

Bearheart DESTINY



Bear Creek
GUARDIANS

A SMALL TOWN SHIFTER ROMANCE

HARMONY RAINES

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Bear Creek Guardians Book Five

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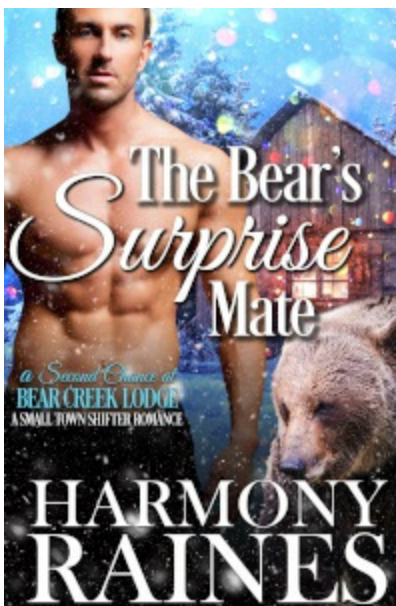
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Chapter One – Heath

Heath's powerful muscles bunched and flexed as he raced up the steep mountain pass, the wind whipping through his thick fur. The thrill of running alongside his fellow Bear Creek Guardians surged through him, their massive bear forms leaping over fallen logs and dodging around imposing boulders with ease. The bond they shared made them an unstoppable force, and Heath reveled in it.

Together, they reached their destination: a serene meadow high in the mountains, bursting with wildflowers that had bloomed in full after the recent heavy rain. The scent of damp earth and fragrant flowers filled the air as Heath and Leif shifted seamlessly into their human forms. Heath stood tall, his keen eyes surveying the vibrant landscape before him, a beautiful palette of natural colors.

"Is this the place?" he asked. Thane had said that it would not be as they expected, and he was right. Gazing out at the peaceful meadow, it seemed impossible that anything could be wrong here.

Leif, his face drawn with concern, nodded. "Yes. This is the place." The deep furrow in his forehead revealed his frustration.

Thane shifted and joined them, looking up at the high protective ridge surrounding the meadow. "There's still nothing here?"

Leif shook his head slowly. "I can sense it normally, like it's there in my peripheral vision, but when we get here, it fades away."

Thane nodded solemnly just as Stellan arrived, his broad shoulders casting a shadow on the ground. "Any ideas?" he asked.

Stellan sighed, shaking his head. "No. There is no medical reason for what Leif can sense. I've examined him thoroughly and ran all the tests, and there is no sign that he is imagining the creature."

"But that doesn't mean I'm not," Leif's voice trembled with uncertainty.

"I know this place," Tavish piped up, standing shoulder to shoulder with the other Guardians, looking pensive, his eyes distant.

"You do?" Thane asked, curiosity piqued. But before Tavish could answer, the blaring sound of Leif's satellite phone interrupted them.

Leif stepped away from the group to answer the call, his expression tense. Heath's bear grumbled in agitation. He shared his unease.

What do you think it means? Heath murmured.

Nothing good, his bear replied, his voice low and rumbling.

I know Sable has researched the news archives and the museum archives, but I think it's time we asked for help from the people who might have answers, Heath said.

You're right, Heath's bear agreed. *It's time.*

"Where?" Leif's strained tone drew everyone's attention back to him. "And the other rescue crew is already out?"

Leif nodded as he listened to the voice on the other end of the phone, his jaw clenching. Then he looked up at his friends, concern etched on his face.

"What is it?" Thane asked.

"There's a group of hikers missing. They set out from The Catherine Hotel mid-morning and were due back an hour ago," Leif replied, his voice heavy with worry.

"Sounds familiar," Thane murmured, the memory of the couple who had vanished months back lingering in their minds. Despite an extensive search, they were never found—only to later appear on a security camera miles away. An eyewitness claimed they left of their own accord, leaving all their belongings behind in their hotel room at The Catherine. The mystery remained unsolved.

Heath's chest tightened with unease as he exchanged glances with his fellow Guardians. "Do you think this is another trick?"

"Who knows?" Leif shrugged, his gaze locked on something unseen in the distance. "But I can't risk it."

Thane nodded in agreement, his expression solemn. "We'll come with you."

Leif took one last look at the seemingly insignificant patch of land. "This was a wasted journey, anyway." He turned away and put the phone back to his ear.

"Only time will tell," Thane said sagely, his breath visible in the cold air as he sighed.

It must mean something, Heath's bear insisted.

But what? Heath replied silently, his mind racing through various scenarios. But none made sense.

From what Leif had said, it was always the same: he could sense the creature up here. He described it as a constant nagging, but each time he reached the meadow, it had vanished. As if something was taunting him, daring him to keep chasing after something that might not even exist.

“Okay,” Leif spoke into the phone, pulling Heath from his thoughts. “I’m with the other guardians. We’ll go find the missing hikers. Do you have any coordinates?” Leif’s jaw clenched as he listened, and it was obvious he did not like the answer he received.

“It looks as if we are going to be hunting hikers instead of this creature,” Cormac said gruffly, his voice heavy with annoyance.

“Hunting?” Heath arched an eyebrow at his friend.

“You could call it that. It’s going to take all of us to find them,” Cormac answered, his eyes narrowing as he stared into the distance.

“Like looking for a needle in a haystack,” Stellan agreed, his own gaze filled with concern.

“Okay,” Leif said as he ended the call, his voice strained. “I expect you got most of that.”

“There’s people missing, and no one has a clue where they are?” Heath questioned, furrowing his brow.

“You’ve got it.” Leif put the phone back in his pack. “The mountain rescue crew on duty are already out on another rescue. So, it’s down to us. When we get back, I’m going to recommend we close off some trails until the bad weather blows over. The terrain is dangerous for inexperienced hikers.”

“Good thinking. But for now, let’s go track down these hikers,” Thane said confidently, and Heath couldn’t help but be inspired by his friend’s unwavering faith in their abilities.

“Let’s go.” Leif turned to look across the mountains, his eyes scanning the rugged terrain. “They were spotted by another couple of hikers near Bronlim Pass. Few trails lead off from there, so I have an idea where they must have gone if they didn’t turn back.”

“Hasn’t there been some landslides over that way?” Stellan asked, the worry evident in his voice.

“There have,” Leif replied grimly.

“Goodness, let’s hope we don’t have to dig them out of a mudslide,” Cormac muttered before taking two steps forward. The surrounding air shimmered with static electricity, and he shifted into his bear form. As soon as his massive paws touched the ground, he was off and running toward Bronlim Pass.

In an instant, the other guardians followed suit, instantly transforming as they raced after Cormac.

Heath’s powerful bear’s legs propelled him forward as he and the other Bear Creek Guardians raced across the mountains. The rough terrain did little to slow them, their paws splashing through icy streams and pounding over wide grassy plateaus. They descended steep ravines, muscles rippling beneath their fur, their breaths fogging the crisp mountain air.

They all kept their keen senses on alert, while following Leif as he led them through the mountains with unwavering confidence.

As they passed a stunning waterfall, the spray from its roaring cascade drenched Heath’s shaggy coat. He shook himself vigorously, water droplets flying off him and refracting the sunlight into prisms of rainbows. Despite the importance of their mission, Heath couldn’t help but feel exhilarated in running alongside his fellow guardians. His bear grumbled in agreement, though it wondered if there even was a mission this time—or if it was, yet again, another wild goose chase.

Just as Heath was about to agree with his bear’s skepticism, Leif slowed to a stop. The other bears joined him, their sides heaving as they caught their breath from the intense exertion.

Heath felt something, too, an unexplainable presence nearby. *Can you sense that?* he asked his bear.

Yes, came the reply.

“Can you sense that?” Heath repeated aloud as they all shifted into their human forms. Towering trees surrounded them, the scent of pine needles mingling with the damp earth beneath their feet.

“If by *that*, you mean four people about half a mile up ahead, then yes,” Leif said, brushing his ruffled hair out of his eyes. “But they are…”

“Are what?” Tavish asked as he scanned the landscape before them.

“I don’t know. It’s like they’re *inside* the mountain.” Leif squinted as if trying to peer through the solid rock before them.

“Are you sure?” Thane asked, his eyes going out of focus as he pushed his senses outward. All around them, the forest seemed to hold its breath in anticipation.

“I’ve been on more mountain rescues than I can count,” Leif replied. “This is different.”

“Are they in a cave?” Stellan asked, his brows furrowing as he considered the possibilities.

Heath could sense the fear lurking beneath the doctor’s calm exterior. “I didn’t think anyone did caving up here.”

“Let’s go see.” With that, Leif transformed back into his bear form and sprinted away, consumed by a sense of urgency. The others followed suit, their bears taking over as they raced through the forest and up toward the higher mountainside where they could sense the people.

Heath’s muscles strained as he and the other Bear Creek Guardians climbed the narrow trail, nothing more than an animal path, up the steep mountainside. The heavy rain over the last few weeks had left deep rivulets where the path had been partly washed away, but they had no choice but to keep going, keep climbing.

What the...? Heath’s bear ducked down as a shower of shale rained down as Leif, who was just in front of him, slipped and nearly lost his footing. Heath’s bear growled in frustration as they continued their grueling climb.

What are these hikers even doing up here? Heath asked, annoyed by the treacherous terrain.

His bear shook his head, small stones and dirt flying from his fur. *When we find them, we can ask them.*

They reached the top of the trail and Leif paused, his bear panting heavily as he waited for the others to join him.

They could all sense the hikers now; they were close by. But something felt off. Heath agreed with Leif’s earlier assessment. It did feel as if they were *inside* the mountain.

Thane shifted into his human form and took a water bottle from his pack. As the others followed suit, he offered the water around. Heath gratefully accepted the cool liquid and took a long drink before passing it on.

Thane turned to Lief. “You know these mountains better than anyone. Is there a cave system around here? Could they have ventured in too far and got

lost?”

Leif swallowed a mouthful of water and shook his head. “Not a cave system, but there are a couple of old shafts farther up. Most of the year they’re covered in ice, but the ice has melted with the recent heavy rain and warmer weather, and so the entrances might be exposed.”

“Could they have fallen in?” Stellan asked in concern.

“That would be my guess. It’s the only explanation for what I can sense,” Leif replied, his eyes scanning the area. “But…”

“But what?” Tavish asked, as he handed the water bottle back to Thane.

“Four of them?” Leif asked, disbelief in his voice.

“What if the ground gave way?” Tavish suggested.

“A possibility,” Leif conceded.

Heath’s stomach clenched at the thought of four people trapped inside the mountain, their lives potentially hanging in the balance.

There was something about being trapped underground that made his blood run cold. He took a deep breath as he warded off the feeling of suffocation that pressed down on him.

Did the others feel the same?

The tense glance that passed between them said yes.

Bears might like to sleep in caves, but only when they can still feel the wind on their faces. And know that they can leave when they want. No bear wants to be hemmed in by rock, with no escape.

“Let’s get going,” Thane said, and the six men hiked the last part of the trail on foot. Not just because they didn’t want to risk exposing themselves as shifters, but also because their human forms were lighter than their bears.

There was a chance one of these shafts might have opened up under the weight of the four hikers. If the ground up here was unsafe, then they didn’t want to make matters worse.

“Let’s fan out,” Leif suggested as they reached the top of the trail where they found a rocky plateau. “The entrance to the shaft might be hidden.”

“That would explain how come four hikers fell.” Cormac looked uneasy as the six guardians spread out.

The recent heavy rain had made the ground muddy and unstable, and it wasn’t hard to imagine how easy it would be for someone to slip and fall. It

was strange to see the mountainside devoid of snow. They seemed harsher when they showed just bare rock. Heath pushed out his senses as they searched the area, hoping to find some sign of the missing hikers.

There. Heath spotted a footprint in the mud.

Only one, his bear asked in confusion.

Heath turned in a circle, looking for more. But then Thane called out.

“Over here!” The others rushed to where Thane was standing, and Heath’s heart sank as he saw the gaping hole in the ground.

The shaft was dark, and Heath couldn’t see the bottom. The only thing he could hear was the sound of rushing water echoing from somewhere far below.

“They fell down there?” Cormac’s tone mirrored Heath’s fears. If they had, could anyone survive such a fall?

“Look.” Thane held up a scrap of fabric caught on a jagged rock. It looked as if it had been torn from a waterproof jacket.

Leif hunkered down next to the dark blue fabric and touched his fingers to it. “This is new. It can’t have been here long.”

“Is there anyone down there?” Tavish bellowed into the abyss.

“Yes!” came a desperate voice. “Yes. We’re down here!”

“Is anyone injured?” Leif called out.

“Not badly. Although Tony has a cut on his head,” the hiker called back.

“Okay,” Leif replied. “Listen, stay put and we’ll call for help.”

“The water is rising,” the hiker shouted with concern. “I don’t know how much time we have before it floods.”

Leif ran his hand across his eyes and stared down into the shaft. “Stay calm. We’ll get you out of there.”

“Can we get them out?” Thane asked, as he peered down into the shaft.

“We have no choice.” Leif stood up and took his pack from his back and placed it down on the ground. “I’ll call for help, but there’s no way a rescue helicopter can land up here. And if the water is rising, we don’t have time to wait for another rescue team to reach us. So, it’s up to us to get them out of there.”

The Bear Creek Guardians nodded as one. These people needed their help. And help was what they were sworn to do.

Chapter Two – Tamara

As Tamara drove into the heart of Bear Creek, her pulse quickened with anticipation. The quaint little town was everything she had dreamed of—a place where people knew each other by name and life moved at a gentler pace. She could hardly believe her luck when her editor had assigned her this piece.

She parked her car on the main street and stepped out into the light drizzle that enveloped the town. The fresh mountain air filled her lungs as she closed her car door, its crispness invigorating her. Turning her gaze upward, Tamara marveled at the towering peaks disappearing into the low clouds, their enormity both humbling and awe-inspiring. A thrill ran through her veins like electricity as she checked her watch; in just one hour, she would be able to collect the keys to her temporary home. Nestled close to the eponymous creek, the charming cottage promised mornings filled with birdsong and the soothing murmur of flowing water.

Tamara's daydreams were abruptly shattered by the shrill ring of her phone, its sound jarring against the peaceful backdrop of the town. With a sigh, she fished it from her pocket, her mother's face flashing across the screen. So much for her good mood, she thought as she reluctantly answered the call.

"Hi, Mom, everything all right?" Tamara asked lightly, trying to maintain her composure.

"You tell me," her mother replied curtly. Tamara locked her car and hitched her purse onto her shoulder, strolling down the sidewalk toward a local diner. The scent of freshly baked pies wafted through the air, momentarily distracting her from the conversation.

"Well, everything is fine from where I am standing," she responded, hoping to keep things civil.

"And where exactly are you standing?" her mother retorted, as if oblivious to the voicemail Tamara had left her earlier. Tamara's heart weighed heavily in her chest, knowing this conversation would only lead to yet another argument.

"Is that why you're calling?" she asked, trying to keep the weariness from

her voice. “I left a message on your voicemail telling you I was coming to Bear Creek.”

“To write a fluff piece on some local artist,” her mother stated disdainfully.

Tamara clenched her jaw as she defended her assignment. “Yes, I am here to interview a local artist,” she confirmed. “And I enjoy writing so-called fluff pieces. As much as people like reading them.”

“You are better than that, Tamara,” her mom insisted. But Tamara had had enough of these conversations—the constant disapproval and lack of understanding.

“Mom, it’s not about being better. It’s about what I enjoy, and I enjoy bringing the people in my articles to life. I love broadening my readers’ world...”

“When you could write front-page headlines.” It wasn’t a question.

Which was good because Tamara was done giving answers.

Her conversations with her mom were always the same, and they never got anywhere. Tamara was happy to agree to disagree on her career choices. Her mother was not.

“I’m happy, Mom.” Tamara reached the diner but didn’t go inside.

“You say that now,” her mom began. “But when you look back in ten, twenty years’ time, you will regret not being more ambitious.”

Tamara took a deep breath, her patience wearing thin. “I won’t regret doing what makes me happy,” she replied firmly. “And right now, that’s writing about people and their passions.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line before her mother sighed heavily. “Okay, fine. I just worry about you, Tamara. You have so much potential.”

“I know, Mom,” Tamara replied, her voice softening. “And I appreciate that. But what’s best for me is to follow my own path.”

There was a pause before her mother spoke again. “I just don’t want you to...”

Her mother faltered and Tamara mentally finished the rest of the sentence...end up like me.

But she wasn’t her mom. She knew that. Tamara just wished that her mom

could see that they were different people, with different hopes and dreams.

“Goodbye, Mom. I’ll call you in a day or two,” she said.

“Okay, take care of yourself,” her mom answered.

“I will. I love you.” Tamara smiled sadly to herself. Her relationship with her mom had never been easy. But she truly loved her mother, and she knew her mom loved her. Maybe too much.

Tamara just wished that her mom would actually listen to her.

“I love you, too.” The line went dead, and Tamara slipped the phone back into her pocket.

Time to eat.

Tamara pushed the diner door open and the smell of freshly brewed coffee and sizzling bacon hit her nostrils. She took a deep breath, and her stomach grumbled in response to the delicious aroma.

The diner was a small, cozy place with a few booths and a barstool seating area. It wasn’t crowded, but there were a few customers scattered around, engrossed in their meals or the morning news on the TV in the corner. Tamara scanned the room for an empty booth and spotted one in the corner by the window. She made her way over and slid into the red vinyl seat, grabbing the menu from the holder on the table.

As she perused the breakfast options, she glanced around the room. People watching was one of her favorite pastimes, she loved dreaming up stories of the people she encountered. Who were they? What did they do for a living? Or a hobby?

Her eyes followed a woman carrying a young baby as they entered the diner and slid into a booth next to another woman.

“Any news?”

“I just spoke to Leif,” the other woman replied. “They’re on their way back down the mountain.”

“With the hikers?” the woman with the baby asked.

“Yes.” The second woman reached out and touched the upper arm of the woman with the baby, offering comfort.

“Thank goodness,” the woman with the baby said. “Hear that, Summer? Daddy is on his way back to us.” She took a shuddering breath. “I never used to get like this.”

“Hey, Sable, it’s understandable. You’ve just had a baby. Your hormones are all over the place.” The two women exchanged knowing looks.

“I love that Thane is a Bear Creek Guardian. But it does nothing for my nerves when he’s on a rescue like this. Not when the weather is turning,” Sable replied. “I don’t know how people are out hiking right now when there’s already been landslides.”

“You know he can take care of himself,” the second woman said. “Not that he has to when the guardians are all together.”

“Thanks, Emily.” Sable looked up as the server came toward the table. “Hey, Betsy.”

“Hi, Sable.” Betsy’s expression brightened, and she waved at the baby in Sable’s arms. “And how is Summer today? Waiting for her daddy to come down off the mountain?”

“You heard about the rescue?” Sable asked as she shifted the position of her baby so that Betsy could stroke her cheek.

“Town’s buzzing about it,” Betsy said. “Good thing those men of yours always seem to be in the right place at the right time. We’re lucky to have the Bear Creek Guardians.”

Bear Creek Guardians. Tamara was intrigued as to who these men were. Perhaps it was the name of the local mountain rescue crew.

“Do you want some coffee?” Betsy asked Sable.

“No, thank you,” Sable said. “I’m trying to avoid caffeine.”

“Anything else I can get you?” Betsy asked.

“No, I’m fine, I only popped in to check in with Emily.” Sable moved to the edge of the booth and got up. “But thank you anyway, Betsy.”

“Anytime. And when the guys are back, I’ll send over some coffee and some hot food. They’ve got to keep their strength up with this weather.” Betsy ducked her head and looked out of the window. “I think we’ve had enough rain!”

“It has been unseasonably wet, according to Leif,” Emily said.

“See you later.” Sable headed for the door and Betsy watched her go before she turned her attention to her other customers.

More precisely, Tamara.

Tamara’s cheeks flushed pink as she realized Betsy had caught her

eavesdropping. She sheepishly looked at the waitress and said, “Sorry, I couldn’t help but hear you talking about a mountain rescue.”

Betsy smiled obligingly. “Yes, there were four hikers missing on the mountain, and no one knew where they got lost. But they are safe now.”

“With the...Bear Creek Guardians?” Tamara asked, hoping Betsy might offer some kind of information on these men.

“Yes.” Betsy glanced toward the mountains. “They always seem to be in the right place at the right time.”

“They rescue many people from the mountain?” Tamara asked, trying to hide her eagerness for information.

“Not just the mountain,” Betsy said. “They do lots of little things that make the town a better place.”

“It sure is a wonderful town,” Tamara said, sensing an opportunity to gather background information for her article.

“It is.” Betsy nodded, then lifted her hand, her pencil hovering over her notebook as she asked, “What can I get you?”

“Um, just a coffee and pancakes, please,” Tamara replied, not too disappointed that Betsy hadn’t said any more on the matter.

As Betsy left the table, Tamara leaned back in her seat and stared up at the distant mountain. It was an awesome sight, the craggy peaks draped in mist like a delicate veil. Her mind filled with images of the people who founded the town. She’d read about Calder Hanrahan and his beloved Elia during her research of the town. Their love story intertwined with the founding of Bear Creek, which seemed to hold its history in very high regard. There was supposedly a display in the museum telling their story, and she planned to check it out after completing her assignment.

Betsy returned with Tamara’s coffee and a plate of pancakes, the scent of warm maple syrup wafting through the air. “Thank you,” Tamara said, her eyes lingering on the steam rising from the coffee.

“You’re welcome,” Betsy replied, her smile putting Tamara at ease.

As Tamara picked up her fork and dug into her breakfast, she thought back to her phone call with her mother. Maybe she could go and interview the Bear Creek Guardians. There might be a story there. Local heroes were always popular with her readers. But was that really what interested her? Or was it the secrets that seemed to lurk in the shadows of this town? Or her

imagination.

Tamara chewed thoughtfully on a bite of pancake. She had come here for a simple assignment about Heath, who was the artist she had come to interview, but now she found herself drawn toward the Bear Creek Guardians and the history of the town.

Maybe she could do both while she was here. Heath was someone who she'd followed for some time and had been on her bucket list of people to interview since she'd first seen one of his paintings. But she couldn't deny the pull of finding out more about the so-called Bear Creek Guardians.

The taste of adventure and danger danced in her mind as she considered pursuing this new story.

She took a sip of her coffee and gazed at the mountains once more. As soon as she'd finished her breakfast, she'd collect the key to her rental cottage and then drive over to the local mountain rescue center and see if she could get some details on the rescue.

Writing a story on the Bear Creek Guardians and their good deeds would give her a good excuse to stay a little longer in town. What she'd truly like was a reason to stay here forever.

Her mom would certainly have something to say about that!

Chapter Three – Heath

“Cormac, take this anchor and fix the rope to that boulder over there.” Leif pointed to a large boulder about ten feet away from the shaft entrance.

Heath couldn't help but admire that Leif was already so prepared, especially when it came to the mountains. He always made a habit of carrying everything he'd need for a rescue even when he was not on duty.

“Sure.” Cormac took the metal anchor and rope and walked over to the chunk of rock. “There's already an anchor here,” Cormac called out as he reached the boulder.

“Maybe they didn't fall down the shaft,” Thane mused, his deep voice cutting through the tense silence. “Maybe they climbed down.”

“Use our anchor. We don't know if the other one is secure enough,” Leif advised, his eyes scanning the area for any trace of climbing equipment. A knot formed in Heath's stomach as he considered the possibility that the hikers had tied their rope, only for it to unravel and send them plummeting into the darkness below. The thought of such a terrifying experience sent a shiver down his spine.

“What do you need us to do?” Heath asked, unable to stand idly by any longer.

“When Cormac's finished, you'll lower me down first. Then Stellan, so that he can assess everyone. We don't want to cause more injury,” Leif instructed.

As Stellan prepared his medical kit, Heath handed over his own first aid supplies. “Here, I have a first aid kit in my pack.”

“Thanks. Anyone else?” Stellan asked, his calm demeanor betraying no hint of anxiety.

“I have one,” Thane replied.

“Good, keep it up here. If anyone needs further treatment when we come up, you can use your kit,” Stellan directed.

Thane nodded gravely, and the group sprang into action.

Heath's gaze followed every movement as Cormac quickly anchored the rope securely to the boulder and tugged it hard to ensure it wasn't going to

budge. “Good to go,” Cormac called out as the heavy rope snaked its way through the anchor, ready for the descent.

“Let’s do it,” Leif said. With a final nod, he stepped into the harness, ready to brave the unknown depths.

“Okay,” Thane said as he, Heath, Tavish, and Cormac took up the slack as Leif inched his way to the edge and then walked over it.

Heath’s hands were steady on the rope as they began lowering Leif. Like his fellow guardians, his focus was unwavering.

They held Leif’s life in their hands. And they would not let him down.

The descent was slow and controlled, each guardian playing their part with meticulous care. When Leif’s voice finally echoed up from the darkness, confirming he had reached the bottom, a collective sigh of relief was barely audible over the tension that still hung in the air.

Quickly, they pulled the harness up for the next descent. Heath assisted Stellan into the harness, ensuring every strap was secured and every buckle fastened. Stellan’s descent mirrored Leif’s—slow, steady, and without incident.

“Everyone is okay!” Stellan’s voice floated up from the dark depths and Heath felt a momentary ease in the pit of his stomach.

They waited, the minutes stretching out like hours, the silence of the mountain around them a stark contrast to the flurry of activity inside the shaft. Finally, Leif’s voice broke the stillness. “We’re ready for the first hiker to be pulled to safety.”

One by one, each hiker was secured and carefully hauled up. Heath’s arms ached from the effort, but the sight of each rescued hiker, weary but safe, fueled him with renewed strength. The guardians worked seamlessly, barely having to communicate with one another as the rescue neared its end.

As Thane helped the final hiker up the shaft and onto solid ground, the guardians prepared for the last part of their rescue. Stellan was next, his medical kit securely fastened to his side. When he emerged into the daylight, his nod confirmed that all was well.

Finally, it was Leif’s turn, the last to leave the shaft. As they pulled him up, Heath felt an overwhelming sense of pride and relief. Their mission was complete, all hikers safe, and their team unharmed.

“We did it,” Cormac said as he sat down on the boulder, his fingers toying

with the anchor.

“We did,” Heath agreed as he turned his back on Cormac and studied the hikers, who sat huddled together on the ground.

No climbing gear, his bear said.

Maybe they left it down in the shaft, his bear replied.

While Leif was on the satellite phone with the Bear Creek Mountain Rescue Center, Stellan carefully checked over each of the hikers once more in the daylight. His professional attitude made everyone feel relaxed, and he even shared a couple of laughs with the hikers.

Something feels off, Heath’s bear said.

In what way? Heath asked.

They don’t seem as traumatized by their ordeal as I would have expected. They could have died in that shaft, his bear replied.

They’re young, they bounce back faster, just as we did when we were that age. Even so, Heath watched closely, studying the hikers. They were indeed young, looking to only be in their twenties, and well-equipped for hiking the lower slopes in their brightly-colored clothes and medium backpacks. But not this rough terrain.

Heath tensed his jaw. They had been reckless coming up here under-prepared, but they could not have foreseen that there would be exposed mine shafts in the mountains.

As Stellan finished up his examinations, Heath stepped forward. “I’m glad you guys are okay.”

The hiker wearing a blue coat nodded. “Yeah, that was a close shave. We really didn’t expect anyone to find us that quickly.”

“No kidding.” One wearing red looked over at the group of guardians. “You guys were crazy fast with everything. I guess you do this for a living.”

Heath furrowed his brow. He wanted answers. “How exactly did you all end up down there, anyway?”

The hikers exchanged glances.

Furtive glances, Heath’s bear said.

However, before Heath could press them for an answer, Leif announced, “We need to get moving. There’s a helicopter on its way. We need to hike down to the Nortto Plateau for the pickup.”

“The Norto Plateau. It’s the nearest clearing, large enough for a helicopter landing.” Thane nodded in agreement.

“We need to move quickly.” Leif glanced up at the sky. The sun was beginning to dip lower, and soon the temperature would dip, too. The bear shifters would be fine, but after their ordeal, the cold might prove dangerous to the hikers.

Without wasting a moment, the guardians gathered their packs and prepared to move. Heath, alongside his fellow guardians, quickly organized the hikers, checking their footwear and distributing water bottles and energy bars.

Despite their exhaustion, the hikers rallied at the prospect of rescue.

The hike down to the Norto Plateau was arduous, the terrain uneven and challenging, but the hikers seemed to cope well, despite their ordeal.

