



# Wolf's Fated

BRIDES FOR BEASTS  
KYM DILLON  
CANDACE AYERS

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Any sexual activity portrayed in these pages occurs between consenting adults over the age of 18.

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\*\* This book is a standalone, but many of the characters were introduced in the previous series, *Brides for Beasts: Bears*. \*\*

## CHAPTER I

# APRIL



I sit bolt upright at the distant jingling. It takes me a few seconds to place the sound—keys on a keyring. Which can only mean one thing at this time of night. A mysterious messenger has come to whisk me off to an alternate universe where the hot, hunky king of the realm has been waiting to make me his queen.

Just kidding. It's a room check.

Apparently, the staff needs to make nightly inspections to ensure we haven't garroted ourselves with dental floss or shanked someone with a spork.

It's not a mysterious stranger. And, as a fifty-something mentally unwell woman whose crow's feet are starting to resemble the LA freeway system, I don't think romance is in the cards for me any time soon. Or ever. But hey, life could be worse. At least that's what I tell myself when I peer into the mirror every morning in the bathroom of the mental hospital I currently call home.

Yup, you heard right. I'm an *inmate* at the Silver Lake Residential Facility—a long-term mental healthcare facility. I landed here because a few decades ago I made the appallingly stupid mistake of falling for a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Literally. A wolf. Or at least that's what my annoyingly defective brain insists. My boyfriend was a freaking werewolf—the kind you see in bad Syfy channel movies. Long story short, I spilled the beans about my wolfman ex-lover turning



all furry under the full moon and got slapped with a first-class ticket to institutionalization. Been here ever since.

I crack one eye open and peer at my roommate, Agnes, who's snoring up a storm. She gets the good meds. Lucky wench. Meanwhile, I'm jolted awake every night for bed checks and it takes hours to get back to sleep.

The keys rattle closer, signaling my door is next on the midnight inspection tour. I close my eyes and even out my breathing, going for that whole "sound asleep, don't mind me" vibe. Maybe they'll just peek in and keep going.

A key slides into the lock and—surprise, surprise—the door creaks open slowly. But instead of the usual shuffle of orthopedic shoes, I hear...nothing. Weird. I hold perfectly still, resisting the urge to peek through my lashes at the unexpected silence.

The quiet stretches on until my nerves are pulled as taut as Agnes's support hose. Unable to stand it any longer, I crack one eye.

Then both eyes snap open wide and I audibly gasp.

Standing at the foot of my bed is a hulking figure who sure as shizzle isn't Nurse Caroline. I bolt upright, mouth agape. Sweet lord above, the man's built like a brick wall stuffed into scrubs.

"Shhh," Brick Wall says. Even in a whisper, his voice is deeper than the ocean. My heartbeat kicks into overdrive.

Oh my god, am I being kidnapped?

Strangely, panic doesn't set in. In fact, I'm almost...giddy. Kidnapping is far more exciting than bingo Tuesdays or Friday Uno tournaments.

Don't get me wrong, this place isn't horrible. Yeah, the fashion is drab and the arts and crafts budget is limited, but you'd be amazed at the gossip that gets swapped over stale cookies and powdered juice mix. Who knew Gladys in 3C was once a Vegas showgirl back in the eighties? And Hank in 4B is convinced he's Napoleon reincarnated. Bless his heart.

But after twenty-odd years of heavy antipsychotics and round-the-clock supervision, a gal starts feeling a little stir-crazy, you know?

“W-who are you?” I stammer. “What are you doing in my room?”

“I’m Asa. And I’m getting you out of here. Let’s go.” Asa the Brick Wall holds out his huge hand.

Getting me out of here? I’m not sure what that means exactly. Is this a kidnapping or a rescue? Either way, it sure beats another twenty years of macaroni art therapy and zombifying meds.

I start to reach for his hand, but—wait just a freaking minute. I study Asa warily. “Why should I trust you? How do I know this isn’t some elaborate psychotic break I’m having?”

Asa shrugs. “No idea. But does it matter? Either way, you get out of this joint.”

Huh. He makes a valid point.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I place my hand in Asa’s. His long fingers curl around mine in a tender grip belying his intimidating size.

Asa grins, obviously pleased I’ve decided to roll the dice on possible psychosis. “Atta girl. Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

A bubble of slightly hysterical laughter tries to escape my throat. I can’t remember the last time I felt this giddy rush of adrenaline.

Possibility mixed with adventure—I love it!

Asa guides me into an empty hall. It’s eerily quiet and all the doors stand open, the rooms inside dark and still.

My elation fades. “Wait, where is everyone? The patients and the staff?”

Asa hesitates. “They’re a little tied up at the moment.” At my horrified look, he winces. “Not literally tied up. I just...gave them something to help them sleep. Very deeply.”

“Oh.” I blink. Not sure if I should be alarmed about Asa dosing an entire psych hospital or impressed by his ingenuity.

We creep down the shadowy corridor. I keep glancing over my shoulder certain someone will jump out yelling “Get back to bed!” But the only sound is our muted footfalls.

At a heavy metal door beneath a red Exit sign, Asa pauses. “Stay here a sec. Be right back.”

Before I can panic at being left alone, he jogs off. I wait anxiously, gnawing my lip. As the seconds tick by, I have to talk myself out of sprinting back to my room and diving under the covers.

Just as I’m about to wimp out, Asa reappears wearing street clothes and carrying a duffle bag.

“Here, put these on.” He shoves the bag at me.

I unzip it finding a flowy peasant blouse, a long skirt, and a pair of sneakers—normal people clothes. After changing quickly, I shove my feet into the kicks. They’re a little big, but beggars can’t be choosers. Just having real clothes on makes me stand a little taller.

Asa points to my head. “Almost forgot.” He plops a baseball cap on me, tugging the brim low. “There. Ready for our great escape?”

I square my shoulders. “Yup. Let’s do this.”

Asa pushes open the heavy door and we slip out into the night. My heart pounds with exhilaration. I inhale deeply. The smells of damp pavement and grass tickle my nose. My skin prickles at the light breeze. It’s been ages since I’ve felt this alive. I didn’t realize how much I missed being a part of the real world.

We hug the building’s exterior, dodging security cameras. At a high chainlink fence, Asa gives me a boost, lifting me effortlessly so I can climb over. Show off. But I’ll give him this much, Brick Wall knows how to show a girl a fun time.

Asa climbs the fence after me with ease. We book it across the grounds and don’t stop until we reach a wooded area across

the street from the hospital. Only then do I let out the hysterical laugh I'd been holding.

I made it. I'm actually out. For the first time in two decades, I'm standing under the open sky, breathing sweet, free air.

Asa grins down at me. "We still have a ways to go."

That's when a sliver of fear and panic shoot through me. What the hell am I doing? And with whom am I doing it?

"Hang on just a sec, James Bond. Before this spy mission continues, I need a few more answers." I cross my arms, prepared to go limp noodle if necessary. "I trusted you this far because you seem trustworthy." Lie. The only reason I trusted him was because I thought I was either dreaming or hallucinating. Not so sure anymore. I stand firm, hands on hips. It's tell-me-everything-or-I'm-not-budging time. "Who are you? And why'd you break me out?"

Asa shoves his hands in his pockets. "I'm a..uh...friend of your daughter, Marla."

Ice floods my veins. Asa knows Marla? Oh god, has something happened to my baby girl? Fear grips my heart in a vise.

As if reading my thoughts, Asa hastens to add, "She's fine. Marla just wants you to be with her." He smiles. "I'm... She's... uh, we're... Mates. Fated mates."

My legs go wobbly with relief. Marla is okay. Better than okay from the sound of it.

*Fated mate.* I know that term. I haven't heard it in years, but I recall it from my brief time with Daeton, Marla's father. Fated mate. Those words brought me nothing but grief and misery.

"Wait." I stand up straighter. "You're not a wolf shifter, are you?" My forehead wrinkles and I stare at the ground. "No. Of course, you're not. You can't be because they don't exist." Maybe Nurse Caroline forgot to administer my meds. I think hard. Did I receive my pills this evening?

A brief hint of pity flashes in Asa's eyes. He must sense how much I hate pity because the look is gone in a flash and he

says, “I can assure you we do exist and yes, I am a wolf shifter. I promise no harm will come to you. What do you say, April? We’ve come this far. Will you trust me the rest of the way?”

My eyes narrow, but a blind woman could see the way his face lit up when he mentioned Marla. And he’s right. I’ve come this far. So, I nod. “Lead the way.”

He grins down at me, canines glinting in the moonlight. “Hold on tight.”

“Wha—” is all I manage as, in one quick move, he swings me onto his back and takes off at a dead sprint toward the wooded area at the edge of the property, long powerful legs eating up the distance. I cling on for dear life, the night air whipping my hair.

My feet never once touch the ground. The man moves stealthily through the shadowed grounds before plunging straight into the woods bordering the property. He navigates the terrain with ease, vaulting ravines and ducking low-hanging branches without ever slowing his pace.

The farther we get from Silver Lake, the wider my smile grows. Buh-bye, stupid orderlies! Smell ya later, Gladys and Hank!

As the miles fly by and my initial adrenaline rush fades, I find myself relaxing against my rescuer’s solid back. I can’t explain why, but I like this big, gentle guy. He seems nice. I’m glad he’s with my daughter.

I must doze off at some point, lulled by his rhythmic footfalls. One second we’re surrounded by shadowy forest, the next I’m being gently jostled awake.

“We’re here,” a gravelly voice murmurs near my ear.

