**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 14**

**Episodes 1448-1555**

**Episode 1448**

LOLA

I knew that I shouldn’t snoop. I knew that, right? It was a solid, undeniable fact.

But I couldn’t help myself. Curiosity got the best of me, making me itch to figure out more about Emmett. With everything Ras had just told me, I just couldn’t ignore the little voice in my head that was telling me to step into his office.

Besides, didn’t I owe it to myself to get to the bottom of what he wanted with me? He had shown a pretty intense interest, and it was doubtful that his intentions were pure and altruistic. There was something so shady about the man that was just as distracting as his outrageous gorgeousness.

Making up my mind, I slowly pushed the office door open. Also, if he really didn’t want people looking around his office, he probably shouldn’t just leave the door open, right? This was obviously his fault.And I was not blaming the victim here—not when Emmett had repeatedly semi-victimized *me*. And made me feel like I could be his victim. Somehow. Like, he was in a position of power over me, and honestly, right now, by walking into his office, I would be gaining power over him, for once.

*Everything about what I’m thinking right now makes complete and total sense, don’t @ me.*

I crept into the room, feeling justified, and looked around cautiously. There was, of course, nobody here. I slowly closed the door behind me, wincing when it creaked. This thing needed to be oiled before someone caught any entirely innocent trespassers in Emmett’s lair of doom!

Okay, but this just didn’t look that sinister, though.

A little confused, I saw that it was just a standard office. Lots of bookshelves, papers on the desk, a couple of chairs, that kind of thing. I was almost disappointed, to be honest. I scoffed at myself, rolling my eyes. I’d half-expected to see creepy organs floating in jars. Or, like, butterflies pinned to the walls and bats flying around the ceiling. Maybe a deer head on the wall. Either way, nothing as simple as this.

Just as I was musing about how boring all this was, there was a sudden creak in the hallway.

*Oh no!*

I whirled around in panic, thinking I’d been caught. I made a move to hide, and in my flurry, I tripped over something on the ground that made me half-fall into a bookshelf. I couldn’t help but remember the many times that Cali had done stuff like this, and I’d laughed at her. But now here I was, doing the exact same thing. I reached out to steady myself by grabbing onto a fancy-looking bust—

That fell backward with a little click.

I watched in shock as the bookshelf nearest to Emmett’s desk slowly began to open into the room. *Oh, my god...* This was just like in the movies! I’d triggered some kind of hidden lever that revealed a secret passageway! I didn’t have the skills to be Indiana Jones! I didn’t know how to fight a crystal skull or whatever!

I froze, listening intently for the noise out in the hallway, but it was gone now. The room was once again totally silent. The only sound I could hear was my heartbeat, vibrating in my ears. I stood still for a moment, staring into the pitch-dark passageway. I couldn’t believe this was really happening. Actually, I totally could. This was, after all, a very old vampire school—why *wouldn’t* it have a bunch of secret chambers?

I swallowed roughly.

This whole thing was really creepy, and I battled with myself over what to do next. On the one hand, I wanted to rush in and investigate. But on the other, I just wanted to go to bed and let all this go. To just relax and dream a little dream of Jay and me together.

But who was I kidding? I’d never been one to let mysteries lie unsolved.

I thought back to what Ras had said. That Emmett had dangerous secrets. She’d never elaborated, but the word “danger” had stuck with me. What could the danger possibly be? What could Emmett be hiding? I had to know what was up with all of this.

In the end, my curiosity overpowered my caution.

I was more certain than ever that Emmett was shady with a capital S. No innocent person had secret passageways in their office! It was a scientific fact that all creepy, spooky, untrustworthy individuals did stuff like this! Something was definitely up with Emmett, and I was going to get to the bottom of it, come hell or high water.

Especially since he seemed to have taken such an interest in me. Interest that could in no way be innocent.

I passed over the threshold of the tunnel-like space, readying myself for a long journey down a damp, dark corridor. I expected a bunch of spiders or mice to attack me, but there was actually none of that.

Shockingly enough, I almost immediately ran into a fancy door. It was embossed with trees, birds, frogs, and other forest animals. The wood was shiny and expensive-looking. But the most interesting part about the door was that it was ajar. It was like someone—the universe, perhaps—wanted me to be here.

Of course, that didn’t mean that I wasn’t intimidated.

Hesitantly, I pushed the door open. Thankfully, I remained in one piece, nothing attacking me. When I finally moved into the room beyond, I froze. It was still dark, but there were various white lights illuminating the space. It looked like some kind of laboratory. There were things bubbling in vials, liquids that seemed more solid than they should have been, Bunsen burners, and jars everywhere. The scent of bleach was *very* prominent. Not a good sign.

My blood ran cold, because *this*? THIS was kind of what I’d been expecting to encounter in his office. It was extremely freaky and alarming.

What the hell was Emmett up to in here?

I started to move around, making sure not to touch anything or accidentally push it over. The jars with body parts that I’d expected to see earlier were right here. I shuddered when my gaze caught on a brain floating in one of them, tagged with a sticker that included some sort of code and a date next to it. Apart from the brain, there was a heart, a dead frog, and something that looked suspiciously like a penis, but I decided to assume it was some sort of slug. A big one.

It was all so jarring, but I couldn’t look away.

The desk that Emmett had in here was nowhere near as fancy as the one in his main office. This one seemed more practical, large enough to accommodate all his needs, which primarily consisted of notes. There were piles and piles and piles of papers stacked all over.

I took a peek at them, my hands shaking, expecting to find some sort of explanation for this madness. What I saw instead was a language that I didn’t understand in a very messy script. But under that, it clearly looked like math. Equations. Algebra had always been something that I was good at, but here, I had no idea of the context. He was trying to solve for that elusive X, but I doubted it was just a random equation. This was an actual problem.

But what was that problem, exactly?

A couple of feet away, to the right of the desk, there was a file cabinet that was slightly ajar, much like the doors had been. For some reason, it caught my attention. Feeling jittery, I reached out and pulled it open. My mouth dropped open when I saw that it was full of files that were labeled with names. Names of real people, along with dates.

A sickening feeling settled in my stomach.

The files were in alphabetical order, and I dared to look at S for my last name, *Spillane*.

I wasn’t one of the names. But I held my breath when I realized that Emmett had filed everything by first name. Almost choking, I checked the letter L, for *Lola*.

I still wasn’t there.

Okay, maybe this was fine. Maybe this wasn’t as creepy as it looked. Maybe Emmett was just doing some sort of *research*, with people who knew him. Who were aware of whatever it was that he was doing. Right?

*Right?*

I thought it would be better to leave now, but then I stopped myself.

I knew I had to check one last thing.

The letter A. *Shit.*

And to my horror, there I was.

*Aaliyah (Lola) Lyn Spillane.*

Feeling like I was about to throw up, I yanked out the manila folder and opened it up. It was full of papers and numbers, more equations, and at the very top, there was a declaration in big bold letters.

*EXHIBIT 589 – EX-LUPINE, POTENTIAL HYBRID.*

**Episode 1449**

I felt Artemis go rigid next to me. I was frozen as well. And not only because I’d recently taken a deep dive into cold water yet again, like it was my only hobby in life.

“One of the portals is open? Which one? What *kind* of portal are talking about here?” I asked Vander, shivering.

My first thought had been the Fae portal at Haystack Rock. The big one, the obvious choice. But then I thought back to the pond, to the spirits I’d seen when I was drowning, to the vision I’d had of Silas… Did Vander mean that the portal to the spirit world had opened?

*Oh,* SHIT*. Oh shit!*

I anxiously waited for Vander to reply, holding my breath.

They took a step closer, their face grave. “The portal to the Fae world has reopened.”

“You mean Haystack Rock?” Artemis asked, mirroring my earlier thoughts.

Vander nodded seriously. I was actually relieved they hadn’t been referring to the pond. The idea of some kind of gate straight to hell opening up right next to the pack house was more than a little alarming. I was already living in fear and angst, expecting danger to burst up at any second. I didn’t need any more drama in my life.

“What does it mean that Haystack Rock has been reopened?” I asked Vander. “Did someone do it on purpose? Are the other portals going to open?”

Vander shook their head. I had ever seen them so troubled. “That’s just the thing—I don’t know. And I usually know everything.”

I could see Artemis keeping herself from calling Vander a show-off, but Vander wasn’t lying. They were stating fact. They *were* the Keeper of All Nature.

“But what happens now?” Artemis asked.

“This kind of portal closure and opening is unheard of. We’re in uncharted territory, which means that I can’t make any assumptions for now.” Vander’s brow was furrowed, their lips a thin line. They looked extremely worried.

“So what?” I asked, sounding a little panicky. “You can’t do anything?”

Vander sighed. “I will need to investigate further. But I just wanted to let you guys know.” They then looked straight at Artemis, gaze piercing. “I figured that you would need to know, given that so much of the recent chaos seems to be centered on this pack house.”

There was something about the way that Vander stared at Artemis that bothered me. I opened my mouth to respond, but then they snapped their fingers and disappeared.

*I hate when they do that! It doesn’t give me the opportunity to analyze the million things I want to talk about!* I thought, grumbling internally.

A beat of silence passed. Greyson was leaning against the wall, watching the entire interaction silently. Following his lead, the rest of the pack had also fallen silent and let Vander focus on Artemis and me.

Big Mac, though, was now staring at Greyson. “What the hell is all of that supposed to mean?”

Greyson scoffed. “The Keeper of All Nature has no fucking idea, and you expect *me* to know?”

Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “You are the Alpha, aren’t you?”

Greyson shook his head, his earlier wryness gone. I could see that he was struggling to take everything in. He was far more stressed than I’d seen him in a really long time.

I felt horrible about piling more onto him, but I was pretty sure that he would want me to tell him what happened back at the pond. In fact, he would probably freak out on me if I didn’t say anything. I wanted to protect him, but at the same time I knew I needed to be honest.

Finally, I piped up. “There’s something else.”

“Of *course* there is,” Big Mac grumbled.

Everyone in the pack turned to look at me. Greyson waited, anxious. I hated seeing him like this. I hated knowing that I was about to be the bringer of bad news, adding even more weight to his shoulders.

“What happened, Cali?” Xavier asked quietly, stepping up next to Greyson.

Both of my mates stared at me now, and even though I felt grounded by their presence, I could feel the stress rolling off them in waves.

“I think…” I breathed. “I think Silas is back.”

Everyone around us erupted into chaos, before Greyson yelled, “Stop! Let her speak!”

Xavier looked pained. Glancing between him and Greyson, I started to tell the pack about falling into the pond with Artemis. I felt terrible for dropping this bombshell on my mates; the entire time I was speaking, the two of them kept stealing glances at each other. They rarely, if ever, did that.

I could tell that they were keeping something from me.

“There’s something you’re not telling me, isn’t there?” I asked, looking between them.

The boys looked at each other again before Greyson gave Xavier a nod. Then Xavier said, “The part about Silas…”

“What?” I asked, swallowing roughly. “Did you see him too?”

“Yes,” he said gravely.

Before the pack could erupt into questions once more, Greyson raised his hand. “Everyone, slow down. We still don’t know what’s going on. With everything that’s happening right now, who knows what’s real?”

“You think that Silas isn’t real?” Xavier asked Greyson, his eyebrows arched.

The Alpha shook his head. “I know that I felt Silas’s heart stop. I know that I felt his blood in my hands, the life leaving his body. We killed him, didn’t we?”

I raised my hand, like we were in a classroom. “Um, excuse me? I think it’s obvious by now that not everyone who died has stayed dead. It seems to be a trend around here.”

There was urgent mumbling throughout the pack. I could feel the nervous energy surrounding me, the pack members freaking out. Greyson turned to stare at them, his presence imposing enough to make everyone fall silent once more. “We’ve already defeated Silas once. If need be, we will do it again.”

The entire pack gave nods of agreement, but still kept murmuring. I couldn’t blame them. This was a complete and utter mess. The biggest danger we had ever faced could be back, probably stronger than ever. That was enough to worry even the most level-headed person.

I, personally, was freaking the fuck out.

“I think we should focus on the now at the moment,” Xavier said then, stepping closer to me with a frown. “Cali, you’re soaking wet. I’m pretty we can all agree that you don’t need to get a cold on top of everything else.”

With all the madness going on, I had all but forgotten how freezing I was. But now that there was a pause in the conversation, I realized I was shivering.

“We should all take a breather,” Greyson said then, looking around at the pack. “Whatever is coming, we’ll need to be well-rested to deal with it.”

He moved up to me, right next to Xavier. “We need to get you inside, out of those wet clothes.” As if in sync, both Greyson and Xavier pulled me up by an elbow. Their grip was hot and firm, and it made me instantly flustered.

“I’m fine,” I mumbled, shaking my head.

“Yeah, but you could get sick,” Xavier said.

“He’s right, we need to take care of this,” Greyson agreed.

It was surreal to the point of ridiculous to see both of them set their differences aside to escort me inside.

“I said I’m fine,” I protested. “There’s no need to infantilize me!”

“We wouldn’t need to do that if you could manage the simple task of warming yourself up after almost dying in a freezing pond,” Greyson deadpanned.

I glared up at him. “You’d better watch it with the tone—”

“Or what? Are you going to bring back my dead father to kill us all?” he deadpanned. *Again*. “Because if so, you’re too late—he’s already here.”

It was times like these that I kind of wanted to kill Greyson, but also fuck him. The struggle was real.

“He’s right,” Xavier said, agreeing with Greyson. Seeing them both on the same side freaked me out just as much as the ghosts.

“I hate you both,” I said stubbornly, crossing my arms over my chest.

Xavier leaned forward and kissed my forehead, resting his hands on my shoulders. Gently, he said, “Cali, we just worry about you.”

And that was when I melted.

Greyson cleared his throat. “Xavier, can you run patrol? We need to know if there are any imminent threats, and you’re the best tracker in the pack.”

Xavier looked down at me, his hands still on my arms. It seemed like he wanted to object, but then he sighed, probably realizing that Greyson was right. “I’ll be back before dawn.”

My heart ached as I watched him leave.

“I guess I’ll head upstairs, take a hot shower, and make sure I don’t die from hypothermia,” I grumbled.

Greyson followed me upstairs. His tone was sarcastic. “I’m so glad you reached that decision on your own, without needing two people to remind you of the obvious.”

I scoffed, shoving him. He laughed.

“Pip’s sleeping in there, so where do I…” I trailed off as we reached my room.

“Here,” Greyson muttered, pulling me by the elbow toward his own room.

Once we got inside, his expression softened.

“You can take a hot shower here,” he said. “Leave your clothes to dry by the fire. You can sleep in my bed.”

I blinked up at him, my heart starting to race.

“And where are *you* going to sleep?” I squeaked.

**Episode 1450**

CHARLIE

I stared at Sophie and waited for her to answer my very simple question. *Why did you say that I was your date?*

Because I didn’t remember agreeing to any of that. To dating. To any kind of connection between us that wasn’t platonic. I didn’t want to lead her on in any way. But at the same time, I couldn’t afford to upset her, because she knew my secret. I didn’t want to think that she’d betray me just out of spite, but either way, this wasn’t a good position that I’d put myself in. How could I have been such an idiot?

But what should I have done instead? Let her die? That seemed a bit much, didn’t it?

Sophie took a deep breath and looked up at me. “Honestly, I was just trying to have your back…” She trailed off, and something inside me eased slightly. “I figured that we should stick together right now. Don’t you think? I was just trying to help.”

I exhaled in relief. “*Oh*. Oh, yeah, yes! I really appreciate that. Thank you.”

Sophie kept gazing up at me, her eyes widening slightly before she looked down at her hands. “And, I mean… I wanted to go to the dance with you anyway.” She smirked, looking at me through her lashes.

Well, then. This was not what I’d signed up for.

“I—that’s—I mean...” I started stammering, and Sophie laughed.

She nudged me, grinning. “Oh my gosh, you’re such a dork! Don’t worry about it, we can take things slow.”

So, this was a fucking mess.

I wished so badly that I could just tell Sophie the truth about Violet. I felt horrible for lying to her, and as she smiled up at me, my stomach turned to lead. I didn’t dare wonder if she had a crush on me, because I knew I’d hate the answer to that. And even though Sophie seemed trustworthy so far, I couldn’t trust that she would keep more than one secret. I couldn’t risk letting her know anything about Violet. I was already at risk letting a hunter know about my existence, and I didn’t want to drag Violet into this and put her in harm’s way as well.

Sophie, despite everything, *was* a supernatural hunter, after all.

“Anyway,” Sophie said casually, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “I just wanted to let you know that I’m looking forward to it. Talk to you later!”

She waved at me and walked away, swaying her hips.

After she left, I just stood there, my stomach twisting with unease. I’d only been at this training camp for like three days, and I already felt like I was totally in over my head. I couldn’t even remember the exact lies I’d told everyone. How the hell was I going to keep myself together and also keep track of what the hell I was doing?

My parents had definitely not thought through sending me here.

Right on cue, Romilly entered my line of sight, only seconds after Sophie had walked away. I suspected that she’d been waiting to talk to me in person. And now here she was, looking grim.

“I need to speak with you,” she declared.

I groaned. This was the last thing I needed right now, but I didn’t really have a choice. “What do you want?”

Romilly glanced around suspiciously. “We can’t talk here. We don’t know who could be listening. You should follow me.”

She turned on her heel and headed toward the garden shed. I followed her, my head hung low. This was for sure going to be as exhausting as every conversation I’d had with her. I knew that she meant well, but sometimes good intentions weren’t enough. In fact, they could very easily turn into frustration, and I could see that plain as day on Romilly’s face.

“*This?*” She glared at me, waving her hands around. “*This* is what you consider keeping a low profile? Are you even listening to what I’m telling you?”

I groaned for the second time in the same minute. “Oh my god, I’m trying!” I snapped. “Do you think I like all this? I’m so stressed out, I’ll probably start going bald!”

“The idea of you going bald does serve our interests, actually—especially if it stopped all the girls from flirting with you and giving you so much attention,” Romilly declared.

I could not believe my ears. “*Seriously?*”

“You would be bald, but at least you wouldn’t be dead. Which you seem to be pretty interested in, since the whole camp is buzzing about you *again*. You really had to go and play hero?”

This was messed up. It felt like I was constantly justifying myself. Like I was constantly being accused of random shit when none of it was my fault.

“If you bought into that insane theory about the pickaxe and me breaking a hole in the ice for Sophie to get hurt, then you don’t know me at all. I would never, *ever* do anything like that. I had nothing to do with the accident!”

Romilly kept glaring at me, but she raised her hand in a “stop” motion. “I know you didn’t do it on purpose. Any of it. I know you just wanted to help. But that doesn’t change the fact that now I have to tell your mother you’ve been making waves.”

I scowled. “Do you, though? This doesn’t seem like anything my mom needs to know.”

Romilly peered at me. She was probably a foot shorter than me, but still so intimidating. “Charlie, this is not a joke. If you don’t blend in here, who knows what could happen? You’re walking a very thin line.”

I huffed, frustrated. “It’s not like I seek out trouble. It just keeps on popping up. I’m really trying to do my best here, don’t you see that? Or do you think I wake up every morning and think of new ways to endanger myself and give you a headache?”

She took a deep breath. “No, I don’t believe you’re doing any of this on purpose. But the fact that it keeps happening is something that you need to examine.”

“I don’t know what you want me to do or say. In my opinion, my mom doesn’t need to know anything, anyway,” I said. “It’s not like anyone knows my secret.”

Of course, I *was* internally freaking out about Sophie.

“Charlie, I need you to work harder—”

“On keeping a low profile, I know,” I told her. “I promise I will.”

Romilly looked at me gravely, like a disappointed teacher. “You’d better, if you don’t want to get yourself into even more trouble.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “I don’t want to be a burden to you. Or to anyone.”

She took a deep breath then, her expression softening a bit. “I know this isn’t easy, Charlie. So I guess…” She seemed skeptical.

“What?”

“I won’t tell your mom about the ice incident.”

I was flooded with relief. “Thank you. I’ll try my best not to—”

“But if anything else happens, I won’t keep it from your parents, you understand?”

I nodded furiously. “Thank you so much. I promise to keep a low profile. I’ll do my best.”

She gave me a long-suffering sigh and patted my shoulder. “At least you’re not a bad kid.”

That had to be the first compliment she’d ever paid me.

I thanked her once more for not ratting me out to my parents, said goodnight, and skedaddled, not believing my luck.

The sounds of the forest were the only thing in my ears as I crossed the grounds back to the dorms.

Then suddenly, I heard heavy footsteps. When I turned around, I saw the last person I wanted to see in the whole wide world.

“Hey, show off!” Chad spat, marching up to me. “What were you doing out there with the groundskeeper, huh? Setting up your next scheme?”

He was all in my face, probably because he had no idea that I could tear him apart with one hand.

“Get the hell out of my way,” I snapped. Fury was starting to rise up inside me. It was all this kid’s fault. He was fucking obsessed with me.

He sneered. “You don’t tell me what to do.” Poking a finger in my chest, he said, “I’m watching you, bro, and I don’t like what I see.”

I grabbed his finger and shoved it away. After the day I’d had, this was one step too far for me, and I could feel myself slipping. I was starting to lose control, and the urge to shift and attack Chad was overwhelming.

But I summoned all my strength, all my self-discipline, all the promises that I had made to both Romilly and Violet, and took a deep breath. I tried to calm myself, because I knew that Romilly was right. I needed to fit in.

I looked Chad straight in the eye and asked, “What is it going to take for you to leave me alone?”

**Episode 1451**

GREYSON

I looked down at Cali. She was drenched and shivering, with her lips turning blue. She would’ve called herself a drowned rat, but I’d never seen anything so beautiful. No matter how much I gave her a hard time, this girl owned me through and through.

All I wanted to do was pull her into my arms and warm her up.

If she let me, I’d take off all those wet clothes and cuddle her close. I’d spread her out on my bed, take off my clothes as well, and skin to skin, I would drown her shivers. I would kiss her cool skin until it heated up under my touch, under my mouth, and then I would make her tremble for other reasons that had nothing to do with the cold. We’d heat up quickly together.

I was itching to have her again, to feel her, to hear her moan my name in pleasure as I pinned her down and took everything I wanted. Everything *she* wanted. Being with Cali always sent my mind into a frenzy; I couldn’t get enough of her. I could make her feel so good, fix every bad thing that had happened in the last few hours. I could show her how much I cared for her, how much I loved her. I could—

“Greyson?” she squeaked my name. “What are you thinking?”

Looking away, I took a breath and shook my head. I could see how conflicted she looked. How stressed she was. I didn’t want to add anything more to burden her, because I was pretty sure that she was probably still worried about Xavier being back and him having seen us kiss.

It was all a mess, and it had the potential to explode.

“I’ll sleep on the living room couch,” I told her, reaching out to tuck her wet hair behind her ear. *And dream of you all night long*, I thought to myself*.*

She looked up at me with huge eyes.

“Thank you,” she murmured. It felt like she was grateful to me for not tempting her, as much as she was grateful for the bed. It was kind of an ego boost, not gonna lie, especially considering the way her pupils had blown up just by looking at me.

“You really need to get out of those clothes, though,” I said. “Like, right now.”

Her soft lips parted, scandalized. “*Greyson!*”

I laughed. “Not in front of me, though I would immensely joy the view. I’m just saying that you might catch pneumonia in this weather.”

She narrowed her eyes at me before her lips cracked into a smile. “You’re such a menace.”

“You think *I’m* the menace?” I called after her as she headed into the bathroom. “Seriously? Promise me that next time you get any insane ideas about finding answers in a haunted pond, you’ll tell me.”

She paused, turning to face me. “And why should I do that? So you can stop me from doing what I think is right?”

I pressed my lips together to hide a smile. She really was a piece of work, and I loved everything about it. “Cali, I can’t stop you. Of course I can’t. I’d be a fool not to know that by now. But I could at least be there to protect you.”

She gave me a little smile, looking all pleased with herself, before going into the bathroom and closing the door behind her. Big Mac would’ve called this enabling her and letting her put her life in danger for no real reason other than the fact that she was a naïve fool. I called it supporting her unconditionally.

Different strokes.

I headed downstairs, forcing myself not to think about Cali in the shower. That was a literal wet dream that would derail my entire thinking process, and I had lot of pressing matters to deal with at the moment—above all, the possible return of Silas.

I growled in frustration, scrubbing at my face.

Wasn’t it enough that I’d killed him once? Did we really need a repeat performance? *Sit the fuck down, Dad, we don’t want you here.* The man seriously could not take a hint.

I couldn’t even fucking wrap my head around this whole thing, and there was only one person I could talk to about this who would understand. Xavier. My infuriating, loyal little brother—one of them at least. I went out to the lawn and shifted, following Xavier’s scent through the woods.

As crazy as it sounded, I was actually really glad that he was back. He was dependable, and a strong fighter. As much as I hated to admit it, there was no way that I could have taken down Silas on my own the first time around. And if he had truly returned, if our father was roaming around in the land of the living, I’d need Xavier on my side to get shit done—the same way we already had once before.

I saw the black wolf in the distance, and he whirled around in surprise, pausing when he saw me. As I trotted toward him, he mind linked with me.

*What is it? Did something happen to Cali?* Xavier asked.

It shook my head as I neared him. *Cali is fine.*

*Are you sure she didn’t accidentally drown herself in the shower or something?* Xavier asked. *Because she doesn’t seem to have a very good relationship with water.*

I scoffed. *You say that now, but you wouldn’t be brave enough to make those kinds of comments in front of her.*

His wolf snorted. *Of course not. I let you be the sarcastic jackass so I get the brownie points.*

My wolf head-butted him on the shoulder for that. He snapped at me. For once, though, the energy between us didn’t feel malicious. But then we paused and stared at each other, and I realized it was time to cut to the chase.

*We need to talk about Silas*, I said. *It can’t be a coincidence that Cali was attacked.*

*What do you mean?* Xavier’s wolf stared at me.

*If Silas is really back, he’ll be coming for her. There’s no doubt about that*, I said.

The black wolf nodded slowly. I could see the tension in his massive jaw. *But do you really think it’s him? Like, for real? With all the revenants… It might all be a trick.*

*It’s possible*, I replied*. But still, think about Ava. She came back for real. Not just as a spirit, but as a flesh-and-blood person. A person who has messed with our lives repeatedly.*

Xavier shook his head. *Tell me about it.*

*There’s always the possibility that Silas returned just like Ava did*,I said. *And if Silas is back for real, we need to come together to protect Cali.*

Xavier snorted. *You really think you need to tell me that? I’d never let anything happen to Cali—ever.*

*And you think I would?* I said, a little annoyed now.

*When the fuck did I say that?* Xavier demanded. *I’ve accused you of a lot of things over the years, but never that, so stop getting so pissy.*

I head-butted him again. This time a little harder than necessary. *I’m not getting fucking pissy. You are!*

Xavier’s wolf growled. *You know what? I’ve had enough of your—*

*Okay!* I said, shaking my head at myself. I needed to get a grip here. *You’re right.*

Xavier blinked. *I am?*

*Yeah. You’ve never accused me of not caring about Cali. And I’ve never done that to you either. So we should probably focus on that and not let this* due destini *shit get between us. That’s exactly what Silas would want.*

Xavier nodded solemnly. *If we’re divided, we’re weaker, and he has more of an opportunity to attack. To make Cali an easy target.*

I nodded.

Xavier let out a little huff. *I guess that I can’t kill you, then.*

I rolled my eyes. *You haven’t tried to kill me in a really long-ass time, so you should probably stop bringing it up.*

Xavier just huffed again, but I but I could tell there was no anger behind it.

Just to make sure, I asked, *So we’re in agreement? We’ll work together?*

Xavier’s wolf stared at me. He was about to answer when suddenly, my vision went blurry.

*Greyson?* Xavier said, but it was too late.

I swayed, my feet suddenly heavy, my heartbeat overwhelming in my ears. I stumbled and fell to the ground, fighting to clear my throbbing head. My brother kept saying my name, his wolf’s snout nosing at my ear, but I could barely hear. I closed my eyes, fighting to ignore the headache.

And when I opened them again, I sucked in a breath.

Silas was standing before me.

He looked exactly as I remembered him—not a spirit, but a man. Flesh and blood, breathing. Alive as could be.

He smiled at me, creepy and terrifying. “Hello, son.”

**Episode 1452**

The hot water felt so good rushing over my cold skin. I had been chilled to the bone, my nails turning blue, and now warmth was engulfing me, the sensation so amazing that I found myself feeling grateful for all the little things in life. And the big ones too. Like Greyson and Xavier and how worried they’d been about me, even if they were being irritating.

My thoughts went back to Greyson, to him saying I could sleep in his bed. For a beat there, I’d expected him to say that he would sleep with me after we shared a shower together. It was probably the only thing that would have made this moment even better for me.

As I scrubbed myself with Greyson’s shower gel, I realized that I would be smelling like him for the next few hours. Closing my eyes, I let out a low moan as I massaged the knots in my shoulder; for a moment, I imagined Greyson doing that for me, in here, surrounded by warmth.

My cheeks burned before I shook my head at myself. Snapping my eyes open, I stopped that train of thought. Xavier was just outside the house, and he had seen me kissing Greyson. The pain in his face had been palpable. The idea of hurting him was horrible.

Taking a deep breath, I poured shampoo in my hand and started washing my hair. The moment I closed my eyes, I imagined Xavier doing it for me instead, his hot breath in my ear… With a shiver, I stopped myself once more.

*Do you have no shame?* I huffed, judging myself. *Bad Cali!*

The hopelessness of the *due destini* was always horrible to deal with, like a constant sword hanging over my head. But I couldn’t think about that right now. It was too much, too overwhelming, and it would not solve anything. I still didn’t have any answers.

Grumbling to myself, I turned off the water and traced the wall to find a big fuzzy robe that Greyson had left there for me the other day. It was so thoughtful and sweet that—

I stopped myself from continuing that line of thought.

Aiming for distraction, I thought back to what had happened in the pond.

How many times could I possibly almost die, anyway? Had fate not already accepted that I would just not be killed anytime soon? At least I had that going for me, of all the things.

*The unkillable Cali!* I thought to myself, smirking as I padded over to Greyson’s bed. I got under the covers and lay there for a moment. It was the first moment of true peace I’d had in a while. There was nothing immediate that I had to do, no one to go rescue, no ponds to hop into… It was just me and the bed and sleep.

And my thoughts, of course.

I started to wonder if I should perhaps be a little less impulsive, because there was a chance—a tiny chance—that my luck would eventually run out and I would actually die if I kept putting myself in dangerous situations that I could deal with differently. Nevertheless, if you thought about it, I had gone through so many things that should have ended me, but I was still here. Someone always saved me. Maybe I *didn’t* need to not be reckless, because my secret superpower was to not die.

Yeah, that probably wouldn’t last much longer with my luck.

Sighing, I settled back into the covers and nuzzled the pillow. In that moment, I realized how absolutely drenched I was in Greyson’s scent. Spicy and earthy and so delicious.

My heart started pounding.

The thought of him in bed, with me, was killing me. Just like the idea of Xavier being upset. *UGH!*

“Nope, nah-ah, no more!” I muttered, sitting upright.

I couldn’t stop lusting after Greyson, and this just wouldn’t do. I got out of bed right away, realizing that there was no way that I’d be able to sleep right now. I was just too tense and very easily lured into dangerous thoughts. I walked out of Greyson’s room, tightening the robe around me, and moved down the hallway until I reached Artemis’s door.

I was about to open it when I realized that there was a chance Rishika would be inside. Colton used to barge in to me and Xavier while we were in bed all the time, and I did *not* want to be Colton. The memory of being in Xavier’s arms was vibrant inside my head, the closeness between us, and all the pleasure… Those were much simpler times, when my biggest problem had been Colton.

So instead of pulling a Colton, I remained respectful and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Artemis said.

I got into the room and saw Artemis sitting on her bed. She was still in the exact same clothes she’d been wearing at the pond, but she was dry and didn’t look cold at all. I gave her a look. “Couldn’t sleep either?”

She shook her head. “Too much to think about.” She paused, taking me in. “I can’t stop thinking about what we saw down there.”

I swallowed roughly. “You saw Silas too?”

Artemis nodded, averting her eyes from my own. My heart sank. I’d almost been hoping that I’d imagined it all. That it had all been part of the creepy pond’s creepiness, making me see things.

“Is it actually possible that Silas is back for real?” I asked.

Artemis shrugged. She looked a little lost and upset. “Anything is possible now, right? I definitely saw him. That was why I knew I had to go after you.”

I felt a smile tug at the corners of my mouth. I was so grateful and glad that my sister had been there to save me from my third almost-drowning experience. Or was it fourth? I’d lost count.

Taking a deep breath, I sat next to Artemis on the bed, feeling the urge to touch and comfort her. She seemed skeptical, and at the same time sad.

“How are you dealing with this whole thing?” I asked. “It seems like you’ve been doing better…”

Artemis turned to me, staring deep into my eyes. “I’ve been feeling much better. Especially compared to before.”

The words were exactly what I wanted to hear, but something still felt off. Could Artemis be hiding something from me? Why did it feel like it? Why did it feel that there was distance between us, even though we were right next to each other?

“What do you think changed to make you feel better?” I asked carefully. “Was it the potion?”

Artemis still refused to meet my gaze. She stared at her hands, twisting in her lap. She shrugged again. “I’m not sure. All I know now is that I’m going to be fine. Better than fine, even.” She turned to face me, smiling brightly all of a sudden.

She looked like Artemis, but there was something odd about her. About her behavior and the vibe she was giving off. But maybe I was imagining it. There was no reason for me to be uneasy. We were fine. This was the exact thing I’d been hoping for—for my sister to feel better, to *be* better.

I knew I shouldn’t focus on anything negative, that I should just appreciate this moment between us. How important it was. How strong it made our connection. Artemis was opening up to me, and I could only consider that a gift.

“I’m glad to hear that,” I murmured. “You had me scared there for a while.”

“Really?” Artemis asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Really,” I said, reaching out to hold her hands. “It’s not every day that I feel like my only sister is acting like another person.”

“That’s what you think? Or, what you used to think?”

I nodded. “And the part where you vomited the potion, that was also pretty creepy. And York. Basically, everything was really fucking—”

“Creepy,” Artemis cut me off, snorting. “It’s not like we should consider ourselves safe right now, though.”

I blinked. *Oh no, I don’t like the sound of that!* I thought.

“What do you mean?” I asked my sister, eyebrows furrowed.

“I’ve been thinking…” Artemis trailed off.

“Why does that sound ominous?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m being serious here, Cali. I’ve been thinking that the last place I saw the Orb was back at Haystack Rock.”

I frowned. “And? What does that have to do with anything?”

“I think that if we want all this to end, maybe we need to find it,” Artemis said, staring into my eyes.

I felt my throat dry up. “Find what?”

Artemis didn’t break eye contact. “The Orb, Cali. If we don’t find it, nothing ends. Nothing will ever end; we’ll just stay here, stuck in limbo.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “What are you saying? That we need to go back to the Fae world?”

**Episode 1453**

GREYSON

Horror struck me like lightning.

My father, the worst thing that had ever happened to me, was standing right before me, smiling. He seemed alive, flesh and blood, not a spirit. The heart that we had torn apart, the chest that we had torn open, the decaying flesh that we had burned… It was like we hadn’t touched him. Our father had returned, looking like he had never been harmed in his life.

His form was healthy and powerful, and I knew that his wolf would be equally powerful.

This was my greatest nightmare come true.

He kept smiling, staring down at me.

The smile started off creepy, but now, there was something else to it, something almost… Real? Like he truly was happy to see me. He looked friendlier than I’d ever seen him. This had to be a trap. Of course it was.

Or it was one of those visions that came to torture me.

“Come on, son,” he said affectionately, a twinge of tenderness in his tone that I had never, fucking *ever*, heard before in my entire life. “Get up. Let’s play a game.”

What kind of game? Was he going to kill me and feed me to his Rogues? Was he going to break me apart and leave me outside to rot? Would he tie me up to torture me? That would be his idea of a game. That would be his normal form of entertainment.

But this Silas didn’t seem normal. He had my father’s face, but there was something significantly different about him.

In that moment, he didn’t seem evil.

It felt like I’d fallen into some sort of wormhole that made no sense.

I slowly got to my feet. My body moved without my orders. My head was spinning. And as I got to my feet, I noticed that I’d shifted back to human. I glanced around, and to my utter confusion, I realized it was broad daylight. I was in a wide, open yard that I had never seen before. There was a cute little cottage house and a pool. A nice garden with roses and trees and a pond with fish in it. It looked like somewhere I would have killed to have lived in as a kid. It looked like peace.

And then, when I looked at Silas again, I was shocked to see him pick up a basketball. What the hell was going on right now? Was this even real? It couldn’t be real, right?

Had I lost my mind? Had my brain finally broken?

Was I dead?

“Catch!” Silas said, tossing the ball to me.

I caught it without thinking, and held it without saying anything for a moment. I stared at the thing, fighting to process what the fuck was happening.

When I looked at Silas again, he was grinning. “Don’t think you can take your old man? C’mon son!”

He pointed toward a basketball hoop, looking happy and casual. “Best of five, remember?”

I stood there, trying to wrap my head around the surrealism of what was happening. Here I was, with my father, and we were both wearing sneakers and basketball shorts. His were red, mine were blue, he had a sleeveless T-shirt on, and I was bare chested. We looked normal, ready to shoot some hoops. Like it was any other day—normal, even.

As if there was an invisible force that stopped me from processing and running away, I tossed the basketball back to him. Silas whooped and dribbled to the hoop. He threw it up with ease and started whistling and clapping when it went in.

“You’d better catch up, boy!” he exclaimed with a smirk. He looked so excited to be with me, to be playing this dumb game.

I’d always wanted to have a dad who paid attention to me, who threw a ball around with me. But this had never happened between us. This wasn’t real. Silas would never act like a real father. Silas would never act like a *good* father—like someone who cared, like someone who loved, like someone who saw his children as people instead of pieces of meat to continue his Alpha bloodline. He had been a sadist, a horrible, *horrible* legend, full of hatred. That was his legacy.

He had always been only a monster. To me and to everyone else.

Silas continued playing with the ball, asking me questions about the game, one after the other, like we were buddies. Like we were friends. Like we were father and son. Not a word had escaped my mouth this entire time. Or was I replying, but couldn’t remember? Was I replying to him without understanding or feeling it? There was something wrong here. So very wrong.

Just as I was about to tell him to go to hell, the door to the house opened. My heart dropped when Cali poked her head out. I wanted to scream at her to go inside and duck for cover, to run away from Silas as quickly as she could. But Cali was beaming. Cali, in a little yellow dress and her hair up in a bun, waved at us enthusiastically, looking like this was one of the greatest days of her life. She looked delighted to be speaking with both me and Silas.

“Are you boys about done out here?” she called happily. “Lunch is nearly ready! I made your favorite, chicken breast sandwiches!”

“We’ll be right there, Caliana!” Silas replied.

I just stood there, frozen. He then met my gaze and gave me another massive smile while Cali went back into the house.

“You picked a good one with that girl, Greyson,” he said. “She’s a gem.”

I found I could finally speak. “We picked each other.”

Silas kept smiling, to the point where I didn’t know how to respond. And then, he made things a million times worse by telling me, “I’m so proud of you, son. I always knew that you were destined for greatness.”

This… This made *no* sense.

My head was throbbing, because I knew that this wasn’t real. And yet, as a child, I had always yearned to hear those words come out of his mouth. But this had never been my reality.

Silas moved closer to me, and for the first time in my life, I didn’t flinch away when he raised his hand to touch me. He squeezed my shoulder and patted it. His voice came out even and sincere in a way that it could never be in real life. “I love you, son.”

The words burned me.

Suddenly, my vision went blurry again. Hearing Silas say something like that was jarring and shocking enough to pull me out of whatever this was. Everything went black for a moment, and when I opened my eyes again, it was dark.