As they descended, out of habit, the guardians used their senses to stay alert for any danger.

Finally, the large, flat rocky surface of the Norto Plateau came into view, a welcome sight for the weary group. They settled on the plateau, each person catching their breath, their eyes turning skyward at the sound of the approaching helicopter.

The helicopter’s roar filled the sky as it descended toward its destination. The blades cut through the air and sent leaves and dust whirling around it.

Working together, the guardians guided the hikers toward the awaiting helicopter, their steps quick but cautious. The hikers, though weary, looked relieved as they boarded the chopper.

“Stellan should go with them,” Leif called out above the noise of the helicopter.

“Agreed,” Thane said. “And you should go, too.”

“I’m fine,” Leif insisted.

“I don’t doubt it, but this is your rescue, and you should report to the chief at the rescue center,” Thane told him.

With a nod, Leif turned and ducked down as he ran toward the waiting helicopter. Then, with a powerful gust, the helicopter lifted off the ground and turned toward Bear Creek.

As the sound of the helicopter faded into the distance, the remaining guardians exchanged a glance, an unspoken agreement passing between

them. In a fluid, almost choreographed motion, they shifted seamlessly into their bear forms.

Fueled by the adrenaline of the successful rescue, they set off down the mountain.

Having come down from the high ridges, they were back in familiar territory, and they thundered down the mountainside, their massive paws thudding against the earth as they descended.

The wind rushed through their fur as they navigated the terrain, almost on instinct alone. Trees and rocks blurred past them, the mountain itself seeming to acknowledge their passage with a respectful hush.

As Heath and his fellow guardians ran toward the rescue center on the edge of town, the sound of the helicopter's blades chopped through the air. They had run at such speed that they were only minutes behind the helicopter.

But as Heath neared the center, an unfamiliar sensation pricked at his senses. His bear bristled, a primal instinct alerting him to something beyond the ordinary.

He felt an inexplicable pull, a mysterious thrill that seemed oddly familiar. Yet it wasn't familiar. He had never felt this before.

If he had, he would surely remember.

Was it the creature that had appeared when the mates of the other guardians were in danger? Heath could not be sure.

Had the others felt it?

As the other guardians closed in on the rescue center through the pine forest, it seemed as if they were oblivious to whatever he could sense.

Perhaps this is what Leif feels, Heath's bear said.

But if it is, it's not calling to us from the mountains, Heath answered.

No, it's close. Very close. Excitement threaded through the bear's veins.

I don't think it's the creature, Heath said.

No, it's not, his bear answered.

Focusing on the sensation, a revelation dawned on Heath. The pull he felt, the call that stirred his very being, was his mate.

Excitement surged through him, re-energizing every fiber of his being.

Yes! His bear lowered its head, stride lengthening as he tapped into a

reservoir of strength and resolve he hadn't known he possessed.

He caught up with the others swiftly, his pace unyielding, driven by a force that transcended the physical world. His heart pounded in his chest, a rhythmic drumbeat that echoed the call of fate.

As he passed his fellow guardians, a sense of destiny enveloped him. His destiny.

She was up ahead. If he was right, she was at the mountain rescue center. But why? He did not know.

Perhaps she is a relative of one of the hikers, Heath suggested.

His bear grunted. *Let's hope she's not a significant other of one of them.*

And if she was?

Well, he'd deal with that if it happened. For now, there was no point dwelling on such thoughts.

No, the only thoughts we need to be dwelling on are good ones. His bear was filled with excitement. As if their life had new meaning, new purpose.

Not that their life hadn't always had purpose. He was a Bear Creek Guardian, after all, and always would be.

But he'd seen the changes a mate had brought to his fellow guardians. The way they were happier, more fulfilled, more complete. And now it was his turn to experience that for himself.

As the compound of the rescue center came into sight, he could sense her presence and feel her energy calling to him.

But his bear reluctantly slowed. They could not rush in without considering the consequences. A level head was needed if he didn't want to make a jackass of himself.

Before he came into view of the center, he shifted into his human form and stood still. He needed to take a moment to compose himself before he took a deep breath and strode forward.

The helicopter sat on its pad now, with everyone having been unloaded and ushered inside, and that was where Heath aimed for.

He could feel his bear's excitement and anticipation, and it was difficult to ignore. But he needed to be cautious and composed.

How can you be so calm when she is so close? his bear asked.

Because I have to be, Heath replied.

With a roll of his shoulders, he reached for the door handle and tugged it open. Inside, the rescue center was bustling with activity. People were coming and going, and the sound of chatter filled the air.

The hikers all sat on soft chairs around a table, sipping at warm drinks that had been given to them while someone in uniform next to them went through some paperwork.

But Heath wasn't interested in the hikers now. How could he be when the most important person in his world was here?

There. He caught a glimpse of her through the moving people toward the back of the room. His mate.

Heath swallowed hard and smoothed his hand over his hair. He could sense the other guardians entering the building behind him, no doubt curious what had gotten into him.

"How are you all feeling?" Heath recognized the man asking the questions as Jonas Clark from the Bear Creek Tribune.

"Grateful to the men who saved us. Stellan and Leif, and the other guys," one of the hikers replied and then looked up and caught sight of Heath. "Hey, you were just up there with us. How did you get down the mountain so fast?"

All eyes turned to Heath, including his mate's.

"Heath." Jonas turned to him with an apologetic look on his face.

"We wanted to get back to check on you all." Heath tried to evade the question and color crept across his cheeks. He hated being the center of attention.

"Still..." the hiker began.

"You should go and get checked out," Stellan said as he walked in from another room. "There's an ambulance outside waiting to take you all to Bear Bluff Hospital."

"Sure," the hiker said as he shot Heath a questioning glance.

Let's hope he lets this slide, Heath's bear said.

Let's hope so, Heath replied as he tore his gaze from the hikers and searched for his mate.

She must have left through one of the other entrances, as he could no longer spot her in amongst everyone else.

Heath swung around and headed toward the door. Only to be met by the

concerned faces of three guardians as they stood in the doorway.

“My mate,” Heath said in a low tone.

“Here?” Tavish asked and glanced around the room.

“She just left,” Heath said.

“Then what are you doing standing here?” Cormac asked.

“Good luck.” Thane slapped him on the back as they parted to let Heath pass.

Heath stumbled out of the building, the pull of his mate overwhelming his senses.

She was close. He couldn't risk losing her.

Hurry, his bear told him as if he needed to be told.

Heath ran around the side of the building, aware of the hikers as they were led out of the building and toward the waiting ambulance. He was drawing attention to himself. More attention than he should. But he had to find her.

There. She was unlocking her car in the parking lot. If he didn't hurry, she might drive out of his life forever.

“Hello!” he blurted out as he stopped a few feet away from her.

She looked up, startled by his sudden appearance. Then her expression cleared, and she held out her hand to him. “Heath Milner! Sorry, I thought you were busy for now. I was planning on finding you tomorrow. Good to meet you.”

She knows who we are, his bear said.

“Oh, sorry.” Her smile widened at his confused expression. “I'm Tamara Delainy.”

He looked at her blankly, although the name did sound familiar.

“I'm here to interview you,” Tamara said.

“Oh.” Heath nodded and slid his hand into hers. The moment they touched, sparks flew between them. And as Tamara's eyes widened, he knew she'd felt it, too.

This was it, their first tentative steps as fated mates.

He only hoped he didn't blow it.

Chapter Four – Tamara

Tamara's cheeks flushed as Heath's warm, calloused hand enveloped her own. His grip was firm, as if he never intended to let her go. The sensation sent a shiver down her spine, and as their eyes met, she suspected he felt the same electric connection between them.

The same attraction.

What was she thinking? This was crazy. Perhaps she was simply tired after the long drive. Or perhaps she craved the closeness of another human being. Her line of work could feel lonely amongst all the stiff professionalism, which Heath didn't seem to care for.

Tamara blinked rapidly, trying to regain her composure. "It's good to finally meet you," she stammered, hoping he wouldn't notice her flustered state.

Heath grinned, his dark brown eyes alight with something that seemed like recognition. "It's good to finally meet you, too. *At last.*" His words hung in the air, heavy with significance that Tamara couldn't quite grasp.

It was as though he had been waiting for her his entire life.

There she went again with her crazy romantic notions. First, the thoughts of living in a quaint town in the middle of nowhere, and now this. What had gotten into her since she arrived in Bear Creek?

She slid her hand out of his, feeling the loss of contact keenly. Reminding herself of her personal rules, she took a step back.

No dating the people she interviewed—it wasn't professional, and she'd seen how it could lead to problems for other reporters and journalists. It could bias a story or, worse, ruin a relationship if an interviewee didn't like what was written about them. She needed to keep her distance from him, no matter how tempting it was to step closer and feel his warmth again.

Which she had a sinking feeling would be easier said than done.

As Heath smiled at her, Tamara's stomach fluttered. His eyes were mesmerizing, flecked with bronze and filled with warmth. And then, for a split second, she thought she saw *love* reflected in them, but she quickly shook her head, scolding herself for even entertaining such a notion.

Love!

This was crazy—she didn't believe in love at first sight, especially not for her. She tried to rationalize her feelings, convincing herself it was only because of her admiration for his art.

“Your art is so captivating,” she said, forcing her gaze away from him and toward the mountains in the distance. “I can see why you love the mountains so much.”

Heath sighed, his broad shoulders rising and falling as he followed her gaze. “They have been a lifelong inspiration. I can lose myself in their beauty for days sometimes.” His voice was soft, as if he were sharing a secret with her.

The moment was interrupted as the ambulance carrying the hikers who had been part of a dramatic rescue on the mountains passed them on its way to the hospital.

Heath stiffened, his jaw clenched as he watched it go.

“You were part of that rescue?” Tamara asked, more out of curiosity than concern.

“I was,” he nodded, his eyes briefly meeting hers before shifting back to the mountains. Then, as though shaking off the weight of his responsibilities, he turned back to her with a small smile. “Listen, why don't we go for coffee?”

Tamara glanced at her car and hesitated. “I'd love to, but I really should unpack first.” She smiled apologetically. “Besides, I'm not even sure where my cottage is, and I don't want to be driving around after dark trying to find it.”

Heath's smile widened, and he seemed to stand a little taller. “I know every inch of Bear Creek. So why not let me help you find your cottage?”

Tamara opened her mouth to protest, to remind herself of her rules and boundaries, but instead found herself nodding.

“Okay.” He went around to the passenger side of the car and her gaze followed.

“Oh!” Tamara gasped. “You're coming in the car with me?”

“Is that okay?” Heath asked, his hand on the door handle.

“It is.” Her brows creased, and then she reached for the car door and opened it. “I just assumed you had your own vehicle.”

“Not here,” Heath answered as he slipped into the passenger seat.

Tamara took a deep steadying breath as she got into the driver’s seat and inserted the key into the ignition. As she started the car, she could feel Heath’s eyes on her.

Her chest tightened. It was as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of the car. She turned to him, feeling the intensity of his gaze, and found herself holding her breath.

Heath’s eyes were dark and magnetic, compelling her to stare back at him. For an instant, they were both lost in the moment, and Tamara felt a spark of something unmistakable between them. It was as if the world had disappeared, and there were only the two of them in the car.

Heath’s hand found hers, and Tamara shivered as she felt his fingertips brush against her skin. It was a simple touch, but it sent a jolt of electricity through her body, making her heart race faster.

Their gazes locked, and Tamara could feel the heat emanating from his body. She wanted to lean into him, to feel the strength of his arms around her, but she knew that would be crossing a line.

Then, just as suddenly, Heath withdrew his hand. “Sorry. I just...”

“It’s okay,” she said. “I kind of feel...a connection.” Goodness, where was she going with this conversation? “Which is crazy since we’ve just met. But I guess I feel as if I know you, since I have studied your art for so long.”

“You have?” He sounded surprised and more than a little pleased.

“For my article, of course.” Tamara twisted her hands on the steering wheel at her little white lie.

“Of course, the article,” he agreed, but she dared not look at him.

Instead, she pulled out of the parking lot, and onto the winding road that led toward town. Tamara knew the general direction of the cottage, and the owner had given her directions when she picked up the key. However, the owner’s directions had come with a warning to avoid a ford which was impassable to Tamara’s car because of the recent heavy rain.

Having a local man by her side would mean she didn’t get lost or stranded.

“Take a left up here,” Heath said, pointing to a narrow road that Tamara had almost missed. She turned the car onto the road and followed it as it wound through the trees. The air grew cooler, and Tamara could smell the pine trees through her cracked open window.

“This is amazing,” Tamara whispered in awe as she looked up at the tall trees. Then she grinned. “I expect that sounds odd to a person who has always lived here.”

“Not at all,” Heath replied. “No matter how many times I walk the trails through the pine forests, I always find a joy in the peace and seniority they offer.”

“There’s a painting of yours hanging in a gallery in France.” She waved her hand across the vista before them. “The way you captured the light was amazing. It was comforting, and a little eerie all in one.”

“I have been described as having a unique eye for lighting. At first, I thought it was a veiled criticism but now I have embraced it,” Heath said.

“It is unique, and it’s good that you embraced it. It makes your work stand out.” She nodded and then took a right turn that took them back down the mountain slopes. “Wow.”

The pines trees thinned and the view before them took her breath away. The creek looked like a thin silver chain as it wound through lush green fields toward the horizon. Nestling along the banks as it flowed through the natural basin was the creek’s namesake, the town of Bear Creek.

“You like it?” Heath asked as if it truly mattered to him that she did.

“I do.” Tamara turned left and was pleasantly surprised to see that the road meandered along the side of the creek, where it flowed down the foot of the mountain. She drove carefully here, avoiding the areas where it had burst its banks in places and spilled over onto the road.

“There’s the cottage you’re staying at, Bywater Cottage.” Heath pointed to a cream-colored cottage set on a small rise next to the creek.

“I can see why it got its name,” Tamara said.

Tamara turned off the road and onto a gravel track leading to the cottage. The crunch of the gravel under her tires was like an excited drum roll announcing her arrival. She stopped the car and leaned on the steering wheel as she stared at the charming little place, with roses climbing around the door and wildflowers strewn across the yard.

It was even more delightful than she’d imagined from the photos she’d seen online.

“Thank you for showing me the way here,” Tamara said, glancing over at Heath, who seemed to be just as captivated by the sight before them. The

intensity of his gaze made her cheeks flush, and she leaned back in her seat, trying to regain control of her emotions.

“You are welcome,” he said smoothly.

“Do you want me to drive you home?” Was she being rude? Did it sound as if she were trying to get rid of him even though he’d been so generous with his time in directing her here? “Or you could come in for coffee. The owner said the kitchen is well stocked, and I brought fresh milk.”

Heath shook his head, his smile sending shivers down her spine. “No, I’m fine.” He hesitated and then said, “I should go and let you get settled in.”

“You’re going to walk home?” she squeaked as he opened the car door and got out.

Heath chuckled. “I am. It’s only a couple of miles to Bearheart Ridge.”

She got out of the car as well. “Still, that’s quite a walk.” Tamara looked out at the ridge. It would be a short drive, but it was a bit farther than a casual walk. “I suppose it’s not that far if you’re used to hiking in the mountains. One of the reasons I rented this cottage was so that I would be close to you.”

Her eyes widened in horror, mentally cursing herself for her lack of filter. But the comment was innocent enough—unless he could read the thoughts swirling around in her head. She imagined walking barefoot across the dew-laden grass to his home in Bearheart Ridge. Not that it would be a romantic walk across the grass; Bearheart Ridge might be close, but it was high above the creek, over rocky terrain.

Heath’s smile widened, making her ache to her core. He was so enigmatic. “Shall I see you in?” Heath nodded toward the cottage.

“I can manage.” She wrapped her arms across her body, as if putting up a barrier between them—which might not be a bad thing if she was going to stick to her no fraternizing with her interviewees’ rule.

“Will you come to dinner?” Heath’s question caught her off guard.

“Yes.”

Dinner would not be fraternizing; she was here to see his work and interview him after all.

“Tonight?” he asked, and the dark pools of emotion that were his eyes made it impossible to say no.

So she said, “Yes.” It wasn’t as if she had picked up any groceries apart from the milk, and the owner’s idea of a well-stocked kitchen might not

stretch to more than coffee, tea, and condiments.

“It’s a date then. I’ll see you at seven.” With that, Heath backed away, his eyes never leaving her face.

Tamara took an involuntary step toward him, as if she didn’t want him to leave her behind. Then she planted her feet firmly on the ground, hip-width apart, forcing herself to stay put as she answered, “I’ll see you at seven.”

He turned and walked away. She couldn’t help but notice that his walk was almost breezy as he followed the creek back up toward the ridge. She watched as he disappeared up the path into the pine forest until he was lost to her. Yet a part of her imagined they would never be lost to each other again. She couldn’t explain it, but they shared a bond, a connection.

“You need coffee,” she told herself firmly, turning around, ready to explore the cottage that was her new home for the next few days. Although she was already dreaming of living here for the rest of her life.

Chapter Five – Heath

Heath forced himself to turn away from Tamara, her warm smile lingering in his memory. His muscles tensed with the urge to run back and grab hold of her, to never let go.

But he couldn't. Not yet. He took a deep breath and managed to put one foot in front of the other, moving farther away from his mate.

Remember, we'll see her tonight at dinner, his bear rumbled within him, offering some consolation.

Dinner. The thought of cooking for Tamara sent a jolt of panic through him. What should he make? What if she didn't like it? It was already getting late, and he hadn't even planned the menu. He really hadn't thought everything through when he offered.

His bear chuckled at his distress. *Better create one of your masterpieces, then.*

We both know cooking isn't really my area of expertise.

Thinking about the task ahead, the dim air under the pines crackled and popped, static electricity surrounding him like an electric storm. In an instant, his human form vanished, replaced by the powerful figure of his bear. He swung his massive head around, looking back at the little cottage below, sitting next to the swollen creek. He didn't need to see her to know where she was; he could sense her presence, like a magnetic pull toward his soulmate, a sixth sense that had been unlocked upon meeting her.

With a renewed sense of purpose, he turned and loped home toward Bearheart Ridge, anticipation and expectation thrumming through every fiber of his being. Surely fate had brought Tamara into his life for a reason. They would be together.

Besides, she already loves your work, his bear mused.

It does help, Heath agreed, though a nagging doubt still lingered at the back of his mind.

Don't look for problems that aren't there, his bear warned.

Heath sighed heavily. *We are the fifth Bear Creek Guardian to find our mate. None of the others had a straightforward time, so I doubt we will*

either.

He thought back to the rescue mission and the scene in the mountain rescue center. Tamara had heard what was said about the guardians' quick descent, and as a journalist, she might dig deeper and ask questions. Questions that he wasn't sure how she'd react upon hearing the answers.

Then you need to tell her about us. About me, his bear urged. *Sooner rather than later.*

Heath nodded. He needed to be honest with Tamara, but not tonight. Tonight was for getting to know her, understanding who she was, and building a foundation for their relationship.

Unless she already knows. He considered the possibility both thrilling and terrifying. There was a chance, however small it might be, that Tamara already knew about shifters.

With that thought, Heath's bear ran faster, paws thudding against the earth as they climbed toward Bearheart Ridge. The small collection of timber houses huddled together on a ledge overlooking the town of Bear Creek was idyllic. Standing back from the town below, but not isolated—the perfect compromise. But now, his gaze was drawn downward, toward the woman who would become his mate. A mate he would protect. A mate he would love.

Heath approached his house, the afternoon sunlight casting a warm glow on the weathered wood. The barn next door had been converted into his art studio years ago, and he felt a familiar urge to capture the moment as he watched the soft rays of sunset caressing the ridge as the sun slid behind the mountains. But today, there was something more important than his art—a new chapter in his life had begun.

Putting the thought of painting to one side, Heath climbed the porch steps, just as three bears tumbled around the corner of the street and gamboled into his front yard. They shifted simultaneously, their massive forms shrinking into humans in the blink of an eye. Thane, Cormac, and Tavish stood before him, grinning like mischievous schoolboys.

“So, tell us what happened?” Thane asked, his dark eyes alight with curiosity.

As Heath let himself into the house, the others following close behind. “What's to tell?” Heath deflected, making his way to the kitchen, where he opened the fridge, revealing its meager contents. He grabbed four bottles of

Bear Creek Honey Beer and handed them out to his friends.

“Hey, I’m the only one who doesn’t have a mate,” Tavish reminded Heath, a hint of melancholy in his tone. “So, I want all the details since I have to live vicariously through my fellow guardians.”

Heath sighed heavily, his heart aching for his friend. “I’m sorry you’re the last.”

“But by no means least,” Cormac interjected, clinking his bottle against Tavish’s.

“It’ll happen for you,” Thane added confidently.

Tavish’s expression faltered, and he sucked in a breath. “But in the meantime, spill.”

Heath took a swig of his beer, steeling himself for the questions that would come. “Well, her name is Tamara...”

“Where do I know that name from?” Tavish interrupted, furrowing his brow.

“Tamara is here to interview me about my art. She’s writing an article on me,” Heath explained, feeling a mix of pride and vulnerability at exposing his inner thoughts and motivations through his artwork. It wasn’t so bad when strangers viewed his art, but he always felt less than comfortable talking about his passion with those close to him.

Cormac’s eyes widened. “That’s great! More exposure for you, and a mate to go with it.”

“Fate moves in mysterious ways,” Thane agreed with a knowing nod.

“So you were destined to meet,” Tavish mused. “But what was she doing at the mountain rescue center? Did she know you were part of the rescue?”

Heath shook his head, realizing he hadn’t thought to ask Tamara about her presence at the rescue center. In fact, he hadn’t even thought about how odd it was until now. “I don’t really know why she was there. But I can ask her over dinner tonight.”

“You’re taking her out to dinner?” Cormac asked, his tone teasing. “Smooth.”

A flush crept up Heath’s neck as he confessed, “Oh, I was planning on cooking for her. But maybe taking her out would be a better idea, since I have nothing in.” He opened the fridge again, as if hoping new ingredients would magically appear. The emptiness only confirmed that if he wanted to impress

his mate, he'd have to shape up. He'd never been a recluse, but he found that with most of his time spent immersing himself in his art, there was little left for anything else—such as learning to cook impressive first date meals.

Tavish chuckled. “Looks like you’re finally settling down.”

Heath grinned wryly. “I wouldn’t say that yet, Tavish. We’ve only just met.”

“Ah, but you know what they say about love at first sight,” Cormac chimed in.

Heath rolled his eyes. “I don’t think it was love at first sight for Tamara.”

“It is,” Thane assured him. “Tamara just doesn’t realize it yet.”

Heath looked up, a grin spreading across his face.

We have more company, his bear informed him, excited by the familiar scents.

We do, Heath replied and left his fellow guardians drinking their beer as he went to the door to greet them.

“There he is!” Emily called out, rushing toward him with open arms. She wrapped him in a warm embrace, her laughter infectious.

Sable approached next, her newborn baby cradled in her arms and Mia and Sarah in tow. She leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss on Heath’s cheek. “Before we know it, there’ll be a lot of little Bear Creek Guardians running around Bearheart Ridge.”

Heath felt a pang of longing at her words, but he tried not to get ahead of himself. “I’m trying not to get my hopes up too high,” he admitted, the fear of rejection lurking beneath the surface.

“What do you mean?” Sable looked at him with concerned eyes.

“I have to tell her about shifters and mates and everything else. What if she freaks out? Or what if she accepts me for who I am but doesn’t want to settle down here?” The questions tumbled from his lips, revealing the turmoil within him.

Sarah linked arms with Heath, guiding him inside his house as the others followed. “Listen,” she whispered, her eyes holding his. “It’ll all work out. Believe me.”

Mia nodded in agreement, her gaze steady and reassuring. “There might be times when it’s hard to see the path ahead, but if you trust in fate, then it’ll

all work out.”

Tavish chuckled and said, “Have you been talking to my mom?”

“I might have,” Mia admitted, her smile widening. “She’s a wise woman.”

“She is,” Tavish agreed, his own smile tinged with nostalgia. “A wise woman who is threatening to come back to Bearheart Ridge and help me find a mate.”

“I thought they were not coming back for another six months or more,” Cormac interjected, his brow furrowing.

“They weren’t, but my mom and dad are dying to meet Summer,” Thane said, nodding toward the baby in Sable’s arms. “And if they come back, everyone else will, too.”

“And they want to meet all our mates,” Cormac said. “But my mom also believes that they should stay away because it was only after they left, we started to meet our mates and that if they come back before I meet my mate, they’ll jinx it.”

“Really?” Emily asked with curiosity.

“Yeah, I mean, it sounds superstitious,” Cormac admitted. “But we are a group of people who are ruled by an ancient oath.”

“True.” Sable laughed.

“So, what’s she like?” Mia inquired, her eyes brimming with excitement. “And, more importantly, when can we meet her?”

“She’s coming to dinner tonight,” Thane revealed.

Mia’s eyes widened in surprise. “Is she?” she asked, unable to mask her excitement.

Heath nodded reluctantly. “But looking at the contents of my fridge, I think I might take her out to eat instead.”

“No, it would be much cozier if you had dinner here. More intimate,” Sable suggested, her eyes warm and sincere.

“And, Heath, you can show off your art,” Sarah chimed in, her enthusiasm contagious.

“Tamara already knows about his art,” Cormac pointed out mischievously.

“Tamara?” Sable’s eyes narrowed, her surprise evident. “Isn’t she the one coming to interview you?”

“Yes,” Heath confirmed, feeling the weight of the impending evening

settle on his shoulders.

“Well, in that case, you must have dinner here, and we’ll all help,” Emily declared. “Just like you helped Leif. Our first date at the museum was magical.”

“You don’t have to,” Heath began, but Sable cut him off.

“We want to,” she insisted. “And we’ll make it special. You deserve it, Heath.”

“Thank you,” he said, his voice cracking with emotion at the kindness of his friends.

One day soon, Tamara would be part of this group, part of the Bear Creek Guardians. He couldn’t wait for that day.

One step at a time, his bear reminded him.

“Okay, let’s see what you have in stock.” Mia pulled the door open and sighed.

Emily looked over her shoulder at the scant contents. “Between us, we can rustle something up. I’m sure we can donate some ingredients, and then maybe some cooking lessons.”

“Are you sure?” Heath asked, grateful for their generosity.

“Absolutely,” Sable said, as she rocked Summer in her arms. “We’ll make it a night to remember.”

“At least where the food is concerned,” Sarah said. “The rest is up to you.”

“We should go get started,” Mia said.

“You go ahead.” Thane went to Sable and kissed her cheek before dropping a light kiss on his daughter’s head. “We’ll be there in a second.”

“Is everything all right?” Sable murmured.

“Yes,” he assured her. “We haven’t discussed this morning’s rescue yet.”

“Oh.” Sable searched Thane’s face, as if she were not quite sure he was hiding something.

“Five minutes,” Thane assured her.

“Okay.” Sable looked at them each in turn and then followed Emily, Mia, and Sarah out of the house.

“The rescue?” Cormac cocked an eyebrow at the leader of the guardians.

“We should be on our guard,” Thane said.

“On our guard?” Tavish asked.

“There was something off about this morning. I can’t put my finger on it…” Thane glanced at Heath. “Sorry, I should have kept my concerns to myself until after tonight.”

“No,” Heath shook his head. “I agree. There was something off about it. I could feel it, too.”

“Me, too,” Cormac chimed in.

“Do you think it’s connected to Tamara? Since she was at the center when the hikers arrived in the helicopter?” Heath asked.

Thane nodded gravely. “It’s possible. Or it could be a coincidence. If there is a link, then I’m not sure what it could be.”

Tavish shrugged. “She’s a journalist, or a reporter, right? She might have just wanted to see what the commotion was all about.”

When she comes over tonight, we can ask her about it, Heath said.

As long as we don’t push her away, his bear said solemnly.

“I’ll let you know if I pick up on anything this evening,” Heath said.

Thane shook his head. “This evening is about you getting to know your mate. Don’t jeopardize that.”

“I won’t,” Heath said firmly.

As he stood there in his kitchen, he pushed his senses out. Not searching for his mate, but for the creature. The harbinger of doom.

The other guardians had felt it around the time they had met their mate, and for Leif, it had never left.

But for Heath, it wasn’t there.

Maybe we are all overreacting, his bear said hopefully.

Heath hoped he was right. But deep down in his soul, a small seed of doubt had sprouted.

