

CAPTIVATED BY
WILD
BEAR
SHIFTER

A ROGUE SHIFTERS AND HUNTERS

BRITTANY
WHITE

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BRITTANY WHITE

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DEAN

Dean finished packing the rest of his clothes and toiletries. He'd had enough of Ivy Spring, Colorado. He had followed his childhood friend, Lucy, here, hoping to win her heart and convince her to go through the mating ceremony with him after he became alpha of his bear shifter clan. However, she had fallen in love with his best friend, Micah, who was going to be the alpha of their wolf shifter clan.

His phone rang just as he put the last of his items in his bag.

"When are you coming home?" his father, David, demanded.

"I'll leave this afternoon," Dean said. "I'm getting packed up right now."

"How is Micah doing?"

Micah was gravely injured when he was shot after he, Lucy, and Dean got into an altercation with shifter hunters. There was a war happening in Ivy Springs that pitted the billionaire Faisons, owners of the Forest Resort, against all of the shifters in the area, including tourists. They routinely hired hunters to track down and kill any shifter, or even suspected shifter, that they could find.

"He's doing a lot better, thanks to Lucy. She took care of him. He was strong enough to go talk to the dragon king in the shifter world to report on what happened, although he was

exhausted and hurting when he got back. I think that he is coming back tomorrow.”

“I thought the dragon king and shifter world were myths,” his father said.

“So did I, but apparently, they are real. Micah visited the shifter world and met Draco, the dragon king.”

“I’m kind of envious,” David said.

“Me, too. I was there as much as Micah was, and I could have made the trip a lot easier, but I guess Micah is our designated spokesman. I’m not mad, though. After what Micah went through, he deserved the dubious honor. I would hate to be the one to tell Draco what happened and face his possible wrath.”

“There is that,” David said.

His father started to say something else, but the door to his room burst open and a blond hurricane blew in.

“Dad, I have to go.”

Dean hung up and looked at Alexis Faison, one of the four billionaires, whose family had waged war against the shifters for many generations.

“What in the hell are you doing in my room?” Dean asked.

“I heard you talking. You and your friends are shifters. You guys killed the hunters,” she hollered. “I’m going to tell everyone, and you’ll all be dead.”

Dean closed the door behind her and shifted his hand into a bear paw with very sharp claws.

He put it on her neck and said, “You aren’t going to tell anyone anything.”

His mind raced a million miles an hour. He had to figure out how to keep Alexis quiet long enough for him, Micah, and Lucy to get out of town. Suddenly, an idea came to him. It wasn’t a good idea, but it was an idea.

Pointing to the desk, he said, “Sit.”

“No,” she said.

Lightly scratching her neck with his claw, he said, “I told you to sit.”

She glared at him as she walked over to the desk and sat in the chair.

“Take out some paper and write a note to your brothers saying that you’ve fallen in love with a man and you’re leaving town with him.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you won’t leave this room. I abhor hurting women, but if it comes between you and my friends and me, you will be the sacrifice,” Dean said, his voice low and menacing.

She looked up at him, the fear evident in her eyes. He hated terrifying her, but he had to protect himself and the others.

Alexis pulled some paper and a pen out of the desk drawer and wrote,

Hey brothers,

I am so happy that I finally found the one. He loves me back. I’m going to go with him to his home. Don’t worry about me. I’m finally not going to be alone in this world anymore. I’ll be in touch later.

Much love,

Alexis

Dean looked for anything in the note that might give her brothers any clue as to what was happening, but he didn’t see anything. Micah had told him that Alexis fell in love easily, so this probably wouldn’t come as a shock to them.

“How are you going to get me out of here? I’m not going to go willingly. I will kick and scream my lungs out. You’ll be killed before you reach the door.”

“Do you think so?” Dean asked.

She glared at him with a look that was half defiance and half fear.

He shifted his bear paw back into a human hand and touched both sides of her head. He focused hard, willing her to go into a deep sleep. Her eyes fluttered and her legs buckled. He caught her before she hit the floor and laid her on the bed.

Taking a deep breath he asked, “Dean, what in the hell are you thinking?”

He could leave her there, asleep in the bed, but she might wake up before Lucy and Micah could get out of town. Plus, if she told her brothers who killed the hunters, then more hunters would follow them to Montana.

“This was the best option,” he said aloud.

Dean opened his computer and checked out online. He looked around the room one more time and was satisfied that he had packed everything.

After rummaging through Alexis’ purse, he pulled out her cell phone and turned it off. He covered Alexis’ body with his long trench coat, put Alexis’ purse in his bag, and hoisted it over his shoulder. Then, he picked her up, draping her over his other shoulder, as though he was just carrying his coat out instead of wearing it.

The hallway was clear. With relief, Dean made it to the back entrance without running into anyone. He had parked his truck behind the resort, just because the spaces were bigger. He was glad of that now.

Carefully, he put Alexis in the passenger seat and buckled her up. Then, they were on their way.

Dean called Lucy and explained what happened. As expected, she told him that what he did was idiotic and was going to cause them a lot of trouble. He told her he didn’t see any other way to fix the situation.

He didn’t bother calling Micah, because he knew that Lucy would tell him everything, and Dean didn’t want to hear it.

Needless to say, the drive back was nerve wracking. Glancing into his rearview mirror every five minutes, he expected to see blue lights in the background at any minute. There was no way that he could explain what was going on. Just across the Wyoming state line, he saw the feared blue lights flashing in his mirror. His throat closed and his heart beat a million miles an hour. His stomach clenched painfully.

Easing the truck over, he waited for the state police to haul him to jail. Lightheaded with relief, Dean watched as the car whizzed past him, in pursuit of someone else.

He stopped somewhere in Wyoming and smashed Alexis' phone into a million pieces and put it in the dumpster. While he was certain that it couldn't be traced while the phone was off, he didn't want to take any chances. He also didn't want her to try to use it to get rescued.

Heaving a huge sigh of relief when he crossed into Montana, he rubbed his eyes. The eleven-hour drive, with minimal breaks, had been exhausting.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he arrived at a primitive cabin, hidden in the forest on top of the mountain. Only three other people knew of its existence, so they would be safe.

Dean went inside and was pleased to see that the wood box was full. He started a fire in the old wood stove and went back outside, carrying in his bag and his hostage.

He laid her gently on the couch and went outside to start the generator that supplied a little bit of electricity to the cabin. He flipped on the lights and sat in the recliner he had brought up to the cabin and waited.

Alexis groaned and twitched a little, letting him know that she was waking up. Her eyes were wide and wild when she sat up and stared at him.

“Where am I?” she screamed. “You had better take me home right now, or you'll regret it.”

He opened his mouth to talk, but she screamed at him.

“You monster. You bastard. You’re going to die for this. My brothers will send every hunter in the world to take you out and your entire family. You had better let me go.”

“No.”

The simple word spoken in a low voice seemed to momentarily take the wind out of her sails.

“My brothers will kill you when they find me here,” she said, through gritted teeth.

“First, I doubt that they ever would. This cabin is hidden on top of a mountain, and no one knows where it’s at. If they, by some remote chance, did get close, I guess you would just have to disappear so there was no one to rescue,” Dean told her, staring into her eyes and grinning evilly. “That would actually solve a whole other problem for me.”

Her mouth opened and then closed.

“You’ll be staying here in the cabin for the foreseeable future. I’ll have to be gone some, so you’ll be alone. You can scream all you want, but the nearest people around who might hear you are about seventy-five miles away. You can try to escape, but the nearest highway is fifty miles away. You’d either freeze to death before then or end up as dinner for some animal.”

She shivered and her eyes opened wide. Alexis was stuck and she knew it. Slowly, she looked around the cabin, taking in the primitive conditions. The only thing that wasn’t primitive was the couch and recliner that Dean had indulged in. The sink had a hand pump that only spewed out cold water. There was no stove, microwave, or other appliances.

Dean wished that he could have taken a picture of her face as she looked around. She looked as though she had just stepped in a huge pile of warm, fresh cow manure ripe with odor, with her thousand-dollar shoes.

“Now that’s settled, I’m hungry.”

Rummaging through the cabinets, he pulled out a pot and a couple cans of beef stew. He could feel Alexis’ eyes on him as

he opened them, dumped them into the pan, and put the pan on the wood burning stove.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

She just stared at him with pure hatred in his eyes. He couldn't really blame her. He would hate him, too, if he was her.

“I need the restroom,” she said.

Smiling to himself, he thought, *This is going to be fun.*

He pulled a roll of toilet paper out of the cabinet.

“You might want to put on my coat. It's cold out there.”

“What do you mean?”

“The outhouse is out back,” he said. “I'll show you the way.”

“Outhouse? Out back?”

“Yep.”

Panic crossed her face, which seemed to turn pale under the gobs of makeup that she was wearing.

She looked at the toilet paper in his hand, questioningly.

“I can't leave the toilet paper in the outhouse. The rats like to make nests out of it, and I'm out of old catalogues to use as back up.”

Alexis' knees buckled and Dean jumped to catch her before she fell to the floor. She angrily pushed him away and regained her balance.

He grabbed a pair of his sister's snow boots and some socks that she had stored at the cabin.

“I'm not wearing those,” she said. “They are used.”

“I'm not sure how you're going to walk in the snow with your high heels, but if you insist.”

Dean walked with her to the outhouse, listening to her curse the entire way. She even said a few things that he had

never heard come out of a woman's mouth before, and a couple of women in his clan belonged to a motorcycle club.

Chuckling to himself, he thought, *The princess is going to have a rude awakening here.*

ALEXIS

“I hate him. I hate this. This must be hell,” Alexis said as she eyed the wooden bench with a hole in it that served as a toilet.

“I’m going to get a fucking splinter in my ass,” she groaned as she gingerly sat down.

She shivered as the cold air surrounded her in an icy shroud.

The pee is never going to come out at this rate. It’s frozen inside of my bladder.

Finally, relief came.

Alexis vaguely wondered what happened when the hole was completely full, and then decided that she really didn’t want to know.

The wind drove icy knives into her as she stepped outside of the outhouse. Dean was standing there, in just a sweater, with his arms crossed.

How is he not frozen? It must be that shifter blood.

Her eyes darted around. There was no sign of another human being. The cabin and small shed next to it were surrounded by trees. It appeared that Dean had told her the truth when he said that there was nothing and no one around for miles and miles.

Begrudgingly, she stumbled through the snow back to the cabin. Her feet were blocks of ice and were numb. She

realized that she should have taken Dean up on his offer of socks and snow boots.

Dean got down two bowls out of the cabinet.

“Are you hungry?”

Alexis just stared at him for a minute and then shook her head. She never ate anything that came out of a can like that. On top of that, her stomach was tied up in so many knots that she didn't think that she could swallow anything and keep it down.

Leaning back on the couch, she closed her eyes and wondered how in the world she had managed to get herself in this mess. Her mind rewound to the day before.

She remembered that she had been in a good mood. She and her friends were having a get together to drink wine, eat popcorn, and watch movies at Tina's house. Tina had a home theater room, complete with one of the really large white screens and theater seating.

As she walked by one of the rooms, she'd heard a deep voice say, “Dragon king and shifter world.” Then, she heard, “hunters.”

Alexis remembered her brothers, Raf and Xavier, talking about some hunters who went up on the mountain and never returned. They had sent out a search party, but they weren't found. There was no sign of them anywhere. None of the cameras found had any useful pictures or videos.

Her blood ran cold, and fury exploded inside of her as she figured out that a shifter was staying at her resort and that the shifter had likely killed the hunters. Without even thinking, she burst into the room to see the tall handsome man she had been flirting with at the resort's bar.

He looked at her in surprise, as she shrieked at him that she was going to have him and his friends killed.

The look he gave her made her heart stop. Her lungs stopped working as she struggled to draw in a breath. She knew that she had made a terrible mistake. Her mind whirled

like a tornado, trying to figure out a way to just back out of the room and go for help.

Dean was faster than her and she almost pissed herself when he shut the door and his hand became a bear claw.

She racked her brain, frantically, trying to figure out some way to let her brothers know that she was in trouble. She had read about people who did that, like signing the paper with a nickname, or including a special word. Even if she had included something weird, like “save some Canadian bacon and pineapple pizza for me,” they would just think that it was her being weird. As soon as she finished the note, the world faded to black. When she woke up, she was in this rustic cabin with no appliances or anything else.

Her first instinct was to scream at Dean and demand that he take her home. He didn't seem to be bothered and just told her that he would put her back to sleep if she kept it up. She believed him.

She shook her head to dispel the thoughts.

You have to focus on right now and figure out how you are going to get out of this mess.

“Are you sure you don't want anything to eat?” he asked.

“No,” she said petulantly, crossing her arms.

“Suit yourself,” he said.

He finished the last of the stew, then washed his plate and the pot in a sink that just had a handle that he pumped to get running water.

Her heart leapt when she saw her purse sitting on the table by the couch. She reached for it, searching frantically.

“If you're looking for your phone, you aren't going to find it. I crushed it into tiny pieces and threw it away. It really wouldn't matter, because you aren't going to have cell service here anyway. Did you see any cell towers on the mountain?”

When he opened the door, a rush of biting air blew into the room, making her shiver. Alexis was positive that she was going to freeze to death before anyone could rescue her. Of

course, someone would have to know that she needed rescuing before they could do that. Her brothers would assume that she just ran off with another one of her crushes.

Dean came back in with an armload of wood.

“It’s going to get cold tonight,” he said. “You need to learn how to stack the wood in the fire, because I’m going to be gone tomorrow and you will need to stay warm.”

“There is no way that I can put wood in that thing,” she replied haughtily, sticking her nose in the air.

She looked at her fingernails and shuddered in horror at what the wood would do to them. Plus, the roughness of the wood would damage her delicate hands.

Dean shrugged and said, “If you let the fire go out, you will freeze to death.”

She could feel the color draining from her face.

“Come here,” he ordered.

She automatically obeyed.

“You are going to get hungry tomorrow,” he said. “This is a can opener. You put it on the can like this, squeeze the handles together, and then turn this little knob. Be careful not to cut yourself. You pour the contents in the pot and put it on the stove. Make sure that you stir the contents, so it doesn’t burn. Use this potholder to take the pot off the stove.”

“I’m not doing that,” she said.

“Then you will be hungry. That is your choice.”

“It’s not my choice to be here,” she said. “You need to take me home, immediately.”

“You made it your choice when you burst in on me like that and threatened to have me and my friends killed. I would kill and die to protect them.”

Her eyes widened with fear. She put her hands to her throat as though she was afraid that he would rip it out right then and there.

“What if I tear apart this cabin tomorrow while you are gone?” she asked.

“Then, you will be living in a torn apart cabin for the foreseeable future,” Dean said. “You aren’t leaving here for a while.”

“Ugh,” she growled.

Stupid fucking bastard. This is why we hate shifters. They are monsters. They are crude and violent.

“Something you have to say?” Dean asked with amusement.

Alexis rubbed her face. She had heard that shifters could communicate telepathically.

“There is only one bedroom here. When the family came up here, my parents had the bed and the rest of us slept on cots in the living room. I’m such a gentleman that I will let you have the bedroom. Come with me.”

He led the way to the bedroom and pulled the plastic covering off the bed. Then, he grabbed some sheets that had been wrapped in plastic to keep the dust off of them.

Thank goodness for that.

“I assume you have no idea how to make a bed?” he asked, sarcastically.

“No.”

Dean quickly made the bed, apparently not in the mood for another domestic lesson.

“You can shut the door if you want to, but that will keep the heat from getting in. It will get very cold very fast.”

Alexis glared at him. If looks could kill, Dean would have exploded into flames right then. She wanted nothing more than to slam the door in his face, but she had just warmed up from her trip to that horrific toilet. She didn’t want to freeze to death.

She slipped between the sheets and pulled the mountain of blankets over her. Grudgingly, she admitted that the bed felt

good, and she enjoyed being enveloped in the warmth of the blankets. Her mind wouldn't stop racing though, and she couldn't seem to fall asleep. Instead, she stared at the ceiling all night.

Grouchy and in the mood to cut someone's throat the next morning, she tumbled out of the bed with a groan. She had to pee and she was dreading drudging through the snow to get to that miserable outhouse.

This time, she grudgingly pulled on the socks and snow boots he had offered her the night before. She was surprised they fit, because she had rather small feet. Snarling, she pulled on Dean's coat, since she didn't have one.

The morning sun was bright and glistened on the snowy ground. The whiteness reflected the light, beaming into her eyes.

“Great. Snow blindness. What else could go wrong? And I just got out of bed.”

Dean had a couple bowls of oatmeal made by the time she staggered back into the cabin. She wanted to refuse the food, but she was hungry. Churlishly, she accepted it, and scarfed it.

“What size clothes do you wear?” Dean asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You need clothes. What size clothes do you wear?”

“I always get my clothes tailor made just for me,” she said, snidely.

“I don't see that happening,” Dean said. “So, I can either buy you some clothes or you can just keep wearing the same ones that you have on.”

“Fine. I wear a size six pants, and a medium blouse. I wear a size six shoe.”

Dean grinned and said, “What about your bra? I assume you would want a clean bra as well?”

The heat rushed to her face, and she knew that she was glowing bright red.

“36 DD.”

He wrote everything down.

“I don’t know if you know how to read or if you like to read, but there are a lot of books in the shelves in the bedroom you slept in, in case you get bored.”

A flash of anger coursed through her. Of course, she knew how to read. She actually loved to read. She didn’t reply. She simply stared at him.

“I’ve got to go. I’ll see you later,” he said.

He went to the shed and pulled his truck out. She watched sulkily as he drove away. Her eyes followed him until the truck disappeared into the trees.

“How in the hell did you get yourself into this mess?” she asked herself.

Then, she answered herself.

“Because you were rash and didn’t think of the possible consequences of bursting into his room like that.”

She was so used to everyone doing her bidding and everyone being intimidated by her because of who she was, that she didn’t even dream that something like this could happen.

“What did I expect – that he would just wait around for the hunters and my brother to come up and kill him?” she asked herself in disgust.

Alexis looked out the window to the shed. He had parked his truck in there. She wondered what else might be in there. There might be another vehicle, even if it was a snowmobile that she could use to get away.

Wrinkling her nose in disgust, Alexis pulled the boots back on and trudged out into the deep snow. It took her eyes a moment to adjust from the brightness of the outdoors to the dim light of the shed. There was an old chest freezer there and two humming generators. She found some tools and other odds and ends, but nothing that she could use to escape.

Frustrated, she walked back toward the cabin. The tracks from Dean's truck were clearly visible.

"I can follow them into town and get help," she thought.

Dean's words echoed in her head.

"Fifty miles to the road."

She couldn't walk that far.

Her head hanging low, she cried. Plopping down on the couch, she wondered if she was going to spend the rest of her life stuck in the cabin.

DEAN

Dean shook his head as he drove down the mountain toward town. The thudding of the tire chains echoed in his brain, giving him a massive headache. It really wasn't the tires, though. It was the whole situation with Alexis. He wished that he could turn back time and warn his past self not to do anything stupid. He should have simply put her to sleep and left her on the bed. He, Micah, and Lucy would be out of town by then. He had no idea whether she and her brothers would be foolish enough to come after them in Livingston. Not only would they face the entire grizzly bear shifter clan and wolf shifter clan, but there was a dragon shifter clan, a moose shifter clan, and a black bear shifter clan nearby. They would all defend the area up here.

He hoped that she didn't burn the place down when she tried to put wood in the stove or if she tried to heat something up to eat.

"I'm pretty sure that the hardest thing that she has ever had to do was wipe her own ass the day the maid had off," Dean scoffed.

He thought about her only wearing tailor made and not wanting to wear the snow boots because they had already been worn.

"She is up for a rude awakening," Dean said. "She is about to be introduced to the real world."

He thought about her threat to destroy the cabin.

"I hope for her sake that she doesn't try it."

Dean called Lucy, who had just arrived back in Ivy Springs. She had planned to stay a few more days in Ivy Springs to help out at the café that she had been working at, but the owner told her to go ahead and come home.

“Tell me that you let her go,” Lucy said.

“Of course, I haven’t. She would either go to the police or go back to her brothers and bring back hell on all of us, or both.”

“You should have thought about that before you kidnapped her. Where is she?”

“Safe enough,” Dean said. “She’s at the cabin.”

“You can’t just keep her there indefinitely.”

“I know. I’ll figure something out,” he replied. “Can you do me a favor?”

“What?” Lucy asked, the disgust clear in her voice.

“I have her measurements. Could you buy her some clothes, shoes, a coat, and snow boots? I don’t know what women like to wear. She’ll need toiletries, too. I have no idea what to get.”

“Ugh,” Lucy said.

They met at the coffee shop and Dean gave Lucy his credit card and the measurements.

“I’m only going to the supercenter in town. I’m not getting her anything fancy, and she’ll just have to deal with it or go naked.”

“I agree,” Dean said.

The day seemed to drone on. He had several meetings to go to.

Micah had the right idea – make a policy that there can only be three meetings a week, and if it can be handled by email, it doesn’t go on the agenda.

The day seemed to never end as people droned on and on about whatever topic they were passionate about. He didn’t

hear most of it. Images of broken out windows, ripped cushions, with dishes, books, and everything else thrown around the room. He could feel the anger rising in him, and he could have cheerfully choked Alexis.

Calm down. She hasn't done anything to your knowledge. You're just getting mad about nothing.

Micah and Lucy were waiting for him at a tiny little café in town owned by Mama Peggy. She made the best chicken n dumplings in the world. He ordered some to go, while they loaded Lucy's purchases into his truck.

"I got her some books, puzzle books, and a pen in case she gets bored," Lucy said.

"That was sweet of you," Dean said. "I wouldn't have guessed that you cared."

"If I was stuck in four walls with nothing to occupy my mind, I would go stark raving mad," Lucy replied. "That is just cruel."

"True that," Dean agreed.

"I can't believe this. It seems surreal," Micah said. "You have a kidnapped billionaire stashed in the middle of God's country."

Dean said, "I know. I've heard it all before. I don't want to listen to another diatribe about my rashness."

Micah clamped his lips shut, his brow furrowed, and he stared at Dean with a disapproving look.

"Does anyone in your clan know about this?" Lucy asked.

"No. Just us three, and I intend to keep it that way," Dean replied.

The food was delivered in the Styrofoam boxes.

"I need to get going. I still have to go to the grocery store and get gas for the generators," he said.

The drive back to the cabin was long. It seemed longer than the journey from Ivy Springs to the cabin. The roads were starting to get slick, since they had thawed out some and then

refroze. He was glad that he had the chains on his tires as well as four wheel drive.

He stood outside the cabin with his hand on the door. He wasn't sure if he was ready to see what the insides looked like. The images from earlier popped into his mind. Taking a deep breath, he turned the handle and stepped inside.

Glancing around quickly, he saw that there was nothing out of place. The room was warm, so she had to have put some more wood into the stove, which she managed to do without burning the place down.

Alexis was wrapped up in a blanket, sitting on the couch, staring at him.

“Put the boots on and come with me. Help me carry in your stuff.”

She stared at him for a minute and then reluctantly did as she was told, surprising him.

Dean handed her the bags that were for her while he unloaded the groceries. She snatched them out of his hands and stormed into the bedroom she was using.

“I guess a thank you is out of the question,” he said to himself.

Alexis overheard him and replied, “I wouldn't need all this new stuff if you hadn't abducted me. I could be back home, in my own suite, with my own things.”

“You could be, after you made sure to have my friends and me slaughtered,” Dean said. “I am in no mood to be killed on the whim of bigoted idiots.”

“We are not idiots,” Alexis countered.

“Mm-hmm.”

Dean finished putting the groceries away and then got out a pot. He dumped the chicken n dumplings in the pot and warmed them up on the stove. Tonight, Alexis didn't turn her nose up at the food. He figured that she was hungry enough to overcome her foolish pride, since she ate everything he gave her.

“I bought a pumpkin pie if you want dessert. It’s my favorite.”

“Yes, please.”

He was shocked. She said, “please.”

The world must be coming to an end.”

After putting a big piece on her plate, he offered her some whipped cream. The way she dug into the dessert, she was either starving, or loved it.

When she was finished, she said, “I need a shower.”

“No showers here. There is a wash tub in the bathroom, but it has a pump handle like the kitchen and only runs cold water. We’ll have to boil some water to make it warm enough.

This certainly isn’t the spa treatment that she was used to. There wouldn’t be any salts or bubbles for her bath, either.

He pulled a big pot out of the cabinet and pumped water into it and set it on the stove. Alexis waited impatiently while he washed dishes and then brought in more firewood.

Finally, the water was boiling. He poured it into the tub and turned on the spigot. She checked the water periodically, to make sure it was the right temperature.

The flannel jammies Lucy bought fit her perfectly. She had scrubbed all the makeup off and brushed her hair. It took him by surprise. She actually was a very pretty woman.

She stood by the stove and watched him carry the tub outside and dump the water on the snow.

“This would be a whole easier if you would just take me back to town. I won’t say anything to anyone. I’ll just go home and forget this every happened.”

“I don’t think so,” Dean said.

She stomped her foot on the floor and crossed her arms.

“I demand that you stop this shit and take me to town so I can go home.”

“Demand away,” Dean said.

“This is totally stupid,” she shrieked. “You are never going to get away with this. I will find a way out of here, and my brothers will kill you.”

Dean ignored her. He grabbed a James Patterson book and leaned back into his recliner, trying to focus on the words.

“You had better let me go right now.”

He was silent.

She slammed her hand on the cabinet and said, “Listen to me.”

“When you say something worth hearing, I will.”

She stomped her feet a few more times in frustration, which Dean ignored.

I wonder if this is what it is like to have a petulant two-year-old having a temper tantrum.

When she figured out that wasn't going to work, she flopped down on the couch and stared at him hard enough to bore a hole into his soul. He wondered exactly how long she would keep it up.

“Exactly how long are you planning on keeping me here? Am I going to grow old and die here?” she asked snottily.

“If that's what it takes,” he said.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You'll be here until you figure out how to act like a decent human being and treat everyone with respect.”

Alexis finally got bored of staring at him and brought out a crossword puzzle book that Lucy had bought her. Blessed silence filled the air. For the first time in several days, Dean relaxed. The tension in his shoulders ebbed away and his head stopped throbbing. His problems hadn't gone away, but he didn't care right now. He would deal with everything another time.

Dean was tired. After an hour of reading, he realized that he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer.

“You’re sitting on my bed. You can either sit in the chair or go to your room. I’m going to sleep.”

He brushed his teeth and was gratified when he saw that the living room was empty.

She stumbled into the living room the next morning just as he was about to leave.

Dean opened up the refrigerator door and pointed.

“There is orange juice and milk in here. I got some ham, cheese, and other things that you can fix quickly. There is cereal, bread and other food in the cabinet, if you get hungry. I assume you can figure out how to make yourself a bowl of cereal or put a sandwich together.”

Dean wasn’t asking to be mean. He honestly wasn’t sure if she knew how to do those simple tasks.

“I think that I can figure it out,” she said, snarkily.

“One last thing. Don’t even think about getting petty revenge by destroying the food. If you do that, you won’t eat for a week. I go to town all the time, so I assure you, you won’t be hurting me if you do something stupid like that.”

“You wouldn’t dare make me go hungry.”

“It would be your fault, so yes, I would,” Dean said, sternly.

She stuck out her bottom lip. Dean wasn’t sure if she was upset because he told her that he would make her go hungry if she destroyed the food or if he had spoiled her plans.

Sighing heavily, he got his coat and headed out.

“This is going to be a very long journey,” Dean said aloud.

ALEXIS

Alexis looked through the cabinets. There was some mini shredded wheat cereal, so she made herself a bowl, making sure to add liberal amounts of sugar to it, even though it was already frosted.

As much as she hated Dean, it felt a lot lonelier without him to rage at.

She stared out the window at the snow. The ground was pure white as far as she could see.

“I wonder if anyone even misses me? I don’t really have any friends, just acquaintances. Jerry, Xavier, and Raf are so caught up in their own lives that they probably don’t even notice that I am gone. They probably read the note and took the ‘out of sight out of mind’ approach.”

Sadness overwhelmed her when she thought that no one even loved her enough to miss her.

“Maybe when I get back, I can try making a true friend, instead of just acquaintances. She would be someone who would truly understand me,” she said to herself.

The depressing thought tumbled into her mind that she had no idea how to make a true friend. All of the people that she hung out with were simply individuals in her social circle. They never had any long conversations about their lives, their hopes and dreams, or any of that. They always talked about superficial stuff.

“What does that say about me and my life?” she wondered.

She thought about what she might be doing right now if she was home. A list of potential activities crossed her mind, such as shopping, watching movies, drinking at the bar, and that type of thing.

“Anything beats being stuck here.”

Dean told her that the nearest road was fifty miles away. She reasoned that if he would do something so low as to kidnap her, he probably wouldn't hesitate to lie to her, either. Maybe there was someone closer than seventy-five miles away. For all she knew, there could be another cabin a short distance away.

Slipping on her snow boots and coat, she walked outside, and promptly sank into a drift up to her waist after taking just a few steps. She pulled her leg up and her snow boot got stuck in the snow. Balancing on one foot, she dug around in the snow for her boot. She lost her balance and fell into the snow.

“Damn it all to hell,” she screamed into the cold morning air.

Her words echoed back to her.

She managed to get back into the cabin. Standing by the stove, she cried. She truly was stuck here, maybe forever.

Although loathe to go outside again, the call of nature forced her to. Remembering her earlier experience, she was grateful that Dean had shoveled a path to go from the cabin to the outhouse.

“You're an idiot,” she told herself, angrily. “If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be going to the outhouse at all. I could be at home, in my nice and cozy suite, using my own toilet with a bidet.”

Alexis groaned loudly when she saw that the entire roll of toilet paper had been shredded into a huge pile of mess.

She looked around fearfully when she remembered that Dean said the rats would make a nest out of toilet paper if she left it in the outhouse. Although the evidence of such a rat was right in front of her face, she didn't see any beady little eyes or hear the scratching noise of tiny claws.

Debating about whether she should go back to the cabin for another roll, she stood there for a minute. The cold seeped through her coat and into her bones.

“Fuck it,” she exclaimed loudly. “I’ll just drip dry.”

