

Winter Wolves

A winter scene featuring two wolves in the foreground. One wolf is reddish-brown and is lying down on the snow, looking towards the left. The other wolf is grey and black with striking blue and orange eyes, standing upright and looking directly at the viewer. In the background, there is a wooden structure, possibly a barn or shed, partially covered in snow. The sky is a warm, golden-yellow color, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall atmosphere is serene and cold.

Christine Michelle

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MOONLIT DREAMS PUBLICATIONS

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PROLOGUE



Sabine

MY HEART STUTTERED IN my chest, then stopped, as if the pain of loss couldn't allow another life-sustaining beat.

For a flickering moment, I was okay with that. I'd already lost my father, and now, my mother was gone as well. I stared down at her beautiful body that had been ravaged by the poison she pumped into her veins to stave off the withering sickness after the loss of my father, her fate-blessed mate.

The doctor who attended her was removed from the room after I threatened his life. He didn't believe in fate-blessed mates. As a result of his lack of belief, the idiot wouldn't give credence to the theory of withering sickness stemming from the loss of a fated mate. This Goddess-forsaken pack refused

to believe and that failure would lead to the pack's demise eventually.

I heard the whispers. The Winter Pack used to call them moon-blessed mates because they thought the moon herself gave the blessing of such an important union. They remained only whispers in the shadows though because the Alpha family would hear nothing about unions that didn't involve choice. Fate be damned.

The doctor was clearly in his pocket of influence and had trash-talked my mother as she'd taken her last breath. The only reason I was thankful for him having been there was because it brought clarity. My mother had done the unthinkable to survive the loss of her mate, so that she had time to be sure that I wouldn't have to fight and scrape for everything in my future without her.

"Mom," I whispered as I placed a kiss just above her right eyebrow. My fingers trailed through her hair that was the color of wet sand on a beach. Her once perpetually tanned skin, that used to hold a bronze-like glow, was now gray with death's embrace. Her eyes remained closed, and my heart wept that I'd never see them again. They were the opposite of my coloring. Where I had a golden-amber left eye and an ice blue right, hers were reversed. My father used to call us mirrored images.

Our eye color was where our appearances diverged. My hair held the darker hues of my father's family, a trait passed on more with the northern territory wolves. My skin was pale

with freckles dotting across my shoulders, chest, and the bridge of my nose. While my mother had been of average height, I was tall for a female, an inch shy of six feet tall. I had some curves, but they didn't compare to the roundness my mother carried throughout the years. Her hips were wider, butt and boobs far larger. If you put us side-by-side, people would say I was sporty whereas my mother was more like a sultry pinup.

It didn't matter to either of us. We both loved one another, and she taught me to love everything about my body because our differences weren't meant to be comparisons that made the other person feel lesser in any way.

“Our differences are what make us each beautiful in our own ways,” she would tell me.

I never doubted her.

Then again, I never knew she was drinking poison every day for the past few years to keep herself on Earth while making sure I had everything I needed in life before she was gone.

My eyes tracked over her withered frame. It took me aback to see just how much she had wasted away in front of me before I realized there was anything wrong. Her curves had been obliterated, cheeks that were no longer full had sunken and become sallow. There were things I'd noticed, and she had played it off, telling me it was just because she worked too hard. There were always promises that she'd eat double when she was done to make up for the calories she burned.

A tear dripped from my face down to the same mirrored spot on my mother's. "How am I going to make it without you?" I asked her. Unfortunately, my mother would never be able to give me that answer.

The doctor finally came to take her body away to be prepped for her return to the Goddess. While he wouldn't think of what the afterlife held for fated mates, since most of his pack did not believe in them, I knew she was finally going home to my father. They were meant to dance together amongst the stars.

As the door was shut on the van that would take my mother's body away, a tiny mewling noise caught my attention. There was a kitten perched under the wheel of the van, and I knew what would happen if the doctor took off without realizing it was there.

I dove for the kitten as the van started, and tucked the little ball of fluff securely into my hands as the doctor pulled away.

"You poor thing. I'm not sure you realize how close you just came to joining my mother for her last ride."

"Meow."

"Well, then," I huffed at the cat's seemingly indignant protest. "You look scrawnier than she did. Let's go see what we have in the house to fatten you up."

A contented purring started up and rumbled against my chest. It was probably just my imagination, but it felt almost as if the vibrations soothed a piece of my heart, as if my mother

herself had sent the cat as a message that everything would be all right.

I laughed out loud as I shut the door to my apartment behind me. “Could you imagine? My mother – a shifter wolf – sending me a cat as a comfort?”

“Meow.”

That time, the noise sounded more like an agreement than anything else.

“Well, then...” I sighed before taking on the responsibility to keep the poor little orphaned kitten alive. At least, I assumed it had been there because it had been on its own. Kind of like me – the recently orphaned wolf shifter.

CHAPTER 1



Sabine

NORMALLY, MY DREAMS WERE forgotten the minute my eyes opened. There was always a prevailing feeling lingering somewhere at the back of my mind while the details stayed just out of reach. Maybe I wanted to forget because the dreams were just too unbelievable.

Today was different.

When I woke in a cold sweat, with my heart hammering away inside my chest as though it had plans on escaping. There was no denying the truth any longer.

The Alpha of the northern territories, better known to everyone as the Winter Pack, was my fate-blessed mate. Some called them fated, others called them moon-blessed or

soulmates. Despite what everyone else called them, the winter wolves called them fiction. Very few shifters in the north believed there was a special connection between two mates who were meant to be bonded to one another by a higher being or purpose that could only be found in one particular shifter. Instead, they believed in chosen mates only. Talk of anything else was a fairytale. That left me in the miserable position of being the low woman on the pack totem pole trying to convince the Alpha of my pack that I was the mate fate had chosen for him.

It didn't help that the Winter Pack believed in earning your rank the hard way. Our wolves fought for rank. You could be born to an Alpha, but if you couldn't hold the position yourself, it didn't remain your position for long.

The only wolves who didn't have to fight for their position were the Omegas. They didn't fight at all. While they didn't hold rank, they were revered for their special skillset. I was not an Omega. Even that would have been better than my bottom of the barrel position. It wasn't that I couldn't fight. The desire to move up to a new rank simply wasn't there. For me, there were far more important things to do each day than rank climbing and posturing. Besides, once you moved up in the ranks, the problem became the challenges themselves.

The higher the rank, the more you had to fight to keep it, and that just seemed too exhausting to me when I had a business to run, and at one time, a sick mother to care for. So, why bother? Instead, I did my thing, baked my cakes, employed a dozen

packmates, and stayed under the radar. That had worked for me for all of my 26 years.

Everyone in the pack knew me because they loved my food, but at the same time, I was mostly invisible like any other service industry worker. Well, that wasn't entirely true. There was the silly notion that I baked with magic and sometimes my cupcakes would lead people to find their most compatible mate. That didn't mean they believed in anything like soulmates or fated mates. Nope. It just meant that I was a good matchmaker or something. The idiots in my pack who bothered to notice me often referred to me as the cupcake cupid.

It was slightly undignified, but at least no one wanted to challenge me for the title. Then again, it also meant that the Alpha of my pack wasn't going to be inclined to hear that the cupcake cupid was his mate. Fated or not.

In the Summer Pack, many pairings were considered to be fated mates. They had mating ceremonies to bless the union, even though it wasn't strictly required to seal the fate-blessed bond. Most didn't figure out who their mate was until they were around 25 to 30 years old. Wolf shifters had an unusually long lifespan and as a result we weren't really seen as full grown until we hit our mid-twenties.

For the summer wolves, finding your mate around that time of a wolf's life was a significant milestone. For the winter wolves, it was a joke and almost never happened. Deep longing filled my chest, right beside the ache of knowing that

I'd been born to the wrong pack. Then again, my fate-intended mate wouldn't have changed, no matter what pack I belonged to or the beliefs they held. There was still no getting around the fact that my mate refused to believe in fate-blessed pairings. He would rather allow one of the horrid she-wolves, who held the strength to fight their way to the top of the pack, to become his mate than someone who might care about the pack in the way a true Luna should.

When a fate-blessed pairing, on occasion, supposedly happened to a northern wolf, it was either laughed off as a joke, or both parties agreed to try it out for their own reasons to see what the big deal was. You would think that my pack would pay more attention to the couples who actually went along with the pull of fate and claimed their other half. Those were the couples who had the most pups, stayed together through everything, and ended up dying together in the end. The bond they shared was always unbreakable. The chosen mates of the pack rarely had children and when they did, they were sometimes not as healthy or strong as those who were born to a fate-blessed mating.

Finding my own mate was something I had dreamed of after listening to my mom tell me about the special bond she shared with my dad. Only, I wasn't a part of the Summer Pack and there was no way the Alpha of the Winter Pack would acknowledge me, let alone even think of becoming my mate. He'd never even said a single word to me. Truth be told, I didn't think he even knew I existed. Our pack was the largest in the world, so it would be impossible for him to know every

wolf in his territory. The fact that I lived and worked less than ten miles from the pack house didn't seem to matter.

There was also the problem that he had a long-time on-again, off again girlfriend. They hadn't sealed a mate bond or had any official ceremony tying them together yet. I always thought it was because they were too busy fighting challenges to keep their status, but there could have been other reasons, too.

It was possible, or at least my poor little heart hoped, that he felt the bond pulling him elsewhere, even if he didn't realize that was why he hadn't made things official with Carmella yet. Then again, not sealing the mate bond could just be because they seemed to be "off again" far too often and neither of them remained celibate or loyal during those times. Reminding myself of that left a horrible feeling in my belly. Even if he did accept me, there was no way I could accept a mate who would so easily leave my side for another female. I had heard stories of what happened to bonded couples who cheated. The results seemed to be dimmed in chosen pairs, so it happened more often than it should with them. With a fated pairing, cheating pains could become fatal because it also aided in destroying the bond.

There was no need to worry about that, though. My mate might have been fated to be mine, but the likelihood of him ever even discovering I existed, let alone believing in our bond or accepting it, was about as good as me becoming the Queen of England.

CHAPTER 2



Sabine

“ARE YOU GOING TO tell him?” Dierdre, my best friend, asked as I popped the last two dozen cupcakes in the oven. We were pulling overtime at the bakery to make the sweets for the solstice party that the pack was holding the following day. Dee’s silky blonde hair was pulled back in a bun at the nape of her neck to keep it tidy while we worked. It made her blue eyes stand out as she widened them to emphasize her question.

“Yes, I’ll get right on that. I’m sure there won’t be any trouble gaining an audience with the Alpha, and he’s guaranteed to believe that I’m his mate, too. It’ll be all roses and butterflies and nice things.” I rolled my eyes as the sarcasm dripped from my words.

“First, butterflies are creepy, so I don’t know why you thought they should be listed as a *‘nice thing’*, Sabine.” She emphasized those two words with finger quotes. “Second, you never know until you try. You’ve been dreaming of having a fate-blessed mate for ages. Now that you literally dreamed about who it is, you’re determined to let a few logistics stop you?”

I looked into the seemingly never-ending depths of Dee’s eyes while trying to figure out how she could be so positive. Normally, my beautiful friend was the one who was rarely even cautiously optimistic. Being three years older than me, she had almost given up on finding her fate-blessed mate. She’d had the dreams but had never seen him in our pack. That meant he was out there somewhere among one of the other packs and she had never been granted permission to leave the territory to go looking.

“How in the hell are butterflies creepy? And you and I both know there are more than a few logistics stopping me. There would be the challenge I’d have to fight to get his girlfriend out of the way. That would only happen if I could even get close enough to issue a challenge, let alone win. And you know challenges don’t work like that. I would have to fight my way up the ranks first to even be able to issue a challenge to one of the elite ranking wolves. That could take a lifetime, Dee.”

“Okay, first, those winged menaces are nasty little worms who hide away in a self-made tent until they can fly. They’re still just worms with wings. Flying. Freaking. Worms, Sabine.

Worms shouldn't fly! It's just..." Dee shivered visibly before adding, "Wrong."

I sighed and rolled my eyes at her once more. Note to self – don't bring up butterflies in front of Dee anymore. Apparently, they were a trigger. Part of me wanted to giggle that my big bad wolf best friend seemed to be afraid of worms, but there were more important things to think about. That didn't mean I wouldn't file that information away and gift her with a stuffed worm or stuffed butterfly on her birthday every year, now that I knew they creeped her out.

It would be the best revenge for the frog bullshit she'd been pulling with me for years. It wasn't my fault that my wolf tried to eat one that hopped inside my mouth and made me foam up. My wolf was so freaked out about the thing hopping in there that she spit it out and relinquished the shift to my human self. Then the damn frog hopped right on my bare breast and flicked its tongue at me before hopping again and landing on top of my head where it proceeded to get tangled in my hair. I shivered just thinking about it.

"As for the other stuff, I guess I see your point. It would be a lot of work. Isn't love supposed to be worth the work you have to put in, though?"

"Dee, I don't love him. That's impossible, since I don't even know the man. We've never even spoken a single word to one another."

The little bell that hung over the door out front tinkled to inform me that not only had Dee forgotten to lock the door,

like I'd asked her to do an hour ago, but someone had come into the bakery.

"Dammit," I growled.

"Sorry, I forgot," Dee whimpered as her head tucked into her shoulders as if she could hide from the fact that she'd screwed up again. I loved her. She was my best friend for a reason because she was loyal and loved me to a fault. The woman would forget her own head if it wasn't attached to her body, though.

"Hello?" A strong male voice called out.

I nabbed a towel and started wiping my hands off as I moved out of the kitchen to the storefront portion of the bakery. "Hi, how can I...?"

His warm, whiskey-hued eyes met mine and the rest of my words got hung up somewhere in the back of my throat.

"Holy shit!"

"I hope there's no shit in the bakery," he teased. It made me realize I'd said that last part out loud, despite the other words not working properly.

"Sorry, Alpha. We weren't expecting anyone as we closed an hour ago."

"The door was unlocked, and your sign says open."

"Sorry, Sabine!" Dee called from the kitchen where she continued to hide from me.

“That was a mistake, but since you’re already here, is there something I can help you with?” I glanced around, realizing that all the baked goods from the day were already bought out or packaged up to be sent to the school.

“I was hoping to get a cup of coffee and some peace and fucking quiet for a few minutes. Do you think that’s possible?”

“Sure, you can have a seat anywhere. I’ll just lock up first and make sure no one else comes in.”

“Would it be possible for me to sit in the back?” He pointed toward the windows as he asked this, and my curiosity got the better of me.

“You could do that. It’s a bit warm back there, since I’m baking for tomorrow’s celebration.” I clicked the lock in place, flipped the sign, and headed back toward the kitchen. The man waited for me to move alongside him before following me back. It was intimidating to have him at my back considering he was a good six inches taller than my statuesque frame. He was also broad-shouldered, muscular all over, and exuded the typical alpha shifter energy that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“I don’t mind the heat.” His voice dropped an octave and when I glanced back, it was to find those amber orbs of his glued to my ass.

“Heading out, lock the door behind me. Don’t forget to do that thing we were talking about, since opportunity knocked!” I was going to kill my best friend.

“What thing did you need to do?”

I turned and looked at Alpha Stormborn. “I’ve been having crazy dreams lately about someone being my fate-blessed mate.”

He shrugged his giant shoulders. “Some people believe in that.”

“You don’t?”

“Never seen evidence of it. So, do you know who your mate is supposed to be?”

I could tell he was humoring me. His tone was nice enough, but it was clear he didn’t believe in fated mates. The half-cocked grin he wore sort of sold the idea that he thought my dream was more wishful thinking than anything else.

“It was you.” The words slipped out before I could stop them. There was no good reason for me to speak my truth, since it seemed ludicrous even to me. Still, part of me wanted to see his reaction.

“I’m flattered you’ve been dreaming about me, but I think that’s all it was.”

“There’s a way to find out,” I explained.

“If we touch.” His arrogant tone and the smirk accompanying it made it obvious that while he knew what I was talking about, he still didn’t believe me. Then again, the way he backed up a couple steps to maintain a healthy distance between us meant he wasn’t taking any chances on being wrong and being landed with me as his mate. There was no

denying how much that stung. “Maybe this wasn’t the quiet space I thought it would be.”

“I don’t want anything from you,” I argued.

“Don’t you?” He shook his head. “Of all the come-ons that I’ve had thrown my way over the years, no one has actually ever claimed to be my moon-blessed mate before. That’s a new one.” Even though he didn’t believe it, he still used the term more popular amongst the northern wolves. Once upon a time, they felt that fated mates were a blessing from the moon herself. There were a few, though not many, who still believed that way. Everyone else laughed it all off as a joke.

My shoulders bounced with indifference as the oven timer buzzed. I turned to pull the cupcakes out and found that Alpha Stormborn remained standing there watching my every move.

“Are you the one who provides the sweets for the celebrations every year?”

“I have provided them for the past seven years.” There was pride in my voice as I spoke because in a way, I’d been fighting my own challenges. I had to be the best damn baker, and most reliable, to keep that contract with the pack after my mother worked so hard to earn it in the first place.

“Impressive.”

“It is.”

“What’s your name?”

“Sabine Hopkins.”

“Sabine Hopkins,” he repeated in a whisper as if he was searching his memory banks for a name he’d never come across when dealing with the pack before.

“We’ve never met or spoken before today,” I offered up.

“How did you manage the contract then?”

“My mother first obtained the contract a decade ago. She worked to fulfill it for the three years before she passed. I took over after she died, since she had a five-year contract in the bakery’s name. A new contract was issued to me the following year, since I’d been the one to fulfill the last couple years of the original.”

“I see.”

“There’s a seat over there in the corner,” I nodded toward the desk I used for paperwork. “Sorry it’s such a mess, but I’m usually the only one who has to deal with it. I’ll get you that coffee and leave you to it.”

“Just like that?”

“That’s what you came in for, right?”

“It is, but then you claimed to be my mate.”

There was no way to keep my sigh in as I explained to him why I could remain so level-headed about everything. Even as his soulful amber eyes threatened to drown me in lust, reality tamped the feeling down enough that I could think. “I already knew you wouldn’t believe me even if I ever got the chance to tell you.”

“So, you were just going to never tell me?” He couldn’t hide the curiosity in his tone.

“If you hadn’t walked in here tonight, I’d never have had the opportunity to do so.”

“And now that I have walked in here, and you told me, you’re just going to make me coffee and let me sit here in peace without attempting to touch me to see if it’s true?”

“You said you don’t believe in moon-blessed or fate-blessed mates and took a very obvious step away to avoid my touch. I don’t go where I’m not wanted.”

“Seems more like you don’t like to fight for what you think should be yours.”

“While I might believe in some pairings being fated, I’m also a realist and a busy woman. I don’t have the time to convince you of something you don’t want to believe in.” I threw my hands up and twirled once indicating the space around us. “I’ve been here, hard at work, since three this morning. I’ll be here for another couple hours yet to get everything ready to roll out for the celebration tomorrow. To be honest, being your mate sounds very time consuming, what with all the challenges...”

“Once I’m mated officially, there can be no more challenges for that position,” he reminded me.

“True, but until then, only the strongest females are contenders.”

“And?”

“And I am nowhere near the top of the pack in rank.”

“What rank do you currently hold?”

I had to think about it for a minute because I honestly wasn't sure. “That's a good question. I haven't had to fight a challenge since high school. Who knows?”

“How old are you?” He asked, shocked that it had obviously been a while.

“I'm 26.”

“Eight years?” He questioned. The disbelief was evident in his voice. “How in the hell have you gone eight years in this pack without fighting a challenge?”

Again, I shrugged my shoulders. “I never needed to. After school, I was too busy with my mom's bakery and even more so after I took over. I guess I work too much to be challenged.”

“What about angry customers? Surely, someone has challenged you over something going wrong in the bakery?” I laughed at his assumption. “What's so funny?”

“I've never had a complaint about the bakery.” He gave me a look that said he would believe in the fabled moon-blessed mates before accepting that I'd never had a complaint about my business.

“No one wants to anger the cupcake cupid,” I teased.

“Cupcake cupid?” His brows furrowed, as if he was deep in thought. Then his head shook back and forth causing his dark brown hair to fall from its slicked-back, put-together look to

tumble down into his eyes. He appeared far more carefree like that. He ruined the appeal when his fingers worked the hair back into place as best he could. Not that he wasn't still handsome. There was no taking that rugged beauty away from the man. Still, I preferred the far less put together side of him to the slick appearance that was better suited for a businessman in the city than the Alpha of a pack of shifter wolves.

“You're the woman who does the matchmaking thing with cupcakes?”

“That's what they say.”

“Is it true, though?”

“You don't believe in fate-blessed mates, so why would you even ask if I had some strange matchmaking power?” His nervous chuckle made me question his beliefs for a brief moment.

“You're right. I don't believe in it.” He stood from the seat he'd taken at my desk and his frame towered over my already lofty height. I was just shy of six feet tall myself, but my Alpha stood at least a half foot above me. His solid frame tapered down from broad shoulders to a slightly narrowed waistline. To be honest, he was broad and muscular all over, so nothing on the man could be considered slim in the sense that he might have been skinny. He was solidly thick all over.

His liquid cinnamon eyes stared down at me as he held one of his giant hands out for me to take. It wasn't often that males, even shifters, could make me feel dainty, but this man

made me feel downright spritely. I reached out and took his hand in my own and, in that single touch, proved the Alpha wrong.

The zip of electrical current that ran from his hand to mine seemed to supercharge my heart just as quickly as it blew my pupils – and his – wide open. The black swallowed the gold in his eyes almost entirely leaving behind a slender ring of molten gold, making his eyes look like the sun during the height of a total solar eclipse.

It took great effort to separate our hands from one another, and by the time we managed it, we were both left breathless from the encounter.

“Impossible,” he mumbled.

“That was wild,” I said at the same time.

“What kind of witchcraft are you brewing in this bakery?” He accused immediately going on high alert. To add insult to his question he also backed away and put as much distance as he could between us. The man then had the audacity to pick up his coffee cup and sniff the remnants as if I’d poisoned the damn thing.

None of it should have been surprising and yet, it still took me aback that instead of believing we were actually fated mates, his response was immediately to go on the defensive like I’d cast a spell on him.

“It’s odd that you have no problem believing in one type of magic, while firmly denying another that is natural and has a

long history amongst our kind.”

“You can forget about supplying anything for the celebration tomorrow,” he insisted.

It was my turn to be shocked all over again. “I’ve already made everything.”

“Good luck selling it then.” His snide response turned my stomach as his back met my gaze and he moved to head out of my bakery. “I’ll be sure to pass the word that your flavor of witchcraft isn’t welcome among the pack.”

“You’re banishing me?” I asked, completely flabbergasted that my revelation to him that we were meant to be mates would come to this.

“Not yet, but I have a feeling you’ll see your own way out soon enough.”

My heart plummeted from the lofty heights of connecting with my fate-blessed mate back down to ground level. He threatened me, my livelihood, and the business – my mother’s legacy that she left behind for me. It would be destroyed all because of our Alpha’s ignorance and refusal to accept the hand the fates had dealt us.

I watched as he walked away from me, noting his stiff shoulders as he went. There was no doubt his wolf was unhappy with him. The human side of our beings might fight the innate pack workings, but the beast inside knew when it was introduced to its mate. They didn’t like to be told they couldn’t have what their nature demanded of them.

Since he didn't acknowledge fated mates, he probably wouldn't even realize why his wolf had a problem. For that matter, I might just seem like a threat to him because his wolf would feel off after meeting me and walking away instead of cementing our bond. My wolf certainly had a lot to say as she whined inside my body, telling a tale of misery at having found and lost our mate so quickly.

"I'm sorry," I said aloud, though I was talking to my own wolf who whimpered inside of me.

'He didn't care about us at all.'

"These wolves don't believe in fate-blessed mates."

'But it's natural. An honor to find our other halves. It's the only true happiness a shifter can know.' My wolf argued. That last bit was up for debate, but she was more in tune with the our instincts than my human side was.

"We need to be prepared to leave. He's going to destroy us before he will ever acknowledge the truth. You heard him." I glanced around at the bakery my mother worked so hard to put together and knew that I was saying goodbye to it. I wasn't the only one who would suffer as a result. I employed twelve other shifters, including my best friend.

"I should have kept my mouth shut."

'You did the right thing. It's our mate who should be ashamed of himself.'

"That doesn't change the fact that he's coming after our business in the hopes of running me out of town. He has the

power to do it and I'm no one."

I moved back into the office after locking up behind Alpha Stormborn and called Dee to warn her. "What happened?" She asked excitedly.

"I told him." She didn't catch on to the monotone voice I spoke with in an effort to keep from crying.

"Did he fall at your feet and worship his new mate?" There was a pause in which I didn't answer. "No, that couldn't have happened because there's no way you'd be on the phone with me. How bad was it?"

"He accused me of being a witch, after he touched me to prove that I was wrong about the mate thing. Then he informed me that my business was no longer welcome at the celebration tomorrow and wished me luck getting anyone to show up here again."

"WHAT?!" Dee shrieked into the phone. "He can't do that."

"He's the Alpha," I reminded her.

"Yeah, but... Oh God! This is all my fault. You told me that you shouldn't tell him, and I pushed you."

"It's not your fault. I had every opportunity to keep my mouth shut and chose to tell the truth knowing what his reaction might be."

"Yeah, but I don't think either of us thought he'd threaten your business."

"He's going to try to run me out of the pack," I admitted.

“Oh, Sabine! What are you going to do?”

“Wait and see what tomorrow brings and then notify everyone that we’ll be shutting down. What else can I do?”

“Fight it. Fight him.”

“He’s the Alpha!” I reminded her.

“I’ll go with you then. Maybe, I’ll find my mate in another pack and you can...” She realized too late that I’d already found my mate, and we had touched one another. The act of touching your fate-blessed mate initiated the bond between shifter wolves. The claiming, when wolves bit one another during an intimate act, would seal the bond for good.

While the activation bond was only a fraction as powerful as the claiming bond, it still entwined our wolf spirits together in ways that could be damaging for each of us. If either of us attempted intimacy with another wolf, the other would feel it. If one was hurt, the other would know.

“Sabine.” My name was a sad note and not much else. We both knew my situation would be pretty hopeless from here on out. It might have been better if he’d just killed me on the spot for being a witch.

“The worst part is that it will never end – the pain of him being with others. He doesn’t know enough or believe enough to say the words of rejection.”

“What if you say them?”

“I can’t. If I say them, I’m the one going against fate. There’s no way I can do that. I’ll be the one punished for

rejecting him. I'm literally stuck in a hell of my own making now."

I could hear the deep sigh on the other end of the phone as I glanced around the bakery. I didn't want to hear her pity or more ways to possibly salvage what was clearly never going to get better, so I changed the direction of our conversation. "All this food will go to waste," I muttered sadly.

"You don't know that. Maybe he just needed to blow off some steam by saying that stuff and nothing will come from it."

"Maybe," I offered. "I need to go let Charlene know why my delivery won't arrive tomorrow."

"Pretty sure the Alpha will tell her not to accept it."

"Yep, but she should hear it from me that I was ordered not to send it."

I hung up the phone and dialed Charlene, the event coordinator for the pack. "Hey Sabine! Please, tell me you aren't calling to say there won't be enough goodies for tomorrow."

I swallowed the thick knot of guilt that seemed lodged in my throat. My actions had far-reaching consequences for my pack as well as myself. "I um... Well... I angered the Alpha, and he told me that my services were no longer required tomorrow."

"What?! No! There's no way to have your goods replaced on this short of notice. I'll talk to him and..." She hesitated then. "How exactly did you anger him?"

He never commanded me to keep our fated mate status a secret, so I went with the truth. “I told him we were fate-blessed and...”

“You told Alpha Stormborn that you were fated mates?”

“Yep. I had the dreams and he showed up. It was the first time I ever met him in person, and he just happened to walk into my bakery after we closed for the day. I told him. He didn’t believe me, so he touched my hand to prove me wrong and we both felt the bond ignite.”

“Well, he couldn’t deny it then, right?”

“He had also just learned that everyone teasingly called me the cupcake cupid, and then he accused me of witchcraft and threatened to have me removed from the pack. Then he thought better of it and told me that I would walk away from the pack on my own after he threatened my business.” That was when I lost it and the tears started.

“Oh, my goodness! Sabine! What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” There was no hiding my sniffles, no matter how much I wanted to. “My mom’s legacy will be ruined and all because I couldn’t keep my mouth shut. I knew better than to tell him.”

“No. Don’t do that to yourself. Anyone would have done the same in your shoes. Most wolves here might not like to acknowledge that the moon-blessed pairs exist because they seem to be so rare in our pack, but the ones who chance finding theirs never turn them away without trying.”

“I’m sorry to burden you with this, I just thought you should hear from me that I was ordered not to send anything tomorrow.”

“What are you going to do with everything you made for the celebration?” Her question was tinged in sadness, and knowing Charlene the way I did, it wasn’t because her celebration would have to do without. It was out of genuine concern for me and the bakery.

“I don’t know. The way he spoke, it was almost like he was going to give a mandated order that no one is to come here. It would leave me to rely on the human side of the clientele, which isn’t much because they feel weird being around the shifter vibes. It won’t be enough, especially to support twelve employees and definitely not to sell out of everything I made.”

It occurred to me then that I was given an advance from the pack to make the treats for the solstice celebration. “Oh, and I’ll have to return the advance, too. That means I’ll be starting out in the red before I even sell any of it.”

“I’ll see what I can do, Sabine. I’ll give you a call back shortly.”

Hopelessness set in the minute the call ended and I was left to stare at the kitchen where I’d worked since high school. Back then, the place had been tiny. There was barely room for three tables up front and we only had two working ovens to get everything done. Just before my mom died, she managed to buy the larger space next door and turn it into one giant bakery. We had a massive kitchen with a storage area to die for

and a massive walk-in cold storage unit to house specialty cakes before they were transported.

We also had room for twenty tables out in the bakery now and a couple little lounge areas with love seats and small coffee tables. Mom always said I was her secret recipe, the cog in the wheel that made everything more successful because my cupcakes were irresistible for some reason.

When she used to call my baking skills ‘magic’ it was meant as a compliment. I wonder what she would have thought of our Alpha insinuating I was an actual witch trying to trap him with a spell or potion. I wished she was there to wrap her arms around me and tell me that everything would work out as it was meant to, but she wasn’t. It was probably for the best because if she were still alive, I might have just cost my mom her livelihood, too. That would have been unbearable.

CHAPTER 3



Sabine

THE BAKERY WAS MEANT to be closed for the solstice celebration. We were supposed to have delivered all the goodies that the pack was paying for. Since I was specifically told not to bring them by the Alpha, and Charlene never called me back, I figured I'd open the bakery instead.

A slow trickle of humans came in and bought some of the items that had been meant for the celebration. No shifters came by. That wasn't surprising, since everyone except me was at the all-day celebration. It would go on into the night where the pack would run under the full moon.

I'd been looking forward to the pack run all month, but there was no way I could go now. Alpha Stormborn hadn't banished

me from the pack, but he made it clear that I was no longer welcome when he set about sabotaging my business.

It was three o'clock before I thought about closing down. The last human had been in about thirty minutes before, and every surface of the bakery had already been scrubbed clean. Thankfully, a frazzled mother needed last minute cupcakes for her child's birthday party, since the human-run bakery in town had mixed up the days they were supposed to be ready. She ended up buying two hundred of the cupcakes I'd made for the celebration. It was still only a fraction of what I'd produced, but at least I'd recoup a little money from the soon-to-be wasted products.

I could still sell most of it the next day, but at a discounted price, since it would no longer be considered fresh. The bell over top of the door tinkled just as I was about to close up for the day and Dee came bouncing in.

“Why do you have the bakery open today?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Figured I'd try to sell some of the stuff I already made, since there was so much of it.”

“How did that go?” The apprehension in her voice spoke volumes. It made me certain that word about my bakery being off limits to the pack had gone out.

“There was a human party, so I sold a couple hundred cupcakes and then just a few stragglers' orders throughout the day. Better than nothing.”

She nodded her head.

“He put the word out already, didn’t he?”

“I’m so sorry, Sabine. If you hadn’t listened to me, none of this would be happening.”

“Don’t blame yourself. I’m the one who opened my big fat mouth when I knew better.”

“Are you coming for the pack run tonight?”

My mouth turned down in an involuntary frown. “I really don’t think I’d be welcome there, do you?”

“No one has ever noticed you before,” Dee said before she cringed when it became obvious how that sounded. “You know what I mean.”

“I do, but there’s also the fact that the whole pack was basically told not to come to my bakery anymore. I think that kind of makes me a more visible target for everyone.”

Dee nodded as her shoulders slumped forward. “We’ll just use tonight to mark down all the celebration pastries for tomorrow.”

“You should go,” I told her.

“No. I don’t want to leave you all alone.”

“Really, Dee, you should go. Don’t worry about coming into the bakery tomorrow either. Spend the time looking for another job because you’re going to need it. At least this way, you’re getting a head start on all my other employees who will be vying for the same jobs.”

My best friend whimpered at my suggestion, and a tear fell from her eye as she realized that this really did mean the death of my family's business. I'd be lucky if I could sell the building for enough money to start over, considering the pack would blacklist the real estate, too. I was bound by pack law to sell to pack first, which would complicate things. It meant I'd have to give a ninety-day window for a packmate to come through with an offer before I could open it up for humans. If the pack member's offer was too low, I'd still be forced to consider it. My heart physically hurt with the loss of the place already.

"Do you want me to call everyone else?"

"No, I think they should hear it from me."

"Maybe you should give it a week to see if it really will be a problem. You weren't even on the Alpha's radar a week ago, who is to say next week he'll even remember..."

I stared at her with a look that said she was smoking something good, and I probably needed a hit. My best friend was gorgeous inside and out, and she needed distance from me before she got pulled under and blacklisted, too. She had a good chance of finding a mate if she wasn't associated with me.

"I know that look. Don't even think about it. Remember our conversation last night? I'm going wherever you go. I've been on a million pack runs and never found a mate here, so it's time for greener pastures anyway."

"I love you, Deirdre."

“I love you too, Sabine. Now, let’s get these baked goods marked down. Tomorrow is a new day, and we need to make some scratch to get out of this disaster of a pack.”

“Is that so?”

We both froze and turned to see the Alpha standing in the doorway. Why the bell on the door didn’t chime when he opened it, I will never know. The damned thing. It felt like gremlins had descended on my life and were trying to make a mockery of it.

Unfortunately for both of us, the Alpha was not alone. He brought an entourage with him to witness my best friend calling our pack a disaster.

“That sounds a little bit like treason to me,” a beautiful waif of a blonde woman stated as she clung to the Alpha’s arm like she’d been stuck there with super glue and couldn’t escape. The sight caused me to want to vomit and kill her all at once. The two feelings melded until it made me dizzy. I managed to swallow down my murderous urge, though it did nothing for my nausea.

“Actually, it sounds like we’re planning to do exactly what the Alpha wanted me to do when he was here last night.” I had no qualms about telling people that I’d been rejected by him. If there were consequences later, from him rejecting our bond, I wanted everyone to know why.

The blonde wolf turned her head up to look at her beloved Alpha with narrowed eyes. “You didn’t tell me you were here

last night. You just said that you'd heard about her putting potions in the cupcakes."

"I stopped in last night for a coffee."

"And I told him that he was my fate-blessed mate. He touched me, setting the bond in place, and instead of acknowledging the truth, he accused me of using witchcraft and poisoning his coffee with a potion." I rolled my eyes as I spat the explanation out for his entire entourage to hear.

The woman threw her head back and laughed, but the two older wolves with him did not. The older woman frowned and took a much harder look at me. The man who stood beside her cocked his head to the side and assessed me with greater interest.

"What happened when you touched?" The elder male wolf asked. I wasn't stupid. I knew who he was. If he hadn't looked like a slightly older version of his son, I'd still know that he was the previous Alpha of our pack.

"There was an electric charge and it felt as though something snapped into..."

"Enough!" The Alpha bellowed. The almighty noise halted everyone in their tracks. "Fated mates aren't real."

"Are you challenging me?" The blonde woman asked, as her attention fell back on me.

"Nope," I offered with finality.

"So, you're a liar and a coward?" She asked while laughing at me, as if what she had to say might hurt my feelings.

“As I explained to Alpha Stormborn last night, I haven’t had to fight a challenge since I left high school because I don’t care to. I’m happy – or I was until he came into my bakery last night – with my place in life and the pack. I don’t have some great ambition to be glued to the arm of our leader.” My eyes tracked to where the woman was still clutching onto his arm so tightly, there was no doubt in my mind he’d have marks from where she held on.

“I don’t care about raising my status in the pack either. So, no, I’m not a coward. I just have different priorities than being arm candy to someone who makes me fight for the privilege to dangle there.”

The older female, who was still acting as Luna of our pack until her son found a mate, threw her head back and laughed at that. “You are a smart cookie, pardon my pun, considering where you work.”

“I like puns,” I admitted. “No need to apologize for them.”

“A low-rank bitch like you would,” the blonde sassed back before she realized that she’d just insulted the Alpha’s mother by insulting me. “I didn’t mean that to offend you,” she attempted to backpedal.

“Oh, shut up,” Mother-Luna told her before clearing her throat to gain her son’s attention.

“What is it, Mother?”

“Your father and I were moon-blessed mates,” she told him nonchalantly.

You could have heard a pin drop in my store. The blonde suddenly clung a little tighter to the Alpha's arm. I didn't think it was possible, but there she went, proving me wrong.

"You're what?" Alpha Stormborn asked and watched as his father nodded his head in agreement.

"I didn't believe in them either until I met your mother. We accidentally bumped into one another one night, just before a pack run and as Miss-"

"Sabine," I provided my name for him.

"Miss Sabine explained, it was a lot like an electrical current shooting into our bodies from the point of contact and the bond formed before we managed to pull apart again." The man smiled warmly at me as he added, "It snapped into place. I believe that's what you were saying a moment ago."

"This can't be happening," Alpha Stormborn muttered.

"Well, as lovely as this conversation has been, it seems to be a moot point. Was there some other business that you came to conduct tonight, Alpha?" I asked.

"Yeah, he came to tell you to pack your shit up and get out of town because no one is going to purchase another of your poisoned baked goods." The blonde just couldn't help herself.

"I have no clue who you are, but I'm sure you don't have the authority to speak for the Alpha," I stated coolly.

I knew exactly who she was. Our former Beta, Carmichael Woodsong, had a daughter who was mostly useless, but thought she was held in more esteem by the pack. Thanks to

her father's rank, she didn't have to start at the bottom of the pack to fight challenges that would get her close to the alpha, but she fought her fair share to remain at the top of the heap. Her ridiculous attempts to gain the spot as Luna didn't mean a thing to me, though, especially since my mate rejected the fact that there was a bond between us. When Carmella stood there staring at me, I added, "That was my polite way of saying that I wasn't talking to you."