It took me a long moment to realize where I was, what was going on.

I was still in my wolf form.

I was back in the forest with Xavier, the place I’d been before the vision had struck. I lay on the cold forest floor as Xavier loomed over me. He had shifted back to human. He stared at me with real concern in his eyes.

“Uh, dude? What just happened? Are you okay?”

I shifted back to human as well. I stared up my brother, not sure what to say. I was still so confused and freaked the fuck out by the *Brady Bunch* vision I’d just had of Silas. It was so strange, so foreign, and so unbelievable. It was a version of my father that I had certainly never seen in real life.

A version that I would never experience.

“Hello?” Xavier shook my shoulder. “What the fuck? Are you listening to me? Are you sick or something? Please don’t throw up on me.”

First of all, my brother was an asshole. Second, I had no idea how much to tell him about the visions. I certainly didn’t want to admit that I had just heard our evil father tell me that he loved me. Xavier would think that I’d lost my mind. That I was literally delusional. I thought back to all the visions and realized that they could be a real liability if anything happened to the pack… to Cali.

What if I zoned out in the middle of a fight and that ended up being deadly for someone I cared about? And if Silas was really back, there was no way I could risk letting myself be this vulnerable. It was out of the question.

I sat up with Xavier’s help, my knees shaking. And then I steadied myself, ignoring my spinning head.

“Greyson?” Xavier said. “Are you okay?”

No, I wasn’t. I hadn’t been in a while. And enough was enough. These visions were getting out of control. They could have real consequences in the future. I had to put a stop to them, once and for all.

It was time to call the witches.

**Episode 1454**

CHARLIE

I glared at Chad while my wolf thrashed on the inside. I was right on the verge of losing control. Something about this asshole had gotten under my skin, but I knew I had to be very careful. There was no way Chad wouldn’t flip and tell everyone if he even got a whiff of something off about me. But it was so hard to contain the rage inside me. My wolf had marked Chad as an enemy, and my instincts were screaming at me to attack him.

To attack and destroy and also perhaps kick him off a cliff or something.

My wolf was very inventive when it came to disposing of problems.

Chad had repeatedly been a problem for me, and he fucking dared to underestimate me at the same time. It was too much to handle.

“Oh, you want me to leave you alone?” Chad mocked, moving closer to me. “Is that it?”

I clenched my fists tighter to stop myself from doing something foolish. “That’s what I said. Do you need me to translate? I don’t have all fucking day.”

Chad’s eyes narrowed. He seemed to be thinking something through. And then he said, “If you want me to leave you alone, you have to get me Sophie.”

It took me a moment to process the absolute fuckery of what Chad had just said. It wasn’t at all what I’d been expecting. And yet somehow, it was a hundred times worse. I took a step back in case I accidentally kicked him in the nuts.

“The hell are you talking about? Sophie’s a person, not a thing I can *get* you,” I snapped.

Chad stepped closer to me again. Clearly he didn’t have any self-preservation instincts. “Those are my terms.”

I rubbed my forehead to stop myself from forcing this absolute tool to eat dirt. “What the fuck is wrong with you, dude? This is literally why Sophie would never look at you twice.”

Chad gasped. Was he offended? Did this son of a bitch really think he had the room to be offended here? “You’d better watch your—”

“Maybe if you weren’t such an insufferable asshole, Sophie would actually like you,” I declared. “But you’ve already ruined that. She can see right through you. And there’s no way she’s ever going to go for you. You’d better accept that sooner or later, before you embarrass yourself.”

Chad laughed. “That’s what you think! You’re full of shit!”

“What I *think*…” I took a step closer, cracking my neck to the side to swallow down all the tension inside me. “No, what I *know*, is that you planted that pickaxe. I know exactly what you did.”

Chad crossed his arms, shrugging. His smirk was infuriating. “You don’t have any proof. So what you’re saying doesn’t count. Allegations don’t matter to anyone.”

“Maybe I’ll have to get some proof,” I said through gritted teeth.

Chad snorted. “Good luck, bro. And in the meantime, I will keep watching you.” He moved his index and middle finger between me and his eyes. “I’m telling you, there’s something wrong with you, and I know I can figure it out. Remember that.”

With those final words, the insufferable piece of shit turned his back on me. My wolf was roaring on the inside, the instinct to protect my pride and ego so intense that my chest was hurting. But my head said to calm down. I felt so uneasy. And if I wasn’t careful, I was going to lose it and rip that asshole’s throat out. I couldn’t afford to do that, not with Romilly watching me so closely.

I really needed to do something to smooth things over. And I was going to have to do it before my parents showed up for the Friends and Family Weekend.

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Violet lay in my bed, looking up at me with wide eyes, biting her lip.

“You have to be quiet, okay?” I whispered in her ear. “My roommates could be back any second now.”

“Okay,” Violet breathed, shivering when I nuzzled her neck. She pressed her lips together as I started brushing my mouth down her collarbones and across every soft, perfect inch of her beautiful body. She was so gorgeous. I couldn’t get enough of looking at her. She let out a whimper, staring down at me as her cheeks grew pink.

“Shh…” I whispered.

She smelled so good that my wolf preened. I slid my hands down her, watched as she trembled under my touch, arching up into it. I reached lower, looking for her permission, asking for it…

*DRRRIIIIINNNN!*

That was someone’s goddamn alarm clock.

I groaned, waking up in the worst mood ever. Apparently, a guy couldn’t even have a sex dream around here without someone ruining his life. I was literally wasting away out here, dealing with a megalomaniac like Chad, hiding my true identity, and weirdly fending off Sophie because she probably kind of liked me. Either way, I was not having a good time, so I deserved a good dream with my amazing mate, damn it!

I missed Violet so damn much.

“Hey, Charlie! Rise and shine, bro!”

I opened my eyes to see Zachery standing over me, holding a cup of coffee. He seemed so chipper that I wanted to shove him. I would’ve given anything to go back to sleep and finish what I’d started in that dream.

“Go away,” I grumbled, turning my back on Zachery and moving the blanket over my head. Going back to dreamland was highly preferable to hunter camp, especially a dream like that one.

The little shit just laughed and yanked off all my covers. “C’mon, man! We’ve got to get to training. You know that Sergeant Pepperdine will flip if we’re late.”

Unfortunately, Zachery was right. I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling, accepting my horrible fate. Grumbling the entire time, I washed my face and put on my clothes while Zachery kept drinking his coffee like the early bird he was. I knew that I couldn’t avoid the drills, though. It would be a bad move to rock the already unsteady boat with Pepperdine.

“Are you ready?” Zachery asked me.

I huffed. “As ready as I can be.”

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The day continued like usual. I was running with the group, reminding myself to pretend I was exhausted, even though I felt like I could run forever. Preferably away from Chad and Pepperdine. Finally, it came time for the standard water break. Before Sophie could spot me and come over for some chit-chat and hip bumping, I covertly held out my phone and moved to the edge of the group, slipping into the woods when nobody was looking. It felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders.

I kept an eye to the rest of the group to make sure that nobody was leaving and dialed Violet’s number.

When she picked up the phone, just hearing her voice lifted my mood.

“Hello?” she muttered.

I leaned against a tree, sighing. “Hi, Sunshine.”

“Charlie!” she said, the longing in her voice making my heart race. Maybe it was a good sign? Maybe we’d been able to move past our little fight from before. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I just needed to hear you. Sometimes being away is too much… The only thing that makes me feel like myself is listening to your voice.”

Violet let out a little sound that made me want to bite my fist. It reminded me of the dream that I hadn’t finished that morning.

“Tell me about it,” she said, huffing. “Things are insane here!”

I scowled, alarmed. “What? What’s going on? Are you safe?”

Her voice was shaky. “I mean, for now. But they’re saying that Silas might be back…”

I could *not* believe this.

Though to be fair, the dead seemed to come back to life all the time around the Redwood pack, so I probably shouldn’t have been so surprised. But I had seen Silas die. I had *seen* the Evers brothers tear his heart out. It had been something straight out of a slasher movie. And yet, apparently it hadn’t been enough to get rid of Silas entirely.

“Are you sure you’re safe? Because that doesn’t sound safe to me,” I said, looking around again to make sure that nobody was spying on me.

“It’s fine right now,” Violet mumbled. “But everyone’s on edge. I can’t imagine having to fight him *again.*”

I absolutely hated the idea of Violet fighting without me. I would lose my mind just thinking that I wouldn’t be there to protect her, to stand between her and danger, to give my life for her if necessary. I glanced back at the group chatting in the woods, drinking water and looking carefree.

I was not carefree.

I did not fucking belong here.

“If there’s going to be a fight, you aren’t doing it without me,” I said evenly.

Violet paused. “What are you saying, Charlie?”

She sounded hopeful, if apprehensive. But I was certain.

“I’m coming back to the pack house.”

**Episode 1455**

LOLA

I had spent the entire night awake, tossing and turning in my bed. After I’d found the creepy folder on myself in Emmett’s creepy office, hidden behind the creepy secret door, I’d gotten so freaked out that I’d immediately gotten the hell out of there. I didn’t want to be caught by Emmett in his mad scientist lair. That was NOT a conversation I wanted to have with him.

I shifted in bed, reaching under my pillow to pull out the folder. I had debated on stealing it but of course decided that theft was the only solution. What else was I supposed to have done? I looked over it for the hundredth time. It still didn’t make any sense to me. There was a lot of strange scribbling that I couldn’t decipher. I had used an app for translation, but it hadn’t recognized the picture I’d uploaded.

So, bottom line, *what the hell did it all mean?*

Why the hell was Emmett keeping some kind of folder on me, like I was a scientific test subject? Why had he approached me in the first place? Why had he brought me to that orgy? Had it just been to see my reactions? Were they so different to a “normal” vampire’s? Having spent all my life as a hybrid, I’d always felt like I was being singled out in a bad way, and that seemed to be continuing now as well. It was a fate that I apparently couldn’t escape.

The thought made me sick, my stomach convulsing unpleasantly at the image of Emmett rubbing his hands together while trying to figure out how my insides worked. I was not some specimen in a petri dish! The idea that Emmett had been tracking me was terrifying—I had never felt more watched in my entire life.

And for what purpose? What exactly did he want with me? What could he do to me while being my professor? While I was supposed to be staying in this school to remain safe and learn more about myself?

This was ridiculous—I’d never felt more confused about who I was, or more unsafe around an authority figure.

Could I be in actual danger here, or was Emmett’s bullshit just that—*bullshit*?

Either way, I was certain that he was up to no good. And he had lied to me repeatedly. Ras had given me reason to be suspicious too. I fucking hated men who lied.

My alarm went off right then, startling me. I almost jumped up and fell over the bed, groaning. Where the hell had the time gone? I hadn’t slept all night, and now I needed to wake up… from not sleeping? *Unbelievable!* I was completely exhausted and felt like shit.

I pulled myself out of bed, grumbling every curse word I knew, and headed to the bathroom. I felt like I was back in high school as I grumpily washed my face, brushed my teeth, and applied the morning skincare that Cali constantly mocked me about, but I didn’t care. I made a mental note to ask someone around here, maybe Ras, if I needed to still wear sunscreen now that I was a vampire. Wrinkle prevention probably wasn’t a thing for them, but I was also half-human, so better safe than sorry.

I was still annoyed that I couldn’t see my reflection, because it made putting on mascara impossible. I was pretty sure that I looked like hell after the night I’d had, anyway, so I didn’t give a shit at this point. As I got dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, I glanced back at my bed. I sighed, imagining Jay lying on it. Naked, of course, with his abs glinting in the sunlight. He would wave me over and smile and look so sexy without even trying. That was the hottest thing about him—how effortlessly attractive he was, while at the same time staying the sweetest, most trustworthy boy I’d ever known.

I was taking a moment to daydream about him when my eyes fell on that damn folder.

I rushed to tuck it back under my pillow. I definitely didn’t want anyone knowing that I had it. And I also didn’t want to know what Emmett would do once he figured out it was missing. That should be interesting.

Before leaving the room, I glanced at my bed one last time and thought of Jay again. I looked down at my phone. Should I call him? Should I tell him what I’d found? But if I did tell him, he would flip out. He would come back to the school again and probably cause some sort of scene, or—if he was in normal mode instead of wolf mode—he would demand to speak to the headmistress and the entire school board to have Emmett kicked out, or something.

But making Jay freak out right now sounded like the last thing I should do. I knew that things were chaotic enough back at the pack house. I took a deep breath and shoved my phone into my pocket as I pushed open the door and moved into the busy hallway. Nobody else looked as tired as I felt. All around me, the students were chattering happily. They didn’t have a care in the world, and I couldn’t relate at all.

A strong sense of loneliness suddenly hit me. I swallowed, feeling my throat constrict. Emmett had been the first person to make me feel like I belonged at this school, but now I knew that he had some kind of agenda. A probably potentially *dangerous* agenda. Or at least a shady and creepy one. Either way, he obviously didn’t really care about me.

Nobody in this place cared about me the way Jay and the pack did. They never would.

The thought made me so deeply sad that I had to make an effort to ignore it. What good would it do? I already had a best friend and other friends back at the pack house. Sooner rather than later, I hoped to return to them. I obviously still needed to deal with my vampire urges and also this freaky Emmett situation, but this whole thing would have to end at some point. *Right?*

I couldn’t stay at this damn school forever.

I got to class and waited in line to enter the classroom. I tried to psych myself up enough to sit through an entire hour of learning about the origins of vampire transformation or whatever. I didn’t understand why we needed to learn about that. I clearly would not be shifting into a bat anytime soon. My shifting days were gone forever. And honestly, if shifting was again back on the table, the last thing I would want to turn into was a black flying mouse.

*How weird is that? I don’t like it in any way, shape, or—*

A hand landed on my shoulder, making me freeze. Suddenly, I was terrified. Oh GOD, it had to be Emmett. Why had I been so stupid as to take the folder? Of course he would notice and suspect me! And I didn’t even know if he had a camera in his office! But wait, would I even show up in camera footage? Because vampires didn’t show up in the mirror, so maybe cameras were the same!

Slowly, I turned around to face…

*Jacqueline.*

I rolled my eyes. Seriously? That was it?

“What do you want, Jackie?” I snapped.

Her eyes narrowed as she blocked my way. “It’s Jacqueline, bitch.”

I rolled my eyes again, because this child had no idea of all the things that I’d been through in my life with the Redwoods. She thought *she* was scary? Hilarious!

“Whatever, Jackie. Leave me alone, I’ve got to get to class,” I declared.

She scoffed. “Oh right, we all know how important class is to you.”

I couldn’t believe this asshole. “Seriously? I don’t know what your problem is with me, but I’m just trying to live, here,” I declared. “Ignore me, just like I ignore you! We literally don’t need to talk again, ever!”

I tried to push past her, but she stopped me.

“Ha, not so fast!” She glared at me.

I was just so unbelievably bored with and annoyed by this interaction. “Seriously, what the fuck do you want? Leave me the hell—”

She looked at me straight in the eyes and said, “I know what you did.”

My heart started speeding up. And then I remembered that Jacqueline had seen me the other night, when I’d come back from the sex party.

*Oh. That.*

Of course I would deny it. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I haven’t done anything wrong.”

Jacqueline raised an eyebrow. “Oh, I don’t know about that.” She took a step closer to me, tilting her head to the side. After looking right and left, her voice dropped an octave. And then she muttered, “I know what you did last night.”

**Episode 1456**

XAVIER

Bright light made my eyes flicker open. It was morning, and I’d just had a full night’s sleep. After Greyson had had his weird zone-out in the forest—what the fuck had that been, anyway?—he and I had returned to the pack house. I’d showered and then immediately passed out. I must have been much more tired than I’d originally thought. Cali had been sleeping when I’d arrived, so I’d decided not to wake her. She had been through a lot, and I didn’t want to mess things up.

Still, I wasn’t pleased she was in Greyson’s room.

Now that it was a new day and all that, my mind went back to her, and how cold she had been the night before. I hoped she wouldn’t catch pneumonia or something.

The second thought in my head was Greyson. What was going on with him?

Now, more than ever, we both needed to be vigilant.

And with Cali running off to investigate things on her own at random, I had to admit that both Greyson and I needed to work overtime to keep an eye on her and make sure that she was safe. It was fucked up to think so—to trust her so little with her own self, as if she were a pet or a toddler. But when she consciously kept putting herself in danger when there were clearly many other options, I guessed we had no other choice.

Cali had her powers now, and Greyson and I knew they could be very effective, but it looked like there were a million dangers that appeared to be immune to them. Like ghosts. Not that Greyson and I knew how to punch a ghost, but at least we would save her from drowning, which seemed to be her latest way of getting into danger. I knew that she didn’t like it when we ruined all her exploring plans, but sometimes there was no need to go exploring without one or two Alphas with you. Artemis had done well saving her, but Cali’s sister was also impulsive, so the two of them made quite the pair. Bottom line, Cali was the safest when Greyson and I were around.

If there was one thing that we agreed on, it was that Cali needed to be safe. How that made me feel was another story. But at least two of us were on the lookout for her.

As for her accusing us of hovering—if she didn’t want us to fucking hover, she’d need to dial back on the recklessness. Otherwise, we would just keep hovering, because that was a mate’s cross to bear.

Either way, I had missed her so fucking much.

I was glad to be back, for her and for her alone.

I stretched on the bed, shivering as I got out. It had gotten cold enough that the mornings were nippy. Cali had looked freezing the night before. I really needed to check on her. I was feeling quite positive this morning—now that the Kira/Garren drama was all wrapped up, I was grateful to be able to focus all my energy on the pack. And on Cali. I couldn’t wait to see her and hang out. I wanted to just *be* *with her* without anything hanging over our heads.

After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I checked out my reflection. All the bruises from the latest mission had faded, thankfully. I didn’t want to stress Cali out any more than I had to. I put on a pair of jeans and a shirt, mostly because Cali’s parents were around and I wanted to make a good impression instead of wandering naked like I used to.

I headed downstairs, and I could smell delicious bacon frying in the kitchen. When I walked in, I saw Torin whistling to himself and swaying to some sort of tune. There were tomatoes, peppers, eggs, and a bunch of other things on the counter. The Fae looked so chipper that you never would’ve imagined that our pack house was in constant danger. The guy was super annoying, but there was a part of me that secretly liked having him around. Not that I would admit it to his face. He was a good friend to Cali.

He was casually adding more strips to the pan as he looked up at me with a grin.

“Morning,” I said.

“Good morning, Xavier!” He pointed at his pan. “Are you hungry? I figured that after all the drama last night, people would be hungry.”

Torin was annoying, but he could stay. He could stay for a really long time.

“What’s on the menu?” I asked.

“Do you want eggs and bacon, or an omelet? I can make an omelet with cheese, ham, cherry tomatoes, peppers, mushrooms, onions—”

“Just eggs and bacon would be fine,” I said, before he started cataloging the entirety of what was in the fridge.

“Coming right up!” he enthused.

I snorted.

“Thanks,” I said, after he placed the food in front of me. “This looks really good.”

Torin beamed at me and watched as I dug in. It was a little weird, but I could forgive him because the food was delicious, and I’d accepted the way he was a while back.

He sat across from me, drinking some orange juice. After the second sip, he asked, “So. How are you feeling?”

I gave him a look. He had leaned forward and stared at me intently. I wasn’t sure what he was getting at. “I feel fine. Why are you asking?”

Torin cringed. “I meant… about your dad maybe being back. You know?”

His words put a damper on my good mood. “We don’t know anything yet for sure,” I said curtly.

Torin nodded, taking a long deep breath. “That’s true. But I’m glad that Astrid and I are still hanging out. If you guys are in danger, I want to be here to help.”

I was a little surprised by him being so open about helping us. But maybe I shouldn’t have been—Torin liked to talk about his feelings, and he’d already proven repeatedly that he and his friend could help us anytime we wanted. Despite his meddling, he was a good dude.

Perhaps I should be a little nicer to him.

“I think we’re lucky to have you and Astrid around,” I said.

Torin smiled so widely that I had to smile back.

I heard footsteps behind me, and recognized them instantly. I turned to see Cali coming down the stairs. She was in a sweater and a pair of yoga pants, her hair all mussed. There were dark circles under her eyes, and it looked like she hadn’t slept at all. But still, to me, she was stunning.

“Good morning,” she told both me and Torin.

I stood up, to be as close to her as possible. “Are you okay? How are you feeling? Did you have any nightmares about the pond?” Was that why she hadn’t slept well?

She blinked up at my array of questions, sighing. “Xavier, I’m fine.” Her voice was soft, almost broken.

I was suddenly struck by sadness, realizing that Cali had so much on her plate. Of course she was worried. Of course she was stressed. I hated that. This was not the way things were supposed to be for her. She only wanted to help, to make things better for everyone. She deserved so much more than all this supernatural drama. It had been so long since she’d lived like a normal girl.

“Oh, sweetie,” Torin said. “You must be tired.”

“A little, I guess,” Cali said, and we both took a seat at the table.

“You’re not cold or anything? After the pond, I mean?”

She snorted. “I told you I’m fine. Don’t push it.”

“You should eat, though,” I said. “Aren’t you hungry?”

Before Cali could reply, Torin gasped. “I will make you a plate right this instant!”

“Thank you,” she said.

A couple of minutes later, Torin placed a plate of food and a glass of orange juice before her. I finished my food and coffee as Torin started asking Cali random questions about her favorite breakfast food. As Cali started waxing poetic about waffles without her usual enthusiasm, the notion that existing in this supernatural world was getting exhausting to her was more evident than ever.

As Cali thanked Torin for the food again, I remembered his and Tom’s misguided *Bachelorette* plan. It had been ridiculous, a nightmare, but the two of them had raised at least one valid point—Cali deserved to be taken out, to have fun, to laugh and go on actual dates. Now that I thought about it, Torin’s deranged dates were actually the only dates we’d ever been on.

How fucking ridiculous was that? How the hell had I let that happen? It was just not right. Not fair, to either Cali or myself.

I stared at her until she stopped drinking her juice and stared back at me. “What?”

Without thinking, I blurted, “How would you feel about getting out of here for the day?”

**Episode 1457**

I blinked up at Xavier like an owl.

“What are you talking about?” I asked slowly. “We can’t go anywhere! There’s way too much going on at the pack house. Leaving right now would be reckless!”

Xavier grinned at me, looking all dashing and gorgeous. And was he wearing a *shirt*? Why the hell was he wearing a shirt indoors? That was weird.

“Also, why are you wearing a shirt?” I asked.

He chuckled. “To answer your second question first, I know that your parents are around, so I thought it would be best not to roam around naked.”

That was actually very sweet of him. *Aww!*

“As for leaving, I’m talking about going out for the day, letting off some steam. Not *leaving* leaving.” He paused. “Though as a last resort, that wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

I scoffed, elbowing him. “Don’t joke about stuff like that.”

He was still smirking, but his expression softened. He moved closer and reached out to touch my cheek. His fingertips were featherlight as they traced my skin. His touch felt as wonderful as ever, smooth but charged. “You’ve been dealing with everything here at the pack house and haven’t been taking any time for yourself, Cali. I know that.”

I frowned. “I’ve been taking time for myself.”

He arched an eyebrow. “When was the last time you brushed your hair?”

I gasped. “How dare you call me out like that?”

He grabbed my hand and brought it closer to his mouth. It was pretty hard to stay mad at him when he kissed me there.

“Cali, I feel the same about you whether you have messy hair or not. I’m just saying that you can’t keep going on like this.”

I pouted. “Like what?”

He gave me a look. “It’s like half the time you deal with everyone else’s problems, and the other half you go on suicide missions. That can’t be healthy.”

The fact that we had reached a point where Xavier, of all people, was talking to me about what was healthy or not had to be a revelation. An unbelievable, outstanding revelation.

*Also, look at all his growth!*

“Basically,” Xavier continued, “you need to relax. You *deserve* to relax.”

I took a deep breath. “I can’t just gallivant around and have fun with everything that’s going on. What about the pack?”

Xavier lowered his head to bring himself to my eye level. “I care about the pack, but I care about you more. You won’t be able to help anyone if you’re at the end of your rope. Am I wrong?”

I narrowed my eyes at him suspiciously. “I don’t know why you’re making so much sense, suddenly.”

“All I’m saying is that you need to recharge and have some fun,” Xavier continued.

I sighed deeply, tilting my head to the side. “I’m not so sure.”

“No!” Dad piped up from right behind me. I turned to see him standing by the doorframe. How long had he been listening? “That’s a great idea, Cali. Xavier is right.”

“I also agree,” Torin added, because my dad and Torin probably agreed on everything always.

Dad grabbed my hand and led me into the living room, along with Xavier. “You should get out of here, have a little fun with Xavier. It sounds like exactly what you need.”

I pressed my lips together, looking between my dad and Xavier, who was standing there in the morning light like some sort of crisp white shirt-wearing prince, who wanted to take me away from all my worries. “I don’t think…”

Just then, Greyson climbed down the stairs. He had clearly heard everything, if his serious expression was anything to go by. He looked between Xavier and me. My heart started pounding. I was just about to open my mouth and tell him that there was no way that I would go anywhere, that there was no reason for him to worry, that I would never leave the pack when they were going through all this madness.

But then, with one last look at Xavier, Greyson turned to me and stared. To my absolute shock, he said, “I agree. You two should have some fun.”

It took me at least five seconds to process what the hell he’d just said.

*What?* I screamed inside my head. *Is he seriously saying that he wants me to go on a date with Xavier?*

Oh, god. Were we back to the phase where Greyson acted like a martyr? Because I could *not* handle that a second time!

Xavier looked equally astonished—apparently, he’d expected to meet some resistance from his brother before he could steal me away. But Greyson remained cool and collected.

“It’s not safe for you here, anyway,” he said, “and Xavier is right. You deserve to get out and relax for a change.”

My dad grinned at my two mates. “Sounds great to me!”

There was a long beat of silence before I slowly asked, “Seriously? You’re for real right now?”

Greyson took a step closer to me, and then another. He stared into my eyes. “Of course. How could I say no to what’s right for you?” He wrinkled his nose slightly and shot Xavier a disdainful look. “Even if it’s with my brother.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Thank you for the vote of confidence, jackass.”

Greyson didn’t miss a beat. “You’re welcome, asshole.”

Before the two of them could play-wrestle—or actually wrestle—on the floor, I stepped between them. “But what are you going to do today?”

“Today, we need to work on securing the house,” Greyson replied. “It would be easier for me to focus if I knew that you were safe, being looked after.”

I hated the way he said that. Being *looked after*? What was I, a puppy?

“I don’t need babysitting,” I declared.

Greyson arched both his eyebrows. “That’s debatable. If you manage *not* to accidentally die in the next week, just because you didn’t inform either of us that you decided to go play reckless detective, then maybe Xavier and I will feel more comfortable with the whole vibe you’ve got going on at the moment.”

I glared at him, shoving his arm. “I’ve always been like this! I am independent! And this is what happens when—”

“He’s only saying that you’ve taken it too far lately, Cali,” Xavier said in an even tone.

*Oh my god, they’re ganging up on me again!* I thought, aghast.

“What are you kids talking about? When did Cali recklessly put herself in danger?” my dad, the last person I needed hearing this conversation, demanded. “I know that she accidentally almost drowned the other day in a death pond, but is there anything new? Am I missing something?”

I gave both Greyson and Xavier the death stare. With what was probably a three-way mate mind linking, I told them both, *Don’t you DARE tell my dad any details about my latest pond adventure!*

Xavier cleared his throat. “It’s all fine, Mr. Hart.”

I tapped my foot on the floor. “This is extremely problematic, you know. I’m pretty sure there are like fifteen feminist laws being broken right now. I could sue.”

Greyson sighed, resting his hands on my shoulders. His grey eyes were piercing, so intense I couldn’t imagine escaping. “Cali, please. Go with Xavier. Relax. Okay?”

I could see that under all the nonsense and the teasing, Greyson meant that, 100%. I glanced between him and his brother, who was now holding my hand, as if to make sure he was also attached to me somehow.

The truth was that even though I was hesitant, the idea of putting all the drama aside for a day and having fun with Xavier was incredibly tantalizing. Especially when I realized that he and I had never actually had a real date together. How was that even *possible*?

*But should I really just leave right now with my mate when the entire world is kind of on fire? When my sister—*

The thought startled me. Artemis. I couldn’t leave if I was worried that Artemis was going to rush off to the Fae world without me.

“Okay,” I told Xavier. “Just give me a moment.”

I could feel his eyes following me as I rushed upstairs to Artemis’s bedroom. I pulled a Colton in my haste and barged into her room. Luckily, Artemis was alone, sitting at her desk and staring into the mirror.

“What’s up?” she asked me, her expression blank.

“What you said earlier about going to the Fae world… I’m going out today, but promise me that you won’t do anything until I get back. Okay?” I asked.

Artemis turned to face me. She didn’t speak for a moment, just pressed her lips together.

I felt a pang of worry. “Please, promise me? Regular-promise me?”

Artemis met my eyes and slowly nodded.

I grinned, relieved. “I’ll be back tonight.”

I got out of the room and nearly ran into Xavier, who had been waiting. He had put on his leather jacket and looked sexy as sin.

He grinned at me. “So? Are you ready to go?”

**Episode 1458**

GREYSON

As I watched Xavier tugging Cali toward the door, my stomach gave a sickening twist, like an elevator had suddenly dropped too fast. Cali looked back at me over her shoulder just before the door closed, and I could see that her expression was torn between excitement and a kind of anguish. It only made me feel even worse.

I knew how hard this was on her—to be so torn between Xavier and me—and she needed some time away from the house. *Without* the guilt. And it was clear how just the *idea* of a day away from the crushing drama and responsibility of this place had lifted her spirits. It had brought a light back into her eyes that I hadn’t seen in too long, making them sparkle like precious gems. I loved seeing it, though it served to remind me of how long she’d gone without it.

I sighed. Xavier was right, as much as it killed me to admit it—Cali deserved to get away and have some fun. She’d been under so much pressure for so long. First her mom’s illness, then *due destini* and the stress that it brought, the Orb, and now this drama with Artemis and the revenants… She just needed a break.

And I couldn’t help but admit that the idea of having her safely away from the pack house brought me a measure of relief, too. I loved Cali, and I loved having her near—I’d been away from her enough to know how painful it was, not being able to see her everyday—but more and more lately, I’d been wondering if it wouldn’t be safer to send her away altogether.

I knew she’d hate the idea. She always said we were stronger together, and maybe she was right about that, but knowing that she was in danger always put me on edge. It distracted me, and it was a weakness that I wouldn’t possess if I knew she was safely out of the way.

I passed a hand through my hair with a sigh. Either way, giving her a day to unwind and me a day to focus on the pack was the right call. I knew that. But watching her walk out the door with Xavier, looking all excited… It really stung. I glanced out the window at the begrudging late autumn sunlight. It was going to be a nice day to be out. I was going to have to keep busy today to keep from thinking too much about the two of them walking hand-in-hand along the boardwalk somewhere, bundled up and cuddled together, or of them sharing cotton candy on the Ferris wheel, or of Xavier winning her a stuffed bunny in a carnival game, or of the two of them getting cozy on a Tunnel of Love ride… and anything else they might get up to while all alone for the first time since Xavier had gotten back.

I gave my head a hard shake. *Exactly*. I needed to keep busy today to keep my mind off exactly *that*.

I took a deep breath and looked around briskly. It was still early, and most of the pack was asleep. There was a ton that had to be done, and I needed to focus on what needed to happen today to keep the pack safe. My first thought was of Pip and Mace, so I headed upstairs to check on them.

Pausing before Cali’s door, I hesitated, for just a moment, then knocked.

Mace appeared almost at once. “Greyson, hey.” He nodded, indicating that I should come on in.

I stepped into the room. It was dim—the curtains were drawn against even the faint morning light—and Pip was in the bed, though she was sitting up now. In the dim light I could see that she looked a little better than she had when she’d first arrived, though Mace looked as tired and haggard as ever, if slightly less panicked than before. He sat down on the foot of the bed, and I dropped into the desk chair.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Pip.

“Better,” she said. Her voice was raspy, but she smiled a little and looked cheerful and optimistic. “A little better all the time—”

“But she’s still weak,” Mace interjected. “We can’t be sure she’s really better. What if those things that attacked her come back, man?” he asked me. He shook his head. “The way it affected her the first time, when she was so strong… There’s no way she could withstand it now, if they come back for a second attack. And I can’t expose the rest of my pack to this kind of danger. There’s just still so much we don’t know about what’s going on, Greyson. Nothing seems safe now.”

“I know,” I said, nodding. “I agree with you. Actually, I’ve been thinking—with everything that’s been happening here, and especially now, with the possibility that Silas has come back, do you think it would be safer if you brought the rest of your pack here, to our pack house?”

Mace rubbed a hand along his jaw, dark with a several day’s worth of beard. “You think that’s the right move?”

I nodded without hesitation. “I really do. I don’t see any downsides. You bring your pack here, we at least double our numbers. We’re stronger together.”

Mace thought about it for just a moment more, then he nodded. “I’m glad you’re thinking along those lines, Greyson. It means we’re on the same page.” He glanced over at Pip. “Can you make sure someone here keeps an eye on Pip? If we’re doing this, I’m going to go now. I’d like to bring the pack back here as soon as possible.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “We can watch out for her. I’ll go see who’s free.”

When I walked out of the room, I was feeling slightly better. Whatever danger was coming, at least we’d have bolstered ranks to deal with it.

And with that matter squared away, I headed downstairs and turned my thoughts to the matter that was foremost on my mind—the visions I’d been having, and the witches I suspected were causing them. I pulled out my phone and scrolled through my contacts. But after a moment, I frowned in confusion. I was *sure* I had Chloe’s number in my contacts, but now I couldn’t find it. Really? There was nothing here?

“*Shit*,” I muttered to myself, leaning against the wall near the kitchen. I really needed to talk to them. I had to deal with this, the sooner the better. I slowed down when I scrolled past Maren’s name. She was the one who’d introduced me to the sisters. Would *she* have their numbers?

“To hell with that,” I said to myself, but I didn’t take my eyes off her name on my phone. She was the last person I wanted to talk to. Considering how she’d left, how would that conversation even go?

*Hi Maren, how are you? I know you’d rather not disclose any personal information about yourself or your son who I now know is definitely* not *my biological child despite our uncanny resemblance and this feeling I just can’t shake, but do you have a contact number for those witch sisters? Hello? Maren? Hello?*

I shook my head and scrolled past Maren’s name, going through my contacts one more time. Chloe’s number *had* to be in here somewhere. I must have just missed it.

And, to my surprise, on the second time around, I did find a number I’d missed the first time around. But… I stared at the name.

*You Called* 😉

I *hadn’t* missed it the first time around. This contact hadn’t *been there* the first time around.

But it was definitely them. There was something about that idiotic winky face that made me certain of it. It was exactly the kind of thing they would think was funny.

I was about to dial the number when I looked up. There were a few people up and about, sitting in the living room, drinking coffee and yawning, and I figured this was the kind of conversation that would benefit from privacy, so I stepped through the living room and out the front door onto the porch.

Taking a deep breath, I dialed the new number.

“We’ve been expecting your call, Greyson,” a woman’s voice said, just after the first ring.

I fought down the uneasy feeling in my stomach at the sound of her voice. “We need to talk.”

“We know,” the woman said, sounding thoroughly unsurprised.

Rattled, but trying not to show it, I pressed on. “These visions—or dreams, or whatever they are—they’re getting dangerous. They need to stop.”

The voice gave a long-suffering sigh. “The dreams aren’t going to end until you make a *choice*. We thought we made that clear.”

“A choice?” I asked.

“Yes, a choice. And our offer expires on Thanksgiving.”

**Episode 1459**

VIOLET

I sat on my bed, staring up at the ceiling and tossing my phone absently from hand to hand. I was thinking hard, my thoughts a million miles away. When Charlie had announced that he was coming back to the pack house, I hadn’t even been able to respond. I’d been too shocked at first, and then he’d cut the call short, whispering into the phone that he had to go before he’d abruptly hung up.

And now I couldn’t stop thinking—and worrying—about it. I checked my phone for the tenth time, but there were no new messages. I knew how important the hunter training camp was to Charlie’s parents, and I knew how important his parents were to Charlie—I’d seen how completely devastated he had been when it had looked like they’d turned their backs on him for being a werewolf. And leaving camp to come back to Oregon and the pack house would definitely blow our cover about our fake break-up. The whole idea just seemed like a complete non-starter.

But there were other issues at play here, too. As much as I wanted to see him, I didn’t *want* Charlie coming back and getting involved in all the dangerous stuff that had been swirling around the pack house. I knew he would only be coming back because he was worried about me, but I could take care of myself.

Besides, I was worried about him, too. He was strong and a good fighter, but he was still a fairly new werewolf and only just gaining full knowledge and control of his power and strength. And if there was another battle with a potentially-returned-from-the-dead Silas, I’d just feel a hell of a lot better if he stayed out of it altogether. And far, far away.

I looked down at my blank phone screen—for the eleventh time—and had a quick flash of the photo I’d seen on Instagram, of Charlie with that girl hanging onto his arm. Quickly, the thought became a daydream of sorts. Charlie and this girl picking pumpkins. Charlie and her at the beach. Charlie and her kissing.

I frowned, shaking my head. What was that girl’s name?

*Sophie.*

I felt a quick, painful stab of something that felt an awful lot like jealousy.

One upside of Charlie potentially coming back to the pack house: at least I wouldn’t have to waste my time creating jealous fantasies about Charlie and this Sophie person getting cozy during long training sessions, sitting close together by campfires, going on overnight vampire hunts together and sharing a tent in the woods…

I pushed these thoughts out of my brain, giving my head a firm shake. I *wasn’t* going to go down that road. I trusted Charlie completely, and that kind of bitter pettiness was beneath me. I had wanted to ask Charlie about Sophie, but I’d stopped myself. It was pride, probably, but I didn’t want Charlie thinking that I didn’t trust him. I *did* trust him. He’d never given me any reason not to.

I heaved a sigh so deep it felt like it came all the way from my toes, and I sat up, swinging my feet onto the floor. Lilac had told me not to worry about the girl on Instagram. He was right—he always was. He always knew just the right thing to say to me.

In a flash, I jumped to my feet. I was going to go find Marta and Lilac. It was partly in an effort to distract myself from thinking about Charlie and Sophie—but also, it was time to check to see if Big Mac’s Big Book of Necromancy had any information that would help us bring Lilac back to life. For *good*, this time.

I thought about how scared everyone was about the possibility of Silas being back, and felt a wave of anger break over me. Why was it that all these terrible people kept coming back from the grave—Ava, Silas—but for some reason it was virtually impossible to bring back any of the good guys, like Lilac?

I reached for the door and threw it open, but stopped suddenly. “Marta!” I exclaimed, surprised.

She was standing in front of my door, her hand raised to knock. “Hey,” she said, looking a little rattled by my sudden appearance.

“I was just about to come find you,” I said, recovering myself.

“Oh, were you?” Marta asked. She shifted on her feet, looking suddenly uncomfortable. “Listen, Violet, I really need to talk to you about—”

But I grabbed her hand and tugged her out the door. “Okay. Just tell me on the way!”

“On the way where?” Marta asked, confused, trying to pull her hand from my grasp. “I wanted to—”

“To talk to Big Mac! We need to talk to her about Lilac!”

“Actually, Violet, I really need to talk to you about—”

“I’ve been thinking a ton about bringing Lilac back, and I was thinking about how solid he was when you brought him back with the cinnamon, Marta, and I’ve been thinking that was a really good sign. I mean, I know, I know, it’s totally a different process to bring someone back permanently rather than just temporarily, but it just seems like if it was possible to do that, it’s *got* to be possible to do it for keeps, don’t you think?” I asked breathlessly, pulling Marta down the hallway toward Big Mac’s room. “I mean, after Lilac died, I felt so hopeless, you know? I just felt like he was lost forever. But that all changed when you showed up, and now I feel like real change for him is finally within reach.”