Several deer appeared in the woods just beyond the cabin. She held her breath and stared at them when she stepped out of the outhouse.

Alexis was surprised that the deer didn’t run away. They seemed to be as interested in her as she was in them. She noticed that one of them had a huge rack of horns on his head.

“They are beautiful,” Alexis said.

The deer started when she spoke and sauntered away from her.

“I wonder how they survive in the winter,” she muttered to herself. “I don’t see a lot of bushes and grass for them to eat.”

She headed for the cabin and then thought, *If I was at home, I could just look it up on my phone and figure out how they survived.*

Then, the thought occurred to her that if she was home, she wouldn’t have noticed the deer. She never went on the mountain or ventured into the wilderness. No deer ever ventured inside the city limits.

“Knock it off. There is absolutely nothing good about being kidnapped and held captive in the vast wilderness. I should be home shopping and socializing.”

Dean looked tired when he came back that evening. She wondered what he did all day. Did he have a job, or did he spend his days hanging out with his friends. However, she wasn’t curious enough to ask him.

She noticed that he was freshly shaven and was wearing different clothes than he wore that morning. That meant that he was likely going home to shower and change. Resentment bubbled up inside of her. Right now, she would kill for a nice hot shower.

At least he does come back up here every night. He could just dump me off and leave me to fend for myself.

Mentally kicking herself, she thought, *Stop. I am not grateful for any of this. I should be at home right now.*

He made dinner in silence. The quiet was deafening and she was sure that she could hear her own heartbeat. She tried to think of something to say to break it up, but she couldn't think of anything to say but to demand that he let her go home. She already knew his response to that, so she didn't even bother wasting her breath.

Asking him how his day was seemed to be too domestic. She wasn't his wife or even his friend. She was his hostage.

The chicken he cooked on the wood stove was delicious. It was seasoned perfectly. She had never eaten anything that tasted so good. If she hadn't seen him cooking it himself, she would have thought he got it from a high-end restaurant.

She opened her mouth to ask him how he became such a good cook and then slammed it shut again. Alexis wasn't about to compliment him on his cooking skills.

He washed the dishes, carried in firewood, and then settled down in his chair with a book. She tried to work a crossword puzzle, but she couldn't keep her mind focused. It wandered everywhere, like a squirrel on crack.

Finally, she couldn't stand it anymore.

"I saw some deer today. They were pretty close to the cabin."

"There are a lot of them in this area. They are beautiful."

"Yes, they are," Alexis agreed. "How do they survive in the wintertime if they eat grass?"

"During winter, the deer's activities change so that their metabolism slows down and they aren't using as much energy. That means that they eat less food. They eat wood browse when they do get hungry."

"What is that?"

“It is the bark, twigs, and leaves from trees,” he explained. “If the snow isn’t too deep, then they can also root around under the snow to find grass and other food.”

“They are smart.”

“They are adaptable. Animals are great at adapting to their situations, just like most humans are able to.”

I’m never going to get used to this, she thought.

Instead of saying what was on her mind, she asked, “How did you learn to live in such primitive conditions?”

“I’ve been coming up here, mostly with my father, since I learned to walk. He taught me everything I needed to know, like cutting firewood, foraging for food, hunting, and how to cook. Just like your parents taught you everything that you know.”

She laughed humorlessly.

“My parents didn’t teach me a damn thing. They were always on this trip or that vacation. We barely saw them. They hired nannies to watch over us, who didn’t teach us anything about life, either. They were there to get a paycheck,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” Dean replied. “That is awful.”

Alexis shrugged her shoulders and said, “It is what it is. One thing I did learn though, was that money can buy almost anything I want, and when money doesn’t work, intimidation usually does.”

Dean cocked his head to one side and asked, “Do you enjoy bullying others? Does it make you feel good or give you some kind of satisfaction?”

Alexis just stared at him.

“Do you ever stop to think what effect your actions have on other people? They feel fear, humiliation, helplessness, and a whole other range of negative emotions.”

“I guess I never really thought about it.”

They lapsed into silence for a minute and then Dean asked, “Besides shopping, socializing, and intimidating other people,

do you have any hobbies?”

“I love art. I’m not too bad at drawing and painting, but I really enjoy going to art museums. My favorite is Van Gough. It is sad that he was insane, but there is so much beauty in that insanity.”

“I am a huge fan of his. My favorite episode of *Dr. Who* was when Amy, Rory, and the doctor went to visit him,” Dean said. “I like the traditional painters, too, such as Raphael and Michelangelo and their plate halos they painted.”

“Wait, back up a minute. You like *Dr. Who*?”

Dean smiled and nodded.

“I do. I’m not as much a fan of the older ones, but I love the newer ones, starting with Chris Eccleston. Do you watch them?”

“Yep. I like Amy Pond just a smidge more than Rose as the companion.”

They talked about the show for a while and then the conversation returned to art. She discovered that not only was Dean a fan of classical art and Van Gough, he had a thing for beautiful architecture.

The night went by quickly, and Dean said, “As much as I have enjoyed our conversation, I have to get some sleep.”

She instantly got up and went to her bedroom while Dean brushed his teeth and got ready for bed.

Waiting for her turn at the bowl and spigot in the bathroom, she replayed the evening in her mind.

She was surprised that he knew so much about art. If she didn’t know better, she would have assumed that he was an art major. He also liked *Dr. Who*. She figured that he would be exclusively into war and action movies or sports. Of course, he might like those, too. Alexis would have never guessed that he would be so interesting to talk to. She figured that shifters were on the same intelligence level as Neandertals.

After she brushed her teeth and braided her hair, she crawled into bed. Sleep eluded her again. Dean’s words

echoed in her mind. He had asked her what she got out of being a bully and whether it made her happy or brought her satisfaction, and he explained how it affected other people.

“Jamie,” she whispered.

Alexis remembered how she had bullied Jamie mercilessly. Jamie was dating Luke. Luke was the most gorgeous specimen of man to ever walk this Earth, and Alexis had wanted him for herself, but Luke wouldn't even give her the time of day.

Figuring that the best way to get Luke interested in her was to get rid of Jamie, she had tried to get Clara, who owned the café where Jamie worked, to fire Jamie. Clara refused because the two of them were friends. She had tried to get Jamie's landlord to evict her, but he refused and told her to go to hell. Alexis had also been extremely nasty to Jamie to her face.

“How did Jamie feel?” Alexis asked herself. “She must have felt awful.”

For the first time in her life, Alexis felt an emotion she had never experienced before – remorse.

DEAN

Alexis seemed to watch Dean with interest as he cooked breakfast.

“Do you want to learn how to cook?” he asked.

“Maybe, but not necessarily on a wood burning stove,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “If it was an electric stove.”

“Fair enough,” Dean said. “Is there anything that you would like me to bring back from town?”

“You could just take me to town and I could go shopping for myself.”

“Mmm, that’s not going to happen,” Dean said. “Nice try, though.”

Alexis sucked in a huge breath and glared at him for a minute.

“I would like some adult coloring books and gel pens. It’s a fun way to relax.”

Dean was shocked. He never would have guessed that something so simple would make her happy.

“There is no television or radio here, since it would never be able to get a signal. However, I like to listen to podcasts when I hang out at the cabin. Have you ever listened to any?”

“I love podcasts,” she said.

“What type?”

“True crime, history, haunted stories, and mythology,” she said.

“You like history and mythology?” he asked, surprised.

“I do. Why do you find that odd? Did you think that all I had in the brain department was fluff?”

“Well,” Dean said, shrugging his shoulders.

“I get it. I don’t act like I have a thought in my head. I read a lot, though, and watch documentaries. I also like science. I love watching the *How Earth was Made* documentary series. It talks about how volcanoes were formed and how they helped shape the Earth and a bunch of other types of phenomena.”

“When did you find the time to read and watch documentaries if you were always out shopping and socializing?” Dean asked.

The question slipped out before he could stop it.

She laughed and said, “I have plenty of free time on my hands, trust me.”

He washed the plates and griddle, and then said, “I’ll be back later. Have a good day.”

“Um, I’m a prisoner in a cabin far away from my family and home.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” Dean said.

As Dean drove to town he thought about how impressed he was with Alexis. She always wore a ton of makeup, stiletto heels, and tailor makes. Her hair was always perfectly styled with enough spray to form a nice helmet. Her tone had been snotty and condescending. Based on her prior behavior, as reported by Dillon, he would have guessed that she was a fluffy airhead who knew nothing about the world outside of spending a ton of money and being mean to people. It turns out that she actually has a brain. Who would have guessed?

He felt sorry for her. It wasn’t because she was a kidnap victim stuck in a rustic remote cabin with no technology, which was a situation partially of her own making. What she had revealed about her childhood and family dynamics made

him sad. Growing up without loving, nurturing parents would have been extremely hard. It's no wonder she acted the way she did. There wasn't anyone to teach her any better.

Dean couldn't imagine that. He had a wonderful family. He and his father sometimes butted heads, but they were close. His mom doted on him and his siblings, and he adored all of them. He was also close to his extended family members and the bear shifters in his clan.

Five coloring books should be enough.

He grabbed some he thought she would like based on their conversation along with a pack of a hundred gel pens.

That will keep her busy for a couple of days, at least.

The electronics store had a device that he could put a bunch of podcasts on. It took him forever to go through the thousands of different podcasts available and set them up to download the individual episodes.

Micah offered to buy him lunch at their favorite Mexican food restaurant.

"How is it going with your houseguest?" he asked.

Dean raised his eyebrows and sighed.

"Not as bad as you might think, actually. She is smarter than I originally gave her credit for, and she has stopped screaming at me and stomping her feet. We've actually had a couple of decent conversations."

"Wow. Based on what I've seen of her and the way that Dillon and Lucy talked, I am surprised."

"Me, too."

"I talked to Dillon yesterday afternoon," Micah said.

"Uh-oh. This can't be good."

"Although I didn't tell him anything, the contents of the note that you had her write has become public knowledge, so there is a lot of speculation."

“I guess there would be, since someone who is quite noticeable in the community went missing all of the sudden,” Dean replied.

“According to Dillon, most of the people believe the note, since she practically fell in love with anyone who caught her attention. They are just trying to figure out who she left with. You and I are the first contenders in their minds, since we left about the same time that she did,” Micah said.

“That’s not too surprising, although a bit worrisome,” Dean said.

“What’s even more worrisome is that there are a few people, especially the hunters, who are trying to convince everyone that she was killed by a shifter, who then hid the body.”

“Ugh,” Dean said, scratching his head. “Maybe I should have her make a video explaining how happy she is right now. You could send it to Dillon and he could make sure that everyone saw it.”

“Do you really think that she would go along with that?” Micah asked, skeptically.

“I doubt it.” Dean grinned. “Like I said, she has quit screaming and throwing tantrums, but she isn’t pleased about her current living situation. It’s a lot more primitive than anything she’s ever been used to.”

“I can only imagine, especially in the wintertime. Of course, in the summer, it gets hot in the cabin if you want to cook any food on the wood stove.”

“That’s why I always take my Coleman propane stove up there.”

“Have you figured out what you are going to do with Alexis for the long term? You can’t keep her up there until she is ninety years old.”

“I know. I’ll eventually figure something out. Right now, my plan is just to get through the next few weeks.”

“Your alpha ceremony is coming up soon,” Micah said.

Dean nodded.

“In two days. I’ve already decided that I’m going to steal one of your ideas and strictly reduce the number of meetings we have every week. I’m going to also insist that an agenda be brought to the table each time and that we adhere to it. The sidebar conversations are going to be a thing of the past.”

“I know they are the worst. People get off topic and then the meetings are three hours longer than they were originally meant to be,” Micah said. “Are you ready for the switch?”

“Yes. Like you, I’ve been trained my whole life to take this position. I know the laws, how to change laws, make laws, and even break the laws,” Dean said. “How about you?”

“I’m ready to get the ceremony over with and then go through the mating ceremony with Lucy.”

“I’m glad that you two fell in love. If it wasn’t going to be me, then it should be you.”

“Thanks.” Micah laughed. “Lucy is a great woman. I’m a little worried about her, though. She’s been very tired lately and hasn’t been feeling great.”

“Is she coming down with something or is it something else?” Dean asked, wriggling his eyebrows.

“She hasn’t said anything to me about the something else,” Micah replied. “It could be the fact that she’s working full time and applying to different schools. She is serious about getting her master’s and then doctorate in social work.”

“Will her duties as alpha queen give her enough time?”

“Yes. I’m going to hire a personal assistant for her who will accomplish most of those. The only ones she won’t be able to get out of are the formal occasions, like attending the gala.”

“She’ll want to go to that anyway.”

“Yes. She always loves those,” Micah replied. “Is your father and the elders pestering you about taking a mate?”

“Yep. I’m fighting them hard. I know it’s tradition, but it’s a tradition that I’m going to break,” Dean said. “One of their suggestions has a voice so shrill that it can shatter glass. Another one of them is pretty enough but doesn’t have any brain cells. She would be a ‘yes, dear’ wife and couldn’t hold a conversation in a bowl.”

“They couldn’t find anyone more appetizing?”

“The families of those women either have money or status and money.”

“Gotcha. If nothing else you could always do a mail order bride,” Micah teased.

“I can see that working out well,” Dean replied, sardonically.

“Beats a blow-up woman you would tote everywhere.”

“That is the perfect idea. When I get tired of her, I would just pop her and take her to the dump.”

“Ouch,” Micah said. “In all seriousness, though, I’m sure you’ll find the right person. She’ll come along when you least expect it.”

“I guess so. If not, I’ll be the first alpha bachelor,” Dean said. “You had it easy. Your fated mate was right in front of your face since you were in diapers.”

“Trust me, it wasn’t easy to convince Lucy that she loved me. I almost had to die, and even then, it took her a while.”

“So, that’s where I went wrong.” Dean laughed. “Instead of trying to kiss her, I should have had someone shoot me.”

Micah laughed.

Alexis was relaxing in the recliner when he got back to the cabin. She happily dug through the bag he gave her.

“These are perfect,” she exclaimed. “Thank you.”

Shocked, Dean replied, “You’re welcome.”

When did she learn to say that?

Dean began to wonder how well the people of Ivy Springs had really known her. She admitted that she could be rude, and he had seen for himself what she thought about shifters. She put more make-up on than a clown and acted as though the world revolved around money and what she wanted. However, there was another side of her that was surprising. She was smart and she had manners.

The steaks that Dean had put in the refrigerator the night before were thawed out. He hunted for some seasoning and his pan. After wrapping some large potatoes in aluminum foil, he carefully placed those in the fire.

“Aren’t they going to explode?” she asked.

“Not if you do it right.”

She watched him cook the steaks with a dubious expression.

“Cooking on this isn’t a whole lot different than cooking on a gas range,” he explained. “The only difference is, I can’t adjust the heat on this, so I have to pay attention to what I’m doing. How do you like your steaks?”

“Medium well.”

“Good. Me, too.”

Dean couldn’t believe his eyes when she voluntarily set the table and put out butter, salt, pepper, and sour cream.

She laughed when she saw the expression on his face.

“It wasn’t that hard. It wasn’t anything that the average five-year-old couldn’t do.”

“Have you ever set a table before?”

“Nope, but I know what one looks like when it’s set, except there’s only one fork and knife. I didn’t put out spoons, except for the sour cream, since we aren’t having soup.”

“Sorry, no five-course meal here.”

Dean knew that he didn’t sound sorry.

“Those are only for special occasions.”

Alexis took a bite of her steak, still not sure whether she trusted Dean's cooking or not. She put a small piece in her mouth, chewing carefully.

“Wow. Tasty and tender. This is better than the widely acclaimed chef who works for us has ever made.”

“I'm glad that it meets your approval.”

After washing up after dinner, Dean sat in the recliner and watched Alexis read. He replayed the conversation he had with Micah earlier that day. He had no idea what the end game with Alexis was going to be.

ALEXIS

“I don’t have to go into town today,” Dean said. “I finally have a day off. They don’t come very often. Do you want to get some exercise?”

Thinking that he was going to suggest a trip to town, she said, “I would love some exercise. Staying trapped in these four walls is enough to make anyone a little dotty. Sometimes I feel like they are closing in on me.”

“I understand that. I’m sorry,” he replied. “Have you ever walked with snowshoes?”

“I have, but not for a very long time. I used to go out when I was younger.”

“I’m sure it won’t take you long to get the hang of them,” Dean replied. “I saw my sister’s snowshoes in the closet when I was grabbing the boots.”

She was a little disappointed that it wasn’t a trip to town, but she really should have known better. Dean knew damn well that she would try to get help the first chance she had.

The forest was incredibly beautiful. The pine and spruce smelled delightful, and their bright green needles seemed to glow from the sunlight. The snow sparkled like diamonds in the areas that the sun’s rays hit it. The winter birds were having a lively conversation. In the distance an elk bellowed.

“Did you hear that?” Dean asked.

“The scream? Yeah. What was that?”

“That was a mountain lion.”

Her face paled a bit and he said, “Don’t worry. It’s far away and I promise that I would protect you from it.”

She nodded, although she still wasn’t completely reassured. He wasn’t wearing a gun. She didn’t think that he even had a knife on him.

Dean stopped her and pointed into the trees.

“Do you see them?” he asked.

She focused and saw some elk gnawing on trees.

“Majestic,” she said.

An hour into the adventure, Alexis was starting to get tired. She worked out and thought of herself as in shape, but snow shoeing was a whole new type of exercise. She tried very hard to keep up, because she didn’t want to seem weak to Dean.

He seemed to notice because he said, “Let’s head back. I have some hot chocolate with our names in it.”

This was a lot more fun than going to town.

Alexis thought about what a trip to town would have looked like. She would have made a scene and made it clear that she had been kidnapped. At the very least, Dean would go to jail. The problem was that she didn’t want him to go to jail.

She looked at him and really saw how handsome he was. He had a chiseled face and golden-brown hair. He had a nice body from what she could tell from his t-shirts and jeans. Alexis also thought about how nice he had been to her. He had shown her respect – a different type of respect than anyone else had shown her. His respect had been treating her like an intelligent human being. Everyone else’s respect was fearful. It wasn’t because they liked her, it was because they were afraid of her.

Growling in the back of her throat, she told herself to stop being so maudlin. This man had kidnapped her.

I must be suffering from Stockholm Syndrome.

He made grilled cheese and tomato soup for lunch. It was simple yet delicious. She couldn't remember the last time she had enjoyed a grilled cheese sandwich. Every meal had always been gourmet.

"Have you ever played Monopoly?" he asked.

"I have, when I was a kid."

"Up for a game?"

"Of course," she replied. "But don't cry when I kick your butt."

"Don't get too cocky, now," he said. "You never know how the dice will land."

Alexis blew on the dice and crossed her fingers each time it was her roll. She wanted the oranges, yellows, and greens. Boardwalk and Park Place would be great properties to own, as well.

She got the light blues, oranges, and reds, and all four railroads. He got the yellows and greens. The rest of the properties were pretty much split between them, so there were no monopolies. Neither of them would trade.

"I can't remember the last time that I laughed so hard," she said.

"Even though I kicked your gluteus maximus?"

"You had to have cheated. You loaded the dice or something," she protested, jokingly. "They always seemed to land on just what you needed."

"I just have a magic touch. I do a nice shake and swish when I roll. The dice love it and reward me greatly."

"They do, huh? Has anyone ever told you that you're full of bull malarky?"

Dean exaggeratingly scratched his chin and stared up at the sky as though he was thinking extremely hard.

"Come to think of it, I might have been told something like that a time or two."

“Mm-hmm. I’m sure that it’s been more than just a time or two.”

He grinned at her, and Alexis felt her heart skip a beat. He was an incredibly sexy man. Dean was also interesting and fun to be around. She couldn’t remember the last time she had such a genuinely good time.

Then, she caught herself.

Knock it off. I have to find a way to get out of this prison. I want a regular heater I don’t have to feed, a toilet I don’t have to go outside to use, and a hot shower.

The conflict inside of her almost felt physical. On one hand, she was very angry that she had been kidnapped and held hostage on a mountain far away from civilization. On the other hand, she had to admit that it hadn’t been that bad. It wasn’t like she was being tortured. The food was good, and Dean was interesting to be around. It just wasn’t home.

She thought of the life she had led in Ivy Springs. After forcing herself out of bed, usually around ten, she would spend an hour on her makeup and hair. Alexis would try on at least three or four outfits until she found the one she wanted to wear. Then, it was a day of fake smiles, spending money on things she didn’t want or need, and hanging out with people she didn’t necessarily like.

I’ve heard it said that you can’t go home. I think this is what it meant. What I thought was home isn’t there anymore, not because it’s changed, but because I have, at least a little.

The thought shocked her. She had changed a little bit, but she would likely go back to being the same Alexis she had always been once she got out of this hellhole and made it back to Ivy Springs.

A tiny thought in the very back of her brain, so small that she could barely hear it, asked, “Do you want to be the same person you were?”

Ignoring it, she thanked Dean as he handed her a cup of hot chocolate.

He sat down in the chair and started to pick up a book when she asked, “Are there a lot of shifters in the area?”

“My guess is that there are the same number of shifters in this area as there are in any other area, although Ivy Springs may have less because of your friends.”

“Oh,” she said, simply.

“In case you weren’t aware, there are a lot of other people, who you would consider supernatural, living in your area, and all around the world, too,” he said.

“There are? Like what?”

“Vampires and witches, to name a few. There are some people who believe that there are fairies and other such people in existence as well.”

“Do you believe in fairies?”

I’ve never known one, but I do know that there is so much in this world that we really don’t know about, so I can’t say.”

“There can’t be any vampires in our area. None of us have been attacked by one and there aren’t any more bats in Ivy Springs than there are anywhere else, or we would notice.”

Dean laughed, and she felt a flush creep up her cheeks. He thought she was stupid.

“A lot of people think of vampires like that, in part, thanks to Bram Stoker. However, there are a lot of myths surrounding vampires. As I said before, there are good and bad in every category of people. There are very few covens of vampires who do feed off of humans. However, most vampires either get their food from a blood bank or they feed off of animals, which, isn’t as healthy for them, but it feeds them.”

Alexis’ mouth hung open and her eyes were wide.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope. They can be in the sun, garlic doesn’t affect them, they can cross running water, and some of them are even Christian.”

The thoughts in Alexis' brain were a jumbled mess. He had to be kidding her, didn't he? However, the look on his face told her that Dean was very serious.

She took a minute to digest the information.

"How do I know if the person I'm talking to is a vampire?"

"If they tell you. They look just like everyone else. No one wears a sign announcing who they are, because there are too many judgmental and hating people in the world who try to destroy what they don't understand."

"Oh," Alexis said, thinking about her family's hatred of shifters.

Neither she nor her brothers had ever had a bad experience with a shifter. They simply hated them because they were taught to hate them.

"What about witches? I've never seen one."

"You probably have. Unless they are using their craft for money, such as those who do fortune telling or sell potions and such, witches tend to keep their identity a secret. First, people would try to take advantage of them, asking them for spells, charms, and other favors. Second, it wasn't that long ago that perceived witches were hanged or burned at the stake."

"Wow," was all Alexis could think to say.

Dean leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers, waiting for more questions.

"How much of the population is supernatural?" she asked.

"I would say between thirty-five percent and forty-five percent."

"So, they could easily gang up on regular humans and kill us all," she said, suddenly frightened at the prospect.

"They could, but they don't want war and violence. They simply want to be left alone to live their life, like they leave other people alone to live theirs."

Alexis had the feeling that from now on, she would stare into the faces of every single person she came across,

wondering if they were a shifter, vampire, witch, or some other type of person who could kill her with a snap of their fingers.

She didn't want to hear anymore, so she walked to the basin in the kitchen and washed her cup. It wasn't until she sat back down that she realized that she had actually washed a dish for the first time in her life.

Dean started reading. She tried, but she couldn't comprehend the words, rereading the same paragraph several times and she still didn't know what it said.

There were a few flakes falling from the sky. They were big and fluffy.

I wonder how scientists know that no two snowflakes are exactly the same. There is no way that they could have looked at every single snowflake in the entire world.

She thought about asking Dean, not because she expected an answer, but more for amusement. However, he was engrossed in his book. Besides, he would probably tell her some story about how some human-like creature was an artist and took pride carefully crafting each flake before freeing it into the world.

Stop being ridiculous. You're just flustered because you learned a lot about the world around you that you never knew and you're tired.

Her eyes glazed over as the flakes clung to the window.

Am I really going to have to spend the rest of my life in this place?

A flash of anger flared up inside of her that said, "Hell, no. I'll find a way out, one way or the other."

Then, one of those tiny niggles formed in the back of her head and asked, "If you did stay here forever, would it really be so bad?"

DEAN

Dean pulled his suit out of the garment bag and made sure that there were no wrinkles, dust, or stray hairs on it. He hated wearing a suit and tie. A t-shirt, polo shirt, or even a regular button down shirt with jeans was more his style. He was putting on his black tie when a sleepy Alexis walked into the room.

She looked him up and down, taking in his black suit, white shirt, dress shoes, and tie.

“Wow, you are looking sharp today,” she remarked, looking him up and down. “Do you have a special event to attend?”

“Actually, I do. My father is retiring, and I am going to be named the alpha of our grizzly bear clan.”

“The alpha? That sounds important.”

“It is. I am going to be the new leader of our clan in a ceremony today. Kind of like the king or president. There are elders who advise and help make and change policies and laws, settle disputes, and a million other duties, but I will make the ultimate decision on everything,” Dean explained. “What this means in essence is that I go to a lot of meetings.”

She laughed at his tone when he mentioned the meetings.

“Sounds to me that you really enjoy going to meetings.”

“Oooh, I do. They’re my favorite,” he said in a high-pitched whiny voice while clapping his hands.

This made Alexis roar with laughter.

“Are you excited?”

“I don’t know if you would call it excitement, exactly. I’ve been groomed for this position practically my entire life.”

“Sounds impressive.”

Dean shrugged and said, “I guess so. I haven’t really thought about it that way. To me, it’s more of a responsibility of being the head of a big family and a leader as a career.”

“I would love to go and watch the ceremony,” she said. “I imagine that it will be very exciting.”

Grinning, Dean replied, “I don’t think so.”

“You are afraid that I would throw a big fit, tell everyone that you kidnapped me, and demand that someone take me home.”

“Yeah, something along those lines.”

“I’m really disappointed if you think that I would ruin such an important event for you,” Alexis said.

“Sorry,” Dean replied, not sounding particularly apologetic. “But I’m pretty sure that you would take any opportunity that you could to escape. Not only is that dangerous to me, but it is dangerous to my friends and family. That’s why you’re here to begin with. I had to protect my own.”

Alexis didn’t deny it. She simply flopped down on the couch with her bottom lip sticking out like a petulant child.

“I will see if someone will record the ceremony for you.”

She just crossed her arms and stared off into space.

He knew that she wasn’t happy, but he hadn’t come up with a decent solution yet, and until he did, things were just going to have to stay as they were. There was no way that he could put anyone else in danger, and he knew that she would sic the hunters on them.

He cleared his mind as he drove down the mountain. Even though he had dismissed it to Alexis, he was a little excited and a little nervous.

The meeting was held in a large, cavernous grotto in the heart of grizzly bear territory. It was where the clan met for all the sacred events and where he would lead the clan from. It was brightly lit with torches ensconced against the rock walls. A dais was set up on one side. Chairs were lined up for those who attended the ceremony. All in the clan were welcome.

Elder Fredrick greeted him warmly with a handshake and a hug. His father beamed at him and did the same.

“Welcome, fellow members of this grizzly bear clan, to this momentous occasion. Today, we gather to witness the rise of a new alpha, Dean, who has proven his strength, wisdom, and dedication to our clan,” Elder Fredrick intoned.

Dean stepped forward, his eyes filled with determination and a sense of responsibility.

“You have shown great courage and resilience in your journey. You have proven yourself as a protector and guardian of this clan. Today we honor your commitment and declare you as the new alpha.”

The clan members clapped and Dean’s chest filled with pride.

“As the new alpha, you will carry the weight of our clan’s legacy. You will lead with integrity, compassion, and unwavering loyalty. Are you ready to shoulder that responsibility?”

Dean held his head up high as he answered, “I am ready. I accept this honor and the weight it carries. I vow to protect and guide our clan with all my heart.”

His father gravely lifted a pendant he wore over his head and approached Dean. The pendant was adorned with the sacred symbol of the grizzly bear clan.

“As a symbol of your leadership and authority, we bestow upon you this sacred pendant. Wear it with pride, as it signifies

your connection to our ancestral lineage and the strength of our clan,” Elder Fredrick said.

David placed the pendant around Dean’s neck and whispered in his ear, “I’m so proud of you, son.”

Elder Cyrus said, “With this necklace, the power of our clan flows through you. But remember, that true leadership lies not only in strength, but also humility. Lead by example and govern with fairness, always considering the well-being of our clan.”

“I shall honor this responsibility with deep reverence. I understand the importance of unity, cooperation, and respect within our clan. I will strive to create an environment where all members feel valued and safe.”

“Excellent. With your words, you have affirmed your commitment to our clan. Now, let us all bow our heads in a moment of silence to honor the transition of power and to send our collective positive energy to Dean, our new alpha,” Elder Fredrick said.

The clan members close their eyes and bow their heads as a serene silence fills the room.

“From this day forward, the grizzly bear clan recognizes Dean as our alpha. May his reign be filled with strength, harmony, and prosperity for all,” Elder Cyrus said.

Everyone clapped and cheered. His father and the elders shook his hand and he stepped off the dais. His clan members rushed up to congratulate him.

I just hope that I haven’t doomed us all by kidnapping Alexis.

Micah handed Dean his phone and said, “I have the whole thing recorded.”

“Thank you. I told Alexis I would let her see it.”

Micah just heaved a heavy sigh.

“I appreciate you coming. I’ll be at yours, too.”

“You had better be,” Micah replied.

On his way back to the cabin, he stopped off for some good wine. He thought that Alexis might like to have some, and he was in the celebratory mood.

She was napping on the couch when he got in. He tried to be quiet, but she jumped up with a start, staring at him wide-eyed as though she wasn't sure who he was. Then, a millisecond later, she shook her head, as though to clear the cobwebs and smiled.

