



SHIFTER
NEEDS A
NANNY

NANNY

for the

BEAR DADDY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MILLY TAIDEN

NANNY FOR THE BEAR DADDY

SHIFTER NEEDS A NANNY

BOOK 5

MILLY TAIDEN



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NANNY FOR THE BEAR DADDY

SHIFTER NEEDS A NANNY 5

*NEW YORK TIMES and USA TODAY BESTSELLING
AUTHOR*

MILLY TAIDEN

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Lyra Clemmons is desperate for a job, so she jumps at the opportunity when she sees an ad for a nanny. Finding her employer to be a hot, single dad with an adorable infant was an unexpected perk. **Of course, those hot glances he gives her have her wondering if there could be more between them.**

Timber Mahogany is the leader of the Montana Maul, a clan of bear shifters protecting what's theirs. But it's time for a rebellion when the antiquated bear council tells him he can't have his fated mate because she's a human. **There's no way he's giving up his curvy goddess.**

Lyra knows a time will come when the love of her life will bring freedom to all the bears secretly living with human mates. But will he have to sacrifice his life to get what he wants? **If the council has its way, both Lyra and Timber will be the prime examples of what happens when the law is disobeyed.**

—*For all baby lovers.*

Enjoy!

ONE



TIMBER

“Damn Mounties,” Timber grumbled to himself as he peered at the tracks, which were human footprints.

Timber stood on the invisible border between Montana and the southern part of Canada. He was surrounded by thick woods on one side and a monolithic mountain range a few miles from where he stood.

The Mounties weren't supposed to get this close to the American border unless they were standing at the official entrance to Canada. But they thought no one was watching around here.

Well, they were wrong.

Timber was here, and he was *always* watching.

And the next time one of them comes into my territory, they'll be sorry.

A cold finality enclosed Timber's thoughts. He would never hurt a human unprovoked, but he had to uphold the boundaries surrounding his property. Otherwise, the humans who wandered in would get hurt by things much worse than him.

The humans would never believe it, but Timber knew there were some things in these woods that could do more damage than bullets.

Timber was only keeping the balance because that was his job as a bear shifter and leader of the Montana Maul. They

were a group of bear shifters who lived in the territory that Timber and several other bears protected.

Timber resolved he would deal with the Mounties later if they made the same mistake twice. For now, he'd walk back to the cabin he had built at the base of the mountain range. But as he walked, he realized he was going to have a problem getting home.

Montana was going through the dregs of winter, and snow still lay thick on the ground. But soil erosion had occurred where the snow had melted, and this had caused a small landslide that now stood right in the middle of his pathway to home.

Timber growled under his breath as he took several large steps backward. Then he took a running leap and grabbed hold of a low-hanging branch of a nearby pine tree.

"Sorry," he grunted. Timber wasn't sure who had instilled the habit of apologizing to foliage in him, but he had been doing it since he was a child.

It had probably come from the mother he couldn't remember.

His muscles strained as he hung onto the branch, and he almost rolled his eyes as he looked at the drop beneath him. He'd never make it in human form, not even with the increased strength and speed that were melded to his DNA as a shifter.

Timber started the shift as soon as he let go of the branch. Hands and feet became claws. Dark fur sprouted from his skin. His teeth lengthened, sharpened, and hardened while his face became a muzzle.

Timber fell through the air, more bear than human, and hit the ground with a roll.

Getting to his feet, he heard a shriek ring through the air. A shriek filled with pain and agony. Angry crows took to the sky, disturbed by his shift and the sound.

Timber broke into a lumbering run and let the bear take over.

TIMBER LOOKED DOWN at the baby he had named Marigold.

His baby.

Then he looked at the grave several yards from the cabin where he had buried her mother, who had died in childbirth.

It was not recommended that shifters have children with bears who were not their mates. And the grave proved it.

A one-night stand with Serenity Ledbetter almost ten months ago had resulted in a pregnancy and her death. Shifter women weren't designed to carry the babies of men who weren't their mates.

And now Timber had a baby to take care of.

Such a fucking waste, he thought as he looked at the grave. *You didn't know she would die. This isn't your fault.*

Serenity hadn't planned any of this very well, but she had at least arrived with the basics that Marigold would require for her first few days of life. Timber had formula and diapers, the bare minimum. They wouldn't last much longer, but it was a start. And for that, he was grateful.

Marigold, who was nestled in the crook of his arm, started crying again.

"This is becoming a real trend with you, isn't it?" Timber told her, reluctant affection coloring his voice. She looked like her mother. And she looked a bit like him too.

But she also looked like a small sack of potatoes sometimes.

She looked up at him, still crying. He lumbered to the table where he had prepared a bottle. He fed Marigold while he sat at his desk.

After she had finished the meal and seemingly sated her hunger or thirst, Timber set her down to sleep on his bed. He

had been sleeping on the floor since her birth, too afraid that he would squash her in his sleep.

Then he went into the next room, which was his study. At his computer, he logged onto AmazingZon. The website that sold everything and anything.

The baby section overwhelmed him instantly. To be safe, he added two of everything to his cart and checked out.

“Five thousand dollars?” he murmured. Surely that number was wrong. But then he shrugged and continued with payment.

He hadn’t expected Marigold to be this expensive. But she was his daughter, and his heart bloomed at the sight of her.

Just then, a wailing cry came from the next room. Timber sighed.

“Daddy’s coming,” he hollered.

THE DELIVERY DRIVER arrived two days later with everything he’d bought for Marigold.

She was crying when the driver arrived, and Timber blinked through sleep-crusted eyes as he signed for the delivery.

“You okay, buddy?” There was genuine concern in the driver’s voice. When Timber looked up at him, the driver smiled slightly.

“How do I get a baby to sleep all night?”

The driver laughed heartily as he hauled the items out of the back of his truck. “Babies, they don’t sleep at night, brother. You need to invest in a good coffee machine and a nanny.”

TWO



LYRA

“She might be right, but there is no way in hell I’m ever admitting it,” Lyra said to herself as she closed her laptop.

She looked at her phone, which had been buzzing all morning. The messages were mostly from her mother, inevitably calling and texting to find out whether Lyra had gotten a job yet. Lyra had been ignoring the messages for days but wouldn’t be able to much longer.

She didn’t need to hear her mother admonish her again for getting a degree majoring in English and Classical Literature. Because it turned out her mother had been right. And that was not something Lyra ever wanted to admit.

Finding a job had been nearly impossible ever since leaving school. Though she had found work as a temp at a local law firm, that wasn’t exactly what Lyra wanted to do. The only jobs available to someone with her degree involved teaching, and Lyra couldn’t face the thought of being in a lecture hall all day.

Her phone buzzed again, and she finally got up to scroll through the messages.

Damn, Lyra thought as she looked at her friend Alex’s message. This particular one described the girth of her latest boyfriend’s ... member.

“Well, good for her,” Lyra declared as kindly and resolutely as she could. “She deserves a job that she loves and a boyfriend who can crack her back like a glowstick.”

But so do you, a stubborn voice spoke in the back of her mind.

The truth of the situation was that Lyra's temp job would be coming to an end soon. It was, after all, temporary. And when that ended, she'd have to move out of her apartment and in with her mother, giving up the last bit of freedom she had.

She wasn't sure what she'd do if she didn't find a job soon.

Lyra put the coffee pot on and scooped the last of her grounds into the filter just as a heavy thump sounded outside her front door. Her apartment had a view of the town, and her front door opened right onto the street. She left the coffee to do its thing, sighing as she walked to the front door.

Lyra couldn't shake the sense of melancholy that had settled over her in the last week. The slight depression at impending unemployment had left her feeling tired and unsatisfied with everything.

The thump she had heard from her front door was the newspaper thrown from the street. A newspaper she wasn't paying for. Apparently, the apartment's previous tenant was still paying five dollars for something they weren't reading.

Montana was facing the tail end of winter, and her skin prickled as she inhaled the cold, crisp breeze. The chilly air enhanced the fragrance of everything around her, and the scent of Montana's pine trees had never been this clear.

You could always look in the newspaper's help wanted ads, she said to herself sarcastically.

But frustration overwhelmed her, especially when she went back into the kitchen and discovered she had burned the coffee. She threw the newspaper open, knowing that she'd never find anything.

The Missoula newspapers were only ever good for reading through the personals section, where someone named Candy was corresponding with an ex-lover named Arnold. The ads between the two got steamier every week, and they were better than watching a soap opera.

But today, Lyra ignored the sleazy romance section ... although she would go back to read it later because she wanted to know if Arnold would ever grow a pair and ask Candy out.

You were right, she thought to herself. *Nothing good in here.*

Until she came across an ad that was so poorly written that it had to be a joke. But the more closely she read it, the more desperate it sounded.

Whoever had written it was in deep shit and needed help right away.

Looking for a nanny for my newborn daughter. Room and board availble. Will pay whatevr you ask. Pls.

Lyra almost burst into laughter as she read and reread the ad. There was a phone number attached, and after she put the kettle on for a cup of tea, she decided to call it.

A gruff voice answered the phone, and her breath was caught in her throat for a moment. Her stomach twisted with doubt as she realized that if she took this job, any hope of getting a job with her degree would vanish.

Then she looked at the stack of bills on her countertop.

“I’d like to interview for the nanny job.” She spoke clearly and confidently as a sudden wave of dizziness passed over her.

“When can you come?” The voice had softened. Lyra tried picturing the man the voice belonged to, but all she came up with was a grizzly, wild man who didn’t shave.

“As soon as you need me.”

“Fine. Tomorrow morning. I’ll send you the address.”

The man ended the call with a curt goodbye, and Lyra put her cell phone down as a sense of excitement welled in her.

Her phone buzzed twice. Two messages came through. One from the man, whose address was on the outskirts of town.

The other was from her mother inviting her to dinner.

LYRA ARRIVED for dinner at her mother's home with a bottle of wine and a block of stinky cheese.

She explained the job interview she had lined up with her mother, who shook her head with disappointment. But for once, Lyra didn't care. Things were finally looking up.

Outside, thunder rumbled and roiled across the sky. "These situations never work out, trust me," her mother warned. Lyra knew her mother, Karen, only wanted the best for her. "You'll get attached to the child. And him. And he'll end up marrying his secretary."

THREE



TIMBER

How can a baby have this much shit in her? Timber thought to himself as he tried to clean Marigold's bottom. He didn't want to say the words out loud because he didn't want her to start swearing at such a young age.

She's literally a baby. Besides, she's your kid. She's going to cuss.

He grinned reluctantly to himself, but the grin vanished as another stream of poop came out of the bottom he had just cleaned.

Timber wasn't sure how this was happening or why. He was feeding her when she was hungry and burping her properly afterward. How could she be pooping this much even after everything he was doing?

He cleaned her again and grabbed the diaper, unfolding it as quickly as he could. "Maybe I shouldn't have put the princess dress on you before I did this?" he asked Marigold miserably.

His daughter looked up at him with her large gray eyes before she inexplicably started wailing.

He had wanted to make a good impression on the woman who he was interviewing for the nanny job today. "I wanted you to look presentable, sweetheart," he tried cooing at her as he cleaned her again ... another burst of poop had come from her bottom.

But this time, instead of being a stream, it spurted everywhere. When Timber looked down, his shirt ... a new

shirt ... was streaked with baby shit.

“Oh, dear God.” He groaned and set about cleaning her again. Marigold had stopped crying and was looking up at him.

Timber didn't think his daughter could feel any emotions other than hunger, tiredness, and irritation. But right then, the only emotion in her eyes was trust.

His daughter was looking up at him like he was the center of her world ... which he was, if only because she had not met anyone else.

But it was a nice feeling, nonetheless.

Another spurt of poop burst from her, and this time, her dress was completely ruined. The burst of poo was followed by a fart so loud that the sound bounced off the walls of the cabin, making Timber jump.

He glared down at Marigold, then set to wiping her up again. Timber started coughing as the acrid fragrance of shit filled the cabin. And he was covered in it.

“There will never be enough showers to clean this off,” he groaned to himself as the doorbell rang. “Come in,” he yelled, not bothering to move as he wiped Marigold down, smearing more than cleaning. “Please, just come in.”

The woman who walked in was not what he had expected from a nanny. Her voice had sounded young over the phone, but he hadn't expected her to look the way she did. And Timber couldn't help but notice everything about her, even though he was elbow-deep in baby crap.

Lyra Clemmons was a vision of wavy, shiny blonde hair. She was a vision of plump curves ... he had never seen an ass that spectacular before.

The uncertain smile she had been wearing dropped from her face as she examined the situation Timber was in. Then she dumped her bag on the floor and walked briskly toward him, rolling up the sleeves of her shirt.

He was breathless and didn't say anything as she pushed him away and expertly cleaned up Marigold and put her in a diaper in one fluid motion. "You should always, always put a wipe over her little baby butt to protect your clothing," Lyra said sternly.

Timber nodded dumbly. His heart was racing. Inside him, the bear lifted its head hopeful before whining slightly.

"Baby poop is lethal. You have to protect yourself," she continued.

Lyra was the only person who had answered the ad he had placed in the *Missoula Daily* newspaper. And now that she was here moving with efficiency as she pulled the soiled dress off Marigold and sponged the baby poop off the infant's tiny body, Timber never wanted her to leave.

Marigold's arms were flailing as she tried to twist away from Lyra. But Lyra just continued moving as she found a clean baby onesie. She dressed Marigold in record time before she lifted the baby to her shoulder and started swaying.

"Why don't you clean yourself up?" Lyra said to Timber over her shoulder, her voice kind.

"Yeah," he replied, slightly dazed. "I should probably do that."

He trudged to the bathroom, where he stripped, cleaned off in the basin, and then hurried to his bedroom to find a clean shirt and pants.

When he was finally presentable, he went back to the living room, where Lyra had settled on the couch with Marigold. Instead of crying, which she was always doing, Marigold was fast asleep.

A feeling of immense peace washed over Timber as he stood in the doorway, watching the two of them. Then he looked out the open door at the slight hump of dirt in the distance where Serenity was buried under the great oak overlooking the lake and mountains.

He had a feeling her mother would approve of his decision.

Lyra saw him and sat forward. “I guess you want to interview me now. Sorry for just taking over.” She laughed nervously, her cheeks becoming rosy as she blushed. Her eyes were a bright, sparkling liquid green.

“Yes. Well.” Timber cleared his throat. “Tell me all about you.”

And so Lyra burst into speech, still patting Marigold on the back every few minutes.

She was a graduate with an English degree and had been unable to find a job. She had worked as a babysitter in high school. She was articulate, funny, and caring.

Marigold clearly had no problem with her.

And neither did Timber.

Lyra was it. He would have hired her without the interview, just from seeing how quickly she had moved to save him from being blasted with more baby poop.

But Timber was also nervous.

Because Lyra was also *it* for him. He resonated with her. And so did his bear.

And she was a human.

This wasn't supposed to be happening.

FOUR



LYRA

She was a little shocked when he offered her the job. Of course, she could tell he had been desperate. Any man would be if he was knee-deep in shit and couldn't get out.

But she also had nothing better to do besides accept his offer. Maybe it had been a bit of a joke, but she felt she should be there. It was clear that Timber needed help.

“Will you accept the offer?” Timber asked once more, rocking Marigold himself now. She was half asleep in his arms, her little fingers wrapped around the fabric of his shirt.

She couldn't help but smile at them. The man needed help, and she needed the money. The answer was clear, but she wanted to set down some rules.

“Yes, I accept the job, but I do have some requirements. And if those needs aren't met, I will not accept the job.” She was sure it sounded like she was being a bitch, but she had feelings about how children should be raised.

She didn't want to be the one staying up late at night watching after her. She didn't want to be the one stuck with Marigold at all hours of the day. She wanted to make sure that Timber knew she was the nanny and not the mother.

“Marigold is the child I am looking after. She is your daughter, and I firmly believe that she needs to see you just as much as she sees me. I have no problem watching after her and maybe handling her for some nights, but she is your sole responsibility.”

She watched Timber take her words in, giving her a nod. “Understood. I can accept that.”

She watched the way he rocked Marigold, and she swallowed. She bit her cheek, looking him over. She didn’t get a chance when she first arrived, but now she could.

His dark brown hair covered his ears, while a thick beard hid the lower half of his face, adding roughness to his complexion. But his eyes were as gentle as a lamb.

His gray shirt’s long sleeves were rolled up his forearms, and she noted a bear tattoo on his wrist. She thought about asking about it but decided to save it for another time.

He wore jeans and black socks. She thought of a woodworker and a GQ model mixed together, and that was how Timber looked.

She swallowed, needing to focus. She couldn’t spend her time drooling over him. “As long as we are clear that I am here to help with Marigold and not completely raise her, I accept the job.”

Timber thought about her words and nodded. “I don’t expect you to do everything. I am just new at this, and I have no idea what I am doing Lyra. I may need some guidance on this.”

She snorted. “Some?”

He smirked, and her insides twisted. He was certainly hot when he looked at her with those eyes. “Okay, maybe a lot.”

She inhaled and looked around the open space. They had only been in the living room, and she was blown away so far. The building had all-natural wood, and two large couches faced a large fireplace.

A kitchen sat to the right of her, with wood cabinets and a granite countertop. She loved the bay window that displayed the gorgeous mountains and lake.

“Shall I show you around?” Timber asked, still swaying as he held Marigold.

She nodded and followed after him. He walked down a hallway with four doors.

He showed her inside the bathroom and Marigold's room before he turned toward the last room.

Her mouth dropped as Timber opened a door next to her bed. "And this is your bathroom. You should have everything you need here."

She took in the large walk-in shower and double sink. Another large window looked out toward the lake.

After she picked her jaw up off the floor, they went back into the living room. She watched as Timber put Marigold into a small bassinet and seated himself on the couch.

"When would you like me to start?" she asked, grabbing her purse.

He looked up at her with tired eyes. "If you could start today, that would be great. I'll add an extra thousand as a bonus if you can."

She had nothing better to do. She had no other job lined up, so there was no reason she couldn't start that day.

"All right, but once more, I would like to be clear that I'm not here to raise Marigold. I'm here to watch after her."

He nodded. "Yes, and I thank you for that. I'm just so clueless. So, bear with me if I look like a dumbass half the time."

She smirked, unable to help herself. It was clear he needed help. The house was a mess, and the kitchen looked like a bomb had gone off.

He needed a hand, and she wondered why he didn't have any. She also wondered about the mother. Where was she?

"You don't have friends who could help you with any of this? Or at least drop by and give you a hand?"

He shook his head, running his hand through his hair. "No, babies aren't something any of them are used to either."

She took in his words and felt bad for him. While she has no idea how he came to be in this situation, he clearly was trying to make the best of it.

“I love my daughter, and I want the best for her. So, you’ll have to show me how to do lots of things.”

“I can do that.”

He looked at Marigold, and she watched as his expression changed. His eyes dropped, and his face seemed to pale slightly.

“I’m scared I’m going to screw up. Or that I’ll drop her, and she’s gonna end up hurt. I haven’t slept because I don’t know if she’s still breathing at night. They certainly didn’t state how your entire world flips upside down when you become a parent.”

A warm smile grew on her face. He felt how every other parent in the world felt. And she knew that he would make an amazing dad in the end.

Once he figured out how to do everything.

FIVE



TIMBER

Timber felt blessed to have Marigold. He was ready to be the father and role model she needed. He wanted to do everything right since she wouldn't have a mother in her life. He watched as she cooed in her sleep. He ached to hold her, feeling like he was being a bad father for putting her down.

He looked at Lyra, needing to focus his attention on something else. He studied her golden blond hair and light brown eyes. She had a calming aura around her. She was wearing a simple black dress, and her hair was pulled back in a loose bun. She held a confidence he liked.

He was grateful she took the job, and he understood her demands. He didn't want to be a father that wasn't around. But he needed a hand getting started on taking care of Marigold.

He relaxed on the couch and sighed. She seated herself in the chair, her eyes looking from Marigold to him.

He felt that pull to be near her. He wanted to hold her and never let her go. He wanted to do much more to her and quickly shook his head.

Think of something else. Talk about anything besides your need to be with her. You just met her.

“Do you know what the Montana Maul is? Have you heard of them?” He wondered if she'd ever heard about them and what was said concerning them.

Lyra laughed, nodding as she did. Her eyes twinkled as she found humor in his question.

“I have,” she said, her shoulders shaking. “I’ve heard they are just a bunch of roughed-up bears. I wouldn’t say I’ve heard much but little things here and there.”

He frowned, wondering what she had fully heard but decided to just continue with his point. He waved a hand at himself. “I’m the leader of the Montana Mauls. It’s my job to keep the northern part of Montana safe and protected. So, I will be gone from home often, just so you know.”

He watched her react, wondering if she would pick up on what he was saying. Few people knew about shifters, and he wanted to see if she was one of them.

He watched her eyebrow rise, almost like he was making a joke. So, it was possible she didn’t know what shifters were.

“I’m like a guide,” he continued. “Making sure that our kind stays safe. I manage the rest of the group and have to keep a check on everything that goes on in our parts.”

He waited to see if maybe she would say she knew what he was. And that he didn’t need to tiptoe around it. But she didn’t. She really had no idea.

He was hoping deep down she had known. He wouldn’t have to explain anything to her then.

“So, you’re a leader of a group?” she asked, tilting her head to the side.

He nodded. “I am.”

They both fell silent. It seemed she was waiting for him to say he was joking, but he wasn’t. He was being serious.

Marigold whimpered in her bassinet, and Lyra moved toward her. She lifted the babe into her arms and softly bounced her as she walked.

His heart twisted watching her. He wanted her more now than ever. He gripped his couch, trying to control himself. He inhaled slowly, remaining calm. The last thing he needed was to mess up this new relationship.

Lyra dropped her voice and looked at him, speaking in a teasing tone. “Leader of the Montana Mauls.”

He couldn't help but smirk at her, seeing she didn't believe him. He didn't know whether to correct her or let her believe he was joking.

She turned and looked at Marigold as she spoke. "Is your father a gruffly bear? Hmm. Have you seen him be a teddy bear? Does he protect teddy bears from danger?"

He watched as she held Marigold gently, talking to her in a soft, soothing voice. His heart warmed as her loving essence filled him. A part of him he didn't know was so empty suddenly overflowed with emotions.

But it was a bad idea to allow himself to be with her. A human and a bear shifter mating wasn't possible. He didn't think he'd ever heard of it, and it was against the rules.

Besides, he didn't think it was proper, even if it was a thing. He couldn't disturb the DNA that made a bear shifter.

I can't imagine myself having a child that couldn't shift. I wouldn't wish that on my own child, would I?

His eyes moved to Marigold. At least he had her, his daughter, who was a full bear shifter, no doubt about it.

While she came from a stupid decision and a night he just wanted to let loose, he was glad she was with him. She was a part of his life he would never give back.

He pushed himself off the couch and sighed. "Well, do you have any questions for me? About my job or what I'm expecting of you?"

Lyra laughed at him. "Just a question for you. As the leader, what do you keep an eye out for? What exactly? A person?"

He smirked, hearing she was still using her teasing tone. "Maybe it's bears?" he joked back. Well, he wasn't joking. He was being serious, but she wasn't. He decided just to go with it for now.

She moved around the couch toward the kitchen and started a baby bottle. He watched as she flowed through the space, knowing she would fit in well.

SIX



LYRA

Lyra thought that Timber had the appearance of what society used to categorize as a manly man, as in the ones who look like lumberjacks with dark scraggly beards you see on the side of a BBQ sauce bottle. Other than the beard, which was well-kept and neat, the man was a stereotype down to the grunts and groans and shoulders as wide as the Himalayan Mountains.

The days began to repeat themselves, but Lyra didn't find herself bored. Quite the contrary. Marigold was a sweet, energetic youngster who kept Lyra on her toes. But then there was Timber, who was there all day while she cared for his kin, stuffing himself inside his office where he kept the door shut like a hibernating grizzly.

He would then emerge during meal hours, scarfing down lazy meals until Lyra insisted they have dinner together. It was vital for Marigold to know her father rather than just some woman who took over the spot of both parents.

His sense of humor made her heart leap. Lyra was certainly quick to giggle, but Timber had such a way with his expressions and delivery that tickled her funny bone. He spoke so dryly, his face deadpan as if he had been practicing comedy for years.

During an evening when the air was crisp, they all sat at the dinner table talking about Lyra's time at college and, inevitably, about the strange position Timber had at this supposed Montana Maul. She thought it was some kind of *gentlemen's club* that he was pulling her leg about.

“So what exactly goes on during these ‘secret meetings’?” She straightened her slouching posture in her chair, which her mother would’ve appreciated.

Timber glanced up, his sight landing on her breasts, which were now propped up. A thrill raced through her from the desire shining in his eyes. Though that was not her intention, she was glad he noticed she was a woman and not just somebody off the street.

Lyra raised her brows at him, curling her lips inward to stifle a teasing grin.

“We investigate bear behavior in the area,” he said, that solemn look pinned to his expression. “Right now, we are investigating a bear hunter in the territory. We’ve managed to chase them across the Canadian border.”

Timber moved his attention back to his plate of sweet ginger chicken and rice that Lyra had cooked. She was having a hard time taking in the information in a serious way, so she nodded, stirring the food around on her own plate and tensing her lips so it was barely a slit.

“Uh-uh,” she grumbled.

He snapped his neck back up to her, the veins and skin on his neck going taunt. Lyra boldly met his eyes, so dark and cautionary.

She stirred with desire, pleading for him in her mind to show her what a bad girl she had been.

“Is that funny to you?”

Lyra couldn’t hold her mouth downward even if she wanted to. Her cheeks lifted like they were being pulled by steel cables, her chest beginning to heave up and down at the smallest lilt of frustration in his tone.

“Well, I just thought that it might be difficult to have to go across the border like that, chasing a hunter and all.”

Lyra, driven by sheer lust and a daring spirit, scooped up the last of her chicken rice and slid it into her mouth languidly.

She used her plump lips to glide over the fork, pulling it sensually with wide eyes that said, “Come get me.”

A part of her couldn't believe how she was behaving, usually being a complete professional and all, but the other part said *fuck it*. No man had ever set off the desire bells in her body as Timber did. She was going to make a move or regret it forever.

She leaned back in her chair as she chewed, regarding him with a soft, saucy glare. Timber held his fork in his hand, frozen still, his own chest rising and falling like the angry waves of the sea.

Then, in an uncharacteristic act, he tilted his head, the veins in his neck jolting out like thick straws. For a good long moment, Lyra forgot entirely that Marigold was there.

His voice went as low as a bass strum, as soothing as a smooth jazz solo.

“The way we cross doesn't require passports. They also never ask for one.”

Her sarcastic expression melted away like snow in the sun. She rubbed her palms against her thighs, unconsciously trying to express the carnal energy raging through her body like an electrical storm.

She still didn't know if he was joking, but the content of his words was nearly rendered meaningless. They were flirting, and her body was thirsty for the knowledge of where exactly it was all going to lead.

The words that fell out of her mouth next even she didn't quite understand.

“Do you have a secretary?”

SEVEN



TIMBER

Lyra had been toying with him.

He had no clue as to whether or not she was really starting to become aware of what he was referring to under the sexy teasing and poking fun at him. He was slowly trying to insert the idea into her mind that, yes, shifters were real, and he was one of them. In fact, he was the head of the Montana Maul, a collection of bear shifters who patrol the areas of Montana connecting to the Canadian border.

But the actual facts were starting to get lost and blurry, even to Timber himself. He stopped caring about what they were talking about but rather enjoyed the erotic undercurrents of the tone she used, the way her posture presented her voluptuous breasts nearly right up to his line of sight, the zest between her legs starting to spill and share its fragrance.

Lyra wore several V-neck tops, which flawlessly accentuated her generous bust. She usually tied her hair up in a ponytail, exposing her long, swan-like neck. Her golden hair caught in the dying light of evening, with shimmers of crimson and amber scattered through like morning dew.

He was going to lose his mind if he didn't get a taste of her, and he needed to get a taste right then and there.

Her question about the secretary pulled him from the void of excitement, seeming irrelevant and random.

