

Fatal Temptation: Between Two Alphas

novel Chapter 21

Chapter Twenty-One

When I enter the kitchen again, the kids are sitting at the counter.

The girl bounces in her seat. "I'm Jacelyn."

She's like a mini Mia. Eyes so big and sweet, joy radiating from her little body. And that name. It brings tears to my eyes.

Mia named my niece after me. I knew that from the information Jacob told me, but somehow seeing this little girl makes it suddenly real.

"Hello sweetheart," I tell her. I lean down.

It's awkward. I want to hug her.

But I'm a stranger.

I start to lean back, rethinking the impulse then her little arms sling around my neck and she squeezes tightly.

I breathe her scent. Committing it to memory. She is my family. And I will protect her until I take my last breath.

I hate that I missed her early years. Holding her as a baby. Seeing her take her first steps.

I position her on my hip and turn back to Aaron. He watches without saying much. But I can tell he's assessing everything.

I don't look at Morgan.

I can feel her eyes on me, but I don't dare.

Now that my wolf has made his intentions known, it's all I can think about. The...awareness of her is like a jolt of energy lingering in the air.

Of all the women in this world... a witch? Really.

And what would happen when we inevitably got into a fight? Her magic could smote my ass.

"Where is my mother?" Aaron asks.

Jacelyn rests her head on my shoulder.

"She's gone back to our pack. I'd like for you both to come and see her. To meet your whole family."

Aaron doesn't say anything. He's weighing my words, debating.

"Why should we come now?" he asks.

Morgan makes a sound, and my attention is drawn to her. I'm not sure what I see in her expression. Does she feel the tug between us too?

Maybe witches are immune to wolf magic or the concept of a true mating.

I focus on my nephew.

Aaron stares at me, his expression neutral, waiting.

Am I supposed to lie? I don't know how much Mia has told them, and maybe it'd have been better to have discussed things with her—before knocking her unconscious with enough ketamine for an elephant.

I rake my one hand through my hair.

All three sets of eyes stare at me expectantly.

"Well, kids, the truth is....your dad—my brother—is sick. And he misses your mom so much. And he really wants to meet both of you."

"He's the Alpha," Aaron says. It's a statement more than a question.

“That’s right.”

“Then it’s important that he gets better.”

“Yes.”

“Because a pack without an alpha is vulnerable.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Maybe Mia is bringing them up with the intent of them one day belonging in our world. If she isn’t, I’m going to set her straight on that.

It’s one thing to go it alone. But it isn’t fair to force the life of a rogue on innocent children.

And I know that’s all kinds of fucked up and unfair, especially given her circumstances, but still.

The kids belong with their pack.

Looking at these beautiful children... Holding my little niece and her clinging to me like she’s trying to make up for all the years she missed, I feel something big and warm start to unfurl in my chest.

I’d die for them.

It’s like a whole other kind of love, and it reminds me that there is nothing more important than pack—than family.

“Jace,” Morgan says quietly. She knows my name.

When I meet her gaze, my wolf turns circles.

Damn it all.

“My children are alone. Unprotected. In a place where we know that your Luna’s pack is currently attacking. And you think by kidnapping me, I’m just going to merrily come home with my tail between my legs? Back to that same luna who attacked me—and my whole pack who rejected me?”

I can hardly wrap my head around the arrogance and the misogyny.

“You’re not well,” Liam says.

There’s that.

My heart breaks as I think of my kids, alone. I’m all they’ve ever known. If I die...who will love them and care for them. Who will keep them safe?

Do I trust anyone to care for them the same as me?

Cameron, my wolf tells me.

No.

Cameron, she insists,

He’s sick too—that’s why we’re going back.

It’s the only reason.

“Look guys,” I say. I make myself stand up, although I have to hang onto the seats on the plane. I’m dizzy and whether it’s the affliction or whatever they shot me up with, I’m weak. “We all know I’m coming back for a reason. This isn’t some happy reunion. This isn’t me coming to stay. I’ll do what I can to help your Alpha, and then I’m leaving.”

And my kids are coming with me.

I don’t say this because it will literally start a war and that’s not what anybody needs—at least not while on this private jet.

“Hey Mia!” Christian yells from the pilot’s seat. He’s happy and genuine. And deep down I know he missed me—they all did.

I sigh. “Hi Chris.”

But their loyalty wasn’t to me. Maybe I could forgive, over time. But I would never forget.

This was still my ‘pack’ but they were no longer my ‘family.’”

The radio makes a noise and Christian answers it.

“Damn it!’ Christian mumbles and all heads swing to the front of the plane.

“What is it?” I ask.

“It’s Cameron. They’re losing him!”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

My wolf growls.

We’re back in this ‘other’ place.

It’s the darkness between wakefulness and sleep. A dream, but not.

I don’t see death—but I sense it.

It’s hovering like a mist at the edge of the woods.

I’m not sure how I can find my way to this space, but it’s an instinct ingrained in me.

“Hey beautiful.” Cameron stands beside the lake. Petals fall from the cherry blossom tree at the shoreline. My dad planted this tree with my mom. I always felt closer to her here.

It must be spring, this tree only blooms for a few days when the weather first turns warm. It’s a welcome sign that winter is over.

Cam’s blonde hair curls over the collar of his shirt and his beard is trim. He looks good. When he smiles, I’m a young girl again and that grin of his lights me up from the inside.