“You scared me. You're home earlier than normal.”

“The ceremony is over. I didn't feel like staying for the after party,” he said. “I probably should have, I guess. Huge parties aren't really my thing, although I will have to get used to them.”

“Did you record the ceremony?”

“Yes, do you want to see it?”

She scooted over on the couch and patted the cushion next to her, inviting him to sit down. He took off his jacket, loosened his tie, and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt.

“Now, I can breathe,” he said as he started the video.

Alexis held his phone and intensely watched the video, twice.

“Wow,” she said. “That was very impressive.”

“Thank you.”

“Can I see the pendant?”

He pulled it out from under his shirt and showed it to her.

“Does it really hold power?” she asked.

“It does for the alpha. For others, it would simply be another pendant.”

“It is so beautiful.”

“I brought home some wine to celebrate,” he said.

“I would love some.”

He fished a couple of glasses out of the cabinet, handing one to Alexis.

She held it up and said, “To the new alpha.”

Alexis settled back down on the couch while he parked himself in the recliner. “What is next for you?”

DEAN LAUGHED AND SAID, “Well, to my father and the elders, it should be a mating ceremony, which is just like a wedding ceremony. The alpha queen has a lot of important duties to attend to. However, I haven’t found anyone who I want to be tied to for the rest of my life.”

“What about Lucy? Wasn’t she the reason that you came to Ivy Springs?”

“I thought that I was in love with her and tried to persuade her to be my mate. However, she fell in love with Micah, and I realized that she really was more of a great friend than a lover.”

“What was it about Lucy that made you think you were in love with her and made Micah fall in love with her?” Alexis asked, picking at her nails.

“Lucy is an incredible woman. She has an inner strength and can get through anything. She is smart, funny, and is an incredibly caring woman. There is nothing that she wouldn’t do to help another person or animal in need.”

“I see,” she said. “Are those the traits that you would look for in someone you wanted to marry?”

“Yes. But there also has to be chemistry. Call me a hopeless romantic, but I want to feel the electricity between my mate and me that is more than just a need for sex.”

Alexis nodded, thoughtfully.

“What about you?” he asked.

Alexis shrugged her shoulders.

“I guess I don’t even know anymore. I’ve dated a few guys, but it never worked out. I guess it was because we were

both too selfish to give the other person what they needed.”

“What do you need?” Dean asked.

“I guess I don’t really know. I guess that I was just looking for someone to put me on a pedestal and look good on my arm. I’ve never really thought about substance.”

“That is important. Looks fade and if there’s no substance, there can’t be the love that’s important for a good relationship.”

She nodded.

“You know, I don’t think that I’ve ever felt love for anyone or anything.”

“I’m sorry for you,” Dean said.

Alexis abruptly changed the subject.

“I’m hungry. What are you cooking tonight?”

“Hamburgers and macaroni and cheese, with baked beans.”

“Not your typical meal you have for a celebration,” she said.

“It makes me happy,” he replied.

At the end of the night, he couldn’t remember what they talked about. The conversation had been pleasant, though, and Dean had an enjoyable time. He thought that Alexis enjoyed herself.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be a party pooper, but I have to get up early tomorrow,” Dean said.

“I’m getting tired anyway,” she replied.

They both stood up at the same time and brushed by each other. She brushed a kiss across his lips and then hurried into the bedroom, her face beat red.

“It must have been the wine,” he said softly to himself.

He had to admit that he liked the feeling. She smelled good since she wasn’t drenched in perfume. Dean acknowledged that she was beautiful without all the makeup and goop in her

hair. She had been wearing it straight down her back or just braiding it, and it was gorgeous. Briefly, he wondered what it would be like to run his fingers through it and wondered if it would be as silky as it looked. She also had a lot of great qualities that she had kept hidden from the world and maybe even herself.

Dean closed his eyes, imagining what it might be like to have sex with her. Then he forcefully pushed away those thoughts and drifted off to sleep.

ALEXIS

Alexis could feel the heat in her face as she shuffled into the bedroom. She had no idea what in the world had possessed her to kiss him. Licking her lips, she wondered what it would be like if he had grabbed her and returned the kiss. The hard pressure of his lips against hers, while their tongues danced together. All of the men before had been either average kissers or absolutely terrible kissers. One, she had to actually wipe the wetness off her face.

I bet that Dean is a great kisser.

She smiled at the thought.

Stop it, Alexis. You are only here in his company because he kidnapped you.

In all honesty, though, her stay here hadn't been unpleasant, save for the part where she had to go outside to potty, especially since there was no source of heat in the outhouse.

Dean had been treating her well. He made sure she had food and wasn't bored. She really enjoyed his company. If she was honest with herself, she didn't miss all the shopping trips and socializing. The peace she found here was refreshing, which was interesting because she didn't even know that she needed it.

Alexis asked herself what she would do in this situation. She had barged into his room and threatened to have him and his friends killed. If she was truthful, she would admit that she couldn't come up with a different solution.

The sheets in the bed were cool, but not cold. They were actually perfect. She snuggled in, pulling the blankets and comforter up to her neck.

Images of Dean pranced in her mind. As soon as she would banish them, they faded back in, teasing her, haunting her.

She pictured his handsome, rugged face and wondered if Lucy had just been blind. How could she not see that not only was Dean great looking, but he was also a pretty wonderful man – for a kidnapper.

“He’s a shifter,” she reminded herself.

So what? she flashed back. *He’s been a lot more decent to you than a lot of regular humans have been.*

Dean had been sexy in that suit, especially after he loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. There was just something about that look that made her heart beat a little faster. The t-shirts that he usually wore fit him perfectly and showed a very muscular chest and thick arms. Suddenly, her fingers started aching to touch his chest.

No other man had ever invoked that kind of need inside of her, not even Luke whom she had pursued so ardently. None of the men she had ever met could make her feel the heat that smoldered inside of her.

Closing her eyes, Alexis allowed herself the pleasure of indulging in her whims for just a moment. In her mind, she pictured him slowly unbuttoning his shirt, revealing his chest. She wondered if it was bare or if he had hair on his chest. Licking her lips, she hoped that he had hair covering those incredible pecs.

Nibbling on her bottom lip, she squirmed from the heated sensation forming between her legs. Her hands reached out to touch his chest, and she could almost feel the hard muscles under her fingertips.

Sighing heavily, her fingers slipped under her panties and found the hard nub. She dipped a finger into her soaked tunnel and rubbed the wet digit over her clit. In her mind, Dean had

completely undressed and had mounted her. Although she had tried hard not to stare, she knew that he had a very nice package.

In her mind, he pressed himself against her and slowly pushed his way in. She could almost feel herself stretching from his girth as her silken inner walls tightened against him.

Rubbing herself, her legs spread wide apart, she imagined his chest close to hers, as they brushed against each other. Her fingers clung to his back as their bodies rocked together. Her lips pressed against his throat and chest as Dean moved in and out of her faster and harder.

The heat built up inside of her and electricity buzzed in the air around her. Her heart was beating a million miles an hour and she started to pant. Her body was hot and she moaned as she felt herself throb as a gush of warm liquid poured out of her.

It took a moment for her to catch her breath and for her heart to return to a normal rate. She was a little disappointed that it didn't last a little longer. The images of Dean lingered in her mind as she slipped out of bed and added her panties to the dirty clothes bag.

She was embarrassed that she had just pleased herself to the images of her kidnapper, who was a bear shifter of all things. Her brothers and parents would disown her if they knew. With a slight smile, Alexis acknowledged that she wasn't in the least bit sorry. She even hoped that maybe she would get to see if real life lived up to her fantasy. Giggling, she pictured what the residents of Ivy Springs would think of that particular dream.

Dean was up early the next morning. Wiping the sleep out of her eyes, Alexis was groggy when she stumbled into the living room. She walked out in just her short night shirt and panties. He was making pancakes and bacon for breakfast.

With satisfaction, she noticed that Dean took a second look at her, and his lips had lifted into grin.

“I have to get some shopping done after all my meetings, so I will be late,” he told her. “I’m just going to pick something up for dinner. Any preferences?”

“I love authentic Mexican food, especially carne asada.”

“Then you shall have it,” Dean promised her. “I know the perfect place.”

She devoured the pancakes and watched Dean walk out the door, fighting the urge to hug him goodbye.

Their conversation from the night before ran through her mind. She wondered whether her parents loved each other. They never showed any signs of affect to each other when they were around, just like they never did to their kids. If they didn’t love each other, they certainly had to fuck each other, at least four times. Just because they had sex, though, didn’t mean that they cared about each other or even liked each other. She shuddered at being in a relationship like that.

Picking up her book, she tried to focus on the words. The letters seemed to float around on the page, making it impossible to understand what was in front of her. Sighing, she put the book down and stared out the window.

The Alexis that she was in Ivy Springs was a lot different from the Alexis she was here. It was almost as though she had shed an outer skin to reveal a completely different person. She was finally able to relax, and she wasn’t overwhelmed by constant noise going on around her. There was no one to dress up for to impress others and no acts to perform. She could be herself. Alexis wondered who she really was.

The question was, what would she be like if she returned to Ivy Springs? Shuddering, she realized that the thought didn’t seem so appealing.

Although the bright sun was shining through the windows, the cabin seemed dark. The walls were creeping in, the room getting suffocatingly smaller. A hushed silence screamed in the still air.

“I have to get out,” Alexis almost yelled.

She hurriedly dressed in the warmest clothes that Dean had bought her. Laughing at the thought that she would have never worn a knit hat in the past, she pulled the bright colored beanie, complete with a pom-pom over her head. A scarf protected her neck from the cold air and her silvery-blue down coat always kept her extremely warm. Thick socks, snow boots, and snowshoes completed the ensemble.

“No one from Ivy Springs would even recognize me now,” she said. “Not even my brothers.”

A doubt niggled in the back of her mind as she eyed the expanse of woods that spread out before her and the deep snow that she stood on. She didn’t know the area, and she knew that it could be dangerous to venture out alone.

Her gut rolled and told her to go back inside the cabin, or at best, walk around the cabin a few times until she got the restlessness out. However, her desire to get out and get some meaningful exercise overrode her instincts.

“I won’t go far, so I don’t get lost. I’ll just walk along the wood line and make sure that I keep the cabin in view.”

Feeling more confident, she put one foot in front of the other, looking around her, breathing in the fresh air. In spite of her best intentions, she soon found that she couldn’t see the cabin.

“I left foot prints. I can follow those. No need to panic.”

However, the more she walked, she realized that she had been walking in circles for the past hour. The tracks didn’t lead her back to the cabin.

Her heart started thundering and her breath caught in her throat.

“Take a deep breath through your nose. Hold it for a few seconds and out through your mouth,” she told herself.

After she was sure that she wasn’t going to hyperventilate and pass out in the snow, she thought about the situation. At one point in the circle, there was going to be a line of tracks that would veer off and lead back to the cabin.

“I will look for that. I just have to calm down and think coolly.”

Shivering a little, partially from fear and partially from the air that seeped in through her jacket, she carefully retraced her steps once again, scrutinizing the ground for the trail that would lead back to the cabin.

“I have to be getting close,” she said, biting her bottom lip, anxiously, worried that she might have missed it.

A few more steps and the hair raised on the back of her neck. Loud growling permeated the silence of the air. Slowly turning around, fear gripping her heart like a vise, her eyes widened when she saw three wolves standing in front of her, baring their teeth.

“Good doggies,” she said, her voice shriller than she’d ever heard it.

Slowly, they crept closer to her. She stepped back, hoping that she didn’t trip over her snowshoes.

Heart pounding, panting hard, her mind raced. She had no idea what to do. There was no way in the world that she could outrun them, and she remembered from a documentary that she read that running would only make them see her as prey and chase her. It’s not like they would simply watch her try to jet back to the cabin and then walk away.

A squeak escaped her lips when her back hit a tree. She looked up, wondering if she could somehow ditch her snowshoes and climb it. There were no branches low enough for her to grab onto.

The wolves crept closer and closer toward her. She was trapped.

DEAN

Dean rubbed his red, burning eyes. The glaring lights in the conference room were starting to give him a headache. The nasally high-pitched voice of Edna, who was in charge of the clan's gala this year seemed to drive a sharp blade straight into his brain. He was certain that if he had to listen to one more minute of her complaining about a lack of funding and help, his head was literally going to explode and parts of his brain would be everywhere.

Elder Fredrick was obviously feeling the same, because he said, "Edna, you'll figure it out. You always do. Every year you face challenges and every year you always host a fabulous gala for the clan."

Seemingly pleased with the comment, she smiled and stopped talking.

Looking at his watch, Dean said, "We're out of time, today, folks. Is there anything else that is an absolute emergency that can't wait."

Everyone looked around at each other and then shook their heads.

"Thank the heavens," Dean muttered under his breath.

He packed up the paperwork in front of him and headed out the door, hoping to get to the grocery store and pick up dinner before it got too late.

David stopped him as Dean was heading back toward his office.

“Son, do you have a minute?”

“A minute,” Dean said.

“We need to talk about the gala. Who are you bringing?”

“I don’t have anyone in mind,” Dean said. “I’ve been preoccupied with other business.”

“This is very important. It is customary for the alpha to go through the mating ceremony soon after he becomes the alpha,” David said. “I know you had a thing for Lucy, but that didn’t pan out. What are your plans?”

“I have none. There is no one who even remotely interests me, especially not for the rest of my life. When the right woman comes along, then we’ll talk about a mating ceremony, but not until that happens.”

“It is customary...” his father started to say.

“I know what is customary. However, I am not going to be tied down to someone that I can’t stomach just to satisfy some kind of archaic tradition. If I’m trapped in a miserable partnership, I won’t be a good leader.”

David sighed heavily, clearly displeased with Dean’s response.

“What about the gala. You can’t come stag.”

“Why not? I always have.”

“Because you are the alpha. It just isn’t done. Wilma would be a great choice and so would Deanna.”

“I like both of them well enough, but definitely not enough to even date. Wilma is as sharp as a bag of wet leather. Deanna loves to hear the sound of her own voice and doesn’t understand that conversation requires that she allow other people to speak. She drives me nuts.”

“You are the alpha, so you have to have a date for the gala.”

“Well, I suppose that I can either come to the gala stag or I can skip it altogether,” Dean said, staring his father in the eyes.

David started to sputter something, but Dean didn't hear his words. Suddenly, a dark feeling gripped his gut, twisting it.

“Alexis” flashed in his brain.

“I can't talk about this right now. I have to go,” Dean's panic started to spread through him like a wild fire.

He grabbed his keys and ran for his truck. Flooring it all the way up to the cabin, the dark feeling continued to grow. Something was wrong.

Throwing open the cabin door, he yelled, “Alexis.”

There was no answer. A quick search of the building indicated that she wasn't there.

“Great. She went outside. Where did she go?”

He ran back outside and noticed the snowshoe tracks leading into the woods. After quickly strapping on the snowshoes, he followed her tracks, about two miles away from the cabin. It was evident that she had gotten lost and was walking in circles. The overlapping of her prints showed that.

Dean groaned. It would make it that more difficult to find her. Eyeing the freshest prints, he tracked Alexis.

Loud growling stopped him dead in his tracks. Cocking his head to the side, he listened to determine where they were coming from. Pinpointing the origin of the sound, his heart pounding, he ran toward the location.

He halted when he took in the situation. Alexis was standing with her back against the tree, her hands straight by her side. Her eyes were wide with fear, and he could see her shaking from where he was. The pungent odor of sheer terror wafted in the cool breeze. Three wolves slowly advanced toward her, their teeth bared, loud growls escaping from their throats.

Alexis saw him and whispered, “Please help me.”

In a flash, Dean undressed and shifted into a large imposing grizzly bear. His growl was so loud and menacing that the trees shook. Three wolf heads whipped toward him as he ran into the scene. They hesitated for the merest of seconds

before tucking their tails between their legs and running into the woods.

Shifting back into his human form, Dean ran to Alexis, who was staring blankly at him with her mouth hanging open.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

She shook her head.

“I’m okay.”

“Gather my clothes and then get on my back. It’ll be easier for me to carry you home than for you to walk,” Dean ordered as he shifted back into his bear form.

He walked over to where Alexis picked up his hastily discarded clothes and laid down so that she could reach his back.

Alexis looked at him doubtfully and then looked at her feet.

It’s okay. I promise you’ll be safe, Dean said telepathically.

She jumped, startled at the sound of his voice in her mind. Alexis looked at Dean questionably and he nodded. Hesitantly, she slowly approached him and then swung her leg over his back like she would a horse.

Carefully standing up so he wouldn’t dislodge her, Dean heard Alexis gasp. He wasn’t sure if it was a “this is cool” gasp or an “I’m terrified out of my mind gasp,” but he didn’t have time to figure it out. It was already dark out and getting colder by the minute.

Dean covered the trip pretty quickly. He could feel Alexis shivering hard and knew that she was in danger of being hypothermic. She needed to get warm, fast.

Alexis slid off his back as soon as he stopped in front of the cabin door, not waiting for him to lay down so that she could get off easier. She watched in fascination as he quickly shifted back into his human form.

“Get inside. It’s warm there,” Dean ordered.

If the situation hadn't been so dire, he would have been amused at the fact that Alexis couldn't seem to keep her eyes off of him. She looked him up and down like he was a fine work of art.

Dean dressed as quickly as he had undressed and grabbed a blanket to wrap around Alexis, who was huddled near the stove. He quickly made some coffee and handed her a cup. Her hands were visibly shaking when he gave it to her.

"You're sure you're not hurt?" he asked, concern evident in his voice.

"I'm sure. I was just a little scared."

"A little?" Dean asked teasingly, his eyebrows raised.

"Okay, maybe a lot."

"Why were you out there?"

"I just meant to go for a short walk. I was getting cabin fever. I meant to keep the cabin in my view, but it seemed like only a minute had gone by and I was lost."

"It's easy to do out here if you don't know the area, and even then, sometimes, a person could get lost."

She nodded and took another sip of her drink.

Silence filled the air for a bit and then she asked, "Those weren't shifters, were they?"

"No, they weren't. Those were real wolves. A shifter would never do that to another human being."

"You're a shifter and you saved my life."

"I am and I did," Dean said.

After seeming to reflect on that for a minute she said, "Not all shifters are bad."

"There's going to be bad in all so-called categories of people – shifters, mundane humans, doctors, teachers, and so on. However, while the media focuses more on the bad than the good, making it seem as though the bad outweighs the

good, there are a lot more good people in this world than there are bad.”

She nodded.

“The wolves weren’t bad, either. They were either defending their territory or they were hungry and spotted an available food source.”

“I’m pretty sure that I don’t appreciate being considered a food source,” she joked.

Dean was glad that she was starting to feel better.

She sipped her coffee for a few minutes and then grinned.

“I’ve never ridden a grizzly bear before. It was kind of fun.”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t recommend riding a full grizzly bear. They have been known to attack humans and eat them.”

“What you’re saying is, I look like a snack.”

“Yes, you do,” Dean said, understanding the double meaning of her words. “If you liked riding a grizzly bear, you would really like riding a dragon. They are a lot of fun.”

“Ride a dragon? Do you mean that dragons exist?”

“They do. At least dragon shifters exist. I don’t know if there are actual full-blooded dragons hiding out in the caves on mountains, hoarding treasures. I’ve heard, although I’ve never met any, that there could be other types of shifters, as well, such as unicorn shifters.”

“Unicorns?”

“Not the kind that you see in cartoons that eat butterflies and fart rainbows,” Dean said.

Alexis giggled at that.

“These unicorns are very shaggy and not as sleekly beautiful as the myths.”

Alexis nodded and said, “I read that a team of scientists found remnants of a unicorn that existed about forty thousand years ago and existed at the same time as humans. It was really

a rhinoceros species that had a single horn coming out of its forehead and was as big as a mammoth.”

She thought about it for a second and said, “Please don’t tell me that there are T-rex shifters and pterodactyl shifters.”

Dean laughed and said, “Not to my knowledge. I don’t think that there is any evidence that shifters existed back then. Although, I would imagine that there are crocodile and alligator shifters, and those reptiles were around at the same time that dinosaurs were.”

“Wow,” Alexis said. “I would have never imagined any of this.”

Dean had been cooking while they were talking and put the fixings for tacos on the table.

“Are you warm enough to eat?”

“I’m starving.”

“It’s not the Mexican food that I promised you earlier, but I didn’t stop. I had a feeling something was wrong, so I ran straight here from the office.

“I’m glad you did.”

When it was time for bed, Dean stretched out on the couch and closed his eyes, his mind on Alexis. If he had let the wolves eat Alexis, that would have solved all of his problems, but there was no way that he could have done that. He wouldn’t wish that fate on his greatest enemy.

She’s actually starting to be human, instead of an entitled brat, Dean thought. I still don’t trust her, though. I can’t let her loose to put me, my family, and my friends in danger.

He was just about to sleep when he heard the sounds of soft footsteps.

“Dean? Are you awake?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I can’t sleep and I don’t want to be alone. Can I stay with you?”

Dean turned on his side and pressed his back against the couch, giving her room to lay down next to him. She crawled under the blanket, her chest pressing against his, her head resting on his arm.

She looked up at him, smiled, and said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Alexis brushed her lips against his. Dean groaned, wrapped his arms around her, and intensified the kiss.

ALEXIS

Alexis' breath caught in her throat as the pressure from Dean's lips increased against her own. Embers that had been smoldering inside of her ignited. His tongue pressed against her mouth, demanding entrance. She opened.

Their breaths mingled as his arms tightened around her. Their tongues danced together in a passionate motion. Her fingers tangled in the curls of his hair at the base of his neck. He smelled so delicious, like a combination of outdoors and the sweet smell of the firewood. His mouth tasted minty, like the toothpaste he just used to brush his teeth.

Her heart rammed against her ribcage as the kiss intensified. It was everything that she imagined it would be, when she had pictured him and touched herself.

He nibbled the tip of her tongue and then flicked it with his. Alexis opened her eyes to see the chiseled profile of his face, causing her heart to lurch. She had never seen such beauty in her life.

Lightly biting her lips and then tracing them, he stared into her eyes. The depths of his hazel eyes seemed to go on for an eternity. She gently touched his face, tracing his brow, his cheeks, and the contours of his face.

"You are so incredibly handsome," she said.

His grin was so sexy that it stole her breath away.

"Why, thank you," he said, in a deep husky voice.

Alexis pressed her lips against his cheek and kissed along his jawline, down to his chin. Her lips brushed against his, and she mimicked his earlier actions, nibbling on his lips and tracing them with her tongue. Thousands of butterfly wings fluttered inside of her stomach. She could feel her heart beating, and her body filled with an aching need.

He touched her face and then put his hand on the back of her head as his lips once more devoured hers, consuming her as though he was starving. His tongue explored her mouth. He ticked the roof of her mouth and stroked the top of her tongue.

She reveled in every sensation. No man's kiss had ever affected her like this. Every nerve in her body responded to the touch of his hand, the pressure of his body against hers, and the exploration of her mouth. The heat from the kiss radiated around them, shrouding them. Alexis could feel Dean's heartbeat through her nightshirt.

Alexis put her hand on his biceps, feeling the large muscle. She squeezed it and a thrill flowed through her. It was just like she imagined. Her fingers ached to explore the rest of his body. She wanted to tell him to take off his clothes so she could touch every inch of him. Shyness forced her to swallow the words, making her want to scream in frustration.

Dean was just as affected as she was. Alexis could feel his growing arousal hidden under the sweatpants he wore. It pressed against her stomach, letting her know that his need was just as strong as hers was.

Sensing her desires, he sat up and pulled his shirt off, revealing a sculpted torso. His pecs were huge and hard, leading down to a trim waist. Without thinking or planning, Alexis' hands touched him, flat on the center of his chest. She slowly moved them away from each other, sliding across his hard muscles.

He sucked in his breath as her fingers delighted in the exploration. She smiled when she discovered that he did have hair on his chest, just as she had hoped. She traced the trail of hair from the top of his chest to where it dipped into his sweats.

“I’m feeling a little underdressed here,” Dean said.

“Why is that?”

“You have more clothes on than I do.”

“I guess we’ll have to do something about that.”

Alexis had no idea what came over her. No man had seen her without a shirt since she was a toddler, and probably not even then. Dean pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it somewhere.

“Perfect,” he said.

“Thank you for that assessment.” Alexis grinned at him, not sure what else to say.

He put his hands at the top of her shoulders, and slowly moved down her chest, over her large, rounded globes, rubbing her nipples, and down her flat stomach.

“Does someone hit the gym?” he asked.

“Someone does when she has the chance,” Alexis replied.

His fingertips ran along her sides in feathery light touches that tickled her, but not in a way that made her laugh. It was a sensation that floated through her, heating her even more. He wrapped his hands around the base of her breasts, squeezing them, not tight enough to cause pain, but enough to provide pleasure.

He rubbed his thumbs over her hard nipples, sending electrical currents jumping through her body, entangling every nerve. Lowering his head, he sucked one nipple into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue. He lightly bit it and then ran his tongue around it in a circle.

Liquid heat rushed between Alexis’ legs. She had to fight not to touch herself, making herself explode instantly.

Dean found her other nipple and suckled it. He flicked his tongue against the hard rosebud. Static electricity snapped around her and inside of her. She moaned loudly, the sensations flooding her body.

He reached down and his fingers found her wetness. Alexis spread her legs, letting him slip a finger inside of her. He gently moved his finger in and out of her. A second finger joined the first. He spread them apart, stretching her walls, as he continued pleasuring her.

Her mouth parted and she panted as Dean's mouth tantalized her nipples. Her fingers dug into his back and she moaned.

His thumb touched her clit and rubbed against it. She sucked in a huge breath and squeaked as fire exploded inside of her. He lightly pinched it between his thumb and forefinger and rubbed it.

"Oh my heavens," she breathed, her body shaking.

She tried to suppress the feelings that flooded her body. Alexis wanted so much for the touching to continue, but she couldn't stop the torrent of fire that licked at her from the inside. Her heart raced and her body began to quiver. She panted hard as the heat became so strong, it threatened to overwhelm her.

"Dean," she screamed as a river of hot creamy liquid poured out of her over his fingers.

He smiled into her eyes once she could breathe again.

"Like that, did you?"

"It was alright," she said.

Then, the words slipped out of her mouth before she could stop them.

"I want something more."

"What do you want?"

She could hear the want in his husky voice.

Shyly, she touched his hard package that had been pressing against her earlier.

"I want this."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

“Yes. I am so sure.”

Dean stood up and pushed his sweats to the floor. Alexis felt her eyes get so big that they almost popped out of her head. The shaft that jutted out from Dean’s body was huge and thick. She wasn’t so sure that it was going to fit inside of her, but she knew that she wanted to try.

She pushed her panties off and threw them on the floor. Dean laid down on top of her and kissed her, passionately, his lips pressed hard against hers, possessively. His tongue made love to her mouth as the large round mushroom head of his cock pressed against her hot, wet, opening.

Slowly, he pushed it inside. Alexis could feel her pussy expanding, adjusting to his thickness.

Heaving a huge breath, she hissed, “Yes.”

The tip of his cock found a small barrier. He hesitated for a millisecond and then pushed through it. A sharp pain hit Alexis temporarily, but it was quickly replaced by an all encompassing heat. Inch by inch, he gradually buried all nine inches deep inside of her, stretching her, as her wet, hot walls encased him.

Dean moaned and stopped for a minute, letting her adjust to him.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Oh, my lord, yes,” she moaned.

Alexis watched his face as he raised his hips, pulling back out of her until just the tip of his cock was left inside of her. He moved it back and forth, the ridge tantalizing the entrance of her wetness. Then, just as slowly as before, he embedded himself back deep inside of her.

Alexis looked at his gorgeous face as he made love to her. His eyes blazed as he felt her wrap around him. Their chests rubbed together, tantalizing her nipples, sending flames of electricity coursing through her body. She pictured what they would look like if she could see them in a mirror. His body on top of hers, his naked back and ass moving as he pistoned in and out of her.

Her body found the rhythm and began to move in time with his. Sweet music filled the air as her hips met his when he pushed back inside of her. Her throbbing clit hit him, causing even more electrical pulses to careen through her body.

Alexis' senses heightened. The crackling fire grew louder and the streaming beams from the moon were brighter. Dean's intoxicating smell permeated every cell in her body. The warm air circled around them, caressing their skin as their bodies moved together.

Dean groaned and moved faster. He pulled almost all the way out of her and then drove back into her.

"Oh, my lord, yes, Dean. Dean," she moaned.

Pumping hard and fast into her, Alexis felt the raging inferno flash inside of her, the burning heat threatening to completely devour her. Her heart was racing, and she panted hard as the white flames rippled through her.

"Please, Dean. Please," she begged.

"Tell me what you want," he ordered.

"You. I want you, hard and fast."

In reply, he pulled almost all the way out and then slammed back inside of her.

"Yes. More."

Alexis felt his thick shaft caressing her pussy walls as he continued to thrust inside of her, the tip of his cock going deep inside of her. She closed her eyes and flashes of light exploded as she pulsed around his cock. A volcano exploded, and a hot river of lava raged over him.

"Yes, Baby, cum for me," he said.

His cock throbbed and Alexis moaned loudly as she felt him shoot a hot load of his seed deep inside of her.

After a couple of minutes, their heartbeats returned to normal. Dean looked into her eyes and kissed her.

DEAN

Dean laid on the couch, holding Alexis close to him. His brain was buzzing. Never in a million years would he have thought that he would have sex with a woman whose family's life's mission was to annihilate all shifters in the world.

Yet, here they were. Her head on his chest, snuggling close to him. A contented sigh escaped from her lips, as she lightly ran her fingers up and down his arm.

He wasn't sure what to say. When he had bedded other women, they usually laid in silence for a few minutes and then he would say that he had an early morning and needed to go. He never made promises to call the next day unless he really intended to. Dean never lied to them.

That excuse wouldn't work here. He wasn't going to leave, and to be honest, he wasn't sure that he wanted to. This time was different, although he couldn't explain why.

Alexis broke the silence.

"It was much better than my fantasy," she told him with a grin.

Dean choked on a laugh. "What?"

