



SAMHAIN

*Sabine*  
and the Beast

MOIRA ROGERS

A curse can erase her from his mind, but never from his heart.

*...and the Beast, Book 1*

After three years at war, the High Lord of the Forest returns to his lands, a victorious wolf leader intent on claiming his mate. Instead Ciar finds an empty bed and a court with no recollection of the woman he loved. Following her long-cold trail proves far easier than facing what awaits him at the end.

Sabine's first instinct is to beg her beloved to leave. The High Lord's mother hired a witch to curse Sabine, desperate to wipe the lowborn wolf from her son's mind. But the spell worked too well, and Sabine has vanished from the thoughts of everyone who sees her. Including her own family.

The edges of his memory already blurring, Ciar and Sabine must race to find a way to reverse the spell. Yet every searing moment together is not enough to stop the curse's inexorable progress. His only chance is to bind Sabine to him too tightly to be forgotten, before she disappears once and for all.

Warning: This story contains cruel betrayal, destined love, vile curses, smoldering reunions, wicked deeds between wanton shapeshifters and a happily-ever-after worthy of any fairy tale.

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# Sabine

*Maira Rogers*

## Dedication

To our intrepid editor Anne, who always indulges our subgenre ADD, even when it includes crazy, crazy things. Thank you.

# Prologue

Once, the kingdom stood united.

It was strong then, strong enough to stand against invaders who sought to break it apart and seize parts of the whole as their own. The four races of shapeshifters fought together, died together and emerged victorious.

It wasn't until later, when the threats had died, that the kingdom fell apart. With no one to fight, no one purpose to unite them, they began to fracture.

And then they began to fight one another.

The four nations warred for generations, until the High Lord of the Plains and the High Lord of the Forest chose to put aside past grievances, though wolves and lions have ever been natural enemies. Together they brought peace to their people, and commanded their most trusted generals, the First Warlords, to help them drive the armies from the mountains and the navies from the seas back to their own territories.

Brutal war reigned for years, but the new alliance emerged victorious. The High Lords and First Warlords parted as brothers and returned to their own lands, where they sought to enjoy the peace they'd struggled so hard to secure.

But when the High Lord of the Forest returned to his palace, eager to greet his lover, he found that jealousy and betrayal had been at work in his court, and the battle for his personal peace had just begun.

# Chapter One

No one talked about the wild woman in the forest.

Mothers did not scare recalcitrant children into good behavior with stories of how the woman would snatch them from their beds as they slept. Green recruits to the warlords' armies did not boast of how they'd fought her and bested her magic. There were no whispered rumors, no legends, no cautionary tales.

Any of these things might have been, had anyone spoken of the woman in the first place. But no one did, for no one could.

No one remembered her at all.

The wolf studied the cabin.

It was an ugly thing. Small and squat, built of dark stones packed with mud and topped with a wild roof thatched by inexperienced hands. Even the High Lord of the Forest could recognize a poorly constructed hovel, for all that he had been bred a warrior and lived his days in a magnificent palace. This sad little hut couldn't hope to keep out the weather—not the cold winter drafts rushing down from the mountains, or the heavy winds that whistled through the trees.

Had he been in his other form, he might have frowned. Instead the wolf lowered his head and sniffed at the dried leaves, hardly able to believe that the sweet, familiar scent had led him here.

The door opened and a woman stepped out. Her heavy cloak couldn't conceal the curves that lay beneath it, nor could the rough hood hide hair like spun gold, glinting in the late-afternoon light.

She froze, staring down at her hand on the leather latch, as if she did not dare look up.

The wolf stepped forward, paws silent on the forest floor. When he stood just inside the clearing, he closed his eyes and called his other form. As easy as breathing, after so many years at war. He counted her heartbeats—three before he stood on two legs, clad in rough leathers and a sturdy cloak. They weren't the extravagant sables and silks his mother pressed upon him, but a warrior's clothing, attuned to him by magic so it would survive the change between forms. It could well be years before he was comfortable in anything else again.

It *had* been years since he'd spoken to her. "Sabine."

"Ciar." She turned and whispered something that sounded like either a plea or a prayer, though he could not make out the words.

Whatever it was, it fell far from an explanation. “I did not expect to return from war only to find my rooms bare of any trace of you.”

“You—” Confusion darkened her eyes, and she started forward only to draw up short. “You have been gone a very long time.”

Their comfortable understanding of one another seemed to have vanished as surely as she had. A stranger stared at him, her energy and demeanor only a hair shy of feral. Not the easy woman he’d loved. “I went to war, Sabine. You know this.”

“Yes, I know this,” she snapped, color rising in her pale cheeks. “I ceased to exist the day you left.”

He’d left orders, and he wished he was more surprised they’d been disregarded. Sabine had been the mistress of his heart, but she lacked the noble blood his mother valued above all else. “I am sorry. You will tell me who ignored my command that you be treated with courtesy.”

“You don’t understand,” she murmured, “and you should not have come.” Tears welled in her eyes.

“Sabine.” He strode forward, reaching for her, and she shrank back.

“No,” she growled, one hand held out as if to ward him off. “You mustn’t touch me.”

War had hardened him. Some nights he woke in a cold sweat, sure that blood still slicked his skin. Did she see violence in him now? Did she *fear* him? “I intend you no harm.”

Sabine laughed, a helpless noise that held no mirth. “You’re the only one left, Ciar, the most important. I won’t survive it if I lose you too.”

Frustration brought the edge of his wolf to the surface, turned his words to a snarl. “I don’t understand.”

She closed her eyes, hiding the longing that shone suddenly in their depths. “If you promise not to touch me, I will make some tea and explain. But you must *swear* it, on your life.”

“I swear it.” On his sanity, perhaps. The long nights in his tent, dreaming of warm skin and full breasts, of the sweet heat of her body, even just the pleasure of holding her—never had he imagined coming home to such coldness.

He hadn’t expected any of what he’d found upon his return home. Not the court full of near-strangers or his empty rooms, and certainly not a mother who had taken the presumptuous step of arranging his betrothal to woman he hardly knew.

Ciar had left it behind—the palace, his mother, his so-called betrothed. Nothing had mattered but the woman before him, the one who watched him now as if trying to judge his sincerity.

After a moment, Sabine unlatched the door and waved him inside.

The hut was as uncomfortable as it looked, almost unbearably chilly until she knelt and stirred up the banked fire. Only then did she remove her cloak, revealing a simple dress of dark blue. “Sit, please.”



She'd been young when she'd first come to his bed. Not so much younger than he himself, but if war had hardened him, then age had softened her. Oh, not all over—her body seemed more slender, perhaps, but with entrancing new curves that made his mouth water. Wicked hips, glorious breasts—

He was not to touch her. It was hard not to sigh as he dropped to a hard wooden chair, his discomfort magnified by his acute arousal.

Sabine hung a kettle over the fire and began to speak. "When you left, those at the palace were eager for me to go, as well. I refused. The chancellor offered me money, your mother asked me to think of what was best for you... The last thing they wanted to hear was that I'd promised myself to you."

"They didn't need to be told. I made it clear to everyone that they were to treat you as my mate."

She hesitated at his words, and he saw her hands were shaking as she pulled two chipped cups from a cupboard beside the hearth. "They needed to be rid of me. Your mother had her witch lay a spell. You had gone, so she had to cast the magic on me." She turned away. "Magic to make you forget me while you were away."

The words made no sense. "And yet here I am. I assure you, I thought of you every night."

It seemed to ease her. She glanced back at him and, for just a moment, she looked the way she once had—blushing at his attention. Yearning for his touch.

She blinked and it was gone. "Something must have gone wrong. Soon, no one at the palace could remember me, not even the witch."

All thoughts of lusty touches faded in a rush of worry. "When I asked about you, I thought my mother was doing what she has ever done—refusing to acknowledge any truth which does not please her."

"Far from it. It—" She dropped to sit across from him at the rough table, careful to keep her hands far from his, misery etched in every tense line of her body. "At first I thought it was a cruel joke, or perhaps an effect limited to the palace. When I traveled home to see my mother, I found out the truth."

Worry turned to horror. "No."

Sabine closed her eyes, as if it hurt her to make him listen. "It happens faster if I touch someone, or if they sleep. I don't know why. Otherwise, I think I simply...fade."

So she'd lived alone, in the woods. In squalor. "How long?"

A shudder took her. "I would have spared you this, Ciar. It won't matter now, not for long, but you should know that."

Ominous words, but he chose to pretend there might be some innocuous meaning. "You've discovered a way to break the spell?"

She flinched. "The witch was most affected, along with your mother. I tried to tell her what was happening, begged her to reverse the spell, but every time she turned away, she forgot I was there."

"Sabine. What do you mean, that it won't matter for long?"

“Your distance must have protected you from the spell’s effects. But my own mother forgot me, Ciar, and now so will you.”

“Never.” The chair scraped on the rough-hewn floor as he shoved away from the table. “Do you honestly expect me to leave you here by yourself?”

“I wish you *would*.” Her voice thickened with tears. “You don’t know what it’s like to look into someone’s eyes and see nothing. No hint of recognition, *nothing*. Think about it and tell me what would have been worse for you today—a cold reception, or if I hadn’t even remembered your face.”

He reached out but checked the gesture. “Nothing could provide more torment than this. Knowing you suffer.”

For the first time, her shoulders straightened and she looked almost calm. Peaceful. “Then I’ll take my solace in knowing I won’t torment you for long.”

“You won’t,” he agreed quietly. “Because you and I are going to find the witch. She will not be able to forget the High Lord of the Forest when he stands before her.”

Sabine smiled, though the expression fell short of reaching her eyes. “I appreciate that.”

She didn’t believe him. Well enough, he’d give her reason to believe. “May I stay tonight?”

“Of course.” She sprinkled dried herbs in each cup and poured steaming water over them. “You will always be welcome in my home.”

*And I will free you. A promise to them both.*

How sobering that fighting a war had seemed a less daunting task.

## Chapter Two

Sabine had not slept.

She'd tried, but every passing heartbeat had reminded her of the wolf who rested by the hearth, and the likelihood that he would wake, bleary-eyed and confused, and demand to know who she was and why she was there.

It wouldn't matter that this was her home, such as it was. His memories of arriving, perhaps even of tea and dinner, would be present but changed, stripped of her presence.

The final heartbreak, the worst of all.

In her stronger moments, she'd wished him complete forgetfulness, peace from the agony of loss that plagued her. In her weakest, she'd cried to the moon and stars, begged him to come for her. To save her.

This was the reward for her selfishness.

He stirred before dawn, coming to his feet in near silence and a tricky bit of magic that left him standing as a man, shoulders tense, one hand on the knife strapped to his hip. Confusion lit his eyes for one terrifying, miserable second, but it cleared when his gaze fell on her. "Sabine."

She didn't dare move. "Ciar?"

His gaze shifted, took in the rough cabin, the plain furniture. A frown curved his strong mouth. "Where are we?"

Sudden fear seized her. He *was* forgetting. "My home. Don't—don't you remember?"

"I—" His frown deepened. He strode to the table and eyed the chair he'd sat in the night before. "I sat here, and we talked. About...a curse?"

"Yes." Sabine heaved a relieved breath. Not touching him must have worked, somehow continued the suppression of the magic. "Yes, the curse. It makes people forget, but you remember." She began to shake. "Ciar, you *remember*."

"Of course I remember." But there was bluster in the words, a tiny hint of a lie. "Magic can do many things, but it will never strip you from my heart."

If it could strip a child from a mother's heart, it could steal Sabine from his, and she knew it. Still... "Breakfast. I should make some breakfast, and we can talk—" She scrambled from the bed.

His breath hissed out. When she turned she found Ciar's gaze locked on her hips. It drifted slowly up, lingering on the curve of her breasts through her shift. His hands fisted. Heat filled his eyes. When he spoke, it was in a hoarse whisper. "I have missed you so very much."

Her body warmed, but she shivered under his gaze. Memories of him had sustained her even as she'd ached for his touch, and the temptation to fall into him was strong.

Sabine shook herself. "I cannot touch you. I don't know what would happen." She might lose him yet, a risk she couldn't bear to take.

"I know." He turned his back on her, laying his hand on the chair. His rough leather armor emphasized the new broadness of his shoulders, the intimidating bulk of a man who had lived as a soldier. "Forget breakfast. My packs are attuned to me. We'll gather what you do not wish to leave behind and start back to the palace as wolves. It will be faster."

"You want to go to the palace?"

"The witch may still be there. If not, I will find her. I know my mother's contacts well."

So he'd meant the offer. Something inside Sabine mended suddenly, something she hadn't realized was broken. "Thank you, Ciar."

"Do not thank me." His words whipped through the cabin, harsh enough to cut. "It is because of me you suffer. You live in a hard, sad little hut, alone—"

His hand clenched convulsively on the back of the chair, and the wood shattered in his grasp. When he opened his fist, blood welled where splinters of wood had pierced his skin.

Sabine grabbed a clean apron and dipped it into the water bucket, only remembering at the last moment to hand it to him instead of ministering to his wounds herself. "It isn't your fault. I knew they were desperate to rid themselves of me. I thought..."

