

A romantic couple embracing, with a tiger cub in the foreground. The man is shirtless and has his arms around the woman, who has her eyes closed. The tiger cub is looking directly at the camera. The entire scene is framed by a decorative gold border with a repeating pattern of small, four-pointed stars.

DRAGON'S
GAP

LOVE'S CATALYST

L.M. LACEE

Dragon's Gap

Love's Catalyst

by L.M. Lacey

Books in the DRAGON'S GAP SERIES:

Reighn & Sage

Sharm & Edith

Love's Catalyst

Storm & Charlie

Ash & Olinda

Ace & Harper

Love's Impulse

Thorn & Ciana

Ocean & Conor

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DEDICATION FOR DRAGON'S GAP

To all my family that have travelled this journey with me that have ultimately brought me to this point in time, I thank you for your love and support even when I faltered, your belief in me carried me forward.

For my husband Brian and my son Mark, without your patience, the series Dragon's Gap would never have existed.

You are my Lords.

L. M. Lacey

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PROLOGUE

Dragon's Gap is a town protected and hidden from the world by dragon magic.

As the name implies the town is owned by dragons. When the Shifter's Goddess pronounced all full-blood shifters had incurred her wrath and were under a sentence of death, panic ensued.

The Goddess in her grace relented to allow full and half-blood shifters who found their way to Dragon's Gap to survive. So, this brings us to this novella which is about two of Dragon's Gaps favorite people, Lars Axton, Prime to the Dragon Lord, and Claire Nash, retriever and seer, friend and adopted sister to Sage and June.

Oh, let us not forget our three-year-old tiger cub Kammy who Claire rescued then adopted. Without Kammy, her mummy and her new daddy would never have found each other. She is a catalyst for love.

CHAPTER ONE:

Three-year-old tiger cub, Kammy Nash, daughter of Claire Nash, niece to the Dragon Lord and Lady, was on a mission!

Kammy stopped walking and sat down on her rump as she thought about what she was doing. She had run away from her Auntie June's home because she was on a mission. She scratched behind her ear with her little claws as she thought about how important her mission was.

She swapped paws and scratched behind the other ear as she thought about how much she loved the word mission. She even knew what the word meant. It was when her Uncle Storm had to do something important and left home. Just like her Mama was doing something important for Auntie Sage, which was why she was not at home.

Thinking of her Uncle Storm made her think of her Uncle Reign. Then that made her think of her cousins Molly and Ava. Kammy sighed loudly, she felt sad because her cousins were really lucky, they had a Dada, and he was a dragon. Sometimes Molly's Dada let her sit on his back with Molly, and he would

take them flying when he was in his dragon skin.

Kammy sighed again. Every night she wished for her own Dada, just like she had wished for her very own Mama. And now she had her Mama, and she was fierce. That was what Auntie Sage called her. Kammy's smile morphed into a frown, Edee said her Mama had... Kammy thought really hard, then smiled when she remembered the word Edee used. Issues... Yeah, because it sounded like tissues and tissues were good to play with. Issues made her growl, because issues made her Mama sad. She and Molly had tried finding the issues to make them go away, but they were hard to find.

Kammy stretched, then growled again low in her throat like she did sometimes when she was unhappy or scared. She was sure those nasty issues had caused all the hurts on her Mama when Granma Grace had gone away.

Smiling again, because she hoped her new Dada would find those nasty issues and make them go away. Then her Mama would smile all the time because she was happy. Kammy scratched her face, then remembered why she was in her tiger skin and hissed, like she saw Auntie Jacks do to Uncle Stan when he forgot something. She, Kammy Nash, was on a

mission!

Her Mama explained shifting into her tiger skin. That was when she went from her pink skin with two legs, to her tiger skin with four legs and a tail. She looked behind her to see if her tail was still there; it was sneaky and sometimes hid from her. She quickly spun around four times, trying to grab her tail, but it was too fast for her and she got dizzy, and had to sit down.

Thinking about her Auntie June, she became a little sad because she had not told her she was going to look for her Dada. She did not want Auntie June to be growly with her; she liked staying with Auntie June. She had her own bed and everything, and Auntie June liked to snuggle and read books to her when Mama was not home. She was excited because soon they were gonna move into their brand-new home. She and Mama were only staying with Auntie June until Mama got all the furniture, she said they had to have, like beds and couches for snuggling.

She could not wait for her new home. It was gonna be good. She hoped it smelled like Auntie June's and Granma Grace's home. They always smelled of cookies, and she loved cookies;

she really did they made her tummy sing.

She shook her head then started walking again as she thought about how her Mama made bad cookies; they were always hard. She had never told Mama her cookies were bad because she tried really hard to make them taste nice. Just like she tried really hard to make the food she cooked taste good. Granma Grace said that it was good her Mama tried cooking rather than never trying at all. Kammy sighed; it was okay for Granma to say that; she did not have to eat her Mama's cooking. Auntie Sage said her Mama could not cook water.

And now she was thinking about her Mama's cooking she wanted to cry. She might never have cookies again. Who was gonna make dinner when they went to their new home? She sat down and chewed on her tail as she thought about that. Then she smiled her new Dada, he would make dinner for her and her Mama.

She sniffed her tail and growled when it waved at her, then remembered why she was in the street in her tiger skin. She had scented her new Dada at her Auntie June's home. Auntie Jacks called them instincts that made shifters know stuff. She was a shifter like Molly, so when her Dada had come to talk to her

Auntie June, Kammy's instincts told her he was her Dada.

By the time she untangled herself from the stupid; that was what Mama called things that made her mad; her stupid blanket, which she had hidden under to see if she could see in the dark, her Dada was gone. She did not even know what he looked like, but she had put her nose to the floor by the front door and sniffed really hard, just like Auntie Jacks showed her to do, and she smelled him real good.

So, when Auntie June was in the kitchen, she shifted into her tiger skin and followed him all the way to the busy place Mama and her aunts took her to with Molly and Ava.

Kammy looked around, and then she crouched down by the brick wall and sniffed the air. She had to be careful, her tummy still felt funny after she had run across the road. She had been really scared, because she had not wanted to get squished like her Mama said she would be if the cars ran her over.

Lifting her head up and stretching to see where her Dada was, she saw him at the outside table; she thought he looked sad. Kammy cocked her head to the side. Maybe her Dada was sad because he did not know about her and Mama, or because he could not smell her, like she smelled him. Oh no, maybe it

was because he knew Mama made bad cookies. Kammy worried about this until she decided she would tell him that Auntie June made good cookies.

Kammy frowned as she eyed the space between her and her new Dada. It was a long way and if she did not hurry. She would get caught before she talked to her new Dada. She looked around and saw a box, and an idea came to her.

She stepped up on the box and jumped up and down twice. It was good to do that because sometimes the boxes were not strong. She and Molly had found that out. This box was good. She pushed the box really hard with her head and nose and finally moved it to where she wanted it to go. Panting, she sat and looked at the box and then to where her new Dada sat again, then nodded her head. She knew if she used the box, she could jump to the table where her Dada was.

Just then people walked close to where she was. Ducking back against the wall she looked around; she did not want to go home yet. Fear gripped her, making her heart beat faster as she sniffed the air. Good, her Auntie June had not found her. She knew her Auntie June would be all growly because she had sneaked out of her home. She would be really growly if she

could see her jumping. Mama and Auntie June always said not to jump on the bed, even though she was a good jumper, Uncle Reign said so.

When she did jump to her Dada, he would be happy, and then her Mama would be happy too.

She froze as she heard someone yelling.

“Kammy! Kammy!”

Oh no! That was her Auntie June. Kammy stood up and looked around, she couldn't see her but Kammy knew what her auntie's voice sounded like.

She had to hurry now, so she leaned down on her front paws and wiggled her bottom in the air. Just like she did when she was ready to jump onto her Mama's bed. Then she narrowed her eyes and growled and wiggled harder, without looking anywhere but at the box. Kammy ran and jumped...

CHAPTER TWO:

Lars drank his coffee as he thought over the changes made to Dragon's Gap. It was no longer a blip on a non-existent map in nowheresville. Now it was a medium-sized town, growing into a large thriving city, complete with castle.

He laughed to himself as he thought of how the shifters seemed amazed by the castle which the dragons had always just taken for granted. He supposed having a castle materialize from nothing, which happened whenever the town or the Dragon Lord wished, as it was hard for some shifters to accept. They found it hard to understand that the castle was always there, just placed out of time. This concept was very difficult for people who only understood basic Earth magic, to comprehend.

Eventually the dragons learned to just say magic had hidden it. Which in essence was true, but not the complete truth, and if Lars was honest with himself, he would admit he did not understand it either. It was Dragon Lord Magic, and that was all he knew and all he really wanted to know.

His attention was taken by another Hunter running a circuit of the town. All morning he had caught glimpses of Shields and

Hunters running or just walking around the town. He was pleased to see Reign's plan was working, and they were mingling with the townspeople, or at least were willing to enter the town when people were about.

That was another thing that struck him about his town. There was a large and diverse population within Dragon's Gap now. There seemed to be humans and shifters of all species, interlaced with the reclusive Dragons. All living and working together, adding to the vibrancy of the town, as it slowly started to find its new balance.

He knew of dragons who at long last were realizing there was more to life than just their own species, and they seemed to be embracing the different cultures entering Dragon's Gap. At least that was what the reports he received each week said. While the dragons had hidden away, watching their lives and culture fade from the lack of female dragons and shadows being found, other species had grown and evolved over that same time.

Reign's decree that life for dragonkind had to change had come as a shock to some of the older and more exclusive dragons. Thankfully, not all dragons were blind to the changing

world around them, most could already see and embrace the changes that were happening at Dragon's Gap. Unfortunately, even now, not enough of them were waking up to the fact they were in a new world. The older dragons found the changes harder to accept, unlike the younger dragons, like himself, who enjoyed the challenge of an alternative world.

Lars knew the Elder dragons and Nobility even now, months (later) after Reign's decrees, still needed to wake up and see what was happening around them. Hopefully, they would understand soon that the world would not stand still for them. He felt that the world of shifters and dragons was on the cusp of evolution. Unlike the stubborn Nobles who fought the changes and clung harder to the life they once knew, he could not wait for the new world to happen. As far as he was concerned, change could not happen fast enough.

During the trial, he had not been overly surprised to see his parents and grandparents had aligned themselves with John Morton. Nor was he all that astonished they had not dissociated themselves from him when given the opportunity to do so. Lars snorted quietly to himself as he thought back on how it had not taken his family long to demand his presence at their estate

following the trial. He still found it a strange experience to be given orders by people he did not really know or care about.

CHAPTER THREE:

Lars had been five years old when he was fostered to the Kingsley family. It was many years later, when he found out that Rene` Kingsley, the Dragon Lord at the time, had removed him from his parents' home.

It seemed the Dragon Lord had been at Lars' parent's estate for a meeting, when a tiny malnourished boy wiggled out of a hole in the wall of Lars' father's study. It seemed the hole led to the cellar where he had been sleeping.

Lars had crawled to the study because Rene` Kingsley had been the Dragon Lord, and his dragon had called to him. How his dragon had known Lars was there remained a mystery for many years. Secondly; he had been starving. How long since he had eaten was never determined. It was not that his parents were cruel; they were not even just neglectful. His birth had been a surprise to his parents, who had no desire for children, which is what his foster mother, Mama Verity explained when he had asked. She told him it was not that his birth parents did not love him. It was just they were incapable of love and were too self-involved to understand they had to see to his well-

being.

Mama Verity did not dislike or like his birth parents, as she never voiced an opinion either way. He thought maybe she felt unable to explain people like them, because in truth, she would never feel or think as they did.

Papa Rene`, Lars knew, thought otherwise. He loathed Lars' birth parents and grandparents and made sure Lars was never returned to them by making him a ward of the Dragon Lord and Lady.

As Dragon Lady, Mama Verity reintroduced the term nest brother or sister to Dragonkind. He believed she did so to save his parents' and grandparents' reputation because she was a kind female.

It was not common knowledge how Lars ended up as a nest brother to Reign and his brothers. Most people assumed that Verity and Rene` chose him because of who his parents were. Lars' brother Storm told him many years later when they had spent a night consuming dragon's ale. Their father had known what the expression on Lars' Sire's face meant when he had crawled into his study, it had been shock. His birth father had been more surprised than Rene` to see the appearance of the

thin, filthy child and honestly did not remember he was his son. Storm said his birth parents had literally forgotten all about him, Lars knew it was not neglect, it was absolute disinterest.

When he was in the first flush of adulthood, he found out his Dam's parents had died many years before his birth. And that before he was taken into the Kingsley home, his Sire's parents were asked if they would take the small boy and raise him. They declined, stating they had raised one child for the dragon nation and did not feel it was their duty to do so again.

As he grew older Lars found out that his parents and grandparents traded on his relationship with the Kingsleys and that Rene' often turned a blind eye to their behavior. When he took up the position he held now, he stopped all considerations and concessions his birth family received, which displeased them greatly. It seemed without the special privileges they were granted from the crown and other nobles, their wealth decreased as did their reputation

Lars sighed as he sipped his coffee, remembering the past always made him feel sad, and at the same time, pleased he was alive in this wonderful world. He especially enjoyed and derived quiet amusement from all the rumors that were always

circulating about how and why he was Reign's Prime and not any of Reign's blood brothers.

He knew it was frustrating for the gossips when he and Reign declined to explain Reign's reasons for his choice of Prime. As he would say when asked, firstly; his relationship to Lars was no one's business and secondly; he was well suited to the position of Prime. His calm disposition, so unlike the fiery nature of the Kingsley males, was a big factor in why he was selected, but truthfully, the number one reason he was Reign's Prime was because not one of his brothers, including their other nest brother Stanvis, wanted the position.

All the brothers had declined so quickly when asked, dragon's heads would have spun completely off. Stanvis had declined, due he said to his short patience and a sword happy hand, which was true, everyone knew his default was to let his sword do his talking for him. Stanvis enjoyed being second to Lars, leaving the bulk of interaction with the dragon society up to Lars and Reign.

For some inexplicable reason, his thoughts jumped back to that fateful morning when the request from his birth parents arrived. He had been in two minds whether he wanted to go to

the family estate or ignore the summons. Half of him was annoyed at the thought that his birth family felt they had the right to demand his presence, and the other half was curious as to why they wished to see him. Sometimes, like last night when the dreams were intense, he wished he had ignored the summons.

His dragon said. *It would not have made a difference. They wanted to bring down the dragon nation.*

I know my friend, but still so many deaths could have been avoided.

