

Chapter 45

Clara

I watched as my little girl ran around with a few kids who were about her age. The daycare was exceptional, I'll admit. Almost as big as the main floor of the packhouse, with brightly colored walls with all sorts of different themes. There was an endless supply of books, which was great; Isabelle loved to read. Or look at the pictures, as her reading skills were only just developing. Ben had brought me to the room designated for Isa's age group, but across the hall there were toddlers running around, pulling on the workers clothes and occasionally throwing food. How I did not miss that stage. Down the hall a way was the room assigned for newborns and babies. And how I dearly missed that stage.

Now my little snuggler was her own person, with her own thoughts and feelings and limitations. I missed being the person she relied on for everything, but at the same time, I was so damn proud of her every day, as she learned new things and grew. Still, I wished I could just make it stop, and keep her as my little girl forever. And then there were days, after tantrums and tears, after fights to put shoes on, wrestling to get her clothes on and for her to keep them on, I prayed she was old enough to live on her own soon. Being a mother was a terrible mess of emotions that no book or pamphlet had prepared me for.

I wouldn't change it for anything in the world.

So, needless to say that it was very, very, very hard to watch Isabelle walks away from me into a group of werewolf pups, who may or may not treat her as an equal.

"Your daughter will be very safe here, and she will have lots of fun. She is in the best of hands." The woman, Sarah I think her name was, was smiling at me in I guess what was supposed to be a reassuring manner. She looked friendly enough, an open face that had fine lines around her eyes and mouth. I put her at around fifty years old, but with wolves, who knew? She could have been ninety. Regardless, the sincerity in her light blue eyes calmed me some.

"And Ben... I mean, the Beta... he explained our situation?" I asked her.

She nodded. "He did. And you need not worry about it. I would not care if your daughter was a dragon, I would treat her the same as I would any pup here. And I will make sure that the children do too."

I let out a breath. "Thank you."

"I do need to ask though, as Beta Ben didn't know. Has Isabelle ever been in a school-like setting?"

"No. I was home-schooling for the last year or so." I paused. "Is that okay?"

"It is. I will just have to get her acclimated one step at a time. But I am confident she will learn it all in no time." Sarah beamed towards my daughter, playing with blocks on the ground with a little brunette. "She seems to draw people to her. Amara is usually so quiet, a shy girl. I'm so happy to see her playing with someone else for a change."

I smiled proudly. "She is special." I said.

"That she is."

I startled, turning to look at Ben beside me. I hadn't even noticed he was here! He wasn't looking at me though; He was gazing at my daughter with a mixture of awe and pride. Exactly what I was feeling inside. It made my heartbeat stutter.

"What are you doing here?" I meant to be stern, and failed miserably.

When his piercing gaze finally met mine, I had to work to keep myself in check. This man had such an effect on me, it was insane. His wavy hair just begged for me to run my fingers through it. His eyes were the color of chocolate milk, warm and relaxing, but easy to get lost in. And I never thought I'd be the type to like facial hair, but Ben pulled it off very well. Standing next to him, I felt like a midget, but I also felt safe; protected. Ben was sexy as Hell, and that was not helping me to stay resilient towards him. Stupid hormones.

"I'm taking you to meet Lily. I didn't want you to get lost."

"Well, off you go then. I need to start today's sing-along shortly." Sarah said to us. With one last look at my girl, I forced myself to walk out the door with Ben. The urge to run back to her was almost overwhelming.

"Hey."

Having been so absorbed in my thoughts, I'd missed that Ben had stopped walking. I almost ran into the back of him.

"What?"

"She's going to be fine Clara. I can see how worried you are, but remember what I said. If anyone messes with Isabelle, they will have me to deal with."

"I know." I sighed. "You can't possibly imagine how hard it is for me right now though. I've never been away from her."

"Ever?"

"Never."

"Then I think this will be good for the both of you. You need to have a life outside being a mom, and Isabelle needs to explore, make friends and learn what it's like to be independent."

I knew he was right. I did. My brain agreed with him, but my heart was telling me to go back and not let my child out of my sight. We started

walking again, our arms occasionally brushing against each other. I felt tingles every time; I'd heard the bond wasn't as strong for witches as it was for wolves, but experiencing it now, I wasn't sure I agreed.

"When was the last time you went out?" Ben asked me suddenly.

"Out?"

"Yeah. Like, to the movies or out for dinner or something."

"I don't know. Probably before Isabelle was born?"

"Uhm, okay. Wow."

"Why?" I peered at him curiously. Was he nervous?

"Well, I was thinking... there's a great movie theater here. And we also have some pretty great restaurants, nothing too fancy though. There are also burger joints if you're into that-"

Oh, my Goddess.

"Ben." I interrupted his rambling. "We can't." I shook my head.

He sighed sadly. Then a look of something close to determination entered his eyes. "I'm trying here Clara. I know neither one of us expected this. But I don't want to spend all our time fighting, or avoiding each other."

"I'm not ready to... be your mate, not the way you want. I don't know if I ever will be." I admitted.

"You know what, that's fine with me. But we are mates, so we should try and make this work so some degree, don't you think? Maybe, I don't know... we can just be friends for now?"

"You just asked me out." I pointed out to him.

"Friends can go to the movies together. And grab dinner. I do it with Dimitri and Luke all the time."

My eyebrows raised in surprise. "Your Alpha goes to the movies?"

"Well, not lately."

I bit the inside of my cheek, thinking about it. He had a point. Being mates meant that no matter how much I tried, I wanted to be around him. And he wanted to be around me, which meant he was going to be around Isa. I couldn't spend all my time fighting with him, not in front of her. That was no good, and truthfully, it upset me as well. It was just easier to be angry with him, for any reason, even if it was stupid. But that's not the example I wanted for my daughter.

"Okay." I said slowly. "We can be friends. But only for Isabelle." I clarified.

"Great!" He grinned and I couldn't help a little smile in return.

We walked in silence for a while. It felt odd being close to him; Odd because it was nice. I felt calm, carefree. Something I'd not felt in four years.

"Speaking of Isabelle..." Ben trailed off.

"What about her?"

"I'd like to get to know her a little better. Spend some time with her. With your permission and supervision of course."

I couldn't bring myself to say no. "I suppose it's inevitable anyways."

Ben simply nodded, looking overjoyed. His reaction sent a pang of hurt through my chest. This man who barely knew us was more invested in my daughter than her own father had ever been. It wasn't fair.

Then again, maybe it wasn't fair to compare the two.

"Here we are."

When had we gone into the forest? Damn, I really needed to pay better attention! We stood in a little clearing; some distance from the packhouse.

Lily was leaning against a tree, waving at us frantically. I gave her a short wave back.

"I'll come by when you're done to take you back to the daycare."

"That's really not necessary." I protested.

"Think of it as a friendly gesture." He winked and my lips went dry. I watched him walk away, admiring the way his muscles moved under his shirt. Damn.

"So, what's on the agenda for today?" Lily skipped over to me, a huge smile on her face.

Focus Clara.

Turning away from my mate, I said, "First things first. You need to shift."