

Bearheart HUNTER



Bear Creek
GUARDIANS

A SMALL TOWN SHIFTER ROMANCE

HARMONY RAINES

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Bearheart Hunter

Bear Creek Guardians Book Four

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Bearheart Hunter

Bear Creek Guardians Book Four

When Leif senses his mate is in danger, he must do whatever it takes to ensure her safety.

But how does he protect her against forces unseen?

Emily moves to Bear Creek in the hope that the fresh mountain air might help her heal from her painful past.

And who wouldn't want to live here? The town is charming and the people are friendly and welcoming. Plus, she has scored a dream job, redesigning the interior of an old house for Reginald Beachamp.

But all is not as it seems. When a mysterious stranger saves her from almost certain death, Emily is sure there is something different about him.

Something *not quite right*.

But the more she gets to know Leif, the more she realizes that she's wrong.

That he might, in fact, be *Mr. Right*.

However, Emily has a secret that might mean their relationship is doomed before it even has a chance to blossom.

Leif is drawn into the mountains by the mysterious creature that seems to appear whenever a mate of the Bear Creek Guardians is in danger. However, after saving his mate the sense of the creature does not fade.

It's as if it's watching, waiting...but for what?

There's only one thing Leif can do. Hunt it down and find out exactly what it wants with him. And his mate.

But nothing is as it seems for these fated mates. Can Leif and Emily find their way to each other and their happy ever after?

Chapter One – Leif

Leif's bear splashed through the swollen stream, which only a couple of days ago had been a mere trickle. As he emerged from the swift water, the droplets of water that clung to his thick fur glistened under the sun's bright light, giving him an ethereal appearance.

He came to a stop, water dripping from his thick coat, as the bear turned his gaze toward the sky. The clouds had finally cleared, and the air was warm. As he stood there, a rocky outcrop towered above him, with steam rising from it and swirling like a misty morning.

His bear closed his eyes, listening to the tranquil ambience of the mountain. This was his home, where he belonged.

Remember, we live in Bearheart Ridge, in a house...along with our friends and responsibilities. Leif chuckled to his bear, breaking the silence of their shared thoughts.

Give me a nice, cozy den in these mountains over our house any day. His bear snorted playfully in response as he shook himself, sending droplets of water flying from his coat in a dazzling rainbow.

They continued on, moving away from the stream and toward the pine forests. The ground was soft from all the rain, and Leif's bear's paws sank into the damp earth as they walked.

The bear wrinkled his nose as he stepped into a deeper puddle, splattering mud onto his face.

Ugh. He rubbed the mud away from his eyes with his paw, narrowing them as he looked downward.

A fresh track, clearly imprinted into the earth. Leif's bear gently placed his paw back on the ground. His eyes widened as he noted the size and shape.

Is that... The hackles stood up along his bear's neck as he lowered his head and sniffed the ground. But there was no scent. It was as if whatever made this footprint had never been here.

It is, Leif replied, and the air shimmered around them as the bear disappeared, replaced by Leif in his human form.

Instantly, he crouched down and gently brushed his fingers over the track,

tracing the outline.

An intense rush of adrenaline coursed through his veins, causing his heart to thump loudly and the sound of its rapid beats echoed in his ears. Filled with trepidation, Leif took a closer look at the footprint, but there could be no mistake in what he saw. *It's the creature. This footprint belongs to the creature.*

But why? his bear asked. *Why here? Why now?*

I don't know. Leif looked up ahead, scanning the surrounding area. There was nothing there. He closed his eyes and focused, extending his senses outward, straining to detect any other signs of the mysterious beast.

I can't sense anything. His bear moaned mournfully.

Yet they were also filled with a sense of excitement as they thought back to when they had last seen footprints such as these. This creature was both a blessing and a curse. A blessing since it meant their fated mate was near; a curse because it meant she was in danger. The thought of losing her before they even met terrified Leif.

Leif took a breath. *We need to find her. Quickly.*

He forced himself to push his racing thoughts aside. He knew all too well that in the wilderness, time was of the essence.

The air popped and crackled as Leif shifted. In an instant, his bear once again stood in his place. Then he took off at a run, following the clear tracks over the mud and into the trees.

Leif picked out a broken branch here, disturbed leaf litter there. His bear kept his nose to the ground, keeping on the trail even as the tracks became harder to see amongst the tree roots.

We'll find her, if she is out here, Leif assured his bear as they ran on. He was desperate for that first sense of *her*. That would make this real.

It is real, his bear reminded him, surging forward. *Thane, Stellan, and Cormac all sensed this creature before they found their mate.*

True, Leif thought, but he couldn't seem to let himself accept it, believe in it. Not yet.

Because if he did and he didn't find her...

His bear growled softly. *She is out there, waiting for us.*

You're right. He needed to treat this as he would any mountain rescue. If

someone was out here in danger, it was his job to find them and bring them to safety.

He let the familiar scent of the damp pine needles anchor him to the task at hand.

Leif's bear pushed through the increasingly dense foliage. The thicket could not cut his bear's tough hide, and the sticky mud could not slow them down as each step brought him closer to *her*.

It wasn't just the trail they were following. He could almost *feel* that they were moving in the right direction, as if something inside him just *knew*.

Even with the difficult trail, they were almost at a run as they broke into a small clearing and slid to a stop. Leif's bear looked around, but the tracks had disappeared.

He cursed silently, frustration bubbling inside him. He couldn't fail her.

But then, the back of his neck prickled, and he could sense the creature. Or what he assumed was the creature. It was like nothing he had ever experienced before in all his time on the mountain. It was unmistakably *other*. Call it supernatural, call it paranormal. It was different.

Says the man who can shift from a man to a bear. His bear chuckled, despite the growing ominous feeling that gripped them both.

Leif knew whatever it was, it was there for him. He only hoped it was there to help him find his mate and save her from whatever was threatening her.

Leif shifted back into his human form, standing tall in the middle of the clearing.

"Show yourself," Leif growled, his eyes darting around the forest. "I know you're here."

The creature remained hidden, but its presence lingered, urging him forward. He took a step, trusting this mysterious being to guide him.

Leif let go of the world, his beloved mountain, and surrendered to the primal force within him, allowing the bear to take control. As it surged forward, a rush of raw power coursed through his veins. Before the transformation was even complete, Leif's bear leaped into the air and crashed through the thicket.

He didn't follow any tracks or trails; instead, he relied only on instinct. Instinct that had never led him astray—it was a part of him, as much as the

fur now rippling down his back.

As Leif's bear ran, sure-footed and true, the elusive creature he had pursued remained just out of sight, but its presence was constant.

Leif couldn't tell if he glimpsed it, or if that was just the shadows of trees as they ran. But there was one thing he knew: the creature was leading them somewhere.

Of course it's leading us somewhere, Leif scoffed, we just don't know where that somewhere is.

His bear gritted its teeth. His breath was like thunder, his muscles coiling like steel springs beneath its thick fur. Hot blood pounded in his ears as they broke the tree line and surged up the rocky ridges beyond.

They threw caution to the wind, ignoring the slick mud coating the rocks as they were driven higher and higher into the mountains by this growing sensation.

A lump of rock gave way under paw, and Leif's bear landed heavily on the ground. He scrambled to his feet before he could slide too far and pushed on.

Nothing would stop them. He needed to find his mate and protect her at all costs. His heart ached for his mate, for the connection they already shared. He longed to hold her in his arms, to feel her warmth against his skin, to assure himself that she was safe. Every step he took brought him closer to that moment—or so he hoped.

Yet, he couldn't keep his frustration from growing with each leap. His powerful legs were beginning to ache from the fast climb, and his lungs now burned with every breath.

He could not see how this creature moved so swiftly and so unseen across the rugged terrain. Would he ever be able to catch the mysterious beast that had been haunting Bearheart Ridge for weeks?

His bear inhaled deeply, trying to catch the scent of the creature, when instead an intoxicating aroma caught in the back of his throat.

It was *her*.

The sensation that moved over him was like nothing he'd ever experienced before; the fatigue from the climb completely washed away. He felt somehow in a peaceful haze, and also the sharpest, most focused he had ever felt, all at the same time.

Now that he'd felt her presence, he couldn't imagine letting it slip away again.

Leif's muscles tensed as his primal instincts kicked in, urging him to protect her from whatever danger lurked nearby.

We're so close now, Leif's bear grunted, his entire being focused completely on her. He could feel her moving away from him, but only at a slow pace.

She wasn't running from something. She wasn't hiding from something...she was walking. Strolling, even.

She must be hiking on the mountain trail, Leif said.

Then where is the danger? his bear asked, the question echoing through his mind.

I don't know, Leif admitted silently. *Maybe she doesn't know she's in danger!*

The mysterious creature was still out there, he could still just about feel it. Somewhere up ahead, it had slowed down or stopped just over the next ridge.

Leif tried to feel some sense of relief that they were close to her now, but he still couldn't shake the ominous feeling that came whenever the creature arrived.

But he knew it didn't matter what awaited them over the ridge. He was bound by an ancient oath to protect the people of his community, and this creature had to be a part of that oath. It only appeared to the other guardians and had never led them astray.

He had to trust in it.

In an eruption of rock and dirt, Leif's bear exploded over the top of the ridge. His hulking body heaved from his breaths, steam streamed from his fur and there was a fire in his eyes as he scanned the peaceful mountain trail.

What? Leif exclaimed.

The feeling of the creature had evaporated into the hazy mist that hung over the trail.

I... His bear relaxed his coiled muscles as they looked down the wide path. Delicate, pretty patches of flowers grew in between the rocks. The tops of the tall pine trees below barely stirred in the heavy air. Distant birdsong broke the silence.

Leif and his bear eyed the sheer cliff face that backed the other side of the trail.

There's no way any creature, no matter how big or agile, made it up there. Leif shook his head.

His bear walked up the cliff and pushed himself onto his hind legs. He stretched his neck upwards and sniffed the air.

Nothing... He froze. Wait...

His bear fell back onto his feet.

I sense it, too, Leif could feel his heart in his throat.

He cautiously walked toward a sharp bend in the trail, where it snaked around a large boulder.

As they rounded the rock, in the distance, they could see a lone figure walking away from them.

Leif felt giddy. He couldn't believe it.

Finally, his mate.

Chapter Two – Emily

Emily stopped walking for a moment and turned around to admire the view from her vantage point high in the mountains surrounding Bear Creek.

Wonderful, she breathed.

The sun had reappeared from behind a passing cloud. Its rays gently lifted the last of the haze and transformed the creek, the town's namesake, into a silvery thread that disappeared into the distance.

From afar, the homes of Bear Creek looked like tiny houses in a miniature village.

Breathing in the cool, clear mountain air, Emily exhaled slowly, savoring the tranquility of her surroundings.

This was just what she needed. Moving to Bear Creek had been one of the best decisions she'd ever made. Wild open spaces were just the distraction she needed. Being out here on the mountain gave her a sense of peace that she had never found back home.

However, despite her peaceful surroundings, a tight knot of worry formed in Emily's chest.

She was a long way from the nearest house. If anything happened to her out here alone on the mountain, there was no one to help her. Maybe that's all there was to it.

But as the tiny hairs on the nape of her neck started to rise, she was certain it was something else entirely.

Swallowing down her fear, Emily glanced around, seeking out any signs of danger. However, she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, only rocks, trees, and dainty mountain flowers that somehow found a way to survive and thrive up here.

She leaned down and plucked one of the blooms, examining it closely before folding it inside a piece of paper and slipping it into her pocket. She'd press it when she got back to her room at Mountain View. She'd been hired by the owner to redesign the interior and liked to draw inspiration from the natural world around her.

As she straightened up, she still couldn't shake the anxious feeling in her

gut that grew into a deep sense of unease.

She was certain there was something—or someone—lurking nearby.

A cold prickle crawled across her skin as she turned to look back along the trail. There was no one there. She was safe. Emily sucked in a deep breath, dismissing her fears, and continued her hike into the mountains.

“Don’t even start thinking about bears or mountain lions,” she told herself, trying to stifle her overactive imagination.

As a way of distraction, she switched her thoughts to her new employer, Reginald Beauchamp, or more precisely, his impressive house, Mountain View. It was huge, more like a mansion than a house, and not in keeping with most of the timber lodges that littered the lower mountain slopes. But then again, Emily suspected Reginald Beauchamp didn’t seem to fit in with the folks who lived in Bear Creek, either. He was definitely a city boy, or man, trying to find his place in this quaint old town.

Emily stopped on the trail and looked back toward the town. The unsettling feeling had left her but had been replaced by a sense of longing.

Out of nowhere, an empty feeling washed over her. A deep-seated desire for a family of her own clawed its way to the surface, catching Emily off-guard. She covered her mouth with her hand and stifled a sob. She thought she was over this. Emily had come to terms with the fact that there was little chance she would ever have a family, a child, of her own.

She’d had her chance, and it had been ripped away from her in the cruelest way possible.

Emily placed a hand on her belly and pushed back at the tumult of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. She was not doing this, not here on the mountain.

She turned away from the faraway town, and her gloomy thoughts.

Instead, she focused on the mysterious presence she’d felt earlier. She knew her imagination had a tendency to run wild, but this felt different, and she couldn’t shake the nagging sensation that she was being watched.

She listened to the rhythmic crunch of gravel beneath her boots as she walked, trying to push down her fears. The mountainside was so quiet, but instead of feeling peaceful, it now only served to heighten her awareness of just how alone she was out here.

No sooner did the thought cross her mind than Emily realized she hadn’t

heard birds singing in a while, nor the gentle swooshing of distant pines trees in the wind.

It was as if the world around her was holding its breath. But for what?

She looked around for some kind of shelter, somewhere she could hide, but all she saw were boulders.

Boulders large enough to hide a bear.

Or something else...

Emily tensed at the sudden feeling of eyes watching her again, but much stronger than before. Her pulse raced as her fight-or-flight reflex kicked in.

But Emily was not physically capable of fighting a bear, or a wolf, or... She stopped herself from following that train of thought.

As for flight... There was no way she could outrun a wild animal either.

She turned around. There was no one there. No sign of movement, but the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. It was as if the air had suddenly been electrically charged.

Emily looked up at the sparse clouds in the sky. Maybe there was a thunderstorm coming her way. She'd checked the weather forecast before she'd ventured onto the mountain, and they'd said nothing about bad weather. But what other explanation could there be for the strange static charge that hung heavy in the air?

Emily's gaze lingered on the empty trail. What was she to do?

Her options were limited. Either she walked on and pretended everything was fine, hoping to run and hide when she got the opportunity. Or she turned around and headed back down the trail, praying she'd encounter another hiker or, even better, a group of hikers she could join. Safety in numbers, her mum always told her.

While the day was beautiful, Emily didn't feel too bad about cutting her hike short to avoid danger. She turned on her heel and began trekking back the way she had come.

She moved quickly but stopped herself from breaking into a run. Distracted, she gasped as she stepped into a puddle. The splash seemed to echo around her, leaving her unnerved.

What was wrong with her? She never got freaked out like this.

Emily took a steadying breath and shook her head at herself. She was an

experienced hiker and yet she was jumping at shadows.

After adjusting the strap on her backpack, she walked on, a little more cautiously. She'd been lucky it was only a puddle she'd stepped in. If she sprained her ankle out here alone, she would be in trouble.

As she walked, she focused on the scrunch of gravel under her feet and her own steady breaths. This was an ordinary hike on an ordinary day. There were no monsters lurking in the undergrowth, no beast waiting to jump out at her from behind a boulder.

Or so she thought.

As she approached a bear-sized boulder that screened the rest of the trail, her breath caught in her throat. Cold dread gripped her when she saw a tall, broad-shouldered man walking toward her.

There was nowhere to run. And even if she did, she doubted she could get away. Instead, she forced herself to keep walking, keeping her shoulders relaxed and her eyes on the trail.

I'm just being paranoid, she thought, trying to calm her racing heart. *This guy is another hiker out, enjoying the peace and solitude of the mountain.*

But as he drew nearer, her stomach fluttered. However, it wasn't fear that had taken hold of her; it was something else entirely. What was it about this man that stirred such strange emotions within her? Despite her curiosity, Emily didn't plan to stop and find out. She needed to keep walking. Keep going. It had become the mantra of her life. With each step, she hoped that her life wasn't about to be cut short.

"Hey there!" the man called out, his voice wavering as he approached.

He certainly didn't appear dangerous. But looks could be deceptive. She knew that. People showed you the face they wanted you to see. Even those closest to you could keep a part of themselves hidden.

However, as they drew closer to one another, an inexplicable familiarity washed over her, making her heart race with anticipation.

Yet as she raised her eyes and locked them with his, she was certain she'd never met him before in her life. How could this perfect stranger evoke such emotions within her?

Confused, she slowed her pace. And so did he, his confident strides becoming more hesitant before he came to a complete stop.

The guy smiled, a little awkwardly. He almost appeared unsure of himself.

Emily eyed the lightweight jacket that did little to mask his muscular frame. Drifting lower, her gaze lingered on his shorts covering powerful legs and boots similar to her own. He certainly looked like a hiker.

Why had he stopped? Was there something wrong with him? Perhaps he had sensed something off, too.

However, he didn't look in any distress as he stood there. He was waiting for her, waiting for her to go to him.

Who is he? Emily thought, trying to rationalize her feelings as her legs carried her toward him. *Why am I not afraid? She certainly should be afraid.*

Caught in the spell his presence seemed to cast, Emily shook her head, attempting to break free of the invisible chains tethering her to him. She forcibly broke eye contact with the man and stared at the trail ahead, focusing on getting past him. But as she drew level with him, he reached out and curled his fingers around her upper arm.

Emily jumped and let out a screech as she tried to pull away from him.

"Sorry," he said, releasing her arm and holding out his hands as if to show he meant her no harm. His voice was deep and soothing, like warm honey, but she couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to him than met the eye.

"Stay away from me," Emily hissed, skirting around him. But he stepped sideways and blocked her path, his eyes filled with concern.

"Wait, please," the guy said.

"What do you want?" she demanded, her voice wavering despite her best efforts to sound strong.

"I wanted to make sure you are safe," he said, his expression earnest. The sincerity in his voice made it nearly impossible for Emily to stay angry. But she couldn't ignore the nagging suspicion that there was something he wasn't telling her.

"Safe from what?" she asked, her curiosity piqued. "Why would I be in danger?"

He hesitated for a moment, as if struggling with an internal debate. Finally, he sighed and looked deep into her eyes. "I'm...not sure."

Emily took a step back and narrowed her eyes at him. "You want to save me, but you don't know what from?" she asked, her tone incredulous.

The man looked from side to side, as if searching for danger, as if hoping

to prove himself to her.

She couldn't deny the inexplicable connection she felt to him, like an invisible thread pulling them together.

A part of her, a big part of her, wanted him to prove himself to her. To be her hero. Goodness knows she needed a hero after the emotional turmoil she'd experienced lately. But no, she was an independent woman; she could handle herself. She certainly didn't need a man to rescue her from some unseen danger.

Emily swallowed hard, her throat dry and tight. Could she handle herself in this situation?

Emily followed his gaze as he looked up at the high-sided valleys, before they locked eyes again. She couldn't help herself from studying his strong jawline and piercing eyes, which were both alluring and intimidating.

"We should leave this place," he said and reached for her arm. His touch sent shivers down her spine, but she wouldn't let it show.

Emily shrugged him off. "I was already heading back down before you stopped me. I think it's best if I go alone."

He glanced around and then retracted his hand. "I'll escort you," he said, determination in his voice.

"I can escort myself," Emily replied, defiance lacing her words. "Didn't you just hear what I said?" The man's gaze never wavered, and she found herself drawn to the intensity of his eyes.

"Please," he said, his eyes lighting up as if he had just remembered something. He stuffed his hand in his pocket and pulled out an ID card. "I'm with the Bear Creek Mountain Rescue."

Emily leaned forward and studied the ID card. It looked authentic. She glanced at the photo and then at him. As their eyes locked, something passed between them. Something soul deep. Something undeniable.

Emily hesitated, torn between her wariness and the strange magnetism of this mysterious man. She thought about her lonely nights and the silent ache in her heart that she couldn't quite fill. Could she trust him? Or was he just another person who would let her down?

"Fine," she said finally, her voice barely a whisper. "But I can take care of myself."

"Of course you can," he replied. "Shall we?"

Emily nodded, tearing her eyes from him. “We shall.”

She began to walk down the path, the man by her side. The atmosphere felt charged once again, as if something was lurking just beyond their vision.

At least they were walking in the right direction, Emily thought, trying to focus on that positive.

A deep rumbling filled the air. It was distant, yet enough to make the ground quiver.

“Is that thunder?” Emily looked up at the blue sky.

Within seconds, the rumble had turned into a roar, and loose stones slid down the surrounding mountainside. She turned to look up at the steep slopes above them. “Oh, my!” She turned to run, but before she could react, the man grabbed hold of her arm, his grip strong and firm, and dragged her forcibly down the trail.

He had almost inhuman strength as he practically lifted her off her feet. She screamed, or at least she thought she screamed. Emily wasn’t certain of anything other than that the world around them seemed to shift beneath her feet.

“Stay close,” he said, his voice an urgent shout. He wrapped his arm around her, shielding her from danger.

As they ran, Emily glanced back to see the trail swallowed by a wave of mud and rock as the mountainside slumped downward into the valley. Lumps of stone showered the ground around them, and Emily could hear trees cracking and splintering below them.

Ahead of them, Emily could see another wave of earth storming down the mountain.

“We’re not going to make it!” she yelled.

She heard the stranger grunt, and she was thrown sideways as he pulled them flat against a steep, rocky cliff face.

“Who are you?” she managed to ask between gasps for air. His only response was to hold her tighter, his eyes staying on the trail around them as it was swept away. It seemed as though he was hiding something, but Emily didn’t have the luxury of time to press further.

She clung to the man’s side, her heart pounding in her chest as the world crumbled around them. As she peeked out around his shoulder, she could see the shifting earth on either side of them. He’d managed to find a spot that

mostly sheltered them from the landslide, a rocky outcropping that wouldn't budge so easily.

Still, she could hear the thuds of rocks falling around them, and she winced with every grunt of pain the man gave as pieces of debris fell on him.

In all the chaos around her, one question was still clear in her mind—who was this man who had saved her from danger?

Chapter Three – Leif

Leif covered his mate's body with his own, shielding her from the relentless onslaught of rocks and debris. The landslide roared around them like a beast unleashed, drowning out all other sounds. As his hands touched her trembling form, a sudden jolt of recognition coursed through him, electric and undeniable. She tensed in his arms, and he knew she had felt it, too.

But this was not the time for introductions or explanations. Not until he knew she was safe.

Leif tightened his grip around her, his shifter instincts taking over as a large boulder rolled down the side of the valley. The ground shuddered as it crashed into another, throwing up a shower of smaller rocks that rained down on them. Or rather, on him. He gritted his teeth against the pain and looked up warily as the landslide subsided.

The barrage of rocks and earth slowed and before long, the world came once again to a standstill.

“Are you all right?” Leif asked, concern etched across his features.

His mate nodded hesitantly, her eyes wide with shock.

As the thick dust in the air settled, Leif slowly uncoiled his body, unwilling to put any distance between them. No distance at all. But as she stirred in his arms, he reluctantly let go of her completely.

What happens if she runs? his bear asked, a hint of panic in its voice.

She won't run, Leif assured him. Although he sounded surer than he felt.

“How did you know?” were the first words out of his mate's mouth as she eased herself away from him, her gaze cautious yet curious.

“I...” What was he supposed to say? Some invisible mystery creature had somehow guided him here?

Yeah, she's going to think you are crazy, his bear said tartly. *You'd better think of something fast.*

“There's been a lot of rain over the last few days,” Leif explained, grasping at straws. “The ground is saturated.”

His mate let out a snort and raised her eyebrow. “And so you knew this is exactly where there would be a landslide?”

She has you there, his bear conceded.

Leif rocked back on his heels and held out his hands to her, as if imploring her to understand. “I was following the trail and my...*instincts* told me that these high-sided valleys were particularly vulnerable to landslides.”

He nodded, liking the sound of his excuse, but the skeptical look in her eyes betrayed her disbelief.

Leif turned away from her. He felt a small shot of adrenaline as he stared at the destruction before him. The landslide had left a gaping wound in the mountainside, and a chill crept up his spine as he imagined how close she’d come to being crushed beneath the debris. He had put his trust in the strange creature that had led them here, and now she was safe—but for how long?

Leif stepped out from the small alcove they had sheltered in and surveyed the destruction. It looked like a giant hand had swept across the forest, uprooting rows of trees, which still cracked and creaked as they settled. Stone continued to shift and roll down the slope around them, but as he looked up at the scarred mountain, his pulse quickened.

He inclined his head to the right, as if listening for something. It wasn’t a sound that caught his attention, but a sensation clawing at the edges of his consciousness. The creature. He could feel its lingering presence, beckoning him toward it, somewhere farther into the mountains. But why? His mate was safe by his side, and that’s all that should have mattered.

Yet an instinctual part of him knew he couldn’t afford to take any chances; he needed to get her off the mountain, and fast.

“We should go,” Leif told her, his voice tense with urgency.

“We?” she asked, confusion etched on her face. “I can find my way down, you know.”

Leif shook his head, his jaw set. “I insist on going with you.”

“Look, I don’t want to keep you from your job or anything...”

“Trust me,” he interrupted. “My shift is over, and I’m heading down the mountain, anyway.” He hoped that would be enough to convince her, but she still seemed hesitant.

“How do you know there aren’t more people on the mountain? What if...” She glanced past him, and her eyes widened in shock as the reality of what had just happened sank in.

Leif had to stop himself from placing a hand on her shoulder to comfort

her. “We’ll look for others on the way down, but landslides tend to be localized.”

“Okay,” she agreed, brushing hair back from her face. Her hands trembled ever so slightly, betraying the fear she tried to hide.

“Are you okay?” Leif asked, genuine concern seeping into his voice.

She nodded, forcing a smile. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just...a little shaken up, that’s all.”

Leif scanned her with the expert eye of a man who had rescued more people than he could count. He instantly noted the paleness of her skin, and without a second thought, he unhooked his backpack and pulled out a water bottle. “Here,” he said, offering it to her. “You should drink something.”

“Thank you,” she replied, taking it with a trembling hand. As she sipped from the bottle, Leif felt a deep sense of protectiveness toward this woman—his mate.

Leif inched his hand out toward her, once more needing to offer his mate a comforting touch. But he closed his fingers and clenched his fist, painfully aware until she knew his secret it might seem inappropriate to touch her.

“My name is Leif,” he said suddenly, trying to bridge the gap between them.

“I read it on your ID.” She nodded as she handed his water bottle back to him, her fingers brushing against his for a brief moment, sending a shiver down his spine. He forced himself to keep his breath steady and not react.

“Here.” Leif handed her an energy bar, concern etched in the creases of his brow. “You should eat this.”

“I’m fine,” she told him, waving it away. The messy strands of her hair highlighted the paleness of her face, in contrast to her composed words.

“You look pale,” Leif insisted, his voice gentle but firm. “And it’s a long hike down to Bear Creek; you’ll need plenty of energy.”

“I’m not going to town,” she replied, her tone resolute, and a flicker of panic surged through him.

“You’re not?” Leif asked, trying to keep his voice level. What if she was simply out for a hike and she was going to get in her car and drive away?

The thought made him feel weak, and his bear rumbled its agreement deep within him. They would follow her wherever she went and convince her they were meant to be together.

His mate looked at him for a long moment before she accepted the energy bar and unwrapped it. Before she took a bite, she held out her hand to him. "My name is Emily," she said, giving him a soft smile that made his heart skip a beat. "I think the shock robbed me of my manners."

"Emily," Leif repeated, savoring the taste of her name on his tongue. It took him a moment to recover his composure as their hands met, leaving his palm tingling from her touch. "So, where are you heading to?" he asked, desperate to keep her near.

Emily covered her mouth as she chewed and swallowed the energy bar, her eyes never leaving his. "I'm heading to Mountain View," she told him.

"Mountain View?" Leif echoed, puzzled.

Isn't that Reginald Beauchamp's house? Leif's bear asked, his curiosity piqued.

Leif's eyes widened. *Yes, it is.*

He couldn't tell if the thought of her going to Reginald's house was worse than her planning to leave town.

His bear's agitation grew. *We will protect her from whatever or whoever means her harm.*

But we don't know if Reginald means her harm. For all we know, Emily might be a relation of Reginald's. Leif could see no family resemblance but that didn't mean Emily and Reginald were not family.

Just our luck, his bear grumbled, but that did not diminish their joy of finding their mate.

It doesn't matter who she is related to, Leif said as he turned away from her.

No, it does not, his bear agreed.

"We should go." Leif began leading the way down the mountain as he mulled over the new information.

"Is it safe?" Emily asked as she followed close behind him, placing her feet in the prints left by his boots.

Leif looked up at the sides of the valley and said, "Yes."

"How can you tell?" Emily asked, as they skirted around a pile of mud and loose boulders.

"Instinct," Leif replied and then added, "and experience."

“I’m sorry I was rude,” Emily told him. “I’m glad you are here to lead me safely down the mountain.”

“You’re welcome,” Leif said with a glance over his shoulder. “What brings you to Mountain View? Reginald Beauchamp owns it now, right?”

“He does,” Emily confirmed.

“How well do you know him?” Leif asked, attempting to quickly steer the conversation in a new direction as he took them around a large pile of loose rock.

Emily chewed thoughtfully on the energy bar, color beginning to return to her face. “I don’t know him too well at all,” she admitted between bites. “He was searching for someone to redesign the interior of the house, and I was looking for a job. I applied, showed him my designs, and he liked them.”

She finished her energy bar and screwed up the wrapper, tucking it into her pocket.

Leif realized he may have overstepped the boundaries of their fledgling relationship. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “How do you like working for him?”

Emily studied him for a moment, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Do *you* know Reginald?” she asked, her voice tinged with suspicion.

“Reginald is new in town, but we’ve met briefly,” Leif replied, trying to keep his tone neutral.

Emily nodded, seeming satisfied with his answer. “I’ve only been working for Mr. Beauchamp for a couple of days, but so far, I find him charming and easy to work for. We seem to be on the same wavelength where the designs are concerned, which is always a good sign.”

“It is.” Leif forced a smile, but his gut churned with unease. There was something about Reginald Beauchamp that set his bear on edge, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that Emily was in danger.

But it was likely just a leftover feeling from tracking the creature over the mountain. And the near-death experience in a landslide, of course.

“Mountain View is a wonderful house. It’s such a pity it’s been neglected for so long,” Emily said, as she carefully stepped over a thick tree branch.

Leif nodded in understanding. “The old man who owned it before lost his…” He paused, unsure whether to continue, glancing over his shoulder at her. But Emily urged him on with a nod, so he took a deep breath and said,

“He lost the woman he loved and pined away for a decade or more, with no interest in life, and kept the house like a mausoleum. He didn’t want to change a thing.”

Emily’s eyes misted with tears, and she clenched her jaw. “That’s such a sad story,” she whispered, her voice filled with empathy.

“It is. I can’t imagine the pain of losing the love of your life,” Leif murmured, watching the emotions play across Emily’s face.

She sighed, shaking her head. “It might be romantic, but it’s also sad that he couldn’t move on, that he couldn’t find joy in the world without her,” Emily said, looking away from Leif.

His gaze lingered on her profile, taking in the curve of her cheek and the way her hair framed her face. He couldn’t be sure, but she looked as if she was fighting back tears.

“Sometimes love is that strong, a bond is unbreakable,” Leif replied, his voice soft but unwavering.

Emily glanced sideways at him, a small smile tugging at her lips. “Are you a romantic, Leif?” she asked, her expression unreadable.

His cheeks warmed, but he didn’t shy away from her question. “I hope that one day I might know the same love,” he admitted, his gaze locked with hers.

“The love of *your* life?” Emily’s smile faltered, and she lowered her eyes. “In my experience, no love lasts forever,” she said quietly, a note of sadness in her voice.

Leif’s bear growled deep within him, urging him to convince her otherwise.

“I disagree,” he said, his voice gentle. He knew what he wanted to say next. *I hope I might have the chance to prove a love like this exists to you.* However, he wasn’t sure it was the right time to express those views.

Yes, his bear said. *It might be better to wait until we have known Emily for at least an hour.*

“So, have you moved to Bear Creek permanently?” Leif asked, trying to hide the hope in his voice.

