If I did, I would fix it. Maybe I should get a bowl haircut, thick glasses and start wearing my pants up to my belly button."

“I want to see you do that,” Josh said. “Please.”

Luke playfully swatted Josh.

“So, Jamie’s old fiancé actually had the nerve to ask you to step aside,” Josh said. “That must have been amusing.”

“The guy was pathetic. I almost felt sorry for him.”

“Poor Jamie has been having a rough time lately. First, a couple of yahoos try to kill her and now she is being haunted by her past,” Josh said.

“She seems to be holding up okay. She is more embarrassed about the situation than anything.”

“I imagine so,” Josh replied. “How are things going between you guys?”

Luke smiled and said, “They are going great. Last night we hung out watching *Forensic Files*.”

“Sounds very domesticated,” Josh teased. “Are you thinking about making the relationship more permanent?”

“Hold your horses, there, brother. I wouldn’t go that far. I really like her a lot, but we’ve only been seeing each other a couple of weeks. I’m still getting adjusted to civilian life. Becoming domesticated, as you call it, with a wife and kids is far in the distance.”

“No need to rush things,” Josh said. “You’ll know when you are ready.”

“That’s my thought,” Luke said. “When are you going to find yourself a woman?”

“I know all the women who are permanent residents of Ivy Springs. Some of them are pretty, some of them are smart, and some of them are both, but none of them are for me. There’s no spark.”

“You could use one of those dating apps,” Luke suggested.

“I don’t think so. I’ve heard stories about catfishing and other kinds of things that happens. Plus, it’s just too much effort. When the time is right, the Fates will plop the perfect woman down right in front of me with a sign that says, ‘here she is.’”

“You think that it’s really going to work that way?” Luke laughed.

“Yep,” Josh said. “Your break.”

Carl was in a particularly good mood when Luke got to the store the next morning.

“Your mother and I would like for you to come to dinner tonight. Your mother is making her world famous lasagna.”

“I don’t know why she calls it world famous when only a few people have tasted it,” Luke said, shaking his head.

“It makes your mother happy. Let her have it,” Carl said.

“Sure, I’ll come tonight,” Luke said.

The day actually went by relatively quickly with no drama from Alexis, Ryan, or the Faisons. Luke wondered if it was possible that everything was finally settling down. He enjoyed spending time with his mother. She had a quiet strength about her that he admired. He also appreciated her slightly dry sense of humor.

Luke brought a bottle of wine for his mother. She greeted him at the door with a kiss and said, “I’m sorry. This wasn’t my doing.”

He wondered what she was talking about, but quickly figured it out when he heard the voices from the living room. His father had invited other guests over for dinner.

“Luke. Meet my friend, George, his wife, Elizabeth, and their daughter, Tasha,” Carl said.

Luke politely shook hands with them and sat in a corner chair.

“We’ve heard a lot about you,” George said. “Your father is quite proud of you.”

“Thank you,” Luke said.

“Tasha went to school to be an accountant,” George said. “She’s a certified professional accountant and owns her own business.”

Luke immediately figured out what was going on. They must be dragon shifters and his father was playing matchmaker.

He bit his tongue to try to keep from saying what was on his mind. He wasn’t going to be rude to his father in front of the guests.

His mother came in and announced that dinner was ready. The three guests stood up and headed for the dining room. Carl pulled him aside.

“They are a great family of dragon shifters. Tasha is a beautiful young woman and is sweet and smart.”

“I’m not interested,” Luke said, pulling away from his father.

Carl had Tasha sit next to Luke at dinner. Luke saw his mother look at him with a sympathetic glance. Luke wasn’t trying to be rude, but he really didn’t have a whole lot to say. He asked Tasha about herself and her job. He acknowledged that he had been in the service. The rest of the time was spent in an awkward silence.

After dessert was finished, Carl said, “Luke, why don’t you take Tasha into the living room so that the two of you can get to know each other better?”

Tasha obediently got up and Luke followed.

“Tasha, I’m sorry. I’m sure that you are a wonderful person, but I’m in a relationship with someone else. She isn’t a dragon shifter, which has upset my father. He was trying to play matchmaker,” Luke said.

Her face flushed with embarrassment and said, “I understand. I really don’t want to be in a relationship right now, anyway. I’m trying to keep my business going, and it is taking up all of my time. Dad practically forced me to come.”

The two of them had a lively discussion about parents, and Luke was glad that she wasn’t hurt.

Luke’s father, however, was furious. He confronted Luke the next morning.

“What did you think that you were doing? You were rude to that poor woman,” Carl said.

“No, I wasn’t. I was honest with her and told her that I was in a relationship with another woman. She was relieved because she didn’t want to be in a relationship, anyway,” Luke said, his voice cold as ice.

“You are a dragon shifter. Dragon shifters are the kings of the other shifters. It is beneath you to date a bear shifter.”

“Your way of thinking is stupid and archaic. I will date whomever I damn well please,” Luke said.

As Luke stormed out of the hardware store, Carl said, “We’ll see about that.”

JAMIE

The sun was shining brightly, making the snow glisten like diamonds. The morning rush was over. Everyone had been in a great mood as Christmas was just around the corner. Different colored lights glowed everywhere. Candy cane, wreath, and star decorations were hanging off the street lights and in the shop windows.

Jamie still had a few gifts to purchase. She wasn't sure what to get for Luke. She would have to find a way to subtly question him to see what he might enjoy. Zeke, who was off from school for a two week break, was getting antsy, so Jamie volunteered to take him and Reno for a walk around the block.

He proudly told Jamie about the beaded necklace he had made for his mother as a gift and a clay bowl he had made for his dad. Reno was going to get a big bag of treats, but he couldn't have them all at once, "because it would make him sick."

Zeke said, "I haven't made anything for my sister yet because she hasn't got here. I'm not telling you what your present is."

"That's fair, because I'm not telling you what yours is," Jamie said.

"Mama and Aunt Charlie have babies. When are you going to have a baby?"

"I don't know, kiddo. When the time is right, I suppose."

Jamie hoped that Luke wanted a family. She was sure that he would be a good dad.

Knock it off. You have a long way to go before that happens.

Jamie was a little shocked at her quickness to fall in love with Luke after

what happened with Ryan. The cognitive side of her brain told her that rushing it was playing with fire while the emotional side of her brain quoted the cliché, “the heart knows what it wants.”

When they got back to the café, Zeke was ready to settle down in his play area and make some Christmas cards for everyone.

“I hope that when I have kids, they are all just like Zeke,” Jamie said.

“He is an awesome kid. My kind of luck the baby will be the opposite and will be wild and crazy.”