“Do I have a secretary?” he repeated.

Lyra leaned forward on the table, her breasts sitting on it like it was the perfect shelf. He thought he could see a flicker

of the shade of the bra she was wearing in his peripheral vision. It was rude to stare, even if a woman was being so indirectly direct with her advances. But it was a lot like trying not to look directly into the striking spill of the luminous moon.

Coral. Her bra was coral.

“Yes,” she murmured.

Her bulbous flesh bobbed up and down, just begging for his baseball mitt size paw to wrap around and massage them.

“Why would I have a secretary?” he said, cocking a gentle eyebrow.

She shrugged, then slowly rose from the table. She lingered as she bent forward, those glowing orbs looking like their own flavorful meal.

Timber had to clear his throat to stifle a grunt.

“Oh, just something silly my mother said. She said not to get attached to the kid because then you might fall in love with your secretary and run off with her.”

Marigold was beginning to doze off, so Lyra scooped her up and laid her on her shoulder as Timber tried to compute what she had just said. Blood ran to his cock faster than to his brain.

“Umm” was all he could conjure.

Lyra, who looked like she had applied lipstick that was a similar shade as her bra, bit down into her lip and then gave him a frisky wink.

“I’m going to put her down. Give me a second.”

Lyra turned the corner of the kitchen and disappeared into the hallway. Timber ran his hands through his hair, trying to keep the beast of his desire at bay.

She was driving him crazy even when she did nothing but breathe. But what she was doing now was just cruel.

And it needed to be addressed.

He heard Lyra close the bedroom door of Marigold's room, then pad down to the kitchen. He stood at the edge of the wall near the entryway, wanting to catch her off guard.

And catch her off guard, he did.

"Why do you care if I fall for a secretary?" he growled ... the bear in him coming out ... as she had turned the corner, beguiled by the empty chair and table, then jolted once Timber had begun speaking. Her confident expression washed away, replaced by startled intrigue.

Timber advanced on her slowly, causing her to back away, not out of fear, but something else entirely. He clenched his fists as she moved to the kitchen counter, her eyes upturned to him and her chest protruding.

He tried to narrow in on her with a grave look that meant business, but he caught a whiff of her scent that ran beautifully up the curve of her cleavage and caressed his open nostrils. She must taste like vanilla and honeysuckle.

They had made it to the kitchen counter, and she pressed her back against it, the flat of her palms pushing down to give her plumage even more leverage. Timber pressed his knuckles into the marble of the counter, towering over her like a silverback gorilla.

She was no longer startled but thrilled. He could see in her shiny, parted lips and the bloom of gold in those adventurous eyes.

He could also smell it sweetly through her skin and hip-hugging jeans.

"I like I said," she muttered, swallowing to get a hold of herself. "It's something my mother said. Nothing too important."

Timber reached a hand up to her neck and cupped the side of it gently. She let out a gasp, airy and sensual, that made his cock twitch.

"Would you be jealous of her?" he grunted.

Lyra did not hesitate one second.

“Extremely,” she panted.

Timber couldn't take it anymore. He smelled her sex, her skin, the array of perfumes and lotions and essence blended into some divine potion made personally for his ingestion.

He bent down to her, watched as her eyes fluttered to his mouth, then pushed his lips against hers.

“Mmm.”

Lyra moaned the second they touched, which sent Timber into a frenzy. He lifted her by the waist to sit on the countertop, making their heights more even. She immediately wrapped her legs around his waist like an octopus, pulling him into her wet glory, which had started leaking through her pants.

Timber tangled his fingers in her locks as they both grunted, the sensation of her bound tits about to send him off the deep end. He sucked on her lower lip and immediately traced his teeth down her supple nape, following the magnificent pathway that led to her bursting treasures.

“God, Timber,” she said, panting and moaning. “What took you so long?”

The anguished and fervid bear was ready to give her nipples a light nip for her remark, but then Marigold began to wail from the other room. He groaned, continuing down to the top of her breasts, ready to dive in deep and drown.

But Lyra was a compassionate professional. He hated that at that moment.

“Wait, something could be wrong,” she said, lightly pushing him away.

Timber wanted to rip off her jeans and fuck her until she saw God, but he couldn't while his daughter cried out in potential pain. So he reluctantly pulled himself away from her like peeling a Band-Aid in one fell swoop.

Lyra jumped off the counter, smirking and adjusting her shirt. They would have to get back to that later.

EIGHT



LYRA

Lyra's body was on fire the night Timber finally laid his hands on her. A frenzy had been unleashed like someone had flicked a switch, letting her lust loose all over him as he tossed her casually onto the kitchen counter. If it hadn't been for Marigold's desperate cries, Lyra would've let him take her right then and there.

Marigold had been in a particularly nasty mood that night, not calming down easily the way she normally would when Lyra came into the room to soothe her. She had checked her diaper, given her a back rub, and even rocked her in her arms as they gazed out the window at the black velvet night. Lyra checked the infant's temperature just in case, but it had been normal.

Finally, after hours of attempts at comfort, little Marigold dozed off in her arms. The adrenaline scorching through Lyra's body had evaporated, leaving her taut and spent. She carefully laid the child in her crib with extra effort to be stealthy.

It was only when she snuck out of the bedroom, leaving the door slightly ajar, that she remembered the carnal embrace they'd had in the kitchen.

The house was dead quiet. Lyra lifted her hand to her lips, running two fingers over their plumpness, trying to summon the memory of his taste. It felt so recent, yet, so long ago. Her entire attention had been on a disturbed Marigold, and then, standing there in the darkness, she remembered how badly she had wanted him.

She hadn't wanted anyone like that in a long time.

She sauntered down the hall and stopped at his door. She bit her lip, imagining him in bed, pleasing himself just to keep the naughty thoughts at bay. She wanted to be the thing that pleased him, that felt him tense and release deep inside her.

Lyra sighed through her teeth, then headed toward her bedroom. She was satisfied knowing that he wanted her, too, but some of her confidence had been drained taking care of Marigold. She would wait until the juices flowed naturally again.

Lyra fell asleep quickly and deeply, waking up rested just as the sun began to rise. That was Marigold's hour, too, and she had gone back to the placid, dreamy little girl Lyra had known and loved before.

Lyra went about her usual routine, getting Marigold changed and dressed for the day, feeding her breakfast while she made her own, and considered what they would do together to bond even further. But lingering on Lyra's mind that morning was Timber and his weird bear obsession.

She had been willing to accept it as a strange, flirty image, but they had gone past the stage of flirting. He was a thick hulk of a man who had likely been compared to a bear several times. Thus the whole Grizzly Adams association. She got the picture, but why was he so adamant about it, especially when it came to what he did for a living?

Once Marigold was finished eating and ready to move around, Lyra set her on the living room rug to play as she cleaned up the room. When wiping down the coffee table, she picked up Timber's iPad, and the screen popped on.

She wasn't a nosy person, but his email app was open with a half-typed message on the screen. Her eyes bulged as she read the names, none of which did anything to settle her curiosity about his "group."

"Wayne Burlington ... BS Canada ... Southern Furs ... Minne Claws ... BS?"

Marigold was gnawing on her finger, looking around passively. Her eyes had begun to droop already with morning fatigue. Lyra felt a wash of guilt, then set the pad back on the table, screen untouched.

Later in the evening, Timber returned, looking exhausted. Lyra sat by the fireplace reading, though she could barely absorb the words she had been reading. She was ruminating about the names on the tablet.

“Evening,” she said, looking over the book’s pages.

“Evening,” Timber said with a scowl.

Lyra’s heart was beating like a drum in her chest, watching him remove his obscenely large jacket and the strain over his shirt as he hung it in the closet with his back to her.

“How was your day?” she said, voice surprisingly mousey.

“Long,” he snarled. “Ran all the way to Canada and back. I’m running on empty.”

Lyra blinked heavily, realizing what she had just heard him say. He kicked off his boots, and she closed the book on her lap.

“Drove, you mean. You mean you *drove* to Canada and back.”

Timber wasn’t in a playful mood, confined to scowling and already stomping down the hallway with a thick air of irritation.

“No, I ran. Barefoot. Now I need to hibernate for a week.”

He trampled down the hallway and went into the bedroom, shutting the door loud enough to potentially wake a sleeping Marigold. Lyra cringed and waited, but there was nothing.

She left the book on the couch as she stood, running her hands through her hair and leaving them to settle on the back of her neck. She had heard what he’d said, twice. And he wasn’t saying it to tease her. He was dead serious.

But then there was the burning attraction. She could either go to bed, slide her hand down between her legs, and summon

a vision of his touch, or she could have the real thing.

Desire pulsed through her loins like a beating heart. She looked at herself in the mirror over the fireplace, catching her own bedroom eyes and groaning.

She had brought a sexy little slip with her from home. Why? She hadn't known. One of those ... *maybe I'll need it, but I doubt it* situations. But there she was, in the home of a bear-like man whose body she needed to destroy her own.

Lyra would let him rest for now.

NINE



TIMBER

Timber could barely recall what he had said to Lyra before his head hit the pillow. His feet ached from the long chase to the border and then back again. Despite its strong shifter status, his body craved rest as much as it craved the very thing that had caused such a stir inside his normally settled belly.

He thought he had been dreaming when she first walked in. He had been in bed for what felt like forever, his mind and consciousness encased in a warm blanket of darkness. His eyes fluttered open, awakened by the soft closing of his bedroom door.

“I hope I didn’t wake you.”

Lyra. Her voice, as gentle as a butterfly’s wing, soared to him in the black. He squinted, slowly adjusting to the curvy, voluptuous outline that stood next to the bed. She was floating like a siren in the seas, beckoning him with her wares.

“Hmm, not at all,” he murmured. “Are you all right?”

Lyra chuckled, the song a sweet melody. Her outline began to sharpen as his eyes adjusted to the dimness; she was barely wearing anything, merely a thin silk slip.

Timber nearly lunged at her when he realized he could see her breasts through the gown, nipples erect, pink, angular, and delicious.

She had her hair down, set free from its usual tight bindings. It was longer than he suspected, flowing over the tops of her unencumbered breasts. Her fingers were long and

slender, her waistline and hips in the shape of a vase. She was robust like Aphrodite, waiting for him on a cloud.

Lyra said nothing as she came to him, sitting on the side of the bed. Her hand crawled toward him, resting it against his wrist.

“Marigold is asleep,” she whispered. “when I came in here, I wanted to make sure to ask you a vital question.”

His cock rose to attention beneath the covers. He slept naked, so it pushed up against the comforter that covered him. It was titillating, knowing there was but a single boundary left between their completely naked bodies.

He focused on her, her dazzling eyes looking over the seductive tilts of her eyelids.

“Ask me,” he murmured.

She hesitated for a moment, then her voice returned to its husky, jazz tongue lilt.

“Do you like me?”

Timber chuckled. As he did, he ripped the comforter off of his body, exposing his stone-hard erection to the woman he had hired to take care of his child.

Her eyes widened into big, sparkly saucers, scanning him with bated breath. Her mouth parted as he reached a hand up to her body, slowly gliding past her breasts and settling softly against her throat. He used one large thumb to rub sensually over her lips, which she gladly opened for him.

Timber was going to burst out of his skin.

“I will gladly show you how much I like you,” he growled.

Timber then pulled her on top of him, and their bodies finally pressed against one another, sparking a magic he had never experienced. He felt the soaking wetness of her pussy sliding up and down the length of his cock, adoring the fact that she had walked into his room without any panties on. He helped her rip off her slip in a feral frenzy, tossing it over her head and onto the floor.

Finally, she leaned forward on him, pressing her breasts against his chest as they made out. Timber was frantic, wanting to drink in every inch of the incredible creature. His mouth explored hers as she moaned gutturally, his hands wrapped around the plumpness of her ass as her pussy teased his hardness. He raked the supple skin of her nape, finally arriving at the succulent breasts he had been yearning for since the second they'd met.

He slipped one nipple into his mouth and sucked reverently. It was clear she was sensitive because she immediately squirmed like a beast in heat. She ran her pussy down the length of his shaft, then, with an easy flow of her body, guided him inside her.

“Oh, Lyra,” he grunted into her breasts.

Her eyes rolled back as she rode him, his mouth moving between her deliciously responsive tits. They were as large as melons he'd seen in fruit markets, full and natural in their sensation and form. Lyra bounced up and down on him, his cock throbbing and ready to burst like a comet across the clear black sky.

“Fuck, Timber,” she moaned. “I'm going to come already.”

Timber lifted his hips to meet her, thrusting inside her with a mischievous look as he gnawed rabidly on her tits. She cried out his name, becoming intensely uncoiled by his cock, his mouth, and his intentions.

He watched her unfold for him like a flower. He felt the beautiful clench of her pussy around his cock before her warm juices began to flow.

Timber expertly pulled her from his cock to sit on his face as she panted and muttered. Her honey sweetness coated his beard as she released herself two more times, spilling into his open and welcoming mouth.

She was barely able to speak when he gently laid her back on the bed, crawled between her legs, and made slow and tender love to her. She locked her ankles around his waist and

bored her fingers into his hair as he finally climaxed, a shocking thirty seconds of physical release.

The two lovers lay together, panting and moaning each other's names like a poem. Timber stayed between her legs, resting his head against her bulbous breasts, engulfing himself in her enticing scent.

As he fell into another dreamless slumber, Timber knew without a shadow of a doubt this woman was his mate.

TEN



LYRA

Lyra was walking on cloud nine. She felt full of energy the next morning and had a skip in her step. She was eager to get going and start the day.

She had woken up still curled in Timber's arms, and she felt like a dream. After making amazing love, they fell asleep together. It was the type of relationship she felt that only lucky people had, and she got it. She smiled, looking at him while he slept.

The sound of Marigold crying boomed through the baby monitor. Timber didn't even budge in his sleep. She slipped out of his grasp and hurried out the door, shutting it as she went.

She tied a robe around herself as she slipped into Marigold's room. She lay in her crib, crying up a storm. Lyra leaned over Mari, giving her a smile.

"Good morning, sweet girl. I'm sorry, did I sleep in? Are you hungry?"

She pulled her out of the crib and rocked her. Marigold dropped her cry to a whimper.

"I'll make you a bottle," she said as she turned, heading down the hallway. She walked into the kitchen, pulled a bottle from the fridge, and warmed it.

Looking outside, she rocked the child. It was starting to rain, and she felt like a cup of coffee. She looked over her shoulder toward Timber's bedroom door. She wondered if he would be there awhile. They had been up pretty late.

She fed Marigold and made herself breakfast after having her coffee. She spent most of the afternoon watching Marigold. She changed her, fed her, and rocked her. She followed the routine to nap time.

She looked at Timber's closed door. She walked toward it and cracked it open, peering inside. Timber still slept soundly. She heard him softly snoring.

She wondered if he had caught a bug or maybe he wasn't a night person and stayed up too late. She wanted to wake him but thought better of it. She would just let him rest.

She went back to taking care of her charge. They had lunch, and then before she knew it, she started dinner. When the meal was ready, she once more looked at Timber's bedroom door. She hadn't heard him get up or even use the restroom. It made her worry.

She put dinner away after eating and bathed Marigold. She put her to bed and once more checked in on Timber. She walked toward his bed and placed her hand on his arm.

“Timber? You okay?”

He grunted and rolled over, eyes closed. She wet her lips and was about to say something but stopped. She sighed, letting him sleep instead. Apparently, he needed the rest.

She left the room and retreated to her own. She could wake him tomorrow.

The following morning, she watched Marigold and went through breakfast alone and into lunch. She watched the clock, her worry building leaps and bounds. She hoped he wasn't so sick that he couldn't call out for help.

Marigold was napping when she slipped back into Timber's bedroom. She tiptoed to his bed and gently shook his shoulder.

“Timber, are you not feeling okay? Should I call a doctor?”

He grunted and rolled away, pulling the sheets over him. She frowned.

“Don’t ignore my question, please. Are you feeling okay? Let me feel your head.”

She reached over to him, and his eyes snapped open. He glared at her, enraged.

“Stop!” he snapped.

He rolled farther from her to the other side of the bed. She stiffened, her throat tightening.

“Just take care of the baby and let me catch up on my sleep, would you? Can’t you just do that?” he growled at her.

She felt tears well, and she swallowed, stepping back. She wanted to say something but didn’t know what. She hurried out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

She tried not to let his words bother her because she would have probably reacted the same way if she wasn’t feeling good.

Right? You would have been grouchy.

She shook her head and decided to leave it be. She needed to focus on Marigold, and she heard the child waking from her nap.

On the third day, she was plain angry. She wasn’t worried anymore. All night, she replayed Timber’s words in her head. He wanted only her to watch Marigold.

But she told him right from the beginning she wasn’t Marigold’s mother. The baby had seen her more than her own father, and it pissed her off.

After putting her down for a nap, she stormed into Timber’s bedroom. She threw the door open, allowing it to slam against the wall. She marched up to his bed, feeling like steam spewed from her ears.

“Get up!” she yelled, pulling at his sheets.

Timber pulled his eyes open, looking at her. He sat slightly up, rubbing his eyes. “What time is it?”

She scowled at him. While he was nicer, she was still angry.

“It’s almost three, and you need to get out of bed and see your daughter.”

He groaned, rubbing at his forehead now. She crossed her arms.

“Are you sick? Do I need to call someone?”

He looked at her and shook his head. “No, I’m not sick.”

“Then there is no reason you haven’t gotten out of bed,” she barked, losing control over her frustration.

He yawned. “This happens. I’ll stay awake a lot, and then I’ll sleep for a few days. It often happens during hibernation time.”

She was sure her steam kicked up a notch. Her head was going to erupt. She was sick of him talking like he was a wild animal.

“Enough of that,” she yelled, throwing her hands into the air. “Stop insinuating that you are a bear, damn it. I’m tired of hearing it.”

ELEVEN



TIMBER

Lyra was yelling at him, and he was trying to wake up. It was hard, considering he was in a deep sleep and really didn't want to wake up.

“What the hell, Timber? I've been up with your child for *three* days, and you're going to give me some bullshit excuse as to why you're sleeping?”

He pinched at his nose, trying to push off his need to fall back asleep. If what she said was true, he needed to get up.

“Answer me,” Lyra growled, crossing her arms.

He looked at her, and his body responded. She wore short shorts and a tank top that showed most of her skin. The shirt was hiked up, exposing half of her stomach. It stirred his insides.

His cock hardened at the sight of her. His eyes scraped over her curves and down her thighs. He wanted her badly.

She snapped her fingers, pulling his eyes back up, “What gives?” she said in a calmer tone.

He scratched his head and yawned once more. “I told you, I sleep a lot during certain times.”

She growled at him. “That isn't an answer. I want an honest answer.”

“Where is Marigold?” he asked, feeling himself fully waking.

“She’s having her afternoon nap, which you would have known if you had even tried to get out of bed.”

He tilted his head at her, seeing the frustration in her eyes. “I’m sorry. Sometimes I get tired and grumpy. Grumpy Bear is a fitting name for me.”

He watched her eyes narrow, not even smirking at his humorous comment. He frowned, seeing she was livid.

“Why are you sleeping so much? It’s been days, Timber. Days. And if you’re so damn tired, what do you even do? And don’t give me all that stupid bear bullshit talk.”

He dropped his shoulders and sighed. “I told you. I’m head of the Montana Mauls. I wasn’t lying about that.”

She gripped her hands into tight fists. Her lips pulled into a straight line, and she inhaled sharply.

“If you’re not going to be honest with me, then I’m not staying. I told you I wasn’t going to watch after your kid day in and day out. I’m the nanny, not the mother.”

She turned on her heel and marched toward the door. He quickly pulled himself out of bed and reached for her hand, stopping her.

“Stop!” Lyra yelled, but he didn’t.

“Just give me a second to explain,” he whispered, making her pause.

He knew she wouldn’t believe him unless she saw with her own eyes, so he turned them toward the door and walked her out to the backyard.

The grass was wet, and it smelled like it had recently rained. He turned toward her on the deck and took a few steps back.

“Now, you can’t say I didn’t warn you,” he said, watching her look at him confused.

He relaxed his muscles and allowed himself to shift into his bear form. His bones moved, and his muscles contracted. And then she screamed.

Lyra's eyes widened in shock, and her mouth dropped as an ear-piercing scream left her lips. She took a step back, landing halfway off the top stair of the deck.

He moved quickly, rushing to catch her. He grabbed her gently with his paw, falling with her. He shifted into his human form as they tumbled to the ground.

She pulled away, looking at him with large eyes. "You ... you were ..."

He nodded, knowing it was hard for anyone to process. "Yes, I am a shifter."

He pulled them both up and turned her toward the door. Inside, he grabbed some pants from the laundry room and slipped them on. He found her sitting on the couch, still holding that shocked expression.

He sat next to her, knowing she had questions. He waited, letting her process what had happened.

She ran her hands through her hair, blowing out a breath as she did. She looked at him. "You were being honest. This entire time you were telling me the truth."

He nodded. "It's hard for humans to take in. So, I don't blame you for thinking I was lying."

She wet her lips and swallowed. He watched her throat bob.

"And Marigold? She is ..."

He nodded. "Her mother, Serenity, and I hooked up a while back. We were both just trying to find some entertainment, and she got pregnant. She died after having Marigold."

Lyra gasped. "She died? What happen?"

"I don't know. I heard a scream and ran back to my house to find her with a just-birthed baby in her arms." He remembered her last words to him: *You take care of her*. Serenity had a few family members in the area, but she never liked them. Thus her final words made sense to him.

"You're both shifters?" Lyra asked.

He nodded again. “Yes, we both are bear shifters.”

“That explains the sleeping,” she whispered. “I’m sorry I yelled.”

“Don’t be,” he said, giving her a gentle smile. “You’re actually taking this better than most people.”

She softly laughed, rubbing her hands over her face. “Serenity was just a hookup? She wasn’t anyone special?”

He squirmed in his seat. Talking about Serenity was a touchy subject, but he needed to talk about it. “Shifters have mates, and to answer your question, no, she wasn’t mine. We both just wanted to have some fun and ended up creating Marigold.”

“So you didn’t love her?”

He shook his head. “No, I didn’t. But I cared about her. She was bearing my child, after all.”

She looked away, rubbing her hands together.

He swallowed, suddenly nervous. He had to tell her his feelings. They had slept together, and it was only fair that he be completely honest with her now. No more secrets.

“As bear shifters, we aren’t supposed to mate with humans. It’s strongly frowned upon.”

He watched her eyes snap back at him.

“But I have fallen in love with you, Lyra, and no one is going to tell me who I can or can’t be with.”

He watched a smile form on her lips and a twinkle in her eyes, and he knew she understood.

TWELVE



LYRA

Her heart was beating so fast and hard that it was becoming painful.

Lyra's mouth had gone dry, and she was sure that her eyes were wide with shock, though she couldn't quite feel them.

Maybe I'm having an out-of-body experience, she thought to herself. Because at that moment, she couldn't feel anything except the throbbing of her heart.

She couldn't hear the birds chirping or the breeze blowing. Only the thud, rush, and gush of blood in her ears.

She took a step back as Timber the bear looked at her, his mouth open and rugged face now fully covered with hair.

He really was a bear shifter. He hadn't been joking with her all this time.

Every insinuation had become true in mere seconds.

Lyra took another step back and then another and another until the bear lunged at her, and she felt herself falling. They landed on the ground, Timber back in his human body.

Timber helped her to her feet, staring into her eyes.

He must see something there. Something was deterring him from making another move.

Thoughts rippled through her mind, unbidden.

And at the same time, Lyra was remembering every legend about the woods and mountains of Missoula.

She was remembering every whispered conversation her mother, grandmother, and aunts had about the hidden depths of Montana and what went on in the wilderness.

Lyra had scoffed at the idea of shapeshifters and men who had two faces ... one animal and one human.

She had assumed they were just legends and myths or old wives' tales.

But it was all true. All of it.

She sucked in several shallow breaths as human Timber guided her back into the cabin, where she sat on the couch, too frazzled to think of anything else to do.

After a short conversation about what happened outside and Marigold's mother, the baby cried out from her crib.

She hurried into the room and lifted Marigold into her arms, and the little girl easily laid her head on her shoulder.

Lyra was careful with her, but she needed something to hold onto at that moment. The baby would have to do.

And then, more emotion rippled through her, almost violently.

Because Lyra realized that Marigold, little baby Marigold, was growling.

And she had been doing it ever since Lyra had stepped into Marigold and Timber's lives.

The sound lingered somewhere between a purr and a howl and came from deep within Marigold's chest.

She did it when she was upset, when she was hungry, and when she was happy.

Because she's a little bear shifter. She is just doing what feels natural to her.

Lyra pushed the thoughts away as she finally turned to face Timber.

"So," Lyra said. "What now? What do we do now?"

Timber took a hesitant step toward her.

Outside, the wind had picked up. Leaves and thick, rich patches of soil blew around in gusts and spurts.

The air had smelled wet and ripe, as though it was about to rain.

“I want you. Only you,” Timber said. His eyes were sincere ... sincere enough that Lyra believed him. “More than anything. But I have to ensure that the council approves of our relationship first.”

“Why?”

Lyra settled into the rocking chair next to the baby’s bed.

Marigold was still awake but allowed Lyra to cradle her. It was as if the baby knew Lyra needed to hold her.

“Because,” Timber leaned against the changing table, “the council rarely approves of bears and humans mixing. Socially and ... romantically.”

“Is it really that big of a deal?” Lyra found the strength to ask Timber, who crossed his arms over his chest.

“It isn’t to me. But the bear council wants us to keep our bloodlines pure. They believe that mating with humans is physically impossible, and even if it were possible, it would dilute the power of the bear shifters.”

“Oh. Okay.” Lyra wasn’t sure why she felt so deflated.

She looked at Timber, who was staring down at the floor.

He was the first man who made her feel completely, wholly herself. And she had fallen in love with his baby too.

And he wasn’t even an actual man.

“Besides, everyone at the council is stressed out now,” Timber said.

Lyra raised her brows, indicating that he should continue.

Marigold’s breathing had changed, becoming slow and deep. The little one was asleep.

“A bear shifter is killing bears. I’ve been tasked to find him as head of the Montana Maul. We think he’s from Canada

and is crossing the border close by.”

The wind was howling, and Lyra stood to put Marigold carefully in her crib before stepping out of her room.

Timber followed, closing the door behind him.

She paced around the living room as a new fear had struck her.

She was in love with a bear shifter who was hunting someone who was killing bear shifters.

Make it make sense, she thought to herself.

But she was even more afraid when she thought that the man she was falling for was in danger.

When Lyra turned, Timber was right behind her, and he took her hands in his.

“I’m scared that you’re going to get hurt,” she whispered. “If someone is hunting you, then ...”

“No,” Timber spoke quickly as though to assuage her fear. “They’re killing wild bears. Not bear shifters. And even though they’re not hunting us, it is against the code for us to kill our non-shifting brethren.”

Her shoulders relaxed as the tension and fear melted.

“Okay,” she whispered, then laughed slightly. “Okay. That is good to know.”

“I’ll be fine. We just have to keep our relationship quiet for now. Until the bear council approves it. And it won’t be easy.”

“I don’t care,” Lyra said stubbornly. “I’ll wait as long as I have to.”

Timber smiled. “I knew you were it from the moment you stepped through that door.”

THIRTEEN



TIMBER

This won't be easy.

The little voice in Timber's head ... the one that had sprung up upon Serenity's death ... was getting louder and louder every day.

It had been three days since he had revealed himself to Lyra. And at that time, he had debated whether calling a meeting of the council was the right thing to do.

But he knew he needed their approval if he wanted his relationship with Lyra to succeed.

And now, as he watched her take care of Marigold, he couldn't imagine life without her.

The bear inside him agreed, growling and whining at the very thought of losing Lyra.

He had to try. He would never forgive himself if he didn't.

Timber left the cabin after Lyra and Marigold laid down for a nap. Lyra had taken to sleeping at the same time as Marigold because that was the only time she got any sleep.

Outside, he shifted, allowing the bear to take over, growling with relief as his body stretched in places no human would ever be able to.

