



WERE-ZOO  
BOOK SIXTEEN

# TAROUSIN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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# **Tarquin (Were Zoo Book Sixteen)**

By R. E. Butler

# Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Excerpt from Saber Chronicles Book One](#)

[Other Books by R. E. Butler](#)

[About the Author](#)

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# Chapter One

Tarquin Myers, bear shifter and resident grill-dude, climbed the stairs from the bears' private living quarters to the employee cafeteria. He didn't have to start grilling burgers for park patrons until noon, but he had loads of prep work to do ahead of today's burger of the day—teriyaki and pineapple.

Marcus, bear alpha, stood in the cafeteria with a cup of coffee in a black travel mug in one hand and a half-eaten breakfast sandwich in the other.

“Morning,” Tarquin said.

“Morning,” Marcus answered. “You're heading out early.”

“Prep for the burger of the day.”

Marcus took a bite of sandwich and hummed. “Right, the Hawaiian style one.”

“Yeah, should be good.”

“I heard you guys are going out tonight.”

Tarquin and several of his friends—Seneca, Silvanus, and August—were hitting a favorite local bar called the Tap Room. They were all shifters—Seneca was a bear like Tarquin, Silvanus was a wolf, and August was a gorilla. They all lived underground with their shifter groups, which also included elephant shifters, and kept their shifter nature a secret from humans. Tarquin and Seneca had been best friends since Tarquin joined the bear sleuth at eighteen and started working at the park. The bears manned the park's food stalls—for the

patrons who came to see the exhibits and the shifters who called it home.

“Yep,” Tarquin said. “It’s Silvanus’s birthday and he wanted to grab a drink out.”

“He’s probably hoping he’ll find his soulmate,” Marcus mused.

“Aren’t we all?” Tarquin said.

It was a hard truth. Shifters had soulmates, the one person on the planet meant to be theirs. A shifter would recognize his or her soulmate on sight, but since shifters weren’t known to humans, it made sharing the truth of what they were more difficult. Some of the shifters in the park had found their soulmates in humans, including Justus and Tayme, who were both bears. A shifter couldn’t just blurt out that they could turn into an animal; it might send the human running for the hills. Or worse... to the news outlets. Because their secrecy was paramount for the safety of the others in the park, they couldn’t share their truth until they knew their soulmate’s heart was aligned to theirs and the secret would be safe.

It would be loads easier if Tarquin’s soulmate was a shifter so he wouldn’t have to hold back the truth of what he was with her until they were in love, but he doubted that would be the case. He suspected that his soulmate would be human, in which case he’d have to be extra charming and get her to fall in love with him quick.

Of course, he first had to find her.

“You guys will find your soulmates when the time is right.”

“It would be great if it was sooner rather than later, so keep a good thought for us all tonight. You never know what might happen.”

“Very true. See you later.”

Tarquin said goodbye to his alpha, then found his favorite energy drink in the fridge and grabbed a sandwich from the warmer and headed out into the park.

He was twenty-four. He didn't want to think about what could happen if he had to wait years to find his soulmate. Some of the alphas, including Joss, hadn't found their soulmate until later in life. Marcus had a soulmate, but she died, and no one knew if he'd get another one. Was there only one soulmate for everyone, or if circumstances changed, could that happen again?

Hopefully, though, Tarquin's soulmate would show up soon. He didn't want to spend decades dating his right hand waiting for her. He'd go nuts.

It was a warm October morning, and he knew that aside from two different elementary school field trips scheduled for the day, it would be a busy one because the bird sanctuary within the park had a new resident—a scarlet macaw. The bird had recently arrived from another bird sanctuary in Florida for rehabilitation by Jess and Evan, who ran the sanctuary and hosted daily talks to patrons about the various residents of the sanctuary.

Tarquin headed to the park kitchen and found Rory and Tayme, a mated couple who manned the ice cream stall during the summer months, making out next to the commercial fridge.

“It's way too early for that,” Tarquin said.

Tayme chuckled and leaned away from his mate, whose cheeks were pink with blush. “Never too early.”

“Hi, Tarquin,” Rory said, smoothing her park golf shirt. “What are you up to today?”

“Teriyaki and pineapple burger prep. What are you guys selling today?”

Since the ice cream stall was closed until May, they would work another stall in the park or head down to the marketplace underground, where a kitchen provided three meals a day for the residents, run by alpha wolf Joss’s mate, Jeanie.

“Snack stall,” Tayme said. “We’re doing rainbow cotton candy and candy-coated popcorn in honor of the macaw, although I think there’s something weird about red cotton candy. It looks demonic.”

“It does not,” Rory said with a laugh. “We were just making the popcorn. Do you need the stove?”

“Not right now,” Tarquin said.

He headed to the huge pantry to grab the canned pineapple slices and get them drained, and then he’d make the teriyaki sauce, slice the onions, cut the sweet buns, and prep the patties.

Glancing at the clock, he saw he had about two hours before he needed to hit the grill and get it warmed up. But first, he’d finish his energy drink and breakfast sandwiches.

“Are you working the VIP tour today?” Tayme asked.

Tarquin swallowed the bite of sausage and cheese biscuit and shook his head. “I’m off today, but I’ll be in the paddock



tomorrow. You?”

“We’re in today but off tomorrow,” Tayme said.

The park ran VIP safari tours, and the shifters spent time in the paddocks to give the humans something to see. There was a paddock of natural, non-shifting animals that included an ornery moose named Tank, but the rest of the paddocks housed only shifters.

“I was just talking to Marcus about finding soulmates,” Tarquin said. “We haven’t had a soulmate come on the tour since Evan met his mate, Lark.”

“I don’t think she counts, though,” Rory said. “She didn’t actually get one of the VIP tickets in the mail that the alphas sent out. She came to the safari tour stand and asked to buy a ticket for herself and her niece. It was more fate than anything.”

“Good point,” Tarquin said. He finished the sandwich and tossed the wrapper. The park alphas had been sending out VIP safari tour tickets for two years now to unmated males and females in the tri-state area. While lots of humans used the tickets, hardly any soulmates had come from them. The last one he could think of was elephant shifter Cael’s mate, Novi, who’d gotten a ticket addressed to a previous resident of her apartment. That seemed to be a fluke, just as Lark and Evan’s meetup had been. Or fate, however someone wanted to look at it.

“Well, hopefully you’ll meet your soulmate soon,” Rory said. She turned her attention to the hot air poppers on the counter while Tayme made colored sugar coating for the popcorn.

“I hope so too,” Tarquin said.

Leaving the couple to their conversation about what flavor the rainbow-colored popcorn should be, Tarquin popped in AirPods and opened a playlist to entertain himself while he worked. In no time, he’d be smiling at patrons and handing over baskets of burgers and fries. And then it would be time to head out to the Tap Room for a night of drinks and darts, and maybe—just maybe—he’d meet his soulmate.

## Chapter Two

Lucy Beckett took a long drink from her water bottle and rocked back on her heels. It wasn't hot, but she was sweating under the tent where she and her younger sister, Luna, sold homemade canned goods and crafts at the farmers' market.

"Ugh, are you going through menopause or something? You're sweating," Luna said, making a face.

"I just hauled the heavy crates of preserves by myself. You'd be sweating too," she said, then added, "and I'm only twenty-three. I'm way too young for menopause."

Luna shrugged and tucked a lock of auburn hair behind her ear. "I'm bored."

"It's nine a.m.! We just got here." Lucy's sister was perpetually bored, part and par of being fifteen.

"Can I go get a coffee from the stand over there?" Luna pointed to a tent with a short line of people waiting to get specialty coffees.

Lucy pulled some money from the box under the folding table and handed her a ten. "If they have scones, grab me one."

"You bet. Thanks!"

Lucy watched her sister run off to the coffee stand, then turned her attention to the tables. They had three folding tables set up in a U-shape under the tent. Each table was covered with red gingham. One had crafts—crochet and knit items that Lucy made, and painted wooden trivets and coasters that Luna made. The other two tables held canned goods—everything

from pickles to preserves and marinara. Selling at farmers' markets throughout the year was how she and her sister made a living.

They were technically homesteaders, living mostly off the land that surrounded their cabin. They had electricity thanks to solar panels and running water courtesy of a cistern well. Luna had recently reached the age where she didn't want to participate in the daily goings-on of living off-the-grid, but it was just the two of them now, and her sister had no choice but to pitch in. Lucy couldn't do everything, although she tried her best to not put too much burden on her sister since she also had schoolwork to deal with.

"They had chocolate and cherry, so I got chocolate," Luna said as she offered a scone wrapped in a napkin to her.

"Thanks. What kind of coffee did you get?"

Luna joined her behind the tables and sat on the metal folding chair. "Toffee iced latte. It's so good!"

Lucy was a tea drinker herself. Luna was all about sweet coffee-flavored iced drinks.

Someone appeared at the table and asked about the marinara sauce. Lucy prepared a sample in a tiny plastic cup with a small wedge of homemade Italian bread.

"Oh crap, that's good," the woman exclaimed. "I'll take two jars. Do you sell pasta? Or this bread?"

Lucy smiled. She loved it when people enjoyed the things she made. Her mom had taught her to can when she was little. "I don't sell pasta or bread, just the sauce."

"Well, I bet you could sell the bread too. It's great."

“Thank you so much.” She put the jars in a paper shopping bag wrapped with newspaper to keep them from knocking against each other and accepted payment. After giving her change, she said, “Enjoy.”

“I will! Thank you.”

The woman stepped away, and Lucy handed Luna the money to put away. “If I sell ten of my coasters, can we stop at Beatrice’s on the way home for pie?”

Beatrice’s was a bakery that had the best pies around. Luna’s favorite was the three-berry, but Lucy loved the caramel apple. “Sure thing. How are you going to sell so many coasters?”

“Sit here and look cute.”

Lucy snorted and fiddled with the small hand-lettered sign in front of the cherry preserves. “Good luck.”

“Hey! I’m cute. You’re just mad because you’re going through menopause.”

“Oh my gosh!” Lucy groaned. “I already told you, I’m too young for that.”

Luna grinned wickedly, and Lucy shook her head. Her sister was in the mood to start shit, it appeared, but she wasn’t going to take the bait.

“Good luck selling ten coasters. If you don’t sell that many, you have to carry all the crates to the van yourself.”

“Ah, crap.”

Lucy smiled at her sister, then greeted a customer who came up to ask about the macrame flower hangers that were on hooks around the perimeter of the tent.

She hoped the day went by quickly. While she enjoyed being out and about, there was always a nagging worry at the back of her mind that the outside world wasn't really safe. They'd lost both their parents and it was just them now. Lucy never minded responsibility, but sometimes she was choked by the knowledge that she was her sister's guardian and had to be careful with both their safety.

As the last albino doe shifters, their secret had to be kept safe no matter what. They couldn't really let down their guard because you never knew who was listening or paying attention.

But she'd never burden Luna with her feelings. She was a teenager and needed to focus on homeschool and figuring out what she wanted to do with her life. And yeah, Luna was antsy without friends and Lucy was damn lonely herself, but the cabin was the safest place for them.

But it hadn't always been like this.

Back before their mom died and they'd lived with the herd, there had been safety in numbers.

Now there were no numbers, no safety. Just her and Luna, trying not to get discovered by humans.

Smiling brightly at the young girl who came up to the table, Lucy turned her thoughts to selling and kept her fingers crossed that they'd have a great day.

\* \* \*

“I want to go for a run,” Luna said as they sat at a small corner booth and ate slices of still-warm pie.

Lucy paused, fork halfway to her mouth. “You know we don’t talk about stuff like this outside of the house, Lune.”

“I’m being very broad in my description,” she pointed out. “I just wanted to let you know that I want to go running when we get home. It’s been way too long.”

Lucy put the forkful of pie in her mouth and chewed slowly while she thought about the last time they’d shifted and gone for a run. It had probably been at least two months.

“I know,” Lucy said finally.

Luna’s brow arched. “I can hear in your voice that you want to say no.”

“I didn’t say no. I just worry.”

“I know, you worry enough for the both of us and a few extra people.”

“Probably,” Lucy said with a snort.

“So let’s scout when we get home and make sure it’s clear and then go for a run. I need to stretch my legs, and you do too.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Luna did a little shimmy-dance in the seat. “That means yes.”

“Now I want to say no just to prove you wrong.”

“Aw, boo. Don’t be like that.”

“Fine, fine. As long as it’s clear.”

“Woohoo!”

“What are you two celebrating?” Beatrice asked as she came over to refill their glasses.

Without missing a beat, Luna said, “I sold eleven sets of coasters at the farmers’ market today.”

“Hey, congrats!” She finished filling Lucy’s water and asked if they needed anything else.

“Nope, we’re good, thanks.”

Beatrice dropped the check at the table with a smile and sauntered away.

“She’s so nice,” Luna said. “I wonder if I could work here when I’m done with school.”

Immediately Lucy wanted to say no, because that would mean she’d be gone for hours at a time where Lucy couldn’t make sure she was safe. But she also recognized that was her dad’s paranoia banging around in her head.

Just because he’d been so scared didn’t mean she had to be scared of everything too. Hadn’t she kept the two of them safe for the last year by herself?

Hell, yes.

“I don’t see why not,” Lucy said.

Luna beamed at her. “I just need to get really good at pies.”

“Anything you set your mind to, I’m sure you can do it.”

They talked about Luna’s schoolwork while they finished their pie. Her sister had two more years of



homeschool to go. Then she could take her GED and get her license, just like Lucy had done years earlier.

“Maybe I’ll meet a cute boy when I work here.”

Lucy stood and picked up the check. “Is that why you want a job?”

“It would be nice to be around people other than you.”

“Ouch, dude.”

Lucy paid and Luna left the tip, and then they headed out to the van.

As Luna got into the passenger seat, Lucy glanced around the parking lot. Beatrice’s was a standalone brick building a block from a strip mall that boasted a salon, cigar shop, deli, and diner. They were a half hour from home, which entailed twenty minutes on the main road and ten minutes down various dirt roads carved into the woods.

“Watcha looking at?” Luna called.

Lucy shook her head and got into the van. It had crossed her mind over the years that she could get a real job somewhere, get an apartment, provide Luna with a more normal life than they’d had. But then she thought about what they’d do to shift and how vulnerable they’d be if they didn’t have land and privacy.

It would be devastating if humans found out shifters were real.

And she’d never come across any like her and Luna since they’d lost their herd all those years ago. Not even other types. She wondered if there were any in New Jersey.

“I was just thinking about the future.”

“Like how a prince is going to walk into the bakery when I work there and sweep me off my feet?”

She turned on the van’s ignition and laughed. “Is he a shifter?”

“Heck yeah, but something big and scary, like a lion or a tiger. They’re real, right?”

“Lions and tigers? Yeah.”

“Shifter ones?”

“Oh, well, that’s what Dad always said, but I’ve never seen any types of shifters but our kind.”

“Sad. I like the idea of marrying a predator.”

“What on earth for?”

“So he can keep me safe when I’m out for my run. And you too, of course.”

“Oh, I’m in this fantasy scenario?”

Lucy turned onto the main road and pressed the gas.

“Yep. You can live in the guest house.”

“Thanks, kid.”

As Luna chatted about her fantastical romantic future, Lucy felt a pang of longing. She’d never meet her soulmate at the cabin, so how would she ever find her Mr. Right? At this point, she wouldn’t mind a Mr. Kinda-Sorta.

She’d been on a few dates over the years, mostly with humans she met at various markets and fairs. But she knew none of them was her soulmate, and thank freaking goodness. How the hell would she even go about sharing the truth with a human?

“We’ll find our forever guys someday, Lune. But you’re only fifteen, so you’ve got plenty of time.”

Luna shrugged. “You’re young too. But I still hope our forever guys show up. Sooner rather than later.”

“Hear, hear.”

## Chapter Three

The bar was crowded, but Tarquin had expected it to be. The Tap Room was a relatively safe space their people went to whenever they wanted to blow off steam. Relatively safe, because like any bar, there were occasional fights that broke out, and because shifters were stronger and faster than humans, they took care to not get involved. Or be the cause of any fights. He loved living and working at the park, but sometimes it was a drag never having anywhere else to go.

“We should build a bar in the park,” August said as he pulled a stool out from around a high table and settled in.

“Then we’d really never get to leave,” Silvanus said.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Tarquin said.

Mercer returned from the bar with four beer bottles. “Cutie at the bar said happy birthday, dude.”

Silvanus leaned back and looked to where Mercer had indicated a brunette female in a white top.

“She *is* cute. I should go say hi.”

“Ditching us already?” Tarquin asked, laughing.

“Hell, yes. You don’t have tits. And also, I think it’s a law I should get kissed on my birthday by a cute female.” Silvanus took his beer and headed to the bar to say hello.

“I’ll remember that law when it’s my birthday,” August said.

Tarquin would too.

Too bad his birthday had passed and he hadn't gotten a kiss or even so much as a hello from a cute female.

"Uh oh, Tarquin's being all introspective," Mercer said.

"What?" Tarquin asked as he twisted the cap off the beer and took a drink. "Intro-what-now?"

"You're rubbing your chest like your heart hurts," Mercer said.

"That means you're thinking about finding a wife," August said.

While shifters called their soulmates mate, out in public around humans they said husband or wife. Shifters did tend to get married as well, especially if their soulmate was human, but being mated was for life anyway, so whether the couple chose to get married also was strictly up to them.

"There aren't a lot of married people in our group," Tarquin said.

"Ours either," Mercer said, to which August agreed. The shifter groups all had some mated couples within their ranks, but no one group was entirely mated. The smallest shifter group in the park was the elephants with only four males, of which two were mated. The other groups all had more people within them, with the wolves being the largest group.

"The tours were supposed to help, but they really didn't do all that much," August said. "I think the leaders thought they would make the difference."

"They won't give up on them, though," Tarquin said. "We need to be out there for the tours anyway, so might as well keep our fingers crossed and hope for the best."

August lifted his beer bottle. “To hope.”

“And ladies,” Mercer said.

Tarquin grinned and lifted his bottle to tap the others. “To hopeful ladies.”

Turning around on the stool, Tarquin found Silvanus still talking to the female at the bar. The dance floor was packed, music blaring from speakers overhead. He didn’t feel a stirring from his bear for anyone in the bar, but he did feel something.

He just didn’t know what.

\* \* \*

Lucy waited two full hours after sunset before she even entertained the idea of shifting with Luna. She was very sure that her sister would go out on her own if Lucy didn’t go with her, and there was no way that was happening.

She stepped out onto the back patio. Everything was dark. The moon was a waning crescent, just a bare sliver in the dark sky. They didn’t keep any lights on outside when they were out in their shifts, just a small battery-operated lantern in the window to guide them, although they’d both been living in the cabin for the last fourteen years and never had trouble navigating the woods.

Luna had only been shifting for a few months, and Lucy knew it was tough for her not to have the freedom to shift whenever she wanted.

Luna joined her on the porch. “It’ll be fine.”

“I know.”

“You don’t sound like you know.”

“I just worry.”

Luna put her arm around Lucy. Her little sister was a few inches taller than her petite five-four and looked more like their mom every day. “We’ll scout well first and stay close to the cabin like always. It’s dark as hell out here, so no human could see us do anything; their eyesight isn’t good enough.”

Those were all things that Lucy had told her sister once she’d started shifting, when she’d been worried they might be discovered by game hunters.

Since they’d lost both their parents, wariness was a good thing because it helped keep them safe. But she didn’t want to trap her sister in the cabin or stop herself from shifting either. They could be safe and have fun too.

“All right, let’s go scout and then shift. My doe is aching to come out.”

“Mine too, trust me,” Luna said.

They stepped off the porch and started to scout. As their dad had taught them, they walked a few yards into the woods and then faced away from each other and walked in a circle around the cabin. Each time they passed each other, they’d go a few more yards into the woods and make the circle larger, listening and looking for anything out of the ordinary. This time, they walked in circles for twenty minutes, until Lucy was sure there wasn’t anyone around, and if someone happened to be in the woods, they could get back to the safety of the cabin easily.

“That’s good, I think,” Lucy said. “Ready to head back?”

“Yes!” Luna did a little dance and cheered.

Lucy grinned at her antics. They returned to the cabin, following the lantern in the window. As they stripped, Lucy said, “Stay with me, but if we get separated for some reason, come back here.”

“I know.”

“I know you know, but I like to remind you because Dad always reminded me.”

Luna straightened and looked at Lucy. In the darkness with her sensitive eyesight, Lucy could see her sad smile.

“Do you think he would be proud of us?”

“Of course!” Lucy gave her a quick hug. “Mom would be too. She loved to paint and was so creative, just like you. Dad would be so proud of both of us for taking care of each other and keeping each other safe. Why do you ask?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I was just thinking about him today, and how he and Mom had the whole herd to rely on, but it’s just you and me. We don’t even have family we can reach out to because they’re all gone now. I wonder if Dad wouldn’t have been so scared to lose us that he might have found other herds we could join? But also I want him to be proud of how well we’re doing on our own. Even if I am lonely.”

“We’ve got each other, which is what matters. And I’m lonely too, but that’ll change in the future, I’m sure. You’ll



finish school and get a job, and maybe we can even move closer to town but keep the cabin for shifting.”

Luna’s eyes went wide. “Oh, do you think so?”

“Yeah. We can have both things, I think. Safety and a future.”

“With boys,” Luna said, clicking her tongue.

“Girl, you’ve got boys on the brain.”

“Heck, yes. But if you find your soulmate, will I get to live with you guys? Assuming your bedroom is soundproofed, so I don’t have to hear any gross things?”

Lucy laughed. “Of course you’d be with us. You and I are a package deal.”

“Cool.” She rocked onto her heels. “And the soundproofing?”

Shaking her head, Lucy dropped the remainder of her clothes and stepped off the porch. “Definitely.”

