

The alpha's
CAPTIVE

ASPEN RIDGE PACK: ALPHAS
LUNA WILDER

THE ALPHA'S CAPTIVE

ASPEN RIDGE PACK: THE ALPHAS

BOOK 3

LUNA WILDER

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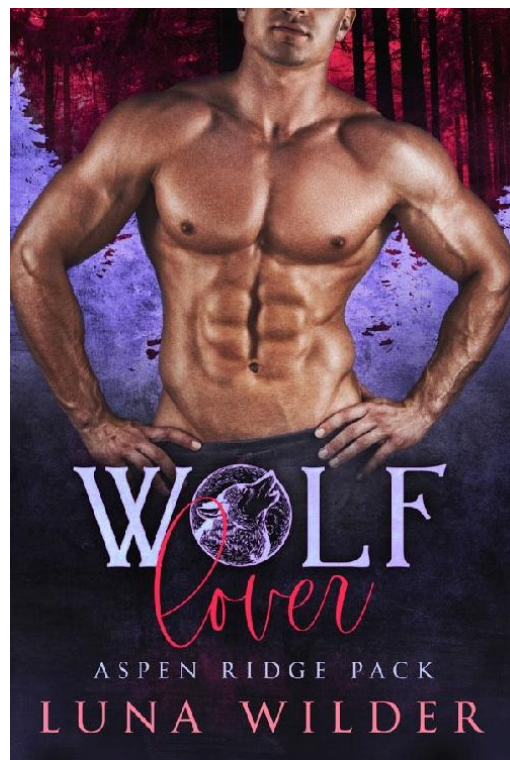
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He doesn't trust her, so how can she be with him?

Willa:

Being a captive isn't exactly how I thought I would celebrate my eighteenth birthday.

None of what's happened in the last few days went according to plan.

When Mack showed up at my door a few days ago, accusing me of stealing from my work, I thought that it was some kind of terrible joke.

He meant it though, and now I'm stuck here until he realizes that I've been framed.

When he tells me we're fated to be together, I think it's just another sick prank.

Turns out he's serious about that too though.

Now I'm not sure what to do.

Mack:

There's something about Willa that has me intrigued.

She's not who I have pictured when I went looking for a thief.

She's not what I had pictured when I thought of my fated mate, either.

Now I have messed things up before they've even begun.

Romance and love aren't my strong suits, but I'm willing to try for Willa.

I just hope that it's not too little too late.

These Alpha shifters are about to fall HARD!

Come to the small town of Aspen Ridge, Alaska and get ready to watch these swoon-worthy wolf and bear shifters fall in love with their fated mates!

ONE



Mack

“BUILDING HAS STARTED downtown in the Silver Spring Pack. They’re going to be working their way out to some of the other members’ houses soon too,” Kane tells us, and I nod.

“That’s good. I’ve heard that some of their members may be staying here though,” I add, and he nods.

“Yeah, I think I’ve got about fifteen families that want to stay here since they’re already settled.”

“Good. Does the pack need any more assistance from us?” Jonas asks.

“Just our construction workers and they’ve already all been hired. I imagine that they wouldn’t mind some food or other things delivered every now and then,” Kane says, and Bishop and I nod.

I make a note to ask for donations from my pack in my notebook. The meeting is almost over and I’m ready to go home and take a shower. I was up half of last night and I’m ready to crash soon.

Jonas’s radio crackles to life next to him, and I frown as Jonathon, the manager of the Aspen Ridge Ski Lodge and Resort, asks for our assistance.

“I can take it,” I offer.

I can see that Kane and Bishop are both eager to get home to their mates, and it's not fair to stick Jonas with dealing with whatever is going on.

"Thanks," Bishop and Kane say at the same time.

"I'll come with you," Jonas says as he grabs the walkie-talkie and stands.

"See you guys later," I say as I head out of the community hall.

Jonas falls into step beside me, his eyes scanning the streets. I'm sure that he's looking for his crush, Maddie. I glance at the Half Moon Diner, looking for her through the windows, but I don't see her.

"Did you want to grab something to eat first?" I ask him, and his eyes snap to mine.

"No, let's go."

He takes off at a fast pace up the street to where the Aspen Ridge Ski Lodge and Resort sits. It's at the edge of downtown so technically, we all split responsibilities of looking after it and making sure that things are running smoothly.

It's the off-season now, so I'm surprised that there's an issue. It's starting to get too cold for most human tourists so the parking lot is empty except for a handful of cars.

I follow Jonas inside and up to the front desk, where a prissy-looking man in a suit is standing, his mouth puckered with a look of distaste that I feel is probably usual for him.

"Jonathon," Jonas says, sounding tired already.

I wonder what he knows about this guy.

"There's been a robbery," Jonathon says.

His nametag says manager, and I'm guessing that he was the one who called over the radio.

"A robbery?" I ask, and he nods.

"From the register here and the safe in the back," he tells us, already turning to lead us behind the counter.

He pushes the girl who is working at the reception desk out of the way slightly and leads us back into his office. There's money stacked on the desk, and it's obvious that he must have been getting ready to make a run to the bank in town to deposit some.

"I was checking the balances and noticed they didn't add up. We're off... by a lot," he finishes, and I frown.

Our pack relies quite a bit on the money that this place brings in. We need it now more than ever since we're taking in other shifters from the Silver Springs Pack.

"Have you checked the cameras?" I ask, and he shakes his head.

"No, we're having the system updated. They haven't been working for the last week."

"So there's no footage or evidence then?"

"No," he confirms.

"Any idea who could have done this?" Jonas asks.

"Who has access to the safe and could get to the money?" I ask the manager.

"Well, me, of course. Also, anyone who works the night shift and the day manager, Ron."

I nod. I know Ron. He's a shifter and has been working at this place since it opened. He swears that he'll never retire, and I believe him. This place is his home. That also means he wouldn't steal from this place so we can rule him out as a suspect.

"We need a list," I tell Jonathon, and he nods, but then hesitates.

"I know most of the people who work nights, and Ron, of course. I don't think that any of them would do this... but there is a new girl that started a few weeks ago. She's been working nights," he tells us.

"And you think that it's her," I fill in, and he nods.

"What's her name?" I ask.

“Willa Matthews.”

Jonas shifts on his feet, and I glance at him. He looks confused and like he doesn't believe the manager.

“Okay. I'll go talk to her. How much was missing?” I ask as I pull out my notebook to write it down.

I scribble Willa Matthews at the top of a new page.

“A little over a hundred thousand, maybe more. I'm still digging, and now I need to go back and look at the books for the last few weeks.”

I have a moment of doubt.

He said that she's only been working here for a few weeks. Could she really have stolen all of that in such a short amount of time?

I guess she makes more sense than one of the seasoned workers doing it.

I write down the amount and close my notebook.

“I'll go talk to her, but let me know when you come up with a final amount. Or if you have any new information.”

“I will,” he promises.

Jonas and I head out of the office and back down the hill towards town.

“I don't think that it was Willa,” he says, and I frown.

“How do you know? Who is she?”

“She's one of Maddie's friends,” he admits in a mumble, and I roll my eyes.

I don't say it, but all I can think is that Jonas's crush is getting in the way of the facts.

“Where does she live?” I ask him.

“In your territory. 124 Willow Lane.”

“Stalker.”

He glares at me, and I shake my head.

“I’ll go talk to her. See if there’s any validity in the manager’s theory,” I tell him.

“Want me to come with you?” He asks, and I shake my head.

“No, I’ve got it. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

We split up and I make my way toward her place. My bear rumbles inside of me, awake from his nap at last.

Good morning, I tell him sarcastically.

It’s not like I missed anything. Some boring Alpha meeting. Snooze.

I roll my eyes at him and he stretches inside of me.

Where are we going now?

To deal with a girl.

Our mate? He asks in hope.

My gut clenches and I grit my teeth.

No, I tell him.

I still haven’t found my mate. To be fair, I haven’t really been looking for her. I left Aspen Ridge Pack right after graduation and joined the Marines. I only came back a year ago after I was shot. My father, the previous Alpha of the West Pack, was ready to retire, and I took over for him then. He moved further south with my mom, and I haven’t spoken to them much since.

They were never proud of me. I was never tough enough, fast enough, smart enough. I was just never enough. It’s why I left as soon as I could and why I only came back when I had to. It’s why I haven’t looked for my mate. If I wasn’t good enough for my parents, then why would I think I would be good enough for my mate?

Still, it hurts to see Bishop and Kane so happy and in love with their own mates. Some part of me, deep, deep down, really wants that.

My bear rolls over inside me and I force thoughts of my parents and childhood out of my head as I turn to face the front door of Willa Matthews' house.

Alright. Let's get this over with and then head home, I tell my bear, and he yawns lazily in agreement.

I let out a breath as I raise my hand and knock.

TWO



Willa

I GRAB my winter coat and slip it on as I pat my pockets and make sure I've got my phone and keys on me. I'm supposed to be meeting my friends at Emma's house in a few minutes, and if I don't hurry, then I'm going to be late.

A knock sounds at the front door, and I smile. It must be Maddie wanting to walk to Emma's together. My parents are out to dinner with some of their friends, so I zip up my jacket and answer the front door with a smile.

That smile fades when I see that it's not Maddie standing there but Mack. He's the leader of my part of town. I don't think I've ever spoken to him, though. When I was younger, I had a massive crush on him.

As I stare at him in the dimming light, I realize that the crush might still be there. He towers over me, at least a foot taller than my 5'4" frame. His dark brown hair is cut close to his scalp, and I wonder if it's a habit of being in the military or just how he likes it cut.

"Willa Matthews?" He asks me, and I nod.

"Yeah, to what do I owe this honor?" I ask him as I step out and close the door behind me.

I lock it, trying to control my hormones before I turn to face him again. Something about having those piercing blue eyes on me that makes me feel... tingly.

“You work at the Ski Lodge and Resort?” He asks me, and I nod.

“Yeah, I started there about three weeks ago. Why?” I ask him as I turn to face him.

“There’s been a robbery there.”

An image of Jonathon, the sleazy nighttime manager, pops into my head, but I bite my lip.

“I don’t know anything about it. I wasn’t even working today, so…” I trail off.

“We’re not sure that it happened today.”

“Okay,” I say, starting to walk past him. “I still don’t have any information for you. Check the cameras or the shift schedule.”

“We can’t.”

He reaches out, his hand wrapping around my elbow as he pulls me to a stop.

“You need to come with me.”

I huff out a laugh, thinking that he must be joking. I mean, surely he can’t think that I would have anything to do with this.

“What?” I ask once I realize that he’s serious.

“Or you can just hand over what you took, and maybe we can pretend like this didn’t happen. Though I doubt that you’ll still have a job.”

“I didn’t take anything,” I snarl, jerking my arm out of his hold.

I have no idea what he’s talking about, and I can’t believe this is happening.

