

K.C. MILLS



HEXED
BENNETT PACK
E T O M X

HEXED WOLF

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NOTE TO READERS:

Hello Beautiful people!
Welcome to *Hollow Grove* where things go bump in the night.

This is a fictional town with fictional characters and although my supernaturals are based on the general understanding of how they live and function. There may be things that don't fit your expectation.

I reserve the right to shift, tweak, and twist these individuals to be what I create them to be.

With that being said, please move forward with an open mind and if you can't, then this might not be the one that feeds your soul. You'll definitely get my signature style with an Alpha male who isn't afraid to show his heart but I've added a bit of a supernatural twist.

Thanks so much for allowing me to share my craft with you and enjoy!

SINCERELY,

Me!

SYNOPSIS

Fated Bonds are absolute but what happens when that bond is cursed to destroy you and everyone you love?

Toyin is a witch that knows her destiny, and being rejected by her one true love leaves her feeling empty, desperate and hopeless. However, one night, one mistake, birthed a beautiful blessing. Toyin may not be able to have the man who owns her heart but they will forever be bonded through their son.

Xander is an Alpha who refuses to lose this family even if it means denying his heart. This one time, the moon goddess may have gotten things all wrong. His only recourse is to endure the pain of denying his mate while focusing on his son.

WELCOME to Hollow Grove where things go bump in the night.

CHAPTER I

TOYIN ALDEN

T *hen.*

“Are you not coming in?”

I began to panic. The spell I’d cast was harmless. However, it would only work if he entered the cabin. *His* cabin where I assumed we would both stay for the evening. Jo and Laz were spending their first night together united as Alpha and Luna. Zion had company of his own. Since Xander’s cabin had three floors with enough space to accompany everyone, I’d assumed when Jo mentioned I could stay there for the night Xander would stay with me.

“No, I’m heading back to the city.” His expression was tight and he kept looking past me to the door, like he was struggling internally between what he wanted to do versus what he was going to do. *Run.*

“You’re always running, Xander. What did I do so wrong that makes you deny me?” *Fuck this spell.* “You know what, never mind. I don’t care anymore. I don’t need to know. It’s time for me to let this go and find a man who will appreciate me the way you clearly *never* will.”

I turned on my heels, adamant about the things I’d said, pushing through the front door and expecting Xander to do like he always did, denying whatever this was with us. But he proved me wrong.

The minute he crossed the threshold of his cabin his brows pinched and he blinked a few times before he focused on me. I

could sense my spell had worked. He no longer possessed the restraint to ignore what he was feeling.

“You want to know what things would be like if I didn’t run?” His eyes were determined and wild. Then, before I could respond, his mouth crashed against mine. While he kissed me, I felt the warmth of his palm at my thigh then the sting from my panties being ripped away.

I gasped at the dip of his fingers inside me and my body welcomed the sensation. His kiss was intense and greedy. The movement of his fingers, slowly sliding in and out of me, was controlled and fuck, so good. I was in heaven. Pure, unadulterated, blissful contentment. It didn’t take long for the ripples of pleasure to roll through me. My hips bucked wildly and I sucked in sharp breaths, panting until my mind cleared enough to realize Xander was fumbling with his jeans.

In a swift motion, he lifted me and my bare ass landed on the console table next to the door. His eyes were wild again. Stormy and dangerous with need.

“Tell me no or I’m going to fuck you, Toyin. Hard and fast. And as good as it will be for both of us, we know that’s not a good idea.”

“I don’t *know* anything other than what I feel right now and I want more of this feeling. If you walk away it will be your decision.”

He sneered and I felt his chest rumble. Xander was torn but I didn’t care. Even if this was all I ever got—*this one night*—I wanted every second of what he was proposing.

He yanked me forward and I felt him, hard and thick against my thigh. My entire body was thrumming with need. “Tell me no.”

I shook my head. “I won’t...”

He growled from somewhere deep and gave in.

“Fuck...” He palmed my ass and angled my hips while he pushed up against my entrance, pausing briefly before he pulled back and drove in harder. When I was completely filled with him, his mouth crashed against mine. He bit down on my

lip, distracting me from the fullness of him because fuck, he was a lot.

My eyelids fluttered. He smiled mischievously and cockily. “You should have told me no.” Xander thrust a few times with deep, controlled movements until I relaxed and allowed my hips to match his rhythm. His pace increased and I gasped for air while he buried himself deeper with each thrust. A wave of pleasure rippled in my core, crawling through the rest of my body, pulsing and rising until I tipped over the edge. My climax thundered through me in waves, over and over again.

Xander thickened inside me and I felt his teeth graze my skin. My entire body felt hot and needy while I braced for his mark, but it never came. Xander growled through his release then snatched away, stumbling backward like he was confused about what’d just happened.

I could see the minute he knew. The moment he realized I was the reason this had happened.

“What the fuck did you do?”

“Nothing...”

“That’s a lie, Toyin. What the fuck did you do? You used magic on me?”

“I...no. It’s not what you think. I just...”

“You fucking lied. You made a promise. Do you know what the fuck you almost did? You have no idea...” The look he sent my way crushed my soul, then he was gone and I felt emptier than I ever had in my entire life.

CHAPTER 2

XANDER BENNETT

Now.
Your kid.

Mine.

Son.

What in the entire fuck? My head was spinning. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening.

My wolf was erratic with one thought.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

“Xan, did you hear what I said?” My eyes left my brother and landed on Toyin. Her small frame was protectively cradling the child. *My child.*

Laz, I need to talk to you, outside. – Me

You need to talk to her... – Laz

Outside, now! – Me

I turned and stormed out of my brother's apartment, leaving the door open. He followed and the door slammed shut behind him.

“What the fuck is going on...” Laz spoke out loud but I needed this conversation to be discreet.

She told you that's my kid? – Me

She didn't have to tell me. You saw him and even if you didn't see him, you feel it. You know he's yours. So again, what the fuck is going on? – Laz

Fuck! How? – Me

You're the oldest, Xan. Do I really need to explain how? – Laz

My brother grinned at me with an arched brow. I growled at the comment because this shit wasn't funny.

He shouldn't be here. I can't be a father to her kid. – Me

Too fucking bad, Xan. He's yours. I don't know what the hell is going on but he's yours and we don't turn our backs on our own. – Laz

He stepped to me, getting right in my face. We both squared up but Lazar wasn't the problem. Toyin was.

“He's mine, my son. I will not turn my back on him,” I sneered, eyes narrowed, pulse thudding.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

“And what about...”

Before he could finish the sentence, my door swung open and Keerah stepped into the hallway looking perplexed as her eyes moved between me and Laz.

“You have a son?”

“Who the fuck is she?” Laz swung his head in her direction before he slowly aligned his glare back on me.

“His *mate*. Who the fuck are you?”

“Mate?”

The soft voice that sounded from behind Laz caused my chest to restrict. I didn't want to look but I also wasn't a coward. My eyes lowered and locked with hers which were filled with confusion and pain.

“Toyin...”

Her glare narrowed in anger. “Answer me.”

Mine. Mine. Mine.

This shit hurts. Every inch of my body felt tortured.

“Toy...”

“I said answer me, Xander. Did you choose her? Is. She. Your. Mate?”

I didn't get the chance to respond because Keerah did.

“Yes, now can we move on?” She turned to me. “Xander, you didn't tell me that you had a kid.”

“Because he didn't know, but don't worry. *My* son will not get in the way of whatever you two have going on. *Your* mate. *My* son.” Toyin's eyes lifted to mine, the warning clear. She was drawing a line in the sand and daring me to cross it.

I stepped toward her but Laz cut off my path, shaking his head. “Not now, Xan. We'll take care of Toyin like we've been doing since you left. You go deal with *that*.”

“I'm not a *that*. My name is...” Keerah froze from the look Laz delivered. When her eyes lowered I realized Toyin was no longer there, but Jo and Zion were in her place. They were standing together on this and had collectively decided Keerah was the enemy. They were protecting Toyin and my son from me. *My* son.

“This is not your call to make,” I growled, glaring at Laz. He sneered, baring his teeth. “It is my decision, Xander. I am your Alpha. Go deal with *that*.” His eyes never left mine, but he lifted a hand and pointed at Keerah. I was seconds away from squaring up with my brother but his door slammed before I had the chance. I took a step forward and lowered my head, closing my eyes for a brief moment to get grounded.

“Inside, now.” I moved past Keerah and thankfully she followed. As soon as my door slammed shut, my back landed against it hard and my hand moved to my chest. The pain was stronger than it had ever been before.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

“You have a son?” Keerah yelled and threw her hands up.

“You're not my mate. Why the fuck would you say that?”

“Because I will be. You said you rejected yours...wait. It's her. She's the one you rejected? She's human.”

“She's not your business.”

Keerah stepped closer. “I’m here because you invited me. She is my business.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You didn’t have a pack. They turned their backs on you. I was doing you a favor and I never said you would be my mate.”

“Then what are we? We’ve been fucking each other for the past three months. It’s only been the two of us...”

The pain in my body lessened which only meant one thing. Toyin had left. Distance was the only remedy to my foolishness.

“You can’t stay here.” I pushed away from the door, heading to the kitchen where I yanked open a cabinet and wrapped my hand around a bottle of cognac.

“What do you mean I can’t stay here? You promised I could join your pack. That I—”

“You still can. When I said you can’t be *here*, I meant, in my apartment. There are empty units in the building we reserve for pack members. My brothers and I own the building. I’ll make sure you have one.”

“No, that’s not what I want. I’m here because of you. I’m here to be with *you*, Xander.”

I laughed dryly, considering the dumb ass decision I’d made to bring her home with me, but I had genuinely been trying to do something good. Just because my life was fucked up didn’t mean I couldn’t help others figure out their shit.

I had a son.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

“You can take what I’m offering, Keerah. I’m trying to help. I never promised you would be my mate. I never promised anything other than giving you the opportunity to be a part of our pack but I also made it clear that it wasn’t just my decision. Don’t confuse sex as security or commitment.”

“I...wow...” She glared at me, turned on her heels, and a few minutes later my bedroom door slammed. How many

fucking doors were going to slam before this situation was rectified?

I lifted the bottle, turned it up, and allowed the smooth brown liquor to travel down my throat with large gulps. It burned but I didn't care. I needed something to mollify the chaos in my head.

After a few minutes I slammed the bottle on the counter, crossed the hall, and let myself into my brother's apartment. He glanced at me over his shoulder before turning completely. His son, *my nephew*, was in his arms.

"She can't stay here." He spoke calmly and I narrowed my eyes but his expression remained unmoved.

"You don't make decisions about my life, Laz."

"Don't I, though? I am..."

"Say that shit again and I will send my fist into your face. You're only the Alpha because I allow you to be. Don't you dare forget my role in this family."

Laz snorted, bouncing the baby in his arms before he kissed his little head. The visual was strange. My brother softened for his kid. "You're the oldest but you're not acting like a leader, Xan. What the fuck is going on with you? *Toyin* is your mate. She was selected for you by the Moon Goddess. You have a connection to each other through the universe. Nothing is greater than that bond. Why would you deny her?"

"Because I have to. We can't be together."

"You've been together, Xan. You have a son."

"Fuck..." I hissed and began pacing. "This can't be happening."

"It is happening. He's here. There's nothing you can do about it. Why don't you just seal the bond and..."

"Because I can't. You're not listening," I growled.

While I was erratic, Laz remained calm, watching me closely. After a minute he kissed his son on the head and placed him into a travel playpen before moving to me. He

placed a hand on my shoulder and gripped firmly. “We need to talk. You’re going to explain what the hell is going on with you.”

My eyes darted around his apartment and he read my mind.

“She’s not here. Jo and Zion left with Toyin and the baby to make sure she made it home safely and that she was okay.”

I nodded tightly and he pointed to the living room. I followed and sat, dropping my elbows to my thighs and my face into my palms.

“Explain because none of this is making sense. I get that she’s human...”

“A *witch*,” I stated tightly.

“Okay a witch, which is not ideal but not all that unheard of.”

“Not just any witch, Laz.”

“Toyin is a healer. Her magic is safe. Hell, if it weren’t for her, Jo wouldn’t be here. I know you’re not afraid of a little magic.”

“That’s who she is now. But if I claim her, she’ll become something else and we’ll all be in trouble.”

“Trouble how?” Laz glared my way and I closed my eyes, shaking my head.

“Toyin is an Equinox witch. A pure blood Equinox.”

I noticed the minute it registered.

“The stories Mom used to tell us?”

“Yes, but they’re not just stories, Laz. It’s real. Very fucking real.”

Centuries ago when witches and werewolves were at war, those who crossed lines and indulged in forbidden love became victims of a standing curse. If they mated, the witches were granted access to magic so powerful it couldn’t be contained or controlled. The witches, no matter light or dark,

shifted and were tasked with murdering their mate, their families, their entire packs. It was like a blood thirst that couldn't be controlled, something the witches came up with to keep their covens pure. Both sides feared the consequences so mating was forbidden and avoided.

“You mean to tell me your mate is a descendant of the Sovran Coven and if you seal the bond and claim her, she's going to try to kill you.”

“Not just me. Anyone I love—our pack, our *child* who has my blood running through his veins. Bonding with me will not only make her want to do so, it will give her the power to make it happen. We can conquer everything *but* magic. There won't be a damn thing I can do to stop the thirst to kill, which will consume Toyin. It's why I've rejected her all this time.”

For you. For your family. Now, for my son.

“I don't believe that shit.”

“I don't care what you believe, Laz. It's the goddamn truth.”

“How do you know her lineage? She's never said anything about this curse. Don't you think she would have? She knows you two are fated.”

“She doesn't know her lineage. Not that part, as far as I can tell.”

“Then how the fuck do you know?”

“That ring she wears.”

“What ring?”

“It's a gold band with a rune inscribed in the metal. I recognized it a few weeks after she got here. Something about the ring kept nagging at me but I didn't know why. I asked where she'd gotten it and she told me the ring had been passed down from her great-great-grandmother through the family until it ended up with her mother who left it for Toyin. My attraction to her has always been strong...”

“She's your mate.”

“It’s not just that. She’s also forbidden, which doesn’t make any sense. I knew she was my mate but something in me realized I couldn’t have her. If I claim Toyin, she’ll remember who she is. She’ll remember the lineage and I’ll have to kill her before she has a chance to harm one of us.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“I do. It’s that goddamn ring. Dad had one. I didn’t believe the stories Mom told us about staying away from witches. He showed me the ring as a warning when he’d caught me sneaking around with one. The ring had belonged to the witch he’d killed after she murdered an alpha and his entire pack. A really good friend of his had died with that pack.”

“Merren,” Laz mumbled lowly. He knew the story about how Merren had lost his life and his pack. “That’s why you’ve rejected her all this time? You believe the stories are true and that she’s...”

“The stories *are* true and she is a descendant of the Sovran Coven. She has the ring. It belongs in her family which means she shares their bloodline and the curse. I love her, Laz. I think I have from the minute I found her in that damn coffee shop but if I claim Toyin and seal our bond, accepting what the Moon Goddess believes to be my destiny...”

“You’ll have to kill her before she kills you.”

I nodded tightly.

“What if that’s not your destiny? Things could be different now. That was centuries ago. The curse dates back a millennium.”

“I can’t take that chance. There’s always a possibility that we somehow survive this but if I’m wrong?” I shook my head. “No matter how I feel about her, I won’t put myself or my family at risk.”

“I thought all this time you were just being an ass. I know our parents frowned on us mating anyone other than our kind but your resistance to Toy was more than our parents’ beliefs or expectations. You’re afraid.”

I glared at my brother. I didn’t fear a damn thing.

He smirked. “Not that kind of fear, Xan. I’m speaking of the kind that comes from wanting those you love to be safe. You *fear* that she’ll get hurt so you’ve been keeping your distance. You’ve rejected Toy because you want her in your life the only way you can have her, at a distance.”

I nodded again. There was no point in lying.

“So then explain how the fuck you have a son? Why would you cross that line and risk losing control enough to possibly claim her?”

Sex with your chosen one was so intense that there was little to no restraint. I understood that now. I’d learned the night of Laz and Jo’s mating ceremony. It took all my will not to claim Toyin. The mark had almost happened. My teeth grazed her skin but I pulled back, knowing I could have fucked up. That one misstep was why I’d left. I was so pissed and I’d only lost control because she’d made me.

Magic.

“She did something. I don’t know what.” I frowned hard.

“You’re saying she used magic and you don’t remember being with her.”

No, I fucking remembered. Every kiss, every touch, the way she screamed my name...

“I don’t know why I gave in. She had to have done something. I’ve never lost control that way before. I never would have on my own.”

“Fuck.”

“Exactly and now we have a son.” I glared at my brother who brushed a hand over his head.

“We’ll figure it out. But until we do, *she* has to go. She can’t be here. It’s not fair to Toy and you need to get to know your son.”

She... Keerah.

“We’re not together like that and she doesn’t have anywhere else to go. I promised her I would present a proposal

for her to join our pack...”

“No. Not happening.”

“She’s alone, Laz.” I narrowed my glare on him because not too long ago he was facing the same dilemma with accepting Jo.

“I don’t care and don’t look at me like that. She’s not Jo.”

His lone wolf.

“I’m not saying she is, but she is *alone*. I brought her here because we accept the misfits, the unloved, and give them a place to belong. You have to at least consider giving her a home.”

Laz chuckled dryly. “You really want another woman you’ve been fucking, *here*, around Toyin? That’s the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard in all my life, Xan. Jo isn’t going to accept her. She’s protective of Toy. We all are. But since you left, and she had Rafe, the others are not always kind. They’re angry because of Rafe.”

“What have they done?” I growled and he smirked.

“Nothing because they know better but that doesn’t mean she can’t feel how much they dislike her. Toy doesn’t need one more person to add to an already long list.”

“Keerah won’t be a problem.”

“Yeah right. Your funeral, Xan. Like you said, you’re the oldest. You do whatever the fuck you want. Just know I’m warning you, keeping her around is not a good idea. This is still my pack. I’m Alpha. Jo is Luna. We have a responsibility to everyone we look after and right now? That doesn’t include whoever she is and it may *never* include her.”

“Yeah...”

I stood to leave but not before asking the question that had been pushing through my mind. “Where is she?”

“Your cabin out on our property. She moved into a unit here in the building on the floor below us to make it easier for all of us to help with Rafe, but after what transpired tonight

she wanted distance. I can't blame her and neither can you. When she needs space she goes to your cabin. To be honest, I think it's more about having a place to connect with you."

I nodded and left. It was time to be officially introduced to my son.

CHAPTER 3

TOYIN.

“Toy, what can I do?” When Jo stepped close to me I glanced at Rafe who was sleeping peacefully in his pack and play.

“Nothing, I’m fine. You both can head back to the city.”

I smiled weakly at Zion and Jo. While Zion was pecking away on his phone, Jo continued staring at me for a moment longer. She tucked a few loose strands of her auburn hair behind her ear. A reflection of her inner wolf.