Then he lumbered into the forest, to the top of the highest point in the area, and let out a great growl. The forest shook in the aftermath.

Angry crows took off overhead, and snakes slithered into the deep dark safety of their holes in the ground.

Timber heard the shifting of the forest around him as another bear shifter came out of the undergrowth.

The bear was a shifter named Callum. He was an emissary of the council, and this hill was where messages were traded between the council and the bear shifters.

With a growl, they greeted one another.

Timber relayed his message, and Callum nodded in his bear form.

The bear shifter left, disappearing into the forest without a sound or trace.

When Timber left the hill, the forest had settled, and its creatures were back where they had been before Timber called the meeting.

Two crows, however, circled him overhead as he walked back to the cabin.

They cried out in the air every few seconds, taunting him.

Crows were different from the other birds of the forests. They might not be shifters, but they saw and heard everything. They understood things that no wild animal should.

And now, as the cabin came into view, it was as though the crows were mocking him for even thinking he could get away with being with a human.

THE MEETING with the bear council took place before dawn the next morning.

The council meeting took place in a cabin that had been the home of a revered elder.

Four bear shifters waited for him. However, other bear shifters stalked the dark forest surrounding the cabin.

Each bear shifter inside the cabin represented one of the bear mauls in the area.

Devlen, Callum, Elias, and Jameson represented the bears of Montana.

“Timber Mahogany,” Devlen spoke in his growling voice.

Timber inclined his head in a small bow to each of them.

The four shifters all wore bear skins.

“Thank you for seeing me,” he said. “I am here to plead before the council. I would like to find a human mate. Clearly, Serenity and I were not a match, and this resulted in her death.”

Each of the four bears recoiled with disgust at his words.

Timber raised his hands, and they let him continue.

“I believe there are bears who could resonate and mate with humans. There are so few female bear shifters that our population is dwindling.”

Devlen almost spat as he started speaking, his voice hot and angry.

“I believe, Timber Mahogany, that you’ve mated with a human before coming here to get our approval.”

Fear raced through Timber, crashing into him in great waves and almost knocking him over.

But he remained steady, his face impassive.

“Not at all, sir,” he said as respectfully as he could. Anger had blended with his fear. “I simply want us to change the old ways of living to save the bear shifters of Montana.”

“The reason we do not mate with humans, Timber,” Elias spoke in a gentler voice, though his face was stern, “is because we are keeping our species pure. Mating and procreating with humans only weakens us.”

“But what difference does it make?” Timber couldn’t keep the frustration out of his voice. “What difference will it make

when there are no longer any bears left? The wolves mate humans.”

“You mean the dogs?” Devlen’s nose twitched, his face wrinkling with disgust.

That seemed to be the only emotion he felt.

“The wolf shifters abide by different laws than we do,” Callum pointed out, a lazy smile stretching across his face though his gray eyes remained cold.

“Laws of our own making. Laws that we can change,” Timber kept on, and now he was betraying himself by the way his voice shook.

“Laws that we will not change.” Devlen’s voice shook almost as much as Timber’s did. “Laws that have kept us safe for decades.”

“The wolf shifters who have mated with humans have all had shifter babies,” Timber insisted. “That should mean something good for us.”

“No!” Devlen brought his hand down on the table in front of him, his voice a bellow.

Timber heard the birds of the forest taking off into the sky.

Jameson spoke then, the only one of the bears who had been quiet the entire time.

“We will not allow it. Bears do not mate or resonate with humans. It is impossible and unnatural. And any bear who ventures to do so will be kicked out of the council.”

“Yes,” Elias continued. “Any bear who does such a thing will be cut off from the resources we provide. They will lose any and all protection they have enjoyed thus far.”

“And they will be severely punished.”

When Timber looked at Devlen, the shifter was pressing his lips together in a grim line.

And he knew he had failed.

FOURTEEN



LYRA

Lyra woke up when Timber did, though she pretended to be asleep.

She knew it was an important morning for him. He would be meeting the bear council to plead their case, so they could be together.

She listened to him get ready, smiling to herself as he burned himself trying to cook breakfast.

It was close to three in the morning when he left.

Lyra remained in bed for a while after Timber left, pressing her face into his pillow and inhaling his scent.

Then she decided to get up and eat breakfast while it was warm.

She checked in on Marigold and then went out to the porch, where she watched as the world woke up.

Lyra had always known that Montana, and Missoula, in particular, was overrun with animals. But she had never seen them up close until she moved into the cabin with Timber and Mari.

Now she was seeing squirrels, chipmunks, and bluebirds almost every day.

She had even seen a fox and a coyote once, though those animals didn't come close to the house.

Timber said they knew that the human who lived in the cabin was not all human.

They could smell the *wrongness* of the human, and smart animals, even if they were natural predators, didn't mess with what they didn't understand.

The forest remained dark for a while. Lyra ran a hand through her hair as she inhaled the cool, crisp air that bit at her skin.

Winter was fading away faster and faster, and she could tell the morning would be bright and warm.

She sat on the porch for a while before heading to the bathroom.

Her stomach was in knots as she stood underneath the warm water of the shower. She was anxious and excited for Timber, for her bear, to come home.

She needed him to return with good news. She needed him to tell her they could be together, that the council had given them their blessing.

Lyra had just pulled on her clothes for the day when Timber walked in.

She had expected him to be happy. She had been so convinced that the other bear shifters would approve of them.

Clearly, she had been hoping for too much if his face was anything to go by.

He looked tired, and the corners of his mouth were downturned with sadness. Timber came up to Lyra and pulled her into his embrace, pressing his body against hers. Then he let go of her silently and walked into Mari's room. He picked up his daughter, who woke at his touch.

"I take it the meeting didn't go well?" Lyra asked him.

Timber shook his head.

"They didn't approve. And they threatened to kick out any bear who attempted to mate with a human."

"From the council?" Lyra's face had become hot with anger, her eyes wet with sadness.

“From everything.” Timber shrugged and headed to the kitchen with Marigold. “Any bears who dared to mate with a human would be kicked out of the council and would be cut off from the protection of the council.”

“That’s horrible. And I’m guessing they’re not the type to change their minds,” Lyra breathed the words.

Her heart dropped into her stomach, and her breathing, she realized, was shallow, unsteady.

Timber’s eyes darkened then, and his jaw tightened as he clenched his teeth.

“We need to be very careful, Lyra.” The warning in his voice was clear. “We need to continue pretending that you’re my nanny and not my mate.”

“You really cannot expect me to do that.” The distress in Lyra’s voice surprised her. But a dent had been put in her pride.

“Yes, you have to,” Timber said, his voice more serious than Lyra had ever heard it before. “You cannot tell anyone about us. Not even your mother. And I’m not doing this because I want to keep you a secret ... far from it. I’m doing this because I want to protect you.”

“Maybe we should move?” The idea flashed across Lyra’s mind so suddenly that she hurried to grasp it before it vanished. “Move to another state where we can live freely. Like Alaska.”

Timber shook his head as Marigold started crying.

Lyra took the baby automatically, cradling the little girl in her arms and soothing her. Then she heated some water.

“We just have to keep things low-key until I figure out how to fix this.” Timber groaned the words, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

“I thought that there was no way to fix this,” Lyra said as she placed one of Marigold’s full bottles in the warm water.

Marigold was still fussing but calmed down once the bottle was warm enough and Lyra fed her.

“I don’t know if there is a way,” Timber said, sitting heavily on the couch. “We will just have to keep things secret. Maybe there are a few other bear shifters who are going through the same thing.”

“Sure,” Lyra said, her voice nonchalant as she burped Marigold. Then she left Timber silently because she had to bathe Marigold and get her into clean clothes.

You might as well complete your duties as the nanny if you’re going to pretend that is all you are, she thought to herself.

After dressing Marigold and brushing through her unruly mop of hair, Lyra returned to the living room where Timber had fallen asleep on the couch.

“Don’t let it bother you,” Lyra told herself as she put Marigold in the baby carrier and started straightening up the place.

But she was asking the impossible of herself.

How could she not let it bother her when this was the man and child she loved more than herself?

How could she not let it bother her when she had no one to talk to about it?

FIFTEEN



TIMBER

Patrolling the forest with Jarrod and Pauley, Timber walked among them, but he wasn't mentally present.

His mind was elsewhere, still stewing over the meeting with the council. He was livid that they had denied him so quickly without even giving it a thought. He had hoped they would've at least been open-minded.

"Oy," Jarrod broke the silence, poking him with a stick. "You're grouchy today."

Pauley snorted, shaking his head. "Good call on poking the man. The irony isn't lost."

He swatted the stick away, rolling his eyes as he did. He sighed, frustrated. "I'm not grouchy. I'm just irritated."

"Isn't that just a fancy word for grouchy?" Jarrod asked, stepping over a rock.

He sighed heavily, and both of them looked at him with their brows raised. "I went to see the council about dating humans. They refused the idea quicker than I could get the words out."

"Ahh," Pauley said, nodding his head. "We heard you went to a meeting, not entirely sure what it was about."

"Guessing it didn't go well?" Jarrod asked, grabbing another stick.

He turned to him, pointing a finger. "Poke me again, and I'll ram that stick so far up your ass, you'll taste it."

Pauley laughed, choking on his voice. "I'll take that as it went very bad."

He grumbled. "Clearly. I just don't understand what the issue is. It isn't like there is any scientific evidence that dating humans makes us weaker. They went on about wanting to keep the bloodline pure."

"There is the possibility of your child never being a shifter," Pauley piped up. Jarrod dropped the stick he'd picked up.

"There is a possibility. That doesn't mean it will happen."

He wondered if maybe that was better sometimes. Humans didn't have stupid rules they had to follow. They could do what they wanted. The thought of a human child didn't disappoint him.

Jarrod shrugged, taking a few steps ahead of them. He stretched as he walked. "Well, I don't think the idea is crazy. Humans and shifters can get along, so why not allow them to mate? What's the harm? It's our lives, after all."

He knew Jarrod wasn't mated and hadn't looked around too much. He had other things on his plate to handle.

"Really?" Pauley looked at him, a little surprised. "You don't have a problem with it?"

Jarrod shrugged. "Why is it any of the council's business who people sleep with? Do we have to ask them whether or not we can have children? I think it's something that should just be left up to people to make their own decisions."

He relaxed a little seeing that Jarrod understood his side. They both looked at Pauley.

Pauley was dating a shifter and had been for a while. He hadn't spoken much about it, but people knew it was serious.

"I'm not saying I disagree," he commented, waving a hand. "I think people should be able to love who they want, but I think they are only trying to be concerned about the clan. It is their job, after all."

Jarrold laughed, looking at him with a wild expression. "I'm sorry. Should I ask them if I can move? Do I have to ask them for their approval next time I decide to do something?" Jarrold asked in a sarcastic tone.

Pauley rolled his eyes. "I'm not saying that. I'm just saying I get both sides."

Jarrold looked at him. "Does this mean you have someone in mind, then?"

He froze slightly. He couldn't tell them about Lyra. He didn't want word to get out. She couldn't even tell her mother, so he needed to stay quiet about it as well.

"No. I just met someone and thought about it. I figured I would bring it up with them. I didn't expect such backlash about the idea."

He didn't like how they suspected he'd already mated. That idea made his insides twist.

They all fell quiet as they continued to walk. They were deep in the forest, and all he could hear was the sound of their feet against the ground.

He wished things were different. He wanted to tell them about Lyra. He could go on about her all day. He wanted to tell them about how gentle she was with Marigold. He wanted to explain how he was in love.

"Well, if I knew someone and I liked them, or let's say I knew they were my mate, I'd go for it."

This surprised him. He always saw the guys as rule followers like their life depended on it. Then again, he was also like that himself. Yet here he was, willing to break them.

"Love is a powerful thing," Jarrold said, holding a smile. "And sometimes I think the council forgets that."

He sighed, unsure of what to say.

"Well, I still think you should tell the council. It's just what we are supposed to do. It's the rules," Pauley said.

Jarrood rolled his eyes. “I don’t stick my nose up their business, and they shouldn’t stick theirs up mine.”

Then, he nudged Timber’s arm playfully.

“If she’s the one, mate with her,” Jarrood said, giving him a look. “Forget the rules.”

“You should get their blessing first. You want the bear community’s back,” Pauley said, glaring at Jarrood.

He glanced at both of them. “You act as if I’ve found my mate, guys.” He walked ahead of them. “I was just talking hypothetically. Don’t get your panties in a twist.”

He hated to lie, but he couldn’t tell them the truth. At least, not right now. He would later after things settled.

He would talk to the council again and try to get them to understand. Right now, he needed to focus on finding the person murdering the bears.

SIXTEEN



LYRA

Lyra waited for Timber to get back from hunting. She was nervous and still a little hurt that the council denied him. She wished it had gone better. Maybe she had put too much faith in things not being so different between bears and humans.

She paced the floor, trying to remain calm, but it was hard. He'd been gone for a while, and she felt their relationship, or whatever they were, was on thin ice. She didn't like the feeling.

She was trying to hold on, but it felt like he was slipping away from her. She pushed herself up and turned on the TV, needing to refocus her mind. Then she started a bath for Marigold and got her ready for bed. She had her tucked in a few minutes after seven.

Lyra stood in her nursery, unsure of where she wanted to go. She would like to go to bed, but she also wanted to talk to Timber. She didn't like where they had left their conversation earlier.

So, she glanced at Marigold once more before she grabbed the baby monitor and slipped out of her room. She closed the door and sighed once she was in the hallway.

She looked at Timber's bedroom door and headed down the hallway toward it. When she opened the door, she was surprised to see Timber there waiting. He sat on the bed, his head turning toward her as she walked in. She never heard him get back.

Her body relaxed at the sight of him. She had missed him, and he hadn't been gone that long.

“How was your hunting?” she asked, setting the monitor on the bedside table.

Timber reached for her hand, shaking his head. “I don't want to talk about that.”

He pulled her toward him, sealing their lips together. A spark ran down her body. She leaned into it.

His hands skated over her back and down, cupping her ass. He pulled her onto his lap, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. The kiss deepened, and she moaned softly against him.

He broke the kiss, inhaling against her neck. “You smell so good,” he muttered into her ear.

She smiled, feeling his hands sliding up her back. He reached for her bra straps.

She leaned back, looking into his eyes. “Are you sure you don't want to talk?” she asked, seeing frustration in his eyes.

He shook his head. “Maybe later. Right now, I just want you.”

She felt the love so deep in his words. She kissed him, allowing him to pull her shirt open and undo her bra.

The air bit at her bare skin, but he pulled them onto the bed and under the covers. She pressed into the sheets as his fingers scraped at her pants.

His lips kissed her hips, and then they crept down as he exposed more of her skin. She felt hot everywhere, and her toes curled. His fingers touched her inner thighs, and she bit her lip. She looked down at him, watching.

He slipped her pants all the way off, wrapping his hands around her thighs. She watched him spread her, kissing each of her legs.

She was wet, and watching his tongue travel over her skin stirred her insides. She wanted him badly.

She licked her lips as he leaned back and untied his pants. She swallowed, feeling like she'd explode if he didn't hurry up.

He'd hardly touched her, and she was already like putty in his hands. She loved him. She wasn't sure when it happened, but she did. And he loved her.

She could see it in his eyes. They twinkled when he looked at her. It drove her insane.

She watched Timber slip his cock out, and she inhaled. She didn't think she would get used to his size.

Timber was gentle with her. He made sure she was taken care of, and it made her feel blessed.

She hated they had to keep their love a secret because she wanted to scream it from the top of a mountain. She wanted to tell people how perfect he was. She wanted to tell her mother.

He kissed her, hovering over her as he did. She moaned as his tongue intertwined with hers. And she felt the tip of his cock slide into her.

She moaned as he moved deeply into her, filling her entirely. Her nails dug at his skin, and her head rolled back. He kissed her neck as he pushed her legs wider.

"Talk to me, Lyra," Timber whispered into her ear.

"I thought you didn't want to talk," she whispered with a smirk.

"I have no problem talking about how it feels having my dick inside you," he chirped, chuckling at her.

He moved, making her stomach flip, and her body felt high. She felt his hand move, one of his thumbs rolling circles over her clit.

"I can feel you tightening around me," he growled. His fingers tightened on her thigh.

She nodded. "Yes, I'm close."

His thumb continued, working her over like he'd done it a million times. Her toes curled tighter. Her thighs shook, and

that electric feeling sparked higher. Timber picked up the speed, moving her legs into a different position.

He hit her exactly where she needed it, and her body spasmed. She orgasmed hard. “Timber ...” she moaned his name as her body tightened around his cock.

Timber thrust deeper into her, and he pulsed inside her. He grunted and came to a stop.

She went limp onto the sheets and gasped for air. She’d hardly moved, yet she felt like she had run ten miles.

His hand cupped her chin, and he kissed her softly. He chuckled into her ear. “I feel better now.”

She smiled, happy to help. She wished they would be able to tell people, but she didn’t press the issue. At least, not for now.

SEVENTEEN



TIMBER

He stared at the door opposite of him, worried. The council had summoned him back, and he was sitting outside in the hallway. He felt like a child about to get a lecture.

His stomach twisted, and his leg wouldn't stop bouncing. He tried pacing, but then he felt he looked guilty. So, he sat.

He swallowed and blew out a heavy sigh as he leaned back.

The door opened, and a small gal poked her head out. She locked her eyes on him as she spoke. "They will see you now."

He pulled himself up and followed her into the meeting room. The council all sat behind a table, hands crossed, looking at him with serious expressions. The aura in the room was intense.

He stood on the other end and waited as the door shut, leaving him inside with them. Devlen was the one to clear his throat first.

"We have called you here because we caught wind that you have a human living inside your house. Is that true?"

He watched as all eyes narrowed on him. He felt they were ready to pounce, but he wasn't going to allow it. They could assume, but they didn't know the truth.

Remain calm. You don't have to tell them anything.

He squared his back and tilted his head at them. "That is correct."

River, another council member, narrowed her eyes. “So, you admit that you have a woman, a human woman, living in your house? After we just told you that you could not mate with a human?”

He wanted to growl, his bear trying to break out, but he held his anger down and frowned at them. “I have a human nanny. Lyra is my daughter’s nanny.”

They didn’t seem to believe him, and he sighed, waving a hand.

“Serenity died if you have forgotten, and I have a newborn baby that needs attention. Much more attention than I can give her, mind you. So, I hired a nanny.”

“You’re saying that this nanny that is living in your house hasn’t joined you in bed? That’s what you’re saying? You haven’t slept with her?” Devlen asked, narrowing his eyes. He wanted him to admit that he’d mated with Lyra, but he wasn’t going to.

“No,” he lied, shaking his head. “She is just my nanny. She’s what Marigold needs right now. I need an extra set of hands around the house.”

Devlen scoffed and shook his head. He placed his hand on the table, his words coming out harshly. “I don’t believe you. You’re lying. She isn’t just your nanny, and we are all watching. I’d be careful, Timber, because all eyes are on you now.”

He swallowed, feeling his anxiety spike. He looked at each of them and wanted to point out each of their flaws. But he didn’t.

He made a face and scoffed himself. He had to act the part if he wanted them to get off his back. He didn’t need them sniffing around his house.

“She is just a nanny for my daughter. I’m not the type of guy to screw the help. That’s a low blow even for you to insinuate here, Devlen. Unless you’re going to come over and change my daughter’s dirty diapers, I would appreciate it if you let me choose who to watch my child.”

They all fell silent for a moment. The council members looked at each other before one of them looked at him. “So, you aren’t together?”

“No,” he said, waving his hands. “I have a nanny for my daughter. Newborns are a lot of work, and she answered my ad. I can pull the ad up if I need to. She’s watching her now while I’m here arguing with you.”

River smiled at him. “I hope that’s the truth. Because she seems beneath you, Timber.”

His jaw clenched.

“Too small, really. A terrible fit for you.”

The others nodded in agreement.

River laughed. “We were worried you were about to throw your life away for some human woman. Honestly, the thought of you dirtying your daughter’s future because of a human. It was almost laughable.”

He tasted blood in his mouth because he bit down so hard. He inhaled through his nose, waving his hand. “She’s a human babysitter,” he said bluntly. “That’s all.”

“Good,” Devlen said. “We wouldn’t want to throw you out because you decided a human girl was more important than us.”

“Besides,” River said, speaking over Devlen. “She wouldn’t be able to handle you, Timber. You’re a large man for such a small girl. You’d break her.”

He frowned, seeing they found humor in the idea. It enraged him. They found humor in the woman he loved. He wanted to shift and rip each of them apart. He wanted to splatter the floor with their blood and stand over them. He wanted to hear them beg for forgiveness.

He was grinding his teeth together so hard he was sure he had chipped a tooth. His jaw hurt from clenching.

“Silly girl,” another laughed, shaking their head. “Maybe she hopes he will fall in love.”

He watched as Devlen laughed, looking at him. “You are dismissed, Timber. But we are watching you. Remember that. Maybe you aren’t sleeping with her, but we know you are sleeping with someone.”

He swallowed and said nothing. He turned, leaving the meeting. As he stepped out, he questioned whether he wanted to stay with the group. He could leave them and live life on his own.

He and Lyra could be together without having to worry about others. They could have other children and not worry about people’s opinions. They could be free.

He liked the idea because he didn’t see people wanting to mess with him. He was a big bear, one of the biggest in the region.

He headed out of the hallway, mulling everything over. He needed to think about his next steps carefully. He couldn’t make a mistake if he wanted to have the life he yearned for.

EIGHTEEN



LYRA

The weather was finally clearing up.

But Lyra suspected that the sudden warmth was only an anomaly in Missoula, where winter had a tendency to linger.

But still, a warm day was a warm day, and it meant she got to do something she had been yearning to do for a while.

And that was ... shopping.

Lyra wanted for nothing while living with Timber and taking care of Mari. She wasn't sure where Timber got his money, but it was clear he was wealthy.

They received deliveries of groceries and things for Mari several times a week, and Timber had given Lyra his black card to purchase items online.

But as much as Lyra enjoyed shopping online, she was getting paid now, even if the job she was doing didn't feel like a job.

And getting paid meant she had bills that had to be sorted out and shopping to be done.

She had virtually no summer clothes for the upcoming, inevitable change of the season. Lyra also needed toiletries, and she was running out of her favorite lip balm.

Timber would be busy tracking the bear hunter all day, but he gave her the keys to his truck ... a massive Ford F series.

Lyra spent about two hours trying to fit Mari's car seat into the backseat of the truck.

Then she went back into the cabin to wash and dress Marigold, who she put in a fluffy, yellow onesie.

She put a white cap on Mari's head and matching white woolen booties on the infant's tiny feet.

Not that Marigold was that tiny any longer. The baby was growing faster and faster every day ... faster than most babies.

Lyra had a feeling it had something to do with her bear-shifter genes.

Marigold was even outgrowing the clothes that Lyra had purchased two weeks earlier.

"I'll stop by the baby care store in town," Lyra whispered to Marigold. She stroked the baby's cheek once and then lifted her into her arms. "And we'll get you some new threads."

Lyra grabbed her bag on the way out, as well as the Maya wrap Timber had purchased.

She settled Marigold safely into the car seat, strapping her in tightly. Then Lyra got into the driver's seat and turned on the beast of a truck.

The engine roared to life, and Marigold burst into bell-like laughter in the backseat.

IN COSTCO, Lyra realized she was being followed.

Marigold was secure in the Maya wrap, and she could feel the baby's steady breathing against her neck.

She had just come from the drugstore and was heading to the supermarket for snacks.

At first, Lyra thought she had imagined it.

She had gone into town pretty early, and most people were at work or school. So it could seem that someone was following her, even though they were just in the same aisle as she was.

But after about twenty minutes of pushing the cart up and down the store, Lyra knew she wasn't imagining it at all.

The man who was following her, a giant of a man well over six feet, was practically breathing down her neck. He had tried, at first, to make himself seem inconspicuous. But he apparently didn't care right then whether she knew he was following her or not.

Lyra didn't think she was in any real danger. But she turned the cart down the next aisle and headed to the front of the store just in case.

Then she stopped in the snack aisle, and the man came to a stop a few feet away from her.

Slow your breathing, girl. No need to get out of here because of this. It's probably just some loser who wants to ask you out.

It *had* happened before.

But then he spoke.

"That's a beautiful little girl you have there." His voice was hoarse and old. When Lyra turned to him, she thought that he couldn't be hitting on her.

He was probably a few decades older than her. His hair was silvery-white, and his eyes held the permanently watery look of someone who had seen too much.

A scar ran through his right brow, and he wore gold rings on every finger.

Her skin prickled, though Lyra didn't know if it was plain anxiety or real fear that had her heart racing in her chest.

Marigold must have sensed the shift in Lyra's mood. Or maybe she could simply feel Lyra's heart thudding erratically against her cheek. But she stirred then, wriggling against the folds of the wrap that held her safely.

"She is. She's lovely," Lyra said. Her voice was stilted and had risen two octaves.

Why did you have to squeak the words out? she thought to herself with a wince.

“Well, she looks just like her mother.” The man seemed harmless enough and peered down into the Maya wrap at Marigold, who was slowly waking up.

“She’s not my daughter,” Lyra said quickly. “I’m just her nanny. And I have to go before she wakes up properly.”

She didn’t miss the widening of the man’s eyes or the way his lips parted with shock.

But Lyra didn’t want to give him a chance to question her further. She had a feeling something wasn’t right about the way he had followed her and then made those seemingly innocuous remarks about Mari.

Lyra rang up her items quickly, paid, and then hurried to the truck with her cart.

After she was sure that Marigold was securely in her car seat, she dumped the bags next to the car seat and then got into the driver’s seat.

Her skin still prickled, and her breath was shaky as she pulled out of the parking lot and onto the main road that led back to the mountain.

Something had been wrong with that man, and she would have to tell Timber right away.

NINETEEN



TIMBER

Lyra was pretty when she was flushed, Timber thought, as she spoke animatedly, her hands waving through the air.

Marigold lay in her swinging baby seat, her large eyes fixed on Lyra. The woman had enchanted both of them.

And what was wrong with that? They had no one else.

But Timber became increasingly concerned as Lyra spoke. She was describing a situation that he didn't like.

He was suddenly, violently, pulled back to the last meeting with the bear council and the threats they made.

Could this man have been one of the council's goons? Timber couldn't picture any shifter he had ever met from Lyra's descriptions.

But then, there were bear shifters all over the United States. Who knew what kind of trash Elias or Callum had called in to take care of Timber?

"I don't want you going out on your own again," Timber found himself saying. His voice was harsher, hotter than he had intended.

Lyra turned from where she stood at the stove and looked at him with raised brows.

Her bright eyes were almost cold. He shuddered. Lyra had never looked at him with anything other than warmth in her eyes.

"Excuse me?"

Her voice was a whisper.

Just then, Marigold started fussing, and Lyra came from the kitchen to pick up Timber's daughter.

"It isn't safe for you to go out on your own. We don't know if that guy who followed you was just a creep or if he was connected to something ... else."

Timber ensured that his voice was gentler, but Lyra still looked incredibly angry.

"I'm not someone who likes being told what to do," she said. "And I'm definitely not someone who likes being told where to go or being told to stay inside."

"Like I said." His temper was getting out of hand. He could feel it. "It isn't safe for you to do that. I'm just trying to keep you safe."

"No, you're trying to control me." It had started snowing outside again.

Will this winter ever end? Timber thought distractedly. He took several deep breaths.

"Lyra, I love you. I want you to be safe. But if you're not in this cabin where I can see or hear you, how am I supposed to keep you safe?"

"I can take care of myself." Marigold had started crying, and Lyra shushed the infant, whose face was red and screwed up with distress.

"Not against a group of bear shifters like the Montana Maul, you can't." Timber's voice was hoarse.

He wasn't sure if it was with anger or with distress, like Marigold.

"Are you saying they'd send you after me?" Lyra stopped in her tracks. Timber could practically see the anger draining from her face.

The anger was replaced, almost instantly, by cold, hard fear.

“They wouldn’t send me.” Timber’s voice was gentle again. He just had to make her see. “But they’d send a group of warrior bear shifters to make sure I didn’t end up with you.”