“I’ve missed you.” He walks closer.

My wolf is snapping and barking. Which makes no sense. Nala loves Cameron. She never gave up on him.

“I’m not sure how much time we have,” he tells me.

I feel the urgency too.

I glance at the forest, the mist is dark and ominous. Waiting.

I step closer toward the tree, toward the light.

Cam moves in front of me. His huge body blocking out the sun and his scent blowing to me—heat and earth and desire. It blends with the scent of cherry blossoms and the lake, creating an unforgettable memory.

Familiar and yet new.

When his hand reaches out and touches my face, I cry.

It’s joy and pain. Love and hate.

Desire and apathy.

“No,” he whispers. “Don’t let the pain in.”

I feel it then—his pain and mine.

Cameron hurts so deeply. It’s agony.

“I’m sorry,” he tells me.

I know he means it.

His other hand comes up, until they’re both cupping my face.

His eyes are beautiful, bottomless, the brightest green.

Then his lips are dipping toward mine.

I shouldn't do this. I shouldn't.

I need to break away and find my way out of this place.

"This isn't real, Cam."

His lips brush mine. They're so soft and full. So gentle.

He'd often kiss me like this. Gently, reverently, like I was some precious thing to cherish. Maybe not when the heat of the moment was upon us, but afterward. After he fucked me senseless.

My body remembers, and it stirs. Slickens. Heat pouring down my limbs and between my legs.

His nostrils flare. He loves the smell of me, the taste. I don't think there's a position we haven't tried or an inch of my body he hasn't explored.

His lips brush mine again. Tempting, teasing.

Maybe it is love.

I've always loved him.

He comes with a roar, and as he pulses inside my body, I clench and climax around him again. He drags me up and rolls so I'm sprawled across his chest.

We stay there. For minutes. Hours?

The only sound is our breathing and the steady thump of his heart beneath my head.

He occasionally twitches inside me and that fullness sends a ripple through my body that makes him chuckle.

He does it again.

"Stop it."

"Never," he says proudly.

He shifts to his side so I lie beside him, our bodies still connected. One of my legs thrown over his hip.

“I won’t let you go,” he tells me.

“Don’t.” I think I’m the only thing tying him to the real world. I could be wrong, but something about this place feels as peaceful as it does dangerous.

His hand trails down to my stomach. “I want you to have my baby, Mia.” He smiles crookedly. “Do you think we can get pregnant here?”

Here, meaning this...place.

I don’t know.

Nala makes a sound, it’s a rumbling purr of sorts. Yes, she tells me.

Her voice is so strong and clear I realize: It’s not can we make a baby...

We just did.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

“Here she comes!”

When I open my eyes, I see my father.

His hair is nearly all white and lines bracket his mouth and eyes. He’s still handsome. Still strong. But he appears to have aged dramatically in the years I’ve been gone.

I sit up slowly.

I'm in a hospital bed. I glance to my right. Cameron is in a bed beside mine.

Across the room is Ashley.

The growl that comes out is feral.

My father steps back abruptly. It wasn't directed at him, but let him think what he wants. He did nothing that fateful night.

Nothing for his only daughter.

I know he wasn't particularly emotional, but he was all I had.

"You look so beautiful," he says.

My dad never paid me a compliment like this before.

His hand shakes as he reaches to touch my hand.

I tense.

He freezes. His eyes furrow like I've struck him.

But he doesn't get to be hurt.

I am the one who's hurt.

He takes the next step and clasps my hand. His fingers are cold but his grip is firm. Relief pours through him. I can see it, smell it.

"I'm so happy you're here. I can hardly believe you're back."

"It wasn't by choice," I tell him truthfully.

Cam's father walks in. And his bitchy sister Claire too. I arch a brow at her.

Normally, she'd make some catty comment or give me a glare that would make me feel like gum beneath her Prada shoes.

Instead she sobs. Big ugly tears ruining her makeup as she lurches toward the hospital bed.

Her arms sling around me and I'm hugged hard.

I'm too shocked to move.

When she draws back, she swipes her eyes hastily. She doesn't say another word. No welcomes or apologies. She just stands and nods and walks back out of the room.

Huh.

The Alpha nods once at me and then goes to his son's side. He presses the call button, but it's unnecessary, Dr. Lee is already coming into the room.

"His color looks better," Alpha Healmsworth remarks.

Cam looks a little flushed. But that might just be from our sex dreams.

He has that same, sated smile he'd have after we spent hours together tangled up in bed.

I want to tell myself that it doesn't count. That what happened in that 'other place' just isn't possible. That it has no bearing on what we do in the real world.

Nala barks sharply.

Right.

I'm pregnant.

I decide to take that little nugget and tuck into a mental pocket. I can't wrap my mind around the fact that I'm back, or that Cam is what--in a coma?--or that we can connect in some other plane--one where we can touch and feel and conceive a baby.

Deep breath.

Everyone is staring at me.

Dr. Lee comes over and examines my arm. "This wound is only partially healed."

"Yes."

"Have you shifted since incurring the injury?"

"Yes." I tilt my head. "I'm sure my abductors relayed this information prior to my arrival."

My father and Cam's share an uncomfortable look.