His dragon asked quietly. *Why are you thinking of that time? It is in the past.*

I think because of the dreams. This morning the memories are still fresh.

Lars' dragon sighed as Lars let the memories surface. At that time it was not very often his birth family sought him out. If they did, it was usually to demand he return to the family or reinstate their favor with the Dragon Lord, which he always declined to do. The worse reason was when they wanted to introduce him to a female, which he usually refused to meet.

On that morning, he finished his breakfast which he had

lingered over, then took a leisurely shower, and spent countless minutes deciding on his attire. All the while wavering between going to the family estate and refusing. Finally, he decided to go and find out what they wanted this time. Curiosity overcame his reluctance.

As he was making his way out of the castle, Storm had stopped him. Lars had eyed his brother to see if he was calm, and his dragon was not on the surface of his skin. He, like Reign, knew Storm was on the edge of going rogue, although he had seemed more settled of late.

“Brother!” Storm demanded. “Where are you going so early, without a guard?”

Lars smiled at that. Storm was blunt, no niceties for him or idle chit chat, and at least in that part, his brother was the same. “The Axtons ordered me to meet with them.”

Storm’s eyes became chips of black ice. He despised Lars’ birth parents and grandparents. He hated what they had done to his brother; he had been old enough to remember his Sire coming home with the scared, sickly dragonet. His wide gray eyes had held no expectations, no hope, and no wonder for the world around him. It had hurt Storm’s heart, and he had wanted

to rip their faces off. Reign had spent hours in those first few days talking him out of doing just that. As time passed Storm had kept his eyes on the Axtons and now they dared to order his brother to their home. His voice held his dragon as he said.

“No!”

Lars nodded; he had guessed that would be his response. “My thoughts as well, then I thought why not. I am an adult, and they have no hold on me. I use their name as is my right, and as a bonus it annoys them. My continued rebuff of their demands to return to their family and reinstate the favors of the Dragon Lord also irritates them, as does my resistance to their insistence I accept a female of their choosing, which I know embarrasses them.”

He laughed, then told Storm. “Believe me when I tell you I consider that another bonus, but it is not just for those reasons I do not capitulate.” He smiled as he said. “I don’t agree with anything they want or say because they are not my family. It does not matter how often they say that I am. Nothing they can say to me or demand of me means anything. A family is more than a name. You, my brother and our family taught me that.”

Storm’s scowl did not change, but he clapped him on the

shoulder. “Alright, but remember you are part of my family. I will not hesitate to take their heads if they hurt you.”

Lars inclined his head. “Thank you brother, I will keep that in mind.”

Storm nodded and carried on into the castle. Lars gave a fleeting thought to the possibility he would go to Reign or Mama Verity, then shrugged, Storm being Storm he would probably not.

In that he was wrong, Storm was not fooled. As much as Lars looked calm, he felt his unease. So he did not go to Reign, who would have flown directly to the Axton family home and leveled it as he had promised to do on many occasions. He went instead to his father who was making preparations to leave and caught him as he was walking from the castle.

“My son!” Rene` looked at his son and saw what Lars had seen: Storm’s dragon was quiet. After the battle Storm had been in with Reign to rescue Grace, Rene` had talked to him about his loss of control. It had taken some careful conversation with Storm’s dragon to reassure him he was not going rogue, even if he felt like it at times.

Together Storm and his dragon regained a balance which seemed to be holding enough so Rene` felt he could leave. Now, though, he could see something had upset his son. As direct as always, Storm came straight to the point.

“The Axton family have demanded Lars attend them.”

Rene` dropped his bag and gave his son his full attention.

“What is he doing?”

“He is on his way there now.”

“You are worried.”

“Yes, you know it will be about Reign’s decrees.”

“Oh, I am sure it will be.”

“They will wound him.” Storm tried to suppress the anger that rose quickly within him. Rene` knew his son. For all his blunt and sharp attitude, he loved deeply, especially his family. Storm’s heart was large and the tenderest of all his boys, even Sharm’s. Gently, he asked him. “Are you suggesting we go to the Axton’s estate?”

Storm did not answer directly, instead he said. “I told him he could not go, but he said they mean nothing to him.” He looked away, just in case his father could see the misgivings he had about letting Lars leave without him.

Rene` hid his smile, imagining Storm saying as much to Lars. “Ahh I see. What do you think we should do?”

“I want to kill them, so they do not hurt him and stop making him feel guilty like they do. He does not say that is what they do, but he feels it.”

Rene` placed his arm around his second-born son and hugged him. “Son, sometimes we have to trust in what we have given him. He will not leave us. He is ours in every way but name.”

Storm nodded into his father’s shoulder as he said. “He says he will not give that up. That it is his right to bear their family name.”

“He is correct, his line goes back to the First Dragons, he should be proud of it.”

Storm hugged his father quickly then stepped back, a smile on his face. “He said it annoyed them, which is why he keeps it.”

Rene` laughed. “I bet it infuriates them, especially as he will not bend to their demands. Now my son, should we trust your brother to return to us?”

Storm looked away and then back at his father, his dragon

in his eyes. “If they hurt him or keep him from us. I will render their house gone.”

Rene` squeezed his shoulder. “Fair enough. Keep me informed.”

Storm nodded. “I will. Papa take care.”

“Always my son. I have your Dam and you and your brothers to come home to, as well as my new grand-babies.”

Storm smiled. “They are very cute.”

“Yes, they are.” Rene` saluted him goodbye as he walked out of the castle, leaving him alone in the hallway with his thoughts.

Reighn said. “You could come with us to help Lars.”

Storm did not turn around but stayed where he was, watching his father enter the glowing portal. “Why do you go?”

Reighn grinned, Johner and Stanvis stood beside him as Keeper moved closer to Storm. Johner said. “Stanvis heard whispers they are going to ask him to betray Reighn and kill us.”

Storm slowly turned to confront his brothers. The hardness of his eyes was frightening in its intensity. “Will they go to trial?”

Reighn shook his head. “Warnings were given at the trial, they should have heeded them.”

Storm grunted in response, thinking a trial would hurt Lars he liked this plan better.

Keeper said. “Come with us Storm. There will undoubtedly be someone you can hit.”

Storm eyed his brothers. “See, now that is a good reason.”

Reighn sighed as he mumbled. “Brothers... idiots all of you.”

Verity had arrived in time to hear Storm and Rene` speaking, she had remained in the shadows hoping to comfort her son after his father left, but when Reighn and his brothers had gathered to ask Storm to go with them to help Lars, she had stayed hidden. Although she could not stop the tears from falling for the pain her son was going to have to endure, as she turned to climb back up the stairs to her apartment, she silently cursed the arrogance of people who had lived long enough to know better.

CHAPTER FOUR:

While Storm had been talking to his father and brothers, Lars had launched himself into the sky. A majestic navy-blue dragon coasted over the town and pastures, making his unhurried way to the estate of the Axton's.

He landed on the cobbled walkway and with a thought transformed back to human. Sighing, he walked up the ten steps toward the ornate doors of the stone mansion which housed people he did not like.

His position as Prime to the Dragon Lord afforded him a certain lifestyle as well as power and influence. Which was exactly why his birth parents desperately wanted him to return to the family.

Their attempts to lure him back mostly amused him. Although their favorite scheme of introducing him to eligible females in the hopes he would bond with one of them, just annoyed him. He knew they believed if that was to happen, they could then control him through her. When he discovered this, Lars was amazed they thought this plan would work, it showed how little his birth family knew about him.

Sadly, for them, Lars never obliged them by meeting with any of the females they mentioned, one; because he would not give them the satisfaction of falling into their trap. Two; because unfortunately, the female in question was usually several years older than him. The Axton's had also learned not to surprise him with some hapless female, because Lars would leave without even allowing an introduction to occur.

So far he had thwarted all their attempts at coercion, usually just by refusing to cooperate, but mostly he just ignored them. He suspected the pressure they exerted was kept to a minimum because of their fear of Reign, who was quite different to his father, which he proved at the trial of the traitors. Lars knew they did not call this meeting to thrust another female at him or to harangue him about his lack of duty to the Axton name. No, it was because of what had happened in court.

He stood now at the doors to a home that was never his and never would be and fortified his shields and fought to gain control over his temper. It was, he realized, becoming harder to do. He knocked once, and a male dragon a few years older than Lars immediately opened the door.

The dragon bowed and spoke. "Prime Lars, your parents

and Elders await you in the morning room.”

“Thank you Braxton, are you healthy?”

“I am my Lord, thank you for asking.”

“Good, you know where to find me if you need too. The castle is always open to all servants, as is Lady Grace’s home.”

The dragon looked at him and raised an eyebrow as he asked. “Will that be necessary, Lord Lars?”

“If this meeting is about what I assume it is, then yes.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

Lars knew the dragon understood the warning he was giving him, and would warn all the employees here and at the residence of his grandparents. Once they received the warning, Lars hoped they would be ready to leave. Changing the subject, he asked Braxton. “Have you been paid recently?”

When Lars had found out the servants in his family’s employ never received an income, he had become enraged. In no uncertain terms he made his parents and grandparents aware of the law, which said they had to pay their servants. When they had strongly objected, he had threatened to make their treatment of the dragons in their employ public, as well as parade them in court, where they could explain their reasons in front of Reign

and the Nobles. They had hurriedly capitulated, not trusting his parents and grandparents to follow through on their promise to make restitution. Lars had Stanvis work out how much the servants were entitled to and how much back pay they were owed. Begrudgingly, his parents and grandparents paid the accounts in full and continued to pay their servants. He suspected they secretly hoped if they paid, he would not tell the Dragon Lord. Which of course he did. Now he checked regularly to make sure the servants received their income on time.

After he found out about his family's employees, he made sure all employees throughout the dragon nation were paid. It had taken a year, but he and Stanvis had accomplished the task and now all employees were paid a decent wage, because of Stanvis's and Lars' investigation, and the subsequent remuneration paid to the servants. Both Lars and Stanvis earned the loyalty of all the servants and the disdain of the Axtons and Nobles.

Braxton gave Lars a small smile as he said. "As it happens, we were paid just this morning. I will show you through my Lord."

Lars returned the smile. He just bet his parents had paid them, knowing he was to come today. He placed his hand on the male's arm, halting his progress. In a soft whisper, he asked. "Braxton, would you and your brother, Noah, consider coming to work for me?"

A little startled by the request, the older male stopped and nodded, a satisfied smile on his face. "We would my Lord. Indeed we would."

Lars nodded and whispered. "Please consider doing so today."

With raised eyebrows, Braxton said. "Indeed my Lord."

Lars dropped his hand as he said. "Come to the castle when you can."

Braxton nodded but did not reply as he escorted Lars to a set of ornate gold leafed doors. He turned the overlarge handles and pushing open the doors to what Lady Axton called the morning room. In truth, this was just a lounge that was not as cluttered with antiques as the other lounges in the house were.

Braxton announced loudly and with a flourish. "My Lord Prime, Lars Axton!"

Lars stepped into the room, just stopping the smile

Braxton's dramatics always caused. It was a source of pride for the former Shield to announce Lars with as much force as possible in his deep voice. It never seemed to matter to him what room they entered, he still made sure to say it the same way. Lars knew Braxton was aware his behavior annoyed his father and grandfather, and had the added effect of causing his mother and grandmother to clutch their chests in distress. Petty as it was, Lars always got a laugh from their reaction to Braxton's announcements.

Once Lars entered the lounge, Braxton closed the doors then rushed at a pace unseen of in the home to the kitchen. "Noah, leave all that and make your calls."

His brother heaved a sigh of relief as he asked. "So it is today then?"

"Our Lord Lars hinted it was."

Noah anxiously asked. "What will become of us?" Although he was relieved, he could not help being concerned about where he and his brother were to go. He was thankful to be leaving this cursed house, he hated working here, but there had been no other option when he and Braxton had looked for employment after he had healed from wounds received in the line of duty.

That had been a horrific stage of his and his dragon's life. Wounded and unable to fly, his dragon had become depressed, which was common for dragons when they were confined to the ground. The thought of never being able to fly was a constant fear for all male dragons.

Often the wounded dragons would divorce themselves from their human side, unable to face the knowledge they could never soar the skies together again. Unfortunately, if the dragon stayed depressed too long, they more often than not spiraled from depression into dragon despair. Then it was only a quick slide into dragon madness, which resulted more often than not in the dragon going rogue, which left the Dragon Lord no choice but to issue a death sentence.

Noah had been well past depressed and slipping into the first stages of despair when Braxton had resigned from the Shields and returned to take over his rehabilitation. He had spent months retraining him to walk and then eventually to fly. His dragon's flight was not as smooth as it had been in his youth, but the feeling of the wind on his scales was a joy he never took for granted again.

Braxton also arranged financing for Noah's training as a

chef, which had always been his dream. It was only years later he had discovered it was Commander Storm who had actually financed his training, and he had sworn Braxton to secrecy. For a while Noah had felt guilty about Braxton resigning his commission from the Shields until he found out Braxton's dream for retirement had been to oversee an estate. He had learned that Commander Storm had financed his training as well.

For Braxton and Noah, who were seasoned warriors, their choice of occupations could seem ironic to some people, but not to Storm. He told Braxton he understood their need for a peaceful way of life after years of service.

Unfortunately, neither of them had any idea how hard it would be to get work after they qualified. Few households or none really wanted to take on two washed up warriors as servants. With no other option, they had eventually accepted employment in the Axton household. At the time, unpaid work was better than none. Also, they were the only servants to live within the home, which meant they did not have to find accommodation elsewhere, although it was expected they would do guard duty.

The brothers were still handsome males with a few well-placed scars which did not seem to offend the female shifters they had met so far. As with every male dragon, the brothers hoped to find their shadows among the shifters and humans pouring into Dragon's Gap. However, they knew it would not happen, hidden away as they were in this house with these people.

Braxton told Noah. "We are to go to our Lord Lars and work for him."

Noah turned all the way around from the counter he had been cutting vegetables on and asked. "Did he say both of us?"

"He did by name, brother. We finally will be free from here."

"Good, this mission sucked." A shifter term he had heard and liked. Calling it a mission was the only way the brothers had thought of their duty within the household. Even though Lars had made good on his promise of protection and a better life for all servants, being paid did not change the atmosphere of the household or the people who they worked for. Having another offer of employment and from Lars, who they both liked and respected, was a blessing.

Braxton laughed and clapped Noah on his shoulder. “That is the truth, so when our Lord leaves, we will follow. I will secure our possessions. Make the calls brother.”

“I will.”