Chapter Six – Tamara

Tamara settled into the wrought-iron chair in the yard of Bywater Cottage, cradling a steaming cup of herbal tea between her hands. The warm, humid air wrapped around her like a blanket, carrying with it the fragrant scent of roses and other flowers that filled the small garden. She closed her eyes, allowing herself to be soothed by the gentle murmur of the nearby creek and the distant calls of birds soaring over the mountains.

As she sipped her tea, the image of Heath's intense gaze filled her thoughts. The connection she felt toward him was undeniable, and unlike anything else she had ever felt. She was glad they shared a common love for this area—the mountains, the wilderness. It radiated through every piece of his art, just as it resonated within her own soul. Perhaps that was why she had been drawn to his art.

Tamara resisted the thought of delving deeper into the feelings that stirred within her. She was just here to write an article about his art, not to explore a life together with him.

With a sigh, she drained the last drops of her tea and rose from the chair. Turning back toward the cottage, she took in its rustic charm—whitewashed walls adorned with ivy, a stone path leading to the front door, and window boxes brimming with colorful blooms.

She'd stayed in all sorts of accommodations throughout her career as a journalist, and this was one of the nicest. It was clear that the rental was designed to appeal to those who yearned for a simpler, more idyllic lifestyle, which was perfect for her. Yet, despite its enchanting appearance, the lack of personal touches reminded her it wasn't truly a home. How she longed to make it hers.

Tamara ascended the creaky wooden stairs to the bedroom, where her sparse belongings hung in the closet. Her fingers traced the soft fabric of a floaty purple dress, one of her favorites. A sudden uncertainty washed over her: would it be too formal for dinner at Heath's house? She didn't want to appear overdressed or give him the impression that she was reading too much into their meeting. Or was that exactly what she was doing? The question circled her thoughts, refusing to be pinned down.

Laughing at her own indecision—an unfamiliar feeling for her—Tamara grabbed the dress from its hanger. She'd wear it.

Tamara stepped into the dress and carefully zipped up the back, admiring how it clung to her curves and flowed gracefully over her body. The fabric was light and airy, perfect for a warm summer evening. She ran her hands down the sides of the dress, feeling confident and elegant.

After applying her makeup and securing her hair in a messy bun, she slipped on a pair of comfortable flat pumps and went downstairs. She caught a glimpse of herself in the hallway mirror and tilted her head to one side as she inspected her reflection with a critical eye.

She'd been overthinking the dinner date with Heath. The dress was pretty, but she still looked professional. There was a reason it was her favorite, after all. And she certainly didn't look as if she were going out to try to seduce her favorite artist.

Color crept across her cheeks as Tamara slipped the voice recorder and notepad into her purse. This was an interview, after all.

As she stepped out of the cottage, Tamara rolled her shoulders and inhaled a deep, steadying breath. But a thrill of excitement crept over her, threading through her veins. She couldn't shake off the feeling she was on the cusp of something wonderful.

Rolling her eyes at herself, she went to the car and took one last look at Bywater Cottage before she put the car in drive and headed for Bearheart Ridge. She had the directions in her GPS, but she took a special note of the route so she wouldn't get lost on the way back.

Yes, she did trust her GPS to get her back to the cottage but needed to be sure it didn't guide her through the flooded ford. Getting stranded there in the dark would not be a good way to end the evening.

However, she was getting ahead of herself. The evening hadn't even started yet.

The tires of Tamara's car crunched against the gravelly mountain back roads as she navigated her way to Bearheart Ridge, her heart pounding with anticipation. As she turned one last bend, the small collection of homes came into view, perched on the ridge like carefully placed miniature models. The last of the sunlight cast long shadows across the ridge and dripped onto the pine trees below. Tamara had read about the picturesque beauty of this place while researching Heath but experiencing it firsthand was an entirely

different story.

Her fingers tightened around the steering wheel as she reminded herself that this was just an ordinary assignment. She was here to find out more about Heath, the talented artist who had captured the interest of her readers. She had interviewed artists before, and had written pieces on some of Heath's work, so marrying the two should be a piece of cake.

As she parked her car outside his house, Tamara couldn't help but feel a sense of belonging, even more so than at the cottage she currently called home. Bear Creek had stolen her heart, and for a moment, she wondered once again what her mom would think of her newfound attachment to this place. But she quickly shook that thought from her head; this was her life, and she needed to live it on her terms.

Exiting the car, she approached Heath's house. It was small, plain, and cottage-like, but her eyes were drawn to a long, low barn that sat to the side of the house. Heath hadn't seemed like the kind of person to keep animals, so she wondered if the simple building with a sweeping view of the mountains would be his art studio.

If so, Tamara could only imagine the magic that had happened inside those walls. Her curiosity burned and she was tempted to peek inside the barn when the door to the house opened, revealing Heath standing in the doorway, dressed in worn denim jeans and a green button-up shirt.

"Hello," he said, his deep, gravelly voice sending shivers down her spine. Desire flared within her, but she swallowed it down.

"Hi there," Tamara squeaked before clearing her throat. "I was admiring the view. It's beautiful."

"I'm glad you like it," Heath replied, his eyes lighting up as though she had complimented him instead of the scenery. He seemed open and warm, but Tamara reminded herself not to let her guard down—this was not a date.

"You've lived here all your life," she stated, more than asked.

"Yes, this house has been in my family for generations." He tapped on the door frame and smiled invitingly. "Come in; let me show you the rest of the house."

Tamara ascended the steps. Anticipation built as she wondered what lay behind those walls—the artist himself and the inspiration for his passionate, raw paintings.

“Something smells good,” she said as she reached the porch and stood in front of the doorway.

Heath cracked a smile and said, “I’m going to be honest.”

“Please do,” Tamara replied. With her line of work, she appreciated honesty, perhaps even more than most.

“When I invited you to dinner, I didn’t think ahead. My fridge was empty, and my cupboards were embarrassingly bare.”

“A starving artist?” Tamara’s research had led her to believe his art was in demand, and he likely had a tidy nest egg tucked away for a rainy day. He clearly didn’t seem to lead a lavish and expensive lifestyle.

Heath chuckled and said, “More like a forgetful one.”

“You get so consumed by your work that you forget to buy groceries?” she asked. That could make a good headline—*Heath, the man whose only sustenance was his art*. Well, with some more work, maybe.

“Sometimes. I’m lucky that some of my friends keep a close eye on me and their mates...” He sighed and looked away. “Their wives and partners take pity on me and bring me a plate of food most days.”

Mates? Tamara repeated the word in her head, liking the sound of it. Perhaps it’s a tradition here in the mountains to call a significant other a mate.

As Tamara followed Heath along the hallway, she noticed the walls were hung with small pieces of his art. She could tell they were his from the unique style of brushwork, though many of them seemed part of a larger whole, as if Heath had cut out his favorite bits from his paintings.

All but one, that was.

Tamara stopped and admired a larger, complete painting of a deer in winter. It was a common enough idea for a painting of a wild animal, but there was something enticing about the work. The way the light pooling around the deer, warm despite the winter sun, made the deer seem as though it would leap from the silver, snow-covered world behind it.

“Where did you learn to paint?” Tamara’s research had not uncovered that morsel, and she could not find the information in other articles and interviews with Heath—not that there were many, and not that he revealed much even in those he had featured on.

Heath came to stand next to her, shoulder to shoulder, so that they were

almost touching. She could feel the heat emanating from him and her nostrils flared as she picked up his scent—faintly earthy, musky, yet fresh, as if he smelled of the very mountain itself.

“I’m self-taught. Mostly.” He paused, and she sensed he was holding something back, some part of himself that he didn’t want to share.

Tamara stood staring at the painting, waiting for him to answer. Sometimes that was the best way to get the genuine answers—give a person room to collect their thoughts and then speak. She sensed rather than saw Heath glance sideways at her. He pursed his lips, and she waited, the moments stretching out before he said, “My grandfather.”

Tamara glanced back at the painting of the deer one last time. She wished she could take photos of Heath’s personal art collection, but knew it would be invasive to do so without asking. And she was certain that if she asked him now, she wouldn’t get more of an answer from him regarding his grandfather.

Heath turned and walked away from her, entering the kitchen. “Wine?” he asked, holding up a bottle of red. Tamara hesitated for a moment before nodding, accepting the glass he poured for her. As their fingers brushed against each other, warmth flooded her veins, and she was reminded of the connection she felt to him—a connection that now seemed deeper than ever in the intimate setting of his art-filled house.

“Is that where you get your love of painting?” she inquired, hoping to learn more about his grandfather.

Heath withdrew his hand and busied himself at the stove. “He painted,” he said, “but he painted for himself, no one else. It was personal for him. As if he were capturing a memory.”

“Your paintings seem to capture an essence of your subject,” Tamara observed, sipping her wine and watching him closely.

“I suppose in some ways that is why I paint. Immortalizing a life in all its amazing colors and textures. It’s a moment that is fleeting, there and then gone, never to return.” He grinned as he turned to face her. “I can’t explain it very well.”

“I think you’re doing very well,” Tamara assured him with a smile, pulling out a chair at the kitchen table. “May I sit?”

Heath nodded, gesturing for her to make herself comfortable. There it was again—a personal invitation to be part of his life, part of his world. But

maybe Heath was just that way with everyone. She took a seat, placed her purse on her lap, and retrieved her notepad from within. It would be easier to record him, to get the true inflection of his voice, but she wanted to write his words down, to capture them in her own hand—her own version of art.

“So your grandfather taught you to paint,” Tamara said, hoping Heath would continue.

“Yes, not formally. By osmosis, I suppose you would say,” Heath replied, lifting the lid on an aromatic dish simmering on the stovetop. A heady scent of garlic and rosemary filled the kitchen, making Tamara’s mouth water.

“Did you watch him paint?” she asked, savoring the flavors that danced on her tongue.

“Painting is so much more than a brush on canvas,” Heath explained as he moved around the kitchen, taking plates from cupboards and setting them out on the table. “My grandfather taught me how to be one with nature, how to capture moments that would be lost if we didn’t blend in with our surroundings and become part of that moment ourselves. Take the deer.” He nodded toward the hallway. “If the deer had scented us, if we’d startled it, then the moment would never have existed. The painting would never have been created because it wouldn’t have existed up here.” He tapped the side of his head.

“So you don’t take photos of your subjects?” she asked, furrowing her brow.

“No,” Heath shook his head, gazing at her. “I commit whatever I wish to paint to memory. And then when it’s time, it’s like this other part of me takes over. I suppose art is less about the complete truth of how a moment happened, but rather how we experienced it. At least for me it is.”

Her skin tingled as he looked at her. Was he committing her to memory so that he could capture this moment forever?

No, she was being ridiculous. If there was one thing she’d learned about Heath from her research, it was that he never painted people.

Her hand shook slightly as she reached for her wineglass and sipped the dark red liquid. She needed to keep her senses about her, because one thing she knew for sure, she was falling for this man.

And falling hard.

Chapter Seven – Heath

Heath found himself entranced by the curve of her lips as she sipped her wine before leaning forward and taking a bite of the wild mushroom risotto that the others had made for him.

The dish seemed simple, but it smelled and looked delicious. Tamara's eyes lighting up as she tasted it only confirmed the fact.

"This is delicious," Tamara said, savoring another forkful.

Heath felt a surge of pride. Not in the dish he hadn't cooked, but in his friends, who were so talented and selfless to help him out in a pinch. "I'll pass on the compliment to the chefs. Although I did pick the vegetables from my garden and prepare them. But the real magic was not mine."

"Is this a close-knit community?" Tamara asked, swirling her wine before taking another sip.

Heath nodded, his own appetite momentarily forgotten as he watched her. "Yes, very much so. We look out for each other here." He finally dug into his own food, the flavors exploding in his mouth. His friends had truly outdone themselves.

"And you grew up here," Tamara observed. "Is it the kind of place where people rarely move away?"

"Yes, the friends I have now are the same as I grew up with." Heath had many fond memories of his childhood, playing and exploring Bear Creek with his fellow Guardians.

"And these are the Bear Creek Guardians?" Tamara's question hit him completely off guard, causing him to choke on his pasta.

As he cleared his throat, he took a quick sip of wine and wiped his hand across his eyes. "Yes." He nodded cautiously. "Where did you hear that name?"

"Should I not have?" Tamara tilted her head, showing an expression of curiosity. "At the diner, there was a conversation I overheard. They mentioned the Guardians were part of the rescue and that they always seem to be in the right place at the right time."

Heath's bear stirred within him, agreeing with her assessment. *She's not*

wrong, he rumbled. *But this is not going to make it into the article.*

“We help out when we can,” Heath said, trying to play down their role. If Tamara dug any deeper, she would learn the truth.

Then the sooner she learns the truth from us, the better, his bear insisted.

“And the hikers today?” Tamara pressed, the glint of intrigue in her eyes unmistakable.

Heath needed to redirect the conversation back to his art, but he couldn’t risk appearing evasive. “Today we were on the mountain. Hiking on the mountain, when Leif got a call,” he explained, covering up the real reason they were up there.

“Leif.” Tamara set her fork down on her plate and picked up her pen to make notes.

“Leif is part of the Bear Creek Mountain Rescue.” Heath’s explanation sounded like more of a question as his stomach twisted as though he’d swallowed a knot of thorny vines. Why did he feel as if he were digging himself a hole as deep as the shaft they’d pulled the hikers from?

He wanted nothing more than to share everything with this mesmerizing woman sitting across from him. She was his mate, after all. Yet he knew it was too soon.

But he hated the idea of lying to her about who he was.

“So that’s why you got involved in the rescue?” Tamara asked, her voice gentle but probing. He could only offer a mute nod in response, knowing he needed to be careful with his words. “It was lucky for them you found them,” she continued. “I heard that their location was unknown. But you found them down a shaft, is that right?”

“Yes,” Heath said, trying to regain control of himself. His mate was so near, and it was proving incredibly difficult to focus on anything else. Her presence overwhelmed his senses, causing his thoughts to stray from the conversation at hand.

He struggled to think straight, his mind trying to turn to how much he would like to paint her. It was a strange thought, as he had never had any motivation to paint anyone before. But he could just imagine capturing her sparkling eyes, the good humored, but inquisitive way she looked at him, the delicate curve of her cheek, the warm pink tinge that colored her cheeks.

Focus, his bear chastised him sharply. Heath blinked, realizing he’d been

staring at her. To his relief, Tamara didn't seem to mind; in fact, there was a flush of color in her cheeks, suggesting that she felt the connection between them just as strongly as he did.

"How did you manage to find them?" she asked, steering the conversation back to where she wanted.

"We had a rough idea of where they were," Heath said, grateful for the opportunity to change the subject. "Lief and the other team members spend a lot of time on the mountain, and with the heavy rain we've had recently, there's already been a few landslides, so Lief knew what trails were impassable at the moment. Lief made an educated guess, and thankfully, he was right."

"Very lucky," Tamara agreed, taking a bite of her dinner. She chewed thoughtfully, giving Heath a moment to collect himself. He didn't wait for her next question, deciding it was time to turn the tables and find out more about her.

"What made you want to become a journalist?" he asked.

Tamara's gaze flickered with surprise, but she seemed pleased by the inquiry. "Oh," she said, pausing to think as she ate. "I guess we're similar in that my grandfather inspired me."

"He did?" Heath asked, genuinely curious.

"Yes, but the difference is that he passed away when I was five. I never knew him, at least not that I recall. But as I grew up, I read his articles. My grandma has a scrapbook filled with them. I found them fascinating."

"So he was your inspiration," Heath said. Although they expressed themselves differently, he could feel that they were deeply similar.

"Exactly," Tamara agreed. "His articles were like snapshots in time, just like your grandfather's paintings. I thought it was important that events were recorded as they happened. Even the smallest moments deserve to be remembered."

"And that's why you interview people like me?" Heath asked, eager to learn more about her perspective.

"It's not where I started," she explained. "But I wanted to spread positive articles. I wanted to lift people up."

"From what I've seen, you do," Heath told her sincerely. Her eyes widened slightly.

“You’ve read some of my articles?” she asked, her voice wavering just a touch.

“Of course,” Heath replied with a hint of amusement. “You aren’t the only one who did their research. I don’t do many interviews, so before I agreed to this one, I asked your editor to send some over.”

“Ah,” Tamara said, her eyes dancing with humor. “You were checking me out.”

“I was,” he admitted, finishing his dinner. “When you’re ready, would you like to see my studio?”

“Definitely,” she said enthusiastically and hurriedly ate the rest of the food on her plate.

She is keen, Heath’s bear said.

For my work, Heath replied.

One day she’ll be as enthusiastic about us, his bear assured him.

I cannot wait for that day, Heath replied as he got up and began to clear the table.

“Oh, I’ll help.” Tamara pushed her chair away from the table and stood up.

“It’s okay, I’ve got it,” Heath assured her with a smile. “Take your time, finish your wine.”

“I’m almost done.” Tamara reached for her glass and took a last sip of her wine before joining him in clearing the table.

“I’m hoping you won’t be disappointed at the art in my studio,” he said lightly as she hurriedly picked up her plate and glass and carried them to the sink.

“Is my enthusiasm that obvious?” she laughed.

“Just a little,” he replied with a wide grin.

Tamara paused and sighed as she looked out the kitchen window. “I know I keep saying it, but I really love the view.” Tamara stared out at the fading mountains as twilight fell, and stars showed through the dark sky.

“I will never grow tired of it.” Heath put the dish he was carrying down on the counter and joined her at the window. “I’ve painted this view in every season. As the colors and the light change, the valleys and ridges seem to be in flux, even though the mountain has stood unmoving for my whole life.”

“The mountain is like a living, breathing creature to you.” Tamara looked up at him and his heart pounded as longing consumed him.

“Yes, it is.” He nodded and licked his lips, wanting to kiss her more than anything as the connection between them seemed to deepen with each moment they spent in each other’s company. “Shall we go?” Heath offered her his hand.

She glanced at it before her eyes met his and she slipped her hand into his. Tamara didn’t look away as their fingers intertwined and a current of electricity passed between them. It was as if she were trying to gauge his reaction, to see if he felt it, too.

And he did. The warmth spread through his body and desire threaded his veins.

“This way,” he murmured and led her to the door.

As they stepped outside, a gentle breeze brushed against his skin. They crossed the yard to the old barn that Heath had converted into his studio and Tamara’s grip tightened ever so slightly, betraying an excitement that mirrored his own.

But she was excited to see his art, not to spend time with the man who created it.

Well, he aimed to make it a private viewing she would never forget.

Heath swung open the doors and flicked on the lights. Canvasses of all sizes adorned the walls, and sat in easels and on shelves, each having been carefully selected and placed by Heath. The crowd of paintings made the lofty space feel closer and more intimate than it should have. The myriad of colors looked deep and saturated under the warm light of the barn, from the color pops of a meadow to the dark greens of the forest, to the icy blue of the frozen creek. The scent of oil paint and turpentine mingling with traces of varnish and wood was comforting to him and set him more at ease.

Tamara’s breath caught in her throat as she gazed upon the scenes before her. Each piece was complete on its own but grouped together in small huddles to create a study in contrasts: the fierceness of a storm set against the tranquility of a mountain lake, the vibrant color of fall leaves juxtaposed with the stark beauty of snow-laden branches. The theme of nature’s ever-changing dance was close to Heath’s heart, and while it wasn’t possible to capture it in a single painting, he had always hoped that by piecing them together he would be able to at least keep a small part of that close by.

“Wow,” she breathed, her awe-filled eyes meeting his own. “Your work is incredible.” Her voice faltered and then she said, “I mean, I already knew it was incredible, but to see it like this.” She waved her hand around the studio. “It’s like I’m stepping onto the mountains, seeing the world through your eyes.”

“Thank you,” he replied, a flush creeping up his neck as he fought to maintain his composure. The praise meant more than he could say, especially coming from her.

His mate.

“Can I look around?” Tamara took a step farther into the studio and then turned to look at him.

“Of course.” Heath reluctantly let her go.

Heath watched as Tamara wandered through his studio, her fingers trailing softly over each canvas. She took her time standing before them as if absorbing every detail of his work. He followed her around, attempting to see his paintings through her eyes.

A strange feeling stirred within him as he watched her admiring his artwork.

It looks different, Heath told his bear, *but I don’t know why.*

That’s because we are seeing it through fresh eyes, the eyes of a man with love in his heart, his bear answered.

Heath smiled to himself at the thought. His bear was right; there was love in his heart for this woman. He couldn’t believe how lucky he was to have found a mate who appreciated his work and the way he saw the world.

A world he wanted to show her.

Tamara paused before a large canvas that seemed out of place among the others. Her brow furrowed. “What are these?” she asked, her curiosity piqued.

Heath stepped closer, looking at the ochre-colored canvas with smeared figures painted with harsh, dark charcoal.

“Cave paintings,” Heath replied, stepping closer.

“Cave paintings?” Tamara hunkered down and stared at the images depicting enormous bears, fierce tigers, and wolves howling at the moon.

“They’re from a cave in the mountains,” he explained as he crouched next

to her.

“These mountains?” she asked, glancing up at him. He nodded. “Can you show them to me?”

“Of course.” Heath agreed, more than happy for any excuse to spend more time with her.

Then she gave a short laugh. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to pressure you. It’s rude of me to expect you to drop everything for me.”

“No, I’d like to,” Heath reassured her. “Tomorrow?”

Her eyes widened, and she leaned toward him, her tongue snaking out to lick her lips. “Tomorrow will be fantastic. We could continue our interview as we hike.”

Tamara stood up abruptly and folded her arms across her body, creating a barrier between them. Heath’s heart sank at her sudden withdrawal.

“Our interview,” he echoed, his voice strained with disappointment. It was clear she was putting up a wall between them, but it was one he intended to knock down and demolish for good.

Chapter Eight – Tamara

Tamara stirred awake as the first sunbeams filtered through the trees outside her bedroom window at Bywater Cottage. Fluttering leaves cast a diffused light across the bed, gently lifting her from her slumber. For a moment, she lay still, basking in the soothing chorus of birdsong and the distant lowing of cattle that drifted in through the open window.

This is heaven, she thought, stretching languidly beneath the covers.

Her thoughts meandered toward the one thing missing from her idyllic morning—a man in her bed. She rolled over, fingertips grazing the cool sheets where a certain artist should have been lying.

If only...

But thoughts of Heath reminded her of his offer to show her the cave paintings high in the mountains. Heath had warned her it was a long hike, and they needed to leave early.

With a sigh, she pushed away the covers and rose from the bed. Standing by the window, she peered out at the rugged landscape, her eyes lingering on the mountain as she tried to pinpoint the exact location of Bearheart Ridge.

More specifically, Heath. But the houses and the man were hidden from her.

“What is wrong with you, Tamara?” she chided herself as she shook off her lingering fantasies and headed for the shower.

But no matter how many times she reminded herself she needed to keep her relationship with Heath professional, thoughts of his lips on hers, his hands roaming her body snuck back in.

Tamara turned on the shower faucet and waited for the water to run warm, even though a cold shower might be the only way to quench her desire for Heath.

As the invigorating scent of her body wash filled her senses, Tamara’s mind drifted back to their dinner the previous night. She imagined what it would feel like to have Heath’s strong hands caressing her skin instead of her own, lathering her body with soap. Exploring her curves.

Goodness, why did he have such an effect on her? Each time they touched

each other, there was a shock of recognition. An undercurrent of need, of desire.

With a wistful sigh, she washed away the suds, her thoughts, and the last remnants of sleep.

After toweling dry and wrapping her hair up, Tamara padded across the bedroom floor to her closet. She chose a pair of comfortable jeans, a shirt, and a warm sweater, anticipating the mountainous terrain's unpredictable weather. Retrieving her hiking boots from the bottom of the closet, she also grabbed a backpack before heading downstairs to prepare for her next adventure.

That was another thing she loved about her job. She never knew where she'd end up next or what new thing she'd be trying out.

Soon, the enticing aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the kitchen.

While she waited for the coffee to brew, Tamara filled her water bottle with cool water from the faucet. Heath had promised to provide food for their hike since she hadn't yet had the chance to stock up on groceries.

Before she left Bear Creek, she'd have to repay his hospitality with a home-cooked meal. Her stomach grumbled at the thought of food. She really needed to visit a store today.

Pouring herself a steaming cup of coffee, she rummaged through the cupboards and found a box of cereal. She quickly prepared a bowl, adding a splash of milk before venturing outside to enjoy her breakfast in the backyard.

Tamara placed her coffee cup and cereal bowl down on the table and then settled into the wrought-iron chair. The sun warmed her face while the gentle babble of the nearby creek provided a soothing soundtrack as she cupped her coffee in her hands and took a sip.

Utter bliss.

But she didn't have time to linger this morning. She needed to get up to Bearheart Ridge. Perhaps tomorrow, she would indulge in a leisurely breakfast out here while going over her notes for her article on Heath.

After eating her cereal and drinking her coffee, Tamara collected her water bottle, her notepad, her voice recorder, and a light raincoat and put them in her backpack. Then she headed out to her car.

The drive to Bearheart Ridge was enjoyable. No rush hour traffic, no

honking horns. She would love this to be her commute every morning.

As she climbed along the back roads to Bearheart Ridge, she looked down at the view, but it was the distant rain clouds that caught her attention. Heath had mentioned the increased rainfall recently, and it looked as if there was more on its way.

Tamara arrived at Bearheart Ridge to find Heath waiting for her on his driveway with a wide grin on his face. He was dressed in rugged hiking gear and had a large backpack slung over his shoulder.

“Good morning, Tamara,” he said, his eyes lighting up as she approached.

“Good morning, Heath,” she replied as she got out of the car. “Those rain clouds don’t look good. Are we still okay with our hike?”

“Yes,” Heath assured her. “They’re not coming our way.”

Tamara glanced over her shoulder at the distant clouds as she grabbed her backpack and locked her car. “If you’re sure.”

“I am,” Heath replied, and she believed him. The man had lived his life on the mountain. He could probably forecast the weather better than any weatherman.

“Okay. I’m ready to go.” Tamara adjusted the straps on her pack as he waited for her to join him. “Do you need me to carry something?”

His pack looked heavy, and she wanted to pull her weight and do her share. But he shook his head. “No, I’m good. I’m used to carrying this pack on long hikes.”

“Do you have paint and canvas in there?” Tamara tilted her head to look up at him.

Heath was tall, a good eight inches taller than she was. And wide. His shoulders were so broad he probably didn’t notice the weight of his pack.

“No, not this time.” Heath chuckled. “Ready to go?”

Tamara nodded. “Lead the way.”

Heath led them away from the small commune of Bearheart Ridge, and up a trail that cut away from the buildings and higher into the mountains. It wasn’t long before they had left the houses behind, and while the trail was well worn, it clearly wasn’t made for a casual hike.

Heath seemed right at home, moving nimbly and navigating the rugged terrain with the ease and familiarity of a seasoned outdoorsman. With each

upward step, the steep cliffs rose higher around them, framing the breathtaking view of the valley below.

The fresh air took on a sweet smell as they entered a band of dense pine wood. The tall, sturdy trees creaked in the breeze and softened the sunlight, cooling Tamara off a little after she had taken off her sweater.

Without warning, Heath stopped in his tracks and motioned for Tamara to follow him off the trail. Slowly, they crept through the sparse undergrowth. Tamara felt a thrill of exhilaration as she stepped carefully onto Heath's large footprints, staying as close to him as possible. When he signaled for her to duck down, she did so without hesitation, trying to keep her breath steady and quiet.

Through a thick shrub, Tamara caught sight of a small family of otters playing in a small, slow-moving stream. Their sleek bodies dove and twisted through the water and their joyful chattering filled the air. Tamara noticed that there were several otters that were much smaller than the others, and her heart melted as she realized they must have been young.

She was reminded of Heath's words when they had looked at the painting of the deer, how one had to immerse themselves in a moment and let it unfold around them. She was grateful that Heath had allowed her to share this moment with him.

Eventually, the pair backed away as carefully as they had approached, leaving the otters to their carefree playing. They continued along the trail until they were a safe distance away before speaking again.

"How did you know they were there?" Tamara asked, her curiosity piqued.

Heath's eyes held a mysterious glint as he replied, "Call it intuition." He studied her for a moment before adding, "And I have explored this area so many times I can almost foretell where certain creatures are going to be. That otter family has held the same territory for a few years. They often have babies this time of year, and that section of the river is where the mother otter teaches her cubs to swim."

Tamara nodded, his explanation making sense, but she couldn't shake the feeling that Heath was holding something back.

She wanted him to open up to her completely.

For her interview. Of course.

It would explain how his artwork was so immersive when the artist was so intimately familiar with the natural world he sought to capture on canvas.

