



Bearing North (Grizzly Protection: Alaska Shifter Branch #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Previously published as Orson by Elva Birch in the Grizzly Guardians series, this edition has been re-written in third person and edited extensively to fit the World of Instinct setting.

North to the future and a fated mate!

Orson was sent to Alaska to run an established security company that Grizzly Protective Services was taking over, and he's determined to be gruff and take-charge like his brothers to prove that he's got what it takes. No more screw-up youngest brother. He's New Orson, grouchy and solid...until he meets his destiny and loses his heart and his head.

Alex Vex brought the security company back from the brink long before Grizzly Protective Services waltzed in to buy it out. She'll have to swallow her pride and put on a bubble-headed facade to appease her new boss, no matter how much it galls her to see someone step in to take credit for all of her hard work and success. She'll be sparkle and sunshine if it kills her and it just might!

When Orson proposes a trip north, Alex can't say no...just like she can't say no to Orson's grumpy good looks or the tantalizing secrets and the sense of humor that he's hiding.

But someone is trying to sabotage their trip, and when it isn't a room with only one bed, it's someone trying to get them both out of the picture altogether.

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Bearing North is a short, sizzling novel in the World of Instinct shared by A Day Care for Shifters. It is a thrilling and hilarious opposites-attract, enemies-to-lovers, grumpy-and-sunshine, office romance instalove, with fated mates, secret shifters, and delicious descriptions of wild Alaska.

Total Pages (Source): 31

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:36 am

1

ORSON

So this is Alaska.

Orson pulled up in front of an unimpressive building at the end of a busy Anchorage road, easing the car into the space for the CEO.

He honestly wondered if Peter had set his itinerary up on purpose to get him here exhausted and bleary-eyed for his first day of work.

But the trip, a long-ass plane flight with four connections and then a rental car straight to the security office from the airport, certainly gave him time to think about why he was here.

He was disgraced.

Alaska was where his big brothers could send him to get him out of their hair. It'll teach you responsibility, Theo said when he assigned him the job. It'll keep you out of trouble, Peter said. It'll make you someone else's problem, Baxter added. Axel just laughed, and Hunter ruffled his hair like he was thirteen.

Grizzly Protection Services had just bought out an established security firm with a good reputation to expand into the forty-ninth state. Orson's sole responsibility was to take a desk job and try not to shame the family name by running it into the ground. It was already in the capable hands of one Alex Vex, who had a reputation for being a

cutthroat negotiator, a skilled fighter, and a respected community figure. Getting her to accept a second-in-command position instead of leaving to build a new business in competition would be Orson's biggest hurdle, but he had a big budget to work with.

Under its old name, Snafu River Security had won several business awards, and recently negotiated a major contract to protect the Alaska Pipeline itself—eight hundred miles of massive piping from the north oilfields to the south coast.

All Orson had to do was not be his usual disaster and let things succeed without him.

And he didn't want to be his usual disaster.

But he also didn't want to be put in a box marked Alaska to stay out of trouble.

He needed to prove he could be a functional part of a team. He wasn't willing to be sidelined. This was his chance to confirm that he wasn't the least of his brothers, even if he was the youngest and most prone to disaster. (Honestly, the fishpond incident was not even a little bit his fault. And the flooded New York office was a complete accident. No one had pinned the golf cart thing on him, even if he was strongly suspected.)

He pulled down the car visor and frowned at his reflection in the mirror before getting out. He didn't look like a kid anymore; he had an honest-to-god beard now. He'd shaved clean up until a month ago and was happy it hadn't come in all patchy. He could finally grow real facial hair and maybe the new Alaska branch of Grizzly Protection Services wouldn't call him Baby Bear or Cub, which his brothers never let him forget was the meaning of his name, despite the fact that he was heading towards his thirtieth birthday.

He looked like New Orson . He wanted to come in and be a leader, not a loser. He was determined to be a real boss, not just a figurehead.

He just had to find out how to do that. What would Theo do? Or Baxter? Growl a lot, probably. Yell at people and make all the right things happen.

He gave a test growl.

Weak, Orson. Really weak.

The second growl was better. More convincing. Manlier. He tugged on his short beard and practiced again.

What else did his older brothers do so successfully? Grunt. They grunted a lot.

Orson usually filled in conversations with jokes and quips, but jokes and quips were exactly what had gotten him sent to Alaska.

No jokes. He wasn't Orson the Comedian anymore. He was Orson the Gruff. He was Orson the Commanding. Orson the Not-a-Screwup. These people wouldn't know any better. He'd keep his mouth shut and his eyes open and pretend he knew what he was doing.

I got this, he told himself. He was going to walk into that office with his chin up and a convincing grizzly growl in his chest and he'd show them exactly who their new boss was. He was New Orson .

I got this.

His bear gave a rumble of interest in his head as Orson got out of the car and went to the front door. He didn't seem even slightly fazed by their disgrace, and he was insisting that this was where they belonged.

Alaska? Orson asked him skeptically.

Here, his bear said firmly. Now. The magical shifter instinct that guided his bear half was often frustrating to Orson, vague and unhelpful more than it was actually useful. Here might mean Anchorage, Alaska, or possibly this exact square of concrete sidewalk. Now might mean this week or a split second that Orson was going to miss by blinking.

Downtown Anchorage was windy and smelled like saltwater. There was more city here than Orson had feared, but less than he'd hoped, with a few tall buildings and no skyscrapers. Blue mountains hemmed the town, and gray clouds overhead threatened rain. The office, which appeared to be residing in an old auto shop, still had the Snafu River branding of the old business over the door. The Grizzly Protection Services logo was taped in the window.

Orson opened the door with his newfound bluster and stomped in, slamming it behind him.

The office had a little lobby with some chairs and a water cooler. A few wildlife paintings decorated the walls. The secretary's desk was cluttered with personal effects and stuffed moose. Mooses?

Orson refused the temptation to make a joke out of this.

He was New Orson , and he made himself scowl harder and cross his arms instead of trying to break the ice with a good laugh. He was absolutely not going to start out soft.

Two women stood by the front desk with a handful of uniformed guards.

The guards snapped to attention at Orson's entrance. He remembered to keep glowering, even though he thought the show of respect was a pretty good start. This was what he wanted. He was the boss , not the screwup little brother.

I got this.

The woman behind the desk was a plump, smiling woman who must be the secretary. She had an earpiece and was dressed in what Orson was coming to recognize as Alaskan chic—cargo pants and a flowery blouse.

The second woman was holding a clipboard and wore a short semi-professional skirt with a blouse that wasn't quite see-through but definitely thin enough to hint at everything beneath it. She was looking away, but as the door slammed behind Orson, she seemed to draw in a bracing breath.

Then she turned to greet him with a sunny smile. "Mr. Davison! Welcome to the new Alaska branch! I hope everything is to your pleasure!"

Pleasure...

For a moment, that was all Orson could think of.

She was the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen, with loose black hair and golden-tanned skin. She wasn't a shifter, he could tell by instinct, but she was tall and strong, with sparkling brown eyes, and Orson thought she was about his age. Was she a secretary, too? Maybe a bookkeeper? She had a welcoming smile on her red lips, and her neck was like a swan's. She smelled like cinnamon and pine and warm stone.

Orson's bear rose up in him with a roar better than any that Orson had yet managed. Our mate! This is why we're here and now!

Oh shit oh shit oh shit.

Orson definitely didn't have this.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:36 am

2

ALEXANDRA

Alex was utterly pissed, but absolutely determined not to let the new co-owner of the company know it.

Sparkle! she reminded herself. I am sweetness and light! I am a cupcake with sprinkles! I am a zen flower of agreeability. I am harmony and softness!

The problem? Alex wasn't any of those things.

Snafu River Security had been her baby for nearly five years, ever since her previous boss tried running it into the ground. When he made drinking his full-time work, Alex turned the business from a struggling butt of local jokes and disdain to a respectable company that won high-profile contracts.

She was the one who had gotten them gold-level ratings. She was the one who refined their training program, and put their finances in order. She was the one who upgraded them to the digital age technology they needed to be competitive. She was the one who knew every security guard they employed, down to the names of their children and their pets.

She was the one who had secured the pipeline contract.

And now, thanks to a sell-out she wasn't even consulted about, this complete jerk from the lower 48 was barreling in to take all the credit and glory...and probably fire

her as part of the turnover.

“You gotta be nicer, honey!” Sandra had advised Alex. “This guy isn’t going to want a second in command who could kick his ass and take his name. You need to giggle at his jokes and maybe wear a skirt. A cute, short skirt. And don’t glare like that! You’ll make him fire you out of self-preservation!”

So here she stood, in an uncomfortably short skirt and a ridiculously sexy shirt feeling like a side of meat trying her best not to bite the head off her new boss.

Speaking of meat, if Alex hadn’t been so mad about the business sale, she might have had some appreciation for the slab of beefcake that was representing the new owner of Grizzly Protection Services.

He had a short, tidy beard and well-muscled arms crossed over the kind of chest that publishers put on dirty books. His hair was neatly cut, and his face would have been breathtakingly handsome if he wasn’t scowling so ferociously.

Who pissed in his oats? He was getting a successful business— her successful business!—handed to him on a platter .

The more Alex thought about it, the madder she got, so she forced a giggle, like Sandra had suggested.

“Tee hee hee.” She meant it as a light-hearted conversation noise, but it sounded like she’d gotten a chickadee stuck in her throat.

Everyone stared at her. The guards because they’d probably never seen her look so inane. Sandra because she’d suggested giggling , not that noise she’d just made. Orson Davison because he was undoubtedly deciding whether to fire her now or wait and do it in private.

Alex tried again. “Can I get you something, Mr. Davison? A cup of coffee?” In your lap? “Do you take sugar?” She tried another giggle that was only slightly more effective than her first.

“No, tha— No!” he roared. “I don’t want sugar! No coffee!”

Now, everyone stared at him, because his outburst was totally inappropriate for an offer of coffee.

Great. The new boss was a pampered rich kid and an unhinged grouch.

It was a shame, because he was so damn handsome. Well, no one was the whole package. “Okay!” Alex chirped, all the sunshine she could muster in her voice. “You don’t have to have coffee! Would you like a tour of the facilities?” It was the last thing she wanted to do, but Sandra’s words were burned into her brain. She didn’t want to start over. She loved this company, and half the staff would quit in solidarity if she got canned. Alex could stomach risking her career, but not theirs.

So she would sparkle like a... sparkly thing...and kiss his ass, even if it killed her.

“Yes!” Orson roared, and snapped his mouth shut like he’d just given away state secrets.

Was this a moment for another giggle? “Tee hee hee.” The third try was slightly better, and Alex tried to walk with little light steps instead of striding like she usually did as she led him past Sandra’s desk to the door marked private.

He paused to glower at the guards. “Don’t you people have jobs to do?”

They murmured apologies and scattered, suddenly remembering urgent work elsewhere. Sandra sat behind her desk and began typing furiously. Apparently, they

would not get the peppy new-boss speech they had anticipated.

Alex led Orson back down the hallway to his new office, keenly aware of him close behind her. She'd been expecting a spoiled brat, so that part wasn't a surprise. He was the youngest of the Davison brothers and came with a reputation as a playboy and prankster. But he was older than she'd expected, probably in his late twenties, like she was. He had a thick, short beard and an impressive physique.

He'd make a good poster boy for the business, but Alex doubted he had the substance to back up the broad-shouldered image. She could probably take him in the ring; he looked slow and smug. And she could undoubtedly outdo him in experience and hard work.

"We'll update the nameplate at the door as soon as possible," she said through gritted teeth. Sparkle!

This had been her office, the best room in the building, with a view out over the inlet. It was low tide right now, with the mud flats glistening in the morning sun. Alex had cleared out the desk of her things and moved into a dark corner of the surveillance lab with no windows.

"If you need anything, let Sandra or me know right away," Alex said, trying not to snarl. "I'll show you where the supply closet is, too."

Her mug was still on the desk where she'd left it after she savored her last cup of coffee before all her hard work was upended. There was a snarling grizzly bear on one side and the other side said "Don't mess with Alex before coffee!"

There was a little coffee left in the bottom and she didn't want to waste it.

"Wait, are you Alex Vex?" Orson asked as she finished it.

Sandra had suggested that Alex Vex was too threatening a name.

“ Alexandra ,” she said through gritted teeth. She hated her full name, but she was willing to suffer the extra syllables to keep the peace and keep her job. Fucking sparkle , she reminded herself. “Tee hee hee. You can call me Alexandra. Tee hee.”

He blinked at her, then pulled his mouth into a judgmental scowl. “ Alexandra Vex,” he said, like he didn’t like the sound of it.

That makes two of us, jerkface.

“Let me show you the training room!” Alex suggested quickly. “Tee hee hee.” It was easier to giggle the more she did it.

The training room had been an attached auto shop, and Alex had leaned into the weird set-up by sinking a climbing wall into the old oil pit when the lift was removed. There was a big padded sparring area and free weights with a selection of resistance machines against one wall. A Star Trek Borg poster above them that said ‘Resistance is Futile!’ Headphones hung from screens in front of ellipticals, and punching bags were suspended from the ceiling on chains. Upbeat 80’s music played on the sound system, and a row of lockers allowed the guards to store their workout gear and uniforms on site.

“We compensate our teams for the hours they spend working out and training,” Alex explained cautiously. It was one of her particularly risky business decisions that had paid off well. It fostered feelings of loyalty and teamwork and drastically improved employee health and skill. Once or twice a month, she hired experts in different fighting and fitness forms to do hands-on work with them. Physical security was only one part of the business, but it was an important one.

Was Orson going to be the type to second-guess what was working so well for the

business and overthrow the program on his first day?

Alex was prepared for a fight—a sparkly fight?—but Orson only grunted as he looked around, and then followed her upstairs.

“We’ve upgraded our security and surveillance infrastructure considerably in the last five years,” Alex said, then wondered if she should dumb herself down. Sandra had been adamant that she should stay as non-threatening as possible. “Tee hee hee. It’s all so shiny and new!”

He grunted unhelpfully again, though he was polite enough when she introduced him to Tom, the cybersecurity head.

“Is a lot of what you—we—I! —do remote?” Orson wanted to know.

Alex looked at him curiously, and he growled at her. A literal growl! It was sort of challenging and sexy, but Alex tamped down her urge to growl back at him. “Tee hee hee.”

Tom pretended not to notice anything out of the ordinary and showed Orson the screens he was monitoring, pointing out some of the projects they were watching.

“Is that a bridge?”

“The pipeline is slung under that bridge,” Tom told him. “It’s the only place to cross the Yukon River up there, and it’s open to the public, but we monitor activity there. We’ve got some drones in the area that we can send in.”

“Can’t you send actual people from here?” Orson asked, furrowing a brow.

Tom was silent, looking at Alex.

She didn't want to be responsible for telling Orson he was an idiot, but she didn't want Tom to get in trouble, either. "Tee hee hee," Alex said. "It's five hundred miles from here. It's even a three-hour drive from our smaller Fairbanks office."

Tom looked at Alex like she was insane. Alex sparkled at Orson even harder. Smiling this much made her cheeks hurt, and the makeup she was wearing under duress felt crinkly on her face.

Orson grunted again, but Alex thought his ears looked a little red.

Sandra's words rang in her head. If you embarrass him, he won't keep you around.

But Alex didn't want to embarrass him. She wanted to destroy him.

3

ORSON

Orson knew that he was not covering himself in glory on his first day.

It was painfully clear that he knew nothing about Alaska, running a business, or being a person who didn't make jokes.

And Alexandra Vex was his mate.

Orson had always felt a certain amount of disbelief at the idea of mates. It felt more like fairy tale than fate when he heard other people talking about them. Not every shifter found one, and when they did, they were hard pressed to explain how it was different than instinct. You just know, his big brother Peter had told him. You just know that this one person is the key to all your possible happiness and you'd better not screw it up.

Orson was very invested in not screwing this up. Even more than not screwing up coming to Alaska and being New Orson in charge of their new branch.

But he wasn't sure what to make of her. Alex Vex was supposed to be a competent and insightful business manager, but the Alexandra Vex who showed him around the new office was vapid and giggled a lot. Was she flirting? She didn't seem very warm, even though she smiled at him and fluttered her eyelashes. Her eyes remained cool and calculating.

Orson wanted her...and wow, he wanted her. That soft skin, that silky hair. Those long legs, the curves she wasn't hiding. He wanted to pin her against the climbing wall, wrap her legs around him, and take her against that fake limestone. He wanted to bend her over his new desk and see what she was hiding underneath that short skirt. He wanted to taste her mouth, to claim her completely.

His bear wasn't sure why they hadn't done any of those things yet, but the finer points of indecency laws were frequently lost on him.

And Orson got the undeniable feeling that Alexandra Vex wasn't showing him her real self— or the real business. If he didn't know better, he'd think he was being led down a false trail...to what? Was the business in worse shape than his family had been led to believe? Theo had checked over the finances, and Orson's brothers wouldn't have set him up for failure...would they? No, no matter what he did, they were family. They had his back. Even when they sent him to Alaska.

And Alexandra Vex is my mate.

It was a good thing Orson had decided ahead of time to grunt his way through conversations, because every time that he looked straight at her, all his blood left his brain for lower places, and he couldn't form complete sentences when he tried.

The worst part? He truly wanted to impress this woman, but had no idea how.

He followed her helplessly around the building, meeting people he wouldn't remember. He frowned and grumbled a lot because he wasn't sure what else to do, hopelessly out of his depth. Alexandra finished the tour back in the lobby, where she and Sandra looked at Orson expectantly. This was his business now, and he was supposed to be making decisions .

It took all of Orson's self-control not to make a joke and get a laugh out of the

situation. He could quip about not remembering names and ask for Hello, My Name Is stickers for everyone for his first week, jest about lunch breaks, or make a show of checking his GPS for directions to the bathroom.