Noah’s job was to call the other servants of the house and let them know what was happening, so they did not come to work. Then notify the elder Axton’s servants to inform them what Lars had stated. Braxton in the meantime, would collect all their possessions and make ready to leave.

As he made his calls, Noah could not keep the excitement from bubbling to the surface and knew his dragon was just as pleased as he was to be leaving.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Lars heard the door close behind him and the hurried steps of the former Shield moving away. He hoped he and his brother were making ready to leave.

He addressed the four people in the room. “Good morning, you asked for my attendance.”

“This is how you greet your family?” His grandfather asked.

It was obvious to anyone that met the Axton males who Lars received his physique from. He was as tall and as well muscled, if not more so than his grandfather and father. Although his father did not train as the Elder Axton and Lars did, so his muscles were not as defined, and he was definitely not as fit as either his son or father. Lars was often thankful physique was the only resemblance to either dragon he held. Lars’ grandfather and father had both inherited the Axton’s brown eyes and distinctive mane of golden hair. Unlike his grandfather, Lars’ father had his hair styled in a square cut, which did nothing to reduce the impact of his most prominent feature, his long nose.

Again, Lars was thankful he had inherited his mother's gray eyes and softer facial features, with a normal size nose, which occasionally he had been told enhanced his attractiveness.

He had a mixture of his father's golden hair and his mother's white tresses, giving his hair a blond, sun-kissed look. He was always pleased he did not take after his father's mother, whose face constantly reminded Lars, unkindly he knew, of a rat's narrow shaped face, with her beady brown eyes and narrow sharp nose above pursed lips. She wore her dark brown hair pulled back from her forehead in a tight eye watering bun which sat on top of her head. How she ever got a hat on it endlessly entertained Lars' dragon.

Thankfully, his mother he saw, only took after his grandmother in her dress sense. Her hair she was still styling in a coronet. Both females wore long pale-colored dresses, better suited for the Victorian era. Morning dresses, he remembered Mama Verity calling them once. She said a lot of the older female dragons dressed this way; they thought it gave them presence and respect.

Papa Rene` told him, they dressed like that, to remind everyone they had been alive a very long time. Lars suspected

they loved the rigidity of the Victorian times, much as the males who wore the high collars of the past with dark suits did. He was sure his father did not know what a pair of jeans looked like, and could not imagine him wearing a sweater. Although the thought seemed to amuse his dragon.

Lars raised one eyebrow as he replied. “No, I greet my family with affection.”

If it was possible, the four faces turned toward him became even colder. Already he could feel his dragon’s impatience at being in the home he felt he had failed Lars in, no matter how many times he told him it was not true. So when he spoke, his dragon’s growl underwrote each word.

All four of the occupants heard it, but as it was not the first time it had happened, they did not comment. The one and only time Lars had allowed his dragon to come forth, he had rained havoc on his parent’s home, destroying hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of antiques. Immediately after that disastrous visit, his parents had gone to Rene` and told him what Lars had done. He in return asked, in his polite intense way, what they had done to upset his son. Coming away from the meeting without compensation, they thought to take matters into their

own hands and quickly found out how powerless they were regarding Lars. Nobles did not like having Shields appear in their home in the middle of the night to warn them against interfering in the Dragon Lord's son.

Of course, that was many years ago, when Lars and his dragon were much younger and they both had less control. Barely keeping the sigh from his voice, he asked. "What is it you want and if it is another female, I will leave now."

"No!" His grandfather said as he rose to his feet. "No son, it is not another female."

Son was a term used by his grandparent, which Lars always ignored as he did now. His grandfather smiled and spoke in his charming, grandfatherly voice that usually grated on Lars' nerves, as it did now.

"Lars, we have asked you here, so you can explain all that nonsense that took place in court."

Lars sighed, counted to ten and gave himself a mental pat on the back for being right. "I am unsure which part you did not understand, it all seemed self-explanatory to me."

His father snarled. "Do not treat us as fools!"

"I assure you I do not."

All the charm was gone from his grandfather's voice as he sneered. "What has the house of Kingsley been feeding you boy? Why must you be so foolish as to think they act in your best interests?"

Lars felt his dragon rise and his eyes elongate, making his presence felt. The two males were in a quandary now, both of them felt sure they could easily subdue Lars as it was two against one. Also, if their servants helped, maybe they could bring him down, as long as he did not shift to his dragon. The trouble with doing that, was that it would incur the wrath of the entire Kingsley family, which would not work in their favor right now.

Lars' grandfather thought to defuse the situation by saying. "There is no reason to become upset, we only wish to discuss what is to happen in the future."

Lars did not take the friendly voice as anything other than a lie, but his dragon calmed when he reminded him of Papa Rene's saying. Sometimes, one must remind people who and what you were and if that required force, so be it! "You call me foolish and boy. Who do you think you are speaking to? I am Prime to the Dragon Lord..."

His mother cut in. “We know and expect you to handle this.”

Lars’ attention was instantly taken with what she said and how eagerly she waited for his reply. He didn’t want to believe it, but it appeared his first thoughts were becoming an actuality. “We... who are we?”

His father smirked as he threw a scroll at him. Lars caught it in his right hand as he looked at the four people in the room. They watched him like vultures looking at roadkill. He made sure to keep his expression impassive. Lars was not impressed either with them or the show of unity they were trying hard to reflect. He flicked the scroll, unrolling it, and read the list of twenty names, all Nobles. He saw his parent’s and grandparent’s names were first and second on the list. “What is this?”

But he knew, sadly he knew, his parents and grandparents had gone from supporters of John Morton to traitors. This was confirmed when his grandmother told him. “It is a list of Nobles who wish the realm dissolved and a new one established.”

Lars jerked when he heard the bold statement as though

they were discussing a list of people to attend a ball, not overthrowing Reign and his family. He cleared his throat and asked. “Who have you decided to assume the position of Dragon Lord?”

“Quenton Poul.” His father told him with pride.

Lars shook his head in disbelief, the male was a nice dragon but naïve in many ways. He asked, unable to hide his incredulous tone.

“He is only three hundred and forty years old, somewhat naïve and uneducated. Does he realize what you are asking of him?”

“Goddess no!” Trilled his grandmother, as she waved her lace handkerchief in front of her face as though to wave away his question.

His mother explained. “He is a stupid boy, but he is malleable, which is all that is necessary. His parents are pleased with our decision in choosing him.”

This made Lars bite back a smile, now he understood their reasoning in why he had not been nominated for the position. He was the least malleable person he or they knew.

His mother told him. “As for education, we know he is

lacking, but you know the old saying. A little knowledge would be a dangerous thing. This would be true for Quenton, so ignorance will work best for him and us.”

Meaning Lars knew, if Quenton understood what was expected of him, he would probably not go along with it. He asked as he shook the scroll. “So, his parents are on here too?”

His father said. “Of course. Now he will need your guidance to fulfil our expectations. It will be nothing you do not do now for Reign.”

“My guidance, and what of the Royal family?”

His grandfather brushed imaginary lint from his sleeve as he refused to meet Lars’ eyes. “What of them, they will have to go. There will be no place for them afterward.”

Incredulous, Lars asked. “You expect them to just move along!”

They all looked at him and then the females laughed. His mother shook her head as she brought herself under control. “Do not be a child, of course not. We will see to that. Deaths of families happen all the time, food goes bad, air turns sour. Those animals that he has aligned himself with may tear him and his family apart. The witch could accidentally cast an

unfortunate spell. All manner of things kills families.” She shrugged nonchalantly, then narrowed her eyes and stared at him as though she was talking to an idiot. “Seriously you are very badly educated for someone who lives at the castle, did they not teach you historical intrigue? Well never mind we, your true family, will handle this.”

His grandmother said with a tone of disappointment shadowing her words. “It is as I suspected. This will be too much for him. All that brainwashing I suppose. We had hoped not to involve any outsiders into what is a family matter.” She sniffed delicately and flapped her lace handkerchief once more. “I see we are left with no choice.”

Lars stood absolutely still for a full minute as he replayed the entire conversation again in his mind and decided his grandmother’s words rang untrue. There would be no outsiders to call. This was a bluff to see if he would be stupid enough to volunteer. Foolish people, they did not know him at all. “Surely you do not expect me to help you with this?”

His father stated. “You are our son.”

His grandfather told him with self-righteous indignation. “It is your family duty.”

Lars frowned as he explained. “You are proposing treason, you realize this?”

“Rubbish!” Blustered his grandfather as he took a swallow of his whiskey. “Mild rebellion, at most.”

Lars shook his head as he tried to make them understand they were wrong. “No, it is treason. You saw the Elementals yesterday, what they did and the judgment they handed down. You will be risking their wrath. Do you really wish to pit yourselves against them?”

His father sighed loudly, then scornfully stated. “Do not be ridiculous, of course not.”

Lars was relieved. He may not like these people, but he did not wish for them or anyone to suffer the same fate as the people who had been judged by the Elementals. “Then what do you have in mind? Will you refuse to swear to the Dragon Lord?”

His mother said archly. “Of course not. It is our duty to do so as a Noble. Your Sire and Grandsire will swear fealty on behalf of our family, then we will overthrow him.”

Lars laughed; he could not help it. These people were insane or so naive it was almost criminal. “And, you say that is

not treasonous.”

His grandmother growled. “Please refrain from being obtuse. Rebellion has throughout history been acceptable, if done correctly and orderly. We will accomplish both.”

“The Elementals will have nothing to say about it.” Stated his grandfather in tones he used to quell any counter opinions to his own.

“Why is that?” Lars asked, bewildered with their reasoning.

His father explained. “This is dragon business. Nothing to do with the Elementals.”

“So, your thinking is, if you swear your loyalty to the Dragon Lord and the nation. that anything you do afterward will be considered an internal matter and will not incur the Elementals wrath. I suppose you also think as the Dragon Lord and his family will not be here to complain, you have no fear of the Elementals retaliating, and the new Dragon Lord will take no action as he will be under your control. Does everyone on this list think the same?” Lars asked as he shook the paper once more.

His father nodded, saying. “Yes, and there is you of course.”

“Me... why me?”

His grandfather explained with a certain amount of smug pride. “After the Dragon Lord and his family are gone, you are next in line. As we have already chosen the next Dragon Lord, we expect you to step aside and serve him. Dragon society will not want to be seen to be questioning your decision. We as your rightful family, will make sure everyone understands you are in mourning for the Kingsleys, after all you were their nest son and brother.”

“And you believe this will stop speculation?”

“Why should we care about gossip?” His father told him pityingly. “Seriously, who is there to go against us? We, through you and Quenton, will have the Hunters and Shields at our command.”

Lars was amazed they thought it would be that easy. The Hunters and Shields were not commanded as such. They were who they were because they were loyal, firstly; to the Kingsley family and secondly; to the dragon nation.

He asked his dragon. *How do they not know this?*

Because they see what they want to. Not what the truth is.

His mind swam with the stupidity the four people in the room were speaking. He asked because he could not seem to

help himself. “What of the Elementals, have you forgotten them? Reign is their chosen.”

“Why are you being so difficult?” His mother whined.

His grandmother sneered as she told his father, “I told you he was a waste of time. They have brain-washed him.”

His father looked at him and stated. “My Dam is right. You are truly disappointing as a son. Can you not see the bigger picture we are showing you? What life could be like in the future under our reign?”

Lars wanted to tell them they were wrong. He wanted desperately to unleash his dragon on these foolish people. He closed his eyes and wished himself anywhere but here with these obscenely entitled and delusional people. Finally, he could hide no more. Opening his eyes, he sighed as he pulled the door behind him open and in a strained voice told them, “There were so many things for you to have taken away from court yesterday. The one important piece of information for you to have heard and then accounted for was technology.” He showed them his left hand and the phone in it. “This allowed our Dragon Lord to hear and understand everything that was said here this morning. There will be no going back from what you

have planned.”

It was only then they heard the booted feet approaching the room. Reign stood with his brothers and guards in the doorway and received the scroll from Lars. He looked his brother in the eye as he softly said. “There will be no reprieve.”

Lars bowed his head. “I understand, the young dragon Quenton Poult knows nothing of this.”

“I am sure he does not.” Reign signaled a guard closer. “Arron, go and collect Quenton Poult and secure him somewhere safe, please.”

“As you will, my Lord.” He saluted and left with two others.

Reign gave the scroll a quick look, then handed it to Keeper. “If you will, my brothers.”

“With pleasure.” Keeper said as he gave the four ashen faced people a hard look.

Storm squeezed Lars’ arm in comfort and growled at the four slack jawed Axton’s. “As if you had not done enough.”

Johner shook his head and spoke. “It is hard to believe, yesterday taught you nothing.”

With a sympathetic look to Lars, he left with Keeper and

Storm followed by castle guards to arrest the other conspirators.

Lars asked Stanvis. “Make sure everything is removed to storage please, and the servants are taken care of.”

“As you wish Prime. Both residences?”

“Yes please.”

Without a backward look at the people who alleged to be his family, Lars walked away. He did not halt even when the outraged shouts from the males and the cries from the females rang in his ears. He just closed the door on the house and that part of his life forever.

He flew to Verity, landing on her balcony and stepping into her open arms. “I am so very sorry. It is over now, stay with me as long as you need to.”

He sighed in relief and stayed with her throughout the day and the night. He stayed with her when they felt Reign breathe dragon fire on the homes of the guilty. When he felt the Elementals remove his birth family and all the traitors from the world.

The following weeks were hard for Lars and his family, coping with the fallout from the betrayal of the Nobles, as well as the attacks on the retrievers and the kidnapping of Grace.

Now weeks later he sat here, in this place on this day, drinking wonderful coffee, reliving an event from his past that still haunted his dreams.

His dragon sighed. *Time to place it back in the past.*

Dragging it all up only makes us hurt.

Lars agreed. *I know, let us find something to smile about instead.*

CHAPTER SIX:

Lars grinned as he watched a little boy laugh as he skipped next to a teenage girl. She held in her hands two brown bakery bags, oozing he bet with sweet cinnamon rolls. His dragon hummed with delight - he liked cinnamon rolls.

Lars had woken this morning just as the sun had risen and once awake, neither he nor his dragon had been able to resist the lure of the crisp air as the skies turned blue. They had flown high above the world, surfing the air currents, for what seemed like hours.

Eventually, they had returned to the Gap, circling high above the castle for many enjoyable minutes, before he landed to leave a message with June. As castle liaison, she relieved him of having to hunt down Reign, and passing on the messages left for him overnight. He blessed the day Sage had introduced June into their lives, especially his. She relieved him of so much of the day-to-day business of the castle; he was sure his work load had decreased by half.