She was a hybrid wolf as well. A beautiful and rare red wolf. They all fit. This woman who was with Xander *fit*. I was the outsider. The thought had me cringing internally. Another reason why Xander and I were here, in this very place of conflict. We weren’t meant to be and I forced the issue.

“Zion, will you wait for me in the car? I need a moment with Toy.”

“What’s wrong?” His eyes shot up from his phone and across the living room where they landed on the two of us.

“Nothing. I just need a minute to say a few things, *privately*.”

“You can say whatever you need to with me here. My brother is an ass for leaving like he is for showing up with another woman...”

“A wolf,” I corrected because let’s face it, she was one of them. I was the outsider.

“That doesn’t mean a damn thing so don’t go thinking she has some rights you don’t because she’s...”

“One of you.”

“You’re one of us,” Jo stated firmly and Zion added, “You’re family, Toy, and not just because of Rafe.”

“I know, it’s just...”

“No...” Jo shook her head to shut down whatever I was thinking. “You’re ours and you’re his, okay?”

I wish it were that simple.

“Okay.”

“Zion, give us a minute.”

He crossed the room and pulled me into a hug. I clung to him for a moment because I needed to feel like I belonged. Xander being home had snatched that away from me. As much as I’d wanted him to return, in his absence, his brothers and Jo had made me feel accepted and like family. Xander had always been a friend but held me at arm’s length. I never understood why. He was mine and I was his but he kept me on the outside of his world.

“This will be okay, Toy. Xander will get his shit together or Laz and I will make him. You’re going to be okay.”

I might not be.

“Thank you. You’re an amazing brother and an even more amazing uncle. I wouldn’t have survived this year without you.”

He smiled, looking like a younger but equally handsome version of his two brothers. “I know.”

After he left, Jo and I sat on the sofa. She covered my hand with hers and stared at me without speaking. Naturally I grew anxious.

“Why are you staring at me?”

“I’m waiting for you to tell me what’s really going on.”

“Wha...what do you mean?” My anxiety spiked more and I slipped my hand away from hers.

“You kept pinching the back of your neck and rubbing your earlobe. You do that when you’re nervous or stressed, both of which apply, but it seems more than usual. So what’s going on?”

“Nothing.” I rolled my shoulders back and she huffed a sigh.

“When I call you family, I mean it, Toy. You are my family but more than that, you’re my best friend. My sister. Since I’ve been here you’ve become an important part of my world. You saved my life. It’s us against the universe so you can trust me with your secrets. I know you have a very important one you need to share. So please, tell me what’s going on. We can’t fix this if you don’t tell someone.”

“I don’t...there are no...I just...”

“What happened the night of my ceremony? How about we start there? Why did Xander leave?”

“Because he doesn’t want me and we’re meant to be. So it’s easier if he keeps his distance.”

“I’m sure it is, but that’s not the entire truth, is it?”

Oh God.

I slowly shook my head.

“Then tell me. If you don’t want Laz or Zion to know, I won’t tell them. But someone needs to know what’s going on with the two of you.”

I closed my eyes and gave her my confession. “I used magic. The night of your ceremony.”

“You...oh...”

“Not to make him claim me, just to force his true feelings to show. I thought if he couldn’t resist, that if he didn’t hold back, he would seal the bond and everything would be fine.”

“But it wasn’t?”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“What happened?” Jo seemed concerned and I felt horrible. I didn’t want her believing I was a horrible person. I felt the same as Jo. She was my family, my best friend, my sister. When I didn’t speak right away, she grabbed my hand again, lacing her fingers with mine. “Toy, I won’t judge you, *ever*.”

“I know. This is hard. I messed things up between us and I don’t know that they’ll ever be right again.”

“You don’t know anything with certainty. Tell me and maybe I can help.”

“The spell was simple. It was only used to force Xander to be honest. To lower his ability to deny me. I didn’t mess with his true feelings. I know what those are. I know how he feels, but I didn’t understand why he denied me. Because of the spell, we were together.”

“You had sex?”

“Yes and he almost claimed me. His teeth were on my neck then something shifted. He pulled away just in time. He knew I’d used magic and he was so angry. When he asked, I lied. I don’t know why I did because he already knew. God, he was so furious, Jo. He kept yelling that I couldn’t be his and he couldn’t be mine then he left.”

“He was angry about the magic?”

I nodded. “I’d promised him I would never use magic on him. It was the only thing he ever asked of me and I broke that promise. Now we have Rafe, Xan hates me, and things are so screwed up. He’s going to mate that woman and I’ll be...”

Alone.

“This is all my fault. I should have never used that spell.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. Especially if you promised you wouldn’t, but that doesn’t mean we can’t fix this or that he won’t forgive you.”

“He won’t.”

“He will. He has to. You’re now parents to that beautiful baby boy and the two of you have to figure this out for him.” She squeezed my hand and tugged me into a hug. “It’s going to be okay; I promise.”

She couldn’t make that promise. No one could.

“You should head back. You have an hour drive.”

“Toy...”

“I’m fine, Jo.” She narrowed her eyes and I smiled and amended my statement. “I will be fine. Xander and I have to figure this out and you’re right, we will. For Rafe.”

I glanced at my son. My beautiful baby boy who reminded me every day that one terrible decision could produce something wonderful. I had him and even if his father wanted nothing to do with me, he would love our son.

I hoped.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. We’ll be fine. Go.” I shoved her gently. She stood to leave and I walked Jo to the door.

“He’s coming, you know that right?” Jo smiled and I felt my pulse quicken. “Maybe not right away but he will come. I suggest you be ready for when he does.”

She hugged me tightly and I hugged her back. “I know and I will.”

That was a lie. I didn’t think I could ever be ready for Xander, especially not after what I’d done. I watched from the porch as Zion pulled away from the cabin then locked Rafe and I in, setting the alarm. Being out here alone should have frightened me. I was surrounded by woods and darkness on the two hundred acres Xander and his brothers owned and miles beyond that was uncharted territory. To most it would feel scary but to me this place felt like home. It *felt* like him.

While Rafe was still asleep, I decided to take a quick shower and fix something to eat. Then we would both climb in bed. *Xander’s bed*. To get some sleep. Prayerfully I would be able to but somehow, I felt like my mind wouldn’t allow me.

The minute I stepped into the steamy, hot enclosure everything came flooding back to me, reminding me of that night. The night I'd ruined us.

I sobbed with the heartache of having to figure out my life without Xander in it.

CHAPTER 4

XANDER.

“Where are you?” was the first thing out of Keerah’s mouth when I answered her call. The tone she used would have normally annoyed me but I wasn’t in the mood to expend energy on her at the moment. I had bigger issues so I bypassed the question with one of my own.

“Did Jo get you set up?”

“If you mean did she demand I move my things out of your place, then yes.”

“Keerah, I already told you what the situation would be. You shouldn’t be surprised, more like grateful.”

“Grateful that you brought me here and abandoned me for a woman that kept a child from you?”

“Toy is none of your business but let me ask you something and I need you to be completely honest...”

“I’m listening.”

“Did I ever present the idea that you and I would be together?”

“No, but...”

“No. Let’s leave it there. Not once did I insinuate we would be together. Sex is not commitment. I brought you with me because you needed a pack. A *home*.”

“I know that sex isn’t commitment, Xander. I’m mature enough to understand that but I assumed we would at least

maintain our friendship. We were together out there. You and me. We relied on each other, looked out for one another. We were *friends*.”

“We’re still friends, Keerah. My life is very complicated right now.” I glanced at the front door to my cabin.

“Your family doesn’t want me here.”

Jo wasn’t thrilled with the idea of me bringing a woman to our pack. She was close to Toyin. Their friendship and bond had grown tremendously in the time I had been gone but Jo was also our Luna. She was fair and even if she didn’t like the idea of Keerah, she wouldn’t be malicious...I hoped.

“Did Jo say or do something...”

“No...” she huffed. “She was cordial, almost nice, when she got me situated. She set me up with some of the other pack members working at the plant nursery and even told me to reach out to her if I needed anything. But I’m not naïve. She’s being respectful because of *you*, not because I’m being welcomed with open arms.”

“Being with me won’t change any of that.” No point in me lying. If I chose Keerah over Toyin, which would never happen, Jo would likely hate her more.

“It might.” She sounded hopeful.

“Trust me, it won’t. Jo is fair and the pack follows her lead. Prove you want to be here for the right reasons and they will embrace you. You can’t make it about me.”

“I know. I just figured it might be easier.”

“I promise it won’t and Keerah, we’re friends. If you play your cards right we’ll be pack family but that’s all I can offer. I’ve always been upfront about where we stood.”

“You have but now you’re taking sex off the table. Really amazing sex. You have to expect that I’ll be a little unhappy about the no sex thing. I will admit that having a home outweighs the sex, no matter how amazing.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “I would say I’m offended but I understand.”

She released a sigh. “I’ll make it work. Thank you again. I do appreciate everything you’ve done.”

“I don’t want you to thank me. I want you to find your place here. You deserve to have a home, Keerah.”

“Right. I’ll make nice with my potential new Luna.”

“Yeah, that will help. I have to go.” I ended the call and stared at my cabin. Even if I didn’t have the situation with Toyin, Keerah would never be more than she had been. A distraction. I liked her but my standards for being happy had been obliterated in a coffee shop years ago and now here I was, stuck in a never-ending cycle of unhappiness.

Who the fuck did I piss off?

The question had been on repeat in my mind for the past year. It began the minute I’d experienced the wonders and depths of Toyin Alden.

I sat in my car staring at the house that held everything I wanted in life. The woman I loved and the child I never expected to have with her. My son. I wanted it all but having it all with Toyin wasn’t possible. One of us would die so I had to settle for half. Being a father to my son, then one day watching as another man loved the woman who’d given him to me, knowing she would tolerate him but only ever love me.

With exhaustion settling into my body, I climbed out of my vehicle, made my way to the house, and let myself in. I felt her outside, but the minute I stepped into my cabin, her presence, along with my son’s, made the cabin feel more like hers.

“You’re awake...” It was just after eleven.

“I knew you would come.”

I stood just inside the living room. Toyin sat in the center of the largest sofa with perfect posture. Her hands rested in her lap and she stared at me with cautious eyes. *Fearful.*

“Where is he?” My wolf was wild beneath my skin. He wanted to see his pup. Rafe had already been claimed by both of us.

“Asleep.”

I nodded and moved toward the back of the first level where my bedroom was. The house was three levels. The top two floors housed suites for my brothers even though they owned properties out here as well.

After I reached the bedroom I froze at the door, feeling overwhelmed by the presence of my son. I could feel him so strongly that my spirit felt connected.

“He’s so perfect,” Toyin whispered from behind me. I didn’t bother looking over my shoulder or acknowledging her presence out loud but she was right. He was perfect.

After suppressing the urge to hold him, not wanting to disrupt his sleep, I turned and headed back to the main area. Just like I had done at my apartment I sought out liquor. This time I filled a glass and tossed it back before my palms landed flat on the counter and my head hung between my shoulders.

“You should have told me.”

“How?” she said quietly. I lifted my eyes and when they met hers she also reminded me why I was out of touch. “You shut off your phone and you put a wall up. Your brothers couldn’t communicate with you. You didn’t want to be found, Xander. You blocked everyone...”

“I shut *you* out...” I growled and she flinched at the inflection of my voice. “And you know why?”

“I’m sorry...” she said softly. She was so timid and quiet which wasn’t the Toyin I knew. I was almost tempted to ask her what had changed. Was she okay? Was this new version of her remorseful for what she had done or was she cowering because I was angry? She didn’t deserve my concern so I wouldn’t give it...not yet.

“How is he?”

“He’s good. *Perfect.*” Her tone was more confident. Defensive. I didn’t doubt she was a good mother. She was a good person. She loved hard and that would be passed down to my son. *Our* son.

“Magic?” She was a witch; I was a hybrid. There was a good chance he had traits from both of us. My pure blood

would make him an Alpha but there was also a chance that he...

“No, not yet. He’s only ten months old.”

I did the math in my head. I had been gone a little over a year which meant she’d carried him for not more than three months. She hadn’t carried him full term based on human standards.

“He’s...”

“Yes. I mean I can’t be sure but according to Laz and the research I’ve done, he’ll be a shifter, like you.” She smiled nervously. “But he could still be like me. Are you concerned about his ability to have magic?”

I extended to my full height and poured another drink, hoping it would relax the pulse of anger thrumming through me. When I slammed the empty glass onto the counter, I closed the space between us.

“I’m not angry about anything concerning my son. I’m angry about how he got here. I’m *angry* with his mother. You fucking lied me, Toy. You broke your promise.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Stop fucking saying you’re sorry. You’re not sorry, Toyin.”

“I am. I didn’t do this to hurt you. I just needed you to see that we work. That *this* works. I don’t understand why you can’t accept that we’re meant to be. You’re mine and I’m yours. Why won’t you let this happen?”

“It can’t,” I yelled, eyes wild, wolf going crazy inside me.

“Why not?”

“Because of this.” I reached for her hand and yanked it in front of her face, brushing my fingers over the ring. “You have no clue what this is, do you?”

“It’s nothing. A family heirloom.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “It’s proof that you and I are a terrible idea.”

She frowned hard. “Your parents warned you about witches and wolves. My mother warned me too but none of that matters. It was their logic, their thinking, but we’ve proven over the years their fears were exaggerated. Things are different. No more wars, witches and wolves mate all the time. The Goddess chose for us. They chose *you* for me.”

“As some kind of cruel joke I’m sure. This can’t happen. Do you know your history?”

She frowned and I shook my head, releasing her hand. I walked to the living room and she followed but kept her distance. I sat in the armchair while she returned to the sofa, same middle cushion.

“I’m a Moon Equinox witch but you already know because I’ve never hidden who I am from any of you. I’m a healer. My magic is light, not dark. I’m barely even a spell caster...”

I shot her a hard stare because that was a lie. She’d casted a spell and used it on me the night we’d conceived our son. Toyin read my mind and cringed.

“That was only one time and my abilities with spell casting are very limited.”

“But you’re capable of not only casting spells but dark magic.”

She frowned. “Only if I choose to and I don’t.”

I shook my head. “That’s the thing. If I mark you, the choice will no longer be yours.”

“I don’t understand. You’re talking in circles, Xander. Say what the fuck you mean.”

I leaned back, eased my hand into my pocket, and removed the ring. It had been in a cedar box for years, hidden amongst my father’s things I’d kept after he passed. I stood, walked over to Toy, grabbed her hand, and placed the ring in her palm before I sank into the armchair once more.

“This is...” She eyed the ring I had given her then the one on her finger. “Where did you get this?”

“From my father.”

“Your father?”

“Yes. He got it from a witch he killed after she murdered his best friend along with his entire pack. She was one of *your* ancestors.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re not just a Moon Equinox witch, Toyin. You’re a descendent of the Sovran Coven which means you’re pure blood just like I am,” I stated and she still seemed confused.

“You have no clue about your family legacy, do you?”

“I...no. Not whatever it is you’re talking about. My mother never discussed this with me.”

I pointed to the ring on her finger. “When your mother gave you that, she didn’t tell you the story behind it?”

“No. She only told me that it was passed down through generations. She said it was a reminder of who I was and...”

Something shifted. I felt the exact moment where something clicked and made sense.

“Tell me.”

“It’s nothing.”

“If it were nothing the color wouldn’t have drained from your face. What else did she say?” I demanded.

“It’s not what she said. It’s the timing.”

“Timing.”

“Yes, the timing of when she gave me the ring.” Toyin got anxious. Really fucking anxious. “She had a divination about my future. There was a dark shadow hovering over me...” she said, slowly glancing my way before she continued. “She gave me the ring and said it was a reminder that I needed to stick with my kind. On my twenty-first birthday, she told me the dark figure was a wolf and terrible things would happen if I allowed myself to love anyone other than our kind. Especially a wolf.”

“You didn’t think that was strange?”

“No, my mother was old school. She believed in tradition and *tradition* is loving and marrying your kind. She was a Moon Equinox witch, our coven was pure, but she also told me to trust my connection to the earth. The Moon Goddess chose you for me, why wouldn't I trust that we should be together?”

“I know I've never asked you this and you've never shared with any of us that I know of... But where is your mother? And what do you know about your father?”

Toyin grimaced but didn't speak. I sensed she was considering her words. She had been alone which was the reason my brothers had welcomed her to our pack. My reason was more selfish. She was mine even if I couldn't have her. It devastated me to find out our fate but it would have devastated me more to not have some piece of her. Regardless of how much it pained me, I wanted her close.

“Now is not the time for secrets. I've never asked because it wasn't relevant before now and I sensed there was pain behind the reason you were alone. You need to tell me what you know.”

“Very little,” she said quietly. “I never knew my father. She refused to discuss him with me, only sharing that he was very powerful and dangerous. Being with him was a mistake. That's what she told me.”

“And you didn't question her, not even when you were older?”

“I didn't have to. He was a Circle of Ember Warlock. That much she did share but made me swear to never tell anyone. It took me a while to learn why.”

“Which is?” I knew very little about the magic or their kind. Enough to keep our pack safe and protected from witches which wasn't much because we didn't bother anyone or cross boundaries. We existed peacefully in our territory but defended when necessary. Rarely did we ever have to.

“Circle of Ember breeds the most powerful and god-like warlocks. When you think about magic, there's a positive and

negative, dark and light, which balances. Embers don't have balance. They're completely dark."

"But you're not..."

She shook her head. "I guess it bypassed me. My mother always said my lack of ability was a blessing. Maybe because she was afraid I would end up like him." She seemed almost relieved.

"That doesn't explain why you were alone."

She grimaced again and mindlessly turned the ring on her finger. "After my mother made me promise to only be with our kind, she told me I needed to leave because I wasn't safe. The divination she had put me in danger. I refused because she was all I had. Our coven..." Toyin swallowed back her emotions.

"But you left?" My brows pinched.

"Not on my own. I don't know how or why but I suppose my mother was powerful enough to make it happen."

"Make what happen?"

"I went to sleep one night and woke up alone. She was gone, my life was gone. There was no trace of my mother or the coven that had been my family. I searched for years, asked questions, and no one knew anything about them. It made me crazy for a while because I thought maybe I was. How could an entire coven not exist? How could *she* not exist? I eventually gave up and began living my life without their existence. I met you about a year later." Her eyes slowly lifted to mine.

"And we offered you a home. A family..."

"Yes, so I never looked back. There was nothing to hold onto. I accepted my new life."

Fuck! This was getting even more complicated.

"She didn't tell you the entire story."

"Then you tell me. I can sense you're hiding something."

I removed my phone and pulled up the articles I'd found online. Our truths were hidden in mythical retellings. When I

lifted the device and handed it over, Toyin read, swiped, and continued reading. With each second that passed her brows pinched more and expression turned hopeless.