But that wasn't what Theo or Baxter would do. Besides, he was New Orson , not Old Orson . New Orson was going to be an amazing boss, and to do that, he needed a lot more information.

"I'd like to visit the pipeline," he blurted. "I want to see the whole thing."

Sandra and Alexandra both stared. "The entire pipeline?" Sandra asked hesitantly.

Orson remembered at that moment that the project was protecting eight hundred miles of pipeline, and he'd already looked like an idiot for suggesting that they send people out to respond to situations three hours from a station as needed. Traveling eight hundred miles of Alaska was not going to be a breezy day trip, and it only emphasized that he didn't have the slightest idea what he was doing.

No, wait, this is perfect!

It would give him a chance to familiarize himself with Alaska, it would get him out of the office so he didn't do anything dumb on his first week. And best of all... Orson pointed to Alexandra. "You'll come with me!" He didn't make it a question, turning back to Sandra so he wouldn't second guess his impulsive imperiousness. "I want to stop and see all our projects along the way. Make any necessary travel arrangements," Orson told her boldly, not daring to suggest what they would be. Would a dog sled be best? He hadn't seen any snow, but it was probably colder the further north they got.

Alexandra gave one of those weird, theatrical giggles that didn't actually sound amused. "Tee hee hee. You're the boss," she said lightly. "When do you want to

leave?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Orson said firmly. “As early as possible.”

Sandra was typing on her keyboard. “I’ll book you a flight to Valdez first thing. A company truck will be available for you there. You can detour to our mine construction security project outside of Tok, and from there drive through Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay. I’ll book you a flight back down from Deadhorse. It will be four nights, five days in total.”

Four nights? And worse... Val-deez? Oh, damn, Orson realized that he had been saying it Val-dehz this whole day and no one had corrected him. Was it a sign that they were afraid of him? That was what he wanted, wasn’t it? Dang, what would Peter do?

“Good work, Sandra,” Orson said as gruffly as he could manage. “Miss Vex, will you need a ride to the airport?”

“I will not,” she said through gritted teeth.

Was she mad that he had ordered her to come with him? Just as Orson doubted the soundness of this plan, she followed it with a fake sounding, “Tee hee hee,” and fluttered her eyelashes. “See you bright and early!”

Orson fled to his office and shut the door, sinking into the chair to put his head in his hands.

What had he gotten himself into?

ALEXANDRA

Alex was still holding her empty snarling bear coffee cup, and she nearly smashed it when she put it down on Sandra's desk. "I'd rather punch him in the nose than get stuck in a truck with him for eight hundred miles."

"You're doing fine," Sandra assured her. "You just have to charm him. It's going to be perfect! This is exactly what we want!"

Alex tugged at her skirt. "I feel like a floozy and giggle like an underpaid clown. How is this in any way exactly what we want?"

"This is your chance to get close to him! A long road trip, lonely hotels together..."

Alex stared at Sandra. "Do you want me to seduce him?!"

"If you want to, sure—I mean, the guy is hotter than butter sizzling on a griddle! But I meant you should find his weaknesses and maybe figure out how to blackmail him into keeping you on. If that means sleeping with him, I'm sure that wouldn't be so bad." She fanned herself suggestively.

Alex usually trusted Sandra's advice. They had come up in the company together, taking dispatcher jobs within a few weeks of each other, and she'd always been a loyal and steadfast friend.

But this was too much!

It wasn't that it wouldn't be fun to seduce him—whatever flaws Orson Davison had, he was sex on a stick and it would not be a hardship to peel his clothing off and see him naked—but Alex had standards! Standards that didn't involve sleeping with her new boss for leverage. “This is already way, way out of my wheelhouse, Sandra. I feel like I should just be...competent and do my best.”

“Oh, honey,” Sandra said pityingly.

Was her best that terrible?

“When you do your best, you make everyone around you look bad,” Sandra reminded her. “And Orson Davison is not the kind of guy who wants to look bad. So if you don't want him to fire you and undo all the work you've done for this place, keep smiling like you have been today, and let him call the shots.”

“What if he calls dumb shots?” Alex wasn't sure Orson was an idiot, but he'd said maybe a dozen words all day that weren't snorts or grumbles. It could have been arrogance or annoyance, but there was just as much of a chance that it was stupidity.

“Then you quietly fix them and let him save face,” Sandra suggested practically.

Alex knew how to kick ass in five fighting styles and could balance the books and get stuff done, but she wasn't really that great at making friends. She should trust Sandra on this. Maybe, as Orson settled in a little, Alex would find a new place in the company that she liked.

Would it be so bad to have a figurehead that wasn't her?

Alex didn't want to have to follow him around wiping his butt and cleaning up his

messes, but there was a lot to the day-to-day running of a security company that she would happily have delegated to someone who could handle it. Sandra didn't have a head for figures or the drive to get things done that she did, or Alex would have promoted her long ago. She wouldn't mind having days off again, and it would be nice to use the vacation time she'd been accruing. Maybe even date, which was something Alex hadn't done in years.

Alex accidentally thought about Orson's hot body and Sandra's seduction suggestion.

"I'm not wearing heels on a road trip up the haul road," she said. "I barely made it through our tour without twisting an ankle."

"Tight jeans will work," Sandra assured her. "And do something with your hair."

"I did do something with my hair!" Alex protested. "I brushed it!"

Sandra gave a suffering sigh.

"Forget my hair," Alex said. "Did you find anything about that missing detonator?" They had a small selection of training devices for disarming bombs, and one had fallen off the inventory list.

Sandra shook her head. "I'm sure it got used in a demonstration and someone didn't cancel it from the stock list correctly." She didn't seem bothered by the discrepancy, but the last thing Alex needed was any minor inconsistency while their records were being scrutinized.

"Keep looking for it," Alex commanded. "I'll go make sure Mr. Davison doesn't hook something up to the network that shouldn't be on it. The last thing we need is some porno site virus crashing our system."

It would complicate things too much to have an affair with her new boss, Alex decided reluctantly. She'd have to come up with other ways to ensure her employment.

5

ORSON

Y elling at people was the hardest part of Orson's act. It wasn't so bad keeping the jokes to a running commentary in his head—he had swallowed so many that's what she said replies that he was surprised that they weren't falling out of his ears. He would have liked to mock himself for pronouncing Valdez wrong.

But trying to be pushy in public and roaring with ire instead of laughter was a huge challenge. It didn't seem natural to Orson to point out errors and order people around. He kept wanting to apologize or make people laugh so they didn't feel bad.

His bear wasn't helping, either. He just wanted to wrestle Alexandra down and roll in wildflowers or rotting fish or something. Our mate, he said joyfully, every time Orson saw her. He kept suggesting sex positions and food to feed her.

I don't need your help, Orson told him the next morning, when the two of them had gotten through the airport security and were boarding the plane.

You should be making cubs right now, his bear protested.

I don't think Alexandra is interested in joining the mile high club.

She was just as simpering and chatty as she'd been the day before, but to Orson's relief, she was mostly talking with the stewardess, so he didn't have to do much but grunt and accept snacks. Sandra had booked him a first class window seat, and

Alexandra was on the aisle next to him. She was wearing more practical clothing—ass-hugging jeans and a company T-shirt, with sturdy hiking boots. Her luggage was small and simple.

To Orson's surprise, the flight was only forty-five minutes—no time for more than a takeoff, a quick soda and a bag of pretzel twists, and then they were landing. His phone had helpfully informed him that it was a five and a half hour drive, so he had anticipated more time in the air. He brought his laptop and a copy of a road guide called the Milepost to familiarize himself with the trip, but didn't have time to crack either of them open.

The view was astounding. Once they were above the clouds, it was all jagged mountains, some of them snow-capped. Then they were descending sharply to a river delta between ridges.

"Here we are!" Alexandra sang, as they disembarked. The terminal was tiny and they got off the airplane on a set of rickety stairs. It was windy and little stabbing drops of rain blew against Orson's bare skin. A T-shirt had been the wrong thing to wear, but it had been warm and sunny in Anchorage. Alexandra produced a windbreaker from her bag and looked prepared. Orson wasn't going to shiver or complain, so he just scowled and stomped down the stairs after her.

A car was waiting to drive them to Valdez; the airport was several miles from the town.

Alexandra pointed out the sights as they drove, talking about the pipeline terminal and the fishing and the mountains and the glaciers. "The port here never freezes!" she said cheerfully. "So three to five tankers leave every week all year! Tee hee hee!" She slithered expertly out of each attempt Orson made to ask her questions about herself.

Well, they had a few days to get to know each other. Alone. Orson hoped she would

open up on their long drive.

There were birds on the Valdez docks. Not just ravens, staring at him with one eye in a clear request for food, but also bald eagles—a dozen of them! They were perched all around the parking lots like vultures and no one seemed the slightest bit awed by their presence. Orson pretended to ignore them like everyone else.

The security office in Valdez was one wild-eyed guy at a computer monitor in a tiny rented room. He was wearing a T-shirt that said “May the (m*a) be with you” and Orson desperately wanted to laugh at it with him, but remembered at the last moment that he wasn’t supposed to have a sense of humor and only grunted and shook his hand.

The geek kept looking curiously at Alexandra, and Orson intercepted a discreet shake of her head in warning. When she saw Orson glance at her, her smile got even wider and she gave an airheaded, “Tee hee hee! We don’t have a lot of time to stay, Craig. We want to stop at the terminal here and then head up to Tok.”

Oh.

Orson had been pronouncing the name like Tik Tok, the social media app, and apparently it was “Toke.” The danger of being gruff and blustery was that no one corrected him, so he sounded stupider and stupider as the day progressed.

A company pickup waited for them in the parking lot, with the new Grizzly Protection Services vinyl logo stuck on a space on the door with slightly less mud than the rest. It was a crew cab in deep blue, and Orson glanced into the back to find a plastic bin lashed into place, with not one but two spare tires, a full-sized shovel, and a marked emergency kit. How far away from civilization were they going? Were they going to bury bodies? Sandra had assured him that he didn’t need any camping equipment and that she had arranged housing all along the way.

Alexandra went to the driver's side and opened the back door.

"I'll drive," Orson insisted. That was the boss thing to do, right?

"Of course!" she said. "Tee hee hee." She left the door ajar and went around to the other side of the truck, storing her luggage in the back seat.

Orson was beginning to suspect that there was something sinister behind her fake-sounding giggle. He slung his suitcase into the back of the cab and settled into the driver's seat.

He thought he did all right through the brief tour of the Valdez (Valdeeeeeez) terminal, but he was eager to get on the road, alone with the woman making his bear do emotional somersaults.

"Buckle up!" he said cheerfully, before he could remember that he wasn't Old Orson. He followed it with a grunt that sounded super forced.

Alexandra didn't comment, though Orson caught a confused sideways glance.

He vowed to be tough and silent for the rest of the trip but blew it almost at once as they drove north into a gorgeous canyon just as the clouds cleared and the sky opened up overhead. The road was twisty and narrow, and Orson nearly drove off it twice staring at the waterfalls cascading down the cliffs opposite of the road across a frothy river. Between the light and the water and the sheer rock walls, it was a view straight out of a postcard, and he had to force himself not to gape. Fortunately, traffic was light, because he crossed the centerline several times.

"Pull over here," Alexandra said firmly, following it with a clear afterthought of a giggle. "Tee hee hee."

Here proved to be a viewing point of a particularly stunning waterfall. The light streaming into the canyon lit it up like a filmy, foamy spill of silver. Rainbows danced everywhere.

“Bridal Veil Falls,” Alexandra said briefly, as they got out. “It’s more impressive earlier in the spring, but we’ve had a lot of rain lately. I’ll take the wheel now.” She put her hand out imperiously, then winced. “So you can enjoy the view. Tee hee hee.”

Orson obediently dropped the keys into her hand, then wondered if he should have insisted on continuing to drive. He settled for scowling at her and stomping to the other side of the truck without speaking.

ALEXANDRA

Alex took over driving because fear for her life overwhelmed her need to suck up, but she needn't have worried that Orson was going to take offense. He acted like he'd never seen waterfalls or mountains, craning at the views Alex had stopped appreciating years ago.

Every so often, he seemed to realize what he was doing and sat back in his seat, crossed his arms, and glared at the road. But it wasn't many miles before he leaned forward again, gazing out at the broad sky with its fluffy clouds, snow-capped peaks, and scattered wildlife.

Alex kept up a chirpy, exhausting monologue when he wasn't any help at all, and pulled over when she spotted Dahl sheep along the mountainside, pointing out the tiny forms. "They look like tiny patches of snow, but if you watch, they'll move. If you want a closer look, there are binoculars in the glove box."

He looked like he wanted to say yes but only grunted in reply, so she put the truck back in gear and pulled onto the highway. "We're coming up on Thompson Pass," she told him some time later, pulling into the campground for the view. He did use the binoculars then, sweeping the facing glaciers in interest.

"You should see Denali," Alex told him. "It's the tallest mountain in North America and worth a side trip."

He gave an off-putting snort. It was fascinating to Alex to watch him struggle with himself. He was clearly excited to see the wilderness and had a youthful eagerness that was at complete odds with his more usual snarling, scowling demeanor. Every time he caught her watching him, he frowned harder and drew himself up.

“You mean Mt. McKinley?” he asked, sounding cross.

“They renamed it Denali, the Native name, like ten years ago,” Alex said as mildly as she could manage. “It means The Great One.” Should she giggle? Trying to keep up a light, air-headed conversation without pointing out his inaccuracies was frustrating. At least he hadn’t called Tok “Tock” since they’d made contact with the Valdez office. And he didn’t suggest a side-trip to see Denali, so Alex didn’t have to explain that it would add at least a day and a half to an already agonizing journey.

“It’s another four hours to Tok,” Alex reminded him. She didn’t want to rush his sight-seeing, and she was intrigued by the little glimpses of enthusiasm he seemed to be trying to hide, but she also looked forward to dropping her chirpy, bubbly facade and shutting a hotel door on Orson’s smug face.

He stomped back to the passenger side without offering to drive, so Alex slipped into the driver seat and clipped on her seatbelt.

“Music?” he asked gruffly when she forgot to be a tour guide for a while and they had lapsed into silence. The scenery got less epic as they descended down into the broad valley. “What do you like?”

Alex shrugged. “Anything but country.” Oh crap, what if he loves country music? Trying to please him was going to give her a damned ulcer.

“There’s no cell connection,” he grouched.

Sparkle, Alex reminded herself. “There are a lot of areas of the state with no connectivity. It can be a major safety concern.”

She glanced at his profile as he frowned at his phone.

Did he have to be so good-looking? It would be a lot easier to hate him if he was soft and slovenly. But that nose was just the right shape and size on his chiseled face, and every move he made was like music. The muscles in his neck suggested even more treasure beneath the collar of his plaid shirt. He had a mountain man lumberjack look, like he was used to swinging an axe or tossing hay bales.

Dammit, he probably did like country music.

Alex forced herself back to concentrating on the road, only speeding a sensible amount. She was glad when he got his phone seamlessly connected to the stereo and put on an 80’s rock mix that had a combination of favorites and tolerable popular songs.

They pulled off at Copper Center, a quaint little historical town with one of the best pipeline viewing stations in the state. She caught Orson looking longingly at the tourist district as they drove past. “If you’re looking for more excursions, the trip to McCarthy is worth making. Plan on overnighing out there.” And maybe don’t drive yourself , she almost added. That road was even rougher than this one and had more arresting views, tighter curves, and steeper drop-offs. She could see Orson driving straight into the river because he was watching the scenery.

He grunted as they pulled into the pipeline station.

They got out and Alex rolled her shoulders. This was early in the trip, but trying to maintain her charade of cheer was taking its toll on her muscles. She’d have to be mindful about stretching and maybe get up early to go jogging.

She nearly walked into Orson's back, because he'd come to a stop without warning.

"It's...so big."

"That's what she said," Alex muttered.

ORSON

Orson couldn't contain his shout of laughter when Alexandra said exactly what he'd been thinking, in a complete deadpan. He tried to smother it with a manly harumph and crossed his arms over his chest. "I mean, I can understand the security complications of something like this. It's right here. We can walk right up and touch it!"

The pipe in this section was above the ground, suspended on tall pilings, and it crept along like a giant multi-legged millipede in a crooked line. The pipe was four feet in diameter, a glistening ribbon of silver into the wilderness. The road went straight up to it, and there was an informational sign with photos of the cross-section as well as diagrams of how the oil was pumped at stations and descriptions of how the piping was periodically cleaned.

"Why isn't it straight?" Orson blurted, staring in either direction.

"Thermal variance," Alexandra said promptly. "Metal expands in the heat and shrinks in the cold, and we have massive temperature swings. It can get down to fifty below and up to a hundred above. If it was laid out a straight line, it would buckle and crack. That's why it's on those slides, see, not fixed to the piles. It also means it's more flexible in the case of an earthquake. I mean, tee hee hee, I guess!"

Orson gave her a sideways glance. Why was she pretending to act so stupid? She caught him looking at her and gave him a vapid smile while playing with her hair.

Orson didn't have to pretend to frown as he turned back to the pipeline. "So, how do you protect something like this? I mean, it's not fenced in or isolated from the public." A pair of tourists was taking selfies right in front of it, reaching up to show how tall it was in the photo. "I'd envisioned, like, shifts of guards, but it's too much to cover with people."

"We have cameras," Alexandra said confidently. "And do sweeps remotely. We analyze suspicious behavior and react accordingly. We also monitor current events and news and provide physical presence as required. It's all very clearly laid out in our contract, every eventuality, and it's as much research and anticipation as it is reaction."

Orson gave her another sideways glance. Her eyes had narrowed, and her scowl was as good as any of his brothers'.

Alex Vex. She was the one who had negotiated the contract. She was the one who'd made the business competitive. The more he learned about the job, the more Orson realized exactly what that meant. She wasn't just sexy, she was smart, and it turned him on as much as her long legs and sweet denim-clad ass.

