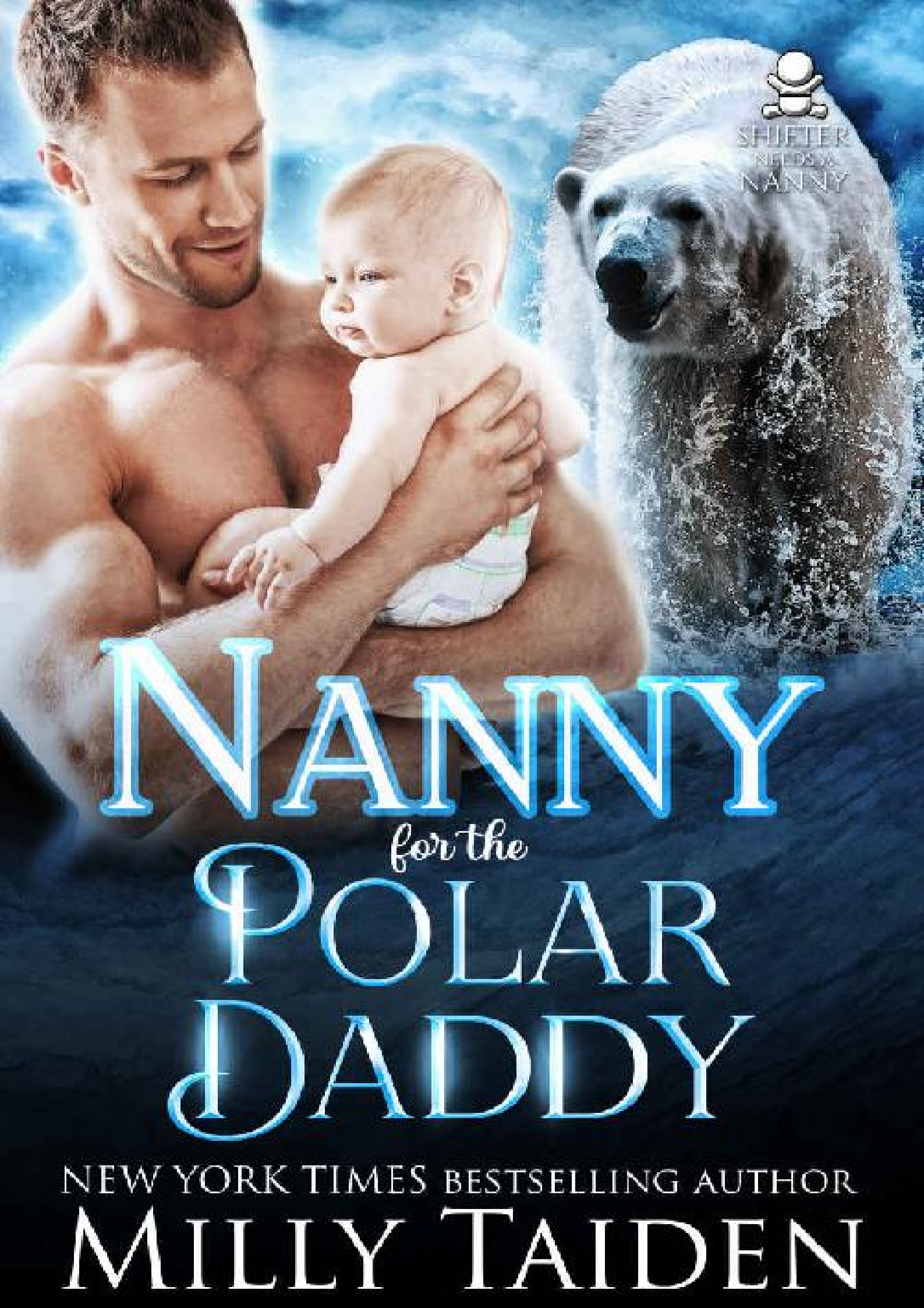




SHIFTER
NEEDS A
NANNY



NANNY
for the
POLAR
DADDY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MILLY TAIDEN

NANNY FOR THE POLAR DADDY

SHIFTER NEEDS A NANNY

BOOK 7

MILLY TAIDEN



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Nanny for the Polar Daddy.

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NANNY FOR THE POLAR
DADDY

SHIFTER NEEDS A NANNY 7

*NEW YORK TIMES and USA TODAY BESTSELLING
AUTHOR*

MILLY TAIDEN

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are fictitious or have been used fictitiously, and are not to be construed as real in any way. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Pediatric nurse Nora Williams can't do her job anymore. She needs a clean slate. A new job. When she agrees to work as a medical nanny for an orphaned child, she doesn't expect her guardian to be so hunky. **She's not supposed to notice his good looks or strong body, but she's having a hard time keeping her blood pressure and hormones under control.**

Hudson Connors, a polar bear shifter, lost his best friend in a plane crash where the only survivor was the young daughter, who was critically injured. Hudson knows he needs help. Nora is perfect for the job. She has experience, is great with children and knows how to handle trauma cases. **She's also the most beautiful, intelligent and caring woman he's ever met. Oh, and she's his mate.**

Fate decides that both are lucky to find each other to solve all their problems. But the challenges are just beginning. His perfect mate is human and they're not allowed into the clan. Then he learns that the plane crash may not have been accidental and those responsible aren't done. **Hudson and Nora need to work together to save the child, even if their romance is doomed before it even blossoms.**

*—For those who work in healthcare, trauma rooms and in
trauma response teams.*

Enjoy!

ONE



NORA

“Wasn’t there anything else you could have done?” came the all-to-familiar question from grieving parents.

Nora always thought she was mentally ready for it and knew how to answer, but she had never gotten used to seeing the loss mixed with disbelief in each parent’s eyes, leading up to her having to tell them the worst news imaginable to a parent.

Your child has passed, and there was nothing we could do.

It never ceased to cause tears to lodge in her throat, and she wished she could say anything but that.

Nora forced down her own emotions. “No, unfortunately not. The infection spread too rapidly, causing Valerie’s system to shut down.”

She watched the mother fall apart in her husband’s arms as the realization sank in. And all Nora was allowed to do was stand there and say she would give them a moment.

This was a picture Nora had seen more than her share of times.

After she said her practiced line, she turned and went around the corner to shed her own tears for the family.

She loved her job but hated it. When it was good, it was great. But when it was bad, it literally meant death. She used to be able to handle most of these situations better, but since her own mother passed away, Nora had been having a hard time keeping it together.

She was one of the most devoted pediatric nurses at the hospital, and she cared deeply for all those she took into her care. But she had become more withdrawn since losing her mother, which made her feel even colder, but she saw no other way.

All she could think these days was, “If it can be loved, it can be lost.” And that fear meant she didn’t know how to love anymore. Or maybe she was just too scared to try. Wasn’t it the same difference in the end?

Once she pulled herself together, she peeked around the corner at the parents.

The father’s eyes swam with his own devastation, but he let the tears drip silently down his face as he stayed strong and held his wife. She gasped for air with her own grieving sobs.

Nora gulped and leaned back against the wall.

This was getting harder and harder to handle. Barely twenty-seven years old, she already felt the weight of the world on her.

She wasn’t just emotionally exhausted by the losses she had witnessed and recently suffered herself. She was physically depleted as well. She wasn’t sleeping or eating like she should, and when she did find a moment to rest, the looming debt she owed for school and just to live slammed her.

Nora closed her eyes and asked herself if this was something she really wanted to keep doing. Nothing was going to bring her more joy than helping children. But she simply wasn’t making enough money, and the downside seemed to be getting more overwhelming the more time she spent here.

This was a question she had been dwelling on for a while. She had even started looking at other nursing jobs in the help wanted ads, hoping something might jump out at her. She needed better pay and less stress because her current situation was slowly killing her.

Nora’s inner contemplation was interrupted by the father coming to find her and discuss further action.

The mother stayed by the chairs while her husband did the questioning. Nora felt a flash of guilt every time the mother's gaze pierced her, sensing the judgmental eyes that asked if Nora had done enough.

Nora never knew how to explain that she had given everything she had.

But it was never enough, and it got a little harder to face every day.

NORA DROPPED her bag on the floor of her apartment before she flipped on the lights and made her way to her bedroom.

She was drained, as usual. She wanted comfy clothes and tea. "Then I'll look online for more job postings," she promised herself. That had become the unwinding routine as of late.

Nora grabbed her reliable sweats and a baggy T-shirt as she discarded her bra and headed to the bathroom.

She pulled her blond hair out of its tight ponytail and massaged her scalp.

After quickly running a brush through it, she made her tea and finally sat on the couch with her laptop. She clicked the TV on to a show she had seen a thousand times and searched job postings as the noise buzzed in the background.

"Now, let's see if anything new has come up," she mumbled to herself, hoping there were more than just the few she had seen the last couple of days.

She skimmed through her email and junk to make sure she hadn't missed any offers since she posted her resumé as public.

Nothing.

With a heavy sigh, she opened her job search page, expecting the same disappointment.

She sipped her tea and scrolled through ad after ad, not seeing anything new.

Nora closed her laptop and kept it on her crossed legs. She tilted her head back in exhaustion and annoyance.

“Might as well just accept that I’m gonna be at the hospital forever,” she said to herself gloomily.

She lifted her head so her eyes could see the TV, but she wasn’t really watching it. She was mentally checked out and trying not to overthink everything.

Then, a ding interrupted her dazed state. Nora looked at her laptop, realizing that she hadn’t shut it completely, so it was still on.

She opened it to see what the notification sound was for.

There was a red dot on the tab that she had opened for looking for jobs. It blinked the words *I new message*.

Nora’s heart quickened in the hope that it was an employer reaching out.

She clicked on it eagerly, only to be filled with more disappointment.

It was just a message stating that the field category she was looking at had posted a new job listing.

The excitement of seconds before was already gone as she huffed and clicked on the newly added post, expecting nothing but one more of the low-paying let-downs.

Her eyes skimmed over the description, and then she went back to re-read it thoroughly, not believing what she was seeing. She read it again, slowly realizing that it was actually real.

The ad called for a nursing job to take care of just one child. The medical needs were extensive, and the girl had limited mobility, among other complex issues. But none of her medically fragile conditions were fatal.

It was brief, but Nora got the gist of what may be required.

Caring for one child who wasn't terminal looked right up Nora's alley. Not only that, the location was not far away. But what really stood out for Nora was the pay. It was almost double what she made now. Yes, it was around-the-clock work, but to Nora, it seemed like her savior.

She was trying not to get too far ahead of herself, knowing how hard these jobs were to come by and how many others were probably applying at this very second.

The only part that she wasn't sure of was how old the child would be. But that was neither here nor there, especially given the array of children she'd dealt with throughout the years. If she was offered the job, she was sure she would be more than capable.

It was everything she was looking for. This might be the change she desperately needed.

Nora checked her resumé to make sure it was up to date, and everything was in order. She couldn't fuck this up.

It didn't ask for a cover letter, but she wrote a short one anyway. It couldn't hurt to give someone more information about the person who would be entrusted with caring for their child.

She clicked on the application form and filled out the required fields, then attached the files and sent them along with her application.

The submission page loaded, letting her know that her information had been successfully sent.

Nora let out a deep breath that she wasn't even aware she'd been holding.

She wanted this job more than she could admit to herself.

"This sounds like the exact job I was looking for," she realized out loud, both giddy and nervous that it finally seemed to be here.

She closed her laptop and leaned her head back, thinking about getting this job, trying to put out positive vibes for once.

Nora needed this chance for an emotional break. To give her back the joy she had once found in her work before the deaths had caught up to her and her mother died.

She even dared to hope that it could change her life and get it back on track.

TWO



HUDSON

Hudson's morning coffee steamed over his screen as he held his head in his hands, fingers dug into his black locks as he tried not to stress. "I need this to work," he muttered. "I don't have another backup plan."

The screen had refreshed every five minutes all night before Hudson finally admitted defeat and set his pride aside. Logan, his beta, talked him into looking for help caring for Hannah.

Being the alpha, Hudson had an obligation to take care of the orphaned members of his polar bear clan, but Hannah wasn't officially part of the clan.

Her father, Frank, had abandoned the shifters to marry Hannah's mother, a human. But Frank was one of Hudson's best friends and business partner, so they still saw each other often and were very much a part of each other's lives.

Still, that made Hannah technically an outsider, especially because she didn't have any shifter capabilities. But he had to take care of Hannah now. As alpha, he could at least provide that.

The problem was that Hudson had no real parental upbringing to have gained any sort of parenting skills. He had lost his own parents at a young age.

Then he received the call about the plane crash that killed Frank and his wife. Their six-year-old daughter survived but was left alone and severely injured.

But at thirty-one years of age, never having married or had any children, Hudson didn't know how to take care of her. He wouldn't know how to take care of any kid, but definitely not one in Hannah's shape. He wasn't a doctor, and Hannah's condition was more complicated than just giving her a bed to sleep in and some toys.

Not only that, but deep down, Hudson was grieving, no matter how much he didn't want to admit it.

That's when Logan suggested he hire professional help to show him how to properly care for a child in a wheelchair who needed around-the-clock care for physical therapy, meds, and so on.

He turned on the laptop and gave it a moment to start up. "There won't be any responses to your stupid ad," he mused gloomily. "They say everyone is short-staffed these days. Especially for good nurses. You aren't going to find some trained nurse willing to give up her job for just one patient."

He looked over his shoulder as he waited for the computer to load, his eye landing on a picture of him and Frank after one of their business deals had gone through.

No one knew how to seal a deal and read off of Hudson's pitch like Frank.

Their friendship had made their partnership blossom.

Now Frank was gone along with his wife.

It was just him and Hannah now. And if anyone knew what she was going through by missing her parents, it was him. He just wasn't sure how to talk to a child about that. Or how he could even pretend to make it better.

It never got better. And he didn't want to lie to her.

Hudson felt guilty about his many failings when it came to Hannah. He was too busy with his job. He lacked the proper knowledge of caring for a child. And he had no idea where to start on her medical and recovery needs, even though he was the one who wanted to take her in.

He pushed himself out of his chair and tiptoed to Hannah's room.

Her curly brown hair was scattered over her face and pillow with a drool spot where her mouth was.

Hudson smiled, happy that she was sleeping so well. No one deserved rest more.

His smile faded as his eyes skimmed over her room and landed on the large wheelchair parked near her bed.

Looking at the clock, he saw it was still early, so he let her continue her slumber.

He shut the door to a crack and returned to his cooling coffee and waiting laptop.

He sat with a heavy sigh, hoping that he was doing the right thing by giving her a home where she knew no one and had no immediate family.

If he were honest, and he always tried to be, his confidence in the whole thing had quickly waned. Of course, he wasn't going to give her up. He just hated admitting he needed help. It wasn't in an alpha's nature.

If anyone besides Logan had recommended that he get help, he wouldn't have taken it so well. Hudson might be prideful, but he knew when his beta was right. He usually was, whether Hudson liked it or not.

"Well, I guess that's enough putting it off," he mumbled as he clicked open the webpage and went to his email.

He had a new email on top. It was from the website letting him know that he had applicants for his position.

Applicants were good. It meant he had options.

"Hell, yes," he whispered, not wanting to wake Hannah. "Let's see what we have here."

Hudson went to the link to view the first applicant.

He apparently had his hopes too high that his first candidate would be the perfect fit. It was disappointing, to say the least. She hadn't held a job that lasted more than a couple

of months. However, she indicated in the application that she was young and willing to try new things.

Her submission photo would have told him how unequipped she was for the job, considering she found it professional to select a picture with a filter over her face.

“Yeah, I don’t think so.” He exited out of her information and clicked on the next candidate, less optimistic this time.

The next was okay but not great.

Hudson went through three other candidates and realized that the battle wasn’t going to be hiding his identity as a polar bear shifter. No, the problem well before that would be in getting someone he trusted or who would be a good influence around Hannah. None met any of those standards. They especially fell short in the experience department.

He had two resumés to go through.

Hudson got up and poured himself another cup of coffee so he could mentally prepare for what he expected would be more disappointment.

He glanced at the time on the laptop. His day wouldn’t officially start for another hour or so. It would allow him enough time to read through these last two and write an email that he could copy and paste to let them down easily.

He clicked open the one at the top. “Nora... What are you willing to bring to the table?”

Hudson scrolled through her answers to his application before moving to her resumé.

She had responded well enough, but anyone who wanted a job knew how to play that game. The person came out on the resumé, not the simple yes or no questions.

Hudson’s eyes widened as he saw just how much experience she had in exactly what he was looking for.

“Finally,” he sighed, allowing optimism to inch its way back in.

Her work history was perfect. She even wrote a cover letter, which impressed Hudson even more. Most didn't know what a cover letter was, let alone how to properly format one.

He read through her short intro, hoping it was as promising as her resumé had been.

She was a pediatric nurse looking for a change from the hospital where she currently worked. She loved children, and helping them was her passion in life. She would love to be able to focus her energy on one child who needed twenty-four-hour care with an ever-changing regime. She seemed to want the challenge.

She didn't have a profile picture submitted with her application, which didn't bug Hudson one bit. It made it easier for him to judge her credentials rather than base his reaction on what he saw and would or could automatically assume.

Just for the hell of it, Hudson looked at the last applicant. No good, especially compared to Nora's.

He pulled the promising prospect back onto his screen and read through the entirety of her submissions again.

He had a great gut feeling about her, and his inner polar bear agreed. But what if she already had other offers? She was highly experienced, and anyone could snatch her up.

Without further hesitation, he whipped up an email responding that he would like to hire her based on credentials alone but would like to meet with her first so they could observe her fit with Hannah as well as discuss what would actually be expected. He promised if there was a conflict, he would pay her a full month's salary just for the inconvenience.

He waited for about ten minutes after he sent it, then slammed the rest of his coffee and decided that it was time to wake Hannah and get the day started.

As he started to rise, his inbox dinged.

A glance told him it was a reply from Nora, the applicant to whom he had just more or less offered the job.

Without sitting, he leaned forward and clicked it open.

That sounds perfect. Please let me know when and where you would like to meet or if there is anything else you may need from me. I look forward to meeting you and Hannah. - Nora

Hudson smiled as he looked over the calendar and sent appointment times back to Nora, letting her know they would meet at his home since she would want to see her new place of employment.

He stood and hoped this was going to be beneficial for Hannah, who had always been shy and withdrawn but was even more so after the accident.

Hudson prayed this would go well. He only wanted to do what was best for Hannah, and he hoped Nora was the answer.

THREE



NORA

Nora tucked her blonde hair behind her ear, adjusted her blouse, and took a deep breath before knocking. “Just smile and be yourself,” she muttered before internally chastising herself for talking to herself.

This was it. If she hit it off with them, then she would be getting the escape she needed from the ever-present death surrounding her.

After three raps, Nora heard footsteps approach the door from the inside and tried to calm her racing heart as she waited.

When it opened, Nora was caught off guard by how *hot* the man from the other side of the email was.

He had come across as older. This guy was tall, muscular, and had an aura that was both brooding and methodical. His hazel eyes, which stood out from his ebony hair, seemed to glow in the dim light of the hall.

Nora realized she was staring at someone who she was hoping would employ her.

Embarrassed, she collected herself and stuck out her hand. “Hi, Mr. Connors? I’m Nora.”

The pull of a small, fake smile etched its way onto his sharp features. “Nora, hi. Thank you for coming.” He stepped back and gestured for her to come inside.

Nora took in the home.

It was comfy and huge enough for mobility in a wheelchair. And beautiful. A gorgeous, overly large log home, complete with a fireplace and stone inlays ... it looked like a dream home to Nora. It was essentially a mansion but with the relaxed aura of a mere cabin.

It also added to the shock of how young Mr. Connors was. She wondered what his profession was that would pay for something this large and gorgeous.

She quickly pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind, realizing she didn't care because whatever it was, it allowed him to pay her the amount he had advertised.

"Hannah." His gruff voice jerked Nora back to the present. She had to admit that he was not only sexy but intimidating. Or maybe bitter seemed like a better word.

And that worried her. She didn't need any more negativity in her life. And if he was like this at the first meeting, she couldn't imagine how chipper he would be dealing with a young child with medical issues.

Before she could ponder too long, a timid-looking young girl rolled out in a wheelchair. Her big brown eyes told Nora that she had already seen her fair share of sorrow, and she wasn't even out of elementary school.

Nora didn't know the whole story since the emails between her and Mr. Connors had been brief, and the ad wasn't full of details, just the highlights. But she could see in her eyes a similar sorrow to what Nora had recently gone through, only this was so much worse.

Nora focused on the girl hiding behind her brown curls and knelt down to her level. "Hi, I'm Nora. Would you, by chance, be Hannah?"

The girl shot a questioning look up at the solemn man. He must have given her a signal because she, too, forced a smile and introduced herself. "Yes. I'm Hannah."

Maybe these two aren't so different after all, Nora mused as she sensed how uncertain they both were around her. That was to be expected, she supposed.

They all eventually made their way to the sitting room, and Nora gently led the girl into opening up and telling a little about herself.

Mr. Connors stayed with them, Nora feeling how intensely he was taking in everything that happened.

She tried to ignore him, but it was hard. He had such a strong presence that it made him difficult to disregard. But eventually, she was able to block him out. Hannah made that easy.

She had just as many questions for Nora as Nora had for her.

After about thirty minutes of getting to know Hannah and having her actively engage, Nora decided to ask the harder question.

“So, Hannah. For me to give you the best road to success, can you tell me what you had to go through to get here?”

Nora knew that Mr. Connors would probably fill her in on his own time, but hearing it from the source instead of a second party would help her so much more in getting started and building a connection with Hannah.

Mr. Connors stiffened at the question, and Hannah’s big eyes started to glisten.

“We don’t have to talk about that now ...” he practically growled.

Hannah’s voice was soft as she cut him off. “It’s okay.”

He immediately stopped talking and even seemed to soften at her words. He sat back, his own eyes now seeming to reflect the light more.

At that moment, Nora saw the care in his expression for this little girl and understood that this wasn’t a gruff man, not when it mattered. He obviously saw himself as the only thing protecting this little one from what had befallen her and what life might have in store.

She respected, no, *admired* that.

Hannah told her story of losing her parents in a plane crash where all aboard had died. Parts were hard for her to want to talk about, but she did, nonetheless.

It never ceased to surprise Nora that the bravery of children was so much greater than they were given credit for.

Still, Hannah got through it and talked about her being left unable to walk while she still recovered and what she had done so far. Her now-guardian chimed in occasionally to provide more details when necessary.

It was obvious to Nora that not only had Hannah sustained physical trauma but emotional as well, which she had already suspected.

But the more she watched Mr. Connors ebb in here and there, the more she noticed he had emotional baggage tied into this as well.

She turned her attention to him after a moment. “Mr. Connors...”

“Please, call me Hudson.”

She nodded, taking it as a good thing that he was moving to be more casual.

“What made you decide to take in Hannah?”

He cleared his throat, pushing back any emotion he was about to show. “Her father and mother are ... were good friends of mine. I’ve known Hannah all her life, and I want to make sure she has everything she needs. I can do that for her.”

His answer was honest. That little bit of softness flickered when he had responded to her.

She didn’t need to hear anymore. She turned her attention back to Hannah, who was carefully watching Hudson.

“Hannah,” she began. The little girl jerked her big brown eyes back to Nora. “I promise, as long as you want me here and will work for it, that I will help you with the healing process.”

The brown eyes widened with eagerness. “Really?”

Nora nodded with a smile. “Absolutely. You are going to have to do your part, too, though. There will be medications and timers we have to pay attention to, exercises that will hurt but be for the best, exams, and physical therapy. It won’t be an easy or short road, but it will be successful as long as we work together and you give it your all. Do you think that you can do that?”

Hannah nodded her head eagerly. “I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will.”

The two shared a moment before Hudson asked a question. “So, what are we looking at for a schedule? That way, Hannah and I are prepared for what to do when we need to add things to our agendas.”

Nora sat back in her seat and kept her eyes on Hannah as she answered. “Well, it’s going to be an adjustment, but we will go over what you both do every day and change up things when we need to. Like when to get your meds, what counseling sessions might be good, what days to have physical therapy, which I’ll be there for, by the way.”

She winked at Hannah, who smiled in return. “I told you that you won’t be alone in this.”

Hudson nodded. “That sounds like a good start. Hannah, I’ll go over the calendars with Nora, and we’ll build a schedule. We can start tomorrow if she’s willing to take the job.”

Nora looked at Hudson at the mention of her getting the job. He had an expectant look, waiting for her answer.

“Absolutely,” she answered without a second thought.

Hannah’s eyes danced with joy, which solidified Nora’s feelings. This was going to be a full-time job and challenging, as well, but rewarding.

She enjoyed being around Hannah, but she wasn’t sure about Hudson yet.

But he wasn’t what was important. All that mattered was that he wanted the best for this little girl, and Nora was eager

to be a part of that.

FOUR



HUDSON

Hudson walked into the living room and noticed that the PT nurse was there with Nora helping her. Hannah was on the ground. He watched as they stretched out Hannah's legs, trying to get her muscles to move.

It was something they had been working on a couple of days a week now, and every time they did, Hannah seemed unhappy with the results.

He watched pain cross her face, and he wanted to yell at them to stop. The bear in him growled at the sight, demanding that he rush in and put a stop to it. Hannah was only six. She didn't deserve the pain that came with everything.

But in his mind, he heard Nora's warning from before. *"It will likely hurt, and we are going to push her, but it's all for her. She needs this. She needs to work the muscles, or she will never recover. Hannah will not always be like this, and if we want her to walk again, we have to push her."*

He swallowed and watched as Nora gave Hannah a soft smile. She reached out, brushing some of Hannah's hair back. "You're doing so great, sweetie. I'm impressed. You really can handle anything, can't you?"

Hannah beamed with a smile, and the pain that covered her face a moment ago was gone completely. Hannah now looked confident, ready to continue working hard.

Nora helped the other nurse move Hannah into a different position, trying to move her legs a little farther than before.

He smiled at them. He liked how quickly Hannah got along with Nora and vice versa. Hannah needed a woman in her corner, someone who knew how to handle her.

He was a little jealous. He wished he knew how to help her and make her feel better. He'd known Hannah since she was born, but to her, he was just another person her parents knew.

He remembered visiting her folks' house and seeing Hannah run around happily. She had the life every kid dreamed of, and it had been snatched from her so quickly. It was a feeling he'd never wish upon anyone.

He didn't know how to make her feel safe or how to make her laugh. He didn't know what her favorite color was or what she wanted to be when she grew up. These were all questions her parents would know the answers to. And now they were gone.

He ran a hand over his face, realizing he needed to do better. He needed to work harder, too, so she had someone she could lean on. Her parents were gone, so he was responsible for making her feel safe.

"Hudson," Hannah called out to him, giving him a big smile. "Did you see that? I moved my foot. I moved it!"

Hannah giggled, looking back at her feet. "I moved it."

Tears burned in the back of his eyes. Just a couple of months ago, she was as normal and happy as could be, and now she was so giddy that she could wiggle her toes.

Nora looked at him, giving him a gentle smile. She walked over to him, patting him on the shoulder. "She's doing good. This is progress. This is all going in the right direction."

Hannah looked back up at him. "What's wrong? Why do you look sad?"

He quickly hardened his face and gave her a nod. He didn't need her feeling the emotions he was feeling. She was happy, and he wanted her to stay that way. "Nothing. This is good, Hannah."

The PT nurse nodded. “I agree. We can try again on Thursday, but I think we should stop for today.”

Nora thanked the nurse and helped her out.

He bent down to Hannah’s level. He could see a sparkle in her eyes, a sparkle he had not seen since her parents died. Nora really had a way with her.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, a question he asked her every day.

“I feel good,” she said, looking down the hallway where Nora had disappeared. “I like her. She’s nice.”

“You think? I don’t know. She seems bossy. We might have to get a new nurse,” he teased back.

“She isn’t.” Hannah giggled. “Maybe to you. She’s nice to me.”

He smiled at her while Nora walked back. “What are you two giggling about?”

“Nothing,” he said, pulling himself up. “I was just letting Hannah know I was going to be in my office for a little bit. I have a few phone calls to make.”

Nora gave him a brandishing look, but he didn’t mind. He was keeping himself distant from them for several reasons.

He couldn’t get emotional every time Hannah made progress. She didn’t need him around to make her already difficult journey even harder.

Still, his bear practically purred when he was around Nora. He figured it was because of how well she handled Hannah. She knew exactly what Hannah needed while he was still learning.

“Well, you enjoy your phone calls,” Nora chirped, bending down to Hannah’s level. “We are going to watch a movie and then work on a puzzle after that.”

Hannah’s eyes lit up, and he felt a pang in his chest. The feeling wasn’t like the others he’d felt. It was from Nora *and*

Hannah. He quickly shook it off as unimportant juvenile jealousy and gave them a smile.

“You two enjoy that. I’ll be back for lunch.”

He turned on his heel, heading down the hallway toward his home office. He heard Hannah giggling as he shut his door, trying to get himself to focus.

After a few phone calls and what felt like forever, he left his secluded room. He found Hannah and Nora in the kitchen. Hannah was talking while Nora stood next to the counter, stirring something in a bowl. He leaned against the wall, watching them.

“My mom used to bake cookies,” Hannah said, watching Nora. “She used to make some really good sugar cookies.”