"You heard me," she said, lightly poking him in the chest. "Actually, having sex with you in real life was better than it was in my fantasy."

"Wait. You fantasized about us having sex?"

“I did,” she admitted.

“Um, I really don’t know what to say about that,” Dean admitted.

She giggled. He wondered if she would have admitted such a thing in the light of day, although she did seem to be a “no holds barred” kind of person and never had a problem saying exactly what was on her mind.

“I was thinking. The bed is a lot bigger than the couch. There is enough room for the both of us.”

Dean hesitated. He didn’t want her to get the wrong idea. For him, it had just been sex and nothing more. Enjoyable sex, but just sex none the less. He didn’t have any kind of romantic ideas about her. He wasn’t sure that Alexis was emotionally mature enough to know the difference between just having sex and making love.

He looked down into her eyes, about to tell her that he thought that it was better if he stuck to the couch, but the pleading look in her deep blue orbs stopped him.

Pressing his lips together, he said, “Okay,” and hoped that he wouldn’t end up regretting the decision.

She stood up and seemed suddenly shy as she quickly gathered her night shirt and slid it back over her head. Alexis went to the bathroom to clean up and slipped her panties back on.

So much for a second round.

Dean grinned at the thought.

He had to admit that the bed was more comfortable than the couch, only because he was slightly too tall to be able to stretch out on the couch. It felt good to be able to extend his legs all the way out.

The adventurous and exciting day seemed to have taken a toll on Alexis, since she was asleep within a minute of climbing into bed with him. Dean, on the other hand, wasn’t so lucky. He stared at the ceiling, wondering if having sex with

Alexis was the second biggest mistake he ever made. The first, was kidnapping her.

Alexis had quite the reputation in Ivy Springs, which was why Dean was completely surprised that she had been a virgin. He figured that she would have had at least some experience. Instead, she seemed to be completely innocent.

Well, I guess that's what I get for assuming.

Dean just hoped that wouldn't make things even more complicated than they were already going to be. His last thought as he slipped into the blissful darkness was that he hoped things weren't going to be too awkward the next morning.

He woke up early and tried to be quiet as he got ready for the day. Alexis stumbled out of the bedroom, still in her night shirt, hair disheveled. She looked up at him and grinned.

"Good morning," she said. "I'll be right back."

He was stunned when she didn't even bother putting on pants. She simply pulled on the snow boots and her coat and went outside.

"Brrr," she said. "That is one hell of a way to wake up in the morning. But the cold works better than any coffee I've ever had."

Laughing, Dean agreed.

"I would make you breakfast this morning, but I like you too much to try to poison you," Alexis joked.

"Well, I can teach you how to make bacon and scrambled eggs if you want to learn."

"Sure," she said.

He got out the eggs and showed her how to crack them. Pieces of the shell got into the eggs after she cracked the first one and she giggled as she fished them out. The second egg was more successful.

"Put just a little bit of milk in them, and then use the whisk to mix everything together."

Alexis carefully followed his directions and only made a small mess when she mixed a little too vigorously at first.

“We’re going to set that aside for a minute. Let’s cook the bacon first.”

She watched and listened intently as he showed her how to put the bacon in the pan, turn the bacon, and how to know when it was done.

“You have to make sure the bacon does get done, because eating undercooked pork could give you dangerous hook worms.”

Wrinkling her nose, she said, “That sounds disgusting.”

“And deadly.”

The grease only got her once as she tried her hand at turning the bacon. Dean watched her, amazed that such a simple thing as cooking bacon could give a person so much joy. Of course, this was the first time she ever tried cooking and was doing a good job. That was a good reason to be happy.

She cooked the eggs with his supervision and did an equally good job. When he complimented her, she smiled widely and clapped her hands.

“You are a lot more capable of things than you give yourself credit for. I bet that there isn’t much you couldn’t do if you wanted to,” Dean said. “You are very intelligent.”

Alexis looked surprised at his comment. “Do you really think so?” she asked.

“Yes.”

With a choked laugh, she said, “My brothers are always calling me an air head and say that I couldn’t fight my way out of a wet paper bag.”

“Just because someone else gives you a label or makes assumptions about you doesn’t mean that they are true. It doesn’t define who you are. Only you can do that.”

“I guess I never thought about that.”

“You know, you are actually a very beautiful woman without all that makeup you always wore. Your natural beauty far exceeds anything you tried to achieve with face paint.”

Alexis blushed.

Changing the subject, Dean asked, “What are your plans today? Are you going outside?”

Shaking her head vigorously, she replied, “Nope. I’m only going outside to go to the outhouse. I learned my lesson yesterday.”

“I need to get going,” Dean said.

He got up and started to collect the dishes.

“I’ll wash the dishes,” Alexis said.

The shock must have been evident on his face, because she laughed and wiggled her fingers at him.

“I know, right. I’ve already given up on my nails.”

Dean arrived at the wolf shifter clan’s ceremonial cave ten minutes before the ceremony began that would make Micah the alpha of his clan. Shaking his head, he thought that it seemed like just yesterday that they were boys running around, climbing trees, swimming, and just being kids. Now, they both had the weight and responsibility of their world resting on their shoulders.

The ceremony was every bit solemn and eloquent as Dean’s was. His heart swelled with pride for his best friend as he made a vow to protect and lead the clan.

“Congratulations, Alpha,” Dean said, patting Micah on the back after the crowds thinned out. “Can I buy you and Lucy some lunch?”

“Absolutely,” Micah replied.

“Are you all prepared for the mating ceremony?” Dean asked Lucy.

Lucy and Micah were originally supposed to go through the mating ceremony a couple of weeks after the alpha

ceremony, but they didn't want to wait. It would happen in a few days instead.

"I am. Luckily, I didn't have to do a whole lot. A seamstress made my traditional gown for me, and the clan is decorating, catering, and hosting the entire thing, as is the custom. I pretty much just have to get dressed and show up."

"That makes things a lot easier for you. Most women spend months arranging for flowers, venue, dresses, catering, and all of that jazz," Dean said.

"I know. Micah doesn't have to get fitted for anything. I assume you have your tux all ready."

"I do. You guys didn't give me enough time to throw him an epic bachelor party, though."

Lucy put her hand over Micah's and grinned. "Trust me. He doesn't need one," she said.

Micah and Dean laughed.

"I'm just really glad for you guys. You deserve happiness, and I love you both."

All three raised their glasses of sweet iced tea and said, "Here, here."

"What about you? When are you going to go through the mating ceremony?" Lucy asked.

Dean held up his hand and said, "Stop. Don't even start. I have to listen to enough of that from my father."

"I understand that," Micah muttered.

After they ate a few bites, Lucy asked, "What are you going to do about Alexis?"

Heaving a huge sigh, Dean replied, "I don't know. But I will tell you that she's not the same woman as she used to be. I've discovered that she actually has a sense of humor and is intelligent. I actually enjoy having conversations with her."

Micah and Lucy looked at him skeptically.

“She even showed an interest in learning more about shifters and the shifter world,” Dean said. “Who knows, maybe a leopard can change her spots.”

Dean decided that they didn’t need to know how much she was learning about shifters and the fact that they had sex the previous night. They would give him all kinds of grief for that.

“Maybe,” Lucy said. “I guess people can change. Martin Luther King said, ‘People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don’t know each other; they don’t know each other because they have not communicated with each other.’ Maybe she can learn not to fear and hate shifters since she has gotten to personally know one.”

“Maybe so,” Dean said.

You have no idea just how personally she has gotten to know one, and she seemed to like it a lot.

During the drive back to the cabin, Dean wondered what he would do with Alexis. He couldn’t keep her there forever, although he thought that it was interesting that she hadn’t mentioned going home for a few days.

Maybe she had changed enough that he could send her back home and she could be a voice of reason to the other Faisons and help them understand that the war in Ivy Springs was completely stupid. He was positive, though, that they wouldn’t listen to her.

He was curious, though, about what would happen if she went back to Ivy Springs and how she would step back into her old life. Would she go back to being the snotty, entitled bitch that she had been, or would the new and improved Alexis stay?

Sighing heavily, he told himself that he still had time to figure things out. It wasn’t like he had to get her home by a certain time so she wouldn’t break her curfew. Then, he sharply reminded himself that they weren’t on a date. He had kidnapped her and taken her across state lines.

ALEXIS

Alexis looked up from her coloring book when she heard the cabin door open. She had been so engrossed in the serial killer podcast that she had lost track of time.

“Hi,” Dean said. “How was your day?”

“Relaxing,” Alexis said. “I washed dishes and managed to make a sandwich for lunch without breaking a nail.”

She laughed at her own joke.

“How was your day?”

“It was good. My friend, Micah, had his alpha ceremony today.”

“Did you record it for me?” she asked hopefully.

“No, I’m sorry. I didn’t even think about it. I’m sure that his fiancé did, though. I’ll ask her for a copy.”

“That would be awesome. Was it just like yours?”

“Very similar,” Dean replied. “Not exactly the same, but pretty close.”

Dean took some plastic containers out of a paper bag.

“I brought that Mexican food I promised you.”

“I’m glad that you skipped it. I don’t think I would have enjoyed being wolf chow.”

“Probably not.” Dean grinned.

They ate in silence for a few minutes and then Dean said, “You were smiling when I came in. You looked happy. Are you happy here?”

Alexis looked at him and said, with a hint of surprise in her voice at her answer, “I guess I was happy. Even though I’m not exactly here of my own free will, I won’t lie. Once I got over the shock, it’s been okay. Almost like a vacation from the hustle and bustle of trying to keep up with the Ivy Springs and Colorado elite. I don’t have to worry about keeping up appearances and trying to see and be seen.”

“That does have to be exhausting. Do you ever have time to just take a time out and be yourself?”

She coughed a humorless laugh. “Dean, I don’t even know who I am. If I have any down time, I watch documentaries or *Supernatural*. I never stop to think about my true self. I just roll with it.”

“Have you found you since you’ve been here and had nothing but time on your hands?”

Furrowing her brow, Alexis cocked her head.

“I have thought some about that. I honestly don’t know. How do I put a label on anything? I was a mean girl, but I would like to think that I’m not a mean girl now. However, I haven’t had the chance to be, either,” she said. “As for my life?” She shrugged her shoulders. “Constantly socializing, partying, shopping, and all of that just doesn’t sound as much fun anymore. Unfortunately, I have no idea what else I could do.”

“You’ll figure it out. I don’t think that you can be suddenly enlightened overnight. On top of that, there are a lot of grown folks who went through twelve years of university and they still have no idea what they are doing with their lives.”

“I envy you. You know.”

“I never had a choice. Being the alpha of my clan was planned out for me since birth.”

“What if you could choose?”

“I honestly don’t know. I’ve never thought about it.”

Alexis thought about the conversation as she finished up her Spanish rice. They were similar in some ways, because they were both raised to be a specific person. She was raised to be a spoiled diva and he was raised to be a leader. What would it have been like if she had been raised to be a leader?

“I’m washing the plates tonight,” she said, as she picked up their plastic containers and forks and chucked them in the trash.

“You did that very efficiently,” Dean said.

“Thank you.”

He took his usual spot in the recliner, and she stretched out on the couch. The heat rose in her cheeks when she thought about what had happened on the couch the night before.

“What is being a shifter like?”

“It’s the same as being a mundane human. We eat, drink, have sex, love, have feelings, go to work, engage in society, get involved in politics, and everything else that other folks do.”

“Are there a lot of differences?”

“A couple. The most obvious is that we can shift into our animal forms. I can become a bear and do everything that a regular grizzly does. Shifters tend to heal faster from wounds. They also are usually physically stronger than other humans. Other than that, we are pretty much the same. Mundane humans have the same instincts that shifters have, if they would bother listening to them.”

“Micah and Lucy are wolf shifters, right?”

“They are.”

“Do they have to stay inside during a full moon?”

“You are thinking of were creatures, like a werewolf or a werebear. People who are bitten by a werewolf, werebear, or other creature are infected with a virus that changes them. When they are in their human form, they are normal, and

usually don't remember what they do when they change into their were form," Dean said.

Alexis leaned forward, wanting to hear more.

"Shifters always think as humans regardless of what form they are in, and they have their same human characteristics, such as caring, morals, etc. When people shift into their were form, the animalistic characteristics take over and the human characteristics are lost. The humans have no control over what they do when they are in their were form."

"That sounds terrifying," she said. "I would hate to not know or be able to control what I'm doing."

"I think that it would be, as well," Dean said.

"And now you are going to tell me that were creatures truly do exist."

Dean grinned at her.

Alexis groaned. She suddenly felt like the naive people on *Supernatural* when they find out that there is a whole other world out there that exists.

"I feel like I've been missing out on so much," she said.

"To be honest, most mundane people have no idea that there are so many wonderful and frightening beings who share the same air as them."

"I'm not sure if I'm glad to be one of the lucky few or if I would rather keep my head buried in the sand."

Dean laughed. "My father always says that knowledge is power."

"Are there any were creatures out here?"

"I don't think so, but I don't know for sure. I've never seen any, but then I don't go into the woods at night."

I should be terrified right now, Alexis thought.

Instead, she was just curious. She wanted to know more.

A comfortable silence filled the room. The warm air wrapped around her like a familiar blanket. She really liked

Dean and enjoyed being with him. No one had ever treated her as nicely as he did.

“Do you want to go to Livingston tomorrow?” Dean asked.

Her jaw dropped and her eyes opened wide. She was certain that she hadn’t heard him correctly.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Dean grinned and repeated his question.

“I would be happy to take you shopping and take you out to eat.”

“You would?”

“Yeah.”

“Aren’t you afraid that I will tell people about what happened or try to go back home?” she asked.

A serious look settled on Dean’s face.

“What I did was wrong, and I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have kidnapped you. I panicked and acted without thinking, which isn’t my usual MO. If you decide to tell people what happened, then I will face the consequences.”

Alexis pictured Dean behind bars and the image made her sick to her stomach.

“If you just want to go home, I will buy you a first-class ticket.”

That idea made her gut twist. She was suddenly disgusted at the life she had in Ivy Springs and with the person she had been.

“I don’t want to go back to Ivy Springs,” she said.

It was Dean’s turn to be shocked. “What? Why?”

“For the first time in my life, I’m happy. I never knew that I wasn’t happy before, but I can’t go back and be the Alexis I was, and I doubt if people in Ivy Springs would ever trust me or accept the new me. There would be pressure crushing me from all sides.”

“Fair enough,” Dean said. “If you want to, you can live with me in my house or I can rent you a house or apartment.”

A sudden shyness consumed her. “I would like to stay with you.”

She watched Dean for his reaction. A slight smile curved on his lips and he nodded.

Alexis packed her things that night. She laughed when she saw the amount of clothes and books that she had managed to acquire in the short time that she had been at the cabin.

“It doesn’t even come close to comparing to the amount of clothes and other crap I have in Ivy Springs,” Alexis said to herself, picturing the huge closets full of clothes, shoes, and other accessories she had collected. Some of them hadn’t even been worn yet.

Dean was making up the couch when she finished.

“Why don’t you sleep in the bed? It is plenty big enough for the two of us,” she suggested before she even thought about what she was saying.

He studied her face for a minute as though trying to read her thoughts. If he could, he would just hear that it felt good to be near him.

“Okay,” he said simply.

Alexis felt a little lost. She didn’t know whether she should wear her nightshirt again, or just sleep naked. It wasn’t like he hadn’t seen her. She certainly wouldn’t object to them having sex again, although she was a little sore.

I guess that’s what happens when you have sex with someone who’s hung like an elephant.

She giggled.

“What’s so funny?” Dean asked.

Alexis was sure that she blushed all the way from her toes to the top of her head.

“Nothing.” She giggled again.

He simply grinned and shook her head.

In the end, Alexis decided on the nightshirt and panties. It's not like she couldn't take them off if they did happen to have sex again.

Unfortunately, Dean was a perfect gentleman. He wore a t-shirt and sweats to bed. She wasn't completely disappointed, though, when he pulled her close to him before she went to sleep.

Alexis looked around the cabin the next morning as Dean cooked the last of the bacon and made some pancakes.

I'm really going to miss this place, even feeding the stove and going to the outhouse.

She was shocked by her own thoughts.

"Do you think that we could come back up here sometime?" she asked.

Dean looked at her in surprise.

"Of course, if you want to," he said. "I would think that you would want to get away from here and stay away."

Grinning, she said, "I think it's growing on me, like a fungus."

He laughed. "This place is absolutely gorgeous in the summertime. If you haven't gone back home, we can come up then."

"I can't imagine not being here," she said. "Ivy Springs seems so far away, like on a different realm or planet. It doesn't seem real. I can't imagine going back to that life."

DEAN

Dean laid awake for a while, holding Alexis close to him. He wondered what she would think if he told her that she had a cute snore. The old Alexis would have ordered the executioner to behead him. The new and improved Alexis would probably laugh and take it as a compliment.

He thought about his offer to take Alexis to Livingston. It had been an impromptu offer. He hadn't really thought it out.

I have to stop doing that, Dean thought. It's going to get me in trouble.

Although it had been a spur of the moment suggestion, he was glad that he made it. He couldn't keep Alexis locked up in the cabin forever. It wasn't fair. If he was locked up inside four walls with not much to do and no one to talk to, it would drive him crazy. It would drive anyone crazy. This was especially true, considering the social butterfly that Alexis had been in Ivy Springs, where she socialized from the time her feet hit the floor to the time she went to bed.

Shock had bounced through him when she told him that she wanted to stay in Montana. He was pleased, though. Dean was starting to really like Alexis. She was fun to talk to. The sex had been pretty damn good, too.

A nagging fear lingered in the back of his mind. She could very well be fooling him and scream for help the second that he brought her into town. Dean didn't think that she would, but the fear still persisted.

He silently wondered what his family's reaction was going to be when they realized that he suddenly had a female guest staying at his house. Running his fingers through his hair, he had no idea what to tell them.

That's a tomorrow problem. Tonight, I need to get some sleep.

Morpheus eluded him, and Dean had to force the count backward from a hundred in order to sleep. Finally, though, his mind settled down and allowed him to fall blissfully asleep.

Dean elected to make pancakes and bacon for breakfast. Alexis shocked him again when she asked if they could come back and visit the cabin sometime. She really liked it. He was sure that she would want to get away and stay away from the site of her captivity.

Alexis sat up straight and looked avidly out the window as they drove toward town.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful in my life," she gushed. "It is absolutely breathtaking."

"The mountain and scenery in your area is gorgeous as well," Dean replied.

"You know, I never took the time to look at it. I was always so busy with materialistic pursuits, so to speak."

"Don't knock it. There is something to be said for some materialism, like a hot water heater, shower, real electricity, and a stove."

"Not to mention an indoor toilet, where I don't have to worry about getting splinters in my butt or the rats eating toilet paper."

"There is definitely something to be said for that."

"I had a bidet."

"Did you? I would think that would feel a little weird."

"Nah, you get used to it," she said.

"Well, here you will have to use good old-fashioned Charmin, although I suppose I could bring in the water hose if

you want.”

“That is a really sweet offer, but I think that I’m going to have to pass on that kind offer for now,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, that really doesn’t seem to be too exciting,” she said, wrinkling her nose.

“Fine. I was just trying to be accommodating,” Dean teased.

“I’m sure that you were, and I appreciate your overwhelming kindness.”

Alexis was amazed at his house.

“This is incredible,” she said. “It is huge.”

Touring the house, she gushed over the huge kitchen and the stainless-steel appliances. She ran her hand over the granite island top. The big screen television in the living room fascinated her.

Flopping down on the overstuffed couch and stretching out her arms, she said, “I could get used to this.”

He showed her to her bedroom, which had its own bathroom.

“This will be a first for me,” she said. “I’ve lived my entire life at the resort. I have a large suite, but I’ve never lived in a real house. This is awesome.”

Grinning, Dean said, “I’m glad that you like it.”

“One thing I have missed is a nice hot shower. Can I take one before we do anything else you might have planned?”

“Sure,” Dean said, showing her where the towels and wash cloths were.

He sat in his favorite recliner and called Micah.

“Hey, I was wondering if you and Lucy were available for lunch. I brought Alexis to Livingston with me, and I thought you might like to meet the new and improved she.”

“You brought her here? Is that smart?”

“I think so,” Dean replied. “I hope so. She said that she was happy here and didn’t want to go back home.”

“You’re playing a dangerous game, man,” Micah warned.

“I know, but I couldn’t keep her in the cabin forever. It wasn’t fair, and it’s been proven that being cut off from other people like that can have serious repercussions on a person’s mental health.”

“That is true, but if she starts talking, you’re facing some serious prison time.”

“I am aware,” Dean said. “So, are you guys free for lunch or what?”

“Sure, we’ll meet you.”

Dean told him the time and place and hung up, just as Alexis came out of the bathroom.

A long braid hung down her back, and she was adorable in a button down flannel shirt and a pair of jeans.

“All you need is a cowgirl hat and some boots,” Dean said.

“I can’t wear boots that don’t have a zipper. My arches are too high.”

“I bet we could find something that you could wear.”

She grinned.

The small town of Livingston only had almost eight thousand residents. It had to be a tiny village compared to Ivy Springs, Colorado Springs, and Denver.

He took her downtown to some of the mom and pop shops. She dove into one store that specialized in western wear. The owner sauntered over when she saw Alexis ogling the hats.

“Do you see one that you like?” she asked.

Pointing to a small white hat, Alexis replied, “I like that one.”

“What size hat do you wear?”

Alexis furrowed her brow and said, “I don’t know. I’ve never bought a hat before.”

Celia, the owner, brought out a tape measure and wrapped it around Alexis' head. Then, she found a hat that fit Alexis.

Popping the hat on her head, Alexis looked at Dean and smiled. "How do I look?"

"You look plum adorable."

"I have to agree with Dean. You do look absolutely adorable," Celia said.

Dean started to pull out his wallet, but Alexis beat him to it. She handed Celia her credit card and playfully stuck her tongue out at Dean.

"That will be a hundred and forty-seven dollars," Celia said.

"Thank you," Alexis said when Celia handed her the receipt.

"Do you want to wear it or do you want me to put it in a box?"

"I would like to wear it, thanks," Alexis replied.

Dean watched in silent astonishment. The old Alexis would have never been so polite and respectful.

"You tell your folks I said 'hello,' you hear?"

"I sure will."

He could feel Celia's eyes boring into them as he and Alexis walked out the door. Dean would have bet a hundred dollars that, within the hour, every single person in Livingston was going to know that he came into the shop with a strange woman. Celia was a good woman, but they all loved to gossip.

A jewelry store was right next door and Alexis zoomed in on it. The owner, who was a Native American, made a lot of the silver and gold pieces himself. Other members of his nation also created beautiful pieces that included turquoise, coral, and other stones.

"Oh my heavens, these are so gorgeous," Alexis gushed.

"Thank you, ma'am."

“Please call me Alexis. I think you and I are going to be friends,” she said, with a huge smile.

“Alexis it is. My name is Running Bear.”

She picked out a dainty cuff bracelet that had intricate designs carved into it. A silver and turquoise necklace caught her eye, as did the matching earrings.

“I love these,” she said.

Running Bear rung them up and then said, “Let me grab some boxes for those.”

“Is he a shifter, too?” she asked.

“Not to my knowledge. But he is a great silversmith.”

“I can see that.”

Alexis put on her new prizes, as excited as a little kid at Christmas time.

“I’ll be back soon, Running Bear,” Alexis promised.

The old man grinned at her and waved.

“Take care, Dean.”

“You, too, sir.”

“It’s time for lunch. I hope you don’t mind. I invited Micah and Lucy to eat with us.”

“They hate me,” she said, suddenly nervous.

“They don’t hate you. They don’t know you. They’ll love the you that you are now.”

“That almost sounded confusing.” She giggled.

“I know.”

The deli was packed, so he was glad that Micah and Lucy had saved a table for them. Both of them did a double take when they saw Alexis.

“Wow. I didn’t recognize you,” Lucy blurted out. “You are absolutely beautiful.”

With flaming red cheeks, Alexis said, “Thank you.”

“I see that you’ve been shopping,” Micah noted, eyeing the jewelry and the hat.

“I have. I love those little shops here, especially the jewelry store. I wish I had that kind of talent.”

“You’ve never tried. You might have a talent for making jewelry, especially if you took some classes,” Dean said.

“You’re right. I hadn’t thought about that. Maybe I could be Running Bear’s apprentice.” She grinned, cheekily.

The four of them chatted for a while, and Lucy said, “I hope you don’t think that I’m being rude, but are you sure that you are Alexis Faison? The Alexis Faison from Ivy Springs?”

With a short laugh, Alexis said, “I am. I’m not necessarily proud of the original that you met. I’m the new and improved version.”

“Dean said that you changed, but I didn’t believe him,” Micah said. “I said that no one could change that much that fast, but you have proved me wrong.”

Alexis smiled widely.

Micah checked his watch and said, “I’ve got to be going. I have a meeting to attend that I wasn’t able to get out of. Alexis, it was good to hang out with you.”

“Thanks, you, too.”

Lucy handed Alexis a piece of paper. “This is my number. Call me and we’ll hang out. I sincerely mean that. I would like for us to be friends, especially if you are serious about staying in Montana.”

“I will.”

“I told you so,” Dean said, once they were back in his truck. Micah and Lucy think that you’re great.”

Alexis merely smiled and asked, “Where are we going?”

“We are going to the electronics store. I’m going to buy you a new phone.”

“I can buy my own phone,” she insisted. “I could buy every phone in the store and not notice a dent in my bank account.”

“I am the one who broke yours, though.”

“To my benefit,” she said, putting her hand on his arm.

It took a while for her to find a phone she liked and to have it activated.

“Don’t you want your old number back?”

“No. I’m sure that everyone has been blowing it up. This way, I can contact the people I want to and not worry about the others. I can be honest and say that they really aren’t my friends and honestly don’t care about me, as a person. They just care about the social status.”

“That’s got to hurt.”

“I never thought about it before now.”

He took her to the craft store and she looked at him curiously.

“You like coloring. I thought maybe you might like to get some art supplies and try your hand at drawing or painting.”

Her eyes lit up. “Oooh, I never thought of that.”

Alexis’ childlike pleasure at gathering art supplies made Dean smile.

That evening, as they settled in at the house, Dean ordered a pizza. They hung around together and watched some movies.

“I need to get some sleep,” Dean said. “You’re welcome to stay up and watch television, either here or in your room.”

“I’ll head to bed, too. Goodnight.”

She went to the guest room, and Dean had to admit that he was a little disappointed that she hadn’t asked if she could sleep with him. He liked cuddling with her at night.

It’s way too soon to be thinking like that, he admonished himself.

However, he couldn't help the feeling of pleasure when she knocked on his door.

“Dean?”

ALEXIS

Alexis laid in the large bed, her eyes darting around the room. It had been a busy day, and she was tired, but she couldn't fall asleep. It had been a busy day, but a lot of fun. She had enjoyed hanging out with Dean, Micah, and Lucy. Smiling, she thought about how shocked Micah and Lucy had been about her change.

It wasn't the fun memories of shopping, getting to see downtown Livingston, or even the fun of lunch with Micah and Lucy that was keeping her awake. Although she and Dean had only been sharing a bed for a couple of days, it felt empty without him lying next to her.

Did she dare? Could she really get up the nerve to knock on his bedroom door and ask to sleep with him?

Why not? I asked him to sleep with me at the cabin. It doesn't really make a difference now, does it?

Gathering up the courage and preparing herself for a solid no, she softly walked to his room and knocked. Her breath was knocked out of her when he opened the door completely naked.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes. I just... Well, the bed... I was wondering..." She couldn't quite seem to get the words out.

Dean smiled and opened the door wider, and made a flourish with his hands, gesturing for her to come in.

He put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her, then walked over to his bed and got in.

She thought about it for a brief second and decided that if he was going to sleep naked then so was she. Quickly, she pulled her shirt off over her head, dropped her panties on the floor, and dove into the bed, scooting up next to him.

His lips found hers. They were soft at first and then became more insistent. He pressed his tongue against her mouth and she opened for him. A hand was on the back of her head and the other on her back. She rubbed his arm as his tongue explored her mouth.

Cinders started to spark and flames grew. His hand caressed her back from between her shoulders all the way down to her butt and back up again. Alexis imagined a trail of fire popping up everywhere that he touched.

He kissed her cheek and then nibbled on her ear. She sucked in a breath as her heart beat faster and her stomach fluttered. His lips grazed her neck and she felt bolts of electricity tingling. Hot wetness flooded between her legs.

Dean's hard cock pressed against her stomach, letting her know that he needed her as much as she ached for him. Hesitantly, she reached down between them and wrapped her hand around his thick shaft.

"Yes, Baby. Touch me," he whispered in her ear.

She moved her hand slowly from the base of his large cock to the tip and back down. She heard Dean draw in a deep breath as she stroked him. His hand slipped between her legs. Two fingers pushed inside of her and spread apart as he tantalized her. His thumb found her clit.

Small fires burst into raging flames as he continued to pleasure her. The feeling was intense and Alexis wanted it to continue, but she couldn't control herself. Her hand tightened on Dean and she exploded on his hand.

"That's it, Baby. Cum on me."

Her body trembled, but all too soon, she was spent and her heart returned back to normal.

Dean rolled onto his back and said, "Straddle me."

Her eyes wide, she obeyed him, putting the large mushroom tip of his cock against her wet sensitive pussy.

"Impale yourself on me," he ordered.

Slowly, Alexis pushed down on him, relishing in the feeling of him stretching her, rubbing her silken walls. She moaned loudly when he was buried deep inside of her.

"How does that feel?" he asked.

"So good," she whispered.

He put his hands on her back and pulled her close to him, pressing his lips against hers. The feeling of her breasts pressed against his chest sent a new wave of heat rushing through her.

She lifted her hips slowly, until just the tip of his cock was embedded inside of her. Then, just as slowly, she lowered herself until he was completely sheathed inside of her.

"Oh, yes," he said.

Their bodies began to move in a rhythm as she stroked his huge cock with her silken walls, massaging him, caressing him.

Her heart raced and she panted as she felt the searing infernos building inside of her.

"You feel so good," he moaned.