She'd thought she could handle it. That her will—and her love for Ciar—would triumph over any games they tried to play. But she hadn't counted on the witch.

"You're mine to protect," he whispered. "I would have mated you before I left, if I could have. I was almost selfish enough to do so, even knowing you'd be bound to solitude if I died."

"You were protecting me." The last thing he'd wanted was to fall in battle and leave her alone and grieving him for the remainder of her days.

"Was I?" He pulled a splinter from his hand, the gesture rough and careless. "Have I saved you from solitude, then?"

Irritation pricked at her. "Very well, you left me to rot. Does it help to punish yourself?"

He blotted at the blood on his hand and sighed. "Perhaps I feel as if I deserve it. The punishment as well as your anger."

She'd long since burned through any hurt or anger that he hadn't come to rescue her. She was strong enough to survive on her own. "This is new for you, but I have had time to ponder where blame lies. You should not punish yourself."

Silence grew between them as he settled the cloth on the table and turned slowly. He bowed to her, not just an incline of his head but a full movement, putting his head lower than hers. “Very well. Please pack your things, Sabine. We have many days of travel ahead of us.”

“All right.” Everything she needed would fit into one of his packs, with plenty of room to spare. She took it wordlessly and crossed the room, where she began to tuck her belongings inside.

It didn’t take long. The last thing she retrieved was the small glass vial she’d hidden behind a stack of wooden bowls. She checked the stopper and wrapped it in a spare bit of linen before shoving it in a small pouch sewn into the pack.

*It’s only in case, she told herself for the hundredth time. Just in case.*

She dressed quickly in her only remaining attuned garments and turned to Ciar, though she avoided his eyes as she held out the pack. “I’m ready.”

Ciar could have run long into the night. He had, on the journey in search of her, snatching bits of sleep as he hunted rumors that faded to whispers. His time at war had, after all, accustomed him to hard living and exhaustion. He could have entrusted the bulk of his army to his First Warlord—Farran was more capable in the arts of death than Ciar would ever be—but a High Lord did not demand of his soldiers what he would not suffer himself.

Sabine was strong—she’d always been strong—but she couldn’t tolerate the same punishing pace. After resting in a small village at noon, he led her toward a larger hamlet as the sun dipped in the west. A place where they could find a warm meal and a soft bed, where she could soak tired muscles in a hot bath.

They stopped in a copse of trees on the edge of a large clearing. Though they’d traveled mostly in silence, he reached out to her now, calling on the magic to wind his thoughts with hers. “*We’ll spend the night here.*”

She looked at the trees that surrounded them. “*This will do.*”

“No,” he corrected. “*We will change here and stay at the inn. I have been here before. The food is delicious, and the beds very soft.*”

In a moment, a heartbeat, she knelt before him in her human form. “Must we, Ciar?”

It was habit now to stand as he changed, to be on two feet and ready to charge into battle. A mistake, since it meant she knelt before him, her blonde hair streaming down her back and her face tilted up. Desperate fantasy stirred, an image of golden locks wrapped around his fists as her sweet little tongue lapped at his cock, all eagerness and arousal he could scent in the air.

Maybe his leathers hid his fierce hunger. Perhaps it didn’t matter, when he couldn’t keep it out of his rasping voice. “Why do you wish to stay in the forest?”

She lowered her eyes, though not before her gaze hesitated on the front of his pants. Her pale throat worked as she swallowed. “Still trying to protect you, I suppose. Silly, isn’t it? A woman like me, trying to shield the High Lord.”

Not silly at all, when she held his heart in her slender hands. “Protect me from what?” he asked gently. “Nothing in that town holds any danger for me.”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she stretched out her hand only to quickly pull it away. “Take me to the inn, please, and we will see.”

He wanted to help her to her feet. Offer her his arm. Sheer torture to do neither, but he didn’t question his self-control when her heart was at stake. “It’s only a short walk,” he promised, then stepped into the clearing.

Sabine followed him silently, keeping behind him but not far. She didn’t speak, not even when he opened the inn door and ushered her inside.

A dark-haired woman with a sweet face waved them to a table in the corner. “Good evenin’. Fancy a drink or some supper?”

Perhaps they could escape to a private room without being recognized. “A room—a suite, if you have it—and dinner in private.” He unhooked his pouch from his belt and drew out a heavy gold coin, a dozen times the worth of the finest room and ten meals.

The barmaid’s eyes went wide. “We have but one room that would suit. There’s stew in the pot, but I’m bettin’ we could find something else in the larder, if you prefer.”

“Is Nadia still in charge of the kitchens?” At the girl’s hasty nod, he smiled. “Tell her that her tall friend from the north is here and needs dinner for two. Her best, and as much of it as she has to spare.”

“Dinner for two, you and the lady.” The woman beamed and turned for the kitchens.

Sabine stood beside him, fidgeting with the lace cuff on her dress. “Did you travel this way often before the war?”

He didn’t wait to be led to the suite. He knew where it was, and he *was* the High Lord. “From time to time. Nadia is the best cook in a hundred leagues.”

Sabine smiled, a tiny curving of her full lips. “Better than Henkel?”

His sudden, deep laughter startled him. How long had it been since he’d laughed freely? “I should think it a testament to my regard for you that I suffered through five courses of that meal.”

“Honestly? I half wish you had demanded we leave in a fit of royal pique.”

“The next time someone puts charred duck and barely cooked bread in front of us, I will most certainly do so.”

She laughed at that, a sound he remembered all too well. “I would be eternally grateful.”

The innkeeper puffed up the stairs behind them, red faced and out of breath. “My Lo—I mean, good sir.” His face turned redder, making Ciar intensely grateful that the poor man had no need to make deception a daily habit. “The suite is at your disposal, you and the lady. May I show you the way?”

“You may,” he allowed, stepping aside to give Sabine room to back up without brushing against him. “Thank you for your discretion. My lady and I wish to enjoy an undisturbed dinner and evening alone.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” He panted as he pulled a ring of keys from his belt and led them down the hall. “Nadia has started your meal, as requested. Would you like anything in the meantime?”

“No, thank you.” Ciar waited until the man opened the door and gestured Sabine inside, then pressed another coin into his hand. “For your understanding,” he murmured.

He inclined his head as he backed away. “You’re too generous, sir.”

When the innkeeper had gone, Sabine wrapped her arm around one of the bed’s four posters and smiled ruefully. “He probably thinks I’m another man’s wife, you know.”

“Perhaps.” Ciar closed the door and turned the giant brass key for good measure. If Nadia arrived and found the door locked, she would leave the food, knowing better than to disturb him. “Were it mine to choose, you’d be naked already.”

Her breath hitched. “You are the High Lord, leader of all the wolves. I imagine everything is yours to choose.”

“Is it?” Oh, what a dangerous game he played—but what could brand her in his memory more fully than the sight of her lost in ecstasy? “You never bent to me unless it pleased you, sweet Sabine. And you never let me forget the power you could wield from your knees.”

She toyed with the end of one blonde curl. “Was that what enchanted you, Ciar? That I never gave a damn about your birthright? That I only wanted you?”

Enchanted him, bewitched him. “It’s a heady thing for a lord, to be craved as a man.”

“Yes, I craved you.” Her fingers trailed from her hair to the laces of her bodice. “I dreamt of you. Your hands on my body.”

He couldn’t have the triumphant homecoming he’d dreamed of, but he could have her. He backed up, dropped onto a padded chair and reached for the laces on his left boot. “Show me,” he commanded. Not the High Lord to a subject—a man to a woman. A strong wolf to his mate.

“You will not touch me?” She seemed torn between relief and disappointment.

“You will touch yourself at my command. Your hands, my will.” He smiled at her as he tugged his boot free, a wicked smile with a feral edge she would recognize. He had taken her so many ways, and this was just one more. A game to be played, until the pleasure made the rules irrelevant. “Unlace your bodice, my love.”

She swayed as if weak-kneed, though it took her only a moment to steady herself. “Say it again,” she whispered as she unknotted the lace.

“My love.” He traced her features, studied the sweep of her pale brows and her high cheekbones, how color flooded her cheeks when he watched her. It was impossible to believe that magic could erase this beloved face from his memory when the years and endless bloody battles had not.

Her bodice loosened, and she let the dress billow to the floor before reaching down to gather her gauzy shift in both hands. “I remember your smiles,” she whispered. “The way you held me. Even the way you would stroke your thumb over the back of my neck as you rested your hand on my shoulder. Everything. And you’re beautiful.”

She kicked off her slippers, stripped the shift over her head and stood there, naked and waiting.

Three years had changed so much and yet nothing. She was still gorgeous, lush and desirable. But her curves were more pronounced now, her hips more rounded, her breasts fuller. He ached to touch, to trace his fingertips over every inch of her. To taste her. To possess her.

Instead he stripped off his other boot and reached for the fastening on his leathers. “I’m not as beautiful as you are. No one could be.”

Her gaze lingered on him, a caress that she echoed by skimming one hand lightly over her own skin. “I don’t believe you. You’re...Ciar.”

“Only with you.” His sturdy vest hit the floor, and he nearly snapped the ties on his shirt in his haste to pull it over his head. “Kneel on the bed. Facing me.”

She did, moving gracefully. When she knelt, her knees parted wide, he could see the wet glisten of arousal. He remembered how it felt to slide deep into her cunt, to have her hot and tight around him.

His cock strained against his pants as he reached for his belt. “Lick your fingers.”

Sabine touched her mouth, and her tongue snuck out to slick over her fingertips. “Can I see you?”

“Soon.” Not too soon, though. He slowed his movements. “I would take your nipple between my lips. Tease you until your back arched, then use my teeth.”

She held his gaze and caught her nipple between her fingers. “How hard would you bite me?”

“Until you whimpered, and I knew it was close to too much.”

She twisted the hard peak and moaned. “Never too much, Ciar. Never *enough*.”

He dropped his belt and reached for his pants. “Now the other one.”

Her back arched as she squeezed her other breast. “You don’t even need to touch me, do you?”

Oh, he needed to touch her. Needed it more than his next breath—but he’d never pain her with that knowledge, wouldn’t break the spell and make tonight *not enough*. “Do you want to see how hard I’ve grown from watching you?”

She shook, her hunger painted plainly on her features, and one hand dropped to her thigh. “Please, Ciar. Show me your desire.”



He stripped off his pants and stood before her, naked and aroused. On display, and unaccustomed nervousness stirred. The years had changed him, too, and there was always the chance she could look on him now and find him lacking.

Sabine studied him, not even breathing. Finally, she exhaled a shaky sigh. “You’ve saved me. No matter what happens now, you’ve already saved me, love.”

“I *will* save you.” He allowed himself two steps forward. Just two, so he could stand at the foot of the bed, close enough to pretend their scents were entwined. “This is only a reminder. When the spell is broken, I want you shaking at the thought of how many ways I’ll take you.”

She nodded slowly. “A reminder.”

“Yes. Of how good we can be.” His cock ached, so he wrapped his hand around it without looking away from her. His own touch was nothing—he’d had more of it than he cared to think of. It was her gaze on him, the way she watched him, that made pleasure tingle at the base of his spine. “Lie on your back.”

Her eyelids fluttered as she obeyed, but when she lay before him, her thighs spread, she kept her gaze on him. “Yes?”

“Yes.” He wanted to bury his face between her legs, lick her cunt until she screamed for him. He curled his free hand around the bedpost so he would not reach for her. “Touch yourself. One finger only.”

There was that smile again, wicked this time as she trailed her fingertip up the inside of her thigh. “Where?”

Arousal grew into a painful throb. “Open yourself for me. Let me see that sweet little pearl before you touch it.”

Sabine fidgeted on the bed, but her voice was a tease. “How am I to do that with only one finger?”

His low growl would have sent brave men running in fear. “*Sabine.*”

“Ciar,” she chided. “I am not one of your soldiers.” As she spoke, she slipped her fingers through blonde curls and lower, revealing the tiny bud he longed to feel beneath his tongue. “I am your lover.”

“Sometimes you obey my commands,” he whispered. “When it pleases us both, you’re quick enough to show your throat and bend to my will.”

“Like I said...” She dipped her finger inside her body, made it wet and silky before circling the sensitive flesh he’d ordered her to touch. “I am your lover.”

She was his lover, and more. He knew that—his heart *swore* to it, but his analytical mind could already see the blurry edges. Pieces missing, like an inexorable tide carrying his memories out to sea a grain at a time.

That gave him the strength not to touch her. Instead he stroked his cock, too slow and gentle to give relief. “Not so much longer. Then you will have my tongue where your fingers are. My lips. I remember how sweet you scream when you come under my mouth.”

“I remember, yes.” She trembled, touching herself as she watched his hand. “I could taste myself on your tongue.”

“And then you would taste me.” His fingers tightened, and he groaned. “You always did like to tease me. Thrust your fingers deep into your cunt. I would see your ecstasy.”

She obeyed with a soft moan, and her teeth sank into her bottom lip as she rocked against her palm, two fingers nestled inside her body.

If he didn’t stop stroking himself, he would come before she did, but he couldn’t force his hand to still. His callused fingers dragged over his length in the same rhythm as her hand. “Faster, Sabine. Make yourself come.”