“This isn’t us, Xander. It’s not.”

“It is.”

“How do you know? A lot of these things are embellished and...”

“Read the rune on the pendant in the article. It’s the same one on your ring. On both rings.”

She glanced at the screen again and her lips parted briefly then slammed shut before she stared at me once more with hopelessness that crushed my soul.

“You’re rejecting me because you think this is true. You believe that if you choose me, some deeply rooted curse will ignite and I’ll try to...”

“Kill me, our son, my family, my pack.”

“I don’t believe any of this.”

“I do.”

“It’s a myth. Do you know how many fictionalized stories are out there about all of us? Most are founded in fear of what people can’t understand so they made us creatures who should be feared and avoided.”

“I do, but I also know there’s truth in every one of those theories. My parents told me about this curse. The past between witches and shifters. You know of them too. For years they were at war—killing, fighting, tearing each other apart. Is it so hard for you to believe there’s a curse created to keep our existences separate?”

“No, but why would it still exist? Our worlds are different now.”

“Some things get overlooked, some aren’t reversible, some are just there as reminders of where we came from. This is who we are, Toyin. You fucked with something very dangerous when you cast that spell. We have a son...”

“You’re saying we can’t be together.”

“Not if we want to be here for Rafe, we can’t.”

“You don’t know for sure.” She seemed desperate, and fuck I was too, but...

“Are you willing to take that risk?”

When her eyes moved to the back of the house where Rafe was sleeping and landed back on mine, I had her answer.

“You don’t have to mark me for us to be together.” She was desperate and trying.

“I barely survived the one night we were together. I can’t keep testing myself. I won’t...” My eyes met hers. “And I don’t trust you.”

You broke your promise.

She was crushed but I didn’t care. I *didn’t* trust her and trusting Toyin put us both at risk. Put our son at risk.

“I won’t...” My eyes narrowed and she shook her head, changing the subject. “So what now?”

I brushed a hand down my face. “I work on getting past what you did and we raise our son. That’s all this can be.”

She was crushed again but so was I. No, I didn’t trust her. She’d broken a very important promise but she was still mine. I couldn’t have her. I was supposed to and that hurt. My wolf did not understand why I kept denying him. He moved off instinct and his instinct was to claim our mate.

Toyin swallowed hard. “I understand.”

My eyes narrowed. “Do you? Because if not, let me be clear, if anything about my past or yours is true, if this is real, we don’t survive this. One or both of us...”

“Dies. I get it. I won’t take that risk.” When I simply stared, she exhaled her frustration like she had the right to be annoyed. “I’m giving you my word. I won’t do it again and I know that doesn’t mean much to you considering the past, but I won’t cast any more spells. And for the record, I never put you under one. I didn’t manipulate your feelings for me. I only

used magic to force you to acknowledge those feelings. *Feelings* you already had.”

My wolf growled in awareness of those feelings.

“Doesn’t matter, you manipulated *something*.”

She didn’t respond so I stood, allowing my eyes to sweep the open space. There were toys, a playpen, and a high chair. All reminders that she’d spent time here with our son.

“Get some rest. We’ll head back to the city tomorrow.”

“No, you can go. I’m going to stay here for a while.”

My wolf growled his disapproval and I snorted, glaring down at Toyin. “You’re going back to the city *with me*. I’m going to get to know my son.”

“Don’t you dare act as if you not knowing him is my fault. I didn’t keep Rafe from you. *You* left.”

“I didn’t know he existed. He shouldn’t have existed, Toy. This shit is not on me either. We’re going to the city.”

“And what about your mate? What will she have to say about us being with you?”

My wolf snarled in defense of Toyin. No matter how this had happened or how angry I was, no one would come before Toyin or our child. He wouldn’t allow it, neither would I, but I didn’t tell her any different. Keeping my intent hidden was cruel, but I wanted to hurt her the same way she’d hurt me.

“She’s for me to worry about, not you. Get some rest.”

Toyin opened her mouth to speak but I cut her off. “Don’t bother. You do not have the right. Let us not forget you created this mess and now you have to deal with the consequences. No matter what they are. I’ll stay in Laz’s room since you two are in mine. Good night.”

I folded my arms over my chest and she glared at me but turned on her heels, heading to my room. The door slammed shortly after and I groaned my annoyance.

Another fucking door slamming.

I was already over this shit.

CHAPTER 5

TOYIN.

By the time the sun came up I was exhausted. I'd barely slept because my mind was clouded and heavy with thoughts of what Xander had told me the night before. I must have read a hundred stories online which all said the same thing and proved his point. We were doomed. There was no way we could be together.

Pure blood witches and royal blood werewolves were not allowed to mate. Millenniums ago, my ancestors had decided since love was blind with some of our coven, they would use fear to stop those members from following their hearts. If you ventured outside of the coven, there was the fear of extinction of the one you loved.

Not every member carried the curse, but that was by design. You had to decide if the risk was worth the reward. However if you chose wrong and were indeed one of the cursed witches, lives were lost. There were only two outcomes. You killed your true love and everyone they loved which meant you ended up brokenhearted and alone or you died in the process of trying to destroy the one you loved.

A harsh lesson, a profound risk, but according to the myths it kept covens and packs pure. Now, the same curse was keeping me from having my one true love. A shifter my heart already belonged to. By default I would be denying my son the loving family and home he deserved.

This was all my fault.

“Can I come in?” The deep rumble of Xander’s voice which touched places in me that it shouldn’t have, startled me. I had been so used to being without him that I’d forgotten he was here. Even though I hadn’t gotten any sleep, I was still in bed, *his* bed. Xander stood by the door, staring intensely, waiting for permission. Before I could process what he was thinking his eyes landed on the crib in the corner. “He’s awake...”

I frowned because it was barely six and Rafe usually wasn’t up before seven or eight. When I glanced to the corner and noticed my baby boy sitting up smiling, my eyes shot over to Xander who entered the room, mumbling the answer to a question I hadn’t asked. “I heard him.”

Supernatural hearing. I’d easily forgotten how things worked in a shifter’s world and their capabilities. Xander was shirtless so I watched his back, the muscles flexing and moving as he reached for and lifted Rafe into his arms. A wave of emotion cycled through me. This was his first time holding his son, feeling the bond I’d felt since he was born.

“Do you know me?” The low rumble of Xander’s voice placed a smile on my face as he spoke to Rafe, who bounced and smiled in his father’s arms. Xander chuckled and kissed the top of his head.

His back was still to me but I could feel his smile, his acceptance of the way our lives had shifted. More importantly I could feel his peace and when he turned my heart melted. This strong handsome man, holding his son, a smaller version of himself was everything I wanted in my life.

Xander was beautiful all on his own. Tall, solid, muscular frame with intricate tribal ink down his neck, shoulders, and back. The beard he wore was longer than I was used to and so was his hair, which was now in short spirals, but every inch of this man was temptingly perfect.

There was also that painful fact that one look at him, forced memories of that one night and I was struggling to be okay with that being our only night.

Those dark intense eyes, full lips, wide nose were also present on the smaller version of himself who was smiling and clasping his father's beard with his tiny fist. Alone, Xander was perfection but together with his son—*our son*—they moved my world into a stratosphere I didn't believe possible.

“Laz said you named him Rafe...”

“Rafe Xander Bennett.”

He frowned, looking down at him again. “He has my last name? How? I wasn't here.”

“I delivered him at the cabin with Mara.” Mara was the multipurpose pack member. She navigated in so many different lanes which was necessary for our world, but midwife was one of the most important. Delivering babies had to be handled with care for supernaturals and she was always there to ensure things went as they should. “She filled out the paperwork to get his birth certificate. We added you as the father. Laz signed your name. I couldn't...” I swallowed hard. “You needed to be listed. He's yours, you weren't here. I'm...”

“Don't say sorry. Thank you.” He nodded stiffly, smiling at Rafe.

“Rafe...” he murmured.

“It means wise wolf. He's your son, it fits.”

“What do you call him?”

“Mostly Rafe, but sometimes Wild One.”

“Wild One?”

“He's active. Really active and doesn't like to stay still. The name fits, see...” I pointed to our son who bounced like he was about to leap out of his father's arms but Xander's reflexes were quick. Instead Rafe bucked, rocking wildly.

“That's probably his wolf. He wants to play.”

“He's so young.” I frowned. I had asked questions and done the research. Laz and Zion couldn't sense Rafe's wolf yet or tell specifically if he had one but Xander was his father so...

“He won’t shift for a while. I feel his wolf and our little pup *is* a wild one. Aren’t you, Wild One?” I watched as our son cooed and bounced in his father’s arms. It was beautiful. And I felt terrible because Xander had missed so much already. That hadn’t been my fault. He’d shut us out. He ran... *because of me*. But I still felt bad for what he’d missed over the past months.

“You can feed him then we’ll leave. I need things for him at my place in the city.”

I threw the covers back and climbed out of bed. My heart was racing. “I have things at my place. You can just come see him there.”

“No,” Xander growled from somewhere deep. “He will be with me.” I panicked and his eyes softened a little. “Both of you. With me at my place.”

“But...”

He sighed. “We can’t be together but we will raise him together, as a family.”

My arms locked over my chest and Xander’s eyes lowered, following the motion. His awareness of me made my skin warm. “And what about your mate?”

“I told you...”

My stomach knotted at the thought of him being with another woman. He had before, plenty of times since I had been around, but this time felt different. This woman he’d claimed as his mate.

“I know what you told me but how can you not expect me to worry about her? Are we all going to live there together? One big happy blended family or something.”

Xander offered a challenging grin that had my angry flaring and core tightening. “You can’t handle that?”

It annoyed me how easily he managed to get under my skin. My eyes narrowed and he smiled wider. “I think I just pissed your mother off, Wild One.”

I stormed closer. “You can go to hell. Give me my son.”

When I reached for Rafe, Xander turned away and stepped back. “*Our* son and relax all that. Although I have the right, I wouldn’t treat you with disrespect. You are the mother of my child. I don’t agree with how this happened, but I will never dishonor you, Toyin. No one else will either. We’re a family. While we’re at my place it will only be the three of us.”

“And what about *her*?”

Xander sighed his frustration, heading to the door as he explained, “She’s *not* my mate. I didn’t choose or claim her. That’s some shit she made up in her head.”

I smiled at his back, feeling hopeful, but then asked, “So why did you bring her with you?”

“She doesn’t have anywhere else to go. That’s kind of our thing, Toy. We provide solace and a sense of family to those who don’t have their own. It’s what our parents did and now what we do.”

Jo had been a lone wolf but was also Laz’s mate. There were families within the clan but only a few. The Bennett pack was Laz, his brothers, and a collection of misfits. They were chosen family but still...

“And now that you know about Rafe...”

I followed him out the room and he stopped, turning to me. “What about him? My promise to her wasn’t about you or anyone else. Only her need for a pack family. A safe place to exist.”

“But you slept with her. You had a relationship.”

“You and I are going back to who we were. I slept with other women in the past, Toy. The only difference now is we’re raising our son.”

“Together as a family, cohabiting at your place with your rules while you sleep with other women?”

My heart hurt but he didn’t respond. He only turned to walk away but I didn’t let him go.

“And what about me? Do I have the same rights as you? Am I allowed to sleep with who I want?”

He growled but didn't respond right away. He paused his steps and glared over his shoulder. "We both need to focus on raising our son. He's the priority."

With that, he walked away, heading to the stairs. I assumed Xander was taking Rafe with him so he could get dressed. I headed back to his room to do the same and gathered clothes for our son once I showered and changed. This was going to be a disaster. I could already feel the darkness brewing but there wasn't a damn thing I could do about any of this because I'd created this mess.



THE DRIVE back to the city was quiet. Rafe slept and Xander didn't talk. I wondered what was going through his head but I didn't ask. Mostly since I was afraid of what he might share. More anger from what I'd done. More confirmation that we could never be or changing his mind about the woman who'd arrived with him. Neither topic was one I wanted to discuss so I remained quiet too.

As soon as we entered the lobby of our building, me moving with quick steps to keep in pace with Xander's long strides while he carried our son against his chest in one arm and Rafe's bags over his shoulder, two women from the Bennett pack approached us. Both sets of eyes bounced between Xander and me.

The looks on their faces expressed their thoughts as they whispered between themselves. Most didn't approve of me. They weren't always nice and welcoming, but I didn't care. I had Jo, Zion, and Laz. Not all of the pack members were as blatant with their disapproval as these two and not all of them still harbored ill feelings but some did.

Most of the women in the pack realized I wasn't going anywhere so they were coming around but not these two. I assumed Xander wouldn't care but he proved me wrong when he cut off their path, delivering a disapproving stare.

“You don’t need to understand anything about her or our situation.”

“I...we...” Sharma said before Kiara finished her fumbled sentence.

“We don’t care about what you have going on.” She spoke with very little confidence as she peered skeptically at Xander who smiled darkly.

“I don’t get it. She’s not one of us and barely his type.” His tone was condescending and I assumed he was repeating what they were whispering.

Their eyes widened at the same time and he leaned toward the women. “She’s none of your business. *We* are none of your business, understood?”

“Understood,” fumbled from both their mouths as they attempted to move around Xander but he spoke once more, halting their steps.

“And disrespecting my son or his mother is the same as disrespecting me. Don’t make that mistake again.” His voice was cold and harsh which had me glaring at them. What the hell had they said about my son?

I was about to ask when they bolted, hurrying out the building. “What did they say?”

He lowered his eyes and started moving again. I quickly fell in step beside Xander. “That he wasn’t mine.”

My mouth dropped open but I remained calm when I asserted the truth. “He’s yours.”

“I know.” His heavy gaze made it to me as the doors to the elevator opened. As soon as we were inside, I looked up at Xander but before I could say what I was thinking, he shook his head. “He’s mine, Toy. I don’t need a test. It won’t be any more convincing than what I’m feeling. He’s mine,” he repeated.

We traveled to the top floor. My unit was on the floor beneath theirs but I chose not to argue the logistics. The closer we got to his place, the more my heart raced. Was she there? If

she was, would I be able to control myself from clawing her eyes out or banishing her from existence?

Who was I kidding? My spell casting skills were basic at best. I couldn't do much to the woman other than cause a few mild discomforts. Like severe acne or warts.

Warts. How cliché. I grinned at the thought then rolled my eyes while Xander unlocked the door and walked inside. I hesitated and he frowned briefly before shaking his head. "She's not here. Laz and Jo made sure she had a place and no, not on your floor. She's on the third but I already told you, she's not your concern."

I scowled and entered the apartment. I had only been here a few times. Mostly when we were all together our time was spent at Laz or Zion's apartments. Xander always kept his distance from me and his feelings locked tight. It was surreal how things had changed. Now he wanted me here, with him.

Because of our son.

I followed Xander through the apartment, which was massive and similar to his brothers'. Wide open space, modern features, dark blends of gray and black with a beautiful view of Hollow Grove through the floor to ceiling windows that took up one wall of the living room.

He stopped in the hallway outside one of the rooms and opened the door, motioning for me to enter first. The space was fully decorated with black furniture and blinds with deep gray carpet. It felt masculine and prominent, like him. "You can have this room. Mine is across the hall."

When I didn't say anything, he frowned and lowered his eyes to me. "What's wrong?"

"It's dark."

"We can change whatever you want. The other room is an office. We'll have to move my things out to make it comfortable for our little wild one's room."

I smiled up at my baby boy who was still out cold with his head resting on his father's shoulder. "You don't have to call him that."

Xander's brows pinched and he dropped his eyes to our son's face. "It's what he's used to." His eyes swept the room again then he laid Rafe on the bed, placing his bag on the dresser. "Why don't you make a list of what we need and we can go out..."

"I have stuff at my place, the rest we can order."

"Or we can go get it, *together*. He should have things at both of our places and I missed a lot, Toy. I want to get some of that back."

I arched a brow. "Does that mean you're forcing me to stay here?"

He glared at me like he wanted to say yes. "I'm not forcing you. I'm hoping you'll agree this is best for now so I can get acquainted with our son. You being here will help. All of this is new to me."

He was trying, this was my fault. I wasn't going to argue. "Okay, we can go out."

He nodded tightly. "I'm gonna go see if Jo and Laz will keep him. I'm sure it will be easier to shop without him."

Xander left and I leaned over the bed and kissed Rafe's cheeks before I sat on the side processing what my world looked like right now. A few minutes later Jo appeared in the doorway, smiling.

"You okay?"

"No."

Her eyes softened sympathetically. "It will get better."

I shook my head. "No, it won't. He's so angry with me and he has every right to be. Now things between us are weird. So much worse than they were before. At least in the past we were friends. Now we're just...complicated."

She entered the room and sat beside me. "Laz told me about the curse. I'm sorry. This is so messed up, Toy."

"Yeah, me too."

"We're going to figure this out. All of us."

“There’s nothing to figure out.”

“You love him and he loves you...”

I scoffed and she smiled. “He’s upset but he loves you, Toyin. You’re his mate.”

“*Forbidden* mate.”

“Yeah well we’ll find a way around that very small detail. It’s just magic and no magic’s permanent, right?”

She had a point but some magic was so powerful it was almost impossible to reverse or challenge.

“I’m a healer. I don’t have the kind of magic or powers that can touch this.”

“Maybe not but we’ve reached out to some people who might be able to help. We’re going to fix this. You and Xander are meant to be.”

“We *were*, but not now. He doesn’t trust me.”

She smiled and rolled her eyes. “No?”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“You’re here in his apartment, where he lives, sleeps, and where he’s most vulnerable. You don’t think he trusts you?”

My brows pinched but my shoulders relaxed. “Maybe a little.”

“More than a little. Give him time and no more magic.” She smiled wider. “On him that is.”

“Oh gosh, no.” I glanced at our son. “I learned my lesson.”

“Then the rest will work itself out.” She stood and glanced at Rafe too. “Be careful, Toy. I love you both and if what they’re saying is true, you two being together before we have a chance to navigate this is dangerous. You can’t bond and you two here alone will be tempting. Laz said it was a bad idea but Xander told him it was his decision. No sex and I mean it. If things get out of control...”

“I’m not thinking about sex.” *Or at least I wasn’t...* “I want Xander to get to know his son. He deserves that. He

missed a lot.”

“So did you,” she warned. I had missed a lot but mostly because I’d forced his hand and he left. “Let’s do lunch soon. We need to talk this through.”

“Okay. Not that it will help.” I felt helpless to the situation.

“Positive thoughts, Toy.”

She left and I considered what she was saying. Maybe there was a way around this, but even if there was that didn’t mean Xander would choose me. I might have ruined the possibility and the reality of this being it for us made me sick to my stomach.

CHAPTER 6

XANDER.

For the last few hours, Toyin had dragged me from store to store shopping for our son. I wasn't annoyed by our day, but the pull to her and the longing I felt while my wolf went crazy pushing for me to mount and claim Toyin was trouble of a different kind. I had never in my life wanted anyone or anything as badly as I wanted Toyin.