“We don’t even know that it was a bear shifter who followed me. We don’t even know that it is the bear council behind it.”

Timber realized Lyra was trying to reason with him. But she’d get angry again when she realized that it couldn’t be done.

“I don’t care.” The warning in his voice was clear. “You aren’t going anywhere without me.”

She didn’t say anything but grabbed Marigold’s bottle and pack of diapers and headed for the nursery.

He winced as the door slammed shut. Marigold continued crying for a few minutes, but Timber heard Lyra soothing his daughter.

Soon, he heard Marigold’s breathing change. The bear cub was falling asleep, slowly but surely.

Timber inhaled and exhaled with Marigold, but Lyra never came out of the nursery.

LYRA DIDN’T LEAVE the baby’s room for the rest of the night. And instead of falling asleep alone in the bed they had been sharing, Timber slept out on the porch.

He woke up to frost stretching across the window panes.

He was cold ... even the heat from his bear didn’t make up for the cold Montana night and morning.

Timber had overslept, he realized when he walked into the kitchen and looked at the clock that shined its numbers at him in blaring red.

He blinked as he headed for the bathroom to wash away the sleep that was crusted to his eyelashes.

Hopefully, Lyra would be in a better mood today.

In the cold light of day, his words and behavior seemed unreasonable to him too. He could understand why Lyra was upset.

But he just wanted to keep her safe.

He was in the kitchen, putting the kettle on, when Lyra came out of the nursery.

She walked out, carrying the duffle bag she had moved in with and two large cloth bags filled with things that Timber couldn't identify.

"Good morning. Would you like some coffee?" he asked. Surely, she wouldn't miss the tremor in his voice.

"No." Lyra's voice was curt. "I'm leaving. Consider this my resignation."

"What?" Timber's voice cracked on the word.

"I can't stay here and work for you if you're going to insist on keeping me locked up."

Lyra's voice had been curt before, but suddenly, Timber heard her voice shake with emotion.

"I ... please don't leave, Lyra!" Timber didn't think he could do anything but beg.

He had to make her stay. Somehow.

It was at that moment that he realized how much he loved her. She was his mate.

"I don't think you really want me. You want a nanny and a whore."

"That's not true!"

"You may believe that. But I know the truth. And I'm not here to be anyone's secret mistress."

And with that, she turned and hurried out the door.

TWENTY



LYRA

Leaving Marigold felt worse than leaving Timber.

It was when she stepped out onto the street where the taxi she had called was waiting that Lyra realized how much she had bonded with the baby.

And leaving Timber hurt too.

But the pain was magnified by the look Marigold had given her as Lyra washed and dressed her for the last time.

It was a look of pure, unadulterated trust.

That baby loved you. And you just left her.

Her inner voice had never been this critical of her before. Lyra had always been gentle with herself.

But walking away from Marigold ... and Timber ... was the hardest thing she had ever done.

The taxi was silent when she got inside, and the driver nodded at her in quiet greeting as they pulled onto the dirt road that led to town from Timber's cabin.

The road was winding and twisting, and right then, the road matched Lyra's emotions perfectly.

Then she laughed out loud ... making the driver jump ... at the absurdity of her thought.

If you had said that to Mom, she would have told you to stop being so dramatic.

And maybe her mother would have been right.

Lyra loved Timber, but he clearly didn't love her enough to make things official. She couldn't stand being anyone's mistress. She wanted to be more than that. Lyra had even started seeing herself as Marigold's mother.

They had created a family, the three of them. And even if the bear council was the thing that stood in the way, it still didn't mean he could keep her locked in the cabin.

Timber wanted to pretend that their relationship, and his so-called love for her, didn't exist. Unless he was horny.

Lyra couldn't give herself away like that.

She never could.

LYRA HAD EARNED enough money while taking care of Marigold to afford four months' rent on an apartment, but she decided to head home to her mother's.

She was officially unemployed again. She couldn't afford to spend the money she had made.

But Lyra was more determined than ever to scrape together a life for herself. She would do it, even if she had to claw her way out of unemployment.

She still had her keys to her mother's house, and when Lyra walked in, the house was silent and dark.

It seemed her mother wasn't home. She was probably out shopping or with one of her friends.

Great, your mother's got a better social life than you do. Now get it together.

Her thoughts had changed.

Instead of feeling sorry for herself, she would be strong. She would put herself back together and be happy doing it.

Back in her room, Lyra unpacked her duffel bag and pulled out her laptop.

Then she headed to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee while she updated her resumé.

Lyra also considered starting a writing blog where she could post fictional stories about men that turned into bears and wolves. But then she remembered the man who had followed her in Costco.

She understood what Timber had meant when he said she was in danger.

Right then, she had been in real danger.

Looking back, she remembered those watery eyes.

Those eyes had seemed so mild at the time. But right then, sitting in her mother's kitchen, she recalled the threatening glint in the man's eyes.

Lyra didn't think he'd take too kindly to Timber Mahogany's nanny posting stories about shapeshifters for the whole world to see.

"Don't sign your own death sentence, girl," Lyra whispered to herself.

Maybe she could write about something else.

Lyra scrolled through LinkedIn and every other job board she could find online.

There were still no jobs available for English majors.

No jobs except teaching positions. And some of them, Lyra saw with newfound horror, required teaching certificates.

She shut her laptop with a sigh. She decided to forgo the coffee and rifled through her mother's wine bar instead.

She found a bag of chips and took a bottle of rosé, and settled on the couch.

LYRA WAS three-quarters of the way through the second Bridget Jones movie when her mother arrived home.

“Lyra? Honey?” Her mother must have seen the debris that Lyra had left in her wake.

She’d finished the bottle of rosé, the bag of chips, and a box of cookies.

And when her mother walked into the living room, all Lyra had the energy to do was burst into tears.

“Oh, dear God, Lyra.” Her mother’s voice was filled with pure kindness, and she wrapped her arms around Lyra.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” she murmured, stroking Lyra’s head as she continued bawling her eyes out. “What happened, baby?”

Lyra shook her head, hiccupping slightly.

It had started raining, and the cold was creeping into the living room from where Lyra’s mother had left the front door slightly open.

Lyra wiped her eyes and pulled away from her mother.

She couldn’t tell her mother the truth. Mostly because her mother would think she was batshit crazy.

But also because even speaking about Timber, speaking about the life she had built with her bear man and his little cub daughter, would break her heart all over again.

She shook her head. Her mother waited for her to speak, still stroking her head soothingly.

Finally, Lyra found it within herself to speak.

But when she did speak, Lyra started crying again.

“I got attached to his baby. And I fell in love with him. And he ... chose his secretary instead.”

The excuse she gave was better than the real one.

Lyra’s mother didn’t admonish her for something she had warned her daughter about. Instead, she pulled Lyra into her arms again as Lyra cried and cried.

TWENTY-ONE



TIMBER

He found taking care of Marigold by himself was not going well. He was struggling to do everything. Even the simplest things he was screwing up.

When he got up early the following morning, Marigold was hungry. He tried to be quick in making her bottle and managed to spill the milk powder all over the floor. Marigold screamed louder.

He tried cleaning it up, instead slipping in it and slamming into the table that was holding her carrier. Pain radiated over his knees and legs, and he cursed under his breath.

Marigold was screaming at the top of her lungs, and it broke his heart. He knew if Lyra were there, everything would be fine.

After finally making her a bottle, he sat down to feed her. He glanced at his phone, hoping for Lyra to message him that she had forgotten something. He wanted her back.

His phone was blank, and his stomach dipped. He chewed on his cheek ... hoping ... that was all he could do. He hoped she would come back. His bear roared for her.

Marigold looked at him, her fingers gripping the bottle as she ate. She blinked, and he took in her innocent eyes. He wondered if she missed Lyra like he did.

He heard Marigold toot, and then he smelled her poop. Marigold giggled and spat up milk. It splattered down her neck and over her outfit. It was going to stain. He moved quickly, reaching for a cloth when her poop stench smacked him in the

face. He looked down, seeing she'd shit out of her diaper and through her onesie.

He had poop all over his shirt, and the stench was strong. He wrinkled his nose and looked down at her.

"All right," he said to her. "Time for a bath."

He pulled her up and headed for the bathroom. He turned the water on, and Lyra started to scream.

He rocked her, trying to soothe her, feeling he was failing as a father. These were all things he should be able to handle, and he wasn't doing so well.

Timber put her into the bathtub and allowed her to play with a few toys. He glanced at his phone, deciding to type out another message.

He'd sent her three already, asking her to come back. He'd asked her if they could talk. He'd asked her what he could do to fix things. His bear encouraged the thoughts, rumbling with the need for her.

She'd given him silence in return. He hated it. He wished she would yell or scream at him. He couldn't stand the silence.

You know what will fix it. You have to get the council to allow you to be with her.

He tried to wash Marigold when she started to scream and kick. Water flushed over the edge of the plastic tub, soaking the floor. She splashed with her hands, spraying water on him.

His clothes clung to him, and frustration was at an all-time high. He finally pulled her out of the water and into a towel when she leaked out more thick brown liquid.

She giggled as it spread down his shirt, dropping onto the floor. He just stood there a moment, feeling like a wreck.

He thought he had his life together a week ago, and now everything was falling apart at the seams. He couldn't even take care of his daughter, let alone give her the life she deserved.

He called Lyra while he fed Marigold lunch. His line went straight to voicemail. He sighed, looking at Marigold. He'd changed her four times already and didn't even bother with pants this time.

"This is Lyra. Please leave a message."

There was a soft beep, and he swallowed. "Lyra, please give me a call back. Please."

He set his phone down and gave Marigold another scoop of food. Marigold giggled and started to blow raspberries spraying her food all over him. He jumped back, wiping at his face.

He smiled at her as she giggled. She slammed her hands onto the carrier seat's sides, splattering the food spilled on her.

"We need to have another bath," he told her with a sigh.

In moments like this, he should feel grateful, but he wasn't. He felt like Marigold was missing out on the proper help she needed. It was clear he couldn't take care of her.

His phone rang, and he looked at it, seeing it was Lyra. He quickly picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Stop calling me," she said in an irritated voice. "I don't need you leaving me voicemails and messages all day."

"Lyra, can we please talk?"

"I'm going to message you the address where you can send my last check."

He frowned.

"And you should probably throw extra money in there for all the bedroom services that I gave you."

"Lyra, please. I just need a few minutes, so we can talk."

"I don't want to talk, Timber. I want to be treated like a human being. A person with feelings. I'm not coming back. So, stop calling me. Send me my check and leave me be."

She ended the call, and he sat there numb. He glanced at Marigold, who giggled, and he heard her pooping again.

After getting Marigold down for her afternoon nap, he called the council. He demanded a meeting. He needed to get them to side with him.

If he wanted Lyra to come back, he needed to get them to agree. He would beg if he had to. He would fucking give them whatever they wanted if he could just have Lyra.

He looked around his house, seeing the mess that it was. There was a full garbage can and milk powder on the floor. The kitchen sink was full of dishes, and the living room had three loads of laundry untouched. He needed Lyra.

He got Marigold packed up for the meeting. He had his fingers crossed it would go well.

TWENTY-TWO



LYRA

Lyra hardly slept through the night. She tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. She couldn't turn her mind off, either.

She just kept replaying her argument with Timber. She could still see the hurt look in his eyes when she told him she was quitting. It was seared into her brain.

But she knew it was for the best. She refused to be a mistress and had warned him from the very beginning. But she knew that everything hadn't been his fault.

But he was hiding her, and she couldn't handle it. While it wasn't like he had a wife, he did in a way. The council wouldn't approve of them, and he would continue to keep her hidden. That wasn't a life for her.

"Lyra, are you awake?"

Her mother called down the hallway, and she groaned. She just wanted to curl under her sheets and never come out. But she had to find a job. She had to get moving.

She changed after a long shower and headed down the stairs. She found her mother had made her breakfast, and she sighed.

She felt she had taken ten steps back from where she was before she met Timber. She hated it. She was living with her mother, jobless, and close to being broke.

"Thanks, Mom," she said, swinging into a seat. "I'll be out of the house most of today."

“Going to apply for jobs?” her mom asked, looking over her shoulder at her. She saw the hatred for Timber in her eyes.

Her stomach twisted. She hated that she lied to her mother about why she was back. It wasn't like Timber cheated on her, but she was still going through heartbreak.

“Are you sure you don't need me to do anything? I could hurt the man. Make him regret everything he did.”

She knew her mom was trying to lighten the mood. But she just didn't feel it. She missed Timber and Marigold.

“It's fine,” she said and took a bite of her scrambled eggs. “I'll live.”

She was out of the house half an hour later and driving down the main street of town. She felt a headache forming, and her eyes hurt. She'd applied a layer of makeup, hoping they couldn't tell she hadn't slept in a while.

She parked in front of the publishing office. She stared at the large building. She felt worry creep over her.

Was she making a giant mistake? Was leaving Timber the wrong step for her future? Should she have stayed with him?

Those were questions she'd been asking since she left. Questions she wasn't entirely sure she had the right answer to.

Was she going to miss Timber? Yes. Did she think that leaving him was a giant mistake? In a way. But nothing would change if she kept living the way Timber wanted. She loved him and Marigold. She saw a future with them, even if they were bears, and she could have been happy. But she wouldn't hide away.

She wasn't going to be seen as the nanny who he fucked on the side. And she didn't want to be the reason that Timber was stressed and unhappy.

She knew it hurt now, and Timber was probably struggling, but he would figure it out. She knew he could. It hurt, but he would be okay.

He would find someone else that the council was okay with, and he'd have a great life. It just hurt knowing she

wasn't going to be part of it.

She straightened herself and stepped out of her car. She took a deep breath. If he could move on, so could she.

But he hasn't moved on. He still wants you. He didn't want you to leave.

She shook her head, clearing her mind, and forced herself forward. She entered the building and held her head high, a smile on her face.

A blonde woman stood behind the front counter, and her eyes slid up to Lyra's. She smiled at Lyra. "Can I help you with anything?"

She nodded her head. "Yes, I see you have an opening. I would like to apply."

After filling out a job application and chatting with the gal, she headed out to apply at a few other places. She stopped at the media center and applied for another job.

She sat in her car after she finished and sighed exhaustedly. Her lack of sleep was getting to her.

She didn't want to be a teacher, and she wanted to do something with her degree. She didn't have a lot of options at the moment as she hardly had any job history.

She pinched her nose, leaning her head against the seat. She had applied to be a tutor, hoping it would give her some income. It would work until she found a full-time job. Though she was worried. It had taken her a while to get a job before she picked up her nanny position.

She also didn't want to stay at her mother's house for much longer. She loved her mother, but she couldn't stand the looks she gave her.

Her mother brought up Timber often, angry about how he'd supposedly treated her. She couldn't stand feeling the shame of the lie.

She looked at her phone, glancing at the messages Timber had left her. She bit her bottom lip, telling herself she couldn't message him.

“You can’t talk to him, Lyra,” she told herself. “This is better for us. I have principles to stand by.”

She tossed her phone into her purse.

“No matter how much my horny ass may want the man, we can’t.” She turned her car on and prepared to head home. She needed a nap, and maybe she would have a job in the next couple of days and start moving forward in life.

TWENTY-THREE



TIMBER

Marigold was screaming as he stood in the hallway outside the council room. The sound bounced off the walls and felt like a jackhammer in his head. He tried soothing her, but she only screamed louder.

He wondered if she missed Lyra. If her screaming was her way of telling him, she needed the woman around.

Timber paced, bouncing her as she moved. His head was pounding, and he felt that his eyes were going to pop out of his head. He was sure Marigold had shit on his shirt, and he stunk, but he needed to be here.

The door opened, and the gal from before poked her head out. She winced at Marigold's screaming but held the door for him. He dug in his bag for a pacifier.

The doors shut behind him, and all eyes dropped to him once more. He dropped her bag onto the ground and looked at each of them with pure frustration.

Marigold whined over her pacifier, and Elias frowned at him. "You brought your baby with you? Are you sure that was a smart idea?"

He growled at her, baring his teeth. "I had no choice!"

They fell silent, and he bounced Marigold gently, inhaling sharply through his nose. He closed his eyes for a moment before he looked back at them.

"I am here because I am asking you once more to reconsider your decision to say no to us having the ability to

mate with humans.”

Elias rolled his eyes, clicking his tongue. “We have already discussed this.”

“Yes,” he growled, his elongated bear teeth flashing. “And I am asking you to reconsider.”

Devlen leaned forward, placing his hands on the table. “Where is your nanny, Timber? You spoke so highly of her last time. I’m surprised she isn’t here watching after Marigold.”

Marigold clung to him, her eyes bouncing around the room. He hoped he never had to bring her back into it after the meeting.

“She quit. She found herself another job.”

Jameson snorted, shaking his head at him. “Did she leave because you guys couldn’t be together? Was she the one that you were bedding? Was she the reason you came barging in here, demanding something so stupid?”

He knew they were digging for him to admit it. He wasn’t going to. He refused to.

He sighed, frustrated. “We already went over this last time I was here. I wasn’t fucking the nanny. I haven’t fucked anyone.”

“You’re getting rather angry for such a simple question,” Elias said, a bite behind his words. “Is that because you’re lying?”

“I’m angry because you all refuse to even think about it. There is a woman that I want to be with, and you all refuse to allow me. My child deserves a mother.”

“We aren’t saying she doesn’t,” Devlen said. “We are simply saying you can’t mate with a human. There are plenty of other people you can go to.”

He didn’t want anyone else. He wanted Lyra. He wanted her more than breathing or living life itself.

He wanted them to understand and allow him to be with her. He wanted them to bend the rules. He was sick of having

to follow everything they said.

“Who have you been sleeping with, Timber?” Devlen asked, narrowing his eyes at him. “You need to tell us.”

“The only person I slept with is Serenity. She is the only woman that joined me in bed.”

“And what about this human woman you refuse to give a name to? You expect us to believe you haven’t fucked another?”

“I have someone I’m interested in. She is fantastic. I could see a future with her. I want to be with her.”

He watched all of their faces shift into disgust. Devlen leaned forward, a growl ripped from his lips. “You will do no such thing. We forbid it.”

He growled. “What is your reason? For some bullshit excuse to keep the DNA clean? You and I both know that is the largest lie you could come up with. You all have your heads so far up your asses you can’t even see that society has changed.”

“We have said our peace on the matter,” Callum yelled at him. “Our answer is final.”

“You’re not even going to talk about this? You’re just going to dismiss this?”

They remained quiet, standing on their words.

“There are others, I’m sure. There have to be others who have fallen in love with humans. You aren’t just hurting me. You’re hurting others. My daughter deserves a mother. You are being too strict on your policies and need to loosen them.”

“We will do no such thing,” Elias snipped at him. “And you need to learn your place.”

Marigold whimpered, and he pulled her closer, kissing the top of her head. He looked back at the council, needing to get them to understand.

“I haven’t seen any other clans have issues with human mating. We are probably the only ones that care, and there is

no reason.”

Devlen swung up. His chair slammed to the ground as he yelled. “This meeting is over! Our answer is final, and if you bring it to us again, we will take action to release you from your duties.”

He stiffened, and Marigold started to scream. It resonated off the walls echoing around him, and he felt defeated. They had refused him again.

He bounced her, and Elias rolled his eyes. “Leave and take your child with you. I hope you find another nanny.”

He wanted to shift and rip them all apart. But Marigold screamed louder, making them all wince. He turned on his heel and left the room. The door slammed shut behind him.

He didn’t know what to do. He was out of answers and out of ways to win Lyra back.

TWENTY-FOUR



LYRA

She felt giddy as she sat in her car. She stared at the building. The media outlet had called her back for an interview.

She was getting another step closer to piecing her life together. She had the urge to call Timber and tell him but didn't. She couldn't.

She got out of her car and took a deep breath in. She straightened her back and headed inside. There was a young guy behind the counter wearing a tailored suit, and his hair was combed back. He looked more like a model than he did a clerk.

She looked down at her outfit, having not dressed that fancy. She swallowed, suddenly nervous. She was told to wear something nice.

"I have an interview," she stated, stopping in front of the counter. "With Jill. It's at ten." She looked at the clock behind the guy seeing she was ten minutes early.

The boy looked at her, and his eyes did a quick look over before giving her a nod. "Yes, please take a seat. I'll inform Jill you are here."

He turned and stepped away, heading down the hallway. She took a seat, clutching her purse with a death grip.

Shit ... Should I have dressed nicer? I didn't realize that the dress code was higher-end.

She looked at her black dress with buttons running down it. She wore flat black shoes and a simple necklace. Clothes

she expected anyone could wear in an office.

The guy came back down the hall three minutes later. “Jill is ready for you.”

She pulled herself up and walked down with him. She inhaled through her nose.

All right, remember. You are amazing. You can get this job. You deserve this job.

Twenty minutes later, she was leaving, and Jill had offered her the job. But she had to dress professionally. It was mandatory.

So, she headed down the main road downtown and looked for a few stores where she could shop. She needed a lot, considering most of her clothes consisted of loungewear. She had some nicer outfits like the one she was wearing. Jill had explained she needed to up her game.

She pulled up at her first store and pulled herself out of the car. She headed inside and looked for a few suits. She was also told she could write off a few purchased items if she needed, so she didn't fret about money.

She walked toward the clearance racks in the back and scanned for pants. She felt like eyes were on her, and she looked over her shoulder. There was no one in the store besides the gal running the register.

She shook the feeling off and continued searching. She managed to find herself three pairs of pants and a nice shirt for the lovely price of four hundred dollars. She definitely was going to write them off.

She headed to the next store in search of nice shoes. Her flats didn't impress Jill. She felt nothing had impressed Jill besides her resume. Jill explained they needed her to look her finest at all times. You never know who could be watching you. That thought made her think of Timber, and she wanted to look amazing.

She headed down the rack, flipping through shoe boxes. She pulled her eyes up and once more had the feeling someone was watching her. Worry caused her stomach to churn.

Lyra grabbed a pair of shoes and headed to check out. She didn't start work until next week so she could go shopping again with her mother. Her mother had better taste in clothes anyway.

She paid for her shoes and headed straight to her car. She heard footsteps behind her and turned around. There was no one.

Her heart raced, and panic set in. She turned back around and ran to her car. She locked her doors and tore out of the parking lot.

She was heading home when she realized there was a car following her. She swerved into another lane, and they did too. Seeing the car's windows were tinted, she swallowed. There was no license plate. The pit in her stomach only grew.

She couldn't go home. She couldn't let them know where she lived. So, she went down different streets in the hope of losing them. It wasn't going well.

Instead, she turned left, and then she took a right. And she went onto the interstate and hopped off. They were still behind her.

Lyra looked at her gas, and her worry grew. She was going to get gas before her interview but forgot, and now she was getting very low. She had less than a fourth of a tank.

She was driving in a small quiet neighborhood. She decided she would park in a block and call the cops. The cops would know what to do. She could head into someone's house and have witnesses. She turned into a driveway and frowned when she realized it was a house for sale.

The car wasn't around her, and she slipped out. She started down the street, looking for a house that had a light on. She didn't see any.

Her stomach roiled as she walked, and her feeling of fear grew tenfold. She saw a house ahead with the porch light on and started to run.

She heard something to her left, a low growl. She ran faster, pumping her legs to move as quickly as she could get

them to go.

A pair of eyes stared at her, and a large paw reached out to her from the dark side of a house. She screamed.

It yanked her back through a small yard and into the woods, and she screamed even louder.

No one seemed to hear her, or no one seemed to care.

She tried to free herself, but it was no use. She was small compared to the person pulling her deeper into the woods. She just needed to accept her fate.

TWENTY-FIVE



TIMBER

Timber was rattled after the meeting with the committee. They just wouldn't listen to him, even if he had good points, which he felt he did. If they knew what it was like to find their mate, then they would know what it was like for Timber. He physically could not be without Lyra. She was connected to him for life, whether she was there or she wasn't.

He drove home, trying to keep his cool for the sake of Marigold, who was largely unaffected thus far by his emotions. When he walked in the front door, his phone vibrated madly in his pocket.

“Hold on, hold on.”

He took Marigold to her playpen, feeling the vibration stop and go to voicemail. He frantically slipped it out of his pocket, thinking that it was either Lyra or the council. But when he looked at it, it was a number he didn't recognize.

Timber listened to the voicemail; it sounded like a woman panting with fear and desperation.

“Hi, hi, is this Timber Mahogany? Please call this number back, please. This is Lyra's mother, Karen. Please call me as soon as possible.”

Marigold played with her toys, roaring with a plush bear in hand. Timber didn't have time to take in the amusing image as he hit the reply button instantly.

“She's missing,” Karen implored. “She was supposed to meet me at my house two hours ago, and ... and, they found her car at another, empty house.”

It was obvious that the woman was upset. So Timber moved into action, scooping up Marigold into his arms along with a few jars of baby food, a bag of diapers, and a to-go bag of extra clothing.

“I will be there as soon as I can. What is your address?”

Timber packed the car and secured Marigold into her car seat before setting off to Missoula. He was trying with all of his heart and soul not to let his rage get the best of him. He needed to narrow his focus to finding his beloved before he unleashed his fury upon the perpetrators.

It had to be the bear council giving him a strict warning. He hated that he had brought her into his tumultuous, stubborn world.

Timber arrived at Karen’s with lightning speed. She was waiting at the door for him, a significantly small and bony woman with balled-up tissues in her palms. Lyra clearly didn’t get her shapely form from her mother. He brandished himself for having such a thought during an emergency.

He introduced himself and Marigold to Karen, who welcomed him inside politely. She was a stern, strong woman, struck by the agony of a potential loss. But Timber wasn’t going to let that happen. Not even if it meant his own life.

“I have brought all of what Marigold will require. Even the playpen is in the car,” Timber said, handing the child to Karen. “If you could take care of her while I search for Lyra, it would mean the world to me.”

The long-faced woman took the child like a grandmother, settling her on her hip and swaying instinctively. She looked Timber up and down, cocking an eyebrow in his direction.

“So you really chose the secretary over my daughter, didn’t you?”

Timber gave her an uncharacteristic smile. He had a vague idea what she was talking about, something Lyra had asked him many moons ago in a whirlwind frenzy of seduction. But there was no time for that.

“I’m going to head out now. You have my number. Please let me know if you need anything for Marigold.”

Karen nodded as Timber went to the car to retrieve the playpen. He brought it inside and set it up in the living room. Karen placed Marigold inside of it, then Timber gave the little girl a sweet kiss. She cooed at him, drooling and ignorant of her circumstances.

“I’ll be back soon, honey,” he whispered.

Karen followed him to the front door, once again giving him an up-and-down look. She crossed her arms after opening the door for him, that serious look remaining.

“Find my daughter. Then we can discuss the secretary.”

Timber was going to crack a joke, but when he turned to her, her eyes had turned to glossy marble. She was stifling tears, her face beginning to crumble in fear.

Timber touched her wrist affectionately.

“I am going to find her. Lyra is going to be fine. I promise.”

She nodded at him firmly. He wondered if she really believed him or was just suspicious of the strange, towering man her daughter had worked for.

It was only noon, the sun sitting high like a beach ball in a crisp blue sky. He climbed into his truck and planned out his route using the digital GPS. He had to find somewhere to park the truck before he could shift. Karen likely had no clue he was a bear shifter, and Lyra had used the secretary thing as a cover.

He searched for the area where her car had been left, then headed in that direction. He would sniff out the woods nearby, then track her scent for as long as he could physically move.

Timber gripped the steering wheel tightly, thinking only of action and positive results. That was how they hunted in his bear pack, focusing on only what you could do and not on what you could not. It would be helpful during other missions, but with Lyra, it was personal. He had to keep it together while

he searched for her. Other than Marigold, she was the only person in the world who had his heart.

The sun followed him along the highway, beaming into the truck and lighting the way toward his darling beloved. The color of his daughter's namesake, marigold, cast a pathway ahead of him.

