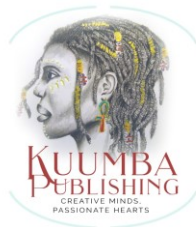


FAIRY TALE FATALE
**BEARLY
GOLD**

A “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”
Reimagining

N. D. Jones



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Kuumba Publishing
1325 Bedford Avenue
#32374
Pikesville, MD
kuumbapublishing.com

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Book Layout & Design ©2017 - BookDesignTemplates.com

Editor: Chris at Hidden Gems
Cover Design: Fantasia Cover Designs
Jwahir and the Three Bears Coloring Pages: Ika Sirana

Bearly Gold/N.D. Jones. -- 1st ed.
ISBN-13: 979-8-9871464-4-6

Content Warnings: on-page sex between consenting adults, on-page/implied child death, implied child sexual assault, talk of/threatening child physical assault, talk of suicide, talk of drug use, talk of sex slaves

Dedication

Shirley Anita Chisholm

November 30, 1924–January 1, 2005

Politician, Educator, Author

“I want history to remember me . . . not as the first black woman to have made a bid for the presidency of the United States, but as a black woman who lived in the 20th century and who dared to be herself. I want to be remembered as a catalyst for change in America.”

1: This Won't End Well

2122

The State of Namju

Fuxing City

“I’m not leaving my children here to die.”

Fayola watched as Dr. Teresa Pérez-Soto stomped past her and back into Peace Blossoms Orphanage. Or rather, she inwardly sighed at the doctor’s pointless theatrics as the woman reentered the two-story medical clinic. The sign on the brick building read: Peace Blossoms Clinic for Children. Someone, perhaps one of the youths Dr. Pérez-Soto claimed as her own, had used red spray paint to write *Orphanage* overtop of the last three words.

Clinic or orphanage, biological or adopted children, it doesn’t matter. My mission is clear. Extract Dr. Pérez-Soto and return her to her worried brother. A straightforward mission. My last. Finally.

Fayola scanned the area. Small, local businesses lined both sides of the abandoned street. Like the clinic, an old-fashioned sign affixed to the front of each business drew the eye to big, white letters outlined in black. One or more familiar pictorials—a bear paw, an elephant trunk, and a human hand—appeared under the name of each business.

The clinic’s sign has all three images. Dr. Pérez-Soto services every kind of child in this country.

Twisted metal gates and broken glass from storefront windows littered the sidewalk in front of many businesses with paw and hand pictorials.

The calm stillness of this street won’t last. I can feel the vibrations. Their marching is like a building earthquake deep in Earth Pact’s core. The regiments will converge on this part of the city in an hour. That’ll be more than enough time to complete the extraction part of my mission. Whether she wants to or not, Dr. Pérez-Soto will be leaving with me.

Fayola tried the knob to the clinic, shaking her head when the door did not open. Did the doctor think her temper tantrum and a locked door would have her taking to the sky and failing to complete her mission?

Bam. Smash. Hinges snapped; the wooden door cracked in fours and crashed to the floor.

Stepping on pieces of the ruined door, Fayola strolled inside the clinic. Shafts of light from outside lit the foyer, bouncing off candle wax stuck to the floor and the face of a frowning Dr. Pérez-Soto.

“You broke my door.”

With the tip of her booted foot, Fayola pushed one of the chunks of wood out of her way. “Inconsequential.”

“It isn’t.” Light brown eyes lowered to Fayola’s glove-covered hands before settling on her black boots. “Did you do that with your hands or feet?”

“Inconsequential. We have less than an hour. Pack a bag and say your goodbyes.”

“I told you, I’m not going anywhere.”

Fayola stepped farther into the clinic. The foyer led to stairs to the right and two closed doors to the left. Although she could not hear the children, she could smell blood from a recent injury in the air.

For the second time in less than ten minutes, the doctor turned her back on her. Long dark hair trailed to wide hips and over a pink and white dress the same color as the blooms of the fifty-foot peace blossom tree she landed on upon arriving in northern Fuxing City. The tree had afforded her a safe location for reconnaissance. As always, her mission intel had been correct. Regiments from the Sunhung and Taepo herds were on the move.