They moved faster. She lifted her hips so he was just inside of her and then thrust hard back down on him, burying him hard and deep inside of her.

"Dean," she moaned, as she continued to pleasure herself with him.

His arms were wrapped tightly around her as their hips danced together. Thunder boomed around them and an exquisitely intense feeling filled her. A scream escaped from her lips as their hips slammed together. Wave after wave of heat roared over him.

“Yes,” he moaned loudly.

He began to throb and he shot a huge geyser of his seed deep into her. Alexis shook with the intensity of the torrid sensations.

After a moment, she collapsed on top of him. He wrapped his arms tightly around her.

“You are amazing,” Dean said.

She smiled and nuzzled up against him.

Feeling better than she ever had in her entire life, held close to Dean, she drifted off into a deep sleep.

As she showered the next morning, she thought about her relationship with Dean. The sex was incredible. It was beyond anything that she could ever imagine it would be. More than that, though, she loved sleeping with him and being in his arms. It had only been a short amount of time since she had really gotten to know him, but his presence comforted her and made her happy. The word “love” popped into her mind.

Don't even go there, Alexis. It's too soon to think that you're falling in love with the man. Look at what happened the last time you thought you were in love. You ended up with egg on your face. You made a huge fool out of yourself.

Vowing to firmly put the thought out of her mind, she sauntered into the kitchen. Dean was already dressed, his hair wet, from using the other shower.

What would it be like if we could shower together? He would look so hot with his body wet.

Shaking her head to dispel the thought and image, she grinned at Dean and asked, “How about breakfast? I think that I can remember what you taught me.”

“Sounds great. I'm here to help if you get stuck.”

Dean showed her where the pans, bowls, and utensils were. Excited, she pulled out the eggs and bacon. She did everything in the exact order that he had showed her at the cabin. Alexis declared it a success when she didn't break any of the shells into the bowl with the eggs.

After the first bite of eggs and bacon, Dean said, “This is very good. Nice job.”

Beaming, she replied, “Thank you,” and puffed out her chest a little.

“I’m proud of you. I knew you could do anything you wanted if you tried.”

“I’ll wash dishes,” she announced.

“Actually, you don’t have to,” Dean said, and showed her how to load the dishwasher, put in the soap, and turn it on.

“Wow. That’s awesome.”

She knew that she sounded like a child, being proud of herself for making a simple breakfast and being intrigued by the dishwasher, but the fact was this was her first time ever doing any of this.

Dean went to work and Alexis wasn’t sure what to do with herself. Her sweet tooth started screaming for a snack. She investigated his kitchen. Nothing. No chocolate bars, no ice cream, nothing. However, she did discover some chocolate chips in the cabinet.

She thought about ripping into them and enjoying the chocolate chips by themselves. Then, she noticed that there was a recipe on the back.

“I can read and follow directions,” she told herself. “Why not try it?”

Snooping through the cabinets she found cookie sheets, bowls, and the rest of the ingredients that she would need. It took her a minute to figure out how to turn on the oven, but she managed.

Carefully mixing the ingredients as the directions instructed, she put spoonfuls of cookie mix onto the sheet and put them in the oven. Eight minutes later, she pulled the sheet out. The golden brown cookies looked good.

When they cooled, she tried one. It was perfect. Alexis danced around the kitchen, proud of herself. She grabbed her phone and sent a text message to Dean.

Way to go. Proud of you.

Once again, Alexis knew that she was celebrating a victory for a task that an average ten-year-old could do, but this was the first time she had done anything like this. The best part was that she hadn't burned down the kitchen. She even remembered to turn off the oven.

As she snacked, Alexis wondered whether she should send a text message to her brothers, letting them know that she was okay and was having a good time. They probably didn't even notice that she was gone, nor did they care. It wasn't like they were close.

Alexis was still deciding when her phone rang.

"Hey, I got your number from Dean. My friend, Ginger, and I are going to go bowling. We were wondering if you would like to go," Lucy asked.

"I don't know how to bowl. I've never been before."

"No worries. We'll teach you."

Alexis thought about it for a second and then said, "Yes. That sounds like fun."

"We'll be there in ten minutes. Wear something comfortable."

Her heart raced and there was a huge smile on her face. Alexis realized that she was excited to be going bowling with Lucy and her friend. She was even more thrilled that Lucy thought to ask her to go.

The bowling alley wasn't big. It only had ten lanes. There was a small arcade and a couple of pool tables and an air hockey table. Alexis had to admit that she wasn't thrilled about wearing shoes that hundreds of other people had worn, but she figured that her socks would protect her from germs.

They helped her pick the right ball and showed her how to put her fingers in it. Then, they demonstrated how to roll the ball down the lane.

She threw gutter balls the first few times that she tried. Lucy showed her how to throw the ball without turning her

wrist so that the ball would go straighter. Concentrating very hard on her approach and how she threw the ball, she almost forgot to watch her ball. Elated, she noticed that it went down the alley straight and she made her first strike.

Clapping her hands and jumping up and down, she pointed and yelled, “Did you see that?”

Ginger and Lucy both clapped for her and said, “We did. Way to go.”

Lucy won the first two games and Ginger won the third, while Alexis always came in last, but she didn’t care. She couldn’t stop smiling.

It wasn’t just the bowling. The three women talked about their lives and men. Alexis noticed that they actually listened to her and heard what she said. Ginger and Lucy seemed to care what she thought. That, by itself, was a whole new experience for her.

They stopped for dinner. Alexis worried about Dean, but Lucy assured her that Dean and Micah were getting dinner.

Lucy dropped Alexis off.

Before she got out of the car, Alexis said, “Thank you. I had an awesome time. I’ve never had real friends before and you have no idea how much today meant to me.”

“We’ll get together again, soon,” Lucy promised. “We enjoyed having you with us.”

Alexis went into the house feeling as though Lucy meant what she said. Although it sounded funny, being kidnapped had been the best thing that had ever happened to her. It opened up a whole new, wonderful, world.

It occurred to her that Lucy was a shifter. Alexis’ lover and new friend were both shifters, a group of people she would have been glad to slaughter in the past.

DEAN

Dean checked his watch again. He still had several more hours before he could justify calling it a day. Rubbing his head, he leaned back in his chair. The meeting had gone as well as he had thought it would, but he really didn't care.

His father and the elders had pushed back when he told them that the meetings were going to be kept to an hour and every agenda item had to be approved beforehand. There would be no side bar conversations or last minute issues added to the agenda unless it was an absolute emergency.

They also didn't like the fact that he had hired a secretary to go through his emails and deal with all but the most pressing and important matters. She would also go through the agendas prior to the meetings to make sure that there wasn't anything on the agenda that could be handled by email or a phone call.

Shaking his head, he recalled one of the elders saying, "You can't do this," when Dean appointed a judge who would take care of the majority of the issues that popped up, including any petty crimes or disputes. Dean would only deal with the most severe cases.

"It's time that the alpha operates more efficiently," Dean said. "My time is better used serving the needs of the clan than it is taking care of minor issues that can be delegated. I don't intend to micromanage the clan or the lives of the individual members."

“We’ve always done things this way,” his father had argued.

“It’s time to make some changes,” Dean said. “You sometimes worked fifteen hour days and still couldn’t keep up with everything. You were always tired, and, no offense, rather grouchy. I don’t want to be perpetually exhausted and cranky, because that would make me less effective and more prone to making mistakes.”

David clamped his lips shut tightly.

“Amy, who I hired to be my secretary, or personal assistant, if you will, is going to do a great job. She is detail oriented and quite frankly, she was the smartest girl in school. She has her stuff together. Her resume and references are impeccable. James is going to be a great judge. He is patient and listens very closely. He is objective and fair. He was the guy who broke up all the fights and helped settle disputes when we were younger, and his resume proves that he still has those traits. I’ve made my decision and its final.”

There was a lot of grumbling and muttering under their breath, but Dean didn’t care. He was determined to be a good leader for his clan and that meant making necessary, if unpopular, changes. He and Micah had talked about the issue at length, and they both agreed that change was necessary.

Ian, Dean’s lieutenant, joined Dean for lunch.

“You made quite a stir in there this morning,” Ian remarked.

“I know, but it had to be done,” Dean replied. “I will die to protect my clan, but I’m not going to kill myself over excessive paperwork and overlong, fruitless, pointless meetings.”

“I think the changes are great and will be beneficial for everyone,” Ian said. “Your father and the elders will adjust to it over time.”

“I sincerely hope so, because these aren’t the only changes we’re going to make. Did you make the order for the computers?”

“I did. I researched what computers and apps would be most beneficial, which was what we went over yesterday. I put in the order, and everything should be ready to go by the end of next week.”

“Terrific. I’m glad that you went to MIT and know how to handle all of this stuff.”

“I’m not sure that I can see Elder Fredrick and Elder Cyrus banging away on the keyboards.” Ian grinned.

“They will figure it out.”

“You didn’t tell them that you were hiring Della as an accountant to manage the budget and keep track of supplies and all that.”

Dean laughed and said, “I didn’t want to give them a heart attack or cause any strokes today. She had to give a month’s notice at the CPA firm she works at, so they have time to get over today’s announcement before I make another.”

“Good idea,” Ian said.

He took a sip of his sweet iced tea and then asked, “Who is your house guest?”

“You know about her, huh?”

“This is Livingston. If you sneeze in the middle of the night in your own bathroom, the next morning there will be at least six pots of chicken noodle soup on your front porch. Word gets around fast.”

“You’re right about that. There are no secrets here. Alexis is a woman I met in Ivy Springs. She’s just visiting for a while.”

“Hmm,” was all Ian said.

Dean had no answers that he intended to share, so he simply left it at that.

Mounds of work kept him busy the rest of the afternoon. Every one of the elders stopped by his office to talk about the changes. Dean was positive that the day was never going to end.

“At least I’m not going to be the only unpopular alpha, at least for a while,” Dean told himself as he finally was able to pack up for the day.

Micah intended to make the same kinds of changes for his wolf shifter clan.

Alexis was waiting for him when he got home. Dean realized that he was glad to see her and had been looking forward to coming home to her. He didn’t want to think about what that meant.

“I have something to show you,” she said, holding up her sketch book.

She had drawn a tree that graced his backyard and was excited to show him.

“This is awesome,” he said. “Especially for your first time. Just think what kind of masterpieces you are going to create once you’ve had some practice.”

A huge smile crossed her face, she blushed slightly, and said, “Thank you.”

“Let me get dressed and we’ll go out for some Japanese food,” he said. “I have a hankering for some teriyaki and California rolls.”

The food was delicious. Alexis had watched *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* and they talked about whether the ancient gods that everyone believed in were real. They discussed the theology of several different cultures, and once again, Dean was impressed with her knowledge and her ability to eloquently articulate her thoughts.

They were just about ready to go when two people came to their table and pulled up a couple of chairs.

“Raf. Xavier. What in the world are you doing here?”

Raf looked her up and down, wrinkled his nose, furrowed his brow, and asked, “What in the hell happened to you?”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“This. Your clothes are shabby, and your face and hair are a wreck,” Raf said.

Dean’s blood boiled and he opened his mouth to say something, but Alexis held up her hand.

“My clothes are just fine. I like them and they are comfortable. I like the way I look without all the paint on my face, and I also like the way my hair looks. I feel good and I look good.”

Raf slammed his fist down on the table and growled, “Enough of this play acting. You have to come back to Ivy Springs. People are talking.”

Alexis laughed and a shadow passed over Raf’s face. “I really don’t care. Let them talk. None of them really cared about me and no one there knows the real me.”

“You have disgraced the family name by running off with the likes of him,” he said, gesturing at Dean. “Plus, some people are convinced you were killed by shifters.”

“You’ve seen me. You can go back and tell everyone that I’m alive, well, and happy. As for damaging the family’s reputation because I left with a man from a different social class, to be honest, I really don’t care.”

“You were happy at home,” Raf insisted.

“I really wasn’t. I thought I was, but in reality, I was just existing. I’m truly happy here. Thank you for worrying about me, but I’m good. Are you guys staying for dinner?” she asked, trying to sound chipper.

Raf growled at her and said, “Quit being an idiot. Get your things and let’s go.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Alexis said quietly.

Standing up quickly, Raf knocked his chair back, making a huge crashing sound. Everyone in the restaurant stared.

Pointing a finger at Dean, Raf yelled, “This is all your fault, you piece of shit.”

Dean stood up, towering over Raf. His hands balled into fists, his knuckles turned white.

He gritted his teeth and said, “You need to keep your voice down. You are embarrassing your sister.”

He waited for Raf to take a swing at him, but, much to Dean’s disappointment, he didn’t.

Raf knocked a glass off the table and said, “Xavier, let’s get out of here.”

Xavier touched Alexis on the shoulder, briefly, and then followed Raf.

Dean threw enough money on the table to cover dinner plus an extra hundred for the scene, and he and Alexis left. He was still seething when they got into his truck. Dean had half hoped that Raf was waiting in the parking lot for them, because he felt an uncontrollable need to pulverize the arrogant bastard.

“Thank you for not punching him in the restaurant,” Alexis said, touching his arm.

“Trust me, it took a lot of willpower,” Dean said.

“I know. You just proved, though, that shifters aren’t bad. If they were, you would have eaten him on the spot.”

“I just ate and I’m not a cannibal,” Dean said, growling.

Alexis laughed, knowing that Dean was trying to relieve the situation.

They drove home.

“I’m proud of you,” Dean said, once he was able to calm down. “It took a lot of guts to stand up for yourself like that. On top of that, you stayed calm while he was being rude to you.”

She grinned and said, “I guess I am changing a lot, aren’t I?”

“You are. I’m very proud of you,” Dean said.

“That means a lot to me.”

They sat on the couch together and Alexis reached for his hand. He held hers. A soothing warmth spread through his body.

“It was very embarrassing,” Alexis said. “Would you believe that this is the first time I’ve really felt embarrassed in spite of my previous bad behavior?”

“You’re a different person now,” Dean said.

“I’m sorry that you were embarrassed.”

“No worries. It wasn’t the first time and probably won’t be the last,” Dean said. “I’m just glad that you are okay.”

“I’m good. You know, I don’t think that Raf came because he was worried about me or that he cares about me. He only came because he thinks I’m besmirching the family name.”

“Xavier seemed to care.”

“Maybe,” Alexis said. “One thing is for sure. I’m not going back there.”

Dean was happy to hear that. A part of him knew that he didn’t want her to leave.

After a few more minutes of talking, Dean said, “I need a shower.”

He had just finished washing his hair when he heard the shower door open and Alexis slipped into the shower with him. She grabbed the soap and lathered him up.

“I’ve pictured this,” she admitted. “You look so much sexier in real life.”

He put both hands on her face and kissed her. They hurried up, finished their shower, dried off, and tumbled into bed. Sex was raw and fierce, and Alexis followed his lead.

Satiated, his energy spent, Dean held Alexis close to him. Her head was on his chest. She fit his body perfectly. Something stirred inside of Dean and he realized that he did care a lot about Alexis. He wasn’t going to say that he loved her, but he did have feelings for her. Dean just couldn’t put a name to those feelings.

ALEXIS

Her heart beat so hard and fast that Alexis was afraid that it was going to jump out of her chest. With her lungs burning and her legs screaming in pain, she ran for her life. Alexis looked around her for any sign that the cabin was near. Darkness was falling and she could feel the hot breath of the wolves.

“Dean, help,” she screamed.

Her eyes opened wide in terror and she looked around her, lost.

Where am I? she screamed inside of her mind.

Her breathing slowly returned to normal and her heart stopped thundering in her ears.

Safe. I'm safe. I'm at Dean's house. It was just a nightmare.

She got out of bed and grabbed a robe, before padding into the kitchen for a drink of water. The full moon and dancing stars beckoned her through the sliding glass door in the living room. Wrapping the robe even more tightly around her, a chill ran through her body. Something, almost magnetic, pulled her from the outside. Knowing that it was freezing cold was the only thing that kept her from answering the pull.

The nightmare played in her thoughts. She could almost hear the snow crunching beneath her feet, the trees mimicking her as she ran. Alexis was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't hear Dean come up behind her.

She screamed when he put his hands on her shoulders. Whirling around, her eyes wide, she shook with fear. It took her a full second to realize that it was Dean.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, concern etched on his face.

Willing her heart to calm down, she thought, *If this keeps up, I’m going to have a heart attack.*

“I had a bad dream,” she confessed. “I dreamed that I was lost in the forest and the wolves were chasing me and were gaining on me. I could actually feel their hot breath on me.”

“Honey, I’m sorry,” he said, pulling her close to him and wrapping his arms around her. “I promise that as long as I’m around, nothing is going to happen to you. I would die before anyone or anything hurts you.”

She laid her head against his bare chest. Alexis could hear his heart beat and she started to relax.

“I know. I don’t even know why I dreamed about that now.”

“Maybe it was the stress with your brother that triggered it.”

“It could be,” Alexis said.

“I could have Micah and Lucy shift into their wolf form and you could pet them and interact with them. It might take away your fear of the animals. They really are gorgeous creatures.”

“All animals are. While it might be amusing to play with the wolves, I think that it would be a little weird.”

“Suit yourself,” Dean said, haughtily, pretending to be hurt that she rejected his suggestion.

She laughed, feeling a million times better.

“You good now?”

Nodding, she said, “Yes, thank you. You’re my hero.”

“I know. I just need to dig my cape out of the attic.”

Once they were settled back in bed, Alexis said, “I am a little worried about what Raf might do. Xavier isn’t so bad, but Raf can be a real ass and can be mean.”

Dean squeezed her and said, “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. I promise that I won’t let him force you to go back to Ivy Springs.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Pressed tightly against his body, Alexis’ eyes grew heavy, and soon she was in a deep sleep.

Dean was looking through her sketch book when she stumbled into the kitchen the next morning. She had tried drawing the tree again. She had also drawn a horse based on a picture that she saw.

“These are pretty good,” he said. “You might be a beginner, but these are a lot better than what I can do. I’m a man of many talents. Unfortunately, drawing isn’t one of them.”

“No one can be good at everything,” Alexis said.

“I’m not very good at singing, either.”

He started to sing a song. Alexis roared with laughter because he purposely sounded like a boy going through puberty.

“You have to stop,” she implored. “My sides are hurting.”

Grinning, Dean stopped singing and said, “I’m very good at memorizing lyrics. You should hear my rendition of my favorite ’80s hair band songs.”

“Maybe another time,” Alexis said. “Right now my stomach is singing the hungry song.”

“How about pancakes for breakfast?”

“Will you show me how to make them?”

“Of course.”

Following his directions, she managed to make the pancakes well.

“I think I’m starting to get a hang of this whole cooking thing,” she said.

“I think so. Baking, too. You noticed that there aren’t any cookies left.”

“I saw that, Piggy.”

“Oink, oink.”

Alexis was sad to see him leave for work. He kissed her briefly and told her to have a good day.

She plopped on the couch and turned on the television. She decided to stream *Indiana Jones and Raiders of the Lost Ark*. She liked the entire series of movies.

Her phone buzzed, indicating that she had a text.

Pack your bags. Better yet, leave your stuff there. We’re coming to get you. You’re coming home.

Alexis groaned. She should have known that Raf wasn’t going to give up that easily.

Raf answered on the first ring.

“Go back to Ivy Springs. I’m staying here. I like Montana, I like Livingston, and I love the people here.”

“They must have put something in the water, because you are brainwashed. You don’t belong here.”

“I do. I don’t belong in Ivy Springs any more. I’m not the same Alexis that I was there. I don’t even like that person. I wouldn’t want to be her anymore.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.”

“Actually, for the first time in my life, I’m being smart,” she said, calmly. “Go home, Raf.”

She hung up before he could say anything else.

Alexis hoped that would be the end of it, but she was pretty sure that it wouldn’t be. Once Raf got something in his head, he was like a bulldog.

“Who knows, maybe someday I will go back to Ivy Springs just to show everyone that I’ve changed. The first

person I'll visit is Clara and apologize to her."

She pushed away the thoughts, and turned the television back on and enjoyed a marathon of Indiana Jones while coloring.

She was excited when she heard Dean's truck pull into the garage. Meeting him at the door, she hugged him.

"I could get used to this," Dean remarked, with a smile.

He went into the kitchen and sat down. She followed.

"How was your day?"

"Busy. I managed to piss off a whole bunch of people, though. They'll get over it or they won't. I'm not sure that I care at this moment," he said.

"I guess that is what happens when you are a leader."

"I guess so. How about you?"

Alexis told him about Raf's phone call.

"I don't think that he's going to give up," Alexis said.

"Well, he'll have to rent a hotel, then, because he can't stay here."

Alexis giggled.

"How do you feel about making dinner?"

"I don't know how."

"I'll tell you."

Dean gave her instructions on how to make ranch cheesy chicken and fried potatoes.

"This is a lot of food," she said.

"We're having company."

Just then, the doorbell rang and before either of them could answer, Micah and Lucy came in.

Alexis was nervous when she put the dishes on the table.

He took the first bite and smiled.

“This is delicious. Very good.”

Micah and Lucy also complimented her on the food.

Alexis felt a sense of pride flow through her.

“Do you like cooking and baking?” Lucy asked.

“I’ve only cooked three things and baked one,” she said. “So far, though, I like it. It’s not something that I would want to do as a job, though. The cleanup part isn’t my favorite either, although I know it’s part of the process.”

“Unfortunately, there’s always going to be a not so fun part of any endeavor,” Dean said.

“How about some spades?” Lucy asked after everyone helped clean up.

“That sounds like fun,” Alexis replied. “That is a game that I’m good at.”

“I call dibs for Alexis as my partner,” Lucy yelled.

Everyone laughed. They played several games. Lucy and Alexis won one more game than the guys did.

Lucy stuck her tongue out at them and said, “We are the champions. We rock.”

“We played five games and you won three of them. That hardly makes you the champions. It just means that you got better cards than we did,” Micah protested, laughingly.

“Nope. We know how to bid our hands better. You went backward at least once each game because you guys sandbag too much,” Alexis said.

“We did just fine,” Dean retorted.

“Mm-hmm. You got schooled,” Lucy taunted.

“In your dreams. We’ll just have to have a rematch, soon,” Micah told her, tickling her.

“Stop that. You can’t tickle your way out of a humiliating defeat.”

Alexis laughed. She loved witnessing the loving, fun relationship that the two of them had.

“We had better be going,” Lucy said. “We both have busy days tomorrow. This has been a lot of fun. We’ll have to do it again, soon.”

“I would like that,” Alexis said.

Lucy spontaneously hugged Alexis, surprising her. Alexis hugged her back.

That was the first hug she had ever remembered getting, besides from Dean. It felt good to know that she was liked.

“I have a busy day tomorrow, too,” Dean said. “How about a shower and bed?”

Alexis took that as an invitation to join him. She loved his shower, because it had a head on both ends of the stall so no one was left standing in the cold. The hot water streamed over her body. It felt so delicious.

Dean and Alexis soaped up each other’s body. She loved running her hands over his chest. She knelt in front of him to wash his legs. It was obvious that Dean enjoyed her touching him, too.

He picked her up and said, “Put your legs around my waist.”

She obeyed, moaning as his hard shaft slid inside of her. He pushed her back against the wall. The cold tile was a shock against the hot water and heat from Dean’s body.

Closing her eyes, she relished the glorious sense that swept through her body. He lightly bit her neck as he pumped into her, moving faster and harder with each thrust. Her fingers dug into his back, scratching him lightly.

“Oh my heavens,” she whispered.

Her body quivered and her velvety walls pulsed around him.

“Dean, Dean,” she called out.

They both exploded at the same time, the heat from their bodies encompassing them. Slowly, Dean lowered her back to the shower floor. She held on to him as her knees buckled.

He grinned at her.

“That good, huh?”

“Better than good,” she said.

“We should probably wash ourselves this time, or we’ll never make it to bed,” Dean said.

Alexis stuck out her bottom lip and said, “Party pooper.”

Dean quickly fell asleep. Alexis lay awake, savoring the feeling of his arms around her. She thought about how happy Lucy and Micah were and envied them.

Is there any chance that maybe Dean and I can find love like that?

She reminded herself not to rush into any feelings. It was important to take her time and make sure that anything she felt was real this time.

Drifting off to sleep, Alexis wondered what the future held for her and Dean, and if there would be a future for the two of them.

DEAN

Dean was sorting through his emails. Amy was doing an incredible job at weeding out the ones that she could take care of and leaving only the most pressing ones for him. Instead of the usual hundred, there were only twenty-six that were screaming for his attention.

He was pleased that the one meeting they had today had gone well. It lasted just over an hour, and they strictly followed the items on the agenda. Amy attended and took notes, which she forwarded to him. Certain that the elders and his father would soon see the benefits of his new policies, he considered the morning a success.

Hitting the send button on another email, Dean stretched. He needed a bit of a brain break. Staring at the computer screen for too long made his eyes cross. A knock on the door startled him. He looked up to see his father standing in the doorway with a grim look on his face.

“Father. What brings you here?” Dean asked.

David sat down in the chair at Dean’s desk and clasped his hands in front of him.

“I understand that there was a little altercation between you and another man at the Japanese restaurant.”

Dean groaned loudly and ran his fingers through his hair. He had hoped that his father wouldn’t find out about that, although he figured that he probably would. There were no secrets in Livingston.

“How did you hear about that?”

“William and Alisa were there,” David said.

Dean sighed. Of course, there would be members of their bear shifter clan at the same restaurant at the same time that he and Alexis were there.

“Yes, there was a scene.”

“Who were the men?”

“They were the brothers of the woman I was with, Alexis.”

“Why were they there?” David demanded.

“They wanted to convince Alexis to go back to Ivy Springs with them. They didn’t think that I was good enough for Alexis to keep company with since they are billionaires and I’m not.”

David frowned and asked, “Who is this Alexis and where did she come from? Why is she here?”

“I met Alexis when I was in Ivy Springs. She came to Ivy Springs and is staying with me until she wants to get back to Ivy Springs.”

David stared at Dean for a few seconds and then asked, “Are you going to go through the mating ceremony with Alexis?”

“No. She is a friend who is staying with me for a while,” Dean growled, aggravated. “I already told you that I will go through the mating ceremony when I’m damn well good and ready, with a woman of my choosing, who I love.”

“You know that it is traditional for the alpha to take a mate after the ceremony.”

“It is a tradition and not a law. You need to back off. I’m tired of having this conversation with you.”

Pressing his lips together, David barked, “It is not appropriate for you to have a woman living in your house with you when you don’t intend to go through the mating ceremony with her.”

“Pull your head out of the eighteenth century, Father,” Dean replied, seething. “Please excuse me. I have work to do.”

David glared at Dean for a minute and then slammed the chair back and left the office. Dean sat for a minute, infuriated, his fists clenched. His father was going too far by constantly harping on him about taking a mate. It seemed like every other conversation was about him taking a mate.

Ian popped his head into Dean’s office.

“Lunch? I’m buying,” Ian said.

“In that case, I’m in.”

Once they were seated in a corner booth at a hole in the wall café that had the best food in the area, Ian leaned forward and said, “I heard your dad asking about the little altercation that happened.”

Sighing heavily, Dean said, “You should have just come into the office and that way I only had to explain it once.”

Ian shrugged his shoulders and said, “Yeah, but I also knew that your father would bring up your future mate and I didn’t want to be there for that. I know that topic irritates you.”

“Just a tad,” Dean admitted. “Alexis, who is staying with me for a while, is from Ivy Springs. She is from a prominent family there, who are billionaires. Her two brothers, Raf and Xavier, want her to go home, because she is tarnishing the family name by slumming with someone not in her social class. She doesn’t want to go back, at least right now. Raf got angry.”

“Aha,” Ian said. “You are such a low life person.”

“I know, right.”

“Are you going to kick Raf’s ass?”

“As much as I would like to, no, unless he throws the first punch. It could get very dangerous, especially if he was to somehow find out that I’m a shifter. The last several generations of their family have been waging a kind of war against shifters. The legend is that a long time ago, the regular

humans and shifters had a decent relationship, although the billionaire daddy was starting to hate shifters. He was enraged when his daughter fell in love with a dragon shifter. A war started, and the dragon king worked with witches to create a shifter world that has a portal that only shifters can see. A lot of the shifters went there. The billionaire's daughter went, too, because she was pregnant with the dragon shifter's kid."

"Which made him even angrier," Ian deduced.

"Correct. The family, the Faisons, have continued the war ever since. They go so far as to hire hunters to kill shifters or anyone that they suspect is a shifter."

"Ugly family. Do you think that they will come down here to cause trouble?" Ian asked.

"I don't think so. Alexis made it clear that she was happy here and didn't want to go back."

"Does she know that you are a shifter?"

Dean nodded.

"Aren't you afraid that she will tell her brothers and have hunters come to kill you?"

"No. I trust her."

"I hope that you're right," Ian said.

"Me, too."

Dean couldn't concentrate once he was back in his office. Images of Alexis pounded in his brain.

"What in the hell was I thinking?" Dean muttered. "The problem is that I wasn't thinking, and because of that, I might have caused the people here a whole lot of trouble."

If there was anything positive to come out of the situation was that Alexis had a new lease on life. She had been miserable, although she didn't know it at the time. She had told him multiple times that she didn't want to go back to the life she had.

Dean thought about her going back to Ivy Springs, and his heart lurched. He really cared about Alexis, and she added

something great to his life. He looked forward to seeing her after work every night. He enjoyed their conversations. Even sitting on the couch and not talking at all was fun. A tiny voice in the back of his mind suggested that he was falling in love with her.

Micah asked Dean if he wanted to meet up for a beer or two after work. Dean wanted to get home to Alexis, but decided that it wouldn't hurt to hang out with Micah for a bit. He texted Alexis to let her know that he would be an hour or so late getting home.

It sounds like we're already mated, Dean laughed after he sent the text.

As Dean suspected, Micah was curious about the event, too. Weary of the topic, Dean explained once again.

"I've only ever seen Raf acting all high and mighty, talking in his slow, condescending tone of voice. I would have thought that he would be too arrogant to display a show of anger in public and throw a temper tantrum in front of a lot of people."

"One would have thought," Dean said. "I am a little worried that he will take drastic measures to force Alexis to go back to Ivy Springs."