“Temporarily,” Emily replied as she sucked in a breath. “Although I could see myself settling down here. The air is clear, and the mountains are incredible.” Her smile lit up her whole face. “Although I don’t know if the

mountains share the same sentiment since they just tried to kill me.”

She is incredible, his bear said.

She is, Leif agreed. *And she is ours.*

Not yet, his bear reminded him.

“I don’t think there’s a better place to live in all the world,” Leif agreed, wishing he could convince her right here, right now, that this was where she belonged. “And the mountains are usually much more welcoming.”

“Have you lived here your whole life?” Emily asked, as they continued down the mountain.

Leif nodded. “Yes. I was born and raised here. And I believe I have the best job in the world.”

“It must get lonely out here. Especially in the winter months when there are not so many tourists,” Emily observed.

Leif shrugged. “I like the solitude.”

At least he did before today. But now that he’d met his mate, he never wanted to be alone again.

Chapter Four – Emily

Emily slowed a little, staring at Leif's broad back as he walked on. She couldn't deny the inexplicable pull drawing her to him, but she couldn't quite understand it either.

Somehow, without even looking over his shoulder, Leif seemed to sense she had fallen behind. He slowed and turned to ask, "Are you all right?"

"Yes. All good." Emily began walking again and tried to remain focused on where she was treading, but her mind could not help but wander. And wonder...about Leif and how he came to be there at the exact time and place to save her life. She didn't quite buy the idea that his instincts and experience had brought him to her just in time to save her.

It seemed altogether too convenient. Yet she had no other explanation.

Leif smiled, his gaze searching as he said, "If you need to rest, just say the word and we can stop."

"I'm okay, honestly," Emily replied as she lengthened her stride to keep up with him.

However, as they walked, she could feel his concerned gaze on her when he thought she wasn't looking. It was as if she could sense him—as if they shared a connection.

Shaking her head, Emily pushed that thought from her mind. She had just moved to a new town where she didn't know anyone. It was natural to want to form connections with other people. Leif was simply part of the mountain rescue team who saved her life. It was more than reasonable to feel some connection to him after what they had gone through.

Or perhaps it was just that deep down, no matter how much she convinced herself she was fine, she was lonely. And had been for some time.

"Are you sure you are all right?" Leif's voice broke through her thoughts, worry etched into his rugged features.

"Y...yes. I'm fine." Emily forced a smile, though she felt anything but fine. Memories of her last relationship haunted her like an oppressive fog, weighing her down. She had never fully moved on, and she wasn't sure anyone would want the baggage that came with her. She pursed her lips. Part

of her didn't believe she deserved to be happy, to love again.

"Have you seen much of Bear Creek since you've been here?" Leif's question pulled her out of her reverie again.

"Not much," Emily admitted. "I've only been here for a couple of days. I'm just settling in."

Leif stared ahead for a moment before he suggested, "Maybe I could show you around the town." He stammered, adding, "Unless you have someone in your life."

"Someone in my life?" Emily raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued.

Leif's cheeks flushed pink beneath his sun-bronzed complexion. "I mean, you might have a husband." His eyes strayed to her ring finger, which was bare. "Or a boyfriend," he added hastily. "I wouldn't want to cause trouble."

Emily tried to suppress the flutter of excitement in her chest. "There is no husband or boyfriend. There is no *someone* in my life."

Leif's mouth twitched at the corners, and he seemed pleased with the news. Emily turned away, staring at the dense trees to her left as she smothered a smile.

She had never felt a connection like this with anyone before. At least not so instant. She barely knew this man's name, and she already felt like their lives were somehow intertwined. And, despite the uncertainty, it felt undeniably right.

"What the!" Emily almost screamed as she felt a hand clamp down on her shoulder.

She turned to see Leif crouching down and beckoning her to do the same before putting a finger to his lips, his eyes wide with urgency.

Panic rose in her chest again. Was there more danger lurking in the mountains? Another landslide, or worse?

But then Leif pointed through the trees, and Emily followed his gaze. *There*, a deer stood delicately in a small patch of sunlight that filtered through the leaves above. Its soft eyes were wide as it sniffed the air, ears twitching at the barely audible rustle of the forest around them. The scene was so serene, so enchanting. Emily held her breath in an attempt not to disturb the fragile moment.

The deer turned and nuzzled the small fawn next to her, who had been nearly invisible in the undergrowth. Emily's eyes pricked with tears as she

watched the tender interaction between mother and child. It was an idyllic scene, one she might have missed if Leif hadn't been there.

They remained silent side by side, watching as the mother deer led her baby deeper into the trees and out of view.

When Leif turned to grin at her, it took her breath away. He seemed so open and honest, not trying to impress her by being someone he wasn't.

That resonated with Emily. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice full of awe. "That was incredible."

"Wasn't it?" Leif replied, his voice low and reverent. "No matter how many times I see new life like that, it never gets old."

"You love these mountains," Emily observed, admiring the way his face beamed when he spoke about nature.

He smiled, a genuine smile that reached his eyes, and said, "I do. I know them like the back of my hand."

Emily straightened up, feeling a sudden boldness. "I think I'd like you to show me the mountains and all the hidden wonders I'd miss hiking on my own, as well as the town."

Leif's grin widened with enthusiasm. "I'd like that," he answered, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "I'd like that very much."

A blush crept up Emily's cheeks, realizing she may have come on a little strong.

Did *he* have a significant other? She didn't think so, considering his earlier advancements.

Emily turned away from Leif, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. She didn't want him to see how affected she was by his presence.

"Shall we walk on?" Leif asked.

"Of course." Emily glanced at the spot where they'd seen the deer and her baby. A twinge of sadness made her heart ache with longing.

Then she straightened her back and followed Leif along the trail for some time in comfortable silence.

With the landslide far behind them, it wasn't long before they were back on trails that Emily recognized. All too soon, they reached a fork in the road, and Emily felt a slight sinking feeling when she realized what that meant.

"This is me," she said, pointing toward Mountain View. She expected Leif

to go the other way, the other fork leading toward town and the mountain rescue center.

Leif hesitated for a moment, his eyes searching her face before finally speaking. "I'm going that way, too."

Emily wasn't sure she believed him, but she liked his company. With Leif, it all seemed so easy; there was no awkwardness in the silences that rested between them. Even though they had only just met, it felt as if she had known him forever.

She nodded, and they walked on together until they broke out from the trees and into the warm afternoon sun. A heat haze shimmered across the wild meadow around them, and the scent of damp earth and pine enveloped them.

After pausing for a moment to enjoy the view, they cut across the meadow and followed a winding trail. Emily continued to be wrapped up in her thoughts until she heard a chuckle from beside her.

"Everything all right?" Emily asked with a wry smile.

Leif nodded. "Yes, I was just thinking whether earlier was the most dangerous situation I've been in or not, but I've just remembered one of the funnier *rescues* I've been a part of."

"Care to share?" Emily asked.

"We got this call one afternoon from a tourist up on the mountain. They were in full-blown panic, telling us about some 'wild animal' blocking the trail. It was pretty close to town, so we of course rushed out prepared to deal with a bear, or a mountain lion that was a danger to the town." Leif stifled a laugh. "But as we crept up the trail, it wasn't a growl we heard, but a very deep *meow!*"

"It was a cat?" Emily exclaimed.

"Oh yes. A chubby tabby cat had followed its owner up the trail but had only got so far before deciding it was a good place to nap. It found a spot, on top of a ridge, just poking out of the bushes, so all the hikers thought it was a mountain lion."

"Really?" Emily asked, her voice laced with giggles. "So the 'ferocious beast' was just sunbathing?"

"Yep." Leif nodded. "Totally oblivious to all the chaos it had caused. When I picked it up, it just looked at me, as if to say, 'Took you long

enough.”

Emily laughed at the absurdity of the situation, her affection for the man beside her growing as he chuckled with her.

What more could a woman ask for than a man who made her laugh?

As they rounded the trail bend, Mountain View appeared before them, nestled in a clearing in the trees. It was a stunning house, made of stone, imposing yet harmoniously blending with its surroundings. They stopped walking and stood side by side, taking in the breathtaking sight.

“When I first saw this house, it took my breath away,” Emily murmured.

Leif nodded in agreement. “The house has been a part of Bear Creek’s history. It’s as old as the town itself. At least parts of it.”

Emily looked away from the house to Leif. “I’d love to hear more about the history of Mountain View. Maybe I could incorporate certain features into my designs.”

“Maybe I could tell you more over dinner?” Leif suggested, his gaze steady on hers.

“Is that an invitation?” Emily boldly asked, unsure what had gotten hold of her since she’d met her handsome rescuer.

Leif smiled warmly, his eyes full of promise. “Yes.”

She hesitated for a moment, her inner conflict clear in the furrow of her brow. Was she ready?

“All right,” she finally agreed. “I’d like that.”

In fact, she decided she would like that a lot.

As Leif smiled, looking relieved, she grinned back at him before ducking her head, feeling a little shy.

But in a good way. She liked being around him. He made her smile. He made her heart feel lighter. Her world seem brighter.

Goodness, next thing she’d be convincing herself that love at first sight truly existed.

And that was just the stuff of fairy tales.

“I’ll pick you up at seven?” Leif asked, his gaze darkening a little as his eyes drifted toward Mountain View.

Emily sensed an uneasiness in him. Was the history of Mountain View dark, filled with treachery and murder? She certainly hadn’t gotten that vibe

from the house.

But then the house was made of stone and timber. It wasn't a living thing.

Yet, she'd always felt as if a house spoke to her. When she placed her hands on the walls, it was as if she could feel the house, like a living, breathing thing.

She'd better not tell Leif about that side of herself just yet or he'd think she was crazy. And maybe she was.

"Seven would be perfect," Emily told him. "Or I could drive to town and meet you there. I don't want you to come out of your way..."

"It's not out of my way," he assured her, his eyes locked with hers. "Have a great rest of your day, Emily. I'll see you soon."

"See you soon," she murmured as he turned and walked away, leaving her staring after him until he was out of view, swallowed up by the forest.

And still she stood there, staring after him.

She shivered as the hairs on the back of her neck rose, and the air filled with static electricity once more. Emily rubbed the back of her neck as she turned to look at the sky.

Was there a storm coming? But the sky was clear.

Perhaps it was a natural phenomenon, something peculiar to the mountain.

She could ask Leif about it on their date.

Wait, was it a date? He'd asked her to dinner. Perhaps he was just being welcoming.

But as she turned away and continued on to Mountain View, she hoped it was more.

As she entered the grounds, she spotted Reginald standing on the veranda that ran along one side of the house, binoculars in hand. He raised his arm and waved at her, a friendly smile showing on his aged face.

A sudden thought struck Emily. Had he been watching her and Leif as they descended the mountain?

No, she chided herself internally. That was just paranoia speaking. There was an abundance of birds in the area; he was probably just birdwatching. She forced a smile onto her face and waved back, calling out, "Afternoon!"

"Ah, Emily," Reginald said as he approached her, his eyes filled with curiosity. "Did you enjoy your hike?"

“It was...eventful,” she laughed, a little weakly. She was only just realizing how exhausted she was.

Reginald’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh? How so?”

“Um, well, there was a landslide in one of the valleys,” Emily explained, hesitating for a moment before adding, “I was saved by a member of the mountain rescue team.”

“A landslide? I thought that I had heard rumbling.” Concern washed over Reginald’s face. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, thanks to Leif,” she said, her cheeks warming at the mention of his name. “He seemed to have a sixth sense about the landslide.”

“Leif, you say?” Reginald’s tone held a note of intrigue.

“Yes.” Emily nodded, noting Reginald’s change of tone. “Do you know him?”

“A little. He’s one of the Bear Creek Guardians.”

“The what?”

Reginald smiled wryly. “The Bear Creek Guardians. They’re quite the local legends, descendants of the town’s original founders supposedly. Even with your short time here, I’m surprised you hadn’t heard of them.” Reginald eyed her carefully, taking in her reaction.

“Really?” Emily looked up at the distant mountain top, suddenly more interested in learning about these guardians. “I’m having dinner with Leif tonight. He’s going to tell me more about Mountain View’s history.”

Reginald’s jaw clenched momentarily, and Emily wondered if he was going to advise her against meeting Leif. But his expression quickly cleared. “It’s good that you’re making friends here. Perhaps you could pass on any information about the house to me? I’d love to learn more about my home.”

“Of course,” Emily agreed, though she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was an undercurrent of tension between them.

With a nod, Reginald walked away, leaving her staring into the distance, trying to spot a trace of the captivating and mysterious Leif.

She leaned on the railing that ran around the veranda as she quietly sorted through the hectic events of the day. Somehow, just when she had begun to figure out her feelings, she only felt more conflicted. On the one hand, she felt drawn to Leif, as if they shared some unspoken connection. And he had saved her life.

On the other, Reginald's reaction had left her feeling uneasy.

She wasn't sure how she felt about the idea of the town being run by some mysterious group of 'Guardians.' But if her time spent with Leif was anything to go by, maybe they weren't so bad.

With a sigh, Emily pushed those thoughts aside for now. She had a job to do, after all.

Chapter Five – Leif

Leif shifted and ran through the forest, his paws sinking into the soft rain-soaked ground. Every fiber of his being wanted to turn around and go back to Emily, but he resisted the urge and ran on, putting one paw firmly in front of the other.

Although it was a harder climb, Leif and his bear made sure to stick to solid ground, wary of the potential of another landslide.

As he climbed higher, he could feel the connection between him and Emily stretching out, fading, but never breaking.

The bear stopped as he crested a ridge and turned to look back at Mountain View, nestled in the lower woodlands. He couldn't see Emily, but he could sense her presence. And he could sense Reginald, too.

Leif's bear ground his back teeth together and screwed up his short snout as jealousy swept over him like a bitter wind.

Emily is ours, and ours alone, Leif reminded his inner bear, trying to calm the storm within him.

His bear snorted and replied, *I'm not worried about Emily in that way. It's Reginald's behavior that bothers me. I don't trust him, and I don't believe he's a good guy.*

Maybe we're just being paranoid, Leif reassured his bear, feeling the weight of his own insecurities. *Just because we don't like him or believe him to be a good guy doesn't mean that Reginald is necessarily a bad guy. We need to trust in our mate and her instincts toward Reginald.*

Leif's bear huffed.

Emily is more than capable of looking out for herself, Leif continued, remembering how she was wary of him when they first met on the mountain before the landslide. *We can't forget that she has her own mind and intuition.*

As he stood there, fur bristling in the cool mountain air, Leif knew he had to trust Emily. If they were truly fated mates, their connection would be strong enough to withstand any challenge. Even the mysterious Reginald Beauchamp.

Let's go home, Leif said to his bear.

With a snort, the bear turned away from Mountain View, paws pounding against the damp earth as they continued their journey toward Bearheart Ridge.

Lost in his own thoughts of his mate, the journey home flew by. Leif's bear slowed his pace as they trudged up the road that cut through the ridge and toward the small cluster of houses that the guardians called home.

Each step forward was another step farther away from Emily and seemed harder to take than the last.

The bear turned his eyes from the road and toward the houses.

They couldn't see anyone. Unusual. Leif pushed out his shifter senses. The other guardians were gathered at Thane's house, their energy swirling through the air like a tangible force.

Sable, his bear was suddenly consumed with the need to get to their leader's house as fast as possible.

Is it time? Leif's breath caught in his throat.

Was *Sable* about to have her baby—the first of a new generation of guardians? Was that why everyone had gathered there?

They dashed forward and sprinted toward their leader's house.

When they were less than ten feet away, Leif shifted, momentarily disappearing from the world. When he returned to his human form, he jogged forward on two legs instead of four toward the door. The news of his mate was pushed to the back of his mind as concern for *Sable* took over.

A new life, a new beginning.

Just as we have our own new beginning, Leif's bear rumbled happily. *We have found our mate.*

We have. A smile tugged at the corners of Leif's lips as he conjured up the image of Emily in his mind. She was beautiful, everything they had ever dreamed of.

At the thought of her, Leif slowed, glancing over his shoulder, sensing her presence in the distance. So near and yet so far.

We need to be patient, his bear reminded him.

We do, Leif murmured, an ache settling deep within his chest. He didn't want to be patient.

Soon, his bear said. *Soon we will reveal ourselves to Emily, and we will*

live together here in Bearheart Ridge.

Perhaps, if they were lucky, they too would have a child—a new Bear Creek Guardian of their own.

The thought sent warmth spiraling through Leif's veins, chasing away the chill of the mountain air. He had always longed for a mate and children. He longed to teach his children all he knew about the mountains and their secrets. He wanted to pass down the knowledge he'd gained over the many years he'd spent traversing the terrain, helping those in need and protecting the environment he loved so dearly.

As Leif reached Thane's front door, he noticed how quiet everything seemed. There was no sound of a child crying, nor could he sense Sable in distress.

His inner bear rumbled in assurance—the baby had not come yet.

Leif took a deep breath before making his way around to the back of the house. He was met with the familiar sight of Thane's well-tended backyard, complete with carefully arranged alpine flowers and shrubs. The kitchen door stood wide open, as if inviting him inside. As he stepped over the threshold, his gaze met the expectant faces of the other guardians.

"Is everything all right?" Thane asked, leaning against the counter, concern knitting his brow.

Leif looked around the room, puzzled by their expressions. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"We were wondering if you were involved in a rescue since you're so late," Tavish replied, taking a casual sip of his beer.

"Late?" Leif echoed, his confusion deepening.

Stellan chuckled, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "Did you get hit on the head and forget we were meeting today?"

Leif's brow creased as he forced himself to stop thinking about Emily and focus on his duty as a guardian. Her laughter still rang in his ears, but he knew he couldn't afford to be distracted now.

Heath got up from the table and went to the fridge, pulling out a bottle of Bear Creek Honey Beer. He popped it open before handing it to Leif. "Here, you look like you need this."

Leif's hand trembled slightly as he accepted the drink, acutely aware of the curious and concerned gazes from his fellow guardians. He took a sip, the

honeyed liquid soothing his parched throat.

Cormac rose from his seat, placing a large hand on Leif's shoulder and guiding him to sit down. "You look as if you've seen a ghost," he murmured, his voice gravelly with concern.

Leif shook his head. "No, not a ghost." He paused for a moment, struggling to force words out.

A hushed silence fell over the room, broken only by the steady ticking of the kitchen clock. Leif could feel the heat rising in his cheeks.

"My mate." Leif shook his head, as if he could hardly comprehend the news himself that he'd found his mate.

Tavish nearly choked on his beer and Stellan clapped him hard on the back, while the others stared at Leif for a moment, their eyes wide with disbelief. Then, as one, it was as if the news sank in, and the guardians gathered in Thane's kitchen exploded in a chorus of congratulations.

"Now, that is a good excuse for being late," Thane said, grinning widely at Leif, his dark eyes sparkling with mirth.

Leif ducked his head and hid a smile, feeling the warmth of camaraderie enveloping him like a bear hug. The sense of love and goodwill in the room was overwhelming, and for a moment, he allowed himself to bask in it.

"Come on, tell us all about it," Tavish urged, his voice tinged with envy.

Leif glanced up at his friend, whose eyes betrayed a longing for the same happiness, the same wonder at the world that filled Leif now. It was magical, truly magical, to meet that person who was a perfect match, the person fate had chosen to be your true love, your soul mate.

Of course, it would be even more magical when that person, our Emily, knew the truth, his bear grumbled inside him, but there was humor in its voice.

"I was out on the mountain..." Leif paused, his expression clouding as shadows danced across his face.

"Leif?" Thane asked quietly, concern etched into the lines of his face.

"You saw the creature," Stellan murmured, his voice barely audible over the sound of Tavish setting down his beer.

Leif nodded, feeling a chill run down his spine at the memory. "At least I saw the footprints in the mud, and then I sensed it."

“Wow.” Tavish ran a hand through his hair and blew the air out of his cheeks, clearly shaken by the implications.

“Yeah, it was intense,” Leif agreed, his voice rough with emotion.

“Tell us what happened,” Cormac encouraged, his usually controlled demeanor giving way to curiosity. He leaned forward, his eyes locked on Leif’s face as if trying to read the tale from his expression.

“I followed the trail of footprints,” Leif said, feeling for a moment as though he were back on the mountainside. “They led me to a high-sided valley. And there she was.” His heart swelled at the memory of Emily, standing there in the stunning scenery, her eyes wide with wonder and fear. She looked so fragile, so human, yet she had an inner strength that called to both him and his bear.

“And then what happened?” Thane asked quietly, his voice tense with anticipation.

“There was a landslide, the biggest I think I’ve ever seen.” Leif lifted his head and looked at each of them, watching as their expressions grew serious.

Leif’s pulse quickened as he relived the terrifying moment, the landslide roaring like a freight train in his ears. He’d lunged forward, grabbing his fated mate and shielding her with his body. The fear of losing her had tightened its grip on his heart, making it hard to breathe.

“But you saved her?” Cormac asked, his voice hoarse from emotion.

“Of course, he saved her,” Heath croaked, trying to sound confident. “Or else he wouldn’t be sitting here now.” Yet there was a hint of uncertainty in Heath’s tone.

Leif nodded, swallowing hard. “I saved her, although I don’t know what would’ve happened if I hadn’t gotten there in time.”

“You mean if the creature hadn’t guided you there?” Cormac asked seriously.

“Yes,” Leif replied. The feeling of anxiety at some unknown danger continued to gnaw at him.

It doesn’t bear thinking about, his bear growled.

No, it doesn’t, Leif agreed silently. But think of it, they must. This creature was bound to them in ways they did not understand. Perhaps it was time they tried to comprehend the connection.

“So you arrived in time because the creature guided you there?” Thane

asked. Although phrased as a question, it was clearly a statement, his authoritative tone leaving no room for doubt. As the leader of the Bear Creek Guardians, he commanded the respect and obedience of all those present.

“Yes,” Leif said, his voice barely audible. “I was nowhere near the valley. I had no idea there would be a landslide.”

Cormac nodded and said, “You were lucky you saw the tracks.”

Leif pressed his lips together before taking a swig of his beer, the bitter taste doing little to wash away the lingering unease.

“What is it, Leif?” Thane approached him and placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it slightly.

“I can still feel it now,” Leif admitted, his eyes distant, as if still searching for any sign of the strange creature in the distant mountain.

As Leif’s words hung in the air, the group exchanged glances filled with concern and uncertainty. The Bear Creek Guardians were no strangers to danger, but the creature that had led Leif to his mate was something they couldn’t quite grasp. Its motives were unclear, and its connection to them remained a mystery.

Leif looked up at Thane, his eyes meeting the steadfast gaze of the Bear Creek Guardians’ leader. Thane’s grip tightened on Leif’s shoulder, fingers digging in just enough to remind him that he wasn’t alone in this. “You can still feel it now?” Thane repeated, a note of concern lacing his words.

“Yes,” Leif nodded and took another deep slug of beer, feeling the cold liquid slide down his throat before settling heavily in his stomach. He needed the familiar sensation to anchor himself as his inner bear rumbled with unease.

“But your mate...” Thane paused, then cast off the serious tone, “Tell us about her!”

Leif sucked in a breath, a smile briefly returning to his face as he pictured her in his mind. “Her name is Emily,” he began, hesitating before pushing past the lump in his throat. “She’s an interior designer.” Another pause.

“And?” Cormac prodded, refusing to let him off the hook.

Leif’s jaw clenched. “And she works for Reginald Beauchamp,” Leif admitted, watching as surprise flickered across the faces of his companions.

“Your mate works for Reginald Beauchamp?” Cormac asked, his tone a mix of disbelief and concern. It was no secret that the man had been viewed

with suspicion ever since he arrived in Bearheart Ridge.

Leif nodded slowly, feeling the knot in his chest tighten. “Yes. Emily is an interior designer, and she’s helping Reginald with his house, Mountain View.”

“Leif...” Thane’s hand remained on Leif’s shoulder, steadying him. “Do you believe the creature is warning you of danger to Emily at Mountain View?”

Leif shook his head. “No, I can sense the creature way up in the mountains. Higher than the valley where the landslide happened.”

Stellan rose from his seat and circled the table to crouch beside Leif. Thane stepped back, making room for Stellan’s practiced hands as they examined Leif for any signs of injury. “Did you get hurt in the landslide?” Stellan asked, casting a glance at Leif’s head, presumably to see if he had actually hit his head.

“No,” Leif replied, pushing Stellan’s hand away. “And the feeling is not in my head.”

“Well, it is,” his bear muttered, its voice grumbling like distant thunder.

You know what I mean, Leif shot back silently, struggling to maintain his composure. *You can sense it, too; it’s not our imagination.*

No, his bear sighed, conceding the point. *It’s not our imagination.*

“Stress can sometimes make us see or feel things that are not there.” Stellan tried to explain the situation at hand logically. But Leif knew better.

“This isn’t stress,” Leif insisted, his voice barely above a whisper. “I fear it’s an omen, a harbinger of doom.”

“Doom?” Thane echoed, his brow furrowing with concern. “What do you mean?”

Leif met Thane’s gaze, his own eyes reflecting the gravity of his words. Any sign of the creature brought with it nothing but danger. And now, it seemed it was here to stay.

“Our doom,” he replied steadily, “the doom of the Bear Creek Guardians.”

Chapter Six – Emily

Emily couldn't get Leif out of her head as she stood in the large room that she hoped to transform into an elegant living room. The space was flooded with natural light, illuminating the antique wooden floors and the high, beamed ceilings. Intricate crown molding adorned the edges where walls met ceiling, adding a touch of historic charm to the room. The large windows framed the breathtaking view, with lush forests stretching up to the rugged peaks of the mountain.

Reginald had given her free rein on the designs to a certain extent, his only proviso being that he got the final say on the exact design before work began. So far, they had worked well together, and Reginald had been enthusiastic about her ideas. But her designs were still very much a work in progress.

Her next steps were to simply spend some time in the room to see if it would 'talk' to her, and perhaps give her some more inspiration. She wanted to spend the next few days studying the light as it changed throughout the day. Emily was also excited to hear Leif's stories about the house and incorporate any details into her designs.

Her footsteps over the hardwood floor echoed through the room as she walked to the window and looked out at the mountains. They seemed so wild and untamed, much like the man she met out there today, Leif. There was definitely something about him, something unique. As for his smile... Her stomach flipped at the memory of his soft smile and the warmth of his touch. Not to mention his strong arms that he wrapped around her when he shielded her from the landslide.

And that led to one more mystery: how did he possibly know that she was in danger? There was no way he could have sensed the landslide. Was it luck? Fate?

Her eyes were locked on the distant horizon as if mesmerized by some unseen force. She wrapped her arms around herself, craving the warmth of an embrace she could only dream of—Leif's strong arms enveloping her, making her feel safe. A shiver ran down her spine as she imagined his breath tickling her ear, whispering sweet nothings laced with promises of protection.

But deep down, Emily knew the truth: no one could shield another person

from all harm, and it was dangerous to believe otherwise. She sighed, the weight of reality settling like a leaden cloak on her shoulders and turned away from the window. It was time to focus on work; perhaps losing herself in the task at hand would help keep thoughts of Leif at bay.

As she pivoted, her heart leaped into her throat at the sight of Reginald standing across the room, his piercing gaze fixed on her. The corners of his lips curled into an enigmatic smile. How long had he been standing there, watching her? And why hadn't he announced his arrival?

"Reginald," Emily stammered, forcing a smile onto her lips even as he unnerved her. "I didn't hear you come in." She remembered her parents' worried expressions when she told them about her new job in a remote mountain mansion. She suddenly felt that their concern for her safety was valid.

"You seemed miles away," Reginald replied smoothly, his features softening. "I didn't want to disturb your reverie." He approached her, each step measured and deliberate.

Emily forced herself to relax and let her hands drop to her sides. Her nerves were still frayed after the events of the day. "I was just drawing inspiration from the mountain views for my final designs."

"Ah, yes." Reginald nodded, eyes alight with anticipation. "I can't wait to see what you've come up with. Your transformation of this room will be nothing short of remarkable, I'm sure."

"Thank you," Emily replied, as she returned his smile. "I can't wait to see the end results either."

She couldn't deny that the opportunity to transform such a beautiful house had been a major factor in accepting the job. Perhaps, she mused, it was because she hoped that by transforming the house, she might somehow transform herself.

Emily chastised herself inwardly for indulging in such whimsical thoughts, knowing all too well that true change came from within. However, she did feel different after the earlier events of the day. Perhaps near-death experiences gave people a new perspective on life.

As the smile faded from her face, Emily turned away from Reginald and back toward the window. The vibrant hues of the setting sun painted the sky with glorious streaks of orange and pink, transforming the light in the room. The mountain that had nearly taken her life only hours before now seemed so

calm and serene.

She took a slow breath of the warm evening air.

Emily had never told Reginald about her reasons for taking the job. She had told herself that it was healthy to keep a distance between herself and her employer. Emily had come to realize that she would like to keep a distance between herself and everyone. It was a self-preservation tactic she'd developed, at first, without even realizing.

Yet, as the image of Leif floated into her mind, she realized that part of her yearned to let him in. Could she trust him enough to reveal her inner scars? The thought both thrilled and terrified her.

He's still a stranger! Emily thought to herself. How could she even be considering letting down her defenses, letting someone know her like no one has in years, when that person had been in her life for a mere few hours?

As if summoned by her thoughts, she sensed Reginald approaching and quietly standing beside her in front of the window.

"The moment I saw this view, I knew I had to have this house," he said, his voice low and tinged with nostalgia.

Emily quickly brushed her hand across her eyes, composing herself before turning toward him. "Why did you choose to move to Bear Creek? Surely not just to live in this house?"

Reginald stared into the distance, his gaze lost in thought, or perhaps trapped in memories of a past she knew nothing about. Despite her attempts at researching him, she'd found little online beyond his business dealings. The man himself was a mystery. One she did not want to unravel.

"I have a personal connection to this town," he finally replied, straightening up and facing her with a guarded expression.

Emily raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. "A family connection? Like ancestors who lived here?"

Emily studied Reginald's face as his expression darkened for a split second, like the fleeting shadow of a cloud passing over the sun. Then he smiled brightly and said, "No family connection."

However, Emily wasn't sure she believed him; there was something disingenuous about his sudden smile. But she kept her words guarded. "Well, you certainly have a beautiful house. I imagine many people would have traveled to live in such a place. And once the interior is done, it's going to be

spectacular.”

Reginald nodded in agreement as he turned, his gaze sweeping the empty room with an air of pride. “I plan to make this the best house in town,” he declared, “one everyone will envy.”

Emily kept the frown from her face. It was a strange thing to say, but then again, there wasn’t anything wrong with being proud of your home. Her livelihood depended on people wanting that. “I’ll do whatever I can to help you make your dreams come true,” she offered earnestly.

Reginald smiled wryly and shook his head. “My dreams can never come true.” He jerked his head up as if he hadn’t meant to say that out loud. But he met her gaze as he added, “As you know, we all have a past—things we wished were different, things that are outside of our control.”

Emily’s cheeks flushed pink at his words. What did Reginald mean by that? Did he do a background check on her? Of course he would have, and certainly more in-depth than a simple Google search. He was allowing her to come live in and renovate his home after all. A rich man like Reginald Beauchamp would do a *very* in-depth background check to make sure she wasn’t a threat to him or his fortune. Yet it unnerved her to think that he might have intimate knowledge of her and her past. And why bring it up now?

The sun cast long shadows across the room as Emily moved away from Reginald and crossed the spacious living area. Her footsteps echoed on the polished hardwood floor as she fetched her sketchbook. Clutching it to her chest, she turned back toward him and said, “I’m going to go and sit out on the veranda and work on my ideas.”

She berated herself for sounding as if she was asking Reginald’s permission to leave. But he had that kind of air about him. Commanding. Yes, that was how she would describe it. Emily sensed that Reginald was used to getting what he wanted.

As he nodded at her and then turned back to stare at the view—the distant mountains framed by the large window—she caught something in his eyes. Sadness? Perhaps there was something in his past that he could not attain, and that was what had driven him to be the man he was today. Emily could understand how adversity could drive a person: it was often the scars others didn’t see that affected their lives the most. They were there, hidden beneath the surface, but others had no clue.

“Enjoy the evening,” Reginald said, his voice resonating throughout the sparse room. “It is a beautiful sunset tonight.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, feeling a sudden sense of sorrow and sympathy for Reginald. Had he sacrificed his happiness, or maybe a chance, with the love of his life for his business, only to regret it later on when it was too late?