“So did my mom,” Nora said, giving her a smile back. “My mother used to add an extra tablespoon of vanilla, so they were extra sweet.”

Hannah giggled. “Can we make them into shapes? My mom used to cut them into hearts, and I decorated them.”

“Sure, though I’m not sure what Hudson has around here for cutting things. What does the recipe say to do next?”

Hannah looked back at the book in her lap. Her fingers were wrapped around the book in a death grip. He knew that it wasn’t his book, so it likely had to be Hannah’s mom’s.

“Add in the sugar. Mix it in slowly.”

Nora sifted the sugar into the bowl, and he could see Hannah watching her carefully.

He remembered making his mother’s recipes when he was older and on his own. He felt a little closer to her when he did. He still made his mother’s soups in times of stress. Yet it had never occurred to him that he could now bond with Hannah the same way.

“What’s next?” Nora asked, and Hannah looked at the instructions.

He didn't want to interrupt them. Hannah liked Nora, and he didn't want to get in the way of them having a fun time.

He crept back down the hallway and slipped out the back door. He decided to get a little fresh air. Hannah would have a shower soon. Nora always helped her clean up around three o'clock, and then they would get settled for dinner.

He sat outside, feeling that pang in his chest once more. He closed his eyes and thought about Nora.

She certainly was an eye-catcher, and the way she moved caught his attention more than it should. It was wrong even to be thinking such things when Hannah needed her. It was another reason he tried to keep his distance. He wanted to let his guard down so badly. But he couldn't do that.

Hannah needed him to keep his head on straight. His clan needed him to focus. He couldn't let a human with a fine figure pull his attention away from important things.

Another problem was that Nora didn't know about his shifter abilities, and he wasn't sure how she'd react. He couldn't allow her closer because then he'd have to tell her. He couldn't risk losing the help, so he'd just keep doing what he was doing.

He pinched at his eyes, shaking his head. He wished it was that easy, but it wasn't. It was going to be a lot harder than that.

FIVE



NORA

Nora watched as Hudson helped Hannah out of the car. She couldn't help but smile, seeing how gentle he was. He held Hannah carefully, moving her arm around his shoulder as he cradled her.

Loud music blared behind them from the amusement park. She had been worried that it may not have been a good place to bring Hannah, considering she was wheelchair-bound, but Hannah wanted to go. And Hudson looked up activities she could be part of.

He pulled Hannah out and settled her into her chair. She wiggled, trying to see past him.

"Hannah, stay still for a moment," he said, trying to make sure the seat was completely flat.

Hannah looked over his shoulder, and she couldn't help but smirk at the cuteness of it. Hannah was so excited to be getting out of the house. She had been practically bouncing since they left.

The girl needed fresh air and not to have her entire life surrounded by her health and healing. Emotional resilience and self-care were just as important in this journey as exercises and nursing.

"All right, if you're all settled, we can head in," Hudson said, pulling himself up.

They turned to the gates, and she watched as Hudson pushed Hannah's wheelchair. He was nervous and a little

awkward as he did so. He was used to being at the house and not out in the open.

As they got to the line, Hudson and Hannah were both looking around. Hannah looked excited, while Hudson looked concerned. People screamed as the roller coaster zipped around, which made Hudson tense. She understood. She was worried about whether Hannah would have a fun time, too.

Hudson paid for the tickets, and they were inside. People wandered around, families eager to get on the rides and visit each of the booths with activities. Hannah squirmed in her seat with energy.

“Which one will we do first?” she asked frantically, her head turned to Hudson.

Nora pulled out the map, scanning over the entire attraction. She found the games section. “How about ring toss to start?” she said, looking at both of them.

Hannah nodded eagerly, and Hudson shrugged in agreement.

They headed down the pathway. Hudson leaned closer to the wheelchair as he moved it. He looked like a giant gorilla pushing a little kid’s chair. She couldn’t help but smirk.

As they arrived at the booth, there were a few other kids trying. Nora pulled out a few tickets and was handed eight rings.

She gave several to Hannah while Hudson pushed her closer to the small wall. Hannah leaned forward a little and threw her first ring. It bounced off a bottle and tumbled to the ground. She threw her second, and it bounced twice before it landed in between bottles. She scowled and tried her third with no luck.

She handed three more to Hannah and flickered her eyes up to Hudson. He stood with his hands stuffed into his pocket, watching Hannah.

“You ever try this?” she asked him as Hannah threw another ring and, this time, landed it around a bottle. Hannah threw her hands up, cheering.

Hudson shook his head. “No.”

Hannah looked up at him. “You should try. It’s fun.”

She held out the two remaining rings, and Hudson looked at them like they were snakes. But he took them and looked at Hannah. She showed him how to throw them, and she watched as Hudson tried the two rings, not getting either on a bottle.

They ended up trying another eight rings, winning Hannah a giant stuffed bear. Hannah giggled as they headed to another game. “Where to next?” she asked with a squeal.

They threw balls at tin cans and darts at balloons. After they had tried most of the carnival games, they headed out for the rides.

Hudson had relaxed a little. He had a small smile pulling on his lips when Hannah pointed at a ride she wanted to try. They stood in line for the roller coaster, and Nora noticed Hudson looked uneasy again.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, whispering to him.

“I’ve never been on one,” he said, looking at the coaster.

She pulled her lips in, biting on them to stop herself from laughing. The sudden thought of big, gruff Hudson being nervous about getting on a roller coaster was something she was never going to forget.

“Don’t smirk like that,” Hudson said. “We didn’t do stuff like this growing up.”

“I promise you’ll have fun,” she said as the line started to move forward. They were pulled to the front of the line. Hudson helped Hannah into a seat, and they all squeezed in. Hudson gripped the ride with white knuckles.

“My dad loved this ride,” Hannah said, looking forward. “His favorite part was the spin where you go upside down. Your stomach drops, and you feel like you’re going to fall.”

Hudson’s head jerked toward them with wide eyes. “Upside down! What?”

The ride creaked as the carts rolled forward. Hudson's face went white, and Hannah giggled. She reached her hand over, taking Hudson's.

"It's okay. I'll hold your hand."

The ride moved forward, and it gained speed quickly. Nora and Hannah laughed as they started up, slowly creeping to the top of the first steep incline. After a pause at the very top, they plummeted toward the ground. They swirled and whirled around, and they were flying upside down at one point.

Hannah screamed with happiness, and Nora peeked over, seeing Hudson with a smirk of entertainment.

After the ride ended, they rolled to the bumper cars. Hudson and Hannah sat together. Hudson steered as Hannah pointed out which car to hit. They marched toward the super slides next. She and Hannah went up, and she held Hannah on her lap as they slid down. Hudson waited at the bottom, snapping a photo.

They went on the spinning tea cups, the tilt-a-whirl, and the swings that soared above the crowds. Hudson even let Hannah get her face painted with rainbows and a unicorn.

Near lunchtime, they ordered hot dogs, and Nora noted the nervousness Hudson had before was gone. He was enjoying himself almost as much as Hannah was.

She was happy that everything was going smoothly. Hannah was having a good time, and that had been her one big concern.

After they finished eating, they headed to the petting zoo. Hannah leaned over, petting each animal that she could reach. She giggled as she fed them.

"Hudson, did you see? He ate out of my hand." Hannah smiled as a baby goat licked her fingers.

Hudson smiled at Hannah. "I did," he said as he leaned over, petting the mother goat.

They kept moving along, seeing donkeys, cows, and chickens. They stopped and watched the pigs and moved along

to the mini horses. Hannah tried convincing Hudson to buy a horse. She'd been trying to convince her parents for a couple of years.

“Why do you want a horse?” he asked as they exited the barn.

She shrugged and looked at him. “Because all my friends have one.”

“Hardly a reason,” he said, laughing at her. She smirked, watching Hannah smile back at Hudson.

The sun was sinking as they left for the car. Hudson helped Hannah into the back as Nora put the wheelchair into the trunk.

“So, did you have a fun time?” she asked as they both got into the front. She looked into the back seat, finding Hannah already asleep. It had been a long day for her. The past week had been a lot of hard work, and Nora was happy the girl had a day away from it.

“I did. Thank you for helping to make this possible.” Hudson smiled at her, and her heart skipped a beat. It had been doing so all day, and she quickly tried to shake it off. She couldn't be ogling her boss.

She was just feeling this way because of how far Hudson had come. When she first arrived, he had no idea how to take care of Hannah, and now he was learning. That's all it was.

That's what she was telling herself.

SIX



HUDSON

Once they returned home, Nora helped Hannah bathe and get ready for bed. Meanwhile, Hudson went to his study and got on the phone with his beta, Logan.

“Things are not adding up here,” Logan said. “All the clues are pointing elsewhere.”

Hudson agreed but didn't want his thoughts on the accident to influence others.

He dove right into the topic. No time for niceties. He leaned over the desk and focused on the legal pad under his hand, which held a pen. He mindlessly inked arrows onto the pad, one after another. Their target was a rough-drawn dart board with a question mark where the bull's eye should be.

“Logan, can you get the enforcers and elders assembled tonight at our forest lair?”

“Yeah, sure. I can put out a call. What level? A regular meeting or an emergency level four?”

Normally, Logan never asked such questions, but his beta heard the urgency in his voice.

“Make it a two, threatening to become a three. This is why we must meet tonight.”

“Leave it to me. We'll convene after dusk.”

“Thanks. See you and the members there.”

It was all Hudson could do to even be that polite. The plane crash which killed his best friend was all-consuming. He

didn't know if it was his shifter intuition at work or merely the question of why a crash happened at all. He had to get answers, and quickly, in case there was more to the story than a dead engine or an electrical failure.

It was only a half hour until dusk, but to Hudson, the time on his wall clock ticked by like the minute hand was stuck in the mud. His sight went from the picture window, which faced west, to the clock. The pen he still held beat on his desktop stapler to the second-hand tick-tock drum.

Hudson never liked to wait for anything or anyone. It wasn't uncommon for a polar bear, or really any kind of shifter, but he always wondered where he got his impatience from. His father? His mother? They died when he was so young he couldn't possibly know.

As the last of the winter's dim daylight faded below the undulating hills, Hudson breathed a sigh of relief. It was finally time. He rocketed out of his chair and hurried outside to the woodshed. There, in the privacy of the small space, he undressed completely, folded up his clothes for later, and bolted outside once more. The stinging cold hit his sensitive human skin.

Hudson drew breath in and exhaled, stretched, and in one fluid motion, the man turned into a gigantic bear. A polar bear, to be precise. His form now had mammoth muscle structure, a prominent black nose, and eyes as big as a billiard eight ball. He shook his body to even out the pristine white fur.

Hudson sniffed the air. Cold, crisp. He caught the lair scent instantly. There. Onward.

With one easy bound, Hudson raced through the pines. Tree bows bent, and shrubs shivered under his massive weight. The world of the forest, *his* forest, genuflected to his power.

It took no time to reach the expansive ranch-style log cabin lair. A sliver of white smoke floated from the fieldstone chimney, and a pale amber glow from lit lanterns filled the bottle glass window panes. By the looks of all the paw tracks, the elders were assembled within. *Good. Time is of the essence here.*

Hudson shook his coat to rid it of the fallen snow, wiped his gigantic paws on the bristle mat, and used his nose to flip the wooden latch open. As a builder of custom log cabins, he was proud of his bear-shifter design. All had been adapted to polar bear needs.

All eyes turned when Hudson darkened the door and shifted to his two-legged form.

“Ah, Alpha, there you are. We are ready to begin.”

Logan slid the chair at the head of the massive pine table for their alpha, and Hudson nodded and deftly took it. Again, with no preamble, the leader got down to business.

“I need an elder-wide investigation into the plane crash which took our former member, Frank, his wife, and nearly killed his daughter, Hannah. I need to know if this catastrophic failure was due to machine malfunction, pilot error, or some nefarious plot to take out certain members of our clan. He may have been a former member, but I’m concerned we may be blind to a threat to us if we don’t examine it further.”

Murmurs and head nods erupted down both sides of the elongated table.

“I have a list of investigative duties with me for each of you. Each is assigned according to your background and skills. Some are purely mechanical, others forensic. You will receive them at the end of the meeting.

“My primary goal is to uncover whether this was an accidental crash or the plane was downed by sabotage. Whether Frank or someone else on the craft was a target, and if so, why? Please get your results back to Logan as soon as possible. That is all. Meeting adjourned.”

Hudson pounded the table once with his hand. The members rose from their chairs and talked freely among themselves as Logan handed out the assignments. Logan soon returned to the fireplace mantle where Hudson stood.

“Well, Alpha, do you think this investigation will bring anything more to light?”

“It had better. I don’t want another deadly accident to occur to our people. And until I have all the facts, I can’t rest.”

“Are you concerned for Hannah?”

“Honestly, yes. Hannah may be in serious jeopardy if the plane or its passengers were targeted. And the poor girl still uses a wheelchair from her injuries and is therefore at severe risk.”

The shifters departed the lair one by one, and Hudson slowly padded back to his luxurious home. He maintained his shifter form all along the wooden trail, as he had far more warmth in his polar fur. And somehow, when he was alone, he felt more comfortable in the beastly skin.

Hudson reached the front of his home and saw a light on in Hannah’s room. His guilt at not spending more time with the little girl gave him an idea. He glanced at Nora’s room, seeing her shades drawn with a glow behind the curtain that assured him Nora was relaxing in her own room and would not witness what came next.

With his giant nose, he sniffed out a pebble under the snow and flipped it up with his paw at the girl’s window.

The curtains fluttered, and soon Hannah’s face appeared through the glass. She saw Hudson in his polar bear form, and a gleeful expression lit up her face. She opened the pane and called out.

“Hudson, that’s you, isn’t it? Daddy told me you could be a polar bear like he was.”

He slowly padded up to her and licked her face, sending her into giggles. He gathered snow into ball shapes with his paws and placed several on the window ledge.

Hannah stared at them for a moment, and then her face broke into a smile. “You want to have a snowball fight?”

Hudson bounced on all four paws and lumbered to a spot behind a tree, grabbed a ball of his own, and threw it as well as a bear could throw.

Back and forth, up and down, each ball flew and landed with a splat on the little girl and her furry white foe. Hudson howled with delight as Hannah giggled. By the end, the bear and girl were happily covered in the fluffy white globs.

Hudson plodded up to Hannah's sash and laid his nose on the sill so the little girl could pet him. Outward gestures of affection were difficult for Hudson, but for his adopted daughter, he tried. It seemed easier as a bear than as a man.

"Gosh, Hudson, I wish I could shift like you. Or at least play outside."

Hudson raised his nose and nuzzled her cheek. He would remind her later that the doctors said if she kept up with her medicine and physical therapy, she'd be walking and running in no time.

Hudson nuzzled the girl in his care once more, then lumbered off toward the woodshed to shift back into a man form again and get dressed in his clothes.

Sitting by the fire, the flickering light creating amber shapes upon the darkened space, Hudson thought back to what happened to spin his life into a 180-degree change.

A father to Hannah, and who knows, a family of my own one day.

His thoughts meandered to Nora, her easy mothering instincts, and how well Hannah took to her and her care.

No. Seal those thoughts away. A mixed marriage, shifter to human? It never works out in the end. Look at Frank. All the ridicule and scorn. So much so that he felt he had to leave the clan. And then what becomes of little Hannah? You can't jeopardize her future over silly, flirty games.

The firelight reflected in his glistening eyes, and one last thought sprang to mind.

Besides, I have more things to worry about than mating. There's a plane down, a shifter dead, and a mystery to solve. Accident or cold-blooded murder?

SEVEN



NORA

Nora watched as Hannah pushed herself along quickly down the hall. “Slow down, Hannah. I’m sure breakfast will still be there.”

She couldn’t help smiling at the girl’s eagerness. Hannah might have been in a wheelchair, but she was still six years old and full of energy like any other kid her age.

The girl giggled and looked back to grin at Nora, not slowing down. “Yeah, but we’re supposed to have chocolate chip pancakes today. We can’t be late for that.”

Nora opened her mouth to respond when she noticed a large shoe in Hannah’s path.

“Watch out!” she called out a second too late to realize that she shouldn’t have given such a vague, frantic command.

Panicked, Hannah tried to slow down and swerve all at once to try and avoid the obstruction. In doing so, though, she slid into a rug that bunched up on the end. The wheels caught the edge of the rug, and the wheelchair tipped over, and Hannah flew forward with a cry.

In a flash, Nora was racing toward the girl and caught her just before she could hit the floor.

A frantic sob escaped the young girl, and she gripped Nora for dear life. The nurse tucked the girl tightly against her and rocked her back and forth in her arms slowly. She smoothed her hair and whispered that she was going to be all right.

There was a bang of a door, and suddenly, Hudson was storming toward them. He took one look at his sobbing child and her tipped-over chair and growled. “What happened?”

An unexpected fury rose in Nora, and she glared at the man.

“What happened?” she snapped back. “What happened was that there are shoes lying everywhere that should have been picked up. And you shouldn’t have this type of loose rug everywhere with someone in a wheelchair in the house.”

She knew the mature thing to do would be to take Hannah to breakfast and then continue this conversation elsewhere. But it was as if a dam had broken open, and she couldn’t stop the tirade coming out. He needed to hear this. More importantly, he needed to *understand* this.

“In fact, your whole house isn’t exactly childproof. And as far as I can tell, you seem to have no intention of making it any better. You knew her condition when she was coming to live with you, and yet you made no attempt to try to accommodate her.”

Hudson opened his mouth to speak, but Nora kept going. “You’re not just some bachelor living alone anymore. You have a child. A responsibility. If you don’t do something about it, it could even be considered negligence.”

The man flinched, and pain and regret filled his face. And most of all, fear. Nora immediately felt her anger subside.

Hannah let out a whimper, and guilt rose in Nora. She really should have had this conversation without the girl. But it was too late now.

“Hey, it’s all right. Everything is going to be okay,” she soothed. “Look at me, Hannah.”

Reluctantly, the girl lifted her head from where she’d buried it in Nora’s shirt. The nurse brushed away the girl’s tears. “See, you’re okay. You just had a little scare. Now, I want you to take a deep breath with me.”

She took deep breaths and let them out. Shakily, Hannah began to copy her until her breathing evened out. Nora smiled

at her. “There you go, much better.”

Nora scooped her up to place her back in the wheelchair. Hannah gripped her shirt and gave her a frantic look. “Can you just carry me instead? I don’t want to fall again.”

Her heart clenched in sympathy for the girl, but this was what was best for her. She couldn’t coddle her. Otherwise, the girl would always be afraid.

The nurse gave her a reassuring grin. “It’s okay. You can’t be scared just because of one accident. If you don’t get back up and try again, you’re never going to get anywhere.”

Hannah still didn’t look completely convinced. So Nora tried another tactic.

She smiled mischievously. “Besides, I’m pretty sure we still have chocolate chip pancakes that need eating. And you’d hate to miss out on that.”

Hannah immediately brightened. “That’s right! We need to get there right away.”

Nora grinned at her and set her in the chair. “Let’s go get some pancakes then. And this time, we’ll go a little slower.”

The girl’s look became sheepish, but she nodded. They made their way to the dining room, where the new personal chef was setting out platters of food, Hannah moving more carefully this time.

Hudson followed a bit behind them. Nora glanced back at him. He looked like a scolded dog.

But he was still there, making sure Hannah got her pancakes. And he really had been very loving toward the girl. He just didn’t seem to know how to express it.

Nora sighed. Maybe she’d been a bit too harsh with him. He was new to all this, and like all new parents, he still had a lot of things to figure out. And it was quite obvious that he hadn’t *planned* on becoming a parent.

Assuming that he was ignoring the child’s needs out of selfishness was hardly fair. Deep down, she suspected the

problem wasn't that he was too self-involved to care about Hannah.

In fact, maybe part of the issue was that she wished the handsome Hudson paid a little more attention to her. But that was neither here nor there, and she knew better than to let her attraction to the man ruin her working relationship with Hannah ... or cause her to judge him too harshly.

Navigating how to properly help Hannah in her condition was no small feat. He didn't deserve scolding for not mastering it instantly. Even not-so-new-parents struggled with that.

She didn't think that he'd intentionally endanger the girl. Hudson really seemed to love and care for her, and he seemed almost ashamed now. She remembered how tender he'd been with her the other day. With some guidance, he could be a wonderful father to Hannah.

But that was what he needed. Guidance. Not berating.

And she was staying with them and was a pediatric nurse who worked with kids all the time. If anyone could help him learn how to properly keep Hannah safe, it was her.

Breakfast was fairly quiet. Hannah didn't talk much except to sometimes tell Nora about something. Hudson didn't speak a word throughout the whole meal.

Not that he was much of a talker anyway, but now he was downright silent. Like, somehow, his words might make everything worse.

They really needed to have a heart-to-heart about this whole situation.

After breakfast, Hannah went to read. All her terror from earlier seemed completely forgotten. Nora was glad for that, at least. Kids typically bounced back from small scares like that fairly easily.

She noticed Hudson about to slink away to his office and pursed her lips. They needed to have another, more productive talk. And now was a prime opportunity to do so.

Nora cleared her throat, and he looked back at her questioningly.

“Can we talk for a moment in private?” she asked.

He gave her a wary look but nodded. They moved into another room away from Hannah.

She sighed. “Look, I’m sorry for snapping earlier. I was just so frustrated after seeing Hannah almost get hurt, and I just lost it. I should have taken a different approach with that conversation and expressed my fears more reasonably.”

He grunted. “I suppose that’s understandable enough.”

“However, even though I shouldn’t have said those things the way I did or when I did, I still meant them.”

Hudson grimaced. “I know. Believe me when I say that I didn’t intend for this to happen. Nor do I intend to let it happen again.”

She put up a hand. “Don’t sound so bleak. It’s not a hopeless case or anything. You just have to learn how to adjust your life with her now a part of it. When you become a parent, all your priorities need to shift to center around helping that child.”

She reached a hand out to pat his shoulder but then hesitated and thought better of it. The closed-off Hudson probably wouldn’t appreciate it, and their relationship wasn’t there yet. Even if the thought of touching his strong arm muscles made her stomach flutter.

“And I know it isn’t easy,” she continued instead. “Trust me, I’ve seen all sorts of parents. Even the ones who have read every parenting book they can find, yet still struggle. But you also don’t have to go at this alone.”

He perked up a little. “Are you saying you’re willing to help me learn?”

A small smile crept onto her face. “Well, you did hire me to help Hannah to the best of my ability. And helping her includes helping you.”

“I would appreciate that greatly. Thank you,” he murmured.

She nodded. “Good. Then, the first priority should be making this house as accessible for Hannah as possible. We’ll figure out everything else after that.”

EIGHT



HUDSON

After his talk with Nora, Hudson immediately called a fellow contractor who specialized in ADA remodeling and arranged for them to come the next day. What Nora had said to him shook him to his core. And most of her comments had stung his pride more than a little.

He was an alpha. He was supposed to be attentive to his pack. To know their wants and needs and how to provide and care for them. And yet, he hadn't been able to meet the needs of his own ward.

It irked him to no end that he hadn't realized how neglectful he was being. How it hadn't even occurred to him to do half the things that Nora had spent the rest of the day suggesting. In hindsight, they were blindingly obvious and necessary. How had he been so oblivious? It wasn't like he couldn't afford it.

Hannah could have gotten hurt if Nora wasn't there. Or the girl could have easily gotten herself hurt anywhere else in the house at any point. That simply was unacceptable.

And so changes had to be made.

"We'll start with the wing Hannah's staying in. Then, from there, we'll make our way through the rest of the house," he told the project manager in charge of the redesign. On the other side of him, Nora studied the drawings intently.

Hudson had wanted her to be there to approve everything they were doing. After all, she knew best in this case.

“However, we don’t want to just make this place wheelchair accessible,” she said. “Hannah’s recovery might be very gradual right now, but she will get better. Then, we will need to make sure she can still get around the house easily as her mobility needs change. For example, she may be using crutches in a month, so we’ll need to address all those stages.”

The project manager nodded. “All right then. The men and I will get started.”

Soon, the house was bustling with men in construction uniforms. Rugs were thrown out, and floor transitions smoothed. Doors were widened. Ramps were built.

And there in the heart of it was Nora. She was giving instructions to the men like she was a general preparing for battle.

Nora was never sharp with them or rude or impatient. She was firm, certainly, but she always explained things calmly, talked it out, and collaborated with the men. And the men, in turn, listened to her attentively and did everything she asked.

Despite being the smallest one there, no one questioned her authority.

Hudson felt his respect for the woman rise. Anyone could be demanding and loud, but Nora was a true leader. She knew how to take charge while showing respect and authority at the same time. It took a unique type of person to accomplish that.

After a while, he was happy to sit back and let her direct the men. Even the bear inside him seemed to enjoy the show.

At lunch, she sat with a tired sigh. “I shouldn’t feel tired. I’m not even the one doing all the heavy lifting.”

Hudson quirked a smile. “Yes, well, I imagine that has something to do with you taking the lead on this project. You know, maybe I should have hired you to run my company instead.”

Her cheeks turned red. “I didn’t mean to overstep. I can back off if you want me to.”

He chuckled. “No, not at all. I promise I was only teasing. I’m glad you’re stepping up. You know more about this than I do.”

The tension went out of her shoulders, and a small smile of her own grew on her face. Bits of her hair that had come loose from the ponytail she’d put it in made her look even more lovely than usual.

Hudson quickly stomped down those thoughts. She could never be his, and he needed to get all thoughts of it out of his head.

“Nora!” Hannah’s excited voice called out. Hudson smiled as he watched the girl roll over to them. “Nora, Hudson, did you see what they’re doing to the house?”

Nora laughed. “I did. You’re going to be able to get around much easier now.”

Hannah turned her gaze to Hudson, suddenly shy. “Thank you, Hudson, for putting new things in for me.”

His heart both melted and broke at that. She should have been able to just ask for this sort of thing. She should have felt like she could have. But there was still that strange barrier that he didn’t know how to cross so he could truly connect with her.

“You’re welcome, little one. Don’t be afraid to make requests of me. I promise I don’t bite.” He winked at her, and she giggled, knowing that he absolutely could bite.

The joke, of course, went right over Nora’s head, but she smiled anyway. She was probably just glad the two of them were connecting.

The construction crew worked well into the evening, and by that point, they’d gotten a lot more done than expected. After the crew had left, the trio enjoyed the quiet briefly, but it was soon time for bed. Both Hudson and Nora tucked Hannah in that night. The nurse read the girl a story and then sang softly to her as she fell asleep.

Hudson watched in amazement at how easily Hannah relaxed around Nora. He tried to pinpoint just what it was

about the nurse that made Hannah feel so comfortable, so secure.

Not that there were a limited number of options for why Hannah could like her so much. Nora was caring and attentive and always seemed to know just the right things to say. Sometimes, Hudson wished he could claim he was the same way.

When it was clear Hannah was fast asleep, the two of them quietly crept out of her room. Nora smiled at him once they were in the hallway. “Well, I guess you must be pretty tired. I’ll let you get to bed.”

“Wait.”

The nurse paused and gave him a questioning look.

“Uh, would you like to join me for a cup of coffee,” he said.

She smiled tiredly at him. “I am planning on going to bed in the next hour.”

“Tea then,” he amended.

Nora chuckled. “Tea sounds lovely.”

They went into the kitchen, and Hudson brewed them both a cup of tea. For a while, they just sipped their tea in silence. Finally, though, Nora spoke. “All right. I can see the gears turning in your head. What’s up?”

Had he really been that easy to read?

Hudson sighed. “You know how to connect with Hannah so easily. You always seem to know just what to say to make her feel safe and at home. But I don’t. She’s been through something that no child should ever have to go through, and I don’t know how to help her. What it is I’m supposed to say and do.”

He stared at the kitchen table, drawing his finger across the surface of it anxiously. “Right now, I feel like everything out of my mouth is either too hollow or too harsh. And so I just end up not saying anything at all, which I realize isn’t any

better. You just seem to have a sense of what she needs, so I guess I'm looking for input."

Nora seemed to think for a moment before speaking. "Every child is different, which means there isn't an exact right answer. What I do know is that, more than anything, she needs to know that you're there for her. That she can count on you to be there in all the bad times."

"Yes, but how? How do I let her know that?"

The nurse smiled softly. "In lots of different ways. By telling her, for one, but also by showing it. Playing with her, doing little crafts or activities with her, and taking an interest in the things she likes."

Hudson had to school his face to not show his disdain. Nora was right, but the idea of playing a child's games was hardly something he had a lot of experience or interest in. His bear didn't mind the occasional romp in the snow, sure. But a grown man playing dress-up? For Hannah, he would learn.

"If she sees that you're willing to take time out for her to do things she likes, she'll know she can rely on you. Being patient with her and listening are also very important. Once you start listening, I think you'll start to know how to help her better," Nora pointed out.

"She lost her whole world not too long ago, and I think she's still trying to adjust to this new one she's been thrust into. She's lost and scared about what her life is going to look like now, and she needs kindness and patience now more than ever. Knowing that she's loved and has someone on her side means everything to her," she finally concluded, sipping at her tea.

Hudson stared at her in amazement. Nora really did have emotional instincts that he didn't. Instincts whose growth was perhaps snubbed by his own childhood and losing his parents so early in life. What would he have given to feel that same love and comfort Nora spoke of? He wished someone had been there for him like that, doing those things for him. Hudson vowed then and there that he wouldn't let Hannah live the same life he had. He would be that person for her. He

would be the person he wished he'd had as a child. For her, he would do everything in his power to give her a loving home.