My eyes drifted to the center of the aisle where she stared at endless rows of diapers, hands on her hips, deep in concentration. A temporary fix he would piss in and we would dispose of. The decision shouldn't have been so complicated but my thoughts weren't on the diaper decision. They were on the throbbing and pulsing of my dick which had been rock hard since I'd returned home and laid eyes on *her*.

Even now as she stood with her petite frame torturing me, I knew living together was a horrible idea. Her lower half was covered in black leggings, allowing that damn ass to taunt me. She wore a cropped tee and a short denim jacket that stopped at her waist, providing me with the perfect view. Fuck me.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

“He’s growing so fast. I wonder if I should get half his current size and half the next size up. It’s best to keep a full stock. The worst is realizing at two in the morning that you’re down to the last diaper and you have to make a quick store run.”

I snapped out of my lustful thoughts and glared at Toyin. “You left the house at two in the morning to get pampers?”

With our son?” The weight and authority in my tone had her turning to frown at me.

“No, I didn’t. I ordered them. They have services that work all hours of the day and night but if I’d needed to, I would have. It was only me caring for him, Xander. Let’s not forget you left us...”

I made a correction. “*You*... I left *you*. I didn’t know about him.” Another low blow but shit, this was hard and neither of us wanted to be wrong. “You also weren’t alone. You had Laz and Zion. Seems like Zion was more than willing to do whatever you needed him to.”

Was I jealous of my own brother?

A little.

He and Toyin seemed incredibly cozy but he wouldn’t do that to me. He knew she was *mine*...

“Laz and Zion both stepped up in *your* absence. Zion more than Laz. Jo got pregnant not long after me and I didn’t want to be an imposition on either of them. You should be happy I had your brothers.” She glared my way.

“I am.” But it still pissed me off. Leaving had been my decision. Blocking them had been my decision. Staying gone for a year, my decision. But had I known about my son, I would have *decided* differently.

“They were good uncles. That’s all.”

“I’m not insinuating anything else,” I asserted and she smirked, rolling her eyes like she had read my thoughts.

“Mmhm.”

“Zion wouldn’t cross that line and neither would *you*?” I posed the last part as a question because I was sure of Zion’s motives, but hers...

“I wouldn’t sleep with your brother, Xander. If you don’t feel certain about whether or not I would, then I’m telling you now.” She sounded angry. When she turned back to the diapers, snatching packs from the shelf, I relaxed, smiled, and

moved to help. Whatever she grabbed, I grabbed until we had more than enough.

“Can we go now? We have two carts of stuff that feels like overkill,” I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

“It’s not. Kids require a lot.” Toyin shot me a dirty look and I chuckled, catching her around the waist before she could escape with the cart she was in charge of. When her back met my chest and I held her in place with my hand flat against her stomach, I immediately regretted doing so.

Her softness to my hardness. The light scent of cotton candy that clung to her skin and the way my wolf began pacing beneath my skin were all reminders that being close to Toyin was not good for either of us.

“No more arguing over blame. This is where we are...” I swallowed hard, fighting the urge to sink my teeth into her neck. “I’m willing to do whatever to make this work.”

“Then let me go so we don’t make a terrible mistake.” Her words were hoarse and I understood why. Our attraction, the sexual tension, and the pull was strong. I made the smart choice and did as she asked, but my muscles remained locked painfully tight.

“Truce.” Toyin forced a smile, tightly wrapped her hands around the handle to the shopping cart, and walked off.

There was no way for me to survive this and if it wasn’t for our son, I wouldn’t try. I would claim her and fully accept the consequences but there was more to consider than me and my selfish needs.

After our shopping was done and my Jeep was loaded, I realized neither of us had eaten since that morning. My stomach growled with awareness the minute I began thinking about food.

“We should eat.” I glanced at Toyin as I navigated from the shopping center’s parking lot. She kept her eyes on her phone when she responded which irritated me a little. I knew our fate but that didn’t magically end all the things I felt and wanted for us.

“I can make us something when we get back. Jo said Rafe is up from a nap.”

“Then let’s take his things to the apartment then we can all go out and grab something,” I murmured, keeping my eyes pinned on Toyin until hers fastened to mine.

“We don’t have to go out. It’s not like...”

“We’re a *family*, because we are,” I defended. Her rejection hurt, even if mild.

“I was going to say together. We don’t have to be a family in public.” She grimaced and mumbled the last part. “It might be easier if we’re not.”

“I will not hide from anyone, Toyin. That’s not who the fuck I am. If you’re concerned about how being attached to me affects your future...”

“I’m not,” she argued. “At least not in the way you’re thinking. You’re the Alpha...”

“Laz is the Alpha.” I glared and she rolled her eyes. My brothers and I were all Alphas but Laz was the leader of our pack. After our father passed, the role could have been mine. I hadn’t wanted it. Laz was more suited and with me being the eldest of the three, I needed the freedom to protect my brothers without the responsibility of protecting an entire pack. I was very capable, as were Laz and Zion. However we all had our roles and accepted them.

“You’re all Alphas. You know what I mean. You’re a prize. The women in your pack don’t appreciate that we’re...” She frowned slightly. “What we are.”

Promised to each other.

“And you don’t think you are?”

“That I’m what?”

“A prize?” My expression darkened. I was protective of Toyin. She was mine to protect, both physically and emotionally.

“I am,” she said sternly.

“Then fuck what the others think or believe. We won’t hide our family to spare their feelings.”

She smiled and nodded. “You’ll have to be with one of them, one day.”

I didn’t address the statement because I didn’t want to. Physically maybe but I would never *be* with anyone but Toyin. That much I understood even if she didn’t. If where we were right now was the best I could have, then it would have to be enough. Instead of dwelling there, I changed the subject.

“Have they said or done anything to you? To make you feel unwelcome?”

She scoffed and rolled her eyes again. “You heard Sharma and Kiara. Their opinion of me was mild. It’s also not everyone’s opinion but I also don’t care. They can dislike me, hate me even, but they will honor and respect my son.”

My wolf growled in confirmation. “They will and not just Rafe...”

I glared at Toyin, communicating what I meant and she sighed. “Don’t go pissing off your pack for me. That’s not a smart move.”

I shrugged. “I’m their Alpha, you think I give a fuck about pissing any of them off?”

She grinned. “So you’re the Alpha now?”

“When it counts.” I winked and she shook her head. I lifted a hand and lowered it to her thigh, giving a gentle squeeze. Toyin looked up at me hesitantly and I made my stance clear. “I’ve always protected you, Toyin. From the day we met, I’ve always put in the effort to ensure you were good. That will not change, no matter our circumstances. Our pack rules are based on family, mutual respect, and acceptance. That applies to you as well and not just because of me or Rafe. You are a part of Bennett pack, our community, and we do not accept disrespecting our own.”

“Thank you.” Her voice was light but quiet so I left things as they were. Whatever this was between us would be

impossible to navigate but I refused to allow it to destroy either of us.



“HE’S A HAPPY BABY.”

“He is. He hardly ever gets upset or cries. There’s almost always a smile on his face.”

I stared at my son, feeling so many conflicting emotions. I loved him with every fiber of my being yet I felt cheated by the things I would never get to experience with him. The first few months of his life would always be lost to me.

“Hey...” Toyin said softly. Rafe was sitting in her lap so I lifted my eyes from his and found hers filled with concern. “What’s wrong?”

“What did I miss...” I glanced down again. “With him?”

The pain flickered in her eyes. Pain for me because she understood what I was dealing with.

“I know you can’t tell me every little thing, but I want to know as much as you’re willing to share.”

“I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, Xander but I can also let you see it...” She hesitated. “If...if you want but you’ll have to trust me.”

Magic.

My angry glare met her hesitant one and she tightened the hold on our son. “Never mind, I was just...”

“How, what do you have to do?”

No matter how angry I was with Toyin for using magic the one night we were together, I understood why she’d done it. Our desperation to be together was the same. However, I knew all the reasons we couldn’t be. I didn’t completely trust her but I was also sure she wouldn’t do anything to harm me. If she could give me memories of my son, things I’d missed, then I wanted them. I would let her in.

“I can share my memories with you. It’s actually quite simple.”

I frowned hard and she added, “I’m only sharing my memories. I won’t have insight into yours nor will I be able to change anything. I’m giving you access to mine. Consider it opening a one sided portal.”

Sounded easy enough but...

“That’s all. Nothing else changes.”

“No, that’s all but you don’t have to. I can tell you...”

I quickly shook my head. “No, do it.”

“Give me your hand.”

I lifted my hand and extended it across the table. She slipped her palm into mine.

“Close your eyes.”

I tensed and glanced around the café. It was small, quiet, and damn near empty. She smiled softly. “You can keep them open but I have to close mine. If it doesn’t work...”

“No, I can do it. How long will it take?”

“Not long, the memories will flood your mind fast, but they’ll stay and become a part of you. You’ll recall them the same as I do. You won’t know everything that’s there but if you think of certain things the memories will surface. Things that remind you of what I’ve experienced with him. Like when you smell lavender, you’ll think of his bath time and see those memories. That’s how it works. You can also say certain things in your mind, like thinking of the day he was born, and you’ll remember. It’s not an exact science but it’s a lot better than me just telling you. The memories will be yours and you’ll experience them like you were there.”

“Okay...” I gripped her hand tighter and watched as she closed her eyes. I kept my eyes on her until she began mumbling phrases I didn’t understand then the sudden urge to close my eyes took over. My palms felt warm and the warmth traveled up my arm to my spine then flashes started to fill my

head. Things I knew I hadn't experienced but could see clear as day.

Toyin in my cabin. She was in pain and Jo was with her, whispering encouraging words, brushing damp hair from her face. I saw the minute Rafe was placed in her arms. Toyin cried and my chest tightened. I saw her lying next to him in an apartment that looked like the ones in our building. He smiled as he lay on his back, kicking his little feet while she sang to him.

It was like watching a live photo stream of her life and his. Then I felt an overwhelming sadness when images of Toyin curled up in the bed, crying, shifted into my view. She snatched her hand away and my eyes shot open. Hers fluttered and blinked like she was struggling to focus but a cautious smile surfaced right after.

“See, that wasn't so bad, was it?”

I frowned and she smiled more prominently. She had to be aware of what I'd seen because when I opened my mouth to ask, she shook her head.

“It was hard...” she said quietly. “Doing this without you. It was difficult at times but it wasn't always like that.”

“Toy...”

“No, it's fine. You're here now and this wasn't about me. Did you see him?”

I smiled and glanced at Rafe who was babbling away trying to grab at what was left on Toyin's plate. “Yeah I did. It's weird as shit because I know I wasn't there, but it feels like I was. I see it like those are my memories and not yours.”

“Good, see magic is not so...” Her sentence halted and her eyes moved around. Toyin's posture was rigid and she looked terrified, which had me looking around.

“What's wrong?”

“Magic.” Her eyes bounced around to the few faces in here with us.

“The magic you just did?”

“Not that. This is dark. It feels *very* dark. Something’s not right. We should go.”

She pushed her chair back and lifted Rafe to her chest. Her movements were jerky and erratic which had my wolf on edge, ready to shift and defend.

“What do you mean dark, Toy?”

Her eyes moved around again before they landed on me. “I can’t explain it. Just dark. Please can we go.”

“Yeah, let’s go.” I removed cash from my pocket and tossed it on the table, reaching for Rafe but Toyin clutched him tighter.

“Let me take him, just in case...”

Just in case something or someone was out there I needed to handle.

With a stiff nod, I lifted his bag and handed it to Toyin. “Stay behind me and close.”

When I moved, she moved. I felt her at my back when we exited the building. The sun had just set and night was hovering which draped the area with darkness but my senses were on alert. Toyin was right, something was off. I could sense the danger which had me pulsing to shift.

“Get in, lock the doors, and stay the fuck in the car,” I demanded, yanking the door open.

“Xan...”

“This is not the time. Just...” She threw me off when she fisted my shirt and kissed me. I hooked an arm around her waist and kissed her back, with our son cradled between us. “Stay in the car, no matter what?”

With a sharp nod and hesitant eyes she pulled away and slipped into the passenger seat of my Jeep only seconds before I laid eyes on the problem. A warlock. He appeared human but I could see the glow of power that surrounded him. His eyes were glowing a steely gray and his expression was taunting.

“You can’t keep him from us, *wolf*.” The smugness in his tone had me shifting as I launched for him, swiping a paw that caught him in the side before he elevated and threw a hand in my direction. A ball of energy knocked me in my chest and I went flying back toward the alley next to the café. That was when I realized he wasn’t alone. Two rogues were waiting.

I snarled at both who took a step forward, canines exposed. Within seconds, both went for my throat. I leapt to meet their charge, twisting to catch them both, bringing my paws in and extending them from my chest. I caught one across his lower half and the other down the neck before I landed hard on my back and slid across the ground into the side of the building.

“You’re good, *wolf*. He told me not to underestimate you. I should have known. You’re a Bennett.” I lifted my head to see the warlock positioned on the edge of the building. While my focus was on him the two rogues charged once more.

I caught the first one around the neck, meeting his advance with my own. I clamped down hard and jerked my head back until I ripped his throat and he landed with dead weight below me but the pause allowed the other to pounce, colliding with me.

I bared my teeth, spinning away from him, but his size and weight limited my control. With quick movements my paws swiped at his neck enough for me to throw him off and we fell back to the ground, tangled in claws, teeth, and snarls until I managed to claw into the rogue’s neck and chest at the same time. I dug in deep enough to draw out a suffering groan seconds before the beast scampered away from me, collapsing to the ground. Just like the one before him, he shifted back to his human form as life drained from his body.

“You can’t fight everyone...” The warlock lifted his hand and landed a few feet away from me. I lunged toward him but collided with a wall I couldn’t see. He was protecting himself.

Fucking pussy.

I snarled, baring my teeth. “Then put down your magic and I’ll fight *you*...”

“That wouldn’t be very smart, now would it? I’m no fool, *wolf*.” The smugness in his tone grated my nerves. “That would be like you taking me on without your wolf.”

I quickly shifted and extended to my full height, holding my arms out beside me. “I’m willing and I’ll still rip you to shreds, as I am now.”

He smirked. “This is not my fight. I’m only here as a warning. You can’t protect him from all of us. He’s coming for the boy.”

Rafe.

“You’re not touching my son,” I growled.

“Don’t be so sure.”

I lunged again with a rage grounded determination. Anyone trying to harm my son would die. Once again he threw his hand up and hid behind a wall of magic like a coward. “Fucking pussy, put the magic away and let me prove to you just how sure I am.”

He grinned and shook his head. “Again, not my fight. You’ve been warned. He’s coming.”

He turned to leave but paused and circled his finger in the air. “I suppose I’ll clean up your mess. Can’t have the humans fearful that *your* kind is a threat right now. Besides, you have bigger issues.”

The rogues’ bodies disappeared and so did the warlock. I stood with my chest heaving, as I stared into the black space where he had been standing before I headed back to my Jeep, tapping the window. Toyin’s eyes darted around before she hit the lock and I moved to the back to retrieve the duffle I kept with a change of clothes. I yanked on jeans and a t-shirt, bypassing shoes, and moved into the driver’s seat.

“What happened?” Toyin’s eyes were wild as she searched me for injuries. They were minor and already healing.

“Not now.”

“Xander...”

“I said not now,” I growled, peeling out of the parking lot. *Rafe*, they wanted Rafe and I needed to know why. Until I had some clarity, I couldn’t process any of what had just happened which meant I needed to speak to my brothers.

Meet me at my place. – Me

What happened? – Laz

I’ll explain when I get there. – Me

What the fuck happened, Xan? I feel your concern. Is Rafe okay? – Zion

He’s fine. We just need to ensure he’ll stay that way. My place, now. I’m on my way. – Me

I felt Toyin staring at me as she held Rafe in her lap. She had bypassed his car seat but I couldn’t blame her. She was his mother; she could sense something wasn’t right even if she didn’t know exactly what was looming.

“Is it bad?” she asked when my eyes met hers and I decided not to lie.

“It might be but I’ll give my life for his so you don’t have to worry.”

The look she gave said it all. That wasn’t a tradeoff. She wasn’t prepared to lose either of us, but at the moment the only assurance I had was no one would touch our son because I would put my life on the line for his, so I kept my thoughts to myself.

CHAPTER 7

TOYIN.

“They’re here.”

“What?” I looked up from where I’d been sitting with my back against the headboard with Rafe asleep in my arms.

“Iraina Lafayette and Meriden Alden.”

I frowned more and Xander’s pinched brows relaxed some. His focus was on Rafe when he spoke. “Jo reached out to see if they could help us figure this out. Iraina is Izan’s sister...”

“The vampires? How can they help?”

“She’s a hybrid, vampire witch. According to Jo, Meriden is an elder from the Willow Grove coven. You share a very distant lineage with her. They both know about the curse and think they can help.”

I shook my head, looking down at Rafe. “That’s not what this is about, he said you can’t keep *him* from them. He said they’re coming for our son, Xander. No one is angry with us for avoiding the curse. They want Rafe, which doesn’t make sense.”

“No, it doesn’t and we need to figure out why. So come talk to them.”

I exhaled a sigh and adjusted Rafe in my arms so I could do as he asked. Xander realized I was bringing Rafe with me and shook his head. “Let him sleep.”

I cradled him tighter and my eyes darted up to his, communicating my fears. Someone wanted my son. I didn’t

want him to be alone.

“He’s safe here, Toy. To get to him, they have to go through me. Let him sleep.” Xander moved from the doorway, kissed the top of my head, and lifted Rafe from my arms. As soon as he had him, I felt the void but watched as Xander whispered against the side of our son’s face, placed him in his portable crib, then extended a hand to me.

“Let’s go.”

I slid my palm against his and walked with Xander to the living room. Zion was in the kitchen pouring a glass of some type of liquor while Laz stood next to Jo a few feet away from the door where I noticed the two women. I couldn’t help but recognize Iraina. She was strikingly beautiful with smooth mocha hued skin, a slim nose, diamond shaped eyes, and bowed lips. Her jet-black hair was pulled back into a sleek ponytail that landed between her shoulder blades and her makeup was flawless, appearing as if it were professionally done. She was dressed in black leather pants, a black mock turtleneck, and heels—a signature for the vampire side of her bloodline.

Then there was Meriden who was the complete contrast. Jeans, a loose-fitting sweater, and ankle boots. Her gray streaked hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun and her appearance read more “threw on something to make it out the door” than trying to be fashionable. Her eyes were kind when they found me which was very different from the sharp intrusive gaze and smugness from Iraina who was the first to speak.

“Toyin?” She extended a hand which I reluctantly accepted. “I’m Iraina Lafayette. It’s nice to meet you.” She then moved her gaze over to Xander who was still beside me. “And you, it’s been a while. You just disappeared, didn’t you?”