I pry my bleary eyes open, and Asa sets me on my feet in front of a log cabin-style building with double wooden doors that say Mess Hall. I rub the sleep from my eyes, suddenly hyper-aware of my frumpy attire. I lost the baseball cap somewhere along the way and my hair is a ratty mess.

I follow Asa, sticking close to his broad back as I look around at the rows of tables.

Then Asa steps aside and I'm face-to-face with a young red-haired woman. A sight for sore eyes.

"Mama?" my daughter gasps, hands flying to her mouth and her big doe eyes brimming with tears.

"My Marla?" I whisper in disbelief.

And then my little girl—all grown up—is flinging her arms around me sobbing, "Mama, you're really here!"

## CHAPTER 2

# DEKE



Councilman Greyson's voice drones like a buzzing gnat in my ear. Blah blah heirs, blah blah bloodline, blah blah responsibility as Alpha. I stifle a yawn and nod along absently. If I have to sit through one more droll meeting listening to the old man pontificate about the dire fate of our village if we don't reproduce, I might just put myself out of my misery.

Don't get me wrong, the issue is serious. No female wolf pups have been born in Timbercrest Village in four decades which means our pack's future is looking grim. The Shifter Council has devised a program called Brides for Beasts with the intent of temporarily bringing human females into our communities to assist with repopulation.

Councilman Greyson, aka my father, clears his throat loudly, letting me know he noticed my glazed-over stare. Whoops. I straighten in my seat and try to appear attentive. "Yes, very concerning issue," I chime in, hoping it's an appropriate response.

The old man's bushy brows lower over his beady eyes and I straighten my spine reflexively. Crap. Wrong answer.

In my defense, we've gone over the details of how the BfB program will work here in Timbercrest a hundred times. The council is hand-selecting human females and screening them for physical and psychological fitness before offering them a new start and financial compensation in exchange for a defined breeding agreement—six months of trying to conceive.



I'm on board with the idea. We all are. Every unmated male in the village is frothing at the mouth for a chance to have a breeder assigned to him.

When the old man looks at me expectantly once more, I choose my words carefully. "I believe the survival of our pack is paramount. I can assure you all will proceed according to plan on our end."

Before the meeting adjourns, my father drops one more tantalizing detail that makes me sit up straighter. The first of the human females will arrive in a couple of days, just in time for the full moon.

My mind is already racing ahead, imagining what it will be like to finally have a soft, warm female in my bed after going without for so damn long. Once the councilman leaves, I find myself whistling cheerfully as I stroll down the hall. I feel lighter than I have in ages. The promise of change is in the air.

When I pass the large mirror near the entrance, my reflection makes me pause. I look...different. The perpetual tension I carry in my shoulders has lessened and there's a spark of something in my eyes that's been absent for too long—hope.

I chuckle wryly at myself, shaking my head. One little ray of hope shines through the clouds and here I am grinning like a fool. Pathetic.

But I can't deny the swell of anticipation I feel or tamp down my eagerness for the coming months. Change is in the air. I feel it. It's barreling toward us like a freight train and once it arrives, nothing in Timbercrest Village will ever be the same.

The moment I step outside, an aroma hits me that nearly knocks me right off my feet. The rich, heady scent makes my heart instantly thunder against my ribs. It wraps around me like the softest silk.

*Mate!*

Mate? Here? Impossible.

I halt, inhaling deeply, straining all my senses toward the smell. It's fainter now on the breeze, but the unmistakable sweetness lingers. A growl rumbles up from deep in my chest.

*Mine*, my wolf snarls possessively.

I pivot sharply. Where is she? I must find her. Frantically, I follow the scent into the village center and toward the mess hall where the alluring fragrance seems concentrated.

My mate? Here in Timbercrest village? My rational mind struggles to make sense of this phenomenon even as my instincts scream at me to run faster.

*Track. Find. Claim.*

The scent grows stronger and my inner wolf is nearly deranged, snarling and snapping urgently beneath my fur. Patience, I urge the beast inside even as excitement makes my pulse hammer erratically.

When we reach the large log structure that serves as our mess hall and central gathering place, my nostrils flare widely. The tantalizing scent of my mate permeates the air.

I follow my hyper-alert senses. After so many years of believing I would never find my fated one, could she truly be here in Timbercrest?

My muscles coil tightly in anticipation laced with disbelief, and I burst through the main doors in a fevered rush of adrenaline-laced lust.

A petite woman with shoulder-length ash-brown hair whirls around. The moment I lay eyes on her, the air leaves my lungs in a whoosh.

It's her. The one whose unique scent is driving me half-crazed with desire.

My wolf lunges inside me, desperate to emerge and claim what is ours. But I force him down. Barely.

The word is out of my mouth before I can stop it. It emerges as more of a growl than actual speech, "Mate."

This woman is already imprinting herself on my very soul.

Marla is saying something. I tune in just in time to catch, "... my mom, April."

April. Her name is April

“Mom, meet my Uncle Deke.”

I’m aghast when, the moment the words are out of Marla’s mouth, my mate recoils.

Why? What’s wrong? Doesn’t she feel the mate bond?

It takes a moment for the situation to register. She’s...she’s Marla’s mother. Which means—oh hell. Marla’s mother who my brother Daeton left pregnant and alone all those years ago. Marla told my dad and me the whole sordid story—as much as she knew anyway.

My head spins trying to make sense of it all. But one truth rings out louder than all the clamoring questions. This woman is my mate. And she’s here, standing before me, looking tiny and fragile and so damn beautiful I can hardly breathe.

Those big doe eyes. That cute button nose covered in freckles. The crinkles at the corners of her eyes. The thick curves I want to explore with my hands and mouth. Every cell in my body screams to take her and mark her and love her.

But then I notice her posture. Her shoulders are stiff, her spine ramrod straight. Her arms are crossed protectively over her stomach. And oh god, the wariness in her eyes. The lingering hint of old wounds cleaves my heart in two. Is this what my brother did to her? She now stands here like a skittish kitten poised to flee.

I loved my brother and don’t want my memory of him tainted, but right now, I’m so angry with him I could strangle him.

Everything in me softens. My inner wolf lets out a mournful whine, desperate to comfort our mate. I can see I’ll have to move slowly. Carefully. Despite our bond, she doesn’t know me. She has invisible wounds, barely concealed scars. I need to fix this mess, but it will take time and patience.

Lucky for April, I happen to have an infinite capacity for both—when it comes to my mate, anyway.

Pasting on what I hope is a friendly but non-threatening smile, I step forward smoothly and take April’s hand in mine. Her skin is like silk, her touch electric. Our bond thrums between us in crackles and sparks. Surely she must feel that, no?

I brush a feather-light caress across her knuckles with my thumb.

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited for you, April.” I let her see the sincerity in my eyes because it’s the absolute truth. Meeting my mate under any circumstances is a gift straight from the moon goddess. But with April also being Marla’s mother—the link makes my heart soar. Our lives are woven together by fate.

April just blinks at me. Her cheeks are pink and she’s clearly flustered.

I chastise myself. *Dial it back, asshole. Patience.*

It’s fine. I’ll do what I have to do. I have no intention of letting my mate slip through my fingers.

## CHAPTER 3

# APRIL



I stand frozen, mouth agape, as he strides across the room and gives me a look that screams “big bad wolf is on the prowl.”

Guess that makes me a juicy lamb.

Okay, maybe I’m more like mutton, but this middle-life mutton chop hasn’t been on the receiving end of a sizzling once-over in quite some time and the man’s heated gaze sends shivers down my spine.

I glance behind me to make sure I’m the one he’s devouring with his eyes and not some hot young tight-bodied cutie. Yep, it’s just me in my frumpy secondhand peasant dress standing here looking bewildered.

The man’s nostrils flare and I swear I see his pupils dilate until his eyes are nearly black. He rumbles one word— “Mate.”

Come again?

I blink stupidly as my brain short circuits trying to process. Sluggishly, the gears start turning.

Mate.

Does he mean me? Is he trying to say I’m his...mate—as in fated mate? I look to Marla for clarification, but she’s beaming proudly between us as if the man just announced he cured world hunger. Clearly, I’m missing something.

Before I can make heads or tails of it all, Marla is introducing us and he is gripping my hands in his much larger ones and peering deep into my eyes.

His name is Deke. Unce Deke.

*Uncle Deke? What?!*

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited for you, April.” His voice is a velvety caress that makes my knees tremble. Those mesmerizing nearly-black eyes seem to bore into my soul.

Cripes, I feel lightheaded. Someone please explain what the Sam Hill is happening here. Like now.

“I’m sorry, but I’m confused,” I say, gently extricating my fingers from Deke’s grip. I hate that I immediately miss the warmth of his hands enveloping mine.

“Mate? Are you saying we’re...”

“Fated mates.” Deke’s eyes burn with sincerity. “I knew the moment I scented you.”

Fated mates? Scented me? This is giving me flashbacks of the whirlwind fling I had with Marla’s father all those years ago. The one that destroyed my life and nearly destroyed my daughter’s life too. I remember Daeton schmoozing me into bed one minute and then spouting off how somewhere in the universe existed his one and only, his fated mate—and she wasn’t me. An hour later he took off and I never saw him again.

Yeah, I sat there in complete shock and devastation while Daeton blew my naïve little twenty-something life up like a nuclear bomb and dumped me flat on my knocked-up ass.

So, yeah, I’m skeptical of heavy come-ons. Been there; done that. Got the T-shirt and the stretch marks.

I take a wary step back, eyeing Marla who appears oblivious to my distress. Meanwhile, the big bad wolf edges closer until his huge frame towers over me. Suddenly I’m acutely aware of our size difference. The top of my head barely comes to his chest.