“Probably,” Jamie said. “But you never know.”

Clara and Jamie got into their regular routine, making sure that everything was stocked and waiting on the customers who needed something warm to drink to combat the chill.

Jamie was at the register when a tall, regal man walked in. He looked a lot like Luke, so Jamie figured that it was his father.

“Welcome. What can I get for you today,” Jamie asked.

“You are Jamie, yes?” the man said, looking down his nose at her.

“I am.”

“My name is Carl Abrams. I am Luke’s father,” he said.

“I can see the physical resemblance,” Jamie replied.

“Let me be blunt. I knew who your father was. He was a bear shifter. You are a bear shifter.”

“I am,” Jamie acknowledged.

“A bear shifter has no business being with a dragon shifter. Dragon shifters are the elite of the shifters and need to stay with their own kind,” Carl said haughtily. “You need to walk away from Luke and leave him alone. You have him confused so he is unable to do the right thing.”

Jamie had a hard time not laughing in the man’s face. Luke was a strong person who knew exactly what he wanted.

“Luke is a grown man. He is old enough to make his own choices. If Luke wants to be with me, then I think that’s great, because I care very deeply for him,” Jamie said, trying to keep her voice even.

“I won’t allow you to ruin Luke’s life. If you don’t walk away from him, I can make sure that you disappear.”

With that threat, Carl left the café as stately as he had arrived.

Clara came in from the kitchen and noticed that Jamie was shaking and pale.

“What’s wrong? Did Alexis come in here again?”

“No. Luke’s father. He said that Luke needed to be with a dragon shifter and I needed to break things off with Luke. When I told him that Luke could make his own decisions, he said that he could make me disappear,” Jamie said.

“Was he threatening to kill you?” Clara asked, disbelievingly.

“I don’t know, but that is how I took it.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I have to tell Luke about it,” Jamie said. “Alexis is one thing, but his father coming after me is quite another. That is his business.”

“I agree with you,” Clara said.

“Luke and I have a date tonight. I’ll talk to him then,” Jamie said. “I think that I’m also going to tell him that I love him.”

Clara smiled and said, “That is great.”

“I’m terrified,” Jamie said. “What if he doesn’t love me?”

“I’m sure that he does,” Clara said. “But if he doesn’t say it back, don’t worry too much. For some people, it just takes a while longer. He’ll figure it out eventually.”

Jamie laughed at herself as she got ready for her date. She tried on several different outfits until she found the perfect one. She brushed her hair until it was silky soft and put on a little bit of makeup that highlighted her eyes and high cheekbones. Jamie was well aware that Luke likely didn’t care what she looked like, but she wanted to look great, anyway. It made her feel better.

Luke called.

“I’m running a bit late. Would you mind meeting me at the restaurant?”

“Not at all,” Jamie said.

She beat him there. For a second, a flashback popped into her mind and she pictured herself waiting at the table all night long and no Luke.

She pushed the thought aside and muttered under her breath, “You’re being ridiculous.”

Luke was a few minutes late and apologized profusely.

“It happens,” Jamie said. “No big deal.”

Jamie was tense throughout dinner. Her eyes continued to dart around the restaurant, looking for any signs of Alexis, Ryan, or worse, Luke’s father. Luke continued to talk and didn’t seem to notice that Jamie was stressed. She wanted to tell him about Carl’s visit, but she wasn’t sure how to bring it up.

Finally, when there was a lull in the conversation, she said, “I need to talk to you about something.”

Just then, Luke's phone rang. He looked at the number and sighed heavily.

"It's my father."

Luke listened for a minute and said, "Why did you call me about this? I'll take care of it tomorrow."

She was about to bring up the incident again, but the waitress walked by with the check. Luke paid for the meal, leaving a generous tip.

"Would you like to take a walk? It's cold out, but the skies are clear and beautiful," Luke asked.

"Sure," Jamie said.

The two of them walked hand in hand around the trail that surrounded a nearby park. It was a full moon and the silvery light glistened on the snow. The big and little dipper were easy to pick out in the dark sky.

"I love being out where the city lights don't outshine the stars and moon," Luke said. "I think that I would like to get a house out in the country sometime soon."

"That sounds very nice," Jamie said.

"You've been very quiet tonight. Are you okay?" Luke asked. "A penny for your thoughts."

Jamie didn't quite know how to say what was on her mind. After a couple of seconds she said, "I have fallen in love with you."

Luke stopped dead in his tracks and stared at Jamie. His eyes were wide with that deer in the headlights look. He stared at her in stunned silence.

Jamie nodded and said, "I understand."

She walked away, leaving a shocked Luke staring after her. Jamie hoped that he would come after her and say something – anything – but he didn't. A rock dropped into the pit of her stomach and tears welled up in her eyes. Her chest hurt. Jamie felt like a fool and her heart was broken.

Once she shut her front door, she felt as though the world was locked out. A glass of wine called her name when she walked into the enveloping warmth of her house.

"I guess that makes things easy for everyone," Jamie said. "Carl gets what he wants, and Alexis sort of gets what she wants. She might not get Luke, but at least I won't be in her way, in her mind. Maybe she'll leave me alone now."

Her own voice sounded lonely and sad in the emptiness of her house.

"Who knows. Maybe he'll think about it and we can work on our

relationship. He might grow to love me over time,” Jamie told herself.

She honestly didn't know what to think. A hot bath and another glass of wine sounded perfect.

Her bathtub was full of hot bubbly water and she was about to get in when she heard a loud pounding on her front door.

“What the hell?” she said.

Hoping against hope that it was Luke, she peeked out the window. Dillon stood on her porch, shifting from one foot to the other.

Jamie ripped open the front door and asked, “What's wrong? Did something happen to Clara or Zeke?”

“No. You have to get out of here. Brent, the bartender at the resort, overheard Ryan and Alexis talking tonight. Ryan told Alexis that you are a bear shifter. Hunters are on the way. You have to go right now,” Dillon said, all in one breath.

Jamie's heart stopped and her breath caught in her throat. She ran into her bedroom and grabbed a backpack. She threw in a change of clothes, a picture of her parents, and a couple other important mementos, and rushed out to her car.

“I'll stall them as long as I can. You have to get to the shifter world,” Dillon said.

Jamie drove as quickly as she safely could on the snow packed roads in the dark. She panicked every time she saw the flash of headlights in her rearview mirror.

Sliding to a stop at an obscure and rarely used trail on the mountain, Jamie jumped out her car. She dropped the keys onto the floor and shifted. Grabbing her backpack in her mouth, she lumbered up the mountain toward the portal to the shifter world.