Marta was insisting on moving slowly, so I gave her hand a little tug as we neared Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s room. I knocked on the door, but I was too excited to wait for an answer, and I pushed the door open, charging in.

Big Mac was in the room alone, pacing back and forth. She looked up, frozen, as Marta and I tumbled into the room, but when she saw it was just us, she let out a heavy sigh of irritation. “Oh, it’s you. What the hell do you want?”

“I heard about Silas,” I started breathlessly.

“You did, did you?” Big Mac narrowed her eyes. “*And?*”  
 “And if it’s true that he came back from the dead—add that to Ava coming back from the other side—that means there’s *definitely* a way that Lilac could come back, right?”

Big Mac groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose, like I was giving her a headache. “Not this again. You really don’t think I have enough to worry about right now, girl?”

“But Big Mac—”

“Forgive me if the safety of your entire pack is more important than raising the dead, Violet.”

I stopped speaking and stepped back, like Big Mac had just slapped me. She saw this and her face twisted, like she might have regretted her words, but she didn’t say anything.

“But he’s my brother,” I said quietly. “My family.”

Big Mac pressed her lips together but didn’t answer.

I took a deep breath. “Can we at least borrow the book of necromancy for ourselves, then? Just to look over?” I added hastily, when Big Mac started to shake her head. “Maybe we’ll find something that we can talk to you about.”

Big Mac gave me a long, searching look, and something in her face softened. She shot a glance at Marta and gave another sigh. For a moment I thought she was going to kick us out of her room, but when she walked over to her desk and started to open drawers, my heart gave a huge leap. She looked through a few drawers—maybe she’d forgotten where she’d put it—but, finally, in the last drawer, she found a thick old book, bound in brown leather with faded gold writing on the cover. When she turned around, she held it out to me, but when I reached out to grab it, she pulled it back slightly.

“If I give this to you,” she said, narrowing her eyes, “you have to promise to just *look* at it. Both of you,” she added, looking over at Marta.

“Promise!” I said fervently. “I promise. *We* promise.”

I reached for the book again.

But Big Mac held it closer to her chest, her expression angry now. “I’m not playing games here, girls. The magic in this book is extremely powerful and extremely dark. If you try anything in here without the proper guidance, you run the very real risk of harming not only yourselves—though you *will* do that—but…” She shook her head.

“But what?” I asked, a thrill of fear moving through me.

Big Mac eyed me carefully, like she was checking to see if I was really, *really* listening. “You run the risk of destroying Lilac’s very soul.”

**Episode 1460**

As Xavier steered the car down the road under the dull morning sunshine, I couldn’t help but grow more excited. I’d felt so guilty walking out of the pack house, knowing how horrible it had to feel for Greyson to think of Xavier and me getting to have a whole day off while he had so much responsibility on his shoulders. But Xavier—and Greyson, and my dad—was right: I *needed* a break. I wasn’t sleeping well, I’d lost my appetite, and I felt stressed *all the time*. The idea of a free day just to have fun sounded amazing.

Everything had felt so dangerous—and every decision so high-stakes—for so long that just being in the car with Xavier, knowing that we could forget about that all today, made me feel like I was walking on air. I felt lighter than I had in ages.

I hadn’t realized it, but I must have been bouncing my leg, because Xavier glanced over, smiling, and rested his hand on my knee, quieting the movement.

I grinned at him. “I’m just excited,” I admitted. “And curious. Where are you taking me?”  
 He smiled, his eyes back on the road. “You’ll see,” he said mysteriously.

“Ugh,” I said, leaning my head back against the seat rest. “You know patience is not my virtue, Xavier.”

He chuckled but didn’t give any more clues.

I contented myself with looking out the window at the fall landscape until we drove into the city.

“Where are we going?” I asked again. Finally, when we pulled into a parking lot, I looked over at Xavier in disbelief. “The *mall*? Seriously?”  
 I mean, sure, I loved a good day of shopping as much as the next person, but strolling through the mall wasn’t exactly what I’d had in mind when Xavier had whisked me away.

But he just grinned at me and shrugged. “I need jeans,” he said with a wink.

This cracked through my disbelief, and I burst out laughing. I was always amazed at how many pairs of jeans he and the other werewolves destroyed when they shifted. “That’s fair.”

Then Xavier’s expression grew graver, and he glanced around the crowded parking lot. “Plus, it’s crowded here. That means we can blend in, be safe.” He cocked an eyebrow. “And since you’re so determined to keep diving into frigid bodies of water and ruining your clothes, you need some new winter things, too. What do you say?”

I grinned. “Let’s do it.”

Xavier was out of the car and opening my door for me before I’d pulled on my coat, and after he helped me out of the car, he didn’t let go of my hand, but interlaced his fingers with mine.

I looked up at him as we walked toward the shopping center, and my heart beat a painful rhythm. This was all so *normal*. Everything about it. Anyone looking at us would see a woman and a man—an *achingly gorgeous* man, but a man all the same—walking together to do some holiday shopping together. Holding hands. Happy. In love. No supernatural drama. No dead people crawling out of graves to menace them.

Just two people on a date at the mall.

Xavier looked down at me, catching my gaze, and smiled. He tugged me closer and looped his arm across my shoulders. I fitted myself under his arm and leaned in, closing my eyes for a moment, savoring the security I felt being so close to him.

But I opened them again when I felt something soft and cool flutter onto my face.

“Snow!” I exclaimed delightedly, looking up. “It’s snowing!” I hadn’t even noticed the sky growing cloudy and grey as we drove.

Xavier laughed as I stuck out my tongue, trying to catch a snowflake. When we reached the doors, he pulled one open and waited for me to go through.

But I stopped, looking at him. The way the cool morning light was hitting him made my breath catch in my throat. It was like seeing him for the first time—his dark hair, his high cheekbones and sharp jaw, and those mesmerizing eyes… He was so beautiful, and I just stood still for a long moment, staring.

He met my eyes, and a fire kindled behind his. He reached for me and—catching me around the waist—pulled me close and pressed his lips to mine. His kiss was powerful, but not urgent, like he had all the time in the world, and I closed my eyes as I leaned into him, trying to lock this moment into my memory forever.

I was glad he kept me close as he broke away from the kiss, because I felt dizzy, like I’d been spinning in circles.

“Ready to go in?” he murmured.

I nodded and, keeping his arm around my waist, he led me through the glass doors and into the mall.

The moment we stepped in, I felt my face break into a wide grin. It had been *ages* since I’d done something as normal as shop in a mall, and stepping back into one made me realize how much I’d missed it. Just to our right was an Auntie Anne’s pretzel shop, and just to the left was a Cinnabon, and the melting butter smell combined with the cinnamon smell was like a magic potion—or a time machine. It reminded me of shopping with Lola back in high school, long before I’d met either Xavier or Greyson, when I’d thought stories about werewolves and vampires and Fae were just fairytales.

“So,” Xavier said, looking around. “Where do you want to go first?”

I looked around, too. There were the regular clothing shops and make-up stores and a store that just sold pool tables. But when I caught sight of the tiny, ancient photo booth shoved into the far corner of the food court, I gasped. “*Oh!* Lola and I used to love those!”

Xavier caught sight of what I was looking at and frowned in confusion. “Really?”

I rolled my eyes. “You have no sentimentality, Xavier Evers. Every time we went shopping, we’d get another picture. Remember back at my parent’s house? My whole mirror was covered in those little photo strips.”

Xavier laughed. “Let’s start there, then. It’s time to start a new collection.”

He grabbed my hand, and we headed over.

The booth was tiny, and Xavier was so tall that I had to practically sit in his lap to fit after he’d crowded his way inside. He pulled the small red curtain shut, and, as he started to put the money in the slot, I became suddenly aware of our *very* close proximity. Every inch of my body was pressed against every inch of his, and everything I could feel was rock solid muscle and sinew.

I could feel my face start to flush.

“Ready?” Xavier asked, feeding in the last of the money.

“Yeah,” I said, trying to sound casual.

The screen in front of us lit up and the fuzzy display began to count down:

*5, 4, 3, 2, 1, FLASH!*

In the first photo we both smiled, our faces next to each other.

But as the countdown began again, I felt Xavier’s hand on the back of my neck. I looked over and he tipped my face to his, leaning down to kiss me.

*FLASH!*

This kiss wasn’t like the kiss outside. This one wasn’t taking its time—it was just taking. This was a kiss he’d been waiting to give me, I could tell. It felt impatient and restless and wanting, and I closed my eyes as his tongue slid against mine. I wanted, too.

*FLASH!*

He pulled me closer, and I hooked a knee over his lap, straddling him, suddenly feeling this insane urge to rip his clothes off right there in the photo booth, with nothing but a three-foot velvet curtain shielding us from the food court.

*FLASH!*

“*THANK YOU. PLEASE COLLECT YOUR PHOTOS*,” announced a robotic voice.

My face was lava-hot as I clambered off Xavier and stepped out of the photo booth. Xavier sat for a moment longer, collecting himself, and then stepped out too. I had almost recovered from making such a scene by the time the photos finished printing, but when they dropped into the receiver and I picked them up, I felt my face growing hot all over again.

“These are… nice,” Xavier said, taking the photos from my hand, a note of laughter in his voice.

“Um, yeah,” I agreed, glancing through the progression of the photos.

“You can’t deny it, we do look good together,” he said, smirking at the photos, then at me.

My whole body felt too warm now, so I pulled the photos out of his grasp and looked around quickly.

“So, where to now?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

Xavier looked around, and then a wicked grin spread across his face. “How about there?”

I followed his eyeline to a store with obviously high-end and very risqué lingerie displayed in the wide glass windows.

Oh my god.

“*There?*” I gasped.

Was I really about to go *lingerie shopping* with Xavier?

**Episode 1461**

LOLA

“*Get over here*,” I hissed, dragging Jacqueline out of the crowded main corridor and into a small alcove where it was quieter and—more importantly—more private. My heart was racing, and it had nothing to do with the exertion of dragging a protesting Jacqueline. All I could think was that the jig was well and truly up. This vampire wench was about to run off and tell Emmett that I’d snuck into his office and snooped around in his secret lair.

Huffing, I let go of Jacqueline and looked around, making sure we were alone. Then I turned back to her.

“What the *hell* are you talking about, ‘you know what I did last night’?” I asked and waited for her response with bated breath.

Jacqueline smirked at me, clearly enjoying that she had me in such a tight spot. “I know you’ve been seeing Professor Laurence. I watched you slipping into his office last night—looking super sketchy—”

“*What?*” I asked, shocked.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh my god. Don’t try to deny it. I’ve seen the way you two look at each other. *Everyone* sees it. You’re practically undressing each other with your eyes in the middle of the halls. Everyone knows you’ve been all caught up in your vampire heat, but vampire heat doesn’t mean it’s chill to start sleeping with a professor, Lola!”

I gaped at her. The first thing I felt was abject relief. Jacqueline clearly had *no* *idea* what I’d actually been up to last night, and that Emmett hadn’t even been in his office when I’d snuck in. Which meant she didn’t know my actual secret, so there was no danger that she was going to blow my cover.

However, the second thing I felt was indignation.

“Wait, you think I’m *sleeping* with Professor Laurence?!”

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “No, I don’t *think* it. I *know* it.” She took a threatening step closer to me, edging me into the wall. “And wasn’t your doggy mate *just* here, too? So trashy,” she said, shaking her head in disgust. “How could you do that to someone with abs like his?”

Waves of anger were rolling through me now. “How *dare* you accuse me of cheating on my mate?” I snapped. “You have no idea what you’re saying—”

“No, *you* have no idea,” Jacqueline snapped back. “What you’re doing is against school rules, Lola, and if Irma finds out, she’s going to kick your ass out of here so fast it’ll make your shaggy little head spin.”

I stared at Jacqueline for a moment as a piece of the puzzle fell into place. “Wait a minute. This isn’t about school rules at all, is it? This is about Emmett. You have the hots for Professor Laurence, and you’re just jealous!”

A flash of consternation crossed Jacqueline’s smug expression, but it was gone quickly. “Please. Jealous of *what*? Of a freak like you? Come on.”

Fury was starting to build in me, and I took a deep breath, trying to control it before it started to control me. I *had* to calm down.

“You know what, Jacqueline?” I said, working to keep my voice steady. “You don’t like me? Fine. You want to be obsessed with me? Fine. I don’t really care. You aren’t worth my time. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m late for class.”

And without waiting for her to say another word, I pushed past her, trying my level best to act completely above it all, even though my heart was racing. Her pettiness wasn’t worth my time, but I *wasn’t* above it all. She might have gotten my secret wrong, but if she chose to start the rumor she *thought* was true about me, that could still mean trouble.

As I headed for class, I knew what I had to do: I was going to have to work extra hard to stay away from Emmett, which I should’ve been doing anyway—especially now that I knew what kind of spooky science experiments he was up to.

And that was all fine with me. I still wasn’t sure what he was planning for me, but I wanted no part in any of it. I hadn’t come here for him to live out his Dr. Frankenstein fantasy. I had come to this school to get my vampire hunger under control—and now this pesky vampire heat as well—and that was *it.*

I yanked open the door to my classroom and marched in, determined to focus.

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After class, I had to admit that—in terms of focusing on class material—that last class had been a big-time fail. But I had managed to make a decision over the course of the last hour, and that was something.

I fought against the tide of chattering vampire students hurrying toward lunch and headed purposefully in the opposite direction, certain now about what I needed to do. I knew I wanted to disassociate myself from all the drama I’d recently found myself in, and I knew who I wanted to ask for help.

“Come in,” a voice called, in answer to my knock.

I pushed through the door and found Ras in her tidy office. The late autumn sun shone through the wavy glass windows as she bent over a tiny, perfect bonsai tree placed on a small plinth just in front of them. She was holding a small pair of clippers in her hand and was carefully trimming the tree with painstaking snips, but she looked up with I walked in.

“Lola,” she said, smiling and straightening. “How very nice to see you. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

I shut the door tightly behind me, suddenly unsure of how much I wanted to say. I wanted to tell her everything, but—would it be a good idea to mention what I’d found in Emmett’s office the night before? How did I talk about that without admitting I’d snuck in when he wasn’t there, and that I’d been snooping around? I doubted she’d be too impressed with that part of the story. It would definitely open its own can of worms that I didn’t need right now.

I took a deep breath, pushing all that aside and focusing instead on what I knew I had the best chance of handling—and hopefully *stopping*—in the short-term. “It’s the vampire heat,” I said simply.

Ras looked back at me. “The vampire heat? What about it?”

I looked her in the eye. “I’ve decided I want to go ahead with the hypnotherapy.”

Ras’s eyebrows shot up. “Really? Are you sure?”

I nodded. “I’m sure. But,” I said quickly, “you’re sure it’s not going to actually mess with my mate bond? In *any* way? Because this thing with Jay, it’s forever. You know that, right? I just want to take care of the vampire heat and get back to normal.”

Ras put down her pruning sheers and waved an airy hand. “Correct. It won’t destroy anything. Hypnotherapy will suppress the mate bond for a while, but it’s not like you’ll forget who he is.”

I nodded, talking another deep breath. If all of this meant that soon I’d be done thinking about anyone other than my mate, I was in. Jay was my everything, the man of my whole heart. I wanted to be done with this heat, focus on controlling being a vampire, and get back to him.

“Okay. I’m in, then.”

“Great,” Ras said, looking excited. She hurried over to her desk and dug around for a moment, looking for something. The something turned out to be the amulet she’d shown me last time, which she held up triumphantly.

“Here it is! Now, sit down,” she said, waving me toward a chair on the other side of her desk.

I settled down, my hands on the arms of the chair, and watched her carefully.

“Okay, I’m going to count backward from one hundred. Don’t think about it, or try to count with me. Just let the sound wash over you like water. One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven, ninety-six…”

It was weird at first, but I got used to it, and after a while it did start to feel relaxing. After a while longer I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew I was blinking my eyes open. I looked around, but Ras’s office looked just the same—tidy and spare, with the bonsai tree on its little table near the window.

Ras smiled at me. “Welcome back!”

I stared at her, confused, but before I could ask any questions, my phone rang. I pulled it out of my pocket and looked down at the screen in confusion. The photo that came up was of me with a dark-haired guy with a patch over one eye. I was smiling in the photo and had my face pressed against the guy’s face, but his face—a handsome one—was contorted into a silly grin, and he’d rolled his one eye up to look at the sky.

I frowned down at the name at the top of the screen, then up at Ras. “Who’s Jay?”

**Episode 1462**

XAVIER

When I winked at Cali, the flush in her cheeks rose again, and I grinned. I loved to see it. Her hair was a little mussed, her lips bee-stung from our impromptu make-out session in the photo booth, and the overall effect was so sexy it made me want to look for a mattress store and test out a few of their beds.

I looked down at the photos in her hand. I loved how sexy they were, but there was something else about them that struck me, though it took a moment for me to realize what it was: these were the first printed-out photos I’d ever seen of the two of us together.

I shook my head. This date was long, *long* overdue.

Cali smoothed her hair and looked away, looking a little flustered. That she still felt that way from being in a small space with me—and from the effect of our kiss—did something strange to my heart. I loved that I could still have that effect on her, because she sure as hell still had that effect on me.

And when she looked over at the lingerie shop, the blush on her face deepened and she glanced quickly away. I was thinking of the first time she’d tried on lingerie for me—way back when—and I wondered if she was thinking of the same thing. My gaze traveled down, taking in her body, today shrouded in jeans and winter boots and a heavy parka. But even beneath all her layers, I could still make out her shape, and my body hummed, remembering how gorgeous she’d looked then in the delicate underwear that had clung to her curves like lacy spiderwebs, and thinking how amazing she’d look in it now.

But my fantasies were interrupted when she gave her head a tiny shake and looked back up at me.

“That’s probably not the best idea, Xavier.” She cleared her throat. “We’re not together, remember?”

I tilted my head and lifted an eyebrow. “Cali, we’re still mates. We *will* be together again,” I said with absolute certainty. Whether she wanted to listen to reason right now was her choice, but she couldn’t deny that kiss. “And besides.” I grinned. “It’s not like I’ve never seen you in just your panties before.”

Cali blushed again and gave my shoulder a playful shove. “*Hey!* You are not permitted access to those files at the moment, Xavier. Folder not found!”

I chuckled and shook my head, but I didn’t push the issue. I didn’t want to pressure her into anything she wasn’t fully comfortable with, so I held up my hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. No lace today.”

“*Anyway*,” Cali said, clearing her throat again and looking around. She was clearly anxious to change the subject to something less charged, and she pointed to a likely-looking store. “How about Buckle?” She pointed at a trio of mannequins in jeans displayed outside the store. “You said you needed jeans, right?”

I always needed new jeans. Werewolf hazard.

I nodded. “Yeah, fine.” I took one of the copies of the photo strips from her hand and slipped it carefully into my wallet.

Cali watched me for a moment, then turned and led the way toward the store.

Once inside, I watched with fond amusement as she immediately started pulling clothes from the racks for me to try on.

“*Ohh*, these would look great on you,” Cali murmured to herself. She laddered four pairs of dark wash jeans on her arm, then pulled a lighter wash from the rack and looked at it critically. “No way.” She grabbed a few more pairs of jeans and then moved on to sweaters. She held up a beige V-neck. “This would completely wash you out.”

When she grabbed two blue sweaters, I pointed out that they were nearly the same color, and she shot me a disbelieving look.

“They are *turquoise* and *teal*, Xavier. Open your eyes. They’re going to look great on you. They’ll bring out your eyes.”

I smiled as she turned back to the clothes. Malls and shopping weren’t normally my thing—I’d brought Cali here today because I thought she needed it—but I was really enjoying it, too. I loved how much we felt like a real, normal couple, just spending the day together. Together or not, she was all mine right now.

“Okay, ready,” Cali said, her voice muffled behind the mountain of clothing she’d amassed in an astonishingly short period of time. “You ready to try this stuff on?”

“Sure,” I said. I looked around the store. The mall was quiet, and there wasn’t an attendant near the dressing room. “I think we just go in.”

“I’m not going to go in with you,” Cali said quickly, her eyes growing wide with alarm. She pushed the clothes into my arms.

“Come on,” I said, catching her hand. “I need your help.”

“I don’t know…” Cali started, sounding unsure.

“How will I know if any of this looks good?” I asked with a sly smile. “I need you. You know I have a terrible eye for fashion.”

Cali laughed. “That’s true. Okay. I’ll come back and just wait in that chair,” she said, pointing to the armchair next to the floor-to-ceiling mirror outside the individual rooms. “That way you can do a fashion show for me.”

I groaned as I walked into the dressing room, but I actually got kind of into it. The dressing room hadn’t been cleared out after the last person, and the guy who’d been in before me had… *eclectic* tastes. I pulled on a pair of the dark wash jeans and one of the blue sweaters, then finished the look with a leather belt with a huge sliver and turquoise belt buckle, and a truly awful black and blue fedora.

When I walked out of the dressing room, Cali’s jaw dropped. Then she tossed her head back, her eyes screwed up as she laughed.

It had been ages since I’d heard her laugh so hard, and it did my heart good to hear it. I strutted the length of the dressing room corridor, which only made her laugh harder.

“I know, right?” I said. “It’s hard to take it all in, isn’t it?”

Cali nodded, tears of laughter in her eyes. “Yeah, it is.” She took a deep breath. “But the sweater looks great. And the jeans make your ass look amazing.” She flushed.

I gave her a wink. “Just wait until you see the next lot.”

The next lot was a burgundy sweater with grey jeans, over which I slipped on a puffy silver parka about six sizes too big, and mirrored sunglasses that hid half my face.

“Take *everything*,” Cali said, nodding in approval as she tried not to laugh.

I showed her the rest of the jeans and sweaters she’d picked out—along with all the accessories left behind in my dressing room. I knew no self-respecting Alpha would ever be caught dead in most of this stuff, but the store was quiet and, with no one around but us, I had to admit that it felt really good to just let loose and have fun.

It was something I didn’t know if I had ever really thought about before, but I loved to make Cali laugh. Not just smile, but really, really laugh. The kind of laugh that made her throw her head back and wheeze a little. And it was the pursuit of that laughter that made me put on the world’s dumbest fucking fashion show.

When we’d calmed down and I’d pulled on my own jeans again, Cali stood in the doorway of my dressing room. “None of those,” she said, waving at the pile of accessories left behind by the fly disco astronaut who’d used the room before me. “But yes to those jeans and those three sweaters,” she said, pointing.

I nodded, then tipped my head up. I’d caught a whiff of something—or someone. It was an employee—the dressing room attendant, probably—heading our way, and, still feeling kind of wound up, I grabbed Cali’s hand and pulled her into the dressing room. “Inside, quick!”

Cali’s eyes widened. “*Xavier*,” she chided, even as she started to giggle. “What are you doing? We can’t be in here together.”

I closed the door and put a finger to my lips. “*Shh*. If you’re quiet, they won’t know you’re here.”

The room was small, and Cali huddled against me for a moment. Like a repeat of the photo booth, we were together again, in a small, enclosed space, our bodies touching. Cali looked up at me, and suddenly the silliness melted from the air around us and was replaced with something far more charged—something far more electric.

Cali’s pupils dilated, like the small room had suddenly filled with light, and I couldn’t help myself. I pushed my body against hers, pressing her against the wall of the dressing room, and kissed her, hard.

**Episode 1463**

This kiss was like a continuation of the one in the photo booth—it demanded and took—and from the first second, I was ready to lose myself in it completely. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and my fingers tangled into his hair, my nails dragging hard against his scalp. He moaned with pleasure, the sound lost against our lips.

In the very, very back of my mind, there was a tiny voice reminding me that this wasn’t a good idea. The voice had a million reasons—Greyson, we were in public, the veins that still swirled across Xavier’s chest—but I wasn’t listening. I was having too good a time, and I didn’t even want to stop myself.

The whole day had felt strange and slightly out-of-body—like I was spending the day in a parallel universe, where Xavier and I were just a regular couple who did regular things together, and all the millions of reasons why we couldn’t have this kind of straightforward relationship just simply didn’t exist. A universe where he and I were just allowed to be together—and to enjoy each other.

Xavier was still shirtless from changing—*thankfully*—and I ran my hand down his chest and to his abs, feeling the architecture of his muscles beneath my hand.

Taking his cue from me, he slipped his own hands into my coat and beneath the hem of my shirt. I shivered when his fingers found my skin, making their feather-soft way upward. He took my bottom lip between his teeth as his thumbs ran across the underside of my breasts, and my whole body shivered with pleasure.

“*Oh god*,” I moaned, dropping my head back against the wall of the dressing room.

He grinned and trailed kisses down my exposed neck as he grasped my breasts with more force. His body was pressed hard against mine, grinding against me, and just as the thrum of my arousal was reaching near-shouting levels, there was an enormous crash from just outside the dressing room.

Xavier and I both froze for a moment, our bodies flush, our hands full of each other, breathing hard.

“*Shit!*” someone yelled from outside the room, and Xavier and I sprang away from each other like guilty teenagers.

“*Dammit*, Ashley,” another voice said, sounding irritated. “I *told* you that was going to happen. I told you that putting more on it would be too heavy.”

Xavier and I looked at each other for a long moment, then, as one, we burst out laughing. I covered my mouth, trying to stifle the sound, but it was no good.

Almost immediately there was a loud rap on our dressing room door. “Hello? *Hello?* I can hear you! Only one person per room! It’s right here on the sign, for fuck’s sake,” the voice muttered.

Xavier started to laugh again, and my face flushed hot.

“Sorry,” I said, opening the door and slipping out into the corridor. “I was just looking to see how something fit.”

“*Sure*.” The blonde employee rolled her eyes, looking unconvinced. She jerked her thumb, motioning for me to get lost. She looked past me, and I watched her eyes widen for a moment as she took in a shirtless Xavier. “Him, too,” she added, after she’d composed herself.

Xavier snorted a laugh and pulled on his shirt. He grabbed the clothes we had decided on, and the two of us slinked out of the dressing room.

He stepped next to me and took my hand as we got in line to pay. I liked the feel of holding his hand so much that I sidled closer and tucked my shoulder beneath his.

The cashier rang up the clothes with a friendly smile. “Find everything okay?”

“Yup,” Xavier said, squeezing my waist a little, which made me smile.

“Did you hear about that storm we’re supposed to be getting today?” the cashier asked, his brow creasing with concern.

“Nope,” Xavier said handing over his credit card.

The cashier nodded, taking Xavier’s card. “Yeah, there’s a big storm system moving down from Canada. Came up real suddenly. It’s supposed to be pretty bad.”

As I was mostly thinking about how warm Xavier was and how incredible it felt to be pressed up against him, I was only half-listening to the cashier, but Xavier seemed more concerned.

“How bad is it supposed to get?” he asked.

The cashier handed him his receipt and two bags filled with clothes. “My manager says they’re talking about closing the mall early. If you drove a-ways to get here, I’d think about heading home soon. I hear the roads are going to get bad pretty fast. It’s supposed to be that real icy snow that’s hell to drive on.”

Xavier glanced down at me. “Maybe we should skip lunch and head back to the house before the roads get bad.”

“Oh…” I looked up, disappointed. The thought of cutting our day short and heading back to the pack house—and regular life—brought me back down to earth with a sharp thud. I tried to smile, but I could feel tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. No more shopping, no lunch, no movie, no dinner. I sighed. Clearly, I needed a breather from the magical chaos of the pack house much more than I’d thought, because the idea of heading back into it really threw me for a loop.

Xavier studied my face for a moment, then he leaned down and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I’m sorry, Cali. I’m bummed, too. But I just want to make sure I get you back home safely.”

\*\*\*\*

In the car, heading back toward the pack house, Xavier held my hand over the center console. We were quiet, still basking in the glow of our time together, even under the weight of the leaden sky above us.

I leaned over and pulled my knees up to my chest, snuggling into the seat and grasping Xavier’s hand with both of my own. “I liked this,” I said, looking down at our intertwined fingers.

“What?” Xavier asked with a smile, glancing over at me.

“Being with you. Being able to forget all our problems for a few hours and just do normal things.”

Xavier squeezed my hand. “I liked it, too.” He was quiet for a moment. “You know, Cali, I’ve been thinking… Maybe you should just keep doing normal things.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

He glanced over at me. “Like, away from the pack house.”

I sat up, shocked, and dropped his hand. “What are you talking about?”

“Cali—”

“You want me to *leave*?”

“That’s not what I’m saying—”

“Why do I keep having this conversation?” I raged, turning my body away from his and staring out the window.

“Cali, I’m *worried*, okay?” he said. “With everything that’s been happening with the revenants, I just can’t stop thinking about how you seem to keep getting targeted.”

“What are you talking about?” I snapped, whipping around to glare at him.

He gave me an even stare. “With the pond, and then the potion. I’m just thinking you might be safer *away* from the pack house.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “Not this again. I’m tired of everyone thinking I need to run and hide every time something big happens. I’m *Fae*, Xavier, in case you forgot. I have power! I can take care of myself, and protect other people. I fought Silas once, and if that’s who we have to fight again, then I’m going to be there for it!”

Xavier took a deep breath. “We need to think about this, Cali, because it’s the safest thing for you. Not that you’ve ever listened to us before,” he added in an undertone.

I shot him an icy glare. “Listen, my father might be turning into a werewolf, and my sister is too sick to be traveling right now, and I’m not going to leave them. Besides that, I’m not going to leave you *or* the pack while any of the rest of this crazy shit is happening, either!”

Xavier blew out a frustrated breath and gripped the steering wheel with both hands, but I didn’t budge. Maybe in the past I would have caved and given in to what he wanted, but not now.

“I know how to handle myself, Xavier. It’s not like I’m powerless. I’m Fae. I have the ability to protect myself. You’ve seen me do it.”

A muscle in Xavier’s jaw twitched, like he was clenching his teeth. “Can we talk about this a little later, Cali?”

“*Why?*” I demanded. I was on a roll, now.

“The snow is getting worse. It’s starting to stick, and I really need to focus on the road,” he said tensely.

I opened my mouth to argue, but closed it again. I felt royally shut down, but when I glanced out through the windshield, I immediately saw what he was talking about. The light dusting that had started when we’d arrived at the mall had grown thicker and thicker, and the visibility was awful. I squinted and was trying to make out the car in front of us when its brake lights suddenly flared to life.

“*Watch out!*” I screamed.

Reflexively, Xavier hit the brakes, and the car began to fishtail across the highway.

**Episode 1464**

GREYSON

Outside the window, the wind swirled sharp snow crystals into tight spirals before they could hit the ground. They spun faster and faster, like miniature tornadoes, the energy concentrating until, at last, the icy wind shifted again and the spirals burst apart like a meteor shower. The wind howled as it whipped around the eaves of the roof, and I flinched as a blast of icy snow rattled the windows. The storm bearing down on the pack house was turning into a true blizzard, and I stared out the window at it, a sinking feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach.

I looked up when the front door burst open and Torin spilled into the living room, bringing with him a flurry of snow and frigid air.

“What were you doing out there?” I asked sharply. I hadn’t even seen him in the yard, which meant the visibility was getting worse.

Torin flashed his exuberant grin. “It’s amazing out there,” he said breathlessly. “I made a snow angel, and I was trying to build a snowman!”

“Were you out there alone?” I demanded, turning back to the window and scanning the grounds for anyone else.

“Well.” Torin rolled his eyes. “I tried to convince Astrid to come out with me, but she said it was too cold and wouldn’t come. Then I tried Sage, and Jay, and then I was just asking *anyone*, but yeah.” He shrugged. “I was out there alone. It was fun for a while, but it’s getting really rough out there!”

I gritted my teeth as Torin slammed the door shut and a frigid blast of air gusted into the house. I’d already called in all the border patrols and cancelled the night guards, but I was worried about Cali out in this storm. I knew she was with Xavier, and there was no way he would ever let anything happen to her, but with the way our luck had been going recently, I also knew that nothing was guaranteed.

I leaned against the window and stared out at the snow. It was piling up thick on the ground, but it wasn’t sticking—it was too icy. Exactly the kind of snow that was hell to drive on. I just hoped they’d get back here soon. There was a leaden feeling in the pit of my stomach, and it wasn’t going to go away until I saw Cali walk safely through the door.

And I had made a decision: once the storm passed, I was going to sit her down and try to convince her that she would be safer if she and her parents left the pack house. Permanently. Or, at least until the danger here passed.

I heaved a gusty sigh. I knew that wasn’t going to be an easy conversation. I could practically see the anger flashing in her eyes already. More to distract myself from that uncomfortable image than anything else, I looked down at my phone, but there were no messages. I frowned at the blank screen. I was still confused about that call with Chloe. As ever, the witches had been maddeningly vague.

I frowned, trying to remember the conversation. Chloe had said that the visions wouldn’t stop until I made a choice, and that I only had until Thanksgiving to make it. I shook my head. I still wasn’t even sure what I was supposed to be choosing.

Ugh. *Witches.*

How goddamn hard would it be for them to just give me a straight answer for once?

I leaned against the windowsill and stared—unseeing—out at the storm.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

I looked up, surprised.

Kira had appeared at my side without my noticing. I must have been too lost in my thoughts to hear her approach. She was leaning against the wall on the other side of the window, looking out at the storm, but when I looked over at her, she raised her eyebrows.

“You look deep in thought. What are you thinking about?”

I snorted and shook my head. “A million different things,” I muttered. *None of which are your business*, I thought to myself, though I didn’t say it out loud.

Kira looked at me for a long moment, like she understood what I wasn’t saying. She shrugged. “I get it. But, if you wanted to, you could get some of it off your chest. I know how to keep a secret, Greyson. I should. I’ve got a fair few myself.”

I almost snorted again—the idea that I was going to pour all my troubles out to this random witch was absurd—but then I stopped myself. Kira *was* a witch. And I was having witch problems. Maybe she’d know something about the type of magic I was dealing with. I studied her face for a moment, which was still looking back at me, her expression neutral. She didn’t have any skin in this game—she wasn’t a pack member or anything, just passing through—so she wasn’t going to freak out about her territory being invaded like Big Mac would. Maybe she *could* help me.

I hesitated for moment, trying to figure out a way to phrase my question without giving her too many of the details. “What do you know about dream magic?”

I had apparently succeeded in not giving away too many details, because Kira looked baffled.

“Um, vague much? Maybe a *little* more information would help me out?”

“Fair enough.” I chuckled, rubbing the back of my neck as I thought of what to add. I was hesitant to say too much—I wondered if she was going to think there was something wrong with me if I gave too much information about what was going on. It all also sounded crazy.

Kira sighed. “I need more information if you want my help, Greyson. Just so I know what’s going on. Not to judge you, or anything.”

I hesitated, then, with a shake of my head, just threw caution to the wind. “Okay, here’s what happened. I met some witches in Portland a while back. Three of them, and they’re sisters, if that matters at all. They told me that I couldn’t change the future, but that I could somehow change the past. And ever since then, I’ve been having these… dreams.”

Talk about the short version of the story.

“What kind of dreams?” Kira asked, frowning.

I shook my head, the frustration I always felt when I thought about the dreams surging up. “They’re really more like visions of the future.”

“The future?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “Like alternate reality versions of the future. Like possible timelines.”

Kira’s eyes widened. “Wow. That sounds like really powerful magic.” She frowned again. “Witches don’t just grant stuff like that, though. This isn’t a fairytale. What do they want from you in return?”

I heaved a sigh. “It’s kind of a long story, but they owe me.”

“For what?”

I shrugged. “I saved their lives.”

Kira’s frown cleared. “Oh. Okay. I’ve heard rumors of magic like this. Magic that can distort the past, but…” She shook her head. “It never comes without a serious cost. And it always involves a sacrifice. It’s definitely not the kind of magic that any witch would do lightly. It’s not precise, and it can go awry really easily.”

“Awry?” I asked.

She nodded. “*Disastrously* awry.”

I rubbed my forehead, where a headache was starting to pound. *Of course. That sounded like magic*. I felt disappointment settle onto my shoulders, but I didn’t know what I’d expected to hear. I shouldn’t have expected easy answers to these questions.

This was a huge mistake. I was the Alpha of my pack. I had too many people relying on me to even consider doing anything that could have such wide-reaching consequences. I gave my head a reproachful shake. What kind of Alpha would be so selfish?

It looked like my answer for the witch sisters was going to have to be *no*.

Kira looked at me, her gaze keen. “Do these questions by chance have anything to do with Cali and the *due destini* with Xavier?”

I didn’t answer, but it didn’t seem like I needed to, because Kira nodded, a knowing look on her face.

“I know how you feel, Greyson,” she said quietly, her voice suddenly sad. “I can understand how loving someone that much can lead people to take drastic measures.” Her eyes grew bright. “If I had a chance to get my husband back—even for a moment—I think I’d do anything. Even time magic. Even knowing all the risks.”

I looked at her, frankly surprised. “Really? Are you saying… Do you think I should try it, then?”

Kira opened her mouth to answer, but then she froze, her eyes unfocused, her face a mask of fear.

“Kira? What is it?” I asked, alarmed.

The blood drained from her face in an instant, and when she spoke, her voice was barely a whisper. “I don’t know how to tell you this,” she said. “But there’s a vampire here. *Now*.”

**Episode 1465**

The car fishtailed across the highway, then one of the wheels seemed to catch and we began to spin in tight circles. I grabbed onto anything—*everything*—as I screamed. I should have closed my eyes, but I didn’t even think to, instead keeping them wide open, taking everything in. I was sick, scared, and completely discombobulated as the car spun faster and faster.

Xavier was gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles had turned white, trying to get the car back under control, but we must have hit a patch of black ice and the wheels couldn’t get purchase, so there was nothing he could do. We were out of control, and—to make matters even worse—the blizzard outside the windows had grown so intense that everything was just a swiftly moving white blur.

Then, suddenly, with an ear-splitting *CRUNCH*, we jolted to a stop.

Xavier and I flew sideways before we were jerked unceremoniously back into place by our seat belts. We sat still for a long moment, breathing hard, and the sudden silence rang in my ears. I became slowly aware of the pain shooting through my body: the burning in my throat—probably from screaming—the throbbing in my chest where the seat belt had caught me, and also in my neck and my hips. I shook my head, trying to clear it, but it buzzed like there was a swarm of bees loose in it.

“Cali! *Cali!* Are you okay? Cali! Can you hear me?”

Xavier’s voice sounded like it was coming from far away. My ears were still ringing, so I looked over, trying to focus on him as he called to me. I tried to speak—to tell him that I was fine—but my head was still spinning, and my mouth wouldn’t quite form the words.

Xavier moved and, dimly, I heard him unsnap his seat belt. He leaned across the center console and unbuckled my belt, then ran his hands over me quickly, lightly, like he was checking for injuries. “Cali. Cali, baby, talk to me. Tell me you’re okay.”

I looked up, blinking. “I’m fine,” I managed. “I’m fine, Xavier. I’m okay.”

He exhaled a long breath. “Thank god. Nothing hurts?” I shook my head. “Do that again.”

I did.  
“Now nod yes. And shrug your shoulders. Now wave your hands. Wiggle your toes.”

I rolled my eyes but did as he asked.

When I’d passed his fitness test, he nodded and sat back in his seat. “Okay. You stay in here. Keep the car running and the heater on. I’m going to go see how bad things are out there.”

The moment he pushed the car door open, a blast of icy air swirled into the car, bringing with it a hail of icy snow. The sound of the wind was deafening, so Xavier probably didn’t hear me when I shouted after him.

“Wait, Xavier! I’ll come, too!”