After refusing her offer of tea and a longer visit, he had

launched into the sky once more. Thirty minutes later, he and his dragon felt more centred and ready to face the day. He landed near the town and walked the early morning streets, finally settling at this outside table to enjoy his first coffee of the day.

Over the months, he found he enjoyed sitting and watching all the different species and humans walking around. Suddenly he felt a wave of sadness flow over him, as his dragon asked. *Will we ever find our shadow?*

Lars tried to cajole him from his thoughts with a little humor. *It will happen when it does. Maybe we will have to go hunting for her. She is unlikely to drop into our lives.*

Now he thought about it, he too wondered if he would ever get the opportunity to raise young like his brothers and friends were doing.

He hoped he would and knew he was like every other dragon wanting a family, shaking off the feeling of gloom, there had been enough of that this morning already. He sipped his coffee and thought about the changing world he was living in, and how he loved every minute of it. Whether he was lucky enough to find his shadow or not, he knew his family still loved

him. Seeing his lifelong friends find their shadows or mates, as the shifters called them, was a balm to his heart.

Even Stan, his nest brother, had found his shadow Jacqueline or Jacks for short. She was a tall, exquisite and studious Leopard who wore glasses and business suits, which he had to admit she suited. Not that he thought Jacks would have been a good fit for him. She seemed to have a serious turn of mind, perhaps it was to do with her being a forensic accountant.

He wanted a female that had a sense of humor, someone who was demure in her dress. A tall, slim, polished female who would understand his need to be active and present in his job as Prime to the Dragon Lord. Someone who was discreet because as Prime, he was required to know everything that went on within the dragon nation. This would mean she too would be privy to that information. She would have to realize he would need to be on call day and night and sometimes he would be placed in danger. Lars smiled as his thoughts went over the female his shadow would be. He and his dragon would have no concerns if she was a shifter, in fact he hoped she would be. It would be different and exciting.

He sighed again and sipped his coffee as he went back to people watching. He caught a flash of orange from the corner of his eye, but when he turned his head and looked along the street; he saw nothing. Frowning, he shrugged and went on with his thoughts as he idly looked around him.

Over his lifetime he had visited other towns in other countries and even with all the surrounding growth he still loved the feel of Dragon's Gap. He often thought he should live right in the middle of it all, rather than at the castle. Especially now that the Gap was growing so fast, it would be invigorating to be part of the bustling activity. So involved in his thoughts, he did not see the flying kitten until she landed rump first on his table.

She spun toward him, stopping on her third rotation to look up into his eyes. And that was when Lars lost his heart, staring into two green clear pools of shining liquid as they stared back at him.

Oops! Kammy thought. I really am a good jumper.

When the kitten rose on all fours and crawled over to him and nudged his hand, he automatically began stroking her from head to the tip of her tail. He admitted he was smitten.

At the moment Kammy felt Lars' hand stroke her fur, all thoughts fled her mind. His soft touch made her purr, which surprised Lars and enticed his dragon to croon a dragon's song in return. Lars was stunned, he did not know his dragon could make that sound.

Suddenly he heard loud voices calling out from the street. He scooped the kitten into his arms where she proceeded to wash his fingers and purr even louder. His dragon grumbled and stopped his song as June walked over and sat in the vacant chair opposite him while she talked into her phone. "No, I have her. She has found Lars... No, she looks fine."

Hanging up, she looked at the kitten which had now placed her little head in the palm of Lars' hand and said. "You are in such trouble, little Missy."

Lars cuddled her closer. "Who is this that says she is in trouble?"

June laughed. "That would be her Mama. You should maybe let her go, because if I am not mistaken, her mother is coming now."

Lars looked over his shoulder to where June was looking and saw a small female around five-foot tall, walking toward

them. She had curves that made his dragon sit up and pant.

Really? Panting? Lars asked him, but his dragon was too busy staring to reply.

The female had short spiked hair, striped black and white. Her jeans had seen better days as had her tee-shirt, which barely covered her ample breasts. The shirt had been washed so many times the color was faded. It may have started out gray, but was bleached white now. She wore a leather jacket which was well worn and weathered, as were her calf length black biker boots. She was pocketing a phone as she came nearer.

Lars inwardly shook his head, unable to believe someone like this female was mother to this precious bundle in his arms. Instinctively, he held the cub more securely as he watched the female advance. He was sure he would see the usual tattoos and piercings females like her favored, but as she came closer, he realized his mistake. This was not a Gothic outfit, or clothes to make a statement, like people he had encountered over the years wore.

Studying her, he knew she wore clothes she could afford or deemed necessary, and it shamed him to think he had jumped to an erroneous conclusion. Then his dragon roared to escape,

trying to push through his skin, wanting to touch, to feel his shadow. His dragon roared again, *Shadow!*

Lars struggled to contain his dragon and not drop the kitten as he felt his knees weaken at the fury of his dragon's desire to escape.

Then a small hand, calloused from work, touched the skin on his chest above the open collar of his shirt. Immediately his dragon ceased its struggles. Beyond coherent words, Lars nodded his head in thanks to the female who slowly removed her hand.

She stood in front of him with her arms folded, looking up at him as he held the kit in his arms. Claire looked him up and down and leaned in a little, then sniffed and sniffed again, just as the kit was doing. Amusingly Lars did not find this strange, in fact he found it rather endearing.

June stood and placed her arm protectively around the female. He wondered what she saw in his face to warrant that reaction. Then he realized it was for the comfort of the female, not because of him. Fear looked out at him from green eyes, not as deep as her daughter's but just as vibrant.

He leaned down and placed his face in the join between her

neck and shoulder and felt her slight shudder. Then he drew in her scent and smelled desire and anxiety. He leaned in closer and rubbed his cheek against hers and whispered in her ear.

“Shadow.”

She seemed to relax at the word, or it could have been the familiar action that settled her. Whichever it was, she nodded slightly as he withdrew.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

June made the introductions. “Lars Axton, this is Claire Nash and the little cub in your arms is Kammy, who is Claire’s daughter. I know you have heard Sage and myself talk about Claire. I am amazed you two have not met until now.” She turned to Claire and said. “Claire, this is Lars Axton. As you know he is Prime to Reign and nest brother to Stanvis and all the Kingsley brothers.”

Claire was not sure if she was pleased or stunned. As she stared at the male she went with stunned. Seriously, who would not be, he was stunning. Tall, with broad shoulders that tapered down to a narrow waist and legs that held muscles in abundance. In fact, she bet he had muscles on muscles everywhere. *Could you say gorgeous?*

His golden hair sat just below his collar and she bet those white streaks were natural. Claire clenched her hands to stop herself from reaching out and running her fingers through those blond locks. Sighing, she bet it was soft and would slip through her fingers like expensive silk. Then she felt her work-roughened hands and realized that touching him was just not

going to happen. There was no way she could put her hands on him, it would be embarrassing.

Her eyes drifted to his hands, and she almost groaned out loud. Claire had a thing about men's hands which Sage and June had teased her about mercilessly, when she had inadvertently confessed it one drunken night. There was no denying her mate's fingers were long, and his hands were wide and strong. *Yummy!*

She sighed again, this male was all over beautiful and rich. She could tell from his styled haircut to his tailored clothes he came from money. What she wondered would he think of her, a former street rat?

What Lars thought was summed up in one word.

Enchantress!

She was delightful, from her black and white hair and lovely rounded breasts, which almost had him whimpering with want, to her delectable shaped legs, that ended in a pair of combat boots. She had to have the smallest feet he had ever seen on an adult. She was more elfin than warrior, but as he looked into her gorgeous green eyes, he saw the core of steel within.

Claire shook her head in amusement at herself. She was unsure if she wanted to crawl all over him or run for the hills. Her mate was an honest to Goddess dragon. She had never in her wildest dreams, and Claire had lots of dreams, ever thought a dragon would be her mate. She refused to hear the little voice that sounded a lot like her hateful ex-boyfriend, telling her that no decent male would ever want a street rat like her.

Which he had been yelling before she shot him. Luckily, she had been feeling generous that day and only shot his ear off. She banished his voice, and that time of her life, back into the recesses of her mind and placed herself in the here and now.

“I am probably not what you thought your shadow would be like. I expect you wanted some tall, slim professional female, not a half-breed cougar who lived a greater part of her youth on the streets and does not know what country she was born in. A female that has had no contact with her family and has no wish to.”

Lars took her tightly clenched hand in his large one and kissed her work roughened knuckles. He almost smiled when he scented gunshot residue. “You are my shadow. What half formed fantasies I may have had, do not compare to the female

who stands in front of me. My dragon and I have waited our entire long, lonely life to have someone of our own. What either of us dreamed of pales compared to you. I know you know of my beginnings.”

At her sheepish look, he said. “I am well aware. Sage, June and Edith gossip, we all know.”

“Hey!” June growled. “Still here!”

Lars raised an eyebrow, and she shrugged. “Well, it is not like males don’t gossip.”

Lars smiled; he could not deny that. “Very true, gossip is the mainstay of the castle. Everyone indulges.” He said to Claire, “In light of that, we have both been lucky to surround ourselves with the family we want and now we have each other and our Kammy, what else is there?”

Claire agreed as she swayed toward him, saying. “Nothing, okay, but first things first.” She pulled her face into her best frown and adopted her sternest tone as she looked at the small cub in her mate’s arms.

“Well, little cub. What do you have to say for yourself? Running off like you did was dangerous, you could have been hurt. You snuck out of your Auntie June’s home. She was very

worried.”

Which was a tame way of saying June’s heart pounding panic had been like a case of heartburn. It was not even close to the terror she had felt. Claire frowned harder. “I was worried too, when I returned to find you missing. Lots of people were worried. We were just about to call Uncle Reign and Auntie Sage.”

Kammy hung her head. *Uncle Reign and Auntie Sage. She was in real trouble.*

Claire tried not to smile at the sad tiger cub as she said. “Auntie June had to stop baking her delicious cookies to come look for you.”

The cub’s head lifted and she sadly made soft mewling sounds. When her Mama made no move to comfort her, Kammy sighed, she knew what her Mama wanted her to do. She could not hide in her tiger skin anymore.

Hands on her hips, Claire waited. Lars could tell her heart was not in the scolding, but the cub hung her head lower and slipped from his arms. Then, with a shimmer of sparkles, a tiny figure of a naked, slim, tanned girl appeared standing on the table.

With a flick of his hand, Lars clothed her in a yellow dress and cute white socks and black shoes. She looked adorable with her short blonde hair streaked with red and her big green eyes staring at him in wonder. Her little rosebud mouth formed an astonished circle.

Even Claire was impressed. *Who knew Dragons did simple magic!* With effort she remembered her daughter and tore her eyes from her mate as she cleared her throat, saying mildly.

“Kammy.”

She walked over to Claire and wrapped her arms around her neck and in a clear voice said. *“Butsa Mama, I found my Dada!”*

They both looked at Lars, who had a big smile on his face. Claire tried not to smile; she really did as she agreed. “I see that honey but you ran away and that was naughty. What if Mama or Auntie June could not have found you?”

“Because the bad mans gets me?” Kammy asked.

They all turned to see Lars with his fangs extended and eyes elongated as a soft growl rumbled from him. Claire figured a normal female would have been running for the hills. She just thought he was hot. *Did Mama say hot?*

Kammy asked. *“Mama, why Dada growly?”*

“Probably because you ran away from Auntie June.” Claire said with a straight face and ignored June’s snort of laughter.

Kammy’s little mouth went back into the circle again, then she tipped her head to the side and uttered. *“Kay, me not do that agin Dada.”* She went to Lars and gave his face a pat saying. *“Okay Dada, I not run away from Mama or Auntie June agin.”*

Lars closed his eyes and breathed deeply. June and Claire watched him regain control of his dragon with little effort. He opened his eyes, and they were both surprised to see a smile in the depths of the stone-gray eyes. Instantly both of them recognized his dragon was staring out at them.

Kammy squealed. *“Hello my Dada’s dragon. Me, Kammy.”*

Lars’ dragon hummed loudly as Kammy kissed his cheek. *“Me, love you Dada’s dragon.”*

Lars’ smile exploded as he told her. “As he loves you, Kammy.”

June told him, much to Claire’s embarrassment and surprise, “If it helps, she means issues, not bad man as we know it. She gets a little confused still. Claire has issues. Kammy and Molly hunted for them all day yesterday.”

Kammy nodded and said sadly. *“We not find them. You kill them Dada, okay?”*

Lars smiled at Claire’s embarrassed face as he said. “Leave it to me, my Kammy. I will fix them.”

Kammy laughed and told Claire. *“Me finds Dada to kill issues Mama.”*

“Yes honey.” Claire looked up at Lars and said honestly. “I have issues with trust and being left. I swear they are the major ones. There may be a few more hiding around.” She shrugged. “I work on them constantly.”

He nodded. “That is what is so good about having a dragon as a shadow. We never leave and never stray. I am yours for eternity. There will be no one else for us.”

“Oh, well, okay. Yeah, that is good.” Claire stumbled a little over how to answer him, because with those words she felt something unlock in her heart.

June said to Claire in Spanish. “While you were away, Kammy dreamed of when you were hurt. She told me she thought the issues had done that.”

Claire replied in the same language. “Oh, damn it! Okay I will talk to Rene`. Thanks June.”

“No problems. That is why I am the auntie.”

Lars said in Spanish. “Now, I understand the reference to killing.”

Claire said. “Yeah, I thought she had not seen any of that. Guess I was wrong.”

“Kids get to see and hear stuff all the time, they are not meant to.” Lars told her with a smile.

“And now you know why we converse in Spanish.” June told him.

“I do, logical and efficient.”

Kammy smiled, “*Pretty words.*”

Lars agreed with her. “They are very pretty.”

“So, Kammy found you then?” Asked June reverting back to English and getting back to the original topic. Giving her friend a minute to get herself together. She had never seen Claire look as though she had been sucker punched before. It was amusing.

June thought perhaps that was what falling in love was like. Never having experienced it herself, she had no idea. Lars nodded as he hugged the little girl gently. “It seems she did. She is delightful.” He spoke directly to the little girl who had her

arms wrapped around his neck now. “But my little cub, you will promise your Mama and Dada not to run away again.”

Kammy pouted her lips and said. “*But Dada, sometimes my tiger wants to run.*”

Lars nodded his head. “I understand, sometimes my dragon wants to fly.”

“*You fly me? Like Molly’s Dada fly her?*” She squealed with pleasure,

“Yes, I will. But first I need to find someone for you to run with.” He looked at Claire. “Do you know Conor Towers? He is a lion.”