When he reaches to tuck a stray lock of hair behind my ear, I shy away. Deke’s hand freezes, hurt flashing in his eyes.

Real nice, April. Way to bruise the guy’s ego when he’s just trying to be sweet. But I can’t help it. My first instinct around

a man is to pull away. Twenty-odd years locked away from male attention will do that to a gal.

I offer him an apologetic half-smile. “Maybe we could slow things down a bit?” I suggest gently. “I’ve been out of circulation for a while, if you know what I mean.”

Deke nods, looking chagrined. “Of course. You’re right. I’m moving too fast.” He rakes a hand through his dark hair and laughs somewhat abashedly. “Please forgive my forwardness.”

Wow, manners. Now I feel guilty. The poor guy looks like a kicked puppy. But I’m just not ready to dive into things with both feet. Even if some other body parts are all systems go.

Deke clears his throat, adopting a friendly yet platonic stance. “How about I give you a tour of the village?”

I’m not sure.

Without thinking, I look to my daughter questioningly. Should I accept?

Wait. Why am I asking my daughter? I’m the parent. I should make my own decisions.

Unfortunately, I think this is a side effect of institutionalization. I seem to be unable to make decisions for myself. I’ll have to work on that.

Marla nods encouragingly.

“A tour sounds like a lovely olive branch.” I smile up at him, hoping to convey that I’m not flat-out rejecting his overzealous advances. Just rusty. Slowing this budding... whatever it is...until I get my bearings.

Okay, I’ll just come right out and say it—Deke is hot. And I don’t mean “stand outside on a summer day” hot. I’m talking “my ovaries are doing the macarena” hot.

As we exit the mess hall into the afternoon sunshine, I try and fail to keep my eyes from straying to his chiseled features and salt-and-pepper beard.

Is it weird that the last man I was with was his brother? Probably to some people. Not to me, though.



I thought I was in love with Daeton. I thought so for nearly twenty-five years. I wasn't. I know that now. I never felt like this with Daeton. Never.

As Deke points out places in the village, I'm trying not to drool over him. Hard to do when his muscular arm keeps brushing mine as we walk.

Mmm...muscles on muscles. He's like a real-life bodybuilding lumberjack fantasy. I half expect him to pull out an ax and start chopping trees like Paul Bunyon, and I'd be down with that. I'd just sit and watch his sweat-slicked muscles flex for hours.

"Over here is the schoolhouse for the pups," Deke says, pointing to a quaint log cabin.

Pups. Of course, wolf kids would be called pups. Makes sense.

"So, do you have any children?" I ask in the interest of making conversation, but I am genuinely curious.

He hesitates for a long moment, as though there's a story there. I prepare myself to listen to it when he simply responds, "No."

Huh. I wonder why he hesitated like that.

"And this is where Constance, our midwife, lives," Deke continues as we amble down the row of log structures.

Timbercrest Village is charmingly rustic, like a quaint mountain village lost in time. I half expect little Heidi to come frolicking out in her dirndl playing an accordion and yodeling.

"It's lovely here," I comment, which makes Deke stand a little taller.

"I'm pleased you like it." He smiles, and damn if that smile doesn't do naughty things to my insides. "I want you to feel at home."

At home. What a foreign concept. The last time I had a real home was back when leg warmers were in style—the first time around.

We continue chatting amicably until an older woman rushes over to us near the edge of the woods.

“Oh, you must be Marla’s mother!” She clasps my hands excitedly. “I’m Ida. Marla is such a treasure.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say to Ida. “I’m April.”

“What a lovely name. Reminiscent of springtime and new beginnings.” Ida smiles brightly and I can’t help but like her instantly. She reminds me of someone’s sweet grandma.

Ida welcomes me to the pack and extends an invitation for Marla and me to come to tea next week.

After Deke and I complete the loop back to where we started, Deke points out his cabin and invites me inside, which I have to say is tempting, but I think I need to digest all this a bit. I mean, I kind of feel as though I’ve stepped into the twilight zone.

“Thank you for the lovely tour. But I’d really like to spend some time catching up with Marla if you don’t mind.”

“Of course.” Deke’s shoulders slump marginally and I almost feel bad. Then he tries again. “How about a picnic under the moonlight tonight? Would you be up for that?”

A moonlit picnic? That sounds romantic. And with Hottie McWolferson? Hell yeah!

I don’t say all that aloud, of course. Nope. I say, “That sounds nice.”

Deke walks me to Marla and Asa’s front porch. Their home is a cozy-looking cabin and that makes me smile. My daughter seems happy and that’s everything a mother could want for her child—happiness.

I turn to Deke to thank him again but before I open my mouth, Deke swoops down and presses his lips to my cheek. It’s just a peck, and not even on the lips, but it turns my knees to jelly. When he pulls back I clutch the porch railing for support.

His eyes glow with a luminous light. “I know you need time, and I’m willing to be patient.” His voice drops an octave. “But

once you're ready, I intend to show you how a true mate should be loved and pleased."

Holy haywire hormones!

And there's that word again—mate.

My cheeks flame hotter than the surface of the sun. That gruff, husky promise sends an illicit little thrill straight to my core despite my efforts to remain aloof.

As I combust on the spot, he gives a roguish wink. "Until tonight," he says as he saunters away leaving me staring after him slack-jawed.

Once he disappears from view, I press trembling fingers to my still-tingling cheek. What was that? It felt like being hit with a lightning bolt of pure animal magnetism.

## CHAPTER 4

# DEKE



The afternoon drags on at a glacial pace as I wait for the moon to show. I keep glancing at the clock, willing time to speed up, but the damn thing seems stuck.

My wolf is pacing anxiously, ready to bound out of my skin. I feel like a teen pup going on his first run. All jittery excitement and raging hormones. Pathetic, honestly. I'm a grown-ass Alpha acting like a lovesick pup.

*Get a grip, I tell myself. It's just a simple picnic.*

Yeah right. And I'm the tooth fairy.

There's nothing simple about spending time with my mate. My restraint is hanging on by a thread thinner than a spider web.

I've never wanted a female more. My attraction goes beyond the physical, though there's definitely no shortage of carnal cravings there. But it's more than that with April. She touches something deep in my soul. When I'm near her, my spirit feels connected to hers.

The mate bond is truly amazing. I had no idea it could feel this good.

I think she feels it too, beneath her lingering wariness. I cling to that fragile shred of hope. If she'll only lower those defenses, she'll discover what I already know—we belong together.

I won't push though. She's been through too much.

I'll be patient. I'll gently chip away at that protective shell until it disintegrates. And once she lets me, I'll shower her

with more love and devotion than she can fathom.

The thought makes me smile like a fool. Yep, I've got it bad. Even I have to shake my head at how deep under the woman's spell I've fallen—especially since I only just met her a few hours ago. That doesn't matter though. Not when I've waited over fifty years for her.

When I can't stand pacing a minute longer, I grab the picnic basket and double-check the supplies. A quilt to spread on the mossy ground? Check. A bouquet of wildflowers? Check. Battery-operated lanterns for mood lighting? Check. Breath mints? Double check.

Two minutes later, I knock on Asa's front door.

I raised Asa from a pup after his parents were killed in the same landslide that took my brother Daeton's life. Daeton. I'm not going to think of him right now.

Asa answers, a cheesy grin spreading across his face.

"Where is she?" I blurt. One more minute of waiting and I may erupt.

He throws his head back and laughs. "She'll be ready in a second. Come on in."

Asa steps back so I can enter. A knowing smirk plays on his lips. "Never thought I'd see the day." He looks me over and says teasingly, "You're primped and polished to within an inch of your life there, Romeo."

I scowl. A biting retort is on the tip of my tongue but before I let loose, I second-guess myself and smooth my shirt self-consciously. "Do I look overeager?"

"Nah, you look..." Asa pretends to search for the right word. "Smitten."

"Great. That's exactly the vibe I'm going for," I deadpan.

Asa just grins and claps me on the back. "Relax, Alpha. She's gonna love—"

His words cut off abruptly when April steps into the room. Asa fades into the background as my entire focus zeroes in on

her. Damn, she's a vision. The calf-length floral dress with a cardigan makes her look soft, feminine, and sexy as all get out.

"Hi," April says a little breathlessly. Like she's as nervous-excited about this date as I am. The realization sends hope barreling through me.

"Hello." I'm proud my voice comes out steady despite my mouth going dry and my pulse galloping like a racehorse. "You look beautiful."

A pretty blush stains April's cheeks. "Oh, uh, thanks."

An awkward beat passes where we both just stand there grinning at each other dopily. Asa pointedly clears his throat, snapping us both back to reality.

I hold out my arm like a gentleman. "Shall we?"

Giggling at my attempt at gallantry, April loops her arm through mine. "We shall."

As I lead her outside, I bend my free arm behind my back and flip Asa and his shit-eating grin a good night with my middle finger.

By the time we reach the secluded willow grove near the stream, the first stars are emerging overhead. I spread out the quilt and turn on the lanterns while April explores our surroundings. Her delighted smile when she turns back makes my chest swell to bursting.

I'll do anything to keep that enthralled look of wonder on April's face.

We settle onto the blanket and dig into the feast I packed. Between bites, conversation flows easily. I tell April more about my role as Alpha and life in our shifter community. In turn, she shares stories about residents in the mental health facilities she's lived in that have me chuckling.

She's not only brave, she's open and honest and gorgeous.

I can't remember the last time I felt so content just enjoying someone's company. No pretense or hiding behind my public Alpha facade—just laughing together over a picnic beneath the stars feels as natural as breathing with April.

April scoots closer on the blanket, tentative yet determined. My pulse kicks into overdrive.