"You little mongrel!" Her snarled words were a little slurred thanks to the way her fangs descended in her mouth. The woman was about two seconds away from losing her shit and shifting in a public space. There might not have been any other customers in my bakery, but the windows were not tinted for privacy.

Former Alpha Stormborn grabbed the woman by the nape of her neck and shook her. "Get yourself under control or you can go wait in the car."

A low growl expelled from the current Alpha's chest. "Go wait in the car anyway, Carmella."

"I challenge her!" Carmella shouted, obviously not knowing when to keep her trap shut.

"I do not accept," I informed her.

"Because you're a coward," the woman hissed.

"No, it's because you're not worth the fight."

She attempted to launch herself at me but was caught in the former's Alpha's grasp before she could move an inch. He

then thrust her into the hands of another male wolf who I'd dismissed when they walked in. It was the pack's current Beta, who also happened to be one of my previously happy customers, having found his mate thanks to my cupcakes.

As he took control of the woman and turned to take her out, Beta Blakely stopped long enough to look back over his shoulder. "Apologies for the disturbance, Miss Hopkins." He glanced quickly at his Alpha and then turned away to take Carmella out to the alpha family's waiting vehicle.

"Was there something you needed?" I asked again.

"I..." The Alpha seemed flustered as he turned to look back out the door that his girlfriend and Beta had just gone through. "Do you know Beta Blakely?"

"I do. He used to come here often until he met his mate. I think they're a little too busy making pups to come in these days, but once in a while they bring the youngest pups in to say hello."

I couldn't help the smile that bloomed on my face as the memory of the last time they were in warmed my heart. I pointed to the picture of the proud family that hung up on my wall. Every single couple, who claimed that they found their mate thanks to the cupcake cupid, had a picture on my wall. As of last count, there were thirty-two. That was averaging about six couples a year, but there were others who simply refused to play along when I suggested they take a cupcake to someone I thought was their fate-blessed mate.

If it wasn't for this pack's staunch belief that mates were strictly chosen, then there would probably be more happily mated couples producing pups in the pack.

"I would love to pick your brain about how you do it," Mother-Luna said.

I smiled at her kindness. "It's simple really. When two shifters who belong together come close enough, I can see the spark between them. This pack teaches that there are no fated mates, so our packmates have stopped noticing the clues. I never stopped noticing, so I can see them."

"So, you bake them special cupcakes?"

I grinned at the Alpha's mother. Her eyes were a bit darker than her son's but they seemed to twinkle with delight as I leaned forward and mock whispered. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course." Her smile was genuine and a bit conspiratorial.

"I have an exceptional memory. If someone from the pack has been in here to buy cupcakes, their favorite is stored up here." I tapped the side of my head and smiled at the mother-luna. "I tell one person, usually the female because their dreams are what lead to the curious stares that I notice, that their mate would love it if they received their favorite cupcake. If they agree to deliver it, I hand it over to them for free. They deliver the cupcake, which usually involves them accidentally touching in the transfer and that zing of electrical charge happens. Once the bond snaps into place, they start talking and that's all she wrote."

“Brilliant!” Mother-Luna actually clapped her hands and grinned so widely I thought her face might hurt from the effort.

“Wait, you’re saying you don’t put anything special in the cupcakes? You just notice who should be together based on looks they give one another, and the cupcake is just a tool to nudge them together?” The Alpha asked. I nodded as his father spoke next.

“You said you give the cupcakes to them for free?”

“I do. It’s my little way to contribute a bit more to the pack. I figure the more happily mated pairs; the more well-adjusted pups are born. A few free cupcakes per year is such a small price to pay for someone else’s lifelong happiness. I do it gladly.”

“Why does everyone seem to think there’s something magic in your cupcakes then?” The Alpha asked.

“Well, when they fall into the bond, they really aren’t paying attention to the fact that no one has actually ingested the cupcake yet, and then they usually end up sharing it as a bonding experience. To them, it probably does seem magical, but not because I put *poison* in the cupcakes. It’s because they were meant to be together and getting them to touch to snap the bond in place was as easy as offering a free cupcake.”

“I’m happy to answer any questions you all have, but if you don’t mind, I really need to get the rest of the baked goods that were supposed to go to the pack celebration into the freezer. I might be able to sell a few to humans tomorrow at a

discounted rate, but otherwise they will all have to be thrown out, and I hate wasting food.” I didn’t bother to wait for permission and simply turned my back on them and went into the kitchen.

“Ballsy move,” Dee whispered in my ear as she followed me.

The Alpha and his family didn’t follow me right away. We could hear them conversing in low whispers but couldn’t make out what they were saying.

“I think the former Alpha and Luna are on your side. Beta Blakely is, too.” Dee grinned as she said that, but what she didn’t understand is that it wouldn’t change anything. The Alpha had already put out a bad word about my business. Even if he changed his tune, there would be plenty of shifters who would never come back and certainly wouldn’t trust me to offer up a cupcake meet-cute with their mates.

“Oh my! You have all this to sell?” Mother-Luna asked as she walked into the back and looked around at the baked goods waiting to be marked down and placed back in the freezer for the night.

My gaze drifted around to all the racks of cakes, pies, cupcakes, and tarts that were meant to have been for the celebration. “There was a human birthday party that bought out a couple hundred cupcakes today, thankfully. This is what was left after today’s sales.”

“This is unacceptable,” she whispered as her eyes darted around to everything I’d made. Mother-Luna’s eyes narrowed

accusingly on her son. “You ruined your mate’s business when she prepared all this for our pack. She’s been looking out for the well-being of the pack for so long. Honestly, Mitchell, how could you?”

“Mom, she’s not my mate. It was a trick pulled by a female of such low rank that she had no other way to secure a place at my side. She claims to not be ambitious, but there’s no other explanation.”

“She didn’t even want to tell you about her dreams,” Dee argued. “I told her she had to. For some strange reason, I thought you might listen. I should have never given her that advice, because she wasn’t going to say anything to you.”

“You were going to allow your moon-blessed to slip through your fingers without saying anything?” The former Alpha asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I knew what the result of telling him would be. It wasn’t Dee’s fault that I told him. She shouldn’t take on that guilt. He seemed so normal, and like he was trying to hide from everyone that night. I thought he might listen after I met him, but I was wrong. My initial assessment was correct, that I’d tell him and he’d either laugh at me or ruin my life for daring to think I could possibly be his mate. He did the ‘ruining my life overnight’ thing by basically making my bakery a no-go zone for all shifters and then he brought his girlfriend to laugh at me and add insult to injury.”

Everyone stood quietly, waiting to see if Alpha Stormborn had anything to say for himself. He appeared to be fuming

while trying to maintain his temper. I wasn't sure why, since I only spoke the truth.

"I guess you did everything you could, under the circumstances." My respect grew for the former Alpha and his mate as they waited for their son to come to his senses while not demanding that he do so. I wouldn't want a mate who was forced to accept me.

The Alpha stared off into the distance for a minute, probably silently communicating with a member of the pack. "We have to go. Carmella is giving my Beta hell in the car." Alpha Stomrborn looked annoyed at having to admit that while his mother scoffed at him.

"She shouldn't really be your priority. Send Blakely to return her to her home and figure out what needs to be done here."

"Mother," That one word held a warning tone. She might have been the pack's acting Luna, but her son wouldn't take well to her meddling. "I need to take care of my duties before I worry about some low-ranked baker and her failing business."

"You can say what you want about me, but my business has been a success for a very long time. Failing now is only thanks to you ruining it." I turned my back on the asshole and only when I heard the gasps of those around me, did I realize what a mistake that was.

"You dare turn your back and dismiss your Alpha?" His question was bellowed so loudly that I felt it in my bones. Still, I refused to turn around and face him. He didn't deserve my recognition or respect. It was clear he chose to act as a

child would, throwing a tantrum when he got news that he didn't like rather than dealing with the situation like an adult.

“I came here to tell you I was going to offer mercy and lift the ban on this place, but that's not going to happen now. It's clear you don't know how to respect your betters.”

I had to bite my tongue from telling him that he was the only person in the room not 'better' than me. I wouldn't put a price on my head though because that would eventually affect Dee, too.

“As your Alpha, I refuse to allow you to leave the territory for the next six months. You can suffer the consequences of your actions. I suggest you start learning to fight for the scraps of food doled out to the lower ranks because it's the only way you'll be eating once this place gets shut down and you can't afford the rent on the building any longer.”

“I own the building.” My words were aimed at the wall, since I remained with my back to him.

“Okay, you won't be able to afford the mortgage.”

The nerve of this asshole. “I OWN the building,” I reiterated. “My business has been so successful that I don't have any debt associated with it. It is *mine*. I will be just fine without having to fight for your scraps, but I wonder how your pack would feel knowing that you think so little of the lower ranked individuals who keep your territory running, so your pampered high ranks can have all the spoils they do now.” That was when I turned back to him with a narrow-eyed glare.

“Threaten me one more time and you will no longer be breathing to worry about it,” he snarled at me. While his words were obviously laced with Alpha power, since everyone else cowered before him, I did not. “Take a seat!” He bellowed an order at me. I refused and stood my ground.

“I’ve done absolutely nothing wrong for you to treat me this way. All I ever did was tell the truth, and I won’t be punished for doing that by anyone. Not even you.”

He roared his frustration in my face before his father stood between us and asked him quietly to just leave well enough alone. “Cooler heads will prevail, Son. You both need some time to really think about everything you’ve witnessed.”

Mother-Luna nodded at me before she turned and left the kitchen area. The former Alpha made sure his son followed his wife while he acted as a buffer. Once those two were gone, he turned back to me. “I can see that you were made to be a match for my son, but actively defying him will only keep him blinded by anger.”

“That’s funny because every time he speaks, I’m blinded by anger, too.”

The former Alpha chuckled and turned to walk away. “I can’t wait to watch him fall. You will make an amazing Luna one day.”

CHAPTER 4



Sabine

“WHEN DID YOU GROW a set of silver fucking balls? Holy crap, Sabine! You literally just went up against the Alpha of our pack.”

The tears that I worked so hard to hold back while in his presence started to fall then. “I screwed everything up. Now, we’re stuck here for six months. I might have been able to keep my feet when he ordered me to sit, but we won’t be able to leave the territory without a price being put on our heads now. I’m sorry, Dee.”

She waved away my concern. “I go where you go. If I can’t go find my mate, eventually he’ll come looking for me.”

“Well, if he turns out to be anything like mine, you may not want the bastard.”

Dee giggled. “That’s a serious hate-on you have for your mate.”

“Yeah, well, when your mate sets out to destroy your livelihood and watch you suffer, there’s really no place for love to bloom.”

“Do you think anyone will come here to buy the rest of this stuff tomorrow?” Dee asked as we started putting away all the baked goods. My heart hurt that there was so much here.

“No, I don’t. I have a small nest egg, but I’m not sure if it will last a full six months, especially if the word is out that I’m persona non grata at places like the grocery store.”

“You could use a human store,” she suggested.

“If I have to. You know humans do all sorts of weird things to their food. I’d rather not.”

“You’d also rather not starve, so we’ll keep that as a backup plan. Do you think you’ll have to sell the bakery?”

“Most likely, and that’s if the Asshole – I mean Alpha – doesn’t put out a ban against the pack purchasing it.”

“So, we’re back to square one?”

“Basically.” I glanced up at the picture of my mother and I that we’d hung together in the kitchen. “Sorry, Mom.”

Dee’s hand smoothed over my back in support. “She knows it isn’t your fault.”



Three hours later

I DOUBLED OVER FROM a pain in my chest that I couldn't explain. Despite the efforts to hide it from my best friend, she noticed the minute the gasp hit my lips.

“Oh my God! Sabine, are you okay?”

My hand flew to the middle of my chest where I attempted to massage the ache away. “It feels like my heart is about to explode.” The pain felt different as soon as the words tumbled from my mouth. “Maybe it's going to implode,” I stated through panicked breaths. “I'm being...” The torturous spasms were impossible to speak around. “Stabbed. Shredded...” A mournful squeal cut me off as my heart twisted and squeezed unnaturally inside my chest. “From the inside out, Dee.”

“Sit here.” Dee pulled me over to my desk and sat me in my chair. “Deep breaths.”

Tears leaked out as the pain grew into a steady throbbing ache instead of the initial quick punch of pain it started as.

“Should I call the pack doctor?”

I nodded. That's when Dee knew whatever was happening to me was serious. The pack doctor wasn't my favorite shifter in the world. I thought he hadn't done enough to help my mom when she passed away. He claimed there was nothing he could do. Unbeknownst to me, at the time, she had been micro-dosing a concoction of witch's brew. It contained trace

amounts of silver nitrate and wolfsbane. Both were poisonous for our kind, but they also had their purposes, too.

Witch's brew would stave off the withering sickness after a mate died. Not many in the northern territories suffered from withering sickness, since they didn't believe in fated mates. My mom had been dying a slow death for years since my father passed on. She tried hanging on for my sake, to establish the bakery, so I could be successful without having to battle all the time for pack rank.

The problem with witch's brew was that the poison kept the person taking it in a steady state of physical pain, which helped to counteract the emotional pain they faced. It had the side effect of building toxins up in the system over time. Those toxins are what eventually took my mom from me. The pack doctor thought that if she hadn't taken the poison, she might have beaten the withering sickness on her own. He had no problem showing his disdain for my mother's choices. Then again, he hadn't believed in withering sickness, anyway. I'm not sure why else someone would knowingly poison themselves for years, if withering sickness wasn't real, but that's how we left things the day my mother died.

That asshole hadn't been there to see what she looked like in the early days after losing my father though. I thought I'd be an orphan at 13. Instead, she hung in until I reached 19, and she knew that I was financially able to care for myself. My mom deserved an award for her sacrifice, not some jerk's disdain simply because he was told not to believe in fated mates.

Surprisingly, the doctor arrived in just ten minutes. If I didn't dislike him so much, I might be willing to give him credit for at least being speedy.

“What's going on?”

“She's having chest pain, just out of the blue, and I swear whatever is happening is killing her,” Dee stated.

Doctor Peters came close and dropped down on his knees in front of me before lifting my chin with his finger. He took one look at the agony written all over my face and the place where my hand massaged my chest as if that action could hold it together. A look of pure sadness crossed his face.

“Have you met your mate?”

I tried to scoff, but the sound came out more like a moan of agony as my wolf writhed in pain inside of me. “I came so fast because I wanted to apologize to you for the things I said about your mother. For not being more compassionate with her. I've found my moon-blessed mate since then. She's the one that fate set aside for me. I understand now what your mother was going through, and she must have been extraordinary to hang on as long as she did for you, even with the use of the brew.”

“Hurts,” I managed to say through clenched teeth. I truly wanted to thank him for the kind words, knowing that they could only come once he had that understanding. Still, the way he treated my mom was no longer my focus. The fact that I was dying from some unforeseen reason was the only thing I

could manage to think about because the pain made any other type of thoughts irrelevant.

“Did you meet your mate?” He asked again.

I tried to nod, but the groan that followed probably made it look like I was just in more pain. Dee spoke up for me then. “She did, last night. They touched – just their hands, but enough that she said she felt electricity and something snapping into place.”

“The initial bond,” Dr. Peters stated knowingly. “Did your mate officially reject you?”

“He didn’t accept her,” Dee informed him. “He doesn’t believe in fated mates.”

“Did he formally say that he was rejecting her?” He asked Dee that time since she was able to communicate where I was completely incapacitated.

“No, he didn’t.”

The doctor’s shoulders slumped. “Do you know who it is?”

“Of course,” Dee stated.

“Can you call him?”

She laughed. I wanted to laugh with her, but my heart felt as though it was being ripped from my chest and shredded at the same time. As if Alpha Mitchell Stormborn would pick up a call from me, even if I had his number. “He’s a bit too important to be bothered with the likes of us. Neither of us

knows how to reach him and would be turned away if we tried.”

“Do you know anyone who could get in touch with him, it’s imperative.”

“No one would believe us,” Dee explained.

“Try me.”

“She’s fated to Alpha Stormborn.”

“Mitchell?” Dr. Peters asked in surprise.

“Told you, no one would believe us.” She huffed. “His parents did, but...”

Dr. Peters pulled out his phone and dialed a number. “Mother-Luna,” he stated. “I need you to listen, and do what I’m telling you, otherwise your son is going to end up killing an innocent girl and maybe himself as a result.” We could hear the mother Luna’s panicked tone, even though her words weren’t intelligible.

“Go to your son and get him to stop doing what he’s doing, right now.” There was a pause as she spoke on the other end. “I’m not sure either of you needs to hear that answer.” There was another pause, and even I could recognize the demand in her voice. “Your son is having sex with someone right now and it is killing his mate.”

“I’m on my way,” she yelled into the phone and then all we could hear was her labored breaths and the pitter-patter of someone running in high heels. Then, there was banging on what I guessed must be a closed a door. A pause. More

banging. A muffled voice that belonged clearly belonging to a man, but the pain in my chest eased somewhat when I heard it.

“Mitchell, you come to this door right now!” We all heard her yell. “It is an emergency.”

The sound of a door being jerked open and his voice came through loud and clear. “What’s happened? Is it Dad?”

“No, you are killing your mate, you jackass. I don’t care which floozy you took to your bed tonight, but get rid of her and then you will come have a conversation with your father and me.” Something was said that I couldn’t hear, but then her voice rose in pitch and volume. “How dare you! I thought when we left you alone with her that you at least did the right thing and set her free, if you weren’t going to claim her. Instead, you’re subjecting her to the most painful experience a shifter can have.”

“What are you talking about? I don’t even have a mate.” The conviction in his voice was like another stab directly into my heart. I groaned in pain as those words left his lips.

“Don’t you lie to me! We spoke to her at the bakery earlier.”

Another woman’s voice screeched in the background then. “That little whore just interrupted my orgasm? She won’t have to worry about cheating mate pains when I’m done with her. I’ll skin her alive for this.”

“Cheating mate pains? What the hell are you both talking about?”

That's what I wanted to know, too. My eyes met Dr. Peter's and he nodded his head to acknowledge that was why I was in so much pain. It was something I knew of in theory, but the experience had been far worse than I ever believed possible and I wasn't even fully mated to Mitchell. What would happen if we had claimed one another fully and he did this? There was no way that could be survivable.

There were some voices muffled on the other end and then the Alpha growled loudly. "You believed her when she said she was my mate? You knew this would happen to her, and you still seduced me into sex tonight?" I cringed at the revelations I didn't need to hear, especially since it came with another quick stab of pain.

"I was teaching that bitch a lesson and hoping she died from the pain. Then there wouldn't be a problem."

"Treason!" Alpha Stormborn's mother yelled. "They've snapped the bond in place, precarious as it may be now. If she dies, there's a chance he will, too. If you knew about the cheating pains, then you knew that was a possibility." There was a call for the guards, a lot of crying and pleading, and then everything went silent.

"I brought someone off the street," a woman said as she came into the kitchen of my bakery with a male following closely behind her.

"Who are you?" I asked, since I was finally able to catch my breath.

"I'm Annabeth, Dr. Peter's mate."

“And that guy?” I asked, pointing to the man who followed her in.

“He is an unmated male who is willing to help us prove a point.”

Dr. Peters smiled and then spoke into the phone. “Mother-Luna,” he said to get her attention. “Watch your son. We’re about to prove to him that the bond is real, as are the consequences of desecrating it.

“That’s a wonderful idea.” I could hear the smile in her reply.

Dr. Peters then turned to me. “I know you probably won’t want to do this, but I *need* you to kiss this male.”

“I don’t want to,” was my immediate response.

“You need to. It’s the only thing that will make the Alpha believe that you are indeed his mate and what he does with others will affect you negatively on your side of the bond.”

“I still don’t want to.”

“Do you want to feel like your chest is going to explode every time he’s with another female? Do you want to die because he doesn’t believe in moon-blessed mates and decides to fuck everyone he desires?” Dee asked me.

“No. Absolutely not.”

“Then kiss the guy and be done with it.” She pulled me out of the chair and pushed me into the arms of the stranger.

“Sorry about this,” I told him. The guy shrugged his shoulders and grinned down at my boobs.

“I’m not sorry,” he said as he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine. His tongue slipped into my mouth and arms twined around my hips where he proceeded to grope my ass.

“STOP!” was bellowed through the phone line along with a growl. “I will kill whoever that is,” the Alpha threatened.

“No, you won’t. That male helped to prove a point, so you wouldn’t stubbornly get your mate, or yourself, killed.” Mother-Luna sounded fierce through the phone line right before someone hung up the call.

“Let’s hope that was enough to either make him release you from the bond through rejection or to take things seriously and claim you. I am fairly certain that our dear Mother-Luna will drive home that point that what he felt was only from a quick kiss versus what he put you through tonight.”

“He’ll never claim me. He’s already said as much. So, what happens if he rejects me?”

“Some don’t make it through a rejection. It’s almost as if you’re truly mated and that person dies. Since you only have a fledgling bond created through the barest of touches, my hope is that it hurts like hell, but you pull through. If you were fully claimed when the rejection took place, the chances of survival are miniscule. Since finding my own mate, I’ve pulled my head out of my ass and studied up on possible ramifications, in case I ever came across another case like your mother’s. I had hoped that I could find some way to help.” I could tell by the

way the sparkle in his gaze dimmed that it wouldn't be possible. "It seems that the only mates who stand a chance of surviving the death of their other half are those born of Alpha lines."

I didn't feel the need to tell him that I was in fact from an Alpha line and that what had just happened still hurt like hell. It made me wonder exactly how bad things had been for my mother and how she managed to deal with that excruciating level of pain for years until I was old enough to survive on my own.

"What then? Will I still feel every time he's with someone else? Will he feel if I am?"

"I'm not sure. I've never spoken to rejected mates before about the effects the rejection had. I just know there are those who make it and those who don't."

"Great. So, it wasn't enough to lose my business thanks to telling him that I'm his mate, I might actually die as a result, too."

"If it is any consolation, if you die as a result, he will die with you. That much I do know for sure. It's the price the fates require for one who shuns their mate without thought about the consequences."

CHAPTER 5



Mitchell

“WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?” My mother asked after smacking me in the head. “Don’t bother to answer that until you get dressed. Once you’ve showered the stench of that pack whore off and get dressed, come see your father and me in the study.”

I was 32 years -old, and while shifters generally didn’t have issues with nudity, having to talk to my mom while I was covered in the sweaty remnants of sex was more than a little off-putting. To have the reason for that talk be that the mediocre sex with Carmella might have killed a woman, and possibly me, was more than embarrassing. Anger swelled inside and seeped from my pores.

Carmella knew what might happen. That meant she knew enough about moon-blessed mates, she probably believed in them, but intended to push herself on me anyway. She did it knowing there might be someone out there destined for each of us. What I didn't understand was how my parents could be moon-blessed and I never knew, especially when our pack didn't believe in them. Wouldn't they have to believe in them if their former Alpha had his own? Nothing made sense. I rubbed the spot over my chest where the ache had formed when...

It was just a kiss. What I had done with Carmella was so much more than that. What kind of pain had I caused the woman who claimed to be my mate?

After my shower, I made my way to the study. It was what most people would call a well-appointed library where my father used to work when he was Alpha. I preferred to be more hands-on with everything and leave the paperwork type stuff to the bean counting types. That meant I was out amongst my pack more and didn't need the office in the library as much.

It was still a favorite haunt of my father's. His wolf enjoyed the quiet solitude, which was odd for a pack creature. While he had a few silver hairs along his temple region, my father didn't look a day over thirty-five. Knowing he was nearing his sixties; he wasn't doing too bad for a wolf who had once been Alpha. Shifters could live to be a few hundred years old. There were some on the international wolf council who had reached the ripe old age of 500, but a normal wolf made it to about 300 if they were able to live out their natural lives. Alphas almost

never made it to 200. The responsibilities, challenges for power, and burdens on them meant they physically aged quicker than most wolves or died in a battle.

That was why most Alphas handed their packs – in one way or another – to the next generation within thirty to fifty years of taking on the responsibility. My father’s denim blue eyes tracked my movements all the way to the little loveseat beside the lounge he and my mother shared.

“If you two are moon-blessed mates, why did you never say anything about it to me or anyone else for that matter?”

“We couldn’t.”

“It was a secret we kept at my father’s behest.” Mom explained, though the way her face scrunched up made me think there was more to it than that.

“Why in the hell would you keep something like that a secret? How many wolves in our pack have marked a chosen as their mate when they might have a moon-blessed out there? What happens to them, and to their fated mate, when they do that?”

“A little patience and we’ll explain everything.” My father tossed a book on the cushion beside me. “That will help. Read it later. For now, just listen. We’ll answer questions once we get this out.”

My parents looked into one another’s eyes and both sighed, as if they were preparing to release a great burden together.

“Our great grandparent’s generation of wolves decided that they didn’t like fate, gods, goddesses, or whoever was responsible for dictating their lives,” my father started.

“They used to have places back then where they sent mates who were rejected by their other halves. Before they decided to thumb their noses at the fates, there were ceremonies held, great parties that took place twice a year where all eligible adult wolves, who hadn’t yet found their mates, would gather. The intention was to try to find their lost half.”

“For some, that worked out. For others, especially the females, it meant being shipped off to another pack to be with their male counterpart. Some of those packs were less than ideal and treated the females as nothing better than slaves. Some didn’t respect the mate bond and would desecrate it by sleeping with others.”

I blanched at my mother’s choice of words, wishing she hadn’t been the one to pick up where my father left off. Having just felt a tiny blip of what I’d put my own – of what I’d put that woman through – I couldn’t imagine someone doing that on purpose.

“The bond can be amazing,” my father added. “It can also be used to bring about traumatic experiences for those who don’t take it seriously.”

“Alpha Jeremiah Frostborn, your three-times great grandfather who ruled the northern territory then, lost his youngest daughter to a rogue wolf who was in a drifter pack. They were all nothing more than rogues, the degenerates who

had been kicked out of their packs for crimes against packmates,” Mom explained. “When his daughter was forced to go with her mate, after the bond snapped in place, your great grandfather tried to force the mated pair to stay within the northern territories. Being a rogue, her mate refused, as he didn’t want to be bound by pack law.”

“Lucy was tortured by her mate. He slept with other females, unwilling females at that. He allowed her to be used by his pack as well.”

“I thought that hurt the mate who was being cheated on?”

“We know that it hurt her. I’m not so sure it did anything to him beyond diminishing the bond they shared. There was rumor that he had a witch on the side, possibly enslaved, who gave him relief from the pain. We’re not sure how they managed, but that poor girl was tortured. She escaped and made it all the way back to your great, great grandfather. She told him everything that had befallen her and then she died, right there in his arms. There’s speculation that the rogue pack killed her mate when they realized he let his mate escape. It could have been something else that killed him or maybe his witch found a way to sever the bond, so that only the female died as a result.” Mom shrugged. “No one knows because her mate was never found, despite an exhaustive search.”

“Alpha Frostborn decided then and there that our pack would no longer participate in the mate-finding parties. He made it law that no one was to go looking for their moon-blessed mate. Of course, shifters who had great relationships with their

own fated couldn't support the law and there was an uprising. It was quickly quashed, but not without the loss of a lot of pairs that were mated by fate." Dad sighed again as he finished.

"Son," my mom leaned over and patted my hand that rested on my knee. "You have to understand, he thought he was doing the right thing because his daughter wasn't the only mate to suffer at the hands of fate. Back then, mates were sometimes rejected. There were places where they sent the rejects, claiming they were deficient. It was an abuse, too. Alpha Jeremiah realized that, but he was also assured that while the rejection prisons weren't necessary, the pack also needed to have the thought of moon-blessed mates devalued.

"He started a campaign to spread the word that it was all a silly myth. There were just some couples who got along and handled things well – just like with humans. Some stayed together for a lifetime while others divorced. Shifters, he told the pack, were no different. Since the pack was no longer attending the mate-finding parties that the other packs attended, there were less and less moon-blessed mates. The numbers started to reflect the lies that were told. People started to believe. They still believe, more now than back then, because the moon-blessed mate numbers have dwindled further. Among those from the northern territories who have found their mates, many keep it a secret that they're a moon-blessed pair. They're afraid of how it will look if others found out what they believed."

“Why did you two keep the secret? You were Alpha,” I challenged my father.

“I wasn’t Alpha yet when Stella and I found one another. By the time I defeated her father in an alpha challenge, the damage had already been done and we were stuck with keeping the secret.”

“As the Alpha’s only child, I was betrothed to a male who my father thought would make a great leader for our pack. I never saw in that man what my father did. My betrothed was strong enough, and indeed had Alpha potential, but he also had a cruel streak. I dreaded the pairing, but my father wouldn’t listen to my concerns. Two days before the mating ceremony was supposed to take place, I ran into your father.”

Dad chuckled at her choice of words and then explained why. “She means literally. We ran into one another as Stella was running away, and I was leaving the territory, too. The need to find my mate had been riding me for a couple of years. It was what brought me to the Winter Pack, back then known as Frostborn Territory. The minute we touched, as I held her hand to pick her back up from where she’d bounced off me and fell to the ground, that electric pulse shot through us, and the bond snapped in place. I knew what it was immediately, but Stella didn’t. Her family never spoke of the moon-blessed bond with her.”

“We immediately sealed the bond,” Mom explained with a blush to her cheeks.

Dad chuckled again. “There was no way I was going to allow Stella, or anyone else, to talk me out of doing it. I knew who she was. I also knew that her family was the reason the northern territory refused to acknowledge the blessing of the moon. When we approached her father, George, he was livid to find she’d been claimed without his permission. When we told him that we were moon-blessed mates, he yelled and screamed at us. The man called for a female to be brought up from the dungeons, but we didn’t realize her significance at the time. She was a witch, and not a normal one.

“He had her bind us from speaking about our bond. The witch wasn’t entirely willing, so she built in a loophole. We were able to talk about our bond with others who had found their moon-blessed mate, but as you know – or will come to find out soon enough – they’re rare in our territory. We were forced to keep up the farce, though we never pushed the agenda, simply enforced the pack law that no one could attend the mate-seeking celebrations the other packs still hold biannually.”

“What you did could hurt just as many people as the old ways.” I didn’t bother to hide the anger in my voice. “I believed you. Because I believed you, I didn’t give an ounce of credence to a woman who claimed to be my moon-blessed mate. I basically terrorized her and I almost hurt her tonight as a result.” My anger bloomed hot. “I threatened to have her banished, killed even!”

They both looked on and nodded, but didn’t address my anger. Instead, my mom continued to tell me about their past

and how it had caught up to me and my mate in the worst ways. “When we realized we were bound from speaking, your father flew into a rage and challenged my dad. That is how he became Alpha of the pack. My father still planned to hand over the leadership of the pack to the man he chose to be my mate, even without the pairing. Since Malcolm fought and won, and we were already mated, there was hope that we would be able to change what my family had done to this pack.”

“Son,” my father called to me with a wariness in his tone. “You need to understand that you *did* hurt your mate. What you felt earlier was from a simple kiss with another male. If she had taken it further, you would understand just how terribly you hurt her.” His eyes pierced mine, trying to drill his point home to me.

“What happened to her?” I yelled at them.

“She’s fine now.” My mom tried to assure me.

“What happened?”

“If you two hadn’t touched, then nothing would have happened beyond her knowing that you rejected the truth. You would have remained potential moon-blessed mates and nothing more. You could have had sex with every female in the pack and she would have never even known unless they told her.”

“But we touched, and that jolt...” I reminded my parents.

“Yes, you started the bonding process with a touch. The touch allows you to know if either of you is in danger. It also allows the other mate to know when one is being disloyal to them. If you fornicate with another, your mate not only knows, but the pain of your betrayal is manifested in a physical way.”

I ran my hand over my chest remembering the quick jab of pain I felt earlier when my mother was still on the phone with Dr. Peters. “She was with someone else earlier. That’s what I felt? That’s what you meant about a simple kiss? That was real? I could feel that it was a kiss somehow even though I wasn’t there to see it.” My brain felt like a twisted place where reality crashed into what I’d always thought was a flight of fancy. It was a complete mindfuck.

Mom nodded her head. “Dr. Peters needed you to understand the feeling, so that you would never do that to your mate again. As your father tried to explain, all that girl did was kiss another man and you felt that stabbing pain. Imagine what she felt while you had sex with that rank whore.”

“Stella.” My father’s disapproval of the term in conjunction with one of his best friend’s daughters was laced through Mom’s name.

“What? Carmella knew exactly what she was doing. She’s been stringing our son along for years, playing the field, and doing only what was necessary to keep her rank so she could stay close and no one else could have him. That woman has done nothing to help the pack. She has always been a leech. Damn shame Carmichael didn’t step in and do something

about her or her waste of a space brother.” Mom shook her head as anger reddened her face. “The man who was your Beta in the early years would never have tolerated their behavior.”

“You’re right. I’m not sure what happened to him.” Mom scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Okay, we know what happened to him. He chose the wrong female to bond with. I always thought...”

Mom nodded her head. “We both knew who he was supposed to be with, but then that horrible excuse of a woman showed up out of the blue and...” She waved the thought away. “That’s neither here nor there. What’s done can’t be undone. The future can be helped, though.” Her amber-gold eyes locked with mine. “You have to know the truth about her. There was always something that held you back from claiming her.”

Mom wasn’t wrong. There was always this feeling of wrongness whenever Carmella spoke about me claiming her. Earlier, when we got back from the baker’s house, she tried to convince me that we should finally do it. It was time we settled down before more nut jobs in the pack started to make similar claims, so they could rise in the pack without having to fight their way to the top. She seduced me. I allowed my anger to push me to hate-fueled sex with Carmella. Claiming her wasn’t even an afterthought for me, but that didn’t stop me from using her body. It didn’t stop her accusations of false mate claims from taking root in my mind, which only fueled my anger.

The electric zap and pop when I touched that woman had been chalked up to static charge. I'd used logic to throw it out as a real indicator, even though I'd heard stories about that happening. Those stories felt like fairytales other packs claimed to see if we were gullible enough to believe. Our pack was the opposite, yet still gullible. We believed the lie that we didn't have a mate out there waiting to find us. The damage that belief had done to our pack was unthinkable. It didn't escape me that our pack had the least number of births despite being the largest in the world.

The pain in my chest that I felt earlier, combined with the sick feeling in my stomach, made me wonder, once again, what her experience must have been earlier. If a kiss left me feeling as though someone thrust their hand through my chest and squeezed my heart with all their might, what she must have felt was unimaginable. If the pain was worse based on the level of disloyalty, if it continued for as long as... I had to shove that thought away.

"Does it wear off after the first stab?" I asked, because as much as I didn't want to know, I had to find out exactly what kind of damage I caused.

My father shook his head. "She felt every minute from the moment you first touched another woman in an intimate way to each kiss and all the way up until your mother interrupted your tryst."

I was going to be sick. In fact, I got up and practically ran for the waste basket by the desk and then emptied the contents

of my stomach into it before standing to my full height and glaring at my parents. “Why didn’t you tell me this on our way home? Why didn’t you warn me?”

“You wouldn’t have listened,” Mom stated coolly. “You went so far as to command us to keep our mouths shut about it when we were in the car, so how were we to tell you?” Her pinched-face scowl caused a wave of shame to work its way through my body again. “You weren’t even paying attention when we were at the bakery earlier. Otherwise, you would have seen that having Carmella dig her claws into your arm and hang off you the way it did was already having an adverse effect on your mate. She mentioned it a couple times, but if you had observed her body language, it was clear that she felt Carmella’s possessive touch on you.”

Son of a...

“What do I do now?” The question I really wanted to ask was, *‘How could I be so clueless?’* The answer to that question wasn’t one I wanted to hear, though.

“Now, you make a choice. Do you want to take a chance on fate, if she’ll even let you at this point?” My mom asked.

“Or,” my dad broke in to offer another option, “you officially reject her as your mate. Once you do so, there’s no taking it back, but she won’t... Well, she shouldn’t feel your betrayals any longer. Though, you may feel it anytime she is with someone else. Not to the extent you would without the rejection, but the fates have a way of punishing the person

who goes against their plan. And son, you need to know, some have died as a result of rejecting their mate.”

“So, basically, I don’t have a choice at all. It’s this woman or some type of pain for the rest of my life?” There words were out of my mouth before I realized how that would come across. It wasn’t that I was callous and uncaring about what might happen in her future, but the woman was a stranger. Hell, I couldn’t even recall her damn name.

She was a beautiful woman, successful, helped the pack in her own way, and wasn’t trying to climb the ranks through devious methods the way Carmella had for years. If I’d met her under different circumstances, she would have been the ideal mate for me. I’d thought most of those things the night I ducked into her bakery looking for a quiet place to hide away from the demands of the pack for five minutes.

“I don’t think *she’ll* accept *me* now, do you?” I asked my parents.

“Give her a little time to get over what you put her through tonight.” There was no part of me that enjoyed my mother’s advice. It meant everything would need to be put on hold and somehow, that didn’t bode well.

“Go to her and explain your own ignorance. Don’t try to pass the responsibility off on anyone else.” My father’s advice sounded like the better plan, but it still had flaws.

“Even though Carmella knew exactly what she was doing?” I asked.

“She might have known what she was doing, but you were the idiot who slept with her after finding out you had a mate out there. You touched your mate, felt the bond snap into place, and you still ignored that it was possible.” My mother rolled her eyes at me. That was not something the Mother-Luna was known for doing. Normally, my mother was all class and poise, even under the enormous pressure of helping to run the largest pack in the world.

Well, we *were* the largest pack. The southern region’s, Summer Pack, was catching up and many speculated it was because they had so many happily mated pairs producing more pups every year. There was no denying that our natural numbers were dwindling. The only way we were increasing numbers recently was when we received transfers. My own Beta’s mate was one of those transfers. It started to dawn on me that the transfers were coming in because they hadn’t found their mates anywhere else.

“Things need to change.” The admission was out of my mouth before I realized it had been said aloud. I didn’t miss the sigh of relief both of my parents expressed. “If what you’re saying is true, then our pack went from one extreme to another without any thought for what might lie between.”

“That is true,” my father agreed.

“You were Alpha before me. Why didn’t you change things?”

“We already explained why. We were hoping to see more natural pairings, especially since we relaxed some of the

restrictions.” At my puzzled look, he explained. “When someone came forward wanting to go on ‘an adventure’ and leave the pack for a time, we allowed it because we knew what they were really doing. They were in search of their mate and all we could do was hope they’d bring their mate back with them rather than staying away. So far, the biggest boon to fated pairs coming together seems to be a result of the cupcake cupid’s attempts to intervene when she sees a couple who belong together.”