“I know of him. We have not officially met yet, although that is about to change when I take over as the official Liaison to Dragon’s Gap.”

June said. “I know him. He is a good Alpha.”

Lars told them. “He is the sheriff of Dragon’s Gap now. He and his pride look after the people here. They also do retrievals on occasion.” He asked Claire. “Would he be acceptable to run with Kammy?”

“I suppose so. I would like to meet him first.”

“Of course, and there is my brother Stanvis’s shadow,

Jacks.”

Kammy said. “*Me, like Auntie Jacks.*”

“You know her?”

Claire told him. “She is helping Kammy with control.”

Confused, he asked. “She does not run with her?”

Claire shook her head. “No, Leopards run very fast, too fast for cubs. Once she is in her leopard skin, she is borderline controlled. Before Jacks came here, she liked to hunt.”

Surprised he would never have thought that of Jacks, he said. “Ahh! I see, the teaching is helping her.”

They were both impressed he understood. “Yes, it was June’s idea.”

June smiled modestly as she said. “Well not all mine, I discussed it with Conor who trains her. It seemed to make sense.”

“So, we will ask Conor. If he cannot help, I am sure he will find someone for you to run with Kammy. A safe someone.”

“*Kay Dada. I run with Molly.*” She snuggled down against his chest and smiled at her mother, who cocked one eyebrow up. “You still get to be punished young lady.”

Kammy turned beseeching eyes to Lars, who told her. “Your

Mama is correct.”

Kammy sighed. “*Yes Dada.*”

Claire said. “As you ran away from your Auntie June, she will set the punishment for you. June?”

“Well now a punishment... Mmm... Let me see. I think it only fair Kammy helps me clean-up my kitchen. Yes, that is a good punishment.”

Kammy almost clapped her hands with glee, she loved cleaning Auntie June’s kitchen. Then she remembered she was to be sad.

Kammy lifted her head from Lars’ chest and said. “*I can do that.*” She looked at Lars and insisted. “*I’m real good at me punshmnts!*”

He asked. “Do you get a lot?”

Kammy laughed, a sound of pure delight. “*I likes cookies.*”

“I have no idea what that means?”

Claire frowned, and it was not pretend this time as she told him. “For punishments June and Grace have the girls help clean their kitchens and or stack the dishwasher. Usually, after they have made cookies, they get to eat any broken cookies and there are always lots of them.”

June said innocently. “It is sad to say, this is true.”

“It is how they get broken; no one admits to.” Grumbled Claire.

Lars laughed at the inventive way they disciplined his cub. He knew Claire was not upset, even if she sounded like it. His laugh trapped Claire’s attention; he held nothing back letting the world hear his amusement. It was honest and genuine and lit her heart on fire, taking her by surprise at how much she enjoyed it.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

As the fascinated Claire remained staring at her dragon like he was ice cream and she wanted to devour him.

June decided there was no time like the present to tackle a problem she had been stewing over for the last few days.

“So, while we are in town, let’s go and look at Kammy’s new home. See how much Claire has decorated and the new furniture she has picked out.”

Kammy squealed with delight and clapped her hands.

“Yes... Yes, show Dada home.”

Claire looked startled and said weakly. “We should really get home to the castle and tidy your place.”

Lars smiled. “I am sure we can put that off for a few hours. Is that alright June?”

“Oh, of course we can. There is time for that later, right Kammy?”

“Yeah... Yeah.”

Lars grinned, some of Kammy’s excitement rubbing off on him. “So, let’s go and look at Kammy’s home.”

Claire tried one more time with a sinking feeling in her

stomach that whatever she said would not deter her friend. “We should really wait for the decorators to finish.”

She was ignored but not giving up entirely she looked at her soon to be mate and best friend and then her daughter who was bouncing with excitement. And tried again to sway the trio against going to the house.

“June, I am sure Lars must have many things he needs to do. We are holding him up.”

Again they ignored her. Kammy continued to bounce up and down saying. *“Let’s go Dada... let’s go see my new bedroom with furnita in it. See new home Mama got us.”*

Claire groaned softly as Lars asked. “So you have a home here in town?”

Claire bit her bottom lip as she thought quickly and with a well-practiced sigh and the saddest eyes she had ever made, she said. “Yeah, but I suppose we have to live at the castle now, what a shame, oh well that is life.”

She was not expecting the damn male to grin and say. “What a coincidence, I was just sitting here wondering at the possibilities of living here in town and look, problem solved.”

Desperately Claire asked as June stared at her with a

confused expression and suspicion darkening her eyes. “No, don’t be silly, we cannot ask that of you. Your family, the royals, will they allow it?”

He frowned as he asked. “Why would they not?”

Claire could see the hole, but she jumped anyway as she said. “Well, you are one of them, right?”

His voice became a little cooler as he said. “One of them... I am unsure what you mean. Please explain my shadow?”

“Yeah, Claire, please explain.” Murmured June.

Claire was in deep now, but she kept going in the hopes she could dig her way out of the impossible situation, before she was discovered it looked unlikely. “You know a royal.” Irritated now because she found herself justifying something that was said as a smoke screen, she snarled. “You live at the friggin castle and dress in clothes that cost a fortune. Your hair cut probably cost more than my entire wardrobe.” She stamped her foot as June’s eyes gleamed with suppressed laughter. Lars’ eyebrows had risen with each word spoken. Finally, she threw her hands up and growled defensively. “Do not get an attitude with me.”

Lars smiled at her tone as he murmured to his dragon. *So*

cute!

He replied. *She is hiding something!*

You think? Lars inclined his head and suggested. “Now, may be a good time to clear that misconception up. My shadow, I am not royal in the way you mean, and I will not apologize for my clothes or hair. I earn the money to indulge in both.”

His voice, June noticed, was the calm tones of a male who was dealing with a female he is unsure of, but thought adorable. She smiled inwardly as she thought Claire had finally met her match in the dragon.

Claire felt bad, an unusual feeling for her, she hunched her shoulders and spoke. “Yeah well, this is probably a good time to mention the other issues I have. With clothes and fancy stuff and mostly money!”

Lars gave her thoughtful look and waved his hand in the air. “Let us talk about this later, for now we should take our little one and see this house.”

June snapped her phone closed. “Cabs coming.”

Claire hung her head, staring defeat in the face. She huffed out a breath and nodded in agreement, what else was there to do. *Damn and double damn. Nothing for it now but to ride it*

out.

CHAPTER NINE:

After a short cab ride they arrived at Claire and Kammy's new home on a quiet street which ran parallel to the main street of Dragon's Gap.

Claire let them in and watched as June stood with her mouth open in shock while Lars looked around in surprise. He could not believe this was the home Claire had chosen for her and Kammy.

Originally when Reign explained his idea of opening the town to shifters. They realized people would need homes, which Dragon's Gap was short of. Building homes would not be a problem, there were plenty of willing dragons with the gift for building. What was a problem was no one had any idea what style of house to build?

So Stanvis came up with the clever idea of holding a competition whereby dragons could submit designs of homes and they would build the best ones. This worked amazingly well and streets of houses began appearing. To Lars' surprise, when he submitted several designs, all of them had been accepted. And this was one of his designs. The last time he saw

this house it was a drawing on a piece of paper.

Kammy became bored with the adults standing doing nothing and ran off to explore her new home. Claire stood with her hands shoved deep into the back pockets of her jeans, refusing to meet his or June's eyes.

Lars looked from one female to the other, as his dragon asked. *Why is Shadow upset?*

I don't know, nothing seems wrong, although June turning red would indicate something is not right.

They did not have to wait long to find out what was upsetting both females. Unlike some females who screeched when upset, June roared as she did now when she demanded. **"Nothing!** You have done nothing. There are not even carpets or curtains."

Claire hunched her shoulders and shrugged apologetically, saying. "I know."

"Decorating a house and filling it with furniture is not rocket science." June stated as she looked around again, as if she might find some furniture she had missed the first time. "Nothing!" She shook her head in amazement. "I don't understand, not a stick of furniture anywhere!" She looked at

Claire like she was under a microscope and asked, “Why?”

Claire squirmed as both June and Lars stood looking at her, while Kammy ran in and out of the rooms. “Because I was unsure what I was looking at in all those magazines. Nothing made sense.”

Lars said. “I am obviously missing something. What is going on?”

Claire stared at the floor as June’s eyes narrowed on her, and she snarled as she slammed her hands onto her slim hips. “You, my friend, are looking at an unfurnished home.”

Lars looked bemusedly from one female to the other. “Still, I am in the dark.”

“She!” June said as she pointed at Claire. “Was buying furniture and having the place decorated for the past three weeks. All ready for the big move in day. Which is in a week’s time or was?”

“Oh, I see.” He said as he looked at his dejected shadow.

June threw her hands up in the air. “Do you? ... Do you, really? Why don’t you explain it to me.”

Lars took one of Claire’s fisted hands in his and asked softly. “Claire, my shadow, can you cook?”

Surprised by the question, both females looked at him. June started to ask, “What has that...?”

Lars raised one eyebrow at her and she clamped her mouth shut on the rest of the question. Claire shrugged as she looked up into the gentle, smiling face of her mate and sighed again. “I try but no, I cannot.”

June mumbled. “I can attest to that.”

They ignored her as Lars asked Claire. “You have no idea about putting a home together, do you?”

Relieved that he seemed to understand. Claire answered. “No, I looked at magazines and researched on the net, but...” She fluffed her hair; this was a gesture she rarely did, as she was very seldom flustered. “It was all so confusing... You know?”

He nodded. “I do.” At her skeptical look, he assured her. “I do, now as a dragon, when we find our shadow, we can do two things.”

Both she and June raised their eyebrows. Claire was the one to ask with a cheeky grin. “Only two?”

June asked. “What the hell has cooking, now dragon stuff to do with this empty house?”

But again, the mates ignored her. Lars grinned in appreciation as he said to Claire.

“Sassy female, I like that. And for your information I can do more than two things, which I will show you later.” Lars grinned widened at the expression of anticipation that entered his shadow’s eyes.

His dragon hissed. *Shadow wants us.*

Yes, but we must make this right first, there is time for us later.

Not much later. Grumbled his dragon.

Trying not to wince at his dragon’s ill humor, Lars said to Claire. “As you know Dragons are old- fashioned and we believe in courting our Shadows. What you may not know is that can last from days to weeks.”

Claire scrunched her nose up at the information about courting. She wanted him now. Shifters did not put off mating, even half shifters could find themselves in trouble if they were courted for too long and too long was never an exact science. So that was not going to happen for her and Lars, she was just not that patient.

Lars was amused as his dragon said. *Shadow does not like*

that!

He said. “I see like me, that thought holds no appeal. So, the other option is we can bond immediately.”

“What... right now?” Claire occasionally could be quite literal. She looked at June as she asked. “Are you sure?”

He laughed as he hugged her. “No, not immediately. I mean, without the courtship, it would mean you and Kammy staying in my apartment with me. Then I can take over finishing our home.”

“Or just starting it.” June muttered, which once again they ignored.

“I am sure June and Grace will help, so it can be completed quickly.”

He glanced at June, who nodded in agreement. More relaxed now because the accusing look in June’s eyes had disappeared, Claire spread her hands in a helpless gesture. “Oh, I like that. See, I just don’t understand all this furniture and colors stuff. You know?”

June said. “Why did you not say?”

Claire scowled. “I am a mother and an adult. I should be able to do this, or at least that was what I was hoping would

happen.”

June nodded as it all came together for her. Claire had never had an actual home, not even as a child. Her parents were criminals, who traveled from city to city, usually with the police looking for them. So Claire would no more know what to place in a house to make it a home than she could fly like a dragon. June felt a twinge of guilt, she should have realized and remembered Claire’s past.

She hugged her saying, “Yeah, I get that.” Looking past Claire to Lars, she told him. “We’d better include Sage. She will be pissed if we leave her out and then there will be sulking. So much sulking.”

Claire laughed, partially because what June said was true about Sage and because she was relieved her secret was finally out. She would no longer have to come up with reasons for her friends not visiting her new home.

Lars said. “I have a feeling it will be the same for Mama Verity. She will be just as angry.”

“Lady Verity, really?” Both Claire and June said together.

Lars nodded. “Don’t be fooled, that female is nasty when she is thwarted, and this would be thwarting.”

They all grinned, thinking of the sweet Verity being pissed. Finally, June stated. “Okay, so we have a plan.”

“We do?” Asked a startled Claire, as she looked at her friend and mate.

“Yep, don’t worry, we have this. What do you think?” June asked Lars.

With his arm around Claire, he asked. “Do you have a tablet?”

“Of course.” June opened her large bag and took out her tablet she was seldom without.

“First order of business, is to have a look around at our home and make some lists.” He removed his arm from around Claire’s waist much to her regret and rubbed his hands together. “When I designed this house, I actually imagined it complete with furniture and fixtures.”

“Wait... Wait!” Claire said as June and she stood with opened mouths, finally Claire asked. “You designed this home?”

“I did! Several of us were asked to design homes, and this was one of mine. I can show you others, but I have to say this was the one I considered, the best of them.”

He stood there, tall, handsome and damn it, talented. Claire felt the lip of the well she was going to topple into. Love she knew was down at the bottom just waiting for her to dive in feet first and heaven help her, she was falling fast.

“Oh my, is this fate or what?” June asked Claire.

Claire nodded as she agreed. “It truly is.”

June said. “This has to be magic.”

Amused all over again, Lars said. “Of course it is. This is Dragon’s Gap!”

CHAPTER TEN:

With a plan in place June and Lars started the tour of the home. Claire trudged behind the other two as they talked lighting and color wheels and spoke in obscure terms about decorating and fixtures.

If they remained silent for too long Kammy would blow into the room and chatter about something new she had seen or wanted. This was mostly directed at Lars. Claire thought she was scared they would leave without her. June said she was just nosy. Lars said nothing, but Claire noticed he would lightly touch Kammy's hair in what she assumed was reassurance and Kammy would smile and run off again.

To do what, Claire did not know. The few times she broached her thoughts of going with her daughter. June very determinedly shot that idea down. Although Claire grudgingly admitted, even if only to herself, as they went from room to room, she was not bored.

Either June and Lars were speaking in simple terms now, or she understood more than she thought she did, but the discussions on furniture and fixtures were interesting. Of

course, knowing what the term fixtures meant helped a lot. Nothing they suggested was intimidating or overwhelming, or worse, boring. It had not been like this when she had spent hours searching for furniture on her own. She supposed because the actual decisions were taken out of her hands, she could relax and enjoy the experience.

