



HEART BROKEN
WOLF
SHIFTER

SNOW HAVEN SHIFTERS

BRITTANY
WHITE

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Thank you for reading!

Her Alpha Dragon Protector (SNEAK PEEK)

Chapter 1

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RAVEN

Raven's long black hair was braided and wound around her head like a coronet. Her make-up was perfect and had been expertly applied by her sister, who was an expert at such things.

Her brown eyes sparkled with excitement, outshining the sequins that decorated her white dress that glinted in the light every time she moved.

Robin, Raven's older sister, smiled at her and said, "If you don't calm down, you're going to have a heart attack before you even have the chance to get married."

"I know. It's just that I've been in love with Zach for eight years. That's more than a quarter of my entire life," Raven said.

Raven sat on the bed and smiled at the thought of the tall bear shifter who had been the center of her world for what seemed like forever. She could feel his gentle hands touching her face, caressing her, and holding her close to him. His kisses made her knees weak. Zach had one look that he could give her that would make her insides explode.

Tonight, she would learn what true ecstasy was. They would lie together as husband and wife and consummate their union as he filled her with a part of himself and his seed.

Raven knew that Zach wanted cubs right away. Although she wanted to wait, so that she could have a few years with just the man of her dreams, she wouldn't be upset if she got pregnant the first night they were ever together in that way.

She had met Zach her freshman year in high school and practically fell in love with him the first time that she laid eyes on him. He was everything she had always dreamed of in a man. He was tall – six foot three. He was very muscular, and it was quite obvious that he took care of his body. His blond hair curled at his collar. Zach's blue eyes were like a clear lake on a warm summer's night. Raven was practically drooling on herself when the teacher sat him next to her in class and asked her to show him around. They had been together ever since.

Zach had proposed to her six months ago at her graduation party. She had earned her bachelor of science degree in criminal justice, with thoughts of going on to law school. It all depended on what she and Zach decided to do. She might just work security for her bear clan. Her father was the alpha and had already promised her a position on the team.

It wasn't like she didn't deserve it. She was adept as a fighter in both human and bear form. She had taken Krav Maga and Ju Jit Su. Her degree only made her that much more eligible for the position.

Robin interrupted her thoughts.

“You have something old since you are wearing Mom's pearl necklace,” Robin said.

Raven fingered the smooth pearls. A tiny diamond pendant broke up the pearls and lay delicately between the swell of her breasts.

“Does my dress, veil, and shoes count as something new?” Raven asked.

“I think it does,” Robin said. “Since you are borrowing my pearl and diamond earrings, you have something borrowed. Now, what about something blue?”

Raven shyly lifted up the hem of her dress to reveal the garter that graced her thigh. It was white lace and had a blue ribbon threaded through the middle of it.

“I've got that covered, too,” Raven said.

Robin looked at her watch and asked, “Are you ready?”

“I’ve never been readier for anything in my entire life,” Raven said, standing up so quickly that she almost lost her balance.

They headed down the stairs, and as they arrived at the point where her father was to walk her down the aisle, Raven knew that there was something wrong. All of the guests were standing and whispering to themselves. There was no music playing.

Her father leaned over and said, “I tried to catch you before you came downstairs. I was just heading up. Zach just had this note delivered.”

Her father handed her a note that had been carefully folded, just like Zach would do. He was a perfectionist and nothing was ever out of place with him.

Raven opened the note and saw Zach’s precise handwriting.

The words floated around on the paper, and it took a minute for Raven to comprehend them.

Dear Raven:

I’m sorry to do this to you. You have been the center of my life for so long that it’s hard to imagine you not being a part of it. I tried so hard to make it right, but it would never be, for me. I’ve fallen in love with another woman, Karen, and there is no way that I can go through the mating ceremony with you. I thought that I could leave her behind, but I can’t.

I hope you find your fated mate and that you have an incredible life.

All the best,

Zach

The tears blinded Raven as she crumbled those hated words in her hand. She hoisted the bottom of her dress and fled back up those stairs to seek refuge in the room that she had been so excited in a few minutes ago.

Robin was hot on her heels.

As Raven tugged at the dress that was now choking her, she exclaimed, “Get it off, get it off.”

“Let me unzip it,” Robin said, her voice smooth, trying to help her sister calm down.

Raven stepped out of the dress after flinging her shoes across the room.

Robin hastily unclasped the pearls, not wanting them to be destroyed in Raven’s grief.

“How could he do this to me?” Raven asked. “How could he humiliate me here and now? He could have told me a long time ago. I wouldn’t have been happy, but at least I wouldn’t have been destroyed in front of everyone.”

“My guess is that he didn’t want the confrontation,” Robin said. “He is a coward and couldn’t tell you, or anyone else, face to face.”

Raven had managed to shed herself of her wedding fineries and stood naked in the middle of the room.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Robin said. “I know you’re about to shift and run until you run out of forest. But I have a better idea. There is a room full of people down there from both sides of the family. Put on the dress you were intending to wear to the reception and go downstairs. Party like it’s 1999. That will show him that he didn’t hurt you. He dumps you at the altar and you party.”

Raven looked at her sister and squinted her eyes.

“No one knows that ‘Party like it’s 1999’ refers to the idea that when Y2K arrived the world was going to end, so everyone should party like it’s the last day of their lives,” Raven said.

“You understood what I meant, so that’s all that matters,” Robin said. “You can either run away and hide or show the bastard that you just don’t care.”

Raven nodded. She always had a lot of pride and the idea of running didn’t set well with her after her sister provided an alternative.

As she changed, Raven said, “You know, I had set up my whole life to focus on Zach and the family that I hoped we could have. Now, what am I going to do?”

“I’ll tell you what to do. First, you are going to go back to school and get that law degree. Second, you are going to take the position on Father’s security force like we talked about. Third, you are going to spend every extra dime you make and every extra second you have doting on your nephew,” Robin said.

It took Raven a few seconds to understand what Robin was talking about.

Then, she said, “You’re going to have a cub? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to wait until the wedding and mating ceremony was over. This was to be about you,” Robin said.

Robin and Raven headed back downstairs to where most of the guests were standing around awkwardly.

Raven said, “I hear that there’s a party going on. Let’s get it rolling.”

Although she put on a happy face for everyone, including her parents and sister, she hurt so badly inside that she wanted to curl up into a ball and cry. By the time the night was done, she was too exhausted to cry. She simply fell onto her bed and let the darkness overtake her.

When she woke up, Raven felt an emptiness inside that she had never imagined could exist. Her entire teenage and adult life had been wrapped around Zach. She always made her decisions based on what Zach was doing or what Zach would want. It never occurred to her that she would need to create an identity that was just her.

She shifted into her black bear form and slipped out the back door, avoiding her father and mother. As she ran through the wooded area behind her house, she thought about who she was — starting with the basics. When she thought of her favorite food, she just thought of what Zach liked to eat. Her favorite colors were those that Zach liked to see her in.

“Ah, hell, no,” she told herself. “This is going to have to change. I can’t believe that I did this to myself.”

Raven made two promises to herself right then. The first was that she was going to figure out who she was and stay true to herself. The second was that she was never going to fall in love again, especially if it meant that she had to give up a part, or all, of her identity to be with another person.

Two days later, Robin went into the hospital. She was having some complications and would have to stay on bed rest for the next three months until the cub could be safely born. Raven moved into the house with Robin and her husband, since he still had to work.

Efron was born a healthy, happy cub. He was definitely going to give his parents a run for their money.

Raven did as she promised herself. She enrolled in law school, took a position with the clan’s security team, and set out to find herself.

TWO YEARS LATER – IAN

“T ransylvania might have gotten too hot for Dracula,” Joshua joked, as he sipped his beer. Joshua, or Josh, was the head of his wolf clan’s security team. The brown-haired, blue-eyed man never seemed to take anything seriously, although those closest to him knew of the deep sorrow that he held close to his chest.

Luke, the alpha of the local dragon clan, who had recently gotten married, was one of the chosen few who knew Josh well – probably better than Josh would have liked to admit.

He had a rare night away from home, since Josh’s mother, Wanda, and her best friend, Kathy, were hanging out at the house. They were there supposedly to hang out with Luke’s wife, Rowena, who was a very powerful witch. However, everyone knew the truth. The two older women were there to spoil the hell out of Luke’s and Rowena’s two babies.

“I highly doubt that Dracula would come all the way out to Snow Haven, Alaska to build a huge castle, surround it with fences and barbed wire, and import an entire army of security officers,” Luke said.

“It would keep out those pesky assholes with wooden stakes,” Ian quipped.

Ian was a lion shifter who owned a security company comprised of shifters who had served in the military or who Ian thought would fit into what was needed.

James, a bear shifter, groaned and said, “Don’t encourage him, Ian. Pretty soon, he’ll have a story going where all the

beautiful young women in Alaska are going to go missing, since Dracula is a very hungry dude.”

“There are more populated states that would fit a Dracula theory just a bit better,” Ian said. “He would blend right in with all the people in California, especially Los Angeles. Everything goes out there.”

The men laughed as Beau, who owned the club called *Shifter’s Paradise*, refilled their glasses.

“Did you notice that all of the security officers who patrol the area are wearing white camouflage uniforms?” Beau asked.

“I didn’t know you ever left the bar. How do you know that?” Luke asked.

“I told him,” Ian said, laughing.

“Then, I got curious, so I headed out to see for myself. I thought that maybe Ian was trying to pull my leg, because no one really wears white camouflage uniforms. Sure as hell, I saw them with my own two peepers,” Beau said.

“I guess they must be a little disappointed that it hasn’t snowed yet,” Josh said. “Because now, they just look like a bunch of idiots walking around.”

“Whether they look like a bunch of idiots or not, I don’t like it,” Luke said. “The last thing that we need here is something coming in and disrupting our way of life. We finally got everything settled down since Rowena arrived in town followed by the hit squads who were after her.”

All of the men nodded. The peace and tranquility of Snow Haven did get turned upside down after Rowena arrived in town seeking safety from the hordes of shifters and other witches who were trying to kill her.

“Do you think that it is a government establishment or a private company?” James asked.

“I don’t know. I hate the thought of either one coming into the area. Both types of people think that they can do whatever

they want to without any kind of consequences. They create trouble just with the extra people being in the area.”

“Not to mention the fact that they usually have no problem going after the local wildlife and polluting our water and air,” Beau added.

“I’m leaning toward it being a government facility, although I could be wrong,” Luke said. “It seemed to go up practically overnight. A month and a half ago, that was the outskirts of the forest. Next thing I know, trucks are coming in, around the clock, with workers, and now we have a structure that would rival Buckingham Palace. A privately owned corporation could do everything that quickly, but my instincts tell me that it’s government.”

“That’s the last thing that we need. There are parts of the government that know that shifters, witches, and even vampires exist peacefully among the people, but they pretty much are on a don’t ask don’t tell. If other parts of the government get ahold of the information, they might exploit that knowledge,” James said.

“Private industries do as well. You know all of the rumors and conspiracy theories surrounding some of the biggest companies in the world,” Beau said.

“Me and some of my boys will check out the place,” Ian said. “We’ll watch it to see what kinds of activities take place there.”

“I’ll join you,” Josh said.

“I figured that you would,” Ian said.

“You, on the other hand, have the job of making sure that those boys of yours don’t fly around, setting fire to things as dragons, and then wreak hell with their magical abilities.” James laughed.

“I’m leaving that up to Rowena,” Luke said. “She’s the only one who has the skills to control those hellions.”

Josh smiled into his drink, but inside he hurt. His daughter, Stormy, would have been ten. She had already been showing signs of being very precocious, just like her mother, Naomi.

Naomi had been the love of his life. They had met when he was a small cub. Her mother and his mother had been close friends. Ironically, Naomi's mother had even known Rowena's mother, who had died when Rowena was just a little girl.

Since his mother and Naomi's mother had done practically everything together, Naomi had been a constant in his life. Their relationship had gone from them playing together, to them aggravating each other, to them falling in love.

Naomi had decided to take Stormy to Juneau to buy her some clothes and just have a fun day out. They were on their way home when some asshole, who had too much to drink, ran a red light and t-boned their car. His wife and daughter were killed instantly while the drunk walked away without a scratch or a bruise.

A huge part of Josh died that night. For the longest time, it took so much effort to even breathe that he was sure that he was going to simply wither away and die. His heart and soul were shattered into a million pieces, and the world was nothing but a gray mass of emptiness.

Every time he closed his eyes, he pictured their faces. He could feel his little girl's butterfly kisses on his cheek and hear her sweet voice, "I love you, Daddy."

His wife had the clearest blue eyes that shone with love for him and his daughter. Her touch brought him to his knees. She had a sarcastic sense of humor that matched his own. Nights were sweet and tender – even the nights when they simply held each other close to each other. His arms ached for her presence.

It took him years before he could bring himself to pack up his wife's clothes and donate them to the women's shelter in Juneau that helped women who suffered from domestic abuse. Stormy's room hadn't been touched.

After they died, he had sat in her room all the time, held her favorite stuffed animal, and just cried. He couldn't stop crying. He didn't eat. He didn't sleep. He just sat and prayed that, somehow, it had all been a mistake and that they were going to walk through the door.

For the first couple of days, his mother had let him grieve. Then, she descended upon him and his house. She pried him out of Stormy's room. He shut the door, and no one had been in there since then.

He imagined that there were three tons of dust on everything, but he hadn't been able to clean it out.

A woman walked by their table and smiled at Josh. She was a very beautiful woman, and Josh knew that he could have her if he wanted. He could go to her place and fuck until the house shook. Occasionally, he had found someone that he could bear to relieve himself with, but those moments had been few and far between.

He never took anyone home with him. No woman, who would be available for just a night, was good enough to step into Naomi's house.

"Josh," Luke said.

"What?" Josh asked, startled.

"Where have you been?" Luke asked.

Josh shook his head and asked, "What are you talking about?"

"Ian is thinking about going up to the new facility and sniffing around. He asked if you wanted to go with him," James said, studying his friend.

"Yeah, sure," Josh said. "That sounds like a good idea. Regardless of what kind of crazy shit is going on up there, we need to know. If it isn't anything that will affect us, then that is great. But if something is going to trickle down, we need to know that, too."

"It will have some kind of effect, regardless of what is going on in the building," Ian said. "Unless, of course, it is a self-contained city of sorts and no one ever leaves the premises."

"Even if it is a self-contained facility, complete with their own club and version of Beau, they are bound to get tired of

looking at each other. They will come out sooner or later. We are closer than Juneau, which could mean trouble for us.”

“No one could replace our Beau. He’s too damn handsome and is a one of a kind,” James said.

“Even if they do trickle down here, it doesn’t *have* to mean trouble,” Beau replied.

“You always see the positive in the world,” Josh replied. “I think that it’s because you inhale too much of those beer fumes. Even the best of people can cause a little bit of trouble when they are couped up but suddenly are freed. Think about all of the sailors who were granted leave after they were on a ship for a long time.”

Although he would like to think that the presence of the new facility wouldn’t have any kind of negative effects on the area, he felt as though there was a dark curtain closing in around them even as they talked.

RAVEN

Raven was still trying to figure out what direction she wanted to take in her life. On one hand, she loved the law. A law degree would enable her to work outside of clan life in the mundane world, as well as represent the shifters who got in trouble when there was a clan hearing. Her clan was situated on the outskirts of Toronto, Canada, so there was a lot of work to be had if she went in that direction.

On the other hand, she really enjoyed her job. She had worked her way to the second highest position in clan security. She had to work extra hard because she was the daughter of the alpha. There were no special favors given to her.

All of the classes that she had taken in tracking, investigating, profiling, and many others had made her one of the most valuable team members. Part of her job was to make sure that the activities of the shifters in her clan didn't catch the attention of the mundane people. Then, the shifters would have to leave the home that they had had for eons. Mundane people loved to kill and dissect things that they didn't understand.

Robin visited her sister one night after work and casually brought up the weekend.

"I'm going to work. I have figured out the pattern of burglaries and fires in the area, and I'm pretty sure that I know who is doing it. I'm going to tail him Saturday night and catch him in the act," Raven said.

"You work too much," Robin said.

“Nah. I enjoy my job,” Raven protested.

“When was the last time that you’ve been out on a date with a bear shifter, other shifter, or even a mundane person?” Robin asked.

“Mmm, I don’t know. It’s been a few weeks,” Raven said, shrugging her shoulders.

“A few months maybe. Each man that you date always has something wrong with him. Either there is something about his physical appearance that turns you off, he has an annoying habit, or whatever,” Robin said.

“I can’t help it if there is no Mr. Right out there for me. I’m quite content with not having a man in my life. I don’t have to share my bed, and I don’t have to tell anyone what I’m doing or where I’m going,” Raven protested.

“You can’t keep comparing every man that you meet to Zach,” Robin said.

“I’m not worried about Zach anymore. He’s just an old memory,” Raven said.

“Liar, liar, pants on fire,” Robin stated.

The conversation ended when Efron managed to pull over a stack of books onto himself.

After Robin left, Raven made herself a drink and smiled as she replayed the conversation in her head. Robin had found her fated mate and they were so happy together, so she expected Raven to be out in the world hunting for her mate.

If Raven was honest with herself, she was a little gun shy. Once bitten twice shy fit her perfectly. She would also admit that every man she came across was instantly compared to Zach. She couldn’t help it.

“It’s not like I’m an old maid,” Raven said to herself. “I still have time to find him if he’s out there.”

Her Saturday night plans went perfectly. Derrick Thomas was a young shifter who was about twenty. He had seemingly lost his way a long time ago. He had been in trouble since he was about ten or eleven. Raven followed him when he left

home and headed out. He liked to rob the houses in the rich neighborhoods and then set them on fire to try to cover up any evidence that he might have left behind.

Sure enough, he headed straight for the house that Raven figured that he would hit. It was known that the family would be out. She caught him as he came out of the house.

“Why are you doing this? You don’t even need the money,” Raven asked as he walked out of the house with a pillowcase full of valuable jewelry and other goods.

She could tell that he was thinking about making a run for it, but Raven said, “Don’t even try it, son. Not only can I outrun you as a human and a bear, but I know where you live.”

His shoulders slumped and he dropped the bag. Raven called in for backup, which arrived quickly.

At the hearing, which took place the following week, the Elders asked him why he should be granted leniency, especially since he had a history of causing trouble.

Derrick merely shrugged his shoulders and sighed.

The Elders talked and then they decreed that he would be exiled to an island that was only accessible by helicopter or boat. The remote island was a penal colony where shifters from many different clans were sent. It was possible to reform and get off the island, but very few did so.

Raven felt bad for him, but he was old enough to know the difference between right and wrong. He was also old enough to understand the consequences of his actions – not only for himself but for his entire clan. He had been given many warnings, but he hadn’t listened. His parents couldn’t – or wouldn’t – do anything about him.

That afternoon, she went home and sat on her back porch, staring out into the forest that started at her fence line. She admitted to herself that she did get lonely at times. Raven remembered what it felt like when Zach stared into her eyes. He smiled that sexy, sweet smile he had and then he kissed her. The kiss turned her insides upside down and more than

once she almost agreed to take that step and let him take her. However, she always stopped herself.

Shaking her head to get the image out, she stood up to take a shower. She thought that she might go to a club or someplace where there were other people, just so their voices could help drive his memory out of her head.

Just then, her phone rang.

“Raven, Raven,” her sister cried. “You have to come quick. Efron is missing.”

Raven was at her sister’s house less than five minutes later.

“You have to find him. We’ve looked everywhere, and we can’t find him,” her sister cried.

“What happened?” Raven asked. “When did you last see him?”

“He was fussy, so I put him down for his afternoon nap. I was a little tired, too, so I decided to lie down. When I woke up, he was gone,” Robin wailed.

“Did he crawl out of bed and walk out?” Raven asked.

“No, I had locked the doors so he couldn’t do that. Look at his bedroom window,” Robin said, pulling Raven by the hand.

It was pretty obvious that someone had come into the house through the window. The screen was missing, and the lock had been jimmied. A muddy footprint was embedded in the carpet in front of the window.

Raven called into her leader to explain the situation and ask for help. Soon, Robin’s house was swarming with shifters. They looked for clues around the house, but except for an identical shoe print found in the mud on the outside of the window, there were no clues. The individual wore gloves, so there were no fingerprints. There was no touch DNA. There were no fibers or hairs anywhere.

“How long was he out of your sight?” Raven asked.

“Maybe an hour. Not much more. He doesn’t usually sleep more than that, so I set my alarm for about forty-five minutes

so I could be awake when he called out to me,” Robin replied. “I fell asleep pretty quickly.”

Raven nodded to her sister.

“When I woke up, I waited about fifteen minutes. Then, I went in to check on him. He was gone,” she cried. “I had the baby monitor on, but I didn’t hear anything. You know that I am a light sleeper. Why didn’t I hear him make any noise or hear the person breaking in?”

“Whoever did this was an expert. They knew exactly what they were doing,” Raven said. “It probably took five minutes or less for the entire job to be done.”

Robin started to cry and Raven said, “None of this is your fault. You did everything right. I swear on everything that I hold sacred that I won’t rest until I find Efron and bring him home to you.”

Even as she spoke the words, she hoped with everything she had inside of her that she would be able to find her nephew. These kinds of cases were notoriously hard to solve. Whoever took Efron now had at least a two-hour head start on them. A person could cover a lot of distance in two hours.

One of the members of her security clan approached Raven and asked if they could talk privately.

“I am friends with some of the security members from other clans. Some of their children have been taken as well. There are at least two wolf cubs, an eaglet, and a baby dragon shifter that have disappeared within the last week or so,” the woman reported.

“Why haven’t we talked about this sooner?” Raven snapped.

The woman took a step back and said, “They all thought that it was just random kidnappings. Kids get kidnapped all the time, especially in the mundane world. They just figured that it had spilled over into the shifter world.”

“Write down the names of those other security members and give it to Jergen, the head of our security team. I think that we have a problem on our hands,” Raven said.

“I will,” the woman promised and scurried away to obey orders.

They searched the area for hours but didn't find a single clue as to who might have taken Efron or where they might have taken him.

Exhausted, Raven headed home. She was so tired, but it took forever for her to fall asleep. When she finally did, it felt as though she had only been asleep for a short time when she heard a knock on her front door.

The person was gone by the time she got there. However, taped to her door was a note that read, “Snow Haven, Alaska.”

JOSHUA

Joshua and Ian talked it over and decided that the best way to try and get information about the facility was to simply ask.

They both had a sense of foreboding as Josh drove them up the side of the mountain to where the entrance of the facility appeared to be.

Once they reached the guard shack, they could tell that doing things the open and honest way wasn't going to get them anywhere.

The guard stepped out of the shack with a gun strapped across his chest. He had his hand on his pistol that was still sheathed at his waist.

"Can I help you?" he asked, disdainfully.

"I hope so," Joshua said. "I'm Joshua Jamison and this is Ian MacKullen. We are the acting law enforcement for Snow Haven. Naturally we were curious about this facility and its purpose since it is so close to our town."

The guard narrowed his eyes and said, "This is a private facility and is no concern of yours."

"Of course, it is our concern, as the people in this facility will have to go somewhere and Snow Haven is the closest town," Ian insisted.

"The people here will have no business in your *town*," the guard said.

The way the guard said town was the same way that one might say “shit hole.”

“Could we speak with the owner, manager, or whoever might be in charge?” Joshua asked.

“No. Now, please back your vehicle up and return to your town,” the guard said.

The guard made a motion as though he was thinking about drawing his gun. Neither Ian nor Josh wanted a confrontation with the man, so Josh did as the guard requested.

“Well, doing it the regular way didn’t work,” Ian said.

“Nope,” Josh said.

When everyone got together that night, Josh reported the altercation with the security guard.

“I have no doubt that he would have shot us dead right then and there. Our bodies would have disappeared along with my truck, and they wouldn’t have known anything about it if someone came asking,” Josh reported.

“The fact that the guy wasn’t willing to give any kind of information is a good indication that there is something hinky going on,” James said.

“Was there any kind of insignia on his clothes?” Luke asked.

“Nope,” Ian replied. “He wore the strange whitish gray camouflage uniform that we’ve seen everyone else wearing. It was completely plain. It didn’t have his name or anything on it.”

“Interesting,” Beau said. “Does that mean that they are a civilian group, they are paramilitary, or some kind of ultra-secret service?”

“There is no telling. But one thing is for sure – they don’t want us nosing around up there,” Ian said.

“What’s our next plan?” Luke asked.

“We could send Beau up there and tell the guard that he wants a job application. There are just no open positions

available here in Snow Haven,” James joked.

“I could see that going over like a ton of bricks,” Beau said.

“Who knows, maybe they didn’t bring enough people to cook or clean the bathrooms,” James said.

Beau groaned and said, “Guys, please make him stop.”

“It looks like we’re going to have to do it the old-fashioned way,” Ian said. “We’re going to have to go up there and snoop around.”

“We’ll just have to make sure that we don’t get caught. I think that fella meant business when he started tugging on his gun. I do believe it wasn’t just for show or to just try to scare us away,” Josh replied.

“I’ll do a couple of flyovers tomorrow. Chances are they don’t have the long-range artillery there that could take me down. I doubt if I’ll see much, but who knows – maybe they left some of their dirty laundry out on the line,” Luke said.

“While the rest of us can simply shift and skulk around, although a tiger, a panther, and a lion might be a bit more obvious than bears and wolves,” James said.

“The sight of such unexpected creatures might give them pause – long enough to escape before they start shooting,” James said.

“Or, it might make them think that something hinky is going on and make them investigate. Then, everyone could be in trouble,” Beau said, dryly.

“You make a good point. So, maybe it should be Josh and James who do most of the ground patrol close to the wire. The rest of us will kind of stay in the background. We might be able to watch from the tree line, hidden, so that we can keep an eye on any activity but they can’t see us,” Ian said.

“Do you think that will be necessary?” Beau asked.

“I would love to lie to you and tell you that I think that we’re all overreacting and being paranoid. Perhaps the isolation has made us all a little loopy,” Josh said. “However,

the reception we got today makes me think that there is something to be worried about.”

“I concur,” Ian said.

Luke’s phone chirped.

He checked his messages and said, “I’d better get going before Rowena puts some kind of evil spell on me that causes a nasty case of boils to erupt on my ass. Apparently, the kids are giving her a hard time and refuse to go to sleep until they see ‘Daddy.’”

“I thought that she was a white witch and would never do anything like that.” Ian laughed.

“Even white witches have their limits when they are dealing with two magical dragon shifters,” Luke said, throwing some cash on the table and leaving.

Josh watched him leave, feeling envious. Once upon a time, he had a wife and child to go home to. Then, he shook his head. He wasn’t going down that road again. If he opened that door, he would start missing them so much that his heart would shatter all over again.

“I’ll take a walk tomorrow,” Josh said. “I won’t get so close to the fence to draw attention, but I’ll get close enough that I can maybe get a glimpse of what is going on there.”

“I’ll head up there with you, for backup. They won’t be surprised to see a bear in the area. I’ll stay hidden unless I’m needed.”

“Sounds good,” Josh said.

He downed the rest of his beer and threw his cash on the table. “I’ll let you know when I’m ready to head out.”

Josh headed over to the cafe that his mother owned. She was sure to have an extra piece of pie that he could con her out of.

There were still a few customers finishing up their meal. He knew all of them and greeted them – except for one.

Sitting in the back corner of the café was a beautiful woman he had never seen before. Her brown eyes surveyed him as soon as he walked in. He saw her look him up and down, as though she was a robot scanning him, to determine whether he was a threat or not.