So why would she keep giggling and dumbing herself down?

She was a puzzle. An enticing, enchanting puzzle that was making his pants not fit.

"We're still several hours from Tok," she reminded him. "Tee hee hee. We should get going."

She kept up the bubbly tour guide act for a few more miles before they lapsed into silence while Orson's playlist cycled through rock songs and nostalgia.

There were a lot of trees in Alaska, he realized as they drove. A lot of trees.

They weren't the towering shady monstrosities of California, or the dense, lush forests of the American South.

They were quirky and mid-sized, scraggly spruces mixed with soft-looking deciduous trees. The lower slopes of the mountains were covered with them, and when they had elevation, Orson could see that the forest stretched out almost forever. Alaska was big

.

That's what she said.

There was a sense of humor behind Alexandra's armor.

Sometimes they drove for miles without seeing a real building. Occasional turnoffs looked like driveways rather than legitimate roads, and they only saw cars coming in the other direction a few times an hour. At one point, they were slowed by a poky RV, but Alexandra passed them on a clear stretch of road. Once in a while, there were actual side roads with stop signs. It was hard to believe they were on a major highway.

Orson tried to pry more information from Alexandra about herself, but she only glanced at him, smiled, tittered obnoxiously, and changed the subject to talk about Alaska.

He let her jabber whenever she would, loving the sound of her voice, especially when she forgot to be air-headed and got invested in her topic. She admitted that she was passionate about fishing, which set Orson's bear aquiver in excitement.

Yes , he growled happily. She is meant to be ours.

They stopped so many times that they got into Tok quite late.

“We should get dinner before we find our rooms,” Alexandra suggested. “Sandra booked us some cabins just down the road. Fast Eddy’s has the best pizza in the state but they close at nine.”

“Pizza sounds great.” It did, too; Orson didn’t have to exaggerate. It sounded comforting and familiar, and it had been a whole lot of day that wasn’t either of those things. He was looking forward to catching up on the sleep that had eluded him the night after meeting his mate and he was still struggling with jet lag. “What time is it? I’m starving. ”

The sun was still high in the sky, which was confusing, because Orson’s phone said it was already eight PM. They had stopped at every pipeline viewing area on the way, though they started to look the same after a while.

“You get used to the daylight,” Alexandra said pityingly. “It gets dark again in August.”

Orson stared up at the blue sky. “I was hoping to see the northern lights,” he admitted.

“They’re up there, but it won’t be dark enough to see them for a few months.”

Somehow, that was a very comfortable feeling.

Fast Eddy’s was a long, low building off the highway, and Alexandra pulled the truck up in front of it. It sounded like a dive bar and looked like it was barely a step up from that.

A harried waitress led them to a booth and handed them plastic menus. Alexandra didn’t even look at it. “Growling Grizzly,” she said.

Orson was alarmed at first, wondering if she was calling him out. Then he realized it was the name of a pizza, just as she gave a simpering smile. “Tee hee hee, I mean, if you want to split one, we can!”

Orson liked her better giving orders than backpedaling. Why was she being so weird? He’d gotten glimpses all day of the woman she must be behind that fake laugh, the kind of woman who could successfully run a security company and win awards.

“Sounds great,” he agreed, closing his menu. “I’ll take a beer.”

“Water,” Alexandra said, looking at him suspiciously.

Should he have ordered a whiskey? Or a water?

It was utterly exhausting trying to pretend to be someone he wasn’t. He was so tired of wondering if he was doing everything right.

And this was his mate , sitting across from him. He wanted to know what she was thinking, what it would taste like to kiss her, what her real laugh sounded like.

“Tee hee hee.”

That wasn’t either real or a laugh.

“Alexandra...”

She winced. Was he pronouncing that wrong, too?

“I had some questions about the company employees,” he said.

Her mouth curved up in a cute little smile. “Tee hee hee. I’m happy to answer any

questions.”

“Why did you hire felons?”

Her fake little smile froze in place, but her gaze didn’t waver. Had she not expected him to find that? He might be clueless about Alaska, but he’d taken the time to review the basics of the business before he came north.

“I vet every employee on an individual basis,” she said. “I chose to select them based on their rehabilitation and exemplary qualifications, rather than their...checkered records. They’ve been loyal and hard-working. I don’t have any regrets.” Her voice grew more forceful as she went, and she seemed to realize how loud she’d gotten. “Tee hee hee...”

“Don’t our clients have qualms about that?”

“I’m not keeping it a secret if that’s what you’re implying.” Orson wasn’t sure how she kept that smile on her face when her eyes were so angry.

Mama bear , his grizzly warned him. Don’t mess with a mama bear.

ALEXANDRA

Alex knew this would come up eventually.

Most companies, especially security businesses, wouldn't think twice about excluding people with arrest records. But her faith in the men and women she'd hired had paid off in spades. They had everything to prove and held back nothing. Alex treated them fairly and rewarded them amply, and they returned her trust with absolute loyalty.

Alex went on, trying to keep her voice light and gentle. Sparkle! "Convicted felons can't be assigned certain federal jobs, but we have a lot of work they are uniquely qualified for. I have never had a personnel problem with them. Their contribution to our company is unquestionable." She hated having to balance Sandra's warnings not to challenge Orson with her loyalty to her people. She was willing to go to bat for them, but if she came on too strong, she'd just put Orson's back up and end up doing them more harm than good.

Why was this such a minefield?

Why did the company ownership have to change and jeopardize everything she'd worked so hard for?

And why did Orson Davison have to be so damn hot?

Alex was glad when the pizza came quickly and Orson was distracted by the slab of hot cheese and meat. They both abandoned formal manners in the face of the culinary temptation and empty bellies after a long day of travel. The drive had taken much longer than she had hoped because they stopped so frequently.

“This is good, ” he said in earnest appreciation. If he was devastating when trying to be frigid, he was twice as appealing when he seemed to forget his scowling mask and got invested in something. He was like a husky puppy, forgetting the size of his own paws. Then he glanced up at her with a hungry look that had nothing to do with pizza and Alex caught herself thinking about Sandra’s suggestion to seduce him.

It was dangerously easy to talk to him while dealing with finger food, chuckling over the Alaskan decor and the foul-mouthed party of wildland firefighters in the next booth. He seemed to forget to be gruff and grumpy, and he made sly remarks that surprised laughter out of Alex several times.

More bothersome, she hadn’t reacted physically to someone like this in a long time. She was too busy for relationships and didn’t find one-night stands any more fulfilling than a dirty book and a vibrator...and they were infinitely less complicated. It was impossibly unfair that the time she was genuinely interested in a man , it was the one person she couldn’t risk screwing up with. If she played her cards wrong, she’d lose her business and ruin the lives of people depending on her. It wasn’t worth a sweaty night or two of passion.

But Sandra had a different plan. Her plot became clear when they arrived at the rental cabins and were given two sets of keys to the same room.

“No, we reserved two cabins ,” Alex told the receptionist. “Two separate cabins.” The idea of sharing a room with Orson Davison made her knees weak with unwelcome desire, but she wasn’t going to let her libido torpedo her resolve.

The clerk gave Alex a thousand-mile stare that suggested she'd been dealing with tiresome tourists all day and didn't appreciate the late check-in. "I have you down for a single cabin. The Fireweed. Check-out is at eleven AM."

Orson was no help at all, back in his silent stalwart mode with his arms crossed as he frowned at the taxidermy.

"Well, do you have another room we could rent?" Alex asked desperately.

The receptionist gave a little haha that was about as close to a laugh as the giggle Alex had used for the past two days. "It's midsummer," she pointed out. "We are booked solid. You only got this cabin because we had a last-minute cancellation. Everyone else has already checked in for the night. There's nothing I can do for you." She looked at Orson rather speculatively, like she might offer him her own room. Alex was surprised at how the idea of that made her bristle.

It wasn't like she had any claim on the man. He'd given her a few appreciative looks, and Alex thought they might have chemistry if they weren't so busy trying to navigate their professional relationship, but that wasn't anything to base ownership on.

Alex took the keys. Maybe it had two beds?

It didn't.

It was a one-room cabin with one fluffy bed in the middle, a king-sized, quilt-covered bed that took up most of the space. There was a tiny bathroom with a shower.

A pillow barrier down the middle of the bed? It didn't even look like there was room for one person on the floor beside it. Not a person of Orson's size.

“I can sleep in the truck,” Orson offered unexpectedly.

“You’re taller than me,” Alex countered. “And I’m used to sleeping when it’s light outside, which you aren’t.”

The frown he gave her wasn’t the one she’d gotten used to when he was trying to cover up his enthusiasm. This frown was a thoughtful one with an overlay of stubbornness. “I’m going to insist,” he said firmly.

He really was, too.

Alex hadn’t gotten to where she was by picking battles she couldn’t—or shouldn’t—win. He was going to play the chivalrous gender card and stick to his guns. They could argue about it, and she might even win because she was stubborn and terrifying, but it would be the opposite of what she was trying to do. She was trying to be accommodating and non-threatening.

“Tee hee,” Alex said. “I guess I’ll let you. But if Sandra screwed up our next reservation, maybe we can take turns sleeping in the truck! Tee hee!”

Orson frowned harder and didn’t agree to her proposal. “Alexandra...”

Alex held her breath. Was he going to suggest they share the bed? She was kind of dying for him to do so and dreading that he might.

Was she strong enough to turn him down?

This wasn’t the same kind of silence where she saw him tamping down impulsive responses and smothering laughs. He looked like he wanted to say something and wasn’t sure how to. It was a dangerous silence, both of them feeling each other out.

Alex spoke first. “This is like a silly cliché, isn’t it?” If there was no getting around the elephant-sized bed in the room, they might as well acknowledge it. “I’m going to murder Sandra.” She couldn’t make herself giggle at the end and licked her lips because her mouth was completely dry, thirsty for Orson’s kiss.

She was not supposed to be thinking about kissing him.

Orson cleared his throat. Was his suitcase in front of his crotch on purpose? “Good night,” he said gruffly.

“Good night!” Alex said as brightly as she could manage. Sparkle.

Then, before she could beg him to stay, she shut the door and locked it.

9

ORSON

O rson was an idiot.

That's all there was to it.

Here was an opportunity on a platter to claim Alexandra for his own, and for some dumb reason, he wanted to be a gentleman .

His bear was puzzled, and Orson was wracked with regrets.

If he'd stepped forward and kissed her in the doorway of the cabin, would they be in there right now, discovering exactly how deep their defenses went? He'd caught her gaze lingering over him a few times, and knew that she was attracted to him by her intoxicating smell and the way her breath sometimes caught.

But Orson was afraid she would regret an affair. She clearly had a problem with him as her boss, however she tried to smother it in cute little attempts to giggle and gaslight him. He didn't want her surrender to be a matter of power or convenience.

And Orson longed for that surrender. His hard-on was physical proof of how desperate he was to claim her. But what if she was responding to the person he was pretending to be...and what would she do with the goofy screw-up he really was?

If she liked New Orson , the way he was starting to think she might, maybe she

wouldn't like Real Orson .

Orson wasn't convinced he was doing a great job being New Orson , but he hadn't been himself, either, and he was conflicted about continuing to pretend to be anything he wasn't with his mate. He didn't want secrets from her, but he definitely wanted her.

Alexandra's warning about the light outside was well-founded.

Orson didn't quite fit lengthwise in the back seat of the truck, but even when he found a decently comfortable position, sleep was completely impossible with full daylight streaming in. Maybe he should get one of those sleep masks that women wore to avoid getting bags under their eyes. Did they come without lace and lavender scent?

Old Orson would have worn the girliest one he could find, just for the laughs.

But would Alexandra laugh, or would she give that awful false giggle that was clearly for his benefit?

After a few hours of trying to sleep in the truck, attempting to cover his face without suffocating or sweating to death, Orson gave up. His phone said it was one in the morning, and it was utterly quiet. The little cluster of cabins was right up against the boreal forest, and this was an opportunity Orson almost never got. No one was around, and he had looked around earlier for cameras because he was trying to wrap his head around the security business and had seen nothing obvious.

It was hot in the truck, and Orson had taken his shirt off to try to find a comfortable temperature for sleeping, so he was shirtless as he finally gave up and got out. His skin was bared to the outdoors for only a moment, and in those few seconds, an entire swarm of mosquitoes found his uncovered flesh. Orson was happy to surprise them

with a thick coat of fur as he dropped to all fours and shook his shoulders in delicious freedom.

They still hummed in his ears, trying to find access to his sweet blood, but he didn't give them a second thought as he rambled for the shelter of the trees.

There were places back home in Colorado where it was safe to shift and go wilderness wandering. But chances to do so had been rare and it was more fun getting into trouble as a human.

Orson's senses as a bear were similar to his human senses, but more keen, and Alaska smelled as good as it looked. Even at this godawful early hour, it was sun-warmed and spiced with spruce, moss, and plants he wasn't familiar with. He'd have to ask Alexandra what everything was.

Alexandra.

His mate.

With his bear out, it was harder than ever not to simply barrel in her direction and break into the cabin to curl into that big, welcoming bed with her.

But if Orson wasn't sure about her reaction to Real Orson , he was pretty sure what her reaction to Real Orson the Bear would be. If she didn't have a gun, she for sure had pepper spray, and Orson didn't want a face full of bullets or capsicum.

He had to be un-Orson altogether and think about what he was doing for once, not just act on instinct and impulse. Rash acts got fishponds set on fire and flooded New York offices.

Orson wanted this woman in all the ways imaginable, not just a quick road trip

hookup, not some kind of fraught office romance. He wanted her in a forever way, and he had no idea what that might look like.

Did he give up his job so there wasn't a power divide? Did he fire her? (No, even his bear knew that was a dumb idea. Dumber than offering to sleep in the truck!) Did he promote her to co-owner? Marry her?

His bear liked that idea.

They roamed up to the top of a nearby ridge where they could look out over the vast land.

Orson had been sent here as a punishment, but it was unexpectedly like coming home. He could put up with outhouses and swarms of mosquitoes. He could get used to nights of daylight, never-ending forests, and the deserted highways that went on forever. His mate was here, steeped in this land so deep that he could smell it in her pores. She was a force like this place, shaped by frightful power and beauty, formed with roots in its rivers and fingers in its clouds like some kind of goddess.

She was his, and this land came with her. He wanted them both with a primal, patient need. Orson assured his bear that they could wait and be sure she was ready to be theirs.

The cabin roofs were barely visible from an outcropping where Orson sat with his bear, watching birds and listening to the drone of insects. The mountains around changed colors like holograms in the short time he was there, with clouds drifting across the sky. The brilliant sun was low, kissing the horizon but not yet plunging beneath it. It would, he knew—they weren't above the Arctic Circle yet—but the sunset was slow and shallow. It wouldn't get completely dark, even when the sun was below the skyline.

Orson was tempted to wander further, down the opposite ridge to the mountains, perhaps investigate the ribbon of river that he saw beyond. But the last thing he needed was to get lost and have a search party sent out after him. He gave a huff and set off back to the truck. He should try to get some sleep and maybe insist on driving the next day.

Bears can sprint after prey but much more commonly plod along, and he enjoyed a leisurely return to the cabin, sniffing after rodents and crushing old logs under his paws. Birches gave particularly satisfying crunches, rotted out from the middle. The moss was springy, and the wild roses couldn't scratch through his thick fur.

He got to the truck and stretched, shifting as he stood on his hind feet and reaching for the truck door before he realized that the curtain at the window of their cabin was open.

And Alexandra was staring out at him.

10

ALEXANDRA

Theoretically, Alex knew she should be most concerned about the giant grizzly bear that had just transformed into Orson.

Realistically, she couldn't get much beyond the fact that Orson was standing next to the truck without a shirt.

The man was breathtaking .

She'd guessed at his physique beneath his buttoned-up shirts and slacks, but guessing was a whole lot different than seeing all that rippling muscle and beautiful flesh with her own eyes. He had curls on his chest she was frankly dying to run her fingers through and shoulders she could imagine clawing.

She couldn't see all of him, over the nose of the truck, and he wasn't nearly as tall as a human as he was as a towering bear. But she could see enough of his torso to get a good idea of the rest of him.

And he definitely saw her, seeing him, clutching the curtain like a lifeline.

He gave a little start and might have made a yelp of surprise that Alex couldn't hear through the window.

He had just transformed from a bear, and her head was having a lot of trouble

wrapping itself around that concept, particularly since she was so distracted by the picture burned in her brain of those shoulders and that burly chest.

Alex let the curtain fall and gave him enough time to put a shirt on, then marched out into the bright Alaska night to confront him. She didn't see any point in pretending it hadn't happened, and she couldn't imagine how awkward it would be trying not to talk about it as they drove north. She wasn't the kind of person to avoid something because it might be unpleasant, no matter how Sandra tried to convince her to let things go and go with the flow or ignore the elephant in the room.

Orson was clambering around the truck when Alex came out, and she was irrationally disappointed to find him fully dressed. He could have left the shirt off now that she'd seen that much.

On the other hand, it made it much easier to speak in actual words when she wasn't distracted by all that skin she wanted to lick.

She reminded herself that Orson was the asshole who'd come here to replace her, and then remembered he'd just been a literal bear.

"I was coming out to see if you wanted to trade off with the bed," she squeaked.

(The big, comfortable bed that was big enough for both of them.)

"I could do the last half of the night in the truck," Alex said before her baser nature could convince her to throw herself at him and rip his shirt off again. "That would be fair."

Orson looked confused and dragged a hand through his hair. "You...saw?"

Saw him standing there all sexy and half-naked? Yeah, she saw that.

“You were a bear,” Alex said flatly.

“You don’t seem awfully surprised.”

Did he sound disappointed and a little pouty? It was pretty cute.