“This is a dream.” She fucked her fingers deeper, her eyes glazing with pleasure. “This is all a—” A hoarse cry swallowed the words as she flushed and shuddered, writhing on the coverlet. His name escaped her on a whisper as she rode her release, a soft exhalation full of possession and pleading.

Ciar couldn’t stop his growl, or the rush of instinctive pleasure. The wolf was past ready to claim his woman, to mate her once and for all. Bind her to them with sex and magic, make her what she should have been all along—theirs.

*Soon*, he promised himself as he watched her twist on the bed. *Soon*.

Then he gave in to the needs of his body and gripped his shaft hard, jerking his hand over it with practiced speed until the sight of Sabine with her slick fingers inside her pushed him over the edge.

Panting and disheveled, she watched him with yearning. “I’ve never seen anything more beautiful.”

Ciar needed his grip on the bedpost to keep his feet. “You’ll be free to look on me every day for the rest of your life.”

Sabine rolled to her side and brushed her hair from her face. “Now I’m sleepy, and we’ve not yet eaten.”

“Then rest. I’ll wake you when the food arrives.”

She blinked several times. “Ciar?”

“Yes?”

Impending slumber thickened her voice. “I’ve missed you terribly.”

His heart ached. “Now you won’t have to. I intend to mate you, Sabine. You’ll be mine. I’ll be yours. Soon, I promise.”

## Chapter Three

Sabine woke to the sound of the door closing and the rich scent of roasted fowl. She sat up on the bed, her nakedness forgotten.

Until Ciar looked at her.

She slid from the bed and retrieved her shift with a blush. “How long did I sleep?”

“Not long.” He wore his pants and nothing else as he brought the heavy tray to the table set in the corner of their room. “You were very tired.”

She couldn’t tear her gaze from his bare chest. “You must be exhausted too.”

He smiled. “This is more luxury than I’ve been accustomed to.”

That was especially true for her, and it had helped her create an illusion, a fantasy. For a little while, she’d let herself believe that everything was normal now. Exactly the way it used to be.

“Don’t look so sad, love.” Ciar pulled back a chair and waved to it, a sweeping, gallant gesture. “Eat. We have a long way to run tomorrow.”

Sabine obeyed in silence, slipping onto the chair. The food looked and smelled delicious, but her appetite couldn’t compete with her worry.

Every moment she spent with Ciar, it became easier to convince herself this was different. *He* was different. And if he woke the next morning with no recollection of how he’d come to be there—or even who she was—it would hurt a thousand times worse than it would have the day before.

“Sabine.” He settled in his chair, then met her gaze squarely. “I’ll not lie to you. I can feel the magic of the spell. And that’s good, is it not? Stealing memories a bit at a time is better than losing them all at once, and it will give us time to find a solution.”

The depth of the grief that seized her was surprising. “You’re forgetting.”

“Slowly,” he said, voice firm. “But I’m making new memories too. I won’t forget all of you. I’ll *never* forget all of you.”

Some things shouldn’t be slow. A quick end was preferable, one slash of the executioner’s blade instead of being left to bleed and linger. “Of course.”

The growl that tore free of him sounded frustrated. “Why do you have no faith in me?”

“It isn’t—” Three years, and she didn’t know how to talk to anyone anymore, even Ciar. “You have a strong spirit, and I know you loved me. If anyone can wade through this spell, this *curse*, it’s you.”

"I can, and I will. Believe in me." He smiled suddenly. "I made an alliance with the cats. Lions and wolves fought a war together and won. I can do the impossible."

Her hand shook as she reached for her wine. It wasn't a matter of trust, or even Ciar's will, and yet she had no choice but to open herself to the possibility. If she refused, if she shut him out, she might be able to protect herself. But to what end? A miserable, lonely life?

"I trust you," she whispered finally. The truth, though they barely knew each other anymore. War had certainly changed him, and her situation had changed her.

He still knew her well enough to read her thoughts in her eyes. "This is just a trial. Once we're past it, we'll have all the time in the world to learn each other again."

All the time in the world, but her greatest fear lingered—that no magic in the world could change what was done, and he was doomed to forget her no matter what they did.

The sun had already sunk low in the west, but the heat of the day lingered. Sabine panted and stopped beside a fallen tree, bracing her paws on the rotting wood. "*Can we camp here?*"

Ciar stopped a few paces away, a tall, powerful wolf with fur the same sandy color as his untamed hair. He lifted his head and sniffed the wind, then turned once. "*A little farther. There's a cabin over this hill, one we have tended so court officials will have a place to sleep on long journeys.*"

Not as fancy as their lodgings the night before, but at least they'd probably be alone. The stress of staying at the inn had been something she'd tried to hide from Ciar, though she was sure he'd noticed her reaction as they departed. The innkeeper had acted puzzled, as though he'd never seen her, and Sabine had all but fled.

"*Very well.*" She followed him over the rise and was relieved to see the cabin was small, and no smoke rose from the chimney.

"*Just the two of us,*" he promised. "*A quiet night.*"

"*Don't worry about me, Ciar. I'm fine.*" Then, before he could contradict her, she ran toward the cabin.

The magic came sluggishly, as it always did when she was nervous about her surroundings. Instinct told her to stay on four legs, to ready herself for danger as a wolf.

She changed anyway and tugged at the cabin door. The latch turned, but the door didn't move. "Sealed with magic?"

A yip. Ciar shimmered, became a man. "I have a token. The cabins are locked with enchantments."

Inside, it was neat and clean, meticulously so. Two bedchambers, and Sabine breathed a sigh of relief. "There's an extra bed."

His lips twitched as he closed the door. "Under different circumstances, hearing those words in such a pleased tone would wound my ego."

"You know I didn't mean it that way."

"I know." He nodded toward the corner, where a stove and a few cupboards formed a makeshift kitchen. "Do you feel adventurous enough to cook tonight?"

"That depends on you. Are you going to hunt?"

"What would my lady like for her stew pot?"

His mock formality made her laugh. "Whatever my lord wishes to bring back."

"A few bunnies? Perhaps a bird? If this place is properly stocked, there will be a bow and arrow in the shed."

"Pheasant?"

"Done." Longing unfurled in his eyes as he leaned against the wall and watched her. "Do you ever wish we could have lived like this? Two people, alone in the woods?"

"From time to time." A secret fantasy, because it was selfish to want him to love her that much, enough to abandon his life.

And yet he offered nonetheless. "If it would save you, I would walk away from everything. If you needed me to..."

It would slowly kill him. He was a leader, the High Lord, and if he couldn't care for his people, he would die. "No, Ciar. You have responsibilities, ones that make you who you are."

"Yes, I suppose I do. It doesn't mean we couldn't escape once in a while."

He might think the war had changed him, but there was a warmth, a goodness inside him that couldn't be touched. "I'd like that."

His nod sent golden hair cascading over his forehead. "Good enough. I'm going to hunt. No one else will be able to cross the threshold unless you bid them to."

"I'll be fine." Unless he took to the woods for his hunt and forgot why he was even there in the first place.

Some fear must have shown on her face. In her eyes. "Do you wish me to stay?"

It would mean eating dried meat and whatever was to be found at the cabin. "I won't say I'm not concerned, but it's silly."

"It's not silly if it vexes you." Ciar strode closer, then paused. "Is it skin to skin that makes the magic worse?"

"Anything." Did that hoarse whisper belong to her? "Any kind of contact."

His jaw tightened. "You have no idea how desperately I want to hold you. Not for my own sake, but for yours."

Her mother had hugged her, held her as she cried. And then... "No."

A sigh left him. "I know. I'll be back soon. I promise."

She wished the curse hadn't stolen the comfort of that promise from her. But the sincerity of the words humbled her, left her with no choice but to believe.

When it happened, it was a small thing.

It wasn't the loss of his self-control or an act of unbearable hunger. His will didn't shatter, nor did his resolve waver.

He reached for the pitcher of water at the same time as Sabine, and their hands touched.

Just that. One brush of fingers, but he felt magic snap around him like a vise, claws digging under his skin until he hissed in pain.

Sabine yanked her hand back with a cry and a clatter as she knocked her cup from the table. "Damn it. *Damn it.*"

He was such a fool. A blindingly idiotic fool, and the only thought that came to his mind was, *It doesn't matter now.*

The table was in the way, so he flipped it over with one swipe of his hand and reached out, snatching her around the waist. He dragged her to him so fast she collided with his chest, and he didn't *care*. Nothing mattered but kissing her.

"Ciar." She clung to him, her fingers clenched in his shirt, as if she couldn't bear to let go. He drew his hands up her back and curled them in her hair with a helpless groan.

Her lips parted under his. He told himself to take his time, to kiss her slowly, but she was sweet and hungry and his tongue drove into her mouth before he could stop himself, tasting everything he'd missed.

Sabine growled, her teeth sinking into his lower lip as she tore at his vest. The accidental touch left them free because of their desperation—they had nothing more to lose, and everything to gain from tumbling into one another, even for a little while.

Ciar tightened his fingers in her hair and drew her head back, breath coming in helpless pants. "Let me mate you. Magic might be stronger than a curse."

She shook her head. "I don't know what will happen to you if we're mated and—and—"

He silenced her with a kiss. "I know what will happen to me if I don't try."

She stared at him for what seemed an eternity, her heart flashing through her eyes. Everything from loss to hope and back again, until she finally offered a shaky nod. "All right." Her hands smoothed up to his shoulders. "Take me as your mate, Ciar."

The words he'd wanted for years, and he wouldn't let the pain of tomorrow interfere. He backed her toward the bed, hating that it was a sparse bunk with a thin mattress and not the silken sheets and luxury she deserved.

It wouldn't matter. He'd make sure it didn't matter. "You've always been mine, Sabine."

"Yes, always." She sank to the bed and stared up at him. "There has never been another for me, and there never will."

He chose to believe that the words would have been true, curse or no. He touched her cheek, traced the softness of her skin. "Undress me, love."

She slid his vest to the floor, and her fingers trembled on the buttons of his shirt. "Love," she echoed softly.

The word on her lips could bring him to his knees if he let it. "I may not have the patience for a mating the first time. Perhaps I'll have to make love to you twice. Or three times, to be safe."

"Whatever you need." She leaned in until her breath blew hot on his bare stomach. "Whatever you want."

"I want to please you. Please you. Give you what you need."

She rubbed her cheek against his skin and reached for his pants. "You always do. And you will—now, tonight."

Ciar put his fingers under her chin and lifted her face to his. "Tell me, Sabine, what you most desire."

She hesitated, her blue eyes drifting shut. "Your touch, Ciar. Everything that entails, from having you inside me to—to having you hold me in sleep."

That he could provide. The best memory possible, in case—

*No.* Tonight was not about just-in-case. It was about her.

Ciar caught her hands and eased them from his body. His boots were easy to strip away, as was his clothing. He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her into his lap, the irresistible heat of her cunt rubbing against his cock. "Kiss me."

She smiled, a hint of the rebellious, teasing lover he remembered. "And if I won't?"

He tightened his fingers on her hips. Smiled. "Then we'll sit like this, and see which of us gives in first."

She tried to move again, and her blue eyes darkened with desire when she could not. "You're strong enough to take what you want. Does it mean so much for me to give it?"

"It means everything." Denial had never been in his nature, but he contented himself with quick tastes, licking her jaw and nipping at her ear, reveling in the quiet ways her body responded. With her like this, alive in his arms, he felt stronger than any curse.

A tiny shudder rocked her, and she caught his mouth with a moan that sounded like his name.

Of everything they'd had, everything they'd been, this was what he had missed the most. Her lips, her kiss, the way he could judge her mood by the tilt of her head or the scrape of her teeth. Soft and slow or hot and needy, and tonight she was all of it.

More.

Her hips rocked in his grasp again, and this time she tossed her head back with a gasp. “Let me, Ciar. I’m begging.”

“I haven’t even tasted you yet.” He licked the shell of her ear. “Haven’t felt you come on my tongue.”

“If I promise you will before the sun rises, will you let me take you now?”

“I’ll hold you to it,” he whispered, then released his grip on her hips.

Sabine tightened her arms around his neck as she lifted her body over his and then down, taking him in with a speed and suddenness that left her choking on a sigh. Her nails pricked at his skin, and a tear slipped out of the corner of her eye. “This. Yes.”

He had to catch her waist, if only to keep her from moving. She was slick around his cock, gripping him so tightly he couldn’t imagine anything more pleasurable. “You are as impatient as ever.”

“Hungry for you,” she corrected. “It’s been so *long*.”

“I know.” He caught her hair and bent her back over his arm. “I love you.”

She stared up at him, pleasure and trust shining on her features. “I’ve always loved you.”

He knew, just like he knew climax would claim him if he let himself think about how good it felt to be inside her. Instead he tasted her skin, licked her collarbone and the beautiful curves of her breasts.

Her hands traveled up to clench in his hair, and her thighs flexed as she rocked against him. It would be over too soon, and he didn’t care. It would give him all the excuse in the world to start again.

Everything she’d told herself she could no longer have was in her arms, in her body, and Sabine wanted to weep with the pleasure of it.