“She said there were only about six a year.”

“Yes, and from what we can tell, the pack is only averaging about seven or eight a year in total,” my mother informed me. “I think there’s more, but they deny the bond because they’ve been told it’s not real.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I argued before thinking better of it. Unfortunately, my mom didn’t plan to let it slip by unnoticed.

“It’s really not, considering you’re Alpha, and you denied your bond even after it snapped in place. Your mate was hurt as a result of your carelessness. If that happened to you, the leader of this pack, how many more do you think experienced something similar? How many of our packmates have succumbed to the unexplainable illness that drains and sometimes kills them in recent years? Now, you know why it has become so prevalent in our pack.”

“I still don’t understand why you couldn’t say anything to me. Why was no one able to tell me? I’m the damned Alpha. That’s something I should have known. This history is

something that should have been passed to me as pack knowledge.”

Another voice spoke up in my parent’s stead. “They couldn’t because my father had my brother and me bound, too. The witch who did it left one small loophole. He could speak about it only if the next Alpha discovered the truth, or found his mate, on his own.” My great, great aunt stood there watching all of us from the study doorway. She was younger than my grandfather had been, and still seemed to only be around fifty years old, though I knew she had to be much, much older.

“I still remember what happened to Aunt Lucy,” the elder wolf stated. “I was but a small pup, but Lucy was the youngest of her siblings, and just coming into maturity then. She was so sweet and innocent. Our family’s anger simmered for years over what her mate and his pack of rogues did to her. It kept our tongues bound just as tightly as if the witch had cast her spell on the rest of the family, too.” She sighed while moving deeper into the room.

“For all I know, the witch did bind the entire family. Maybe we should start referring to it as what it is, the alpha family curse.” Her shoulders dropped with the weight of our family’s secret as she moved closer. “I heard what happened to your mate earlier.”

“How?”

“The good doctor called to check on you all, but our dear Mother-Luna must have dropped her cell in the commotion earlier.” She held out the phone as she moved closer to my

mother. “It’s good that you know. Things need to change, but they can’t go back to what they once were. The other packs are still having the same problems our family incurred all those years ago. They might appear to be thriving better than the Winter Pack at the moment, but they have their share of stories involving grief and sacrifice, too.”

“They can’t stay the same either.”

There had always been a level of sadness surrounding my aunt. It dawned me that she’d never taken a mate or had pups of her own and she was now past her prime to do so. “Were you mateless?”

She shook her head and we all watched as a tear dripped down her face. “I had the dreams of my mate for years. There was always warmth and sunshine on his face when I saw him. I always thought maybe he belonged to The Summer Pack.”

“Had the dreams?”

“They stopped coming when I was about thirty-five. I don’t know if he died or took a chosen mate. Either way, our potential bond was severed. I’ve never dreamed of him again, not in the way that we females do before meeting our moon-blessed other halves.”

“The baker said she dreamed of me,” I whispered. The remembered conversation from the first night in the bakery came back to me. “If it was all real, she must hate me now.”

CHAPTER 6



Sabine

I SLOWLY ROLLED THE next t-shirt and tucked it into my suitcase. When I reached to grab another, Dee’s hand came down on top of mine.

“What are you doing?”

“Packing.”

“We aren’t allowed to leave the pack yet, so what’s the point in doing it now?”

“I want to be prepared for when the day gets here. Dee, you don’t know what that was like, and I never want to feel it again.”

“I don’t think running away will stop you from feeling when he fucks someone else.” Her dry tone, more than the words, stopped me in my tracks.

“I have to believe that distance will at least dull it somewhat. If not, I might as well pour rat poison in my leftover cupcakes and eat them all.”

“Can rat poison kill shifters?” She wondered out loud.

“Let’s hope so, because there aren’t a whole lot of options laying around unless I can figure out where my mom got the witch’s brew.”

“You are never taking that stuff! It’s a slow and agonizing death sentence. It would be better to just feel the cheating pains than to take that shit. You saw what it did to your mom over time. It rotted her body from the inside out.”

It had been a week since the incident, and while I hadn’t felt my fated mate cheating on me again, he hadn’t come to me either. There was no telling how everything would play out. Being prepared to leave, even if it went against a decree made by my pack’s Alpha, might be the only way to save myself. There was also the fact that I would eventually run out of money. All of my employees had to be informed that I could no longer employ them. We tried to stay open for a few days, but on the third day, our only clientele were humans, and they just didn’t bring in enough business since the town was mostly shifters.

It didn’t help that the shifters who normally frequented the bakery had been the ones to make the humans uncomfortable

coming there to begin with. It was like I was damned either way. The shifters drove the human business away, which was fine before. Now that a particular shifter had driven our kind away, there was no way to come back from that.

My heart ached with the thought of losing my mother's bakery. She had worked so hard to build up the business and pass it along to me when she died. Instead of taking care of what she left me, I failed her. Another five t-shirts went into the suitcase before I started on the shorts and jeans.

"If you keep up at this rate, you won't have anything left to wear before you're ready to leave," Dee warned me teasingly.

My eye roll was ignored, but I could kind of see her point. According to our Alpha, we couldn't leave for six months. Technically, I had five months and three weeks to go. The jerk wanted to make it hurt me in every way possible before he allowed me to leave his lands. It was his will that kept me here. My best friend had a legitimate excuse to go and seek a mate. If only our leaders actually believed in fate-blessed mates. I had no such excuse, since my mate was here and chose to ignore that fate put us together.

Thankfully, he hadn't been with anyone else since the doctor had been summoned to tend me, but there was no telling how long that reprieve would last. A knock on my door startled me out of my thoughts.

"You want me to get that?"

"No, I'll get it. It's probably Johann stopping by to claim his last wages."

“He didn’t work for them,” Dee argued. “You’re giving away money you don’t have anymore.”

“What would you have me do?”

“Turn them loose. The pack had no problem dropping your bakery like it was nothing. Like you were nothing. I don’t know why you’re still looking out for everyone else above yourself considering. Tell them you can’t pay because you’ve made no money. Johann stopped showing up the minute that decree went out against the bakery anyway. He doesn’t deserve to be paid for his disloyalty.”

“Dee, I promised everyone a week’s severance pay. They all have to go try to find another job and there are bills to pay in the meantime. It’s not their fault that Alpha Stormborn shut down my business.”

“You’re stuck here for six months with no business, and probably no hopes for a job, since you’ll be blacklisted the same as your bakery. What about you?”

“That’s why I’m packing now.” My response shouldn’t have been necessary. It shouldn’t even have been possible, considering I’d been given a command from my Alpha. It seemed as though fear overruled an Alpha command, though. If I stayed, eventually he would be intimate with someone again. There was no way I would chance dying from the pain he would inflict on me. To be fair, dying was a real possibility, since I didn’t have income any longer. The building my bakery sat in might have been owned outright, but there were still bills associated with it. There were taxes, utilities, and winter

would be upon us before my six months was over. Being a wolf shifter wouldn't save me from the cold, especially since not having heat would mean that my water pipes would likely freeze and burst, too. No water or heat would make for miserable conditions and more bills to pay later with no money to do so.

There was another knock on the door, more impatient than the last one, so I abandoned my labors and moved to go answer the damn thing. When I swung the door open, regret immediately settled in that I hadn't checked to see who was there before doing so.

“Are you going to invite me in?”

“No,” I told my Alpha as he stood there looking completely flummoxed at my audacity to deny him. His Beta, who stood beside him, chuckled.

“Well, can't say you didn't earn that reception,” Davis Blakely told his Alpha.

“What do you want?”

“To come in and speak with you,” Alpha Stormborn growled.

“Well, I guess you're going to be disappointed then because I don't want you in my space.” I turned to shut the door only to have it kicked out of my grasp. I huffed angrily when the damn thing splintered and hung limply from the top hinge, the bottom having broken free.

“You destroyed my business, nearly killed me, and that wasn’t enough for you?” I asked. “Now, you have to destroy my home, too? Tear my door down, so any fool can come inside and have his way with me or steal what little I have to tide me over for the six months you’ve imprisoned me here without means to live?”

“What are you babbling about?”

“Alpha, maybe you should take a minute to process,” his Beta suggested.

The idiot didn’t listen. Instead, he moved into my domain and sniffed the air. “There is someone here with you.”

“Imagine that.” I agreed sarcastically. “There’s someone here with you as well.”

The asshole tore off through my house and made his way to my bedroom to see Dee standing over my suitcase, crying for me and my circumstances. She glanced up and finally registered who exactly had barged into my home.

“Alpha,” she whispered while bowing and angling her head slightly, exposing her neck to the side to show her submission.

“What is this?” When no one answered him, both Beta Blakely and I made our way back to my bedroom.

“I asked a question. What is this?” When I got to the bedroom door, he was holding my clothing up to his nose, inhaling my scent. His head snapped around so quickly, it almost felt like he didn’t even move. It was like my eyes were

playing tricks on me and he'd been facing my direction the whole time.

The noise that came out of my mouth in response was one part shock, one part humor, one part disbelief, and a whole lot of *'fuck you very much'* directed at my Alpha. "Looks like my clothing," I informed him.

"Why are your clothes being packed into a suitcase?"

"Why wouldn't they be? You stole my livelihood, threatened my life, and made it impossible for me to stay in this forsaken pack."

"Forsaken? We are the largest pack in the world." His arrogance was annoying.

"Not for much longer. I've seen the numbers. Our numbers dwindle every year. The only time they grow is when someone comes in from another pack to see if they can find a mate here."

"There are young born to our pack, too."

Again, I made a noise of contempt. "Only to those new arrivals who find a mate and stay."

That stopped Mitchell in his tracks. Apparently, it wasn't the first time someone had presented him with that information.

"How would you know?"

"Because I pay attention to the pack. I'm not bogged down by inane challenges. Instead, I get to know the people who share this pack with us. I know who is mated, if it was by

choice or fate, whether they've been blessed with pups, and how sad those who aren't blessed have been. I know that many in this pack think it is dying. They think we've angered the gods and goddesses. The few believers who remain know this pack has angered the fates. If you think I'm the only person with a packed suitcase, you're even more ignorant of your own pack than I presumed you to be."

"I ordered you to stay put."

"Then I suggest you let the pack know you ordered your moon-blessed mate to be put to death, because that is the sentence your six months gives me. If you don't bring about my death by callously fucking other people, I'll likely starve or freeze to death anyway." I wouldn't starve because my wolf could hunt, but there was no use bringing up the fact that it was the only way I'd be able to sustain myself before our unforgiving climate took me out.

He gasped and took a step back almost as if I'd struck him physically instead of with my words. "I have done no such thing."

"How do you expect me to feed myself?"

"You said that your business wasn't in debt. Surely, you have enough money to last six months."

It was Dee's turn to laugh at him. "Yeah, she could have done so, if she wasn't still taking care of the dozen pack members who worked for her and lost their jobs when you ruined her business."

“Aaron lost his job?” Beta Blakely asked. His concern was evident in his tone as he questioned me.

I nodded as a tear trailed down from the corner of my eye, along the length of my nose, and ended up dangling from my upper lip before I blew out a breath and made it fall away to the floor. The alpha’s eyes tracked the tiny droplet of moisture as if it was the most interesting thing he’d ever seen.

“He’s expecting a pup,” Blakely stated.

“Yes,” I whispered. “He and Nora were devastated by the recent events. She had to start working again and the woman who hired her on to clean is cruel. I gave Aaron two weeks’ worth of severance pay instead of the one I gave to everyone else, but that barely helps when they know there’s nothing else coming.”

“He’ll find something else,” our ignorant Alpha suggested.

“I had twelve employees who are now all looking for the same type of jobs. Where do you think they’re all going to find employment? Not to mention, many of them need the proximity of their job to their home because otherwise they can’t get there on time as they don’t have transportation close enough to work that they can get there? Some of them needed special hours because of their home lives or school. A new boss won’t be inclined to accommodate those things. This pack doesn’t help the shifters who break their backs to make sure your lives at the top are easy as you please. This pack hinders its people. It makes life harder than it has to be. If you aren’t fighting for everything, then you don’t get anything.

Some of them don't want to fight because they are too damn tired at the end of very long work days to have to worry about fighting battles for status."

I laughed at the look on his face. "I could name three men and a woman who could easily replace Beta Blakely." I quickly looked at the man in question. "No offense, but it's true. They're at the bottom of the rankings because they don't have time to fight all your silly little battles. You know who has the time? Rich, pampered assholes who don't have any worries about where their next meal is coming from or how their rent is getting paid. The strongest in your pack are simply wasted potential at the bottom of the ranks because they are just trying to get by for another day. Our parents' ranks shouldn't make our rank. The only exception to that is those born of Alpha blood. None of you have learned that lesson yet, though. If you didn't doom our pack to fail because you don't believe in fate-blessed mates, then you certainly have by oppressing the strongest of the pack in favor of the ones whose families have the most.

"Sure, sometimes, strength carries through the line, especially Alpha lines, but not always. No one at the top of the heap wants to hear that, though. Believing that is a threat to their existence. Kind of like how this pack stopped believing in fate-blessed mates. They were a threat to someone, so the alpha family decided no one should believe. You can't hide from fate though. It catches up to you."

Alpha Stormborn huffed out what felt like an exhausted breath and then he turned to Dee. "Would you please leave

us?” Then he turned to Blakely. “Take her to get some dinner or something.”

“No, that will not look good when my mate hears that I’m out having dinner with another female.”

“Fine then go wait outside by the car,” he demanded of his Beta before turning to my best friend. “I don’t care where you go, but you’re not staying here for this. I’m sure she’ll invite you back whenever we finish.”

“SHE will,” Dee emphasized, noting that the asshole couldn’t even say my name. That made me wonder if he even remembered it.

After they left, he grabbed my hand and guided me back out to the living room, but only after giving my suitcase another sidelong glare. We both took a seat and suddenly my couch fit for three seemed more like a loveseat for two. Mitchell took up an inordinate amount of space with both his body and presence. He angled himself so that he faced me while I continued to keep my body and my eyes averted from his, faced forward, staring at the spot on my hutch where my television used to sit until I sold it a couple days ago. Unfortunately, I couldn’t staunch my sense of smell. His cool, crisp forest scent that seemed to defy the heat of the summer we were currently sweltering through made it difficult to take in a breath without closing my eyes and wrapping his fragrance around my body. Damn my wolf instincts all to hell for that, too.

I chose to focus on the elements within my control, instead of the ones that alluded me. Liquidating my life wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. The empty space over my mantle was evidence of that. The only reason I hadn't cried over the sale of my television was because I rarely had the opportunity to sit down and watch it anyway. Ironic that now that I had the time, it had to go since it held more value as an asset than a source of entertainment.

“Why do you have a suitcase packed?”

“Because I'm leaving,” I informed him with zero fear of repercussions. What could he do to me that he hadn't already done?

“I can't allow that.”

“I didn't ask your permission.”

“I can give another Alpha order, since I didn't make the last one stick.”

“You can, but I no longer have any respect for you, so I don't think it would work.”

He seemed taken aback by my candor, but I didn't care if his little feelings got hurt. “I didn't know that moon-blessed mates were real until that day.”

“What day would that be?” I snapped the question and turned narrowed, judgmental eyes on the man who was supposed to be my mate. “Was it the day I first told you that we were fated and our initial bond snapped in place? I suppose it could have been the day your parents told you that they were

moon-blessed mates? Or was it when your Beta told you he found his fated mate? Oh, wait, I bet it was that time you decided to fuck the horrid she-beast, despite knowing you had a fate-blessed mate and despite feeling the bond snap into place. You thought what? *'Who cares if she's in pain, since I don't plan to claim her?'*” He was shaking his head, but I didn't care about what he was thinking anymore.

“I'm leaving because you're careless and ultimately unworthy to lead your people. They suffer while you flourish. Considering you denied your fate, and then took a giant shit right on top of it, I don't think you have to worry about prospering for much longer. Fate does unkind things to unkind people who refuse their lot in life.”

He sat, staring at me for the longest time. “I haven't been with anyone since I realized it was actually true.”

“Congratulations.” I spat at him in a clipped tone that belied the spoken word. “You act as if I don't already know. I would have felt your further disloyalty.”

“Then you know that I've come to terms with the truth.”

“All I know is that you set about ruining my life for something that was completely out of my control. You won. You got exactly what you wanted, so you can't be angry, or even surprised, that I have my bags packed and I'm ready to get the hell out of here.”

“You can't leave. You said it yourself: We're mates.”

“And you rejected me as your mate, destroyed my business, and ruined multiple lives in the wake of your determination to angrily get back at me for having the audacity to explain our fated union to you. We need to figure out if there’s a formal way to disband the bond permanently. It shouldn’t be too hard since we never marked one another. There has to be a way.”

“That’s not what I want.” His voice was soft and laced in tones of regret that I could taste on the air.

“Yeah? You want to claim me now?” I asked excitedly, as if he was giving me everything that I ever wanted plus a fluffy magical unicorn on the side that would grant any further wishes I had.

His smile beamed brightly at me, and I could even see the hope for our situation resolving itself. His eyes twinkled brightly right until I laughed in his face.

“You have lost your absolute Alpha mind. I would never agree to be your mate now. You put your selfishness above thirteen of your packmates, one of whom was moon-blessed to you. That is unforgivable and not exactly an appealing quality in a mate.

CHAPTER 7



Mitchell

MY MOTHER TRIED TO warn me to give her time. It was probably good that I hadn't listened, considering she had her bags packed and was ready to leave the northern territory, despite my order that she wasn't to leave for six months. How she was planning to disobey my Alpha order? I wasn't sure, but part of me wondered if I'd damaged her bond with the pack irreparably when my hot-headed orders had been handed down about staying away from her bakery.

I hadn't realized that she employed so many shifters. The day I went to her bakery, it was just her and one other female. I thought she was mostly running a one-woman show with maybe two or three part-time employees at the most. To find

out I'd ruined the livelihoods of over a dozen of my wolves made me want to beat my own ass.

I'd never felt more out of touch with my pack as I had over the past two weeks. She wasn't wrong about that part. I knew the needs and wants of the top tier wolves and expected those at the bottom to just fight for what they wanted. It never occurred to me that it wasn't that damn easy even if they could win challenges.

Winning a fight and ranking didn't automatically change their lot in life. It just led to more challenges and more time that they couldn't afford to waste if they wanted to eat and keep a roof over their heads. I had toured some of the other packs and knew that they had housing in place for all of their members, so that no one was ever left without a roof over their heads. Some of the packs had work assignments set based on aptitude assessments during schooling for their members. It was done to make sure that the members contributed to their society in the best way while not having to worry about the necessities in life. It was something I hadn't even considered implementing in our pack because being the largest meant we were spread out pretty far and wide.

A sick feeling settled in my stomach as I stared at the woman who was meant to be my mate. This woman, who had been helping pack members for years while never expecting anything in return, had been a large part of what made our pack even semi-successful. She did it all without wanting any acclaim or reward. I had been damn near ready to claim Carmella as my chosen mate to stop the constant challenges

she faced by staying at my side. Carmella, a she-wolf who couldn't be bothered to care about the fate of our packmates. A woman who was the complete opposite of my moon-blessed mate in the worst possible ways, had almost been my choice, and that didn't sit well with me.

I never thought she was the greatest wolf in our pack. She seemed to be the strongest female, physically, because the challenges posed against her were easily beaten, but it hadn't occurred to me that she simply had weak challengers because the strong ones were too busy living their lives to want to be mated to me. It never occurred to me that other possible potential mates might have kept their distance because they were too busy to post up the challenges to get close enough to be noticed. Obviously, having a moon-blessed mate out there waiting for had never been an option either. So, by some weird default that I didn't know existed, Carmella had risen to the top of the pack as the seemingly strongest female available.

So many new truths floated through my mind as I sat there in stunned silence with this woman, whose name I'd forgotten. It had been said to me. She had told me her name, but I couldn't for the life of me remember it. That thought saddened me because it meant that I was exactly who she painted me to be. I was the selfish asshole alpha who had come here to claim her simply because doing so would make my life easier and might be good for the overall health of my pack.

"You're saying there's no chance you'll ever change your mind about me?" I finally asked.

“Why would I? How could you even expect a positive reception here after what you’ve put me through?”

“I’m sorry,” I managed to choke out.

“Sorry doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change the things that have been done or how I see you now. All ‘sorry’ means is that you wish you could change the things you screwed up so that it benefits *you*. You can’t. That word means nothing to me when I think about how I’ve been treated.”

“I’ll lift the ban on the bakery,” I offered.

“It won’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“If you think I’ll make another baked good for those finicky bastards, especially the ones I helped bring together after they abandoned me on your whim, you are sadly mistaken.”

“They were given an Alpha Command. It isn’t right to punish the pack for something they couldn’t help.”

She laughed. “Like you punished me for something that was out of my control?”

She had a fair point there. “What is it you would have me do? I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry I did this to you. I honestly didn’t know. My family hid the real reason our pack refused to believe in the moon-blessed. They hid it from me. My parents were bound by the previous Alpha’s bidding that they could not tell the secret of the fated. My own family wasn’t able to speak to me about it until I discovered my own mate or learned the truth of moon-blessed bonds and accepted it on my

own. We think there is a family curse that helped hold their tongues to that secret.”

“So, what? You want a special ribbon for finally freeing your mind, opening your eyes, and realizing that life wasn’t all roses and fluffy bunnies? The rest of us don’t have the luxury to live with our heads in the clouds, oblivious to the most important things about our pack.”

“No, shit, I’m just trying to say...”

“If you want to apologize, make your apologies to the pack for the years that they’ve been denied the chance to find their mates. Apologize to them for overlooking the overburdened lower ranks who are simply too tired from being the pack’s workhorses to fight for a better position. You don’t owe *me* anything.”

“It seems I owe you everything, since that’s what I took from you. I’ll see that you get it all back and then some, even if you won’t consider completing the bond with me now.” I stood and took one last look at the woman who should have been my partner in life, and I worried that I would never know her in that capacity and all because of some Alpha-God complex I’d developed.

I thought I knew the pack’s deepest secrets, but those secrets that were buried the deepest were the ones to bite me in the ass and prove that I knew nothing. I’d ruled in ignorance for too long. That was about to change.

“Would you think about coming with me to the pack house and guiding me in how to make things better for our people?”

She stared at me for a long time before speaking. “What is my name?”

Shame blazed a heated path across my cheeks and sent fire straight to my belly that scorched its mark inside me. I couldn’t answer her, so I turned and walked away. When I tried to shut her door behind me, the damn thing fell off the only hinge left holding it up. It was yet another thing in this woman’s life that I’d ruined, and I didn’t even have the forethought to make sure I knew her name before going to seek her out.

Thankfully, Blakely was still outside waiting on me. “Do not leave until her door is fixed and secured. I want someone watching her house. If she attempts to leave, they are to allow it, follow, and inform me with updates. Otherwise, she is to be kept safe. That woman is a pack treasure.”

“Better late than never, I suppose,” Beta Blakely mumbled.

“It’s not better. She’ll never have me now. The most I can hope for is that she will stick around and help me make sure this shit never happens to another pack member because of my family’s curse.”

“Might have helped if you knew her name,” he suggested, obviously having overheard our entire conversation. I should have known waiting at the car wasn’t far enough. It made me wonder how many other people in this neighborhood of too-close houses heard the words we spoke to one another.

“Her name is Sabine,” I told him.

“Why didn’t you say it to her then?”

“Because it only just came to me.” Shame continued to eat a path into my belly where it chose to dwell until I could figure out a way to make everything right again. There were a lot of things I needed to fix, starting with Sabine’s door. Our relationship would have to take the back burner until I could prove myself to a woman who I did not deserve.

CHAPTER 8



Sabine

MY BROKEN DOOR WAS a sorry sight to see as Alpha Stormborn walked away. I wanted to call him by his familiar name, Mitchell, just to prove I knew it when he couldn't recall mine. That would have been pointless since he was the Alpha, and everyone knew his name. Still, it hurt to know that my name wasn't something he could even conjure to help the pack. It only came to him once he left my presence.

I sat there on my couch and watched as a crew came in to repair the damage their Alpha had done to my house. "Hey, Sabine!" One of the men called out.

I looked up to see Brady Andrews, who used to be a regular at the bakery. He was also one of the fated pairs I'd helped

bring together.

“Brady,” I acknowledged before turning my face away from him and the other workers. I hadn’t been lying to Alpha Stormborn when I said that my previous patrons didn’t deserve for me to open the bakery again. Anger and resentment bubbled up inside me. It was a feeling that I loathed. I’d spent my life filled with contentment, except those times of great sadness when my father, and then my mother, passed away. Never had I lived through times of great anger. It seemed to be the only emotion I could process these days.

“Sabine?” Brady called out to me. Apparently, I’d lost some time while the men had been working and I remained lost in my thoughts.

“Yes?” I asked. Brady came in while the others left and closed the door.

“We were told why the door needed to be fixed. I’m sorry you’re having such a hard time with your moon-blessed. No one deserves that, but you least of all. You’re the one who tried to bring us all together, so we could be happy. This shouldn’t be the reward you receive after all that. You were supposed to get a happy ending, too.”

I shrugged my shoulders at him.

“I wanted you to know that I didn’t avoid the bakery because of the Alpha’s orders. I’ve been working up in Canada on a project that’s meant to bridge the borders between the Canadian and American northern territories without having to deal with the human’s border rules and the stupid wolf

watchers, and worse – the hunters, who make it impossible for us to cross in our paws.”

I laughed. “People are weird. With everything going on in the world, they focus on wolves crossing into another country.” I rolled my eyes.

“Justine would have been by, too, but we’re expecting a pup any day now. She didn’t want to risk there being any kind of pushback if she went there and the pup possibly getting hurt.”

Okay, now I felt a little bit like a jackass for giving him a mostly cold shoulder earlier.

“I’m sorry for your situation, Sabine,” he mentioned again. When I finally looked at him, he began mouthing words to me without using his voice that would carry to the listening ears outside. “If you need help to get away, we will help you.” Justine was one of the shifters who dared to come to the northern territories looking for her mate after she kept dreaming of him in the snow. I couldn’t remember what pack she had come from, but there was a possibility that she had contacts who might be able to help me. The other packs would all jump at the chance to harbor the runaway mate of The Winter Wolves Alpha, knowing that it would weaken him. If they knew my lineage, they’d all jump at the chance to pull me in. It was one the reasons my family had always stayed to ourselves.

I simply nodded my head in acknowledgment, even as I knew I’d never put Brady and Justine in danger by taking his family up on that offer. I’d find my own way out of the

territory eventually, even if I had to play nice and pretend for a while to lull everyone into believing I wasn't going to run.

CHAPTER 9



Mitchell

“SHE IS READY TO forsake me, our bond, and our pack,” I admitted to my parents after heading back to the pack house. They both looked away, as if it was too much for them to see the pain my new reality caused. “The worst part is that I can’t even blame her. In her shoes, I’d probably do the same or worse.”

“There has to be a way, Son.” My father’s jaw hardened as his teeth gnashed together in pure stubborn frustration. If only I could believe everything that he said to me as if it was gospel still. That ship had sailed. My parents being bound to keep the secret of fated mates from me, and everyone else, didn’t seem to matter.

Truthfully, I wasn't even angry at him. My shame, anger, and regret all piled in on myself. I was the idiot who was too blinded by the ease with which I'd taken and held my position. I hadn't looked down from my self-imposed lofty position to notice what was happening in my own pack. Sabine was right about that. Not only had I been blind to things that other packs openly spoke of, especially when the pack leaders got together to discuss allied interests or acts of war. Every time we met; the other packs asked us to join the bi-annual fated meetups. Every year, I refused as I laughed at how ridiculous they all were.

Every fucking year, I stuck my head in the sand and failed to listen as they told me how many fated pairings they had the previous year. I simply didn't believe when they bragged about how many pups were on the way in their packs. Not once did it dawn on me that I couldn't boast about the number of pups being born because it was far lower than each individual pack. That should not have been possible since ours was the largest pack in the world. By sheer volume, we should have been beating all of them in the number of pups birthed.

We had eight in the previous year compared to the southern territory's fifty-four, the west's thirty-two, and the eastern territory's nineteen. The Eastern territory was the smallest pack because they had more cities in their territory that resulted in less pack lands for their wolves to run. They were an eighth of our size and had double the number of pups last year.

I was supposed to be the Alpha of the Northern Territories. Instead, I'd lorded untruths and silly games over my winter wolves and forced our pack into a steady decline. Not only that, but my ignorance probably cost me my mate and a future family, too.

"I need to be alone for a bit."

"Not sure that's wise. There's no need beating yourself up over things you didn't know you needed to understand. Everything is fixable, especially when it comes to our moon-blessed mates. Trust me, she doesn't want to live her life without you." My mom offered a small smile that felt more like she didn't believe her own bullshit than it did encouragement. "There's a reason she was brave enough to tell you, even knowing you wouldn't give the news a favorable reception."

"Trust me, Mom, you didn't hear her tonight or see her determination or that packed suitcase. She has no intentions of sticking around. I have a guard detail watching her because she's going to bolt from our territory the first chance she gets."

My father's temper kicked up and his outrage slammed into me as his words hit their mark. "You are the Alpha of this pack. You force her hand if need be until she'll give it to you willingly."

My mother's jaw fell open as she glared at my father. "If you think that will work, then I'm not sure what the hell is wrong with you. That girl has been put through the ringer by our son, including the loss of her business and surviving mate cheating

pains. If you'd done the same to me when we first met, I'd have never even allowed you near me once my suitcase was packed."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Mom."

"That's reality, Son," she snapped at me. "Being high-handed with her is not the way to go about winning her back. Did you not try to simply explain your position and why you didn't believe?"

"I did."

"And it didn't make a dent with her?"

"She asked me a question that I couldn't answer at that time, and it seemed that any favorable reaction she might have had washed away in the wake of my non-answer."

Mom huffed and Dad tipped his head to the side, curiosity getting the better of him. "What the hell was the question?"

Heat flooded my face again as the shame of my situation washed over me once more. "Her name."

"What?" My father asked, not understanding that my answer was the question she asked me.

"Tell me that's not true. Even I know her name, Mitchell." My mother was completely flabbergasted.

I shook my head. "I couldn't recall it until after she kicked me out and I was speaking to Beta Blakely. It finally came to me, but it was too late. Even if I'd turned and told her I

remembered, she would have thought that he told me what it was.”

“You went to win your mate over without knowing her name?” My mom asked again. I could only assume she hoped my answer would change. When I said nothing to contradict her, she threw her hands up in the air as if to dispense with my stupidity. If only it were that simple.

“That was a dumbass thing to do, Son. Even I know you have to at least know their names, especially when you’re apologizing for sleeping with another woman. You know the name of the woman you dishonored your mate with, and your mate knows that, too.” My dad turned his back on me and walked away, following in his own mate’s footsteps as she muttered about all the ways she must have gone wrong as a parent with each step.

“Do you remember that time you dropped him by accident when you nearly stepped on that snake?” My father queried.

Mom gasped. “You think I gave him brain damage?” She asked in return, rather than answering his initial question.

“It would explain so much.” My father stated before they turned the corner and moved out of sight.

On top of everything else, my parents thought they gave me brain damage as a kid. If I hadn’t known how much I screwed up already, that certainly put things into perspective.

CHAPTER 10



Sabine

THE NERVE OF THAT asshole.

Unknown number: Dinner with my family tonight. Be here by 6. Don't be late.

Sabine: Pretty sure you have the wrong number.

Unknown number: No, I don't.

Sabine: Okay, well, good luck with your dinner, Stranger.

Unknown number: You know exactly who this is. Be there or I will come drag you out of your house in whatever you're wearing or not wearing.

I stared at the texts, starting to get an inkling of who it might be. That wasn't the reason why I ignored his last text. I was an adult and didn't play stupid games with graceless idiots. So, I sent a text to the generic number given to the pack for contacting the Mother-Luna, or whoever answered those things.

Sabine: *This is Sabine Hopkins, I used to own Celestial Sweets Bakery before we were forced to close, and this message is for the actual Mother-Luna. I'm receiving texts from an unknown number demanding I show up for family dinner, otherwise whoever it is will drag me out of my home, whether I'm wearing clothing or not. I thought female shifters were protected from that sort of abuse in this pack! I thought the pack valued choice and consent. As I don't know who this person is, I don't know who it is I have to fear or if they had the wrong number to begin with. If that's the case, there is a female packmate out there who needs to be warned that she is in danger!*

Unknown number: *Real cute going to my mom. You're still coming to dinner at 6.*

Mother-Luna: *Apologies for my son's lack of manners. I requested that you attend our family dinner tonight, so that we can all get to know you better.*

Sabine (to Mother-Luna): Please, don't take this as disrespectful, but I'm baffled as to why that is. Your son rejected and ruined me. I accepted that fate.

Mother-Luna: I wasn't aware that my son formally rejected you. Either way, please come to dinner, as I would love to pick your brain about how you recognize moon-blessed mates in our pack before they even recognize one another. I will send someone to pick you up.

What was I supposed to say to that? I didn't know there was some sort of formal rejection to be done. I'd hoped that it could be, and once done, I'd be free of the burden of cheating pains. It was probably rude, but I didn't bother to answer her text or respond to her son either. I did add his contact information, so that I wouldn't confuse him for another real unknown number and accidentally respond to him.

Asshole Alpha: Sabine?

Asshole Alpha: You can't ignore your Alpha.

Asshole Alpha: Fine. I'll see you tonight. We'll do things your way.

I wasn't sure what "my way" meant, but it was obvious I'd have to prepare myself for the worst. Even if I couldn't leave the northern territories, I had to think about at least getting as far from Skadiville as I could. Our town, the seat of the pack, had been named for the Goddess, Skadi. She ruled a wintry, mountainous region according to Norse Mythology, and was often seen in the company of a wolf. There had never been a female ruler of the northern territories, that I knew of. There had been one in the Summer Pack many moons ago, though.

It was a shame that there weren't more female leaders. I felt it in my soul that we would get far more accomplished for our people if that was the case. Then again, if our wolves would stop valuing simple brawn over brains, that might help, too. Instead of being led astray by my hopeful thoughts, I pulled my cell phone out and called Dee.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry about last night. I wasn't in the mood to relive everything once he left."

"That's understandable, but where did you leave things? Are you going to try to be a mated pair, get to know one another, or is there some sort of magic bond removal process you agreed to undergo?"

I laughed at Dee as she spouted off pretty much every scenario for me that she could imagine in the space of twenty seconds. “He asked me to try.” I could hear that she was holding her breath. “So, I asked him my name,” I explained.

“Oh, no. Tell me I’m wrong in what I’m thinking.”

“Well, if you’re thinking that he couldn’t tell me my name, then you’d be correct. He didn’t know it. At least, in that moment, he couldn’t recall the name of the mate he’d come to claim.” I rolled my eyes even as I informed my friend of his idiocy. “After he left, and went outside to talk to Beta Blakely, he remembered.”

“Too little, too late, huh?”

“You bet. Now, I’ve been summoned to attend a family dinner.”

“Are you going?”

“I wasn’t going to, but then the Mother-Luna extended her personal invitation and didn’t leave a whole lot of room for me to tell her I wouldn’t be there.” I said before sending Dee screenshots of Alpha Stormborn’s texts and going over the entire situation with her again.

“Wow. He doesn’t seem able to help himself, does he?”

“This is what happens when you value muscle over brain in leadership. Sure, you might be able to face challengers better, but if you don’t have the sense to even attempt to be kind to a mate you already humiliated and rejected, then how can you

run a pack – the largest in the world for now – with any kind of success?”

“Well, we all know what’s happening with our pack as the numbers dwindle year-to-year, so I guess that answers your question.” She hesitated a moment. “Do you want me to go with you tonight?”

“No. There was no plus one authorized, but I do need you to know where I’ll be, and who invited me, along with everything else. If I don’t contact you again after tonight, then I want you to escape this pack and get help from my mother’s people.”

“Do you think the Summer Pack would help?”

“My mother was the second daughter of the Summer Pack Alpha. They will help to find me, if there’s anything left to find.”

“Holy shit!” Dee yelled into the phone. “Why am I just now learning that you’re basically royalty?”

“It’s not something my mother or I ever wanted anyone here to know. She would have been used as a pawn and that wasn’t the kind of life she wanted for herself or her family.”

“Wait, moon-blessed mates are usually equal in power,” Dee surmised.

“My father could have been an Alpha if he chose it. There’s little doubt in my mind he would have made a far better Alpha than the one that rules now, too.”

“Maybe that’s why you were chosen to be his Luna, so you could help our pack by being the common sense to his brawn?” She questioned.

“Who knows?” I threw out on a huff, trying to downplay the thought. “I need to go get ready. I just wanted you to be aware of what was going on and who to contact if the worst should happen.”

“I won’t let you down, but I don’t think Mother-Luna would allow anything to happen to you.”

“We both know it’s not really up to her.”

I could hear Dee’s sigh as I hung up the phone and turned to go dig through my packed clothes to find something that might be suitable to wear to dinner with the Alpha family.

At twenty to six, a car pulled up out front. When I didn’t immediately exit my house and go to it, a male shifter got out, huffed as if he was incredibly put out by having to be there, and then he came bounding up to my front door where he knocked so loudly, I’m sure he got the attention of every shifter in a ten-mile radius.

I opened the door and he didn’t bother saying a word. The asshole just turned his back on me and walked back to the car. Since I had no clue if he was supposed to be the ride the Mother-Luna sent for me, I closed the door again and went to sit on my couch and continue to wait. After two more minutes, the persistent banging started again.

I held back the giggle, knowing exactly why the male was there, but like hell if I was going to just blindly follow some prissy asshole who couldn't use his words. I opened my door to see him fuming on the other side.

“Get your ass to my car, now!” He demanded with a bit of growl to his tone. I closed the door in his face.

Just as I cleared the entryway, headed back to the couch, the door burst off its hinges and flew into the wall beyond it. The damn thing didn't even fall. It stuck into the wall where it landed. That was when my anger boiled over. I might not have fought since high school, but I was still a wolf, and once my trigger was tripped, there was no going back.

“You broke my fucking house!” I yelled at the man as I lunged, shifting mid-air into my wolf who was gray and white with black markings, especially around my muzzle and ears. My contacts didn't shift with me, so in wolf form my heterochromia was evident. I had one golden eye and one icy blue. Normally, I wore contacts that made it appear as though I had two amber-gold eyes as was typical of the majority of the Winter Pack.

The male shifter who attacked my door didn't have time to notice. I attacked so fast that he hadn't even fully transformed from human to wolf before I had my teeth firmly lodged around his neck. He whimpered and slid to his side in a gentle fall that was meant to ease me along with him. It was an intentional move to show that he was submitting to me and that I didn't have to rip into his throat any further.