I tensed uncomfortably at the familiarity she used when speaking to Xander and the way her eyes trailed over him.

“You don’t see me enough to know when I’m around and when I’m not, Iraina,” he murmured, bringing a smile to her

lips.

“I know everything, especially things I’m interested in.”

“Raina, not the time or place,” Laz warned and her eyes shot over to him while her face split into a full smile. She circled back to me and offered that same smile.

“I’m no threat to whatever *this* is.” She flicked her wrist between Xander and me. “I only flirt because it makes him uncomfortable and well, look at him.” She winked and stepped around us, heading to the living room.

My eyes shot up to his and he groaned and shook his head, placing a kiss on my temple before he whispered. “Never happened and never will.”

I wasn’t given time to respond because Jo looped her arm through mine. “Why don’t we get situated in here.”

Jo and I sat next to each other. I smiled at Kaleb who was strapped against her chest in a baby sling. Laz, Zion, and Xander stood nearby, shoulder to shoulder—big, opposing, and serious. Meriden sat in the armchair adjacent to us while Iraina was propped on the side of where Meriden was seated.

Meriden stared my way. “Xander explained what you’re dealing with and I’m familiar with the binding spell. I have an aunt who fell victim centuries ago. She...” She glanced over at Xander and his brothers before smiling softly at me. “She found herself in love with the wrong man, or rather, what her kind considered wrong based on the rules back then.”

“Did she...”

Die.

“Yes, it was tragic. A lot of lives were lost, *including* her own. From what I understand, it was a brutal and horrific sight. Their hearts were forced right out of their chest, killing them instantly.”

“Then why are you here? We already know the possibilities.” Xander frowned and Laz placed a hand on his arm to prevent him from advancing forward.

Iraina took over, bringing everyone's attention to her. "Meriden and I counseled together and with a trusted few. Considering how delicate the situation is we thought it best to keep this discreet. We all seem to agree on how things might be different between the two of you." She was the epitome of confidence. So much that I believed she had a resolution simply from how she delivered the words.

"Different how?" I asked.

"Your son," she stated bluntly.

"Whatever the fuck you're thinking the answer is no," Xander snarled and I agreed, standing.

"You're not using our son and if that's your solution, you're wasting our time."

"Toyin, dear, she's not insinuating that we would *use* Rafe. That would never be an option."

"No, it wouldn't." I narrowed my eyes at Meriden and Iraina, who only smiled smugly. I angled my head to the side in warning and her smile expanded.

I think I have a few spells in me to handle her.

"They said you were a fiery little thing, regardless of you only being a healer." Her eyes drifted to Xander. "I hope we're right because she will be good for you, *Alpha*."

"Right about what?" Jo cut in, followed by Zion.

"This is about my nephew."

My eyes drifted to the back of the apartment where Rafe was sleeping peacefully in his crib.

"Everyone just relax." Laz spoke calmly like always. His role as pack leader always put him in the position to be level headed. That worked when it came to anyone except Jo. He addressed Meriden and Iraina. "Explain, please."

"Their situation is unique. None of the others in history managed to bypass the binding spell to produce an offspring...."

“Because they died before they were able to procreate,” Iraina cut in and added. “You two did this backwards. You produced an offspring before for you sealed the bond.”

“I haven’t claimed her.” Xander’s stare was hard, revealing the reality which pained him. We were forbidden.

“What does that have to do with anything?” I questioned, feeling more hopeless and confused about why they thought that mattered.

Meriden and Iraina glanced at each other before Meriden explained. “The bonding spell may not exist in you anymore. It’s very possible you passed it down to your son or you were one of the lucky ones who bypassed it.”

“My...no...” I shook my head, feeling the weight of their confession.

“Yes, but not in the way you’re thinking and that could be because of what he is. Regardless of the intent behind the curse, it’s still magic. *Very* powerful magic.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Xander’s voice was heavy and dangerous. Protective of Rafe.

“Your son is the product of both you and Toyin which makes him a pure blood witch and wolf hybrid. He’s rare...” Meriden stated, glancing at me and Xander.

“Extremely rare and *very* powerful. I’m assuming that’s why the warning was sent. There aren’t any like him and if similar offspring exist, they’re not as pure or *innocent* as your son. Can you imagine what it would mean to possess the type of power and rarity that exists in Rafe?” Iraina glanced toward the back of the house. When Xander growled at her, she smiled.

“I would never harm your child. I’m only acknowledging that I feel him. *His* power. The presence is impossibly strong which means others feel him too. He’s nearing his first year. His magic is pulsing now whereas it wasn’t before.”

Meriden added, “There’s a mix of light and dark magic in Rafe. He’ll have abilities that most could never dream of, which means if he’s not protected...”

“He’s protected,” I stated, glancing at Xander, his brothers, and Jo.

“If the binding spell no longer exists within Toyin that means—”

“Yes, they can mate. But we can’t say for sure...” Meriden cut Zion off, confirming what he was thinking but with cautious eyes. “History very well may repeat itself.”

“Or you two could bond and live happily ever after. She *is*, after all, your mate.” Iraina winked at Xander who grunted his annoyance with the entire situation.

“Is this a joke to you, Iraina?” Jo snarled and Iraina brushed it off with a lazy shrug.

“No, it’s not. I more than anyone understand what it’s like to long for a connection with your mate. I only pray mine is out there somewhere.” She moved her eyes from Jo to me. “You have yours. If there’s a chance, I don’t see why you wouldn’t take it.”

“Because it could end in death and our son no longer has his parents.” Xander’s voice was strained. I felt his inner turmoil. He wanted to try but was afraid of what it might cost him...*us*.

Meriden stood and reached for me. I reared back when she lifted her hands but she only smiled. “I want to see something. May I?”

I was hesitant but nodded as she placed one hand over my heart and the other on the side of my face. She closed her eyes and whispered something I didn’t understand but immediately after, the words stirred something in my being. I could feel magic simmering in my blood, burrowing deep beneath my skin.

When she stepped back her eyes slowly peeled open. “You’re a healer, right?”

“Yes, why?”

“That’s not what your energy is saying. I feel your magic too. It’s not as strong as your son’s but it’s there.”

“What does that mean?” Xander stepped closer and pulled me away from Meriden, into his chest. My body relaxed against his.

“You might not have bonded with her but your child grew in her womb. Essentially, it’s the same thing. You’re connected.”

“Does that mean they’re safe to complete the bond?”

“I can’t guarantee anything, only that it’s possible. Having a child changed the course of things between Xander and Toyin. Possibly even broke the binding spell that forbade them from being together. There’s no record of an offspring from two forbidden lineages. Iraina and I both agree with what we sense from both Toyin and Rafe. Your son is the key to giving you the happiness you both so desperately want.”

“None of what you’re saying seems worth the risk which means you’re not helping us.” Xander’s irritation had only heightened since this conversation had begun.

“There’s one more thing...” Meriden’s cautious gaze shifted to Iraina.

“Stop with the secret communicating and just tell us,” Laz snarled, which had Meriden turning to Xander.

“We’re in the throes of a blood moon. You should mark her. We can be here...”

“What the fuck? You want a front row seat to us having sex?”

“We won’t be in the room with you, unless you’re open to the idea. A little voyeurism never hurt anyone but what Meriden means is she and I will be near. Our hope is to create a spell that counters the existing one binding the two of you together while you mark her. If we do so during this full moon, when our powers are at peak levels, this could work.”

A blood moon was often considered the opening path to a darker side. Mostly with feelings and emotions but with magic, the blood moon intensified the possibility of depth with the immense power that was otherwise hidden in the shadows.

“I don’t know...” I shook my head, looking at everyone in the room.

“I think we need a minute...” Xander’s eyes landed on his brother. “Alone.”

“Xan, we need to figure this out...”

“You don’t think Toy and I know that more than anyone else in this room. We need a minute so get the fuck out. All of you.” Xander was frustrated and he had good reason to be. Our son was now a part of this. Things were spinning out of control faster than we could process.

“Laz, let’s go.” Jo placed her hand on the Alpha’s chest and his eyes lowered to hers before they lifted to his brother’s once more. This time Xander relaxed some.

“I know you’re worried, but your concern doesn’t change the outcome. Right now, it’s only making things worse. Give us a minute.” Laz nodded tightly and walked away. After they were all gone Xander went to check on Rafe, who had fallen asleep. Then he sank onto the sofa. I joined him, but instead of keeping my distance like I should have, I curled my body in his lap and he let me.

“None of this seems fair,” I whispered against his chest and he exhaled a sigh and kissed the top of my head.

“Because it’s not. It’s pretty fucked up.” He kissed the side of my neck and tightened his hold on me. “You know it was never about not wanting you, right? Now that it’s all out there, I hope you know this is all I ever wanted. It’s what I need but wanting and needing you is so fucking dangerous to us both. It hurts like hell, Toy. It’s fucking killing me...”

I tensed and tried to pull away. “I should probably...”

“No...” he growled. “This is all I have. Being with you like this is all I get so I’ll take the pain. Being close with you is no worse than the pain I feel from keeping my distance.”

“Xander...”

“I said I’ll take what I can get, Toy. Stay, please.”

And I did. I was both mentally and physically exhausted. Knowing Rafe would cry if he needed us, I let everything go. In the comfort of arms that would never fully be mine, I drifted.

CHAPTER 8

XANDER.

Mark her.
Mark her.

Mark her.

I shifted in my sleep with the weight and warmth of Toyin's body splayed across mine. Even in my sleep-laced haze, I felt content knowing she was with me. But the more my mind began to clear, the more a new feeling surfaced. The urge to make sure I had this feeling of contentment forever.

Mark her. Mark her. Mark her.

My wolf began to behave erratically, further encouraging the feeling swirling in my chest and pulsing through my veins to the point where I felt an intense need for something, for *her*.

"Xander, what are you doing?"

"This..." I kissed her neck and pinched her nipples.

"This is dangerous. We agreed..."

"I know, but I need you right now and you need me. I feel it."

I slipped my hand between her thighs and she moaned, arching her back away from the sofa, pushing her chest into me. "I do but this is..."

"Dangerous. I know. I can handle it, but I need you right now." What I was doing wasn't smart but I couldn't bring myself to think logically. Every thought I had was about

fucking Toyin and the urge was so overwhelming I didn't know if I would survive if I didn't.

“Are you...” My fingers moved beneath the layer of her panties, causing Toyin to swallow hard. “Oh God, are you sure?”

“I'm sure.” My tongue grazed her neck. “I'll stop if you want me to...”

“No...” she rushed out. “I need this. I need *you*.”

My wolf growled his approval and I lifted enough to rip her shorts and panties away then pushed her shirt up, leaving a trail of kisses as I moved down her body. My shoulders dipped below her thighs, lifting them enough to bury my face in her pussy, rolling my tongue over her warm, slick heat. My first few passes were soft and gentle which propelled Toyin's hips forward. My tongue flattened, moving harder and faster, sucking her clit until she arched her back away from the sofa, gasping when I slid two fingers deep inside.

The first time we were together it was a quick, hard fuck. As much as I'd enjoyed the act, being here right now with my mouth on Toyin, far outweighed any memories I had prior to this moment.

I sucked, licked, and fucked her with my fingers until she was on the verge of handing over her soul. It was mine regardless. I continued, with her dripping down my beard. She was so wet and releasing the most sinful sounds and praises for how good my mouth felt on her. As dangerous as this was, it was also so worth every minute.

“Xander, oh fuck, please...”

I continued working her over—fast, slow, sliding my fingers in deeper. I twisted them, shifting up relentlessly until she tipped over the edge into a blissful state of ecstasy. Her hips pushed forward with jerky motions while her legs shook and her thighs tightened around me.

I lifted and leveled over her body, removing my dick from my pants, pressing forward, stroking the tip between her folds until I was coated. Then I guided myself into her, slowly. She

gaped and I groaned my approval of her warmth and wetness engulfing me inch by inch. Everything shifted in that moment. Lust ignited through my veins and our movements became feral and fierce.

Toyin lifted her legs, wrapping them around my waist which pushed her hips forward to meet my thrusts. With each one I landed deeper, stroking her just right, eliciting soft moans, hastened breathing, and low growls. The melody had me driving into her harder and deeper, losing myself. When her walls tightened around me, I quickened my movements, burying my face into the curve of her neck while we both spiraled.

“Fuck...” A wave of blazing heat rushed through my veins while Toyin’s back bowed from away from the sofa, pushing me into a release so all-consuming and powerful that my mind clouded over. Then I fucked up...

I jerked back and was on my feet but it was too late.

Toyin’s eyes rolled back into her head until she blinked me back into focus. At the same time my mind cleared. I felt exhausted and hazy like I had been under some kind of trance which had a low growl moving through my chest.

“What did you do?”

“I didn’t...it wasn’t me. You did this, Xander. It wasn’t me,” she defended as her eyes went wide then narrowed on me. Something was off. I didn’t know what but there had been some type of control over me that was no longer there. I felt the absence of whatever it was but then I watched Toyin’s hand move to her neck and I was reminded of what I had just done. “You...you marked me.” She was shaking, her body pulsating, trembling, then her eyes changed. They were no longer brown; they glowed a steely gray.

Laz, Zion, get over here now. – Me

The moment I sent the message out to my brothers, Toy’s eyes flared. She shook her head like she was trying to make sense of what was happening or attempting to dislodge something from her mind. Moments after my door flew open,

she swung her head toward Zion who entered first followed by Laz.

What's going on? – Zion

I fucked up but no matter what happens, you protect Rafe.
– Me

Fucked up how? – Laz

Shit, you marked her, didn't you? – Zion.

Fuck, Xan. What do we do? – Laz

Take Rafe and go. – Me

Hell no. That's not happening. – Zion.

If a choice is made. It's him. Not her, not me. Rafe. Take him, now. – Me

You can't have him. I won't let you have him. – Toy

My eyes swung over to her at the sound of her voice in my head. Her arms lifted slowly, palms facing out, until they were parallel with the ceiling.

Toy, what are you doing? – Me

You're not taking him. Tell them, now. – Toy

When she turned her hands, holding them toward me, Laz growled and shifted into a wide stance, preparing for an attack on Toyin. Her eyes were wild and the pulse of magic was thrumming thickly around us.

No. Don't fucking move. – Me

I'm not going to stand here and watch her try to destroy you. – Laz

Neither am I. – Zion.

She doesn't want to hurt me. She thinks you want to hurt her and Rafe. Don't fucking move. – Me

Xan... – Laz

I mean it. – Me

I kept my eyes on Toyin but hers bounced between Laz and Zion. She watched them like a hawk and I felt her thoughts. I felt *her*. If they moved, she would attack, but not because she wanted to destroy us. She was fearful that we wanted to harm her and take our son.

“Toy...” Her eyes fastened to mine. “I can hear your thoughts. I know what you’re thinking. They’re not going to take him.”

“You told them to...”

I nodded, moving toward her slowly. Her eyes were still glowing and her hand was still lifted but I didn’t fucking care. We weren’t doing this. “Because I didn’t know what was happening. I didn’t know what you would do.”

The curse.

I wouldn’t hurt you or Rafe but you think I will. They think I will. – Toy.

Because we didn’t know what would happen. – Me

“But it was your decision. You did this...” Tears streaked her cheeks and her body trembled. She was afraid but I wasn’t. I felt her and she needed to feel me.

“It wasn’t his fault,” a feminine voice stated softly from the door, causing both Toy and I to look that way.

“It was hers.” Jo stepped into the apartment after she shoved Keerah through the door. The force of Jo’s motion caused Keerah to stumble but she gained her footing, straightening swiftly as she sneered at Jo. Laz and Zion moved quickly, building a wall between the two women. Jo didn’t need their help but I needed answers.

“What do you mean it was hers?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Keerah growled and Jo laughed dryly.

“You were outside his apartment, chanting. You had no business being up here in the middle of the night.”

“I don’t know how I got here and I don’t have a clue what you are talking about.”

“She’s lying...” Jo growled but Meriden stepped in.

“She’s telling the truth. She doesn’t possess magic, at least not her own.”

“I saw her,” Jo argued.

“She was doing a spell while under one. Whoever crafted the spell was powerful enough to use her as a vessel. They wanted it to look like it was her magic...”

“It wasn’t.”

“So you say. I still don’t trust her,” Jo made clear.

“What spell?” I cut in. The hows and whys didn’t matter at this very moment.

“The one that caused you to seal the bond.”

“How do you know that? And why the fuck are you here?” I stepped closer to Toyin, so I was at her back. There were too many moving pieces happening right now.

“I asked her to stay. She was at Toy’s place.” Jo shifted her eyes to Meriden.

“Why?”

“Because someone tried to fucking kill you, Xan. We can’t do shit with magic but she can. Iraina would have stayed too but Izan needed her.”

My eyes landed on Meriden. “If that’s true, then why wouldn’t you stop this if you knew it was happening?”

“I tried. Something powerful kept me from leaving the apartment which is how I know she’s not lying. Even if she had done the spell of her own free will, she wouldn’t have the type of magic that would stop mine. This was the work of someone powerful and dark.”

“Why?” Toyin stepped forward but I hooked her waist and brought her back to me. When she angled her head up, her eyes were brown again but flashed gray. I narrowed mine in

warning. I didn't give a damn. She relented and remained close.

"My guess is that whoever it was hoped the two of you would kill each other which would have left Rafe alone..."

"*Unprotected.*" Toyin cringed. Her muscles locked but I tightened the grip on her waist.

"But they didn't," Zion said, looking at the two of us.

"How long does it take? When would we know..."

If the curse worked.

"It didn't work," Jo stated, with hope laced in her words.

"You don't know that," Laz argued and looked at Meriden for answers. "How long?"

"Immediately. His heart is still in his chest so we were right..."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Zion queried.

"It's how they kill if overcome by the curse. With the flick of her finger, Toy would have telekinetically removed my heart from my chest." A calmness settled over me when Toyin's hesitant eyes lifted to mine.

"Then it's not happening." Jo's voice was still laced with hope.

"No, we were right. Having Rafe changed things for the two of you or she was never cursed."

"Good, then get the fuck out of my way so I can leave. All of you are insane," Keerah said.

Jo blocked Keerah's path. "You're not going anywhere. I'm still not convinced."

"Jo, let her go. Meriden's right. There's no magic. If there was, I would feel it and I don't."

"I don't care. Even if that's true, she could be working with someone. She's going to the basement until I am sure."

"Jo..." I warned but Laz shook his head. This was getting out of control.

“She’s right. A risk we’re not taking.” He turned to Keerah who looked at me for help. Help I couldn’t offer. No matter what I felt, Jo and Laz were right. We needed to know for sure. They would question her but so would I.

“I’m going...”

“That’s not a good idea.” Zion frowned at me but I ignored him.

“You don’t know her and you already think she’s guilty. I’m going to make sure she has a fair chance at defending her position.”