“This is nice.” April’s lips quirk up at the corners as she studies me. “You really went all out tonight.” Her gaze travels over the twinkling lights and wildflower arrangement.

I shrug, aiming for nonchalance even as my pulse hammers eagerly. Does she like it? Does it make her feel special? Wanted?

“What can I say?” I give her my most roguish grin. “I’m a romantic at heart.”

April snorts delicately. “Is that what you are?”

“Oh yes. Any of the guys in the pack will tell you I’m a sensitive guy. In touch with my feelings and in tune with my feminine side.”

Now April laughs outright, the sound warming me like a ray of sunshine. “Somehow I have a hard time picturing that.”

“Because I ooze such rugged alpha manliness?” I wiggle my eyebrows.

“Obviously.” Her eyes sparkle with mirth and I decide in that instant I’ll do whatever it takes to keep amusement lighting up her pretty features.

“Well, it’s all an act.” I lean closer conspiratorially. “Truth is, I enjoy snuggling by the fire, moonlit walks on the beach, reading poetry...”

“Uh-huh.” April arches a skeptical brow, but her lips quirk.

“Do you also enjoy chick flicks and pedicures?”

“Busted. But don’t tell anyone. I have a reputation to maintain.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

Our faces are only inches apart now. The lingering smile fades from April’s lips, her eyes turning serious. I hold perfectly still, senses hyper-focused on her every minuscule reaction. My thumb strokes the inside of her delicate wrist. I can feel



her pulse jump, betraying her nerves. But she doesn't pull away.

It would be so easy to close the small distance between us. To slant my mouth over hers and kiss April the way I've been aching to from the moment I laid eyes on her in the mess hall.

But I resist. Barely. This moment feels fragile. One wrong move could shatter everything. The last damned thing I want is to make her uncomfortable or push her faster than she's ready to go. So I let April set the pace, my heart thundering as I await her next cue.

After an endless moment, she leans incrementally closer. I stop breathing altogether when her fingertips skim up my arm to my shoulder. April watches her own progress, looking dazed.

"Deke, I..." Her voice falters and fades, eyes darting to meet mine uncertainly.

"You're calling the shots here. We're on your timetable," I tell her. April chews her lip. My hungry gaze tracks the motion and my dick leaps painfully beneath my zipper. Down boy.

Finally, she seems to make a decision. Spine straightening, April gives a resolute little nod. Before I realize her intent, she fists my shirt and yanks me those last few inches toward her until our mouths meet.

For a stunned second, my brain short circuits. April is kissing me. My mate wants me. Every coherent thought flees my head. I'm operating on pure instinct when I haul her against my chest and kiss her back fervently.

She tastes like sweet nectar and I can't get enough, gentling the kiss from urgent and heated to slow and sensual, learning the shape of her lips. The velvety slide of her tongue tangling with mine makes my blood roar in my ears.

I pour everything I'm feeling into that kiss, all the bottled-up longing and restrained desire. April grips my shoulders, kissing me back just as eagerly. Like she's been waiting for this moment as desperately as I have. The realization sends triumph blazing through me.

We come up gasping for air. Before she can overthink, I duck my head to trail kisses along her delicate jawline to that sensitive spot below her ear. April tips her head back with a breathy sigh that goes straight to my cock. Unable to resist, I close my lips over the tender skin and suck lightly. The spot where my claiming bite will someday go. Someday—when she's ready.

The primal promise sends a shudder wracking through me.

April's hands dive into my hair, scratching my scalp in a way that has me seeing stars.

“Deke.”

My wolf holds his head high at hearing my name on her lips like that. Soon I'll have her moaning it along with declarations of love and commitment. But for now, I'll savor each new step that brings us closer.

When she draws away, I reluctantly back off.

April gazes up at me, the moon reflected in her dazed, passion-glazed eyes. She's never looked more beautiful.

Chuckling, I brush our noses together. “Been wanting to do that since the moment I saw you.” Before, if I'm honest. From the moment I caught a hint of her sweet fragrance in the air.

“Yeah?” April bites her lip, cheeks pinking charmingly.

“Absolutely.”

I tip her chin up. Our chemistry is explosive enough to power the entire village. Yet at the same time, kissing April feels as natural as breathing.

I lace our fingers together as the peaceful quiet settles around us once more.

“I meant what I said, April. We can move at your pace. Whatever you're comfortable with.”

I kiss our joined hands, hoping she reads the promise in my eyes. I'll wait as long as she needs if it means earning her trust and love. She's worth any sacrifice.

April draws in a shaky breath, emotion shining in her gaze.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “For understanding and being so patient with me.”

The throaty gratitude in her voice makes me want to take her in my arms, hug her close, and shelter her from all harm. She’s suffered enough heartache for several lifetimes.

April still has doubts and reservations. Her trust won’t be won overnight. But damn, we just took a major step forward.

## CHAPTER 5

# APRIL



Marla and Asa are curled up together by the fireplace. They both give me knowing looks when I enter floating on a cloud.

“Soooo...how was the date?” Marla asks, unable to hide her sly grin.

“It wasn’t a date,” I insist, I don’t know why I feel myself blushing. “Just a friendly picnic.”

“Uh-huh. Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” Marla waggles her brows.

I roll my eyes, kicking off my shoes. But I can’t keep a ridiculous smile from stretching across my face. It was...well, there are no words.

Okay, fine, it was a date. And it was perfect. Sue me for being old-fashioned, but Deke is an absolute gentleman. A kind, strong, patient alpha male. I didn’t know men like him existed.

Marla flashes me a classic “I told you so” smirk as, with a happy sigh, I head to bed to give my daughter and her mate some privacy.

I flop down on the bed, limbs sprawled out like a starfish. I break into a loopy grin just remembering Deke’s kisses. Wow, can he kiss. I was seeing actual fireworks. It was like the Fourth of July behind my eyelids.

But it’s more than just the off-the-charts chemistry between us that has my insides humming happily. Deke is so understanding and considerate, letting me set the pace even though I know his inner alpha caveman is probably ready to go

full throttle. He even said we can move at my comfort level. As slow as I need. Ugh, he's heaven!

I roll over and mash my face into the pillow, feet kicking giddily like a teenager. I haven't felt this intoxicated off of a mere kiss since playing spin-the-bottle at Julie Hendrick's birthday party in eighth grade. And I'm pretty sure my lips didn't tingle for hours afterward from kissing greasy-haired pubescent Mickey Douglas.

Maybe I should schedule a bikini wax. Isn't that the trend nowadays—bare down there? It's been a hot minute since the landscaping down south saw any action, and from the size of the bulge in Deke's jeans, I'm guessing the man is packing heat like a forest fire. Guess I should tidy up the underbrush.

Or maybe I'm getting ahead of myself.

Deke said he's willing to take things slow, not put any pressure on me before I'm ready. And I appreciate that, I really do. His sensitivity is refreshing after the callous disregard his brother showed when he knocked me up and abandoned me to raise Marla alone.

Still...I can't deny the urges Deke sparks in me. My southern regions might be dustier than a forgotten book on a shelf, but I'm far from dead below the belt. And being around Deke's rugged sexiness makes my libido want to rise up and tango. Or do a horizontal mambo.

I'm just scared. Terrified, if I'm being totally honest. It's been over two decades since I was intimate with a man. And I don't exactly have a wide sample size to compare. What if I'm terrible in the sack? Rusty as an old gate hinge?

What if Deke expects a woman with experience, someone worldly who can show him a good time between the sheets? Not some middle-aged mom who needs training wheels just to get back on the bike so to speak.

And there's always the chance he'll be disappointed in...other ways. I'm far from my perky twenty-something physique these days. Things have shifted a bit due to gravity. My ass in

particular is not what it used to be. It's basically a pancake at this point. A saggy flapjack.

What if he sees all my sags and wrinkles and decides I'm not the sexy siren he thought? I don't know if my ego can take that kind of rejection. Maybe it's better to live in fantasy land, keep up a flirty façade, but avoid actually getting naked where he'll see the reality.

Earlier today, when we first met, he said I was...we were... mates. Does he still think that, or did he change his mind? I don't know how that works.

Sparks were flying tonight—that I do know.

I snuggle under the covers, eager to relive every swoon-worthy moment in my head. The man's lips deserve their own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

But it was more than just physical magnetism with Deke. Corny as it sounds, I felt a real connection between us tonight.

Maybe this fated mate thing is legit after all.

I appreciate him giving me the reins. But if I'm being real with myself, is there any reason for me to hold back? Why shouldn't I jump on him and screw his brains out?

I mean I'm not some blushing virgin who needs to guard her virtue. I'm a grown-ass, menopausal woman who can get down and dirty with whomever she wants. Maybe it's time to get back in the saddle, so to speak.

Lord knows I won't be getting any younger, firmer, or perkier. My sell-by date is rapidly approaching.

*Okay, stop with the self-deprecating schtick, April. Just stop. You deserve a little fun after being celibate for half your life.*

It doesn't mean we have to start monogramming the bath towels just yet. Sometimes you just have to say "what the hell" and take a leap. Fortune favors the bold, and all that. I'll never get anywhere standing on the sidelines agonizing over potential pitfalls.

It's time I throw caution to the wind and finally claim a little joy for myself. And if hot-as-hellfire Deke happens to be an

active participant in that joy, so be it.

I spent twenty-odd years miserable—locked away, drugged up,  
and written off as psychotic for telling the truth.

A truth I now know isn't psychotic at all!

No more. Starting now, I choose to live life to the fullest.

And that starts with Deke.

Newly emboldened, I make a spur-of-the-moment decision.  
I'm going to rock Deke's world right now—tonight. No more  
tentative tiptoeing around the issue. It's time to grab the bull  
by the horns. Or should I say the wolf by the balls.