LUKE

Luke stood under the bright clear skies, stunned. Jamie had told him that she was in love with him. He wasn't sure what to say. He cared deeply for her. Was it love?

He walked around for a while trying to sort out everything in his head. What he did know was that he felt bad about how the night had ended. He wanted to continue dating Jamie and seeing where their relationship went. Luke was sure that, eventually, he would fall in love with her and they would take the next step. It just wasn't today.

Hoping that Jamie was still awake, he texted her, but she didn't reply. Thinking that she was just upset, he drove by her house. He would knock on her door if he saw any lights on. However, her car was gone.

"Where the hell is she?" he asked. "She probably just went for a drive, needing to clear her head."

Although it was dark and some parts of the roads were snow packed and dangerous, that was the only explanation that he could think of.

When she didn't answer his text early the next morning, he drove by her house again. Her car still wasn't there.

"She must be at the café already."

He waited for the café to open and walked inside, expecting to see Jamie standing behind the counter waiting on customers. Instead, he found a pale Clara taking orders.

Waiting until all of the customers were taking care of, he walked to the counter.

"Where is Jamie?" he asked.

“She’s gone,” Clara said, a tear escaping from her eye.

“What do you mean, gone?” Luke asked.

“She left Ivy Springs for good.”

Luke’s heart sank.

“Where did she go?”

“It doesn’t matter. What does matter is the hell that Jamie has been going through in the last several weeks.”

“What hell? What are you talking about?” Luke asked, completely bewildered.

Clara told him about Alexis and how Alexis had threatened and bullied Jamie. She explained that Alexis had tried to get Jamie fired and kicked out of her home because Jamie refused to quit seeing him.

“On top of that, your father came by yesterday morning. He threatened to make her disappear if she didn’t stop seeing you,” Clara said.

“He did what?” Luke exclaimed.

“He threatened to make her disappear. Jamie was afraid that it meant that your father was going to kill her,” Clara said. “She said that she was going to tell you about it last night.”

“She said that she needed to talk to me about something at dinner, but we kept getting interrupted. She never mentioned anything about Alexis.”

“That was because she didn’t think that you needed to know. She kept telling me that men hate drama and the drama that Alexis was creating would just drive you away.”

“Oh, my lord,” Luke said. “I had no idea. Poor Jamie.”

Clara’s eyes narrowed and she put her hands on her hips.

“Did you ever happen to notice that Jamie was stressed out? Did you ever think to ask her about it?”

“I saw that she was a little tense sometimes, but I figured that she would talk about it if she wanted to,” Luke admitted. “Last night she said that she wanted to talk to me about something. She told me that she was in love with me.”

Clara just looked at him.

“I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. Now I feel like a complete ass about everything. Please tell me where she is so that I can make it up to her.”

“I don’t think so,” Clara said.

Luke stared at her for a minute and then nodded. He figured that he

wasn't going to be able to change Clara's mind, at least right now. Clara was very angry at the entire situation.

Furious, Luke drove up to the resort and found Alexis at the bar, eating breakfast. She jumped up with a huge smile on her face and her arms wide like she was going to hug him.

"Luke. I'm so glad that you came," she said.

"Cut the crap, Alexis. I just found out that you have been making Jamie's life miserable. Did you really try to get her fired and kicked out of her house?"

"I was just doing it for us," Alexis said. "I knew that if Jamie was out of the way that you and I could be together. I heard that she left town. You can get to know me. I know that we'll be great together."

"I don't think so," Luke said. "There is no way I could ever be with you. You are a spoiled woman who only thinks of herself. You have no compassion for anyone else in the world. You think that the entire universe revolves around you. I have no use for someone like that."

Alexis gasped.

"How dare you talk to me that way? No one has ever spoken to me like that."

"It's about time that they did," Luke said. "You might be rich, but even if you had all the money in the world, that doesn't make you any better than anyone else. As a matter of fact, in my eyes, there is a whole host of people who are better, because they work hard to make this world a better place for others. You have the ability to help those less fortunate, but instead, you choose to only worry about you. That disgusts me."

Alexis turned pale and grabbed the bar stool for support. Luke thought for a second that she was about to pass out. Every head in the diner had their heads turned toward them. It was deadly silent.

Luke turned and marched out the door. Fury coursed through him as he headed for the hardware store. He wondered what Alexis would do if she found out that the person that she had been wanting so badly was a shifter. He would have loved to see the look on her face as he told her. As tempting as it was, he kept his mouth shut because he had to protect himself and his family.

"Where have you been?" Carl asked when Luke came in the store.

When he saw the look on Luke's face, he took a step back.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Luke thundered.

“What do you mean?” Carl asked.

“Clara told me that you went to the café and threatened to make Jamie disappear if she didn’t break things off with me.”

“I was just doing what was best for you. You are a dragon shifter and that woman isn’t right for you.”

“You have no right to decide who or what is right for me,” Luke roared. “You went way too far.”

“I am your father. It is my job to protect you,” Carl protested.

“I am a grown man. I have faced many life or death situations. I have been taking care of myself and making decisions for myself for a long time,” Luke growled. “I’m going to find Jamie and ask her to marry me. You can choose to be a part of our lives or not – I really don’t care. But if you ever, ever, say anything or do anything to upset her again, I’ll destroy you. I don’t care if you are my father. Am I clear.”

“You can’t talk to me like that,” Carl shouted.

“I just did,” Luke said and stormed out of the hardware store.

He went to the mountain and shifted. He didn’t care if he did run across any hunters. He would take them out the same way that he dealt with Walter and Parker. He was tired of hiding and running from them. If they wanted a fight, he was in the mood to fight.

Fortunately, for the hunters, Luke didn’t come across anyone.

He had managed to calm down by the time night fell. Josh called and asked Luke if he was up for a game of pool.

They met at the bar. Luke was starving and ate three bacon cheeseburgers and fries. A couple of beers washed them down.

“Damn, Luke,” Josh said.

“I’ve had one hell of a day,” Luke said.

“I heard about the incident with Alexis. Word spread through town like wildfire. I think that you are a local hero, now.”

“She had it coming. So did my father,” Luke said.

Josh’s eyes got big when Luke told him what Carl had done to Jamie and how Luke had put him in his place.

“You have had a busy day,” Josh said. “No wonder you’re eating like you’re starving to death. What are you going to do now?”

“Losing Jamie made me realize how much I love her. I’m going to buy a ring, find her, and marry her.”

“Good for you,” Josh said, clapping Luke on the back.

The next morning, Luke found the perfect ring. He went to the café and showed it to Clara.

“I love her. I want to ask her to marry me. Please tell me where she is,” Luke begged.