The truth was, Alex knew she was probably still shocked. It was unbelievable and she was tired and high-strung for a whole host of reasons—including shirtless Orson—and to be fair... “That is not the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen. I won’t say I don’t have some burning questions, but Native lore has a lot of shapeshifting stories and honestly I might like you better as a bear.”

“Hey!” Orson’s outrage was as honest as the grin that split his face.

It was far more devastating than his attempts to be surly and distant. This was the real and enthusiastic Orson she’d caught glimpses of during their drive up, and she liked Real Orson a dangerous amount. “Do you want the bed or not?”

Orson glanced at the door to the cabin and then fixed her with a hot look of hunger.

Alex had guessed that he felt a certain animal attraction to her, even before she realized how literally animal that might be. But he’d done a good job of frowning, grunting, and pretending her tight jeans did nothing for him. Now, he seemed to have decided he was done with the act altogether. “I’d like to share the bed with you,” he said boldly. Then he added a rakish, “Please?”

Zing.

Alex considered herself a logical and practical woman, capable of thinking with her brain and not her body. She could make tough choices and didn’t get weepy or wring her hands when things were hard. Autonomy was critical to her, and she would never

let her libido lead her into trouble.

But Orson, with his golden-brown eyes, boyish bearded smile, and those shoulders that were still imprinted on her eyelids, was going to be her utter downfall.

ORSON

A lexandra looked like something had shorted out in her head at Orson's offer, and he couldn't help but feel a little good about that.

She knew.

She knew he was a bear, and knew he wanted her. She hadn't drawn away from Real Orson when he accidentally forgot to be who he'd been trying to be. And she hadn't given a single false giggle or coy look since he'd been a bear. Maybe he should have done that earlier!

"You're my...boss," she said like she was reminding herself.

"I own the company," Orson clarified. "I haven't established my position ." He was thinking hard about different positions right now: missionary, doggy style, up against the wall of the cabin. The logs looked a little splintery—they might want to skip that.

"There's a chain of command," she said, rallying. "Did you even read the employee handbook?"

"It was big and looked boring," Orson said.

She laughed then, a real snort of surprise and amusement, not that insipid giggle.

"That's what she said."

Orson gave a shout of laughter and went to scoop her up in his arms and spin her around because there was no woman in the world who could possibly be more made for him.

He had forgotten that she was a security officer who had done extensive personal safety training until he was suddenly lurching through the air in an arc as she used all of the momentum from his impulsive charge to flip him down on his back and kneel on his chest.

“Wow!” Orson said, with the exhale of all the breath he had left. “Alexandra Vex, I adore you.”

“Alex,” she said sharply.

“What?”

“Just Alex. I hate my full name.”

“Why’d you use it, then?”

“Sandra told me my name was too threatening. You might feel emasculated.”

Orson had to laugh again. “You are the one who just flattened me and sat on my chest. Your knee is really pointy.”

A strange voice hollered from the next cabin door as it opened. “Hey, do you need any help?”

Alex called back, “No, thanks, we’re all good here.”

“Can you keep it down, then?”

Orson had to remind himself that even though it felt like early evening, it was the middle of the night. “Sorry!” he added.

The neighbor’s door closed and latched.

Alex rolled off and offered him a hand up. He didn’t let go once he was standing on his own feet again, right-side-up. “You didn’t answer about the bed...” Orson drew her closer, giving her every opportunity to pull her hand from his.

Her eyes were hazel—brown with a ring of green near the center. She gazed at him unblinking. “Sandra said I should seduce you,” she said quietly.

“Maybe I should give her a raise.” Orson whistled. “Would she like a fruit basket? A bottle of wine?”

“Mr. Davison...”

“Orson. You Alex, me Orson.” It wasn’t his best Tarzan impression, but she smiled slowly.

“Orson...”

Then he was lowering his mouth to hers because it sounded like an invitation. He kissed her softly, just a brush of lips at first.

She didn’t Vulcan nerve-grip him or break his knees, which Orson figured was a good sign, and when he moved to wrap his arms around her at last, she gave a noise of surrender and was suddenly alive against him.

Alex Vex was no wilting flower or soft, giggly little girl waiting for someone else to make every first move. Once she decided something, she was all in, clawing at the

buttons of the shirt he'd just put back on.

Orson got them, by sheer will, to the door of their cabin and through to the big bed that was the only feature of the room. He had to let go of her long enough to close the door, and when he got back, she'd already stripped her long-sleeved T-shirt off over her head.

Orson's breath caught, like she'd just thrown him down again. He knew she was strong and beautiful, but as she drew off her shirt, he felt like she was uncovering a light; she only got brighter as her layers peeled off to the real her.

"Take your shirt off," she commanded.

Orson was not only willing to obey, but eager, his fingers clumsy on the remaining buttons. He didn't wait for her to order his pants off, shucking them aside while she did the same.

There was a moment of new nudity, drinking each other in, uncertain where to touch first. There was a scar on her side that he drew a finger over, making her hiss, and she ran her hands up through his chest hair and back down with her nails. Her shoulders. Her hips. Her sweet face. Orson wanted to claim it all for his own as he gave himself utterly to her. He kissed her again and again, their bodies brushing and then crushing together.

They fell to the bed and he held her under and against him, not quite entering because he was at such a fever pitch of need that he knew he had to meter his pleasure. He kissed her neck and she grabbed at his shoulders, trying to wrap her legs around him and draw him into her. "Wait, wait," he growled. "Wait for it..."

He teased and tormented her, tickling her to surprised laughter and kissing all the skin he could find. He held her arms above her as he rubbed his cock on the inside of her

thighs.

“Orson, please. I need you! I want you!”

How long could he make this last? What heights could he bring her to? Orson was throbbing with need now, and was unsurprised when she tested his strength by trying to squirm free to have her way with him. She was so strong and lithe and determined! Their struggle was not serious and Orson let her push him over and straddle him, both of them groaning as she lowered herself onto the length of him.

She rode him that way, deeper and hotter and desperate until she cried out and clenched hard. Orson rolled her over for the last strokes, thrusting and clutching at her, growling and grasping as pleasure coursed through him.

She was his.

She was his mate and he was utterly hers, one with her body for the moment. He could feel her heartbeat inside of her as he took those last, spiraling strokes and finally they both lay in a haze of happy aftermath.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:36 am

12

ALEX

A lex had been right about Orson being dangerous.

He was gorgeous and built, and she could have caressed his skin for hours without getting bored.

She'd guessed he would be good in bed, but she hadn't expected him to be so much fun . He was there for her pleasure, and he tortured her with tickles and teased her to impossible heights before releasing her at last. It wasn't mechanical or selfish; he was there, laughing with her, finding the places that drove her crazy, challenging her boundaries but respecting them, and at the end of it, she had no defense against him.

He cradled her close as they finished, his breath on her neck, his cock still throbbing inside of her as the aftershocks of bliss ebbed away.

"Alex," he breathed near her ear. If he felt emasculated by the name, he certainly hadn't shown it when he claimed her.

Alex loved how strong he was, how silly he could be, and how tenderly he held her, like she was a treasure, not a tempest.

"Alex," he said again. "My mate. "

The word resonated inside her. "Mate? Like...an animal's mate?" He was a bear,

Alex remembered, and that seemed the least insane part of all of this.

He brushed her hair back from where it had been tickling her face but she'd been too lazy and comfortable to move. "Like that, but also not. I'm a shifter."

"That much is obvious."

He chuckled. "It comes with some perks."

"Like being able to change into a bear. I can think of times that would be useful."

"I also have a shifter's sense of instinct. It's like a sixth sense that tells me when I'm walking into trouble, not that it can keep me out of it."

"Like a bird's ability to navigate? Or a bear's need to hibernate?"

"Or like knowing when I meet the one person I'm supposed to be with forever."

That, and the sweat drying on her skin, sent a chill running over her. Alex backed away on the bed. "Forever?"

What did that even mean?

Orson kept a hand cupped around her face. "Forever," he said firmly.

Alex sat up, drawing back from his addictive touch, and folded her arms around herself. "We didn't talk about forever."

They hadn't talked about anything. He'd told her to call him by his name and then kissed her, and she was simply lost.

“I’m not like this,” Alex said, scowling. “I don’t usually do this. I never do this.” Had she led him on?

“That seems to be a theme between us,” Orson said thoughtfully, rising to one elbow. “I’ve also been trying to be someone I’m not.”

“You’re not very good at it,” Alex couldn’t help but observe. Sandra would have pinched her if she’d been there and reminded her that she wasn’t supposed to insult the guy who could fire her.

Orson didn’t take offense, that easy smile on his mouth again. “Neither are you.”

Should she be offended? She wasn’t. “I’m going to take a shower,” she stated, getting off the bed altogether. She wasn’t blind to how he watched her, full of hunger despite what they’d just done.

“Do you want company?” he offered.

Her experience with sharing showers was that they were always smaller than they should be. There was a lot of elbowing each other accidentally and not being able to bend down to get the soap when it was inevitably dropped. But Orson was still naked, and gorgeous, and she wasn’t tired of his skin yet.

Alex shrugged one shoulder suggestively, and he scrambled off the bed with an undignified whoop to follow her into the bathroom.

It was a small shower, not a full-sized tub, with tiny hotel shampoo and conditioner in one corner caddy. Orson unwrapped the sliver of soap and lathered it up before he touched her, smoothing bubbles over everything from her neck down. There wasn’t room for him to bend over, so he knelt to soap her hips and legs, worshiping her slowly to her toes.

Alex returned the favor, frothing the soap in his chest hair before caressing his arms and shoulders and down his sides, lingering over his sexy hipbones and his taut ass. His cock, soft from use, stirred under her fingers, and she dallied there, stroking him and making him groan and clutch the safety bars. Alex knelt and soaped his thighs, tickling his knees, and washed his feet one at a time. This had her at just the right height to take his penis in her mouth and she couldn't resist. It had rinsed clear, and tasted slightly rusty from the well water.

Orson tangled his fingers in her hair, clutching but not controlling, and she sucked and teased with her tongue as he swelled in her mouth. She dragged her teeth gently on the sensitive skin and took him deeper, reaching to squeeze his testicles and scratch his thighs.

He was hard now and seemed impossible to hold in her mouth. Alex released him with one last lick. He drew her up and pressed her against the tile wall of the shower as he found her pussy and drove in.

He held her there effortlessly, pumping slowly into her, kissing and gently biting her neck. She didn't think she could ever tire of his steady rhythm, holding her right at a crest of excitement, even while she craved a little more, a little faster, a little deeper. Instead, he pulled out.

"Orson..." she begged, even though she never begged. "Please..."

He shut the water off, but Alex didn't care. She was already overheated, and clawing at him with new need. He opened the shower door, turned to bend her down on the rug, and entered her from behind. This new angle had her coming at once, clenching and biting back her cries. He rocked her through that orgasm, and another, before he became frantic himself and spilled into her, hot and hard and erratic.

They laughed together afterward, lying on the floor soaking wet and spent.

“This isn’t me,” Alex protested. “I don’t have fun like this.”

“I think this is entirely you,” Orson countered, kissing her. “And you’re absolutely perfect.”

But Alex had a stab of doubt. Would she regret this in the morning?

13

ORSON

They slept so late that housekeeping banging on the door finally woke Orson.

Alex came awake with a start and scrambled out of his embrace. “We’re up!” she called, rolling off the far side of the bed. “We’ll be out soon!” Orson made a note to practice that voice. It wasn’t rude, precisely, but it was full of confidence and not a hint of apology.

“How soon?” he asked, eyeing her curves hopefully as she jiggled her pants up.

She stooped and threw a pillow at him. “We’re on a schedule. Snap to!”

Orson obediently snapped to , and they swiftly packed and loaded their luggage into the truck. Alex checked them out and drove them to Fast Eddy’s for breakfast. It was a brief meal, but not light. His biscuits and gravy were rich and filling, and served with a bowl of cubed melons with halved strawberries.

“Can you grow these things here?” Orson wanted to know.

Alex looked up from the phone she was tapping messages on. “Yes, but those aren’t. Local strawberries are much smaller and sweeter. Melons are enormous and wouldn’t be ripe yet.”

She knows everything, Orson thought in admiration.

“We’ve got a hotel tonight in downtown Fairbanks,” Alex said. She’d picked an omelet with reindeer sausage and had already eaten it efficiently. “Two rooms, I confirmed with Sandra.”

“We don’t have to use them both,” Orson suggested with a waggle of his eyebrows.

She rewarded him with a glimpse of an answering smirk, quickly smothered. “Two rooms,” she repeated. “We’ll stop at the Tok project and then drive to the Fairbanks office and get going early tomorrow morning for Coldfoot, where we again have two rooms.”

Orson had the Milepost open on the table beside him. “It’s only five hundred miles to Prudhoe Bay from Fairbanks. Why aren’t we driving straight through? Isn’t that only about eight hours?”

“The Haul Road isn’t paved,” Alex said patiently. “It’s eleven or twelve hours of driving if we don’t stop. We could do it, but it would be a long, miserable day. It’s better to break it up, since we can. And there are no amenities. If you need something for the trip, get it in Fairbanks.”

“I can think of something I’ll need,” Orson said, grinning at her.

She raised an eyebrow at him and Orson cataloged that gesture to use if he ever needed to be New Orson again. It managed to be both threatening, funny, and exasperated. He paid the bill with a company card and left a generous tip.

She didn’t offer him the truck keys, and he didn’t offer to drive.

The trip to Fairbanks was a hundred times more pleasant than the day before. The sky was a shade of clear blue Orson wasn’t sure he’d ever seen before, dotted with fluffy white clouds that looked straight out of romantic classical paintings. It was

surprisingly hot, and the air conditioning in the truck didn't work, so they drove with windows down. Orson was tempted to put his head out like a happy dog and howl.

It wasn't just the sunshine and the mountain views, though those were still quite grand.

It wasn't even that he'd gotten laid and had dopamine still coursing through his veins.

It was that Alex wasn't blowing smoke up his nose anymore, and he didn't have to hide who he was. She didn't giggle. Orson didn't grunt. He asked every question he was dying to ask, and she told him flat out whenever the question was dumb.

She was his soulmate , and she was smart, sexy, and strong.

Orson sang to his favorite songs without shame and coaxed her into the choruses she knew. She had a husky voice and good pitch. They could probably take down the house on karaoke night with the right song.

"Keep your eyes peeled," she warned. "We're coming up on North Pole, and you'll probably see Santa Claus."

"The North Pole?" Orson had been concentrating on the road map past Fairbanks. "Seriously ?"

"It's a little city called North Pole, and they take Christmas very, very seriously ."

They didn't leave the highway and didn't have to. There was a twenty-foot plastic statue of Santa Claus in front of a red and white striped building, and the street light posts were painted like candy canes. The motif continued with curious Christmas-themed buildings and businesses along the highway.

“One of the city council members legally changed his name to Santa Claus a few years ago. He later ran for Congress.”

Orson gave Alex a suspicious sideways look, trying to decide if she was pulling his leg. She didn't give her terrible giggle, only raised her near eyebrow at him. Was it a joke? He couldn't tell, and it drove him crazy in the very best way.

14

ALEX

Alex had grown up in Fairbanks, and even though she called Anchorage home now, she always felt nostalgic as the familiar landmarks came up driving north. Eielson Air Force Base had its boundaries delineated with an imposing chain link fence. A fighter jet was landing as they drove past the airfield, and Orson craned his head to watch it. There was the flood project, several acres of landscaped water storage space overgrown with willows and alders. They passed the turn-off for Chena Lakes, where Alex had gone to plenty of parties that didn't check ID before you got a drink from the cooler.

Then they got to North Pole, and Orson's eyes all but popped from his head. It was impossible to explain the little city with its absurdity and exuberance. Alex relished watching him exclaim over the twenty-foot plastic Santa, the Christmas-themed lumberyard, and all the relevant street names. It was an odd juxtaposition with the sunshine and heat.

Alex had thought he was hot but hateful when they left Valdez, and alpha jerks didn't entice her. But enthusiastic Orson, cracking constant jokes and singing along with the music...he was funny, smart, and sexy and she feared for her heart.

Forever, he'd said. My mate. His possessiveness was hot, but his happiness made her weak.

Alex could take bubbly lessons from him, she thought. And she wanted to take

bubbly lessons from him like she hadn't from Sandra. She wanted the secret to his effervescent joy. She wanted to bottle it and sip happily like a bee drinking nectar.

Oh, right. He was also a bear.

Her brain kept skittering off that fact like it was too much to deal with.

It was too much to deal with.

But he was a bear, she was his mate, and she still didn't know what that meant.

Alex no longer feared that he was going to fire her, but it was ridiculously unprofessional to have slept with him on his second day as her boss, and she still wasn't sure where they were going to land in terms of authority. Was she going to slide in as his second in command? Could she even do that? She had a lot of pride and stubbornness and was used to giving orders, not taking them. She had hated herself skipping around the office pretending to be sweet and non-threatening.

And that was the Alex that he'd declared as his mate. He hadn't complained about her comparative quiet and coolness on the trip from Tok, but he was also pretty busy singing and making dad jokes about the road names.

"Orson..."

"Are we going back to Anchorage?" he asked in alarm, turning to look at a sign they'd just passed.

"No, this is just the cut-off that goes around town," Alex explained, turning onto the offramp. "Our office is on the west side."

"Whew!" Orson settled back in his seat. "I was afraid you were kidnapping me."

How did he keep making her laugh when she was trying to have serious conversations? “My people are going to want to know where we stand.”

“We can do it standing,” Orson said slyly. “Or lying down or on your back. Missionary style isn’t to be scoffed at.”

Alex gave a snort of laughter, quickly smothered. “That’s not what I meant. That’s the opposite of what I meant. Look, I don’t want any misunderstandings. What are we doing here?”

She wished the drive was longer, or she’d started this sooner, and was glad when they hit a red light.