Once he was solidly laid out on his flank beneath me, I tapped him in the middle of his forehead with my paw, an indication that I wanted him to stay, then I released his throat. When it looked like he was about to move, I growled and showed my teeth that were still coated in his bitter blood. There was something wrong with him. The blood was wrong, but that was the least of my concerns in that moment.

I tapped my paw to his head once more before I shifted back to my human skin. “You are rude. If you wanted me to go with you, you should have told me who you were and why you were here after knocking the first time. Do you even know who I am?”

A whine emitted from his throat.

“I am your Alpha’s rejected mate.” His whine grew louder as his eyes widened and pupils blew out further to swallow most of the greenish gold color there. “More importantly, I am the granddaughter of Alpha Wesley of The Summer Pack.”

Another loud whine came from the wolf as he continued to hold the position I required of him. I thought about how to handle this as I pulled my phone out of my pocket and called Dee.

“Trouble already? It’s not even six yet.”

“Dee, I need you to come to my house and guard my possessions until someone can come fix my front door.”

“Again?” She asked hesitantly.

“Yes, again. I’m calling Brady, he should be able to come straight away if he doesn’t have another job right now.”

“Be right there.” Dee only lived two blocks over from me, so it would take less than five minutes for her to get there. I dialed another number as I waited.

“Hi Brady, it’s Sabine.”

“Are you calling for-” he started to ask.

I cut him off before he could get the words out that could possibly get him into trouble with his pack. “No. I need you to come by my house as soon as possible. It seems I’m having trouble with my door again.”

“Shit! Are you okay?” He asked.

“I’m just fine. The minion they sent was rude, but he’s just a little pussy cat who couldn’t back up his temper,” I snarled at the wolf who was still prostrate on my floor.

Brady laughed. “They didn’t know who they were messing with, did they?”

That made me curious. “And you do?”

“Justine was sent to our pack for more reasons than just to find a mate.”

“They were checking on me?” I asked.

“Yes. My offer from last night still stands with the full backing of them.”

“Thank you. That’s good to know. I’m going to be late to dinner with the Alpha family if I stand around here gabbing

any longer. Dee will be here waiting until you can show up. Oh, and Brady?”

“Yeah?”

“The door is stuck inside my wall, so you might want to bring whatever extra tools you’ll need to deal with getting it out and fixing the door-sized hole.”

“Shit,” he whispered again.

I hung up just as Dee showed up. She whistled as she took in the damage and the wolf lying on my floor. “Well, that’s going to be tough for him to explain.” She took a picture and sent it to me. She got the door in the wall, the wolf on the floor, and me standing over him all in one shot. I grinned.

“Thanks. I’m sending this to Alpha Stormborn and Mother-Luna to thank them for their kind consideration when offering me a ride.” I winked at Dee, sent the text, and then silenced my cell phone. “Can you check to see if Lupa is still here?”

“That cat hates every shifter except you,” Dee reminded me.

“I just want to make sure she’s safe. You don’t have to handle her.” My best friend nodded in response, though I could have sworn she visibly shivered at the thought of dealing with the stray cat I’d taken in. Cats and shifter wolves got on about as well as... Well, cats and dogs. Still, Lupa loved me, and I adored her. For some reason her spirit called to me and there was nothing for me to do but answer that call.

“You,” I stated while addressing the wolf. “Get up and go climb in the back of your car when I open the door for you.

You will lie down on the backseat like a good little dog and keep quiet as I drive us to the pack house.”

He whimpered, but otherwise didn't move. “Rise,” I told him, and he slowly rose to his paws and padded out slightly to the left and behind me as I walked to the car and held the back door open for him. He hopped in without complaint and then laid down on the seat and tucked his snout in between his body and the back of the seat, so that he wouldn't have to watch me adjust the driver's seat and mirrors or drive his car back to the pack house.

Part of me wanted him to shift, so I could ask him some questions. He seemed familiar, but I couldn't place who he was or what rank he held in the pack. I didn't like remaining ignorant about who he was, but I also didn't want to hear the asshole speak to me. I chose the option that would keep me sane, considering the alpha family would be waiting on me when we arrived.

CHAPTER 11



Sabine

I STARED AT THE pack house as if it were an evil castle and I was about to storm it and wage war all alone. The asshole in the back seat whimpered again and I wanted to punch him in his stupid muzzle for not remaining quiet. Everyone always underestimated me, as if they couldn't sense the power that lie dormant under my skin.

A dark chuckle erupted from me as I glanced into the rearview mirror at the wolf. "I bet you won't underestimate me again." I got out of the car just as the front door to the house opened and Alpha Stormborn, along with his family, stepped out onto the wide porch to greet me. There was no missing the shock on their faces as they watched me get out of the driver's seat of their man's vehicle. No one moved as I opened the

back door and stared at the wolf for a minute before delivering my order. A prickling sensation overwhelmed me and a sick feeling echoed in my stomach just before I did.

My attention moved to the porch once more to see the same blonde bimbo – I refused to give her the respect of even thinking her name - run out and wrap her arms around my mate's waist. A low growl emanated from me as I grabbed the wolf in the back seat by his scruff and dragged him out of the car.

The bimbo screeched, withdrew her bitchy little claws from my mate, and scrambled down the steps at a full out run heading for me with vengeance in mind. I guessed the wolf I'd tamed had something to do with her reaction. "STAY!" I ordered the whimpering dog at my feet.

He dropped to his belly on the paved driveway and continued to whine a warning to the woman hell bent on charging me. As she neared, I could see exactly how she planned to attack, with dumb, brute strength. Once again, she was used to fighting weaker wolves with falsely elevated rank and position. Plus, she thought I was so far beneath her that a fight wouldn't warrant more than one swift, brutal attack.

I laughed as she neared and the sound startled her, causing a missed step. As she righted herself, to keep from stumbling further, I was there. There was no time wasted before I took advantage of the situation. My fist shot forward, right into the bitch's throat. She immediately fell to the ground on her knees,

clutching her throat and gasping as if there were no more air to be had.

The former Alpha and Luna held their son back from coming off the porch and aiding either one of us. “This is their fight,” Mother-Luna spoke to him. He couldn’t deny that. His bitch had challenged me once before with words and now she had done so in a physical act of aggression. Pack law said no one, not even an Alpha, could step into a she-wolf challenge for a mate. There was a loophole in this battle. I wasn’t fighting for my mate. I was fighting because I was angry and she had the gall to attack me.

I stood back and waited for the female to catch her breath again, though it was obvious that each puff of air to enter her body hurt like hell. That tended to happen when someone crushed your windpipe and your body didn’t heal the damage quickly enough.

“Will” gasp “Kill” gasp “You!”

Her threat was minimized by the gasping she had to do in between each word. I laughed again, which only served to anger her that time. “Who is this wolf to you?” I asked as I kicked my foot into the ribs of the male who was lying on the ground at my feet.

“Brother,” she hissed.

“The former Beta’s son?” I asked, speaking to the growing crowd. An elderly female wolf had come out onto the porch along with the former Beta himself. They all watched as I stared up at them. The man nodded. “I suggest you school

your children on what happens when they try to fight outside of their abilities.”

It was Carmella’s turn to laugh. “You had the element of surprise before,” she growled, finally having full function of her vocal cords.

“Well, see, I knew you’d say something like that and cry about how unfair the fight was because you stumbled into my fist.” I sighed, as if this conversation was nothing more than tedious drivel. That’s exactly what it was. The wolf at my feet whined again, trying to warn his sister that he was in the position he maintained on his belly for a reason.

I glanced up at everyone who stood on the porch of the pack house and those who were watching from the periphery in the woods as well as the windows. “I did not want to fight. I did not want to make a claim. I just wanted to live a life content with helping this pack grow and be healthy.”

“Sounds like the coward is trying to get out of fighting me!” Carmella shouted theatrically, obviously well aware of the growing audience we had, too. I watched as her father shook his head in disappointment. My eyes shifted to her as she finally fully recovered and charged me again. The idiot didn’t even try to change her tactics. I ducked underneath her attack and once again slammed my fist into her throat.

She dropped immediately, gasping once more as she tried to draw breath. “I gave you the chance to heal and fight me for real, but that was pathetic. Is charging full force into battle your only tactic?”

She couldn't answer me, but I heard a few bits of snickering laughter from those watching. I pointed to the former beta's other child who was still lying near my feet. "He thought he could best me, too. This asshole was sent to collect me for a dinner with the Alpha family. He didn't announce who he was, why he was there, or anything. He rudely and angrily demanded I get in a car with a strange male. Like any intelligent wolf would follow that order."

The Mother-Luna winced when she realized that her 'ride' for me had screwed up her plans. "I have to assume he was ordered to treat me as trash that he was picking up at the curb because why would he treat an Alpha's guest so poorly, if that was not the case?"

"He was not ordered to treat you poorly."

"No?" I asked in response to Alpha Stormborn's reply. "Tell that to my front door that is now lodged into my entry room wall from where he kicked it in to retrieve me by force."

"You forced your way into my mate's house?" Mitchell growled angrily at the wolf. "Shift and explain yourself!" The Alpha bellowed at him. I rolled my eyes.

"He won't disobey my orders, not even for yours." I explained. That ruffled everyone's feathers. "He's doing it to protect you and your pack."

"This is your pack, too," he countered.

I shook my head. "No, it's not, and that's on account of you." I glanced down at the wolf who continued to whine.

“Shift,” I ordered. He did as commanded and stood naked in front of everyone as he took a solid step to the side presumably to put more distance between us. His sister had recovered again and was about to charge me once more before her brother spoke.

“Stop, Carmella.” His barked order for his sister shocked her into temporary submission. “You will never win against her.”

“Just because you got your ass handed to you-” she started to say, and her brother grinned.

“Fine. Have it your way.” The man jogged up to the porch to stand beside their father and the Alpha family. “You might want to call Doc in to take care of Car when she’s done.”

“You asshole!” The woman fumed at her brother before turning her beady blue eyes on me. “I’ll kill you for this. For all of this.”

“Wasn’t she supposed to be locked up for treason?” I asked.

The Mother-Luna nodded her head, but Alpha Stormborn took a step forward to answer. “As I was the supposed victim, I had her released after our conversation earlier.”

“She was safer locked up. You should have left her there.” As the last word left my lips, the woman charged me, again. She did not seem to learn her lesson. If this was a sign of the tactics that kept her on top as the number one ranked female, I was truly worried for the pack.

I proved to her that changing tactics was a good thing, although not for her. She had managed to duck her chin so her

throat wasn't as accessible. I dropped at the last minute and swiped my leg out, sending her tumbling behind me without having landed the punch she intended to throw. She sprang into her wolf form and came back at me in a full charge again. I waited until her jaw opened to snap onto my neck. Then, I reached out and caught hold of her muzzle, snapping her jaw closed as I threw her to the ground at my feet. Immediately, I leaned in to put the weight of my foot down on her throat. Since she as in wolf form, she couldn't just throw me off.

“This is your best female?” I asked with a laugh. “You’ve been breeding dumb to the top of your ranks for far too long if that’s the case. I’m at the bottom of the pack somewhere, haven’t fought a rank challenge in over eight years, and didn’t even work up a sweat here. This is supposedly the female who holds the top spot, besides our Mother-Luna?”

No one spoke. The former Beta, her father, turned his back on his daughter. Not only had she shamed him and the pack by shifting to paws in a fistfight, but then she lost the fight in her paws the same way she’d lost it in her human skin.

“If you planned to have your whore sit at the dinner table with you, then I have to decline the invitation to join your family for a meal.”

There were several gasps in the vicinity, though I paid them no mind. The Mother-Luna didn't bother to hide her grin, nor did our previous Alpha. Alpha Stormborn however did not like something I'd said.

He postured with a wide stance, shoulders back, and an Alpha order waiting on his tongue as he took a moment to assess the situation. Then, he shook his head. “She was not invited to dinner.”

The wolf beneath my foot snarled and snapped her teeth at me. I reached down and grasped her muzzle viciously in my hands. “You will not snap at me, bitch. Learn your place!” Then I slapped her nose. It was the biggest sign of disrespect you could give another shifter wolf besides pissing on them.

“Carmella!” The Alpha bellowed. “You lost your challenge, any further attempt to harm Sabine will land you back in the cells.” She whined at his order. “Step off her, so I can have her shift back,” he said to me without the Alpha order in his tone.

I stepped back and the stupid bitch immediately made a leap for me again. Fuck it. I didn’t want to see her in the cells after that, not without her going in there completely broken. I shifted to paws to meet her challenge. Unlike her shift that took half a minute, mine was instant. There were gasps as people took in my wolf form, many for the first time.

My wolf was above average in size and probably rivaled the current alpha’s. The black markings in my fur seemed tipped with a metallic blue hue when the light hit it just right. The first time seeing it always dazzled people who hadn’t paid attention to it before. I’d never hidden my wolf from the pack, I’d simply gone unnoticed before because I always drifted toward the back on the runs to keep up with the stragglers and make sure no one got left behind.

“Your eyes!” Mother-Luna gasped, but I had no time for her as the she-wolf before me began to circle, looking for her chance to take me out. She wouldn’t find it. “Do you know what this means?” The older Luna asked someone. Again, I was too busy assessing my opponent to really pay attention to anything else, beyond making sure that no one else was going to jump in and try to help the bitch who foolishly challenged me again.

She was taking forever to attack this time, so I sat down and yawned, as if I was bored. There were a few chuckles from the gathering crowd. All of it combined pissed the bimbo off enough that she flew into action, going for a brute force attack on my throat once again. I swiped a paw at her before her teeth could reach me and she went flying into the bottom steps of the porch.

The stupid she-wolf came charging at me, once again, where I still sat on my haunches. If I could have laughed as my wolf, I would have. The woman clearly had no tactical training. As she charged in again, I slapped her with another paw and sent her sprawling out on her belly a few feet away. This wasn’t even a fight. She was simply prolonging her own humiliation.

When she got to her paws and started to come for me again, Alpha Stormborn was there in the space of two heartbeats. He snatched her out of the air by her scruff when she leaped at me and threw her to the porch where her brother stood watching. Someone had given him a pair of sweatpants to wear so he wasn’t still standing there in the buff.

“Take her back to the cells for defying an order from her Alpha.”

I snuffled, which was as close as I could get to a laugh. Sending her back to the cells was a joke, since he'd just release her again. Then again, she'd just embarrassed herself, and him by proxy, so maybe he'd leave her to suffer a bit longer this time.

“I'll get you some clothes,” the elder female called out to me, but before she could do so, I shifted back with my clothes fully intact. There were awed noises and gasps of shock at the unusual feat. “Or not,” the woman chuckled. “Dinner should be interesting. The pre-show did not disappoint.” The elder female turned then and walked back into the pack house as I moved to join her.

Part of me wanted to get back into the car I'd arrived in and drive myself home after having to deal with my mate's whore, but the stubborn part of me wanted to make him as uncomfortable as possible before I took my leave.

Once we were all inside the pack house, I took the time to glance around. It was the first time I'd ever been inside, and I'd been born to this pack, and lived in this territory just miles down the road my whole life. That said more about the disparity in the Winter Wolves pack than anything else could. Shifters who didn't rank high enough weren't allowed here when it should have been the opposite. The weakest of our kind should have been protected under the umbrella of the pack's care.

That's what my mother used to tell me. It was why the Summer Pack thrived the way they did. Their pack wasn't the largest, but that was because they weren't striving for sheer numbers. Their purpose was to have a balanced, healthy pack. Period. Their idea of weak pack members were the ones who were cruel or couldn't control their shifts when they got emotional. Those shifters did not stay in the pack long. The Summer Pack believed in culling the weak who disrupted the pack's harmony.

Some would say they were going against shifter nature by doing so, but each pack had their own issues. That's what I'd told my mom back when she explained it all to me and she had agreed. Just as no one person is without flaws, neither is a pack.

I stopped to look at a family portrait that hung on the wall just outside of what I assumed was the dining room. There were an Alpha couple and four children. The youngest one, a girl, had strange eyes that almost seemed familiar to me for some reason that I couldn't place.

"That is where all this trouble started," Mother-Luna expressed as her eyes followed mine to the painting. "We'll explain everything over dinner."

I nodded and followed her into the dining room. As the Alpha's mate, I was supposed to take the seat immediately to his left, closest to his heart, while the seat to his right was reserved for his Beta, if he was in attendance. There was no way that the seat to the left of the Alpha was a place where I

would park my butt. He hadn't claimed me in any way, and in fact, had released his girlfriend from the cells presumably to join us for dinner before she decided to show her ass and have me hand it back to her again.

I waited until everyone else was seated and just as Alpha Stormborn patted the table to his left, indicating that was where I should sit, I chose to go sit beside his mother at the other end of the table instead. Alpha Stormborn sat the head of the table. His father sat opposite him at the other head as was the customary position for the former Alpha. His mate sat to his left and his Beta to his right. Beside his Beta sat a pinch-faced woman who stared at me with disgust plainly written on her features. From looks alone, I knew who she was, since her daughter favored her so much.

She was Carmella's mother. Beside her was the elder shifter female who had been outside earlier. Something about her struck me as familiar and the portrait outside the dining hall came to mind. She was one of those children or closely related to them. It wasn't the youngest daughter she resembled, but the other, older one.

Beta Blakey made his way into the room and took the seat beside his Alpha. "She has been locked down in the cells again along with her brother."

"Why have you locked both of my children in the cells?"

"Both attacked my mate without provocation or orders."

"That is what we do in this pack. We fight for the dominate positions, our rank, and our mates," the woman complained.

Rightfully so, considering she spoke the truth about the way the pack normally operated.

“Not after being told to stand down. Certainly not when tasked with picking up a guest of the Alpha family for dinner.”

“You have no right!” The woman argued. Her mate placed his hand over hers and squeezed in an effort to get her to stand down. That only worked to infuriate the woman more.

“I have every right since I’m Alpha here,” Alpha Stormborn barked back at her. Then he turned his eyes to me. “I offer my apologies that your home was damaged. I will have it fixed immediately.”

“No need. I had my friend stay there to keep watch of my things until Brady could come fix it.”

“Brady?” He asked.

“The same man whose crew fixed my door previously when *you* busted it down,” I informed him much to the delight of the elder shifter.

“We will still pay his bill for the repairs. That should not fall on your shoulders.”

“Well, I won’t argue, since the pack has made me unemployable and I don’t have the money to throw at a door and a wall I didn’t break myself.”

Alpha Stormborn sucked in a breath that made me think I caught him off guard with my candor once again. “I will fix that, too.”

“You can’t simply fix a reputation once you, as the leader of this pack, is responsible for tarnishing it,” I reminded him.

“I’m Alpha. My command is all people need to show up to your bakery again.”

“I was thinking of your pack’s tarnished reputation with me, not the other way around.”

“You are too wise,” Mother-Luna murmured to me. “Now, tell me this secret you’ve been keeping from the pack.”

I balked at her suggestion. “I keep no secrets from the pack.” She stared at my eyes pointedly. Unlike my clothes, the contacts were one thing that I couldn’t bring with me when I shifted. When my wolf took over, she made sure they didn’t hinder her vision, so she always managed to pop them out during the shift.

“I think you do, considering,” Mother-Luna said and again stared at my eyes.

“I keep contacts in to sort the color because it tends to be off-putting to other shifters when they see them. Since I run a business, or used to, it was easier to keep them evened out in hue as best I could. I have never hidden it in my wolf form and I have attended nearly every pack run since I was able to shift. When my father was alive, he used to allow me to ride on his back for the runs before I was of age to shift and I wasn’t able to wear the contacts back then.”

“I don’t understand how you went unnoticed for so long. Your mother, she is the one you inherited them from, right?”

“Yes, that’s true, and plenty of people in the pack noticed my eyes when I was younger. It was the main reason I had to fight. Never for position, always because of my demon eyes.”

Mother-Luna chuckled. “I wish your mother had brought that to my attention. We could have fixed that for you early on.”

“What is this all about?” We both turned to her son and it was almost as if he was seeing me for the first time. “What do her strange eyes have to do with anything?”

“Are you truly the Alpha of the Winter Wolves?” I asked with more than a hint of sarcasm lacing my words.

“Of course, I am.”

“Then you should know the ways to identify the leaders of others packs, yes?”

He was slower to respond that time as he seemed to be taking in what I was telling him in conjunction with my strange eyes. “So, you’re telling me that you belong to the Summer Pack’s Alpha line?”

“As I told the mutt, who attempted to threaten me when he was sent to bring me to this dinner, I am the granddaughter of their current Alpha.”

“Impossible!” My supposed mate yelled. The elder shifter lady - whose name I still didn’t know - cackled in delight. There was a noise from the former Alpha that sounded very much like a groan of frustration, but I don’t think that one was

directed at me as much as it was his son for giving up a moon-blessed pairing with a female Alpha.

“You don’t scent as Alpha,” Mother-Luna stated.

“Neither do you, and yet you are a female Alpha.” I winked at her. “You should know as well as I do that potential Alphas don’t give off the stench of power until they’ve claimed it for themselves.” She seemed lost in thought for a moment and then nodded her head in understanding.

“Everyone who isn’t in the Alpha family, and Sabine, needs to clear the room right now.”

“Pfft.” The pinch-faced mate of the former Beta scoffed at her Alpha’s demands. “We’ve already heard enough.” She turned her beady little eyes on me. They were a milky blue and looked like how her daughter’s might one day appear when she hit her old age. The fact that woman had aged so mercilessly, in such a short time, spoke volumes of who she was and what she’d been up to. That happened very rarely - aging at human speed - for our kind, and there were only a couple reasons for it. None of them were good.

“Why do you look so old?” The blunt question flew from my lips before I could hold it back. “It seems to me that there are very few reasons for a wolf of your supposed age to look the way you do with milky eyes, graying hair under all that dye and the wrinkles you can’t quite hide with makeup. I’m sure it’s all much worse. You’re not even aging at typical human measures. It’s faster for you. What have you been up to?”

“She’s a crone!” The elder shifter who was sitting next to her stated as she moved further away. Being unsatisfied with that, the woman stood and moved all the way over to where the Alpha sat and put him between herself and the woman at the table who had flown under everyone’s radar.

Both the current and former alpha stood and took a good hard look at her. “What is the meaning of this?” The alpha’s father asked as anger balled his fists and fur climbed up and down his arms. It was almost as if a veil had been lifted from the occupants of the room and they were seeing the woman in a different light. It made me wonder what they had seen when they looked at her before I mentioned her rapid aging. She must have used some form of enchantment to keep them from noticing.

Malcolm Stormborn’s former beta stood, too, and stared down at his mate as if he’d never seen her before. Come to think of it, she didn’t look that bad when we all first entered the dining hall. “She’s never looked this way before,” he admitted and the others agreed.

“You beat the crone’s guardians in battle today,” the elder shifter called out from where she was hiding behind the Alpha – who was apparently her great, great nephew possibly third great depending on whether she was the woman in the painting or a close relative.

“The crone’s guardians?” I murmured more to myself than anyone else. That sounded right, though. “There are always two, usually related because then they can be bound by family

secrets.” The memory of learning such things from my mother when she realized they didn’t teach common knowledge in the schools here, came flooding back to me. “You made your own children your guardians?”

“Guardians have to be blood,” the woman hissed at me. “You’ve ruined my glamor. He would have denounced you as his mate officially if we’d had one more night with him.”

“We?” Alpha Stormborn asked.

“A crone’s guardian can play host to this parasite with their body. That means when you were with your little girlfriend, you were really with her, too.”

“What the fuck?”

“That’s disgusting,” Beta Blakey stated as he stared at his friend, as if answering the question that he’d just asked.

All eyes turned to me momentarily. The Crone’s were the only ones I was watching, though. She was planning. I ruined her plot to take over the pack, and apparently it had been in motion for quite a while. There was something about her that struck me as way off. “You’re too old to have had more pups.”

She cackled at me. “That’s what magic is for, little idiot.”

“You stole a womb,” I surmised.

“Stole a what?” Alpha Stormborn asked. Poor thing really was clueless about the other non-human creatures among the shifter community.

“I will fill everyone in on the things they should already know later. For now, you all need to clear out while I deal with this bitch.”

The crone cackled in delight once more, as if she had some knowledge that I would fall at her feet once they all left. “You need your guardians more than I do,” she warned.

“I fight my own battles because I’m not a coward, unlike some.”

“Who in the hell are you?” The former beta, Carmichael Woodsong, asked her.

“You were as close as I could get to the alpha position before now. I had to get my revenge on the family who took my only son from me.”

“Your only son? I thought he was currently being held in the cells?”

She scoffed at Beta Blakely. “He is no son of mine. Just because he was born of my blood, doesn’t mean that little rat in the cell is anything to me. He is what he was meant to be - a guard dog and nothing more. The brat is a useless one at that.”

Carmichael appeared lost as he took several inadvertent steps away from the woman who he thought was his chosen life mate. The horror of everything she was saying, and seeing her real face, was finally setting in.

I felt bad for these people, but if they knew and taught anything of shifter lore, and the witches who bore enough

shifter blood to pose as us, they would have recognized the signs much sooner.

“Beta Woodsong,” I addressed using his former title, “I need you to step away and not interfere as I kick your fake mate’s ass.”

He continued to move, along with the former Alpha and his mate, to the other side of the room where their son still stood. “You think you can win a challenge against me just because you beat my guardians?” She sneered at me as she spoke, as if her bravado would save her.

“I know so. Weak guardians equal a weak ass crone.”

She flew across the table at me, knocking glasses askew. Faintly, I could hear the dripping of liquid that made its way to the edges of the table. “The apples don’t fall far from the stupid tree,” I taunted as I stepped out of her brute force attack. The woman had access to magic at her fingertips, yet the first thing she did was try to go toe-to-toe with me physically. It didn’t make any damn sense. Then again, she’d gone so long without being challenged, she seemed thrown by the turn of events.

“I’m going to rip you to shreds and then I’m going to do the same to every person in this room. That little whore your family sent to corrupt my true son should be here for this, but my guess is that she’s off living her best cursed life.” She cackled wickedly, and I took advantage of her head being thrown back and let my fist loose right into her throat. I definitely understood where the guardians got their stupid

gene from. I knew it couldn't be sad shifter genes. Even the weakest shifter knew to protect vulnerable spots like their throat.

Unlike with her children, I didn't back off to wait to taunt her until she was able to breathe again. If she was able to speak, she was able to cast magic and I couldn't take a chance on her remembering that.

CHAPTER 12



Mitchell

SABINE'S FISTS FLEW TOWARD the old woman. My brain was still having a hell of a time wrapping around the fact that Beta Woodsong's mate was an ugly, old crone instead of the slightly older version of the woman I had dated off and on for years. That thought made my stomach turn as well. How many times had I fucked the daughter when she was possessed by her mother? A wave of revulsion rippled through my body at the thought and I decided to turn it off and just watch Sabine and the show she was putting on.

The crone rolled across the table after that last hit where we all heard bones snapping. It didn't keep her down, though. I had a sneaking suspicion that she was using magic to heal herself as they fought. Sabine never let her rest the way she

had with Carmella, which gave credence to my theory. Her fist launched into the crone's throat once more, but that time, she had partially formed claws, and as she pulled her fist back, she let the claws fly and opened up the woman's throat. Blood spewed forward in a torrent, but it wasn't the normal viscosity. Instead, it bubbled like thick tar as it left her body. Thick, rotten tar that had the distinguishable note of sulfur to it.

Sabine didn't stop there. Her partially shifted claw dove right through skin and bone of the old crone's chest and came back with a shriveled black organ that may have once been the crone's heart. The crone still stood there, stunned as she took in the damage Sabine had done to her.

"Impossible," she whispered right before my moon-blessed mate shifted into her stunning wolf and ripped the crone's head from her body. What was left of the crone immediately began to wither and desiccate before our eyes.

"I don't even understand how any of that just happened," I admitted while staring at what remained of the old hag. When I looked back up, Sabine stood there swishing water around in her mouth and spitting it back out into a bowl that once held fruit that had spilled out during the battle.

"I think we might want to head to another room before I explain some things to you," she mentioned before tossing the heart into the fireplace and watching it burn.

"Was it necessary to burn that?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I figured it couldn't hurt."

“Follow me,” my mother offered and everyone walked, somewhat shakily, out of the dining room of doom and down the hall until we reached the formal parlor. I questioned my mother’s choice of venues, considering Sabine was still splattered with the oily blood of the crone.

“I’ll stand. Too much adrenaline to sit anyway,” Sabine offered as she stood closer to the fireplace in this room to pull in its warmth.

“I’ll have someone bring you something sweet to eat. It will help with that,” my mother offered. Sabine nodded her head in agreement.

“What in the hell just happened?” Beta Woodsong asked. His shaky voice matched the tremor that was noticeable in his hands as he tried to wrap his head around the fact that he’d been mated to a witch, not a wolf, for all these years.

“I’m so sorry, Beta Woodsong. She stole your future when she came here for her revenge.”

“What revenge?” He shouted at Sabine, as if she would know. When she shrugged her shoulders, he growled in frustration. I took a step closer to her, ready to protect the woman who probably didn’t need it.

“I think I know what that was all about. She was the mother of the man Aunt Lucy was mated to.”

We all turned to look at the eldest shifter currently residing at the pack house, my great, great aunt, Alice. While she

couldn't have been much younger than the crone herself, if that was the case, she had definitely aged better.

She gave a brief family history for Sabine and Carmichael's sake then she turned to the rest of us. "That witch said Lucy was cursed, not dead. If my aunt is still out there somewhere, we need to find her."

"It seems there are a lot of things we need to discuss before we launch into a manhunt for a long-lost shifter."

"But-" Great Aunt Alice started to argue, when I shut her down.

"I understand she is your aunt, and promise to give everything to finding her, but first we need more answers from Sabine, the Woodsong siblings, and fuck... It feels like there is so much that has been hidden from me. How in the hell I managed to keep this pack together while operating in total darkness is another question that I don't even know how to answer."

"You did the best with what you had, Son." While it was a very fatherly thing to say, I couldn't stomach the platitudes coming from him. I'd failed my pack in far too many ways since taking over. My parents failed before me as well. All of those failures boiled down to pure ignorance. If I'd just heeded the warnings from the other packs during our meetings, I could have learned the truth long ago. Instead, my own arrogance led us all here.

Before anyone could say another word, I looked at the mate the moon blessed me with and felt heartsick all over again

about just how badly I might have fucked things up.

“You’re descended from the Southern Pack, the Alpha no less, and yet you live here. Why?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Why does anyone move to this pack?” Before I could answer her with some arrogant speech about how we were the best pack, she rolled her eyes, as if knowing what I might try to say. “To find their mates,” she finished before I managed to stick my foot in my own damn mouth again.

“You came here to find your mate?”

“No, my mother came to find hers.”

“And she did?” I asked because that seemed unlikely since females born of Pack Alphas were almost always mated to another alpha in the old legends. I hadn’t given it much credence, since we didn’t believe in moon-blessed mates, but my ears would have to stop working to have never heard some of the lore.

“My father was a member of your pack.” Sabine glanced at my parents. “I believe he was the brother of the man you were arranged to be mated to,” she explained to my mother.

My parents nodded in tandem as if that made sense. “There were whispered conversations that the brother they betrothed me to wasn’t the one who should be Alpha, despite him being the oldest. I don’t think I had an opportunity to cross paths with your father, or if I did, it never clicked who he was.” Mom sighed as she spoke as if she regretted that fact deeply.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get the chance to know both your parents before they were taken from us. They must have been truly wonderful people to raise such a beautiful, intelligent, thoughtful, and fierce daughter.”

“Thank you,” Sabine bowed her head to my mother out of respect. To receive such a compliment from my mother, if you were not her own child, was a rare occurrence.

“So, you were the child of an Alpha male and an Alpha born female?” I questioned to make sure I had it right.

“That is correct.”

“You all just lived here in the pack under the radar your whole life?”

“We weren’t hiding, if that’s what you’re insinuating. My family just wanted happiness. Sometimes, that’s hard to achieve when you are the family in power. My parents knew that if anything happened to my grandfather or my uncle that they would be called to challenge for rule of the Summer Pack. They always hoped that wouldn’t be the case, and in the meantime, they built a life here. My father repaired things for people.” Sabine beamed and her eyes glistened with a memory before she added, “He was always so handy with everything. I swear, if you put anything with a motor within his reach, he would find a way to make it work again if it was broken. If there was nothing wrong with it, he’d still tinker until he made it work better.”

There was a wistful, longing expression on her face. It was like Sabine had been transported back in time to sit with her

parents as she recounted memories of them. The rest of us failed to exist, even as she was talking about them for our sakes.

“My mom had the bakery. At first, she baked out of our home for people who couldn’t afford the normal prices at the human run bakery. Then other shifters, with more money, started coming to her, so that she’d bake them something exclusive for their parties. Mom was always coming up with clever ways to decorate her baked goods. After a few years, she and my dad managed to save enough money to buy a human owned coffee shop that failed in town. It was a risk because it wasn’t the best location, but she needed more space to bake so that our house wasn’t overrun with baked goods and all the mess the work left behind every day.

“After my father died, she struggled for a while. I never knew what happened to bring her out of it, until after she died. I thought she beat the withering sickness that usually consumes a mate who isn’t taken when their mate passes on.”

“She took the brew, didn’t she?” Mom asked her and the sadness there in my mother’s eyes was palpable.

“Yes. She took the brew and hung in there. Eventually, she purchased the space next to her shop and expanded. It gave us more storage space, a bigger walk-in freezer, and room for customers to stay and partake of the daily specials. That was something new. Before then, ninety percent of the business was special order items for events. She got the contract with the pack when I was sixteen.” A wistful smile played across

Sabine's lips again. The lower one was just a bit fuller than the top, but when she smiled, they thinned out a great deal and seemed to create a more delicate look to the woman.

“She hung in there for three more years, but I noticed she was wasting away during the last two. I allowed her to placate me with denials. She swore everything was okay, that she'd be okay, and that I'd have the most successful bakery ever one day.” Sadness dripped from the next words she spoke and made me wish I had the gift to turn back time. Not so I could correct the mistakes I'd made, but so that she could have her mom back, both of her parents even.

“I was nineteen when she passed into the beyond. I've been running the bakery ever since. That was seven years ago. Up until a couple weeks ago, I never thought I'd leave this town or the pack. It's where my parents' souls were set free, where they raised me, where I once thought I belonged.”

“You still do,” I whispered. Since shifter hearing was a thing, she heard me anyway and while her eyes lifted to meet mine, all I saw there was a mask of despondency mixed with her resolve. Those mystical mismatched eyes mesmerized me as she turned back to my parents.

“There are things you all need to be made of aware, so the trouble you had with the crone never plagues your pack again. She got entirely too close to the Alpha family, and since her goal was your destruction, you're lucky she chose to play a long game of siring an heir, therefore tainting your line with

her blood. She could have taken out your entire family at any point.”

“We should adjourn to the lower levels where we are less likely to be overheard for now,” my father suggested. “Besides, we need to check in with that foul beast’s children and figure out what to do with them as well.”

“My children,” Beta Woodsong whispered. It was clear that he was still in shock.

CHAPTER 13



Sabine

“WE SHOULD HAVE THAT tested. I’m not so sure you could have sired those children. It would take a lot of magic to make that happen, no matter what the crone said.”

I wasn’t sure if my concerns made the man feel better or worse. No matter what, he’d raised those two beings since they were born. While there was bound to be relief, grief licked at its heels.

We drew further into the bowels of the pack house down to the basement that never seemed to end. There were three floors below ground, and we wound up in the lowest level before I was escorted to a room with walls so thick, there was no way another shifter could hear what happened inside.

A small part of me hesitated before going in because there was no telling what would happen to me from that point forward. Still, something in my bones told me that they wouldn't harm the woman who they now owed a life debt to.

As if he knew I doubted my safety, Mitchell drew closer and pulled my hand into his own, connecting our bodies skin-to-skin in that small way. Relief swept through my body with his touch, along with a strong dose of lust that lured me closer involuntarily. Worry for what was to come doused those feelings enough for me to pull away. Instead of feeling better, freer even, with the lack of contact I felt more at odds and fearful of what was to come.

I didn't dare look at Mitchell because I was afraid of his response. Instead, my eyes remained trained on his mother as she took a seat on a plush settee in the corner. Her deep sigh reverberated throughout the room as everyone chose a spot to sit on the mishmash of furniture that seemed to be thrown at random around the space. Being aware of the muck that still covered my clothing, I chose a chair that seemed the least likely to be missed if it couldn't be cleaned properly.

“What is it you think our pack needs to know about the world, young one?” The former Alpha asked me, and while there was a genuinely curious note to his voice, there was also the slightest hint of animosity. My knowing things that an Alpha, even a former Alpha, didn't was not sitting right with his ego.

“Your pack stopped teaching important lessons. I often wondered why the things my mother taught me were never present in the pack’s school. It was as if you wanted your pack to be ignorant of the very things that could make them thrive or bring them to their knees in devastation.”

The men in the room bristled, as did Mother-Luna, but they all held their tongues, waiting for me to explain that statement. It was, after all, a failing on their parts since they were in charge of the pack and determined what the pups learned. What I just said meant that they hadn’t been doing their jobs.

“From the earliest time in a shifter’s life, long before the shift even, the pups in the Summer Pack are taught to actively seek their fate-blessed mates. Your pack has enforced the opposite for generations and it has been to its detriment.” My eyes found the only other female in the room. “You know this to be a lie and yet allowed it to persist.”

She tipped her head in acknowledgment as the door opened and the elder shifter female entered the room. “I need to be here for this,” she declared to the room before shifting so that I was in her line of sight. “They will need to hear the truth from an elder too as you speak it.”

I understood. These people wouldn’t just take everything that came out of my mouth as gospel. They’d be idiots if they did. For all they knew, I was another crone tricking my way to the throne.

“Failure to teach the truth of our kind has already had a lasting effect on your pack. There are those amongst your pack

who never met their mate because they weren't allowed to go search. Others have met them, and like Alpha Stormborn, they denied their mate because they've been told that their moon-blessed other halves are a fairytale. Your birthrates are far below what they should be and dropping every year. The reason for this is that it is difficult to have pups outside of a blessed mating."

"We are already going to address that with the pack. We were meant to do so at a pack meeting tomorrow. That's why you were invited to the family dinner tonight. We wanted to have you here with us, hopefully as a united front with Mitchell," Mother-Luna stated.

I wanted to ask if they were planning on me staying willingly or if the plan had been to hold me hostage and stand me up in front of the pack as a puppet whose strings they were pulling, but I bit my tongue instead.

"Another thing the other packs are taught, that the winter wolves neglect, is the lessons about our enemies."