Well, that's just tough. We aren't going to pretend things are peachy. Not after what they did to me. I don't expect Alpha Healmsworth to apologize—as the ruler of this pack, he can say or do whatever he pleases.

"Before you arrived, while you were still in flight," the doctor tells me, "Cameron flatlined. He was... for all intents and medical purposes, dead."

I gasp.

"Can you tell me what happened when you lost consciousness on the plane?"

Uh? Hours of mindblowing sex?

I wasn't about to share that. "I, uh, think I was able to connect with Cam. Only it was more like a dream or something."

My dad's eyes flare. He looks anxious... and sad?

"Can you try to communicate with Cam now?" the doctor asks.

I've never been much good at meditating. And I know nothing of channeling my thoughts or even how to act like some sort of receptor to receive his.

"Just close your eyes and try," Dr. Lee says. "Concentrate."

A sob catches in my throat.

His eyes swell with tears.

“Dad, I, uh, I don’t have the strength for ...”

He nods and pats my hand. I glance back at Cameron.

“Take a bath and eat,” Dr. Lee advises. “You can come back after.”

“He’d like that,” my father says.

I rub my head with my free hand. I can barely process the last-day?!

One minute, I’m in the arms of another Alpha, feeling like I was getting a second chance at happiness.

Then... everything unraveled.

Now I was home—no this wasn’t home.

Home was with my kids.

We push out of the medical wing into the open expanse of grass that forms the square. Our pack is set up like the strongholds in the old countries, with buildings and the Alpha’s house and main halls all flanking a big open space.

We’d hold feasts and holidays, dances and celebrations here. One giant pine is at its center. The tree we’d all decorate come Christmas.

And there, beneath the tree are Jacelyn and Aaron.

They’re smiling and playing soccer with Morgan and Cam’s mom and some of the pack’s kids.

I stop in my tracks.

“I didn’t know, Mia,” my dad cries. “That you were pregnant.”

I’ve never heard him cry. Not over mom. Not over me.

“They’re so beautiful,” he whispers with awe. Tears stream down his face. “They’re so smart and perfect. Little Jacelyn, she’s so much like you!”

He lets go of my hand. “Pop-pop’s here!” he yells and runs to intercept the ball and pass it to my daughter. She laughs and giggles. Her pigtails bobbing as she tries to keep the ball moving without falling.

He never joked or played a sport with me.

The stab of jealousy is sharp and I’m ashamed of it.

But what hurts most, the sheer terror and fear that sweep through my body at this idyllic picture.

Because the secret is out now.

These aren’t just my children—they’re Cameron’s.

And I know this pack will fight with fang and claw to keep my babies.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Aaron notices me first.

He stops playing immediately and runs to my side.

I drop to my knees and hug him.

He pats my back. “We’re fine, mom. You don’t have to worry.” When I lean back and kiss his forehead, he studies me with eyes that see too much. “Are you okay, mommy?”

I force myself to smile. “Of course! We’re together!”

He doesn't believe me. And he flinches that I might lie to him.

I hug him again and whisper, "Hey, my little man, knock it off. No reading mommy's mind!"

He giggles. He's still grumpy, but I know he won't stay that way.

I'm grateful for these glimpses of my little boy. Children should be free to play and learn and discover the world. They shouldn't have to carry the weight of their parents' sins.

Morgan approaches. She shoves her hands into her designer jeans. "I'm sorry."

Not a conversation I'm having with the little ones around.

My daughter squeals with laughter as she kicks the soccer ball past some imaginary goal line. Jace sweeps her up and tosses her in the air, cheering her victory.

My kids are happy.

They're surrounded by kin. By packmates.

A dark thought swirls through my mind and then sinks into my stomach. I've denied these people my children.

Grandparents, aunts, uncles.

Cameron—his right as a father.

They never rocked my kids to sleep. Never took them for walks in the park. Or played blocks or stayed up with them at night when they were getting their first teeth.

A sliver of guilt burns my stomach.

Morgan continues to watch me closely. "Hey Aaron, why don't you get back into the game? Your Uncle Jace... he's way too smug with that last goal. I know you can beat him."

Aaron grins. He's definitely got competitive genes.

He runs off then stops and glances back at me.

"I'm good! Go have fun!" I smile until he turns and then I narrow my eyes at the witch who I thought was my best friend. "Walk with me," I say.

We leave the kids and Cam's family. I'm not happy about it, but they deserve this time. Alpha Healmsworth shoots me one angry look, as his wife keeps tearing up as she stares at the kids. I arch a brow back at him.

Daring him to argue.

"You're... I don't know, different," Morgan says. "Your energy." She inclines her head. "Is it being on the packlands?"

Witches draw power from the earth, so I understand why she would think that. "No, our magic doesn't work that way."

"It's nice here."

"Are you really trying to distract me with small talk right now? You promised me!"

She takes a deep breath. "I did."

"Then why would you do this? You have to see that it's going to be impossible to leave here."

"Then maybe you shouldn't."

"What?"

"Did he come through here?" It's my father and he races into the room, looking terrified.

"What? Who?" I ask him.

“Aaron.” My father shoves a hand through his hair. “He said he’d be right back. I thought he was coming to follow you, or maybe to see his father... but ...”

“Dad, please tell me you did not just lose my son!”

I close my eyes and focus for a moment. I won’t panic.