And to make sure she didn’t truly play a role in this because if she did, you won’t have to kill her. I will. – Me

Okay. – Laz

I glared at Keerah, leaving no room to misinterpret my intentions. She didn’t appear happy about my stance. I didn’t fucking care. I turned to Toyin. “You can go if you don’t trust my reasons for wanting to be there.”

I trust you. – Toy

Her delicate hand was placed on my chest, covering my heart. For the first time since I’d met Toyin I felt something odd stirring beneath her touch. Magic. It had never been this strong before. She was different and so was I. The pull to her was unnaturally intense and overwhelming so I gripped her chin and my mouth clashed with hers.

Mine.

Mate.

“You’re mine now, you know that, right?”

“Yeah.” She smiled. “Kinda hard not to know when I can feel you all over.”

My eyes lowered to where her throat bobbed and the pulse beneath her skin fluttered with awareness of me. My wolf growled and my muscles locked tight with need. “Let’s go. We need to get this over with.”

“Mated for five minutes and you already think you’re running shit,” Laz joked but I wasn’t in the mood for anything *but* Toyin. The sooner we got this over with, the sooner I could get back to her. “Zion, stay with Toy and Rafe.”

I dragged my eyes over her one last time before delivering my final command. “Don’t let her leave the apartment.”

Zion sneered at the barked order but nodded in acknowledgment and we left.



“HOW DID YOU MEET?” Jo stood on defense. Feet apart, shoulders squared, fingers splayed at each side ready to draw claws in preparation for an attack. One I sensed pulsing beneath her skin. Keerah glared at me but Jo snarled. “I asked the question. You keep your eyes on me.”

“I was roaming unfamiliar territory. I got cornered by pack Omegas and Xander came to my defense.”

“Mm...”

“And you just happened to be in need at the exact moment he showed up.”

“It wasn’t a set up,” Keerah growled, approaching the steel bars she was encased in. Her fingers grasped the metal bars like she needed something to keep her grounded.

“She’s telling the truth...” I stated, calmly approaching as well. I stepped around Jo, stopping inches away from the cell that kept Keerah guarded. We weren’t at risk of being harmed by her, but she was indeed at risk of being harmed by us if her answers didn’t meet our expectations.

Both Laz and Jo swung their eyes my way. I felt the heat of their accusing stares but didn’t acknowledge them with a glance, only my words, but they were more so meant for Keerah. “There was no pretense to how we met. You knew who I was but did not ask for anything. Even after I helped settle the conflict of you being in forbidden pack territory and they decided to let you go because of my name. You thanked

me and were going to move on. You didn't ask for anything, I offered."

"I know our story, Xander. It's not me you need to convince." Her eyes moved past me and Jo scoffed.

"Women have their ways," she muttered and I smirked, glancing over my shoulder.

"Did you?"

"Easy, Xander," Laz warned and I chuckled.

"There was no malicious intent prior to us arriving here. I know that for certain. Otherwise you wouldn't have been allowed to join me. I'm no fool but what I'm not clear about is whether or not anything changed after we arrived. After you found out about Toy and my son. Jealousy and pride are two very powerful emotions. Maybe someone got to you and you decided that you had the right to disrupt things. If that was the case, this is your one chance to tell me now, and maybe you'll walk away from this."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you fucking kidding me? You think I let someone use me to harm you or *her*? I don't give a fuck about her..."

Jo growled from behind me but I held my hand up. "You may not give a fuck about her but that's not the case when it comes to me. You presented yourself as my *mate*. You had intentions even if they weren't placed by me."

I watched her with a keen eye and noticed the shift in hers. I'd struck a nerve. She had feelings that were deeper than mine. I liked Keerah but never confused her place in my life.

"He's giving you a chance. I advise that you open your fucking mouth and explain yourself." Laz stepped up so he and I were shoulder to shoulder. Keerah's eyes darted between the three of us.

"I didn't plot against your mate. Yes, I have feelings but I'm also not stupid. I saw what she was the minute we got near her. It would have been pointless for me to fight a losing battle. I didn't stand a chance so let me be clear. I. Did. Not. Do. This. Of. Free. Will."

Her eyes fastened with mine, communicating her truth.

“Let her go,” I stated, taking a step back.

“No, I’m not convinced.” Laz turned to me. His eyes, crimson now, shifted across to me. Mine flared with the same blood red pushing back. Both of us asserting dominance as Alphas.

“The decision is not yours. I’m taking responsibility for setting her free. Let her go,” I seethed, causing Jo to push between us.

“I’ll do it before the two of you rip each other apart for no reason.” She stepped to the cage, keyed a code, and the bars clicked, signaling they were unlocked. “You’re free for now but you should know we’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

Keerah pushed at the bars, swinging the door open. “No you won’t. I’m leaving. All of you are fucking crazy. I’ll do better on my own if this is what being part of a pack feels like.”

“You don’t have to leave.” I understood her position, but she needed to understand ours.

“I know I don’t but I’m not welcome here. You don’t trust me and neither do they. You don’t think your pack will follow the consensus of their leaders? If I stay, I’m still an outsider. They’ll never fully welcome me because of my history with you.”

“I will make sure they do.” My eyes met hers and she shook her head as her gaze softened.

“You were a good friend. I shouldn’t have pushed, and for that I apologize, but it’s best if I leave.”

“Are you running?” Jo asked.

“I didn’t come here to disrupt things, set him up, or play a role in his downfall. Believe whatever the fuck you want. Thank you for what little time you did offer but this pack is not for me. I’m leaving.”

She glanced at me then walked away, pausing at the door. “That is if I’m allowed to?”

“No one will harm you, Keerah. You have my word,” I offered, followed by Laz.

“And mine.”

After she was gone, Jo turned to us. “As much as I want to dislike her, she was telling the truth.”

“She was.” I nodded and Laz agreed with a nod of his own.

“Her pulse quickened and heart rate increased but from anger. I’m still going to have a few of our people follow her to see where she goes, just in case.” Jo arched a brow at me. “Unless you disagree, *Alpha*?”

I chuckled, knowing she was referring to the moment Laz and I had. I rarely ever asserted my position but when I did, I overpowered my brother. He didn’t like it but there wasn’t much he could do about the reality. “I agree.”

Jo placed her hand on Laz’s chest, lifting onto her toes, thinking she would snag a quick kiss but he hooked an arm, bringing her to him, forcing her feet from the ground when he attacked her mouth. The visual had my wolf reacting with the same need for the woman I’d left upstairs.

“I’ll be upstairs after I take care of her.” She blushed and glanced at me before her eyes landed on Laz then she was gone. My brother watched her leave and didn’t give me his full attention until we were alone.

“If she’s not the problem then someone else is.” I sensed the unease in his tone. I had been attacked. We needed to know who’d set that in motion or neither of us could let our guards down.

“We’ll figure it out.”

“But not right now.” He smirked and I shrugged.

“It’s been a long time coming. I plan on making up for lost time.”

“As you should. Congratulations, brother. At least now you’ll no longer be such an overbearing asshole.”

I grunted at the thought. “Don’t be so sure.”

He and I moved toward the door but he paused just outside. “We’ll talk soon. This needs to be handled sooner rather than later.”

With a sharp nod, we left things as they were for now.

CHAPTER 9

TOYIN.

Holding Rafe was different. I felt the magic surging in his blood. It hummed in unison with what was now flowing through mine. I wasn't sure how but the why was evident. We were all bonded. Rafe, Xander, and now, me.

My hand lifted to the mark at the curve of my neck. My fingers warmed and tingled as they moved over the disrupted skin. So much had shifted in such a short amount of time. I was different. Our son was different. The magic that rushed through our bodies was stronger than anything I had ever experienced before but it wasn't just his magic. Our son's wolf was present as well, standing guard. I smiled, allowing my eyes to close, exhaling a breath of ease and peace.

“How did it go?”

My eyes slowly peeled open to find Xander standing in the doorway. I hadn't heard him enter the apartment but I'd felt him close. I felt him more profoundly than I ever had which was comforting and frightening at the same time. I'd have to get used to the overwhelming sense of him.

“She's gone? He okay?” Xander motioned to Rafe with a tilt of his head.

“Yes, he's fine. He whined a little after you left. Maybe he sensed everything happening...”

“Or maybe he sensed my absence.” Xander's brow pinched as he stared at our son. It felt like he was trying to convince himself of what he had just said.

“Both, I'm sure. You sent her away?”

“She left.”

“Was she guilty?”

“No.”

“Then why did she leave?” I studied him closely.

“She was hurt...” His eyes locked with mine.

“Because of us?”

“Partially yes but mostly because we all blamed her.”

“She’s a wolf, she has to understand the loyalty and protectiveness of a pack.”

“I’m sure she does but that doesn’t mean she wasn’t offended by the accusations and hurt by...”

“Us.”

He shrugged. “Maybe, but that’s not my concern. You’re my concern.” He approached and carefully removed Rafe from my arms. He cradled him against his chest and smiled when Rafe sighed in contentment.

“You’re right. He is perfect.”

“I feel his wolf. Is that normal?”

Xander nodded but kept his eyes on Rafe’s tiny little face. “For you, yes. You’re his mother. I feel him because his wolf communicates with mine. They want to meet. To bond.”

“When will that happen?” I frowned, staring at the two of them. Xander’s upper body was bare. They’d left out of here so fast he hadn’t bothered with a shirt or shoes. Xander was also perfect but in a different way. The cut of his body. The way his pants hung low on his hips, granting a teasing view of the contours and lines that cut down his sides and stomach disappearing into the cotton pants that covered his lower half.

“Not for a while. He’s not ready to shift yet. For now, we’ll communicate and bond this way.” Xander lowered his face, pressing his forehead to our son’s. “But first, I’m going to communicate with his mother.”

When his eyes shifted left and dragged over me, my blood warmed. “We should sleep. It’s late.”

It had to be somewhere between three or four in the morning but my body was buzzing with energy. I wasn’t tired.

“It’s early and I owe you. Both times we were together were about an intended goal.”

My cheeks heated from the way his eyes blazed with a promise or possibly a threat. Both sounded tempting. A barely there grin teased his lips. “You’ve never been in my bed...”

“Yes I have...”

I had slept in his bed at the cabin plenty of nights while he was gone but as if he’d read my thoughts, his smile turned dark.

“In my bed, with me...”

A blaze flared in his eyes before he placed Rafe back into his crib then lifted me, drawing my legs around his waist. I was carried across the hall to his room, to his bed. By the time we were both naked, my entire body was aching with need so the kiss he granted felt like a lifeline. It was gentle and slow but deepened, increasing with each brush of his lips against mine. It wasn’t enough so when I clawed at him demanding more, he smiled darkly.

“I’m not rushing and neither are you.” He hovered over me, his body composed of hard planes of muscle and power that I wanted to feel. He smiled, pressing his hips forward, rocking into me. It was nice but not enough. Anger and longing flooded my veins and pulsed in my core. When his mouth was on me again, the kiss was still unhurried but this time, primal and hungry with need. We *needed* each other. He was my survival and I was his.

“Be patient, Toy.”

“I don’t think I can.” I released a shaky breath.

“Too bad. You don’t have a choice. I’m going to enjoy every inch of you.” One by one my arms were lifted and held above my head. My small wrists were clasped together by one

of his hands. The other pinched a nipple and his tongue followed. I arched toward the touch each time I felt his mouth on me.

“This feels different.”

“You’re mine. It’s no longer just sex. This is about satisfying a need that you feel pulsing from me, that I feel pulsing inside you.”

His tongue trailed over my skin, caressing each nipple one by one. He latched onto them with his mouth, then nipped both. A sharp pinch that he soothed with his lips before he released my wrists and traveled lower. I kept my hands above my head while his mouth blazed a trail down my chest and stomach until my thighs were spread wide.

“So beautiful,” he murmured when he kissed me gently, barely grazing my slick skin before dragging his stare back up to my face. The flare of his eyes burned my skin but that smile. Oh fuck. When his mouth lowered again, I felt it all over. Everything he kissed, touched, explored felt like electric currents charging my body. My pussy throbbed, begging for attention he didn’t give. When I jutted my hips forward, he lifted his eyes again. “You can’t rush me, Toy. Don’t try or this only gets worse...” His lips lifted. “For *you*.”

By the time he plunged his tongue into my slickness, trailing up to my clit, I was barely able to maintain my moans as I writhed beneath his touch. A finger entered me followed by a second and my gasp intensified. An orgasm rushed through me so quickly I hadn’t been able to prepare and it took me under while he continued to worship me with his tongue. I ground against his face, seeking more. The smell and feel of him were so intense and overwhelming. He was right, this wasn’t just sex. My hips moved while he pumped his fingers in and out of me. Coaxing, pulling, pleasing.

Then he was on my body again. The heat from his lips and tongue extended my release as he kissed my inner thighs and up my stomach back to my breasts. Once again I was jutting my hips forward. I already missed his mouth there.

“Xander, hurry...” I stated harshly. “Please.”

I felt strange in a good way but needy. When he lifted his eyes I noticed him hesitate for a minute but then his teeth grazed my nipple as he watched and waited for a reaction. When he received it, he smiled darkly.

“What?”

“I feel your magic. I see it. Your eyes...”

“I can’t...I don’t know how to control it.”

This was new. My magic had changed, grown, and I wasn’t sure what to do with any of this.

“Don’t...” he growled, surprising me. “I’m not asking you to. I like the way it feels.”

He kissed me with ferocity that had my body blazing and heart pounding in anticipation, causing my legs to tremble. Then I was full of him. I tried to settle my breathing after his first thrust but the pleasure mixed with euphoria as he stretched me in a sinfully painful way was overwhelming. Once he was buried deep, he stilled, allowing himself time to settle. He cursed under his breath then something dark and dangerous appeared in his eyes.

His motions were slow and intentional. Different. So very different and I felt every inch of him. Our eyes locked in challenge while he filled and stretched me. I moaned his name while he kissed me, working his tongue in tandem with each thrust of his hips.

“Fuck, Toy. You ready to cum for me again. This time with me inside you?”

He pushed deeper, growling arrogantly as he pressed his mouth to mine. I clenched around him, proof that he didn’t have to ask. He could feel me inching toward it as I pulsed against him.

“Ahh, there it is.” His words sent me spiraling but I felt him spiraling too. He grew thicker and pushed deeper inside me. “Mine,” he hissed through a roar of arrogance.

He spilled into me, claiming me in a different way. While I shattered, I felt his tongue move over my mark swiping and

pressing, drawing out my pleasure while he rode his own. I wasn't sure how much time passed before I felt his forehead against mine. The warmth of his breath brushed over my mouth until he smiled and kissed me.

"I love you..." he said quietly, in a way that contradicted how confident and powerful I knew Xander to be. He was vulnerable, raw, open to me. He was apologizing for the years he'd kept me at arm's length but he didn't have to.

"I know." I lifted my head, brushing my lips over his. "I love you too."

This bond was absolute. His loyalty was only to me. His connections was mine and mine alone. Always, forever. Xander had given himself to *me*.

His eyes flared, glowing golden brown circled in crimson.

My mate.

My world.

His thoughts were loud in my head so I smiled and nodded to agree because no matter what, from now on, we had each other.



"GET DRESSED." Xander leaned over the back of the sofa and kissed my mark, sending a rush of warmth and eroticism through my body.

"Why?"

"Pack business."

"Can't we get a pass with all things considered?" I smiled up at him and he shook his head. Xander and I had been secluded in his place for almost a week. Jo and Laz had come by but we hadn't actually left. Mostly because of me. We still had no idea who'd attacked Xander. They were still out there and whoever it was wanted our son. Xander had made it clear multiple times that he refused to hide but to appease me, for now, we stayed in.

“We could but I have a feeling Jo would drag you up out of here.”

“We have pack business with Laz and Jo?”

“No. You, Jo, and the other ladies. Her idea so if you have a problem with that? Take it up with her.”

My eyes darted over to Rafe and Xander either heard my thoughts or sensed my unease. He had been doing a lot of that lately. The mark connected us in ways I was still trying to make sense of but he was content with our bond and invading my thoughts.

“He’s my son, Toy. I can handle him and if I have questions, Laz is here.”

“I wasn’t...”

“You were...” He kissed my mark again as if explaining how he knew. “But I won’t hold it against you. I’ve missed a lot so you have the right to doubt.”

“I don’t doubt. I’m just used to being with him.”

“Get dressed. Jo said meet her across the hall in thirty minutes.”

I groaned. “Fine.”

I struggled leaving the apartment. Being away from Xander felt like torture and I wondered if I was experiencing a slight bit of what he’d felt all these years from not being able to connect with me the way he wanted. I also understood I had to have a life outside of him and Rafe, even if just a tiny one. So after I crossed the hall to get Jo, and she and I were heading to the elevators, I decided to focus on the time I was spending with her.

“So what’s this pack business?”

“You’ll see when we get there.” She smiled smugly as we stepped into the elevator. When we went up instead of down, I narrowed my eyes at Jo who only shrugged until we stepped off on the roof. I noticed several other women, all members of the Bennett pack, leisurely lounging with drinks in hand and small plates of what looked like heavy hors d’oeuvres.

“Is this a party?”

“Kind of but more of a get together...” Jo looped her arm through mine. “For you.”

“A party for what?” I jerked to a stop and she stepped in front of me.

“You’re officially mated to one of the Bennett Alphas. You need to be formally introduced to them as...”

“As what?” I frowned at my friend. “You’re their Luna. I’m just...*me*.”

“All of the above is correct but you’re not just you, Toy. Xander, Laz, and Zion are equally respected. These women need to respect you just as much as they respect me...”

“They do...”

It was a lie, most of them tolerated me.

“Good, then there shouldn’t be any issues. We are here tonight to officially welcome you as a member of authority with our pack.”

“That’s now how this works.”

There were Alphas, then Betas. Since the Bennett pack’s leadership was made up of three Alphas, Zion and Xander served as Betas.

“It is, if I say that’s how it works. Technically you’re just as much a Luna to this pack as I am.”

“No, I’m not. I don’t want any parts of that.”

I had no idea what Jo was smoking but she had truly lost her mind. “You’re not me...”

“You got that right. You’re all wolf warrior and bad ass. I’m happy with my role as healer and...”

“You’re not just a healer anymore, Toy. Everything’s different now and we’ll be relying on you to cover and protect our pack just as much as they rely on me, but with magic instead of strength and power.”

I cringed. “You might want to let me figure out how to use this magic before you go trusting me to cover or protect anyone.”

The sum total of my magic thus far had been herbs, roots, clay, blended with ash to facilitate the natural powers of healing from the earth. There was nothing powerful about my abilities.

Jo grinned. “You’ll figure it out but for now, we gon’ let these hoes know that you’re just as badass and if they don’t respect you, you’ll shrink their heads or curse them to a lifetime of no orgasms.”

I choked on a laugh. “That would be insanely cruel...”

“But you like the idea.”

“I do.”

“Good, now let’s go.”