That would interest him all by itself. It told him that she was on edge about something.

However, there was something more about her, although he would rather die than admit it to himself or anyone else.

She had black hair that had been braided and coiled up on her head, making her look as though she was wearing a crown. Her high cheekbones highlighted her intelligent eyes.

Apparently, she had just finished her meal, as she stood up. She was about average height, but she had curves in all the right places. The woman carried herself with an air of confidence, as though she was well aware of who she was and what her place was in the world. It wasn't arrogance – just confidence.

The glance and slight smile she gave him as she walked past was enough to send all kinds of strange feelings through his body. His stomach was full of butterflies and his heart started beating just a little bit faster. He had to quell the urge to rush over to her, grab her, and kiss her until she begged for mercy.

She spoke briefly to his mother and then walked upstairs to the bed part of his mother's bed and breakfast.

"Who is she?" Josh asked his mother as she slid into the seat across from his.

Wanda slid a generous piece of pumpkin pie over to him and said, "Her name is Raven. She said that she wanted to go on vacation and was just traveling all over Alaska."

"Where did she say that she was from?" Josh asked.

"Toronto," Wanda said.

"Is she traveling alone?" Josh asked.

"You are awfully nosy, aren't you?" Wanda asked.

“It’s my job to make sure that everyone in this town is safe,” Josh said. “Look what happened the last time a strange woman came to town. She wreaked havoc all over the place.”

“Then, she married one of your best friends and is a wonderful person,” Wanda said.

Josh just looked at his mother, waiting for her to answer his question. He knew damn good and well that she was just as nosy as he was.

“She is alone,” Wanda finally replied.

“Hmm,” Josh said.

“What?” Wanda asked.

“First, we get that crazy, secret facility built outside of town. Then, soon after, a woman suddenly shows up in Snow Haven. Just happens to wander in. Before Rowena, how many visitors ever came to Snow Haven?” Josh asked.

“We had a few every now and then,” Wanda said. “But I do see your point. It isn’t often that a lone woman just happens to meander into town.”

“You have good instincts,” Josh said. “What did you think about her?”

“I got the feeling that she was a good woman with a lot of secrets. And to be completely honest, I was pretty sure that, regardless of what her story is, she didn’t find her way into town by accident.”

RAVEN

Raven questioned herself a million times when she packed her bags and loaded up her truck.

“Robin, I may or may not have a lead. Someone left me a note with the words ‘Snow Haven, Alaska’ on it. My gut tells me that it has something to do with Efron,” Ravena told her sister.

Her sister just nodded numbly and clutched Efron’s favorite blanket and stuffed animal.

Finally, she eked out, “Please bring him home to me.”

“I’ll do everything that I possibly can,” Ravena said.

She hugged her sister and headed out. Snow Haven was barely a dot on the map. Raven wondered what the people there were like.

“It doesn’t matter. It would be good if they are helpful, but if not, then I’ll just figure it out on my own,” she muttered to herself.

As she drove outside of Juneau toward Snow Haven, she passed the tall castle looking structure with an outer perimeter that could rival Fort Knox.

An icy chill ran down her spine and her stomach clenched as she drove past it. It seemed to have a dark mist hanging over it and an evil aura. She could almost feel a claw reaching out to grab her soul.

“Does this nasty place have something to do with Efron’s disappearance?” she asked aloud. “I just hope that whoever left me the tip on my door is waiting here with some more information.”

It seemed that there were no hotels or other places for lodging in town except for Wanda’s bed and breakfast. She was pleased to see that there were rooms available and that Wanda was a very sweet woman.

Raven had arrived just in time for dinner. She was starving. After setting her bags down on the floor of her room, she headed back downstairs. The special for the night was chicken n dumplin’s. Raven hadn’t heard of them before, but they smelled good, so she opted for a plate.

She had just finished her meal when a man walked in that was reminiscent of a Greek god. He was tall, with dark brown hair, and the bluest eyes she had ever seen. Every ounce of him screamed powerhouse.

A fire that she had thought had died out years ago started to burn just a little, and she had a sudden urge to reach out and touch his chest, just to make sure he was real.

He quickly surveyed the room and greeted everyone there. Then, his eyes landed on her. She felt hypnotized by him.

Finally, she was able to tear herself away. She smiled at him as she walked up the stairs to her room.

She told herself, “Get a grip, Raven. You aren’t here to shop for a new man. You are here to find your nephew.”

It had been a long drive, since she had driven straight through. Her eyelids were heavy, and she felt as though she was going to pass out on the floor if she didn’t make it to bed.

Her last thoughts, as she fell asleep, was on that man she had locked eyes with, who would have been perfect for her dessert. She had a sneaking suspicion that she would be seeing him again, soon.

She just didn’t know how soon.

Raven had gotten up early, hoping to eat breakfast quickly and then scout around town. Someone wanted her here, and she needed to know why. Then, if there was still some daylight left, which she figured there would be, since the town was so tiny it would take an hour to check out, Raven would head over to the facilities to see what she could see.

As soon as she slid into the back booth and ordered an omelet and orange juice, “the man” was back.

In spite of herself, Raven’s entire body started to tingle, as though a slow electrical current was flowing through her. She trembled slightly.

Get ahold of yourself.

He noticed her immediately and started walking slowly toward her, like she was a wild deer, as though he was afraid that she would stand up and run.

“Is this seat taken?” he asked, pointing to the bench across from her.

His deep voice was like the sexiest rumble of thunder that she had ever heard in her life.

She licked her lips, smiled slightly, and shook her head. She was afraid that if she spoke, it would come out some kind of mousy squeak.

“I’m Josh. You’re in the right place if you’re hungry. My mother, Wanda, and the cook, Kathy, make the best food in the entire state of Alaska,” he said.

“I’m Raven. Your mother seems to be a sweetheart,” Raven said.

“I am a sweetheart,” Wanda said, putting plates down in front of them both.

She saw Raven’s questioning look and said, “He always eats anything we make. You’re having an omelet, so we just made him one, too.”

Then, as she set the glasses down in front of them, she said, “He gets coffee, though. You don’t want to be around him unless he’s had some.”

Josh chuckled and said, “Thanks, Mom.”

She winked at Raven and then headed back to the kitchen.

“We don’t get too many new people in Snow Haven,” he said. “Most people don’t even know the town exists. What brings you here?”

Wow. He doesn’t beat around the bush, does he? Straight to the point – who are you and what do you want?

Raven had to admit that she respected him for being blunt with his intentions.

“I needed a vacation. I haven’t been away from home ever. I just decided to explore the area and found this spot. It sounded charming, so I decided to visit,” she explained.

Josh nodded and said, “It is definitely a beautiful place. I’m simply surprised that you found it. Snow Haven isn’t anything more than a blip on a map.”

She knew that he was fishing for more information, but she wasn’t about to tell him anything. Her gut said that she could trust him. However, she wanted to get to know more about him and this town before she told him anything. For all she knew he could be the head serial killer in a town full of monsters. Or, he could be involved with the disappearance of her nephew.

Raven figured that this wouldn’t be their last encounter, and she would have the chance to figure out whether he was trustworthy.

What Raven did know was that the man was incredibly sexy and did things to her insides that made her want to either jump in his arms or run and hide. She couldn’t imagine what would happen if he actually touched her.

“What do you do, Josh?” she asked, with a slight smile.

“I’m in security,” he said. “It’s my job to make sure that everyone stays safe.”

“Ah, that’s what is behind the twenty questions. And all this time, I thought that you were just being friendly,” Raven said.

“I am a very friendly guy.” Josh laughed. “It not every day that a beautiful woman finds her way to town. I wanted to talk to you before anyone else had the chance to.”

“Ah, is that what it is?” Raven laughed. “Me thinks, sir, that you are full of hot air.”

“Cross my heart,” Josh said.

Just then, another man entered the café. He scanned the room for a few seconds and then headed over to Josh.

“I’d heard that we had a visitor,” the man said. “Of course, Josh beat me to the introductions.”

The man tapped Josh on the shoulder, who made room for him. The newcomer was every bit as sexy as Josh was, but he didn’t turn Raven’s world upside down the same way.

“Ian, this is Raven. Raven, my friend, Ian. He also works security,” Josh said.

Raven held out her hand to shake Ian’s and said, “It’s nice to meet you.”

“What brings you to our little town?” Ian asked.

“I needed a vacation and decided to take a tour of Alaska,” Raven replied. “I happened to come across this town and thought that it would be interesting to explore.”

“That will take you about five minutes,” Ian said.

Raven simply smiled at him. She knew that he was fishing for information just as hard as Josh was. Of course, that was their jobs, since they were both in security.

“Is there so much crime in Snow Haven that they need two security officers?” she asked.

“Actually, there are a few more of us. That is why there is practically *no* crime in Snow Haven,” Josh told her.

“Is that so?” Raven asked, raising her eyebrows.

At that point, Wanda glided over and greeted Ian.

“Good morning. Are you hungry?” she asked.

“No, ma’am. I ate at home,” Ian said.

She put a cup of coffee down on the table in front of him, patted his shoulder, and headed back to the kitchen. Raven had a strong feeling that she was watching the three of them from behind the window.

Ian took a sip of the coffee and said, “Kathy makes the absolute best. Raven, it was great to meet you, but Josh and I have some business to attend to. I hope I get to see you again before you leave town.”

Raven smiled and said, “Me, too.”

Josh looked at her with such intensity that Raven was sure that he could see through her body and read her mind, so that he knew every single one of her secrets.

Then, he gave her a sexy boyish grin that would have buckled her knees if she had been standing.

“I’m sure I’ll see you later,” he said, and then turned to leave.

She looked around town and noted that there was a bar that was called *Shifter’s Paradise*.

Interesting. Maybe I’m not such an outsider after all.

As Ian said, it took her about five minutes to check out the town. She didn’t see anything that would make her think that Efron had been brought here.

She decided that she would head to the facility that she passed on the way into town. What she didn’t know was that she wasn’t alone.

JOSH

There was something about Raven that enticed Josh. Everything about her, from that sexy smile to the guarded look in her eyes. It certainly didn't look that she was an amazingly gorgeous woman. She had turned his world completely upside down. Raven had aroused feelings inside of him that he thought had died with his wife.

"Knock it off," he muttered to himself, under his breath.

"Pardon?" Ian said, with a sly smile.

He knew exactly what was going on in Josh's brain.

"Let's hold off on going to Dracula's castle for a bit," Josh said.

"Why's that? I thought you were looking forward to seeing what the ghouls were up to," Ian replied.

"I am. However, I'm pretty sure the Elvira who just came to town isn't all that she proclaims to be. I'd bet a week's pay that she didn't just happen to be traveling around Alaska and accidentally stumbled upon Snow Haven. Snow Haven isn't linked to any big cities, and there is really nothing around it for many, many miles. When people show up in Snow Haven it is for a reason," Josh said.

"What you are saying is that you would like to tail her and see what she's up to," Ian said.

"That is precisely what I am saying," Josh said.

“And your reason for tailing her has absolutely nothing to do with that gleam in your eye that has magically appeared?” Ian teased.

“Not in the slightest,” Josh said. “There is something about her story that doesn’t quite ring true, and I would really like to know the real reason why she is here. I’ll bet you dollars to donuts it has something to do with that monstrosity on the hill, and it’s not anything good.”

“I’ll tell you what. I have some paperwork that I need to finish up on an overseas project that a couple of my men are working on. You follow your ‘Mistress of the Dark’ and see what she is up to and whether she has any vampiric ties to the castle. Let me know when you’re ready to go check it out,” Ian said.

Ian made a U-turn and dropped Josh back off at the diner and headed to his office. Josh had caught a glimpse of Raven as she was walking downtown and figured that it wouldn’t be too hard to track her. She wasn’t trying to conceal herself or the fact that she was in town.

It didn’t take her long to figure out that he had been completely right when he was describing Snow Haven. It was a small town with a couple of bars, a couple of small eating joints, a few churches, a grocery store, and two general stores, along with a post office and a doctor’s office.

Apparently, there wasn’t anything in town that was overly interesting to her, because she turned around and headed back toward the direction of his mother’s café. However, instead of going back inside, she went behind it and into the woods.

Josh found it difficult to keep track of her without letting her know that he was behind her. He cringed at every single stick that he stepped on or stack of leaves that he rustled. However, she either wasn’t paying attention to what was happening around her or his movements weren’t as loud as they sounded to him.

It didn’t take him long to figure out where she was heading. Raven was walking straight toward the new facility that everyone was wondering about.

To his surprise, she stopped when she got close to the outer perimeter of the fence and undressed.

He sucked in a huge breath. If he thought that she was some kind of sexy creature when he saw her at his mother's café, he was mistaken. The woman standing in front of him was the most incredibly beautiful woman he had ever seen. Models who were supposed to be the epitome of beauty had nothing on this woman.

His cock was instantly at attention, and a flash of heat exploded inside of him. It took every ounce of his willpower not to walk over to her, hold her, and consume her.

Josh was surprised by his animalistic response. He had never felt this way about any woman his entire life, even Naomi. It hurt him to admit it, but his love for Naomi was more of a slow and steady type of emotion. It had none of the raging, burning desire that he was feeling now.

His attention was brought back to the situation at hand when he saw the reason why Raven had stripped. She hadn't wanted to ruin her clothes when she shifted into her bear form.

So, she was a shifter. That explains why she seems so at home in the woods. But what is her business with the facilities about?

Josh shifted into his wolf form and crept closer to her. She might sense that there was another shifter close by, but since her attention was on the looming structure in front of her, she likely didn't know he was there.

At first, Raven kept her distance and stayed in the tree line. However, as she surveyed three sides of the fence line that was close to the forest, she didn't see anything. Apparently, she wanted a better look, because she ambled closer. Any person keeping watch would see nothing but a curious black bear.

However, it soon became very clear that not even nosy black bears were welcome close to the facility. Two shots rang out in Raven's direction.

She didn't need to be told twice. She turned tail and ran back into the forest.

Raven watched from a distance for a while, but nothing happened. If it wasn't for the security guard keeping watch at the front and the shots that had come from the building, Josh would have thought that the entire place was empty.

Eventually, she decided that she wasn't going to learn anything, so she went back to where she had neatly folded her clothes. Raven shifted back to human form and then, much to Josh's dismay, quickly redressed.

Following her lead, Josh did the same. He was dressed by the time that she reached the point that he had been hiding.

"Are creepy facilities with a lot of security part of your tour as well?" Josh asked as she approached.

"Were you following me?" Raven asked, irritated.

"Of course, I was," Josh replied. "I told you that I was security and it was my job to keep everyone in Snow Haven safe."

"I promise that everyone is safe from me," Raven said.

"You didn't tell me that you were a shifter," Josh said.

"You didn't ask. It also isn't something that one would normally share with strangers," Raven said.

"Well, I guess we aren't strangers anymore. Snow Haven has a lot of different shifter clans in the area – some who you wouldn't necessarily think would be up in the cold part of the world. There are also some solitary shifters who struck it out on their own," Josh said.

"What category do you belong to?" Raven asked.

"Neither. I'm the head of security for our wolf shifter clan. My best friend, Blake, is the alpha," Josh said. "What about you?"

"My father is the alpha of our bear clan," Raven said.

Josh thought that she was going to add something but had decided not to at the last minute. It would seem that he wasn't the only person who was having trust issues.

“Why would an alpha allow his daughter to wander off into the great Alaskan wilds by herself? It’s dangerous out here for a woman by herself,” Josh said.

“I can take care of myself,” Raven assured him.

“Even if I was buying your story about coming to Snow Haven because you just so happened to find it on a map and was curious, that doesn’t explain why you were sniffing around up there at the facilities,” Josh said.

“It looks like one of those government places where they have a lot of secrets. I’ve always heard that Alaska is a hot bed for UFO activity. The aliens can land their crafts out here and no one would see them. I believe that a UFO crashed around here somewhere, and they have aliens stashed in there. I want to rescue the aliens and set them free, before their alien families come looking for them. Besides, it’s just cruel to perform experiments on creatures just because they are different from everyone else,” Raven said.

“You sound like a combination of *Men in Black* and *Independence Day*,” Josh said, unsure of whether to be irritated or amused. “You have all the qualities of being a great actress.”

“Fact is usually stranger than fiction,” Raven said. “And thanks for the compliment. My next stop is Hollywood. I’m hoping that I get to act in a movie with Keanu Reeves. He’s the best actor out there, in my opinion.”

Josh just shook his head.

“What is the real reason you were up there?” he asked.

“I was curious. I saw the structure as I drove into town, and I wanted to know what it was about. My father always said that I should have been some kind of cat shifter, since I’m always so curious,” Raven said.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” Josh replied.

“I’ve heard that. But I seem to be one of those cats who have nine lives,” Raven said.

“You almost lost one of them today,” Josh stated.

“Maybe,” Raven said. “I doubt it though. They didn’t know I was a shifter, and shooting a black bear out of season wouldn’t be good for their business or for keeping things quiet up there.”

“Most people would have turned tail and ran when they were being shot at,” Josh said.

“Ah, sir, but I’m most definitely not most people,” Raven said.

You can say that again, Josh thought to himself.

RAVEN

Raven was pretty certain that she had aggravated Josh. He was trying to get some real information out of her and all she was giving him was a bunch of nonsense. He wasn't an idiot and knew damn good and well that she didn't believe all the alien nonsense that she was spouting.

It would be so much easier if she could trust him. She wanted to be able to trust him and her gut told her that she could, but Raven doubted herself. Raven wasn't sure whether it was her gut that was telling her to trust him or if it was something else.

The attraction between them was strong. The entire time they walked back toward the café together, all she could really think about was what it would be like if he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

A couple of times their arms brushed against each other as they walked, and Raven felt as though she had been punched in the stomach. She swore that she could hear the electricity snapping in the air as they verbally sparred with each other.

She wanted to know whether it would feel the same if Josh kissed her as it did when Zach had kissed her. No one else had touched her since Zach had left her at the altar.

That was probably the biggest reason why she couldn't let herself trust him. She had loved Zach and trusted him with every bit of her being – and look how that turned out.

Raven was starving by the time that they got back to the café. She was always hungry after she had shifted. Plus, she

had taken quite the walk – first out around town and then in the woods and around the grounds of the building.

She honestly wasn't sure whether she wanted him to stay and eat with her or if she wanted him to leave her to muddle through her thoughts. He, however, had already made up his mind. As Raven slid into the seat of her usual booth, he sat across from her.

“Kathy does a terrific steak and baked potato,” Josh told her.

“That sounds good,” Raven said. “Thanks for the recommendation.”

“Does your family know that you are up here in the great Alaskan wilderness?” Josh asked her.

“Of course. I'm smart enough to let people know where to find me in the event of an emergency, whether on their side or mine,” she said. “If I get accosted by some crazy serial killer posing as a security dude, they need to know where to look for my body.”

The grin that spread across his face made her insides melt. They both reached for a roll at the same time and their hands met. Just for a second, neither of them moved as though they were transfixed. A warmth radiated from his hand and throughout her body. At that moment she would have given almost anything to know what it felt like to be held in his arms.

The moment was interrupted by Wanda bringing over their plates.

“How was your day?” Wanda asked Raven.

“It was interesting,” Raven said. “I spent the day exploring.”

“She went up to the new addition to the countryside,” Josh said. “She thinks that the government is harboring aliens up there.”

“Kind of an Area 53, huh?” Wanda said, smiling at Raven. “That beats Josh's theory.”

Raven raised her eyebrows and asked, “What is his theory?”

“He thinks that Dracula has moved in,” Wanda said.

“I don’t think that Dracula would last long up here. He would run out of food pretty quickly, unless he had it brought in by truck or plane,” Raven said. “My theory makes a lot more sense.”

“I have to agree with you.” Wanda smiled.

Then, she patted Raven on the shoulder and said, “Enjoy your meal.”

“When are you going to tell me the real reason why you were snooping around up there?” Josh said.

“That question is starting to get a little bit annoying. I already told you that it was because I was curious. One doesn’t see facilities quite like that very often, and I wondered what it was all about,” Raven said.

The truth was that Raven wasn’t quite sure why she had been pulled so strongly up there. There was just something about it that seemed to capture her attention. It was almost as though the place was calling to her or pulling her in. It seemed alive and to be pulsating, as though the building had its own heartbeat.

How could she tell Josh that when she didn’t understand it herself? The whole thing sounded crazy. Her story about the aliens made more sense than that.

Apparently, Josh had decided that he wasn’t going to get any answers and asked, “Do you have a man waiting for you back home?”

The question startled Raven.

“Nooo. I don’t even have a cat or a dog,” she replied. “Why do you ask?”

“I was just curious. Like I said, we don’t get too many new people in town. I don’t get a chance to practice my interrogation skills very often,” he said.

“I see. Or maybe, you just have a hint of cat in your background, too,” Raven replied laughing. “You’re a bit curious.”

“Guilty as charged,” Josh said.

After they devoured the pumpkin pie that Wanda served them, Josh asked, “Do you want to go for a walk?”

“Yes. That sounds awesome,” Raven said.

As they walked down the street toward town, Josh’s hand once again brushed hers. Raven wanted to grab it and hold onto it, but was too shy. That was funny, because Raven had never been shy about anything in her entire life. She had always been the one to go after whatever she wanted without hesitation.

Look where that got you, her brain chided.

That was different, she said.

She let out a choked laugh because her brain was having a fight with itself.

“Are you okay?” Josh asked.

“Yes. I was just thinking about your idea that Dracula was in the castle. Next, you’re going to tell me that Elvira is shackled up there with him,” she fibbed.

“Ian and I actually thought that you were Elvira. After all, you showed up soon after that place was erected,” Josh said.

“I’ll never tell,” Raven said.

At one point during the walk, Raven thought that he was about to put his hand on the small of her back, but decided not to at the last minute. She was pretty sure that he was as attracted to her as she was to him. She just wondered if he felt as mixed up about it.

“Well, I guess I’d better get you back. I have a long day tomorrow, and I need to hit the hay,” Josh said.

When they reached the café, they both stood outside. It was awkward. It felt like two young teenagers having a first

date, and the boy didn't know whether he should hug the girl, kiss the girl, or just shake her hand and walk away.

Josh apparently decided that none of those options were good.

"I enjoyed not getting to know much about you," Josh said. "Except that you do have a good sense of humor and a terrific imagination."

"Thank you. It was good getting to know you as well," Raven said.

Then, to avoid any more awkwardness, she went inside.

Wanda smiled at her and said, "I was beginning to think that I needed to flash the porch light for you."

Raven laughed and headed up to her room.

However, she was restless. She paced back and forth in her room like a caged bear. Finally, she couldn't stand it anymore.

Raven headed downstairs and slipped out the back door. Wanda had given her a key so she could get in and out of the building as she wanted.

She decided that she would stay in her human form and just walk one of the well-worn trails that led into the forest. Raven wasn't ready to let anyone besides Josh know that she was a bear shifter and had no idea who might be watching her. For all she knew, Josh and Ian had created some kind of surveillance detail that kept an eye on her every move.

Just as Raven was about to turn around and head back toward the bed and breakfast, she had to stifle a squeal. Someone who was dressed all in dark clothing had stepped out of the shadows.

"You have to be very careful. Don't trust anyone. They will hurt you if they know that you are getting closer to the answer," the person said, before disappearing back into the darkness.

Raven hurried back to the safety of her room. Obviously, at least one person knew why she was in Snow Haven. It was likely the person who knew what had happened to her nephew.

The encounter only brought up a million more questions. The first question was who was the person that was trying to help her, and why didn't that individual simply tell her exactly what she needed to know? The second question was who were the "they" that the individual referenced. Third, did that very well-guarded facility have something to do with her nephew's disappearance, and if so, what?

Raven was frustrated and found it hard to sleep. She had to figure out where Efron was. However, the fact that someone was trying to give her clues along the way gave her hope that the little boy was still alive. Otherwise, what would be the purpose?

Finally, after tossing and turning for what seemed like hours, Raven was finally able to relax a little bit. She let herself be enveloped by the coolness of the linens that covered the comfortable bed. Raven focused on how it felt to lie on the mattress, which wasn't too firm, but didn't swallow her up, either. Her last thought before she slipped off to sleep was that she wondered what it would feel like if she was lying there in Josh's arms.

JOSH

Josh woke up grouchy. Even after three cups of coffee, he still wanted to bite at anything and anyone that so much as moved around him.

To say that he struggled to sleep the night before was an understatement. It took him forever to get to sleep. Images of that raven-haired beauty popped into his mind every time he closed his eyes.

She had intrigued him in so many ways. Her quick repartee and sense of humor were as attractive to him as her toned, naked body had been. He also figured out that she was very strong willed. He had done everything he could but tie her down and waterboard her, to get her to tell him why she was in the area and why she was interested in that monstrous structure. She steadfastly refused to say anything. There weren't too many people who stood up to him.

They had touched a couple of times the night before, and it had been electrifying. He hadn't been a monk since his wife had died, but no one had this kind of effect on him.

When he finally was able to sleep, he had a strange dream. The facility on the hill had embodied an evil soul and was reaching out toward him, determined to tear him into pieces.

Josh wasn't sure whether there was something truly evil about the place and the dream was a warning, or if he had been focused too much on it and that fascination had infiltrated his sleep.

He wasn't overly thrilled to realize that it was meeting day. Josh loved the people in his clan, but he didn't love sitting in the same room with them for hours on end. Most of the time, the issues that the clan members wanted to discuss could be worked out by them sending him an email or text, Josh or a member of his staff figuring out the issue, and sending a message back. All too often, people would get off topic and the meetings would last a lot longer than they should.

He hated being cooped up. He would much rather be out and about solving problems and taking care of the world. He just wasn't feeling too peopley today. Unfortunately, unless he was on his deathbed, there was no way he could avoid the meeting, since he was head of security. And even then, they would just send the clan doctor to heal him.

The meeting got started with the usual greetings. Everyone catching up on each other's children and families, and so on. Josh simply grabbed more coffee and a donut, then took his regular chair. His face must have reflected his mood because no one approached him.

Finally, everyone sat down and his second in command began the meeting with a list of topics that needed to be discussed. About halfway into the meeting, the door burst open and two wolf shifters exploded into the room. Everyone looked up at them in shock.

"We need help. Our son, Gentry, was playing in the back yard. I went into the house for just a second and when I came back out, he had completely disappeared," the woman, Alice, cried.

"She called me and we looked everywhere for him, with the neighbors' help. He didn't crawl or toddle off. He was only a year old and couldn't have gotten very far," Alan, her husband added.

Josh's mind instantly flew to Raven. She just gets to town, is vague about her purpose in town, and then, for the first time ever, a shifter pup goes missing. What are the chances of that being a coincidence?

After getting the details from the parents, Josh pulled his second in command, Liam, aside and ordered, “You get search teams going and start the investigation. I have a hunch about something that I need to follow up on.”

“Yes, sir,” Liam said, and immediately took charge.

Josh picked up his stuff and made a beeline for the bed and breakfast.

“Where is she?” he asked his mother as soon as he walked into the café.

“For heaven’s sake, Josh. Leave her alone. She is still asleep,” Wanda said.

“A shifter pup went missing. She knows something. It is just too much of a coincidence for her to be in town and suddenly our first kidnapping ever happens,” Josh said.

He pushed past his mother and headed up the stairs. She was just opening the door when he pushed himself inside.

“What do you think you are doing? Get out,” a furious Raven demanded.

“We need to talk. I need some answers from you and I need them right now,” he said. “Did you have anything to do with what is going on?”