“You’re my mate,” Orson said.

“Not that .” Even if she was wildly curious about that , too. “Professionally. Snafu—Grizzly Protective Services is your business now. Where does that leave me?”

Alex glanced from watching the light to see him gazing at her, instead of out the window.

“Did you think I’d fire you? Is that why you put on that ridiculous act?”

Alex was silent, letting him draw his own conclusions, and the car behind them honked when the light changed.

She pulled through the intersection. The car behind them zipped impatiently around, and the driver flipped her off, but Alex refused to speed.

“Maybe I will fire you,” Orson joked. “Fire you up, I mean...”

“Quit fucking clowning around!” Alex snapped. Crap. That was too strong. She needed to back down. “Tee hee hee.”

“Don’t do that,” Orson said grimly.

Alex glanced at him, confused, as she switched lanes to pass a painfully slow semi. Was he calling her out for yelling at him?

“Don’t giggle like that,” he clarified. “It’s awful. You’re terrible at it. I’ll stop joking forever if you promise never to do that.”

Alex didn’t actually want him to stop joking. But she was happy never to giggle again. “I’m sorry I yelled,” she said flatly.

“You call that yelling?” Orson scoffed. “Any one of my brothers could yell you under a bus.”

“I’ll have to appeal to them for lessons,” she said dryly.

“Anyway, I owe you answers. I didn’t think about how uncertain you must feel about your position.”

“I’m not—” But he was right. Alex was uncertain. And that never brought out the best in her. “Fuck. Look, I don’t want to give up my job. And I’m good at it. If I left, half the staff would quit with me, and you’d be screwed.”

Orson grinned at me. “I’m happy to be screwed by you ...”

“Are you going to make everything a joke?” Alex demanded, chuckling despite herself.

“Ah, dammit. I already forgot my promise. Please don’t giggle.”

Alex did laugh, a shout of it, because what else could she do? “This is your new Fairbanks office,” she said, pulling up in front of the building. “Please don’t embarrass yourself.”

“Aren’t you more worried about me embarrassing you ?” he teased.

But for some reason, she really wasn’t.

15

ORSON

Orson was more nervous meeting the Fairbanks crew as himself than he had been with the Anchorage office trying to be New Orson, but he didn't need to worry.

There was a sign on the door. See you at the Midnight Sun Fest!

Alex frowned at her phone. "Oh, Frederica texted me. Most of the staff is on security duty, and they'll meet us there. The festival is usually low-key, but it's always smart to have some people in uniforms wandering around to break up fights, round up drunks, and catch stray dogs. I'll fill you in on the details of our contract."

"Alex," Orson said, catching her arm before she could return to the truck. "I can see you're worried about your position, but I didn't come here to pull the rug out from under you. You're doing a bang-up job, and my brothers sent me here because they thought I could coast along on your coattails and stay out of trouble. I...don't want to be dead weight, but I don't want to screw this up, either. I just...don't want to get canned on my first week."

Alex stared at me. "You're worried about your job?"

"You're super competent and intimidating!" Orson said honestly. "You need me like you need an enema."

"An ENEMA?!"

“I tried to think of something uncomfortable you probably don’t need!” Orson protested. “This is why I shouldn’t be in charge of a whole company! Or if I am, I shouldn’t be allowed to speak!”

Alex howled with laughter.

It wasn’t anything like her vapid little giggle, and it wasn’t even her giddy sex laughter. It was a belly laugh, so deep and true that Orson had to laugh with her. She clutched at him like she couldn’t hold herself up on her legs and they clung to each other as they chortled.

She recovered first, wiping her eyes and shoving him away. “Alright, enema-man, we’ve got a festival to crash. You’ll get to see Fairbanks at its party best.”

She told Orson about the festival as they drove to it. “Today is the summer solstice, the longest day of the year. There’s always a downtown party with vendors and beer tents and all the businesses stay open late. It’s twelve hours long, with music, a car show, and a bouncy house.”

“Oo, a bouncy house,” Orson said.

“I’m pretty sure you’re too tall to enter,” Alex said wryly.

“I bet you could get me in with a security badge.”

“What are you going to do? Detain the little kids?”

“Did you ever think about having kids?”

Alex nearly drove into a barricade, slamming on the brakes of the truck at the last moment. “What?!”

“I mean, we didn’t talk about it, and given the birds and the bees, we probably should. Or actually, the bears and the bees...”

“I have an implant,” she said shortly. “Otherwise, I would have made you wear protection.”

It didn’t surprise Orson that Alex would think ahead. She seemed to have everything planned. “Someday, maybe?”

She stared at him, and it was a raw, wondering look. “I haven’t really thought about it.”

She didn’t invite further conversation, pulling past a ‘No Entrance’ sign to slowly drive the truck through a crowd of milling people to a hotel parking lot.

Downtown Fairbanks was significantly smaller than Anchorage, but what it lacked in size, it made up for in enthusiasm. The buildings were splashed with bright murals, and it looked like the entire population of the city had shown up for this event, crowded into the closed-off streets between lanes of vendor tents. Dogs and kids ran screaming through the crowds, chased by harried parents doing parkour with strollers.

Alex wedged the truck into a spot Orson wouldn’t have guessed they’d fit in, and when he opened the doors, there was a wave of smells. Never mind the huge breakfast in Tok, his stomach grumbled audibly in hunger. He’d worked up a mighty appetite the night before.

“What are you in the mood for?” Alex asked, raising one of her eyebrows at his noisy waist.

“What is that smell?” Orson felt like he was being assailed by delicious scents.

Alex put a knowing nose in the air. “Loaded fries, maybe. Or tacos. Could be the rib place.”

They found the row of food trucks easily. Orson ended up with a burger. Alex got a pile of fries topped with smoked pork and sauce, choosing the “My Girlfriend Isn’t Hungry” size platter, which was sized for at least three people.

They wandered as they ate, past booths selling Native crafts and fresh vegetables, information tables about road construction projects and homeschool programs, artists with huge canvases and tiny soapstone carvings, and homemade candies, jams, and bread. Orson was glad his hands were busy with food because he would have been tempted to buy everything .

Music played on two of the three stages. A belly dance troupe danced to electronic Middle Eastern music, competing with some fusion of punk and folk from the opposite side of the fair. A juggler was telling jokes on the third stage.

Alex led Orson to a park overlooking a big river with a view across the water to a historic church. She pointed out landmarks with her fries.

They scored a bench just as a couple got up and sat close together to finish their food.

“Alex...”

“I can’t commit to kids,” she said, staring at the last fries in her box. “I’m not promising that kind of forever.”

Had she been thinking about that conversation like he had? The idea of babies had never enthralled Orson, but he couldn’t help but think they’d make good ones, and he couldn’t imagine anything more important than raising good kids.

“I figured out how to make it work,” Orson said, folding the last bite of his burger into his mouth.

Alex fixed him with a sideways look like one of the ravens from Valdez. “Kids? I’m pretty sure I know how babies are made. That’s not the problem.”

Orson almost choked on his burger as he laughed. “Marry me! Then you’ll own half the business and there’s no weird power dynamic.”

They were sitting so close together that Orson could feel Alex freeze up. “It’s not that simple,” she said quietly.

“Why not?” he asked. “I love you. You’re my destiny!”

The bench was back-to-back with a cluster of older women who had fallen quiet to eavesdrop, and they all applauded, startling both of them.

Alex surged to her feet. “I don’t love you!” she protested, and the clapping died to a spreading awkward silence. “I barely know you! You’re— I can’t— How could you?—?”

Orson was glad she’d finished her fries, because he was pretty sure she would have dumped them on him now if there had been any left. She seemed to gather herself. “You’ve got a lot of nerve, Orson Davison. How dare you make assumptions about my destiny for me? Fuck you and your incredible ego for thinking you can make a proper woman of me with a wedding ring and a fiction about fate. Get over yourself, you...you...pompous ass.”

Then she stormed off, disappearing quickly into the crowd.

Orson sat for a stunned moment, staring after her before a hand patted his shoulder.

“You’d better go after her, son.”

The only problem was that he had no idea where she’d gone.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:36 am

16

ALEX

Alex lost herself in the crowd at once, and wandered the streets of downtown Fairbanks until she ran out of festival abruptly by the parking garage in a quiet pocket without people.

Babies.

Marriage.

He was a bear.

Alex wasn't sure which part was most unbelievable.

She'd been so stupid to sleep with him.

She had too much common sense for that kind of slip-up, no matter how handsome and funny he was.

She'd made mistakes before, plenty of them, and she knew how to file regrets and move on with her life. The problem was, she didn't regret a single moment of it. She was actually considering babies and marriage, not just dismissing the idea as hormonal nonsense.

She wasn't sure she was cut out for motherhood or matrimony, but it didn't horrify

her like she thought it ought to.

And perversely, the fact that she wasn't afraid terrified her the most.

Alex realized that Orson was probably lost in Fairbanks with no idea which hotel they were staying at; the parking lot with the truck was located between several of them. He would be smart enough to meet her back there—and she'd have to return for her luggage eventually.

Alex found a trashcan to dump the empty platter from her fries and wandered back through the crowd to the truck.

Her first thought, when she caught sight of the man kneeling beside it, was that she was in the midst of getting a car boot from a cop. But event parking enforcement was part of their contract, and he wasn't wearing one of their uniforms.

“Hey!” Alex called.

He startled up, turned, and fled, clutching something in his hand. A thief? What was he stealing from underneath their truck?

He was smart, heading straight for the crowd, and Alex lost him there because he was savvy enough to blend in instead of pushing through and leaving a wake for her to follow. He'd been wearing a ballcap and a T-shirt with a logo, but that described half of Fairbanks right now, and ballcaps could be removed.

Alex spent some time looking for him without luck, still distracted and trying not to peer into passing strollers like a creep because she still had babies on her brain.

ORSON

It made sense to return to where Alex had parked the truck and wait for her there. Unfortunately, Orson had gotten all turned around in the swirl of the festival and had no idea where it was.

He wandered the booths again, watching for familiar landmarks and thinking about Alex.

It wasn't—he hoped!—that she was really mad at him, but that he'd caught her by surprise, not once, but twice that morning. Alex, he could already tell, did not like to be surprised.

And she might not be the girly-girl she'd been pretending to be, but she still deserved a little romance. He should be sweeping her off her feet and courting her, not springing marriage and carriages on her on their second full day together like it was an expectation.

A man with a ballcap low over his eyes hurtled carelessly through the crowd and ran right into Orson, bouncing off his chest.

“Woah!” Orson said, catching him on the rebound and holding him at arm's length.

He looked up at Orson with a flash of unexpected terror, then jerked himself out of his grasp and fled in the opposite direction. Something metallic hit the ground and

Orson bent to retrieve it. It was a small tool of some kind, with a pointy tip and a broad, dented back, like an awl or a punch.

It seemed like a strange thing to drop and a gross overreaction for running into someone in a press of people. Orson shrugged the weirdo off, put the thing in his pocket so it didn't puncture a foot or a stroller tire, and continued his search for the company truck. The smell of the man's fear reminded him that he had other senses he could use. Magical instinct was an uncertain compass at best, but Alex's distinctive scent led him to where she had parked, little whiffs of her intoxicating essence guiding Orson to her over the strong smells of food and other people.

He found both the truck and Alex, who was unlocking the door with a scowl on her face that any of Orson's brothers could be proud of.

"Alex!"

He bounded up beside her.

She thrust his suitcase at him without preamble. "Two rooms," she reminded him, reaching for her own.

"About that..."

Her look suggested that he choose his words wisely.

"Two rooms," Orson agreed. "But I was wondering if you'd let me buy you a drink before we went to our two very separate rooms. I'm sorry I sprang everything on you in public before, but I'd...like to get to know you more. Find out how you ended up running the security company. What it was like growing up in Alaska. Have you ever been charged by a moose? Do you have a dog sled?"

“Not everyone in Alaska has a dog sled,” Alex scoffed, but her look was softer than it had been.

“See, now that’s a thing I know!” Orson gave her his best I’m not trouble grin. “What else can you teach me?”

“Two rooms,” she reminded him.

“Two rooms,” he agreed.

18

ALEX

Two rooms, Alex reminded herself, sitting at the hotel bar with Orson Davison.

The biggest problem with this man was not that his arrival jeopardized her job and had the possibility of destroying the business she'd rebuilt. It was not even that he was devastatingly handsome and clearly knew it.

It was that he was smart and funny and completely willing to listen to her.

He wasn't afraid of her or intimidated because she'd flipped him over and sat on him. He wasn't put off by her insisting on two rooms or trying to pretend their dirty-bad night of passion hadn't happened. All the things she'd expected from his gruff good looks and high-handed introduction had proved wrong .

And Alex wasn't that good at being wrong.

Orson, on the other hand, was really good at it. He cheerfully admitted that he knew nothing about Alaska or running a company, with no trace of false humility.

"I was going to come up here and try to take everything over and be this commanding figure, all gruff and grouchy and bad-ass like my brothers, but I was as terrible at that as I am at everything."

"You're not terrible at it," Alex lied kindly.

“I’m terrible at it,” Orson insisted. “Almost as bad as you are at being all giggly and girlish.”

“I’m girlish!” Alex protested. Then the bartender came to take their drink order. “Whiskey on the rocks. Single malt.”

Orson gestured as if that proved his point. “I’d like a Manhattan,” he said. When the bartender moved down the bar to get their drinks, he said in a stage whisper, “I like the cherry.”

There was a dirty joke there, but Alex didn’t bite.

Alex had enough fries and pulled pork in her stomach that she wasn’t afraid of a few drinks, but as the evening went on, she realized that she was a little afraid of Orson.

Not because he could turn into a bear—which ought to have terrified a regular person—but because he could talk about things like babies and marriage, and she wasn’t running in the opposite direction.

He started by asking questions about the business and offering bits of his outside observations that weren’t entirely nonsensical. By the second round, he had coaxed her into talking about her childhood, terrorizing the little suburbia wilderness she grew up in, racing around on her ten-speed with skinned knees and pine sap on her sleeves.

He told her about his misspent youth in return, being the screwball of his brothers.

“So there I was with about fifty-three gallons of coffee creamer, and it’s coating the surface of this fishpond when someone flicks a cherry”—he didn’t volunteer who was smoking what—“and the whole thing goes up like a giant Viking funeral pyre. I didn’t even know coffee creamer was flammable! The fish were fine. In fact, they

were probably better off with the stuff burning off the surface than mixing in and suffocating them. But of course, I got blamed for the whole thing, even though it was clearly not my fault. My brother Theo got me a shirt that says fish killer, even though not one of them died except the one already floating sideways, which was probably a coincidence.”

They lost track of time, laughing and talking about everything under the sun. Alex forgot to count how many times her whiskey was refilled, confident that she could hold her own until it was closing time and she had to climb to her feet.

“Two rooms,” Orson told her, and she wasn’t entirely sure how they’d gotten to the hall outside their side-by-side rooms.

“Two rooms,” Alex echoed him foolishly. She didn’t want two rooms by this point, she just wanted Orson to strip her naked and do things to her body like he had before. “We could share one.”

His arm was under hers and she used the other to catch his face and kiss him.

“You’re drunk,” he observed, after a kiss that wasn’t nearly long enough.

“No, I’m not,” Alex protested. “I don’t get drunk. I drink other people under the table.” She was usually the one carrying someone else to bed. This was a very strange position to be in. She could imagine some much better positions, and she found herself running her hand over Orson’s arm suggestively.

“I’m a bear shifter,” he reminded Alex as he unlocked her door, keeping her propped up. “I forgot you wouldn’t be able to keep up.”

“I can keep up!” Alex pushed him away and made it to the bed, which tipped up to meet her. “I just need to take my shirt off...”

He came to help her, to her delight, unclipping her bra and taking off her jeans while she lay, laughing helplessly. Then, he tucked her under the covers and kissed her forehead.

“Aren’t you going to get in here with me?” Alex asked when she realized he still had all his clothing on.

“I love you, Alex Vex,” he said tenderly. “We have two rooms tonight.”

“I’m saying yes,” she reminded him.

“I couldn’t take advantage of you in this state,” Orson said.

“It’s a big state, Alaska. If you cut us in half, Texas would be the third largest state.”

He laughed at her because she was being funny, and then he did the forehead kiss again. Alex meant to intercept him for a real kiss but closed her eyes instead. Then he was gone, the hotel door clicking behind him.

Alex woke up much later feeling dizzy and a lot less amused, and staggered to the bathroom. She drank several tiny cups of water from the tap, and stared at her reflection.

What was she doing, drinking with Orson Davison, thinking about having kids with him and teaching them to ride 10-speeds? She was getting drunk with him at a bar and laughing? It was wrong on every level.

And Alex wasn’t that good at being wrong.

ORSON

The more he got to know her, the more Alex Vex impressed Orson.

She had tucked down more whiskey than he realized humans were capable of, and he hadn't even noticed she was getting drunk until she tried to stand. It took all his willpower not to crawl into bed with her after tucking her in, but he didn't want her to have morning regrets.

Orson guessed she had them anyway by the wince she gave when he greeted her and the fact that she was wearing sunglasses at breakfast. He had to give her credit for being no less grumpy than usual, though she was clearly toughing out a wicked hangover. She had showered, but Orson could still smell the whiskey in her pores. He wasn't sure many people would have been standing the morning after like she was.

And even hung over, she was absolutely gorgeous. Orson was half-regretting his chivalry, because the morning wood he'd woken up with hadn't gone anywhere. It was distracting, how hot she made him. He suspected she would laugh if she knew how much she bothered him. Orson almost told her because he loved hearing her laugh. Her true laugh.

"I'm going to check out the gift shop before we go," Orson said as she sucked down a second cup of hotel-quality coffee like it might cure her.

"I'll make sure the truck is good to go," she said, giving him a careless wave.