## CHAPTER 6

# APRIL



Hopping out of bed, I rummage through the clothes Marla loaned me looking for something alluring yet tasteful to wear. There are no skimpy negligees so I settle on a slinky little minidress that's a bit snug. Still, it's the sexiest thing here.

I glance in the mirror and finger-comb my hair into artful tousled waves. I touch up my lipstick and mascara and that completes the "come hither" look. It's the best I can do at the moment.

Trying not to lose my nerve, I tiptoe past Asa and Marla's bedroom, since they're no longer beside the fireplace, and slip outside into the night.

My heels click on the pathway and my minidress offers little protection against the chilled air. Wrapping my arms around myself, I hurry toward Deke's cabin, my breaths coming faster—whether from cold or nerves, I can't say for sure.

Okay, April, this is it. Time to be bold.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I knock on the front door of the cabin that Deke pointed out as his earlier. Then I step back, straightening my spine and summoning my inner vixen from her loong slumber.

A second later, the door swings open. Deke's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline and his jaw goes slack when he sees me on his doorstep dressed for seduction. He makes a small, strangled sound low in his throat as his heated gaze rakes over my body hungrily.

“April? What are you—I mean, is everything okay?” Deke rakes a hand through his hair, looking utterly at a loss.

“Everything’s perfect.” I brush past him, adding an extra sway to my hips as I sashay inside. When I glance over my shoulder, his eyes are glued hungrily to my barely covered ass. The look in his eyes tells me it’s not too flat or too saggy—not for his tastes.

I turn and lean back against his kitchen counter, angling my body invitingly. “I was just thinking about that kiss from earlier. And I decided I’d like to continue where we left off.” I bite my lip and peer up at him coyly through my lashes. “If you’re not too tired, that is.”

Deke still seems stunned, like maybe he thinks he’s dreaming. He opens and closes his mouth a few times without speaking.

Finally, he seems to find his voice again. “April, are—are you sure about this?” Despite the hesitation in his words, Deke is already crossing the room toward me, broad shoulders squared and eyes simmering with desire. “We can still go slow if that’s what you need.”

I appreciate him giving me an out, but tonight I’m bold. And I’m sure about this. About him. Gripping Deke’s shirt, I pull, summoning him to me.

“Less talking, more kissing,” I order before rising on my toes and turning my face upward.

Deke doesn’t need to be told twice. With a muffled groan, he hauls me against him and seals his mouth over mine. All restraint vanishes. We kiss with wild abandon, all teeth and twining tongues.

When we break apart, both gasping for oxygen, Deke traces his fingertips down my face reverently. “You have no idea how much I want you, April. How long I’ve waited for you.”

“Yeah, about that. Did you mean what you said about us being...um...mates?” I whisper, my heart thundering.

“Yes. You and I are fated mates. Now and forever.”

“Then how ‘bout you show me what you’re packing, big boy.”

Deke scoops me into his arms. I let out a delighted squeal then giggle hysterically when he tosses me onto the massive bed and covers my body with his. We share heated kisses as his hands roam and caress through the thin barrier of my minidress.

Every brush of his fingers over my sensitized skin leaves sparks in their wake. I haven't felt this deliriously aroused since...well, ever.

When Deke's big palm finally closes over my breast, I gasp, arching into his touch shamelessly. He lavishes attention on my aching nipples until I'm mindless, writhing beneath him and whispering pleas for more.

At last, Deke sits back and grips the hem of my minidress. Keeping his blazing eyes locked with mine, he eases the material up. I help him draw it over my head then toss it aside, leaving me bare before him.

For a moment, Deke just stares down at me sprawled naked on the bed, something like awe slackening his rugged features. Under his worshipful gaze, I lose all the insecurities of a short time ago. I feel beautiful, desirable—cherished.

"You're exquisite," he rasps, brushing featherlight kisses across my collarbone that make me shiver.

When I reach for the button of his jeans, Deke captures my wrist gently. Confused, I meet his intense stare.

"Tonight is for you," he says gruffly. "Just lie back and let me make you feel good."

A breathless whimper escapes me as Deke trails open-mouthed kisses lower. Down between my breasts and over my squishy tummy. His big hands guide my thighs wider and heat floods my core when his head dips between my legs.

At the first velvet swipe of his tongue through my slick folds, coherent thought flees my brain. I fist my hands in Deke's hair, urging him on as he works me into a writhing, panting mess with his skillful mouth and fingers.

My back bows sharply off the bed when he sucks my swollen clit between his lips, the pleasure so intense it borders pain.

“Deke!” I cry out as ecstasy crests and breaks over me.

As the last tremors fade, Deke kisses his way back up my boneless body. I cling to him, still seeing stars behind my eyelids. That was... I don't even have words. Mind-blowing doesn't begin to cover it.

When I can form a rational thought again, I realize Deke is still wearing his jeans. Gripping his shoulders, I guide him onto his back and then straddle his hips purposefully.

I peer down at him, heart overflowing. “I believe it's my turn to rock your world now.”

Deke's eyes gleam predatorily, but his touch is achingly gentle as he tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. “Not tonight, April. There's no rush here. We have all the time in the world. Besides, I'm not done with you. Not by a longshot.”

My answering smile wobbles as emotion clogs my throat. I don't know what I did to deserve this wonderful man. But I hope he knows meeting him was worth the long wait.

## CHAPTER 7

# DEKE



I can't wipe the stupid grin off my face as I scribble a quick note for April and leave it on the pillow next to her sleeping form. Last night was incredible. Beyond anything I imagined. And this morning, waking up beside my gorgeous mate—her hair fanned out across the pillow, lips slightly parted as she snores ever so softly—is utter perfection.

I want this every morning for the rest of my days. Maybe it's too soon to ask April to move in with me officially? I'll casually toss the idea out when we have dinner tonight and see how she responds. No pressure. I meant what I said about giving her space and letting her set the pace. I'm just so eager to have her with me every night and day.

But I get it—baby steps. And I'm good with that. I'd sell my soul for this woman.

I tiptoe out the front door, still grinning like a fool.

As I make my way to my office, I nod and wave at the handful of early risers I pass along the way. Most of them either give me strange looks or chuckle knowingly.

Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. I'm walking on sunshine over here. Sue me for being head-over-heels for the sexiest, funniest, most incredible woman on earth.

Once in my office, I try my best to focus on pack business for the day ahead and not daydream about April's cute little snores.

There are disputes to settle, budgets to review, and supplies to requisition. All extremely boring compared to thoughts of

kissing every one of those adorable freckles dotting April's nose.

After signing off on the latest monthly food budget proposal, I find myself grinning goofily yet again. Is it too early to call April? I don't want to wake her if she's still sleeping, but I really want to tell her how amazing last night was and how I already miss her smile and the sound of her laughter. Yeah, I think I'll call.

A brisk knock at my office door jolts me from my contemplation. Before I can respond, the door swings open and my father strolls in looking as stern and as stuffy as ever. So much for my mood.

"Good morning, Alpha." He helps himself to one of the chairs opposite my desk, regarding me through narrowed eyes.

"Councilman. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

It takes me a second to switch gears from romantic musings back to pack business.

"During our previous discussion on BfB, I neglected to mention the most exciting fact."

I suppress an eye roll and lace my fingers atop my desk, aiming for polite professionalism. "I'm listening."

"As you're no doubt aware, the first candidate arrives tomorrow." He smacks his palms on his knees decisively.

"Which brings me to why I'm here. I wanted to be the first to inform you that, as Alpha, you've been selected to receive the initial BfB breeder." A huge grin spreads over his craggy face as though he's pleased with himself.

I blink stupidly. I open my mouth but no words come out. Inside, I'm chuckling. Yesterday I would have been right on board with this. Today, there's nothing that can make me agree to it.

My father barrels on, oblivious to my amused stare.

"Naturally, as the pack's leader, it's imperative you sire the next generation of potential Alphas. We'll have a fertility ceremony and you and the BfB breeder we bring in can begin copulating right away."



“Not gonna happen,” I blurt when I find my voice again, shaking my head.

“It most certainly will happen. As Alpha, it’s your sworn duty to propagate the pack’s lineage.” Greyson’s bushy brows snap together sternly.

I scoff. “Yeah, well, consider this my official notice that I won’t be copulating or propagating or anything else with any BfB breeder. And you can take that to the Shifter Council.”



### APRIL

The first thing I see when I open my eyes is a wood-paneled wall.

Where am I?

And then it all comes rushing back. I’m no longer at Silver Lake Residential Facility. I now live with my daughter and her mate and I spent the night with a smoking hot werewolf man who gave me so many orgasms I thought I’d melt into the sheets like a puddle of goo.

I sit up and look around. I’m alone in the room, but there’s a note on the pillow next to me.

*Good morning, beautiful. I didn't want to wake you, but I needed to get to the office this morning. I hope you'll have dinner with me tonight. I can't wait to see your smiling face. Last night was incredible. You're incredible. I'm the luckiest man in the world. ~Deke*

I'm grinning so hard my cheeks hurt when I saunter to the kitchen, my empty belly leading the way. Let's see what Mr. Magic Tongue has for breakfast.

Hmm, the fridge and pantry are seriously lacking. The cupboards aren't much better unless I want to eat dry cereal, saltines, or a popup toaster pastry. I don't know how the man keeps his buff physique eating this kind of junk food.

Maybe I can bake him something tasty and homemade. I loved baking when I was younger. Haven't done it in ages, but how hard can it be?

Let's see, for muffin ingredients, I'll need some flour, baking powder, milk, butter... Ooh, he has mini chocolate chips! Jackpot. Now we're in business.