“You’re the newest hire. You work night shifts when the money goes into the safe,” he says, like those things automatically make me guilty.

“I’m not the only one who works nights. I’m not the only one with access to the safe. Hell, I’m not even the best option

for who could have robbed the place. I'm a low-level employee! You think that they just give out the codes to everything to me?"

"If not you, then who?"

"Jonathon," I blurt out, and he frowns.

"The manager."

"Yeah, he's a slimy prick."

His lips almost pull up into a smile at that.

"He's the one who called in the theft. I doubt that he would do that if he was the thief."

"I'd bet everything that I have that he did. Which is about two thousand dollars, by the way."

Jonathon didn't hire me, Ron did. Ron is nice, the sweetest old man that I've ever met. Unfortunately for me, I work the afternoon and night shifts, which means that I usually work with Jonathon.

Jonathon is a slimy toad. He's hit on me and everyone else who works at the place at least a dozen times. No one will go near him though.

I'm not even sure what he's doing in Aspen Ridge. Most people who live here were born and raised here, but Jonathon moved to town about eighteen months ago. I don't think that many people know much about him.

"Maybe you should look into his background," I suggest, and Mack frowns.

"Why? What will I find?" He asks.

"I don't know. It's just a hunch."

"Uh huh."

Mack doesn't look convinced. I shouldn't be surprised that he doesn't believe me. He's a very black and white kind of guy. He's reserved and repressed. He doesn't take leaps of faith. He doesn't believe in the best of people.

“You need to come with me,” he says again, grabbing my arm in his tight hold.

He starts to drag me down the front path of my house, and I dig my heels in.

“Yeah, no can do, big guy. I’ve got plans for tonight.”

“With Maddie, Emma, and Isla?” He guesses, and I stare at him in shock.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I know that Maddie is planning on leaving town, and until we get this whole thing cleared up, I can’t let you out of my sight. So, you’re coming with me.”

With that, he turns and throws me over his shoulder, then starts striding down the road. I’m in too much shock to react at first, and then I realize that I should bide my time. I can’t overpower him and doubt that I could outrun him even if I did manage to get out of his hold.

Mack doesn’t know this, but I’m smart, clever, and stubborn.

So I’ll wait.

But I will be getting away.

THREE



Mack

I'M NOT sure who I believe.

What Willa says makes some sense, but what if that's a lie? All I can think is that I could trust her and she could end up skipping town. Then I would be known as the Alpha who let a thief get away. I can already imagine what my parents would say when they found out.

No, I can't let her go. Not until I figure out who took the money.

Willa digs her hands into my butt, and my bear perks up inside of me at the contact. She pushes herself up, grunting slightly as she twists to stare at the side of my side.

"Where are we going? This isn't the way to jail," she points out.

"I want to keep the robbery quiet. We're going to my house. You'll stay there until I figure things out."

"Bummer," she sighs, and I choke on a laugh.

"You'd rather be in jail?"

"Yeah, I've always wondered if I could break out of one. This was my chance to try it."

"You won't be breaking out of anywhere. This line of talking is only making you look guiltier."

I tighten my grip on her, and she sighs loudly before she drops back down onto my shoulder.

My bear is trying to figure her out as we continue to walk towards our house. I live in a secluded cottage a few miles from Main Street. I could have moved into the Alpha's house, my childhood home, but it didn't feel right. I wanted some privacy, something that was just my own and didn't have old memories attached to it.

I weave my way along the path through the trees, and I feel Willa's hands on my ass again as she turns to look at my house.

"Nice place. Not what I had pictured," she comments.

"What did you picture?"

"I don't know. Something darker. Colder."

I study the white two-story cottage, trying to see it through her eyes. I suppose it is a strange place to call home for a grumpy bear like me.

I carry her inside and up to the second floor.

"I don't have a basement or anything so this will have to do," I tell her as I carry her into the guest room next to my bedroom.

I set her down on her feet, and she sways slightly as all the blood rushes back to her head.

"What's the plan now?" She asks me, taking a step back and looking around.

"You'll stay here."

"As what? Your prisoner? Your captive?" She asks, and I can see her getting pissed off all over again.

"It will only be for a few days," I assure her.

"You can't just go around holding people captive against their will!" She shouts, and my bear stands up inside of me.

I lean down closer to her, my breath fanning across her lips as I snarl at her.

“I damn well can, and I am.”

She blinks, her eyes widening in surprise, but she quickly gets over the shock and glares at me.

“We’ll see about that,” she says quietly, and I growl as I spin on my heel and stalk out of the room.

“I’m supposed to be meeting my friends right now. They’ll be worried if I don’t show up,” she calls after me.

“Text them and tell them that you can’t make it.”

“No.”

“Then I’ll text Kane. Problem solved.”

I close the guestroom door, shoving a door stop in the door next to the hinges so that she can’t get out, and then I stomp my way downstairs and into the kitchen.

I’m worked up and on edge. I haven’t had anyone challenge me, not since I took over as Alpha from my dad, and I wonder if her pushing back is what has me so twisted up inside or if it’s something else.

My bear starts to pace, and I know that I should go out. I should shift and let him run around our territory, do a perimeter check, make sure that everyone is safe.

I grip the granite countertop, staring down at my shadow on the shiny surface.

What is happening to me? I like order, for things to be in their place and to run smoothly. So why am I so drawn to that curvy little troublemaker upstairs?

I push away from the counter, not getting any answers.

Run, my bear growls, and I tug off my shirt as I head outside.

FOUR



Willa

AS SOON AS he closes the bedroom door, I'm looking for a way out. There's no way that I'm staying here until he realizes that I'm innocent. Who knows how long that could be?

There's not much in the room. A small closet, a bed, and a dresser. I head for the window and try to ease it open as quietly as I can. I stick my head out and let out a whistle when I see how far down it is.

Snow banks drift up against the side of the house and I'm suddenly grateful for all of the snow that we've been getting lately. I try to debate the best way down. There's a tree branch that's close to the window. If I could stand on the ledge, I might be able to grab it.

I take a deep breath, zipping my coat up all the way to my neck before I boost myself up onto the window ledge.

I stick my head out and then my shoulders, gripping onto the cold wood as I pull the rest of my body out of the window and balance on the ledge.

"Great, now it looks like it's even higher," I grit out as I cling to the windowsill.

A gust of wind blows by me and I almost lose my grip.

At least if I fall, it will be into the nice soft snow, right?

I take a deep breath and reach out for the thick tree branch. My fingers wrap around the ice and snow covered branch and push off from the windowsill.

I meant to push off and wrap my legs around the branch too, but as soon as my feet leave the ledge, my grip on the branch slips and I gasp as I go falling.

“Oomph!” I grunt as I land in the snow bank.

It wasn't as soft as I would have liked, but I don't think that anything is broken. I'll probably just have a few bruises at worst.

I push up onto my feet and as soon as my head pops above the snow, I groan.

“What are you doing?” Mack shouts as he charges my way through the snow.

“What are *you* doing? And why aren't you wearing a shirt?” I yell back at him as I struggle to pull myself out of the snow.

He reaches me before I can and pulls me out easily, throwing me back over his shoulder as he stomps around the side of the house and back inside. I let out a sigh of relief as the heat hits me and starts to warm my frozen hands.

Every line in Mack's body is tight, tense, and frozen with anger.

He tosses me down onto the bed in the guestroom, and it would be hot how he manhandles me if I wasn't also pissed at him.

“You have to stay here. Is that understood?” He growls down at me, and I glare up at him.

“For how long? When will I be able to leave?” I ask him.

“I'm going to investigate things tomorrow. I'll know more then.”

“It's my birthday tomorrow, and I have plans. I'm spending it with my parents and friends. Celebrating, you know?” I ask him sarcastically.

“We’ll see what I find out,” he says.

He heads over to the window, closing and locking it. He gives me a hard warning look that I roll my eyes at as he heads back to the bedroom door.

“Stay here,” he says before he leaves and locks me in the room once again.

I wait until his footsteps have gone downstairs before I roll over in the bed, grab a pillow, and scream into it.

His scent hits me in the face, and I’m transported back to when I was a silly little girl. A girl who had a massive crush on Mack. He was a few years ahead of me in school but was impossible to ignore. Tall, brooding, handsome, he was my dream guy. Other girls my age were obsessed with the latest Hollywood heartthrob, but for me, it was always Mack.

Even when he got back from the military, the crush was still there. Maybe more so than because I had come up with a bunch of war hero stories about him in my head. He was even more handsome, skilled, smart, and capable then. My eyes were drawn to him every time he walked into the same room as me.

That crush feels like it died tonight.

Well, kind of.

It’s more of a hate thing going on now, but the physical attraction is still there.

Unfortunately for me.

FIVE



Mack

I RUB my shoulder as I trudge through the freshly fallen snow back toward my house. I barely slept last night. I was worked up and on edge, and I'm not sure if it was because of the things that Willa makes me feel or if having someone else in the house just threw my bear and me off.

My shoulder has been flaring up all night too. I know it's because I carried her around quite a bit yesterday. My shoulder healed after I was shot, but it's still not back to one hundred percent. It probably never will be.

I sigh as I try to rub out the stiffness there. My bear is pacing inside of me. I'm surprised that he's still all riled up. I let him out to run for the last hour. I figured that he would be calmed down and tired by now.

The house is quiet as I walk up the front porch steps. I tug on the clothes that I left there and head inside.

As soon as I step inside, it hits me.

Mate! My bear roars, but I'm already moving.

Excitement propels me up the stairs, and I smile. I can't believe that I've finally found my mate. My bear is roaring inside of me, his elation bubbling inside of me.

We've finally found her! He shouts, and I grin.

I'm halfway up the stairs when I freeze. The smile drops from my face, and I blink.

What am I doing? I'm the Alpha of my pack. I can't be doing this. My mate can't be the girl I'm holding captive in my house because I think she might have stolen from my pack.

My bear snarls at me, urging me to go upstairs and claim our mate, but I shake my head. I back down one step and then two. He roars inside of me, almost deafening me. He claws at me as I head back down the stairs and outside.

I close the door, needing the fresh air to clear my head. I need to be thinking clearly right now.

What the heck am I going to do?

Go claim our mate! My bear yells at me, and I try to ignore him.

I can't. Not yet. I need to put this robbery business to bed first before I decide what to do with my mate.

My bear isn't happy with me at all as I walk back into the house and upstairs. I'm going to wake up Willa and then head up to the Ski Lodge to talk to Ron. I'm hoping that he'll have more insight into all of this.

I knock on her bedroom door as I remove the door stopper. She doesn't answer, and I knock again before I push open the door.

"Son of a bitch," I growl when I see the open bedroom window, the curtains flapping in the wind.

There's a small puddle of water of melted snow underneath the open window so I know that she's been gone for a while. She must have snuck out the window while I went out to let my bear out to run.