Orson considered kissing her and decided he didn't want to risk having her punch him in public. He had some dignity to maintain.

She caught his wrist as he passed her. "Orson..."

Kiss?

"Thanks. For last night. Thanks. " She let go and returned her attention to her coffee.

There was undoubtedly something graceful and profound that Orson could have said. "That's what she said," He quipped.

Alex nearly snorted up her coffee trying not to laugh, and Orson went away feeling triumphant. Even if this wasn't exactly as he'd seen the courtship of his mate going, he felt like he'd done the right thing, the noble thing, and they were closer now than ever. Orson had told her stories he'd never told anyone, and she had opened up like a blooming flower. He fell harder in love with her with every word she spoke.

The hotel gift shop was impressive, with an entire section dedicated to bears. Orson picked out tacky tourist presents for each of his brothers, and a plushy for Peter's wife, who was expecting a baby. He impulsively added a jade bear pawprint necklace for Alex, even if she didn't seem like the type to wear a necklace. He just loved the idea of putting his mark on her, and the necklace seemed more likely to go over well with her than a bracelet or a ring. Orson wondered if she'd ever consider a tattoo. He knew from experience that her tanned skin had no decoration besides scars and freckles.

He remembered Alex saying there were no amenities between Fairbanks and Deadhorse, so he added a bunch of overpriced road trip snacks to his bill—honey-roasted peanuts, salmon jerky, a few bottles of water, and some gourmet chocolates.

With his arms full, he checked them out of the hotel and went to meet Alex at the truck.

20

ALEX

“Y ou have to be quieter, Sandra.” At the best of times, Sandra could be pretty shrill.

And this was not the best of times.

Alex still had her sunglasses on, and she had forced herself to eat the toast and ham from the hotel breakfast before leaving Orson in the gift shop so she could get the truck ready for the last part of their trip.

“Are you hung over?” Sandra demanded, no less quietly.

“Maybe a little,” Alex admitted.

“Did you get drunk?” Sandra asked in astonishment. “Alex, you don’t get drunk. You’re the prude keeping everyone else from getting stupid.”

She wasn’t wrong, even if she was annoying. Alex never trusted anyone else to keep the party from ending in regrets, so she always drank just enough and never more, confident that she could hold her liquor better than anyone else, anyway.

And Orson Davison had effortlessly drunk her under the table.

She remembered most of the night, laughing and talking. She remembered wondering if she should drink more when their glasses were refilled the third or fourth time, and

deciding...she could . She was safe with Orson, and he wouldn't let anything regrettable happen. She didn't have to be the person on point, for once in her life. She was allowed to relax, and Orson would protect her.

In all of her years working for a security company, Alex had never considered that she needed or wanted anyone to defend her. She was the one who provided defense, not the one who required it. But it had been so lovely, not needing to watch her own back for a while, able to unwind and have a good time for once.

What was this man doing to her?

“So...?”

Alex had almost forgotten she was still on the phone with Sandra.

“So, what?” she asked crossly.

“Two rooms?”

“Two rooms.”

“Just one bed?”

“ Two rooms .”

“What happened in Tok?”

Alex flushed hot. “He slept in the truck.” For the first half of the night. Then he turned into a bear, I saw him shirtless, and we had wild, hot sex on the only-one-bed. She couldn't tell Sandra that part. It shocked her to realize that she trusted Orson more than she trusted Sandra.

“Look, I think maybe we misjudged him,” Alex told Sandra. “He’s got some intriguing ideas about the business and no interest in micromanaging anything. He’s not an idiot, and he’s humble enough to admit what he doesn’t know. I think we might come out ahead here. It could be a really good partnership.”

Sandra was quiet. “And he thinks that everything is fine the way it is?”

Sandra didn’t agree with Alex about all the choices she’d made along the way. She hadn’t been in favor of hiring convicts or paying for gym time. Was she secretly hoping that Orson would overturn some of Alex’s decisions? Had she been trying to get Alex to act the idiot purposefully, thinking that Orson would want to get rid of her?

Alex shook her head to dispel the idea. Sandra was her friend . She had no reason to suspect her of sabotage. That was just the hangover making her brain misfire in odd directions.

“He respects my authority,” Alex said, sure of that at least. His mate . Whatever that meant in the business world. “He wants to keep me on, and he wants Snafu—Grizzly Protection Services—to succeed.” He wants to marry me. Her head throbbed.

“A lot of guys say that,” Sandra warned. “But they only actually want the one thing...”

Orson had gotten that one thing, and he could have had more of that one thing, but he’d been a complete gentleman last night when she was out of her senses. How was it possible that she was thinking that this was the guy she might marry? “I gotta go, Sandra. We’ll be out of cell phone range for most of the rest of the trip. Take care of the office, and I’ll catch up again when I can.”

“Sure, honey.” Sandra hung up, and Alex went to check the fluids, ensure all the tires

on the truck and the spares were fully inflated, and verify that they had the emergency equipment they might need on the Haul Road.

Alex didn't think she'd mind that much if Sandra had only booked them one room in Coldfoot.

ORSON

If the road was bugging him, Orson could only imagine how it was jarring Alex's head. "Is there a reason that they don't make the road flat ? Why the roller coaster?"

"It's called permafrost," Alex said shortly. "They build it flat, but the frost thaws differentially and heaves the road up in these waves on top of it."

"That was probably a hassle constructing the pipeline, too," Orson said thoughtfully. They could see glimpses of the pipeline periodically through the scrubby trees. The traffic thinned almost at once, and the road went from bad to worse, the pavement ending completely.

Orson had traveled plenty of gravel roads before, but this was a major highway on the maps. He'd had higher expectations.

Alex filled him in on the pipeline construction history and, from her words, he began to cobble together a picture of the enormous project and the sheer scope of the work and maintenance.

They met several huge semis along the way, and Alex warned him that the larger vehicles had the right of way at all times. The big rigs sometimes slowed courteously, but gravel still bounced off the windshield when they passed. The truck had started out with several chips in the glass, but Orson guessed they would end up in Deadhorse with many more.

It wasn't long until he realized why they had two spare tires. They didn't blow one themselves on the rough grade, but it was clear that it was a hazard of the road by the number of shredded tires in the ditches. Alex pulled off to help a van with a single mom trying to corral her wound-up kids and change a tire at the same time.

"We're meeting their dad at the Five Mile Campground," the harried mother explained. "Honey, don't let Charles eat the lug nuts!"

Alex and Orson jostled good-naturedly over who would change the tire, and ended up doing it together, Alex working the jack and the wrench while Orson wrestled the tires and tried not to look like it was too easy.

"Can I...pay you something?" the mother asked gratefully once she'd gotten her kids loaded back up.

"Of course not," Alex said. "We have to take care of each other out here!"

"Bye, kids!" Orson called.

"Bye, Mr. Grizzly!"

Orson gave Alex an alarmed look as we walked back to the truck. "How'd he know?" he whispered. The kid hadn't felt like a shifter to his instinct.

"It's the giant logo on the truck," Alex whispered back. "That's real slick, you know. Great way to keep your secret."

Orson gave a shout of laughter. "Want me to drive for a while?"

"Nah." Alex seemed mostly recovered by now, and she accepted some of the snacks he plied her with.

Orson recognized the Yukon Bridge from the security footage. “I see now why I looked like an idiot suggesting human response to threats here,” he said as they stopped to scope it out.

Alex pointed out the cameras, and Orson waved enthusiastically for them before she shushed him. “They’ll send drones out if we’re here too long, or if they perceive threatening behavior,” she reminded him.

“I’m waving. How threatening is that?”

“Let’s go, you ham.” He thought she said it fondly. “The visitor’s center on the far side has the best view and the last flush toilets for a long, long ways.”

They stopped at most of the scenic pullouts, and Orson marveled at the scope and beauty of Alaska. Every time that he thought it couldn’t get grander, it managed to. The sky clouded over, and the stops were brief, because the moment the truck door opened, the mosquitoes descended, thirsty and annoying.

Every time they got going again, they had to kill a dozen of them. Their corpses smeared the truck windows.

Orson insisted on a selfie at the Arctic Circle, which wasn’t a circle at all, just pullout and an informational sign. Alex smiled for the picture. While she was distracted, Orson kissed her, snapping another photo, and for a moment, he feared he’d disrupted the easy warmth they’d enjoyed during the ride this far. She frowned, then smiled slowly again and invited a real kiss.

It was easy to forget everything else, standing at the monument in a breeze stiff enough to keep the bugs off. Alex was in his arms, exactly where she belonged, and he might have stayed there much longer and risked exposing more skin if a pair of tourists in a very dirty Jeep had not pulled in just then.

“We’ve got a long journey left to go,” Alex reminded him, but she didn’t pull away when he caught her by the hand to walk back to the truck.

22

ALEX

Alex wasn't sure whether she should bless Sandra or curse her when they got to Coldfoot and found a reservation for only one room.

Orson stared at the compound in wonder as they drove in.

Coldfoot didn't deserve the title of "town." It was just a series of box-like housing units strung together in an overgrown gravel pit. Their room was in one of these, so tiny and industrial that Alex could see Mr. Billionaire's toes curling. It made the cabin in Tok look amazingly spacious and modern. The bathroom was like an airplane closet, and the paneling was original from the 70s, unbroken by any attempt at art or decor.

It did, somehow, have two beds, twins on opposite sides of the room wrapped in crisp white bedding. An experimental nudge suggested they were bolted down to the floor.

"Only one room," Orson said, filling up the room himself as they put their luggage down at the foot of each bed.

"Two beds," Alex pointed out.

"One for sleeping, one for love-making...?" Orson's eyes were full of hope and mischief.

Alex wasn't sure that Orson alone would fit in either of the beds, but she'd been thinking about getting him naked again since her headache had finally lifted, halfway between the Yukon River Bridge and the Arctic Circle.

"Let's test that out," she suggested. She was in for a penny, in for a pound...and in this case, all in for that promised pounding.

"You are so sexy," Orson said admiringly as he shut the door behind him.

There were no real illusions of privacy—the walls were paper thin to the next room and anyone in the hallway would hear any noises they made—but Alex had spent the last two days wound to the hilt. Orson wasn't making it easy on her with his careless grace and sexy sideways come-hither looks.

She wasn't used to playing coy or pretending to be prudish, and now that they were being honest, she wasn't going to suddenly start. She stripped off her dusty shirt and kicked off her hiking boots. It was a wild race to nudity, and Orson barely waited for her pants to come off both legs before he was wrestling her down on the bed and driving into her.

The long, rattling trip had been like driving on a vibrator, and Orson slipped between her ready, wet lips without effort. Alex came almost at once, intensely keyed up and hungry for his weight on her. He rested over her just right, filling her at the perfect angle, one leg held high, the other spread beneath them. While she was still recovering from her first orgasm, he flipped her over and found another position to thrust into her. She abandoned her vow to stay quiet, unable to smother all of her cries in the pillow. He knew how to touch her, when to slow down, when to speed up, and when to deny her pleasure to prolong it.

Alex remembered how he'd insisted on her delight at the expense of his in Tok, and hooked her foot around his ankle to twist him under her. "Your turn, sexy," she

growled, scratching his chest hard enough to make red marks under his chest hair.

He only gave a token of resistance before letting her pin his arms above him while she stroked his cock and teased him with her nails using the other hand. He groaned and gritted his teeth, arching his hips in an unspoken plea, but he didn't fight her hard as she tormented him.

"Alex..."

Was he begging or warning? Alex couldn't decide.

"Alex..." he said again.

She loved his sexy voice saying her name. It didn't sound masculine in his mouth, and he wasn't afraid of her.

"Say it again," she ordered him.

"Alex!"

She lowered herself down around him and released his arms to straddle him. He took her hips in his hands and pulled her closer, commanding their desperate rhythm as she rode him harder and harder. Alex found another crest of pleasure as he pumped into her at last. They became aware of someone down the hall pounding on the wall as the squeak of the bedsprings slowed and faded away.

"Alex," he said again.

This was her favorite one yet, full of yearning, satisfaction, and delight.

"We should probably get some dinner and actually sleep," Orson suggested, after she

nearly fell off the bed trying to cuddle beside him. She regretted wasting the big king-size bed in Fairbanks. She didn't want to sleep by herself tonight, but she wasn't sure how they would make a twin bed work. Orson was a moose.

No, he was a bear.

And she was his mate.

And she still had no idea what to do with that.

23

ORSON

“Can I get fries with the hot beef sandwich?” Orson asked, looking over the menu curiously.

“Sorry, no.” The waitress looked like she’d heard the request before. “We don’t have a fryer. Bears.”

He looked up at her and smiled. “I don’t want a fried bear. I want fried potatoes.”

Alex gave a snort and explained, “They don’t have a fryer because the waste oil attracts bears, and they already have enough trouble with them.”

“Oh.” Orson had to admit that fried food did smell delicious as a bear. He sometimes regretted how keen his sense of smell could be as a bear shifter—deodorant and perfume could be nauseating—but food was a special delight. It was useful for tracking people, when he remembered to. “Chips will be fine, then.”

The waitress gave Alex an approving look and took their orders to the kitchen.

“Orson...”

He loved it when she said his name. It made his bear wiggle happily. It didn’t sound like a baby name on her lips.

“It means bear cub,” he confessed to her.

“What?”

“Orson. My name. My brothers never let me forget it.”

“Siblings are like that,” Alex said with a smirk.

“Have you thought about that?” Orson asked impulsively.

“Siblings?”

“How many kids you might want?”

For a moment, he was afraid she was going to stand up and knock him on his ass again. He was ready for her this time, so she’d have more trouble getting through his defenses.

But she didn’t look mad, she looked thoughtful. “A little,” she said reluctantly.

“Two, at least,” Orson said eagerly. “So they entertain each other. More than three might require a minivan. Which I wouldn’t mind driving, don’t get me wrong. Just a thing to think about.”

“You have thought about this,” Alex observed.

“I’d stay home with them. You’re way better at business stuff than me, and I’ve got cousins. I know how to change a diaper and won’t give them sharp things. I don’t mind being a soccer dad if they’re athletic. Or a Mathletes dad if they’re all smart like their mom. I’m not asking you to give up your job. Though you’d have to have the babies. I couldn’t do that part. Biology, you know.”

“Biology,” Alex said faintly.

“And it doesn’t have to be right away, of course. When we’re ready.”

“And if I didn’t want any?” Alex sounded a little dangerous. “Ever?”

No cubs? His grizzly pouted.

Orson smothered him. “That’s okay. I can be a stay-at-home husband without kids. I’ll take up an expensive hobby, and you can be my sugar mama.”

“Your sugar mama?!” Alex’s outrage was everything he’d hoped it would be.

“I have no shame. I’m completely happy to be a kept man.”

The waitress arrived with their meals and had heard enough of the conversation to give Orson a long, skeptical look as she put his sandwich in front of him. Alex took a vicious bite of her grilled cheese. “Three,” she said briefly.

“You want three kept men? I read about that once. It sounded pretty hot, but I might be the jealous type...”

She laughed crumbs into her napkin. “Kids!” she clarified when she had gotten herself under control. “Three kids! I...think that would be about right.”

“You will be the best mom,” Orson said without the slightest hesitation. “I can picture it now. You’ll teach the girls self-defense and ten speeds and I’ll teach their brother how to shoot and scratch himself.” He demonstrated the scratching and Alex kicked him under the table as she got her sandwich under control again.

This was everything he wanted in the world. It didn’t matter that their hotel room had

two tiny beds, or that they were in a tiny, cheap shipping container passing itself off as a building halfway to nowhere. If Alex was there with him, it was a palace, and he wanted to start making those babies right now in their room with paper-thin walls.

She must have guessed that from his look, because she kicked him under the table again. “Keep your pants on, hot shot,” she warned. “I’m not thinking right this minute. I want a little time to figure this all out.”

“We could practice, though,” Orson suggested seriously. “We wouldn’t want to do it wrong when we go to actually do it.”

They laughed, but Orson was sure that anything he did with Alex couldn’t ever be the slightest bit wrong.

24

ALEX

Alex didn't understand how all of this could feel so right.

Even lying squashed awkwardly in a tiny twin bed with Orson after another round of wall-pounding sex didn't seem wrong. She slept deeply tucked tight in his arms and dreamed of bear cubs and meadows full of fireweed and bees. She woke to him stroking her with his fingers and they made quiet, slow love that didn't wake the neighbors as the midnight sun streamed around curtains that were supposed to be light-blocking.

The second time they woke, they peeled apart reluctantly and packed to leave before the hotel could kick them out. They ate energy bars and made love one last time instead of having breakfast out.

Orson paused at the desk as they were checking out and put his nose in the air. He looked suspiciously after someone leaving hastily, pulling the hood of a sweatshirt that seemed too heavy for the warm day up over a ballcap.

"What is it?" Alex asked. The stranger's behavior was odd, but the further north you went, the weirder people got. Her whole body had a pleasant hum of satisfaction, and she wasn't on the job, so she was happy to let it slide.

Orson shrugged and looked at the clerk, who seemed to have missed his bloodhound act. "Probably nothing."

They checked out and went out to the truck. Orson walked around to the driver's side, and for a moment Alex wondered if he was going to insist on driving. Was it some kind of macho thing where after wild hot sex, he had to be all alpha?

But no, he only opened the door for her like a gentleman. Alex paused to kiss him gratefully, then got in and started the truck. Orson paused to sniff the air again with a furrow to his brow, then climbed into the passenger seat and turned on the music.

The road north was so noisy with gravel that it was driving and conversation, or driving and music, but not both.

They stopped at the last tree north and Orson snapped a photo of Alex with the standing dead spruce. "This is only the last tree until we're down over the pass, right?"

Alex shook her head. "Nope, this is the very last tree from here to the coast. The climate is too brutal past the mountains for them to live. There are some scrubby alder and willows, but nothing more from here to the north pole."