He shut the door before I could get over to it, so I turned to my own, but it wouldn’t open. I tried it again, but the door was stuck. Or there was something blocking it, and I couldn’t get it to open, no matter how hard I pushed. I wiped away some of the condensation that had built up on the windshield and squinted through it, trying to catch a glimpse of Xavier—but there was nothing. Just a white, swirling mist. The wind screamed as it whipped around the car, and even though the heater was still running, I shivered. Maybe it was shock setting in. I peered out the window for just a moment more before I made my decision.

I was just crawling over the center console to get out on the driver’s side when the door opened and Xavier slid back into the seat.

He pulled the door shut after him, blocking out the snow trying to make its way into the car, and held his hands up to the heater to warm them. His expression was grim.

“What?” I asked, my stomach sinking. “What’s up?”

A muscle in his jaw flexed. “We slammed up against a snowbank. That’s what stopped us.”

“*Okay*,” I said slowly, not quite following. “That’s better than another car, right?”

“The snowbank is huge. I don’t even know how it formed so fast. Maybe from a plow or something? But the force of that spinout we were doing wedged us in.” He glanced over at me. “We’re trapped.”

I gaped at him. “*What?* Are you sure?”

He nodded. “I tried pushing, but the car’s in there crazy tight. Too much for me to get it to budge.”

He looked frustrated about it, which I understood. Xavier was incredibly strong, and if he wasn’t able to push the car free, then not much would.

“Xavier,” I said, putting my hand on his arm.

He shook his head. “Even if I could get the car out somehow, I don’t know what we would do. There’s no way we could go on. The roads are shit. They’re not safe. Visibility is basically nothing at this point, and it’s just going to get worse when it gets dark.”

“Oh god,” I said quietly. I gave the ghost of a smile. “And here I was, thinking Minnesota blizzards were bad.”

Xavier peered out of the windshield, his expression dark. “Honestly, I’ve never seen one this bad. I’ve never seen anything like this. Especially the way it came up so quickly…” He shook his head. “It’s weird.”

*It’s weird. And never a good thing.*

My thoughts flew back to the storm that Artemis, Rishika, and I had weathered, out in the woods. That had come up quickly as well. There had been clear skies one minute, and a total deluge the next. That had been weird, too.

I swallowed hard. “Um, do you think there’s a possibility this storm is… *unnatural*?” I asked hesitantly.

Xavier quickly looked over at me. I could see the wheels turning behind his eyes, and I knew he was hearing what I wasn’t saying—that maybe this was all somehow related to the Orb.

He looked grim. “I wouldn’t rule it out.”

We sat with that between us for a long moment.

Then I looked up, frowning. I put my hands up to the air vents. “Oh my god.”

“What?” Xavier asked.

“There’s no heat coming out,” I said, trying the rest of the vents. The engine was still running, and air was still blowing through the vents, but it was frigid.

Xavier felt the air for himself, then pulled his phone out of his pocket. “*Fuck*,” he muttered. “No service,” he said, shaking his head. “Everything must be down because of the storm.”

I rubbed my hand across my eyes. “What are we going to do? You could shift, I guess. I could hang on and we could run back—”

But Xavier was already shaking his head. “No way. You don’t know what it’s like out there, Cali.” He looked at my coat, which had seemed warm enough when we’d left that morning, but was nowhere near thick enough to withstand a blizzard. “You’re human. I could take the exposure, but you don’t have a fur coat. No, I’m not risking you getting hypothermia in this wind.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

Xavier shrugged. “We wait it out.”

I sighed. “Fine,” I said, leaning back in my seat. I wrapped my arms around myself, tucking my hands beneath my arms, as my fingers were already freezing. My toes were cold, and the icy drafts from the vents were finding their way into my coat. I was starting to shiver, but I tried to hide it, holding myself as still as possible, though it made my body ache. But when my teeth started to chatter, there was nothing I could do to stop it.

The sound was loud in the quiet car, and Xavier looked over at me, his expression concerned. He reached down and pulled the lever, releasing his seat so it laid out nearly flat.

“Come here,” he said, reaching for me and pulling me into his arms.

I let him, sinking into him. Xavier had always run hot, and being closer to him made me feel instantly warmer, like he was my personal hot water bottle… with abs. I hummed with contentment as I snuggled closer in the tight space, and I felt him chuckle. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad.

He unzipped my coat and slipped his hands beneath my shirt, placing his warm palms on my freezing skin.

I closed my eyes with a hum of pleasure.

His whole body tensed, reacting to my hum, and his grip tightened on my waist.

I held my breath for a moment, wondering what he was going to do next.

When he started to breathe again, he bent his head to whisper in my ear, “You know,” he said, his voice caressing my ear, “scientifically, the most effective way to stay warm is full skin-to-skin contact…”

**Episode 1466**

AVA

From the warmth of my bed, the storm outside looked like a solid white mass. Occasionally, when the wind gusted, it would throw a bunch of icy snow against the window, and I would get a sense of how much was falling, but it was mostly just a blurry haze. The wind shrieked around the corners of the house, then, as it changed direction, began to howl. The windows in the pack house were snug and tight, but icy currents still seemed to creep in through the corners, and I wrapped my arms around myself. The wind sounded like a living thing, angry and hungry. It was the craziest blizzard I could remember happening around these parts, and it had just come up out of nowhere.

My eyes had started to glaze over—mesmerized by the snow and the frost that was starting to creep across the glass—when suddenly I sat bolt upright. At the window, where once there had only been a white wall of snow, there was suddenly a face—a handsome, tanned face. It was Iñigo’s face, and he was looking right at me. He saw me looking back and smiled, gesturing for me to come closer.

I sucked in a surprised breath and—glancing nervously at my closed door—got to my feet and crossed quickly to the window. When I yanked the sash up, the wind blasted in, stealing my breath. I squinted into it as I was pelted with ice-sharp shards of snow. The wind blowing into the room was frigid, but I was too unnerved by Iñigo’s sudden appearance to notice the goosebumps rising on my arms.

“What the *hell* are you doing here?” I hissed. “You shouldn’t be here. You know that; I told you it’s not safe. Get out of here.”

I must have been leaning out of the window a bit—just beyond the boundary of safety, because—to my surprise—Iñigo reached his hand out and grabbed my throat in a lightning quick move.

“Invite me in, Ava.” His voice was a low hiss. “Invite me in or *die* right here, right now*.*”

I could feel the individual bones of each of his fingers pressing hard on my neck, squeezing tighter and tighter, crushing my trachea. The pain was excruciating, but there was something else, too: panic was rising in my chest, nearly overwhelming me. I clawed at his hands, trying to get him to release me, but he didn’t even flinch, Finally, I nodded as well as I could.

“Okay, okay,” I rasped. “Yes. Come in.”

The dangerous glare in Iñigo’s eyes disappeared in an instant, replaced with a satisfied smile, but the effect wasn’t at all pleasant. His quick changes were always deeply disturbing, and this one was especially so. He released his grip on my throat one finger at a time, and as he stepped into my room, I collapsed to the floor, coughing and gasping and sucking in air.

But as he looked around, I scrambled back to my feet. My animal instincts told me that being in a vulnerable, indefensible position around this man was not a good idea, and I watched him as he took in my small room. There was no part of me that wanted him here. I had been doing everything in my power to avoid this eventuality—his presence in the house. He had been wanting to get into the pack house ever since I’d arrived, but I’d managed to avoid it. This was the one place where he couldn’t reach me. The one place where I was safe from him.

But that was over; I was safe no more.

He stepped closer to me, his gaze sweeping up and down in a proprietary way, his smile growing hard. “Thanks for the invite. It’s about time—I was beginning to think you didn’t want me here.”

Fear blossomed in my chest, and I glanced over at the door again. “This house is filled with werewolves. They could be here any moment.”

Iñigo took another step toward me, his face now inches from mine. “I doubt that,” he said, his voice silky. “Did you really think you could hide from me forever, Ava?” He reached out and ran a cool finger down the length of my cheek. I sucked in my breath, trying not to react. “Did you?”

I shivered. I couldn’t help it. It was half from fear, and half from the effect of his touch and the flash of arousal he still inspired in me. Then I swallowed hard and met his eyes. “I haven’t been hiding. I’m keeping to our agreement. I just need a little more time.”

His finger stilled on my cheek, and his eyes hardened like steel. “Your time has run out, Ava.”

The cold look in his eyes made my blood chill. “Iñigo, I don’t know if you realize what you’re asking here. You don’t know how hard it’s going to be to—”

He put up a hand to stop me from speaking. “I’m not just here for you, Ava.”

I gaped at him, shocked. “Wait, what?”

He turned away dismissively. “I’ve got a runaway witch to deal with who’s hiding here. Thanks for that tip by the way, Pet.”

*Kira.*

I pressed my lips together, stopping myself from saying anything I shouldn’t. I knew Iñigo, and I knew how much he must have hated that she’d somehow escaped from his clutches, and right out from under his nose. He was a man who valued control, and he just didn’t tolerate that kind of rebellion in his loyal ranks.

He swung around to smile at me, his expression weirdly bright and cheerful. “So, Ava, how about a tour?”

“What?” I asked blankly.

His smile grew, like he was enjoying seeing me look so uncomfortable. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were ashamed of me. Show me around! I want to meet the whole gang. Where are the Fae you promised me? And I want to find my witch.”

I blinked. “You can’t be serious.”

He tilted his head, his smile growing dangerous. “Now, have you ever known me to joke, Ava?’

“B-But… surely you don’t think I can just lead you around the pack house on some kind of show and tell tour,” I sputtered. “I mean, what the hell do you think is going to happen out there, Iñigo? This place is filled with werewolves. They’ll take one look at you and tear you to pieces.”

*And me, too*, I thought, but I kept that to myself.

He waved an airy hand. “I’m not afraid of the dogs,” he said dismissively. “My only concern is getting what I’ve been promised, and taking back what’s mine. I want the Fae, and I want Kira.”

A wave of cold terror broke over me as Iñigo turned toward the door and swung it open. I grabbed for his hand, pulling him back.

“STOP! Are you *insane*? You can’t go out there!”

The walls were closing in, and panic was making it hard to think clearly. He was going to ruin everything—if he didn’t kill me, the rest of the pack would. Iñigo was going to expose my lies to everyone. Xavier and Greyson were already so suspicious of me—having me followed everywhere—and when they realized I’d let a vampire into the pack house, everything was going to be over. For good. Any hope I had of reigniting a spark with Xavier, re-establishing our bond—just getting my fucking life back—it was going to be all over, the second Iñigo strolled down the stairs.

I tightened my grip on the vampire, but he pulled his arm away easily.

“Don’t you *dare* touch me,” he snapped. He stepped closer to me, backing me against the wall. “Get this straight, Ava—you might be afraid of your little pup friends, but I’m not. I’m not afraid of anything. Vampires are stronger than werewolves.”

“There are a lot of them,” I murmured, grasping at straws. “A whole pack.”

He gave a mirthless laugh. “This entire pack isn’t strong enough for a vampire as old and as skilled as I am.” He dropped his eyes, taking in my cleavage with a hungry glance, then looked back up at me. “Besides,” he added, “I have you, don’t I?”

“Iñigo—” I started, trying to sound reasonable, but he interrupted.

“*Enough*. There isn’t anything you or anyone else can do to stop me.” And, without waiting for me to say another word, he turned and strode out of my room, into the pack house.

For a moment I stood, frozen with fear, but then I lunged after him. “Iñigo, stop!”

He rounded on me, and I fell back, gasping with horror.

His lips were pulled back in a terrifying grimace, so his lethal fangs were fully visible. All this was bad enough, but even worse, his eyes had changed, too. Their deep brown color was gone, replaced with a horrible, flaming orange.

**Episode 1467**

I looked up into Xavier’s eyes as he spoke, then closed my eyes as his hands began to move again, his fingers hot against my cold skin. The heat from his body was sinking into me, but it was more than that—it felt as though being near him was heating me from the inside out. Like my bones had been chilled and his touch was warming them, reviving them. Bringing me back to life.

I sank deeper into him, letting my mind go blissfully blank, letting myself feel nothing but the intoxicating warmth of his body pressed hard against mine for a moment. Then, though it caused me almost physical pain, I opened my eyes. I took a deep breath and gave my head a sharp shake. I *had* to get a grip on myself. I shouldn’t be doing this, this wasn’t right…

Was it?

Xavier’s hands stilled on my skin, like he’d noticed me tensing up. He craned his neck to look down at me. “Cali? Are you okay?” he asked, his voice a low rasp.

The snow swirling outside made the silence inside the car complete, and it rang in my ears as I hesitated, thinking about how I should answer his question. *Was I okay*? I thought back to our morning, and the time we’d just shared together. How incredible it had felt to just… *be* with him. Walk with him, hold his hand, laugh with him. I thought back to how Xavier had insisted on today—saying I deserved this, a break from our dark, supernatural reality—and how much I knew he cared about me.

In the back of my mind I knew that going any further would probably only complicate things, but I just couldn’t help myself. It was everything—his touch, his smell, the feel of his body against mine, the look in his hooded eyes when he looked down at me… It was nearly impossible to resist him.

He must have seen some of the conflict happening behind my eyes, because I watched as something sad flitted across his expression. He shifted a little in the small space so he could look at me more easily.

“Cali, listen to me,” he said, his eyes intent on mine. “Today, with you… It felt so right. You felt that too, didn’t you?” I nodded, biting my lip. “I just kept thinking that *that* is the kind of life you deserve. Where you can be happy. Where you can go where you want, *when* you want, without having to worry about looking over your shoulder all the time, checking to make sure something dark isn’t following you.” His eyes darkened. “Sometimes I almost wish you’d never been brought into this life—into my world—”

My eyes widened, and I sucked in a breath. I thought back to everything Xavier had brought into my life, and Ishook my head vehemently. “No, don’t say that.”

“Yes,” he said firmly, his expression grim. “I do think about it, and sometimes I do wonder how it would be if things were different. But I’m too selfish to really wish it. Falling in love with you has made my life so much more complicated than I could have ever imagined”—I rolled my eyes—“but I promise you, I wouldn’t change it for anything. Not for anything in the world, Cali.”

My throat had grown tight as he spoke. I had never heard him speak like this—so open and honest about how he felt—and my heart pounded in my chest. My whole body felt alive, humming with desire as I gazed at the planes of his beautiful face. I took a deep breath.

“Xavier, I’m okay, and I want this,” I murmured.

His brows furrowed, like he didn’t quite understand what I meant.

“I want *you*,” I purred, making myself clearer.

The confusion in his eyes cleared in an instant, and he leaned down, wrapping his hand behind my neck, threading his hands into my hair and pulling me into a kiss.

All my hesitations and second thoughts were gone—swirled away like the torrents of snow out the window. All I could think about in this moment was Xavier—his hands, his lips, his tongue, his body. I was fully his, and he was fully mine.

I’d missed him so much.

He pulled me on top of him so I was straddling him. His kiss was pushy and hungry, and I gave myself over to it—finally letting myself live fully in the moment with him. He wanted me—I could feel the proof of that hardening against my thigh—and *god almighty*, I wanted him just as much. I swiveled my hips, grinding into him, and felt heat pooling between my legs.

Struck with a sudden inspiration, I slid my hand down to the side of the seat and let it slide back as far as it would go, giving me more space. Then I moved my kiss to Xavier’s ear, where I bit a little harder than was strictly necessary. He sucked in a breath as I continued downward to his throat. I tongued the base of it as I unbuttoned his shirt, then kept moving downward.

“Cali,” he murmured. “What are you—” But he broke off when I kissed his stomach just above his belt. Then he just moaned. My entire body shivered. The fact that I could make him react that way was intoxicating.

I smiled as my fingers fumbled, unfastening his belt. This whole day had felt like a different world, and being here—alone together in the car, stranded on the side of the road—had only intensified that feeling. I loved Xavier, and I wanted to show him how much.

“*Fuck*,” Xavier hissed when I took his cock into my mouth. He pressed his head back onto the headrest, and his fingers threaded into my hair, gripping tightly. “Oh, fuck, Cali. *Fuck*.” He seemed to have lost the ability to string a sentence together.

He panted as I slid him in and out of my mouth, his body tensing and relaxing as droplets of water rolled down the windows, which had grown slick with condensation. His breath quickened as I tightened my hand around the base of him, then his whole body tensed and began to shudder.

“Oh *fuck*.” His hands tightened in my hair, and I increased my tempo as he climaxed. He removed a hand from my hair and slammed it into the window. *Eat shit,* Titanic*.* “Cali, that was…” he whispered as he shuddered, coming down, “*amazing*.”

I leaned back and, taking a breath, smiled up at him. “Really?”

He opened his eyes blearily, then, with a hungry look, pulled me up and onto his lap. He opened the button of my jeans and traced his fingers on the front of my panties. I whimpered.

“I need you,” I said.

“Yeah?” he asked, grinning.

“*Yes*.”

I gasped when his fingers slipped into me. “*Oh god*.”

He stroked me softly, finding exactly where I wanted him to touch, and I writhed on top of him.

“*Xavier*,” I murmured.

I hadn’t realized how aroused I was, but it didn’t take long for stars to start bursting behind my eyes. My body shook I pressed myself harder against Xavier’s fingers. “More, *please*!”

He grinned at this and pulled me down, kissing me hard. This pushed me over the edge, and I cried against his mouth as I came.

I fell back across the center console and into my seat, panting hard. The car was now toasty warm, as was I, and I wriggled a little as the waves of pleasure continued to crash at my shores. I looked over at Xavier, a grin on my face. “That’s one way to keep warm.”

But Xavier didn’t return my smile. To my surprise, he looked pensive, his brow furrowed.

“What is it, Xavier?” I asked, suddenly worried.

He looked at me, his gaze intense. “Are you… okay?”

I stared at him for a moment. “What?”

“Do you regret what we just did?”

“Xavier—”

“I just need to know,” he said quickly.

I thought for a moment. The truth was, maybe I should’ve been regretting it. I knew it certainly wasn’t going to make things easier between Greyson and Xavier and me, but… I just *didn’t*. I didn’t regret it at all. I leaned over and pressed a soft kiss to his mouth. He returned it without hesitation. There was no impatience to this one; this was slow and lingering, full of longing and promise. I pulled back just enough to look into his deep blue eyes.

“I don’t regret it at all.”

He raised his brows. “You’re sure?”

There was something so intriguing about this little glimpse of vulnerability in Xavier, and I felt a thrum of arousal within me like the plucking of a guitar string. I smiled and leaned forward, moving across the center console again. “Maybe I can just *show* you how sure I am…”

**Episode 1468**

I kissed Xavier passionately, the warmth of him fueling my every move. Snow fell heavily outside, and all I wanted was to stay in this wonderful cocoon with him.

“I want you,” I whispered against his ear, brushing my lips against the shell of it. He shuddered and gripped my waist tighter, pulling me onto his lap. The back seat of the car wasn’t the most comfortable place to do this, but as I stared from his face to his abs and then down at his hardness, I suddenly felt right at home.

“You feel so fucking good,” Xavier muttered, mouthing at my neck. He traced between my legs, feeling how much I needed him, making me moan. “You love this, don’t you?”

I nodded with a whimper, hovering over him before he gripped my hips and lowered me onto him. When our bodies met, I shivered. My breath caught, arms flying to wrap around his neck. “*Xavier*…”

“That’s it. Say my name,” he whispered, grabbing my hips to make me ride him. He groaned, reaching down to kiss my collarbones, then lower, sucking and licking at me as I rode him. It became harder and faster, my moans growing louder. He reached between my legs again, his thumb rubbing circles where we were joined. Electricity shot through me, and I almost jumped in pleasure—resulting in me hitting my head on the ceiling of the car*.*

*Fuck!*

“Ouch!” I huffed and laughed, Xavier following suit.

I rubbed my head as he kissed my cheek, my neck, mumbling, “You wanna change positions?”

“I mean, I’d like not to die, so yes.”

He laughed again and easily maneuvered me onto all fours. I looked over my shoulder to see him watching me greedily, licking his lips as he stared between my legs, spreading me with his palms. His touch was scorching, making my stomach tighten, desire doubling down.

“So fucking beautiful,” he muttered, sliding home and pulling me back to him. I cried out in pleasure. He caged my entire body, grinding in and making me shiver. I gripped the back seat cushion tightly as he moved inside me, kissing up my neck.

I was pretty sure he hit his head on the ceiling of the car a couple of times as well, but the difference between us was that he didn’t give a fuck. He felt so amazing and made me feel so good that I couldn’t stop whimpering. I seized up as he kept hitting that same spot inside me over and over, reaching down to touch myself while he kept going.

He kissed at my neck when I trembled around him, whispering in my ear, “I love you so much, Caliana Hart.”

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Afterward, Xavier felt like a furnace against me. It was blissful. He hugged me tight, kissing the top of my head tenderly. I smuggled into him, taking in his amazing scent.

But before my eyes could close and I could relax, my gaze fell on the veins on his chest.

It reminded me of how Greyson’s veins had been affected after I took the potion. My stomach clenched. It made me hold my mate a little tighter, and he noticed the change in my mood. He cupped my chin, making me face him.

“Don’t do this,” he whispered.

“What?”

He shook his head. The longing in his eyes made me hold my breath. “You don’t need to think about the curse, Cali. Please, don’t think about anything other than us right now.”

I kissed his cheek, then his lips. Pushing his hair back softly, I muttered, “I wish it was that easy.” I glanced at his chest. “Seeing the veins can only remind me of the curse, of Greyson and *due destini*, and how—”

He cut me off. “I said not to think about it, didn’t I?” He squeezed me tighter against him and kissed my forehead. The feel of him was as comforting as ever, even though there was a storm inside me. “We need to figure out a way to keep you warm.”

I sighed, allowing myself to drink in his warmth. “Honestly, this is great. Just keep holding me and I could survive all winter.”

Xavier smiled softly, leaning down to kiss me again.

*Bang!*

There was an explosion of glass and snow as the windshield burst.

*What the hell? WHAT IS IT THIS TIME?*

“Xavier!” I gasped as he caged me with his body to protect me from the shards. “What is it? Vampires? Rogues? Revenants?”

My frantic questions came one after the other. Xavier’s only response was to grunt before a large branch literally slapped him in the face. *Oh no!*

“Oh my god!” I said, pulling him close to examine the scrape on his cheek. “Are you okay? That branch attacked your beautiful face!”

“It must have broken and smashed the windshield,” Xavier said. He started gathering my clothes. “You’d better get dressed—the wind is out of control. Put on the stuff we just bought, the warm jacket.”

For once, I followed directions. I was both relieved that what had happened wasn’t supernatural, and worried because there went the warmth. I felt the temperature drop in seconds as cold wind got into the car. The icy atmosphere made me shudder.

“What do we do now?” I asked Xavier.

“Hold on,” he told me and moved to open the door. “*Shit*.”

“What?” I asked. “What is it?”

“Won’t open. Seems like we can’t even get out of the car, now,” Xavier grumbled. His expression was severe. “Let me see what I can do.”

I watched, wide eyed, as Xavier crawled through the broken windshield, smashing the rest of it with his fists. He looked around at the never-ending white, then turned to stare at me. His voice was loud enough to be heard over the wind. “We can’t stay here.”

*YA THINK?* I thought to myself. But at the same time, I didn’t know if just running off into the snow would be a good idea. I was so grateful for my new coat, mittens, and scarf, but the cold was still too much to bear. My teeth were chattering, but I managed to speak. “We’ll be fine. It’s just like Minnesota. We can snuggle and stay warm and—”

Xavier shook his head. “I need to get you out of here. We have to find shelter.”

Before I could protest, he literally reached into the car and pulled me out through the windshield, as if I were a bag of feathers. *Jesus*.

“Xavier, I don’t like the idea of—”

“Don’t you get it?” he said gruffly. “If we don’t find shelter, you will freeze to death.”

At this point, I saw his logic and realized that I’d been lying to myself. I wouldn’t survive if we stayed here, because the truth was that I was already freezing my ass off. The new winter wear could only help so much. As if he could read my mind, Xavier grabbed some extra clothes from the back of the car.

“You have to bundle up, okay?” he told me. He shielded me from the wind as I added three of his large shirts and then put my coat back on. I took so much comfort from the feel and smell of them.

Before I could thank him, though, Xavier shifted. The large black wolf stared at me.

“Wait, what are you doing?” I asked, sounding a little panicked.

*Hop on*, he told me through our mind link. *I’m going to run as fast as I can toward the pack house. Maybe we’ll find shelter on the way. It’s better than saying here—we’re too exposed.*

Feeling the cold piercing my skin, even through the layers, I nodded. My legs were freezing, but at least my torso felt warmer than before, with Xavier’s shirts engulfing it.

*Okay*, I replied. *I trust you.*

I hopped onto his back and wrapped my arms around his neck. Within seconds, we were racing through the woods. The snow was blinding for me, but I hoped that an Alpha werewolf could see better than I could. And even though Xavier’s fur was warmer than normal, and I was wearing a pair of mittens, my hands soon started to grow numb with cold. My grip was faltering.

*No, Cali!* I told myself. *You’d better focus! Xavier is doing so much to make sure you’re safe!*

I had to keep myself in check.

I managed for a while, but then the cold became too much to deal with, and my eyes strung. The moment I closed them, I felt Xavier falter beneath me. My stomach dropped, panic rising inside me.

*What is happening? No, this can’t be—*

I didn’t finish my thought. Both of us tumbled to the ground, and I screamed my mate’s name. My arms and legs were scraped, and I was shaking all over, both from fear and the icy atmosphere. The wind was relentless. I looked around, panting, trembling, my head throbbing from the tension and anxiety.

The only thing I saw was white.

No black wolf in sight.

*Oh my god… Where’s Xavier?*

**Episode 1469**

AVA

Iñigo lunged toward me, his fangs glistening. His orange eyes were fixed on me as if he were a bull and I was a red sign. His eyes looked exactly like that kid, York’s.

Could Iñigo somehow have turned into a revenant?

I stumbled back, forcing myself not to scream. The last thing I needed was for the pack to figure out what was going on in here, even though I knew my life was in danger. Was Iñigo going to kill me? Was I about to die here, in a house full of werewolves, just because I was too guilty to ask for their help?

Suddenly, the vampire faltered.

His eyes flickered back to normal, and he froze in place, shaking his head, looking down. He looked bewildered, as if he’d just popped out of a trance.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I hissed.

Iñigo held his head between his hands, like it was suddenly heavy. Meanwhile, I held my breath when I heard voices in the house. If the others realized there was a vampire in the upstairs hallway—much less a vampire like Iñigo, who had threatened them before—I would be screwed. I grabbed him by the arm.

I was feeling much bolder now that he didn’t look completely unhinged, so I pulled him into my bedroom and shut the door. The storm was howling outside, hurling snow against my window.

I was ready to shift, to fight Iñigo off if necessary, but he still stood there, wincing and rubbing his head.

I had never seen him like this. So confused.

The threat I’d felt before vanished. Of course, he was still a vampire, still Iñigo, but when he faced me, his dark eyes had reverted to their normal, penetrating state. There was nothing terrifying about them that had to do with magic. They were just their *regular* level of terrifying.

When he finally spoke, his voice was gruff. “What the fuck did you do to me?”

I scoffed. “Are you serious? *You* attacked *me*, remember?”

His eyes narrowed, his voice coming out in a hiss. At least he was smart enough to stay quiet. “That’s just bullshit. Are you working with my witch? Is this some kind of trap?”

I tried to keep myself in check. “*You* forced your way in! How could I possibly trap you?” I pointed out my window, outraged. “You’re welcome to leave anytime!”

Iñigo looked completely like his normal self, now. He crossed his arms over his chest and chuckled. “You’d like me to leave, wouldn’t you?”

The man was infuriating. My voice was a whisper, but still annoyed. “Of course I would! Your plan to attack the pack house is too risky. If you go after the witch or the Fae, the pack will know it was you, and you’ll be as good as dead!”

He tilted his head to the side lazily and stepped closer to me. When he reached out to touch me, I didn’t flinch back. I had no idea why. All I knew was that when he placed his hand gently on my cheek, I stood there immobile. I swallowed roughly and stared at him.

“So now you’re worried about me?” he murmured. Before I could reply, his eyes went cold. He grabbed me by the throat, squeezing slightly. “Because I’m not so easily persuaded.”

I shoved his hand away, aghast. “I thought you were smarter than this! You really want to go down there guns blazing when you don’t even know what just happened to you?”

Iñigo gave me yet another suspicious look. “Tell me, then. What *did* just happen to me?”

I rubbed my temples, fighting to maintain my composure. “You were clearly possessed by something dark and powerful. It’s been affecting members of the pack house, and they haven’t been able to stop it.”

His expression remained blank. “Is that so?”

He seemed so utterly unaffected that I wanted to punch him. “Obviously! I don’t know whether it’s a witch’s spell, or something else. But whatever it is, it’s dangerous, so—”

“What else could it be if it’s not a spell?” Iñigo demanded, cutting me off. At least he looked a little bit interested now.

“There’s been talk of the Orb,” I said.

Iñigo snorted, unconvinced and arrogant. “The *Orb*?”

“Yes, the Orb,” I repeated.

He shrugged. “The Orb is nothing more than a tool to be used. I’m not a wolf, sweetheart. Vampires live by a different set of rules.”

I scoffed. “That’s what you say, but that’s not what just happened.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Iñigo said calmly.

“Stop fucking lying to me,” I declared. “The entire time I’ve known you, you’ve *never* rubbed your head like you had a headache. What just happened was different, and you know it.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Do I, really?”

I pointed at him accusingly. “I saw it in your eyes—the orange—that was possession. And you felt it. Don’t think you’re so immune, because none of us are.”

He shrugged, like I was talking to him about the weather. “Let’s say it did happen. What do you suggest I do?”

He reached out to touch my shoulder, then paused. His hand returned to his forehead, rubbing once more. He squeezed his eyes shut and wavered slightly.

It was worse than before.

I had no idea why, but my stomach clenched, seeing him like this. He was always so powerful and in control that the sight of him being uneasy, or anything less than utterly in charge, was jarring to me. It made me wonder what the hell kind of powers were roaming around here that would manage to affect someone like him.

“It’s happening again, isn’t it?” I asked. There was something in my voice that sounded like worry, but that couldn’t be. Iñigo was a cold-blooded murderer, a really bad person.

I wasn’t *worried* about him.

“You need to get out of here,” I said, pushing him back toward the window, “and fight whatever this is, since you’re so strong and supposedly immune.”

“Go to hell,” he growled at me.

I grabbed him by the shoulders, shaking him. “Fight it, Iñigo. Do it!”

He gripped both my arms, and for moment, I was certain he was about to attack. But then, he winced again, one hand on my arm, the other back at his forehead. I had no idea what to do. I was just sure that I had to get him to leave, before someone found us. The window was a few feet behind him. I could just shove him out, even shift into my wolf and pounce on him. I could do it now, as he struggled with the pain in his head. He was clearly vulnerable…

What was holding me back?

Unless it was all an act.

Determined, I shoved him once more, and it was like he snapped out of it. He snarled and shoved me back, and we bumped up against the bed. He seemed like his usual self when he stared at the bed and then at me, smirking. “Well, this brings back a couple of memories.”

“Shut the fuck up!”

He sighed. “So you don’t remember? Maybe you need a refresher.”

I growled, ignoring the way my cheeks heated.

“Absolutely not,” I snapped, and shoved him harder than before. He fell back onto the floor. I pointed out the window. “You need to get out of here before someone finds you.”

He ignored me yet again, jumping to his feet and dusting himself off. “I’m willing to leave the Fae to you, but I’m not leaving without the witch.”

“Don’t be stupid,” I hissed. “Witches are very good at killing vampires— never mind a witch with a pack of werewolves behind her! And the Alpha is here!”

I suddenly realized that if they did kill Iñigo, several of my problems would be solved. But then any hope of getting Xavier back would be squashed… There had to be a way to get Iñigo out, keep him out, and keep him from killing me.

I thought about letting Big Mac know he was here, but discarded the thought instantly. The pack already didn’t trust me, and that could be the last straw.

Iñigo and I stared at each other, five feet between us. I was breathing heavily, but he seemed back in control. He opened his mouth to reply to me. I held my breath when I suddenly heard voices outside my door, down the hall.

“You need to leave!” I hissed, and the monster grinned as I dragged him to the window.

“Okay, Okay! So pushy,” he said mockingly.

But just as I thought that he was about to jump out of the room and into the cold, he turned around and grabbed me. His eyes were as penetrating as ever, trapping me.

I was panting, hanging halfway out of the window with the snow blowing into my face, when I heard the click of the door opening.

**Episode 1470**

XAVIER

I tumbled head over heels, slamming into a tree. A wave of snow landed on me, piercing through my fur. It was the first time that I actually felt the cold of the storm. I leapt up instantly, sniffing the air to locate Cali. The snowfall was so thick that I couldn’t see.

*Cali! I’m right here! Where are you?* I mind linked, struggling against the blizzard.

I plowed through the snow, searching for her, worry and panic rising. I’d wanted to protect her by trying to return to the pack house, but the situation had ended up a million times worse. If anything happened to her, I would never forgive myself. *Never*. And I was pretty sure Greyson wouldn’t forgive me either.

He would be right to hate me, because I would hate myself the most.

*Cali, please answer if you can hear me!* I mind linked again and again. I frantically used my nose to search, until I finally caught a whiff of her perfume and rushed to her.

*Xavier!* she mind linked, and I was so relieved I could’ve died.

The moment I reached for her, she hugged me tight. I could feel her shaking.

*I’m so sorry I fell. I’m okay*, she said.

*No*, I replied. *This is my fault. I’m so sorry—I should’ve been more careful.*

Her lips were blue, her eyelashes white from the snow. I looked around; we still had a ways to go. As a wolf, I was fast, but the snow was making everything so much more difficult. There was no way that I would leave my mate exposed like this, though.

*Can you ride any further?* I asked Cali.

With a determined expression, she brushed off the snow and stood up, nodding.

*Of course I can*, she said, and I lowered myself so she could climb up again. She wrapped herself around me once more, and the feel of her filled me with strength and purpose.

*I’m going to go slower to make it easier for you to hold on. Nothing’s going to happen to you, okay?* I said. *I just need you to hold on. Can you do that, tiger?*

She sounded determined. *I will. I promise!*

I started off again but made sure to maintain a more careful stride. I had no choice—I had to sacrifice speed. I didn’t want her to tumble off again, just because I wasn’t attentive enough in my panic to get her to safety. But even with my wolf’s eyes, it was hard to see more than a foot ahead. It was getting darker and colder by the second. If I didn’t get her to shelter soon…

I refused to think about that possibility.

I didn’t want her to worry, and I needed to keep her alert so she wouldn’t doze off and let go.

*How you doing back there?* I asked.

*Wonderful*, she replied dryly.

I would have snorted under other circumstances. *Hey, remember when we first met? Did you ever think we’d end up racing through a blizzard in the forest with me as a wolf?*

She chuckled, and I could actually hear her teeth chattering at the same time. *I have to admit, when I first met you, I didn’t think I’d stick around. You didn’t exactly like me that much.*

I scoffed. *That’s not true!*

*Seriously? You were colder to me than this snow storm!* she said, sounding annoyed.

*I was cautious*, I replied. *But the moment I saw you, I knew that I’d never let you go. You were—are—the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.*

She hugged me tighter. *You’re such a flatterer. I love you.*

*I love you too, baby. And you know I mean that. I never thought I’d feel this way about anyone. Ever*.

I could feel the mate bond between us burning bright as Cali’s grip got even tighter.

*You’re my world, Cali. Just hold on a little longer, okay?*

*Okay*, she said, and she sounded determined.

Doubling my efforts to move through the snow, I fought the wind that whipped against my eyes. I looked around, trying to see if there was anything we could use to protect our faces. The dimmer the light became, the harder it was for me to remain oriented and move in the right direction.

Suddenly, a shadow loomed ahead.

It stood among the perfect pristine white, and it didn’t match the rest of our surroundings. It was immobile in a way that made my hackles rise. I slowed down and sniffed the air, fighting to catch the shadow’s scent through the snow.

Out loud, Cali asked, “What’s wrong?” Her teeth were chattering with every word.

*Hold on, stay still*, I said. *There’s something up ahead.*

*It’s not a tree or a rock?* Cali asked.

*I don’t think so*, I replied, continuing to sniff the air, even though the wind was making it difficult to separate anything. As we slowly approached, though, I saw the outline of a cabin.

Relief flooded me.

*We’re saved!* Cali cried.

I wasn’t quite as excited, but I still felt better than before. It looked like the cabin was either abandoned or no one was home. The windows were dark. I considered dropping Cali off so I could check it out on my own, but I didn’t want to risk leaving her alone. Not even for a second. If something threatening was in the cabin, I would just have to handle it while keeping my mate safe.

*I want you to be quiet now, okay? Whatever you want to say, say it through mind link.*

*Okay*, she replied.

Things must have seemed pretty serious to her if she wasn’t arguing with me. I was glad that she realized the gravity of the situation.

I moved to the door and pushed the handle with my snout with a little more force than necessary. I was shocked to see that the door was unlocked. I tensed. This was definitely unusual to see.

*This is good, right?* Cali asked me.

*Depends*, I replied.

*On what?* she asked.

*If it’s a trap*, I said. I knew better than to take something like this at face value.

I entered the cabin, and it was dark and quiet. My eyes adjusted immediately, and I took in the scents of the room. There was a fireplace and wood. And, most importantly, there was nobody there, at least for the moment.

Instantly, I kicked the door shut and lowered myself so Cali could climb down.

She was weak and shivering, her lips blue and her face pale. “I guess we’re not gonna die in here, then?” she asked conversationally, as if she didn’t look like a snowman.

I quickly shifted back and grabbed a blanket from the couch in the corner. I wrapped Cali in it and scrambled to start the fire. I was grateful that there were matches. Whoever had left this place couldn’t be far away, but I wasn’t about to worry about that right now. I needed to keep my mate warm.

When the fire caught just moments later, I was relieved. I turned to look at Cali under the flickering glow of the flame. She was shaking, her hair sticking to her forehead, dripping wet.

“This won’t do,” I said. “You need to come closer and get out of your wet clothes.”

“So bossy,” she scoffed, trembling at the same time. Where did she find the energy to talk back to me? It was actually admirable.

“Let me do it, you’re taking too long,” I said, pulling off her clothes myself since her hands were too shaky to unbutton anything.

“That’s what she said,” she mumbled, snickering.

I rolled my eyes, appreciating what a good sport she was being about all this, and undressed her quickly. Her soft, bare body looked gorgeous under the light of the fire, and when I pulled her close, skin to skin once more, she moaned in relief. The sound made my stomach tighten.

“Here, this should be better,” I said, wrapping the blanket over both of us and pulling her into my arms. We huddled together before the warmth of the fire.

She nodded. She was still trembling, but not quite as violently as before. “This is much better, actually.”

I kissed her cheek and chafed her arms, hoping that the friction would bring her temperature back up. This was so much better than that frozen tundra of a car. A few moments later, her breathing evened out. Her teeth were no longer chattering, and her lips were their usual soft pink.

She turned to look at me, her hands stretched toward the fire, toward the warmth, as she rubbed them together. She offered me a gorgeous smile. “Thank you for everything, Xavier.”

My heart started racing at the gentleness of her tone. She was so fucking perfect, and I felt the undeniable urge to kiss her. I leaned forward, about to do just that…

And then a floorboard creaked behind us.

**Episode 1471**

LOLA

My phone was ringing, and I kept staring down at the image of the cute guy. Who was he? Why was he calling me? Why did his face look so familiar, but any thought of him felt so far away?

I couldn’t place anyone with the name Jay… It felt like something so on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t place it. Was I supposed to know? Gosh, I hated forgetting anything.

“What’s happening right now?” I asked Ras. I couldn’t read her face. She just stared at me nervously, clearing her throat.

“We were doing some hypnotherapy… Are you okay? How do you feel?” she asked.

I frowned, a little confused. What was she talking about?