A confused look crossed Raven’s face, giving him the first clue that he was barking up the wrong tree. Still, he wasn’t satisfied with that. He needed to know the real reason why Raven had ended up in his town.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I already told you. My name is Raven Woods. I’m the oldest daughter of the alpha of my clan,” she said, in a deadpan voice.

“Why are you here, and don’t give me any bullshit about being on vacation. I don’t have time for that crap. A young pup’s life might be at stake,” Josh said.

“I didn’t take your pup. Search my room if you like,” Raven said. “Then, get the hell out of it.”

Josh sucked in a huge breath of air, trying very hard to keep ahold of his temper.

“What is the real reason you are in Snow Haven?” he asked through gritted teeth.

Finally, she sat down on the bed and rubbed her face with her hand.

“I am the second in command of my clan’s security team. A few days ago, my nephew was kidnapped. He was in his room, in his bed. My sister had locked all the doors and windows, and went to take her own nap. When she got up, she could see that the screen had been torn off, the window had been jimmed open, and Efron was gone. There was one small, muddy footprint on the floor just inside his window. Other than that, there were no other clues,” she related.

“That doesn’t explain why you are in Snow Haven,” Josh insisted.

“Someone knocked on my door in the middle of the night. By the time that I got to my door, there was no one there. However, the person had taped a note on the outside of it. It just said ‘Snow Haven, Alaska.’ The words were likely written with a black sharpie and were written in block letters,” she related. “I had no idea that this place even existed. However, I came with the hopes of finding Efron. I’m mostly convinced that no one in town had anything to do with taking him, but I get a really bad feeling from that place outside of town.”

“Do you still have the note?” he asked.

She pulled it out of her bag and handed it over. She had put it inside a clear plastic baggie to avoid messing up any potential evidence that might be on it.

“Take it. Maybe someone on your team can pick up some fingerprints or DNA, although I doubt it. The person or people who took Efron were very careful about not leaving behind any evidence. I’m willing to bet that whoever handled this note used gloves. I only touched it from the corners, so that I wouldn’t mess anything up,” she said.

“Why didn’t you turn it over to your own security team?” he asked.

“I made a beeline for Snow Haven. I know that statistics on the survivability of stolen children. He was only two, so he has a better chance of still being alive, but finding him won’t be easy. I didn’t have any time to waste,” she reported.

“You said that you were ‘mostly convinced’ that it wasn’t someone from Snow Haven that took him. Is there something that might make you think that someone from here is responsible?” he queried.

She hesitated for a brief second, as though deciding whether to tell him what she knew.

He was just about to prompt her when she said, “I took a walk last night because I was restless. While I was out, someone came out of the shadows and basically said that if the ‘they’ knew that I was getting closer to the truth, then I would be in danger.”

“Who are they?” he asked.

“I wish I knew. If I did, I would go find them and get my nephew back,” Raven replied.

“What did the person look like?” he inquired.

“I don’t know. The person was small, so it was either a woman or a small man. The person whispered, so I couldn’t tell by the voice. The individual was dressed from head to toe in black and stayed in the shadows. Then, as soon as he or she delivered the message, the person was gone.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this earlier when I was asking you instead of giving me some story about being on vacation?” he asked.

“I didn’t know if I could trust you. For all I knew, this entire town was made up of crazy folks who stole children and raised them to be cult members,” Raven said.

“Really? Do I give off the Jim Jones or David Koresh vibe to you?” he asked, sarcastically.

She shrugged her shoulders and retorted, “People like that are master manipulators. You can never tell.”

Josh growled deep in his throat.

Then, he said, “You need to go back home. You are clearly in danger here. We’ll take over the investigation.”

She stood up and looked him straight in the eyes.

“I don’t know who the hell you think you are to come in here and give orders to me. I’m just as much a part of security for my clan as you are. I’m quite capable of taking care of myself. I’m not going anywhere until I find my nephew. There’s the door. Use it,” she demanded.

RAVEN

Raven was furious. She could feel the heat burning in her face and her fists clenched tight, her knuckles white. This man had a lot of nerve busting into her room like that and accusing her of having something to do with the kidnapping of a wolf shifter pup. Then, on top of that, once he figured out that she had nothing to do with the pup's disappearance, he told her she needed to leave because she was in danger. He thought that she couldn't take care of herself just because she was a woman. Perhaps a throat punch would show her just how capable she was.

"You are out of your league here. Alaska is rough. The terrain is rough. My people and I know the area like the back of our hands. If your nephew is out here, we'll find him," he told her.

"Fuck you and the horse that you rode in on. Get the hell out of my room," she snarled. "I'll leave when I'm damn good and ready and not a moment before."

"Do you kiss your mama with that mouth?" he asked.

"And my daddy, too. Out," she replied.

Raven thought that she saw the briefest flicker of respect flash in his eyes. However, he still tried to push her out.

"This isn't your jurisdiction," he said. "This isn't even your country."

Raven's jaw clenched so tightly, she was afraid that she was going to break her teeth.

“I’m not leaving. But you are,” she said.

Out of the blue, he started laughing and sat in the chair that was positioned in the corner of her room.

Bewildered, Raven stared at him as though he had lost his mind.

“You are as stubborn as a mule and have the tenacity of a bulldog,” he said.

“I guess that makes me a real bitch,” Raven said, relaxing just a little bit, as she sat back down on the side of her bed.

“Since you refuse to leave and it seems that we have a similar problem, I guess that we should work together,” Josh said.

Raven didn’t say anything. She just stared at him through her narrowed eyes. She still didn’t trust him. To be honest she wasn’t sure whether she wanted to kiss him or kick his ass. Either choice would give her great satisfaction. Maybe she should kick his ass and then kiss him.

“When anyone in Snow Haven is attacked, it isn’t just a problem for that one shifter clan. It is everyone’s problem. Let me call a few people. You need to tell them what you’ve told me so maybe we can figure out a game plan,” Josh said. “I’ll make some phone calls if you want to eat breakfast. Beau serves some good burgers and steaks at *Shifter’s Paradise*, but it’s probably not what you would want for breakfast.”

Raven looked at him. She was starving, but she almost wanted to defy him just because he suggested it. Then, she told herself that she was being an idiot and nodded her head.

Wanda took her order and then said, “He can be a bit stressful sometimes, can’t he?”

“That is an understatement,” Raven said. “He can be a royal pain in the ass.”

“Did someone call my name?” Josh asked, joining them.

Wanda simply laughed and went to get their breakfast.

“I take it the real reason why you were snooping around up there was because you think it had something to do with your nephew’s disappearance?” he asked.

“Yeah. There is something evil about that place. It almost feels like the building and everything around it is consciously alive,” Raven said.

Josh nodded and said, “I kind of get that feeling, too. It certainly isn’t a great place. I would really like to know what is going on up there.”

Wanda interrupted the conversation by setting plates of french toast, bacon, and scrambled eggs in front of them. She refilled Josh’s coffee and Raven’s orange juice, and then sat down next to Josh.

“What happened this morning?” she asked.

Josh explained how the meeting was interrupted when Alice and Alan came in and reported that their son was missing.

“Since I was new in town he automatically assumed that I had something to do with it or knew something about it,” Raven explained.

She told Wanda about her nephew and what had brought her to Snow Haven.

“Watch your back,” Wanda said to both of them. “Something bad is going on around here.”

They headed over to the bar. Ian was already waiting. Luke and James joined them soon after. Beau brought over some sodas and sat down. Josh introduced her to everyone and then had her repeat her story.

“It definitely isn’t a coincidence that your nephew was kidnapped, you were directed here, and then one of our little guys was taken,” Luke said.

“I’m sure it has something to do with the building,” Raven said. “I can’t tell you how I know or what is going on. It’s just something inside of my gut that says that our answers are in that facility.”

“She actually went up there to investigate as a bear yesterday and managed to get shot at. The shooter either purposely missed or is a terrible shot, but either way, they don’t even want four legged creatures investigating,” Josh said.

Luke reported, “When I flew over the area the other day, I didn’t see anything. For now, whatever is going on is happening inside, at least in the daytime.”

“I’ll have some of my guys go up and wander around. I have a couple of wolf and bear shifters, plus a coyote shifter, who could keep watch on the place,” Ian said. “Meanwhile, there has to be some clues somewhere. We just have to find them.”

The group went their separate ways soon after. Raven and Josh decided that they would walk back that way. They had almost gotten into sight of the facility when they shifted into their animal forms.

Although they kept up a vigilance for most of the day, they didn’t see anything. There didn’t seem to be any kind of movement or noise coming from the entire structure.

Once night fell and a couple of Ian’s men approached, Raven and Josh decided to head back into town.

“What made you decide to join the security team?” Josh asked Raven.

“I have always been interested in law enforcement and the law itself. I joined the lower ranks when I was in high school and worked my way up. I got a degree in criminal justice. I was trying to decide whether I wanted to get my law degree or just continue my studies in criminal justice when Efron went missing,” she said.

Raven decided that what happened with Zach was none of his business. Besides, it was just too painful to talk about. The situation still made her question her ability to judge other people, made her distrustful of others, and made her wonder what was so wrong with her that he would abandon her on their special day.

To keep him from asking more questions about her, and because she was curious, she asked, “What about you?”

“Like you, I’ve always had an interest in security and law enforcement. I got onto the security team when I was younger. When Blake’s father decided to retire, the head of the security team decided that he was ready to relax as well. Blake became the alpha and appointed me head of security,” Josh stated. “Do you ever want to become the head of your security team?”

“Nope. That poor man has to go to too many meetings. I get to avoid the meetings. He just tells me what goes on and lets me know what issues I need to handle. I’m good with that.”

Josh laughed and said, “I know what you mean about meetings. I hate them. But I make my second in command go with me. He basically leads them. I only intervene when I have to.”

They were walking close enough together that their arms brushed quite often. There seemed to be some kind of sensual bubble surrounding them. They lapsed into a comfortable silence as they approached the town.

“I’m not quite ready for civilization yet,” Josh said. “There is a really beautiful spot by the river that I would love to show you, if you aren’t too tired.”

“I would never be able to rest. I’m so wired up, I would probably spend the rest of the evening wearing a path in the floor of your mother’s room,” Raven said. “Lead on.”

Raven found the canopy of trees overhead to be very charming. The branches seemed to lean over and touch her as she walked by. The breeze was perfect. It was just a little bit of warm gentle air swirled around them, whispering in her ear.

The sky had grown dark by the time they reached the little clearing in the woods. However, the full moon and millions of stars lit up the area, making it almost as bright as the sun would. The lights danced on the slow, rippling water.

Wildflowers carpeted the ground. Raven sat down and sighed.

“This place is almost heaven,” she said. “It makes me feel like I’ve stepped into an entirely new world. I wouldn’t be surprised to see the lights from fairies dancing around.”

“It is a very special place to me,” Josh said. “This is where I come to get away from everyone and everything. I come here to think, or sometimes, to not think.”

Raven smiled at him and he smiled back. His blue eyes seemed to have turned just a tiny shade darker. She moved without thinking, as though she was on automatic pilot. She reached up and caressed his strong jawline. He covered her hand with his for a brief second. Then, he leaned over and captured her lips with his.

RAVEN

This kiss was nothing like the way that Zach used to kiss her. Zach's lips were always soft and he stuck his tongue in her mouth like a dagger, threatening to gag her.

There was nothing soft about Josh's kiss. He devoured her mouth, his lips hard and hungry. His tongue danced with hers and then tickled the roof of her mouth.

He buried his hands in her hair, his want and need clear. He gently laid her back on the grass, his lips never leaving hers.

The air smelled sweet and mystical. The scent was intoxicating and nothing like she had ever sensed before. It seemed to invade her body through her pores and send her on a new high like she had never experienced.

His touch was gentle and hard at the same time. She was sure that he could kiss her like this for the rest of her life and it would never be enough.

Josh pulled away for just a second and whispered, "Let me take this off," as he lifted the bottom of her shirt. He pulled it over her head and her bra followed.

"You are so beautiful," he said.

Josh dipped his head down and sucked her nipple gently, causing Raven to let out a small squeak. He gently rubbed her other nipple with his thumb. Raven felt the heat between her legs begin to build.

Slowly, he moved his head to the valley between her breasts and kissed a trail to the top of her pants. He unbuttoned them and she lifted up so he could slide them down.

He stopped for a brief moment to pull his clothes off. The sight of him took Raven's breath away. His thick arms bulged as he moved. His sculpted chest led down to a six pack. Josh's legs were very muscular. What really caught her attention was the long, thick cock that stood proudly from his midsection.

Raven craved to touch it but was terrified to reach out for him. She licked her lips unconsciously and stared up at him. He seemed to know that turmoil that was exploding within her. He gave her a wicked smile and laid next to her on the ground on his side.

Josh rested his head in one hand and then put his other hand on her shoulder. Slowly, ever so slowly, he moved his hand over her breast, stopping for a moment to rub his thumb across her already hard and highly sensitive nipple. Then, he continued his journey to her belly.

"You must work out," he said.

When his hand reached the area between her legs, she almost stopped breathing. She was aching for something.

Raven gasped for air, thinking that she was going to pass out just from his touch and from a need for more.

"Are you sure you want me?" he whispered in her ear.

"I'm sure," she managed to eke out.

She was never so sure of anything in her entire life. Raven was positive that she would have died on the spot if he had stopped.

He moved so that he could spread her legs and kneel between them. Raven's entire body melted into a pool of desire.

She trembled as he leaned over her body and sucked her bottom lip into his mouth and then nibbled on it gently. He pushed his tongue against her lips, and she opened her mouth,

giving him entry. Josh leaned on his elbows as he consumed her mouth in a heated, passionate kiss.

Once again, he pulled away. He kissed the hollow of her throat that was pulsing rapidly. Then, once again, he turned his attention to her breasts. He licked one of her nipples, lapping at it as though it was a delicious treat. The soft breeze caressed the wet nipple, cooling it. He wrapped his hands around her globes, squeezing gently, rubbing his thumb across her nipples and licking them. He gently sucked one into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue and nibbling on it. Then, he moved over to the next one, licking it and sucking it.

The sensation caused her nipples to tingle and spark, sending wave after wave of electrical currents throughout her body. Every fiber of her being was pulsating.

Josh licked the area between her breasts, as he continued to knead them with his fingers and rub her hard rosebuds with his thumb. He slowly licked his way down to her belly button before moving between her legs.

The world began to spin out of control when Josh licked the entrance of her pussy, from the bottom of the entrance to the top. Multi-colored lights flashed in the air around her and she forgot to breathe for a moment. Her fingers gripped his arms tightly as they were still tantalizing her tits.

He pushed his tongue into her and traced the inside walls of her hot, wet tunnel. She moaned loudly as fires burst into flames in every cell of her body. He licked the insides of her pussy lips, slowly, making nerves Raven never knew she had, explode.

Josh moved his hands down and spread her pussy lips apart. His tongue once again moved up and down the slit of her pussy, tracing the outside edges of the entrance.

Raven moaned loudly and said, "Oh my heavens," as her fingers clenched a handful of grass, trying to maintain a hold in this world.

All of her senses were heightened as Josh continued to tantalize her womanhood. The rustling of the trees sounded

like an orchestra had begun to play. The music was carried by the warm puff of wind that danced around them. That sweet smell that had filled the air became even more intense, and Raven could feel it uplifting her.

Josh flicked his tongue on her clit, and Raven screamed out his name.

“Josh, oh, Zeus and all the gods on Olympus,” she cried out.

The heat was building up hotter and hotter. It was a heat like she had never felt before. It wasn't the oven-like heat of a hot summer day. Instead, it was like the burning heat of a raging forest fire that blazed all around her and inside of her.

Raven's heart was beating a million miles an hour, and she was sure that it was going to explode out of her chest and into a million pieces. She panted, trying to suck in precious oxygen, but she just couldn't get enough.

Lightning exploded in the air around them. The energy was thick and was palpating around them, consuming them.

Josh sucked her clit into his mouth and flicked it with his tongue. He reached up and captured both of her nipples in his hands. He squeezed them lightly between his thumb and forefinger, rolling them and tugging on them.

Raven was certain that the stormy fire inside of her was going to explode out of control, consuming her in the searing flames.

She felt the rumbling start deep in her body. The electricity inside of her snapped and popped, the fires crackled, and then a roaring river of hot, creamy liquid exploded out of her. Raven's body trembled as the intense sensations overwhelmed her and made the world disappear.

Gradually, her senses returned to her. The air cooled and her normal body returned to her.

Josh looked up at her and smiled that smoky grin that sent her heart racing again.

He put the large knob that graced the end of his cock at the entrance of her pussy. Slowly, he pushed his way in, letting her hot, wet silken walls adjust to his girth.

He stopped when he reached the barrier that proved that he was her first lover.

“This might hurt a bit, but breathe with it and it’ll be over,” he whispered.

She nodded, although his voice seemed to be a gossamer of a spiderweb that wafted around her.

He pushed through and Raven noticed a little pinch, but it only lasted a brief second.

Josh laid on top of her, supporting himself with his elbows so he didn’t smash her. The feel of his hard chest pressed against hers was enough to make her want to scream with desire. He kissed her gently, and she tasted herself on his lips.

So many new sensations sent any semblance of thought flying out of her mind. He began to move slowly in and out of her, caressing her pussy with his cock. Every slight movement sent a new volley of fiery waves coursing through her body. She trembled with the intensity of the heat that was building inside of her.

Josh pulled almost all the way out of her, until only the large apple that graced the end of his cock was inside of her. Then, with excruciating slowness, he pushed his way back inside. Raven wanted to scream. She wanted him completely inside of her.

“Yes,” she breathed. “I can’t believe... I never imagined...”

“That’s it, baby,” he said. “Just let yourself feel the sensations. You feel so good to me. You are so amazingly tight,” he said. “It feels so amazing to be inside of you.”

Josh began to move a little faster, pistoning in and out of her. Raven began to pant hard and loud moans came from deep inside of her. Her heart thundered out of control.

The heat from inside of her body clashed with the cooling night air, causing thunderous explosions to light up the sky around them.

“Yes, Josh. Oh my heavens,” she breathed.

She lifted her hips up to him, and he began to move even faster. He pulled almost completely out and drove back in hard and fast, burying himself deep inside of her.

“Yes, yes,” she screamed, her fingers digging deep into his shoulders. The entire world burst into flame and a volcano of molten lava exploded. She began to tremble and her pussy pulsed, tightening around his thick cock.

He moaned loudly and his dick began to throb, and he sent a geyser of his seed deep inside of her body.

Slowly, the air around them cooled and the world gradually came back into focus. Josh moaned and collapsed on the ground next to her.

JOSH

Josh laid on his side, looking at Raven. She was staring blankly up into the sky, lying perfectly still. He wondered what she was thinking.

“So, Josh, Zeus, and all the gods on Olympus?” he asked. “Was I that good?”

Raven’s entire body turned bright red.

“Well, you know. You did alright,” she said. “Although, I had never actually met any of the gods. If Zeus was half as promiscuous as the myths say he was, then he must have had some talents. You have talent.”

“I appreciate that assessment,” he said. “I tried to make sure that you felt good.”

“You did alright,” she said again.

“Based on your reaction it was a bit better than just alright,” Josh replied.

Raven simply grinned but didn’t comment.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you were a virgin?” he asked.

“It wasn’t important,” she said. “I had never found anyone that I wanted to be with before. I wanted to be with you.”

That was a simple enough answer, but Josh had no idea how to respond to it.

“Don’t worry. There are no strings attached. I’m not naïve enough to think that just because I gave my virginity to you

that there are any obligations on your part,” she said. “Just like Juice Newton sang, *Just Call Me Angel of the Morning*.”

“But it’s not morning. And with your mouth and stubbornness, you are definitely not an angel. At least one that came down from heaven,” Josh said.

Raven growled at him and playfully punched him in the arm. Then, her stomach started growling loudly.

“I guess that I need to get you back to the bed and breakfast,” Josh said.

They dressed and headed back.

“I’m glad you’re here. I saved some of Kathy’s world-famous pot roast for you,” Wanda said, greeting her with a hug.

“Awesome. I’m famished. Let me go wash my hands,” she said.

Wanda put her hand on Josh’s chest as he moved to wash his own hands.

“Not so fast, young man,” she said.

“What’s up?” Josh asked.

“You need to be careful with her. She hasn’t told me her back story, but I can feel that she is very vulnerable – especially to you. If you don’t have any honorable intentions toward her, you need to make sure that your only interactions with her are professional. If you hurt her, then remember, you are not too old for me to turn you over my knee and paddle your behind,” Wanda said fiercely. “She’s been strong for so long, I doubt that she even knows that she has any kind of vulnerabilities, especially any that she would admit to herself or anyone else.”

Josh was surprised. His mother didn’t often get so riled up over things or protective over people. The last time she got so protective was with Rowena. He couldn’t remember anyone before that.

Raven really was starved, and she wolfed down everything on her plate in a matter of minutes.

“I have to admire a woman who doesn’t just pick at her food,” Josh told her.

“That’s a waste of time and it’s stupid,” Ravena replied.

“I would have to agree,” he said.

She stretched and yawned, then said, “I’m exhausted. I’m going to bed. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Most likely,” he replied. “Sweet dreams.”

He wasn’t sure whether he should stand up and hug her or what. However, she didn’t give him time to make up his mind. She simply walked past him, her head held high. She thanked Wanda and Kathy, and then headed upstairs.

Josh went home feeling like a horse’s ass. She was alone in a small town. She was going through some emotional turmoil because of her nephew’s disappearance. And she had been a virgin.

“She is a grown woman, and she has told me more than once that she is quite capable of taking care of herself and making her own decisions. She might have been a virgin, but she could have told me, and I would have taken her back to the café,” Josh told himself.

On the other hand, he had sensed that she was attracted to him, and heaven knows that he was very attracted to her. He knew that when those kinds of emotions were high, something that seemed right at the moment became a huge regret later on.

“I should have been the man and walked away for the both of us,” he berated himself. “However, if I said it to her in that way, she would have kicked my ass all over the forest.”

Josh had to admit that he had let his needs get him carried away. He had wanted her more than he had ever wanted another human being.

He reminded himself that he had only known her for a couple of days. The intensity of his feelings for her weren’t reasonable. There was some kind of pull that drew him to her, like a magnet.

“Maybe it really has been too long since I’ve been with a woman,” he told himself. “I should probably go to Juneau and make a regular date with a hooker once a month or so to keep anything like this from ever happening again.”

Josh instantly knew that he was lying to himself. There was a strong connection between him and Raven. It scared him half to death.

The conflict kept him tossing and turning in his bed all night long. After another sleepless night, he woke up in a foul mood for the second day in a row.

He forced himself to be pleasant when he greeted Raven. She had just finished her breakfast. He was a little irritated that she looked as though she had gotten a good night’s rest. Apparently, she wasn’t wrestling with any of the doubts or issues that he had been.

“Let’s go meet up with the guys,” he said. “We can talk about what, if anything, we found out.”

Rowena had accompanied her husband, Luke, today.

“I’m Rowena. I wanted to meet you. As you know, there aren’t too many people who stumble into this town. I was the last one, actually,” Rowena said to Raven.

“That’s what I’ve heard. I’m Raven.”

With that, they sat down and Josh started.

“Raven and I went up to the facilities yesterday. We kept an eye on the place for most of the day and didn’t see anything. We didn’t detect any movement or sound coming from inside the place and there certainly wasn’t anything coming from the outside,” he reported.

“My men reported the same thing. They didn’t even see any lights come on once it got dark. Unless they have all their windows covered or they only use interior lights, nothing happens once the sun goes down,” Ian stated.

“I flew over several times yesterday,” Luke said. “I didn’t see anything.”

“There has to be something going on there,” Raven insisted. “I can feel it in my gut.”

“There likely is. They didn’t build the facility just to abandon it, and no one has that kind of security without something going on. However, there were no signs of any kids running around – shifters or mundane.”

Josh could tell that Raven was starting to get frustrated. Apparently, so was Rowena.

“Let’s go outside. You can tell me about your nephew,” Rowena said.

Rowena’s familiar, a large pit bull named Poseidon followed them out. Rowena introduced him as they headed out the door. Raven looked startled when Poseidon spoke to her.

“I’m not so sure that I believe your girlfriend,” James said.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Josh protested.

“I’ve seen the way that you look at her,” Ian said.

Josh gave him the “go to hell” look, and Ian took it as a sign that he should probably shut up.

“What part don’t you believe?” he asked James.

“I’m sure that her nephew was kidnapped and somehow she was led here. However, I’m not so convinced that the facility is housing stolen children,” James said. “There doesn’t seem to be any kind of signs that would indicate that.”

“A shifter-snatching factory does seem to be a little farfetched,” Beau said. “That is something that a person only sees in the movies. The fact that she was brought here and a pup was kidnapped here are all coincidences. Just like when Waylon Jennings lost out on the coin match for a seat in the plane to Ritchie Valens and said, ‘I hope your plane crashes’ which it did, killing everyone on board. Coincidence.”

Although they brought up some good points, Josh was irritated that they were criticizing Raven. The fact that he was irritated by their comments only aggravated him more.

I need a drink – or ten.

“So, what do you guys think is going on up there?” Josh asked.

“Nothing good, I’m sure,” Luke said.

“Maybe it is just one of those good old-fashioned tuberculosis or yellow fever wards,” Beau joked. “They are housing a bunch of people who are afflicted with some horrible, highly contagious diseases.”

“I haven’t heard of any outbreaks of anything like that lately,” Josh said.

“It could also be a high security prison,” James mused. “Although it would be weird to not see people outside and to see more security towers.”

“Someone was certainly watching. They shot at Raven when she got too close in her bear form,” Josh said.

“My guess is that it is a research laboratory. There are so many organizations and individual people who are so much against animal testing that it can be dangerous for the researchers and the facilities. They are constantly receiving threats. The researchers are gunned down. The facilities are bombed. Sometimes, the advocates break into the facilities and let all of the animals loose, thinking that they are saving them, when in fact they are only spreading the diseases that the animals have been infected with,” Luke said.

“That actually makes a lot of sense,” Josh said.

“Raven is smart. Eventually, she’ll find another clue and figure out why she was brought to Snow Haven. And meanwhile, we’ll keep an eye on the facility. Regardless of what is going on there or what is not, there is something sinister about it,” Ian said.

RAVEN

Rowena and Raven sat on a bench outside of the bar. Raven was fascinated with Poseidon.

“Almost every witch has a familiar. Poseidon has been my best friend since I was a baby. I can’t tell you the number of times he saved my life. He’s also a great listener. He’ll listen to all of my problems and doesn’t judge me,” Rowena said.

“Trust me, I’m judging. I usually just keep my mouth shut. I’ve discovered that is the best policy,” Poseidon said.

“See if I buy you any more of those doggie cookies from the bakery,” Rowena threatened, laughing.

“That’s exactly why I keep my mouth shut,” Poseidon said. “She always threatens to take away my cookies.”

Raven laughed. She was starting to feel a little bit better. She was so furious when she walked out of the bar that she could have happily throat punched all of them. She knew that they thought that she was being, at the very least, over dramatic.

She thought that Josh had believed her and agreed with her. He seemed to the night before. Apparently, though, his friends were able to persuade him differently.

“It was nice to meet you,” Raven said. “I need to take care of some business. I hope to see you again.”

“I’m sure that you will. Please don’t give up hope on finding Efron. I feel, deep down inside of me that you will get

him back, safe. My witch's instincts are usually spot on," Rowena said.

"Thank you," Raven said.

Then, with one long, baleful look at the bar, she headed back to the café.

She knew that she needed to check in. Raven didn't think that she would be able to handle talking to her sister without any kind of news about Efron, so she called her father instead.