Clara stared at him for a minute and then said, “She’s in the shifter world.”

“What? Why?”

“Ryan told Alexis that Jamie was a bear shifter. Hunters were coming after her. She had to go.”

Luke smacked his forehead and growled.

“Oh, my lord. I can’t believe this,” he said.

Luke headed back home and sat on his back porch nursing a beer, trying to figure out what to do. He loved Jamie, but could he leave the human world and everything that he had ever known to go to the shifter world? Once there, he could never return to the human world.

A couple of hours later, Josh pounded on his front door and then came in before Luke could answer.

“You have to go,” Josh said.

“The hunters had a trail cam in the area where you shifted and saved Jamie. They know that you are a dragon shifter. Your parents have been warned. They are heading north to Montana to be with the clan. You have to get out of here, too. Hunters are on their way.”

“I’ll fry them,” Luke growled.

“You can’t kill them all. They will just keep coming in droves, putting everyone in danger.”

Luke wanted to fight, but he saw the wisdom in Josh’s words.

He grabbed his go bag, hugged Josh, and shifted into his dragon form in his backyard. For a brief second, he thought about joining his parents in Montana. However, his heart was in the shifter world.

JAMIE

As Jamie ran up the side of the mountain, a million thoughts ran through her mind. She had no idea what the shifter world would be like. She had money in the human world, but she didn't think that the shifter world would have a branch of her bank.

She worried about Clara and Zeke. Jamie knew that Dillon would let Clara know what happened, but she was pregnant and would need help at the café. Zeke wouldn't understand. Jamie was sad that she was leaving her parents behind, although she knew deep in her heart that they had already moved on to whatever realm came after death.

Jamie hoped that Luke would understand. She liked to think that even though their last parting had been awkward, they could have worked something out.

Mostly, though, she just hoped that she could make it up the side of the mountain to the portal. The snow was deep and she hadn't been out in bear form often lately. Her sides were starting to hurt and she had a hard time breathing. It would be ironic if she passed out or died while on the run from those who wanted to kill her.

Finally, though, she could see the shimmer in the air. The sun was just starting to come up and faint lights were streaking through the trees. There were no sounds of anyone following her.

A large moose stepped out of the trees as she approached the portal.

“State your business.”

“My name is Jamie. The hunters found out that I'm a shifter and they are after me. I don't think they followed me up here. I need to move to the shifter

world.”

The moose stepped aside and let her through. Much to her surprise, the landscape on the other side of the portal looked pretty much the same as it did in the human world.

There was a large building off to one side, and Jamie decided that was probably the welcoming center.

After explaining herself for what seemed like another hundred times or so to different people, she was given a small apartment and an allowance to tide her over until she found a job. There were a lot of places looking for someone with a business background, so Jamie was certain that she would find something soon.

It didn't take her long to get settled in. She had enough money to furnish her apartment, buy clothes, and stock the kitchen. Jamie had interviewed for a few jobs and was certain that there would be an offer on the table soon.

Her heart ached. She missed Luke. Images of his face filled her mind each night before she went to sleep. Replays of conversations went through her head. She smiled as she closed her eyes and could almost feel his touch caressing her.

Jamie looked out the window and sat back down on the couch. She stood up and walked around her apartment a few times. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore and stepped outside into the brisk morning air.

There were a bunch of small shops in the downtown area and she roamed through each one. Her favorite was the shop that sold homemade fudge and other goodies. As the bright lights twinkled, Jamie was reminded that she would be missing Christmas with her friends – and with Luke.

“It's better off this way,” she told herself. “There is no way that we could be together in Ivy Springs, even if he did decide that he wanted to continue the relationship. There were just too many people who interfered with our relationship.”

Of course, that didn't make the aching need for him lessen.

Jamie was surprised one afternoon, soon after she arrived in the shifter world, when there was a knock on her door. A couple and their little boy stood in the doorway.

Jamie recognized the man immediately.

“Noah?” she asked.

“It is, how are you, Jamie?”

“Great.”

“This is my wife, April, and our son, Sebastian,” Noah said.

“I’ve heard about you, of course,” Jamie said, greeting April. “Please, come in.”

Sebastian quickly found a spot on the floor, pulled out some toys from the bag that his mother carried and started to play.

April laughed and said, “He is very independent and is always able to entertain himself, no matter where we go.”

A couple of weeks passed. April and Jamie became very good friends. Jamie told April about Luke, and all of the drama that had surrounded their relationship.

“You poor thing,” April said. “You’ve had it pretty rough lately.”

“I know, right?” Jamie laughed. “At least I don’t have to worry about Alexis, Ryan, or Carl anymore. Everything has been peaceful with no drama.”

“That does make things nice,” April said.

April looked at Jamie and bit her lip. Jamie had the feeling that April had something to say but wasn’t quite sure how to say it.

“What’s up?” Jamie said. “Just spit it out.”

“Luke is in the shifter world, too. Noah has talked to him a few times. Apparently, he came right after you did.”

“Why?” Jamie asked.

“Luke said that there were some trail cams in an area where he shifted and blasted a couple of hunters. He told Noah that he would have rather stayed in Ivy Springs and just fought the hunters, but he knew that it would be better for everyone if he left the city.”

“I see,” Jamie said.

A myriad of emotions flooded her. She felt guilty that Luke had to leave his home because of her. The fact that Luke had been in the shifter world and not tried to find her proved to her that he wasn’t interested in pursuing a relationship with her.

Her feelings must have been mirrored on her face because April said, “You should reach out to him.”

“No,” Jamie said. “He knows I’m here. He knows where I stand. I’m not going to make a bad situation worse by hunting him down.”

“You should at least give him a chance,” April said.

“Everything is better this way,” Jamie said.

April shook her head and said, “Stubborn wench.”

“Thank you,” Jamie replied, laughing.

A day later, Jamie got a note from Clara that Dillon had brought with him. She had written that the baby was healthy, but the doctor hadn’t been able to tell her whether it was a boy or a girl. Clara also said that Zeke missed her a lot, and that Ryan had gone back to Denver.

Jamie dashed a quick note off, updating Clara on her life in the shifter world that Dillon took back with him.

It comforted her to have some contact with Clara.

About a week later, Jamie was sick right after she made breakfast. She looked in the mirror at her red eyes, and realized they were the same eyes she had looked at the day before and the day before that. She had been sick every morning for a week and a half.

Jamie sat down on her bed and yawned. She had been very tired lately, to the point that she had to take a nap during her lunch breaks just to get through the day. Tilting her head back, she moaned as she thought about how much her breasts had been hurting.

“There’s no way,” she said to herself.