“Good. I don’t need to be traumatized.”

When Luna joined her on the cool grass, they shifted together as they’d done since Luna was able to take her albino doe form. Prior to that, Lucy had shifted by herself and stuck near the cabin so Luna wasn’t alone. It was easier now to have her sister with her so they could go for a run and explore the woods. There was a shallow creek with the sweetest, cold water in it. It was always the first place they went.

Shaking herself out, Lucy lifted her muzzle and inhaled, sorting through the scents on the air, then walked in the direction of the creek.

Luna chuffed and darted past Lucy, racing a circle around her and then taking off toward the creek. Lucy mentally shook her head and raced after her, dodging trees and following her sister, who was just a white blur in the darkness. They reached the creek a few minutes later. Luna splashed into the water and dipped her head to drink. Lucy stayed on the bank and took a drink, enjoying the cool and sweet water.

They wandered around the creek, nibbling on tender shoots and reveling in being in their shifts. It was so freeing and fun to be able to run on four hooves, to feel at one with nature in a way they didn't get to experience when they were in their human forms. She was sorry she'd made Luna wait longer than necessary to shift again; she should've let her the moment she asked a few weeks ago.

Lucy decided she was going to stop letting the intrusive fearful worries stop them from enjoying life and living it to the fullest. Just because they'd lost their parents to terrible tragedies didn't mean that those same things would happen to them.

They followed the bend of the creek, wandering farther from the cabin. Lucy wanted to call her sister back home, but decided to let her lead instead and stay out until she was ready to return.

Luna looked at Lucy and stuck out her tongue, then darted off.

Just as she took a few leaps away, an all-too-familiar yip echoed around them.

A coyote!

Their dad had been killed in his shift by coyotes, and the sound still sent chills down Lucy's spine.

Luna froze, her eyes wide, and then panic set in.

She bolted, but not toward the cabin—away from it!

Lucy bellowed an alarm, urging her to come back, but Luna disappeared into the darkness, only the sound of her crashing through the underbrush carrying back to her.

Taking off after her sister, she bellowed again, hoping she'd break out of her fearful run and come back, but she didn't.

Lucy didn't know how long it was before she finally caught sight of Luna, but it felt like ages had passed. She called again, hoping she'd stop.

Luna did stop, skidding to a halt, but as Lucy closed the distance to her, she could see why her sister had stopped.

Hunters!

Luna had inadvertently run right to a campfire surrounded by males in camouflage. They jumped up in surprise, shouting for guns.

“Deer! White deer!”

Lucy nipped Luna's hindquarters, snapping her out of her fearful, frozen state, and the two darted away. She heard engines, but smaller ones than cars or trucks. The hunters either had four-wheelers or motorcycles, possibly both. It meant that Lucy and Luna couldn't outrun them, and they might lead them directly to the cabin.

Her mind raced as they darted in and out of the trees, unable to lose the vehicles that continued to close in on them.

They'd eventually get tired of this too-fast pace; they needed to shake them.

A bullet whizzed nearby, striking a tree. Luna let out a soft scream of alarm.

Lucy knew what she had to do.

She butted her head against her sister and called a command to her to head home, and then Lucy ducked the other way, circling around to meet the hunters and draw them off her sister. She saw out of the corner of her eye that Luna was going toward the cabin, but her gait had slowed and she was looking back.

"Go, go!" Luna let out the call with her doe's grunts.

She spread her legs and lowered her head, waiting for the hunters.

It took mere minutes for them to draw close enough she could see them.

Four males. Two four-wheelers with two males on each.

"Get her! I want that head on my wall!" One of the males crowed.

She saw the flash of rifle barrels as the vehicles' engines roared. Instead of fleeing to the side, she leaped as far as she could between the vehicles and took off the way they'd come. The vehicles screeched as they turned to chase her.

Sparing a glance back, Lucy saw both four-wheelers following her. She had a little distance from them, but they would close it quick. She had to get away, but she didn't know where to go.

Her mind spun as she ran full-tilt, unsure of her direction or destination, just wanting to get away.

Bullets exploded into trees near her, each one feeling closer than the last.

Then something caught her hip and pain seared through her. Her hooves stumbled as her back leg went limp. She let out a call of alarm and kept fighting to move forward, her gait slower with her bum leg.

She leaped over a small ditch, her hooves hitting pavement. For a moment, she felt relief at seeing a road.

And then she was surrounded by bright light.

Turning her head as she stumbled forward, she was surprised to see two big yellow orbs coming at her and the sound of brakes squealing.

And then everything went black.

## Chapter Four

Tarquin didn't consider himself much of a dancer, but he could hold his own on the floor. When a pretty redhead named Kim asked for a dance, he hadn't really been inclined to do it, but he'd been sitting too long anyway, and most of his buddies were on the dance floor too.

He didn't know the song, or the choreographed dance some of the people on the floor were doing, but he still held his own.

"You're a good dancer," Kim said loudly.

"Thanks, you too."

"I love this song!" She lifted her arms in the air and closed her eyes.

August bumped into him. "Having fun, man?"

"Loads," Tarquin said. "You?"

"Not as much fun as Silvanus."

Tarquin scanned the crowd and found the birthday boy dancing with two females. He looked like he was in heaven.

"Is that your friend?" Kim asked.

"Yeah, it's his birthday," Tarquin said, and she nodded.

August gave Tarquin a fist bump and danced away with his partner.

The song ended, and Tarquin exhaled. "Thanks for the dance."

Another song started immediately. “How about we keep going?” she said.

“I’m going to sit this one out.” He smiled and walked away to the table where Mercer sat talking to the waitress who was clearing their table.

“Here,” Mercer said, writing his number on a napkin. “Give me a call anytime.”

“I will,” she said, winking and stuffing the number into her jeans pocket.

When they were alone at the table, Tarquin said, “She’s pretty.”

“Yep. Not my soulmate, though. I’m not sure if I’ll actually go out with her if she calls.”

“Then why give her your number?”

“She asked,” he said with a shrug. “Also, I might, if she’s not looking for anything serious. Not going to settle when I’m waiting for my forever female.”

“Me either.” He glanced back at where Silvanus and August were still dancing, both looking like they were having the time of their lives. “I don’t think they want to settle either, but they sure are having fun.”

“Clearly. I’m working the tour tomorrow. You?”

Tarquin lifted his beer and finished it. “Yep.”

“Well, maybe tomorrow will bring a new chapter for both of us.”

Tarquin wondered if that was true. He had been feeling strange all day, especially since he’d been out with his friends.

Maybe his bear was feeling a connection to their mate in some supernatural way.

Or maybe his bear was just horny and lonely.

Either way, Tarquin hoped that Mercer was right and tomorrow would bring new things their way.

\* \* \*

“Look, it’s after midnight,” Mercer said as Tarquin got behind the wheel of the park’s SUV that they’d borrowed for their night out.

“So?” Silvanus asked as he collapsed into the second-row bench seat next to August.

“Tarquin and I were talking about tomorrow being a day that might bring a new chapter into our lives. And now it’s tomorrow.”

“What? Wait, am I drunk?” August asked. “That made no sense.”

“Damn, does that mean it’s not my birthday anymore?” Silvanus asked. “I only got to kiss three females.”

“Three? That’s a pretty sweet birthday,” August said.

“Well, it would’ve been sweeter if any of them were my soulmate. Can you imagine going to a bar on a random Friday night and finding your soulmate in the crowd? Fucking awesome.”

Tarquin pulled from the parking lot and onto the main road. They were forty minutes from the park.



“Someone text the security team and let them know we’re on the way,” he said.

“On it,” Mercer said. “And back to August’s question: no you’re not drunk, I was just talking about the timing of things. When we left the park it was yesterday, and none of us found our soulmate. Now it’s today, and the whole damn day is stretched in front of us. All of us are working the VIP tours this afternoon, and who the hell knows what will happen?”

“I like being optimistic,” Tarquin said. “It feels like we’ve been doing the tours forever, but I’m definitely feeling like something is going to change soon. Maybe we’ll find our soulmates, or maybe it’s something else. But one way or another, I think something good is coming our way.”

“I hope it’s soulmates for all of us,” Silvanus said. “This is the year I definitely want to find my mate.”

Tarquin added in his agreement with the others.

Maybe there was something in the air.

Maybe, just maybe, he’d find his soulmate. Maybe she’d gotten the free VIP tour coupon and parking pass in the mail and had made a reservation for that afternoon, and then when the Jeep she was in stopped in front of the bear paddock, he’d know her on sight.

The road hummed beneath the tires as he sped toward the park.

He and his friends continued talking about the VIP tours. As he opened his mouth to share that he also wouldn’t mind if his soulmate just happened to come into the park for a visit without a tour coupon, like several of the park’s residents had had occur, he saw a flash of white dart out of the woods that

lined either side of the road. He slammed his foot down on the brake as an entirely white deer stumbled to a stop in the middle of the road, staring at them.

He swore the deer was looking him dead in the eyes.

The tires screamed on the asphalt as he tried to turn away, but he caught the deer right in the side, sending it flying several feet into the road. The impact rattled the SUV as it rocked to a stop.

“Shit, man,” Mercer said.

“Everyone okay?” Tarquin asked. He unbuckled his seatbelt.

“What are you doing?” Silvanus asked.

“Going to check on it.” He opened the door.

“Why? No way it’s alive after that hit,” Mercer said.

“Maybe, maybe not. But if it’s dead, we can’t leave it in the road anyway, and if it’s alive, maybe Cael can help.”

Cael was an elephant shifter and the resident park veterinarian, taking care of the non-shifting animals.

“All right, let’s go see. But this better not turn into one of those video fails where the deer kills the person trying to help it,” Mercer said.

Tarquin chuckled and climbed from the SUV. The moment he shut the door, something stirred within him and he had to pause with his hand on the door before he could move.

“You okay, dude?” Silvanus asked.

“Yeah.” He rubbed his chest and shook off whatever weird feeling was coursing through him.

They approached the deer, which he realized was actually a doe because she didn't have antlers. He knelt at the doe's back and placed his hand on her ribcage to feel if she was breathing.

The moment his hand touched her, that stirring inside him reached a fever pitch and awareness snapped within him.

She wasn't a regular doe—she was a shifter.

And his soulmate!

“Fuck. Shit!” He leaned down and rested his head on her chest and heard the thump of her heart. “Call someone. We've gotta get her to the park!”

“Call who? What's going on?” Mercer asked.

“Call the park. She's my soulmate.”

No one said anything for a moment. Tarquin lifted his head and glowered at them, his bear coming out and a growl rumbling in his chest.

“Shit, really? I'll call Doc Paula right now,” August said.

“I'll grab the back gate. Do you need help getting her up?” Silvanus asked.

“I don't think so.”

Tarquin slipped his hands underneath her and lifted her. She weighed as much as an adult human, but her body was larger, so he had to balance her weight against his chest. Mercer helped steady him as he rose to his feet and walked the short distance to the back of the SUV.

Silvanus had opened the back gate and put the third row of seats down, making room for her.

“She’s alive, right?” August asked. “I’m on the phone with the doc.”

“She’s breathing, and I can hear her heart beating.”

He half-climbed and half-leaned into the back of the SUV to set her inside, then tucked her legs in so he could close the door. He stared at her for a moment.

“Get in there,” Silvanus said. “If she wakes up, you have to be able to help her in case she panics; she may not remember anything.”

He was thankful for the reminder, and besides, he didn’t really want to leave her alone. He climbed in and settled at her back in the space behind the second row.

“Doc Paula says she’s meeting us at the employee gate and will have a gurney.”

Tarquin couldn’t really talk. He just wanted her to be okay and for them to get to the park as soon as damn possible.

“I’ll drive,” Silvanus said as he shut the gate. Mercer and Silvanus got into the front seats, and August got into the second row.

“Okay, we’re on the way. Should be fifteen minutes or less. Thanks, Doc.” August ended the call. “She said she’ll be waiting.”

“Thanks, guys.”

Tarquin put his hands on his soulmate, and it was then that he realized there was blood on his arm. He looked at his arms but didn’t see any cuts. He inspected her pale fur and saw blood smeared over her haunches. “I think she’s hurt.”

“You hit her with the SUV, so yeah,” Silvanus said.

“No, she’s bleeding.”

“Do you think she was shot or something?” Mercer asked.

“How would she get shot?” August asked.

“She ran into the road,” Mercer said. “Maybe she was being chased by hunters. I’d wager an albino doe would be a trophy they’d want to get. Fucking asshole hunters.”

Fury stole through him at the thought of how upset she must have been if what they thought was true. What if she’d been chased, shot at, and wounded and then ran into the street in a panic? And then he’d fucking hit her with the SUV.

Well, he’d have some serious apologizing to do, that was for sure.

When she woke up. Which he hoped was soon.

“I really can’t believe it,” he said, resting his hands on her.

“What? That you hit your soulmate with the SUV?” August asked.

“No. Well, yes. But I mean, I can’t believe that we were talking about finding our soulmates and I did. Fate’s a funny thing.”

“After being hit by the SUV, I’d imagine your soulmate thinks that fate’s a bitch,” Silvanus said.

“That too,” Tarquin said.

Leaning over, he whispered into her ear, “You’re safe, sweetheart, from whatever was chasing you. I promise that on my life.” To Silvanus, he called out, “Faster, man.”

His answer was the roar of the engine as his friend gunned it.

The sooner he got her to the park and she was taken care of, the sooner she would heal and shift back to human.

He couldn't wait to meet her.

## Chapter Five

“She’s healing, it’s just slow,” a feminine voice said.

Lucy came back to consciousness by slow degrees, first hearing beeping and then voices.

“Is that normal for her kind?” a masculine voice said.

A very nice masculine voice, which made her heart speed up and her doe run circles in her mind.

“Uh, is she okay? Why is her heart racing?” the male asked, his voice rising a little.

“I think she’s awake,” the female said.

Whelp, time to open the old eyes.

Lucy cracked her eyes open slowly. Her vision was blurry at first, but as it cleared, she could see a plain white ceiling. It definitely wasn’t a ceiling in her home, and the last thing she remembered was running into the road and away from the hunters.

Hunters.

Luna!

Sitting up abruptly, Lucy nearly brained herself on a large male’s head. He ducked back before she could give both of them concussions.

“I need to get...who are you? Where am I?” The questions slipped from her mouth so fast, it took her a moment to realize she was in some kind of hospital room.

Oh shit, was she in a human hospital? That was definitely not okay. If they did blood work, it might look strange to them and she didn't need any questions about what she was.

“My name is Tarquin. I'm the one that brought you here. You're safe in the park's clinic. What's your name?”

She looked down at herself before answering. She was dressed in a soft hospital gown and on a bed, with a sheet pooled around her hips. There was an IV in her hand and a heart monitor on her finger.

The female she'd heard smiled kindly and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

“I'm Doc Paula and I'm a wolf. You're in our underground living quarters in the Amazing Adventures Safari Park. You're safe now.”

Her brain was misfiring as she took in all the female said. Wolf? Underground?

Her hands clenched in the sheet. “I need to get home.”

Tarquin frowned. “Can you tell us your name?”

She pursed her lips. She did feel safe, but she wasn't sure what that actually meant.

“Lucy. Lucy Bennett.” She offered a smile, which he returned. And holy crap, did that make him even sexier than before, and that was saying something. He was positively the best-looking male she'd ever seen in her life. All broad shoulders and muscles for days, and piercing brown eyes that seemed like they were looking right into her soul.



“It’s nice to meet you, Lucy.” Tarquin smiled even more, until a dimple formed in one cheek and she damn near swooned on the bed.

Focus!

“Do you know what happened?” Tarquin asked.

“I was being chased by hunters. I’m sorry, you’re a wolf? You’re both wolves?”

“Just me,” Doc Paula said. “Before you guys get into any serious discussions, let me examine you. If that’s okay?”

Lucy nodded.

Paula approached and Tarquin moved away. She checked Lucy over and asked her how she was feeling.

“Confused as to where I am and how I got here, and maybe a little sore? But okay, I guess.”

“When you shifted back to human, the majority of your injuries healed. You were pretty banged up after everything that happened, but I ran scans on you while you were unconscious, which confirmed everything that was injured has healed up. I gave you some pain meds via the IV. I can give you some more for the residual pain, or you could shift again; that always helps.”

“How long was I out for?”

“Five hours,” she said as she looped the stethoscope around her neck. “Do you want a phone to call someone?”

“No, I just need to get home.”

While she and Luna shared a cell phone, Lucy didn’t remember bringing it into the cabin after they got home.

And she'd been unconscious for five freaking hours! Luna must be so scared and worried.

Doc Paula glanced at Tarquin. "You're certainly free to go, Lucy. There's a selection of clothes in the bathroom for you, and then Tarquin will take you where you need to go. If you need anything, just let either of us know."

"Thank you."

"Of course, anytime." Paula smiled and left the room, leaving just Lucy and Tarquin.

"You can take me home?"

"Absolutely. But is there a reason you're rushing to get home?"

"I don't know you."

His brow arched. "I know that, Lucy, but I'm the one who found you and I want to get to know you. Is that such a bad thing? I mean, unless you have a male in your life?" He let out a little growl and then coughed as if to cover it up.

She entirely ignored the feelings that were swirling inside her when it came to the sexy male.

"I don't have a male in my life, I just need to get home. Can we leave soon?"

"Sure. As soon as you're ready."

She swung her legs around and pushed against the bed rail to stand. Her legs were weak, and she nearly went backward onto the bed but managed to stay upright. Tarquin grabbed her elbow and helped steady her. At his touch, so simple and helpful, heat speared through her and her doe let out a happy call in her head.

“What are you?” she asked.

“Black bear.”

“You’re in a wolf pack?”

“No, my sleuth has an underground space as well, just like the wolves. But we don’t have our own doctor so we use Doc Paula for anything we need. I brought you to her so she could help you. I was worried as hell there for a while.”

“I’m still in New Jersey, right?”

“Of course.” He told her they were in the equivalent of an underground city, beneath the Amazing Adventures Safari Park, where shifters lived and worked.

She’d never been to the park, but she’d seen advertisements for it on billboards and magazines. It wasn’t that far from the cabin.

When she felt like she could walk and stay upright, she made her way to the bathroom and shut the door. On a shelf was a stack of clothing and several pairs of shoes, along with toiletries.

She gasped when she saw herself in the mirror over the sink.

“You okay, sweetheart?”

Dang, she liked him calling her sweetheart.

“I look like hell.”

“You’re beautiful.”

She rested her hands on the counter and closed her eyes, shutting out the image of her healing black eyes, which were purple and yellow at this point but must have looked much

worse when she was unconscious. Her hair was a mess and her eyes were bloodshot. Her body ached like she'd been run over by a truck, but she could feel her accelerated healing making things better.

She bet in an hour she'd feel normal again.

She washed her face and brushed her teeth, then used the toilet. She dressed in a pair of buttery soft jeans and a hoodie with the park's logo on the front and chose a pair of white slip-on shoes. After running a brush through her hair, she quickly braided it and tied the end with an elastic.

She grasped the door handle but didn't open it right away.

On the other side of the door was Tarquin, a bear shifter who'd brought her to safety. Not only was he some kind of rescuing angel in the right place at the right time, but he was sexy as hell and very caring.

And he was her soulmate.

But she couldn't think about any of that stuff right now; she needed to focus on Luna and make sure she was okay. Hopefully the hunters hadn't picked up Luna's trail after chasing Lucy and she'd made it back to the cabin.

She opened the door. It would've been hard to miss the relief on Tarquin's face when his gaze connected with hers, and for the barest of moments, she wanted to just stay with him.

But that was exactly what she couldn't do. Luna was counting on her, and Lucy was not about to start disappointing her sister.

“So I know where the park is, and I can navigate us to my place. Is it okay if we get going?”

“Of course.” He smiled, but he looked disappointed.

He opened the door to the room and led her out. She couldn't help but notice that he was taller than her by a foot, and while he was imposing, she wasn't nervous with him. Well, she kind of was, because he was her freaking soulmate and she didn't know what to say about that. So instead of saying anything about the swirling romantic feelings that were blooming inside her, she concentrated on where he was taking her.

They left a house, but when she looked over her shoulder, she saw it looked like a rock-covered den, as did the other homes in the room, which had dark flooring and walls painted like the forest.

“This is the wolves' private living area,” Tarquin said as they made their way across the large room. There were two doors, and he opened one and held it for her. There were stairs that led up.

“We're really underground?” she asked as she climbed the stairs.

“Yep. There are living quarters for all the shifters under the park, as well as a central market with stores and a kitchen that makes meals for everyone. We all work at the park as well. Living here, and working, helps us keep our secret safe.”

When they reached the top of the stairs, he opened the door for her and led her into a cafeteria. One of the walls had floor-to-ceiling windows and faced into the park. She could see the sun was already up.

She had so many questions, but first she really wanted to get to the cabin and check on her sister.

They walked through the park to an employee parking lot. A small group of males were standing near a row of vehicles.

“Lucy, these are my friends. They’re going to be our escort to your place,” Tarquin said.

“Why do we need an escort?”

“Because our people don’t go anywhere alone,” a large male said and then introduced himself as Jupiter.

The other two males were Mercer and August, who said they were glad to see she was okay.

“It’s a miracle,” August said, “considering how bad you looked when we hit you.”

She tilted her head. “Hit me? What are you talking about?”

## Chapter Six

Had Lucy heard correctly? Tarquin hit her with his car?

Tarquin growled softly and scrubbed a hand through his dark hair. “I didn’t get a chance to tell her what happened,” he told the other males. “She’s been really insistent on getting home.” Then he turned to her and said, “I’ll tell you about it in the SUV, I promise.”

“All right.”