TWENTY-SIX



LYRA

Lyra struggled with the bear as it clawed at her jacket, knowing that it was utterly fruitless. A part of her was afraid, of course, since the only bear she had interacted directly with was Timber, and she was close with him. It jolted her into the woods, but its movements were intentional. It was obviously a shifter, and it was likely being ordered around by the council.

She continued to struggle, though she calmed a bit, recognizing she wasn't going to get mauled. It dragged her to the other side of the woods and to a van where a man, thick and tall as Timber, stood next to an open door.

The shifter still had her jacket hood in its gob, and she tried to reach up and scratch at its eyes. It was pointless, though. Even if she managed to get a grip on its snout or plunge her fingers into its eye sockets, there were two more waiting for her. And although she was tenacious, she had nothing on three bear shifters.

“STOP!” she screamed.

The shifter who had been dragging her dropped her against the cold ground. She thudded on her back, her neck getting a slight whiplash from the sudden movement.

There was one man in the driver's seat while the second man stood by the van door. He had a dark beard and hair slicked back, his face utterly exposed. He brought a finger to his mouth as he approached her.

“Don't scream,” he hissed. “We'll gag you if you do.”

Lyra wanted to seem slightly compliant and exaggerated her fear to try to get the best of them. The man who had been the bear shifted back into human form, helping the dark-haired man lift her by her limbs and place her into the vehicle.

She only struggled slightly, which was what was expected of her. She asked them repeatedly what they wanted as both men climbed into the back, sliding the van doors shut.

It had been a bright day, so it took Lyra a second to adjust to the bleak, plastic dark. The dark-haired man, who seemed to be the one doing all the talking, removed rope from the passenger's front seat.

“Give me your hands,” he ordered.

She held them out, and he bound them together. While he did, the half-naked man bound her ankles. Her neck ached from being pulled so abruptly into the woods and dragged at such a laborious speed.

“Are you Timber's friends?” she asked softly.

The dark-haired man tied a tight knot around her wrist. She breathed in sharply, feeling her fingers beginning to tingle already. He stared at her on his knees, eyes as black as his beard and hair.

“What kind of relationship do you have with Timber? If you tell us now, everything will go smoothly.”

The half-naked man knelt before her, too, staring with stern intrigue. Lyra did the only thing she thought might help delay them in their attempt to intimidate her and to give Timber time to track her down: lie.

“I was his nanny. I took care of his daughter for a while, in-house, then I left to pursue a career in media. It's what I have my degree in.”

Lyra made sure her voice was even, not too confident, not too meek. But she could tell neither of them believed her. Hell, they could probably smell the lie reeking off her body.

The dark-haired man narrowed his eyes, moving in closer, his nostrils flaring. The van remained still, with casual cars

zooming by without any realization that a kidnapping was taking place.

“And what did you do during your time as a nanny with Mr. Timber Mahogany?”

Lyra gazed at the half-naked man and the man in the driver’s seat, neither of whom had spoken yet. A bemused smile grew across her lips, and she began to chuckle.

They didn’t seem to like that.

“That’s none of your fucking business,” she said as she laughed. “And I’m never going to tell you.”

Lyra realized immediately that her expression of egotistical confidence may have gone too far. The dark-haired man reached for duct tape that had been sitting in the passenger’s seat, unraveled it, and stretched it out in front of her.

She opened her mouth to bellow, trying to shuffle backward in the van, but it was too late. They pinned the tape over her mouth, stifling her cry, then secured her bindings against a hook on the van wall. It was clear that they had done all of this before.

Lyra began to panic when the dark-haired man tapped on the driver’s back, and the van began to move. She had no idea how fast bear shifters were, but it was likely that the van was going to be a hell of a lot faster.

She batted her hands against the wall of the van, attempting to yell from beneath the tape. The metal clanked against the van, her hands having been pinned out of reach of her mouth while the half-naked man held onto her ankles. Her body was being slightly stretched as the van climbed a few hills, bumping along the way like a casual delivery service.

What on earth had she done? Had she sealed her fate, acting like a fool with people whose abilities she didn’t completely understand?

All she knew was that she wanted to see Timber again. At that moment, as she clanked against the van walls, she vowed that if she ever got to see that damn bear bastard, she would leap into his arms and never let go.

But for now, three of his enemies had her. One of them had a death grip on her feet, while another kept peering into the darkness. He scared her more with his silence than any of the words he would ever speak.

TWENTY-SEVEN



TIMBER

Timber skyrocketed to the spot where Lyra's car was found. It had bright yellow caution tape around it, as Karen had reported her missing to the police. There wasn't much public awareness about it, though, as a few cops stood around, cracking jokes, indifferent to her potential plight.

Timber got out of his car a short distance away, trying to catch her scent to follow. His heart rattled in his chest when he realized he couldn't isolate it; it was being covered and blocked by some big, wet animals.

He knew those big wet animals well.

It was a rare ability to be able to cover a scent so well, especially when it was another's fated mate's specific aroma. He picked up some of it, but he couldn't quite get close enough to her car. He didn't want to get involved with the cops; they would only delay his mission.

The cops didn't notice him, which was all well and good. He typed in the address to the bear council headquarters, then sped off in the opposite direction.

As he zipped along the highway, he dialed the headquarters' number. A high-up named Zane answered casually and sprightly.

"Where is she?" he snarled through the car phone.

"I'm sorry, who is this?"

"I know the council took her. This is Timber. I know you took Lyra. Now tell me where she is, and we can talk about

this reasonably.”

Zane was a newer member of the council, but that didn't mean he lacked knowledge or sway. There was a long pause in between his response, meaning that someone was likely behind the scenes, slicing their throat in a cut-him-off gesture.

“I have no earthly idea what you are talking about, Timber. Do you want to tell me about what's going on?”

The softness of his tone only served to irk Timber further. He slammed the red button on the phone, hanging up on him.

“Fuckers,” he muttered.

Timber got to the headquarters in no time, parking his truck in the woods nearby so he wouldn't be seen. There were certain parts of the headquarters that any bear shifter could walk into and seek out advice or an appointment. Then, of course, there were the secure areas requiring a guard or passcode to get through.

That was where Timber planned on going. He would break into the secret files he knew were kept just beyond the security detail team entryway. All he needed was to use what existed of his charm, as well as his physical presence, to intimidate whoever was on duty.

He was a big man and held in high regard for his leadership of the shifters in Montana. He walked in casually, scooting by the security table without gazing their way.

“Oh, can I help you, sir?”

A young man who was as thin as a tree branch called to him with a trembling lip. Timber turned, expressing his annoyance.

“Yes, I have a meeting,” he said, looking lazily at his phone. “Can you let me into the back area? Zane won't be long.”

The young man's brow furrowed, his hand going to the Taser on his sidearm. Timber's hand reached to the bridge of his nose and rubbed it with impatience.

He then approached the young man, casting a shadow like an eclipse.

“Look, I know you’re just doing your job, but I’m in a bit of a rush. Zane is going to meet me here, but he is running late. I’d be eternally grateful if you could let me into the back.”

Not an ounce of charm in his voice, merely a stern threat. The young man swallowed, then pressed a button behind the desk that unlocked the security door. The buzz rang through the lobby with humming success.

Timber grasped his chest in a strange act of gratitude.

“Thank you. I will be sure to get you promoted.”

Timber opened the door, feeling the young man’s eyes on him. He could detect the sour, acidic fragrance of fear on the boy, so he wouldn’t likely address him anytime soon.

That worked out for him because he needed time to rifle through the files in the digital security room.

Timber moved with swiftness and agility, finding the addresses of each council member promptly. He took pictures with his phone and decided that he would narrow it down that way since he was having trouble picking up Lyra’s scent. It only took him a short five minutes, then he closed the door softly behind him.

The young man buzzed him out again, barely looking up from the security desk. Timber gave him a salute as he tried to walk casually, completely aware that he would likely be seen on camera by someone who knew what they were doing.

That didn’t matter, though. Even if he was caught, jailed, and punished, he could go on. But only as long as Lyra was safe. She and Marigold were the only people who mattered to him.

He snuck back into the woods and climbed into his truck. He had the addresses input into his GPS and planned to visit each of them, one by one, scouting out their properties and picking up his beloved’s scent.

Just as Timber started the engine to leave, his phone rang. His throat ran dry; it was Zane.

He guffawed out loud as he ignored the buzzing, ripping the vehicle out of the woods and pulling onto the highway. He would visit the closest address first, then spread out from there. She was going to be at one of their places. There were simply no other options.

TWENTY-EIGHT



LYRA

She was somewhere outside of town, but she couldn't pinpoint where. Maybe out in the boonies. There was a difference in the smell.

The van came to a stop, and she looked around, taking it in. It was starting to get dark, and there was nothing but trees around her. Trees and a barn ahead of them. The door to the right of her swung open, and she jumped as someone reached in, grabbing her from the van. She wanted to kick the person but refrained from doing so.

They yanked her sideways, and her feet slammed into the ground. The door to the van slammed shut, and she looked at her attackers.

They were wearing nothing but black, and they had masks on their faces making it impossible for her to identify them. She sighed as they pushed her forward.

“Move!” one yelled at her.

“Stop pushing me!” she yelled back.

They walked across the yard, and she looked around. She wondered how far they had driven as she'd lost track of time. She could see the sun was starting to set and frowned.

Her mother would start to worry about where she was. She hated the idea of her mother panicking.

The door to the barn swung open, and they pushed her forward. She took it in, taking in the open space. Hay was

scattered, and it stunk, but her eyes fell to the middle, where there was a rope hanging. Her stomach flipped.

They shoved her forward, pulling her hands above her head. She tried to wiggle herself free, but it was no use. It was three against one.

They tied her hands above her head, and she looked around, wishing she had gotten herself free. She pulled at the tie, seeing it was tight.

The position stretched her and forced her to use her muscles. It was a simple yet painful tactic.

One stopped in front of her, and she watched as their eyelids narrowed. “Tell us why you stopped nannyng for Timber.”

“Jesus Christ, this again,” she grumbled, rolling her eyes. “I already told you. I found a different job. A job with better pay. I wasn’t sleeping with the man if that’s what you want to know.”

The person grabbed her chin painfully, holding her face forward. “You are lying. You left for another reason. Spill.”

“You’re fucking insane,” she bit back. “You’re holding an innocent person hostage. You realize you could go to jail for this, right?”

“Did you have a sexual relationship with Timber?” another asked, and she grumbled. They weren’t listening to her, so she didn’t know why she bothered.

“When did you guys first start having a relationship?”

“Why did you leave?”

“Are you pregnant with a child? Is that why you left?”

They grilled her with questions. They kept going, and she couldn’t breathe. She felt her mind sinking into a sea of lies.

The more questions they asked her, the more she asked in response.

“What is your issue with Timber being with a human? Why are you so interested in me? When are you going to let

me go home?”

It was like a circle they wouldn't get out of. No one was getting what they wanted. And after a while, they were sick of her not giving them the answers they wanted.

“Stop and answer the fucking questions,” one screamed at her.

“I already told you I was his nanny,” she said. “I was his damn nanny!”

“You're lying,” another one snarled at her.

“Eat shit!” she snarled back, fed up with their questions and probing. “You have the wrong girl here. You want his whore ... look somewhere else.”

One of them threw their hands up, cursing under their breath. They turned, talking to each other, whispering under their breath. They clearly were getting tired of her.

She panted, her arms hurt from being strung up. Her legs ached from standing, and she wondered how long she'd been in here. How long had they been grilling her for answers?

They turned back to her. “Fine, let's say you aren't the woman he's been sleeping with. You should know who it was. Tell us.”

“I'm not telling you jack-squat. And not because I don't want to. It's because I don't know.”

“You will tell us,” one growled.

“I just told you I don't know.”

“You're lying.”

“Jesus, this again.” She rolled her head around back, looking up at the barn roof.

“Who is this woman he's seeing?”

She sagged against the rope and sighed. “I. Don't. Know. I don't know who he was sleeping with. I was the nanny. I just watched after Marigold, and that was it. Nothing else.”

“You’re lying,” another growled, getting into her space. She snapped her head back, looking at them. “Tell us the truth.”

“That is the truth. Now let me go.”

Another stepped forward, getting into her space. “We will let you go when you tell us the truth.”

“I already did!”

The one in the back shrugged. “Fine, you don’t want to tell us. Maybe some time alone will change your mind.”

They untied her from the rope and retied her around a beam. She stumbled backward into the hay, and her muscles gave out. She had no fight in her to even argue anymore. She watched them open the barn door and slam it shut behind them. Her stomach clenched as she heard the van start up.

It pulled away, and a sob broke free from her. She cried hard, crying out for Timber. She missed him. She needed him.

Over the past few days, she’d been trying to keep herself together, but she was only fooling herself. She wanted Timber so badly, it hurt.

She missed Marigold, and she missed the life she had. She hated how things turned out. This wasn’t how everything was supposed to go.

TWENTY-NINE



TIMBER

Timber went to the first house on his list. It was Elias's house. He owned a large house in one of the most popular neighborhoods in the town. He didn't see him having Lyra, but he wasn't taking his chances.

Being sure that no one saw him, he walked around the house, looking for an open window or a back door. He heard Elias on the phone inside.

He froze by a window, where Elias sat at a desk on the phone. He kept moving, finding the back door. His shifter sight led the way.

Timber slipped inside and went to the office door. He grabbed a little wire, sticking it into the doorknob. If he wanted to leave, he wasn't going to.

Then, he surveyed his house. He checked all the rooms and every floor, but there wasn't any sign of Lyra. Not even a note or a note of where to go for a meeting.

He slipped out the back door when he heard him trying to turn the knob. "Goddamn it, Chuck, I have to call you back. My damn door is stuck again. I have to call a locksmith."

Timber smirked, shutting the door behind him. He rounded the house, laughing as he heard him struggling to get the door unlocked. He would never have that problem with his shifter strength.

Once back in his truck, he marked him off the list. He went to River's house, seeing she wasn't home. He moved through

her small home, slightly disturbed by the number of stuffed animals she had on display. It crept him out.

He shrugged the feeling off and kept looking. There was nothing there and no sign of Lyra. He left the house as quickly as he had arrived.

At Callum's house, he heard the man moving around. He rubbed his head, trying to think of a way to get into the house without him knowing.

He then had an idea. He pulled his phone out and made a call. He went around the other side of Callum's house when his doorbell rang.

He slipped inside as Callum went to answer the door. He did a quick look through the kitchen and into the living room.

“Order for eighteen pizzas.”

“I didn't order any pizzas. You have the wrong address.”

“Sir, you did. Just ten minutes ago, and you rushed them.”

“Kid, I didn't order any pizzas.”

He peeked down the hallway seeing the pizza boy with the pizzas and Callum looking pissed. He hurried up the stairs taking his opportunity.

“Sir, I'm not leaving until you pay for these. Your total is a hundred and eighteen dollars.”

He went through the bedrooms and ran his hands through his hair, frustrated. There was no sign of Lyra. He was running out of places.

He only had one more name on the list, and he was fucked. But what if they didn't keep her in their houses? It was something he hadn't thought about before. If none of them had her, she could be anywhere.

“Take your pizzas back. I didn't order them.”

Timber hurried down the stairs. The argument up front was growing heated. He slipped out the back door and around the house.

He heard Callum slam the door in the guy's face. "Dude! If you don't pay, I'm going to lose my job."

He walked down the sidewalk toward the pizza guy's van. He slipped a hundred and a fifty under the windshield wiper with a note to leave the pizzas wherever he wanted.

He climbed into his truck and headed to the last address on his list. He was worried. He needed to find Lyra. He parked when he noticed someone was coming out of Devlen's house. He squinted, trying to see better, and his body clenched. It was Pauley.

What the fuck is he doing here?

His stomach told him it wasn't going to be an answer he liked. He pulled himself out of the truck. His fingers curled into fists.

Pauley walked down the sidewalk, and his body froze when he saw him coming. "Timber."

"You son of a bitch," he growled. "You know where they have her, don't you?"

Pauley took a step back pulling his hands up. "I don't. I have ..."

"Don't fucking lie to me," he snapped, grabbing his collar. His bear roared. "I will snap your fucking neck! What the fuck are you doing here?"

Pauley blinked, unable to form a sentence, but it was clear. He was siding with the council on this. He thought a pure bloodline was the way to live.

"You piece of shit!"

"You can't hate me for my beliefs, Timber. It's better for the clan."

"No, you being dead would be better for the clan! Acting like you're my friend, and then you sneak around behind my back!"

"I'm ..."

“You are,” he snarled, pulling him closer to him. “You are not my friend. Tell me where Lyra is!”

He stuttered, and he tightened his hold on his collar. He wanted to crush his windpipe.

“She is my life, and trust me, I won’t mind a little blood on my hands to get her. I am a desperate man, and you are in my fucking way.”

“All right, all right!” He threw his hands up. “They took her to an abandoned barn near the edge of town. It’s off Route 84. It’s been empty for years. Devlen purchased it a couple of months ago.”

He narrowed his eyes on the bastard but knew he was telling the truth. That was the thing about Pauley. He didn’t like confrontations.

“If you tell them about me going for her, it will be the biggest mistake of your life.”

Pauley’s throat bobbed.

“I will take pleasure in cutting your cock off and shoving it so far down your throat you’ll wish you were dead. All thoughts of having a future will be destroyed, and I will be the reason. Remember that.”

He shoved him away and turned back to his vehicle. Pauley didn’t say anything, and he didn’t need to. They were done.

THIRTY



LYRA

Lyra's hands were losing all sensation as the day slowly began to fade beyond her. She watched the little slit of light diminish through the barn doors, her hope resting on that tiny shimmer of illumination. Her throat was dry, her stomach folding into itself with hunger, and her fear had nearly swallowed her whole.

She had been glad that at least they had placed her sitting on a bushel of hay. It was raggedy and rough, making the bottom of her legs itchy, even through her slacks. But her feet hadn't gone numb. Well, until the freeze of darkness fell.

It cast upon her and the barn like a cape, sucking away any warmth the sun had brought. A frosty glow emanated from her breath. As hope sank away, the entire interior of the barn disappeared into an oily black abyss.

Lyra was surprised she had enough energy to panic. Her breath went in and out of her mouth like steam, and she thought twice when she thought about screaming. She had screamed once she was sure they had left her, but there was no reply. She had screamed for a good hour, or whatever amount of time it had been. And nothing.

She couldn't even hear cars swirling by. That was how far from civilization they were. She had tried to focus on her feet, wrangling the bindings behind her back to maintain some blood flow. But they had knotted it well; she wasn't going anywhere.

Lyra let her head droop onto her chest out of exhaustion. Her arms were extensions of her body, but her hands were phantoms. In her lulling daze, she imagined needing to have them amputated. Then what would happen with her life? Would Timber even want some inexperienced nanny with no hands taking care of his daughter?

Lyra was delirious, but the thought still broke her heart.

She began to doze, then she heard something wooden scraping against something else, likely wooden too. Lyra shot her head up, her heart galloping like a horse in its final lap of a big race.

“HELLO?” she yelled.

Her voice was raspy and not in a sexy way. She struggled with the bindings, in case it was the shifters, back to make sure she hadn't moved. The lock of the barn door rattled, then was abruptly ripped to pieces. Lyra stopped struggling, bracing herself against the hay under her bum.

In the pale moonlight, Timber stood there, victorious. A rusty lock was broken into two pieces in his hand. Lyra had never felt more elated.

“I think their lock is broken,” he quipped.

Lyra began to laugh incoherently, suddenly aware of how thirsty she was, how hungry she was, and how in dire need of rest, warmth, and love she was. Timber went to her quickly, releasing her wrists from her bindings first, letting her come loose from the beam she had been tied to for hours.

She had been leaning forward when he had snapped them off, the release uttering thrilling. She toppled forward, going headfirst into the barn soil, but Timber caught her by the chest with his big mitt of a hand.

Lyra let her body go limp, the adrenaline beginning to dissipate out of her pores and exhausting her beyond belief.

“Hey, hey,” he whispered, taking her head in his hands. “I'm here now, Lyra. Everything is going to be okay.”

She believed him the way she believed everything he had to say to her. She fell into his arms the way a child falls into those of their loving parents, scooped up from a long day in the sun. Her wrists throbbed, which was good, as he carried her into the night in his arms.

Lyra felt herself placed softly onto the front seat, which had been pushed down so she could lay flat on her back. Timber held her chin for her, pouring water tenderly between her lips. She drank as much as she could, not wanting to overdo it and make herself vomit.

“That’s it, not too much. I’m taking you back to your mother’s. Marigold is waiting for you.”

Timber covered her with a blanket, then lifted her wrists to his face. Her eyes fluttered open and closed slowly. It was difficult to keep them open. He took some ice from a pack in the back and placed it in her lap for her wrists to rest on, but not before kissing each one sweetly.

“We’ll make sure nothing happens to those lovely hands. You’re going to be okay, darling.”

Lyra let herself lean back into the seat, her bones finally giving in to rest. The ice on her wrists was prickly, but it soothed the aches and would keep them from blowing up into a balloon. She trusted Timber with everything; he made her heart swell even in her stuporous state.

They arrived at her mother’s home, and Timber carried her inside just as he had to the truck. She was in and out of consciousness, only hearing the faint cries of her mother, who only wanted to cradle her daughter in her arms.

“Let’s put her in bed and let her rest for a bit,” Timber whispered.

Timber and her mother took care of her, giving her a bath, feeding her soup, and then laying her in a soft, dark, warm room. It had been her childhood bedroom; she sensed it.

“I am so glad you are okay, honey,” her mother said, kissing her forehead.

Lyra knew now what her mother must have felt. The clutching of one's heart because your heart exists outside of you. Her heart resided inside Marigold and Timber, and she could have easily lost them both.

Her mother hugged her and wept. Timber watched from the door, his loving energy always all-encompassing like a totem placed over an archway.

She would never forget the infinite expanse of that comfort.

THIRTY-ONE



TIMBER

Timber couldn't keep Lyra in bed for long. She was quickly restless, insisting on getting up.

He relented, but he hovered close to her, and that's what he was doing now as Karen stood holding Marigold. She giggled happily when her eyes landed on them. He wondered if she missed Lyra as much as he had.

He walked toward Karen, who handed Marigold over. Marigold grabbed at his clothes, pressing herself against him. He cradled her, listening to her heartbeat.

He relaxed, having both of his girls by his side again. He never wanted to lose them. And he meant the promise he made to Lyra about not keeping their relationship a secret.

"Thank you for bringing her back to me," she said, looking at Lyra. "Are you okay?"

Lyra nodded her head. "I'm fine. A little sore and shaken up, but that's it."

Karen sighed, her shoulders dropping in relief. He watched her eyes look over Lyra, looking for marks. She'd been worried.

Lyra gave her a hug which slightly calmed her mother.

After a moment of seeing her daughter, Karen snapped her eyes back to him. She glared at him, shaking her head. "While this is a heartwarming moment, I still don't like you very much. You put my daughter in a dangerous position."

He looked at her, confused. He thought about what she had stated before he went to find Lyra. Something about cheating on her. He didn't understand because that wasn't what happened.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, kissing the top of Marigold's head. He inhaled her scent, missing her baby smell.

"You shouldn't cheat," she snipped at him, crossing her arms as Lyra pushed free.

"Mom," Lyra whispered. "Please don't. I think we should talk for a moment."

"Don't what? Get angry? I'm already there." Her eyes flew back to him. "You shouldn't have cheated on my daughter. Used her in such a manner. It's men like you that make it hard for girls to move on."

"Hold on a second," he said, waving his hand. "I think there is a misunderstanding going on here."

"Yes, Mom," Lyra said, but her mother waved her hand, forcing them to both fall silent.

"I'm not done," she continued. "My daughter deserves better. For you to be with the secretary, yet you come here to save her? How does that make any sense in your mind?"

He froze. He was confused, and his eyes went to Lyra, who mashed her lips together. She seemed like she was trying not to laugh. If only her mother knew he was really a very loyal bear.

"I'm confused. I don't have the words." He didn't know what to say. He didn't know where she was getting that information, but he had a feeling it was Lyra.

"Clearly," her mother muttered, shaking her head. "That is very clear here. But you need to figure it out. My daughter may be young, but that doesn't mean she has time for you to be using her in whatever way you see fit."

He adjusted Marigold shaking his head. "I can assure you, that isn't what's happening here. I would never do that."

“It is. That is what’s happening. You’re sleeping with your secretary and my daughter. Pick a woman and stick to it, sir. This bouncing around is unhealthy for all of you.”

His mouth hung open in shock. He didn’t know what to say.

Lyra burst out laughing, and they all looked at her. She wiped at her eyes, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t laugh. I really shouldn’t be laughing.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” her mother grumbled. “This is a serious conversation. I’m grateful he came to help you, but this doesn’t answer any of your big questions, dear.”

“Mom, I know that you’re only trying to help, but I exaggerated the situation.”

She looked back at him, ignoring what Lyra was saying. “Do you want my daughter or not? Who do you want, her or this other woman?”

Lyra snorted, covering her mouth. He stood confused. What other woman?

“Momma.” Lyra chuckled. “I lied. There was no other woman.”

Her mother looked at her with wide eyes. “What do you mean you lied? Why on earth would you lie about that?”

Lyra shrugged, giving her a weak smile. “It just came out. Timber wasn’t sleeping with his secretary. He doesn’t even have one.”

Her eyes flew back to him and then back to Lyra. She scowled at Lyra. “You lied to me?”

Lyra nodded, looking at him. “I told my mother you were sleeping with the secretary because it was easier. I couldn’t say the truth because it hurt too much.”

She chuckled, looking embarrassed.

“Before I interviewed with you, she’d stated that I’d end up getting into a relationship, and the guy would leave me for

a secretary.” She wiped away some tears in her eyes. “I just rolled with it when I left. It was easier than the truth.”

Her mother stood shocked that she’d lied.

He wondered if she was going to tell her mom the truth. He didn’t see a reason not to. But he would leave that up for her to decide.

He bounced Marigold and looked at Karen. “I don’t have a secretary. And I love your daughter. I chose your daughter. That’s why I’m here.”

Karen shook her head at Lyra. “You shouldn’t have lied to me.”

“I know.” Lyra nodded. “And I’m sorry.”

Karen huffed and uncrossed her arms. She looked at him for a moment, her harsh gaze softening. “You love my daughter?”

He nodded. “With all my heart.” His heart flipped, realizing it was the first time he’d admitted that.

Lyra’s eyes were wide in shock, and he gave her a gentle smile. He could see that Lyra loved him. She’d loved him for a while.

THIRTY-TWO



LYRA

She stood there, shocked for a moment. Timber loved her, and he'd said it with such confidence that it twisted her up inside. She couldn't help but smile.

Marigold wiggled in his arms, and she wanted to reach out and kiss both of them. But she wasn't going to with her mother standing next to her. Her mother, who was less than impressed with her at the moment.

Timber looked at her mother, holding a stern expression. "I have loved your daughter for some time now. I care deeply about her. And I want to ensure that she stays safe."

Her mother looked at her with a worried expression. They were all thinking the same thing. Who kidnapped her? And would they try again?

"I think it would be best if you came back home with me," Timber said, giving her a stern look. "I need to protect you, and I can't do it here."

She wanted to go with him, but there was still a problem. She didn't want to be hidden away. She couldn't be. That was why she left.

"Timber, I don't think that's a good idea," she whispered back.

His face dropped, and her mother piped up. "Why not? I agree with him. It would be safer. They got you when you were here. What's stopping them from trying again?"

She wanted to argue and tell her mother there was more to this, but they didn't have the time. And she was too tired to say much.

“Mom, I just ...”

“Lyra,” her mother cut her off, “go with him. Whatever problems you have, I'm sure you two can talk it out and fix them. And if you don't, I don't care. I just want you to be safe.”

Worry hung heavily over her mother, and she wouldn't stop until Lyra agreed to go. And she wanted to. She wanted that security as well.

She gave her mother a nod. “All right, I'll go. But I'll call you.”

Her mother nodded. “Good.”

They packed up all of Marigold's and Lyra's stuff and headed out to the car. She gave her mother a hug, still feeling a little uneasy.