They carried on for some time in quiet, and Tamara tried to attune herself to the world around her. She could hear birdsong, and the occasional rustle of small animals, but she could not imagine being so in touch with the mountains as Heath seemed to be.

If only she stayed, maybe they would find enough time for him to teach her.

Tamara shook her head and smiled at herself, thinking about this future with Heath once again.

After some time, they broke out of the forest and were back on the more exposed mountainside. Jagged edges of boulders jutted out from high-sided valley walls, and large mounds of disturbed dirt covered the landscape, evidence of a recent landslide. Tamara's footing was precarious as she struggled to keep up with Heath, who didn't even seem to notice the uneven terrain.

"Is this a landslide?" Tamara asked, trying not to sound as out of breath as she was.

"Yes, the recent heavy rain has loosened the mud and rocks," he explained, his deep voice carrying over the breeze. "Landslides and flooding can be a real threat in these valleys when the rain is heavy."

"But it's safe, right?" Tamara warily studied the sides of the valley.

"For now," Heath replied.

As he spoke, Heath's eyes became distant, searching for something beyond his vision, just as Tamara had done earlier at Bywater Cottage when she looked for him on the mountainside.

A moment later, his focus returned to her, his eyes intense yet reassuring. He led her around the landslide debris, climbing higher along the valley.

Tamara followed him. Trusting him. Trusting his knowledge of the mountain.

"It's time for a break," Heath declared, stopping near a large boulder.

Tamara slipped her pack off her shoulders and dropped it to the ground. She knew the break was for her benefit; she was tired, while Heath appeared to have boundless energy.

Or perhaps he simply wanted to take a moment to enjoy the mountains, to

capture the scenes around them so that he could paint them later.

And what scenes they were! As they sat side by side on the rock, an eagle circled above on a thermal, casting a fleeting shadow over them.

Tamara watched it, wishing she had the power of flight. What a view the eagle must have of the world below.

“Here, eat something. It’s been a tough climb, but we’re nearly there.” Heath offered her an energy bar, which she accepted gratefully.

“Thank you,” she murmured through a mouthful of the chewy snack.

But then Heath put his finger to his lips, indicating silence. A sliver of fear crept into Tamara’s mind, as if she was expecting something to jump out at them. Or maybe he could sense a landslide.

She followed his finger as he pointed off the trail and up toward the higher side of the valley.

Tamara stopped chewing and tensed up as she saw a wolf sauntering along a game trail, seemingly without a care in the world. Even over that distance, the animal seemed so much larger than she had ever expected.

“Do we need to move?” Tamara whispered.

“No,” Heath shook his head as he watched the beast in the distance. “It won’t bother us. We have an...understanding.”

Tamara raised an eyebrow, but Heath just gave her a smile, and turned his gaze back to the wolf as it disappeared up into the craggy ridge.

They ate in silence, savoring the serene ambiance of the high valley. It felt as if they’d been transported to another world. A world far away from towns and cities, from cars and planes. Tamara was sure this was what the world was like when Bear Creek was founded.

Now that was a world she would love to experience.

Too soon, their break was over, and Tamara put her water bottle back in her pack before she hitched it onto her shoulders. As they resumed their hike, her shoulders ached from carrying her pack, and she was glad that Heath was carrying the bulk of their supplies on his back.

The trail ahead became steeper, and Tamara struggled to keep up with Heath even though he’d adjusted his stride, taking shorter steps as if sensing her fatigue.

Her calves burned, but she refused to give up. She’d gotten this far, and

she desperately wanted to see the cave paintings. That would truly be like stepping back in time, and perhaps would lead to a deeper understanding of Heath's ideals and the inspiration of an artist.

She pushed herself harder, and soon, they reached the top of the ridge.

The view from the top was breathtaking. The valley below was like a painting come to life. Bright hues of green mingled with stony grays that rose to meet the sky.

She had no words to describe it.

Above, the sky was a canvas in itself, a vast expanse of the clearest blue. Yet, on the horizon, dark rain clouds loomed like thick gray smudges of oily paint, a stark contrast to the serenity below.

"We should move on." Heath touched her arm, and she turned away from the view and followed him as the trail narrowed and wound up past a rocky outcropping.

Heath stopped suddenly, hunkering down to study a trail on the ground. His brow furrowed, he lifted his head and looked around them. "What is it?" Tamara whispered, the hairs on the back of her neck tingling.

"I don't normally see these tracks this high up," Heath replied, concern lacing his words.

"Could it be because of the rain?" she offered, hoping to ease his worry.

"Perhaps." Heath straightened up, scanning the area. The mountain was quiet, save for the occasional birdsong. "It's like a herd has passed through here."

He frowned, obviously bothered by the discovery. Then, with a shake of his head, he slid his thumbs under the straps of his pack and continued walking. "Come on," he said, his voice firm yet gentle. "It's not much farther."

He offered her his hand, and she took it, grateful for his warmth and his energy. Glad that she was here with him. And no one else.

Chapter Nine – Heath

At this point, the trail was barely wide enough for just one person and wrapped itself around boulders and broken ground. He walked behind Tamara, guiding her with his voice and being ready to catch her if she were to fall.

Even on the warm summer afternoon, the air had just a hint of chill to it this high up, but was as clear as crystal.

Just as the trail seemed as though it would disappear entirely, they climbed up onto a small, flat ledge.

“Here we are.” Heath leaned forward and pulled back a curtain of thick, weathered vines that covered the cliff face. Behind the vines was the dark cave entrance. The sunlight barely crept inside, and a cool draft brushed over them. “We try to keep this place hidden to protect it.”

Tamara looked at him, her gaze steady and serious. “Your secret is safe with me, Heath.”

His bear rumbled with satisfaction, sensing that she would protect their other secret, too. *When we get around to telling her.*

She will, Heath agreed, ready to put his complete trust in his mate.

After all, as a journalist, Tamara was probably used to protecting her sources.

But deep down, Heath wanted to be the one to protect her. From whatever and whoever might mean her harm.

He shook off the thought, reminding himself they were here for the cave paintings and that there was no danger lurking unseen.

If there was, his shifter senses would have revealed it, and he would deal with it swiftly and permanently.

A primal urge surged through him. It was as if being here so close to the cave activated an ancient part of him. Perhaps as ancient as the oath sworn by the guardians.

“Do you want to go first?” Heath asked, gesturing toward the darkness.

Tamara hesitated, her eyes searching the shadows within the cave. “I don’t know.”

“Don’t worry, there’s nothing in there,” Heath reassured her.

“How can you be sure?” she countered, glancing at him. “There might be a wolf or a bear inside.” She glanced over her shoulder, perhaps recalling the wolf they had seen earlier.

“There isn’t anything in there. I’d know if there were,” Heath replied, his voice confident and calming.

Tamara tilted her head, studying him with curiosity. “Is this that intuition again that you mentioned earlier?”

“Something like that,” Heath admitted.

“A man of mystery.” Tamara grinned, then ducked down as she looked into the cave, her expression changing to one of determination. “I trust you, Heath.” With that declaration, she stepped into the cave.

She trusts us, his bear said happily.

Heath grinned as he followed her inside. Those words alone had made this trek up the mountain worthwhile.

As the darkness of the cave surrounded him, Heath took a flashlight from his pack and turned it on, illuminating their path with its steady beam.

“Can you shine it on the walls so I can see the paintings?” she asked, her voice echoing softly in the enclosed space.

“Wait,” Heath told her, “there’s a better way to see them.”

He pointed the flashlight toward the ground, revealing a circle of stones and some kindling. With practiced ease, Heath used a flint and steel to light a fire, which crackled and danced as it spread warmth through the cave.

There was nothing that compared to the ruddy ambiance cast by fire in a cave. The way the flickering orange flames brought out the colors in the rock and earth pressing in around them was like nothing else.

“Look,” Heath urged Tamara, as the flickering flames cast a warm glow on the ancient drawings adorning the walls. She sucked in a breath and released it slowly, her eyes wide with wonder as the cave paintings seemed to come to life in the light of the dancing flames.

Heath watched her, mesmerized by the way the firelight played across her features. He was as intrigued by his mate as she was by the ancient paintings.

Tamara stepped closer to the cave paintings, captivated by the intricate lines and shapes that made up the ancient artwork.

It was as if everything else, even Heath was forgotten as she studied every detail of the paintings.

Heath understood the spell the paintings cast. He could still recall the first time his grandpa brought him to this cave. The wonder he felt then lived on even now. How could it not?

The walls of the cave were adorned with images that told stories older than the town of Bear Creek itself. There were depictions of bears and wolves and sweeping scenery. In a time when life would have been hard, those living here still managed to make something beautiful. Without any of the intricate tools and specialist paints of the modern world, these people had managed to capture something that Heath believed no one had since, and perhaps never would.

Maybe it was the way that they had represented details not as they were in the moment, but how they could be recognized by anyone throughout the ages, or how they had to pare down the images to their most basic and simplistic way while still being understandable.

With just damp dyes, fingers and charcoal sticks, they had made the bears seem more powerful and imposing than any other creature, and the wolves' held gazes that were fierce yet wise.

Tamara's eyes moved over the walls, eventually coming to rest on a collection of artworks that differed from the others.

These depicted scenes of animals walking alongside humans. The intimacy and connection between the figures were unmistakable. In one, a wolf stood beside a man, their stances mirroring each other, suggesting a bond deeper than companionship. In another, a tall woman was depicted with a bear, her hand resting gently on its massive shoulder.

"What are these?" Tamara asked, her voice hushed in reverence.

Heath stepped closer, his voice soft as he explained, "They tell the stories of an ancient connection between humans and animals, a bond that transcended the physical form."

Tamara's eyes were alight with curiosity. "And these," she gestured to the figures of the humans and animals together, "they look like...partners."

Mates, his bear whispered.

Heath nodded, feeling a surge of hope that soon he might reveal the mating bond he shared with Tamara. "Yes, partnerships. A bond so deep

nothing could break it, not even time itself.”

Tamara’s eyes lingered on a painting where a woman and a wolf gazed into each other’s eyes. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered. “The idea that humans and animals could have such a profound connection.”

A twinge of longing pierced his heart, wishing he could share the full truth of his heritage with her. But he knew it was not yet time. “These paintings are a reminder of our ancestors and our connection to them,” he said instead. His gaze turned to the flames, which seemed to make the paintings dance and move.

As they continued to explore the cave, Tamara’s hand brushed against his, sending a jolt of electricity through his body. He felt the heat of her skin against his and longed to take her in his arms, to show her just how deep their connection could be.

And how special it would be to claim her here, where his ancestors had once forged their own bonds with their mates.

But he held back, knowing that he needed to be patient and let their bond develop naturally.

“What’s through here?” Tamara ducked down, her hand pressed to the cave wall as she looked toward the back of the cave.

“It’s a dead end,” Heath answered. “Wait...”

It looks different, his bear said. The shadow of the end of the cave seemed deeper, as though it was swallowing the light of the fire.

Heath inhaled deeply. *It smells different, too.*

Heath might not have been up here for a few months, but he’d spent enough time in this cave to commit its slightly stale smell to memory.

Earthy, fresher, his bear said.

Heath frowned. “It’s not supposed to smell like that.”

Tamara’s brow furrowed in concern. “What do you mean?”

Heath shook his head. “I don’t know. Perhaps there’s been a rockfall that’s opened up a tunnel. Let’s go check it out.”

Heath went first, pressing his chest against the cave wall as he squeezed through the narrow gap, his senses heightened, alert to any change. The walls were cool and damp to the touch, the air growing noticeably cooler the deeper he went.

He sucked in a breath. It was definitely tight for his large body, but he never minded smaller spaces, and his curiosity pushed any hesitation aside. The sound of Tamara's steady breathing behind him added a comforting touch.

At last, the gap widened, and Heath swung his flashlight from left to right. The space here was large, taller than the previous chamber, but not as long. He could hear the echo of dirt and pebbles falling, and the faint drip of water as they stepped inside. The flooding or landslides must have disturbed the cave and caused whatever was blocking this tunnel to shift.

He turned his flashlight up, but its beam was lost in the shadows, barely illuminating the tips of mighty stalactites above.

"Wow," Tamara breathed, sticking close to him.

Heath brought his light back down, letting it rest on the long, flat wall in front of them. All around the edges, it was filled with dense paintings. Their colors were more muted here, and many of the figures depicted were looking in toward the center. Heath followed their gaze with his torch and caught his breath.

His light settled on a large, dark black and brown creature. It was huge, barely fitting in the pool of light cast by his torch. It was definitely a bear, but was shown to be much, much larger than the other bears painted around it, with a wide, domed head and huge fang-like teeth. It stood on hind legs, its jaw wide. Heath swore he could hear the echoes of a bellowing roar throughout the cave.

Heath swallowed hard as recognition dawned on him. This was the creature that had been appearing to the guardians, as a harbinger of danger, particularly to their mates.

He hadn't seen it. He hadn't even sensed it. But he *knew* what it was.

An icy shiver ran down his spine, and for a moment, he was frozen. His ancestors knew this creature. They knew what it looked like. Had it walked among them all those centuries ago?

He felt Tamara's hand on his back, her touch bringing him back to the present.

"What is it, Heath?" Tamara's voice was filled with concern.

Heath took a deep breath, struggling to keep his composure. "It's a legend among the guardians," he began, his voice steady despite the turmoil inside

him. “This creature, it’s said to appear when there’s danger, especially to those we...care deeply about.”

Tamara’s eyes widened as she studied the painting. “Have you ever seen it?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

He turned to her, his expression solemn. “No, it’s never appeared to me.”

Tamara looked up at him, her eyes reflecting the flickering light of the torch. “But to someone else?” she asked.

“We should leave.” Heath looked up as a shower of earth fell on them. Heath shook the dirt out of his hair and instinctively reached to pull Tamara close.

“Can I take photos?” Tamara reached into her pocket and took out her phone.

“I don’t...” Heath didn’t want to deny his mate, but he didn’t want these photos shared with the world. They were personal to the guardians. Something to be kept hidden and protected for all but their most trusted.

“Don’t worry, I won’t share them with anyone else.” Tamara held up her phone. “Please.”

“I need you to promise that you won’t share them.” Heath was deadly serious, and Tamara tensed before she nodded.

“Okay.” Tamara snapped several images of the paintings and then tapped her phone screen and videoed the cave walls. With every flash of her camera, Heath squinted into the cave to see if it went any deeper...or if there was any movement.

“Come on.” He reached for her arm as small pebbles landed on the cave floor.

As they retraced their steps back through the cave, Heath knew he needed to consult with the other guardians, to delve deeper into the ancient legends that had been passed down through generations. For surely, this new cave opening up could not be a coincidence.

Someone...something wanted them to learn more about the creature.

They squeezed back through the gap into the first cave and then headed for the entrance. He’d be glad to be back in the fresh air, to feel the breeze on his face.

Emerging from the cave, Tamara immediately turned to Heath, her expression a mix of awe and curiosity.

“Will you tell me more about the paintings, about the creature?” she asked, her tone earnest.

Heath nodded, understanding her need for answers. “Let’s get down the mountain a bit. Find a spot to eat lunch.”

He wanted to put some distance between them and the cave. He was afraid to admit that the newly revealed paintings unnerved him.

As they made their way down the rugged path, Heath felt exposed on the open mountainside. There could be anything watching them from anywhere, tucked away in between boulders, looking down on them.

It’s your imagination, his bear assured him.

Heath ran his hand across the back of his neck. He was spooked. It felt as if something was out there watching them, but his senses said otherwise. There was nothing out there. At least, nothing natural. As for the supernatural?

He wished Leif, with his even stronger familiarity with the mountain, or Thane with his steadfast confidence, was with them.

The creature has always helped protect our mates, his bear reminded him.

Heath rolled his shoulders and unclenched his hands. His bear was right. He had always trusted in the oath that bound the guardians. If this creature was bound to the guardians by the same force, he had to learn to trust it, too.

Even so, he was filled with dread at the idea that one day he might sense the creature, he might even meet it face to face.

Because when that happened, his mate would be in danger.

And his need to protect her would be tested. Maybe to its limits.

Chapter Ten – Tamara

Tamara watched as Heath hiked down the rocky path, his broad shoulders tense and his jaw set in a hard line. She was worried about him. Ever since they'd ventured into an unexplored cave, something seemed to be clearly troubling him. The images on the wall of a strange, powerful creature had clearly spooked him. Although he'd said some about its meaning, she still wasn't sure how much she understood, especially the idea that a prehistoric bear creature was supposedly showing up to Heath and his friends.

Her hand curled around her phone, itching to take it out and scroll through the photos she'd taken of the cave paintings. But more than that, she wanted answers from Heath. Her curiosity had been well and truly piqued, and she wouldn't be able to let it go until she got a full explanation as to what exactly was going on.

"Who has seen this creature?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady as they descended farther down the mountain.

Her mind was filled with more questions. Was it only the Bear Creek Guardians, or was this myth more widespread throughout the community here? And what was the deal with these guardians, anyway? When she'd first heard about them, it seemed like just a name the group had given themselves, akin to motorcycle gangs. But after visiting the cave and seeing the ancient artworks, she was convinced there was something deeper, more mystical at play.

The memory of the paintings still sent a shiver down her spine—bears and wolves alongside people, as if united by a bond that defied reason. It made her think of the undeniable connection she felt with Heath. Tamara couldn't explain it, but she knew it went far beyond attraction or desire. There was an inexplicable pull between them, as if they were tethered by an invisible thread.

Heath's strides grew longer, almost desperate, as if he sought to put distance between them and the cave. Or perhaps he thought they were being followed. Paranoia prickled at Tamara, and she glanced around, half-expecting to see someone standing atop a ridge. Or even the wolf from earlier.

Tamara quickened her pace to stay level with Heath as they entered back into the pine forest.

Suddenly, Heath slowed and stopped walking. “This would be a good place to stop,” he said, his voice tight. He pointed into a dense cluster of trees, then strode off the trail without waiting for her response.

Tamara hesitated, torn between her fear of the unknown and her need to know the truth. Although she had come to write a simple article about one of her favorite artists, she felt as though she had managed to catch on to something much bigger, and she refused to let it go. Even if this article would remain at least mostly unpublished to fulfill her promise to Heath, she needed to see it through to the end for herself. With a deep breath, she followed him into the woods, determined to get the answers she craved.

Tamara ducked under low-hanging branches as she followed Heath deeper into the forest. She trusted him, but his silence since they’d left the cave made her uneasy. Was he planning to shut her out completely, not answering any of her burning questions? Or was he simply considering what lies to tell her? Tamara desperately hoped not. She wanted to believe that Heath would be honest with her. And that wasn’t just the journalist in her talking.

As they continued on, she wondered if he would open up more if it wasn’t for the article she was writing about him. Tamara needed him to see that she was worthy of his secrets, and she wanted to know this enigmatic man for more than just her story.

The sound of water bubbling over rocks and stones soon filled the air, the familiar sound soothing Tamara’s frayed nerves. They emerged from the dense foliage into a breathtakingly serene glade nestled beside a stream. Wildflowers swayed gently in the breeze, alive with the hum of bees and the flutter of butterflies.

“Wow,” Tamara breathed, taking in the scene before her. She was surprised at how many little streams must all meet to form the larger creek the town was built around, and by the fact that everywhere they stopped seemed to be of spectacular beauty.

Heath shrugged off his backpack and dropped it to the ground, breaking into her reverie. “We should eat.”

“Sure,” Tamara agreed, her eyes still taking in the beauty of their surroundings. “It’s a beautiful spot.”

Heath surveyed the area, nodding in agreement. “It is.” He unzipped his

pack and pulled out a groundsheet, spreading it over the damp earth. Then he retrieved packets of sandwiches and a Tupperware container, placing them on the sheet.

Tamara removed her own backpack and sat down. Her knee brushed against Heath's, the intimate contact sent a jolt of electricity through her. Her cheeks flushed pink, and her heart skipped, but she tried to force down the intense feelings of desire that swirled within her.

"Thanks for bringing me up here," she said, attempting to engage him. "I can see how this place would inspire your art."

Heath hesitated for a moment, his gaze fixed on the flowing water. "You're welcome," he finally answered.

Tamara studied his face, noting the subtle tension in his jaw and the guarded look in his eyes. Things that had not been there before.

Heath's eyes flickered to hers, and for a brief moment, Tamara saw a flash of vulnerability. But then, just as quickly, his mask slipped back into place.

The sun filtered through the tall trees, casting dappled shadows on them as Heath pulled out two bottles of beer. He looked up at the trees and sighed heavily, the weight of his worries apparent on his broad shoulders. With a soft rustle of fabric, he sat down on the groundsheet, his long legs stretched out in front of him.

Tamara relaxed a little, her knees tucked up to her chest as he offered her a sandwich. "Thanks," she said, taking it hesitantly while eyeing him curiously. She could feel the tension radiating off Heath; it was palpable, like an unanswered question hanging in the air between them.

He met her gaze and blew the air out of his cheeks. "Sorry." His voice was quiet, subdued. Very far from the confident charisma he'd maintained since she met him.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Tamara told him, trying to sound reassuring. But she knew there was more to the story than what he was letting on, and she wanted to know.

"I do," Heath began, picking at the grass beneath his fingertips. "I freaked out a little in the cave."

"Was it the confined space or the paintings?" she asked, hoping to understand his turmoil.

"A little of both, I guess." Heath shrugged and took a deep breath.

“If the rest of the cave looked like it opened up after some sort of cave-in, it’s understandable to be wary,” Tamara said soothingly. Heath nodded, his eyes distant, lost in thought. “And the cave paintings?” Tamara pushed for answers, taking a bite of her sandwich. It was delicious, made with tangy cheese and salad, but what made it mouthwatering was the onion relish. As she chewed, she wondered how such simple ingredients could create something so satisfying.

Heath, however, remained silent. He ate his sandwich and stared at the stream as it rushed past them. “I don’t know.” The words hung in the air like an unfinished sentence.

That wasn’t the answer she wanted, and Tamara wasn’t sure if he was trying to backtrack on his promise to give her an explanation. “You said the creature is connected to the guardians,” she pressed on.

She swallowed hard and then reached for the bottle of beer Heath had popped open for her. She lifted it to her lips and took a long drink. It was sweet and bitter at the same time, a delicious medley of flavors to wash down the sandwich, and she instantly felt better.

However, she was struck by the thought that she could be connected to this whole thing somehow. Was she close enough to a Bear Creek Guardian for it to be something linked to her now? There was certainly a poignant tone Heath used when he said that this creature only appeared when someone special to a guardian was in danger. Was she special to Heath?

“Talk to me, Heath,” she whispered, her voice filled with a gentle plea. “I want to understand.”

“It’s complicated,” he replied. Which was about as close to a non-answer as you could get during an interview.

“I’m okay with complicated,” Tamara assured him as she took a bite of her sandwich and chewed slowly.

Heath picked up his beer and took a long drink before answering, “You feel the connection between us.”

Her eyes widened. She hadn’t expected those to be his next words. “Yes.”

“It’s a deep connection,” he began. “Soul deep.”

Tamara would normally be concerned by such words. In any other circumstances, this would feel wrong, as if someone had developed something creepy, like an obsession for her. But she knew it was more than

that. She could feel it was more than that. “Can you explain it?”

“You saw the cave paintings,” Heath said. “You saw the wolf and the bear, and the humans walking by their sides.”

“I did,” Tamara replied, wondering where this was going.

“They are paintings of shifters.” Heath watched her expression closely, watching for her reaction.

“I’ve heard of shifters,” she replied. “In books and movies.” Her heart hammered so hard she was certain he must be able to hear it. There was a seriousness in Heath’s voice that made her pulse race.

“What if I told you shifters were real?” There was almost a finality in Heath’s voice. And something else. He was afraid.

Her face paled. Could it be real? Were shifters real? She had never been one for believing in myths or legends, but Heath seemed so incredibly genuine.

Was this what she had thought Heath was holding back this whole time?

But how could they be real? Or was Heath delusional? Or perhaps he saw them as real because he committed them to canvas.

Yes, that was it. He was talking metaphorically.

“You’ve seen them?” Tamara asked, even though the real question on her lips was... *Are you one?*

The sound of Heath’s voice cut through the silence as he said, “I’ve seen them.”

Tamara pursed her lips, before opening them a few times as she tried to get the words out, “And are *you* a shifter?”

Heath’s warm hand covered hers with a tenderness that caused her heart to skip a beat. He nodded, eyes filled with emotion. “Yes.”

Tamara felt a little lightheaded as her heartbeat continued to race, partly because of her feelings toward Heath, and partly because she could begin to feel herself believing what Heath was saying.

No.

This was all so impossible. In all the time she had traveled and interviewed people, in all the times *anyone* had traveled and interviewed people, there was no way that something like this could have stayed hidden.

However, the image of the wolves and the bears with their partners was

burning in her mind. This would explain the way she felt inexplicably drawn to Heath, the magnetic force between them. Something she had never felt before.

Gathering the courage to lift her head and meet his gaze, she asked, “And what is the connection we share?” A flicker of fear passed through her thoughts. If he bit her, would she become a shifter, too?

“We are fated mates, Tamara,” Heath explained, his voice soothing. “We are meant to be together forever.”

“Forever?” Tamara’s voice wavered, both shocked and intrigued by the notion that Heath was the man she was supposed to spend the rest of her life with.

“Yes. Forever,” Heath confirmed.

“Just like that?” she asked, wanting to pull away and tell him that was the most ridiculous thing she had ever heard. Yet, at the same time, it was also the most wonderful.

Bear Creek had felt like home since the moment she’d arrived. It was the kind of place she had always dreamed of living, and now that might become a reality if she embraced this bond between her and Heath. Smoothing her hand over her hair in an attempt to calm herself, she couldn’t help but doubt. This couldn’t be true.

“How do I know what you’re saying is real?” Tamara asked, suddenly embarrassed at herself for believing Heath. He was probably making the whole thing up. Hell, he might even have painted those cave paintings himself. Yes, that was it—he used them to lure women up here. This was probably his favorite make-out spot! How could she be so gullible? So naïve?

“Tamara.” Fear flashed in his eyes as she scooted away from him.

“I need to go.” She grabbed her pack and stood up, but before she could walk away, he moved with inhuman speed.

“It’s true. I can show you.” When she looked into his eyes, all she saw was truth.

“Then show me,” she said, swallowing the lump in her throat and praying she wasn’t making a life-altering mistake.

Chapter Eleven – Heath

Heath held Tamara’s gaze, the intensity of their connection making it difficult to breathe.

“Will you give me a chance?” he asked, his voice barely audible above the rustling leaves of the glade.

Tamara nodded without hesitation, her eyes never leaving his. Heath felt a mix of relief and terror wash over him as he nervously took a step back from Tamara, creating a small distance between them.

“Don’t run,” he asked, wishing that he could find different words. How he wished he could make this easier for her.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she assured him. “I’m a journalist, remember? I want to find out the truth.”

The words of his bear echoed in Heath’s mind, urging him forward. *Let’s show her.*

With a deep breath, he nodded, hoping beyond hope he wouldn’t regret what he was about to do. As he locked eyes with Tamara one last time, he committed every detail of her face to memory—the way her dark hair framed her features, the curve of her lips, the intensity of her eyes—before he finally let his bear take over.

The air around him crackled and popped with energy as Heath faded away from human sight, the bond between him and Tamara stretching taut like a tightrope pulled to its limits.

Then, in the blink of an eye, his bear emerged, his massive form taking up the space where Heath had just stood moments before. The bear could sense her, could see her, and his instincts roared within him.

Tamara took a step backward, her foot catching a protruding root. She stumbled momentarily but caught herself, standing firm as the enormous bear materialized before her. “It’s true,” she whispered, her voice quivering with a mixture of awe and fear.

Heath’s bear took a cautious step forward, his head low to the ground as he sniffed the air around them, taking in every nuance of Tamara’s scent. She swallowed hard, her face pale as she watched him, her eyes wide but

determined. Was she scared of him?

I am a bear, his inner bear reminded him shortly.

You are, Heath agreed, *and bears are not known to be cuddly and cute in the wild.*

Tamara clenched her jaw, her body tense as if she were forcing herself to stay put, to stand still and not run from the terrifying creature before her. The bear approached slowly, carefully, acutely aware of her fragile state and unwilling to scare her away. Her fingers twitched at her side, and then she reached out her hand to him as if making friends with a nervous dog.

But the bear wasn't nervous—he was bristling with excitement. This was the day he'd waited for his whole life: the day he met his mate in the flesh.