Tarquin led her to one of the SUVs, slugging August in the shoulder on the way. She smiled at the interaction, as August rubbed his arm and said, “Shit, sorry, man.”

“You probably shouldn’t hit your friends like that,” she said.

He opened the passenger door and said, “Well, he deserved it for opening his big mouth.”

“I said I was sorry,” August called from the open window of the driver’s side of the SUV next to theirs. “Hold a grudge, why don’t ya.”

“I will, trust me.”

Tarquin climbed behind the wheel and shook his head. “He’s my best friend.”

“Oh? I couldn’t tell,” she said with a laugh. He backed out of the parking spot and drove down an access road. Once he’d turned onto the main road and she knew which direction they were headed, she told him how to get to the road that led to her cabin.

“They won’t tell anyone where we live, right?”

“No, of course not. Our people aren’t in the habit of sharing shifter secrets with anyone. And who is ‘we’?”

“My sister, Luna. She’s fifteen. It’s just me and her now, since my dad was killed by coyotes when we were out for a run a year ago.”

“Damn, I’m sorry. So it’s just the two of you?”

“Yes. My mom died when I was a kid when hunters found our herd and slaughtered just about everyone.” She shook her head to dispel the images that always flashed through her mind when she thought about that dark day. “So tell me how you hit me.”

“First, tell me what you remember.”

She hummed. “Luna wanted to shift, so we scouted around the cabin as always, then shifted and went for a run. We were hanging out by a creek and heard a coyote yipping, and it scared Luna. She ran away and I chased after her, but I couldn’t catch up to her. She ran right into a hunters’ camp. They chased us with four-wheelers. I sent Luna off in another direction and then double-backed to make the hunters follow me. They shot me, I think, and the last thing I remember is running into a road and seeing two big white lights.”

“That was the SUV I was driving,” he said with a grimace.

He told her how he’d been driving home from a bar with his friends, including August and Mercer, and hit her when she’d stopped in the middle of the road.



“I thought you were a regular deer and that I’d killed you. The moment I touched you...” He paused and then didn’t continue.

“What?” she prompted.

“You know.”

“Let’s not be coy here, Tarquin,” she said.

“Okay, but you were chased by hunters, nearly killed, and then unconscious for five hours while your body healed from severe injuries. You had multiple broken bones, not to mention the gunshot wound on your flank. I don’t want to overwhelm you or lead you to believe that I’m trying to be pushy.”

“I don’t think you’re being pushy. I guess I am a little overwhelmed. Luna and I were just talking yesterday about the future, finding mates and leaving the cabin. That I suddenly ran right into you is kind of wild.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you. My bear’s furious that you were injured by us, but more than that, he’s furious you were chased by hunters.” He mused for a moment. “I didn’t hear four-wheelers or see anyone in the woods. Maybe they gave up.”

“I just hope they didn’t find Luna. She knows what to do if we get separated, but she’s also a teenager who thinks she knows better sometimes.” She patted his forearm. “And it’s okay, I’m okay. But you never did say what you were originally thinking when you found me.”

He blew out a breath. “I put my hands on you and I knew you were my soulmate. I was freaked out because I thought you might be dying, and how fucking cruel would fate be to have that happen?”

“It would definitely suck.” She chuckled and met his gaze with a smile. “But I’m not dead, and I’m betting your quick actions to get me to the park saved my life. So thank you for that. A human would probably have left me for dead, or the hunters would have finished the job.”

He growled. “Could you find their camp again? We should check it out and make sure they’re gone.”

“I could find it. You don’t have to do that, though.”

“I want to.” He glanced at her. “I want to make sure you’re safe.”

She smiled but didn’t say anything. Part of her wanted to ask him to take her and Luna to the park with him to live, but that was a very small part. Yes, he was her soulmate, but she wasn’t ready to upend their lives for a male she’d known less than an hour. She wanted to get to know him first before they made any big changes.

“How many bears are in your—what did you call it?”

“Sleuth, and there are fourteen. Two of the bears have soulmates: Justus’s soulmate Trina is human, and Tayme’s soulmate Rory is a red fox.”

“What else is there, besides wolves and bears? I’ve never met any shifters besides deer. It was my dad’s family’s herd that was attacked. Both my parents were albino, as were several members of my dad’s family, but the rest were regular white-tailed deer. Now it’s just me and Luna as the last of the albino does.”

“The main ones, the groups that started the park, are wolves, bears, gorillas, elephants, and lions. We’ve got some other types of shifters in soulmates who’ve come to the park as

well.” He explained how the groups used paddocks on the safari tour to search for their soulmates, with the groups each spending time in their shifts while the tours occurred on the weekends.

“I had no clue there were so many shifters so close to us. I doubt our dad did either. When our herd was slaughtered, he just ran with me and Luna until he found an abandoned cabin, and then he claimed it. We’ve been there ever since. It’s pretty rustic, and Luna would like to live someplace with more modern amenities, which was why we were discussing the future yesterday.”

“The park is definitely modern. I’ll just throw this thought out there—there’s plenty of room for you and Luna in our private living area, and I don’t mean just staying with me. I could get you a place of your own where you could be safe, and not out here in the middle of nowhere alone.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said. “I’d like to get to know you better first, and Luna and I have a lot to discuss.”

“I understand.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I am a little bit, but it’s mostly my bear. I’m not allowed to stay away from the park overnight—it’s a rule the alphas put in place to keep everyone safe—otherwise I’d stand guard outside your house all day and night.”

She smiled. He was really sweet.

Pointing to the right, she told him to turn onto the dirt road. “Follow it for a while, it meanders and splits off in different directions, but I’ll guide you.”

“Okay.”

He hung a right, as did the SUV behind them.

While they finished the last leg of the trip, he told her about coming to New Jersey.

“My parents weren’t soulmates and ended up not even being a good fit together. They were set up by their alphas to have a cub, but by the time I was born, they couldn’t stand each other. My mom left me in my dad’s care and went back to her own sleuth. I heard from her when I was little, but then she mated a bear who didn’t want to deal with me, so she never reached out again.”

“Oh, that’s so sad, I’m sorry,” she said.

“Well, my dad’s a good male. Or he was. He passed away when I was seventeen. I stayed in the sleuth until I heard that Marcus was joining up with some other shifters in New Jersey. He was a friend of my dad’s and invited me to come with him, so I did. I’ve been here ever since.”

“I’m sorry you lost your dad too.”

“Marcus is like a second father to me; the sleuth is like my family. There are a lot of us who came here under similar circumstances and not just in the sleuth. There are people who were turned away from their families for different reasons, or who lost loved ones like I did.”

The cabin came into view while she mulled over what he’d shared. The park seemed almost too good to be true, but she knew Tarquin was telling the truth. It was very tempting to simply pack up and go back with him, but she put the thought away as she jumped out of the SUV and ran to the cabin.

The lights were off and the front door was locked.

“Luna? Luna, it’s me!” Lucy banged her hand on the door. “Lune? Open up!”

She heard footsteps rushing to the door and then the click of the deadbolt opening. Luna opened the door and rushed into Lucy’s arms, and the two hugged.

“What happened to you? Where did you go?” Luna asked with a sob. “I thought I lost you.”

Lucy hugged Luna tight. “I’m okay. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I ran right back to the cabin like you told me. I shifted and hid in the house and waited. It’s been hours!”

Lucy smoothed Luna’s hair back from her face and brushed at the tears on her cheeks.

“I’m so sorry,” Lucy said. “The hunters chased me into the road and I got hit by a car.”

“What?” Luna looked down as if cataloging Lucy’s injuries. “You’re okay? I heard gunfire.”

“They shot my butt. Or my hip, I guess. But yes, I’m great now.”

Luna stiffened. “Who’s this?”

Lucy glanced over her shoulder at Tarquin and smiled. Turning back to her sister, she said, “This is Tarquin. He and his friends were driving the car that hit me.”

“You...what?” Luna took a step back, her gaze darting past Lucy to the two SUVs.

“Let’s go inside and talk. I’ve got a ton to tell you.”

## Chapter Seven

Tarquin watched as Lucy put her arm around Luna and led her back into the cabin. He didn't follow because he didn't know if he was supposed to or not since she hadn't asked him to join.

Mercer came up next to him, along with Jupiter and August.

"I have a feeling her sister is going to be pissed at you for hitting her," Mercer said.

"Yeah, but hopefully she'll see the silver lining," Tarquin answered.

"You coming?" Lucy asked, peeking out the door.

"All of us or just me?" he asked.

"All of you."

She gifted him with a smile that made her eyes crinkle at the corners.

His bear let out a chuff of pleasure at seeing the worry gone from her eyes.

She was so damn beautiful, even more so now that she was happily reunited with her sister.

He and the males headed into the cabin. There was a worn couch in front of a fireplace, along with two rocking chairs arranged next to a small table. A nearby kitchen table had a stack of textbooks and a notepad on it, with two chairs tucked in close.

Lucy held out her hand to Tarquin, and he took it as he joined her.

“Tarquin, this is my sister, Luna. This is my friend Tarquin,” she said.

He internally grimaced at the word friend, but he didn’t want to be an ass.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he said.

“You too,” she said. “You really hit my sister with your car?”

“SUV. And yes. It was an accident; she ran out into the road and froze.”

“That’s what deer do,” Luna said with a sniff.

“Be nice,” Lucy said with a low voice.

Luna rolled her eyes. “Well, I guess it’s okay since you saved her from the hunters, even though you almost killed her doing it.”

“I’m really sorry that happened, but I’m not sorry I met your sister. I’m glad you’re okay. Both of you.” He gave Lucy’s hand a squeeze. “Lucy said she could take us to where the hunters’ camp was, to make sure they’re gone. Do you want to come with us?”

“Sure.”

There was a pinging sound. Jupiter lifted his phone and looked at the screen.

“Sorry, my mate’s calling. Give me a minute.” He stepped from the cabin as he answered.

“What is he?” Luna asked.

“Lion,” Tarquin answered. “But his mate’s human. He’s the number two in the pride and head of security for the whole park.”

“I always wanted to go to the park,” Luna said. “Just think, if you’d taken me when I was doing that science project about wild animals, you two might have met a couple years ago.”

Lucy’s eyes widened. “True, I forgot about that.”

“So I guess maybe next time, listen to me when I say I want to go somewhere.”

“Oh geez,” Lucy said, laughing. “I’m afraid she’s in her know-it-all stage.”

“Just because I do know everything doesn’t mean I’m a know-it-all, you know. You just don’t like it when I’m right because I do the dance.”

“Don’t do the dance.”

“I’m right and you’re wrong, but I’m right, so I’m cool.” Luna did a little jig-type dance and snapped her fingers with a silly grin on her face. Lucy laughed and shook her head.

“Okay, that was awful. Let’s go scout the hunters’ camp before she does any other dances.”

“So,” Luna said, walking next to Lucy and looking at Tarquin. “Are there any teenage boys in the park? Like fifteen or so?”

“Uh, no,” Tarquin said, “not that I’m aware of.”

“Well, there’s a couple eighteen-year-olds in the pack,” August said. “I was working the VIP tour last weekend and



they were getting trained as drivers. There might be some others I'm not aware of."

"Nice."

"Absolutely not," Lucy said. "You're fifteen. Rein it in, girlie."

Luna sighed exaggeratedly. "Spoilsport."

\* \* \*

"Everything okay with the missus?" Tarquin asked Jupiter as they joined up with him in the front yard.

"Yep. She asked me to bring home vanilla ice cream, hot fudge sauce, and something called redskin peanuts."

"She wants to make a sundae or something?" Mercer asked.

"Yeah, it's some kind of special layered sundae she used to get when she was a kid." He shrugged. "Pregnancy cravings."

His mate Celeste was four months pregnant.

"Will your baby be able to shift?" Luna asked.

"We don't know," Jupiter said. "But it doesn't matter to me or Celeste, and the pride doesn't care. Were you wondering if they'd kick him or her out if they were unable to shift?"

"Yeah."

"We're not in the habit of doing that," Jupiter said. "None of our groups."

“That’s good,” Luna said, nodding.

As they walked to the creek, Luna peppered them with questions about the park and the people who lived and worked there.

But once they reached the babbling creek, Luna got very quiet. Lucy kept hold of Tarquin’s hand, but put her arm around her sister and pulled her close.

“It’s not your fault that you got spooked,” Lucy said softly.

“I almost got you killed.”

“But you didn’t. And I met Tarquin.”

Luna sniffled and rested her head on Lucy’s shoulder for a moment. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, I promise. I was caught off guard by the coyote too; we haven’t heard one in ages.”

“I hate the sound.”

Lucy nodded in agreement. “But let’s put it all behind us and see if those asshole hunters are still around.”

“What will we do if they are?” Luna asked.

Lucy glanced at Tarquin with a question in her eyes.

He wanted to say that they should both just come to the park, but Lucy had made it clear she didn’t want that right now.

“We can station some people around your place to keep watch tonight,” Jupiter said.

“I thought you couldn’t stay overnight anywhere,” Lucy asked.

“This would be extenuating circumstances,” Jupiter said.  
“I’ll approve it, if it comes to that.”

“Thanks,” Lucy said.

Luna blinked rapidly and then straightened. “Okay, let’s go see if those buttheads are still camping.”

They followed Luna and Lucy as they made their way through the woods until they both froze.

Tarquin stopped with the others and listened intently.

They were male voices nearby.

Jupiter murmured, “Someone come with me to scout ahead. We don’t want them to know we’re here.”

“I’ll be right back,” Tarquin said.

While it was tempting to stay with his mate, he wanted to make sure she was safe.

“Wait, I need to see them to know if they’re the same guys,” Lucy said.

“Don’t leave me,” Luna whispered.

“All right, we’ll all go,” Tarquin said. “But we have to be quiet.”

The six of them crept quietly through the woods until they could see the hunters. They stayed hidden behind trees and brush, watching the four males who were seated around a low-burning campfire with a grate over the top. On the grate was a coffee pot and a skillet.

Tarquin could see two four-wheelers plus a large pickup truck near the tents. The males were dressed in denim and flannel, and none of them looked friendly. Then again, as a

bear shifter that could be targeted by a human hunter in the wild, he didn't think hunters ever looked friendly.

"That's them?" he whispered to Lucy and Luna.

They both nodded.

"Assholes," Luna said.

"Definitely," he said. "Let's get back to the cabin."

Jupiter snapped a picture of the hunters with his phone. Then their group walked away as silently as they'd approached, not making a sound until they reached the creek.

As they walked past it and continued the trek to the cabin, Tarquin asked, "Did they come around the cabin at all last night?"

"No," Luna said. "I stayed up all night waiting for Lucy to come home and I would've heard if someone had come around."

"That's good," Jupiter said. "At least it means they don't know the cabin is here. But I do think you shouldn't be here alone. I'm going to reach out to my dad and let him know I'll need a couple people to volunteer to patrol around the cabin."

"Obviously I'm going to do it," Tarquin said.

"I already counted you on the list," Jupiter said.

"Me too," August said.

Tarquin clapped him on the shoulder. "Thanks, man."

"Ah, hell, I guess I don't need to sleep tonight," Mercer said.

"Thanks, guys," Tarquin said, so thankful for his friends and their willingness to help.

When they reached the cabin, Tarquin went inside with Lucy and Luna and his friends went back to the SUV.

“I’d like to invite you both to come to the park and hang out today. I’d love to show you around. Then we can come back here for the night.”

Lucy looked at him and then said to her sister, “Can you give us a few minutes?”

Luna nodded and disappeared into her room, shutting the door.

“I need time to talk to my sister. I told you I didn’t want to rush things.”

“I’m not trying to rush anything, Lucy. I just want to make sure you’re safe.”

“We are.”

“Not with hunters so close. You’re vulnerable out here by yourselves.”

Her eyes narrowed. “We’ve done just fine on our own, you know. Hunters or not.”

Shit, he didn’t want to make her mad.

“I’m sorry, Lucy, that was a shitty thing for me to say. You’ve done amazingly well out here by yourselves, but now you’ve got me. You don’t have to do everything alone anymore.”

“I just met you a few hours ago.”

“I know.”

Damn, he was messing things up.

Although it warred with his protective side, he knew that she was a fierce and independent female, who could definitely take care of herself and her sister. He may want to protect her and help her, but he couldn't do that if she didn't want him to.

"Listen," he said, softening his tone. "How about you and your sister talk and I take off with my friends. You can meet me at the park for a late-afternoon tour and then dinner. I'll grill you two anything you want."

She tilted her head and the defiant heat left the pretty blue depths. "I'd like that."

He stepped close, inhaling her sweet scent, and took her hands. "I'm sorry if I came across like an ass. This is new to me."

"It is to me too." She smiled up at him. "I'm sorry if I was being an ass too. I got defensive."

"I shouldn't have suggested you couldn't handle things."

"Well, I'm no bear, but I do okay," she said, grinning.

He was tempted to kiss her, but then Luna opened the door. "Are you two done fighting?"

"We're not fighting," Lucy said.

"Sounded like it." Luna joined them, hopping to a stop next to her sister and bumping her shoulder. "So we leaving or staying?"

"We're staying for now, but we'll meet Tarquin at the park for dinner."

"I heard you'd grill anything. Steak?"

"Whatever you want."

“And mushrooms. I love steak with grilled mushrooms.”  
Luna pursed her lips and then said, “And potatoes.”

He smiled as Lucy elbowed her. “All right, let’s not get carried away,” Lucy said.

“It’s your first date and my first time hanging out with someone other than you for the last year. We should do it up right.”

“I agree. Steak with grilled mushrooms and potatoes,” he said. “What time?”

Lucy looked at the clock on the wall. “How about six?”

“Sure. Come to the employee entrance, and I’ll meet you there.”

“Well, give him a kiss goodbye at least. He saved your life. After nearly killing you.”

Lucy’s cheeks flamed. “Luna!”

Luna grinned wickedly. “See you at six, Tarquin. Thanks for bringing my sister home.”

She disappeared into her room again. Tarquin looked down at Lucy, whose whole face was now red and she wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“I’ll see you at six, sweetheart.”

He turned to walk away, but she grabbed his arm. He turned back to face her, and she went on her toes and brushed her lips across his. She paused, leaned back, and said, “I’m not doing this because my sister’s a dork, but because my doe is making the loudest demands in my head and kissing you goodbye might shut her up enough for me to chat with my sister about the future.”

He slid his arm around her and drew her closer, cupping her face with his free hand. “Sweetheart, you can kiss me to quiet your doe anytime.”

She let out a breathy sigh, her eyes darkening, and then she tilted her face to his and really kissed him.

Better than the first brush of their lips together, this kiss seared him all the way to his soul, like they were connected in a significant way now. She wasn’t just his soulmate, she was a female he was wholly attracted to—physically, emotionally, and intimately. They’d known each other such a short time, but she was already the center of his world.

His bear would raze a city to keep her safe.

Their lips parted and their tongues touched, and everything within him went reverently quiet. She was the last female he’d ever kiss.

His soulmate. His everything.

She pulled from the kiss first, nipping his bottom lip and letting out another contented sigh.

“Drive safely,” she said.

“I will. You too.” His mind spun for a moment as his bear roared out an unhappy sound at leaving her. “Wait, do you have a cell?”

“Yeah. I think I left it in the van. Why?”

“I wanted to give you my number so you can call me.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea.” She walked outside with him and opened the door of an old van. She pulled a cell phone from the cup holder and turned it on. “We hardly use it. Luna uses it for her homeschool work, and I contact farmers’



markets to get booth space. I don't have the number memorized."

He told her his number and she sent him a text: a winking face.

"Now we've got each other's numbers," he said, "text or call me if you need anything."

He kissed her again and said goodbye before his bear deafened him internally with his unhappiness.

"See you at six. And thank you again, for everything."

"You're welcome, sweetheart."

He got into the SUV. As he started the engine, August opened the passenger door and sat down.

"Thought you could use some company since you have to leave her behind. Do you think she'll want to stay at the park tonight or here?"

"I don't know. I'd love for her to stay at the park, but she doesn't want to rush things."

"Rushing isn't bad when it's soulmates. You're strangers, but you're also not strangers."

"Yeah. It'll be fine either way. As long as she's safe, that's the only thing that matters."

They headed down the dirt road away from the cabin. He looked in the rearview and watched her turn away and walk back into the cabin.

Damn, he hated leaving, but at least he'd see her that night. The time would drag between now and then, though.

"You know what's wild?" Tarquin asked August.

“What?”

“That Lucy said she and Luna were talking about the future, and we were all talking about it too,” Tarquin said.

“Maybe that’s the way it is with soulmates, that you just start thinking about future things and mating, like the universe is getting you prepped and ready. I’ve been thinking about it a lot myself lately.”

“You have?”

August nodded. “Absolutely. I think all of us have, actually. Every time one of us finds our soulmate, it gets the others pondering the future. I’m fucking happy for you, man.”

“Thanks, man. I hope you find your soulmate soon.”

“Me too.”

Tarquin made a mental list of things to get finished before Lucy and Luna arrived for dinner. Aside from prep and cooking, he needed to give his house a once-over and check in with Alpha Marcus and let him know what was going on.

He still couldn’t believe he’d gone to a bar less than twelve hours ago and found his soulmate.

## Chapter Eight

Lucy yawned as she cracked eggs into a cast iron skillet while Luna sliced bread for the toaster.

“So he’s pretty cool,” Luna said.

“He is.”

“Why aren’t we going with him?”

“Because you and I need to talk.”

“About how you want to jump his bones.”

Lucy dropped the entire egg into the pan, which cracked and sent shards of shell everywhere. “Dang it.”

“Ha, I knew you did.”

“You’re a loon.”

“I heard you call me a dork earlier, so it serves you right.”

Lucy grabbed a towel and scooped out the cracked egg and shell remnants, then started over with a fresh egg. “Anyway, I wanted time to talk to you about things.”

