

CHAPTER 53

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53 Clayton: His Mate CLAYTON The elevator dings and the doors slide open, revealing the penthouse lobby of the Silvermoon Pack's largest hotel. I step out, my boots sinking into the plush carpet. Xavier and Lucas are already there, lounging on the leather couches like a pair of lazy lions. "Clayton!" Xavier booms, rising to his feet. He clasps my hand in a firm shake, clapping me on the back with his other hand. "Good to see you, my friend." "You as well, Xavier." I return his hearty greeting with a grin. "Lucas, always a pleasure." Lucas stands, his smile not quite reaching his eyes as we shake hands. There's a tension in his shoulders, a tightness around his jaw. Something's weighing on him. We settle into the couches, the city skyline glittering beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows. Xavier leans back, crossing his ankles. "How were your flights, boys? No troubles, I hope?" 19 53 Clayton His Male I shake my head. "Smooth sailing for me. No disturbances." Lucas's mouth presses into a grim line. "I wish I could say the same. Got another report of a dead scout right after I landed." The air in the room shifts, the jovial atmosphere evaporating like mist under the morning sun. Xavier's brows knit together. "Shit. Blackwood?" "Who else?" Lucas growls, his fingers curling into fists on his knees. "He's getting bolder, pushing further into our territory." I lean forward, elbows on my knees. "What's your game plan, Lucas? We can't let this stand." The Blackwood alpha has been a massive thorn in the Northwestern Council's side for years. There have been several scuffles between the two packs, but Blackwood has even had run-ins with shifters outside of the Northwestern Territories. Lucas drags a hand down his face, his eyes hard as flint. "I'm working on it. But every time I think I've got a handle on their moves, they slip through my fingers like smoke. I can't get my hands on solid proof to bring 12:39 ZTE < 53 Clayton: His Mater to the Council." Xavier's expression is grave. "Without evidence to bring to the Council, my hands are tied." "Mine, too. But that's only if we make this a Council affair. There are other options." They're drastic, but they're there. "I know." Lucas rubs his hand over his face, and I can see his exhaustion in the droop of his shoulders and the shadows under his eyes. "We sent Jessa Grey back to her pack. We used the official excuse that she hadn't asked for approval and was an unregistered guest in our territory, but Blackwood didn't take it well. There's more, too." I lean forward, my eyes locked on Lucas as he takes a deep, steadying breath. There's a weight in the air, a tension that goes beyond the usual strain of pack politics. This is something more, something personal. "It's my mate," he says finally, the words hanging heavy between us. "She's gone missing." A shocked silence falls over the room. r's eyes widen, his mouth parting slightly as if the words have robbed him of speech. I can only stare at Lucas, 109 53 Clayton: His Mate struggling to process this revelation. "Your mate?" I echo, my voice hushed. "You've found your mate?" Lucas nods, his expression a mixture of awe and anguish. "Yeah. We met at the Lunar Gala a few months back." A rueful smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. "You know how they say it hits you like a freight train? That's an understatement." I remember the gala, the swirl of colors and music, the thrum of anticipation in the air as unmated wolves gathered in hopes of finding their other half. I haven't gone in years. To think that Lucas, of all people, had finally experienced that elusive bond... "Who is she?" Xavier asks, leaning forward. "One of ours?" Lucas shakes his head, his jaw tightening. "She's from the Blackwood pack. Ava Grey." The name sends a ripple of unease through me. The Blackwood Pack has always been shrouded in secrets, their motives inscrutable. To have one of their own bound to :How did this happen?" I ask my mind whirling. "Did 12 49 53 Clayton" τ τ ...the Westwood alpha His Mate Renard sanction this?" A bitter laugh escapes Lucas's lips. "You know Renard better than that. He's been sending Jessa after Kellan instead of me. I'm too dangerous to keep around, even mated." He looks down at his hands with a sigh. "I wish I'd thought about that a long time ago." Xavier looks at Lucas, a knowing glint in his eyes. "You rejected her, didn't you?" His question isn't a question. Lucas nods once, a sharp jerk of his head down. "Yeah. We're working on reconciling. I left for a few days to deal with stuff at the border, came back, and she was gone." Heavy silence hangs in the air as Lucas finishes speaking, the weight of his words settling over us. I can see the anguish in his face, the torment in his eyes. My gut clenches as I imagine myself in his position. If Ava were to vanish without a trace, it would shatter me. The mere idea of her being ripped away is enough to make my wolf howl in agony. He's obsessed with her, and I have to admit that I am too. We don't have a fated connection, but there's something about her 12:33 5/9 53 Clayton: His Mate that I don't want to let go. I swallow hard, pushing the thought away before it can consume me. "We'll find her, Lucas," I say, my voice firm with conviction. "The Aspen Pack stands with you. We'll leave no stone un

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turned until Ava is safely back in your arms." Xavier nods in solemn agreement. "You have our full support, brother. The Silvermoon Pack will lend whatever aid is required to bring your mate home. Ava's a good child, very different from her family and alpha. You're a lucky man, Lucas." "I know." He lets out a long breath. "I can't lose her again. It took a long time to find her. I hear Blackwood started looking for her, too. That's why I think they took her back." Xavier's brow arches. "Back?" Lucas gives a tight smile. "She ran off after I rejected her." Xavier's laugh startles us both, and he apologizes, smacking Lucas on the shoulder. "You're in for a ride. with that one" he says, and Lucas laughs, his anguish 12:33 53 Clayton: His Mater lifting for just a moment. "She's not letting it go easily," he agrees, and for a second, we're all smiling. But it's back to grim worry when Xavier returns to the subject. "So, you think Blackwood kidnapped her?" Xavier's brow furrows. "But why? If she's your mate, wouldn't they want to use that to their advantage?" "Not if she's..." Lucas trails off, his gaze growing distant. "There's more to Ava than meets the eye." I study him closely, seeing the conflict etched into the lines of his face. "What aren't you telling us, Lucas?" He meets my stare, his eyes haunted. "Ava's wolfless. Renard wants to breed her to his men. She has no other use for him without a wolf." A chill runs down my spine at the implication behind his words. At the future for Lucas' Ava. If it were my Ava... Imagining her used as a breeder for a bunch of hormonal wolves has my fists clenching. 12:33) 7/9 53 Cynon His Mate "We need to find her," Xavier says, his voice hard with resolve. "Whatever Renard's plans, we can't let him do that to her." Lucas nods, his jaw set in a grim line. "That's the plan. I've got my best people on it, but we're running into dead ends at every turn. It's like she just vanished into thin air. I can't prove that they took her, much less that it's against her will. The best I have is hearsay about abuse." Xavier rubs his chin, looking at the ceiling as he thinks. "Does Blackwood know you're her mate?" Lucas shakes his head. "Not that I'm aware." "Have you claimed her?" He shakes his head again, his lips tightened into a grim line. I can understand that. The fact that my claiming didn't take galls me more than I want to admit, even if it was something that was morally wrong to do at the time. If I was truly mated to Ava, I could reach her even now, assure myself that she's safe in the apartment I have set up for her. Xavier sighs. "So none of the ancient laws apply. Then wa hava to think of something also"*wW.NovelWorm.com*

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