“You shouldn't have lied to me,” she said as she pulled back. “And when this all settles down, we are going to have a conversation.”

No, she shouldn't have lied to her mother, and when she got back home, she would willingly talk to her. She gave her a tight hug before she slipped free, jumping into Timber's truck.

She relaxed into the seat as he started the engine. She looked outside the window taking in her mother's house. She swallowed, nervous.

“Everything is going to be okay,” Timber said, giving her hand a squeeze.

She knew it was, but that didn't mean she wouldn't worry. She looked at him while he backed out.

“You came for me ...” she whispered to him ... “You came.”

“Of course I did.” He glanced at her. “I meant what I said.”

She smiled, and for a moment, she felt happy. But their relationship was still confusing. She didn't want to be hidden away like before.

“Just because I'm going doesn't mean I'm happy with you keeping our relationship secret. I don't want a relationship like that.”

He looked at her, and his hand reached out, grabbing hers. “It's not. It's out in the open. That's why they were going after you. It was because they know I'm with you.”

She felt her lips form an O, but no sound came out. She gave his hand a tight grip in return.

“They are trying to figure out a way to get rid of me. I'm not going to let that happen, but we aren't hiding anymore.” He dropped his gaze to her. “I'm not going to ever make you hide our relationship again.”

It made her heart leap that he didn't want to keep their love a secret anymore. She smiled back at him, ready to face things together.

“We just have to figure out what we want to do. I know the council isn't going to let this go. We won't go down without a fight.”

She thought about it and looked at Marigold. She watched her drift off to sleep. She looked back at Timber. “We can't be the only ones.”

He looked at her, confused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you can't be the only bear shifter that is with a human. It's not possible.”

He blinked and licked his lips, thinking about it.

“You're right! There have to be others like us. I told the council that,” he replied. “There are surely other couples out there that are keeping their relationships a secret from the council. We just have to find them.” If they banded together, they could maybe change the council's mind.

“It's a thought,” she offered. “Or do you think it's crazy?”

He shook his head. “It’s not crazy. It’s really smart, actually.”

She felt proud the rest of the drive. And when they arrived at his house, she found she’d missed it. She smiled. He leaned over, pulled her toward him, and kissed her. She moaned. She had forgotten how much she loved kissing him.

“Tomorrow, I will get started on looking for other couples. But for tonight, I don’t want to even think about that.”

He kissed her again, his hand wrapping around and holding her firmly against him. He was taking her breath away.

She leaned into it, wanting him. But she also knew that Marigold was right behind them, asleep.

She leaned free with a giggle. “We need to get Marigold inside and in bed first, Timber.”

He smiled back at her. “That won’t take long.”

He unbuckled and got out of the car in a few seconds. She watched him move, biting her lower lip. She looked forward to what the future held for them.

THIRTY-THREE



TIMBER

Lyra was a very responsible and professional woman. It was one of the many reasons why Timber had fallen so hard for her, other than the mate aspect, obviously ... which his bear would not let him forget. She always put Marigold first, which meant something to him, something he wanted to express not only in words but with physical expression for the rest of their lives.

Marigold was Timber's daughter, his charge, his entire soul, even if taking care of a little being wasn't something he had planned on. Or even wanted, for that matter. So having Lyra come into his life and sweep him off his feet through loving Marigold, well, there was no other way than he could think of it other than entirely cosmic.

It was the way she moved toward him. The way she touched him, so gentle, tender, yet firm and formidable. The way she gazed up, fluttering her lashes in an unconscious gesture of attraction. That was when he could sense her heartbeat through the thin, supple veil of skin over her jugular; her delicious skin thumping up and down, pacing the rhythm of their inevitable coming together.

She had put Marigold to sleep, and he was waiting for her in what was now their bedroom. He hadn't realized how desperately he had missed her until coming upon her in the barn, bound and bruised in ways he could only fathom. He had tried to put Marigold to bed on account of her sore wrists, but she had insisted.

“These ham hocks are very capable,” she had quipped, then gave him a playful and sultry wink.

“Oh, I am very aware,” he snarled into her neck.

She had groaned with a brief release, then peeled herself from him to take the child to bed. The process was often an hour at least, getting the little girl into her pj’s, brushing her teeth, then finally, reading her into sweet slumber. Sometimes Timber contributed, but Lyra had insisted on account of her own exhaustion.

She had also missed the child deeply; he could see the flicker of love like a candle in the dark every time Lyra regarded her.

So he waited in the bedroom for the sound of Marigold’s bedroom door to shut softly. He was sitting on the bed, wearing only his underwear, waiting for his beloved to return to him. He also had an ice pack sitting on his thighs, which he had retrieved about a minute before she opened their bedroom door, sneaking in quietly.

Lyra had changed into the tank top she usually wore to sleep in, which fit tightly due to her generous bust. Though, it was still sexy, the way the fabric strained against her chest and arms.

When she turned to him, her smile was dim, her blinks slow and arduous. She gazed at the ice pack, continuing to smile in the fatigued way that made Timber’s heart ache.

“Give me your hands,” he said, holding his own out to her.

“Yes, sir.”

She held them out to him, palms up. Timber touched them delicately, analyzing them like a clinician with tiny brush strokes of his fingertips. The glow of the bedside table illuminated only faint bruising.

He sighed with relief.

“Not as bad as I had anticipated,” he murmured.

Lyra turned her hands and laid them on his bare chest, tucking herself between his legs as she remained standing.

They were almost the same height that way, with her breasts pushing against his skin and her fingers lacing themselves around his neck.

Though she had appeared worn out initially, she was peering at him with a conviction that gave her eyes a refreshing gloss. She spoke firmly but still with that velvet layer of sensuality.

“Claim me.”

Timber groaned, hands coming to her thighs and waist, then cupped around her ass. He pulled her to him, a fun smile painted across her lips.

“Your wrists ...” he whispered.

“Oh, stop that,” she asserted. “You know I’m okay and that I can handle it. I don’t want to wait any longer; I refuse to be some secret mistress. I want to be yours. Completely.”

Timber had never heard anything more profoundly romantic in his entire life. It made him hard instantly, and he knew that she could feel it under the fabric of the tiny pants she wore to bed. Her eyes sparkled, and she craned her neck to him, pushing her tongue inside him and shoving him by the shoulders onto the bed.

She knew what claiming involved, and she knew what it meant to him and his kind. It wasn’t something she was going to ask for lightly. He knew she wanted it as much as he did by the ravenous movements of her body, the haphazard stripping of her clothing, the growl that rumbled through her lips, and the speed with which she shimmied him out of his boxers.

Lyra stayed on top of him as his cock slid inside her wet and ready pussy. Her eyes rolled back as she rode him, her naked, luscious body quite a sight to see.

She curled her body on top of him, pinning her forehead to his, and held him by the neck as both of their climaxes rose like approaching thunder. Timber gripped her ass as it bounced against his cock, the bed beginning to rock against the wall from the zeal of their lovemaking.

“Oh, Timber,” she moaned over his lips. “Do it. I want it. I want it now.”

It happened in slow motion. Their climaxes spilled at nearly the same instant as their muscles tensed. Timber’s creature came to life in the form of glittering fangs and a gaping grin. She turned her neck to him, offering herself gracefully like a lamb to slaughter. By virtue of all of his instincts, Timber sank his teeth into her plushy skin.

“Oh, Timber!”

Lyra grunted and growled as her orgasm shot up and down her body. Timber felt the same way, except he was transported into a whole other realm.

He pulled his teeth away as the two of them swayed in post-climatic bliss. He gazed at the indents as she toppled on top of him, a beautiful, sleek pile of bones.

“I will never hide you,” he whispered as he stroked her hair spilling over him. “Never again.”

THIRTY-FOUR



LYRA

Timber had taken Lyra's idea to heart, which made her feel even more loved and adored. The day after he had given her his claiming bite mark, which he repeatedly asked about, he called up several of his shifters within the Montana area who he suspected had secret human wives. It turned out there were more than he had expected.

Over a mass, private email chain, he explained his and Lyra's experiences and her subsequent kidnapping. They all agreed that it wasn't reasonable of the council to force them all into hiding, so they decided on a plan to meet at Timber's residence to come up with a solution.

Lyra was stunned by the speed of his conviction which also warmed her heart. No one had ever acted so quickly on their promises for her. Words meant a lot, but not when they were empty.

Timber was proving to be a refreshing take on the various men in her life who had made grandiose proclamations yet never backed them up with actions. Maybe there were multiple beautiful benefits to being with a bear shifter.

She felt warm and cozy as she set up the living room to make space for eight bear shifters and their mates. A few of them even had their own children and had been hiding out for years ... staying away from the watchful eye of the council. She had come to think of it as her home, too, as opposed to her lover and employer's; she could only imagine what a couple who had been hiding for years felt like.

Despite Timber's hospitality, Lyra found herself nervous as she waited at the front door, his hand resting gently on the top of her butt. Every day she felt more and more like they were one unit, especially when he peered down at her, his nostrils flaring and eyes glittering with his love for her.

He tapped her for reassurance.

"Are you okay, honey?"

She smiled up at him, and he smiled back. Timber had been such a solemn, stoic character when they'd first met. But after only a few weeks of knowing one another, his expressions had begun to diversify. The grin that trembled upon his lips when he regarded her was one of her favorites.

"Just a bit nervous," she said. "I'd never been around so many bear shifters before."

Timber kissed the top of her head, and she sighed. There was nothing to worry about at that moment; she could simply bask in the glow of her mate's love.

"This is your world now, too," he said softly into her hair. "I want you to be as comfortable and confident as you can be. And I know you will settle in perfectly."

It was the exact pep talk she needed. She sighed, then gave him a solid, passionate kiss just before the doorbell rang through the foyer.

Eight couples and a few of their youngsters slowly trickled in through the front door. Timber had hired a catering service for the evening, who arrived promptly, setting up in the kitchen with a feast for kings. Many of the bear shifters looked like Timber, that forestry, woodsman look that had been so striking when they'd first met. But then some were leaner with thinner builds.

But they all had that irrevocable sense of strength and loyalty Lyra had never encountered in so many people ... particularly men ... in her entire life. They sat around the living room with their human mates and a handful of children scurrying around the floors with toys and snacks.

Lyra sat on the armchair of Timber's wingback, feeling like a queen as she listened and watched Marigold play.

"There is a likelihood that I have more attention due to my leadership within the pack. It has been harder for me to conceal my relationship than perhaps a few of you have been able to."

Bear shifters and humans alike nodded along. Lyra had introduced herself to them all, paying special attention to the women whom she felt more of an inclination to impress. They had all been her at some point, thrown into a strange, fairy tale world where they and their beloved were at risk. They had all embraced her with the same warmth the shifters had given Timber.

"We need to form our own council," one of the larger, thicker shifters named Fred said. "If the main council doesn't agree, there will be no other option."

Fred's mate, Isabel, was a woman with long black hair and an impeccable posture that seemed to be about Lyra's age. She nodded along with her mate, her hand settling on his thigh in agreement.

"It's not fair for all of us to have to live this way. I don't want our children growing up not able to embrace both sides of their rich histories."

Everyone looked at the children giggling on the floor between them. They were all so sweet and innocent. Isabel was right; no child should have to grow up that way.

Everyone had agreed they would confront the main council in unison. They would meet again once the council came to a decision. For the rest of the evening, they spoke of lighter subjects, getting to know each other in a way that only shifters mixed with humans were able to.

Lyra put Marigold to bed just as everyone departed. She dozed against her shoulder as she said goodbye to the new friends whom she hoped she would have for life. A few of the women gave Marigold a light kiss, with Lyra exchanging kisses of her own with the tired tykes headed out the door.

They stood at the threshold together, waving to all of the new shifters they'd just met. Timber held her hand as the day faded into dusk. She wasn't afraid of the night for the first time since she'd arrived. No, she was no longer alone.

Timber and Marigold were her lanterns.

THIRTY-FIVE



TIMBER

The bear council was set to meet at midday a few days after the shifters and their human mates had met at Timber's residence. He felt confident for the first time in a long time, and it had everything to do with Lyra, his stunning and spectacular mate, standing by his side.

They walked into headquarters with Timber leading the charge. Lyra firmly held his hand, wearing a long fitted plaid dress with an equally stylish beige jacket. Her hair looked almost rosy in the glow of afternoon light, long and cascading down the front of her shoulders like an elegant tapestry.

He felt that her confidence had blossomed too. She walked with an air of self-assurance that he had detected glimpses of when they'd first met, except then, it was a show for his affection. She moved in powerful strides that made him want her keenly. Gripping Lyra's hand, feeling her standing tall as her heels clicked against the glossy floors of the council hall, Timber felt both his heart and cock were as strong and firm as ever.

The rest of the shifters and their mates trailed behind him, loyal soldiers following closely. They all sat together in their courtroom-like seats while Timber and Lyra stood directly in front of the council stage, waiting for the members to ascend from their chambers.

Timber kept his hand hooked around Lyra's. He felt both of their pulses beating through their skin, syncing into one tapping tune. They looked at each other at the same time, with Lyra giving him a sexy smirk.

“Let’s do this,” she mouthed.

The doors of the chambers opened, and all of the shifters, plus their mates, stood at attention. The members wore their traditional bear council robes as they climbed to their posts, regarding Timber as they approached.

Devlen, Elias, Jameson, and Callum were all present. Callum was at the center, gazing down at Lyra, then scanning the other shifters and their mates with a preemptive scowl.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” Callum announced, taking a seat.

“Good afternoon.”

Lyra and Timber spoke at the same time. Elias drew down his brows, looking back and forth between the other members. He didn’t like that Lyra was standing there at the front. Her kind was not well thought of by some bear shifters.

But Timber had meant it when he told her he wasn’t going to hide her anymore. That life was over.

“This council meeting has come into session at approximately 12:03 p.m.,” Jameson said, slamming the gavel and marking notes on his tablet. “The meeting was proposed by one Timber Mahogany, leader of the Montana Maul.”

Callum sighed, then leaned back into his chair. Timber gave Lyra’s hand a squeeze, then stepped forward, crossing his hands in front of him formally. He still felt her breath, her heartbeat, her essence behind him, carrying him forward everywhere he went.

“I have somewhat of an idea about what you called this meeting for,” Callum said, his lips tight and nearly disappearing into his face. “I see that you have brought a few friends with you this time.”

“Here, here!” one of the shifters called out.

“Order, order!” Devlen slammed the gavel. “This meeting is between the leader of the Montana Maul and the bear council. No constituents are set to participate.”

Timber couldn't hold back his broad, childlike smile. Callum wasn't a fan of it.

"And what is it exactly that you are so happy about, good leader?" he said, leaning forward in his chair. "You have yet to make your proposal to the council."

Timber turned, then waved his hand over the various shifters and women who sat in the pew-like stands beyond him. He felt he was so big and tall it was as if he could touch the sky with his fingertips.

"The spectators you see before you today are all my friends, yes, but not only that, we share a unique and painful bond; we have all been forced into hiding the true nature of our love."

The room remained silent. His heart slammed in his ears.

Nevertheless, he went on.

"I have investigated, upon my own volition, the circumstances of several of these shifters' lives. They, too, have found mates within the souls of human women. So my tale isn't one that is entirely different at all."

Callum spoke up after grunting with impatience. "Land the plane, Timber."

Timber swelled with anger, but it did not shake his eloquence.

"Council, I propose that you alter your position on the basis of practicality. This is not an uncommon occurrence; we cannot sever our ties to our hearts. We cannot and will not waiver."

Jameson leaned forward, holding the raised gavel in his hand.

"The council is firm in its belief that human and bear shifting mating is strictly prohibited. You cannot simply gather a group together and say that reality has changed. There is a reason why this council has existed for so long."

"It is archaic!" Timber boomed. "You must grow in order to fit in with the times, or your presence is negated."

“HERE, HERE!”

The group of shifters and wives cheered, hooped, and hollered. Timber began to cackle, yet he wasn't sure if it was due to elation or madness. Likely both.

“ORDER. ORDER!” Jameson called out.

“The council is not going to waiver upon its decision, dear Timber,” Callum spoke up, rising to his feet. “So let it be known, and known in this very moment, if you, if any of you, continue your illegal relationships, you will be kicked out and banished from not only the Montana Maul but the bear council indefinitely.”

Jameson slammed down the gavel multiple times to call the session to an end. The council members solemnly left while the shifters and humans yelled and rattled their disapproval loudly.

Lyra slipped her hand into his, then whispered without caution or hesitation. “We will get there. Don't you worry.”

THIRTY-SIX



LYRA

Lyra stood her ground in the council room when the bear shifters hollered behind her. She knew, merely by Timber's aura and how his hand sealed into fists so tight, they could be stones, that it hadn't been the outcome he was looking for.

She had suspected that it would be as such since they had yet to barely open their minds even an inch when it came to the shifter and human integration. So she took him by the hand as the chamber doors slammed shut, their new bear friends in the stands close to inciting a riot.

"Let's get them out of here," she implored. "We don't want to start something we can't finish."

Timber's big, bold eyes softened as he gazed down at her. He nodded, then raised a hand in the air.

The entire room quieted instantly. Timber's voice was calm and reasonable. She admired him deeply for it.

"Come, my friends. Let us gather at my residence to discuss further action. Don't give them another reason to be close-minded."

The men and women nodded in agreement, then proceeded out of the room in an orderly fashion. Lyra squeezed his hand, honored to be the woman by his side during such a revolution.

They moved silently back through the opulent hallway and into the bright day. Lyra didn't feel his anger seeping through his pores anymore. He had gone back to the tranquil, forward-thinking man she had seen during the initial meeting with the bear shifters and their wives.

It made her heart slam between her rib cage like a pinball.

“Now, we must fight,” Timber said as they stood outside headquarters. “We have to take them on before they can announce banishment. Then when we win, we will take over the council, permanently altering that archaic rule.”

Lyra beamed at her man. He was focused, so focused, that he hadn't realized she was pressing her body against his. His hand slid down over her jacket, cupping her ass firmly.

She wasn't even sure he realized he was doing it. Either way, it made her feel powerful beyond comprehension.

“And how do we plan out this battle?” she whispered into his ear.

The hairs on his neck stood, and he finally turned to regard her. She saw that rabid desire in him, as well as conviction. Lyra squeezed her thighs together with vibrating attraction.

“We will talk again at our place. We send forth a notice to the council. They'll send out their representative.”

Lyra's mouth ran dry. The mere thought of her beloved getting hurt caused her legs to feel like water. Timber must have felt it because he pulled her in swiftly by the grip of her ass.

She gasped, leaving her lips parted as he raised his brows at her with a stern look.

“Don't start getting nervous on me. Things are going to be okay. I feel it.”

Lyra trusted him. In fact, it was more than she had trusted anyone in her entire life. Perhaps it was her human nature to worry. But being held so closely, so tightly in Timber's thick arms, she knew he had to be right.

“I won't, sir,” she mused in her husky tone.

His eyes sparkled, then he growled into her neck with a light nibble. God, he drove her mad. They would certainly have to release some tension later.

The two lovers returned to their residence, meeting with the rest of the shifters and their wives. Some of the females weren't present, as they had to tend to the rest of the family. Nevertheless, Timber made his proclamation, stating that he would send out a notice to the council of the impending battle.

Everyone was on board, just as Timber had said. They knew how things worked better than Lyra did, as did their wives. The women who were present said they would fight with what they had, if it came down to it, for the freedom of their husbands and families.

Lyra admired them greatly. At one time, they had been where she was, finding themselves in a strange, surreal world of shapeshifting men with laws and rules they didn't understand. But they had stuck by the man they loved and had been rewarded generously with an eternal commitment and riveting passion.

She could see it in their eyes. The love was real, just as real as it was coursing through her veins and into her heart.

The shifters decided to form their own council for the time being while the fight was being sorted. They quite easily voted Timber as the leader of the council, calling it the New Montana Bear Maul.

Timber was clearly chuffed, proud to be leading such a change in the bear shifter community. They all agreed to meet up again the next day to mark their territory and wait for the notice to the original council to be received.

After they departed, Lyra saw to Marigold, who was especially fussy. They spent the night with her, reading in front of the fireplace, talking, and joking about lighter and happier things. Through it all, Lyra felt a sensation of doom in her heart, the same one which had trickled up her spine earlier in front of the council headquarters.

She tried to bat it away as human fragility. She inherently trusted Timber without a doubt, but her adoration for him had morphed into fear. They didn't speak of it that night, though, as Marigold took some time to get to bed. It only left them time to lay next to each other.

“Do you think she can feel it?”

Lyra whispered in the dark, the two of them exhausted from the day’s events. She had wanted to make love, as she always did with Timber, but she could sense the wheels of the revolution turning in his head.

She rubbed his arm up and down as he spoke. “She’s a shifter, so likely, yes.”

They kissed in a romantic and drawn-out embrace. She settled on his shoulder as they slept.

THIRTY-SEVEN



TIMBER

Timber sensed Lyra's anxiety creeping into her body like an elusive creature of the night. It came with being so closely bonded with a mate he could read her like a book with changing tides and emotions that he could tap into at any moment.

Even when he didn't want to, he felt her mind and her body, the subtlest altering of her heartbeat as it happened in real-time. He felt it when he was holding her outside the headquarters and when they were falling asleep later that night. He knew she wanted to make love, as did he, but he was trying to consider the rebellion, the response from the council, and the potential weighty burden of becoming the new leader.

He tried to place her emotions on the shelf for the time being as he and the other shifters met for breakfast in their living room, which had become its own self-made council room. He once again had his chef make an exorbitant amount of food for them all as they discussed the proceeding plans.

"I have sent a message out to the council, and their reply is pending," he announced from his batwing chair. "For today, I think we should mark the territory where the battle will take place. The usual rules will apply; the loser can either leave or conform to the new laws."

The shifters hollered and clapped in agreement. Lyra sat on the chair arm as she had done several times before.

"Will it be a group battle?" Isabel asked, holding a mug of coffee to her lips.

“That is yet to be determined,” Timber replied. “Sometimes it is, but other times they offer one of their strongest to fight for them. In that case, we will vote for our own representative.”

Timber felt Lyra’s pulse gallop through her veins. They both knew that if the latter were to happen, he would be the one to stand up for the new council.

None of the shifters or their wives said it, but Timber knew. He was their leader, after all.

Once breakfast was finished, the shifters headed out into the dim day, chrome clouds covering the sun like thin drapes. They were set to mark the territory scattered throughout the state. Lyra stayed behind with the wives, taking care of Marigold and the rest of the kin.

He gave her a light kiss before he departed, feeling her slender hands wrapping around his neck. It wasn’t passion for passion’s sake ... it was desperation.

Her eyes were as big as the moon when he glanced down at her.

“We will talk later. I am fine,” he muttered.

He planted another kiss on her forehead, engulfing himself in her enchanting scent before peeling himself from her form. She said nothing, standing on the threshold of the door, watching him and the other shifters head out in opposing directions.

They had laid out a map on the coffee table during breakfast, with a red felt pen where they would leave their traces. Timber and Fred would go close to the borders, as it was the riskiest, and they were inarguably the strongest of the shifters. They did so, using their clothing and bear claw imprints in trees and dirt so the bear council would know they meant business.

It took most of the day to make sure all of the Montana area was covered. By the time dusk fell, Timber was headed home, his fists clutching the steering wheel with excited anticipation.

He and the shifters had decided upon a location where the battle would take place, which was in the middle of the woods, not far off from his own property. The council wouldn't take long in getting back to him. Their reputation was on the line.

As he pulled into the driveway, twilight had sunk into darkness. His phone vibrated, and he yanked it out, his heart nearly beating out of his throat.

The council had replied.

They were sending a representative for the fight, a known bear shifter named Edmund. He was on the council at a lower level and was a good foot or two taller than Timber. He was also a few years younger, which meant he was more feral, ambitious, and had something to prove.

The fight would take place at dusk the next day. Council rules, which didn't mean fighting to the death ... though if death were to occur, the opposing side would accept it as fate. He knew how things worked. He replied to them, agreeing to their terms and citing himself as the New Montana Maul's representative.

He sat in the driveway for some time, summoning the courage to inform Lyra. She would be terrified about the idea of him getting hurt. He once thought that such fears meant that she didn't believe in him, but it was quite the opposite; she did, fervently, but the concept of his loss overshadowed that faith.

But it was the world she was going to be a part of, and he had told her that he wasn't going to keep her a secret, nor would he keep secrets from her. It was a way to keep their bond tight and reliable. Communication was the only way their avid love could be maintained.

Timber got out of the car and went inside, not only staying strong for himself but for Lyra and Marigold. Lyra peeked out of the kitchen, the child slung on her hip.

She knew before he had the chance to open his mouth. Perhaps she was starting to obtain the shifter's intuition since he had marked her. Her heart melted into putty as he sauntered

down the hallway, then touched her tenderly with his hand on her cheek.

“Tomorrow, at dusk,” he whispered.

Marigold was sleepy. Timber took her from Lyra, and she lay on his shoulder. There was nothing sweeter in the world.

“Okay,” Lyra nodded, her unfixed gaze wandering the carpet below.

THIRTY-EIGHT



LYRA

Lyra knew that he was going into the ring for the fight the second he walked in the door that evening. She had spent most of the day with the wives of the shifters, getting to know each other and relating their human woes. Although she found the experiences to be enlightening, her fear remained an insidious sea monster clinging to the back of her skull.

They had all left only a few hours before, leaving Lyra and Marigold alone with her thoughts. She didn't want Timber to think she didn't believe in him. He was massive and strong; she had felt it when they'd made love when he pressed his body into hers and used the force of his might. He could split her in half like he was tearing paper if he wanted to.

But fear was poison, often illogical and fruitless. She had never cared for anyone the way she cared for Timber, so perhaps, all that anxiety came with the territory.

She saw the apology in his eyes when he walked in. Marigold was strapped to her hip and fading fast. His hand was warm and inviting, but the rest of him had made the decision already without her acceptance.

"I'll put her to bed," he said, holding his daughter delicately in his tree trunk arms. "You've had a long day."

His consideration made her ache. She strained her jaw and neck, trying to hold back the tears while he trailed past her and into Marigold's room. She took the time to head to their bedroom, closing the door lightly behind her.

Lyra knew she couldn't talk him out of it. They didn't have many other options. They were the ones who had formed the new council, flushing out these other secret relationships that had thrived in shadows for decades. He had to fight for them as much as he had to fight for her and his child.

Lyra knew that keenly, but that didn't mean she was okay with it. He was a capable, muscular, and sturdy man, so she could only imagine who the council was sending out on their behalf.

Her body hummed with terror, feeling restless and powerless. She paced in front of the mirror, eventually gazing at herself and doing the only thing she thought might be helpful at that moment; she pulled the hair tie from her head, shaking her blonde hair free, then frantically began to strip.

It was absurd, but she thought she could entice him into simply running away with her and Marigold, forgetting all about the bear council and the insurrection, if she offered him her body. Her voluptuous, succulent, luscious, and insatiable body.

She padded to a drawer and pulled the black silk robe she had brought with her, wrapping it around her body quickly as she heard Marigold's bedroom door open and close. She ruffled her hair quickly, casting over the front of her breasts in a disheveled reckless abandon, then sat on the bed. Lyra had crossed her legs and sat up straight, making her already generous bust poke out from her body like two tremendous melons.

Timber turned the doorknob slowly, and it was then that she decided to do something daring. She uncrossed her legs and spread them out the length of the bed, exposing herself to her mate. She leaned back on the bed, puffing out her chest like a bird of prey, feeling sexy, vulnerable, and afraid all at once.

Timber's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets when he finally entered the room. His eyes magnetized down between her legs, his pupils shrinking like a shark's during hunting season. Her pussy pulsed as he slowly descended to his knees.

“Well,” he said in a low, gritty tone, staring into the eye of her pleasure dome. “Good fucking evening to you too, darling.”

Lyra felt briefly elated, his warm breath washing over her wet clit like a soft wind as he moved closer, her thighs trembling with anticipation. He ran his hands under her bent knees, then settled her ass between the bulk of his biceps. He kissed the inside of her thighs, the spongy, sensitive trail to her kingdom.