Everyone in the room hissed at me, as if I'd killed the Alpha in their presence. "We teach how to fight," Mitchell immediately defended.

"Yes, that's about all you teach that is useful, but that is also your soul focus and therefore your biggest weakness as a pack."

Everyone started speaking over one another as I sat back and waited for them to calm down. There was no sense in trying to

talk over them as they wouldn't hear what I had to say until they managed to pull their heads out of their asses.

“Silence!” The elder shifter woman yelled into the room. Her voice bounced back at her and reverberated in the ensuing stillness for a moment before she spoke again. “Sabine is not wrong. I've been telling you all this same thing since that one was just a pup.” She tipped her head in the direction of Mitchell. “Please, explain to them what you meant, Sabine.”

I nodded my thanks to her. “Your only focus is on brawn and winning one-on-one physical fight challenges, but as you saw tonight, our kind have many enemies. Not all of them fight with fists and claws. Some fight with their minds and magic. Your pack has not been trained to recognize that type of fight, let alone how to defend against it. That's why Carmichael Woodson, your Beta at the time he met his fake mate, was so easily rolled under by the crone when she came looking for a way to destroy your pack.

“The only reason she didn't aim higher, and succeed, was because the Alpha pair was a moon-blessed mating. It nullified her charms against you. A moon-blessed mate can't be charmed away from their other half. The crone settled for your Beta who was open to her suggestions because he had not found his own mate yet. Had he been taught to wait for his moon-blessed mate, maybe he would have seen through her charms because he would have noticed that there was no bond that snapped into place. Had he been taught about witches, crones, and their magic, he might have recognized her for what she was long before she became a threat to the pack.”

When no one spoke, I carried on. “Your pack is only as strong as your weakest wolf.” That statement hung in the air for a moment as everyone’s eyes were trained on me and I looked at each of them in turn. “Your philosophy for this pack is that only the strongest prosper. You don’t even see or pay attention to the weakest wolves in your pack.” I stopped and chuckled because even that wasn’t accurate. “I guess I should clarify that. You don’t see the wolves you deem are the weakest because of the circumstances they were born into.”

“What exactly are you getting at?” Mitchell asked and I watched as his jaw twitched with irritation as I berated his pack and the way he’d been running it.

“Who am I?” I asked him in return. For a brief moment, I felt the sting of the past – when I asked a similar question about my name and he couldn’t answer.

“Sabine,” he answered. “I knew your name the other day, it’s just that...”

I waved his sentiment away. “That’s not what I’m asking you this time. Who am I?”

It was the elder shifter who answered. “You are the granddaughter of Alpha Wesley of the Summer Pack. You are the daughter of an Alpha pair in their own right.” The woman winked at me conspiratorially and then added, “You are also the cupcake cupid.”

“Yes, and we lived among your pack without rank for my entire lifetime. My parents did so for a few years before I

came along. My father lived under your radar for the first 28 years of his life before he ever even met his mate.”

“Your point?” Mitchell growled.

“Her point, great-nephew dear, is that this pack had three extraordinarily powerful shifters living unranked and unutilized for many years without any of you even realizing such power was sitting there. As an Alpha family, they could have claimed your proverbial throne from you at any time because it would only take a little unrest amongst an unhappy pack to do so.”

“Exactly,” I offered along with a smile for Alice. “Luckily for all of you, my family didn’t want to rule in your stead.” The Alpha family growled in response.

“She tells no lies. You would have easily been overthrown because you were unprepared to fight. You were taught that your position wasn’t under threat. You were taught what an arrogant man wanted you to believe, not the truth.”

“When you came to my house with Beta Blakely, do you remember me telling you that there were far more shifters in your pack who could best him without even trying?”

“I don’t think you put it quite like that,” Mitchell acknowledged while still trying to brush off the comment with an air of denial.

“Well, it’s true. There are many strong wolves hiding amongst those you deem to be weaker and unworthy of your

attention. Your weakest wolves reside at the top of your pack making it ripe for a takeover.”



AS I EXPLAINED WHERE their pack had gone wrong, someone buzzed into the room through an intercom system that I hadn't noticed before.

“What part of no disturbances did you fail to understand?” Alpha Stormborn asked whoever had interrupted.

“Alpha, the prisoners...” There was a pause and what sounded like gagging. “They're... Well... You should come now if you plan to question them.”

We all stood and followed the Alpha out of the room we'd been sequestered in. The cells were at the other end of the hall and by the time we got there, the supposed son of Beta Carmichael Woodsong was bent over a bucket puking up a foul substance that appeared to be as thick and black as tar while stinking of sulfur. It looked like witch blood.

His sister did not appear to be afflicted with a similar condition. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that there were long blond hairs all over the cell floor. When I glanced up, the woman had yanked out another tuft of hair and there was a bit of her scalp attached to the chunk.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Mitchell yelled his question at her, and seemed ready to charge into the cell to stop her from doing more harm to himself. My hand quickly covered

his to stop him from going into the cell. Pleasure pulsed in an electrical undercurrent where our flesh touched, igniting the bond once more. I had to yank my hand away before I could bring myself to speak about anything other than asking him to claim me there on the spot. That was the power the bond held over fated mates.

“No one must go in there.” My eyes tracked the cell and was surprised to find that it was made to hold magical beings and shifters alike. Despite being able to see that it should be able to keep them contained, I still backed us both up a few paces and that in turn forced the others to slide back as well. Once a person was thrown in the cell, the only way they were getting out again was if someone was stupid enough to allow them to walk through that door. Considering I only knew enough about crones to make some educated guesses, I didn’t want to take a chance of standing in spitting distance of the disgusting duo.

“We have to see to their care,” Mother-Luna corrected me. “They might be guilty of colluding with the crone who gave them life, but we don’t mistreat our prisoners before they’re brought to trial by the pack and found guilty.”

“You aren’t mistreating them. This is their ruse to get someone to open the door. If you open that cell, they will bring chaos and terror to your pack. The only person who was keeping them chained before was their mother. She is no longer of this world.”

“Stop speaking!” Carmella screeched, her body flying into the bars as if she would reach through and choke the sound

from my lips. She immediately jumped back after touching them, as though they burned her. While the bars were meant to contain magic users and shifters, they shouldn't have been physically harmed by touching the bars.

“Everyone needs to step back out of grabbing range, and for the sake of the pack, don't look them in the eyes. Some pure witches have been known to enthrall people with their gifts. I'm not sure if a half breed could do it, but then again, we aren't really sure if either of them is truly a half breed or if the crone lied about who their father was.”

They all stared at me, but had the sense to listen and take a few more steps back until we were all lined up against the far wall where we entered the room that contained these two cells.

“How do we know that *you* speak the truth?” Carmichael asked.

“Look at them without meeting their eyes,” I suggested. “The minute they had our attention, the theatrics stopped.”

As soon as I said that, both of them started up again, as if plagued by some demons the rest of us couldn't see. Luckily, they all realized I was right. “We should head back to the other room to discuss this, but only after you make sure that this floor is emptied out of anyone who might be tempted to help either of them escape.”

We all moved back to the soundproofed room after Alpha Stormborn gave orders to the two guards present. They were each stationed on opposite sides of the cell, in the middle of the hall, out of reach. Each guard faced the opposite direction

to make sure no one approached from either end. They were ordered, under threat of banishment, that they were not to look at the people in the cells, no matter what they were doing.

“I think you need to call my grandfather. Get him on a video chat.”

“He won’t accept a video chat from me,” Mitchell scoffed at the idea.

“He’ll accept it if you tell him that his granddaughter is your moon-blessed mate. Be prepared to deal with him finding out about how you handled that news, since it will be obvious that we have not accepted or sealed the bond yet. He can help guide you through the process of dealing with the two witchlings you have in your cells. You will need his help if you want to make sure they’re handled correctly.”

“Can you come here first?” He asked me and then turned to walk away from the others to a corner of the room where there was no furniture. Once I got there, he pushed a button on the wall and a hidden door opened to allow us entry into another room. I followed behind him and we both waited until the door closed.

“I’m not sure what to say,” Mitchell started before his eyes finally dropped to meet mine. “You probably saved an untold number of people in our pack today. You seem to know far more about everything than we do, and yet you’ve been baking for packmates for years instead of leading them. Why?”

“I told you that my family chose personal happiness over serving a pack. The only thing that would have changed their

path was if they were called to aid the Summer Pack.”

“What about the Winter Pack? Why was this pack not one they would serve?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “That wasn’t a choice for my family to make. That was one your pack made for them by making them insignificant simply because they didn’t take place in your sport fighting for rank mentality.”

Mitchell sighed again. “There are quite a few things about this pack that are soon to change, for the better, but I’m hoping one of them will be to have a true Luna in place again, and one who isn’t bound by my family’s curse.”

“You expect me to accept you after how I’ve been treated?”

“No. I expect you to walk away, but I’m hoping you stay and give this a try, for the pack, for yourself, and maybe one day if you find I’ve earned it, for me too.”

He reached out, as if he meant to caress my cheek, but then let his hand drop. “I want so badly to touch you, hold you, pull you into my arms and make you mine. I’m still baffled over how I was able to resist this pull to you in the first place. It’s like this pull to you didn’t exist before. Then again it did because why else would I have wandered into your bakery that night? It’s not something I’ve ever done before.”

“I think that’s a two-part answer, maybe three. I’ll start with the part I’m unsure of, and that’s the crone’s influence. She was able to have direct access to you threw her daughter and we’re not sure what kind of magic the daughter is capable of.

It's possible they were influencing you and maybe not erasing the feelings, but stifling them somehow. Then, there is the fact that you didn't believe in moon-blessed mates, which made it easier to ignore the pull you felt or brush it off as something else. There's also the fact that every time we touch, or are near enough to one another, the bond gets stronger, the push to complete it becomes a force that tries to bring us together even more. The longer we fight it, the harder it will become to be near one another and not give in."

"So, you're saying this was always inevitable, despite my initial denial?"

"No. The bond can be denied. Plenty of people in your pack have done so. A formal renouncement has to take place to help break the bond before its hold becomes too much to bear. Then, distance helps. Sometimes, the bond is irreparably damaged by abuse of it. If that abuse occurs before the bond is completed, it has been known to break the bond itself. No matter which way the bond is damaged, broken, or denied, there is always a price to pay for it being done."

"I don't want to deny it or break it."

"You did damage it, though."

"I'm so damn sorry for that. I can't even understand why that happened. My brain was fried with everything I'd learned that night about our potential bond, my parents, and then Carmella was in my ear from the minute I got into the car with her. I can't explain it. There was this need to prove that it was all bullshit and someone was trying to get one over on me."

“Someone was trying to get one over on you, and they won,” I reminded him.

The guilty look in his eyes said that even if there was a magical reason behind him ignoring our bond, he still felt responsible. It left me conflicted because it was possible that he was under the influence of a powerful enchantment of some sort, then again, I’d been in so much pain as a result. It was hard to balance those two things in my mind, but especially in my heart.

“No matter how it came about, or how far you took it that night, all of it was enough to hurt me and the bond.” I sighed before my final thought was tacked on. “Whether you knowingly did it or were influenced doesn’t really impact the end result.”

“Does that mean that there’s no hope for us?”

I shook my head because that’s not what it meant at all. Though, I’d be a fool to just suddenly agree to be his mate, even if fate or the moon or whatever was out there pulling our strings intended for us to be together.

“I don’t know what it means for us. There’s the part of me that understands that you didn’t know, and honestly believed the bullshit your family fed you all these years.”

“But...”

“But... Then there’s the part of me that thinks you are an Alpha and should have paid more attention, known better, listened and seen more. Part of me wonders if you will always

be so blinded to what is right in front of you and what that will mean for me or any future pups we might produce. I don't want my kids growing up willfully ignorant or thinking they're better than others just because they were gifted with a better start in life than others. I won't abide you telling my children lies or filling their head with hate for those you deem beneath them."

"I don't..."

"You do, otherwise, you would have the strongest men and women at your side, protecting this pack, and you don't."

"Like I said, it's time to shake things up in this pack and I need you by my side to help make that happen. I know you're probably wondering why fate would stick you with someone like me, but Sabine, I know why the moon blessed me with you. It was so that you could show me where I've gone wrong and help me save our pack. It was so that you could save me from the path I was on. You are more than just my moon-blessed mate. You are the pack's moon-blessed Luna."

"No pressure or anything," I teased to help break the tension. Then I thought about what accepting that position would entail. "I have a cat."

"You have a what?"

"A cat. Her name is Lupa. She's a stray that found me the same day my mother died. She has comforted me all these years and in turn I have taken care of her. Where I go, she goes."

Mitchell sighed and rubbed his hand across the bridge of his nose. “Whatever baggage you bring with you, I will gladly accept.”

“We need to get back to everyone else, so you can find out how to deal with the two beings you have in your holding cells.”

“They’re shifters,” Mitchell explained. “I’ve seen them both shift into their wolves.”

I shrugged, knowing better than he did. “That’s one possibility.”

“What’s the other?”

“They might have been casting an illusion to make everyone think they were shifting into wolves.”

“You think they were out there running around on their hands and feet while pretending to be a wolf?”

I giggled at the imagery. “It’s a little more complicated than that, but yes, it is possible that their wolves don’t exist.”

He shook his head and sighed. “I can’t believe I ever fell for any of it, and then...” He cut himself short, obviously about to talk about how he’d been with Carmella off and on for years. We made our way back into the other room where everyone else sat waiting on our return. “That is something I plan to change for this pack, to make sure no one makes the same mistakes I did.”

“No. You can’t do that,” I insisted as he held the door open for me. “You can’t take everyone else’s free will based on your

own mistake. They have to be able to make their own decisions. Several generations back, your family decided for everyone else that moon-blessed mates didn't exist, and look where we are today because of it. Even the moon, fate, Mother Nature, or whoever is behind our mate pairings gives everyone the freedom to choose. They make it hard for people to resist, but the choice is still there, otherwise there would have never been rejections or the possibility of choosing your own mate."

"See, this is why I need you by my side," he admitted as everyone else in the room looked on. "You are the balance that has been missing in this pack."

There were nods from nearly everyone in the room. The only one who didn't agree was Carmichael and that was because he looked lost to his own thoughts as his head hung in his hands. I moved to him and immediately pulled the man into my arms and wrapped him up in warmth and love. He was the victim of a cruel witch with a vendetta. His children might not be his own and he was going to have to come to terms with the fact that he might have missed out on his true mate while he was snowed over by the Crone. My heart ached for him.

"I'm so sorry for the losses you suffered today. Even if none of those relationships were ever real, your dreams, the hopes you had, the wishes for a future you saw playing out were all yours to lose. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Grieve the loss of what you thought you had, and leave the mess of what you did have for the rest of us to clean up." I pulled him to his feet and took him to the door. "Go get some rest."

Alpha Mitchell followed us into the hallway, where we both made certain the former Beta made his way upstairs and not down to the cells to see the two beings who might not even be his children. Time would tell if they really were, and either way, they were already lost to him.

“Have someone detailed to follow him and stay near enough to hear anything he might get into.”

“You think he might betray us?” Mitchell asked.

I shook my head even as the heavy thoughts weighed me down. “No. I think he might need to be protected from himself when everything finally settles in. He’s going to see his whole life as a failure and worse, he will start to realize all the things he missed out on, like a real family, possibly a moon-blessed mate, and children who would love him. Out of everything he lost today, that reality – the what ifs – will hit him the hardest. When they do, he might decide on a new fate for himself. He could also try to get answers from his supposed children who are locked away in those cells. We all know they’re not above trickery and theatrics to try to get out of those cells.”

Mitchell made a call to have someone watch Carmichael before we made our way to seats opposite his parents, who now shared the settee. His mother leaned back against her mate’s chest and his arms were pulled tightly around her as if to hold her together after so many wild revelations.

“Are you going to accept your place beside my son?” She finally asked me.

“Mom,” Mitchell called out hastily as he attempted to get her to back off. “Now isn’t the time. I need to contact the Summer Pack’s alpha before anything else is discussed.”

CHAPTER 14



Mitchell

SABINE SAT WITH HER back straight, eyes shifting to take in everything, and ears perked up to listen. It was clear to me now that the woman didn't miss a thing. Finally, someone picked up the call I'd been waiting on. When I first placed the call to the Summer Pack, they denied me access to their alpha. It wasn't until I gave them Sabine's name that they told me to hold while they patched me through.

"Is my granddaughter unwell?" Was the first thing Alpha Wesley asked when he picked up his line.

"I'm here and doing well, Grandfather," Sabine called out.

I saw no point in playing games, so I swapped directly from an audio call to include video, and having heard his

granddaughter's voice, Alpha Wesley accepted immediately.

“Ah, Sabine, it's so good to see you, though I'm surprised by the company you're keeping these days.” He chuckled as mentioned the last bit.

My intended mate laughed along. “I promise you that it was just as big a surprise for me.”

“You're his fated, aren't you?” Her grandfather asked, as if I had never spoken and there was no one else in the room he was ignoring.

Sabine nodded and then looked to me to pick up the rest of the conversation. I quickly explained the current status of our relationship, what I'd learned about the bond since, and assured him that I was working to fix the mistakes I made while blinded by ignorance and a family curse.

“You don't deserve my granddaughter, but she's exactly what your pack needs if you have a hope in hell of fixing what's broken there.”

We discussed the other situation, too. Once he was filled in on the events that we'd all witnessed that day, he sighed heavily. “It seems that your forbearers have done you a grave disservice by keeping you in the dark. Had I known, I would have reached out sooner to help educate you.”

“Why would you do that?” I asked.

“Alpha Mitchell, we might serve different packs, but what each of us does affects all of our kind. I don't want to be at war with anyone, nor do I want to watch other shifters fail for

no good reason. We will help you out. If you have spelled cells, and Sabine seems to think you do, then you will be fine for a couple of days until my emissaries can get to you and show you how to test the two beasts. It is imperative that you lock down that level and deny access to everyone until they get there. The Crone's children will do whatever it takes to gain their freedom again. As you've seen personally, even the strongest can fall prey to their magic."

He wasn't wrong about that, but once again I felt a deep shame overwhelm me. Everything that had gone wrong could have been avoided, if only my pack hadn't harmed itself by keeping its people and future leaders in the dark.

To think that the crone could have succeeded in producing an heir with me... A chill swept over my spine as I counted back to the last time when I had sex with Carmella when I finished with her. It had been three months. She would have known, and wouldn't have been trying again the night she hurt Sabine, if they had been successful before. Besides, it was almost unheard of for an unmated shifter to get another shifter pregnant. If she was even any part shifter, that might matter. Damn it.

I glanced up and took in my mate as she discussed logistics with my family and her grandfather. What would she do if I had gotten Carmella pregnant? I doubted she would accept me now, but there was no way she would accept me knowing that I had an heir who held the blood of the crone. Not so long as that abomination of a child survived.

“What do you think?” My father asked, drawing me out of my thoughts. I shook my head, as if to dismiss the thoughts that were plaguing me.

“Sorry, my thoughts drifted. I’m still trying to process everything, I think.”

“You don’t get time to…” My father started to chastise but Sabine and her grandfather both spoke up.

“Yes, he does,” Sabine fired back at my father.

“He’s learned a lot today, some of which affected him on a personal level. I think the Alpha deserves a minute to let it all sink in,” Alpha Wesley stated.

My father still didn’t look happy, but there was nothing to be done about that. He was part of the reason we were in this mess, so he couldn’t really judge me if I took a minute to allow all of the day’s revelations to sink in.

“Run it by me one more time,” I suggested.

Alpha Wesley chuckled. “My emissaries are going to arrive in a few days as some of the experts in the field need to be flown in from overseas. When they arrive, they will help take care of the crone’s watchdogs for you. My lovely granddaughter offered to help outline some things your pack needs to know, and how to educate them. What I asked was if you thought the rest of the pack leaders need to come there and be on hand to lend credence to the things your pack is about to learn. I find that there are some among your pack who already know, since they transferred in from other places.

They may have worked to spread the word among the lower members of your pack.”

Sabine shook her head. “It’s the upper levels he’s going to have problems with. They all have this air of superiority over the rest of the pack. There’s an arrogance born from entitlement that I think they’ll have a hard time getting past it, especially when the lowest ranking wolves start challenging their place in the pack.”

I swallowed thickly at the turmoil the coming changes would bring to my pack and wondered if we would survive the changes whole or if it would break the pack further.

“Think of it as growing pains,” Alpha Wesley suggested. “If you don’t go through it now, your pack will soon start to die off. You’re already at close to a stagnant birth rate, considering your numbers.”

I nodded my head in agreement because the words I needed failed to come to me. Sabine was right. My, and my family’s, arrogance and ego nearly wiped out our pack and now it would be hard work convincing some to come back from the brink before it was too late to course correct. As if reading my mind, Sabine spoke up.

“You’re going to have to put aside for your personal feelings for the people who have ingratiated themselves to you so well over the years.”

“You mean the ones who have kissed my ass?”

Her shoulders bobbed, as if to indicate indifference, but the smirk on her face told a different story. That was exactly what she'd meant.

“They might have once been powerful families, but they've slipped, and most due to laziness. Others because they were never meant to hold the positions they did. They lucked into them and held onto them only because others were too busy to challenge.”

“I think the rest of this conversation needs to be for your pack only,” Sabine's grandfather insisted before he hung up from our call without any goodbyes.

“Will you truly help us, stand beside my son, and make sure our pack finds a healthier footing?” My mother asked as her eyes remained glued to Sabine's.

“I will help you figure out what you need to do to get the pack back on track, but I won't stand beside the Alpha.”

“Why the hell not?” My father asked, voice raised in outrage. It's like he forgot what I'd put her through. “The good of the pack should come before your hurt pride.”

Sabine stood there and stared my father down without cowering – something many found hard, if not impossible, to do. “Of all the people in this room, I have been the *only one* working toward the health of this pack in the only way I knew how without causing myself to be banished.”

My parents both scoffed at her, as if she couldn't come to us and tell the truth sooner. “Sabine is correct. If you both

remember, when she did try to tell me the truth, I ruined her life, harmed her physically through my actions, and in the process led a dozen of our shifters into a financial crisis because they lost their jobs when Sabine's business went under."

The room fell silent as the grave then as we all took a moment to remember, reorient, and breathe.

"That's not the only reason I won't stand beside you," Sabine insisted. "You will have an uphill battle as is with trying to convince the lower ranked wolves to rise up. Then there's the higher ranked wolves who will not take kindly to the challenges. If I stand beside you, as low-ranking wolf, nothing but a mere baker, they won't give any merit to the things you're asking of them or the knowledge you try to impart. They will see me as a rank whore trying to climb the ladder beyond my station. It's better if my contribution stays behind the scenes at this juncture."

A spark of hope flared when she tacked on that last bit. Maybe it meant that at a later point in time, she would be beside me. I could only hope for such an outcome. Something in my gut told me it wouldn't be that easy. Then again, Sabine's own explanation of the mate bond gave me more hope than a few words ever could. She mentioned that the more we touched, the closer we were to one another, the more our bond would demand us to complete the mating. I planned to use that to my advantage.

CHAPTER 15



Sabine

DEE TUGGED AT THE bottom hem of my shirt, forcing me to stop at the edge of the forest instead of moving closer to the stage as I had intended. “How do you think they’ll take it?” She asked as she tipped her head toward the gathered crowd.

“It’s hard to...” My words were choked off by the painful groan that escaped me as my heart lurched awkwardly inside my chest. I clutched the spot and glanced toward the stage immediately. This, unfortunately, was a familiar pain. Dee noticed and her eyes darted around wildly until she locked onto the problem at hand.

“That son of a bitch,” Dee announced. In fact, a great many of the pack were beginning to notice as a hush broke over the

gathered crowd. Members started to openly speculate if she was the wolf he threw Carmella out for. Others, who had obviously heard about me claiming to be his moon-blessed mate, either sneered my way or offered pitying looks. When I doubled over in pain once more, the pitying looks began to outnumber the sneers.

“That rank whore has her mouth on him!” Dee growled. I was too busy trying not to vomit to bother looking for myself.

“Well at least he pushed her off that time,” Dee commented. For one, brief moment, I thought that would be it. I was in the clear and would never have to feel my own heart being shredded inside my chest again. And then, the pain came back with a vengeance and dropped me to my knees.

“Not her, too!” Dee shouted as I bent forward and puked in the grass. Gasps went up nearby as wolves all around us began to speculate about what was happening to me.

“How could he do that to his own mate?”

“How can she stand it?” Another asked.

“Enough!” Alpha Mitchell finally shouted, drawing everyone’s attention. “Unless you four want to share a cell with Carmella, I suggest you get out of my sight and never again presume you have permission to touch me.”

“But we’ve already fucked,” the first woman stated loudly, before tacking on, “many times.” I glanced up then to see Mother-Luna lose her patience and snatch the woman up by the scruff of her neck before tossing her into the crowd.

“This is the type of unacceptable behavior we’re going to address today.” She shouted at the crowd before her eyes landed on me. I happened to be wiping the puke from my mouth at the time and was still down on my knees.

She typed something into her phone and then snapped at Alpha Mitchell to check his messages. He did and I ducked and started to crawl closer to the tree line in the hopes that he wouldn’t see me there. I’d already been humiliated enough. As soon as he turned his attention back to everyone gathered near the stage, I backed further into the shadows.

As Alpha Stormborn, Mitchell, my stupid fated-mate, took center stage and began to address the crowd about the moon-blessed mates and how unmated pack members were to start looking for their other halves, I almost fully tuned him out. I made it to my feet before he begged our pack members to kindly remember how their true mates will feel if they are not chaste before they find one another.

I couldn’t believe the audacity he had to ask that of the pack, especially after the display he just allowed in front of them, and knowing that I must have felt what those females were doing to him.

I stepped further back into the trees and ended up bumping into Brady, my friend and door fixer.

“I’m assuming it’s time now?” He asked.

With a simple nod of my head, he had my agreement. Dee followed behind as Brady led us through the trees to a waiting

car. Our bags were already inside, but there was something missing. “Where’s Lupa?”

Brady hung his head. “She would not allow herself to be caught. That little ball of fluff is ridiculously fast when she wants to be.”

“What am I going to do? I can’t just leave her behind.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll look out for her. If you decide not to come back, we’ll keep working until someone catches her and then we’ll bring her to you personally. My mate said to let you know that we will follow you back to her home pack if you decide to stay there.”

“I would never ask you to do that,” I whispered. He heard me despite my barely-there words spoken into the breeze.

“Sabine, without you here, this pack doesn’t stand a chance in hell of turning itself around. Where you go, we go.”

CHAPTER 16



Mitchell

I HAD MY TALKING points and we were just waiting on everyone to make their way to the meeting before we could we start.

“Have you seen her?” I asked Beta Blakely. He shook his head as he eyed the four women who approached. I was ashamed to admit that I’d been with all of them at different times when Carmella and I had been taking a break. Suddenly, I was thankful that Sabine hadn’t shown up yet.

“Hey baby, I heard Carmella got the boot again.”

“What do you want, Evony?”

“You know exactly what I want,” she murmured as she palmed my dick where probably half the pack could witness

the claiming gesture.

“You need to back off, now!” I angrily whispered, so as not to draw more attention to the brewing situation.

“Aw, come on, Mitchell, you know you love it.” Then the bitch leaned in and damn near plastered herself to me. I was stunned by her bold actions and even more when her lips landed on mine.

Before I could push her off, Blakely snatched her off me. Then, as if I was in some sort of Karmic horror movie hellscape, Ashley moved in to take Evony’s place pawing at me. Before I could even grasp how this was turning into a major shit show, her lips also landed on mine.

My own mother was the one to handle her right before she addressed the crowd.

She hissed at me to read my texts and when I glanced down to see what she wrote my stomach sank.

MOM: Are you having fun allowing other females to paw all over your body in front of your entire pack while they witness your behavior and Sabine getting sick out there in the crowd because of it?

My attention immediately moved to the crowd. I scanned the many faces looking for my mate. I didn’t see her there. Maybe mom was only trying to get me to hurry up and address the

issues so my past would stop popping out of the woodwork to haunt me like they had moments ago.

“Good afternoon to everyone who took the time to show up today. There are some very important items we need to discuss today as a pack, since some things have recently come to light for me.” I went on to explain to the pack how my ancestors reacted horribly and overcompensated for a bad situation by declaring that moon-blessed mates were a myth. Initially, I could feel the crowd’s empathy for my three times great Aunt Lucy. They also seemed to understand the overreaction, but it all slipped away when I started talking about how they needed to wait for their moon-blessed mate instead of hooking up with other single wolves prior to finding their other halves.

I could smell disgust and disapproval from members of the pack and I knew that the little stunt Evony and Ashley had caused earlier was the reason why. I hadn’t addressed the fact that Sabine was my moon-blessed mate yet because it felt like too much to speak about how she had suffered as a result of my actions. While I didn’t mind others learning from my mistakes; it wasn’t fair to put Sabine’s pain on display.

“Do you plan to lead by example?” Someone called out to me.

There was no way to keep my situation from the pack after that. So, I addressed my mate situation and then explained how, because of the family curse, I’d been ignorant about mates and harmed mine as a result. Then I promised I would do everything in my power to make sure the pack healed and

had their true Luna in charge to help them. I told the whole pack I planned to beg Sabine for her forgiveness.

“I haven’t seen Sabine. Does anyone know where she is?”

A woman close to the tree line spoke up. “She looked fairly sick when her mate allowed other females to touch and kiss him in front of the whole pack.”

Fuck! She had seen it all. Worse yet, she must have felt it, too.

“Sabine?” I called out.

“She left,” the same woman, whose name I didn’t know, spoke up to tell me.

“How long ago?”

“Beginning of your little speech about how the pack needed to respect their future bonds with their moon-blessed mates.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

I’d fucked everything up with my pack and not just my mate.

“I was trying to keep from causing a scene before I made that speech. It was the only reason I didn’t do more to stop them because I didn’t want everyone focused on that drama rather than on the more important message.”

“Seems to me, if you had intervened on your mate’s behalf, that would have sent a better message to the pack,” the woman called out.

“You’re right. As with the rest of you, this is all new to me, too. I was brought up, thanks to a family curse, to believe that moon-blessed mates weren’t real. I believed that even after Sabine first told me she dreamed of me. I believed it until it was proven to me what a moon-blessed mate feels when they are disrespected by another.” There were gasps in the audience.

“I hurt Sabine with my disbelief. I hurt her so badly that our pack doctor pulled another male wolf off the street and had him kiss my mate, so that I would feel a tiny bit of what I’d put her through. It pains me, as your Alpha, to admit that to you. It might make me look weak in some eyes, but I need you all to understand the ramifications of what has happened to not only me, but our entire pack. The crone who put this disaster in play nearly decimated our pack before anyone was the wiser. Our birth rates are far lower than those of the other packs and the fact that too many of us have ignored our moon-blessed mates is part of that reason. It’s something I want us to rectify.”

“How will you will be able to rule our pack without your mate?” Someone asked.

“I don’t plan to do that. Sabine is my priority. I will track her down and bring her back to take her place, where she belongs. That woman has been helping this pack more than anyone else – myself included – for years. She is the reason we’ve had the small number of births in the pack that we have, as she has helped moon-blessed mates discover one another. Those

subsequent matings are where all of our pack's new pups have come from.”

“I wouldn't forgive you,” someone mumbled.

“Let's hope Sabine feels differently.” Truth be told, I wouldn't forgive me either. If my pack didn't need Sabine here so badly, I would find a way to set her free. She deserved it, even though it would kill me to do so.

CHAPTER 17



Sabine

WHEN THE CAR STOPPED, we glanced up at the grand entrance to the pack lands run by mother's family.

"Wow," Dee hummed, impressed by the large iron gates and twelve-foot-high stone fence on either side that greeted us. "It looks as though we're about to enter a fancy neighborhood or maybe a posh version of Jurassic Park."

My laughter caught her off guard. "Jurassic Park for shifters maybe."

"State your name and business," a disembodied voice called out via a speaker near the driver's side of my car.

"My name is Sabine Hopkins. I am here to see my grandfather, Alpha Wesley. My friend Deirdre has come with

me in search of her mate.”

The large gate began to open slowly inward but stopped when there was just enough room for the vehicle to pass through. “Follow the road straight to the packhorse Someone will meet you there to verify your identity.”

“Like I said,” Dee confirmed with a nod of her head, “Fancy, posh neighborhood.”

“Mom always said it was a lovely place but kept very secure. It’s why they chose the mountains of north Georgia to settle. There was a lot of forest land to hide all the shifter activity and a low human populace. Most of the humans are older, retired, and simply can’t be bothered to care about the resort area that is too exclusive for locals.”

Dee giggled. “Resort area, huh?”

“That’s what they originally passed it off as, according to my mom.”

“I wish you could have brought her back here before everything went to hell,” Dee stated.

“She didn’t want me to go home to her origin pack.”

“Why not? Did she ever say?”

I shook my head. “Everything she said about it was a little vague, but she basically told me that I would have been restless and ready to leave, even before getting the visions, if my mate were not in the northern pack. She hoped I would find him and be able to convince him that we were fated.”

“It’s almost like she knew you’d have a hard time.”

“Well, considering the pack as a whole didn’t really believe in moon-blessed mates, it wasn’t so far-fetched that she would worry about it.”

“True enough. Wow, does this driveway go on forever or what?” Dee finally complained. She wasn’t wrong. We had gone at least two miles past the gate before we saw even the slightest clearing beyond the trees that bordered the slim, one-laned road. Eventually, offshoot dirt lanes started to appear here and there, only to be swallowed back up by the trees again moments later.

“One thing is for certain. They definitely have privacy out here.”

“Yep,” I agreed quickly as the trees thinned a little further. They finally opened up to showcase a glorious mountain estate. It looked almost like one of those old sprawling resort hotels. It stood at least three stories tall and appeared to have an underground level as well. My best guess would be that it was over 40,000 square feet, but then again, my best guess in that department wasn’t worth much.

“Holy shit,” Dee breathed out. “This place is insane and it’s the pack house. Could you imagine if the Winter Wolves had a place like this?”

I was in awe of the same sight my best friend was taking in. Despite having a relationship with my grandfather, I’d never been to his pack lands before. My mother had always said everything there was on a grand scale, but this put the northern

pack to shame in so many ways. It was obvious that many in the pack lived within the pack house.

It was one of the ways that packs of old helped to keep their members secure, by housing all of the single wolves and sometimes the families too, in one commune style large home. It also helped in aiding single pack members to find their mate, when they were located in the same pack. In my grandfather's pack, once mated, the couple would move out of the pack house into a space of their own, but all were still welcome to the communal spaces for meals. They weren't just welcomed, it was encouraged. To both Dee and me, it seemed like the sign of a healthy pack.

I was surprised to find my grandfather standing there waiting for us the minute we were ushered through the doors by the pack's welcoming committee. That committee consisted of two betas, who checked our identification and sent pictures of us to someone via text message.

“Sorry for the extra precautions but one can never be too careful, especially since the Winter Pack had a crone and her spawns hiding amongst their upper echelon.”

I nodded my head and Dee, not so subtly, pinched my side. “Sorry, this is Deirdre Gallagher, my best friend. Dee this is my grandfather, Alpha Wesley.”

My grandfather smiled warmly at Dee before offering his hand. “You have honored my granddaughter by seeing her safely here. I understand what that means for your chances of returning to your home pack. If you find your mate among our

pack, we welcome you. If you do not find your mate, or can't for whatever reason, settle in your mate's pack, then we will also welcome you into the fold here as I owe you a debt of gratitude."

"I appreciate that." Dee's voice was small in the wake of my grandfather's gesture. Most packs didn't take in stragglers. If you didn't find your mate, you were expected to take someone from your birth pack as your chosen mate.

"Let's go get you both settled and then we'll have a longer talk about what happened to bring you to my doorstep and if that was a final decision or if this will end up being a visit only."

My heart beat erratically in my chest at his last words. The part of me that craved to be one with my fated mate wanted for this to simply be a visit. The logical side of my brain, the one that watched my mate behave as though he hadn't found me in front of his whole pack, thought differently. I wondered if it was a pain I could move past, considering we hadn't completed the mate bond. Maybe it would be one of those things where I always knew he was out there but distance would keep me from feeling any of the ill effects of whatever he gotten up to. It was a better option than believing my life was in the hands of someone so heartless that they could sacrifice me, and maybe themselves in the process, to keep from having a mate. None of it made sense either, since he had practically begged me to stand by his side for the meeting just the day before.

We were shown to a room with two beds in it that we were able to share together. “There aren’t many shared bunk rooms, but we keep a few for siblings. I thought, since you’re both new to the pack, that this would be the best option to make your wolves more secure in a strange environment.”

“Thank you, Alpha. This is more than either of us could have hoped for.”

He nodded to me. “Dinner is at six in the great hall downstairs. I’d give you directions, but you really can’t miss it.” He took us both in before continuing. “I expect you to be there, so I can introduce you both to the pack. It will give Dee a fairly good chance of coming into contact with the majority of our unmated wolves and allow me to finally introduce the pack to my granddaughter.”

I could feel Dee’s body tremble with nervous excitement beside me. I hoped, for her sake, that she was able to find the mate of her dreams. She knew who it was by look. Unfortunately, her dreams hadn’t given her any clues as to where he might be. She did know that it was warm wherever he was. Not that it meant he would be found in the Summer Pack, but it was our best starting point.

CHAPTER 18



Mitchell

THERE WASN'T A SINGLE person within my pack who seemed to know where Sabine had gone. I knew someone did, but issuing an alpha order to my entire pack to come forward with information seemed extreme, even to me. Besides, I already knew. I turned to my Beta and grinned at him as he barged into my room while I tossed another pair of jeans into my bag.

“Going somewhere?”

“Perfect timing. I was about to contact you. I’m headed to Georgia tonight.

“The Summer Pack?” He asked as a knowing grin spread across his face. When I nodded, he followed suit. “It’s about

time you started using your head.”

That stopped me cold. I turned on him as a low growl simmered in my throat.

He rolled his eyes at me like a fucking child. “Seriously? You didn’t think that was accurate? You’ve been bumbling things for a while now, especially where your mate is concerned. It’s understandable to a point, since your family wasn’t able to talk to you about their union being moon-blessed and why our pack didn’t honor those blessings any longer. Still, I remember telling you about meeting my mate. I even told you about Sabine’s involvement in it when it happened.”

“You did?”

“I did.”

After a few minutes of searching my mind for the memory, I gave up. “I don’t remember that at all.”

“Not surprising. The crone’s spawn was in your ear at the time. My guess is that she was whispering things to you that covered the conversation we were having on my end.”

“I responded to you?”

“You did. In fact, you told me it was nonsense and even alluded to the fact that maybe the Sabine character was a witch and should be looked into.”