"The real north pole, not that Christmas city monstrosity?"

"Don't cast shade on our kooky, festive community," Alex warned him, punching him in the arm. "C'mon, it's starting to rain and the pass can get sloppy if it's wet. I don't want to have to rush."

Alaska wasn't always blue sunny skies, but Alex thought it had a certain crazy beauty, even when it was socked in with low clouds and faded with light rain. At this time of year, the slopes were blanketed in rich green and fingers of white snow still lingered on the peaks. Orson stared as they drove higher and higher into the mountains and whistled at the avalanche warning signs. "That's not a danger now, is it?" he said.

“Not so much,” Alex said shortly, concentrating on the road.

She wasn't entirely happy with how the truck was handling, though she couldn't put her finger on what was wrong. She considered getting out and checking it over, just for peace of mind, but they'd gotten a late start, and the rain was getting heavier. It was comfortable in the dry cab with Orson, lulled by the afterglow of their long night of hot sex.

She turned the windshield speed up a notch to improve visibility and turned off the music. “We haven't talked about what happens next. Do we tell people at the office?”

“Oh!” Orson said with all the excitement of a kid finding a prize in a cereal box. “What if I do a big showy proposal in the middle of our first staff meeting? I'll get a ring, go down on one knee...”

“I'm glad you suggested that now so I could tell you hell no ,” Alex said honestly. “That is not the kind of spectacle I appreciate. Business meetings are for business, not romance.”

Orson pouted.

Alex took pity on him. “I'd rather just show up with a ring.”

He brightened. “Let them draw their own conclusions? Do I get to kiss you at work?”

“I'm not a public displays of affection sort of person,” she confessed.

“Can I kiss you in your office with the door closed?” Orson countered.

“I share an office with the surveillance department now,” Alex reminded him.

“Oh, you are definitely getting your office back. I don’t need an office. I’ll stay home with the kids.”

“We didn’t decide for sure on kids,” she cautioned. “And this assumes I marry you at all.”

“Will you?” Orson begged. “Kids optional, will you marry me? I love you, Alex Vex.”

Alex felt cheated having this conversation while she had to concentrate on the road. It was getting narrow and windy. They had just crossed the crest of the pass and were starting downhill, a view of the north slope starting to open up between the mountains. The road was wet now, with little rivers of silty water between the gravel.

Just as Orson said, “Not to be a backseat driver, but should you be going this fast?” a warning light appeared on the dashboard.

The brake pedal, which had been increasingly spongy since Coldfoot, went straight to the floor without slowing them.

“Shit.” Alex wished she’d absorbed a better swearing vocabulary from some of her more colorful employees, because it felt rather weak as she turned into another curve, entirely too fast. A semi barreled up the road toward them, narrowing the road to a single lane. She struggled to keep the truck in their allotted space as it passed, spitting gravel and honking.

Pumping the brakes did nothing, and Alex felt her heart pounding in her throat. It was all downhill from here, with hairpin turns. On one side was a ditch that would roll the truck at this speed. On the other side was an insufficient-looking guard rail and a steep drop into a ravine. Could she scrape the truck along the guard rail to slow them? If it failed, that was the deadly side of the road. Should she try the emergency brake?

Could she control the truck if she did? They were going so fast now that any crash was liable to be deadly. Turning off the truck would only kill the power steering and any control she still had, as well as the visibility that the windshield wipers provided. She downshifted, and the engine screamed, but the truck didn't noticeably slow.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit!" Alex needed more time to consider her options and didn't have any. The brake pedal continued to do nothing, no matter how she pumped it. There was no safe place to steer them off, nowhere to go, and another semi was starting up the bottom of the hill toward them. Alex wasn't convinced she could keep them in their own lane as they gained more speed, and a head-on crash would be deadly.

There was one thing she had to do as she fought the steering wheel and the slippery gravel. "Orson, I love you. If we get out of this, I'll marry you." Alex wasn't going to die without him knowing that.

"I love you, Alex," he said promptly. "Do you trust me?"

That earned him a swift glance. "Yes." Alex had never trusted anyone like this in her life, but she wasn't sure why he'd ask that now.

To her astonishment, he unbuckled his seatbelt and then hers.

"Steer for the ditch," he advised. Then he was reaching over her to open the door as he shifted into a massive bear that filled the truck's cab. He wrapped her into a fur burrito and leaped out into the rain, dragging her with him.

Alex gave the steering wheel one final yank and let go, letting him enfold her in powerful arms.

She had to trust him.

And she did.

ORSON

Orson wasn't entirely sure his plan would work, but he knew he had to try. Humans hurtling out of a truck into a ditch full of rocks at top speed would have been incredibly stupid...but as a bear?

Despite her brave words, he could tell that Alex thought they were done for, and Orson couldn't lose her now. Shifter strength and healing ability might save him from a fatal crash, but surviving without her would destroy him.

His thick fur coat and substantial layer of fat did a lot less to protect him than he hoped. They tumbled end over end down the ditch as the truck barreled on without them, rolled over, and crashed with a shriek of steel and roar of shattering glass.

Orson's only goal was to shield Alex. He cradled her in his arms as they tumbled, tucking her close and absorbing every hit. He met every impact with his shoulder, more invested in keeping Alex safe than in using his limbs to stop their downward progress. He could take a beating and did, concentrating on keeping his claws from scratching her fragile form or letting her slip from his grasp.

The bottom of the ditch was full of rainwater, and it ran around them as they finally came to a stop.

Orson peeled his aching arms away when the world stopped tumbling around him, desperate to see if his precious burden had been harmed.

“Shit,” Alex said breathlessly, lying on his furry belly. “Are you hurt? Orson?”

Orson realized that he was lying still, not sure what was broken, and shifted. “I’m okay.” She was much heavier when he was human, and she scrambled back off of him in alarm.

“Orson, oh my God. That was insane. Did you break anything?” She knelt beside him, running her hands gently along his sides.

Orson sat up with effort, wheezing. “Maybe a rib. I’m not sure. It should be fine soon. Shifters heal faster than humans.” he tested this limbs. An ankle might be sprained, and his elbow was on fire. His clothing was torn in places, and absolutely filthy. “Dammit, I don’t think I’m even going to get any manly scars out of this. But what about you? Are you okay?”

Alex laughed weakly and kissed his forehead. She was shaking, and Orson wrapped her arms around her before he realized he was, too. They trembled together in shock and relief. The rain had slowed to the barest cool drizzle.

“We should get some more clothes on before we get hypothermia,” she said, drawing away. “Do you think the truck will explode?”

“That only happens in movies,” Orson scoffed. “And I’m more worried about mosquitoes.” As the rain let up, the hungry insects moved in on the arms that his T-shirt left bare.

“Let’s get our rain gear,” Alex said practically. She stood up and nearly fell over again. “Oh, ouch. That’s probably sprained.”

Orson surged to his feet to try to catch her. They ended up supporting each other and limping awkwardly to the truck, each of them with one good ankle.

The truck was not on fire, and what was left of the engine made creaking noises as it cooled. The sight was sobering; it was a crushed, crumpled wreck of a vehicle. No one inside could have survived. Not even shifter strength would have saved him.

Orson would have been a lot more maudlin if he wasn't being sucked dry by voracious mosquitoes and drenched. "Raincoat, please!"

He had to shift into a bear and rip a door off to get into the back seat. A semi roared by, heading up the hill as he crouched behind the vehicle as a bear.

"They didn't stop?" Orson waited until they were around the next curve to shift back into human form.

"Have you ever tried to stop a semi going up a grade like that and get it started again?" Alex asked, reaching around him for her luggage. "They probably radioed for emergency help. That's the best they could be expected to do."

Orson found his rain gear and pulled it on. If the mosquitoes south of the mountains had been bad, they were a million times worse here, finding every crack and cranny in his clothing with buzzing persistence. This could have been a very romantic moment; Orson would have loved to lie Alex down and work their shock out in the way that hot-blooded people have been reacting to moments of stress since the caveman days, but he was too busy slapping himself.

"What do you think happened?" Alex asked gravely.

She found her own raincoat in the wreckage and strode away to poke through the remains of the survival equipment thrown from the back of the truck; the shovel was sticking out of the slope like a javelin, the spade completely buried.

"The brakes failed," Orson guessed, coming to her side.

“Modern trucks are supposed to have built-in brake failure precautions.” Orson didn’t think she was mad at him, but her shock was starting to turn to fury and her voice was hard. “Someone sabotaged us.”

A series of memories clicked into place in Orson’s head. “There was a guy at the Midnight Sun Festival. He ran into me and looked afraid when he recognized me. And what was weird was that I smelled him later, back in Coldfoot. He was leaving the lobby, and he’d been around the truck.”

“A guy in a ballcap, stocky, nondescript?” Alex asked sharply. “I saw him crouched beside the truck in Fairbanks, but I thought I scared him off before he could do anything.”

“Yeah, that sounds right,” Orson agreed. “He dropped a tool of some kind. Like a long awl or punch, with a needle-like tip.”

“Something you could puncture a brake line with,” Alex surmised. “It might cause a slow leak that wouldn’t turn into a problem for a long while down the road.”

She was so sexy when she was solving crimes. Orson was almost ready to risk mosquitoes to find a soft bit of moss to make love in, but Alex was all business. “Someone knew exactly where we were going to be and where the worst conditions would be.”

Outrage overwhelmed Orson’s libido. “Someone tried to kill us?”

“It might not have killed us,” Alex said reluctantly. “But it would have stranded us off the road and looked like an accident...”

“And then?”

The sound of the truck cooling suddenly changed, creaking ominously, and Orson had just enough time to dive to cover Alex as it went up in a fireball.

ALEX

The second time Orson saved Alex by shifting into a bear was no less shocking and surprising than the first time. His clothing exploded off him as he burst into bear form. The last intact glass in the truck shattered and the whole thing turned into a fiery Roman candle, shrapnel and screaming metal flung in all directions.

If they had been sitting inside or standing closer, Alex shuddered to think what might have happened. She was grateful that the contents of the back of the truck had been thrown clear so she had to go searching for them. She was even more grateful that Orson hadn't been sheltering in it.

Orson's furry body was a literal bear hug, his thick arms wrapping around her as flaming truck parts fell around them.

When he finally let go, almost nothing was left of the vehicle. If Alex had any lingering doubts about being targets, they were gone now. Someone at Snafu River—Grizzly Protection Services!—could have done this with the missing detonator. It would look like a simple accident gone terribly wrong...and damn the collateral. Were they after her? Orson? This would have taken care of both of them.

Orson shrank back to his human shape. "I'm not going to get another pair of pants," he said in dismay, looking at the shattered, burning wreck.

"I thought your clothing magically went with you," Alex said, hating how shaky her

voice sounded.

“It’s like potty training,” Orson said sheepishly. “You learn to do it as a kid, but sometimes shock and stress make you forget. It’s the shifter equivalent of pissing yourself in fear.”

Alex had to laugh despite the gravity of their situation, eyeing his naked form with adrenaline-streaked appreciation. “There’s another pair of rain pants in the emergency kit. I’m invested in protecting some of those parts from mosquitoes.”

She got him decent, though the pants were several sizes too small, and gave him her raincoat since she at least had a long-sleeved T-shirt. She fingered a gash she found in it, sliced by broken glass. “Someone at the security company did this,” she said grimly. “Someone who wanted one or both of us out of the way.”

The protective gleam in Orson’s eyes raised an unexpected heat in her. “I will find them,” he said. “I will find them and make them sorry.”

Their phones had been in the truck, but there was no cell signal here, anyway. Alex wouldn’t be able to contact the office until they got to Deadhorse. She squinted into the rain, turning every irate employee they had over in her head. “I can’t figure out who would do this,” she said, frustrated and betrayed. “I thought that my people were solid. What would getting us out of the picture gain anyone?”

“Someone you fired? A rival business?” Orson didn’t have suggestions Alex hadn’t already considered.

“Possibly, but would they have this kind of technology? And inside information about where we would be? It’s not like they could use Find My Phone to track us to Coldfoot, and a tail would have been stunningly obvious on the deserted road when we’re stopping like tourists every ten miles. That delay was set by someone who

knew our habits and could guess when we'd be vulnerable."

"Then who would benefit from us being out of the way?" Orson asked. "My brothers would still have ownership of the company, and I wasn't there long enough for any personal grudges. What would have happened with you out of the way? Who could be promoted? That tech guy? The brute with the 'stache? Sandra?"

"Telly doesn't want that kind of authority," Alex said thoughtfully. "John has a rap sheet and a family he wouldn't risk."

"Sandra?" Orson asked again.

Alex didn't even want to consider it, but now that she was...Sandra knew exactly where they would be and when. She obviously disagreed with some of Alex's business choices, and she had been agitating for a promotion she didn't qualify for in the slightest. She hadn't been the tiniest bit concerned about the missing detonator, actively dismissing Alex's worries.

Did Sandra resent the fact that Alex had never given her special treatment? Was she angry that Alex had been the one to salvage the company and win awards? With Alex and Orson out of the way, she could probably get a management position under one of Orson's brothers who didn't know better and fire the people she disagreed with. It would ruin the business, but Alex wondered how much she actually cared about that.

Even her relationship advice was suspect now. Had she been trying to get Alex canned so she could step up? And when Alex told her that she and Orson had worked out an equitable business agreement, had she decided to take more drastic and permanent action?

"I don't want to believe it," Alex said, shaking her head. Her ankle hurt wickedly and her head was pounding, but neither hurt as much as her heart. "I thought she was my

friend.”

But she’d never been good with friends. Maybe it was all a terrible misjudgment on her part.

“Don’t assume the worst,” Orson said, holding her tighter. “We’ll find proof before we go around accusing anyone.” His mismatched and poorly fitting rain suit rustled around her. “Is that a truck coming?”

An orange pickup was starting up the hill, a construction work crew light on the top of its cab.

As they watched it grow in size, a semi hurtled down the hill, honking helpfully as it passed. The big rig would have no more luck stopping on the way down and blocking the road than it would going up, but Alex thought it was honking to encourage them.

The orange truck finally got to them, and a big, bearded driver got out and boggled at the smoking wreck of their truck. “Are you guys okay?”

“Some bruises and scrapes,” Alex said, not offering to explain why Orson was barefoot and wearing nothing but rain gear or how either of them had survived. The cab of his truck was warm, and they squeezed into the front bench seat with Alex in the middle.

But she wasn’t okay at all.

ORSON

Orson could tell Alex was more shaken than she wanted to admit and he squeezed her hand. He held up her part of the conversation when she sank into silence. Had she hit her head? If he hadn't been able to protect her...

"We'll have cellphone coverage in a few miles," the driver said. "Do you need medical attention?"

"We're fine," Orson promised. "We just need some warm clothes and food."

He produced some energy bars, and Orson prodded Alex to eat hers.

As they wound down the mountains, they came out on flat, open land. As promised, there wasn't a tree in sight and the pipeline was in clear view across the tundra, winding along the road further north.

Deadhorse was a definite step up from Coldfoot when they finally got there. It was a little town that was a cluster of very simple buildings topping out at four stories laid in a careful grid next to a large airfield. Orson was surprised by how many lakes there were, and how industrial everything was. He had built up a concept in his head of snowy cabins and forests, but it was more like Soviet-era bloc housing on a wind-scrubbed plains.

There was, however... "Is that snow?!"

“The snow dumps often don’t melt out until July,” the driver explained as they drove past dirty piles of white.

“I should call Sandra,” Alex said when they finally arrived at their hotel, past the gate to Prudhoe Bay, which was the company town for the oilfield itself.

That was what was bothering her. She wasn’t just rattled from the crash, she was devastated that Sandra might have betrayed her and tried to kill her.

Orson still had her hand and had no desire to let it go. “Don’t call her yet,” he advised. “Let’s think about what we want to do. In fact, let’s put this on my personal card so she doesn’t see the expense on the business account.”

The hotel was surprisingly nice, very modern, and provided all amenities. Did people often arrive with no luggage or clothing? The desk attendant was nothing but professional.

There was only one thing Orson could think of doing with no luggage or clothing, and now that the danger had passed, he was on fire. He wanted to remind Alex of what she meant to him, and being so close to losing her made everything keener.

They had two rooms, but she didn’t hesitate to drag Orson into hers, kicking the door shut behind them as she peeled him out of the undersized rain gear.

Orson tore her shirt getting it off of her, growling in need and desire. She wasn’t afraid, growling back in a way that sent shivers down his back.

Part of him knew that this was a natural response to nearly dying, but the rest of him just wanted her. She was his destiny . His gorgeous, glorious, strong, sexy partner, and every part of her he uncovered was perfect.

They stank of smoke, oil, and sweat, but she was still beautiful. Her skin was hot under his fingers as he lay her down on the bed and she wrapped her legs around him to draw him in. He was as hard as he'd ever been in his life and desperate for the heat and heart of her. Deeper and faster he thrust into her, until she was crying out in release and Orson was clawing for control again.

He slowed and rode out her aftershocks, then rolled over to draw her on top of him, reveling in the swing of her petite breasts and the feeling of her straddling him.

“Alex...” he said gruffly. “Alex, my love...”

She said she loved him when she thought she would die, but it didn't mean as much as it did now when she bent to kiss him and whisper, “I love you.”

He held her close, stroking deeper inside her as he reveled in her words and the feeling of her skin all along his. His release was not an explosion, but a submission as he gave all of himself to all of her and they were one at last.

28

ALEX

Alex lay in a hazy afterglow of happiness, able to ignore the murder attempt for the moment. The bed was big enough for both of them to sprawl comfortably on the smooth cotton sheets. “How’s your rib?” she asked, tracing Orson’s muscled side.

“Mostly healed.”

“Must be nice to have super-powered healing.”

“Are you jealous?” Orson teased, catching her hand and kissing it.