“I don’t really think there’s anything to talk about, actually. We both know that you were bound to find your forever guy at some point. And you told me that you’d take me with you no matter what, so I’m not sure why you sent him away.”

She wasn’t sure either.

Except that being with him made her think about the future.

A sexy future, with mating and beds.

And a sweet future, with babies and a home.

She didn't want to get so caught up in thoughts of the future that she forgot she was Luna's guardian.

Luna put the bread in the toaster and then turned to face her, folding her arms. "You do want to be with him, right?"

"Definitely. I just needed a little breather. It's hard to think straight when I'm around him."

"He was bummed we didn't come with him. Or, more likely, bummed you didn't."

"Yeah." Lucy added another egg and lifted the spatula from the counter. "We don't even know what the park is like. He said they live underground. But it sounds so much safer than being out here on our own."

Especially with the hunters.

"Okay. So we should pack, then."

"I...don't know." She flipped the eggs and grabbed plates from the cabinet. "Remember when Dad used to tell us how he met Mom and just knew in his heart that she was his mate?"

"Yeah. What was the term he used?"

"Lovestruck." Lucy smiled. "I feel like that with Tarquin. Like when I woke up in the hospital room in the park, I just knew that he was mine and everything was going to be okay. But I had to get back to you, so I kept ignoring what I was feeling and focusing on getting here to make sure you were okay."

“Sorry I interrupted your meet-cute-boink.”

Lucy turned the eggs onto the plates and snort-laughed. “I think you should stop reading romance novels. They’re warping your mind on what meet-cutes are.”

“I love romance novels, though. And it’s pretty dang amazing how you two met, even if it wasn’t cute.”

They sat at the table and ate eggs and toast with juice and discussed the potential for the future.

Lucy just didn’t know enough about Tarquin or the park to know what to expect, although he’d been very open with her about the situation. He wanted her with him, even if it wasn’t living in his place, and she could see the benefit of staying at the park.

Wiping her mouth with a napkin, she wadded it up and set it on the plate. “I guess I’m not quite ready to be with him yet. I’d like us to stay here tonight, even if it might just be for one more night.”

Luna’s eyes went luminous for a moment and she reached out to give Lucy’s hand a squeeze. “I think one more night here is a good idea.”

After the kitchen was clean, they headed to their bedrooms to rest since they’d both had a rough night. Her bed was cold and empty, and Lucy had never cared about that before. But she cared now because she wished Tarquin was there, even if it was just to lay with her so she could be near him. He smelled so good, and her doe loved him already.

\* \* \*

Lucy turned onto the access road that was marked for employees. The park itself lay ahead of them, safely tucked behind tall stone walls. A guard shack with wooden arms blocked the path. Beyond the shack was a gate within the walls.

A male opened the window and smiled. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Lucy. I'm here to see Tarquin."

"Oh, of course, welcome to the park." He handed her a tag to put in the windshield. "Just in case anyone questions your van in the employee lot. Pull straight ahead; Tarquin will be waiting for you there."

"Thank you."

She put up her window and drove forward, the gate sliding open. She saw a parking lot with several rows of SUVs, some with park decals on the sides. Tarquin stood at the end of one row of empty spaces and waved at her.

Lucy's heart sped up at seeing him. He looked even better than she remembered him looking. Hell, she'd even dreamed about him and his strong arms and sexy smile.

She parked and she and Luna got out.

He met her and gave her a hug and cheek kiss. She rested in his embrace for a moment. "I missed you," he said gruffly.

"I missed you too. I didn't realize how much until I actually saw you."

"Same."

He released his hold on her and smiled. “Ready for the tour?”

“You bet.”

“Hey, Luna,” Tarquin said.

“Hi. Thanks for inviting me along.”

“No way Lucy would come here without you, and I wouldn’t have it any other way anyhow.”

Luna grinned.

The tour started at the security office, where they got VIP visitor badges on lanyards. They saw everything in the park, from the bird sanctuary to the new, not-yet-open petting zoo, to the apartment complex at the back of the park.

It was secluded and set apart from the park so that visitors couldn’t access it. “What’s it for?” Lucy asked.

“In case someone has a mate who has family that doesn’t know the truth of what we are yet. It allows them to have a place where their family can visit without rousing suspicion.”

“Has that happened?” Luna asked, gazing up at the two-story complex. It looked like a small hotel, with white doors behind a walkway and iron railing.

“Yep. We used to have an apartment in the red barn where the bird sanctuary is, but that’s now the bird hospital. Evan and Jess run the sanctuary, and they live in the treehouse that overlooks it.”

“That would be cool,” Luna said.

“I’d like you to stay with me,” Tarquin said.

“I’m going to walk over here for a second,” Luna said.

Lucy chuckled, her cheeks burning. “Don’t go far.”

“I won’t, just out of earshot.”

“I’d like to stay with you, but not tonight,” she said.

He frowned, his brow lowering. “You can have your own place; you don’t have to stay with me.”

“I know, and I appreciate that so much,” she said, taking his hand. “It’s just that Luna and I want to stay one more night at the cabin. I’m not ready to close that part of my life just yet. Everything happened so fast, you know. I thought I was going to die when the hunters were chasing me, or Luna. Then I definitely thought I was going to bite it when you hit me. I need the time to be okay with the abrupt change. Does that make sense?”

He hummed. “Yeah, it does actually. You’ll let me be there, though? With my friends, so we can watch for trouble?”

“Of course. I wished you’d been with me today.”

“I definitely wished that too.”

He moved closer, invading her space, the sweet scent of him, all warmth and masculinity, wrapped around her. He lowered his head so slowly she thought he’d never kiss her.

But then he did and her whole world stopped.

His lips were soft against hers at first, and then he wrapped his arms around her and hauled her close. Their lips parted at the same time, their tongues touching, sliding together. She let out a little moan, her nails digging into his shoulders as the kiss deepened. Her stomach flipped and her doe let out a happy grunt in her head.



Her head was spinning when the kiss ended, and she kept her eyes closed for just a little bit longer, not sure she wanted things to end just yet.

He nipped her bottom lip with a low chuckle that told her he knew just how affected she was by the kiss. When she opened her eyes, she saw that his eyes had changed to the amber of his beast, which meant he was just as affected.

She wanted to say something memorable because it seemed like a momentous occasion, but she couldn't think of anything save for *please kiss me some more, sexy beast*.

And that was not what she wanted to say, at all. Especially when her sister wasn't all that far away and they were out in the open and not somewhere private.

"Is this the last spot on the tour?" she asked, tilting her head back a little to look at him.

"Topside, yes. I guess the question is whether you'd like to eat dinner up here or in the market."

"I thought you were going to grill for us?" she asked, after calling Luna back over.

"I am, but I can grill up here at one of the closed stalls or in my place," he said, dropping his hold on her waist and capturing her hand with his.

"I think it would be nice to be down in your place so we can have the freedom to talk without worrying if anyone is listening," she said.

"That works for me. Afterward, I'd like you to meet Marcus and the rest of the sleuth too."

Lucy was definitely on board with that. She was really curious about the bears and wanted to get to know his friends.

On their way to the employee cafeteria to head down to his home, they met Tayme and his red fox mate Rory, who were working the sandwich stall. Rory came out from behind the stall and gave her and Luna a hug. “Welcome, welcome, I’m so glad to meet you both! Are you interested in sandwiches?”

“I’m grilling for them at my place,” Tarquin said.

“Nice,” Tayme said, nodding in approval.

“Do you have sides? You could stop at the mac and cheese stall,” Rory suggested.

“There’s a mac and cheese stall?” Luna demanded.

“You just spoke her love language,” Lucy said with a laugh.

“Yep,” Rory said. “You can pick the toppings and add-ins too. It’s awesome.”

They chatted with them for a few minutes, and then hit the mac and cheese stall, where Luna got the four-cheese version and added bacon and scallions.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Hyde said as he scooped up a generous helping into a paper container.

“You too,” Lucy said.

After Luna, eyes wide and a huge smile on her face, said thank you, they headed into the employee cafeteria. They stopped in front of a door with a keypad.

“I can’t give you the code until we’re mated officially,” Tarquin said. “It’s nothing personal, just security.”

“I understand,” Lucy said. She turned to Luna and saw her wolfing down the mac and cheese. “I think we should’ve gotten you two servings.”

“It’s amazing! I thought yours was good, but this is awesome.”

“You like to cook?” Tarquin asked.

“I do,” Lucy said. “I mean, I cook out of necessity because we have to eat, but I like it.”

“What’s your favorite thing to make?”

“French toast casserole.”

“I’ve never had that before,” he said. “Would you make it for me sometime?”

“I’d love to.”

They headed down a flight of stairs and came out into the bears’ private living area. The huge space was filled with a dozen small homes. The floor was dark hardwood, and the walls and ceiling were painted to resemble a forest. The homes all had long porches and sidewalks that connected them.

She took Tarquin’s arm and walked with him to his home, which turned out to have three bedrooms with an eat-in kitchen and a family room with a flat-screen TV over the top of an electric fireplace. Luna immediately asked to watch TV since they hadn’t had one in the cabin. He turned it on for her, explained the remote, and let her channel surf to her heart’s content.

He turned on a countertop grill and removed steaks from the refrigerator. She offered to help, but he refused, asking her to chat with him while he sliced mushrooms and checked on the foil-wrapped potatoes in the oven.

By the time the meal was ready, she was not only starving but enjoying herself very much. She'd never had anyone so interested in her and what she had to say. Tarquin was genuinely the sweetest guy she'd ever met.

He called Luna to the table when he was finished cooking, and they filled their plates.

After the first bite of perfectly medium-rare steak, Lucy said, "Oh wow, this tastes amazing."

He smiled. "I'm glad you like it."

"Who taught you how to grill? Or were you just a natural?" she asked.

"A little of both, I guess. When I came here, they had wanted to open a burger stall but didn't have anyone to run it, so I offered to learn. They started me off down in the market on the grill to learn without the pressure of the paying public, and I definitely didn't burn over half of everything I tried to cook."

She grinned. "We cooked over a firepit sometimes in the summer."

"Like what sorts of things?"

"Kebobs mostly, although I do have an old-fashioned hand pie press that we used to make apple pies with."

"Those are my favorite," Luna said. "With caramel sauce and whipped cream."

“Sounds awesome,” he said.

Tarquin asked Luna about school and her favorite subject, to which Lucy knew exactly what she'd say: “Reading, definitely. But only romance or fantasy, not the boring stuff on the approved reading list for school.”

Lucy could relate. She'd disliked slogging through the reading material to finish high school and always preferred finding her own things to read.

“I used to read science fiction when I was a kid,” he said.

“Me too,” Lucy said. “My dad loved sci-fi, and since we didn't have a TV, he liked to buy books from library sales and always searched for sci-fi.”

When the meal was over, Lucy and Luna did the dishes while Tarquin told them about the bears that called the park home. It was clear that the bears were family to him. They were so accepting and genuine.

“Why don't we go out to the market for dessert?” Tarquin suggested when the dishes were done.

“Yes, please,” Lucy said. The meal had been wonderful. Not only the food, which was awesome, but also the conversation with Tarquin. It was all so very normal—having a meal with her mate and her sister and talking—but it was sweetly strange to be in this position. If fate had twisted their lives a different direction, they would never have met and tonight would never have happened.

“You okay?” he asked as they made their way out into the hall that led to the market.

“I’m just happy to be here. Dinner was so great. Thank you for cooking for us.”

“It was definitely my pleasure,” he said, putting his arm around her and drawing her close.

The market was a large, open space with a long counter where meals were handed out, a section of tables and chairs, and several shops, including a nail salon.

“Holy crap,” Lucy said under her breath.

“What?” he asked.

“It’s just...big.”

“Yeah, we have a lot of people to serve. The bears handle the food, both here and topside. The kitchen is run by Jeanie, the alpha wolf’s mate.”

They approached the counter, and Tarquin introduced them to Jeanie.

“Welcome to the park,” she said with a smile. “What can I get for you?”

“What desserts do you have?” Tarquin asked.

“Chocolate cupcakes and cheesecake.”

He looked at the girls. They both said, “Cupcake, please,” at the same time and then grinned at each other. He added, “Make it three.”

“You got it. I’ll call when they’re ready for you,” she said.

Tarquin took them to meet Marcus, the alpha bear.

She’d only ever met one alpha in her life, and that was the alpha of their herd. But a predator alpha had an entirely

different vibe. Even though he was smiling when he rose to his feet and shook their hands, he had an air of authority and power that her former alpha had not had.

But despite being a prey shifter, she wasn't worried about being around so many predator shifters. She felt safe with Tarquin and knew he'd never let anyone hurt them.

They also met lion alpha Caesar, as well as wolf alpha Joss, and Alistair, the elephant alpha.

Tarquin grabbed the cupcakes when they were ready. They said goodbye to Marcus and the others and found an empty table. Tarquin dropped off the cupcakes and went to get bottled water for them.

"There's so many alphas here," Luna said with a low voice. "But they all get along."

"I was thinking the same thing," Lucy said.

"About what?" Tarquin asked, rejoining them.

"That there are a lot of alphas and a lot of different shifter groups, all predators."

"True," he said. "It just works, though. The alphas are in charge of their own groups, so you wouldn't see Atticus the gorilla alpha taking control of the wolves or anything like that. The alphas get together for meetings and decide on issues related to the park and their people. I'm pretty sure it's the only place of its kind, at least in the States."

"Pretty sure?" Luna asked in between bites.

"Well, our people are so secretive, it's not like we could go around asking if anyone's seen shifters, or if a zoo houses shifters instead of natural animals."

Lucy thought the safari setting was really clever. Not only did their people get to be in their shifts out in the open, but humans were none the wiser.

“I do know of a traveling circus that has shifters,” he added. “It wouldn’t surprise me if there are other places like ours, but I do think we’re unique in that we have so many different types in one place.”

“A traveling circus would be so cool,” Luna said.

Lucy agreed. “So what happens if a human comes on the VIP tour and one of the shifters is their soulmate?”

“They take the human to the security office and have them wait for a photo album. The shifter changes back and meets them there and offers to take them to get a bite to eat while they wait. The human would feel a connection to the shifter, so they should want to spend time with them.”

Lucy arched her brow at the emphasis on should, and Tarquin explained that a wolf pack had attempted to take over and sent in one of their males to infiltrate the park. He ended up finding his soulmate in a she-wolf and fled before she could meet him.

“What happened? Did he come back?” Luna asked.

“He did, and he came clean about his alliance to the other pack, but chose our wolf pack because of his soulmate. The other pack was defeated, so our park is safe.”

They chatted while they ate the decadent cupcakes. When they dropped their plates off at the counter to be cleaned, she told Jeanie how much she enjoyed the dessert.

“I’m so glad to hear it. Come back anytime.”



Lucy and Tarquin returned to the table. She opened her mouth to ask what the plans were, when she realized Luna hadn't come back to the table with them.

"She's in the makeup shop," Tarquin said with a smile.

They met with the owner of the shop, Dani, who was mated to Neo, a gorilla shifter.

Lucy looked at Tarquin. "If she's okay here, we could go talk."

His eyes got a little darker and a spicy scent reached her nose.

"I'm great, take your time," Luna said.

"I'll give her a facial," Dani said. "It's my favorite thing to do and lets me get to know people."

"Okay, see you in a bit."

Luna was too busy getting settled on a stool in front of a lit-up makeup mirror to even respond to Lucy.

They returned to the little house in the private living area. Tarquin sat on the couch, his hair tousled as he ran his fingers through it.

She liked everything she'd seen since they came to the park. It was safe beyond her wildest dreams, and for the first time since she'd lost her dad, she could see a very clear picture of the future. The worries and stress of being on her own with Luna were melting away in the wake of Tarquin's attentiveness and concern for both their well-being.

It wasn't just her and Luna against the world. She could relax and let down the walls of fear and worry that she'd built over the years. Tarquin was worth it.

## Chapter Nine

Tarquin's whole body was wound tight. Everything about Lucy screamed passion, from the way her eyes got dark every time they touched, to the kiss that had seared him from the inside out. He wanted more of that, more of her, but he wasn't sure she wanted to do more than kiss.

He was okay with taking things slow. She'd been on her own, taking care of her sister for the last year, and didn't have anyone she could reach out to. Humans were out of the question, because a shifter couldn't trust a human with their secret, and that meant you couldn't be entirely honest with them.

"You must have felt so alone," he said.

Her brows rose. "You mean after my dad died?"

"Yeah."

"I did. I didn't want to burden Luna with how I felt, and it wasn't like I had a place I could take her where I wouldn't feel like that. Everything I did, every choice I've made, has been couched with the question of whether we'd be safe. I have been worried constantly, but Luna has started to chafe against the rules. She wants friends and normalcy, but I don't know how to give that to her."

She joined him on the couch, sitting sideways to face him and resting her head on the back.

He stared into her beautiful eyes. The strange twists of fate that had brought them together came to mind. They never would have met if he'd left the bar ten minutes earlier, or if

Luna hadn't gotten spooked by the coyote and run into the hunters. It was mind-boggling that he might have gone his whole life without ever meeting her.

He opened his mouth to tell her how thankful he was that they'd met, despite the shitty circumstances with the hunters, when she leaned over and kissed him.

His bear let out a throaty growl as she moved closer, straddling his hips and sitting on his lap.

He kneaded her waist, his fingers slipping under the top to touch her soft skin. She was warm and smelled amazing, and kissing her was hands-down the best thing he'd ever done in his life. He couldn't imagine how amazing it would be to mate her and mark her as his mate.

She moaned softly and pressed herself closer. His erection strained against his jeans as she rubbed provocatively against him. It was heaven and hell wrapped up together.

She pulled from the kiss that devastated his senses and pressed her forehead against his as she panted for breath.

"I want."

"Anything," he said.

"I want to take things slow," she said with a low chuckle, "but you're so addictive I can't keep my hands off you."

"Oh?" He brushed her hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ears. "I couldn't tell."

"I think you can," she said, grinning as she pressed a little more closely to him. He groaned.

"It's not nice to tease the bear."

“Yeah, I’m also working myself up, which isn’t cool.” She rested her head on his shoulder and snuggled close. “Did you know it would be like this? That we’d be so attracted to each other right away?”

“If I recall, when you woke up, you didn’t want anything to do with me.”

She kissed his jaw. “I’m sorry about that. I was too worried about Luna.”

“I know, I’m just teasing. But I have heard from people who’ve found their soulmates that they’re consumed with each other from the start. I honestly wondered if you were too worried about your sister to even realize we were mates in the beginning.”

“I knew, I was just trying not to think about it. I didn’t want to get distracted until I could make sure she was okay.” She sat up and stared at him. “I have a lot of baggage.”

He frowned. “Do you mean packing up your house?”

She let out a little laugh and shook her head. “No, I mean emotionally. And physically, too, if you count Luna. I’ve literally got no one in my family except my sister, and she’s a minor, so she’s my responsibility until she’s an adult. And I’ll probably always worry about her. It’s just been the two of us since Dad died, but even before that, he wasn’t the same after our mom died. I worry about Luna, about both our safety, because Dad worried about it so much. His fears over losing us the way he lost Mom are why I was so preoccupied with getting to Luna and making sure she was okay.” She sighed and rubbed the space between her eyes. “I feel like I’ve always been scared, like there’s a shadow of uncertainty that follows me all the time.”

“I can’t imagine what you went through growing up as you did. To lose your mom and herd, and then be so isolated and afraid as you were. I wish we’d met years ago.”

“Me too.”

“I’m not afraid,” he said.

She arched a brow. “I wouldn’t think so, you’re a big bear.”

He kissed her. “No, I mean, I’m not afraid of your baggage. You have every right to have emotional scars from what you went through, and those take time to heal. Hell, some wounds never really do heal. But being Luna’s guardian doesn’t scare me either. She’s your sister, and you’re my soulmate, which makes her my sister.”

She exhaled softly, relief clear on her features.

“Luna’s worried about meeting boys and finding a job, and I’m worried about those things for her too. Even if she’s definitely too young to date.”

“One hundred percent. Maybe when she’s thirty.”

“I do have one favor, though.”

“Name it.”

“Ask me to be your mate. We’ve been acting like we’re mates, but we haven’t really talked about it. I don’t even know if bears have a special ceremony or anything.”

He suddenly felt like an ass.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t mean to take anything for granted.”

“I don’t feel that way. I just want...” Her voice drifted off, her gaze dropping to the side.

“You want what?” He tipped her chin up until she was looking at him again.

“I want all of it. All the experiences.” She wrinkled her nose and her cheeks pinked. He loved to see her blush but didn’t know what she was thinking about to cause it.

“What’s on your mind?”

“I’m not a virgin,” she blurted.

He froze, his brows raising. “O-kay?”

She put her head in her hands and let out an embarrassed laugh. “I didn’t want you to think that I’ve been locked up all chaste or anything; I had needs and I’m sure you did too.” She dropped her hands and looked at him. “But I’ve never been on a date or in a relationship. There are things that aren’t new to me, but so much of it is. Have you ever been in a relationship?”

“No. I wanted to wait for my soulmate. I’ve been with females, but it was really more about sating an urge than wanting to be close to someone.” He paused and then said, “I’ve never actually been on a date either.”

Bringing a human female home was always out of the question, and it was forbidden for park shifters to stay away overnight unless it was approved in advance by the alphas. It meant hurried fucks that meant nothing and made his bear snooze in his head.

“I wish I’d waited for you,” he said. “I wish you were my first.”

Her eyes got luminous, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. “I wish I’d waited too,” she said. Her lips feathered over his, and then she kissed across his cheek and nibbled her way down his neck.

He tilted his head to give her more access as she sucked on his neck and sent shivers down his spine. “My life really started when I met you.”