As soon as we met the crowd, Sharma greeted me with a cautious smile. “What are you drinking?”

“What do you have?” I glanced around at everyone’s hands, noticing similar concoctions all green or blue with fruit, swirled in the glass. “Alana is mixing something she calls the midnight surprise. We have no idea what’s in it but I’ll get you one.”

“Thank you.”

I glanced at Jo who shrugged. Sharma being nice was an odd surprise. I wasn’t sure if Jo had said anything or if the run in with Xander had changed her attitude. We had gone toe to toe more times than I could count so I’d take this version of her over one I’d had to check about not minding my personal bounds.

The rest of the women began congratulating me one by one, chatting away about how amazing it was that Xander was home and we were finally together and not avoiding the inevitable—our bond. These same women who had been snickering about me and gossiping behind my back now all seemed to want to be my best friend. I didn’t question any of

what was going on nor did I have interest in their false friendships. I simply settled in and decided to make the best of the evening.

We ate, talked, some of the women got a little too drunk and danced but the night was pleasant. For the first time since I existed as a part of the pack, I felt like I belonged. Even if these women only now accepted me because they felt they had to. For the first time in years, I remembered what it was like to have a family.

“You look happy.” Mara filled the spot next to me and placed her hand on my knee, giving it a gentle squeeze to get my attention.

“I’ve been happy.”

“Mmm...” she hummed, offering a contemplative smile. “You’ve been existing. Making the best of a complicated situation, but now things are different. You’re *truly* happy.”

I wasn’t able to hide my smile so I only nodded and agreed. “I am.”

“We’re all happy. The two of you, cautiously moving around each other like a ball of confusion was a lot of misplaced energy. Things are finally settling now. You’re a family.”

“Wow, was it that obvious?”

Her smile expanded. “It was. I’ve been with the boys since they were pups. Xander was ten, maybe eleven, when their mother invited me to join their pack. I watched them grow into the men they are today. I watched them bond together and become closer when they lost their parents and I watched them take over, filling the void after they were gone.”

She smiled proudly.

“They’re all exceptional men, strong willed leaders. Each has a specific role that they honor with their entire beings, but Xander, he’s always been the one to carry his family. Laz is the Alpha. He leads the pack, takes on the responsibility for all members but Xander holds far more weight on his shoulders because he takes on the role of carrying the man who everyone

else relies on. That's a tough position to be in and because of the weight he carries, his own personal needs are often overlooked. When you're strong, people assume you shouldn't be allowed to share vulnerability. Now he can have that balance. With *you* and *Rafe*."

I frowned and she placed her hand over mine. "He will continue to carry his brothers, he will carry you and your son as well, but he will also be vulnerable with you. He will have the ability to drop his guard and be fully exposed without feeling weak or inadequate which is a beautiful thing. While you're happy, we're happy too. Our leaders are finding balance. First Laz, now Xander, and hopefully Zion." She scoffed. "Although I think he's got some growing to do before he's ready."

I grinned. She was right. Zion was the lover boy of the three.

"Thank you for that."

"You're welcome, dear."

"Maybe that's why they're all acting so different now," I muttered, glancing at the women who'd seemed so averse to me being a part of their pack knowing I was promised to Xander which I hadn't planned nor could I control. They were all so willing to play nice with me now.

"Oh no." She smiled widely. "They're different because you're different."

I whipped my head to the left, catching her smug grin. "What's that supposed to mean?" I assumed she meant different as in mated. I was aware wolves could smell the scent of mates but I wasn't a wolf. I was...

"Your magic is just as loud as your bond with Xander."

"Wonderful. So they're only being cordial because they're afraid of Xander or me."

She laughed lightly. "In some ways yes, but they also respect you, Toyin. They may not like that you're his one but they also can't deny that disliking you is frivolous in the grand scheme of things. It's not justified. Maybe the possibility of

them having a chance that never existed no longer being an option has adjusted their common sense.”

“Or maybe they’re just afraid I’ll shrink their heads.”

“Would you?” She arched a brow and I grinned.

“I might, if I knew how.”

“You’ll figure it out. Trust what you feel. That’s really the foundation to anything, even magic.”

“Let’s hope so because I’m flying blind with all this.”

Mara stood, offering soft eyes and a motherly smile. “I feel certain you’ll make sense of it all. Just give it time.”

From her lips to the universe’s existence. I prayed she was right because magic could be both a blessing and a curse if it wasn’t handled properly.



THE NEXT MORNING we were up early and driving to the woods at Xander’s insistence. He didn’t explain but I was anxious and needed insight.

“Okay we’re here, now will you tell me why you wanted to drive to the cabin?”

“Let’s get out and I’ll show you.”

“Show me what?”

He smiled mischievously but didn’t say a word. I groaned and eased out of his truck, moving to the back seat to get Rafe who beamed, smiling and thrashing wildly the minute I opened the door. My heart swelled. He was truly a happy baby.

“You are mommy’s *son*-shine. You know that?”

He squealed and began babbling, opening and closing his fists while I worked to unbuckle him. The minute I set him free, he almost leaped for me. I moved quick enough to catch him and felt movement behind me, expecting Xander to be standing there. I turned and gasped at the visual before me. I

found Xander, completely naked but before I could enjoy the beauty of him, he shifted and I was offered the view of him in an alternate form.

He was massive. His body, paws, and head. Everything about him was immense but beautiful. The black fur that replaced his skin was dark and shiny like oil. His eyes, however, were the same, deep brown. I recognized them, which allowed me to feel the same connection I always felt. It was strange. I had only seen Xander in his wolf form a handful of times.

Is this why you wanted to come out here? – Me

Yes. I felt like it was necessary. – Xander

You wanted me to meet your wolf? – Me

The last time you saw him, it was under different circumstances. – Xander

At the restaurant.

And I wanted to introduce him to Rafe. – Xander

He neared me with a slow prow and nudged my leg. I lowered my hand and dragged my fingers through his fur before I lowered to my haunches and brought Rafe to the ground, propping him between my legs.

Xander dipped his snout, nudged him in the stomach, and moved back. Rafe smiled and extended both his arms. Before I could react he took unbalanced steps, moving toward his father.

My mouth dropped open as Xander moved back, slowly forcing Rafe to take more steps.

He's walking. – Xander

No shit and your wolf is what made him do it. – Me

Don't be jealous. – Xander

I'm not. – Me

I wasn't jealous but I was pouting. These two would share something I would never get to experience. But it was

delightful and special.

Rafe grasped at his father, tugging at his fur, bringing his nose down to him. I removed my phone and snapped photos and videos, watching the two of them get acquainted. After a while I sat on the steps enjoying the two of them, trying to make sense of how this was my life. I was mated to a wolf, our son would be one as well one day, running freely on this land in his wolf form. As strange as it all seemed, it felt right.

After watching the way our son was completely at peace with his father's wolf form, I realized I was a little jealous. Their bond was something I would always be on the outside of, looking in.

I think I've changed my mind. I am a little jealous. – Me

Xander's eyes landed on me. God, he was exquisite. Another reality that slapped me in the face. This massive beast was exquisite to me. Incredibly sexy and had my blood thrumming in ways that shouldn't have been possible.

Our bond is just as powerful. – Xander

Maybe but it's not the same. – Me

No, it's not. But the same way he and I will run these grounds together, you will teach him how to protect them with the bond you share. – Xander.

My magic.

Then I will be the one feeling left out and maybe a little fearful, at least until you get a handle on things. – Xander

Asshole. – Me

I stepped off the porch and lifted Rafe into my arms, kissing his cheeks. When I pulled back, he placed both hands on mine leaning into my face, landing a giggly, sloppy kiss.

See, nothing to worry about. – Xander

I glanced at him and rolled my eyes.

Are we staying? – Me

If that's okay with you. I want to stretch my legs a little now and maybe again in the morning. It's been a while since I've gone for a run. My wolf is anxious. – Xander

Alone? – Me

I frowned past him, glancing out at the woods.

Xander approached and circled me before leaning into my side.

I'm perfectly fine on my own. – Xander

I smiled at the arrogance in his tone and stance. Even in wolf form he asserted his dominance.

You telling me not to worry? – Me

I'm telling you your man can handle himself. Go inside. I won't be long. – Xander.

I exhaled and nodded, heading to the house after grabbing Rafe's bag from the truck. Xander remained on guard until we were safely inside. I watched from the window as he took off into the woods, running with power and speed. Again, beautiful.

"I can't wait to see you out there running freely with your father." Rafe clapped and his eyes glowed brighter with a red ring lining them. He was of a royal pure bloodline which meant he was born an alpha like his father and uncles and it showed.

"Oh God, I'm not ready for this." He leaned into me, laughing like he knew exactly what I meant. Based on this kid's DNA I was sure he did.



A FEW HOURS LATER, Xander came in from the woods. He showered and changed while I made us an early dinner. We ate and settled into the living room to let Rafe play for a while before I bathed him for bed.

Just like when we arrived, watching Xander with our son felt like this was how things were always supposed to be, but I couldn't help but wonder if he had regrets even in the slightest way. Our differences never bothered me, but I considered they might bother him.

“Are you disappointed that I'll never get to experience that side of you?”

Xander pushed the plastic truck he and Rafe were playing with toward our son who grabbed it and crawled off, pushing it against the base of the sofa.

“What side of me?”

“Your wolf.”

He smirked and shook his head. “Why would I? You get to experience him in different ways.”

My body heated at the reference. *Sexually.*

“But I can't shift and change, like you. I won't get to run wild out there like Laz and Jo can...”

He reached for me and lifted us both, adjusting our position until I was on my back and he was planked above me. My head turned to where Rafe was clumsily walking around, babbling about his truck.

“He's fine and so are we. We're not Laz and Jo. Our lives won't be the same as theirs and I'm perfectly content with what we are, Toy.”

“Are you sure? That's an important part of your life, of who you are.”

He lowered his face, brushing his lips over mine. “It's who I am. So yes it's important but it's not *all* that I am. I'm yours. Every part of me belongs to *you*. My life as it is now and my wolf. You get all of me, same as I get all of you. So no, I'm not disappointed and I'll never be.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” He kissed me deeply, only pulling back when little feet rushed our way.

“Shit.” Xander grimaced and glanced at Rafe who smiled devilishly when his father looked his way. “You want me to leave your mother alone?”

I smiled when the truck Rafe was holding came crashing down on Xander’s back again. “Mm, I think that’s a yes.”

Xander kissed me once more then lifted from over me, scooping Rafe into his arms. He turned onto his back and tossed him in the air a few times to Rafe’s delight then lowered him to his chest.

“You win for now, Wild One, but later, she’s all mine.”

I barked a laugh when his little face frowned. I swore this kid understood us.

“Oh, he didn’t like that at all.”

Xander swung his head to the side and winked at me. “Too bad because there isn’t a damn thing he can do about it.”

“He’s going to shift one day.”

“Yeah, he will.”

“Will it hurt?”

Xander stilled, then slowly turned his head to me again. “Yeah, it will. The first time is always the worst. It takes hours sometimes and it’s painful as hell. But after that, you learn to get your wolf under control and the shifts become easier.”

I stared at our son, blinking at the thought of him experiencing pain for hours.

“Hey...” Xander’s hand reached for me and he brushed a finger down the side of my face. “It’s a part of the process. A part of who he is but he’ll be okay. He’s built for that part of his life.”

“I know,” I said quietly, feeling an overload of emotions. This was my son. I didn’t like the idea of Rafe feeling pain. “How old were you when you first shifted?”

“Thirteen. Laz was thirteen too and Zion twelve.”

“That young?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you remember...” I paused. “Not the shift but the pain.”

“Some of it but it becomes a sense of pride, so you don’t hate it or have regrets. You honor the change in your life. The power. You can’t...”

“Understand.”

His eyes softened. “You can’t understand but I’ll be there with him and I promise you he’ll be fine.”

“I know.” I lifted and raked my fingers through my hair, smiling at Rafe. “I’m going to give him a bath and get him to bed...”

“Let me do it.” I smiled and arched a brow.

“You’ve seen how he is. Are you sure you’re ready for *his* bath time?” Rafe loved water. Baths were an opportunity to soak any and everything within reach.

“I think I can handle it. Why don’t you relax?”

“Oh I’m definitely going to relax.” I leaned toward them and kissed Rafe on the cheek. “With wine.”



THE NEXT MORNING I awakened to something bright flashing behind my eyelids. My blood turned cold. It was as if ice was rushing through my veins which had my eyes fluttering open and my head swinging to the left where Rafe’s crib was tucked away in the corner against the wall.

“So much power being wasted.” A dark rasp danced through the air and my eyes moved slowly toward the door. Rafe and I were alone but there was something or someone else here. The force wasn’t visible but I could feel its presence, which had me slowly climbing out of bed and moving with cautious steps toward the pull of energy. *Magical* energy.

Whatever was in the cabin wasn't in the room with me but it was dark and powerful. Similar to what I'd felt at the café the night Xander had fought off those wolves, but stronger. So much stronger and darker than I'd felt that night.

With one last look over my shoulder at Rafe, I left the bedroom. My instincts pushed me to move away from him. To keep whatever was here distanced from my son which proved to be a smart decision when I laid eyes on the being standing in the living room. Shadows clung to him, swirling and crawling around his arms and legs, causing my fingertips to pulse and ache. I could feel the magic burning with need.

“Who are you?”

“I'm disappointed.”

“I don't give a damn about your disappointment. I asked who you are.”

He angled his head to the side but kept his expression flat. “You can't feel me, *child*? I certainly feel *you*...” A smug grin teased his lips as he looked past me. “And him.”

Rafe.

Xander. – Me

I feel it. I'm on my way. I'm past the perimeter of the property. I wanted to go for a run before we headed back to the city. Fuck...I'm coming. – Xander

Hurry. – Me

My muscles locked tightly and I curled my fingers into my palm and released them. “It would be wise of you to answer the question. Who are you?”

“You have magic but don't know how to use it. I'm not afraid...” He smiled smugly.

“Answer the fucking question,” I demanded.

His eyes slowly moved back to me, dragging over my face. “Your father, of course. I blame your mother for this ignorance.”

“My...” I choked on the word and it never left my mouth.

“*Father*, yes. Although I’ve never been allowed the pleasure of laying eyes on you, no thanks to your mother. I do know, however, you’re mine.”

“What do you want?”

He smiled crassly. “You know what I want.”

Rafe.

“You need to leave...”

“I will. Once I get what I came for.”

I raised my arms slowly, turning my palms outward and he didn’t flinch. “You’re not touching my son.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. I need him and he’s not yours; he’s *mine*. He’s the reason your mother hid you from me. She wasn’t smart about a lot of things but at least she did her best to protect you. Unfortunately, there’s no hiding anyone or anything from their destiny.”

“My mother—”

“*Is dead*. I killed her and that weak coven who convinced your mother they could protect her from me. Equinoxes are powerful but she was never one of them no matter how much they pretended she was. She was useless for anything other than fucking me and birthing you.”

“You...you killed her?”

“I did. I will say I’m impressed at how much she loved you. She had a choice. Tell me where you were or die. She chose the latter, which was pointless by the way because here you are. It was only a matter of time before I found you. Truthfully, you can thank your son for that. I couldn’t feel you, which I’m sure is because of something they put in place.” His eyes lowered to the ring on my finger and I flinched. “But the boy...” His smile expanded slowly. “He’s something magnificent. His power is ostentatious. You can’t begin to imagine what I can do with him in my control.”

“And you won’t either, because again, you’re not touching my son.”

He'd admitted to killing my mother but I couldn't worry about that now. He was threatening my son which took priority over whatever feelings I had about this man being the reason I'd lost my mother.

"He's mine, *child*. There's not much you can do to stop me. Your power is strong but I know for a fact that it's new and you have no idea what to do with it. If anything you'll kill yourself or your son trying to defend him..."

I blinked several times trying to contain my emotions. How did he know...

"Let me tell you a story of the biggest mistake of my life that turned into the most honorable blessing." He glanced past me and I knew he was considering Rafe his blessing. The thought made my skin crawl.

"I met your mother by chance. She was beautiful, much like yourself. She was also naïve, much like yourself. She believed in love and all that nonsense. She loved *me* regardless of me not returning the sentiment. I never would. She and I were..." He sighed as if seemingly bored. "Not supposed to happen. For me it was just a few good nights. I liked to push boundaries. Royal bloodline faes and *ordinary* witches aren't meant to be."

"My mother was an Equinox. She's pure blood, you're nothing..."

"See what I mean. Naïve." He tsked. "Your mother wasn't pure blood and if that's what she told you, she lied. She got pregnant and decided I shouldn't be allowed the opportunity to be a part of your life. Mostly because I threatened to kill you and her both if she kept you." He smiled smugly.

"She ran and found a coven that used magic to protect the both of you. It worked until just after your twenty-first birthday, when I found her. Just before I killed your mother I stole her memories, hoping to find you. You were, after all, *mine*."

"But you don't want me."

“No, I don’t. I want your son and you have your mother to thank for that. You see, she didn’t have memories about where you were currently but she did have memories of your destiny. Your wolf, the child you would have, his royal bloodline and heritage.”

“Why does that matter to you?”

“Because he’s rare and powerful and once I have his blood, I will be unstoppable.” He took a step closer and I lifted my hands. “You, *child*, have been a disappointment but I’ll spare you if you do the right thing. You’ll more than make up for that disappointment with the gift of your son...”

CHAPTER 10

XANDER.

Protect her.
Kill.

The closer I moved to the cabin; my senses heightened. The smell of Toyin's fear was so overpowering I could barely focus.

"Your wolf, the child you would have, his royal bloodline and heritage."

"Why does that matter to you?"

"Because he's rare and powerful and once I have his blood, I will be unstoppable. You, child, have been a disappointment, but I'll spare you if you do the right thing. You'll more than make up for that disappointment with the gift of your son..."

You'll have to kill me first.

A lethal urge to kill ripped through my body and I moved faster with an unnatural pacing until I reached the clearing that led to our cabins and my porch. The door flew open and my wolf flew through the air, fast and ready to shred flesh, but I was met with a barrier. Invisible and similar to the one the warlock had used the night at the cafe. The force of colliding with it sent me flying back.

"Xander..."

"Your wolf is no match for my magic, child. I suggest you tell him to back down before he kills himself trying to defend you."

I straightened and lunged again, only to be met with the same impact but managing to land upright.

I can't get past his magic. You have to help. – Me

Her magic was new. She had no control over it but I felt it pulsing around us. Hers was as strong as his but she had to believe that.

I don't want to hurt you... or Rafe. – Toyin

You won't. Just focus on getting me through. That's all you have to do. I'll handle the rest. – Me

As if he sensed us communicating, the warlock's hand lifted. He barely moved a finger but the motion sent Toyin flying into a wall nearby. I lost it and lunged again. Her eyes glowed a cool gray and she threw her hand out in front of her, sending magic wildly through the air. It was just enough to allow me to break through and my teeth connected with his neck. The burn and electric charge that moved through me was painful. Each time he touched me, a blaze of unbearable pain jolted into my muscles but I didn't let go. With one deadly and forceful yank of my head, I ripped his throat apart until his head separated from his body. His limbs thrashed wildly then completely gave out.