NINE



NORA

Hannah possessed a spectacular tenacity for a young girl who had been through so much. Nora noticed it several times during their mobility sessions, ones that were often given to adults who had submitted a lot faster. She mused on it a few times, wondering if it was naivety masked in bravery or if she was taking on traits of her passed mother and father.

Either way, Nora admired her for it. Having lost her own mother as an adult was harrowing enough. She couldn't comprehend what it must be like for a child to lose not one but both parents in such a traumatic fashion. But perhaps her youth and power of imagination were actually blessings in disguise when it came to her tragedy.

On a particularly bright and warm morning, Nora was working with Hannah on a mat in what had become the therapy room. She had told Hudson how vital it was for the girl to have a space separate from her bedroom, to divide up the experience of pain and grief away from those of joy and wonder.

She also made sure that the therapy room wasn't sterile and uninviting. Posters of animals and shows Hannah had told her she liked hung on the walls, a pleasant reminder of what remained to live for despite the agony of recovery.

But Nora was dealing with her own grief and had to consciously ignore her own nihilistic thoughts when she worked with the girl. She sat with her on the mat, supporting Hannah's lower back as she sat up and bent to her knees.

“That’s it, just like that,” Nora said, watching in awe as the young girl bent her forehead to touch her kneecaps. “Just softly like that. Good job. You’re doing so well, honey.”

While the exercise was repeated, mostly with success, Nora noticed a few groans coming from Hannah when she returned to an upright position. Nora crawled her fingers along the nubs of her spine, delicately searching for the source of tension.

“Where does it hurt, Hannah?”

Hannah, with her head bent forward, muttered out of the side of her mouth. She was not a complainer despite everything she had to complain about. That also amazed Nora to no end. Nevertheless, she wanted the child to express herself whenever she was in pain or uncomfortable. Not only did Nora think it was important for young girls to learn self-advocacy, but as a medically complicated child, Hannah needed to be good at communicating with her team of helpers.

“When I sit up, the lower part, I think,” she mumbled.

Nora touched the small of her back as she guided the girl back up, sitting in the fetal position for the time being. She felt around gently, feeling lingering tension in the spot just above her pelvis.

She gazed up at the clock and noted they had been working for nearly two hours. Relaxation was just as important as hard work, so Nora decided to give her a break and encourage calm.

“Let’s stop for today. I’m going to show Hudson how to give you a nice massage. It’ll make your back feel better. How does that sound?”

She nodded silently. Nora helped her stand, holding her in the way she had held hundreds of children throughout her career. When she was able to settle into her wheelchair, Nora flashed her a big smile and lightly tapped her head.

“You’ve done so well today, honey. I’m going to get Hudson now. Are you hungry at all?”

Hannah shook her head.

“Okay, you be sure to let me know if you are. You can have your lunch after the massage. I’ll be right back, okay?”

Hannah nodded again. Nora took the empty cup on the dresser, needing to fill it so the girl was properly hydrated. She sought out Hudson first, who she found working in his office.

She felt a rush of blood move through her cheeks as she raised her knuckles to the door. She brushed it away as schoolgirl crush silliness, then drummed her hand against it.

“Come in,” his voice rumbled.

She opened the door halfway, finding him hunched over his desk. It took her a minute to say what was supposed to come out of her mouth. The sight of his gray shirt straining against his shoulders was enough to dry her throat like the Sahara.

Hudson stood, dropping the pen he was holding, and gave her a solemn look. It could have been a scowl if she waited any longer.

Nora gulped, darting her eyes onto the desk, then back down the hallway.

“Hannah is having some back tension. I thought it would be a good opportunity to show you what kind of massage I give her.”

He twitched his nose, clearly repressing his annoyance. She must have interrupted him doing something important.

“Massage?” he repeated.

Nora clutched the doorknob and then spoke firmly.

“Yes, for her back. Even when she gets up on her feet, her back is going to need maintenance. Her core has been weakened by lost mobility. I thought I could show you how for the times when I’m not here.”

The furrowed brow disappeared, and Hudson ran a hand through his hair. A small strand fell in front of his eye, making him look more boyish for a fraction of a second. But Nora clocked it.

“Yes, yes, you’re right,” he said, heading toward the door. “I’m sorry, my mind was elsewhere.”

Nora took a step away and let him pass, a waft of his cologne enchanting her nostrils. Her lips parted briefly, the pinewood scent digging into her pores like an ax against a tree trunk. It was slightly aggressive, but there was something she really enjoyed about it.

“It’s a great opportunity for bonding as well,” Nora said as they moved down the hallway. “I’m going to get her some water. Can you take her into her bedroom for me?”

He nodded, his body transmuting from the gruff exterior into a sheepish uncle role. It was endearing in an odd way, but it also put him in his place when he was being unreasonable.

And Nora enjoyed doing that.

She retrieved water from the kitchen and returned to Hannah’s bedroom. Hudson had done what she had asked but was lingering over the wheelchair with poignant hesitance.

He looked like a dog that had destroyed the owner’s prized possession. Except he hadn’t, and the prized possession was Hannah.

They locked eyes, and Nora placed the cup next to the girl’s bed. She showed him how to lift Hannah onto the bed so she was lying on her stomach. When he did so, it was with the tenderness of a gardener tending to temperamental rose buds.

It made Nora’s heart swell.

“Are you comfortable, honey?” Nora asked Hannah.

Hannah nodded, laying her head on the pillow and closing her eyes. Nora stroked her hair, then pulled up the bottom of the girl’s shirt.

“Now, let us know if anything hurts too much, and we will stop. Okay, Hannah?”

“I will, thank you,” Hannah mumbled.

Nora moved over to her big satchel of oils and removed a warming mint and lavender-scented one that they generally

used for children. Hudson stood there, staring at her awkwardly.

“Open your hands,” she said.

He did as she asked. After pouring some oil into his large palms, she did the same on her own. She then bent over the bed and began massaging Hannah, softly running her fingers down her spine and locating the area of the tension. When she found it, she began to knead it in small circles, like spreading dough out at a bakery.

She looked at Hudson, who still had his palms upturned toward the sky. She encouraged him to come closer, and he did, but with great trepidation.

“Feel here. You’ll notice a bump under the skin. What we want to do is spread it out. It’s going to help her relax.”

He nodded, then went in slowly. His large hands touched her like she was made of glass and as if any light change in pressure would shatter her. Nora watched, amazed, drawn to his willingness to do something so foreign to him. To try something new and risk looking foolish was admirable.

Hannah sighed as Hudson got into the rhythm of it. The tension was easing. After a few more minutes of the massage, they both realized Hannah had dozed off.

A look shared between them was akin to a strike of lightning. Nora had to force herself to look away, a blush rising with vigorous heat to her face.

“See, she loves it,” Nora whispered. “It’s going to really help her calm down.”

Hudson nodded silently, then continued to knead lightly. He continued on long after Hannah was fast asleep. His devotion made Nora’s heart flutter, a joyful longing for a future capturing her thoughts long after.

It had been so long since she let herself hope for anything pleasant, but it seemed like it had found her anyway, in the form of a tall, handsome, black-haired, unlikely hero.

Now, the only question was whether she was brave enough to embrace it or if she was going to run away scared before it had a chance to come crashing down.

TEN



HUDSON

Hudson was shocked by his own ability to ease Hannah's discomfort. It felt odd to do something to a child who was so precious and frail to him. He greatly feared only adding to her pain. But once she'd fallen asleep, he knew he had done something right.

And all with the encouragement of Nora by his side.

He realized that he had been short with her, distracted by his own grief and concerns about the plane crash. Nora was there to help him, and she already had, after barely a few weeks of moving in as Hannah's aid. He wanted to thank her and, at the same time, apologize for his distant behavior. He and Nora were both important to Hannah, so they should try to make an effort to work together.

He knew how he could be, which, unfortunately, wasn't unusual for alphas or shifters of his ilk. It was in their nature to be protective, which often translated into seeming aggressive or straight-up rude. But Nora was there for him and Hannah when they were at their worst. The least he could do was figure out a way to make sure Nora was comfortable.

So the very same day that she had shown him how to massage Hannah's tense back, he decided to have his chef make a special dinner for the both of them. They barely had any private time together, and he wanted to get to know the woman who was doing so much for him and his adopted daughter.

It was what Frank would have wanted.

He didn't know what Nora would have preferred, so he asked the chef to make an assortment of selections. Kobe beef sautéed in ginger and spices and a luxurious ham sprinkled with dazzling white truffles. Just in case none of that was to her liking, he also had Matsutake mushrooms bathed in tasty soy sauce and Japanese rice.

It was a rather luxurious meal, but part of him wanted to impress her. It wasn't something he could easily admit, even when he was lighting candles at the dining room table and making sure the utensils were properly aligned.

He had informed Nora earlier in the day to not eat dinner, that he was planning something for the two of them once Hannah went to bed. He didn't want to make it appear too formal, although he did wear his most pleasing slacks and form-fitting polo to the table.

Hudson waited for her, his leg jostling up and down until she came through the kitchen door. He nearly leapt to his feet at the sight of her in a gray-knitted sweater and tight jeans, her blonde hair pulled back into a comfortable ponytail.

"Oh," she said, blue eyes beaming up at him. "I didn't realize this was going to be so..."

"It's not," Hudson interrupted, gazing down at the lit candles and the extravagant-looking kitchenware. "I just wanted to make you something that was nicer than a ham sandwich."

Nora's look of alarm faded as her eyes flickered, a cute smile tickling her lips.

"How do you know I eat a ham sandwich?"

Hudson chuckled much more freely than he'd planned. He tried to act nonchalant, shrugging as he spoke.

"There's never a lot missing in the fridge at night. And you're very stealthy about it all. I figured you weren't making anything elaborate."

"Bad habit, I suppose," she said, eyeing the chairs.

Hudson moved into action, pulling the chair next to him out for Nora to sit. She let out a puff of laughter but quickly sank down next to him. Hudson returned to his own seat, clearing his throat and trying to veil his apprehension.

“I have heard of much worse habits,” he said, cocking an eyebrow.

Nora began to blush, turning her head away from him and running her fingers through her ponytail. It was hypnotizing watching her do anything at all. He caught himself studying the slender curve of her neck, the slightly exposed collarbone peeking out from her knit-gray sweater.

Hudson had the chef bring the meal in, asking Nora if she required any dietary alterations and that they would be made hastily. She merely stared with astonishment at the filled plates as they arrived at the table, her mouth hanging open.

Hudson was proud. There was no doubt about it. He adored the look of pleased shock on her face, and it made him think of other ways he could summon it, like forcing her legs apart and diving in headfirst.

He shook himself out of the reverie. Then, once all of their food was dished out, and the wine poured, he took the glass by the stem. He raised it, and Nora followed suit, that bewitching smile on her face.

“Here’s to you, Nora, and your commitment toward Hannah’s recovery. I couldn’t be doing any of this without you.”

Nora tilted her head bashfully, then clinked their glasses together. Once they began to eat, Hudson spoke up again, unable to keep his apology hanging.

“I wanted to say that I am sorry for being so distant. I know that it makes our collaboration harder when it comes to Hannah’s recovery. So, for that, I apologize, and I thank you again for what you have done. I’m sure it’s awkward to be here in a house with two strangers, and I certainly haven’t made it any easier.”

She sliced up pieces of the Kobe beef, listening to him intently. He tried not to stare at her when she spoke, but it was difficult to peel away from her natural beauty.

“I appreciate your awareness,” she said, allowing the beef to sit on the prong of the fork. “I know where it is coming from, though. We’re all projection machines, we humans.”

Hudson blinked down at his plate, feeling abruptly exposed. He made a small sound in response, keeping his eye on his own mushroom and rice blend.

“How so?”

“Well, I know Hannah has her parents’ loss to deal with. But you also lost a dear friend. It can be hard to embrace having me here because it’s still ultimately all a reminder of everything that happened, you know? It’s not your fault or my fault. It just is.”

Hudson felt even more vulnerable. She was reading him like a book, and though it felt strange, a part of it was nice.

“You are doing better than you even realize, Hudson,” Nora continued. “I hope you know that. Hannah feels your dedication to her in the same way I do.”

Hudson felt a glow in his chest that he couldn’t quite understand. He shoveled a big spoonful of mushrooms and rice into his mouth, trying to distract his emotions. Nora munched on the Kobe beef, groaning as she did.

“God, this is delicious. Too bad it’s so fucking expensive.”

Hudson chuckled again. Her poignant observation of his inner workings eased his sense of feeling unguarded. He raised his head, placing the stem of the wine glass between his fingers once more.

“Well, as long as you’re around, I will be sure to make you some of this beef. As much as you want, whenever you want.”

“Is that so?” Nora said, placing her fork down and sliding her tongue along her teeth. “What if I ask for it at three in the morning?”

Hudson raised the wine to his lips, watching her. He felt like he could see into her, her salacious thoughts teased by the parting of her mouth and the continued emergence of her tongue. The bear inside him growled.

The sight of it, slithery and daring, made his cock twitch.

“Then you would have it, dear Nora. There are several great reasons to have a chef on site.”

She smiled broadly, lighting up her entire face. It was difficult to look at someone so pretty, so striking that it made his bear grumble. He took another big gulp of wine to calm the beast.

“Only if you personally serve it to me,” Nora whispered in her dusky, deep tone.

Hudson’s bear positively whimpered inside him, and it was both enticing and terrifying.

He cleared his throat, ripping himself from her mesmerizing glare, and returned to the food that remained before him.

“If there is anything else I can do to aid in helping Hannah, I do hope you will let me know. I want to be as much help as I can.”

With that, Nora pulled away, reverting to the professionalism with which she had first introduced herself.

“I will be sure to do that,” she said.

They had flirted around dangerous waters. It would be quite something to have her in his bed, Hudson ruminated once dinner had finished, but it wasn’t worth the risk of losing her. He had picked up her attraction to him in her voice, which was blaring rather than subtle. His bear had caught on and wouldn’t shut up about it.

But he needed to focus. He was still worried about the accident that had cost Frank and Alice’s life and endangered Hannah’s, and he wasn’t sure it was an accident at all. He needed to focus his attention on that, not seducing Hannah’s pretty nurse.

And even if he had time for a woman, it could never be Nora. Not considering what she meant to Hannah. Hannah came first. Her health was the top priority. Not some romp in the sack, no matter how spectacular it would be.

ELEVEN



NORA

At some point during one of their conversations, Hudson mentioned that he still had some of his toys from his childhood. Of course, Nora had insisted they get them and surprise Hannah.

And so they had gone into the attic to see what he had. Nora sorted through the first box and cooed at an adorable elephant plush she found. “Aww, this little guy is adorable. Do you remember what his name was?”

Hudson raised an eyebrow. “His name?”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on. You don’t have to be embarrassed. We’ve all named our stuffed animals something ridiculous. I’m pretty sure I had a stuffed horse I named Lollipop.”

Hudson studied the elephant for a moment before shaking his head. “No, I don’t think I ever named him.”

Nora frowned. He wasn’t acting like he was lying or couldn’t remember. Or even that he was too embarrassed to say. He sounded like he really hadn’t named this cute little elephant. And what kind of kid didn’t name their toys?

She put the elephant in her lap and dug more through the box. Her eyes lit up when she spotted a set of toy soldiers. She pulled them out and lined them up like they were going to battle each other.

Hudson furrowed his brow. “Now, what are you doing?”

Nora grinned at him. “Come on, you had to have done this at some point. Set up mini battles for them to fight in.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment. “Maybe that’s why my uncle bought them for me.”

Nora laughed, though it came out more strained and confused than anything. “They’re toys. I don’t think anyone buys them for kids with the purpose of doing anything with them except play. You really never played war with these guys?”

Hudson shook his head. “I usually played chess if I wanted a strategy game.”

Nora gave him a bewildered look. “Strategy isn’t exactly the point. It’s just playing and having fun.”

He looked a little embarrassed and went back to rummaging through his box. Nora narrowed her eyes. Just what kind of child had Hudson been that he hadn’t even played with toy soldiers? That was practically one of the staples of childhood games.

Hudson pulled out a small stuffed dog from his box. It was clearly made for a small child, maybe even a baby. It was well worn and clearly had been well loved.

“That must have been one of your first toys,” Nora murmured, smiling warmly at the thought. She’d had a stuffed bunny as a baby, and there were tons of pictures of her as a baby holding the bunny. She was pretty sure she still had it in a keepsake box somewhere.

Hudson frowned at one of the back legs of the dog. It was frayed and had all but fallen off the poor thing. “This one is falling apart. We can just throw it away.”

“What!”

Nora’s exclamation made him startle a bit. She glared at him. “You can’t just throw that away. It’s precious!”

“How?”

She huffed. “It was one of your first toys. You don’t want to just throw that kind of thing away.”

“But it’s broken.”

Nora gave him a deadpan look. “He just needs a limb reattachment. And luckily, you happen to have a talented nurse on standby. I can have him in and out of the OR in five minutes tops.”

Hudson shrugged. “If it means that much to you, then sure, have a ball.”

He handed her the toy, and Nora gave him a concerned look.

“Doesn’t it mean anything to you?” she asked quietly.

He shook his head. “Not really.”

“Do any of these things mean anything to you?”

He looked a little exasperated. “They’re just toys. Why should they mean something to me?”

The part of her that was used to analyzing patients was suddenly on high alert.

“Hudson,” she started gently. “They usually mean something to people because of what they represent. Even if we do not play with them anymore, they still hold a sentimental value from our childhood that people often associate with comfort.”

He looked away. “That probably explains it, then. I don’t exactly find any comfort in memories of my childhood.”

And it suddenly clicked in her mind. The reason he struggled so hard to connect with Hannah. Most people would draw upon experiences and emotions from their childhood to help. But if something had happened in Hudson’s childhood to make him so disconnected from even his childhood toys, that would explain a lot.

Nora turned to face him fully. “Tell me if I’m overstepping, but it sounds like you have a lot of repressed anger and sadness associated with your childhood.”

Hudson still didn’t look at her, but his jaw tightened.

“You know, I think you need to find someone you can trust to open up about your past,” she continued. “If you could talk this out with someone, it could help you have a better relationship with Hannah.”

“I’m not going to talk to some stranger about something that happened thirty years ago,” he snapped.

“It doesn’t have to be a stranger,” she pointed out. “I’m not saying you need counseling. I’m just saying that sometimes, when we talk and reflect on the things that have happened to us, it helps them make sense. It’s like talking out loud to solve a math problem. Honestly. Just putting words to your experiences might help give them meaning.”

His expression softened, and he slowly turned to face her. “So, if that’s all it is, would you be willing to talk it out with me?”

Nora blinked in surprise. She hadn’t realized she’d gained so much of his trust. That or the fact that she wasn’t someone he’d known for a long time could be a factor. She was new enough that he wasn’t embarrassed to speak, but not a complete stranger either.

She nodded. “I would, so long as you’re comfortable.”

Hudson seemed to hesitate for a moment before speaking. “I lost my mother when I was four. She was sick for a long time, and I remember it being hard to visit her in the hospital. And then, one day, she was gone.”

Nora nodded to encourage him, trying hard to keep her face neutral. He’d clam up and refuse to say another word if she looked too pitying. She was certain of it.

“My father was devastated, of course, after losing his m... um, his wife. He always seemed so distant after that. It didn’t take long for him to follow her. And then I was left with no one.

“I was, of course, placed with one of my relatives. My aunt was the first to take me in. However, after six months, she sent me to live with a cousin of mine. She said she just wasn’t able

to handle *my state*, as she called it. I never knew what *that* was supposed to even mean.

“I lived with my cousin and his wife for nearly a year before they sent me to live with an uncle of mine. Their excuse was that they were about to have a baby and couldn’t handle taking care of me. From there, I was passed on from relative to relative until I ended up with my great-uncle when I was thirteen.”

His jaw tightened. “My great-uncle had no interest in raising a child, and so he didn’t. He treated me and held me to the same standards as any adult in his employment. And when I was eighteen, he wanted nothing to do with me. But at least he kept me longer than anyone else. None of them wanted the responsibility of a grieving, traumatized child. He ignored the fact that I was a child and treated me more like an employee, but at least I had a place to stay.”

Nora was practically quivering with anger as he spoke. She had half a mind to track down these relatives of Hudson’s and throttle them.

He had been *four*. Of course, he had been grieving and lonely and different. And his own family had held it against him.

And she knew how damaging it could be to a child’s psyche to be passed around like that. To be so clearly unwanted and made to feel like it was all their fault. And that was on top of the trauma he’d already been through.

And then that great-uncle of his treating him like he was just another worker. No wonder Hudson didn’t have any attachment to anything that could be considered childish. He’d been made to feel like being a child was a bad thing.

His gruff exterior made so much sense now. He’d always had to wear that mask to cover up the scared little boy inside.

Oh, that poor boy. Her heart ached as she wondered what he was like before he lost his parents. What he could have been like had his family not made him feel like gutter waste. A burden.

He deserved to feel the same unconditional love that he should have had. That he could still have.

Gently, she put her hand on his. He looked at her in surprise.

“I hope you know that none of that was your fault. You should’ve never been treated that way,” she said firmly. “You are allowed to experience emotions just like any other human being, and you don’t have to be ashamed of them.”

There was something in his gaze she couldn’t quite place, but he didn’t argue with her.

Good.

She intended to show him the unconditional love he should have had.

TWELVE



HUDSON

Going on business trips for long periods of time was nothing new to Hudson. Typically, he even enjoyed them. It was an excuse to get out of the house and his office.

Now, it seemed like a burden. Even his bear agreed.

At first, it hadn't bothered him so much. But by his second day of being away, he began to feel the loneliness of the hotel room. The mundane meetings and wrangling deals. It felt overdrawn and wasteful.

By the third day, he realized what made it feel so wrong. Hannah and Nora weren't there with him.

They hadn't lived with him very long in the grand scheme of things. And yet now he wasn't sure how he ever lived without them in his life. His mind would often wander to thoughts of them. How they were doing, what they were up to, and how Hannah was progressing.

It wasn't like he was completely cut off from them. He called them every day to check up on Hannah and her progress.

"What's it like in Denver?" Hannah had asked on one of their calls.

"Far too crowded," he said with a smile. "But there are some interesting exhibits we'll have to visit in the spring and summer."

"A vacation?" the girl asked excitedly. "Can Nora come too?"

Hudson chuckled. “Of course, Nora can come too. I wouldn’t dream of making the trip without her.”

And it was true. He couldn’t deny or feign how much of his heart the nurse had stolen. Every time he was around her, he felt like he was reunited with a part of himself he didn’t know was gone.

As much as he hoped for Hannah’s recovery, of course, a small part of him never wanted Nora to leave their lives. She belonged, not just because Hannah needed her. He hated to admit it, but a part of him felt like he needed her, too.

“All right,” came the voice of the woman in question. “It’s time for you to go to bed, Hannah. Why don’t you say goodnight to Hudson and then get a book for us to read?”

“Okay. Goodnight, Hudson!” she called out.

His heart soared. “Goodnight, little one.”

There was the sound of shuffling.

“Are you still there, Nora?” he asked.

“I am. What is it?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to hear about her progress.”

“She’s doing really well. Hannah’s a very strong little girl,” Nora said, pride evident in her voice. “At her last doctor’s appointment, he sounded optimistic about her improvement.”

“How far is she walking?” Hannah had progressed to taking some steps on her own, though she still needed the wheelchair to get around.

“She can stay up for about thirty seconds now and always with help. Still, that’s better than she was doing. However, I can tell that she gets frustrated by not being able to do a lot. I keep reminding her just how big a deal it is that she’s able to leave the wheelchair and start walking at all.”

Hudson frowned. He hated the thought that Hannah was not able to see how far she’d come since the crash. He made a mental note to remind her how good she was doing next time.

“And what about you?” he asked. “How are you doing?”

“Well, I’ve been able to make a decent amount of progress with her. Mostly just doing some small exercises and the massages...”

Hudson laughed. “While I’m glad to hear that, I meant, how are *you* doing? You know, personally.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose I’m doing very well, actually.” Surprise colored her tone. “I spend most of my days working or playing with Hannah, which has been really great. Getting to have one-on-one time with her is helpful. I think we’ve really connected.”

His heart warmed at that. Hannah deserved to have someone she could bond with. He hoped she would come to feel the same way about him someday.

“And what about you?”

“Me?” Hudson asked, taken out of his thoughts.

He heard her laugh a little. “Yes, you. How are *you* doing? Personally.”

Hudson didn’t answer for a moment. There was one word that came to mind immediately to describe how he felt.

Lonely.

It had been a long time since he’d truly felt lonely. Or maybe it was more that it had been a long time since he had recognized that’s what he was.

He’d gotten so used to being alone. He had been shipped from family member to family member as a child. He had been isolated by his great-uncle. Lonely just felt like ... normalcy after a while.

Even being the alpha of his clan could be lonely. It wasn’t as though his clan avoided him or distrusted him. It was simply the fact that he *was* the alpha. And out of respect or fear or simple tradition, they tended to let him be. He was on a plane all by himself, and it was nice to be respected. But it was lonely.

It wasn't until Hannah and then Nora had come to live with him that he'd begun to see it. And now he felt like he could never live without them.

But he wasn't ready to unpack that all to Nora yet. And certainly not over the phone. And so he gave a simpler answer. "Tired."

"Well, get some sleep then. I should probably go read to Hannah and get to bed myself," she said. "You have a good night's sleep."

"You too," he murmured. And then she hung up.

The rest of the trip seemed to drag on until Hudson finally couldn't take it anymore. Even the bear inside of him balked at being away from home any longer. He cut short his trip and declined any and all social invitations he got. Normally, those would be the highlights of his trips. But now they were just one more thing standing in the way of him getting back to Hannah and Nora.

The return trip home was only a few hours, but it felt longer than it ever had before. When his house came into view, he instantly relaxed.

He was home.

And for the first time, it really felt like home. Like how a real home should be. His haven with his little makeshift family inside.

It was night, though not quite so late that Hannah couldn't still be awake. He hoped she still was. He'd missed his little girl more than he ever thought he could.

When he didn't spot Hannah or Nora in any of the main rooms, he made his way to Hannah's room. And there they were. Reading on the bed, Hannah was curled up beside Nora as the nurse read.

Hannah was the first to spot him, and her eyes lit up. "Hudson!"

Nora's eyes snapped to him, and a grin spread across her face. "You're back."

A grin of his own formed on his face.

Hannah tugged at Nora's arm. "Oh, can we try it? Please."

Nora gave the girl a wary look. "Are you sure you feel up to it?"

The girl nodded vigorously. Hudson looked questioningly back and forth between the two.

"All right, but you hold on to me. Okay?" Nora said softly but firmly.

"I will," Hannah promised.

Then Nora was gently helping the girl off the bed and helping her stand.

Hudson's eyes went wide. Although the girl leaned on Nora to balance, she was still standing. And then, slowly, she began to walk toward him, leaning on Nora for support,

She grinned at him, pacing slowly back and forth for nearly a full minute. When her legs began to quake, Hudson met her halfway. Hannah wrapped her arms around him in a hug, and Hudson reciprocated tightly.

"Did you see that?" the girl asked.

He squeezed her tightly. "I did. You did wonderful, Hannah."

She pulled back from him a little and looked a little sheepish. "I can't go very far."

Hudson squeezed her arms gently. "Hannah, that in itself is incredible. You're doing an amazing job, and you should be proud of yourself. I'm certainly proud of you."

A small smile formed on her lips. "Really?"

He nodded. "Really."

She hugged him again, even tighter than before. Over her shoulder, he saw Nora smiling at them softly. "Thank you," Nora mouthed silently to him.

Hudson scooped the girl in his arms and dropped her back beside Nora on the bed. "Okay, I'll let Nora get back to

reading to you. I didn't mean to interrupt.”

“You should stay,” Hannah insisted.

“Are you sure?”

The girl giggled. “Of course. That way, we can all be together.”

He looked at Nora, who nodded. “She’s right. We just got you back. Come listen to some fairy tales with us.”

A peace and comfort Hudson hadn't ever known stirred within him. “I will then.”

As he sat there at the edge of the bed and listened while Nora read, the wonder of it all set within him. How happy they'd both been to see him. Like they'd missed him just as much as he'd missed them.

His gaze kept drifting to Nora until he found he couldn't take his eyes off her. She was so effortlessly wonderful, and he wished so badly he could tell her his secrets. The most problematic, of course, was the fact that he was actually a polar bear shifter. If she could accept that, then maybe they could make a true life together.

Not wanting to ruin the moment, he shoved all thoughts of why that could never happen into the depths of his mind.

THIRTEEN



NORA

Nora didn't mind caring for Hannah around the clock when Hudson was gone out of town for business. It was not even like it really felt like work, for she adored Hannah, and the satisfaction she felt getting the injured child back to walking was reward enough.

When he had returned early from his business trip two days ago and surprised them, immense joy had filled her with the thought that he couldn't stay away from them either. But again this morning, he had to leave for another trip, but shorter this time, he'd promised.

"Nora, when is Hudson coming back? I don't like that he has to go away so much. I want to play snowballs with him again. He's so much fun when he's a polar bear."

"Pretends to be a polar bear, you mean?"

"Uh, okay, sure," Hannah said no more but blushed and giggled.

"Oh, sweetie, I don't think it'll be long now. But he is a busy man. He makes log cabin mansions like this one for people all over the world."