It’s only been like three minutes. It’s not like Aaron could’ve gone far.

I head back into the hall and then outside. His scent is there. With the way he was running all over the square, his scent’s everywhere. But I am drawn to the left so I trust my instincts. I don’t run because I don’t want to alarm my daughter.

Morgan’s on my heels and my father too. We take the steps into one of the packhouses. I’m not sure whose. The other scents are unfamiliar. Why would he go into some random home?

For a bathroom maybe? Naw. He loves a good ‘bush wee.” Which, creators of Bluey...cartoons should not teach these things!

My son is too young to track. Those senses don’t develop until the teen years. So why would he come this way?

We hurry inside. I take the stairs two at a time. I can feel him now. If I listen hard enough I can hear his breathing. I push open the second door in the hallway and stop short.

Aaron’s standing in what appears to be a very pretty nursery.

Pinks and whites and pale purple. Huge stuffed animals all over the room and a reading nook with a fairytale castle. It’s a little girl’s childhood dream.

Aaron’s dragged a stack of toy boxes over and stands on top of them so he can reach all the way into the crib.

“What are you doing, I ask?”

“Bonding with my sister,” he tells me.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

I move to the crib and stare at Cameron’s daughter.

A baby he had with that evil bitch Ashley.

The little girl has my son’s eyes. Cameron’s eyes. Jace’s. Their bloodline is strong.

She’s cute and coos and holds Aaron’s hand.

But something is not... right.

Nala whimpers and growls. My wolf senses it too.

I glance at my dad. He shakes his head.

“She’s sick, mommy,” Aaron tells me. My son shouldn’t be able to sense such things, but he does.

Outwardly the baby girl appears normal, if not small and thin.

“How old is she?” I ask.

“Merilee is eighteen months old,” my dad says.

I gasp. She’s so small. She seems more like a baby half that age. That can’t be good.

My dad sweeps the baby up, natural as can be and she taps at his mouth. He blows air and makes kissy sounds.

Who is this man? And where was this doting father when he raised me?!

The hurt lingers, but I won't allow the jealousy to fester or take hold.

All children are innocent. They should just be loved.

I touch the little girl's cheek. "You're such a pretty little angel."

"We have to help her, mommy." My son is agitated and worried. He holds his arms up, a silent demand for the baby, and my dad takes a knee so Aaron can hold her with my father supporting.

The naturalness of it all is astounding.

I glance at Morgan. "Well, you're certainly getting Werewolf 101."

She's been watching our interactions closely and I can tell she's fascinated. But there is also a wariness about her. I sensed it when we started arguing in the sick bay and she's especially fraught with tension now after seeing Merilee.

"Aaron," I kiss his forehead. "I'm going to talk to Auntie Morgan for a bit. You stay here and visit with your sister and Grandpa."

"Pop-pop," he corrects me.

Wow. Okay. He already has a special name for my dad.

Acid rises in my throat. Is there any world in which I can take my kids away?

"Morgan, a word," I tell her.

She nods and follows me back outside. We trace our steps back to the hospital wing and then we pause in the middle of the room.

She glances between Cameron and across to Ashley.

"What do you see?" I ask her.

Dr. Lee enters and joins us. "Yes. I would value your opinion too, as these are inflictions beyond modern medicine and our werewolf genes."

Morgan nods. "It's magic. Dark magic."

A chill traipses up my arms.

"Do you know who wove this spell?" I ask.

She looks away. "I do."

But that's all she says.

Dr. Lee and I share a worried look. "Can it be undone?"

"No." Morgan jerks her head toward Ashley. "Humans and non-mystical beings...they all think magic is like a chalkboard where you write your desire and then when you're done you just erase it and everything goes back to the way it used to be. But that's not how magic works. It is permanent. Binding. This spell especially."

"What is it, exactly?" Dr. Lee presses.

"A soul binding...animus ligare."

Dr. Lee nods. "Wolves mate naturally. We consider a 'true' mating a gift of the Goddess."

"As you should," Morgan agrees. "But when we trick nature there can be consequences. Every spell comes with a price. Nothing is ever given freely."

There is a warning in her words and it gives me a prickle of unease.

"Is there a spell to break it?" I ask. I'm staring at Cameron and watching him decline before my eyes. "There has to be something..."

"I told you. That's not how this works." She sighs. "I feel especially bad for the baby... her genes would be mutated."

"Yes, we've assessed as much," the doctor says. He frowns. "This is one of the rare times, I'd say human medicine could be of real merit. With a stem cell match, we could intervene."

“Stem cells. Like from the placenta?” It’s the first time I’ve ever heard a wolf talk about science as a solution for anything.

“Yes.” The doctor nods at me.

“How long does Merilee have?” I ask. I still don’t know if I’m carrying a baby—that dreamscape makes me think it’s possible, but that would defy all the rules of science.

As in...every rule.

“You have no idea what you’ve done.” I can already hear the Alpha roaring outside and clamoring for me.

“What do you mean?” She’s confused.

“We don’t share our secrets with anyone, Morgan. Not humans. Not other species. We have very strict rules about preserving our packs.”

“But it wasn’t your fault!” Morgan argues.

“This is our most sacred law. And whether intentional or not, Mia broke it.” Dr. Lee looks at me with sympathy. “There will be consequences...”

“What kind of consequences?” Morgan’s voice rises.