She clenched her teeth and shifted her hips, sucking in a sharp breath when the velvety ridges of Ciar’s cock rubbed her inner walls. “You feel—oh Ciar...”

“Tell me,” he commanded—and it *was* a command, for all that it was hardly more than a whisper.

“I need you,” she told him at once. “I need you like this, forever.”

“Forever.” It sounded like a promise. A challenge. His teeth closed on the upper swell of her breast with a possessiveness just short of wild.

She belonged to him, and he belonged to her. Sabine wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his ear. “Mine.”

The heat of his mouth found her throat, and he licked her. Bit her, and rumbled his pleasure against her skin as his hands *finally* urged her to move. “Show me, sweet Sabine. Show me how you claim your man, and I’ll show you how I claim my woman.”

Claiming him meant something so different now. Once, she’d planned to do it with the heat of her body, make him crave her touch as she craved his. Now, she needed to imprint herself on his heart and soul.



She met his gaze and held it. "I no longer have the same claim on you as I once did," she whispered. "But I can have another. We can."

"As a man and a woman," he agreed. "Not the arrogant, untested High Lord and his wicked temptress."

If sexual tension hadn't been clasped so tight around her, she would have laughed. "Yes. Not as silly children anymore."

His lips crashed to hers, hard and hungry. It wasn't a boy's kiss, or even a youth's. It was the desperate, helpless kiss of a man.

Sabine took his mouth, drank in the need that reflected her own, and began to move again. Slowly, with easy rocking thrusts that belied the way pleasure twisted up tight inside her.

His hands settled at her hips, his fingers spread wide as he gripped and lifted her. Up, just a little higher, and back down with a rough growl. Impatience laced the movement, as if control slipped from his grasp with every rock.

"Ciar." Breathless, aching, Sabine dug her nails into his shoulders. "Look at me."

He did, revealing eyes edged in gold. He bared his teeth in a snarl as his fingers dug into her skin. "Don't stop." Not a command. A plea.

The magic was taking hold, turning their encounter into something that would bind them, body and soul. She wanted to cry at the beauty of it, of watching him give in to the mating, but then it took her too, roaring up inside like a wildfire. "Yes."

Her world tilted as he moved, surged to his feet in a flexing of muscle and impatience, though he settled her back on the bed with a gentleness completely apart from the feral hunger in his eyes.

He could take her now, claim her as he'd promised. Sabine drew in a much-needed breath and slid her hands through the soft golden hair on his chest. "Show me how."

The low tones of his voice held an edge, rough and wild. "Perfect submission. I can claim you as a mate, but only if you're willing. Eager. There must be no doubt in your heart."

She could not believe wholeheartedly that their mating would enable him to triumph over her curse, but it didn't matter. She was his, and his forgetting would not change that. "I want to belong to you, Ciar. I have no doubts about that."

"Good." He found her hands and guided them to rest beside her head, fingers twined with his. Then he began to move with long, claiming thrusts that drove deep.

Ciar, inside her. Part of her. She'd waited so long, yearned for him, and yet it seemed like the first time. As if he'd never touched her before.

"I love you," she murmured. "I always will."

"Love you." He rolled his hips, drove even deeper. His lips found her throat and closed in a rough, possessive bite. "*Mine*."

She felt the word in her core, the implications rippling through her along with the ecstasy of his touch. His, and that wouldn't change. Could never change, not now.

*Mate.* It echoed between them, and Sabine surrendered to it, let it pull her deeper into the abyss of sensation that threatened to overwhelm her. She cried out, gripped Ciar's hands and let go. Gave herself to him.

Magic flared, the fundamental kind that came from who and what they were. It wrapped tighter around her with every thrust, driving her pleasure higher until he froze against her and groaned her name.

So close he might as well have been a part of her. Sabine squeezed her eyes shut, but the tears escaped anyway. Now, she would always carry him with her, no matter what happened. She would have the unending magic of their mating—a reminder her heart didn't need, but one she would treasure anyway.

His body went lax, pressing down on hers. Ciar nuzzled her throat and dusted soft, apologetic kisses over the spot he'd bitten. "Too hard. I marked you too hard."

"No, it was perfect." She'd never spoken truer words.

Warm breath tickled against her skin as he sighed and eased from her body. "Only because you're perfect."

Her arms tightened without thought, and she clung to him. "Don't go anywhere, please. Not yet."

"Shh." He rolled over and hauled her atop him, letting her body rest against his chest. "I didn't wish to crush you, that's all."

As long as she had his bare skin pressed to hers, she could relax. "I don't care if you crush me. I never want this to end."

"It can't end. You promised to come on my tongue, and I *will* taste you."

As simple as that, she wanted him again. "I will never tire of having you touch me, Ciar."

"And I will never tire of pleasing you." He gathered her hair by twining it around his hands and smiled up at her. "My beautiful Sabine. What I wouldn't have given to have your smiles to come home to after long days at war."

"I should have traveled with you in the camps."

"The camps were hardly safe." The minute the words escaped, his eyes darkened. "Of course, I did no better at protecting you by leaving you behind."

Sabine smoothed his hair back from his forehead. "It wasn't your fault."

He wouldn't be soothed so easily. "It was my family's fault. My mother will not enjoy the conversation I intend to have with her."

"I admit, I'll not try and stop you."

"This may be the only topic on which I wouldn't allow you to sway me in any case." He tightened his fingers, tugging lightly at her hair. "They hurt my mate."

"Yes, they did." The spell had almost destroyed her, but she was here now, with him. Whole.

He seemed determined to keep her that way. “In two days, we’ll be at the palace. You’ll enter as my mate this time, and things will be different. You’ll be safe.”

Nestled in his arms, it was difficult to imagine any other outcome. “Yes, I will.” Secure, comforted, Sabine let sleep claim her.

## Chapter Four

For the first time in years, Ciar didn't bolt from sleep already reaching for a weapon—though he did wake with a strange woman draped across his chest.

Long blonde hair was everywhere, the rich strands tangled around his hands and tickling his neck. Her body felt sweet enough, curvy and lush, but memory refused to provide the details of who she was and when he'd bedded her. He must have, though—their scents were everywhere, mixed with sex and sweat, a heady combination that left him half-hard already.

She murmured a sleepy protest. "Not yet, Ciar. A little while longer."

At least he'd given her his name, though he supposed the days when the High Lord could walk unrecognized were behind him. He must have had too much to drink, to not remember the name of such a beauty. "I'm afraid I need to get up."

She raised her head and blinked in confusion. "What's the matter?"

How embarrassing to admit the truth. "I've forgotten your name, my lady."

The woman went still. Pale. After a few moments, she offered him a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "That's quite all right, my lord."

He'd given offense, unsurprisingly. "Might you be willing to take pity on my faulty memory?"

She sat up slowly, slid to the bed beside him and reached for the coverlet. "My name is Sabine." She whispered the words with an odd note of challenge.

Sabine. The name was pleasing to his ears, oddly familiar, though he couldn't say why. Perhaps he'd met her before the war. "Do you live in these parts, Sabine?"

"Not for some time now. Only passing through."

"And where are you headed next?"

Her smile didn't falter. "I have no particular destination in mind, my lord."

As awkward as it was, he had no choice but to ask the question memory refused to answer. "I admit, I can't recall how we came to be here."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter, Ciar. You were on your way back to the palace, yes?"

No one called him by his name except his closest friends and his mother. It should have sounded unnatural, but that same memory stirred. The wilder parts of him liked the way his name rolled from her tongue as much as he'd enjoyed the feel of her name on his lips. A rightness that defied explanation.

For now. Perhaps time would tease it free. "Yes, the palace. Are you accompanying me?"

Pain flashed in her even blue gaze, and she spoke too quickly. “No. I mean, I was, but only this far. Not to—to your home.”

“I see.” Only he didn’t. Nothing made sense, especially not the lack of the painful, miserable hangover that surely would have accompanied the amount of liquor it would take for him to bring a stranger to bed and forget who she was. “Then where are you going?”

She turned away, her hair spilling over her bare back. “A small village to the south. Out of your way, I’m afraid.”

“And I can’t convince you to come to change your mind? I could make it worth your time.”

The woman hesitated. “You’re the High Lord. You could command me to, if it pleased you.”

His chest tightened, and he couldn’t fathom why. Nor could he understand why it was so hard to summon the charm that usually came naturally. The war, perhaps, and the endless years of fighting. It made his smile awkward, but he tried to make up for it with the words. “A man who has to command a pretty lady to walk with him doesn’t deserve to call himself High Lord.”

She bit her lip. “I will go with you. Not because you could command me to do so, but because I know you won’t.”

He’d planned to make good time to the palace by running as a wolf, but if the day was nice, perhaps he could walk for a few leagues as a human. She seemed anything but fragile, and a chance to talk with her might solve the mystery of the way his instincts seized every time she smiled.

So he grinned and reached for her hand, lifting it to his lips. “Let’s break our fast, then, and enjoy the morning.”

Her fingers clenched around his, but only for a moment before she pulled them away. “I can have something ready in a few minutes.”

“So my mysterious lady can cook.” He watched her slide from the bed and tried to ignore the panic that tightened with every step she took. “What else do you do, Sabine?”

She crossed the room naked and reached for a white shift draped over the back of a chair. “Live a simple life.” The words were thick, and she cleared her throat. “Wait for a man who isn’t coming back from the war.”

Just like that, guilt closed its fist around his heart. “I’m sorry.” As he should be. Any man who would not return had died under his command.

“It was a long time ago.” The gauzy fabric drifted down around her, and she regarded him thoughtfully. “I think...I am close to making my peace with it.”

He shouldn’t be relieved, but interest stirred in the darkest part of his heart. She was beautiful, and she must have found him tolerable, to be willing to forgive his lapse in memory. “And what will you do, once you’ve made your peace?”

She smiled sadly as she opened one of his satchels, unaccountably familiar with his belongings. “Get back to living my simple life, I suppose.”

“And if an unsimple man came along?”

“Would I let him complicate my life, you mean?”

Would she let *him* complicate her life? “Yes, that’s what I mean.”

A strange light kindled in her eyes, and her teeth sank into her lower lip. “I think we shall have to see.”

No obeisance. No easy assurances, the kind he so often encountered. Few wolves would stand against their High Lord, but she didn’t mouth the words he wanted to hear. “I’ll enjoy finding out.”

She laughed suddenly, as though at an old, familiar joke. “I once had a conversation exactly like this with someone very much like you.”

Ciar grinned at her. “You wound my ego, my lady. I always thought there was no one else like me.”

“You may be right, after all.”

Even her casual words seemed anything but, as if everything she said had another meaning. Instinct insisted *she* had another meaning, a mystery beyond her inexplicable presence in his bed. She was sunlight and warmth wrapped in the comfort of an old friend, and that was the greatest puzzle of all.

He’d walk every league back to his palace on human feet if it gave him the chance to solve it.

If the fabric of the world had been personified, given form, Sabine would have sworn it was laughing at her.

Teasing, at the least, mercilessly and without remorse. Here was Ciar, the love of her life, with absolutely no recollection of who she was—and he wanted her still. Every step was surreal, an odd echo of a past long since lost.

He’d peppered her with questions at first, inquiring after her family and her interests. Even his responses were familiar, words he’d said before. Only the delivery had changed. He was harder now, a man with pain etched in his face, and even his most charming smiles had an edge of desperation that hadn’t been there before the war.

Another difference—when she fell silent, he did as well, seeming content to walk at her side when before he would have insisted on conversation.

She’d expected it to hurt, walking with him like this. Those first few moments of realization that morning *had*, when she’d understood that he’d well and truly forgotten her during the night. That, as far as he knew, he’d awoken with a stranger. Only sheer force of will had stopped her from succumbing to the agony, but she’d managed. She’d stood against the urge to give in to tears.

Now, a curious hope consumed her. Ciar’s obvious interest evoked nostalgic longing, bittersweet and beautiful—and the niggling, unavoidable feeling that perhaps this was a way around the spell that had cost

them so much. The sorceress could doom Sabine to be forgotten, but she couldn't change the things that had drawn them together in the first place.

She had to speak. "What are your plans now that the war has ended?"

He didn't answer at once. Another change from the impulsive man he'd been, that he paused at times to consider his words. "I'm not sure," he said at last. "See to my people, of course. And my court. I fought so hard to come home, but I imagine it's just more work waiting for me."

"Work," she repeated slowly. "Is that all your kingdom is to you?"

"No." It sounded too hasty, and he repeated the word, this time with emphasis. "No, of course not. Forgive me, Sabine. I'm out of sorts."

"I didn't mean to imply—" She took a bracing breath. "So am I. Out of sorts, I mean. Being here with you is...something I never imagined would happen." Especially not twice in a lifetime.

"Something's missing." Abrupt words, laced with frustration. "I know I was fighting to come home to more than this."

Her hope gave way to pain again, and she had to fight to catch her breath. "Even a creature as solitary as myself has heard rumors. You're expected to marry, are you not?"

"My mother has chosen a lady already. She seems...very nice."

His dread made her long to comfort him. "And what do *you* want?"

"Maybe I knew before the war." He smiled, shallow and forced. "Today I want to walk beside a beautiful woman and listen to her stories instead of boring her with my own."

