

WILD
WOLF
BETROTHAL

A ROGUE SHIFTERS AND HUNTERS

BRITTANY
WHITE

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MICAH

“**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 formally 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 staped 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.

LUCY

Lucy was smiling when she got home. It had been another successful day. She had been working with a girl who had been abused as a child and was struggling to fit in with her foster family. However, the girl was starting to understand that the world around her wasn't trying to hurt her and was largely made up of good people. It had been a very long process and Lucy was in the mood to celebrate.

Her version of celebrating was going home to her nice apartment and ordering Chinese food to be delivered so she didn't have to cook. Afterward, she made herself a nice glass of wine and ran a hot bubble bath. Hot water, wine, and a good book was the perfect combination in Lucy's mind.

She was just about to get into the tub when there was a loud knock on the door. Lucy quickly wrapped her soft, plush robe around her and rushed to the door. Someone banging on her door this time of night, without a warning, couldn't be good news.

Her heart sank when she saw who was standing on her doorstep. Her grandfather, who was an elder in the clan was there, along with her father, and the alpha. She stared at them in stunned silence for a minute.

"Can we come in?" her grandfather asked politely as he took a step inside.

She wanted to push him back out the door and tell him "no," but her good manners and self-preservation took over.

"Of course, come in," she said.

She backed away from the door, trying to ignore the sickening knot in her stomach that threatened to make her double over.

She motioned to the couch and chair while she sat down in her favorite recliner. The comfortable chair normally helped relieve all the tension from her day, but this time it was no help. She simply waited, with her arms folded in her lap, for the world to come crashing down on her.

They got the pleasantries over with relatively quickly. None of these men really cared what kind of day she'd had or how she was doing. She just wanted them to get to whatever nasty business they had.

Her grandfather spoke. She hoped that her face didn't reflect the dislike that she had always felt for this cold, unfeeling, manipulative man.

"As you know, when you were a child, you went through a betrothal ceremony with Micah," he said.

"To be honest, I don't even remember it," Lucy said, her heart thundering a million miles an hour.

Now she knew why they were here.

"I was practically still a baby when that happened."

Her grandfather ignored her comments and continued.

"Micah is going to become the alpha of our clan in two months' time."

"I'm glad for him," Lucy said.

"He will need a mate," her grandfather said.

"I wish him luck," Lucy replied.

Lucy could tell that her grandfather was becoming very irritated with her responses. She really didn't care.

"You, as his officially betrothed, are going to go through the mating ceremony with him," her grandfather said.

"Have you talked to Micah about this?" she asked.

"We have," her grandfather said. "Micah understands the necessity of taking a mate. He understands that the two of you have an official engagement, and he is willing to go through the mating ceremony with you."

"No," Lucy said.

"No?" her grandfather asked, his voice deadly calm.

"No. I love Micah as a friend and as a brother. I am not in love with him. I will not spend the rest of my life trapped in a loveless relationship. If and when I go through the mating ceremony, it will be with someone who I love."

"You will be his mate and you will take on the responsibilities of the alpha's mate," her grandfather said, with finality.

"No," Lucy replied again. "I've already made plans for my life. I'm going to go back to school and get my doctorate degree in social work. Eventually,

I will open up my own practice. If I ever go through the mating ceremony, it will be on my own terms – not because someone else forced me to be mated to someone I am not romantically interested in.”

“You are honor bound to go through the mating ceremony with Micah. You were betrothed.”

“I was so young a child that I don’t even remember it. Arranged marriages are outdated and not done in modern American culture.”

Lucy was horrified when her grandfather chuckled evilly.

“I’m afraid, dear child, that you have no choice in the matter. You will do what you are told. In three months’ time, you will go through the mating ceremony with Micah. It is your duty and you will comply.”

With those words, he stood, as did the rest of the entourage. The elder swept out of the living room and Lucy imagined that she could see the royal purple robe of a king being twirled behind him as he made his way, regally, toward her door.

The alpha turned back to Lucy and said, “Micah really cares about you. I’m sure that he won’t mind if you go back to school and start your own practice.”

Then, he closed the door behind him as he stepped out on the porch.

Lucy locked the door behind them and leaned against it. Her face was red and her fists were clenched. How dare they invade her space to dictate what she was going to do with the rest of her life. She was so angry, she was sure that she could feel smoke coming out of her ears.

She clenched her jaw as she thought about what the alpha said. Lucy knew that he meant well, but to suggest that she would have to ask Micah’s permission to go back to school and live out her dreams was laughable.

If she was forced to marry Micah, life as she knew it would be over. First, she would be expected to pop out a couple of heirs. Then, she would be expected to take on the role of the alpha queen, which were substantial. She wouldn’t have time to do her social work or go to school.

Lucy rubbed her head and swallowed her glass of wine in one gulp. She sat back down in her recliner, the now lukewarm bubble bath forgotten.

“There has to be a way out of this,” Lucy said. “Micah is a great guy, but I can’t see spending the rest of my life with him as his mate.”

She thoroughly enjoyed the life she had now. She had her work, her plans to go to school, and she didn’t need anyone’s permission to go anywhere or do anything. Lucy valued her alone time. Nothing made her happier than

coming home to her own place where she could relax to complete silence.

Pacing around her apartment, she tried to think of how she could avoid the mating ceremony. She had an idea that Micah had also been told that he had no choice in the matter. She doubted if talking to him would help, anyway. If Micah saw it as part of his responsibility as an alpha, he would likely go along with it. He was definitely all about doing his duty.

Finally, completely exhausted, she went to bed, determined to find a solution to her problem.

Dean called her the next morning and asked, "Do you have lunch plans?"

She almost told him that she was busy but decided that a distraction would be healthy. Lucy knew from experience that the best way to come up with a solution to a problem was to step away from it for a while.

Lucy smiled widely when she saw her friend waiting for her at her favorite Mexican restaurant.

They hugged and Lucy felt relieved that at least something in her life was normal.

Dean asked her what was going on in her life. She told him about her recent break throughs with some clients and then told him about her plan to go back to school, get her doctorate, and then one day, open her own practice.

"That sounds incredible," he said.

"So, what's been going on for you? It has been a couple of weeks since we've hung out," Lucy said.

"I had a meeting with our elders and my father. I'm going to become the alpha in the next month and a half," he said.

"Congratulations," Lucy said. "You are a great guy, and I know that you'll be a terrific leader."

"Yeah, but now I have to find a mate," Dean said.

Something in his tone made Lucy's stomach clench.

"You've probably figured out that I've been in love with you since we were about ten," Dean said. "I would be honored if you would consider going through the mating ceremony with me."

"Don't the elders expect you to have a mate who is a bear shifter?" she asked.

"They don't care, as long as the mate I choose has good character and would benefit our clan," Dean said.

Lucy drew in a deep breath and said, "Dean, I'm flattered that you think of me that way. However, I'm not in love with you. I can't go through the

mating ceremony with you. Besides, I have my own life to live, and it doesn't include all the duties of an alpha queen. I know that you will find an amazing woman who would be honored to stand by your side and give you the love you deserve."

Dean lowered his head and stared at his plate. Lucy felt bad. She had no idea that Dean had these kinds of feelings for her.

"Is it Micah?" Dean asked.

"What?" Lucy yelped.

"Is it Micah who has captured your heart?"

"No. No one has. Like I said, I have my own life planned. I like living alone. I like being single. I have no intention of going through the mating ceremony with you, Micah, or anyone else, for a long time, if ever."

Lucy felt a huge migraine exploding in her head.

She threw a twenty on the table and said, "Thanks for the lunch invite, Dean. I wish you luck. I need to go home."

As soon as the door shut to her apartment, she felt the entire place welcome her. It was as though the walls were living, breathing entities that wrapped her up in a warm hug. Her soft bed beckoned her and she laid down, covering her eyes with her arm.

It seemed like her entire life had been turned upside down in the last day.

She knew that her father, grandfather, and the alpha would continue to harass her until she agreed to go through the mating ceremony with Micah. She wouldn't find a minute's worth of peace and quiet anywhere.

Although she didn't have a long-term plan, she decided that she needed a change of scenery. It would give her the time to come up with a solution.

The next morning, she called her office.

"Martha, this is Lucy. Something has come up and I need to take an extended leave of absence. I have no idea when I'll be back."

"I hope that everything is okay," her boss said. "Your job will be waiting for you when you are ready."

"Thanks," Lucy said.

She packed a couple of suitcases, turned off her cell phone, and drove south to destination unknown.

MICAH

“**H**ow did things go with Lucy when you reminded her about the betrothal and informed her that you expected her to go through the mating ceremony with me?” Micah asked.

“She didn’t take it well. She said that she had her life planned out and that it didn’t include going through the mating ceremony with anyone,” his father said.

“How did you leave it?” Micah asked.

“She said that there was no way she was going to go through the mating ceremony and her grandfather told her that she was, end of story. I did tell her that I thought you wouldn’t mind if she got her doctorate and then opened up her own practice. Then, we left.”

Micah slapped his hand against his forehead.

“What?”

“She is very independent. Telling her that I would give my permission for her to live out her plans and dreams wouldn’t have set well with her. I imagine that she was furious.”

“I was trying to make her see the bright side of the situation,” the alpha replied.

“That is not how she would take it,” Micah said.

“You should go talk to her and make her see reason. You guys are good friends. I’m sure that you can make her understand that this is an honor for her, and she should embrace being the alpha queen.”

“Would Mom have felt that way?”

“No, but your mom and I were in love when we went through the mating

ceremony,” his father replied.

“Exactly. Lucy isn’t the kind of person who would take kindly from being told that she had to go through the mating ceremony with someone and that her life was going to be disrupted.”

“It can’t be helped,” his father said. “Like I said, you should go talk to her.”

“I think that I’m going to wait a few days and let her simmer down. She’s likely to throat punch me if she saw me right now, especially if she thinks that I’m good with this plan.”

His father shrugged his shoulders and said, “It’s up to you how you handle this situation. Just understand that you and Lucy are expected to go through the mating ceremony a month after you are named the alpha.”

Micah wondered if she would have taken the news any better if he had gone along when they talked to her. He would have gone, but they didn’t tell him of their plans. Micah wondered if they purposely kept him out of the situation so that he and Lucy couldn’t form a united front and protest.

He went to the club and ordered a beer. The loud music drowned out his thoughts. The cozy atmosphere gave him some place where he could relax for a while. Then, he would try to figure out a solution.

Dean called and Micah told him where he was. Dean showed up a few minutes later.

“Have you talked to Lucy lately?” Dean asked.

“No, why?”

“I asked her out for lunch. We talked for a while, and I told her that I was going to be named the alpha of my clan. I told her that I had been in love with her since we were children and asked her to go through the mating ceremony with me.”

Micah raised his eyebrows, took a sip of his drink, and then asked, “How did that go?”

“She told me no. She said that she wasn’t in love with me, she wasn’t going to go through the mating ceremony with anyone for a long time, if ever. Then, she left,” Dean reported.

Licking his lips, Micah said, “You picked a bad time to ask her, anyway.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Lucy and I were officially betrothed to each other when we were kids. The elders have decided that we need to go through with the mating ceremony since I’m about to become the alpha in two months. They talked to

her about it last night.”

Dean’s face turned red and the vein at the side of his neck started throbbing.

He gritted his teeth and said, “Why didn’t you guys tell me about that?”

“To be honest, I never thought about it. I didn’t think that the elders would ever enforce it, since we were five or so when we went through the ceremony. I doubt if Lucy remembered it, and if she did, she probably just figured that arranged marriages were archaic and it would never happen. She was very independent and had her own life’s plans.”

“What happens now?” Dean asked, his voice hard.

“I honestly don’t know,” Micah said. “I figured that I would give her a few days to get over being angry. I’m sure she was furious when she was ordered by the elders to go through with the mating ceremony. From what my father said, it didn’t go well at all. Then, I’ll talk to her about it.”

“What if she continues to refuse to go through the ceremony with you?” he asked.

Micah chewed on his bottom lip for a minute and then said, “I’ll stand by her. I don’t want to force her do it. She would resent me for our entire lives and that would make both of our lives a living hell.”

“That won’t go over well,” Dean said.

“Once I’m alpha, there is nothing that they can do about it,” Micah said. “However, I will admit that I’m rather fond of her, and I will try to persuade her to go through the ceremony with me.”

“I don’t know whether to wish you luck or hope that you fail,” Dean said.

Micah ran into Lucy’s father the next day.

“How is Lucy?” Micah asked.

“I guess that she is still mad. However, once she calms down, she will realize that it is her duty to go through the mating ceremony with you. She will obey the elders and do her duty.”

That didn’t set well with Micah. He wanted to talk to her about the situation. He was hoping that he could convince her that they were great friends, which was a great start to their relationship, and that they would do well together. She could still live her dreams while having the benefits of being an alpha queen.

Figuring that she had time to cool off, he called her the next day, but her phone went straight to voice mail. She didn’t reply to any of his text messages either.

“I guess she really is angry,” Micah said to himself.

She still wasn't answering his calls or texts the next day. He went by her house and saw that her car was gone.

“Maybe she is just working late,” Micah reasoned. “She is dedicated to her job.”

However, he was still worried about her and called her work.

“Micah, it's so good to hear your voice,” Martha said. “How are things?”

“They are going great,” Micah replied. “I was wondering if I could speak to Lucy.”

“Oh, well,” Martha said, her voice dropped. “Lucy took an extended leave of absence a couple of weeks ago. She said that she didn't know when she would be back. She didn't tell me where she was going. I hope that everything is okay.”

“I'm sure that she is fine,” Micah said. “She's just dealing with a personal issue right now.”

“Hey, Henry,” Micah said, when he got Henry on the phone. “Lucy took an extended leave of absence from work. She didn't tell her boss where she was going or when she would be back.”

“Meet me at her apartment,” Lucy's father growled.

The landlord reluctantly let them into Lucy's apartment. Everything was extremely neat, as Lucy always left it. Micah went into Lucy's bathroom and saw that her toiletries were missing. Several articles of clothing were also missing.

“Damn it,” Henry yelled.

Micah hurried out of Lucy's bedroom to see a red-faced Henry clutching a note in his white knuckled hands.

“I can't believe that she would do this to me. This is a disgrace,” Henry yelled.

Micah took the note from Henry and read it.

I'm not ready to be anyone's mate. When, and if, I am ready, I will be mated with someone who I have fallen in love with. I will not be forced to go through a mating ceremony with someone I do not want to spend the rest of my life with. Micah, if you find this note, know that I love you dearly – as a friend. It would be an injustice for you to be mated with someone who doesn't love you the way you deserve to be loved.

“I will have her exiled out of the clan for this,” Henry exclaimed.

“Don't be hasty. This must have come as a shock to her. She had her life

planned out and all of a sudden she is told that her plans and dreams aren't important and that she is going to have to give them all up," Micah said. "She has a right to be frustrated and angry."

"She does not have a right to humiliate her family or you," Henry growled. "She has known about this betrothal her entire life and she knew that this time would come."

"Please, don't do anything rash," Micah said. "I'll find her and I'll make her see reason. Who knows, maybe she has had a chance to clear her head, and she'll understand that we need her to accept the situation."

He winced when he heard the words coming out of his mouth, but his main goal was to calm Henry down and prevent him from doing anything rash and stupid like automatically taking steps to having Lucy exiled from the clan.

Henry nodded and said, "I hope that you can make her see reason. She has three months to figure things out. She is a smart girl."

Micah tried tracking Lucy through her cell phone, but she kept it turned off. It hadn't pinged off of any of the towers since she had left Livingston, where her apartment was. That meant that he didn't even have an idea of what direction she went in.

Lucy also hadn't been active on social media. There were no updates or information since the day she left. She wasn't ever super active on any of those sites anyway, so that was just a long shot.

He reached out to several of Lucy's friends. No one had a clue of where she might be heading. Most of them didn't even know that she was gone. Lucy wasn't the type of person who had to hang out with a bunch of people all the time. She only met up with people occasionally for lunch or dinner to catch up and then she would disappear for a while.

That left Ginger, her best friend. Micah already had an idea of what Ginger would have to say, but he had to try anyway.

Ginger shook her head when she saw him standing in the doorway of her apartment.

"I wondered when you were going to show up," Ginger said, opening the door wide so he could come inside. "Coffee?"

"Sure," he said.

"How could you agree to such an arrangement?" Ginger asked. "You know that there was no way that Lucy was going to go along with it."

"I know," Micah said. "I figured that I could talk to her about it and make

her see that it would be a good arrangement for the both of us.”

“For you, maybe. You aren’t the one who would have to give up your entire life,” Ginger said sharply, handing him a mug of the black liquid.

“I wouldn’t stop her,” Micah said.

“No, but the overwhelming duties of an alpha’s mate would stop her and you know that,” Ginger retorted. “You need to find someone else if you are that desperate for a mate.”

“Are you volunteering for the job?” Micah asked, jokingly.

“No way,” Ginger said, vehemently. “I’m also not telling you where she is.”

No amount of cajoling would get the answer from Ginger. Micah left her apartment frustrated. How in the world was he going to find Lucy?

LUCY

Lucy had cleaned out all but a hundred dollars out of her bank account, which gave her quite a bit of money. She had a little bit of time before she had to figure out what she was going to do.

She drove. Lucy went to Yellowstone National Park and watched Old Faithful shoot up in the air. She went to visit a bunch of different small towns that had historical downtowns. She enjoyed history and science, so she even stopped at a couple of museums. Lucy was pretty much into anything that would keep her mind off of her current problem. She knew that she was avoiding the issue and that wasn't a healthy way to handle the situation, but she figured that if she gave herself enough time, she would come up with a solution.

Eventually, after two weeks of meandering around back roads and small towns, she found herself in Colorado Springs. She discovered a place called Phantom Canyon. Lucy found an obscure place, which wasn't hard to do, and shifted. She ran until her lungs ached and she was certain that her legs weren't going to be able to carry her anymore.

The Garden of the Gods was beautiful, and it took her breath away. Heading a little further up one of the mountain roads, she drove into a charming city called Ivy Springs.

All of the buildings had old looking facades, mimicking the old west. The city had a comfortable feeling about it. She was tired of constantly driving, so she decided that she would stay a while. There was an expensive resort, called Forest Resort, but Lucy was pretty sure that she would run out of money quickly if she tried to stay there for too long. Instead, she settled for

Ivy Spring's Inn, which had long term room rentals.

The owner of the Inn was a sweet-faced older woman who had a very welcoming smile.

"How long are you going to be staying with us?"

"I don't know," Lucy replied. "A couple of weeks, at least."

Lucy realized that she couldn't stay gone forever, but hanging out here for a couple of weeks wouldn't hurt anyone. Martha assured her that she would have a job when she returned, no matter how long she was gone.

"You look troubled," she said.

Lucy smiled.

"I have a major situation that I have to figure out how to deal with. I needed a change of scenery so that I could clear my mind and get a fresh perspective."

"I understand that," the woman said. "I've been to Livingston. It is a nice place. My sister and I went on a shopping trip in Bozeman."

"Would you believe that I've been there my entire life? This is the first time I've ever been out of the area."

"I believe that all states have their own natural beauty, but I might be a little biased in saying that Colorado is the most incredible of all the states. It has mountains, prairie, high desert, and anything else you could wish for."

"It sounds like I'm going to enjoy exploring," Lucy said. "You don't by any chance know of anyone who would want to hire someone for at least a couple of weeks, do you?"

The woman scratched her head and then said, "I do. A wonderful woman, by the name of Clara, owns a café. She recently lost her manager, who quit suddenly and left town. I'm sure that she could use the help for a couple of weeks until she could find someone else to replace her."

She wrote the address of the café on the paper and said, "Tell her that Helen sent you."

Lucy put her belongings in the room assigned to her and stretched out on the comfortable bed. In just a minute, she was sound asleep. She was amazed when she woke up the next morning with the sun shining through the windows.

"I guess I was a little tired," Lucy said to herself.

The little restaurant inside the inn wasn't too busy.

"Did I miss the breakfast rush?" Lucy asked the waitress.

"We aren't as busy in the wintertime," a smiling woman named Carley

said. "In late spring, summer, and early fall we are so busy that we need to clone ourselves to keep up with everything. However, when there is snow on the ground, we are slow."

"That makes sense."

"What brings you to Ivy Springs?" Carley asked.

"Just taking a short vacation from life." Lucy smiled.

"I understand that, completely."

Lucy waited until about ten, hoping that the business at the café would have died down a little by then. The smell of coffee and danishes tickled her senses when she walked in.

"This smells like heaven," she said.

"I'm glad you think so," a smiling woman said. "How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Clara."

"You have found her."

"My name is Lucy. Helen sent me. She said that you might be able to use a hand around here for a couple of weeks."

"Helen sent you, huh? Then you must be good people."

"I like to think that I am," Lucy said. "I'm sure that there are those out there who have a difference of opinion."

"I think that can be said about all of us at one time or another," Clara said. "What brings you to Ivy Springs?"

"I'm on a personal odyssey."

"That sounds very grand. There are no cyclops or sirens in Ivy Springs, but we do have mountains and beautiful sunsets. Have you ever worked at a café before?"

"No. After high school I got my bachelor's degree and my master's degree in social work. I've been in that field in one way or another since high school. But I'm a quick learner."

"I'm sure you are. When can you start?"

"Right now."

"Terrific," Clara said. "Here's an apron."

The coffee and espresso machines were easy to figure out, and Lucy learned how to make a delicious mocha, cappuccino, latte, and anything else that a person could want quickly. The ovens were easy as was the grill. By the end of the day, Lucy was tired but felt good that she had managed to learn the equipment.

"Can you come in at five tomorrow?"

“I sure can,” Lucy said.

She went back to the Inn and grabbed some dinner. She showered and watched a few episodes of NCIS. She fell asleep pretty quickly. It was pretty tiring being constantly on her feet and moving around like she had been.

Lucy arrived right on time the next morning. Clara laughed when Lucy yawned and stretched.

“The great thing about working at a place like this is that you can have all the coffee you want. Did you eat?”

“The kitchen wasn’t open yet,” Lucy said.

“Perfect. I’ll start the grill. Over easy or over medium?”

“Over medium, please,” Lucy said.

“I’ll get the ovens warmed up and you can start all the machines up front. People are going to start pouring in here in about an hour.”

Clara made the best eggs that Lucy had ever had. Sure enough, as soon as they were done eating, customers came in by the droves. Lucy was constantly on the move, making coffees, espressos, and other drinks. Clara worked the cash register and took orders while two women in the back made egg sandwiches, omelets, and other breakfast goodies.

By the time ten rolled around, Lucy was exhausted. She sat down heavily on the stool behind the counter and wiped her brow.

“I don’t know how you do that every day,” Lucy said.

“You get used to it.” Clara smiled. “Although there are still days when I’m sure that my feet are going to explode off.”

Just then, a cute little boy came rushing into the café with a small dog hot on his heels.

“Reno and I were helping Dad all morning,” he said.

“I know that he was glad for your help,” Clara said. “Lucy, this is my son, Zeke, and his best friend, Reno. Zeke, this is my friend, Lucy.”

Zeke held out his hand very formally and said, “It is nice to meet you.”

“I’m very glad to meet you, too,” Lucy said.

“Reno and I are hungry,” Zeke declared.

“I’m sure that we can find a way to fix that,” Clara said.

She went into the back and Zeke looked at Lucy.

“I’m seven years old. I’m the best reader in my class,” he said, proudly.

“That is a great accomplishment,” Lucy replied. “I love to read. What do you like to read?”

Zeke whispered conspiratorially, “I like to read ghost stories, but Mom

doesn't like it when I do. She's afraid they're going to scare me. I like to read mystery stories, though."

"Those are my favorite," Lucy said.

Clara came out with some snacks and Zeke smiled brightly.

"Thanks, Mom. You're the best."

Then, he and Reno went to a nook of the café that seemed to be set aside just for them.

"I love Zeke," Lucy said.

"Most people do. He is smart – too smart for his own good and very mature. I'm afraid that he's going to end up being an old man before he gets to be a kid."

"I hope that if I have kids someday, they are all just like Zeke," Lucy declared.

Although when I have kids, it's going to be on my terms. I won't be pushed into it by someone else.

The lunch rush soon followed, and Lucy was dead on her feet by the time they cleaned up afterward.

Clara handed Lucy a sweet iced tea and took one for herself.

"Is it like that all the time?"

"Even busier in the spring, summer, and early fall when the tourists are in town," Clara said.

"Time goes by fast, though, when you're constantly hopping like that," Lucy said.

They sat in a comfortable silence for a minute and then Lucy asked, "What do you think of arranged marriages?"

"Well," Clara said, trying to choose her words very carefully. "I've had some friends from other countries where it is a common practice. The women were okay with the situation, so who am I to judge?"

"That is a very politically correct answer." Lucy laughed.

"I don't judge other people's beliefs or cultures, but I do think that it should be agreed upon by two consenting adults. I don't agree with marrying a twelve-year-old to a thirty-year-old man," Clara said. "Why do you ask?"

"Would you believe that my family had me go through a betrothal ceremony when I was five? Now, the man is going to be getting a big promotion and both of our families are expecting me to go through with it."

"That is not okay," Clara said. "You were barely old enough to know which doll you wanted to play with, let alone which man you wanted to

spend the rest of your life with.”

“I agree. I love the man in question as a friend, but nothing more,” Lucy said.

“Your family should be ashamed of itself.”

“If I don’t go through with the marriage, then my entire family will turn its back on me and disown me.”

A customer came in, interrupting the conversation.

“Alexis,” Clara said, her voice cold and distant. “What can I get for you?”

“I just wanted to come in and meet your new employee. I heard that you hired a new girl from out of town.”

“There is no need. I don’t need your approval to hire new people, and I don’t need you harassing my employees,” Clara said.

“Tsk, tsk. You’re a bit touchy, aren’t you?”

Clara just stared at her.

“Fine, I’ll go,” Alexis said.

Lucy was shocked at the difference in attitude. Clara had treated everyone else with respect and sweetness.

Clara smiled and said, “I guess I should explain. Alexis Faison, along with her three brothers are the billionaire family that owns the Forest Resort. Do you know what shifters are?”

“I do,” Lucy said.

“A long time ago, regular people and shifters lived in the area in relative peace until an ancestor of the current Faisons, a billionaire, decided that he hated them. It didn’t help that his daughter fell in love with a dragon shifter, the son of the dragon shifter king. The old man declared war on the shifters. Instead of decimating the human population, they created a shifter world and a lot of the shifters moved there. The portal can only be perceived by shifters. The billionaire’s daughter, who was pregnant with the dragon shifter’s child, went with them. Ever since then, there has been a war going on between the billionaires and the shifter community. The Faisons often hire hunters to track down and kill shifters. My friend and manager had to leave for the shifter world after the Faisons found out that she was a bear shifter,” Clara explained.

Lucy was stunned. She had heard of the shifter world, but she had always thought that it was a myth. She also wondered what kind of trouble she had gotten herself into by coming to this town.

“I’m surprised all the shifters don’t just leave,” Lucy said.

“A lot of them have. Some of them have made their lives here and don’t want to be forced out.”

“I can understand that,” Lucy acknowledged.

Lucy soaked in hot water that night. She missed home. However, she was afraid to go back because she knew that if she did, she would likely be exiled unless she agreed to marry Micah.

She called Ginger from a burner phone while she settled in the comfortable bed.

“I had an interesting visit,” Ginger said.

“Let me guess, my father or grandfather.”

“Actually Micah, but he was looking for you. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell him anything.”

“Thank you,” Lucy said. “There has to be a way out of this situation.”

“How about you come back, pack up your things. I’ll pack up my things, and we’ll both move to Ivy Springs.”

“That might not be a bad idea,” Lucy said, only half joking.

MICAH

Micah silently drummed his fingers on the table as he sat through another long meeting. He was pretty sure that the sole occupation of the alpha was to go to meetings. He was equally certain that ninety-five percent of the topics covered during these meetings could be easily covered through email messages. One of the first things that he was going to do once he was alpha was limit the number of meetings they went through each week and put a time limit on how long the meetings would take. A four-hour meeting that only had seven agenda items on it was cruel and unusual punishment.

Finally, the meeting was starting to wrap up. Micah had a million other things that he needed to get done and it was already mid-afternoon. He stood up, intending to leave before anyone could catch him in a sidebar conversation that would take another hour.

However, his hopes were short lived when he heard one of the elders, Lucy's grandfather, say, "Micah, do you have a minute?"

Micah hung his head and swallowed a heavy sigh.

"Sure, Elder Kane. What can I do for you?"

Micah's father stood beside the elder and said, "Have you heard from Lucy?"

"No," Micah said.

"According to Henry, she's been gone for about two weeks now and no one has heard from her," his father said.

Micah simply nodded.

"This is ridiculous. Lucy has a duty to her clan. She has been informed of

her duty, and she is expected to obey,” Elder Kane said. “Running away is irresponsible and disgraceful.”

“I’m sure that she is simply overwhelmed. Lucy had dreams and her life planned out. It didn’t include going through a mating ceremony with me or anyone else,” Micah said. “I’m sure that she is simply taking the time away from everything to process everything.”

“She has known her entire life about the betrothal and the expectation that she would take her place as the alpha queen once you become the alpha,” Elder Kane said, his voice hard.

“We were children when we went through that ceremony. I barely remember it myself and I certainly didn’t think about it at all once it was over,” Micah replied. “No one ever brought it up to me again and I doubt if anyone reminded Lucy, either.”

“She should have remembered,” Elder Kane said, folding his arms over his chest.