There is yelling outside and the sounds of many people descending on this building. Doors slam. Feet pound over the tile floors.

“Death,” I tell her. “The punishment for what I’ve done is death.”

“No!” She gasps. “But this isn’t your fault.” She reaches out. “Mia...”

“Don’t,” I snap. “Don’t touch me.” She lowers her hand, at least having the decency to look ashamed. “My kids—” Oh no, no, no... my children...

“The Alpha is coming,” Dr. Lee says, his voice soft.

But the warning is moot. The Alpha barrels into the room. “Restrain them!” he orders.

The guards behind him hurry to obey. They surround me. Two of them grab my arms. Three others position themselves at the door.

Dr. Lee is no help. His loyalty is to pack. And as the pack has always done, they see in black and white. There are no shades of gray.

“Mia, I’m so sorry,” Morgan is saying. They shackle her with runes. And the effect is immediate. She nearly collapses from how they bind her power.

“I just wanted a life, Morgan. Safe with my children.” I realize now, that trusting anyone was my mistake.

I should’ve been stronger.

My weakness and fear, my loneliness, made me an easy target for this witch.

I can’t even be angry with the Alpha or Dr. Lee or my pack. It’s a horrible transgression I’ve committed. If I were in their shoes, I’d be outraged too.

I’m dragged to the opposite side of the room and tossed onto a gurney. I suppose I can count myself lucky that my kids won’t have to see their mother restrained like a criminal and paraded across the square to the holding cells.

“Mia was completely unaware of what my coven planned,” Morgan pleads.

Alpha Healsworth glares at her, but Morgan won’t be quiet.

“She came to us with nothing. She had no one to turn to,” she says. I appreciate that she’s trying to defend me.

But it’s too little, too late.

And her apologies don’t change the fact that she used me.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

It's dark outside, so I'm not sure how much time has passed.

I'm surprised I was able to sleep, but in the long hours while I lay constrained on the gurney, waiting, I guess the overwhelming stress finally pushed my body to shut down.

A small mercy, I suppose.

"The moon is rising," Dr. Lee says.

Hmm, it's early in the night then. When I try to sit up, I find my restraints gone. The guards are still here. I don't see Morgan.

Christian and Liam enter the hospital room. They head over to Cameron first. They pat his hand and whisper hellos to him, encouraging him to wake up and see his family.

I should've told Cameron about his kids.

When we were in that 'other' space, I should've said something.

It's just one more regret in what's adding up to be so many.

"It's time, Mia," Dr. Lee tells me. "They have convened the Elders."

A trial then.

Funny, how this pack could rally so hard to save Cameron, even while they conspire to punish me.

Liam helps me to my feet. He hands me clean clothes and I automatically accept them before moving toward the bathroom in the corner of the hospital ward. They wait for me to change.

I never did get that shower.

Or a chance to eat.

It's been one day since I've returned to my pack. And already, I'm about to be cast out again—or worse.

I'm hungry and tired and just so...sad.

Nala help me.

She growls and paces, pouring her energy into me.

It's not a lot, but it is enough.

My kids...

They're so empathic and Aaron is so proud. He'll never get over the betrayal of his pack banishing his mother. And Jacelyn, my little angel, she'll be devastated to lose me.

At least, I hope that exile will be the worst of it.

I'm connected to Cameron in some way and surely that must count for something.

Killing me might kill Cameron, and that's the one saving grace I cling to.

Nala whimpers.

I'm seconds away from breaking down. I can't do that. Crying or showing weakness will be perceived as guilt.

I need to be strong. To voice my truth and to appeal to their sense of justice.

I have been punished enough for treacheries that I had no part of.

They lead me out of the building and past the rows of houses.

There isn't much time. I pause and glance at Liam. "I need to see my children."

Liam sighs. "Yeah."

"Liam..." Christian narrows his eyes, and I know they're talking mind to mind. The way pack does.

The way I no longer can, since I'm not pack. Not family.

"They're going to kill us for this," Christian says, but he's already relenting. "We have to be fast, okay?"

I blink away useless tears and hurry to my father's house.

There I see my children playing games with him, and again I wonder what I ever did that made my dad not love me. He seems so happy with them. He was never like that with me.

"Mommy!" Aaron sees me and jumps from his chair to rush into my arms.

I hug him back, loving him so much.

Maybe not everything, but enough.

My son's strength and love fill my heart until I can barely stand up. "Always and everywhere," I whisper.

I kiss my daughter's head and turn to leave.

"Mia!" It's my dad. His mouth trembles but he doesn't have any words.

I nod. "Promise me." I look pointedly at my kids.

"Until my last breath," he vows.

"Mia," Christian says quietly. "It's time."

I force a smile.

As I leave, what's left of my heart is torn apart.

Liam and Chris escort me out of the main compound. We walk beyond the pack houses and the various buildings that house vehicles, and weaponry, supplies and our archives. We move to the edge of the grounds where the soft grass meets the woods.

The moon shines bright and full, and Nala prowls.

Silently, we three strip and shift.

The ground smells...nice.

These woods were home for most of my life, and the familiar scents and terrain bring a brief bit of joy.

Nala, too, missed this place.

A pity that this will be the last time we run these paths or breathe in the smell of pine and cedar and rich, old earth.