Tamara stretched out her hand farther, her palm facing up, and the bear gingerly sniffed at it before nuzzling his massive head into her hand. She gasped, her fingers tangling in his fur, and then she stroked him.

The bear let out a low growl of contentment. This was it—the moment they'd been waiting for. Their mate had accepted them, both sides of him. He leaned into her touch, reveling in the sensation of her skin on his.

Heath's bear leaned into Tamara's touch, his eyes closing in bliss as she ran her fingers through his fur, sending a shiver of pleasure down his spine.

The bear rumbled deep in his chest, a sound of pure joy.

Tamara smiled. She felt it! She felt a connection with her mate that went beyond words, beyond understanding. It was a primal feeling, an instinctual knowledge that this was meant to be.

"Mates," she whispered as she rested her head on his huge shoulder and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Mates, Heath's bear repeated as the stream rushed down the mountain, as eternal as the bond that linked him to Tamara.

They stood together, a bear and his mate, as the world carried on around them, not needing anyone or anything else.

But this moment could not last forever. They needed to get back to Bearheart Ridge.

We need to tell the others about the cave painting, Heath told his bear.

The bear sighed reluctantly and inched away from Tamara. She cupped his enormous head in his hands and kissed his snout before letting him go.

The air around the bear shimmered, and she held out her hands, feeling the electric current on her hands as the air popped and crackled. Then the bear was gone, replaced once again by Heath's human form, who was both excited and nervous about the coming conversation.

"Shifters are real." She smiled, looking a little punch drunk.

"Shifters are real," Heath repeated with some relief.

"Your bear is incredible," Tamara said. "His fur is so soft. And he has the most expressive eyes. He might not be able to talk, but I got a sense of what he was thinking."

"He's a part of me, and I'm a part of him. We're connected. It's hard to explain," he said simply.

Tamara's eyes softened as she looked up at him. "And I'm a part of you, too."

"Yes," Heath answered hoarsely. He'd never expected Tamara to be so accepting of him.

She stepped closer and stroked his cheek as she looked into his eyes and said, "You have the same eyes."

"Does that mean you know what I'm thinking?" Heath rubbed his cheek against her palm, and desire flared between them.

Tamara grinned mischievously. "Maybe I do."

"You do?" he murmured.

"Something like this?" Tamara leaned forward and brushed her lips lightly against his.

"Something like that," he whispered against her lips and threaded his hand around her waist, pulling her against him.

Heath growled low in his throat as he lowered his head and captured her lips in a searing kiss. She clung to him as she returned the kiss, their tongues entwined as their bodies pressed against each other. Tamara moaned against his mouth and Heath deepened the kiss.

As Heath stroked his hand down Tamara's back, she shuddered in his arms before she ran her hands over his chest, exploring the contours of his body.

He was in danger of losing control. His need for her was overwhelming. But this was not something that could be rushed. Tamara might still be

reeling from the shock of learning about shifters and fated mates. He didn't want her to get swept along in the moment and then have regrets.

When he took her for the first time, when he claimed her, he wanted it to be memorable for all the right reasons.

Heath pulled back from her and looked into her eyes. "I've wanted to do that from the first moment we met."

"Me, too," was all she said.

Heath smiled and kissed her tenderly, his hands stroking her back and down over the soft curves of her hips. Tamara's body arched into his as she moaned softly.

Heath pulled back and said, "We should go."

She sighed heavily and leaned her forehead on his chest. "We should."

Heath chuckled. "And you should curb your enthusiasm."

Tamara raised her head and shrugged. "I guess I don't want to go back to reality."

"This. Us. Is our reality, whether we are here in the mountains or wherever." Heath swept his arm around in a wide arc.

"But here with you, it's all so simple." Tamara reached for her backpack and hitched it on her shoulder.

Heath did the same and then slipped one arm around her shoulder as he guided her back toward the trail that would take them back to Bearheart Ridge.

"And once we're back in civilization, we'll figure out how this works, so our lives are as simple, or as complicated as you want them to be," Heath told her. "All that matters to me is that you are happy."

"Really?" She pulled away from him a little and looked up at his face to check he was telling her the truth.

"Really. Your happiness is my number one priority. If you're happy, then I am happy." He chuckled as her forehead wrinkled. "Why do I get the feeling what I just said does not make you happy?"

"Because it's not fair," Tamara told him as she ducked under a low branch. They were back on the main trail and Heath set a fast pace since they were on their way down. The sky overhead had darkened, and he didn't want them to get caught in the rain if the weather front shifted. Earlier it hadn't

looked like the bad weather would hit them, but the wind had started to pick up, and Heath would not risk getting caught on the mountain with Tamara if the rain fell.

“Is life ever fair?” Heath asked.

“No.” She shook her head. “But that’s not the point. The point is that we are equals. Not physically, obviously.” She looked him up and down, her eyes lingering on him a moment longer than necessary. He felt a wave of heat rush over him as he read the desire in her gaze.

“True,” he said as his gaze roamed her body. “You are much more attractive than me.”

“Don’t tease me.” She slapped him lightly on the arm.

“Who is teasing?” Heath stopped walking and reached for her, pulling her into his arms. “You have curves in all the right places.”

“And you have muscles in all the right places. And then some.” She licked her lips, and he lowered his head and kissed her.

“So, I guess we are equals in every way,” he murmured against her lips.

“I guess we are,” she agreed. “Which is why you need to let go of this notion that you were put on this earth to make me happy.”

“You want me to make you miserable instead?” he asked in all seriousness as they continued walking down the trail.

“No,” she chuckled. “I want us to be open and honest with each other. I want us to do what is best for us. Me and you.”

“I can go with that,” Heath agreed.

“Good.” She nodded.

The journey down through the forest and down the mountain seemed to fly by. Almost all sense of unease Heath had felt since the cave had evaporated and been replaced by the sheer joy of being so close, and so open with his fated mate. The only thing that had given him this near feeling of completeness had been when he was immersed in his painting, but this was something else, something more whole.

Bearheart Ridge soon came into view below them, and Heath was relieved to see his house in sight while the weather was still holding. The trail narrowed and he reluctantly let her go and walked in front of her, heading for home. The home he hoped they would one day share.

And share with our children, his bear said.

Yes, Heath said wistfully. How he wanted children. A family.

After Sable had her baby, the intense desire to have a child of his own had grown infinitely. Now, it seemed as if he might get the chance.

If Tamara wanted children, too. She had a career, one that was important to her. Would that mean she didn't want children?

They could always adopt. He'd love a child no matter how it came into his life.

But he'd always imagined that he would have a child of his own.

To continue his bloodline and uphold the oath made by his ancient ancestors.

But that was a discussion for another day. For now, he was simply content to be in the presence of his mate. To feel her near, to know she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

It was like before he met her, he'd been alone. Sure, he had the other guardians and their mates. But Tamara was different.

She was a part of him. Meant for him.

He glanced over his shoulder, just to make sure she was still there, even though he could sense her.

She smiled at him. A smile that would chase away any storm.

He smiled back.

She was his everything. His mate. His love. His life.

He finally felt complete.

Chapter Twelve – Tamara

As Tamara and Heath trekked down the last leg of the trail toward Bearheart Ridge, the events of the day played like a surreal movie in her mind, each moment more unbelievable than the last. Only a few hours ago, they had set off to see the ancient cave paintings, which had captured her curiosity. But what she had witnessed was beyond anything she could have imagined and changed her view of the world entirely.

Heath had revealed his secret, a secret that threatened to shatter the boundaries of her reality. He could shift into a bear. The very thought made her head spin. If she hadn't seen it with her own eyes, if she hadn't felt the coarse texture of his fur beneath her fingertips, Tamara would have dismissed it as an illusion, a trick of the mind. But it was real. Astonishingly, undeniably real.

The world around her seemed to blur, a mix of awe and disbelief clouding her thoughts. The shock of the revelation still clung to her, draining her energy. Or perhaps it was just exhaustion from the hike, the long trek over rough, untamed terrain that had sapped her energy. But she was grateful for her aching muscles. They were proof that the extraordinary experience was real.

It was worth it, so profoundly worth it.

Tamara stole glances at Heath as they walked, his presence both comforting and disconcerting. How could someone so human harbor such a wild, untamed secret? The way he moved, the way he spoke, everything about him was the same, yet everything had changed.

As they stepped off the trail and onto the flat ground of the large plateau that made up the ridge, Tamara looked over the familiar sights and sounds of Bearheart Ridge, and the town below in the distance, with a newfound perspective. The quaint buildings, the cars, and the people moving around in the distant town, all backed by the serene backdrop of mountains. It all felt different now, as if she were seeing it through a lens altered by magic and mystery.

Heath seemed to sense her turmoil, his gaze often lingering on her with a mix of concern and understanding. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice

gentle.

Tamara nodded, forcing a smile. “Just tired, I think. It’s been...a lot to take in.”

Heath’s expression softened. “I know. I can’t imagine what it must be like for you. If you need anything, if you have questions...”

“Can’t believe I touched you...your bear,” Tamara murmured, stealing glances at Heath as they walked side by side.

Heath caught her gaze and grinned. “Just don’t make a habit of trying to stroke any bear. There are wild ones on the mountain, too.”

“I won’t.” Tamara shook her head. She recalled the sensation of running her fingers through his fur, feeling the raw power beneath. She could still feel the lingering warmth on her skin, accompanied by an inexplicable sense of connection to him.

Was it fate? Was she willing to put her trust in something so intangible? Something she had never believed in?

“So what now?” Tamara asked as they took the path leading to Heath’s house.

Her car was there outside, but she wasn’t ready to get in and drive away. She wasn’t ready to leave Heath. Not when she had so many questions for him. And not just about shifters, although she sure had plenty of those! But she also needed to continue with her interview. That was why she’d come to Bear Creek, after all. And neither ominous cave paintings nor shape-shifting men were going to do her job for her.

Heath, sensing her hesitation, offered a simple solution. “Coffee?” he suggested, arching an eyebrow in question. The ordinary proposal seemed almost out of place after the extraordinary experiences of the day.

Tamara paused, considering. Coffee felt too mundane, too normal for a day that had been anything but. But perhaps that’s what she needed, something normal to immerse herself in where she could continue to unravel the mystery that surrounded Heath.

Tamara tilted her head from side to side in indecision. “Sure.”

“Or we could go into town for something to eat,” Heath added as if reading her mind.

The idea of a meal, a change of scenery, felt right. She nodded. “We could, my treat,” Tamara offered, a small smile playing on her lips. “I can put

it on my expenses since you still owe me an interview,” she added, half-jokingly, half-seriously.

Heath chuckled, a sound that eased some of the tension that had built up inside her. “Ah, back to reality, back to business,” he said, his voice light but with an underlying warmth.

As they walked to her car, Tamara felt as if she was straddling two worlds. The ordinary world of interviews and expenses, and a new, extraordinary world where myths walked in the guise of men.

And at the center of it all was Heath, the bridge between these two realities.

“My editor *is* going to want the article,” Tamara said as they reached the car. “But don’t worry, I will only write about your art. The rest of it..”

“No one would believe it, anyway,” Heath chuckled.

“Although my mom would be pleased. Breaking the news to the world that shifters exist would be a career-defining moment.” She opened the driver’s door and their eyes met. “It’s a good thing that’s not why I went into journalism.”

“Because of your grandpa, right?” he said.

“It’s in my blood,” she nodded, knowing he would understand that. “And over the years, I’ve come to find my voice, and that voice likes to tell powerful, uplifting stories. I’m not too fussed about renown or fame.”

“So, if shifters were ever revealed, you would be the one to write the story because you would tell the world we are strong, dependable, and loyal,” Heath teased.

“I can only speak from experience...of the one shifter I’ve met.” She threw her pack onto the backseat and slid in front of the wheel.

Heath mirrored her and got into the passenger seat, making her car feel small.

He sure was a distraction. She could sense him. As if there were an intangible connection drawing them together.

Tamara forced herself to focus on the car, and not the man sitting beside her. With a shaky hand, she started the engine and drove away from his house.

“You sure you won’t turn into a bear on me during the drive?” Tamara quipped, a playful glint in her eye as she followed the winding road toward

town.

“Only if you play unbearable music,” Heath retorted, his grin infectious.

Tamara laughed, her spirits lifting as they descended from the rugged heights of Bearheart Ridge. The road wound its way down, the scenery gradually shifting from the wild, untamed beauty of the mountains gave way to scattered buildings and the occasional open field.

“Are you in control?” Tamara asked.

“Of my bear?” Heath half-turned to face her. “It’s more of a partnership. Neither of us has control, so to speak.”

“But you don’t shift with a full moon or anything like that?” she asked.

“No, there’s no trigger. It’s an act of will. I control when I shift,” Heath assured her.

“And only into a bear?” Tamara hadn’t considered that until now.

“Only a bear,” he replied.

Their conversation was interrupted by the sudden buzz of Heath’s phone. Tamara glanced at him as he answered, his expression shifting to one of concern. “Sable?” Heath put the phone to his ear. “Everything okay?”

Tamara listened, catching bits and pieces of the conversation.

Sable’s voice was muffled, but Tamara could sense the urgency in her tone. “...trouble...nature reserve,” she said. “...can’t go, Summer is due...feed...wakes up...”

Heath nodded, looking out the window at the passing scenery. “Don’t worry, I’ll handle it,” he reassured her.

Tamara’s curiosity piqued. What could possibly be wrong?

Heath ended the call and looked at Tamara, his expression apologetic. “I have to go to the nature reserve. Thane’s already there, but Sable wants someone else to head over and see what’s happening.”

Tamara nodded. “Do you need a ride?”

Heath hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “That would help, thank you. If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not at all.” Tamara glanced sideways at him, noting his concern. “I have a vague idea where it is, but I might need directions.”

“You’ve got it.” Heath pointed to a turn on their left. “This way. Drive for a couple of miles and then take a right turn.”

The atmosphere in the car changed as Heath became more subdued once again. She didn't like him like this. He was normally so calm and cool and collected, but after the cave visit, and now this, she could feel the tension building with him. Tamara sensed there was a story unfolding at the nature reserve. But she reminded herself that she wasn't here as a journalist. She was here for Heath, as his mate.

As they drove, Tamara realized how much she looked forward to being a part of the close-knit group of guardians and their mates. And they must be close-knit, confident that they could depend on each other whatever came their way.

How else could they perform dangerous rescues, or trust one another to keep their secrets? She just hoped they would accept her into their family.

"Take a right here," Heath directed as the road brought them alongside a high wire fence. She turned them down a smaller road that led toward a gate marked "staff only." Under Heath's instructions, she pulled up next to a large truck and parked the car. They got out, and Heath led her through the gate, into the reserve, and toward a fairly large building.

The sound of raised voices guided them to a smaller building to the side with a door marked "staff only" as well. Although Tamara guessed that Heath didn't need to hear the raised voices. The distant expression on his face told her his heightened senses would lead him straight to the source of the commotion.

Suddenly, his eyes narrowed, and he picked up his pace, clearly worried about whatever awaited them.

"Is everything okay?" Tamara asked, trying to keep up with him.

Heath shook his head, his expression still tense. "I don't know what, but something's definitely wrong."

As they drew closer, the voices became clearer, and Tamara picked up on the urgency and frustration in the heated exchange. She tried to read Heath's face, searching for any hint of a clue, but he kept his expression neutral.

"Do you want to wait out here?" Heath asked.

"No," she replied. "Unless you want me to." She was an outsider, after all. She might be Heath's mate, but she would be a stranger to anyone else.

"No, this concerns us all," Heath replied.

"Us all?" she asked.

“You are one of us,” he told her.

Tamara reached out and threaded her fingers through his. “Then let’s go.”

Heath opened the door to reveal a small group of people in a heated discussion. They all paused and looked their way as they entered. There were two older men, though one was clearly some sort of ranger from his uniform, while the other was well dressed in clothes that looked expensive but out of fashion. With the ranger was a younger woman, and toward the center of the room was a man who stood just as tall and broad as Heath.

“Thane. I heard there was a problem.” Heath scanned the faces of the people in the room.

“Heath,” Thane said, looking relieved to see a friendly face. Then his gaze drifted to Tamara. “Hey there.”

“Hi,” she replied awkwardly, raising her hand.

“What’s wrong?” Heath asked as he turned his attention to the ranger, an older man who was visibly upset.

“Someone’s been messing with the animals,” the well-dressed man spat out angrily. “And it looks like it’s an inside job!”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?” Heath asked, his voice filled with concern, but with a slight sharp tone she hadn’t heard from him before.

“A herd of deer is missing,” the ranger replied, his eyes turned down.

“Stolen,” the other man accused.

“Reginald.” Thane held up his hand to calm the situation. “Billy is as upset as the rest of us.”

“Because he’s been caught,” Reginald answered.

“That’s a baseless lie,” the young woman answered as she stepped in front of Billy. “My grandpa would never do that!”

“Then how do you explain the tire tracks?” Reginald asked. “They match Billy’s truck. Even Thane said so.”

“Can someone explain exactly what happened?” Heath asked.

“When we arrived this morning, the herd of deer in the northwest pasture was missing. At first, we thought they had broken through the fence. But then we found tire tracks by the gate. It looks as if someone loaded them onto a trailer and took them,” Thane explained.

“And the tire tracks match Billy’s exactly,” Reginald said.

“He didn’t do it,” Thane answered hotly, his eyes aflame.

“Listen, I have poured a lot of money into this nature reserve,” Reginald said. “And now I am questioning whether that money went to the reserve or to line the pockets of...”

“That’s too far!” the young woman jabbed a finger at Reginald.

“On the contrary, Kylie,” Reginald began. “I don’t think we’re going far enough.” He took his phone out of his pocket and tapped the screen. “I’m calling the sheriff. And until this is resolved, I am going to request that the nature reserve be closed.”

“No,” Billy sobbed.

Tamara clenched her fists. If ever there was a man with an agenda, she sensed Reginald was it.

Perhaps she might have to put her journalistic instincts to good use after all.

Chapter Thirteen – Heath

Heath's jaw tightened as Reginald continued to question Billy's integrity, his bear growling low in his chest. "Reginald, back off," Heath advised, raising his hands in a placating gesture that he knew the older man would perceive as a challenge.

"This has nothing to do with you," Reginald snapped, his nostrils flaring. "This is between me and—"

"The sheriff is here," Thane interrupted from his position near the window.

Everyone fell quiet and the tension in the room seemed to thicken as Sheriff Brad approached with his deputy, Ashley, in tow.

"And you expect me to believe that this investigation will be unbiased?" Reginald sneered, looking Thane up and down.

"Yes." Tamara stepped forward. This kind of thing was her forte. "I'm Tamara Delainy, a journalist here to interview Heath on his career." She handed Reginald her card. "You're welcome to call my editor and check my credentials."

Reginald scrutinized the card before narrowing his eyes at Tamara. "And what are you proposing, Miss Delainy?"

Tamara glanced at Heath, her gaze lingering just long enough for him to notice the barely perceptible quirk of her lips. "I'm proposing that I accompany the sheriff on his investigation and report the truth."

"Ha!" Reginald snorted, his gaze flicking between Heath and Tamara. "And you expect me to believe that you'll only report the truth?"

Heath clenched his fists, the urge to knock Reginald to the floor for disrespecting Tamara nearly overwhelming. His bear rumbled in agreement, equally incensed by Reginald's treatment of Billy. The old man had dedicated his life to the nature reserve; there was no way he would betray the animals.

The door clicked and pushed open, with the sheriff and deputy stepping inside.

"Morning," Brad greeted them with a nod. Thane returned the gesture, his

eyes only briefly leaving Billy, who seemed to have aged a decade since the accusations began. The old man's face was pale and pinched.

"Thanks for coming so promptly, Sheriff," Thane said sincerely.

"We at the Sheriff's Department take any matters of illegal wildlife trade very seriously," Brad replied, pulling out his notebook. "Now, from what Mr. Beauchamp had told me, several deer are missing, and it looks as if they were loaded into a trailer."

"Yes," Reginald interjected. "And the tire tracks match Billy's truck."

"Allegedly," Ashley added, earning a withering glare from Reginald.

"Grandpa didn't do it," Kylie insisted, her anger palpable. "He was at home all night."

"Any witnesses?" Brad asked, pen poised above his notebook.

"Me," Kylie replied, her chin held high.

"Well, it must be true then," Reginald scoffed. "Unless they were in it together."

"Why would Grandpa steal the deer?" Kylie snapped.

"He's close to retirement—maybe he sold them? Check his bank accounts," Reginald demanded, shifting his attention to Brad.

"I'm in charge of this investigation," Brad reminded Reginald curtly. "Not you, Mr. Beauchamp."

"Sorry," Reginald huffed, deflating slightly. "I'm just worried about the poor creatures. They're supposed to be safe here, protected..."

"Okay, Ashley will take statements while I go take a look at the scene," Brad said. "You said the tracks were by the gate closest to the northwest pasture?"

"Yes, I saw them when I went to visit the deer. I enjoy watching the herd during my lunch, but obviously, they're not there now," Reginald explained. "I can come with you and show you where exactly the tire marks are."

"I can find my own way," Brad assured him. Heath couldn't help but grin at the sheriff's dismissive tone.

"Reginald thinks there's going to be a cover-up," Heath informed Brad, unable to resist needling the older man further.

"Does he?" Brad arched an eyebrow at Reginald.

"Ah, but if I could accompany you," Tamara interjected smoothly, "and

document the case as an observer.”

“I think the only way I’m going to know the truth is if I come ,too,” Reginald insisted.

“And me,” Heath added before Brad could respond. The sheriff stared hard at him for a long moment before nodding in agreement.

“Sure, the more the merrier—unless you disturb my crime scene,” Brad conceded.

“I don’t know why a Bear Creek Guardian has to come with us,” Reginald grumbled, eyeing Heath suspiciously.

“Because I have information that might be pertinent to the case,” Heath countered, his gaze unyielding, making it abundantly clear that he would not back down.

As Sheriff Brad stepped toward the door, he looked back at the group with a concerned expression. “Ashley, take care of things here, please,” he instructed. His gaze rested on Billy for a moment, full of empathy for the old man caught amid turmoil.

Ashley nodded in understanding, her face showing a trace of sympathy. “I will.” She moved toward Thane, Billy, and Kylie, her voice gentle as she suggested, “Why don’t we all take a seat? Maybe some coffee?”

Kylie, her emotions raw, nodded and hugged her grandfather tightly before heading out of the room. The tension in Billy’s shoulders seemed to ease just a fraction at her embrace.

“Thane, why don’t you see if Stellan is free?” Brad added.

“I’ve already spoken to him. His shift at the hospital ends in half an hour; he’s coming straight over,” Thane replied, his voice tinged with relief. Thankfully, Ashley had the situation under control, and Billy would soon receive any medical attention he might need.

Heath followed Brad out of the room, resisting the urge to reach out and touch Tamara. He wanted to close the connection between them, to offer her his comfort and his thanks. But he couldn’t risk letting Reginald or anyone else see their relationship as anything other than professional. Inside, Heath’s bear ground its teeth together, eyeing Reginald with distrust.

I never did like the man, Heath’s bear muttered.

Heath felt the same, but he had to consider that Reginald might be genuine in his concern.

He has spent a lot of time and money on the reserve, Heath told his bear. There's a chance he truly believes Billy is responsible for the missing deer.

Then he's a terrible judge of character, his bear grumbled in response.

He comes from a different world, Heath reminded his inner bear. One where people are cutthroat in business.

His bear mumbled something about not minding cutting someone's throat, but Heath pushed the thought aside.

"Okay, let's check out the tire tracks first," Brad said, as they headed for his truck.

Heath and Tamara took the rear seats, while Reginald rode up front next to the sheriff. When Brad was sure everyone was ready, he drove out of the parking lot, following the road for a short way along the fence line before turning right and pulling off near a gate similar to the one at the entrance, but much smaller. They all got out, following Brad along the trail that led to the deer enclosure where the theft had allegedly taken place.

Tamara and Heath couldn't help themselves from looking around for tracks, while Reginald went straight for the gate. "These are the tire marks."

"There's some here as well," Brad announced, taking out his phone to snap a photo. "Walk around them."

The ground around the area was littered with crisscrossing tire marks, clear and unmistakable. Whoever had taken the deer had made no attempt to cover their tracks.

Heath leaned closer to Tamara, keeping his voice low. "It doesn't add up," he murmured.

"No, it does not," Tamara agreed, glancing at him. "What is your information about this theft?"

"The tracks," Heath whispered, cautious not to let Reginald overhear. "Not the tire tracks, but the deer tracks. The deer they kept here are much smaller than the deer we normally get on the mountains, but these tracks are the ones we saw up there."

Tamara's eyes widened in surprise. "The very same?" she asked.

Heath nodded. "I think someone took these deer, and then they either got away or were dumped high on the mountains."

"But why?" Tamara's brow furrowed in confusion.

“That,” Heath said, his gaze scanning the area, “is what we need to figure out.”

They moved close to the enclosure itself and Brad carefully examined the open gate. The padlock hadn’t been forced; it had either been picked or opened with a key, which suggested an inside job or someone with access. Reginald, like a shadow, followed Brad closely, his eyes darting around, keen to not miss any detail as the sheriff documented the scene and took more photos of the tire tracks and gate.

Heath and Tamara stood a respectful distance away, observing but not interfering, although Heath did surreptitiously point out some of the tracks of the small deer to Tamara, who took a quick photo on her phone.

They watched as Brad methodically worked the scene, his professionalism evident in every deliberate move. The tension in the air was palpable, a mixture of concern, suspicion, and the urgency to find the truth.

Finally, Brad straightened up. “Okay, I’m done here,” he announced. He turned to Heath. “What do you have to show me?”

“We need to drive into the mountains,” Heath said, his voice steady. “Then we might need to take a hike.”

Brad considered this for a moment before turning to Reginald. “Are you up for a hike? Or I can drop you back at the center.”

“I aim to see this through,” Reginald stated tartly, his tone implying he suspected they were trying to ditch him.

“Then let’s go,” Brad said, nodding. Together, they walked back to the truck, taking care to avoid the tire tracks that marked the ground.

Once they were all inside the truck, Brad picked up his radio and checked in with the sheriff’s office and his deputy. He relayed their next move, ensuring his team was aware of their whereabouts. Then, with a nod from Heath, they drove back onto the road.

“Take this turn,” Heath directed as they neared a junction.

“Into the mountains?” Brad asked for confirmation.

“Yes,” Heath responded.

Without further question, Brad followed Heath’s directions, driving into the increasingly rugged terrain. The landscape changed as they ascended, from gentle hills to dense forest, which gave way to rocky outcrops and a more untamed wilderness.

I just hope we have this right, Heath's bear said.

We do, Heath assured him. *Someone has tried to set Billy up, I don't know why. But we are going to prove his innocence.*

Heath kept an eye on the mountain peaks around them, using them as landmarks. He wanted to bring them as close to the tracks they had found near the cave without getting too close to it, and he knew that there were only a few roads traversable by car around this rarely traveled area.

As the truck climbed higher into the mountains, Heath stared out the window, lost in thought. The scenario playing out in his mind was troubling. If his suspicions were correct, whoever had taken the deer from the enclosure had no intention of selling them. Instead, they had driven to this remote area, using the quiet back roads, and released them into the wild. But why? What was the purpose?

To frame Billy, Heath concluded silently. Yet, the motive eluded him. Billy was a good man, one of the best Heath had ever known. His dedication to the reserve was evident in everything he did. Thane often shared stories of Billy's tireless efforts, his nights spent caring for sick animals. The injustice of the situation made Heath clench his fists in anger. Someone was causing Billy undue stress, and Heath wanted nothing more than to confront the perpetrator.

He did look ill, his bear noted, echoing Heath's concern.

Stellan will be there soon, Heath reassured himself. *He'll make sure Billy is well cared for.*

From the front seat, Brad glanced over his shoulder. "We keep going?" he asked.

"Yes," Heath responded, his voice firm. "It's not much farther up." He mentally mapped out the mountain, trying to pinpoint the exact spot where the truck would have stopped to release the deer, leading them close to where he and Tamara had seen the tracks.

Reginald, growing impatient, turned to Brad. "This is a waste of time. There's nothing up here."

Brad's grip on the wheel tightened as he shot back, "I'll be the judge of that."

"But we're wasting time," Reginald insisted.

"It's my time to waste," Brad countered, but a quick glance in the

rearview mirror made it clear to Heath that their expedition had better yield results.

“A little farther,” Heath urged.