Nora smiled confidently at Hannah, but the truth was that she also wondered why Hudson had to go and what he actually did on those business forays.

After a storybook reading of the tale of a weasel and a raccoon, followed by a singing round of Little Bunny Foo-Foo, Nora tucked in the tired little one, making sure her favorite polar bear stuffed animal was by her side.

“Nighty night, Hannah. Sweet dreams.”

Yawning, Hannah replied. “Polar bear dreams.”

Nora smiled. She kissed Hannah goodnight and switched on the soft, blue night light of a polar bear napping on an iceberg.

The nurse padded back out to the great room, where a fire crackled low in its hearth. She sipped at the hot chocolate she had made when giving one to Nora as a bedtime treat, sat back, and stared out the expanse of windows at the silent falling snow.

Nora allowed her mind’s eye to fly over the past few weeks here. There had been some flirting at the intimate dinner for two before Hudson had resumed his out-of-town trips, but it was harmless.

“Right? I mean, it was harmless.” No one answered her plea.

It didn’t stop Nora from continuing the one-sided conversation. “It’s not like we’re a couple or anything. We have Hannah in common. He thanked me with a nice dinner. There were some laughs. He’s always very friendly and happy to see me when he comes home from his trips, but I think that’s mostly just runoff from him being happy to see Hannah. No biggie, right?”

Nora got up to take a closer look outside. The flakes were falling like miniature doilies, so soft, so quiet. Everything on the expansive deck was being buried by the white fluffy powder, softening the world’s sharp edges.

No lights coming up the drive. No him. Geez, why are you acting like this if there’s nothing between you two? You’d swear he proposed or something. Get a grip, girl.

Nora sighed. She walked over to the fireplace and threw another log on the fire.

Spruce. It’ll burn fast. Then it’s off to bed for me.

She plunked back down on the sofa and sipped the last of her drink. It tasted sweet, too sweet. She had added too many

marshmallows, probably on account of Hannah's taste. She put down the mug. The marshmallows reminded her of why she was here.

"It's all about Hannah, goofball. Remember? You're here to help her get well and back on her feet. Not to ogle her hunky guardian. Try to keep your eye on the prize."

Somehow, the self-chastising enlivened Nora enough to incline her to take the scenic route on her way to bed. Since arriving at Hudson's mansion, she had never taken a tour of the place. With Hudson away and Hannah asleep, the nurse thought a little peek through the countless rooms wouldn't hurt.

Nora got up and gingerly padded down the many halls, turning left and right as the mansion maze unfolded. The home opened up into a grand space at the end of one hall. By the furnishings, Nora knew it was Hudson's home office. The place was more like an immense old-world library than a mere office with rolling ladders reaching up to shelf after shelf of leather-bound books.

The well-appointed room smelled of firewood, furniture polish, leather, and, oddly, lavender perfume, Old Spice men's aftershave, and the residual scent of pipe tobacco. Yet Nora knew the latter three had nothing to do with Hudson.

She let her fingers run across a shelf of gold-embossed books. The lavender, Old Spice, and tobacco scents came from the books themselves. *Maybe these are his parent's books. Maybe he kept the literary relics around to be close to the people he barely had a chance to know.* Something about the act endeared her all the more to Hudson. It was as if he clung to the past, to the essence of his family, as a guide to walk alone into the future.

All across the log walls hung black and white photos of people and times past and artwork and paintings depicting the mighty polar bear in all its glory. She found it curious, her mind going back to Hannah's talk about polar bears before bed. What was with the interest in the animal?

The nurse was about to take her leave when she spotted an intricately carved box on Hudson's desk. She sat down in his chair and looked it over. It appeared like one of those ancient puzzle boxes where you had to move the slats of wood in just the right order to get the box to open.

Nora flashed a playful smile and started feeling her way around the fine grain wood, pushing here, tugging there, until she heard a click. She looked to the side of the box. A piece of lower trim stuck out, and when she carefully pulled it, the box top popped open.

Nora chuckled. "Yay. Did it."

Inside, on a bed of royal blue velvet, lay a flawless crystal figurine in the shape of a polar bear.

Nora laughed again. "Figures. I wonder where he got it?"

Was it a gift? Did it come from someone special? She surely didn't know. But by its prominence on the desk and its obvious value, it had to have great meaning for the construction tycoon.

Nora dared not touch the crystal, fearing to leave prints. Instead, she carefully closed the lid, pushed back the lower wood trim, and placed the box back where she found it.

A part of her felt shame for even snooping as she had done, but seeing the priceless ornament and his private world in the man's den made her want to know more about the mystery man, who, at this point, was far from a mere client. And Nora felt the desire even if she dared not voice it.

The nurse looked in on Hannah one more time. The child lay sound asleep, cuddling her polar bear. Nora made her way down the hall and into her bedroom, where sleep wouldn't be far behind.

As she changed into her pajamas, a winter wind picked up and buffeted against the window panes. *A squall? Maybe.* Colorado, in the dead of winter, could have vicious storms.

Nora dove under the goose-down duvet and pulled the covers up to her neck. She wasn't cold. The log mansion was the warmest home she had ever been in. It was more doubt and

worry that chilled her bones. Neither was linked to Hannah's recovery, for she was doing so well. Nora figured the little girl would be steady on crutches before they knew it.

Nora's romantic notions lay at Hudson's feet. Her thoughts and actions of late were absolutely wrong, professionally, and, more importantly, personally. Nora had never fallen for a client before. The thought had never entered her mind. She was a caregiver, and she did her job extremely well.

But coming to know Hudson and Hannah as she did, her professional wall simply crumbled. Her heart lay exposed, and she had no idea how to cement it back in.

What am I doing here if I'm crossing a line? And fantasies about belonging to this family are ridiculous. I don't belong to such an affluent family, and I doubt Hudson sees me as anything more than one of his staff. I can't measure up to this man even if I tried.

Nora punched her down pillow so hard it gave off audible puffs. She feared one more punch, and she'd be covered in feathers.

The nurse lay back and let her gaze wander over to the expansive window where the snow kept falling, now in sideswiping gusts. Howls came down the fireplace flue, and limbs from the frozen oaks outside scratched their skeletal fingers along the mighty cabin logs.

With her lips hidden under the duvet, she whispered. "I wish Hudson were here. I feel safer when he is. This house, although majestic, is so empty and cold without him."

She turned over and saw the pillow beside her untouched. She ran her hand across its cool, smooth texture and wished the down was dented and warmed by another. An, oh, so handsome bed partner who was currently so very far away.

FOURTEEN



HUDSON

Hudson finally returned from his latest business trip, tired and mentally worn. Secretly, he hoped he'd open the door and find not only Hannah to greet him but Nora, too.

Sadly, the foyer was empty, but he could hear Hannah's physiotherapists hard at work putting the little girl through her daily exercise regimen.

"Okay, now, Hannah. You keep up this speed, and you will be walking all on your own soon," a disembodied voice said. He could hear the sound of them packing up their items, and he knew the session was over.

"Yippee!"

Hudson heard his little girl's voice and beamed. "Hannah? Where's Hannah?" Hudson called out.

"Hudson!" Within seconds, her wheelchair rolled into the expansive entrance.

Hudson knelt and gave Hannah a big hug and kiss. He was getting better at affection. This time, he didn't care if the therapists looked on.

"Hello, sir. We are done with Hannah for today. Here are her medication refills and the new stretching routine we want her to work on with you or Nora."

Hudson looked down at the two bottles with a quizzical air. "Only two? She was on four before."

The therapist smiled. "She was, but not anymore. That's how well she's improved."

“Wow, Hannah, did you hear that? Only two meds. That’s a tremendous feat.”

“Yep, and look.” Hannah reached out for the therapist’s arm. With the wheelchair locked, the little girl slowly, ever so slowly and with some wincing pain, got to her feet. Hannah stood erect for a few seconds and fell back into the chair. It was the first time she had stood all on her own.

The therapists clapped and cheered, and Hudson had tears in his eyes that he refused to let fall. Even his polar bear roared excitedly.

“Oh, Hannah. That’s truly amazing.” Hudson looked at the head therapist and flashed a grateful smile.

“She’s well on her way, sir. This girl has quite the spunk. I give her a target to reach with her limbs, and she beats the target every time.”

Hannah looked up at the adults. “I have to.”

“Why?” Hudson asked, curious. The urgency in her voice sounded significant.

“Because I want to play snowballs with you. Like we did before. But this time, I get to be outside and make them too.”

“Before?” The therapist looked puzzled.

Hudson stayed mum and merely shrugged. He knew what Hannah meant, but he wasn’t about to tell the caregivers about shifting into a polar bear. Then they’d think he needed the caregiving and in a special home.

The pair said goodbye to the healthcare workers, and Hudson closed the door.

“Hey, you. Our little playtime has to remain a secret. Not everyone appreciates what shifters can do.”

Hannah giggled. “Oops, yeah. Silly adults don’t understand. But I so want to play snowballs with you. But for real this time. Not me inside, but me outside playing with you.”

“Hmm...” Hudson looked around. He figured Nora was taking a rest, knowing the therapists were there. “You know what? What’s stopping us? How about I roll you outside, and we play now?”

Hannah’s smile brightened and then melted. “But I’m still in this wheelchair. How can I play with you like this?”

“This is how.”

Hudson grabbed her coat, hat, scarf, and mittens. He helped her into the cold weather gear. And once she was ready, he rolled her out onto the front porch and down the constructed ramp to the vast snow-covered lawn.

“Okay, close your eyes tight.”

Hannah did as she was told, giggling all the way.

And with a swish of discarded clothes, an inhalation, and an iridescent swirl, Hudson shifted from a mere man freezing in the flesh to a mighty polar bear toasty warm in the whitest of white fur.

Hudson galloped in front of the wheelchair. Hannah cheered and clapped with glee.

“Whoo! Hoo! Snowball fight!”

Excitedly, both the girl and the bear made a pile of snowballs. Hannah could briefly lift herself in and out of the chair and even took a few tentative steps through the snow. Before they knew it, it was a full-on frosty war.

One ball lobbed, then another, then more and more and more. The aim was off with both their throws as the little girl giggled, and the happy howling overtook him.

Hudson romped around Hannah’s chair, jumping and rolling about. Hannah clapped and cheered. “Jump higher! Roll over this way more!”

Their cheerful din masked extraneous sounds. Neither Hannah nor Hudson heard Nora open the back door to look for Hannah. Her footsteps on the pathway around the house were also muffled.

When Nora turned the corner to the front of the house, Hudson was standing on his hind legs doing a polar bear dance for the little girl.

“Oh, my God! Shoo! Shoo! Go away!”

Nora yelled, loudly clapping her hands to scare away what she thought was the wild animal. Somehow, in her panic, it never managed to sink in that there were no polar bears in Colorado. Though Hudson couldn't blame her for the oversight. He knew her thoughts were of Hannah and the mortal danger she was in.

Hudson dropped to all fours and slowly turned around to face the nurse.

Nora's eyes homed in on Hudson's. Shifting or not, the eyes don't change. Hudson knew she recognized him from his eyes alone. He huffed, got back up on his hind legs, and clapped his front paws together as if doing a Russian bear dance.

“Hudson ... is that ... is that *you*?”

Hudson nodded with his massive muzzle. And as fast as he transformed for Hannah, he switched back for Nora, quickly galloping behind a bush to dress in his clothes. In less than a minute, Hudson returned to mortal form, walking calmly out from the shrub to meet Nora face to face.

“Yes, Nora. That was, or well, *is* me. I wanted to tell you for so long, but I couldn't find the right time or the right words. I mean, how do you tell a human this? How can you make them understand?”

Hudson reached out to take her gloved hand.

Nora kept her hands to herself and stepped back. The caregiver stood there as if frozen, unsure, thoroughly confused, and more than a bit frightened.

“Listen, if you let me, I can explain. Hannah is in no danger. I was only playing with her. She loves it when I shapeshift, and we play in the snow. I did it once before, and she liked it. And today, she seemed so down about being stuck

inside. I wanted to cheer her up. And I did, I really did. Look how happy she is.”

Nora’s apprehensive gaze fell on Hannah. Hudson got no retort from the distraught nurse. It was obvious to Hudson and to anyone who laid eyes on the healing girl. Hannah was the picture of health. Hudson didn’t have to be a caregiver to know laughter really was the best medicine.

Nora returned her gaze to Hudson. This time, there were tears in her eyes.

She said not one word, shook her head once, and ran for the front door, closing it soundly.

“Hudson, did I do something wrong? I only wanted to play with you. Is she upset we were playing?”

“No, sweetheart, you did nothing wrong. Sometimes, what kids find easy to get used to, adults find difficult. That’s all. Don’t you worry one bit. I’ll talk to Nora, and everything will be fine. Just you watch. Now, let’s get you back inside before you catch a cold. Can you imagine your therapists if that happened? Boy, would I be in the doghouse then.”

“Oh, Hudson. Not a doghouse. A polar bear den.”

Hudson chuckled. “Right. A polar bear den.”

Hudson grabbed the wheelchair handles and guided the girl up the ramp and inside, where it was warm. He did a quick visual survey as he helped Hannah out of her coat. Nora was nowhere in sight.

Man, I wish Nora could be as easy to deal with as Hannah. Oh hell, man, you know that’s an unfair comparison. Hannah thinks my shifting is funny and normal. Nora knows otherwise. How am I going to make this seem normal to a woman who has never seen this level of abnormality before? And the carefree, warm smiles she always had for me. Are they forever replaced with the fear I saw in her eyes just now?

Hudson sighed. He dutifully rolled Hannah back to her bedroom and got her ready for bed. What he once thought difficult to do ... fathering a child ... seemed child’s play

compared to the obstacle he faced trying to explain the unexplainable to a human woman.

“Goodnight, little one. See you in the morning.”

“Night, and thank you. That was so much fun.”

Hudson smiled, blew the little girl a kiss, and gently closed the door.

Out in the hall, he heard a noise. He stood still to listen. He soon recognized the sound.

Crying. From Nora’s room.

Hudson frowned, inhaled, and walked toward the nurse’s door.

If not a doghouse, the shifter knew he was in one heck of a polar bear den now.

FIFTEEN



NORA

Nora jumped. She heard a light rapping on her door.

The nurse didn't need three guesses about who it might be. After the way she reacted to Hudson in his polar bear form ... staring dumbstruck at his massive build, then high-tailing it for the door ... she expected Hudson to come and talk to her eventually.

She was hoping for the morning. So much for hope.

"Come in." Nora rose from her vanity table, making sure the tie on her bathrobe was tight.

The door opened. Hudson stood there, his expression somber.

"Nora, I'm so sorry you had to find out this way. I didn't mean for this to come as a shock. Please forgive me. I had planned to sit you down at some point and tell you, well, who I am and what I can do. But obviously, it's not information you can just hand out to any person."

"And then once I began to..." he hesitated for a moment, meeting her gaze, "trust you," he finally concluded. "Even once I could trust you, there never seemed to be a right time..."

Nora knew he was trying to find a way to reference the ongoing flirtation occurring between them but wasn't sure how to label it.

"No, it's me who should apologize. What I did right then, outside? It was unforgivable. I am a professional, after all. I

appreciate your understanding of my surprised reaction. But in the end, it's none of my business what goes on in a family. I am there to do my job, not pass judgment. That's all."

Nora waved Hudson to a sitting area in her expansive room. Two armchairs and one couch nestled in a bay window overlooking a snow-covered lake. Hudson took a seat in one of the armchairs. Nora selected the other. She assumed that would provide enough physical and emotional space between the two.

"Yes, I see your point. But what you saw ... this is different from just staying out of a family's affairs. Hugely different. I'm doubtful you've treated a patient whose family can do tricks like this."

Nora laughed and nodded.

"Right, so it's me who needs to make this right," Hudson noted. "I am an animal shifter. I come from a long line of shifters, as it happens. Our clan shifts into polar bears, as you saw. We can do it by choice or, sometimes, through great emotion or in defense of our family. I am the leader of my clan, the alpha, so a lot of the responsibilities fall on my shoulders."

Nora sat back and studied Hudson, returned to his familiar human form. She had a difficult time linking the bear to the man, except for his eyes. In whatever form, Hudson's electrifying hazel eyes remained the same. That was comforting, at least.

Her mind reeled with questions. But she started with the most crucial.

"Is Hannah a shifter, too?"

"No. Hannah is not. Her father, Frank, was. But he left the clan to marry a human woman. As Nora grows, her ability to sense shifters around her may deepen, or she may have other traits similar to shifters, but she will never be able to shift herself."

"Yes, okay." Nora nodded again.

One piece of information at a time so my mind doesn't explode. Good.

“So there aren't any health issues I should be aware of with Hannah? Anything that might affect her treatment? Her progression to full health?”

“No, nothing at all. Consider Hannah to be like any other human in that regard.”

Nora sighed. Another piece of info swallowed.

“You say her father left the clan?”

Until this point, Hudson had been sitting erect, waiting for the proverbial shoe to drop with Nora. Sensing she wasn't about to overreact, run again, or threaten to quit, she watched him relax in the chair.

Hudson inhaled, intertwined his fingers, and laid them gently on his lap. “Yes. You see, mixed marriages are rather frowned upon in the shifting world. It's not that they are outlawed or anything. But there can be whispers, gossip, that sort of thing. All childish, of course, but it can be stressful. The community is evolving and accepting more. But in Frank's time, the only peace he and Hannah's mother, Alice, could get was to leave the clan.”

Nora again nodded. She thought the treatment of mixed marriages by the clan sounded awful, but she knew to mind her own business. She was a nurse in charge of healing Hannah and nothing else.

But a certain mixed marriage did come to mind. And the fanciful thought stayed there in her brain, and it made itself at home. She stared blankly at Hudson while her synapses merrily fired.

If Hannah's father felt drummed out of the clan for falling in love with a human female, what hope is there for me?

Hang on. Wait a sec. Are you nuts? Falling in love? Marriage? Nora, you need to get a grip. Even if Hudson were attracted to you, which he is clearly not, why would you want to be the wife of a polar bear anyway? Nuts, with a capital C for crazy!

Finally, Hudson's voice rocketed Nora back to reality.

"Nora, listen. All you need to know is that you and Hannah are completely safe around me. Being a bear shifter puts my senses on more of an alert than by being just a man. No harm will ever come to you while you're staying here. I promise you that. And although Hannah is biologically not a part of me, she's like my daughter. And with bear shifters, we are a tight family lot."

"Oh, Hudson, that never entered my mind. I've seen you as both now, and you are innately a protector. And with your bear sniffing skills, I doubt a chipmunk could cross your path, and you not know about it."

Hudson was rough around the edges, but she felt no fear in his presence. If anything, the times when he was away on work-related business upset her the most. The mansion felt so huge and so empty then, with far too many shadows.

Hudson leaned forward, his fingers still enmeshed. "Well, that's a relief. The last thing I wanted to do was scare you, Nora. Hannah and I look at you now as part of our family."

Nora leaned forward also. She wanted to drive something home to Hudson, more in actions than in words, but words too. "I trust you implicitly, Hudson. I truly mean that. And so does Hannah. When you're here, there's never a worry."

Nora smiled, praying her caring and compassion came across to the gruff man. Hudson smiled also, so she assumed as much. A tiny part of her psyche wanted to voice more, explain more, confess more. But the nurse in her kept it in check. *Some things are better left unsaid.*

"I hate to say this out loud for fear that you might say yes. But after this shock and what you saw outside tonight. You aren't considering leaving us, are you? I mean, Hannah is doing so well, and she and I would hate for you to leave now."

Hmm ... Hudson doesn't want me to leave? Sure, he said it was because of Hannah, but was it really the only reason? His voice, how he said those words. With such compassion. He looks nervous also, swallowing, clearing his throat, fidgeting.

Maybe there's more to his asking me to stay than because I'm Hannah's nurse.

It truly hadn't come to her mind to leave. Yes, Nora wanted an explanation and some answers to her questions, but to leave? No. Not at all. And if she had her way, maybe never at all.

“Lord, no, Hudson, I am here until we can get Hannah securely back on her feet. I have no intention of leaving a moment before that outcome.”

An audible sigh came from Hudson. Nora couldn't tell if the man's relief was merely for his daughter or maybe for her as well. All she could do was smile and hope for more while still secretly chastising herself for hoping for anything at all between herself and the handsome man.

Hudson looked down at his watch. “Listen, I've taken up enough of your time, and it's getting late. I'll leave you be.” Hudson rose from his chair, walked toward the door, and turned to face Nora one last time. “I couldn't end the night without talking with you. I needed to clear the air and make sure you feel okay. That you feel okay with me. I'm glad we had this talk.”

“Are there any more secrets or surprises I should know about?” Nora smirked, meaning the question as a jest.

But Hudson took the inquiry seriously and put his hand to his heart, flashing a serious expression. “On my honor as a man and as a clan leader, no more secrets, no more surprises. You know all there is to know about me.”

Hudson closed Nora's bedroom door and left the nurse with one final thought. *I doubt I know all about him. I'd like to hear a lot more, even now.*

SIXTEEN



HUDSON

He could hear Nora walking into the kitchen. His bear immediately yearned for her, but he tried to ignore it.

He was working on a cup of coffee and pulled his eyes up. She leaned against the wall and watched him for a moment. He wondered if she was scared from the events of last night. He imagined her world had been flipped upside down.

She needed time, and he wanted to give her that. Everyone was a little thrown when they first found out the truth.

She pushed off the wall and walked into the kitchen. He smiled at her. "Morning."

"We should go away this weekend," she said, pouring herself a cup of coffee. She leaned against the counter, looking at him as he turned to her.

His eyebrows scrunched up, a little surprised by her words. "Why? We have a long weekend. We can relax here."

"Exactly, we have a long weekend. We should go out and do something. Hannah should get out of the house. A different scenery would be good for all of us."

He frowned, but she kept going before he could tell her no.

"Hannah lives here, and this is where all the help comes to take care of her. We should take her somewhere that she doesn't associate all her health care with. Besides, the PT nurse won't be back until next week anyway, so we have the time. Think of it as a family trip."

Hudson looked down the hallway where Hannah's room was. A part of him didn't want to leave while they were still unraveling just what had happened to Hannah's parents. What if his absence delayed the investigation?

But he had already assigned tasks to his clan members in order to get to the bottom of this. His presence really wouldn't add anything more until they had something to go on.

Another, more vocal, part of him knew she had a good point. They spent a lot of their time in the house. "Well, I guess we could go up to my other cabin in the mountains for a few days. We don't have to pack up much besides clothes to go."

Nora's mouth dropped slightly, and she shook her head. "I shouldn't be surprised that you own a second cabin in the mountains."

He smirked at her, giving her a shrug. He didn't bring it up much because he'd been so busy with Hannah's needs.

After they finished their coffee, they packed. Nora helped Hannah get dressed and helped her figure out what she wanted to take. A couple of hours later, they were on the road. He was relaxed in his seat as he drove while Nora sat in the passenger seat. Hannah sat in the back, watching shows on a tablet.

"How are you doing?" he asked, glancing at her for a moment. He noticed she seemed rather calm.

"About what?" she asked, looking at him concerned.

"About yesterday. I wouldn't think you'd be willing to go into the middle of nowhere with me after everything you saw."

"I'm okay with it," she said, giving him a smile. "And thank you for telling me. I imagine it was hard to keep that to yourself."

He looked at Hannah. He kept it to himself because he needed to find someone for Hannah. Hannah always came first. He didn't like keeping the information from her, but now that she did know, it was like a weight was lifted off his chest.

They arrived at the mountain cabin, and her mouth dropped. He knew why. The home was a large, gorgeous building with two stories and a wrap-around porch. There were huge windows that allowed natural light inside and lovely cedar siding. It looked more like a hotel than it did a house, which was why he didn't often come here.

It was just beginning to snow, so they hurried inside, where Nora's eyes grew to the size of saucers.

The cabin had a large fireplace, a huge living room with two couches, and a rocking chair. There was a large kitchen with a huge island, and right next to it was an enormous dining table with ten chairs. The space was covered in natural light even as it snowed outside.

He helped Hannah onto a couch and turned. "I'll grab everything, and we can get settled."

Hannah chuckled at her. "It's nice, isn't it?"

Nora looked at Hannah with large eyes. "You've been here?"

Hannah nodded. "Yeah, my dad brought me here a few times. Hudson does some of his meetings out here."

She looked at him. He nodded in agreement. It was the main reason he bought the place. He needed a space large enough for everyone to fit inside when he had to have a meeting.

After everything was out of the car, they had dinner and settled in for the night. They would start actually enjoying the three-day weekend tomorrow.

The following morning, he got up early to start breakfast. He had a feast made up of pancakes, bacon, and eggs. Just as he was finishing, Nora emerged from her bedroom.

He handed her a cup of coffee with a smile. "Morning."

"Good morning. You seem to be in a good mood."

He nodded, making her a plate of food. "I am. Hannah said she wanted to go sledding, and I thought it was a great idea."

Nora took the plate, looking over to find Hannah already eating at the large table. She smiled at her. “Morning, Nora.”

“Morning, Hannah. How long have you two been up?”

He didn’t want to admit that he’d had a particularly sexy dream that forced him awake. So he decided to start on breakfast instead.

“Just a little bit ago,” Hannah answered, taking a bite of pancakes covered with chocolate and strawberries. It smeared all over her face.

He walked around, wiping at her face and shaking his head.

They packed up their stuff and headed out after breakfast. He helped Hannah onto the sled and looked at Nora. “You want to sit with her?”

“It’s going to be too heavy if I sit in it. I can walk.”

“Nonsense,” he said, waving at the sled. “Sit.”

Nora sighed, choosing not to argue with him. She sat behind Hannah.

He smirked. “Hold onto her.”

She wrapped her arms around Hannah and watched as he pulled off his clothes behind a tree, hanging them from a branch until he shifted. Her eyes widened, and Hannah giggled when he tossed the clothes at her for safekeeping.

“This is gonna be fun,” Hannah said, looking back at her. “My dad used to do this.”

She was about to ask what when he took hold of the sled rope and pulled them. They flew forward, and Nora screamed.

Hannah giggled loudly, cheering as he took off down the mountain in bear form. He could hear Nora cursing under her breath, which only made him chuckle. He took them down the mountain and then back up another. When they got to a large opening in the forest, he slowed to a stop.

He looked back and found Hannah smiling. She looked at Nora, who looked amazed. “This is the large open meadow.

It's covered in snow right now, but when it blooms, it smells wonderful.”

He remembered bringing Hannah here. Her parents loved the fragrance of the flowers, and he figured it would be a fond memory. That and he thought Nora would like it.

Nora smiled at Hannah. “It sounds wonderful. Maybe we can come back when it blooms.”

He hoped her words were true. Hannah would likely be healed by then, and he didn't know what the future held. He just hoped maybe she would be part of it.

Hannah carefully stepped around a little bit to stretch her legs, but he was right next to her if she needed a hand. Hannah had been working hard and was finally walking better.

After a while, Nora and Hannah packed onto the sled, and he pulled them back. When they arrived at the house, Nora helped Hannah inside while he went to grab something to wear. His clothes from earlier were wet from the romp in the snow.

After changing, he found the two girls in the living room. Hannah was fast asleep while a movie played. Nora gave him a wave, placing a finger over her lips. “She's a little tired. I figured we should let her sleep before we start lunch.”

He sat next to her, his finger grazing hers for a moment, and it sent sparks up his spine. She blushed at the contact.

“Good call. She did walk a lot. She pushed herself.”

“It's good for her,” she said, giving him a proud smile. She patted his hand, which sent another spark through his body. “She is healing.”

He swallowed, knowing her words were true. He looked down at Hannah and then up at the movie. He relaxed on the couch, tired from all the running.

“Why don't you take a nap?” Nora whispered.

He wasn't going to, but it was warm, and he figured why not. So, he allowed himself to slip into sleep.

SEVENTEEN



NORA

Nora had tidied things up and tried to read a book earlier that day while Hudson had indulged in a nap with Hannah.

Her reading was going out the window as her mind kept running back to Hudson.

She was trying not to have feelings for him and be realistic about the whole situation, but it was proving harder than she thought.

Nora wasn't hoping too much for anything, but everything he had told her compared to how he was acting was confusing. She couldn't get a good read on just what he might have felt for her, if anything. As a result, she was keeping her mind attentive to every detail, wanting to dissect them to come up with the correct solution on how to manage her growing feelings.

She set her book on her lap, giving up since she had read the same line four times. She looked at the sleeping duo on the couch and let her mind loose.

Hudson was a polar bear. A shifter.

It was all new to Nora, but she found that it didn't detour her.

But that wasn't the issue at hand either.

Hudson had told her that Hannah's father had left the clan to marry a human. That it was frowned upon by the shifters to mate with a human and not your own kind. So, to Nora, that

meant that the alpha, Hudson, had to obey that rule more than anyone, right?

And with that being the case, that meant there was no future between her and him. That begged her to question why he was being so ... flirtatious with her.

Was it just to pass the time?

He wasn't an overly friendly person. He didn't seem like a lady's man, and he sure as hell didn't seem to take anything lightly. So why was he being so open and tender with Nora, or was she interpreting it incorrectly because she wanted something more?

She shook her head and stood from her seat. She hated herself for thinking more about her desires when she was supposed to be focused on helping Hannah, not herself.