Ras gestured at my phone. “You really don’t know who that is?”

I looked down at the guy again. “No. Or… I’m not sure.” I looked up at Ras, my eyebrows raised. “Is he a celebrity?”

Ras blinked at me. “Not exactly.”

“Oh, wait!” I nodded seriously. “Is he from one of my reality shows? *The Bachelor*? He seems like the type to go on that. He’s pretty enough for it, for sure.” I smirked.

Ras kept blinking at me for a few seconds before clearing her throat once more. Did vampires get sore throats?

“He’s not from any TV show. He’s your… friend,” Ras said. She uttered that last word with difficulty. How weird.

This whole thing was weird, actually. “Are you sure he’s my friend? That can’t be—I would remember him!” I looked at the picture again. The young man looked like a hot pirate in a bathing suit. He was ripped. And he was calling *me*! I couldn’t possibly make him wait, right?

I bit my lower lip. “Maybe I should answer? I think I’d like to talk to him.”

“Oh, no,” Ras said, shaking her head. “No, we were suppressing the vampire heat, remember? We’re busy right now.”

“Right,” I said slowly, realization dawning. I sighed. “Yes, now I remember. No fun, no vampire heat.” I frowned once more. “But why was that again?”

Ras stared at me. Her words came out calm and soft. “Because it’s uncontrollable and ruining your day-to-day ability to function as a person and a vampire?”

I huffed. That did sound horrible. “Ugh, that’s right.”

Right then, the ringing stopped. I didn’t like the idea of not talking to the hot guy, but before I could ask more questions about him, Ras gestured at me. “How about we go for a walk together? Just to get your hypnotherapy sea legs under you. Would you like that?”

I nodded, shrugging, and followed Ras to the greenhouse. I was trying to focus on the information she had offered me. I still wasn’t quite sure why I’d done any of this. The vampire heat hadn’t really been so bad, had it? It had been like a reawakening of my senses, of my sensual side. It had felt like connecting to my true self.

But then again, there was that mess with Emmett…

Ras was right. It was kind of hard to learn the ropes of being a vampire when my mind was constantly consumed by sex. And I couldn’t ignore the worrisome information that I had found in Emmett’s office. I needed to keep a clear head at all times to deal with all that. Whatever it was.

I turned to look at Ras. Her expression was troubled. Why, though? I wondered if it would be a good idea to tell Ras about Emmett’s laboratory, and the file with that handwriting that I couldn’t decipher. Maybe she would know how to help me. But what if she wasn’t the right person to trust with this? What if she was biased against Emmett? Or still secretly in love with him? She had helped me so far, though…

*Ugh!* I hated making hard decisions.

I was about to open my mouth and just casually mention Emmett to see Ras’s reaction, but then she spoke up first.

“There’s something you need to know, Lola,” Ras said sharply.

I was surprised by the severity in her expression. “What is it?” I asked.

Ras took a deep breath and glanced at me. Then she said, “So it seems like there was a side effect of the hypnotherapy…”

I squinted at her. “What kind of side effect?”

Ras paused and stared into my eyes. “Are you sure you don’t remember Jay?”

I was confused. Jay? The hot pirate guy on my phone.

“No,” I said. “I don’t remember him. But I’m not sure if he’s that important—is he this year’s Bachelor?”

“Lola, stop,” Ras said seriously. “Jay is not a guy from TV. He’s… He’s your mate.”

I froze. Then my jaw dropped. “My *mate*?”

The thought filled me with unprecedented pleasure and joy, but I wasn’t exactly sure why. It just sounded so romantic to have a mate, and the idea that I got to be with such a sexy guy was actually pretty fun to consider.

But then, I realized something else.

*How could Jay be my mate when I have no idea who he is?* I wondered. *Maybe having a mate isn’t such a good thing.*

I remembered that Cali had two of them, and that it was a total shitshow.

*Yikes!*

“What are you thinking, Lola?” Ras asked.

I shrugged, hesitant to share my thoughts with her.

Ras took a deep breath. “You should remember that even though you feel this strong pull toward Jay, you should use this time to focus on your vampire studies. I feel that once you’ve got that down, everything should go back to normal.”

I was a little confused. “So things aren’t normal now?”

“Let’s just say that they’re a little *complicated*,” Ras told me. “But don’t worry, I’m here for you.” Before I could thank her, she checked her watch. “Anyway, I have to go to a meeting, but I want you to check in with me if you have any further heat problems. Okay?”

Ras was a little weird, but she was nice enough. I nodded, and the two of us parted ways.

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When I got back to my room, all I could think about was this Jay guy, and how beautiful and sweet he seemed. I also couldn’t stop thinking about Ras and, of course, Emmett. It was hard not to think of Emmett after I’d seen his secret office and all that bullshit. The thought reminded me of that creepy file.

I landed on my bed and reached under my pillow. I tried once more to make sense of Emmett’s scrawl. The only thing I could really make out was a series of dates and times, starting with the day that I’d arrived at Tottenville. I scowled.

If only I could read what each entry was! Then all my problems would be over!

Okay, that was an exaggeration, because I seemed to have an endless stream of problems to deal with. But anyway, I had to focus now. All the entries started every day at 6 p.m. I glanced at the time and realized that it was actually almost 6 p.m. right now.

Which meant that if Emmett went to add an entry, he would see that the folder was missing! *Oh, NO.*

I swallowed roughly, realizing that this would probably make him suspect me. He would figure out that I’d snooped around! The last thing I needed was more trouble with him. *Shit*, why hadn’t I thought this through properly? This whole situation was horrible! And I definitely had no idea how Emmett would react if he started treating me like an enemy who’d literally stolen from him!

*There were no cameras in that room, Lola*, I told myself. *And even if there were, you’re a vampire—you don’t show up on film! Right?*

I really should have checked on that before walking into that lab. Cold sweat gathered at the back of my neck as I stared at the file once more. What was I supposed to do? The clock was ticking, time smoothly moving toward 6 p.m.

There was only one thing I could do.

At least, only one thing that I could think to do at that moment, in my panic and worry.

I needed to race back to his office, hope to hell he wasn’t there, and put this thing back in that secret lab. And I needed to do it all before he found out the file was missing.

I stood up, unsure if this was the right decision, but feeling trapped. It was early enough that everyone was still out and about, and it would be so easy for someone to see me. But what other choice did I have?

I glanced at the clock over my bed once more, and the sound of it—*tick tock tick tock tick tock*—made me shiver. Adrenaline coursed through my body, and I gripped the file tightly.

Was there enough time for me to pull this off without getting caught?

**Episode 1472**

GREYSON

I stared at Kira.

“Vampire?” I said. “Are you sure?”

I still wasn’t fully certain whether I could trust her and her powers. My brother had brought her back to the pack house, but that didn’t mean we’d become the best of friends. And where vampires were concerned… Well, they sure as hell weren’t welcome here.

Her expression, though, did seem sincere. “The smell of the herbs I used to cover the scent of vampires… I’ll never forget it, and it’s what I’m smelling right now. Why would I lie?”

I’d heard enough. Even if she was wrong, even if I didn’t trust her, this was worth checking out. A vampire was a threat to the entire pack.

“Is the vampire *in* the house?” I asked her. That seemed like a pretty important distinction. “Is this where you’re getting the scent from? But how would they get in here without being invited?”

Kira’s gaze was hard. “I don’t know. My senses aren’t as sensitive as a werewolf’s. I’m only certain that I can smell the herbs.”

I scented the air. There was no trace of anything unusual for me, which was exactly the point of the magic she was talking about. Shit. I glanced at the kitchen. Torin and Tom were, as usual, chirping to each other and fiddling around. “What if Torin and Cali’s dad are cooking something and using those same herbs?”

Kira shook her head. “They’re too unusual. Definitely not edible. Possibly toxic to humans if ingested.”

My gut throbbed with unease. We just couldn’t catch a fucking break, could we? Was there a chance that that Fae-blood-obsessed vampire was back? Sabyr? He had been so fixated on Cali…

If he was back to harm her, he wouldn’t live to regret it.

“Let’s search the house,” I told Kira. The witch nodded instantly.

It was good to see that she followed directions, and did seem serious about this. I told myself that it would’ve been hard for her to trick my brother so completely. If she was telling the truth, she could become a good ally.

I moved through the first floor, scanning the entire area, with the witch following behind me. Soon, we ran into Rishika, who had just walked in.

“Check the basement for vampires,” I told her sharply. “There might be a threat.”

She nodded in an instant. “On it.”

She didn’t question me—always a good soldier—and headed downstairs quickly.

“It’s up there,” Kira told me, pointing up the stairs.

As we started climbing, I paused. I thought of someone else my brother and I had brought into our house in the past who we didn’t fully trust.

*Ava*.

I trusted every wolf in the pack house, every Fae as well—all except for Ava.

“Son of a bitch,” I grumbled under my breath and raced for her door, Kira right behind me. I turned the knob and swung it open. My senses were on high alert, the urge to attack ready and sharpened.

The cold was what hit me first.

The room was icy, and there was wind coming in from the open window. I turned toward it, to the left, and saw Ava. She was halfway out of the house, and beyond the window, there was a vampire feeding on her neck.

I roared.

Lunging toward Ava, I grabbed her, trying to bring her inside. The vampire pulled back quickly, using the outside of the house for leverage.

“Let her the fuck go, you leech!” I snarled, and the vampire laughed.

It was a tug of war between us—he was trying to get her out, I was trying to pull her back in, and she was half-limp and whimpering. My top priority was to *not* drag the vampire into the house. I had no idea if that would be the same as inviting him in.

And that was the last fucking thing I needed.

*BANG!*

I’d barely finished my train of thought when a sudden blast overcame the room. The vampire was knocked away from Ava, and I tumbled backward with her, landing on the floor with a thud. Just at Kira’s feet.

I looked up at her.

She lowered her hands, shaking and wide-eyed and clearly furious, all at the same time. Then, she rushed to close the window. My hands were bloodied, and Ava’s neck was like a gaping wound.

“What happened?” I asked, staring down at the trembling woman.

“I don’t… He tried to…” Ava fought to speak, but seemed delirious.

A second later, she passed out.

*Fuck.*

Mace barged into the room.

“What the hell is going on here?” he demanded. “What…” He noticed the bite mark on Ava and realization dawned. He marched to the window, snarling, and yanked it open. He turned to me, snapping his teeth. “We need to hunt it. Destroy it before it comes back.”

Kira stared at me, nodding sharply. “Mace is right. That was Iñigo, and he’s… he’s not good news.”

I paused, picking Ava up from the floor and placing her on the bed. She had a pulse, which meant she just needed time to heal. I recognized the name Kira had mentioned. Iñigo was the vampire who’d threatened and trapped Xavier, and allegedly Ava.

He had to be very powerful, if he’d been able to incapacitate my brother.

“Xavier knows him,” I told Mace. “This won’t be a piece of cake, that’s for sure.”

Mace scoffed. “I don’t give a shit who he is. A vampire at a pack house is a threat, and not one to take lightly.”

I glanced out the window, taking a moment to think.

“I appreciate your help,” I told Mace, “but remember—*I’m* the Alpha here.”

Mace gave me a look that felt like a dare. “I’m not going to wait around for your orders when we’re under attack. Pip is in this house, and protecting her comes first.” His eyes narrowed as he stared at me. “Protecting her comes before anything else.”

I was starting to wonder if I’d made a mistake in letting Mace come here. No matter how much I minded my own business, all these problems just kept popping up. Another Alpha werewolf constantly challenging me was a bad problem to have, for sure, and Mace had the potential to become one more issue that I didn’t want to deal with.

“I’m going to say this once,” I told Mace, stepping toward him. I was taller, and pretty grateful for that. Mace had to look up at me, and looking up to meet someone’s gaze was humbling for an Alpha. “I won’t allow anyone to go out into that storm and blindly hunt for a vampire. If you wanna go out there, you go alone.”

Mace growled but looked away, huffing. Apparently, he’d been put in his place.

At least for now.

The situation had been defused for the moment, and now, I needed to focus on the real issue. The threats to the pack house had only gotten greater as time passed. I had so many things to balance right now—my dreams of Silas, the revenant threat, the ticking clock on meeting the witches, and of course, Cali.

… Who was out there somewhere with Xavier, right now, in the storm. I needed to call her. With everything that was happening, I was starting to really fucking regret letting both of them leave the pack house. It had seemed like a good idea in the morning, but now, I was about ready to lose my shit.

Why the hell hadn’t those fools checked the weather before leaving? Did I have to do *everything* around here? Did I have to be everyone’s fucking babysitter, even my brother’s? I’d expected a lot more from Xavier, especially considering all the experience he had with protecting Cali. This whole situation was ridiculous, and I was getting so impatient with all the random bullshit that kept hitting us.

Unless, of course, there was something supernatural about this storm, and nobody could have predicted it. Which just made it a yet *another* fucking problem for me to deal with.

I just hoped Cali was safe. Her safety was the main reason why I’d allowed Xavier to take her with him in the first place. And if anything happened to Cali, I would need to deal with my brother in a way that I didn’t even want to think about. I hated mulling over possibilities like that. It didn’t do anyone any good.

Just then, a series of heavy knocks came from downstairs.

“Where are you going?” Kira called after me as I ran from the room. I didn’t stay to answer her. The people at the door had to be Cali and Xavier.

When I opened the door, though, it wasn’t them.

It was the rest of Mace’s Blue Blood pack.

*More* fucking complications.

I heard Mace’s voice from a few feet behind me, heavy and demanding, challenging. “You gonna let them in, Greyson? Or are you going back on your word as Alpha?”

**Episode 1473**

I felt Xavier tense up. Did he not want to kiss me? Because we’d just done a whole lot more than that in the car earlier. Also, he *had* just saved me from a blizzard, and I was pretty grateful.

I had a whole plan in my head: I would kiss him, and then I would make him lie down, and then I would put my mouth all over his—

His gaze shifted, looking past me.

*Uh-oh*, I thought, realizing*. Something’s wrong, and it’s got nothing to do with me.*

Swallowing roughly, I followed his gaze and saw a large bearded man standing at the top of the cabin’s staircase.

*Oh, shit! OH SHIT!*

This was not going well. Xavier probably hadn’t realized there was someone else in the cabin because his nose had spent so much time out in the cold. Or he had decided to walk in here after weighing our options and deciding that the cold was the biggest threat.

Either way, my heart was drumming.

“Cali,” Xavier hissed, standing up and pulling me behind him as the man started moving down the stairs. “Stay calm.”

*Calm?* I screeched in my head. *OF COURSE I’ll stay calm! I am the epitome of calm!*

I flinched when the man’s large axe thumped as he dragged it down the stairs behind him. He was a shadowy figure, a very big one, who headed toward us slowly, and I was freaking out.

And of course, I couldn’t keep my mouth shut.

“We’re so sorry to have intruded! We didn’t know anyone was here, and it’s super stormy out there, please don’t axe us!” I blurted it all out at once and then winced, cowering behind Xavier.

*Ohmygod, what if this is a serial killer’s secret hideout and we’re about to be turned into sausages? I would NOT look good as a sausage!*

Right then and there, I decided that I was not going to die here. What would my mom think? What would Greyson think? I felt horrible just considering the possibilities.

“Please don’t—”

Xavier squeezed my arm to make me shut up, which was fair. I had to remember that I was here with a werewolf. And not just any werewolf, but Xavier Evers. We’d be fine. Totally fine. The man paused a few feet away from us. I couldn’t see his face clearly, but his beard was very thick.

“We mean no harm,” Xavier said evenly.

And then, the large man gruffly said, “You nudists? I’ve read about your kind.”

I glanced down at myself and Xavier, and yep, of course we were both naked.

“We were just trying to warm up,” Xavier said seriously. “I was worried that my ma—my *girlfriend* would catchhypothermia.”

There was silence as the man stepped closer. I could see his face now, or at least the half of it that wasn’t covered by the beard. With a twinkle in his eye, he said, “Sure. Of course. Every time I get cold, I take my clothes off too.”

And then he burst into a deafening cackle that echoed against the walls.

*Oh my god! Is that an evil cackle? Or just a normal cackle?* I screamed inside my head.

Gathering all my courage, I said, “So you’re not going to kill us?”

The man’s smile faded. He raised the axe and rested it against his shoulder. His grip was tight, white-knuckled, as he took another step closer to us. Xavier’s grip on my arm became instantly harder.

*Don’t worry*, Xavier told me. *He’s just human. We can handle him if we have to.*

I tried not to choke. *Handle him?* I imagined Xavier shifting and ripping the man into pieces. It wasn’t like he had done anything to bother us so far. If anything, *we* had broken into his home!

*Xavier, I will not let you kill a man just because he thinks it’s weird that a couple of naked people appeared in his living room*, I told my mate in the strictest tone possible.

*Fair enough. I could just knock him out*,Xavier bargained.

Yes, that was fair enough, I supposed.

The man glanced at our wet clothes. “You guys on the run? Like Bonnie and Cliff? Or is it Clyde? Never can remember. Anyway, is there a reward on your heads?”

“We were just shopping at the mall!” I blurted out.

The man arched a very thick eyebrow.

“We got into an accident. Needed shelter because of the blizzard,” Xavier added. Making sure that I stayed behind him, he started gathering our clothes. “We’ll get dressed and be on our way. Didn’t mean to impose.”

The man scoffed, dropping his axe to the floor with a thud. “Why the rush? You need dry clothes—I got plenty of ‘em.” He nodded at me casually while I kept hiding behind Xavier, covering my boobs. “They might be a bit big for her, but they’ll keep her warm.”

Xavier stared at him. “Are you serious?”

The man shrugged. “I’m not gonna send a couple of kids out into a storm.”

I gasped, relieved. “You’ll let us stay?”

He grinned. “Call me Rutherford.” He gestured around. “And welcome to my palace.” He laughed again—the dude was really cracking himself up. “You two sit tight and I’ll be back.”

Whistling cheerfully, he headed back upstairs. Xavier and I shared a look.

“You think we can trust him?” I whispered.

Xavier seemed skeptical. “We don’t have much of a choice right now. The storm is still raging.” He pulled me close, wrapping his arm around me and kissing my forehead. “We’ll stay for as long as we have to, and I promise to keep you safe.”

His words were enough to warm me up.

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A little while later, I was rolling up the sleeves of Rutherford’s giant flannel shirt. It wasn’t as warm as Xavier, but it was better than my wet clothes that there were drying out by the fire. I caught sight of Xavier chopping wood on the back porch. There was steam coming off his strong body as he sweated, swinging the axe with enough force that the cabin shook with each blow.

*Damn. Talk about domestic bliss*, I thought.

Meanwhile, Rutherford started whistling as he cooked on a wood stove. He seemed pretty happy-go-lucky, and I felt fortunate to have run into him. Honestly, I felt fortunate just to have survived these messed up circumstances—at least so far.

But how was the rest of the pack doing?

How was Greyson doing?

He had to be worried about me and Xavier. I pulled my phone from my backpack, amazed that it had survived. I needed to call Greyson, but when I looked at the signal, there was nothing.

“How do you make phone calls here?” I asked Rutherford.

He snorted. “You want to make a call, you got to go upstairs, stand by the rear window, and pray.”

Well, that sounded hopeful. Not.

“Thank you,” I said anyway. “I guess I’ll try that.”

I headed upstairs, hoping that I wasn’t going to find a mummified corpse. Rutherford seemed nice, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t a serial killer. In fact, I’d read somewhere that the most charming people could be serial killers—it was part of their allure or whatever. Very creepy, overall.

Nevertheless, I was glad to see that the upstairs was a tidy bedroom with a very clean bathroom and a shelf with books. How nice! This was actually extremely cute and homey. I wondered what Rutherford was doing all alone out here. But then again, at his age, maybe he preferred solace, a fire, and a good book to read.

The real question here, though, was how he survived without the internet.

*Does he not play one of the Fifas?* I wondered. But when I looked outside, I realized that he probably had a garden to tend to when it wasn’t snowing. *Aww!*

Relieved and feeling strangely fond of Rutherford, I moved closer to the window. I held up the phone, searching for a signal, and finally got a flickering bar or two.

*Victory!* I thought. *Finally!*

Pretty happy with myself, I called Greyson, who answered on the second ring. His voice sounded shaky, and the line was filled with static and dropouts.

“Are you okay?” he demanded.

I was so glad to hear him. My heart raced at the sound of his voice. “Please don’t freak out. I’m fine, there was a slight accident, but we’re sheltering.”

“Cali—” More static, cutting off Greyson.

“What?” I asked. “I can’t hear you. I promise to come back as soon as the storm clears!”

“Listen—Xavier—” Greyson’s sentences kept getting cut off, and I couldn’t figure out what was going on.

Frustrated, I asked, “Can you repeat that, please? I literally can’t hear anything. The signal here is horrible.”

And then, all of a sudden, Greyson’s voice was clear in my ear. “Don’t bother coming back to the pack house, Cali.”

**Episode 1474**

GREYSON

From Cali’s hurt tone, it was clear that I might have said that last part a bit too harshly.

“What?” she asked. “What do you mean?”

The signal loss had been toying with my patience. I’d been so worried about her, about where she was, and now I could barely speak to her because of the storm and her location. I told myself to be relieved that she was at least okay, and appreciate what I could get.

But that didn’t mean I had to like it.

“It’s just that right now we have a situation, possibly with some vampires,” I told her, hoping that she could hear me. “It’ll just be better if you stay away.”

The signal had cleared enough that Cali heard at least half of that sentence. “We’re stranded out here, but this guy is helping us.”

I internally cursed at myself, realizing I’d basically offered Cali to my brother on a silver platter. Of *course* the two of them would get marooned together during a blizzard when I’d specifically sent them away. They were together, and I was back here, like always, bearing the responsibility of picking up the pieces.

The life of an Alpha really sucked.

But I couldn’t blame either of them. If all this other stuff hadn’t been happening, maybe I would’ve just gone to the witches and taken them up on their offer. But I couldn’t do that now. Not while the pack was in danger.

At least Cali was safe, away from here. That was my top priority, even if it meant her staying with Xavier, sitting in front of a fire with him, all cozied up while I was stuck here…

I couldn’t *believe* that this was my fucking life.

“What happened—the vampires—” Cali was trying to ask me something, I could tell, but she kept getting cut off.

I took a deep breath. “Please don’t worry about that. Just stay safe. I’ll let you know when it’s safe to come back, okay?”

I waited for Cali to respond, but there was nothing.

“Cali?” I asked. “Can you hear me?”

A second later, the line went dead.

Growling, I stared at the phone. I had no choice but to accept that my brother would have to keep her safe. I wished that our roles were reversed—that I was the one sheltering with Cali, while Xavier had to deal with Mace’s Alpha bullshit.

*Speaking of bullshit…* I stepped back into the living room and found it crowded with the Blue Blood pack members. They had taken off their jackets after brushing off the snow in the hallway. Would I be the bad guy if I made them clean up the mess? I didn’t think so, so I made a mental note to get that taken care of. Honestly, I felt like kicking them out, but I reminded myself that I could use them. There was always safety and numbers.

Just then, Mace walked up to me. “I’d like a word with you.”

Goody. Just what I wanted, another confrontation. Trying not to show how much I did not want to deal with him, I followed Mace into the hallway. The *wet* hallway, after the Blue Bloods’ arrival. I needed a fucking mop.

“I just wanted to tell you I’m sorry,” Mace said, interrupting my very normal thoughts about my messy house.

I looked up at him, surprised. “Huh?”

Mace took a deep breath. “I don’t want to step on your toes. I was just worried about Pip and the vampire attack. But I know that you have a lot to deal with, and it’s hard to juggle it all at once.”

I stared at Mace for a beat, processing his words. “I didn’t think you had it in you to apologize.”

Mace’s somber expression changed to an annoyed one. He glared at me. “I’m more than willing to go along with you while we’re in your pack house. But don’t forget, just as you’re responsible for the Redwoods, I’m responsible for the Blue Bloods.”

I rolled my eyes, scoffing. “I doubt you’ll ever let me forget. But there’s one thing *you* shouldn’t forget.”

“What?”

“There can only be one Alpha in this house,” I told him. “Do you understand?”

Mace huffed, rolling his eyes. “Whatever. Fine.”

“Also, can you get your people to mop the floor? There’s water from the snow everywhere,” I told him seriously.

“I didn’t peg you for a neat freak,” Mace told me, eyebrows arched.

“Just make your people clean up after themselves,” I told him. “They’re not my puppies.”

He rolled his eyes again but nodded. “I’ll have them deal with it, then I’ll go check on Pip.”

Mace walked away and barked at two of his pack members to go get a mop and deal with the snow. *Hah*.

“You did a good thing, letting them stay here,” Sabine said from behind me.

“I want to believe that, Mom, but I guess we’ll see.” It felt so new to call her “Mom,” but I didn’t regret it.

She looked up at me with warm eyes and placed a hand on my shoulder. “It’s okay to feel overwhelmed, you know.”

I shook my head, hoping I didn’t sound as bitter as I felt. “Maybe for everyone else, but not for me. I can’t afford to get overwhelmed.”

She squeezed my arm. “I just need you to remember that you’re doing a great job here. Do you understand?”

Her words and encouragement made me feel much better about everything, strangely enough. “I do.”

She offered me a small smile, and somehow, I felt invigorated. I nodded toward the living room. “Can you help organize where the Blue Bloods are going to sleep and all that? I need to check on Ava.”

“Of course,” my mother replied. “Anything I can do to help.”

Relieved, I headed upstairs. I paused by Cali’s room, hit by the memory of her again. I knew that Mace was in there with Pip, but I wished it were Cali. That I could slip in there with her and forget everything and everyone else. That it could be just the two of us, with no responsibilities and no danger. Today, I needed that more than ever.

I found it pretty fucking ironic that instead of seeing Cali, I was going to Ava.

Why was I even letting her stay here? Hadn’t I just been thinking about how we didn’t trust her? “Keep your enemies close” was shit advice.

Iñigo was bad news, and he was clearly drawn to Ava. She’d always been a tricky one to deal with, mostly because she was a horrible person and nobody trusted her, but at the same time, I’d never considered her truly dangerous. Not until now.

I knocked and entered the room to find Ava sitting up in bed, with Kira on a chair beside her. She was looking very pale.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Ava is recovering her strength,” Kira told me in a mild tone.

Ava nodded, swallowing loudly. “Thank you both for saving me.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, eyeing her suspiciously. “So what happened, exactly?”

Ava pushed her hair out of the way and tilted her neck to the side to reveal her wound.

“So he was feeding on you,” I said slowly. “Did he really attack you, though?”

“What kind of question is that?” she said. “You think I did this to myself?”

I moved closer, still staring at her. “Why didn’t you scream, then?”

She stared back at me, her pale blue gaze pinned to mine. “I didn’t get the chance. Have you ever been bitten by a vampire?”

I scoffed. “You’re in no position to question me.”

She glared. “Forgive me, but it sounds like you don’t believe me. It sounds like you’re blaming the victim.”

“Oh no,” I snapped, glancing at Kira, who had been looking between us like she was witnessing a tennis match. “You don’t get to do that, Ava. You don’t get to say that after tricking both me and my brother into having sex with you. Neither of us consented, so if anything, *we* are *your* victims.”

Ava flinched, looking even paler than before. Her voice was suddenly lower. “I’ve apologized for that a million times. I was desperate to please Nolan, and I made some really fucked up decisions. What more can I do to earn your trust?”

“You can start by telling me the truth about you and that vampire,” I told her coldly.

She looked at me, her eyes glistening, her frustration obvious. “Iñigo was trying to kill me! If it hadn’t been for Kira’s magic, he probably would have.”

I glanced at Kira. Her expression was severe. There was something so dignified about her, so regal, that I was starting to see why Xavier trusted her. On the other hand, Ava made me feel like there were a bunch of snakes slithering up my feet, ready to wrap around my neck and suffocate me.

She couldn’t be trusted. Not ever.

I sat down on the bed beside her, and when she looked away, I pulled her chin up so that she faced me once more. I made sure to keep my voice even, but also as threatening as it needed to be.

“As soon as this storm is over,” I told her, “we’re finding that vampire, and we’re not going to stop until I see you stake him.”

**Episode 1475**

MARTA

Lilac, Violet, and I were in my room, looking at the necromancy spellbook.

“There are so many variations of spells,” I said, going through the index, my eyes wide. “Look! There are even some that work like love potions!”

“I think we’re good in the love department. No need for a spell when it comes to that,” Lilac said with arched eyebrows, nodding toward the book. For some weird reason, I felt my cheeks redden at his comment. Before I could ask him to elaborate, though, Violet spoke up.

“Turn to page 101,” she said. “The title mentions spirits.”

I followed her instructions and turned the pages. The description of the spell said that it could bring spirits back, in the flesh. I looked up at Violet, intrigued. “This is what you wanted, isn’t it?”

She looked troubled. “I did. Until Big Mac told us about all the risks. I’m not so worried about myself.” She swallowed audibly. “But the idea of sending Lilac’s soul into oblivion? That’s horrible. My brother has the sweetest soul I’ve ever known.”

I turned to Lilac, raising an eyebrow. “Do you have anything to say to that? Because I feel like you’d have a lot to say.”

Lilac scoffed, nudging me lightly. “Tell my sister that she’s wrong. *She’s* the sweetest soul.”

I groaned. “Will you two stop it with all your mushy sibling stuff?”

“Can you please ask my sister what she wants to do, then?” Lilac told me, uncharacteristically serious.

“Your brother is wondering what happens next,” I told Violet.

She frowned. “I would kill to get my brother back, but not if it means I’d be killing his soul.”

I wondered if what I was feeling was disappointment. “So we’re not going to do this?”

Violent sighed. “I love my brother too much. If something bad happened, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself.”

I understood where she was coming from. It was all so complicated and sad. I wished I could help more. I wished I could do something to help for *real*.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

“For what?” both Violet and Lilac said at the same time. Their twin sense seemed to have survived Lilac’s death.

I smiled sadly. “I’m sorry I can’t help more. This has to be your decision, Violet.”

Lilac spoke up. “What about *my* decision?”

His expression was unreadable. Before I could ask him what he meant, Violet’s phone rang. She looked at it, and her whole face lit up. “It’s Charlie. Sorry, I gotta go and answer this.”

She skedaddled out of the room, and I fell back on my bed, looking up at the ceiling. This yo-yoing back and forth was mentally exhausting. First, Violet wanted to bring her brother back, and now she didn’t. I understood how complicated everything was, but I felt stuck in the middle, and like I couldn’t truly provide any solutions to either of them.

“Hi there,” Lilac said, hovering over me and interrupting my peace. Like he always did. “So what was that back there? You didn’t do what I asked.”

I waved him off, sitting up slightly so we could talk like normal people. Or at least a normal person and a ghost. A medium, and a ghost. *Oh, Lordy…*

“What are you even whining about?” I asked.

Lilac scrunched up his nose. It was a very cute nose, all upturned. “You were supposed to talk Violet out of bringing me back, remember?”

“She just said she wasn’t going to do it. What more do you want?”

Lilac scoffed, the absolute twit. “No thanks to you!” He arched an eyebrow, smirking. “Maybe it’s you who wants me back, all flesh and blood…”

I huffed. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

But even as I said that, the image of him fully fleshed out on the day we’d brought him back with the cinnamon spell appeared in my mind’s eye. He had looked so… *real*. All skin and muscle and that very cute nose that—

Wait, what was I doing? Was I crushing on a ghost?

The thought of him being right literally haunted me. Was there any truth to his assumption? Did I want Lilac to come back—not for Violet, but for myself?

“You got quiet all of a sudden,” Lilac said, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. Why would he do that? Didn’t he know he was too dead to be cool? *So* annoying.

“I’m just thinking about the many practical reasons as to why I would be relieved if you came back from the dead,” I told him. Then I smiled sweetly. “The most obvious one being that I would no longer have to deal with channeling you. It’s driving me mad.”

He laughed, all tickled pink, even though he was transparent. “Damn, girl. You want me back, just admit it.”

“I don’t want you back. You’re delusional!” I declared.

And to be honest, what would even happen if he *did* come back? Would this… *thing* we had between us blossom in a positive way? Or would it shrivel and wilt, because the spirit world would no longer be between us?

Lilac would no longer have any use for me. He would no longer be forced to talk to me.

For some reason, that thought made me feel horrible.

I wasn’t sure if Lilac was just tolerating me, or I was tolerating him just to get through the days. Though, if I was being honest, I knew that I liked being around him, even if he was a brat.

“Whatever,” Lilac said, shrugging. “I’m glad that Violet changed her mind. Even if it wasn’t thanks to you.”

“Violet is confused, and she hasn’t ruled it out yet,” I reminded him. “You’d better be prepared, because once the spirit portal opens up, Violet will probably reconsider. She goes back and forth a lot, I don’t know if you’ve noticed.”

Lilac snorted. “That’s my sister.”

We fell silent. Lilac stared at me intensely, and I was ready to look away, my heart beating a little too fast for some reason.

“Joking aside,” Lilac murmured. “How would you *really* feel if I came back?”

This time, his question had no humor to it.

“Why are you asking?”

Lilac walked over to sit down next to me again. “I guess… I’ve thought about it a lot. I have a lot of free time, you know, being a ghost and all. And since I’ve been hanging out around you, getting to know you, I wondered…”

“What?” I asked. I could feel heat rising in my cheeks. There was something so attractive about him when he spoke like this, like he meant every word coming out of his mouth. *Unfortunately* attractive, because, again, he was dead.

*But what if he weren’t?*

“I wondered if you’d like *me*,” he said, his gaze shifting from the floor to meet mine. My stomach flipped. Were those butterflies? Was that what the flipping was about? It couldn’t be… Could it?

“You’re annoying,” I told him. But my voice sounded more like a squeak than a statement.

He smiled cheekily. No other boy alive had ever smiled at me like that. Literally.

“That’s part of being a spirit. To annoy,” he said.

I snorted. “Well, you’ve done a great job.”

He tilted his head to the side, taking in every inch of my face. The stomach flipping kept happening.

“And if I wasn’t a spirit?” he said.

I recalled that dance with Lilac and Violet, and I chuckled. “You’d still be annoying, but at least I could smack you once in a while.”

He laughed. He was faint, barely there, but his laughter felt so lively. “Oh, come on! You love me!”

I was now fully blushing. “Oh my goodness, can you just stop?”

Why was he doing this? Why was he talking like this? He was just being a little shit, that was why. Unless…

Unless he was falling for me. But that was ridiculous—just as ridiculous as me falling for him, a ghost. An annoying ghost.

“You’re so cranky,” Lilac said, leaning closer to me. I had this wild thought of him doing something absurd like nuzzling me, because it looked like he was about to, and I felt a little faint. “I guess we’ll have to wait and find out if you’ll ever like me at all.”

I rolled my eyes, ignoring the way my pulse sped up at his words. “Do you ever let anything drop?”

“Nope,” he told me casually.

He was such a menace. He’d only be worse if he were alive.

“Well, we’d better stop horsing around and get this book back to Big Mac,” I said, shutting it. “I don’t want to get on her bad side. When you were alive, did you have much to do with her?”

There was no answer, and when I looked up, Lilac was gone.

“Lilac?” I asked, alarmed.

I suddenly felt as if a string had been plucked from my mind.

Lilac reappeared, but when he spoke, it was in a voice that was merely a shadow of his. The voice of someone familiar. “Marta, don’t be afraid.”

That, of course, made me feel very afraid.

And then the voice said, “You’re in danger.”

**Episode 1476**

LOLA

I hurried down to Emmett’s office, screaming inside my head, the folder in my hands. I was running so, *so* late. I prayed that Emmett wasn’t in there, and I could just slip in and out of his office and that freaky lab as quickly as possible, without any interruptions. That would be for the best. For everyone.

My heart was beating fast enough that I could hear it. What if Emmett *was* in there, though? What was I going to do? We weren’t exactly in a great place at the moment. I knew that he was spying on me, collecting data for god only knew what.

I tried to be as inconspicuous as possible as I strolled down the hall—not running, because I didn’t want to draw attention.

Half the vampires here didn’t seem to trust me as it was, and I didn’t want to make things even worse for myself. I felt so self-conscious all the time, like I was constantly under a massive microscope. But I needed to ignore that feeling. I took a deep breath and braced myself as the students moved past me.

*Just walk normally, Lola. Smile, be normal!* I ordered myself.

The rest of the students seemed not to have noticed me yet, and for that I was grateful. But when I rounded the corner, I came face to face with Jacqueline.

Great.

This Regina George knockoff was the last thing I needed right now. I slipped the folder behind my back and tried to move past her, plastering the fakest smile on my face as I did. But Jacqueline stopped me again, planting herself in front of me to block my way.

“Just to set the record straight,” she started, “I will never be jealous of you. If anything, I pity you.”

She spat that last sentence, and I rolled my eyes. “Funny, I never think about you, *ever*. At all.”

“I haven’t forgotten what you did,” Jacqueline declared, crossing her arms. “And you’d be wise to remember that.”

I smiled mockingly. “Well, I’m *not* wise, so…”

I pushed past the damn vampire and kept walking. My god, I wished that I had my wolf back! I would put an end to that walking, talking *Mean Girls* cliché, just bite her head off and get it over with.

I glanced up at one of the hallway’s clocks and realized that I’d wasted too much time—which would be *any* time—dealing with Jacqueline.

*Fuck.*

Really annoyed and anxious, I clutched the folder. I was determined to get it back to my creepy, infuriating professor—but then my phone rang again. It was the cute one-eyed guy, Jay. I knew I should probably ignore that and continue with my mission, but Ras had said that Jay was not only my best friend, but also my mate.

My mate.

How could I ignore that? And his picture was so hot! And cute! And kind of funny, too. He seemed adorable, and that was hard to resist. I huddled in a corner and picked up the phone, trying to keep my voice down so others wouldn’t hear me.

“Hey, friend!” I said happily.

There was a pause.

“What?” Jay asked, his voice weirded out. He didn’t sound as attractive as I’d expected, actually.

I laughed nervously. “Ha ha, I meant, hey, mate!”

There was another pause.

“Are you on something?” he asked me seriously. Why was he being so serious?

“What? No! Don’t be silly!” I said.

“It’s just that you’re acting really weird,” he said. He sounded even more serious now. He was the weird one here, okay? Jeez!

*Lola, you need to focus!* I reminded myself. The seconds were ticking by, and I had a mission to complete. Emmett’s lair of doom awaited! Who knew what would happen if I didn’t get there on time?

“Sorry,” I blurted out. “All of that vampire etiquette must be getting to me. But I really have to get going—I have a test!”

Jay now sounded not only serious, but also confused. “I thought you already had your last class for the day?”

*Damn it.*

“I mean I have to study for my next test. Hah.”

*Oh god, kill me now.*

“Is everything okay?” Jay asked. He sounded genuinely concerned. Or was he just being nice?

“Yeah, all good,” I said quickly. “Look, can I call you later? I don’t want to be late for dinner.”

“I thought you had to study?”

I was really the worst liar ever. And this guy asked so many questions! Like, why wouldn’t he just let me say whatever the hell I wanted?

“I study while I eat! Gotta run—bye!”

I hung up. Well that hadn’t gone as well as I’d hoped. How could that guy be my mate? Where were the sparks when I heard his voice? Weren’t there meant to be sparks between so-called mates? Maybe Ras was wrong. Jay had sounded cute, despite all the seriousness, but *mates*?

Yeah, not so much.

Frowning at myself, I pushed Jay from my mind as I approached Emmett’s office. I fought to calm my heart. I could do this. I’d done it before. And this was even better, right? I was returning something. Not stealing! Wasn’t that a positive thing?

I thought it was. I decided that it was.

I pressed my ear to the door and listened. It seemed quiet.

After that, I knocked on the door a few times, just to make sure.

“And then, she died!” someone called from a few feet away, and the group cracked up laughing. I slipped away quickly, just as a couple of giggling students passed by. I felt pretty proud of myself for thinking to do that—there was no way I could let them see me around this area. I needed to keep all my bases covered.