Micah knew that no amount of arguing on Lucy’s behalf was going to change the old man’s mind.

“If she isn’t back in time to go through the mating ceremony with you, she will be exiled,” Elder Kane added. “I will not tolerate a member of my family disgracing me this way and disappointing the clan.”

With that, he turned and briskly walked away, Micah’s father right on his heels.

Micah groaned. He had no idea where to find Lucy. Once he found her, he had to figure out how to convince her to go through the mating ceremony with him, for her sake. The problem was that Lucy might be stubborn enough to decide that being exiled was not too much of a price to pay for her freedom.

Later that night, he paced around his living room staring out at the full moon.

“Where in the hell are you, Lucy?”

He was sure that Ginger knew, but she wasn’t talking. Lucy still hadn’t turned on her phone so he couldn’t trace her that way.

Then, an idea came to him. Lucy had GPS in her car. He might be able to track her that way.

The next morning, he called his friend, Mike, and explained the situation.

“I need to find her sooner rather than later,” Micah said. “I really don’t want her to be exiled over this situation.”

“Give me an hour or so,” Mike said.

An hour later, Mike called back with a destination – Ivy Springs, Colorado.

“How in the hell did she end up there?” Micah asked as he packed a couple of bags.

“Dad, I am going to take a vacation before I go through the ceremony making me the alpha,” Micah said over the phone.

“You can’t go now. There is still so much for you to learn. You don’t have time to take a vacation.”

“I won’t have any time after I become the alpha. Whatever I need to learn, I can do it while on the job,” Micah said. “I’ll be back in a couple of weeks.”

“Where are you going?” his father asked.

“I’m going to travel around and see some sights,” he said, and hung up the phone before his father could make any further protests or ask any more questions.

As he drove, he stared at the beauty of the countryside. He had never been outside of Montana before and realized that he had missed so much by not exploring the rest of the country.

While he drove, he tried to plan out exactly what he would say to Lucy. He knew that demanding that she return wouldn’t work. The threat of being exiled might make her more inclined to go back home, but somehow, deep down inside of him, he was pretty sure that it wouldn’t work. She was proud and stubborn, and threats just wouldn’t work.

Micah wondered whether he was simply wasting his time. More than once, he thought about turning his car around and heading back to Livingston and let Lucy do what she wanted.

There were a couple of reasons why he didn’t. One reason was that if he didn’t go through the mating ceremony with Lucy, the elders were sure to try to find someone else they deemed suitable. Another reason was that Micah might have some affection for Lucy and thought that there was a real chance for love to grow between them. On top of that, he didn’t want Lucy to be exiled. That would mean that she wouldn’t be allowed to have any kind of relationship with her friends and family who were part of their clan.

This is a quaint little town, Micah thought as he drove through Ivy Springs. *I could see why she would want to stop here for a while.*

He called Mike and asked where he could find Lucy. Mike gave him the

address to a café on main street. Sure enough, Lucy's car was parked on the street.

Micah parked next to her car and drew in a breath. He still had no idea what he was going to say to her.

"It's now or never," he muttered to himself.

The shocked look on Lucy's face when Micah walked in the door almost made him laugh. He was sure that it matched the same shocked look on his face when he saw that she was behind the counter wearing an apron and a nametag.

Her mouth gaped, her eyes opened wide, and she dropped the coffee cup that she had been holding, not even flinching as it shattered and hot liquid splattered everywhere.

"Lucy, are you okay?" a woman asked, putting her arm around Lucy.

Lucy nodded.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

"I had Mike trace your whereabouts from your car's GPS, Micah said. "We really need to talk."

"Clara, this is Micah. He is the one I told you about."

The other woman grimaced at Micah but held out her hand to shake his.

"Pleasure, I'm sure," she said.

The exact opposite, I think.

Micah wondered what exactly Lucy had told Clara about him and their situation.

"I'll clean up the mess. Go ahead and talk to him, if you want to," Clara said.

Lucy grabbed a couple cups of coffee and they both sat in the corner of the café.

"Why are you here?" Lucy asked.

"You know why," Micah said.

"We were children when we went through the betrothal ceremony. It's not fair to ask us to honor it. I have plans, none of which include going through a mating ceremony with you or anyone else," Lucy said.

"You should at least consider it. We get along extremely well. We are great friends, which is the perfect foundation for a good relationship," Micah said.

"I want more out of life than to just be mated to a friend," Lucy said. "When I go through the mating ceremony, I want it to be with someone who I

have fallen in love with.”

She took in a deep breath and released it slowly.

“I love you dearly, as a friend. Nothing more,” Lucy said. “I value my freedom and my ability to go home to my place and have peace and quiet. I don’t have to worry about anyone else. If I was to go through the mating ceremony with you, then I would be extremely unhappy. That would make both of us unhappy.”

“You know that I would never stop you from going to school or opening your own business.”

Lucy reached out her hand and touched his.

“I know you wouldn’t. But that just isn’t enough for me.”

“The elders and my father are threatening exile if you disobey them,” Micah said. “I would do my best to protect you, but right now, I would have no say in the matter.”

“I figured that would be the case. I would rather be exiled than to be trapped in the prison of being mated to someone who I am not in love with.”

Micah nodded and decided to change the subject. It would do no good to continue to argue with her. It would only aggravate her more.

“Why did you pick Ivy Springs?” he asked.

Lucy visibly relaxed with the question.

“It seemed like a nice enough town. The woman at the Ivy Springs Inn where I am staying said that Clara was looking for help. I don’t want to run completely out of money, so I decided to get a temporary job and just hang out until I can figure out my next step.”

Micah wanted to remind her that she couldn’t stay gone forever, but he decided not to. She already knew that, and he didn’t want to aggravate her.

They talked for a few more minutes about Lucy’s job at the café and how she liked it.

“I’m going to get a room at the same inn as you,” Micah said. “I need a vacation, too, before I assume my duties. We can at least hang out.”

“Sounds good,” Lucy said.

Micah stared at the wall inside of his room.

“I will make her fall in love with me,” he vowed.

He just hoped that he could make it happen.

LUCY

“So that is Micah, huh?” Clara asked.

“That was him,” Lucy said.

“He is very good looking, and he seems like he is a nice man,” Clara remarked.

“Micah is definitely hot. He is also very sweet and is a great guy,” Lucy replied. “It’s just that I’ve never even thought about Micah as being more than my good friend.”

“I understand that. It is important to stay true to yourself,” Clara said. “I’m very proud of you. I know that it has to be extremely hard.”

“It is a little,” Lucy remarked. “It would be easier just to give in and say I’ll go through the mating ceremony just to make everyone happy. But it’s *my* life.”

“It most certainly is, and you are the only one who has to live it.”

Later that evening, Lucy sat in her room thinking about the situation. She had been completely shocked when Micah showed up at the café. She honestly didn’t know how she felt about it. On one hand, she was frustrated that he found her. The whole point of leaving Livingston was to have some time away from the situation so she could figure things out.

On the other hand, she was a little flattered that Micah cared enough about her to track her down and drive all this way to try to talk her into going through the mating ceremony with him.

The truth was that she *had* thought about the betrothal throughout the years. She had felt a twinge of jealousy when he dated other girls. She had wanted to punch Jasmine Ellis in the throat when Lucy caught Jasmine and

Micah making out in the stairwell of their high school.

Lucy had dated a couple of guys, but she never felt anything for them – not even the tiniest spark.

In the dark recesses of her mind, Lucy admitted that she had wondered what it would be like to kiss Micah. She even admitted that she had thought about what it would be like for him to wrap his arms around her and hold her close to him.

“Okay, fine, so I’m physically attracted to him, because he is hot. I’m pretty sure that Micah is hotter than Apollo or any of the other Greek or Roman gods,” Lucy muttered to herself.

Thinking back over her conversation with Clara, she also admitted that Micah was a good man. He was extremely smart and caring. He had a great sense of humor and Lucy always enjoyed hanging out with him.

“If he had asked me out before all of this mess came up, I would have said ‘yes.’ We would have had the chance to see where our relationship would go.”

Lucy chuckled to herself.

“If anyone was eavesdropping, they would think that I had completely lost my mind.”

She stood up and paced the room for a couple of minutes and then stared out the window, taking in the beautiful view of the snow-covered mountain.

Lucy sighed and sat down in the comfortable chair.

The problem wasn’t Micah at all. It was the fact that she didn’t like being told what to do, and especially with such an important decision that would affect the rest of her life.

“Who knows, if they hadn’t told me that I *had* to go through the mating ceremony with Micah and that we had dated for a while, we would have fallen in love with each other,” Lucy said.

The phrase, “cutting off your nose to spite your face” came to mind, but Lucy shook it off.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a couple of raps on the door. She looked through the peep hole and smiled as she opened it up to see Micah standing in the hallway with a large pizza and a six pack of beer.

He smiled and it took her breath away for a moment. He was a sexy man.

“Have you eaten?”

“Nope, and I’m starving,” she said.

As though to emphasize her declaration, her stomach rumbled loudly.

Micah laughed as he walked over to the table and set the pizza and beer down. He pulled a paper bag out of his pocket and dumped the contents over the table. Little packets of parmesan cheese, pepper flakes, and napkins spilled everywhere.

“What did your father and the elders think about you just taking off?” Lucy asked.

“They weren’t happy about it. They told me that I needed to stay there because there is still so much that I have to learn. I just told them that I can learn on the fly whatever I still need to figure out.”

“I guess that went over well,” Lucy said.

“About as well as you would expect,” Micah replied. “But short of holding me hostage, there was not much that they could do. In my opinion, though, I’ve got everything figured out, since this has been thrust down my throat since I could talk. Based on the last few weeks, being the alpha of the clan entails nothing more than trying not to fall asleep through the hours and hours of meetings.”

“That sounds very glamorous.”

“Do you remember that time when we climbed over that fence to try to get to the creek so we could go swimming, and I fell on the top rung and racked myself?”

“I do remember that.”

“I’m pretty sure that was a lot more fun than all of the meetings that I’ve had to attend in the last few weeks,” Micah said.

“Ouch. That hurts.”

“You have no idea,” Micah said. “The first rule I’m going to make when I become alpha is that there will be one meeting day a week, and agenda items have to be approved by me. If it is something that can be accomplished without me or by email, then it will be done that way.”

“That ought to shake things up,” Lucy said.

“My father is a micro manager. I know that he gets his kicks by knowing every little thing that happens in the clan every minute of every day, down to what color socks Jemma and Jason Patterson are going to put on their baby girl.”

Lucy laughed. Micah always had a great way of putting things.

“There has to be some perks to being the alpha,” Lucy said.

“Let me see. I have to go to meetings. I have to give speeches. I have to attend every single ceremony and celebration that happens within the clan. I

have to make the ultimate decision when handing out punishments and consequences. People expect me to solve their petty quarrels. There is practically no time off,” Micah said. “What’s not to love about the job?”

And you wonder why I don’t want the duties that accompany the title of alpha queen.

“Sounds like you need to find a way to delegate some of your duties,” Lucy said.

“That is going to be my first task,” Micah agreed.

They talked for a little bit longer about the different sites that they saw as they drove from Livingston to Ivy Springs. Lucy’s drive was a little more meandering because she hadn’t any idea what her destination might be. Micah took the direct route.

Lucy yawned. It had been a long, busy day.

“I guess you need some sleep,” Micah said, as he stood up.

They quickly gathered up their trash and Micah walked to the door. He hugged Lucy tightly. Lucy loved how it felt to be pressed against his hard chest with his thick arms wrapped around her. She laid her head against him briefly.

Just as quickly as the hug started, it ended. She felt as though the air had a little chill as he released her.

“Sweet dreams,” Micah said. “I’m right next door if you need me.”

She shut the door behind him and then headed for the shower. As the hot water caressed her, she wondered what it would be like if it was Micah touching her.

Lucy shook her head and told herself to snap out of it.

“So what if there is the possibility of more than just a friendship between me and Micah?” she asked herself. “If, and that is a big if, I was to go through with the mating ceremony with him, it will be because we have truly fallen in love with each other.”

Feeling better that she was approaching the situation logically and with an open mind, she managed to fall asleep.

The café was busy as soon as the doors opened the next day. By ten, Lucy was sure that her legs were going to fall off. She sat heavily on a stool and wiped her forehead.

“Wow. With a workout like that, I would never have to go to the gym again,” Lucy said.

Clara laughed.

“I like to think of it as an unchoreographed dance routine with all the fancy footwork involved.”

“Maybe you should create a uniform that includes a leotard and a tutu.”

“Mmm, I don’t see that going over too well.” Clara laughed.

The little string of bells on the door jingled and Lucy got up to take the customer’s order. She felt as though her eyes were going to pop out of her head when she saw who had walked in.

“Dean. What are you doing here? How did you know to come here?”

“Micah told me where you were and that he was coming to try to convince you to come home,” Dean said.

“So, why are you here?” Lucy asked.

“I’ve been in love with you for a long time. I need a mate and I want that person to be you. I’ve come here hoping that I can win your heart.”

Lucy simply stared at him, her jaw hanging open.

After a minute, she said, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“You know that I’m not,” Dean said.

“Dean, I love you as a brother. That’s it. There is not the tiniest of romantic feelings when I’m around you. There is no tingling, no butterflies, nothing. Go back to Montana.”

A crooked grin that had won many a woman’s heart spread across his face.

“I’ve got to try,” Dean said.

“Ugh,” Lucy replied, hanging her head.

A customer came in and Dean said, “I’ll see you later.”

After the customer left, Clara said, “Dang, girl, you’re fighting them off like a swarm of flies.”

“I know. I wonder if one of those electric tennis racket looking fly swatters would work,” Lucy mused.

“Doubtful.”

“Dean had asked me if I would go through the mating ceremony with him before I left Montana. I told him that I wouldn’t because I didn’t look at him that way. Yet, here he is. I can at least understand why Micah came.”

“I can see why you needed a break,” Clara said. “I think I would need to get away to escape the situation, too.”

“Maybe I should disable the GPS in my car and just disappear again.”

“You know that running never solved anything. Especially since, eventually, you have to go back home regardless of what you decide.”

“I know,” Lucy said, dejectedly. “But it sure sounds good.”
Clara just smiled and patted Lucy on the back.

MICAH

Micah was bored and so he decided to go downtown. There were a couple of shops that he thought he would hit up. His mother really loved turquoise and silver jewelry, and there was a shop that promised ornate pieces. He was sure that one of the shops would have something for his two younger sisters as well.

The café was in the same area, but Micah didn't want to seem like a stalker. It was one thing to follow her to Ivy Springs to get her to fall in love with him. However, he didn't want to constantly be in her business to the point where she got sick of seeing him.

He saw a general store that looked like it would have something for his sisters, so he pulled into a parking spot. The store was next door to the café, and Micah had to resist the urge to go in for some coffee and a danish.

Micah got out and walked toward the store when he stopped dead in his tracks, completely in shock.

“Dean, what on earth are you doing here?”

“Pretty much the same thing that you are,” Dean said. “I told you that I've been in love with Lucy since we were in fifth grade. I have to take a mate, and I can't imagine being with anyone other than Lucy. I'm hoping that I can get her to see how much I love her and to make her fall in love with me.”

Micah shook his head.

“I don't think that is going to work. I think that you should go back to Montana,” Micah said. “Find another bear shifter to be your mate. I know that you've always had a ton of women following you around like your own

little harem. Choose one of them.”

Dean laughed.

“I know that you said the two of you are officially betrothed, but if Lucy really wanted to go through with it, she wouldn’t have run away to here,” Dean observed. “My guess is that you are here to convince her to go through with the mating ceremony. Are you in love with her, too?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Micah said. “However, the elders and my father are talking about exiling her if she refuses to go through the mating ceremony with me.”

“Well, if she chooses to be my mate, I can protect her. She won’t need your clan anymore because my clan will be her clan.”

Micah sighed and shook his head. He knew that he wasn’t going to get anywhere by arguing with Dean. Dean had already made up his mind that he was going to stick around and try to get Lucy to fall in love with him.

“Good luck,” Micah said.

Dean looked at Micah as though he was expecting more of a fight from Micah. Micah wasn’t going to do anything so juvenile as to get into a school yard fight over a woman, who would, in the end, make her own decision.

“Where are you staying?” Dean asked.

“Ivy Springs Inn. It’s a quaint little place. The rooms are clean and comfortable.”

“I’m staying at the Forest Resort. It’s very luxurious. They have a hot tub, an indoor pool, a bar, a restaurant, and even a game room with a pool table. I had a nice massage last night,” Dean said. “If nothing else, this is a nice, relaxing vacation before I have to assume the duties of the alpha. You should stop by and we’ll hang out.”

“I’ll try to fit it into my schedule,” Micah said.

Dean hesitated for a minute.

“What are you going to do now?” Dean asked.

“I’m going into this store to see if they have anything that Anna and Belle might like,” Micah said. “Then, I’m going over to Ivy Springs Treasures. Mom has been wanting a turquoise and silver cuff bracelet like the one that is in the window.”

Dean laughed and said, “I hope your dad isn’t planning on getting her one for her birthday.”

“He’s not. I think that he is planning on another pair of earrings. That is what he usually gets her for her birthday. At least he is a little creative about

it. One year he gets her pearl, another garnet, another emerald.” Micah laughed.

“There is that,” Dean said. “My dad always gets Mom something practical and it drives her crazy.”

Micah laughed, glad that the awkwardness between the two of them had dissipated somewhat.

“I’ll see you around,” Dean said, as he walked to his truck.

Micah headed into the store. There was a tall man, who was obviously dressed in tailor made clothes, standing aggressively at the counter. Micah almost left, not wanting to get involved in any drama that might be going on. However, he decided that he would just look around and avoid the man who looked like he had just eaten some rotten fish.

“We all know that Luke was a dragon shifter,” the man growled at the clerk behind the counter.

“We do now,” the other man said, whose name badge read Dillon.

“Both you and Ethan had been seen hanging out with Luke. I heard that he was even invited to a couple of your poker games,” the man said.

“We did hang out with him,” Dillon said. “That doesn’t mean anything, Raf. You talked to him several times, yourself.”

“You had to know that Luke was a dragon shifter,” Raf said. “Who else are shifters in this town?”

“Neither Ethan nor I had any idea that Luke was a dragon shifter. You know as well as I do that all of the shifters take great care not to share their shifter status with the rest of the world. It is much too dangerous in this town for them to do that,” Dillon said. “Like I said, you talked to him several times and you didn’t know that he was a shifter. Alexis was all over him, and she didn’t know that he was a shifter.”

Raf stared at Dillon as though he had grown horns on his head.

“I think that you did know that Luke was a shifter and just kept quiet about it. If you know of anyone else who is a shifter, you had better come clean,” Raf said. “You will be asking for a whole lot of trouble if you don’t.”

“First of all, Raf, I don’t know any shifters. Second, I wouldn’t tell you if I did. This whole war in this town is stupid. Third, I don’t appreciate you coming into my store and trying to intimidate me. I don’t go up to your resort and get nasty with you or threaten you,” Dillon said, straightening up his back and holding his head high in the air.

He was staring down Raf, who was frozen in place.

After a couple of tense moments, Raf slammed his hand down on the counter and said, “We’ll be watching you guys,” and then he blew out the door like a Kansas tornado.

Dillon didn’t move or say anything. He simply watched Raf walk out the door and get into a very expensive Cadillac Escalade.

Micah found a couple of hoodies that had Ivy Springs printed on them, as well as a couple of other nick-nacks that he was sure that his sisters would like and approached the counter.

He raised his eyebrows at Dillon, who was still rooted in his spot.

“Shifters? What in the world was that all about?” Micah asked.

Dillon looked him up and down and frowned at him. He briefly closed his eyes and groaned.

“I guess that you’re new to the area. I haven’t seen you around.”

“I’m from Montana,” Micah said. “Decided that Ivy Springs might be a nice place to hang out for a few days before I start a new, high-stressed job.”

Dillon shook his head and said, “If you are looking for stress, you’ve come to the right place. Do you know what a shifter is?”

“Yes.”

“For the last century or so, there has been a war between the Faisons, Raf’s family, and all the shifters in the area. They’ve gone so far as to hire hunters to try to wipe them out.”

“Why?” Micah asked.

“Basically, a billionaire didn’t like the fact that his daughter had fallen in love with a dragon shifter. She chose to be with him over her father,” Dillon said. “My friend, Luke, who had grown up in this town, was a dragon shifter. His woman was being harassed by some hunters in the woods and Luke took out the hunters. Everything was caught on a trail cam, so the Faisons found out that he was a shifter. Luke and his woman, Jamie, went to the shifter world, and the rest of Luke’s family moved away from the area.”

“So now, Raf thinks you have the down-low on all the shifters in the area,” Micah said.

“Yep,” Dillon said.

“I could see why you would want to keep your own status hidden,” Micah said. “What clan do you belong to?”

Dillon looked shocked.

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“I can tell by your scent that you are a wolf shifter,” Micah said.

“Keep your voice down,” Dillon said. “If anyone hears you say that, then my family and I will be in grave danger. My clan is in the shifter world.”

“The shifter world? I’ve heard of that, but always thought that it was a myth.”

“A lot of people do,” Dillon said. “But that is where I was born and raised. I came to Ivy Springs to try to help keep the other shifters in the area safe.”

“I can’t imagine living like that. Where I’m from, the mundane humans and shifters, as well as everyone else, like the vampires and witches, all live in relative peace. No one goes around wearing name tags announcing who they are, but in general, no one really cares,” Micah said.

“That does sound nice. It was pretty nice in the shifter world. Most of the people there are shifters, although there are a few mundane humans. It is just like the mundane human world, although a lot freer, and, of course, we have the dragon king,” Dillon said.

“I’ve heard of him, too,” Micah said. “I didn’t know that he was real.”

“As real as you or me. He is a fair and just ruler. Everyone loves and respects him,” Dillon said.

Micah pulled out his wallet to pay for his gifts.

“Be safe while you’re here. Don’t go on the mountains here and shift. The hunters have put up trail cams in a lot of different places to try to catch shifters. There have been several who we know were killed and a lot who have gone missing. If you feel the need for a good run, drive the hour to the mountains in Colorado Springs. It is an incredibly beautiful area and you’ll be a lot safer there,” Dillon said.

“Thanks for the tip,” Micah said.

He went to the jewelry store and bought a couple of pieces for his mother, including the cuff bracelet that he knew she would love. The case with the engagement rings caught his attention briefly, before he paid for his mom’s jewelry.

Micah checked his watch. It was closing time for the café, so he waited for Lucy. He couldn’t tell if she was annoyed or resigned when she saw him waiting for her.

Clara looked at Lucy and at Micah.

“You good?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m good. Thanks, Clara. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Lucy hugged the little boy that followed Clara before she turned her

attention to Micah.

“You have to eat. I know that you enjoy eating. I need to eat. There is no reason why we can’t eat together,” Micah said.

Lucy looked at him for a second and then laughed.

“Okay, fine. Let me go back to my room, shower, and change clothes. I love the smell of coffee, but I don’t feel like smelling like it all night.”

“I’ll meet you in the lobby of the inn in an hour,” Micah said.

Lucy nodded.

Micah watched her drive off. He hoped that he could win her heart in time to save them both a whole lot of trouble.

LUCY

Lucy wasn't sure whether she was annoyed or amused when she saw that Micah was waiting for her after work. She had to admit that he was certainly persistent.

As she took a quick shower, she muttered, "I do have to eat, and since he is buying, it is saving me money."

She washed the coffee smell out of her hair and scrubbed the rest of her body.

"It is nice to hang out with him," she told herself.

As she ran the loofah across her body, she closed her eyes and imagined that it was Micah who was touching her. It wasn't the first time she had entertained such fantasies about him. In her mind, she could feel his hands roaming across her body, touching her breasts, and kissing her while the hot water streamed over the both of them. She could feel an aching need develop between her legs as she thought about how it would feel if he was to enter her right there in the shower. She had read enough books to picture the scene and feel the heat rising through her body.

"Girl, you had better get yourself together," she said after a minute. "He's going to be wondering where you are."

She hastily dried off and pulled on some jeans and a blouse. As she suspected, Micah was downstairs in the lobby waiting for her.

"Right on time," Micah said, looking at his watch. "You are nothing if not punctual."

Lucy grinned at him.

They decided on Mexican food. The waitress assured them that

everything on the menu was delicious and genuine Mexican food. It was not the Americanized version of Mexican food.

After ordering, Micah told Lucy about what he had overheard at the store and his conversation with Dillon.

“Clara had told me about the war that has been going on in this city. No one would ever know it,” Lucy said. “Everyone here is so nice and polite. They seem to be laid back and easy going.”

“Maybe those are the mundane humans who have no dog in this fight, as the saying goes.”

“That is possible,” Lucy said. “I can’t imagine living in constant fear like that.”

“Dillon warned me that it isn’t safe to shift on the mountain here. The hunters are everywhere and there are a lot of trail cams posted, so that the hunters can try to find shifters. Dillon said that there have been several killed or have gone missing.”

“That is a shame,” Lucy said.

Lucy laid her hand out on the table, and Micah reached out and touched it. A warm, tingling sensation coursed through Lucy’s arm and into her chest. For a while, his touch had made her react in a way that she couldn’t explain.

“Anna and Belle will be happy,” he said, changing the subject. “I bought them some hoodies and a couple of other souvenirs from the area.”

“They will love that. I think that they live in hoodies, even in the dead of summer when the rest of us are dying from the heat.”

“I can never figure them out,” Micah said. “But then, they are female, and I’ve never been able to figure out any female.”

“That is what is so great about us. We are mysterious. Just when you think you have us figured out, we surprise you.”

“Actually, you are a little bit easier to figure out than other women,” Micah said, with his sexy grin almost making Lucy’s heart stop.

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

“Yes, it is,” Micah said. “You are stubborn and like to be in control of your own life. If someone tells you to jump, you lay down on the ground. If someone forbids you to do something, you go and do the opposite.”

Lucy smiled and rocked her head back and forth.

“That sounds a little bit like me,” Lucy said. “My grandfather always said that my mom raised me to be too independent and strong. Of course, his opinion about women is that they belong barefoot and pregnant in the

kitchen. I have no idea how my grandmother has dealt with him all these years and is still the sweet woman that she is.”

“Maybe it is the time she was raised in. Your mother doesn’t fit that mold.”

“No. She and my grandfather never got along. I always thought that he was just mad that he never had a son.”

“No offense, but I’ve always wondered how you and your dad got along so well. Your mom is sharp as a whip, but your dad seems like someone who would be like your grandfather.”

“He is, but somehow it works for them. Father loves Mom,” Lucy said.

“I think that my father loves my mother, too. She dotes on him, and he seems to eat that up. Once in a while, though, she puts her foot down and he listens to her,” Micah said.

“Anna and Belle are spitfires,” Lucy said.

“I know. They drive Father crazy.”

Lucy laughed.

“You know, I would never expect you to be barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen,” Micah said, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

“That’s because you’ve tasted the food the couple of times that I’ve tried cooking. If it goes beyond scrambled eggs and toast, then it’s likely not edible,” Lucy said.

“I wonder if you would have any luck with those services that send all the ingredients with detailed instructions on how to prepare everything.”

Lucy shook her head in mock sadness.

“I can follow directions. I don’t know what it is. The stove and oven have a vendetta against me. I was a great disappointment to Mom every time I stepped foot in the kitchen. I did manage to learn how to work the coffee maker, though.”

“How are you working at the café?”

Lucy laughed and said, “Clara has everything prepared that is supposed to go in the oven. All I have to do is put it in the oven and take it out when the timer goes off. I’m not allowed to touch the grill.”

The waitress brought their food, and the two of them ate in silence. Sopapillas were Lucy’s favorite dessert, and Lucy moaned when she bit into hers.

Micah laughed at her and used a napkin to wipe the honey off of her chin.

“You are so adorable,” Micah said.

“Thank you,” Lucy said.

“It’s a little cool out, but I’m in the mood for a walk. There is a trail around that park across the street from the inn.”

“I’m game,” Lucy said.

Lucy linked her arm around Micah’s as they walked. She had always enjoyed her time with Micah. She felt safe with him in that she could be herself. She could say what was on her mind. If he didn’t agree, then they debated the different points, usually ending with them agreeing to disagree.

It was starting to flurry and Lucy stuck her tongue out to catch the snowflakes. Micah laughed at her antics and then joined her.

“What would your father say if he saw you now?” Lucy asked.

“He would have a heart attack, which is why the first law I’m going to make when I’m alpha is that every member of the clan has to be outside when it snows to catch snowflakes on their tongue.

“I don’t know yet,” Micah said, in mock seriousness. “Give me some time to think.”

By the time they went back to the inn, Lucy had laughed so much that her jaws hurt.

Micah wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to him and brushed a kiss on her cheek. Then, with a rakish grin, he unlocked his door and disappeared inside.

Lucy smiled as she closed her own door. She loved hanging out with Micah.

She hung her coat on the back of the chair and got undressed for bed. Lucy slid between the cool sheets and closed her eyes.

A warmth had swept through her body when Micah’s lips had brushed against her cheek. She wondered what would have happened if she had turned her head at the last minute and his lips had pressed against her lips.

She lightly touched her lips. She pictured herself staring deep into his beautiful emerald eyes. Lucy ran her hand over her body, lightly touching her nipples. In her mind, it was Micah who was touching her. She pictured his sexy, naked body posed above hers as he touched her. She could almost feel his large shaft pressing against her, begging for entrance.