Still, Nora couldn't ignore the way that Hudson made her feel. It was as if they were their own little family the more time they spent together, and it made her heart feel so full that she never wanted to let it go.

Maybe that's what drove her feelings. Maybe Hudson really wasn't that interested, and she just wanted to imagine he was.

She studied Hudson, his usually hard features softened with his dark hair disheveled. His strong arms hung loosely over the sleeping Hannah as soft snores emanated from them both.

Nope. There was something extra about Hudson that made Nora's heart race and palms sweat as her girly parts called intimately for him.

She needed to get it together. This confusion needed to be put aside.

But what is there to be confused about? He can't be with a human unless he leaves the clan, and I could never ask that of him. Nor could he ever do that. He's their leader, she thought as she went to the kitchen, ready to busy her hands and mind so she could put the matter aside.

IT HAD BEEN A GOOD, long day.

Once Hudson and Hannah had awoken, they had lunch and continued to enjoy the outside before it became too cold.

Meanwhile, Nora kept her focus on Hannah and tried to keep her one-on-one time with Hudson limited.

Thanks to the winter hours and being tucked away in the mountains, it was already dark when they finished dinner. This made it even easier for Hannah to have an earlier bedtime than usual.

She had been working harder than before while they were there, wanting to engage in all the activities and excited that she was able to do so much more than even a week or two before. She had even started to wear leg braces to help keep her up and walking for longer without requiring the chair. It was exhausting, Nora was sure, but Hannah never complained.

It made Nora so happy to see such progress and joy in the young girl's eyes.

Hannah was starting to act like a child again, and that was worth more than all the money to Nora.

She saw it meant as much to Hudson as well, but she forced herself to not dwell on that part. She was already trying to distance herself from her emotional connection to him.

Still, the whole day felt perfect to her. No matter how hard she tried to put Hudson to the side, he made an effort to talk with her continuously.

Once Hannah was tucked into bed, Nora felt a blush come on when she saw Hudson sitting on the couch waiting for her.

“Come sit for a moment.”

She cautiously walked over and sat on the loveseat. “I’m sorry if I overstepped putting her to bed. I just kind of...”

He waved her apology off. “Don’t be sorry for that. If I would have laid her down, she would have asked for you anyway. She’s very fond of you.”

“Well, I’m very fond of her as well.” Nora smiled. She relaxed and leaned back on the couch, casting her eyes on the blazing fireplace, keeping the cabin warm in the dark coldness of the winter night.

She looked out of the window beyond and saw it was starting to snow again.

It added to the whole ambiance of their setting. If she didn’t know any better, it was as if nature was luring her and Hudson into a romantic evening.

Hudson scooted slightly closer to her. “Is this what you were expecting when you took on the job?” He looked intently into her eyes.

She felt naked by the way he looked at her. Her thighs warmed as she realized she wished she was naked ... and that he was too.

Ignoring her sensations, she answered him. “In a way. I knew it was going to be a lot of work, but Hannah is so determined and optimistic. It grows day by day. She inspires me to put my best foot forward because if she is able to, then we all can.”

For the first time, Nora saw a true, warm smile spread over his face. It was a beautiful thing to behold, and she wondered why he didn’t wear it more often.

“You don’t give yourself enough credit. You are an inspiration to her as well. I can tell she looks up to you. I can’t thank you enough.” He touched her hand that rested on the couch, holding her eyes with his own.

Nora’s body was on fire. She knew that she wasn’t making things up in her head anymore. Every tingling in her body longed for more than just his hand to touch her.

Why did something so wrong feel so right? Or was that just the way of the world?

If Hudson felt it also, then was it really wrong?

They stayed silent, looking at each other. Nora didn't move her hand, nor did Hudson. The only sound was the crackling of the wood in the flames of the fire.

Then Hudson slowly moved his hand to her face as he leaned in.

Nora's breath caught in her throat. She so badly wanted to feel his lips on hers. To feel his hands glide all over her body.

He closed the gap and pressed his lips to hers, creating an electric shock wave to fall over Nora's nerve endings.

The kiss was soft at first, but it quickly became deep and hungry as they both seemed to give in to each other.

She was tired of fighting for what made her happy. It made her a hypocrite to tell children to see the lighter side to help them achieve their goals of happiness when she couldn't do it for herself.

They pressed themselves into one another as their fingers feverishly stripped the other. In a moment, they were naked on the couch, in a tangle of limbs and lust.

Nora had a fleeting moment that made her wonder if she should go through with this. Was sex with a bear shifter who she could never have crazy? But then Hudson's overly large cock pressed hard into her thigh before sliding deep inside her. She gasped as she pushed her doubt into the abyss with a moan.

She threw caution to the wind, letting her desires be fully met with Hudson's eager, hard cock as their rhythm fell into perfect sync. The need for each other was mutual. That was clearer now than it had been before. If this was all they were destined to have, then she accepted that.

Doomed or not, Nora was happy and willing to risk it all with him.

EIGHTEEN



HUDSON

The drive back home was quiet. Mostly because everyone in the SUV was exhausted. Hudson, Nora, and Hannah had such a wonderful getaway that now only catching up on sleep remained.

But if Hudson was honest with himself, there was more to the quiet than mere tiredness. Yes, their lovemaking was so sweet and incredible. But the question hung in the air like a looming albatross coming in for the kill.

As Hudson meandered along the winding mountain road, he had more to think about than staying out of the ditches.

Me, with a human. Why am I doing this to myself? And more importantly, why am I doing this to Nora and Hannah? The two people I care about most in the whole world. And for what? I get so close to Nora, only to walk away because she can't shift, leaving her with a broken heart. And Hannah. She's been through too much as it is. To bond so tightly with Nora, then to have Hannah's mother figure simply walk away. How cruel can I be?

Hudson glanced at Nora. Her head leaned against the side window. And as soon as he looked, she quickly closed her eyes. He wasn't the only one who was dealing with tension.

It's not like I don't like human females. I do. But I'm the alpha of a shifter clan. More is expected of me than from a mere member. I'm to carry on the line, aren't I? Have a shifter son. I can't do that with Nora or any human like her. To have

children with her would be like not having any at all. At least, that would be how the clan would feel.

Hudson sighed. He took a sip of the hot coffee Nora had made both of them in to-go mugs before they left the cabin. He side-eyed her again. Her eyes remained closed this time, and she looked like she was truly sleeping.

Look at her there, all cuddled up under a quilt. Such a beauty. And look how she took care of us before we left. Set up a cozy bed for Hannah in the back. Made her a hot chocolate to go and coffee for her and me. She is the perfect wife and mother. And human.

Hudson's expression was dour. His emotions churned like the five stages of grief. He was experiencing a loss, but Nora was right there beside them.

Hudson opened the middle console, grabbed a bottle of Tylenol, and swallowed a couple of tablets with his coffee.

The pull of both ways ... allegiance to the clan and his affection for Nora ... roiled in his gut like a water mill, over and over, up and down. Hudson had never experienced car sickness, but stopping by the side of the road and retching wasn't too far from his mind.

Hudson stopped looking at Nora. He did his best to remove her existence from his mind. *I have to keep my eyes on the prize. I have to focus. Nora is here as Hannah's nurse and nothing more. What we had the other night was a moment of weakness. That's all.*

There could be no other way. Even if he bowed down to his feelings for Nora, what would be the chances the clan would accept another mixed marriage? He knew well how they treated poor Frank and Alice. How could he put Nora through that? How could he endure it himself?

"How are you doing back there, sweetie?" Hudson eyed Hannah through the rearview mirror.

Hannah yawned. "I'm fine, just sleepy. Are we there yet?"

Hudson chuckled. "No, not quite. We will be home soon, though. Slide back down. I'll wake you when we get there."

Hannah smiled, nodded, and melted into her pillow, hugging her stuffed polar bear.

Hudson knew his words would wake Nora. But he didn't dare look her way. His heart would melt, and so would his fortitude if he took in her beautiful face.

I have to figure things out. Take it one step at a time.

He grabbed his mug and took another sip. Guilt clogged his throat.

There's nothing to figure out, dude. She's a human. You're a shifter. Done and done. Heavy the head that wears the crown.

The saying did revolutions in his head. He wished he could go to sleep like Hannah and not think of a thing. But to be an alpha demanded so much more. Hudson had to not only be a leader but a shining example to every member of his clan. If he could not walk the walk, how could he expect others to do so?

Hudson wheeled the SUV down the long drive and stopped outside the front walk. The log cabin mansion looked the same as they had left it. Nothing was out of place. It appeared quiet and still. The snow crunched underfoot as he raised the tailgate and took out the luggage. The frosty winter air woke Hannah before he had a chance to wake her himself.

Hannah grabbed her pillow and polar bear and slowly made for the front door, with Nora following behind to keep Hannah steady on her feet.

We're home, like any other family. Only we aren't any other family.

Hudson should have been smiling. He should have been over the moon at their romantic getaway. But reality stabbed him in his gut, and all he felt when he looked at his daughter and her nurse entering the home was emptiness. It was a hole inside of him as though he hadn't eaten for a century.

The work week began the next day, and Hudson found himself at the office once more. His inbox was full. His focus on how he must think and act was far less demanding.

The CEO kept himself busy with contracts and bidding applications for clients and suppliers. He initialed and signed his way through the day. And when the thought of Nora and her angelic vision seeped into his brain, he swept it out, quick and fast. His world had to be all Hannah and all business and nothing and no one else.

Later that evening, Hudson called a meeting of some of the top men in the clan. The attendees were his beta Logan and trusted lieutenants, who had started an investigation of the mysterious plane crash on his orders. As usual, they met in the clan lair.

“So, men, what have we found?” Hudson sat erect at the head of the table.

Logan started the conversation. He knew his pal well enough to recognize when Hudson meant business.

“I talked with the NTSB and the aviation specialists who built and maintained the plane. And both parties said it was in perfect working order.”

“Any evidence we can hang our hat on?”

“Not yet, but they are still gathering the pieces in their examination hangar. The one NTSB guy said there was oil residue on the broken plane parts and the ground. He wouldn’t say it officially, but he suspected a severed oil line.”

“And what would that do?”

“According to this rep, quite a lot. It could freeze up any number of parts, including the wings, the rudder, even the landing gear.”

A murmur rose between all the men. Their faces were red with simmering rage.

“Hmm...”

“What, Alpha?”

Hudson leaned forward. “Even if all that is true, it doesn’t answer the question of why. Why go to all that trouble for a couple who were already ousted from the clan? Frank and

Alice were effectively personas non-grata at this point. Frank couldn't produce a shifter heir. None of this makes sense."

A lieutenant piped up. "Weren't you scheduled to be on that flight as well?"

Hudson's eyes lit up. "Yes, you're right. I forgot about that. I was headed to the construction conference out east. But then that snafu with the Coeur d'Alene Washington customer happened. He is such a big client of ours. I had to stay back and settle the issue."

"So you missed the flight," Logan said.

"So I missed the flight. Last minute. No one knew I would not be on that plane."

The men fell silent. Hudson knew they were all thinking the same thing. He said it so no one else had to.

"I was the target. Not Frank. Not Alice. It was me."

"We don't know that for sure, Hudson," offered Logan.

Hudson dutifully nodded. "Oh, I think we do. There is no other reason. No other target was on that plane. Listen, men, keep digging, okay? We need to have definitive evidence to nail the perp, whoever it might be."

The men nodded and left the table. The meeting adjourned.

Hudson fell into deep, murmured thoughts on his way back to the mansion.

"Another reason to keep my distance from Hannah and Nora. If I'm the target, being near them is not safe. I won't let anyone hurt my family. Yes, I said *family*. Okay?"

Hudson sadly nodded to himself.

NINETEEN



NORA

Nora woke to have her morning cup of coffee. She'd gotten up even earlier in the hope of catching Hudson and talking to him. She felt that he'd been avoiding her since they had sex, and she didn't like it.

She hurried down the hallway and frowned when she saw the kitchen was empty. She walked in to see the coffee was made, which indicated he'd already been up. He'd even left her a mug to use.

Anger spiked in her stomach. She grabbed the mug, wanting to throw it at the wall. She froze when she heard the front door open. She turned, hope filling her chest, but it was quickly put out when she saw the PT nurse.

She gave her a smile, her light blue scrubs bright against the darkness that surrounded the dark living room. "Morning, Nora. Is Hudson here?" She placed her bag down by the couch, flipping on some lights.

She turned, grabbed the coffee, and shook her head. "You just missed him," she said and then lowered her voice. "Just like I did. Asshole."

She turned back to the nurse. "Would you like a cup of coffee? I haven't gotten Hannah up just yet. She had a hard time sleeping last night. I think she moved too much this weekend."

The nurse shook her head, emptying out her bag. "No, I had a cup just an hour ago. But thank you for the offer. And I

know Hannah is probably in pain, but the exercise is so good for her.”

She already knew that. She didn't need to hear those words. It was Hudson who was just too fucking business-oriented to be here to hear them.

She took a couple sips of coffee before she started to help the nurse set up items for Hannah to work on. Hannah woke an hour later, ready to get going on her day.

She looked at the clock every once in a while, wondering when Hudson would be home.

She kept thinking back to their night and hated how quickly everything changed afterward. She felt used, and she hated how she kept looking for him like a broken girl. She wasn't that person, yet here she was, pining after him.

“Nora,” the nurse spoke up. “You zoned out. Can you hold onto her leg?”

She quickly shook her head, reminding herself she needed to focus. Hannah needed her to pay attention. Hannah needed someone to be in her corner, even if her so-called father wasn't.

That angered her even more. Hudson didn't tell her where he went, and he left Hannah for her to take care of. It was her job, but he wasn't just supposed to leave without informing her of where he was going.

She told herself it didn't matter. She didn't care that he rejected her. She didn't want a husband who focused on work more than he cared for his family. And she really didn't want Hudson if, in the moments of stress, he sank himself into work. Not to mention that between his job and his clan, there'd never be time for her.

There was another ring of the bell, and she hurried to answer it. She gave Hannah a thumbs-up of encouragement before she turned to answer it. She pulled her phone out, sending Hudson a text.

She opened the door and took in a woman and two men wearing scrubs. There were faces that she didn't know, but that

wasn't uncommon. The therapy team was always changing, and a few new nurses had come before.

"Hello, we are here for Hannah's next therapy session," the lady said.

She opened the door farther, allowing them entrance. "Yes, come inside. I didn't realize we were getting some new people."

"Oh, yeah. The other girls were busy with a client that came up, so they asked if we could fill in. We can come back if now isn't a good time."

"Oh, no. Heavens, no." She rubbed at her forehead, angry that Hudson wasn't there. Surely, he knew they would be getting new help today. Why didn't he just tell her?

"She's in the living room with her PT nurse. They should be finishing up in just a moment," she said as she shut the door.

They all gave her a smile before heading down the hallway. She sighed, pulling out her phone once more. She looked to see if Hudson answered her, but of course, her message was left without a response.

She headed down the hallway, checking in on the group. Hannah was finishing up some stretches with the PT nurse, and Nora smiled. "I'm just going to make a quick phone call, and I'll be right back."

She headed toward her bedroom and shut the door. She sighed and dialed up Hudson. It rang a couple of times before he answered. "Hello?"

"Where are you?" she asked, crossing her arms as she leaned against the door.

"I'm out getting a couple of things done. What's wrong?"

She swallowed, knowing she was coming off short-clipped. She exhaled. "I'm just wondering. Hannah had some PT today, and it went really well. Her range of motion improved some more, and they said she would soon be able to

lessen her therapy days to one time a week. That's what we've been waiting for."

She could hear Hudson mumble a few things, and she ground her teeth together. Was he even listening?

"The therapist group came in, and they were a new group. Did you know there were going to be different people?"

"I didn't, but that doesn't surprise me. I'm sure I got a letter somewhere. Is that all?"

Her nostrils flared, and she scowled. "What do you mean, is that all?"

"I just ... I have a lot of things I have to get to, Nora. If everything is under control, I need to get back to it."

Her anger boiled over, and she'd had enough. He'd been avoiding her, and now he couldn't even be civil over the phone. Maybe she shouldn't poke a literal bear, but she didn't care.

"What is your problem?"

"What?"

"You have been acting off since we slept together. Was that a mistake? Should we not have done that?"

"Nora, it's not like that."

"Really? Because it certainly feels like that is what's going on here."

She could hear him sigh, and then she heard the sound of a door open and close. She headed to the window to look.

He sighed. "I'm not saying it was a mistake, but it's complicated."

Her feet froze. She turned, feeling her heart drop. "What?"

"It's not that simple," he replied.

So he was rejecting her. Why else would he say it's complicated? That's what someone says afterward when they reject a potential girlfriend.

“Fine, then give me some specifics as to why it’s complicated. I’m all ears here.”

“Nora, can we just talk about this when I get home? I’ve got a thing to get to, and you have Hannah.”

She curled her hands into tight fists. She wanted to hit something but refrained from doing so.

“You know, you told me before that the problem was that you’re a shifter. That shifters and non-shifters aren’t something that can be. But that isn’t the problem. The problem is that you can’t open yourself up and just be honest. You won’t tell me anything, and yet you expect me to just give you everything free of charge.”

“Nora...”

“You know what? I have to get back. Hannah needs someone to be there for her since you won’t be.”

“That’s not fair,” he said, but she ended the line before he could continue. She felt the tears that broke free, and she quickly wiped them away and straightened her back.

She opened the door and stepped out. She stuffed her phone deep into her pocket and headed down the hallway. “Hey, sorry that took so long.”

She rounded the corner and came to a stop when she took in an empty living room. There was no one around, and the house was utterly silent.

A chill ran down her spine, and she looked toward the back door looking for Hannah. Maybe they took her outside.

She hurried, pulled the door open, and found it empty. Her heart raced, and her mind went to one thing. Hannah was gone. The staff was gone. She heard a door open and shut during her phone call two minutes ago.

“Oh, my God,” she said as she took a step backward.

Hannah was gone.

Hannah was *taken*.

TWENTY



HUDSON

The last thing Hudson was expecting after their little spat was for Nora to call him. A part of him wanted to just let it go to voicemail. He didn't want to have this fight right now, especially not over the phone.

But she'd be angrier with him if he kept ignoring her, and that was what had started this mess in the first place. So, he answered the phone with a growl. "Nora, if you're calling to argue..."

"Hannah's missing!"

Her panicked words sent ice through his veins.

"Missing?" His bear roared at the word. "What do you mean she's missing?"

"I was distracted after I talked with you and wasn't paying attention, and when I went back, she and the therapists were gone." She sounded like she was on the verge of sobbing. "I should've known! They were different, but I just thought the usual ones couldn't make it."

"Stay there. I'm coming to find her." And with that, he hung up.

He didn't bother to cancel any of his appointments for the day or explain where he was going. He just got in the car and drove.

Hannah was missing. Someone had taken her. And there wasn't a force on Earth that was going to keep him from finding her.

The drive went by in a blur. His mind was occupied with every possibility of what could have happened to her. What was happening to her right now?

Everything he'd suspected about the plane crash not being an accident was coming to the forefront of his mind. These could be the same people who went after Frank. It couldn't be a coincidence that she'd been taken so soon after the plane crash.

But what would they want with Hannah?

A few possibilities came to mind, and he growled.

He was going to save Hannah from whoever had taken her away from him. And when he got his hands on whoever it was, he was going to rip them apart.

It seemed like a lifetime before he finally reached his house. He raced inside and found Nora in the living room. Her eyes were red and puffy, and she looked half-crazed with worry.

Her gaze immediately snapped to him, and she looked like she wanted to cry all over again. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I should have known better. I shouldn't have let ..."

Hudson grabbed her arms firmly. "Stop that. I highly doubt that you *let* anything happen. Right now, I need you to tell me everything you can about the people here today."

She nodded and began listing off every detail she could. What they had looked like, the car they drove, the way they walked.

Something else struck him as odd, though. No matter how distracted she was, Nora knew her medical practices and had sat in on enough of Hannah's sessions. These people had to have been good at imitating real doctors to fool her. Unless...

"Did they seem to know what they were doing?"

"What?"

"Did they seem competent in what they were doing when they were working with her? Did they seem like real therapists?" he asked more firmly.

“I didn’t see them working with her, but they had all the equipment needed and had on the right clothes and name tags with the company’s name. That’s why I didn’t even question who they were.” Her voice trailed off at that last part.

“I know I should have asked more questions anyway. I should have called the office to confirm who they were.” She was beginning to ramble. “This would have never happened if I had just put my feelings aside and not been so distracted. I’m so stupid...”

“Hey!” Hudson interrupted her tirade sharply.

She was startled and looked at him with wide eyes. Fresh tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

“You are not stupid. This is not your fault,” he told her firmly, leaving no room for argument. “There’s no way you would ever just let someone take her.”

As he talked, he felt a swelling guilt. Nora could not possibly have known better, but he had, and he had not been prepared. He hadn’t even warned Nora of the danger Hannah could be facing because, in the back of his mind, he had always assumed he was the target as an alpha shifter.

“You love and care for that little girl, and you would never do anything to hurt her. And you were right when we were talking over the phone about not letting anyone in. I should have been more open with you. I should have told you more about who I was and what was going on.”

Nora wrapped her arms around herself. “You being open with me about who you are wouldn’t have helped Hannah. Just because I was angry with you didn’t mean I had to be distracted.”

Hudson shook his head. “No, you don’t understand. I’ve been investigating the plane crash that killed her parents for a while now. I don’t think it was an accident, and I think they might be the ones going after Hannah now.”

The nurse’s eyes went wide. “What?”

Hudson felt another stab of guilt. If only he’d told her, maybe then she’d have been more on her guard. She would

have known there was a threat to Hannah and kept a closer eye on her. Nora was as sharp as they came. She could have helped protect Hannah if she'd only known.

“You should have been told,” he murmured. “It’s not your fault she’s gone, it’s mine. I should have trusted you with the truth, and I didn’t, and now we’re all paying the price.”

Nora studied him for a moment before clenching her jaw. Hudson braced himself for the insults. The screaming, the anger, the accusations. And she would be right.

But instead, her voice came out calm and slow. “What was all that you just said to me about loving and caring for the girl? That I’d never have just let something like this happen to her. That goes for you also.”

Her arms came down to her sides, and she drew herself up to her full height. “You renovated your house the moment you realized she needed that. You took off early from your business trips just to be with her. You learned to laugh and play with her even though you didn’t have that as a child.”

She shook her head. “If I thought for one moment that you were going to endanger that girl, I’d have let you know. I have before. Even if I had known there really was someone after her, I still might not have been able to stop them. You’ve made mistakes, sure, but you’ve always learned from them.”

His relief at her not being angry with him was short-lived. Hannah was still missing, and there was no telling where they had taken her.

That wasn’t about to stop him from finding out. It only pushed his bear to want to go out there and rip someone to shreds.

“Take me to where they were working with her. I should still be able to pick up a trail.”

She nodded and took him to where they had been.

“Stand back,” he told her. And then he pulled off his clothes, handing them to Nora to carry, and shifted.

Using his now-enhanced senses, he sniffed out for unfamiliar scents.

Nora's and Hannah's scents were the strongest in the room since they'd been here the most. Usually, their scents calmed him. But the fact that Hannah was no longer here only fueled his anger.

Then, he caught a few unfamiliar scents. He'd smelled the doctors before who came here. They always smelled of sterilized hospitals and freshness. There was that same sterilized scent, but there was a sickening metallic edge to it. It made his bear growl angrily.

That was them.

He moved through the house, following their scent. Hudson couldn't focus on just Hannah since her scent was everywhere in the house. The fake therapists, on the other hand, had a much clearer trail.

Their scent moved out the door and into the driveway, where they must have driven away. But the fumes from their diesel vehicle still lingered enough in the air for him to follow.

He had their trail. They were not going to get away so easily.

If these were the same people who had gotten his best friend killed, they were in for a world of trouble. Especially now that they'd taken his little girl.

And he feared that was exactly who they were. And Hudson feared to guess whatever they had wanted with Frank, whatever they wanted now with Hannah.

But one thing was quite clear. He was going to tear these men into bloody ribbons.

The bear within him roared, and he let out a guttural cry. A cry of vengeance.

He turned to look back at Nora. She stared at him wide-eyed. There was a touch of fear in her gaze, but mostly, there was awe. And a bit of respect in there as well.

Good. If they were going to work together, he couldn't have her fearing the beast.

TWENTY-ONE



NORA

Nora's guilt and worry over losing Hannah were nearly suffocating. She felt like at any moment she could dissolve into tears again over what had happened. The only thing keeping her upright and moving was the fact that they needed to find Hannah.

Hudson had caught a scent, and they followed it to a dirt road that came to a dead end. From there, the tracks of a four-wheeler dented the snow, leaving a trail through the woods. Now they were both on foot roaming through the forest.

A little ways back, they had passed a No Trespassing sign nailed to a tree. They were no longer in Hudson clan territory. She worried they could be caught and arrested. Then they'd never get to Hannah in time.

"Is she close?" she dared to ask. Hudson just kept sniffing, and Nora clamped her mouth shut and let him focus.

He might have said he didn't blame her for losing Hannah, but she couldn't shake the feeling that he would soon. Right now, he seemed to be under the impression that, for some reason, it was his fault she was taken. But Nora couldn't help but feel that blame landed on her.

After all, she'd been the one with Hannah when she'd been taken right from under her nose. She should have asked more questions. She should have stayed right by Hannah's side so they wouldn't try anything.

She usually monitored her sessions. She never left Hannah with staff whom Hannah hadn't gotten to know and been

comfortable with, and even then, it was rare. To just walk out of the room completely and leave her with three people she had never met before was negligent. And why had this time been different? Because she had been thinking about Hudson.

She'd been distracted by the stupid idea of a romance with her boss. What was wrong with her?

She was typically more practical than this. Nora had never been one to get swept away in the idea of romance and passion. It certainly never distracted her from a patient.

All that daydreaming and then being angry with him for just the idea that they might have more. All the while, there had been a very real girl in her care that she hadn't been paying attention to.

That poor, sweet little girl was gone, and it was all her fault for not being more watchful. Hadn't she already been through enough with losing her parents? Nora couldn't imagine how much therapy it would take for her to overcome this experience.

And she would get that chance to get better.

They were getting her back and taking her home.

She would never rest again until Hannah was safe and sound. And then she'd never let her out of her sight again.

A chilling wind blew through the trees, and she shivered. She noticed then that she hadn't bothered to grab her coat before they left. All she had was her cardigan. She pulled it around her tightly and tried not to think of the cold. After all, how much worse off was Hannah right about now?

The longer they trekked through the forest, the more nervous Nora became. Nothing good ever happened this deep in the woods, especially on property that didn't belong to the ones sneaking around on it. In most movies, it was where psychopaths lived with sharp axes.

A shudder ran through her that had nothing to do with the cold.

She thought about what Hudson had said concerning who he thought might have taken her. That the plane crash that had killed Hannah's parents might not have been so accidental after all.

But that begged the question, why?

Why cause a plane crash?

Who were they?

Were they just after Frank, or could they have been after little Hannah also?

Had they meant for Frank to die in that crash? If they had meant for him to die, then that could mean...

She immediately pushed those thoughts away.

No. Hannah was alive.

They were going to get her back. And she would not allow herself to even consider any other possibility.

The sun was on its way down. Finding Hannah would be much harder in the dark. Maybe not, though. Hudson could turn into a polar bear, after all.

At the very least, he'd still be able to smell her out. She wasn't sure if polar bears had good night vision or not.

It wouldn't matter if he didn't, though. Neither of them were about to give up anytime soon. Up ahead, she saw the tenth No Trespassing sign, but the last few warnings had progressed to more serious threats of prosecution.

Suddenly, Hudson seemed to perk up. Then he dashed through the trees.

Nora ran after him, struggling to keep up. It was then that she also realized that she was wearing flats while running through six inches of snow.

She ignored the stinging cold of the snow getting into her shoes and tried to keep pace with Hudson.

If he was going this fast, it must have meant they were close. Which meant Nora was close.

We will get her back. We will get her back. Nora repeated the mantra in her head.

Then she saw it. Just coming into view beyond the trees was a building.

Hudson slowed his pace, still a fair distance from the structure. He crept a few steps closer, and she peeked around him.

The building looked as though it was falling apart. Though from the cameras and thick-looking doors, she suspected that was only how it was made to look. Someone had wanted to make it seem as though it were an inconspicuous shack in the woods. That way, if anyone saw it, they'd pay it no mind.

Which also meant that whoever created this must have something sinister to hide.

And these were the people holding Hannah captive.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Hudson shook his big bear head, then shifted. She handed him his clothes as he did.

While he dressed, Hudson had a grim look on his face. "I hope to God this isn't what I think it is."

Worry coiled tightly in her. "What do you mean? Do you know what this place is?"

Hudson gave a tight nod. "While I was growing up, a couple of clan members had gone missing. A teenage boy and girl whose parents didn't want them together. We found no sign of them on our land or in the nearest town, so we figured they had run away.

"A few others have gone missing over the years, but they could've left of their own accord. We never suspected anything bad happening to them. A little while later, we heard rumors of a place that illegally experiments on shifters, but no one had any idea where it was or if it really existed."

Nora's eyes widened. Someone was experimenting on shifters?

“Is it other shifters experimenting on their own kind?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No. Humans.”

Nora furrowed her brow. “But how do they know your kind exists? It’s not like it’s public knowledge or anything. How would they even know to look for you?”