Jamie went to the doctor after her work day was over and described her symptoms to him. Fifteen minutes later he confirmed what she had suspected. She was pregnant.

Stunned, she went back to her apartment and plopped down on the couch. She was both terrified and elated. The prospect of being a single mother was overwhelming but she was happy that she would have a little piece of Luke.

“Now I know what Charlie was thinking and going through,” Jamie said. “I wish I could tell her that she’s not alone.”

April stopped by the next day and Jamie shared the happy news with her.

“Congratulations,” April said, hugging Jamie. “I’m so excited for you.”

“Thank you,” Jamie said. “I’m a little nervous, but excited.”

“When are you going to tell Luke?” April asked.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Jamie said.

“What? You have to,” April said. “He’s the father.”

“He knows how I feel about him,” April said. “He is in the shifter world and hasn’t tried to make contact with me. It’s pretty obvious to me that he isn’t ready to be in a permanent relationship, and I’m not going to use the baby to force him to be.”

April sighed and hung her head.

“I’m sure that Luke loves you and would want to be a part of the baby’s

life,” April said. “If nothing else, he should be a part of the baby’s life even if you two aren’t together.”

Jamie looked at April and slowly nodded. That made sense. This was the twenty first century. He wouldn’t feel obligated to be in a relationship with her just because she was pregnant.

“You’re right. I just need to figure out how to tell him. Then, I’ll reach out to him somehow,” Jamie said.

April nodded in approval.

The thought of contacting Luke and telling him that he was going to be a father terrified her. Luckily, she still had a few months to figure out how to tell him and to build up enough courage to let him know that he was going to be a father.

LUKE

Draco, the dragon king, welcomed Luke as he passed through the portal.

“Dillon has told me about you, son. Welcome,” Draco said.

“Thanks,” Luke replied. “It’s an honor to be in your presence.”

Draco smiled and nodded.

“I guess things were heating up for you in Ivy Springs,” Draco said.

“Yes, sir. I never saw the cameras in the trees that filmed me shifting,” Luke said. “I’m sure that my father is never going to forgive me for getting caught.”

“I’m sure your father will be fine. The clan in Montana is very strong. He’ll fit right in,” Draco said. “Do you have any plans here?”

“Well, sir. I was planning on joining the fire department and EMT squad in the human world. It would be a good fit for me here, too. I like to help people, and I like to keep active.”

“Good plan. I’ll let the chief know to expect you in a couple of days,” Draco said.

“Thank you, sir.”

Luke was given a small apartment to live in. He was exhausted after the flight from his house to the shifter world and all the red tape he had to go through before he could get settled. He slept for two days straight on the floor, wrapped up in a sleeping bag.

He furnished his apartment and met with the chief, who told him that training started in a week. That would give Luke a couple more days to settle in.

Noah and his family stopped by. They talked for a long time.

April said, "We've met Jamie. She is a terrific woman. I love her to death."

Luke's heart almost stopped. He knew that she was in the shifter world. One of the things he brought with him was the ring.

"Is she doing well?" Luke asked, nonchalantly.

"She is," April said. "She would kill me for telling you, but she misses you."

"I miss her, too," Luke said.

He waited a couple of weeks before tracking Jamie down. He wanted to get through the training at the fire department and get started at the job. Luke would have loved to have a nice house to offer Jamie, but that would be a while down the road. He had to rebuild his life here, first.

It wasn't hard to figure out where Jamie was. April wrote down Jamie's address and told him Jamie's work schedule. She practically offered to lead him to her apartment.

Luke thanked her and said that he would take care of it.

April looked at him sideways as though she wasn't sure that he would actually go through with his promise to seek her out.

That evening, Luke waited until Jamie had enough time to unwind after work, and then went to her apartment. He took a deep breath as he stood in front of her door. Luke had faced down killers, mercenaries, and all types of evil people. However, for the first time in his life, he was afraid. Luke knew that Jamie had been hurt before and then he had hurt her. He wouldn't blame her if she shut the door in his face.

He knocked. There was movement as she looked out the peep hole to see who was standing in the hallway.

Slowly, the door opened.

"Luke," she said.

"Hi, Jamie," he said. "Can I come in?"

Jamie opened the door wider and motioned for Luke to enter.

"How have you been?" Luke asked.

"Okay. I miss the people in Ivy Springs, but I've made some new friends here, and I have a job with some great people. You?"

"I'm good," Luke said. "Like you, I'll miss home and some of the people there, but I like the shifter world. There seem to be a lot of great people here."

There was an awkward silence for a minute.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Jamie asked.

“No, thank you,” Luke said. “I need to talk to you about something.”

Jamie sat in a recliner across from him and folded her hands primly in her lap.

“I’m sorry,” Luke said.

Her head tilted to the side and she frowned.

“The last time we were together, you told me that you needed to talk to me. I was distracted and didn’t pay attention to you. Clara told me about what Alexis and my father put you through.”

“It’s not your fault,” Jamie said.

“Maybe not, but my father had no right to terrorize you. For what it’s worth, I put him in his place. He would have never been rude or mean to you again,” Luke said.

Jamie nodded and said, “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry for how I reacted when you told me that you loved me. I know that I hurt you,” Luke said.

“I was afraid that it was too soon, but I just wanted you to know.”

“There is an old saying that you don’t know what you have until it’s gone. I went to your house later that night, but you were gone. I drove by the next morning, and you were gone. I just about had a heart attack when you weren’t at the café and Clara told me that you had left town,” Luke said. “It was at that moment that I realized that I loved you.”

Jamie raised her eyebrows and she stared at Luke wide-eyed.

“I finally convinced Clara to tell me that you had to come to the shifter world and why.”

“Is that why you are here?”

“No. Didn’t April and Noah tell you what happened?”

“No.”

“I thought about coming anyway to find you, because I need you in my life. I was forced to come because there were trail cams in the area when I shifted after I took care of those hunters who were threatening you.”

“Oh,” Jamie said, a little disappointed.

“I would have come anyway, because life without you would have been unbearable. The morning before I left, before the trail cam footage had been discovered, I bought you this,” Luke said, pulling the ring out of his pocket.

“Jamie, I love you. I’m in love with you, and I would be honored if you

would be my wife.”

She looked at the ring and then looked back at him.

With a huge smile, she said, “Of course, I will marry you.”

Luke scooped her up in a big hug and held her tight.

“You have no idea how happy you have made me,” he said.

“I have something I need to talk to you about,” Jamie said.

A worried look crossed Luke’s face.

“Remember how I said that I had always wanted a big family?” she asked.

Luke nodded.

“I think that now is as good a time to start as any,” Jamie said.