Raven told him about the huge facilities that had been recently built. She also told him about the fact that a wolf shifter pup had been kidnapped.

"I feel, deep in my soul, that I'm on the right track. And regardless of what the other people around here think, I am certain that it has something to do with that building," Raven reported.

"Do you need me to send some backup?" her father asked.

"No, not yet. I want to find some concrete evidence before I figure out my next step," she replied.

"Okay, keep me posted. Do you want to call your sister or do you want me to?" he asked.

"Will you think me a coward if I ask you to do it?" Raven asked.

"Yes," her father replied.

"Then call me a coward," Raven told him.

"Okay, Coward. Be safe." He chuckled and hung up.

Raven headed back toward the structure. She hoped that she would either see or hear something that told her that she was on the right track or the helpful stranger would have some more tips for her – better tips.

She was surprised to see that the backside of the fenced in area was full of people, dressed in a white camouflage uniform. They marched around in formation for a while. Then, they broke up into several different groups. Some of them were doing hand to hand combat, while others were doing

target practice with rifles and handguns. There was another group of people who were practicing knife fighting, while a different group was practicing martial arts.

Either the area was being used to train members of a military force, or something like it, or this was a great performance. They might be putting on a show simply to throw people off track. They could also be doing it to show anyone who might be snooping around that they had plenty of people who could, and would, protect the area.

After a couple of hours, Raven got bored and headed back to the café. Her thoughts turned toward Josh. She was frustrated that he could act as though he believed her one minute, and then be convinced that something else was going on so quickly. This was exactly the reason why she didn't want to trust anyone anyway. People would just dismiss her thoughts.

To play devil's advocate, she asked herself whether she would believe her concerns. After pondering on it, she decided that she would. The main reason for that was because it was a little too much of a coincidence. The facility was built near Snow Haven. She got a note telling her to go to Snow Haven. Another shifter baby was taken from Snow Haven. It didn't take a genius to add up all the ones in this case and come out with three.

"If he doesn't want to believe me or help me, then screw him. I'll just investigate on my own without his help," she told herself.

She was sleepy, so she decided to take a nap. When she closed her eyes, she saw Josh standing in the middle of the clearing, naked. His body was perfectly sculpted as though the most talented artist throughout time had created him. Josh had a sprinkle of dark brown hair on his chest. Raven's fingers yearned to touch his chest.

Raven was still a bit sore from the previous day's activity, but it was a good feeling. She could almost feel his hands roaming her body, his mouth setting her on fire, and his body on top of hers as they had sex. She could still smell that sweet

scent that seemed to float around her. Raven breathed in deeply, as she couldn't get enough of it. It was with these images that her heavy eyelids closed and she fell into a deep slumber.

Her sleep wasn't as peaceful and terrific as she had hoped. She dreamed that she was floating around in the sky on white fluffy clouds. Then, the clouds got angry, turned dark and dropped her to the ground. She woke up before she could determine whether the fall had killed her.

Raven's eyes popped open wide, her heart pounding and sweat pouring off of her face. She knew the meaning of this dream. It was a clear warning that just when she felt safe, the bottom would fall out of her world.

She sat up in bed and noticed that her stomach was rumbling, so she headed downstairs for lunch. She almost turned around and went back to her room when she saw that Josh was down there waiting for her.

After they sat down and ordered lunch, Josh said, "There was finally some activity up there at the facility today."

"I saw that," she said.

"It looks like the facility is going to be used to train some kind of elite unit, either for a military or paramilitary group," he informed her.

Raven just raised her eyebrows at him.

"Alaska really is the perfect place to train. The mountains and other difficult terrain to cover, the oncoming snowy season, and other special features that Alaska has, it is the perfect place to train," Josh said. "I don't think that it has anything to do with the missing shifter younglings."

He was waiting for her to agree with him, or at least say something. She just kept her mouth shut. She had nothing to say to him. If he didn't want to believe her, then that was fine. She hadn't come to Snow Haven to seek help to find Efron. She figured that she would be working alone. While it would be nice to have help, Raven was fully prepared to find her nephew without assistance.

The rest of lunch was eaten in an awkward silence. Raven was annoyed, although not necessarily with him.

It irked her that Josh could simply summarily dismiss her thoughts and feelings about what was going on, yet she was so attracted to him. She could spend hours looking at him and remembering how his touch felt.

You are acting like a lovesick teenager with a crush. You didn't come to Snow Haven to go gaga over some man. You came here to find your nephew and you need to remember that.

Although Raven knew that she was giving herself good advice, it was much easier said than done.

Josh hurried up and finished his lunch. When he was done, he stood up and said, "I'll see you later," and then headed out the door.

Raven wondered if he thought that she would simply lounge around her room and wait for him to bring her more information about what was going on at the structure or reveal some clue about the missing shifters.

You've never let a man agitate you this much since Zach left. What is your deal?

Raven couldn't answer her own questions.

Heading back toward the facility, she was still thinking about Josh and the effect that he had on her. She had been with Zach practically her whole life. She had been in love with him, yet she had never had sex with him. She had wanted to wait until they were married.

Then, here came Josh. She barely knew the man. He practically told her to go home and let the big guys handle the situation, which pissed her off. When they were alone and he kissed her, she simply capitulated.

After seemingly believing her about the facilities, he changed his mind after a few minutes hanging out with his buddies. He told her that he thought she was wrong about the situation. Instead of being angry with him or disappointed, all

she could think about was his touch and how it felt to have sex with him and how she wanted more.

Raven started walking around the facility, making sure that she stayed within the wood line so that she wouldn't be spotted. Finally, she got tired of walking and found a vantage point where she could just sit back and observe the majority of the area.

She was so focused on her thoughts about the structure and Josh that she didn't know that someone was behind her, slowly creeping up on her.

JOSH

Josh saw Raven sitting on a log, far enough into the wooded area that it was unlikely that she would be seen by any of the security forces that were guarding the area. However, she seemed so focused on staring up at the building and the fenced yard that she wasn't paying attention to her surroundings.

That irritated Josh to no end. What in the hell did she think that she was doing?

He slowly approached her from behind, making sure that he didn't step on any twigs or anything else that would give him away. When he got close enough, he tapped her on the shoulder.

Raven jumped about three miles high in the air and her face turned white.

"What are you doing?" Josh blasted her. "You're out here, by yourself, and you aren't paying attention to your surroundings. What if I had been one of the bad guys? They would have killed you, dragged your body off to who knows where, and no one would have ever found you."

"Regardless of what you and your buddies think, I still believe that this place has something to do with the missing shifters. There is no one in Snow Haven who is responsible, and by your own admission, it was built right before the younglings disappeared. Since you guys don't seem to believe me, I decided to come up here on my own," she said.

Taking a deep breath she admitted, “You were right. I was so caught up in my own thoughts that I wasn’t paying attention to my surroundings. That was stupid and dangerous of me.”

“Damn right it was,” Josh said.

He was surprised at how angry he was. The thought that she might have been hurt – or worse – scared him and infuriated him to no end.

“It was obvious that you don’t believe me, so what are you doing here? Surely, you have something better to do than to follow me around and scare me,” she said.

Josh had to admit to himself that she was right. He needed to be looking for some clues as to where the missing pup had gone, although all searches and inquiries had come up with absolutely nothing.

“Have you seen anything interesting?” he asked.

“Nope. The usual. Quiet as a graveyard,” she said. “I actually think that the fact that it is so quiet is a little bit suspicious. To me, it just seems weird that I can’t hear any talking, laughing, crying, yelling, music, or any other sound from a place that big. There has to be at least twenty people working there at a bare minimum, regardless of what it is used for. Unless they are monks, they would be talking. Activity produces sound. Yet there is none.”

“That is a little suspicious,” Josh agreed. “It would have cost a fortune to soundproof the entire building.”

“Even if they were working in soundproof rooms, there would still be some places where the people would be working or hanging out. Unless it is some prison where people are simply kept in separate cells, not allowed to talk or interact with others, then there would be some kind of noise that results from human interaction. They never leave the place, so one would think that they would have to have contact with each other,” Raven said.

Josh had to admit that she made great points. There was something weird about there never being any kind of sound coming from the area.

“The same thing goes for light. There has never been any kind of light that shines through the windows. Even if they have light-proof curtains, you would think that something would shine through at some point,” Raven told him.

“I agree with you. However, just because something weird is going on up there, doesn’t mean that it has to do with the disappearance of the younglings,” he said.

“You and your buddies obviously think that it is just a place for an elite training group to take place. That’s not too suspicious,” she said.

“True. There was evidence of that this morning,” he said.

“Then, obviously, you don’t need to be here,” she said. “Why don’t you just go back down to your town and do whatever it is that you do, and let me go on about my own business.”

Josh sighed. He knew that she was upset with him. He did have some other things that he needed to take care of. However, he was reluctant to leave her on her own.

Do you want to stick around to make sure that she is safe, to make sure that she doesn’t get into or cause any trouble, or simply because you want to be with her?

Josh didn’t have the answer to his own questions.

The people that seemed to have been training earlier had all disappeared, and once again, the place was eerily quiet. Josh had to agree with Raven that the place had a dark aura around it and almost seemed to have a life of its own.

They stayed until about half an hour after it got dark, just to see if there were any lights that might come on or other signs of life. However, there was nothing.

Eventually, they decided to call it a night, although Raven said, “I hate to leave. I feel like something is going to happen the second I turn my back and I’m going to miss it.”

“I understand that feeling,” Josh said.

They walked back in a comfortable silence. Raven brushed his arm and as though it was completely natural, he reached

for her hand. Her hand fit perfectly in his, as though it was made just for him. As a matter of fact, her entire body seemed to be made to fit perfectly with his.

That kind of thinking is going to get you in trouble.

He knew that he was already in trouble. There was just something about Raven. She occupied his mind when he should be focusing on other things. Now that he'd had a taste of her body and passion, he felt as though he couldn't get enough.

Wanda frowned at him when he and Raven walked in together. He knew that she had seen them disengage their hands when they walked in the door. Her warning screamed loud and clear in his head. He knew that she was right and that he should distance himself from Raven. However, he couldn't.

Raven looked up in surprise when she saw the special for the day.

“Southern fried chicken and country green beans?” she asked.

Wanda smiled at her, shrugged, and said, “We like our comfort food up here, too.”

After dinner was over, Josh knew that he should go home. However, the idea of being alone in his big house wasn't appealing to him.

When Raven asked, rather shyly, “Do you want to come upstairs and hang out for a while?” he knew he should gently turn her down and walk away.

He tried to say the words. However, they just wouldn't come out of his mouth.

“I would like that,” came out instead.

He purposely avoided looking at his mother when he followed Raven upstairs. He didn't want to see the disapproval on her face.

As soon as he and Raven stepped into the room and shut the door, he pushed her against the wall and devoured her lips

as though he was a starving man who hadn't eaten for a month.

She willingly returned the kiss with as much hunger and passion as he felt. She became the aggressor and pushed her tongue into his mouth, exploring it. He moaned as he felt himself become instantly still with need.

Their clothes disappeared almost like magic. She took a step back from him, as he stood in the middle of her room. Her eyes slowly moved up and down his body, while she licked her lips, as though she was about to devour a delicious meal.

Slowly, she stepped forward to him and put her hand on his chest. Her fingers intertwined with the sprinkling hair.

Raven kissed his ear and sucked on it a bit, before making a trail of kisses to his chin. All the while, her hands explored his chest, moving around, touching every inch of him lightly with her fingertips.

She pressed her lips against the hollow of his neck and then licked the center of his chest between his pecs.

Josh sucked in a huge gulp of air and moaned. He pulled her braid out of the crown and then loosened her hair so that it swung down past her waist. His fingers were buried in the luxurious silken curtain that hung down her back.

Raven's lips continued to move down his chest and then knelt in front of him. She grabbed the base of his cock with one hand and then explored it with the fingertips of her other. They were the barest of touches, so light that he almost didn't feel them.

As she graced his cock with the feathery light sensations, she guided the head of his cock to her mouth. She traced the ridge that surrounded the head of his shaft with the tip of her tongue. Then, she flicked the tiny hole in the center and lapped up the clear drop that had formed there.

She opened her mouth wide and took the entire apple into her mouth, sucking on it and licking it.

Her actions nearly sent him to his knees. He moaned loudly when she began to move down his cock, taking almost

all of it into her mouth.

After a couple of minutes, he said, “Raven, if you don’t stop, I’m going to cum in your mouth. There is someplace I would much rather cum.”

He pulled her to her feet and guided her over to the bed. As he pressed himself deep inside of her, he had a feeling that this was much more than just sex.

Josh held her once they had both been satisfied. It would be so easy to lie here all night long holding her in his arms. The fact that he wanted to stay so much terrified him, so he forced himself to move.

“Raven, I need to be getting home. I wish I could stay, but I can’t,” he said, leaning over the bed and kissing her.

He got dressed and practically ran out the door before he could change his mind. Not wanting to see his mother, he went out the back door. There was nothing that she could say to him that he wasn’t already saying to himself.

RAVEN

Raven was very upset when he left. She was sure that he didn't have any fish that he needed to feed at home, and he really didn't want to stay with her. She would have given anything to spend the night wrapped up in his arms, snuggled in tightly to his chest.

Then, she reminded herself that she was the angel of the morning. She gave herself willingly to him. She had wanted him so badly that she was sure that she would explode if she didn't feel his touch that night. There had been no promises made by either one of them.

Actually, Raven had to take that statement back. *She* had made a promise to him that there were no strings attached. Too bad she hadn't made that same promise to herself. Even if she had, she would have broken it.

Her body, heart, and mind seemed to be at war. Her body craved his touch and wanted more of him. She was sure that she would never be able to get enough of him. Her heart and soul knew that she was falling in love with him, which was, as her head told her, the stupidest thing she could ever do. She was here to find Efron and that was it.

Raven tried to calm her mind, but it just wouldn't shut up. Millions of thoughts raced through her brain and bounced around as though there were rubber walls lining her head.

Finally, she gave up. She figured that she would just go for a walk. If she couldn't get her brain to shut up, she could at least make herself physically tired. Besides, mindful walks,

where she focused on the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings around her, often helped her mind calm down.

The night air was brisk, but not cold. It had just a little bit of a nip in it, as though some type of precipitation would be coming the next day. The moon was waning and just a bit smaller than it was the night that she and Josh first had sex. There were a few more clouds in the sky than there had been before, reinforcing Raven's guess that either snow or rain was on its way.

She took her time enjoying all aspects of the walk. She was really hoping that her mysterious contact would reach out to her again. She was very curious as to who the person was, where the person came from, and why the person was helping her. She really hoped that the stranger would give her some hint as to where Efron might be. Then, she could take her nephew, her dignity, and what was left of her heart and go back home.

Raven almost missed the youngling who was curled up in a ball under a tree just off the path where she had been walking. He was asleep and had, what appeared to be, fresh blood on his shirt.

Kneeling next to him, she put her hand on his neck. She was relieved to find that he was breathing.

Shaking him gently, she said, "Wake up. Come on now, open your pretty eyes and look at me."

The youngling's eyes flew open wide, and his face contorted into a visage of fright.

"You're safe. I'm a friend. I just want to help you," she said.

He just stared at her and didn't say anything. Then, he popped his thumb into his mouth. Raven thought that he might be about three years old.

"I'm going to pick you up and take you someplace safe, okay?" she said, calmly and gently, hoping to relieve some of the child's fears.

He simply nodded.

Raven lifted him up into her arms and went back down the path that she came from. She had to set him down so she could use her key to get in the back door. He leaned against the building for support. She scooped him back up into her arms and took him inside.

“I’m going to do something that my Mama would yell at me for. I’m going to let you lie on top of this table,” she said.

He simply looked at her and nodded.

Raven laid him gently down on the table and ran to Wanda’s room, banging on the door as loudly as she could.

“What is wrong?” Wanda asked as she came to the door tying her robe on.

“I found a youngling in the woods. I think he’s hurt. He needs a doctor,” Raven said, all in one breath.

Wanda reached out to the clan doctor and Josh.

Kathy had heard the commotion and popped her head out of the room and asked, “What’s going on?”

Raven explained and then hurried back to the door. Kathy hurried out and looked at the boy who was still laying where Raven had put him.

“Are you hungry, son? Are you thirsty?” Kathy asked, gently.

The young child nodded, still sucking his thumb.

“I’ll get him some soup and orange juice,” Kathy said, scurrying away to the kitchen.

Josh and the doctor must have flown to the café because they were there in a matter of minutes. Luke, Ian, and James were right behind them.

The doctor looked him over and said, “He seems to be okay except for some minor cuts and bruises. He is a coyote shifter and is five years old.”

The doctor lifted him off the table and sat him in a chair.

“He’s awfully small for his age,” Raven said.

“Young coyote shifters often are,” the doc replied.

The boy sat quietly in the chair, looking around the room with curiosity. His bright green eyes seemed to take in every detail. His sandy red hair was a mess and Raven reached over to pull a leaf out of it.

He flinched when she reached toward him but didn't try to move. That broke Raven's heart into a million pieces.

“What is your name, son?” Raven asked, turning toward the youngling.

“My name is Peter Richardson,” he said. “My mama's name is Rachel. My daddy's name is Peter, too, although people just call him Pete.”

He spoke in a very matter of fact tone, as though the information had been drilled into his head.

“Do you know where you live?” Kathy asked.

“Billings, Montana. The wind blows there a lot,” he said.

Wanda went to see if she could find the coyote shifter clan in that area and find his parents.

“What happened?” Raven asked. “You're in Alaska. How did you get here?”

“My brother, Greg, and I went to the park. He's seven. He went to play soccer with his friends, and I was playing in the sandbox. Something poked me and I fell asleep. When I woke up, I was in a bed inside some kind of cage,” Peter reported.

“Were you by yourself?” Luke asked, rubbing the boy's back, trying to help him stay calm.

Peter shook his head.

“No. There were a lot of people there in uniforms. Some of them gave me a lot of shots and took my blood. We had to do all kinds of weird things. There were also people dressed up like army people. They made us go outside and do army stuff, like marching. They taught us how to do karate stuff, like you see on the television,” he said. “That happened all the time.”

He paused for a moment while he gobbled down the soup and orange juice that Kathy had brought him. He ate like he was starving.

“When’s the last time you ate?” Kathy asked, as though reading Raven’s mind.

“I don’t know. I think it was lunch time. They always gave us a lot to eat, plus a lot of vitamins that we took. We also had a lot of shakes,” Peter said, making a face. “Some of those were gross.”

Wanda came out of her room with a triumphant look on her face.

“I found his clan and his parents. He has been missing for about a month and a half,” she said. “They are going to get a private plane and leave within the hour.”

“Do you remember where you stayed?” Raven asked. “Was it in a big castle on top of a hill?”

Peter looked at her confused and said, “Nope, not a castle. It was a regular house. There was a huge fence around it, so that we couldn’t run away. But I did.”

“How did you run away?” Josh asked him.

“I went around back when no one was looking. I dug a hole under the fence so that I could squeeze out. As soon as I got out of the fence, I ran,” Peter replied, proudly.

“You are so smart,” Raven said.

“I know. My mom always tells me,” Peter replied.

That response made everyone chuckle.

“Were you close to the trail where I found you?” Raven asked.

“No. I had to run through lots and lots of trees,” he said. “Then, I got tired and decided to rest.”

“Do you know how many other younglings were with you at the house?” Raven asked.

“Ten, because we had to count ourselves every morning, at lunch time, after dinner, and before bed. I was number six,” he said. “We lined up and said our number.”

“Did you happen to see a little boy there, named Efron? He is two,” Raven asked.

Peter shook his head and replied, “No. Everyone there was the same age as me or maybe a little older.”

With that, Peter yawned widely.

“Would you like to sleep on my bed in my room until your parents get here?” Wanda asked.

Peter yawned again and nodded.

Wanda led him away into her room, making sure to leave the door open so that they could hear Peter if he got upset or called out.

Raven looked at each of the men sitting there in stunned silence.

“Now, do you believe me?” she asked them. “I told you that there was something going on around here regarding the missing younglings.”

JOSH

The more Josh listened to Peter talk, the angrier he had become. He couldn't stand people hurting each other, but it really burned his ass when he found out that someone was hurting a person or animal who couldn't defend themselves.

He really hadn't wanted to believe that there was a shifter trafficking ring tied to the area. He believed Raven and he completely believed that she hadn't written the note herself. What possible reason could she have? He also believed her when she mentioned the stranger with the warning. She had no reason to lie and no reason to be in Snow Haven unless she truly thought that her nephew was up here. However, he had hoped that she was merely being misled.

Peter dashed those hopes to dust. While the boy had not connected the new facility to his ordeal, he had proven that there was human trafficking in the area. It also didn't mean that the facility wasn't connected. It only meant that Peter hadn't been there.

Luke was the first to speak up when Raven said that she had been right and that they all should have believed her.

"We do owe you an apology," Luke said. "We didn't believe that the issue was as bad as you thought it was and we didn't take your concerns seriously."

Raven just smiled at him in appreciation for the apology.

"Where do you think this mysterious house could be?" Ian asked.

They brought out an old map of the area that Wanda had. It was marked where there were farmhouses and hunting cabins.

“We need to find one that is close enough for Peter to run. He is only five and has short legs,” James said.

“On the other hand, it couldn’t have been too close or they would have found him,” Josh said.

They eliminated most of the known hunting cabins immediately. They were either too far back or too dilapidated to resemble Peter’s description.

Then, Ian tapped the map and exclaimed, “I bet I know where it is. There was an old farmstead close to Nate’s ranch.”

Nate Jordan was a panther shifter who owned a large horse and cattle ranch outside of town. His family had owned the ranch for generations. Nate kept to himself and didn’t associate with other people too much, preferring to stay to himself. However, he was a great man and would do anything for the people he cared about.

“He’s not going to be too happy to see us, but I think that we should head over to Nate’s and find out if he has seen anything suspicious,” Ian said.

“I’m going with you guys,” Raven said, getting out of her chair as they all rose.

Everyone was still feeling guilty about not taking her seriously and weren’t going to say anything to her.

It was a long ride to Nate’s place. Raven rode with Ian and Josh in Josh’s truck, while Luke and James took Luke’s truck.

Luke pounded on Nate’s door when they arrived. After a couple of minutes, Nate, a tall, dark man flung open the door, wearing only a pair of boxers.

“What in the hell is going on?” he asked, growling.

His face didn’t show whether he was surprised to see that there was a huge crowd of people standing in his doorway.

“I hate to bother you, my friend, but we have an emergency situation and need your help,” Luke said.

Nate studied their serious faces for a second and then nodded his head. He turned around and walked into his kitchen, motioning to the chairs.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Raven found a coyote shifter in the woods when she was taking a walk tonight. He had been kidnapped in Billings, Montana and brought here. He was with nine other younglings,” Josh said.

He continued to describe everything that Peter had told him.

Nate looked at Raven and narrowed his eyes.

“I don’t know you,” he said, gruffly.

“I just came into town a few days ago. My nephew was kidnapped from my sister’s house in Toronto, Canada. Someone taped a note to my front door. It just said ‘Snow Haven, Alaska’,” she said. “I came here as fast as I could.”

“The day after she arrived, a young pup was kidnapped right out of his front yard,” Josh said. “We still didn’t believe that there was an issue in Snow Haven until tonight.”

“We couldn’t think of any place that might describe where Peter was talking about except for that old farm that is on the other side of your property,” Ian said.

Nate rubbed his eyes and then ran his fingers through his hair. It was a lot to take in all at once, especially when you were just woken from a sound sleep.

“Now that you mention it, I’m pretty sure that someone did buy that place. I noticed that there was some traffic going in and out. I figured that they were fixing up the place to try to sell it. I heard that the kids, who all live in Wyoming, needed the money. I was thinking about buying it myself, but I saw the property come off of Landwatch,” Nate said.

“Do you mind if we cut across your property and head over there?” Luke asked.

“Let me get dressed. I’ll go with you and lead the way,” he said.

It took Nate about three minutes to get dressed and be ready to go. Josh was pretty certain that was a record for anyone.

Nate drove his own truck and led the convoy across some of his fields to get to the farm. The ride was bumpy.

“I’m going to be shake and bake by the time we get there,” Raven said. “I’m not sure that I’m going to have any teeth left.”

Ian and Josh chuckled.

When the posse arrived thirty minutes later, everyone could tell that there was something going on. All the lights in the house were on. Just like Peter had described, the yard had been fenced in with thick wire. It wasn’t just a couple strands of barbed wire that a person could easily climb through.

The gate was open, and the crew went inside. They didn’t bother knocking.

All they found was an older woman sitting on the couch, her hands folded in her lap.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“We’re from Snow Haven,” Luke said.

The woman nodded and replied, “I wasn’t sure whether you would get here first or the other people.”

“What other people?” Josh asked.

“The ones I work for. I’m guessing that you found Peter and he told you about this place,” she said.

“I found him and he did tell us. Where are the rest of the children?” Raven demanded.

“They’re gone,” the older woman said.

“What do you mean ‘they’re gone?’” James asked.

“The people who are usually here and run the place called some other people right after they noticed that Peter was missing. Within twenty minutes, two vans showed up. The kids were loaded into them and they took off, the others with

them. I was told to stay here, and they would either bring more children or pick me up and take me to a new place,” she said. “I’m not that smart, but it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to finally figure out that something wasn’t right.”

“What is your role?” James asked.

“I was hired to cook and clean,” she said. “I was told that these were a bunch of orphans who would be staying here temporarily until homes could be found for them. I needed the money, so I took the job and didn’t ask any questions.”

“How long did the kids stay for before they were sent to their new homes?” Raven asked. “Usually about two weeks. Then, they were taken away by some vans and later that same day, more kids would show up,” the woman reported.

“Does this have anything to do with that facility on the hill?” Raven asked.

The woman looked startled and said, “I have no idea.”

Josh got the feeling that she was lying.

Raven pulled out a picture of her nephew and said, “Was he here?”

The woman looked at the picture and then looked back at Raven, as though she made the connection.

She shook her head and said, “I don’t think so. Most of the kids that come here are a little older than that – usually between the ages of five and ten.”

Raven looked at her for a minute as though she didn’t know whether she believed the old woman or not.

Nate stood by and watched the woman, making sure that she didn’t try to escape. He called the state police and told the officer that help was needed. Nate briefly explained the situation. The officer said that they were on their way, but it would take some time for them to get there.

That was fine because it gave Raven, Josh, Ian, Luke, and James time to search the house for any clues as to what happened here and where the kids might have been taken.

This was a five-bedroom farmhouse. In two of the rooms, there were two sets of bunkbeds and then a bed in the middle. The rooms were bare outside of the beds. The closets were empty. There were no clothes or toys that one would expect to find in a kid's room. There were locks on the outside of the rooms. Steel bars that were embedded close together prevented anyone from trying to escape through a window.

One of the rooms still had some clothes in it. Based on the style of clothes and what the woman downstairs was wearing, it was her room. The other two rooms had neatly made beds but were otherwise bare.

Although they tore the place apart, there didn't seem to be any other clues as to where the other missing kids might be.

Josh knew that Raven was very disappointed.

He hugged her briefly and said, "We'll find your nephew."

He just hoped that he would be able to keep that promise.

RAVEN

Raven was quiet on the way back home. She was so disappointed. Raven was sure that she had been so close to finding Efron. Of course, she wanted to save all of the other younglings, too. Peter had said that there were nine other kids with him at the house. Multiply that by heavens knew how many. That meant that there were a lot of families out there tonight with big holes in their hearts and lives.