“Hit me with your car.”

He chuckled. “Will you ever stop bringing that up?”

“First, it hasn’t even been a full day yet. And second, no. I won’t stop until it stops being funny.”

“You keep me on my toes, sweetheart, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

## Chapter Ten

“I’m going to head to bed,” Luna said when they walked into the cabin later that night.

“Night, hon,” Lucy said.

“Night, kiddo,” Tarquin said.

Luna paused at the door and looked over her shoulder. “The walls are pretty thin.”

Lucy, who had never blushed so dang much in her life, felt her cheeks heat. “I know, Lun.”

“Just reminding ya. Night.”

When the door closed, Tarquin barked out a laugh. He gave her a kiss. “I love seeing you blush.”

She let out a gusty laugh. “It’s happening so much around you.”

“It’s adorable.”

“I should get to bed too,” she said, feeling wistful. She wanted to do a hundred different things right then, and taking him to bed was chief on the list. But Luna wasn’t wrong: the walls were thin, and even if they weren’t, Luna had excellent hearing thanks to being a shifter and would be able to hear it all.

And the very last thing Lucy wanted was to have her first time with Tarquin be within hearing distance of her little sister.

Something dawned on her and she gasped. “Oh gosh, how thin are the walls at your place?”



“Because it’s all full of shifters, all the houses are well-insulated to help with noise, not only within the house but also from house to house. But,” he said, looking thoughtful, “I don’t know that it’ll be entirely quiet in her room.”

“I’ll wear headphones,” Luna said loudly from her room.

Tarquin grinned at Lucy. “Thanks,” he called.

“That’s my cue to go to bed. Are you going to be comfortable out here?”

“Of course.”

He accepted her kiss with a soft growl that made her want to curl up in his lap and see where the night took them. Instead, although it was difficult, she rose to her feet.

“I’m going to sleep for a few hours and then relieve the guys. I’ll see you in the morning,” he said, stretching with a groan.

“Thanks for this,” she said.

“For what?”

“For putting up with my demands and bringing your friends here to stand guard.”

“I’d do anything for you, Lucy, I hope you know that. You wanted one more night in the cabin, and I wanted you to have that. If you wanted more time, you could have that too.”

She took his offered hand and gave it a squeeze. “It’s been a good night. Dad would be happy I found you and that we’re moving on with our lives. I felt like we were treading water and I didn’t know how to get out of it.”

“Whatever I can do to help you, I will.”

“I know.” She bent and gave him one more kiss and then walked away before she was tempted to do anything else.

But instead of going into her room, she knocked on Luna’s door and walked in.

“It was a good night, wasn’t it?” she asked, shutting the door.

Luna looked up from the book she was reading and nodded. “Yeah. I’m excited about being at the park, but I think I’ll miss the cabin too.”

“So you’re definitely okay with us moving to the park?”

“For sure. It’ll be nice to be around other people who know our secret and not be worried so much about being in our shifts.”

“It’ll definitely be nice to have people watching our backs.”

At first she’d been reluctant to move into Tarquin’s place right away, but after spending the evening with him, she couldn’t imagine being anywhere but with him.

“You have to buy me AirPods, by the way,” Luna said. “And a phone of my own. My headphones won’t cut it for noise canceling.”

“I’m sure I can make that happen.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks. I’m pretty dang happy too.” Lucy said goodnight and walked to her room, climbing in bed and immediately wishing that Tarquin was there.

Luna was right: the park had so much more to offer them than she'd ever have been able to provide. Finding her soulmate was freeing in a way that she hadn't expected. Everything didn't ride on her anymore; she had Tarquin for advice and support. She hadn't felt that kind of relief since her dad passed away.

She was no longer alone.

\* \* \*

"We can come back another time and pack everything else," Tarquin said as he grabbed Lucy and Luna's bags and carried them to the SUV. "We don't have to spend all day packing."

"That would be nice," Lucy said. She turned back into the house and grabbed her favorite pillow and fluffy blanket from the bed. As she came back outside, she said, "I want to make sure we don't leave anything behind, and I feel like rushing to get it all done today would mean surely we'd forget something."

"It's no problem at all," he said, giving her a sweet smile. "We can come back as many times as we need to."

Luna skipped from the house, hopping down to the yard from the porch. "I'm ready."

She stopped next to Lucy, and the two put their arms around each other and looked at the cabin. "It's hard to believe this isn't home anymore," Lucy said.

"But it's time," Luna said. "We were both ready for something more; we just didn't know what it was."

Lucy nodded, feeling a little wave of sadness wash over her.

Tarquin joined them and put his arm around Lucy's shoulders. "It's a cute house. I'm sure you made tons of great memories here."

"We did," Lucy said. "But I'm ready to make new memories. With you." She tipped her face up to his and he kissed her.

August carried a box from the cabin. "This is the last one that's packed up. Do you want to keep packing?"

"Nah, we'll come back. Maybe this weekend and finish up," Tarquin said.

Mercer clapped his hands. "I'm ready when y'all are. I promised I'd be there for the security office before lunch and I desperately need to get laundry done."

Lucy gave Luna a final squeeze and then said, "I'm ready too."

Tarquin kissed her cheek and opened both her passenger door and Luna's.

"I should've said shotgun," Luna said, climbing into the second row.

"The mate always gets shotgun," Tarquin said. "Make sure you remember that for when you find your soulmate. After you're thirty, of course."

He shut the doors as Luna screeched, "Thirty? I hope I'm not that old when I find my soulmate."

"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll find your soulmate before then. But Tarquin just meant you're not dating until thirty, so it

doesn't matter when you meet him.”

“Uncool.”

Tarquin started the SUV. “I had a thought.”

“A good one?”

“Definitely. How'd you like to be in the paddock in your shifts on Friday for the VIP tour?”

“Could we? That would be awesome,” Luna said. “I got screwed with my shift this weekend; it was too stressful.”

“Which paddock?” Lucy asked.

“The one with Tank the moose and the non-shifting animals.”

“I'd love that. What will you do, though? There couldn't be a bear in with those non-shifters, right?”

“No, that would definitely not work,” he said, chuckling. “I'll dress as one of the workers and clean up the paddock and hang out with you while the tours are going on.” It was something they often let mates who couldn't shift do, to allow them to be part of the tour and spend time with their mate in their shift. “Then maybe Saturday afternoon we could switch roles and you could hang out with me in the bear paddock.”

Lucy loved that idea. “Who runs the burger stall while you're in the paddocks for two days?”

“There are wolves who will take over a food stall if the bears are needed elsewhere. The alphas try to give everyone a chance to be in the paddock each weekend at least one time, so there's a lot of rotating and filling in that happens for the park workers.”

“How many soulmates have come from the VIP tour coupons?”

“Not that many, actually. It started off great, with Adriana and Celeste on the tour from the coupons. They’re mated to a gorilla and a lion, respectively. But then it petered off a bit and there haven’t been that many. Rhapsody, who’s mated to elephant Kelley, bought her own ticket online. Joss’s mate Jeanie came on the tour, but the coupon was given to her by a neighbor. Neo’s mate Dani, who runs the makeup store in the market, was given a ticket by Jeanie. Lark, who mated wolf Evan, tried to buy a ticket for herself and her niece at the tour stand and was almost turned away when Evan realized she was his soulmate. And Novi, who mated Cael, an elephant, used a ticket addressed to a previous tenant of their apartment.”

Lucy hummed at the information. “So it sounds like the tickets are helpful in some ways, but it’s mostly just luck.”

“Yeah.”

“Like how lucky you were to hit my sister with your car?” Luna quipped from the backseat.

Tarquin grunted. “Not you too.”

“Oh, I’ll be teasing you forever about it. Trust me.”

Lucy hid her smile. She loved how accepting Tarquin was of her sister.

She pulled out the old cell phone, a prepaid one she’d picked up at a convenience store.

“We definitely need to upgrade that,” Luna said.

“I agree,” Lucy said.

“Sure, thing, kiddo.”

In the back of their SUV were several boxes of preserves as well as a box of her crochet and knit items.

“Did you like to sell at the markets and shows?” he asked.

“It’s hard work and often yields very little,” she said. Sometimes they didn’t even make enough to pay for the booth rental. “But I really love making things, especially jams and jellies.”

“Have you ever made bacon jam?”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s really great. Maybe you could find a recipe for it and we could make a burger with it. And I bet we could sell your preserves in the gift or candy shops.”

“Really?” Lucy’s mind spun. It would be wonderful to be able to continue to make preserves, even if it was only in her spare time.

“You bet. They’d probably even use them in the market too. You’d just have to give samples out for people to try.”

“I’ve got plenty, if you couldn’t tell.”

“Maybe you can teach me to make them too.” He lifted her hand and kissed it.

“I’d love that.”

When they reached the park, they stopped in the employee lot and unloaded everything, courtesy of a large wagon that had been brought up by Marcus for them.

“How did it all go?” Marcus asked as he helped unload the SUVs.

“Good. No trouble at all,” Tarquin said.

“Were the hunters still in the area?” he asked.

“Yeah,” August said.

Lucy straightened and looked at the males. “They are? When did you see them?”

“We scouted out the whole area throughout the night,” he said, putting a box of preserves in the wagon. “We wanted to make sure we knew where they were. It looks like they were planning a deer hunt at dawn. They didn’t do anything overnight but drink around the campfire and pass out.”

“At least they didn’t come scouting our way,” Tarquin said. “They had a deer hide away from their camp, but it wasn’t anywhere near the cabin. And it doesn’t matter anyway, since you’re not going to be staying there anymore, right?”

“Yeah, I just didn’t realize they were still there.” Lucy shivered, thinking about how close she’d come to dying thanks to those assholes.

Tarquin pulled the loaded wagon behind them as they entered the park through another gate and headed to the employee cafeteria, using a freight elevator to take everything underground.

“Which room is mine?” Luna asked as she ran inside the house. “Can I pick either?”

“Sure,” Tarquin said. “I put a bed in one bedroom yesterday, but we can move it to the other empty room.”



“I like the other room,” Luna said, coming out to the family room. “It has a walk-in.”

“That works for me,” Tarquin said. “We can get linens from the shop in the market and also look at their phone selection.”

“And AirPods,” Luna said.

“We didn’t forget,” Lucy said.

Luna grabbed a bag of clothes and hangers from the wagon and carried them back into the bedroom she’d chosen.

“It’s like we met each other and became an instant family,” Tarquin said. “That’s so cool.”

It was cool. All of it.

She had no idea that going for a run in their shifts would change their lives so dramatically. She just wished that her dad was still alive to see they didn’t have to live in fear and alone in the woods anymore. They might be the last albino does around, but their people would live on in their future children—hers and Luna’s.

Once Luna turned thirty, anyway.

“Let’s unpack,” Lucy said. “I think you promised to take me out on a date and ask me a very romantic thing.”

“I did,” he said, dropping a kiss to her lips. “I can’t wait.”

Lucy couldn’t wait either.

## Chapter Eleven

Tarquin watched Lucy and Luna in the market's shop as they looked at the cell phones and accessories offered by Zeger and Anke, the wolves who ran it.

“Congratulations on finding your soulmate,” Zeger said, leaning on the counter.

“Thanks.”

“It's always heartening to see you young'uns finding each other. I heard she's a unique deer.”

“Doe, actually, and yeah, she's albino. Her and her sister.”

“That's amazing. I once knew an albino wolf. His pack considered him to be an omen of good tidings and he became alpha eventually.”

“Just because of his fur color?”

Zeger shrugged. “Some packs are superstitious.”

“The only bears I've ever seen that are fully white are polar bears. It would be interesting to see an albino black bear or grizzly.”

The girls returned to the counter. Luna was already on the phone she'd chosen and creating an email address for herself so she could create an account to download apps and games.

Lucy set the phone she picked on the counter and smiled up at him. “Thank you for this.”

“The park provides it all, so it's not me paying for it.”

“I know, but thank you for taking care of us. It means a lot to me.”

“Anytime.” He loved to see her smile. He could tell she was relieved to be at the park, and he was thankful she’d been willing to come. She could have just as easily said she wanted more time in the cabin or more time to get to know him. His bear was happy she was with them.

She tilted her head and eyed him curiously. “When you saw the cabin for the first time, did you think I was some kind of backwoods bumpkin who didn’t know anything about technology?”

“No, of course not.” Her eyes narrowed a bit more, and he put up his hands. “Okay, a little. I mean, you were living in the middle of assnowhere.”

“I think my dad would’ve preferred we weren’t doing anything modern at all, at least not when it came to technology. But we couldn’t do school without having access to the materials online, so we had to have some technology.”

Anke came up to the counter with a case for the AirPods. “Here you go, hon. Lemme grab the linens, and then you’ll be set.”

“Thank you so much,” Lucy said.

“Do you have a favorite TV show?” he asked.

They both said they didn’t watch enough TV to have a favorite, but they did like to go to the movies.

Tarquin took the stack of new linens from Anke and thanked them for their help.

They turned to leave when someone shouted for them.

“I’m so glad I caught you,” Dani said, jogging up to them.

“Hi, Dani, what’s up?” Lucy asked.

“I wanted to invite Luna to a girls’ night. Rory wanted to invite her, but she had to get to work before you all got back here, so she asked me to catch you.”

“Wow, really? Who’s coming?” Luna asked, putting her phone in her pocket.

“Adriana, Celeste, me, Rory, Lark, Novi, Jess, and Trina. We’re going to do facials, manis, and pedis, and then have a sleepover in the treehouse with Jess.”

Luna looked at Lucy. “Can I go?”

“Of course! It sounds like so much fun.”

“Can Lucy come?” Luna asked.

Lucy shook her head. “I’ve got a date tonight, remember?”

“Oh, right. I wouldn’t want to be home tonight anyway,” Luna said, wrinkling her nose.

Tarquin chuckled. Luna was constantly saying things that made Lucy blush. He loved it.

“What time?” he asked.

“Rory will grab her around six, and we’ll bring her home tomorrow after breakfast. Enjoy your date.”

“Thanks,” Lucy said.

“That’s really cool,” Luna said.

They walked down the hall to the bears’ living space.

“Did you ask them to invite me?” Luna asked.

“Nope,” Lucy said. “I didn’t know anything about it.”

Tarquin shook his head when Luna shot him a curious look. He was very thankful, though. He suspected that Marcus asked Rory to reach out to Luna to keep her company while they were on their date. Inviting the mates to join in on a girls’ night was a great idea. Plus, he and Lucy would have the house to themselves.

“Aside from the night you were injured, this will be the first time we’re apart overnight,” Luna said when they walked into the house.

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Can I skip schoolwork tomorrow so I can get my room set up?”

“We actually have a classroom,” Tarquin said. “The few young that we have meet there to do their online schooling. A wolf named Kean runs the classroom and is there to help. We can talk to Joss about it; I’m sure it would be easy to get you into the program they use.”

“Cool. Maybe I can make some more friends.”

“I’m sure you will,” Lucy said.

Luna left them alone in the family room and went to make the bed with the sheets and blankets she’d picked from the store.

Lucy gave him a hug, resting her head over his heart and sighing. “I wasn’t sure what it would feel like to be here, Tarquin.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Home.”

\* \* \*

Tarquin dressed for their first date in black slacks and a white dress shirt, which he paired with a black satin tie.

He put pomade in his hair and fixed it, fussing with the longer strands on top until it looked perfect. He took one last look at himself in the mirror and then walked out of the bathroom. Lucy was getting ready in the other bathroom, which Luna had claimed as her own.

Luna was waiting in the family room with a backpack on one shoulder and her pillow under her arm. “Lucy wants you to knock on the door.”

“The bathroom door?”

“No, the outside door, like you’re coming to pick her up for a real date.”

“Cool.” He went to the fridge and grabbed the flowers he’d stashed there after grabbing them from the market while Lucy had been showering.

“Oh, that’s so sweet,” Luna said. “Lucy is lucky to have you.”

“I’m the lucky one, kiddo, trust me.”

She beamed at him. He stepped outside and shut the door, then listened intently for Lucy so he’d know when she was done in the bathroom. It took a few minutes, but then he

heard the click of heels and knew she'd come into the family room.

Knocking three times, he adjusted his tie and fidgeted with the flowers, a bouquet of red and white roses.

Lucy opened the door and every thought Tarquin had fled.

She looked gorgeous. A black dress hugged her curves, and the heels brought her a little closer to his height. Her hair was swept to one side and curled on the ends, and her lips were just a shade of pink darker than usual.

He couldn't even form a coherent sentence. All he could hear was his bear pacing in his head and making demands that involved stripping her from that sexy dress and finding out what she sounded like when she fell apart.

He finally got his act together.

"You look amazing, sweetheart. The most beautiful female on the planet." He handed the flowers to her.

"When did you get these? They're so pretty. Thank you."

"Earlier," he said, following her inside.

"Do you have a vase?" she asked.

"Would a tall glass work?"

"Sure," she said.

He followed her into the kitchen and located one of the glasses, filling it with water as she cut away the paper and then settled the flowers in the glass. She bent and inhaled them, then smiled at him, her eyes dancing.

“Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart. Ready for our first date?”

“Yes, I can’t wait.”

“Hold on,” Luna said as they walked into the family room. “Let me get a picture of you. Everyone needs to have a picture of their first date.”

They moved to the fireplace and embraced, smiling at Luna as she snapped several pictures.

Their phones buzzed as they both got texts from her with the pictures.

“Have fun,” Luna said.

“Thanks, hon,” Lucy said, giving her a cheek kiss. “You too.”

“I will! It’s my first girls’ night. See you tomorrow.”

Tarquin led Lucy from the house and to the stairwell to take them up to the cafeteria. In the employee parking lot, Joss and Jeanie were waiting by one of the SUVs.

“We’re not officially double dating with you,” Joss said, smiling, “but you need an escort and Jeanie and I haven’t been out in a while.”

“Too long,” Jeanie said.

“Indeed,” Joss said with a nod.

“Thank you,” Tarquin said. “We’re going to Bohners. Do you know where it is?”

“Yes, we’ve eaten there,” Joss said. “You lead, we’ll follow.”



The two alphas walked to their vehicle. Tarquin opened the passenger door of a small SUV for Lucy. “Why do we need an escort?”

He got behind the wheel and started the engine. “It’s just a safety precaution. No one goes anywhere alone. Better safe than sorry.”

“That’s cool.”

When they were away from the park and on the main road, Tarquin said, “Tell me about the first time you shifted.”

“Oh man, you can’t imagine,” she said, giggling, launching into a story that involved Luna watching and her father encouraging her, followed by falling over when she finally did shift and nearly breaking her leg.

They spent the dinner talking about their pasts and their hopes for the future. Both of them wanted kids and agreed that Luna would be an awesome aunt. And they both wanted to work together in the park.

By the time they got back to the park, it was closing time and the patrols were ensuring the human guests were gone. They parted ways with Joss and Jeanie in the cafeteria.

“Hold on,” he said, pulling gently on Lucy’s arm.

“What?” she asked.

“I wanted to show you something.” He led her to an access door and a ladder, leading the way up to the roof. When he helped her out onto the roof, she straightened and gasped at the view over the park.

“Oh wow, look at it all! This is so neat.” She walked over to the ledge and gingerly peeked over.

“I thought you’d like to see the park from up here. It’s a great place for star gazing too.”

She tilted her head back to look at the dark sky filled with stars. “Oh, you’re right. That’s amazing.”

“It’s also good for something else.”

He dropped to one knee and took a ring from his pocket that was encased in a velvet pouch. She lowered her head as he took the ring from the pouch. It was a white gold ring engraved with small hearts.

“Lucy,” he said, holding up the ring, “you’re the most amazing female I’ve ever met. Not only are you sweet and kind, but you’re strong and brave. I’m the luckiest male on the planet to have you in my life. I know we’re soulmates, but I want to ask you to be mine. Would you be my mate, and would you marry me?”

He lifted the ring a little higher.

She stared down at him intently, her body framed by the incredible night sky.

“Yes,” she said, her voice low and filled with emotion. “Yes, I’ll be yours and I’ll marry you, Tarquin. I’m so glad you’re mine.”

He slipped the ring on her finger and stood, catching her in his arms and kissing her. His bear let out a happy growl, which rumbled in his chest.

She patted his heart and grinned against his lips. “My doe is grunting in happiness too.”

He brushed his lips over her throat, and she shivered in his arms.

She looked at the ring. “I love it.”

“I can get you a diamond if you want,” he said. “I wanted to give you a ring tonight, but they didn’t have a ton of jewelry in the shop and I didn’t have time to get you something outside the park.”

“No, this is perfect, it’s really pretty.” She went onto her toes and brushed her lips over his. “Can we go home now, Tarquin? I have a question to ask you myself.”

His bear let out a curious sound.

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s go.”

They made their way down to the bears’ living space, hand in hand. He surprised her by carrying her over the threshold, which made her giggle and blush the most alluring shade of pink.

As he set her on her feet in the living room, she put her arms around his neck and smiled at him. Her eyes were dark and the sweet scent of her arousal made his body react.

“What did you want to ask me?”

“I want us to belong to each other in every way,” she said with a soft voice. “So my question is, will you make me yours? Will you mate me tonight and mark me?”

With a happy growl in his chest, he pulled her close and kissed her.

“Yes, sweetheart. Hell, yes.”

## Chapter Twelve

Lucy was nervous. She'd had sex before, but she knew that being with Tarquin would be entirely different. He was her soulmate, and this was their first time. She wanted it to be amazing and spectacular, and she wanted him to know just how much she cared for him.

She wasn't in love with him yet, but she sure as hell was falling hard and fast for him. How could she not? He was an incredible male. Not just sexy, but protective and kind. She couldn't believe she'd been trying to get away from him when she woke up in the doc's room after the accident. What a terrible mistake that would have been. Even though she liked teasing him about the way they met, she was thankful for him.