Luke stared at her, confused.

“I’m pregnant.”

He sat in stunned silence. He blinked a couple of times and did a double take. His heart started racing.

“I’m going to be a father?” he asked in a halting voice.

Jamie nodded.

“Woo hoo,” he said. “I’m going to be a father.”

He pulled Jamie close to him. He cupped her face, the gentle touch ignited a fire inside of her. Their lips met in a passionate kiss that expressed their love for one another.

Luke and Jamie held each other close, their hands tracing each other’s curves. Luke moaned from the heat that built inside of him.

Their clothes disappeared as they explored each other’s bodies. Luke moved his hands down the contours of Jamie’s body. She released a slow breath of air as his fingers trailed across her breasts, down her belly and between her legs.

His tongue danced with hers as he gently pushed his finger into her hot wet tunnel. He grazed her neck gently with his teeth, then kissed where he had nibbled.

“Luke,” she moaned.

He pressed the large head against her and slowly moved inside of her. He felt the flames roar to life as their bodies melded into one.

She wrapped her arms around him, her fingers kneading in his back muscles as he slowly made love to her.

His heart thundered and the overwhelming love that he felt for her made the world disappear. It was only him and Jamie.

She moved her hips in rhythm with his as their bodies danced together in ecstasy. As he pulled back until only the tip was inside of her, she thrust upward, silently telling him of her aching need to have him fill her.

He thrust hard and fast, burying himself deep inside of her. Jamie moaned loudly and moved her hips in a circle, pressing her clit against him. She lightly scratched him as the intense feelings built up and consumed her.

She pressed her head against the pillow and called out, "Luke."

Her silken walls pulsed against his large cock, massaging it as a river of hot liquid exploded out of her.

"Yes, baby," Luke yelled.

He pulled back a bit and then drove hard, burying himself. Thunder roared through him as he began to throb, shooting a huge fountain of his hot seed into her.

Wrapped in a warm blanket of their love, their bodies still entangled, Luke looked down at Jamie.

"I love you," he said.

"And I love you."

JAMIE

Luke and Jamie had made a lot of friends since they had arrived in the shifter world. They were able to buy a small house on the outskirts of town, a few miles away from Noah and April's home. The four of them had become very close friends.

Jamie sat on the bed in the room she shared with Luke. Her pale peach dress perfectly accented her dark hair and eyes. The ethereal material flowed around her, making it seem as though she was enveloped in a soft cloud.

"Are you ready?" April said.

"I am. It's so funny that when I was getting ready to marry Ryan, I had all the frills of a fairy tale wedding. I even had the something borrowed, something blue, something old, something new. None of that seems important now. I have my parents' wedding rings, my mom's diamond necklace and earrings, to carry Mom and Dad with me. That's all I need."

"I'm sure that they are here with you, now," April said. "Our loved ones are never far away, especially after their body dies. Their spirits are always near you, protecting you and loving you."

Jamie nodded and wiped a tear from her eye, because she wished, more than anything, that they could be there with her.

"I wish that they could be here in the flesh, and I wish that our child could meet them. They would have spoiled the baby rotten," Jamie said.

"I'm sure they are here and they know that you are about to become one with your soul mate."

"Shifters call them fated mates. It is the person we are destined to mate with from the time that we are born."

April smiled and said, "I guess the fates know what they are doing when they helped find the men who complete us."

There was a knock on the door and Lori, one of their friends, said, "It's time."

Jamie and April walked outside. April locked arms with Noah, who was Luke's best man. Slowly, they walked between rows of chairs full of people who were there to celebrate the wedding.

The music changed once April and Noah reached the front. Everyone stood. Jamie slowly walked down the aisle, her eyes on Luke who was breathtaking in his dark tuxedo. With each step she took, her eyes stayed locked on Luke, her heart brimming with love.

She smiled into his eyes when Jamie stood next to him. A slow, sexy grin spread across his face, making her heart skip a beat.

The dragon shifter elder cleared his throat. Jamie and Luke turned to face him.

The elder said in his deep voice, "Dearly beloved, we gather here today to celebrate the union of Luke and Jamie. They stand before us, ready to embark on a lifelong journey filled with love, devotion, and unwavering commitment."

Jamie and Luke exchanged glances, communicating the deep love they felt for each other.

"Jamie and Luke, your love has blossomed through countless moments of laughter and tears. Today you declare your love and dedication to each other, promising to nurture and support one another through the highs and lows that life brings."

Luke reached out for Jamie's hand and held it tightly as the elder continued.

"Luke, do you take Jamie as your mate, your wife, to cherish and love her, supporting her dreams and goals, standing by her side through each chapter of your lives?"

"I do," Luke promised. "You are the missing part of my heart and soul. I promise to honor and protect you, and to love you unconditionally for the rest of our lives."

"Jamie, do you take Luke as your mate, your husband, to cherish and love him, supporting his dreams and goals, standing by his side, through each chapter of your lives?"

"I do," Jamie said. "You are my rock, my best friend, my everything. I

promise to be by your side through the bad and the good. I promise to love you always with my whole heart and stand beside you through all of life's adventures."

"By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you mates, man and wife. You may kiss your bride."

The world around them vanished as Luke lowered his head and pressed his lips against Jamie's, revealing a love and passion that mere words could not express.

The crowd cheered as Luke and Jamie walked back down the aisle and back into their house.

Luke wrapped his arms around Jamie and kissed her again.

"I can't wait to be alone with you," he said.

"I'm looking forward to that, too, but right now, we have a yard full of people who are waiting to celebrate."

"Do you think they would notice if we didn't show up?"

"I do believe that they would," Jamie said.

They stepped back to the side yard where a huge white tent was set up. Tables were adorned with miniature rose bushes. Twinkling lights adorned the tent. April and several other women brought dishes out from the kitchen and set them on the side table, waiting for people to serve themselves.

"I'm glad that we are the couple of the hour, because we get to go first, and I'm starving," Luke said.

"Actually, so am I," Jamie said, rubbing her tummy.

The warm afternoon settled into a cool night.

The first dance was a magical moment that captivated everyone's attention. Slow music played as Luke and Jamie danced together beneath the moon and stars. They held each other tightly, swaying to the rhythm. Their eyes locked together in love, and there was only the two of them as he captured her lips in a slow sensuous kiss.

As the night wore on, there were many heartfelt speeches and toasts wishing the couple a lifetime of love and happiness.

Although they both enjoyed the music, the dancing, and the fun of the reception, Luke and Jamie were glad when all the food had been packed in the kitchen, the cake had been cut and the gifts were opened.