Maybe she was a little closer to finding Efron and maybe saving the others. Tonight's events had proven that there was a major shifter smuggling ring going on in the area. The old woman had said that a lot of children had come through there, and they had only stayed for a couple of weeks before moving out.

She didn't care what Ian thought. She laid her head on Josh's shoulder and closed her eyes as they headed back into town, feeling defeated. Raven knew that Josh wasn't *her* man to turn to for comfort, but she couldn't help herself. Taking some comfort from him just this once wasn't going to hurt anything.

Everyone but Nate went back to the café for breakfast. He said that he was going to get the rest of his sleep and then get to work. Raven didn't blame him one bit for that.

Peter was up and waiting for his breakfast when they got back.

"Did you find my friends?" he asked.

“We didn’t, but we will,” Raven said.

“I hope so. They didn’t like being there either. We would whisper at night and talk about home. We weren’t supposed to talk to each other, but we did,” Peter said.

“I’m so sorry that you went through that. I think that you were very brave to escape. Without you, we never would have found the house where you guys were being kept,” Raven said. “You gave us the clues that we needed to find your friends.”

Just then, the doors of the café flew open and a woman screamed out, “Peter.”

“Mommy,” he yelled, sliding out of his chair and running toward her.

The man behind her got down on his knees and held out his arms. The resemblance was obvious. Peter looked just like his father. Raven was positive that there wasn’t a dry eye in the room as the family held each other closely.

Wanda said, “I have Peter’s breakfast ready. Would you guys like some food? It’s on the house.”

Rachel and Pete just asked for some coffee and toast. Neither of them seemed to want to let go of their son. Raven didn’t blame them one bit for that.

“Thank you for finding him,” they told Raven.

“He rescued himself,” Raven said. “He is the real hero.”

The group smiled at Peter and his family while discussing the events that took place.

“Do you think that we should go around checking all of the old known farms, ranches, homesteads, and hunting shacks?” Ian asked. “If they used one as a sort of half-way house, maybe there are others.”

“It might be a good idea, although I think that they would only want places that are easily accessible. After all, not only are they transporting children, but they are also transporting their supplies and personnel. They aren’t going to be able to walk those things up,” James said.

“They might be able to if they have ATVs. They might also have shifters working for them that can help carry supplies,” Luke said.

“I would hate to think that there are shifters that would be involved in this kind of thing, but after what I saw when Rowena came to town, I know that there are just some awful shifters willing to do anything for a buck, just like regular, mundane people,” Josh said.

“I’ll get some of my men to check out any places that might be suspicious,” Ian said. “Luke, maybe you can get some of your people to do some flyovers.”

“Most definitely,” Luke replied.

“I know you guys don’t believe me, but I still think that the facility on the hill has something to do with this,” Raven said.

“I’m starting to be convinced,” Josh said. “Peter said that he and the other younglings had to do some of the same maneuvers we saw the adults doing earlier.”

Rachel, Pete, and Peter came over to bid farewell and then left. After she watched them go, Raven said, “I don’t care that the sun is already up. I’m going to bed.”

Everyone agreed that they needed to get some sleep, so they headed their separate ways. Josh didn’t say anything – he simply followed Raven upstairs to her room.

They undressed and dove into bed. Josh kissed her briefly and then pulled her tightly against him. He was instantly asleep.

Raven nestled in as close to him as she possibly could. She loved the feeling of being held tightly in his arms and never wanted it to end. She tried to stay awake for as long as she could so that she could savor the moment.

Her logical brain, though, wouldn’t let her fully enjoy the moment. It continuously told her that she couldn’t afford to fall in love with him. He wasn’t going to fall in love with her. She was here for one purpose, and as soon as she found Efron, she was going to head back home, leaving Josh behind.

Besides, look what happened the last time you fell in love. Zach trampled all over your heart and shattered your soul.

Raven knew that her brain was right. She had no business developing any kind of feelings for Josh. The problem was that her heart refused to listen to her head. Her heart had already fallen in love.

All too soon, the day's events got to her, and she couldn't fight it anymore. She closed her eyes, and she was in a deep sleep.

Raven woke up when Josh tried to pull his arm away.

"I'm sorry. I was trying to be gentle. You looked so beautiful and peaceful," he said.

"I can't sleep the day away, anyway," she replied. "What is on your agenda?"

"Well, first, I'm going to go home, take a quick shower, and grab some clothes," he said. "Then, I'm going to figure out what is the next step."

Raven nodded and said, "That is good, because frankly I'm not sure where to go from here."

"Do you want to come with me?" he asked. "Then, we'll just go straight from my house to wherever it is that we are going next."

"That sounds like a terrific idea," Raven agreed.

Raven was astonished when she saw where Josh lived. She figured that, as a bachelor, he would have a small place, like a neat little cabin. However, he had a big, beautiful house that looked like a log cabin on some major steroids. There was a huge bay window at the front of the house.

When she walked in, it almost looked like a small castle. The ceilings in the main room were high. There was a staircase that led to an upstairs area. There was a balcony that went all the way around upstairs.

"Holy crap," Raven said. "You didn't tell me that you were some kind of king. This is beautiful."

“Thank you,” Josh said. “My father built it for my mother. They gave it to me when...”

He stopped. Raven waited for a minute, but apparently, he wasn't inclined to finish his sentence.

Josh pointed to the kitchen and told her, “Go help yourself, although I think that it's a little early for beer. But it's there. Not sure I would blame you after the night that we've had.”

Raven headed for the kitchen while he headed upstairs. She grabbed a bottle of sweet iced tea and then made her way back into the main room. A couple of photographs caught her eye. She walked closer so she could study them.

She picked up one of them and stared at it. It was a picture of a smiling Josh. He had his arms around a gorgeous woman and held a beautiful little girl in his lap. Raven could see that the child had the same mischievous eyes as Josh. Josh looked so incredibly happy.

He hadn't told her that he had a family. She wondered where the woman and child were now. Raven was so enthralled with the picture that she hadn't noticed that Joshua had come back down.

He snatched the picture out of her hand and put it back where she had found it. Just as she started to ask who they were he said, “I don't want to talk about them.”

Raven felt like a complete idiot. He had a wife and child somewhere and here she was, falling in love with him.

She asked for the restroom and headed there so she could splash some cold water on her face and compose herself.

Josh's phone was ringing just as she stepped back into the living room.

“Sergeant Jefferson. What can I do for you?” Joshua asked.

He put his phone on speaker so that Raven could hear the entire conversation.

“We brought that woman in and booked her last night. She refused to tell us her name, so we booked her as Jane Doe and

ran her fingerprints through the system. We didn't come up with anything," he said.

"Something will turn up somewhere," Josh said. "Everyone leaves some kind of footprint."

"Well, maybe the coroner will be able to find out who she is," the man said.

"Coroner?" Josh asked in disbelief.

"Yep. Either someone followed us up here or us running the woman's prints through the system caught someone's attention. However it was, someone figured out that she was a guest at our station. She was found strangled to death in her cell this morning when one of the officers was bringing her breakfast," Sergeant Jefferson reported.

JOSH

Josh couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"She was strangled to death?" Josh asked.

"She definitely didn't commit suicide. She had been found on the floor with a plastic bag over her head. The reason I say that it wasn't suicide is because there were bruises on her shoulders where someone probably put their knees in order to hold her down while she suffocated," the sergeant reported.

"How did someone manage to get in and kill the woman while she was in state custody?" he asked.

"To be quite honest, I'm not sure. We do keep the place locked up pretty tightly at night, especially when there isn't anyone in the building to keep watch," Sergeant Jefferson replied. "Our cameras have been on the fritz lately, and it seems that they went completely out last night. We don't really have state of the art equipment here, so I'm sure that it wouldn't be hard for someone to disconnect the cameras."

"Wasn't there a guard on duty that would have seen or heard something?" Joshua asked, disbelief echoing in his voice.

"We don't always have someone available on staff to stay here. Remember that we have a huge area to cover and when there is an emergency, we have to go answer the call," Sergeant Jefferson told him. "Last night, there was only one person on duty, and he was there intermittently. Apparently, he got called out to deal with a domestic violence situation. He is

very trustworthy, before you go down that road. He wouldn't have done anything to the woman. And he would have made sure all the doors were locked when he left. Someone had to have a way into the building and a regular skeleton key wouldn't do it. It's obvious that she was killed by someone who knew what they were doing."

The sergeant added, "I'll let you know if anything else comes up or if we get an identity on the woman," and then hung up before Josh could even thank him for the information.

Raven shook her head and said, "That is unbelievable."

Josh called the other guys in a group call and told them what he and Raven had just learned.

"So much for getting any kind of information out of her," Luke said. "She was our best hope for a lead at this point."

"That's exactly why she was murdered," James said.

"It pisses me off that whoever is involved brought this mess to our town. We have gone forever without having any kind of drama, crime, or other issues, except for the time when my sweet wife came to town," Luke said. "Outside of Rowena's arrival though, Snow Haven was about as hum-drum as a place could be."

"We'll figure it out," James said. "No one is that good, and if there is more than one person involved than it is more likely that someone will leave some kind of evidence behind."

They all agreed that they would just continue their plans of surveying the facility and looking for possible places for whoever it was to hide the youngling.

"Let's go talk to Alice and Alan and see if they can remember anything else about the time when their pup was taken," Josh said, trying to come up with some way to find more clues about where the younglings were and why they had been taken.

As they drove over, Raven said, "This isn't normal trafficking."

"How so?" Josh asked.

“Most of the time when babies or kids are taken and aren’t molested and killed right away, they are sold off. It might be for sexual abuse, for slavery like maids or farm work, or just to people who can’t have children of their own. But based on what Peter said, they aren’t taking the kids for those purposes,” Raven said. “It sounds more like they are trying to create an army.”

“He did say they were doing those kinds of maneuvers,” Josh said.

“Shifters are very powerful. They would be intimidating and dominating in a battle,” Raven said. “He mentioned that they were taking blood and giving shots. Heaven forbid if they were giving them some kind of steroids to make them stronger or trying to mix up DNA and make the shifters chimeras.”

“Crazy scientists have tried to mix up species before,” Josh admitted, although he hated to.

“Taking the kids makes it easier to train them and brainwash them,” Raven said.

“You are right there, too,” Josh replied.

Josh hated to think what the kids must be going through. He wondered how many of these younglings had been taken and were having heaven knows what done to them. Raven’s argument, although fantastical, also sounds very logical.

Alice greeted him warmly when he knocked on her door. She grimaced when she saw Raven follow him in. He could already tell that this wasn’t going to be a great interview.

“I guess that you heard that Raven found a youngling yesterday,” Josh said.

“I heard. I heard that he had been kidnapped from Montana. Why was he brought here?” Alice asked.

“We don’t know. We are trying to figure that out and find out where the younglings are,” Josh said. “We know that there were several there with him and that several others had been previously brought into the area.”

“Is there anything that you might have remembered since the last time we talked?” Josh asked. “Something that you might have seen or heard? Even a hint of a strange smell could be a valuable clue.”

“Alan and I have been racking our brains. The only thing I remembered was that I thought I had seen a white van cruising the area earlier that morning. I didn’t remember ever seeing it before, but I just figured that it had something to do with whatever is happening on the hill,” she said. “Do you think that whoever was driving that van had something to do with his disappearance?”

“I don’t know. But now we know to be on the lookout for a white van. Did it have windows or anything like that?” Josh asked.

Alice thought about it for a second and then said, “No. The only windows were up front where the driver and passenger would sit, the windshield and the window in the very back. It looked like one of those typical work vans. That was why I just figured it had something to do with the shenanigans up there.”

“Have you seen any strangers in the area? Have any of your neighbors seen anything?” Josh asked.

“No, and not that I know of. I know that the security team talked to them, and they know that if they think of anything or remember anything that they should come to you with the information,” Alice said.

“Thank you. I promise that we’re doing everything we possibly can to find your baby,” Josh said as he and Raven stood to leave.

Suddenly, Alice looked at Raven and hissed, “This is your fault. You brought this mess here. You’re the reason my son is missing.”

“No, ma’am, I’m not. I only came because someone took my nephew and a clue told me to come here,” Raven said. “This problem was here before I came to town.”

Alice started to say something else, but Josh said, “Take it easy. Raven had nothing to do with this. Let us know if you hear anything.”

Josh could tell that Raven was shaken up by the encounter.

“She’s just in a lot of pain. You know that people who are emotional aren’t rational, and they tend to lash out at anyone around them. It’s nothing personal. Deep down inside, she knows that you have nothing to do with her baby’s disappearance,” Josh said.

“I know. But I hate it for her,” Raven said.

Then she growled and said, “This is so damned frustrating. I feel like I’m not doing anything but chasing my own tail and getting nowhere.”

“I know the feeling,” Josh said. “We take one step forward and two steps back. It’s a waltz that I’d rather not dance.”

“The good thing about finding Peter, besides the fact that at least Peter is safe, is that we know that we still have time to find the other younglings. The kidnappers appear to be keeping the kids together and keeping them alive.”

They arrived back at the bed and breakfast, and Josh parked his truck but didn’t get out.

“Let’s walk down to *Shifter’s Paradise* and see if Beau has heard any news. You know that people talk about anything and everything when they start drinking,” Josh suggested.

As they walked toward the bar, Raven reached for his hand, almost as though it was the most natural thing in the world for her to do. He grabbed it. It did feel natural.

The warmth that flowed from her hand to his scared him. It felt good and right for them to take a walk through town holding hands, almost as though they belonged together.

Josh mentally shook himself. That kind of thinking was only going to cause him more pain. This little love affair that was going on between him and Raven was only temporary. She was here to find her nephew. When she did, she would head back to Toronto and resume her duties there.

He wasn't interested in asking her if she wanted to stay after she found the cub. There was no way in the world that he was going to admit that he wanted her to. Even if he did, he sure as hell wasn't going to give her the chance to break his heart. He had already suffered enough heartache for one person.

When he came downstairs, he had been shocked to find Raven staring at a picture of him with Naomi and Stormy. He knew that she had questions, but he had no intention of telling her about them. He couldn't admit to himself that, maybe, he could have two true loves in his life.

RAVEN

Raven wondered what was going through Josh's mind. One second, he would be holding her hand tightly and then he would barely be holding it at all. She wondered if it had something to do with the picture of the woman and little girl that she had seen earlier.

She imagined that she could feel the little sparks of electricity that formed whenever they touched, even in the most innocuous way. Holding hands with him as they walked down the street seemed to be even more intimate than sex did.

Once again, she reminded herself that she needed to get her head on her shoulders. This was a temporary fling for the both of them. Her stay in town was only temporary. The sooner she was able to find Efron, the quicker she could go home and get herself together again.

Beau's bar was right in front of them. Raven was grateful, because it gave her something else to think about besides the man walking beside her.

"Hello, Raven. I hear that you are our new hero," Beau said.

"Hi, Beau. I'm not a hero. Peter was the hero. I merely stumbled across him as I took a walk," Raven said.

"Humble and beautiful – the perfect combination," Beau said. "What can I get for you?"

"We aren't staying long," Josh interjected. "We were just hoping that you might have heard or seen something that stood

out.”

Beau shook his head and said, “You know that I would have called you the second that I did. I thought that if anyone had any information it might have come out today, since Peter was found last night and that old woman was murdered in the jail.”

“You *know* about that?” Raven asked, incredulously.

“Sweetheart, this is Snow Haven. If you sneeze in the middle of the night at your own house with all the doors and windows shut, there will be three pots of chicken soup on your door the next day,” Beau said. “Information spreads out here faster than a prairie fire spreads in Kansas.”

Raven grinned at his analogy.

“I guess that is small town life for you,” Raven said.

“Gossiping is the town sport. That isn’t always a good thing, mind you,” Beau said, with a cheeky grin.

Josh decided to take charge of the conversation again, and said, “Alice said that she thinks she remembered a white van in the neighborhood the morning her son was taken. It was more like a utility or work van than a leisure vehicle. Do you know anyone who has one of those?”

Beau shook his head and replied, “Not that I can think of. Everyone around here drives trucks with four-wheel drive. I suppose there are vans with four-wheel drive, but I haven’t seen anything like that.”

“Thanks for the info,” Josh said. “Just keep your eyes and ears out, and let me know if you come across any useful information.”

“I certainly will,” Beau said.

Raven felt like Josh was actually bustling her out of the bar as though he didn’t like the fact that Beau was a little flirtatious. It made her feel good to think that Josh might be a little jealous. It meant that he had some kind of feelings for her.

They headed back to the café.

Josh said, "I have some clan business that I need to take care of. You might wander around town and see if there is anything that catches your attention. I'll meet you back here later. You shouldn't go anywhere in the woods or near the facility alone. They've already proven that they are dangerous when they killed that woman in the jail."

Raven only smiled. She tended not to take other people's advice. Especially when it went against what she wanted to do.

She was hungry so she headed in for some lunch. She was glad that her father was funding the trip, because, although Wanda's prices were reasonable, eating at the café three times a day was adding up.

"How are you doing?" Wanda asked, sliding into the booth.

"I'm frustrated. I know that Efron is out there somewhere. I have to get him back," Raven said.

"I can't imagine what you or your sister are going through," Wanda said. "It must be excruciating to lose a child."

"That little boy walked on water in my sister's eyes," Raven said. "And mine, too. It would kill both of us if something bad happened to him."

Raven couldn't bring herself to say if he was killed. She couldn't even entertain the fact that it was a possibility.

"I know in my heart that you'll find him," Wanda said. "And I'm always right."

Raven smiled at the older woman and said, "Thanks. I need all the hope and encouragement I can get."

Another customer came in, so Wanda got up to greet him.

There was no way in the world that she was just going to sit around. She thought about walking around in town, but in her heart, Raven knew that there were no answers there. Even though Peter hadn't seen the facilities and the men weren't sure that the place had anything to do with the missing kids,

she knew in her heart that it did. That was where she would find her answers.

She slipped out the back door and started up the now familiar trail to the monstrosity that stood on top of the hill. Raven looked around carefully, paying attention to every sound. She was hoping that someone would pop out of the woods and give her all the answers. Unfortunately, no one did.

Raven stayed in her human form until she got close to the outer fence. She undressed and neatly folded her clothes, hiding them under some brush. Then, she shifted into her bear form.

Slowly and quietly, she inched her way toward the gate. She hoped that if she was spotted that someone would just think that she was the wildlife around and wouldn't think anything about her being there.

Raven had walked around for quite a while when she spotted what looked like a hole in the back fence. It was a small hole, but Raven thought that she might be able to squeeze her way through it.

Cautiously, she sniffed the air. She didn't detect any smell that didn't belong. She listened but didn't hear anything out of the ordinary. She didn't see anything either.

Just as she got to the hole and was about to stick her head through it, she felt a sharp pain in her shoulder.

She tried to whip around to see what had happened, but the world started spinning out of control. In just a second, darkness descended upon her, and she was out like a light.

Raven had no idea how much time had passed when her eye lids fluttered open. She looked up to see Josh and Wanda standing over her.

“Thank the heavens that you are awake,” Wanda said.

Raven looked around the room, moving only her eyes, and realized that she was back in her room at the bed and breakfast.

She tried to sit up, but her head started spiraling and her brain felt like mush. Her mouth felt as though it was full of cotton balls. She squinted at the two people standing next to her, trying to make out their shapes in the fog that filled the room.

“How in the world did I get here?” Raven finally managed to ask.

“Kathy found you when she took out the trash earlier. Apparently, someone had dumped your body behind the dumpster. You were in your human form, so whoever it was knew that you were staying here,” Wanda said.

“You are damned lucky that you weren’t killed,” Josh raved. “They probably thought that you were dead. We thought that you might be for a few minutes. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that I came here to do a job and I mean to do it. I did not come here to have you park me here and then pick me back up when it’s convenient for you,” Raven said.

Josh just stood beside the bed and gritted his teeth. Wanda, on the other hand, seemed to think that the whole thing was amusing.

“What happened?” he finally asked.

“I still think that the disappearance of all these younglings is related to the building up there. As I mentioned before, I didn’t come here to sit around on my thumbs all day, so I decided that I would go up there and see if there was anything new to learn,” she said.

Josh and Wanda simply looked at her, waiting for her to continue her story.

“I shifted into bear form when I got close. I listened and sniffed the air, but I didn’t detect anyone or anything that might be out of the ordinary,” she said.

Her voice started to croak, and she was sure that a piece of sandpaper had just slid down her windpipe. She reached for the bottle of water that was by her bed before she continued.

“I saw a small opening in the fence. I was pretty sure that I could get through it, so I got closer. I was just about to try going through the fence when I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder. The world started turning upside down immediately after that, and then next thing I knew the world went black. Then, I woke up here, to see your beautiful face and your grumpy face looking at me,” Raven reported.

“You probably got hit by a tranquilizer,” Wanda said, sympathetically.

“Did the hole look like it had been cut or as if something, like a moose or other large animal, had torn it?” Josh asked.

Raven thought about it for a few seconds and said, “It looked torn. It didn’t have straight edges.”

“Either local wildlife or there are shifters up there and one of them might have tried to find a way out,” Josh said.

Raven couldn’t remember anything else. Josh said something to her, but she couldn’t hear him. She was so tired. The darkness was back.

JOSH

“**M**om, why don't you go back downstairs. I'll keep an eye on her and let you know if anything happens,” Josh said.

Wanda looked at her son appraisingly. Josh braced himself for some kind of lecture, whether it was to say that he needed to let go of the past and that Raven was someone special or if it was going to be another lecture about how he needed to be careful with Raven's emotions.

However, Wanda apparently decided that neither lecture would do any good and that she would be wasting her breath. Instead, she patted him on the back and left the room without a word.

Josh slumped down in the recliner that was stationed in the corner of the room, and stared blankly at Raven, who seemed to be sleeping peacefully. There was a steady rise and fall of her chest and a tiny snore that sounded more like a kitten purring.

He rubbed his face with his hand and then ran his fingers through his hair. He closed his eyes and let out a low growl.

Josh realized that he had been terrified. He was afraid that he was going to lose her, just like he had lost Naomi and Stormy. He was annoyed that he had let himself have such strong feelings for her. He had vowed that he was never going to let himself love anyone else the same way.

Actually, the love he felt for Raven was different than what he had felt for Naomi. The love he had for Naomi had been a

slow, comfortable, warm love, much like a warm blanket on a cold night.

What he felt for Raven was more intense. There was a constant fire that burned deep within his soul. There was a constant yearning to be in her presence. Her scent had permeated every fiber of his body, pulling him toward her. He loved her spirit, her sense of humor, and her strength. Her stubbornness irked him from time to time, but he loved that too, because it was a part of her.

Stop. This has got to stop.

Josh took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind.

I'm not going down that rabbit hole. I cannot afford to let myself get that attached to someone again. Besides, she's leaving town as soon as she finds her nephew. She might stick around to help find the other younglings, but Snow Haven isn't her home and she'll soon return to Toronto.

Josh was angry with himself. He knew that as much as he wanted to, he couldn't control how he felt about Raven. He couldn't control his want — his extreme need — for her. The fact was that he had been terrified of losing her. What was he going to feel when it came time for her to return home?

I'm just feeling this way because I do care about her, and I was afraid that she was going to get hurt on my watch.

Then, he shook his head because he knew that he was lying to himself. However, he hoped that if he held on tight enough to that lie, it would become a reality.

After another hour, Raven started moving and groaning. Josh stood up and rushed over to the side of her bed to make sure that she was okay. However, it appeared that the tranquilizer had run its course and she was waking up.

She looked startled when she looked up and saw him standing by her bed.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, anxiously.

Raven closed her eyes for a second, which made his heart clench.

Then, she opened her eyes again and said, “Like I was in the ring with Ronda Rousey.”

Josh chuckled. She was going to be okay.

“Actually, I’m starving, and I could use some acetaminophen or something for my head,” she said.

“Mom can help you with both of those things. Let’s get you dressed and get you downstairs,” Josh said.

He couldn’t help but admire her beautiful body as she climbed out of bed. Josh remembered how she seemed to fit him perfectly. Every part of her body seemed to be made for his. There was no awkward positioning when they had sex. They simply formed together.

Raven still seemed to be a little bit unbalanced, so it took her a little longer than usual to get dressed. When she was ready, he walked behind her, ready to grab her if she lost her balance and fell.

Wanda smiled brightly when she saw Raven come down for food.

“I’m so glad to see you up and about. I was terrified that you weren’t going to be okay,” Wanda said.

“You’re sweet,” Raven said. “It’ll take a lot more than that to take me out permanently.”

“Let’s try real hard to *not* find out what it does take,” Wanda said, smiling widely.

She brought both of them a chicken pot pie and orange juice.

“You know the kind of people that we’re up against,” Josh said. “They took out one of their own people to make sure she didn’t talk. They obviously would not think twice about killing you and either making it look like an accident or making sure that your body would never be found. What in the world possessed you to go up there alone and, on top of that, try to get into the place?”

“I can’t just sit around here and twiddle my thumbs all day. You guys were all out doing whatever it is you do. I came here

for answers. I was actually hoping that the person who has been giving me tips would seek me out again,” she said.

“It’s not even safe for me or any of the others to go out there by ourselves, and we know the area like the back of our hand. The next time you feel like you need to go exploring, and I’m not available, find someone to go with you. If nothing else, call Ian and he’ll send one of his guys over,” Josh said.

“I don’t know Ian’s number,” Raven said.

“Mom does. Now promise me that you won’t go off halfcocked like that again,” Josh said.

After a few seconds, she said, “Okay, I promise.”

They finished up their meal and decided that they needed some fresh air. Raven preceded him out the door.

Wanda grabbed his arm and said, “If I didn’t know better, I would think that you are starting to care for her. Be careful – not only for her sake, but for yours.”

Josh didn’t reply. He merely kissed his mother’s cheek and followed Raven outside.

They purposely took a different path than the one that led up to the hill. They both instinctively knew that they needed a break from that. They talked about everything but the case.

Raven told them about Efron and her sister. She told him about her last bust and how she felt bad that the kid had been exiled at such a young age.

“He knew better. He made a conscious choice between right and wrong. His fate is on his shoulders, not yours,” Josh said.

“I know. But it still seems like a waste of life,” she replied.

“Maybe he can be rehabilitated and do some good,” Josh stated.

“I hope so,” Raven replied. “I guess you don’t have any of that kind of stuff going on around here.”

“Not usually,” Josh said.

Josh thought about her family and life. He couldn't stop himself from asking. The words just seemed to come out of his mouth on their own volition.

“So why doesn't a bear shifter, as beautiful as yourself, have a bunch of cubs running around everywhere,” Josh asked.

“Because no man can tolerate my determination, assertiveness, and my overall awesomeness,” she said.

He laughed and said, “Fair enough, I guess.”

Raven sucked in a huge breath and bit her lip.

“I was engaged to a man. We were together for years. On the day of our mating ceremony slash wedding, he left me with a note saying that he didn't love me anymore. He had fallen in love with another woman. The bastard didn't even have the guts to tell me to my face. He didn't have the balls to tell me way before that day so that we could simply call it off. Instead, he left me hanging there, humiliated, in front of everyone,” Raven said.

“I'm sorry. That is awful,” Josh replied.

“Robin convinced me to stay there and party with everyone. She said that my reaction was sure to get back to him, so I should act like it really wasn't that big of a deal. So, I changed my clothes and hung out with everyone. After that, I just focused on my education and moving up on the security team. I never let anyone get close to me after that. It just didn't seem worth it, and I hurt,” Raven related. “To be honest, it made me question my ability to judge other people without letting my emotions get the better of me. I was too afraid to trust another person to let anyone get close to me.”