Emily left the room, the door clicking softly behind her as she headed to the kitchen, needing a hot cup of tea to warm the chill in her bones. Maybe over the course of the renovation, Reginald might open up to her and tell her about his past.

As she wound her way through the large house to the kitchen, she smiled to herself, doubting Reginald would ever reveal his secrets. There were parts of oneself that one wanted to keep private, parts too shameful or hurtful to reveal even to those trusted the most.

And that was why people ran away to houses in the mountains.

Chapter Seven – Leif

Leif's hand clenched the cold beer bottle as the others stared at him. He felt uncomfortable being the center of attention in this way. The atmosphere in the kitchen had turned ominous, heavy like the clouds that had clung to the mountains surrounding Bearheart Ridge for the past week.

Beneath it all, he could still sense the creature lurking up in those peaks. Was it mocking him?

“Gee, I thought when a shifter found his mate, it was all sunshine and rainbows,” Heath remarked, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he tried to lighten the mood. “Not doom and gloom.”

Leif offered an apologetic smile, feeling the weight of their gazes on him like a bear caught in a trap. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled, his throat tight. “Maybe it is an overreaction to finding my mate.”

And maybe he should have kept this revelation to himself.

The urge to escape the kitchen, to go to his house and find sanctuary there, welled up inside Leif. He didn't like the way the others were looking at him.

They aren't judging you, his bear reassured him. They're simply surprised. That's all. They're worried about you.

“All right,” Thane leaned against the kitchen counter, his arms crossed over his broad chest. “What do you propose we do?” His calm, reassuring voice had guided them through many dangerous encounters. With people and the mountain environment. Both of which could be harsh and unrelenting.

“Me?” Leif asked in surprise, shifting uncomfortably under the scrutinizing gaze of the guardians' leader.

Yes. What should we do? His bear urged him to answer. *You are the one who can sense the creature, not them.*

I am, Leif agreed.

Was that a sign? Had he gotten it wrong? Could the creature be a harbinger of his own doom rather than the guardians'? Surely if this was about all of them, they would all be able to sense the creature.

“Leif,” Thane repeated, his calm and reassuring voice contrasting sharply with the intensity of his stare. “We're all working blind regarding this. What

do you propose we do?”

Leif opened his mouth to speak, closing it when he realized he didn't know what to say. He was used to leading mountain rescue teams through treacherous conditions, but he had never been in charge of the guardians. That was Thane's domain, and he was the best leader they could hope for.

“Maybe... Maybe I should investigate further before we decide on a course of action,” Leif suggested hesitantly.

“I agree.” Thane nodded, his expression softening slightly. “You know these mountains better than anyone. If you can track the creature, we might figure out exactly what it wants.”

“What it *wants*?” Cormac asked. “You think this is more than the creature simply warning us that...” Cormac glanced sideways at Leif.

“That my mate is in danger.” Leif swallowed hard, feeling the burden settle heavily on his shoulders. If he alone could sense the creature, then it was his responsibility to find answers. Because those answers might save his mate.

But from what? his bear asked.

I hope we never find out, Leif answered.

That was his hope. That whatever danger might lurk out there would fade away. After all, if his senses were true, the creature was way up in the mountains.

Higher than most hikers ever ventured.

So all we have to do is keep Emily from hiking too far and she'll be safe, his bear said confidently.

If only it was that easy. Leif grasped the beer bottle tighter in his hand, as if its chill could somehow help him keep a clear head and guide him through the storm brewing around him.

“We don't know enough about this creature to know for sure what it wants or what its purpose is.” Thane looked around the kitchen with the air of authority of the Bear Creek Guardians leader. “We know that so far, it's guided us to our mates when they are in danger, just as it guided Leif to his mate today.”

“But we don't know if it's capable of more than that,” Stellan added solemnly.

“Exactly,” Thane replied. “Today, it led Leif to Emily and saved her from

a landslide. What if it knows we are in danger?”

“By *we*, you mean the Bear Creek Guardians?” Tavish asked.

“Or the town itself,” Thane added.

“The town,” Stellan whispered, and his gaze drifted to the distant buildings through the window.

“Exactly. The weather we’ve had lately might have made the mountain unsafe. The creature might be trying to alert us to a more widespread danger.” Thane’s words were met with concerned faces.

“I’ll hunt this creature and find out what it wants.” Leif stood abruptly.

“Wait.” Thane reached for Leif and grabbed his arm as he made to leave. “You aren’t in this alone.”

Leif’s mouth twitched up at the corners. “I know that. I know that you have my back, just as I have yours.”

“But this is different,” Thane said, his voice low and serious. “We don’t know what kind of danger we’re up against. We need to be prepared.”

Leif nodded, knowing that Thane was right. The creature they were dealing with was unlike anything they had encountered before. It was powerful, mysterious, in ways they could not comprehend and had a purpose that they couldn’t decipher.

Yet.

They needed to gather as much information as they could before taking any action.

“We’ll need to do some research,” Stellan said, breaking the silence that had fallen over them.

“I agree,” Thane said. “And we’ll have to be discreet. We don’t want to cause a panic among the townspeople.”

Tavish nodded in agreement. “I’ll start with the local legends and myths. Maybe there’s something in there that can give us a clue.”

“I’ll check with the local historians and see if there have been any similar incidents in the past,” Heath suggested.

“And I will look into any recent geological activity in the area,” Stellan added. “Maybe there’s a correlation between the creature’s appearance and the mountain’s instability.”

The mountain’s instability? Leif’s bear moaned.

The mountain had been part of their lives and those of their ancestors. In all the stories passed down from generation to generation, none had mentioned the mountain being unstable.

Sure, there had been minor rockslides, and a handful of serious avalanches, but nothing major, nothing that would ever threaten the town.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” Thane held up a steadying hand. “There could be a simple explanation.”

The other guardians all looked anywhere but at Leif. The simplest explanation was that his mate was still in danger.

“When you sensed the creature before,” Leif began, “did the sense of it fade once your mate was safe?”

Thane nodded. “I could feel the creature near on a couple of different occasions, but not continuously, as you seem to.”

Leif nodded. “The creature led me to Emily, but when I found her, it instantly seemed to shift location.”

“That isn’t what I felt,” Stellan announced. “Like Thane, when my mate was safe, I could no longer sense it.”

“Perhaps along with tracking the creature, we should also be guarding Emily,” Cormac suggested.

If anyone is going to guard our mate, it should be us, his bear said indignantly.

But we are the only ones who can sense the creature. If anyone is going to hunt it, it’s us, Leif reminded him.

If only we could split ourselves in two, his bear said. *If only one of us could track the creature and one of us could guard our mate.*

But that was impossible. They could not both exist in the same world at the same time. No matter how much they wanted to.

Leif’s put his palm to his forehead as realization hit him. “I need to cancel my dinner plans with Emily,” he said dejectedly. “But I don’t have her phone number.”

Cormac looked at him with concern and almost disbelief. “You’re going to *cancel* on your mate?”

“Look, I have no choice if I intend to go and hunt the creature,” Leif replied, steeling himself for the pain he’d feel at letting Emily down.

“Leif, you should keep to your plans with your mate,” Thane said firmly.

“What about the creature? What about the danger to the town?” Leif asked.

“Trust me,” Thane continued, his voice filled with conviction, “if the town is in that much danger, then the creature will make itself known to all of us.”

Stellan nodded in agreement, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. “Leif, you’re not *that* special,” he teased, trying to bring some humor to the situation.

Leif let out a long breath, his chest tightening with anticipation. He couldn’t wait to meet his mate again and get to know her.

And make sure she is quite safe. His bear growled softly.

Yes, he agreed. He needed to ensure her safety above all else.

“By the end of the evening, the feeling you have might fade,” Stellan said hopefully. “It might be an anomaly, a residue of the creature left over from the warning about the landslide. Especially if it was a very stressful moment.”

“Listen to the doctor,” Thane advised, his eyes focused on Leif.

“And this doctor advises you to go meet your mate, have a wonderful evening, and relax,” Stellan added, his tone warm and reassuring.

Leif hesitated before bolting out of his chair and stepping toward the door. “I’ll take your advice,” he said, glad to meet with Emily sooner rather than later.

However, he experienced a twinge of frustration that they seemed to be back to suggesting this was all in his head. He was convinced it was not, and as he stepped outside Thane’s house, he could still sense the creature lurking at the edge of his consciousness. It was like an itch he couldn’t scratch, lingering at the back of his mind.

And he suspected it wasn’t going anywhere. The creature, whatever its desires, had not moved for hours, as if waiting for Leif. And Leif didn’t know how long he could resist the need to go to it, the pull growing stronger with each passing moment.

With a heavy sigh, Leif forced himself to focus on Emily, pushing aside thoughts of the creature for now. He needed to honor his promise to his friends and to himself, while ensuring that his mate remained safe and secure.

The creature hadn’t gone anywhere yet, despite Stellan’s comforting

words. And he was sure it wasn't going anywhere soon.

Chapter Eight – Emily

Emily stood in front of her open closet, her fingers brushing over the assortment of clothes hanging there. She bit her lip, her thoughts racing as she contemplated what to wear for her dinner with Leif. Her heart fluttered at the memory of his intense eyes and strong arms, but she tried to shake off the feeling. After all, it might not even be a romantic date; he could just be friendly and kind.

“Ah, just make a decision,” she muttered under her breath, finally choosing a simple yet elegant black dress that hugged her curves just right. It was a safe choice—not too casual, not too fancy. Slipping into the dress, Emily felt both confident and slightly nervous, her anticipation of the evening building.

As she applied her makeup, she pondered over their encounter earlier that day. There had been an undeniable spark between them, and she couldn't help but wonder if he had felt it, too. The idea of fate and true love had felt real to her a long time ago. However, her views had changed since then. She now believed either fate didn't exist, or it was incredibly cruel.

However, something about Leif made her question these notions within her.

“You're reading too much into this evening,” she chastised herself, applying a coat of mascara while trying to keep her hand steady. “He's just a guy from a mountain rescue team, not the love of your life.”

But she could hope.

Emily stepped back from the mirror, scrutinizing her reflection. There was no ignoring the twinkle in her eyes as they shone with excitement, framed by dark lashes. Her wavy brown hair fell gracefully over her shoulders, completing the look. Satisfied, she took a deep breath and attempted to calm her racing pulse.

“Okay, here goes nothing,” she whispered, grabbing her purse and heading out the door.

She practically glided down the stairs as she headed for the door. But as she reached the hallway she hesitated, hearing the sounds of plates and cutlery clattering from the kitchen.

Should she tell Reginald that she was going out? It wasn't like he was her parent, or guardian, or anything.

Guardian.

What had Reginald really meant by his comment about the Bear Creek Guardians? Had he told her out of concern for her?

Or perhaps there was bad blood between him and them?

Perhaps that was it. Emily would have to trust her own judgment of the two men. Which might be easier said than done.

On the one hand, Reginald maintained such a stony expression it was hard to get a read on him. While on the other hand, her attraction to Leif definitely clouded any judgments she could make about him.

The creaking of floorboards alerted her to Reginald's approach. She eyed the front door just down the hall, calculating whether she had enough time to make a quick escape. But fate seemed to have other plans, as Reginald rounded the corner and strode toward her, displaying a soft smile.

"Going on your date?" he asked casually.

"I don't know if I'd call it a date," she replied, trying to maintain a neutral tone despite the blush creeping up her cheeks.

Reginald chuckled, his eyes glinting in the evening light filtering through the window of the front door. "Well, from my experience, since you're going on a date with a Bear Creek Guardian, I'll be looking for a new interior designer soon."

Emily furrowed her brow, puzzled by yet another of his comments. "What do you mean?"

"Let's just say that a date with a guardian usually ends in whirlwind romance," Reginald said, still wearing that mysterious smile.

Emily felt a pang of uncertainty mixed with excitement. A whirlwind romance with Leif? The idea thrilled her, but she also knew there were parts of him she didn't quite understand—like this Bear Creek Guardian business.

"You don't have to worry about that," she said, forcing a smile while stifling the unease that stirred within her. "I don't believe in whirlwind romances."

"Good to hear," Reginald replied, his voice steady. "I believe that your designs are very promising, and I don't think I'd easily find someone who

could replace you.”

“I’m committed to the project,” Emily insisted. “Don’t worry, I’d be even more disappointed than you to not see the designs made real.”

“Good.” Reginald leaned toward Emily, and she took a step back before she realized he was reaching for the door. “I believe your guardian has arrived.”

Emily nodded at Reginald. He sure did like to throw the term guardian around. But she had to admit that she was intrigued.

Reginald pushed the door open on the warm evening and inhaled deeply.

Emily stepped out of the house, blowing a breath out through her lips as she made her escape.

The gardens of the house were still bathed in the gentle orange of the sunset, but the forest beyond the surrounding meadows were growing dark. Emily peered down the winding gravel road as Leif’s truck rumbled into view, its engine breaking the tranquility of Mountain View.

She glanced back at Reginald, who stood in the open doorway. By the light of the sunset, she could see his eyes following the vehicle as it pulled up on the driveway.

“I won’t be out late,” Emily assured Reginald.

Her words seemed to shake him from his trance, and he blinked before replying, “You have a key.” Then he stepped back and closed the door, leaving her alone on the porch.

Emily stared at the closed door for a moment, her brow wrinkling as she tried to decipher Reginald’s odd behavior.

But as she heard the truck door open, her stomach fluttered with nerves as she turned and watched Leif as he stepped out of the truck. She pushed her concerns aside and descended the steps, her heels crunching on the gravel, determined not to let Reginald’s words spoil her evening.

Leif grinned at her, his eyes crinkling at the corners, as he stood beside the truck and dusted off his shirt, although it looked clean and almost new.

“You look beautiful,” he said, and the way he looked at her made her believe it.

“Thank you,” Emily replied, feeling a blush rise to her cheeks as he came to meet her.

“Shall we go?” he asked, extending an arm for her to take.

“Yes.” Emily nodded and placed her hand on his forearm, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath her fingers as they walked toward the passenger side door.

As Leif held open the passenger door for her, Emily couldn’t help but glance back at Reginald’s house one last time. She tried to shake off the uneasy feeling that had settled over her. Was he watching them?

“Everything okay?” Leif asked, his voice low and concerned.

“Yes,” Emily said, forcing a smile. “I’m just... I’m looking forward to our evening together.”

“Me, too,” Leif replied, his eyes searching hers for a moment before he helped her into the truck.

Emily buckled her seatbelt, feeling the rough fabric against her skin as she pulled it taut across her chest. Leif made his way around to the driver’s side and climbed in next to her. As he closed the door and started the engine, the air in the truck cab seemed to heat up by several degrees.

Emily swallowed hard, her body fully aware of the man seated next to her; it was as if she were attuned to him on a subconscious level.

She let out a long breath, trying to quell her racing heart and focus on the view surrounding them. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything as beautiful as these mountains,” Emily said, her voice soft and full of wonder.

Leif glanced out of the window and nodded, his eyes reflecting the golden light of the setting sun. “I think you’re right, but I’m biased,” he admitted, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips. “I have already told you I believe Bear Creek is the best place in the world.”

Emily smiled, glancing at him sidelong. “I believe you might be right.”

Leif shifted in his seat, turning his body toward her slightly as he asked, “Does that mean you intend to stay in Bear Creek?” His voice was gentle, yet there was an undercurrent of vulnerability that Emily found incredibly endearing.

“I’m not sure what my plans are after I finish my work at Mountain View,” she admitted. There was always a kind of emptiness she felt when she finished a project. A similar feeling of missing something, like after finishing a riveting TV show or a good book.

And it sometimes took her some time to find the next job. Perhaps she

could find an apartment in town while she searched for a new project.

“Have you got a home somewhere?” Leif asked, his eyes reluctantly on the road in front of them. “Or do you move from place to place with your job?”

“I did have a home,” she replied. “But I’ve decided to start a new chapter in my life and see where it takes me.”

“A new chapter,” Leif murmured.

Emily sensed the tension filling the cab as Leif navigated the winding mountain roads. She wanted to dispel it, make things comfortable between them again. “You know,” she said, glancing at Leif, “I haven’t had a chance to try any of the restaurants in town yet. I’m really looking forward to rectifying that with our dinner tonight.”

Leif glanced sideways at her, and his jaw clenched. Had she said something wrong? Maybe they were going to the local diner instead, and he was worried she’d be disappointed. Emily tried to cover the awkward silence by asking, “Are there any local delicacies here? Apart from honey, I mean. I’ve heard Bear Creek is famous for its honey.”

Leif chuckled, easing the tension just a bit. “Yeah, our famous honey is the magical ingredient in Bear Creek Honey Beer, which is made right here in town.”

Emily nodded. “I did some research on the town before I came here. I read that Carter Eden lives in town.”

Leif chuckled again, his eyes briefly meeting hers before returning to the road. “Yes, that’s true. His house is a rival to Mountain View in size and elegance.”

“Really?” Emily said, her curiosity piqued. “I’d love to see it for real. I saw photos in a lifestyle magazine once and it looked incredible.”

“I can try to arrange a visit,” Leif offered, his voice low and enticing.

Emily watched his face for a moment and wondered if Leif was trying to impress her.

She could not shake off the faint feeling of disappointment that had settled in her chest. She had never pegged him as the kind of guy who would try to impress a woman by name dropping. From their earlier interactions, she had found him to be humble and refreshingly genuine compared to other men she’d met.

The warm sunlight quickly faded, and the road took on a washed glare as the headlights of the truck pushed back the growing shadows. Just as day gave way to night, forest gave way to town, and before long Emily found herself staring out the window at the quaint houses of Bear Creek.

The night was still young, and there were still people on the streets; people heading home from work, some perhaps heading to bars, and she spotted one or two couples who looked to be dressed up for a date.

Emily leaned back in her seat, taking guesses about where they were going for dinner. She was of the belief that where a man chose for a first date told you a lot about him, and she was still unsure as to what kind of man Leif was.

The truck turned off the main road and into a side road and Leif cast her a sheepish grin as he steered them into the parking lot of what looked to be a museum.

Emily raised an eyebrow, confused as to why they were stopping here when the museum looked closed. “Are we just parking here?” she asked hesitantly.

“Actually,” Leif began, switching off the engine and resting his hand on the steering wheel, “I organized a surprise for us. But if you’d rather, we can go to eat in a restaurant instead. We’ll have a wonderful time either way.”

She could hear the excitement in his voice. Emily shook her head, intrigued by this unexpected turn of events and unable to keep herself from smiling. “I’d like to see your surprise,” she assured him, touched by his effort to make the night special.

It seemed that this was more than a friendly dinner—it was shaping up to be a proper date.

Chapter Nine – Leif

Relief washed over Leif at Emily's willingness to trust him. He was taking a bit of a risk by not taking her out for a typical dinner date, but he was certain Emily would appreciate this much more. Besides, she deserved better than typical or normal.

Emily deserved something special. And he wanted his first date with his mate to be memorable.

She'll love it, his bear growled softly in a reassuring tone. *We already know she's interested in the history of Mountain View. She'll appreciate this more than anything else we could have done.*

Trying not to rush too much, Leif got out of the truck, walking around to the passenger side to open the door for Emily. He hesitated briefly before offering her his arm.

We're not coming on too strong, are we? Leif asked.

Definitely not, his bear replied.

"Thank you," Emily said softly, taking his arm with a smile that made his chest tighten.

"You're welcome." Leif nodded to her, and they walked arm in arm toward the museum entrance.

A current of energy seemed to pass between him and Emily where they touched. He inhaled deeply to steady his nerves, but the scent of her perfume was so intoxicating it made his head spin.

Keep it together, his bear told him.

"This way," Leif said, and they climbed the stone steps, arm in arm, onto the wide stone step that stood at the threshold of the building.

"This is incredible." Emily tilted her head back and admired the simple stone arch of the doorway above them.

"It is." Leif looked up at the archway before he lowered his gaze to his mate's face. Her eyes sparkled as she caught him staring at her.

"Can we go inside?" Emily asked.

"Of course," Leif ducked his head and stepped closer to the door and

placed his hand on the solid wood.

Emily frowned as they stood in front of the imposing entrance. The door itself was large, made of very aged, but clearly well-maintained wood. Solid iron curled its way through the grain of the wood, reinforcing the solid door. It was a piece of history.

“Are we locked out?” She glanced back at Leif, uncertainty flickering in her eyes.

Leif dug around in his pocket and held up a large iron key. Its curved shape and subtle etchings matched the door perfectly. “This should do the trick,” he proclaimed.

Emily chuckled, her eyes fixed on the key as she inclined her head toward the door. “I believe it will,” she agreed, the light dancing in her eyes.

Leif’s bear rumbled contentedly at the sight. *Cut the theatrics, unlock the door and reveal the surprise within.*

With a deep breath, Leif inserted the key into the lock and turned it, the loud clunk of the lock echoing through the large space behind the door. The mechanism was well-oiled, and he closed his hand around the handle, feeling the worn metal beneath his fingertips. “After you,” he said, as he pushed the door open and held it for her.

“Such a gentleman,” Emily teased as she stepped inside, her footsteps echoing in the dimly lit entrance hall beyond. Leif followed her, the door closing behind them with a soft thud.

He locked it from the inside and tucked the key back into his pocket before turning to stand next to Emily. As they stood in the cool, dark space, he could feel the anticipation in her breath.

Or was that just him?

Is this too much? Leif could feel his anxiety rising a little. *Should we have saved this for a second or third date?*

Well it’s too late to turn back now, his bear growled irately.

“Ready?” Leif asked.

“Yes,” Emily whispered back.

Leif reached over to where he knew the various light switches were placed on the wall near the entrance and flicked them on.

The flagstone floor, stout pillars, and ceiling filled with intricate carvings

were bathed in light from the spotlights dotted around the room.

“Wow,” Emily breathed as she took in the scene before them. Her gaze slowly turned upwards until she was staring at the artwork covering the ceiling. Her eyes filled with wonder, and Leif heard her breath catch in her throat. “Oh...wow.”

Leif grinned as he saw Emily’s face. He could stare at her all night. But he dragged his gaze away from her face and glanced back up at the carvings—grand images of bears and wolves and great forests and mountains—before returning his eyes to the most stunning thing in the room. His mate.

“I used to come here as a boy with my dad,” Leif said, his voice hushed in reverence.

“Really?” Emily asked eagerly, her eyes wide with wonder.

“Yeah, I was always in awe of these carvings. Couldn’t figure out how a man—or woman,” he added with a smile, causing Emily to chuckle, “could create such a feat.”

Emily stood shoulder to shoulder with him, her gaze following the same path as his. “I wish we still made buildings like this,” she murmured. “I’d love to design a building that future generations would look up at in awe.”

Leif stole a glance at Emily, filled with admiration for her passion. “Maybe you will,” he said softly.

Emily shook her head, a wistful smile playing on her lips. “I’m not an architect. My job is to design the interior of buildings—the colors, patterns, paint, wallpaper, and fabrics. Not beautiful carvings like these.”

“Don’t underestimate your talent.” He reached for her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I’m sure your designs will be remembered for a long time to come. Especially those at Mountain View.”

Emily smiled and looked away. “I don’t know about that.”

“Oh, I do,” Leif insisted, nodding toward the inner sanctum of the museum.

“Why do I get the feeling that you know something I don’t?” Emily asked playfully.

“Come on,” Leif urged, inviting her to walk with him. “Let me show you the reason we’re here.”

“Intriguing,” Emily replied as they strolled hand in hand through the large hallway, their footsteps echoing off the stone around them.

At the end of the large entrance hall, Leif guided Emily through the foyer, which housed the first exhibits of the museum. They wove between the display cases, showing small artifacts that had been dug up from the area over the years. The old wooden floor creaked under their feet as Leif steered them toward the thick wooden door that housed the archives.

This area of the museum was usually off limits to the public, and so was tucked away and not as maintained as the rest of the building. That much was clear by the loud creak of the door's hinges as Leif pushed it open. They were met with the smell of aged paper and dust that crept out from the narrow, dim corridor beyond.

"This way." Leif stepped inside.

Emily kept close to him as she glanced around the dim corridor, and his heart quickened at the feel of her body pressed close to his.

She shuddered as they moved away from the door, which sent a ripple through Leif's body, making him want to pull her even closer.

"Don't worry," he assured her, "there are no ghosts here."

Emily smiled, looking down at her feet. "I don't believe in ghosts."

"Really?" Leif arched an eyebrow.

"Really," she replied, her eyes meeting his with a glimmer of defiance.

"So you haven't seen any ghosts at Mountain View?" he asked, keeping his tone casual.

Emily's complexion paled, and she stammered, "Y-you're joking...there are no ghosts there."

Leif threaded his fingers through hers, feeling the warmth of her skin against his calloused hand, and led her along the corridor. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Stop that!" Emily tugged at his hand, a touch of fear lacing her voice. "Don't make stories up to frighten me."

Leif felt a pang of guilt for causing her distress. "I'm not making them up to frighten you," he insisted, his expression turning serious.

"But you *are* making them up," Emily challenged.

"No," he insisted as they reached a door at the end of the corridor. "When I was a young boy, I was up at the house, and I was sure I saw a woman dressed in black walking across the living room."

“Really?” Emily leaned back and stared at him, a mixture of skepticism and interest in her expression. “You really believe you saw a ghost?”

“I do,” Leif replied, cracking a smile despite the weight of the memory. “And no, I’m not crazy.”

“Of course you’re not,” she said softly, brushing her thumb along the back of his hand. “But our minds can play tricks on us, especially when we’re young.”

“Maybe,” he conceded. “But I’m convinced about what I saw, and there was a smell...”

“A smell?” Emily repeated, her eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

“Yes,” Leif replied. “A smell.”

Leif chuckled as Emily stared at him in silent question.

“Are you saying ghosts *smell*?” Emily finally asked, a hint of amusement in her voice.

Leif shrugged, his broad shoulders rising and falling with the motion. “I’m just telling you what I saw.” He could feel his bear stirring, sensing Emily’s disbelief.

Emily stared at him for a long while before she nodded and said, “I believe you.”

“You do?” Leif asked, taken aback by her acceptance.

“I believe that you believe it was true,” Emily clarified, smiling gently.

She trusts us, Leif’s inner bear murmured, finding it somewhat amusing that Emily would prove her trust over his ghost story.

“It’s not just a story,” Leif insisted, his voice firm but gentle. “I know what I saw, and I know what I smelled.”

“So, what does a ghost smell like?” Emily sounded amused, at least.

Leif pushed open the door, leading Emily into the stuffy archives. “Lavender,” he replied, thinking back to the clear memory.

“Lavender?” Emily echoed, surprise etched on her face.

“Yes,” Leif nodded, his gaze locked on hers. “Since then, every time I smell lavender, it’s as if I am transported back to that moment in the house.”

Emily’s expression softened, her eyes fixed on his as she said, “It must have been traumatic. Seeing a ghost.”

Leif shook his head. “I never felt as if she meant me harm.”

“That’s good to know,” Emily replied.

“Have I scared you?” Leif asked. It hadn’t been his intention. Perhaps he shouldn’t have said anything about the ghost at all. Especially not when they were alone in the dark, dusty museum.

“No.” Emily laughed softly. “It would take more than a ghost story to frighten me.” She gave him a half smile. “Is that why you have brought me down here?”

Leif wasn’t sure what she meant. “I didn’t bring you here to scare you.”

“No,” she cracked a smile, her teeth flashing in the dim light. “I meant have you brought me down here to tell me all about this ghost of yours.”

“Oh no.” Leif shook his head and led her around the high shelves to an old hand-carved wooden table that looked right at home in among all the books and scrolls that filled the shelves. “I brought you here to look at a book.”

“A book.” Emily seemed somewhat bemused.

“It’s not just any book,” Leif assured her as he pulled out a chair and offered her a seat.

“Oh my goodness,” Emily said as her gaze rested on a hand-bound book with a faded cover.

“When I walked you back to Mountain View, and you were asking about the history of the building so that you could use it in your designs, I remembered when I visited Mountain View as a child and saw my ghost. But I remembered that I was there with my mom.” He sat down next to Emily, he could feel the heat of her body radiating out into the cool room. “And then I remembered why she was there.”

“She took these photos?” Emily asked as she flipped open a book and revealed the inside of Mountain View. But not as it was now, but how it was nearly forty years ago.

“She did,” Leif said with pride. “She was asked by the owners to photograph it before they modernized it. The house had been owned by the same family for a century and it had hardly changed.”

“I can see.” Emily leaned forward and stared at the photos. “This is incredible.”

“My mom took these photos so that there would be a record of them preserved for future generations.” He tilted his head and watched Emily as she flipped the pages of the book. Her gaze focused on the photos his mom

had taken and developed. Leif recalled helping her pick out the best ones for this very book.

“I’m glad she did,” Emily replied as she tore her gaze from the photos and locked eyes with him. “Do you believe in fate?”

Of course we do, his bear roared.

“Yes,” Leif answered, trying to restrain his bear’s excitement.

“I never did,” Emily stated. “But it’s hard not to when it seems like fate brought us together on the mountain so that you could show me these photos.”

If only Emily knew that fate had much more in store for them than this photo book.

Chapter Ten – Emily

Emily turned the page carefully, feeling the brittle paper beneath her fingertips. The photos in the book were in good condition, but they were faded from time, and the paper they were mounted on was yellowed and fragile.

“These are amazing.” She shook her head in disbelief. What were the chances that Leif would have a connection to the house she had been employed to redesign? They had met by chance on the mountain, and now here they were, bonding over a photo book Leif’s mom had created. And what a creation it was.

Looking at the photos was like traveling back in time. She could almost perfectly picture each room as they were in these photos, to the point where it felt like she was there. On one page, it was as if she stood at the base of the grand staircase, looking up at the velvety red carpet that flowed over the glossy wood stairs. On another she was in a drawing room, the furniture and finishings dark, heavy and imposing. In the next, a gorgeous dining room with a seemingly endless table filled with delicate glasses and silverware.

It was a strange feeling seeing each room that she had become so familiar with look so different. She could see where each aspect had been modernized, but now could hear it crying out to be blended with the timeless appearance of the past.

Leif’s mom, the photographer, managed to capture the stunning house with a blend of artistry and attention to detail. Through her lens, she immortalized the house’s every detail, transforming the factual into something beautiful with her skilled framing and angles.

The photos were inspiring, but more than that, Emily could tell that they were deeply connected to Leif. A private, intimate part of himself that he had willingly shared with her.

Emily carefully closed the book and looked over at Leif. “Thank you for showing me these,” Emily said, her voice soft and sincere.

“My pleasure,” Leif replied, his eyes lingering on her face. “I think the rest of the photos and the negatives are in my attic.”

“Really?” Emily didn’t even try to mask her excitement. The thought of

spending more time with Leif, exploring the past captured within those photos, sent shivers down her spine. It was as if the universe was conspiring to bring them together.

“Yes, my mom has boxes and boxes of old photos. I keep meaning to convert them to digital so that they won’t get lost forever.” His voice trailed off, a hint of melancholy creeping in.

“I would love to help you with that,” Emily said with enthusiasm. Then she added, “If it’s not an imposition.” The look in Leif’s eyes told her nothing she asked or did would ever be an imposition. What exactly was the connection between them?

“I’d love your help.” His words were as warm as his expression.

Emily’s fingers traced the edges of the old book cover. Wanting to ask more, but not wanting to ruin their date by stirring up a past that might be painful for Leif.

It felt as though these images held a deeper meaning to Leif. There was a kind of reverence that he seemed to hold over them. She wondered whether it was to do with the house, or even perhaps with his mom.

Before she could muster the courage to ask him, Leif abruptly stood up and edged away from the table.

“Shall we go and eat now?” he asked, his voice just a touch strained.

As if in reply, Emily’s stomach rumbled loudly. She giggled as she stood up and said, “My stomach thinks that is a wonderful idea.”

Leif held out his hand to her, his palm rough yet warm. As she slipped her hand into his, the now familiar jolt of electricity shot through her. It was a comforting feeling now, as if this sensation confirmed that she wasn’t crazy to believe they had a connection. Perhaps over dinner, she might find the right moment to ask Leif if he felt the same way when they touched. However, she feared how he might react, scared she might sound crazy. But then again, after Leif admitted to seeing a ghost, she doubted he’d think *she* was the crazy one.

Hand in hand, Leif guided her toward the corridor leading out of the archive room.

Emily took one last look over her shoulder at the room.

The dim light bulbs cast eerie shadows on the walls, giving the place an otherworldly atmosphere. She would have loved to explore the archives

more. To lose herself among the shelves filled with old books and scrolls, their pages yellowed and fragile, some bound in leather or wrapped in delicate silk ribbons. What treasures there must be down here.