Jamie and Luke were finally alone. They went into their bedroom and slowly undressed one another. They looked into each other's eyes.

"I love you," Luke said.

“I love you,” Jamie replied.

They laid together in the bed, touching each other, loving each other. Once they were both spent, they held each other tightly. Luke fell asleep rather quickly, while Jamie stayed away for a while, celebrating the pure happiness that radiated throughout her body, heart, and soul.

THANK YOU FOR READING!

Thank you for reading ***Dragon's Rejected Mate***. I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, may I ask you to please write a review **HERE!**

It would mean the world to me. Reviews are very important and allow me to keep writing the books that you love to read!

**THE WORLD SHE NEVER KNEW
EXISTED (SNEAK PEEK)**

A ROGUE SHIFTERS AND HUNTERS

Blurb

After escaping from a dangerous relationship, I ran straight into the arms of true love.

After ending a rough marriage with a toxic man, I was ready to start a new life with my son, Zeke. I found a neat cafe in a beautiful tourist town called, Ivy Springs. Zeke and I settled into our new home. We loved the people in Ivy Springs, especially the owner of the general store next door – Dillon.

I quickly learned that Ivy Springs had a dark legend attached to it, that pitted the billionaire humans who owned Forest Resort against the shifters in the area. This war opened my eyes to a world that I never knew existed, and I learned that the people I was closest to were not what they seemed.

Dillon Adams grew up in the shifter world but was sent by the dragon king to Ivy Springs to help keep the peace between the two sides as much as possible. The war consumed his life until it was interrupted by me and my son.

Although Dillon had his hands full protecting the shifters of Ivy Springs, he found time to steal my heart.

I had no idea that this man, whom I had fallen in love with, was part of a world that I never knew existed.

Ex-Husband – Determined to control me and decided that if he couldn't have me, no one could.

Shifters – Incredible humans who I never knew existed.

Wolf Shifter – Stole my heart and the man who proved to me that love could be trusted.

Dillon's world changed when he met Zeke and me. He saved my son's life, he saved my life, and he saved my heart.

Would our love be destroyed by a jealous ex and a doubting heart?

“Charlie, I just don’t know what I’m going to do about John. We’ve been divorced for six months, and he still thinks that he owns me. You know last weekend was his weekend with our son, Zeke, which was why you and I decided to go out to the club. A friend of his saw us there and told him. I got a phone call an hour ago from him. He was going off on me about how I had no business going out. Then he called me the usual gambit of names,” Clara said.

She ran her fingers through her hair and gritted her teeth, her frustration clearly showing on her face.

Charlene, who went by Charlie, was Clara’s best friend. They had known each other since they were children and had been inseparable since. It was Charlie who had helped Clara get through her seven-year marriage with the emotionally abusive John. Charlie was the one person who John couldn’t alienate her from. He tried, but Charlie just wouldn’t disappear. It was only with Charlie’s support that Clara got the courage to file for divorce.

“I’m sorry that you have to deal with that,” Charlie said, as she sat back in the chair. “I could punch him in the nose for you.”

Clara laughed, inhaling some of her soda. “Somehow, I don’t think that it would solve anything.”

“It might not, but it would make both of us feel a lot better,” Charlie said.

“Yes, it would,” Clara said.

They were both quiet for a minute and then Clara said, “You know I got that inheritance from Grandma last month. It was quite a bit of money.”

“What are you thinking?” Charlie asked.

“I’m thinking that maybe I should use that money to get away from here. It would be far enough away that I’m out of John’s immediate reach but not too far that I would violate our custody agreement,” Clara said.

“Do you think that would work?” Charlie asked.

“I don’t know whether it would or not, but I really don’t know what else to do,” Clara said.

“Well, whatever you decide, you know that I’m behind you a hundred percent.”

“I know and I love you for it.”

Clara called a realtor the next day and discussed her situation.

“What exactly are you looking for?” the realtor asked.

“I’m not sure. Some kind of investment that would get me within a hundred miles or so of Colorado Springs,” Clara said.

“I think that I might know just the deal for you. There is a café that is for sale in the resort town of Ivy Springs. It is about a hundred and twenty miles away. The owners are looking to sell the property so that they can retire,” the realtor said.

“A café? Hmm, that sounds interesting. When can I see it?”

“How about tomorrow afternoon? The owners are open to potential buyers coming to see the place at any time.”

“That sounds terrific,” Clara said.

After she hung up the phone, she called Charlie.

“Are you busy tomorrow afternoon? I have an appointment to see a café that is for sale in Ivy Springs. I would love for you to go with me and give your opinion on the place.”

“I’m in.”

Clara fell in love with the town as soon as they drove into it. All of the buildings on main street had the old fashion facades, so that the town resembled an old western town. The main street was cobblestoned. She half expected to see someone ride down the road on horseback or see a horse drawn carriage. The cars parked on the side of the street just didn’t seem to belong.

Clara, Charlie, and Zeke walked into the café. Clara was amazed as she looked around. It had all the modern comforts that were in strict contrast to the outside of the building. There was even a small section with computers and a couple of counters where customers could bring their own computers in and connect to the internet or charge their devices.

An older couple introduced themselves.

“My name is Frank, and this is Greta,” the older man said.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Clara said. “This is my friend, Charlie, and my son, Zeke.”

“Let me show you around,” Frank said.

Clara was impressed by the ovens and other equipment in the kitchen that would be used to make the baked goodies, soups, and sandwiches that the café served. The coffee and espresso machines were practically brand new as the owners had done a complete overhaul a couple of years ago.

Frank and Greta introduced them to the staff, who was cordial, but wary of Clara.

“Will the staff be willing to stick around and work for me?” Clara asked.

“They will. They are a good group of people. You treat them right and they will be loyal to you.”

“Why have you decided to sell?” Clara asked. “You’ve obviously put a lot of time, effort, money, and love into this place recently.”

“We’re getting older. The winters in Colorado are cold and rough on our bones. We want to move down south, to Florida, where it is nice and warm all year around,” Frank explained.

“I can understand that,” Clara said, with a smile.

Clara was immediately smitten with the place and made an offer the next day, which was accepted. She and Zeke made another trip up to Ivy Springs a week later so that Greta and Frank could explain everything about vendors, payroll, and all of the other things that she needed to know to run the business. She was a little intimidated by all of it at first, but Greta assured her that she would get the hang of it soon enough.

“Do you have a place to live yet?” Frank asked.

“Not yet,” Clara said. “I haven’t found a house that I liked yet.”

“We are going to put our house on the market. Are you interested in looking at it?”

“Sure,” Clara said.

The little cottage style house was very close to the café, which Clara appreciated. It had three bedrooms, two baths, and an updated kitchen.