At one point, Lars casually said. “As this is to be our home. We will have to have servants and luckily, I have both a chef and butler who I know will work for us. I will ask them if they are interested.”

June nodded. “I am sure the Hogan brothers will love the idea. Will they live in?”

“Perhaps, the plans for this home included an apartment over the garage. I will have that built for them, or they can live in town. In fact, that may be a better idea as they both need to socialize, it has been a while since they did.”

June said. “I can take care of that. Would you like me to ask them for you?”

Lars smiled and shook his head. “Thank you, no. I will talk to them when they get back from their vacation.”

“Oh, where did they go?”

“To a beach resort Reignn owns. It is a nice vacation resort, you should visit.”

June smiled and got a dreamy look on her face. “You know I just might. It sounds great.”

Claire came out of her shocked daze the words servants had put her in and asked. “We what now?”

Lars and June both glanced her way as they entered a kitchen that could be appreciated even by those that did not cook. All three of them sighed at the large room with gleaming granite counters in soft grays and whites. It came with a butler’s pantry and large windows that let in the sunlight. The floors were French oak that echoed the elegance of the kitchen and flowed through to the large separate dining area.

They moved through swing doors into the dining room, which was painted in a dove gray that complimented the kitchen. One wall was dominated by stunning glass doors.

Lars told Claire as she looked around at the exquisite room. “Braxton and Noah work for me. They are brothers, Noah is a former Hunter, and Braxton was a Shield. Noah is an excellent chef and Braxton is a butler or manservant, whichever you want to call him. He is well trained. We cannot take one without the

other.”

Claire smiled, there was more to the story about the brothers, she could tell from the warmth in Lars’ voice as he spoke of them. She would ask about them at another time, for now all she said was. “Of course we can’t, family is important. Will they want to work for Kammy and me?”

“They are dragons, of course they will.” He said when he saw her doubtful face. “But I will ask, I am sure it will not be a problem. If it is, I will make sure to find them employment somewhere else.”

“Okay.”

Changing the subject, Lars spread his arms out as he walked farther into the dining room and said. “Now, I imagined a large twelve-seater table here.”

Claire nodded and said. “Wood, with royal blue cushions on the chairs.” She looked out the large glass doors that led onto a huge covered in patio. “With a similar table and chairs for outside, and we will need a swimming pool. Kammy needs to swim, tigers like swimming, and a playground should go over there. That way we can sit on the patio and watch her.” She asked softly. “Can you see it?”

Lars took her hand and kissed the work roughened palm. “I can, very clearly my shadow.”

June asked, “I thought you said you were no good at this?”

Claire shrugged before murmuring. “I just know what I see here is right.”

June mumbled. “Oh, a seer thing, okay.”

Lars tucked Claire’s hand in the crook of his arm and said. “For the lounge...”

And on they went with Claire every now and again voicing something she saw or felt was right for that room or wall. Not once did June or Lars scoff at her ideas, they just wrote them down and added them to the list.

Two hours later, Kammy was in Lars’ arms, and Claire was exhausted. June said. “Lunch and then a nap for little tigers.”

Lars agreed. “Let me take you all to lunch.”

Then he told Claire. “While Kammy naps, we should go to my place and see what we would like to have shipped here.”

June snickered. “Got to say, that is a new take on come and see my etchings.”

“Hush female.” Snarled Claire. “Ruining the moment.”

June laughed as she went outside to hail the cab. Lars said

just in case Claire was unsure of what he was proposing.

“Claire, June is not wrong.”

“Oh, I know.” He was sure he heard her mutter as she walked out the door. “It better be what I am thinking!”

Shifters were impatient when they found their mates, bonding secured the relationship and that needed to happen as soon as possible. Trust was an enormous issue for Claire. Having Lars committed to their relationship, bound to her and Kammy, was essential to reinforce her and her cat’s belief he would not leave them.

Lunch was a mixture of laughter and delicious food. Kammy fell more and more under Lars’ spell as the meal progressed. She just loved her new Dada. Especially when Lars promised her she could meet his dragon and he would definitely take her flying over the castle, so Molly could see she had a dragon daddy too.

When she grew tired, Lars held her as his dragon sang for her. She joined in with her purr until she went to sleep. It was adorable.

Claire fell into the well of love. Just tipped right on over the side, and yes, there it was, exactly as she knew it would be. Her

future just waiting for her.

They drove back to the castle, and June took Kammy for her nap and to get started on the orders for Claire and Lars' home. She was also going to notify her work force that there was a mission called Decorate Claire's home.

Unimpressed Claire threatened retaliation and reminded June she owned guns. June then replied she had guns too. Lars finally dragged the females apart before they woke Kammy. He had plans, and they did not include his new daughter.

Claire was nervous as she walked into Lars' apartment, and as she toured his home, nerves evolved into agitation. In just his kitchen was every conceivable appliance known to man, and every one of them looked as though they were used often.

When she looked inside his lavish bathroom, she felt a whimper start in her throat, which became more of a whine when she peeked inside his closets and found it was full of expensive clothes from suits to jeans. Her heart dropped when she noticed the walls throughout the apartment displayed swords and numerous well-used weapons. When she faced him in his lounge, she noticed it had a barely used old-fashioned leather lounge suite and expensive art that decorated the walls

and graced the elaborate shelves and coffee table.

His home was not what she had expected. She had honestly thought she would find a bachelor's apartment with the required enormous TV and game console and spilled beer, pizza boxes and clutter all over the surfaces.

Lars' place was so far from any male's place she'd been to, she had no idea what to think. And what was worse, it was tidy, so damn tidy. There was not one speck of dust or anything out of place. She was nothing like this, as most of her friends could attest to, she was the least tidy person they knew.

She shook her head slowly from side to side. Lars took a step toward her, and she took one back as her hand curled over her heart.

He stopped moving as he studied her. "What is it, Claire?"

"Oh Lars, I can't... no... This!" She threw her hands out and whispered. "We can never work." Her eyes once more took in the elegantly furnished room. Everywhere she looked was class and sophistication.

Lars' dragon panicked when he saw his shadow start to fold in on herself. *Fix our shadow! She is sad. Say something. What do we do?*

Calm my friend, everything will be okay.

Lars' eyes narrowed as he thought back over the morning and her attitude to his obvious wealth and his family. With that in mind, he looked around, seeing his home as it must appear to her eyes. "My shadow are you saying a few things that can be broken, replaced and discarded are more important than what we can generate together? I live like this because I live alone. My apartment is well suited to a bachelor that has lived for many years to please himself. It has not always been this way." When she looked at him doubtfully, he smiled and told her, "Believe me, I have gone through the messy stage. The never be at home stage. The nothing in the house stage. The so cluttered Mama Verity threatened to burn the castle down just to clean it stage."

Claire was laughing as he said. "I am at the, everything in its place stage, but I am sure that too will pass. Although since Braxton and Noah arrived, it is even neater and cleaner than it was. They are good at that."

He shrugged as he saw her shoulders lowering and the tight way she held herself begin to relax. "I am sure you have been gathering things over the years, as I have while I waited for you

and Kammy to enter my life. Unlike you, I have had many more years to collect. So I am asking, are you saying no to us because you think I will weigh you against them?”

Claire wanted to shout. “Yes, of course I am! I am just a street kid who came from criminal parents. “But as she stood there looking at her mate, a male that thought no more for the couch he sat on than she did for the shirt she dressed in, she realized three things. One; she was better than this weak female standing here before her mate with all these insecurities. Two; objects, no matter how expensive, did not make the person. Only family, love, and truth did. Three; she was no longer that street kid or the scared, unwanted woman who needed the camouflage of her clothes to hide from people. There was no need to keep people at a distance to protect herself. She did that every day for her and Kammy armed with words and if needed, a gun. And now she knew if she could not keep her or Kammy safe, then this wonderful marvellous dragon, who stood here with her now and saw beneath the clothes to only her, would.

Tipping her chin up, she assured him in a firm voice. “No... No, I am not, but I also know I am better than what I have allowed myself to believe. I dressed like this.” She waved her

hand down her body, not realizing the effect she was having on Lars, whose tongue became glued to the roof of his mouth with wanting.

“For protection to discourage those that I did not trust, I used my camouflage well, but I suspect it is time to discover who I am without it. So before this goes any further, can you help me with a new look, to find a new me?”

He stalked her, she could call it nothing else but stalking as he paced toward her. “I happen to like how you dress, but in saying that, I understand your need to change. To evolve from the old to the new, we will keep your style but add quality, what do you think?”

She grinned. “Agreed, but in saying that I like my hair but I think a little tender loving care may be in order.”

“Your hair is fine, just as it is.” He said. As she backed away from him, he tracked her step for step as he murmured. “I so enjoy hair that has its own personality. We will leave that alone.”

“Well, if you insist.” She backed into the bedroom where she tore her tee-shirt over her head, at the same time kicking off her boots, and brought a hand to her jeans zipper and started to

lower it.

Every muscle in Lars' body had tensed as she revealed her luscious breasts wrapped in some gray cloth laughingly called a bra. When her hand moved over the zipper, he snapped, "Wait!"

Her face paled. "I am sorry, I thought..."

He stepped quickly to her, growling low in his throat. "My shadow, never apologize. I just..." his voice lowered even more, becoming more dragon than human. "I wish to unwrap the rest myself. I have thought of nothing else since I saw your delectable body walking toward me."

Claire lowered her eyes demurely as she breathlessly said. "Oh... Oh, I see. Well, I would hate to deprive you of something you have wanted."

A smile blossomed over her small face, deepening the green of her eyes as he reached out a hand and removed hers from the zipper. Then he moved her toward the bed and as they lowered to the mattress, she watched as his head lowered to hers, and finally... finally he kissed her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck as he slipped a hand behind her back to unsnap her serviceable bra. He slipped it from her body and tossed it away. These he would definitely

rectify, breasts like Claire's needed to be worshiped, not bound and controlled. Once his bounty was released, he lowered the zipper on her jeans and pushed them to the floor, revealing a tiny pink scrap of material.

Lars almost swallowed his tongue as he hoarsely stated. "My sweet, you are full of surprises."

Barely able to form words, she mumbled in reply. "You better be too... my mate"

Which made him laugh until she dragged his mouth to hers again and they fell deeper into the lush mattress, with sighs and groans of delight.

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

Lars stood in Reign's office as his brother paced in front of him. "No, I forbid it!"

"Brother."

"No!" Reign slashed his hand between them. "As your Lord. I will not condone this madness."

Lars smiled as he stood in front of Reign and his mother. His other brothers either sat or leaned against the walls around the room. Why they were all here in Reign's office was purely his annoying younger brother Keeper's fault.

The big mouth had seen Claire and Lars entering his apartment and had hotfooted it to June's place where he had coerced her into revealing Lars' relationship to Claire. He was not annoyed with June. She was still new to the castle and did not know how clever his brothers were at weaseling the juiciest bits of information from unsuspecting people. He would like to say he was surprised, but if it had not been Keeper, it would have been one of the others. They were nothing if not predictable.

So, when he ventured from his apartment, leaving his

shadow asleep and well satisfied, he had been ambushed and dragged here by none other than a smiling Keeper.

His dragon agreed. *Yes, ambushed, I bet our shadow is all warm and waiting for us. We should challenge Keeper to a swim in the pond. Then stand on his head.*

Lars sighed, thinking about Claire as he had left her. Then reminded his dragon. *Remember Papa said we were not allowed to do that anymore?*

His dragon's sigh was a gust of wind through his mind before he stated. *We were dragonets then.*

Lars sent him a smile as he said. *True, but this is family. And remember its family first.*

Shadow and cub are family now.

Well, that is true. But brothers and Mama are family, too.

“Is this right my son, have you found your shadow?” Asked Verity, and as much as she tried, she could not keep the hint of hurt from her tone.

Lars smiled as he inclined his head. “I was coming to tell you Mama, but as usual the news traveled faster than I did. I apologize.” He gave Keeper a hard look of retribution, which was answered with a grin.

Lars hugged Verity and said. “It is Claire Nash, Mama. She and Kammy, or should I say Kammy...” He told them about his first meeting with Kammy. They all laughed at the audacity of the sweet cub.

Reighn sighed as he looked at the love and amazement on his brother’s face, as he told them of Kammy and then Claire. He knew people saw the same expression on his face when he spoke of the wonder and joy of having young ones and finding his shadow. *Damn it!* He said to his dragon. *Our brother is to leave us.*

We will see him, and he has his own shadow and cub. This is a good time. Our brother is no longer sad.

Reighn agreed, but he did not want Lars to live away from the castle. Although as he remembered the frank and honest report Claire had written about her life until she arrived at Dragon’s Gap, he saw she would need the privacy of a house rather than an apartment in the castle. Just as she would need to have her home closer to town. The vibrant life of the streets would always call to her. It was what grounded her, at least until Lars became her center, which would happen in time.

Damn it! He would, of course, give his permission for Lars

to live in town, not that he really needed it: asking was just a formality. His knee jerk reaction of denial was he knew based in fear. He loved his brother and knew the torment he had endured over the years and the fear he lived with. It was only a few weeks ago he grieved the depths of his birth family's betrayal. Maybe living outside the castle would be good for him. Their mother must have thought the same as he heard her say.

“I expect you to attend Sunday family day. There will be no excuse, Claire and Kammy are ours now. Sunday is for us all to unite and catch up with each other as a family.”

Lars kissed her cheek. “I agree Mama, I will make Claire aware of the Sunday tradition you are starting.”

Reighn grinned as his dragon said. *See Mama, has laid the law down, brother is not leaving the family.*

Reighn nodded as he said to Lars. “I don't like it, but I understand the need you and Claire have to live in town. She understands you will remain my Prime, which will never change.”

“Yes, she does, and no it does not change, forever brother.” They clasped arms, then Reighn pulled him in for a hug as he whispered. “And brother, that will always be so.”

Lars nodded, too choked up to speak. Then Reign sighed loudly as he let him go. “I suppose we have to help you move all that stuff you prize.”

This was accompanied by groans and excuses from his brothers about how busy they were. Lars laughed as he said. “Well, as to that, we have a problem, I am sorry to say...” He told them what happened with Claire and their home.

When he finished. Verity flew from the room with a kiss on his cheek and a quick. “Good bye dear. I am happy for you. I must talk to Grace, I wonder why June has not contacted me.”

Keeper asked. “Did you check your phone?”

“Oh, my phone, I forgot.” She grumbled crossly as she pulled it from her pocket, and sure enough there were several messages from June, Sage, Edith and Grace. “I am gone.”