Thankful for his strength and decisiveness, thankful for his desire to keep her and Luna safe.

And she was very thankful that they were going to be mated tonight.

He lifted her effortlessly into his arms and strode to the bedroom. He put her on her feet and kissed her. She eagerly opened her mouth, their tongues dancing as shivers raced up and down her spine.

She worked his tie free, and then undid the buttons of his shirt before giving it a push over his broad shoulders. She eased from the kiss to watch as his muscles bunched and flexed while he pulled the shirt completely off.

His eyes flashed to amber and she caught the scent of his arousal, all heat and masculinity.

Her fingers were trembling as she reached for the zipper at the back of her dress. She pulled it down and then slowly peeled the dress from her shoulders, letting it slide down her arms and pool at her waist. His nostrils flared and a growl rumbled in his chest as she pushed the dress over her hips and let it fall to the floor.

She wasn't wearing anything underneath it.

"You weren't wearing anything at all?" he asked gruffly.

"Nope."

"Sexy female." He reached for her, but she held up a finger and then pointed to his pants.

"Those first."

She sat on the edge of the bed to watch. For the first time in her life, she felt sexy and feminine. He looked at her like she was the only female on the planet, as if the sun rose and set because she wanted it to. It was heady to be wanted so much, cared for so greatly. They didn't know each other very well, but she felt connected to him deeply, so much that it felt like she'd known him her entire life.

That was the way it was supposed to be with soulmates, an instant and sweet connection that defied explanation.

He undid his belt and slacks and shoved them down his legs. His eagerness made her smile, but the smile slipped as a soft moan erupted from her when she witnessed him in all his naked glory.

Muscles and smooth skin everywhere, a little happy trail leading to...oh my.

She wanted to drop to her knees and explore him for a very long time, but before she could move a muscle, he was between her legs and cupping her face. He tilted her head until she was looking at him.

Then he lowered his head to kiss her and all thoughts fled.

Their hands roamed, and she couldn't get enough of how strong he was as she traced his abs and smoothed her fingers over his pecs. He snarled softly against her lips as he cupped her breasts and teased her nipples. Heat speared through her.

He dropped to his knees and pushed her thighs apart. She leaned back on one elbow as he hooked one of her knees over his shoulder and tugged her to the very edge of the bed. The first swipe of his tongue up her folds was slow and soft and made her skin tingle and her pussy clench.

He licked a slow path up from her entrance to her clit, flicking his tongue across the sensitive bud. He met her gaze as he slid a finger inside her, pumping slow and easy as he flicked his tongue over her clit again and again. Warmth filled her and she wiggled a little, spreading her thighs wider.

She couldn't stop watching him. He was easily the sexiest guy she'd ever met, but watching him as he brought her pleasure made it all the more intense.

He pressed his tongue against her clit and growled, making his tongue vibrate. Her body jolted and she let out a gasp as pleasure spiraled inside her. Her climax struck swiftly, the spiral of need welling within her to a fever pitch as he growled against her clit and fingered her. She cried out, her toes curling as wave after wave of heat rose within her.

He moved her up the bed and was over her a heartbeat later, sliding into her body, his thick length stretching her until he filled her completely.

He paused, his arms beneath her, her legs around his hips, and their bodies wed tightly together. She stared up at him, seeing the amber of his eyes and knowing his bear was right there with him.

She cupped his face and kissed him.

He slid from her, then flexed his hips and sank back home again.

Her head kicked back each time he surged forward, moving faster each time. She planted her feet on the bed and lifted her hips to meet him.

He tilted her head to expose her neck.

She knew the bite was coming, knew he was going to mark her and it would hurt.

She closed her eyes and waited for it to happen, but instead, he slid a hand between them and rubbed her clit.

“Yes, keep going,” she moaned. She laid a hand on his head and rested her other against his hand, feeling his fingers moving. She fisted his hair and held on as pleasure arced through her like lightning, his body slamming against her, his fingers rubbing her just right, with his lips on her neck. All the sensations became too much as she exploded into another plateau of pleasure she’d never achieved before.

Her pussy clamped around his cock as she cried out his name and locked her ankles at the small of his back. He thrust into her a few more times, then roared as he came. A moment

later she felt his fangs pierce her neck, but she was too lost to the storm of pleasure swirling inside her to even wince.

She curled around him, her arms and legs caging him tightly to her as she closed her eyes and reveled in the passion between them. No one had ever loved her like Tarquin. She was positively shattered by the climax, blown apart by pleasure.

Because bears knew how to love their females, that was for damn sure.

He moved a little, and she squeezed her legs tighter.

“I don’t want to squish you,” he said roughly.

“I like it; just for a minute more.”

He nuzzled her throat under the mark he’d made. “Anything, Lucy. You can have anything you want, anytime, anywhere.”

“I just want you,” she whispered. She kissed his ear and hummed. “All the time. Everywhere.”

“You got it.”

As they came down from the heavens, she shivered in his arms, pleasure still rolling through her in waves. He brought up the blankets from the bottom of the bed and covered them both.

“How’s your neck?” he murmured.

“It’s good.” She was tempted to touch where he’d marked her, but she knew for sure that would sting.

“If it hurts at all, we can put some ointment on it.”



“I think my fast healing will take care of it before it bothers me.” She tipped her face up and kissed him. “That was amazing.”

He grinned, heat sparking in his eyes. “It definitely was.”

She yawned and snuggled a little closer.

There was nothing in the world better than being with Tarquin.

She wanted to stay up with him longer, to make love a second time, maybe even a third, but she couldn't stop herself from falling asleep.

“I've got you, sweetheart,” Tarquin whispered, kissing the top of her head.

She opened her mouth to reply, but fell asleep before she could, drifting off into the sweet sleep of someone well loved.

\* \* \*

After getting woken up by Tarquin's talented tongue, and a rousing round of how many times could he make her scream his name, they meandered to the bathroom to take a shower together.

“You slept well?” he asked, switching places with her so she could rinse off her hair.

“Amazingly well. You?”

“Best sleep ever.”

“Because we're together,” she said.

“I was just going to say that.”

“Great minds,” she said. After rinsing off, she switched places with him again and ogled him while he rinsed off.

He was terribly sexy and so much fun to touch, from his broad shoulders to his trim waist and thick thighs.

His cock twitched as she perused him and he groaned.

“You stare at it too much, and you’re going to have to deal with it,” he said.

She laughed. “Sorry, you’re sexy.”

He hooked a hand behind her back and drew her close, water droplets slipping down his cheeks and neck. “So are you. Sexiest female on the planet and all mine.”

“Now it’s your turn to be careful about turning me on,” she said.

He grumbled and turned off the water. “I should’ve asked for the day off.”

“We get to hang out, though. I don’t mind.”

“No, I meant so we could stay in bed.”

“Ah, right,” she said with a little laugh. “The day will go by fast.”

“Promise?” he asked, his voice going all low and sultry.

“Yep.”

He gave her a kiss before he let her leave the shower. “You’re addictive.”

“So are you.” She hadn’t known what it would be like to find her soulmate, but she wanted to spend every waking

second with him. Addictive was a perfect word to describe him.

He didn't have a hair dryer and she hadn't thought to pack one, so she rubbed her hair with a towel and used a claw clip to twist it up and out of the way.

"Here, you can wear this shirt until I can get you one," he said, handing her a t-shirt with the park's logo across the back as well as on the front pocket. "You can wear jeans if you want."

"Cool, thanks."

"I need time to unpack," she said. "I'd like to be unpacked here before we go back to the cabin and bring the rest of the stuff here."

"I'll help after work tonight."

"Aw, thanks. What do you normally do for dinner?" she asked as she dressed in the borrowed shirt and jeans.

"I mostly eat in the market. After grilling all day in the park, I usually don't feel like cooking for myself. Sometimes I make myself a burger before I close up, though."

"Is it really okay for me to work with you?"

"Sure, if you'd like to."

She sat on the bed to put her tennis shoes on. "Well, yes, I mean, do the alphas mind if I work with you, but also...do you mind?"

He froze, his shirt halfway on. Giving her a curious look, he tugged it over his chest and said, "Of course I want you to work with me. I can't think of anything better than you and me working together." He sat next to her. "I actually always

wanted that to be the case. I hoped that my soulmate would love cooking and want to be with me.”

The wolves, he explained, always worked with their soulmates, but other shifters didn’t always work together.

“Rory and Tayme work together, but Justus works in security and Celeste works in the nail salon. I wouldn’t mind if you wanted to do something else—I want you to be happy over everything else—but I would honestly love it if we could work together.”

Her heart warmed at his words.

“You’re too sweet.”

“Just for you.”

They went to the market for breakfast and found Marcus and Alistair, the elephant alpha, finishing up.

“Lucy is going to work with me today,” Tarquin said.

“That’s wonderful. I heard you like to make jam, Lucy?” Marcus asked.

“I do. I can a lot of things from our garden, but preserves are my favorite.”

“We don’t have a garden,” Alistair mused. “We should.”

“I was just thinking that,” Marcus said. “Or a greenhouse at least.”

“I’m surprised you don’t with all the people you have to feed,” Lucy said.

Tarquin hummed. “Do I need to take her to security?”

“Yes, have them get started on ID for her and get Anke and Zeger to order some shirts for her too. We’ll have a get-

together to welcome you into the sleuth, Lucy. How's Friday night?"

"Perfect," she said.

"See you guys then," he said.

She walked with Tarquin to the counter and greeted Jeanie.

"French toast or ham quiche?" she asked after saying hello.

"French toast for me," Lucy said.

"I'll take both," Tarquin said.

"Of course," Jeanie said. "I'll call you up."

They grabbed coffee and juice from the station and found a seat with Rory and Tayme.

"I was eavesdropping and heard you're going to work together at the grill station; that's so cool," Rory said.

"It's not really eavesdropping if you can hear super well," Tayme said.

"Call a spade a spade," Rory said, shrugging with a laugh.

"How did it go last night?" Lucy asked.

"Your sister is amazing. I love her so much. She'll fit right in with the sleuth. She was still asleep when I left to meet up with Tayme."

"I'm glad it went well, but I knew she'd have fun. She's really missed out on having friends since we were so isolated."

“You did the best you could under the circumstances, and you’re both amazing people. No worries,” Rory said.

They talked about working the food stalls in the park. The ice cream stall was closed until spring, so they rotated between the other stalls.

“What do you do when it’s freezing outside?” Lucy asked.

“Dress warmly,” Rory said.

“Yes, but we also have enclosed stalls for when the weather is crappy,” Tarquin said. “They’re like small trailers with heat. We put up some tents for the humans to use as shelter to eat, but honestly in the colder months, they often just take food to go and eat in their vehicles.”

“A warm stall is good news,” Lucy said.

“They’re not that warm, though, so don’t let these males tell you that you won’t be cold, because last winter my toes almost froze off.”

“I warmed you up just fine as I recall,” Tayme said with a low voice.

Rory elbowed him and laughed. “Yeah, but I complained a lot too.”

“That’s also true,” Tayme said.

“I won’t mind as long as we’re together,” Lucy said.

“Hey, if they decide to do some kind of greenhouse, maybe we can all work together on it,” Tayme said.

“That would be cool,” Tarquin said. “I don’t know anything about greenhouses, though.”

“I do,” she said. “We used to do a makeshift one every year to grow our winter vegetables. We didn’t have the space to keep it up year-round.”

“Then you’ll be our resident expert,” Rory said.

She and Tayme picked up their empty plates and said goodbye, promising to stop by and relieve them for their lunch break.

“Ah, lunch break,” Lucy said as she swiped a piece of bacon through a puddle of maple syrup.

“What about it?” Tarquin asked.

“I think you promised to rock my world for lunch?”

“Oh yeah, you know it,” he said with a wink.

She bumped his shoulder. “You know what?”

“What’s that, sweetheart?”

“I’m so happy to be here with you. Everyone is so welcoming and kind, and not just to me but also Luna. It’s wonderful.”

He leaned over and kissed her. “I’m happy to be here with you too.”

When their meal was over, they headed topside to find Luna and get her back to the house to unpack, and then they stopped in the security office to get her badge started.

Mercer took her picture with a digital camera attached to a computer and said, “Give me until after lunch, and then you can pick it up.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Sure thing. See ya later.”

He and Tarquin fist-bumped. She and her mate left.

“Where to now?” she asked.

“Kitchen for supplies.”

“What’s the burger of the day?”

He took her hand as they walked. “I have them planned out for a few weeks at a time. If I recall it’s a southwest burger, with tortilla strips and avocado, plus taco seasoned fries.”

“Sounds good.”

He opened the park’s commercial kitchen door and held it open for her. “If you prep the veggies, I’ll get the fries ready and we can rock the prep.”

“You got it.”

She had a spring in her step. She was so tickled to have a job with her soulmate and be useful to the park. She couldn’t wait to serve her first burger to a customer.

He kissed her cheek as she passed by.

“You’re adorable,” he said.

She blushed and let out a girly giggle. “I’m just so dang happy.”

“I’m happy too, trust me.”

“No grumpy bears here,” she said.

“No, ma’am.”



## Chapter Thirteen

Friday afternoon, Tarquin held open the door that led to the non-shifting animals' paddock on the safari tour. They had a little over an hour before the first tour started.

"Did I tell you how sexy you look dressed as a zookeeper?" Lucy asked as she stopped in front of him.

"Ew, I'm impressionable," Luna said, making a face.

Tarquin chuckled. "Sorry, kiddo."

Luna ducked past them and hurried to the stairs. Lucy went onto her toes and kissed him.

"I wish I could be with you in my shift," he said, his bear letting out a disgruntled noise in his head.

"Me too, but there's no way to explain a bear hanging out with does and other non-predators."

"You can be a zookeeper for me," he suggested.

"I'd love that."

He gave her another kiss and walked with her to the stairs, taking them up to a door hidden in the floor of a large storage building in the norms' paddock.

"I'll be walking around the paddock and giving the norms treats, and also picking up trash that blows in from the park. Watch out for Tank—he's an ass."

"I can't wait to meet him in person," Luna said. "Do you think he'll like us?"

"Just watch out for his horns," he cautioned.

He stepped out of the building and closed the door to give them privacy to change forms. Across the grassy space, safely surrounded by tall stone walls, were different species of deer, antelope, and of course, Tank the disgruntled moose.

Tarquin had never played the part of zookeeper before. He was wearing a beige jumpsuit and boots and would try to be inconspicuous as the Jeeps stopped in front of the paddock on the tour and took pictures.

The animals were near the small lake and mostly ignoring him, save for Tank, who was watching him with a distrustful glare.

After a few minutes, one of them kicked the door to alert him they were ready. He opened the door wide and let them out. He'd seen does before, but he'd never seen pure white ones like Luna and Lucy. They were simply stunning, their short fur nearly blindingly white in the sunlight. They were nearly identical, but one was smaller than the other. He patted her on the neck and said, "Hey, Luna."

Lucy grunted and nuzzled his stomach before moving past him.

He popped inside to grab the satchel that contained apples and carrots for the animals as treats.

Closing the door, he turned and watched as Lucy and Luna moved slowly toward the norms and eventually moved to the lake to drink. Norms recognized that shifters weren't natural animals and generally steered clear, but the norms didn't seem to mind Lucy and Luna.

Tank lowered his head and glowered at the females, and Tarquin thought he might need to intervene, but then Tank let

out a grunt and moved to the lake too.

“I’ll be damned,” Tarquin said with a chuckle.

He tossed snacks at the norms that wouldn’t come to him, and then gave Lucy and Luna carrots before he started his trek around the paddock to pick up trash. Lucy stayed with him, and he spent the time chatting to her, telling her stories from his childhood.

He really enjoyed the time with her, although it would’ve been much better if she could talk back to him.

They stayed out in the paddock the entire time during the VIP tours. Lucy and Luna stayed in their shifts for the entire day, which Marcus and the other alphas thought was necessary since they were so unique with their beautiful coloring. Once the last tour had finished, a wolf named Ezra called from the fence.

“We’re clear; you can call it a day.”

“Thanks,” Tarquin said.

Lucy and Luna followed him to the barn. He opened the door and let them in, then closed it for their privacy to wait while they shifted and dressed.

“I think Tank liked us,” Luna said when they were dressed and about to head down to Marcus’s for the sleuth dinner.

“I think so too,” he said. “He was suspicious of you at first, and then he didn’t seem to mind you being in the paddock at all.”

“Can I take him a carrot?” Luna asked, looking at the row of carrots on the workbench.

“In your human form?” Lucy asked, raising a brow.

Luna nodded.

Lucy looked at Tarquin, who shrugged. “I think it’ll be fine. I’ll just stay back so I don’t upset him since I’m a predator.”

Luna grabbed two carrots and walked out of the barn. Lucy stayed with her, leaving Tarquin behind. Luna spoke softly to Tank, her words of encouragement carrying to his sensitive ears.

He wasn’t surprised when Tank took the carrots eagerly as they were his favorite treat, but then he let Luna pet him and even hooked his head over her shoulder as if he were hugging her. She leaned on his neck and patted him a few times.

Lucy turned to look at Tarquin in shock. He grabbed his phone and took a few pics, sending them to Cael, the norms’ vet.

*That’s amazing, Cael texted. She must have the golden touch with him.*

*I thought so too. He hung out with them when I wasn’t too close.*

*Maybe she can help me and Novi out after school sometimes.*

*I’m sure she’ll enjoy that. I’ll have her reach out to Novi once she knows what her school day will look like.*

*Awesome. Have a good one.*

Tarquin signed off and put his phone in his pocket. Lucy and Luna joined him at the barn.

“Ready for dinner?” he asked.

Lucy gave him a kiss. “Absolutely, after I change into something decent.”

He let out a little appreciative growl.

Luna rolled her eyes. “Maybe I could help Rory and Trina set up dinner at Marcus’s?”

Lucy grinned. “I’m sure they’d enjoy that.”

They walked down the stairs to their house in the bears’ private living area. Luna hurried into her room to change. Lucy pulled him into their bedroom and gave him a sultry look.

“How much time do we have?” she asked once Luna had called through the closed door that she was going to meet up with the females at Marcus’s.

He wanted to tell her they had as much time as they wanted because he was a male who was happy to give his female whatever she pleased. But he knew the sleuth was going to be waiting for them for dinner and they didn’t have a ton of time.

He looked at his smartwatch.

“Fifteen minutes, tops.”

She hummed and the sound went straight to his already hard cock.

“Then we’ll just play, I think.”

“Play?”

She tugged him to the bed and sat, putting her hands on his hips.

“One for you and one for me, then when we get back to the house after dinner, we can make love.” She undid the buckle on his jumpsuit.

“One orgasm?” he asked curiously as she undid his buttons.

“Yep.”

He let out a low growl. “I could just give you two.”

She let out a little growl of her own, her fingers dipping inside the jumpsuit and brushing against his cock. “One for each, sexy male. Now strip.”

He grabbed the open collar of the jumpsuit and tugged it from his shoulders, stooping to undo the laces of the work boots. She shimmied from the top and jeans she wore. He straightened and let out a happy growl as she stretched out on her back and crooked her finger at him.

He wanted to do a hundred things to her and say to hell with the sleuth dinner, but he knew he couldn't. If they didn't hurry, they'd get interrupted by a knock on the door.

Sliding next to her, he looked into her eyes and cupped her face. “You're so beautiful,” he said. He kissed her, brushing his lips back and forth and nibbling on her bottom lip. “Are you mine?”

He trailed one hand down her side, mapping her curves.

“Yes,” she whispered, mimicking his motions as she traced his muscles and lightly scratched her nails down his side.

He let out a low hiss as she wrapped her hand around his cock. She scooted a little closer and curled her leg over his hip,

opening her body to his questing fingers.

“I’m yours too,” he said, sliding his fingers gently and slowly into her heat. She tipped her hips toward his hand, her toes curling against his back.

She kissed him, stroking her tongue against his as she moved her hand up and down his length.

“I know you are,” she said in between gasps. The faster he fingered her, the faster she stroked him, until they couldn’t keep kissing. He pressed his forehead against hers and closed his eyes as pleasure swamped him. Her pussy gripped his fingers rhythmically and he knew she was close, so he put his thumb on her clit and rubbed it.

She tossed her head back with a moan as she came, shuddering against him. He followed, his come jetting out in thick ropes over both of them.

He opened his eyes as his climax ebbed and saw she was watching him with a small smile.

“I love you,” she said, her voice low and laced with emotion.

He was momentarily struck dumb that his sweetheart was in love with him, because he was one hundred percent in love with her. He’d fallen fast and hard for her, and no wonder—she was incredible.

“I love you too,” he said.

He leaned in to kiss her.

She rested her head on his forearm and gazed dreamily at him. “I feel like we should make love now, but we have to go eat dinner with your sleuth.”

“Good and bad timing together,” he mused.

She sat up with a groan and looked at the sticky mess on her stomach. “Let’s clean up and then we can get to dinner.”

The sooner they left, the sooner they could return and finish what they started.

As she moved from the bed, he grabbed her hand and brought her back to him for a long, sweet kiss.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Lucy.”

Her eyes sparkled with warmth as she kissed him once more and then slipped from his arms. “You are for me too. I’ve never been happier, here with you in the park, with Luna and your friends. I feel like my life is finally beginning, and it’s all because of you.”

His bear was all puffed up like a peacock, happy that she was so happy and loved them. He followed her into the bathroom to clean up, even though it was the very last thing he wanted to do.



## Chapter Fourteen

Although Lucy had met everyone in the sleuth, she was still nervous as she walked with Tarquin to Marcus's home.

"So how many bears are mated again?" she asked.

"Just two. Justus is mated to Trina, who's human, and Tayme is mated to Rory, a red fox."

"Not Marcus?"