At that point, Josh felt like a real ass. He knew that their relationship wasn't going to be a forever relationship. He knew that she was smart enough to realize that as well. He still felt as though he had taken advantage of her.

Josh opened his mouth to tell her about Naomi and Stormy. After all, she had just laid her soul bare for him to see. However, he couldn't bring himself to tell her about them. He never talked to anyone about them for any reason.

The night was starting to get a little cooler, and Raven shivered a bit.

“Let’s get you back home,” he said.

They walked silently, hand in hand, back to the bed and breakfast. Then, as though his feet had their own mind, they carried him up the stairs to her room.

RAVEN

As soon as the door shut behind them, Josh reached for her. He put his hands on either side of her face and leaned down to kiss her. At first the kiss almost felt tentative. It was the briefest whisper of a touch. Then, the pressure on her mouth grew and soon the passion of all of mankind manifested in the touch of their lips.

Raven's brain told her that she needed to stop and that she was only going to get hurt. However, the rest of her body told her brain to shut up. She was going to experience everything that she possibly could with Josh, so she would have enough memories to last her a lifetime. As much as she would try to deny it to herself, she knew that she had fallen in love with him, and it was the love of a lifetime.

The air came alive and was suddenly filled with a pulsating electricity. The tingling currents grazed her skin, raising goosebumps all over her body. The familiar scent of their chemistry combining filled her senses.

Raven moaned loudly as his tongue dove into her mouth, exploring it, tasting it. He nibbled on the tip of her tongue and then sucked on it. She wrapped her arms around him, her fingers kneading the tight muscles on his back. Then, one of her hands slipped up and cupped the back of his neck gently.

Her chest was pressed tightly against his, as his kiss grew even more intense. Raven could feel the smoldering embers begin to come alive and burst into a raging inferno. Heat

flooded her body, and she needed him to fill her with a ferocity she never knew existed.

Their clothes seemed to dissolve and melt into a puddle at her feet. She ran her hands over his chest and kissed across the top of his pecs. Then, she moved behind him, trailing her fingertips over his body. She licked his shoulder blade and then kissed it. She made a trail of nibbles to his other shoulder blade.

Raven took a tiny step back to survey his back side. She ran her fingers all over his back and looked at his ass. She had never understood what the big deal women made about a man who had a nice ass, but now she got it. It was finely sculpted.

“You are a sexy beast,” she said, moving back toward the front of him. “I’m sure that all of the famous Italian sculptors had you in mind when they began to carve out their marble statues of Greek heroes.”

“I wasn’t born then.” He laughed.

“Ah, but they knew you were coming,” she said.

She started to kneel in front of him, but he stopped her.

“I have a better idea,” he said, and guided her over to the bed.

“Lay down,” he told her.

She obeyed.

Then, he moved so that he was upside down on top of her. His huge cock hung temptingly above her mouth.

She gasped loudly as he began to lick the warm, wet entrance to her pussy.

Raven wrapped her hand around the base of his cock so she could control how much went in. She was certain that she couldn’t handle all nine inches of it in her mouth without gagging or suffocating.

She loved the smooth texture of the head of his cock. A few droplets of clear liquid appeared, and she licked them as though she was savoring the first tastes of her favorite ice

cream cone. When Josh moaned loudly, she knew that she was on the right track.

As he thrust his tongue inside of her, she opened her mouth wide to take as much of him as she could inside. She suckled him and wrapped her tongue around his shaft. Raven loved the contrast of the smooth, silky skin and the hard textures of the veins filled with pulsing blood.

He started to move his hips gently as he fucked her mouth.

Raven moaned deep in her throat as he pushed a couple of fingers inside of her pussy, spreading them apart, stretching her velvety walls to prepare her for the girth of his cock. He flicked her clit with his tongue, sending explosions of heat through her.

The light in the room exploded into a kaleidoscope of a million colors. The prisms danced above her head. Every cell in her body was aflame with an intense heat.

As he wrapped his lips around the hard pebble, she began to tremble. Her heart was thundering and she panted, as though she had run a million miles. Raven sucked hard on the offering in her mouth as Josh twirled his tongue around her clit.

The heat was just too much and Raven was sure that her body was going to explode into a million pieces. She began to tremble and a huge wave of ecstasy overcame her. A river of hot, creamy rapture exploded out of her.

After a minute, when her body began to slow and she finally remembered to breathe, Josh pulled his cock out of her mouth.

“Turn over and get on your hands and knees,” he ordered.

Raven obeyed, quickly moving into the position he demanded.

Josh put one of his hands on her hip while he used the other to guide his cock to the entrance of her dripping pussy.

He pushed the head of his shaft into her.

“Yes,” Raven said, as she felt her pussy tighten around him.

Slowly, he pushed himself deep inside of her.

Raven moaned loudly. He had never been this deep inside of her before.

Josh smacked her ass lightly and then put his other hand on her hips, holding her in the perfect position for him.

As Josh moved, Raven’s nipples constantly rubbed on the soft sheets of the bed, sending bolts of electricity through her body. Her fingers dug into the bed, as he pulled almost all the way out and then drove hard and fast back into her.

“Oh my heavens,” Raven gasped.

Her mind was reeling and her body once more caught fire. She could see the lightning flash around them and the thunder roar as the heavens opened up. The world disappeared and it was as though they were floating in the vast universe.

Josh began to move harder and faster.

“Yes, please,” Raven begged, although she really wasn’t sure what she was begging for.

“Please what?” Josh panted.

“Hard. Deep,” she managed to say.

Josh pulled his massive cock almost all the way out and drove it hard and fast inside of her. The feeling was incredible and intense, and there were no words that could ever describe it.

“Please, more,” Raven said.

Josh continued to drive hard and fast into her. Her tight pussy walls gripped his cock tightly as he moved inside of her.

“I love how your pussy feels. You are so tight. Damn, you feel so good,” he whispered.

Raven couldn’t contain the fire any longer and her pussy began to pulsate around him, sending wave after wave of burning lava over him.

“I’m not ready yet. I want more of you,” he said.

He rolled over on his back, his huge cock standing straight up.

“Come here,” he ordered.

She moved toward him.

“Mount me,” he said.

Raven blushed a little but moved to straddle him. She raised up so that he was just inside of her pussy. Then, she slowly moved down, impaling herself on his thick pole.

“Yes. Heaven’s yes,” he said.

He reached up and squeezed her tits with his hands, kneading them. Then, he pinched her nipples with his fingers, rolling them between his thumb and forefinger, pulling on them slightly.

Raven was sure that her eyes rolled back in her head as the fires, that hadn’t quite died down, flared back up into life. She leaned over so that her chest was touching his. He reached down and put his hands on her ass as she began to move up and down, stroking his cock with her pussy.

“Yes, that’s it. You feel so good,” he said.

He caressed her back, slowly, moving his hands from her shoulders down to her ass and then back up. Her nipples grazed his chest.

When her hips met his, her clit exploded into a million different pieces.

Raven gasped for air. She moved her hip around in circles, pressing that hard, sensitive pebble against him.

“That’s it, baby. Use me to pleasure yourself,” Josh said.

His voice was deep with passion, and Raven was sure that hearing it would be enough to make her cum.

“You feel so good wrapped around my cock,” he said.

Raven continued to rotate her hips. Then, she began to move up and down again. She moved her hips until he was

barely inside of her and then slammed back down on him.

“Yes. That feels so good. I love being inside of you,” Josh whispered.

Raven moved faster and faster on him. The air swirling around her was cool and clashed with the heat that was radiating from their bodies.

She went down hard on him, and she could feel the head of his cock deep inside of her body, stretching her.

As the world began to tilt and the air around her changed from one color to the next, she began to shake. She pressed down hard on him – as hard as she possibly could. Her pussy began to pulsate and grip his cock tightly.

“Josh,” she cried out as her body shook and another river exploded out of her.

“That’s it. Cum on me, baby,” Josh cried as his fingers gripped her thighs.

He thrust up and released a huge fountain of his hot seed deep inside of her. His hard cock was throbbing, and Raven was sure that she was going to pass out from the incredible sensations that flooded her body.

When they both had expended themselves, she rolled over. They cleaned themselves and then they snuggled together in the bed. Raven thought that she had died and gone to heaven as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to him.

RAVEN

Raven was very disappointed when she woke up to discover that Josh was gone. She was actually very surprised that he didn't wake her up when he was getting out of bed, but figured that she was very tired and there might have been some lingering effects of the tranquilizer.

She smiled as she remembered how good it felt to lay on her side and have him pull her tight against him, holding her tight. It had felt so good.

Raven figured that the reason that he was so reluctant to spend the night with her had something to do with the woman and child in the picture. He had the perfect opportunity to open up and tell her about them yesterday when she told him about Zach, but he hadn't said anything. She figured that he must have lost them in some devastating way and that was what kept him so closed up about everything. She hoped that someday he might trust her enough to tell her about them.

After jumping into the shower to fully wake up, Raven slowly got dressed as she tried to figure out what she was going to do for the day. She had promised Josh that she wouldn't try to visit the facility at the top of the hill again. She had already toured Snow Haven a couple of times, and there simply weren't any clues there.

Her stomach told her that the first order of business was food. She was starving. An omelet and orange juice sounded perfect.

Raven gasped when she opened the door. Another note was attached.

“You’re getting close. He’s there.”

Like the last one, it was written in black sharpie in block letters. Block letters were the best way to conceal a person’s handwriting.

She grabbed a plastic bag and handling the note only by the corners, she gingerly slid the note into the bag. Then, she took a picture of it and sent it to Josh.

“I don’t know whether it is genuine or someone is trying to play head games with you,” he said.

“I think that it is the real deal,” Raven said. “Whoever this is, brought me to Snow Haven. We already discovered that there is a shifter trafficking ring operating in the area.”

“You’re right about all of that. You have to promise me not to go anywhere alone, especially up to the facility,” Josh said.

“I promise,” Raven replied.

Wanda smiled at her as Raven made her way down the stairs.

“Good morning,” Wanda said. “What would you like for breakfast?”

After Raven ordered the omelet and orange juice, she asked, “Did you see anyone going upstairs toward my room this morning?”

“No. If I had, I would have never allowed it,” she replied. “Why?”

Raven told her about the note that was taped to the door.

“Someone must have slipped up there when I was in the kitchen. I didn’t see any stranger in the café and, like I said, I would have stopped anyone from going upstairs,” Wanda said.

She was upset that someone had slipped past her keen eye.

“I wonder if someone could have come in the back door to get past you?” Raven asked.

“I guess that is always a possibility,” Wanda said. “I guess I’m going to have to go modern and put a security camera up.”

“The person wasn’t trying to hurt me. They were just giving me a tip as to where I might be able to find Efron,” Raven said.

“Yeah, but what if they had come here to hurt you or even kill you, like they did that old woman in the jail. If they can get to her, then they can get to you,” Wanda countered.

Raven had to admit that Wanda was right.

She was almost done with her breakfast when a stranger walked in. He was very tall and wore a black suit with dark sunglasses. All eyes stared at him as he walked by, but he didn’t look either right or left. He walked straight to Raven and sat down. He didn’t offer any kind of greeting. He simply got straight to the point.

“I know that you and your friends have been snooping around up at the facilities. If you want to see what is going on, be at the front gate at one. Bring your friends. “I’ll give you a tour of the place so that you guys know exactly what is going on there and you can stop nosing around the area,” he said and then walked out the door.

Raven watched him leave, her mouth hanging open. He had made her feel like she was a naughty five-year-old and was surprised that he hadn’t referred to them as *The Little Rascals* or something equally childish.

Everyone in the café had watched him walk out the door and their heads snapped back toward Raven. She wondered if she should even bother calling Josh. He would know about the altercation soon enough.

She finished her breakfast and walked outside. She called Josh.

“I was just about to call you,” he said. “Word on the street is that you had a visitor this morning.”

“Funny how quickly word gets around in this town. I wondered if I should even bother calling you, since you likely

knew what was going on before he even left the café,” Raven said.

“Well, you aren’t lying,” he said. “I probably had five texts while he was still telling you what time to be there.”

Raven laughed.

“I guess you’ll let the others know what time to be at the front gate?” she asked. “Unless, of course, they already know.”

“They probably do,” he said. “But I’ll call them and tell them anyway. I’ll pick you up about half past twelve. We’ll get there early, but they are likely prepared for that.”

“Maybe. He seems to be the kind of guy that one means one. Not twelve fifty-nine or one minute past – but exactly one o’clock,” Raven stated.

Everyone was at the front gate at a quarter ’til.

The guard came out of his little hut with a rifle across his chest. He had a pistol in a holster on both hips.

“What is he expecting – the entire Russian Army to come marching in here to take over?” Raven asked.

“It seems like it, doesn’t it?” Josh said.

“Let me see your identification,” the man demanded.

He took a picture of their driver’s licenses and then pointed to a fence.

“Park there,” he ordered. “Stay in your vehicles until someone comes for you.”

The man who visited Raven at the café came out of the building precisely at one.

“I told you so,” Raven said.

“Is that the man who you talked to earlier?” Josh asked.

“I didn’t actually talk to him. I didn’t get to say a word,” Raven said. “He came in and told me where to be and at what time and told me to bring my friends.”

Everyone got out of their vehicles at the same time.

“My name is Director Edwards. I run this facility. I know that there have been a lot of curiosity about the place and what we are doing here. I hope that today’s tour will end your nosing around and attempted trespassing,” the man said.

Raven wondered whether the man ever took off his sunglasses.

The sheer size of it awed Raven. As they walked in, there was a huge room that served as a reception area. A small woman sat behind a huge desk. She didn’t bother looking up from her computer as they entered.

“The facility is broken down into two parts. The lower part is for an elite military school. All of these rooms are classrooms for our soldiers,” the man said.

He opened one of the doors and there were about ten people sitting at tables, taking notes as another person stood at the front of the room talking. None of them acknowledged the man who opened the door or the people who stared at them.

Director Edwards closed the door and opened a few more, revealing the exact same scenario.

Raven thought that it must take a lot of training and effort not to look at them. Most people’s instincts would have been to look and see what was going on at the door.

They headed upstairs, bypassing the elevator. Raven guessed that since they all wouldn’t fit in one elevator, and Director Edwards didn’t want anyone left alone and unsupervised, that the stairs were the only solution.

There were several laboratories on one side.

“Our people do research on the medicinal properties of different types of plants. The goal is to find more natural solutions for common ailments. Not only would this be healthier for the public, but it would also be more cost effective,” Director Edwards said.

He spoke in a low monotone that was almost too low for Raven to catch.

Director Edwards led them down a corridor to a couple of rooms that had neat rows of plants growing. Artificial light mimicked the sunlight that the plants would need to grow and thrive.

“These are our greenroom, so to speak. We don’t have the time to keep a regular garden. In addition, Alaska’s winters last a long time and aren’t conducive to growing the types of plants that we are researching,” he explained. “It’s much easier to simply grow them here.”

After opening a few more doors, he asked, “Now are you satisfied?”

“It seems to be an unusual and unlikely combination of activities going on,” Josh said. “Military training and biological research in the same place?”

“It’s efficient,” Director Edwards said.

“Is there a basement?” Raven asked.

“There is and it’s off limits,” the director said.

“What about the third floor?” Ian inquired.

“They are doing classified research up there and it, too, is off limits,” the director replied.

“Is that where you are hiding the missing younglings?” Raven asked.

“Young lady, you have been misinformed. The tour is over,” Director Edwards said and ushered them back down the stairs and out the front door. He stood at the front to watch them walk to their vehicles. The guard stepped out of his shack, fully loaded down with weapons, to make sure that everyone got in their vehicles and left the premises.

Raven shivered as a cold chill went down her spine. She knew that she was right about the fact that there was some evil activity going on there.

JOSH

The group headed to Beau's bar to discuss what they saw.

"I thought that it was a bunch of horse shit," James said. "What he showed us was just a small part of the entire operation. I'm not even sure that most of it was real."

"He certainly didn't appreciate us asking questions," Raven said. "He got super touchy when I asked about the younglings."

"My guess is that the powers that be figured us to be a bunch of backwoods people with the IQ of an acorn. They figured that they could take us into the facility, show us a couple of parts of the place, and that we would take them at their word that what they shared with us is all that there was," Luke said.

"No offense, Raven, but I'm still not sure that the younglings are there – although I'm not sure that they aren't. But there is definitely *something* there that they don't want us to know about," Ian added.

"I have more than just my gut instincts that tell me that the younglings are there," Raven said, and told them about the note.

"We don't have any legal reason to go in there," Josh said. "We will just have to keep our eyes open. Has any of the searches in the area panned out?"

“Nope,” Ian said. “There are no clues for anything. None of the places we looked seemed to have been used for anything lately. There was a mysterious fire at the farmhouse in the middle of the night, so any information from there has likely been destroyed.”

“They are very adept at covering their tracks,” Raven said. “Did we get anything from the place before it was destroyed?”

The frustration in her voice was evident and was echoed by everyone in the room. There were missing younglings out there, and every one of them wanted those children found.

“Nothing that we didn’t already know. They took everything that might have been of value with them. There were no signs of the medical equipment, including blood samples or any type of medications. There were no documents or anything else that could even give a hint of the identity of the people who were working there or the children,” Ian said. “The few fingerprints we did get didn’t lead us anywhere. Hell, we still don’t even know who the woman was who had been left behind.”

“I hate not having any leads to follow. I have to find my nephew. I can’t bear to think about what they are doing to the little guy,” Raven exclaimed, slamming her fist down on the table.

Josh rubbed her back briefly to soothe her, until he realized that everyone had noticed the gesture. Then, he dropped his hand.

Luke reached over and put his hand on her shoulder and tried to reassure her.

“We’ll find him. We won’t stop looking until we find him and the rest of them,” Luke promised.

Raven nodded. Josh could see that she was gritting her teeth out of anger and frustration. She didn’t like sitting around and waiting for information or to see what might pop up.

As they were heading out the door to go their separate ways, Josh pulled Luke aside and asked, “Can I take Raven to

the Oasis?”

Luke looked at Josh for a second and then nodded.

The oasis was a secret, sacred place that was in the center of the dragon shifter land. Outsiders were strictly forbidden unless they had specific permission from Luke or one of the Elders.

Josh hoped that taking Raven to the oasis would help calm her nerves and help her find some peace for at least a couple of hours.

Raven and Josh went to the café. Josh asked his mother for a picnic lunch.

When she looked at him quizzically, he said, “Raven is stressed out. Luke gave me permission to take her to the oasis.”

Wanda gave him the same searching look that Luke had. Taking Raven to such a sacred place had meaning, whether Josh wanted to admit it or not.

After Kathy packed the lunch in a bag that Josh could carry in his wolf form, he told Raven, “Come on. I want to take you someplace.”

They headed into the woods, undressed, put their clothes in a bag, and shifted. Raven threw that bag across her back and followed Josh into the woods.

The journey took about an hour. As they trekked through the woods, Josh could sense that Raven was starting to relax a little bit. She looked around her, taking in the trees and the other animals that scurried about.

Finally, they arrived. Raven set down the bag and shifted into human form. Her eyes were open wide as she surveyed the area.

There was some type of thermal springs that ran underground and bubbled up into a clear pool. The water in the pool stayed around eighty degrees year round. The ambient air of the oasis stayed around eighty, as well. The ground was

carpeted with luscious green grass and wildflowers of every color imaginable.

Raven just looked around in awe at the incredible beauty that surrounded them.

“Who would have guessed that a place like this existed on Earth. The Garden of Eden was surely here and not some place in Mesopotamia,” she gasped.

“This is a sacred place in the middle of the dragon shifter clan property. They don’t allow too many people to come here, because they are afraid that people would desecrate it,” Josh said.

“I can see why,” Raven said. “Can I get into the water?”

Josh nodded and watched with satisfaction as Raven delicately slipped into the water like the nymphs of ancient legends. She dove underneath and came up giggling. The water droplets glistened on her body as though she was covered in precious gems.

He couldn’t help himself. Raven was a siren who called to him and who pulled at his soul. When he got close to the pool, Raven splashed him and then jumped away.

He jumped in the water and splashed her back. Then, after the splash game was done, Raven laid on her back and floated.

Her body was so incredibly beautiful and he couldn’t resist. He reached out and touched her side and then her stomach. Her skin was silky soft. Her body was well toned, and her curves showed that she was every bit of a woman.

She smiled at him as he put one of his hands on her ankle and slowly traveled up her leg.

“You have beautiful gams,” he said.

“Why thank you,” she replied.

His hand had reached her apex and she sucked in a deep breath as his fingers found his way into her warm tunnel. His thumb rubbed her clit, eliciting a deep moan that came from the very depths of her being.

Josh leaned over and began to gently suck her nipple, flicking it with his tongue, and lapping at it. She moaned louder and her body began to tremble. His other hand was under the water across her shoulders, holding her up.

“Mmm, Josh,” she whispered between pants.

She arched her hips to give him more access to her.

The sun was hot, the air was cool, and the water was warm. The flowers scented the area with their beautiful, sweet smells. Birds were singing happily, and the buzzing bees were merrily buzzing about. All Josh noticed was the gorgeous vixen that graced the water in front of him.

She began to tremble as her fires burned. Josh felt his own embers flare into life and his cock hardened.

“Josh, don’t stop. Oh heavens, I can’t...” she moaned.

Then, he felt the flood of her desires flow across his fingers.

She stood up, and then he said, “Put your legs around my waist.”

Raven gave a tiny little leap so that her legs wrapped around him. As she did so, she slid down his cock, impaling herself on him.

He reached beneath her, holding her beautiful ass, supporting her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his as her hips moved back and forth.

Her pussy walls encased him tightly and massaged him as he drove in and out of her.

Raven moaned his name.

“Josh, you feel so good. Oh heavens,” she cried out.

The buoyancy of the water added to the feeling that they were floating in air as he continued to move in and out of her.

“You feel so good wrapped around my cock,” he whispered in her ear.

Her fingers dug into the muscles on his back and her legs squeezed him tightly.

“Josh, I can’t hold it,” she panted.

“Don’t try. Cum on me,” he moaned.

He needed to find release or he was going to explode.

She began to tremble and a deluge of her creamy hot liquid exploded over him. Her pussy walls pulsated around his shaft.

His cock began to throb, and lights flashed around him. He squeezed her ass tightly as he sent a torrent of his seed inside of her.

Finally, their breathing returned to normal and the world around them returned. They had worked up an appetite, and both of them dove into the basket of food. Then, they simply laid back on the lush ground and relaxed, feeling the peace from the area seep into them.

The sun was starting to set. As much as they hated to leave, their time in paradise was over and it was time to return to reality.

Josh led her back to the bed and breakfast.

Raven hugged him tightly and said, “Thank you for today. This was the most amazing thing that I’ve ever experienced.”

“I’m glad that you enjoyed yourself,” Josh said.

He wanted so much to stay the night with her. Josh felt like he had to force himself away from her. The more he told himself that it was just a short fling, the more he knew that he was lying to himself.

RAVEN

The group headed to Beau's bar to discuss what they saw.

"I thought that it was a bunch of horse shit," James said. "What he showed us was just a small part of the entire operation. I'm not even sure that most of it was real."

"He certainly didn't appreciate us asking questions," Raven said. "He got super touchy when I asked about the younglings."

"My guess is that the powers that be figured us to be a bunch of backwoods people with the IQ of an acorn. They figured that they could take us into the facility, show us a couple of parts of the place, and that we would take them at their word that what they shared with us is all that there was," Luke said.

"No offense, Raven, but I'm still not sure that the younglings are there – although I'm not sure that they aren't. But there is definitely *something* there that they don't want us to know about," Ian added.

"I have more than just my gut instincts that tell me that the younglings are there," Raven said, and told them about the note.

"We don't have any legal reason to go in there," Josh said. "We will just have to keep our eyes open. Has any of the searches in the area panned out?"

“Nope,” Ian said. “There are no clues for anything. None of the places we looked seemed to have been used for anything lately. There was a mysterious fire at the farmhouse in the middle of the night, so any information from there has likely been destroyed.”

“They are very adept at covering their tracks,” Raven said. “Did we get anything from the place before it was destroyed?”

The frustration in her voice was evident and was echoed by everyone in the room. There were missing younglings out there, and every one of them wanted those children found.

“Nothing that we didn’t already know. They took everything that might have been of value with them. There were no signs of the medical equipment, including blood samples or any type of medications. There were no documents or anything else that could even give a hint of the identity of the people who were working there or the children,” Ian said. “The few fingerprints we did get didn’t lead us anywhere. Hell, we still don’t even know who the woman was who had been left behind.”

“I hate not having any leads to follow. I have to find my nephew. I can’t bear to think about what they are doing to the little guy,” Raven exclaimed, slamming her fist down on the table.

Josh rubbed her back briefly to soothe her, until he realized that everyone had noticed the gesture. Then, he dropped his hand.

Luke reached over and put his hand on her shoulder and tried to reassure her.

“We’ll find him. We won’t stop looking until we find him and the rest of them,” Luke promised.

Raven nodded. Josh could see that she was gritting her teeth out of anger and frustration. She didn’t like sitting around and waiting for information or to see what might pop up.

As they were heading out the door to go their separate ways, Josh pulled Luke aside and asked, “Can I take Raven to

the Oasis?”

Luke looked at Josh for a second and then nodded.

The oasis was a secret, sacred place that was in the center of the dragon shifter land. Outsiders were strictly forbidden unless they had specific permission from Luke or one of the Elders.

Josh hoped that taking Raven to the oasis would help calm her nerves and help her find some peace for at least a couple of hours.

Raven and Josh went to the café. Josh asked his mother for a picnic lunch.

When she looked at him quizzically, he said, “Raven is stressed out. Luke gave me permission to take her to the oasis.”

Wanda gave him the same searching look that Luke had. Taking Raven to such a sacred place had meaning, whether Josh wanted to admit it or not.

After Kathy packed the lunch in a bag that Josh could carry in his wolf form, he told Raven, “Come on. I want to take you someplace.”

They headed into the woods, undressed, put their clothes in a bag, and shifted. Raven threw that bag across her back and followed Josh into the woods.

The journey took about an hour. As they trekked through the woods, Josh could sense that Raven was starting to relax a little bit. She looked around her, taking in the trees and the other animals that scurried about.

Finally, they arrived. Raven set down the bag and shifted into human form. Her eyes were open wide as she surveyed the area.

There was some type of thermal springs that ran underground and bubbled up into a clear pool. The water in the pool stayed around eighty degrees year round. The ambient air of the oasis stayed around eight, as well. The ground was

carpeted with luscious green grass and wild flowers of every color imaginable.

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JOSH

Josh headed into town to eat breakfast with Raven. He had a running tab with his mother and simply paid it at the end of every month. It was easier most days than trying to cook for himself. Her food was better than his any day.

The festival that Snow Haven held every year to celebrate the autumnal equinox was a combination of county fair and simply having a good time. Everyone in town went to the fair to relax before the craziness of winter hit. Even the ranchers and other country folk came into town. Nate made it in about every other year. He wasn't much of a people person.

A missing pup and the fact that there was a shifter trafficking ring in the area didn't put a damper on the festivities.

Josh's reason for wanting to go was twofold. First, he liked the idea of spending the day with Raven and having a little bit of fun. Sometimes it was just good to take a break from everyday life and enjoy the world.

Second, though, he hoped that he would learn something about the case. There would be people coming in who weren't regularly in town. Some of them might know something – either consciously or not – and let some information slip. However, he wouldn't be actively investigating. He knew that, every once in a while, he needed to take a step back from a problem so that he wouldn't get tunnel vision and end up stuck in a rut.