“This is perfect,” Clara announced.

Frank and Greta were very relieved that they already had a buyer and called their realtor to handle all of the details.

Clara was very satisfied. Everything was coming together nicely.

A couple of weeks later, Clara and Zeke were back in Ivy Springs, getting more tutorials from Greta and Frank. They were showing her how to run the equipment so that she could make all the different types of drinks that the café offered.

Clara looked at Greta and heaved a huge sigh.

“This is a little overwhelming,” she said.

Greta patted her on the back and smiled.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get the hang of everything. You’re doing great.”

Clara gave her a weak smile and said, “Thank you for taking the time to teach me all of this.”

“We want to see you succeed. We’ve worked hard for thirty years to keep this place successful. We are glad that you are willing to keep our legacy going,” Greta said.

About an hour later the little bell on the door jingled.

“Dillon,” Greta exclaimed. “It’s good to see you. How are you doing?”

“I’m tired this morning,” he said. “It was a long night doing inventory. I’m hoping that you have some coffee with my name on it. I ran out over there.”

“Of course, dear,” Greta said. “You’re here at the perfect time. The new owner and her son are here, trying to learn the ropes before we leave.”

“Clara, this is Dillon Adams. He runs the general store next door. Dillon, this is Clara Montgomery and her son, Zeke.”

He held his hand out to hers to shake it. She was shocked as there seemed to be some type of electrical spark that shot through her arm as soon as their hands touched.

It must be my imagination, she thought.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he said.

“You as well,” she said.

She tried not to stare at the incredibly sexy man with light brown hair and hazel eyes that stood in front of her. His muscles were bulging, and his arms looked as though they were going to bulge out of his t-shirt.

Luckily, he hadn’t caught her staring at him like a moonstruck teenager over a movie star. He had turned his attentions to Zeke.

“Hello, Zeke. It’s nice to meet you,” Dillon said.

“You, too,” Zeke said, shaking Dillon’s hand. “My name is Ezekial Jonathan Montgomery, but everyone calls me Zeke for short. I’m six years old, and I already know how to read and to add numbers. My mom taught

me.”

“Wow, you seem like a very smart young man,” Dillon replied.

“I am,” Zeke said.

Clara shook her head. Humble was not a word that could be used to describe her son.

Dillon grinned at Zeke’s response.

He caught her eye and for a brief second it seemed as though something passed between them, although she couldn’t say what it was. The moment was gone quickly, leaving her to wonder if she imagined it.

“Dillon is a great guy,” Greta said. “Most of the folks around town are.”

“I take it that there are some who aren’t as awesome,” she said.

“There’s always some bad in every group,” Greta said. “But the good far outweigh the bad.”

She and Zeke went back to Colorado Springs that evening tired. The closing date for the café was quickly approaching, and she had a lot of packing to do.

A couple of weeks later, she was happy when she signed the documents and handed over the cashier’s check to pay for the café and the house. Now, was the hard part.

“Charlie, could you watch Zeke for me?” she asked her.

“Do you want me to be there with you?” she asked. “For back up or just moral support?”

“No, this is something that I have to take care of by myself,” she told her. “We’re meeting in a public place, and you know how important appearances are to him, so he’ll control himself for the most part.”

She and John met at a small diner where they usually met to exchange Zeke.

“What is so important that you wanted to meet me here?” he asked, checking his watch as though he had something more important to do.

“Zeke and I are moving to Ivy Springs,” she told him, bluntly. “I have bought a café there, and we are moving.”

“That is a hundred and twenty miles away,” he exclaimed. “You can’t do that.”

“I have already done that,” she told him. “It is close enough that you can still have Zeke every other weekend. We can find a halfway point to meet.”

“No,” he said. “I won’t let you take Zeke that far away from me.”

I didn’t ask him why it mattered so much. He rarely saw his son except

on his weekends.

“You don’t have a say in this,” I told him. “Everything is final. The moving truck comes tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? How long have you been planning this?” he demanded.

“It’s been in the works for a month,” she admitted.

“And you just now are bothering to tell me?”

“Honestly, it was because I didn’t want to deal with all of the drama.”

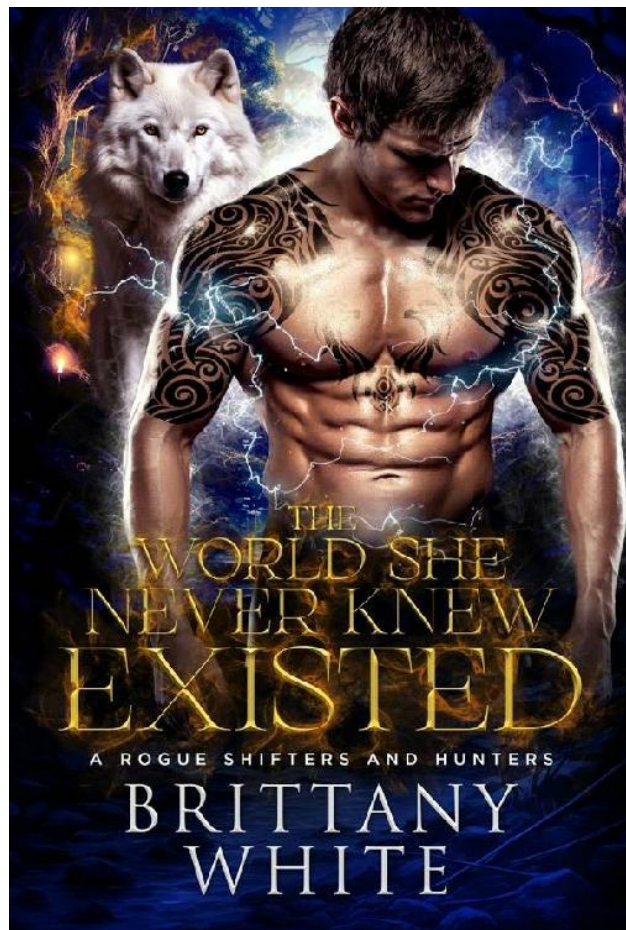
“I’m going to talk to the lawyer about this,” he said.

“Go ahead. I already consulted my lawyer. As long as we are close enough that I can honor the custody agreement, then I am okay,” she said.

“You won’t get away with this,” he said.

He stood up abruptly, knocking his chair over as he stormed out of the diner. Everyone was silent and stared in her direction.

“Well, that went better than I thought,” she said to myself.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brittany White is the author of hot paranormal romance. She began writing short stories for family and friends. Her vivid imagination and love of mysteries and romance eventually led her to follow her dreams to become a published author.

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