She finally spoke, her voice shaky, having nearly completely forgotten what she had spread herself out for.

“Don’t fight,” she purred. “Don’t fight tomorrow, baby. Let’s just all go somewhere else, you, me, and Marigold.”

He had been musing between her legs with his eyes closed, kissing each patch with a poet’s tenderness. When she spoke, he paused, looking up at her with a seriousness that wasn’t intimidating.

“I have to fight, honey,” he said, continuing his way to her center. “I’m their leader now. Like I’m your mate, I have to follow through.”

Lyra scolded herself for literally putting herself in such a position. There was no way to argue with him when his pink tongue was slithering out between his lips, gliding up the length of her folds and resting against her electric nub that was screaming for his attention.

She gasped, then let out a moan that would make Venus blush. She fell back to the bed, simultaneously letting go of her fear while she untied the sash of her robe.

They made love nearly all night, the vigor and ruthlessness on an entirely other level. Lyra felt the anguish of her desperation as she rode his cock, encouraged him to take her from behind, and pinned his head between her legs for what felt like the fourth or fifth time in a matter of hours. Her body was buzzing and transcendently satisfied, and just before dawn, they fell into an undisturbed doze.

Lyra wanted to believe the length of their lovemaking that night wasn't a form of farewell. She knew it when they locked eyes, when they felt each other climaxing, that he wasn't going to change his mind. It was a double-edged sword caring for him, as she worshiped his commitment while also detesting it at the same time.

It was the morning of the fight, and they slept naked in each other's arms.

THIRTY-NINE



TIMBER

Timber woke the morning after making love to Lyra, their two bodies nearly fused as one with cosmic entanglement. He detected the scent of rain in the air as tangerine orange streams spilled through the curtains. The sunrise was ominous and breathtaking all at once.

He didn't know what time they had finally fallen off to sleep, but it didn't matter. It was the day of the fight, and he had to prepare physically, mentally, and spiritually. He rose from the bed, showered, and dressed, moving lightly so as to not wake Lyra. She slept soundly, laying on her side like an angelic sculpture, a masterpiece entombed in porcelain.

He would be lying if he didn't admit that tiring her out with his own body hadn't been part of his plan. He had wanted to soothe her fears the way one irons out wrinkles, and he felt he had, plucking her pleasure strings like an expert instrumentalist.

Timber grinned to himself in the raging morning light, tempted to kiss her awake. But he didn't. Instead, he left a note next to the bedside table and clothed and fed Marigold before departing.

The other women arrived soon after he woke and tended to his daughter. He told them Lyra had a long, difficult night, and she was resting for a bit. A twinkle in their eyes informed them they knew the truth of his sly tale.

He had told Lyra in his note to stay home with the other women so they wouldn't risk getting hurt. He would spend the

day preparing, and then later, when the battle was won, he would return to her ... victorious.

But Timber knew Lyra better than that. She was as stubborn and dedicated as she was beautiful.

Timber went to the site of the battle and ate with the other shifters. They would observe the battle along with the rest of the bear council and their representative Edmund. Just before dusk, the chrome-colored sky began to pelt rain as it had been threatening all day.

Timber stood at the center of their constructed ring, which was merely a few evergreen trees and old soil. The air was damp and reeked of dying leaves, the soil beneath his feet soaking up the drops from the clouds.

He stood there, having removed his shirt and pants, wearing only his boxers. Edmund and the council arrived just before the precise second of dusk. Timber felt cool and collected, having placed Lyra's fear in a secret compartment of his mind.

Edmund climbed out of the SUV they had pulled into the woods, and Timber felt his confidence falter for a second. The man was as wide as a mountain, a few feet taller than him, and beckoning like a giant from another time.

He stomped toward him, removing his shirt and pants. Elias pulled the hood of his robe down, acting as the referee for the commencing fight. The rest of the council stood under a flow of umbrellas held up by lower-level council members. It was a pathetic sight, to say the least.

But no matter, Timber told himself. He narrowed his eyes at his opponent, who had no problem completely stripping down in the pouring rain in front of spectators. Thunder clashed overhead, signaling the beginning of what would likely be a fight for the ages.

“The rule of three will stand here!” Elias bellowed. “The one who does not rise within the count of three shall be the loser. Fight fair, gentlemen.”

Elias held his hand in the air, then struck it downward as lightning shattered above. Timber had barely any time to think because Edmund, the man, had become Edmund, the beast, as fast as the lightning had struck.

Timber shifted, too, dodging the leap of the young bear. He turned on a dime, though, slashing his claws and connected with a cerebral strike to Timber's face. Timber's body felt suddenly heavy, stumbling backward in his bear form, white-hot streaks of pain pulsing instantly.

He nearly toppled to the ground in shock, but he didn't. He turned as he shifted and struck the youngster's back, making a precise slice just below Edmund's jawline. He howled like a whole other animal, serving to frustrate the beast that likely didn't lose often.

“Go, Timber!”

In the seconds it took for Edmund to recover, he'd turned to the soft, flowery voice that beckoned him. He saw that the women and children had come to watch the battle, shuffling under a single umbrella as rain blasted down on their desperate bodies.

Lyra held the umbrella but stood there, startled and bursting with love, while rain smacked down over her form. Marigold was hugging her side.

He had to win. There was no other option.

Edmund charged him, slamming his big bear head into his gut. The wind was briefly knocked out of Timber as he finally did fall to the ground, the youthful bear straddling his body to throttle his face and jugular. He landed a few strikes to his chin before Timber was able to raise his forearms and block the blows.

Timber was becoming enraged, powered by the love for Lyra, Marigold, and his new charges of the Montana Maul. He used the strength of his entire body to shove Edmund off, causing the bear to roll down a small, nearby embankment.

“Timber!”

It wasn't just Lyra yelling but also the other shifter members. Their pride in him fueled his energy as he pounced over the hill, aiming to get a double punch to the face and stomach of the inexperienced brute.

But Edmund was smarter than Timber had anticipated.

He'd hid behind a mighty oak as rain pummeled their fur and successfully tripped Timber. He face-planted into the ground, tasting the wet dirt and musk of last fall's branches.

Edmund then leapt onto his back and bent his neck upward.

Timber couldn't breathe and started to panic as he stared up into the foaming mouth of his enemy. His airway pinched as rain soaked into the wide saucers of his hysterical pupils.

He couldn't go out this way.

FORTY



LYRA

The rain pounded like a punch-drunk boxer as the two bears fought. Lyra felt like her body was detached from itself, floating overhead, watching herself holding the umbrella while her body was permeated with rain and also while watching the man of her dreams have his neck unnaturally bent toward the sky.

That morning, she had woken up with a jolt. She was naked, memories of their incredible lovemaking tumbling through her mind like a waterfall, which was instantly eradicated by the sight of a note next to the bed.

Fear froze her musing waterfall even before she read it. The bastard had left without saying goodbye, instructing her to stay home with Marigold and the rest of the women.

She had heard some commotion outside the bedroom and got dressed before finding the other wives were having a heated discussion. They wanted to watch the fight, but their husbands had told them not to. She joined in, zipping up her sweater swiftly.

“I am not staying here and waiting all day,” she said to the women. “Let’s eat and talk, then we will head out at dusk. They can’t expect us all just to stay here.”

Lyra was acting as a leader without even realizing it. The women agreed, and they piled into one of Timber’s many SUVs. They brought the children with them as thunder cracked above, but that didn’t stop any of the women from

climbing out of the car and watching their leader fight for their rights.

Lyra admittedly had never seen a shifter fight before. She had perhaps seen actual bears fight on animal documentaries, but she imagined this was somehow different. Watching it, her hand on the handle of the umbrella shaking from chills, she didn't think it was different at all.

They were savage, snarling, growling, slashing, and mauling. Edmund was thick and tall, his fur a darker shade than Timber's, and he moved in a way that was far less thought out than Timber's. His cruelty was personal, whereas Timber's was strictly professional.

That could be both a good and bad thing.

When Edmund tumbled down the hill, and Timber had jumped toward him, the figures had moved out of sight. Lyra ran with the umbrella she held with the women and children trailing her, Marigold in her arms. She shielded herself and them behind a thick oak tree, staring in horror as Edmund gained the upper hand.

He'd had Timber on his stomach and craning his neck upward toward the sky. Lyra knew without a shadow of a doubt that her mate, her man, her lover, her darling, would be dead and gone in a split second if Edmund had decided to even slightly move Timber's neck further upward. His spine would snap like a twig, and just like that, it would be lights out, and dreams shattered.

She clung to Marigold, who was staring in confusion at her father. Lyra began to mutter to herself, not entirely sure why.

"You can do this, Timber," she said, biting her words like hard candy. "I know you can."

Elias, who was the referee for the battle, ran through the thick slashing of rain and jumped down the hill. He held a hand in the air, beginning the count of three.

"ONE! TWO!"

Just as Elias's lips formed the word of the final count, Timber was somehow able to use his back legs to sweep

Edmund off him, sending him tumbling down to the sticky leaves below. Timber shot upward onto all fours and proceeded to go mad on his opponent, who was caught off guard.

He punched the younger bear with very human gestures, sending him soaring backward to skid across his back in the wet soil. The women and shifters cheered through the storm as his body thudded, the sound of crystal glass smashing echoing through the woods.

Edmund's nose bled profusely over his dark fur. He was dazed when he tried to stand, and Timber used this opportunity to get in a few final blows.

He stood on his hind legs and let out a magnificent roar. It was a victorious one that made Lyra break out into goose flesh.

Timber smacked Edmund again, once in the chops, then in his throat. The air seemed to siphon out of the young bear's throat like a squeezed straw before sending him back to the ground, groaning on his side as if he had just been tranquilized.

Timber stood there, Lyra's champion, her heart soaring for her man. But he wasn't unscathed; she could see the slash of blood trickling down his sweet bear face, the early indications of a swelling eye.

“ONE! TWO! THREE!”

Elias called out the numbers reluctantly, and that was when Timber fell to his knees. The shifters and women cheered while medical personnel moved to Edmund and the new Montana Maul's leader, both shifting nearly simultaneously.

Lyra let go of the umbrella, settled it into Isabel's palm, and then handed Marigold over. She ran toward Timber as he returned to his human state, the winner but beaten and bloody. Rainwater splashed as he crashed, naked and on all fours in his human form.

Lyra fell to her knees, too, sliding through the soaking dirt, likely staining her jeans for life. She took Timber's head in her

arms, hearing him breathing raggedly, running her fingers up and down his body like she was a witch who could heal him instantly.

“You did it, baby!” she said tearfully. “I’m so fucking proud of you.”

Timber lifted his head with Lyra’s hands holding it upright like it was set to fall off at any second. Her heart lurched when she saw that one eye had swollen shut, gleaming the colors royal purple and blue, the shades of an angry storm.

But he was smiling.

Timber touched her neck, stroking the place where he had marked her. He gazed at it thoughtfully and mused in the pouring rain.

“No, darling, we did it.”

FORTY-ONE



TIMBER

Timber felt like his life was finally coming together like one giant puzzle, all of the pieces fitting gently into one another. After he won the fight, he was tended to by the shifter medical personnel, who deemed he had a few broken ribs and had injured some of his right occipital bone. Lyra was by his side the entire time, holding his hand, looking like a dream in her soaked-through sweater.

On their way home, he whispered to her that he loved how she looked all wet. Her eyes widened, and she bit her lip, her body curling into itself the way it did when she was turned on. It was recommended that they wait a few days before engaging in any physical acts so he could heal, but that didn't stop him from plunging head-first into her pussy the second she returned from the shower.

“What's this for?” she moaned, hanging off the edge of the bed with her hair dripping onto him.

“For everything,” he growled.

She tasted like golden honey laced with sparks from the stars. It was the added layer of his vicious day, enhancing the enchanting feeling of wholeness that surged through him like a mystical fire.

The new members of the bear council, who were all of the shifters with human wives that they had previously engaged with, let him rest for a few days before beginning to go to work. The original council had disbanded, with Elias,

Jameson, Callum, and everyone else becoming casual bear-shifting citizens of the state.

The first plan of action was to mark down the whereabouts of the old members and then to interview a few of the lower-tier ones who might want to join. As the leader, Timber had to oversee it all, as he was used to doing as the leader of the Montana Maul. Except, the council was a much larger scope of shifters, expanding throughout the state and the entire country. It was a lot to take on, but with Lyra by his side, he felt like he could carry the weight of the entire world.

The next action to check off the list was to hunt down the bear hunter who had been ravaging through Canada and Montana, killing the natural bears. It had been the maul's major focus when he'd first met Lyra but had receded into the background as their courtship became the top priority. But everything had settled with Lyra moving into what he considered their home, taking care of Marigold like she was her own offspring.

So he went out with the other members of the council ... the shifters who had human wives. He had come to trust them all acutely, never having felt safer than with them as they galloped through the snowy wilderness.

They hunted and apprehended the bear hunter quickly and smoothly. They brought him to the authorities on the other side of the border, who would arrest and prosecute him under Canadian shire law. Timber was beyond satisfied as they trucked back, his heart sparkling with the thought of having his child and woman in his arms again.

He did have them when he got back, but there was still a lot of work to do at the council. There were the interviews, of course, but then there were the new rules of law to make and old ones to update and rename. The main regulation was the one that disallowed shifters from mating with human women in an attempt to keep their bloodline pure.

Timber was beyond ecstatic to be the one to eradicate that ancient law. He couldn't believe it had existed and thrived for

so long. He and the shifters took over headquarters, making a divisive list of laws and rules that all bear shifters must follow.

The majority of the rules revolved around the safety of humans and other shifters. There was nothing that would isolate a shifter who had fallen in love with a human, no matter what gender that happened to be. Timber and all of the shifters knew how absurd it was to believe in the idea of fated mates and yet not allow those mates to be marked.

It was counterintuitive, and they clinked champagne glasses together as the rule was officially stricken from the record.

They would investigate the whereabouts of the old bear council members the next day. For tonight, Timber wanted to be home with his family. It had become a vital ritual for him to sit with them, talking, cuddling, laughing, reading, watching TV, and finally, showing Lyra how much he loved and appreciated her with his mouth and hands. Even if they didn't make love, he wanted her body curled around his, the sound and feel of her fluttery breath cascading over his skin.

That night, they had made slow, steady love, not wanting to wake a very sensitive Marigold, who was starting to teeth. The sun was still out as she lay below him, rolling her hips upward to meet his swaying thrusts. After they both quietly climaxed, he let himself go on top of her, pressing his cheek into her plushy breasts.

“Do you think it’s going to be a scar?”

Lyra stroked his hair as she spoke, and he nodded into her bosom. She was referring to the slash Edmund had given him in the bear fight, the one remaining imprint of the epic battle. The rest of him had healed well, but that mark would likely remain.

“Probably. I’ve never had someone with such sharp claws catch me that close before.”

He sat up, adoring the way her naked flesh looked under him, sweet and salty from lovemaking. He hovered over her

while she ran her fingers over the three distinct indentations, fascinated, stunning.

“I don’t know why, but it somehow makes you look even sexier,” she purred.

Timber chuckled as he slid his hands under the pillow where his beloved’s head rested. He could stay in that spot for the rest of his life, his eyes fluttering closed as his mate stroked his face and hair with compassionate devotion.

He eventually fell asleep on her stomach, the rise and fall of her breathing like the flow of gentle waves on the shoreline.

Everything was beautiful and right.

FORTY-TWO



LYRA

Lyra felt like her life was finally starting to settle down. Not that she disliked excitement and adventure ... quite the contrary. She hadn't ever expected to fall for a man who could turn into a bear, as well as his young cub she'd initially been hired to take care of. He had been pretty lost and somewhat useless when it came to fatherhood, but she had guided him with her own maternal instincts.

And hell, maybe even some of the instincts were toward him too. She wasn't a shifter, but she knew the second he'd opened the door that he would make some kind of impact in her life. Maybe intuition, maybe lust, maybe something entirely otherworldly.

But none of that mattered anymore. She had lost herself a little, too, falling for the two of them. She had been terrified for her own life and then the life of her new man. She had been thrust into a world that was mystical, magical, and strange. But at the end of it all, she had been rewarded with a man whose passion and commitment to her were as palpable as an electric storm.

And what else could a woman ever want?

The morning after some exploratory lovemaking, which was a structure they added layers to nearly daily, Lyra was making breakfast for her beloveds. Marigold had adjusted to her presence swimmingly, her little golden eyes lighting up the moment Lyra popped into her bedroom in the morning. Lyra was also beginning to see the shifter influence in her DNA, the

understanding in her eyes when she and Timber spoke about things that should have been far beyond her comprehension.

That morning, Lyra let Timber sleep in. Not only had they made love into all hours of the night, but he had also just returned from a trip to Canada to take down a known bear hunter. He was also the most recently voted leader of the New Bear Council, which carried a lot of weight and obligation with it. He had been working hard for the shifters just the way he had promised.

It was refreshing and reassuring.

Lyra flipped pancakes and sausages for whenever Timber woke. She hoped the sweet smell of meat would venture into the bedroom and titillate his nostrils.

Her phone vibrated next to the stove, and she gazed at it. It was her mother.

Lyra blew her bangs up from her face, then tapped the green answer button. If she ignored her mom's call, she would just keep calling all day. Lyra put her on speakerphone so she could continue making the breakfast.

"Morning, Mom," she said brightly.

"Good morning, Lyra," Karen said, sounding somewhat hardened. "Is Timber there?"

Lyra frowned as she flipped a few pancakes.

"No, he's sleeping in a bit. Work has been hectic for him this week."

"I see."

Karen, of course, wasn't aware of the bear council debacle and had been told that Lyra's kidnapping was an entire misunderstanding. Lyra knew that she would have to eventually explain shifters, given the fact that she wanted to spend her life with a man whose daughter would soon gain her own shifting skills.

"Were you looking to talk to him?" Lyra asked in a spritely voice.

“I wanted to ask him a serious question,” Karen said, measuring out a dramatic pause.

Lyra felt a bemused smile growing on her lips as she flopped the pancakes onto a plate, then rolled around the sausages on the pan so they hissed sharply.

“Can I hear this question too?” Lyra replied.

“I wanted to ask him when he was going to make an honest woman out of you.”

Lyra had to stifle a childlike eruption of laughter. The sausages seared on the pan, concealing a few intakes of breath that she couldn't hold in.

“What is this, the 1950s?” Lyra jested. “That's not entirely necessary, do you think?”

“Hmm.” Her mother made a noise as opposed to forming a word. “I want to know what he is thinking. I want to know his intentions for my daughter.”

Lyra was glad she wasn't face to face because there was no way she would have been able to hide her expression of irritation. She rolled her eyes as she placed two sets of sausages on Timber's and her plates, hearing Marigold babbling happily behind her.

“Well, I'll be sure to let him know you called,” Lyra said, trying to sound cheerful.

“I also think Marigold needs a baby brother or sister once you are both married, of course.”

“Jesus Christ,” Lyra muttered to herself.

“What was that?”

“I will talk to him when he's awake, Mom. I appreciate your call. We're about to have breakfast, so can I talk to you later?”

Her mother made what was akin to human growling, then hung up the phone after mumbling something about loving her. Lyra had begun to imitate her mother's grumbling when she turned, holding both plates of food in her hands.

Her face ran hot and red when she saw that Timber was sitting there, playing with his daughter in her high chair. He had a knowing smirk on his face.

“Good morning,” he murmured.

“How long have you been sitting there?” Lyra said, nearly dropping the plates.

“Long enough.”

Timber rose to his feet, the same teasing, sexy smirk on his face. He took the plates from her hand and set them on the table before pulling her aggressively into his arms. She gasped, their pelvises lined up and subtly grinding.

She loved it when he did that to her. It made her feel desired, even when she had her hair tied up in a bun and was only wearing her robe and slippers.

Timber cocked an eyebrow and whispered into the shell of her ear, flushing out goosebumps over her skin.

“Do you want to be made an honest woman?”

Chills ran like a tidal wave up Lyra’s spine. She rubbed her cheek against his and gave him an equally sultry whisper back.

“Is this you proposing?”

Timber didn’t say anything. He merely pressed his lips against hers, slipping in some naughty tongue before Marigold began to complain about their PDA.

FORTY-THREE



TIMBER

It was amusing to Timber that Karen had been so adamant about him proposing to Lyra. It had been on his mind ever since the fight when he came out victorious, and she spent the entire day with him in the shifter hospital room. He knew she was his mate the second they'd met, but he had somehow grown even more madly, deeply, and fondly in love with her every moment they'd spent together since.

Marriage was more of a ceremonial notion for humans, so it hadn't been in his mind until he knew she felt the same way. The marking he had made on her neck was far more meaningful to his kind, and she had turned to him so easily, so full of trust, letting him take her as his without a second thought.

So it felt like kismet when, after eating breakfast together, a blissful, full of light and laughter morning, that he headed out to Karen's to ask for her blessing. It was an old-fashioned gesture, but Timber felt that of all people, Lyra's mother would appreciate it.

Especially since she had been so afraid of him falling for and running away with some imaginary secretary.

He grinned to himself as he pulled into her driveway, having told Lyra that he had some errands to run for the council. Her eyes had flickered, semi-knowing, but she kissed him warmly the way she always had.

"Don't be long," she said in a husky voice.

Timber quivered thinking about her mouth trailing over his naked skin, and he knew without a moment of doubt that he was going to spend the rest of his life worshiping the woman. She was his queen, his cosmic goddess. He would do anything she requested.

Karen was surprised to see him on her doorstep, looking chipper and dapper in his three-piece beige suit. It was something he started wearing to the bear council meetings, feeling like he had to set an example for the rest of their kind.

They sat in her living room having tea, with Karen gazing suspiciously at him over her steaming mug.

“I would like to ask you for your daughter’s hand in marriage,” he said with pride.

“Hmm,” she grunted. “Is this because of my phone call this morning?”

Timber beamed. He felt like his face might crack with joy.

“Not at all. I had been thinking about it for some time, but your phone call reminded me that I wanted your blessing first.”

Karen was reluctant, eyeing him like he was a beast ready to steal her daughter away from her. It took him offering to let her come with him to purchase the ring for her to lighten up.

“Of course,” she said happily.

They traveled together in his SUV to a jewelry store that he had previously researched, one of the most prominent and popular in the region. Lyra’s birthday was in July, and he wanted to get something unique with her birthstone, which was a ruby.

He and Karen walked around the store together like they had known each other for years. It filled Timber with glee to see her pointing at certain cuts, remarking about her daughter’s inclination toward odd shapes.

She finally pointed one out to the associate that had been helping them, pressing down on the glass with the end of her fingertip.

“There.”

Timber came to her, towering over the small and formidable woman. She was pointing at a solitaire cut ruby piece encrusted with diamonds, glistening in the midday sun like the center of a robust heart.

“That is it,” Karen said, so certain. “I am sure of it. Lyra will love it.”

Karen helped Timber out with the sizing, choosing a shining gold band to hold the ruby piece together. She gasped at the price, but Timber had waved his hand, grinning widely.

“Nothing is too much for my beloved.”

It was the first time he really saw Lyra’s mother smile. Behind that smile were years of protecting her daughter as a single mother. Her quiet strength was something Timber had come to admire, knowing that Lyra had adopted the same trait without really knowing it.

She had finally warmed up to him, and that made him feel even more elated than he already was. They chatted easily and smoothly as he drove her home, the velvet box nestled into his jacket pocket.

He held the door for her as she climbed out of the car, then said his goodbyes with a tight embrace. She was smaller than Lyra, her head pressing into his solar plexus before having to crane her neck up to him.

“Thank you for today,” she said, sounding humble. “I know my daughter is going to be treated well by you. And don’t worry, I won’t tell her about today.”

Timber felt his throat tighten with happiness. He touched Karen’s shoulder, then rubbed it compassionately.

“I am going to treat your daughter like the queen she is. You never have to worry about that.”

Her eyes sparkled in the sun, and within it, Timber caught a glimpse of Lyra. She gave him a fun wink.

“Oh, I am sure of it.”

Timber left Karen's home, elated. He knew at that moment that he had never really truly felt happy before in his life. Sure, there was relaxation, there was sex, there was fun, there was the thrill of the hunt, and the leadership of the Montana Maul. But meeting Lyra and falling in love with her had made him feel something he never thought his grumpy bear self could ever scrape the surface of.

Contentment.

He dreamed of a life beyond that day with Lyra and Marigold and with other offspring. He dreamed of them growing old together, learning new and exciting facts about one another daily. Things would change, surely, but they would only ever get better and better.

He drove into the sunset, a tear gliding down his cheek.

FORTY-FOUR



LYRA

The week had been long and arduous for Lyra. Although every day felt like a sparkling dream to her, there were still times more taxing than others. Marigold's teeth were coming in, which made her fussy and difficult to settle at night. The weather had been moody, seeming to cast a permanent veil of bleak gray over the previously stark blue shimmer she was used to.

It had made her own disposition a little downcast too. She had been thinking about what her mother had said to her about being made an *honest woman* with a marriage proposal. She hated that her mother's words were having an effect on her, but there was no point in denying it; she had started to wonder if the proposal had been on Timber's mind at all.

Lyra wasn't traditional by any means. She hadn't been the little girl who fantasized about marrying her perfect man one day. She felt that if it was in the cards for her life, then so be it. She never longed or pined after it.

But meeting Timber had changed all that. She daydreamed about calling him her husband. It was simply formal wording, something made by signing a sheet of paper. But the romance of it appealed to her, the infinity, the dedication to withhold and withstand the steady climb toward the grave and beyond.

Maybe that was what the mating ritual was like for shifters. She hadn't considered that. Every time the brush of Timber's fingertips moved over the indent in the crook of her nape, she had started to think, subconsciously, that it was.

At first, he seemed concerned that it had hurt. It had somewhat, but it was a sweet sting. That, mixed with the transcendent orgasm, had made the experience supernatural and beyond fulfilling.

Then it became almost ceremonial.

On the weekends, such as this morning, Timber would often let her sleep in while he tended to Marigold. She woke up with the golden sun in her eyes, letting out a deep, satisfying sigh as she buried her face in the pillow. It was nice to finally see the sun after a week of drab conditions.

“Good morning, sweetheart.”

Lyra fluttered her eyes open to the astounding sight of her man, shirtless and all, the mountain and valleys of his muscles reflecting like a Greek god in the sunlight. Looking at him in any way, clothed or not, made Lyra feel a fever she hoped would never fade.

And, alas, he was holding a steaming cup of coffee for her.

She sat up in bed, raising her arms in the air for a big stretch.

“Mmm, good morning, my darling.”

Timber gently handed her the mug, kissing her lips and then each eyelid. Lyra felt like she was floating.

“I have some plans for us tonight that I think you’ll enjoy,” he said, stroking her hand. “I have called your mother, and she’s agreed to watch Marigold tonight.”

Lyra pursed her lips as she raised the mug up to her mouth, barely awake and already floored. The sun surrounded Timber’s half-naked body, giving his form a vibrating, halo effect.

She licked her lips and tilted her head at him endearingly.

“Where did you come from?” she whispered.

He grinned, then raised a single finger to his lips.

“It’s a secret.”

That evening, the sun dipped below the horizon, emanating a canary-yellow glow over the still waters. Timber had taken her on a river cruise on the Clarks Fork River not far from his property. Torches flickered around them as they ate a succulent steak dinner, a warm velvet blanket wrapped around Lyra's arms that were exposed to the winter air. They talked, laughed, and drank cherry wine with great merriment.

It was the kind of night Lyra never wanted to end. Timber had evolved from being such a cold-faced, distant mystery, to an open-hearted, jolly man, with a cozy hug. She felt the constant urge to reach out to him and stroke his beard, still in disbelief that she had found someone so profoundly compassionate and committed.

Feeling full and satisfied, Lyra leaned back in her chair and wrapped the blanket tighter around her chest. She wore a cute floral dress that hugged her curves in all the right places. However, the sun had gone down, and frost still lingered in the late winter air.

"Let's go inside, honey," she said, shivering slightly. "I'm starting to get cold."