"My stories are too sad to tell." And intimately entwined with his. "Life, I think, is about making the best of things. People think it's about grand gestures and undying love, but that isn't the truth." Sabine stopped and studied Ciar's profile. "The truth is that few can afford the luxury of such things."

A few steps later he must have realized she was no longer at his side. Pivoting, he faced her, curiosity in his eyes. "What are you making the best of, Sabine? What brought you into my life, and why can't I remember how it came to pass?"

What would he think if she told him the truth? What would he say? He'd consider her mad, surely. "A chance meeting, my lord. Two lonely people escaping for a while."

"Two lonely people," he echoed, and that curiosity turned sharp. "And yet...I trust you."

"And that's unusual for you?" she asked, though she already knew the answer.

His fingers curled toward his palms. "I've been at war, my lady. I trust few."

"Then I do not know what to tell you." She shrugged. "If you have your suspicions, do share them with me."

"I have no suspicions," he retorted. "And that is my concern. I've seen magic. Curses turned against my men. I should be wary."

“Is that what you’d like to hear?” she asked softly. “That I’ve enchanted you with magic? Bound you to me?”

“Have you?”

“No.” That much, at least, was true. “I’ve worked no magic.”

“And yet you know something I do not.” He sounded certain.

He’d always been able to read her too easily. “Perhaps *I’m* cursed. Perhaps you do not recall meeting me because you cannot—because no one can.” A terrifying thought occurred to her, one that diminished her lighthearted mood. “Perhaps, once you sleep again, you are bound to forget this, as well.”

He didn’t laugh. Strong lips turned down in a frown as his gaze swept over her, assessing. Intelligence had always stood in his eyes, now it was plain on his face too. “I can’t imagine how I could forget you.”

In a heartbeat, the pain came rushing back. “You’ll have to trust me when I say you could. Completely.”

“Did you know me well, Sabine?”

Gone was the intriguing charade, her chance to have more time before she lost him for good. She turned away. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

He moved so silently she had no warning before his hands closed around her shoulders. “All right. We’ll talk of other things.”

She stiffened under his touch before she could stop herself, and she twisted away quickly. “I think we should not talk at all. Not for a little while.”

For a moment, she thought he’d push. It had always been his way, the arrogance of royalty tempered by his honest need to be a part of her life. Ciar had never let her hide herself, and he’d given his own open trust in return.

Now he fell quiet and nodded to the road.

Proof enough that she could harbor her delusions, but this *was* different. He was no longer a young prince in the blush of infatuation, and she—

She wasn’t his lover.

Suddenly, Sabine wanted nothing more than to escape. Ciar would always see too much, and sooner or later she’d have to tell him the truth.

She’d leave first, steal away while he slept if she had to. She’d have to retrieve her things from his packs, erase the lingering traces of her presence. And the vial...

She shook herself. No, she’d take the poison with her, but only to find a way to dispose of it. If the last few days had proven anything to her, it was that she was strong enough to endure this loss. Ciar was her mate—that would not change, at least for her—and knowing he was safe and healthy was an irreplaceable comfort. That he’d forgotten her, that the bond had not overcome her curse, was something she could not allow to dominate her thoughts because she would surely break down.



Stolen moments could never replace what she'd lost, what *they'd* lost, and tormenting herself this way was nothing short of madness. So she would go, and content herself with the short reprieve she'd been granted. And it would have to be enough.

## Chapter Five

Everything felt wrong from the moment he opened his eyes.

Ciar stared at the roughly plastered ceiling above his head and tried to chase the feeling to a conclusion. Any conclusion, really, anything to explain why he felt as if the past few days were a jumble of emotional upheaval when he'd spent them by himself.

Or had he? An intoxicating scent tickled at his senses as he rolled to sit upright on the edge of the low bed. The blankets were sturdy wool, and lifting one edge to his nose made it easier to catch the elusive smell. A female wolf. Faint—too faint for her to have slept with him—but present nonetheless.

A woman must have stayed in the cabin before him. Someone familiar, and it only stood to reason that he'd know anyone who might pass the night in one of the royal stations. A lady of the court, perhaps, traveling back to a distant country estate. Someone he'd pass in the halls of his palace in months to come and recognize by the scent she'd left behind.

Too bad she was likely married. His body thrummed with an awareness he couldn't disperse, a hunger out of place with his surroundings. Something was missing, had slipped through his fingers like a spirit, and the world seemed paler without it. Dark. Lonely.

So lonely.

Rising to his feet, Ciar stretched and forced such fancies from his mind. He'd grown soft from spending his nights in the relative comfort of well-padded beds instead of on the dirt floor of his tent. War might be a misery, but it kept a man too exhausted at night to do more than steal what moments of sleep he could.

And yet...everything felt wrong.

It felt wrong as he ate breakfast and stared at the empty spot across the table from him. It felt wrong as he collected his few belongings into his bespelled pack and stepped from the cottage.

He'd forgotten something. He was so certain he returned inside and checked every corner of the two rooms. He even ignored royal dignity and dropped to his knees, peering under the bed as he tried to recall what was missing. A thing, or a person—whatever it was, the cabin offered no answers aside from the mysterious female scent.

Outside again, Ciar examined the forest floor in a desperate attempt to find a clue. Any clue.

A careful perusal of the forest floor revealed the first inconsistency. There *was* another set of footsteps, and recent ones, at that. There were the tracks of his own large boots—odd enough, since he

couldn't remember now why he would have walked when running as a wolf was much more convenient—and next to them, a smaller tread. A female or a young boy, slight enough that the indentations left in the muddy path next to the door weren't very deep.

The second, smaller set had arrived alongside him—but they'd left already.

Gripped by a need beyond explanation, Ciar followed them.

When he reached the main road, the tracks veered to the south. The road stretched out to the north, leading toward the palace. Home, where he needed to be. His mother would try to press upon him the sweet, well-bred noblewoman she'd chosen, and he'd wonder how to put into words the feeling that plagued him.

Something was missing.

Responsibility lay to the north. Duty and honor and the life he'd fought so many years to secure, a life that seemed fractured now. Full of questions.

The path to the south might hold answers.

No question, then. Closing his eyes, Ciar reached inside and let the wolf fill him.

Magic rose, and with it a screaming pain. He hit the ground on four paws with a howl of loss shredding his throat as memories tumbled over him in a wave.

Too much, at first. Blonde hair. A smile. A woman, laughing.

Sabine laughing.

*Sabine.*

Pieces locked into place, like a child's wooden puzzle. The scent on the sheets, the two sets of footsteps. The shock of remembering almost drove him to the ground, but even that vanished under the shock of having forgotten her to begin with.

Every memory brought two more. Sabine, smiling at him when he teased her, frowning when he pushed too far. Finding her in the cabin, finding her *cursed*...

He'd promised not to forget her.

He'd lied.

No wonder she'd slipped away in the night. He'd pushed and prodded, at her home and at the inn. Every step of the way, he'd held out hope with a reckless arrogance that shamed him in the face of his abject failure.

More memories. Sabine across a table from him, so terribly fragile as he swore he could do anything. Sabine, under him, crying out his name, gasping and moaning as magic wrapped them tighter and tighter.

A mating, a spell that was no spell at all, but the power of two wolves longing for one another so desperately that they became one. Wolves had ever been unique, tied to one great love when a lion might bind himself to many women.

Perhaps that uniqueness had saved him after all. A witch could tear Sabine from his human mind, but never from where she dwelled as a part of his spirit. If death could not undo such a connection, neither could a curse.

But did *she* know that? Surely not, if she'd left. How her heart must have bled, yesterday, when he'd walked beside her as a stranger.

So she had run, but he could follow. As a wolf, if he had to, on four paws, hunting her as he had before. He'd stay a wolf, if that was what it required. Better to lose himself to the beast within than to lose her.

With a goal—with hope—he gathered the strength inside him and ran.

The minutes blurred together as Ciar followed the pull of the mating bond. The forest blurred too, flying past him as he pushed himself to his limit. Years at war had given him a stamina she couldn't hope to match.

He'd find her. Catch her, before desperation broke what was left of her heart.

With every step, the warm place inside him burned a little brighter, until he swore he could feel the echo of her thoughts mingling with his own.

"*Sabine.*" If their mating hadn't been tangled up with a curse, surely she would have heard him. Surely she would have replied.

The unerring tug brought him to a small village with an even smaller tavern. Barely more than a house, and probably boasting no more than two or three rooms that weren't occupied by the owner himself.

Resuming human form might mean he would forget her again, stand stupidly outside the inn and wonder how he'd gotten there. He might turn and leave, never realizing that the answer to the nagging ache in his heart lay just beyond the door.

But remaining a wolf presented its own problems. When scratching at the door did nothing, he crashed against the door until it rattled, howling his displeasure loudly enough to bring villagers running.

"Is it a mad wolf?" one man whispered, only to be quickly quieted by another.

The door swung open before Ciar could crash into it again, and a woman with riotous red curls cursed. "What in blazes—"

He howled again. Not anger or rage—an imperious summons with an arrogance no wolf could miss, no matter their form.

And then there she was. Sabine appeared at the end of the hall, her face pale. "Ciar."

*Sabine.* The redhead was wise enough to step out of the way a moment before his control snapped. His paws skittered across the scratched floor as he lunged, sliding to a stop close enough to slam his head into Sabine's hip.

She fell back, landing hard on the bottom of the staircase, but she barely seemed to notice. "Why are you here?" she asked as her fingers slid into his fur. "How?"

He nipped at her fingertips as frustration threatened to drive him mad. The bond lay plain between them, he could feel it. She should be able to hear him, even in human form. Lifting his muzzle, he bumped at the side of her temple, silently begging her to *try*.

Sabine closed her eyes as his nose brushed her cheek. A moment later, she drew in a sharp breath, almost a gasp. *“Ciar.”*

*“You’re my mate. I remember you.”*

Her eyes glistened with tears. *“Only now? Like this?”*

For the first time, he hated this form. He wanted arms to wrap around her and fingers to wipe away her tears. *“I don’t dare change back. Not until the spell is broken. I will not lose you again.”*

She pressed a trembling hand to her mouth. *“Did you make it back to the palace?”*

*“I made it five steps out of the cabin. As soon as I changed forms, I remembered.”*

She laughed, though the sound held no amusement. *“An impossible situation. You cannot live the rest of your days as a wolf.”*

No, he couldn’t. No one could, not if he hoped to retain the sense of a man. Wolves who went feral lost all reason, and the High Lord could not risk such a thing, not with peace so new and his kingdom suffering from his absence.

But a few days... He could give her that. He owed her that. *“Then we’ll find the witch, and I’ll impress upon her the importance of not disappointing me.”*

Sabine stared at him for a long moment and glanced around, as if just noticing the crowd they’d drawn. *“No one at the palace remembers me.”*

He’d already considered it. *“Farran. Do you remember him?”*

*“He’s a warlord, the First. And your friend.”*

*“He’ll remember you, as I did. Not forever, but long enough. And no man, woman or witch will dare to stand against him.”* Not when the men of Farran’s family were legendary for their power in battle—and for their vicious tempers.

She sat straighter and caught his head between her hands. *“Do you think it will work?”*

*“It will work.”* He couldn’t allow himself to believe otherwise.

The first hint of a smile curved her lips. *“Doesn’t matter if it doesn’t,”* she whispered. *“I’ll be there every day, if you want. Even if you forget me, I belong to you.”*

Ciar bumped his nose against her hand, then quickly licked the inside of her wrist. She belonged to him, and now she understood. If he had to stay a wolf for a month, he’d find a way to reclaim her.

Nothing would make him forget her again.

Running alongside Ciar as a wolf helped dispel some of Sabine's anxiety. This was natural, *right*. The way they were meant to be, a wolf and his mate.

Reassuming her human form as they approached the palace brought her fear rushing back. If no one else concentrated hard enough to hear Ciar's inner voice, she might be seized. And if they touched her...

Ciar would attack and blood would be shed.

He yipped and bumped his nose against her hand. *"I've summoned Farran. He will meet us at the gate."*

The tightness in her chest eased. "He can hear you?"

*"A spell the lions developed. All of my warlords can hear me, whether we're human or wolf."*

It was magic the likes of which she'd never seen. Then again, wouldn't the lions be shocked to hear that a person's existence could be utterly erased through a trick of magic?

*Of all the silly things to think about at a time like this.* Sabine shook herself and lifted her voice in a shout, just in case. "Farran!"

One side of the huge wooden gates swung open, revealing a tall, dangerous-looking man with a scruffy beard and wild eyes. Farran, as changed by the years as Ciar had been, and even more untamed than she remembered.

His gaze fell on Ciar for a moment before shifting to Sabine. "I didn't believe it was true, not until I demanded that Ciar's mother tell me what she'd done to you. She truly has no recollection at all."

"No one does, not—" Her voice failed. "Not even my own mother."

Farran reached out a hand. Ciar lunged, snapping at his friend's fingers with teeth vicious enough to shred skin.

Sabine stepped back, her heart in her throat. "The witch. Does the same one still serve here?"

"Yes." Farran's gaze strayed to the wolf again. "Settle yourself, Ciar. I have no intention of touching your mate."