Lucy had seen Micah naked often, as they stripped before they shifted. He was incredibly sexy and, in the last year or so, her knees went a little weak each time that she saw him.

Her fingers found the hard pebble that was above her aching pussy. She

rubbed it gently and then a little harder, rolling it between her fingers. She used her other hand to lightly pinch her nipples.

It didn't take long before she felt the tingling build up inside of her and she felt the warmth of release exploding out of her.

She felt a little embarrassed when she was done. This wasn't the first time that she had fantasized about someone when she touched herself, but usually it was a celebrity who had turned her on.

"Oh well. Actual sex with Micah is about as likely to happen as it is with any of those movie stars," she told herself.

After washing up and brushing her teeth, she fell back into bed, almost instantly asleep.

The next morning, the café was busy as usual. Dean came in at the end of the morning rush.

"Do you want to have lunch with me?" Dean asked.

When Lucy hesitated, he held up his hands and said, "No pressure. Just as friends."

Lucy thought about it for a second and then said, "Sure, but my lunch is later, since I need to work through the rush."

The two of them went across the street to a small Indian restaurant. She ordered the hyderabadi dum biryani, as she loved spicy food, and this was one of her favorites. Dean had the chicken tikka masala.

Dean kept his word during the meal. They talked about her plans to get her degree and to eventually open her own practice. Her goal was to work with young people who suffered from PTSD. Dean praised her and told her that was a worthy goal. He expressed the same frustration with being an alpha that Micah did, the main one being too many meetings.

She checked her watch and told him that she needed to get back to work. He walked her back across the street, and he hugged her a little tighter and longer than normal.

"Dean, stop. I love you as a friend and as nothing else. There will never be anything more than friendship between us."

He let her go and grinned at her as he got into his car. Lucy rolled her eyes as she went back into the café. An hour later, a huge bouquet of flowers arrived. They were from Dean.

"This is starting to get annoying," Lucy said. "He doesn't understand that I could never see him as more than a friend."

"Do you want me to kick him in the pants and see if that helps?" Clara

offered.

“No, thanks,” Lucy said, laughing. “I appreciate the offer, though.”

Just then, Alexis blew into the café like a hurricane.

She pranced up to the counter and pursed her lips at Clara. She pointed at Clara and said, “You knew that Jamie was a bear shifter.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. There is no such thing as a shifter,” Clara said, narrowing her eyes at Alexis. “And if you plan on keeping that finger you had better get it out of my face.”

Alexis lowered her arm but continued to stare at Clara.

“You guys were best friends. There is no way in the world that you didn’t know that she was a shifter.”

“You know that people in this town don’t talk about things like that, even if she was a shifter, which I don’t believe in,” Clara said.

“You know, where I come from, regular humans and shifters get along just fine,” Lucy said. “As a matter of fact, we have a couple of vampire families who live in the area. I don’t understand what the big deal is.”

Alexis gasped as she spun around to face Lucy.

“Shifters are evil creatures and destroy everything that they get their hands on,” she exclaimed.

“Not where I come from,” Lucy said. “The shifters I know are perfectly nice individuals.”

“I really doubt that. They must have you fooled,” Alexis said.

She turned back to Clara and said, “We know that you have shifter friends. We’ll be watching you.”

Then, she flounced out the door just as flamboyantly as she came in.

“You have to be very careful,” Clara said. “Alexis and her brothers are very dangerous. They will go after you even if you aren’t a shifter if you get in their crosshairs. They targeted Jamie before they knew that she was a shifter.”

“Why don’t all the shifters just stand up against them? They would back down, just like any bully.”

Clara sighed heavily and said, “It’s not that easy.”

Lucy disagreed, but kept her mouth shut. She didn’t live here and this wasn’t her fight.

Clara looked at Lucy with a hard searching look.

“What kind of shifter are you?”

Lucy replied, “It’s that obvious, huh? I’m a wolf shifter.”

“Be very, very careful,” Clara said. “This is a very dangerous place for you.”

A chill ran down Lucy’s spine in spite of herself.

MICAH

Micah groaned when his phone buzzed early the next morning. He was planning on sleeping in before deciding how he was going to spend the rest of his day. After all, he was on vacation, and it was likely the last one he was going to get in a very long time.

“Dean,” Micah said, surprised. “What are you doing up so early?”

“I’m hungry and I figured that you might be, too,” Dean said. “Do you want to have breakfast together?”

In spite of the fact that they were both trying to win Lucy’s heart, they were still friends, and Micah didn’t have any other plans.

“Sure, that sounds good. Where at?”

Dean named a small diner that was located on the outskirts of town.

“I’m buying,” Dean promised.

“Then I think I’m very hungry,” Micah said, laughing.

The two men found an open table in the back corner of the diner. A cute waitress approached to take their order. Micah was amused that she was flirting heavily with Dean.

“You have the most incredible blue eyes that I’ve ever seen,” she said, putting her hand on Dean’s arm.

“Thank you,” he said, smiling at her. “I’ll have the steak omelet, hashbrowns, and bacon.”

The young woman poked out her bottom lip when she figured out that Dean wasn’t going to flirt back with her. She quickly took Micah’s order and walked away, quickly.

“I think that you just broke her heart,” Micah said.

“Did I?” Dean asked. “I hate that for her.”

Micah just shook his head and grinned.

“Are you having fun on your vacation?” Micah asked.

Dean shrugged and said, “Mostly it’s just boring. I get up, eat breakfast, try to have lunch with Lucy, and then go back and play pool, swim, or sit in the hot tub.”

“How have your lunches with Lucy going?” Micah asked.

Dean laughed humorlessly.

“Same as always. We talk and have fun, but she insists that she’ll never see me as more than a brother or good friend.”

Micah nodded.

“What about you?” Dean asked.

“We hang out and have fun, but I don’t try to push her. I know Lucy well enough to know that she isn’t going to do anything if she thinks that someone is trying to force her into doing it. If and when she falls in love with someone, it will be because it comes naturally to her.”

“That isn’t stopping you from being here,” Dean said.

“I realize that. If nothing else, though, I can convince her to come home. I’ll protect her from the elders and my father, if she still refuses to go through with the mating ceremony,” Micah said.

“I’m glad for that,” Dean said. “I think that she is going to end up an old spinster out of sheer spite.”

“That’s always a possibility,” Micah said.

“What are you doing this afternoon?”

“I have some emails to catch up on. Even though I’m supposedly on vacation, I still have certain tasks that I have to keep up with.”

“Ah, man, that sucks. I think that I’m going to go up on the mountain and go for a run,” Dean said.

“That’s not a good idea,” Micah replied.

“Why not?” Dean asked, confused, a frown furrowing his forehead.

Micah told Dean about the war going on in Ivy Springs between the shifters and the mundane humans.

“Why don’t the shifters just stand up to the Faisons?” Dean asked. “That would shut them down pretty quickly.”

“Lucy and I asked the same thing. Their fear is that if they do that, and there is blood spilled, that the war would spread beyond this place,” Micah explained.

“I don’t buy that. Most people just don’t care. They live in an ideology of ‘if it doesn’t affect me directly, then it’s not important.’ Besides, blood has already been spilled, on both sides, according to what you’ve told me.”

“It has been, and it will continue to be spilled if something isn’t done to stop it. However, it’s not our place to judge them or tell them what to do.”

Dean sighed.

“I will be on the lookout for hidden cameras and hunters,” Dean said. “I’m not going to start anything, but I’m sure as hell not going to run away if someone comes after me.”

Micah nodded and said, “I understand. Just be very careful.”

“I will,” Dean replied.

The more Micah thought about it, the more that he agreed with Dean. They were not a part of the war here.

The café wasn’t busy, and Lucy was wiping down tables.

“If your boss doesn’t need you this afternoon, do you want to go for a run on the mountains?” Micah asked.

Lucy bit her bottom lip and rubbed her eyebrow.

“Do you think that it is safe?” she asked, the uncertainty obvious in her voice.

“We’ll watch for cameras and hunters. Forewarned is forearmed, as they say,” Micah replied.

“I don’t know who ‘they’ are and whether ‘they’ are credible, but I guess it can’t be too dangerous if we are careful. Let me ask Clara if she can do without me for the afternoon.”

Clara groaned when Lucy asked her if she could take the afternoon off to go for a run.

“I don’t mind you taking the afternoon off, obviously, but I don’t think that going up in those mountains is a good idea,” Clara said. “I don’t want either of you to get hurt.”

“As Micah said, we’ll watch for the hunters and for the cameras,” Lucy promised. “We won’t shift if it isn’t safe.”

Lucy could tell that her words weren’t quelling Clara’s fears. Clara was truly terrified for the safety of her friend.

“Like I said, you are welcome to take the afternoon off. But I’m begging you, please, please, be careful. I couldn’t stand to lose another friend to this damned war.”

Lucy hugged Clara and said, “I promise that we will be very careful.

Nothing is going to happen to us.”

Micah grimaced as Lucy joined him.

“Those people really do have this entire city terrified, don’t they?”

“Yes, they do, and I hate it. It’s not like we would go around advertising that we are shifters, even in Livingston, but we wouldn’t hide it, either,” Lucy said. “A lot of people that I’m friends with know that I’m a shifter and they don’t care. Actually, I think that a couple of them are jealous.”

“What’s not to be jealous of?” Micah asked.

Micah and Lucy hiked up the mountain until they were surrounded by a thick copse of trees. They cautiously inspected every tree and bush, making sure that there were no cameras hidden anywhere. They undressed and folded their clothes, carefully hiding them in the tree branches so that they couldn’t be seen.

“I’ll race you to that stand of trees down there,” Micah said. “Loser has to buy the winner dinner tonight.”

“You’re on,” Lucy said.

Micah held back a bit and let Lucy take the lead. Then, at the last minute, he put on a surge of speed, crossing the imaginary finish line first.”

“You beat me by a nose,” Lucy said, laughing. “I demand a rematch.”

“I think that it was by a whole head,” he said. “If I win, you have to buy me dessert, too.”

They raced, and once again, Micah beat Lucy by just a little bit.

“I let you win,” Lucy said. “I didn’t want to hurt your manly pride.”

“Oh, really,” Micah said. “We could do this all day if you want to.”

“Nah, I’m good. I know what I know,” she said.

Micah laughed and the two of them trotted through the snow in a comfortable silence for a while. He loved how the coolness felt against his body and the sweet smell of the air. He had roamed mountains his entire life, but each one had its own brand of beauty. He gloried in the bare branches of the white barked aspen trees, the trembling branches of the Colorado blue spruce, and the dark green elegance of the pine trees.

“It’s incredible,” Lucy said, as she took in the same serene scene.

“Yes, it is,” Micah replied. “I can’t imagine having this place so near yet being unable to enjoy it.”

After a couple of hours, they headed back toward the area where they had left their clothes.

Their ears pricked up when they heard the voices coming from a clearing

in the trees.

“Have you checked all the cameras?” a woman asked.

“I have. There hasn’t been anyone around them in a while,” a short man, with a rifle slung over his shoulder said.

“Maybe we should move them. All the shifters in the area may have figured out where we put the cameras and are avoiding them.”

“We could do that, but not today,” the man said.

“You know, when Raf hired us, he said that there were a lot of shifters in this area,” the woman complained. “I’ve only seen the two shifters that were caught on the camera.”

“You mean the dragon shifter and bear shifter?”

“Yeah, and they got away. They wouldn’t have gotten away if I had been there,” she said.

“I don’t know. Regular shifters are easy to handle, but dragon shifters are a lot harder since they have that built in armor and flame thrower,” the man said. “I’m glad it was them and not me.”

“I guess,” she said. “I’m hungry. Let’s head back.”

Lucy and Micah watched the two hunters head back down the mountain.

“Wow, they are brutal,” Lucy said. “They are bloodthirsty.”

“There are always going to be those who like to kill for the sake of killing. Just like the hunters who go big game hunting just to make themselves feel more powerful than they really are,” Micah said in disgust.

The encounter with the hunters dampened their mood somewhat as they made their way to the tree where they had hidden their clothes. They quickly shifted and dressed and then wiped away their wolf tracks in the area.

“Hopefully, either the snow will melt before anyone comes up here or it will snow again,” Lucy said.

“I hope so,” Micah replied. “Although this really doesn’t tell them anything other than the fact that there are shifters in the area, which they already know.”

Micah dropped Lucy off at her car and they met up at the inn.

“Why don’t we just eat here tonight,” Lucy suggested. “There food is good, and I don’t really feel like going out again.”

“Sounds good, but remember, you’re buying dinner *and* dessert,” Micah goaded.

“I know. If I knew that you would gloat this much about winning, I wouldn’t have let you win,” Lucy replied.

“Your legs are shorter than mine and I’m faster than you. I gave you a head start, and I still beat you,” Micah teased.

“My legs are long enough to reach the ground,” Lucy said. “Besides, being lower to the ground gives me an advantage.”

“I’ll give you a rematch any day,” Micah said, smugly.

“Bring it.” Lucy laughed.

After dinner, Lucy invited Micah into her room. She had borrowed a chess board from room services.

“Let’s see how you do here,” she said.

“You know that men are always better at chess than women,” Micah replied, setting up his pieces.

Lucy beat Micah two out of three games.

“What do you have to say for yourself now?” Lucy taunted.

“I let you win. I would hate to have beaten you at two events in one day,” Micah said. “I wouldn’t want you to feel bad about yourself.”

Lucy laughed and said, “You are much too competitive to let anyone beat you on purpose. I know that you will be licking your wounds for a week over this.”

“I get a consolation prize,” Micah said.

“You do, huh?” Lucy said. “You’ve already had dinner and dessert. What else do you want?”

He put his hand on her face, leaned in close, and said, “This.”

LUCY

Lucy closed her eyes when she felt Micah's lips press against hers. At first, the touch was very gentle and delicate. Then, Micah moaned, and the kiss became more insistent. His tongue pressed against her, and she instinctively opened her mouth.

He explored her mouth, touching the top of her tongue and then the roof of her mouth. Their breaths mingled as Micah ran his fingers through her hair and then cupped the back of her head.

Lucy wrapped her arms around him, kneading his hard back muscles with her fingertips. She breathed in his scent, a combination of pine and fresh air that she had always associated with him.

Her heart thundered in her chest as Micah pulled away. He traced her swollen red lips as he stared into her eyes. The deep emerald of his own eyes seemed to peer into my soul.

"You are so beautiful," he said.

"Thank you," Lucy whispered, craving the feeling of his lips again.

He seemed to read her mind as he devoured her lips, claiming them. A warmth spread through her body as he continued to ravish her mouth with his.

Lucy moaned against his mouth as her entire body began to ache for more than just a kiss.

He gently nibbled on her top lip. Lucy's lips parted as Micah traced them with his tongue. Her body tingled with anticipation.

Without thinking, Lucy slipped her hands under the t-shirt that was stretched tight across his chest and back. She ran her hands from the top of

his shoulders down to his waist band and back up again, her fingertips tingling from the heat of his body.

Micah broke the kiss long enough to pull his shirt off and throw it on the floor.

Lucy had seen him without his shirt hundreds of times before, as they had often shifted and ran together. However, there was something different about it. This time, her fingers ached to explore the hard, tanned muscles of his chest.

She hesitantly reached toward him. Micah gently held her hands and placed them on his chest. Lucy slowly ran her hands over his muscles. She traced the smattering of dark brown hair that covered his hard pecs and led a trail down to his pant line. Lucy ran her hands over his arms, feeling his hard biceps and triceps.

Sucking in a huge breath, she said, “You are incredibly sexy.”

“Mmm. Glad you like it,” Micah replied, with that crooked sexy grin covering his face.

Lucy touched the side of his face and kissed his jawline, just below his ear. She traced his jaw line with tiny kisses. Micah moaned, but stayed still as she explored his face with her lips. She had always loved the contours of his face.

She touched her lips against his, tentatively at first, and then with more pressure. He gladly opened his mouth to give her tongue entrance. Mimicking his earlier actions, she tasted the roof of his mouth and stroked the top of his tongue.

Lucy had shared kisses with previous boyfriends, but none of them made her heart race like this shared kiss with Micah did. One of his hands tangled in her hair and the other held the small of his back.

Her entire body ached to feel his touch. She wanted so much to fulfill the fantasies that she'd been having about him lately. Fires that she never knew existed consumed her body. She had never needed anything like she needed Micah at that moment.

Pulling away from him slightly, she shyly unbuttoned her shirt and let it fall to the floor. She reached around, unsnapped her bra, and let it slide off. Lucy had undressed in front of Micah many times without feeling any kind of shyness or embarrassment, but this time it was different.

Lucy didn't know what to expect. She was afraid that Micah would turn away from her or perhaps think that she wasn't as attractive as she found him.

He put his hands on her shoulders and slowly ran them down her arm to her wrist. Then, he put his hands on her collarbone and moved down her chest, over her breasts and tummy, to her waist.

“You’re so perfect,” he said in a half whisper.

She released the breath that she didn’t know that she had been holding.

Micah pulled her close to him and her breasts pressed against his hard chest, her nipples hard as they rubbed against the hair on his pecs. Her breath caught in her throat as his hands caressed her back and sides.

The teasing touch made Lucy tremble. The feather like touch glided along her skin, barely touching her, but sending shivers of delight coursing through her body. His fingertips danced along the contours of her body. The sensation was delicate and elusive, like a faint brush of a butterfly’s wings.

“You are so sexy.”

Micah’s warm breath whispered against her ear before he gently nibbled on it.

Lucy moaned loudly. She spread her hands out on Micah’s chest and followed the trail of hair to his pants. Her need overcame her shyness as she started to unbutton his pants.

He held her face in both of his hands and looked deeply into her eyes.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes,” Lucy whispered.

Micah stood up and let Lucy unbutton his pants. He kicked off his shoes, pants, and underwear and stood naked in front of her.

Lucy gasped. She had seen him naked before but had never seen him aroused before. His thick cock was huge. She stared at it and licked her lips.

“Like what you see?” he asked, that grin back.

“Why, yes, sir, I do,” Lucy replied, trying to sound lighthearted, although it came out more as a pant.

“I think that you are over dressed,” Micah said.

She hesitated for just a moment, once again shy.

Don’t be an idiot.

Lucy unfastened her pants and pushed them and her pants down to her ankles. Stepping out of them and kicking them to the side, she started to take the step that separated her and Micah.

“Hold on for a second,” Micah said. “I want to look at you.”

Lucy wanted to remind him that he’d seen her a thousand times, but the words didn’t come. Instead, she stood still, a blush creeping into her cheeks.

“Woman, you have no idea what you are doing to me right now,” Micah said.

He stepped close to her and wrapped his arms around her. Micah gently walked her backward toward the bed. Her knees hit the bed and she sat down. He gently pushed her back so that she was lying down.

Micah laid on top of her, using his elbows to prop himself so that he didn't squash her. Once again, his lips found hers.

She could feel him pressing against her. Lucy craved him. She wanted so much for him to push inside of her and fill her.

Micah had other ideas. He pulled his lips away from hers and kissed her chin. Then, he kissed the hollow in her throat. Micah's mouth found one of her nipples and he sucked it in, flicking the pink bud with his tongue.

Lightning exploded in Lucy at the touch. Her fingers kneaded Micah's back and ran down his arms, touching him.

He licked her other nipple and gently sucked on it. Her entire body tingled. A million butterflies danced in her stomach, and she could feel the heat rush between her legs.

Micah reached between her legs and pushed two fingers into the hot, wet tunnel. He spread his fingers out, stretching her.

Lucy gasped for air as he continued to massage her inner walls with his fingers. She had pleased herself many times before, but this felt so different.

“Micah,” Lucy cried out, as his thumb found the hard pebble.

He gently rubbed it while his fingers continued to move inside of her.

Lucy closed her eyes and pressed her head back into the pillows. He continued to suck on one of her nipples, gently nibbling on it, and then licking it. He lightly pinched her other nipple and tugged on it just a bit, sending bolts of hot, white lightning through her.

She spread her legs a little wider, lifting her hips as he continued to tantalize her clit with his thumb.

Flames licked Lucy's body, and she started to tremble.

She moaned, “Micah,” as a rush of hot lava exploded out of her.

Micah continued to touch her as her body shook with the sheer pleasure from all the sensations that flooded her.

After a minute, Lucy was able to breathe again, and her heart rate returned to normal. She stared at Micah. He was incredibly muscular, but in a sexy way. She reached out and touched him as he repositioned himself on top

of her. His muscles were toned and hard beneath her fingers.

She raised her head and kissed his chest. Her lips trailed across his pecs, her tongue darting out to taste him.

He moaned and she looked into his eyes, hoping to see a hint of the passion that she felt. Micah stared back, looking into her soul. Her hands moved from his chest to his arms as he pressed against her hot, wet tunnel.

Micah so slowly pushed in, the large apple head on his cock stretching her. The fires that had been tamed once again burned inside of her as he inched his way into her. He paused only briefly as he encountered the proof that he was her first lover, before pushing through it.

It stung for a tiny second before the blazing inferno took over her body.

“Oh my heavens,” Lucy panted.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concerned.

“Yes,” she breathed. “You feel so good inside of me.”

“Yes, I do,” he agreed.

Micah slowly pulled back out, until just the massive head was still embedded inside of her, and then, inch by inch, he buried his full ten inches inside of her, stretching her.

“I love how your pussy massages my cock,” Micah said.

Lucy moaned as her fingers dug into his back. She moved her hips in time with his movements, as he pulled back and then sheathed himself inside of her again.

With just the tip of his cock inside of her, he pistoned back and forth, the ridge massaging the entrance to her pussy.

Then, he suddenly thrust hard and fast, driving deep inside of her.

“Yes, Micah,” she said. “Oh my heavens, yes.”

She touched Micah, feeling his muscular arms and kneading his back. Lightning and thunder crashed all around her as Micah continued to drive hard and fast, completely burying himself inside of her.

The fires overwhelmed her, and her body began to quiver. She panted and her heart raced as she felt a volcano explode inside of her and hot lava pour over her lover, as her walls pulsated around his hard cock.

He drew back and slammed into her once more. Micah let out a sound that was a cross between a moan and a yell as his cock throbbed. A hot fountain of his seed jetted deep inside of her.

After a minute the air cooled around them, and they caught their breath. Micah pulled out of Lucy, making her feel empty. He laid down next to her

and pulled her to him.

He nuzzled her neck and kissed her gently.

MICAH

Micah laid next to Lucy holding her. Making love to her had felt so right. He enjoyed feeling her cuddled up in his arms. He had suspected that she hadn't been with another man and felt honored and happy that he was the one she gave her innocence to. He just hoped that he could find a way to convince her to go through the mating ceremony with him.

There was no way that Micah would even come close to admitting that he was in love with her, but he did acknowledge that he cared deeply for her, and he couldn't imagine seeing her with someone else. He wasn't sure why the thought of seeing her with someone else bothered him so much, but it really did.

They snuggled next to each other quietly for several minutes, then she said, "You know, this was great, but it doesn't change anything."

Chuckling, Micah said, "I didn't expect it to. To be honest, I didn't expect the kiss to be that intense or to go that far."

"It was a nice kiss," Lucy said. "The best kiss that I've ever had, in fact."

"I know, right?" Micah teased. "I am the best. Maybe I should set up a kissing booth when we get back home and raise money for charity."

Lucy laughed and said, "I didn't think that we would go that far tonight, but I can honestly say that I'm not sorry. You made me feel things that I didn't know were possible. I had read about it in books and magazines, but I thought they were exaggerated."

"You are welcome, ma'am," Micah said. "I'm here to serve."

"As much as I loved it, I don't think that I'm up for another round, so I

need you to haul your naked carcass out of my bed and go back to your room,” Lucy said.

“Ouch. I think I just got my feelings hurt. How could you call this work of art a carcass?” Micah replied, gesturing to his body.

“Because it’s all used up for now.” Lucy laughed.

“Oh, you think so, do you? You’re the one who said that round two wasn’t in the works,” Micah replied.

“Would you be able to go again?”

“I don’t know, but I could stick around and find out,” Micah teased. “I’m sure that I wouldn’t disappoint you.”

“I don’t think so. I need to get some sleep. I will admit that after our run today and the exercise from tonight, I’m about ready to pass out.”

“Fine, be that way. But don’t say that I didn’t offer,” Micah joked as he hoisted himself out of bed.

He noticed that Lucy was eyeing his body, so he dressed slowly.

“Do you like what you see?”

“It’s alright,” Lucy replied.

“Alright?” Micah asked, in mock hurt. “I can’t believe you would say something so awful to me.”

Lucy shook her head and laughed at him. She faked a huge yawn, tapping her mouth with her hand.

“Get thee gone, creature,” she said.

Micah grabbed his socks and shoes and leaned over the bed to brush a kiss across Lucy’s lips.

“Sleep well,” he said.

Micah hopped in the shower, enjoying the feeling of the hot water cascading over his body. He closed his eyes and felt Lucy’s hands tentatively touching him. The thought of her shyly exploring his body ignited a couple of embers inside of him and he felt his cock twitching a little bit. He groaned when he thought of how good it felt to be inside of her, with her hot, tight, wet walls caressing him. It had taken him a little effort to hold back his orgasm until she had experienced hers. Micah was starting to ache again. He could definitely go back over there and show her that he was up for a second round.

“Down, boy. I think I need to make this a cold shower,” he said to himself. “Or at least stop thinking about Lucy touching me.”

The cold shower seemed to do the trick, although he knew that it

wouldn't take much to get him aroused again. He had to admit that making love to Lucy was a different experience than he had with other women.

"It is just because I've known her my entire life and we do have a connection, even if it isn't romantic love," he told himself.

He hadn't been surprised when she told him that them making love didn't change anything. Although he hadn't intended to get physical with her, he would never have expected her to suddenly decide to go through the mating ceremony with him after one night of passion. He still had a lot of convincing to do, though, before she would consider going through the mating ceremony with him. Micah knew Lucy well enough to understand that part of it would be convincing her to let go of her pride. She would resist going through the mating ceremony simply because the elders and alpha were trying to force her to do it.

"I do think that she is starting to feel something more for me than friendship, or she wouldn't have let me kiss her that way and she certainly wouldn't have made love to me," Micah muttered to himself. "It's a start in the right direction, at least."

Micah had to admit that he was exhausted after the long day and fell quickly to sleep, wondering what the events of the next week would bring.

Lucy and Micah met for breakfast the next morning.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

"I did, although I had weird dreams. One of those dreams was that I was in the middle of an ocean, in a perfectly good ship, and decided to put on a life vest, jump in an innertube, and swim back to shore."

"That is a strange dream. Did you do some heaving drinking after I left your room?" Micah asked, teasingly.

"No, but I think I'm going to have to do some research to try and figure out what that dream means. What about you?"

"I slept like the dead. I barely woke up even when you called me and asked if I wanted to eat breakfast with you before you went to work," Micah said. "I might go back and take a nap when we're done here."

"You're a lazy bum," Lucy said.

"I might just be that," Micah replied. "At least for another week or so. After all, I'm on vacation."

"There are a lot of really cool spots you could visit, especially around Colorado Springs and Manitou Springs," Lucy suggested.

"I could go sightseeing. I might drag Dean along with me, because I

know that he's been bored, although they have all kinds of entertainment available at the resort," Micah said. "On the other hand, I could go sit in the café all day long and heckle you while you schlep coffee and danishes."

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"I've seen you mean. You don't scare me," Micah teased.

"You should be very scared," Lucy replied. "I'm terrifying."

"You keep telling yourself that," Micah said.

Lucy checked her watch.

"Ooh, I would love to continue to sit here and scare you, but I need to get to work. There are thirsty people out there in the world," Lucy said.

Micah stood up and brushed a kiss across her lips. She smiled at him, touched his cheek briefly, and headed out the door.

He sat back down to finish his orange juice. She didn't pull back when he kissed her, and she touched his face in a way that she had never done before last night. Maybe she was starting to feel something for him, in spite of her best efforts not to. There was still a long way to go.

His room felt cramped. He wasn't used to being inactive. Deciding to take Lucy's suggestion about exploring the nearby sights, he picked up his phone to call Dean. Just as he did, his father called.

"Ugh," Micah said to himself.

He thought about ignoring the call, but that wouldn't make his father go away. It was better just to deal with the man and get it over with.

"Father," Micah said. "Good morning."

"Good morning," his father said. "How is your vacation going?"

"It's going well," Micah said.

"I know that you are there to try to convince Lucy to come back with you and go through the mating ceremony."

"I figured that you did." Micah sighed.

It wouldn't have taken a genius to figure out where he went and why.

"How is that going?"

"Everything is going fine," Micah replied.

He felt no need to tell his father that he had been making baby steps toward capturing Lucy's heart.

"What are you going to do if she doesn't agree to go through the mating ceremony?"

"Then I will return home, take my place as alpha, and do my job," Micah

said. "I'm not going to force her into it and I'm not going to threaten her if she doesn't, because it wouldn't work. Even if it did, she would resent it, and both of our lives would be a living hell. I don't want that for either of us."

"You have to have a mate," his father said.

"I will deal with the situation later. The world will not come to an end if I don't have a mate as soon as I take the office," Micah said. "I'm not going to go through a mating ceremony with someone just to make everyone else happy. I would rather refuse to become the alpha than do that."

His father was silent because he knew that Micah didn't make idle threats.

"I need to be going," Micah said.

"When are you going to be back?"

"In a week or two. Not much longer than that," Micah promised.

His father grunted and hung up the phone.

"Goodbye to you, too." Micah laughed.