All too soon, we reach the clearing. It's marked by a ring of standing stones. A sight more suited to Britain or maybe Ireland or the old country in the Netherlands, where such rings were more common.

There is an outer ring of stones. They're small and mark the start of the sacred ground. We pause here and shift back to human.

It's as a human that my fate will be determined.

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novel Chapter 27

Chapter Twenty-Seven

As we walk into the first ring, the moonlight and firelight ahead bring the taller stone circle and the wolves gathered outside it into focus.

Our ancestors brought their traditions to the New World, and the power that radiates from this sacred area reminds me that I am but one wolf in a long, long line of shifters.

Magic saturates this space. Borne of nature, the Goddess and this earth.

Pack wolves convene outside the circle. They kneel and await the trial. Some are thoughtful, others growling low, their anger at my misdeeds so very clear. There are dozens of them gathered. Distant family, people I once called friends. Members of a community that I'd known my whole life.

They're here to watch me pay for my sins.

I silently walk past them and into the main ring.

At the top of the circle sits the Alpha, with three seats on either side for the Elders. I remember the first time I saw Cameron take his place at the head of the circle. I'd been so proud.

Cam's father sits there now.

A fire is lit. It burns bright.

We stop before the Alpha and Elders.

The heat of the fire warms my back like the sun after a storm.

This isn't too different from the last time I'd stood naked in front of my pack. That was the day Cameron married Ashley.

I'd been singled out then too.

Alone, targeted. Rejected. Other.

I call on Nala for strength, lest my fear bleeds through. It pulses though, like a living thing about to leak through my pores.

I see the hunger for justice burning in too many eyes and sense the eagerness to kill.

The Elders...they just look bored.

I repress my shiver, surprised when I see Morgan enter the circle. She stands at the edge of one of the tall standing stones, with Jace, Declan and Michail. She meets my gaze with a fierce one of her own.

I'm guessing she's just as afraid as I am, because outsiders aren't allowed in the circle.

Which means... if they brought her here, she's not intended to survive.

She's still bound in rune chains. She won't be able to help me.

She won't be able to help herself.

Part of me feels bad about that. Deep down, I know she'd never willingly harm me, and her guilt is a palpable force.

Not that it matters now.

What's done... is done.

I spare one last glance at Jace. He's stricken with the knowledge that HE brought me here. He started this cycle of events and now I can only reap whatever may come.

Alpha Healmsworth stares into the fire.

Elder Tomlin stands. He's a big wolf with a grizzled beard and bright blue eyes. "We are called together this night to bear witness and trial to Mia Riorsen."

Elder Isla stands next. Her long white hair is braided and she looks regal and wise. "For those of you who do not know, these are the crimes that have transpired..."

She recites the events and I stand quietly. She doesn't embellish or add any inflection to her voice. The facts are relayed rather blandly.

"Is this the truth of the actions as they transpired?" she asks me.

“Yes,” I say.

“We have very strict rules,” Gemma says. This Elder is not as tall as Isla or nearly as old. But she carries strength and wisdom and she’s long been a wolf revered by our people. “Our laws have allowed us to survive as we have for these many millennia. Our laws keep our packs safe.”

I wait silently.

Tomlin shakes his head. There is no mistaking his disgust. “Mia Riorsen has conspired with witches! With this information—with our blood—they can cast targeted spells, and even wipe out our kind!”

The grumbling outside the circle turns into gasps and growls of outrage.

I cringe. I can’t help it. That much rage directed my way is impossible to ignore.

Alpha Healmsworth watches me, his expression hard to read.

Tomlin sits, and now Elder Marco stands. “What say you, Mia?” he asks.

Of all the Elders, I always admired him most. He says very little, but his lessons as a child stayed with me. His eyes are kind, and his face, though weathered and woven with lines, has always radiated happiness.

Although he doesn’t look happy now. Not at all.

“I was falsely accused once and banished from this pack. Ashley’s duplicity has been revealed, and yet there is no recompense for what was done.”

This causes some murmurs in the pack and I watch as the Elders shift in their seats.

Wolves start shifting. The moon hits me like a spotlight. And I’m reminded again, that I don’t belong.

I probably never did.

“Alpha Healmsworth.” My voice is hoarse. “I am connected to your son. Banish me. Imprison me. But don’t risk Cameron’s life like this...”

His eyes widen at my audacity. Then they narrow. “Do not speak to me about my son! What you’ve done jeopardizes his children!”

Ah, there it is.

Maybe I should be surprised, but I’m not. With Cameron’s decline, the Alpha powers would have returned to his father. And he’s accepted that. I think maybe he’s even happy to have that absolute power back.

With me gone... he’ll have his heirs.

My children have secured his bloodline.

I look at Jace.

He is filled with so much regret it’s like a wave of pain that slams into me. “I’m sorry!” he shouts.

He takes a knee.

Michail, Liam, Christian, Declan.

Even Claire.

They kneel.

Some of the women and my old friends, I see them when I glance outside the circle. They kneel.

It is their one show of support for me.

But it won’t mean a thing.

I want to be with Cameron as we were when the days were long and our love was pure.

I want to have one last moment with Eric. I didn’t have the chance to love him, but in the brief time I knew him, I did. I wish I could say goodbye.

Above all, I just want to hold my children once more.