I close the window and jog downstairs. As I step outside, I'm about to shift when I realize that I can't. I can't trust my bear around her right now.

I walk around to the back of the house and follow her footsteps through the snow towards town. Once we get closer to Main Street, I start to lose track of which steps are hers.

Luckily for me, my bear and I pick up her scent and follow it to the Half Moon Diner.

I spot Willa inside instantly. She's seated with two people who can only be her parents. They're laughing and they all look so happy and normal.

I'm debating whether I should go inside or wait for her out here when they stand and start to head for the door.

I study her parents for a moment, trying to figure out who they are. I have a lot of humans in my part of town, and I don't know them as well as the shifters. Willa and her parents are humans, which is why I didn't know who she was, not really. It also means that it's going to make explaining that she's my mate and that we're meant to be even harder.

"Morning," I greet them as they walk down the front steps of the diner.

Willa gives me a cheeky smile, and I know she's gloating that she pulled one over on me and managed to escape this morning.

"Morning, Mack," she says sweetly.

Her parents smile, and I take in their nice clothes. They look like a normal, middle-class family.

I should look into their financials. Maybe Willa stole the money for them.

"Happy birthday," I tell Willa, and she blinks.

She seems surprised that I remembered, and I frown.

Does she think that I'm that much of an ass?

Well, I did kind of kidnap her and lock her in my house...

My bear harumphs at me and sits down. He's a lot calmer now that we're near Willa.

"Thanks."

"Are you headed to Emma's place now?" I ask her, remembering how she mentioned wanting to hang out with her friends today.

“Um, yeah.”

“We’ll let you go. Have fun, honey,” her mom says.

“And happy birthday,” her dad asks.

They both hug and kiss her goodbye, and then I’m left alone with Willa.

My mate.

“I need to talk to you.”

“I’d rather not,” she says, turning to head towards Kane and Emma’s house.

I grab her arm, dragging her into an empty alley and throwing her over my shoulder. I can feel my shoulder protest, but I ignore the twinge of pain and start to stride down the path towards home.

“We need to talk,” I say, and she sighs.

I can picture her rolling her eyes at me, and my bear breathes in deeply.

She’s right there. Just bite her. Claim her, he urges me.

“What has Emma told you about Kane? Or Isla about Bishop?” I ask her as we head inside.

I kick the door closed behind us and set her down on the couch in the living room.

“Not much. They love them. They’re good guys. Why?” She asks, frowning at me in confusion.

This wasn’t what she thought I was going to ask her about. I was hoping that maybe her friends would have told her more about shifters and fated mates. Either they have and she’s keeping their secret, or they haven’t. I’m not sure which, so that means that I’m going to have to explain it all.

“They’re shifters,” I tell her, and she blinks at me.

“What?”

“They’re shifters. A wolf and a polar bear. I’m a black bear,” I say, and she stares at me. “Isla and Emma are their fated mates, and you... you’re mine.”

Then... nothing.

We both just stare at each other. It doesn't even look like she's breathing. She's just frozen in place, absorbing what I just told her.

"What?" She asks again, and I groan in frustration.

"I'm not explaining this right. I never thought that I would have to," I say as I start to pace in front of her.

"Listen, are you, like, okay? Are you having some kind of mental breakdown or something? Should I call someone?"

I growl, ripping off my shirt and then clawing at my pants.

I'll shift for her, and then she'll see I'm telling the truth. Then she'll believe me.

"Whoa!" She shouts, throwing up her hands as I push my pants and underwear down.

I kick them and my shoes off and then glance back at her.

"Look at me," I order.

"I'd rather not, dude."

"Do it. I'm going to prove this all to you."

She peeks at me from between her fingers, and that's when I let my bear push forward. My nails and teeth grow, and fur starts to cover my skin. My hands and feet turn into paws, and I shiver as my bones readjust. Within moments, I'm landing on all fours in front of her.

Her eyes widen behind her hands and she gapes at me.

"Fuck me," she whispers as she stares at me in shock.

Yes, please, my bear agrees right away.

I step forward, and she tenses like she thinks I might attack her. I stop and sit down by her feet. Even sitting, I'm still taller than her.

It takes her a few minutes before she reaches out and makes contact with me. Her touch is light on my fur, and I lean into it more.

“Hmm,” she says, and I want to growl in frustration.

She’s so hard for me to read. I wish that she would just tell me what she’s thinking.

I nudge her hand with my nose, and she smiles slightly.

That has to be a good sign, right?

I step back from her and shift back into my human form. She averts her eyes, chewing on her lip as I pull my clothes back on.

“So, now you believe me?”

“That you’re a bear? A, uh, shifter? Sure.”

“And we’re meant to be together.”

She laughs slightly at that, and I frown.

“It’s true. That’s how things work with shifters. We’re fated to our one true mate. We won’t love anyone before or after them. And you’re mine.”

“No,” she says.

“Yes. I could smell it as soon as I walked in here this morning. You’re my mate. You’re meant to be mine.”

She opens her mouth, and I interrupt her before she can say it.

“Don’t say no.”

“Fine, I won’t say no.”

I breathe a sigh of relief.

Now we’re getting somewhere.

“I’ll say pass.”

Now it’s my turn to stare at her in shock.

SIX



Willa

MACK STARES at me like he's not sure what to do with me or how to respond. I know the feeling well. I mean, the man just turned into a bear right in front of me.

Now he's talking about us being meant to be together like that means something to me. Especially after he just held me captive and accused me of being a thief.

"I'm telling the truth," he says again. "Don't worry; I won't claim you until I've figured out if you're a criminal or not though."

"Don't worry," I seethe, and he nods.

"I'm the Alpha of my pack. I can't be tied to a thief," he explains.

"So, we're meant to be together because fate says so, not because you want me, and if it turns out that I'm a thief, which I'm *NOT*," I stress, "then you're wrong, and we won't be together."

"No, we would still be meant to be together; I would just reject you."

"Well, I'm saving you a step then because I reject you!" I scream at him.

He blinks, seeming taken aback by my rage, and I push past him and up the stairs. I head for the guestroom where he's

kept me and slam the door after myself.

I can hear his heavy footsteps on the stairs, and I brace myself, waiting to see if he'll try to come in.

"I'm going to go investigate," he tells me through the door.

I don't bother to respond.

"Happy birthday, Willa. I'll be back soon. Then we can talk."

I snort, and he sighs and heads back downstairs.

I wait until he leaves, and then I head for the bedroom door. He didn't lock me in this time. I close the door after me and jog down the stairs. My plan is to head to Emma's and spend the rest of the day with my friends. Maybe they'll have more advice on what to do with everything that Mack said to me this morning.

It's freezing on my walk to Emma's house. I hurry when the wind picks up and burst into her house, scaring the crap out of all three of my friends.

"No! You ruined the surprise," Emma complains as she climbs down from the step ladder.

I smile at the slightly crooked happy birthday sign and throw my arms around Isla and Maddie as they rush to hug me.

"Happy birthday!" They say in unison.

"Thanks," I say with a grin.

"Happy birthday!" Emma adds as she joins our group hug.

"Thanks guys."

"You're here early. I thought we had another half an hour," Isla says as we head over to the couch.

"Crap! I need to go grab something. I'll be right back!" Maddie calls as she grabs her coat and rushes out the door.

"Yeah, my plans kind of...changed," I start.

"How so?"

I look around at my friends, trying to decide how much to say. I know that Isla and Emma are both with shifters so I guess it's fine to just dive in.

"Mack is a shifter. A bear," I blurt out.

"Yeah," Isla says, and I realize they both already knew.

"And he says that I'm his fated mate."

That seems to shut them up. They share a look, and I push to my feet and start to pace.

"He also thinks that I'm a thief."

"What?" They squawk in outrage.

"Someone stole from the Ski Lodge and Jonathon accused me. Mack believes him."

"That freaking Jonathon," Emma seethes, and I nod.

"I know."

"I can't believe that anyone believes Jonathon," Isla groans, and I sigh.

"I know, but I mean, the guy is crazy."

"Crazy hot," Isla mutters, and I glare at her.

"Sorry, but he is. And you don't need to worry about the robbery charge. No one who knows you is going to believe it, and I'm sure that your name is going to be cleared any day now," Isla assures me.

"She's right. No one is going to believe that you stole from work," Emma adds.

"That's not my biggest problem right now. It's that Mack keeps dragging me back to his house. He's determined to hold me captive until this is all cleared up, but now he's throwing this fated mate stuff on top."

"Well, if he says you're his mate, then you are," Isla adds.

"Yeah, they only have the one," Emma says.

"What does that *mean* though?" I ask them.

"To be his mate?" Emma asks, and I nod.

“That you’re meant to be,” Isla says. “Shifters will only love their mate. You’re like the center of their whole world.”

“It’s kind of amazing,” Emma sighs dreamily.

“Yeah, it can be addicting. They would do anything for you,” Isla adds.

“So, it’s a good thing?” I ask them.

“Oh, yeah,” they say with a laugh.

“Huh.”

I’m not quite sold on everything. Their mates didn’t hold them captive and accuse them of stealing.

Mack seems so relaxed about being my mate too. He said that he would reject me like it was nothing, like it would be the easiest thing in the world to do, so obviously, I’m not that important to him.

“What are you going to do now?” Emma asks.

“Clear my name,” I say right away.

“And with Mack?” Isla asks.

“Nothing. I don’t want to be with someone who doesn’t trust me, who wouldn’t give me the benefit of the doubt.”

They frown but nod, and I plop back down next to them.

“Screw Mack then. Let’s forget about him and just celebrate your birthday,” Emma says.

“Deal,” I say as Maddie comes back in carrying a bakery box.

“Perfect timing!” Isla tells her, and I grin and try to forget all about Mack as I eat cake and hang out with my best friends.

SEVEN



Mack

“SON OF A BITCH,” I snarl as I stomp my way around the jail.

The two deputies working scurry out of my way. I don’t even look at them as I toss the paperwork onto the front desk.

It was the freaking manager. Jonathon. He was trying to frame my mate. What’s worse is that it’s not even the first time he’s done something like this. Jonathon isn’t even his real name.

“He’s got warrants out for his arrest in Arizona and Kentucky. I’m going to go get the money he stole, and then you can process him and let those two states fight over him.”

“Yes, sir,” both deputies say at the same time.

I stalk out of the police station and over to my Jeep. Jonathon, or whatever his real name is, told me where the money was stashed. He thought that Ron was onto him, rightfully so, and he was trying to pin the theft on someone else so that he had a few more days to get some more money and time to make his escape. We’re just lucky that he didn’t have enough time to spend any of it or slip away.

I drive past the Ski Lodge and up further into the mountains to the abandoned hunting cabin that Jonathon told me about. I park outside and head over to the door. It’s chain-

locked, and I have to kick it in. Sure enough, there, under the old floorboards, is the suitcase full of money.