He knew that his father wasn't happy with him, but his father knew that Micah was a grown man who wasn't about to be pushed around by his father, even if he was the alpha.

Micah closed his eyes. He wasn't going to bet Lucy to go through the mating ceremony with him and he wasn't going to force her. However, he was going to do everything that he possibly could do to win her heart. It was going to be a challenge, but Micah never turned his back on a challenge.

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He felt no need to tell his father that he had been making baby steps toward capturing Lucy's heart.

"What are you going to do if she doesn't agree to go through the mating ceremony?"

"Then I will return home, take my place as alpha, and do my job," Micah

said. "I'm not going to force her into it and I'm not going to threaten her if she doesn't, because it wouldn't work. Even if it did, she would resent it, and both of our lives would be a living hell. I don't want that for either of us."

"You have to have a mate," his father said.

"I will deal with the situation later. The world will not come to an end if I don't have a mate as soon as I take the office," Micah said. "I'm not going to go through a mating ceremony with someone just to make everyone else happy. I would rather refuse to become the alpha rather than do that."

His father was silent, because he knew that Micah didn't make idle threats.

"I need to be going," Micah said.

"When are you going to be back?"

"In a week or two. Not much longer than that," Micah promised.

His father grunted and hung up the phone.

"Good bye to you, too," Micah laughed.

He knew that his father wasn't happy with him, but his father knew that Micah was a grown man who wasn't about to be pushed around by his father, even if he was the alpha.

Micah closed his eyes. He wasn't going to bet Lucy to go through the mating ceremony with him and he wasn't going to force her. However, he was going to do everything that he possibly could to win her heart. It was going to be a challenge, but Micah never turned his back on a challenge.

LUCY

Lucy had lied when she told Micah that she had fallen instantly asleep. She had laid awake for a long time, thinking about Micah. She still couldn't believe that she and Micah had sex. Never in a million years would she have imagined that it would actually happen. It was hard for her to believe that she had felt his hard, sexy body on top of hers as he had filled her aching need for him.

Making love to him had been magical. It was even better than she had ever imagined. He had lit so many fires inside of her that there were a couple of times that she was sure that she was going to combust from the sheer intensity of it. She had loved lying in his arms, snuggling against him, after they had both exploded.

She had to admit that Micah stirred something inside of her soul. The kiss had ignited feelings that she had never felt from any other man. She had wanted him, craved him.

Lucy wasn't old fashioned, but she also wasn't one to have sex with just anyone. She knew that she would want to be with someone special. There was no one else in the world that she had even considered being intimate with.

Although Lucy wanted to deny it, she knew that she had felt more than a physical attraction to Micah. He *was* incredibly hot and had made her wet just by looking at him. His touch had made a thousand butterflies flutter in her belly and electricity snap around her.

There was more than just that, though. Micah was an incredible man and Lucy loved being with him. She would even admit that she looked forward to

hanging out with Micah and enjoyed her time with him more than she did with anyone else – even her best friend, Ginger.

Lucy was so wrapped up in her thoughts of Micah that she arrived at the café without remembering any of the drive there. She hoped that she hadn't run any red lights or driven through any stop signs.

"That just means that I consider him a great friend. He is a lot of fun, and I enjoy being with him," Lucy said aloud, as she parked her car.

A tiny voice in the back of her mind screamed out, "Liar."

Lucy did her best to ignore the voice as she stepped into the warm fragrant air of the café.

"Good morning," Clara said, with a smile.

"Good morning," Lucy said. "I'm sorry I'm late. I had breakfast with Micah and lost track of time."

"No worries," Clara said. "How did things go yesterday?"

"We had fun for the most part when we went for our run," Lucy said. "We ran into a couple of hunters, but they didn't see us. You were right about how evil and vicious they are."

"They are demons straight out of the pit of hell," Clara replied.

"It reminds me of that story I read when I was a kid – *The Most Dangerous Game*. It was about a man who had hunted every single big game animal in the world, got bored, and decided to start hunting humans."

"I remember that story, and you are right. That describes those bastards to a T," Clara said.

"I can almost picture their houses. Instead of having deer heads and bear heads hanging on the wall, which is awful enough, they have human heads mounted," Lucy said.

"That's an image I didn't need to have," Clara replied.

"I just don't understand what makes people so evil that they have to hunt people simply because they are different."

"I wish I knew, and I wish I knew how to fix it. The world would be a lot better place if there was a cure for blind hatred," Clara said.

"Anyway, after they left, we went back to the area where we shifted. I lost a couple of races to Micah so I had to buy dinner and dessert," Lucy said. "I tried to tell him that I let him win, but he wasn't buying it."

Clara laughed.

"I got my vengeance, though. We went back to my room and played a couple games of chess. I won."

“What was your prize?”

“He claimed a consolation prize and kissed me,” Lucy reported, her face flushing red.

“A consolation prize, huh?” Clara asked, wriggling her eyebrows at Lucy. She leaned against the counter, smiling at Lucy, and said, “Do tell.”

“It was just a kiss,” Lucy stammered, her face turning an even brighter red.

“Was it? If that was the case, then why is your face so red?”

“It was a great kiss,” Lucy admitted.

“What happened after this great kiss? Did he just bid you good night and go back to his room?” Clara asked, teasingly.

Lucy was sure that her face was about to burst into flames. She could still taste his kisses and feel his body on top of hers.

“Earth to Lucy.” Clara laughed, waving her arms in front of Lucy.

Lucy knew that she probably looked a little foolish with the huge grin that was plastered on her face.

“He didn’t leave, at least not right after the kiss,” Lucy confessed. “We had sex.”

“Did you now? And?”

“And, it was just like it is in the books. The heat, the tingling, everything. It takes my breath away just by thinking about it.”

“Was it just the physical sensations or was there something more?”

Lucy hesitated for a second. She had this same conversation in her head just a bit ago, but it was harder to actually admit it out loud to another person.

“It was more than just physical. I felt something else, but I couldn’t tell you exactly what it was,” Lucy said.

“Are you starting to feel something more than just friendship for him?”

“I might be,” Lucy said. “I don’t know. I don’t want to rush to any conclusions. You know that they say that you should never say ‘I love you’ after sex because the emotions are still high. I think I need to take a step back and think about everything.”

“I can understand that.”

“I did tell him that having sex didn’t change anything.”

“You’ve already admitted that you feel something for Micah that likely goes beyond just friendship. Are you sure that you aren’t letting your stubbornness and your pride get in the way of your happiness?”

“I’m not going to lie and say no. But, don’t you think that I would know

if I was in love with Micah?”

“Love can sneak up on you pretty quickly,” Clara said. “Trust me, I know.”

Just then, Clara let out a loud yelp and she rubbed her belly.

“What’s wrong?” Lucy asked, her heart thudding with panic.

Clara smiled and said, “Nothing. I guess it’s safe to tell you that I’m pregnant. Dillon, my husband, is a wolf shifter, too. As you know, shifter babies have a shorter gestation period than other babies, so I was trying to keep the pregnancy quiet so people couldn’t do the math.”

“Congratulations,” Lucy said. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, the baby just kicked, hard. She does that all the time.”

“She?”

“Zeke is convinced that he’s going to have a baby sister.”

“Maybe he has the gift of sight,” Lucy said. “And all this time, I thought that you were just pleasantly plump.”

Clara giggled.

“It sucks that you feel like you have to keep it a secret,” Lucy said. “A baby should be celebrated.”

“I know, but that’s the way it is here.”

“I can’t imagine living in such a toxic environment where you are constantly looking over your shoulder.”

“This is home,” Clara said, shrugging her shoulders. “I love the people here. Plus, Dillon works with others to help keep the shifters in the area safe.”

“You’re a stronger and better person than I am.”

A few hours later, the door to the café opened and a beautiful blond woman with an adorable little girl came in.

“Charlie,” Clara exclaimed. “I wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow.”

“Luna and I missed you and Zeke, and I guess Dillon, too,” Charlie said, smiling. “Since Ethan left town this morning, I decided to come early.”

Clara shook her head at the last statement, and Lucy wondered what she was missing.

“Charlie, this is Lucy, my new friend and helper. Lucy, this is Charlie, my best friend. This little princess is Luna.”

Lucy shook Charlie’s hand and then held out her hand to Luna. Luna opened up both arms and leaned over toward Lucy for Lucy to hold her.

“Welcome to the family.” Charlie laughed.

Luna gave Lucy a kiss on the cheek.

“She is adorable,” Lucy said. “She looks just like you.”

Clara and Charlie exchanged glances.

“Actually, she looks a lot like her father,” Clara said, looking at Charlie.

Charlie heaved a heavy sigh and said, “You can tell her.”

“You’ve met Ethan, Dillon’s friend?” Clara asked.

“Yeeeeessss,” Lucy said.

“Ethan is Luna’s father. Ethan and Charlie hooked up. Ethan made it clear while the two of them were seeing each other that he wasn’t interested in anything long term. He wasn’t ready to settle down and all that jazz,” Clara said. “So, when Charlie got pregnant, she decided not to tell Ethan.”

“Which is why you only visit when he’s out of town,” Lucy said.

“Exactly,” Charlie replied.

“Don’t you think he might change his mind once he finds out about this adorable baby girl?” Lucy asked.

“I don’t want to trap him into a relationship that he doesn’t want,” Charlie said. “I’ll admit that I have feelings for him, but I don’t want him to think that I’m trapping him.”

“Maybe he could have a relationship with Luna without you guys being together, if he doesn’t want to be,” Lucy said.

She immediately bit her tongue after she said it, because this was none of her business.

“Exactly,” Clara said.

“Maybe someday,” Charlie said.

Just then, Zeke and Reno burst through the café doors.

“Daddy said that Luna was here,” he yelled.

“Hello, Zeke,” Charlie said, laughing.

“Hi, Aunt Charlie. Where’s Luna?”

The little girl was already squirming to get out of Lucy’s arms. As soon as Lucy set the little girl on the ground, she ran as fast as her chubby legs could carry her to Zeke. Zeke hugged her and then the three of them went back to Zeke’s corner to play.

“He takes great care of her,” Charlie said. “He’s going to make a great big brother.”

Lucy watched the two children playing together and felt a little tug on her heartstrings. She liked the idea of having children but wanted to fall in love first.

Micah crossed her mind, but she instantly pushed the thought of him

away. She might have a little bit of feelings for him, but she was nowhere near the “I” word yet.

Dean came in a little bit later and asked her if they could have dinner together. Lucy hesitated for a second, thinking that she would rather have dinner with Micah.

Maybe putting a little bit of distance between Micah and me will help me clear my thoughts.

They decided on a diner that served old fashioned American food, like meatloaf and chicken and dumplings.

The evening went well. Dean didn't say or do anything during dinner that made Lucy feel uncomfortable. He told her about some of the places he'd visited since he' been in the area. Lucy talked about working at the café and how it gave her a whole new appreciation for people who worked on their feet all day and served the public.

“Most people are really nice, but once in a while someone comes in with a nasty attitude they want to share with everyone,” Lucy said.

“That sucks. How do you handle it?”

“I smile big and tell them to have a wonderful day, ignoring everything else.”

Dean laughed and replied, “I can see you doing that.”

After a couple slices of pumpkin pie, Lucy said, “I have an early morning shift. I need to get going.”

They walked out to the parking lot together and Dean hugged her.

He tried to kiss her, but Lucy put up her hand and said, “Don't.”

“We have so much fun together,” Dean said. “We would be great mates.”

“No, we wouldn't, because I don't love you like that,” Lucy said. “I don't feel the tiniest spark of anything, except friendship, when I'm with you.”

“I'll find a way to make you fall in love with me,” Dean said.

Lucy groaned as she got back into her car. She sincerely wished that both men would just go back to Montana and leave her alone.

MICAH

Micah hung out in his room and ordered pizza and beer to be delivered. He turned on a football game for a distraction but didn't really pay any attention to it. Dean had called him earlier to ask him how things were going with Lucy.

"About the same," Micah said, honestly. "She and I are still great friends, and she is still determined that she isn't going to honor our betrothal agreement."

"That still leaves some hope for me, then," Dean said.

"I guess so," Micah replied.

"She and I are going out to dinner tonight," Dean told him.

A slight twinge cramped Micah's stomach. He was well aware that Dean was still hell bent on making Lucy fall in love with him. He knew that Lucy wasn't someone who slept around, but he couldn't help but think that Lucy had told Micah she only felt friendship for him and they had made love.

Does she feel the same kind of friendship with Dean? he thought, bitterly.

Growling in the back of his throat, he told himself, "Knock it off."

"Micah?" Dean asked.

"I'm here. Just had something in the back of my throat. You guys have fun tonight."

"I'm going to try," Dean said.

Micah stared out the window at the mountain. He wasn't going to deny that the little twinge in his gut was jealousy. He also wasn't going to admit that it was because he loved Lucy, although he did have feelings for her. Dean was interfering with Micah's plans on wooing Lucy and trying to

convince her that going through the mating ceremony with him was the right choice for the both of them.

He headed out to the mountain for a long run. He was tired, but still restless when he returned to his room. Instead of going out again, though, he decided to stay in.

The football game was merely background noise. He couldn't help but listen for Lucy and wonder how their date was going.

Checking his watch when he heard her footsteps, Micah noted with satisfaction that it was only eight. She didn't get off work until six, so that had barely left enough time for them to find someplace to eat, order, and then enjoy their meal.

"Apparently, the date didn't go as well as Dean had hoped that it would," Micah said, not bothering to deny the satisfaction that thought brought him.

He had no intention of bothering Lucy tonight. Micah knew her well enough to know that would simply irritate her, and that was the last thing that he wanted. Grabbing another beer, he sat back into the comfortable chair and enjoyed the rest of the football game.

Dean called Micah the next morning and suggested lunch. Micah agreed. He didn't have anything better to do. Plus, he wanted to hear from Dean's own mouth about how the date went.

They talked about the football game that was on the night before. Each of them rooted for a different team and Dean's favorite team won. He rubbed that in.

"I didn't know you watched the game," Micah said innocently. "I thought that you were out with Lucy last night."

"We went out for dinner, but she wanted to go back to her room right after," Dean said.

"How did things go?"

"They were going great for a while. We hung out just like we normally do. Then, when dinner was over, she said that she was ready to go home. I walked her to her car and hugged her. I tried to kiss her, but she blocked it."

"Ouch," Micah said.

"Yeah. She told me that she only loves me as a friend and as nothing more," Dean said, morosely.

"So, what are you going to do?" Micah asked. "It sounds like you aren't going to be able to convince her to be with you."

"I'm not going to give up quite yet. Maybe I'll invite her out for a nice

walk or something and try to tell her exactly what my thoughts are, how I feel about her, and why.”

“You think that will make her change her mind?” Micah asked.

“I don’t know,” Dean said. “But short of kidnapping her, I’m not sure what else to do.”

Dean noticed the look on Micah’s face. He held up his hand and laughed.

“Don’t worry. I’m not that stupid. I know that not only would I have you and the rest of the wolf shifter clan on my ass, but she would find a way to murder me.”

Micah nodded.

“She is a touch cookie. I wouldn’t want to cross her.”

“What about you?”

“I don’t know,” Micah said. “I can’t hang around Ivy Springs much longer. My father already called me, antsy for me to get back. I think that he is tired of going to all those damned meetings himself and wants me to go for him. Trick’s on him – My first act as alpha is going to enact a policy that there is only one meeting that I go to a week. Any other business can be communicated by email.”

“Prepare your email then. It’s going to explode.”

“I’m going to hire a secretary,” Micah said.

Dean laughed and then returned his attention back to Lucy.

“What if you can’t convince her to go back with you and go through the mating ceremony with you?”

“Then, I won’t go through the mating ceremony until I can find the right person, if I ever do. I will also make sure to protect Lucy. I won’t let the elders exile her,” Micah said.

“I’m glad for that.”

“What are you going to do if she doesn’t change her mind about you?”

Dean shrugged and said, “I guess the same thing as you. I will simply go back home, assume my duties, and wait to see if there is anyone else who comes along that I could stand waking up to every morning for the rest of my life.”

“Eh, don’t be so picky. She can always sleep in a different room,” Micah joked.

“You’re one to talk,” Dean replied. “But really, like you, I am looking for a connection. Someone that I can relax with and enjoy life with.”

“Lucy certainly fits that bill,” Micah said.

Dean sat back in his chair and said, "My father called. He wanted to know what I was doing in Ivy Springs."

"You never told him?" Micah asked.

"Nope. He was on a need to know basis. To be honest, I'm not sure how he figured out that I was here."

"I didn't tell my father either, but he figured it out pretty quickly."

"My father already has a lineup of women who he thinks would make a suitable mate," Dean said, rolling his eyes.

"Heaven forbid," Micah said. "The third rule I'm going to make, after protecting Lucy and abolishing meetings, is that alphas no longer have to be mated."

"I think that I'm going to copy you," Dean said.

After lunch, Micah called his best friend, Isaac, who was also going to be his second in command.

"How are things up there?"

"Crazy," Isaac said. "There are already several people who are taking bets on whether you are able to convince Lucy to come back with you and go through the mating ceremony with you."

"That's a little embarrassing," Micah said.

"You know that people will do anything up here for entertainment. Plus, you are royalty. Everyone wants to know who the king will take for a bride. I'm pretty sure that there are women fighting over you already."

"The more you talk the more I think that I'm going to stay here in Ivy Springs," Micah said. "I'll just get a job at the café with Lucy."

"I can picture you in an apron, handing out pastries and coffee," Isaac said.

"I'll even wear sensible shoes so my feet don't hurt," Micah said. "But seriously, as beautiful as this city is, I couldn't stay here."

Micah told Isaac about the war that was going on between the Faisons and the shifters, and how there were hunters on the mountain who set up cameras and traps just to hunt down shifters and kill them for no reason other than they were shifters.

"It sounds like a vile place."

"It really is just one family. I don't think anyone else in town gives a rat's ass about who is a shifter or not."

"Stay safe up there, Brother, and come home sooner rather than later," Isaac said.

Micah decided to stop by the café and ask Lucy to go to dinner. She hesitated for a minute before she answered, and Micah was afraid that she was going to say no. He really couldn't blame her. She was probably sick of him and Dean.

"Sure," she finally answered. "You're buying dinner and dessert tonight."

"I can do that. Restaurant at the inn?"

"I'll meet you there around seven."

Lucy showed up at the restaurant right at seven. Her hair was still wet from the shower.

"I love the smell of coffee, but not as a perfume," she joked.

They ordered their dinner, and Lucy said, "You know, I remember being twelve. I couldn't imagine having a job or doing grown up stuff. I kind of thought that I would stay twelve forever. That was yesterday."

"I know what you mean. I miss those days," Micah said. "I miss laughing at you when you did crazy things, like wrecking your motorcycle and ending up covered from head to foot in mud."

"That wasn't funny," Lucy exclaimed. "The carburetor flooded, and it took me forever to get it started again."

"I told you that you should have gotten a Kawasaki instead," Micah said.

"What about you? You decided that you were going to prove to everyone how brave you were and climbed that huge tree. You managed to slide out on that branch. It broke and you hit every branch all the way to the ground, breaking your arm," Lucy retorted.

"Yeah, I was pretty sure that my father wanted to beat my ass for that one, but Mom wouldn't let him. She said my broken arm was punishment enough."

"It seemed that it wasn't, because I recall you climbing that exact same tree as soon as your arm healed," Lucy said, shaking her head.

"I couldn't let it beat me, now, could I?" Micah joked.

Micah was glad to see that Lucy visibly relaxed as they continued their banter through dinner.

Once dessert was served and eaten, Micah walked Lucy back to her room. He cupped her face in his hands and brushed his lips across hers. He thought he felt her knees buckle a little as he pressed harder against her mouth, consuming her, just as the aching need was about to overtake him.

He pulled away, touched her face, and then said, "Good night, Lucy. Sweet dreams," before disappearing inside his room.

Micah smiled to himself, because he was sure that Lucy watched him walk away, wanting more than just a kiss from him.

LUCY

Lucy walked into her room and sat down heavily in her chair. She put her fingers to her lips, where she could still feel the warmth from Micah's kiss. It had been intense, and Lucy admitted to herself that it had made her knees weak.

It was more than just the gentle touch of his hands on her face. It was more than the pressure of his lips against hers and the way he made love to her mouth with his.

She had experienced some incredible kisses in the past, although none of them could measure up to the talent that Micah had. However, no kiss had ever affected her the way that Micah's did.

Rubbing her face, she closed her eyes and leaned back in the chair. The kiss had done more than simply tantalized her mouth. It had sent a flood of fire exploding through her body making her crave more. She wanted more. The memory of their breaths mingling together as his tongue danced with hers made her heart thunder in her chest.

Tingling sensations of pure electricity ran through her veins as her body started to burn. The hot, wet need exploded between her legs as she remembered how it felt when he had filled her, bringing her ecstatic pleasure that she had never imagined possible.

She would have invited him into her room if he hadn't walked away. Lucy wasn't foolish enough to deny that she wouldn't have turned him away if he had wanted to make love to her again. In actuality, the minute he stepped into her room, she would have pulled his shirt off so she could touch his incredible chest and she wouldn't have stopped there.

Groaning at her unfulfilled ache, she rubbed herself through her jeans, feeling the heat that Micah's kiss had created. Her hard nub was starting to throb.

She pulled her pants and panties off, followed by her shirt and bra. Laying on the bed, she rubbed her clit, fantasizing that Micah's hard body was on top of hers. The heat built up inside of her and exploded onto her fingers.

Lying on the bed panting, her arms ached for Micah. She wanted so much to reach for him and pull him close to her, but he wasn't there.

Thinking back to the kiss in the hallway, Lucy swore that she saw the same desires in Micah's eyes that she had felt in hers, yet he had walked away. She wondered if she had taken matters into his own hands, as she had.

Biting her bottom lip, Lucy wondered why Micah had kissed her so intently and then left her hanging in the hallway.

I guess he was just respecting my boundaries, Lucy thought. *After all, I am the one who said that nothing had changed after we had sex the first time.*

Lucy knew that was a lie. She wasn't ready to follow Micah back home and go through the mating ceremony with him, but she was ready to admit that she was developing some kind of feelings for him. She wanted him, physically. There was absolutely no doubt about that. She craved to feel him next to her, touching her, and creating the inferno that raged when he was inside of her.

There was more to it than just that, though. She had always enjoyed being with Micah. They had a lot of fun together, whether it was climbing trees or getting into heated discussions about different issues. Lucy looked forward to being in Micah's company.

"Am I falling in love with him?" she wondered aloud. "Am I being blinded, like Clara said, because of my pride?"

Lucy jumped in the shower, enjoying the feeling of the hot water pouring over her body. She hadn't really considered the notion of whether she would like to spend the rest of her life with Micah. The biggest issue she had was that she had plans and dreams. She resented the idea that she was expected to give them all up because a bunch of old men said that she had to.

Lucy was up early the next morning. She was a little disappointed when she didn't see Micah in the restaurant. She had been looking forward to talking to him again, even if it was for a few minutes.

The café was busy from the moment that Clara unlocked the front door.

There were a couple of other places in the city that offered coffee, breakfast sandwiches, breakfast burritos, and danishes, but there must have been something special about Clara's place, because it was the most popular and, for the most part, people didn't seem to mind waiting in line for their food and drinks.

Lucy moved her head in a circle, getting the kinks out. The last four hours had gone by in a blur.

"It looks to me like you need a massage," a deep voice said.

Lucy focused on the tall man standing at the register, smiling at her. He was extremely well built and had a Clint Eastwood smile. His brown eyes were twinkling.

"Maybe so," Lucy said. "I've thought about going to one of those massage parlors a couple of times, but never managed to make it there."

"You should definitely try it, sometime. Or, you could just find someone who is good with their hands," he said.

"That's a thought. What can I get for you?" Lucy asked.

"A coffee, black, and a blueberry muffin," he said.

"Sure thing."

"Your eyes are captivating. I've never seen purple eyes before."

"Thank you," Lucy said.

"My name is Brian. Are you busy tonight?"

"I am, I'm sorry," Lucy said. "Your total is nine-fifty."

Brian handed over a twenty and said, "Keep the change."

"Thank you," Lucy said.

He wrote his number down on the back of the receipt that Lucy gave him and said, "If you change your mind, give me a call."

"Thanks," Lucy said.

Clara patted Lucy on the back and said, "Well, aren't you the lucky one today. That is Brian Mitchell. He is one of the most sought after bachelors in Ivy Springs. He drives a nice car, has a beautiful house, owns some businesses, and if the rumors are right, has almost as much money as the Faisons. Women are always after him, but he doesn't pay them any attention."

"He is nice looking," Lucy said, tossing his number in the trash.

"You aren't interested?"

"There wasn't a single spark of anything," Lucy said. "Besides, I'm not going to stay in Ivy Springs forever. Eventually, I have to get back to my

life.”

“Plus, there might be someone else occupying your attention,” Clara remarked.

Lucy sighed and said, “There has been. I’m just confused. How do I know if I love someone enough to spend the rest of my life with him? I have no idea what that kind of love even looks like.”

“It can be confusing. When I first met John, my ex-husband, I was sure that I was in love with him. He ticked all the right boxes, if you know what I mean. But when I met Dillon, I felt something completely different. It wasn’t just about the sex, which was great, but I was drawn to him. I wanted to be with him, talk to him, and do things with him, even if it was as simple as watching television or going bowling. It was a mental, emotional, and physical attraction all rolled up in one.”

“I am physically attracted to Micah. Just looking at him, even with his clothes on, is enough to get me heated up. I love spending time with him, no matter what we are doing. The idea of committing to spending the rest of my life tied to him, though, is terrifying. What if this is a feeling that passes?”

“I think that you will know, in your soul, when it is true love. The only thing is that you have to let yourself admit it. Don’t let your stubbornness talk you out of it.”

Lucy nodded and said, “You talk as though you know me or something.”

Clara laughed and said, “You remind me of me. I almost lost Dillon because I was too stubborn and too scared to admit my true feelings for him. Luckily for me, I figured it out before it was too late.”

After the café closed, Lucy wandered back to her room. She showered and then wondered what she was going to do with herself. Neither Dean nor Micah had asked her to have dinner with them. She was relieved that Dean hadn’t asked her. She still cared about him as a friend and enjoyed spending time with him, but she hated trying to avoid the awkward hugs and kisses afterward. She didn’t want to hurt him, but she also wanted him to understand that she had absolutely no romantic feelings toward him.

On the other hand, she was a little depressed that Micah hadn’t asked her to join him for dinner. It wasn’t just that she enjoyed hanging out with him. She also wanted the kisses and touches that came after dinner.

Lucy ordered some Mexican food to be delivered, deciding that she didn’t want to leave the inn. She went downstairs to grab some soda and water from the vending machine, passing by the small restaurant.

Micah was sitting at one of the tables, facing away from her. A beautiful woman with the most incredible red hair was sitting at the table with him, laughing at something that he said. The woman leaned across the table toward Micah and reached out her hand as though she was touching his. Her shirt was low enough that Micah was sure to have a clear view of the woman's breasts.

Her heart clenched and her stomach dropped as she hurried past them to the vending machines. With shaking hands, she put in her credit card and pushed the buttons for the different drinks she wanted. Gathering them up, she tried not to look at Micah and the woman when she walked past, but she couldn't help it. The woman was still leaning across the table, talking animatedly.

Lucy hurried back to her room and set the drinks in the refrigerator. Her food arrived shortly after.

The delicious meal that had been so appetizing when she ordered it, sat on the table, getting cold. Lucy picked up her fork and pushed her enchilada and rice around on the plate, the image of the red-haired woman vivid in Lucy's mind.

"I have no right to be jealous," Lucy said. "I have no claims on Micah. As a matter of fact, I have made it clear that we are not a couple. He has every right to talk to any woman he chooses."

In spite of her words, Lucy felt sick when she envisioned the two of them going back to Micah's room and Micah holding the woman in his arms.

MICAH

Micah looked up from his computer and rubbed the back of his neck. He closed his eyes as he shut the lid on his computer. Not for the first time, he wondered what he had been thinking when he decided to bring the damned contraption with him. He knew that he would just end up getting slammed with a ton of paperwork and emails.

“There has to be an easier way of doing this,” Micah told himself. He was going to have to hire a couple of secretaries to take care of the paperwork, emails, and other duties that he had been struggling over all day. It wasn’t that they were hard tasks. They were simply tedious.

Sighing heavily, he noted that he had three missed calls from his father. Micah had turned off his notifications after the first one, because he didn’t want to deal with whatever his father wanted to talk about, which was likely the situation between him and Lucy. Micah had nothing new to report and didn’t want to listen to his father ramble on about how he needed a mate.

His rumbling stomach reminded him that he had only had a small lunch on the run. Micah thought about asking Lucy if she wanted to go to dinner. He was pretty sure that she would agree to go with him. However, he decided to give her a break. They had been spending a lot of time together lately, and he reasoned that maybe a little bit of time away from each other wouldn’t be a bad thing. On top of that, she might be getting tired of feeling like a hunted rabbit, since both he and Dean had been pursuing her.

He did remember, with a sense of satisfaction, that his kiss had seemed to have a profound effect on her. She had a shocked look on her face when he had walked away. He had been pretty sure that she would have invited him

into her room if he hadn't and was equally sure that they would have ended up in bed together. However, as much as he would have loved having sex with her, there had to be something more in their relationship if they were going to have one.

Plus, it never hurts to leave a woman wanting more, Micah thought with a grin.