The Alpha stands. “Mia Riorsen, you are found guilty of endangering this pack. And the penalty for that ... is death.”

Before he can shift, the fire blazes up into a wall of flames.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Enough!” Morgan steps forward. She raises her hands. The runes explode off her wrists like shrapnel, spearing into the stones and into at least one wolf.

I am knocked off my feet.

I didn’t know she had power like that.

From the gasps and screams of the pack—they didn’t know a witch could have power like that either.

“I said, ‘Enough!’” she screams.

The fire churns even brighter, flames glowing in red and purple and blue. Wind rages through the circle.

The Elders shift.

The pack moves...like a pack. Wolves grouping together into a wall of snarling fangs and snapping teeth. They move from outside the sacred stones into the inner sanctum.

Morgan blows back the frontline wolves with a gust of wind that sends them tumbling into the wolves behind them.

Then she calls the flames. And they rise.

Like a sheet of fire, the swirling inferno grows.

Two wolves catch me before I can stand back up—the decree has been issued, and even amid this madness, they will see that the Alpha's will is done. One of them bites my leg and I scream in pain.

Morgan gathers her magic and the blast of wind and fire she unleashes rocks through the circle in waves.

Wolves whimper and reel.

They burn and are tossed into the stones.

All at once, I'm slammed to the ground, the two wolves who held me are gone—they roll and howl as they burn. I shove to my hands and knees and gasp for air. My leg is mangled and I'm losing blood.

Before I can stand, I'm ripped back by my hair.

A knife presses to my throat. "Stop! Now!" Alpha Healmsworth growls.

Morgan freezes. She sways on her feet.

The pack is regrouping. The scent of burnt hair and ash is heavy in the air. After the maelstrom of wind and fire, the stillness of the night is unnerving.

There is no sound.

Only the harsh breathing of humans and beasts, and the crackling of the fire that has dimmed to a low burn.

I'm going to die now.

Morgan's strong...but she used too much magic in those first spells. She staggers as she tries to raise the flames again, and Jace catches her as she falls.

The fire flickers and fades.

I let my eyes meet hers. She has wronged me, yes, but when given the chance to use her magic to escape or to save a friend.

She chose to try to help me.

A tear slips free.

I feel the knife cut into my skin. I suck in a breath as my blood drips down my neck.

I never thought about what my last moments on this earth might be like. Not like this, for sure. I would've liked to have died old, surrounded by my children and grandchildren, holding Cameron's hand. Knowing my life had been spent well.

That I was loved.

Time slows and ebbs. I draw a breath and then another, holding them in because these will be my last, and I want to cling to everything I can on this earth.

The knife is steady at my throat, but even without it slicing deep, I'm bleeding freely from my leg.

It won't be long now.

My vision dims and I try to reach that place I did with Cam, that plane between the worlds. I feel my pulse slow as the air leaves my lungs...

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

CAMERON

“Get your hands off my mate!”

I can't believe what I'm seeing.

Mia is on her knees. My father has a knife at her throat.

There's blood down her neck and chest. Her one leg is a bloody mess.

The circle is in upheaval. Wolves are wounded. Some have shifted back to human. Others prowl the circle waiting for my father's command. Small fires dot the ground and the embers smolder.

The clearing reeks of blood and ash and magic.

There's an outsider in the circle, beside my brother. A witch.

And my father is about to kill Mia?

What the actual fuck?

"Stand down!" I stagger forward. Sean, my beta and Mia's father, moves to help me, but I wave him back.

I may be weak, but in this chaos, I need to stand strong.

The Elders obey immediately. They recede their lycan forms to human. My father is the last to shift, and prickles of unease roll up my spine at his willingness to ignore my command.

"Dad!"

He retracts his wolfen features and shakes his head. He looks confused. Well, that sure as fuck makes two of us.

One minute, I was unconscious. Suspended in some dreamlike state.

The next, I was staring at two little kids, with eyes just like mine...

"Cam?" My father shifts back completely and rushes to my side.

He catches me in a bearhug and squeezes.

"Dad..." I cough. "Ease up."

“Alpha Cameron.” He has tears in his eyes he doesn’t shed.

My father is never one for big emotional displays.

Then again, he isn’t one for murder either.

Annoyed that he could do what he did, I push him aside and rush to my mate. “Mia?”

She’s bloody and dirty, sitting on the ground, but her eyes, when she looks up at me...I’ve never seen a more beautiful sight.

My hand shakes as I touch her hand.

Just seeing her here, now, it’s like a dream come to life.

The feel of her skin, the squeeze of her fingers around mine is like a lifeline.

My memories are ... fractured.

I remember the night she left. I recall the years of my life with Ashley.

That night—I don’t know how long ago—when Ashley went to see her brother and when she returned...my whole world went to hell.

Everything between then and now is a blur. A space where time ceases to exist and the only bits of joy came from stolen moments with the girl I’d betrayed so long ago.

My father clears his throat.

I’m lost in my thoughts, silently holding Mia’s hand.

My whole pack watches me, waiting.

“Explain,” I order, and my power washes around the circle. Oddly, it feels as if it comes from my father first, but it settles back in me.

When no one speaks, Morgan sighs. “Hello? Beauty products? You all age so slowly and heal so fast. We plan to make our cosmetics more youth-

enhancing. It's all about money, not spells. We deal in science. Our magic is reserved for our covens. We don't squander it on humans."