“Shit,” I hummed. “I wonder just how a big of an impact the crone’s family had on our pack while we were all under their influence.”

“Big enough to keep our birth rates catastrophically low for more than a generation.”

“My parents need to stay here, and stay protected, while I am gone. If anything happens to keep me away or kill me, they will have to rule until someone else is found to take my place.”

“What about the crone’s children?” It was weird that not a single person would use their names now. Some believed it gave them power, and maybe it did.

“Keep them locked in those cells and don’t allow anyone near them. Food can be slid into the cells and they have water. If they have a medical issue that they cry about, let’s hope it kills them. I want no one sent in to give aid to them for any reason. We have already seen that they will use all sorts of trickery to get themselves out of those cells. While I’m gone, I will confer face-to-face with the summer pack about what should be done with them. I can’t believe we had crones living amongst us for so long.”

“I can’t believe none of us knew they were anything beyond fairytale. It makes you wonder what else we’ll discover. Without your mate in town, we might have never realized that moon-blessed mates were real and...” My beta’s eyes drifted to the floor. “I don’t want to imagine never having my mate. She’s everything to me, and if Sabine hadn’t pushed us toward one another, I never would have gone there because of the rankings.”

Everyone had been surprised to find that the Alpha’s right-hand man had taken a mate in the lower end of the pack’s

rankings. There was a point when I tried to talk him out of mating so far beneath him. Then his mate had fought Sasha Wintermoon because Sasha was jealous that the Blakely's attentions had shifted from her. Sasha nearly died in that fight and Blakely's mate walked away without a single scratch on her. That should have been an eye-opener that we had serious, underdog powerhouses hiding out in the lower ranks, but for some reason, it felt all-too-easy to ignore. I was beginning to think that was down to Carmella and her mother's influence as well.

My beta gave me a knowing nod, as if he might have been thinking the same thing, but he didn't dare mention it. I wasn't naïve enough anymore to think there wouldn't be more recent events that, looking back, may have also been heavily influenced by the crone's family. "Do you think you can convince Sabine to come back?"

"I fucking hope so!"

CHAPTER 19



Sabine

“THIS PACK IS AMAZING. If you decide to go back to the winter pack, and I find my mate here...” Dee started to announce and then stopped. Her eyes widened in surprise when she realized what that would mean. “Oh God! I can’t wish for you to be happy with your mate or for you to stay hidden from him because either one hurts you. What if we’re separated?”

I chuckled softly. “I understand, and let’s say that if you find your mate amongst the pack here, and I decide to forgive mine and take my place with the Winter Wolves, we will have to work out our vacations so that we can meet up together and hang out.”

“We’ll barely see one another, though,” Dee lamented. “Maybe, I can convince whoever my mate is to come to the Winter Pack.”

Our eyes met and we both laughed about that. “No, even I know that would be a dumb move for anyone who grew up here.” Dee glanced around and ignored the wolves who obviously heard us and laughed about it. “Although, maybe you can convince that doofus you’re fated to that his pack should do better.”

“That won’t take much convincing,” a familiar voice called from behind us. We both turned to stare as Mitchell walked into the dining hall of the Summer Pack with my grandfather at his side. “We’re still working out where everything went wrong with the pack two and three generations back, thanks in part to the crone, and there are plans in place to fix what was broken. Unfortunately, I can’t do that without my mate because being without her is like missing a piece of myself.”

I wanted to believe him. I really, really wanted to believe him. It was obvious by some of the swoony sounds coming from nearby females that they liked what he had to say. Still, there were memories of him with other women, of him denying our bond, that plagued me in the night when I tried to sleep. Sometimes, during the day, they would strike as well.

Dee hit me in the side with her elbow and finally, I turned my attention up to Mitchell. “What are you doing here?”

“What do you think?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.”

“Well, how about I change your opinion, so it will be really fucking obvious to you?”

“We’ll see,” I tossed back even as my heart picked up a few extra beats. Mitchell prepared to say something and before he could, I shook my head. “Not here,” I warned in a whisper. Most of the wolves on our side of the room would have heard my whispered request, but the others were taking notice of what was happening, too. An energetic buzz started burning through the room as conversation ticked up another level and the question on everyone’s mind started to hit my ears.

“Is that the Winter Pack alpha?”

“Is that Mitchell Stormborn?”

“Holy crap, what is he doing here?”

“Is he here for our Alpha’s granddaughter? I thought she was staying in the pack.”

The speculation was a bit much and there was no way I would voluntarily add to it by putting our non-relationship drama in front of nearly every single unmated wolf in the pack.

“Will you come with me?” Mitchell asked.

I had to work hard to hide my shock. “You are technically still my alpha; you could just command me.”

“I could, but I’m not here to command you, Sabine.”

There was no getting around this conversation. Since having it in the middle of the dining hall didn’t sound like a pleasant

experience, I picked up my tray and walked it over to the clean-up station.

“I’ll take care of that for you,” a younger female stated as she hopped up and grabbed my tray from me.

“Thank you.” With nothing else to hold me back, I turned and followed my mate from the dining hall. My grandfather walked quietly beside us.

“Before you run off to work things out, I wanted to speak with you both about something that has been bothering me since Sabine showed up and told me what happened.” He inclined his head in the opposite direction of the front door where I had been headed. “Come to my office, where we won’t be overheard.”

We followed behind my grandfather until we were all three behind closed doors. I took a seat before one could be offered and Mitchell followed suit. Surprisingly, my grandfather didn’t take his post behind the giant desk. Instead, he pulled a third chair up close to form a weird sort-of triangle between the three of us. Mitchell slid his chair closer to mine as he sat down. Part of me wanted to be petty and scoot mine further from him. Instead, I sat stiffly, figuring the quicker we got this over with, the sooner we could figure out how to deal with our bond.

Grandfather patted my knee and smiled at me before turning his attention to Mitchell. “Sabine told me of the meeting you held with your pack just before she left.”

“As I was made aware later, Sabine didn’t stay for the whole meeting,” Mitchell countered. My cheeks flamed even though I had nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed of.

“Yes, but the part of the meeting that concerned me was the behavior of some of your female pack mates.”

“That behavior was addressed and will never happen again,” Mitchell assured my grandfather while staring directly at me. I refused to meet his eyes and continued to watch my grandfather who smiled.

“That might well be true, but I need to know if that was unusual behavior.”

My attention was piqued because thinking back, I’d never seen that happen at a pack meeting or during a pack run before. The closest to it would have been when Carmella was monopolizing his time during runs.

Mitchell shook his head. “No. That’s part of what threw me off guard. That and not wanting to draw unnecessary attention and drama.” He rolled his eyes at himself. “I screwed that one up by not acting.” The tips of his ears turned red and I bet if I reached over and touched them, they would be as hot as my face had been moments ago.

“Understandable, as it seems you’ve been operating somewhat blindly for as long as you’ve held the alpha position. Do you know if either of the crone’s children were intimately involved with any of those women who came up to you, openly touched, or otherwise made suggestive remarks that day?”

Mitchell seemed lost in thought, or memories, as he nodded his head. “Yes, Carmella was intimate with at least two of them. I can’t say I ever cared for her brother, so whatever he got up to was lost on me.”

“It is said that there is a certain thrall that intimate partners can be put under when getting into bed with a crone.”

“That would explain Beta Woodsong having been hoodwinked by her for so long,” I muttered. I didn’t dare say the same of Mitchell and Carmella, but it was implied.

My grandfather nodded his head in agreement. “Yes, that’s exactly what I’m speaking of. He was under her thrall until the end, correct? He remained so until after she had been called out as a crone, or after her death, correct? Carmichael Woodsong most likely seemed to come out of a fog and wondered how it all happened?”

“After she was called out as a crone, he seemed as though he was fighting a fog, but when she was killed, it was cleared away immediately. From what he said, it was like he had been absent from his own life for the years that he was with her.”

Grandfather nodded again. “The crone’s children, especially the female, knew about Sabine being your moon-blessed mate for a good while prior to being locked up, yes?”

“That’s right. She tried to convince me that Sabine had poisoned me with a potion when I tried to explain that I felt something when we came in contact.” Mitchell’s eyes found mine briefly and when I saw the apology there, I turned away.

We both knew what happened after that. He had set about destroying my life and then he was intimate with her.

“I believe you were under thrall as well.” When my grandfather stated it as fact, my head snapped back around and I stared at him.

“She wasn’t there when I told him about the bond,” I argued.

“No. For that, he had his family’s curse working against him. Since he had been led to believe fated mates didn’t exist, he was forced to grapple with what that might mean if the Alpha family had been wrong over several generations. It was natural for him to fight the truth, as much as you don’t want to hear that, Sabine. He wasn’t so much fighting the bond as he was the legacy of how his family’s lies would impact his pack.”

Through my peripheral vision, I could see Mitchell nodding along with my grandfather and I knew there must have been at least a modicum of truth to it, even if I wasn’t ready to forgive him. No matter what, it had been his duty to the pack that snapped him out of everything, not his bond to me. That was still hard to take. Our bond felt like a consolation prize.

“The women who approached you at the pack meeting,” Grandfather started again, getting back on track with his original concern. “I believe they were acting on suggestions planted by the crone’s spawn before they were locked up. They knew that keeping Sabine away from you was imperative. If you were near each other too much, it would strengthen the bond, whether you believed in it initially or not.”

“So, you think they’re behavior was because they are still somehow linked to Carmella or her brother?”

“I do. That means anyone else who those two have been intimate with could be susceptible as well.”

I turned to look at Mitchell and raised a brow at him. The tips of his ears turned red once more.

“Because you are Alpha, and found faith in your bond, I believe the impact they may have had on you was lessened. It might, however, explain your poor judgement in how to handle the females who approached you the day of the meeting. You may not have been inclined to accept what they were offering, but something held you back from reprimanding them as an alpha should. No pack alpha worries about making a scene. He simply does what is necessary to maintain order.”

“It felt as though I was dazed as it happened, almost like a dream.”

“That is what it is said to feel like for those who are only partially under thrall, whether it be to a vampire or crone. Vampire thrall does not work on our kind, but something in the crone’s magic makes us susceptible to it.”

“So, you’re saying that Mitchell’s initial reaction to me telling him about the bond was partly because of family history and maybe slightly because he was under the crone’s thrall. Then everything else that happened may have been because he was still under it. If that’s the case, then it blows the first part of your Carmichael Woodsong theory out of the

water. Alpha Stormborn already knew Carmella was the crone's child when the pack meeting took place. So, that means..."

"They need to die," Mitchell stated coolly.

"It would seem that distance helps ease the impact of the thrall as well. Then again, maybe time is helping," Grandfather stated in that thoughtful way of his.

"Is there no way to know for sure?" I asked.

He shook his head. "To know for sure would mean conducting experiments and the crone's magics are nothing to be trifled with. We can't take the chance of doing so. I consulted with the elder wolves and they all agreed after giving anecdotal evidence of previous brushes with crone magic. The team that will be en route to the Winter Pack in the next few days was already set to destroy the crone's spawn. They were going to do minimal testing first, as I understand, but nothing that would put the pack back in danger."

I growled out my frustrations. "So, it's possible that Carmella still has some of the pack in her thrall?"

"I am afraid so." Grandfather glanced at Mitchell then. "Something needs to be done before that particular situation becomes a problem."

Mitchell took out his cell phone immediately. Once the person on the other end answered, he put it on speaker. "You are on the line with Alpha Wesley and Sabine as well as myself."

“Alpha Wesley, Sabine,” the male voice on the other end of the line called out.

“Father, we need to know if all is well with the crone’s children.” I found it interesting that he no longer referred to Carmella by name. The hesitation on the other end of the line wasn’t missed by anyone.

“Has there been an incident?” Grandfather asked.

“We caught the same women from the meeting trying to get down to the cells,” Mitchell’s father began and then stopped when Mitchell cut him off.

“Did they make it down there?”

“No.” Former Alpha Stormborn laughed. “Like we would let that happen. Considering the ramifications of what was done to our family and how tightly bound we were to keep the truth of matters from the rest of the pack, and even our own heirs, I figured there was a possibility that they had some sway over members of the pack they’ve been with the most.” My grandfather nodded his head and smiled. “The cells are degrading, though.”

“They are eating at them with their magic regularly?” Grandfather asked.

“It would seem so. They’re doing something to cause the cells to lose potency. We made a decision, in the best interest of the pack, and because we weren’t sure if Mitchell was still being influenced, he wasn’t included.”

“What did you do?” Mitchell asked, though he didn’t seem angered by his father leaving him out of the loop.

“We carried out an execution order for both of the crone’s spawn.”

“You had them both killed?” I gasped in surprise.

“It was clear that they were in on whatever revenge plot their mother had against the pack. Considering their influence remained in some pack members, and possibly its alpha, we had no choice.”

“Did you put them down in the same way as their mother?” Grandfather asked.

“Yes. They were removed of heads and heart before being rendered to ash.”

“How have the exposed pack members behaved since then?”

“Marked improvement in their behavior. One of them might as well have had a personality transplant. She is asking to be allowed to leave the pack because she feels ashamed of what she’s done.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to have anyone that was previously under the crone’s thrall leave the pack.” Mitchell spoke up. “We can discuss that further when we return, but for now, tell her she will have to wait.”

“Mitchell, I think it would be a mercy to allow her to go.”

“Father, I understand that position, but she will need to be questioned first. After that, we can decide if it would harm the

pack to have her run off and talk about the things she witnessed or not.”

“Understood.”

“We wanted to warn you about the possibility that some members of the pack were under their thrall still. That was all I had. Is there anything else I should be made aware of?”

“No. That covered everything that is pertinent...” It sounded as though there were was more he wanted to say.

“Something else?”

“It can wait to be addressed until you get back, but there are some members asking about whether their matings can be nullified so they can seek out their moon-blessed mates.”

Grandfather groaned. “What a mess. You would be smart to hold off on any such decision until we can confer with the council of elders. Something tells me that those choices are binding, and even if they could break the bond of a chosen mate, that doesn’t mean their moon-blessed mate is still available to them.”

“Why wouldn’t they be?” Mitchell asked.

“I’m curious about that as well,” His father stated.

“When a wolf is rejected formally, either with the words by their moon-blessed mate or when their fated mate takes another by choice, they are set free. The bond that could have been no longer exists and they walk a different path that sometimes leads them to a second chance mate. Some are fated, some chosen. Either way, the original fated mates

belonging to your chosen pairs are no longer bound to them. I would like to check in with the elders to see if acceptance at a later date can repair the bond, so long as the other mate hasn't already bonded with another as well. I do know there is nothing that can be done once the other mate has also chosen to bond another."

"What about being able to reproduce?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"The mate that was rejected and found another..." Shit. How was I supposed to phrase this without starting a shitstorm? "Are they punished in the same way as the couples who chose their mates despite the fated wolves that waited for them?"

"Punished?" My grandfather asked. We both knew he wasn't stupid. The man knew exactly what I was asking, but he refused to answer until I spelled it out all the way.

"The couple who go against a mated pairing and choose a mate instead are rarely blessed with a pregnancy, let alone a healthy pup. What about the other half of the original fated pairing? You said they get a second chance at a mate. Are they able to breed with the second chance pairing or did the mate that rejected them doom them to never have children?"

"Ahh, I see," my grandfather stated as if he just had an epiphany. The jerk. "When one is presented a second chance mate, it is also blessed by the moon or fate or whatever each pack wants to attribute the phenomena to. A second chance mate that was chosen by fate works as if the first pairing never

happened. They are blessed with offspring as any fated pairing would be.”

I leaned back and sighed in relief. That was good news indeed.

“No!” Mitchell called out and turned to me. “I never rejected you.”

“Actually, you did. Then you ruined my business and slept with another female to prove your point.”

My grandfather gasped dramatically, as if he wasn’t already aware of what happened. “You put her through the cheating pains?”

“I didn’t cheat. I didn’t know there would be any pain,” Mitchell protested.

My grandfather grabbed hold of my hand and held on with a fierceness that he hadn’t shown me before. “Whatever you need, I am behind you.” His eyes drifted to Mitchell in a calculating manner and then back to me. “You know I informed Dee she is welcome to remain and become part of my pack whether she finds her mate here or not, but I failed to offer you the same concession. I told you that you were welcome here for however long you chose to stay because I assumed you would go back to the Winter Pack eventually, since the pull of a fated mate is hard to ignore. That was before I knew he rejected you.”

“I didn’t reject her,” Mitchell seethed.

“No? What would you call it then?” Grandfather asked.

“I...” Mitchell was speechless.

“No doubt you didn’t say the words of rejection to my granddaughter because you didn’t know them, but you showed her your rejection through your actions.”

“I apologized. My ignorance of everything and the influence on myself and others from the crone and her children made it difficult for me to accept the truth in the beginning.”

I sighed because Mitchell wasn’t wrong. The way he treated me was not entirely of his own making, considering the circumstances. Still... “It’s funny because in any other circumstance, I would be forgiving of those things. You’re right, you were not working with all the information and what you did know was working against us. It’s hard to process that my fated mate didn’t believe in that type of bond. What’s worse to process, though, is that he completely disregarded it for a female everyone knew he wasn’t serious about to begin with.”

Mitchell sat there with the blood draining from his face. “What are you saying?”

“Life is all about choices, Mitchell. Do you think Beta Woodsong gets his moon-blessed mate back now that the crone is dead? Chances are, she already moved on to a second chance mate. The crone and her children might have been involved in part of the reasons you chose to reject me, but when it all gets lined up, I wasn’t enough for you. I ranked too low.”

My grandfather cut me off with a scoff. “What is this about low ranking? You’re an alpha female.”

I chuckled. “Their pack runs differently. I was nothing more than a lowly baker because I didn’t bother to fight the silly little battles those at the top choose to play around with.”

“I don’t understand,” Grandfather stated.

“Mitchell can fill you in on how rank is chosen there. That’s not my business.”

“You are still a part of my pack,” Mitchell stated.

“A fact that I have been debating about lately.”

“You can’t leave the pack,” he whispered.

“I can.”

CHAPTER 20



Mitchell

SABINE GOT UP AND walked out of Alpha Wesley's office.

I watched her go, too stunned by her words to follow after her.

"You really mucked things up," Alpha Wesley stated. I nodded because what else could be said. There was no denying he was correct. The older man sighed. "Sabine is the last of my bloodline. She is my priority, even above my own pack." He sighed again and the heaviness of that breath seemed to weigh down the entire room. "I want to see her happy, settled, in a place where she belongs."

"I want that, too."

"I want that even if it means she isn't by your side."

That had my attention. I shifted to stare at the man again. “She’s meant to be with me. I didn’t realize...” I shook my head of the cobwebs that seemed to still be falling free of my mind. “If there was a way to go back and see what was really in front of me, I would do it.”

“I know you would, Mitchell. Despite the family curse that kept you from seeing the truth of things, I always liked you. There’s a good head on your shoulders, and I think now that everything has been cleared up, your pack can expect good things from you. Remember, while it’s easy for you to write off your behavior as a symptom of the curse and the Crone and her spawn’s influence, Sabine was the one to suffer from your treatment of her. You ruined a business my own daughter worked hard to leave behind. Sabine’s mother lingered in agony after her mate’s death to make sure that Sabine had a legacy to keep her going. You took that away. She has knowledge of the other females you’ve lain with. There are things you can never take back, but never forget, it is my granddaughter who will have to live with the worst of those memories.”

If the floor could open up and suck me into the pits of the earth, I would have welcomed it. Knowing that Alpha Wesley wasn’t wrong made everything feel hopeless. How could I expect Sabine to forgive me when there was no way I could do it if our places were reversed? I would have killed any man who dared to touch her before she found me. She had been forced to see females paw at me in public, knowing they had

intimate knowledge of me and my body. I shook the thought off.

“I see you are starting to understand just how deep the hole is that you need to climb back out of.”

“How in the hell am I supposed to do that? I can’t even imagine if everything was reversed. If I were her, I wouldn’t forgive me.”

“Maybe, that’s where you start,” he offered.

I glared at him and he threw his head back and bellowed out a deep, boisterous laugh. “You want me to tell her to never forgive me?”

Alpha Wesley’s laughter died down to a chuckle before he finally sobered and offered a shrug of his shoulders as apology for the outburst. “No. I’m telling you to start from how you would feel if things were reversed and think about how to go forward to repair the breaks in your bond in a meaningful way. She has to see that you are willing to do. It will have more of an impact than you simply telling her you’re sorry or using the excuses to blow off the hurt she was left with.”

That was the advice I took from the office with me as I went in search of my mate. At least, I hoped that I would one day still be able to make her my mate. There was a good chance she would deny me. The best thing I could do for Sabine, the thing that I would want if our situations were reversed, would be to have her officially let me go, so that she could potentially find her second chance mate. I didn’t know if that was something I’d be capable of granting her, though.

CHAPTER 21



Sabine

“HOW DID IT GO?” Dee asked the minute I made my way back to the room we shared.

“There is a small, tiny, itty-bitty part of me that feels awful for him.”

“For who?” Dee reared back as if I had slapped her as she asked that question. “Not Alpha Mitchell Stormborn. Fuck that guy. Please, tell me you feel bad for Alpha Wesley for having to meet with the giant ball of slobber known as the mate in your rear-view mirror.”

The vehemence behind the words my best friend slung at me made me pull her into a hard embrace.

“Stop with the struggle hugs already,” she suggested in a distressed voice.

“You know you love it!”

Dee jabbed her finger into my ribs, forcing me to release the hold I had on her. “Damn, Dee. That hurt.”

“It’ll heal. My pride might not, though. Thank fuck no one was around to see you squeeze the absolute breath out of me.”

We both fell into a bit of a giggle fit before we collapsed side-by-side on one of the beds. Our legs both still dangled over the edge as we laid back and turned our heads to look at one another. My feet remained solidly planted on the floor while Dee’s shorter legs caused hers to hang a couple inches off the ground.

“Seriously, how can you feel bad for him after everything he put you through?”

My shoulder shrug was minimized because of my position lying flat on my back. “Think about it,” I suggested. “The man was running a pack with his arms tied behind his back and one leg lopped off. He had no reason to believe that he was leading everyone astray. That in itself means he will have a hell of a hill to climb where the pack is concerned. I’m sure running off to chase after the mate he offended on multiple levels isn’t sitting well with them either, considering the chaos the pack must be in.”

“Still, none of that explains why you feel bad for him. His family put him in that position.”

“Exactly! Between his family curse, lie, or whatever you want to call it and the influence of the Crone’s family, everything that made him a bad alpha, and a horrible potential mate, only existed because of those circumstances that were beyond his control. He could potentially lose his fated mate, his pack, and literally his whole known existence because of something that started generations ago.”

“I guess when you put it like that, it does suck. Still, I can’t forgive him because I’ve been there by your side as you’ve been the one hurt by everything.”

“You don’t think he’s hurting, too?”

Dee sighed and then groaned loudly. “Are you at least going to make him grovel some before you let your good heart and common sense prevail?”

My chuckle was sort of my answer. “Of course, he needs to prove to me that something like this will never happen again. There has to be a moment when he looks up from whatever has been thrown in front of him and questions it before he ends up buried under a bunch of lies again.”

Dee rolled her eyes. “You know, if the Winter Pack didn’t need you so badly, I’d hogtie you, throw you in my trunk, and drive us far away from here until you had enough distance that you never thought of him again.”

“I don’t think that’s possible, since he’s my moon-blessed mate, Dee.”

“Pfft, whatever,” she countered.

“Can we change the subject for a minute and talk about you instead?”

“What about me?”

“Have you had the dreams since we’ve been here?”

“Yes, but it feels like he’s further away now, if that makes sense. I felt certain that he was in the Summer Pack when we were back home. I could feel the warmth on my face in the dream and his skin was tanned, hair turned to almost golden strands at the tips. Everything about him screamed summer.”

“Maybe he’s in another country?”

Dee groaned and nabbed a pillow to growl into. “I can’t stand this. Why do we have to figure out these vague dreams, like a damn puzzle? Why can’t they come with a picture of their photo ID and an address?”

“That doesn’t seem very sporting,” I teased.

“Easy for you to say, considering your mate walked right into your business,” she argued on a pout.

“And look how knowing exactly who my mate was, and where to find him, turned out for me. I think we all have our struggles with the moon-blessed bond. Some are just a different variety of frustration than others.”

“There you go again, sounding too smart for my own good. Can I just wallow about this for a bit before you try to put things into perspective.”

“Absolutely. Wallow away. I’ll wait.”

Dee laughed. “You weren’t doing anything else anyway.”

A knock sounded on the door and the tingle that went up my spine was a good indicator of who might be on the other side.

“I can go. Maybe a run will help burn off some excess energy and then when I sleep tonight, I’ll see a piece of mail with his address on it in my dream tonight.” We both chuckled as Dee got up and moved toward the door. “I can send him away if you still need a minute, she offered.

“It’s okay.”

Dee nodded, opened the door, and slipped through while leaving it ajar for Mitchell to come through. I saw the subtle tilt of her head as she bent her neck to him in respect. Mitchell might have been on her list of people she’d like to throat punch, but he was still her Alpha.

To my surprise, Mitchell did not come into the room. He stood on the threshold, clearly on the hallway side, and waited. “Is it okay for me enter?”

“You’re the Alpha. Don’t you make the rules?”

“These are not my pack lands, and even if they were, I’m still capable of common courtesy. I realize that my ability to offer that, or a modicum of empathy for other wolves, has been sorely lacking for a while, but it is something I fully intend to rectify.”

That admission made me smile. “Come in,” I offered. “No use giving the Summer Pack more of a show than they’ve already received.”

“Actually, I was hoping you would come for a run with me. Alpha Wesley approved a little adventure on his lands.” It was good that he tacked that last bit on because it would otherwise be seen as a hostile movement for another alpha to shift in his territory. “We’ve never run together, and I thought it might help alleviate some of the tension between us before we talk about what’s in store for the future.”

“We have run together before,” I told him.

“No,” he disagreed with a shake of his head.

“I’ve lived in your pack my whole life, Alpha Stormborn. We have most assuredly run together.”

“Not like this, just the two of us, and can you please call me Mitchell. It feels like you’re off to see the principal or on a job interview when you call me by my formal title.”

My shoulders bobbed as I stood from the bed I’d been lounging on before Dee took off. Mitchell and I left my room and walked through the pack house together and ignored the curious looks we received from the Summer Pack members who lurked on the periphery watching. There was no doubt in my mind that they all knew what was going on and why I was here. Having been at the lowest rung of my pack’s ladder, I knew that nothing escaped the gossip for long.

We were almost to the forest’s edge when a female voice called out, “Alpha Mitchell!”

We both turned as a beautiful, blonde woman approached with a swing of her hips. She was putting out a sultry vibe, but

it didn't ring true, nor did the way she made my mate's title less formal without his permission. "I was hoping to speak with you about tagging along to your pack when you head back." The tone she used was flirty but the words tasted false on the air.

"What exactly are you hoping to accomplish here? By now, your entire pack knows that Sabine is my mate and also the granddaughter of your Alpha. The amount of disrespect in your approach could have you banished from both packs."

"Wait, no!" Her lip jutted out in a pout as tears welled in her eyes. "I'm sorry," she rushed out, though her apology was directed to me and not Mitchell. "I was told Alpha Mitchell would only feign interest in me if I made myself approachable. I need to get to his pack because I've had the dreams and my mate is there. We all know how they feel about fated bonds, but I have to try." The desperate tones and the real words and intentions were directed solely at me, not Mitchell. That should have been seen as further disrespect, and if he had been her Alpha, it would have been.

"Why do you now direct your concerns to my mate?" Mitchell asked, though his own voice lost most of the growl it employed moments ago.

"Sabine understands," the woman murmured.

"Check in with Alpha Wesley first. If he grants permission for you to accompany me when I go back to the Winter Pack, you are welcome to come with me." I glanced up at Mitchell

then to make sure I wasn't overstepping by offering her an in with the pack that I had run from.

"Thank you, Sabine." The woman cringed a bit. "I'm sorry for that. I was told it was the only way..." Her voice trailed off as a rumble of disapproval came from Mitchell.

"I understand. If you don't mind, we were about to go for a run," I explained before turning my back on the woman. She didn't say anything else and I stood still, listening to her footfalls and the continued rumbles coming from my mate.

"It seems I have more damage to repair than just with my pack. My apologies that the women of our world see that as the only way to approach me."

A drawn-out sigh left my lips before I turned my face up to his. "I am trying to remind myself that it is a result of circumstances that forced your behavior, but Mitchell, as much as you may have been influenced by the Crone's curse on your family and the influences of her daughter, you have to own some of that regretful behavior. Somehow, I don't think Carmella's behavior turned you into a lady's man, since she had designs on becoming your mate."

"While that's true, I think it was my Alpha blood that created that scenario."

I cocked a curious, yet disbelieving brow up at him. "Do tell," I demanded humorlessly.

"Every time I was with another female," he cringed as he acknowledged that. "It was because my wolf was always

pushing me away from *her* and toward pretty much any other female in the pack. I guess, innately, he knew that there was something not right with her. I listened, but her influence would always draw me back when she found herself near enough. When my father was still in charge, her father was his Beta – his second, so we were thrown together often enough to force the constant struggle.”

I nodded in acceptance of what he said because it made sense. Then, not wanting to hear any further details, I threw my shirt off and started to unbutton my shorts. “Let’s run first and talk after.” Taking off my clothes wasn’t strictly necessary for me when I shifted, but for some reason it was easier to bring my clothes with me when my emotions were running high. When I had too much time to think about it, things sometimes went wonky.

Mitchell’s enthusiastic grin nearly brought me to my knees. Outside of my little showdown with the crone’s brats, it had been more than a month since I’d been able to let my wolf free to do her thing, and there was a hope that in doing so, she would bring a little clarity to the situation.

By the time I removed the last of my clothes, the shift came over me immediately as I sprouted fur and dropped to four paws. My fur was a mix of grays and whites with a few darker blacks interspersed here and there. My eyes stood out brightly amidst the lighter-colored backdrop of my fur. One being an icy blue while the other was amber-hued. The total package made for a sight to see. While I also had the same heterochromia as in my human body, they were somehow

brighter and more vibrant when I transitioned to my wolf. Mitchell's wolf stood taller than my own with cream and cinnamon coloring while both of his eyes were a warm whiskey-brown, the same as the hue he possessed in his human skin.

My wolf took one look at his, huffed in indignation, and trotted off with her back to him. She knew exactly what she was doing. It was an invitation to chase and he took her up on the offer. The minute he picked up the pace to catch up to her, she took off in a sprint. When he once again stepped up his speed, she bolted into a full-out run. Her playful yips in response to feeling him take up the chase felt like laughter in our shared soul. This run was exactly what we needed. It was a balm to the wounds that had been openly festering for far too long. Our human dramas didn't apply to our wolves. They just wanted to enjoy their time running free together.

For the next hour, we chased, nipped, played, and tussled in the forest on lands belonging to the Summer Pack, my mother's pack. It was a refreshing change of pace and the first time I ever wished that we could stay in our wolf bodies forever. Everything was easier there. We were meant to be together and accepted one another despite our human bullshit.

CHAPTER 22



Mitchell

WHEN WE CAME BACK to our skin, a melancholy clung to the air around Sabine that wasn't there moments ago.

“What happened to take your smile away?” I asked as we donned our clothing.

“Sorry, it isn't you. When I glanced around one last time, it hit me that these are the same lands my mother ran in as a child. She told me so many stories about how happy she was here in this pack. There were so many stories of the Nantahala National Forest and her running free through the trees here, that it just hit me. She was at home here in these trees. In this place. This is the first time I was able to run here and it only happened after she was already gone.”

“Why did they stay in my pack if she longed to be back here?”

“At first, it was because my father was unsure whether he would be called to take over your pack,” She explained. “I think he may have done so when the birth rates dropped so dramatically, but he was lost to us before that could happen.”

“Your father was planning a coup?” I seethed, knowing it would have meant an Alpha challenge. That was the only one way to dethrone a pack alpha, outside of the usual line of succession. A challenge to the death would have been issued and it would have been done by my mate’s father.

“My father didn’t want to be alpha of the pack. His ambitions were to have a simple, happy life. It’s why he left it to your father all those years earlier when it was a possibility. Instead, he waited for his mate, my mother, to come for him. When she did, that settled things for him. He couldn’t leave. Despite her wanting to go back to her home pack, he refused. He said that there was something wrong with the Winter Pack and that someone needed to monitor the situation in case they needed to step in. As a true alpha-born wolf, he felt obliged to stay and watch over the pack from the shadows.”

“I see.” There was no hiding the anger as the words ground out from between my tightly-clenched jaws.

“He wasn’t wrong,” My mate reminded me. “Because of his love for the pack, my mother never got to go home. Because of her love for me, she lingered in excruciating pain for years to make sure I had a legacy to keep me going.”

“Why didn’t she bring you back to the Summer Pack after losing your father?”

“I told her my dreams were always of winter and snow. Mom said that meant I was right where I needed to be.”

“She was a good woman.”

“The best,” Sabine agreed wistfully.

“At the risk of sounding presumptuous, you said that woman who approached us earlier could go back to the Winter Pack with you. Does that mean you’re planning to come back and...” I trailed off there unable to tack on any bits about our potential mating. Unfortunately, Sabine wouldn’t let it rest and a taunting little smirk pulled her lips up at the corners.

“And?” She asked innocently, even as her facial expression told a different story.

“Okay, I was going to ease into this, but you seem to want to dive headfirst into the complications we’ve faced.” She rolled her eyes at my assessments. “Learning the truth helped me put everything into perspective. Being away from Carmella helped as well. Being away from my pack has put a distance between me and all of those circles of influence that have unnaturally changed my outlook.”

“And what exactly is your outlook these days?”

“I want my mate. I want you. We were fated to be together and if not for those outliers that influenced my decisions, we most likely would have fallen right into one another’s arms

that first night and not come up for air.” Once again, she rolled her eyes.

“You didn’t seem to have any problem keeping your distance.”

“That’s not true. I couldn’t take my eyes off you from the moment I walked into your bakery. I even touched you, knowing somewhere deep in my soul – in that place where my wolf lies in wait until he can come up to the surface again, that it was beyond me to stop myself from doing so.”

“Still, you walked away that day. Then, you proceeded to ruin my reputation and my business.” Her brows curved up again with a haughty look thrown my way. I deserved every bit of her ire, but that didn’t mean we had to be stuck in that place where she hated me, even if she had good reason to do so.

“Sabine,” I started but her name on my lips made her chuckle.

“At least you know that much now,” she teased. I was relieved to hear the tone was true. She hadn’t said it in anger or with any venom to her words. Still, a blush burned across my cheeks with the memory of being unable to answer her the night she asked me if I even knew her name.

“Yes, I am capable of learning from my mistakes.”

“That’s good to know, though I already figured that out or we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“What do you mean?”

She smiled and the warmth that bled out through her multi-hued eyes captivated me. “You’re here. You came after me when I left. That says more about you than most of the things you did while under the influence of lies and magic.”

“Can you ever forgive me?” I questioned.

“I don’t think it’s necessary to forgive you, but that doesn’t mean I won’t still have to get a handle on my emotions.” She must have seen the puzzled look on my face because she answered my unasked question before I could even form the words. “Even though your actions hurt me, I’d be an idiot to not consider the fact that your actions were guided by forces beyond your control.”

“Sorry,” I apologized sheepishly. “I’m having a hard time imagining you being so understanding. I don’t want to look a gift horse in the mouth either, but...”

She giggled then sat on the cool grass in the shade of a copse of tall maples. When she patted the ground beside her, I took up the offered position and waited. “If I were kidnapped and raped by an opposing force, in the hopes that doing so would keep you away from me, would you refuse our bond?”

I shook my head in the negative even as anger boiled my blood at the thought. “That wouldn’t be your fault and anyone who dared would be dead.”

Sabine smiled at me.

“And if someone manipulated me into denying our bond, and made me believe there was no such thing, would you hold

that against me?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you can see why I’m not holding it against you. I do require patience, because despite knowing there were mitigating circumstance in the way you treated me, my memories of those awful moments dealing with you aren’t easily dismissed. There is a scar on my heart for each moment I felt let down by you. Whether it was to deny the possibility of our bond, or your intimacy with someone else... Even though there was a reason those things happened that was beyond your control, I can’t erase the way they battered my heart.”

“What do you suggest we do to remedy that situation?”

“We live,” she offered with a shrug.

“Come again?”

Her smile made warmth bloom from the center of my chest before she tipped her head to the side and rested it against my shoulder. Sabine picked up my hand and laced our fingers together. “We live and build new memories to overwrite the old ones. We give the old ones time to fade into the shadows of happier times.”

A whoosh of air left my lungs on a surprised gasp. “Is it really that simple?”

“It’s that simple and that difficult,” she answered. “I don’t want to run from my destiny. If we break our bond, the Crone wins. Instead, we need to do whatever is possible to strengthen

it. For our pack, for one another, and also for the sweetest kind of revenge possible.”

“How is it possible that you’re this perfect?”

“I’m not perfect, Mitchell. I’m perfect for you.”

“One day soon, I hope you’ll think I’m perfect for you, too. I’ll earn that place in your heart and mind.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” We both flopped back on the grass and lie there side-by-side soaking up the sun that is still fighting its way through the tree branches to reach the ground. Soon, the light will fall behind the mountain and be lost to us, but even then, I wouldn’t mind lying right here beside Sabine until the moon’s beams could find us, too.

Sabine turned on her side to face me and I mirrored her movement. After a few minutes of staring at one another and me cataloging each and every freckle spread across the bridge of her nose, she sighed out this beautiful little sound of contentment. I wanted to roll in that sound and wrap it around myself like a security blanket for the moments when her heart ached and I couldn’t bear to see it happen.

Sabine reached over and ran her fingers lightly over the stubble that had formed along my jaw, growing thicker as the day waned. When her trembling fingers ran across my lower lip, tracing it as her eyes tracked the movement, I inhaled deeply and kissed the tips of those fingers.

My mate’s gaze slid lazily up from my mouth to meet my eyes. Her fingers slid from my lip to the other side of my jaw,

across the tips of my ears, and then she buried them in my too-long locks that should have been trimmed weeks ago. Thankfully, she didn't seem to mind the overgrown, slightly unkempt look.

“Sometimes, I think maybe I'm crazy for entertaining this idea.”

“What idea is that?” I asked.

“Making love to you in this forest,” she admitted. A blush stole up her chest and neck and burned hot into her cheeks before slipping away again.

“We're not exactly in the forest anymore,” I reminded her. I tapped into my wolf's ears and listened intently to make sure we were alone anyway. There was no way I could pass up the chance if she said to hell with it and wanted to secure our bond right here and now.