Ciar backed up until his side was pressed firmly against Sabine's leg, protective anger in every line of his strong form, and only one thing would soothe him.

Sabine spoke quickly. "You're the only person who remembers me, Farran. I don't have the authority to make demands here at the palace, and if Ciar shifts back..."

"I understand." His jaw tightened a little, anger or unease in his eyes. "The witch sits in his mother's suite most days, along with the other ladies of the court. The quickest way to have done with it is to go there now."

Sabine took a deep breath, and Ciar nudged her impatiently through the heavy gate. He'd been a wolf for two days now, longer than most people remained in their other forms, and the strain was beginning to show.

No matter the outcome, it had to end today.

## Chapter Six

Ciar's mother, Maris, was just as imperious as Sabine remembered, though she smiled politely when they entered. No doubt she assumed Sabine had accompanied Farran, not the anxious wolf who followed them into the High Lady's chamber.

The witch smiled too, though she seemed troubled. Confused. Her eyes narrowed, carving deep creases between her eyebrows as she stared at Sabine, as if she was a puzzle that needed solving.

It made Ciar snarl again. He angled his body in front of Sabine, and Farran spoke into the tense silence. "My Lady, your son and his mate are here."

Gasps and whispers rippled through the room. Ciar's mother's vague smile faltered. "Impossible, Farran. My son has yet to choose a mate."

Farran didn't move, but something slithered through the room. Magic, or power—something so feral, so threatening that the whispers hushed. Even the High Lady herself paled and glanced at Ciar. "Surely you can stand on two feet and speak to me yourself."

Ciar growled.

Farran shifted his weight, as if preparing for a fight, and looked to Sabine.

For a moment, fear and memories held her rooted to the spot. This was where it had happened, where the High Lady had invited her up to talk. Sabine had been excited, so moved by the gesture that she hadn't stopped to consider that the woman might be plotting against her.

And this, this was where Maris and her witch had looked on her with no recollection of her. Where she'd been banished from the castle for her shrieking nonsense, not once but dozens of times. Day after day, until her throat had grown raw from the screaming.

For a moment, she couldn't speak. And then Ciar brushed against her, butting his head under her hand. "*You're my mate now. No one can throw you from this palace.*"

The words gave Sabine the strength to step forward. "I would speak to you alone, Lady. You and your sorceress."

As the women behind her began to rise, Maris flung out one hand, pointing at a petite brunette with flawless skin and the bearing of a gentlewoman. "Iloria must stay as well. As my son's *true* intended mate, this concerns her greatly."

The woman flinched and looked as though she wanted to leave, but she only bowed her head. "As you wish, my lady."

Farran bared his teeth in what seemed to be a warning, but he didn't disagree. "She stays. The rest of you leave. *Now*."

As the room emptied, Sabine once again met the witch's gaze, and she caught another jolt of recognition. "You see it, don't you? You did before. You don't remember me, but you always saw the magic."

"My magic." The woman's frown deepened. "Some of my power is tied to your own, but obscured, as well. The purpose is unclear."

"You cast a spell on me." Sabine clenched her hands into fists. "A curse, meant to make Ciar forget me while he was away."

Shocked stares turned to the High Lady and her witch. Both women blanched, then Maris's face flushed a deep red as her back stiffened. "I would never—" Everyone heard the lie, even in only a few words. "I do not recall doing any such thing."

"I think that's the crux of the matter, Maris." Farran bit Ciar's mother's name off with the edge of a snarl, one her son echoed. "Have your witch reverse her magic. *Now*."

The witch made a noise of protest. "If I don't know the spell—"

"You can do it." Sabine clenched her hand in Ciar's fur. "There never was a spell which could not be undone."

Farran's rumble of agreement filled the room. "The High Lord bids you do your best, if you want to remain in his territory."

The witch paled. "All I can do is strip her of magic. It will dissolve most anything. Spells to attune items, glamours—"

"Mating bonds." Sabine breathed the words without thinking, sure in her gut they were true.

Ciar was there at once, his head butting against her hip as reassurance flowed from him. "*Then I'll mate you again*."

It didn't take being privy to his thoughts to read the action, and Maris's eyes narrowed. "By all means, dissolve it. Give my son a chance to rectify his mistake."

The growl that rumbled free from Farran should not have been possible, given his human form. "Hold your tongue, woman, if you have sense in your head." He turned his fierce gaze on the witch. "Get on with it, then. Take your magic from her and prepare to beg for your lord's mercy."

The witch seemed torn between relief and confusion. Both gave way to fear as she faced Sabine and bowed her head. The hands she lifted trembled, and magic gathered in the room, coalescing into a tangible pressure around Sabine.

For a moment there was nothing but that pressure, the hair-raising stillness that preceded a storm. It tickled uncomfortably over her skin, and Sabine opened her mouth to ask what came next. What to expect.



But she had no breath and realized that pressure was growing within her as well as without, and she started to panic. Then the pain started, a dull throb that grew into piercing barbs of agony. She twisted, turned, but there was no escape.

When she was sure she could bear no more, the magic vanished. Everything, even the niggling shreds that had dogged her heels for the last few years. She'd felt them flare each time someone had turned a blank gaze her way, showing no hint of recognition.

Gone.

She wanted to weep with relief.

Sabine opened her mouth to speak, but the magic returned with a roaring vengeance. The torment swelled, crested, and Sabine's knees gave as she sank into the welcoming blackness.

Instinct drove Ciar's change, fast and frantic. Sabine tumbled toward the ground and he found himself human again, with arms to catch her.

Her body slumped against his as panic crested, cut only with the relief that he still knew precisely who she was. Ciar knelt on the floor, drew her lax form tight to his chest and cast his gaze toward the witch who trembled a few paces away, face sallow with exertion—and fear.

As it should be.

"What have you done to her?"

She had to draw a deep breath to speak. "It is not an easy thing to remove so much magic."

Threading his fingers carefully into Sabine's hair, he turned her face toward his chest, cradling her head gently. "How long until she wakes?"

"I do not know, my lord."

"Should I fetch a healer?" The soft, hesitant voice barely carried across the room. Iloria, the woman his mother had chosen for him. Nothing but concern filled her brown eyes, and a sweet innocence that made him feel guilty for wanting to turn his temper on her.

The girl was nothing more than a pawn in his mother's game, and he of all people knew how adeptly she moved the pieces. He didn't trust himself not to frighten her, so he spoke to his friend instead. "Farran, send one of the guards for the palace healer."

*"But don't leave,"* he added silently, using the warrior bonds. *"Keep your eyes on the witch."*

*"And your mother,"* Farran replied as he turned toward the door, his heavy boots scraping roughly over the sitting room's delicate rug. *"She's a viper, Ciar."*

Ciar knew, which was the tragedy of it all. His mother had not always been grasping and controlling. He had memories from childhood of her ready smiles and vast heart. The people of the forest had loved

their lady every bit as much as she'd loved her lord—until Ciar's father had died, and taken his mate's heart with him.

Now she tried to steal her son's heart just as surely, and his compassion wouldn't save her. "You did this," he whispered, finding his mother's gaze. "You unleashed this cruelty on the woman I love. *Why?*"

Maris's throat worked. "You cannot afford to indulge boyish infatuations, Ciar. Not as our High Lord."

Sabine lay so still in his arms, and it lent his voice a vicious edge. "That is not for you to decide. I protected my people. I fought and bled so we could live at peace. Don't speak as if my life is one of idle indulgence."

"She isn't *noble*. She's a—"

He let his displeasure evidence itself in a warning snarl. "Choose your words very carefully."

"Fine, follow the foolish vagaries of your heart." She sat back and tilted her head at Iloria. "What of her? Before his death, your father promised her she would have a place of honor in this kingdom. In this *palace*. If you turn her away now, where will she go?"

Ciar followed his mother's gaze to the girl. Poor Iloria looked miserable, as if she'd give anything to be gone from the room. But it wasn't just misery in her eyes—he also found the first stirrings of anger. At least she had spirit.

A spirit Ciar must not have been the only one to notice. Farran cleared his throat and stepped forward. "She can marry me."

Maris blinked at the declaration. "What?"

"I'm the First Warlord of the Forest, Maris," Farran grated out. "I'm rich, I'm damn near royal, and I need a wife."

He was also losing his temper, something Ciar could see clearly from long experience. As valuable as the man was as a warrior, he didn't have the patience or ability to deal with diplomacy or polite conversation. He didn't even possess the decorum to address Ciar's mother correctly, calling her by her first name, though no one would dare challenge him over his breach of protocol. "Enough, Farran. You've made the offer. Lady Iloria can withdraw to her rooms to consider it in private. See that one of the guards escorts her."

She practically fled, not that Ciar blamed her, and Maris sputtered a futile protest.

"Enough," Ciar said again, this time to his mother. "You played your hand and you lost. Either Sabine will make it through this to become my mate and your new High Lady, or she won't..." He couldn't let himself believe it, but fear laced his voice regardless, and he put his rage into the words as well. "You'd best pray to your gods that she does."

He could see an argument forming, but she subsided with a deep bow. In this moment, she was not his mother, but another subject, one who had incurred his wrath. "By your leave, my lord?"

There would be years to make peace. For now she could stew, and suffer a fraction of the unhappiness she'd forced upon Sabine. "As these are your rooms, I'll leave them to you and your witch. I'd suggest you both remain until I send word otherwise."

The guards hurried to swing the doors wide, and Sabine stirred as he lifted her and headed down the hall. "Ciar."

"Shh." His mother's suites were not so far from his own, and he could trust Farran to ensure his orders were obeyed. "Rest, Sabine. You've been through too much."

"Where are we?"

"The palace." Another guard slipped by him and rushed ahead, fumbling with the oversized doors that led to the until-recently vacant rooms of the High Lord. "What do you remember?"

Her eyes fluttered shut. "The spell."

"It's broken now, darling."

She stiffened in his arms before exhaling on a shaky sigh. "*It is* gone, isn't it? But so are you—I can feel it."

"Shh," he whispered again, gathering a little power and letting it wash over her in a soothing wave. "It's fine, love. Now you can choose me again—because you want to, this time. Not because you have to."

"I never had to, Ciar." She slipped her arms around his neck. "I never *had* to. I always wanted you, more than anything."

Without being told, the guard pushed open the door to Ciar's private rooms, and they only made it two steps over the threshold before it closed with a soft *thud* behind him.

Good. For the time being, no one existed in his world but her. "You can have everything. I'll give you that, Sabine."

Her eyes flew open. "Even though you're free now?"

"I've never been free. Not since the first moment I laid eyes on you. I don't wish to be free."

A feral spark of possession ignited in her gaze. "You wish to be mine."

Such simple words to thrill him so. "I am yours, Sabine. Magic could not wipe you from my heart, even when it stole you from my memory."

The first hint of a smile curved her lips. "I dreamed of this. Every moment of every day."

"You believed in me." The vast expanse of his bed beckoned. He hadn't slept it in yet—he hadn't spent a single day at the palace once he'd realized Sabine was missing. It was fitting that she be the first one to lie on the beautiful hand-stitched quilt. "As well you should, sweet Sabine. In case you've not yet heard, I'm a hero."

"Mmm, yes, the High Lord who brought peace to the land," she whispered.

“Who fought alongside lions to do so.” Ciar stretched out beside her and laid his hand over her chest, just above her heart. “Once things have settled here, perhaps I’ll take you to visit the High Lord of the Plains. Malrion is a decent sort...for a lion.”

“And I hope he says the same of you—that you’ll do as an ally, even if you are a wolf.” Sabine reached up and stroked her fingertips along the angle of his jaw. “This is real, isn’t it?”

“It’s real.” He turned his head and nipped at her fingertips as, for the first time, he let himself truly relax. His mate was safe. Alive. Nestled in his bed, from which he might allow her to rise—in a few days. “Choose me, Sabine. Mate with me. Rule the wolves, be the High Lady of the Forest. We can raise a dozen children together and they’ll never have to go to war.”

She didn’t hesitate, and no doubt clouded her expression. “Yes. A dozen. *Two* dozen.”

“Perhaps not two dozen...” He tasted her lips, licked them until they parted on a gasp. “I want some time alone with my mate.”

Her hands slid to his shoulders, clenched in his shirt. “Ciar...”

He must have spent too much time around lions, because the breathlessness of her voice made him want to purr. “Yes, Sabine?”

Her breathing hitched, and she arched under him. “Make love to me.”

“Now?” His cock stirred at the thought of it, but worry lingered. “Are you strong enough?”

“I feel fine. Whatever she did, I don’t think it was physical at all.”

“It still hurt you.” Ciar sank his fingers deep into her hair and fisted his hands in the loose strands. “Take me, Sabine. Mate me.”

She rolled him with a quick, playful growl. Her hair spilled down around them as she kissed him, soft at first and then deep. Needy.

Perfect.

They’d survived war and separation, had survived curses and magic. The day-to-day trials of life and love would be bitter and sweet in turn, but with her, they’d be everything.

She was everything. And she was his.

Forever.

## Epilogue

Sabine tugged the heavy brocade curtain out of the way and peered out the coach window. “Are we almost there yet?”