My bear is snarling at me, and I grit my teeth.

Who cares about the money? Go get our mate! Make this right with her! We should have claimed her this morning.

We have a responsibility to the pack. We need to take care of them. We'll drop the money off and then go find her, I promise him.

The sun is starting to set as I pull up in front of the police station and carry the money inside.

“Let me know if you run into any problems,” I tell them, and they nod. “I’ve already told Ron that we found the money. After you’re done here, we’ll let him deposit it. He’ll be by in the morning.”

“Yes, sir,” they say, and I turn to leave.

I head home, practicing my speech to Willa on my drive. The house is quiet and dark as I walk in, and I’m not surprised; it’s close to eleven at night already. She’s probably fast asleep.

Maybe I should wait to talk to her in the morning.

No! My bear roars, and I sigh as I head upstairs to the guestroom.

I push open the door and sigh.

“Yep, of course, she’s fucking gone.”

I spin on my heel and stomp my way downstairs and back out to my Jeep. I climb behind the wheel and back out of the drive. I have a feeling that I know where she’s at, and I head towards Kane’s house.

His house is quiet and dark, too, but I don’t let that stop me. I’m about to knock on the door when it swings open, and Kane gives me a tired smile.

“I figured that you would be by at some point.”

“I got Jonathon situated at the station. I brought the money in too.”

“Good. Are you here for Willa?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s asleep. All of the girls are,” he tells me.

“Is she pissed at me?” I blurt out, and he smiles slightly.

“Yep. What are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t have a freaking clue,” I admit, scrubbing my hands down my face.

It’s been a long day. This isn’t how I should have spent my mate’s birthday. I should have been with her. I should have been celebrating her. More than that, I should have trusted her from the beginning. I never should have taken her captive or accused her without any proof. Now, I might have just pushed her away for good.

My bear makes a distressed sound inside of me at that thought, and I wince.

“I could bite her,” I say, talking more to myself and my bear than to Kane. “Then she’ll feel the connection between us at the mating moon.”

Kane laughs, shaking his head at me.

“It won’t be that easy. Trust me. You’re going to have to grovel and romance her. It’s what I had to do with Emma when I messed things up with her.”

“Willa is different. We haven’t known each other long, not like you and Emma.”

He just laughs at me again, and I push past him and head inside. Emma is sound asleep on the couch, her friends around her, and I reach down and pick her up into my arms. I carry her past a still chuckling Kane and over to my Jeep.

She must be really tired because she doesn’t so much as stir as I buckle her in and make the drive home.

As I go, I can't help but wonder if Kane might be right about the groveling and romance. He has more experience with women than I do. Maybe I should listen to him. Maybe I should have asked him for more advice.

I guess we'll see who's right tomorrow morning.

EIGHT



Willa

WHEN I WAKE up the next morning, I'm not even all that surprised to be back in Mack's house. What does stun me is that I'm in Mack's bed this time.

As soon as I blink my eyes open and realize where I am, I promptly throw my legs over the edge and jump off the mattress like it's on fire.

I stare in horror when I see that Mack is still in the bed.

"Oh, god! Did we sleep together?" I screech, and he jack knifes up in bed, blinking his bleary eyes open.

I look down at my body, letting out a sigh of relief when I see that I'm still fully dressed.

"What? No," he says, climbing out of bed. "I brought you home from Kane and Emma's."

"Why?" I ask him, and he blinks.

"The manager, Jonathon, he confessed last night. We got the money back."

"Okay... and? That doesn't explain why you kidnapped me from my friend's house last night and forced me to sleep in your bed."

"I didn't kidnap you," he starts, and I give him a look.

He sighs, and I start to inch for the bedroom door.

“Jonathon is in prison now. He has a few warrants out, so he’ll be leaving Alaska soon.”

“Good. Wait, you arrested him. That’s even better. I can go home then.”

Mack frowns at me as I turn and head for the door. I’m excited to finally go back to my real life.

I head downstairs, Mack hot on my heels the entire time.

“No, you can’t leave,” he stops me.

“Why not?”

“Well, you’ll be moving in here instead,” he explains, and I turn to gape at him.

“Um, no. I won’t be doing that.”

“You have to. We’re fated mates.”

“No, we’re not,” I say forcefully.

“We are. I shifted for you. I told you about all of this.”

“Right, but I don’t care. I don’t want to be your mate. I want someone good and kind. I want someone who sees the best in people. I want someone who trusts me and knows me and loves me, and you are not any of those things.”

I turn around and head for the door, and I can hear Mack sputtering, trying to come up with something to say to get me to stay, but I ignore him.

I even slam the door for good measure on my way out.

NINE



Mack

“I NEED HELP,” I announce as soon as Kane, Bishop, and Jonas walk into the community center.

“With Willa?” Kane guesses right away.

“Yeah, things did not go well this morning,” I admit.

“Told you.”

I glare at him, and he smirks as he takes a seat at the table next to me.

“Yeah, you told me. Now, please, help me fix it.”

“I told you, you need to grovel and romance her,” Kane tells me.

“Right, but how exactly do I do that?” I ask them.

“Just tell her how you feel about her,” Bishop suggests.

“Did you tell her that you’re fated mates?” Jonas asks.

“Yeah, it doesn’t mean anything to her,” I tell him.

“Probably because you accused her of stealing from her job and then locked her in your house,” Kane says, and I glare at him again.

“Yes, I understand where I went wrong,” I tell him through my teeth.

“So go tell her that you’re sorry. Beg her to forgive you. Ask what you can do to make it up to her,” Bishop suggests.

Okay, that could work.

Could it? My bear growls at me.

He’s been furious, pacing back and forth like a caged beast all day. I messed things up with our mate. If I had just bitten her on her birthday, my bear is convinced that we wouldn’t be in any of this mess right now.

“Okay, any other ideas or tips?” I ask them.

“Plan a good date, and don’t just treat it like a way to get into her pants,” Kane says.

My bear shakes his head at that, and I roll my eyes at him. With the full moon approaching in a few days, he’s been more determined than ever to spend it with our mate.

“Okay, I can do that.”

“You could take her on a picnic or make her dinner,” Jonas suggests.

“Yeah, do something intimate and special. Something where you can really get to know her and spend time just the two of you,” Kane adds.

“Okay, I can do that.”

I start to make a plan of things that we could do together, but the truth is that I’m going to need to convince her to forgive me and give me a second chance first.

My bear starts to pace nervously inside of me, and I swallow hard. That’s the part that I’m really worried about.

Did I mess things up with Willa so badly that I ruined things before they could even start? I have no experience with women. Do I really think that I’m going to be able to make all of this up to her? Do I even have a chance with her?

I can’t help but think about what my parents would say about all of this. I bet they wouldn’t even be surprised if they found out I messed things up with my fated mate. They probably expected my mate to reject me.

I push those thoughts away and stand from the table.

“Thanks, guys,” I say sincerely.

“Are you going to go talk to her today or wait until tomorrow?” Bishop asks.

“Tonight. If I want to be with her for the mating moon, I’m going to need time to make all of this up to her.”

“Good idea,” Kane says.

We head out of the community center, and my bear takes a deep breath, trying to catch any whiff of our mate. There’s no sign or smell of her so I’m guessing that she’s either at Kane and Emma’s place or her own house.

I head towards her house first and my heart lodges in my throat when I see her out front. She’s smiling as she shovels off the last bite of her driveway, and I stop and stare at her.

She looks beautiful and happy. Her dark hair is tied up in a messy bun on top of her head, her earmuffs making her look sweet. Her cheeks are stained a light pink from the cold and exertion of shoveling.

Maybe I should just leave her alone. I’ve been her mate for two days and all I’ve made her is angry, upset, and miserable. Maybe she’s better off without me in her life.

My bear snarls at me, and I blink, taking another step towards her.

“Hey, do you need a hand with that?” I ask as I walk closer.

She looks over at me, seeming resigned when she sees that it’s me.

“No, I’ve got it. Thanks though.”

She shovels off the last bit of snow and takes a deep breath, wiping the sweat from her brow.

“Did you want to go for a little walk with me?” I ask when I see her parents peeking out at us from behind the blinds.

“Is that necessary?” She asks, and I try not to be too disappointed.

“Please,” I beg, and she studies me for a moment before she nods.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

We start to walk down the quiet road, the snow crunching under our feet as we go. I know that I don’t have long with her, so as soon as we’re out of view of her parents’ house, I start my campaign to win her back.

“I’m sorry. I should have trusted you when you said you didn’t take the money. You’re right; you do deserve someone who sees the best in people and who trusts you. That should have been me.”

“Thanks for saying that,” she says.

“I wanted to try to explain my reasoning. I’m hoping you’ll be able to see why I did things the way I did and that maybe you’ll be willing to give me another chance.”

She side eyes me, and the little bit of hope that I have dies quickly. Still, I have to try, so I dig down deep and try to open up to her.

“I’ve always had a lot of... pressure put on me. I was the Alpha’s son, and it was expected that I would take over. I had to be tough and strong and the law. That was drilled into me.”

“Alpha?” She asks, and I blink.

“Oh, it’s the leader of the pack. I’m in charge of the West Pack of Aspen Ridge.”

“Okay. Continue.”

“My parents were strict. They wanted me to be the best at everything, and I just... never seemed to be able to meet their expectations. I was never good enough,” I finish quietly.

“But, you’re the Alpha? And a freaking war hero?” She asks, sounding outraged on my behalf.

“It doesn’t matter to them.”

“It should. You’re a good guy, Mack. They should be able to see it.”

“Thanks,” I whisper.

My bear is sitting up proudly inside of me. He’s happy with our mate, happy that she can see our worth and is on our side.

“Anyways, when I found out that there had been a robbery, I was upset and worried about my pack. I didn’t want the thief to get away and knew that if the thief was my mate and she got away with stealing hundreds of thousands, I would never live it down. I was trying to do right by my pack, but in doing that, I let down my mate. I shouldn’t have done that. I really am sorry, Willa.”

“It’s okay. I can kind of see where you’re coming from.”

“Let me make it up to you. Let me take you to dinner,” I plead with her.

She hesitates, chewing on her plump bottom lip as we make our way back to her house. My heart is beating out of control as I wait for her answer.

“Please, Willa. Fate paired us together and there’s a reason for that. Just give me another chance and I promise you’ll see it too.”

“Alright,” she says reluctantly, and I jump on her agreement before she can take it back.

“Great! I’ll go home and get things ready. I’ll pick you up in an hour and a half,” I say, and she blinks.

“Tonight?”

“Yeah... unless you have plans already?”

“No, but...”

“Then, dinner. Okay?”

She studies me as we stop at the end of her driveway, and my bear paces inside of me.

“Okay,” she says, and I grin.

“Good. I’ll see you soon.”

I want to lean down and kiss her goodbye, but I know how that would go, so instead, I just wave and head off toward my place.