When I lifted my eyes to find Toyin, she was near the wall and collapsed to her knees. She was struggling with labored breaths and her clenched fists resting on her thighs. The force of controlling such powerful magic she hadn't learned to navigate had likely drained her.

"Rafe..." she whispered. I scented her fear once more. She was terrified so I shifted, hurrying past her toward the bedroom and almost dropped to my knees when I found him in his crib.

He smiled and extended his arms to me and my world settled. I snatched up a pair of sweats from the chair in the corner and yanked them on before I lifted Rafe into my arms, hugging him so securely I was at risk of crushing his small frame.

I inhaled a slow breath as my heartbeat leveled to the same pace of his. Now that I knew he was okay I had to get back to Toy. The minute I was in her line of sight she broke down crying.

“Is he...”

I kneeled in front of her, handing Rafe over. “He’s okay, Toy. He’s okay.”

My voice was rough and she sobbed so hard I could barely stand it. I lifted and carried them to the sofa. With me holding Toy and Toy holding our son, she cried while I thanked the universe I hadn’t lost either of them.



“YOU SURE YOU don’t want to go back to the city?”

Toyin shook her head. “No, not yet.” Her fear and panic no longer existed. She had been quiet since her father had tried to kill her and take our son, which had resulted in me killing him. She also wouldn’t let Rafe out of her sight. She barely wanted me to touch him. After I cleaned up what was left of her father’s body and burned his remains in the fire pit centered between all three cabins, she asked if we could go to Laz’s instead of going back to the city.

“You head on inside. I’ll get our things.” I leaned down and kissed Toyin first, then the top of Rafe’s head. He reached for me but I nodded to the door. She smiled and turned to head inside.

After I brought our things in, I dumped the plastic bin with Rafe’s toys on the living room floor. He whined and squirmed to get out of her lap but she held him tightly.

“Toy, let him play.”

She closed her eyes and buried her face in his hair for a minute but she did as asked and placed him on the floor. His little legs moved clumsily and fast, heading right for his toys. I sat next to Toyin, dragging her into my lap. She curled into me, resting her head on my chest.

“You want to talk about it?”

“No...” she said quietly.

“I think you should.”

She exhaled a sigh. “I know I should.”

“Tell me whatever you want and what you don’t want to share you don’t have to.”

I wanted it all. Every single detail. I wanted to bring him back to life and kill him a million more times. He’d hurt Toyin mentally and wanted to physically hurt her and our son. My wolf growled at the memory.

“He killed my mother.”

I tensed. “He told you that?”

“Yes and I believe him. He said a lot of things but mostly that he never wanted me.” I tightened my hold on her and kissed the top of her head, waiting for the rest. “She knew about you and Rafe...”

“What do you mean?”

“My mother was skilled with divination. The same way she knew about you, according to my father she knew about Rafe. She saw my future before she had me. The curse was only one way to keep me from you and to be honest, I’m not sure I was ever at risk. The ring might have been a ploy to keep me from mating with you but it was also a way to keep him from finding me.”

She paused and twisted the ring on her finger before continuing.

“If she knew my future, my fate—that my father would want our son—she would have wanted to protect me any way she could. He’s the one with pure blood. Not her. Maybe it was all a lie.”

She lifted her eyes to mine. “If she did all this to protect you then it was a necessary lie. Wouldn’t you do the same for him?” I glanced at Rafe and her eyes followed.

“Yes.” She brushed her fingers over my neck. “That lie kept me from you.”

“It doesn’t matter. You have me now.” Her eyes shifted to Rafe again and I added. “And he’s safe. Your father is gone. He’s not coming back.”

“Neither is she...” she whispered quietly.

“Yeah...” I hugged her tighter. Toyin had been through a lot. Everything she learned had been overwhelming and would take time to work through but she had me. I would make sure she survived it all because I needed her and so did Rafe.

“It feels like I’m losing her all over again. At least before, I hoped I would see her again. Now I know that’s not possible and it really fucking hurts.”

“I know. I feel it too.”

She smiled up at me. “That still is hard for me to get used to.”

I lifted her chin and lowered my mouth to hers. “I don’t think we ever will. At least I damn sure hope we don’t. I like feeling you. Even if it hurts.”

“Me too.” I kissed her and when she pulled back, she buried her face in my chest. I would be her safe space for as long as I had breath in my lungs. That was one thing I knew would never change, regardless of what else in our lives did.



THE NEXT MORNING I awoke feeling the heat of Toyin’s body next to mine. I was grateful I’d persuaded her to let Rafe sleep in his crib instead of in the bed with us. At the moment my dick was incredibly hard and I needed to feel her.

When I slipped my hand between her thighs and she moaned her approval, I shifted enough to roll her onto her back and she smiled up at me. “Good morning.”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it.” I kissed her neck then lifted enough to get out of the briefs and shorts I slept in

before working on her panties. The only other thing keeping me from her was one of my t-shirts which she could keep. Right now, my goal was being inside her.

“Mmm, that sounds promising.” She opened her legs wider as an invitation I fully accepted.

“You have no idea.” I maneuvered between her legs and pressed against her pussy. She was already slick with anticipation which had my wolf growling. The dark expression in her eyes and the slight tilt of her lips was all the permission I needed.

I entered her with one hard thrust that had her sucking in a sharp breath when it landed. She lifted her legs and her knees fell open wider which had me pulling back and pressing forward again. This time faster and followed by another thrust. I fucked her hard, but slow. I shoved her shirt up and bent my head to take a nipple between my teeth. The mixture of pleasure and pain had her back arching, pressing into me.

“More...” she demanded and I didn’t hesitate to deliver. I groaned, watching her jaw fall slack each time I was completely buried in her pussy and she fought to keep me there. The way she stretched and molded so perfectly for me, her nails grazing my skin while I drove into her harder and faster with our eyes locked in challenge, was everything.

Cum for me.

Make me cum.

I smirked and lowered my face to the curve to her neck, sucking my mark, and she screamed my name as she came. Her body clenched around mine, pulling me in deeper until I tumbled right behind her.

After a few minutes of recuperating, I rolled over to my side, bringing her small frame with me. “It’s time to go back to the city.”

“I know. I’m ready.” She inched closer to my chest, tucking her head beneath my chin, fitting perfectly against me. Once again making me grateful she was finally mine.



LAZ PUSHED a glass of cognac my way and lifted his, leaning against the counter. I leaned against the one opposite him and brought my glass to my lips, taking down some before I glanced over my shoulder after his eyes traveled to the living room where Toyin and Jo were on the floor playing with Rafe and Kaleb.

Are you sure that's it? No more surprise family members we have to worry about? – Laz

No. Her father killed her mother. I killed him. No one's fucking with Toyin or our son. – Me

I frowned at my brother who nodded.

How is she? – Laz

Dealing. I don't think she's fully processed it all just yet. – Me

Her mother lied her entire life to prevent her from creating an heir that her father wanted to sacrifice for his own gain by exploiting power. That's a lot to process. – Laz

It is but the worst of it all is learning that he killed her mother. The only person who ever truly loved her. She used to hope that one day they'd find their way back to each other but that's never going to happen. – Me

He killed her mother and you killed him. It won't give her what she lost but it's justice and you're wrong, Xan. Her mother is not the only person who truly loved Toy. We love her. She's our family. Has always been but things are damn sure different now. She's yours. – Laz

I smirked and nodded, finishing my drink.

“Very different,” I stated, glancing over my shoulder. “But in the best fucking way possible.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, some shit you can never really prepare for or explain.” When I looked at him, his focus was on Jo. She felt him too, as she looked up and smiled.

“Oh shit,” Jo belted out, causing Laz to frown her way as she stared at her phone.

“What’s wrong?”

“I was supposed to meet Zion downstairs. We have to clear the apartment to get it ready just in case. I pretty much packed up everything but asked Zion to move the mattress out. I have the keys; he can’t get in.”

“Which apartment?” Jo narrowed her stare on me when Laz asked and he smirked.

“Oh *that* one. Just take him the keys.”

“*We* can take the keys. I want to make sure they thoroughly cleaned everything. Since he’s the one who brought her here, he can remove the mattress.”

“Jo...” Laz warned, looking past her toward Toyin.

“Stop looking like that. I’m sure she agrees. Let’s go,” she demanded and I glanced at Laz who closed his eyes, shaking his head.

“Let’s go.” He cut his eyes at me and I arched a brow.

“Didn’t she just say Zion was moving the mattress out?”

“Yeah she did and she also said this is your fucking mess. You brought her here so let’s go.”

“Damn, Laz. I’m not sure who’s running shit. You or Jo. Maybe I need to rethink taking the position.”

He growled and I smirked. “Easy, Alpha. I don’t want your headaches and I’m not about to fight Jo to be in charge.”

“Fuck you. Let’s go.”

“You won’t fight me because you know you’d lose,” she added, lifting Kaleb into her chest and securing him into a wrapped carrier. Toyin lifted Rafe into her chest and we left the apartment, taking the elevator down two levels where we found Zion leaning against the wall with his head bowed while he pecked away at his phone.

“If you brought all of them, why the fuck am I here?” he said without looking up.

Jo moved past all of us, using the keys she’d brought from their apartment to let us in. I slapped Zion’s phone from his hand but his reflexes were quick enough for him to catch it before it crashed to the floor.

“You’re here because your alpha demanded you be here.” I smirked at Laz and Zion looked between both of us before he grinned.

You mean Jo. – Zion

Yep, she’s the one running shit. – Me

Don’t make me fuck you up in front of your kid, Xan. – Laz

He paused and added, *But wait, that won’t matter because he thinks Zion is his daddy anyway. – Laz*

I sneered and cut off his path but he grinned and shoved me away.

I only helped. Never stepped into your role. Chill the fuck out. – Zion

“Zion, Xander. Mattress.” Jo’s eyes bounced between the two of us before she turned back to the kitchen, opening cabinets to inspect them which was pointless because Keerah had only been here less than a week. She was just being extra as fuck to make a point of completely erasing her existence.

I followed Zion to the back and stepped into the bedroom right behind him, but he stilled and lifted his head as if scenting something. After a minute he growled and moved to the bed, leaning over and sniffing harder.

When he turned to me, his expression was hard and his eyes glowed, rimmed in red.

“What the hell is wrong with...”

Before I finished the sentence, he rushed my way, shoving me into the wall with his arm against my throat. “Where is she?”

“Who is she?” I asked, pushing him away. Laz and I were pretty equally matched but we could both easily overpower Zion.

“My mate. Where the fuck is she?”

He charged me again but Laz stepped into the room, moving between us. “What’s going on?”

“Your little brother seems to have lost his mind is what’s going on. You better get him before I beat his ass.”

“I haven’t lost my mind but he’s going to lose some teeth if he doesn’t tell me where she is?”

“Where who is?”

“Keerah...” Zion growled.

“I don’t know where she is and why do you care? She left which you already know and I’ve been a little too preoccupied with my own life to check in on hers.”

“I’m asking you to tell me where she would go. You were out there with her so you should know.”

“Zion, what the fuck? Why do you care?” Laz shoved our brother in the chest then walked up on him.

“Because she’s *mine*.”

“Bruh, you have lost your mind,” Laz mumbled.

That was when it clicked. “The world cannot be this fucking small...”

Laz turned to me. “What are you talking about?”

“He scented her as soon as he walked in the room. She’s...”

“My mate.”

“Nah, that’s not possible. He’s been around her. He would have known before now.”

“He hasn’t.” All eyes moved to the door where Jo was standing with a frown on her face. “Every time they were around each other, there was a distance and a lot going on. So much that he would have been distracted.”

“He was in Xan’s apartment. Why is it just hitting him now?”

“She wasn’t there for long. She never slept in my bed, showered in my bathroom, barely even took a piss before Jo threw her out.”

All eyes were on Jo again and she shrugged. “She wasn’t supposed to be there and I didn’t throw her out. I let her stay here.”

“Fuck all that. Tell me where she would go.” Zion glared at me once more. The determination in his eyes was all the proof I needed. He wasn’t letting this go.

“I am not believing she’s his mate. I agree, the world cannot be this fucking small,” Laz mumbled in frustration.

“It’s not an exact science. It could be true. She slept in that bed the entire time she was here. Her scent would be more present,” Toyin said, stepping up beside Jo. “I did a lot of research back before...well you know.”

Before our bond was completed.

“Just tell me where to find her.”

“I can’t. I have no clue where she would go. She doesn’t have a pack. I met her when she was roaming. She’s probably still doing the same thing, moving from place to place.”

“Fine, then I’ll go find her on my own.”

“Zion...” Laz warned, stepping in front of him to cut off his path. They both squared their stances in challenge.

“She’s mine, Laz. Would you let me stop you if it were Jo out there?”

“No, but that’s not the same.”

“It is for me. She’s mine so you either get the fuck out of my way or *you* can lose some teeth instead of him.” He pointed at me and Laz exhaled a sigh and moved out the way.

“What the fuck? He’s not leaving alone.”

Zion snorted and glared at me. “*You* did.”

Then he walked out after Jo and Toyin cleared the doorway.

You remember what it felt like when Xander shut us out? You don't do that or I'll hunt you down and drag your ass back here with my bare hands. – Laz

He looked right at me.

I'll check in but I have to do this. – Zion

“You're really letting him do this?”

“You want to try and stop him?” Laz shot back.

We both looked toward the doorway where Jo and Toyin had been and I didn't have to respond.

If Keerah was truly Zion's mate there wasn't a damn thing Laz and I could do to stop him from going after her.

Fuck!

EPILOGUE

T *hree months and some change...*

“Close your eyes and concentrate on the pulse slowly moving through you,” I muttered to myself as I inhaled and exhaled slowly. “Release it naturally.”

The desperation of never feeling helpless again was driving me. The reminder of my father’s presence—dark, foreign and suffocating—was enough for my body to give into what I was feeling.

With a shaky breath I stretched my fingers, spreading them wide and chanting in the first language my mother had taught me. I muttered the incantation, with a slow controlled cadence. What I now understood was the Sovran tongue. Their language which expressed and communicated their magic and power. I wasn’t born as a descendant of the Sovran or Equinox covens but I embraced the spirit of them and that was enough.

Seconds later I felt warm all over. The tips of my fingers burned and my skin was blazing. There was a rush of blood moving throughout my veins that challenged and dominated the human side of my existence.

When I peeled my eyes open, I saw the glow surrounding me but I was only able to maintain it for a minute or so before I collapsed, fearful I would crash onto the concreted rooftop, but strong arms caught me and cradled my body to his. I blinked Xander into view, noticing the strain on his face as he carried me to one of the nearby tables.

“What’s wrong?”

“Your skin is hot like fire. I’m assuming from the ring of flames I just saw around you.”

He sat me on the table and wedged his body between my legs, placing his palms flat on the wooden surface.

“Sorry, did I burn you?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s already healing.”

I lowered my eyes to the red welts on his arms and cringed but he tapped my thigh and my eyes shot up to his. “Hey, don’t worry about it. Tell me what you just did.”

“I channeled power from the sun.”

He frowned and I further explained. “It makes me stronger, more powerful. When I have the power pulsing through me, I can use it as a weapon.”

“What you’re saying is you can burn shit up with the flick of your finger.” He grinned and I nodded.

“Yes, so you better be nice.”

“I’m not scared of you, Toy, at least not your magic. The only thing you have that will bring me to my knees is right here.” He pushed my thighs wider with his body, yanking my hips, so I was pressed against the thickness of him, fully erect in his jeans.

I dropped my eyes then arched a brow when they were on his face again. He smirked and kissed me, pulling back just enough to continue. “You doing magic is sexy as fuck. You in a ring of fire is even sexier.”

“Now you know how it feels for me when I get to see you shift.”

“I already know. I can smell your pussy dripping the minute it happens.”

I smiled slowly and kissed him. “Good, at least you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“But you have to get a handle on all this. You collapsed after you did it. I don’t like that.”

“It takes time. I’m learning.”

“Learn in a safer way or make sure I’m around to catch you when you fall.”

I smirked. “I can do that.”

“You *will* do that.”

My eyes rolled playfully. “I *will* do that.”

“Good.”

“What did Laz say about Zion? He checked in today?”

Xander tensed. His relationship with Zion was complicated at the moment. They weren’t at odds, but Zion wasn’t keeping in touch with Xander as much as he was Laz. They all assumed it was because of the awkwardness of Xander having been with Keerah, who Zion had been hunting for the past two months, but it wasn’t Xander’s fault. He didn’t know.

Laz told Zion to be grateful Xander *had* been with her or he might have never known she belonged to him. Wolves were prideful, cocky and ego driven. The brothers were always in competition. no matter how much they loved each other. So the two realities were not helping the situation. Zion’s way of handling things hurt Xander but he understood. Zion was his little brother and Xander loved him regardless, but his avoidance hurt.

“He’s in Canada. Caught her scent and found a traveling pack that said she spent a few weeks with them before she disappeared again.”

“But he’s okay?”

Xander nodded stiffly. I felt his discomfort. “He’s fine. I just wish he would bring his ass home.”

“He will, when he finds her.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“I don’t know but if it were me, would you stop looking?”

His expression was tight. “Fuck no.”

“Then be understanding.”

Xander released a sigh. “I am.” He raked a hand over his face. “I just hate this shit and it reminds me...”

“Of how we felt when *you* were gone.”

“Yeah...”

“This is different,” I said softly and he gently gripped my neck, tilting my head back.

“Don’t go back to that. We’re good now.”

I smiled when he kissed me. “We are.”

“Let’s go. Jo sent me to get you because she’s almost done cooking. We should go eat.”

“Or we could stay up here a little longer and I could show you another magic trick I learned.” I reached for his jeans and tugged at his belt. “But it’s with my mouth and not my magic. *Although*, from what I’ve read, it can be very magical for *you*.”

He groaned under his breath but didn’t stop me. I knew he wouldn’t just like he knew I wouldn’t disappoint.

Fuck I love you. – Xander

You better because this is a really amazing trick. – Me

I loved this man with my whole heart and I was about to show him that love in a very physical way, with my tongue.

THANK YOU!

It looks like there's another undeniable bond brewing but Zion will have to find her first to know if what he's feeling is really the pull from his fated.

Zion is up next from the Bennett Pack. I'm grateful you circled back to read about Xander and Toyin and if you're new to the Bennett Alphas, make sure you check out Laz and Jo's story in Lone Wolf.

There's so much more to come and I pray you'll hang around to travel down this new road with me.

-There was a mention of the Lafayette Family as well and their stories will follow. -

Thanks so much for offering me your time and I'll see you next time.

As always, you'll find me in the cut...

Crafting Romance With An Edge ♥