“Are you sure?” Tamara asked, her eyes meeting his. Even the rugged sheriff’s truck was bouncing and rattling up the narrow mountain road.

“I am,” Heath affirmed, holding her gaze. Tamara nodded, signaling her trust in his judgment.

They drove on until Heath suddenly called out, “Here!”

Brad brought the truck to a stop, and Heath was the first to step out into the fresh mountain air.

“This is it.”

“There’s nothing here,” Reginald said, his voice dripping with exasperation.

“There is if you know where to look,” Heath assured him, his confidence unwavering.

Brad joined Heath, and together they scoured the ground. “There,” Brad pointed to a broken branch, and upon closer inspection, faint tire tracks were revealed in the damp ground.

“The deer were unloaded here, and then ran into the mountains,” Heath explained.

“We saw their tracks,” Tamara added, supporting Heath’s statement, remembering what he told her on their trek. “They were unusually high up.”

“We thought they might have been forced higher because of the rains, but this makes more sense,” Heath continued.

Brad raked a hand through his hair, his frustration evident. “None of this makes sense.”

“So that’s it?” Reginald asked, skepticism coloring his tone.

“No,” Brad replied, walking back to the truck. “This is not it by a long shot. I am convinced there is a crime here. But I am also convinced that Billy is not the perpetrator. Someone has set him up to discredit him. Don’t worry about the hike for now. I’ll ask Leif to help me find those deer tracks.”

As Brad spoke, Heath’s gaze shifted to Reginald. The pieces were starting to fit together, pointing toward a likely suspect. But why would Reginald go to such lengths? Was this all about gaining control of the nature reserve?

Chapter Fourteen – Tamara

Tamara got into the truck, and after checking in with his office, Brad drove back down the mountain to the nature reserve. Reginald, seated stiffly beside Brad, was visibly displeased. His mood cast a frosty atmosphere inside the vehicle, making the journey seem longer than it was. Tamara watched him discreetly, wondering if he planned to continue pursuing the matter further, or if Brad's conclusions had given him pause.

However, there was no real proof Billy hadn't taken the deer. Not that she wasn't convinced of his innocence. Heath and the other people who knew Billy obviously respected him deeply. They were convinced that Billy was innocent, and that was good enough for her.

But was she being swayed by her connection to Heath?

If she was being completely unbiased, she would have further questions. For a start, why were the tire tracks similar, if not the same, as Billy's truck tires? Was that a coincidence, or had someone gone out of their way to frame Billy? Or did Billy, in fact, bring the deer up here?

And why?

"Are you all right?" Heath asked as they pulled back into the nature reserve.

"Yes, I'm just going over everything. Trying to come up with a plausible explanation for what's happened," she told him.

"I think we'd all like a plausible explanation," Reginald said from the front seat. "Although, I still maintain the most plausible explanation right now is that Billy loaded the deer onto a trailer and then had a change of heart."

"I can assure you, I aim to explore every angle of this investigation," Brad assured Reginald as he switched off the engine.

Reginald was the first to step out of the truck. As his feet hit the ground, he turned to Brad, his tone slightly less abrasive than before. "Keep me up to date with your inquiries, Sheriff," he said, a hint of command still present in his voice.

"Will do," Brad replied, his voice neutral but firm, leaving no doubt that

he was in charge of the investigation.

With that, Reginald stalked across the parking lot to his car and got in. Tamara watched as he drove away. She really should have arranged to go and interview him and get some background on the man.

Maybe Heath could give her his address, and she could arrange an interview. Although, by the scowl on Heath's face, she figured he would prefer it if she didn't go anywhere near Reginald.

But that wasn't his decision. She'd agreed to report on this story, and she aimed to do just that. Which meant she needed to hear from all sides. Fated mates or not, she was still a reporter, and it was her duty to uncover the truth.

"Let's go update Thane." Brad walked back to the center, the mood among them sober.

"What do you think?" Tamara asked Heath as she paused before entering the building.

"I think someone has gone to elaborate lengths to frame Billy. What I don't know is why." Heath looked over her shoulder as Brad went inside.

"Do you think Reginald wants to get control of the center?" Tamara asked.

"It looks that way," Heath agreed.

"Or that is how someone wants it to look," Tamara said.

"You might be right, but this is turning into one hell of a conspiracy theory." Heath looked exasperated. "I mean, what's the point? The nature reserve isn't a cash cow. It's hard work with low pay, and the only real reward is knowing that you are doing good for the animals and the natural environment."

"I'd like to do some more digging," Tamara said. "Maybe some interviews. Is there some kind of place for records? Where I can research the history of the town?"

"There's the archives." Heath placed his hand on her shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Do whatever you need to do."

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "I will."

Inside, they found Brad talking to Thane alone, his expression taut with anger, though he was clearly trying to maintain his composure. Tamara could see the strain in his eyes, the tight set of his jaw. It was evident that the accusations against Billy had hit him hard.

“Is Billy all right?” Heath asked.

“Stellan took Billy home,” Thane explained, his voice low but controlled. “Kylie’s gone with them to look after her grandpa.”

“It’s probably best he has a few days off until I can figure out what is going on here,” Brad said.

Thane’s brow was furrowed with concern as he addressed Brad. “You still think Billy is behind this?”

Brad shook his head, his expression serious. “No, but I believe that is what someone wants us to think. So, for now, Billy is safer at home.”

Heath nodded in agreement. “And we should check in on him as often as we can.”

“Do you think he’s in danger?” Thane asked, a hint of incredulity in his voice.

“That I don’t know,” Brad admitted. “But Heath is right, we need to keep a check on him.”

“The guardians will keep him safe,” Heath affirmed, his tone resolute.

“Okay,” Brad said with a firm nod. “Now, I’m going up into the mountains with Ashley and Leif to follow the trail of the deer. We might get some clues from them—perhaps a coral they were being stored in but got loose from. But if nothing else, we’ll try to guide them back down this way.”

“Thanks, Brad.” Thane extended his hand, his gratitude evident despite the tense situation.

“Take care, Thane,” Brad said as he shook his hand, then turned to leave.

Tamara felt a chill run through her as Thane spoke again, his words trailing off thoughtfully, “We are assuming this is about Billy...”

Her blood ran cold at the implication of his words. Was Thane insinuating that this might be about him? Or the guardians? No, she reassured herself, she was reading too much into his words. But the seed of doubt had been planted. The situation was complex, and the motives behind the deer theft remained shrouded in mystery.

She glanced at Heath, wondering if he shared her concerns. His expression was unreadable, but Tamara sensed a similar unease in him.

“We should check in regularly,” Brad said as he nodded his goodbye to Heath and Tamara. “Thanks for your help.”

“You’re welcome,” Tamara said. “And if you have any updates, I’d be grateful.”

“Are you planning on writing an article?” Brad asked warily.

“There is a story here,” Tamara replied.

“There is,” Brad murmured.

“It’s okay,” Heath stepped in. “Tamara is my mate. She knows about shifters, and nothing is going to make it into her article that might cause us trouble.”

Tamara pressed her lips together. It took her off guard with how candid Heath was. How many people in this town knew about shifters, anyway?

It wasn’t important right now, though. She did not want her stories to be censored by the local authorities.

She felt the cynical part of her mind take over as she watched the sheriff and the two guardians. They were obviously on good terms. So what would happen if this was directly related to shifters? Perhaps the deer had been stolen so that shifters could hunt them over the mountain. People did that with guns all the time for sport and pleasure. So why not shifters?

“Bye, Brad.” Heath walked the sheriff to the door and closed it behind him. As he turned around, Thane and Heath exchanged unreadable glances.

After a moment, Heath broke the silence. “Is there anything I can do?” he asked, his voice tinged with concern.

Thane shook his head, a weary look in his eyes. “No. There’s plenty of people here. People who are loyal to Billy.” His words were firm, but Tamara could sense an undercurrent of something else—was it doubt or just exhaustion?

“Do you think any of them could be behind this?” Tamara ventured, trying to gauge Thane’s reaction. “Or volunteers?”

Thane’s response was immediate, his head shaking in a definitive no. However, his troubled expression didn’t quite match the certainty of his words. “Listen, thanks for coming,” he said, his tone hinting at a desire to be left alone.

“Call me if you need me,” Heath offered, his concern for Thane evident.

“I will,” Thane replied, his voice tired. His posture sagged slightly, betraying the weight of the situation on his shoulders.

As they prepared to leave, Tamara observed Thane. He looked tired and drawn, and she suspected his desire for solitude was genuine rather than an attempt to keep them from digging deeper. Or was it? The journalist in her couldn't help but wonder if Thane feared what she might uncover if she stayed to investigate further.

Tamara knew her tendency toward mild paranoia often went hand in hand with her profession. People often had things to hide, and it was her job to unearth those secrets. This was why she gravitated toward feel-good articles. They were straightforward, lacking the complex layers of deceit and intrigue.

But then she remembered why she had come to Bearheart Ridge in the first place—to write a feel-good article about Heath. And he, too, had had something to hide. Something significant, and indeed, something big and furry.

As they stepped outside, the peace of the reserve, now void of arguing people, brought a momentary clarity to Tamara's thoughts. She needed to do her job. And follow the leads wherever they may go.

"How about we grab some food?" Heath suggested as he slid his arm around her shoulders and hugged her close.

"I am starving," she admitted. "But I also want to collapse onto the sofa at Bywater Cottage in front of a roaring fire."

"That can be arranged," Heath let her go as they reached the car. "How about takeout? There's this amazing Italian place in town that does food to go."

"Oh, that sounds so good." She unlocked the car, and they got inside. "I also need to go to the grocery store."

"Then let's do both," he suggested. "I can help carry the groceries to the cottage."

"And then, after we've eaten, we should continue our interview." If Tamara was going to investigate the stolen deer, she needed to get her interview with Heath written first. That was why she was here, she reminded herself, for what seemed the hundredth time.

Heath chuckled. "You didn't get enough from our last one?"

Tamara scoffed. "Of course not. I got a glimpse into your inspiration, and fair enough, I did get to see your personal gallery. But what about your aspirations, your favorite and least favorite techniques, mediums, your least

favorite piece?”

Heath arched his eyebrows. “Noted. Definitely not enough from the last one.”

Tamara guided the car toward town, the engine humming softly as they left the nature reserve behind. The drive was quiet, each lost in their own thoughts about the day’s events. Tamara’s mind raced with questions and theories, while Heath seemed to be processing the situation in his own way.

“Thanks for today, by the way,” Tamara said, breaking the silence. “It means a lot that you shared so much of your life with me.”

Heath glanced at her, a small smile playing on his lips. “Of course. We’re mates, remember?”

Tamara smiled back, feeling a warmth spread through her. “We are mates.”

They soon reached the town and Tamara found a parking spot near the pizza place, and they headed inside. The aroma of freshly baked pizza and simmering sauces filled the air, making Tamara’s stomach rumble.

“I’ll have a large pepperoni, and what about you?” Heath asked as they approached the counter.

“I’m thinking pasta. Maybe the spaghetti carbonara?” Tamara suggested, her mouth watering at the thought.

“Great choice,” Heath agreed, placing their order.

While they waited, they chatted about lighter topics, steering clear of the investigation for the moment. It was a welcome reprieve, however, Tamara was not going to give up on the investigation. But for now, she wanted to enjoy some time getting to know Heath.

At least until they’d eaten.

Once their order was ready, they headed to the local grocery store. Tamara picked up essentials, with Heath helping her choose local items and carrying the heavier bags. It seemed so natural, as if they had done this a thousand times already when they had been strangers only a day or so ago.

Back at the car, Heath loaded the groceries into the trunk while Tamara secured the takeout in the back seat. The drive to Bywater Cottage was short, and soon they were unloading their purchases.

In the kitchen, Tamara busied herself putting away groceries and dishing up their takeout. The aroma of pizza and pasta filled the cozy space, and she

was more aware than ever of her empty stomach. It had been a long and busy day, both physically and mentally, without nearly enough food or downtime.

Meanwhile, Heath kneeled by the fireplace, expertly arranging the logs and kindling. Soon, a crackling fire lit up the room, casting a warm, inviting glow, and raising the temperature comfortably.

They settled down on the sofa, plates of food on their laps, the fire's warmth enveloping them. It was a picture of domestic bliss, a stark contrast to the day's earlier events. For a moment, they simply enjoyed each other's company.

But as they ate, her hunger for food was replaced by a hunger for her mate.

In the quiet of the cottage, she wanted nothing more than for them to explore each other's bodies.

And when she looked at him and their eyes met, she knew that was exactly what he wanted, too.

Chapter Fifteen – Heath

Heath and Tamara lounged on the plush sofa, their bodies pressed together as they sipped from glasses of wine. They both shared bits of each other's meals, and both the pizza and the pasta were absolutely delicious. The fire crackled and danced in the hearth, casting warm, flickering light over their faces, and making the room cozy. As darkness settled outside, it cloaked the cottage in an intimate atmosphere, heightening the connection between them.

"I should add more wood to the fire," Heath stood up and crouched down in front of the hearth. As he placed more wood into the fire, he was acutely aware of Tamara's gaze on him, sensing her attention in a way that made them feel perfectly attuned to each other.

"Do you like what you see?" he teased over his shoulder, poking the fire expertly.

Tamara chuckled from the sofa. "I have seen better views," she quipped playfully.

Heath glanced at her over his shoulder, his expression softening. "I have not," he responded sincerely, watching as a blush crept onto her cheeks.

"Have you ever wanted to do anything else other than paint?" she asked, attempting to steer the conversation back to safer ground.

Heath added two logs to the fire, quickly prodding them into place with a poker before setting it aside. Turning to face her, he answered simply, "No."

"Wow, this article is going to be either very short or I'm going to have to embellish your words," Tamara mused, her lips curling into a playful smile.

Heath held out his hand to her, beckoning her to join him by the fire. She obliged, settling down onto the thick rug beside him. "Well, you asked the wrong question," he said.

"I did?" she asked with a tilt of her head.

"You asked if I ever wanted to do anything other than paint, and the answer is no. But I have had other jobs," he explained.

"Do tell," she encouraged, her eyes locked on his.

"Anything and everything," he replied, his voice holding a touch of pride. "I didn't want my parents supporting me, even though they offered to. They

were the ones who turned the barn into a studio.”

“So, you worked any job you could to support yourself?” she asked, impressed by his determination.

“Yes, being a provider is in my DNA.” Heath’s hand found its way to Tamara’s face, cupping her cheek gently as his thumb brushed across her soft skin.

Tamara’s breath hitched at the touch of his palm against her cheek and Heath swallowed hard as desire flared in his chest.

He wanted her. And when she leaned into his hand, her eyes fluttering closed as she savored the sensation of his touch, he was certain she wanted him, too. Heath’s fingers trailed down her jawline, his touch feather-light and tantalizing. Tamara lifted her head and leaned forward. Heath licked his lips as if he could already taste her. Then, slowly, their lips pressed together in a questioning kiss.

They were in uncharted territory. They hardly knew each other. But the need to be together, to make love, and consummate their relationship, was overwhelming.

Part of him wondered if they should wait. Perhaps the excitement of the day’s revelations had clouded their judgment. But another part of him, a primal, wild part, urged him to take her now and never let her go.

Tamara moaned softly as their kiss deepened, her hands finding their way to his shoulders as she leaned into him. She slid her hand down his chest, following the contours of his body as she moved lower, much lower. He gasped as she slid her hand between his thighs and cupped his hardness in her hand. How he wished he was naked, and her skin was against his skin.

He nipped her neck as he pulled her sweater up and slid his hand under her shirt. With a swift moment of his wrist, he nudged the cup of her bra down and cupped her swollen breast in his hand. She squeezed his hardness as he tweaked her nipple between his thumb and finger, and she gasped, her breath warm on his neck.

Damn, he wanted her. He wanted her naked in his arms. He wanted to bury himself inside her and take her until she cried out his name.

Heath slipped his hand out from under her clothes and tugged at the hem of her sweater. Tamara obediently lifted her arms, and he pulled it over her head, tossing it unceremoniously to the floor.

Her shirt was next. It didn't stand a chance against his eager hands. Then he leaned back, drinking in the sight of her breasts still hidden by her lacy bra.

Tamara unclasped her bra and slid it off.

"You're so beautiful, Tamara," he whispered as his fingers trailed down her shoulders, her arms, her collarbone, and lightly over her breasts.

Tamara's breath caught in her throat as his fingers lightly grazed her nipples.

He leaned down and took her nipple in his mouth, sucking gently on it as Tamara's hands found their way into his hair. She moaned softly and he gently bit down on the hardening peak.

Tamara arched her back, and he moved to the other nipple, nipping at it gently as he ran his hand down over her soft belly, then lower to cup her mound.

She covered his hand with hers and pressed herself into him, writhing rhythmically as her breath quickened. Spurred on, he kissed his way down her belly and unbuttoned her jeans, kissing her hipbones as he pulled them over her thighs.

Heath knew what she wanted, and he was going to take his time and worship every inch of her body until she begged him to take her.

He slid her jeans down and off her feet, then slid his hands up the soft skin of her legs, stroking her thighs, teasing her flesh with his fingertips.

Tamara groaned with need as he neared her mound, but he stopped just as his fingers brushed against her. She whimpered; her hips raised off the rug as she offered herself to his touch.

But he didn't want to touch. He wanted to taste.

He pushed her legs apart and moved in between them, kissing her inner thighs as he worked his way up to her most sensitive flesh.

She shivered as he blew on her heated flesh and then trembled as he lowered his head and licked her with the flat of his tongue. Her fingers tangled in his hair as he covered her with his mouth and began to gently suck.

Heath flicked his tongue over her mound, teasing her as he slipped first one, then two fingers inside of her.

She arched her back as he thrust his fingers in and out of her, moving his head back and forth as he devoured her.

Her hips bucked against his mouth as her breath quickened and she moaned softly as her orgasm built. Heath smiled as he felt her tighten around his fingers and he savored the sweet taste of her as her body shuddered with the intensity of her release.

He rolled her onto her side and moved behind her, kissing her neck as his hardness pressed against her back. Her breath caught in her throat as he reached down between her legs and stroked her mound with his right hand, teasing her nipples with his left, as he ignited her desire once more.

Then she turned to face him and slid her hand down to unbuckle his belt. As one, they removed his clothes, her fingers exploring every inch of his body as his flesh was exposed. With a sigh, she cupped her hand around his hard length and stroked him.

He'd never experienced anything like it. The same electrical current that passed between them when they touched seemed to dance across his sensitive skin.

"I want you," he whispered against her ear as he turned her onto her back and eased her thighs wider apart.

Tamara smiled up at him, her hand stroking his face as he guided himself into her slick heat. He slid into her, slowly and gently, pausing for a moment when he was fully buried inside of her.

His lips were against her ear as he began to move, his breath quickening as he thrust into her again and again. She sucked his nipple into her mouth, her tongue swirling around and around as she teased him. When she tugged the taut bud between her teeth, he nearly exploded inside her. But he wanted this first time to last longer, and he fought for control.

He circled his hips, stretching her inner walls as her breathing quickened. Then he slowed, inching himself in and out of her as he slipped his hand around her and held her close.

He'd never felt so complete. She was the half of him that had been missing his whole life. And now she was here in his arms.

The thought overwhelmed him, his desire to feel her come around him too much.

He pulled his hips back, and then thrust into her hard, impaling her completely. She moaned and dug her fingers into his back as she urged him on.

His thrusts became more insistent, as her moans became more desperate. Her inner muscles tightened around him. She was so close.

He reached between them and stroked her mound as he thrust into her. She tensed, and her inner muscles rippled around him. He couldn't wait any longer. Her moans, her scent and the feel of her tight around his shaft were just too much.

He let out a low guttural howl, as if a primal part of him had been set free. Heath jerked into her, filling her with his seed as he came.

Tamara wrapped her legs around him, urging him deeper, harder as her orgasm claimed her.

Breathless and sated, he moved to lie beside her on the rug and reached for the blanket from the arm of the sofa. In one swift movement, he covered them with the soft fabric, holding his mate close as she trembled in his arms.

Heath stroked her back, soothing her as her breathing gradually slowed and she lay with her head on his chest, her eyes half-closed as they watched the flickering flames.

It was a magical moment. One he would remember and savor forever.

Although he hoped there would be many more moments like these. Hours of making love to his mate. Of hearing her cry out his name. Of hearing her whimper with need.

Need for him. And only him.

"I don't think this is what my editor had in mind when he asked me to come and do this interview," she murmured against his chest.

He laughed, a low rumble as he said, "And I don't think this will be making its way into any of your articles either."

She chuckled and stroked his chest, her fingers circling his nipple, which tightened into a taut bud. "Oh, I don't know. I am sure there are plenty of women who fantasize about you."

"They can fantasize all they want," he told her. "But you are the only one for me."

"It all seems so surreal," she murmured. "But I feel the same way."

"We are bonded together forever," he told her.

And nothing can keep us apart, his bear added.

As Heath gazed at the fire, he only hoped that was true.

The events of the day crowded into his mind. Someone was up to no good. That much was obvious. But why?

Who were they trying to hurt? Surely not Billy.

His arm tightened protectively around his mate.

Until they figured out the answer, he didn't want to let her go.

Chapter Sixteen – Tamara

Tamara slowly woke up, stretching in the warm bed. Her hand fell to the side, expecting emptiness, but instead, it encountered something hard and firm. Heath. A smile spread across her face as she snuggled against him, breathing in his musky scent. He stirred, turning over to face her, and slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her close.

“Good morning,” Heath murmured, his voice rumbling deep in his chest like a contented bear.

“Morning,” Tamara whispered, unable to keep the smile from her face. She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his, feeling the rough stubble on his cheeks. She trailed her fingers down his chest, the coarse hair under her fingertips sending shivers down her spine. Their kiss deepened, passion flaring between them, their connection undeniable.

At that moment, the shrill sound of her phone ringing pierced the air, shattering the intimacy. Tamara groaned in frustration, reluctantly reaching for the offending device. She glowered at the name appearing on the screen. “It’s my editor,” she muttered, her annoyance evident.

“You should take it.” Heath, ever understanding, sat up and gently kissed her shoulder before sliding out of bed. “I’ll go make coffee.”

“Okay,” she sighed, watching as he grabbed his clothes from the floor, muscles rippling with every movement. With a tantalizing wink over his shoulder, he strode out of the room, leaving her to deal with her editor.

Tamara tapped her phone screen and said, “Hello, Frank.”

“Hey, Tamara, how are you doing down there in the back of beyond?” Frank asked, his tone light and teasing.

“It’s more *up* there in the back of beyond,” Tamara corrected, finding herself grinning despite the interruption. “You should see the mountains; they’re incredible.”

“I can tell by the sound of your voice that you’re enjoying yourself,” Frank replied, a note of amusement in his voice.

“I am, but that’s not to say I’m not working hard.” Tamara felt a twinge of guilt as she recalled the night spent tangled in Heath’s embrace. But life

wasn't meant to be all work and no play. She had gathered most of what she needed for her article on Heath. All that was left was to pull her notes together and actually write it.

"I'm not accusing you of slacking," Frank said lightly. "But I am offering you a bigger story."

"You are?" Tamara tried to keep her tone neutral, fearing someone had tipped off her editor about the mysterious disappearance of the deer herd from Bear Creek Nature Reserve.

"Yes, if you want it," Frank confirmed. "Now, I know you don't mind writing small-town pieces...but since you're in the area."

"What's the story?" Tamara asked, rising from the bed and crossing to the window. The light across the mountains was breathtaking, painting the landscape in hues of gold and pink. She wished she had Heath's talent for capturing such beauty on canvas. Maybe he could teach her—or she could try her hand at photography.

"We've had a tip-off. The day you arrived there was a rescue in the mountains. A group of hikers got trapped down a shaft."

She could hear the sound of paper being shuffled from the other end of the phone.

"That's right," Tamara said, her eyes drifting to the door. Could Heath hear this conversation with his super senses? Did it matter if he did?

"Well, I have been given evidence that the rescue team who found them set the whole thing up," Frank stated.

Tamara's mind took a moment to understand what Frank had just said, but once it did, she felt her peace evaporate. "What?" Tamara snapped down the phone, her heart racing.

"I know," Frank said, his voice filled with disbelief. "I did some digging, and it seems they are quite the local heroes."

"They are," Tamara confirmed, putting her fingers to her temples. A wave of nausea rolled over her as she tried to process the information. "So, I want you to investigate them. I want to know if they set up this rescue, did they set up more? Have they hoodwinked the town of Bear Creek?"

No! she wanted to shout down the phone. That was a lie. But she was putting her trust, her faith, and her career in a man she hardly knew.

"Tamara?" Frank asked, cutting into her thoughts.

“I’m here,” she replied, swallowing hard.

“Look, I know it’s not the kind of article you like to write...” Frank began.

“No,” Tamara interrupted him. “I’d like the story.” If something was going on here, then she wanted the truth. Because if Heath and the other guardians had lied about this, and other rescues, maybe he had lied about her being his mate. And even if he hadn’t, she knew she couldn’t be with someone who would live a life like that.

Her heart ached and her stomach hollowed as she glanced at the bed where she and Heath had made love. It had felt so real. Her feelings for him felt real. They were mates, she was sure they were. But what if she was a fool? What if she had allowed herself to be taken in by a conman because it’s what she wanted? A man who would love her without question for the rest of her life.

“Okay, I’ll send over the information. Put the other story on hold if you have to,” Frank said.

“Thank you,” Tamara whispered, her voice barely audible as she hung up the phone. Her stomach churned with a mixture of dread and uncertainty. She pressed her hand against her chest, trying to will away the sharp pain that accompanied the thought of Heath betraying her trust.

Tamara took a deep breath, shaking off her doubts as she got dressed. She couldn’t let herself be consumed by suspicion—not when there were still so many unanswered questions. As she pulled on her jeans and slipped into a comfortable sweater, she pondered the situation. Did she truly believe that the Bear Creek Guardians set up the rescue of the hikers? No, she didn’t. Call it intuition like Heath did, but deep down, she was certain someone was setting them up—perhaps in the same way they’d tried to incriminate Billy. But who? And why?

She aimed to get answers. Hell, it was now her job to get answers. Her editor had asked her to write a story on the rescue and about any possible wrongdoing by the Bear Creek Guardians. Not that he actually used that word. She gnawed at her lower lip. The question she had to answer now was how much she was going to share with Heath. Nothing. If she was going to do her job properly, it would be better if she kept the information to herself. Telling Heath might cause him to close up again or might change any answers he gave her.

With a sigh, Tamara finished dressing and went downstairs. The smell of

fresh coffee greeted her, but Heath was nowhere to be found. Panic surged through her chest. Had he heard her talking on the phone and left?

Determined to put the mating bond to the test, Tamara closed her eyes. If Heath was here, could she sense him? When they touched, their bodies were completely attuned. Did that mean she could sense him even when she couldn't see him? Tamara relaxed her mind and pushed out her senses, the hairs on the back of her neck tingling as she thought of Heath. She imagined stroking his skin, feeling the electrical current pass between them and the heat of his flesh. The warmth of his lips on hers. A smile played across her lips. He was in the backyard.

Tamara went to the kitchen, poured two cups of coffee from the steaming coffee maker, and headed outside. There he was, walking along the banks of the creek, deep in conversation with someone on his phone, his face serious. Who was he talking to? Had the guardians been tipped off about the accusation?

“Hey,” she whispered and held up a cup of coffee.

Heath turned, his expression shifting from seriousness to warmth upon seeing her. “Morning,” he mouthed and walked toward her as he listened to the person speaking on the other end of the phone. “Thank you.” He leaned forward and kissed her cheek as he took the coffee cup from her.

Tamara turned away from him and stared out across the fast-flowing creek, trying not to eavesdrop on Heath's conversation. But she sure would like to know who he was talking to.

“Okay, Thane,” Heath said, answering her question. “I'll join you in an hour.” Then he ended the call and put his phone in his pocket.

“Everything okay?” Tamara asked, sipping her coffee as she tried to keep her voice casual. Heath had spoken to Thane briefly last night for an update, but there had been no further news on the sheriff's department's investigation. One of the other guardians had spent the night staking out Billy's house to make sure he was okay. While two others had spent the night patrolling the nature reserve.

Which kind of proved their innocence. Didn't it? Unless they were keeping an eye on him for some other reason.

Tamara pushed the thought out of her head. She'd dealt with enough nefarious people to be fairly confident when she judged someone.

“Just Thane giving an update after he spoke to Brad this morning,” Heath answered, as he came to stand next to her.