Josh felt a little guilty asking Raven to go with him. He knew that she had feelings for him and that he was just leading her on, making her think that there could be something permanent between them when it just wasn't possible.

Deep down inside of him, he knew that he was in love with her and that she was his fated mate. However, he refused to let those feelings come to the surface.

He told himself, as he walked into the café, "I'm just going to enjoy the day. I'm not going to think about my feelings or anything else."

The festival was just getting started when they made it to the park that was in the center of the town.

"How country are you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Raven replied.

"I bet you an ice cream that I can stay on the mechanical bull longer than you can," Josh said.

"Oh no you didn't," Raven said, in a city girl accent.

"I sure did," he replied, with the same accent.

"Bet. You go first," Raven told him.

Josh got on the bull and managed to stay on for seven seconds before he ended up on the padded floor with a loud thud.

"Is that all you got?" she asked him. "Step aside and let me show you how the real folks handle this."

Raven got on the bull and managed to stay on for nine and a half seconds.

"Ha. I told you so," she said. "You owe me an ice cream. I'll collect after lunch."

They walked around for a bit checking out the different exhibits going on. Raven slipped her hand into his, and Josh had to admit that he loved holding on to her.

The Ferris wheel loomed ahead, and Josh asked her if she wanted to go.

“I’m not a huge fan of heights,” she started to say.

“Oh, are you scared?” he asked.

She looked at him, narrowed her eyes and said, “If I was, you’d never know,” and then she led the way over to a ride.

Josh made a mental note to himself that he should never challenge her to do anything he *didn’t* want her to do because she would cut off her right arm simply to defy him. He wasn’t sure whether he admired her stubbornness or if it drove him a little insane.

Loading the Ferris wheel was a slow process. When they were at the top, Raven looked around the area and said, “This is a truly beautiful place.”

She looked at him with the sweetest smile, and he couldn’t resist. He put two fingers under her chin and lifted her face to his. Josh leaned over and softly brushed his lips across hers, and then pressed harder, kissing her passionately. Neither of them knew that the ride had started to move for a full minute.

Raven’s eyes were sparkling. Josh would have sworn that the stars in the heavens had nothing on the shine in Raven’s eyes. She smiled at him, and a warmth of love spread through him.

When the ride was over, Raven said, “I guess you are going to challenge me to ride on the roller coaster now?”

“I don’t know. I was thinking about taking a break,” Josh said.

“Oh, look who’s scared now,” she teased.

“Fine,” he said.

He pulled her by the hand over to the rollercoaster and handed over the required number of tickets. They got into the first car.

The ride started to slowly move up the incline and then rested at the top of the hill. Raven was holding on to the bar as tightly as she could, and he thought that she looked a little pale.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Just fine,” she said, through gritted teeth.

As the ride started to fall, he raised his arms in the air and yelled like everyone else. Raven’s eyes got huge, her knuckles turned white on the bar, and she screamed.

When they got to the bottom and the cars started to swoosh into a turn, she started laughing.

“I have no idea why I torture myself like that,” she said.

It was followed by, “Here we go again.”

Josh loved the way that she laughed. It was a loud, strong laugh that was natural. It wasn’t the little tinkling laugh that some women tried to force. There was nothing forced or fake about Raven.

After a few more rises and falls, as well as a few sharp turns, Josh had to admit that he was as ready to dismount as she was.

“I’m not sure that wolves are meant to do those kinds of things,” he said, rubbing his tummy.

“Bears either,” Raven said. “Although I’ll probably do it again just to prove to myself that I’m not afraid of it.”

“I guess that is one way to handle perceived weaknesses. Or you could just admit that something gets to you and avoid it when possible,” Josh said.

“That is for wimps,” Raven said.

They headed over to one of the games where the object was to knock down bottles with a baseball.

“I bet you some fried oreos that I can out throw you,” Josh said.

“No bet. I’m not good at this game. However, if you want to throw some darts, I’ll take your bet,” she said.

“Bet,” he agreed.

They tied at the darts and agreed that fried oreos weren’t what they really wanted anyway. Both of them won a small

stuffed animal, that Raven pushed into the bag that she carried with her. Funnel cakes, on the other hand, were fair game.

Raven was starving so they grabbed some Philly cheese steak sandwiches from one of the vendors and sat down at the picnic table.

“Are you having fun?” Josh asked.

“Yes. I’m having a blast. What about you?” she asked.

“I haven’t had this much fun in a very long time,” he admitted.

“That’s because you walk around with your underwear too tight and you have a perpetual wedgy,” she said.

“Are you saying that I walk around like something is stuck up my ass all the time?” Josh countered.

“That is precisely what I am saying,” Raven said. “You joke around and laugh, but you are always closed off and are tight.”

Josh thought about what she said and admitted that she was right. He was annoyed that he didn’t have some kind of a smart-ass comeback for her.

Once they were done with lunch, they decided to go into the house of mirrors. Because they had the animalistic gifts, it didn’t take them long to make their way through the maze. However, they did stop to look at themselves in the different mirrors and make fun of each other as the mirrors showed them as toothpicks, elves, or balls of fluff.

“I’m not so sure that I like that one,” Josh said. “It could really hurt my self-image as a big, strong, macho man.”

“I thought that you looked adorable as a little ball of fluff,” she said. “Are you sure you aren’t a bunny shifter?”

He took a swat at her ass.

She dodged it and giggled, while saying in a sing-song voice, “Missed me, missed me, now you’ve got to kiss me.”

He reached for her and planted a huge kiss on her lips, for once not caring whether the entire world saw it.

They passed one of the vendor vans and Raven said, “You owe me an ice cream.”

“Aren’t you full from lunch?” he asked.

“I’ve always got room for ice cream,” she retorted.

She ordered her favorite, which was mint chocolate chip, while he got a cookie dough cone. They wandered around, holding hands, enjoying their treat.

Josh noticed that Ian and James were out walking around. To everyone else, they would just look like a couple of guys who happened to come to the event and were just meandering around. However, Josh knew that they were looking for anyone who might be acting strangely or seem out of place.

“How’s it going?” Josh asked them, as they approached.

“Okay, so far,” Ian said. “There are a couple of people here that I don’t recognize, but they don’t seem to be doing anything that they shouldn’t. I circle back and check them out every once in a while, though.”

“We haven’t heard anyone talking about anything that is related to the case,” James said.

Raven seemed to be distracted by a group of laughing kids. She smiled at them and meandered over that way. He thought that she would be an amazing mother someday.

RAVEN

Raven had felt the chemistry between her and Josh as they had walked around the festival holding hands. She could tell that he was relaxing and starting to enjoy himself. She thought that today was the first time that she had really heard him laugh.

She knew that she had fallen in love with him. That scent that surrounded them when they made love and permeated through her cells even when they were apart was the combination of their animal scents that proved that Josh was her fated mate.

Raven was completely prepared to take Efron back to his mother and then come back to Snow Haven to spend the rest of her life with Josh. She just hoped that he would realize it and say something to her about his true feelings.

Wanda's warning nagged at the back of her head, and she wondered if it meant that Josh would never be able to admit that he had fallen in love with her. Raven knew that Josh was holding back something from her, and she suspected that it had something to do with the woman and child she had seen in the picture.

Whatever it was, Raven hoped that he would be able to trust her enough to open up to her and tell her about them. She wished, with all of her that once he did open up to her that he would also let himself love her the way that she loved him.

Raven had seen the group of kids laughing off to the side and that some people had gathered around them. She was

curious as to what was going on. As soon as she learned that Ian and James hadn't discovered anything interesting, she headed toward the kids.

As she drew closer to the group, she could see that Luke's and Rowena's kids were in their human form doing magic tricks. She recognized them from the pictures that Rowena had proudly showed her when they first met. They were striking boys and would be hard to miss, anyway.

It was evident that Rowena's powerful talents had been handed down to her kids. They performed like normal magicians would, talking it up and using a lot of gestures. However, unlike the regular magicians, the boys' movements hid the fact that their magic was real.

The oldest one pulled off his baseball cap. He reached in, pretending that it was huge inside. He pulled out a pure white dove, which he released into the air.

Not to be outdone, his brother pulled a bandana out of his pocket. He tucked it into his fist and waved his hand over it. Everyone watched in awe as a bouquet of flowers seemed to grow out of his fist.

He handed them to a cute little girl who was standing nearby. She blushed furiously as she accepted the bouquet and then ran off to her mother.

These boys are also dragon shifters. Dragon shifters are incredibly powerful – more than any other shifter. Add their magical abilities to being dragon shifters and these kids will be a force to be reckoned with.

Raven was very glad that they were being raised by good people with pure hearts, so that the kids would use their gifts to make the world a better place. If they were evil they would be almost unstoppable.

She stopped to throw away the napkin that had been wrapped around her ice cream and rinse her hands off in one of those outdoor sinks.

Suddenly, something felt off. Raven looked back over to where the crowd of kids had been and saw that they had all

gone their separate ways. The two young dragon shifters were standing alone in the shadow of one of the rides.

She looked up and noticed that there were a couple of people who were watching the younglings very intently. Their faces processed through Raven's brain, and she realized that they had been among the crowd of people watching the two boys do their magic tricks. All of the sudden, loud warning bells started going off in Raven's brain.

She started to run to the boys while looking for Luke and Rowena. Before she could even get the words out, the strangers grabbed the boys, put their hands over the boys' mouths, and began to run.

"Luke. Rowena. Josh. We need help. Someone took the boys," Raven screamed. However, she felt as though her voice got lost in the loud noises from the festival and no one even noticed the chaos that was occurring.

The two adults stuffed the boys into a white van and took off like a flash. Raven instantly shifted into her bear form and ran after them as fast as she could. Luckily the van couldn't go as fast on these roads as it could on the highway. Raven could see that the van was heading toward the facility, and she took a shortcut through the woods. She arrived just as the van was going through the security gate.

Raven didn't think that she would make it through the security gate, since there was at least one guard loaded down with weapons. He would likely shoot her dead, even if she was in her bear form.

Instead, she headed to the side of the facility, where the bay door was. She took a deep breath and ran as fast as she could into the fence. She managed to push it away from the two poles on either side and push the poles over a little.

Her heart racing a million miles an hour, she rushed the fence again. This time, she managed to push it over.

Raven's lungs felt as though they were going to burst, and she couldn't get enough air. Her sides hurt, and she was afraid that her heart was going to explode right there, but she

wouldn't let herself slow down. She would die before another child got hurt.

The van had pulled up to the bay door and the door was starting to shut. She managed to slide under before it completely closed.

She saw the two adults had been joined by a couple of other people. They were half dragging and half carrying the two boys inside.

Raven wondered why the boys didn't use their magic against the adults, but then figured that either they hadn't learned self-defense type of magic or were too frightened to think about it.

The group opened up a door that presumably led from the garage area into the facility.

Raven stood in the shadow for a second and sent a telepathic message to Josh.

"I'm at the facilities. Some people have Luke and Rowena's kids. Please hurry."

She hoped that he was open to getting her messages. She prayed that her message would carry that far. Surely, he had noticed that she was missing as were the hatchlings.

Raven shifted into human form to try to keep from being noticed as much. She looked over and saw a shelf that had some scrubs on them, so she grabbed a shirt and pair of pants and slid them on. Both of the items were too big on her, but she didn't care.

The door into the facility was closing and Raven rushed over to it, just as it was about to close. She was grateful that they were so confident that they were safe from being breached that they hadn't turned around to make sure that the door closed behind them.

No one was in the reception area. Raven sniffed the air and listened intently. She was glad that her animal talents still worked even when she was in her human form.

Raven figured that they had gone up the stairs. Her thoughts were proven true when she saw the tail end of one of the people's coats as they turned around the corner.

She rushed over to the stairs, not caring whether the cameras caught her presence there or not. They would know that she was in the building soon enough anyway.

The hallway was empty when Raven got upstairs. Then, she heard voices coming from one of the rooms.

The door was cracked just a little bit and Raven peeked inside.

The older boy told his younger brother, "Don't worry. Mom and Dad will find us soon and will take out everyone here. We'll be safe."

Sniffing, the younger boy wiped his nose with the back of his hand and nodded.

The kids were sitting on what looked to be an examination table. They were being held by huge men the size of gorillas. A nurse was holding a syringe full of liquid. Raven guessed that it was some kind of sedative to make sure the kids were compliant with whatever was about to happen to them.

She was just about to walk in when one of the women noticed that the door was ajar. She had walked over to it and was about to close it, when Raven slammed into it, pushing it open.

One of the men ran toward her. Raven shifted into her bear form and growled.

She used one of her big paws and hit a thin woman that was closest to her, sending the woman flying into a wall. Then, she turned around and swiped at the man coming toward her. Her claws ripped long rows of slashes across his face.

He screamed in pain as long streams of blood poured out of his face.

The woman with the syringe ran toward Raven, screaming like a mad woman. Raven had no idea whether the sedative would work on her bear form, but she had no intention of

finding out. As the woman approached and tried to jab the needle into her shoulder, Raven jumped out of the way. She pounced on the woman, knocking her to the ground.

Just then, Raven felt a sharp pain in her side. She looked up and saw that one of the huge men that had been holding down one of the boys had pulled a knife and stabbed her.

JOSH

Josh noticed that Raven had disappeared the same time that Luke and Rowena figured out that their sons were missing. Josh thought that he had heard Raven calling to him, but the noise from the festival drowned out the sound of her voice.

Frantically looking around, Josh saw Raven shifting into her bear form and take off. He tried to push his way through the crowd, but it seemed as though the number of people had multiplied and formed a thick way to keep him from reaching her in time.

Josh ran back to James and Ian and said, "Raven is in trouble."

Just then, Luke and Rowena raced up to them, and Rowena cried, "The boys are gone. Someone took my boys."

"That's who Raven was chasing," Josh said. "She must have seen someone taking them."

"Where do you think they are taking the children? We have searched every single place in town and outside of town for miles and miles. There is nothing," Ian asked.

Suddenly, Raven's voice started to echo in Josh's brain.

"She's at the facility. The kids are there, too."

Luke, James, Josh, and Ian sent messages to their clans and people and headed up to the facility.

Josh was more terrified than he had ever been in his entire life. He knew damned good and well that Raven wouldn't just sit back and let the people take the younglings to wherever without her trying to intervene. She wouldn't think twice about risking her life to save the hatchlings.

The four men shifted into their animal forms and raced up to the facility, hoping that their backup could get there in time. They had seen the number of people who were doing military maneuvers at the place and had no doubt that the people would kill them in a heartbeat. That meant that Raven was in extreme danger. That thought tore Josh's heart right out of his chest.

They raced up to the facilities and found the downed fence that Raven had gone over. Adrenaline was rushing through Josh's veins and although he wanted to rush into the facilities and start ripping the place apart, he didn't want the people inside to start hurting the younglings or Raven. They moved around slowly, keeping close to the walls. They found their way to the bay door. Luke used his fire to melt a hole through it.

They all gingerly stepped through, not wanting to burn themselves on the glowing hot metal remnants of the door. The four men decided to break up into teams. Luke and Ian would go in one direction while Josh and James would go in another.

Luke and Ian were going to investigate the bottom floor of the facility while Josh and James went upstairs. They passed a closed door at the top of the stairs. Two people were inside of the room arguing.

"You are stupid. I told you after you took the wolf shifter that you weren't allowed to take any more of the younglings in this area. Yet you decided to take two right out in public. You drew the attention of everyone," a man roared.

"I couldn't help it," another man said, his voice quivering as though he was about to break into tears. "They were dragon shifters, and they were doing magic. Just think what they could do for the program."

"They aren't going to do anything for the program if you get the local people involved," he said. "I can't keep cleaning

up your messes. If you fuck up one more time, you are done.”

Then, the man added ominously, “And you know what that means.”

“I know,” the other man said, dejectedly.

Josh and James had heard enough. They busted through the door. The men stood there, in complete shock to see a wolf and bear staring them down, growling. James jumped on the larger man, his bear claws digging deep into the man’s chest.

Josh leaped on the smaller man, knocking him to the floor.

Josh shifted and demanded, “Where are the two kids that you brought in here?”

The man didn’t hesitate.

“They are in room 240,” he stammered.

James and Josh ripped the men’s clothes into strips and tied and gagged them. Then, after stuffing them into a closet, they shifted back to their animal forms and went looking for the room.

A fight was in full force when they reached the room. Raven was in her bear form and had obviously been fighting for a while. Three people were down. She had blood pouring from her side and she was facing down a huge man with a double-bladed knife.

Luke’s kids had pressed themselves into a corner, with the oldest boy trying to shield his brother. It was obvious that Raven was trying to keep herself between the kids and the people who threatened them.

Josh sent a telepathic message to Luke, letting him know where they and the kids were. Then, he and James exploded into the room with the all the fury of a Kansas tornado.

Furniture and people went flying everywhere. James managed to get two more people down, leaving the only person standing the one who Raven was facing.

The man lunged toward Raven with the knife. Josh leaped and knocked him down to the ground. The knife went flying

across the room.

Josh's powerful jaws were on the man's throat, and he was about to rip the man open when he remembered that there were kids in the room.

Instead, he just put his paw on the man, and panting, he looked up at Raven. She had already shifted and had gone to the children, trying to reassure them that they were safe.

She had a huge hole in her side.

Josh shifted, ripping the white jacket off of one of the people lying on the floor, motionless with fear. He ripped it into strips and walked over to Raven. She winced when he pressed it to her side.

"Boys, are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes," the oldest boy said, trying to sound strong for his brother.

Suddenly, Luke burst into the room in his human form and rushed to the boys.

"Oh my heavens. Are you guys okay? Did they hurt you in any way?" Luke asked, pulling both of them into his arms and holding them tightly.

"We're okay. That woman over there was going to give us a shot but that woman, who was a bear, made her stop," the younger boy said.

The woman, who had managed to sit up, had a look of absolute terror on her face when she saw the fury that flared up in Luke's face.

However, he just turned back to Raven and said, "I can never thank you enough for rescuing my sons. I'm sorry that I didn't take you seriously," he said.

"No worries," Raven said.

She walked over to the woman who had been about to give the shot, whose eyes opened wider and wider as Raven knelt down and said, "Where are they?"

“Keep your mouth shut, Ruth,” the man whose face was ripped open said.

“Ruth, unless you want your face to resemble his, I suggest you tell me,” Raven said.

Josh could see that her hand had tightened into a fist and that the woman was about to be destroyed if she didn't answer. Josh was not inclined to intervene.

“They are upstairs,” the woman said, trembling so hard that Josh was sure that she was going to make the entire structure fall apart.

The woman pulled out a bunch of keys, and said, “You'll need these.”

Josh wondered why they hadn't been inundated with all the people defending the place when his second in command said, “We have the place surrounded and we are inside.”

It's one thing to be brave enough to bully children and regular people. It's quite another to face an entire army of wolves, bears, dragons, and other pissed off animals.

Raven rushed upstairs to the area that the woman had mentioned. There were a couple of people at the top of the stairs who had heard the commotion but weren't sure what was going on. They drew their weapons. Raven walked straight up to the first one and snatched it out of his hand.

“Unless you would like me to use this on you, I suggest you get downstairs,” Raven growled at them.

Both men ran down the stairs as though the devil was hot on their tail.

Raven and Josh burst into the double doors, followed by several other shifters. It opened up into a huge room. The younglings were in different parts of the room, accompanied by the adults who had been assigned to watch over them.

“We've already taken out your comrades. I have no problem destroying you right here and now, although I would prefer not to subject the kids to that kind of a scene. You can

either walk out that door and head down the stairs peacefully, or you can get the full effect of a bear's rage," Raven said.

She was weakened from the blood loss, but the adrenaline was preventing her from feeling the full effects.

It didn't take long for the individuals in the room to make up their minds. They simply walked quietly to the door without saying a word.

There were at least fifty kids in the room of various ages from infants to about five or six years old. All of them stared at Raven and the group of people behind them in awe and terror.

"You are safe now," Raven said, softly. "We are friends. We are going to try to help you find your families and get you home."

Everyone slowly walked into the room toward the kids, trying not to scare them. "My name is Josh," Josh said to one group.

"Aunt Raven," a tiny voice screamed.

"Efron," Raven exclaimed and ran over to a baby who had been huddled in a group with other younglings his age.

RAVEN

Raven held on to her nephew for dear life, as though she was afraid that if she let him go that he would disappear again. She immediately got on her phone and texted Robin, “I have him. Come to Snow Haven.”

“On our way,” Robin replied.

Raven, Josh, Ian, and James moved toward the center of the room.

“We have to figure out a plan on how to take care of these guys and find their homes,” Raven said.

Just then, Luke called Josh.

“The feds are here,” Luke said.

Just then, five or six people in dark suits burst into the room, causing the younglings to cower against the wall.

Raven set down Efron and pushed him behind her. Then, the four of them stood in front of the newcomers, their arms crossed. The newcomers weren’t getting anywhere near the younglings.

“My name is Agent Peters. We were notified that there was a problem here, and we arrived as soon as possible.”

None of the shifters said a word. They just stood there, ready to fight.

“Everyone involved with this situation will be arrested. Our people are taking everyone into custody as we speak,” he said.

The four shifters were silent and stood their ground.

“If you can keep the youngsters up here, out of harm’s way, we will take care of all of the people involved in this. Who is in charge here?” he asked.

Without thinking, Raven took a step forward and said, “I am.”

“I will leave it to you to find out who these little guys are,” Agent Peters said.

With that, he turned around and left, with the others following behind him.

Raven looked at the three men and asked, “Do you believe him?”

“I don’t know,” Josh replied.

He called Luke and said, “What is going on?”

“There are tons of people being led out of here in handcuffs,” Luke said. “I’m coming up.”

Raven and Josh stayed upstairs with the younglings for the rest of the evening. Wanda and Kathy came up and found the kitchen, which was stocked full of food. For the sake of simplicity, they made sandwiches and soup for everyone.

“It’s kind of funny that this was a government run program, but the government turned on them as soon as everything went down,” Raven said.

“Just like the old-fashioned *Mission Impossible* shows. They could take on the mission, but the secretary would disavow any knowledge of the mission, or even their existence, if anything happened,” Josh said.

One of the older kids led Josh down to the area where everyone slept. It was almost as though they were kept in little prison cells.

“I have an idea,” Raven said. “Let’s just have a sleepover up here.”

The kids liked that idea and soon they were set up. Some of the younger kids fell asleep rather quickly.

Robin and her husband arrived a few hours later, thrilled and relieved that Efron had been found.

Later on, Raven decided that she needed some fresh air. She went outside to take a quick walk. As she meandered along the path, someone tapped on her shoulders.

Raven let out a squeak and then turned quickly. She recognized the form of the person who had been helping her.

“Did you find your nephew?” she said.

“Yes, what are you doing out here?” Raven asked.

“I was in my lab and saw all the shifters converging on the place. I knew it was only a matter of minutes before they, and the feds, would be all over the place. I decided to hide out in here until I could talk to you. I knew that you would come out here sooner or later,” the woman said.

“You worked in that place?” Raven asked, starting to get angry at the woman.

“Yes. At first, I was hired as a geneticist. I was told that I would be working on ground-breaking science that would make a difference for the world. I was told that I would be doing research that could make people stronger and healthier. I always wanted to make the world a better place, so I agreed. Then, when I was brought here, I realized that I had been lied to,” she said.

“How did you know to find me?” Raven asked.

“At first, I was in a facility that is in Toronto. Your nephew showed up. He told me your name when I took his blood, so I managed to leave the grounds for a little bit and tell you Snow Haven. I had overheard the director of the program telling some of the other people that we were pulling up stakes in Canada and heading north,” the woman said.

“What were they trying to do?” Raven asked.

Her blood ran cold when the woman said, “They were trying to do genetic modification and brainwashing to create some kind of elite army. The members of this special unit would be sent in to fight in the more dangerous missions. The

enemy wouldn't expect themselves to be fighting a shifter army. I just couldn't let these kids go through all of that. I had to find a way to help them."

"I do appreciate your help," Raven said. "We might not have ever found him if it wasn't for you. What's your name?"

"Sandra Davis. Can you help me? The government isn't going to want the public to find out about the program. Most of the people who were here are going to disappear," she said. "I don't want to disappear."

"Come with me," Raven said.

She felt really bad for the woman who had been tricked into doing the unethical and immoral work.

Everyone was surprised when she walked in with Sandra.

"Luke, Josh, James, and Ian. I would like for you to meet Sandra. She needs our help," Raven said.

After Sandra told her story, James said, "If I hadn't seen the laboratories and all of the younglings here, I would never have believed it. This sounds like something out of a science fiction horror movie."

"It is that," Josh said.

"You are the reason that Raven was here, and it was she who saved my sons. As the alpha of my clan, I can promise you safe haven here," Luke said.

"Thank you. I'm so sorry," she cried.

Luke called one of his clan mates over and ordered that Sandra be taken to their hall. She would be kept safe there until they could figure out the best way to help her.

Raven was satisfied. Although the government was nothing to be trifled with, not even they would want to front a group of pissed off dragon shifters.

James called his clan doctor, since he was a bear shifter as well. The doctor looked at the hole in Raven's side and bandaged it up with a poultice.

“You’ll heal pretty quickly, since you are a shifter. Thankfully, the knife didn’t hit any of your organs or do any kind of real damage. The only real concern is that the wound might be infected. Keep the poultice on and change it out every twelve hours,” the doc said, handing her a bag of herbs. “If it gets red, hot, or swells, call me immediately. Otherwise, you’ll be fine.”

“I appreciate it,” Raven said.

“I appreciate the fact that you were willing to die to protect these guys here,” the doc replied.

Raven, Josh, James, Ian, Luke, Wanda, Kathy, and Rowena stayed the night with the kids to make sure that they were safe during the night. Raven slept well the rest of the night, exhausted but happy.

The next day, there were several government officials who were at the door. Raven was terrified that they were there to take the younglings.

Instead, the agents simply apologized profusely and offered their assistance.

“You’ve done enough, thank you,” Raven said, scowling at the woman who was the spokesperson.

“There seem to have been a couple of people here who were not among those arrested yesterday. Have you seen any strangers around here?” the agent asked, apparently undaunted by Raven’s death glare.

“No,” Raven simply said.

The woman handed Raven a card and said, “If anyone who doesn’t belong to Snow Haven shows up, call me. If there is anything that I can help with, call me.”

Raven took the card but didn’t feel like thanking the woman. Raven knew that she likely knew about what was going on the entire time and was part of the “cleanup crew.”

Finally, the woman and her entourage left. Raven was slightly astonished that the government would simply let them help the younglings, but then realized that the government

agency knew that they would have a hell of a fight on their hands if any move was taken to try to take the kids away.

Raven, Robin, Rowena, Wanda, and Kathy worked tirelessly the next several days to try to figure out the identity of the younglings and how to get ahold of their parents. It was easier with the older ones, because they knew their name, their parents' names, and what area they were from. Then, it was simply a matter of contacting the clan leaders.

It was trickier with the younger ones. They had to use telepathy to pick up on clues about the younglings' identities, who their parents were, and where they had come from. Then, it was a matter of research.

The task of finding the children's homes was exhausting. At the end of six days, all but fourteen kids had been taken home by their parents. All of the kids had been taken from the northwestern states, Canada, and Alaska, except one. How the group managed to get their hands on a chameleon shifter from Florida was beyond Raven.

Raven was sad for these kids who were left, but they were just too young to have a lot of information. They would have to figure out what kind of shifter they were and then call as many clans as they could to find out whether any of them were missing younglings.