Fayola had seen the civil war’s destruction; dead bodies left for ravager birds to pick over, buildings leveled to their rocky foundation, and crop fields burned to inedible ash.

No matter the place, war looks, smells, and sounds the same. Wars also wreak the same turmoil. Grief and heartache. Starvation and desperation.

A door from a room to Fayola’s left opened. A six- or seven-year-old girl, human, from the fragrant berry scent of her, peeked around the door. Rubbing golden-brown eyes and shuffling tiny feet, she made her way to Dr. Pérez-Soto. Wrapping thin arms around one of Dr. Pérez-Soto’s legs, the child buried a face as round as a ripe plum against the doctor’s thigh. “I’m hungry.”

One after the other, more children emerged from the open door, piling out and surrounding Dr. Pérez-Soto.

Orphans. Something else war leaves behind. Twenty-one of them, but not all are human. The first one out appears to be the youngest. The oldest are those twin girls holding hands. Fifteen or so. Bear shifters like Dr. Pérez-Soto. They share her almond-shaped eyes and straight dark hair. Those physical traits are typical of bear shifters from this region. But the twins’ skin has a warm undertone to Dr. Pérez-Soto’s coolness, neither of which changes how their blood would taste going down.

Fayola checked her tactical watch—a gift from Jelani. *Fifty-five minutes before they converge on this small city.* “Since the children are here now, the farewells can come first, then the packing. For your comfort, I suggest changing into pants.”

“Do you have no heart?”

“What I have is a mission to complete.” Fayola waved her hand at the gathered children, who watched her with a mix of curiosity and dread. “They are not my mission. You are. Come morning, nothing on this street will be left standing.”

“Or alive.”

Fayola took the two words as a rhetorical statement, as much as she did Dr. Pérez-Soto’s attempt at guilt. Neither altered her mission parameters, so she set her watch for thirty minutes and took up position at the foot of the stairs.

“That’s it? You have nothing else to say?” To her credit, Dr. Pérez-Soto did not argue her point—fruitless though it was—in front of the children. “Go through my office and back upstairs.”

“But—” the twins began.

“Do as I say. It will be fine.”

The twin with a healing cut across her forehead turned to Fayola. “Which kind are you?”

Fayola understood her question, despite having been stated with a vagueness typical of youth. “Inconsequential.”

The girl nodded; her eyes filled with a world-weary maturity unbecoming of a person so young. “We prayed for a Dela Eden.”

Dela Eden. I can’t be that for these children. They aren’t my mission, and one soldier is not enough to save twenty-two people.

“What’s a Dela Eden?” the youngest child asked.

“A savior, but it doesn’t matter.” The twin with the scar took hold of the little girl’s hand. “She isn’t one. Not ours anyway.” She led the girl back into the room they’d exited. Their retreat was followed by the other children. Not one of them looked back, accepting life’s cruel fate with a grace she’d never seen in adults, much less in children.

No, not grace. Hopelessness.

“I guess this is supposed to be a rescue mission.” Dr. Pérez-Soto closed her office door after the last child entered. She then leaned against the door, too arrogant or foolish to realize her stubborn posture held neither bite nor sway. “The kind you are doesn’t matter. Your human form is about five-six. No bulk or fat. Nothing about your human body is impressive. But . . .”

Fayola only half listened to Dr. Pérez-Soto. If talking made it easier for her to accept the inevitable, Fayola wouldn’t interrupt. Still, her silence did not mean she had to grant the woman her full attention.

Dr. Pérez-Soto pushed from the door but maintained the distance between them. “I’ve seen your people in flight. You’re fast but also large enough to carry two or three adults. I bet you could even hold heavy bears on your back.”

“No.”

“No, you’re not strong enough to carry two big bear shifters like me?”

“First, Dr. Pérez-Soto, you’re a sun bear. One seventy at most. Not big by any bear shifter standard. Two, it doesn’t matter how much weight I can carry because I have no intention of—”

“One seven-year-old and two ten-year-olds. That’s it. Combined, they weigh less than I do.”

“The pact is for your rescue only. That’s my mission.”

“Then change the mission. They’re children. Innocents caught in a bloody, vicious war. Pacts don’t matter here.”