"He was mated, but she died."

"Were they soulmates?"

"Yes."

"That's sad. Do you think when that happens that the person left behind gets another soulmate eventually?"

He hummed. "I don't know, actually. Maybe if Marcus's heart were open to the possibility, but he doesn't seem to mind being on his own now. It's precious and rare to find a soulmate, you know. A lot of shifters either don't believe in soulmates or they choose not to wait."

He told her about Atticus, who was in his forties before he found his soulmate, as well as Joss, who'd been mated to a female who wasn't his soulmate, and after she passed away he was single for a long time before finding Jeanie, who was his soulmate.

"I'm glad we found each other," she said. "My parents were soulmates, but I don't know what my dad thought was going to happen for me and Luna's romantic future with us being in the middle of nowhere."

They paused on Marcus's doorstep. "Do you think he would have eventually moved from the cabin?"

"I don't know. Maybe when Luna finished school. He was content in the woods, but I knew that eventually we'd need to get out and live life. It might have just been me and Luna living away from the cabin and visiting him."

She wasn't sure what her dad would have thought about that. He'd lived in fear for such a long time, and she'd been fine with the status quo until he died, and then she hadn't known what to do with herself, terrified of making a bad choice. When you held a secret like shifters being unknown to humans, you worried about everything.

The past was the past, though. They weren't in the cabin, fearful of being discovered; they'd found a home in the park and the people who so willingly welcomed her and Luna.

Although it annoyed Tarquin when she teased him about hitting her on the road that night, without that happening, she'd still be in the cabin and wondering what her next move should be.

"My dad would've liked you," she said finally. "And he would've enjoyed the park and hanging out with Tank." She was sure that her dad would've been quite the sight in the paddock with his big antlers and imposing stature.

"I wish I could've met him," Tarquin said. He smiled down at her, then opened the door.

"Let's eat," he said.

They walked into the home, which was very similar to Tarquin's but a little bigger. A huge table was set and everyone

was milling around. They clapped and whistled when they walked into the kitchen.

Luna smiled at Lucy from across the table as everyone sat down. She and Tarquin sat next to Marcus at the head of the table.

“Let’s go round again and make sure everyone knows everyone,” Marcus said.

“Well,” Lucy said when he nodded at her to go first, “I’m Lucy and I’m mated to Tarquin, and I’m just so dang happy to be here.”

Tarquin chuckled. “You guys know me.”

They sounded off around the table until the whole group was introduced, ending with Luna, who was seated next to Rory.

The table was filled with bowls and platters of every kind of food. “Can you tell the bears are the ones who like to do the cooking?” Seneca asked as he lifted a platter of grilled chicken.

“Definitely,” Lucy said.

She filled her plate with grilled chicken, honey-roasted carrots, and a pile of rice pilaf.

“Don’t forget the rolls,” Trina said. “I made them just for your welcome dinner.”

The big fluffy Parker House rolls smelled delicious.

“Aw, thank you.” Lucy took one and held the basket of piping hot rolls for Tarquin. “So,” she said, handing the basket to Fell, who sat on her left, “is there an actual ceremony for bears?”

“What kind of ceremony?” Marcus asked.

“To join the sleuth. And, I guess, mating too.”

“We don’t have a formal joining ceremony,” he said. “You and Tarquin are mated and he marked you, and that makes you part of the sleuth. As far as a mating ceremony, we don’t have one of those either. I think we might be the most lowkey of the shifters when it comes to ceremonies.”

“What do the other groups do?” she asked.

“For the lions, they prepare a special meal and then everyone meets in the paddock for a bonfire. They set a rabbit loose, and the male has to hunt and kill it and then prepare it over the fire for his mate,” Hayden said.

“The wolves have a big party in the paddock,” Marcus said with a nod. “They have a huge bonfire, and the couple join together in front of the pack and then spend the night in a tent in the paddock.”

“The gorillas don’t have a ceremony, though,” Rory pointed out. “They pretty much do what we do.”

“True,” Tarquin said. “The elephants don’t either.”

“So I guess we’re not the most low-key,” Marcus said with a chuckle. “Just that some of the others are high maintenance.”

“Did your people have ceremonies?” Rory asked.

“No. When a couple was newly mated, our people would get together and shift as a group to go for a run. It’s called a mating run. They always picked the darkest night possible, when it was either cloudy or the moon was a sliver, to help there be less visibility. The new couple led the run.”

“That’s pretty awesome,” Tarquin said.

“We could do that tomorrow,” Luna said.

“Run?” Lucy asked.

“Yeah, you’re newly mated and—no offense to the paddocks at the park—but our herd territory is the cabin. If we’re already going to be at the cabin, then we could do your mating run there.”

“What about the hunters?” Tarquin pointed out before Lucy could say just that.

“Oh, crap, I forgot about those buttheads.” Luna made a face. “They ruined everything.”

“Well, hold on,” Marcus said. “If it’s part of your people’s tradition, then maybe we can make it work. What’s it look like for nighttime visibility for the next few days?”

Seneca opened a weather app on his phone and poked around on it.

“It’s going to be mostly clear tonight and tomorrow, but Sunday night there’s a storm front rolling in and it’ll be very cloudy. Should be hardly any moon.”

She looked at Luna, who was giving her puppy-dog eyes.

“How would we keep each other safe?” she asked, looking at Tarquin.

“We’ll have the whole sleuth there,” Marcus said. “A few of us can shift with you, Tarquin, and Luna, and the rest of us will stand guard. We can give you some space to run, maybe around the cabin, and post guards beyond that to look for the hunters.”

“They might have moved on anyway, especially if a storm is coming,” Tarquin said. He smiled at Lucy. “It’s up to you, sweetheart. Even if it’s not your herd’s actual territory, we could still do it at the paddock.”

“True,” she said. Luna’s face dropped a little in disappointment, which made Lucy feel bad. Her sister was trying to hold onto being in the herd, and things were different now, but some things could stay the same. “But I think going for a run at the cabin is a great way to honor our parents. So long as everyone is safe.” She leveled a look at her sister. “If Tarquin or Marcus say it’s too dangerous, we won’t do it.”

Luna smiled broadly. “That works for me.”

“We need some help finishing packing tomorrow,” Tarquin said, “if anyone wants to be part of the escort.”

Several volunteered, including Rory and Tayme.

Conversation switched to the coming weekend and VIP tours.

She really couldn’t believe how amazing the sleuth was. She was a virtual stranger to them with a sad backstory, but because she was Tarquin’s soulmate, they welcomed her with open arms. She’d always wanted a big family, and the sleuth made her feel like she already had one.

The meal ended with chocolate cake filled with raspberry cream.

When they were walking back to the house, Luna said, “I saw Rhapsody this morning when I went by the classroom to drop off my homework, and she asked me to babysit tomorrow night. Kelley is taking her on a date.”

Lucy hadn't met their baby, but she'd met the couple in the market earlier that week.

"That sounds awesome."

"You guys should go on a date too," Luna suggested.

"I think that's a great idea," Tarquin said.

Luna yawned and stretched. "I'm going to pop in my AirPods and hit the hay. See you tomorrow. I can't wait to finish packing up the cabin. I forgot my favorite hoodie."

"It was probably in the laundry," Lucy said.

"Probably. Night."

"Night, honey," Lucy said.

"Good night, kiddo," Tarquin said.

They stood in the family room for a moment until her door shut, and then Tarquin stooped and tossed Lucy over his shoulder. She stifled a squeak of surprise, giggling as he carried her swiftly to the bedroom.

He dropped her to the bed on her back and followed her down, caging her in with his arms. "My lovely sweetheart," he said, kissing her throat. "I believe we have some unfinished business to attend to."

She curled her arms around his neck and nibbled on his jaw, her body lighting up as he explored her.

He smiled at her, his eyes glowing with the amber of his bear.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you too."

## Chapter Fifteen

Although Tarquin had only moved once when he'd come to the park, he'd helped others pack and unpack and generally wasn't a fan of the job. But today, as he wrapped a mason jar in a kitchen towel and set it in a box, he couldn't have enjoyed himself more.

Packing up the cabin meant that Lucy and Luna were moving to the park permanently, and although he'd only been with Lucy for a week, it felt like he'd known her forever.

Outside the cabin, Marcus and Tayme were closing down the plumbing system so that no matter how long the cabin stayed empty, the pipes wouldn't burst and flood anything. Lucy had said she didn't remember much about what the cabin was like when they first moved in, only that it had been very dusty and unused and they'd spent a few weeks worrying that the owner might show up.

Which he or she never had.

"With the solar panels, did you ever have to do without electricity?" Tarquin asked as Lucy came into the kitchen with an empty box.

"Sometimes," she said. "If it was cloudy, then the cells wouldn't charge. After we figured the owners wouldn't show up, Dad installed the panels so we could have electricity. When the power was low, we'd drive into town and spend time at the library so Luna could do her schoolwork. There was a dollar theater about a half hour from here that showed old movies. Luna and I enjoyed hanging out there on the



weekends, watching a few movies and enjoying all the good snacks and popcorn.”

“Well, at the park you don’t have to worry about not having electricity on cloudy days,” he said. “Although we don’t have a library, we have the classroom, plus internet for her school.”

“A park library would be cool,” she said.

“So would a movie theater,” Luna said.

Marcus came into the cabin. “Cistern’s taken care of. What’s this about a movie theater?”

“That it would be neat if we had one for the shifters,” Tarquin said.

Marcus hummed. “I never thought about it, but we could actually use the educational theater to show a regular movie.”

“There’s a theater?” Luna asked, her brows winging up in curiosity.

“Yep, it’s small, only seats thirty,” Marcus said. “We use it for educational films, for those times when we have schools or children’s groups come through. In the summer, people like to use it to get out of the heat.”

Tarquin thought using the educational theater to show regular movies was a good idea. “The seats aren’t terribly comfortable,” he pointed out, “but we could bring blankets and pillows, have a sleuth movie night.”

“Let’s do that next weekend,” Marcus said. “Luna can pick the movie.”

Luna let out a little woohoo and grinned.

“It’ll be a teen movie for sure,” Lucy said. “You just agreed to spend two hours watching teenage actors make mooneyes at each other.”

“It’ll be fine as long as I have popcorn,” Marcus said.

Tarquin laughed.

They continued to work, packing up the cabin. Most of the things Lucy hadn’t packed the first time were her kitchen items for making her preserves. When Rory had heard about the preserves, she was excited to mix them with ice cream and had suggested they could even sell preserves at the ice cream stall when it opened in the spring.

It was nearly dinnertime when they were finished packing the cabin up and loading the SUVs.

Tarquin stood in the front yard with his arm around Lucy, with Luna at her side. They stared silently at the cabin.

“We’ll be back tomorrow,” Luna said quietly.

“I know, I’m so excited for that,” Lucy said. “I just was thinking this is the end of an era. It’s bittersweet to say goodbye to the cabin.”

He kissed her temple. “I’m glad I could be here to share this with you.”

“Me too.” She leaned against him with a sigh. Then she straightened and said, “I’m ready to go, I’m freaking starving.”

“Could we stop and pick up some pie from Beatrice’s?” Luna asked.

“Sure,” Tarquin said. “But let’s get dinner first. Any good places around?”

Lucy told him about a diner they liked, and he spoke to the others who were excited to eat away from the park for a change.

He climbed behind the wheel and followed the SUVs away from the cabin. It had been a long day, but Lucy and Luna were officially moved out and he couldn't have been happier.

And now he had another thing to look forward to on Sunday night, when they'd shift together as a family and celebrate their mating—the does and the bears together.

\* \* \*

Saturday afternoon, Tarquin and Lucy left Luna at the not-quite-yet-opened petting zoo to work with Cael and Novi as they took care of the animals.

“When is the petting zoo opening?” Lucy asked as they walked away from Luna, who was giggling as several baby goats tried to climb into her lap.

“They're going to do a preview in a few weeks but will close it for the winter, with an official opening in the spring.”

“Luna really loves it.”

Cael had mentioned that if Luna wanted to help out after school and on the weekends with the petting zoo animals that they'd love to have her help, and she'd eagerly jumped at the chance.

“I'm glad she's found something for herself,” Tarquin said. “I didn't want her to be bored or feel like she was trapped

in the private living area.”

“Yeah, I didn’t want that for her either, but the truth is that we weren’t really free at the cabin because there was always the worry of being discovered. Here at the park, there’s freedom and that’s precious.” She elbowed him with a smile. “Plus you’re here.”

He put his arm around her. “And now you’re here too. I think we both got very lucky in the soulmate department.”

“Fact.”

They headed through the underground maze of stairwells and hallways to go from the employee cafeteria to the bear paddock’s storage building so he could shift and she could change into her zookeeper uniform.

He offered her his hand and helped her up the last few steps into the building.

“So I just do what you did yesterday?” she asked.

“Pretty much, but there’s only the bears in this paddock. You can give apples to the guys, but when the Jeeps come around for the tour, you’ll need to keep your distance so it doesn’t look suspicious. You can use the satchel to pick up trash.”

“Okay.”

He stripped and she watched him, so he did a sexy little show for her, loving how her eyes darkened and her scent got sweeter.

“You keep looking at me like that, and I’m going to have to lock the door so no one else can come up here,” he said gruffly.

“I can’t help it that you’re sexy. I’m very, very lucky.”

“I’m the lucky one, sweetheart.”

She blew him a kiss. He very much wanted to give her a real kiss, but he knew if she touched him at all, he was going to want to do everything with her. So instead of moving to her, he winked and finished stripping, then shifted.

He knew that she’d never been in the presence of a real bear before, at least not up close. She’d told him she’d seen them out in the woods when she would run with Luna, but they never came close.

He thought she might be a little nervous to see him at first, since he was so much bigger as a bear than in his human form, but she didn’t appear to be nervous at all.

He sat with a grunt, and she smiled. Closing the distance between them, she ran her hands over his face, rubbed his ears, and then scratched her hands through the fur on his back, which made him want to thump his back leg in happiness.

“You’re pretty dang amazing,” she said.

He made a few bear sounds, wanting to tell her that he thought she was amazing too. He hooked his big, furry paw around her back and gently drew her against him. She let out a laugh and hugged him back as best she could.

She stood there in his embrace for a while, relaxed against him. She even yawned a bit.

But then they both heard heavy footsteps coming up the stairs under the door.

“That’s our cue,” she said.

He made a grumbling sound.

“I know,” she answered as if she knew he was complaining. “But the time will go fast, and then we can get back to the house.”

Now that was something he was very much looking forward to.

Butting his head against the building’s door, he lumbered outside and turned to watch her open the door in the floor and greet the sleuth as they trooped up the stairs.

“I’ve got apples, and then I’m going to pick up trash and stay out of sight when the Jeeps come by,” she said.

“Sounds good,” Marcus said. “Have fun.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed that one of you finds his soulmate during the tours today.”

“Keep all your fingers crossed,” Seneca said. “We will too.”

She grabbed the satchel and hurried from the building, shutting the door behind her. Tarquin was waiting for her a few paces away. She joined him, and they did as they’d done the day before with their roles reversed: made their way around the paddock, her talking while he listened.

She tossed apples to the bears in between the Jeeps stopping during the VIP tours. She and Tarquin stayed out of sight behind a stand of trees whenever the Jeeps rolled through. There were mostly human females on the tours, but he did notice two males as well. It was too bad that the tours weren’t bringing in more soulmates. The idea seemed like a great one.

When the tours were finished, Tarquin and Lucy headed into the building first, where he shifted and dressed swiftly before throwing open the doors to let the others in.

He hefted the door in the floor up, and she walked down ahead of him.

“I’m kind of hungry,” she said, pausing at the door to their home in the bears’ private living space.

“I’ll cook for you.”

She gave him a narrowed look. “Do you mean in the kitchen? Because you cook everywhere, and I’m genuinely hungry.”

“Yes, woman,” he said, laughing loudly. “I promise to really cook for you. In the kitchen first, and then in the bedroom later.”

“Gross,” Luna’s voice came through the door. “Didn’t I ask you to not be gross when I’m within earshot?”

Lucy grinned at her sister’s excellent hearing, and Tarquin opened the door to their home.

“Hey, how was the petting zoo?” she asked Luna after they’d walked inside.

“I love it so much. The goats kept trying to sit in my lap.”

She gave her sister a one-armed hug. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“How does grilled chicken sound?”

“Works for me,” Lucy said.

“Me too.”

Lucy hooked her arm through Tarquin's as they made their way to the kitchen.

He'd been a bachelor before he met her, and now he had an instant family, with an amazing soulmate and her sweet sister. Going to the bar that night had changed his life in innumerable ways. He couldn't wait to see what the future brought.



## Chapter Sixteen

Lucy waited on the back porch with Luna as Tarquin and the sleuth scoured the area Sunday evening. It was one of the darkest nights she'd ever seen. Even the stars were covered by clouds and a cool wind blew through the trees, making the branches clack together like some kind of ominous ethereal music.

Luna shivered.

“We don't have to do this if you're nervous,” she said.

“I'm just cold,” Luna reassured her. “There's no way I want to give up the chance to honor our people, especially Mom and Dad. I think the world put on a show for us—used clouds to cover up everything so it's pitch black out. For sure the hunters aren't hunting tonight; they wouldn't be able to see anything.”

“True,” Lucy said.

A battery-operated lantern sat on the porch rail and illuminated a few feet around them, but didn't do much to cut into the vast darkness.

She felt Tarquin draw close before she saw the darker shadow of his form as he approached the cabin. She lit off the porch and ran into his arms.

He embraced her with a chuckle. “I missed you too, sweetheart.”

“How's it look out there?”

“Good,” he said.

Marcus joined them. “The hunters are actually packing up. They were listening to a weather radio when we got close enough to see them.”

“That’s good news,” she said. “Even though I didn’t expect to get near them, it’s nice to know they’re on their way out.”

Tarquin nodded. “Ready to shift?”

“Definitely.”

She watched the sleuth amble back to the cabin and join them. Even Rory was there, excited to get to shift and run around with everyone, since she normally didn’t get to be part of the group when they were in the paddock for the VIP tours.

“Those of us who are shifting will go first,” Marcus said. “Then we’ll give you privacy and you can shift and join us. We’ve set up a perimeter to patrol, so don’t venture past our people.”

“Will do,” Lucy said.

She, Luna, and Tarquin headed into the cabin with the lantern to give the sleuth privacy.

“Remember, don’t get scared of anything out there, okay?” Tarquin said.

“Why are you looking at me?” Luna asked.

“Because you’re the reason I got run over,” Lucy said dryly.

“Hey! Don’t use facts against me.”

With a laugh, Lucy said, “It’s okay, I promise. But Tarquin’s right. We’ll be together and there isn’t anything to

worry about. Even if you hear or see a coyote, you'll be safe."

"Exactly," Tarquin said. "Tonight's about communing with the sleuth and honoring the traditions of your herd and family."

Lucy smiled so hard her cheeks hurt. She loved that he'd embraced her and Luna and their herd's traditions so readily.

She gave him a hug.

"What's that for?" he asked, hugging her back and resting his face in the crux of her neck.

"I'm just so happy we're together. You make me happy."

"You make me happy too, sweetheart. Every inch of you."

He let out a gruff sound.

Luna made a gagging sound.

"Someday you won't mind the romantic stuff," Lucy pointed out as she and Tarquin parted.

"I don't mind it, just not when it's happening to you. You're my sister."

"Yeah, I'm not crazy about thinking of you kissing any boys either."

"As if you'd let me kiss anyone anytime soon."

"Right," Tarquin said. "Forty."

"I thought you said thirty," Luna said, exasperated.

"I can change my mind," he said. "I'll just scare any boys dumb enough to come sniffing around you anyway."

"Oh, please don't do that!"

Lucy laughed as Luna pleaded with Tarquin to let her have a boyfriend, in the event the situation arose.

“Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it,” Lucy said.

“I’ll burn that bridge first,” Tarquin said with a grumble.

Lucy elbowed her sister. “You always wanted a brother, now you’ve got a brother-in-law who’s seriously protective of you.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Lucy could tell Tarquin enjoyed teasing Luna. He winked at Lucy as he walked to the back door and opened it, peering out.

“Everyone’s shifted, let’s shift!”

The bears had vacated the immediate area to give them privacy to shift. Lucy set the lantern on the railing and stepped onto the grass where the lantern cast its light on the ground.

She inhaled the crisp night air and let her head fall back, looking up at the dark sky.

She took off her boots and headed onto the porch.

“Where are you going?” Tarquin asked.

“I’m going to put these inside so they don’t get wet with the dew.”

“I’ll do it.”

He took her boots and then waited while Luna took off her shoes and handed them to him.

She stepped onto the grass once more and joined her sister.

“Ready for one last run through the woods?” she asked.

“Yep. I wish Mom and Dad were here with us, but I’m glad you’re here with me.”

Lucy hugged her tightly. “I’m glad you’re here with me too.”

She and her sister stripped swiftly. Lucy knew that Tarquin would wait until Luna had shifted before he came out into the yard with them, so she hurried to shift so he could join them.

As she rose onto all fours and stretched, she heard the unmistakable sound of a rifle cocking.

“You...you were just human!”

\* \* \*

Tarquin heard a rifle cock and a high-pitched male shout, “You...you were just human!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, he burst from the cabin in time to see a human male, nearly invisible in the darkness because he was wearing face paint and camouflage clothing, point a rifle at the two albino does in the yard, illuminated faintly by the lantern.

His skin went white-hot, and his bear let out a furious bellow as his shift exploded from him. The rifle went off and he felt something rip into his shoulder, but he ignored the pain and clamped his jaw around the male’s arm. The bones snapped like kindling and the male howled, beating his fist against Tarquin’s head.

He swung his head with a mighty shake and sent the male flying. The sleuth crashed through the trees and joined them as the male hit a tree head-first, a cracking sound reverberating through the night.