Then again, I was still wondering about the video thing. Because if vampires could, indeed, be caught on video and this whole school was under surveillance, I was screwed.

Taking a deep breath, I double-checked to make sure that the hallway was clear. When the group turned the corner and I was certain that they were gone, I was back at it. I stuck my ear to the door once more, knocked a few more times, and figured that he couldn’t be in there.

But either way, I needed to pretend that everything was normal. Like I was just casually dropping by—as if we were friends, and he wasn’t a shady son of a bitch.

“Emmett? Are you in?” I called after opening the door. I stuck my head inside.

It was empty. Nobody in sight.

*It’s now or never. Don’t chicken out, Lola!*

I decided to slip inside. I closed the door behind me without making any noise and hurried to the bookshelf. The bust was there, looking inconspicuous and ancient, but I knew the truth behind it. I pulled on it, and the shelf instantly slid to the side like last time.

*I can do this!* I told myself, ignoring the rapid beating of my heart.

Taking a deep breath, I peered inside. The short hallway was dark. Did vampires even need lights, though? I sure hoped they didn’t. If the lab was empty, I would be able to do what I needed to do without turning on any lights. I slipped down the corridor and found that same overly ornate door half-open. Did Emmett have something against closed doors?

Either way, it suited me.

I went inside and made a beeline for the filing cabinet.

And then, I realized that I wasn’t sure which drawer I’d stolen the file from.

*Oh, shit! This is not good!*

I paused, looking around at all the creepy things Emmett had in here—the organs in the jars, and the dead frogs… I needed to retrace my steps. I remembered the filing was all alphabetical, so—

A gurgling sound made me freeze.

*I’VE BEEN CAUGHT AND I’M GOING TO DIE!*

“I’m not doing anything!” I squealed out loud.

When I turned, though, I realized it was one of the lab contraptions. Not Emmett.

Okay, that was close.

I exhaled loudly and then moved toward the drawers. This had to be it. There were names on tabs, and I searched for mine, but it wasn’t there. I frowned. I clearly remembered that the file had been in a holder with my full name on it. All of my names, ever—my first name, my nickname, my middle name, and my last name. Maybe this wasn’t the right drawer? But it had to be!

*Also, what time is it? Am I too late? Did I spend too much time talking to my mate who doesn’t feel like a mate? I hope I didn’t—*

A cold hand on my shoulder spun me around.

“*Emmett*,” I croaked.

His green eyes pierced right through me. His expression was unreadable.

“I knew you’d come back,” he said in a low, chilling voice. “Do you need some help?”

**Episode 1477**

Rutherford had made grilled chicken and baked potatoes for dinner. It was actually delicious. A couple of hours later, I was sitting by the fire, sipping the tea that he’d made.

Rutherford was kind of the best.

I stared at the fire, feeling cozy and content, until my mind wandered to Greyson. He *had* said that I should go on this little trip, though, so how guilty should I feel? Still, it was hard not to compare everything I’d had with Greyson—especially the visions of family—with the bliss I’d found today with Xavier.

This little cabin had become an oasis for us.

Just then, I heard Xavier climb down the stairs. He had lumberjack clothes on—a baggy flannel, jeans, and a hat.

“So?” he said, making a turn for me to stare at him in all his glory. “What do you think?”

“I think you should grow a beard and go chop down some trees,” I said, grinning.

He smiled back at me. He was usually so stoic, and seeing him like this felt soothing to me. He seemed brand new and happy.

“Rutherford is really chatty,” Xavier said, taking a seat close to me. “He decided to have some ‘man talk’ with me and discuss the home improvement projects he’s been planning.”

“Oh wow,” I said, impressed. “What does he have in mind?”

“He’s going to put a marble island in the kitchen,” Xavier said. “Sounds like a big project.”

I grinned to myself, imagining him trying to install a kitchen island. Or install anything really… It would be *adorable*. I leaned in to kiss his cheek, and he scooped me into his lap. He handled me so easily that I felt flustered as I settled closer. He wrapped his arms around me, planting a kiss on my mouth.

This moment was amazing.

But enjoying it felt unfair, especially with what the pack was going through.

“What are you thinking?” he asked me quietly.

I couldn’t keep the truth from him. “I spoke with Greyson before dinner. He mentioned that there was a vampire situation and that we should stay away.” I winced. “I’m worried about the pack.”

Xavier shook his head. “You shouldn’t be. They’ll be fine, and you’re safe with me—Greyson knows that. If he told you to stay away, there must be a reason.”

“But—”

“I get that you love running into danger and all that, but maybe since we’re trapped here, you should realize that we can’t do anything to help them at the moment.”

I gasped, offended. “I don’t like the way you just said that. Where there’s a will, there’s a way!”

“There’s also a blizzard, and we can’t leave this place.” He smirked. “We’ll get back to the pack house soon enough, don’t worry. Besides, the reason we went to the mall in the first place was to get away—to put pack business and magic behind us for a while. Right?”

I nodded softly. I couldn’t argue.

“Right now, it’s just you, me, a snowstorm, and this fire,” Xavier whispered, leaning close to brush his nose over mine.

I nodded softly, sighing.

“Hey, lovebirds,” Rutherford said, stomping down the stairs. He was another thing that was included in this forced vacation package. I wasn’t complaining, though. He had been so nice.

“Here’s a couple of pillows,” he said, tossing them to Xavier. “There’s two blankets over there, and the couch is a pull-out. Not the best, but it’s better than the floor.”

“Thanks so much!” I said, a little too excitedly. I wanted him to know we were grateful. I didn’t meet a lot of nice people. Every time I met anyone new, they almost always wanted to murder me. It had gotten extremely old, so now that I’d met Rutherford, I was really taken with him.

“You’re welcome, hon,” he said. “I tend to get up pretty early, so if you get up and I’m not back yet, help yourself to anything. I hope you kids will be staying for breakfast, though—it’s the most important meal of the day, and I’ll be making a lot of it.”

I wondered if it would be like those lumberjack breakfasts that I’d seen on diner menus. Either way, I was extremely invested.

“We really appreciate all this,” Xavier told him.

“No worries.” Rutherford shrugged, then headed upstairs after we’d said goodnight. I noticed that he had a night cap on his head, and that his sleepwear was an actual onesie.

*He’s such a fashion icon, though*, I thought. I wasn’t even kidding—lumberjack chic was a *statement*.

Meanwhile, my very own lumberjack mate had set up the pull-out couch.

“Ready to go to bed?” Xavier asked, wrapping his arms around me and resting his chin on my shoulder. I was about to respond when his fingers moved to the hem of Rutherford’s massive flannel, sliding upward.

I gasped, scandalized. “Xavier! Rutherford’s upstairs!”

He grinned, keeping his voice low. “So? He’s already seen us naked.”

“Don’t remind me.”

I climbed into the bed/couch, shoving him. He took off his shirt, because he was shameless, and sat down next to me.

“Come closer,” he said, tugging at my wrist. “I promise I’ll be good.”

“Hah! I doubt that,” I said, but let myself be dragged into his arms once more as we lay down. I was such a sucker. My impression of myself was fortified when Xavier spooned me and then started nuzzling my neck, his hands sliding up and down my sides. He traced the shell of my ear with his tongue, and I had to choke down a moan.

“Xavier!” I huffed. “Rutherford’s going to hear us! He’s done so much for us—we NEED to be respectful!”

He arched an eyebrow. “I can be respectful.”

“Yeah, right,” I scoffed.

“It’s true. I can also be quiet,” he murmured against my lips. “But I’m not sure if you can.”

I smacked him on the arm. “*Excuse me?*”

He stifled laughter against my neck, placing a kiss there and continuing to drive me nuts. “I bet I can make you laugh.”

He started tickling my sides and wrestled me down, moving on top of me as I quietly squealed and chuckled. It was so hard not to laugh, so I had to cover my mouth to stop myself. In between of spurts of giggling, I finally admitted, “Okay, *fine*! I can’t keep quiet when you do that.”

Xavier stopped, looking down at me with a wicked expression. “What about when I do this?”

He brushed his nose down my neck before stopping at the first button of my shirt. He placed a kiss there, spreading my legs to move in between them at the same time, his touch scorching hot.

“*Xavier*!” I choked out on a moan. “Rutherford will hear us!”

He paused, glancing toward the steps. “Rutherford’s snoring. Listen.”

Fighting to settle my heaving breaths, I focused on the sounds of the house. I could actually hear him snoring. It sounded like a saw.

Xavier winked. “See?”

I grinned, pulling him down for a kiss. He swallowed my whimpers as he ground up against me, the denim of his jeans brushing over my underwear.

The friction made me tremble, and when he released me and started kissing down my body, I had to hiss, “Xavier, that’s not gonna help keep me quiet!”

“What?” he asked cheekily, planting kisses around my navel, trailing his hands down the insides of my thighs. My hips arched up toward him, shaking. “Do you want me to stop?”

I shook my head, because the answer to that was OBVIOUSLY NOT*.* Gingerly, he pulled the flannel shirt off over my head. When I was fully naked—apart from my underwear, which had dried earlier—Xavier returned to his position down by my navel.

He started mouthing between my legs, over my panties, making me shudder. Then he slowly slid them off and lowered his lips once more. With one hand stifling the moans that escaped me and the other at his nape, I lay there while Xavier kissed and sucked on me till I thought I’d burst.

I dragged him up, eager to feel more of him, feel all of him.

I was so worked up that at the first gentle thrust of his hips against mine, I almost cried out. He covered my lips with his palm, then his mouth, and he kept moving inside me. Slow but steady, the drag of him was so intense that my body spasmed all around him soon after, my nails digging into his shoulders, heels digging into his back.

He stared deep into my eyes, intense and adoring as he was pushed over the edge himself.

And then he kissed me once more, swallowing my sounds.

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I cozied up to him afterward, feeling sleepy. His warmth and affection engulfed me. He brushed my hair off my face, cupping my cheek before he kissed my forehead.

I smiled up at him. At the same time, though, Xavier whispered, “I can’t do this anymore, Cali.”

**Episode 1478**

LOLA

I stared—frozen—at Emmett, who was watching me closely.

Finally, after a moment that seemed to stretch on forever, he pulled the file from my hands.

“Allow me,” he said coolly, opening the tabbed folder he’d been holding and slipping mine inside.

My eyes slid back up to his face, trying desperately to read his expression. Was he surprised? Betrayed? Angry? His tone of voice didn’t register as angry, or even annoyed. Maybe he wasn’t any of those things… maybe he had been expecting me to come back.

His face gave away as little as his voice. He slipped the tabbed folder back into the file drawer and slowly slid it shut.

“Emmett, listen,” I said, swallowing hard, “I’m really sorry, I know what this looks like, but I didn’t mean for you to—”

“There’s no need for excuses, Lola,” Emmett said, holding up his hand to stop my rambling. “What’s done is done.”

“It can’t be that simple,” I said hoarsely. Emmett didn’t really strike me as the type of vampire to just let things slide.

He raised an eyebrow. “I think the question is, where do we go from here?” His voice was calm and silky smooth. His mesmerizing eyes were fixed on me, catching the light like faceted gems, even in the dim light of his office.

“I… I don’t know,” I admitted.

He smiled. “Why don’t you have a seat?” he said, gesturing toward the desk. “You seem nervous, Lola, and there’s no need to be.”

It was true—I *was* nervous. Why did I feel so nervous around him? Was it because—even in spite of the hypnotism—I still found Emmitt *incredibly* hot?

*Ugh*. Probably.

What the hell was the point of this stupid treatment if I was still at the mercy of the vampire heat? I felt a wave of arousal wash over me. Maybe I should just give up—just give into it.

But something held me back. I knew I shouldn’t. I was too aware of how the heat was affecting me, and I was *determined* not to let it control me.

That determination was new. So, maybe the treatment hadn’t been such a failure after all.

I looked up and found Emmett’s eyes still on me. He couldn’t be trusted. Not completely.

Another very good reason not to let the heat take over.

Emmett narrowed his eyes, his expression so curious it was almost hungry. “I wonder what you’re thinking, Lola. You must have questions.”

I straightened my shoulders, trying to wrest back my composure. “Damn straight, I have questions.” I jerked my chin toward the drawer he’d just shut. “Let’s start there: why the hell are you keeping a file on me? And what the hell is this creepy lab of yours? It’s got such a Dr. Frankenstein vibe. Is that what I am for you? Am I just some experiment for you to poke and prod? Or is this just a weird, convoluted way for you to stalk me?”

“Lola—”

“Who else are you keeping records on?” I demanded, stepping toward the filing cabinet. I had the urge to yank the drawer open, and before I knew it my fingers were curled around the handle.

Emmett caught my hand before I could open the drawer and—once again—I was struck by the effect of his touch. His skin was cool, but it sent what felt like an electric current up my arm as our skin made contact, lighting my nerve endings on fire. Without thinking, I interlaced my fingers with his and pressed our palms together.

A moment later, my mind caught up, and I jerked my hand away and clumsily stepped back.

Emmett smiled. “Lola, I understand. This must be a lot to take in, but I assure you I’m certainly not Dr. Frankenstein. Do you see any stray corpses in my office for starters?” His laughter was as cool as his words, but it sent another shock of heat through my system.

“Well… no.”

“I do wish I could be as dramatic as you imagine me, but,” he said, his voice gentle, “I’ve been collecting data on certain students. Until I met you, it was purely scientific—purely theoretical.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What do you mean, *until you met me*?”

He took a step toward me, his eyes flashing. “You’re different, Lola. You’re one in a million.”

My breathing quickened. “I am?”

“Of course you are. A hybrid werewolf who’s been turned into a living, breathing vampire? Not yet undead, as we’ve all come to expect?” His voice was rising as he grew more excited. “There is so much to learn through you. And because of that—because of *you*, Lola—we might hold the key to helping all of humanity.”

I took a step back. He had grown so loud and intense—not at all the cool and silky-voiced man he had been a moment ago. Now, it was like standing next to a furnace. It didn’t even feel like he was seeing me—his eyes were on me, but they were far away—like he was seeing something beyond me. It was unsettling.

I shook my head. “I don’t see how, Emmett. I’m not a werewolf anymore, remember? My wolf is gone.”

Emmett’s gaze snapped back to me. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “No, don’t you see? The wolf is still inside you. It’s always inside you.”

My wolf was still with me? My heart hammered in my chest. That was the first glimmer of hope I’d felt in days. My head spun from all the questions that flooded my brain at Emmett’s words. “I… wait… hold on. One thing at a time. First off, what do you mean my wolf is still with me? Second, how the hell am I the key to helping humanity?”

Emmett hesitated for a moment. “I could tell you,” he said slowly. He took a step toward me and took my hand. “Or I could show you.”

Without waiting for me to answer, he turned and reached for his desk, pressing a button just below the edge.

The wall behind the desk slid open, revealing a narrow staircase that led downward, disappearing into darkness.

My eyes widened as I let out a low, mildly impressed, whistle. I looked over at Emmett. “Yeah, there’s no way I’m going down there with you.”

Emmett reached for me, brushing his fingers lightly down the side of my face, his gaze locked with mine. “You can’t tell me you’re not a *little* curious.” His finger lingered on my chin for a moment, then he stepped away and started down the stairs.

The echo of his touch burned my skin as I watched him descend the stairs. I took another glance at the empty office. Whatever answers I wanted, I wasn’t going to find them standing around up here.

“Dammit.”

I *was* curious. Of course I was. But was I *that* curious?

I put my finger to where his had rested on the curve of my chin, then I took a step forward. I knew that curiosity killed the cat—but what could it do to a newbie vampire?

Below me, I could hear Emmett’s footsteps on the stairs. It was dark, and the sound was the only guide I had. It was a bit daunting, but I could hear the delicate *thump* of his shoes on the stairs and followed him further down. But, as I continued, I was surprised to notice that my eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness. It reminded me of being in my wolf form, when I’d been able to see perfectly in the dark. I could see Emmett’s shape ahead of me, leading me.

But leading me into *what*?

I slowed when I saw that he’d reached a doorway. He reached into his pocket for a key and unlocked the door. He gave me a small smile before pushing it open. There was a thickly draped window and a lab counter filled with glass vials and neatly ordered test tubes. A burner stood cold, ready for use.

On one wall was a shelf of preserved rodents in neatly labeled boxes. I knew they were rodents because each label had a detailed illustration next to it.

I stopped and looked around, my heart pounding hard. “Okay, remember when I called you Dr. Frankenstein? Yeah, you’re not exactly moving away from that crazy scientist image with this.” I looked at the window, which—on closer inspection—I realized wasn’t just hung with thick curtains, but covered with a thick, black paper as well, nailed into place. “What’s up with that window?”

Emmett seemed right at home here in this creepy lab. He walked over to one of the drawers and began removing some supplies. He pulled on a pair of gloves and removed a hypodermic needle from a box in a drawer. He unpackaged it as he answered me. “You must remember that sunlight is deadly to vampires, Lola.”

I frowned. “Yeah, but at school—”

“That is, unless we wear a daylight item like this,” he continued, pulling a gold cuffed bracelet from his wrist and setting it down on the black marble countertop. He pulled a rack of test tubes toward him, and—using the hypodermic needle—pulled a measure of a clear serum into the glass vial. Then he walked toward the window and pulled the drapes aside.

“Emmett! What are you *doing*?” I demanded, taking an alarmed step back.

He ripped the thick black paper from the window, sending the nails flying through the room, and a hard beam of sunlight shone into the room. “I’m changing the world.”

Then, without warning, he plunged the needle directly into his neck, pushed the plunger down—injecting himself with the serum—and stepped directly into the sunlight.

**Episode 1479**

MARTA

“You’re in danger.”

The voice was crystal clear, but it wasn’t Lilac’s. It was familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. I thought hard, racking my brain, trying to remember who it belonged to. If only it would speak again, I might be able to figure it out.

Then, as if it was reading my mind—maybe it was—the voice came again. “Marta, please don’t be afraid. It’s me.”

I drew in a sharp breath. In a moment, I had traveled back through decades, to a dingy house on the corner of Mott Street on the poor side of Portland. It was the foster home in which I’d spent most of my childhood, and the voice belonged to Sylvia Guthrie, the only friend I’d ever had. I closed my eyes, overwhelmed by the memory.

I was standing in a corner of the back yard of the house that had always seemed to be damp, even in the middle of summer. The couple that ran the house had no children of their own and didn’t even seem to like them—they only took in orphans for the money. There were too many of us girls living there, and there was never enough food, or clothes, or beds. I was maybe twelve at the time, and I’d just had another… *incident*.

I’d been dusting in one of the bedrooms and had glanced up into the mirror when I’d seen him—a withered old man in black, standing just behind me. But when I whirled around, there had been no one in the room with me. I’d dropped the dusting rag and rushed out into the back yard, tears in my eyes. This wasn’t the first time I’d seen someone who couldn’t have been there, and I was terrified someone would find out. The foster home was not a friendly place, and you couldn’t show any weakness. Seeing people who weren’t there was—by definition—a weakness, and I knew the other girls would mock me terribly if they found out about it.

But Sylvia had been outside, raking leaves in the yard. She walked over. “What is it?” she asked, looking at my tears curiously. “What’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “Nothing,” I said quickly. “Nothing’s wrong.”

She looked at me for a moment, then her gaze softened. “Don’t be afraid to tell me, Marta. I can keep a secret.”

I remembered how badly I wanted to trust her, to believe in someone for once. She seemed sincere, and she had always been quiet and kind, not like most of the others at all.

“I think…” I took a breath. “I think I’m being haunted. By ghosts.”

Sylvia’s eyes widened just a bit, but that was all the reaction she allowed herself. She looked at me for a moment. Then she leaned the rake against the stone wall and wrapped her arms around me. “Then you must be very special, Marta.”

No one had ever called me special before. I could still feel the warmth in my chest as my heart swelled with acceptance for the first time…

Back in the here and now, I squeezed my eyes shut. That had been so long ago, but I could still remember the pressure of Sylvia’s arms around me, and the scratch of her wool sweater against my cheek. She would be gone now, of course. Dead. Sylvia and I had stayed close while we’d been in that foster home, and afterward, too, as we’d found jobs and apartments, trying our best to carve out something good in our lives. She must have wondered what had happened to me when I’d disappeared—when Bert had taken me. When he’d ruined my life.

I swallowed down a bitter taste in my mouth. All the time I’d lost in that house with him… Everyone I’d known before would be gone now. Ghosts.

“I didn’t come here to make you sad, Marta,” Sylvia said. “I’m here to warn you.”

I opened my eyes. “What do you mean? Warn me about what?”

“Marta, when you first told me about your abilities to speak to the dead, I thought it was marvelous. Do you remember?”

I nodded, feeling tears gathering at the corners of my eyes. “I remember.”

“I thought it was amazing, to be able to have this secret look into a world we’d always dreamed existed, but never quite knew for sure. But, dear, I’ve been following you for some time—from a distance—and your powers have continued to grow. They’re getting stronger.”

I looked down at the book in my hands, shutting it gently, my fingers tapping the binding as my thoughts swirled. Since being released from Bert’s power, I *had* been growing more aware of my powers as a medium. I was now fully able to communicate with the dead. When I’d been a child, the dead had always been with me, but I hadn’t been able to communicate with them, nor they with me. They’d just been fleeting figures, flitting in and out of my awareness. But it was clear my power had changed.

“Since your powers have increased,” Sylvia went on, “you’ve been able to attract more spirits to you. That’s how you managed to get yourself tethered to that Lilac fellow—who’s quite a handsome one, by the by,” she added, a smile in her voice.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, don’t you start.” I almost laughed because, for a second, it felt as if Sylvia was back in the real world with me, back when we used to sit around our apartment joking about something as simple as crushes. “I don’t get it, though. I’ve been in contact with the other side for fifty years—what’s changed all of a sudden?”

“*You*,” Sylvia said fervently. “Your power has increased. You have to feel it. You’re so much more valuable to them now.”

My heart beat hard. “*Them?* Who’s *them*?”

“They’re going to come for you,” Sylvia said. “To use you.”

I clutched the book in my hands, which were growing sweaty. “Sylvia, you told me not to be afraid, but you’re scaring the shit out of me right now.”

“You shouldn’t be afraid of the truth,” Sylvia said, a bit of a reprimand in her voice. “And it’s what you do with the truth that matters. You can either fight them and stop them, or you can enable them.”

“*Who?*” I asked, growing desperate. “Who are you talking about?”

“You already know,” Sylvia said flatly. “The revenants.”

I closed my eyes, rattled to my core. “I don’t want to be a part of this,” I said, shaking my head.

“Marta, you already are…” Her voice faltered, then trailed off into nothingness.

“Sylvia? Sylvia! Are you there?”

Lilac blinked and looked at me. “She’s gone. I’m sorry, Marta.”

I sat back, shaken. “It’s fine.”

“Was she a friend?” Lilac ventured.

“What? Oh, yes, she was. We grew up in the same foster home, a long time ago.” I looked at him. “Did you hear what she said? That I’m some kind of chosen one? Lilac, I don’t want that. I didn’t sign up for this. Any of this!” I sprang up from my seat, pacing and agitated.

Lilac stepped toward me. “I’m sorry, Marta. I…” He shook his head. “You won’t have to face it alone. I’m still tethered to you, remember? And even if I weren’t… I’d still be by your side.”

“You’re just saying that because you couldn’t leave me, even if you wanted to,” I snapped bitterly.

“But I don’t want to leave you. And I wouldn’t, even if I could.”

I looked at him, startled. “You can’t possibly mean that…”

“I’ve been by your side for a while now—that’s true—and one of the things I’ve learned in that time is that you’re part of this pack, wolf or not.”

“Oh…” I could feel my face heating. Lilac’s words had caught me off-guard. I tried to accept the compliments. I wasn’t used to them, but I liked to hear them. But then fear moved through me, and I shook my head. “Listen, Lilac, I like the pack, but everything about being at this house is overwhelming for me, and that’s *before* taking my medium capabilities into account. I can barely figure out how to get laundry in before the rest of the pack does, or how to schedule my meals before the other wolves descend upon the kitchen. How did you deal with all this constant chaos? And that’s not even including the life-and-death drama.” The wind howled outside the house and I shivered, wrapping my arms around myself.

Lilac sighed. “Moments like this make me really wish I were human. I’d get you a warm sweater to put on.”

“Oh, um, thanks,” I said, smiling. I reached for the blanket at the end of the bed and wrapped it around my shoulders. I looked up when I felt his touch on my shoulder. It felt as it always did—feather-soft, almost more like the memory of a touch than anything else—but there was something about it that was so warm and comforting, I never grew tired of it.

“I meant what I said,” he whispered, his voice low.

I turned to face him, and when he smiled, his expression had none of its usual teasing.

“I’m here for you, whatever comes.”

His eyes were locked with mine, and I felt his hand on my chin as he leaned toward me, lips inches away from mine.

**Episode 1480**

It felt like someone had just punched me in the stomach. I could not have heard Xavier correctly.

“What do you mean, you can’t do this anymore? Are you breaking up with me?” I faltered. “Even though I kind of already broke up with you? But that’s not the point—”  
 “Cali,” Xavier said soothingly, “hang on, let me explain what I mean before you freak out.” He reached for my hand and laced his fingers through mine. He looked at our intertwined hands for a long moment, thinking before he spoke. “Spending today with you was amazing, but it made me really sad, too.”

I frowned. “Sad?”

“It made me realize how much I’ve been missing you. I’ve been trying to be cool about all of this *due destini* shit, but all of this time together just made me remember all the reasons I fell in love with you to begin with…” He shot me one of those smirks that made my heart skip a beat. “And it reminded me how much I hate being apart from you.”

Why did this have to be so difficult? I practically blurted out, “I miss you too. And I hate being apart from you just as much as you do me.”

His grip on my hand tightened and his eyes shone. “So if we both hate it, then why are we pretending?”

“Xavier—”

“I know you can’t choose me, but that doesn’t mean you have to push me away, either.”

I sighed and leaned back on the couch. “I know it’s been hard on you. It’s been hard on me, too. But I don’t know what to do to make things easier.”

Xavier looked at the fire, his expression dark. “It’s fucking torture to stay away from you at the pack house. Especially knowing Greyson is there—probably feeling the same way,” he added, looking disgusted.

“I know—that’s why I wanted some distance. I’m trying to keep things fair—”

“I’m not blaming you,” Xavier said, looking back at me. His expression softened. “I know this is an impossible situation. But we can’t go on like this, pretending like there’s nothing between us. Pretending like we’re not mates, like we don’t have a history. It’s just not sustainable. For any of us.” His mouth tightened. “Maybe for me most of all.”

I felt a flash of anger at this. “It’s just as hard on me, you know.”

He sighed. “I know. And I’m trying to be understanding about it.”

My gaze tracked across his face, illuminated by the firelight. “Would you be so understanding if I had spent the day—and now the night—with Greyson, instead of you?”

Xavier’s jaw tightened. “I doubt it.” He looked back at the fire. “But what choice do we really have? To just keep pretending? It’s so stupid when we both love each other.”

“But what about the *due destini*?” I asked.

“I don’t care,” Xavier snapped. He looked over at me, his expression fierce. “All I know is that I’ll take whatever I can. And right now, I’ll take this.” He put his arm around me and pulled me to him.

And I let him. I closed my eyes as I leaned against him. I wondered where this would lead, and if it would make things harder in the long run. But maybe Xavier was right—maybe we didn’t always have to think about the future. Maybe we could just enjoy what the moment gave. And in this moment—in his arms, in front of a fire, as a storm roared outside—being with Xavier was all I wanted.

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I woke to the soft pressure of a kiss on my lips. I smiled and returned it, snuggling into Xavier’s arms.

When I opened my sleepy eyes, he was looking down at me. “So last night wasn’t a dream.”

He shook his head. “Nope.”

I smiled contentedly. Even with the storm, and the accident, and the strangeness of meeting Rutherford, I wouldn’t have traded the time Xavier and I had stolen for anything in the world. I slipped my arms around his neck and was just pulling him in for another kiss when heavy footsteps made me look up in surprise. I had just enough time to get the blanket over both of us when Rutherford stomped into the cabin, a load of wood in his arms, brushing snow off his shoulders.

“Morning,” he growled, barely giving us a passing glance.

“Morning,” I murmured, smiling awkwardly.

“I’m surprised to see you up so early. Seemed like you two were up pretty late last night.”

I felt my face flushing. Oh my god, had he *heard* us? I shot a glance at Xavier, who looked coolly back at me. I had tried my best to stay quiet, but it was hard with Xavier—I tended to kind of lose control.

“Well,” Rutherford said, hanging up his coat on a peg near the door and stepping toward the potbellied cookstove, “I’ll have breakfast ready in a bit. The storm seems to have let up a little.”

“Has it?” Xavier looked out the window. “That’s good. That was one of the worst storms I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Rutherford said. “Remember that one in ’09? That was a doozy.”

Xavier scoffed. “That snow flurry? Yeah, I remember that one.”

Rutherford peered over his shoulder. “Maybe it hit a little different where you’re from, city boy, but up here in the mountains, that one hit like you wouldn’t believe. Knocked out power for days.”

“Which I guess would be a big deal, if that’s what you rely on,” Xavier said, grinning.

As riveting as listening to two men debate snowstorms past was, I had a pressing need to get proper clothes on. I slipped out of bed and headed upstairs to get dressed. *Hopefully they’ll be done arguing about snow flurries by now.* When I came back down, the smell of bacon and waffles perfumed the air.

“Whoa,” I said, stopping at the bottom of the stairs and staring in amazement at the breakfast spread that had appeared on Rutherford’s rough wooden table. There was a platter of bacon and eggs, waffles, butter, and what looked like homemade jam. There were bowls of fruit, yogurt and granola, and a pot of oatmeal. Not even my dad could get a breakfast this perfect together.

Rutherford looked pleased with my reaction and pulled out a chair for me. “It’s so infrequent for me to have guests, I might have gone a little overboard. My kids don’t stop by like they used to—they got their own lives now. But I do wish I saw my grandkids a little more. You want to see a picture?”

“Of course,” I said. If he was going to feed me food like this I’d stare at just about any pictures he wanted.

Rutherford pulled a photo from beneath a magnet on the refrigerator and handed it to me. It was of a little girl with curly hair and wide, smiling eyes.

“That’s my Tina,” he said proudly.

Breakfast was one of the best meals I’d had in a long time. Rutherford talked endlessly about his daughter Tina and his grandkids, offering us seconds and thirds of everything on the table. Beneath the table, Xavier held my hand, squeezing it gently. Every time he looked at me, his eyes sparkled, and it occurred to me that I couldn’t remember ever having seen him look this happy before.

This was what he meant, about not pretending. Not forcing ourselves apart. And he was right. It did feel good.

After breakfast, Xavier and I reluctantly headed for the door.

“The windshield is gone, so even if we could dig the car out, driving isn’t an option,” Xavier said, looking out the window at the day. He frowned. “I don’t really want to carry you through all this snow, not after you practically froze last night. Maybe I can get ahold of Jay, have him come pick us up.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Rutherford said, coming up behind us. “Why don’t you borrow Ol’ Bunyon?”

Xavier and I exchanged glances.

“Are we supposed to know what that is?” I asked.

“My snowmobile,” Rutherford said, chuckling. He held up a small ring of keys. “Just promise to return him when you can. I don’t have much use for him these days, but I would want him back eventually.”

Xavier’s brows went up as he took the keys. “Yeah, we’ll get it back to you. Thanks, Rutherford. That’s real decent of you.”

“Thank you,” I said. And, on an impulse, I threw my arms around his neck.

“Come on, now,” he said, but his voice had gone croaky. When I pulled away his eyes were oddly bright. “It was nice having you both. You’re good company. Welcome here anytime.”

With more thanks and promises that we’d return soon, Xavier and I headed outside. The snow was thick, but the sky was mercifully clear. It reminded me of Minnesota winters, when I’d spend all day playing outside—building snowmen and snow forts with Lola, making snow angels with my mom, and then tramping over to warm up with Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha.

Even though I was stuffed full of breakfast, my mouth watered at the thought.

Xavier slung a leg over the snowmobile and started it up.

I hopped on just behind him.

*Hold on tight, snow bunny*, he mind linked to me, making me smile.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, clutching tight as he revved the engine and we zoomed into the woods.

I didn’t mind the whipping cold—Xavier’s body was warm, and he blocked most of the wind—but I was starting to wonder what we were going to find back at the pack house. More importantly, I wondered how I was going to find Greyson. He’d told me to stay away, but I hoped that had been because he was worried about my safety, and not because he was upset that I was with Xavier. I felt the tiniest twinge of guilt for thinking about Greyson while I was here with Xavier. Yet another reminder that no matter how good I felt with one I’d always be pulled toward the other. This *due destini* thing was getting on my final nerve.

Sooner than I would have thought possible, the pack house came into view, and Xavier pulled right up to the front porch.

“We have to get some of these,” Xavier said as he jumped to the ground.

But as we approached the front porch, we both looked up in surprise as Mace opened the front door.

“Where’s Greyson?” I asked.

Mace shrugged while my heart raced. “He’s not here,” he said coolly.

*What?*

“He left.”

**Episode 1481**

GREYSON

Jay, Ava, and I moved swiftly through the woods. The snow was thick, but in our wolf forms, it didn’t slow us down at all. Kira rode on my back, holding on tightly as I sprinted toward Iñigo’s territory.

Like I’d promised Ava, I was intent on taking care of that bastard vampire sooner rather than later, and scouting his estate was the first step to doing just that.

I swung right as a pair of hills came into view. I remembered where Iñigo’s estate was from when Jay and I had found Ava, wounded by the vampire, and decided to bring her back to the pack house. It was kind of fitting that she was with us now—having once been bitten by Iñigo, now she was back, preparing to kill him.

Because that was what she would do—when the time came, Ava was going to prove her loyalty to me and the rest of the Redwood pack by killing Iñigo. And if she couldn’t—if she was lying and all of this was just a ruse to set me up—I was ready to kill both Iñigo *and* Ava. If she *was* trying to deceive us all, she wasn’t going to be able to lie her way out of it—not this time. I wouldn’t give her the chance.

*The snow is working in our favor.*

Pulled from my thoughts, I looked over at Jay, who’d mind linked with me.

*It’ll muffle our approach. Make it harder for that bastard to hear us coming.*

I huffed, my breath a cloud of white in the freezing air. That was true, but we still needed to be careful. *Keep your eyes open—not just for Iñigo and the rest of his coven, but for Ava as well.*

*Don’t worry about that. You know how I feel about that woman—there’s no love lost between me and Ava*, Jay assured me. *I think most wolves in the back despise her as much as Xavier does.*

I knew, all right. It was one of the main reasons I wanted to do this before Xavier got back. His blind hatred for the woman would prevent him from seizing the opportunity to knock out a greater threat.

There were drawbacks, of course. To accomplish this, I’d had to leave Mace in charge of the pack, which I didn’t like. I hated leaving any one of my packmates behind, but I had to tell myself it was for everyone’s safety. It wasn’t the best look for a newly made Alpha to up and leave the rest of his wolves, but I was doing this for them.

And, as for Xavier… Well, I was just trying not to think of him and Cali, forced to spend the night together, alone in the storm.

I shook my head as I sprinted forward. Thinking like that was only going to interfere with my goal.

“You need to stop,” Kira said, leaning down. “We’re close. It’s just over the ridge here.”

*She’s right*, Ava added. *We’ll be visible once we get to the top. Let’s stop here.*

I slowed my pace and Jay stopped, too, pawing at the snowy ground. Kira slid off my back and Jay, Ava, and I all shifted back to our human forms.

Kira pulled the backpack off her back and—gaze averted from our naked bodies—handed it to me. “Here are your clothes.”

I pulled out our bundle of spare clothing, grinning as I watched the blush rising in her cheeks. “I promise you, Kira, if you stick around the pack long enough, you’re going to get used to all kinds of things.”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, looking like she didn’t quite believe me, but didn’t say anything in response.

The three of us dressed quickly and headed over the crest of the ridge, Kira leading the way.

“This way,” she said quietly, waving us through the deep snow in the densest part of the trees. She slowed her step as the huge house came into view.

I could feel my senses sharpening as we drew close. I listened hard, but the only thing I could hear was the musical tinkle of ice in the trees. I lifted my nose, sniffing the air, but there was nothing except the cold dampness of the wind. Nothing unusual at all.

“This is strange,” Ava said, narrowing her eyes.

“What?” I asked.

She was gazing at the house. “There should be four or five guards patrolling at all times. But look.” She pointed. “There are only two.”

I followed her gaze and saw a couple of vampires who’d appeared in the distance, around the corner of the house.

“She’s right,” Kira confirmed. “That *is* weird. Iñigo likes his security. Where are the rest?”

“This could be a trap.” I darted a glance at Ava. Was it possible that she’d tipped Iñigo off? Was that why he’d attacked Ava? Had it just been a diversion to enable him to scout the pack house?

A wave of cold fear washed over me: what if the coven was already en route to the pack house?

But I pushed my anxiety away. *That’s why I brought Mace to the house*, I reminded myself. *To bolster our numbers*. And I was glad I had. The vampires would be fools to take us all on.

“Come on,” Ava murmured. “Let’s take a look at the perimeter.”

We followed her through the woods, circling the house in a wide ring, keeping an eye out for movement or signs of a vampire patrol.

“That’s the rear door,” Kira said, pointing. “The guards don’t watch that one regularly. That might be our way in.”

Seemed about as solid a plan as any. I nodded over at Ava. “When the time comes, that’s how we’ll get him.”

Ava didn’t answer, but Kira bit her lip, looking uneasy. “It won’t be that simple.”

“I knew that. To be honest, I was expecting a little more resistance from this big, bad, vampire,” I said.

Kira did not take my attempt to calm her down with a little humor well. Her eyes narrowed as she surveyed the estate. “Something’s wrong. I don’t know what.”

“How so?”

Kira shook her head. “I can’t put my finger on it. The guards seem almost… distracted.”

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I was in the lead when we arrived back at the pack house. I didn’t like leaving the pack in anyone else’s hands for too long—especially someone like Mace. But when we crossed back onto our land, I was relieved to see that everything looked fine. The house was standing and was cheerily lit. Everything seemed to be peaceful, and my fears about Iñigo’s possible sneak attack vanished.

But as I drew closer to the house, something else caught my eye. There was a snowmobile parked just in front of the porch. Who the hell did we know who owned a snowmobile? Then the scent hit me, bringing me up short.

*Cali.*

And Xavier. They were back. They must have used the snowmobile to get back to the house. But where had they gotten it? And what had happened to Xavier’s car?

Part of me wanted to know the answers to these questions, and another part of me did not. Maybe the less I knew about what happened between the two of them while they’d been gone, the better off I’d be.

I shifted back to my human form, raced up the porch steps, and burst into the house. *Wait a second.* I had to compose myself. I couldn’t just careen on through. I had to make sure I didn’t appear too anxious, or overeager, or worse… jealous. Not in front of Xavier. It didn’t matter how much my instincts wanted me to storm up to my mate and kiss her.

The pack house seemed to be in order—there were no marauding vampires, at least. The two packs were spread out everywhere—clustered in the living room in front of a roaring fire, laddered up the stairs, sitting at the dining room table. It was warm and bustling and crazy loud. But even in the din, my ears zeroed in on the sound I was most anxious to hear—Cali’s voice.

No, not her voice—her laugh. It was coming from the kitchen, and I had to stop myself from running toward the sound. I hadn’t realized just how eager I was to see her, but my heart was pounding as I strode through the living room.

As though she could sense me, she turned as I walked in and her face lit like a shining star when she saw me, which made my pounding heart skip erratically.

“*Greyson*,” she breathed, her gaze locked with mine. She stepped toward me.