“While it may not be public knowledge, and shifter clans do their best to keep the secret from outsiders, we’re not perfect. We live intermingled with humanity, and there are times when we slip up or get caught. And whether through pictures or video or word of mouth, word spreads.”

He sighed and met her gaze. “It’s like the people who hunt Big Foot or the Loch Ness Monster. They might only have stories to go on, but they still search. And from what it looks like, these people seem to have found out a lot about my kind. Why else would they be so close to the clan?”

Nora wrapped her arms around herself more tightly, still staring at the structure. “But it looks like a rundown shack. How can research labs and such be in there?”

“I’m guessing that the main facility is underground. That’s how it’s been kept hidden so well.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “This hovel in no way could be a fancy laboratory.”

He pointed. “Does a vacant shack need to have armed guards patrolling the ground?” Around the corner of the building stepped a man dressed in camo and carrying a sidearm holstered on his waist.

Hudson was right! His kind were being hunted like animals. What a horrible, inhuman thing to do to another sentient being. If these people knew so much about shifters, they’d know how similar to humans they were.

The humans were the monsters.

Nora swallowed hard, not sure she wanted to know the answer to her next question. “Why do you think they took Hannah?”

A low growl came from deep within Hudson. "I highly suspect they want to study her hybrid genetics."

Study her? Like she was a bug and not a six-year-old girl.

Nora's worry twisted into barely contained fury.

How dare they! She was just a child and a very human child, too. There was no difference between her and any other child besides perhaps a dormant shifter gene.

And yet they'd still taken her. Planned to study her. And for what? Just what were they planning to do with what they found?

They were going to experiment on her like she was a lab rat.

Nora felt sick as she realized they might already be experimenting on her right now.

Monsters. Horrible, horrible monsters.

She couldn't imagine how scared and confused Hannah must be.

Nora desperately wished there was at least some way to let her know they were coming. That they were going to save her. That they were not going to leave her in this awful place with these awful people.

That they were going to take her home.

And so help whoever tried to hurt that little girl. She'd kill them. Without a shadow of a doubt, she knew she'd kill them. She was not typically a violent person, but to protect Hannah, she could be.

"They'd better not have touched a single hair on her head," she hissed.

Hudson nodded. "Agreed."

"So how do we get her out of there?" she asked, hoping he had a solid plan.

"By calling in reinforcements."

TWENTY-TWO



HUDSON

As much as he wanted to not waste a moment and burst through the doors of the facility and get Hannah, he knew they needed backup.

These people had obviously put a lot of effort into disguising their building and researching his kind. They'd know to expect high-level shifter threats. If he didn't do this right, they could end up being killed before even getting close to Hannah. They needed the clan.

He called the elders in a group phone call as he scaled up a tree to get a better view of the facility and its defenses. Nora climbed another tree farther away to get another angle.

"Alpha, why have you called?" one of the elder's voices asked in a grouchy tone. More than likely, the elders had been preparing for dinner.

"I need the clan assembled immediately at the coordinates I just sent you. They need to be prepared to attack."

A few beats passed as the elders were no doubt looking at where the coordinates were located.

One of the elders let out a groan. "You are not on clan land. Where are you and why?"

"I believe I've found the place where shifters are being experimented on," he replied.

"What?" Several elders yelled at once, and chaos erupted on the other side of the call. "That is mere rumor. Fiction to

explain why a disgruntled shifter would choose to leave the protection of the clan.”

Hudson growled. He did not have time to argue with them about this. Every moment spent talking was another moment they weren't going after Hannah. Another moment where she was still in the hands of those monsters.

“They are not just rumors,” he bit out. “They are very real. They have taken Hannah and are holding her captive there. I need the clan here to back me up *now!*”

“You are certain that is where they have taken her?” another one of the elders, Enzo, asked.

Hudson dug his nails into the branch below him. “Elder Enzo, are you questioning an alpha's ability to track?”

“He is not questioning your ability to do anything,” Elder Gabriel put in. “He is merely confirming the facts.”

“I don't have time for this,” he snapped. “A little girl's life is on the line. We don't have time to argue.”

“This matter absolutely needs to be debated,” another one of the elders shouted. “You said you *believe* that is the place. You do not know for certain. What if you are wrong? We will be exposing ourselves to humans in mass quantity.”

Another elder agreed. “If we charge in only to find innocent humans, it could jeopardize all shifters. The less humans know about us, the better. We must act cautiously for the sake of all our kind.”

“And you would risk a six-year-old girl's life?” he demanded. “They clearly know enough to have taken her. Surely that is enough for you.” He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

“It isn't as though we aren't sympathetic to your plight,” a kinder voice insisted. “But is it not better to risk one life than many? If you have proof these humans have knowledge of our kind and are malicious, then we will send help right away.”

Gabriel finished the thought. “Of course, we will. After all, if they are a threat to our kind, they must be dealt with swiftly.

Human or otherwise. But we must have proof. We cannot simply attack a human facility otherwise. What if Hannah ran away, and we start a war between the two species over a mistake?”

It took everything in him not to scream at the clan elders and then hurl the phone to the ground below. How could they possibly just sit around and allow this to happen?

They really expected him to get proof, send it to them, and then let them debate some more. All the while, he was just supposed to wait around while his daughter was in immediate danger.

This was ridiculous, and he was putting an end to it now.

“I’m calling for a clan overruling vote,” Hudson said.

The elders went quiet on the other end of the line. Then the protests started.

“That is ridiculous.”

“You can’t just ignore our concerns!”

“You’ll be jeopardizing the whole clan!”

“Be sensible.”

“I can’t believe you would call for such a thing!”

A clan overruling vote was something that was rarely used and a bit taboo. Typically, it could be considered an overreach of power. It allowed the vote on a matter to go directly to the clan to decide what they wanted to do. And their decision could overrule any decision made by the clan elders.

It was risky, too, because Hudson wouldn’t be there to plead his case. He just had to hope his people were willing to help.

“My decision is final,” he said gruffly.

“Very well,” Enzo said, and Hudson could tell he was grinding his teeth. “We will put this matter to the clan. But be warned, Alpha, this puts you on thin ice. The elders are already not pleased with your recent involvement with humans.”

And then the line went dead.

With another growl, Hudson shoved the phone back into his pocket and refocused his attention on the shack. There were guards regularly patrolling outside, but there were noticeable gaps in their patrol.

He jumped down from the tree and hiked over to where Nora had climbed.

“Nora,” he called up as loudly as he dared.

A shape moved in the branches, and after a minute, Nora climbed down.

“Two cameras on the backside of the facility. And it took the guard ten minutes to circle back around again,” she reported, hugging her arms tightly around her.

Hudson frowned. It wasn't the same gesture she'd used when she was terrified earlier. Then, taking a closer look at her, he realized she was only wearing a sweater to brace against the elements.

He shrugged off his coat and put it around her. “Put this on. With the sun almost fully down, it's only going to get colder.”

“But don't you need it?” she protested.

He gave her a deadpan look.

She huffed and slipped the coat on. “Polar bear shifter ...
right. When will your clan be

here to help?”

His jaw tightened. “They're refusing to come unless they have proof these humans are actually a threat to shifters.”

“What!” Nora hissed. “There's a little girl in there about to be tortured by madmen. What could possibly make them wait? What proof do they want, her dead body?”

He shook his head. “The elders of the clan are deeply rooted in their customs. They'll stick to their ways even if it endangers another. I've already called for a vote to overrule them. Hopefully, they'll do it immediately, but not likely.”

“So what can we do?” she asked despairingly.

He'd been asking himself that same question ever since he'd hung up with the elders. They couldn't just sit here and wait for a decision to be made. Who knows how long that would take? And then there was the possibility that the vote wouldn't be in their favor.

Hannah was already in there, and they had no idea what they were doing to her at this very moment. He would not just stand by for the sake of politics.

“We're going in,” he said firmly.

She nodded without hesitation. “What's the plan?”

His respect for her rose all the more. She was no shifter or trained soldier, and yet she was willing to dive into a fight, nonetheless.

But he also couldn't go in with just her. She might have had the spirit for it, but she lacked the muscle. It would mean certain death despite her good intentions.

“I'm calling Logan to see if he'll help us.”

She raised an eyebrow. “But if the elders weren't keen on sending help, why would he come?”

“Logan is my beta. His loyalty is to me.” At least, he hoped Logan would be willing to go against the elders to help.

He dialed his beta, who answered on the second ring. “What's the situation, Alpha?”

Hudson felt his jaw clench as he responded. “Logan, Hannah's been taken and is being held by humans who want to experiment on her. I think they could be the same ones we've been looking into who caused the plane crash.”

Logan swore colorfully on the other end. “Send me the coordinates. I'll be there as soon as I can.”

“I will warn you, the elders have already denied me the chance to call backup from the clan thus far. If you do this, they could hold you in contempt.”

“Let them,” Logan said as though it were trivial.

“Then we’ll see you soon.”

TWENTY-THREE



NORA

When Logan arrived just before the sun disappeared behind the mountains, Nora introduced herself and studied his reaction. He didn't seem to be upset with her being a human. In fact, he'd greeted her with a smile and warm welcome before turning serious with Hudson. Maybe not everyone in the clan hated humans.

As soon as darkness fell, the plan was for the two to shift into polar bear form and be ready to attack or defend if need be. Nora wished she could shapeshift, too, thinking she'd feel safer as a massive polar bear. But no such generic luck.

Nora hung back, but she stayed close by Hudson's side. She refused to lose sight of him. Hudson had done all he could to encourage her to stay back while they rescued Hannah. But there was no convincing her. Nora was as emotionally invested in Hannah as he was, so the debate didn't last long.

As the trio waited behind a snow-cloaked hedgerow, doubts crept into her mind. Earlier, they'd watched a guard walk up to the shack door and pull a badge from his pocket to open the door. There was little to no question whether this place was being kept secret, which meant security out of the wazoo. "Look at all those guards. How are we going to get past all that?"

"Watch them. They walk in a definite pattern. See? All we have to do is time our entry when those closest ones reach the other side of the building. And we'll be in," Logan whispered.

“But how? We don’t have a digital ID badge.” Nora asked. Logan didn’t have an answer for her.

“Look over there,” Hudson said, nodding toward a thin column of smoke that hadn’t been there before rising from the ground. “What do you think that is?”

“Let’s go see,” Nora replied, leading the way. When she approached the smoke, she realized it wasn’t from a fire but from a grate-covered air vent that came up from the forest floor. And it wasn’t smoke. “It’s warm air coming out of the facility and turning into vapor when it hits the outside air. Like when you can see your breath out in the cold.”

“That’s our way in,” Hudson said as he came up behind her.

She grunted, “You aren’t getting through that. I’m the only one who is going to fit.”

“No,” Hudson growled, his bear coming to the surface. “Too dangerous.”

Nora plopped her hands on her hips. “Like it or not, I’m the smallest of us three. Logan and you have to stay shifted to attack. So, I will have to do it.”

“What then?” Hudson asked. “You crawl around for hours, get lost, and we never see you again?”

“Alpha,” Logan said, slinging around his backpack, “I brought earpieces, a mini mic set, and the handheld GPS system, plus other stuff.”

Hudson groaned. “Logan, you’re not helping.”

Nora knelt next to where the beta pulled out the items. “What’s this?” she asked, picking up a plastic bag with pea-sized things inside.

“They’re earbuds with a tracking device.” He pulled out a small tablet from his pack. “We can monitor exactly where you are and pinpoint your location.”

Hudson groaned again and started pacing. Yeah, he might be upset about her helping, but he’d get over it once Hannah was safe.

Logan continued with his plan. “You wear it inside while we listen and watch the screen. You find the room where they’re holding Hannah. Then we’ll do a blitzkrieg bear move on the guards. They’ll have zero time to even punch an alarm.”

“Wow. It’s like you’ve done this sort of *spycraft* before,” she said. “I love it.”

“I hate it,” Hudson grumbled.

“Tough titty said the kitty,” she snarked. “I care for Hannah just as much as you. And if I can help, then I am.” She turned to Logan. “Suit me up, spy boy.”

The trio counted down the minutes, one of them not so happily, until the sunset and the twilight dimmed to a rich indigo hue. They would be able to sneak through the trees and take out the guards better with darkness on their side.

Nora hissed. “Okay, it’s go time. Get me in there.”

Hudson ripped the grate off the vent and looked into it. “It goes too far down. Can’t let you do it.”

Nora stepped up to him and shined a flashlight along the shaft, seeing a bend a few feet down. “Nice try.” She knelt and went in head first, Hudson holding her legs until she touched the bottom. “Got it,” she whispered. “See you shortly.”

Nora kept her breaths shallow, not inhaling fully, so her frame stayed small. She snaked through the facility’s shafts, working her way down the sheet metal vents, elbowing forward, and wiggling her hips left and right.

The nurse-turned-spy stayed silent for the longest time. She assumed Hudson would be shifted by now, snorting up a storm and pounding his paws on the ground, frustrated and beyond worried at not hearing anything from her.

But before Logan parted, he had given Nora a warning. “Don’t talk unless absolutely critical. The less sound, the safer.”

So, as Nora inch-wormed her way through the vast facility, she stayed silent as the grave.

Then she heard voices. Male voices. It seemed like two or three. She dragged herself toward them.

“I’ve scheduled the vivisection for nine tomorrow morning.”

“Good. No use delaying the procedure longer than we have to. Especially with that damn alpha leader sticking his muzzle where it doesn’t belong.”

“He’ll be on the warpath already. Too bad we can’t do it tonight.”

“The stakeholders won’t arrive until tomorrow, so we have to wait. She’ll be fine overnight. The doctor gave her a relaxant. It won’t put her out or taint her neuro-reaction time tomorrow, but it will keep her from panicking.”

“Where did they put her?”

“Right across from Surgery One. They will just wheel her bed in when we’re ready.”

“Perfect.”

The voices stopped. Nora heard a door open and close. She pressed the mic button and whispered into the speaker. “I found the right area. Look at the GPS.”

Logan spoke back. “Hold your position. Can you see Hannah?”

“If I crawl farther, I’ll cross a hall. Maybe she’ll be over there.”

Nora heard Hudson. “Okay, be careful. See if you can reach her. Tell her to be still. Tell her we are coming for her.”

“I will. Over.”

Nora began crawling once more. A few feet forward, she looked down an adjoining pipe and spied low light coming through a vented enclosure. The rest of the rooms had been dark since most of the occupants were probably gone for the day.

She wiggled into a position to see down into the room. Sure enough, it was little Hannah, curled up on a cot, quietly

sobbing. The sight broke Nora's heart. Hannah didn't even have her stuffed animal bear as a comfort.

"Psst. Psst." Nora hissed. "Psst." A little louder this time.

Hannah finally raised her head off the pillow and looked all around the room.

"No, here. Up here, sweetie. It's me. Nora. Up here," the nurse whispered.

Hannah looked up and beamed a bright smile at her nurse. She opened her mouth as if to speak.

Nora panicked and spat out a warning. "No. Stay silent. Stay still. Hudson is coming to rescue you. Don't look at me anymore in case they have a camera on you. Just lie back and close your eyes. We'll be with you soon. We promise nothing bad will happen to you. Hang on, sweetie."

Hannah nodded, smiled again, and did what she was told. Nora watched Hannah fall back on the pillow and close her eyes.

Nora clicked her mic again. "I've found her. Mark this spot on the monitor."

"Stay put," Hudson said, "We're coming in." The earbud went silent. She let out a sigh. She had the easy part. But once again, the waiting would kill her.

She wondered if there was an exit of some kind nearby. When the guys created their distraction, maybe she could smuggle Hannah out before anyone knew she was gone.

Nora crawled back to the T-shaped intersection so she could look farther down the ducts. It took some effort. She was red in the face. But she kept pushing. She crawled farther along the original shaft, looking down each intersection for lights.

Faint voices carried to her from an opening ahead. A light snapped on in the room below, illuminating a small swath of metal vent, and she froze in place.

"... eliminated all of this had we got her and that Alpha Hudson on the plane. Sure, vivisection is better. But we

could've dissected her and her parents in one go, and I could take next week off."

"There's nothing we can do about it now. The girl's parents are toast. She'll be toast before noon tomorrow. And you can still go on vacation. Concerning that Hudson asshole, all we'll have to do is execute a home invasion and gun him down before he shifts. Then that will lead us to the rest of the clan."

Nora listened as the men chortled. Her rage simmered, but she couldn't make a sound and give herself away. It was all she could do not to pop the vent grate off and kill the doctors with her bare hands.

"Come on," one of the voices said. "Let's get out of here. I'm tired of not breathing fresh air." The lights switched off, and a door closed. She let out a sigh and pressed her mic button. "ETA?"

When she got no reply, she figured the guys were in bear form and on their way.

The nurse wiggled her way back to Hannah's room.

My God, vivisection. These men are the animals. Not Hudson, not Logan. How can they put a little girl through such torture, all in the name of shifter science and a chance to reign over a clan?

Nora's stomach churned. What-ifs permeated her mind. Thoughts like, *what if we hadn't gotten here until tomorrow? What if we were too late?* The thoughts nearly made her retch.

Hold it together, Nora, for Hannah's sake. Hudson and Logan are almost here. No man can thwart a polar bear attack. And certainly not a duo attack.

Nora repositioned herself over Hannah's vent and waited for the men to arrive. They were the longest minutes she'd ever had to bear.

TWENTY-FOUR



HUDSON

“Okay, Alpha, we have Hannah pinpointed on the GPS. Nora did a fantastic job. Let’s go get her.”

Hudson nodded. “On the count of three, we rush the first two guards and keep attacking till we kill them all.”

“Don’t damage all the ID badges. We need one to get in,” Logan reminded him.

With that, both men quickly stripped and prepared to shift.

“One, two, three!”

Both shapeshifter polar bears howled, growled, and rampaged straight for the first two perimeter guards. Their viciousness in the attack would not be restrained.

A couple of yelps came from the shocked guards before razor-sharp teeth dug into their jugulars. And within seconds, both men were down. Shaking off the blood splatter, Logan and Hudson went for the next two in the same grizzly fashion. And in no time, Logan shifted and raced for the key-coded door and flashed one of the guard’s entry IDs. Hudson raced in behind him after grabbing the GPS system and two dead guards.

Inside was a single elevator. Logan and Hudson nearly ripped the uniforms off the guards and slipped them on.

“Ugh,” Logan grunted. “Nothing like cold, stiff blood on your clothes.”

While buttoning up his shirt, Hudson pushed the elevator call button. “After you,” he said, gesturing toward the opening.

“Thanks,” Logan whispered, still adjusting his pants.

From the tablet’s screen, Hudson studied the map/trail Nora had traveled. If he knew building construction, which he did since that’s what he did for a living, he surmised that the vents ran parallel with the offices along the hallways. That was the direction they needed to go.

When the elevator doors opened, Hudson pointed to the right. “Down this long hall, take the first left.”

He strode down the aisle like he was supposed to be there, waving Logan to shield his six.

The facility sat eerily quiet. No voices and no noises except for the ventilation system moving stale air around. Hudson assumed all had been set for the awful morning ahead, and the diabolical doctors were gone or sleeping.

But if this extraction went well, the horrific vivisection of Hannah would never take place. Nora and Logan would be long gone, along with himself, and Hannah would be safe again in his arms.

Spying one of the CCTV cameras, he turned his face away so any security watching wouldn’t think anything of a fellow guard perhaps looking for the restroom. He safely made his way down the hall. The main fluorescent lighting had been switched off, and only low wall nightlights illuminated the way.

When Hannah’s strong scent hit him outside a door, he stopped and pulled out the tablet to see he was right next to the location Nora had tagged for them.

Logan came up behind him. Hudson tried the door handle, but it was locked.

He noticed a tiny green light attached to the handle. He pointed to the guard’s ID card dangling from the lanyard around Logan’s neck.

Logan flashed a toothy grin as he put it in front of the laser.

Click. The door opened.

In front of them lay Hannah, fast asleep.

Hudson rushed in and laid a hand gently over her mouth. The little girl's eyes popped open, and she recognized him in the dim light. Hudson made a zip-it gesture across his mouth. Hannah nodded. He gently removed his hand and saw her smiling face.

Hannah silently mouthed at him. "You came!"

His insides leapt with joy at seeing her safe. He scooped her up and headed for the door where Logan had stayed on guard.

Hannah looked up at Hudson and whispered. "Where's Nora?"

A whisper came from the ceiling. "I'm still here."

All three looked up, and everyone smiled.

Logan slid the vent's closure clasp to the side, sending the grate swinging open. Nora, with Logan's help, climbed out of the shaft. She quickly went to Hannah and hugged and kissed the little girl.

Suddenly, alarms blared. There were footsteps and sirens, and a light started flashing in the hallway.

Apparently, somebody noticed something. The time for being quiet was long gone. The time to rampage had returned.

Hudson handed his daughter to the only person he trusted to take care of her. "Nora, keep Hannah inside this room. Don't come out until one of us gets you."

"You go fight," she said. "I've got Hannah. Don't worry about us."

Hudson couldn't have been more in love with Nora than he was at that moment if he tried. There was no more use in denying it or trying to pretend it didn't matter. He needed her more than he needed air to breathe. He gave her and Hannah a gentle bear hug and then left the room.

Without another word, Hudson and Logan shifted into their bear forms and raced into the hall. Instantly, two men in

lab coats faced them, coming to a skidding stop. Logan jumped on the one. Hudson, the other. And with two neck bites, the men were done.

Over the intercom system, a cold and apathetic male voice spoke.

“Facility is in lockdown. Unauthorized entry. You cannot escape. Surrender, and you won’t be harmed.”

Hudson raised his head and pointed his bloodied muzzle to wherever the speaker and camera were and let out a terrific roar. *You keep us here, and you won’t like your end. Your two doctors who were dumb enough to charge us are already dead.*

The disembodied voice continued.

“We have initiated the gas attack phase. If you don’t hand over the little girl to us ... return her to the front entry ... poison gas will seep into all halls and rooms and slowly suffocate all of you. You won’t get out of here before it happens. I suggest you hand over the girl now if you want to survive.”

Logan looked at Hudson with fearful eyes. Hudson looked back with a determined stare. They needed to find the control room and stop the poison from infiltrating.

As if reading his mind, Logan took a deep inhale, trying to place a scent. Then he galloped ahead.

Hudson didn’t have to be reminded twice. It was now or never. If they didn’t stop the gas, his newfound family would fall comatose, and Hannah would surely die. Hudson dismissed the thought of failure with each mighty paw slamming into hallway doors and crashing through in hopes of finding the target. He bared his teeth and vowed to rip the heads off anyone who got in his way.

Footfalls again interrupted his thoughts. They were coming closer.

Hudson’s eyes narrowed, and he unclenched his massive jaw.

The alpha looked at his beta, who, paw-for-paw, raced down the hall at the same speed to attack.

“You ready, pal?”

Logan looked over and smiled a satisfied bear smile.
“Born ready, friend. Let’s do this.”

TWENTY-FIVE



NORA

Nora cradled Hannah in her arms like a baby. She really had become attached to her, quite like a mother was drawn to a lost cub. The tragedy the child suffered, and the life after that she would be forced to endure was one of heartache and triumph. There was a good reason why she had come to love the girl. She saw herself in her, a mirror of pain rendered much more dire due to her age.

She clung to Nora, gripping the back of her neck with two strong hands, and wound her little legs around Nora's waist. Nora clung to her just as tightly, trying as much as she could to whisper reassurances.

"We're going to be okay, I promise you. Hudson has got this. We will be safe soon. We will go home and have some hot chocolate..."

"I'm *scared*," the little girl crooned, impossibly pulling Nora in even closer. "I'm so scared, Nora."

The little girl buried her face into Nora's neck. Nora felt the dampness of tears and snot soak her shirt. It added an extra layer to what she had already had to go through, and that made Nora angry.

She wasn't going to go down without a fight, and she knew that Hudson wasn't either.

"We will get through this. We are strong, right?"

Hannah nodded frantically, her nails digging into the back of Nora's neck.

She hated the fact that she may be lying to the child. But hope still had wings in her heart. There had to be a way out of here.

The door flew open. Logan and Hudson, in human form, rushed in. “The air might be tainted,” Hudson’s said. “We have to get both of you out of here. We can’t find the source to turn it off.”

They gestured for the girls to follow them. But the group only got a few feet down the hall when enemy reinforcement arrived. The shifters morphed into their animal forms and slowly backed up as the doctors and soldiers closed in.

There were nearly two dozen, hell, maybe even more, men with guns pointed directly at Hannah’s head. Nora prayed that two big polar bears could easily take out the men surrounding them even if bullets were fired.

But Hannah was at risk, and they were trapped with the bad guys getting closer. Hudson backed up, his rear paws nearly pressing against Nora’s shins. He gazed back at her. The look in his gorgeous dark eyes flickered with rose-gold embers. Her heart sank, wondering if everything they had built until this point had been fruitless.

Nora pinned her back against the wall and stared at the enemy. If it were to be their fate, she would go protecting the little girl who had changed her life for the better. Then something occurred to her.

If poison was being released into the air, then why weren’t the doctors and soldiers wearing gas masks?

“They’re bluffing,” she hollered, “There’s no gas.”

The soldiers stiffened, and one of them screamed, “Raise and fire!”

Nora spun around, shielding Hannah from the bullets with her body. For a moment, she thought that the pain had silenced her hearing and that she was only a mere few seconds away from slipping into the void. She held Hannah as close as any human possibly could.

But there was nothing. Then there was everything.

A loud clamoring, like the smashing of wood and concrete, rumbled the floor. The sound of bullets rained down, which made Nora flinch and curl her body around Hannah, but she never felt a single burn.

She dared to look at the chaos that ensued. Her heart leapt into her throat, not out of fear but from excitement and hope.

Hudson and Logan sprinted forward to attack the soldiers, who had turned to shoot at the horde of majestic polar bears stampeding toward them. The soldiers aimed their guns at them and released a sea of metal and fire, giving Hudson and Logan time to come in from behind and take them down.

Nora saw everything like she was sitting in a box seat at a theater. What ensued right before her eyes was positively cinematic, surreal, and a blend of awful and magnificent.

Many of the polar bears were covered in blood, their white fur acting as a blank canvas that showcased their violence. They slashed the throats of various soldiers, along with the doctors, but more kept coming seemingly out of nowhere. Some of the bears were hit by bullets, briefly injured yet carrying on with the attack, while others were down and out.

Nora couldn't believe what she was witnessing. However, she couldn't completely compute it at the moment, as she was in survival mode. Later, if there was a later, she would reflect upon watching a war between humans and their weapons versus incredible supernatural creatures.

"Is he okay?" Hannah inquired in her arms, looking less afraid and more exhausted from the ordeal. Nora knew she was asking about Hudson, so she scanned the pandemonium, letting out a relieved sigh when she found him.

He was just what she imagined an alpha would look like. Heroic, stealthy, and strong. He was massive in his polar bear form, thrashing his way through the bullets and humans who stood in his way. He was moving so quickly through the pandemonium of people, throttling them, mangling a few, all in the name of Hannah.

It hurt her heart to see the rage in him, but she knew where all of that fury was coming from. It was another version of love, love that he had transferred into the protection of his new daughter.

“He’s okay,” Nora said. “We’re going to make it, Hannah, don’t worry ...” She said that but wasn’t so sure. She and Hannah were directly in the line of fire. She had to find a safe place to hide.

Seeing a set of stairs tucked in a corner, she sprinted toward them with Hannah in her arms. The steps led up to a floor with a long hallway and doors lining each side. This must’ve been where most of the offices were.

She dove inside the first room, unfortunately, with a large window. She slammed the door shut and locked it, settling herself and Hannah behind a big, burly desk.

“What’s going on?” Hannah asked, still sniffing.

Nora settled the girl down onto her lap, then stroked a few strands of hair out of her face. Hannah was clearly terrified, but she never failed to impress Nora with her sense of curiosity, even amidst a complete nightmare.

“Hudson and Logan are fighting the bad guys. I think the rest of the clan just barreled in,” Nora said, adrenaline surging through her body like a lightning storm. “We are going to be okay. We just have to hide up here for a little bit and wait.”

Nora continued to be amazed as a comforting smile grew on the child’s lips. Beyond them were howls and roars of victory blended with shrieks and cries of agony.

“They came. They came to help us,” Hannah said.

Nora kissed her forehead, then helped her settle against the wall before climbing to her feet to push the desk in tighter against them. Coming around the front of the desk, movement out the interior window caught her eye.

The large glass pane in the office she was in had a great vantage point of what looked like an operating room. Was this where those in charge sat to watch the doctors dissect their victims?

The motion she'd noticed was from a lone man in a white lab coat who had entered the operating area. He ran up a few steps to a door on the side of the room and opened it. Then she noticed another large window through which the man appeared in what looked to be a control room of some kind.

The sight of the man sneaking in made Nora's stomach drop. She peered through the clear glass as the man fiddled with a few buttons, then pulled something from his pocket. Nora narrowed her eyes as much as she could, spotting a glint of silver reflection.

As he inserted a key into a slot on the board, a different screech of an alarm went off throughout the entire facility, causing both Hannah and Nora to clap their hands over their ears. Then, a computerized voice came over a loudspeaker.

"Self-destruction mode activated. T-minus three minutes until implementation."

Nora's blood ran cold. There was no time to think.

She slid her body over to Hannah, where she pushed the desk as close as she could manage. She then kissed the top of the girl's head.