“Almost.” Next to her, Ciar laughed. “We should have run.”

She tucked an errant curl behind her ear. “Somehow, I don’t think two wolves showing up on her doorstep would have had the same effect as a royal retinue.”

“But it would have kept you too busy to worry.” Ciar’s fingers found that stray lock of hair and tugged at it. “Are you having second thoughts?”

She should have been. The last time she’d seen her mother, she’d walked away heartbroken. Forgotten. But now... “Even if she doesn’t remember me, I’d like to tell her...something.” What, she didn’t know, and she never would have attempted it without the High Lord by her side. His authority alone would keep anyone from relegating her to the ranks of the ranting insane, no matter what she said.

She stopped short and laughed. She herself was the High Lady, and her word was law, just as Ciar’s was. “I keep forgetting we’re married now,” she admitted.

Another tug, and he wrapped the lock of hair around his finger and brushed a kiss against her cheek. “A mighty feat indeed, when your wedding day was the obsession of half the kingdom.”

And not only because of her own humble circumstances of birth. The First Warlord had wed the same day, taking as his bride the noblewoman who—it was rumored—had been meant for Ciar himself. “Perhaps, when we leave, we can travel to the eastern lands. I would like to visit Farran and Iloria.”

“All in good time.” His lips tickled the corner of her mouth. “Talk to me, Sabine. You can’t hide your heart from me, not anymore.”

“I’m worried,” she whispered. “My mother may not remember me still, and that will hurt, but at least her ignorance will shield her. She cannot miss me if she doesn’t know I exist, and I will survive, as long as I have you.” She bit her lip. “Your friend, however, will not have the comfort of blissful oblivion. I worry that his allegiance to you drove him to act rashly.”

Pulling back, Ciar lifted one hand to cup her cheek. “Farran is a miserable, lonely man whose allegiance to me begins and ends at the battlefield. If anything drove him to act rashly, it was desire and concern for Iloria.”

“Then I’ll put it out of my mind.” Though it was hard to forget the other woman’s stricken, shocked expression. What had transpired at the palace might not have put Farran in a difficult situation, but Iloria was quite another matter.

“Sabine.” He tilted her head back. “Farran is not an easy man, but he is a good man. Once we’ve exhausted your mother’s patience, we’ll impose on them for a week or two, and you’ll see all is well. Iloria made her choice, after all—perhaps she has good reason to wish to be away from her family and the court.”

It made sense. “You’re right, as you usually are.”

The carriage lurched to a halt, and Ciar laughed as he swooped down to kiss her, clearly meaning to distract her from her nervousness. “I’ll remind you that you think so the next time I manage to enrage you, love.”

“We’re here?” Sabine’s heart jumped into her throat. Her protestations aside, she dreaded stepping out of the coach and seeing her mother only to find dazzled surprise on her face instead of recognition. “I’m not ready for this.”

“You are.” His large hand covered her heart, fingers spread wide. “The heart is stronger than any spell. We proved that. She *will* remember you.”

Sabine drew in a deep breath as the coachman opened the door. She could do this, like everything else in her life, because she *had* to. She would not shrink or hide. She was the High Lady of the Forest and, more, Ciar’s mate.

She could do anything.

She stepped out of the coach just as the cottage’s rough front door swung open. Her mother walked out into the afternoon sun, wiping her hands on her apron.

Her eyes widened as they took in Ciar’s fine carriage and Ciar himself, but when her gaze fell on Sabine, she gasped.

Ciar dropped his hand to the small of Sabine’s back and nudged her forward. “Go.”

Her knees would barely hold her, but she walked forward anyway. “Hello, Mother.”

Tears filled her eyes, and she pressed shaking fingers to her lips. “Is it you, Sabine? Truly?”

Some final, hidden part of her opened to the sun, and she flew into her mother’s embrace. “It is—truly.”

“Oh, Sabine.” Her voice caught on a noise that was half-laugh, half-sob. “Oh, my darling girl. Where have you been?”

The truth was unbelievable, and useless now. “It doesn’t matter.”

And it didn’t. She had her mother, and she had her husband. She had *herself*—which, in the end, had been the hardest thing of all to lose. It already seemed like a dream, like an oft-retold account of a long-ago tale, with one difference—no matter what, Sabine was sure now that she would never take her life or the people in it for granted.

Her mother pulled away and wiped her eyes. “Come in, both of you. Please.”

Sabine slipped her hand into Ciar’s, smiled up into his beautiful eyes, shining with love. “Yes, let’s.”

## About the Author

How do you make a Moira Rogers? Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy. To learn more about this romance-writing, crime-fighting duo, visit their webpage at [www.moirarogers.com](http://www.moirarogers.com), or drop them an email at [moira@moirarogers.com](mailto:moira@moirarogers.com). (Disclaimer: crime-fighting abilities may appear only in the aforementioned fevered imaginations.)



## Look for these titles by Moira Rogers

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*Think a vampire-hunting bloodhound is dangerous? Try threatening his woman.*

## Wilder's Mate

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### *Bloodhounds, Book 1*

Wilder Harding is a bloodhound, created by the Guild to hunt down and kill vampires on America's frontier. His enhanced abilities come with a high price: on the full moon, he becomes capable of savagery beyond telling, while the new moon brings a sexual hunger that borders on madness.

Rescuing a weapons inventor from undead kidnappers is just another assignment, though one with an added complication—keeping his hands off the man's pretty young apprentice, who insists on tagging along.

At odds with polite society, Satira's only constant has been the aging weapons inventor who treats her like a daughter. She isn't going to trust Wilder with Nathaniel's life, not when the Guild might decide the old man isn't worth saving. Besides, if there's one thing she's learned, it's that brains are more important than brawn.

As the search stretches far longer than Wilder planned, he finds himself fighting against time. If Satira is still at his side when the new moon comes, nothing will stop him from claiming her. Worse, she seems all too willing. If their passion unlocks the beast inside, no one will be safe. Not even the man they're fighting to save.

*Warning: This book contains a crude, gun-slinging, vampire-hunting hero who howls at the full moon and a smart, stubborn heroine who invents mad-scientist weapons. Also included: wild frontier adventures, brothels, danger, betrayal and a good dose of wicked loving in an alternate Wild West.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Wilder's Mate:*

He'd almost managed to get to sleep when a timid knock sounded on the door that led to Satira's adjoining room. "Wilder?"

He fought the urge to slam a pillow over his face. "Yeah?"

She must have taken his reply as permission to enter, because the door inched open and she slipped through, a slight shadow wrapped in a blanket. The floorboards creaked as she took a step closer to the bed. "Do you mind...?"

She looked like she thought he'd growl at her until she ran screaming from the room. "Come on in."

"I can't sleep." Her voice held more than a little shame at the confession. "If people are expecting you to bed me, it can't hurt our disguise if we sleep in the same room, can it?"

Now he wanted to slam a pillow over his lap. "Can't hurt our disguise." It could only hurt *him* if he had to control himself around her. She grasped her blanket tight around her shoulders, but the gauzy fabric

brushing the floor as she walked was sheer, flesh-colored silk.

She stopped next to the bed. "If you don't want me here, I'll go. I'll understand."

"Do you?"

"I think so." She stared at the floor. "Men have needs, but you're not interested in complicating our already difficult situation by giving in to them."

If he was a snake... "Did you come over here for sex, or because you'd sleep better if you weren't alone?"

"The latter." She shivered and clutched at the blanket as it began to slip. "I know you could get to my room quickly enough if anything happened, but the way some of those men were watching me..."

She was scared, and he felt even worse about his lust as he patted the blanket beside him. "Climb up. You don't have to be alone, and you don't have to worry about me."

"Thank you." The blanket gaped open as she scrambled onto the bed, revealing that the damn flimsy nightgown Juliet had packed for her was transparent all over. She shivered and pulled the blanket up to her chin.

Wilder shook his head. "That scrap of nothing isn't warm enough."

Satira choked on a laugh, a little hysterical but genuine. "I know. If it gets much colder tonight you'll have to kick me out of your bed to keep me from cuddling as close as I can."

The laughter was better than the way she'd looked at him before, hesitant and wary and almost ashamed of her fear. "If you put your cold feet on me, I'll scream like a little girl."

Icy toes poked at his leg, and he laughed and shoved her away.

She squirmed right back, and this time he got an entire foot pressed against his knee. Her breathless laughter cut short on a little moan of pleasure. "You're so *warm*."

"Won't be for long." He affected a growl, one he ruined by laughing again. "Jesus, woman. What were you doing, hanging your legs out the window?"

Satira huffed, but it didn't stop her from tucking her other foot against his shin. "My feet get cold."

"You're a walking icebox."

She echoed his words back, laced with drowsy contentment. "Won't be for long."

Quick as a rattlesnake bite, his protective shell of humor faded, leaving him in bed with a sleepy, scantily clad woman whose body made his knees weak. "Then it'll be my turn to freeze."

One small hand crept back across the covers until her fingers brushed his. "I'd keep you warm."

His balls ached. "Better watch what you promise, sweetheart. I'm not a noble man, no matter what you think."

Satira twisted until she faced him, eyes wide but unafraid. "It's been eleven months since a man took me to bed. I don't want noble."

His first thought was to turn her over his knee and spank her. That led directly to his second thought, a

mental image of her bent over in front of him, her pale ass red from his hand, her cunt glistening and wet. “Satira.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and went still, her slightly ragged breaths and too-quick heartbeat the only sounds for long moments. Then she breathed out a tiny sigh. “You make me feel like such a fool, throwing myself at a man who doesn’t want to have me. Over and over again, and I’m supposed to be intelligent.”

He urged one of the thin straps of the nightgown from her shoulder. “You worry too much.”

“I know.” With her eyes still shut she missed his mouth the first time, her open-mouthed kiss landing on his cheek.

His cock jerked like she’d licked him, and he turned his head far enough to meet her second kiss head-on, opening his mouth under hers. He swallowed her tiny little moan, and for a moment she seemed shy. Her tongue darted along his lower lip, then returned to stroke deeper, teasing against his.

He moved before he realized it, rolling them both and pinning her to the bed. “I’m not a boy. You know that, right?”

A short, jerky nod, and she wet her lips. “You’re not just a man, either. I know that too.”

No fear, and he trembled at the thought of being able to let go. *Really* let go. “No, not a man, either.”

She craned her head up and kissed his chin, then the corner of his lips. “I will enjoy your attentions. Even if you wish to bind me, or order me to my knees, or take me across yours.”

“Shh.” Right now, there was only one thing he wanted to do. He slid one hand into her hair and tilted her head back, opening her mouth wider so he could kiss her deeply.

There was nothing quiet about her moan this time. Her fingers found the back of his head, clutching at him as if she could pull him closer. She reacted more quickly than he thought she would, melting under him.

He trailed his mouth to her neck and collarbone. “What if I do something else entirely? Will you like that?”

“I won’t know until you do it.” Her fingers stroked down to his shoulder, exploring with unabashed curiosity. “I like an adventure. And learning new things.”

“If what I have planned for you is new, you’ve been bedding the wrong men.”

Her bare shoulder lifted in a shrug, but her voice held a soft vulnerability. “They found me pleasant enough to tumble. Perhaps I didn’t inspire them. None of them had seen me in my fancy hair and expensive dress, after all.”

“Like I said...” He skimmed one hand down her side and gathered her sheer gown high on her leg. “You’ve been bedding the wrong men.”

She laughed and bent one knee, sliding her foot along his calf. “Perhaps. So how do you intend to prove that you’re the right man?”

“I could.” His fingertips tickled over the top of her thigh. “Spread your legs.”

No hesitation at all. She opened for him with a quiet, eager noise, her hips lifting toward his hand.  
“And here I was, certain you’d want to see my breasts first. You seem so fond of them.”

“I know how to take my time.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Are you going to take me?”

Wilder slipped his hand under her gown, between her legs. “You mean am I going to fuck you?”

*Sensual water shifters meet volatile air shifters—there's a storm coming.*

## Stormy Seduction

© 2011 Vivian Arend

*Pacific Passion, Book 2*

As morning-afters go, this one is looking pretty bright. Both air shifter Laurin Marshal and water shifter/shaman Matthew Jentry are aware, though, that trouble won't be long in coming. And they're right—before they've barely begun to work out the details of their mystical bond, the People of the Air find them to challenge Laurin's right to choose Matt as her mate.

Fending off Laurin's would-be suitors is easier than Matt anticipated, but there's another dilemma still to face. His own people. Laurin is just beginning to trust that his heart and body are completely hers, a radical change after she's spent the past two years alone and on the run. What will happen when his skittish, innocent partner encounters the playful, sensual—even lusty—ways of the Otter Clan?

Especially since they are arriving at the peak of the traditional summer solstice fertility rituals. And tradition demands they be the main attraction...

*Warning: Incoming extreme passion yielding one otherworldly adventure. Don't let the book length fool you—there's enough heat in this story to challenge global warming. Four plus two equals one ceremony so explosive it may throw the earth off its axis.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Stormy Seduction:*

The kiss was soft, a blessing of his mouth against hers, his fingers tugging through her hair to allow him deeper access, his tongue dancing across the roof of her mouth. A moan of desire escaped her, the need for him to touch her growing by the second. Her breasts felt full and heavy, an aching emptiness between her legs.