“Any news?” Tamara glanced sideways at him. The corners of his mouth were pinched, and he stared into the depths of the creek as if contemplating his answer.

“Brad ran a check on Billy’s financials,” Heath said, his eyes staying on the water.

“And I’m guessing he found something.” Tamara slipped her arm around Heath and leaned into him.

“Billy received a large payment into his personal bank account. He had no explanation for how it got there when Brad questioned him on it, but it obviously supports Reginald’s theory that Billy stole the deer and was well paid.” Heath shook his head. “None of it makes sense. For one, it’s definitely not something Billy would do. But if he were paid, why go to all the trouble of stealing the deer only to dump them in the mountains? Brad said that they hadn’t found any sort of holding area up there.”

“You don’t think he had a change of heart? Like Reginald said?” Tamara asked.

Heath shook his head. “If he did, why not just put them back into the reserve and save on any sort of suspicion? It just doesn’t make sense,” he repeated.

“No, it does not,” she murmured. “It sure looks as if someone has a vendetta against Billy or the nature reserve.”

And maybe the Bear Creek Guardians, too.

Her phone pinged, and she jumped guiltily. She wanted to tell Heath about the phone call with her editor, and the accusations leveled at the Bear Creek Guardians, but she held back.

When she read through the information her editor had sent over, she’d figure out what to do. Perhaps something would be clearer when she had more information.

“Are you okay?” Heath was staring at her, and she realized she’d zoned out.

Tamara hesitated, considering how much to reveal. In the end, she decided to tread carefully. “I just have a lot on my mind,” she confessed, looking down at her coffee. “Work stuff. You know, the interview and everything.

Then this with Billy. I'm going to do some digging around."

"Anything I can help with?" Heath offered.

She shook her head. "No, I've got it under control. But thanks for offering."

"Well," he began, draining his coffee cup. "I need to go."

"You're meeting with Thane?" she asked casually.

"Yes, we're all getting together. I haven't had a chance to tell the others about the cave paintings yet. And then we're going to go and locate the deer herd." He wrapped his arms around her and held her close.

"Brad had no luck finding them?" she asked.

"No, he found their tracks, so he is certain that the herd is on the mountain, but they had to turn back before they found them," Heath explained.

"But the Bear Creek Guardians can find them." Tamara looked into his eyes, searching for the truth as she asked, "Just like you found the hikers?"

"Something like that," Heath said evasively as he brushed his lips against hers.

"I'll see you later?" she asked, looking deep into his eyes. She just couldn't imagine him trying to deceive her.

"Try to keep me away," he said as he took a step backward. "Why don't you come over to my house tonight? I'd like you to meet the others. And we can finish up your interview."

"I'll see you tonight, then." Tamara watched him walk away. Only then did she take her phone out of her pocket and open the email from her boss.

She quickly scanned the information. It wasn't extensive—some news article snippets, a nature survey on the area, and...bank payments. Tamara covered her mouth as she read the same sentence three times to make sure she understood correctly.

Someone had paid a large sum of money into the bank account of one of the hikers on the day of the rescue. Not incriminating on its own. But her editor had proof that the account belonged to Thane. At least that was the name on the account.

Worse. The same account had paid out another amount the day after. Was that the money Billy had received?

This was a story she needed to unravel. But would the truth tear apart not only her relationship with Heath, but the Bear Creek Guardians themselves?

Chapter Seventeen – Heath

Heath walked down the road away from Bywater Cottage, his mind still lingering on Tamara. He could feel her presence, even as the distance grew between them. His skin could still recall the touch of her hands, the warmth of her body.

He wanted nothing more than to stay, especially after her phone call with her editor had left her seeming a bit unsettled. But he had commitments, a duty to the Bear Creek Guardians, and those they protected. And right now, that was Billy.

As he walked, the events of the previous day replayed in his mind—the chaos at the nature reserve, the allegations against Billy, and the mounting suspicion that someone had deliberately framed an innocent man. It gnawed at him, this injustice, this attack on one of their own.

Don't worry, his bear rumbled, its voice a comforting presence in the back of his mind. We will prove Billy's innocence.

And when we do, they will pay, Heath vowed, anger simmering beneath his calm exterior.

And the sooner they got to Bearheart Ridge, the sooner he could act. He needed to speak with the other guardians and come up with a way forward. He walked a little way off the road and the air around him crackled as he shifted. In a blink, the man was gone, replaced by the bear. His form was massive, powerful, and just as committed to the oath of their ancestors.

His bear broke into a run, moving effortlessly across the landscape. Heath's senses were heightened this morning, every scent, every sound was more vivid.

Perhaps claiming his mate had awoken a more primal part of him. Or maybe it was love itself that made everything so intense this morning.

He raced over the lower slopes of Bearheart Ridge, the ground beneath him a blur. He crossed fields, his paws thudding against the earth, then plunged into the dense pine forest, the familiar scents enveloping him.

As he climbed the steep trail toward his home, the weight of his human concerns seemed to fall away, if only for a moment. Here, he was just a bear,

a creature of the wild.

But even as he embraced his animal nature, Heath couldn't completely let go of his human worries. The need to protect his community, to stand up for Billy, to be there for Tamara—it all lingered in the back of his mind, a constant reminder of the responsibilities he carried. Just as it always had.

And he had no complaints. This was his life, and it was a life he loved.

As he reached the top of the trail and neared his home, Heath slowed, his massive form moving more deliberately now. He paused, taking a moment to simply breathe, to feel the warm sun on his back.

He looked out across the valley below, at the silver thread of the creek, the houses dotted across the landscape, and the town of Bear Creek itself. Just as his forefathers once had.

A surge of energy coursed through him. This was his world, a world he loved and would fight to protect.

With a last glance toward Bywater Cottage and his mate, Heath prepared to shift back, to return to the world of man. But for a moment, he savored these last moments of freedom, the wild heart of the bear beating strong within him.

Once the moment had passed, he shifted back into his human form, the change as natural as breathing.

Let's go join the others, his bear said, eager to catch up on any news.

Heath hurried toward Thane's house, where he could sense the other Bear Creek Guardians were gathered. As he approached, a sudden, inexplicable sense of foreboding washed over him. He paused, his senses heightened, scanning the surroundings for any sign of danger. Was it the creature? The same one that had been haunting his thoughts? But as quickly as it came, the feeling vanished. He took a deep breath to steady himself and opened the door to Thane's house.

Inside, the atmosphere was tense. The other guardians were gathered in Thane's kitchen, their expressions grim.

Thane looked up as Heath entered. "Great, we're all here now," he said, a note of relief in his voice.

"Is anyone watching over Billy?" Heath asked, accepting a cup of coffee from Sable.

"Billy is back at the nature reserve," Leif replied. "Ashley's there with

him, so he's safe."

"Which frees us up to go and track down the deer and take them back to the reserve," Thane said.

"That's our plan?" Heath asked, sipping his coffee. "And what about these payments Billy received?" he continued.

"Brad is onto that," Cormac chimed in. "He's trying to trace the bank account..."

Thane paused, his gaze shifting to Sable, who was holding Summer on her hip. Heath noticed the change in Thane's demeanor. "What's wrong?" he asked, a sense of unease creeping up on him.

"The bank account is in Thane's name," Sable revealed, her voice tinged with worry.

Heath clenched his fists, his mind racing. "What is going on here?" he demanded.

Thane shrugged, his expression one of genuine bewilderment. "I have no idea. And there's little we can do for now. Except go get the deer and give Billy some relief. He's worried sick about them."

"Before we go," Heath began, holding the attention of everyone in the kitchen, "there's something I need to tell you."

All eyes turned to Heath.

"Go on," Thane urged.

"When I went into the mountains with Tamara to show her the cave paintings, we found something," Heath said, his voice carrying a weight of significance.

"What?" Thane asked, leaning in slightly.

"In the cave...at the back, there had been a cave-in. I guess the heavy rain washed away the debris that had built up..." Heath ran a hand through his hair, feeling the intensity of the expectant gazes fixed on him.

"There's another chamber?" Leif asked.

"Yes, another chamber," Heath confirmed, feeling an internal struggle.

Why is this so hard? he asked his bear.

Because it involves the creature. And that impacts us all, his bear answered. They tried not to look too hard at Leif. He hadn't talked about it for a while, but they all knew that he was the only one who could still sense

it.

“And what was there?” Cormac asked cautiously, sensing the tension in Heath’s demeanor.

“More cave paintings,” Heath replied, his voice steady despite the turmoil inside. “Only this was different. It seemed more important, even than the others. The center focus of a huge creature.”

“The creature?” Leif asked quickly, leaning back as he took in the revelation. “So, our ancestors saw it, too.”

“Or they could have sensed it. And painted what they *thought* it looked like,” Stellan interjected, always the voice of reason.

“Perhaps,” Heath acknowledged. “But I thought you should all know.”

“Okay, when this is over, we should go and look at them,” Thane said, locking eyes with Heath. “Have you felt the creature?” His gaze was searching, as if trying to gauge Heath’s reaction.

Heath shook his head in response. “No.” Then his brow creased, a flicker of doubt crossing his face.

“Are you sure?” Tavish asked, picking up on Heath’s hesitation.

“There was an instant just now before I came inside...but then it was gone, and I can’t be sure it was even there,” Heath admitted, his confusion evident.

“Keep alert,” Thane commanded, standing up decisively. “All of you. But for now, let’s see if we can’t bring those deer home.”

Heath stood up and left and the other guardians followed him out, each carrying a sense of purpose. Thorn paused to kiss Sable’s cheek and dropped a gentle kiss on Summer’s head before joining the others outside.

Together, they headed along the road toward the trail leading into the mountains. As they reached a secluded spot, without a word, they shifted into their bear forms, and then sprinted off into the mountains, powerful and swift. They followed the same trail Heath had taken with Tamara, but their focus was different this time. When they reached the deer tracks, they followed them intently, their heightened senses tuned to the task at hand.

Leif led the way, his bear moving with a sureness that spoke of deep familiarity with the terrain. Heath and the others followed, spreading out their senses in a concerted effort to locate the herd.

I think I sense them, Heath’s bear murmured.

Me, too, Heath agreed.

Suddenly, Leif's bear bristled and cut away from the trail, tearing through the forest up a sharp incline. The others followed without hesitation, keeping a swift pace while being mindful of their surroundings.

They came to the edge of the tree line and slowed down. Leif had led them true. The scent of the deer was strong in the air, and before long, they could see the herd of deer. They would have been easy to miss to the untrained eye, with their small stature and dark colors. They were clearly aware of the bears as well, all having got to their feet and looking around, scenting the air.

Without having to communicate, the guardians crouched into a low posture and kept their distance. Four of the bears moved to get behind the deer, while Heath and Thane stayed on the lower side of the mountain, ready to guide them when the others caused them to move.

Once everyone was in place, Leif and the others began to push forward, applying gentle pressure on the herd, while Thane and Heath worked together, not unlike sheepdogs, to shepherd the herd safely down the mountain, avoiding any creeks and streams, aiming for the wildlife reserve.

It was fairly slow going getting the herd to stay together and move in the right direction through the trees, but once they moved lower and onto the more open foothills of the mountains, they made much better progress. They made sure to take a wide berth of the town to avoid any people, and eventually, Tavish went on ahead to make sure any roads were clear when they had to make a crossing.

Heath could feel tiredness begin to creep in—the task required their full attention at all times. If they let just one animal slip by them, not only would they have to go track it down later, but there was a risk that the whole herd would bolt and follow, and then there would be no telling where they would end up.

Not a moment too soon, the nature reserve came into view.

As they approached the nature reserve, Thane broke away from the group, running faster ahead.

He's going to open the gate, Heath's bear observed.

Yes, soon the herd will be back where they belong, Heath thought with satisfaction.

By this point, the deer must have realized where they were and took less

and less persuasion to move in the right direction. The guardians could see Thane opening the gate for them, and the deer began trotting on their own toward the pasture, a big ball of brown fur and white spots.

The bears kept near, making sure that every last animal headed inside, Thane keeping far out of the way of them. Once they were all in, Thane closed the gate, securing it behind them.

They were home! One less thing to worry about.

The guardians all shifted into their human forms and watched from a distance as the herd settled back into familiar territory, a sense of accomplishment washing over them.

“Let’s go find Billy and tell him the good news,” Leif said, slapping Thane on the back.

Thane nodded in agreement and brushed his hand across his eyes. “I wish I could clear his name completely. This is so unfair.”

“Hey, we will,” Heath assured his friend.

“How can you be so sure?” Thane asked. “We do not know who is behind this and why.”

“But we know it’s not true, which means that Brad will find the proof he needs,” Heath insisted.

“And until then, we’re all tainted by this.” Thane raked his hand through his hair. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” Cormac said. “You have nothing to be sorry for. And we’re all angry about this.”

“Do you think it’s Reginald?” Leif asked.

“I don’t know,” Thane answered. “I just don’t know. And even if it was, what did he hope to gain from it?”

“We’ll figure it out,” Tavish assured him.

“But right now, we should celebrate this small win,” Stellan told their leader.

“You’re right,” Thane agreed. “Let’s go find Billy and tell him the good news.”

Thane took out his phone and dialed Ashley. “Hey there, is everything all right?” Thane’s voice was tinged with concern.

“Yes, all good. Well, as good as it can be. Billy is subdued, to say the

least,” came Ashley’s reply.

Thane nodded, his expression softening slightly. “We do have some good news. We found the deer and brought them back. Why don’t you bring Billy here? They are back where they belong in the northwest pasture.”

“Good news!” Ashley echoed, a note of relief in her voice. “Have you called Brad yet?”

“No,” Thane replied. “I’ll let him know now.”

“Okay, I’ll see you soon,” Ashley said, before Thane ended the call.

Thane then made another call, this time to the sheriff. “Hey, Brad. We’ve found the deer and returned them to the sanctuary.” Thane paused, listening intently to Brad’s response. Heath, trying to pick up on the conversation, could only read Thane’s reactions but not hear Brad’s words.

“And any news on the bank account?” Thane inquired, his voice hopeful yet apprehensive.

The change in Thane’s expression made it clear that the news wasn’t positive. “Thanks, Brad. Speak soon,” he said, ending the call with a heavy sigh.

As the guardians stood there, their attention was drawn back along the path to the main reserve building. Billy was there with Ashley, his eyes wide with disbelief and relief as he saw the returned herd. A moment later, he let out a laugh, a sound of pure joy that quickly morphed into heaving sobs of relief and gratitude. Ashley, ever compassionate, slipped her arm around him, offering comfort with gentle strokes on his back.

Watching this scene, Heath felt a surge of determination. The sight of Billy, so overwhelmed and vulnerable, ignited a fire within him. He was gripped by an unshakable need to prove Billy’s innocence, as well as Thane’s. This injustice could not stand, and Heath knew they would stop at nothing to uncover the truth and clear their names. They were the guardians, after all, and they would do whatever they could to protect everyone in the town under their care.

Chapter Eighteen – Tamara

Tamara, with a sense of purpose, grabbed her purse, notebook, laptop, and keys as she left Bywater Cottage. Her mind was set on writing the story that would vindicate the Bear Creek Guardians. They were the good guys, wrongly accused, and she was determined to prove it. The thought that someone with money and resources was trying to smear their name fueled her resolve. Such people could cover their tracks with the right tech team, but she wouldn't let that deter her. First, she planned to do some research in the museum archives. If the Bear Creek Guardians were indeed bound to an ancient oath, and if there was historical evidence of their existence, it would lend credence to their story. And after witnessing Heath's transformation, how could she not believe in the oath?

The impossible had become possible in her eyes. Believing in an ancient oath seemed far easier now that she had seen a man shift into a bear. It had shattered her perception of reality, opening her mind to new possibilities.

She drove into town, heading toward the museum along Main Street. However, as she passed The Bear Creek Tribune's offices, an instinctive pull drew her there. This place, she thought, might hold the key to proving the Guardians' innocence.

Parking her car, Tamara crossed the street and hurried to the Tribune's door. She pushed it open and was met by the inquiring look of Jonas Clark, the reporter she had seen at the rescue center taking notes on the situation.

"Hi there, I'm Tamara Delainy," she introduced herself, her voice confident.

"Are you now?" Jonas replied, his tone carrying a hint of recognition. Tamara cracked a smile, feeling a sense of camaraderie with another journalist.

"Yes. I am in town to write an article on Heath Milner," she explained, handing him her card.

"I heard about the interview," Jonas said as he accepted her card, extending his hand. "I'm Jonas Clark."

"I saw you at the rescue a couple of days ago," Tamara replied, acknowledging their previous encounter.

“Ah, yes,” Jonas nodded, his gaze studying her closely, perhaps trying to gauge her angle or intentions.

“I wondered if it was possible to look at the newspaper archives,” she continued, her request clear. “I’d like some background information on Heath. You know, the local artist angle.”

“I see,” Jonas said, glancing toward the door that led farther into the building. Tamara could sense his hesitation. Perhaps it was by appointment only. Or were there things in there that the town liked to keep secret, like the fact that bear shifters lived here?

“Will that be possible?” Tamara pushed. She knew the archives could hold valuable information, pieces of the puzzle she was trying to solve.

Jonas glanced down at her card again, his expression thoughtful. After a moment’s consideration, he looked up and said, “Sure. Why not?”

Relief washed over Tamara. Access to the archives could provide her with the historical context she needed to support her story. She imagined that any information here would be more recent and relative than anything she would likely find in the museum. It was a step closer to uncovering the truth, to proving the Guardians’ innocence. She followed Jonas across the foyer and through the door leading to steps down to a basement area. As soon as she stepped inside, she inhaled the smell of old newspapers and felt at home.

“Is there anything specific you are looking for?” Jonas asked as they went down the steps.

“I would like to check out all the articles on Heath. Perhaps any relating to his childhood, family, perhaps some information on Bearheart Ridge. I hear his family has lived there for generations,” Tamara said.

“They have,” Jonas said and studied her closely. “Has your sudden interest in the folks up at Bearheart Ridge got anything to do with the accusations being leveled at Billy over at the Bear Creek Nature Reserve?”

“I have heard the rumors,” Tamara said.

“And you want to dig up some dirt?” Jonas said with distaste.

“Okay, I am not here to dig up the dirt.” Tamara’s eyes narrowed. “Can we talk off the record?”

Jonas smirked. “That depends.”

“I am here to write a piece on Heath, and we’ve been working...closely together.” She cleared her throat. “But I also know about the accusations

being made around the nature reserve, and I hope to help put things right. If I can go through the archives and just get a good picture of them, and their history in helping this town, I think it will really help put any article I write about Heath into a lighter and stronger context.”

“Well, they do have a history,” Jonas confirmed. “As did their parents before them, and their parents before them.”

Jonas led Tamara through the basement, lined with shelves holding decades of Bear Creek history. “Can I see?” Tamara asked, her eagerness palpable.

“Sure, as long as you’re not here to do a hatchet job on them,” Jonas replied, his tone indicating a mix of caution and curiosity.

“I don’t do hatchet jobs,” Tamara stated bluntly. Her journalistic integrity was something she held in high regard. “I promise you; I want to write an article in celebration of them.” She kept to herself the part about proving their innocence in the nature reserve incident.

“A celebration of the Bear Creek Guardians,” Jonas echoed, a hint of amusement in his voice.

“You don’t think it’s a good idea?” Tamara inquired, noticing his chuckle.

“You’re welcome to check out the archives,” Jonas said, gesturing to the rows of filing cabinets and shelves filled with old newspapers. “But if you want the real story about the guardians, you should ask around. Interview the people in this town to get a fresh outlook, instead of regurgitating what’s already been written.”

Tamara considered his suggestion. The idea of gathering firsthand accounts from the locals would certainly be much stronger than some dusty old articles. It would provide a dynamic, human element to her story, something that mere records and old articles couldn’t capture, but it could take a bit of time.

“That’s a great idea,” Tamara admitted. “But first, I’d like to see what’s been documented here.”

Jonas nodded, seeming to respect her approach. “Fair enough. I’ll leave you to it then. If you need anything, just holler.”

“Thank you.” Tamara watched as he ascended the steps back to the main floor. Alone with the archives, she took a deep breath, savoring the musty scent of history that surrounded her. She began to browse through the files,

pulling out newspapers and documents, immersing herself in the past of Bear Creek and its guardians.

As she delved into the archives, she uncovered articles about the guardians and their long-standing connection to Bear Creek, and various accounts of the guardians' deeds over the years. The deeper she dug, the more she understood the legacy and the respect the guardians commanded in the community.

It was clear that the guardians had been an integral part of Bear Creek for generations, woven into the very fabric of the town. Their actions, often heroic and selfless, were chronicled in numerous articles, painting a picture of a lineage dedicated to protecting and serving their community.

Tamara scribbled notes, circling dates and names, and connecting dots. It wasn't just about proving their innocence now; it was about showcasing a legacy that deserved recognition and respect. She took out her phone and snapped a photo of a newspaper article with a picture of the last generation of Bear Creek Guardians.

She zoomed in on the image on her phone, squinting as she tried to identify Heath's parents. It was intriguing to see them and to think that one day, there would be a similar photo of her and Heath, and the other current Bear Creek Guardians and their mates.

Once Tamara had gathered enough material for her article, she collected her belongings and prepared to leave the archives. But Jonas's suggestion still lingered in her mind. To truly capture the essence of the Bear Creek Guardians, she should talk to the people who had witnessed their acts of bravery and kindness firsthand.

"Thank you!" Tamara called out as she crossed the foyer and headed to the door.

"I look forward to reading your article," Jonas called out.

"I'll send you a copy," Tamara promised.

As she stepped out into the street, her stomach rumbled, reminding her she hadn't eaten all day. A visit to the local diner was what she needed. There she could sit and read through her notes and formulate her article. Then she'd ask around to see if anyone would be willing to talk to her about the guardians.

It was a quick drive to the diner, made quicker with her head busy thinking up headlines and openers for what she was going to write. Before

she knew it, she was inside the warm space, filled with chatter during the busy lunchtime.

As Tamara settled into a booth, she scanned the menu, her thoughts still preoccupied with the day's research. But her focus shifted when she caught sight of a familiar figure—Reginald. He was seated alone, immersed in a newspaper. Seizing the opportunity, Tamara got up and approached his table.

“Hi, do you mind if I sit?” she asked, her voice friendly yet assertive.

Reginald looked up, his expression one of mild surprise. He recovered quickly, and his lips pressed into a thin line. “Miss Delainy, isn't it?” he said, his tone cautious.

Tamara nodded, her smile unwavering. “I wanted to ask you some questions about the deer herd that went missing,” she said, keeping her tone casual. “I wanted to get both sides of the story.”

“Sit,” Reginald gestured, though his demeanor remained guarded.

Tamara sat across from him, opening her notebook and placing it on the table. “Thanks. I've just been to The Bear Creek Tribune and looked at their archives. The Bear Creek Guardians are well-liked in the town, it seems.” She took out her phone and swiped to the photo of the last generation of Bear Creek Guardians.

“I was hoping you might know the last generation of the Bear Creek Guardians,” she said, setting her phone in front of Reginald, the photo displayed prominently. “I was hoping to get just a little more information on them.”

Reginald glanced at the phone, his face betraying a flicker of recognition before he quickly masked it with a dismissive shake of his head. “I have only lived here for a few months. I don't know much about them...”

His gaze lingered on the photo, and Tamara noticed his face paled slightly. “Reginald,” she began, hoping to delve deeper, but before she could continue, he stood up abruptly.

“I'm sorry, I have to go,” Reginald said hurriedly, avoiding her gaze. Without another word, he left the diner, his departure swift and unceremonious.

“Was it something you said?” Betsy asked as she came over with a pot of coffee and offered Tamara a cup.

“I have no idea.” She picked up her phone and stared at the photo of the

guardians.

“Oh, look at them.” Betsy tilted her head so she could get a good look at Tamara’s phone.

“You know them?” Tamara asked.

“I grew up with them,” Betsy said. “Well, they were a little older than me, but I did have a crush on Hamish.” She pointed at one of the men. “But he was never interested and then he met Mimi, and it was love at first sight.”

“Hamish and Mimi,” Tamara repeated.

“Yes, they’re Tavish’s mom and dad.” Betsy switched her attention to Tamara. “And just why have you got their photo?”

“Oh, I’ve just come from The Bear Creek Tribune,” Tamara explained. “I want to write an article about the Bear Creek Guardians.”

“Oh, do you?” Betsy asked curtly. “Has this got something to do with Thane and the nature reserve? Because if you stir up trouble for those boys, you are going to make yourself very unpopular in this town.”

“No, I want to clear Billy’s name. And Thane and the other guardians. I want to counter any claims that are being leveled at the Bear Creek Guardians,” Tamara said hotly.

“Oh.” Betsy’s eyes widened. “You are a mate of...Heath.”

“Yes,” Tamara said, taking a measured breath. “I want to celebrate the legacy handed down from generation to generation. And figured I should interview some people they have helped.”

Betsy turned and scanned the diner. “Well, there are half a dozen people in here that can help you with that.”

“Really?” Tamara asked.

“Yes, just ask, honestly.” Betsy sucked in a deep breath. “I’ll get them all organized and keep a good supply of coffee coming.”

“Thanks, Betsy,” Tamara placed her voice recorder down on the table in front of her.

This might not be the story her editor wanted. But it was the one he was going to get. And when she was done here, she would head over to the sheriff’s office and hand them the information her editor had sent her about the hikers.

Between them, they would clear the Bear Creek Guardians and Billy of

any crimes.

So the guardians could carry on fulfilling their destiny.

Chapter Nineteen – Heath

Heath stared at the canvas before him, paintbrush in hand. It was finished. He'd worked feverishly on this new painting as if something had taken over him, inspiring him to create a masterpiece. He marveled at the colors, the way they blended together, and how they captured the essence of the subject he had painted.

And now he was done.

As he placed his paintbrush down, he stood back and admired the piece with a critical eye as he wiped the paint from his hands.

Then he picked up his phone and tapped the screen, dialing Tamara's number once again. The call went unanswered, adding to the unease that had been growing inside him.

She's okay, his bear assured him.

But why isn't she answering? Heath asked, the lack of response gnawing at him.

Tamara is probably just busy with work, his bear answered.

How do you know? Heath silently asked, then dumped the cloth on the counter and headed to the door.

He grabbed the handle and slid it open, revealing a setting sun dipping behind the mountains. It was later than he thought. Time had gotten away from him as it often did when he was painting.

Heath stepped outside and pushed his senses outward, extending them beyond Bearheart Ridge toward Bywater Cottage as he searched for the familiar essence of his mate.

There she was. He could sense her presence still at Bywater Cottage. She had been there for hours, inside the cottage, as if she hadn't moved for hours. Yet she hadn't responded to any of his calls or messages.

We should go down there, his bear suggested, as impatience grew inside of him. He missed her. The few hours they had been apart seemed like an eternity.

Should we? Heath's bear pondered.

Yes, Heath began. *Tamara was preoccupied this morning after she spoke*

to her editor. Distant.

At first, Heath had dismissed it as his own overthinking, but now, with her silence, the worry was hard to ignore.

Suddenly, he felt a shift in her presence.

She's on the move, his bear observed.

Heath took a step forward, his senses locked onto Tamara. Was she leaving Bywater Cottage, leaving Bear Creek? Leaving him?

The thought made his stomach churn, a hollow feeling spreading through him. The idea was unbearable.

She won't leave without talking to us, his bear said firmly.

Heath knew his bear was right. They had to trust in Tamara, in the bond between them.

And in fate, his bear added.

And fate, Heath silently agreed.

Despite this assurance, the urge to shift into his bear and run to her was overwhelming. To chase after her, to follow wherever she might go, driven by the need to be near her.

But then he exhaled a long breath, forcing himself to calm down. His senses told him that Tamara was not leaving him; she was coming to him. He could feel her approach, sense her car making its way up to Bearheart Ridge.

The realization brought a sense of relief, mixed with anticipation. Whatever was on Tamara's mind, whatever had caused her distance and silence, would soon be revealed.

Heath watched the road leading to his home, waiting for the first glimpse of Tamara's car.

There! He wanted to run to her, but he stayed put as she reached his house and got out of the car.

Heath watched, as if frozen in time, as Tamara smoothly exited her car. Every movement she made seemed to intensify his anxiety. He'd never felt this unsure of himself, this vulnerable. What if she had come to reject him? The thought was like an icy blade slicing through his chest.

As she stood up and reached back into the car for her purse, Heath's gaze was fixed on her. Wanting to go to her, but needing her to come to him.

Just go to her, his bear chided.