"I'm going to help us. Stay here, stay strong. You're amazing."

Hannah kissed Nora's hand and nodded. It was all the motivation she would ever need.

She ran, color and sound disappearing, to stop the destruction of a future she desired more than anything in her world.

TWENTY-SIX



HUDSON

Hudson hadn't ever been so razor-focused in his entire life. Even as the alpha, he had never felt his movements be so smooth, his trust in himself so profound and sure. His heart thumped hard against his ribs because he had so much more to live for than a few months ago. He had a family now.

In the moments of battle, everything else evaporated into the ether. It was clear in his mind what was most importance, and it inspired him to fight harder than he ever had. He was the alpha in his clan, it had been his birthright, but he also wanted Nora. She was his mate, and there wasn't anything more cosmic and written in the stars but that very notion when it came to being a shifter.

But when he heard the clan smash their way into the facility, his heart lit up. They ran in, ready to protect one of their own, slashing and destroying their enemies just as they had all been raised to do as mere cubs.

They all fought bravely, feeding off one another's energy as bullets rained down hard, slashing and crushing the skulls of the men who had meant harm to his beloved family. There were nearly a dozen massive polar bears in the facility, taking on scores of men. What had seemed impossible a few seconds before was now a certainty. The humans continued thudding to the cold concrete as the bears destroyed them.

There were only a few more men left, along with a few doctors who had barricaded themselves in the adjoining offices watching through the large windows, horror etched

onto their faces. First, they needed to get rid of the idiots with the guns.

Logan's fur was stained cherry red, and his teeth bared. They had fought alongside one another, just as they always had, and stopped to regroup as a handful of men ducked around a corner.

The alpha and beta shifted to their two-legged form as the other bears went for the remaining soldiers. "Where did the others come from?" Hudson asked with a smirk. There was no way a vote could've taken place and backup have arrived as quickly as they did.

Logan shrugged. "I may have mentioned where I was going to a few enforcers on my way here."

Hudson grinned. This was his clan, his extended family. He was proud of them.

"Where are Hannah and Nora?" Logan asked.

Hudson turned to where he had spotted Nora running up the stairs with Hannah in her arms. He admired her greatly not only for her strength but also for her intelligence and ability to think clearly during such savage conditions.

"She is safe on the upper floor. Let's deal with these bastards and burn this place to the ground."

They shifted once again into their powerful animals and growled in unison, rising on their hind legs in the traditional form of celebration. When they landed on all fours, they turned their attention back to the remaining enemies that still fought ... three men shooting blindly around a corner.

The clan had narrowed in on them, a few of them having taken hits from the stray bullets and retreating back into the shadows for recovery.

The group fused as one, merging in a charge with Hudson at the head of the pack. The expressions on the faces of the men who continued shooting at them were filled with utter terror. Hudson could see the shadow of death in their eyes before it had the chance to swallow them whole. It made him feel even more powerful and bloodthirsty.

All at once, their fangs and claws protruded, striking the throats of the men in a single quick swipe. Blood spurted out like a fountain, various shades blending together like the horizon at dawn. Death masks lulled them into silence, their bodies and guns clattering to the floor with a smash.

Then, an eerie silence coated the facility. For a fraction of a moment, Hudson thought all was well. Then a blaring shriek screamed through the PA system, accompanied by a shrill alarm spinning with an ominous red glow.

“Self-destruction mode activated. T-minus three minutes until implementation.”

Hudson and Logan looked at each other, and then Hudson roared orders to his clan to retreat, to save themselves, fear taking over like the rush of a horrible drug.

Bears rushed through the halls, searching for exits.

A countdown blared overhead, time sliding away like sand inching through an hourglass. Hudson’s mind was a carousel, unable to think clearly but needing to act even faster.

That was when he saw Nora dart past him and through a door that had Surgery One on it. He poked his head in and saw her vault up the steps toward a door without looking back. She pushed her way inside where a man stood, trying to shove his way past her.

The man wasn’t much, but he was determined. Nora braced herself, blocking him. Then the man promptly slapped her, the sound ringing out with stinging force.

Hudson sprinted into the room as Nora delivered a solid uppercut to the man’s chin. The two stumbled through the entrance, the door slamming shut behind them.

Hudson heard the crash as the duo fell to the ground. He was entirely too big to fit through the door in his bear form, and he had no time to calm down enough to shift back. He knocked the door open with his head, spotting Nora straddling the man with his arms pinned over his head and her hand on his crotch.

She screamed at him next to a control console. Hudson's heart was riveted.

“What is the code? Tell me now, you piece of shit!”

The man screamed as she tightened her fist around his balls, initiating a mewling sound akin to a donkey being branded.

Hudson snapped to look at the digital countdown high on the wall.

“T-minus thirty seconds.”

Nora gritted her teeth and squeezed harder. The man screamed out in the most intense pain he had heard a human express. It was like she was ripping his nails out from the cuticle, or more accurately, testicles from his body.

“Now or we all die,” she yelled, her voice peppered with sorrow.

The man spoke finally, his voice blubbering with anguish and agony. He gave her the code, and Nora leapt off his body, slamming his head against the ground for good measure. She frantically searched the panel for the numerical buttons, typed in the code with trembling hands, and ripped the key from its slot.

Everything once more went silent, but it no longer felt ghastly. It was the type of silence that washed over a field after a snowstorm, like tranquility and divine stillness.

The number one flashed on the digital countdown. Nora stood there, panting, sweat beading her head and body like tiny glassy raindrops.

If Hudson could smile in his bear form, he would.

Nora sank to her knees, her entire body crashing. She began to weep with joy, as well as the grief that had carried her to him, the grief that she had held inside her body for far too long.

Hudson shifted and ran into the control room. He restrained the doctor first, then scooped Nora into his arms.

She writhed against him with unleashed relief. He went to his knees and rocked her back and forth, amazed by the power of such a small person, blessed by the vulnerability she was sharing with him at that moment.

“You are safe now,” he whispered, kissing the top of her head. “Hannah is safe. You saved us all, Nora. Fuck, you’re incredible.”

He let her cry on his bare skin for as long as she needed. He whispered words of kindness and tenderness. He would hold the weight of the world for her. That was what they would be for each other.

Eventually, she quieted, and he kissed the stains of tears from her gorgeous face.

“We did it,” she sputtered.

They embraced a bit longer. They had nothing left but time.

TWENTY-SEVEN



HUDSON

Nora was determined to see Hannah. Hudson assured her that Logan had her taken care of, but she was stubborn, shaking her head and rising to her feet.

“I have to make sure she’s okay,” Nora said, sniffing.

“Nora...”

Upon trying to rise after being held in Hudson’s arms for a good five minutes, Nora’s legs shook, eventually giving way to a stumble. Hudson was there and pulled her close when she began to teeter. He caught her, as always, starting to chuckle and revel in the sensation of her skin on his.

“Wait a minute, love,” he said, holding her close. “Let’s take it slow. You were just a massive badass. Give yourself a break.” He waited for a snarky response, but Nora only chuckled.

She breathed in deeply, nodding against his chest with approval. “Okay, okay. I’ll go slow, I promise.”

Out in the hallway, Logan brought a blanket and clothing for Hudson to wear when having to explain the situation to the police. The sirens in the distance were weak but growing louder.

“We got the rest of the assholes in the back labs,” Logan said, wrapping the blanket around Nora. “Someone in the clan called the police before they got here. Those fuckers are all going to jail for what they did.”

Hudson smiled, feeling the spike of adrenaline and fear seeping out of his pores like steam. He and Nora were going to need a few days of rest after the torment of losing Hannah. He found himself looking forward to helping her relax by running her a bath and massaging her muscles until she fell into a deep slumber.

But as the alpha of the clan, there were also other matters to deal with. He thanked his beta and instructed him to let the police in and tell them as much as he could about the kidnapping.

“I will fill in the gaps about the labs and the testings,” he said.

Logan left the hall where everyone had shifted back to their human forms and were heading to the elevator exit.

Nora looked dazed, her eyes glazing over.

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked sweetly, pulling a shirt over his head.

He strained a little, having been grazed by a couple of bullets, but nothing major. His shifter side would take care of it.

“I think the better question is to ask whether or not *you* are okay.”

Hudson smiled. Despite his need for recovery, he could ravish her right then and there. Everything she had done for him, for the clan, for Hannah, made his love swell like a balloon about to burst. Her muscles were sleek with sweat, her eyes round and bright with thoughts of lovemaking near a glistening bayside...

Then the man who assaulted Nora stumbled through the door and bounced against the wall, then crumpled. Hudson grunted, his romantic rumination thwarted. He stomped toward the man and pulled him up by the shirt collar, causing him to emit a high-pitched wail.

“Shut the fuck up,” Hudson said. “You are in for a world of hurt, my friend. If I were you, I would pipe down or start speaking actual human words.”

Nora reached out, her hand aiming for the man's crotch. His face paled with pathetic fear. A pitiful voice emerged, simultaneously annoying and satisfying. "Yes, yes, I'll talk! I swear! Get her away from me."

Hudson rolled his eyes, then threw the man over his shoulder. It was like carrying a small bale of hay.

He held his hand out to Nora, swathed in the blanket Logan had given her. He grinned ear to ear. Despite the way his body ached, there was light at the end of their harrowing tunnel.

And the light was Nora and his daughter.

"Shall we?" he said.

Her smile shined like the sun. It was all he would ever need to keep going.

"Of course, sir," she remarked, lacing her fingers through his.

Together, they moved through the collection of dead men, encouraging Nora to look straight ahead. Just as Logan had informed him, the rest of the doctors who had retreated when the fighting had started were locked in a room with one of his bears sitting outside the door. He'd deal with them later. They would provide a lot of answers.

Just as Hudson had expected, the police interviewed everyone, including the clan members who didn't get away before the authorities arrived. The entire facility was sanctioned off for further investigation, but Hudson had no concerns about the direction it was heading. Human police rarely got involved in shifter matters unless one of their own had been affected.

In this case, it had been Hannah, and they were going to throw the book at the facility owners. Hudson was fine with all that.

It had begun to snow as Nora sat with Hannah on her lap inside the back of an ambulance. Hudson had stepped away as the officer requested, but he heard everything due to his shifter hearing. He wasn't concerned with what they were saying but

more so regarding how both Hannah and Nora were handling it all.

It was disturbing for any human to have to take on life with a shifter, and it had all been an abrupt introduction for Nora. A part of him felt guilty, while the rest of him was intrigued by how easily she fit into his world.

“Wounds healing well, I assume?”

Hudson peered at the voice that regarded him, an itch of annoyance scratching his brain. Two elders, Gabriel and Enzo, had also responded and were now back in their human form with blankets wrapped around their bodies. White flakes lightly pattered against their gray and aging heads, their brown eyes muted under the wash of silent red and blue lights.

“They are healing brilliantly. Not hurt much, just a few flesh wounds. There are a few other clan members I would worry about before worrying about me.”

They nodded solemnly and without an ounce of shame. Hudson understood why they had done what they did, making the decision to stay out of human matters in order to avoid further exposing their world. But it made him feel abandoned, an old wound that had risen from the depths of his soul.

“We know you were not happy with our decision,” Enzo said. “But you know it was made with the clan in mind. You know that best, as the alpha.”

Hudson nodded. He stayed quiet for the time being.

“We know you left to save what was most important to you. And we respect that. We also want to thank you for forcing our hand. We may be elders, but that doesn’t mean we are always correct.”

Gabriel and Enzo looked at each other as the snow began to fall even harder. It coated the ground as if it was trying to hide the ugliness it had witnessed over the years.

“I appreciate the acknowledgment,” Hudson said, trying to sound genuine. “It was an unfortunate circumstance, all of this.”

“Indeed,” Gabriel replied. “Which is why we wanted to reach out and make it clear there would be no repercussions. We want you to remain as our alpha, and we hope we can put this conflict behind us.”

Hudson gazed over at Nora. She held Hannah in her arms, who had dozed off to sleep from all of the drama. Nora spoke quietly while subtly rocking the little girl at the same time.

The alpha was dumbstruck by her presence in his life. The way they had found each other. The ease at which their bodies danced beneath the cover of darkness. The way she cared for Hannah as if she were her own. He would be an absolute fool to refute the dazzling destiny of her arrival in his life. She had saved him by saving Hannah.

He had been uncertain beforehand due to what had happened with his old friend. Frank had taken a bride, a human bride, and Hudson blamed that for being the reason Frank had to leave the clan.

But standing there under the fluffy flakes, watching her tired expression while expressing boundless love for a young child who wasn't her own blood, Hudson realized his fear of experiencing the same thing was bullshit.

She was the one for him and no one else. He wasn't ever going to risk losing that again.

“That's something I'm going to have to mull over. I will have to get back to you on it.”

Enzo and Gabriel accepted his response, and then they disappeared into the night.

Hudson just wanted to get his family home safe and sound. The clan would have to wait.

TWENTY-EIGHT



NORA

When they arrived home, Hannah wouldn't let go of Nora. Her fingers held onto her with a death grip. Nora didn't have the heart to push her away either.

They were still covered in blood, and every muscle in her body ached. But the pain didn't even come near the amount of relief she had to have them both home, and neither of them hurt.

She didn't know how they got inside. She didn't even know how they got home. Everything after the fight was a blur in her head. She just knew that she had Hannah, and that was all that mattered.

Hudson sat on the chair across from them, his eyes staring at them, but she could tell his mind was split. The elders wanted him to remain the leader. But would they accept her?

If Hannah's parents weren't supposed to be together, why would they approve of their alpha with a human?

She shook her head, pulling herself back. She needed to focus. They were home. Hannah needed sleep. They all needed rest.

She looked down at Hannah, who was silent. She hadn't fallen asleep, but she was on the verge of doing so. Her eyes were half open, and she was still covered in dirt. She wanted to bathe her, but she didn't have the energy.

"I should get her to bed," she whispered, looking at Hudson. "Or at least a bath. I don't know what to do." His eyes shifted to her, taking them both in.

“I’ll take her,” he said, looking at Hannah. “I will get her in bed.” He pulled himself out of the chair and walked to her, reaching out to take Hannah, but suddenly, Hannah’s hold tightened even more.

“No,” she whimpered, her bottom lip quivering. Her eyes snapped wide open with fear. “Don’t make me. If I go to bed, you’ll be gone. They will come back and take me away from you again. I can’t go to sleep.”

Hudson dropped to her level, looking at her. He held onto her arms. “Hannah, sweetie, no one is going to hurt you. I made sure of that.”

“I can’t lose anyone else,” she whispered, looking between Nora and Hudson. “I already lost my mom and dad. Don’t make me lose anyone else. I can’t.”

Tears finally broke away, and she held Hannah even tighter. She could hear the hurt in the girl’s voice, and she wished she could take away all the pain.

The child saw things she shouldn’t have. Things that would give even grown adults nightmares. Hannah would likely never forget the fight and the massacre that went with it.

She could still hear the screaming and her begging for Hudson to be okay. Hannah thought the people she cared most about were going to be ripped from her, and she’d be left with nothing again.

She could imagine how Hannah felt. Being taken from Hudson and then being alone and scared. Nora wished she could make her forget everything. She wished she hadn’t left the living room, to begin with, when the kidnappers arrived in their disguises.

She wiped at her own eyes and leaned back to look at Hannah with tears streaming down her face. She wiped at them. “I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have had to see that. But Hudson is right. They aren’t coming back. You’re safe. That is never going to happen again.”

“Are we a family?” Hannah asked, looking at Hudson. “I feel like we are. And when you were fighting, I just kept

thinking I was about to lose my family again.”

Hudson’s eyes were red when she looked at him, trying to keep it together. Rage filled his face, wanting to go back and rip each person apart again, piece by piece.

After a moment, he nodded, cracking a smile. “Yes, sweetie, we are. We’re a family.”

He looked up at her, locking his eyes with her. “If that is what Nora wants.”

She did. She felt the pull to stay with them. She loved them with every part of her soul. And the thought of not seeing them made her heartache. She wanted them to be a family.

She nodded, leaning back to get a better look at Hannah. “Yes, we’re a family. I would like that more than anything, Hannah.”

Hannah leaned into her arms, and she rocked her. She held her close, gratefully.

Nora pushed away questions she had for another time. She didn’t want to think about the elders or whether or not she and Hudson were even a thing. She was just going to hold Hannah until she fell asleep.

She held onto Hannah until she drifted off. Neither of them moved, allowing the silence and the knowledge of knowing they were alive to soak in.

Hudson eventually got up to shower, letting her mind relax and mull over everything up to this point. A lot had changed.

She never thought she would be able to trust someone with her life. She never thought she’d find someone who cared about her as much as Hudson did.

She loved him. She never wanted to be apart from him, and she needed to be honest with him and herself.

She heard footsteps coming down the hallway. Hudson emerged into the living room with pj’s on and gave her a smile. “I can take Hannah if you want to wash up.”

“Did you mean it?” she asked, looking at Hudson. “Do you feel we are a family? Or were you just saying that because she wanted to hear it?”

He gave her a gentle smile, taking a couple more steps toward the couch. “I meant it. I have felt it for a while. Did you mean what you said?”

She had. She’d known what family felt like, and being around them was exactly that. She also felt that Hannah was so much more than a person she watched. She loved and cared for her like she was her own child.

“I did,” she said, moving a strand of hair from Hannah’s face. She slept peacefully now. “She’s a smart, full-of-life child who is going to do amazing things. I can’t wait to see what she does with her life.”

Hudson smiled as he sat next to her. “I can’t either.”

He took Hannah from her, and she headed to the bathroom. She watched all the blood and grime go down the shower drain. She felt as if it was letting her decide her future.

She dressed and went back out to the living room. She watched as Hudson held Hannah in his arms. Her head leaned on his chest, and she held onto him tightly.

Nora had a feeling the girl wouldn’t be getting over this for a while, but she was okay with it.

Hudson pulled his eyes up and smiled at her. “I was going to put a movie on.”

Nora sat next to him. She rested her head on his shoulder and breathed out a long sigh. She was tired, but she wouldn’t fall asleep. Her mind was too alert.

Hudson leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “We are safe now,” he said.

She’d known that, but somehow, hearing it forced her to relax a little more. She sank into the couch and looked up at him. “You really mean it? You think we are a family.”

He nodded, giving her a grin. “Absolutely.”

She leaned forward, kissing him.

They watched a bit of the movie before she felt herself drift off into sleep.

TWENTY-NINE



HUDSON

He was working on his coffee in the kitchen when Nora came down the hallway. She rubbed at her eyes, still puffy from last night. He felt relieved by their conversation last night and the honesty they all shared.

Nora wanted him, and he wasn't going to treat that like it was nothing. His bear wouldn't allow it. She meant the world to him. Nothing else mattered, not even the elder who had been calling him since he first woke.

"Morning," he said, sliding a mug toward her. He'd already poured it and added the amount of creamer she liked.

She beamed as she took the mug, taking a sip. She sighed as she leaned against the counter. "Thank you."

"Is Hannah up?" he asked, looking down the hallway. He hoped she would sleep in. She was up late, and she needed her rest after everything.

Nora shook her head, sighing heavily as she looked at her coffee. "No, she's still in a deep sleep. I figured I'd let her sleep another hour before waking her."

He smiled at Nora, wanting to pull her into his arms. He thought back to how hard she fought to protect Hannah. Not one sane person would put themselves in harm's way for Hannah like he would, yet Nora did.

His phone rang again, and he grabbed it, scowling at who it was. It was the elder calling once more.

Nora peeked over. "You probably need to get that."

He ignored it, setting it aside. If the elders wanted him, he didn't care. He had other things now. And if they didn't approve of Nora, they weren't worth his time.

She tilted her head, looking at him confused. "Don't you need to answer that?"

"No," he said, pulling her into his arms. "I'm not part of their pack anymore. So, no, I don't have to answer their calls." It was, more or less, the truth.

He never agreed to stay on as the alpha, and he had no inclination to do so either. Nora was more important than anyone else.

"How about we spend today together? We can even do dinner tonight."

"What about Hannah?" she asked, taking another sip from her mug.

As much as he wanted Hannah to be part of that, he needed a heart-to-heart about everything with Nora without her, including the conversation about mating.

"I can have someone watch her."

He would pay his personal chef extra to watch her if he had to.

Hannah woke a little later, and they spent the day together. But he had enough time to make reservations at a nice restaurant and to find someone to watch Hannah that night so they could go out.

They stopped at the restaurant, and Nora looked at him. "Pulling out all the stops, aren't you?"

He chuckled, looking at the elegant storefront. It was higher-end, but it was known for its quietness, which was what he wanted.

He got out and opened her door. He held her hand as they headed inside and told the host he had a reservation, which made Nora look at him a little shocked.

“You have a reservation? When did you have time to do that?”

He smirked. “I have my ways.”

She smiled, rolling her eyes as they were guided to a table on the back patio. A glass dome over them allowed no snow to enter, and a portable heater blasted over the space.

They each took a seat, and the host gave them menus.

“Your waiter will just be a few moments,” she said before turning and heading back inside.

A set of lights flickered low, and Nora looked at him with a blush. “This place is so nice.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he said, reaching across the table. “I want you to have a nice dinner.”

She blushed, wrapping her fingers around his. “Not that I don’t like it, but why here? And why without Hannah?”

He rubbed his thumb over her skin, loving how smooth it was. There were a lot of things about Nora he liked. A list so long, he would go on forever trying to recite them all.

“We had a heart-to-heart last night, but we never got to talk about how we wanted to move forward.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh.”

A man walked up to the table, smiling at them. “Hello. I’m Charlie, and I’ll be your waiter tonight. Can I get you started with drinks?”

“Water,” he said, not taking his eyes from Nora.

Nora looked at the waiter. “Just water for me, please.”

The waiter wrote it down and slipped back inside. Nora looked back at him.

“You were saying?” she said, leaning forward a little more.

He adjusted himself in his chair. He’d thought about what to say, but now that he had to speak, he was speechless. What did someone say in a moment like this?

He never wanted to lose her. He wanted to marry her and have children. He wanted to have a big family with her, and if that meant without being part of a pack, so be it.

He thought back to his phone calls. The elders asked him once more to come back. Before, he would have been flattered, but now he was unsure.

They wanted him to be the alpha again, but it wasn't that simple anymore.

"Nora, I never want to lose you. You mean the world to Hannah and me, and last night, you said you felt we were a family. So, I need to know if you'll marry me."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

He squeezed his hands around hers. "I love you. And I will give up anything to keep you. If that means leaving the pack for good, then so be it."

She shook her head. "I don't want you to do that."

He didn't understand, and Nora wet her lips. "I love you. I do, but I don't want you to leave something that you felt so passionate about before."

"They don't matter if I can't have you."

She smiled at him. "Hudson, you have me. I'm not going anywhere. I would love to marry you, but don't throw the pack away because of me."

His eyes widened a little. "You ... you want to marry me?"

She chuckled. "Of course. But is it really marrying you? Is that how you do it?"

Technically, that was what it was. "We call it mating for life. You have a mating ceremony, but humans call it marriage."

She smirked. "So you want to mate?"

He nodded.

She leaned closer, her face inches from his. "I would love that."

He leaned forward, kissing her. His bear growled, wanting more. He cupped the back of her head, feeling that he had the world in his hands.

The waiter came back and took their orders. After he left again, he looked back at her. “So, you are willing to get mated?”

She nodded, taking a sip of her water. “But I do think you should talk to the elders first.”

He was unsure of that. He knew once he brought it up, they would reject the idea. He didn’t see the point of putting himself and Nora through more disappointment.

He frowned, and she noticed. “What?”

He shrugged. “I know they will be unhappy with the decision, and I don’t want you going through that.”

She smiled at him. “Hudson, I’m a big girl. If they don’t approve, that’s on them, but you’ll never know until you try. I don’t want you to sit around thinking you gave up everything when maybe you don’t have to. You’ve always made it sound like Frank chose to leave the clan, not that he was forced. I’m sure he had his reasons, and I’m sure it wasn’t easy, but let’s just see what the situation is first before we act in haste.”

He understood her point. Apparently, she was thinking more clearly than he was.

He kissed her hands, squeezing them tighter.

“Besides, you were already their alpha. If they really care about you and want you, Hudson, they will agree with whatever else you tell them.”

“When did you become the person with the logic?” he mumbled, watching her blush.

She smiled. “I just want you to have everything you want in life. So, I think you should talk to the elders, and you can go from there. But either way, Hannah and I will be here for you.”

He felt grateful and decided that he would speak to them. And no matter how it went, he’d have his girls in the end.

THIRTY



NORA

Nora was still on cloud nine about how dinner had gone.

She was already happy with their discussions about being a family from the night before, but the fact that Hudson opened up and wanted to marry her was something she hadn't been ready for.

It delighted her endlessly. It actually seemed surreal but was slowly meshing with reality.

Hudson not only wanted to marry her, but he was willing to leave his clan to be with her.

She was flattered but didn't want to be the reason he left a piece of himself behind that had been a monumental part of his life.

Hudson had agreed to talk to the clan elders the following day with Nora, but that was a whole day away. Tonight was all about them.

Hannah would be tucked away into bed by now. When they got home, Nora wanted to finally allow herself to give into her feelings completely and surrender herself to Hudson.

He had given her everything she hadn't even dared to dream of for herself.

A home, family, purpose, and himself. But most of all, hope. Nora wanted to thank him for that in a way he would never forget.

Now, they were finally almost back in the intimate solitude of their home.

Hudson pulled in, letting the vehicle slow to a stop.

Nora wanted to give him a taste of what would be waiting for him. She was also eager to have his taste lingering on her lips.

Before he got out, she grabbed his shirt and pulled him toward her. She kissed him long and deep, letting her tongue take in every flavorful promise he had to offer.

She moaned softly against him as she pulled away. Sitting back in her seat, she let her coy smile play at her lips, leaving him wanting.

Nora arched her back slightly, making her breasts pop just enough to draw his eyes toward them, hunger radiating around his pupils.

She glanced down and noticed the bulge in his pants was growing at a fast pace.

Her panties were soaked by just seeing how badly he wanted her.

Hudson finally looked back up to meet her eyes and smiled wickedly at her before he got out and ran to her side of the car to open the door.

She returned his teasing smile as she allowed him to help her out. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“Careful, it’s slick out.”

“You better not take me down with you.” She giggled as she tucked herself further into his warmth.

He snickered. “Me? Slip on ice? Come on, you know me better than that. My inner polar bear would be so embarrassed.”

She hadn’t thought about it that way, and she started to laugh. “Fair enough.”

They walked inside. Nora went to check on Hannah while Hudson took care of the babysitter.

She peeked into the little girl’s room and saw her sleeping soundly as her night light softly illuminated the room.

Nora looked around and smiled as her eyes fell on Hannah's walking braces.

She had come so far so quickly but still had further to go.

"Is she out?" Hudson had come up behind her and wrapped an arm around her waist.

Nora smiled at the moment.

This was her family. A loving mom and dad looking over their little girl, soaking in every second.

She turned to him. "Yes. Now, let's get ourselves ready for bed. It's been a long day." Nora ran her hand down from his shoulder to his groin. She squeezed his half-chub and kissed his neck before walking away, making sure her hips were overly exaggerated.

Hudson closed Hannah's door softly before Nora heard him follow her quickly to the bedroom.

Once Nora heard their own door shut, she turned and was met with Hudson's forceful kiss.

Their collision was fueled by the desire to fulfill each other's needs with their own flesh.

Nora hooked her fingers into his belt loop as she swept her tongue deep into his mouth. She pulled him to the bed.

When she felt the mattress against her legs, she unfastened his pants with one hand, letting his member out for her perusal.

Nora hadn't been able to fully appreciate Hudson's length and girth the first time they had slept together.

She definitely had felt it that night and had not been let down. But to see it in light in its full glory was something else.

Dicks weren't attractive. That was just a fact. But Hudson's was impressive in the fact that Nora knew what it was capable of. It made it that much more alluring.

She dropped to her knees and took all of him into her waiting mouth.

Her tongue rolled over the ridges as it lapped up what saliva her mouth left behind.

He tasted salty and warm. She had to relax her throat enough to have his cock bend down her throat if she wanted to taste all the way down the shaft.

Hudson groaned, pulling off his shirt as Nora kept sucking.

He was a lot to take in, but Nora was meeting the challenge successfully.

Not only was he growing harder while his groans grew louder, but he was starting to drip his pre-cum.

It drove her to want to make him come as close as possible before he blew his top.

“Fuck,” he moaned as Nora sucked harder, keeping her lips vacuumed shut.

His cock tensed even more inside her mouth. He was close, but she forced herself to stop.

She pulled away and stood. Nora took off her clothes, then her intimates. She ended by throwing her panties at Hudson. They landed on his shoulder.

He grabbed them and hung them from his finger, looking at the lacey material with a gleam in his hazel eyes.

Hudson let them drop.

Nora took in the stunning sight of her naked man standing there, literally dripping with desire. And all for her.

He was so built and beautiful standing there in the light. His black hair and eyebrows exaggerated his dramatic features even more.

Something about his look put her in an even more playful mood.

“Come and get me,” she teased, throwing herself onto the bed.

Hudson smirked and lunged onto the bed after her with a frisky growl.

He was on top of her in a matter of seconds. Granted, Nora didn't try hard to escape him. She didn't want to.

He pinned her arms down above her head and smashed his mouth against hers.