“I want to be closer to you, but I don't think I'm ready to...” Her hesitation was like a sucker punch, but there was no way she was going to see my disappointment.

“Ready to?” I questioned instead, even though I was pretty sure where she was going with that train of thought.

“I'm not ready to fully bond with you. Not yet.” Her fingers found their way back down to my lips and over the point of my chin until they trailed down my neck. “Do you think you can keep your teeth to yourself?”

“You are in charge, Sabine.”

“I need your word,” she insisted.

“You have my word that I will not claim you today even if you beg me to do so in throws of passion.”

“I’m trusting you.” Those three words were a whisper on the wind before she leaned forward and placed her lips tentatively against my own. I understood why all the girly fairytales claimed a kiss from a prince could bring the girl back to life. A kiss from Sabine could have cured whatever damage the crone had done. Of that, I had no doubt. Little explosions of pleasure ebbed and flowed through my veins causing my flesh to break out in tiny little bumps as frissons of pure joy left me wondering if I could keep my promise.

All I wanted in that moment was to make her mine, to complete the bond, to do what needed to be done. It wasn’t possible, though. She trusted me with this and I had to prove myself to her even if it cost me my fucking sanity in the end.

Despite putting our clothes back on only moments ago, they were shucked off again just as fast. There was no rhyme or reason in how we managed to keep our lips locked as long as we did while divesting ourselves of everything we wore, but we managed.

“You are so beautiful,” I whispered against Sabine’s mouth.

Her half grin was full of amusement. “You haven’t even glanced down at my body since I took my clothes back off.”

“Doesn’t matter, I’m not even talking about your body, though that’s delightful, too. I got an eyeful earlier. I’m talking about you. Inside and out, Sabine. You shine with all the goodness, poise, and strength you carry. It’s intoxicating.”

It was my turn to trail my fingers along her warm skin. She was so smooth everywhere. I couldn't get enough of her silky skin or trying to connect all the dots that were strung along her collar bone and shoulders. "It's like looking at my favorite constellation."

Her responding giggle was music to my ears. "You're comparing my freckles to the stars?"

"Freckles to the stars, your beauty to that of a goddess, your heart is incomparable though."

"You realize we're already laying down, so you don't get points for making the girl swoon?" She was teasing because the compliments made her the slightest bit uncomfortable or off balance. It was something that my sweet mate would have to get used to. The haze of horrors that had been left behind when I was in proximity to the crone and her family was long gone. Everything was clear to me now. This woman was impossible to miss when magic wasn't clouding my view.

"I need you," She groaned as my fingers fluttered across the tips of her breasts. I flicked her nipple then pinched before moving on to the next. "More," she demanded just as I bent to take the succulent peak into my mouth. I worked it with my tongue and then sucked and nipped until my beautiful woman writhed beneath me.

My body became a shield, blocking anyone who might potentially stumble upon us as I trailed my fingers down her torso and dipped them inside her wet heat. Sabine was on fire and bucked up to meet my thrust. The liquid squelch the

movement made proved just how ready she was to take me. My thumb slid in languid circles around her hard clit, driving her to the point of no return. Still, I laved her nipples with my tongue while plunging two fingers in and out of her sweet pussy at a sedate pace. The scent of her arousal, earthy and sweet, was intoxicating.

Everything felt surreal, as if this woman laid out before me like a gods-damned buffet had me under her spell. “Can you handle more?” I asked so gruffly that my voice was damn near unrecognizable.

“I want everything,” she demanded in a husky tone that spoke of her own arousal.

“Then that’s exactly what I’ll give you.” It was another promise, whether Sabine realized it or not. I would try to give her the world if I could. I owed her that and so much more. She deserved the moon and stars and eternity to enjoy them.

I hunched in and lined my cock up with her slick entrance. The heat burning off her body there was indescribable. “So fucking hot, beautiful.”

“You’re not so bad either,” she tossed back breathily. I chuckled and the motion of my body forced my cock a little deeper in her pussy. Sabine wasn’t having my slow-motion entry. She grabbed hold of my ass and dug her claws in a bit to make a point as she pulled my body into her own. “More, Mitchell.”

A shiver ran down my spine as my mate called out my name. “Need all of you in me,” she begged. My teeth ached to sink

into the delicate skin on her neck. She needed to wear my claiming mark just as badly as I needed to wear hers. I promised, though. I tucked my forehead into the space instead and glanced down between the tiny bit of space between our bodies where I could see my cock sliding in and out of her super-heated cunt.

“Fucking hell, you are amazing,” I growled as her pussy clenched so tightly to my cock that I should have been worried about the damage she might do. Her inner walls fluttered as leaned in and harder and ran my pubic bone over her clit with each downward thrust.

“Yes, please, don’t stop!”

“Didn’t plan on it.”

“Mitchell, please, need all of you,” she begged again.

“I promised, Sabine.”

“It would feel so good,” she hummed against the skin of my neck before tormenting me with a slow scrape of her teeth.

“Woman, I made a promise,” I reminded her again.

“Mitchell!” She cried out my name as I picked up the pace and slammed even harder into her pussy. Sabine nearly broke the skin on the next thrust, and I had to do something before we both did something she might regret.

I pulled out and picked Sabine up and flipped her over until she was up on all fours. I slammed back into her before she could even work a protest onto her lips. “Now, you can keep your teeth to yourself and avoid temptation.”

Sabine let her hair fall to the side and flicked her neck a little to make it all trail down in a waterfall of thick locks in such a way that the left side of her neck was exposed to me. Then, the little tease tipped her head just to the side enough to leave her neck looking like the tempting morsel that it was.

I spanked her ass in response and watched my hand print appear as a red palm and fingers burning my brand into her ass temporarily.

She moaned. “What was that for?”

“You’re being a bad girl, Sabine.”

“Do bad girls get punished?” She asked on a huff.

“Bad girls get spanked. Good girls get bitten.”

“You promised.”

“I promised I wouldn’t do it this time. No one said anything about the next time I get you naked and underneath me.”

My mate moaned again as my strokes became more demanding. With each determined thrust, she pushed back into me equally as hard, setting a brutal pace where our bodies met at the optimal angle and with just the right amount of force.

A snapping twig somewhere in the distance alerted me to the fact that we didn’t have a lot of time before someone discovered what we were up to out here. It wasn’t unusual to see two shifters fucking out in the open. We spent so much time in our skins after shifts that not many had qualms about public displays. Still, it wasn’t what I wanted for mine and Sabine’s first time. I picked up the pace and leaned over her

back to stretch my arm around her. Once I was wrapped just right, my fingers traced her hard nub and started circling it with renewed interest while not missing a single snap of my hips.

Before long, Sabine's inner walls began to flutter around my cock again as her keening wails of pleasure picked up. Her body rocked harder into my mine, even though I would have sworn it couldn't be possible to go harder. The hand that wasn't wrapped around her body playing with her clit was anchored on her hip, digging in, hanging on, and driving us both together in a punishing movement that would leave marks behind for a little while. Thankfully, we healed rather quickly. I smirked at the real reason I was thankful for that. I grabbed on tighter to her hip and leaned forward again to whisper in her ear. "As soon as these marks fade from your body, I'm going to add new ones. I'll keep doing that until you relent and let me mark you with my fangs."

"Yes, mark me. Bite me!" Her demand nearly made me buckle under the pressure. There was nothing I wanted more than to mark my mate, cum in her sweet pussy, and knock her fine ass up with our very own pup. Sabine's pussy fluttered hot and went against my cock once more as she moaned out yet another climax, triggering my own. Hot jets of cum painted her insides with my essence and I could only hope that the next time we joined like this, we did so as true, claimed mates.

We sat quietly in the afterglow for a few minutes before Sabine finally spoke again. "We should probably get back. You need to speak with my grandfather about opening mating

relations between the packs. The Winter Wolves need more pups and we need to be open to more potential mates coming in to help the pack grow naturally.”

“Like I said earlier, you’re perfect, and I’m hoping you’ll help me out, in a personal way, to bring more pups into the pack.” I leaned in and placed a kiss on the top of her head before helping my mate up and handing her clothing to her once more. We dressed and then walked hand-in-hand back to the Summer Pack’s pack house and for the first time in so long that I couldn’t remember, I felt hopeful for the future.

CHAPTER 23



Sabine

THERE WAS A PART of me that wanted to stay longer. My grandfather's pack had been welcoming and kind to Dee and me. There was also the link to my mother, who I had been missing. Being here, despite having never been here with her, made me feel closer to Mom. All those stories she told me of her childhood seemed to have new life breathed into them as I wandered the wooded lands. The pack's infrastructure may have changed some since she had been there, but the forest remained the same pristine place teeming with life and beauty as when my mother had frolicked here.

I took another deep breath as Dee joined me at the forest's edge. "You're going to miss this place, huh?"

“I’m going to miss you most. Are you sure you want to stay?”

Dee’s somber eyes met mine as I turned to face her. “There’s this feeling,” she placed her hand over where her heart was located in her chest and rubbed there as if something ached inside. “I need to be here for a little longer. Alpha Wesley has given me three months to make a decision to move on and try to find my mate elsewhere, go back to the Winter Pack, or stay here and become a member of the Summer Pack.”

My heart hurt at the last option because it meant that she would never return. While we could still visit one another, life would not be the same without my best friend by my side. I pulled her into a hug, and after a moment, we both reluctantly let go.

“I don’t want to leave you,” I admitted.

“Me either. If there was any other way…” Her words trailed off.

“Don’t apologize to me for trying to find your other half. If anyone understands that pull, despite the obstacles thrown in the way, it’s definitely me.”

“Are you sure about bonding with him?”

I shrugged. “I’m still torn on making it official. We have time to get to know one another and work things out before we take that step. For now, it’s not fair to the rest of the pack to keep their Alpha away when there is so much turmoil and change happening.”

Dee chuckled. “I wonder how many of the chosen couples are ready to gnaw off their own arms to get away from the person they chose?”

“It won’t matter if they do. Their fated mates were given a second chance with someone else the minute they decided to bond with a chosen mate instead of their moon-blessed.”

“I can sort of understand the males doing it and going along with the ‘there’s no such thing as fated mates’ rhetoric, but how did the females do it?” Dee asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You had the dreams of your mate. They’re like a driving force that can’t be ignored. How did they turn that off?”

That was something worth pondering. “It makes me wonder how strong the crone’s influence was over the pack as a whole.”

“If one crone was able to do that, and hold everyone under that belief for that long before her children came along...” Dee shuddered before she could say more.

“It is a scary notion,” I admitted. I took in my friend’s beauty once more. Whoever her mate was, he would be a lucky man to have her in his life. I just hoped that whoever he turned out to be, he appreciated her and treated her well. Dee deserved nothing less than happiness.

“I heard you’re taking a female back with you,” Dee murmured.

“Yes, that’s true.”

“I also heard she tried to come on to our Alpha in front of you.”

“That was true, too. Though, she apologized. It’s probably good that she did because I think it made it clear to Mitchell that damage done to his reputation was far-reaching. It’s something he is going to have to work to overcome because not many know about the crone and her children. Even if they do find out, it’s hard to understand the impact one can have unless you’ve seen it firsthand.”

“Don’t we know it!” Dee agreed dramatically. “At least I can rest easy knowing that they’ve all been taken care of.” She huffed then. “Just because those bitches are no longer under her thrall doesn’t mean you can replace me as your best friend.”

“There is no one who could possibly take that position, no matter where you find yourself settling in this world, we will always be the best of friends.”

“We’re almost ready,” a voice called out and I turned to see Mitchell standing a few feet away. His wan smile gave away his fear that I might not want to leave after saying my goodbyes to my bestie.

“Hey, if things work out and you become Luna, you could always change the bakery name to Luna Cakes and capitalize on that to make your comeback.”

That thought startled me because I hadn’t even imagined what would happen with the bakery when I returned. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I teased as I brushed yet another complication to

the back of my mind for now. Everything would work out the way it was meant to.



THE TRIP BACK TO Michigan took a little over thirteen hours. That was three hours more than the GPS told us it would take. I glared into the backseat where the she-wolf we brought with us looked absolutely peaceful in her restful slumber. She had been the reason for all the extended stops for a bathroom break that turned into souvenir shopping at every truck stop we pulled into for gas along the way. My patience had worn thin on the third stop when she couldn't decide between shot glasses or t-shirts to commemorate being in whatever state we were passing through at the time.

Mitchell had laughed at me and said it was good training for when I took over the duties of Luna of the pack from his mother. It made me nervous to think about holding that position when all I wanted to do was throttle the woman. Unmated females in the Summer Pack were not allowed to travel far beyond the pack's borders without heavy escort because there were concerns of them being snatched by rogue shifters or worse. That was why she wanted to document every single stop on our trip with a purchase and pictures. So. Many. Pictures.

My head ached from holding in the screams by the time we crossed the state line and headed into Michigan. We only had an hour left of our journey and then we would be back in the

Winter Pack's territory. Being so close to home should have felt better than it did. Instead, a ball of dread settled like a lead weight in my belly. I wouldn't have Dee here to keep me sane this time. There was also the issue that if things didn't work out, someone might anticipate me running again and stop me before I was able to take a single breath outside of the pack's territory.

That was a bit defeatist of me, but I'd be an idiot not to worry about all the possible outcomes of me being back. My mom's advice was always to hope for the best but prepare for the worst, so that I would never be caught off guard. I'd been caught off guard a few times too many since having the dreams of my moon-blessed mate. I wasn't willing to be so unprepared for consequences again.

When we passed my side of town, I finally spoke up. "I really need for you to turn around and drop me off at my place."

Mitchell shook his head. "No can do, beautiful."

"Mitchell," I yawned before I could get anything else out. He waited patiently. "I'm exhausted. The last thirteen hours have felt more like twenty and it should have only taken ten for us to get back here."

My mate chuckled and gave the rearview mirror a side eye before turning his attention back to the road and leaning over to take my left hand in his right. "While I appreciate you wanting to get settled back into things, we have an unmated female belonging to the Summer Pack with us. In order to do

right by her and by you, I need you to stick this out with me. We can get a room ready for you at the main house for the night, but I need you with me until we figure out what to do with April.”

“Now I know I’m tired because I never even thought about it like that. What did you do in situations like this before I was around?”

“There were never situations like this before you were around. Remember? Our pack didn’t believe in fated mates before. Plus, it wouldn’t have mattered how things looked before I had a mate, and especially before I even believed having fated one was possible.”

I nodded my head but continued to stare straight out the windshield in front of me. There wasn’t much to see beyond darkened streets and the occasional leaf blowing across the street. The temperature had dropped at least twenty degrees since we left Georgia, but as night fell around us, it grew even colder.

“I think winter is going to be an exceptional bitch this year,” I muttered as a shiver ran through my body.

“Missing the Summer Pack already?” Mitchell teased.

“Missing Dee, warmth, and peace and quiet for sure,” I tossed back with a little wink. There was a chance that he didn’t catch my teasing gesture, since he was paying attention to his driving. “How is this going to work out?”

“What do you mean?”

I brushed my free hand back and forth between us. “This. We have a bond, but we aren’t officially mated. How does this work from here on out?”

“I don’t know, Sabine. That’s something I think we both need clear heads to figure out, so maybe we can table that discussion for breakfast after we get some solid sleep. This trip has us both worn out.”

As if to add her two cents, April snorted out a growly little snore, smacked her lips a couple times, and turned over on the back seat to cozy in on her other side. My eye roll made Mitchell laugh. “That will be you soon enough.”

“I don’t snore, so probably not.”

Mitchell looked like he was about to come back with a comment, but ended up yawning wide and clamping down on the hand that held mine tight. His yawn triggered another from me and before I knew it, we were both giggling. “Honestly, you might be hard pressed to get me out of this car. I’m not sure my legs will even work at this point.”

“You could have napped,” he reminded me.

“I know, but at the risk of sounding a little too much like Sleeping Beauty back there, I’ve only ever been away from the territory once as an adult and I was a bit too upset when I headed to Georgia to pay much attention to anything. I didn’t want to miss the scenery.”

“There hasn’t been much to see since the sun went down,” he pointed out in what seemed like avoidance of the fact that

I'd been so upset when I left the pack.

“That’s true. At that point, we were too close to home and my anticipation outweighed the need for sleep.” Another yawn crept up on me as I finished that sentence, making a mockery of my words.

“I get it. I’m dead tired and even if you had been driving, I would have still had my eyes peeled open.”

We were both quiet for the remainder of the drive, fighting off yawns, and trying not to overthink things. At least, on my end, that was the case. Mitchell never let go of my hand the entire way until we pulled into the driveway of the Alpha family’s house. He glanced up and sighed before drawing his hands down his face in frustration. The place forced an instant chill to work its way through my body. If I could, I would burn the house down along with all the vile memories and wrongness of the past few generations, but that wasn’t up to me.

“I really liked the way Alpha Wesley had the pack house set up for all the unmated members of the pack. It keeps everyone close, so that finding mates who live in the pack is easier. I’m not sure something like that would work for us, since everyone is so used to being out and about on their own now.” Maybe, Mitchell was also ready to burn his family home to the ground.

“I think you’d be surprised,” I muttered, taking the high road and not discussing it. “Plus, it might help you to put all the single pack members under one roof and realize that your ranking structure is really very far off the mark from what it

should be. Some of your strongest members are sitting at the bottom right now, and that does no one any good.”

“You mentioned that before. How are you so certain of that?”

I chuckled lightly. “I know the people at the bottom of the ranking. I don’t just know them in passing. I know their struggles, the things they have been through, the way they battle every day for survival. That kind of strength and fortitude always wins out over the pampered and entitled lot you have fooling around at the top. The ranking fights they engage in are with other soft wolves who haven’t had to try very hard at anything in life. I guarantee if push came to shove, they would give up at the first challenge.” At his skeptical look my shoulders bounced in an indifferent gesture. “Some of them might find their determination, but most would bow out the minute they actually had to try simply because they’re not used to having to do so.”

“That is one of those things I want your help with. We need to get this pack sorted properly.” He groaned. “I wasn’t able to do it yet, since I had to go after you, but I think it needs to be done as soon as possible. There are already whispers of Alpha challenges coming my way from outside the pack. It’s something we need to prepare for.”

I nodded and opened my door as soon as Mitchell shut the car off. “April!” I yelled, and there might have been a little too much glee in my voice as I did so. The female wolf startled,

jumped up, and bumped her head on the roof of the car as she did.

“Ouch! Why did you yell like that?”

“We’re here. You need to get up and gather your things.” I glanced down at the garbage the woman managed to accumulate at her feet as well. “And you need to make sure you clear your trash up while you do that.”

“Can’t someone else do it in the morning? I’m exhausted,” she pouted.

“You’ve been asleep for the past four hours of the trip. You will gather your trash and your belongings before you get out of this car or you can sleep here tonight,” I threatened even though it wasn’t my place.

April glared at me and then shifted her attention to Mitchell. “Is she allowed to talk to me like that?”

“She is my future mate, the future Luna of this pack, and the granddaughter of your Alpha Wesley, and heir the only Alpha Heir of the Summer Pack. You’re damn right she’s allowed to motivate you. I suggest you take her words to heart. From now until the end of your time with our pack, you will show Sabine the utmost respect or your stay here will be a short one. We aren’t a divorced couple whose emotions you can play up and beg one while the other says, ‘No’ to you.”

April bent her neck and appeared contrite as Mitchell put her in her place. “You good?” He asked me then.

“I’ll be good after I get some sleep.” It was nothing less than the truth.

CHAPTER 24



Mitchell

AFTER GETTING BOTH SABINE and April sorted with a room for the night, Sabine's being next door to my own and April's in another wing of the house, I couldn't get to sleep. My thoughts returned to my mate over and over again. It didn't feel right for her to be sleeping somewhere else, even a room away from me. She should have been in my arms.

Despite our intimacy after that run in the Summer Pack, we still had a lot to work out and I had a promise to keep to Sabine. It would be impossible not to roll over and simply take what I wanted if I woke up groggy with her in my bed. It was little solace to my mind, though. Every time I closed my eyes, a different scenario would play out. In some of them, she allowed me to claim her. In others, she rebuffed me and said

that she was better with no mate than attached to someone like me. The truly awful part about the little dreams – sometimes nightmares – was that I couldn't differentiate between reality and dream. I had treated her awfully before, and whether there was a curse, crone interference, or what, I felt as Alpha of the Winter Pack, I should have been immune to it all somehow. It shouldn't have happened the way it did in reality, so of course it was hard to tell the difference between my nightmares and the world we lived in.

Eventually, I found solid sleep. It wasn't for long, though.

I startled awake after dreaming that Carmella was in the room with me. She had been naked and taunting Sabine who stood there staring at me as if I set everything into motion. My heart raced as if I'd been running after deer to take down in a pack hunt. The damn dream felt so real that I sought out my father, so that I could see proof of Carmella's demise. A sick, twisting feeling burned through my gut at the thought. What if there was no proof? Could I believe that the job had been done without it? No, that would be impossible after seeing how easily our pack had been by the crone's magic.

Sabine happened to be sitting in the kitchen with my parents when I found them. "Morning," I called out to everyone.

"Is everything okay?" My mate asked, and I swear the same disapproving look she gave me in the dream was etched upon her face. I started to tell her that everything was fine, but she had done me the courtesy of coming back to the pack to see if

we could make a go of things. The least I could do is give her the truth.

“Honestly, I came to find my dad because I need to see proof that Carmella and her brother were disposed of the way I was told.”

“Was she in your dream last night?” Sabine asked curiously.

“Yes.” My agreement was both hesitant and questioning.

“Mine too,” she informed me. At that point, we shared the details of the dream and they were nearly identical.

“That can’t be a good sign,” my father stated.

“No, it can’t. Now, more than ever, I need to see the proof of what was done.”

“There isn’t much to see as they were both reduced to ash,” my mother explained.

“Something isn’t right. Are you telling me that no one thought to record the end of those two, so that we would have a record of what they’re capable of and what needed to be done to rid the world of a crone’s spawn?” I huffed when they both simply stared at me. “The cells have video feeds running constantly. I want to watch those feeds.”

“Of course.” My father tossed back the rest of his coffee and got up to lead the way to our security room where the camera feeds and backups were housed. I didn’t realize Sabine had followed along as well, but once I was aware of her walking almost at my side, I grabbed hold of her hand and held on tight.

“What are you doing?” She asked hesitantly.

“I know you’re still unsure about where we stand or how things will work out for us in the future, but right now, I think we’re stronger together as a united front.” To my surprise, Sabine nodded her head and squeezed her fingers where they interlocked with my own.

“The room I slept in last night was very cold,” she whispered. “Unnaturally cold,” she tacked on before turning worried eyes up to mine. It was always a little mesmerizing to stare into those mismatched eyes because they were so very different from one another.

“I didn’t notice an issue with the temperature before I drifted off, but after that drive, and getting my mind to shut down, I was dead to the world.”

“I don’t think Carmella was really killed.”

I glanced back at Sabine after that admission. “Not sure how that mistake could be possible, but we’ll see for ourselves very soon.”

“Maybe,” she rushed out in a hushed tone.

“What are you thinking?”

“Carmella spent a lot of time in this house. Her father was the old Alpha’s right-hand man. She would know where the security room was. If she’s free, and not dead, I don’t think you’ll find any evidence of it. Then again, she didn’t seem to be half as intelligent as her mother, so maybe she simply

forgot to cover her tracks.” Sabine shrugged, but our entire party had stopped walking as she explained her concerns.

“Son of a bitch,” my dad hissed before he took off running the rest of the way to the security suite.

Once we all got there, it was secure as always. That didn’t mean anything. A smart person would make sure everything appeared normal. While I never took Carmella as the smartest crayon in the box, it was obvious that she excelled at deception and covering her tracks. Her anger over Sabine proving to me that she was indeed my mate was what made her lose her shit enough to scream the truth, or at least part of it, at me.

My dad quickly queued up the video from the cells the day the crone’s children were sentenced to die. He then backed it all the way up to when someone was down in the cells with the siblings.

“No one was supposed to be down there,” I insisted.

“There shouldn’t have been anyone,” my dad agreed.

He zoomed in on the feed and everyone in the room took a sharp inhale of breath. “How the hell did he even gain access to the house, let alone the cells?” I yelled.

“Shhh.” Sabine rubbed my arm in a comforting gesture while trying to silence me. “What’s done has already been done. Let’s listen to what happened and maybe that will give you the answers rather than shouting to a room full of people who are clearly as stunned as you are.”

I didn't miss the sound of my mother snickering from her position just to the left of my father. He turned the volume up before I could say anything to her.



“YOU ARE BOTH AN abomination,” Carmichael Woodsong yelled at the beings he was led to believe were his children.

“I’m a wolf shifter just like you,” Jeremiah tried to reason with his father. Carmichael laughed.

“No. If that were the case, these particular cells wouldn’t have held you through the full moon.” He reached forward and touched the bars without showing an ounce of pain. “These bars are iron. There isn’t an ounce of silver in them, and yet you burn when you touch them.”

The younger man growled in defiance of his supposed father’s words, though that was all he could do as the magics on the cells held them back from shifting or performing magic. At least, they were supposed to do so, but we had seen that whatever magic had worked on them previously was starting to wear off.

“If I’m not a shifter, then how am I even your son?”

“You’re not,” Carmichael stated and none of us missed the sadness that echoed in his voice. “I have no blood-born children. You are the amalgamation of the crone and a faeling. There is no other possibility.”

“Fae are a myth,” Carmella snorted from her cell.

“So were wolf shifters for ages until we no longer were,” Carmichael threw back at her. “You are both changelings. Not sure how the crone convinced one to lie with her and create the two of you, but it’s the only explanation that fits.” The man tapped the bars again. “Iron burns you. Iron does not burn witches and crones. It burns the Fae. That’s why they no longer come to our world, at least not the bigger, industrialized cities. Too much of the stuff in the area, even if they are careful not to touch it, all the iron construction weakens them. It makes them sick. That’s part of the reason you can’t get your magic to work inside these cells.”

“The changeling who helped sire you is still out there, and my pack will hunt him down and bring him to justice right along with the two of you.”

Carmella started to laugh then. She threw her head back and laughed so boisterously that it looked as though it must hurt. “You are a fool.”

“I was a fool, under the influence of a crone who stole the most important years of my life. She stole my moon-blessed mate from me and any chance we had at a life together.” He shook his head. “I should have known when she gave birth to two children in a chosen mating. It’s just not possible.”

“You were a fool all right. Still are,” Carmella hissed at him. She stood very close to the bars but made sure not to come into contact with them. Jeremiah sat on his butt in the middle of his cell and stared at the man. It wasn’t lost on me that the

boy had been named for my three-times great grandfather who first had to deal with the crone.

“You were always my father. I never knew differently until I was thrown in here with her,” the man stated as he hitched a thumb sideways indicating his sister. “You weren’t the only fool.”

“Men are so stupid. You’re lucky you inherited the Fae changeling abilities, otherwise you would have been a complete dud,” Carmella taunted her brother.

“What was your plan?” Carmichael asked the woman.

“Like I’d tell you.” She scoffed at him before a wicked grin bloomed on her face. “My plan isn’t over yet, Daddy dearest. Now, go fetch Gemma for me, Daddy.” There was something about the way she spoke, especially when she used that word, ‘Daddy’ that didn’t sit right. Her words made the air around them shimmer. To all of our surprise, Carmichael Woodsong turned as if he was a marionette and someone was pulling his strings. Then, he marched out of view of the cameras, presumably to go get Gemma. She was one of the four females who had caused a scene at the pack meeting I held when Sabine disappeared.

“That isn’t good.”

“No, it’s not,” I agreed with my future mate.

Before too long we all watched as Carmichael came back and brought an angry and uncooperative Gemma with him. “I don’t want to see your stupid kids. They’re little crone

minions,” Gemma complained. Carmichael never said a word to her and only continued to walk her to the cells in that stiff way that made me think he was trying to fight whatever compulsion made him move and obey Carmella’s commands in the first place.

“How in the hell does she have that kind of power over him from inside that cell?” I asked.

Sabine stood beside me with her cell phone out. I didn’t even have to ask who she was contacting. “My door is always open; do I need to send someone for you?” We all heard Alpha Wesley’s voice boom through the phone. Sabine chuckled as everyone else looked on and my father paused the security video feed.

“No. We have a huge problem here.” She started explaining the situation, complete with the dream she and I shared early this morning up until what we just saw on the security tape.

“Switch me to video and point the camera at the video feed, so I can see it as well,” Alpha Wesley ordered his granddaughter who obliged immediately. “You say these children are a Fae and Crone hybrid?”

“That’s what Carmichael Woodsong surmised. He said they were born from a changeling.”

“I didn’t think any of those creatures willingly came anywhere near places inhabited by shifters.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” I asked.

“They’re allergic to a wolf bite, but not in the traditional sense of an allergy. A wolf bite, and it’s postulated that a vampire bite will do the same, can render the changeling’s disguise obsolete. They will be pushed into their true form and won’t be able to pull their glamour back around themselves until the venom from the bite has run its course.”

“We don’t have venom in our bites,” I argued.

“Not to others of our kind or humans. Your bite is toxic to vampires and it also causes problems for some Fae.” Everyone was silent as they absorbed that fact, then Alpha Wesley blew us away. “That’s the reason we had so much trouble with the humans when our kind came out to them. They were still operating under the myth that a shifter could change them into a feral, half-human, half-wolf beast with a simple bite.” The elder Alpha chuckled before he continued. “Once upon a time, some human must have seen a shifter bite a Fae, and that creature just happened to be a beastly canine-looking being.”

“Why the fuck are we just hearing about Crones, Fae, and fucking Changelings?” I yelled in frustration.

Alpha Wesley sighed. “That is something you should take up with the council.”

“That sounds like a nice way of saying someone else was hiding the truth that is now creating major chaos for my fucking pack.”

“You’re not wrong,” Alpha Wesley stated. “Shall we watch the rest of your video feed, so we know exactly what you might be facing?”

We all watched as Carmichael pulled Gemma close to the bars and then Jeremiah shot up and yelled a warning that sent chills up my back. “Don’t let them touch!”

It was too late. Something happened on screen. Carmichael and Gemma both went completely rigid and quiet as Carmella’s hand came into contact with Gemma’s face. Something must have gone wrong, though. Gemma and Carmichael both lost their rigid stances and fell to the ground unconscious as Jeremiah started to laugh hysterically from his cell.

“Dumb bitch. I told you not to let them touch.”

Dad paused the feed and we all glanced around at once another. From the looks on their faces, they were all just as sickened by the turn of events as I was. Dad hit play again and we watched as Carmella’s body came back around and immediately started screaming while staring at the bodies on the ground on the other side of the cell.

“How am I in here?” She screeched.

“Shut the fuck up!” Jeremiah yelled at her. “Sister dear, whose body did you end up in?” Jeremiah asked in a sing-song voice. “I need you to scoot the other one closer so I can...”

Both bodies that had previously fallen prone to the floor sat up and that was when the screaming started. Eventually, it dimmed when Carmichael balled his fist up and punched Gemma in the face with all he was worth. Her scream immediately stopped as her body slumped back down into a ball on the floor.

Jeremiah started laughing again. “I told you not to let them touch. You shot straight through that silly twar and into dear old step daddy.” He tipped his head in the direction of Gemma’s prone form. “Push her over here. I don’t mind being inside her again.” The idiot chortled like it was the funniest thing he’d ever said.

“You know what, little brother?” Carmichael’s voice asked. “I don’t think I will. In fact, I think I’ll make sure you never leave this cell again.” Then his gaze turned on Carmella’s body inside the cell. She had moved closer and was staring in what looked like disbelief. That made for two of us as my brain worked to put together what I’d seen.

“Did they...?” I started to ask, but Sabine beat me to it.

“They swapped bodies, didn’t they?” She asked just as we watched Carmella’s hand shoot through the bars without being hurt by the iron. Her hand caught on Carmichael’s and held tightly. When she pulled their skin to the bars, it started burning Carmichael’s hand on touch.

“They did swap bodies. How else would you explain that reaction in him and not her all of a sudden?” I asked as Jeremiah continued to laugh. Carmichael and Carmella both fell to the ground after a shimmer ran through the air. His groan could be heard just as Carmella reached through and took hold of Gemma’s hand as her own burned. There was another shimmer and then before anyone could mutter another word, Gemma’s body rose up from the ground in a flash and took off in a jerky, awkward semblance of a run.

“Son of a bitch,” I yelled. We watched as Jeremiah attempted to get his arm through the bars far enough to grab Carmichael’s hand, but it didn’t work. His body had fallen just out of reach. Carmella’s body remained still on the ground where she’d fallen when her soul, or whatever, had been swapped for Gemma’s.

“How in the hell did we not know this was possible?” I yelled at everyone in the room.

“Even I didn’t know that was possible. That isn’t a normal changeling trait. They’re only supposed to be able to swap into a body once every twenty or so years. She just hopped two bodies in a matter of minutes.”

“What does that mean? Is she out there trading off bodies? If so, we’ll never know who she’s inhabiting.”

Carmichael’s body stirred on the floor and Jeremiah piped up. “You’re going to have one hell of a hangover from that, but Carmella is going to feel far worse.”

Carmichael only offered a grunt in response as he glanced around and noticed that Gemma’s body was gone. “She’s gone?”

“Depends on what you mean by ‘she’,” Jeremiah tormented him.

“Your sister,” Carmichael stated.

“Then yes, she’s gone. Why don’t you come a little closer?” Jeremiah asked nicely.

“I’ll make sure you both pay dearly for everything you’ve done.” Carmichael then left the cells and my father paused the video.

“We need to find Gemma and Carmichael,” he stated.

CHAPTER 25



Sabine

WE WERE ALL A bit shell-shocked after witnessing what went down in the cells a couple days ago. According to the time stamp on the video, it happened around the time the pack meeting should have been wrapping up. Still, it made me wonder. “Why hasn’t this been seen before?” I asked.

Mitchell’s parents and Beta Blakely all looked at me as though I’d lost my mind. I turned my cell phone video back around, so I could see my grandfather from my phone. “I think somehow this whole pack, or at least the members who frequent the Alpha’s house, have been tainted. The only one here who seems to know what’s going on and doesn’t appear foggy about it is the elder aunt.”

“Something else is going on there. I think it’s time I brought the council with me to see what we can do to help. I suggest you continue to watch the feed to make sure the boy was actually put to death and not someone else who took his place in a body swap.”

“Thank you. See you soon.” I turned to my mate. “I hope you don’t mind him coming.”

Mitchell shook his head. “I’ll take any help we can get at this point. The thing I don’t understand is neither of us has seen Gemma since we got here, so how did she get to us and cause a mutual dream?”

“Maybe it wasn’t her that caused that dream. Maybe it was something else at work. Who knows? I think it’s fair to say that we’re all a little out of our league here.” Everyone else in the room was simply staring at me when a chill ran down my spine. I noticed the video feed was being rewound and moved quickly to take the controls. “Don’t even think about it!” I yelled and slapped my hand down over the controls. The subsequent chill that quaked through my body sent ice straight into my bones. “Something is in here with us. If I had to guess, it’s either a ghost or something similar. Maybe her multiple body swaps made her unstable and unable to inhabit one, or it could be Jeremiah.”

“This keeps getting worse,” Mother—Luna stated.

“Anyone have some salt or possibly iron shavings?” I asked and the chill that had enveloped my body pushed away with

haste. It made me feel hopeful for the first time since I woke to that awful dream.

“The chill in the air has faded,” Beta Blakely stated as I nodded.

“It seems the same thing that kept the crone’s children in check will work on them in whatever form they’re in. Everyone needs to wear something made from iron and,” I felt completely silly saying the rest, but we didn’t have a lot to go on, “maybe carry some salt with you, too.”

When no one batted an eye at that advice, I took it as a good sign. “Whatever we’re dealing with can manipulate physical objects in the world, too.” I pointed back to the video feed that had been rewound. “There was either something in there that the thing wanted to see, or it was trying to erase evidence of what happened. Either way, we need to make sure that does not happen,” I suggested. “An iron and salt barrier to the door probably wouldn’t be remiss. Normally, I would think that was just me feeding into the human cliches about supernatural types, but whatever I said sent that thing running, so apparently there’s merit to part or all of my suggestion.”

“We’ll get barriers set up throughout the house.”

“No offense, but I think it’s best to keep the security room off limits and the rest of you leave the house for now.” I wasn’t sure how they thought staying in that house would be a good idea.

“Where are we supposed to go?”

“I don’t know where you all will go, beyond the fact that you obviously have the means to be wherever you want. I’m going home, though. There’s no way I can stay another night here.” I shivered at the thought.

“What a lovely idea. We’ll all go to your place,” Mother-Luna stated in a chirpy manner.

“Um, my place is really small.”

She waved my words away and moved out of the security room. “We’ll manage and being together in a cozy little situation will give us time to get to know one another better.”

“I’m pretty sure people have killed one another from being in such cozy situations too long,” I muttered under my breath. I ignored the chuckles that followed.



MITCHELL, HIS PARENTS AND crazy aunt, and Beta Blakely all sat around my living room looking supremely uncomfortable. “I only have tap water to offer you because I cleared out anything that could potentially spoil before I left.”

“It’s okay, dear. We’ll order some things to be delivered. Until then, I suggest we figure out what we’re going to do to put everything back to rights.”

Funny, the Mother-Luna didn’t seem so keen on being here long, now that she saw just how cozy the accommodations would be. It was my turn to try to smother a chuckle as the woman narrowed her eyes on me. She couldn’t help the way

the corners of her mouth turned up in humor any more than I could, though. Before long, I was laughing about our situation with my fate-blessed mate's family. Mitchell's eyes stayed trained on me the entire time. His attention never wavered, and where I might normally find his observations uncomfortable, in that case, it wasn't. It was clear that he was trying to learn things about me that you only come by organically.

I jumped up from where I'd been perched on the edge of my couch and made my way to the kitchen. "Coffee, anyone?" I called on my way. They would most likely have to drink it black, maybe with sugar added, but it was better than simply sitting in my cramped quarters feeling all kinds of under the microscope.

"Sorry about my family taking over. They have good intentions, but I think they might be a little out of touch about how everyone else in the pack lives."

"Just them?" I teased.

"You already know how far up my own ass my head has been. Figured that didn't need to be pointed out again." The grin he offered with his explanation melted another little chip of ice that had been weighing my heart down. He owned his mistakes. That was something. He pulled me into a hug and then whispered in my ear. "I really am sorry that you have somehow become the focus of all my family's troubles."

"Even if we weren't fated to belong to one another, had your troubles landed near my doorstep, I would have helped in any

way I could. That's what it means to be pack. We look out for one another."

"You're right. I haven't done a very good job of looking after the pack, though, so I wouldn't blame you for turning a blind eye toward me now."