“Pacts matter everywhere.”

“You’re wrong.” Dr. Pérez-Soto pointed a steady finger at Fayola. “You and me. We can create our own pact. Right here. Right now. You take the three youngest to safety. Save them. Don’t shake your head, damn you. I’m not finished. I haven’t told you what I’m willing to offer in exchange.”

“You have nothing I am permitted to take.”

“Which isn’t the same as me having nothing you want.” Dr. Pérez-Soto stalked toward Fayola as if she were a predator ready to seize perceived prey.

Fayola allowed the movement and the foolish thought.

“I’m sure it was my CEO brother who formed a pact with your nation. Rescue, hostage recovery, counterinsurgency. That’s what your people do. Dangerous missions in exchange for blood donation centers.” Dr. Pérez-Soto stopped in front of Fayola. One hand went to her curvaceous hip, the other to hair she flipped over her shoulder—revealing a thick, pulsing vein. “To my knowledge, there are no bird beak pictorials in this entire country. No pictorial, no blood centers for shifters like you. No blood pact.”

Fayola waited for the inevitable offer. Her stomach growled like a lion neither of them could shift into.

At the loud sound, the forty-five-year-old doctor’s full lips lifted, and twinkling eyes brightened.

She eschews the value of pacts. But it’s the blood pacts the Wake has with other countries that have kept us from taking what we want, when we want, and from whom we want.

Tilting her head to the side, Dr. Pérez-Soto proved herself both a self-sacrificing physician and a burdensome final mission. “Sun bears fall within your preferred blood type group. Therefore, I offer myself to you freely in exchange for my children’s lives. That’s all I ask. My blood for their safety. That will be our pact.”

A rush of burning hunger twisted her insides, sparking a need forever close to the surface. Fayola could take the offer. Indeed, Dr. Pérez-Soto wasn’t the first to suggest an illegal pact.

Fayola pressed her nose to Dr. Pérez-Soto’s neck, smelling the rich flavor of her blood. She licked her. *Salty*. “I could claim everything you offer and then go on my way, not taking a single child with me.”

“You wouldn’t.” Dr. Pérez-Soto tried to pull away, but Fayola wrapped an arm around her waist and yanked her close.

“I’m an impundulu. The power of lightning lives in my body, and the blood of birds and bears sustain me. But it wouldn’t do for the Wake to eat until gorged. To hunt our food source to extinction. You die. We die. So pacts exist to protect us both. We honor our pacts. Always.”

“Let me go.”

“Why? This is what you wanted. My beak around your neck—squeezing but not eating from you until you are no more than a corpse primed for draining. Or would you prefer to feel me drink from you while you squirm in my arms as I sink my sharp eyeteeth into your unmarred neck?”

To press her point, Fayola revealed eyeteeth no impundulu could use to drink blood. But the myth persisted.

“You’re unconscionable.”

“Yet it was you who attempted to use your sweet-smelling blood to lure me from my sworn duty.” Fayola licked Dr. Pérez-Soto’s neck again because she enjoyed the shiver of fear the action evoked. “I cannot save them, Doctor, and neither can you.”

Dr. Pérez-Soto struggled against Fayola’s hold, so she released the woman. Sun bears were notorious for their small bodies and short tempers. If she goaded her longer, she would have a four-foot-long black bear with a ridiculously long tongue incapable of speech in front of her. As it was, Dr. Pérez-Soto hadn’t used her normal-sized human tongue to say anything of worth from the moment she’d answered the clinic’s door to find Fayola on the other side.

“If I break my vow as a diello, why would you then trust me to uphold my side of the pact once you’re dead and I’ve slaked my hunger on your warm blood?”

Dr. Pérez-Soto stumbled backward. Her gaze was unwavering, but there was dawning realization in her eyes.

“You came here on a humanitarian mission—a little bear in an unstable nation ruled by elephant shifters.”

“You think me stupid? Naïve?” The last two words were spat like a wad of tasteless tobacco. “I’ve done good work here. You speak of your high-and-mighty pact with my brother”—she flung her hands outward—“well, this is my pact right here. Caring for these children. Making sure they are fed and clothed.”