“This place is like a treasure trove,” she murmured to Leif.

“It is.” Leif’s eyes sparkled as he agreed, clearly captivated by the archive room as much as she was.

Emily couldn’t help but add, “Since your ancestors come from Bear Creek, your family must be part of the fabric of this town.”

For a fleeting moment, Leif tensed, his jaw tightening. But just as quickly, he relaxed and said, “Yes, they are.”

Emily resisted the urge to ask about the Bear Creek Guardians. She didn’t want to spoil the moment, not when Leif had been so kind in arranging for her to come down to the archives. Instead, she squeezed his hand gently and asked, “So, what now?” They had reached the end of the corridor and headed back toward the museum exhibits. She wasn’t ready to leave the museum just yet, but from what Leif hinted at earlier, he had something else planned for dinner. And if the museum archives were anything to go by, it should be special.

Leif closed the archives door behind them and then walked back through the foyer, a playful smile gracing his lips. “You need to be patient a little longer,” he teased.

Emily could see he was enjoying himself, so she inclined her head in agreement, saying, “Sure.” But in reality, curiosity gnawed at her insides, making her desperate to know what Leif had planned.

Emily thought he would lead her back through the grand hallway and to the exit, but he took her in the opposite direction, going deeper into the museum. They walked past exhibits displaying archeological finds—ancient axes, flint arrowheads, and bones that looked like relics of a forgotten era. The dim lighting made everything appear mysterious and otherworldly.

Once out of the exhibition room, they found themselves in a larger room once again, guarded by a massive dinosaur skeleton that towered above them.

As they skirted around the huge fossil, Emily’s eyes widened as she glimpsed an ornate stone table laden with food a little farther on. “Are we picnicking in the museum?” she asked, her voice a mix of surprise and excitement.

Leif chuckled, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “I wanted to show you the exhibit of Calder and Elia first,” he explained. “Calder is one of the founders of the town.”

They moved to the side of the room where two stone figures stood. Emily felt as if she were being drawn toward the exhibit, not so much by the larger-than-life figure of Calder, but by Elia, who stood tall and proud by his side. There was something about the woman that called to her, an inexplicable connection she couldn’t quite understand.

“Elia looks so strong and determined,” Emily murmured, unable to tear her gaze away from the woman’s elegant features.

“Indeed,” Leif replied, his voice soft and reverent. “She was Calder’s rock, his confidant, and partner in every sense of the word.”

Emily gingerly reached around and touched the rough stone as she glanced at Leif. “So, were Calder and Elia real people or just a myth?”

Leif looked up at the detailed faces of the figures standing above them, staring off into an invisible horizon. “They were very much real,” he replied. “In fact, my friend, Thane, is one of their direct descendants.”

“Really?” Emily exclaimed. “That’s fascinating.”

Leif nodded and stared at the exhibit for a long moment before continuing. “Calder and Elia were fated mates, you know.”

A flush of heat crept up on Emily’s cheeks. Was this why Leif wanted to show her this exhibit? Did he believe they were fated mates, too? She stared at the two figures before them, in the dim light they looked so real, as if any moment Calder would raise his huge sword and challenge them. But the figures remained unmoving, frozen in time.

“It must be easy to get caught up in the romance of the story,” Emily murmured as she glanced down to read the information about the exhibit. The air between them seemed charged with an unspoken question.

“Emily,” Leif said, his voice gentle yet firm. “Do you believe that two people can be meant to be together?”

The sudden intensity of his gaze made her feel flustered as she tried to figure out her feelings. Before she met Leif, she’d have said adamantly that there was no such thing as fated mates. But standing here with her hand in his, it was easy to believe. How else could she explain the connection between them?

Emily found her feelings toward Leif confusing, as if he had cast a spell over her. Or perhaps it was the magic of the museum, its walls lined with the secrets of the past. She took a deep breath, her chest tightening as she finally answered him.

“I don’t know what I believe in,” she admitted, her voice trembling slightly. “But I think it’s easier to believe in fated mates if it happens to you.”

As she looked into Leif’s eyes, she found it hard to believe that this wasn’t exactly what was happening to her right now.

As they held each other’s gaze, her pulse quickened, and for a moment, she allowed herself to get lost in the possibility of them being meant for each other. But the uncertainty still lingered, like shadows at the edges of her thoughts.

“Leif...” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Leif smiled. “We should eat,” Leif said abruptly before leading her away from the exhibit and back toward the table, which had been laid out with quite a feast.

It was as if he had sensed her hesitation and wanted to give her space. But Emily knew that the conversation wasn’t over yet. She just needed time to process her feelings.

“This all looks delicious,” Emily said as Leif, ever the gentleman, pulled out a chair for her. She sat down, grateful for the chair beneath her since her knees were wobbly.

Leif sure had a strange effect on her.

“I had a little help,” Leif admitted as he picked up a bottle of wine, which had been chilling in an ice bucket. “I hope you like pinot grigio. It’s made locally, and I have been assured its light with a hint of pear and apricot.”

“That sounds perfect,” Emily answered.

“As you can tell, I am not a wine expert. Honey beer is more my thing,” he said as he poured the wine and handed her a glass.

“Honey beer sounds delicious.” Emily accepted the glass and inhaled the scent of the wine. She closed her eyes as she was instantly transported to an orchard on a warm summer day. She could almost hear the bees buzzing and the birds singing.

And as she lay down beneath the fruit trees, something approached. For a moment, she was frozen in fear. It was a bear.

Not just any bear, but the biggest bear she had ever seen. Although she had never seen one in real life, so she had nothing to compare it to.

But as she looked into the bear's eyes, she let go of her fear. He would not hurt her, could not hurt her.

"Emily." Leif murmured her name, and she opened her eyes.

What magic filled the museum she could not tell, but as she locked eyes with Leif, it was as if she was back in the orchard with the bear.

It was as if they were one and the same.

Which was ridiculous. But she could not shake the feeling.

Emily took a sip of wine, the cool liquid sliding down her throat. She probably just needed food. Yes, that was it. She was feeling lightheaded because she was hungry.

But she could not shake the feeling that the man before her was linked to the bear in some inexplicable way.

And she was linked to them both by a bond that could not be broken.

Chapter Eleven – Leif

Leif sipped his wine, the rich flavors bursting on his tongue and warming his chest. Sarah had chosen it for him, and he had to admit it was good, even though he usually preferred beer.

His inner bear grumbled. *I'm not sure beer would have impressed our mate.*

Maybe not, Leif said. *But Emily had mentioned that she liked the sound of honey beer.* Perhaps he could introduce her to his favorite alcoholic beverage when she came to his house to look at his mom's photos.

Leif's bear chuckled to himself, a low rumble echoing through his thoughts. *I don't believe anyone else would use that as an excuse to get their mate to spend time with them.*

Laugh all you want, Leif replied, *but Emily seems to like the idea, and I would like to look through Mom's photographs. We haven't looked at them for so long; I have forgotten half of what's there.*

Perhaps she has a photo of the creature, his bear suggested.

I wish, Leif replied with a sigh.

At the mention of the creature, Leif's mind wandered toward the mountains, where he could still sense the beast's faint presence. It was there, waiting. But waiting for what?

You're neglecting our mate, his bear chastised him. And he was.

Emily was eyeing him warily, her brow furrowed, and he realized he must appear as if he was ignoring her. Shaking off his distraction, Leif smiled apologetically.

"Shall we eat?" he asked, uncovering the dishes spread across the table. An enticing aroma filled the air, making his stomach growl in anticipation.

"Wow, there are so many dishes," Emily marveled. "This looks incredible."

"I have amazing friends who helped me with these," Leif admitted, a hint of pride in his voice. "Not that I can't cook," he added quickly, not wanting her to think he was completely useless in the kitchen.

"I'd like to meet your friends," Emily replied as she helped herself to the

tapas dishes. The small plates were laden with succulent shrimp cooked in garlic and olive oil, tender marinated chicken skewers, and thinly sliced Spanish ham served with crusty bread and tangy Manchego cheese.

“They would love to meet you, too,” Leif assured her.

Oh boy, would they, his bear said enthusiastically.

“Then maybe I could come over to your house and look at your mom’s photos and meet them at the same time.” Emily winced. “Am I being too pushy?”

“Not at all,” Leif assured her.

“It’s just I don’t know anyone in Bear Creek, except for Reginald, and he doesn’t seem to socialize too much,” Emily said between mouthfuls of food.

“How do you like him?” Leif asked, trying to sound casual.

“He’s all right,” Emily replied in a noncommittal tone. “He likes my ideas for the house, which is good. We seem to be on the same wavelength.”

“Does he intend to stay at Mountain View once the renovations are done?” Leif asked.

“I believe so,” Emily replied. “But he hasn’t talked much about his plans.” She glanced up at Leif. “Do *you* like him?”

“I don’t really know him,” Leif shrugged as he spooned up some of the shrimp. “But he’s made large donations to good causes in town.”

“He told me about the nature reserve,” Emily said. “So I guess he’s trying to be part of the community.”

“Maybe he is,” Leif agreed.

Or maybe he’s bribing us into liking him, Leif’s bear sniped.

We don’t know him well enough to judge him, Leif reminded him.

There’s something about the man that makes my fur crawl, his bear answered.

If he’s good to Emily, then we might have to reevaluate our opinion of him, Leif told his bear.

And if he’s not good to Emily? his bear asked.

Let’s hope we don’t have to go there, Leif said, determined not to let thoughts of Reginald ruin their evening.

Nothing could ruin this evening. His bear sighed in contentment. *But it could be made better if you tell her about me and I get to meet her for myself.*

I think we should leave that for another day, Leif told his bear. Maybe when Emily comes to our house in Bearheart Ridge.

His bear grumbled in reply, but they both knew it was wise to let Emily get to know Leif's human side first.

They didn't want to move too fast and frighten her off.

They ate in silence for a few moments before Emily glanced up at him. "So, how do you find working for the mountain rescue team?"

Leif looked up from his plate of patatas bravas, the crispy potatoes smothered in spicy tomato sauce causing a slight sheen of sweat on his forehead.

"Ah, well," he began, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "I love the freedom of being out on the mountain. There's nothing quite like it."

Emily nodded, taking a bite of her shrimp al ajillo, the garlic-infused oil dripping onto her plate. "It must get dangerous sometimes," she said, concern etching her features. "I can't imagine the landslide is the only thing you've had to deal with."

Leif paused, chewing thoughtfully on a slice of pan con tomate, the ripe tomatoes and crisp bread creating a satisfying crunch in his mouth. Swallowing, he admitted, "It can be dangerous, but the mountains are in my blood. I've roamed them since I first learned to walk."

Emily skewered a piece of bacon-wrapped date and chewed thoughtfully before asking, "Is the mountain rescue team called the Bear Creek Guardians?"

Leif stopped chewing, his fork halfway to his mouth. He shook his head. How could he describe the Bear Creek Guardians without revealing the ancient oath passed down through generations of founding families and the secret world of shifters?

Emily's cheeks flushed pink, embarrassment clear on her face. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to," she mumbled, picking at her food. "I didn't mean to pry."

Leif's heart ached at the sight of her discomfort. He reached across the table, gently touching her hand. "You're not prying, Emily. I just...where did you hear about the Bear Creek Guardians?" His inner bear urged him to find out the context of her knowledge, thinking it might make explaining easier.

Emily pressed her lips together, as if trying to keep her source a secret.

Leif's instincts told him the answer: Reginald Beauchamp.

Of course, his bear growled internally, gnashing its teeth together in frustration. Was Reginald trying to cause trouble?

As Leif pondered what exactly Reginald knew about the guardians and what he might have said to Emily, his bear contemplated the consequences for the older man if he dared to meddle with their budding relationship with their fated mate.

Leif felt the awkward moment of silence stretch out before them. Finally, he decided on how to answer the question. "It's no secret. The Bear Creek Guardians are all members of the families of founders of the town."

Emily's eyes widened, and she leaned in as if to drink in his words. "Are you a descendant of Calder and Elia as well?"

Leif's gaze drifted back toward the display showcasing the founders, but he shook his head. "No, our leader, Thane, is the only direct descent of theirs."

Emily picked up her wineglass and took a sip, her eyes wide with excitement. "So tell me about your ancestor."

Leif grinned as he picked up his glass and took a gulp of the cool wine, relishing its crisp taste on his tongue. "My ancestor was no hero," he said.

Emily looked at him quizzically. "What does that mean?"

Leif hesitated for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "He was a quiet man who scouted the mountains, always on the lookout for danger and threats to the settlers here in Bear Creek. Much like a member of the mountain rescue team."

Emily tilted her head and smiled at Leif, her eyes softening. "A man doesn't have to have an exhibit in a museum to be a hero."

Leif ducked his head, feeling the weight of her gaze. He carefully placed his glass down on the table before he murmured, "I know."

Emily reached across the table and touched her fingers to his. A jolt of recognition passed between them, an undeniable connection that felt both thrilling and terrifying. Leif raised his eyes to lock with hers, unable to look away. In that moment, he knew she felt it, too—there was no doubt.

"I wish I had roots as deep as yours," Emily told him, her voice filled with longing.

Leif's heart clenched at seeing the sadness in her eyes. "It's never too late

to set down roots, Emily,” he held her gaze.

A gentle smile appeared on her features. “I don’t think I’ve ever found the right place.” She paused and then added, her gaze still locked with his, “Until now.”

Leif rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand, feeling the warmth of her skin. “I can’t think of a better place to live than Bear Creek,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

Emily’s gaze lingered on his before she asked, “But you live in Bearheart Ridge, don’t you?”

“I do,” Leif replied. He was trying his best to remain calm, but his stomach was doing backflips with butterflies. “Although I see Bearheart Ridge as part of Bear Creek. It overlooks Bear Creek, giving my ancestors a view across the town so they could see or sense any danger.”

“Sense?” Emily asked, her eyebrow raised in curiosity.

Leif winced as he realized his mistake. “Yes, like a sixth sense,” he replied, not wanting to lie to Emily even though it would leave him open to further questions.

“A sixth sense,” Emily said, her voice trailing off as she considered his words. She leaned back in her seat, breaking contact with Leif. Instinctively, he rubbed his fingers together as if trying to recreate her touch, but nothing could replace the touch of his mate.

Leif glanced at his watch and said, “I should get this food packed away if you’ve finished eating.” He just wanted to take her in his arms, and he was fighting to resist the urge.

Emily chuckled, and said, “It’s all so delicious, but I don’t think I can eat another bite.” Her laughter was a balm to his frayed nerves.

“You could take some leftovers home,” Leif told her.

“Thank you, but...” Emily paused and then added, “Mountain View is not my home.”

“Ah,” Leif began shuffling plates around. “Reginald might not want this food in his refrigerator.”

Emily said, “It’s not that he won’t like it... I’m sure he’d love some leftovers.” She shrugged and picked up her wineglass.

At every mention of his name, Leif felt a small twinge of unease. He forced a smile and said, “Well, this will all fit in my refrigerator, and you

could always come over tomorrow night and eat with me while we look through the photos in the attic.”

Emily grinned and nodded, her face lighting up. “I’d like that. I’d like that a lot.”

And so would we, his bear roared.

Chapter Twelve – Emily

Emily held out her hand to Leif, feeling the warmth of his hand as it brushed against hers. “I’ll help you carry the food out to your truck.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got it,” he replied, his voice gentle yet firm as he tightened his grip on the two packs that held the remainder of the delicious tapas meal he’d organized.

Emily couldn’t believe he’d gone to so much trouble for her. Did that mean this was a date? She wasn’t going to ask him; she’d just assume it was since he’d asked her around to his house the next evening to look at his mom’s photos. She suspected it was really a ruse to spend more time with her but couldn’t be certain and didn’t want to read too much into his actions. She’d never been great at reading men, particularly when it came to romantic relationships.

Perhaps if she had been better at reading men, she wouldn’t have wound up... No, she was not going to think about that tonight. She refused to let her past ruin the present. This evening had been so enjoyable, just what she needed to lift her spirits.

A faint draft whispered through the empty halls, stirring the air just enough to make Emily shiver. Leif glanced over at her, concern etching his face. Emily gave him a reassuring smile, pressing on toward the exit.

In fact, since she’d moved to Bear Creek, the depression that had haunted her for months had lifted. Maybe it was the amazing scenery and clean mountain air that had provided a distraction. Or maybe it was the man standing before her. Whatever it was, she was convinced that Bear Creek was the place where she wanted to set down roots. With the man standing before her.

That thought popped into her head and would not budge. Emily’s heart raced as she considered the possibility of a life with Leif, feeling an undeniable connection between them.

“You can open the doors,” Leif suggested without relinquishing the packs of food as they left the now cleared table.

“I can carry both packs.” Emily arched an eyebrow at him. “While you open the doors.”

“Here, we can share the load,” Leif replied with a shy smile and then handed her a pack. “Since I firmly believe that men and women are equals.”

“Equals?” Emily drew her brows together. “I think you’ll find women are superior.”

Leif’s grin widened. “I am not going to argue with you there.”

“I was joking,” Emily replied.

“I know.” His grin faded, but the look he gave her was enough to ignite her desire.

Flustered, Emily paused, taking one last lingering look at Calder and Elia, while she regained her composure.

As she stared at them, it was as if they were staring back at her. Once true mates, frozen in time, together for eternity.

Emily yearned to feel that same everlasting love. The yearning so strong her heart ached, a real physical ache that took her breath away.

Emily dragged her gaze from the two statues and hurried to catch up with Leif. As she fell into step beside him, she said, “Thank you. This has been an evening I will never forget.”

“My pleasure,” Leif beamed in reply as the massive wooden doors loomed ahead, the intricate carvings of bears and other woodland creatures seeming to come alive in the shadows cast by the moonlight filtering through the tall windows. “I’d like to bring you back here when the museum is open and share all the wonders of Bear Creek with you.”

“Are all the wonders of Bear Creek here in this museum?” Emily asked lightly.

“No, the best wonders are out here...” With that, he unlocked the door, reached for the wrought iron handle and opened it wide to reveal the parking lot.

Before them the mountains loomed in the distance, under a silvery moon. It sure seemed as though there was magic in the air as Emily stood shoulder to shoulder with Leif.

“I believe you are right,” Emily murmured as she sucked in a lungful of hope.

Yes, that’s what it felt like as she enjoyed this moment.

“Shall we go?” Leif held out his hand to her and they walked down the

steps to his truck.

She didn't want the evening to end, like a dream, a most perfect dream she didn't want to wake up from.

They strolled hand in hand to his truck, and he opened the passenger door. Leif placed his pack on the back seat, his fingers brushing against hers as he reached for the pack she was carrying.

Desire flooded her veins, and she wanted to slip her hand around the nape of his neck and kiss him. To pour all her yearning, all her longing into that one kiss, so that he would know just how much she wanted him.

Instead, she swallowed down her desire. If she made a move and her feelings were not reciprocated, she might lose the one friend she had made in Bear Creek.

And she didn't want that.

Emily buckled her seatbelt as Leif went around to the driver's side and climbed in. An alluring energy emanated from him, luring her toward him, but she resisted, gripping the edge of her seat with determination.

Leif turned the key in the ignition, and the truck rumbled to life. With a flash of a smile that made Emily's heart race, he steered the truck out of the parking lot and onto the road. It was late, and there were few cars on the road as they drove out of town and along the back roads that wound around the foot of the mountain. Emily cracked open the window and breathed in the now familiar scent of pine and damp earth—a fragrance both calming and invigorating.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" Leif asked, his voice low and warm like honey.

"Absolutely," Emily replied, her eyes closing for a moment as she absorbed the magic of Bear Creek. It felt as if she had been transported to another world—one where nothing could touch her, and anything was possible.

But not everything, she reminded herself, as her hand subconsciously slipped over her stomach. Tears pricked her eyes, and she sat up straighter, staring out into the darkness surrounding them. The pain of loss still lingered, threatening to suffocate her.

"Hey, are you okay?" Leif asked, genuine concern in his voice as he placed his large, rough hand gently on her forearm. Warmth flooded her body, and Emily blinked back tears. Could he sense her sadness?

“Fine, just lost in thought,” she tried to assure him, swallowing hard and forcing down the pain of loss. This was her chance for a new start, but to truly begin anew, she had to let go of the past—or at least not cling to it so tightly.

Leif’s eyes flickered briefly to hers before returning to the road. “There’s something I want to show you.” His words held a hidden meaning that piqued her curiosity and chased away her melancholy mood.

“Another surprise?” Emily croaked before she cleared her throat.

“You’ll see.” Leif drove on for a mile or so more before he made a left turn.

A left turn into the forest, or so it seemed to Emily.

But Leif knew these mountains.

“Where are we going?” Emily asked when the fear that Leif was going to drive them straight into a tree subsided.

“Just a little farther.” He gripped the steering wheel with both hands as they bounced along a rutted trail. Then the trees thinned, and Leif slowed to a stop.

“This is it?” Emily asked.

“Not quite.” Leif turned off the engine and opened the truck door. “Coming?”

“Where?” she asked, but she opened the door before he replied, trusting that whatever he wanted to show her would be magical.

“Onto the roof,” Leif whispered in her ear before she put her feet on the ground. He’d moved with impossible speed. Hadn’t he?

“The roof?” Emily eyed the high truck dubiously.

Leif laughed, his eyes sparkling in the moonlight. “Trust me, it’s worth it.” Before her eyes, he leaped effortlessly onto the roof of the truck, landing with catlike grace. “Come on!” He crouched down on the cab roof and offered her his hand.

Emily giggled nervously, slipping her hand into his, unsure if she could make it onto the roof, but willing to try. She’d always been one for adventure, and this was no different—even if she felt slightly vulnerable in the dark night.

“Place your foot on the seat, and then I’ll pull you up,” Leif instructed, his

voice steady and reassuring.

“I’m not sure,” she replied, hesitating for a moment. It wasn’t just the height that made her wary. She knew that she was carrying more than a few extra pounds.

“Trust me,” Leif said, his eyes never leaving hers.

And she did. Emily slid her hand into his, placed her foot on the seat of the truck, and before she had a chance to think further than that, he’d pulled her onto the roof.

As she wriggled around to find a comfortable position, Emily couldn’t help but feel like a beached whale. The roof was slippery from the damp night air, but with Leif’s help, she managed to right herself.

“Now, lie down and look up,” Leif instructed, his voice low and soothing.

Emily went to tilt her head back, but he shook his head. “Lie down first.”

“Okay,” she replied, sliding onto her back. As soon as her gaze turned skyward, the sight took her breath away. The sky was filled with what looked like a million stars, twinkling like diamonds on black velvet. “Wow,” she breathed, marveling at the celestial display. Since her arrival in Bear Creek, she hadn’t ventured outside at night.

“Light pollution blocks out so many stars,” Leif said as he settled down beside her, his shoulder brushing against hers. The warmth of his body sent a shiver down her spine.

“Are there more to see the higher up in the mountains you go?” Emily asked, her voice barely above a whisper as she tried to take it all in.

“Yes,” he murmured, his breath warm on her cheek. “It’s like you can reach out and touch them.”

As they lay side by side, their fingers almost touching, the only thing Emily wanted to reach out and touch was Leif. She could feel the magnetic pull between them, making her heart race even faster than before.

But for now, she pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the breathtaking view above her, allowing herself to be lost in the beauty of the stars—and the man beside her.

Chapter Thirteen – Leif

Leif slowed his truck as he entered the grounds of Mountain View, the soft purr of the engine humming through the evening air. The winding road stretched behind them like a coiled snake, and Leif recalled the nervous butterflies that had seized his stomach only hours earlier. He'd been worried Emily would be underwhelmed by his idea of taking her to the museum to see the photos his mother had taken of Mountain View. But much to his relief, Emily had been thrilled to step back in time with him.

Let's hope she is willing to step into the future with us, his bear murmured, a note of longing coloring its gruff tone.

Let's hope indeed. Leif risked a glance at Emily as he brought the truck to a stop outside the house, her face illuminated by the pale moonlight through the windshield. She was breathtaking—and utterly unaware of the supernatural world hidden just beneath the surface of their quiet town.

Would she be as excited about this supernatural world as she was about the visit to the museum? Leif clung to the hope that she would be. Perhaps she might be even more excited.

But that was for another day. For now, it was time to say goodnight.

He could sense Reginald inside the house but could not tell if he was watching them from a window. The nearness of his mate overpowered his keen shifter senses, making it difficult to focus on anything else.

A small price to pay for being so close to our mate, Leif's bear said, a hint of amusement in his words.

A very small price, Leif agreed, sighing at the sight of the woman beside him.

“Thank you again for a wonderful evening,” Emily said, her hand hovering over the door handle as if she were reluctant to leave.

“No, thank you,” Leif replied, swallowing the lump in his throat. “If you haven't guessed, I don't get out too much... Not on dates.”

“Maybe we can change that,” Emily suggested, blushing as heat crept across her cheeks. She ducked her head, her voice growing softer. “That's if you want to...get out more...”

Leif leaned forward and cupped her face in his hand, the softness of her skin sending a shiver down his spine. He stroked his thumb across her cheek, and their gazes locked, electric and intense. "I do," he murmured, wishing he wasn't just talking about a date. In his heart, he was ready to marry his mate right now.

His inner bear chuckled, its gruff voice echoing in his mind. *Maybe you should at least introduce me before you propose.*

"Goodnight," Leif whispered, not wanting her to go. The words were heavy with longing.

"Goodnight, Leif." Emily leaned forward and brushed her lips across his, sending a thrill of excitement through his body.

Leif sighed as their kiss deepened, his calloused hand slipping around her waist and pressing into the small of her back. As he drew Emily closer to him, their tongues intertwined, and he shivered as potent desire coursed through his veins. He wanted her more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. But it was too soon.

Reluctantly, Leif pulled back, breaking their passionate embrace.

Emily's eyes searched his. "I'm sorry," she murmured, inching away from him. "I don't know what came over me."

"Don't be sorry," Leif reassured her, his voice hoarse with emotion, "never be sorry."

A smile played across her lips, easing the atmosphere between them. "I should go," she whispered, glancing at the truck door.

Do you have to? Leif's bear roared its displeasure, a primal need to keep her close, threatening to take control.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said firmly, leaving no room for doubt or negotiation.

His bear grumbled in reluctant agreement, ready to take on anyone who might deny them the pleasure of being with their mate.

"I can't wait," Emily replied, and as she opened the truck door, the mountain breeze caressed Leif's skin, but even its gentle touch was no match for Emily's.

"Shall I come and pick you up?" he asked, already dreading the time they'd be apart.

"No," she answered, shaking her head, "I'm sure I can find you. Just text

me your address and directions.” Leif leaned back in his seat and nodded, then realized she didn’t have his number yet. But Emily was already holding out her phone, a playful giggle escaping her lips. “I thought it was a good way to get you to give me your number.”

“You’re a resourceful woman,” Leif said, taking her phone and typing his number into her contacts. The screen’s glow was dazzling after the drive in the dark.

“I like to think so,” she replied, accepting her phone back from him. As she leaned back inside the truck, Leif moved to press his lips against hers in a soft, lingering kiss. With a last look into each other’s eyes, they reluctantly parted.

“Tomorrow,” Leif said.

“It’s a date,” she replied shyly and then paused. For a long magical moment, they stared into each other’s eyes before she closed the truck door. Then she raised her hand to wave at him before strolling toward the house.

Leif watched her go, wanting to leap out of his truck and drag her into his arms, but he resisted the urge. He felt the heat in his body rising as he admired her graceful walk, the way her hips swayed slightly with each step.

As Emily mounted the steps and opened the door leading inside the house, she took one last lingering look at him, as if she, too, wanted to run back to him. But then she slipped inside the door, and it closed behind her.

Leif sat still for a moment, gripping the steering wheel tightly. He might not see her anymore, but he could still sense her presence.

His bear moaned miserably within him. *We can’t stay here all night, it grumbled. Reginald will likely call the sheriff on us.*

Leif chuckled and said, *Though if he did, I think Sheriff Brad would completely understand.*

His bear grunted in agreement, the rumble echoing in Leif’s chest. *I’m sure he would since he has a mate. He knows better than anyone how strong the desire is to not let your mate out of your sight.*

You sound like a bear with experience, even though we have only known our mate for less than a day. With a sigh, Leif finally started the engine and turned the truck around, leaving the warmth of Emily’s presence behind.

His inner bear sighed, the longing palpable in its voice. *It feels as if we have known her for eternity.*

It does, Leif agreed, his own heart aching with the same sentiment. As they drove away from Mountain View, it felt as if they were leaving a part of themselves behind with Emily.

Leif hummed to himself, happier than he had ever been in his life. Yet as he pulled away from Mountain View, and the overwhelming presence of his mate began to fade just a little, that sense of happiness, once again, blended with unease.

The creature, still high in the mountains, was waiting, waiting—but waiting for what? The question gnawed at him, putting an uncomfortable weight on his chest.

He could not put off the inevitable for long. Soon, he would need to trek into the mountains and find out what the strange being wanted.

Driving back home, he forced the sense of the creature lurking in the shadows to the back of his mind, not wanting it to taint the memory of the incredible evening he'd shared with Emily. The gravel crunched beneath his tires as he navigated the winding roads that led home.

His only wish was that he'd found the right moment to tell her about his other side, to explain about shifters and how she was their fated mate. He knew Emily could sense the connection between them; he'd seen it in her eyes when they touched. Leif's skin tingled at the thought of her touch, and his mind conjured up an image of her face, the flush of her cheeks, the desire in her eyes.

If only he had told her about them being fated mates, maybe she would still be seated beside him now. He would take her home and make love to her in his bed. Or maybe on the roof of his truck beneath a million stars. But all those stars faded in comparison to his mate. She was the light of his life, the sun and the moon.

Next time, his bear chuckled, sensing his yearning.

As they finally reached Bearheart Ridge, Leif drove along the quiet road toward his house. The tall pines swayed gently in the night breeze, causing shifting moon-shadows on the ground. As he came to a stop, he sensed someone at his house. His heart raced, and he froze, but then, almost instantly, he recognized Thane's presence.

"Thane...the baby!" Leif's concern surged through him, and he shot out of the truck, racing toward his leader.

As he approached, Thane looked up from where he was lounging in a wicker chair on Leif's front porch and cracked a smile, seemingly unfazed by Leif's concern. "How was your date?"

Amazing, Leif's bear said, while Leif sighed happily, trying to hide the turmoil within him.

"It was great."

Understatement, his inner bear chided.

No it's not, Leif replied as he slumped down into the chair next to Thane.

Thane nodded, his eyes searching Leif's face for any hint of trouble. "But something's bothering you," he noted, his tone serious.

Leif hesitated, glancing away. He didn't want to burden Thane with his personal fears any more than he already had.

"Why don't you tell me what is?" Thane asked, his tone suspicious, as if he had already guessed the truth.

Or maybe Thane thinks it's Reginald who is bothering us, Leif's inner bear said, its voice grumbling like distant thunder.

Maybe, Leif mused, but without even thinking about it he turned his head and stared at the moonlit mountainside. The rock faces glowed like ghosts under the moonlight, the distant trees were moving silhouettes that hid some secret. A sense of unease coiled tightly in his chest.

"You can still sense it, can't you?" Thane asked, his eyes narrowing as he studied Leif's face.

"Yes," Leif replied, his voice heavy with dread. "The creature is still there, and I don't know why. Emily is safe...at least she was when I left her." His heart ached for his mate already. "There has been no danger this whole time since the landslide. And besides, the creature is up on the mountain, nowhere near Emily."

Leif momentarily pushed his senses out to their limit, straining to get a fix on Emily at Mountain View.

It's too far away, his inner bear growled, frustrated by their inability to protect her from this distance.

Leif tilted his head slightly, as if by changing the angle of his head, he could tune into her better.

"There's another possibility," Thane said, drawing Leif's attention back to

his leader. Now it was Thane who was staring toward the mountain. “What if this is a warning for me?” Thane added, his voice quiet and hoarse.

Leif narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

Thane sighed heavily, his shoulders sagging beneath the weight of his unspoken fears. “What if this is a warning about the baby?” His words hung in the air like a storm cloud.

Leif’s heart stuttered as he took in what Thane was saying. “You think the creature is warning me—us—about the baby?”

But Sable hasn’t even had the baby yet, Leif’s bear said in anguish. The thought of danger befalling a future cub was too much to bear.