I squeezed my arms around his middle and burrowed my head into his shoulder for a minute. His natural, woodsy, slightly animal scent wrapped around me just as much as his arms did. It left me feeling safe and whole in a way that I couldn't explain. When I pulled back and looked away, it was to see his own sorrow-filled eyes aimed down at me.

"Mitchell, everything will work out the way it's meant to. I have a feeling that you and your family have been dealing with forces well beyond our comprehension. It's in the glimpses of you that I have witnessed when you're away from the pack, the influential people that were in your life, and your house that appears to be haunted. Who knows what kinds of things were implanted in your subconscious over the years?" I shrugged my shoulders. "There will always be a small part of me that hurts over the way things started between us. I can't help that. At the same time, I've seen so much of what you and your family have been dealing with and honestly marvel that you were all able to keep things together as long as you have. When we pulled up yesterday, I wanted to burn your family down. I think it might be a good idea, after all."

Mitchell's grin was the only answer I got because a shriek from the other room rang out and startled us apart.

“Is that a...” There was a pause before Mitchell’s elder aunt called out again. “A cat?”

I ran into the living room then and pushed through what would one day be my extended family, and ran for the cat that never seemed to grow beyond its kitten size. I pulled her into my arms and stroked her back one good time. “You are safe and loved,” I told her and those words seemed to trigger a strange response.

The air around us shimmered and before anyone could get their wits about them, I was knocked on my ass and a naked young woman stood towering above me. I recognized her immediately and wasn’t the only one. “Oh my Goddess!” Mitchell’s Aunt Alice proclaimed before she promptly collapsed as if her limbs were made of rubber.

Former Alpha Stormborn caught the older woman before she could hit the ground and spread her body across my too-small couch. “What in the hell just happened?” He demanded as I grabbed the throw blanket from the back of the couch and offered it to the still-naked young woman. My freaking cat. My cat, Lupa, had turned into a human. A shifter. My mind boggled at the fact that I had been living with another female shifter for years without realizing it.

“Thank you,” the woman said to me as I draped the blanket around her. While her words seemed to imply that she was thanking me for the blanket, her eyes held a deeper meaning.

“What in the hell is going on here?” Mitchell demanded to know. His narrow-eyed gaze landed on me momentarily, but

when he saw the shocked look on my face, his own hard visage softened a bit.

“I found Lupa, my kitten, on the day my mother died,” I explained. There really was nothing else to tell from my end. “She has never, in all these years, turned into a human female. She’s always been just a kitten.”

“My name is Lucy Frostborn.”

“That’s impossible,” Mitchell’s mother stated.

“Seems to me a whole lot of ‘impossible’ has been going on within this pack for far longer than anyone realized.” Everyone turned to stare at me as if I had more answers than observations. My gaze ventured to Lucy once more. “Why did you never show yourself before?”

“There was a witch who was tied to the... to...” She choked on each hesitation as though whatever pain she remembered was still fresh in her mind. “She was tied to my mate somehow. I don’t think he was ever my mate. He was, but he wasn’t. There was something very wrong with him.” It started to dawn on me, after what we witnessed on the video, that maybe Lucy was exactly right.

“Maybe he was part of a body swap, too. Like what we saw happen with Carmichael and Gemma,” I guessed.

“That would explain how he could abuse his mate the way he did and not be hit with the ramifications the way Lucy was,” Mitchell’s father stated.

“This is all complete insanity. Why didn’t you shift and tell us sooner? How the hell are you a cat shifter, anyway?”

“I’m not,” Lucy threw back at Mitchell’s accusing tone. “The witch followed me back to the pack when I got away. One minute I was in my father’s arms, the next I passed out, and when I awoke again, I was trapped inside the body of a kitten. My wolf wouldn’t answer. Her spark was gone before I even made it home to my family.”

“I wonder what triggered your change back?” My question was posed out loud, but nobody answered. “Maybe it was having your family here?”

“I think it had more to do with what you said to me,” Lucy offered quietly.

“What do you mean?”

“The last words I remembered as my true self were the witch telling me I would never be loved, no matter how cute a kitten I made.” Lucy’s shoulders bounced up and down once. “I think she cursed me that day to remain a kitten for eternity, but didn’t realize that she gave me a way out.”

“Have I really never said that I loved you before today?” I asked, more to myself than to Lucy.

Her chuckle drew me away from sifting down memory lane. “You usually said something about what a pain in the ass I was, but it always felt as though you did it lovingly. You treated me far better than anyone else ever had.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I whispered. She only nodded her head slightly in acknowledgment of my words. “Come on,” I grabbed her hand and pulled her back toward my bedroom. “Some of my clothes should fit you well enough for now until we can get you your own.”

“I haven’t worn clothes in…” Lucy’s eyes rolled up as she started counting in her head before she simply gave up. “I don’t even remember. Time becomes a jumble when you live your life as a kitten clawing away for food and shelter.”

“Speaking of,” I mentioned. “Why have you always looked like a little kitten and not a full-grown cat?”

“I don’t know. Something about the curse that witch put on me seemed to stop time in its tracks.” She glanced down at her blanket-covered body. “I don’t feel any older than the day I was cursed.”

“You probably don’t look any older either. You look to be a bit younger than me.”

I handed Lucy clothes, pointed to the bathroom, and left her to do her own thing and enjoy being in a human body for the first time in ages. When I joined the others in my cramped living room, Mitchell’s family were finishing up the explanation of what happened to Lucy as their great, great Aunt Alice, Lucy’s niece, took it all in.

“I can’t believe she’s come back to us,” the woman murmured.

“She never left,” I reminded her. “Lucy was cursed and time basically stopped for her somehow while she was living as a kitten. Obviously, the years continued to march on while she lived that life, but she never aged.”

“While you were helping Aunt Lucy, I put a pack-wide announcement out that the Alpha House is off limits. If I have to encapsulate the whole thing in steel and salt to keep the pack safe from the blight that has infected my family for generations, I will. While I agreed with your sentiment of burning the place to the ground, we don’t know if that might potentially set something loose that is otherwise trapped there. I think we should wait until Alpha Wesley brings his experts here to make any further decisions about the place.”

My shivered response was enough to cause Mitchell to move closer and wrap his arms around my body. “We’ll work on building a pack house like Alpha Wesley has for the Summer Pack,” he promised.

“I think the pack would love you for that.”

“I’m only worried about whether you can eventually learn to love me,” he whispered before placing a kiss on the side of my head and then letting me go to answer the unexpected knock on my door. When I went to open it, I found Aaron, his mate, and their tiny little baby standing there.

“You had your pup?” I cooed the question as I leaned forward to see the tiny little ball of joy nestled tightly to Nora’s chest.

“We did. The same night you fled the pack. I heard you were back and wanted to check on you,” Aaron stated before Nora added, “We also brought a few groceries for you, since you probably don’t have anything except cat food in the house.”

I laughed at that because it was all too accurate. “Thank you. Please, come in,” I offered. Both adults stopped in their tracks when they realized my house was filled to the brim with the alpha family.

“We can come another time when we’re not interrupting anything,” Nora offered.

“Nonsense,” Mother-Luna called out. “We have a new pup in the pack to celebrate. Please, come in and take a seat. We’re in the midst of a bit of family drama and have taken over poor Sabine’s humble abode, but we won’t be the cause of her visitors being shut out of her life.”

The Mother-Luna was the best of that family. She seemed to be the least affected by the curse that had hung over her family’s heads for generations and I wondered why.

CHAPTER 26



Mitchell

LUCKILY, IT DIDN'T TAKE much to acclimate my Great Aunt Lucy to the modern world. She had been fully aware and cognizant as her cat-self. When it came time for everyone to get their sleeping arrangements later, it posed a bit of a problem, though.

My parents ended up taking Sabine's guest bedroom while my aunts claimed the living room as their own. It was a very good thing that Sabine had kept the sofa bed she inherited from her mother when she passed. That was where the two eldest members of my family found themselves camped out.

That left Sabine and me. "You can take my room and I'll grab a spot on the floor out here," she suggested, pointing to

the minimal space left after the bed was pulled out from the sofa.

“Like hell. This is your home. We aren’t going to move you onto the floor.” I took hold of Sabine’s hand and pulled her back to the master bedroom. Once we made it into the room, I shut and locked the door behind us. “If you’re still unsure about being with me, I can take the floor in here. With everything that is going on, my instincts as a wolf, and as your mate, won’t allow me to be somewhere you’re not. If you’re okay with where we’re headed, then we’ll share that bed.” I pointed in the direction of her freshly made bed, but my eyes never left hers because I didn’t want to miss her reaction to anything I said.

She offered a timid smile at first and then blew out a breath. I wasn’t sure what to make of it before she stepped so close that the tips of our shoes touched. “I’m still trying to work around my feelings versus logic here. My hurt feelings are trying to keep space between us and my logical brain is arguing that it wasn’t really your fault that you behaved the way you did. None of us really knows what we’re up against here, but it’s obvious that it’s more than just the crone’s magic at work. That house felt like it was outside of our reality. I’m not sure if that makes sense.”

“I know what you mean. It always felt like I was pushing through some invisible bubble whenever I came through the front door. It wouldn’t surprise me, knowing there is at least one Fae and a Fae-witch half-bred or two involved, that there’s more than a curse on the house. Maybe it’s one of those

gateways to another world.” I shrugged then laughed it off. “I feel like a complete ass for saying something that sounds so far-fetched, but...”

“There was a time when humans thought our kind to be nothing more than myth and folklore stories. I don’t think we can push anything off as being outside the realm of possibility at this point.”

“Come here,” I stated before reaching for Sabine’s hand and tugging her even closer to me. I kicked my shoes off and looked down to see she did the same. Our eyes met after we each looked down to see what the other was doing. She grinned up at me and I took that for all the permission needed as I reached behind my back, grabbed my shirt and whipped it over my head to land in the beginnings of a pile of our clothes. Sabine followed suit with her own shirt. Before long, we were both standing in front of one another completely naked.

“I have been dying to get back inside you since our first time in the forest.” The words hung in the air between us.

“You aren’t alone in that,” Sabine admitted somewhat shyly. Those words, knowing she wanted me again, too, knocked the wind out of me. I worried that she would deny feeling anything for me but contempt.

“One day, really soon, we’re going to have to run on our own pack lands. My wolf has been chomping at the bit to get you out running on his turf.”

Sabine giggled. “I would like that very much.”

“I need you to know, if you aren’t ready to complete our bond, I’ll understand.” I took a beat before finishing my thought, and as if she already knew there was more, Sabine waited patiently for the rest. “I want to be with you right now. I want more than anything to be inside you, but the urge to sink my fangs in this delectable neck of yours and claim you as mine officially is riding me hard. If we try to do this now, I can’t guarantee...”

“How about we just let nature and instinct take the course they were meant to take all along,” she suggested. “I have a theory that I wanted to test out anyway and there’s no other way to do it.”

“Theory?” I wasn’t sure how I felt about us completing our mating bond simply because Sabine had a theory about something.

“Trust me,” she insisted.

“How can I say, ‘No’ to that?”

Sabine’s hands came down on my chest and nudged me closer to the bed as her deft fingers traced a pattern on my chest and abdomen. Before she could maneuver me onto the bed, I grabbed her around the waist and flipped us, so that she was the one to fall on her back with me on top of her. The low growl that rumbled in her chest was the only warning I got that shit was about to get very real between us. When we came together before, we were riding the high of our first run together as wolves, but everything was still very up in the air.

This time was different. She had just given me permission to sink more than my cock inside her beautiful body.

Despite knowing that I should probably wait for a better time, there was no possible way to stop myself once given the green light to create the bond I'd nearly thrown away. Being in one another's orbit already had us both primed and ready to go, so I took advantage of how wet Sabine was and slid right inside her warm sheath. She groaned as I grunted at the feel of her body hugging my cock so tightly.

"Perfect for me, beautiful," I reminded her again as I nuzzled my nose down the shell of her ear as my mouth sought out the perfect place to put my mark. Sabine had no such compunction and sunk her teeth deeply into the crook of my neck. Pure fucking ecstasy washed through my veins as she made her mark and sucked my blood into her mouth.

There was no way to hold back from taking what I wanted. My fangs protruded further than normal as I grazed them teasingly over the flesh of her neck, down to her shoulder, and back up to where my mark would be visible even if she was wearing a collared shirt. Then, I bit down as another wave of euphoria surged through my body. My hips snapped and there was no holding back as we came together in a brutal slapping of hips, grinding of bodies, and playful nips and teasing bites.

Just as we both reached our climax, I started to lick the bite at her neck to help seal the wound I'd made. Sabine did the same as she groaned into my heated flesh. "Sabine, my beautiful mate," I mumbled against her neck. "My perfect

other half.” Her body fluttered around me, pulling the rest of release from my body and into her own.

You feel like my perfect other half, too.

I lifted off of her body far enough to meet her eyes as I grinned down at her. “Was that wishful thinking on my part or did I hear you say I’m your perfect other half, too?”

“I didn’t say it out loud,” she insisted as her eyes blew out wider in surprise.

“You thought it, though?”

Her nod was the only answer I received before my mouth was on hers. “I’d love to keep going with you all night, but neither of us got much sleep last night and I have a feeling tomorrow is going to require that we’re both rested.”

Her answering yawn was all the confirmation I needed that I’d made the right decision, no matter how much my dick disagreed with my assessment.

Sabine snuggled into my body and I held on tight to my mate, relishing in the fact that she was still there. She’d given herself freely to me. Everything else would work itself out in time.

CHAPTER 27



Sabine

I WOKE UP PLASTERED to Mitchell's chest. His arm was still around me, as if he was afraid that I might run away at any moment. Fair enough since I'd run from him before. The reasons for me taking off previously no longer seemed to matter. Yes, awful things happened. Yes, he humiliated me in front of the pack on numerous occasions. No, it wasn't his fault. There was an evil blight on the Winter Pack and it had infected the top echelon of our pack spectacularly. The Alpha family, having been the target, received the worst of it.

That brought me to my theory, the one I was willing to complete the mate bond with Mitchell for. Stella, Mitchell's mother, seemed nearly immune – if not oblivious – to whatever was haunting the Alpha house. While I understood

that Great Aunt Alice had been around prior to the crone's influence, and therefore wasn't as affected by her, that was not the case for Stella. She met her mate and acted immediately to set the bond in place. Her meeting the man happened because she left the house. She was ready to run from the pack and her family's demands.

Had she not done so, had she not sealed her fate by binding herself to her moon-blessed mate, she may have also fallen under the spell of the crone.

With that in mind, I took off for the kitchen to make some more coffee and get started on breakfast for everyone. True to her word, Mother Luna had groceries delivered late in the evening the night before. That meant I had what was needed to make some blueberry muffins, eggs, and bacon to go with the coffee.

"Can I help with anything?" I turned to see Stella standing there with a wide grin plastered to her face.

"Take a seat, I have this well under way."

"You bonded with my son." It was a statement but for some reason the Mother-Luna was fishing for confirmation from me. I supposed she wasn't actually the Mother-Luna anymore. She was until an official announcement was made to the pack, but by virtue of my bond to her son, I had become the Luna of the Winter Pack.

"I have."

"Why?" She asked. There was no menace in the question.

“Because we’re fated,” I hedged.

Even with my back turned the woman, her eye roll was still something palpable. “Come now, we both know you weren’t willing to complete the bond after what happened at the last pack meeting. You even ran away to your grandfather’s pack.”

“That’s true, but it also gave me time away from this place to clear my head and get my priorities in order.” After dumping a mess of scrambled eggs into a large serving bowl, I turned to speak to Stella face-to-face. “You’re not as affected by the crone’s blight on the pack as everyone else who lived in that house seemed to be.”

She nodded her head but otherwise didn’t respond for a few minutes. “Do you think I’m one of the changelings?” She finally asked.

My response was a light chuckle as I shook my head. “Not at all. I do think your bond to your husband helps you, though.”

“What of his bond to me?”

“My guess is that the male portion of our population is less resistant to the charms that the crones employ for some reason. Even taking that into consideration, your husband wasn’t as affected as Mitchell was either. He still knew that Carmella was bad for Mitchell, right?”

“That is a fact we lamented over constantly.”

“My grandfather said that pack alphas have a natural resistance to their magic. At least, once they’re aware that a crone is in their midst, they can start pushing through.

Sometimes, they do so before they're fully aware. Mitchell said he constantly fought the pull to be around Carmella. When he wasn't near her for a while, he didn't want to go back. Once she insinuated herself at his side again, he was compelled to stay there for as long as he was in her sphere of influence."

"That sounds about right. Every time he got out from under that woman, we would breathe a sigh of relief only to turn around and have her right back under his nose again."

"I think that the older crone worked her magic so hard, on so many people that she was spread to thin to keep our Alpha enraptured with her daughter. Out of sight, out of mind worked for him, so Carmella made sure to maintain contact with him as often as possible. Her clingy crap had a purpose. Being mated, I don't think even whatever ghostly incarnation of her or her brother that is lingering in the house will bother him now."

"The mate bond diminishes their hold," Stella thought out loud. "Is that the only reason you agreed?"

"No, it's not. Everything that happened was the result of this whole mess, your family's curse. It didn't seem right to hang that over Mitchell's head. Now, I'm hopeful that our bond will erase any residual fog that may have lingering in his brain."

"So, if certain pack members try to entice your mate away, they won't be able to get away with it like they did in their last attempt?" Her eyebrow cocked up and joined the knowing smile that graced me.

“Exactly.”

“You are one smart wolf,” she offered before grabbing a mug to fill with coffee.

CHAPTER 28



Mitchell

I OVERHEARD THE ENTIRE conversation my mother had with Sabine. While it made sense, I hoped that my mate hadn't finally decided to bond with me because of her theory. While I'd be grateful for whatever changed her mind, it seemed wrong to think she did it to protect me when I hadn't done a very good job of protecting her.

"That's one fine mate you have in there, Son."

I turned to see my father and aunts smiling at me.

"Sabine really is the best," Aunt Lucy stated. "I've wandered as a kitten for ages and she was the first shifter to take me in. She didn't just keep me alive, that girl kept me sane when there didn't seem to be any hope."

“I don’t know what would have happened to me and the pack if she hadn’t been around,” I admitted. “The crones would have won. They could have destroyed our pack and then moved on to another. Somehow, I don’t see the vendetta ending with our family.”

“Probably not,” my father admitted.

“Something has been bugging me, though,” I stated and turned my attention back to Lucy. “The crone said that we were responsible for the death of her only son. She alluded to the fact that he’d been your mate.”

“The wolf I dreamed of looked and spoke just like the one who claimed me. I saw him in my dreams every night for a year before we went to the mate-finding celebration.”

“Food’s ready!” Sabine called and we all shuffled into the too-small kitchen and started making plates to take back into the living room, since Sabine only had a tiny, two-seater table. “Sorry there isn’t a bigger table, but it wasn’t necessary before.”

“Never apologize to guests for your home.” My mother stated kindly, then seemed to think about that before she tacked on, “Unless it’s filled with vile creatures that are wreaking havoc on the lives of said guests.” Her teasing wink was meant to soften the blow, but it took a solid half minute for everyone’s brains to engage and then the laughter started.

“I will keep that bit of wisdom tucked away for a rainy day,” Sabine told my mother as she sat on the floor and propped her plate on her knee.

“Why don’t you use the coffee table?” I asked.

“I was saving that for everyone else.”

I shook my head and scooted my mate closer. “They can share.”

“No need for me,” my father interjected as he shuffled to Sabine’s recliner and started hoovering her food into his mouth. His groan of delight meant that my mate could cook as well as she could bake. After a quick side-long glance at Mom, he turned to me and stage-whispered, “I will take you up on an invite to dinner or breakfast any day of the week, Son.”

That earned another hearty chuckle from the peanut gallery before I turned my attention back to my aunt.

“We need to know more about your mate and what happened back then.”

Aunt Lucy nodded her head and finished chewing her food, but Sabine interrupted. “Let her eat before you interrogate her. Your aunt has been dining on Fancy Feast and kibble for at least seven years and who knows what she survived on before I took her in.”

Aunt Lucy gave her a beatific smile before turning to me. “See, I told you she’s the best.”



AFTER WE ATE, LUCY finally dived back into her part of our family’s history.

“When I saw my mate, it was different from my dreams. He was the same, but not.” Her mind was a fractured place and I wasn’t sure if that was because she’d spent decades as a cat or if it was because of the effect the crone and her spawn had on her so long ago.

“Do you think that he was possessed?” I asked.

“It felt like that, sometimes.” Aunt Lucy bobbed her head up and down, but seemed lost in thought for a few minutes. “The thing is, when we first connected at the celebration, he seemed normal. He was the mate from my dreams. It wasn’t until he marked me that things changed.”

“How so?” I asked.

“Well, it was almost like he was two different people. There was my mate, the one who had inhabited my dreams for a year. The same mate who claimed and bit me. Then, there was the cruel other version of him that didn’t make any sense. It reminded me of the old Jekyll and Hyde story.”

I glanced over at Sabine and then pulled her close until finally she was seated in my lap where we sat on the floor. She snuggled in and paid just as close attention to my aunt’s story as I did.

“I wonder,” Sabine huffed out, almost as if she hadn’t meant to speak the words aloud.

“What?” I asked.

“Well, Carmichael Woodsong and Gemma were unmated shifters.” Sabine was calculating something in her mind.

“What if the crone’s first son was also part Fae?” She questioned. “What if he tried to take over Lucy’s mate, but got stuck because of the mate bond? Instead of Her mate being shoved out of his own body, so that the half-changeling could slip inside and take control, the mate bond somehow secured the shifter inside his body.”

“That would make sense,” Lucy mumbled. “Sometimes, he was my mate. Other times, he would work extra hard to prove his cruelty to me.”

“Maybe, the cruel version of your mate wasn’t really your mate. It would explain why he never seemed to suffer from the cheating pains when he allowed things to be done to you.”

“We did wonder how that was possible,” I stated. My mate wasn’t just a beautiful person, she was very astute as well. “So, assuming Aunt Lucy’s real mate and the crone’s first son were stuck inside the same body, duking it out to be top dog on the regular, that would probably put a drain on both of them. So, maybe once he was weak enough, it allowed Lucy to slip away unnoticed long enough to get back home. The crone’s son would have obviously lost his original body because you can’t preserve one that is uninhabited. So, maybe he looked to do another swap in the hopes that it would leave whoever he swapped with to fight Lucy’s mate for their body?”

“That sounds like a solid theory. We have to assume something went wrong with that and the curse that was

supposed to punish Lucy might have been the thing to save her,” Dad interjected.

“Do you think my mate would have been a good person if it wasn’t for...” Lucy looked as though she drifted off to her thoughts rather than complete the question she left hanging. It was my mate who answered her.

“We can never know for sure, but I have faith that the one you knew as the nice guy was the one you were meant to be bonded to and the evil bastard that shared his body is the one who did all those horrible things to you and your mate. He was a victim, too.” Sabine’s eyes met mine and the sorrow there conveyed that she felt that we had been in a similar, though not quite as devastating, boat.

Before we could speculate any further, there was a knock on the door. I glanced down at Sabine who shrugged her shoulders at me. “Up until we met, Dee and Lupa – sorry, Lucy – were the only guests I ever had.”

Aunt Lucy blushed at being reminded that she was a “guest” of Sabine’s for seven years and that she lived that way as a cat. I stood and went to answer the door only to find an entire party waiting outside.

“We dropped by the Alpha family house first,” Alpha Wesley stated. “When nobody was home to greet us, I thought we should come to Sabine’s address and check on her.”

“Come in,” I stated as while holding the door open.

“Holy crap, my house was not ready for this,” Sabine muttered and my family laughed. “Sorry, grandfather, after yesterday’s discovery, we thought it best to come here for the night. I meant to send word, but something happened.”

“Lucy Frostborn?” Alpha Wesley called out in shock. Some of the elder shifters with him also stopped dead in their tracks.

“Yeah, that would be the distraction that stopped me from sending the text. Lucy has been living with me for seven years now as a tiny little kitten.”

“Wait! Your kitten was really a shifter woman this whole time?” A familiar voice called out about of the din of everyone else trying to talk over one another.

“Dee!” Sabine shouted and ran for her best friend as if they hadn’t seen one another just a couple days ago. In the blink of an eye, they were wrapped around one another so tightly you couldn’t see where one woman began and the other ended. That wasn’t what stood out to me, though. It was the younger man toward the back of the crowd who was staring at them with a hint of amusement on his lips and a bit too much fire blazing in his eyes for my liking.

A low, warning growl rumbled from my chest putting everyone on alert. The girls broke apart to see what the fuss was about and then Dee started laughing. “Oh, stop! He’s not looking at your mate.”

“Explain!” I demanded.

The male standing behind my mate and her best friend stepped in front of them, as if to protect them from me. “You will not speak that way to her.” His demand was unexpected, since I did not get even the slightest hint that he might be an alpha wolf. “Dee is my mate,” the man finally stated, which immediately brought the tension in the room down a notch.

“Oh my God! You found him!” Sabine shouted and hugged her best friend again. “I’m so happy for you, and you have to tell me all about it, but right now, there are way too many people standing around in my house and far too many strangers to make me comfortable.”

“That would be Sabine Hopkins, our lovely hostess and my lovely granddaughter,” Alpha Wesley announced proudly. Then he took notice of his granddaughter’s marked neck and inclined his head to me once. “It seems I misspoke. She is now Sabine Stormborn, Luna of the Winter Pack.”

“Holy shit! I’m not the only one who has some explaining to do,” Dee attempted to whisper, but in such close quarters we all heard her anyway.

Alpha Wesley helped to organize everyone in the room with the newcomers on one side and my family on the other. “The Winter Pack Alpha family,” he started and then introduced each of us by our name and titles. Then he turned to the five new people in the room. “This is Eric Mortimer, one of my most trusted Betas,” he introduced Dee’s new mate, “and mate to miss Diedre. I look forward to knowing where you two plan to settle later. You have time to make your decision, as far as I

am concerned.” His gaze came up to meet mine, looking for a similar acceptance.

“You have time to decide on our end as well. Whatever Alpha Wesley has offered you, I will agree to match his limits on when a decision needs to be made.”

“Thank you,” Eric stated.

“This is Petronella Conti, she serves on the Council of Elders,” Alpha Wesley introduced a woman who appeared to be no older than fifty at most, but since she was on the council, chances were high that she was well into her hundreds. “She has extensive knowledge of witches and their dark energy users, the crones.” Without taking a breath to let us really take her in, Alpha Wesley carried on. “Beside her is Nivia Longshadow. Nivia is a visiting member of the Fae Court of Shadows. Augustin, the man to her left, is her guard. They have agreed to consult on the problem at hand with the changelings.”

“You are royalty where you’re from,” Sabine pointed out.

The Fae woman gave a slight nod of her head. “I am an inconsequential member of the royal house.”

“I thought Fae weren’t allowed to give their names,” Sabine stated then blushed profusely. “It’s part of their lore,” she huffed when everyone continued to stare at her.

“Nivia is the shortened, familiar form of my name. You are correct in that we don’t give our full names as it constitutes having power over us.”

Sabine seemed satisfied with her knowledge and tugged my sleeve to gain my attention.

Whatever you say, do not thank the Fae for anything.

I took her hand in mine and squeezed to acknowledge that I got her message loud and clear, and then I passed it along to the rest of the members of our pack who were present.

“And finally, we have Arden Gloss, Alpha of the Sierras Pack.” He nodded his head toward Dee. “No introductions are necessary for your packmate, Dee.” Dee waved at everyone and then blushed just as profusely as Sabine had done earlier. “My granddaughter has kept me abreast of the situation, but obviously, there have been some changes since Lucy Frostborn stands before us looking just as youthful as she did the day she supposedly died.”

We filled everyone in on what happened to Lucy, why we left the Alpha family home, and Sabine’s latest theory about Lucy’s mate’s possible failed body swap with a changeling/crone hybrid.

“You said that this female spawn of the crone swapped bodies twice in quick succession?” Nivia asked.

“We saw it play out on a video recording.”

“Do you have access to this video from here?”

Eventually, we figured out how to gain remote access to the cloud server the security feed was housed on, thanks to Dee’s mate who happened to be the security expert for his pack.

We all watched what happened with former-Beta Woodsong and Gemma. As Carmella was leaving the scene in Gemma's body, Nivia had Eric stop the feed and slow it down.

"There," she pointed out. We all saw that the body of Gemma Atwater appeared to be disintegrating starting at her left foot that was paused in mid-air as she took another step.

"I was so caught up by the jerky movements, and thinking that it was because Carmella was controlling her body, that I didn't notice her body was..." Shit what was it doing?

"Her body was desiccating, as if she had been dead for many years. It shows that the crone's daughter was around much longer than the 30 or so years you all thought. When you said it felt like there was a ghostly presence in that house with you, I would almost guarantee it is the half-breed crone who couldn't stick in that body. She was too weak to take over fully after the first botched attempt. Had she been smart, she would have stayed in the first body. Considering she was raised by the crone and not whichever changeling sired her, it makes sense that she might not have known multiple body swaps would be too much for her."

"Spyros," Augustin mumbled as he took in the video. He wasn't looking at Gemma's foot disappearing, though. His eyes were trained on the video feed from the cell Jeremiah occupied. Nivia's eyes swiveled to the other camera feed at the name. She made a noise that was half growl, half frustrated huff.

"He will pay for this," Nivia vowed.

“Who is Spyros?”

“That thing,” she pointed to Jeremiah on the screen, “is the image of Spyros. He is a changeling who went rogue over three hundred years ago. We thought he was still somewhere in the Fae lands, but this proves we were wrong. He found a crossover point to your world.” Her lips tipped up in a scary version of a smile as her razor-like teeth were exposed. “We can summon him now. He will be able to pull the spirits of his children back to him, if they are still of this world in any way.”

“You said a crossover point,” Sabine pointed out. “Do you mean like a portal between your world and ours?”

“Yes, this is what is meant. They are weak points. We sometimes call them the in-between,” Augustin was the one to answer the question.

“We were discussing how the Alpha’s family home feels weird, almost like you’re crossing over some weird, invisible carrier. Is it possible that the house is the crossover point?”

Nivia and Augustin locked eyes and seemed to be communicating without words in the way I could do with my mate. “We will need to go to this spot and check it out before we summon Spyros here. He mustn’t be allowed to escape back into the Fae lands without having his abilities locked down.”

CHAPTER 29



Sabine

IT FELT LIKE THE world was topsy-turvy as we took Grandfather's entourage to the Alpha family house. They confirmed that it was indeed a weak spot between the worlds, but unnaturally made. Having the crone and her half-breed children practically living in and around the place for so many years, doing their magics, and tainting everything within had created the anomaly.

“There are two changeling half-breeds inside the dwelling,” she stated. “We will seal them inside and then pull the entire house to the other side with us. They will no longer be a problem for you and the weak spot they created will no longer be viable from either side.”

“What about Spyros?” I asked.

“He will be summoned using the essence of his children. They will appear as something else on the other side. Neither of them are truly specters as you think of them. They are just not visible to your eyes, but we can see the wretched little things and the taint on their very souls.” Nivia shivered visibly. “It is for the best that they lacked intelligence, thanks to the mixed breeding with a befouled witch, otherwise they might have caused untold damage and chaos in your pack.”

“They already managed to do just that.”

Nivia glared at my mate. “What they did was parlor tricks compared to what they would be capable of in their true forms if they weren’t bound by the constructs of their mind. They too think they are naught but trapped souls. Be glad they don’t know what they really are.”

With that, Nivia and Augustin stepped into the Alpha home and in seconds the whole thing appeared to tremble before it was sucked into the ground and we were left there staring at nothing more than huge hole in the ground where the underground layers of the house used to be.

“I’ll put in a call to Brady and his boys to come get a fence put up so nobody accidentally falls into that pit,” I suggested.

“I’m not even sure I understand what the hell just happened,” Dee stated. She still hadn’t managed to pick her jaw up when she turned to Stella. “I hope you weren’t overly fond of your family’s heirlooms. That Fae princess just stole your whole house and everything in it.”

We all chuckled about it, but Dee wasn't wrong. Everything was simply gone.

Stella blinked rapidly, as if in shock, until her mate pulled her into his arms. "We have one another, a fresh start, and our pack. Everything will be okay. The rest was just stuff."

"My shoes," the former Luna whined. "You don't understand... All my shoes!"

"Is it just me or did anyone else find that far too anticlimactic?" I asked.

"Did you want a full battle with explosions and wolves snapping and snarling at one another?" Someone asked.

"Well, yeah. I mean, we're talking generations of psychological torture and family curses. It feels like there should have at least been a little war mixed in to end it all."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, beautiful. I think we both war with ourselves enough over what happened, best not to physically manifest that."

"I guess, you're right," I agreed reluctantly. "Still, it feels as though we were cheated. I didn't even get to punch that bitch in the throat again!" It was my turn to whine. Maybe being Luna made us extra emotional.

"I didn't get to see the first time you did it, so I feel especially cheated," Dee chimed in.

"Oh, for the love of the Moon!" former Alpha Stormborn called out before he walked away as his mate followed behind chuckling. She tossed a wink back in my direction and I

returned it. It was our job, after all, to get everyone back to normal as quickly as possible.

EPILOGUE



Sabine

MY HEART FELT FULL as we glanced out at our pack members who showed up for the run. It had been a rough start for us as the Alpha couple after the family's house disappeared three years ago. Some members of the pack felt it was cursed and they took off to other packs to seek refuge. Many of them were from the top-tier of the Winter Pack before the changes were implemented. There was no doubt in my mind that, for them, leaving had nothing to do with a possible cursed pack and everything to do with the fact that their roles were being reversed in a way.

In the past three years, we added seventy-two new pups to the pack. It barely made up for the 132 shifters we lost when they refused to stay in the pack, but I liked to think of it as

weakness leaving the pack and a fresh start being born. We might have been sixty packmates lighter in total, but it was worth it, especially considering that among the people who left were all the females that had previous relations with my mate. Seeing their backs as they left was a relief. Considering some of their behavior was the result of the crone's influence, I was certain it was a relief for them to walk away and start fresh as well.

Two of the seventy-two new pups to our pack belonged to my mate and me. Our first born was Charles Zachary Stormborn. He was named for my grandfather who guided us along during the worst times of our lives, and helped to push us together in the end. My grandfather was no longer the Alpha of the Summer Pack. He turned his pack over to a young alpha who he had worked with over the past two years to get him ready. As Grandfather said, "It's time for fresh blood in the pack." As his only living heir, it was the only option he had to retire before the position dragged him into an early grave.

Our daughter, who was born just three months ago, was cradled in her father's arms as he spoke to Nora, Aaron's mate. Both of my friends stepped into their new roles after entering one of the pack's bi-annual challenge days. Twice a year, we opened up the meeting fields to be utilized for pack challenges. It took a full two weeks to get through the challenges the first year. After the true pack rankings finally worked themselves out, we managed to whittle the challenge days down to a long three-day weekend. Aaron worked beside

my mate and Beta Blakely to keep the pack in line. Nora worked as my assistant, and I couldn't be happier about that.

Dee and her mate decided to stick around and help our pack transition into a healthier future. Eric was in charge of cyber security and testing for weak points between our world and that of the Fae. It was something Augustin had explained to him how to do prior to disappearing with the Alpha house and all its contents.

Stella was still upset about her missing shoe collection, but her mate indulged her with new pairs for every holiday, including things like National Donut Day, in an attempt to appease her. As for me, I settled into being the pack's Luna in the only way I knew how. My office was located inside Luna Cakes, the new name for my bakery. My picture wall was updated to a video screen that flipped through all the moon-blessed pairings and pictures of their adorable new pups as they came along. Whenever a female came of age in the pack and the dreams started, she would come to see me for a Moon-blessed cupcake to take to her mate if he was a member of the pack. Some traditions, even if they were unintentional, were worth keeping.

My eyes trailed over our packmates who were waiting for my mate to say a few words before our pack run that would officially kick off another Challenge Day Celebration. The difference three years and three less crones in our midst made was astounding. Most of our packmates were happy. There were a few chosen-mate pairings that might be doomed in the

near future, but there was no helping that particular stain that the pack's history had on its present.

“Are you ready, beautiful?” My mate asked. When I inclined my head, he handed me our daughter, Olivia Lupa Stormborn. Yes, she was named after Mitchell's Aunt Lucy in a weird round-about way. “I love you,” he added before pressing a kiss to my head and then our daughter's.

“Where is our mischief maker?” I asked. Mitchell's head tipped to the left where his parents stood watching Aunt Lucy chase the ball of energy around the stage while an enraptured Carmichael Woodsong looked on. There was something brewing between those two, had been for more than a year now, but neither of them would acknowledge it publicly just yet. We had to wait and see how everything played out.

“I'll go round him up,” I stated and patted my mate on the chest as I started to move past him.

“Sabine?” He questioned. When I turned around his smile blew me away. It was one he wore often, so you would think that affect would have worn off by now. It hadn't. That smile, the one that showed exactly how happy my mate was, had the power to make my knees go weak.

“Yes?” I asked while shifting my daughter to my other shoulder.

“I'm so thankful that you were smarter than the rest of us.”

That made me laugh. It was something he truly believed. Instead of taking my usual humble route, I grinned up at him.

“You should be! I’m a catch.”

He chuckled before moving to the front of the stage. “My moon-blessed mate, everyone,” he held his hands out in my direction. “Don’t worry, she thinks I’m a catch, too!” He winked at me and then turned back to the pack as he started calling out names to acknowledge our seven new moon-blessed mates among the pack and the two newest pups to be born.

We had done it. Despite the literal heartache we had to endure along the way, it was all worth it to see our pack so healthy. My greatest wish was that my own parents knew how well it all turned out. I’m sure, somewhere amongst the stars and the light of the dawning moon, my mother was smiling down at me. Her sacrifice kept me in the pack I was meant to save. It meant everything to so many people.

“Welcome to the sixth bi-annual Wesley-Hopkins Challenge Day Celebration!” Mitchell called out to our pack. They all cheered and my heart exploded with pride once more. Wesley-Hopkins for my mother, who made everything possible by sacrificing herself to be sure I stayed within the pack because she knew it was important that I do so. Her names, the surname of her childhood and the one she took when she mated my father, were always amongst the opening remarks of the celebration, so there was never a doubt in my mind that she was here somewhere, watching, and knowing that her sacrifice was worth it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christine Michelle



Christine writes angst-driven stories under two (current) pen names and one former (retired) name. Despite her angst words, she mostly runs on coffee and giggles!

Christine Michelle's books:

(mild) MC Romance, Paranormal Romance and Suspense, Rock Star Romance, and other Contemporary Romance

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