“A little,” Alex admitted. “I’m going to be more jealous next week when I’m still limping and you’re all magically fixed up.”

“I’ll carry you everywhere,” Orson offered. “Piggyback, if you want!”

“That will make a great impression in the office,” she chuckled. Then she sobered. She still wasn’t sure what to do about Sandra.

As if he guessed her thoughts, Orson kissed her knuckles. “Do you still think it might have been Sandra?”

“I don’t have any other suspects,” Alex said quietly. “And...”

“Tell me.” Orson might be a ham, but he had an air of authority that Alex didn’t think he even recognized. He had this sexy, sure-handed confidence when he wasn’t trying to be macho-aggressive that suited her perfectly.

“I wonder, looking back, if she hasn’t been trying to sabotage me all along. I always thought I wasn’t good at making friends, but she’s the one who told me that people didn’t like me. She pushed me to act in ways that were unnatural and, thinking about it now, would only have made things worse. I...trusted her, but now I’m not sure why. She’s not very nice, or bright, and I don’t think she’s a good person .”

“Why were you friends?” Orson wanted to know.

“She made me believe that she was the only friend I would ever have.”

“I think you have more friends than you know,” Orson said gravely. “You said yourself that your people would quit if you got fired. You don’t do that for a boss. You do that for a friend.”

Alex blinked at Orson, surprised by his wisdom.

“Anyway, I’ll be your friend,” he said with a cheeky grin. “Maybe a friend with benefits?”

She punched him gently in the shoulder, but her traitor hand turned it into a caress because she could not get enough of his gorgeous arms. “Definitely with benefits.”

A lingering kiss might have turned into something more, but there were things that needed to be done. “So, how do we prove any of this? Can we catch her in a lie? Trap her when she tries again?”

Orson’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “How good is your acting?”

“Depends on the role,” Alex said. “What do you have in mind?”

“It won’t require giggling,” Orson said, and the devilish smile he gave her lit her up inside.

ORSON

The journey south to Anchorage took a leisurely flight of less than two hours, compared to a grueling multi-day drive north. Orson was stunned to find that the city looked incredibly urban compared to the wilderness they had traveled through, but also familiar .

It felt like coming home .

He still let Alex drive because, even if it felt like home, he had no idea where anything was. Driving the wrong way on one of the many one-way streets would probably be a terrible idea.

“Should I confront her alone?” Alex asked as she pulled up in front of the office. Orson could tell it wasn’t really a question for him; she was wondering aloud.

“I’m not letting you face a woman who might have tried to kill us without backup,” Orson said firmly. “You might know six ways to break her knees, but I’m a bear and you’re my mate. Also, I want to see her face when she realizes we’re alive.”

She flashed him one of her rare, real smiles. He loved coaxing those from her.

“All you have to do is bluff,” Orson told her. “She doesn’t know that we don’t know for sure that it was her.”

“We don’t know for sure that it was,” Alex said grimly.

“That’s the bluff part!”

They hadn’t made any contact with Sandra or the office employees, or reported the accident officially yet. Surprise was often a powerful advantage.

And it was worth it to see Sandra stand up in alarm when they strolled casually in. All the acting practice from Orson’s first few days paid off, and he kept a cool scowl on his face even though he was secretly delighted by her obvious affront. It hadn’t been such a wild guess.

But Sandra was a good actress too, and she quickly laughed and said, “You never called from Deadhorse! I was beginning to wonder!”

“Did you wonder if we’d run off the road with failed brakes?” Alex suggested dangerously.

Orson caught a whiff of Sandra’s fear, but she did a good job covering it with a smile. “I mean, if you want to be morbid, I guess.”

“We had a nice chat with your friend,” Alex said, casting her bait as she put the tool that had been dropped at Orson’s feet on the counter. “He told us everything.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sandra said, but her skin went pale, and the scent of her fear sharpened.

“He took a plea bargain and gave you up,” Alex said. “We have all the evidence we need.”

Sandra’s eyes flickered doubtfully to the phone on her desk. “He just told me—” She

caught herself and snapped her mouth shut. “I want a lawyer.”

It wasn’t enough to convict her, Orson knew. Not yet, it wasn’t.

He leaned over the high counter and could still look down on her standing on the other side. He raised his lips in a threatening snarl. “There might not be enough left of you for a lawyer.”

Sandra looked at Alex, who only regarded her without pity. “Why would you do it, Sandra? What did I ever do to you?”

Orson saw the moment Sandra broke, a wave of anger over her face. “What did you do?” she snapped at Alex. “You took all the glory, all the prestige. It was your face in the paper, your name on the awards. I should have been a partner, and you kept me working as a secretary!” She turned her fury on Orson. “And you, waltzing in with all the privilege and power like you owned the place!”

“I do own the place.” Orson shrugged.

“You were well-paid,” Alex said firmly. “I gave you yearly raises and you had generous benefits and easy hours.”

“But you never promoted me!” Sandra shouted, well and truly past caution now. “I should have had your office and your easy life!”

“Easy life?” Alex protested. “You think I had an easy life working sixty hours a week, on call at every moment, doing most of your work for you while I handled everything else, too? You didn’t deserve a promotion.”

“And you deserved to die!”

Everyone in the office froze, including the guards who had come in from the back at the sound of the commotion.

Even if they didn't get the office security tape, now they had witnesses.

Sandra realized it at the same time Orson and Alex did, and she gave a cry and dove for a desk drawer. A gun flashed in her hand, but Orson was over the counter before the guards could even move, knocking it away from her and wrestling her down.

"Don't hurt her," Alex commanded dispassionately.

Orson let the guards restrain Sandra as Alex called the police, taking professional charge of the situation with respectable calm.

It wasn't until the police had taken their full statements, downloaded the camera footage, marched Sandra away for processing, and they were completely alone in Orson's office that Alex let herself relax. Orson took her into his arms and felt her sag against him.

"I didn't want it to be true," she confessed into his chest.

"Who would? You thought she was your friend, and she was betraying you at every turn. I'm so sorry, Alex. I'm so sorry."

Orson rocked her comfortingly, and she held him tight.

She was his strong, gorgeous, capable mate, and he treasured the rare moments that she turned to him for support beyond any dragon's hoard.

"We still haven't decided what my job here will be," Orson reminded her. "I'm available for...hm...special services, and I noticed that this office door has a lock."

To his delight, she laughed and let him go. “Well,” she reminded me, “I have an opening for a secretary now.”

ALEX

“There’s no such thing as not having a white Christmas here, is there?”

Alex had never seen anyone who loved snow as much as Orson. He was still as enthused about it in December as he’d been in September when the first flakes started falling. He stood at their front bay window, looking out over the snow-muffled trees. Usually the view extended to the distant ocean, but between the late morning twilight and the blowing snow, they were isolated in a cloud of muted blue.

“Wasn’t there snow in Colorado?”

“It wasn’t Alaskan snow,” Orson protested. “Alaska does everything better.”

Alex wryly wondered if the glamor would wear out by February or March, when winter seemed to drag on forever and summer was a distant, impossible dream. She couldn’t wait to see him experience an Anchorage spring, with everything bursting into green; she was sure that he would be as exuberant about that as he was about everything else.

If someone had told her six months earlier that she would be here, this happy, engaged to a man who could turn into a bear, she would have laughed at them.

Now she laughed all the time, not the fake little laugh that Sandra had encouraged, but a sound from deep in her belly.

She put her hand over her belly in wonder.

If someone had told her six months ago that an unplanned pregnancy would fill her with anything but existential dread, she would have punched them.

“Can we do presents yet?” Orson begged, turning away from the window as Alex quickly moved her hand. “You haven’t let me into the garage in two days and it’s killing me.”

“Your gift was a little too big to wrap,” she said, smiling at him.

“Is it a car?” Orson guessed.

“It’s not a car,” she teased. “You already have a perfectly good car.”

“Is it sex on top of my car? Because that sounds super fun to unwrap!” Orson swept her up in his big arms and kissed her, which always made it hard to think clearly.

She chuckled. “It’s...related to sex. Sort of. Not really. I mean, technically...”

“Aaaaah!” Orson wailed. “I’m dying to know.”

Alex took pity on him. “C’mon, let’s go see what Santa left you.”

“I was very good this year,” Orson promised. “Super good. I didn’t light anything on fire that wasn’t supposed to be.”

“Close your eyes,” Alex commanded, and he obeyed.

She led him out into the garage. “Merry Christmas,” she said, after letting him suffer a moment while she drank in his handsome face.

Orson opened his eyes. “Oh, a bike! That’s a nice bike. Love the color. Are those

winter tires? Wait...why is there a child seat on the back of it?"

"It will be a little while before they're big enough for a ten-speed of their own," Alex explained, watching Orson's face carefully.

His eyes went wide and cautious. "Do you mean...? But you...?"

"No birth control is one hundred percent," she said pragmatically.

"And are you okay with it? I mean...wow. Wow!" A dozen expressions of pride and excitement crossed his face. "Hot damn!"

"I'm okay with it," Alex said confidently. "I'm more than okay with it." And she was. She was as excited as Orson was, if that was even possible, and it had been so hard to keep the secret this week, burying half a dozen tests in the bathroom trash.

He gave a wild whoop and tackled her with a laughing hug as he lifted her off her feet and twirled her around. "I'm going to be a dad!" he hollered, loud enough that their distant neighbors could probably hear it over the wind.

After he'd twirled her, he set her down on her feet and kissed her passionately. When they drew apart for air, he declared, "I love you, Alex Vex, and you are going to be the sexiest mom in the entire universe. Oh, and I'm afraid I have to tender my notice at work so I can stay home with our kids, which is fine because my boss is super grumpy. She's a total hard-ass, you wouldn't even believe. And we'll have to get married right away so I can still carry you over the threshold." He demonstrated, sweeping her up into his arms, and she laughed and clung to his neck as he carried her back into the house and up the stairs.

"What about my presents?" Alex protested as they passed the sparkling tree.

“I got you a fancy tablet and some lacy underwear,” Orson said dismissively. “You can open them later. No, wait, I want to peel you out of those.” He pivoted back down the stairs and nearly dropped her into pile of presents as he tried to juggle her and pick up a box at the same time.

“Put me down, you oaf,” Alex said, not really struggling. “I can walk upstairs all by myself.”

“You might not be able to when I’m done with you,” Orson cautioned.

“Is that a threat or a promise?” she wanted to know, nuzzling his short beard.

“You tell me,” Orson growled.

They didn’t get the present open or make it to the bedroom, and Alex plucked tinsel from her hair later as they poured coffee in the kitchen.

“I can’t wait,” Orson said, standing close enough that she could feel the heat from his big nude body. “I mean, pregnant sex is definitely super hot, but I can’t wait to say hello to our little cub.”

That stilled Alex. “Will they be a shifter like you?”

“It does tend to be genetically dominant,” Orson said proudly.

Alex took a bracing sip of coffee. The idea of little bear cubs running around the house didn’t scare her was much as it should. She liked that there was a world of wonder and magic secretly shrouded right beside the ordinary one. “What do people do who can’t stay home? Or single parents. Is there a day care for shifters ?”

“I don’t know,” Orson confessed. “Kids are terrible at keeping secrets. I can imagine

how hard it will be.”

“Well, luckily our cub will have a super-dad,” Alex said, sidling even closer. “Thanks for being willing to do it.”

“It’s a hard job, but someone’s got to do it.” He added suggestively, “I do a lot of hard jobs...”

“That’s what she said,” they chorused together.

* * *

SNEAK PREVIEW OF THE ROYAL DRAGONS OF ALASKA

Carina Andresen surged to her feet, sweeping her camp chair out from under her as a make-shift weapon.

Wolf! her brain hammered at her. Wolf! She was going to become an Alaska tourist statistic and get eaten by a wolf on her second week in the kingdom.

Logic slowly caught up with her panic.

The animal across the campfire from her was smaller and doggier than a wolf, and it was only a moment before Carina could get her breath and heartbeat back under control and recognize that it was well-groomed, shyly eyeing her sizzling hot dog, and wagging its tail.

Alaska probably had stray dogs, too; she wasn't that far from civilization.

"Hi there, sweetie," Carina said, her voice still unnaturally high as she put her chair back on its legs. "Does that smell good? Want a bit of hot dog?" Carina turned the hot dog in the flame and waggled it suggestively.

The non-edible dog sped up his tail and when Carina broke off a piece of the meat and dropped it beside her, he crept around the fire and slurped it eagerly up off the ground.

The second bite he took gently from her fingers, and by the second hot dog she dared to pet him.

Within about thirty minutes and five hot dogs, he was leaning on her and letting her scratch his ears and neck as he wagged his tail and groaned in delight.

“Oh, you’re just a dear,” Carina said. “I bet someone’s missing you.” He was a husky mix, Carina guessed; he was tall and strong, with a long, thick coat of dark gray fur and white feet. His ears were upright, and his tail was long and feathered. He didn’t have a collar, but he was clearly friendly. “You want some water?”

The dog licked his lips as if he had understood, and Carina carefully stood so she didn’t frighten him.

But he seemed to be past any shyness now, and he followed Carina to her van trustingly, tail waving happily. He drank the offered water from a frying pan, and then tried to give Carina a kiss dripping with slobber.

“You probably already have a name,” Carina said, laughingly trying to escape the wet tongue. “But I’m going to call you Shadow for now.” She had a grubby towel hanging from her clothesline and used it to dry off his face. They played a gentle game of tug-of-war, testing each other’s strength and manners.

Shadow seemed to approve of his new name and gave her a canine grin once she’d won the towel back from him.

“Alright, Shadow, let’s go collect some more firewood.”

The area was rich with downed wood to harvest, and with the assistance of a folding hand saw, Carina was able to find several heaping armloads of solid, dry wood, enough to keep a cheerful fire going for a few days if she was frugal. It was comforting to have Shadow around for the task; she wasn’t quite as nervous about the noises she heard, and he was a happy distraction from her own brain.

He frolicked with her, and found a stick three times his own length to drag around

possessively.

“So helpful!” Carina laughed at him, as he knocked over an empty pot and swiped her across the knees so that she nearly fell.

When she sat down beside the crackling fire in her low camp chair, Shadow abandoned his prize stick and crowded close to lay his head on her knee. Carina petted him absently.

“Someone’s looking for you, you big softy,” she said regretfully. She would have to try to reunite the dog with his owner but, for now, it was nice having a companion around the camp.

Of all the things she expected when she went running for the wilderness, she had never guessed that the silence would be the worst. She had been camping plenty, but it was always with someone. Since their parents had died, that someone was usually her sister, June, but sometimes it was a friend or a roommate. She was used to having someone to point out birds and animals to, someone to share chores with, stretch out tarps with. When it was just her, the spaces seemed vaster, the wind bit harder, and even the birds were less cheerful.

“You probably don’t care about the birds that would make my life list,” she told Shadow mournfully.

Shadow wagged his tail in a rustle of leaves.

She didn’t have her life list anymore to add to anyway. Everything had been left behind: her phone, her computer, her identity. Her entire life was on hold. She had the van to live in, some supplies and a small nest egg to start from, so she ought to be able to stay out of sight long enough to regroup and...she didn’t know what to do from here. Find a journalist willing to take her story and clear her name?

To fill the quiet, and to help ignore the ache in her chest, she read aloud from the brochure on Alaska that she had been given at the border station. She'd found it that evening while she was emptying the glovebox to take stock of supplies, and Shadow seemed as good a listener as any.

“Like many modern monarchies, Alaska has an elected council of officials who do most of the day to day rulings of this vast, rich land. The royal family is steeped in tradition and mystery, and holds many veto powers, as well as acting as ambassadors to other countries. Known as the Dragon King, the Alaskan sovereign is a reserved figure who rarely appears in public. Margaret, the Queen of Alaska, died twelve years ago, leaving behind six sons.” There was a photo, with boys ranging from about seven to maybe twenty-five. Two of the middle children were identical. One of the twins was wearing a hockey jersey and grinning, the other wore glasses and looked annoyed. The oldest—or at least the tallest—was frowning seriously at the others. The only blonde of the bunch was one of the middle boys, who was looking intently at the camera. The youngest looked painfully bored. They all had tongue-twisting names of more syllables than Carina wanted to try pronouncing.

Carina thought it was an interesting photo. The tension between the oldest two was palpable, and the they were all dressed surprisingly casually. She didn't follow royal gossip much beyond scanning headlines at grocery store checkouts, but Alaska never seemed to make waves; they were rarely involved in dramas and scandals.

Shadow raised his head and cocked his head at some imagined noise in the forest.

“That's a lot of siblings,” Carina observed, ruffling his ears. She felt so much safer having him beside her. “Just one sister was more than enough for me.” She didn't want to admit how much she missed that sister right now.

Shadow returned his head to her knee. “Alaska is a member of the Small Kingdoms Alliance, an exclusive collective of independent monarchies scattered throughout the world.”

Carina turned the brochure over. “There are hot springs about fifty miles north of Fairbanks! I hope to make it there.” Before she ran out of cash. It looked expensive. Maybe she could get work there...she’d heard that it wasn’t hard to find under-the-table jobs in this country.

Shadow suddenly leapt to his feet, barking at something crashing through the woods behind them and Carina nearly tipped over backwards in her camp chair trying to stand up.

She expected to find a moose, or possibly a bear, and she was already picking up the chair to use as a flimsy defense against a charging wild animal.

But it was only a man stepping out of the woods, in an official dark blue uniform emblazoned with the eight gold stars of Alaska.

For a moment, terror every bit as keen as the panic that had gripped her at the first sight of Shadow washed over her. They’d found her.

“You’re trespassing on royal land and I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” he said.

Then she realized with relief that it wasn’t a police officer. He was only a park ranger.

* * *

...or was he? Discover love and adventure in a wonderful alternate Alaska with camping and dogs and magic, reluctant royalty and relentless enemies! Pick up *The Dragon Prince of Alaska* today!