Thane shrugged and turned his gaze toward his house, where Sable slept, unaware of the conversation happening just across the road. “That’s what keeps me awake at night.”

Leif nodded and placed his hand on Thane’s shoulder, trying to reassure him. “But then surely you should be the one sensing the creature,” he said, the unease within him growing stronger.

“We don’t know that for sure,” Thane replied, his brow furrowed with concern. “You are the tracker among us. It’s in your blood. What if…” He ran his hand through his hair and let out a jagged breath, the strain evident in his expression.

“Tomorrow, I’ll go hunt this creature down,” Leif said firmly, determination across his face. “Then we’ll know for sure.”

“Together,” Thane replied.

“What if the baby comes while we’re gone?” Leif asked.

“I need to do this, Leif,” Thane insisted.

“Then we go together,” Leif agreed.

“Together.” Thane nodded. “And find the answers we need.”

Chapter Fourteen – Emily

Emily sat cross-legged in the large bed, her gaze following the sun through the window as it peaked above the hillside trees. The early morning light illuminated the dust particles dancing in the air, and gently lit up her bedroom. It had been more than an hour since she'd woken up, her mind raced with thoughts of her date with Leif and the continuous flow of new ideas for her designs.

The worn sketchpad nestled in her lap held the efforts of her restless night, each page filled with drawings and scribbles inspired by her time here at Mountain View and older photos Leif had shared with her last night.

When her need for coffee won over the delight of snuggling beneath her bedcovers with pencil in hand, she dragged on a robe and headed downstairs. In the dimly lit kitchen she brewed a pot of the dark, fragrant coffee while the house slept on around her.

With the steaming cup in hand, she wandered through the rooms. The house was quiet. Too quiet, even though only Emily and Reginald were living there.

It felt like the house itself still slumbered. Even though the sun was steadily rising, the rooms within were still draped in twilight. As she tiptoed over the plush carpet and chilly hardwood floors, she felt an eerie presence lingering in the rooms. Almost as if a ghost had lived there long before Leif's mother had taken the old photographs.

She found herself in the drawing room, a smaller room tucked away behind the living room, and sat down in the center of the room on a plush cushion she took from one of the armchairs. Knowing what the tired finishings of the house used to look like, she was now beginning to picture a way forward for the house. Each room needed its own personality. Some wanted to be lighter and airier, a place to greet the rising sun. While others needed to remain calm and cool, somewhere to find respite in the quiet hours of the day.

As she sat sipping at her coffee, early rays of sun filtered in through the windows and seemed to stir the house from its slumber and breathed life into it.

Much like how Leif had breathed life into her very soul just last night.

“Emily,” Reginald’s voice suddenly filled the room, making her jump. She hadn’t heard him come downstairs. It was odd to see him awake, causing a flicker of concern to spark within her.

She forced a smile onto her face as she greeted him. “Morning, Reginald.”

“Ah, no need to stand on my account,” Reginald said, stepping farther into the room. His usual charm seemed absent, replaced by a weariness that clung to his every movement.

Emily sank back down onto the plush cushion beneath her, shuffling through her designs. “I have some new ideas I’d like to show you when you have time,” she told him, hoping to break the tension that seemed to envelop the room.

“Did your date with Leif inspire you?” Reginald asked, his voice carrying a subtle edge that made Emily wince a little. She couldn’t tell if he was genuinely curious or if there was something else lurking beneath the surface.

“Actually, yes,” she replied hesitantly, her fingers tracing the lines of her drawings. “Leif took me to the museum and showed me some photos his mom took of the house before it was redecorated. I’ve drawn some inspiration from them.”

A shadow flickered across Reginald’s face, gone as quickly as it had appeared. Was it jealousy or something else entirely? Emily couldn’t tell, but the ominous feeling that settled in her chest refused to dissipate.

“Ah, how intriguing,” he murmured with interest. “I look forward to seeing your new ideas, Emily. But first I need my morning coffee.”

“I can make a fresh pot if you’d like,” Emily offered.

“I am not too old to make it myself,” Reginald said with that same edge that she found impossible to read. “Sorry, I’m a grumpy old bear in the morning until I have at least two cups of coffee.”

As he spoke, he watched her face intently as if looking for a reaction. But she had no idea what reaction he expected to see.

“Maybe we could look at my new designs over a coffee or two.” Emily sprang up from her cushion, filled with enthusiasm that she hoped might brush off on her employer.

As Emily left the room, her eyes lingered on the window as the sun cast its golden rays over the mountains. The scene before her looked like a painting,

the hues blending together to create a breathtaking panorama. She tucked her sketchbook under her arm and followed Reginald toward the kitchen, with a mixture of apprehension and anticipation.

Would he appreciate her new designs that incorporated both the old and the new, a seamless fusion of her original ideas and Mountain View's past?

As they ventured deeper into the creaking house, Emily realized what the house truly needed. Children.

Yes. How much more inviting the place would be if it were filled with the sounds of children's laughter and the warmth of a family's love.

It wasn't her place to decide what the house wanted or needed, though. Mountain View belonged to Reginald. Perhaps he planned to sell the house after its restoration, reaping a profit from the labor they'd put in. But he'd never shared his intentions with her. After all, she reminded herself, he was her employer, and this project was merely a job. She shouldn't allow herself to become emotionally invested in the outcome.

"Here we are," Reginald announced as they entered the kitchen. Emily placed her sketch pad down on the worn wooden table, her fingers brushing against the cool surface.

Before she could reach for the coffeepot, Reginald grabbed it, refilling it and then setting it to work to make a steaming brew.

She sensed he was reminding her that this wasn't her home, her kitchen, or even her coffee pot. With a nod, Emily acknowledged the unspoken boundaries between them. He was her boss, and ultimately, the fate of the house rested in his hands.

"Let's see what you've come up with, shall we?" Reginald said, taking a seat at the table.

As she laid her favorite designs out, a smile played on her lips. These were the ones she had created this morning, while her body still craved caffeine and her mind was in a haze. It was as if the ideas had come from somewhere outside of herself, tapping into a wellspring of inspiration that flowed freely.

She watched his eyes scan her drawings, her heart pounding in her chest as she awaited his judgment.

"Interesting," he muttered, his expression unreadable. "You've managed to combine elements of the old and new quite seamlessly. It's bold, yet respectful of the house's history."

“Thank you,” she replied, relief washing over her. “I wanted to honor the past while creating a space that felt fresh and inviting.”

Reginald nodded, his gaze still locked on her sketches. “You’ve certainly achieved that,” he admitted, sipping his coffee. “But I must consider if this is the direction I want to take with Mountain View.”

Emily’s heart sank, but she forced herself to remain composed. “Of course,” she said, her voice steady. “As I mentioned earlier, this is merely a proposal. You’re free to make any changes or adjustments you see fit.”

“Indeed,” he murmured, closing her sketchbook and sliding it back toward her before he got up and poured two cups of coffee.

As he sat back down at the table and handed her a cup, Emily’s heart sank further. As she studied Reginald’s impassive face, her excitement over her new designs faded into disappointment.

She had poured her soul into creating the perfect balance of modern and rustic elements, believing they were some of the best work she had ever done. But as the one paying for the project, Reginald’s opinion mattered more than hers. She sipped her coffee, trying to steady herself against the wave of dejection.

“So, Leif’s mother was a photographer?” Reginald asked suddenly, catching Emily off guard.

“Yes,” she replied hesitantly, forcing a smile. “His mom was commissioned to photograph the house before it was redecorated, a record of the past, I suppose.”

Reginald sipped his coffee, the silence that followed growing increasingly awkward. Emily searched her mind for something to say, anything to fill the void, but came up empty. Disappointment clung to her, but she’d have to brush it off and come up with new ideas.

“Are there any other photos of Bear Creek from that time?” Reginald inquired, breaking the silence.

Emily held her coffee cup in both hands, taking a sip before answering. She debated whether to tell Reginald about the photos in Leif’s attic—he might not want Reginald to see them. She sensed that Leif wasn’t particularly fond of Reginald, though she couldn’t pinpoint why. Finally, she said, “I don’t know, but I could ask him.”

Reginald’s eyes narrowed as he studied her for a moment, then he replied,

“I’d be grateful if you would.”

“Is there anything you’re especially interested in? This house or the town?” Emily asked, attempting to steer the conversation toward safer waters.

With a shrug, Reginald claimed, “I want to learn everything I can about the town so I can help make it better.”

She bit back the words she wanted to say and instead Emily smiled and said, “It’s *already* such a beautiful town, isn’t it? And the people are so nice.”

Reginald hesitated for a fraction of a second before agreeing, “Yes, they are.”

Emily glanced toward the window. The sun was brighter now, casting a warm glow over the kitchen, but it did nothing to raise the temperature of the room, which was decidedly cool. A sudden need to escape the stifling atmosphere washed over her, as if the walls of Reginald’s grand house were closing in on her.

She drained her coffee cup and took it to the sink with a shaky hand. Then she gathered up her sketchbook, cradling it like a lifeline. “I think I’ll go into town and pick up some supplies.”

“Supplies?” Reginald asked, his tone dripping with condescension.

“Yes, for my designs,” she said, caressing her sketchbook. Emily knew she’d have to draw inspiration from elsewhere, since Reginald seemed unimpressed with her work. She pushed down the disappointment bubbling inside her. “I’m running low on stationary.”

“Ah,” Reginald said disinterestedly, not bothering to look up. His indifference stung, but Emily clenched her jaw and pressed on.

“Is there a direction you would like me to go?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

Reginald tugged his brows together, finally glancing at her. “I thought you were the designer here.”

Emily exhaled slowly, attempting to maintain her composure. “I’ll come up with a few ideas and we can discuss the direction you wish to pursue. Then, I’ll expand the designs.”

Reginald gave her a curt nod, and she left the kitchen, feeling his dismissive gaze follow her.

As she headed upstairs, Emily lingered at the base of the sweeping staircase that served as the focal point of the expansive, faded hallway. It was

an impressive sight, its once-gleaming wood worn down by time and countless footsteps. She ran her hand over the smooth banister, searching for inspiration in the tactile sensation of years gone by.

Emily entered her room and began to dress, choosing a boho dress that fell just above her knees. The fabric was light and airy, perfect for a warm summer day. She donned a wide-brimmed sun hat, shielding her face from the still-intensifying sun. As she applied minimal makeup, Emily considered her next steps. How could she prove herself to Reginald and show him that her designs were worth his time? The thought gnawed at her as she slipped on a pair of sandals.

This had the potential to be the biggest project in her portfolio yet. She couldn't mess it up now.

With a sigh, she grabbed her purse and headed back downstairs.

Emily stepped out of the house and drew in a deep breath, feeling an unexpected sense of freedom. The atmosphere at Mountain View had been stifling, making her long for the open air and the seemingly boundless beauty of the mountains and forests surrounding the town. She strolled toward her car, savoring the sun on her face and the cool breeze that playfully lifted her hair.

Unlocking her car, she slid into the driver's seat, started the engine, and drove away from Mountain View. She let go of the tension in her shoulders as she followed the winding back roads that led toward the heart of Bear Creek. The road curved and dipped, hugging the contours of the land, and Emily felt she was a part of this wild, untamed landscape.

As she rounded a bend, she caught sight of the place where Leif had driven off-road the night before. A vivid memory of the incredible night sky, its expanse peppered with stars, filled her thoughts, along with the image of Leif, the enigmatic man who had shared it all with her. Shaking herself from her reverie, Emily continued driving, determined to find some fresh inspiration or at least clear her head.

Disappointment still gnawed at her; Reginald hadn't liked her designs, and she desperately wished she could talk it over with someone. Her mother wasn't an option, and she didn't know anyone in town well enough to discuss her job and Reginald in confidence. She couldn't risk word getting back to him—the last thing she needed was for Reginald to think she was gossiping about him.

So, lost in thought, Emily drove through the small town of Bear Creek and parked her car, finding a spot almost at random.

As she got out of the car, she noticed a crafting store called Crafty Corner across the street. Perhaps she would find some inspiration there. Making her way to the store, she paused to take in the window display.

Yarn of various colors beckoned to her, and she found herself drawn to the tapestries featuring bears and forest scenes. Emily smiled as the image of Reginald came to mind, remembering his comment about being a grumpy old bear before his first coffee. She allowed herself to hope that when she returned to Mountain View, he might be in a better mood.

Emily pushed open the door and stepped inside the store, a quaint bell jingling overhead. It was cooler in here, but the smile from the store owner who stood behind the counter was warm and friendly. “Hello, welcome to Crafty Corner. If there’s anything you particularly need or anything I can help you with, let me know.”

“I will, thank you,” Emily replied as she returned the store owner’s smile.

Her eyes wandered around the small shop, taking in the shelves filled with an assortment of art supplies, fabrics, and handcrafted items. She reached out and ran her fingers over some fabric swatches, their vibrant colors reminiscent of the lower slopes of the mountains, bejeweled by summer flowers. A pang of longing stirred in her chest—for what, she wasn’t quite sure.

“You have some lovely things,” Emily said, craving conversation and feeling an odd mix of vulnerability and curiosity.

“Thank you,” the store owner said as she came around the counter, extending her hand. “I’m Sarah.”

“Emily,” Emily answered with a smile, shaking Sarah’s hand gently.

“Emily!” Sarah’s eyes widened and a smile spread across her lips. Strange, it was as if Emily was a celebrity or something. An unsettling feeling crept up on her, causing her heart to beat faster. She had barely spoken to anyone in town, and Reginald didn’t seem the chatty type. How did the store owner know her?

Sarah ducked her head and grinned. “Sorry,” she said, “I am a friend of Leif’s.”

Oh. Emily’s eyes widened, and a flush colored her cheeks. So, Leif had

been telling people about her. She had to admit she was flattered, but also somewhat uneasy. What exactly had he shared? She tried to push the thought away.

“Did you help with the tapas?” Sarah chuckled, leaning against the counter.

“I did.” The memory of Emily’s intimate evening with Leif at the museum brought another blush to her face. “The food was delicious.”

Sarah grinned happily, a knowing look in her eyes. “I’m so glad you liked it. Leif didn’t know what to do for your first date.”

“Is that what it was? A date,” Emily mused aloud, feeling a flutter of excitement in her stomach. She’d been wondering if that evening had been as special to Leif as it had been to her.

“Of course!” Sarah gushed, then she covered her mouth with her hand, as if she’d said too much. “Oh, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Don’t worry,” Emily replied, trying to hide the way her heart raced at the confirmation. “I suspected that it wasn’t just a museum visit, and a date instead.”

“Oh, I think it was,” Sarah replied firmly, her eyes shining with sincerity. “The first of many.”

“You seem so sure,” Emily replied, her voice wavering slightly. She wanted to believe it, but some part of her still doubted herself and the connection she felt with Leif.

“Aren’t you?” Sarah asked, her expression deadly serious.

Emily hesitated only a moment before answering. “Yes,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. And deep down, despite the fears and uncertainties that plagued her, she knew she was.

Chapter Fifteen – Leif

Leif flipped open his backpack, the worn fabric revealing an assortment of items meticulously arranged inside. He knew exactly what should be in there, but his training for the Mountain Rescue crew ingrained in him the need to always double-check. The sense of the creature on the mountain was a constant companion as he rifled through the contents, ensuring nothing was missing. After all, it might be exactly what they needed to save a life.

As he inspected his pack, Leif glanced up and saw Thane jogging across the street toward his house. A chill ran down his spine at the sight of his leader and the memory of their conversation last night.

Let's hope this is not about Thane and Sable's baby, his bear said miserably.

I don't think it is, Leif replied silently.

Because if it was, Thane would sense the creature and not us, his bear reasoned.

Exactly, Leif agreed, shifting his focus back to his pack.

They already knew Thane had the unique ability to see the elusive creature that lurked around Bearheart Ridge. The others might have sensed it, but Thane was the only one who had glimpsed it, although he still couldn't identify what exactly the creature was.

Maybe that will change today, Leif said, snapping his pack closed and hoisting it onto his back.

As the pack settled on his shoulders, he strode to the door, pausing briefly before opening it with a reassuring smile for Thane.

"Ready?" Thane asked, his eyes conveying a mix of excitement and concern.

"Yes, let's go hunt this creature," Leif replied, stepping out of his house and closing the door behind him.

"I haven't told Sable where we're going," Thane confessed, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. "I just told her we were going for a hike, that you had things you wanted to talk over."

"Me?" Leif raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued.

“Yeah,” Thane admitted sheepishly. “Mate stuff.”

“Ah,” Leif replied, understanding dawning on him. “Mate stuff.”

A cool breeze rustled through the pines as Thane and Leif reached the edge of a dirt trail that snaked its way into the heart of the mountains. Both men had a serious air about them. This wasn't a leisurely hike in the mountains. This hunt was like chasing the wind, for the creature was as elusive as a whisper in the breeze.

Maybe we could get some advice from Thane on mate stuff, Leif's bear whispered hopefully.

Leif chuckled to himself, feeling the warmth of camaraderie he shared with his bear settling deep in his chest. *Maybe we could.*

“Can you sense it?” Thane asked, his voice low and gravelly, like the shifting of boulders. His dark eyes swept over the landscape before them, searching for any sign of movement or life.

Leif nodded, his brow furrowed as he reached out with his senses. “It's faint, but I can feel it.”

Thane took one last lingering look back toward his mate, Sable, safely in their house. A wistful smile graced his lips before determination set his jaw. “Then let's get on with it.”

As they headed along the trail, the air around them popped and fizzled with electric energy as they shifted their forms. For a brief moment, they disappeared from the world, only to return on four massive paws each. As two powerful bears, they sprinted along the trail, their heavy breathing and thudding footfalls echoing through the trees.

They climbed higher and higher, running tirelessly through dense pine forests that gave way to grassy plateaus. The scent of damp earth mixed with the fresh aroma of pine needles filled their nostrils as they closed the distance between them and their quarry.

But who is the quarry? Leif's bear mused as they ran.

You mean what if we are being drawn toward our doom by this creature? Leif asked, his heart pounding in his chest.

Exactly, his bear replied. *We have tentatively concluded that it's a force for good, but what do we really know about it?*

Maybe when we catch up with it today, we might get some answers, Leif whispered, more to himself than his bear.

His bear snorted, clearly skeptical. *I have an idea that we won't get many answers today. The creature is not exactly forthcoming.*

As they ran on, Leif hoped they might not only catch up with the creature but also catch it. Maybe then, they could make it talk and understand its true intentions.

But his bear laughed at the thought. *You doubt we could make a mythical creature talk if it didn't want to?*

Perhaps, Leif agreed reluctantly. *But maybe it does want to, and that's the point of it drawing us out into the remote wild like this.*

Hiding in the wilderness seems an awfully strange way of being approachable for a chat, his bear grumbled.

As much as Leif was anxious, it was exhilarating to be roaming the mountain, especially with a fellow guardian by his side. Small critters and animals went scurrying for cover as they thundered over the rugged land. Although they were keenly aware of the forest and mountain animals around them, they need not worry, there was only one thing they were hunting.

It didn't take long before they reached the mountain trail where Leif and Emily had first met. Leif's bear slowed down to a gentle lope as they climbed up onto what remained of the trail, and he glanced back to see Thane's bear looking around at the decimation.

The ground had finally settled, the sound of cracking wood and falling rocks only a not-so-distant memory, but the ground had dried out, and there didn't seem to be any danger of another landslide. However, the trail was all but gone.

Leif's bear put his nose to the ground as they picked their way over the strewn boulders and mounds of dirt.

Nothing.

Perhaps the landslide had also scattered the scent of the creature.

They turned their eyes up toward the rocky ridge above them. That's where they last sensed the creature. They glanced back at Thane before they took a massive leap skyward. His bear grunted from the exertion as he extended his paws and grabbed at the top of the ledge, hanging for a moment before his massively thick claws caught on a nook in the rock, and pulled himself up.

Not quite as at home in the rugged terrain, Thane was left scrabbling

around for a moment as he tried to climb up, but managed to haul himself up on the rocky ridge.

Leif glanced around. The vegetation was much sparser here, and the ground more stone than dirt, thankfully leaving it all but untouched by the landslide. His eyes fell upon a small patch of scrubby grass that lay flat in a mostly circular shape. With his face held low, Leif's bear approached the patch of grass.

As he approached, he could taste a very faint, unfamiliar scent on the air. Yes. Something had lain here. Only briefly, but it had been heavy enough to bend the thick grass stalks out of shape.

As he cast his gaze upward, he could see only one traversable path leading away from them that avoided the gouges in the land caused by the landslide, and didn't require climbing impossible cliff faces. The creature must have gone that way.

He looked back to Thane for confirmation before they moved on.

It was a short but steep climb up the rocks. At the top, Leif could hear the soft sound of running water. They pushed on until they reached a mountain stream, its crystal-clear waters babbling over smooth rocks.

The bears drank their fill of the cool, mineral-rich water, their sides heaving from exertion. Then, the surrounding air shimmered as they shifted back into their human forms.

Leif retrieved a couple of energy bars and a water bottle from his backpack, tossing one to Thane before tearing open his own.

They sat in silence for several minutes, devouring the food and soaking in the sights and sounds of the mountain. Birds sang overhead, and a gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the few towering trees surrounding them. It was a moment of peace amidst the chaotic world they inhabited.

Thane broke the silence as he chewed through his energy bar, "I never really did ask you how your date went last night."

Leif stared ahead, searching to find the words to describe the best night of his life. Finally, he replied, "It was perfect. Emily is perfect. The food was definitely perfect."

Thane chuckled, clapping him on the shoulder. "Said like a true bear shifter."

Leif laughed, too, then continued, "I didn't want the evening to end. I

didn't want to take her home. And when I did, I never wanted to leave."

Thane nodded in understanding. "Said every shifter ever on their first date. And their second. Heck, I don't know if that feeling ever truly goes away."

"How did you decide the right moment to tell Sable about being a bear shifter?" Leif asked, his brow furrowed with concern.

Thane chewed his energy bar thoughtfully before answering. "I don't think you can plan the right moment. I think it naturally happens." He chuckled. "Or fate decides that this is when you are going to tell her, whether you're prepared or not."

Leif snorted and said, "Yeah, fate has a hand in all of this, doesn't it?"

"It does," Thane agreed, as he finished his bar and put the wrapper in his pack. He took a long drink of water, then added, "I don't think that's a bad thing."

The question weighed heavily on his mind: was it a bad thing? Should fate have that much control over their lives and that of their mates?

Leif mulled over this question as he sat on a moss-covered rock by the babbling stream, trailing his fingers in the clear, cold water. Was fate the reason they were here now?

Leif narrowed his eyes as he looked across to the far bank. In the soft mud at the water's edge was a mosaic of animal tracks. He could see deer, fox and....something strange.

It must have been the most recent creature to cross the stream as it was imprinted over the rest of the tracks. They were large, much larger than the pawprints his bear left, but were longer, narrower. And the strangest thing of all was the fact that they didn't sink that far into the mud. By the size of the prints the weight of whatever had left them would have obliterated any other sign left on the ground. Instead, they were shallow, as if delicately placed there.

They were on the right track.

Leif took a sharp breath. The pull of the creature was stronger now, the sense of it keener.

Could Thane sense it too now?

He cast a concerned glance over at Thane, who was taking a swig from their shared water bottle. But Thane looked relaxed, perhaps because he felt as if they were doing something to get answers.

Being in motion always feels better than staying still, his bear said sagely.

“Can you tell how much farther we have to run?” Thane asked, breaking the silence that had settled between them.

Leif closed his eyes and pushed his senses out, searching for the creature’s location. “We still have a way to go, but we’re close enough I think I can pinpoint it.”

“Does that mean you know exactly where it is?” Thane asked with intense curiosity.

Leif nodded. “Yes, it’s a couple of valleys over, but much higher.”

His bear agreed, the feeling of the creature’s presence was strong within him. *It hasn’t moved at all. It’s been there for days.*

Thane stared into the distance, his eyes unfocused. “I still can’t sense it.”

“Maybe you will when we get closer,” Leif replied, hoping to reassure his friend.

They stood up, brushing off dirt and leaves before shifting, the air around them shimmering as they disappeared for a second, only to reappear as bears. As one, they were on the move, their powerful bodies propelling them forward with ease.

Soon, they reached the mouth of a high-sided valley, the rocky walls looming above them like ancient sentinels. Leif’s bear examined the stony sides, ensuring they wouldn’t get caught in a landslide. The thought brought back memories of the first time he’d seen his mate.

He had reached her just in time, gathering her into his arms and shielding her from the debris tumbling down the valley.

If the creature hadn’t led us there... his bear reminded him, the words echoing in his mind.

Yes, the creature... It all seems to come back to it. But what does it mean? Leif wondered, a knot of worry forming in his stomach.

As they climbed higher into the valley, the air grew colder, the wind pushing through the land biting through their thick fur. They pressed on, knowing they were close to uncovering the truth about the creature. And yet, Leif couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t quite right.

What if we’re wrong? his bear asked. *What if it’s like a residual sense of the creature, and it’s gone?*

We'll soon find out, Leif replied grimly.

Leif's bear shuddered as they drew closer to the creature, its fur bristling with anticipation. It was over the next ridge, still unmoving, a mystery waiting to be unveiled. Leif cast a glance toward Thane, but his fellow guardian did not seem to sense the creature. Or if he did, he was keeping it to himself.

So, why us? Leif's bear asked.

I wish I had the answer, Leif thought, trying to suppress the nagging feeling that something was amiss.

As they neared the top of a steep incline, they slowed their pace, their muscles bunching as they exerted themselves. They crested the ridge, and found themselves in what almost looked like a cove, but instead of blue water, an expanse of lush green and vibrant flowers covered the plateau, and instead of soft sands, they were hemmed in by high outcroppings that blocked all but the gentlest breeze.

His bear breathed heavily as they stepped onto the plateau, the grass soft beneath their paws. The sweet scent of flowers was in the air, and it was quiet.

It was...beautiful. Yet it held a strange sense of foreboding, as if the land here had been still for a long time, waiting for something,

It's here, Leif's bear whispered, *but I can't see it.*

Thane's bear stepped in front of them before it turned and looked at Leif's bear, a questioning tilt of his head. Did that mean Thane could sense it, too?

Leif shifted into his human form, the air crackling with electricity as the bear disappeared to be replaced by the man. Thane followed his lead, his own transformation equally swift and seamless.

"Anything?" Thane asked, his voice gruff with concern.

"You still can't sense it?" Leif asked, feeling the pressure weighing down on him. He had led them here because he could sense the creature, but there was nothing visible.

Perhaps it's hidden in the meadow, his inner bear suggested.

Perhaps, Leif murmured, taking a step forward into the long grass, then another, allowing his senses to lead him.

The wildflowers swayed gently in the breeze, their colors popping out against the backdrop of lush green grass. But the farther he walked, the less

distinct the sense of the creature became.

“I can’t pinpoint it,” Leif admitted, frustration evident in his voice. “Not anymore.”

“Is it still here?” Thane asked, his eyes scanning the meadow for any hint of the elusive creature.

“I don’t know,” Leif replied, torn between his desire to find the creature and the unsettling feeling that maybe it was better left undiscovered. “It’s like it’s everywhere and nowhere all at once.”

Thane pressed his lips together as his eyes went out of focus. “There’s nothing here, no one else here, only us.”

“So there’s no danger to our mates, no danger to us.” Leif glanced at Thane as he voiced his thoughts, sounding more confident than he felt. “And no threat to your baby.”

Thane let out a long breath, his eyes bright with tears. “No, no threat to the baby.”

“I’m sorry I dragged you out here for nothing,” Leif told his friend.

“No, I’m glad we came,” Thane began. “The creature wanted you to come to this place for a reason, Leif. Maybe one day that reason will become clear.”

But today was not that day, and so they shifted and left the meadow with their questions unanswered.

They had failed in their hunt.

Chapter Sixteen – Emily

Emily was packing her purse, eager to meet Leif for their second date at Bearheart Ridge, when Reginald emerged from the living room. “Emily, do you have a moment? I’d like to discuss something with you.”

“Of course, Reginald,” she replied, trying to conceal her impatience. She set her purse down on the hallway table and turned to face him. “What’s on your mind?”

“About the designs for Mountain View,” he began, rubbing his hands together nervously. “I’ve been thinking about your designs inspired by your visit to the museum yesterday, and I’ve had some second thoughts.”

A mixture of excitement and frustration swirled inside her. She had spent all night sketching out new designs for the rooms at Mountain View based on that visit, and then Reginald seemed to have had doubts. So she had gone into the town, created a new color palette, and sketched out whole new designs *again*, and now Reginald might have been onboard with her original designs.

“Go on,” she prompted, trying to keep her tone neutral.

“Well, I appreciate the thought you’ve put into including the house’s history in the designs. With a few tweaks, we might make it work. Perhaps we could get together over dinner and talk?” Reginald glanced down at Emily’s purse clasped in her hand.

He must have known she was going out to dinner. Was he trying to spoil her evening?

No, she was overreacting. She hadn’t seen Reginald since their talk this morning. After her trip to town, she’d found a quiet spot in the grounds surrounding the house to sit with her sketchbook and come up with her new ideas.

There was no way he could know about her date with Leif. Unless Leif had told someone who had passed the news to Reginald.

Emily was not used to being the talk of the town, but after her encounter with Sarah, she was aware that might be exactly what she was. Had Reginald heard the news from a small-town gossip? She guessed that was the risk of small towns.

“I’m so glad you have had second thoughts, Reginald, and I’d love to discuss them with you further but I’m afraid I have a...an appointment,” she said, forcing a smile.

“An *appointment*?” Reginald leveled his gaze at her. “Well then. Don’t let me keep you.”

“We can talk tomorrow,” she agreed, trying not to feel guilty. Reginald could have texted her earlier and asked to meet so that they could discuss the designs, but he hadn’t. Emily appreciated her job, but she was experienced enough to know that there had to be some boundaries. She wasn’t at Reginald’s beck and call twenty-four hours a day. “Now, if you don’t mind, I don’t want to be late.”

“By all means,” he said, stepping aside to let her pass. “Enjoy your appointment.”

“Thank you, Reginald. Goodnight,” Emily said as she gripped her purse tighter and headed toward the door.

As Emily exited the house and walked to her car, she took a moment to appreciate the breathtaking view before her—every time she walked out the house she was greeted with a new spectacle. The early evening sun hung low in the sky over the forests, casting brilliant golden light across the landscape. She was so lucky to be living in such a picturesque town.

And for that, she had Reginald to thank. Guilt prickled her skin, but she refused to let it take a hold. She might work for Reginald, but she was entitled to a life outside of work, too.

Emily climbed into her car, her mind racing with thoughts about the redesign, and Reginald’s change of heart. It had certainly been unexpected, but most welcome.

Emily drove away from Mountain View, leaving her earlier melancholy mood behind. She’d been convinced that she would never provide Reginald with a design to make him happy, but she might have been wrong.

Maybe he’d just gotten out of bed on the wrong side this morning, as her grandma used to say whenever Emily was cranky in the mornings.

Whatever the reason, she was thankful for his change of heart.

Not least because it meant she could remain in Bear Creek.

As she’d sat with her sketchbook on a patch of soft spring grass under the watchful gaze of the mountain, she’d become convinced she’d be packing her

bags and leaving Mountain View before she even got a chance to work on the house.

And before she got a chance to really get to know Leif.

It was the latter fear that had hurt the most.

Whatever spell he'd cast over her, it had not diminished since their date last night.

And now she was going to visit him at his home.

Emily sucked in a deep breath and let it out with a long sigh as her car wound its way through the mountains toward Bearheart Ridge.

What a perfect evening. The sunlight danced on the leaves of the towering pines that lined the road, casting dappled shadows on the asphalt beneath her tires. She hummed to herself, her mind drifting to the bold interior designs she had planned for Mountain View. Her thoughts flickered with images of warm colors and plush fabrics, creating a welcoming atmosphere to bring life to the old house.

As Emily's car continued to climb, her heart raced in sync with the ascent. Everything seemed to be falling into place, and it was hard not to feel a sense of anticipation at what lay ahead.

Leif. Leif lay ahead. All she had to do was follow this road and there he would be waiting for her.

Her stomach turned over at the thought of his strong arms that had wrapped around her when he shielded her from the landslide.

And then there were his eyes. They seemed to pierce her soul.

Goodness, if she wasn't careful, she was going to fall head over heels for the guy. If she wasn't already, she told herself with a wry smile.

Wow. She was also ready to fall head over heels for Bearheart Ridge.