Now, I just need to plan the best date ever so that I can win another chance with my feisty mate.

Piece of cake, right?

TEN



Willa

MACK SHOWS up exactly an hour and a half later to pick me up for dinner. I'm not sure how I feel about going out with him. I'm trying to forgive him for how he treated me these last couple of days, but it's hard.

Hearing how he sees himself and his parents viewed him was heartbreaking and softened me towards him a bit. It seems crazy to me that he could see himself that way when everyone in town loves and looks up to him.

I never really met his parents, but his father seemed a lot like him. He carried himself with authority. He seemed cold and matter-of-fact about everything. I assumed that Mack had learned his demeanor from his dad, but now I'm wondering if it's all a façade.

"Let me get your door for you," Mack says as he leads me over to his Jeep.

"Thanks."

I shiver as the wind picks up. Now that the sun is setting, it's starting to get crazy cold out. I'm glad that he drove to pick me up. I'm not sure I would have survived the walk there or back home otherwise.

"Do you get cold?" I ask him as he climbs behind the wheel.

“Sure. Moreso when I’m in my human form, but when it’s well below zero, then I can get chilly, even when I’m my bear.”

“Do you shift to your bear form often?” I ask as we pull away from my house and head towards his.

“Every day. He gets antsy when he can’t run or stretch out every day or so.”

“Does the military know about you? Does everyone in town know about shifters?”

“No, and no. There were a few other members of my unit who were shifters, but we never shifted on base or anywhere near it. It’s too dangerous to do that. We don’t want humans knowing that we exist,” he explains.

“I know that you exist.”

“You’re my fated mate. I trust you,” he says, and the words seem to hit me hard.

“With some things,” I say quietly, and he stiffens in his seat.

“I’m sorry about that, Willa. Truly.”

“I know. I’m almost over it,” I tell him, and he sighs as he pulls into his driveway.

We both hop out, and he hurries over to my side as we head for the door. We’re silent as we hurry inside and start to peel off our layers.

The house is the same as it was this morning when I left, but it feels different to be back here. Maybe because this time I’m here as a guest.

“I made us dinner. I hope that you’re hungry... and that you like spaghetti.”

“I do,” I assure him with a laugh.

“Good,” he says, relaxing right before my eyes. “Let me take your coat.”

I pass him my winter gear and follow him into the kitchen. There's a sauce simmering on the stove, and he turns the heat up, warming it up as he starts a pot for the spaghetti.

"I'm surprised that you can cook," I comment, and he gives me a half, kind of sad, smile.

"I learned when I was a kid. My mom was always busy helping my dad out with his Alpha duties, so I had to learn to fend for myself."

My heart sinks as I think about a young Mack all alone in his house cooking a meal for one. I always thought he was one of the popular guys with so many friends. When we were younger, he was always surrounded by people, but I'm starting to realize now that they weren't really friends.

"It's cool that you know how to cook. I'm kind of a disaster in the kitchen. All I can manage is cereal," I say with a self-deprecating laugh.

"I can teach you a few recipes. Maybe you've just never had the right teacher," he rumbles as he adds the pasta to the boiling water.

"Maybe," I hedge.

I've forgiven him, but I'm still not sure that I want to be Mack's mate. I feel kind of bad though for yelling at him about not knowing me. It seems that I judged him too, and not correctly.

All of those bubbly, warm feelings from when I had a crush on him as a girl are still there, lurking just under the surface.

He moves around the kitchen, focusing on our meal, and I watch him, studying him. He's solid, built like a, well, like a bear. I let my eyes roam over the strong muscles of his back and arms. His biceps bunch as he drains the pasta and pulls the garlic bread out of the oven.

"Did you want to eat at the counter or the table?" He asks me as he grabs some plates.

"Wherever you want."

He hesitates for a moment and then carries things over to the table. I slide off of my stool and join him at the kitchen table.

“It looks and smells delicious,” I compliment as we both take our seats.

“Thanks. Hopefully it tastes good too.”

“Tell me more about yourself,” I say as we both pile our plates with food and dig in.

“There’s not much to tell. I was born and raised here. I left when I was eighteen and joined the Marines. I wanted to make something of myself, and I guess I was trying to prove to my parents and myself that I was strong and capable.”

“You are,” I assure him.

He doesn’t look convinced, but he nods and goes on.

“I was shot on my last deployment, and I heard that my dad’s health was starting to decline so I figured now was a good time to come back and take over things from him.”

“Do you like it here?” I ask softly, and he nods.

“I love it here. This place is home.”

“Good,” I smile.

“Do you like it here?” He asks nervously, and I nod.

“Yeah, it’s home.”

We eat in silence for a minute, and I smile.

“I remember you in school. You were the big man on campus. I used to have such a crush on you,” I admit.

“Used to?” He asks, looking worried.

I shrug, smiling slightly, and he looks like he wants to ask me more, but I change the subject.

“I’m starting college soon. In a couple of weeks.”

“You’re leaving?” He asks in a panic.

“No, I’m going to work and take online courses. Well, I was going to work. I’m not sure that I can go back to working

at the Ski Lodge and Resort.”

“You can. They know that you didn’t steal the money.”

“Still, it feels weird now. I’ll try to figure something else out.”

“You don’t have to work. I can take care of us,” he offers, and I give him a warning look.

“We’ll see,” I say.

I’m actually having fun tonight, and don’t want to ruin it by arguing about us being fated mates or whatever.

“What was your favorite subject in school? What’s your major going to be? Where are you going to college?” He asks, rattling off questions at me faster than I can answer.

“I loved math and science. I’m still not sure about my major, but I’m leaning towards criminal justice or maybe law.”

“Really?” He asks in surprise, and I nod.

“I think it would be cool to be sheriff of this place someday. Probably pretty slow since there’s barely any crime, but still. It would be cool to help out the community that way and keep people safe.”

“You’d probably be good at it. You knew it was Jonathon right away. You’re good at reading people.”

“Thanks. I hope so.”

I eat the last of my garlic bread and lean back in my chair.

“I’m stuffed. That was so good. Thanks for cooking for me.”

“Anytime.”

I help him carry the dishes over to the counter, and we stand side by side as he starts to wash the dishes. I dry, stacking them on the counter.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to,” I tell him.

We clean up in a comfortable silence, and I smile.

It took him two days to ruin the crush that I used to have on him. I wonder how many days it will take for him to bring it back, stronger than ever?

ELEVEN



Mack

MY BEAR IS all worked up inside of me as we wait until it's time to go pick up Willa for our second date. I knew that he was going to be like this, which is why I took him for a long run this morning and again this afternoon. It didn't really help. I know he's going to get worse as it gets closer to the full moon tomorrow night.

I wish that things were different. I wish I hadn't messed things up with Willa before they could even begin.

She came over for dinner yesterday, my bear reminds me, and I sigh.

That's true, and I think it was a good first step, but it doesn't mean that she's really forgiven us yet. Not fully anyway. We might have to wait until next month's full moon to claim her.

My bear growls at that thought, and I have to agree with him. I don't want to wait that long either, but it's probably what we deserve. We hurt her by accusing her of stealing from the Ski Lodge and holding her captive here. We need to find some way to make it up to her. I just don't know how.

What can I say or do to make this all right?

I glance at the clock and see that it's almost time to pick up Willa. It feels like a miracle that I was able to talk her into going out with me again. When I asked last night after I

dropped her off at her house, she hesitated for so long that I was sure that she was going to say no.

Just focus on the fact that she said yes, my bear tells me, and I nod.

He's right. I need to take it one day at a time with her.

I grab my car keys and brush out a few wrinkles in my shirt as I head out the door. It's starting to snow harder, and I hurry over to my Jeep and crank the engine, turning the heat all the way on.

The roads are starting to get icy as I make my way towards Willa's place, and the Alpha in me takes over. I should be out making sure that my pack is safe and everyone is inside where it's safe. Maybe I should call and make sure that the snow plows and salt trucks are ready to go.

Stop! Let the other Alphas take care of those things. They can handle it for one night. Go get our mate! My bear snaps at me.

I make it to Willa's house in one piece and climb out. I'm right on time and I hurry up to the front door. I knock, and she answers a minute later.

"Hey, I was just about to call you. I had to call Emma and ask Kane for your number," she says.

She's already shivering from the cold, and I shift, trying to block out the worst of the snow and wind.

"Oh, am I late? I thought I was right on time," I say, glancing at my watch.

"You are. The weather is getting bad though. I think maybe we should cancel tonight before we get snowed in somewhere," she says with a light laugh.

"Oh, yeah, you're probably right."

I try to hide my disappointment, but I don't think that I'm doing a great job of that.

"Maybe tomorrow we can do something?" I ask, forcing a smile to my lips.

“Maybe,” she hedges, and panic starts to set in.

“I’m free all day,” I say, and even I can hear the desperation in my voice.

My bear starts to pace inside of me and his anxiety is not helping matters at all.

“Okay, I’ll um... I’ll call you or something,” she says, already starting to head back inside.

I know that this is it. I’m seconds away from having the door slammed in my face and losing my mate. I can’t let that happen. Not without a fight.

My bear roars inside of me, and I clear my throat, slapping my hand onto the door before it can shut.

“Wait!” I shout, and she blinks, looking up at me in shock. “Just... wait, please, Willa.”

She opens the door a little bit, and I swallow hard. I should have been planning a speech; I should have prepared for anything that could have happened tonight. Now I have Willa’s undivided attention and I have no idea what the hell to say.

“I’m sorry. I know I keep saying that and it probably doesn’t mean anything to you. I mean, it’s just a word, and I —” I cut myself off.

I have no idea where I was going with that.

Oh my god, what am I going to do?

“I’m bad at this,” I sigh.

“You really are,” she agrees.

“I just have no experience with any of this and I have no idea what I’m doing. I want to ask you what I can do to make everything up to you, but I got into this mess and shouldn’t have to put more stuff on you to get myself out of it. It’s just that I have no idea how to make any of this right. I’m so lost and all I know is that I need you. We’re meant to be, and I know that it means nothing to you, that shifters and fated mates and all of this means nothing to you, but it is everything

to me. I messed it up though,” I say, continuing with my verbal vomit.

“Mack,” Willa starts, but I’m on a roll.

“I grew up hearing about mates; I guess I just took you for granted. It’s rare for mates to reject the other and I never thought about you rejecting me. Still, I shouldn’t have treated you the way that I did. I told you about my parents and all of that, but that was just an excuse. I’m my own man, and should have treated you better, with respect and trust. I’ve been such an asshole for so long, so used to being a grump to keep people away, and it’s weird to try not to be now and to let you in, but I want to. I really, really want to.”

“Mack,” Willa tries again.

Let her talk! My bear screams at me.