Luna's fright-filled voice cut through the rage in his head.

He swung around and saw Luna had shifted back and was bent over Lucy, still in her doe form.

Blood seeped from a wound on Lucy's chest.

No!

\* \* \*

Luna wanted to throw up, mostly because she'd forced herself out of her shift so quickly, but also because Lucy had been shot!

It had happened so fast. They'd just shifted into their doe forms, and then a hunter had appeared like a ghost, almost invisible except for the scared light in his eyes. He'd stepped into the spill of light from the lantern, and she'd seen him raise the rifle as he panicked after witnessing their shift.

That was rule number one for shifters. You never, ever let a strange human see you shift. It was imperative for all shifters that their secret stayed safe.

A blast of light came from the rifle barrel, and then Tarquin had turned into a bear and attacked so fast that he'd been a big dark blur in the night.

Lucy slumped to the ground next to her, and Luna's whole world narrowed to the dark spot growing swiftly larger on the front of her sister's chest.

Forcing herself back to human took a toll on her strength, but she powered through the fatigue.

"No! No! Tarquin, help!"

The big bear swung his head around and let out a bellow, the sound filled with worry. The sleuth returned, and several of them shifted back to human, including Tarquin. He nearly fell over with the strain of shifting again so quickly, which shifters weren't normally able to do. But when necessary, like in this particular life-or-death situation, it was definitely possible.

He gently pushed Luna back and pressed his hand to the wound on her chest.

"Shit. Shit! Marcus, what do I do?"

The bear alpha stared down at them for a heartbeat, and then he said, "Keep pressure on the wound. Seneca, see if the human is alive. Fell, take some males and sweep the area. I want to know how a human got by our patrol."

He knelt next to them and leaned over, listening intently. His eyes flashed to amber for a brief moment.

"She's alive, but she's bleeding out. She needs to shift back to human to heal that wound, and that should force the bullet out. We're too far from the park to get to them in time."

Tarquin nodded, his eyes filled with grief.

Marcus sat back on his heels as Tarquin leaned down and said into Lucy's ear, "Shift, baby, please. Stay with me, stay with Luna. Come back. Shift!"

But nothing happened.



## Chapter Seventeen

Tarquin was devastated but refused to give up hope. He could hear Lucy's heart beating and see the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. But the blood passing through his fingers and pooling on the ground was evidence that she wasn't healing fast enough.

Tarquin lifted his tear-filled eyes to his alpha.

“Marcus.”

He met Tarquin's gaze, his somber eyes full of wisdom and authority.

Reverently, he placed his hand on Lucy's head. His eyes turned amber and swiftly grew brighter until they glowed. The hair on the back of Tarquin's neck rose as Marcus leaned into his alpha power and lifted his head to the sky.

With one deep inhale, he roared, the sound reverberating through the trees.

Tarquin nearly shifted again as Marcus's alpha power hit him like a truck and made his bones ache.

From one moment to the next, Lucy changed, as swiftly as the blink of an eye. She was a doe, dying from a gunshot wound that had winged him in the shoulder, and now she was human, with a scar on her chest.

She opened her eyes with a groan and sat up, patting her chest with trembling fingers.

“I...I thought I was dying.”

Tarquin pulled her against him so fast she squeaked in surprise. Tears spilled from his eyes, and he squeezed them together, his bear roaring in his head that she was alive and well.

Pushing her gently away, he cupped her face. “Are you okay?”

“I died?” she asked.

Luna sniffled and hugged her. “I think it was close.”

“Too close,” Tarquin said.

“Geez,” Lucy said. “How did I come back?”

Tarquin looked at Marcus. “How did you know that would work?”

“What worked?” Lucy asked.

“He used his authority as alpha to call you out of your shift,” Tarquin said.

“I wasn’t sure if it would, actually,” Marcus said. “She’s not a bear, but she is your mate and part of the sleuth, so I had to try.” He smiled at Lucy. “Alphas can force a shift if someone is injured or unconscious. I’ve actually never had to do it before, so I’m really glad it worked.”

Tarquin was too.

He sat back as emotion swamped him. He’d nearly lost his soulmate to an asshole hunter.

“You look green,” Lucy said. “Are you okay? Oh, you were shot!”

“You were shot more,” Luna said.

“I’ll heal,” Tarquin said. He glanced at the mark on his shoulder that wasn’t a gaping wound any longer and was slowly knitting together thanks to his healing nature. Dried blood coated his shoulder as it also coated Lucy’s chest, a grim reminder of what could have been.

Lucy hugged Luna and then leaned into Tarquin. “You’re okay? Really okay?” she asked.

He kissed her and scrubbed at his wet cheeks before hugging her and Luna. “I am as long as you are.”

“I’m still confused, but I’m glad I’m here with you guys.” She mused for a moment. “I just remember a sharp pain and then everything went dark, but I felt like I was dying.”

“You were,” Tarquin said. “The bullet hit your chest.”

He glanced down at the place where she’d been shot. The scar that had been visible when she’d first changed back was now gone and she was completely healed. Despite that, he could still see the gaping wound in his mind’s eye. He was sure he wouldn’t ever forget what it had felt like to hold her while she’d been dying, the helplessness settling on him like a wet blanket.

Luna sniffled. “I want to go home. Can we go home?”

Tarquin one hundred percent agreed. He never wanted to set foot in the woods again. It was far too dangerous.

“First we need to make sure it’s safe,” Marcus said as he finished getting dressed. He brought over their clothes. “Lucy and Luna can get dressed, but hold off for a moment, Tarquin.”

He nodded and tied his hoodie around his hips to give himself some modesty around her little sister, and then he rose

to his feet and helped the girls up. While they dressed, he scanned the area, his bear alert for danger.

“You look so angry,” Lucy whispered when she’d pulled her hoodie over her head. “Are you okay?”

He let out a grumbling sigh. “You nearly died because I wasn’t paying attention. My bear is pissed.”

“I’m sorry I brought us here,” she said, chewing her bottom lip. Her eyes went suddenly luminous as tears pooled. “I’m s-sorry.”

He drew her close, his bear chuffing in worry. “You don’t have anything to apologize for. It wasn’t your fault.”

“It was mine,” Luna said. Her voice had gone soft and small, filled with sorrow. “I nearly got you killed. Both of you.”

Lucy held out her hand for Luna, and she took it.

Lucy shuddered slightly in his arms. “We’re all okay, though. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, not yours for suggesting we come here, not mine for thinking it was a grand idea, not ours for shifting in front of a human, and not Tarquin’s or the sleuth’s for that asshole human getting past the patrol and firing at us.”

Tarquin growled, and Lucy leaned back and frowned. “Don’t be mad at yourself.”

“I can’t help it.” He kissed her forehead and glanced to where the sleuth had returned from the woods. “I’m just glad you’re okay now.”

“Me too.”

He left his sweetheart and her sister inside the cabin and joined Marcus and the sleuth. Many of them were still in their shifts, but others had dressed while he'd been thanking his lucky stars and whatever fates were in charge of doing and bearing safety that his new family was alive and well.

"The human's dead," Seneca said. "I'm sure you're not too broken up about it."

"Not in the slightest," Tarquin said. He sighed. "If he's with the hunters, they'll come looking for him."

Marcus snarled. "I have an idea. Are you up to shift again?"

Tarquin looked at him in surprise. "If it keeps us all safe, definitely."

"It will, but it's risky."

"Whatever it takes to make sure we're all safe, especially the mates," Tayme said, "is the right thing to do."

"All right," Marcus said. "Tarquin, you shift. I need three volunteers to go on a rampage."

\* \* \*

Tarquin pulled the dead hunter by the leg as he made his way to a place halfway between the hunters' campsite and the road. Justus, London, and Hyde had stayed in their shifts, with the rest of the sleuth returning to human. Several were at the cabin to watch for danger and keep Lucy and Luna safe, and the others were following behind the three bears who were going

to fake an attack on the hunters and drive them to where he and the dead hunter would be.

He reached the space finally, dropped the hunter and lifted his head, bellowing a call that he was ready. It would help orient the bears to drive the hunters into his path.

He sat on his haunches and sighed. It had been a fucking terrifying night, and he just wanted to get back to the safety of the park and never step foot in the woods again.

Listening intently, he heard a chorus of roars from the bears followed by the panicked screams of the hunters. Some shots were fired, but he doubted the panicking males would be able to hit the bears in the dark.

It took a few minutes, but he heard the hunters clumsily crashing through the woods right toward him. He rose to his paws and lifted the dead hunter, shaking his head and growling menacingly to make it appear that a bear had attacked the hunter and killed him right at that moment.

The hunters skidded to a halt a few yards from him.

“Oh no! Bobby!” one of them cried out.

“It’s too late for him! I’m out of here!” another said, ducking to one side.

“But his wife?” the first one asked as he backed away slowly.

“We’ll send someone to come look for his body, if it’s still here.”

Tarquin crunched through the leg bones and whipped the male to the side, then leveled himself at the one male who was still there. He let out a furious growl and the male lifted his

rifle, his hands trembling and making the whole rifle shake wildly.

Justus appeared and knocked the rifle from the male's hands, sending the male scattering into the night after his friends.

Marcus walked up to them a moment later, directing Fell to follow the hunters and make sure they left.

“This was messy,” Marcus said, “and a hell of a risk, but it worked. The hunters are gone, the male who saw the girls shift is dead, and the other hunters think a natural bear killed this fellow. All in all, I think we're done here. Let's get the hell home.”

Tarquin looked down at the hunter who'd nearly cost him everything. The male had been in the wrong place at the wrong time and tried to kill the girls, which had triggered his protective instincts. He was sorry the male had to die, but he'd never apologize for keeping his mate and his family safe.

He stared a moment longer and then turned away, following the others back to the cabin. Lucy raced out of the cabin and hugged him. He sat back on his haunches and wrapped a furry arm around her with a chuff.

“I heard rifles; I was so worried.”

“They got off a few shots,” Marcus said, “but they were so scared they just fired into the darkness and none of our people got hurt.”

“Do we have to wait until they can shift back?” Luna asked.

“I actually reached out to Joss and the other alphas, and they’re sending some of the large panel vans here so the guys can travel back to the park without waiting out their shifts. They should be here in a few minutes.”

“Good,” Lucy said.

He and his mate waited in the backyard with Luna for the vans. When they finally arrived, Fell had returned and shared that the hunters had cautiously doubled back to the campsite to get the rest of their supplies, then fled in their vehicles.

Lucy reached for Luna’s hand, and they linked fingers. “This is goodbye,” she said, looking to the cabin. “It was a home while Dad was alive, but it’s not home anymore.”

“I’m glad we have the park. It really does feel like home,” Luna said.

“It truly does,” Lucy said. She sniffled and gave him a watery smile. “I’m so ready to get home, Tarquin. Let’s get you loaded up.”

He lumbered to the front of the cabin with his mate and her sister, then climbed into the remaining van. Lucy rode with him in the back of the van, leaning against his side. Luna rode with Rory, Tayme, and several of the males in another van.

“I think,” Lucy said as she snuggled a little deeper against him, “that we’re even.”

He lifted his head and looked at her. Although he wanted to ask her what she was talking about, he couldn’t just yet.

She lifted her head to look at him and then rested it again on his side and closed her eyes. “You hit me with the



SUV the night we met. I was planning to hold that over your head forever. But tonight, you came here with me and got shot by a hunter, and then you had to drag a dead body through the woods and pretend to maul it again. And Marcus said you had another rifle pointed at you! So I'd say that after what you went through tonight, we're even for the hitting-me-with-the-car thing."

He grumbled. They were definitely not even, because she'd been shot too.

"I know what you're thinking," she said, petting his side. "I was shot, but I don't remember it and the pain was only a heartbeat. You were conscious the whole time you were healing, and you had other stuff to deal with. We're even. I've declared it."

Well, he wasn't going to argue with his soulmate.

If she declared they were even, then he was going to make it so.

He grumbled a little, wishing he could talk in real words.

"I know," she said, then yawned. "You agree with me because I'm awesome and very mostly right, all the time."

He chuffed a laugh.

"I love you, Tarquin. I've declared it."

He'd declare it as soon as he got back into his human form too.

## Chapter Eighteen

Mercer swiped his card at the security office door on Sunday morning. When the light clicked to green and the door unlocked, he pushed it open and switched off the security system so the door could be opened from the outside by park patrons without needing to be buzzed in.

His lion was a little agitated and had been since yesterday, after he'd spent the entire day in the paddock during the VIP tours without finding his soulmate. Hell, they hadn't had that many tours anyway, since the weather lately had been more chilly than warm, typical of New Jersey fall. The VIP tours would continue as long as people booked them, but generally they dried up during the winter months when it was too cold for humans. Which meant if he didn't find his soulmate before December, he'd probably be spending the winter alone.

Again.

He turned on the lights and stepped behind the counter, then turned on the computer. The front door opened.

"Morning," Jupiter, head of park security and a lion shifter like Mercer, walked into the office.

"Hey."

Jupiter paused with a frown. "You okay?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You look annoyed."

"Just thinking about being unmated."

“Gotcha. Well, it’ll happen when the time is right. Hopefully soon for you and the others, though.” Their pride wasn’t that large, but only a few of their people were mated, including Jupiter, who’d met his soulmate Celeste on a VIP tour.

“I hope it’s soon too.”

Jupiter walked into the smaller office, and Mercer busied himself getting set up. The park was open from eleven to eight, so he had only a half hour before the park opened and patrons started coming in. He mostly had to deal with the occasional child separated from their parents and the rare fight that would break out when people got into heated arguments. Mostly, the security office was a boring post. He enjoyed doing patrols around the park, but he hadn’t been tasked with that, so he’d be riding the desk for the day.

The time moved at a snail’s pace, which unfortunately gave him plenty of opportunity to think about his empty bed and listen to his lion complain in his head.

And then the door opened, and he was briefly blinded by the sunshine.

As his eyes quickly adjusted to the bright sunlight pouring into the small space, he saw the most beautiful woman he’d ever laid eyes on in his life. She stood in the open door, her blonde hair loose around her shoulders, her blue eyes searching, her teeth digging into her bottom lip.

Then she spoke.

“I was hoping I could talk to someone about a job,” she said. Her voice was what he imagined angels sounded like. Slightly musical, very sexy, and a little...nervous?

She stepped into the office completely and the door shut, sending a wave of her scent his direction. The moment her scent hit him, all warm like sunshine and sweet like melted sugar, he knew he was in the presence of his soulmate.

The problem? She was very clearly human.

\* \* \*

Lucy smiled to herself as she chopped bacon in the park's kitchen and scooped it up with the back of the knife, adding it to the pan of reduced brown sugar and balsamic vinegar.

"I got you more bacon," Tarquin said, walking into the commercial kitchen with several bags on each arm.

"Awesome, I'm just finishing up the first batch."

He pecked her cheek with a happy growl.

It had been a week since the events at the cabin. They'd taken two days off to enjoy their mating and unpack her and Luna's things, and then they'd gotten right into work. Luna spent weekday mornings in school with several other kids in a classroom under the park and the afternoons working in the petting zoo with the small animals. She was happier than Lucy had seen her in ages.

Lucy joined Tarquin at the burger stall as a permanent staff member of Amazing Adventures Safari Park. He manned the grill, and she assembled the burgers and handled the fries. She loved helping him come up with the burger of the day, like today's that would feature bacon jam.

"That smells amazing," he said. "Or is that just you?"

With a laugh, she said, “It might be a little of both. I’ve cooked four pounds of bacon already this morning. I think I’ll permanently smell like it.” She gestured to a plate. “I put some bacon jam on toast for you to try.”

“Oh, thanks.”

He put the bags on the counter and unloaded them, putting several pounds of bacon wrapped in butcher paper next to her, and then he picked up the thick-sliced Texas toast topped with butter and bacon jam.

She watched him take a bite.

He chewed a few times and then closed his eyes with a happy sigh. “Holy hell, this is good.”

She beamed at him.

“What’s good?” Marcus asked, walking into the kitchen with Seneca and Justus.

“Lucy’s bacon jam.”

The three males each took a piece of the second slice of toast and remarked how good it tasted. Her cheeks hurt from smiling so much at their compliments.

Marcus brushed his hands off. “Truly delicious, Lucy. The burger stall will be really popular today, I’m sure. We added the burger of the day to the announcement board at the front gate.”

“Thanks, Marcus,” Tarquin said.

“Hey, if you have any to spare, you should send it down to the marketplace for Jeanie to put out on the condiment table,” Justus said. “Trina puts bacon on everything, so I’d love a jar of this for her too.”

“I’ll make it happen,” Lucy promised.

The males separated to different areas of the kitchen, with Justus heading to the security office for his shift. Most bears handled some aspect of food for the park or shifters, but he said he enjoyed working at the security office, and it was close to where Trina worked at the sweets shop.

Lucy stirred the bacon into the syrup and then turned off the heat. Online ticket sales for the day ahead told her that there would be several hundred people in through the gates that day, so they had to be prepared.

“This is so much better than I ever dreamed,” she said, turning to face Tarquin. He finished the last bite of his toast.

“Which part?”

He joined her, resting his hands on her hips.

“I always wanted to have my jams for sale on a larger scale; I just didn’t know how to make that happen. Now, not only is the gift shop selling my strawberry preserves, but I’m making bacon jam for burgers in the park for patrons. Hundreds of people might get to try something I made today.” Tears pricked her eyes, and she blinked rapidly to dispel them.

“Happy tears, I trust?” he asked, pulling her close and resting his face against her neck. She wrapped her arms around him fully and squeezed.

“Definitely.”

“You’re so talented and creative. Since you joined me at the burger stall, our sales have gone way up. I thought I was pretty slick with the daily burger choices, but you knock it out

of the park all the time.” He kissed her neck and let out a bearish hum.

“I love everything about working the burger stall with you.”

She leaned back and kissed him.

“I love it too. I always hoped my soulmate would want to work with me. You made all my dreams come true.”

“Hey now,” Fell said. “None of that lovey-dovey stuff while the rest of us single males are within earshot.”

“Sorry,” she said with a smile.

“I’m not.” Tarquin drew her close once more and gave her a kiss.

He let her go, and she turned back to the stove. Grabbing a ladle, she moved the bacon jam from the skillet into a container and snapped a lid on it. One down, three more to go.

She glanced over her shoulder to see Tarquin set up the mandolin slicer and pull out several bags of onions. He must have felt her watching him because he looked at her and winked.

Her cheeks heated as sexy thoughts traipsed through her mind, but she shut them down. Couldn’t get all turned on in the kitchen with the sleuth nearby and a full day of work ahead.

But maybe they could take a break. A sexy one.

*Lunch?* she mouthed to him.

He nodded with a soft growl, his eyes flashing.

A quick check of her watch showed that was six hours away, quite a damn long time. She'd just keep her fingers crossed that the time moved swiftly.

Turning her attention back to the stove, she got another skillet out and started a new batch of bacon jam, humming a tune from a commercial she'd seen on the news that morning.

This was genuinely her dream job, and it was all thanks to her soulmate.

Their meeting was a comedy of errors that nearly ended with her hoofing it into the great beyond. But she'd survived, not only the car accident but also the hunting accident, and come out on the other side of things stronger and with a better appreciation for what true home and family meant.

Her dad had been too scared to live life to the fullest after his mate died, and Lucy had bought into that with all her heart, living scared in the woods and worrying constantly about Luna's safety. But her dad had died anyway, and she'd only gotten more scared, clipping Luna's proverbial wings in the process.

Then Tarquin crashed into their lives, and he brought safety and passion to her in spades. The high stone walls of the park told her that she could live her life in freedom and safety, and wasn't alone in keeping her sister safe. She had a soulmate watching their backs, and an entire sleuth of bear shifters who were willing to kill to protect their own.

A world she'd never known existed at a safari park that catered to humans. The strange twists of fate that brought her to the wrought iron gates now filled her with hope for a future full of love and family.



Whatever came their way, she now knew with certainty that she and Tarquin could handle anything, no matter how big or dangerous.

To get her happily ever after, all she'd needed was a lonely stretch of road, a bunch of crazy hunters, and a bear behind the wheel. The rest was history.

\* \* \*

Thank you so much for reading **Tarquin**! I hope you enjoyed hanging out with the shifters who call the park home! The series will continue in 2024 with Mercer.

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\* \* \*

[Focusing on the fights ahead of him](#), he zoned out and ignored the humans who walked by slowly, several yards away, and stared at them as if they were freaks in a side show.

An alluring scent caught his attention, and he snapped from his revelry, scanning the crowd.

“Whoa, what’s wrong?” Lia asked.

He scented the air, sifting through the scents until he found the one that called to him. Even without knowing what she smelled like in his dreams, he knew he was in the presence of his truemate. The scent strengthened as the crowd passed by, and then he saw her. Long, dark brown hair like melted chocolate. Skin like fresh cream. A body to die for—this time trapped behind satin and sequins. She walked between Jonathon and another male, who had his hand on her elbow.

Everything within him focused on her. His beast roared for him to shift and go to her, and the sound spilled out of his

mouth. The deafening roar silenced the humans for a brief moment, and then they panicked.

As his family tried to hold him back, Jonathon rushed Alaric's true mate from the training center along with the other humans and pack members, and when the doors had shut and her scent was gone, his beast roared in anguish.

"Calm down!" Slade said, growling the words.

"Mine," he groaned as he went to his knees, his bones cracking as his beast tried to force him to shift so he could hunt for his mate and protect her.

"No, don't shift!"

\* \* \*

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R. E. Butler is a USA Today Best Selling Author of Paranormal Romance such as the Were Zoo and Cider Falls series. She lives on the water in New Jersey with her husband, kids, and an enormous furry pup.

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\* \* \*

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