The sight that greeted her as she crested the ridge overwhelmed her. Bearheart Ridge was a small enclave of homes nestled under the mountain, their wooden exteriors blending seamlessly with the surrounding nature. Below, the larger town of Bear Creek was bathed in the soft glow of evening.

As she parked her car and stepped out, a gentle breeze caressed her face, carrying the scent of honeysuckle. Standing there, taking in the view, Emily could easily imagine Leif's ancestors living here hundreds of years ago when the town was founded. This was a community that had weathered countless seasons, its people bound together by a steadfast devotion and loyalty.

The Bear Creek Guardians, it all made more sense now that she was here with the view. They truly did guard over the town.

“Emily!” Leif called out from the porch of his cabin.

“Hey, Leif,” she replied with a smile, feeling a rush of excitement.

As she walked toward him, her mind swirled with questions about his past, his family, and the lives they led in this hidden paradise.

Emily gazed out at the breathtaking view from Bearheart Ridge, mesmerized by the sight until she felt Leif approaching.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Leif asked, his eyes sparkling with pride as he stood beside her so close she could feel the heat from his body.

“Absolutely stunning,” Emily replied, her eyes fixed on the rugged beauty of the landscape before them. And the man by her side. “I can see why you love living here.”

Leif grinned, clearly pleased by her admiration. “It’s my own little paradise.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, suddenly shy. “Would you like to come inside? I could make us some drinks.”

“Sounds perfect,” Emily said, accepting his invitation even though she could stand there for eternity staring out at this view with Leif beside her.

“This way.” He held out his hand, and she threaded her fingers through his as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

As their skin touched, she felt the now familiar frisson of electricity between them, and warmth flooded her body. She swallowed down her desire for him, wishing she could understand the power he had over her.

As Leif turned his head and locked eyes with hers, she realized that she exerted the same inexplicable power over him.

He smiled, the corners of his mouth tugging up as he stepped toward the door leading to his cabin. Emily followed him, just as she would follow him wherever he led.

As they stepped into Leif’s rustic cabin, Emily was immediately struck by the warmth and comfort of the rooms. Handmade bookcases lined the walls, filled with an impressive collection of books on nature, plant identification, and animal tracking. It was obvious Leif was passionate about the natural world around him.

“I’ll go fix us those drinks,” Leif said and squeezed her hand before letting it go.

Her skin tingled where they'd touched and she wanted to follow him, but she also wanted to discover more about the man.

As Leif went to the kitchen, Emily wandered over to a shelf filled with curious items that Leif had collected, perhaps from his hikes over the mountain. She marveled at the intricate patterns of a feather, the delicate curve of a seashell, and the vibrant colors of a butterfly's wing.

"Your collection is amazing," she said, turning to find Leif watching her with a mixture of pride and vulnerability.

"Thank you," he replied, his cheeks flushing slightly. "I've always been drawn to the beauty of nature. I guess I just wanted to surround myself with it."

"Mission accomplished," Emily teased, her heart skipping a beat as she caught sight of the genuine happiness in Leif's eyes.

"I thought I would introduce you to the delights of Bear Creek Honey Beer." Leif handed her a beer bottle.

"Thank you." Emily accepted the bottle and raised it to his.

"Here's to many more adventures," Leif said softly, his voice barely above a whisper. "Though, perhaps more planned than our first." He chuckled.

"Cheers to that," Emily agreed and took a sip of beer.

It was like nothing she had ever tasted, the sweetness of the honey melded with fruits and spices that gave the beer a depth of flavor that lingered in her mouth.

"Good?" Leif asked as though it was important that she enjoyed the beer. Which she did.

"Very." She took another long sip and then examined the label. "It's brewed here in Bear Creek? It says the honey is harvested locally..." Her eyes widened. "And it's made by Carter Eden? *The Carter Eden?*"

"There can only be one," Leif chuckled. "We can go down and visit the brewery."

"I'd love to." Emily stared at Leif as he drank his beer, and a sudden surge of desire filled her. Maybe it was the beer affecting her already, but Leif had a swoon-worthy rugged handsomeness about him.

Yet beneath that ruggedness there, she sensed he was a gentle soul, which captivated her.

As he set his beer bottle down, she found herself leaning in closer to him, her heart racing with anticipation. His eyes met hers, and she saw a flicker of desire in them before he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers.

As their tongues entwined, Leif's hands explored her body with gentle but insistent touches. His fingers brushed against the soft fabric of her blouse before cupping her breast, causing a shiver to race down her spine. She moaned into his mouth, her desire for him growing more intense by the second.

"Leif," she gasped when they finally broke apart, her eyes dark with need. She wanted more, much more.

Leif's gaze bore into hers, filled with the same hunger she felt. However, to her surprise, he took a step back, gently untangling himself from her embrace. "We should go and look for the photos in the attic," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion.

"Your mom's old photos." Emily frowned, confused by the sudden change in pace. She wanted Leif, needed him to take her and make her his, but he seemed determined to hold back.

And she had to respect that.

But she could hope.

Chapter Seventeen – Leif

Leif led Emily through the dimly lit hallway of his mountain home, their hands intertwined as they passed various curiosities he'd discovered on his hikes through the mountains.

Smooth stones, twisted bits of wood, and a collection of bird skulls were all carefully arranged on a shelf. Each of these objects held a story from his travels into the wilderness.

But this was no time to think of his solitary walks in the mountains. Not when his mate was here by his side.

Then again, maybe thinking of solitary walks on the mountain might help ease his inner turmoil.

And calm his racing heart.

Although that was doubtful, after the heated kiss they'd just shared.

A kiss which had left him in turmoil.

As they reached the staircase leading to the first floor, Leif's mind conjured a different destination for them—his bedroom.

In his mind's eye, he saw himself slowly undressing Emily, each article of clothing falling to the floor like autumn leaves. He envisioned kissing every inch of her body, tasting her soft skin, and inhaling the intoxicating scent of her desire.

"Leif, this place is amazing," Emily said, pulling him back to reality. "You have an eye for the beauty of nature."

"I don't think that many people would agree," he replied, his voice low. "Most people wouldn't look twice at these things lying on the ground outside, and would think it strange to find inside a home."

"I'd love for you to take me out onto the mountain and teach me how to see those things through your eyes."

Leif held her gaze for a long moment, trying to figure out if she were simply humoring him.

She's not, his bear said. *She means every word.*

"I'd like that, too," he said.

An imaginative reply, his bear teased.

Being around Emily robs me of all thoughts, Leif told his bear.

All? his bear asked with a knowing laugh.

Well, not all, Leif admitted.

He reluctantly released her hand and began climbing the narrow steps leading to the attic. His heightened senses were fixed on Emily as she followed closely behind him, her soft footsteps stirring the dust that had settled on the wooden stairs.

Leif rarely came up here. He had no reason to. He lived a simple life and didn't accumulate items that often ended up in people's attics. Well, not things that he needed often. Just old memories.

Reaching the attic door, he pushed it open and held out his hand once more.

"Watch your step," he cautioned, his voice laced with concern.

As their fingers met again, a powerful wave of intimate friction surged between them. The sensation was electric, sending shivers down Leif's spine and igniting a fire within him that threatened to consume him whole. His intense desire for Emily was overwhelming.

But he fought for control, focusing on his breathing as he stood up straight in the attic, his mate by his side.

"Leif, this is incredible," Emily breathed as she took in the attic's treasures. Her eyes widened with awe, and for a moment, Leif allowed himself to bask in her wonder.

"I haven't been up here for a while," he replied, his voice strained. "I'd forgotten how much junk had been accumulated over the years."

"I wouldn't call it junk," Emily told him as she rummaged through a box filled with vintage toys and games. "This looks like you kept everything from your childhood," she observed. "I can't believe you still have this stuff."

"Not just my childhood." Leif laughed. "There's some of my grandpa's toys in one of these boxes. My family always seems to keep their toys for the next generation to play with."

Unfortunately, there has not been a next generation in this family, his bear grumbled.

And that is not our fault, Leif reminded him.

I know, but I wish we'd had kids years ago. That we'd spent happy evenings playing with all these old toys and games before settling down to read a bedtime story, his bear said wistfully.

We can't change the past and so we have to be content that we still have time to fulfil those dreams, Leif told his bear.

Oh, don't worry, I'm more than content, his bear assured him. *And when I get to meet Emily in the fur, I'll be downright ecstatic.*

Leif chuckled at his bear. But he felt the same way, as if their life was finally beginning.

Their family life, that was. Neither Leif nor his bear could wait to have kids. He had so much he wanted to show them, to teach them, about the world.

About our world, his bear said as he dreamed of taking their children over the mountains and teaching them how to track and read the signs that nature left for them to follow.

“Do you have any idea where the photos are?” Emily asked as she placed a wooden skittle back in a box.

“They should be near the front of...this.” He waved his hand around the attic not really knowing how to describe the array of haphazard items.

“I'd love to work my way through...this,” Emily said with a grin. “From front to back. There's so much history here.”

“Let's just hope we can find those photos in amongst all this history,” Leif said with a wry smile.

“Okay, let's get started,” Emily said eagerly.

Emily and Leif rummaged through the dusty boxes that filled the cramped attic, their fingers brushing against long-forgotten things. The dim light cast eerie shadows on the walls as old toys and games peeked out from the corners of faded boxes, and the dust caught a little in his throat. He'd have to make sure to clean the place a little next time he invited his mate to spend an evening in the attic.

“Hey, I think I found it!” Emily exclaimed, tapping her hand on the lid of a cardboard box.

“That looks exactly like what we're looking for,” Leif said with relief that it hadn't taken too long to find.

“Shall I open it, or do you want the honor?” Emily tugged at the cardboard

box and held it out to him.

“No, you found it, you should be the one to open it,” Leif told her.

“Okay.” She carefully opened the lid, revealing a treasure trove of photographs taken by Leif’s mother more than forty years ago. Each image captured moments of Bear Creek’s history—its picturesque mountains, an assortment of townsfolk, and natural beauty.

Leif leaned over to get a better look at the photos, a smile spreading across his face as he recognized faces from his past. Among them, he spotted a photo of his parents standing proudly beside the other members of the previous generation of Bear Creek Guardians. A wave of nostalgia washed over him, and for a moment, he was transported back to the days when he was just a child learning about the legacy he would one day inherit.

“Look at this!” Emily said, holding up another photo that caught Leif’s attention. She laughed, her eyes wide with wonder. “Is this your *ghost*?”

Leif’s eyes narrowed, and his brows furrowed as he took in the woman in the photograph. It was her—the elusive figure who had haunted his dreams. The scent of lavender seemed to waft through the air, carrying him back to the very moment the photo was taken. His mind raced, trying to piece together fragments of a memory that had been locked away for decades.

“Leif?” Emily asked, concern creeping into her voice as she noticed his sudden change in demeanor. “Are you all right?”

He blinked rapidly, forcing himself to return to the present. “Yeah, I’m fine,” he said, his voice betraying a hint of uncertainty.

“Who is she?” Emily pressed, her curiosity piqued by Leif’s reaction.

“I don’t know.” Leif rummaged through his memories, trying to remember more. “I remember this moment, but I thought...”

“That she was a ghost,” Emily finished for him, watching his expression.

“Yeah.” He ran a hand through his hair and laughed nervously. “I’ve been telling people that story for my whole life.”

“And now you’re disappointed that the supernatural doesn’t exist?” Emily said.

Oh, it does, Leif’s bear roared.

“Not so much disappointed...” Leif paused. “I was a child, for whatever reason when I met this lady, I thought she was a ghost.”

“I guess she was a little pale,” Emily said supportively as she stared closer at the woman in the photo. Then she looked up at Leif and smiled. “You were a child with a healthy imagination. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“No,” Leif agreed.

“Tell me about these people,” Emily pointed to the photo of Leif’s parents and the other guardians.

“This is my mom and dad,” Leif told her. “And these are the other members of the last generation of Bear Creek Guardians.”

“Wow.” Emily leaned closer, her breath warm as it caressed his hand. “So these are all direct descendants of the founders, too?”

“They are.” Leif set the photo down alongside the one of his ghost and picked up a photo album that was faded around the edges. He flicked it open. “These are of the town.”

Emily accepted the photo album when he offered it to her and said, “This is like stepping back in time.”

Emily sat down on a wooden trunk and opened the photo album.

Leif hesitated, itching to sit next to her, but hesitant to invade her space.

“Come look at these with me.” Emily patted the trunk. “I need you to tell me who these people are and where these photos were taken.”

“Sure.” Leif did not need asking twice and he sat down next to her, their thighs pressed together as Emily spread the worn photo album open on their laps. The pages were filled with snapshots of Bear Creek from forty years ago; it was like looking through a window to the past. Leif could see the wonder in Emily’s eyes as she studied each image, her fingers gently tracing the edges of the photographs.

“Wow, look at this one,” Emily said, pointing to a faded picture of the main street, lined with classic cars and people strolling about in long coats. “It’s like stepping into a time capsule.”

Leif chuckled. “Yeah, my mom took photos of pretty much everything she could. She always loved capturing every moment of our town’s history.” He flipped to the next page, revealing a photo of him as a young boy, grinning widely as he climbed a tree.

“Is that you?” she asked, amused. “You look so carefree and wild.”

“Those were simpler times,” Leif agreed.

“If only we understood that...” She glanced up at him. “You know. Because before we know it life gets complicated, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” Leif agreed.

Very complicated, his bear agreed.

And tonight promised to be one of the most complicated nights of his life. For tonight, he planned to tell Emily about bear shifters.

He couldn’t keep putting it off and he hoped it would bring them closer, but fear gnawed at the edges of his thoughts. What if she didn’t understand? What if she rejected him?

The only way we’ll ever know is if we tell her, his bear said.

I just have to figure out the right time, Leif agreed.

No time like the present, his bear told him.

But before Leif had a chance to open his mouth, his phone rang, shattering the quiet intimacy of the moment. Leif glanced at the screen and saw the mountain rescue leader’s number flashing. His heart sank, but duty called.

“Sorry, Emily,” he said, reluctantly pulling away from her. “I have to take this.”

“Of course,” she replied, nodding her understanding as he stepped away, pausing by the stairs down and tapping on his phone screen.

“Hey there, what’s up?” Leif asked.

“Leif, we need you for a rescue on the mountain,” the voice on the other end said urgently. “Can you get here ASAP?”

“Understood. I’m on my way,” Leif responded. He ended the call and turned to Emily, disappointment evident on his face. “I’m sorry, but I have to go. It sounds like there’s an emergency on the mountain.”

“Hey, it’s your job, people need you,” Emily said softly, though her eyes were clouded with worry. “I understand.”

“Stay here and carry on looking at the photos, if you’d like,” Leif offered, not wanting their evening to end so abruptly.

Emily hesitated, then shook her head. “No, I should go. But thank you.”

As they descended the stairs together, a palpable tension filled the air. It was as if Emily could not wait to get out of there.

She grabbed her coat and purse and bolted for the door. But, before she left, she paused and looked back at Leif, her eyes shimmering with real fear.

“Be careful, Leif,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

Leif longed to ask her about the fear he saw in her eyes, to explore the unspoken emotions between them. But time was short, and someone needed him out on the mountain. With a heavy heart, he forced a smile and nodded. “Always, Emily. Always.”

Leif walked her to her car, opening the door for her. As she climbed in, he leaned down and kissed her on the cheek, the scent of her skin sending a jolt of desire through him.

“I’ll see you soon,” he promised, and stepped back as she drove away.

Leif took a deep breath, then turned and headed back to the house, his mind racing with thoughts of Emily.

What is she so afraid of? his bear asked.

I don’t know, Leif replied, but duty called. He needed to focus on the rescue mission at hand.

He ran back to the house, grabbed his gear and headed for his truck.

As he drove along the winding roads of the mountain, he mentally prepared himself for whatever rescue mission lay ahead.

Was this something to do with the creature? Was this what the beast had been trying to warn him about?

Leif turned his attention to the distant point on the mountain where he and Thane had gone earlier. But there was no sense of the creature.

It was as if it had done what it had set out to do, lead them to that wildflower meadow.

But why? his bear asked. *There was nothing there.*

Perhaps it was a blip, Leif said. *Or perhaps whatever danger it was warning us of has passed.*

He reached the Bear Creek Mountain Rescue Center and parked the truck. As Leif got out, he pushed his senses toward Mountain View. He could sense Emily had nearly reached the house.

She is safe, his bear said.

Leif grabbed his gear out of the back of his truck and headed toward the group of other rescuers who had gathered outside the main building.

Their leader, Rick, nodded at him with a grim expression on his face. “Leif, we got a call that a group of hikers who have gotten themselves into

trouble up on the north face. We all know it's a dangerous area at the best of times but after the rain we've had, it could be treacherous. We've already had the one landslide up there."

Leif nodded, adrenaline pumping through his veins. "Are we ready to head out?"

"We are," Rick replied.

"Then let's go." Leif headed for one of the mountain rescue trucks, and the others followed. They would drive as high into the mountains as they could and then hike on from there.

The lives of the hikers depended on the mountain rescue crew, and Leif and the other members would do what it took to get them down safely.

And us down safely, his bear said.

Because now they had a mate to come home to.

Chapter Eighteen – Emily

Emily drove slowly along the back roads leading to Mountain View, her hands gripping the wheel tightly to stop them from trembling as she tried to steady her nerves. She couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom that had settled in her chest since Leif got the phone call summoning him to join the mountain rescue team.

Emily knew it was unreasonable to worry so much about Leif; after all, he had been part of the mountain rescue team for years. He was experienced, skilled, and more than capable of handling the dangers of the mountains. And yet, every time she thought about him out there on a rescue mission, her heart clenched with fear. If this was how she was going to feel every time he went out into the mountains, was it worth pursuing a relationship with him?

As she navigated a particularly sharp curve in the road, she took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. The way she felt about Leif wasn't something she could just ignore—it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance at love, and he was worth the risk. But fear still gnawed at her insides, threatening to consume her. Fear of losing everything again, fear of not being strong enough to cope with that kind of loss once more.

When she finally reached Mountain View, she pulled over and stopped the car, taking a few moments to compose herself. She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, counting each inhale and exhale until her heartbeat slowed and the anxiety started to dissipate.

She was overreacting. Leif was experienced, and not the kind of man to take a risk. Plus, he wasn't out there alone, there was a crew of extremely capable people with him. Professional people who were good at their job.

He'd be okay.

With her fear under control, Emily opened the car door and stepped out, making her way toward the house. As she walked, a gentle breeze swept down from the surrounding mountains, caressing her face like a lover's touch. The sensation brought a small smile to her lips, and she reached up to brush her fingers against her cheek, thinking of Leif's strong but gentle hands.

He'd be okay, she told herself once more and the tension in her body

waned. A sense of calm enveloped her, as if the very mountains themselves were offering her their support. Maybe it was what Leif felt when he was out in the wilds. Perhaps that's why he loved it out there so much.

Emily looked over her shoulder at the distant mountain peaks, silhouetted against the night sky then she let herself into the house. She was met with an eerie silence and a dark hallway that seemed to swallow her whole and fear prickled her neck once more.

Perhaps it was the old photographs and talk of ghosts, but a sense of unease crept over her.

Light. She needed light. Light that would chase away the darkness and take her fears with it.

She flicked the light switch, and the old lightbulb overhead feebly flared to life, casting a dim orange pool of light around her. She took a shaky breath as she looked down the hallway, the light unable to pierce through the darkness, instead casting long shadows that retreated away from her, as if they were trying to hide from her gaze. She was being ridiculous. The house was not haunted.

But the feeling of unease clung to her as she ventured farther into the house, each creak of the floorboards beneath her feet echoing like whispers throughout the rooms. It felt as though the house itself was holding its breath, waiting for something, or someone, to appear. Emily couldn't help but recall the photo of the older adult woman Leif had told her about, the one he'd met here as a child. The thought of ghosts sent a chill down her spine. What if they did exist and the woman walked these very halls, searching for...what?

Shaking off her irrational fears, she reached the kitchen and flipped the light switch. The room instantly brightened, and she let out a small sigh of relief.

Tea. Tea would make her feel better.

Emily crossed the kitchen to the stove and lifted the kettle. Grasping it tightly, she went to the sink and filled it with water, then set it to boil. Soon the sound of bubbling water filled the otherwise silent room. As the steam gently rose, she poured herself a cup of tea and sat down at the table.

With the cup nestled between her hands, Emily stared into the depths of the liquid, mesmerized by the swirling patterns. Then the surface stilled, and she swore she saw Leif's face in the steam rising from the hot liquid.

It was an omen. Not that she believed in such things.

But in her heart, she knew he would be safe; they had unfinished business between them, after all. But as she laughed to herself, she realized it wasn't mere business that tied them together—it was something much more profound and inexplicable.

Taking a sip of her tea, she glanced up and the liquid nearly swished over the edge of the cup as Reginald entered the kitchen.

Maybe he was the ghost of the house, Emily thought as she let out the breath that had caught in her throat.

After the initial shot of adrenaline, a wave of disappointment washed over her. She'd been enjoying the solitude of losing herself in thoughts of Leif.

But this was Reginald's house, and she didn't want to make him feel unwelcome in his own home. So, she forced a smile onto her face.

"Evening, Reginald," she said, trying to keep her tone light and friendly.

Reginald, looking slightly disheveled, gave her a tight-lipped smile. "I wasn't expecting you back so soon from your...appointment."

"Neither was I." She took another sip of her tea, her thoughts drifting back to Leif. "But life is full of unexpected twists and turns, don't you think?"

Reginald gave a small snort. "I used to think that way until I took firm control over the direction my life was heading."

Maybe that was the secret of Reginald's success, he never let chance, or fate, control his life.

"Doesn't that make life a little boring?" Emily asked even though she had to admit she'd love to have control over her life. She was done with unexpected twists and turns.

No, that wasn't true. Leif was a twist and a turn she was truly thankful for.

"There is nothing boring about it," Reginald assured as he poured himself a cup of tea. "Don't you wish you control over your life?"

"Sometimes, of course," Emily admitted.

"And other times you are happy for your life to lead you here and there." Reginald swept his hand back and forth as he sat down across the table from her.

"There is something to be said for spontaneity," Emily told him.

"Spontaneity," Reginald scoffed. "Planning is everything."

“Well, I plan on an early night.” Emily finished her tea and stood up, feeling the exhaustion of the day weighing heavily on her. “Maybe we could talk about my designs in the morning.”

“Of course,” he said brusquely. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

Emily nodded and went to the sink, where she washed out her teacup and put it on the drainer then headed toward the stairs, grateful to be alone with her thoughts once more.

Wearily, Emily ascended the creaky wooden staircase, her fingers trailing along the worn banister as she admired the faded wallpaper. She imagined how many other people had climbed these stairs to bed over the years. The history of the house sent a shiver down her spine, and she felt a connection to those who had walked this path before her. It was as if they were all around her and if she looked carefully, she might see them.

But that was a fanciful thought of a tired mind. A good night’s sleep would chase away all thoughts of ghosts.

Emily reached the top of the stairs and turned to the left, her steps slow as she made her way to her bedroom. Turning the doorknob, she pushed the door open and stepped inside. As she flicked on the light, Emily’s gaze was immediately drawn to the hand-carved furniture. Her eyes widened as she recognized the chest of drawers from Leif’s mom’s photos. Standing in front of it, she placed her hands on the solid wood and closed her eyes, as if willing herself to feel the ghosts of the past, to touch the supernatural. Because if she could feel the ghosts here, maybe she could talk to those who had passed...

Not just here, but elsewhere...

Opening her eyes, Emily blinked back tears and straightened up, heading to the bathroom to brush her teeth and get ready for bed.

What a silly thought...

Before she climbed beneath the sheets, she went to the window and stared out at the mountain. Was he still out there, risking his life to help others?

With a sigh, Emily closed the drapes and turned her back to the window. If only she knew Leif was safe.

She sat on the edge of her bed and reached for her cell phone on the nightstand. Perhaps she could call him, just to make sure everything was okay. But as her fingers touched the cool screen, she hesitated and set the phone back down on the nightstand. He was busy, out there trying to help

people in need, and she didn't want to disturb him.

Climbing into bed, Emily turned off the light on the nightstand and pulled the covers over her. She stared at the dim light peeping through the curtained window, pushing out her senses as if she could locate Leif by sheer will. But she couldn't. Her thoughts raced in circles, a mix of worry and frustration, as she tried to understand why the connection between them seemed so intense. She hardly knew him, and yet, somehow, she felt as if they were fated to be together.

Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes as she lay there, struggling to find sleep amidst the storm of emotions raging within her. She wanted to believe that everything would work out, that they would find their way back to each other in the end. But for now, all she could do was close her eyes and try to sleep, praying that Leif would return to her safe and sound...

Emily jolted awake, her heart pounding against her ribcage. The darkness of the room enveloped her like a thick shroud, and she strained her ears for any sound that might have woken her. The old house creaked and groaned softly around her, as if it had secrets to tell but couldn't quite find the words.

There! The faintest rattle against the windowpane made her heart try to claw its way out of her chest. Were the ghosts coming for her? *Ridiculous*, she chided herself, sitting up in bed. Ghosts wouldn't be tapping on the window like some impatient visitor.

Gathering her courage, Emily swung her legs off the side of the bed and placed her feet on the cold wooden floor. She held her breath, listening for any other sounds. Another rattle at the window. Was it Leif? Unsteady on her feet from fear and confusion, she pushed herself to stand and hurried to the window, unsure whether she could sense him or if her mind was playing tricks on her.

Frustrated at herself, Emily dragged open the drapes in a sweeping movement and then unlocked the window and pushed it open.

The cool breeze swept into the room and she breathed in a lungful of crisp night air.

"I thought you were ignoring me," Leif called up, a fistful of gravel in his hand. "Or that I'd gotten the wrong room."

"Leif!" Emily let out her pent-up breath and laughed, quickly covering her

mouth with her hand. “What are you doing here?” she hissed into the night.

“I came to see you,” Leif replied, his voice barely audible above the rustling leaves.

“In the middle of the night?” Emily asked, realizing she had no idea what time it was. She glanced up at the stars, but even though there were a million of them, she couldn’t tell the time by their positions.

Leif shifted uncomfortably, his gaze flickering to the side. “I wanted to check on you.”

Emily chuckled, her previous fear dissipating. “I’m not the one who went out into the mountains at night to rescue someone. Did you find them?”

Leif nodded. “Yes, they’re all safe and have gone to the hospital to be checked over. But since they didn’t need me anymore, I thought I’d come here.”

Curiosity piqued, Emily leaned farther out of the window. “Where’s your truck?”

Leif glanced left and right as if searching for it before admitting, “I cut across the mountains.”

Emily studied his face, sensing that there was something he wasn’t telling her.

And whatever that something was, she intended to find out before the night was over.

Chapter Nineteen – Leif

Leif stood outside Emily's bedroom window, watching the expression on her face as she leaned slightly out the window, a gentle summer breeze playing with her hair. The scent of wildflowers mixed with her unique aroma, intoxicating him.

What he wouldn't give to climb up there, take her in his arms and claim her as his own.

But that wasn't why he was here.

"Leif, it's late," Emily said softly, her voice filled with worry. "Why don't you come inside?"

He hesitated. How could he deny his mate's wishes?

Because we have to tell her the truth first, his bear ground out.

Leif let out a long sigh. His bear was right. It wasn't fair to claim her before she knew exactly what he was and how their fates were entwined.

"Actually, I was hoping you'd come outside and join me," he replied, trying to keep his voice steady. "It's such a beautiful, warm summer night, and I have something I want to show you."

Emily looked down at him curiously, her eyes searching his for any hint of deception. She hesitated, biting her lip, before finally agreeing. "All right, give me a moment to get dressed, and I'll meet you out front."

As she disappeared from view, Leif's impatience surged, his senses locked onto her every movement. He could hear the soft rustle of fabric as she changed clothes and the faint creak of the floorboards beneath her feet as she moved through the house. Every second felt like an eternity, but he knew he had to be patient.

Finally, the front door opened, and Emily stepped out into the moonlight. She hesitated on the porch for a moment, her eyes scanning the shadows before finding Leif waiting near the steps.

He cracked a smile as she hurried toward him and ran down the steps, her eyes bright with anticipation.

"All right, Mr. Mysterious," she teased as she reached him. "What is it that you want to show me?"

“Let’s walk, Emily,” Leif said with a grin, reaching out to take her hand. “Then all will be revealed.”

“Will it?” she asked lightly, but there was an edge to her voice as if she might be questioning whether it was wise to be out here alone with him at night.

“It will,” Leif promised.

As they walked together under the canopy of stars, Leif shivered with anticipation.

Finally, he was about to reveal his true self to his mate.

Leif led Emily to a clearing in the woods, the bright moonlight illuminating the area. He turned to face her, his eyes glowing with the intensity of his emotions. “Emily,” he began, his voice low and husky. “There’s something I need to show you.”

Emily looked at him with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension, sensing that this moment was pivotal. “What is it, Leif?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Leif took a deep breath. “I’m not like other people.”

Emily arched her eyebrow. “Is this some kind of chat up line? Because if it is, I’ll go back to the house right now.”

“No, no!” Leif held up his hands to her. “Nothing like that, I promise.”

“Then what is this, Leif?” Emily folded her arms across her body. Even in the darkness he could feel her fear. Not of him but of the unknown.

And that was what he was about to do. Launch them into the unknown.

It’s what we have to do, his bear assured him. For us to move on with our lives, for us to claim our mate, Emily has to know the truth. The truth about shifters. The truth about true mates.

“Do you trust me, Emily?” Leif asked.

“You’re asking me that when I have come out here with you in the dark, when no one knows where I am? Or who I am with?” Emily said. “I’ve enjoyed your surprises so far, but even with them in mind this is more than a little strange.”

Leif’s gaze flickered back toward the house. He could sense Reginald there. But Emily was right, Reginald was probably asleep in his bed and had no idea Emily had left the house.

“Okay.” Leif nodded and sucked in a deep steadying breath. “I need you to trust me a little more. And promise not to run.”

“Not to run?” Emily’s voice trembled and she instinctively took a step back.

“Whatever happens, know that I would never, could never hurt you.” There was no more time for words. He sensed that if he didn’t show her now, this minute, Emily would lose her nerve, lose her faith in him and run back to the house.

And she might be lost to us forever, his bear moaned.

Leif could not let that happen. This was it, he must convince Emily that they were meant to be together forever.

Leif closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then shifted into his bear form.

The air around him popped and fizzed as he faded from the world. For a moment it was as if the connection they shared was stretched almost to a breaking point.

Then his bear returned and stood tall and proud in front of their mate, the ends of his bronze fur catching the light of the moon, and his dark eyes shining slightly as he moved.

Emily gasped, her eyes widening in shock. She took a step back, but Leif quickly stepped forward, nuzzling his nose against her hand. He could feel her trembling, but he didn’t want to scare her. He wanted her to see that he was still the same person, just in a different form.

Emily froze, her hand resting on the fur of Leif’s bear.

Leif’s bear looked up at her, his eyes filled with hope. He could sense her fear, but he also sensed her curiosity and fascination. He could feel the warmth of her hand through his fur and he leaned into her touch, trying to convey his love and devotion to her.

If only I could tell her what she means to me, his bear said as he shivered with joy when Emily twirled his thick fur around her fingers.

Her eyes were wide with awe, and she breathed out in wonder, “You’re the most incredible bear I’ve ever seen.”

Hey now, Leif playfully chided his bear, *don’t let it go to your head. You’re probably the only bear she’s ever seen close up.*

The bear chuckled, a deep rumble reverberating through his chest. *Nothing*

you say will dampen my mood, Leif, he responded, his eyes never leaving Emily's face.

All right, all right. Leif laughed, feeling the immense joy his bear experienced at this moment. *Enjoy this first meeting with our mate. It's a unique moment in time, one that'll never be repeated.*

Agreed, the bear replied, his gaze softening. *There's only one chance to make a good first impression with our mate, and this is it.*

Emily kneeled before the bear, her eyes locked onto his as she cupped his face in her hands. "How is this possible?" she whispered, her voice filled with curiosity and disbelief.

The bear simply gazed back at her, a calm intelligence reflected in his eyes as he caressed her skin with his warm breath.

Emily hesitated for a second before leaning forward, pressing her forehead against his in a tender gesture of trust and acceptance. When she pulled back, her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were bright with tears. "I'm honored to meet you," she murmured. "But I'd like to talk to Leif now."

Every fiber of his bear's being resonated with an indescribable yearning to stay here with Emily. But his bear would only ever want what was best for his mate and right now, that was their human form.