She loved feeling his urgency course through her enough to be reciprocated. Their energy for each other right now was an endless feed of lust.

She wriggled her body below his as their tongues twirled together. The heat from him radiated, adding to her already hot body.

His cock skimmed the inside of her thigh as he pressed against her to deepen his kiss.

Wetness poured from between her legs with the heat and pressure. Just the thought and memory of what his dick could do to her added excitement.

Her face flushed at the memory, and her body yearned for more.

She wriggled herself lower to position him perfectly with her pussy. When she pressed her body to his, she felt that he was perfectly aligned to enter.

She thrust her hips upward and met his dick with ease as he slid into her overly-soaked pussy.

He pushed harder against her mouth as he entered her, moaning into her.

It turned her on so much that she was about to give in right there.

She held off.

Keeping her hands pinned in his own, Hudson started pumping deep inside Nora, slow at first.

He was keeping his pace slow to make both of them last longer, and she loved it. She savored having his cock buried deep inside her. But she also wanted to feel the sweet release of having her needs met with such intensity that it would tear her apart.

“I want to finish with you,” she moaned into his ear, arching her back more to press her erect nipples into him.

“Oh, you will. I’ll make sure of it,” he rumbled as he pushed himself deeper and shortened the distance he pulled out. He was staying deeper and harder to stimulate not only himself but her clit.

It was working all too well.

Nora’s fingers dug into Hudson’s hands as she started to scream, reaching her peak.

She felt his jaw clench as he reached his own.

Nora screamed as her body shook violently with her climax. Hudson gripped her hard as he drove hard and didn’t pull out, completely filling Nora.

Once their bodies had calmed, Hudson kissed Nora again, softer this time. “I love you, Nora.”

Her heart swelled at the words. She had thought that she would never be this happy. “I love you too.”

THIRTY-ONE



HUDSON

Hudson and Nora had agreed they would meet the elders together. A decision had to be made not only by him as the alpha but by the elders themselves. He looked out onto two very discernible pathways, one that beckoned him toward a life with Nora and Hannah while the other called him to continue along the path as alpha.

Both were honorable directions, but his heart was drawn to Nora. That was what happened when a shifter found their mate. They were the sun, moon, and stars. Everything else would forever pale in comparison.

The next day, as they got ready to head to the elders' den, a dark cloud veiled the glistening dome of the sky. Hudson stood in the living room, hands in his pockets during the early hours of the day while Hannah slept.

He had left Nora in bed, knowing she was still emotionally recovering from the whirlwind of the past few days.

He stood there considering his options but knew the truth of the matter without having to assess it over again. Nora owned his heart and soul; there was no other way to put it. His fate as to whether or not he would live his life with her and Hannah as an alpha was in the elder's hands.

Hudson sighed, gazing out the window, watching the ominous cloud roll over the spill of the fiery sunrise. He heard footsteps behind him, then caught the scent of his darling mate.

In the dim light, he could see she was wearing one of his robes, which draped around her like a blanket. She left her hair down to flow around her body with a disheveled beauty.

“Have you been up long?” she asked in a fresh and soothing voice.

“No,” he whispered back. “Are you all right? You need to rest more.”

Nora blew her lips out in a raspberry, then rolled her eyes dramatically before wrapping her arms around his waist. She was so petite, but there was so much power behind the woman. It was astonishing.

“You haven’t marked me yet, mister,” she said, burying her face into his chest.

“Oh, is that when you’ll actually start listening to me?”

She lifted her head to him, pouting her bottom lip. In the dim morning light, he could see a scattering of freckles strewn along the bridge of her nose and cheeks. Her eyes appeared more aquamarine, a blend of sea glass and teal ocean water at dusk. She was enchanting, making his heart flutter and his bear whimper at the slightest touch.

“I never said *that*,” she quipped.

Hudson bent his head to hers, his lips lingering. Their warm breaths mingled, and every drop of playfulness vanished. What bloomed between them was outright passion, a wildfire that could never be contained.

And he would never want it to be.

“Mmm, Hudson,” she whispered, her hands sliding up and down his biceps. “I’m all for fun, but we’ve got to see the elders this morning. I know it’s not going to be easy.”

Hudson grunted. His cock had risen to attention, his mind fleeting with pleasant thoughts and images of their bodies mingled as one. He would much prefer to indulge in Nora and the sacred corners of her body than have to deal with any potential consequences from the elders.

“You’re right,” he growled, pulling her in close by the waist so she could feel his swollen cock against her. “But later, you’re going to be my meal.”

She giggled against him, her body going rigid, then soft as she gave in only a little. Hudson picked up on the rate of her heart and the way her voice lowered and became breathy.

But it had to be done. They both knew it. They had the rest of their lives to have spontaneous sex.

Nora pushed him away lightly, two hands against his chest, and he let her go reluctantly. Her face had flushed prettily, and a grin was glued onto her lips.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way,” she mused.

After somehow managing to keep their hands off one another for the time being, Nora woke Hannah and made her breakfast. They were set to meet the elders at noon in their den, leaving Hannah briefly with one of the physical therapists she trusted most.

Hannah said goodbye to them both enthusiastically. It was clear she was just as excited about the prospect of them all becoming a family as Hudson and Nora were. He desperately did not want to let her down.

They took a scenic route through the forest just outside Hudson’s home property, the sun beginning to filter through the trees with a hopeful gleam. They stopped just outside an outcrop parked next to the trail, then followed along it, hand in hand, deeper into the mouth of the forest.

“You don’t have to do this,” Hudson said as they approached the gates of the den.

They stopped under a canopy of trees, the light making Nora’s ocean eyes even more staggeringly vivid. She scowled at him, taking both hands in hers. She kissed them, then spoke against his knuckles.

“It’s way too late for any of that talk,” she muttered, staring at him wide-eyed and unblinking. “I have dedicated myself to you and Hannah. I am not going anywhere. That is unless you want me to.”

Hudson scowled then. He pulled her in, crushing her lips with his own. He felt her breath being stolen from her, sensing the movement of her very soul against his mouth.

When he stopped, she was grinning smugly. He nibbled on her neck, then let her go.

“I want you here, and only here. Let’s get that straight.”

“Got it,” she said, licking her lips.

They moved together, hand in hand, certain of one another but unsure about everything surrounding them. They approached the elders, who were all gathered on an elevated stage. Torches flickered around them as they sat upon their thrones carved from ancient wood into the shape of polar bears.

“Come now, good Hudson,” Enzo said. “We are glad you have finally made your decision and come to tell us what you have decided. We await it patiently.”

His heart rattled in his chest. He felt Nora’s heartbeat, as well, through the fusion of their connection. They were both scared because of how much they cared. He had to make a stand for the two of them.

So Hudson placed a kiss upon Nora’s forehead, sending her reassuring energy, then turned to the elders. He moved closer to the stage, noting some looked at him with indifference, some with wisdom.

“Good Elders, I come today to present what I have chosen along with a subsequent request.”

The crackling fire filled the silence. Elder Gabriel raised his hand, encouraging Hudson to go on.

“Proceed,” he said.

Hudson stood tall, confident about what he was going to say. He thought about his parents, lost to the wind when he was only a young boy. He thought about the troublesome kid who was only craving love, his aggression masking the pain of such a shocking loss. Then he thought of Hannah, a young girl who experienced a similar loss.

He and Nora had to be there for her. They were meant to be as if drawn in the cosmos.

His voice boomed with pride as he regarded the elders, filling the entirety of the forest like a sonic flux.

“I will accept your request to return as alpha for my clan, but I can and will only accept based upon the acceptance of a human as my mate. Those are my conditions. If you cannot accept her, then I cannot agree and will not be the alpha any longer.”

The elders exchanged a look, one that was not of bewilderment but expectation. The silence throbbed through Hudson’s mind. The life he had known could all be lost with a single word.

But he would do it all for Nora and Hannah, again and again.

Gabriel rose to his feet, his usual blank stare faltering into a beaming grin. He clapped his hands together once, and then the rest of the elders rose, following his movements and clapping once together.

“We do not always support the mating of a shifter and a human. It isn’t discrimination, you see. Not every human is equipped to handle the life we live. But Nora has more than proven her capabilities and worthiness. She is a strong, brave woman. Shifter or not, she has shown her mettle to be the mate of our alpha. So it shall be done! Welcome to our clan, dear Nora, mate of Hudson.”

Hudson had never been so happy in his entire life. Nora leapt into his arms, laughing and crying with joy as the elders celebrated the return of their alpha.

Their soon-to-be-*mated* alpha.

THIRTY-TWO



HUDSON

“Today went better than I imagined,” Hudson remarked as he opened the house door for Hannah and Nora.

They had just returned from a very pleasant mating party hosted by the clan on the day before their mating ceremony. Though both Hudson and Nora had been a little nervous, it had turned out to be quite enjoyable. The elders had approved their mating ceremony a few months ago, but Hudson still wasn't sure how the clan would feel about it on a more personal level.

“Well, given your past experiences, I'm sure your expectations weren't very high,” Nora said, giving him a look.

“I think it was fun,” Hannah exclaimed as she hurried through the doorway.

Now that she was doing better and better by the day, everything was at a faster speed.

Her drive and enthusiasm never failed to make Hudson smile as he watched her take on obstacle after obstacle with such optimism.

He chuckled after her. “It was. But it's late now, so why don't you go and get your jammies on before you brush your teeth.”

“May I have a story tonight?” Hannah asked as she headed toward her room.

“I don't see why not,” Nora answered as she slid her shoes off and unwound her updo, letting her blond locks cascade over her shoulders.

Hudson wanted to pull her hair back in his hands and kiss her neck but refrained.

He could wait until Hannah was in bed, then he and Nora had some celebrating of their own to do. Just the two of them.

His eyes must have given away his plans for later.

“What are you thinking?”

He looked at his betrothed with love and lust. Hudson had never realized that he could love two people so much.

Part of him felt guilty for what Frank had gone through with Alice, but that was a long time ago. Maybe the elders were right, and Alice hadn't been cut out to be included in their clan. It was done now, and nothing could change it.

He was learning that if he ever wanted to enjoy the moment, then he needed to stop worrying about every little thing that should have gone differently. Hannah and Nora had shown him that. And he wasn't going to take his time lightly with either of them. Life was too short.

He pulled Nora into his arms and held her close. “Just about how lucky I am.”

She giggled. “Oh, I'm sure.”

He moved his mouth close to her ear. “Well, if you really must know, it's how badly I want you. I was thinking about the things that I'm going to do to you once we are behind a closed door.”

She pulled away enough to look him in the eye and raise her eyebrow as if questioning if that was true.

Hudson proved his honesty by grabbing her hand and putting it on his hardening bulge. “Told you,” he taunted.

She smiled and kissed him.

“Brushing my teeth!” Hannah interrupted as she scuttled from her room to the bathroom.

The two pulled away from each other with smirks. Nora followed Hannah into the bathroom to check on her brushing

skills while Hudson went to her room and got ready to read whatever story she'd chosen.

He looked around the room, feeling at peace, finally. His friend's daughter was healing, emotionally and physically. She loved Nora, who was now going to be in her life forever. But most of all, Hannah had helped Hudson heal as well.

Hudson thought about the irony of all three members of this makeshift family being orphans but finding each other to make a happy home.

"Ready!"

Hannah yanked Hudson out of his musings as she climbed onto her bed and wiggled under the covers. She handed him one of her favorite books, grabbed her stuffed polar bear, and settled in for her story.

Nora sat on the edge of the bed while Hudson read from a small chair placed by the nightstand.

Unsurprisingly, Hannah was out before the book had been finished.

The two adults kissed her forehead, shut off her light, and left her door slightly cracked open, leaving her to dream.

They walked into their bedroom.

"I'm gonna change," Nora commented over her shoulder.

"I don't think so."

She turned to look at Hudson.

He was there, kissing her shoulder and sliding her clothes off her body. "I think you won't be needing any..." he snapped her bra before unhooking it with ease, "...clothing for tonight."

He could see the goosebumps scatter over Nora's skin as he let his breath linger on her.

Nora now stood naked in front of him. Her magnificent body called to his inner shifter.

He wanted to make love to her. To claim her. Now that they were engaged to mate, Hudson's need to mark her as his was calling louder each day.

He had told Nora about the claiming scratch and how it allowed their connection to deepen and be more in tune with each other, especially him with his shifter sense. It also marked her as his mate for all and any other shifters to know, making her untouchable.

She had wanted to know more about what to expect, so he had told her everything. Nora hadn't even flinched. All she had done was smile and assure him that she wasn't going anywhere.

Now, looking at her, with those thoughts flitting back to him, his cock grew even larger at seeing his future wife standing completely naked and ready to be served.

"Get comfortable," he ordered as he discarded his own clothes.

Nora lay on the bed and spread her legs, propping herself onto her elbows.

Hudson knelt at the edge of the mattress, grabbed her ankles, and yanked her pussy down to his mouth. A low growl emitted from him, making her wetter as his bear side became more present.

She gasped at the motion before it turned into a moan as he inserted his tongue into her and pressed and flicked against her clit as he sought out her special trigger.

"Holy fuck!" Nora moaned once he found it.

He could taste her getting wetter and wetter as he worked his tongue around her walls. He held her hips tightly as she tried to wriggle and squirm against his face as pleasure overwhelmed her.

Hudson loved tasting her, but his throbbing cock was aching desperately to feel her warm pussy squeeze it.

He pulled his lips away but replaced them with his fingers as he moved up her warm body to make his way to her upper

lips.

Nora pushed her head up, kissing him first.

It turned Hudson on that she wanted to taste herself. He bit her lower lip as he slid his dick into her slick runway.

“Mmm, oh, God. That feels so good,” she purred against him as he slowly pushed as deep as he could go.

“Fuck, yes, it does.”

He kissed her jaw, neck, and breasts, then slowly circled back to each part of her again as he pumped slowly in and out of her. The urge to satiate his inner animal was overwhelming, but the wanton desire to just enjoy her body and make love to her had won him over.

He wanted to relish in her and show her just how tender he could be.

Hudson had opened up to her more than he had to anyone else, but now he wanted to show her physically that he could be just as tender as the words he had been sharing with her.

Nora’s moans were proof that she was receiving his message loud and clear.

“You feel so good,” Hudson groaned as he pushed deeper inside her, taking it all in.

Nora tightened her abs to sit up and bite his ear. “I want to come so bad. Fuck me hard.”

Her plea made his nerves tingle and stand at full attention, eager to please. He quickened his pace. He also made sure his thrusts were deep and just as effective as they were in their more intimate moments.

Hudson grew dangerously close in a matter of seconds once he changed his pace. The need drove him on, as well as Nora’s screams of needing him more and how close she was.

“Fuck, Nora. I’m so close.”

“Don’t stop!”

Their moans blended into one as they rose together to their climax.

Hudson suddenly pushed himself onto his knees, grabbed her hips, and yanked her hard into his pelvis to drive his cock deeper.

“Holy shit!”

He felt her shudder and release against him, her pussy twitching against his dick. He dug his fingers deeper into her ass and let himself go along with her.

Hudson scratched her as he dragged his fingers down with his release, leaving a deep mark on her hip. His inner bear roared with pleasure, marking his territory permanently.

Nora was still shaking in his hands when Hudson had completely emptied himself into her.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he lowered her hips. He was worried that he had hurt her by marking her.

She smiled a wide, slow grin that gleamed with pleasure. “Perfect.”

“You aren’t hurt?”

“Not at all.”

He pulled out of her to lie beside her and brushed hair from her face. Hudson stared at his whole world. He pulled her close to him and silently vowed that nothing would ever hurt her or let him take her for granted.

THIRTY-THREE



NORA

Before the mating ceremony was set to begin, Nora overheard two elders talking as they waited in line to be seated in the ceremonial ring. Their excitement bolstered hers. Their doubts weighed heavily on her own.

“Can you believe this? Another alpha sealing. Hudson has been single for so long, I assumed our clan lineage would die off,” said one elder, donning the indigo and gold robes and regalia of the clan.

“Ah, yes, a sealing. Indeed. But to a human woman. What lineage can that be if there are no shifter children?” Another elder looked on, his eyebrows raised.

Nora saw the elder’s expression and assumed it represented how many of the clan members felt about the mating. But then she remembered what Hudson had said to her in a private moment.

Love conquers all. Shifting requires a deep love for it to take seed. What you and I have is as deep and abiding as it can get. Chemistry is needed to birth a shifter, sure. Genes. But the spark to make shifting develop? That spark comes from love.

She left the men to their conversation and returned to getting ready. A robe had been laid out for her to wear, made of deep royal purple velvet and gold brocade ... the clan colors that were only worn by the alpha family and elders. Its heavy weight represented the responsibility the alpha family had to its clan.

Nora held it up, wrapped it around her shoulders, and secured the golden ties. The weight, literal and symbolic, sat mightily on her shoulders. But a serene smile painted her face. She would relish her place in the clan.

Nora faced the mirror. “I will give my all to Hudson’s clan, as I will give my all to him.”

The day before, Nora had overseen the ceremonial preparations. She saw bunting and fairy lights being strung through the trees and tiki torches lining the processional path. She watched as a team assembled a mighty oak table set out for the celebratory feast. A delicious scent had her peeking her nose into the kitchen, where mouth-watering festive dishes simmered and sizzled.

The sights, the sounds, and yes, the scents made the usually secretive and darkened lair dazzling in no time, giving it a joyful and homey atmosphere.

At dusk, the entire clan arrived at the ceremony. The elders and the members, young and old, were jubilant and excited for the mating celebration to begin. An official mating ceremony had not taken place since Hudson’s parents had been sealed, so anticipation wafted in the evening air.

All the elders lined up at the altar, shifted in unison, and began the official polar bear howls. Before taking a step, Nora glanced back to make sure all was well with her robe’s train. The heavy material swished along, glistening in the torch firelight.

Nora watched as the members stood and turned to see them arrive. Hand in hand, Hudson led her down the aisle, where several strides ahead, Hannah, now walking on her own, tossed wild rose petals.

When the couple reached the altar, the most senior elder began the rites.

Nora turned to Hudson one last time to be assured this was what he genuinely wanted. Her heart sang when she saw the excitement and pride on his face, signaling he was beyond thrilled to have Nora become his official mate.

“Drink the water your elders have cupped from the divine stream. Let it renew your spirits and join them as one.”

Nora sipped and watched as Hudson also did. The water was ice cold and so clear in the silver chalices.

“Hannah, will you lay the wild rose chains you have in your basket over your parents’ hands, signifying a familial line eternal?”

Hannah stepped up and wrapped the flower chains around Hudson’s and Nora’s hands. Up to this point, Nora had managed no tears. But seeing their little girl joining her new parents in an eternal unity was too much. Tears happily flowed.

“And now, your pledges, please. Nora, you first.”

Nora faced Hudson and with a love so deep, she began. “I, Nora, give unto you, Alpha Hudson, supreme leader of the polar bear clan, my body and my soul, from today until my dying breath. All that I have is yours. All that I have belongs to your clan. I shall be your love, your confidant, and your partner forevermore.”

“And now, Hudson, your pledge.”

“I, Hudson, supreme leader of the polar bear clan, give unto you, Nora, my heart and my soul. I will cherish and serve you as my mate from this day forward. All that I have, all that the clan possesses, is yours. I shall be your love, your confidant, and your partner forevermore.”

The elder committed their promise with the giving and receiving of rings and sealing the rite with incense flowing from a silver flask.

The elders, still in polar bear shift, howled once more, with the members howling, too, as Nora, now Hudson’s mate, took her man’s hand and glided back down the aisle, her spirit, if not her feet, floating on air.

The well-wishers cheered and threw rose petals in the air as Nora made her way down the aisle with Hudson. Her thoughts were all about the joyful day, the perfect man to whom she had been sealed.

I can't believe this has happened. Me, a female human, in love and now mated to a shifter man. But I know in my heart I've found my place in this world. I can heal as a nurse in a realm where I belong and where I'm accepted.

A massive bonfire lit the area around the festive table, where everyone drank ceremonial wine and devoured the many traditional sealing dishes. Excited by her walking progress, Hannah insisted on serving the plates to Hudson and Nora by herself, proving to her new parents that all was indeed well.

“We are one, aren't we?” Nora asked of her mate.

“We are, sweetheart. All three of us. Look at how happy you've made Hannah and me. You've healed Hannah's wounds, and you've filled my heart with such joy. I assumed I would never find a mate. I had gone so long, never having one. Then you appeared, and I knew you were the one. I only hope Hannah and I give to you all the love and devotion you have shown us.”

Nora squeezed Hudson's hand, fearing that if she tried to speak tears would flow.

The festive night and all its merriment went on into the late hours with joyful chatter and dancing. At the apex of the evening, a three-tiered, white ice cream cake in the shape of two polar bears embracing came out on a wooden board for the couple to cut and share. And below the two, a smaller bear cub hugged the hind legs of the pair.

A full moon hung over the party on the clear and starry night. And under the moonlight, the band played Nora's favorite song for their official dance.

Hudson took her into his arms, and they swayed to the romantic tune. Hudson's eyes, filled with love, looked straight into Nora's. His intensity outshone her own, and she couldn't help but smile.

“I adore you, you know?”

“I hope so.” Nora winked.

“No, sweetheart, I mean it. No matter what others say. Know this is the right choice for me and our family. You are my fated mate. I think you have been since I first laid my eyes on you. I spent a lot of time back then trying to deny my true feelings. What a waste of time.”

“I’d be lying if I didn’t confess the same. I merely assumed there was no way you’d accept me.”

“Because you are human?”

“Yes, and because, well, you’re an alpha. A reigning monarch in your realm. I figured I’d never measure up to what you were looking for in a mate. I’d never be enough for you and for Hannah.”

Hudson looked deeply into Nora’s eyes. “The fact is, it’s us who need to be worthy of you, Nora. Look at Hannah. She’s actually dancing with one of the shifter boys. I never thought that would be possible after the plane crash. And you complete me. You stayed by my side, helping me heal Hannah and at your own peril. What better mate could there be, shifter or not?”

Nora smiled. And as the party died down, she laid her head on Hudson’s shoulder and whispered to herself. “He loves me. He truly does. Shifter or not.”

THIRTY-FOUR



HUDSON

It had been over a year since Hudson had been sealed to Nora, and in that year, only joy and love filled Hudson's heart. It had been the best year of his life as an alpha shifter and a man.

“Daddy, look! It's snowing outside. Can we go out and play? Peter has never seen snow.”

Hudson chuckled. “Well, what do you think, Mommy? Can we all go out and play?”

“I don't know any reason why not. I'll bundle him up in the tiny snowsuit Elder Enzo gave him. We might as well take it for a run. Let's go!”

With the evil doctors long behind bars and their torture facility erased off the map, no enemies pervaded their peace. As a father, alpha leader, and husband, Hudson could focus on the business and his family, the latter of which had grown by one. Nora gave birth to a precious baby boy three months prior, whom they named Peter. The tot looked like the spitting image of Hudson. And the alpha leader was secretly elated.

Never before had Hudson experienced such fulfillment. A husband, and now a father twice. No longer was his future in question. He found love and had been given an heir. It didn't matter to him in the least whether the boy could ever shift, as he loved both Peter and Hannah regardless. There was a sense of quiet contentment in a future forever sealed by his love for Nora.

Nora, Hannah, and little Peter donned their warm winter gear while Hudson ran around the side of the house, disrobed

in the nearby shed, and raced back out front in his bigger-than-life polar bear existence.

Hudson romped and played around Hannah, the pair throwing snowballs, giggling, and howling up a storm as Nora held Peter. Hudson stopped his play long enough to gaze at Nora and the baby. He flashed a bright-eyed, wide polar bear grin as he watched snowflakes fall on his son's face. The little boy smiled and cooed with each icy flake. Hudson thought that reaction unusual, assuming the cold would make a baby cry. But not Peter. Not his baby boy.

Peter looks like he loves the cold. Look at his tiny hands reaching out to grab the flakes. It's like he's happier in the cold than he is in the warmth. Maybe he's not a shapeshifter, but he sure takes after his papa.

Hudson shifted back and dressed. "Nora, I'll take Peter while you play with Hannah for a while."

Nora got up from the porch steps, the pair trading a snowball for a cute baby boy.

Hudson took the toddler and laid him in the fluffy white stuff, his tiny snowsuit shielding his body from the cold. Instantly, the boy cooed again and giggled, scooping up tufts of the stuff in his tiny mittens. Peter sat beside Hudson, scooping and letting the gathered flakes fly, belly laughing each time.

"Look at Peter. He loves it out here." Hannah stopped throwing snowballs at Nora when she saw her little brother having such fun.

"Hudson, you have to admit, it's odd that he is not crying in this cold."

"I know. I thought for sure the first flakes touching his cheeks meant we'd be in for howls. But no. Peter is an alpha, after all."

"Are you sorry he's not a shapeshifter?" Nora asked, walking up to Hudson.

"Nora, look at Peter. He is an alpha. Maybe he won't shapeshift, but he's a born leader."

The family watched as Peter rolled onto his belly, his face falling into the snow. Instead of screaming, he giggled, lifting his heavy head in and out of the cold snow.

Nora laughed. Hannah giggled, and Hudson scooped him up and laid him in his lap. The child was covered in snow head to foot, and instead of fussing, Peter talked and giggled like his older sister.

Hudson held his baby tightly and watched Nora and Hannah make snow angels. He was so proud of his little girl's achievements. Although she would occasionally stumble, her legs became stronger every day. He noticed if she was especially preoccupied with whatever she was doing, Hannah would forget her frailties and walk like any other girl.

Finally, I can stop worrying about my little girl, who is growing up right in front of my eyes. Frank and Alice would be so proud of their little Hannah. I only hope they are looking down on her and seeing what Nora and I see. A brave girl who never gave up. Hey, Frank, wherever you are, you should know Nora and I won't give up on Hannah either. You and Alice can rest easy, my friend.

Hudson leaned against a frozen maple tree and, together with Peter in his arms, they watched mother and daughter laugh and play. Peter pointed, cooed, and baby talked. Hudson wondered what the little boy was saying. He couldn't wait for the day when they could talk as father and son. The future for Hudson looked so bright.

The alpha leaned over and whispered to Peter. "You know, it doesn't matter to me if you don't shift. And someday soon, the clan will see alphas can lead without shifting just as well as if they could. It's not only physical abilities that make the man. It's about the heart and soul he puts into his efforts which count. Right, Peter?"

Peter looked up and cooed. With his tiny fingers, he reached up and touched his father's nose as if musing how the man had gone from polar bear to human. Hudson inhaled his baby's wonderful scent. But this time, Peter's scent was different. He still had his wonderful baby smell, but there was

a mix Hudson had not smelled before. It was musky and sweet, like earth and tree sap.

Hudson's expression changed to one of shock and pride. He knew that scent. He knew it so well.

Almost reflexively, he set the baby down and shifted to smell again. In his polar bear form, it confirmed what he already knew. The fur on his bear body stood on end, and he instinctually howled. Nora and Hannah stopped throwing their snowballs and came running.

“What’s wrong? Is the baby sick?”

He’s ... he’s ... he stammered. Even in his own mind, he couldn’t organize his thoughts. He quickly shifted as Nora grew more concerned.

“What? Hudson, is he hurt?” Nora bent down to scoop him up, but Hudson cut her off by grabbing the baby gently. He stood and raised Peter into the air. “Peter is a shifter! Oh, Nora, Hannah. He’s a shifter!”

Every fiber of Hudson’s being tingled. The vibrations coming off his little boy, plus the unique shifter scent, made it a certainty. Whatever gene combination between Nora and him ... love plus shifter genes ... had mixed inside their boy. It took being outside in the cold for the DNA to mature and for Hudson to sense his boy turning into an animal shifter.

Nora reached up and took her boy into her arms. She looked him over carefully.

“How can you tell? He looks the same, Hudson.”

“But he smells like me!”

Nora sniffed Peter. Hannah came closer and also sniffed. “All I smell is a dirty diaper.”

A scent no one in the family had picked up before ... the mix of musky earth and the sweet scent of tree sap. The signature smell of a polar bear shifter.

“He’s here. The next in line to the clan. Our baby boy will lead the clan far into the future. The lineage is held. We did it,

Nora. Your love and my genes. We made the impossible possible.”

Nora held Peter while Hudson and Hannah threw snow at each other. The baby clapped his little hands and merrily laughed. Hudson wondered if that was what the little boy had been cooing about all along.

“Hudson, so what you told me long ago, it can really happen? Just through love and genes?”

“It can if the love is pure and everlasting, yes. Elders from many generations before talked of such a combination. It has ended up in our lore. Some think that is how it all began, with the love of a good human woman who cared after an abandoned baby polar bear. And that original baby bear went on to father shifters. The birth of a man who belonged in both worlds and could return to his bear roots.”

“Shifters, humans, fur, or skin. I don’t care how we started, my love. I care how we have ended up. A loving family, from now until the end of time.” Nora reached up and kissed Hudson.

“Nora, little Peter, and my dear, sweet Hannah. That we are.”



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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<http://eepurl.com/pt9q1>

Find out more about Milly here:

www.millytaiden.com

milly@millytaiden.com



ALSO BY MILLY TAIDEN

Find out more about Milly Taiden here:

Email: millytaiden@gmail.com

Website: <http://www.millytaiden.com>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/millytaidenpage>

Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/millytaiden>

You can find a complete list of all my books by series and reading order at my website: [millytaiden.com](http://www.millytaiden.com)