It's been decades, but it turns out baking is like riding a bike and I remember more than I thought. I fall into a nice rhythm of mixing, measuring, and then spooning the batter into tins. The rich, chocolatey aroma fills the cozy kitchen. Before I know it, I've got a batch of piping hot, perfectly domed chocolate chip muffins cooling on the counter. Not too shabby.

Maybe it's silly, but I'm excited to bring these to Deke. I hope it makes him smile. Knowing I put that sexy grin on his handsome face will totally make my day.

I plate up the muffins all pretty-like and head out the door before I can overthink this whole muffin mission. The last thing I want is to come across as desperate or pushy, but Deke and I share a connection. He said we're fated mates. I have to remember to ask him about that. What all does being fated mates entail?

As I near the Alpha's office, I'm struck by a pang of nerves. What if Deke thinks this gesture is too much? Too bunny-boiler-like? Crap, maybe this wasn't such a stellar plan. Oh god, I'm going to look like a total smothering clinger, aren't I? Abort mission! Abort!

Just as I'm about to turn tail and run, I hear voices coming from inside the office. I'm not eavesdropping, I swear. But I catch a few words that stop me in my tracks.

“...you’ve been selected...paired the initial BfB breeder...sire the next generation of potential Alphas.”

My eyes go wide. I shouldn’t eavesdrop. I shouldn’t be listening and if I could force my feet to move right now I would. Guilt twists my insides. It sounds like they’re discussing the fact that Deke needs to start having babies.

He’s the Alpha. It’s his duty.

And then I hear, “We’ll have a fertility ceremony and you and the BfB breeder we bring in can begin copulating right away.”

My heart sinks. I may feel young and alive this morning, but when it comes to having babies, not so much. The toy box is still here, but the crib is long gone.

I think back to our village tour yesterday when I asked if he had kids, he hesitated. Of course, he did. He was probably going to say not yet or that he was still hopeful.

Not only does he have a duty to his pack, but Deke deserves a chance at fatherhood.

With my stomach in a knot, I tiptoe away before they discover me lurking. Well, this throws a wrench in things.

On second thought, *I’m* the wrench.

If Deke spends time with me, he’ll miss his shot at fatherhood. I don’t know what BfB means, but breeder and fertility ceremony are self-explanatory.

Also self-explanatory: I need to make myself scarce. Remove myself from another potential heartache.

Briefly, I stop back at Deke’s. I leave the muffins and scrawl a quick note at the bottom of his.

*Deke, last night was fun, but I don't think we should make a habit of it. I wish you well, but this mate thing between us just won't work. Take care. ~ April*

I nibble my lip as I slip out the front door. Walking away stings more than expected, but it's for the best.

What is with me and this family, anyway? First Daeton, now Deke. Well, this time I'm the one doing the leaving before I get left.

## CHAPTER 8

# DEKE



I pace back and forth on Asa and Marla's front porch, seething with anger. The note from April crumpled in my fist. Her words cut me deeper than any knife blade. Last night was incredible—the best night of my life—and now she's acting like it meant nothing? Like we're not freaking fated mates? Oh, hell no. My wolf and I are both seeing red right now.

"Alpha, man, you gotta chill." Asa holds his palms up in a placating gesture when he sees the murderous scowl on my face. "Quit huffing and puffing like you're trying to blow the house down. Let's talk this out like civilized—"

I cut him off with a menacing snarl, and Asa leaps backward to avoid my swinging fist and snapping jaws. So much for being civilized.

The commotion draws Marla to the door. She takes one look at me in full raging beast mode and plants her hands on her hips fiercely. "Don't even think about hurting my mother, Uncle Deke," she warns.

*Hurt her?* I would never. I force myself to take a deep breath, barely containing the urge to push my way inside, throw April over my shoulder like a caveman, and carry her straight back to my place so we can straighten all this out. In bed.

Somehow I don't think that will be as productive as my wolf does.

Asa steps protectively in front of his mate. "Now, now, let's all stay calm," he soothes. To Marla, he says, "Deke just wants to talk to April. She's his mate. He'd rather die than hurt her."

I give a curt nod, jaw clenched so tightly I think my teeth might crack. Marla still eyes me distrustfully.

“It’s okay, Marla,” April calls from inside the cabin. “Deke’s right, we need to talk. Why don’t you and Asa go for a nice walk?”

Marla opens her mouth to argue, then sighs in defeat at her mother’s insistence. Asa leads her away, shooting me a pointed look over his shoulder that clearly says “get your shit together.” The fucker. It wasn’t long ago that he was tying his mate to his bed to keep her.

Once we’re alone, I take a deep breath and turn to face April. My anger melts away, replaced by a desperate ache in my chest. She won’t meet my eyes. Her lower lip is caught between her teeth.

“Why?” I ask simply, willing my voice to remain steady. “Last night was...” I trail off, at a loss for how to put my jumbled emotions into words. Taking her hand, I peer searchingly into her downcast eyes. “April, please. Just talk to me. What’s going on in that pretty head of yours?”

April fidgets, avoiding my gaze. “It was a fun fling, but I don’t think we should continue seeing each other romantically. You’re the pack Alpha. You have responsibilities.” She shrugs, the feigned nonchalance like a dagger to my heart. “I’m just not mate material. Sorry.”

Every word feels like a sharp slap to the face.

“A fun fling?” I can’t mask the hurt bleeding into my voice. Gripping her shoulders, I turn her to look at me. “April, we’re fated mates. Do you understand what that means? A bond like ours can’t be tossed aside lightly.” My voice drops to a desperate rasp. “I want forever with you. All of it—the laughter, the companionship, the passion. I want every day with you.”

April bites her lip, clearly conflicted. I tone down my intensity a notch, smoothing a hand over her hair. “Hey, I get it if you need more time. I told you we can take this slow, whatever

you're comfortable with." I tip her chin up and stare into her gorgeous eyes. "Just don't ask me to walk away. Please."

April huffs out a watery sigh and shakes her head.

Sobering, I tuck a lock of hair behind her ear. "April, what's really going on, sweetheart? And don't say you're not mate material ever again. You're everything I could dream of in a mate and so much more."

April looks down, fiddling with the hem of her shirt. "It's just...I may have stopped by your office today. And I may have...overheard a conversation," she admits sheepishly. "Something about you being expected to produce an heir? And there was mention of a breeder and fertility ceremony?"

Understanding clicks into place and I groan. Fuck.

While my brain scrambles to try to remember the conversation and what exactly she might have overheard, April continues. "I asked Marla about the BfB program, so I know what it's about and how important it is to your pack. I'm too old to have babies."

Gripping her shoulders, I meet April's wary gaze squarely. "You know what I told my father this morning? Did you hear that part of the conversation?"

She shakes her head.

"I told him there's no freaking way I'm pairing up with any random BfB breeder. Not when I have you. That would be like accepting dog kibble when I could have a filet mignon."

April's eyes search my face but she doesn't say anything.

"You're my fated mate. Please come back to my place. We can have dinner and talk." And hopefully, I can convince her to stay the night. "April, you're the only woman for me. I want you to wear my claiming mark. What do you say we forget all about this BfB and work on us—you and me? Can we do that?"

April smiles sadly, wistfully, and says, "No."



## CHAPTER 9

# APRIL



*One month later...*

Ugh, I really don't want to be here right now. And by here I mean at another fertility ceremony watching the man I can't get out of my head or my heart get paired off with a woman who isn't me.

Someone pass the bleach for my eyeballs, please and thank you.

I should have just stayed at Marla's tonight with a pint of fudge ripple ice cream, a batch of chocolate chip cookie dough, and some trashy reality TV to distract me.

But noooo, I had to come and put myself through this suffering.

Spoiler alert: watching the guy you have heart palpitations for get set up with another woman does not feel awesome. Like not even a little bit.

In fact, it sucks big, hairy donkey balls.

The worst part? It's my fault.

Ugh, what is wrong with me? I'm the one who told Deke the only way I'd let him officially claim me as his mate is if he agreed to do the whole BfB breeder bang-a-thon first. Because apparently, I'm an idiot.

I thought it seemed logical at the time. All I could think was that if he gave up the chance to have a child so he could instead be mated to me, he'd eventually come to regret it.

Then after a time, resentment would creep in, and...I'm a coward. A ridiculous coward.

Now, as I watch Deke stand up on the dais awaiting a woman who is not me, I wish I could take back my stupid ultimatum. Because handing Deke over to another woman on a silver platter is damn stupid.

Meanwhile, the pack is crowded around the bonfire and I'm stading off a little ways trying not to cry as my insides do gymnastics routines worthy of an Olympic gold medal.

Did I think watching Deke take a breeder would be no biggie? Just a quick hump and dump? Pfft, no.

I got through it the first time—a month ago when Genie arrived—only because it didn't actually happen. Zeb challenged for Genie and Deke forfeited. That caused a pretty big stir in the village since apparently, an Alpha has never forfeited a fight before.

Afterward, Deke begged me to reconsider and allow him to officially claim me, but I stubbornly stuck to my guns and told Deke I'd only ever consider it if he takes a breeder. I'm an idiot.

With a heavy sigh, I turn away from the throng of people. I just can't stay here or I might legit lose my mind. Or projectile vomit. Either seems likely at this point.

Keeping my head down, I leave the rowdy crowd behind and stroll around the village. It's completely deserted since everyone is at the bonfire watching the ceremony.

Making a beeline for the empty mess hall, I drop onto a bench and bury my face in my hands. I'm a legit dumpster fire of issues. Even I can admit that. Why I self-sabotaged my shot at happiness, I couldn't tell you.