“Honorable but ultimately futile.” Fayola rechecked her watch. *Twenty minutes*. “You’ve resorted to burning candles because the government turned off the electricity to force people out of areas controlled by the opposition. You’ve permitted the children to seek whatever they and you require from the abandoned stores. Not without injury, though. But surviving isn’t living. It’s merely a stubborn postponement of death. Now pack your things so we can be on our way.”

“You’re heartless.”

“If it makes you feel better to think of me as the villain, then I’m heartless. Once you finish wallowing in that characterization, stop and feel.”

Raising hands at eye level, Dr. Pérez-Soto flexed her fingers. “Feel?”

“With your feet.”

Dr. Pérez-Soto turned away from Fayola and toward the open doorway. In the short time Fayola had wasted indulging the doctor’s bout of irrationalism wrapped in guilt, the sun had begun to set. She neither knew nor cared who had referred to the female as *stupid* and *naïve* for leaving the safety of her country to offer medical aid to children in a nation more concerned with avenging perceived wrongs than protecting its citizens.

Every battle can’t be won. No more than every wound can be healed.

Dr. Pérez-Soto planted herself south of the broken door chunks.

Fayola knew the second the doctor grasped the magnitude of the situation—her loud gasp reverberated between them.

Slowly, as if walking in a pit of poisonous snakes, Dr. Pérez-Soto moved away from the entryway. “I can feel them coming this way. Two or three dozen.” She sank to her knees, falling like a bird’s egg from a nest—cracking but not shattering on impact. “So many of them. I thought we would be safe here after everyone fled. There’s nothing here. No strategic advantage to claim this city.”

Fayola grabbed Dr. Pérez-Soto by the elbow and helped the woman to her feet. “My mission is your extraction from Fuxing City and safe return to Delcanos.”

“Are Namju citizens still trying to cross into Delcanos? When the first wave left this neighborhood, seeking refugee status in the border nations, I gathered the children and went with them. I headed straight for the Namju-Delcanos border. But the border guards wouldn’t admit the children. They didn’t care that I was a Delcanos citizen and the children’s doctor.”

Of course they didn’t. Leaders of the three countries bordering Namju may sympathize with the plight of its citizens but none will risk being drawn into a war by opening their border to refugees. Conflict resolution support has been ignored. This civil war is far from over.

When she failed to respond, the doctor pushed on—talking fast. “New pact. I’ll go quietly. No more fussing. I’ll go. Take me to the Namju-Delcanos border. For an impundulu, it would be a ten-minute flight. Twenty minutes round trip.

“I’m sorry. Sorry for minimizing your adherence to pact law.”

“You still are. I’m not supposed to be in this country. I can’t be seen by Namju soldiers, much less confront them. You’re a doctor, so you know basic mathematics. I’m a single impundulu.”

“You’re a diello, which means you’re close to retirement, although you look a decade younger than me. For you to have earned that rank at such a young age tells me a lot about you; mainly, you’re seasoned and skilled and as close to a Dela Eden as my children will get.” Dr. Pérez-Soto dropped to her knees again, clasping her hands together—not in prayer to her god but in supplication to . . . Fayola. “Please, Diello Fayola. Please. Please.”

She glared at the pleading female, whose eyes had gone misty and face red.

The office door opened again. Out came the same little girl from earlier—not rubbing her eyes or shuffling her feet, but walking with an adultlike purpose across the foyer and straight to Fayola. Small hands grabbed her legs and eyes a lighter shade of golden-brown than her hair peered up at Fayola. “I don’t believe Mei lien. You are our Dela Eden.”

Dr. Pérez-Soto jumped to her feet. “Yes, yes she is, Jwahir.”

Fayola looked from little Jwahir to a grinning Dr. Pérez-Soto. “You haven’t won.”

“I’ll let the children know I’ll be leaving but that you’ll return to watch over them until the danger passes.”

“I said—”

“Yes, yes . . .” The sun bear darted toward her office, telling Jwahir to, “Hold your Dela Eden’s hand. I bet she’d like that.”

“This isn’t part of my miss—”

Small fingers slid against tough leather gloves. “Thank you, Dela Eden.”

Fayola swore under her breath. *This won’t end well . . . for them or for me.*