Meeting her in the middle, I caught her up in a hug, pulling her close. I wrapped my arms around her and dropped my head into her hair, feeling my whole body unwind as she melted against me.

We just stood like that for a long moment, holding each other tightly as the house bustled around us. Then, finally, I pulled back slightly, just enough to look down at her face, which was shining up at me.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I said. “I was worried about you—with the storm and everything,” I added hastily.

She looked up at me, and her eyes flashed with something mysterious, like she was hiding a secret from me.

“Greyson, there’s something that I have to… I mean what I want to say is…” she stuttered, fighting for the right words. She breathed out hard, staring me square in the eyes. “Greyson, I want you back.”

**Episode 1482**

CHARLIE

I’d been planning.

Ever since Violet and I had spoken and she’d told me that Silas was back, I’d been plotting a way to escape the hunter camp and get back to Oregon, to the pack house, and to Violet. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy—it wasn’t like I was going to be able to simply walk out of a place like this. For one thing, the whole damn camp was completely fenced in. I’d learned that on the first of our daily morning runs around the camp’s perimeter. The fence was technically intended to keep people—and non-people supernaturals—out, but it also kept campers in.

There was also the problem of what would happen if my parents ever found out that I’d bounced from this place, and *why*. I didn’t even want to think about that.

I hadn’t told Violet about my plans. She’d been texting me, telling me not to come back. She’d been insisting she and the pack would be okay, and not to worry about her, but how could I not? And now with Silas possibly back… I couldn’t just sit here and play at camp when I had real dangers to deal with. I’d already made up my mind: impossible as it was, I was getting out of here one way or the other.

And I’d tried. My first attempt had been thwarted by that freak blizzard in the northwest. It had blown in out of nowhere, and every flight going in or out of anywhere close to Oregon had been cancelled.

But that was probably for the best. It wasn’t like I could just book a ticket online and hop on a plane. I had to think about this, plan it out and figure out how to do it without leaving a paper trail someone could easily follow. Not only did have I have to break out of here, I had to do it so flawlessly no one was going to be able to catch up.

*WHAM!*

A crushing blow slammed into the side of my head, making stars explode behind my eyes, and I fell to the ground, blinking hard. “What the hell?”

Zachery laughed as he lowered his kickboxing gloves. “Dude, you were wide open for that. Where’s your head? You okay, man?” He pulled off a glove, holding out a hand to help me to my feet.

I gave my head a little shake, trying to clear my vision as I got my feet back under me. “Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, ignoring the pounding headache that was blooming. Apart from the pain, I *was* fine, just a little embarrassed. And even more so when I glanced over and saw Chad looking at me, a smug smile on his face. He had seen the whole thing.

I gritted my teeth. That dude was the worst. I wished I could imprint my foot on Chad’s stupid forehead. But maybe I’d still get a chance to do that.

Zachery clapped my shoulder. “Good thing I didn’t catch your eye with that bitchin’ right hook. It’d be a shame to go to the dance tonight with a black eye. Then again,” he added thoughtfully, “maybe it’d be cool to show up in sunglasses. You’re still going with Sophie, right?”

*Crap*. The dance. I hesitated. I’d been so consumed with the specter of Silas, I’d forgotten all about the dance. I glanced over at Sophie, who was wearing boxing gloves and kicking the crap out of Reggie.

“Yeah, I guess I’m still going with her. Who else is going to be there?”

Zachery shrugged. “I don’t know. All the other campers. Everyone’s going. It’s one of the only events where we get to, like, have actual fun.” He looked around and found Aisha—who was getting a drink of water—then waved her over. “What’s the deal with the dance tonight?”

Aisha wiped her sweaty forehead and broke into a giant smile. “Um, it’s like real life Tinder. Except you don’t have to swipe.”

I laughed at the wolfish look in her eyes. “What about the instructors? Are they there, too?”

Aisha groaned and rolled her eyes. “Unfortunately, yes. It’s like they don’t trust us, or something.”

“Oh man, that sucks,” Zachery said sympathetically, nodding at Aisha a little too enthusiastically.

This wasn’t good news. If the faculty was going to be at the dance, there was an even higher chance of getting caught while trying to make a run for it.

I looked up when I heard my name.

Sergeant Pepperdine was glaring in my direction. “Charlie! Chad! In the ring!”

Zachery grinned at me. “Sweet, dude! This is your chance for payback. Don’t waste it.”

He was right, but I couldn’t stop myself from worrying as I let him tighten the laces of my boxing gloves. Chad was already in the ring when I stepped in, smirking at me.

“Ready for this?” he taunted.

*Just be normal*, I reminded myself. *Don’t go all wolf on this douchebag*.

Pepperdine blew his whistle, and Chad surged toward me. I stepped back, circling around him. Chad tossed out an experimental left hook, which I dodged easily. He threw a haymaker that came at me as slow as molasses, but I let it land, just to keep things normal. I threw a shot at his ribs, which seemed to surprise him for some reason. It wasn’t even that hard of a shot; what was he playing at?

“Come on, Charlie!” Zachery yelled from the sidelines.

Chad feinted, pretending to throw a right hook. It wasn’t his dominant hand, so the feint was obvious, and without conscious thought I bent and kicked, the blow catching Chad hard in the stomach.

He stumbled backward and fell, landing hard on his ass, gasping for air.

Sergeant Pepperdine’s whistle was like an alarm, bringing me back to my senses, and I froze. *Holy shit*. Had I just blown it? *Again?*

Sergeant Pepperdine walked toward me and put a hand on my shoulder. “Nice shot, son. Good timing.” He turned to Chad, who was still wheezing. “Don’t make it so easy on him next time, Chad. You were wide open. If Charlie were a vampire, you’d be dead right now.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as Pepperdine walked away, and—I couldn’t help it—I grinned at Chad, who glared up at me as he dragged in a painful-looking breath.

“All right everyone!” Sergeant Pepperdine yelled. “Hit the showers. That’s enough for today.”

“Charlie!” Zachery bounded over, grinning at me, his hand raised for a high-five. “You really made that one count, bro! *BAM!* Right in the gut! Did you see the look on his face when you got him? That was awesome!”

I shrugged as I pulled off my gloves. “It wasn’t that big of a deal, man.”

“Are you *kidding*?” Zachery shook his head. “It was awesome. *Everyone* saw that go down.”

I glanced at Sophie, who was talking animatedly to a guy with curly black hair and a girl with red braids. “Hey, give me a second, okay, Zachery?”

“Sure, man.” Zachery nodded knowingly. “Catch you in the locker room.”

I headed over to Sophie, who looked up as I approached. “Hey.”

She smiled, and her whole face lit up. “Hey to you, too.” She shook her head disbelievingly. “God, Charlie, is there anything you’re not good at?”

I shrugged, feeling awkward. “You’re not so shabby, yourself. I saw you taking down Reggie earlier.”

Sophie laughed. “Yeah, he should have seen that coming. Well, I guess no one’s going to be dumb enough to mess with us at the dance tonight.”

I glanced up at her friends. “Um, yeah, about that—”

She gasped, her expression darkening. “Oh, no, don’t tell me you’ve changed your mind.”

Her friends exchanged glances, clearly uncomfortable with the fact they might be watching some kind of break up. I didn’t have the time to clear up their misconceptions. “We’ll catch you later,” the redheaded girl said, and they headed off.

“I thought we were going together,” Sophie said, turning to me. “You’re *bailing* on me?”

“No, that’s not it, exactly,” I said, feeling my face growing hot. “That’s not… I just… Something came up.”

Sophie gave me a searching look. I knew she probably wanted to pry for details and, damn, but I wasn’t sure exactly how I was going to explain all the complicated pack drama to her in under five minutes. She blew out an exasperated breath. “It’s fine. I mean, I’m disappointed, obviously, but I know I sprang the whole thing on you. I know you were kind of forced into saying you were going with me. If you’ve changed your mind about it, I get it.”

I looked around. Her friends had walked away, but there were still people standing close enough to overhear our conversation. Taking Sophie’s elbow, I led her further away from the bustle of the campers making their slow way toward the locker rooms.

“Listen,” I started.

“Okay, what’s going on? This feels serious, Charlie,” she said, her brows furrowing.

“It is,” I admitted.

She looked up. “So spill already.”

I took a deep breath. “Something’s come up, and it’s hard to explain, but it’s important. Will you help me tonight?”

**Episode 1483**

Greyson looked down at me, his eyes filled with questions. “What do you mean, you want me back? I thought that you were… that *we* were…” he trailed off, obviously not wanting to complete that sentence with the obvious “we’re on a break.”

I thought about my conversation with Xavier, and the time we’d just spent together. I thought about what it had felt like to just stop pushing so hard against everything I was feeling. How good it had felt to just turn toward what I wanted more than anything—how it had made me feel free.

I took a deep breath. “I broke up with you—with both you *and* Xavier—because I couldn’t handle the pressure of the *due destini*. I thought it would be easier if I just had some space from you. From both of you. And maybe I thought it would be easier for you, too.”

Greyson’s expression darkened. “I know this was rough. And I’d be lying if I didn’t say it was challenging for me, too.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Okay, saying that it’s been *challenging* is putting it mildly.”

He ran a hand through his light hair and blew out a breath. “Okay, it’s been godawful. Is that what you want me to say? It’s been awful for everyone.” He took my hands. “But what is this all leading to, Cali? What do you want?”

My hands felt small in his, and the heat from him seemed to radiate up my arms. I squeezed his hands. “What I want is the tension between us to go away, Greyson.”

He glanced away. “Even with everything that’s going on now?”

“There’s *always* a lot going on,” I said. “That’s just it. It never seems to end. And my heart can’t handle it if there’s this constant gap between the three of us, too.”

Greyson looked down at me again. “So, what do we do? What’s the magic spell? How do we get rid of the tension that this stupid curse causes?”

I took a deep breath. “I want to be a part of both of your lives. Both you and Xavier.” Greyson’s brow furrowed, but I pressed on. “Trying to stay away from you has made me realize that being apart from either of you is worse than trying to have you both in my life.”

Greyson took this in. After a moment he smiled down at me. “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t, huh?”

Disarmed by his genuine smile, I stammered, “Uh, yeah. Something like that.”

It was astounding. Even after the amazing time I’d had with Xavier, I immediately felt such a powerful attraction to Greyson, it took almost took my breath away.

Greyson nodded. “If that’s what you want, Cali.”

It was. More than anything I wanted to end this torture of keeping my mates away. How was it any better for either of us? And right now, I definitely wasn’t strong enough to walk away from Greyson, now while he looked at me like that.

His smile grew as he watched the flush bloom in my cheeks. “I’m more than willing to do whatever you want, love. Especially if it leads to the future we’ve both had a glimpse of.” He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. “But we can talk about this later. I’m just glad you’re back.”

“Yeah,” I said, leaning into him. “I’m glad I’m back, too.”

He held me close for a moment longer, then stepped away. “I have to go find Mace. I left him in charge while I was gone, and we have some things to discuss.”

I nodded, and he headed out. As I watched him go, I saw Ava coming in through the front door with Kira and Jay. And just like that, there went my Greyson-high. I looked away from her with utter disgust. What the *hell* was she still doing here? I wished she would just leave. She was a huge part of the tension in the house.

“Cali!”

I turned to face Torin, who was standing across the center kitchen island, waving with a huge grin on his face.

“Hey, Torin. What’s up?” I asked warily.

“Oh, nothing much. Just that I’m becoming a *bartender*! Look what I just created.” He held up a tall, stemmed glass filled with orange liquid, topped with a curl of what looked like spiralized pumpkin.

“What is it?” I asked, staring at the strange concoction.

“I’m calling it a Harvest Moontini! I made it up! Well, mostly. I found a book of cocktail recipes and kind of used the base of a sangria recipe, but made it more autumnal with pumpkin spice flavors and more citrus. Have some!” He shoved the glass into my face.

I took a hesitant sip—because Torin looked so excited—but, to my absolute surprise, the Harvest Moontini was actually delicious.

“Torin, this is *amazing*.” I looked at the acid orange color of the drink. “It’s like you somehow made a rainbow into a cocktail.”

Torin beamed at me, looking proud of himself. “Thank you. I’m going to serve them at Thanksgiving dinner.”

“That’s a great idea,” I said, taking another drink. Then I frowned and put it down. “But wait—isn’t it a little early to be serving drinks right now?”

Torin just grinned and shrugged. “You know what they say, it’s always five o’clock somewhere.”

I groaned. “Torin, where did you hear that old relic? It sounds like something my dad would say.”

“Cali.” My mom came up behind me and spun me around, wrapping her arms around me. “You’re back! Are you okay?” she asked, pulling back and looking at me anxiously.

“Yeah, Mom, I’m fine. Why does everyone keep asking me that?” I laughed.

“I heard you and Xavier were stranded somewhere,” she fretted. “You’re all right? What happened?”

“Yeah, we were stranded, but it was only for a little while. We were taken in by a real lumberjack, who turned out to be a total teddy bear. It was pretty fun, actually, once I got over being kind of freaked out. But I want to know what’s been happening here. How’s Artemis? And how’s Pip doing? What’s the news there?”

“Well…” My mom leaned a hip against the kitchen island. “Pip seems to have recovered, which is good news. And, as for Artemis—well, you can go see for yourself. She’s back to her usual self.” She smiled, and some of the tension dropped from her face. “It’s so good to see.”

I turned to Torin. “Thanks for the drink, but I’ll wait to finish getting plastered until after I’ve found my sister.”

I headed off to find her, knowing she’d want to talk about going to the Fae world, now that she was back to herself.

To my surprise, she wasn’t in her room, and I had searched a few other places in the house and yard before I finally found her in the basement weight room with Rishika. Rishika was hitting a speed bag, and Artemis was on the bench press, a remarkable amount of weights stacked on either side of the bar. I was surprised to find her here, but impressed and—it had to be said—a little jealous. God, I would kill to have muscles like those. I watched as Artemis handled a few reps with startling ease given the weight on the bar. Maybe I could talk one of them into being my trainer. Again.

“Hey, Cali.” Artemis looked up at me from the bench. She re-racked the bar. “You’re back.” She sat up and looked at Rishika. “Do you mind?”

Rishika stopped the speed bag with a groan. “I can take a hint,” she said, and headed out of the small room, pulling the tape from her hands with her teeth.

“So,” Artemis said, giving me a wicked grin, “snow-bound overnight with one of your mates, huh? All alone out there in the big bad world… Bet that was really awful. How’d you survive it?”

Her voice was laced with sarcasm and inuendo, which made me blush, and grin. She was teasing hard and busting my chops—she sounded like Artemis, and my worries began to fade. Maybe all the things I’d thought were affecting Artemis had been in my head? Or, if not, maybe they were just gone, somehow. Or maybe that potion I’d given her had worked.

Artemis raised her eyebrows at me. “I’m going to assume you didn’t come down here to work out. Though you are welcome to pump some steel if you want,” she said, slapping the workout bench as she spoke.

I laughed. “Um, I think the phrase is ‘pump some iron,’ but no, I’m not going to do either of those things. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Then why *are* you here?” she asked, her smile fading.

“After Vander told us the portal to the Fae world had reopened, you were talking about going,” I started.

Artemis nodded. “Yeah, and then you asked me to wait until you got back. So, I waited. And now you’re back.”

I took a deep breath. “Artemis, you know I can’t let you just go into the Fae world alone.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Does that mean you’re coming with me?”

**Episode 1484**

LOLA

I lay still in my bed, staring up at the ceiling. It was morning, and I knew I should get up and get going, but I just couldn’t generate the energy to move. I was still so shaken from what I’d seen yesterday in Emmett’s office. I would never—until my dying day—forget the terror I’d felt when Emmett had stepped into that shaft of sunlight. I’d been frozen with fear, certain that I was going to watch him die.

I’d heard from the Redwood pack members what happened to vampires when they stumbled into the sun without a charm; they turned to ash immediately. It was supposed to be awful to witness—just an immediate snuffing out of life. And when Emmett had stepped into the light, I’d wanted to close my eyes, but I just hadn’t been able to. It had been like watching a slow-moving train wreck. I knew I should have looked away, but I couldn’t. But to my surprise… nothing had happened. Emmett had just stood there, a terrible smile on his sunlit face. I’d held my breath, waiting, but still no explosions, no ash, no charred-up vampire. He’d been… fine.

He’d held out his hand. “Come, Lola,” he’d said to me. “Come join me. Feel this!”

But it had been too much for me. All of it—the sun, the serum, the fevered look in his eyes, the ardent tone of his voice… I’d just spun on my heel and sprinted away at top speed, back to my room, where I’d hidden until the sun had gone down. I’d tried to go to sleep but had slept like shit. I’d tossed and turned all night, haunted by dreams of Emmett stepping into that damn shaft of light and being consumed by flame, screaming in agony. Or turning to ash before my eyes, then blowing into me. I’d woken half a dozen times, gasping and coughing, choking on nothing but air.

When I blinked, my eyes felt gritty as sandpaper, and I turned my aching neck to look out the window.

Snow was falling from a dove-grey sky this morning. If I’d been feeling better, I would have been elated. I usually loved snow. I found it soothing; it reminded me of being home in Minnesota. But after everything that had happened, it felt oppressive, and I looked away quickly.

Given what had happened with Emmett, I felt like I should do *something*—tell someone about it. But *who*? I could call Jay. He was supposed to be my best friend. But that felt strange. I felt like I didn’t really know him, despite what Ras had said.

I could call Cali. She was my best friend, too. Always had been. Plus, I remembered her. She probably wouldn’t understand exactly what I was going through, but she was always willing to listen.

Reaching for my phone on my bedside table, I dialed Cali’s number.

“Lola!” Cali answered after the first ring. “I’m so glad to hear from you. How are you?”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “Things are… complicated.”

“I hear that.” Cali laughed. “How much longer are you planning on being at Tottenville? I miss you. And Jay misses you, too. He’s always going on and on about it. It’s driving everyone crazy. Not that I blame him, of course. You two always were the cute ones in the pack.”

“Yeah,” I said absently, “Jay seems… nice.”

Cali didn’t speak for a moment. Then, “I’m sorry, did you just describe your mate as *nice*?”

My laugh came out sounding nervous. “Well, when we talked, he did seem nice, so… yeah. *Nice*.”

“What the *hell* is going on with you?” Cali demanded. “Jay is your *mate*. You *love* him. He’s the sexiest man alive—or so I’ve been led to believe, judging by what you’re *constantly* telling me. What the hell is happening over there?”

I sighed. “It’s part of my therapy.”

“What kind of therapy makes you distance yourself from your mate, Lola?” Cali sounded outraged.

“It’s designed to help me deal with this vampire heat problem I’ve been having.”

“Okay,” Cali said slowly. “Does Jay know about this?”

I shrugged. “Well, I talked to him yesterday, and everything seemed fine to me. We had a nice conversation. He’s a nice…” I wracked my brain for the right word. “Guy.” I ignored Cali’s gasp. “But I didn’t call to talk about Jay!”

“Okay, weirdo,” Cali said, and, switching gears, she said, “Well, I have really missed you the last few days. There’s been so much going on with me and Xavier and Greyson and our mate bond and the *due destini*.”  
 When wasn’t there something going on with that curse? “Any new developments?”

“Yeah. It’s all so overwhelming. I just realized that I didn’t really want all that distance. I thought it was going to help me figure stuff out, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized…”

As Cali spoke, I began to think that maybe I shouldn’t tell her about Emmett right now. It sounded like Cali had a lot going on, and I didn’t want to overwhelm her with more of my own drama. And I knew that Cali was shit at keeping secrets when she was wrapped up in other problems. And she had those in abundance.

I bit my lip and looked out the window at the softly falling snow. No, it was probably best not to give her any fodder to take to Jay, or anyone else.

I tuned back in as Cali finished her diatribe.

“I wish I could be there for you in person, girl,” I said. “It sounds like there’s a shit-ton going on. I miss you, Cali.”

“I know,” Cali said, “I miss you, too. Listen, I should go. Thanks for calling. I’ll call you soon, okay? Love you.”

“You too,” I said, and ended the call.

Tossing my phone away, I flopped back on my bed and stared back up at the ceiling. I’d called Cali hoping it would make feel better, but instead I just felt worse. I’d wanted to pour out all my troubles, but I hadn’t told her anything. If Cali knew that I was hiding some of my own issues to spare her she’d be furious, but what else was I supposed to do? Ugh, this was so frustrating. And after all that, I *still* desperately needed to talk to someone about all the chaos going on in my brain. Someone who might be able to understand my very specific set of problems with one Professor Emmett Laurence.

Of course! I sat up so fast my head spun. Ras had told me to come talk to her if I had any problems. And this was clearly turning into a problem.

So, I got dressed and headed downstairs to the faculty offices—but I was doomed to disappointment. Ras was out of her office, and the door was locked. I turned away, walking absently down the hall. I didn’t know where to go, so it didn’t matter what direction I took, though I did my best to avoid the knots of students.

As I walked, I thought about my dads. I missed them, though I knew they’d never be able to wrap their heads around my problems in a million years. They’d try, because that was their way, but they hadn’t even known I was a werewolf, much less a vampire, so—as much as I loved them both—the thought of trying to bring them up to speed at this point just seemed like too much. The learning curve was simply too steep.

I stopped suddenly, looking around, my heart pounding. I hadn’t been paying any attention to where I was going, but I’d somehow unconsciously walked directly to Emmett’s office—the scene of the crime.

Well, *crimes*. There had been a few.

The door was open, and, unable to stop myself, I leaned forward to peek in, and was startled to see Emmett at his desk. He looked up from his desk and smiled.

“Lola, come in,” he said, waving.

What the hell was I even doing here? I knew I shouldn’t have come, but I couldn’t un-ring that bell, so I pushed the door open and stepped into his office. I didn’t move toward his desk, though. I stayed near the door, clasping my hands behind my back.

His brow furrowed with concern, and he stood and walked out from behind his desk. “Lola, are you all right? I hope I didn’t upset you too much last night.”

I opened my mouth automatically to tell him I was fine, but then I stopped myself. “I *am* upset, actually. It was really unsettling.”

He took another step forward, the crease between his brows deepening. “I’m sorry about that. That was not my intention, I assure you. But now that you’ve seen what I’m able to do, you must be intrigued.” He paused. “Please know that I haven’t shared that with anyone. I’ve never felt like I could—not until I met you, Lola.”

My breath caught in my throat as he reached for my hand and took it in his cool, dry grasp.

“I want you to join me,” he said, his gaze burning into mine. “And I have a question to ask you, now that you’re here. Lola, will you be my personal assistant?”

**Episode 1485**

GREYSON

I stopped by the laundry room on my way out of the kitchen, grabbing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt to throw on before I headed off to find Mace, but before I could even start to look around, I had to run the gauntlet of the living room. Whatever holdover bliss I’d been feeling from my conversation with Cali was shattered in an instant when I saw how things had devolved. It had looked fine when I’d walked in, but maybe I just hadn’t been paying attention, because now I could see that a group of Redwoods and a group of Blue Bloods were bunched up on opposite sides of the living room. Battle lines if ever I saw some. What the hell could have happened to get them all riled up? We couldn’t afford to be fighting one another now.

“—I’m telling you for the last time,” a Blue Blood with long dark hair shouted, pointing a finger at Zainab, “I didn’t eat those damn eggs.”

“Oh, so they just disappeared. By magic. Half a dozen organic eggs that I boiled and stored especially for myself because I like a little protein as a snack. Is that what I’m supposed to believe here?” a furious Zainab said, rolling her eyes.

“Whatever, dude, like one of you hasn’t been using my towel!” a Blue Blood with tight black curls yelled. “It’s been damp as hell since the day I got here!”

“It’s *Oregon*!” Sage yelled back. “It rains every day! It’s damp here! Get used to it! I want to know who’s been using my fifty-dollar face moisturizer all over their damn body. I just bought the bottle, and then you guys show up and now it’s half gone. And I’m supposed to think that’s a coincidence?”

“Ladies! Gentlemen!” Torin yelled, stepping between the two sides as they surged toward each other, pushing and shouting threats. “Let’s not lose our heads here. We can figure this out. There are lots of eggs in the house, and we can throw that towel in the dryer. Oh, and Sage,” he added in an undertone, “I’ve been using your moisturizer. It’s been doing wonders for my chapped feet—”

“*Torin!*” Sage yelled, shoving his shoulder.

This started another bout of yelling from both sides, and I groaned. I hated this part of being an Alpha—it felt less like being a leader, and a lot more like being a babysitter.

I rubbed my eyes, feeling weariness overtake me. It was all well and good to try to bring the packs together for a meeting, but living together? I should have seen this kind of major conflict coming.

More than anything, I just wanted to walk back into the kitchen, grab Cali by the hand, pull her outside to a car, and speed off into the sunset, as if we were the only two people in the world.

But that was always going to be a silly daydream even if she ever did choose me. I was the Alpha, and this pack was my responsibility.

“Quiet!” I growled, my voice thundering across the room.

Nothing could silence squabbling packs faster than the voice of an Alpha.

“I’m calling a meeting before blood is spilled. Go tell the rest of your packs. Everyone in here, five minutes.” There were some grumbles of dissent as I eyed the crowd. “And if anyone has a problem with that, they can come take it up with me.”

The grumbling came to an abrupt stop.

I turned toward the stairs just in time to see Mace coming down, his arm around Pip.

“Hey,” I said, walking toward them. “I was just coming to look for you. I’m glad to see you’re up and about, Pip. How are you feeling?”

She gave me a wan smile. “Okay. A little weak, but mostly okay.”

I looked at her thin, pale face and her glassy eyes. She was more than just a *little* weak—she seemed almost lifeless. She wasn’t anywhere near the snappy, sharp Pip I remembered. But maybe she just needed more time to recover.

“Good,” I said. “I’m glad.”

“Thank you for helping,” she said gratefully. “Mace and I really appreciate all you’ve done.”

I nodded. “Of course. We were glad to do it. I know there’s always been some friction between our packs, but we need to stick together until we know for sure what’s going on. That’s one of the reasons I just called a meeting.” I tipped my head. “Living room. Our wolves are about ready to tear one another apart over towels.”

When I walked back into the living room, both packs were gathered, propped up on every last piece of furniture available. Xavier was leaning against the wall near the door, his arms crossed over his chest, his expression bored.

I shook my head, prepared to be frustrated with his attitude—but then Cali walked in with Artemis, and every frustration, every problem, every thought of Silas and the revenants evaporated. I looked at her and my heart felt light. Just having her back, even if she was all the way across the room, made everything else feel as though it didn’t really matter. I still didn’t know what exactly this new arrangement she had in mind would look like, but if it gave me time to be with her, I was all in.

I took a deep breath and gave my head a little shake, trying to refocus.

“Listen up,” I said, drawing everyone’s attention. “I don’t need to remind anyone here that we’re facing a grave threat. One that requires all of us not only to work together, but live together. That makes us safe, but it requires sacrifice. We have to compromise, we have to be considerate, we have to refrain from knee-jerk reactions. I’m not saying this will be easy, but if we can’t manage to get along under one roof, then what chance do we have of defeating the revenants?” I looked around, into every face in the room. No one answered. “If we’re doing this, we’re doing it together.” I looked over to Mace. “Do you want to add anything?”

I didn’t even know why I bothered to ask. I knew the answer—of course Mace would have something to add.

He stood from his place on the arm of the couch and stepped up to stand beside me. “I agree with Greyson. We have no choice but to unite for the sake of both our pack’s futures. We have no time to squabble amongst ourselves when there are far worse enemies at our door. Like Greyson said, we only stand a chance of defeating the revenants if we work together. Are you with us?”

“*Yeah!*” one of the Blue Bloods yelled, pumping his fist.

I managed to not roll my eyes. Mace was basically just repeating everything I’d just said, but with added exclamation marks. Whatever. Mace loved the spotlight; maybe this would satiate him and keep him from trying to assert himself in all the wrong moments.

“So let’s do this! *Together!*” Mace declared.

His pack roared back, and even the Redwoods nodded approvingly.

“Thanks, Mace,” I said, as he went to rejoin Pip. “So, let’s just remember to stay civil, and if anyone has any problems, just take them to your respective Alpha, and we’ll try to get them taken care of. Okay, that’s it.”

People began to get up and move out as the meeting ended, and despite Mace’s campaign speech, I thought the meeting had gone well. Everyone seemed to be onboard, and I spied Zainab clapping the dark-haired Blue Blood egg-stealer on the shoulder as they walked out together.

“That’ll certainly bring in the votes.”

I looked over as Xavier walked toward me, clapping his hands sarcastically.

“Well done,” he added. “You should have been a politician, big brother.”

I gritted my teeth. “I’m just doing what has to be done.” I paused, then forced myself to add, “Thanks for bringing Cali back safe.”

Xavier grinned. “No problem. And I *mean* no problem. You should have seen it—snowbound in a rustic cabin, soaked to the skin, cuddled together, with nothing but a roaring fire to dry our clothes—”

“Did you come back just to rub it in my face?” I snarled, anger surging through me.

“I came back because you need me,” Xavier retorted.

Fighting back the urge to strangle my brother on the spot, I looked around the room. “I hope it wasn’t a mistake, bringing Cali back to all of this.”

Xavier chuckled. “Well, we both know Cali. No matter what either of us say to her, she’d never stay away.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “She wouldn’t.”

There was something he wasn’t saying. I could sense it in the charged silence between his words.

Xavier cleared his throat. “So, did Cali talk to you?”

“About what?” I asked warily.

Xavier looked uncharacteristically strained. “She wants to… *see* both of us again.”

“Yeah, she mentioned something like that.”

He raised his eyebrows. “What do you think?”

I looked back at him coolly. “I think if we want to keep her happy it’s about time we set some ground rules. Don’t you agree?”

**Episode 1486**

MARTA

I tried to drag in a breath, but dank, fetid water filled my mouth, my nose, and my lungs. It was in my eyes and my ears—it was everywhere. I was drowning, and the ghosts were clutching at me with their strong, skeletal fingers, dragging me down to the bottomless depths of the ghost pond. This was it. This was the end…

Startled awake by the nightmare, I sat up straight in bed, breathing hard, my heart pounding in my chest. I looked around, confused. I was always discombobulated when I woke like that—ripped from sleep—and I looked out the window, but the sky was the same leaden grey it had been for days, so I glanced at the clock. *One in the afternoon?* How had I slept so long?

Then, without warning, my head gave a throb so painful I lay back down on the pillows with a groan. It felt like I’d drunk a dozen bottles of beer last night, though I knew I hadn’t. I’d only been to one party like that, and that had been along a lake in Portland decades ago—long before Bert. Along with the beer, there had been shots of whisky with old Amanda Blinkerton, who taught school and was as prim as could be, but that girl could hold her booze. That party had given me the worst hangover of my life—I’d almost lost my job at the phone company because of it—but whatever had caused *this* headache was right on par with it.

I put my hand to my head and groaned as my head gave another throb so painful, I thought I was going to be sick.

“Are you okay, Marta?”

I turned and found myself face to face with Lilac, lying on the pillow next to me.

“I-I’m fine,” I stammered. “Were you here the whole time?” I asked, my heart pounding even harder.

Lilac’s transparent brows furrowed. “Not like I can go anywhere else, can I? Are you okay?”

I was barely hearing what he was saying—I was too close to his face to be able to focus. And I suddenly found myself thinking of last night, when I’d been half-convinced that he’d been about to kiss me.

Frowning, I studied his face. I could see every freckle on his high cheekbones. He was more opaque than usual today. I closed my eyes for a moment—I could almost feel his breath on my face. This was so strange…

“Marta?”

My eyes snapped open again. “Yes?” I asked, clasping my hands together. I looked down, frowning. Why did they feel so cold and clammy?

There was a cool, light pressure on my forehead, and when I looked up, Lilac had his hand on my brow, a frown pursing his lips.

“Marta, you’re burning up.”

“You’re a ghost, Lilac. How can you tell?”

Lilac laughed. “I’m not really sure, but I can.” He shrugged. “Probably because of whatever connection we share.”

There was a funny twinge in my stomach at his words. Why would he say that?

But then Lilac dropped his hand and the moment broke.

“I’m fine,” I said, sitting up. “I’m just wiped out from last night. Channeling Sylvia must have taken more out of me than I thought. I feel like my head is completely underwater.”

Lilac sat up, nodding. “I get that. I can sense a lot more ghost activity around us—more than normal. Maybe it has to do with the ghost pond?”

That only made me think of the drowning nightmare. I had to concentrate to pull in a few more deep breaths to steady myself again. “Or maybe it’s me,” I murmured. “Sylvia said I’m some kind of key.” I shook my head, panic starting to rise in my chest. “I don’t want to be a key.”

I stepped off the bed and headed for the bathroom, looking around a little wildly. I started snatching things up, gathering my toothbrush and toothpaste, the robe and slippers Cali had given me—not really thinking about what I was doing. “Maybe I should get out of here. Get far away from this place with these werewolves and these ghosts and the rest of this supernatural nonsense. Just get away and be alone somewhere.”

I grabbed the shampoo and conditioner from the edge of the bathtub, but it was too much to hold, and everything fell to the floor in a big jumble. It was the last straw to an already horrible morning. Before I could stop myself, I burst into tears.

Lilac appeared at the bathroom door, looking terrified. “Hey, Marta, uh, what’s wrong? Don’t cry. It’s okay—oh, god, please don’t cry.”

I dropped my face into my hands and cried harder, my whole body wracked with sobs. I wasn’t even sure why. I was just confused and scared and really lonely.

Then I felt something light and cool close around me. Lilac had put his arms around me, enfolding me in a hug.

His hand stroked down my hair as he spoke soothingly. “It’s okay, Marta.”

The touch of his hand wasn’t quite the same as a real, corporeal person, but it was comforting all the same, and my tears slowly stopped.

“Even if you wanted to be alone,” he whispered into my hear, “I’d come with you. And Violet would probably come too.” I smiled wearily. “I meant what I said last night. You have the pack. You’re not alone in all of this, okay?” He leaned back to look at me and took my face in his hands.

*Why is he doing this?* I asked myself. *Does he like me? Like,* like-like *me?*

The moment stretched as we looked at each other, and my heart beat loudly, thundering in my ears. I wondered distantly if he was feeling as nervous as I was.

Of course he wasn’t. I didn’t even know why *I* was nervous. It was absurd to feel this way about a ghost. And about *Lilac*, of all ghosts. He was so annoying and inconsiderate… and he loved his sister, and he was so loyal, and kind, and…

Too late, I realized I’d just started listing all his good qualities, and I bit my lip as I looked at him. Without knowing exactly how it happened, or who started it, Lilac’s lips were pressed to mine, and we were kissing. The pressure of his lips was cool and airy, like the rest of him, but the fire they lit within me was anything but. I felt his hands slide around my face and softly cup my cheeks. And, as electricity surged through me, something strange started to happen. The pressure of Lilac’s kiss began to increase. It had started out flimsy and wispy, like a cool breeze, but it grew stronger, until I could feel the curves of his lips against mine. I didn’t open my eyes, but when I put my arms around him, he felt warmer, too, less like a cold morning breeze.

But it was hard to think about any of that. I was kissing a ghost. A *much younger* ghost. It was a lot to take in.

When I pulled back, breathing rather hard, Lilac looked stunned. He stared at me, his mouth hanging open in shock.

He bit his lip, trying to hide a smile. “Well,” he said, clearing his throat. “That was unexpected.”

“Yes,” I agreed, pressing my fingers to my lips, which had started to tingle.

“Not that it was bad,” he added quickly, and, allowing himself to smile, stepped closer, moving his hand to my face, ready to kiss me again.

“Hold your horses, pal,” I said, putting a hand to his chest to stop him. “I just need a second.” More than a second. This had gone too far. This was *crazy*. I couldn’t be making out with a ghost! Especially not Violet’s ghost brother. And what about Violet? I pushed past Lilac, shaking my head.

“You should go,” I said.

Lilac frowned at me as I swung the bedroom door open. “Um, first of all, Marta, I literally can’t. I can’t go anywhere without you, remember? We’re tethered together. That’s kind of our deal. And second, why are you so upset? As far as kisses go, I thought it was—"

I closed my eyes. “This can’t be happening to me.”

Lilac strode toward me, but he stepped on the blanket I’d thrown off the bed in my haste to get up and managed to get his feet tangled in it. He tried to catch himself, but couldn’t, and stumbled into me, pushing me hard against the door. The door slammed shut, and Lilac and I both tumbled unceremoniously to the floor.

“*Ow!*” Lilac moaned, clutching his ankle. “That really hurt!”

I stared at him in shock. “What just happened?”

He rolled his eyes, annoyed. “I *fell*, okay? And it hurt. I landed with all my weight on my ankle. Jeeze, I hope I didn’t sprain it.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. You’re a *ghost*, Lilac. You can’t *trip* on things. Not unless…” Our eyes met, widening as realization dawned on both of us. “Unless you… came back… to life?”

**Episode 1487**

After the meeting ended, I charged upstairs after Artemis, anxious to finish the conversation the hastily-called pack meeting had interrupted. But maybe the pack meeting had come just in time—our conversation in the weight room had started to turn tense as we’d argued about going back to the Fae world. I didn’t want Artemis to go alone, but I didn’t know if I wanted to go with her, either. I didn’t know what that kind of undertaking going back would be, and I didn’t know if I wanted to leave the pack for some undisclosed amount of time.

But Artemis was immovable on the subject. She just kept insisting that she had to go.

“Don’t you see, Cali?” she’d said, fretfully pacing the small room, stepping over weights. “There’s so much I need to find out. Going there could shed some light on what happened to the Orb, which affects us all, but I could also get information on my father.” She’d looked at me, her eyes wide. “You have to see how important it is for me to find out more about Kadmos.”

Of course I could see that, and I didn’t want her to *not* learn more about her father, but we still needed to talk about it.

Charging down the upstairs hallway, I stopped short in front of my room when I saw Artemis sitting on my bed, her head down.

“Hey,” I said softly.

She looked up. “Hey. I was hoping you’d come up here. I wanted to talk to you. Alone.”

I tensed.

“Okay,” I said slowly, stepping in and closing the door behind me. “But I hope this isn’t just going to be a continuation of the argument.” I shook my head. “I don’t know why we can’t figure this out.”

“No, Cali, that’s why I wanted to talk to you.”

I looked at her, confused. “What do you mean?”  
 Artemis took a deep breath. “I’ve changed my mind.”

“On which issue?” I hoped it was what I was thinking, but I wanted to hear her say it before I jumped to conclusions.

“I don’t want to go to the Fae world.”

Oh, thank god.

Despite my relief that she was rethinking her approach to going alone, I was still stunned by the complete 180 she had pulled. “Can I ask why? You seemed dead-set on going no matter what I, or anyone else, said.”

“I was,” Artemis admitted, looking down at her hands. “But then I listened to Greyson’s speech downstairs. And I remembered how you talked about the pack, about how it’s part of your family…”

“It is,” I said quietly.

She looked up. “And I’m *your* family, so if the pack’s your family, then it’s my family too. You know I’ve struggled with that—figuring out where I belong—but hearing Greyson just now, I realized how much I care about what happens to you, and to Mom, and Rishika—to everyone.” She shook her head. “I don’t want to abandon the family. It wouldn’t be right.”

My throat was tight, and I felt like I was on the verge of bursting into tears. I did know how much Artemis had struggled with feeling like she was part of anything—never mind part of a family—and hearing these words from her meant so much to me. I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her, pulling her into a tight hug.

“I’ve got your back, Artemis,” I said, my voice muffled against her shoulder.

There was so much going on, and my worries about everything plaguing the pack ran through my mind constantly, but… it just felt like none of that mattered. *Artemis* mattered, and I couldn’t stop worrying about her. If dark magic really had been affecting her, it couldn’t be happening anymore. I couldn’t feel anything, I couldn’t sense anything. She was just Artemis. She was just my sister.