I must be more spaced out than I realized because suddenly a man's voice says, "Mind if I join you?"

I glance up to see an older gentleman who looks vaguely familiar. He's dressed sharply and his stern expression reminds me of someone.

“Oh, I was just leaving,” I mutter, moving to stand.

“Nonsense. Sit, sit.” He settles on the bench across from me.

“You’re Marla’s mother, April, correct? We haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Councilman Greyson.”

Oh, jeez. Deke’s dad. Wonderful. Just the person I want to chat with tonight.

“Nice to meet you,” I manage politely, resisting the urge to bolt for the exit.

“I must apologize for not seeking you out sooner,” Greyson says kindly. “And I owe you an apology for my son Daeton’s reprehensible behavior all those years ago.”

I nod awkwardly, throat tightening. Ancient history I’d rather not dredge up.

But Greyson continues, “Thank you for our Marla. She’s a treasure. And I firmly believe if Daeton knew you carried his child, he wouldn’t have abandoned you the way he did. I’m truly sorry for that.”

I blink in surprise. That’s...unexpectedly charitable.

“I appreciate you saying that,” I reply diplomatically. Then, unable to resist, I voice the question that’s plagued me for the entire month I’ve been here. “Do you think if he hadn’t abandoned me, if he knew about the baby, Daeton and I would be together right now?”

Greyson throws his head back and barks out a laugh.

“Absolutely not. Deke would never have allowed that. Deke would have beaten him to a pulp if he tried to steal you away, baby or no baby.”

I rock back slightly, surprised by his response.

“Fated mates don’t work that way, my dear. You’re Deke’s.”

Suddenly Greyson tips his head back and sniffs the air, a distant look in his eyes. “The ceremony must be winding down. I’m sure Deke will be seeking you out any minute now. He’s done his duty, but now his only thoughts will be of you.”

My nose scrunches in distaste at the word “duty.” I don’t even want to picture him and that young breeder woman in bed together. The mental image makes my empty stomach roil.

“I’m sure Deke is fine. He’s probably off celebrating and getting to know his, you know, breeder, or whatever she’s called.” I try and fail to keep the bitter jealousy from my tone.

Greyson just chuckles. “Somehow I doubt that. You see, as a general rule, we wolves don’t fare too well when separated from our mate.”

I clench and unclench my fists, bile rising in my throat.

Sympathy flashes across Greyson’s face. “Trust me, April. Deke hasn’t gotten near any female but you. Nor will he. He’s on his way right now.”

I study my nails, feigning disinterest. “Well, he deserves a shot at fatherhood. I’m too old to provide that.” I aim for a casual, matter-of-fact tone and miss by a mile. Because my voice totally wobbles. Stupid emotions pick the worst times to make an appearance.

“I’m certain that’s not how Deke feels. And he has been a father—in all the ways that matter. He raised Asa like a son. And now we have Marla in our family thanks to you.” His smile turns bittersweet. “I’m asking you to please stop torturing my son. Stop making him jump through silly hoops. As someone who has lost a cherished mate and a child, believe me when I say there are no guarantees in life. We must seize happiness where and when we find it.”

Rejecting him? Jump through hoops? Is that what I’m doing?

Greyson pats my shoulder kindly. “Try not to be too hard on him. I can assure you he didn’t lay a finger on the BfB candidate. I know it and the entire pack knows it. Deke’s only doing what you insisted. That boy will do anything in the quest to win your affection.”

As I try not to dwell on the fact that he just called his fifty-year-old son a boy, Greyson winks and ambles off, leaving me stunned.

## CHAPTER 10

# DEKE



I meander through the village with only one thing on my mind—find April. The damn ceremony is finally over, and I couldn't be more relieved. Not exactly my idea of a fun night but a man does what he must for the woman he loves. Even if said woman insists on putting him through the wringer before agreeing to be his mate.

Tonight didn't go as planned, but it worked out okay.

Nearing the mess hall, I catch a trace of April's sweet, delicate scent lingering in the air. I halt, inhaling deeply, and realize by the stale old man stink also hanging in the air that my father was here recently as well. Hmm, that's odd. I hope he didn't say anything to April that might screw up my chances with her. Then again, not sure my chances could get much worse. Still, something tells me his stuffy lecturing wouldn't exactly improve my case.

I trudge inside the empty structure. My inner wolf is whimpering pitifully, anxious at being separated from our mate. When I see her petite figure sitting alone at one of the tables, my heart leaps.

There she is, my beautiful infuriating mate. As she turns, I drink in the sight of her—her ash-brown hair brushing her shoulders, lips pressed into an uncertain line, her doe-eyes staring questioningly. Perfection.

“Deke.” April twists her fingers together nervously. “I just met your father.”

“I hope he didn't say anything to upset you.”

April takes in a huge breath. “I thought you’d be busy with the, uh... the new BfB volunteer.” She clears her throat, glancing away. “Why aren’t you with your breeder?”

My lips quirk up despite the situation. She’s jealous. Then why is she making me do this? Why torture us both like this?

Closing the distance between us in long strides, I take April’s hands in mine, relieved when she doesn’t pull away.

“Hey, whadda ya know. It didn’t work out.”

She stares at me incredulously. “Again?!”

I just shrug. “I tried,” I lie. Then I let out a long, laborious exhale. “Can I stop now? Can you stop?”

“Can *I* stop? Can I stop what?”

“Rejecting me.” I know it’s harsh, but it’s true. Still, I hate it when she winces as though my words strike a nerve.

“Tell me the truth, Deke. Are you intentionally sabotaging this BfB thing so you’re not forced to have a breeder?”

I look at her as though the question is ridiculous. I can’t help it. It is. “Of course.”

Her jaw drops. She stares at me speechless for a moment. Then she clears her throat. “I-I didn’t expect you to say that.”

“Come on, sweetheart, you don’t really think I’d want another woman when I’m head-over-heels in love with you, do you?”

April gapes at me.

Cupping her delicate face in my hands, I meet her confused stare steadily. “Isn’t it obvious yet I’d do anything to convince you we belong together? Even participate in an absurd charade if that’s what you ask of me.” I brush my thumb over her soft cheek. “I meant what I said. I’m willing to take this relationship at whatever pace makes you comfortable.”

April bites her lip and looks away guiltily. “I feel awful for putting you through that. You’ve been nothing but devoted since the moment we met yet I just expected you to hop in bed with someone else, no biggie. What the hell is wrong with me? I’m a terrible mate!”



I nudge her chin up until her uncertain gaze meets mine again. “Stop. You’re a perfect mate. But the only woman I’m hopping into bed with is you.” I keep my voice soft, free of accusation. “Even if you denied me for the rest of our days, I’d still remain faithfully yours. I’d be miserable, but still yours.”

A tiny smile plays at the corners of April’s mouth. “Miserable, huh?”

I clutch my chest dramatically. “The worst. Pining away, howling at the moon over you.” The sound of her laughter lifts my spirits.

Sobering, I grasp April’s hands again, rubbing my thumbs over her knuckles. “I want to be clear. Participating in this BfB thing was never anything more than an act intended to appease you. There’s not a woman alive who could tempt me away from you.” I squeeze her hands gently. “You’re it for me, April. My one and only.”

April releases a long breath. Her eyes shimmer with emotion. “You’d really give up your chance to have children just to be with me?” Her voice cracks adorably.

Drawing her against my chest, I press a kiss to the top of her head. “Sweetheart, don’t you know by now that you make me happier than I ever dreamed possible?” I cup her delicate face in my hands, smiling down at her tenderly. “I have everything I could ever want or need right here in my arms.”

April’s face scrunches up in that cute way it does when she’s fighting tears. Throwing her arms around me, she buries her face in my shirt. Blissed out and floating ten feet off the ground, I just hold her close as her walls crumble.

When April draws back, she stares up at me. “Okay. No more hoop jumping. I’m done torturing you and driving us both miserable. Let’s put this whole BfB business behind us for good.”

My wolf wants to throw back his head and howl with triumph and sweet relief. I grin down at my sassy mate. “Yeah? Does this mean I can finally claim you as mine?”

April smiles, her watery eyes sparkling. “Yes.”

Shouting hallelujahs, I sweep her into my arms and kiss my mate breathless. This amazing woman owns me body and soul. And I wouldn't have it any other way. I can't wipe the ecstatic grin off my face as I carry her from the mess hall to my cabin.

## CHAPTER II

# APRIL



My heart pounds against my ribs as Deke carries me through the front door of his cabin, his muscular arms wrapped around me securely. In his embrace, I feel protected and cherished—and more than a little turned on.

Gently, Deke sets me back on my feet. His mesmerizing glowing eyes gaze down at me intently.

“I’ve waited so long for this moment, to finally claim you as mine,” he says, his deep voice gravelly with emotion and desire. “But I want you to be sure.”

A delicious shiver races down my spine. “I’m sure. I’m all yours.” I mean it with every fiber of my being.

A low, possessive growl rumbles from Deke’s broad chest. The primal sound sends heat straight to my core. Gripping my hips firmly, he begins walking me backward toward the spacious bed dominating his bedroom.

My calves hit the mattress and Deke carefully lowers me onto the soft comforter. He follows me down, bracing himself above me. I sink into the plush bedding, anticipation thrumming through my veins.

Deke’s warm weight blankets me. His hard muscles press against my softer curves deliciously. I slide my hands up his biceps, feeling his impressive muscles. Even through his shirt, his strength is evident. Yet his touch remains achingly gentle.

Deke nuzzles my neck, inhaling deeply. “Your scent drives me wild,” he murmurs. His lips find the sensitive spot just beneath

my earlobe. He nips the tender skin then soothes it with his tongue.