Emily needs answers, Leif told his bear.

If only I could talk, the bear said before he nuzzled against Emily and then let go of the world around him. The world that contained his mate.

Leif's bear form seemed to dissolve into the night air, leaving behind a charged atmosphere. The electricity popped and crackled around him as the bear and man swapped places.

When Leif stood before his mate once more, he locked eyes with her, and hope bloomed in his heart.

Wonder shone in her eyes, a mixture of fear and astonishment that both filled him with relief and concern. He knew she had accepted him, at least for now.

But his bear growled softly, reminding him, *She doesn't yet know the full extent of our connection.*

"So..." He offered Emily a half-smile as he stepped closer to her, trying to convey both reassurance and affection.

"So..." She shook her head slowly, her brow furrowed in disbelief. "So

you knew all along that the supernatural exists? And I don't mean ghosts."

Leif pressed his lips into a thin line and nodded. He cleared his throat, overwhelmed with emotion at revealing his truth to her. "I have never thought of myself as being supernatural."

"Oh, you are," Emily told him, her voice soft but firm.

"Are you okay?" Leif asked, searching her face for any sign of rejection or fear.

Emily wrapped her arms around herself as if trying to comfort herself, her gaze drifting down to the ground as she processed everything she had just witnessed. Leif ached to hold her and offer her comfort, but he knew she needed space to process what had just happened.

"I don't know," Emily admitted after a moment, her voice barely above a whisper. "Why did you show me your bear? This must be a massive secret. Isn't it? I mean, people don't know..."

"Take a breath." Leif reached out to her but didn't touch her.

"Are you... Are there more people like you?" Emily asked.

Leif cracked a smile as he noted her concern. Was she afraid he was alone in this world, that he was the only one of his kind?

"There are many others like me," Leif assured her. "It's just not something we advertise. We keep it to ourselves and only share the truth with those we trust."

"So why show *me*?" Emily asked. "We barely know each other. So why trust me with this?"

"Because there's something between us," Leif replied without hesitation. "I know you feel it, too."

Emily looked up at him, her eyes filled with uncertainty but also a glimmer of hope. "I do, at least I think I do. But what are you?"

"I'm a shifter," Leif told her. "I can change from a man to a bear and back again."

"Yeah, I saw," Emily said lightly but there was a hint of doubt in her voice. As if she wasn't sure if she was the victim of a prank.

"It's real." Leif took her hand and placed it over his heart. "I am real, my bear is real and the bond we share is real, too."

"I believe you," Emily said, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's just...a

lot to take in.”

“I know,” Leif said gently. “But I promise you, I will never hurt you. I will always protect you.”

Emily nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving his. “I believe you,” she repeated, her voice growing stronger. “I trust you, Leif. How can I not when you have put your trust, your faith in me?”

Relief flooded through Leif, and he pulled her into his arms, holding her close. He could feel the tension in her body, but slowly she relaxed against him, her head resting on his chest.

They held each other under the watchful gaze of the mountains, lost in their own thoughts and feelings. A sense of peace washed over Leif, knowing that he had finally revealed his true self to the woman he loved and that she had accepted him for who he was.

As they pulled away from each other, Leif looked into Emily’s eyes. Damn, he wanted her.

Wanted more than anything to claim his mate, to make her truly his.

He leaned in, and her eyes fluttered to his lips. Her breath quickened and she licked her lips, subtly telling him that she wanted him, too.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth and a surge of triumph rushed through his bear before Leif pressed his lips against hers.

A rush of recognition flooded through him and he groaned as their kiss deepened.

Emily responded eagerly, her arms wrapping around Leif’s neck as he explored her mouth with his tongue. Leif’s hands ran down her back, pulling her body closer to his. He could feel the heat between her legs, and he quickly lifted her up so that she straddled him.

His arousal grew as he explored her body, touching her skin through her clothes. He wanted to stroke her bare skin, he needed to feel her naked body against his. He pulled away from the kiss and locked eyes with Emily. “Do you want this?” he asked, his voice low and husky with need. “Do you want me?”

“Yes,” Emily said, her voice breathy.

And that was the only answer he needed.

Chapter Twenty – Emily

Emily's intense craving for Leif rocked her body. She'd never wanted something—or someone—so deeply before. His smoldering gaze seared across her skin, igniting a fire in her that matched his. There was nothing she could do to deny it any longer.

And why should she deny it?

Hadn't he said they were meant for each other? Not that she needed him to tell her. Emily had known from the moment they met that they shared a connection.

Leif's admission had simply confirmed what she already knew.

"Where are we going?" Emily asked breathlessly, her voice barely a whisper against the cool night air as he held her in his arms.

"Not much farther," Leif told her as he strode away from Mountain View, farther into the darkness and the sanctuary of the forest.

Emily clung to him, her arms wrapped around his neck as she pressed herself closer. Despite the fact that the reality of shifters had shaken her world, she wasn't afraid. Leif would protect her from whatever might wish to cause her harm. Or try to come between them.

Emily buried her face in his neck and inhaled his rich, earthy scent, feeling the warmth of his skin on her cheek.

As they stepped into a moonlit glade, Leif carefully laid Emily down on the soft grass, his muscular arms cradling her with gentle care.

She clung to him, her nails digging into his clothes as her hunger for him grew. A spark of lust shot from her belly to her core as he lowered his head and kissed her.

Their kiss deepened, and he slid his tongue along her lower lip, nipping the soft sensitive skin. Emily opened her mouth and allowed him access.

Heat built inside her as his tongue probed her mouth and she moaned with abandon, like some primal beast, ready to mate.

The image of Calder and Elia flashed into her mind. It was as if she'd been transported back in time, to those wild days when the town was founded.

But Elia was a ghost of the past, and this was the present. This was real.

Leif was real.

And her desire for him was very real.

Her breasts tingled as Leif slipped his hand under her robe, his calloused fingers stroking her skin and sending shivers down her spine. Emily gasped as his thumb brushed across her nipple, teasing it to a hardened peak.

The heat of his touch seared her flesh, every nerve ending sensitized and aching for more.

“Leif,” she moaned, her voice thick with desire and need as she pulled him closer.

“Emily,” he whispered, his breath hot against her ear as he broke the kiss and pulled back just enough to gaze deeply into her eyes. “Here.”

He removed his jacket and placed it beneath her, providing a soft cushion for her head. Emily lay back and pulled him down next to her, their bodies entwined, as they intimately explored each other’s bodies.

With each gentle touch and soft caress, the weight of this newfound reality settled upon Emily’s shoulders. She was Leif’s mate, a truth that both exhilarated and terrified her.

She was lying here in a forest glade with a man who could shift from a man to a bear. It was all too fantastical.

Could she accept this new world? A world she did not fully understand?

Could she trust in the bond between her and Leif?

Yet as she stroked his face and gazed into his eyes, filled with love and longing, Emily couldn’t deny her heart. She belonged with Leif.

And she was going to give herself to him.

Emily sat up and tugged her robe open. With eyes filled with dark desire, Leif helped her push the robe from her shoulders and it fell to the ground.

Emily reached for the hem of her nightshirt, but his hands closed over hers. She locked eyes with his and he pulled the shirt up over her head, exposing her breasts to his gaze.

“So beautiful,” he murmured as he cupped her breast in his hand and lowered his head to flick his tongue over her taut nipple.

She arched her back as his hand slid down the length of her body, cupping the curve of her hip and holding her close. Emily gasped as his hardness pressed against her thigh, sending a jolt of electricity through her core.

Emily moaned into his mouth, her body writhing against his as he kissed her neck and collarbone, his lips leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

She cradled his head against her chest, her fingers tangled in his hair as he kissed her breasts once more. Emily gasped as her nipples hardened as he swirled his tongue around them.

It was almost impossible to focus, but she wanted Leif to experience pleasure, too.

Emily slid her hand down his body, stroking the bulge in his jeans and making him groan.

“I want you,” she breathed against his ear. “I need you.”

“You have me,” Leif told her as he placed a gentle kiss on her lips. He slipped his hand under the waistband of her underwear, tracing the length of her heat with his fingertips before sliding them deeper inside.

Emily gasped as he slipped a second finger inside her, their tips dancing across her inner walls. He stroked her gently at first, building the pressure and making her tremble. Emily arched her back as her breath quickened, panting as Leif shifted his body to hover above hers.

Leif’s lips trailed down the length of her neck as he slipped her panties over her hips, before he slipped his hand between her legs. He teased her, making Emily groan as his fingers slid back inside her, her hips bucking against his hand. Her body ached for him, the tension rising as he continued to caress her intimately.

She writhed against his hand, desperate for release. But she wanted him inside her.

She reached for his belt and fumbled with the zipper before sliding his jeans down and freeing his hardened shaft. He groaned as her hand wrapped around him, his mouth finding hers as she stroked him. Then he pulled back just enough to free himself from his jeans, and she gasped as she felt his thick length press against her.

She spread her legs wide, parting her thighs and pulling him closer as his shaft nestled against her opening. Leif pressed his mouth against hers, kissing her deeply as he entered her.

With a groan, he plunged inside her, his shaft filling her with his thickness until every inch of him was buried inside her.

He shifted his body, slowly pulling out and then thrusting deeper, filling

her over and over.

She slid her hands down his back, grasping his ass and pulled him even closer, needing to feel him deep inside her. He moaned in response, their bodies moving together in a primal dance as he thrust inside her again and again.

Emily's breath quickened, the tension within her mounting, her body shuddering as Leif slid deeper and deeper with each thrust.

Intense pleasure filled her, every inch of her body tingling as the sweet release of climax washed over her.

And then he came, too.

Leif tensed, and she gasped as he shuddered against her, filling her with his seed. She clung to him as her orgasm faded, leaving her skin tingling as they lay tangled together in one another's arms.

Completely sated after their intense lovemaking, they lay together, neither wanting to break their bond.

"You are my mate," Leif murmured against her ear.

"And we have just mated," Emily laughed softly as she nestled against him, her fingers trailing across his chest.

"We have," Leif agreed, a hint of possessiveness in his voice.

The word 'mates' hung in the air between them, and Emily wondered what it really meant. "Tell me more about fated mates."

He considered for a moment before answering. "It means that fate has decided that we are meant to be together."

"Ah, fate decided, huh?" Emily said lightly. But there was nothing light about tonight's revelations. She felt a mix of disbelief and wonder at the thought of it all.

"Is that a problem?" Leif asked, turning his head to gaze deeply into her eyes. His concern was evident in his expression, and it struck a chord within Emily's heart.

"No," she answered, gazing back at him with sincerity in her eyes. "Maybe fate is better at choosing a man, or a mate, for me than I am."

"Have you been hurt before?" Leif inquired gently, his voice barely above a whisper as he stroked her shoulder.

Emily rested her head on his chest, seeking solace in the warmth and

solidity of his arms. “That’s a story for another time,” she murmured, not wanting to spoil the magic of this precious moment they shared beneath the stars.

Stroking her arm, Leif said, “I know you must be a little overwhelmed by all of this.”

“That is an understatement,” Emily murmured. “But I can take it. I want to know everything about you.”

“Everything,” Leif replied, a playful smile spreading across his lips.

“So, is there more?” Emily smiled back, her heart fluttering with anticipation as he caressed the curve of her breast.

“You remember when we met?” he asked, pressing his lips to her forehead.

“How could I forget? You saved my life,” Emily told him. “I could have died under that landslide.”

“Well...” Leif hesitated.

“Did fate guide you to me?” Emily raised herself onto one elbow, her brows tugged together as she waited for him to answer.

Was that why he knew to come save her? If they weren’t mates, would she have perished?

“Something guided me to you,” Leif admitted. “But I don’t know if it was fate or something else.”

“Because you are a Bear Creek Guardian?” Emily asked.

“Perhaps,” Leif replied.

“I’m guessing being a Bear Creek Guardian is more than just a symbolic role,” Emily said slowly.

“It is,” he admitted, his gaze never leaving hers.

“So tell me exactly what it means,” Emily demanded, her hands trembling at her sides.

“Bear Creek Guardians are descendants of the founders of Bear Creek, just as I told you,” Leif began, his tone gentle and patient.

“So that wasn’t a lie,” Emily said with relief, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

“No,” he replied, lifting his hand to cup her face. “One more thing about us being mates is that I can never lie to you. I can never hurt you—even if it

means hurting myself.”

Emily leaned forward and pressed her lips against his, the tender kiss sending a wave of reassurance through her. “That means more to me than anything,” she whispered when they parted.

“The original Bear Creek Guardians swore an oath to protect the town, and that oath is passed down through the bloodlines. There are six of us in total,” he explained, his voice tinged with pride.

“Six,” Emily repeated, her eyebrows rising in surprise. “And they all live in Bearheart Ridge?”

“They do,” Leif confirmed, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

“And you are sworn to protect the town?” Emily asked, her heart swelling with affection for the man who seemed to embody the true meaning of loyalty.

“Yes,” Leif replied, his voice firm and resolute.

As Emily absorbed the enormity of it all, she couldn’t help but feel a sense of foreboding. That Leif was holding something back.

She suspected whatever that *something* was, it was connected to the Bear Creek Guardians. But what? What could he be afraid to share with her?

Perhaps she could guess.

Leif was connected to the town. His ancestors had lived here for centuries, the oath passed down through the generations.

This was his home, no, more than his home, much more, and he might be afraid she did not want to stay. That her career would take her away from here.

Did she hear herself? Emily pressed her lips together. They had known each other for less than forty-eight hours and yet here she was thinking of their relationship in terms of forever.

Because she wanted forever. With Leif.

“Is that what you wanted to tell me?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

Leif shook his head. “There’s more,” he said, his strong hand gripping hers, as if offering reassurance. “I have super senses; I could feel you on the mountain.”

“Feel me?” Emily asked in surprise, her eyes widening at the thought.

“Yes, it’s like a sixth sense,” Leif explained, holding her gaze. “It allows me to sense things others can’t.”

“So that’s how you came to be right where you needed to be when you saved me from the landslide?” Emily questioned, trying to wrap her head around everything she was learning.

“Not exactly,” Leif replied, turning to stare up at the stars as if seeking guidance.

The sense of foreboding that had been lurking in Emily’s chest returned with a vengeance. “Leif, I need you to tell me what you do mean,” she insisted, needing answers.

Taking a shuddering breath, Leif finally spoke. “There’s a myth, well, a story really, that there is a creature who appears when a guardian’s mate is in danger.”

Emily found it hard to believe that a supernatural being had been appearing to Bear Creek Guardians for centuries. But as she looked into Leif’s eyes, she knew he believed it. Then again, she would have found it hard to believe that men turning into bears were real only a short while ago.

“And you believe this creature guided you to me?” Emily whispered.

“Yes,” Leif answered simply.

“Did you see it?” Emily whispered, feeling the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

“No, it was more of a sense of the creature... Although there were footprints in the wet mud, too,” Leif added, his voice strained.

Emily sucked in a breath. “You saw the footprints?”

“I did,” Leif confirmed, “and it’s not the first time. This creature has also helped Thane, Stellan, and Cormac.”

“And these are also Bear Creek Guardians?” Emily asked, her mind racing to comprehend what Leif was saying.

“They are,” Leif affirmed.

Emily was silent for a moment as she tried to process everything she had learned. Then, with a surge of gratitude, she said, “I am thankful to this creature, and I’m thankful you are my mate.”

Because if she was not connected to Leif, if she were not the mate of a Bear Creek Guardian, she would be dead.

Chapter Twenty-One – Leif

Leif's skin still tingled at the memory of Emily's touch as they made love in the moonlight last night. As he stood in his familiar kitchen, the touch of her, the smell of her, all became dreamlike.

Had it been a dream?

No, his bear assured him.

No, it was real, Leif said with a content sigh.

As he flipped the pancakes on the griddle, Leif pushed his shifter senses out to their limit as he searched for any sign of Emily.

Last night *was* real. But in the cold light of morning, Emily might have been consumed with regret.

Leif's chest tightened as he considered the possibility of Emily rejecting him as a bear shifter.

Trust in our mate and trust in fate, his bear rumbled, strong and reassuring.

Leif took a deep breath and clung to the hope that his bear was right. Last night, Emily had accepted him. Wholeheartedly and without hesitation. It was that very acceptance that had led them to share a night of passion unlike any other.

He remembered vividly how she had felt beneath him, her soft skin pressed against him, her head thrown back in ecstasy as he moved inside her. He recalled the sheer pleasure of filling her with his seed, marking her as his own in the most primal way possible. Even now, he could still taste her on his tongue. Emily consumed his senses, leaving no room for doubt or fear.

Talking of senses, his bear interjected suddenly. *Emily is driving to Bearheart Ridge. I can feel her*. Excitement surged through his bear, who longed to swap places with Leif and greet their mate.

Leif chuckled at the prospect, flipping another pancake onto the plate. *If you can learn to flip pancakes and serve them on a plate, then you can be the one to greet her*, he teased.

His bear grumbled begrudgingly. *I guess I can wait until after breakfast to meet our mate once more*.

Deal, Leif said, unable to hide his own excitement. *Emily seemed pretty impressed with you last night.*

Leif's bear smiled smugly, a ripple of satisfaction passing through him both as he settled down to doze.

Leif's thoughts remained focused on Emily as he plated the pancakes, drizzling them with warm honey and fresh berries. He could hardly wait to see her again, to assure himself that their connection was as strong in the light of day as it had been under the cloak of night.

Should they eat in the kitchen, or enjoy the morning sun together on the porch? Leif was surprisingly nervous as he locked his senses on Emily's approaching car.

Maybe he should wait and ask her.

Leif wiped sticky honey from his fingers as Emily's car pulled up outside. He gave himself a once-over in the mirror by the front door, smoothing down his hair and straightening his shirt.

Then he stepped out onto the porch as Emily's car came to a stop and the driver's door opened.

There she was. His mate.

"Morning," he greeted her cheerily, although his palms were clammy as his stomach clenched with nerves.

Then she smiled and he let out a long breath. She looked happy and relaxed.

Radiant, his bear corrected.

As radiant as the morning sun, Leif murmured as he watched Emily approach.

"Morning," Emily returned, stepping out onto the porch with a shy smile. "Something smells good."

It does, his bear said happily.

I believe Emily was talking about the pancakes, Leif told his bear as the smell of warm pancakes drifted out of the house.

Leif slipped an arm around her waist, holding her close as he kissed her. His mind raced with the tempting thought of skipping breakfast and heading straight to bed. But the growl of his stomach reminded him of more pressing matters.

As the kiss broke, Emily looked up at Leif with a shy smile, her cheeks flushed pink. "I just wanted to make sure what happened last night wasn't a dream," she whispered.

"Last night was very real, beautiful," Leif reassured her, the intensity in his eyes reflecting his sincerity. "Everything I told you is true, I promise."

Emily's still struggling to accept us, his bear said.

She saw us shift with her own eyes, Leif replied.

Seeing isn't always believing, his bear replied.

Then let's help her believe, Leif said.

Emily sucked in a breath. "It's just so...unbelievable," she admitted.

"I know. At least I can understand how you feel," Leif replied.

"Can you?" Emily asked. "I mean, you have known about shifters your whole life."

"I've also known about true mates my whole life," Leif said. "But until I met you, it was hard to believe just how..." He put his hand over his heart.

"Intense it is?" Emily tilted her head slightly to one side.

"Yes." Leif nodded. "Come on, let me show you what else I've been working on this morning."

Leif held out his hand, and she took it and followed him inside.

They walked hand in hand through his house and into the kitchen, where the inviting smell of pancakes and fresh coffee wafted through the air.

Leif pulled out a chair for Emily, kissing the back of her hand as she sat down. He moved around to the other side of the table and passed her a plate.

This seemed so natural, so domestic. He wished every morning could be like this.

One day, it will be, his bear reassured him.

"Help yourself to pancakes," he said, pouring coffee into two mugs. In that moment, Leif knew he wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of his life creating similar moments with Emily.

Only with her living here, not at Mountain View, his bear insisted.

Here, with us forever, Leif agreed.

But they both knew it had to be Emily's decision.

"So, not only can you shift into a bear, but you can cook, too," Emily

teased, biting into the fluffy pancake.

“I have many hidden talents,” Leif replied, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

“Yes, you do,” Emily said, her eyes trailing over his muscular arms and broad chest.

Leif flexed his muscles as he lifted his fork to his mouth. But he resisted the temptation to puff out his chest to impress his mate.

His bear chuckled and said, *No matter how much you puff out your chest, you'll never be as impressive as me.*

Emily swallowed hard, her fork halfway to her mouth as she watched him. “You’re pretty much the perfect guy, aren’t you?”

Leif’s eyes flashed with raw passion. “Perfect for you,” he said, his voice thick with meaning.

His eyes lingered on her, then slid suggestively down to her breasts as he licked honey from his lips.

Emily’s nipples hardened under his gaze, and she dropped her eyes, covering her mouth with her hand to hide her smile. “I’m not sure we’re going to get through breakfast if you look at me like that.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Leif said innocently.

“Oh, you know exactly what I mean.” Emily waved her fork at him as she said, “And I thought you said you could not lie to me.”

“It wasn’t a lie,” Leif told her. “I can’t help it if the way I look at you turns you on.”

“Oh, I’m well aware of how my body reacts to you,” Emily said, a blush warming her cheeks.

“Are you complaining?” he murmured seductively.

“No, not at all,” Emily said.

Leif jerked his head up, his focus shifting momentarily as he detected the subtle shift in the atmosphere outside his house. Leif put his fork down and stood up, his shoulders tense as he tried to discern the source of the commotion.

“Is something wrong?” Emily asked with concern as she paused, her fork halfway to her mouth, as she sensed his uneasiness.

“Hey, it’s all right,” Leif assured her, moving around the table to slip a

comforting arm around her shoulders.

She shivered ever so slightly under his touch, her uncertainty palpable through their close contact. Just as he tightened his hold on her, giving her a reassuring squeeze, his phone beeped—a message demanding his attention.

Not now, he thought, suspecting this was a call from the Bear Creek Mountain Rescue HQ, calling him out on a rescue mission.

Leif fished the device out of his pocket and scanned the text, a smile cracking his stoic expression as his worry melted into relief.

“Everything okay?” Emily inquired, her brows furrowing together in curiosity.

“More than okay,” Leif replied, his grin widening. “Sable is having her baby.”

Emily’s eyes widened in surprise and excitement, but then she hesitated, glancing back toward the door nervously. “You should go and be with the other guardians. This is a big event for all of you,” she suggested, her voice wavering. It was sweet how she didn’t want to impose, but by her voice Leif knew that all she wanted was to be a part of his life.

“Emily, you’re a part of this, too,” Leif caressed her cheek. “Babies are precious, especially to shifters like me. They represent hope and the promise of a future generation.”

She stared at him for a long moment, her eyes searching his face as if trying to unlock some hidden secret. Then, in a voice barely above a whisper, she asked, “Are children important to you?”

“More than anything,” Leif admitted, unable to hide his longing. “I hope that one day we’ll have a child together—one that will carry on my bloodline and uphold the sacred oath to protect this town.”

His phone beeped again, and Leif tapped the phone screen and scrolled to Thane’s message. As he read the words, he could feel his heartbeat quicken, but not from fear. From joy.

“The baby is close,” he whispered, awestruck, as he tapped the screen and replied he would be right over.

“Thank you for breakfast.” Sable stood up, her plate of pancakes only half eaten.

Leif’s excitement dissipated as Emily picked up her purse and headed toward the door, with her keys jingling in her hand.

“Emily.” Leif reached for her but his fingers slipped off her jacket as she shrugged her shoulder and hurried out of the house.

What happened? his bear asked in confusion.

I don’t know, Leif replied as he followed after Emily.

As they got outside, Emily turned to face him. “You should go to your friends.”

“Emily.” he reached to touch her cheek and relief flooded him when she didn’t pull away. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Emily replied.

“This doesn’t feel like nothing,” Leif said gently.

“You should go to your friends. A new baby is so exciting.” Emily’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

“Tell me what’s wrong.” Leif hated seeing her hurting like this. It wrenched at his very soul.

Emily closed her hand over his and said, “We’ll talk later, but for now, I’d like some time alone.”

She’s shutting us out, his bear moaned mournfully.

Leif swallowed hard and nodded. He knew if he tried to force her to talk now, she would only push him away even more.

“We’ll talk soon,” Leif told her.

“We will.” Emily turned away from him, but then swung back around and he opened his arms, pulling her close.

Her fingers tangled in his hair and she shuddered against him.

But then she pulled away and hurried to her car, leaving Leif confused and alone.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Emily

Emily stumbled to her car, her legs feeling like they were made of jelly. The weight of her thoughts threatened to crush her as she fumbled with her keys, desperate to escape the suffocating atmosphere that closed in around her.

She didn't want Leif to see her like this—vulnerable and teetering on the edge of emotional collapse. As much as she needed his comforting presence, she needed time alone to confront the fears lurking in the shadows of her heart and her mind.

From what Leif had said, children were everything to shifters, and to him. He had spoken about the importance of children, of continuing his bloodline, and the oath that had been passed down through generations.

Emily could feel the love he had for her radiating from his every touch, every stolen glance. But would she ever be enough if she couldn't bear him children? Would their love be strong enough to weather the storm of such a devastating revelation?

She slid into the driver's seat, her hands trembling as she gripped the steering wheel. With a shaky breath, she started the engine and drove away from Leif's house without looking back. Sadness enveloped her, clinging, cloying.

Threatening to suffocate her.

And it would suffocate her. She'd been here before.

And yes, she had fought free. But it had taken time and strength, and she didn't know if she had it in her to do it again.

Emily had always dreamed of a family, of a loving husband and children to call her own. But deep down, she feared that dream might never come true for her. How could she tell Leif? Would it break his heart just as it broke hers?

As she continued driving down the winding road away from Bearheart Ridge, the pain of leaving felt like a physical force pressing against her chest.

Being with Leif in Bearheart Ridge had already begun to feel like home, as if she'd finally found where she truly belonged.

But it wasn't her home, not really. She was an outsider, a stranger caught

up in a world she didn't fully understand.

The journey back to Mountain View was a miserable one, each mile that separated her from Leif a sharp stab in her heart.

She should leave, for both their sakes.

How could she bear to stay here any longer, not when every moment reminded her of the pain she was causing both herself and Leif?

More than once during the drive, the thought of telling Reginald Beauchamp that she couldn't redesign the interior of Mountain View crossed her mind. It would be better for everyone if she just left, giving Leif a chance to find happiness with someone who could give him the family he so desperately wanted.

However, as Emily drove along the mountain roads, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was abandoning something precious—something that might never come again. But sometimes, letting go was the only way to truly love someone.

Finally, she pulled up to the large house and stepped out of the car; she stood frozen to the spot as she stared at the mountains in the distance.

Why had fate brought them together if she couldn't give him what he wanted, what he needed?

What he deserved.

Leif was part of the Bear Creek Guardians. He carried an oath that had been passed down through the centuries. But if she was his mate, if his future was tied to hers, then his bloodline might end here, too.

Her heart broke as she thought of Leif.

She couldn't let that happen, even though she wanted nothing more than to be in his arms.

Instead, all she could do was take a deep breath and walk toward the house.

Tears stung her eyes as she walked; each step closer to the door seemed to drag her further away from any chance of happiness with Leif. Her hands trembled as they grasped the door handle, and for a moment, Emily's courage faltered. But then, with one last glance at the mountains, she stepped inside.

The house was silent, and Emily thought perhaps Reginald was out in town, but normally he didn't leave the house until later in the day.

Still, she was glad of the time alone to compose herself.

Emily headed to the kitchen to make some tea. Then she would sit and contemplate her future.

Stay or go?

She wanted to stay with all her heart, but she also didn't want her presence to stop Leif from moving on.

Emily's fingers trembled as she reached for a tea bag. She carefully placed it into her favorite porcelain cup, one she'd brought with her when she moved here. Her fingers traced its delicate floral pattern, reminding her of simpler times.

But these were the times she found herself in. And she had to deal with it. She needed to make a choice.

Emily poured the boiling water onto her tea bag and inhaled deeply, the scent of chamomile and lavender filling her senses.

But she needed a sugar boost, something sweet. Emily licked her lips, the taste of honey on her lips from the pancakes.

Hmm, maybe a spoonful of honey in her tea would make her feel better.

And remind her of a certain sweet bear shifter.

A smile touched her lips as she thought of Leif.

There was no doubting how much she loved him.

Emily covered her mouth as that thought struck her. She loved him.

And she knew he loved her. She could see it in his eyes, feel it in his touch.

But did that change anything?

No. Leif still wanted children, children she might not give him.

Emily reached for the pot of honey and added a generous amount to her tea. She took her time stirring the honey into her tea, the golden liquid swirling around, a small whirlpool offering temporary distraction from her thoughts.

Then she blew on the hot liquid and took a sip before adding a touch more. Once satisfied with the sweetness, she cradled the cup with both hands, seeking comfort in its warmth.

Leaving the sanctuary of the kitchen, Emily wandered through the house. She had been so excited when she got this job, thrilled to can work in such a

beautiful home. Disappointment bloomed in her heart at the thought of not seeing her designs brought to life. But there would be other houses, other opportunities.

Finally, she found solace in a window seat that looked out over the mountains. The view was breathtaking, but it did little to ease her pain. Curling up, she cradled the cup of tea in her hand, staring blankly at the landscape before her. This wasn't fair. Why had fate played a trick on her and Leif like this? Leif was a Bear Creek Guardian, his bloodline strong and meant to continue. But if Emily understood him correctly, the fact that they were true mates would make it impossible for him to move on and find a woman who could give him the children he wanted and deserved.

Tears pricked her eyes. Fate had already been cruel to her; why should she expect it to be any different now? But if she did plan to leave and allow Leif to move on, then she at least owed him an explanation.

She couldn't just disappear without a word of explanation. She couldn't do that to him.

"Emily," Reginald's voice startled her, causing her to nearly spill her tea as she turned around at the sound of her name.

"Reginald, I thought you were out." Emily stifled a sob.

"No, I was upstairs when I heard you come home. Have you been to town?" Reginald asked as he tilted his head to one side and studied her. His eyes held a mix of curiosity and concern—always the observer, as if he were cursed to stand on the sidelines of life.

Emily swallowed hard and cleared her throat before taking another sip of her tea. "No, I went to Bearheart Ridge," she admitted, wondering how much she could reveal without exposing the secrets she was bound to keep.

Or did Reginald already know?

Her boss had given a considerable amount of money to good causes in town, including the local nature reserve. He obviously planned to set roots down here.

Perhaps there was a reason for that.

Oh. Her eyes widened as she studied Reginald. Was he a shifter?

She never thought to ask Leif whether Reginald was a bear shifter, too.

Was there a way of telling if someone was a shifter or not? A tell that was obvious once you knew what to look for?

Reginald's eyes narrowed slightly as he caught her gaze. "Bearheart Ridge, hm? That's a bit out of the way. What were you doing up there this early in the morning?" He tried to keep his tone casual, but there was an underlying current of excitement in his voice.

Which was unusual for Reginald. In the short time Emily had known him, he'd never gotten excited about anything.

"Leif invited me to breakfast," she replied, knowing she should have made an excuse that didn't leave her open to any further probing. "It's a beautiful place."

Reginald nodded slowly, his eyes still fixed on her. "Yes, it is. So, it's serious between you and Leif?"

"We've only just met," Emily told Reginald, her suspicions that he knew about shifters growing.

Was Reginald trying to figure out if *she* knew about shifters?

Leif had said that shifters liked to keep their secret...well, secret.

Reginald stepped into the room. "Sometimes we know as soon as we meet someone for the first time that they are *the one*." Reginald's words seemed to confirm her suspicions that he *did* know about shifters.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Emily said, trying to keep her voice steady.

Reginald leaned in closer, his eyes piercing. "You know what I mean, Emily. Are you aware of what Leif is?"

Emily took a deep breath and nodded slowly. "Yes, I know what he is."

Reginald's expression softened as he nodded, before he turned and took a seat in the armchair. "I thought as much. You seem to handle it well, considering."

Emily shrugged. "I don't have a choice. Leif is...important to me."

Reginald nodded. "I understand. It's difficult being involved with a man like Leif."

"A man like Leif?" Emily repeated. They were skirting around the truth, as if neither of them wanted to say the words.

"Yes." Reginald levied his gaze with hers and then said, "You two have something special between you."

"We do," Emily replied. "But I don't know if that's enough."