"What would you do if he did send hunters down here to take her back?"

"I promised Alexis that I would die protecting her," Dean said.

Micah grunted his displeasure.

"This whole thing has turned into a bigger mess. This goes beyond you simply kidnapping a billionaire. This could bring Ivy Springs' war here."

"I know," Dean admitted. "There is some good that has come out of it. Alexis is happy and now she had a chance at a real life."

"What you did was illegal and irresponsible, regardless of whether any good came out of your actions."

Miserably, Dean said, "I know."

Micah took a couple sips of his beer, then looked Dean in the eyes and asked, “Are you falling in love with Alexis?”

Dean sucked in a huge breath as he considered his answer.

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

Alexis was waiting excitedly for him when he got home. She had found a recipe for peanut butter cookies and was anxious for him to try them. Dean tasted one and then took three more.

“They are delicious,” he declared.

Alexis’ delighted smile lit up the room. She clapped her hands in excitement.

“I’m sorry there is no supper. I am a little nervous about cooking anything without you around, even if I do have a recipe. It’s a lot easier to burn something on the stove than in the oven, and I wouldn’t want to burn the house down.”

“I’m sure that you would have done great, but it’s okay. Do you want to go out for something?”

She shook her head.

“I would rather not. I don’t know if Raf and Xavier have left yet, and I don’t want another scene.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “How about if we just make some tacos?”

They joked and laughed while he cooked the hamburger and she cut up some veges. It was almost like they had been working together for years.

“You know, I think the food tastes even better when I help make it,” she said. “I don’t know if it is because I’m proud of myself for accomplishing something new, or if everyone feels that way.”

“I think a big part of it is that you are doing something new and you are doing a great job. You should be proud of yourself.”

“I am,” she acknowledged.

“Are you okay staying here by yourself? Do you get bored since you aren’t out and about with friends and going places?”

“I’m really not bored,” she said.

After dinner, Dean said, “I need to do a little bit of house cleaning.”

“Can I help?” she asked eagerly.

“Sure. Have you ever run a vacuum cleaner before?”

“Really?” she asked, with a smirk on her face.

He laughed and showed her how to vacuum, while he swept and mopped. Dean smiled when he heard Alexis singing loudly while she worked.

They cleaned the bathrooms together and dusted. They were done with chores pretty quickly. Alexis smiled and laughed the entire time.

“I’ve never met anyone who had so much fun doing housework.”

“That’s because they weren’t doing it with you,” she said.

As he held her close to him in bed that night, Dean tried to sort out his feelings for Alexis and wondered what she felt about him.

We have time to figure everything out, he reminded himself.

ALEXIS

Alexis was browsing different online shops. She was thinking about getting a gift for Dean, but wasn't sure what she wanted to get. He obviously wasn't into dust collectors or nick knacks that people put on shelves for show. The only jewelry that he wore was the pendant that hung around his neck that he never took off.

It occurred to her that maybe he would just like something that she made. He was very complimentary about her drawings, and she had to admit that she was getting a lot better. Maybe she could draw a bear in the woods near the cabin.

She jumped when her phone vibrated in her hand.

"Jerry," she said.

At least it was him and not Raf or Xavier. Jerry was her favorite brother.

"Good morning, brother," she said.

"Good morning, favorite sister."

"I'm your only sister." She laughed.

"Which makes you my favorite," he said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm doing great. I'm happy. I'm enjoying life and having fun. How about you?"

"Same shit, different day," Jerry said. "When are you coming home?"

“I don’t think that I am,” Alexis replied. “This is my home now.”

“Are you really that happy there?”

“I am. I didn’t realize it before, but I was just existing in Ivy Springs. I had no ambitions in life, and I didn’t even know who I was. I’m learning about me, now. I’ve figured out that life is about more than shopping, socializing, and talking about shifters and hunters.”

“I guess I can see why getting away from all that would be a good thing.”

“Jerry, I was a complete, selfish bitch. I was mean to people and only thought about what I wanted. I didn’t care about anyone or anything else, except for maybe you.”

“You had your moments,” Jerry agreed, laughing.

“Moments? It was constant,” she said. “And do you want to know what else?”

“What?”

“I’m sick of that stupid shifter and human war we have going on. We have no beef with the shifters. They’ve not done anything to us. If they took out some hunters, it was only out of self-defense. I’ve met some shifters and I really like them. They are some of the nicest people I’ve ever met.”

“That’s awesome,” Jerry said.

“Really? You mean that?”

“I do,” Jerry said. “I’ve been thinking the same thing. The war is stupid. It started at least a hundred years ago, if not further back. It’s based on a legend that might not even be true. Even if it is, who cares. A woman fell in love with someone her family disapproved of. Can we say Romeo and Juliet?”

Alexis laughed. She remembered that Jerry had been pulling away from Raf’s fascination with killing shifters and had been pretty much doing his own thing.

“I would like it if you could come for a visit sometime,” Alexis said. “I think that you would like it here, too. Life is so laid back here and everyone is nice.”

“After everything settles down, I might just do that,” Jerry said. “You take care of yourself, sis, and call me if you need anything.”

Smiling, Alexis was glad that she had at least one brother on her side. That meant a lot to her.

Dean and Alexis make enchiladas together that evening.

While they were eating, Dean said, “Micah and Lucy’s mating ceremony is the day after tomorrow. I was wondering if you would like to go with me. I’m Micah’s best man, so you would have to sit in the audience, but I’ll be there. There will be a reception afterward.”

Alexis’ heart beat faster and she smiled widely. “I would love to go. That sounds like a lot of fun.”

“Terrific,” Dean said.

“What happens at a mating ceremony?”

“The same thing that happens at a wedding, pretty much,” Dean replied.

“I’ve never been to one of those, either,” she confessed.

“Basically, Lucy and Micah will exchange their vows to always love, support, and be there for each other. The elder will declare them mated. I do think that Micah and Lucy are electing to wear rings, although not all mated couples do. The reception is just a huge party.”

“That sounds like fun,” Alexis said.

“Excellent. I’ll let them know that you will be my plus one.” Dean grinned.

They played a couple games of chess. Alexis was gratified when she won two games out of three.

“I declare you the champ,” Dean said. “What is your prize?”

“You,” she said, walking seductively over to him and pulling his shirt off.

Dean nipped her neck gently and said, “I’m all yours.”

I wish that he really was all mine, Alexis thought.

Then, she quickly pushed the thought away, reminding herself not to jump into anything too quickly.

Early the next morning, Alexis called Lucy.

“I know that you are super busy, but Dean asked me to go to your mating ceremony with him. I was wondering if I could take you out to get your nails and hair done, and then maybe you could help me find an appropriate dress? I’ve never been to anything like this before,” Alexis said, the uncertainty evident in her voice.

“That sounds very nice,” Lucy said. “You don’t have to take me to get my hair and nails done, though. I would be glad to help you.”

“I want to, though. It would make me happy.”

“Can you be ready in fifteen minutes?”

Nancy, who owned the nail shop, greeted Lucy warmly with a hug.

“I was hoping to see you today. Who is your friend?”

“This is Alexis. Alexis, the best nail person in the world.”

Nancy blushed and said, “You hush now.”

Alexis smiled and laughed with Lucy and the technicians as they got their nails done. She decided on something simple, which was very different than before.

She watched with fascination as the beautician formed permanent curls in Lucy’s hair. It felt very good to do something nice for another person just because she could and because she genuinely liked Lucy.

They went to several dress shops. Alexis had a hard time deciding on something that she liked. Finally, she settled for a cobalt blue straight-line dress that highlighted her eyes. She

picked out a simple diamond pendant, earrings, and a bracelet. Then, she chose a small clutch and some shoes that matched her dress.

“Thanks for shopping with me today. It’s so much more fun to do it with a friend,” Alexis said.

“Thank you for inviting me. I’ve had a lot of fun.”

Lucy’s stomach rumbled and they decided it was time for lunch.

“Is everything ready for the ceremony?” Alexis asked.

“It is. All Micah and I have to do is show up,” Lucy said. “I’m so excited. Micah, Dean, and I have been best friends since we were in diapers. I was betrothed to Micah when I was very young, but I didn’t want to marry him. Then, suddenly, I discovered that I was in love with him. Now, I can’t wait for the mating ceremony and for us to spend the rest of our lives together. We even moved the proposed date up a week and a half.”

“I’m glad for you. You are a good person and deserve to be happy.”

“Thank you.”

“What are you going to do after you go through the mating ceremony? Are you going to keep working?”

“I am. I love doing social work and knowing that I make a difference for other people. I’m also going to go back to school, get my master’s degree, and then my doctorate. Someday, I am going to open my own practice and specialize in youngsters who suffer from PTSD.”

“That is amazing,” Alexis said. “I’m a little jealous, though.”

“Why?”

“You have your life planned out. After I graduated high school, I never thought about my future. I guess I just thought that life was one shopping or social even after the other. Now that I’ve had a chance to get away from all that, I know that I want a lot more. I just don’t know what.”

Lucy reached over and touched Alexis' hand. "Don't worry. You will figure out what your heart wants."

My heart wants Dean.

Alexis quickly pushed that thought aside and changed the subject.

"I want to get you a gift."

"That isn't necessary," Lucy said. "Besides, you already did."

Lucy wiggled her fingernails at Alexis and then flipped one of the curls.

Alexis laughed and said, "That was for you as my friend. I want to get you and Micah something for your ceremony. What can I get you?"

"Well, I did have my eye on either a bread maker or a cappuccino machine."

"Cappuccino machine? Didn't you get enough of that while you were working at the café with Clara?"

"One can never have too many cappuccinos," Lucy said, in mock seriousness.

Alexis insisted on paying for lunch and then said, "Let's go shopping."

She ended up buying the bread maker and the cappuccino machine, and then had them giftwrapped.

"It would look like a child wrapped these if I tried it," Alexis joked.

"You need to stop selling yourself short," Lucy admonished. "You are a lot smarter and more capable than you think you are. Just because you don't have a lot of practice at something doesn't mean that you're bad at it. I'm positive that you could do anything that you wanted to if you tried."

Alexis smiled shyly and said, "Thank you. That means a lot coming from you."

They stopped for some mochas and then Lucy dropped her off.

She was exhausted, but happy. Alexis couldn't remember ever having so much fun shopping before, and she didn't even get a ton of stuff for herself. She actually enjoyed doing something for another person.

The couch called her name and Alexis plopped down on it. Looking around, she thought about how much more comfortable the house was than her suite in Ivy Springs. It was bigger and a lot less crowded with useless stuff.

“Maybe I should start looking for a house of my own. It's not like I can live here with Dean forever,” she told herself.

Then she added, “I might like to, though.”

DEAN

Needing to escape the confines of his office, Dean shifted and ran for a couple of miles. His morning had been stressful. It started off with a major dispute between ranchers. Their land bordered each other's, and their cattle often intermingled. Rancher one had gotten tired of trying to sort out the cattle and had built a fence. Unfortunately, it was six inches on Rancher two's land.

This was normally something that was handled by the mediators, but they couldn't come to an agreement. James, the new judge, was out for the week because his mother was sick.

"I demand that he move the fence," Rancher two had said.

"I want him to pay for half, since it benefits him as much as it benefits me," Rancher one had argued.

This is completely stupid, Dean thought.

After listening to both sides, Dean said, "Either the fence stays where it's at and Rancher one pays for the entire cost of the fence, or he moves it, and Rancher two reimburses him for the cost of the fence plus labor."

Almost in unison, bright red splotches appeared on both of their faces. They were furious, but did not dare argue with his decision.

"You have five minutes to decide," Dean said.

They couldn't decide, so Dean ordered that the fence stay where it was. Both of the ranchers were furious with his

decision, so Dean figured that he must have made the right one.

He was reluctant to go back to his office and face the rest of the work that was stacked up, but he had no choice. The constant interruptions made it impossible to get anything accomplished. What really frustrated him was the visit from his father.

“Your mother and I are having some guests over for dinner tomorrow. We would like for you to come.”

“I can’t. Micah’s and Lucy’s mating ceremony is tomorrow,” Dean said.

“When are you...”

Dean held up his hand and said, “Stop. Don’t even start in on me. I’m not in the mood.”

His father stared at him for a minute and then walked away. Dean figured that his father understood that pushing him further, especially right now, would not be in David’s best interest. The man might be his father, but Dean was the alpha, and an order was an order.

Everything seemed to go wrong. He felt like something was constantly poking at him, nonstop. Rubbing the back of his neck, he clenched his jaw. Growling in the back of his throat, he had to stop himself from slamming the computer lid down. He was done.

Alexis jumped up from the couch when he came in.

“Dean, you’re home early,” she said brightly.

“Is that a problem?” he asked.

She looked like he had just slapped her across the face. Immediately, he was sorry for snapping at her.

He reached out, pulled her close to him, hugged her, and said, “I’m sorry. I had a frustrating and annoying day, and I’m grumpy. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

“It’s okay,” she said.

“No, it’s not.” He sighed.

Just holding her close to him melted some of the frustrations away and he was already starting to feel calmer. She kissed his cheek, grabbed his hand, and led him to the couch.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He told her about his day, which, each little incident seemed minor. However, when he added them all together it was annoying.

“I’m sorry, again. When I took my vow to protect and lead the clan, I also vowed not to be a grumpy old man like my father. I’ve barely started my duties, and here I am, being grumpy.”

“It happens. Everyone gets grumpy once in a while. It’s human nature,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

“How was your day?” he asked.

Alexis told him, her voice clearly reflecting the excitement and happiness she felt hanging out with Lucy.

“I’m envious of Lucy, though. She knows what she wants out of life. There are so many people that she’s helped. Now, she is going to go back to school, get a couple more degrees, and open her own practice so that she can help even more people.”

“Lucy is a great woman,” Dean said. “But why are you envious?”

“I would like to go to school and be able to make a difference in the world. It never occurred to me to do that until I talked to Lucy.”

“What would you like to do?” Dean asked. “What would you want to study?”

“That’s just the thing. I’ve never thought about it until now. I don’t know what I would be good at.”

“You would be good at anything that you wanted to be. Think about what makes your heart happy. Would you want to work with children or animals? There are a lot of jobs where you could help veterans and the homeless. You could be a

social worker, teacher, lawyer, politician, or a million other things where you could make a difference in other people's lives."

"Whew. It's overwhelming. I don't even know where to start. I've never thought about my future until now."

"You don't have to start tomorrow. You're still figuring out the world outside of Ivy Springs, and you are still learning about yourself. That's a big task all by itself."

"I guess so," Alexis replied. "All I do know is that you kidnapping me is the best thing that ever happened to me."

Laughing, Dean said, "I'm glad you think so, because if I had the chance to do it all over again, I wouldn't have."

"That's really too bad, because you saved my life and I love it here. I love..." She paused. "All of the people here, too."

Dean wondered if she was about to say that she loved him. A part of him hoped that she would and a part of him was afraid that she would. He had no idea what he would say back.

Checking his watch, Dean hoped that Alexis was almost ready. They needed to be at the ceremonial hall early, since he was the best man. He shifted from one foot to the other as he finished his cup of coffee.

He was just about to call out for Alexis when she came down the stairs. The cobalt blue dress fit her form perfectly, accentuating her small waist. The neckline dipped just enough to give a tantalizing, yet tasteful, glimpse of her beautiful breasts. Her eyes sparkled, highlighted by the color of the dress. She wore a necklace with a simple diamond pendant and diamond stud earrings. Her hair was curled and styled, and she wore some eyeshadow, eye liner, and a hint of lipstick.

"You look absolutely stunning," he said.

"Thank you," she smiled, shyly.

"You never needed all that goop on your face. I can't believe you never realized the natural beauty that you are."

Her face flushed pink at the compliment.

He smiled at her and teased, “What happened to the stiletto heels?”

“I discovered that these are a lot more comfortable,” she said. “Besides, those shoes don’t fit the new me.”

Hugging her tightly, he said, “I think that the new you is great.”

Alexis held his hand tightly when they got to the ceremonial hall. He knew that she was nervous about being around so many people she didn’t know. More than one person glanced their way and whispered.

She held her head up high and smiled at everyone. It was contagious and everyone smiled back.

Micah’s mom rushed up to him and hugged him.

“Dean, I can’t tell you how happy I am, and I’m glad that you are a part of the celebration. You are as much of a son to me as Micah is. You practically lived at our house half of the time.”

“I love you, too, Mom. I’m very happy for the two of them. They will love each other and drive each other bonkers, like they have always done, but they will be happy.”

She looked at Alexis, smiled warmly, and said, “Who have you brought with you?”

“This is Alexis. We met in Ivy Springs. Alexis, everyone calls her Mom, even people who are older than her.”

“Welcome, my dear. How do you like it here so far?”

“It’s wonderful. All of the people are so amazing.”

“It is a terrific place,” Mom said. “I would love it if you would sit with us during the ceremony.”

“I would be honored, thank you.”

Dean was relieved that Alexis would have a friendly face to sit next to during the ceremony.

He kissed Alexis on the cheek and said, “I’m going to leave you in good hands. I need to find Micah now.”

Alexis still looked a little nervous, but he was sure that Mom would ease that very quickly. Micah's mom had a way about her that could calm any storm. Sometimes he wondered if there was some healing witch blood in her, mixed with the shifter blood.

"Are you nervous?" Dean asked Micah.

"No. I feel good about this, and I'm proud to say my vows in front of everyone."

Dean slapped him on the back and said, "Good for you. I'm happy for the both of you."

"It's your turn..."

"Stop. Don't go there," Dean said, wagging his finger back and forth, playfully.

Micah just grinned at him.

The ceremony was beautiful, and Dean found that he was moved when Micah and Lucy said their vows. Dean managed to get a couple of glances at Alexis. She was crying along with his mother.

What is it about these types of ceremonies that make women cry?

The reception was beautiful. The time came for Dean to make his speech. He had worked hard on the speech and hoped that it wasn't too long.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention, please. As the best man, I have the incredible honor and privilege of standing here today to toast Lucy and Micah.

"First and foremost, I want to say how absolutely radiant and breathtaking Lucy looks tonight. And Micah, I have to admit, you clean up pretty well, too. But beyond their stunning appearances, what truly shines is the love and connection between these two beautiful souls.

"Today, we celebrate the culmination of a love story that has been years in the making. Lucy and Micah have been the epitome of true friendship and unwavering support for each other. They have been there through thick and thin, always

ready with a listening ear, a shoulder to lean on, and a dose of laughter when it was needed the most.

“It was clear there was something special between them. They shared an undeniable bond, a connection that made their friendship stand out from the rest. Little did we know that their friendship would grow into a love that would forever change their lives.

“Lucy and Micah as individuals, you are both incredible people — kind, caring, and with hearts full of compassion. But together, you are a force to be reckoned with. The love you share has already inspired those around you. And I have no doubt that you will continue to inspire and support each other in the journey that lies ahead.

“I raise my glass to Lucy and Micah — may your marriage be filled with love, laughter, and endless joy. May you continue to grow and evolve as individuals while nurturing the beautiful connection you share. And may your journey together be as extraordinary as the love that brought you here today.

“To the newlyweds, cheers! May your love light up the world and may your hearts forever be intertwined. Here’s to a lifetime of happiness and bliss.”

“That was beautiful,” Lucy said. “Thanks.”

Alexis and Dean danced all night long. He loved the way she felt in his arms. It was as though she belonged there.

The highlight of the night was when the couple opened their gifts. Lucy had a gift for Micah. He opened it and was surprised to see baby clothes. It took him a couple of minutes to realize what Lucy was telling him. He was over the moon excited to find out that he was going to be a father.

It was dark when they got back to the house. Instead of turning on the light in the living room, they were content to let the beams from the moon illuminate the area.

She turned on the radio. A slow country song played.

“Dance with me?” she asked.

He wrapped his arms around her, and they swayed to the music. Dean was mesmerized by her eyes, as they drew him in. His lips pressed to hers and he felt an immediate burst of flames inside of him.

ALEXIS

Nothing in this world felt better to Alexis than having Dean's arms wrapped around her. As their bodies slowly swayed to the music that filled the room and their hearts, Dean's lips connected with hers. The kiss was light at first. Then, as the fires flickered alive, he became more possessive, more demanding.

His tongue made love to her mouth, just as his body had. He stroked her face with the back of his hand and then put it on the back of her head. Alexis wrapped her arms around him, holding on, fearing that her knees would buckle from the sensations that overtook her body.

Butterflies danced in her stomach as they stood together in the living room, the soft music swirling around them while Dean's kiss made the world spin out of control.

Her fingers deftly unbuttoned his shirt. She spread it open and reached for him. The palm of her hands caressed his collar bone and then slowly moved down to his hard chest, down his stomach to his waist. She pulled his shirt off and tossed it to the couch.

Alexis took a step back, gazing at the gorgeous man who stood in the light of the moon like some kind of chiseled god. She licked her lips as a now familiar ache overtook her senses.

She untied his shoes and then unfastened his pants, pushing them down. He stepped out of them. Alexis nibbled on her bottom lip as she consumed his naked form with her eyes.

“You are so incredibly gorgeous,” Alexis whispered. “You might have just stepped out of the pages of a book picturing Greek gods.”

Dean smiled at her compliment.

Pressing her lips against his chest, she kissed and tasted him, while her hands roamed over his hard body. Dean didn't move, letting her explore him with her hands and mouth. She moved behind him, kissing his back. Her hands drifted down to his firm ass, lightly squeezing them.

“You have a nice ass,” she said.

He wiggled it a little bit in response, causing her to giggle.

Alexis stepped back in front of him, her hands meandering across his chest. Dean's arousal was hard and thick. Her mouth watered and she wondered how he would react if she tasted him. From the books she had read, men enjoyed being licked and sucked.

She lifted up the hem of her dress and knelt down in front of him. Dean moaned as soon as she did. Feeling empowered, she wrapped one hand around the base of his thick cock and licked the tip.

A hissing sound came from Dean. She looked up and saw him watching her. Alexis traced the ridge around the mushroom head of his cock and felt Dean tremble slightly. Pressing her tongue against the base of his shaft, she licked her way to the tip, as though it was a delicious ice cream cone.

Dean moaned loudly and buried his fingers in her hair. Alexis took this as a sign that she was on the right track. She stroked him with the tip of her tongue until she had tasted all of him. A couple of small drops of clear liquid formed, and she lapped them, noting their sweet taste.

Opening her mouth wide, Alexis sucked the large round tip into her mouth. She slowly took more of him in, her lips passing over the ridge and further down, until he hit the back of her throat.

Her tongue caressed him. She marveled at the soft, silky skin that covered the hardness of his shaft. Dean's heavy

breathing and moans let Alexis know that she was doing everything right. Emboldened, she pulled back until just the tip was in her mouth. She flicked it with her tongue. Then she slowly lowered her head again, her hand moving in rhythm, stroking him with her mouth and hand.

“Oh, lord, yes,” he moaned.

A warmth spread through Alexis’ body, as she continued to suck him and lick him. She reached up and gently fondled his balls, careful not to hurt him. Dean trembled again at the touch, as she stroked him with her tongue. A low hum tickled the inside of her body at the feeling of his cock pressed against her throat.

She lightly scraped him with her teeth and then licked him where her teeth had been.

Dean moaned loudly and said, “Baby, you’ve got to stop.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No, you did not. It feels too good and I don’t want to cum in your mouth. I have another place in mind,” he said.

He pulled her to her feet and reached around her, unzipping her dress, letting it fall to the floor in a liquid blue pool. Her bra joined it as did her panties. She started to unfasten her shoes, but Dean stopped her.

“Leave those on.”

Gently, he pushed her backward toward the couch. She sat when her knees hit the back of it.

“Slide down just a bit, so you are hanging off the edge.”

She obeyed.

Dean spread her legs so that her knees were wide apart. Suddenly shy, Alexis felt very naughty being exposed to him this way.

“You look delicious,” he said.

Kneeling in front of her, he licked from the bottom of her pussy to the top. A bolt of electricity exploded and bounced around inside Alexis’ body. He licked her and Alexis moaned.

She nearly came out of her skin when he pushed his tongue inside of her, wiggling it, tasting her.

Every part of her body screamed to be touched and tasted as Dean's tongue darted around inside of her.

He pulled his tongue away and then pushed in two fingers, spreading them, stretching her. Pistoning them in and out of her, made Alexis' heart race. She felt empty when he pulled them out.

Reaching up, Dean's fingers found her nipples. He lightly pinched them between his thumb and forefinger, rolling them and pulling on them gently. Flames exploded inside of her, when he flicked her hard clit with his tongue.

Alexis forgot to breathe as her entire body tingled. White hot flames lapped at her insides as he sucked her clit and rubbed her nipples. Her heart raced and the world melted away as he continued to pleasure her.

Her body began to quiver. She couldn't hold back as her body exploded.

"Dean," she cried out, as her hot juices rushed out of her.

After a minute, the world righted herself and Alexis could breathe again. Her thundering heart returned to normal.

"Stand up and face the couch," he said.

She obeyed.

He bent her over the couch, her ass sticking high in the air. Dean caressed her ass, squeezing it and slightly parting her cheeks.

"Your ass is perfect," he said.

Dean gripped her hips and she felt the large knob of his cock pressed against the hot wet entrance of her pussy.

With one swift movement, he buried himself inside of her. Her breath caught in her throat as a wildfire flashed through her.

Lightly slapping her ass, he pulled almost all the way back out and then thrust back into her hard and fast.

“Do you like that?” he asked.

“Yes. Oh, lord, yes,” she moaned.

Alexis pictured the gorgeous man driving in and out of her from behind, his hands on her hips with occasional spanks. Her breasts swayed, her nipples rubbing against the soft fabric of the couch. She could hear the crashing waves of the ocean in her ears, as his hips thrust forward sending his cock deep into her, stretching her, caressing her insides.

Thunder boomed and lightning flashed in the air as the intense heat from their bodies mingled with the cool air of the room.

Dean reached up and grabbed her long hair, pulling her head back slightly. Another spank to the ass as he slammed deep inside of her sent a firebolt blasting through her.

“Oh my lord,” Alexis cried out. “Dean. Oh, lord, Dean.”

“Do you want more?” he asked.

“Please, don’t stop,” she begged.

Prisms of different colored lights danced around her. She could smell Dean’s natural scent of outdoors and cedar. Her hard nipples were tormented by the couch, enhancing the already raging fires inside of her.

The music still played in the background and the room was illuminated by the moon. The world spun out of control.

Dean pounded into her, hard and deep.

“More,” she gasped. “More.”

The exquisite torture of Dean’s cock pulling almost all the way out and driving hard inside of her was too much to bear. She started shaking uncontrollably. Alexis fought hard because she wanted it to go on forever, but she couldn’t hold back.

Her pussy pulsed and she tightened around him. Volcanoes exploded inside of her, and hot molten lava burst out of her, covering him.

Dean’s fingers tightened against her hips and she screamed. The intensity of the burning flames that erupted

made her see darkness, and she was sure that she was going to die from the intensity of it.

He began to shudder and she felt him throb inside of her. Dean groaned loudly as his hot seed jetted deep inside of her.

They both stood there for a second, tired. Alexis moaned in protest when he pulled out of her, feeling empty. He helped her stand and hugged her tightly.

“Shower time?” he asked.

DEAN

““**Y**ou have the sexiest body,” Alexis said, as she gawked at Dean’s soapy form.

“Thank you,” he said. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

The day’s events were finally taking their toll and they hurriedly finished their shower and got into bed.

“The ceremony was absolutely beautiful,” Alexis said. “I thought that your speech was brilliant.”

“Thank you. I thought of it all by myself.”

“How long did it take you to write it and memorize it?”

“A few hours. I wanted to say the right thing, not embarrass myself or anyone else,” he said. “I also didn’t want it to go on too long.”

“You did great,” she assured him. “Do you want to know what my favorite part of the reception was?”

“The cake?”

“No, dancing with you. You’re a regular Fred Astaire.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but my mother made sure that I knew how to dance, since the clan has annual galas that include a ball.”

“That sounds like fun,” she said.

“It can be,” he replied.

With a sigh, she nestled closer to Dean and then closed her eyes.

“Good night. Sweet dreams.”

“Good night.”

He was pretty certain that she was fast asleep before he finished the last word.

Dean thought about the ceremony and how beautiful it had been. He was so glad to see his two best friends becoming forever mates. He smiled sheepishly when he thought about how he had mistaken the comfortable love of a best friend for the love of a mate.

Alexis squirmed a bit and then relaxed. He thought about how wonderful it felt to hold her in his arms. It was comforting. Slowly, he drifted off to sleep.

Micah offered to buy him lunch the next day.

“Why aren’t you on your honeymoon?” Dean asked.

“I have so much work to do right now. Plus, since Lucy is pregnant, and this is her first pregnancy, we want to stay close to the doctor. We’ll get you to babysit after the baby is born and we’ll go then,” Micah said, wiggling his eyebrows at him.

“Me? Babysit? I think you have the wrong fella. I wouldn’t know the first thing about taking care of a baby.”

“Honestly, me, either. I think that I had better figure it out quickly, though,” Micah said. “I’ve only got a few months before the pup arrives.”

“Online classes, read a book, and the University of YouTube should tell you everything that you need to know,” Dean said.

Micah slapped him on the back and said, “You can learn, too, so that you can babysit when Lucy and I go on a honeymoon.”

“Funny man make joke,” Dean said, laughing.

“Someday, you’ll have a whole house full of your own,” Micah said. “Wait and see. You’ll beg Lucy and me to babysit.”

“I don’t see that happening any time soon,” Dean said.

“What about Alexis? You guys seem to be getting very close.”

“I honestly don’t know. I do care a lot about her and there are some feelings that I can’t put a name to.”

“Can’t or you don’t want to?” Micah asked.

Dean sighed heavily and replied, “A little of both and probably more of the latter than the former.”

“I understand that. That was how I felt with Lucy before I realized that she was my fated mate.”

Groaning, Dean said, “How could I possibly fall in love with a woman whose family’s sole mission in life is to kill every shifter on Earth?”

“She no longer represents that family and that mission. Alexis has met a lot of shifters and understands that they are just like mundane humans,” Micah said. “You can’t judge her based on her family. She has changed so much that you can’t even judge her based on her past.”