Another loud rumble from his stomach brought him out of his musing. He considered ordering something to be delivered, but the thought of staying trapped in the four walls of this small room drove him crazy.

The restaurant that was attached to the inn that he and Lucy was staying at served good food, and it would get him out of the cage for a little while.

The delicious smells called to Micah as soon as he passed by the doors, drawing him in. He chose a small table by the window and stared at the menu. The bad thing about being this hungry was that everything sounded good.

After he ordered a steak, medium well, a baked potato, and green beans, he watched out the window into the lobby. There was a very animated conversation going on between two people in the hallway and it looked like the two men were going to start throwing punches. He was startled by a woman's voice.

"Excuse me. I'm sorry for bothering you, but the place is rather busy, and there aren't a lot of places to sit. I was wondering if you minded me joining you."

"Not at all," Micah said.

Micah looked at the tall woman with curves in all the right places. Her green eyes reminded him of the forest. Her red hair reached the nice ass that he managed to get a glimpse of before she sat down. She had high cheekbones and a beautiful smile.

She held out her hand and said, "I'm Elise."

Micah shook it, noting that she had a nice, firm handshake and replied, "Micah. It's nice to meet you."

He shifted a little, leaning against the window as he considered his dinner companion. He didn't mind that she joined him. A good conversation would distract him.

It turned out that Elise was very intelligent. She was a doctor who was taking her first vacation in a couple of years and loved to travel to new areas, which was how she ended up in Ivy Springs.

The two of them somehow ended up talking about artwork.

“I’ve always loved the old classical art,” Micah said. “Raphael and Michelangelo are two of my favorites.”

“You like the Ninja Turtles, huh?” she teased.

“I guess I do, although I’m not as much into sculptures. Donatello was a master at his craft.”

“Leonardo Da Vinci was a pure genius at everything he did,” Elise said. “Did you know that he only slept for twenty minutes every four hours.”

“I had heard that. I guess it worked for him,” Micah said.

“His art was great, but my favorite was Van Gough. He was a genius, and it is really too bad that people didn’t recognize it before he died.”

She leaned over the table, giving him a great look down her shirt. He had to admit that it was a pretty great view. Elise reached out to touch his arm as she talked about how much she loved the painting, *Starry Night*, and how it seemed to reach out to her.

Elise’s leg touched his under the table. She kept it there during dinner. The beautiful red-head made it very obvious that she was interested in Micah.

He insisted on getting the check for them both at the end of the night.

“Thank you,” she said, putting her hand on his arm.

She smiled up at him and stepped close enough to him that their bodies were touching.

“I have some good scotch in my room if you want to come up and hang out with me,” she said.

Her voice was low and hungry, thick with desire. She put her hand on his chest and fiddled with the top button on his shirt as though she was going to unbutton it.

Elise’s voice held great promise of a very enjoyable night. She likely had the experience that could bring a man to the brink of heaven and hell and back again. It would be an incredibly pleasurable night with no strings attached.

It’s not like he would be cheating on Lucy. She had denied their betrothal and had said, on more than one occasion, that she would not go through the mating ceremony with him.

The temptation was almost overwhelming.

Micah almost hated himself when he said, “Elise, as tempted as I am, I have to say no.”

She stared at him for a second and then smiled.

“Whoever she is, she is a lucky lady,” Elise said, softly. “You have a good night.”

He watched her perfectly rounded ass sashay back and forth as she walked down the hallway toward her door. It was so hard not to rush after her and enjoy a night of bliss with no strings attached. Groaning, he headed for the elevator that would take him back to his room. He wasn’t sure whether to be proud of himself for taking the moral high road or if he should be kicking himself in the ass for being an idiot.

Lucy was finishing up a plate of French toast when Micah made it downstairs.

“Good morning,” he said. “How was your evening?”

“Just peachy,” she said, sarcastically.

Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, Micah thought as the waitress brought him a cup of coffee.

“Did you enjoy your evening?”

“It was alright, I guess,” he said. “I had some dinner and spent the rest of the evening watching a marathon of *The Expendables* movies.”

She took a couple more bites of her breakfast and then asked, “I saw you had company last night.”

Micah hid his smile as he could hear the jealousy in her voice.

“The restaurant was full so she asked if she could sit with me. We had a good conversation,” Micah said.

“I see,” Lucy replied.

“Nothing happened between us. Once dinner was over, she went to her room and I went to mine.”

He chuckled under his breath when he saw a look of satisfaction cross her face.

“What are your plans for the day?” Micah asked.

“Working at the café,” Lucy replied. “You?”

“I thought that I would go for a walk on the mountain. I wasn’t planning on shifting, just walking. Do you think that Clara could spare you for the day?”

“I don’t know. I’ll ask,” Lucy said.

After a quick conversation where Clara assured Lucy that she had more than enough staff working, Lucy said, “It looks like I’m free.”

They were quiet as he drove to the parking area on the mountain near one of the trail heads. Micah wondered if Lucy’s jealousy was an indication that

she was starting to feel something more than just friendship toward him. Maybe last night was a good night after all.

They strapped on their snowshoes and started up the side of the mountain.

“I love how peaceful it is up here,” she said. “No cars, horns, loud people, or any of the other noises that bombard us day and night in the city.”

She took in a deep breath.

“It smells so sweet. Nothing like the car exhaust and other fumes that can clog the sinuses in the city.”

“I needed this,” Micah said. “I spent all day yesterday staring at the computer screen and it was about to drive me mad.”

“I guess you’ll have to get used to it,” Lucy said. “You get to go to meetings, kiss babies, and do work on the computer.”

“Kiss babies?”

“Isn’t that what all the politicians do?”

“Only when they are trying to get elected and they are trying to convince everybody that they care about the people.” Micah laughed. “I’m not running for office, so I won’t be kissing anything, including ass.”

“That’s one of the reasons why you’ll make a great alpha,” Lucy said. “You truly care about the people and about the issues, and you won’t be afraid to make decisions that will hurt other people’s feelings. You’ll do what is right.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence,” Micah said.

Lucy put her foot down and his heart stopped when he heard an ominous crack. The snow exploded around Lucy’s foot as she slid down the bank onto the river. The ice cracked under her weight.

LUCY

Lucy's foot twisted. She tried to catch herself as she slid down the slick snowbank. She hit the ground below. A sickening feeling clenched Lucy's heart and fear exploded in Lucy's soul as she realized that she hadn't hit ground at all. Instead, she had managed to fall onto the snow-covered river. The ice cracked and Lucy fell through.

Panic set in as she tried to grab ahold of anything for leverage, but there was nothing. Her body continued to sink into the freezing cold water. The water was up to her waist, her chest and then over her head. She tried to kick and claw her way above the water. Lucy was terrified that she would be swept under a piece of ice that she couldn't break. Her heart beat a million miles an hour as she fought against her terror and the freezing cold.

Her head finally rose above the sheet of ice. The icy river stole her breath away and her lungs were burning as she tried to reach for anything that she could use to pull herself out.

Shifting wouldn't help. She would just end up under the ice, unable to break out of the biting water. A million bitterly cold knives were driven through her body. Lucy managed to grab ahold of a small tree that had been growing on the side of the river, but her gloved hands were starting to go numb.

The swift current that swirled around her legs was tugging at her. Closing her eyes, she prayed that she would be able to hold on to the small tree. Between the pull of the current and her weight, the tree was starting to give. Lucy felt the roots of the small tree start to pull out of the ground.

It had only been a couple of seconds, but it felt like hours had passed as

she tried to hang on to the branch and pull herself out of the water.

Micah jumped over to Lucy and laid down on his belly. He reached for her arms and pulled. She practically flew out of the frozen trap, landing on the ground next to Micah.

Lucy was so cold that she was starting to feel warm, which she knew was a sign of extreme danger.

“Can you walk?” Micah asked.

“I think so,” Lucy said.

She stood and her knees buckled. Micah put her arm around his shoulders, and she leaned on him as they made their way back down the trail. They were going so slow and Lucy’s eyes were getting heavy.

“Just a little further,” Micah said.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, they got to Micah’s truck. He picked her up and tossed her in, like a rag doll, and buckled the seatbelt before racing over to his side.

The heater blasted hot air as she shook, uncontrollably. Her entire body was in excruciating pain. She couldn’t put together a coherent thought.

“Hold on, Lucy,” Micah said.

He drove as quickly as he could to the Inn. Micah slammed into the parking spot and pulled Lucy out of the truck, carrying her to her room.

Micah pulled Lucy’s freezing wet clothes off of her and laid her in the bed, covering her with the thick blankets. Grabbing a towel, he wrapped her hair up the best that he could.

Lucy caught a look of her face in the mirror. It was an alarming shade of ashy grey. She reached up to touch her face. It was cold and hard. She was trembling so hard that the bed shook.

Undressing quickly, Micah jumped into bed next to her, pulling her tight against him, and he wrapped his arms around her, hoping that his body heat would help warm her up. After about an hour, she stopped shivering.

Micah slid out of bed and looked at Lucy’s fingers and toes. They were the same color as the rest of her skin.

“Do you have feeling in them?”

She nodded.

“Can you move them?” he asked.

Lucy focused on one hand and then one foot at a time, wiggling her fingers and toes.

“I don’t think that you have frostbite,” he said, with relief.

“Th-that’s a r-relief,” Lucy said, her voice still shaking.

Micah pulled on his clothes.

“I’m going downstairs for some hot coffee and soup. I’ll be right back.”

Lucy laid in the bed, with the covers pulled up to her chin. She might have stopped shaking, but her organs felt like they were still encased in ice blocks. She closed her eyes and wondered if she was ever going to warm up.

A few minutes later, Micah came up with a tray.

“Can you sit up a little?” he asked, setting the tray on the bedside table.

She nodded as he helped her sit up and propped some pillows behind her.

He held the cup of coffee to her lips.

“Just sip a little at a time,” he told her.

He spooned several bites of soup into her mouth.

Micah gently touched her face.

“Your color is back and your skin is softer. It is warm,” Micah said.

Lucy glanced in the mirror. She was relieved to see that Micah was right. She touched her face. She felt like she had barely escaped the grim reaper.

She finished the bowl of soup and slid back down into the bed.

“I’m so tired,” she said. “I just want to sleep.”

Micah looked at her as though he was worried that if she went to sleep, she wouldn’t wake back up.

“I’ll be fine, I promise,” she said. “It would be natural that I’m tired after all of that.”

“I should call Dillon and see if they can recommend a doctor to come look at you.”

“I’m fine. My fingers and toes are fine. My insides are finally warmed up. I’ll be okay,” Lucy insisted.

Micah hesitated as though he was trying to decide whether he should call Dillon or let Lucy rest. He finally decided that rest was the best medicine. He undressed and scooted into bed next to her, holding Lucy close to him.

She sighed, cuddling close to him, finally feeling safe and warm.

The beeping of her phone made Lucy sit up in shock. She had slept for sixteen hours, and it was time to get up to go to work.

“You really should take the day off,” Micah said.

“I’m fine, really. I have no ill after effects. My fingers and toes are working, and my brain is clear.”

“Lucy, you almost died yesterday.”

“But I didn’t, thanks to you, and now I’m as good as ever.”

Micah pressed his lips together. Lucy knew that he wanted to argue with her, but he knew that it was useless. Once Lucy made up her mind, that was it.

Groaning, he rolled out of bed.

“I’m going to my room for a quick shower and a change of clothes. Will you have time for breakfast?”

“Yeah, if you hurry. You didn’t go back to your room yesterday?”

“Nope. I wasn’t going to leave you. I figured I would wake you up when I ordered dinner, but you didn’t even move.”

“Wow,” Lucy said. “You are sweet.”

“Should I mention that you almost died?”

Lucy laughed, brushed a kiss across his lips, and said, “You’d better hurry.”

She jumped in the shower, enjoying the feeling of the hot water cascading over her.

“I will never take hot water for granted ever again,” she muttered to herself.

She thought about Micah and how caring he was. He didn’t have to stay with her all day, but he did. She knew that he cared about her and that he loved her.

“There is a huge difference between friendship love and romantic love,” Lucy reminded herself. “I want both.”

Even if she did fall in love with Micah, she had to know that he was in love with her, too, before she would agree to the mating ceremony. It couldn’t be a one-sided love.

Lucy knew that Micah wanted to try to convince her to stay in the room, but she cut him off. “I am sure that I would go stir-crazy if I stayed in my room. You know that I get cabin fever easily, and since I feel like my normal self, I’m going to work.”

Micah merely nodded.

“How did your day go yesterday?” Clara asked, once the morning rush was over.

“It was quite an adventure,” Lucy said, and related the harrowing tale.

“Oh my goodness. Why are you here?” Clara asked.

“I am fine,” Lucy said. “It obviously wasn’t my time to go or I’d be dead. I’m not dead, I feel good, so it’s just a great story to tell my friends, and maybe someday, kids.”

“I can’t believe that you are so nonchalant about it.”

“I’ve always believed that I’ll live until it’s my time to go and then I’ll die.”

“I can’t argue with you there.”

A minute later, a tall man walked in.

Clara rushed over to him, threw her arms around him and said, “Josh. It’s so good to see you. It’s been a minute.”

“I know,” Josh said. “We’re short a person, so we’ve all been taking extra shifts.”

Josh was a firefighter and first responder who had basic paramedic training.

He looked at Lucy and said, “You must be Lucy. Dillon asked me to come check you out. Apparently, you decided on an impromptu cold bath yesterday.”

“Well, you know. I had an itch.” Lucy laughed.

“How are you feeling?” Josh asked.

“Fine. I was a little chilled yesterday, but I’m all good now.”

“Chilled?”

“Okay, I was sure that my kidneys and liver were frozen solid, but they are fine now.”

“Let me see your fingers and toes.”

Sighing heavily, Lucy showed him her fingers, wiggling them. She took off her shoes and socks and wiggled her toes.

“I don’t see any signs of frostbite. Are you able to eat, drink, and potty okay?”

“Just fine,” Lucy reported.

“Then, my professional opinion is that you are just fine.”

“I told Micah that.”

“I’m sure you did, but he was worried enough to call Dillon anyway.”

He turned to Clara and said, “Dillon told me. Congrats. How are you feeling?”

“I feel good. The baby is growing fast and is healthy.”

“You call me if you need anything,” Josh said. “I need to get back to the station.”

He hugged Clara, shook Lucy’s hand and walked out the door.

“That was Luke’s best friend. I know that he has taken some heat from the Faicons since Luke disappeared.”

“That sucks. He seems like a nice guy.”

“He is awesome. I hope that he finds a wonderful woman who appreciates him someday.”

Lucy was about to reply when Dean walked in.

“Lucy. Are you okay? Micah told me what happened.”

Micah has a big mouth.

Lucy repressed her thoughts and assured Dean that she was fine.

“Can I get you anything? Is there anything I can do?”

“Nope,” Lucy said. “I’m all good.”

“I was hoping that I could come to your room tonight with dinner, so we could hang out,” Dean said.

Lucy sighed. She knew that Dean wanted more than to just hang out. She hated cutting him out of her life, but she just didn’t want to deal with the stress and awkwardness of him pushing her.

“That’s very sweet of you,” Lucy said. “I just don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Dean’s hang dog look nearly broke Lucy’s heart. It would only be worse, though, if she relented and she had to push him away because he didn’t seem to understand that he was permanently in the friend zone.

Finally, Dean said, “Okay. Call me if you need anything.”

He walked out with his shoulders slumped and his head hanging low.

“I don’t envy you a single bit,” Clara said, putting her arm around Lucy’s shoulder.

MICAH

Micah was relieved when Josh called him and reported that Lucy was fine. Micah was sure that she was and knew that shifters recovered a lot faster from injuries and other mishaps than other people, but he still had a tiny fear in the back of his brain. It was like a little kid that wouldn't stop poking him and wouldn't stop until he had an expert look over Lucy.

He did his best to leave her alone, but in the end, the compulsion to go to the café was overwhelming. She was wiping down tables and cleaning up when he stepped in.

“Hi, welcome to, oh, it's you,” she said.

“That just makes me feel great,” Micah said, laughing.

Lucy smirked and said, “I didn't mean it that way. I just don't need to be all happy and bubbly with you. I can just say, what do you want, here it is, go away.”

“Ouch. I can see that your sense of humor hasn't suffered any.”

“Nope. It's good as new.”

“How are you feeling, really?”

“I'm okay. Just a little tired, I guess. I was just thinking about ordering some Thai food and eating in my room with the television.”

“Oh, okay,” Micah said, a little disappointed.

“Do you want to join me?”

His heart lifted a little at the invitation.

“Sure. You're buying. You owe me after making me have a heart attack yesterday.”

“But I almost died,” Lucy protested, laughing.

“However, you didn’t die. You are alive enough to buy dinner to make up for the fact that you almost killed me when I had a heart attack.”

“That sounds like good logic to me,” Clara said, laughing. “He makes a good point.”

“Two against one? That’s not fair.”

Micah decided to let her have a little bit of breathing room, so he waited until she texted him that the food was on the way.

He watched in fascination as she ate all of her food and the rice, and then reached for what was left of his food after he finished.

“I guess the spill must have made me hungry,” Lucy said. “My body was working overtime to repair any damage that being frozen half to death might have caused.”

Micah laughed and said, “I can see that. Would you like me to order you some more?”

She grinned, used a napkin to wipe her face, and patted her belly.

“I’m good now.”

One of the John Wick movies was on the television.

“He does a good job, although watching these movies is just like watching a video game,” Lucy said. “As soon as he gets one of them down, three more pop up.”

“I saw a documentary about all of the training that he does for this movie,” Micah said. “It is pretty rigorous.”

“He is dedicated. He’s also a really great guy. He treats all of his fans with love and respect. He makes sure that everyone on the crew gets paid really well,” Lucy said. “I’ve been a fan since *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*.”

“Is that why you’re watching John Wick with me instead of a chick flick?”

Lucy smacked him playfully and asked him, “Have you ever seen me watch a chick flick? I’ve always liked action adventure movies, psychological thrillers, and such.”

“I have, actually. I’ve seen you watch *Dirty Dancing* and *Say Anything*.”

“Those don’t count,” Lucy said. “Even you watched *Dirty Dancing* and don’t you deny it.”

“I won’t. I’ve seen everything that Patrick Swayze has been in. He was a hell of an actor.”

“Which did you like better – *Next of Kin* or *Roadhouse*?” Lucy asked.

Micah scratched his chin and pretended to do some heavy thinking.

“Both equally. Not only did they have Patrick Swayze in them, but they had other actors that I love as well.”

Smiling, Micah sat back in the chair as they watched John Wick and talked about their favorite actors and movies. He noted that Lucy was relaxed and was having a good time. She smiled and laughed, and it was just like the days before there was all the pressure for them to go through the mating ceremony.

He cringed as he thought about the mating ceremony. He knew that he and Lucy would do well together if they went through the mating ceremony. They had always been close friends and neither of them had any secrets from the other. He was certain that romantic love would grow in time, if she would just give it a chance. If nothing else, they had their friendship and the sex was only going to get better, especially when she became more experienced.

The movie ended and Lucy stretched and yawned. She rubbed her eyes and checked her watch to see what time it was.

“I know it’s early, but I’m so sleepy,” Lucy said.

“You are still worn out from yesterday,” Micah said. “And, even though you feel better, your body is still healing.”

They both stood up. Micah hugged her tightly, wrapping his arms around her. He still couldn’t believe that he had almost lost her yesterday. He brushed a stray piece of hair out of her face. She tilted her face up to his, her purple eyes full of emotion that Micah couldn’t identify.

Time seemed to stand still as his emotions and physical sensations intertwined. His heart raced and he softly caressed her face, noticing the silky softness of her skin.

His lips met hers and electric sparks ignited inside of him, sending a surge of warmth and longing through his body. Their mouths melded together in a sensuous dance, their tongues passionately exploring each other. Micah could feel her breath as their mouths spoke of a desire that could never be expressed by words.

Finally, they break apart. Lucy touched her lips with her fingers and looked deeply into his eyes.

After a minute, she asked, “Do you want to stay with me tonight?”

There was nothing that Micah wanted more at that moment.

They undressed each other, their hands exploring each other’s bodies.

They laid down on the bed, and their mouths met again, tasting, dancing, exploring.

He put his hand between her legs and felt that she was ready for him. She was hot and wet. She moaned when he touched her and spread her legs for him.

Micah hovered over her and slowly entered her, burying himself inside of her, inch by inch.

Lucy pressed her head into the pillow, her fingers lightly scratching his back, her eyes closed.

“Yes,” she said. “Oh, Micah, yes.”

An inferno grew hotter and hotter inside of him, as he continued to move in and out of her, her silken walls stroking his shaft.

She ran her hands over his chest, arms, and sides, touching him. The sensations added to the fires that were burning white hot.

“Damn, woman, what you do to me.”

Lucy lifted her hips to meet his, and they created a rhythmic song as their bodies moved together in perfect sync.

She moaned loudly, her fingers digging into his back muscles. Her walls began to pulsate around him as she made a mewling sound.

His heart was racing a million miles an hour and he panted hard. It felt exquisite and he wanted it to last longer, but he was struggling to hold back. When Lucy moved her hips back and thrust up against him hard, shooting hot liquid over him, he lost control.

Lightning flashed and electricity exploded throughout his body as his cock began to throb and he exploded deep inside of her.

She relaxed, catching her breath. He leaned over her and brushed a kiss across her lips.

After a minute, she grinned and said, “I think I’m all warmed up, now.”

They got ready for bed. Lucy had an extra toothbrush, so he didn’t have to get dressed to go to his room. He might look good, but it probably would be a bad idea for him to pop into the hallway naked, even for a minute.

They slid between the cool sheets and Micah pulled Lucy close to him. She fell asleep in his arms, almost immediately.

He was in a deep sleep when Lucy cried out in a half scream and half call for help. He gently touched her face and called her name.

Her eyelids fluttered open, and he could see the terror in them for a brief second. She was panting, trying to catch her breath. Her lips trembled and she

was ghostly pale. Her muscles were tense and her body was rigid.

“Lucy. You’re okay. Look at me. I’m here and you’re okay.”

She stared into his face for a minute and her muscles started to unclench.

“Lucy. Look at me. You’re okay.”

She nodded and reached out to grab his arm.

Her breathing finally returned to normal and she croaked out, “I was in the river, and the waters had swept me away so that I was trapped under the ice. I couldn’t break through the ice. I couldn’t breathe.”

Micah wiped a tear from her face. She shivered.

“I’m so cold.”

“You are okay,” he said. “I’m here.”

Taking a deep breath, she whispered, “I was so scared.”

“I know you were. What you went through was absolutely terrifying.”

She finally calmed down and completely relaxed. Once again, she snuggled close to him and fell asleep.

Micah was worried about the effect her fall had. He had never seen her show any kind of fear, ever, and she had been in a couple of hairy situations. Satisfied that she was asleep and was okay, he soon fell asleep.

Lucy was fine the next morning and insisted on buying breakfast. Elise walked by their table and the two women locked eyes. Then, Lucy grinned, and Elise grimaced, marching away.

Laughing, she said, “It seems that you have an admirer.”

Micah shrugged and said, “I guess that I’m simply irresistible to everyone.”

Then, he added, “You have a couple of admirers, yourself.”

Lucy didn’t say anything.

“Have you given any thought about when you are going home?” he asked.

“No,” Lucy replied, frowning.

A few hours later, Micah was about to lose his mind from all of the paperwork that he had been focusing on. He thought about going for a walk in the mountains, but considering what had happened the day before, he decided against it. If he was home where he knew every inch of the mountains, it would be one thing. However, yesterday proved that they didn’t know the area and it could be dangerous.

He had enjoyed Dillon’s company so he decided to pop over there.

“Hey, man. How is Lucy?”

“Back to her stubborn self.” Micah laughed. “Thanks for sending Josh to look her over. I feel better.”

“That river has a habit of pulling people in. One of my friend’s wives fell in and he had to rescue her. Zeke managed to slide into the river, too. It looks so calm and peaceful on the outside, but it is murderous underneath.”

Micah was about to say, “Just like this town,” but the bell on the door jingled and Alexis walked in.

“Good morning, Dillon,” she said.

“Good morning, Alexis,” Dillon replied.

She browsed around for a few minutes and picked up a couple of hoodies and a few items that were clearly meant for kids.

“There are a couple of littles staying at the resort and they are absolutely adorable,” Alexis said. “I wanted to get them something.”

She put the items on the counter and pulled out her credit card. Alexis looked at Micah, smiled politely, and nodded.

“I’ll see you later,” she said, taking her receipt and walking out the door.

Dillon stared after her in disbelief.

“I wonder what in the world is wrong with her,” he said. “I wonder if she was diagnosed with a terminal illness and is trying to get right with the world before she dies. She always hits on the new guys who come to town, and she is *never* nice – not even to children.”

“Maybe she’s changed and turned over a new leaf in life.”

Laughing, Dillon said, “I don’t think that any of the Faisons can change. They’re born evil. I doubt if they even have a soul.”

Later that night, Micah and Lucy ate dinner at a small mom and pop diner and then went for a walk under the starry sky. They held hands, enjoying the night in a comfortable silence. It was getting late, so they went back to the inn.

Micah stood outside of her room long enough to hug her and kiss her, his mouth once again expressing a need.

“Good night,” he said, heading into his room.

He laid in his bed, staring up at the ceiling, wondering if she felt the physical need to connect as much as he did.

LUCY

A huge bouquet of red roses were on the counter when Lucy got to work the next morning.

Clara smiled and said, “The delivery guy brought them right after I got here.”

Lucy rolled her eyes when she looked at the tag.

With each delicate petal and gentle fragrance, this bouquet carries the essence of my feelings for you. In every blossom, I see the reflection of your captivating smile and tenderness in your eyes. These flowers convey the depths of my affection which grows stronger with each passing day.

“He’s poetic and romantic if nothing else,” Clara said.

“Ugh. I know,” Lucy said. “He’s a great guy, even if he doesn’t know that my favorite flowers are carnations.”

“I guess guys just think that every woman loves roses. Besides, red roses are the language of love.”

Lucy hung her head, her chin touching her chest and sighed.

“So, what is Dean like?”

“He’s a great guy,” Lucy said. “I’ve known him my entire life. He has a great sense of humor, is extremely smart, and is a good man. He will make a terrific alpha because he genuinely cares about the people in his clan as well as the people in the world around him. We were in town once, and he saw a guy digging in the trash can for food. He took the man to a restaurant for food. He gave the manager of the restaurant a hundred dollars and told him to give the man food any time he came in.”

“He does sound like a great guy.”

“Livingston, Montana.”

“I noticed that you have some friends who came with you,” Alexis said.

“They did. We all needed a breath of fresh air,” Lucy explained.

“I’ve only talked to them briefly,” Alexis said.

“They are both pretty great men,” Lucy said. “All three of us have been best friends since we were in diapers.”

“I’m guessing that they didn’t follow you into town because they want to be just friends,” Alexis said. “I’m also guessing that you didn’t come to town just because you needed a vacation.”

Lucy sighed. She figured that it wouldn’t hurt to be a little honest with Alexis.

“You are right,” Lucy said. “They both, all of the sudden, decided that they wanted to be out of the friend zone. I guess they figured that it was time to get married and start a family, and I was convenient.”

“Honey, if they followed you here all the way from Montana, it wasn’t because you were convenient. They must feel something for you. If they are both great men, why don’t you just pick one and settle down?”

Lucy said, “I only want to get married if I am truly in love with someone.”

Alexis gave a humorless laugh that almost sounded like a donkey’s guffaw.

“What is love? Does it even exist?”

“I like to think that it does.”

“I thought that I was in love with someone, but he wasn’t the person that I thought he was,” Alexis said, sadly.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve known Luke since we were kids, although he didn’t run around in the same circles. I always had a crush on him. He came back to Ivy Springs after getting out of the military. Every time I looked at him, my heart lurched. Butterflies swarmed in my stomach, and I thought about him constantly. But then, I found out that he was a shifter.”

“So,” Lucy said. “What difference does that make?”

“The Faisons have been at war with shifters for the last two hundred years. There is no way that I could be with a shifter.”

“Maybe it’s time to end the war,” Lucy said. “Nothing good ever comes of hate.”

Alexis shrugged her shoulders and said, “It doesn’t matter, anyway. Luke

and his family completely disappeared. I doubt if I will ever see him again.”

“I’m really sorry that your heart was broken,” Lucy said.

In spite of what she knew about Alexis and her family, she truly did sympathize with Alexis.

“I guess it doesn’t matter,” she said. “Can I have a large mocha?”

“Of course,” Lucy said.

Alexis paid with a twenty, telling Lucy to keep the change, and left.

Clara stared after Alexis, her mouth open and her eyes wide.

“I had no idea that she was capable of any feelings,” Clara said. “But she actually seemed like she was sad that Luke had left. Of course, if he hadn’t, it wouldn’t have mattered, because he was in love with Jamie, anyway, but still.”

“People will surprise you, sometimes,” Lucy said. “Or, she might be changing. She might have learned to have feelings.”

“I don’t know,” Clara said. “I’m not sure that a leopard can change his spots for stripes and turn purple, because that is how extreme it is to think that Alexis might be capable of thinking of anything but herself.”

“Well, either she really did feel something genuine for Luke, or she is simply sad because he was something that she wanted but couldn’t have.”

“I vote for the second,” Clara said. “Although she was also super nice today. That’s not like her. And Dillon said that she went to his store to buy some gifts for a couple of kids who were staying at the resort.”

Lucy shrugged her shoulders and raised her hands, palms up as if to say, “I don’t know.”