“I’m sorry, Willa. I’m so sorry and if you can just forgive me, I swear I will spend the rest of my life making things right. I’ll figure it out. I swear. Can we just start over?” I ask as a big gust of wind sends flurries all around us.

I hold my breath as I wait for her response, and she shifts on her feet.

“Mack... I just, I need some time,” she says softly, and I try to swallow down my disappointment.

“Oh, okay. I understand.”

I start to back away, and she opens her mouth like she wants to say something, but no words come out.

I give her a small smile and turn, trudging back to my Jeep as more snow starts to fall all around me.

I never thought that it would happen, but I think that my mate just rejected me.

My bear roars mournfully inside of me, and I sigh in agreement.

“I know, buddy. I know.”

I start my Jeep, pull away from the curb in front of her house, and head back home.

TWELVE



Willa

I HAVE no idea what to do and I hate it.

I'm so used to being sure about my decisions, but with Mack, I'm all over the place. When I left his house after he told me that Jonathon was the real thief, I was determined to ignore him, but he kept sucking me back in.

When he told me about his parents and childhood, my heart broke for him. My parents are awesome, and I guess I assumed that the Alpha's parents would be too, but that wasn't the case. I can't imagine being so hard on my kids. I can't imagine growing up and not knowing if I'm loved and wanted, but it sounds like that was Mack's reality.

After our dinner together, I thought that maybe we could be friends. I'd forgive him for how he treated me, but I didn't think I wanted to be his mate or anything.

To be honest, I thought that he would let me go. He made it sound like rejecting me would be a piece of cake, but yesterday when I tried to blow him off, he fought for me. In fact, it was the first time I truly saw that mask he keeps so firmly in place slip. He was scared to lose me, terrified of the possibility. His impassioned speech moved something in me, but I still have questions.

That's why I'm headed to his place right now. The snow finally stopped, so I got bundled up to make the trek over.

“Hey! Where are you headed?” Maddie asks me as I almost run right into her.

“Hey, um, I’m headed over to Mack’s place.”

She gives me a knowing look, and I laugh.

“To *talk*,” I stress, and she laughs then.

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

“Oh my gosh, you’re the worst. I’m seriously just going to talk to him,” I promise her.

She knows all about him accusing me of stealing and apologizing. She also knows I had a crush on him when I was younger. The girls have been asking for updates on what’s happening between the two of us for the last couple of days, and I’ve been honest, telling them that I have no clue.

Movement catches my eye, and I see Jonas stop dead in his tracks when he spots Maddie and me. His eyes are locked on her, and a thought hits me.

I wonder if Jonas is a shifter, too, and Maddie is his mate. That would explain the longing looks that he’s always giving her. I’ll have to ask Mack.

“Are you headed to work?” I ask, and she nods.

“Yeah, I picked up an extra shift. I’m trying to work as much as I can to save up.”

“Have you found an apartment yet?” I ask her, and she shakes her head.

“No, everything is crazy expensive, and I would need to find a roommate, which I don’t really want to do. Not unless it was going to be you or one of the girls.”

“Well, I can’t say that I’m disappointed. I don’t want you to leave.”

“I know, but I have to do something. I can’t take living with my mom for too much longer,” she grumbles, and I give her a sympathetic smile.

“You can crash with me anytime. I’ll even share my bed with you,” I tell her, and she smiles.

“Thanks. I might take you up on that. If Mack isn’t already sharing it with you instead.”

“Stop! Go to work,” I say with a giggle, and she smirks.

“I’ll text you on my break,” she promises, and I wave as she takes off.

Jonas starts to follow her, and I give him a knowing smile.

“Roads are icy. Just want to make sure that she gets there safe,” he tells me as he passes.

“Uh huh.”

His cheeks heat with a faint blush and he hurries to catch up to her as she rounds a corner.

I continue onto Mack’s house and take a deep breath as I climb up onto the front porch and ring the doorbell. The door is ripped open a second later, and I gasp, jumping back and almost slipping right off the porch.

Luckily, Mack catches me and drags me inside.

“It’s freezing out. You should have called me. I would have come to get you or just come to you,” he says, practically carrying me over to the chair next to the fireplace.

“I’m fine. I’m all bundled up,” I tell him as I peel off my gloves and warm my hands by the fire.

He makes some grumbly sound, and my core clenches at the sound.

“I wanted to talk to you,” I tell him, trying to distract myself from thoughts of Mack naked and making that sound again.

“Okay, about what?”

He seems nervous now, and I straighten in my chair.

“Is Jonas a shifter?”

He blinks at me, caught off guard by this line of questioning.

“What?”

“Jonas, is he a shifter? A bear like you?”

“No, he’s a wolf. Why?” He asks, and I can see the jealousy starting to overtake him.

“I just ran into him and was wondering.”

“He’s not your mate.”

“Yeah, I know. Is he Maddie’s?” I ask.

“Probably. The guy has been in love with her for years, since he was fifteen or so, but he’ll need to wait until she’s eighteen to find out for sure.”

“Must be nice,” I sigh, and he frowns.

“Is that what you want? Someone who pines for you and follows you around like a puppy dog?” He asks, and I snuggle deeper into my chair.

“Yes. It’s what everyone wants.”

“Oh.”

He looks thoughtful for a moment, and I study him. He looks tired today like he didn’t get any sleep. I wonder if he was too upset about our conversation yesterday and couldn’t sleep.

“I can do that,” he announces, and I blink.

“Do what?”

“Be your shadow.”

“It’s not the same,” I tell him, and he looks frustrated by that answer.

“I know you probably won’t believe me, but there’s always been something between us. I didn’t notice you before, true, but that’s not because of you. When I was younger, I was just so wrapped up in making my parents proud. I mean, I never noticed girls. Even in the military, I was concentrating on serving my country and staying alive. There’s never been anyone before you, and there won’t be anyone after you. I felt it though. That first day, when I...”

“Accused me of grand larceny,” I fill in, and he winces.

“Yeah, that. I felt it then. You made me smile. You drove me crazy. You’re still driving me crazy. I was attracted to you, and that shouldn’t have been possible since I didn’t know you were my mate yet.”

He’s right. I can’t deny that there’s something between us.

Still...

“What happens if I become your mate?” I ask quietly, and his eyes bore into mine.

“Then I’ll love you until my dying breath. I’ll only ever love you. I’ll only ever want you. You will become the center of my world, and I’ll do anything to make you happy and to keep you safe.”

“And what happens if you treat me bad again? What happens if someone else accuses me of a crime?”

“I’ll rip their fucking throat out,” he growls, and I can see his bear more in that moment.

“You didn’t before,” I point out. “Wait... did you?”

I haven’t seen Jonathon around...

“No, I didn’t. He’s in Arizona now, being booked for his crimes there.”

“Good.”

“I messed up before. Badly. I know that, and I’m really sorry, Willa. I can’t prove it to you unless you give me a chance, but if you do, I swear that nothing like this will ever happen again. I might mess up, but I will always have your back. I promise.”

“It’s hard to trust you,” I admit, and he seems to slump in his chair.

“I know. I’m sorry,” he murmurs.

He looks so broken right now, and it breaks my heart. I hate to see him like this.

You're the only one who ever will. He only lets down his guard with you, my subconscious whispers.

Maybe he does trust me.

“Could I break it?” I ask him. “If I became your mate and you did treat me poorly again, could I walk away?”

He makes a pained sound, looking devastated at just the thought of me leaving him.

“You could. It would kill me, but you could.”

We stare at each other, and I can see the anxiety and stress etched into his features. This guy leads a whole pack. He was in the military and sent to fight in wars, and I know, I just know, that this is the first time he's ever been truly scared.

That hits me hard and I take a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

“Okay,” I say, and he blinks, looking scared to hope at this point.

“Okay?” He asks, and I nod.

“I'll be your mate.”

THIRTEEN



Mack

WILLA SAID she was getting hungry so I'm currently digging through my cupboards, trying to figure out what I can make for us to eat. I'm not much of a cook. Normally, I just throw together a sandwich or make some spaghetti or something.

"I don't have much here. I could make grilled cheese and a... can of tomato soup," I say when I spot the can in the cupboard.

"That sounds good. Need any help?" She offers.

"No, I've got it. You just relax."

I grab a pot and pan and get started on our dinner. We talked for a bit more after she agreed to be mine. I can barely remember what was said. All I could think was, she's mine! She's my mate! It didn't help that my bear was rolling around inside of me in excitement and distracting me too.

I add the first grilled cheese to that pan, and my mouth waters at the scent of butter and melting cheese. My bear snaps at me. He's hungry for something more than food. The mating heat is pressing down on us already.

I wonder if Willa can feel the mating heat too.

I sneak a peek at her and see that her eyes are locked on my ass. I smirk to myself even as my face warms with a blush.

So, she wants me too.

I should probably tell her a bit more about the mating moon tonight and the mating heat that comes along with it.

I check out Willa, wondering how to go about that, but I keep getting distracted. She looks so beautiful. She's wearing a tight pair of yoga pants and a loose-fitting sweater that hangs off one shoulder, exposing the spot where my bite mark will hopefully be later tonight. My bear licks his lips inside of me, and I swallow hard.

I flip the sandwich over and turn the heat up on the soup. I grab some plates and bowls as I practice what I should say.

"Are you okay? You seem a little... tense," Willa says, and I realize it's been dead silent in the kitchen for a few minutes.

"Let's eat. I'll tell you about it over dinner."

"Alright," she says, and I hurry to pull out her chair at the table.

I grab our food and set hers in front of her.

"This looks great. Thanks for cooking."

"Of course. Sorry that I can't offer you something better."

"Are you kidding? I love soup and grilled cheese. It reminds me of my childhood. My mom used to make this at least once a week."

"Then I'm happy to make it for you."

I take a seat next to her and we both dig in.

"Are you sure that you're okay?" She asks, eyeing me carefully.

"I'm sure," I say, clearing my throat.

Tell her! My bear snarls at me, and I clear my throat again.

"Um, it's the full moon tonight," I start. "And that means that every mated shifter is going to feel the mating heat."

"What's that?"

"It's... it's like pure desire hitting you for one night a month."

Her spoon clatters into her bowl, and she sputters on her bite of soup for a moment.

“I’ll always want you, but tonight, it’s going to feel like I’ll die if I don’t have you. I think that it will feel the same for you too.”

She still doesn’t say anything to that, just stares at me with wide eyes, and I rush to clarify.

“I’m not trying to pressure you! We’ll only do what you’re comfortable with. We’ll go at your pace.”

“Right,” she says, and she looks like she’s in a bit of a daze.

We eat in silence for a few minutes, but I notice that Willa is really just pushing her food around her plate.

“I didn’t mean to freak you out,” I apologize, and she shakes her head.

“I think I do feel it,” she whispers, and my heart leaps in my chest. My bear jumps to his feet, too, and I try not to get too excited.

Claim her! My bear screams in my head, and I grit my teeth.