Reign looked at the empty doorway and said. “This deserves a drink brothers. My place, let’s go.”

Lars sighed as he messaged Claire. She had just come from the shower, and grinned as she read his message, then sent him a message back. *Family first, my mate.*

He sent back. *You are my family.*

Just then there was banging on the apartment door. Claire

cursed as she reached for her guns and realized she was not wearing any.

Sage burst into the bedroom, followed by Edith and June. “How could you bond, and without me!”

Claire quickly messaged Lars. *Oops, I’m in trouble, Sage is here. Later.*

She asked Sage as she waved her hand around the bedroom. “Did you want to be here?”

Sage flapped her hands about as she said. “Eww! Dear Goddess, no, you whack job. Just you know.”

“It’s like a code.” Edith said to June as she watched the two females.

June nodded. “It’s a weird sort of shorthand.”

Edith laughed. “I thought shifters were all okay with the mating and sex stuff. You know all free and wild like.”

Sage and Claire turned and stared at her. June grinned as Sage said with attitude, which Edith thought was totally not called for.

“If that was true Edith, why are you and Sharm always sneaking off to unknown places to, you know, get it on?”

“I call that being free and wild and there is no sneaking,

witch.” Edith grumbled, then on a brighter note she asked. “So are we doing girls night or what?”

“Of course we are, but first.” Sage turned to Claire and demanded. “Explain.”

“Oh... oh well... you know it was all Kammy...” She explained how she and Lars found out they were mates, finishing with. “I am sorry it was so fast.”

Edith nudged June with raised eyebrows saying. “I don’t think she means that.”

“Well, you never know.” June answered as they all looked at Claire, who blushed and snarled. “Shut it. Seriously, my lips are sealed.”

Sage sighed. “Okay, as she is not talking. I will take care of food and drinks. June, your job is to call everyone. Let’s get this going.”

With phones glued to their ears, they left the apartment.

“Who is all of them?” Claire asked Edith, who had dropped into an armchair as she told her. “You better dress in comfortable clothes. There will be games, loads of friggin games, and if it is anything like my night, it is the whole damn castle and town plus the Faerie Grove, and they can really

party.” She laughed at the look on Claire’s face. “Welcome to the friggin family, sister.”

“Well shit!”

Edith laughed again. “Exactly.”

Claire phoned Lars. “Hi.”

“Hello shadow, what are you doing?”

“Apparently there is a girl’s night.”

“I see and what happens on these nights?”

“Edith says there will be games. Did you not go to Edith and Sage’s night?”

“Well I did but sadly I do not remember too much.”

Claire smiled, he sounded as if he could not remember if he had been there or not. “I called to tell you there will be drinking, lots and lots of drinking.”

“Huh! Now I remember, which is why I am unsure what I am supposed to say to that. Oh, Reign, says it is normal and apparently we males are to attend.”

“Well, it can get unruly as Sage and Edee’s night did. Apparently, it was wild.”

Edith was grinning, remembering Lars and Stan playing the knife game called chicken. They had been so drunk that Verity

had taken the knife away and replaced it with a banana which, if she remembered rightly, they had not noticed.

Lars said. “Again, I am not sure what to respond to that, other than to say Reign says Kammy will stay with Molly and Ava and their nannies.”

“Okay, that is good. So now you can have a drink too.” She heard a smile in his voice as he said. “I am way ahead of you. My brothers have opened the dragon’s ale.”

Claire closed her eyes. Dragon’s ale was not for the faint of heart, it was potent. Whiskey was lemonade compared to Dragons’ ale. She, Sage and June had all tried it not long after they had arrived at Dragon’s Gap. It took two days for her to sober up enough to function. She looked at Edith and asked. “Edee, have you tried Dragon’s ale?”

Edith scowled. “No, Sharm says, it is too potent.” She eyed Claire and asked eagerly. “I could try it tonight.”

“Oh, you most definitely will.” Claire replied, and then she said to Lars. “Tell Sharm to be prepared. Edee is trying Dragon’s ale.”

“Dear Goddess!”

She whispered into the phone as she watched the impatient

Edith pace, waiting for her to finish her call. “It cannot be that bad.”

His reply did not reassure her. “We will find out. I will see you tonight or tomorrow.”

“Okay.” She disconnected and eyed the impatient Edith. “I should dress.”

“Well hurry, where can I get ale from. You know I missed all the action on my night. This will be fun with a capital F.”

Claire wide-eyed looked at her and said. “Ahh, do not worry June will have some. It is becoming a tradition for her to supply it.”

CHAPTER TWELVE:

Over the following six days, Lars and his shoppers brought everything, including flatware for their new home.

Yesterday, his apartment had been stripped and packed. They had stored all his weapons in an empty storage room on the utility level of the castle, after deciding having them in the house with Kammy was too risky. In the future, he would make a decision on what to do with them. Perhaps Strom would like to add them to his collection. Although Lars found it hard thinking of parting with some of his older weapons, they had been with him since his youth; they were like old friends. Claire, when he discussed it with her, told him it was his decision, but she thought he should keep them.

Only the bare essentials for the couple and Kammy were left this morning. Everything he and the ladies had ordered other than drapes and carpeting had been delivered to the castle. Much to Lars' amused satisfaction and the consternation of his brothers, who moaned and groaned every time they saw a delivery arrive.

He had decided on having the renovations done now, so offices for Lars and Claire were being built. The swimming pool and playground were already finished and the garage conversion would begin next week.

Kammy's bedroom and playroom were having murals painted by faeries, a gift from Queen Scarlett. The one in her bedroom was of dragons, flying, swimming and jumping or in any position that she and Molly could think of. Every dragon resembled Lars and his brothers and her grandfather, at Kammy's insistence, of course. Since she had gone flying with her new daddy, she was even more obsessed with them.

The mural for the playroom was of a jungle scene with big cats as well as bears and wolves hiding amongst the greenery. Claire had pointed out a faerie hiding in the flowers to Molly and Kammy the day before. The girls had spent the rest of the day searching for animals and faeries. It seemed to Lars that when the girls did find either one, it would disappear and reappear somewhere else. Magic was a wonderful thing, especially faerie magic.

Conor Towers was an ideal instructor for Kammy. He had taken her and Molly and several other cubs for a run several

times since Claire and Kammy had come to live with him. It seemed to go well, Conor was now looking at setting up adult shifters with younger ones as mentors to help them with shifting and learning social behavior. A tiger would have to be found to give her lessons later on, but for now Conor was happy to mentor the cubs.

Claire hummed as she poured milk into Kammy's cereal. Moving day was finally upon them. She had to admit she was as excited as Kammy, although she could sit still, unlike a little cub who could barely sit still long enough to eat her breakfast. Lars seemed distracted and kept turning his head left to right, and several times she or Kammy had to repeat themselves when they spoke.

Finally, Claire asked. "Lars are you okay? Is everything alright, we can move another day."

"What... No... No! I am sorry. Everything is fine, I guess my dragon is excited, just like Kammy." He said as he rescued a glass of juice from falling as Kammy waved her spoon around. "All will be fine, I am looking forward to our new home."

"Well, if you are sure?"

"My love, I am." He kissed her and yet Claire felt his

attention was divided.

Still, he joined in on the conversations with her and Kammy and when his brothers came to collect boxes; he joked with them as though nothing was wrong.

Four hours later, Lars stood in among the boxes and furniture in what was to become the playroom for Kammy. His shadow and her friends were debating the placement of the furniture in the formal lounge. It sounded like June was winning, which was good since it would save him moving it later. He and Mama Verity had spent the better part of yesterday organizing the layout for furniture in each room.

He was pleased, as was his dragon, that they were finally ready to start their new lives in their new home. Braxton and Noah were pleased to stay, and both agreed to come and work for them. Claire had liked the males on sight, Lars thought maybe it was because they had been warriors, so she felt comfortable with them.

After a long debate, it was decided Noah and Braxton's days off would be Saturday and Sunday. The only one happy about this decision had been Claire. Lars and the brothers had tried to persuade her it was unnecessary, even Kammy gave it

her best shot, but Claire was adamant they could manage without the brothers.

“I am sure we can manage for one day, we go to family at the castle on Sunday.” Frowning at their concern, she had stated. “I do not understand why you are worried.”

Lars had hurriedly explained they were only worried about her doing too much on her days off. She had eyed the three males suspiciously but had not pushed the point. When she had left the room, he made Noah promise to fill the freezer with food.

Lars had been warned and not just by Kammy, Sage and June had also told him of Claire’s inability to cook. Even she had told him. And yet he still tried to eat the surprise breakfast she had made for him just after moving she and Kammy into his apartment. He had taken one mouthful of scrambled eggs and given up. Still to this day he was unsure how she could kill eggs as badly as she had done. He had taken her and Kammy to breakfast, then begged Noah to return early.

Both Braxton and Noah had elected to live in town. The brothers were moving into their own homes in a small block of twenty apartments, with other retired Hunters and Shields as

neighbors. Lars had heard through Johner, Braxton had even been on several dates.

Kammy was enchanted with both males, especially when she saw their dragons. Lars noticed when he arrived this morning both dragons had been added to the mural.

They had moved almost all the heavy furniture in, and the appliances had been installed the day before. All that was left were boxes from Lars' apartment and the large dining room table which his brothers, all six of them, were heaving through the patio doors as he watched.

He had offered to help and been not so politely turned down. Apparently, there were enough hands doing enough damage. It had taken them fifteen minutes to decide on how they were to approach the problem. Now, with a lot of growling and cursing, the table had become jammed in the doorway.

He was thinking of telling his brothers their mother and Grace had arrived, but they appeared before he could, and to his amusement the cussing instantly ceased.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:

With his head cocked to the side, Lars was listening hard for the sound he had been hearing on and off for some time. He asked his dragon. *Do you hear that?*

I do, where is it coming from?

Lars turned his head slightly and tried to visualize what it was he was hearing. It was so faint as to be only a murmur of sound.

I do not know, are we the only one's hearing this?

I think we are.

He realized he had been hearing the sound since the small hours of the morning, which had caused him to wake repeatedly throughout the rest of the night. He turned his head again, trying to get a fix on the location. He was sure it was not a harmful sound, but it was definitely a cry for attention.

Claire's hand touching his face brought him back to the here and now. When his eyes focused on her, he was concerned by the worried look on her face. "Claire, what is it?"

"You tell me, you are distracted. Your attention is somewhere else. What is going on?"

Only then did he realize everyone was looking at him. Frowning, he lifted his head and scented the air. “I think something or someone is calling me. As no one else seems to hear it but my dragon and me, I would say it is definitely directed at me.”

Verity asked. “What does it feel like?”

“Distressed, sadness filled with pain. Unfortunately, it is so faint it is hard to know if I am correct.” He looked around at all the dragons there and said. “It seems I am right. None of you are hearing the sound?”

With a quick look to everyone and receiving negative shakes of their heads. Reign asked Lars. “What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know.”

Soon all the dragons were scenting the air and looking concerned. Keeper stepped out of the front door and looked up and down the street. He came back and told them. “Nothing is out there.”

Storm did a quick look around the backyard with the same result. “Nothing out there.”

Claire said. “It seems to me someone is trying to get your

attention. Why don't we fly over the town and see if we can locate whoever is doing it?"

Sharm and Keeper said together. "We will come with you!"

"Really!" Edith asked. "Both of you."

Sharm said. "My soul, he may need me."

Keeper grinned at Sharm as he said. "No brother, do not worry, I will help Lars and Claire. You stay here so you can finish placing the small table into the dining room."

Sharm sent him a warning growl, and he was not the only one. Every male there did the same. Before they could offer any more of a protest or stop him, Keeper raced out the door and was airborne in seconds.

Storm said to his mother. "I told you he was unnecessary when he hatched."

Stan snarled. "Small table."

"I wish he moved like that when we were carrying that thing." Johner grumbled as he pointed to the large dining table.

Lars took Claire's hand, "We will not be long. June has the plan."

Reighn's muttered, "You better not be..." Was cut off when Sage poked him with her elbow.

She waved them away. “Go... go now.”

Outside Lars transformed and a gorgeous navy-blue dragon, fifty foot long with slate-colored eyes stood in his place.

Claire sighed as she said. “Oh my Goddess, you are truly beautiful. I know I say it every time, but I am in awe at your magnificence.” She stroked her hand over the warm scales on his side. “Delightful, my very own dragon.”

Before he could reply, they heard Molly and Kammy both screech. “*Dada. Unca Lars.*”

Claire hurried around his snout as she said. “Quick, let’s go, before they see you. How they know when one of you shifts, I don’t understand. They must have you tagged.”

With help from his leg, she was astride the dragon in seconds. Then they were in the air, just as they heard the first wail from the doorway. When Claire felt her dragon slow, she tapped his side and said. *Do not even think of it. She will be fine!*

But she is so small.

You are not her toy. She has to learn. Now concentrate, someone other than your daughter may need you.

He sighed but carried on flying and was met by Keeper as

they flew over the castle. The two dragons flew in spiralling circles above Dragon's Gap, searching for a sound only Lars could hear. Claire could tell when Lars located the origin of the sound, he nodded to Keeper, and together the dragons flew down to land in front of the medical center.

Claire slipped from his back as Lars and Keeper went from dragon to human, and asked. "Here?"

"Yes here." Lars rushed into the medical ward of the center with Claire and Keeper following close behind.

Surprised, Ella asked. "Lord Lars, what can I do for you?"

"I do not know, something is calling me here."

Ella acknowledged both Claire and Keeper with a nod and a smile as she asked. "What is it, Prime?"

"If I knew, I would tell you." He said absently.

Claire moved to stand between them when Ella moved back from the slightly distraught male. Wide-eyed, she murmured to Claire. "I have never seen Lord Lars like this before."

Soothingly, Claire replied. "Neither have we, so we are sort of going with the flow here. Apparently, he is hearing something none of us can, and we are following the sound."

Ella said. "He thinks it is coming from within the ward."

“That is the theory.” Claire replied as they turned to watch him.

Lars moved into the middle of the room and was slowly turning in a circle. Then he stalled on a half turn and pointed toward a dark corner warded off by a crimson, three paneled screens. With his dragon in his voice, he asked. “What is behind there?”

Healer Donald Patten came hurrying past Keeper Claire and Ella, not even noticing who was there. He arrived out of breath and apologetic. “Lord Prime Lars, no one told me you were here. I am in charge.”

He gave Ella a searing look, which Claire was glad to see she returned. However, she still moved a pace in front of her to block the healer’s line of sight to her friend. Apparently, the look annoyed Keeper, who shifted restlessly behind them.