Wearing a warm wool V-neck, Timber stood and walked around to her side of the table. She thought he was going to pull her chair out for her and offer his hand like the gentleman he seemed to be morphing into.

But instead, he leaned over her, and her eyes darted at him. Then a person emerged from inside the cruise liner, wearing a tuxedo and carrying a shiny wooden instrument.

Her eyes flicked to the musician, who began to play a harmonious, romantic tune. A burst of a glow went off in her stomach, and she knew immediately what was happening.

Timber slowly went to one knee and pulled out a dark red box from his pocket. Lyra's heart hammered like a drum in her ears.

"I wanted to ask you something," he said, eyes beginning to gloss over. "Before you get too cold. Because I want to keep you warm forever."

Timber slowly popped open the box that sat in his palm, and Lyra's eyes magnetized to the humming ruby-red shine that illuminated the dim evening. A ring cut from her birthstone sat in the box, peering up at her like a star shooting across a clear sky.

Tears ran down her face as she gazed at her beloved. She never imagined that she would end up with a bear shifter, but she wouldn't change it. There wasn't anything in her mind but the big, bold, glorious future with him.

"Will you?" he murmured.

"Yes!"

She pulled him to her chest as he went to both knees, and they wept with blinding joy. The violinist continued his melodious song, singing the score of their abundant life.

FORTY-FIVE



TIMBER

Timber and Lyra came to the agreement that they didn't want an extravagant wedding. She loved the idea of having something small but romantic and elegant in its own private way. Timber certainly had the resources to get the planning done fast, so they chose to have it within a week in his own expansive backyard.

Lyra had never been finicky, but she was adamant about certain things she wanted. It was one of the many layers of her that Timber adored peeling away and learning more about, magnificently undressing those beautiful varying traits.

They sat in bed one night after Marigold had finally fallen asleep, staying up till nearly two in the morning discussing specifics. Lyra was elated and spirited as if it was two in the afternoon.

“What about a honeymoon?” she said, wearing only her underwear and a loose T-shirt with various pamphlets between her legs. “I'm assuming that's still in the cards.”

She spoke in a way that wasn't expectant, more playful and sweeter. Her engagement ring caught the light of the lamp on the bedside table, casting rivers of loving red over the walls in their bedroom as she pushed the hair from her face.

Her eyes sparkled at him, and he forgot what she had said for a second. He stared at her adoringly until she shook the pamphlets at him with feigned impatience.

“Earth to grumpy bear,” she teased.

“Oh, crud, sorry,” he said, rubbing the space between his eyes. “You’re just so captivating. I got lost for a moment.”

Lyra rolled her eyes at him, although she knew better than anyone that he was serious. He had never spoken to a woman like that, but with Lyra, it came naturally. She astounded him every second.

“Okay, mister romantic,” she said, tossing the pamphlets onto his lap. “You tell me, where should we go to celebrate our love?”

Timber raised both hands to her face, stroking her with sensual tenderness. Eventually, the entire point of the conversation was lost as they had begun to kiss, and he smoothly cast her T-shirt off her body. They made love on top of the pamphlets, scrunching and crinkling them below their strong and sweaty bodies.

As much as Timber adored their spontaneity, he wanted to make sure Lyra knew he cared about the wedding. He knew she did, too, in the sense that most humans did. So he booked their honeymoon without prompt, a trip on a private yacht for a week sailing the Alaskan seas.

He also sent her out to get a wedding dress with her old friends and new shifter wife friends. He said there was no price tag that would shock him and let her go, spritely and excitedly, into the quaint town nearby.

When she returned, her cheeks were rosy. Her eyes were as bright as the fresh winter sky.

“I have some desserts for us to try,” she mused at him.

They had managed to hire a wedding planner who was working overtime, who aided them in the actual ceremony, hiring a minister, and organizing both a bachelor and bachelorette party all within a week. All they had to do was try out a few cake samples from local bakeries and choose what they wanted to serve.

Lyra hid her wedding dress in their bedroom, out of sight. Timber felt tingly inside, thinking about his beautiful bride and

how she would look walking down the aisle in less than a week's time.

They tasted various slices of cake with Marigold in tow. She had her choices too, stuffing her face with sugary treats varying from vanilla, chocolate, red velvet, and even a cheesecake assortment.

“Great, now she’s never going to sleep,” Lyra joked.

Marigold was growing up fast. Timber noticed certain movements and gestures that reminded him of her biological mother, a woman he had cared for but barely knew. He was over the moon with how she had adjusted to Lyra’s presence, like there had not been time between a woman’s influence at all.

Timber and Lyra laughed, and Marigold giggled as they narrowed down the selection. They had to stop her from eating the leftovers, cackling over the various stains on her cute little face.

“I think she wants them all,” Timber said.

On the night before the wedding, both Timber and Lyra spent time with their friends in what was deemed a *stag-and-doe* but separated. Timber wasn’t nuts about the idea. He wanted to spend every waking moment with his mate and no one else.

Lyra teased him, though, saying that it was his last night of freedom.

“Freedom?” he scoffed. “I am freer with you than I have ever been. I don’t want, and will never want, anything else.”

Lyra’s face lit up as they embraced at the door. She nibbled on his ear, pressing her breasts against his chest as she spoke.

“I love you more than I can ever say. I am going to miss you tonight.”

His manhood quivered as he buried his face into her neck, tracing his tongue over the imprint he had made with his fangs not so long ago. He kissed it, feeling an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

“I always miss you, baby.”

They finally parted, hands slipping away as they went their separate ways to their gatherings. Timber’s friends had planned a tree-trunk throwing contest, which he enjoyed fervently.

But it wasn’t the same as having Lyra by his side. Even when they were sitting in silence, he felt complete. But he did what was asked of him that night, dreaming of their life with his daughter and the mate who had cured him of every heartache he’d ever experienced.

FORTY-SIX



LYRA

Lyra had a fun time with her old friends, blended with the new friends who were the wives of the shifters who had aided in the creation of the New Bear Council. They bar-hopped around the small town, playing truth or dare and learning more about the women of the state she would grow old in. Her stomach hurt from the amount of laughing and glee they had all gone through till the moon dissipated in the sky.

She had made sure not to go too crazy with booze as she didn't want to be hungover on her wedding day. She woke with a feeling of completeness. She felt anxious at first, which was a knee-jerk response she'd had since she was a child. But then, she let it go, something she had become better at since mating with Timber.

It was a bright, crisp day, with the chill in the wind giving way to the oncoming spring. She had stayed at Isabel's home that night, and when she rose from the bed, she encountered a deliciously laid-out breakfast where all of the women were waiting for her.

Lyra had never felt so loved and appreciated in her entire life. Her mind initially rejected it, of course, as it was the only way she had known how to live. But with Timber's silent encouragement, she embraced it, opening her heart and soul to people who would do her no harm.

They ate and talked. She was set to get ready at Timber's and her place, separated from his section of the house where his buddies were set for the same. The entire day moved fast but slow at the same time, like a sequence of memories

snapping ahead and backward, all so beautiful and impossible to contain.

She put on her wedding dress around four in the afternoon, as the ceremony was set to take place at dusk. She had chosen a stunning bone-white piece that hugged her ample bosom and waist, flaring out at the bottom to showcase the long train that would sway down the aisle. It was laced with tiny stitching of roses in champagne white decorated over the bust line and scattered throughout the rest of the dress. She wore a corset beneath it, cinching her hips and pushing up what was one of her favorite features of her body, creating a breathtaking mermaid appearance that she knew would stun her waiting husband-to-be.

Lyra felt like the goddess Timber had assured her she was. She had felt sexy before in her life in certain pieces of clothing, but she had never believed a man when he had said it back to her. She had always been afraid, hesitant, and mistrustful of their intentions.

But gazing at the mirror as Isabel and the other women applied dark forest green eyeshadow to accent her makeup, she knew that she was free forever from those chains.

She stood with a bouquet of pink and yellow roses at the end of the aisle, looking over the pristine emerald of the backyard. It had been expertly converted into a romantic, elegant oasis, with a white carpet runner splitting the carved wooden chairs. The runner ended at a dark cherrywood archway decorated in bursting red shades of even more roses.

The same violin player who had been present when Timber proposed began playing a solo tune. The sky was a tapestry of majesty, the sky blue having faded into a lavender and lilac opulence.

But all Lyra could see was Timber. He'd had a suit tailor-made in the color of the forest that surrounded them. His hair was cut and styled neatly, matching the close trim of his beard. His eyes were glossy when she began walking toward him.

He was something she never knew she had wanted. Something known but never said aloud. Something she would

have never dared to wish for. Yet, there he was, palpable, dashing, real, sturdy, and stable.

They held hands as the officiate, a new member of the New Bear Council, stood between them as they said their vows. Both spoke straight from the heart, which pierced Lyra like an arrow when Timber said his.

He looked down at her, tilting his head in the most affectionate way she had ever observed. Her heart galloped madly, hoping that the feeling would never fade.

“Lyra, you are the best thing I have never planned,” he said, smirking and sparkling. “I was lost in a sea of confusion when you came to me in the night. You are my lantern of hope and love.”

Lyra said her vows, too, which she somehow was able to release from a throat that had run as dry as a desert.

She held his look of love, the rest of the world around them disappearing into the coral twilight.

“Timber, I never thought I would want to tame an animal before. I have never tried, but with you, I am glad I did. You have shown me what I’m worth and have made me braver than I have ever been before. You are the sea captain in our eternal voyage.”

They grinned endlessly, not having known that the other would use a nautical metaphor. They kissed the first time as husband and wife to soft applause beyond them.

“My captain,” she whispered over his lips.

“My lantern.”

They sailed down the aisle and to the reception, which also took place in the backyard. They had a calm, quiet celebration of their love, a blossoming of affection surging around every corner and every touch.

Marigold sat between them in a golden dress, switching between their laps all night until it was bedtime. Lyra kissed each cheek, full of wonder that she had brought them together.

Their meeting had been magical, which surely meant the rest of their lives together would be too.

FORTY-SEVEN



TIMBER

Timber knew how much Lyra had enjoyed the yachting adventure they had taken on the day he proposed. So, for their honeymoon, he took it upon himself to lease one that would explore the Alaskan seas for as long as they saw fit.

He hired a small crew of five who would tend to their needs as far as cooking, cleaning, and steering the ship. He was ecstatic to reveal it to her as they went on his private jet, soaring into a secret week of bliss.

The sky was clear all week, a blinding bright, crisp blue shade. The frozen tundra glided along beyond them silently as they spent their days bundled up in wool jackets and hats, drinking coffee and hot chocolate as they floated from island to island. When they were ported, they explored each area, indulging in the cultural cuisine and traditional celebrations.

As much as Timber adored the days of watching his beloved wife laugh and absorb the wide-open world around her, it was the nights that he looked forward to the most. The crew he hired was kind and efficient but also respected the privacy of their relationship. Timber wanted to grab his wife at any instant, pulling her by the hand into their bedroom to indulge in each other, no matter what time of day it was.

Timber wasn't much for PDA, but he did love teasing her. Her cheeks would flush beyond the pink blooms of the cold when he ran a hand past the hemline of her jeans, setting in the warm space between her thighs. He would then leave it there for her to respond, which she always did.

“Baby,” she crooned, snapping her head at him with wide eyes.

He chuckled. Her surprising arousal had never failed to amuse and satisfy him. They had been spending a lot of time together naked, their days flowing into nights, and nights into days, without any acknowledgment of time.

In fact, he had tasted her that very morning, trailing his tongue between her legs to wake her up. Her honey flowed into him with a quiet gasp, a unique flavor to go with his coffee.

They had eaten at the breakfast table, dazed and giggling with sensuality like two teenagers. They then came up into the sharp cold air, drinking more coffee with a spiked addition just for the sake of it.

“What?” he said, curling his tongue between his teeth and moving in closer.

Lyra wore a faux-fur hat a few sizes too big. Her rosy cheeks made her look like a little kid, having just come in from sledding.

Timber rubbed his nose against hers, gliding his hand up toward her heat. She groaned when he trailed over her mound, moving upward to settle on her waist.

“You are insatiable,” she purred.

His heart was going to burst out of his chest. He never knew he could be so deliriously happy. He thought that the bear council was enough for him to be content. But he realized after falling in love with Lyra that he had never been content at all.

He had never known thorough, layered, enlightening, fresh, and edgy love.

It not only made him feel whole, but it made him feel like he would become more and more of a man for her. A better man. A three-dimensional being with her growing and loving him and herself along the way.

Timber sighed, pressing his forehead to hers. The patch of skin that was exposed was a bit chilly, so he kissed it, warming her with his lips.

“This still feels like a dream,” he whispered.

Lyra sighed, then scooted her body closer to his, intermingling their legs and weaving them as one. They both closed their eyes, air emitting from their mouths and swirling upward into the ether between them.

“It does, doesn’t it?” she murmured back. “It can always feel like that, you know. Not just here in this magical place.”

Timber felt her smile as he crushed her under his mouth. She giggled, and they kissed passionately on the top of the ship, icebergs floating around them like clouds.

He made a point of taking her to various islands along the way, even though he did just want to spend time eternally making love to her, being the cause of the look in her eyes of shocked rapture. The bedroom was their paradise. The curtains were open sometimes, the frosty light from the winter landscape casting itself over their bodies. He wanted her to know, without any doubt, that she would be the only one he would ever crave.

For their final night, they ate dinner outside, tucked between multiple heaters and flickering torches of light. The tangerine flames licked around them, highlighting Lyra’s strong and sharp features. Her lips were the color of coral, vibrating between the flames and the black velvet backdrop of the starry sky.

She wore a heavy cobalt dress, tight-fitting from head to toe. She was like a gift he couldn’t wait to unwrap when they were alone within their own delectable universe.

They ate, and Timber did everything he could to charm her. Her laugh was like music to him, her thoughts intriguing as poetry and art pieces. He asked her to dance as the record player rolled next to two crackling torches, and they swayed until the moon sliced through the black glass of the sea.

“Marigold must miss us,” Lyra whispered against his chest.

There was no better moment in Timber’s entire life. He kissed the top of her head, leaning his cheek into her golden hair.

“She definitely does. And I miss her too.”

Lyra raised her head to him, pinning her chin against his collarbone. There were no words left to be said.

They kissed, breathing in the only essence of oxygen they would ever need.

FORTY-EIGHT



LYRA

Life had settled into a beautiful flow ever since Timber had proposed to Lyra. The fear about the bear council's disapproval and the perpetual anxiety about being kidnapped again had dissipated like a flickering flame into morsels of glowing embers.

She officially adopted Marigold as her daughter, which really went without saying. Timber helped her get the proper papers set up, and she signed them without hesitation. The three of them had a mutual love for one another.

Lyra wanted to do something special to mark the occasion of Marigold's adoption, so on a day when Timber was seeing the council, she had purchased a special print that she felt represented their unique love and dynamics.

She presented it to Timber at dinner that night with Marigold's little feet swinging from the high chair with anticipation.

"What do you think?" Lyra asked.

She had her tongue sticking out between her teeth in a teasing expression as Timber tore through the wrapping paper. He held the frame in his hands, giving her a fake scowl.

"I see you really let the grumpy bear motif go to your head," he quipped.

Lyra covered her mouth with one hand and wrapped the other around her stomach. She stifled a delighted laugh. He had the starry look in his eyes that she was hoping for, one that walked the line of playfully wanting to devour her.

It soared through her like harp strings being played.

The print she'd made was a replication of the Three Bears storybook rhyme, specially drawn by an artist she'd found on social media. The artist drew the bears with a likeness to the three of them: Lyra, Timber, and Marigold.

Timber smirked, that glisten in his eyes remaining, then lifted the print up for Marigold to see. Her legs jiggled with potent excitement, reaching for the photo with applesauce-stained hands.

“Look, honey, it's us,” Timber said. “It's you, Daddy, and Mommy!”

The bemused smile on Lyra's face was washed away by genuine shock. She'd never heard Timber refer to her as Marigold's mother. She had opened her mouth to say something, she didn't know what, then received instant whiplash from what came next.

Marigold turned to her in her high chair, smiled broadly like a child much older and aware of the impact of her words, then spoke as clear as a bell.

“MOMMY! MOM!”

The child's legs shook uncontrollably, wanting Lyra to take her from the chair. Lyra's eyes darted to Timber, whose mouth hung open.

“Did you ...”

“Never,” Timber replied. “She just said it ... herself ... right now.”

Lyra had never felt so much overwhelming contentment in her life. She picked Marigold up from the high chair and spun her around, making the child giggle with unabashed glee.

“I'm your mommy, yes!” Lyra exclaimed.

“Mommy!”

Timber laughed along with her as he took the frame from the table and hung it at the entrance to the kitchen. He

removed a photo of the members of the old Montana Maul and replaced it with the three bears portrait.

At first, Lyra wanted to say that he didn't need to put it there. But that was her undermining her own value, so when she settled Marigold on her hip, she merely wiped the tears from her eyes and stood next to her husband, staring at the portrait.

The three of them embraced, much like the bears were in the photo. Lyra realized at that moment that little Marigold would eventually be able to shift and that she was the sole mere human.

Timber wrapped a hand around her waist, then kissed her forehead.

"I'm so glad we will have you here to balance us out."

"Mommy and daddy," Marigold babbled while gnawing on her fist.

"Forever and always," Lyra whispered, kissing Marigold, then her beloved husband.

That night after Marigold went to bed, they spent time reminiscing about when they'd first met. It wasn't too long ago, but because of their closeness, it felt like ages.

"Remember when your mother thought I ran away with a secretary?"

Lyra lay in her panties and T-shirt, drinking tea the way they often would when they got into bed. She giggled, then buried her face into the pillow.

"God, that was so embarrassing," she muttered.

Timber ran his big, strong hand up her shirt, rubbing it affectionately as he spoke.

"Well, at least I know now that I can actually hire one. Would you like that?"

Lyra sat up from the pillow, grimacing. Timber had that playful shine in his eyes, and she pushed his shoulders back onto the bed in response.

“Not if you don’t want to feel my wrath,” she growled.

Timber laughed as she straddled him, pinning him by the wrists to the bed in a fruitless act of dominance. Lyra loved the way his body felt against hers, even when they weren’t making love and were wearing clothing.

“Ooo ... that sounds interesting,” he growled back.

They played together, giggling like teenagers, which inevitably led to some relaxing fooling around. Lyra found herself on her back with Timber running his hands up her shirt until he cupped her bare, glorious breasts.

She tilted her head back in rapture. Every time he did it, she felt renewed.

“Is this you showing your wrath?”

Her hair had come loose from the ponytail, and she waved it about as she shook her head. She gave in to his touch as she moaned, wrapping her legs around his waist as his mouth descended from her solar plexus to that sacred place between her thighs.

FORTY-NINE



TIMBER

Timber was constantly surprised by his new wife in the most beautiful and romantic ways. She was not only charming and an utter bombshell but was also creative, vivacious, and full of energy, even at the most difficult times. Lyra supported him like no other woman ... or shifter or person, for that matter ... had ever before in his life.

And that didn't mean that she was a doormat; quite the contrary. Lyra had no problem telling him exactly what she felt and thought. It made it easy for him to voice his feelings, making communication flow as smoothly as a river.

They had been married for four blissful months, with Lyra acting as Marigold's official mother, literally and figuratively. Timber had created the habit of tapping the photo of the three bears that his wife had made when the adoption papers went through, often kissing his fingertips and placing them on the photo. It was a lovely ritual to start his day, especially when he woke at the break of dawn before they were awake.

The morning of their four-month anniversary, he went into the kitchen to make his usual breakfast before tending to the council, floating in the dark after kissing Lyra's bare shoulders in bed. He stuck his hand out as he often did, sliding it along the wall and expecting his fingers to catch along the outline of the picture frame.

But it didn't.

Timber stopped for a moment in the dim lighting, thinking his fingers were placed too high or too low. He scowled to

himself, backing up and investigating thoroughly while squinting into the darkness.

The frame wasn't there.

Timber looked around in a panicked frenzy. It was highly irrational to worry about something in such an extreme manner, but the photo had become a kind of totem to him, sending him enchanting waves of energy of their love before emerging into the real world, ready to take on any challenge that was thrown his way.

But without the photo, he felt like a shipwreck, lost at sea.

When he looked around the floor in the hallway, then the kitchen, thinking Marigold had somehow knocked it over or snuck it somewhere, he retreated to her bedroom. He crept around silently, the glow of her night light illuminating her little, soft, slumbered face.

When he once more found nothing, he returned to their bedroom. Lyra was still sound asleep, on her side of the bed away from him, with the comforter curled around her body like a dress. He drank her in for a moment, her peaceful perfection, then climbed back into bed.

Timber wrapped his arms around his wife, fragrant, stunning, and serene. He tucked one arm under the pillow where her head lay, then tangled the other around her waist. He then settled his crotch against her bum, flawlessly spooning her awake.

He kissed her shoulders as he had fifteen minutes earlier, tracing his nose along her sublime valleys.

"Mmm ..." she groaned.

It hurt him to wake her, but he was alarmed. The sight of her in bed, his queen relaxed and calm, had remedied some of the fear, but not entirely.

"Baby," he whispered against her skin. "I'm sorry to wake you. But the picture is gone. I don't know where it is."

He tried to conceal the worry in his voice but was failing miserably. Lyra stirred, then turned over to face him, her

eyelids still glued shut as she replied to him in her low, dreamy voice.

“Gone?” she repeated back. “What do you mean?”

He pushed her hair back from her face, kissing her forehead. She let out a satisfied moan, which made his cock hard for a second.

“It’s not on the wall,” he said, feeling a bit calmer.

Lyra’s bright, surreal eyes began to flutter open. Even in her semi-unconscious state, Timber could see her lips beginning to curl on their ends. She shifted closer to him, burying half her face into the pillow as she whispered.

“Look next to you, on the table.”

Timber did as she asked, feeling her ankles curl around his leg. After looking for only two seconds, he saw what she was referring to. He must have missed it in the routine of his early rises.

Another picture frame was sitting there, wrapped up in the same tissue she had used the first time. He tore it open, the sunrise beginning to spill into their private paradise.

Timber poured over the photo again, but he knew that there must be something different. He scanned it multiple times, frowning.

“I don’t understand ...”

“Look closer,” she said sleepily, her eyes beginning to stay open longer.

He did as she asked again, and the realization hit him like a lightning bolt.

The photo was identical except for the image of a little cub drawn over Lyra’s momma bear’s belly.

Timber carefully placed the photo on the nightstand, threw the comforter off of his wife, and then crawled down to her belly. She began giggling as he kissed it delicately, running his hands along it like she was made of glass.

“You are sneaky, miss,” he said, tears falling down his cheeks. “You are so damn sneaky. I love you so much.”

Lyra ran her hands through his hair, a gesture he had come to associate with relaxation and comfort.

“I was going to put it up before you got home later,” she said, a dazed goddess. “But you’re just too fast for me.”

Timber continued kissing the entirety of her stomach when he spoke, endearing himself to the child who had yet to be born.

“When is it due?”

She tugged at his chin lightly, and he gazed up. She still looked sleepy, but God, she was divine.

“On our anniversary,” she said, grinning.

Timber then openly began to cry, pressing his face against Lyra’s bare skin. He was going to have a house full of children with his mate, the woman who had come into his life and changed all the rules and, in turn, changed him.

All for the better.

FIFTY



LYRA

She walked down the hallway holding onto Marigold's hand. She smiled at her when she felt something shift in her stomach. She froze and grabbed onto her midsection.

"Lyra, have you seen my shirt? The one I brought home the other night?" Timber asked, poking his head out from down the hallway.

Wetness trickled down her thigh, and they both looked down. Marigold looked at her with wide eyes. "Mama peed. Mama peed, Dad!"

"Oh God," she gasped, looking at Timber. "My water just broke."

"It's okay," he said, quickly walking toward her. "We will just get you to the hospital. Just take a deep breath."

She felt panic sink in as she looked at Marigold. They had a ton of things to do. They had to call her mother. She couldn't have the baby now.

She suddenly felt unprepared. She leaned into the wall as a contraction hit her. "Timber!" she yelled.

He was by her side, rubbing her arm. "We're okay. We've got this. Everything is going to be okay."

"It's too early," she said, looking at him. "We can't have the baby yet."

He gave her a smile. "That doesn't matter right now. What matters is that the baby is ready to come out. We can do this."

She nodded as he guided her down the hallway. “Deep breaths, sweetie. Everything is going to be okay. We’re going to the hospital.”

Everything was happening quickly. Timber had her and Marigold in the car within half an hour, and they were heading to the hospital. When they arrived, her contractions were closer together. They admitted her, and ten hours later, she gave birth to a little girl.

She lay in bed feeling weak. Karen sat in a chair next to Marigold, both waiting for the nurse to come back with the baby.

Timber rubbed circles over her hand. “You did amazing, sweetie. She’s beautiful.”

She smiled weakly at him. She wanted a nap, but more, she wanted to see her daughter. The door opened, and the nurse stepped in. In her arms was their little girl.

She walked toward Lyra, putting the baby into her arms. The nurse smiled. “She’s beautiful. She has bright eyes, and she’s pretty vocal. What are we naming this pretty girl?”

She looked down at her baby, her heart feeling full. She was tiny with her little fingers in fists. Her eyes looked toward Timber, who smiled.

She looked at the nurse. “Poppy. We are going to call her Poppy.”

After a day in the hospital, they all went home, and things fell into motion. She grew to love her new life. She loved watching Poppy and having Marigold around to see her.

Marigold fell in love with her little sister, and she wanted to show her everything as they grew. She wanted to be that big sister. She would feed Poppy, and she’d curl up next to her every chance she got.

MARI LOVED her even more as the years went by and Poppy learned to walk.

Lyra was lying on the couch when Timber came home in the evening. She looked up and gave him a smile. “Hey.”

“Hey, are the girls in bed already?” He hung his jacket up, looking around the living room.

She nodded, pointing to the hallway. “They decided to run around outside a lot and grew tired early. They fell asleep right after their bath.”

He smiled at her, walking to the couch. “So, we are all alone?”

She snorted. “I wouldn’t say *alone*.”

He chuckled, leaning closer to her. “Okay, are you saying we have alone time?”

She raised an eyebrow. She couldn’t remember the last time they had time alone together. And not that she didn’t love her girls. She had a busy life, and she loved it. But when they had alone time, she suddenly found herself wanting Timber.

His lips pressed against hers, wasting no time. He grabbed her off the couch, pulling her against him. She laughed as he pulled her into his arms.

She kissed him back just as desperately. She ran her hands up into his hair, pulling at his roots. A moan left her lips as his mouth moved down her neck.

“To the bedroom?”

She nodded, and he hooked her legs, carrying her down the hallway. She giggled as they went, still feeling like two kids. They still loved each other, just like they had when they first met.

They tumbled onto the sheets, and they both laughed. He kissed her again, pulling at her shirt. She pulled at his pants. Neither wasted time getting naked. She had forgotten how much she missed his skin against hers. She missed that physical connection.

She reveled in each touch, each brush against her body. She felt him moving against her, and he slowly slid into her.

She moved, wrapping her legs around him and pulling him deeper into her. He slid against her G-spot, and she felt her nails bite into his skin.

“I love you, Lyra,” Timber whispered into her ear. “And I am blessed to have you in my life.”

Tears built from her happiness. She never imagined she would have this life, and she never wanted to lose it. She loved Marigold and Poppy with her entire heart.

“I love you. And I love the life we’ve built.”

Timber braced his arms, speeding up. She cried out as she came thinking about her family and the amazing future they would have.

They lay in the sheets together, and she curled up in his arms. Her life was complete. Who knew all she needed was a grumpy bear?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author

Hi! I'm Milly Taiden. I love to write sexy stories featuring fun, sassy heroines with curves and growly alpha males with fur. My books are a great way to satisfy your craving for paranormal romance with action, humor, suspense and happily ever afters.

I live in Florida with my hubby, our son, and our fur babies: Speedy, Stormy and Teddy. I have a serious addiction to chocolate and cake.

I love to meet new readers, so come sign up for my newsletter and check out my Facebook page. We always have lots of fun stuff going on there.

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