Be good or she’ll run out of here and we’ll never see her again. We’re only doing what she wants to do, I remind him.

“Now what happens?” She asks, and I swallow.

“That’s up to you. I know that shifters and fated mates are all new to you.”

She stares at me, and I take a deep breath, trying to calm my bear down. He’s pacing back and forth inside me. We’re so close to finally fully claiming her that we can taste it and it tastes so sweet.

I take a deep breath and when I can smell her desire, I know I might actually have a chance with her tonight.

“What’s next?” She asks.

“Well, I... I need to bite you and then I would claim you,” I explain.

“Bite me?” She squeaks, and I nod.

“It’s a shifter thing. We mark our mates so that others know that you’re taken.”

“Okay.”

She seems nervous, and I rush to reassure her.

“It won’t hurt! In fact, I hear that it can make you... come,” I finish, and she blinks.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

We’re silent for a beat, and she chews on her bottom lip.

“And then you... claim me? What’s that?”

“Sex,” I blurt out, and her eyes widen.

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” I say hoarsely.

Fuck, I want her so bad.

She nods, her eyes locking with mine. I’m not sure who moves first, but in the blink of an eye, we’re wrapped around each other.

The spoons clatter in the bowls as we bump against the table. Her hands are in my hair and mine are gripping her waist. I can feel the mating heat pulsing like a second heartbeat all around me and I can sense that it’s the same for her too.

“Willa, God,” I groan once she breaks our kiss to gulp down air. “I never want you to think I’m using you. If this is too fast for you, then you need to tell me now.”

“I need you. I want you,” she half moans, and I look down at her, trying to gauge her mood.

She nods, and I can see the desperate edge in her pretty eyes. She’s trying to play it cool, but she wants me just as

much as I want her.

Willa bites her bottom lip, drawing my eyes to that spot. My dick lengthens even more, pressing against my jeans, against her pussy through her yoga pants. I hold my breath, waiting for her response. She grinds against me and my control snaps.

I'm on her in the next breath, lifting her in my arms and practically sprinting with her through the house and upstairs to our room. Her scent is still lingering here and it's been driving me crazy these last few nights.

I rest her down on the bed, coming down over her and pinning her arms above her head. She gasps as I nudge her legs wider.

“Are you aching for me too, mate?” I all but growl.

I need to hear that she wants me as much as I need her.

She nods eagerly, her pupils dilating and cheeks flushing. So damn sexy.

I grunt and slam my mouth down over hers, swallowing her moans of pleasure as I thrust my tongue in and out past her sweet lips. Willa wriggles and whines underneath me, and I release her arms, freeing up both of my hands to roam over her curvy body.

WE BREAK APART, both of us gasping for air as I help her sit up and peel off her loose shirt.

She looks so vulnerable all of a sudden, a nervous glint in her eyes as her hands move to cover the swells and dips of her body.

“You're gorgeous. The prettiest thing I've ever seen,” I tell her reverently.

She smiles at me and my heart threatens to burst out of my chest.

My bear whines. He wants to bite her, to lick all of her, and I push him down and get back to worshipping my mate.

My hands run up and down the smooth skin of her stomach, ribs, and then cup her perfect breasts, still covered in a lace bra. I rub my thumbs over her already hard nipples, making her moan and arch her back. She doesn't even seem to notice as I deftly unhook her bra and slide it down her arms.

"Oh fuck me," she whispers, tipping her head back and tangling her fingers in my hair as I bend down and suck one perky tit into my mouth.

"I aim to, mate," I tell her against her skin.

I smile with a mouthful of her breast and bite down gently on her nipple. Willa's whole body jerks, making me completely ravenous for her. I want to hear her moan and scream my name. I want to watch her break apart underneath me.

Back and forth I suck, lick, nibble, and knead her tender flesh, and she loves every second of my attention. I think I could make her come just like this, but I have other plans for her. Big, big plans.

I pop off her tit, making her whimper and pout. Grinning, I scoot down between her legs and hook my thumbs into her yoga pants and panties.

"Still okay?" I grunt, needing her to check in on her and get her permission, even though I might die if I don't have her taste on my tongue in the next three seconds.

"Yes! God, yes!" She gasps out, and I grin.

It sounds like she might die if I don't make her come in the next three seconds too.

I groan in approval and start tugging her pants and panties down, slowly revealing the curve of her hips and the soft curve of her thighs.

She takes a breath like she's going to say something, but then I pull her pants all the way down, baring her ripe, juicy cunt to me for the first time. I rid her of the last scraps of clothing and then take my time looking her up and down from my position on my knees in front of her.

I need to catch up.

I pull my shirt over my head, wanting to be skin-to-skin with her as I eat her out.

I don't have it in me to draw this out any longer. Scooting down her body, I throw her legs over my shoulders and dive into that pretty pussy. I flatten my tongue and lick from her entrance up to her clit and as soon as I tap her tight bundle of nerves, Willa goes off.

“FUCK!” She screams, her thick thighs clamping down on my head, her back bowed off the mattress, her fingers clawing the sheets as her orgasm rips through her.

I don't stop. Not for a second.

Using my tongue, my lips, and my teeth, I keep rubbing her throbbing clit, pushing her past her orgasm, higher, higher, higher, till she's shaking, gasping for air, pleading for me to give her mercy. Only then do I ease off her over-sensitive bundle of nerves and turn my attention to lapping up her release.

Willa shudders as I gently bring her down with long, steady strokes of my tongue, licking her clean.

“That was so fast. I've never come that fast,” she pants, and I chuckle.

I place her legs back on the bed and stand, stripping out of my jeans and boxers before I crawl on top of her, holding myself up with a forearm on either side of her head. I stare down at my mate as she opens her eyes and looks at me with such awe. I can't explain what that does to me. I've never felt anything like it, having her admiration, seeing her like this, knowing I put that look there.

“Claim me,” she whispers while rocking her hips and gliding her pussy up and down the underside of my aching cock.

My curvy mate is gorgeous. Too damn beautiful and good for me, that's for sure. But she's mine anyway and I'm not letting her go. I can't now that I've finally found her.

Willa chews on her lip nervously, and I realize I've just been drooling over her. I know without her saying that she's a virgin. That thought makes me growl, and my bear goes crazy, needing to be the only one inside of her. We'll only ever belong to each other.

"You're perfect," I whisper, though all I want to do is roar and devour every inch of her. She deserves better, though.

My cock nudges against her snug opening, and I grit my teeth as I move against her. I fist her hair and tug, giving me access to her tempting little mouth. My lips crash down on hers, and we lose ourselves in each other's passion.

"Mack!" she cries, her tone indicating she's been saying my name for a little while now. I can't help it; I'm just so lost in her.

"Hm?"

"I need you," she pleads, and I nod eagerly.

"Willa..."

She cuts me off by leaning up and capturing my lips in a scorching kiss. I growl into her mouth and take over her movements, sliding my dick up and down her wet pussy, but never entering her. She gives in so beautifully to me, trusting me with her body, her pleasure. Back and forth, I rub my swollen fucking cock over her sensitive bundle of nerves until she's panting again.

"Mack, please," she begs, and I can't take it any longer.

I love teasing her, but I'm close to coming all over her, and I need to be inside of her when we come for the first time together. I rub back and forth, my dick pinned between my stomach and her pussy, grinding hard, gritting my teeth against the urge to come.

"I'm going to make this so good for you," I promise her, and she nods.

"I trust you."

My mouth starts to water and my teeth elongate. I bury my face in her neck, breathing in her sweet scent. I start to push

into her, and she tenses slightly as I reach her virginity. My bear is howling in my head, his lust and excitement heightening my own.

“It will only hurt this first time,” I say, kissing her neck and then biting down as I thrust fully into her, making her mine.

My bear growls in my head, and I realize I’m growling out loud too. I lick over my bite mark, sealing it as Willa cries out in pleasure beneath me. I stare down at my mark on her and I swear that I could come from just the sight of it.

My balls are tingling and I feel my cock hardening even more as I start to pound into her. I should go slower, but I can’t seem to make myself slow down. I’ve been on edge for too long, and now that I’m finally with her, I can’t control myself anymore.

“So beautiful. So damn tight. Fucking dream come true,” I grunt out with each thrust, and Willa moans, arching against me and taking me deeper.

Her tits are smashed up against my chest, and I feel the hard little peaks rubbing against me with each movement. I’m close to coming already, and I know I won’t last much longer so I bow my head, running my lips over the bite mark on her shoulder.

“Mack!” She shouts as her pussy contracts around my cock and she starts to come.

Her release triggers my own, and I groan into her neck as I follow her over the edge. I chant her name as my come splashes against her womb, and my bear licks his lips as he thinks about breeding her tonight.

“Mine. My mate,” I breathe out against her lips, and she smiles, still breathing hard as I roll us over so that she’s sprawled on top of me.

I rest my forehead on hers, breathing in her sugary, fruity scent mixed with our lust. It’s intoxicating. It’s all I want to smell for the rest of my life, and as I gather her in my arms, I smile, knowing that I finally have my mate.

And I'm not going to do anything to mess it up.

FOURTEEN



Willa

THE ROOM IS STILL DARK when I slowly open my eyes the next morning. I'm so warm and comfortable that I don't even want to get up. I could stay in this bed forever and be happy. The mattress is so comfy under me, and I burrow further under the blankets and against Mack's side.

My body is sore, and I'm reminded of all of the things he and I did together last night. That feeling, the pulsing connection between us, is still there today, though it's faded a bit. Instead of this wild current like it was yesterday, it's more of a faint throb.

I wonder if the mating heat has finally passed now.

I stretch, trying to ease the tenderness in my muscles as I blink the sleep from my eyes. Something is poking me in the back, and it takes me a second to realize what it is.

"Mate," Mack says, his voice groggy still as he throws a heavy arm around my waist and drags me closer to him.

I grind back against his thick erection, loving the way it makes him tremble with need.

"Do you need me again?" he asks, sounding more awake now.

His hand grips my hip tighter and I love the possessive touch.

“Uh huh,” I moan as I roll over to face him.

His dark eyes seem to glow in the dim light, and my pulse starts to race the longer he stares at me like that.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he murmurs, pushing some hair away from my face.

I tilt my face up towards him more, and he gets the hint, leaning forward and capturing my lips with his. I moan softly as he growls and slides his hands over my naked body.

My skin prickles with awareness everywhere he touches me. The heat I felt last night is back, threatening to burn me alive if I don’t have him inside of me again soon, and I move, throwing my leg over his waist and straddling him so that I can feel him where I need him most.

I can’t help the needy whimper that falls from my lips when my bare pussy rubs up against his cock. I feel him lengthen and harden beneath me, the sensation making me so, *so wet*.

I wrap my arms around his neck and hold him close as I grind down on his lap. Mack groans and breaks our kiss, only for his lips to start to nibble down my neck. I shiver and squeeze my thighs around his hips, needing more, needing all of him.