It might be sexist, but watching him battle earlier, fighting on her behalf, had really turned her on.

He stroked her cheek. "We can set sail in the morning, and still make it to Bella Coola by dinner on Saturday. Does that give you enough time to prepare for teaching this coming week?"

She thought quickly. "All of Sunday to finish the final adjustments to my lesson plans? Fine by me. Will you be okay for setting up for visits?"

"Easily. Someone is arranging the general drop-in clinic ahead of time. I won't see individual patients until midweek." Matt lowered his hand to cup her butt again like he had at the start of the fight. His fingers traced the edge of the bikini bottom she'd pulled on after flying over to the ship. He whispered against her lips, "Why'd you get dressed?"

"I didn't think you wanted me hanging out while we were getting the *Stormchild* underway."

He nodded his understanding even as his fingers massaged her butt cheeks. "Well, for what it's worth,

rest assured I have no issues with you hanging out, ever, around me. No matter what we're doing."

Laurin popped open the button on his shorts. "Ditto. Well, I don't think I want you naked when you're treating patients."

He caught her hands in his and pressed her open palms against his rising cock. "You want to play *doctor* with me?"

The image that popped into her mind had nothing to do with him in a lab coat, but everything to do with an intimate encounter. Did he want to play? Maybe he could take her from behind, pressing her against the raised decking, the glowing sunset shimmering off their bodies. She lowered his zipper and released his cock, smoothing a stroke down the hard length. Capturing the fluid leaking from the tip on her thumb, she lifted her hand to her mouth and sucked it.

He watched her, mesmerized. Pupils dilating. Breath increasing in pace.

The salty taste of his seed splashed over her tongue and she remembered the feel of taking him in her mouth earlier, during their first trip on the *Stormchild*. Of him filling her, controlling her, and she groaned out with need. She'd loved every second of it.

"Damn it, Laurin." He dropped his head back and thrust into her fingers. "I can see what you're thinking."

*What?*

He hissed his pleasure out, cupping a hand around hers to tighten her grasp. Every rock of his groin forced his shaft through her fingers from tip to root. "It's not your hand I see. It's your mouth. I'm fucking your mouth and it's so hot and wet and tight. I'm dying here."

Laurin smiled. He had mentioned that yesterday, and this morning, that he saw her fantasies. She'd never heard of such a thing. Hmm, maybe this was something they should explore in more depth. A mischievous thought overtook her, and she pictured herself on her knees before him, breasts supported only by her bikini bra. Like watching a movie trailer, she zoomed in from a new angle, to see herself looking up, her tongue extending to touch the tip of his erection.

His body jerked at the moment of envisioned contact.

Under her fingers his cock was hot and hard. In her mind it glistened with her saliva as he plunged into her mouth repetitively. Matt groaned aloud, his head dropping to her shoulder, her hands encasing him.

"Oh God, it's not enough. I need..." His words faded away, his rhythmic thrusts breaking tempo.

His breathing grew frantic but she wasn't ready to stop. Her mind's view changed to her lying face down over the raised section in the forward area of the *Stormchild*. She mentally opened her legs wide, showing him touching her from behind, his cock pressing into her slick opening.

Matt lost it. He pulled her hands from his body and lifted her into the air.

"Matt!"

It was only a few steps later he dropped her to the decking, twirling her around and yanking her

against his body. He dragged a hand down her torso, caressing her breasts before fitting between her legs to cup her mound. The very obvious, and very full, length of his erection fit between the cheeks of her ass as he ground against her.

“I need to be in you, Moonshine, not simply watch the pretty pictures.” His fingers slipped to her hip, and he snapped the sides of her bikini with ease. The tatters of fabric fell to the ground. “No matter how incredible the pictures may be.”

He forced her forward, her upper body coming in contact with the smooth wood of the cabin roof. One hand between her shoulder blades locked her in place. He used his knees to separate her legs farther. Then his cock rested at her entrance and she held her breath. He’d placed her in the same position she’d imagined moments before.

“Show me,” Matt demanded.

The visual images returned, this time mixed with the very tactile additions of reality. Not only did she see herself bent over, ass in the air, ripe for his possession, she felt—everything. The solid wood under her torso as her body warmed it. The press of his hand on her back, the cooling breeze off the water dancing over her heated skin.

The exquisite pleasure of his shaft sliding into her sex.



*She follows her dreams into his arms...and danger is not far behind.*

## Anchor

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Children are supposed to outgrow night terrors. Mala is the rare exception. At night she dreams of wolves, ones who attack, and the ones her dream-self protects. The effort costs her—one dream often leads to a week of missed work.

After a months-long reprieve, the dreams are back with a vengeance. Her defense of a young wolf from his abusive father is rewarded when the boy mentions the name of a real town. Finally, the chance to learn if her dreams are just as real. She never expected to meet an honest-to-God alpha wolf, much less develop an instant, embarrassing crush on him.

Angus MacIntyre, the de facto alpha of Wolf Town, is determined to see every fugitive wolf employed, educated and well-adjusted to life in the open. The arrival of a young wolf on the run isn't all that unusual, but the human woman hard on his heels is beyond extraordinary.

The dark-eyed beauty stirs his mine instinct in a way he's never felt before. She possesses a dream-wraith ability that challenges everything he thinks he knows about his world, and makes her vulnerable to those who might try to use it—and her—to their advantage.

*Warning: Wolf towns, bad guys, dreams and non-alpha alpha wolves, as well as an overabundance of family, and, of course, a healthy dose of romance and sex.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Anchor:*

Mala got off the bus, hiked her pack up on her back and walked out of the small station. They had more snow on the ground here than in Toronto, no surprise. She glanced up and down the main road to see it looked like every other small town in northern Ontario she'd just bussed through on the milk run. There were no wolves in sight. She wondered if she gave off an *I'm not a werewolf* vibe that would alienate everyone she talked to. But from what she'd read, the town had plenty of non-wolf inhabitants. Wolf Town attracted wolves *and* those with wolves in the family.

Two blocks down she identified a friendly looking restaurant and walked in. The waitress and all five customers turned to stare at her, and she had the impression one of them sniffed.

*Courage.* She pasted on a smile and marched up to the counter to drop her bag at her feet.

"Hi."

The woman nodded, and Mala had the same feeling she'd had on occasion when she realized she was the only dark-skinned person in a room full of whites and the whites all noticed. That wasn't the case here, but she felt out of place, an outsider. Well, for goodness' sake, she was an outsider. *Focus, Mala.*

"What would you like?" the waitress asked.

“Um.” Oh yeah, she’d do well to look at the menu posted on the chalkboard. She seized upon the first appealing item listed. “Tuna melt, please, and a coffee. Thanks very much.”

“Coming up.” The waitress didn’t soften exactly, but Mala had the impression politeness had gone some way to ease the wariness in the restaurant. Which had Mala wondering if people here got tourists who came in saying rude things and asking stupid questions.

That said, she had *her* question to ask. But the waitress made it easy. As she delivered Mala’s plate, she said, “Visiting someone in town?”

Shaking her head, Mala watched the waitress’s mouth tighten. She was about to withdraw from Mala, and she didn’t want to miss the opportunity. *Go for it. Take the plunge.* “But I am looking for a Caleb. A teenage boy.”

She could feel her face burn. She knew what her blush looked like, a deep, unattractive red. It made her look awkward. In her embarrassment, it took Mala a moment to realize that although the waitress’s eyes had narrowed, she hadn’t answered, hadn’t said something to the effect that she didn’t know any such Caleb.

Good God, could the boy in her dreams somehow be real?

The waitress glanced sideways, meeting the gaze of a tall, dark woman who had risen from her table.

Grim-faced, the woman swept past Mala and out the glass door. Mala glanced from the door back to the waitress, unsure what was going on.

“Want some dessert with that?” the woman asked, her tone frosty. Her pale eyes held a flat expression.

“Um, no thanks.” Mala was having trouble interpreting what had just happened. It wasn’t that awful a question, surely? But the atmosphere had turned creepy, with the waitress looking at her like she was something to wipe off the bottom of her shoe and the customers who remained burning holes in her back. Or so she imagined. Mala’s imagination liked to go into overdrive. The source of all her problems, her father used to tell her with some regularity.

She went with a perky, vacant tone. “I’ll pay up now.” She handed over her credit card.

“Why thank you,” said the waitress with an excess of sarcasm, and took the card, leaving for the kitchen instead of going to the cash register.

Mala snuck a glance at the customers who all suddenly found something to talk about. She really wanted to leave, right away. There’d been stories, of course, stories she’d disregarded, where people claimed Wolf Town was a dangerous place to visit with out-of-control wolves ready to attack at any moment.

She hadn’t been able to believe the government would sanction such a place. Maybe she’d been naïve. She leaned forward on the counter and called out, “Excuse me?”

Though she could see the waitress's back, the older woman didn't respond or turn around. In fact, she picked up her cell and began talking. Mala felt trapped and she didn't think it was an accident. Perhaps she should take her losses and leave without her credit card. Except money was a bit of an issue for her.

The door slammed open then, and she spun on her seat to face a large, broad-shouldered man who strode towards her with purpose. She wanted to pull her own fear together, shape it into a weapon and strike him down—except this wasn't a dream. So she rose to standing and braced herself, though for what, she couldn't imagine.

He pulled up short and leaned down to inhale deeply. He held that breath and while he did, his eyes, a vivid blue, changed from angry to...bemused. He blinked once before he exhaled.

"Can I help you?" she asked as coolly as possible. She didn't like gazing up at him as he stood above her, too close, and she was *not* used to strange men sniffing her. She didn't care if that was the norm in this town—along with stealing credit cards.

"I hope so." His mouth curved up on one side, an attractive warm expression at total odds with the determined, flat look he'd worn as he'd first entered the restaurant, and she found herself overwhelmed by his mere presence. "But first, let me welcome you to Wolf Town."

She stood at such attention that Angus almost expected a salute. He'd come in here a tad angry, yes. Jancis announcing that someone was after Caleb hadn't put Angus in the most welcoming frame of mind. But this young woman was a) not a werewolf, b) frightened and c) smelled good.

Okay, she did smell good to him in an appealing she-attracts-me way. Not that it mattered since she was human. But he meant to focus on the fact his nose told him she was on the side of good. His most famed characteristic in the world of shifters was his nose, which managed to suss out when someone was essentially a decent person. Or not.

This dark-eyed young lady with hacked-off hair—was it the style these days?—did not deliberately do people harm.

So perhaps she'd been coerced or manipulated into this. Or perhaps she was being followed unawares. Maybe Caleb knew her. Angus didn't believe in coincidence.

He realized he'd been circling her and she was trembling, her heart rate not only increasing but accelerating. Obviously his words of welcome couldn't be taken quite at face value. And his actions were too wolf-like to be comfortable for a normal.

He backed off to sit on a stool two over from where she'd been seated. Then he cut to the chase. "I'm Angus MacIntyre. I'd like to know why you're visiting us here in Wolf Town."

Her eyes widened. Recognition of his name, he assumed, given that newspaper articles and such tended to mention him as the one in charge. Some even called him a mayor.

She glanced behind her where, yes, everyone was staring, all five of them. Could be she expected to be attacked. While he disliked some of the assumptions normals made about wolves, he also didn't intend to bait this woman. He wanted to know about her connection to Caleb.

He could see what it was like for her. She wondered if she'd made a terrible mistake, if she'd stumbled into some kind of trouble she didn't know how to get out of.

She also didn't know how to lie, because whatever she was trying to say didn't come out. Finally the stiff set of her shoulders relaxed in a kind of surrender, though she remained standing.

To the customers and Eden watching, he called out, "I'm trying to have a private conversation here." They turned away, not that they wouldn't hear everything anyway, but a semblance of privacy had its uses. To the strange woman, he said, "No one is going to cause you harm in this town. But you've shown an interest in one of my people and *that* interests me."

Her mouth dropped open and the surprise, almost shock, was real. "Caleb is here?"

"Caleb who?"

"Yes." She appeared to forget she'd been frightened moments earlier, her intense interest in Caleb surpassing everything else. And it wasn't malevolent interest, he was sure of it. Maybe she'd been sent by Caleb's mother? Though Shanna hadn't tried very hard to reach out to Caleb since they'd decided to separate to survive Caleb's father. Angus disapproved of her lack of effort, though he didn't intend to disparage Caleb's one non-psychotic parent in front of the boy.

"Yes," the strange woman repeated. "There are many Calebs in the world." A line formed between her eyes and she asked the question like so much was riding on it. "He's not a young boy, is he? A teenager, I mean. He's not..." her voice dropped to a whisper, as if she could barely believe she was saying the words aloud, "...a skinny black wolf?"

He stared at her. Because of course Caleb was a skinny black wolf, and wouldn't she be sure of that if she was searching for him? Why would she be looking for someone she didn't know? He let the silence build, waiting to see if she'd say more. But when he didn't answer, she seemed to come to a conclusion and covered her mouth with her fist. Her next words made even less sense.

"Oh my God, he's *real*?" she said, aghast.



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