Dean took a sip of his sweet iced tea and said, “I guess so.”

Changing the subject, Dean asked, “How are things going for you as the new alpha?”

“To be honest, it seems to be just the same as it was before, except that now I’m in charge. If I don’t like the way something is done, a certain policy, or whatever, I change it. Like you, I decreased the number of meetings, limited the agenda for meetings, and hired a personal assistant and a magistrate.”

“I stole those ideas from you,” Dean confessed. “How did that go over with the elders?”

“The same as it did for you.” Micah laughed. “But they’ll get over it and adjust, or they won’t and they’ll complain about it for the rest of their lives. Either way, the changes will stay. How are things going on your end?”

“Okay. ’Bout the same as you. I have had a couple of frustrating days, though, and had to shift and go for a run to get some tension out. I think that I’ve been shifting and

running more since I've become alpha than before. I go at least once a day."

"I hear you. Me, too. It's a healthy way to get out frustrations. It beats eating the particular elder that is being aggravating."

Dean laughed. He was really glad that his brief pursuit of Lucy hadn't damaged their relationship. He was a little bit embarrassed that he thought he was so in love with Lucy that he had pursued her to Ivy Springs.

A little voice in the back of his head told him that going to Ivy Springs was a good thing, because he had a chance to get to know Alexis, whose harsh exterior had been hiding a good soul.

He and Alexis went out for dinner that night. They talked about movies they enjoyed. Dean was very surprised to discover that she had seen all the Star Wars, Indiana Jones, the Expendables, and John Wick movies.

"I figured that you would be more of a Romcom and Hallmark love stories," he teased.

"No more than you just watch violent movies, sports, and NASCAR," she retorted. "I know that you've probably seen *Dirty Dancing* a million times."

"Guilty, but I love Patrick Swayze. I've seen all of his movies."

Dean, once again, was amazed at how comfortable he was with Alexis. They could talk about important topics or nothing at all, and it was great.

He was a little tense, half expecting Raf to pop up again, but there was no sign of him. He thought that the tension was giving him a little bit of indigestion. Alexis picked up on his stress.

"Are you okay?"

"I am good," he said.

"You're worried about Raf, aren't you?"

“Yes. I don’t want him stressing you out and I really don’t want to deal with another scene.”

“I understand. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Dean assured her.

Although it was cold out, the night sky was beautiful, so Dean and Alexis decided to take a walk at a nearby park.

“I think that the stars are a lot brighter in Montana,” she said, staring up at the diamonds dancing in the sky.

“How many times did you ever take the time to look at the stars in Ivy Springs?” he asked.

“You have a point. I never even thought about it,” she admitted. “I’m so glad that you brought me here.”

They made love once they got back home. As he held her in his arms, Dean thought about how much Alexis had come to mean to him. He still wasn’t going to say love, but he would say that she was a very important part of his life.

The gala was coming up and Dean thought about inviting Alexis. He was sure that she would know how to conduct herself at such an important formal occasion. Dean was also positive that she wouldn’t tell anyone how she ended up in Livingston. Alexis would never condescend or be rude to the others because they were shifters. However sure he was that Alexis would be gracious and wonderful, there was still the tiniest doubt in the back of his mind. Faced with a stressful situation, would her old stripes start to burn through her new skin?

There was another issue, as well. If Dean took Alexis to the gala as his date, everyone would assume that they were betrothed. As much as he cared about her and enjoyed her company, he wasn’t planning on asking her to be his forever.

Telling himself that he didn’t have to make a decision right that moment, he fell asleep.

The next day started out hectic. The head of the committee that was planning the gala was in a tizzy and wanted to talk to

him about every little detail, even though he told her a million times that she had always done a great job and he trusted her.

Then there was an issue with one of the teenage boys shoplifting from a local store. The owner agreed not to press charges as long as the boy worked off the amount that was stolen, but Dean couldn't let him get by with such a light sentence. He had to learn his lesson that that type of behavior wasn't acceptable.

Dean was just about to go for a run to clear his head when his phone rang. It was an Ivy Springs number.

"Hello."

"This is Raf."

"I figured."

"You had better send my sister home, today, or there will be hell to pay," Raf threatened.

"Alexis is a grown woman who knows her own mind. She can go back to Ivy Springs whenever she chooses."

"She is an airhead and doesn't know what is best for her," Raf snarled.

"Alexis is a lot smarter and a lot more capable than you give her credit for. You need to trust your sister to know her own heart and to make her own decisions."

"This isn't going to be the end of it," Raf growled and hung up.

Dean ran his fingers through his hair and leaned back in his chair. He closed his eyes and sighed, knowing that he might have caused the people in Livingston a whole lot of trouble. However, he had forced Alexis to come here. He wasn't about to force her to leave.

ALEXIS

Alexis was sipping a mocha and looking out the window. She thought about going for a walk, but images from the last time she wandered out alone filled her brain. Although she was certain that hungry wolves wouldn't venture this far into town, the fear still nagged her. Plus, she didn't want to get lost.

She wondered if being a shifter would help her not get lost, since wolves, bears, and other animals have an instinct for being able to find their way home no matter how far away they roam.

"I wish that someone could wave a magic wand and turn me into a shifter."

She laughed at the thought, because just a couple months ago she wanted to kill all shifters.

Lost in thought, Alexis jumped when her phone buzzed. She looked at the number and sighed heavily. She really didn't want to deal with him right now, but if she didn't answer, he would just keep calling.

"Good morning, Raf."

"You need to quit slumming and get your ass home."

Anger flashed through her.

"I'm not slumming and I am home," she said. "I enjoy Livingston and I love the people here. I have actual friends. I have no intention of leaving here."

“You are stupid. You’ve just been brainwashed. You always think that you’re in love with some handsome face and lose your mind. Then, something happens, and you realize it was just a crush.”

“In the past, that was true. I am in Livingston because I want to be.”

“That bastard Dean has pulled the wool over your eyes. He’s just using you and when he’s done, he’ll toss you aside like a piece of garbage.”

“That is not true,” Alexis protested hotly. “I’m finally seeing the truth and the real world for the first time in my life.”

“Don’t make me come and get you,” Raf warned.

“What are you going to do? Kidnap me and force me to go back to Ivy Springs?”

The irony of that potential situation was not lost on Alexis.

“If I have to. And Dean just might get hurt in the process.”

“You couldn’t make me stay,” Alexis said. “I would just leave again.”

“Alexis...”

“This conversation and your threats are getting tiresome. Please, just leave me alone. You don’t even want me back because you care about me. You are just worried about the family name.”

She ended the call, hoping that Raf would leave it alone, but she knew that this likely wasn’t the end of it. When Raf got his teeth into something, he was like a bulldog with a bone. He wasn’t going to give it up.

Alexis thought about disappearing so that Dean and possibly Micah and Lucy wouldn’t get hurt, but the thought of leaving Dean made her heart ache.

Although she told herself several times that it was too soon, she couldn’t help but think that she was falling in love with Dean.

“I have time to figure things out,” she assured herself.

That night, while they were cleaning up after dinner, Dean asked, “Would you like to go to my clan’s gala with me?”

“What’s that like?” she asked.

“First, we have a huge feast. As alpha, I sit at the end of the table. As my date, you would sit to the right. We eat. Afterward, there is a huge ball. It is a formal affair, so you would need a formal dress.”

“That sounds like a lot of fun. I would love to go,” she said, enthusiastically.

“I must warn you, there will be a lot of people asking you questions. They will want to know how we met and why you are in Livingston.”

“That’s easy,” she said. “I will just tell them that we met while you were staying in Ivy Springs, and I decided that I needed a break from the life up there. I know it’s a little fib, but I think that it could be excused for this situation.”

“That sounds good,” he said.

“I’m excited, but nervous. I don’t want to embarrass you. You are the most important man in the clan.”

“First, I am a hundred percent certain that you will not embarrass me. Second, in my opinion, everyone is equally important. I just lead a group of my equals.”

“I like that way of thinking. This world would be a lot better off if everyone thought that way.”

Dean grinned at her and kissed her cheek.

“Raf called me today,” she said. “He demanded that I go back to Ivy Springs and said that he would come up and get me if I didn’t.”

“He called me, too. He said that things were going to get ugly if I didn’t send you home. I told him that you would decide for yourself.”

“I’m sorry to be causing this trouble.”

Dean choked on his drink.

“If you recall, I’m the one who kidnapped you and brought you here against your will. This, in no way, is your fault. Even if you had come of your own free will, it’s still not your fault. Your brother is the one who is at fault.”

Alexis nodded and said, “I will leave and go somewhere else if it’s going to cause trouble.”

“First of all, where would you go? Second of all, I promised you that I would protect you, with my life, if need be. You will stay here, if that’s what you want,” Dean said. Then, he grinned and added, “Besides, you promised me that you would go to the gala with me. It’s too late to back out now.”

She laughed and hugged him. They played a couple of games of canasta until it was time for bed. Alexis smiled as she snuggled close to Dean. Never in a million years would she have imagined herself so happy. If someone had told her a couple months ago that she would be in a tiny town, with no makeup or fancy clothes, cuddled up with a shifter, she would have thought them insane.

Alexis called Lucy the next morning.

“Dean invited me to go to the gala with him and I need a dress. I’ll buy lunch if you will go with me and help me pick out something appropriate, plus accessories.”

“I would love to go,” Lucy said. “Can you be ready in twenty minutes?”

“I’ll be waiting.”

“I thought that I would take you to Billings,” Lucy said when she arrived. “The shops here are terrific, but there will be a lot more to choose from in a bigger city.”

They went through several stores before Lucy and Alexis found a ball gown that looked gorgeous on her. It was a burnt orange color that most women wouldn’t be able to pull off. They found matching shoes and a clutch.

“All my jewelry is in Ivy Springs, except for a couple of things that I got here,” Alexis said.

“There are a few jewelry stores around here,” Lucy said.

They browsed and eventually Alexis found the perfect pieces. She found a sapphire necklace, a couple of drop earrings, and a matching bracelet.

“The baby is demanding sustenance,” Lucy said, after Alexis paid for everything.

Alexis rubbed her own tummy and said, “I’m kind of hungry, too.”

After lunch, Alexis said, “We need to find a baby store.”

“Why? Are you expecting?”

“Nope, but you are,” Alexis said. “I think the baby needs a few more outfits and some toys.”

“Woman, you are going to spoil the baby rotten.”

“It’s my prerogative.” Alexis laughed.

On the way home, Alexis said, “I enjoyed hanging out today, but I like the smaller town better.”

“Really?” Lucy asked. “I would have never guessed that. I figured that a town as small as Livingston would be driving you crazy by now.”

“I know, and the old Alexis would have stuck her nose in the air at the small-town living. But I really love it.”

“You really have changed so much. I remember the first time I met you. Let’s just say that I didn’t have a very high opinion of you.”

Alexis sighed and said, “Looking back, I don’t have a real high opinion of the person I used to be.”

“The transformation is amazing,” Lucy said.

“I know. The biggest change is that a couple months ago, I wanted to kill all shifters. Now, I have one for a best friend and one I think that I’m falling in love with.”

Lucy raised her eyebrows.

Alexis laughed and said, “I know, I know. I had a reputation for falling in love with every handsome guy that came around. But this time it is different. I mean, I’m not for sure that I’m in love with him, but I do know that I have strong feelings for him, that are different than anything that I’ve ever felt before.”

“You have all the time in the world to sort out your feelings,” Lucy said.

“That’s what I keep telling myself.”

When Lucy dropped Alexis off, Alexis said, “Thank you for being my friend. I’ve never had a real friend before.”

Lucy smiled and hugged Alexis.

“You are a terrific person, and it’s easy to be your friend.”

Alexis was nervous the night of the gala. She took a lot of time getting ready. She made sure that her dress was perfect. The sapphires accented her dress and made her eyes stand out. Her hair was perfectly curled and styled.

Looking down at the makeup on the counter, she smiled. In Ivy Springs, she would have started with a thick layer of foundation and would have added blush, eyeliner, lip liner, and all kinds of cosmetics. This time, it was eyeliner, eye shadow, and some lipstick.

Dean always told her how beautiful she was without all the makeup that she used to wear. She wanted Dean to think that she was beautiful, instead of like a clown.

With one last glance in the mirror, she walked shyly down the stairs to see Dean’s reaction.

DEAN

Dean woke up early the morning of the gala. He would have loved to play hooky from work, but there were a lot of jobs he had to accomplish.

Of course, the day started with a meeting. This one wasn't as long as it would have been before he took over, but still long enough. He was itching to go for a run before tackling a few tasks.

He groaned when his father followed him to his office.

"The gala is tonight," David said.

"I know," Dean replied.

"It's unthinkable that the new alpha go to the gala without a date," David said.

"I can always skip it," Dean said.

"Really? I don't think so," David said.

"You'll be happy to know that I have a date," Dean replied.

"Please tell me it's not that silly woman who has been staying at your house,"

Dean simply smiled at his father and said, "Please excuse me. I have work to get done."

David growled but walked away.

Micah dropped by at lunchtime with some sandwiches.

“I know how it is right before the gala,” Micah said. “I figured that you would be hungry.

“I’m starving, thanks,” Dean said.

“Lucy and Alexis went shopping for a gown for the gala,” Micah said.

“I know. Alexis wouldn’t show me what she bought. She said she wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Lucy said that it was a beautiful dress, and you know that she has impeccable taste.”

Dean nodded and took a huge bite of his sandwich.

“Are you sure that taking Alexis to the gala is a good idea?”

“Why not?” Dean asked.

“She could tell everyone how she managed to end up in Livingston,” Micah said.

“She could,” Dean agreed, “but I don’t think that she would. I think that if she was going to do that, she would have already. Plus, I have offered to send her back home and her brothers have tried to get her to go back, but she refuses. She says that she is happy here.”

“She does seem to be. Alexis thanked Lucy for being her friend and said that she had never had one before. It almost broke Lucy’s heart, although considering the person Alexis had been, it is no wonder she didn’t have any real friends.”

“She was something else, but people change,” Dean said.

“There is another thing that you should consider,” Micah said.

“What’s that?” Dean asked, although he had an idea what Micah was going to say.

“Everyone is going to think that you and she are betrothed.”

“They can think what they want, but it doesn’t make it so. I’m getting a little tired of having to bend to what people think

about me and what I should do.”

“I know that feeling,” Micah said.

“To be honest with you, I’m not a hundred percent sure that taking her is the best idea that I’ve ever had, but I think that she would enjoy it and I need a date.”

Micah laughed and teased Dean, saying, “It’s not the worst idea that you’ve ever had when it comes to that woman.”

Dean groaned and said, “Tell me about it.”

Laughing, Micah opened his mouth.

Holding up his hand, Dean said, “Never mind. Don’t tell me.”

That evening, Dean was wrestling with his bowtie. He couldn’t seem to get it straight.

His thoughts returned to his conversation with Micah. He was a little bit worried about taking Alexis to the gala. Dean was certain that Alexis wouldn’t do anything to embarrass him. At least, he was almost positive. However, he was a little concerned about how the rest of the clan would react to her.

Dean was sitting on the couch when Alexis came down the stairs. She wore minimal makeup, and her hair was curled and styled. Her dress and jewelry were stunning on her.

“You look absolutely gorgeous,” he said, as she walked toward him.

“You clean up pretty nice, too,” she said, smiling at him.

Alexis hugged him tightly. Dean wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. The light kiss turned into a deeper, more passionate kiss.

He pulled away and put two fingers under her chin, lifting her face up.

“We had better get going now before I decide to just skip the whole damn affair and throw you down on the floor.”

She giggled and said, “That wouldn’t be too terribly bad, would it?”

“Yes, it would,” he said. “I’m the new alpha and this is my first gala as the alpha. It would create quite a scandal if I didn’t go.”

Alexis blinked her eyes at him playfully and said, “Since when are you worried about creating a scandal?”

He laughed and said, “You minx.”

Everyone’s eyes were on them when they walked into the room. A silence settled over the crowd. Alexis clutched his arm tightly and he felt her tremble.

“Hold your head up and don’t let them see you sweat,” he whispered as he led her to the large table at the front of the room.

Dean pulled back the seat and then pushed her in before taking his own seat. He purposefully ignored his father’s glaring stare.

He can think what he wants. I really don’t care, Dean thought. I’m tired of people trying to run my life for me.

There were a lot of whispers. People were curious about Alexis, especially since it was tradition that the woman the alpha took to the gala as a date was soon to be his mate.

Joke’s on them.

Dinner started off a little awkward, but then Alexis got into a conversation with a couple of other people and she relaxed. The man seated to her right was a literature professor at the college. They started talking about different works. Alexis told him that she loved Lord Alfred Tennyson, loved *Le Mortre d’ Arthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Professor King became excited, and they launched into a huge discussion about the merits of those works and authors and then others. Soon, several people joined the discussion.

Dean was pleased that no one asked any awkward questions about Alexis or her background. A huge smile lit up her face, making her even more beautiful. She had a natural charm that drew people to her.

He wondered when and how she had developed that personality trait. It certainly hadn't been evident in Ivy Springs. It seemed like he learned something new about Alexis every day.

Dinner was soon over and it was time for the dance. As was customary, as alpha, Dean led the first dance with his partner. She danced divinely. Soon, the dance floor was full.

The professor asked Dean if he could have a dance. Dean grinned and gave his permission. He watched Alexis move gracefully across the floor as she laughed at something the professor said.

A growling voice interrupted his thoughts.

"You just had to bring her, didn't you?"

"Hello, Father. Yes, I did."

"Why? There are plenty of other women who would have done well instead of that outsider, who has already caused you embarrassment when her brothers caused a scene."

"That wasn't her fault."

"Everyone is going to think that you will go through the mating ceremony with her, and she isn't an appropriate mate for you."

A flash of anger coursed through Dean and he said, "Father, I'm going to tell you this one more time and one more time only. You will back off. Who I date and who I don't is my business and no one else's. When and if I take a mate, and who I choose to take as my mate is my business. We are done talking about this."

David looked at his son and understood that he had crossed the line. Without another word, he turned and stormed off.

Alexis rejoined him and asked, "Is everything okay?"

Dean mustered up a smile and said, "Yes. Everything is fine."

Although he wanted nothing more than to leave, Dean was obligated to stay for a while. He grabbed Alexis' hand and led

her to the dance floor, holding her close to him as their bodies swayed with the music.

She fit perfectly against his body, and he knew they made a stunning couple. Dean loved the feeling of holding her close to him, their arms wrapped around each other. His heart beat a little faster and an unidentifiable feeling swept through him.

Could I be falling in love with Alexis?

The thought startled him, and just as quickly as it came, he pushed it away again. Alexis might have changed. She wasn't the same person he had met in Ivy Springs. However, they were still from two different worlds and eventually, Alexis would want to go back to hers.

Finally, they could leave.

"Did you have a good time?" he asked when they got home.

"The best. I had so much fun," she said. "All of the people were so nice."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Dean said.

She looked at him from under her eyelashes and walked up to him, starting to unbutton his shirt.

"I think that I'm going to like being home just a little bit more."

ALEXIS

They lounged around the house that morning, since Dean didn't have to go into work. He told her how to make French toast.

"This is delicious. You did a terrific job," he said.

Beaming with pride, she said, "Thank you."

He noticed that she kept looking out the sliding glass doors a little wistfully.

"I just realized that with the exception of the shopping trip with Lucy and the gala, you hadn't been able to get outside."

Alexis nodded.

"Would you like to go snowshoeing?" he asked.

Her face brightened and she said, "I would love to."

"Do you want to invite Lucy and Micah?" he asked.

"Yeah. I love those guys," she said enthusiastically.

The four of them went to the base of the mountain and strapped on their snowshoes.

"Lucy, are you sure that this is okay for you to go?" Alexis asked, concerned.

"Of course. Exercise is good for the baby. The doctor said that I should keep doing everything that I would ordinarily do," Lucy said.

Alexis nodded, although she was still worried about her friend.

The morning was beautiful. The sun glinted off of the snow. White covered pine needles looked like a scene out of a work of art. Dean pointed out elk tracks in the snow.

There was a particularly deep spot and Alexis didn't put her foot down right. Her leg went in, all the way to her knee and she fell. Dean ran over to her, but Alexis was laughing so hard that she had a difficult time catching her breath.

"You scared me half to death, you turkey," Dean said.

That only made Alexis laugh harder. Pretty soon, all of them were laughing.

They walked on for a little while longer, and Dean said, "I bet you two that I could beat you in a race."

Micah laughed and said, "You wish."

"Care to put your money where your mouth is?" Dean asked, grinning.

"You're on. The loser buys dinner for everyone," Micah said.

"Hold on a minute, I want in on this," Lucy said. "You guys can't have all the fun."

"Fine. Since Alexis can't shift, she can start the race and then watch to see who the winner is," Dean said.

"She'll be biased," Micah protested, laughing.

"Sure I will be, for Lucy," Alexis said. "Us women have to stick together."

Lucy high-fived Alexis, and said, "You know it, sister."

Alexis' heart swelled with happiness when Lucy called her sister.

Although she was a little shocked when the three of them undressed out in the open, carefully folded their clothes, and then shifted, she tried hard not to show it.

She clapped when she saw Lucy and Micah and said, "You guys are so beautiful."

Although she knew that they weren't full wolves, she couldn't stop herself from stroking their silky soft fur.

"Wow. Amazing. I can't believe this."

Lucy howled, making Alexis giggle.

The three of them lined up and Alexis said, "On your mark, get set, go."

The three of them ran as fast as they could to the designated tree, turned around, and raced back. Alexis rooted for Lucy, but had to declare Dean the winner, who came in first by a head.

She scratched Dean's bear head and they started to shift, but stopped suddenly when they heard rustling in the trees. Alexis' heart nearly stopped when she saw seven hunters step out from the cover of the foliage.

They stared at Alexis and then the other three.

One of the men said, "Raf sent us. Our instructions are to take you back to Ivy Springs, even if we have to do it by force."

Alexis stood tall, her head high. She crossed her arms and said, "I am home. I'm not going anywhere."

Lucy, Micah, and Dean stood behind her.

"You have no choice. Raf hired us to kill your friends and take you back with us. As you can see, you are outnumbered," the man said.

"I do have a choice and I'm not going back. You'll have to kill me before I let you hurt my friends," Alexis said, rage flowing through her.

"Do you really think that you can win against us?"

"Maybe not, but I'll die trying," she snarled, her heart thundering.

They walked toward her and two of them grabbed her.

Alexis headbutted the woman who had grabbed her arm, breaking the woman's nose. She growled as she whirled

around and kneed the man in his nuts, making him howl in pain. The woman grabbed her again. Alexis snatched a handful of the woman's hair and used it to twist her head back. The hunter fell to the ground and Alexis landed on her neck with her leg.

The man stood up and Alexis nailed him again in the nuts. When he fell, she kneed him in the face hard enough to make him fall back. Then, she throat-punched him. Her two assailants were out.

She whirled around to see that the other five had weapons. Dean was fighting one of the men when another came up behind him and stabbed Dean in the side three times with a large knife. Alexis saw a rock that had been uncovered by the scuffle and picked it up. It was incredibly heavy, and it took super-human strength for her to raise it high and bring it crashing down on the back of the man's head as hard as she could. The man fell into the snow, blood spreading out from the large gash Alexis had caused.

Dean was able to take out the man he had been fighting. Alexis' stomach crunched and her gut tied into a knot when she saw how much blood he was losing. She started to run over to him, but she was grabbed from behind. A cold knife was pressed against her neck.

“Stop fighting or I will kill her.”

“No, you won't. That would sign your death warrant,” Alexis said.

Then, she suddenly dropped to her knees. As soon as she did that, Lucy leapt, her mouth closing in on the man's throat.

All of the hunters were down. Alexis ran over to Dean. She took off her coat and pressed it against his wounds. She pressed her face to his, begging him not to die.

“Stay here with him while we take care of these guys,” Lucy ordered.

Alexis nodded numbly and held onto Dean, crying, telling him that he was going to be okay.

It seemed like forever before Lucy and Micah came back. Alexis looked up at Lucy and asked, frantically, “Are you okay? Is the baby okay?”

Lucy smiled and touched Alexis’ shoulder and said, “We both are fine.”

“Dean, can you shift?” Micah asked.

Alexis cringed at the panic in Micah’s voice.

Slowly, Dean shifted back into his human form, the three knife wounds looking even more savage.

Lucy brought over his clothes. Alexis and Lucy gently dressed Dean. Then, Micah lifted him up and they started down the mountain.

The trip down took an eternity. Alexis constantly looked at Dean, who was barely conscious. He moaned. She prayed that Micah would have the strength to carry him all the way back to Dean’s truck.

Finally, they got back. The clan doctor was waiting for them, since Lucy had called him while Micah had driven frantically home to the house.

Micah carried Dean into his bedroom and put him on the bed. Dean was unconscious and was moaning. The doctor carefully undressed him and examined his wounds.

“He is gravely injured. I can’t be sure, but I think that one of his kidneys has been punctured. Without doing surgery or doing a scan on his body, I can’t be sure. It’s too dangerous to move him and I wouldn’t do anything differently anyway. There is nothing that I could do that a shifter body can’t do on its own.”

Alexis swallowed a sob.

“What can I do?” she asked.

The doctor gave her several bags of herbs that were labeled. The directions on how to use the contents of each bag were on the bags.

He reviewed everything with Alexis and said, "I'll be back tomorrow. Here is my number. Call me if anything changes."

"Okay," Alexis whispered.

Micah and Lucy hung around for a while. They sent out for some food, but Alexis' stomach was too twisted up for her to swallow anything.

"We're going to head home. Is there anything that we can do for you before we go?"

"I'm so sorry that I caused you guys trouble. I'll never forgive myself if Dean... if Dean doesn't..."

Lucy caressed Alexis' hair and then hugged her.

"Honey, none of this is your fault. You didn't even come here on your own, and you certainly didn't send the hunters after yourself. You had a right to stand up for yourself and refuse to leave."

Micah agreed and then said, "Remind me never to piss you off. You are one hell of a bad ass. I never would have guessed that you could fight like that."

"It was all instinct," Alexis confessed. "And I might have copied a few of the moves I saw in movies."

"You did well, and we are proud of you," Lucy said. "Call us if you need anything."

"I will. Thank you," Alexis said.

After they left, Alexis carefully laid next to Dean and cried.

DEAN

Dean's eyes were so heavy that he couldn't open them, no matter how hard he tried. His head felt fuzzy, and he couldn't think. His mouth was so dry that he was sure it was filled with cotton.

He took in a deep breath and tried to remember. A sharp pain in his side ripped through him, making him want to scream, but he didn't have the strength.

Where am I? What is going on?

Once again, he tried to open his eyes, but they wouldn't open.

He felt a cool, gentle hand brush his forehead. A wet sponge was pressed to his lips. Gradually, his memory returned. He remembered being on the mountain and facing seven hunters. Two of them grabbed Alexis and the rest of them brought out weapons.

Dean flinched as he felt the knife stabbing him over and over again from behind while he fought another man. He could feel the blood pouring out of him. Dean heard the snarling and growling as Lucy and Micah fought other hunters. He heard Alexis yelling and fighting.

He tried to look at his side. He knew that he had been stabbed at least three times. He didn't know if any of his organs had been hit, but he knew that he was losing a lot of blood.

He moaned and a soft voice said, “Shsh, you’re okay. You’re safe. It’s all over now.”

Darkness crowded in from all sides and Dean slowly drifted away again.

The room was dark when Dean woke up. His eyes frantically darted around the room, trying to figure out where he was. His heart raced and the pain in his side was unbearable. Finally, after a full minute, he calmed down when he realized that he was in his own bedroom.

He felt Alexis lying next to him. In spite of his initial panic and the pain in his side, he chuckled to himself. Alexis was snoring softly. The old princess would have been horrified at the thought that she snored and would have denied it vehemently, even if he had recorded proof.

Dean closed his eyes. They felt like they were covered in sandpaper. His mouth felt full of cotton and his head hurt as though a vise was squeezing it tightly. The slightest movement sent sharp pains tearing through his body.

Alexis sensed him moving and sat up, instantly awake.

“Dean,” she breathed.

She jumped out of the bed and rushed over to the other side.

“Water,” he managed to squeak out.

She grabbed a cup with a bendy straw in it. Carefully, she raised his head so he could have a drink.

“Sip it slowly. We don’t need you getting sick.”

He wanted to gulp it, he was so thirsty, but he knew that she was right.

“How long?” he asked.

“Two days,” she answered. “The doctor has been in to see you three times. He said that you are healing better than he had hoped. He wasn’t sure you were going to make it at first, but now that you have survived this long, he says you’re going to be just fine.”

Dean processed what she said. He squirmed a little and winced.

“I know it still hurts a lot. I have some tea that can help with that,” she said. “The doctor left it for you.”

She ran to the kitchen and came back with a cup of liquid. Dean took a sip and grimaced.

“This stuff is awful,” he spewed.

“I know,” she said. “The doctor said that it is pretty foul tasting, but it will help relieve the pain. It is wild lettuce and has the same pain killing effects as opium, but it isn’t addictive and doesn’t have any of those nasty side effects.”

He took another sip making an exaggerated face, which made Alexis laugh.

“I added honey, hoping it would help.”

“I appreciate the effort,” he said.

Deciding to get it over with, he gulped the entire cup. He thought that the taste was almost as bad as the pain in his side.

“Have you been taking care of me this whole time?” he asked.

“Yep. Just call me Nurse Alexis. The doctor said I was doing a terrific job,” she said, smiling proudly.

“I know that you are,” Dean said. “You’re terrific at anything you try.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Are you hungry?”

“Now that you mention it,” he said. “I could definitely eat.”

“Thank goodness. There is a ton of food piling up. Someone has to eat it.”

She came back with a plateful of chicken macaroni casserole.

“I know who made this. Elise makes it every time we have a potluck event. It’s one of my favorite dishes.”

Alexis helped him sit up enough that he could eat. Dean dug into the plate, starving. However, he only managed to get halfway through.

“I’m not surprised,” Alexis said. “You did almost die two days ago. Any other person would still be unconscious, let alone able to eat anything.”

“One of the great things about shifters is that we heal exponentially faster than other people.”