“Please,” I beg, my voice barely sounding like mine, and he moans.

“I’ll give you anything that you want, mate. You just have to ask, and it’s yours.”

Mack leans back and cups my face, resting his forehead on mine. We’re both breathing heavily, the air thick with what we both crave. He slides his hands down my neck, shoulders, and torso until he cups my ass, squeezing the soft flesh in a possessive hold.

His fingertips trail up my sides in featherlight touches as he looks at me with a mix of awe and reverence. He’s looking at me like I’m the center of his world, and it’s addictive.

Leaning forward, Mack captures one of my nipples in his mouth, gently sucking as his hands slide around to my back, pressing me closer to him. I tip my head back and rock my hips against his, savoring every swipe of his tongue and stroke of his fingers.

Mack hums in approval as I grind against him faster, and he switches breasts, lavishing the other with the same attention. I feel the vibrations deep down in my core, making more of my arousal drip down and coat his hot, throbbing dick. I feel it swell up even more as a soft growl rumbles up from his chest.

I slide my hands down his sculpted chest, pushing him back. He grunts in frustration like I took away his favorite toy, and it makes me giggle knowing he wants me that much.

Mack looks up at me with the softest smile, making me melt for him; even while I'm so turned on, I feel like I might burst into flames at any second.

“Fuck, I love that sound. Love every single time I can get you to laugh or smile at me.”

God, how is this man so freaking perfect? He really is my perfect match.

I don't know how to respond to him with words, so I kiss him once again as my hands trail lower, lower, lower, until my fingers wrap around his cock, stroking him and rubbing his precum up and down his thickness.

“Jesus, Willa,” he grunts, his muscles tensing and flexing as I pick up my pace. Mack grips my hips and lifts me up, positioning me so the head of his cock is right at my entrance. My core clenches up and releases more of my wetness, helping him to slide in easily. “This what you need, mate? Need me to fill you up? You could have just asked.”

“Yes! God, Mack,” I breathe out, moaning as my tight channel stretches to accommodate him.

I feel every vein and ridge of his shaft as he enters me. It feels so damn good to be connected like this, to be filled so completely in a way that only Mack can provide.

Mack groans and sucks on the bite mark on my neck as his hands slide up my back and grip my shoulders. He presses my body down on his as he grinds his thick cock against me, hitting my clit just right with each pass.

I jerk and tremble in his embrace, gasping for air when he pushes me right to the edge. Mack trails his fingers back down my spine, gripping my ass and spreading my cheeks apart as he starts to fuck up into my drenched cunt.

“Love feeling you dripping for me, Willa. Love your sexy fucking body,” he murmurs, nipping at my earlobe and causing me to shudder in his arms.

“Oh God,” is all I can manage to say, too lost in the sensation of his cock scraping along my walls and hitting every pleasure point inside of me.

I feel my orgasm starting to form deep in my core, throbbing outward and seizing up my muscles. My joints lock up, and I suck in a breath, bracing myself for what’s to come. I squeeze my core around him and roll my hips in jerky motions, needing to come so bad it hurts.

Mack senses my urgency, cupping the back of my neck and drawing me down for a passionate kiss. He pulls my bottom lip through his teeth before diving in, tangling his tongue with mine as he bounces me on his length. He tilts his hips and hits that one spot that drives me crazy. Over and over, he hammers into me until the coil snaps, and I cry out my orgasm. Pure pleasure slams into me, overwhelming my senses as I writhe and whimper and get completely swept away by my release.

I’m barely conscious as Mack rolls us over and pulls out of me. He gives me a kiss before he crawls out of bed. I stare at his sexy ass shamelessly.

“Where are you going?” I ask when he tugs on his boxers.

“To get my mate something to eat.”

I grin, and he smiles softly at me, giving me one more kiss before he heads out of the room. I bite my lip and lean back against the pillows.

So much has happened in the last twenty-four hours. It's been a whirlwind, but I strangely only feel good about it. There's no more hesitation or uncertainty and I think that's because of everything that Mack and I shared.

He's so attentive, and it's like I can feel the bond between us now that he's marked and claimed me. I feel more secure in our relationship because of that.

"Breakfast is served," Mack says as he carries two bowls of cereal into the room.

"My hero," I say with a laugh, and he grins.

"I promise that I'll get some more food for here."

"This is perfect," I promise him.

We eat in silence for a moment, and I relax against him.

"What do we do now?" I ask, and he turns to look at me.

"What do you mean? You want to go again?" He asks excitedly, and I laugh.

"Yeah, but that's not what I meant. I mean, what happens between us? What's our future look like?"

"Well, we can do whatever you want. If you want to go back to work, then that's fine. Want to stay home? That's fine too."

"I have college starting soon."

"Okay, I can set up an office in one of the rooms here for you to study and work in," he offers, and I lean over and kiss him.

He seems surprised but pleased by the action, and I swear I fall a little more in love with him at that moment.

"We can figure that out together," I tell him, and he nods.

"Okay," he agrees.

"I love you, Mack," I say softly, and he freezes.

His dark eyes swing to find mine, and I smile. I get the feeling that he hasn't heard those words a lot before, and I intend to fix that.

“You do?” He asks, and the doubt breaks my heart.

“Yeah, I do,” I whisper, and he blinks.

A slow smile stretches across his face, and my heart kicks against my ribs.

“I love you too, Willa. So much.”

He leans forward, resting his forehead against mine, and I smile, letting my eyes fall closed and just breathing him in.

“What did you want to do today?” He asks me a few minutes later.

“Well, later we need to go get some of my things to move in here. Right now, though,” I say as I set our bowls aside and throw my leg over his. “Right now, I wanted to try something.”

He grins up at me, as together, we lower me onto his thick length.

“God, I love you,” he says hoarsely, and I sink all of the way down onto him.

“I love you too.”

He seals his lips over mine, and I get lost in him once again.

FIFTEEN



Mack

FIVE YEARS LATER...

“WHOA! LOOK WHO FINALLY ARRIVED,” Kane calls as I walk into the Alpha meeting.

“I’m right on time,” I growl at him as I take my seat at the table.

“Yeah, but for you, that’s like being half an hour late,” Bishop rumbles.

“Let’s get this over with. I need to get back home to my mate and kids.”

“What’s on the schedule?” Jonas asks, and I try to pay attention as we go around the table discussing problems and giving updates.

It’s hard though. My head is back in bed with my Willa. I wish that I was still curled up around her. I wonder if the kids have climbed into bed with her yet.

We just found out that Willa is pregnant again, and I want to get through this meeting and back to her. We have a doctor’s appointment later today, and I wanted to spend some quality time with my family before we had to go to that.

Willa and I have been mates for five years now and married for just as long. She graduated college just last year, and she's been helping out at the sheriff's department in town. I don't love the thought of my mate being a police officer and being in danger, but Willa loves it and she's damn good at it. I'm not surprised since she's so clever and smart.

We had our first kid, a boy that we named Ashton, three years ago, followed two years ago by our baby girl, Riley. I thought we were done after two, so it was a surprise when we just recently found out that we were expecting again.

These last five years have been incredible. I've kept my promise and treated Willa like a queen, and I could see it after the first month that she trusted that I would never hurt her. When she married me, I knew she would never leave me too.

"Earth to Mack?" Kane says, and I blink.

"What?" I ask them.

"I said, do you have any plans for tonight?" Bishop asks.

"Oh, yeah, Willa's parents are taking the kids so we can have some alone time to celebrate our anniversary."

"Lucky. Have fun," Jonas sighs, and I smile.

"I will."

Willa's parents still live in town, and they've welcomed me into the family with open arms. My parents, not so much. I haven't talked to them in years. They sneered when they found out that I was mated to Willa. They looked down at her because she was a human and therefore looked down on me for being mated to a weak human. They're words, of course.

I cut them off after that. Willa is the best, and I won't let anyone talk badly about her. To be honest, I barely noticed their absence from my life. They haven't really been parents or part of it for a long, long time.

"Get out of here then. Go enjoy time with your mate. Tell her that I said hi," Kane says, and I leap to my feet.

"Okay, thanks. I'll see you guys later," I call as I practically sprint out of the room.

I can hear them laughing as I go, but I ignore them and beeline it back home. We still live in my house tucked away in the woods. I love the privacy, and I know that Willa does too.

My bear rolls around inside of me as I open the front door and take the stairs two at a time up to our room. I smile when I see my family laughing in bed.

“You’re back early,” Willa comments, and I smirk.

“I missed you all too much, so I had to cut the meeting short,” I tell them.

“Daddy!” Ashton cries, throwing himself into my arms, and I grin as I spin him around.

Riley is giggling in Willa’s arms, and I smile as I watch them together. I never thought that I would have this. I definitely don’t deserve it.

I know that I can be a prick sometimes. Willa has definitely mellowed me out. She softens me, and it’s noticeable. People in the pack have treated me differently these last few years with her by my side. I’m more approachable and nicer. I’m more patient, especially since we had the kids.

I’m a better person, and it’s all because of Willa. I owe her everything. I’d be nothing without her.

“Ready to go see our next baby?” She whispers to me as she climbs out of bed, and I grin.

“Let’s go.”

She laughs, leaning up to kiss me as she heads to the closet to get dressed. I watch her go, mesmerized by the gentle sway of her round ass.

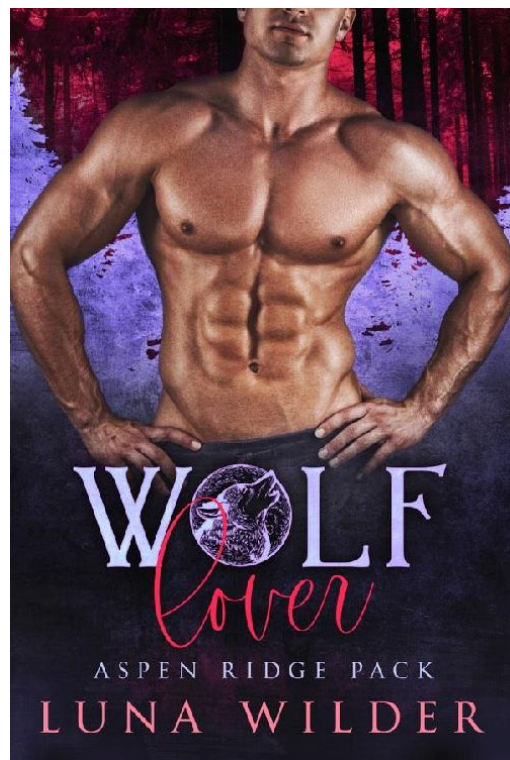
My bear rumbles inside of me, and I grin.

I know, buddy, I know. We’ll be biting that ass soon enough.

He grins, and I grin too as I wrangle the kids and head downstairs to get breakfast started.

Today is going to be a good day.

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