"Enough?" Reginald raised an eyebrow before leaning back in his chair

and steepling his fingers. “If you think this is true love, then why would it not be enough?”

Emily furrowed her brow, trying to decipher what Reginald was saying.

Or not saying.

Did he somehow know about true mates? If he knew about shifters, then it would make sense.

She hesitated a moment before speaking, heart pounding in her chest. “Leif wants a family,” she admitted softly, the pain of her own dreams left unfulfilled evident in her voice. “And that’s something I might not give him.”

Reginald studied her for a moment. “Emily,” he said gently, before leaning forward. “You should follow your heart. If that path leads to Leif, then that’s where you belong.”

She blinked in surprise, never expecting that kind of advice to come from Reginald. He wagged his eyebrows in response and said with a sly grin, “Life is full of surprises.”

Emily’s eyes narrowed, sensing something different about Reginald this morning. It was a subtle shift, almost imperceptible, but it was there. Then again, there was something different about her, too, and maybe her boss was picking up on that.

“It certainly is,” she agreed, taking a deep breath before mustering the courage to ask, “Reginald, have you ever been in love?”

For a moment, it seemed as if he wouldn’t answer. His eyes grew distant, and he stared out toward the mountains, lost in thought. But then he sighed and when he spoke, his voice was tinged with sadness. “I loved someone a long time ago.”

Even through his stony, callous exterior, Emily could see the tumultuous emotions swirling inside of him. Had the relationship ended in disaster? Or perhaps the person he loved had died. Was that why Reginald was a bachelor, having lost his true love? That made sense, especially if he was a shifter—if there was only ever one woman for him for his whole life, then he had been mourning her ever since. Emily’s heart ached for Reginald, empathizing with the pain he must have been carrying all this time.

And it made her decision easier. She couldn’t break Leif’s heart, at least not on purpose. Life was too short, too uncertain, and she owed it to herself—and to him—to take a chance on love.

With newfound clarity, Emily stood up. “Thanks for the chat, Reginald.”

“I hope it helped,” Reginald replied.

“It did.” As she walked out of the room, a weight lifted off her shoulders.

She knew what she had to do now. It was time to take a leap of faith and follow her heart.

Chapter Twenty-Three – Leif

Anticipation built up inside Leif as he crossed the street to Thane's house, where the other Bear Creek Guardians were already gathered.

This is it, his bear said, sharing his excitement.

He didn't bother knocking, letting himself in and heading straight into the kitchen where the other guardians stood around in a quiet group.

"Thane," Leif said as he entered the kitchen and hugged his friend.

"Leif." Thane looked dazed, his eyes wide with disbelief. "It's happening," he murmured, a sense of awe in his voice.

Leif glanced up at the ceiling, pushing out his senses to where Sable was upstairs with Mia and Sarah. He wished Emily was here, too, that she felt a part of this momentous occasion. It pained him that she had left so abruptly, without explanation, but he couldn't help but be swept up in the joy that filled the room.

"Sable is in capable hands," Leif reassured him, glancing at Stellan for backup.

The doctor nodded confidently. "Don't worry," he said, "the midwife is on her way. And if she's not here in time, there is a doctor in the house."

"Thanks for the reassurance. I appreciate it." Thane let out a long breath of relief and shook his head. "I never expected to be this nervous," he admitted, running his hands over his face.

"Everything is going to be fine, Thane," Tavish assured him, his usually quiet voice firm and steady.

Thane nodded, moving to the kitchen counter and grabbing the coffee pot. He poured himself a cup of coffee before staring at it and placing it down on the counter with a sigh. "I'll have the jitters if I drink any more coffee."

"Why don't I make you some herbal tea?" Heath suggested and reached for the kettle.

"Thanks," Thane replied, glancing around the room at his friends. "Thank you all for being here."

"We wouldn't miss it," Cormac replied, his usual daredevil demeanor replaced with calm sincerity. "This child is a part of all of our future."

Thane glanced at Leif as Heath filled the kettle with water. “Where is Emily?” he asked, concern etched on his face. “I thought I sensed her at your house.”

“She was,” Leif replied, his throat tightening. “But she went home.”

“Oh?” Thane’s eyes searched Leif’s face for answers. Despite the imminent arrival of his firstborn child, Thane was still the leader of the guardians, and his concern for his friends never wavered.

Leif ran his hand through his hair, and his stomach clenched. “I asked her to come over for breakfast, and she did. But when I got your text about Sable going into labor, she...she kind of freaked out a little.”

“And you let her go?” Thane questioned, eyebrows raised.

“She said she needed time alone,” Leif murmured, resisting the urge to run from the house and shift into his bear.

He was torn between being there for Thane and racing after Emily to find out what had upset her so deeply.

Thane is right, his bear growled, restless and insistent. *We should go to Emily.*

“Talk to her,” Thane urged, understanding Leif’s inner turmoil.

“My place is here with you,” he replied, but the words tasted bitter in his mouth.

“Go,” Thane insisted, placing a hand on Leif’s shoulder. “There’s time before Sable has the baby.” Thane glanced at Stellan for confirmation, and the doctor nodded his head. “Your place is with your mate, Leif, as much as it is here.”

Leif nodded, grateful for Thane’s understanding. Now that the decision was made, he quickly made his way out of the house and shifted into his bear form.

With a shake of his head, Leif’s bear ran toward the trail leading to Mountain View.

They were pushed on not only by the desire to see Emily again, and to make whatever was wrong right, but also because they wanted to make it back in time for the arrival of the baby. They thundered on, aware of everything around them. The forest was alive with the sounds of animals and the rustling of leaves as he bounded over logs and bushes.

Onward he ran, trying to compose his thoughts, but then he slowed. He

could sense her.

But Emily wasn't at Mountain View. She was in her car. And if he was not mistaken, she was driving back toward Bearheart Ridge.

Leif's bear spun around on his back legs and ran back toward Bearheart Ridge, consumed with worry and fear. He needed to find her and make sure she was okay.

As he ran, he tried to push away the doubts and worries that plagued him.

Our mate might be returning to us for the same reason we were going to her. His bear's muscles strained, his heart pounding, his lungs working hard as he tried to beat Emily back to Bearheart Ridge.

What if she got there and found his house empty? Emily might turn around and drive away forever.

Leif's bear growled at the thought, pushing himself even harder. He wouldn't let that happen. He couldn't bear the thought of losing Emily, not when he had just found her.

Finally, Leif's bear burst through the trees and sprinted to his house as her car lights crested the ridge.

Just as she reached his house, his bear stood before her car, panting.

Emily flung the door open and before Leif had a chance to shift back into his human form, she wrapped her arms around him as she dropped to her knees.

Leif's bear nuzzled his mate tenderly as she buried her head in his soft fur, her tears dampening the thick strands.

He stood there stalwart and steadfast, comforting Emily in the only way he knew how.

Finally, she sniffed loudly and lifted her head, brushing her hand across her eyes to wipe away the lingering tears.

Leif's bear moaned softly at her, a deep sound like distant rolling thunder, trying to offer comfort.

"Sorry for rushing off like that," Emily apologized with a small, weak smile on her face. The bear looked at her and gently rubbed his head against her arm in response. "Why weren't you at Thane's house? Isn't Sable having her baby?"

The bear glanced toward Thane's house and then nodded at her,

acknowledging the fact.

“You were on your way to see me?” Emily asked, her voice trembling slightly. “Is that why you were breathing so heavily?”

The bear nodded once more, his eyes never leaving hers.

“It’s amazing that you can understand me,” Emily said, awe filling her voice as she stared at the magnificent creature before her.

The bear tilted his head to one side and attempted to give what he hoped looked like a grin rather than appearing as if he was about to bite her head off.

As they stood there, Emily took a deep breath and admitted, “I owe you an explanation.”

The bear shook his head, and the surrounding air fizzed and popped. They needed to swap places so Emily could speak to him in his human form.

However, Emily placed her hands on either side of the bear’s head and said firmly, “No, I might find it easier to explain to *you*.” She pressed her lips together and whispered, “Sorry, Leif.”

The bear snuffled and blew warm air over her, eliciting a smile from Emily as she found comfort in his presence.

Taking a deep breath, she began her confession. “I was involved with a man—a man I thought I knew and who I believed loved me. But I was wrong.” Tears filled her eyes again, and she paused, composing herself as the bear patiently waited for her to continue.

As Leif’s bear stood there, offering Emily the unwavering support she needed, he forced down the rage burning inside of him. It was clear Emily had been hurt badly, and he wanted to destroy the person who had done that to her.

But as he looked into her tear-filled eyes, he also knew that he would do anything to heal her pain and ensure her happiness.

“Leif,” Emily whispered, her voice choked with emotion. “I didn’t know if I could ever trust again.”

The bear simply looked at her, his heart aching for her, something he’d never experienced before.

“Until I met you.” She placed a kiss on the side of the bear’s face.

The bear leaned forward, and Leif wished he could hold her, comfort her

in his arms. But she wanted to talk to his bear, and he had to accept that.

“But when you talked about children and I saw just how much having a family of your own means to you, I got scared,” Emily confessed.

A chill threaded through Leif’s veins. As he feared, Emily’s sudden departure had been because of the news Sable was about to give birth.

“You see, I lost a child,” Emily whispered. “There was an accident...” She paused and the silence that followed told Leif that Emily might not be telling him the whole truth.

“They were both killed,” Emily whispered. “My baby and... Well, *he* died, too.”

As Emily covered her face with her hand and sobbed, Leif’s bear let go of the world. For a heartbreaking instant Emily was alone outside his house, and then he was there, wrapping her in his arms and holding her close.

Leif held Emily in his arms, her tears soaking into his shirt as her body trembled with each sob. The weight of her grief and the pain she carried seemed to seep into him as well, making his heart ache.

When her cries subsided, Leif gently lifted her up, cradling her against his chest. He could feel her heartbeat gradually slowing down, syncing with his own. Carrying her inside his house, he laid her carefully on the sofa, perching on the edge next to her.

“Emily...” Leif whispered, brushing a damp strand of hair from her eyes. “It’s okay.”

She looked up at him, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen. “It’s not,” she replied sadly, a single tear escaping her eye. “You don’t understand.”

“Then tell me,” Leif urged, taking her hand in his larger one. “There’s nothing you cannot tell me.”

Emily took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling slowly before she spoke. “I don’t know if I can have children.”

So that was why she left, Leif’s bear murmured, understanding dawning on them both.

Emily hadn’t left because Sable was having her baby; it was because she knew how much having children and continuing their bloodline meant to Leif.

“Emily,” Leif said, his voice soft but firm, “you are my mate. Fate has brought us together. We belong together—”

“But how can you love me when I can’t give you what you want?” Emily looked at him, her face still wet from tears as she asked the question that weighed heavily on her soul.

Leif cupped her cheek in his hand, his thumb caressing her soft skin as he whispered, “I already love you. You are my mate. And that is all that matters—that we are together.”

“But it doesn’t seem fair to you,” Emily protested, her cheeks wet with fresh tears.

“Maybe we’ll have children, or maybe we won’t. But we have to trust that fate brought us together for a reason,” Leif reassured her.

Emily’s eyes searched his, as if looking for any hint of doubt. Finding none, she leaned in and pressed her lips against his

“I love you,” Emily whispered, her breath warm against his lips.

Leif looked into her eyes, the depth of his love reflected back at him in hers. With a tender smile, he replied, “That’s all I need to know.”

Chapter Twenty-Four – Emily

Emily shuddered as she leaned into Leif, his protective arms around her, holding her close. Relief and elation coursed through her veins.

As his arms tightened around her, she nestled against him, feeling the warmth of his body as his heart thudded in his chest.

She had been so scared that Leif might not want her as his mate after she admitted she might not have children.

But Emily had been wrong. Leif wanted her, the whole of her.

Even though he'd confessed to her earlier that having children, raising a family, and passing on the oath his ancestors had sworn was so important to him, he still wanted her.

Her hand slipped around his neck, and she pulled his head toward her. As their lips parted, Leif's eyes held a warmth and sincerity that made her heart soar and any last shred of doubt float away.

"We're perfect together, Emily," he whispered.

A smile bloomed on her face as she accepted this truth, feeling the weight of her past lift from her shoulders. "I've never been happier, Leif. I'd given up on love after what happened, but you...you've changed everything."

Leif's grip tightened around her, and she could see the fear in his eyes. "I was so scared you were going to leave, and I'd lose you forever. When you left earlier, I thought you'd rejected me and what I am."

Emily sighed. She had to be honest with him about her thoughts and fears. "I did seriously consider leaving Bear Creek. But not because I rejected you. I could never do that."

"Then why?" Leif's voice cracked as he cupped her face in his hand.

"So that you would be free to find someone else," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "But then, selfishly, I couldn't bear the thought of living without you."

Leif's eyes glistened as he stroked her cheek tenderly. "There is no one else for me, Emily. You are my true mate, and that's a once in a lifetime—no, once in an *eternity* event."

"Reginald helped me see that," she said hesitantly. "He advised me to

fight for love.”

“Reginald?” Leif tensed at the mention of his name. “He’s the reason you came back?”

Emily nodded, remembering the wise words and the sadness in Reginald’s eyes. “I believe he loved and lost, too. Maybe that’s what made him the man he is today.”

“Really?” Leif’s expression softened, and he looked deep into her eyes. “Well, I’m grateful to him, then. And I will spend the rest of my life proving to you that our love is meant to be.”

Emily’s throat constricted as emotion overwhelmed her. His eyes said it all, she would spend the rest of her life loving and being loved by this man, and for the first time in a long time, she felt a sense of peace and contentment settle over her.

As if she were exactly where she was meant to be.

Leif’s lips found hers, and they kissed with a passion that only true love could ignite. His hands roamed over her body, and Emily’s skin tingled with desire. She wanted him more than anything, and she knew he felt the same way.

Breaking away from the kiss, Leif looked at her with a hunger in his eyes. “I love you, Emily. More than I ever thought it possible to love another person.”

Emily smiled at him. “I love you, too. More than anything in this world.”

Leif kissed her again, holding her tight.

She would always carry the pain of the past but that pain had dulled a little since she’d met Leif. Since he’d held her, she knew that everything would be all right.

They simply needed to trust in fate. After all, fate had brought them together.

Suddenly, Leif pulled away. “The baby.” Leif jerked his head up and looked across the street to Thane’s house.

“You can sense it?” Emily asked, still in awe of his shifter senses.

“Yes,” Leif said, his body tensed.

“Then you should go to them,” Emily told him. But when Leif looked at her she corrected herself. “We should go to them.”

“We should.” Leif nodded, and held out his hand to her.

Emily slipped her hand into his and relished the spark of electricity that passed between them as skin met skin.

Hand in hand they quickly made their way across the street to Thane’s house. As they approached, Emily heard the sound of excited voices from within.

“Has Sable had the baby?” Emily whispered. There was no sounds of a baby crying and Emily prayed that if Sable had given birth that everything was all right.

“Yes,” Leif said and a second later the sound of a newborn filled the house.

“Yes!” They entered the kitchen to a scene of celebration, as four men and two women hugged each other.

“You’re just in time,” one of the men said as he ushered them in to join the celebration, tears in his eyes. “I’m Stellan.” The broad-chested man pulled her into his arms. “And I am so happy for the both of you.” Then, before he let her go he grabbed hold of Leif, too, and held them both in a tight bear hug.

“We need to breathe.” Leif patted his friend on the shoulder and Stellan released them from his grasp.

“And I’m Mia,” one of the women introduced herself and grinned at Leif. “This is a happy day. Two new people in our lives.”

“It is,” Leif agreed as the other people gathered in the room introduced themselves to Emily each.

Emily greeted each person, her smile widening as joy filled her. The room was filled with happiness and love, and she was grateful to be a part of it all.

A part of something bigger than herself. She might not be a Bear Creek Guardian herself but she was a mate to one and that carried its own responsibilities.

Responsibilities that went further than being a mother of the next generation. It was being there for other people, helping them, picking them up when they were down.

How was it possible to feel such a sense of warmth and belonging among these people she barely knew. But she had never felt more at home than she did now.

Leif squeezed her hand gently, a silent reminder that they had come here for a reason. “Thane is coming down with the baby,” Leif whispered.

The room filled with anticipation as everyone looked up, following Leif’s gaze to the staircase.

A tight knot formed in Emily’s stomach. She feared she might overreact and break down in tears when she saw the baby—a reminder of all she had lost when she lost her own child. The hopes and dreams that died along with her precious little one weighed heavily on her heart.

As Thane’s footsteps echoed on the stairs, Emily felt sick. But then, Leif seemed to sense her unease and leaned forward, pressing his lips to her cheek. Her heart skipped a beat and she leaned into him, as Leif wrapped his arm protectively around her.

When Thane walked into the kitchen cradling his newborn baby in his arms, Emily was in control of her emotions. This was a happy day, a day to rejoice in new life.

Not just that of the baby but her new life, too. One filled with love.

“It’s a girl,” Thane announced happily, his face beaming with pride and joy as he held the small bundle of blankets close to his chest. The baby cooed softly as it took in the new sights, smells and sounds of the world around it.

The mood in the room shifted, lifting Emily’s spirits as the other guardians greeted the new baby, crowding around Thane to see the child.

Cormac, his voice warm and teasing, remarked, “The next generation of guardians might be all female after all.”

Tavish chuckled, adding, “We did say that would be a thing to see.”

Mia approached Thane, her eyes shining with excitement as she extended her hands to hold the baby. Carefully, Thane passed his precious bundle to her, watching protectively as Mia cradled the infant.

“Has there ever been an all-female generation of Bear Creek Guardians?” Mia asked, her eyes never leaving the baby’s face.

Heath shook his head. “No, I don’t think there has. Maybe a mixture, half and half, would be good.”

“A balance,” Thane agreed, smiling warmly at the thought of the future generations that would continue their legacy.

As Emily watched the scene unfold, she couldn’t help the bittersweet ache in her heart.

She might never have the chance to hold her own child like this, but seeing Leif and the others filled with joy gave her strength.

For now, she held onto Leif, letting his love and support carry her through the pain, hoping that her own dreams might still come true.

But they already had. She'd met a man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. And who definitely wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

Fate had brought them together. But fate or no fate, given a choice, she would be right here by his side.

"Does this little one have a name yet?" Stellan asked as he cradled the baby in his arms and gazed down at her with open adoration.

"Summer," Thane replied as he held out his arms and Stellan passed Summer back to her father.

"That's a beautiful name," Leif replied.

"We think so," Thane replied, as he rocked his daughter in his arms.

"It's good to meet you, Summer," Leif said and reached out to stroke the newborn's cheek.

"The first of the new generation," Thane said as he grinned widely, filled with pride.

Emily's eyes misted with tears at the sight of Thane holding his daughter with such love and tenderness. He would make a great father, just as Leif would make a great father one day if they were somehow blessed with a child of their own.

"You should take that little one back to her mom," Cormac told Thane. "While we crack open something cold and bubbly."

"We did bring champagne," Sarah said and clapped her hands as she went to the fridge and took out a bottle.

Glasses appeared on the counter and Sarah handed the bottle to Cormac who opened it carefully, so the cork didn't pop too loudly and frighten Summer.

"Here's to Summer, and her proud parents," Tavish made the toast and everyone joined in.

"To Summer and her proud parents," a chorus of voices toasted in muted tones.

They drank, and bubbles went up Emily's nose, making her giggle.

“Want some air?” Leif asked and took her hand, guiding her toward the door.

“They seem like wonderful people,” Emily told him as they left the house.

“They are,” Leif replied. “And yes, I am biased since I have known all the guys my whole life. But their mates are wonderful, too. And so are you.”

“Leif...” Emily began as the image of Leif looking at Summer with such adoration slid into her head.

“It’s okay, Emily,” Leif assured her. “We’re true mates. There’s an unbreakable bond between us and that is fact that nothing can ever change.”

Emily wiped her fingers under her eyes as she blinked back tears. “It’s just hearing the others talk... You’ve obviously hoped and dreamed about your own children.”

“But until I found you, I was resigned to the idea that I would never have a mate, let alone children of my own.” He slid his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close.

Emily leaned into him, feeling the warmth of his body against her own. “I never thought I could have this kind of happiness,” she whispered, her voice choked with emotion. “But with you, anything seems possible.”

Leif tilted her chin up so he could look into her eyes. “You’re everything to me, Emily. And I promise you, we’ll have a family of our own someday. Somehow.”

Emily looked down at the ground then raised her eyes to lock eyes with him. “We will.”

Leif had restored her faith in love. Now she was ready to believe that anything was possible.

Epilogue

“Are you okay?” Emily slipped out of bed and came to stand next to Leif, who was staring out of his bedroom window, into the distance.

“Yes,” Leif answered as he slipped his arm around her shoulders and held her close.

She leaned into him, absorbing the warmth of his body as he dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Can you sense the creature?”

Leif shook his head slowly and stared out of the window once more. “No.”

Emily let out a long sigh, part relief, part contentment at being here with the man she loved. “Shall we get going?”

Leif glanced down at her. “It’s early. We are not meeting the others until ten.”

“I know.” She placed her hand on his chest, and he turned to face her, his eyes filled with love. “I thought we could get a head start and enjoy the mountain. Alone.”

Emily trailed her fingers down his chest, her eyes conveying the message she wanted him to know.

“Oh, some alone time.” Leif slid his hand onto the small of her back and smiled, his eyes deep pools of emotion.

“Yes. You. Me...” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his lips. “Or we could stay here in bed...”

Either scenario would be just fine, Emily thought to herself. But she had been harboring a fantasy of making love to Leif on the mountain, in daylight, with the sun warming her skin, while the mountain breeze caressed her body as she and Leif moved together as one.

The thought of moving as one with her mate ignited her desire. Could she wait long enough for them to leave Bearheart Ridge behind and climb into the mountains?

“I would love to lay you down on the soft grass and caress your skin...” Leif trailed his fingers over her breasts, and her nipples immediately formed hard peaks.

She shivered in anticipation. “Then let’s go.”

On legs that didn't want to support her, she turned and walked away from him. Going to the closet, she pulled out a pair of slacks that were suitable for a mountain hike, a T-shirt, and a sweater to ward off the chill of the morning air.

Leif lingered by the window, watching as she peeled off her nightshirt and stood naked before him. She leaned down, her breasts swaying as she pulled on fresh underwear and then slid her feet into her slacks.

He licked his lips, and she had to force herself not to go to him and offer herself to him right then.

But she had a fantasy she needed fulfilling.

With a groan, Leif raked a hand through his hair and dragged on his clothes before heading for the door. "I'm going to remove myself from temptation or we won't get to the mountain at all today."

A smile played on Emily's lips as she watched him go and then finished dressing. She pulled a brush through her hair and then tied it in a ponytail before following Leif down to the kitchen.

"Coffee?" He handed her a cup, his eyes on her as she sipped it slowly, savoring the taste.

"This is good." She glanced at the backpack on the table. "You've packed the picnic, too?"

"Yeah," he said huskily. "I wanted to get going as soon as you were ready."

The jolt of desire through her body was swift. "I'm ready now." She gulped down her coffee even though it was too hot.

"I was hoping you might say that." Leif smirked as placed his cup in the sink and then reached for the pack and slung it over one shoulder. "Let's go."

They left the house and Emily paused at the door, looking at the early morning sun.

"Something wrong?" Leif stood close behind her, their bodies almost touching. She could feel the heat emanating from him, and something else...

Desire. It was all she could do not to take his hand and take him back to bed.

Instead, she shook her head. "It's just so beautiful." She sighed. "I never get tired of watching the sun rise over the mountains. With you."

“I know what you mean.” Leif stepped away from her. “I used to go out to the meadow and watch it. And dream of sharing the experience with someone special.” He held out his hand to her. “With you.”

“Then let’s go.” She threaded her fingers through his and they strode away from the house, heading for the trail that led into the mountains.

As they walked, the sun rose higher and cast a golden glow across the world around them. A hawk circled overhead, and a rabbit scurried across their path.

It was perfect.

Almost.

She squeezed his hand, and Leif glanced down at her and smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Did I ever tell you I love you?”

“You did,” he nodded.

“And that I love my life here in Bear Creek?”

“Uh huh,” he murmured.

She laughed and nudged him as she said, “You are a man of few words.”

“Some people might think that’s a positive attribute,” Leif teased.

“I guess there are more pleasurable ways for you to use your mouth than words,” Emily agreed solemnly.

“And I’m going to show you one of those ways.” He scooped her up in his arms and cradled her to his chest as he quickened his pace. His long strides carried them higher into the mountain and closer to their destination.

Obliged to encourage him, Emily nuzzled his neck, leaving a trail of kisses on his skin. He tightened his hold on her and groaned as he finally left the trail and marched through the trees to a small glade next to a bubbling stream.

“Is this where we are meeting the others?” Emily asked, as he lay her down on the soft grass.

“No,” he growled. “But I don’t think I have the stamina to make it there. Not when you are driving me wild.”

“Wild, huh?” Emily grabbed hold of his shirt and pulled him down toward her.

“Wild.” He dumped the pack on the ground and slipped his arm around her waist, holding her against him, leaving her in no doubt of just how wild she’d driven him.

“I think you need a release.” Emily tugged at his belt and then slid her hand inside his jeans, curling her fingers around his hardness.

Leif bit his lip and closed his eyes as she stroked his shaft up and down. “I want to come inside you.”

He captured her mouth with his and eased his body away as he fought with her zipper and won. As his tongue plundered her mouth, he slid his hand between her thighs, his fingertips thrumming her most sensitive flesh before he slipped two fingers inside her.

Emily arched her back, and he lifted her T-shirt and pulled down her bra before swirling his tongue around her nipple. Her inner muscles clenched around his fingers as he drove her toward climax.

But then he stopped and locked eyes with her. “But first I want to taste you.”

He kissed the tips of her hardened nipples and eased his fingers from inside her. Then he slid down her body, leaving a trail of fire in his wake as he pressed his lips to her skin.

Hooking his fingers around her clothes, he slid her panties and slacks down her legs, before kneeling before her and lowering his head to her most intimate flesh.

Leif traced her wetness with his tongue, then swirled it around her nub. Emily arched her back as he delivered long, slow licks to her most sensitive flesh and then speared his tongue deep inside her, before lapping up her juices.

“You taste sweeter than honey,” he murmured as he pulled back from her.

“You are torturing me,” she moaned, as he lapped at her once more.

“That was my plan,” Leif murmured and licked her sensitive flesh while sliding two fingers inside her and stroking her inner walls.

Emily’s hips bucked as he thrust his fingers deeper inside her and brought her to the edge of her climax. “Leif, please.”

“Please what?”

But she had no more words as her orgasm crashed into her. In the quiet of the glade, she came, her inner walls clenched around his fingers as he swirled his tongue over her mound.

When the tremors finally faded, she lay back. Tears misted her eyes as Leif crawled up her body and kissed her tenderly.

“Was that what you wanted?”

“Yes.” She cupped his face in her hands. “But now, I want you inside me.”

“I am at your command.” He dragged his shirt off and kicked off his jeans before tugging her remaining clothes over her head. In an instant, her bra joined the rest of her clothes on the soft grass.

Then he hovered over her, his eyes locked with hers as he guided himself into her. The sensation of fullness and pleasure was so intense that Emily had to grip his shoulders to steady herself.

Leif slid out, then back in again, his movements slow and steady. Emily’s eyelids fluttered shut as he drove her toward another peak.

Leif’s hips thrust faster and harder as he buried himself in her. They moved as one, lost to the rhythm as Emily dug her nails into his back, urging him on, urging him to take her, to claim her.

He captured her mouth in a searing kiss, his tongue entwining with hers.

Emily moaned into his mouth as her inner muscles tightened around him once more. This time, he was right there with her.

He jerked into her, his body tense as his warm seed filled her. As her own orgasm washed over her, she’d never felt freer.

Or more satisfied.

There was something to be said for having a bear shifter as a mate.

“I think you found your stamina,” Emily whispered in his ear as they lay together in each other’s arms.

“You have no idea,” Leif said as he trailed his fingers across her skin.

“Show me,” she whispered, but then her stomach growled, and the moment was gone as she giggled, her shoulders shaking.

“I guess we have worked up an appetite,” Leif said as he rolled away from her and reached for the pack.

“Let’s eat when we reach the meadow.” Emily rolled away from him and grabbed her clothes.

“That might be a good idea. Because if we stay here, I might just make love to you again. And again.” He dressed quickly and then shouldered the pack.

As he straightened up, he raised his head and stiffened.

“What is it?” Emily froze, expecting the creature to jump out at them.

“The others are on their way to the meadow.” He arched an eyebrow at her and she covered her cheeks with her hands.

“Did they?” Emily nodded at him, expecting him to read her mind. Which he did.

“No, they weren’t close enough to know we were just making love,” Leif assured her, but she wasn’t sure she believed him.

This might be one of those moments when he was bending the truth to make her feel better.

She’d forgive him for that.

They left the glade hand in hand, heading for the meadow where the Bear Creek Guardians and their mates were meeting for a picnic.

In the weeks since she had arrived in Bear Creek, Emily had found a family with the tightknit group. And even though her job at Mountain View was nearly completed, there was no question she would stay here.

With the man she loved. And who loved her unconditionally.

“We’re here,” Leif announced as they crested a ridge and a long meadow filled with flowers opened up before them.

“Is this where you sensed the creature?” Emily asked.

Leif shook his head, his eyes drawn to a distant ridge. “No, it’s higher up.”

“Can you sense it now?” Emily asked.

“No.” Leif didn’t look at her as he took the pack off his back and dropped it to the ground.

Emily shivered. Was he lying now? To save her from fear?

Before she had a chance to ask him, two bears crested the ridge and gamboled across the meadow.

Seeing the bears like this, so free, so filled with joy, made her laugh. And Emily pushed her fears to the back of her mind. Where they belonged on a day like this.

A day of celebration.

They had come here to celebrate Summer’s arrival into the world. The first of a new generation of Bear Creek Guardians.

Her stomach rumbled again, and she placed her hand over her belly. She really needed to eat something. She didn’t know what was wrong with her. It seemed she was starving all the time.

As if she were eating for two...

The world around her seemed to go out of focus and she swayed, feeling dizzy.

“Emily.” Leif caught hold of her, and she leaned against him. “Are you okay?”

Emily nodded as she mentally went through the changes that had occurred in her body over the last couple of weeks.

“I could ask Stellan to check you over?” Leif asked with concern.

“No, it’s fine,” Emily whispered.

“You don’t look fine,” Leif replied.

“I’m just in shock,” she replied.

“Shock?”

“Yes.” Emily turned to face him, although it was hard to make out his features through the mist of tears. “I think I’m pregnant.”

No, she didn’t *think* she was pregnant. She *was* pregnant.

It seemed as if bear shifters were not the only miracle she’d found here in Bear Creek.

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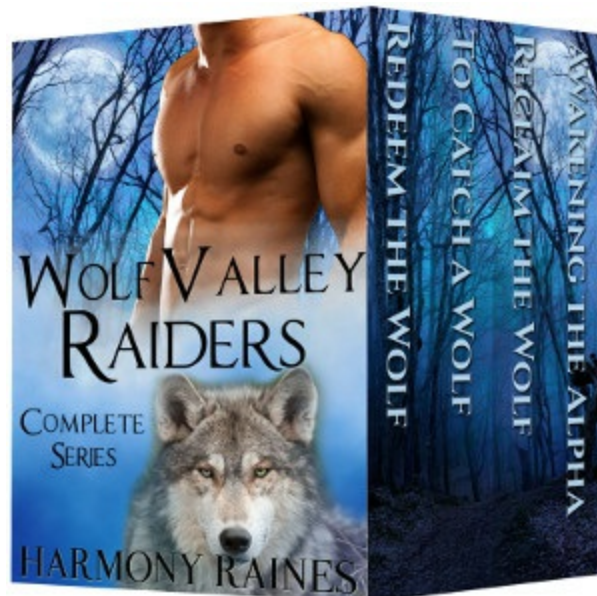
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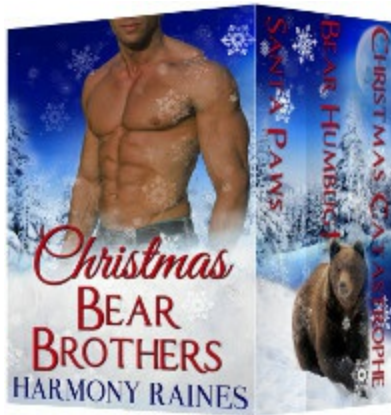
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