Sitting down after the lunch rush felt so good. The bottoms of her feet ached, and she wanted nothing more than to soak them in a hot tub. Her back hurt and she really needed a nap.

The bowl of baked potato soup and piece of French bread were delicious. Lucy wondered if she had enough time for a second bowl when her phone rang. She had turned it back on after Dean and Micah showed up, since everyone already knew where she was.

“Dad,” she said.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m good,” Lucy said. “Enjoying the change in scenery.”

“That’s good. We heard you had a scare the other day. Are you okay?”

Dean, Lucy thought.

“I’m fine. Micah saved my life and took care of me.”

“Speaking of Micah, you need to think about scooping him up and coming home. The elders have decided that they aren’t going to wait around for you to make up your mind. They are already going through the list of eligible women they think would be suitable as his mate.”

Lucy’s heart sank as she thought about another woman in Micah’s arms and in his bed. She pictured that beautiful red-head in his bed, and a bit of anger flared up.

“Don’t they think that he should have a say in whether he goes through the mating ceremony and who he goes through the ceremony with?”

“It is the custom that the alpha takes a mate after he is anointed,” her father said. “I know that you care about Micah and it’s obvious that he has feelings for you or he wouldn’t have gone after you.”

“I do care about him, Dad. I do love him, but I want to go through the mating ceremony with someone I am in love with and who feels that kind of love for me.”

“Love will grow. Frankly though, you don’t have a lot of time. The ceremony making him alpha is coming up quickly.”

“I know.”

“You need to get your head on straight, girl. You going through the mating ceremony and becoming the alpha’s queen would do a lot for this family’s status. It is your responsibility.”

“Dad, I need to go,” Lucy said, hanging up the phone.

All of the positive feelings that she had been having toward Micah and the thought that maybe they could go through with the mating ceremony instantly dissolved. She wasn’t going to be a pawn in anyone’s game.

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“He does sound like a great guy.”

“Dean has always been like that. He stuck up for the kids getting bullied. If he saw someone in school who didn’t seem to have any friends, Dean became their friend. He was the quarterback for the football team and hugely popular, but he never let that go to his head. He took one of the unpopular girls to prom, because she didn’t have anyone to go with. She was actually very pretty once she put an effort into it.”

“Wow.”

“He got straight A’s in school, respected the teachers, and always did great at everything he tried. He hasn’t changed at all.”

“Dean sounds damned near perfect. He’s also exceedingly handsome.”

Lucy sighed heavily and said, “He is. He’s amazing.”

“Buuutttt...”

“But I don’t feel anything romantic toward him. I love him dearly, as a brother and as a good friend. There are no sparks of any kind, not even a spark from static electricity.”

“That isn’t something that you can grow. It’s either there or it isn’t,” Clara said.

“Exactly. I’ve been trying to get Dean to understand that, but he just won’t listen. He’ll make some lucky woman a great mate someday. It just isn’t going to be me,” Lucy said.

“I hope he does find that lucky lady. It sounds like he is someone who deserves happiness.”

“Me too. It would be quite convenient for me if he would find her sooner

rather than later.”

“Things just don’t seem to work that way, do they?” Clara asked.

“Nope.”

Clara looked up and groaned softly. Alexis was at the door.

“Good morning,” she said to Clara. “I hope you’re having a good day.”

“I am. I hope you are.”

Alexis turned her attention to Lucy and asked, “How do you like Ivy Springs?”

“It’s great. It’s beautiful and all of the people here have been incredible.”

“Are you thinking about staying here, permanently?”

“No. This was just a get away destination so that I could clear my head. I have to get back home, soon.”

“Where is home at?” Alexis asked, sounding as though she was genuinely interested.

“Livingston, Montana.”

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“They did. We all needed a breath of fresh air,” Lucy explained.

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MICAH

Micah's eyes were starting to blur. He rubbed them, groaning. A headache was creeping up the back of his neck and threatened to take over his entire brain. A pot of coffee and an energy drink equaled, what felt like, a million emails, some of which were so inane that he wondered whether they were sent just to annoy him. Surely, people couldn't really be as dumb as some of the emails indicated.

He had one email that asked whether, when he became alpha, he would sanction the idea that all females wear the same color ball gown to the clan gala each year so that the organizers could make sure that all of the women's and girls' gowns matched the theme. Micah had to read that email twice to make sure that he hadn't missed anything. All kinds of snappy replies popped into his brain. He also thought about simply deleting the email and not replying to it, but he had a feeling that anyone who would actually send this type of question would simply continue to email him repeatedly until he answered. Shaking his head, he simply replied, "No. Females should be allowed to wear whatever color festive wear they choose."

Micah didn't even say ball gown. He figured that if a female wished to wear a tuxedo to the gala, then more power to her. It didn't hurt him at all, and it made that person happy.

Then, there had been the endless paperwork, a lot of which should have been delegated.

"No wonder Father has always been so busy," Micah said to himself after completing the paperwork for some vendor orders. "There should be a person whose sole purpose is to deal with this kind of mess."

He added that to the long list of changes he was planning to make once he became alpha.

Micah put his forehead in his hand, wondering what the elders and other members of the clan senate did.

“We need a major overhaul,” Micah decided.

His stomach was making loud noises like a semi-truck that was about to blow an engine.

“Food.”

He thought about the restaurant attached to the inn and the other, typical, fast-food eateries that dotted Ivy Springs, but none of it sounded appealing.

“The café has sandwiches.”

His stomach rumbled in agreement.

Lucy’s face lit up in a big smile when Micah walked in. He stood patiently behind a long line of other people waiting to make their order.

“Is it always this busy at lunch time?” Micah asked when he made it to the counter.

Lucy nodded. “Usually. People are hungry and we have some of the best sandwiches around. The baked potato soup is delicious as well.”

“Maybe they are just coming in to meet the one and only Lucy Stratton, cashier extraordinaire, with her famous purple eyes.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Lucy said. “If it was me, they would be coming in to experience my biting wit.”

“You do have an interesting sense of humor, although I would say that a person has to know you to truly understand it,” Micah said, plastering a serious look on his face.

“Mm-hmm. And you think that you know me?”

Micah threw up his hands in mock horror.

“I don’t think that a man could ever truly understand a woman. It is completely beyond our intellectual capacity.”

Lucy laughed and shook her head.

“To be honest, I don’t think that even women understand women. But, you are holding up the line. Did you come here to give me a hard time or to order something?”

“Both. What’s good here?”

“Everything. I think that you would like the fully loaded steak and cheese sandwich.”

“That sounds good.”

“For you, though, I recommend two full sandwiches and the soup.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m trying to say that I’ve seen you eat, and while the sandwiches would be enough to fill up a normal human being with a normal appetite, you will need at least two.”

“I’m not normal?”

“Quite the opposite.”

Someone in the line cleared their throat loudly, so Micah swallowed his next comment and said, “Fine, get me two of those, a bowl of baked potato soup, with some bread and a large drink.”

“Do you want dessert?”

All kinds of comments floated through Micah’s mind, but none of them were appropriate for the time and place.

“I’ll come back up if I’m still hungry.”

Micah watched Lucy as she worked. Her brilliant smile charmed even the crankiest of customers. Her smile was genuine. It reached her glowing eyes, and everyone seemed to be taken in by them.

Once it had died down some, she walked over and started picking up his dishes.

“Are you ready for some dessert?” she asked.

“I’m good for now, but maybe this evening there might be a few things on the menu that look delicious.”

“I guess that depends on which menu you are looking at,” Lucy replied, smirking at him, as she walked away.

Lucy would be busy, and he certainly didn’t want to be creepy and seem like he was stalking her so he decided to go next door and talk to Dillon. He was starting to get bored in Ivy Springs and really wanted to go home. He just wasn’t sure when he should cut ties and just leave. In some ways, he felt as though he was making some progress with Lucy. Slow progress, but progress nonetheless.

Dillon was sitting behind the counter, working on a crossword puzzle.

“What is an eleven letter word that means snobbish?” Dillon asked.

“Pretentious,” Micah replied.

Dillon counted the squares and said, “Perfect. What brings you here?”

“To be honest, I’m rather bored. I finished up a ton of work this morning – answering emails and doing paperwork, and if I was at home, I’d go shift or work with the kids down at the community center. But here, there’s not much

to do, except answer more emails, that I suspect are pouring in as we speak.”

“I guess that I’m glad that I’m not the alpha of my clan.”

“All of this will change once I am. My father liked to have his finger in every pie. He is a micromanager. I’m going to delegate all of this to others. I’ll have a secretary who will answer all the emails, except for the most pressing ones, I’ll have someone in charge of taking care of vendors, orders, supplies, and making sure that the bills get paid. And don’t even get me started on useless meetings.”

Dillon laughed heartily.

“I could see where that would be a bit overwhelming and frustrating.”

“I stared at the computer so much, I was afraid that my eyeballs were going to pop out.”

“I hate being on the computer. Of course, everything to do with the store is electronic now, from orders, to paying taxes and vendors, and day to day operations. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t make sense to hire someone to do it for me, and Ethan refuses.”

“Smart man.” Micah laughed. “I hear from Lucy that you are going to be a father again.”

Dillon’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. A broad smile crossed his face and his eyes glowed with happiness.

“I am. I’m excited. Zeke is a great son and he’ll be a great brother. I just hope that the baby is as great a kid as Zeke is.”

“I haven’t had a lot of interaction with him, but Lucy says he is a terrific kid. I’m sure that with both you and Clara raising the baby, it will be just as wonderful.”

“I hope so, although you know with kids, you can’t always tell. They all have a personality of their own, and it doesn’t matter how much love you give them or good parenting skills you have, they still end up doing their own thing.”

“This is true. Do you know what you are having yet?”

Dillon shook his head.

“Not yet. I’m not sure that Clara wants to know, although Zeke is absolutely certain that he is about to have a sister.”

“I would listen to the boy, then. Young’uns tend to know things.”

“You’re right about that.” Dillon laughed. “Sometimes, they tend to know too much.”

Just then, the door opened and Dillon groaned softly.

“What does he want?”

Raf walked deliberately to the counter, his cowboy boots making a loud clumping sound on the wood floor. Micah wasn't sure whether the man was trying to make an entrance like a debutant to a ball, but he wouldn't have been surprised if Raf spun around in a circle and curtsied.

“Dillon, Micah,” he said.

“How can I help you?” Dillon asked.

“I was just out and about and thought that I would stop in to say ‘hello.’”

“Hello,” Dillon said.

Micah nodded.

Raf looked at Micah and asked, “How long are you, Dean, and Lucy planning on staying in Ivy Springs?”

“I don't know. I'll probably head back home in a few days. I can't answer for Lucy and Dean.”

“Where are you guys from again?”

“Montana.”

“Why did you decide to come here?”

Micah was beginning to get irritated as he felt as though he was getting the third degree, and he didn't appreciate it.

“Vacation,” Micah said.

“Just a vacation?” Raf asked, raising his eyebrows. “Alexis said that you three have some kind of love triangle going on.”

Love triangle? Really?

“Well, I am trying to talk Lucy into marrying me,” Micah said.

Raf laughed, derisively.

“You came all this way for a skirt?”

“Something like that,” Micah said, trying to keep his temper in check.

“I would never chase a woman. If she wasn't interested in me, I would just walk away, unless she had something that I really wanted. In that case, I would just take what I wanted anyway,” Raf said.

Micah looked at Dillon, who sucked in a huge breath and squinted his eyes. Micah felt sick to his stomach at Raf's statement.

Raf slapped Micah on the back and said, “Take care.”

Dillon and Micah watched Raf stride out the door as though he was some kind of king.

“He is something else,” Micah said.

“Yeah, but I don't know what. I'm pretty sure he isn't even human.”

After Micah left, he ordered some Chinese food to be delivered, making sure to get some extra crab Rangoon, which was Lucy's favorite. He sent her a text letting her know he would bring dinner by when she got off of work. He got a smiley face emoji back.

Since when did Lucy start using emojis?

They sat close together on her bed watching reruns of *Whose Line Is It Anyway* with Drew Carey as the host.

"Remember, our teacher used to make us play the question game?" Lucy asked.

"I do remember. Dean always did better than any of us."

A commercial came on and Micah leaned over and brushed his lips against Lucy's.

With pulses racing and hearts pounding, Lucy and Micah found themselves drawn irresistibly closer. Their eyes locked, silently conveying the intensity of their desire. In that moment, the world around them ceased to exist as their lips met in a searing kiss.

The electricity that sparked between them sent shockwaves of pleasure through their bodies. Their lips moved with a fervent hunger, each touch igniting a fire deep within their souls. Their hands intertwined, fingers exploring the contours of each other's bodies, savoring warmth and softness.

Micah, unable to resist the magnetism of Lucy's lips, pulled her even closer. Their bodies pressed against each other, aching to be as close as possible. A symphony of sighs and gasps filled the air as their passionate embrace deepened.

Time seemed to stand still as Lucy's fingers traced the outline of Micah's jaw, his soft stubble igniting a delicious sensation against her skin. Micah's hands roamed gently, exploring the curves of Lucy's body, his touch sending shivers down her spine.

As their tongues danced, their connection intensified, a language spoken only by them. Every sensation, every taste, fueled the flame within, igniting a growing need for each other. Their breathing grew ragged, the intensity of the moment becoming almost overwhelming.

Breaking the kiss ever so slightly, their lips lingered, teasing and savoring the shared intimacy.

LUCY

Lucy's fingers found the bottom of Luke's T-shirt and pulled it over his head. She sucked in her breath as her eyes feasted on the sexy, hard, muscular chest. She tentatively touched him, feeling the warmth of his body through her fingertips. As she ran her fingers over his chest, she could feel the electricity pulsating through her body.

He groaned, letting her know that he liked her touches.

"You are a sexy man," she said.

"Thanks for noticing," Micah replied, that sexy grin making Lucy's heart dance.

She leaned forward and kissed his chest, the tip of her tongue tasting him. Micah groaned as her mouth explored his chest, his throat, and his face.

Her heart thundered in her chest as she stood up and pulled her shirt off over her head, throwing it onto the chair. Her bra followed.

Holding out her hand to Micah, she pulled him to his feet. She unbuttoned his pants, pushing them down around his ankles. After he stepped out of them, she took a step back and just stared at his body. Micah's six pack tapered into his waist. He had long muscular legs.

Lucy reached for him, running her hands up and down his thick arms, her lips pressed against his pecs. She walked behind him, kissing his back, her hands touching him from his shoulders down to his ass.

"I'm not much of an ass person, but if I was, I would say that you have a sexy one," Lucy said.

In response, Micah flexed his ass muscles and wiggled it around a couple of times.

She ran her hands over his legs, his ass, and his back. Micah stood very still as she explored his body.

Staring at his arousal, Lucy had a strong desire to taste it. She had read about it in the many books she had read and wondered what it would be like. Biting her lip, she wondered if she had the courage to act on her longing.

Judging by his reaction when she had kissed his chest, Lucy was sure that Micah would not object.

Closing her eyes and sucking in a huge breath, she got to her knees. As soon as she went to her knees, Micah gasped.

Micah let out a guttural moan when Lucy put her tongue on the base of his cock and licked her way back to the head.

Startled, Lucy pulled away.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“You did something very right,” Micah breathed.

Feeling more confident, Lucy licked his cock from the base to the tip, tasting every inch of him. She traced the ridge around the large, round head. Micah sucked in a huge breath as she licked the dots of clear, sweet liquid that formed at the tip of his cock.

Her fingers ran up and down the shaft. The textures were fascinating as the soft skin covered the rigid veins that lined the entire ten inches.

She opened her mouth wide and took as much of him in as she could, feeling the rounded tip press against the back of her throat.

“Oh my lord,” Micah panted.

Lucy wrapped a hand around the base of his cock and gently cradled his balls with the other.

Micah made a noise that sounded as though he was in agony.

Feeling more confident, Lucy slowly moved her lips back to the ridge of his cock, suckling it as she went. She moved her hand up to meet her mouth and then back down to the base.

A tingling sensation coursed through her as her lips moved back down the length of his shaft, suckling him. Her hand moved up to meet her mouth, caressing every inch of his shaft. Her tongue rubbed against the silky soft skin.

Lucy shivered slightly as she continued to pleasure the gorgeous man in front of her, tasting him and touching him. The heat built up between her legs and an aching need started to devour her.

The sounds coming from Micah were as arousing as any touch or caress

could be. The naughty idea that she was on her knees, sucking his cock, was extremely erotic.

“Lucy,” Micah breathed. “You have to stop, or I’m going to cum in your mouth.”

She thought about it for half a second. On one hand she would love for him to unload his hot, creamy fire into her mouth. She wanted to taste him and the thought was enough to almost send her over the edge.

On the other hand, the aching need between her legs screamed at her. She needed to feel him inside of her.

She stood, reluctantly letting go of the length of him.

He grinned at her and said, “It’s my turn. Take off the rest of your clothes and lay on the bed.”

Lucy obeyed him.

Micah laid next to her, pressing his lips against Lucy’s. He pushed his tongue into her mouth, the kiss searing and passionate. He nibbled on her top lip and then licked it.

The smoldering embers inside of Lucy burst into flame from that single kiss. Her pussy ached for him to bury himself deep inside of her.

He broke the kiss. His hands squeezed her breasts. Micah sucked one of her nipples into his mouth, nibbling on it gently and flicking it with his tongue. Rubbing her other nipple with his thumb, he sucked harder on the hard bud he had captured in his mouth. Micah lightly pinched her nipple, pulling on it gently, and rolling it between his thumb and fingers.

Moaning loudly, Lucy tangled her hands in his hair and ran them over his shoulders. The electricity snapped inside of her, as every cell in her body lit up.

Micah switched and sucked in her other nipple, lavishing as much attention on it as he did the first. He flicked it with his tongue and sucked on it, lightly at first and then a little more intensely. Her other nipple was not forgotten. The different sensations from the rubbing of the nipple, pulling on it, and pinching it made her heart race a million miles an hour while the butterflies exploded in her stomach.

“Like that did you?” Micah asked, with a wicked grin.

“I did,” Lucy panted.

“Wait ’til you see what’s next,” he promised.

Micah moved between her legs. She felt absolutely bawdy as he spread her legs as wide as they could go, bending them at the knees.

“So sexy,” he said, gazing at her entire body.

He put his hands on her ankles and slowly ran them up over her calves, her knees, and her thighs, his touch feathery light, tickling her sensitive skin. She drew in a huge breath and moaned, the caresses sending a million bolts of electricity through her.

Lucy stared at his chiseled face, his incredibly sexy chest as he looked into her eyes, seemingly into her soul.

Micah shifted his attention to the hot, wet, aching womanhood that was exposed to his perusal.

Pulling her butterfly lips apart, he said, “So enticing. You are perfect.”

A million different feelings teemed inside of her. She felt so naughty that he was looking at her so intently. She was incredibly aroused and needed him inside of her. Shyness flooded through her and she had to tell herself to relax and trust Micah.

Lucy lost all consciousness of those feelings when Micah leaned over her and licked her from the bottom of the entrance to her pussy to the top. Her fingers dug into the sheets and she moaned loudly as his tongue pushed into her.

“Oh heavens,” she moaned.

The air in the room swirled around her in a maelstrom when he flicked her clit with the tip of his tongue. She trembled and a thousand volcanoes erupted inside of her.

While he flicked the hard nub with his tongue and gently sucked on it, Micah’s hands found her nipples. He lightly pinched them and pulled on them as he continued to graze her clit with the tip of his tongue.

Lucy pressed her head against the pillows and began to shake as the electricity blazed through her body. Every cell was on fire. She panted, trying to breathe and her heart thundered like a thousand racehorses.

Fiery and icy raging rivers gushed through her body, pulsating in tune to the beat of an unknown song. The sensations were so intense that Lucy was sure that she was going to pass out from them.

Gasping for air, her body quaked and the world went dark as all the rivers in the world exploded at once. She was both relieved and disappointed when it all ended in just a moment.

“Get on your hands and knees,” Micah demanded, in a husky voice.

Without questioning, Lucy obeyed. His large mushroom tip pressed against her and easily slipped inside from all the heated wetness. Micah thrust

hard against her, burying himself deep.

Lucy cried out, "Micah. Oh heavens, Micah."

His fingers dug into her hips as he pulled back, leaving only the tip inside of her. He barely moved back and forth, rubbing the ridge of his cock against the opening of her pussy.

She tilted her head back, the sensations almost overwhelming. Leaning on her elbows, her sensitive nipples rubbed against the silken sheets, as Micah moved behind her.

Then, suddenly, he drove hard and fast inside of her, stretching her, sheathing himself deep in her body.

"Yes," Lucy cried out. "Oh, for the love of all that is holy."

Her entire body was aflame. Her nipples tingled from Micah's earlier touch. Her clit was electrified, and her pussy was liquid fire. The cool air in the room slammed against the heat of their bodies, creating a hurricane. She swore that she could feel the winds rotating around them, caressing her skin.

Micah held her hips tight as he pulled back until just the large, rounded tip of his cock was embedded inside of her. He pistoned back and forth, just an inch, for a minute, tantalizing her, making her cry out for him to fill her.

"Please, Micah. Hard, fast, please."

He continued to tease her senses for a few more agonizing seconds before he drove hard into her body, impaling himself deeply in her body. Her tight, silken pussy walls pulsed around him, as he thrust into her, over and over again, the rounded tip plunging into her depths.

Lucy cried out, loudly, "Micah."

Her body shook and her white knuckled hands twisted the sheets into knots as a tsunami of hot molten lava exploded out of her body.

Micah groaned. He pulled back and plunged inside of her. His throbbing cock kept time with her vibrating pussy as he shot a hot jet of his seed inside of her.

The two of them stayed motionless for a moment, while the ecstasy poured out of them. Finally, they were breathing normally again, and Lucy's heart rate returned to normal. Micah pulled out of Lucy, leaving her feeling empty.

She collapsed on the bed, spent.

MICAH

Micah collapsed next to Lucy and closed his eyes. The sex had been incredible. Although he hadn't been a playboy, he certainly had been with his share of women. No one had made him explode as powerfully as he had with Lucy. There had been a chemical connection between the two of them that he had never felt before.

He pulled Lucy close to him, enjoying feeling her smooth body pressed against his. Although he had seen her naked body throughout the years as they grew up, he always pictured it as she looked when she was a gangly teenager, with skinny arms, skinny legs, and a beanpole body. Even when she had become an adult, he had never looked at her in any other way. Until just the other day when his eyes opened and he saw her for the woman she had become.

After snuggling for a few minutes, Lucy groaned, got out of bed, and started the shower.

“Are you coming?” she asked.

Surprised, Micah leapt up before she could change her mind.

He watched her wash and rinse her hair. Her arms raised above her head, thrusting her breasts out as she scrubbed her scalp and threaded her fingers through her hair. Her body was stretched taught as she made sure that all of the suds were rinsed out. He never thought that such a simple action would be so provocative. It took all of his will power not to reach for her and take her right there.

Moaning, Micah grabbed the soap and wash cloth, running it over her chest, arms, and legs. She turned around so that he could wash her back. He

ran his hands over her slippery, soapy ass, loving the contours of her body.

Grinning, she rinsed off and took the cloth from him. Lucy meticulously ran the washcloth over his arms and across his chest, ever so slowly. Her fingers made circles in the suds after the washcloth passed over him.

The fire was building hotter inside of Micah again and he nearly exploded when she gently washed his balls and cock. He made sure that he was completely rinsed off and then picked her up and let her slide onto his cock in one fluid motion.

With her back pressed against the wall and her arms and legs around him, Micah didn't even think about being gentle. He pounded into her, thrusting hard and fast. Her fingers dug into his shoulders and she moaned loudly in his ear, as he stretched her tight pussy walls with his thick cock. Harder and faster he pumped, until she let out a soft scream and began to vibrate against him. He moaned and he began to throb once again, filling her with his hot seed.

She leaned her forehead against his and then he gently let her down.

"That was amazing," she said.

"Thank you," Micah said. "I'm ready and at your service."

"I don't think I could handle another go around." Lucy laughed.

He was amused when Lucy washed herself and stepped out of the shower.

Lucy blow dried her hair, brushed her teeth, and hopped in bed. Micah brushed his teeth with the spare toothbrush he had used. He walked toward his clothes and then looked at Lucy, unsure whether she was going to kick him out.

She didn't. She patted the bed beside her. Lucy snuggled tightly against him, pulled the covers over both of them, and almost instantly fell asleep. Lucy was sleeping, and soon, Morpheus overtook him as well.

"I'll buy you breakfast," Lucy said, brightly, the next morning.

"Deal."

"I enjoyed my time with you last night," Micah said, between bites of scrambled eggs.

"It was quite nice, wasn't it," Lucy said. "That still doesn't mean that I'm ready to go through with the mating ceremony, though."

"Have you at least thought about it?"

"I have. I haven't completely ruled it out. I'm giving us a chance, as you see."

That's a step in the right direction, at least.

“Well, you know that I love you, and I think that we would have a great future together,” Micah said.

“You love me, and I love you. But what kind of love is it? Are you in love with me?”

Micah didn't say anything.

“That's what I thought. And I couldn't say that I'm in love with you either. That is what I'm looking for. I'm looking for the kind of love that makes my knees buckle. The kind of love where, every day, I look forward to the time we spend together as we plan new places to explore, even if it is just the local museums, and new adventures, even if it is in our own backyard.”

He smirked before he could stop himself.

“Does that kind of love even exist?”

“How could you even ask that question?”

After Lucy went to work, Micah went upstairs to his room and opened his computer. However, instead of tackling his duties, he stared out the window and thought about his conversation with Lucy.

Even if that kind of love exists, would I even be able to feel it? Am I capable of feeling that kind of intense love for another person?

After an hour of pretending, Micah gave up and closed his computer. He needed to get out and run.

Lucy was talking to Dean at the café. There weren't any other customers and Clara's employees were washing down tables and equipment they had just washed down ten minutes ago.

“Do you guys want to go up on the mountain?” Micah asked.

Lucy looked at Clara, who nodded her head, the concern clear in her eyes.

“You know how I feel about that,” Clara said. “I don't want anything to happen to you guys. But, we are dead here, you are adults...”

“I promise we'll be safe. There's safety in numbers, we'll look for cameras, and watch for hunters,” Lucy promised.

Sighing heavily, Clara nodded.

After hiking for a couple of miles, the three of them found a secluded spot off the trail. They looked diligently, but they didn't see the tiny camera attached to one of the branches.

Quickly stripping and hiding their clothes, the three of them shifted. The day was incredible. Although it was January in Colorado, on a mountain, the air felt warm from the sun filtering down through the trees. The winter birds were singing and the air was thick with the sweet pine smell.

The three of them ran for a while to get out some of their pent up energy, and then lumbered through the woods, enjoying the day.

They were shocked when they finally returned to the area where they had left their clothes. Four hunters were waiting for them.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t three shifters right here on our mountain,” one of them said.

“You know that shifters aren’t wanted around here. I’m sure that you know what we do to shifters. However, if you come along peacefully with us, I’m sure that we could have a nice cozy conversation,” a tall man with a grizzled voice said. “Otherwise, we can kill you where you stand. It makes no never mind to us.”

Micah, Dean, and Lucy all exchanged glances. Lucy bared her teeth toward the hunter closest to her and started to back away.

The man pulled a gun and said, “Oh, no, you don’t.”

Lucy continued to growl, but she didn’t move.

“You’re coming with us,” the grizzled voiced man said.

He leveled his gun at Lucy, and Micah leapt. He felt the searing pain in his side as the bullet tore through him. However, he didn’t stop. He could hear Dean and Lucy growling and fighting. Two more shots were fired, but Micah didn’t know where they went to.

Micah grabbed the man’s arm with his mouth when he pulled out the knife and tried to slash Micah. Knowing he had no choice, as this man was intent on killing him, Micah bit the man on the neck and ripped. He whirled around to see that the other three hunters were also dead.

Dean and Lucy rushed toward him as he fell over, dizzy and weak from the blood loss. The world was spinning around in circles and there was darkness closing in around the edges.

“We have to get you back to town,” Lucy yelled.

“You have to take care of the bodies, first,” Micah gasped out, ignoring the excruciating pain that wracked his body as he tried to breathe and speak. “The mine we passed...”

“You’re right,” Dean said. “Lucy and I will take care of it.”

Lucy turned to human form and put two of the bodies across Dean’s back. Then, she shifted back to wolf form and the two of them each grabbed a person and laboriously drug them off to the mine they saw about a mile away.

Micah laid on the snowy ground, feeling weaker and weaker.

“Sorry it took so long,” Dean said. “We made sure to clean up the drag

marks in the snow and any evidence of blood.”

Micah tried to nod but failed.

Lucy and Dean shifted and dressed. Then, they asked Micah if he had enough strength to shift. He did. They helped him dress and, between the two of them carried him back to Micah’s truck. The world had spun out of control, and Micah didn’t remember the walk back down the mountain.

When he woke up again, he was lying in Lucy’s room at the inn. He managed to open his eyes just a slit. A gray-haired older man, who looked to be about a hundred and twenty was standing over him.

A clink in a metal container echoed throughout the room. The man straightened and walked over to Lucy, handing her the container.

“The bullet nicked his liver,” the old man told Lucy and Dean. “Quite honestly, I’m surprised that he’s still alive.”

Lucy nodded, but Dean said, “He’s very stubborn. He wouldn’t let a little thing like a bullet get in his way.”