Although Raven was so glad to be able to help the children, she was excited to have a date night with Josh. She knew that she was in love with him and that he was her fated mate. She had never imagined that such intense love existed. What she had felt for Zach was nothing compared to her feelings for Josh.

Raven had made up her mind that she was going to tell Josh that night how she felt. If he didn't make his move toward her, she would ask him to go through the mating ceremony. After all, this was modern times and women could ask the men – right?

She got nervous, though, as soon as she sat down at the table with Josh. Something just didn't feel right.

JOSH

Josh was very nervous about the evening. He knew that Raven was expecting to hear a proposal that night. He felt like a coward but was actually glad that Raven had been super busy with the younglings the last several days, because he was dreading the ordeal that was about to happen.

He had rehearsed a million times what he was going to say to her that night. Unfortunately, everything he came up with sounded harsh and extremely mean. Josh was furious with himself, because he knew that he had led her on and let her believe that they possibly could have a future together.

When they first started out, it was a lot easier, because they both knew that she would be going back to Canada once she found her nephew. However, he realized that she was willing to give up the life she had there to make one with him in Snow Haven.

Finally, he admitted to himself that the issue wasn't that he didn't love her. He did love her. He knew that she was his fated mate. He would have been happy living his life with Naomi, but even after they were married, their relationship was more like a comfortable friendship. He never had the intense feelings for Naomi that he had for Raven.

Josh enjoyed hanging out with Raven. He loved her sassy wit. He loved her strength and determination, and her passion for everything that she got involved with.

That was the problem right there. He *did* love Raven, intensely and completely. If it hurt as much as it did to lose Naomi, how much worse would it be if something happened to Raven? The mere thought of it felt like someone had punched him in the stomach with a battering ram.

They had agreed to meet at a restaurant in Juneau. Both of them had decided that a change in scenery would be a good thing.

Raven had suggested that they drive together, but Josh said that he would prefer to meet her there since he had some other business to take care of. The truth was that he didn't want to break her heart and then have to ride all the way back to Snow Haven sitting next to her. That would hurt him more than anything. He knew that he was being an ass and a coward, but he honestly didn't think that he could handle her heartbreak, knowing that he caused it.

Josh had arrived first. He got a table and waited for Raven to come in. He knew the second that she stepped into the restaurant because the energy in the room shifted. Josh wasn't the only one to sense it. Every eye was on her as the hostess led her to his table.

"You look gorgeous," he said, and meant it.

Raven was dressed in a black dress that fit her form perfectly. The décolletage was low enough that the top swell of her breasts showed, but not so low that it was tasteless. The hem ended just below her knees. Black high heeled shoes showed off her shapely legs.

She had to have gone out shopping just for their date, because he doubted that she had packed anything like that to come to Snow Haven in search of her nephew. That knowledge just added to his guilt.

Once their order was taken, Josh asked, "How are things going?"

"Well, as you know, we found the families for all but fourteen of the younglings. We are going to keep searching for their families, who must be frantic. I'm hoping that word will

get out about what happened, and the families will call us,” she said.

“What will happen to them in the meantime?” Josh asked.

“Apparently, the facility got turned over to the Alaskan government. I’ve been working with them. They don’t want it and don’t really have a use for it. They are going to give me a grant to buy it from them. Basically, they are giving it to me without giving it to me, if that makes sense,” Raven said.

“It doesn’t, but not much about the government ever does,” Josh said.

“True enough. There are enough supplies to keep it going for a while. All of the medical equipment and hinky crap has been taken out of the place. There is a lot of open room. I am going to create a program for homeless and orphaned shifters who don’t have another place. I’ll keep it running by using donations and grants,” Raven said.

Josh could see the excitement in her eyes as she described the different types of educational and other programs that she would have going on to give every single one of the shifters who came to her a fighting chance to make it great in the world. He admired her desire to make the world a better place for people who might not otherwise have a chance.

It was another reason why he loved her so much. She had such a kind and giving heart.

Dinner was served at that moment, so they dove into their food.

“You know, because of the facility on the hill, I’ll be staying in Snow Haven. At first, I’ll have to stay up there, but once enough staff is hired to take turns staying the night with them, I’ll be able to spend my days up there as the director and then go home,” Raven said.

Josh’s heart lurched. He knew exactly where she was going with this, and he wished with every fiber of his being that he could run out of the place and not have this conversation with her.

She blushed a little bit and said, “I guess that you’ve already figured out that, although I did my best not to, I have fallen in love with you. I know that you feel something for me, too.”

Josh carefully folded up his napkin and set it on the table.

He sucked in a huge breath of air and said, “Do you remember that picture that you saw at my house, and I told you that I didn’t want to talk about it?”

Raven nodded slowly, already picking up on the fact that this conversation wasn’t going to go in the direction that she had hoped.

“The woman was Naomi and the little girl was Stormy,” he said, slowly, a hitch catching in his voice.

Raven sat still and waited for him to continue.

“I grew up with Naomi and when we were old enough, we got married. A few months later, Stormy was born,” Josh said.

He had to stop for a second. He had never talked to anyone about them, and it was so hard now.

“One afternoon, Naomi took Stormy to Juneau to go shopping. They were on their way back home when they were hit by a drunk driver who ran through a light. He t-boned their car. The man walked away without a scratch, but my wife and my baby girl...” He paused.

He couldn’t say the words. He had never said the words aloud to anyone before and it killed him to try to say them now.

“...they were killed,” he finished.

“I’m so sorry,” Raven said softly. “I can’t imagine anything that hurts more than that in this world.”

“I’ve never talked to anyone about them,” Josh said. “But I have to make you understand. I do care about you, Raven. More than care. I love you. But there is no way in the world I could ever chance going through that again.”

Raven didn't move. She didn't speak. She looked shocked and as though he had just stabbed her through the heart with a poisoned spear. Then, a tear slowly dripped down her cheek.

As though she was moving in slow motion, she set her fork on the plate and her napkin on the table. She stood up and then pushed her chair into the table. Holding her head up high, she turned and walked out of the restaurant without saying a word to him.

Josh wanted so badly to go after her. He loved her so much and he hated to see her hurt. He hated it even more that he was the reason that she was feeling so much pain. Yet, he had to let her go. Going after her would only make things worse. It would either give her false hope or she would deck him because she didn't want to see him. He honestly couldn't blame her if it was the latter of those two options. He felt like kicking his own ass.

Every head turned to watch her walk, with as much dignity as she could possibly have, out the door. Then, once she had walked out of the building and out of his life, all eyes were on him. He wanted to scream and yell. He wanted to tell her how much he did love her. But that was something that he could never do.

RAVEN

Once she climbed into her truck she sat there, numbly. She didn't breathe. She was certain that her heart stopped beating and the world stopped spinning.

Raven felt like such a fool. She couldn't believe that she had allowed herself to be hurt a second time.

The first time had been bad enough. She had been humiliated in front of everyone. She had believed that her whole life would be centered on Zach and their family. However, she had survived it.

The feelings that she had for Josh were so much stronger. The idea that Zach was her fated mate had never crossed her mind. He simply was her man, and she was going to marry him.

Raven felt that her soul was tied to Josh. He was a part of her very existence and she thought that he had felt the same for her.

In a way, he said that he did. He loved her enough that he was afraid of something happening to her and that he would lose her.

That's just a really stupid excuse. He is losing me anyway.

Raven didn't know if he was just trying to come up with some kind of lame excuse for breaking things off with her or if he was lying to himself – or all of the above.

“Whatever,” she told herself. “This was just another hard lesson learned. Love simply isn't in the cards for me.”

Robin was waiting up for her when she returned.

“How did it go?” Robin asked.

“He told me about his wife and daughter who had died. He said that it had been unbearable when he lost them and that he wasn’t willing to go through all of that again,” Raven said, trying very hard not to cry.

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry,” she said.

“It’s all good. I think that I’m going to get a dog,” Raven said. “They are a lot less hassle and drama. I really wish I could get a talking dog like Rowena has, though.”

Robin laughed and said, “I think that you have to be a witch to qualify for that kind of a service dog. But since you can communicate telepathically with your dog it would be practically the same thing.”

Raven smiled at her sister, and said, “I’m tired. I think that I’m just going to go to bed. Luckily, there’s no party and huge group of people to hang out with tonight. I just don’t think that I could handle that.”

“Are you okay?” Robin asked.

“I’m hurt. I’m sad. I’m – I don’t know what else.” Raven sighed.

She headed toward one of the larger rooms that she had taken for herself. She was glad that her sister and brother-in-law had decided to stay for a while – at least until things got settled down. Although Raven normally wouldn’t admit to anyone, even herself, that she needed emotional support, she certainly did now.

The days were filled with trying to get everything up and running smoothly. They were still trying to find the families of the younglings who had been kidnapped. On top of that, it seemed like there were a lot of young shifters who needed a safe place to live. Once the word got out, a couple of new faces appeared each week.

Nights were a lot harder, though. She laid in bed and remembered what it was like to have Josh wrap his arms

around her and hold her close to him. She remembered how it felt to have him press his lips to hers and kiss her passionately. Raven thought about how it felt to have their bodies moving together perfectly and how he seemed to know how to make those fires burn hot inside of her. She had always wanted the sensations to last forever, but all too soon, he would move just right, and she would explode all over him.

One morning, Raven woke up sick to her stomach – again. She sat down on the side of her bed and thought about it. She had been sick every day for the last two weeks. In addition, she had also been super tired. On top of it all, her breasts had been extremely sore.

“I’ve just been stressed out and super busy trying to get everything settled here,” she told herself.

“Liar,” she growled.

Raven got ahold of James’ clan doctor and made an appointment to come see him.

After he examined her, he said, “Well, I don’t quite know if this is good news or bad news, but you are pregnant.”

Raven simply swallowed hard. He was only confirming what she already suspected.

“How far along am I?” she asked.

“About a month,” the doc said.

She smiled at him and said, “Thanks. I appreciate your help. If you don’t mind, I would appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone.”

The doctor made the sign across his lips of a zipper being closed up.

“My lips are sealed,” he promised. “It’s patient doctor privilege anyway.”

Raven headed back up to the huge building in shock. She wasn’t stupid. She wasn’t about to ask how it happened, which seemed to be a lot of people’s reaction to the news. She knew exactly *how* it happened.

It had simply never occurred to her that she *would* get pregnant while she and Josh had sex.

Raven sighed and shook her head. She would have the family that she had always wanted, just not exactly in the *way* that she had always wanted.

And even though Josh had hurt her so deeply she was certain that she could never recover, she still loved him with every fiber of her being. Now, she would always have a part of Josh with her.

Raven thought about calling Josh and letting him know that he was going to be a father again but decided against it. He had made it clear that he didn't want any attachments in his life. He might also think that she was just telling him about the baby because she was trying to get him to make a commitment to her. If he didn't want to be with her because he loved her, she didn't want him at all.

Robin knew that something was up the second that Raven returned from her appointment.

“What’s going on?” Robin asked.

“Well, I’m not sure exactly how to say this,” Raven started.

“You’re having a baby,” Robin replied.

“How did you know?” Raven asked.

“You’re broadcasting it in your mind,” Robin said. “What does Josh think?”

“He doesn’t know,” Raven said.

“When are you going to tell him?” Robin asked.

“Maybe when the baby is eighteen,” Raven replied.

“That’s not cool,” Raven protested. “He has a right to know that he is going to have a baby.”

“He doesn’t want one,” Raven said. “He told me that he didn’t want to be with me because he didn’t want to love someone and then have a chance of something bad happening to them.”

“He might change his mind when he knows that he is going to be a daddy,” Robin said.

“I don’t want him to change his mind about being with me just because there is a kid. People who get married just because the female is pregnant never ends well. They have to be together because they love each other,” Raven said. “I don’t want him to think that I’m only trying to get him to support the kid. I don’t need him for that. I’ll take care of my baby by myself.”

“I think that you are making a huge mistake,” Robin said.

“It is my mistake to make,” Raven countered.

“Your mistake isn’t only going to affect your life,” Robin said. “It’s going to have a huge impact on your child as well – not to mention Josh’s.”

“I know. But I just think that it is best that Josh doesn’t know – at least for now. Maybe when the child is older,” Raven said.

Robin simply shook her head, walked away, muttering something very unflattering about Raven under her breath.

Raven headed up to her room and laid down on the bed, rubbing her stomach. She had a tiny cub or pup growing inside of her.

What if it had both genetic markers, like Luke’s and Rowena’s boys had? Her baby might be both a wolf and a bear shifter. Would that be a pup or a cub?

Raven laughed at her own joke and then thought that she was losing her mind. One of the problems that she faced was that even if she didn’t tell Josh about the baby, he was bound to find out sooner or later. After all, this was Snow Haven where everyone brought you tissues if you sneezed while you were asleep in the middle of the night.

Pulling a pillow over her head, she growled at the situation.

Then, she took a deep breath and said, “I don’t have to make a decision today. But I do have to get up and help take

care of the younglings.”

JOSH

Josh was miserable. He struggled to keep his thoughts on his duties. He missed Raven so much that it hurt. He also couldn't get that look that she had on her face when he told her that he couldn't ever be with her. He knew that he had destroyed her heart.

She handled it with all the grace of a queen. She hadn't yelled or screamed. She hadn't said anything at all. She simply left the table.

Over the next couple of weeks, he was tempted a million times to go talk to her, apologize to her, and beg her to go through the mating ceremony with him.

Late one night, he was sitting at home, on the back deck, drinking a beer, just thinking of Raven. He was so mixed up and upset, he felt as though his world had been turned upside down. He wandered back into his house and picked up his favorite picture of Naomi. She had been playing with Stormy and laughing. He captured her in the middle of one of those fits of joy.

"Naomi, I just don't know what to do," he said to the smiling face of his dead wife.

He was startled because he thought he heard her voice in his head saying, "Go after her. Tell her how much you love her and start a life with her."

Gently putting the picture back on the table, he ran his fingers through his hair and closed his eyes. That was exactly

what Naomi would say. She would want him to move on with his life. She would want him to find love again and pursue it.

The next morning, he headed into town to eat breakfast, but more importantly to see his mother.

She brought him his coffee and asked what he wanted to eat.

“Whatever,” he said.

“Whatever, it is,” she replied.

She came back with a plate full of scrambled eggs, two sausage patties, and some toast.

After setting it down on the table she sat across from him and asked, “What’s on your mind?”

“Raven,” he said.

“I see,” Wanda replied. “What about her?”

“I think I screwed up,” Josh stated.

“I agree, but tell me what you are thinking,” she said.

“I know that she is in love with me – or at least she was,” Josh said. “I am in love with her, too. But I’m scared.”

“What are you afraid of?” Wanda asked.

“I can’t go through the agony of losing her the way that I lost Naomi and Stormy,” he said. “It would kill me.”

“But, son, you already are suffering the loss of her love. I know that it hurt you something awful when Naomi and Stormy were killed. But she would want you to be happy. Instead of being miserable right now and worrying about something that most likely will never happen, you could be with Raven and enjoying life,” Wanda said.

Josh simply nodded his head. He knew that his mother was right.

“You are a fool if you are offered a second chance at love and you don’t jump on it,” Wanda said. “People don’t often get a second chance.”

“Is that why you never remarried after Pop died?” Josh asked.

“It was different. I had a lot of years with my mister. He was my complete heart and soul. I suppose if there had been another man who captured me the way that Raven has captured you, I would have gone down that road again. But alas, no one has ever come my way with that special sparkle for me,” Wanda said, putting her hand to her forehead in a very dramatic way.

“Mother, you are terrible,” he said.

“Thank you. Now, son, what are you going to do?” Wanda asked.

“I think that I’m going to finish my breakfast and go get a ring made,” he said.

“That sounds like a great idea,” Wanda said.

Josh made his way to the jeweler and asked, “Do you think that you can have a ring made that has a wolf and a bear engraved on it?”

“Yep,” the man said. “When do you need it by?”

“As soon as possible,” Josh replied.

Now that he had made up his mind and decided that he wanted to be with Raven, he was in a hurry. He didn’t want to waste one more day without her.

“I’ll have it for you first thing in the morning,” the man said.

Josh saw Luke that afternoon and told him that he was going to apologize to Raven and ask her to be his life mate.

“It’s about damn time,” Luke said. “You were about to drive all of us crazy with your moping. We were talking about having a shotgun ceremony.”

Josh laughed, but Luke didn’t. Josh had a tiny feeling that Luke might have been serious about it.

The next morning, Josh got the ring and headed straight up the hill. One of the newly hired women answered the door.

“My name is Josh. Can you please tell Raven that I need to talk to her?” he asked.

“Wait here,” the woman said, and shut the door in his face.

Josh stood where he was, shifting from one foot to the other, impatiently. Finally, the door opened again.

“She said that she is busy and doesn’t want to see you,” the woman said.

Before Josh could argue, the woman shut the door in his face.

Josh wasn’t about to give up. He had managed to get into the building uninvited in the past. He could damn sure do it again.

Fortunately, Josh didn’t have to come up with some elaborate plan to break into the formidable facility. Fifteen minutes after Josh was turned away, Raven walked out the side door with a line of kids in tow. She tossed them a few balls and had them playing and laughing.

Josh walked up behind her and said, “Raven. Can we please talk?”

She jumped when he startled her, but she didn’t turn around.

“I think you said everything the other night. I’m good,” she replied.

“I’m sorry. I was a complete fool. I was so caught up in my fears of going through all that pain again that I didn’t even think that by turning you away I would be missing out on a lifetime of love and happiness,” Josh said.

Raven sighed heavily and her shoulders slumped, but she still didn’t turn around. She didn’t say anything either. Josh took that as a good sign.

“I do love you. I’ve been in love with you since practically the first day that I laid eyes on you. I know that you are my fated mate, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you,” he said. “Raven, will you please marry me and go through the mating ceremony with me?”

She turned around. Her eyes were filled with tears. Only this time, instead of sadness, they were tears of joy.

“I love you. I will,” she said.

He showed her the ring and slipped it on her finger.

“There is something you need to know,” she said.

“What is that?” he asked.

“You’re going to be a father again,” Raven said.

THANK YOU FOR READING!

Thank you for reading *Heart Broken Wolf Shifter*. I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, may I ask you to please write a review **HERE!**

It would mean the world to me. Reviews are very important and allow me to keep writing the books that you love to read!

**HER ALPHA DRAGON
PROTECTOR (SNEAK
PEEK)**

SNOW HAVEN SHIFTERS

Blurb

I've been running my entire life, and I never found a place where I felt safe. Until I found Snow Haven.

Shifters, witches, and others have been trying to kill me my entire life – but not for anything I've done. It's because of who I am. I'm a very powerful witch.

Some want to capture me because they want to use me and use my magic for their own benefit. Some want to kill me because they are afraid that I will get in the way of their evil magic.

One wants me out of the way because he thinks I'm encroaching on his territory – the alpha of the dragon clan.

Snow Haven was supposed to be my safe haven, a place to hide until I turned twenty-one when my magical powers would grow exponentially and I would be the most powerful witch to exist in more than a century. The hunters have found me even here and they threaten the lives of those I love most — including Luke.

Luke, the alpha of his dragon clan, saved me while I was being attacked. Then, he demanded answers. When he learned of the danger I was in, he appointed himself my protector. The chemistry between us was instant.

His touch, his kisses, and his love were overwhelming. He captured my heart and my soul.

Even as the rogue shifters, evil witches, and one very jealous dragon shifter try to destroy me and those I love most, I can't make myself leave.

A bear shifter — who was my mother's best friend

A pit bull – my familiar and best friend

A dragon shifter – the alpha of his clan and the love of my life

I knew I should leave Snow Haven and disappear to protect those I've come to love. Yet, I was compelled to stay.

Every day, the evil grew and threatened to destroy me. Could I live long enough to save those I love and find true happiness with my soulmate?

Luke Sanders brushed his silvery hair out of his eyes and took a drink. He sighed and rubbed his forehead.

“I don’t know how long it’s been since I’ve had the chance to take a break,” he told his best friend, Ian MacKullen. “I didn’t think that our clan was big enough, but I’m beginning to think that I’m going to have to appoint a second.”

Luke was the alpha of his dragon clan, and it seemed that someone was always in need of his help with one problem or another. His people seemed to have no qualms about waking him up in the middle of the night, asking for help with problems that could clearly wait until the next morning.

“I wouldn’t trade places with you for a million years,” Ian said. “However, I really don’t see you giving up an inch of power to anyone.”

Ian was a lion shifter who had been in the special forces in the military. Once he left, he started a security company comprised of other ex-military shifters. His company did everything from serving as body guards, to investigations, and even a few things that no one really needed to know about.

“You stay busy all the time, Brother,” Luke said.

“At least I usually get to sleep through the night,” Ian said. “And I have a lot of people who work under me. I usually just assign jobs based on my people’s particular skill set. Occasionally, I take on a job if it seems interesting.”

Luke took another drink and asked, "Have you seen the new woman who slipped into town a few days ago?"

"Yeah. I think she came in during the middle of the night because none of my men saw her when she arrived. We just spotted her the next morning having breakfast in the café," Ian reported.

"She must have a room there at the bed and breakfast," Luke observed.

He was referring to the café that had had a couple of rooms to rent above it. The rooms could be rented by the night or by the week, depending on the need of the traveler.

"Why do you think she is here?" Ian asked.

"There is no telling. Sometimes people come up here just to get away for a few days. Others think that they might want to settle in, but realize that since we are so remote, it isn't always easy," Luke said. "However, I get the feeling that there is something different about her."

"She always has that brindle pit bull with her. He is glued to her side," Ian stated. "She almost acts as though she wants to disappear inside of herself. However, a pretty woman like that, especially with that dark red hair she has, is bound to be noticed sooner rather than later. I hope she isn't bringing trouble with her."

"I had a brief conversation with her earlier today when I went into the café to get some coffee," Luke said. "She was very polite and sweet. I asked why she came to Snow Haven, Alaska. After all, it isn't a place that people just randomly pick to visit."

"What did she say?" Ian asked.

"She said her mother and grandmother had always talked about how beautiful it was up here, and she always wanted to visit. Since she had the time right now, she decided to head north," Luke related.

"Did you believe her?" Ian inquired.

“I think it is part of the truth, but not the whole truth,” Luke said. “The dog was the damndest thing, too. He watched me very closely. It almost seemed as though he was taking in every word of the conversation.”

“Animals are a lot smarter than most people think. Was he a shifter?” Ian asked.

Luke shook his head, but added, “There is something different about him. I get the feeling that he isn’t your regular domesticated dog. I’m also pretty sure that if I had made the smallest of moves to go near the woman, he would have attacked. I could easily have defended myself, but you know that I would never hurt an animal that was simply trying to protect its mistress.”

“Did you get a name?” Ian asked. “I could try to do some background research to find out about her past and what she might be bringing with her.”

“She only gave her first name – Rowena,” Luke said.

“Rowena. That is an interesting name. Although I’m sure that mortals have that name, too, I’ve mostly heard the name attached to powerful witches,” Ian said. “Which would explain her dog, if he’s her familiar.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. We might just be a little overprotective. She could be mortal Rowena who wanted to visit a small town in Alaska that her mother and grandmother frequently mentioned. She just happens to have a very protective dog,” Luke said.

“Sure. Because sometimes, things are exactly as they seem,” Ian said.

Then, they both laughed at the absurdity of the statement.

Both men were very protective of their little town, the people who lived there, and of course, their clan. Anything that seemed off captured their attention. Snow Haven was an out of the way town – a village really. It was a small place, about an hour outside of Juneau. People in this town tended to mind their business. Shifters were free to be shifters, witches were free to be witches, and mundane humans – well, they just

minded their own business and went about doing their human things.

Snow Haven was close enough to Juneau that it wasn't hard for the citizens to get their supplies. However, it was far enough away from the city that there wasn't any crime or other issues that seemed to plague bigger places.

Luke and Ian were just two of the men in the area whose mission it was to keep Snow Haven a safe and peaceful area. Any newcomer was viewed with a lot of suspicion.

They lapsed into a comfortable silence.

A few minutes later, their eyes were riveted to the door.

Two shifters who weren't from the area sauntered in and headed over to the bar.

“What are the chances that we have a woman finding her way to this place and now these bozos?” Ian asked.

Luke surveyed the men and said, “I think that Snow Haven has recently become a new popular destination for no good reason. I don't like this.”

Both men were scraggly looking. Luke could tell that one of them was a wolf shifter and the other was a bear shifter, so they weren't part of the same clan, by birth. However, there were a lot of clans made up of different shifter breeds. These clans usually meant trouble, because the shifters were outsiders of their own people. These guys certainly didn't look as though they were strangers to trouble.

They sat close enough to Luke and Ian that the two men could hear what the shifters were saying.

At first, the two commented on the area and what a nice place it was. They kept their voices at a conversational level, and acted as though they were simply hanging out. However, Luke's senses told him that these two meant a lot of trouble.

After about ten minutes, one of the men beckoned the bartender over.

“I'm looking for my sister, and I think that she may have come up here. I was wondering if there had been any women

who have recently shown up in the area,” one of them asked.

“She has pretty, dark-red hair and has a scruffy looking dog with her,” the other man supplied. “That damn dog never leaves her side.”

Luke saw the first man kick the second man’s leg.

The bartender looked at Luke out of the corner of his eye. Luke shook his head almost imperceptibly.

Luke didn’t know who the woman was or why these men were after her, but he felt as though their intentions weren’t good. He couldn’t explain why he felt the need to protect her.

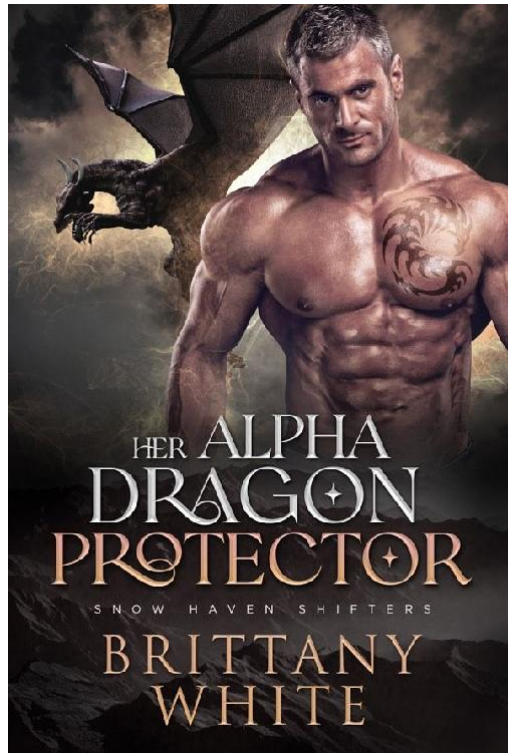
“I haven’t seen anyone around here like that,” the bartender replied. “We don’t get a lot of strangers around here, especially single women. She might be in Juneau.”

Both men looked at the bartender as though they didn’t believe a word he was saying. However, they were smart enough not to express their doubts. They simply finished off their drinks, laid enough money on the table to pay for the beverages and for a tip, and headed out.

“I wonder what that was all about?” Luke mused.

“I don’t know, but I’m willing to bet my fortune that they weren’t looking for their long-lost sister or for the lost heir to a fortune,” Ian said.

“I think we have some trouble brewing here in Snow Haven,” Luke observed. “We need to be on high alert, and you need to get your posse ready to figure out what in the hell is going on.”



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**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brittany White is the author of hot paranormal romance. She began writing short stories for family and friends. Her vivid imagination and love of mysteries and romance eventually led her to follow her dreams to become a published author.

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