“Well, you aren’t ready to get up and go partying yet,” Alexis said. “Lie back down.”

After washing her hands, she carefully pulled back his bandage and tossed it in the trash. Then, she made a poultice of some herbs she pulled out of another bag and packed it against his side. He hissed at the coldness touching his skin. She closed it up with some gauze.

“Your skin is basically healed, but the doctor said that the poultice will continue drawing out any poisons that might be inside of you. It will help prevent infections.”

“Who would have thought that you would have made such a great nurse?” Dean asked.

“I never would have thought it in a million years,” she said. “But it’s the least that I could do. You would never have been hurt if Raf hadn’t sent those hunters after me.”

“You can’t blame yourself for that. I kind of had a hand in you being here in the first place,” he said.

“True.” She laughed. “And, much to your surprise, I don’t want to leave.”

Dean yawned and Alexis said, “Time for you go get more sleep. You still have a lot of internal healing to do.”

The next couple of days seemed to drag on. Dean wanted so much to get out of bed and do something. He was certain that the four walls of the bedroom were closing in on him and were suffocating him. However, each time he tried to move, it felt like someone was clawing him from the inside.

“You aren’t going to heal instantly,” Alexis reminded him.

Dean growled.

Micah and Lucy came by to see how he was doing.

“I feel like someone stabbed me in the kidneys,” Dean said.

“I wonder why that might be,” Micah asked.

“I don’t know. It must have been something I ate.”

“I’m glad that your sense of humor wasn’t cut out of you,” Lucy said.

“Alexis has been great,” Dean said. “She has been playing nurse. The doctor told me that he couldn’t have hired someone better. She followed all of his instructions to the letter, and she is likely the reason that I’m still alive.”

“We’ve been checking in with her,” Lucy said. “That’s why we waited to come until today. She said that you were healing really well and weren’t falling asleep every ten minutes.”

“She feels guilty, like this whole mess is her fault,” Dean said. “I tried to convince her that it wasn’t, but I don’t think she believes me.”

“We’ve told her the same thing. She had no control over what her brother or the hunters did,” Micah said.

Dean knew that Micah wanted to tell Dean that this whole mess was his fault for kidnapping Alexis to begin with, but Micah held his tongue.

“Where is she?” Dean asked.

“When we showed up, she asked us if we would hang out until she got back. She needed to go to the store for a couple of things,” Lucy said. “Judging by the kitchen, it’s not food. You have enough to last you for the year. Alexis has put a lot of it in the freezer for future dinners and lunches.”

“That is one thing about the people around here. They care, and the best way they know how to show it is by bringing food,” Dean replied.

“You should have seen Alexis during the fight,” Lucy said. “She managed to take out the two people who grabbed her. Then, she saved your life by knocking out the man who was stabbing you.”

“Where did she learn to fight like that?” Dean asked, amazed.

“I don’t know. She said it was all instinct and moves she learned from watching movies,” Lucy said. “Whatever it was, she was amazing.”

Dean rubbed his chin and said, “I didn’t know that she saved my life. She never said anything about that.”

“I doubt if she would,” Micah said. “The old Alexis would have rubbed it in your face, but the new Alexis is a lot humbler.”

“What are you going to do now?” Lucy asked.

“I guess I’ll go back to work. Dad has taken over my duties for now and making a mess of my new system, although I am grateful to him,” Dean said.

“What about Alexis?” Micah asked. “Raf might send more people after her.”

“You know, when I saw those two people grab Alexis, my heart stopped. The thought of her getting hurt, let alone losing her, was more than I could handle. I realized at that moment that I had fallen in love with her. As soon as I am healed, I am going to ask her to go through the mating ceremony with me.”

Micah and Lucy congratulated him.

“I know that Alexis loves you,” Lucy said. “She hasn’t said as much, but she has proven it. I know that you guys will be happy together.”

“Even though this turned out well, I wouldn’t recommend kidnapping any other women, even if you are trying to save lives,” Micah teased.

“Nah, Bruh, I’m done with that.” Dean laughed.

ALEXIS

Alexis wasn't surprised when Dean woke up a couple of mornings later and announced that he was going to work.

"I feel a lot better. There is only a twinge in my side when I move wrong," he said.

Worried, Alexis asked, "Can't you wait a couple more days and completely heal? You don't want to tear anything inside. You said your father is taking care of your duties."

Dean put his hands on her cheeks and kissed her.

"Thank you for worrying about me, but the doctor said that I was good to go," Dean said. "You heard him for yourself."

"I know, but..."

"No buts. I'm fine. I promise that if I start to feel tired or I hurt, I'll come home and let you fuss over me a little more."

Alexis grinned at this. She still didn't like the idea of Dean going to work, but she knew that she couldn't stop him. He was getting a serious case of cabin fever.

She walked around the house after he left, not sure what to do with herself. Alexis had been so focused on Dean and trying to keep him from dying, that she hadn't had any time to herself.

Plopping on the couch, she decided that she would color and watch some old reruns of *In the Heat of the Night*. She

really liked the character, Althea. Just as the theme song finished, the doorbell rang.

Alexis got up to answer the door, fully expecting it to be another well-wisher with another casserole. She kind of hoped that it was more brownies. The last batch of brownies that someone brought were to die for.

She was surprised to see Dean's father standing at the door. The mean look on his face made Alexis' heart clutch.

"Please come in," Alexis said. "Can I get you some coffee?"

"No, I won't be staying long," he said tersely.

"Dean isn't here. He insisted that he was well enough to go to work. He had the doctor's blessing," Alexis said.

"I know that. I'm not here to see Dean. I've come to talk to you."

"Okay," Alexis said nervously.

"This is all your fault," David growled. "Because you are here, my son was almost murdered by a bunch of thugs. Oh, I heard that you saved his life by taking out the man who was stabbing him, and that you worked day and night to nurse him back to health, but that wouldn't have been necessary if you weren't here to begin with."

"I had no idea that Raf would send people after me," Alexis said.

"It doesn't matter what you thought or what you expected. The fact is that they came for you and because of that, I almost lost my son and our clan almost lost their alpha. This is all on your head," he roared.

Alexis stood still and didn't say anything, willing the tears in her eyes not to fall.

"You've done nothing but cause trouble since you got here, what with that scene that your brother caused at the restaurant and now this. On top of that, you are an embarrassment. It's not proper for an unmarried woman to be living in the same house as an unmarried man, unless they are betrothed, which

you clearly are not. His duty is to find a mate and go through the mating ceremony. He can't do that while you are distracting him."

She bit the inside of her lip to keep it from trembling. Her hands were laced together and clenched, her knuckles white. Alexis was sure that her heart was going to rip itself out of her chest. Still, she said nothing and waited for the man to finish.

"I want you to pack up your shit and get the hell out of my town and away from my son," he demanded, pointing a finger at her.

I'm not going anywhere, Alexis thought defiantly.

"Is that all?" she asked, quietly.

He snarled at her, whirled around and stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

Alexis was proud of herself. The old her would have gotten in his face and given him a dressing down. She also would have told him that she wasn't even in Livingston because she had wanted to come.

Scratching her head, she wondered what the old man would think if he knew that the only reason she was here in the first place was because Dean had kidnapped her. It had been after she had threatened to have him, Micah, and Lucy killed, but still, a kidnapping is a kidnapping. However, she figured that there were only four people who knew the truth and that was more than enough. Alexis would rather die than cause any trouble for Dean.

Her hands were shaking and she couldn't relax, so she called Lucy and asked, "How are you and the baby?"

"We're doing great," Lucy said. "How are you?"

"I'm good. Dean went to work today, so I'm a little worried about him," she said.

"There is something else wrong. What is it?" Lucy asked.

"It's all good," Alexis replied.

"You can't lie to a shifter," Lucy said. "Spill it."

Alexis told her about David's visit.

"Wow. He had no right to do that. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I don't know whether I'm angry, upset, or understanding of his feelings because he almost lost his son."

"Regardless of his feelings, he was out of line. You should tell Dean."

"I don't want to cause any problems between him and his father," Alexis protested. "Promise me that you or Micah won't tell him, either."

"Dean would be angry if he ever found out."

"He won't, unless his father tells him, which I doubt that he would," Alexis said.

Lucy agreed that neither of them would tell Dean about the visit, although Lucy was clearly unhappy about it.

Alexis changed the subject and asked, "When is the baby shower?"

"I'm not sure. Ginger, who is arranging it, always does things at the last minute."

"Is there anything that you still need?"

Lucy laughed and said, "You've bought the baby enough."

"That's my prerogative." Alexis laughed.

They talked for a few more minutes and then Lucy had to get back to work. Alexis stared at the clock more than she did the television, waiting for Dean to come home.

Dean's face was pale when he came home that afternoon. He had bags under his eyes, and he looked completely exhausted.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

He brushed a kiss across her lips and said, "Thank you for worrying about me. I'm good. I'm just a little tired. I had forgotten how busy everything is there. Plus, it felt like every single person in the tri-state area had to stop by and ask me how I was doing, how I felt, and to try to get details about

what happened. I'm thinking that I'm going to write a letter saying that I'm feeling fine, healing well, and include a narrative about what happened. That way, when someone comes to my door, I can just hand them the letter."

Alexis laughed. She was glad to see that as tired as he seemed, he hadn't lost his sense of humor. She was still worried, though, because Dean said he was going to take a nap before dinner. Dean wasn't a man who would ordinarily take naps.

He seemed more like himself when he woke up, which relieved Alexis.

"Did you get anything accomplished or was the entire day one long stream of visitors?"

"Of course, there was a meeting first thing this morning. I'm really glad that Amy takes great notes because I was zoned out for most of it. They were talking about the different committees and budget requests, all of which could have been accomplished by sending emails. One of our new horse ranchers came in to talk about a new idea he had and just wanted some advice. Actually, he just wanted me to tell him that it was a good idea."

"Was it?"

"It was and I complimented him on his thoughts. It was simple, but it made his day."

"That's why you are a good leader. You care about the people. You don't let the power of the position get to your head."

"The second that starts to happen, I hope that someone smacks me so I can step down."

In spite of his insistence that he was fine, Dean showered and went to bed right after dinner. Alexis wasn't tired, so she hung out in the living room. She was trying to read a book, but she couldn't focus. The letters seemed to dance off of the page and float in the air around her in a great big jumbled mess.

She resisted the urge to go check on Dean, telling herself that he was fine. Worry consumed her, so she eventually

peeked in the door. He was sleeping peacefully.

Images from the fight replayed through her head for the hundredth time. The terror she felt when the doctor told her that he might not make it flashed in her mind, as did the relief when he finally said that he thought Dean would pull through and be as good as new.

“I love him,” she whispered. “I’m in love with him.”

A hot flush burned her cheeks when she thought about the kid’s crush she had on Luke and how she had acted around him. She had been a complete idiot and made an absolute fool of herself. Humiliation crept through her when she thought of her behavior, as did remorse for the way that she had treated Jamie.

Alexis wondered if Dean loved her, even a little.

“What if he didn’t?” she asked herself.

Dean was gone all day. She could just wait for him to leave, pack up her stuff and go back to Ivy Springs, although she couldn’t imagine doing that. She could build or buy a house in or around Livingston.

“What would it be like to be in the same area if Dean told me that he didn’t love me the same way that I love him? To see him, especially with another woman, would tear my heart out.”

She decided that she would go somewhere else and just start over. She still had billions in her bank account, so she never had to worry about money.

Thoughts of Lucy popped into her mind and how Lucy was dedicated to making the world a better place for others.

“There are so many ways that I could help other people. I could help create a homeless shelter that had apartments for the people and resources to help them get back on their feet. I could create a community center. I could even buy a huge piece of land and create a no kill shelter for animals, like the Asher House.”

Alexis thought of all the documentaries and news stories she had recently seen about the struggles that people and animals faced and had been shocked. She had been so blinded by her own selfishness that she never saw the real world. It was a world full of need, good people, and people and animals who needed a helping hand.

Laughing, she realized how much she really had changed. She could never go back to Ivy Springs because that life no longer fit who she was.

“I’ll figure things out,” Alexis told herself confidently.

The next morning, she woke up still tired. She made breakfast for Dean, but her nauseated stomach wouldn’t let her eat a single bite. Then, she realized that she had been so busy taking care of Dean that she had been sick for a couple of weeks. She was tired all the time.

After Dean left, she called the doctor.

“How is Dean?” he asked. “Is everything all right?”

“It is and he is great. I’m calling about myself. I haven’t been feeling well lately.”

The doctor made an appointment for her. After a blood test, he came back into the room, smiling.

“Congratulations. You’re going to be a mother.”

A thrill exploded in Alexis and she smiled widely.

Then, she thought, *How in the world am I going to tell Dean? What is his father going to think?*

ALEXIS

Alexis worried about how to tell Dean that he was going to be a father. She thought that he would be happy, but she really wasn't sure. After all, he had never said anything to her to indicate that he loved her. She knew that he cared about her. He almost died to protect her. However, he was a great guy and would do anything to protect those he loved.

He was smiling when he walked in the door.

"You look a lot better than you did yesterday," Alexis said. "I guess today wasn't as stressful?"

"No. I had a great day," he said.

"Good, I'm glad. Can I get you something to drink?" she asked as he sat on the couch.

"No, I'm good for now. Will you sit next to me?" he asked, patting the cushion next to him. "I want to talk to you about something."

Uh-oh, Alexis thought. This is where he asks me to leave.

Dean seemed a little nervous. Alexis was a little worried because she had never seen him like this before.

"I never would have guessed when I kidnapped you, that you would change my life so much. I guess I really wasn't thinking at all, or I wouldn't have done it. It was wrong for me to do that, but I have to admit that I'm not at all sorry. Alexis, I have watched you change into a wonderful, smart, warm, woman."

This is a strange prelude to getting the boot.

Alexis clasped her hands together, nervously waiting for the words that she was sure were coming.

“My life is so much better with you in it,” Dean said.

He fished around in his pocket and pulled out a small box. Alexis gasped at the beautiful gold and diamond ring that was inside.

“I never would have guessed, in a million years, that I would fall in love with the infamous Alexis Faison, but I did. I can’t imagine my life without you. Will you go through the mating ceremony with me?”

Her eyes opened wide and she was speechless for a minute. Then, she threw her arms around him, holding him tightly.

“Yes,” she said. “I am so in love with you, and there is nothing in the world that I want more.”

“There are a lot of duties associated with your station. Micah has hired a personal assistant to help Lucy with hers. I’m happy to do the same for you, at least until you get the hang of everything.”

“I’m excited to take on the responsibility,” Alexis said.

She put her hands over her face and said, “I can’t believe this is really happening to me. This is too good to be true.”

“I’ll spend a lifetime proving to you that it’s very true,” Dean said, kissing her.

When he pulled away, Alexis smiled at Dean.

“I have something that I need to talk to you about, too,” she said.

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“You know that third, small bedroom that is next to the master bedroom?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, cautiously.

“I think that room would make a great nursery,” Alexis said.

“Do you want to start a family right away?” Dean asked.

“I think that decision has already been made,” she told him, with a shy smile.

Dean stared at her for a second. Then, his face lit up as he realized what Alexis was trying to tell him.

“We’re going to have a baby?” he asked.

“We are,” Alexis said, nodding. “I found out today.”

“That is terrific. I’m so excited.”

Alexis heaved a huge sigh of relief.

“Just think, our baby and Lucy’s and Micah’s baby can grow up together.”

Dean pulled her close and said, “You’ve made me the happiest man in the world.”

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. The kiss spoke of incredible passions and a life full of love.

A couple of weeks later, Alexis was in one of the chambers of the ceremonial hall getting ready. She wore the traditional dress of the women who married the alphas of the clan. It was a cobalt blue dress that had intricate flowers embroidered on it. Pearls were sewn into the flower patterns.

Lucy had helped Alexis style her hair so that it resembled a crown atop her head. A couple of pearl studded combs held the coronet in place.

“You look absolutely gorgeous,” Lucy complimented her.

“Thank you,” Alexis said.

Ginger spontaneously hugged her and said, “I’m a little envious. Dean is a great catch.”

Alexis smiled.

“You will be a terrific alpha queen,” Ginger said. “I know that you will work hard to make sure that every person in the

clan and in the town are taken care of. You are such an amazing person, and it's an honor to be your friend."

Micah came for Lucy, who was Alexis' matron of honor.

"Alexis, you are gorgeous," Micah complimented. "Almost as beautiful as Lucy."

Alexis blushed and said, "Thank you."

Trembling so hard that she was afraid that she would shake herself out of her shoes, Alexis took her place in the hallway. There was no one for her to lean on in case she did fall. She had a vision of herself taking the first step, tripping, and sprawling all over the floor.

"Knock it off," she muttered to herself.

The music cued her, and Alexis took her first step. She saw Dean waiting at the altar, dressed in a pair of black slacks and a traditional white tunic. He was so tall and handsome, it stole Alexis' breath. He smiled at her, and the rest of the world faded away. With every step, her heart fluttered faster.

Elder Fredrick said, "Today, we gather to witness the union of these two souls destined to be together, as Dean, alpha of our clan, and Alexis, his beloved mate, come before us."

The atmosphere tingled with electricity as Dean gently took Alexis' hands in his strong, steady grip. Their eyes locked, a union of souls reflected in their depths. Their bond was unbreakable, a testament to the love that had grown between them.

Dean's voice carried with unwavering certainty as he recited his vow. "Alexis, my mate and my heart, I stand before you and our clan, vowing to protect, cherish, and honor you for all eternity. As alpha, I pledge to lead our clan with wisdom and strength, guided by the love we share."

Alexis took a deep breath and prayed that her voice wouldn't crack as she recited her vow. "Dean, my love and my alpha, I stand here willingly, entrusting my heart and life to you. I promise to stand by your side, to support and uplift you, and to love and care for our clan as my own."

Elder Fredrick wrapped a blue satin ribbon around both of their hands uniting them.

“I hereby declare our alpha Dean mated to his queen, Alexis. May their lives be filled with joy as they lead our clan together.”

Everyone clapped.

Dean looked down at Alexis and smiled. He touched her cheek and whispered, “I love you,” before he captured her lips in a passionate kiss.

The reception was in the same large, cavernous room next to where they got married. Alexis and Dean stood by the entrance, greeting the guests. Alexis was excited to see that all of them seemed to accept her as Dean’s mate, even though she was an outsider.

Everyone mingled while the room was made ready for the reception. Tables were brought in and chairs were rearranged. Alexis clung tightly to Dean’s hand. Everyone wanted to talk to them and she was a little shy.

The band started playing and Dean bowed over her hand with a grin.

“I believe that this is our dance,” he said.

He led her out onto the dance floor, and Alexis felt on top of the world as he held her in his arms as they moved in time with the slow, sweet song. The dance floor was crowded when the second song started.

At one point, David asked Alexis to dance with him. She didn’t want to, but couldn’t see a way out of it without causing a scene. She waited for him to berate her or say something along the lines of her not being worthy of being Dean’s mate.

Alexis was very surprised when he said, “I was wrong for attacking you that day and I hope that you’ll forgive me.”

“Of course,” she said.

“Thank you. Welcome to the family.”

The rest of the evening was a blur. Finally, it was time for the bride and groom to depart.

Dean opened the door of the house and carried her across the threshold. He kissed her and said, “Welcome home, my queen.”

THANK YOU FOR READING!

Thank you for reading *Captivated By Wild Bear 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!

WILD WOLF BETROTHAL (SNEAK PEEK)

A ROGUE SHIFTERS AND HUNTERS

Blurb

From packmates to soulmates: When friendships evolve into passion.

Micah and I, wolf shifters, had gone through a betrothal ceremony when we were barely out of diapers. I quickly forgot about it as I planned out my life. I had a degree in social work and was making a difference with troubled children and families. Then, one night, my past caught up with me. The elder and alpha visited me and reminded me of the betrothal. Now, as Micah was about to be made alpha, they demanded that I make good on the promise.

I already had my life planned out, and it didn't include going through the mating ceremony with my good friend. Overwhelmed and needing to clear my mind, I left home and found myself in Ivy Springs, Colorado. It was a beautiful city, but it had a dark undercurrent. The billionaires, whose roots went back centuries, had declared war on all shifters.

Micah tracked me down, determined to make me fall in love with him. Our good friend, Dean, soon followed. Dean was also about to become alpha and wanted me to be his mate.

None of us could have predicted the trouble we found ourselves in.

Would we even survive long enough to find true love?

Bear shifter – Good friend who wanted more than friendship from me.

Faisons and evil hunters – People who would stop at nothing to destroy every shifter on the planet, including Micah, Dean, and me.

Wolf shifter – My betrothed who was determined to capture my heart.

Micah came to Ivy Springs to win my heart. Instead, he found danger that nearly cost both of us our lives.

Would our friendship survive Ivy Springs' war and turn into true love?

“Wild Wolf Betrothal” is a passionate, standalone paranormal romance, promising an enduring happily-ever-after.

“**S**top that.” Lucy laughed as she slapped Micah’s hand. “Those are my chili cheese fries. If you want some, order your own.”

“I don’t want a whole big order. Besides, you can’t eat all of those by yourself.”

“Watch me,” Lucy said, smugly.

She signaled for the waitress to come over.

“My friend, here, would love to have his *own* order of chili cheese fries, please. Add onions, tomatoes, and bacon bits.”

The waitress smiled at Micah and walked away from the table. Micah and Lucy had been coming here for ages, and he suspected that the waitress had a crush on him, although she never did more than lightly flirt with him. The waitress probably thought that he and Lucy were an item.

They had grown up together and were very close. Micah appreciated everything about Lucy. She had a great heart. She had a wonderful personality and was sweet to everyone. It was nothing for her to walk by a homeless person and end up buying them a meal. Lucy also possessed an incredible sense of humor.

More than once, Micah thought about asking her out on a formal date, but he was afraid that it would ruin their friendship. Besides, that issue was about to come to the surface sooner rather than later. Micah was next in line to become the alpha of his wolf shifter clan. He and Lucy had

been betrothed to each other when they were very young by their parents. Technically, she was his fiancé. He thought that they would get along very well together as a mated couple since they were such close friends now.

Lucy was thrilled about her day. Her dark amethyst eyes lit up and a huge smile crossed her face.

“The family had been struggling for a long time. The son was out of control and pretty much ruled the household with fear,” she said. “We’ve been working a long time on how the parents can set boundaries and for the son to understand that he needs to adhere to the boundaries. He is getting counseling for his anger control issues. I think they are going to be a success story.”

“That’s exciting,” Micah said.

“I love feeling like I can make a difference for other people in a positive way. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and I’ve decided that I am going to go for my doctorate in social work,” Lucy said, excitedly. “I know that it will be a challenge, but I’m up for it.”

“I know that you will do great. Are you going to make me call you Dr. Lucy?” Micah teased.

“I just might do that,” Lucy said. “Although I love working for the organization that I’m with right now, someday I would like to open my own practice.”

She looked at Micah and asked, “If you could do anything in the world, what would you do?”

Micah shrugged his shoulders and said, “I really don’t know. I haven’t thought a whole lot about it. My life has been planned out for me since I was a kid. I’ve been groomed to take on the role of alpha of the clan since I was a teenager.”

“I would hate that so much. I need the ability to choose my own future and determine the course of my own life,” Lucy said.

Micah wondered if she even remembered that she had been betrothed to him and that someday, she would be expected to become his mate. He decided to keep his mouth shut and not

remind her of that right now, though. That would be a very hard conversation for another day – one that he was not looking forward to.

They ended their evening with a chaste hug.

Micah thought about what Lucy had said. What would he have done if he had the power to choose his own destiny? He had always been interested in the military. Becoming a firefighter also sounded challenging and something that he would enjoy doing. Like Lucy, the idea of making a positive difference in someone's life sounded good.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. Day dreaming did no good. He had a role to fill and he would do the best job that he possibly could.

A few nights later, Micah and Dean went to the club for drinks. Dean was a life-long friend of both Micah's and Lucy's.

“My father and the elders called a meeting last night,” Dean said. “They told me that the ceremony to make me the alpha of my bear shifter clan is going to happen in a month and a half.”

“Are you ready?” Micah asked.

Heaving a heavy sigh, Dean said, “I guess so. After all, just like you, I've spent my entire life learning about the laws, sub-laws, policies, and the other ins and outs of being an alpha. I know the duties and how to perform them.”

“But are you ready to take on that responsibility,” Micah asked.

“To be honest, I was hoping that I would have a few more years of enjoying life. But, when the elders and the current alpha speak, I have no choice,” Dean said, gloomily.

“I know what you mean.”

“That was not the only thing that they had to say. They also informed me that I need to find a mate,” Dean said. “I wasn't really ready for that either.”

“What are you going to do?”

“There is a woman who I’ve been in love with since I was about ten. She has no clue and I’m pretty sure that she looks at me as more of a brother than anything else. But I can’t imagine being with another woman,” Dean said.

“Who is this lucky woman?” Micah asked.

Dean shook his head and said, “Well, I’ll let you know after I talk to her. I don’t want to jinx anything.”

Micah nodded and didn’t press Dean for the name, although Micah was pretty sure that he knew exactly who the object of Dean’s affection was. Micah had suspected that Dean had a thing for Lucy for a while. Dean hung on every word that Lucy said and practically jumped through hoops anytime Lucy said that she wanted or needed anything.

Micah thought about casually mentioning that he and Lucy were betrothed, but that information had been kept quiet all these years. Only a handful of people knew. Plus, he would let Lucy make her own decisions. If she decided that she wanted to be with Dean, then he wished them both nothing but happiness. He would do his part by formerly ending the betrothal between the two of them.

A few days later, Micah was summoned to a meeting with the elders and his father. With a sinking heart, he stepped into the conference room. He knew exactly what this meeting was going to be about.

“Sit down, Son,” his father said, pointing to a chair.

All of the elders leaned in close to his father, so they could hear what he had to say.

Micah took a deep breath and pressed his lips together. He waited to hear the words that he knew was coming.

“I’m getting older,” his father said. “I would like to take your mother to visit all the different places in the country that she has always dreamed about going and maybe even to places in Europe, Asia, and South America. You have made me proud with all the hard work you have done over the years, preparing for the role of alpha. You are smart, responsible, and you are

able to analyze a situation before making any kind of rash decisions.”

Micah held back a sigh, so that he wouldn't seem disrespectful, but he did wish that his father would just hurry up and spit out the words that Micah knew were coming.

“In two months' time, I'm going to step down in my role as alpha and you will assume it,” his father pronounced in a booming voice that made Micah wonder if the older man was expecting a standing ovation for his declaration.

Instead, Micah merely nodded as all the heads turned toward him.

“You know that in your new role as an alpha, you will be expected to take a mate,” one of the elders informed him.

Micah looked at him with a straight face, but bit back the immediate response that was on the tip of his tongue. He was not ready for a mate and did not want a mate.

After a couple of seconds, he said, “I would prefer to assume the role and become comfortable with it before changing my life further by taking a mate.”

That comment went over as well as he thought that it would. All of the elders' faces puckered, like they had just sucked on a lemon, at the same time, making Micah wonder if they practiced that reaction. He would have laughed if the situation wasn't so tense.

“It is tradition. It is the way that it has always been done,” the elder said.

“It is tradition. It isn't law. Times have changed since that tradition was established,” Micah argued.

Another round of puckered faces made Micah groan. He had an idea that he wasn't going to win this argument.

Ignoring his comment, his father asked, “Is there anyone special in your life who you love and you could make a life with?”

Micah looked at his father and said, sardonically, “You know that there isn't.”

The elder stapled his fingers and said, in a very serious voice, “You remember that when you were children, you and Lucy Stratton were betrothed together.”

“That contract is not fair,” Micah said. “We were both too young to even know what was happening to us. We both should have a right to choose who we love and mate with.”

“The contract is formal and is binding. The two of you will go through the mating ceremony one month after you have taken your place as alpha of this clan,” the elder said in a voice that brooked no argument. “It is your duty, and you have no choice.”

Micah sucked in a huge breath and was about to make another argument, but his father said, “You and Lucy have a great relationship. You are friends and hang out all the time.”

“Friends, not lovers,” Micah argued, weakly.

“Enough of this,” the elder said, his fist crashing down on the table, making a thunderous sound echo through the room. “You will go through the mating ceremony with Lucy. End of discussion.”

“Have you talked to Lucy about this?” Micah asked.

“No. We wanted to talk to you about it first. If you had someone else you preferred for the role, we would have given you that option. Since you don’t, Lucy it is,” his father said.

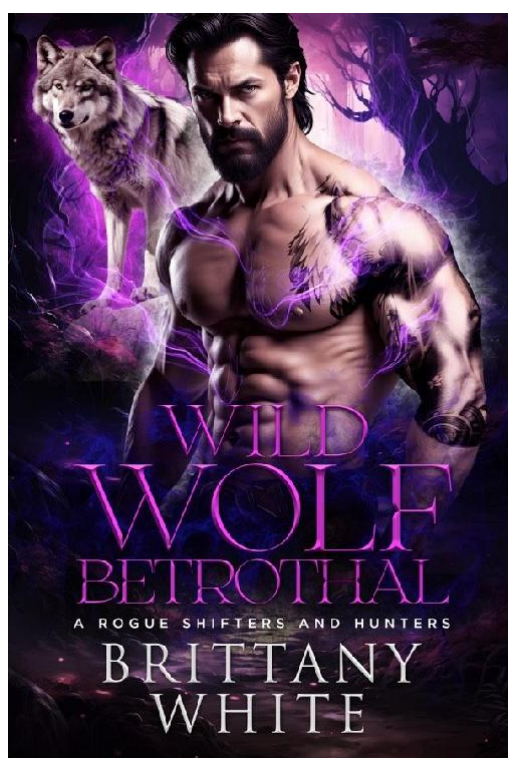
“So, I get an option but Lucy doesn’t,” Micah asked.

Once again, he was met with a round of hard stares.

“The decision is final,” the elder said.

As everyone left the room, Micah thought, *I’m glad that I’m not going to have to be the one to have that conversation with her.*

Considering what Lucy had said about being glad she could determine the course of her own life, being told that she would be forced to go through a mating ceremony would go over like a ton of bricks. He could almost see the fireworks already.



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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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