The doctor showed Lucy how to make a compact out of some herbs that the doctor had in a bag and put it on the wound.

“This will help reduce the risk of infection and help the wound heal,” he said.

The man handed Lucy some pills and bags of herbs, giving her instructions on how to change the poultices and when to give him the pills.

“Here is my card. Call me if anything changes or if you need anything. I’ll be back in a couple of days to check on him,” the doctor said.

After he left, Dean said, “You’re gonna play nurse, huh?”

“Of course,” Lucy said. “If I wasn’t here, you know that you would.”

“Yeah, but I’m not as cute a nurse as you are.” He laughed.

Lucy chuckled and said, “Get out of here.”

“Call me if you need anything,” Dean said.

He left and Lucy sat down in the chair that was next to the bed. She reached out and held Micah’s hand tightly.

“You’d better heal from this,” she said through gritted teeth.

Micah wanted to look at her, but his eyelids were so heavy. Instead, he let the darkness fall over him again.

LUCY

Lucy watched Micah as he slept, reliving the events. It seemed like it had been years from the moment that he had been shot until now. She hated to leave him as she and Dean had taken the bodies to the mine shaft and then scrubbed the snow with branches, leading off into a million different directions everywhere from the spot where they had shifted. The snow had started to melt some from the direct sunlight hitting it, in spite of the cold air. Normally, Lucy would have admired how the glistening snow looked like dancing diamonds beneath the bright skies, but her heart was full of fear.

The trip down the mountain was torturous. Micah was no light weight, and although Dean had born the majority of the weight, Lucy felt as though her body was going to crumble. Micah hadn't been able to help at all. In fact, she was sure that he was unconscious for most, if not all, of the trip.

She had called Clara as soon as she and Dean had gotten Micah settled in the inn. Dillon got ahold of a shifter doctor, who hurried to the inn. Lucy and Dean had both held their breath as he examined Micah.

"He's lucky that he is still alive. The good thing is that since he is, he will likely survive this ordeal. He is a shifter and he will heal a lot faster than a mundane human would. The biggest challenge is to make sure he doesn't get an infection."

Lucy listened attentively as the doctor explained every medication to her, including the poultices. She made notes as he told her when to give the medications and how to do the poultices.

She held his hand tightly as he moaned. Her heart nearly stopped when

she felt how hot his skin was. His face was flushed, he was shivering, but at the same time, he was sweating profusely. She took his temperature. It was a hundred and three degrees.

“Take a deep breath. The doctor said that this might happen.”

She managed to shake him awake enough to get a couple of pills inside of him. Then, his eyes fluttered closed and he went back into a deep sleep. She walked back and forth all night between the bed and the bathroom, getting cool rags to put on his forehead.

Finally, about four in the morning, his fever was down to a hundred degrees. He was breathing evenly. Relieved, Lucy managed to fall asleep in the chair.

When she woke up the next morning, she had a serious crick in her neck. She rubbed her neck and moved her head in a circle, trying to loosen up the muscles.

Lucy ordered breakfast to be sent up for her and some broth for Micah. She figured that he probably wouldn't be able to eat a full course meal, but he would need something in his belly. She answered a bunch of texts from Dean and Clara, wanting to know how Micah was doing. Not ready to deal with the drama, she hadn't told anyone back home what happened.

A documentary about the deserts around the world and proof that they were once under water played in the background. Lucy half-heartedly listened to it, as the narrator explained that paleontologists had found a previously unknown extinct species of whale that had four legs, sharp teeth, and lived exclusively in the water.

She leaned back in the chair, a splitting headache pounding between her temples and the back of her skull. Her eyes were burning and felt gritty. She closed them for relief, but the sensations remained. Her body screamed for sleep, but that seemed impossible.

“What happened?”

A deep voice startled Lucy out of her stupor.

“Micah. You're awake,” Lucy exclaimed.

He tried to sit up, but he groaned in pain and fell back to the bed.

“You were shot yesterday,” Lucy said. “We had gone for a run and when we got back, there were four hunters there. One of them shot you. The bullet nicked your liver and caused some damage.”

“I need to get out of bed,” Micah said.

“You need to lay still.”

“Unless I’m wearing a diaper, I need to get out of bed,” he insisted.

“Good to know you haven’t lost your sense of humor,” Lucy said, as she helped Micah up.

“It’s a little embarrassing to have to be like a woman.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Lucy promised.

A few hours later, there was a soft knock on the door. Dillon was there.

“How is the patient?”

“Impatient,” Lucy said. “He wants to get out of bed, but I just don’t think that is a good idea right now. The doctor said he needs to rest for at least a week.”

“There is no way I can lay in bed for a week,” Micah called out.

Dillon and Micah exchanged pleasantries and then Dillon’s face got serious.

“What in the hell happened?”

“Dean, Lucy, and I shifted and went for a run. We checked for cameras and nearby hunters, but we didn’t see any. Apparently, we missed a tiny camera hidden on a branch. They were waiting for us when we got back,” Micah explained.

“There were four of them,” Lucy piped up. “They had guns. They said that we could go quietly with them or they would kill us. We had no intention of going anywhere with them. One of them pointed a gun at me. Micah leapt toward him and was shot. Then, all hell broke loose.”

Dillon squinted his eyes shut, heaved a deep breath, pressed his lips together and ran his fingers through his hair. He clearly wasn’t pleased.

“What happened to the hunters?”

“They are at the bottom of a mine shaft,” Lucy said.

Groaning, Dillon said, “This is going to cause a lot of problems.”

“It couldn’t be helped. We wouldn’t have fought if we hadn’t been forced to. It was an ‘us or them’ situation.”

“You shouldn’t have been up on that mountain shifting anyway. You were warned,” Dillon growled.

“Whoa, back the truck up,” Micah said, in a hard voice. “First of all, is that what you would say to an innocent tourist who happened to be in the area and not known of the lore? Second, are you really blaming us when we were the ones ambushed? Frankly, I don’t know how you guys live in a prison, anyway, afraid of your own shadows.”

Micah’s face was bright red and the vein in the side of his neck was

beating hard. His white knuckled fingers gripped the sheets.

Dillon looked at Micah and then sighed again.

“You’re right. We spend so much time trying not to antagonize the situation even further that we have created a prison for ourselves. And, of course, I’m not victim blaming, although it sounds that way. I’m just really frustrated because this is going to mean a lot of problems for the shifters in the area.”

“You guys need to stand up for yourself.”

Dillon’s shoulders slumped and he rubbed the back of his neck.

“I wish it was that easy,” he said. “I’m glad to see that you are okay. I need to get back to the store.”

Lucy could see that Micah was completely pissed when Dillon left.

“I can’t believe his attitude. They have all just given up here.”

“We don’t live here,” Lucy said. “We haven’t lived their struggle that has been going on for so long. We haven’t had to deal with the constant threat of hunters hanging over our head.”

Micah’s chest heaved and he nodded.

“I guess so.”

“We can’t judge until we go a day in their heads and hearts.”

“Save the social media memes,” Micah said grumpily.

“Ouch,” Lucy said.

She didn’t take offense to his words, knowing that he was in pain, he was frustrated at being forced to stay in bed, and annoyed with the situation in Ivy Springs, even though it wasn’t his fight.

Clara came by that evening with a bunch of sandwiches and baked potato soup, which was Lucy’s favorite.

“How is your patient?” she asked.

“Grouchy and ready to get out of bed and fight the world,” Lucy said.

“Men can be that way, especially when they don’t feel good. There is nothing worse than Dillon with a cold. He had one not too long ago, and I was about to banish him to Ethan’s house until he got better.”

Lucy laughed.

“I’m sorry that you ran into hunters,” Clara said. “I was afraid that something like that would happen. I would never have wanted you to get caught up in our war here.”

“We knew the risks, although we thought that we were being extra cautious,” Micah said. “We are really sorry if it adds to the stress here.”

Clara smiled and said, “I know this is going to sound callous, and while I hate that anyone was hurt, I can’t help but feel grateful that there are four fewer hunters in the area, at least for a while. We’re still going to be looking over our shoulders, but there is some relief.”

“Maybe if hunters keep disappearing from the area, other hunters will think twice about coming.”

“I doubt that,” Clara said. “If anything, they’ll want to ‘avenge their fellow hunters’ and even more will come.”

“I’m really sorry,” Micah said again.

“If you keep apologizing, I’m going to shoot you on the other side, and I don’t even own a gun.”

“Feisty woman.” Micah laughed.

After a few more minutes, Clara said, “Zeke, Reno, and Dillon are waiting for me at home, so I’d better get.”

“You put the dog before your husband?” Micah teased.

She shrugged her shoulders and grinned. “You know how it is. Seriously, though, it is because Zeke and Reno come as a package.”

Micah, in spite of being convinced that he was ready to go full speed ahead, yawned, and quickly fell asleep.

Lucy turned her documentary back on the television and sat back in the chair, stapling her fingers.

She had no idea what her end game was. Although she wasn’t ready to go back home yet, she couldn’t stay in Ivy Springs indefinitely, especially with all of the drama going on here.

Her eyes focused on Micah’s chest, watching the steady rise and fall of his breathing. She could still feel the terror that gripped her soul when she thought that Micah was going to die.

Does that mean I’ve fallen in love?

MICAH

After the third day, Lucy decided that Micah was well enough to go back to his room. The wound had almost healed up, and while he tired easily, and there was a twinge of pain when he twisted wrong, he was feeling a lot better.

The first thing he did was jump in the shower, making the water as hot as he could stand it. He stretched his arms out, leaning against the wall, his head hanging down, the hot water cascading over his body.

It felt so good, although if he was honest, he had enjoyed the gentle sponge baths that Lucy had given him. She had blushed each time that she had gotten a reaction out of him.

“What do you expect?” he had asked her, with a huge grin.

“I expect you to behave,” she replied.

“You don’t know me very well, then.”

They had laughed, although it had hurt like someone was twisting his gut into a knot. He had secretly hoped that she might take matters into her own hands – or mouth – but she hadn’t. Micah was a little disappointed, although he had to admit that even that much would have been extremely painful.

After a half hour, Micah said, “If I don’t get out of the shower, I’m going to start growing gills.”

Sitting in the chair, Micah picked up the phone. This was the part that he was dreading the most. He had to let his father know what had happened.

Micah explained the situation as succinctly as possible. At least the old man’s first thought was of his son’s welfare.

“Are you sure that you’re going to be okay?”

“The doctor gave me a clean bill of health,” Micah said. “I’m just moving a little bit slower than I was, but I feel great.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

There was a brief pause.

“How in the world could you get caught up in a situation like that?” his father demanded.

“Like I said. We were careful, just not careful enough,” Micah replied.

“You shouldn’t have been there in the first place. As soon as you heard about all of the drama and other bullshit that was going on down there, you should have left. There is too much at stake for you to be involved in that mess.”

“I didn’t plan on getting involved, Father,” Micah replied. “It just happened. There are hunters that move through Montana and kill shifters every year.”

“I realize that, but they are few and far between. It’s not like we’re infested with hunters like Ivy Springs is.”

Micah had to admit that his father was right about that.

“This is unacceptable. You need to get your ass back home now. You have the alpha ceremony to go through in a couple of weeks. You have duties to your clan.”

Micah took a deep breath. He had expected this reaction from his father.

“I’ll be home in a few days.”

“You’d better,” his father said.

Micah wanted to say, “or what,” but his father had already hung up the phone.

Rubbing his head, he tossed his phone on the table.

A light rap on his door and Lucy stepped in.

“You are able to get around, you have your meds, and instructions. I figure that I may as well go back to the café and help out,” Lucy said.

“You can’t stand sitting around doing nothing, either, can you?”

Lucy had the grace to look guilty.

“Call me if you need anything.”

Micah closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the chair. Groaning to himself, he wondered what he was still doing in Ivy Springs. He hadn’t seemed to be making any progress with Lucy.

She had taken care of him, but they were close friends. She would have done the same for Ginger, Dean, or any person she met on the street who

needed it. It was true that they had made love several times and they were getting closer, but Lucy had even said that she would only go through the mating ceremony with someone she was in love with, and she had made a point that she wasn't ready to go through the ceremony with him.

Part of him wondered if Lucy did have feelings for him, beyond friendship, but was just too stubborn to admit it. He knew that she loathed being forced into doing something that wasn't a part of her life plan, especially when it came to an intimate part of her life.

He was in the same boat. His father and the elders had some woman lined up for him to go through the mating ceremony with. Of course, he had been with women in the past who he certainly wasn't in love with. The idea of being with a woman he had absolutely no feelings for for the rest of his life made him nauseous. He wasn't the kind of guy to mate with a woman, have sex with her once a year to get her knocked up, and then indulge in relationships with other women. That went against every moral fiber that he had.

This whole thing was giving him a headache.

"To hell with it. I'll stay a bachelor my whole life. I'll just find some worthy kid among the clan and make him my heir."

The comment was hollow, because he did want a family someday. He wanted to have that special someone to share the good times and bad. He wanted sons and daughters to raise, take fishing, play ball with, and whatever else the kids were into.

Dillon popped by about an hour later.

"How are you feeling?"

"Good as new," Micah said, still irritated with the man.

"I'm glad to hear that," Dillon said.

He cracked his knuckles and scratched his face.

"Listen, the dragon king would like to talk with you."

"Why?" Micah asked.

"He wants to hear about the situation from the horse's mouth, so to speak," Dillon said. "I know it might not be where you are from, but an audience with the dragon king is an honor. He does hold a lot of clout both in the shifter world and the human world. Plus, not too many people are allowed to pass into the shifter world and then back into the human world. The rule is that once you go to the shifter world, you stay."

"Are you sure he would let me leave?"

Dillon laughed.

“Of course. He just wants to talk to you, not kidnap you. Are you by any chance up to it today?”

Micah thought about it and said, “Yes.”

He just hoped that he would be able to back it up. It had only been a few days since he was laying on death’s door.

After Micah grabbed his gear, Dillon led the way to his truck. They made small talk about Montana, Colorado, and the shifter world, comparing the three places. Except for the war that was going on in Ivy Springs, it seemed to Micah that the three places were very similar. The only difference was that there were a lot more shifters in the shifter world. Other than that, people were just people, trying to live their lives and make it through the day. The people in all the different areas were caring, understanding people.

Dillon parked his truck and the two men strapped on their snowshoes and trudged up the mountain. Micah hated the fact that he was moving a little slower than he normally did. By the time they reached the area where Dillon deemed it safe to shift, Micah could feel a dull ache in his side.

“Are you going to be okay? Do we need to turn back?”

“No. We’ve come this far. I’ll get through it,” Micah said, hating to admit any kind of weakness in front of anyone.

They shifted and walked the rest of the way up the mountain. It was a little easier going in wolf form than human form, but Micah was still winded by the time they got to the moose that seemed to be sleeping, his back to the cold breeze.

“Oh, hello, Dillon,” the moose said.

“Hi, Jeffrey. This is Micah. Draco is expecting us,” Dillon said.

Jeffrey studied Micah for a second and then nodded.

Micah focused on an area between two large trees. At first glance it seemed to be an ordinary space. Then, he looked at it again, concentrating. He could see faint electric waves in the air, like static electricity. He expected to hear some kind of weird noise emanating from it, like something from a sci fi movie or *The Twilight Zone*.

Dillon laughed when he saw Micah’s reaction.

“It’s impressive, isn’t it?”

Micah nodded as he and Dillon stepped through the vortex. He looked around as they entered the shifter world. It was the edge of the woods that seemed to spill over from the human world.

They walked a little further and Micah found himself in a bustling city. There were businesses and cars. People were everywhere.

“Just like the human world,” Dillon said.

The huge structure in the middle of the city captured Micah’s attention. It almost seemed to glow a radiant gold color as the sun hit it.

Micah was glad that they caught a taxi to the castle-like structure. It wasn’t a huge distance away, but Micah’s side was aching, and he was feeling fatigued.

The arched entry gave way to a hallway. Art of all types lined the wall and Micah was certain that he could happily spend years just examining each piece. However, there was no time for that. Dillon quickly ushered him through two huge wooden doors into a large room that looked like a ball room. There was a huge round table and chairs toward the back of the room. A tall regal man with black hair and piercing gray eyes waited.

“Draco, this is Micah. Micah, Draco, the dragon king.”

Micah wasn’t sure whether to bow or hold out his hand. Sensing his issue, Draco held out his hand to shake it.

“Welcome to the shifter world,” Draco said.

“Thank you. It’s fantastic.”

“Let’s get down to business. Dillon tells me that you had an altercation with some hunters on the mountain. Tell me about it.”

Micah related the story for what seemed like the hundredth time. Draco listened intently as he explained every action.

“It sounds like you were justified in your actions. You three were defending yourselves.”

“We were.”

Micah wondered what was going through his head. He figured it was the same thoughts that Dillon had expressed – that the three of them knew about the situation and shouldn’t have gone to the mountain to shift.

However, Draco just asked, “How long are you guys going to be in Ivy Springs?”

“Not too much longer,” Micah replied. “Dean and I have to get back home. Dean is going to be made the alpha of his bear clan next week. I will go through the ceremony in two weeks. I can’t say about Lucy. I can’t figure her out.”

Draco chuckled at that comment. He did seem pleased, though, that they would be leaving soon. Micah figured that Draco believed that they had

caused enough trouble during their stay.

The dragon king asked about Montana, and then someone approached saying that his next appointment had arrived.

“Thank you for coming to talk to me,” Draco said, offering his hand once more. “Safe travels back.”

“Thank you,” Micah said as he and Dillon were ushered out of the room.

Micah thought about the meeting on the way home. It had definitely been an interesting encounter and would be one that he could relate to his friends and family. Not everyone got the chance to meet the dragon king and very few people came out of the shifter world after visiting it. It was memorable and one for the books, so to speak.

By the time Dillon dropped him off at the inn, Micah could barely move. He sent a message to Lucy telling her that he was just going to bed for the night and fell into his bed, exhausted and sore. He was unequivocally ready to leave Ivy Springs behind.

LUCY

Every few minutes, Lucy checked her phone, worried about Micah. Clara had mentioned that Dillon planned on taking Micah to meet the dragon king to explain what happened on the mountain. Lucy worried that it was too much too soon, but she told herself that Micah was going to do what Micah wanted to do, regardless of what she had to say about the situation. She knew that he would be gone almost all day, but that didn't stop her from looking for messages.

Finally, her phone blinged and vibrated. It was Micah. The message simply said that he was tired and was going straight to bed.

She hesitated in front of Micah's door when she got off work, but she talked herself into going to her room and leaving Micah alone. After ordering pizza, Lucy found some reruns of NCIS to watch. She really liked the episodes with Ziva in them. The character had a great sense of humor and was exceedingly smart. She was also beautiful and a badass.

While the team searched to find the murderer, Lucy leaned back on the bed. She bit her bottom lip and pinched the skin at her throat. Staring off into space, she thought about Micah. More than anything, she wanted to go to the room next door and check on him. She wanted to see for herself that he was still breathing. Although the wound had healed for the most part, she wanted to check it to see if it had been torn open or if there were any signs of infection. The thought of losing him made her stomach roll and her soul scream out.

Rubbing her face with her hands, she felt the pain creeping up from the back of her neck, up the back of her head, until she felt like someone had put

it in a vice. She felt a tightness in her chest, making it hard to draw a breath. The realization had hit her like a ton of bricks.

“I love him.”

Hearing the words out loud startled her, but she acknowledged the truth to them.

“I’m in love with him,” Lucy repeated.

She wasn’t sure how it happened or when it happened.

“Maybe I’ve loved him all this time and it just now hit me when I faced the real possibility of losing him.”

Lucy closed her eyes and thought about a life with Micah. The first image that came to mind was the smug looks on her grandfather’s and father’s faces when she went back to Montana with her tail tucked between her legs, agreeing to marry Micah. Her father would congratulate her on deciding to do the right thing for the family. The question for Lucy was whether she could swallow her pride for a lifetime of love with Micah.

There was another issue as well. She knew that she was in love with Micah and that she would love to spend the rest of her life with him. However, while he was willing to go through the mating ceremony with her, he had not said that he was in love with her. A one-sided love wasn’t good enough. There would come a time when Micah would want to feel that kind of love, but he would be tied down to her. If he left her, it would break her heart. If he wasn’t free to find a woman he could be in love with, he would resent her.

Groaning, Lucy looked around the room, feeling trapped. At home, she could go out on her back porch or even go for a run in the woods behind her house. Here – well, she could go to the lobby where the vending machines were. She supposed that she could go to the club, but drinking alone didn’t sound like fun.

She was glad when she was starting to get sleepy, as long as her conflict didn’t show up in her dreams. Lucy tossed and turned all night and was tired and grumpy the next morning.

Her face lit up when she saw Zeke and Reno at the café the next morning. Zeke rushed up to her with a big hug, while Reno danced around her feet.

“You guys make me feel like a famous movie star.”

“You’re famous to us,” Zeke announced.

“I never thought about it like that,” Lucy said, smiling.

Zeke excitedly told her all about the books he was reading and how much

he loved science.

“I want to be a doctor when I grow up, but I don’t know if I will be a people doctor or an animal doctor.”

“There is a lot of need for both in the world. Whatever you decide, I know that you’ll be great.”

Zeke smiled widely and then went back to his nook as customers started to come in.

“I’m going to kidnap that child and his little dog, too,” Lucy announced to Clara.

Clara laughed.

“He is a terrific kid, but if you don’t mind, I’ll hold on to him.”

“Fine, be that way,” Lucy said, crossing her arms, and pretending to pout.

She hoped that if she was ever blessed with kids that they would turn out to be just like Zeke.

During a lull in customers, Clara asked, “How is Micah doing?”

“He is doing a lot better, although he was tired last night. He went to bed as soon as he got back from his adventure.”

“I imagine that he would be. I’ve not been up there, but I hear that it is quite the climb,” Clara said.

“You haven’t been to the shifter world?”

Clara shook her head.

“No. The rule of thumb is that once you go there, you stay. You aren’t allowed to go in and out between worlds. I’m happy in my human world,” Clara said.

“How is it that Micah was able to visit and leave?”

“I guess the dragon king made an exception for him. It happens once in a while. Plus, people who work for him, like Dillon, are able to go between the worlds. But everyday folks, like us, have to choose.”

“I understand the reasoning, but I would still love to visit,” Lucy said.

Clara just smiled and put her hand on her stomach. Reaching for the stool behind her, she sat down hard.

“What can I do?” Lucy asked, worriedly.

“Nothing. It’s okay. The doctor said that the baby and I are both very healthy. Sometimes, though, she kicks extremely hard and it hurts. Plus, the baby is bigger than most human babies are, so sometimes, it gets a bit rough. The doctor said that since I am a human carrying a shifter baby, that is to be expected.”

Lucy studied Clara's face. She was pale and was holding onto the counter tightly, her knuckles white.

"You aren't about to go into labor, are you? I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no babies," Lucy said, quoting the movie, *Gone with the Wind*.

Clara laughed and said, "You don't have to worry about birthing anything. Even if I was going into labor and it was right now so I didn't have time to go to the doctor, Josh and the crew would come and help.

"Whew, that is a relief. I know to get hot water, towels, and scissors from the movies, but I wouldn't know what to do with them."

Clara started to laugh again, but then winced.

Zeke walked up to the counter and asked, "Mom, are you okay?"

"Yes, Baby, I'm good. She's just engaged in an energetic soccer game right now."

"You're silly. You don't have a soccer ball or a net in your tummy with her." Zeke giggled.

"You're right. I was just telling a joke."

Zeke looked up at Lucy, his eyes earnest.

"I'm going to take good care of Mom and my sister."

"I know that you are."

Another wince and Lucy's heart lurched. It was clear that Clara wasn't feeling well. Lucy wrote a quick note on a piece of paper and handed it to Zeke.

"Could you and Reno take this next door to your dad?"

A few minutes later and Dillon rushed in, with Zeke and Reno hot on his heels.

Clara looked at Lucy and asked, "What did you do?"

"I sent a note saying that you were okay but that you were extremely uncomfortable," Lucy said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Are you okay? What's going on?" Dillon asked worriedly.

"Just like Lucy said, I'm uncomfortable. The baby is kicking a lot and hard, and it's a bit painful."

"You aren't having cramps or contractions, are you?" he asked.

"No, nothing like that," Clara said. "I just needed to sit down for a minute."

Dillon looked at Lucy and asked, "Can you handle the café for the rest of the day?"

"Yes."

“You’re going home, now,” Dillon said.

Clara started to protest, but Dillon held up his hand and said, “No. Now. Get your things.”

Giving Lucy the evil eye, Clara grabbed her coat and purse. She hugged Lucy on the way out, because she knew that Lucy cared about her.

Lucy watched the family leave. She patted her own belly and thought that she would love to have a family with Micah. An image of her holding a baby popped into her mind and she smiled.

Then, her smile faded. She was getting way ahead of herself.

Pursing her lips, Lucy thought about her life.

How in the world did it get so complicated? One minute, I’m engaged in social work, helping families and children, planning on going back to school. The next minute, I’m in a completely different state working at a café.

Her heart cried out as she tried to decide what was more important – love or pride.

MICAH

Micah was walking around downtown, admiring the architecture of the buildings. He was still tired from his trip to the shifter world, but the idea of staying at the inn, caged within the four walls, was unbearable.

Dillon was finishing sweeping the sidewalk when he walked by.

“How are you feeling after the hike yesterday?”

Micah absently rubbed his side and said, “Tired and a little sore, but okay. It’ll be a few days before I’m up for another adventure like that.”

Dillon laughed and said, “It can be tiring for those of us who hadn’t just taken a bullet in the side. Why don’t you come in and chat for a while?”

A little surprised that Dillon wanted to chit chat after all that had gone down, Micah followed him inside.

Dillon sent a text message, and a few minutes later, three large cups of coffee arrived, courtesy of Zeke and his faithful companion. He also had a bag of danishes tucked under his arm.

“You do that better than most adults,” Micah said, complimenting Zeke on his ability to carry over the drinks without spilling them. “I would be wearing half of one cup on my shirt and the other half would be on the ground.”

“I’ve had a lot of practice,” Zeke said solemnly.

Micah pulled a ten out of his wallet and said, “Here’s a tip for you for doing such a great job.”

“Thank you,” Zeke said, his eyes wide. “Now I have enough to buy that huge stuffed dog for my sister.”

Reno barked and looked up expectantly. Dillon laughed and handed Micah a dog treat to deliver to the waiting pet.

“My show is on, so I’m going back. Love you, Dad.”

“Do you guys have a name picked out for his sister?”

“We’ve been tossing around some girl and boy names, although my gut says that Zeke is right.” Dillon laughed.

He looked up sharply when the bell on the door indicated that someone came in the store.

“Brent. How are you?” Dillon asked.

“Good. You? How’s Clara?”

“We are great. Brent, this is Micah, visiting from Montana. Micah, Brent works as the head barkeeper at the Forest Resort.”

The two men shook hands.

“How are things going up there?” Dillon asked.

“Well, Raf is upset. All of his hunters are missing except for Crystal and one other. In the last month or so, six or seven have disappeared.”

“Has he thought about the fact that they might have gotten bored up here since no one ever shifts anymore, and they might have left town?” Ethan asked.

“He and Xavier talked about that, but both dismissed the idea since all of their stuff is still here,” Brent reported. “He is reaching out to his contacts to see if he can rally up more hunters.”

“That could go one of two ways,” Dillon commented. “Either no one will come because of all the disappearances and because no shifters are ever spotted in the area, or they will come in droves to avenge their disappeared cohorts.”

“It’s going to be interesting to see how this plays out, that is for sure,” Ethan says. “Hopefully, they’ll decide to just stay away.”

“I hope. On a different note, Alexis was sitting at the bar last night, talking to your buddy,” Brent said, nodding toward Micah.

“Is he her newest crush?” Dillon asked, rolling his eyes.

“No. Actually, she was nursing a broken heart and was telling Dean all about how much she loved a man, and that she tried to get him to notice her, but he wouldn’t. Then, she found out that he wasn’t what he seemed,” Brent said. “She stopped short of telling Dean that Luke was a dragon shifter. I even thought I saw a tear.”

“No way. I didn’t think that she had the capacity to cry,” Ethan said. “I

didn't think that she could feel anything but hatred, derision, and arrogance."

"Apparently, she does," Brent said.

"I would almost feel sorry for her, but I know what kind of person she is. I know the kind of hell that she put Jamie through, just to try to make Jamie leave town so that Alexis could have Luke," Dillon said.

Ethan explained, "Alexis tried to force Clara to fire Jamie and tried to force Jamie's landlord to evict her. That way, Jamie wouldn't have a job or a place to stay and would have to leave town."

"That was diabolical," Micah said.

"Jamie is a sweet woman and didn't deserve that kind of treatment from anyone," Ethan said.

"I don't guess anyone does," Dillon observed.

Brent checked his watch and said, "Well, guys, I've got to get to work."

"Be safe," Dillon cautioned. "Any sign at all that they know and you high tail it out of there."

"I will," Brent promised. "I place great value on my own hide."

"He has put himself in a dangerous situation, hasn't he?" Micah asked.

"It is a little precarious. There have been a couple of close calls, but so far, he's been able to maintain his cover. The Faisons talk about their business in front of him like he is invisible. He brings a lot of valuable information to the rest of us," Dillon said. "He's been working there forever, so he's a fixture."

"I hope for his sake that they don't find out," Micah said. "I hope that the other shifters decide that it just isn't worth coming to Ivy Springs and go in other directions. I can't imagine that there are hundreds of hunters out in the world, so that several could just pour into this town."