I clutch his broad shoulders, pleasure rolling through me. Turning my head to give him better access, I comb my fingers through his dark hair encouragingly.

Deke trails open-mouthed kisses down the column of my throat. My nails scrape lightly over his scalp. Every brush of his lips over my sensitized skin leaves sparks dancing in their wake.

When his big hand slides beneath my blouse to cup my breast through the thin lace of my bra, I gasp and arch into his palm wantonly. As Deke kneads gently my nipple stiffens almost painfully against the fabric.

“Please,” I pant, desperate for his touch on my bare skin.

Needing no further encouragement, Deke makes quick work of stripping me bare until I’m splayed out nude beneath him. His heated gaze roams my body, his glowing eyes drinking me in.

Rather than embarrassment under such intense scrutiny, all I feel is beautiful. Desired.

“You’re exquisite.” Deke’s voice is husky with lust. Leaning down, he nibbles a meandering path across my collarbone and between my breasts.

I squirm restlessly, aching and empty. But Deke seems intent on taking his time exploring every inch of newly exposed skin. His hands trace unhurriedly along my sides, thumbs skimming just under the curve of my breasts.

Mouth watering, I stare at the muscular expanse of his shoulders and chest and slip my hands beneath his shirt, my fingertips gliding over hot satiny skin and hard muscle. When I scrape my nails lightly down his back, Deke groans low in his throat. The sound sends heat pooling between my thighs.

At last, Deke closes his mouth over one straining nipple. I cry out as he laves the sensitive tip, fingers plucking and rolling the other. He lavishes attention on my breasts until I’m mindless, arching and writhing beneath him.

“Please, I need you,” I gasp, delirious with desire.

Deke moves lower, kissing down my stomach, nipping my hip bone playfully. Gripping my knees, he nudges my thighs wider and settles between.

My heart kicks into overdrive when Deke strokes a broad hand up my inner thigh. I’m soaked and aching for him. At the first velvet swipe of his tongue through my slick folds, my back bows sharply off the bed.

“Deke!” I cry out his name, fisting my hands desperately in the sheets.

Skillfully, he works me into a panting, trembling mess—licking broad strokes before zeroing in on my swollen clit. He slides two thick fingers inside my drenched channel, crooking them just right. The dual stimulation is incredible, my inner muscles clutching his fingers as he steadily drives me higher.

When Deke seals his lips around my throbbing clit and sucks firmly, I shatter completely with a sharp cry. My climax crashes through me with the force of a tidal wave, pleasure rocking every cell of my body.

I’m still floating outside myself when Deke kisses his way back up my boneless body and his big frame drapes over me heavily. Through my euphoric haze, I manage to grasp the waistband of his jeans.

“Please,” I gasp, fumbling urgently with the button. “I need you inside me. Now.”

Deke captures my wrists gently, stilling my desperate movements. “Shhh, I’ve got you.”

Shedding the last of his clothes quickly, he settles back over me. The broad head of his thick cock nudges my slick entrance. Gripping my hip with one hand, Deke guides himself inside me with the other.

At the first press of his wide girth stretching and filling me, I nearly sob with relief. Inch by incredible inch, he eases inside, allowing my body to adjust to his size.

Once fully sheathed to the hilt, Deke goes still above me. A slight tremor wracks his powerful frame. Jaw clenched, he fights for control.

“You feel incredible,” he rasps. “So hot and tight.”

I shift restlessly beneath him, inner muscles clenching around his impressive length. I’ve never felt so wonderfully full and connected. Fingers digging into his shoulders, I urge him to move.

With exquisite care, Deke draws back slowly then rocks forward. We quickly find our rhythm, our bodies moving together fluidly. Each deep glide lights my nerve endings on fire. The pressure builds steadily, my breath coming faster.

Unable to resist, I guide Deke’s mouth back to that sensitive spot on my neck in preparation. Understanding my readiness, he increases his tempo. His powerful thrusts strike deeper, the friction maddeningly intense.

“Mine,” Deke growls fiercely against my neck. There’s a flash of pain as his sharp teeth pierce my skin—a claiming bite. The erotic mix of pleasure and pain rockets me over the edge again.

My inner walls clamp down hard as ecstasy crashes over me. Deke continues pumping through my spasms. With a low groan, his hips stutter and I feel the hot jets of his release deep inside.

We cling together, breathless, as the last shudders fade. Still buried within me, Deke rests his forehead against mine. His heart thunders under my palm, perfectly in sync with my own racing heartbeat.

In this moment, locked together heart, body and soul, I’ve never felt more complete.

When he lifts his head, Deke smiles down at me tenderly. His gorgeous eyes shine with awe and adoration. He caresses my face as though I’m precious to him.

“My mate. My love. My everything,” he whispers reverently.

Emotion clogs my throat. Blinking back happy tears, I trace Deke's handsome features—his straight nose, his sharp cheekbones. My fingertips brush over his sexy salt-and-pepper beard.

"I'm yours," I vow, heart overflowing. "Now and always."

Cupping the back of my head, Deke lowers his mouth to mine in a kiss brimming with promise. All the love and passion we feel for one another is conveyed without words.

"So..." I give him a coy smile. "On a scale of one to mind-blowing, how would you rate the experience of claiming your mate?"

"I'd rate it at about one-thousand-one-hundred-and-beyond-infinity," he says, a smile on his lips. "You surpassed every fantasy I ever had. That was..." He pauses, searching for the right words. When they don't come, Deke shakes his head, chuckling. "I don't think there is a word to describe how incredible that was."

God, I love this man. Could he be any more perfect?



# EPILOGUE

APRIL



*Three Years Later*

“Come on, little guy. You can do it!” I cheer encouragingly.

My grandson takes a few wobbly steps across the living room rug before plopping down on his diapered bottom. His chubby hands immediately reach for one of the many scattered toys.

“So close! Nice try, bud.” I swoop him up, blowing raspberries on his round belly. Baby Zane erupts into infectious giggles.

At eight months old, he’s the spitting image of his daddy, my son-in-law Asa. Though the twinkle of mischief in those big brown eyes is all Marla.

Speaking of Marla, my daughter chooses that moment to breeze into the cabin, arms laden with baskets of groceries.

“Let me help you with those,” Deke says, relieving Marla of the baskets while flashing me a heart-stopping smile that makes my knees wobbly.

Yup, three years and the man still gives me butterflies.

“Thanks, Uncle Deke.” Marla lifts Zane and nuzzles her son’s chubby cheek. The adorable sight makes me melt.

I follow Deke into the kitchen to help put away the groceries. As we arrange things in the pantry, I glance out the window above the sink.

My view is the cozy cabin I now share with Deke. Our little love nest, as he likes to call it with a playful wiggle of his brows. After officially claiming each other as mates, it took

me all of one day to move out of Marla's place and into Deke's cabin. Now I can't imagine living anywhere else.

"How's my great-grandson today?"

I turn to see Deke's dad Greyson strolling through the front door. He makes a beeline for Marla and the baby.

"Has he said his first word yet?" Greyson asks, taking Zane from Marla's arms.

"Not yet, but any day now," Marla says. She and Asa often bring Zane over for Gramps and Grammy (that's me!) to babysit. And I gotta tell you, Deke and I absolutely love being grandparents.

"Well, come on then, let's see if we can speed that along." Greyson bounces Zane and repeats "great-grandpa" slowly.

We all laugh when Zane just blows spit bubbles and grins adorably.

Curled against Deke's side with his arm wrapped around me, I sigh contentedly. Who knew such happiness was possible? For so long, it felt like my shot at joy and fulfillment had passed. Yet here I am in my fifties more in love than ever.

Deke's fingers stroke idly through my hair. Our eyes meet and his soften in a way that melts my heart.

"You know what I'm in the mood for?" I whisper to my mate.

He cocks a brow questioningly.

I grin. "A moonlit picnic."

Deke and I say our goodbyes and before long, we have a cozy spread on a blanket under the stars. We laugh and chat late into the night, enjoying the peace of being together beneath the moonlight.

As our conversation dies down, I cuddle close to Deke's side with his strong arm wrapped around me. Crickets chirp softly and the lanterns glow. The moment feels magical.

"Have I told you lately how happy you've made me?" Deke presses a kiss to my hair.

“At least once daily.” I squeeze him tight. “Right back at ya, handsome.”

Tilting my chin up, Deke captures my lips. The kiss starts soft and tender then quickly ignites into something more heated and urgent. I melt against him, tingles racing everywhere our bodies touch.

When we finally break apart for air, Deke rests his forehead against mine. The depth of love and desire shining in his eyes makes my toes curl.

Suddenly he braces his hands beneath my thighs and lifts me effortlessly into his lap. I let out a giddy shriek that turns into breathless laughter.

Straddling his hips, I link my arms around Deke’s neck. His big hands grip my waist as our mouths meet again hungrily.

Our passion and hunger for one another seems to grow stronger every day. My inner sex kitten has come out to play—and gotten her groove back in a big way.

As the kiss turns urgent and Deke’s greedy hands roam my curves, I make a mental note that moonlit picnics should be a regular thing.

Breaking the kiss, I smile down at my mate wickedly.

“You know, I’m feeling awfully...horny tonight. How about we take this party somewhere more private?” I punctuate my suggestion with a slow grind of my hips that has Deke’s eyes rolling back.

Growling approvingly, he practically leaps to his feet with me clinging koala-style. Laughing breathlessly, I smack loud kisses across his bearded cheeks and jaw as he carries me toward our cozy cabin.

Yup, life is pretty damn perfect these days. No complaints here.



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