Like Edith, Claire did not like Donald. She knew there was something not right with him, but could not put her finger on what it was. The male was always overly polite to her and June, which seemed to set her cougar on alert. One day she would figure it out, but until then, she and June kept out of his way.

He asked Lars. “Obviously no one is here to aid you. So

Lord Lars, what can I help you with?"

Claire snorted in disgust for the slight to Ella.

Lars asked. "I wish to know what or who is behind that screen."

Donald looked confused as to why Lars was asking the question but he answered anyway. "That is an unfortunate infant, barely alive. Not of course a hatchling. Sadly, he will not survive much longer."

Claire gasped as she asked. "Ella, did you know about this?"

Ella shook her head. "No, I have not long been on duty. Donald was not here when I arrived to give his report."

"How long ago was that?" Claire asked, anger simmering in her stomach.

"Thirty minutes ago. I just entered the ward as you arrived."

"I will seriously have words with Sharm about this. It is not good enough." Claire angrily stated.

Ella nodded. "I will speak to him as well."

Donald said in his pompous voice, which always grated on Claire's nerves. "I was occupied elsewhere. Our Lord Sharm understands I cannot be everywhere at once. What would you

have me do? It is not like I have help, what with Ella off all the time.”

Ella growled with Claire and funnily enough Keeper. A little perturbed by the sounds coming from the three people, Donald swallowed and nervously moved closer to Lars.

“Prime, the infant was brought in late last night and has deteriorated ever since. We ascertain it is only just birthed. We do not know what species it is or how the infant was delivered here. Apparently, it just appeared in the crib.”

No one there missed hearing the disinterest and lack of compassion in his voice or the many times he referred to the infant as an it.

Claire barely held her temper at bay as she asked. “Why did you not call Edith and ask her to help you?”

Donald gave her a condescending smile as he said. “Lady Claire, it is highly unlikely a person could actually do what is rumored she can.”

“Her shadow says she can.” Stated Keeper, his dragon making his voice sound deeper and more sinister.

Ella shivered in response to the danger in his tones. Keeper said in the quiet tones of a confident dragon warrior. “As my

brother seems to be concerned elsewhere, I will warn you only once. Do not use that tone again with his shadow, and that is not a rumor. Lord Lars and Lady Claire are bonded.”

Lars snapped into awareness. He looked at his angry brother and the closed face of his shadow and said to Donald. “Leave now!”

Donald blustered. “Prime I apologize, I did not know.”

“**NOW!**” His dragon roared. “Do not let me see you again. Leave.”

Keeper moved ever so slightly, but it was enough for the healer. He almost ran from the room. Lars looked at Claire. “I am sorry Claire.”

She waved his apology away. “Nothing I haven’t heard before.”

He gave her a hard look, then decided to let it go for now. “Ella, can you help me?”

“Of course, Prime Lars.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:

They all walked to the screen, and as Ella moved closer to Claire, she asked. “Why would we talk to Edee?”

Before she could answer, Lars told her. “Edee can sense the age, species and date of birth of any species. Did you not get the memo?”

“No Prime Lars, I did not.”

Claire asked. “She did not tell you herself?”

A little hurt, Ella shook her head. Claire looked at her and said. “I bet she thought you knew already.”

Ella frowned. “Maybe.”

“Seriously, with what she has gone through lately. Ella, are you going to be mad at her?”

Ella exclaimed. “Oh no, she is my friend.”

“Exactly.” Then Claire told Lars. “I will look into it.”

“Thank you, Claire.”

He pulled the screen away, to expose a very tiny baby lying under a sheet. No one had swaddled or even covered the infant with a warm blanket.

Claire cried angrily. “This is so wrong.”

“What is wrong with him?” Lars asked Ella as he lifted the baby from the crib. “I am assuming he is a male.”

Ella was reading the chart as she absently replied. “Yes male, it seems he will not settle or sleep for long periods of time. He has not taken any formula, and it appears they have tried them all. It does not say why and what tests were done.”

“So, they leave him to die?” Claire was so angry, she wanted her guns. “I cannot believe the healers are so cruel, as to do this.”

Lars soothed her. “Hush my shadow. We will get to the bottom of this.” He asked Ella. “Who attended the infant?”

Ella blanched as she read the signature on the bottom of the chart. “Donald.”

“Of course.” Lars looked at the small hatchling in his hands and knew even as small as this little scrap of a miracle was, he had called for him. Lars’ dragon surfaced as he placed his face near the infants and sniffed.

Ours... Our hatchling.

Yes, he is. Lars agreed, as he looked at Keeper. “Brother, he needs you.”

Keeper moved pass Claire with a soft squeeze to her arm in

reassurance. He placed his large hand on the hatchling's forehead and over his eyes as he took him from Lars.

His dragon sighed and grunted. *Too much pain and too much guilt for a small one.*

Keeper agreed. *Little hatchling carries too much weight. His birth mother died, but not because of him. I should imagine bad life choices. He is lucky to be alive.*

His dragon snorted. *Hatchling is very strong to call for brother and shadow. To know who he needs for parents.*

Keeper smiled. *I agree, now it is time to give him some relief.*

Together they removed the feelings surrounding his birth and any memories of the female that carried him. There seemed to be deaths the infant was sure happened because of his birth. Keeper and his dragon removed those memories as well. They looked to see if the baby knew how he arrived at Dragon's Gap, but he did not.

A mystery for another day. Said his dragon. *Let us give him happy hatchling memories.*

Good idea.

Together they went to work, doing what they did best,

giving the baby memories of Claire and Lars and the sound of their voices. Then Keeper's dragon who adored Kammy placed her voice along with her laugh in the baby's memory. They also introduced voices from the other members of the family as echoes in his mind, similar to what a hatchling would hear in a womb.

When they were finished, Keeper removed his hand and cuddled the baby close as his dragon crooned to him. The baby flicked his eyes open and Keeper grinned in surprise to see the baby had gray eyes.

“How appropriate, the same eye color as his daddy's.”

He handed him back to Lars, who took him gingerly as the baby's face scrunched up and he weakly mewled in distress. He held the baby out to Claire. “My love, he needs you.”

“Oh, I bet he is hungry.” Claire smiled at Ella as she handed her a small diaper and a bundle of baby clothes. Claire dressed him like she had been doing it forever. Then she swaddled him and wrapped a blanket around his small body. Ella handed her a bottle as she found a seat and started to feed the hungry infant.

“So now we know he is not sick.” Said Ella softly as she stroked her finger down the soft baby cheek while he sucked

furiously at the bottle.

Claire smiled. “You better call home and arrange a nursery my love and you Uncle Keeper, should call the family and let them know.”

Both males grinned and saluted her. Lars said. “As you say, Mama.”

Ella said. “I will arrange his formula and some diapers.”

Minutes later, Keeper said as he shut his phone. “Mama said she and Grace will shop now for clothes.”

Claire told him. “He is tiny.”

He grinned. “I sent a photo, and Reign said he needs a name to record the claim. Do you have a name?”

“That is his daddy’s department. I named Kammy.”

Keeper said quietly as he watched her and the baby. “Edith will wait for you, Sharm has gone to talk to Donald.”

“Wow, that was quite the phone call.”

Keeper nodded to Lars, who was just ending his call. “Your shadow got to him before me.”

“Oh, I see.”

Lars came back and said. “All settled, June and Sage are setting up the nursery.”

“They can get furniture at this time of the day?” Claire asked, she had been visualizing the baby sleeping in an empty drawer until tomorrow.

He smiled as he kissed her forehead. “She is the Dragon Lady, so yes she can.”

“I forgot that.” Relieved, she rocked her baby boy. “We will go home as soon as he is finished his bottle. Why do you think he can eat now?”

Lars said. “He is in his Mama’s arms, and his father is here to protect him, why should he not. I think he was pining for us.”

Claire smiled. “Yeah, that is what I think.”

Ella tentatively asked. “Would it not be better for him to remain here for a few days until he puts on weight Lady Claire?”

Claire lifted her head from the study of her son and smiled at Ella. “Firstly, why am I all of sudden Lady Claire?”

Ella said stiffly. “I think that is obvious.”

Claire grimaced as she muttered. “You dragons and your customs.” In a louder voice, she asked. “Okay, so why were you not at my girl’s night?”

“I was away visiting the family estate.” By her tone and the

look in her eyes, it had not been fun.

“Well next girl’s night, you will be there.”

“Yes Lady Claire.”

“Now as to why it will not be good for him to stay here. I would be underfoot every minute of the day and if I wasn’t these two would and then there is the rest of the family. No, for your peace of mind and the centers, it will be better if we take him home.”

Keeper asked her. “Would your staff really like our Dam and Grace as well as the Dragon Lord here all day, every day?”

Ella breathed out in surprise. “No... No, I am sure that would not be good.”

Lars laughed as he said. “Then there is Lady Sage and June, not to mention Edee.”

Keeper said “Imagine, Molly and Kammy here every minute.”

Claire said. “Alright you two, I think she has it now.”

Lars told Ella. “He called me to come for him. We cannot abandon him now. Home is where he needs to be, and I am sure you or Sharm will visit every day.”

She agreed with a smile. “Well, that is true.”

Lars stroked a finger down the hatchling's cheek. "He needs to feel wanted, to feel the love of his mother's arms and his father's heart.

Looking up into his face, a face that had become so dear to her so quickly. Claire placed her hand on his cheek. "Yes, he does. He also needs a name to know he is a part of the family."

Just then Edith arrived. "I am sorry we could not wait. Sharm needed to talk to someone. You know the T.W.A.T."

Claire and Ella barely stopped their laughter from spilling out as she spelled out her name for Donald. Edith hugged Ella. "Hey you, we missed you at girl's night."

Ella sighed. "I missed you too. Sadly, I had to go to the family estate."

Edith pushed her a little away. "Ella, you should have told me. I would have gone with you."

"Edee, it was okay." She smiled, but Edith could still see the hurt in her eyes.

"If you say so." She turned to Claire and Lars, telling them. "Your mothers are crazy, running around like the world is ending. So we came here to hide."

Kammy said worriedly. "*Edee say we can.*"

Lars told her and Molly. “Of course you can my kitten and you too Molly. Come see the hatchling.”

Both girls moved slowly over and looked into the wrinkled face of the small baby as he drank from his bottle. Kammy said. “*He is squishy.*”

Claire laughed, then said. “He will not be so squishy when he is a little older.”

She looked at her mother doubtfully as she said. “*Okay Mama.*”

Molly stood looking at the baby, her face screwed up in a frown. She looked under Claire’s chair. Then she moved and looked behind the chair, finally she asked. “*Edee where babbie?*”

Edith looking confused and said. “Kammy’s Mama is holding him honey.”

Molly looked at Edith and then Claire, then the baby. She held her hands apart and asked as though she was not sure they understood her question. “*Babbie small?*”

Edith grinned as she assured her. “Yep, but he will grow.”

She too looked doubtful as she repeated what Kammy had said. “*Okay Edee.*”

Together the girls looked at each other as much to say adults were crazy. Keeper told the girls. “You know you two started out like that?”

They both looked at him and blinked, then they shook their heads, Kammy said. “*You funny Unca Keepa.*”

Molly crossed her arms and said. “*Me not.*”

To forestall the brewing argument Keeper and the girls were going to get into. Claire cleared her throat gently and asked Edith. “Can you tell us what species he is please?”

Amused at the giant man who looked like he was about to square off against two under five-year-old’s. Edith said. “Sure.” She placed her hand over the baby and smiled. “He is a full blood moon bear or what is known as an Asian bear. That is what they are called in the books I found, when I did all my research into bears.”

They all knew Edith had been raised human and did not know she was a bear until about five years ago.

She said now. “They are one of the more secretive breeds of the world. So, no one is sure how many there are. They are very rare.” She smiled at the couple as she told them. “He is a miracle to be here, and he is only three days old. Do you know

how he got here?”

Keeper answered for them. “No idea, a mystery to solve some other time.”

Edith shrugged. “So, have you decided on a name?”

Lars nodded. “I like, Kale Nash Axton. What do you think, Claire?”

“Oh Lars, thank you, that is wonderful. What do you think, Kammy?”

“It like my name.”

Edith smiled. “What is your name, sweetie?”

She said proudly. *“Kammy Lara Axton, me like Dada.”*

Lars murmured as he and Claire stared at one another. “Fate decided, before we even met.”

Edith said. “You all sound surprised, and yet we are all magical. So, it stands to reason the fates would guide, and in some cases shove us together.”

Lars murmured. “I suppose that could be true. Maybe we chafe at it so much because we like thinking we run our own lives. Not some mystical beings.”

Edith laughed. “He says that and we have Elementals running around the world.”

Claire stared down into her son's face and smiled. "I guess Elementals and fates, they all get us to where we need to be in the end."

And looking at her and the baby. No one could disagree. Edith agreed softly. "That is true."

Claire raised the baby to her shoulder and gently rubbed his back. He mewled, and she kissed the soft fuzz on his head, causing him to let go a deep sigh. It was as though all his muscles relaxed in relief and he burped, then instantly fell asleep. She could feel her heart melting as tears came unbidden to her eyes.

Concerned, Lars asked. "My soul, what has come over you?"

"Happy tears. Honest to goodness happy tears."

EPILOGUE:

Ella sighed as she moved away from the small family, feeling annoyed with herself that she felt envious of a three-day-old hatchling because he was already loved. She had never been loved like that. If nothing else, this week, which had seemed like a month at her family's estate proved it.

She knew she would probably go the rest of her life without that kind of love, and the sadness of the thought almost choked her. From long practice she stopped the tears in her chest, just as she had done many times in the past, and would no doubt do again in the future, her long lonely future. Annoyed all over again at her self-pity, she went to find a carrier for the infant.

She did not see the dragon who watched her like a mouse in a trap.

Keeper asked his dragon. *Is she our Shadow?*

I do not know.

I thought it was instinctive.

Really! Did you read that in a book?

You know, dragon. You disparage books, but you read and hoard just as much as I do.

Let us get back to the topic of our Shadow!

CHARACTERS:

Rene` and Verity Kingsley.

Reighn and Sage Kingsley.

Molly and Ava.

Storm Kingsley.

Sharm and Edith Kingsley.

Lars and Claire Kingsley.

Kammy and Kale.

Johner Kingsley.

Stanvis and Jacqueline Kingsley.

Keeper Kingsley.

Grace Orlov.

June Bradly.

Ella Field.

Braxton Hogan.

Noah Hogan.

Donald Patten.

Continue on Book 4 Storm & Charlie