"I honestly don't know. To us, it seems like there is a hunter cornucopia, where hunters keep pouring out and invading the area," Ethan said.

"I'm sorry if our actions make things worse for you guys. That wasn't our intent."

"I know," Dillon said. "It's just fortunate that you were forewarned, so you knew what to expect when they confronted you."

Micah nodded in agreement.

"I can't imagine how terrifying it has been for tourists shifting on the mountain."

"We wish that we had a way of letting them know it's dangerous. However, there is no such thing as a shifter newsletter where we can send out

the information to all the shifters in the country,” Dillon joked.

Then, he turned to Ethan and said, “Hey. That would be a great project for you.”

Ethan shook his head vigorously and held up his hands in mock horror.

“Not on your life.”

A couple of people came in the store, so Micah left. He thought about visiting Lucy, but the café seemed to be busy, too.

Micah looked around the town. Just like the store fronts, the town had a nice façade. It was in a beautiful area and tourists flocked to it. But behind the façades was a darkness that Micah wanted no part of. He made up his mind. He was going to talk to Lucy and ask her to be his mate. Regardless of her answer, though, he was going home.

Just then, his phone vibrated.

“Dean, what’s up?”

“Bored. You.”

“The same.”

“I’ll buy the first round,” Dean said. “Do you want to meet at that club?”

“Sure.”

“I’m glad that you are looking good,” Dean said. “I was terrified that we were going to lose you.”

“I’m glad that you didn’t ask me how I was doing.” Micah laughed. “I’m better, although tired.”

He explained that Dillon had taken him to talk to the dragon king the day before.

“I guess I’m not quite as good as I thought I was, but at least I was able to make the trip.”

“I’m envious. I would have loved to visit the shifter world and talk to the dragon king.”

Micah explained the little bit he saw and said, “It would be a fabulous place to visit. Unfortunately, that is not allowed. The only reason I was able to go to the shifter world and back out again was because I had special permission from the dragon king.”

“So, he seemed relieved when you told him that we would be leaving soon.”

“He did. Can you blame him? We knew the risks and shifted anyway. We created a mess that they will have to deal with.”

“No, we didn’t,” Dean said. “The hunters put themselves in that position.

We simply defended ourselves.”

“I can still see their position that we were warned and should have found another place to shift,” Micah argued.

“Yeah, you’re right.

“I just can’t imagine living here full time and having to constantly look over my shoulder. We get hunters every once in a while back home, but nothing like this. There has to be some kind of spray, like Raid, that can get rid of them,” Dean said.

Micah nodded.

“I know what you mean. Unfortunately, the hunters here are like roaches. You can kill two and four more show up. It’s because the Faisons sponsor them. They give them a place to stay, money, food, the works.”

“Feed them and they will come,” Dean said. “You are planning on heading out?”

“I am. I can’t imagine staying here any longer. Plus, I’m bored out of my mind. And if I don’t get back soon, my father is going to have a stroke.”

“What about Lucy?”

Micah shrugged.

“I’ll go whether she comes with me or not. She’s going to do what she wants to do and that’s it.”

“She is stubborn that way,” Dean said.

“What about you?”

“I plan on leaving tomorrow,” Dean said. “It’s getting close to time for the ceremony. It’s clear that Lucy isn’t interested in more than a friendship with me.”

The two friends toasted each other, both wondering what the future would hold for them.

LUCY

“Ouch, damn it,” Lucy yelled.
“What happened?”
“I burned my hand on the grill.”

Clara panicked and found some aloe for the burn. Lucy assured her that it would heal quickly and she would be fine.

“That is the last time you go near that thing,” Clara vowed.

“It was only my second time. Once out of two times isn’t a bad average.”

“Ugh.”

“To be fair, I did mention my lack of cooking skills and my complete ineptitude around any kind of kitchen equipment.” Lucy laughed.

“I just asked you to flip the sandwich. I didn’t think that you could do any damage doing that.”

“Surprise,” Lucy said.

The forgotten sandwich started to burn, filling the kitchen with smoke. Clara rushed over and pulled it off.

“You’re a menace,” Clara said, in mock seriousness, shaking her finger at Lucy.

“Thank you.”

Lucy smiled. She really liked Clara. It would be hard to leave her when it was time to go back to Livingston.

They were about to leave for the night when Dean called.

“What’s up?”

“We are on our way back home,” Dean said, his voice tight with anxiety.

“We?” Lucy asked, her heart sinking at the thought that Micah would

leave without saying goodbye.

“There was an incident,” Dean said. “I was on the phone in my room talking to Father about the upcoming ceremony. Apparently, Alexis had been in the hallway and overheard the conversation. She busted into my room and started yelling that she knew that I was a shifter. She told me she was going to call the hunters and that they were going to kill me.”

“Oh, no. what did you do?”

“I forced her to write a letter to her brothers, telling them that she had fallen in love and was leaving town, and to not try to find her. Then, I took her out through the back door.”

“Dean, what have you done? What are you going to do with her?”

“I did the only thing that I could have done. I can fight a couple of hunters, but not an army of them. Plus, if she told everyone that I’m a shifter, they would come after you and Micah, too. I’m taking her back to Montana.”

“And then what?”

“I guess I’ll keep her at the cabin until I can figure things out,” he said. “She’ll learn to live with shifters and be happy about it, or she’ll stay in the cabin. I really don’t care.”

Lucy sat heavily on the stool, completely flabbergasted. This was the last thing in the world that she would expect from Dean. She had no idea what to say.

“Luc, are you there?”

“I’m here. Just be careful.”

“I will. I wish you and Micah the best of luck.”

Clara’s face was ghostly white. Lucy was worried that she was about to pass out.

“Did I hear that right? Your friend kidnapped Alexis Faison?”

“You heard correctly,” Lucy said, grimly.

“I can’t believe that. Do you know what kind of trouble that is going to cause?”

Trying to stay positive, Lucy said, “Hopefully, none. Maybe her brothers will buy the explanation.”

“I don’t know,” Clara said. “Maybe they will. She does have a history of falling in love with every good looking man who crosses her path. And it’s not like that family has much of a close bond. Everyone talked about how they practically celebrated when their folks were killed because that meant they got their inheritance. Money was the only thing that connected them.”

“I’m so sorry,” Lucy said. “We’ve done nothing but cause trouble since we came here. I just wanted to get away from the pressure and the stress of everything. I had no idea that they would follow me.”

“I know,” Clara said, hanging her head. “None of it was your fault. You were just looking to get away. I get it.”

“It’s a hell of a coincidence that I just happened to find Ivy Springs, with its dark history and ongoing war. It looked so peaceful and beautiful when I first got here.”

“I thought the exact same thing,” Clara said. “I didn’t even know that there was such a thing as shifters when I bought this café. I needed to get out of Colorado Springs and away from my abusive ex-husband. I was sure that this would be the perfect place to start a new life. It turns out that my best friend, who I have known since we were in diapers, is a tiger shifter. I didn’t find out until after I moved here. I didn’t believe Jamie when she first said that she was a shifter until she showed me. I just about passed out from shock.”

“And then you married a wolf shifter.” Lucy laughed.

“I know. Imagine that. I found out that he was a wolf shifter when Zeke fell into the river and Dillon turned into a wolf to save him.”

“That’s a hell of a way to find out.”

“I know, right.” Clara laughed.

“That river seems to have a wicked personality all by itself. You told me it got a woman several months ago, then Zeke, then me.”

“Well, I’m just now learning about this world that I never knew existed before. Shifters, vampires, witches, and who knows who else is living in this world with us. Why not a river sprite with a mean streak.”

“That actually makes sense. I never thought about it that way. For all we know, all of the fantastic beings that we’ve read about in fairy tales and other stories could exist,” Lucy said.

“If they do, I want a Pegasus. One that is colored like the paint ponies would be great, only horse size.”

“I could only imagine the reaction you would get from the people in this town if you showed up for work riding a Pegasus.” Lucy laughed. “But since you are ordering, I would like one, too.”

Their silly chatter lightened the mood a little bit, but in the back of Lucy’s mind, she was concerned for Dean, and she was extremely worried about the consequences his actions would have on the people in Ivy Springs. It was bad

enough that they had caused potential chaos by confronting the hunters.

Micah stopped by just as they were walking out the door.

Clara smiled at him.

“How are you doing? Lucy said that you were tired and sore after your journey.”

Lucy winced. She knew that Micah was getting tired of people asking him how he was doing.

However, like his charming self, he smiled widely at Clara and said, “I’m doing a lot better. I think that I’m completely healed. I got lucky. Plus, I had a good nurse.”

“I’m so glad.”

“How are you? Lucy said you were feeling some pain. She was worried about you.”

“I’m good. It’s just the baby kicking. She is super strong and getting big, fast.”

“Zeke has you convinced?”

“Yep.” Clara laughed.

They said their goodbyes, and Micah asked Lucy, “How was your day?”

“Um, interesting,” Lucy replied. “Have you talked to Dean today?”

Micah frowned.

“This can’t be good.”

“No. He kidnapped Alexis Faison from the resort and is taking her back to Montana with him as we speak.”

“He did what? Please tell me that this is some kind of weird joke.”

“I wish it was,” Lucy said. “He said that he was talking to his father in his room, she overheard him, and burst into his room. She threatened to have him killed. Dean said that he was afraid that he would be facing a mob and he wanted to protect us, so to keep her from talking, he took her with him.”

“How stupid and reckless. He could have found a way to stall her long enough to leave and just warned us and we would have left town.”

“I know. I guess he just panicked. He wasn’t thinking. He said he did have her write a note saying that she fell in love with someone and was leaving town with him.”

Micah snorted.

“Does he really think that is going to work?”

“I guess so,” Lucy replied, shrugging her shoulders.

“What is he planning on doing with her in Montana?”

“He is taking her to the cabin and is going to keep her there.”

“Forever?”

Lucy held her hands up and said, “I don’t know. But that is a tomorrow problem.”

Micah gritted his teeth and ran his fingers through his hair.

“Not only is he going to cause a lot of problems here, but he is going to make home a target for these people. It’s no secret that we are from Livingston, Montana.”

“I know.” Lucy sighed.

He closed his eyes and groaned.

“I’m going to murder him with my bare hands when I get home.”

“I’ll help,” Lucy promised. “But what’s done is done. Dean and Alexis are gone, and it’s not like he could just change his mind and say, ‘oops, my bad.’ One other thing – Clara overheard the conversation.”

“I think I feel a migraine developing,” Micah said.

“Dinner? I’m buying.”

“Yeah, sure. Let’s have it delivered. I don’t feel like peopling right now.”

“I feel ya.”

Lucy headed back to her room for a shower and a change of clothes. Although the incident with the hunters and Dean’s awful decision wasn’t her fault, her presence in Ivy Springs has been a curse for the city. Maybe it was time to pack up and go home.

MICAH

Micah was furious. What in the hell had Dean been thinking? Dean picked up his phone on the second ring. “Go ahead. Let me have it,” Dean said, without even a greeting.

“Why?”

“It was the only thing that I could think to do at the moment,” Dean said. “She burst in on me and took me by surprise. She had already picked up her phone to call someone. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Anything but kidnap her,” Micah roared.

He could feel his blood pressure rising, and his white knuckles showed with his clenched fists.

“What are you going to do with her?”

“Like I told Lucy, I’ll take her to the cabin. She’ll eventually figure out that she has to live in a shifter community and be happy about it.”

“You are going to bring a tremendous amount of trouble down on us,” Micah fumed.

“I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it,” Dean replied.

Micah growled into the phone and ended the call.

He had no idea what Dean was going to do about Alexis. He might have had her write the note, and he might have even put it someplace besides the room he had stayed in. However, it wouldn’t take a rocket scientist to see that Dean and Alexis left at the exact same time. They would figure it out, sooner rather than later. If they went looking for Alexis, they would find her. She would tell them that she didn’t leave on her free will and all hell would break

loose. It would affect all the shifter clans in the area, not just Dean's.

Lucy and Micah ordered pizza and watched *Bill and Ted Face the Music*. It was a funny movie, but it didn't lighten either of their moods. The next movie started to play, but neither of them paid attention to it.

They made a half-hearted attempt at a conversation.

"It's hard to believe that Ted is the same actor as John Wick. I know it's Keanu Reeves. It looks like him, but the characters are completely opposite," Lucy said.

"I guess that's what makes him such a great actor. He can play any role. He becomes the character. He's not just an actor playing a role."

Lucy nodded.

Micah took Lucy's hand.

"I'm going back to Montana. Not only do I have to prepare for the ceremony to make me alpha, it is getting too uncomfortable in this city. It will only get worse."

Lucy nodded.

"I came here to make you fall in love with me. You described the kind of love you were looking for, and I laughed, and asked whether that kind of love was even possible."

"I remember," Lucy replied.

"The truth is, somewhere along the way, I fell in love with you. I realized that you are my fated mate, and I do want to spend the rest of my life with you. Lucy, will you go back with me and go through the mating ceremony with me? I promise that you can still go to school, open your own practice, and do all the things you dreamed of. I just want to be a part of your life."

Lucy's eyes opened wide, and her mouth moved a little, but no sound came out. After a few seconds, when she didn't answer him, Micah figured that she still wasn't interested in being with him. He stood, kissed her cheek, and left without another word.

Sitting on his bed, he stared at the documentary about the super volcano that exists under Yellowstone National Park, without hearing the words or comprehending anything.

Running his fingers through his hair, he laughed at himself.

In less than a month, he was going to be the alpha of his clan. He was strong and never gave up on a challenge, and had always gotten what he wanted, one way or another. Micah wanted Lucy, but she didn't want him. He knew that, as alpha, he could order her to go through the mating

ceremony with him, but he didn't want her like that. She would hate him. Besides, even though the alpha made a lot of decisions that affected people's lives, he wasn't going to make that kind of decision for anyone, let alone Lucy. He would never interfere with anyone's personal life.

He laid on the bed and stared at the ceiling for what seemed like hours. The dull voice in the background droned on. A million thoughts jumbled in his mind like a chaotic mess. It was like a giant jigsaw puzzle, with all the pieces scattered everywhere and none of them fit together.

Finally, he fell asleep, but tossed and turned all night long. When he woke up the next morning, he was tired and cranky, but there was no way that he could go back to sleep.

Stretching, he rolled out of bed and hopped in the shower. The hot water woke him up a little. A pot of coffee helped, too. Figuring that Lucy had already left for the café, he went down for breakfast, still trying to sort out everything that had happened since he came to Ivy Springs. He came to the conclusion that he never should have left home.

Dillon was finishing up with a customer when he walked in.

"Good morning. You look a lot better than you did the last time I saw you."

Micah chuckled and said, "That is because the last time you saw me, I had been up and down a mountain, in one day, a couple of days after I was shot."

"True enough," Dillon replied.

"I just wanted to stop by to bid you farewell. It's time for me to head back to Montana."

"I'm sorry to see you go. I really like you. You're a good man."

Laughing, Micah said, "You don't have to lie. I know that you are relieved that I'm going. I've caused a little bit of stress since I've been here."

"That wasn't your fault. Better you were caught by the hunters and could deal with the issue than tourists who have no idea about what is going on. We've had a few disappear."

Micah just grinned. Dillon wasn't fooling anyone.

Just as Micah was about to leave, Raf walked in.

"Hey, guys, what's up?" he asked.

"Nothing much," Dillon replied.

"I was hoping to find you here, Micah. Listen, I was wondering if you guys have any idea about what happened to Alexis. We found a note saying

that she had fallen in love and she was leaving with him. But she left everything behind, except for her purse.”

Dillon shrugged and said, “I have no idea.”

Micah shook his head.

Raf turned and looked at Micah, trying to stare him down.

“She left at the same time that your buddy, Dean, did.”

“I don’t know anything. Dean and I haven’t hung out in a while, although he did mention talking to Alexis a couple of times,” Micah said.

“You mentioned that the note said that she fell in love and was leaving with the man. You know how easy it is for her to fall in love with someone. She had a thing for Noah, then me, and then Luke. Is it really such a stretch to think that she would fancy herself in love with another man?” Dillon asked.

Raf sighed heavily and scratched his chin.

“No, I guess not. I just find it strange that she didn’t say anything to me, Jerry, or Xavier. You would have thought that she would at least tell us goodbye.”

“Maybe she thought that you would try to talk her out of leaving. She may have been worried that you would point out all the other times she fell in love and would try to make her see that this was just another infatuation,” Dillon replied.

“I guess that could be the case,” Raf said. “Because there is no way in hell that we would have let her go, even if we had to lock her in her room.”

“Love makes people do crazy things,” Dillon said. “What are you going to do now?”

Raf sighed heavily again.

“I don’t know. She is an adult and is capable of making her own decisions about her life, even if those decisions are reckless.”

Micah hoped with every fiber of his being that the Faisons would leave it at that. It wouldn’t solve the problem of Dean having a kidnap victim, but it would turn down the heat a little.

“If and when she’s ready to come back home, she is quite capable of doing that,” Raf said, more to himself than Dillon or Micah.

“Maybe I’ll give it a while and see if she contacts us. If not, we might try to find her to make sure she’s okay.”

“I’m sure she’ll contact you when she’s ready,” Dillon said. “Alexis is the kind of person who will do things on her own time, when she is good and

ready, and not a second before.”

“That is true,” Raf agreed. “Thanks, guys.”

When he was gone, Dillon looked at Micah.

“You know more than you were letting on, weren’t you?”

“I might,” Micah said.

“What happened to Alexis? Where is she?”

Micah opened his mouth to tell Dillon what happened, but then Dillon said, “Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

Surprised that Clara hadn’t told him what happened, Micah shut his mouth again.

Instead, he said, “Well, I had better be going. If you guys are ever up my way, we’d be pleased to see you.”

They shook hands and Micah walked out the door, pretty sure that Dillon would never come to visit, especially when Clara told him about Alexis.

He went back to the inn and packed his bags. There was one more thing that he had to do before he left town – let Lucy know he was leaving.

LUCY

All night long, Lucy beat herself up over what had happened with Micah. He had told her that he was in love with her and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, and she hadn't said anything. She had wanted to, but her mouth wouldn't form the words. Now, she had to figure out how to approach Micah and tell him how she felt.

She made a couple of mistakes on simple orders because her mind was so caught up with the situation.

"What's wrong?" Clara asked. "This isn't like you."

"Micah told me he was in love with me last night and that he wanted to go through the mating ceremony with him."

"That's terrific. You said 'yes?'"

"I couldn't get the words out. I just sat there in stunned silence until he left. I wanted to chase after him, but I was stunned. That was the last thing in the world that I expected."

Clara patted Lucy on the shoulder and said, "The good news is that you know where to find him. You can tell him how you feel and make things right."

"If he hasn't decided that he no longer wants me," Lucy groaned.

"I promise that if he truly loves you, there is no chance of that," Clara assured her.

Lucy was cleaning out the espresso machine when Micah walked in. She felt a little shy when she saw him, after what happened.

"Coffee?" she asked.

He nodded.

“I was at the store next door and Raf came in. He wanted to know if I knew anything about where Alexis was. Just as we figured, he pointed out that she disappeared at the exact same time that Dean left.”

“What did you tell him?”

“What *could* I tell him? ‘My buddy, Dean, decided to kidnap her after she overheard him talking on the phone about being a shifter. I hated to lie, but what else could I do?’”

“You did exactly what you had to do,” Lucy said.

“Dillon didn’t know anything about the situation. Clara never told him,” Micah said.

“She got really sick last night, starting right after she got home,” Lucy replied. “This pregnancy has been extremely hard on her.”

“I guess that I should go tell Dillon,” Micah said. “He’s gonna find out anyway.”

“What difference does it make at this point?” Lucy said. “It’s not like Dillon can do anything about it, whether he finds out about it now from you or whether he finds out later from Clara. What’s done is done.”

“I guess so, but I don’t like it.”

“Me either. Damn Dean for putting us in a spot like this,” Lucy said.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve already kicked his ass in my mind,” Micah replied.

“I’m right there with you.”

Micah nodded and then said, “I’m leaving Ivy Springs and going back home. Not only have I had about as much of this city as I can handle, I have to go through the ceremony in a couple of weeks. There is a ton of work I have to get done.”

Lucy nodded.

“Are you coming back soon?” he asked.

“I am. I’m going to give Clara two weeks’ notice and I’ll be on my way,” Lucy said.

“This whole mating ceremony situation is crazy. You should have the right to decide who you want to spend the rest of your life with, instead of having it decided for you when you are a kid. You have your own dreams and goals. It’s not fair to disrupt those just for the sake of tradition and other people’s expectations. As alpha, I’ll protect you. I’ll make sure that no one tries to exile you for wanting to live your own life.”

“Thank you,” Lucy whispered.

“I’ll see you around then.”

Micah turned to leave.

He was almost at the door when Lucy called out, “Micah.”

Lucy rushed over to him.

She looked him in the eyes and said, “I love you, too. I’ve known that I am in love with you for a while. My foolish pride wouldn’t allow me to admit it. I just kept picturing the knowing smirks on my grandfather’s and your father’s faces when I came back, ready to give in to their demands. It grated on my soul. The thing is that now I don’t care. They can think what they want, look anyway that they want, and it won’t bother me. The thought of losing you terrifies me. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. So, if you haven’t changed your mind, I would love to go through the mating ceremony with you.”

Micah smiled widely and pulled her close to him. He pressed his lips against hers in a passionate kiss that stirred the embers burning inside of her.

“Ewww. Mom and Dad do that. Get a room.”

Breaking apart, Micah and Lucy looked down to see Zeke staring up at them with a wrinkled nose.

“Just wait, buddy. Someday, you will find a girl that you will want to kiss, too.”

“No way,” Zeke said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Girls have cooties.”

“You just keep thinking that.” Micah laughed, ruffling Zeke’s hair.

Clara called to Zeke and Micah looked back at Lucy with such a tender look in his eyes that it made her heart melt.

“So, two weeks?”

“Two weeks,” Lucy said.

He kissed her briefly and then left, with Lucy watching him until he was out of sight.

“Congratulations,” Clara said.

“You heard?”

“I did,” Clara replied, hugging her. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you,” Lucy replied.

“You don’t have to give two weeks’ notice, but I would like it if you could work through the weekend. I hired two more people, who will start tomorrow, and I want to make sure they are trained before you go.”

“I’ll be glad to stay,” Lucy said. “So, you have to hire two people to take

my place? I'm that good."

She pumped out her chest, smirked, and stuck her nose in the air.

"You are that good," Clara said.

"I will miss you. I would love it if you guys could come visit us in Montana," Lucy said.

"I'll miss you, too. I would love to see Montana someday."

The trip back to Montana was a lot shorter. There was no stopping to see the sights. She still wasn't happy that the two old men would think that they forced her hand, but it was a small price to pay to get to be with Micah.

About a week after she returned home, Lucy was sick to her stomach. Finally, the nausea settled and she felt better.

Then it hit her. She had been sick every morning for the last couple of weeks. She was tired and her breasts hurt.

"There's no way, is there?" she asked herself.

Two days later, the clan doctor confirmed her suspicions. Now she had to find the right time and right way to tell Micah. They didn't get to see each other very much these days. He was busy transferring alpha duties, and she was busy packing up her house. The mating ceremony would take place two weeks after he became alpha. He had a large house on several acres, with a pond, trees, and a nice big yard. Her house was good, but his was great, so it would make sense that she would move in with him.

She watched, with pride, as Micah took his pledge as the leadership was handed over from his father to him. Micah would make a great leader.

Finally, the day came. She was in one of the chambers at the meeting house, with her mother and Ginger. Her hair was beautifully curled and styled. Her make up was perfect. Her gown was a traditional gown worn by brides of the alpha. It was a deep red color elaborately embroidered with gold thread. It fit her form perfectly.

"You are gorgeous," her mother assured her.

Ten minutes later, her father knocked on the door, letting her know that it was time.

Lucy only had eyes for Micah as her father escorted her. She barely noticed the music playing or the people standing, watching as she passed. Her father kissed her cheek and took his seat beside her mother. Her heart soared as Micah reached out his hand, and their fingers intertwined, their touch igniting a surge of warmth and love. They stood together, surrounded by the beauty of nature.

A gentle smile graced Lucy's lips as the elder began to speak, sharing heartfelt words about love, commitment, and the journey that lay ahead for Lucy and Micah. The words resonated deep within her soul, reflecting the depth of their bond and the promises they were about to make.

Micah spoke his vows with a tenderness that melted Lucy's heart and reaffirmed the depth of their connection. Lucy's voice trembled with emotion as she pledged her love and devotion to Micah. Her words, filled with passion and sincerity, echoed through the air.

After the elder declared their union official, Lucy turned to face Micah, her soul overflowing with happiness and anticipation for the life that they would have together.

At the reception, after all the gifts were opened, Lucy pulled one out that she had been hiding.

"This is for you," she said.

Micah looked at her and said, "I didn't get you anything."

"Just open it."

He opened the box. There was a yellow onesie, a bib, some yellow booties, and a teal outfit.

There were gasps and oohs from everyone as he pulled them out of the box.

"I don't think that these are going to fit," he said.

Lucy just stared at him and smiled.

He looked back at the clothes and then looked back at her.

"Does this mean that we're going to have a baby?"

"That's exactly what it means," she said.

"Wow. That is amazing." Micah smiled.

Everyone clapped and congratulated them.

They escaped about an hour later, going back to their house.

After making love, Micah held her tenderly in his arms.

"I love you," he said.

"And I love you, so much."

THANK YOU FOR READING!

Thank you for reading ***Wild Wolf Betrothal***. 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!

**DRAGON'S REJECTED MATE
(SNEAK PEEK)**

A ROGUE SHIFTERS AND HUNTERS

Blurb

A Shattered Heart, Dangerous Shifter Hunters, and a Sexy Dragon Shifter

Heartbroken when my beloved fiancé left me for another woman on our wedding day, I thought that I would spend the rest of my life alone. That is, until Luke Abrams walked into my life. The tall, blond man stole my breath away.

I was a bear shifter living in a city where the billionaire humans who owned the Forest Resort had declared open war on the shifter population. All shifters, not knowing who could be trusted, kept their identity a closely guarded secret – even from each other.

Luke left Ivy Springs right after high school to join the military where he became a member of an elite squad of shifters who participated in dangerous missions all over the world. After being injured in such a mission, he decided it was time to come home. He didn't know that he was walking right into a war zone.

That's when he walked into my life looking for a cup of coffee and left with my heart.

I had no idea that this man, who had stolen my heart, was a dragon shifter, and that he would turn my world upside down.

Ryan – Ex-fiancé who rejected my heart and betrayed me.
Alexis Faison – Wanted the man I had fallen in love with and would stop at nothing to have him.
Dragon Shifter – Man who walked into my life and made me believe in love again.

Luke didn't know that the hornets' nest he walked into when he moved back to Ivy Springs would change his life forever.

Would the war between humans and shifters, a controlling father, and a fanatic stalker destroy Luke and Jamie's chance at a happily ever after?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You look beautiful,” Jamie said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dear Jamie,

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

Ryan

Jaime pressed her lips together, refusing to cry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I know, Mama."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She hesitated.

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

John was her abusive ex-husband.

"What does your heart tell you?"

"That Dillon is nothing like John."

"Then, I say go for it."

She nodded and then changed the subject.

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

Jamie was quiet for a minute and nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Luke?” Jamie asked in disbelief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jamie grinned at him.

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

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

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

“Growing up has a way of changing us.”

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

“Do I get that back?”

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

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

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

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

He smiled at her as he left.

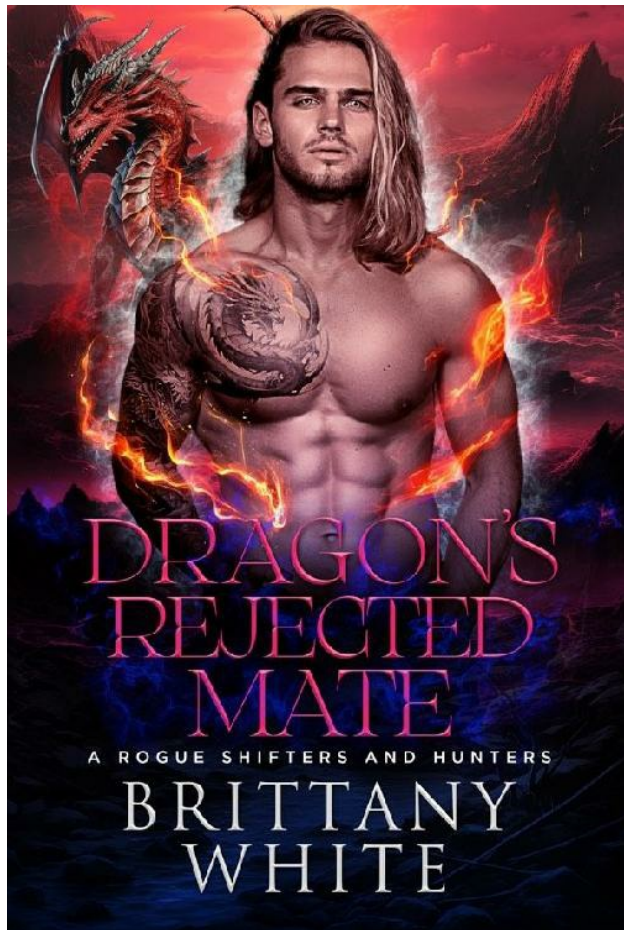
“Girl, what was that all about?” Clara asked.

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

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

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

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



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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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