But he stayed frozen to the spot.

Then she looked around, and when her eyes found him, she lifted a hand in a casual wave. The simple gesture sent a wave of relief crashing over him, expelling the breath from his lungs in a whoosh.

“Hey there,” Tamara called out as she walked toward him, her stride confident, as if nothing was amiss.

So why had she been ignoring his calls?

“Hey,” Heath replied, his voice barely more than a whisper as his throat constricted. He took a hesitant step forward, then another, closing the distance between them. “Are you okay?” he asked, his voice laced with a mix of concern and confusion.

“Yes,” she grinned, and her eyes lit up like the stars. “More than okay.”

Heath swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. “I tried to call,” he said, struggling to keep the accusation from his voice. He didn’t want to push her away, not when he needed her so much.

“Sorry.” Tamara’s hand delved into her purse, and she pulled out her phone, flipping it on. “I was working on an article, and I always switch my phone off to avoid distractions.”

Heath processed her words. His mind clouded with relief. So it wasn’t about him. She had been so engrossed in her work that she had shut out everything else, even him.

“Wow, you did call. And message. And leave voicemails.” She scanned her phone, and he ran a hand through his hair, realizing he must look like a stalker.

“I was worried,” he said, hoping she’d understand his actions.

“You didn’t need to,” she replied. “I am capable of taking care of myself.”

“I know,” he said and looked sheepish.

“Oh, you were worried about *us*. Not *me*.” She arched an eyebrow at him.

“This morning, after you spoke to your editor, you seemed different. Distant.” He clenched his jaw as her smile faltered.

“You are intuitive,” she said.

“Especially when it comes to you,” he replied.

“Well, you’re right.” She nodded toward the house. “Shall we go inside? I have something I want to tell you. And show you.”

“In here.” He rubbed his palms on his thighs before he led her into his studio.

“Okay.” Tamara looked a little bemused as she followed him inside and he closed the door behind them.

“There’s something I want to show you.” He hesitated and then said, “But you first.”

Tamara, looking slightly nervous, reached into her purse and pulled out her laptop. With a soft click, the screen came to life, casting a glow across her face. She turned the laptop to face Heath, her eyes holding a mix of apprehension and determination.

“This is what I have been working on,” she said.

Heath’s gaze fell on the words displayed on the screen.

His bear stirred within him, sensing the importance of what lay before their eyes. *It’s about us*, his bear noted.

Well, it’s about the Bear Creek Guardians, Heath corrected, his eyes scanning the document.

Tamara took a deep breath before explaining. “When my editor called this morning, he asked me to work on a story about how the Bear Creek Guardians set up their rescues, claiming credit for staged rescues. He even had ‘proof’ that one of the hikers you rescued a few days ago received payment.”

“Payment?” Heath echoed, incredulous. The idea was absurd, insulting even.

“Yes,” Tamara nodded solemnly. “The bank account allegedly belongs to Thane.”

“Thane?” Heath repeated, stunned. His bear growled softly, echoing his disbelief.

Just like the payment to Billy, his bear pointed out, the implication clear and disturbing.

“I agreed to write the story,” Tamara continued, her gaze steady.

“You doubted us?” Heath asked, a tightness forming in his chest. “You doubted me?”

She shook her head, her expression earnest. “For a split second, maybe. But questioning things is my job. Then, I decided to write what I felt was the

truth. I went to the Tribune's archives to research the history of the Bear Creek Guardians."

Heath listened, a mix of emotions churning inside him.

"It was Jonas Clark who suggested I interview the people of Bear Creek, to tell their story and what the Bear Creek Guardians mean to them," Tamara added.

"And you did," Heath said, his eyes moving over the article she had written.

"Then I went to Brad with the information about the bank payments. The account is the same as the one that paid Billy," she revealed.

"And what did Brad say?" Heath asked, his bear bristling with a need for action.

"Brad passed the information to the tech team. They had already discovered it was owned by a shell company based offshore. They're still working on it, but Brad is convinced that this whole thing was set up to discredit the Bear Creek Guardians, Thane in particular."

"Thane? But the payment was made to Billy," Heath said.

Tamara shrugged. "Guilt by association to Billy. If Billy was charged with stealing the deer, it puts those who work closely with Billy under suspicion."

"But who?" Heath asked, his mind racing. Someone was targeting them, but who could it be?

"You tell me," Tamara replied. "It's someone with money and resources."

Heath stood there, absorbing her words, the reality of the situation hitting him. Someone was orchestrating a complex plot against them, against Thane specifically.

Reginald, his bear said fiercely.

We have no proof, Heath answered.

"You have an idea who it is," Tamara said, as if she'd read his mind.

"Off the record," Heath replied.

"Of course," Tamara answered.

"Reginald Beauchamp." The name left a bitter taste in Heath's mouth as he spoke it aloud.

Tamara's eyes widened in surprise. "Reginald Beauchamp? I talked with him today in the diner. But he left abruptly when I showed him a photo of

your parents.”

“My parents?” Heath asked.

“Yes. Well, the last generation of the guardians,” she explained.

“I don’t understand,” Heath said. “Reginald is new in town. He doesn’t know our parents.”

“Maybe when he saw the photo, he realized that his plan to discredit the guardians wouldn’t work because of their history,” Tamara surmised.

“It’s possible,” Heath suggested. “Let’s go speak with Thane about it.”

“Sure.” She hesitated. “What did you want to show me?”

Heath glanced at his canvas and then said, “It can wait.”

Heath and Tamara walked along the quiet streets of Bearheart Ridge, their footsteps in sync as they headed toward Thane’s house. The evening air was crisp, carrying the scents of pine and earth, a gentle reminder of the natural beauty that surrounded them.

As they entered Thane’s backyard, the scene before them was one of domestic tranquility. Thane was seated with baby Summer cradled in his arms, gently rocking her while whispering words of adoration. Sable sat beside him, her eyes reflecting the love and pride she felt for her family. Heath felt a pang of longing deep within him, a yearning for a child of his own, a future he hoped to share with Tamara.

“Hey, you two,” Thane greeted them, his voice warm with welcome.

“Hey,” Heath responded, his thoughts filled with a mix of emotions.

Sable stood up to greet Tamara, her smile genuine. “It’s good to finally meet you, Tamara,” she said as she approached Tamara. “I’m Sable.”

“And you,” Tamara replied, returning the smile. The two women hugged, a gesture of newfound friendship and understanding.

Thane, still holding Summer, studied Heath’s face, sensing something amiss. “Is there a problem?” he asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“Have you spoken to Brad?” Heath inquired, getting straight to the point.

“Not since this morning.” Thane’s brow furrowed with concern. “Has there been a breakthrough?”

“Sort of,” Tamara said, choosing her words carefully. “My editor called me this morning and asked me to write an article on the Bear Creek Guardians and their alleged rescues.”

“*Alleged?*” Sable asked, her voice sharp with surprise and a hint of offense.

“His words, not mine,” Tamara quickly clarified, wanting to ease any misunderstanding.

“It seems someone called Tamara’s editor and claimed that the hikers had been paid by the guardians to stage the rescue,” Heath elaborated.

“What?” Thane exclaimed defensively. He gently shifted Summer in his arms, as if protecting her from the absurdity of the situation.

“I know,” Heath sighed, shaking his head.

“But I passed the information onto Brad, and it turns out the payment came from the same bank account as the money paid to Billy,” Tamara told them.

“What?” Sable echoed, her expression turning from shock to concern as she sat back down.

“Brad got the tech team to dig deeper, and they found that the account was bogus. Someone is trying to frame Thane,” Tamara revealed, the gravity of her words hanging in the air.

“And we think that person is Reginald,” Heath stated, his gaze locking with Thane’s.

He does not look surprised, Heath’s bear said.

No, he does not, Heath said, certain now that their instincts were right.

Chapter Twenty – Tamara

“I had my suspicions after the incident at the reserve,” Thane said. “But I didn’t believe it. I just don’t understand why.”

“What are we going to do?” Sable asked. “We have no proof. Do we?”

“I’ll talk to Brad,” Thane said and stood up, handing Summer to Sable.

But as Thane took out his phone and tapped the screen, he looked up sharply as a man and a woman joined them in the backyard.

“What’s up, Emily?” Sable asked.

It was obvious from Emily’s expression that *something* had happened, and fear gripped Tamara. Had Reginald, or whoever was behind the attempts to hurt the Bear Creek Guardians struck again?

“I’m so close to finishing the interior of Mountain View,” Emily began, and then covered her mouth as she took a shuddering breath.

“Come sit down,” Thane said and ushered Sable into his seat.

“Leif?” Heath asked with concern.

“Reginald came back from town this afternoon and announced that he was leaving Bear Creek and that he no longer needed Emily’s *services*,” Leif said, his anger simmering beneath the surface.

“He left town?” Heath asked.

“Yes,” Emily confirmed as she regained her composure. “I’ve never seen him in such a state. It was as if he’d seen a ghost.”

“I’m afraid I might be responsible.” Tamara slipped her hand into her purse and took out her phone.

“What do you mean?” Leif turned his attention to Tamara.

“Tamara’s editor asked her to write an article about us after he was tipped off that we are corrupt and pay people to get stuck on the mountain so that we can go and rescue them,” Heath explained, his tone defensive. “We’re being accused of attention seeking.”

“What?” Leif ground out, his fists clenched.

“My editor was given ‘proof’ of those payments,” Tamara said.

“Is this linked to what happened at the nature reserve?” Leif asked grimly.

“Yes, the bank account the payments came from is the same. And they are in my name. Someone has set me up,” Thane said.

“And what does this have to do with Reginald?” Emily asked.

“We think he might be behind the whole thing,” Heath replied.

“Why?” Emily asked. “I mean, when Leif and I got together, it was Reginald who encouraged me to follow my heart. I was so close to walking away, but he convinced me to stay.” She reached out her hand to Leif, and he went to her.

Tamara’s breath caught in her throat at the look of love that passed between them. She could see how much they adored each other, how they were meant for each other. Just as she was meant for Heath.

“We don’t have proof,” Heath admitted.

“But after I did my research, I went to the diner. Reginald was there, and I wanted to interview him. When I sat down, I showed him this.” She swiped her phone screen and then showed them the photo of the last generation of guardians and their mates.

“That’s our parents,” Leif said, his brow furrowed. “I don’t understand.”

“I can only think that he realized that this would disprove his accusations against the guardians,” Tamara began. “Anyone with any sense would know that if the rescues were all lies, all set up, there’s no way they could stay a secret through generations of Bear Creek Guardians. Someone would have talked before now.”

“And so he left?” Emily asked. “He was worried that when we put the pieces together, we’d do what?”

“Maybe he was scared of what would happen when the news got out,” Heath said.

“He thought we might attack him?” Leif asked incredulously.

“Or that he’d be shunned by the people of Bear Creek,” Tamara said. “The people I interviewed are fiercely protective of you. So he left before he got hounded out of town.”

“Maybe that’s what I felt,” Heath murmured. They all turned to look at him as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“What you felt?” Thane asked.

“Remember when you asked me if I had sensed the creature?” Heath

reminded his leader.

“And you said you weren’t sure if you felt it briefly,” Thane nodded.

“Maybe that was when Reginald was with Tamara. Maybe for a split second, she was in danger.” Heath’s face paled and his eyes darkened.

“You think Reginald might have intended Tamara harm?” Thane growled.

“It might have crossed his mind,” Leif agreed, and then he stepped away from the others and stared toward the mountains.

“Do you still sense the creature out there?” Emily came to stand next to her mate.

“Yes,” Leif said. “It’s still there.” He frowned. “At least I think it is.” He rubbed his temples. “Or maybe I’m so used to sensing it...”

“Maybe it’s a good thing,” Sable said. “We know it’s out there watching over us. And if we are ever in danger, it’s there to warn us. Perhaps if we look deep enough in the museum archives, we might find stories of the other guardians sensing the creature.”

“You might be right. We should go up and check out those cave paintings,” Thane said. “See if we can get any clues from them. We need to gather all the information we can on the creature.”

“You’re right,” Heath said.

“Okay. I’ll call Brad and let him know Reginald has left and pass on our suspicions. It might make it easier for him to make a link between Reginald and the offshore accounts if he has both pieces of the puzzle.” Thane smiled down at Sable. “For now, the threat seems to have passed. And we should enjoy our lives and be grateful for those we share it with.”

“Very grateful,” Heath agreed and slipped his hand into Tamara’s. “Which is why we are going to take our leave.”

“We are?” Tamara asked.

“Yes, I still have something to show you.” He pulled her close and slid his arm around her shoulders.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” Thane said.

“Goodnight,” Tamara waved at the others.

“Goodnight,” they all chorused.

“I’m intrigued to see what you have to show me,” Tamara told Heath as he led her away from Thane’s house.

“I hope you like it,” Heath said nervously.

“I’m sure I will.” She leaned into him, absorbing his warmth as they crossed the street and made their way to his house.

Heath led Tamara back to his studio, a mixture of excitement and nerves swirling within him. Closing the door behind them, he let go of her hand and asked her to stay put. Tamara, with a hint of playfulness in her voice, joked, “You’re not going to shift into your bear again, are you?” Then she added, “Not that I would mind, but...”

Heath chuckled, the sound warm and reassuring. “No, that’s not your surprise,” he replied, his eyes twinkling with a blend of mischief and affection.

He looked nervous as he moved to stand in front of a large canvas, his gaze lingering on it critically. Tamara watched him, her curiosity piqued. What was he about to show her?

Then he returned to her, his movements deliberate. Gently, he placed his hands over her eyes. “Trust me,” he whispered, his breath caressing her skin, sending shivers of desire through her.

She nodded and allowed him to guide her toward the canvas. The anticipation was almost overwhelming, yet she trusted him implicitly.

He positioned her carefully in front of the painting and then slowly lifted his hands from her eyes.

The revelation took her breath away.

Before her was a painting of herself, standing in a woodland glade bathed in sunlight that gave her an almost ethereal glow. The details were exquisite, capturing not just her physical likeness, but something far deeper. Her eyes in the painting held a certain depth, a reflection of her love for Heath, mirrored in the curve of her lips.

“It’s...it’s wonderful,” she said, her voice choked with emotion. Tears misted her eyes as she took in every detail of the painting.

Heath stood beside her, his gaze fixed on her face, drinking in her reaction. “So are you,” he told her, his voice filled with sincerity and admiration.

Tamara turned to face him, her eyes shining. The painting was not just a portrait. It was as if Heath had managed to capture a piece of her soul on the canvas.

She reached out, her fingers tracing the outline of her painted self, feeling an overwhelming sense of love and belonging. Heath had seen her, truly seen her, and had brought that vision to life in a way that left her speechless.

“You’ve captured...me,” she whispered, her eyes meeting his.

“I painted what I see, what I feel,” he said. “You, Tamara, are my inspiration.” Heath smiled, a soft, tender expression that made her heart ache. For him and only him.

“I love you,” she said. She might have said those words before, but she’d never meant them like this.

“I love you, too,” he said gruffly and reached for her, pulling her into his arms.

Their lips met in a searing kiss, and their passion instantly ignited. Tamara clung to him, lost in the intensity of her feelings for her mate. Her one and only true love.

Without breaking the kiss, he lifted her and carried her across the studio to a pile of clean sheeting he used to cover his paintings. There he lay her down, his gaze roaming her body as if he were mentally undressing her.

Well, she was going to do more than mentally undress her man. She tugged at his paint-stained T-shirt and he grabbed the hem and yanked it over his head, throwing it aside as he leaned down and kissed her hungrily. She stroked his bare chest, reveling in his hard-toned muscles and the way his nipples hardened to stiff peaks.

Heath’s tongue demanded entrance, and she opened her mouth to him, their tongues entwined. As their kiss deepened, Heath expertly removed her shirt and bra, before cupping her breast in his hand. His thumb rubbed over her nipple, teasing and taunting until it stood erect and aching for his touch.

His mouth covered her breasts, and he suckled her nipples, first one, then the other, his teeth nipping at the hard buds, his tongue soothing. Tamara groaned, her fingers digging into his shoulders, her nails biting into his skin.

Heath slid his hand down her body, his fingers catching the waistband of her slacks and tugging them down. She lifted her hips, helping him to remove them and her panties. Then she reached for his jeans, unbuttoning them and working the zipper until she could push them over his hips.

As soon as he was naked, he hovered over her, his hardness pressing against her thigh. He moved downward, his lips trailing a path of fire down

her neck to her breasts. His tongue swirled around her nipples, teasing them so that she writhed under him.

Her fingers threaded through his hair, holding his head to her breasts. Then she arched her back as he nibbled her nipples, biting and sucking them until she wanted to scream with the sensations that shot through her.

Heath slid farther down, his hands sliding up the outside of her thighs to her hips, then he parted her legs and placed his hands on her knees, holding them apart as he settled between them.

Tamara felt his hot gaze on her most intimate flesh and she blushed. His breath was warm on her skin as he leaned in and kissed her there, his tongue sliding along her folds, and then he flicked it over her swollen nub.

Tamara moaned, her hips sliding upward, seeking more of his touch.

Heath continued his torture, lapping at her, his finger sliding into her as he stroked her intimately. Tamara writhed under him, her hips thrusting, seeking release. Then he slipped a second finger into her, his thumb strumming her sensitive flesh.

Tamara shuddered, her breathing coming in pants as she struggled to contain the sensations he was creating.

Time slipped away as she lost herself to his touch, but soon she was on the brink of coming and she wanted him inside her when she did.

“Heath,” she gasped, tugging at his shoulders.

As if he read her mind, Heath slid up her body, settling between her thighs as he braced himself on his elbows.

She reached between them, guiding his shaft to her entrance. Slowly, he filled her, his hardness stretching her as she tightened around him.

Heath gasped. He stopped halfway inside her, his body tense as he fought to control himself. Slowly, he continued until he filled her completely.

With a groan, he bent his head and kissed her hard, his tongue delving into her mouth. She responded, her tongue tangling with his, her hands sliding over his shoulders as they locked together.

Then Heath began to move in her, his thrusts gentle at first until they became more forceful. As if he could barely control the primal beast within him.

Tamara lifted her hips to meet him as he slid in and out of her.

Then he pulled out of her and sat back on his heels. He slipped his arm beneath her and flipped her onto her stomach.

“Kneel for me,” he said gruffly.

Tamara turned her head to look at him over her shoulder and smiled as she kneeled on all fours. Heath positioned himself behind her and she gasped when he entered her from behind, her hips bucking back to meet his as he thrust into her.

In and out, he moved, his hand sliding around her hip to her mound. Tamara moaned. His fingers strummed her sensitive flesh, while his other hand reached around to cup her breast. He tweaked her nipple, sending exquisite pain through her body.

The pressure began to mount, and she gasped as she sought release. Then he tensed and with a low groan, he came, filling her with his seed. Tamara cried out as her orgasm claimed her.

Her whole body tensed as the waves of pleasure washed over her, his fingers thrumming against her mound as she came hard.

As the last of her orgasm faded, she dropped down onto the sheets, her chest rising and falling as she struggled to catch her breath. Heath lay down next to her, his hand on her back as he traced patterns slowly on her skin.

With a contented sigh, she rolled over, resting her head on his shoulder and wrapping an arm around his waist. She smiled, feeling complete for the first time in her life.

There was no place she would rather be than in the arms of her shifter mate.

She might have come here to write an article about Heath’s art. But instead, she had written the ultimate feel-good story.

One that most definitely had a happy ending. Her own happily ever after.

Epilogue

Heath held her close, one arm wrapped around her waist, while his other hand lightly held hers as they moved the brush across the canvas. The close proximity, the warmth of his body, and his scent enveloping her were intoxicating. He leaned in, planting a soft kiss on her neck.

“That’s not fair. You’re distracting me,” Tamara playfully nudged him, her voice laced with mock annoyance and a hint of delight.

“Sorry,” Heath replied with a chuckle, pulling her closer.

She leaned back into him, a contented sigh escaping her lips. “I don’t think this will be a masterpiece, whether you distract me or not. I don’t have your talent,” she admitted her tone a mix of resignation and admiration.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Heath encouraged. “It just takes practice.”

“I don’t have your eye,” Tamara said, pausing her brush strokes and stepping away from the canvas.

“No, you don’t,” Heath agreed, releasing her hand. His words were not a criticism but a recognition of their individuality.

Tamara looked at him, a question unspoken in her eyes. “I’m a lost cause?” she asked, half-joking, half-serious.

“No.” Heath shook his head, his gaze softening. “What I should have said is that you should be free to develop your own eye. Your perspective, your vision. It’s unique, just like you.”

Tamara smiled, a glint of newfound confidence in her eyes. “My own eye,” she repeated, the concept resonating within her. “I like that.”

Heath stepped back, giving her space. “See the world through your eyes, Tamara, and paint it that way. Your vision is just as valuable as mine.”

“Do you know how much I love you?” Tamara leaned into him.

“I know how much I love you.” He kissed her neck and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Do you want me to leave you and the canvas alone?”

Tamara shook her head, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “No way, I want you here.” She turned around in his arms, her fingers trailing along his chest. “Maybe you can inspire me in other ways.”

Heath grinned and leaned forward until their lips were an inch apart. “I can certainly try.”

Tamara giggled as Heath lifted her up, pushed aside his paints, and placed her on the edge of the counter, his hands resting on her hips. She wrapped her legs around him and pulled him closer, their lips meeting in a heated kiss.

She melted into him, the taste of him on her tongue intoxicating. Her hands roamed his body, exploring every inch. She traced the outline of his muscles, feeling the power in them.

Heath’s hands found their way under Tamara’s shirt, caressing the soft skin of her back. Tamara moaned into his mouth, her desire for him growing by the second. She slid her hands down his chest and tugged at his belt until it came undone.

Then she hooked her fingers inside his waistband and pushed his jeans down over his hips. They slid down his toned thighs and pooled at his feet. She curled her hand around his hard length and stroked him up and down. He groaned and closed his eyes as he bit down on his lower lip.

“Damn, I want you,” he ground out.

“I’m right here,” she said and shook her hair back from her shoulders as she licked her lips, teasing him, tempting him.

She pulled her shirt off, her hardened nipples poking through her lace bra. Heath leaned in and sucked one of her breasts through her bra, then reached around and unhooked it, tossing the fabric to the floor.

His tongue flicked over her nipple, and she arched her back in response.

He reached between her legs and stroked her mound through her slacks. She gasped and rocked her hips against his hand, wanting to feel him inside her.

She wriggled to the edge of the counter, and he hooked his fingers into the waistband of her slacks. Then, with one powerful arm wrapped around her waist, he lifted her off the counter and dragged her slacks off, taking her panties with them.

“Better,” he murmured against her ear as he slipped two fingers inside her.

Tamara gripped his arms and moaned as he stroked her inner walls. But she wanted more. She wanted him inside her.

Sliding her hand around his shaft, she stroked him up and down, then guided him into her. Heath slipped his fingers out of her and rubbed his

thumb over her mound as he entered her slowly, her inner walls tight around him.

Heath slid his arm around her back and held her tightly as he flexed his hips forward, driving deeper into her. She nipped his neck, sucking on his earlobe, driving him into a frenzy.

His powerful muscles flexed, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, aching for him. And it was an ache only he could ease.

With each thrust, with each touch of his hands, he brought her closer to the edge. Then he tensed, his muscles bunching as he jerked into her, filling her with his seed.

Her inner muscles tightened around him as her orgasm hit her and she came, her fingers digging into his flesh as she urged him on.

“I love you,” he gasped as he slumped forward, his hand resting on the counter as she buried her face in his shoulder.

“I love you, too,” she answered. “So, very much.”

Heath tensed and looked up, his eyes out of focus.

“What is it?” Tamara asked. It had been a few weeks since Reginald had left town, but she was still on edge. Perhaps with time, she’d let go of the feeling. But not yet.

“They are here,” Heath murmured.

“Your parents?” Tamara made to move, but he held her close, and lowered his head, nipping her taut nipple. “Heath.”

“What?” He sucked her nipple hard and then let it go. As he glanced up at her, his eyes twinkled with humor.

“You are wicked.” She shoved his shoulder playfully.

“That’s not what you usually tell me,” he teased. “Usually you say how good I am.”

“Fetch my clothes,” she told him as she uncoiled her legs from around him.

Heath pulled out of her with a reluctant groan that gave her a rush of pleasure. As he reached for her clothes and gathered them up, she watched him with a smile. He sure was good in every way.

“Don’t worry,” he told her as he handed over her clothes. “They will love you.”

“I hope so,” Tamara said.

“How could they not?” Heath asked. “You are my mate. And soon to be the mother of my child. And their grandchild.”

She slid her hand down over her belly. She was still stunned that she’d gotten pregnant so fast. As was her mom.

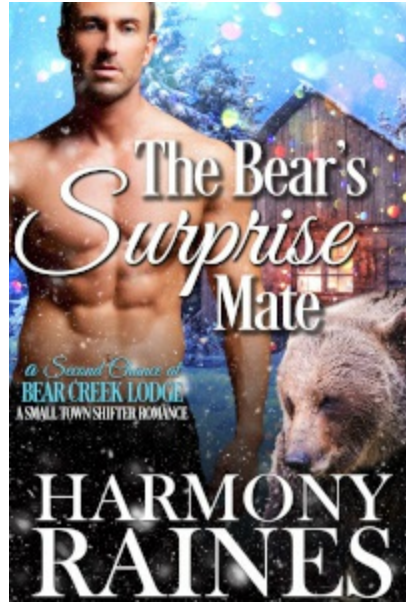
She’d expected criticism from her mom. However, her mom had been over the moon.

Life was perfect.

As long as Heath’s parents liked her. And Reginald didn’t return to Bear Creek.

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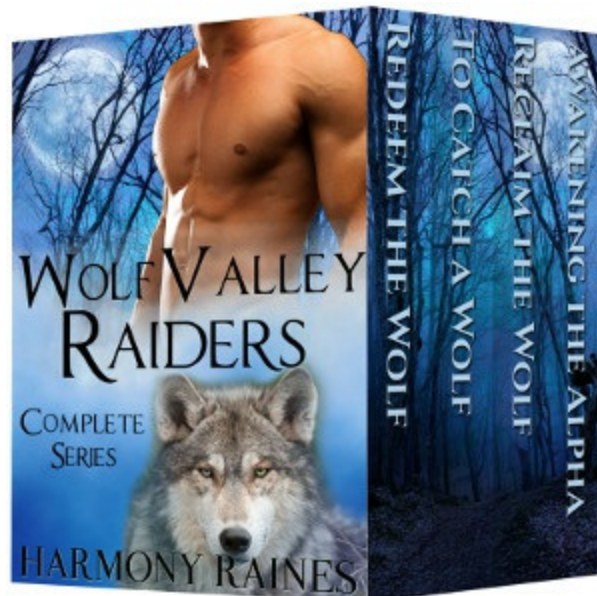
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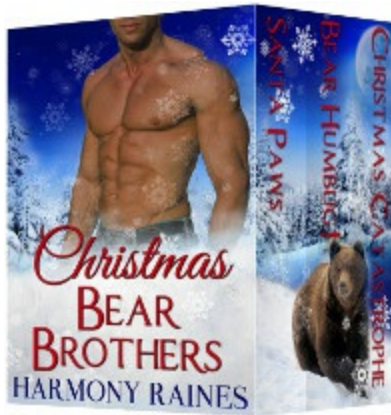
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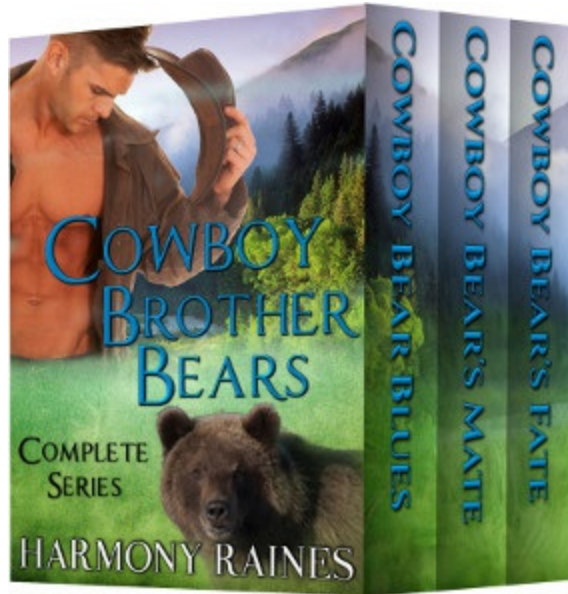
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