"That's all well and good," I allow. Conn wants me to grab Mia. To pull her into our arms and hold her close.

But this is a Trial. And the full power of the Elders have converged.

My father had been about to execute my mate.

A witch is among us.

One with access to our genetics—my kids' genetics.

I don't know how long I've been unconscious, but seriously... What. The. Fuck!?

I glare at my father.

He knows—he's always known that Mia is the one. That my heart and soul belonged to her long before I even knew what love was. The fact that the bond never fully sparked between us...I still can't comprehend why.

Not that it matters.

"We have our laws, son," he says quietly.

I don't try to hold back the growl that escapes.

Yeah, we have our laws. But he, above anyone else, knows what Mia means to me. And now that I know she has been alone, and that she is the mother of my children...

"No one is touching Mia." I put the full force of my Alpha powers into the decree. The surge of power is welcome, but in that command, I've expelled what little strength I have left.

Several wolves rock back a step. Good. The command is one that cannot be undone. Not unless I rescind it.

I glance at the witch. “You claim to have acted honorably, and that you would not abuse the knowledge you’ve gained. But you can’t speak for your entire coven.”

“No, she can’t,” Jace adds with a growl.

“Handle it,” I tell my brother.

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Chapter Thirty

There’s screaming and cursing as Jace drags the witch away. I’ll deal with that situation later.

For now, I’ve removed at least one threat.

Time to deal with the next one...

I stroke Mia’s head. “What do you think?” I whisper. “Ready to shift back now? We can run together later, I promise.”

Her head swings up and down once, and then she’s morphing back. My hand stays on her. I can’t stop touching her. Her skin is soft, so soft.

I want to hold her and kiss her and make love to her.

What we did in my dreams... it wasn’t nearly enough.

“All right,” my father says, and his voice echoes across the circle. “My son is awake! Our Alpha is alive! Let’s go back to the square and celebrate. It is Cameron’s rule that will determine what happens with...everything else.”

There are nods and murmurs of acceptance.

Someone drapes a robe over Mia's shoulders. It's Dr. Lee. "She isn't fully recovered," he says. And the implication in his tone is clear: neither am I.

Before the crowd can disperse there is a marked hush.

"Hello Mother!" It's Aaron.

The boy walks toward us, and the entire circle stills.

"Aaron, no!" Mia cries. She's scared and sad and wounded. She doesn't want her son to see her like this.

"It's okay, Momma." The little boy smiles at her. "Jacelyn and I are safe. You're safe now too."

These are my children. I can hardly wrap my head around it.

The boy grins at me, his little smirk saying, 'Come on, dad, get up to speed.'

I'm trying, son, I project to him.

He smiles so big, it's clear he's thrilled to have heard me.

I notice he has blond hair. Like mine. And green eyes. Also like mine.

I'm stunned.

And that little girl...my heart about doubles in size. She's the spitting image of Mia.

The little boy puts his hand on mine. Conn rumbles with approval. The boy is strong and confident, an alpha by birth and blood.

I breathe deep, committing his scent to memory, looking forward to a time when I can get to know him more. I still cannot believe I have a son.

"Don't send our pack away yet," he tells me. "They need to know."

"Know what," I ask carefully.

“The truth,” he says simply. “Because if Auntie Morgan didn’t do what she did, then my sister would die.”

I’m confused but I let him speak. His sister, the little girl, Jacelyn, looks fine.

The boy, Aaron, continues, sounding much older than a child. “It is a cruel fate that kept us from you, Father. But had it not, then my sister would never have been born. And Merilee is meant to be on this earth.”

There is a collective gasp from my pack, at my son’s... revelation.

“Yes,” Jacelyn agrees as she comes to stand on my other side. I wrap my arm around her instinctively. “Everything has happened as it has needed to. So we can save Merilee. And we have to save her, daddy. Because she will do great things...”

JACE

“What the hell, Morgan? All your talk about protecting my niece and nephew, when you’d already compromised all of our safety!”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she argues.

I keep my hand on her arm as I march her back toward the packhouses. Michail keeps pace with us. He wasn’t tasked with the chore. He just has my back, a bit of added muscle should the situation call for it.

But if this witch were to summon the same magic she did in the circle, I’m pretty sure we’d be burnt to a crisp before we could even bring our wolves out.

She laughed and teased, wiped their noses and snuggled with them.

They love her. Call her Auntie Morgan.

She obviously loves them.

Or so I'd thought.

"I love those kids!" she screams, as if reading my mind.

And in that moment, something occurs to me. "You can't go back... can you?" When she brought the kids to my pack, there would have been repercussions.

"No," she whispers. "Once the kids were within our grasp, the coven voted. They wanted to run more tests—

"On my niece and nephew."

She nods and looks away. "I wasn't going to let that happen."

"When I showed up, you saw an opportunity and you took it."

"Yes."

"That can't be easy for you."

She jerks a shoulder again. "It is, what it is...there is a bounty on my head."

Sonofabitch.

I want to gather her up and kiss away her sadness.

"That's the price I was going to demand, Jace," she says softly. "Your pack's protection."

So that was her angle. "You know I'd give that to you anyway."

"I know that ...now." She smiles. "Because I never would've broken out of those runes if you hadn't unlocked them."