Artemis pulled away and looked me dead in the eye. “I’m determined to help, Cali. I’m going to help defeat the revenants. And if you want to train, too, I’m more than happy to help you.”

“Really?” I asked, incredulous. “You mean it?”

Artemis nodded. “Totally. Though you might regret taking me up on the offer, given what I have in mind.”

I started to laugh, but then I turned when I heard a heavy knock at the door. When I opened it, it was Greyson and Xavier, standing shoulder to shoulder, looking down at me.

I stared up at them, startled into silence. It was as though my brain couldn’t even compute this strange turn of events—I couldn’t figure out what they were doing here, together. Being around one of them was enough to make me lose my composure even on a good day. *Both* of them? Yikes.

Behind me, Artemis cleared her throat meaningfully. “Um, I think I might get… uh… going. Maybe go finish that workout with Rishika. So, I’ll just… get out of here.”

With a wide-eyed glance back at me, Artemis slipped between Greyson and Xavier and disappeared down the hall.

Greyson raised his eyebrows. “Can we come in?”

“I guess?” I rasped. My throat felt suddenly dry.

When they stepped into the room, it suddenly occurred to me how incredibly large both of these men where. They were tall and broad-shouldered, and they both had this Alpha energy that seemed to take up more than just physical space. It made me feel small, made the room seem small. Even the oxygen suddenly felt thinner.

I backed up, my heart beating hard, but when I looked up at them, I tried to keep my expression from betraying how deeply freaked out I felt. “Why do I get the feeling something serious happened?”

“We came to talk to you about the *due destini*,” Xavier started.

Oh god, the curse. My eyes went to their chests, both covered by their shirts. But no. They were standing right in front of me. If something had happened, one of them would be dead.

*What the hell is happening?* Some of what was going on in my mind must have shown on my face, because Greyson took a step toward me.

“I know this seems strange, Cali, but these are strange times.”

I looked up, my heart pounding, my brain struggling to keep up with the conversation. “Wait. Does this have anything to do with what I discussed with you?” I glanced at Xavier. “With both of you?”

Greyson and Xavier exchanged a look, which made my stomach plummet.

“Yeah.” Xavier nodded. “And we’ve been working out some… rules.”

“Rules?” I repeated. My mind, still spinning, produced an image of one of them putting on glasses and pulling out a thick black notebook, then reading out the minutes of their last meeting.

“We realized that you were right—the previous arrangement we had, it wasn’t working,” Greyson said gravely. “We didn’t like it, and we didn’t like what it did to you, either. Watching you beat yourself up just for being my—our—mate is torture. We can’t put you through that guilt anymore.”

“It wasn’t—” I started, but Xavier put his hand up to stop me.

“Cali, come on. We know you too well for you to even argue that.”

I gritted my teeth. This wasn’t fair. They *did* know me well, and there were two of them. I glanced between them. “And I know *you* too well to know that it wasn’t good for either of you. But I don’t know what your rules can do to change that. You still have the black marks through your veins. I could still kill one of you by accident. I could still lose my mind. This curse is still with us all. How do your rules apply to that?”

Xavier shook his head. “We’re still figuring it out. We’re still figuring a lot out, Cali. But if it is Silas who’s targeting us again, then he’s going to know our weaknesses, and we don’t want to give him anything he can use to turn us against each other.”

I leaned back against the edge of my desk, thinking.

“What I just said downstairs to the packs, about unity, it wasn’t intended just for them. It was about us, too,” Greyson said, his grey eyes piercing into mine. “We need to make things between us—between *all* of us”—he gestured to himself, Xavier, and me—“better. Whatever that means. And whatever it takes.” He shot a look at Xavier that wasn’t precisely friendly. “Even if we don’t like it.”

I stared at him, then at Xavier. I just couldn’t wrap my head around this turn of events. That they were both here, suggesting that we all work together… It was so *different*. And it wasn’t like we hadn’t tried to think outside the box on this thing before. When I’d tried to date both of them—even in that silly *Bachelorette* game Torin had come up with—it had been a nightmare. It had been awful, and they had been so angry. At each other, and at me. And now they wanted *what*, exactly?

To risk death for me?

I dropped my head into my hands, trying to quiet my spinning mind.

“So, what are you suggesting*?*” I was almost afraid to ask.

Greyson took a step toward me. “How would you feel if we shared you?”

**Episode 1488**

My jaw dropped, my eyes widened, and my brain absolutely short-circuited.

*I must be dreaming. This is one of those horny dreams that makes no sense but everyone ends up having sex with each other. Like a mental porno.*

Because there was no way in hell I’d just heard Greyson say the words, “How would you feel if we shared you?”

Xavier and Greyson couldn’t even walk down the same hallway without spitting fire at each other. And then there was the time Mrs. Smith had run out of white chocolate mocha and there had only been one cup left in the kitchen. Both of my mates had wanted it, but I was the one who’d ended up chugging it down—and burning my mouth in the process—because if I’d learned anything in all my time with the Redwood pack, it was that Greyson and Xavier *didn’t* *share*.

Ev-er.

I looked back and forth between Xavier’s raised eyebrows and Greyson’s twitching mouth that looked very much like it wanted to laugh. Then I pinched myself. Hard. And a bright burst of pain jolted up my arm.

“Ouch,” I muttered. Okay, maybe this wasn’t a dream. Maybe this truly was happening. In that case, I should say something, right?

*Right. But what the* hell *do I say to that?*

Was this a genuine offer? Or some kind of trick? Or…

I had no other ideas.

Xavier cleared his throat. He looked a little bit like he wanted to laugh too, and right now, right after Greyson had casually brought up Share-gate, they had never looked more like brothers.

“Well?” Xavier pressed. “What do you think?”

Heat rushed into my face. *Answer, Cali! Damn it!*

*“*Um…” I cleared my throat. “So, question… How did you guys… When did you… Whose idea was this?” I finally managed.

The brothers looked at each other for a beat and then turned back to me and said in unison, “Ours.”

I blinked. Somehow *that* was just as surprising as Greyson’s question. “Wait a second…” I put my hands up. “This idea is coming from *both* of you?” My voice cracked. My head was spinning as I imagined my two mates, who never passed up the opportunity to fight with each other, casually chatting about the logistics of, I don’t know, *sharing their mate.*

But my brain threw up a big “404 Not Found” sign to that query. And so the questions began pouring out. “How did this happen? When did you guys decide this? How did you talk about this without murdering each other? What about—”

“Cali.” Greyson gently cut me off. “I know it’s a… a big surprise, but do you think you’d be interested in something like that? We want to ease some of the tension between the three of us. With everything going on, we need to be united—and I, as Alpha, need to demonstrate that unity now more than ever.”

Xavier snorted at this, and Greyson threw him a glare.

Somehow, this was oddly comforting. *I guess they’re still not BFFs.*

Head spinning, I looked between them. “I’m sorry, I just—what does this mean exactly?” I squeaked. I couldn’t believe I was going to say the next thing aloud. I couldn’t believe I was even *thinking* it. “Sorry, but does this mean like… a threesome?”

My face went on fire.

“*No*,” they both said at the same time, exchanging a glance.

“Absolutely not,” Xavier said.

“It would be more like spending time with us,” Greyson explained, “*separately*.”

“Of course,” I said, nodding, but my face was still hot.

Okay, so this was… a tactical decision. They were trying to work together for the good of the three of us, and the good of the pack. That much was a relief. But never in a million years would I have expected this. How many times had we fought because of me going back and forth between the two of them? Admittedly, it wasn’t entirely by choice because of the *due destini*, but the reason we’d broken up was because it was impossible for me to keep bouncing back and forth between my two mates. It was hard on them, and it was hard on me too.

But now, what? They were suddenly fine with it?

Was *I* fine with it?

I still didn’t know.

“But what about the curse?” I asked. “If I make any kind of decision, it could end up hurting one of you, or both of you.”

Xavier nodded. “We know,” he said. “We understand the risk this puts to both of our lives.”

“We’re willing to bury the hatchet. At least the best we can,” Greyson said. “We want to prevent you from making a choice inadvertently or being too hard on yourself… So… Do you want to do this with us?”

Before I could respond, Greyson sat down on the bed next to me and took my hand. “I love you so much, Cali. You mean everything to me, and there’s nothing I wouldn’t do, nothing I wouldn’t try, to keep you in my life.”

Xavier knelt in front of me and took my other hand. “We both love you so much, tiger. Don’t you know that?”

My mouth went dry. My mates… My mates were here, confessing their love for me, together. Then Greyson leaned in and brushed a kiss against my throat while Xavier nuzzled against my thigh. My body flushed hot, and I didn’t know where to look, how to move, where to put my hands or lips.

Greyson suddenly pulled me into his lap and kissed me deeply, making my head spin. I felt the bed dip down slightly behind me. Xavier. His hands slid over my hips and around to my stomach, skimming upward and stopped just shy of my breasts. His hot mouth latched onto the side of my neck, opposite from where Greyson had just been kissing me.

“Don’t you know how much we want you?” Xavier rasped. His hot breath ghosting over the sensitive shell of my ear sent my insides into convulsions. Suddenly, the term *share* took on a new meaning, and lust and shock poured into my stomach in equal parts.

*Oh my god.*

“Cali?”

My head snapped up, and the fantasy dissolved right in front of me. I was left with Greyson still at my side, holding my hand, and Xavier right in front of me. He was the one who had pulled me out of my softcore porn fantasy.

“Are you okay?” Xavier asked. “You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine!” I squeaked, and then cleared my throat again. “Um, you mentioned rules? What are these rules, exactly?”

“*No threesomes*,” Xavier said, practically growling.

“Right.” Greyson nodded. “Well, first of all, we can’t do anything in front of the entire pack. Our collective situation is already on display enough as it is; we don’t need to exacerbate it further. And two…” He looked from me to Xavier and back. “No kissing one mate in front of the other—”

“Number three: you can’t be jealous,” I added suddenly, cutting him off.

Both of the brothers looked at me in confusion, and I raised my eyebrow at them. “*See?* Do you really think this sharing thing is going to work with you two at each other’s throats just like always? If we’re going to agree to this, then *everyone* needs to be on board, and that means no jealousy. No games, no trying to one-up each other.” I gave Xavier a pointed look.

He scoffed. “What? I know how not to be jealous.”

My eyebrows rose, and he scowled.

“*What?*”

Greyson cleared this throat. “Okay, so no jealousy, great. Number four: you have to spend equal time with both of us—or as much as that’s possible.”

“And if there’s ever a tie,” Xavier piped up, “then Cali should defer to the person she met first.”

Greyson threw him a dirty look, and Xavier smirked.

“No,” Greyson said.

Xavier shrugged. “It was worth a try.”

Okay, four rules. Keep the arrangement on the DL, be respectful of everyone, no jealousy, and sharing my time equally. That seemed easy enough—sort of. I took a deep breath.

“Seriously? You two are *both* on board with this?” I said. “Seriously? I mean, how is this different than Torin’s *Bachelorette* thing? Look how that blew up in our faces.”

Greyson nodded. “The thing is, Torin might have been onto something. Only instead of turning our private lives into a game with the intent that you choose one of us, now we’re asking you to choose both of us. I’m sure there’ll be some bumps along the way, but we have to try *something*. We have to learn to coexist.”

“I agree,” Xavier said. “It’s not our fault that the *due destini* chose any of us. We might as well try to be happy.”

Wow… They were really gonna go for it.

Sharing me.

They were all-in.

Now I didn’t have to consider leaving anymore. We’d work through the *due destini* together, and the rest of everything else too. It was, in a way, everything I’d been hoping for all along. Ever since I’d found out about the *due destini*, and the impossible choice I had to make, I’d felt torn, isolated by the burden of that choice. I had to carry that burden, fight it and learn to deal with it, and all the while my mates had been begging me to choose one of them.

But not anymore.

And for the first time in far too long, suddenly, I didn’t feel so alone anymore.

I nodded, and a bright smile pulled at my lips. “I accept. Or, I agree. However you’re supposed to do this.”

Xavier nodded.

“All right, then,” Greyson said. “We’re… all set, I guess.”

My head spun with the new possibilities. *What the hell did I just agree to?*

**Episode 1489**

LOLA

Immediately, I was pissed off at Emmett—even as he stared at me, his eyes twinkling with delight.

Would I be his assistant? How fucking dared he ask me that?

“*What?* Last night you scared the living daylights out of me by hopping into the artificial sunlight, and today I’m just supposed to be chill with it? No freaking way!”

His mouth quirked. “I do appreciate your concern, but I assure you I was never in any real danger. The serum works, and it could be revolutionary in the vampire community.”

“Ah-*ha*!” I pointed at him. “There it is. Last night you said *humanity*, but really this serum is only meant to help vampires, and you’re researching it unethically!”

I shook my head. Now I was just angry at myself. Why in the world had I even bothered to show up here? Why had I ever hoped that Emmett would be anything better than the creepy asshole he had proven himself to be?

I stepped back. “I can’t be part of this with you. I’m sorry, Emmett. I won’t be your assistant.”

*No matter how stupid hot you are.*

Why, exactly, was it that the hot ones were always either taken, mad scientists, or dead? You’d think in a world this big there would be a few good and fuckable men out there, but no… It was apparently just as impossible to find a man like that as it was for Emmett to not be a low-key psychopath.

“I’m so sorry you feel that way, Lola.” Emmett sighed. “But if you would allow me a few more moments of your time, I’d like to show you more of my work, sans the more… *dramatic* elements of last night.”

And there was that small, charming smile that never failed to make me wonder what it would look like if he let himself full-on grin. I was intrigued by the concept of a happy and laughing Emmett, partially because it seemed so at odds with his demure, professional teacher persona, but also because I had a feeling that the vampire in front of me had the power to light a room with a grin alone.

Maybe it was for the best that I’d never seen it, then. It would make it a hell of a lot harder to keep my distance.

I didn’t move, but I didn’t say yes either.

“Lola,” he pressed, his voice lilting over my name like a caress. “I really do believe you have the potential to be a huge asset to my work. I meant what I said when you arrived at Tottenville—you’re special.”

He got up from his desk and crossed the room to me while I stood still, passive, waiting to see what he would do next. He stopped right in front of me, not so close that he was crowding me, but a little closer than was strictly professional. His face shone with adoration as he took me in.

“You’re a living, breathing vampire. I’m absolutely in awe of you, and have been from the moment we met. Will you please just give me one more chance to convince you?”

Staring into those beautiful eyes of his, I felt the vampire heat spark to life within me. Hunger, longing, and an ache to be satisfied—all coiling in my belly.

Heat rushed to my cheeks, and I cleared my throat. “What do you want to show me?”

Emmett led me into the laboratory, then into an area that I’d never been before. All along one wall were shelves filled with cages. A few of the cages had live rats in them—white, black, brown, and speckled.

I gasped. “Oh my god! They’re so cute!”

Completely ignoring whatever the heck Emmett was saying, I rushed up to the cages. There was a particularly cute rat with white fur and red eyes staring back at me. The others were busy living their rat lives, sleeping, eating, running on their wheels, but this one seemed just as interested in me as I was it.

*I wonder if Emmett will let me keep it when his experiment is over.*

“Look at this cute little guy!” I squealed. “Does it have a name?”

Emmett smirked. “Um, no. They don’t. And I’d suggest you be careful around them. Not all of them are as nice as they look.”

“Oh, hush. They’re all perfect, sweet angels. I’m going to name this one Ratticus Finch.” I stuck my finger in between the bars to pet the white one, but it suddenly rushed forward with a speed that was *not* normal for a rat, and I barely managed to pull my finger out in time. “Ah! Ratticus, no!”

Emmett appeared beside me. “I told you. They’re vampire rats, and you’ve got blood they’d probably like.”

“Uh, not to be pedantic, or whatever, but you did *not* tell me they were vampire rats. That might have been good to know upfront.”

Emmett appeared unfazed. “And if you’d been listening to me instead of looking at the rats, you *would* have known that upfront.”

I glared, but he was already turning his back and heading over to another cage on a nearby table.

“Come see this, Lola,” he said.

Inside the cage was a super fluffy rat. It looked like a long chinchilla. “Wow, what kind of rat is this?”

“One that has werewolf DNA.”

My eyes bugged out. “What? So it can shift into a mini wolf? Oh my god, show me! It’s gotta be so cute!”

I imagined a rat-wolf small enough to fit into my hands. *That* would be the rat I smuggled back home with me.

Emmett laughed, and the sound was like gasoline on my simmering vampire heat. I tried to ignore the bolt of lust and focus on the vampire in front of me.

“No, it can’t shift, but it has some of the werewolf abilities, like healing and an improved sense of smell.” He stepped forward and collected a vial and a syringe from the table next to the cage. I watched as he filled the syringe with the dark red liquid in the vial—god, I kind of hoped it wasn’t blood. He grabbed the rat-wolf out of the cage and injected the contents of the syringe into the creature, then he set it down back in the cage.

I stepped forward, suddenly worried. “What did you do to it?”

He never took his eyes off the rat. “Watch.”

I looked back at the cage, to where the rat was inspecting itself in the mirror. One moment it was looking at its extra-furry reflection, and then suddenly the reflection disappeared.

I gasped. “Is the rat-wolf a vampire now? How?”

After another beat, the rat’s reflection returned, and it let out a little howl as tiny sharp teeth descended from its mouth.

When I turned to Emmett, he was smiling. It was an insanely gorgeous smile, too. I blinked, then shook myself.

“Wait, how is this possible?” I demanded. “Is the rat somehow now both a werewolf *and* a vampire?”

His smile only grew wider. “Yes, you’re correct. Unfortunately, the effects don’t last very long. The rat-wolf’s body is not designed to tolerate the interference of vampire characteristics. As with full werewolves, a wolf cannot be turned into a vampire and survive.”

*Oh*. I looked down at the little rat-wolf. *Sorry, little guy.* I swallowed, suddenly less ecstatic about Emmett’s new trick.

“How is this possible?” I finally asked.

“With a little science, anything is possible.” He led me away from the rat, probably to keep me from getting distracted by the poor little creature’s impending demise. “Lola, when I was turned into a vampire, I thought all the things I loved about being human would be gone forever. And, to be fair, they’re not entirely gone. I can eat, and I’ve found a community here, a purpose—but for me, it’s not the same. I want to be a vampire, but to be elevated. To have all the best parts of my humanity remain intact, while also living the life of the undead. And now, I have the chance to give that possibility to others. When I said this was for humanity *and* for vampires, I meant it. My life’s work is literally restoring the humanity to vampire kind.”

I blinked, slowly absorbing this information. In a way, it made sense. I thought of the vampires I’d fought and killed over the years, the vampire who had turned me. How different would things have been if those creatures had retained some shred of humanity?

Another thought occurred to me, and hope flared to life in my chest. *Could this mean that I could get my wolf back someday?*

Emmett watched the emotions play out across my face. “I know this is a lot to take in, but I want to offer you one last example before you decide. And if you say no, I give you my word that I’ll let it be.” He reached into a drawer and pulled out a stethoscope. He held it out to me. “Put it on.”

I put the ear buds into my ears, feeling a bit awkward. “Okay, what now?”

“Put it against my chest.”

I swallowed but did as he said. There was no sound, and why would there be? He was dead. He didn’t have a heartbeat.

Then Emmett grabbed another syringe off the table, and I recognized it as the serum he’d taken last night. He injected it into the crook of his arm, and after a moment, I heard the rhythmic thump of his heart through the stethoscope.

I looked up at him with a gasp, and he grinned down at me, all hot and brilliant and beautiful.

*This is why I had to suppress the heat*, I thought. *If I hadn’t done the hypnotherapy, who knows what I would be doing right now?*

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Emmett asked.

I couldn’t tear my eyes away from his lips, and I found myself leaning forward.

Oh god, was I finally going to kiss him?

**Episode 1490**

GREYSON

I looked from my mate’s beautiful, glowing face to Xavier, who was looking at Cali as well. His face was always softer when he was looking at her, something we probably had in common. He seemed happy that she was happy. When he caught my eye, however, there was no mistaking the slight narrowing of his eyes.

*No jealousy, my ass.*

Were we seriously doing this? I felt a little bit like I was losing my mind with all this sharing business. In what universe would it actually be possible for me to peacefully share *anything* with Xavier, much less the most important person in both of our lives?

But there was a part of me that felt hopeful. Like for the first time since the *due destini* curse had reared its ugly head and put all our lives on the line, I could finally breathe. This arrangement wasn’t ideal, but it could create a truce between Xavier and me. For now, at least.

And honestly, if it meant I got to be with Cali—*really* be with her, with no hot and cold, back and forth, together and broken up bullshit—then it would be more than worth it. It was probably extreme, and unconventional, but conventionality had flown out the window the moment we’d learned about the *due destini*. And right now, I needed to make decisions with pack unity in mind, and that meant that I needed to finally get my personal life in order. It was long overdue.

The Redwood pack deserved a leader who would stick by them and lead them regardless of the circumstances. I couldn’t ever let myself get so torn up about Cali that I left the pack again. I’d stepped in as Alpha for a reason, and I needed to make sure I was keeping up my end of the bargain.

I had to take care of the pack, and I knew that the best the way for me to do that was for Cali and me to be on good terms. But of course, Cali and I couldn’t be on good terms without throwing a wrench into things with Xavier, which had always been the crux of the issue. There was no way for everyone to walk away happy—or, in the case of the curse, *alive*.

But maybe now, we’d finally found a solution to this seemingly never-ending problem. A solution that not only was Cali on board with, but Xavier too. For once, we all seemed to be on the same page.

It made me a little itchy, to be honest. But the alternative… Well, we’d already spent way too much time and energy trying to make the alternative work.

It did feel strange to be teaming up with Xavier at all. If we weren’t fighting over Cali, we were fighting over the Redwood pack, and if we weren’t fighting about who was leading the pack, then we were fighting about some old baggage from when we were kids.

As much as I wished things could be different, Xavier and I didn’t know how to coexist peacefully, and it was beyond twisted that the thing that was uniting us was actually our horrible father.

*Thanks a lot,* Dad*.*

Xavier coughed, pulling me out of my thoughts, and I was suddenly aware of the awkward silence that had bloomed between us. It was almost like each of us was waiting for the others to make the first move. I’d make it easy for everyone, then.

I cleared my throat for what felt like the thousandth time. “If we’re all set, I’d actually like to talk to Xavier about something else for a moment.”

“Oh.” Cali’s face became impossibly even more red. God, she was adorable. “All right then. I’ll just… go see what Artemis and Rishika are doing.”

I was a very, very lucky man to be her mate, and even luckier still for this chance at some simple happiness with her. Hope swelled in my chest at the thought. The love of my life would be back in my arms soon, and this time I would have all the time in the world to enjoy her, to savor her.

No more rushed moments while Xavier wasn’t around. No more trying to quietly convince her to choose me. No more keeping my distance in a sad attempt to make any of this easier for her—for us.

For perhaps the first time ever, I could be with Cali without anything or anyone else getting in the way. And sharing with Xavier or not, the promise of finally being with my mate would get me through just about anything.

We excused ourselves and headed downstairs to the living room. As soon as we stepped inside, Xavier spun to face me, his face hard. “So, what’s up?”

I was admittedly taken aback by his coldness, but I knew better than to take it personally. Or, at least, any more personally than I took anything Xavier said or did to me. The sharing thing wasn’t ideal for either of us, but we’d agreed that it was what we needed to do. It would be hard for Xavier—just like it would be hard for me—but as long as he remained calm and didn’t let that hot head of his blow its top, we just might be able to make this work.

“I want to talk about Ava,” I said, my tone even.

Xavier scowled, and I could practically see his hackles raising. He got that way whenever I brought up his ex-mate, and I had a feeling he wasn’t going to be especially happy to hear me out. “What about Ava?”

“I don’t trust her.”

“Okay?” He shrugged. “We’re on the same page about that.”

“I gave Ava a bit of an ultimatum,” I said. “She has to kill Iñigo.”

He scoffed. “That’s not an ultimatum—an ultimatum has consequences.”

“Well, if she *doesn’t* kill him, the consequence is that I kill both of them.”

His smirk slipped. “Fair. But what does this have to do with me?”

Before I could respond, Mace stepped into the living room. Completely ignoring me, he headed straight for Xavier and held out his hand. “You’re back! It’s good to see you. Did you get stranded in the snow?”

Xavier shook his hand. “For a while, yeah. But we made it work. How’s Pip?”

“Better, I think.”

Since when were those two chummy? I felt my own hackles raising. Mace and I had never had the best relationship—why, I didn’t really know. I’d always suspected it had something to do with my father. Maybe one day I’d get to stop paying for his sins.

Mace stepped back and looked at both of us. “You two are working together now?” His gaze focused on Xavier. “We should coordinate about your father. If he’s back, we need to have a plan like last time.”

I jumped in before Xavier could respond. “Yes, we’re going to work on it. But if you have anything to say to the Alpha, you need to come to me. Not the Beta.”

Xavier’s eyebrows twitched, but he thankfully didn’t lose his shit. I could see he was fuming though. If we were going to share Cali, he had to learn to compromise on other things.

Mace nodded. “Good, good. Well, let me know what you decide, and we’ll get a plan together.” After saying goodbye to Xavier—and not me—Mace left us alone.

Xavier immediately rounded on me. “If you think I’m your fucking *Beta*,” he spat out the word, “or second to you in *anything*, you have another thing coming.”

“Yes, you are. It’s actually quite simple. I’m the Alpha, and you’re my younger brother,” I said. “You defer to me.”

My brother’s face twisted into a snarl. Oh boy. He didn’t like that.

*Too bad*.

This was reality, right here. I was the Alpha, and I knew it pissed Xavier off to be reminded of that fact, but until he stopped being a brat and did something about it, that was just how things were going to be.

I cleared my throat. “But to answer your question about Ava, I figure you probably want some revenge on Iñigo after what he did to you, right?”

Xavier composed himself and then nodded. “Given the opportunity, I’d tear that fucking bloodsucker limb from limb.”

“Neat,” I deadpanned. “It’s your lucky day. You just might have the opportunity you’ve been waiting for.”

His eyebrows raised. “Really? What would it involve?”

“Would you be willing to watch Ava? Make sure that she keeps her word? I know just how little her word means, so I figured it’d be good for her to have a babysitter. I hope you’re up for this. With everything that’s going on right now, I need to divide and conquer.”

Xavier smirked. “Well, I’m already a step ahead of you there. I don’t trust Ava for shit. I thought about trying to get close to her, but what’s the point? I know she’s hiding something. I don’t have to watch her to find out. It’s just a matter of time.” He thought for a moment, then added, “I’ll make sure she follows through with the ultimatum, and if not, I’ll be thrilled to take Iñigo’s head off myself.”

“And Ava?” I pressed.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “What about her?”

“If I asked you to,” I started, “could you kill her again?”

**Episode 1491**

MARTA

My gaze zeroed in on Lilac while my brain stuttered, trying to make sense of the impossible thing I’d just seen.

“Did you… Did you really just trip on something?” I asked.

Lilac looked back at the blanket he’d stumbled on, his face twisted in confusion.

It sounded like the stupidest question in the world. Of course he hadn’t tripped on anything—he was a ghost. He could pass through anything and everything, therefore tripping wasn’t something he ever needed to worry about. It wasn’t something he was even capable of it.

And yet… I’d just seen him trip. I knew it.

How in the world was that possible?

I didn’t know.

But then again, tripping was hardly the first “impossible” feat Lilac had achieved. Heat rushed into my face as I recalled the way his lips had moved against mine. *That* was impossible. Kissing a ghost and feeling them kiss you back. And suddenly, I couldn’t bring myself to worry too much about Lilac tripping. Or the exact sequence of events that had made him corporeal enough to kiss.

All I could think about was kissing him again.

When I looked at Lilac again, that confusion was still on his face, but there was something else there, too. He stood up and reached toward the wall. I watched, half-expecting his hand to go right through it—just like it always did. Instead, his palm met firm, flat, unyielding wall. He ran his hand over it, his eyes wide. He looked back at me, like he was making sure he wasn’t imagining things, like he was making sure I could see it too.

I gave him a barely perceptible nod, my eyes locked on his hand, pressed up against the wall. Just like his lips had pressed against mine. What was the saying? “An unstoppable force meets an immovable object”? I wasn’t sure which of us played which role, but I remembered all too well how there had been no stopping that kiss—for either one of us. No moving out of the way.

I wanted to feel that unstoppable force again.

Lilac turned back to the wall and curled his fingers into a fist. For one stupid moment, I thought maybe he was going to try to punch a hole in the wall, but all he did was rap on the surface. He was *knocking* on the wall. Once again corporeal enough to be bound by the laws of the mortal world.

I let out a breath. “Oh my god.”

Someone pounded on the wall from the room next door and there was a muffled, “WHAT? I’m napping!”

I didn’t recognize the voice, but it didn’t matter. Nothing was pulling me out of my shock over—and newfound fascination for—Lilac.

He moved away from the wall and approached me, lowering his voice. “What did you do?”

I started. “I’m sorry? What did *I* do?”

He nodded, like it was the most obvious thing in the world for him to assume I’d somehow turned him into a real boy. A *Pinocchio* of my own making. “You’re the medium!” he whisper-yelled. “I’m just the ghost!”

I scoffed. “I didn’t *do* anything, and even if I did, it wasn’t on purpose!”

A crease appeared between his eyes. He didn’t believe me. That was fair—I wasn’t sure I believed me either. But I didn’t know what else could have caused this. I stared at him, and he stared back. Stupid me, I found myself looking at his lips again.

And wanting to taste them one more time.

I shook myself. *Keep it in your pants, Marta! And also maybe aim for someone who’s not dead.*

I sighed. “You’re the one who kissed me,” I told him. “That must have triggered something.”

But was that even possible?

Kissing didn’t supercharge spirits, did it? Or was it more general, like intimacy or… or feelings? I grimaced. I didn’t know anything about this, and I could’ve speculated for the rest of my life and still not come anywhere close to an answer.

Of course, there was always the chance that Lilac was right. That it wasn’t so much our kiss as it was *me*. Sylvia had told me that my power had increased… Was this part of it? With great power came the ability to kiss a spirit into the real world?

But that was stupid, of course. How powerful could a medium truly be? And could ghosts tap into that power?

If that was the case, then we were in for a world of trouble. Maybe Sylvia had been right to warn me, even though I had no idea what might be coming for me, or why.

Lilac stepped toward me, and my heart skipped a beat. Was he going to—

He poked me in the shoulder. Hard. More of a jab than anything else.

“Ow!” I cried, grabbing at my shoulder. “What the hell was that for?”

But he didn’t look the least bit repentant. “Hmm… You might not have been the best person to try that on.”

“You think?” I rubbed the spot with a grimace.

“Oh, come on. I didn’t poke you *that* hard.”

“I think that’s for me to decide, don’t you?” I snapped.

“What? You want me to kiss it better or something?”

My face went hot. “*No*. No, thank you.”

I couldn’t help noticing that his cheeks were also a little pinker than they’d been before.

He cleared his throat. “Speaking of… I wonder whether I somehow took some of your energy and it made me physically manifest for a second?”

If possible, my face got even redder. Would that mean that my kiss had literally given him some of my energy?

Lilac walked back to the wall, his hand raised to knock, but this time his fist went right through the wall again. A scream erupted on the other side of the wall. “What the fuck is that?”

He quickly yanked his hand back. “That’s not ideal.”

*No kidding.* I frowned. “So it’s temporary, then.”

He nodded. “It must be.” He looked down at his hand, and then the wall. And then his gaze slid over to me and stayed there. There was a strange look in his eyes I couldn’t quite place. It made my stomach bubble with butterflies.

“What?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He crossed over to me and took my hand in his. It felt ghostly again, cold and wispy, like his touch wasn’t entirely there, though I could still technically feel it.

When I looked up at him, I found Lilac scanning my face with that same expression. It was something like… *longing*. Was it for me?

“I haven’t felt pain in such a long time,” he said suddenly, his eyes intense, pinning me in place. “You don’t understand… Feeling that, and feeling your skin on mine, even if whatever that was is gone, now…” He swallowed. “It made me feel alive again.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “In the best way possible.”

I was suddenly hyperaware of his hand in mine. We *had* just kissed, so it felt kind of dumb to wonder whether or not he actually *liked me*, liked me. But I wasn’t so out of the dating loop that I was unaware of the fact that you didn’t have to actually like someone to kiss them.

It could’ve been boredom. It could’ve been this tethering thing that had forced us together. It could’ve been the jolt of energy he apparently got from kissing me. What a great incentive that had to be—kiss this girl and you’ll almost come back to life!

I knew better than to hope for more from Lilac, but a small part of me hoped that he’d kissed me because he liked me. Because he wanted to kiss me—and not for some supernatural energy bonus. It felt idiotic to stand here with him looking at me like that when I didn’t know how he actually felt, but I couldn’t bring myself to break away from his gaze.

“How do you think that works?” he asked. “Do you think it can happen again?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible, I guess…”

And apparently that was invitation enough, because then Lilac was angling his face toward mine again, and I did nothing to stop it.

He paused when our lips were a hair’s breadth apart. “For the longest time, I’ve been outside of real life, first in the spirit world and then when my spirit began to wander the human world again. I felt aimless, but I had my sister to anchor me. But when I’m with you…”

My breath hitched.

“I feel like anything is possible.” He smiled softly. “You make me feel alive, Marta. In every way.”

Before he said another word, I leaned forward and kissed him. Suddenly, it didn’t matter if he liked me for me, or if this was just our tether pulling us together. Because his lips were soft and cool, and his hands were slipping down my back, pulling me into him. With each brush of his lips against mine, I felt him growing warmer. Felt him becoming more solid, more *real* beneath my touch.

My fingers sank into his hair, and I was pleasantly surprised to feel the silky fibers. His hands anchored on my hips as he broke away from my mouth and kissed a surprisingly warm trail down the column of my throat.

This was amazing. Beyond anything I’d ever dreamed of. And I wanted more. Anything Lilac was willing to give me.

That thought brought me up short.

*Am I going to sleep with a* ghost*?*

**Episode 1492**

I dug through my chest of drawers in my bedroom, in search of my workout clothes. Where in the world had I stashed them? Admittedly, I didn’t use them all that often—except for loungewear, like pretty much every other girl out there.

I tossed out a pile of T-shirts, in search of the evasive leggings and workout tank. An old U of M shirt was all that remained in the drawer. Where the heck had I put them?

*You’d think they’d be easy to find if they’re not being put to use!*

Artemis’s offer to train me to fight the revenants was at the top of my priority list. It was probably the most important thing I could do right now, honestly, what with the Orb being MIA and Artemis wanting to stick around here for a while longer.

Except even that uber important new task was getting pushed away from the front of my mind. The new, exciting topic at hand in Cali’s brain? TwO bOyFrIeNdS.

*Do I really have two boyfriends now? That somehow feels different than two mates. Did I seriously just have that conversation with Greyson* and *Xavier? A conversation in which they were both in agreement that they wanted to share me? That the whole thing was their idea? And we’d like, set down ground rules, and stuff?*

I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around it. Part of me wondered if I’d fallen into one of those hyper-real witch dreams, and I was about to wake up and go back to Greyson and Xavier fighting tooth and nail over me and demanding that I choose one of them over the other.

But another part of me was… happy? Relieved? For pretty much the first time since I’d met Greyson, we were pushing all the tension and life-threatening choices to the side and resolving to work through all this *due destini* crap together. We were trying to find happiness and peace in the middle of this weird situation—even if that meant that I was with both of them instead of continually trying to choose (or not choose) one of them.

I had high hopes that this might be the thing that would help us, that would—at minimum—give us a break from everything for a while. Still, I couldn’t quite throw myself into this new arrangement with abandon. For one, I knew that things like this were always harder than they seemed. Nothing ever went easily for the three of us—there were always complications and twists and feelings that got in the way.

On top of that, I had a feeling that Greyson and Xavier were only doing this for me. That they were putting aside their feelings so that they could both have me—even if it meant sharing. And they were doing it for *my* benefit, not their own—no matter what Greyson said about needing to stay focused. If I left, they’d be able to stay here and take care of the pack just fine. No, they were absolutely doing this for me.

And… I didn’t really know how I felt about that.

I sighed and slumped against my dresser, my search for my workout clothes entirely forgotten. What if we tried this new arrangement and it just made things worse? Would I just end up going crazy faster? I had to be careful with this. This couldn’t be a “get out of *due destini* free card,” no matter what Xavier and Greyson seemed to think.

I’d have to be careful. I couldn’t take this lightly. Their lives were as much in my hands as they’d ever been.

*UGH.*

I rested my head against my dresser. *I* would *manage to find a negative spin for this, wouldn’t I?*

But my rumination did have an upside. Bundled up and peeking out from beneath my bed were my workout clothes. I must have tossed them to the floor the last time I’d worn them. Hopefully they weren’t too smelly now.

I dressed quickly and headed downstairs to find Artemis and Rishika still working out. Actually, they were exactly where I’d left them.

“Oh!” Artemis’s eyes widened. “You’re back. So soon?”

I smiled and held out my arms to show off my leggings and workout tank. I was ready to go, but it looked like they hadn’t so much as broken a sweat. Dang. I hoped they had a level-one version of this training. Considering how crazy fit they both were, there was a chance I wouldn’t survive, otherwise.

“Um, I’m ready to start my training up again,” I said.

Artemis revolved around the punching bag, jabbing at it in a fast rhythm that had me staring. “Your magic training?” she asked.

I shrugged. I was a heck of a lot better at blasting the shit out of stuff than I was at cardio, or even physically defending myself. “Magic, sure, but also maybe I should be able to, I don’t know, punch someone and make it hurt?”

Rishika snorted. “I think I can help you out with that. First though, let’s get you warmed up. Working out with a punching bag is way more work than it looks.”

And then my sister and Rishika did their best to murder me with cardio.

First, we did jumping jacks. And then lunges. So far, so good. And then Rishika whipped out something called a “burpee,” and I proceeded to get the workout of my life. A burpee, as it turned out, was what happened if you crossed a jumping jack with a pushup—a pure dose of hell.

I made it through four reps before my legs and arms started quaking.

“Come on, Cali!” Artemis called, from where she was flawlessly executing the workout—and twice as fast, too. “I can’t believe the same person who killed the Kollector has such pathetic upper body strength.”

“You don’t—need—push-ups—for blasting—someone!” I grunted out, in between movements.

“You’re doing great, Cali!” Rishika said. It was very clear who was the good cop in this arrangement.

Fast-forward ten minutes, and I was lying face-down on the ground, totally worn out. My arms felt like Jell-O, and my chest was heaving like I’d just run a marathon.

Artemis held out a hand to help me up. “Well, you survived the first round.”

“How am I supposed to survive the second?” I groaned. My legs shook underneath my body weight, and I all but collapsed onto a nearby chair.

“You just keep going.” Rishika shrugged. “And then come back again for more. It’s not that complicated.”

*Huh… I guess not.*

My twenty minutes of torture took my mind off my conversation with Greyson and Xavier, but now that I’d caught my breath, suddenly it all came rushing back.

“I have two boyfriends!” I blurted out.

Artemis and Rishika laughed. “Yeah, we know,” Rishika said.

“No, you don’t get it. It’s official. Greyson and Xavier are *both* my boyfriends now.”

Rishika’s eyebrows rose. “Like that *Bachelorette* thing?”

I shook my head. “They’re going to try to put the past behind them and keep things tension free... They’re calling a truce, of sorts. They’re going to share me.”

“Really?” Artemis asked. “I didn’t really take either Xavier or Greyson as someone up for that kind of thing. So they’re, like, sharing you in bed?”

“*NO*!” I squawked. “Just dating! Dating both of them! Dating normally, nothing weird, nothing with beds, nothing. Just. Dating.”

Artemis made a face. “And they’re *capable* of that?”

“I think it sounds nice,” Rishika said, giving me a polite smile. “Good for you guys. There’s so much happening right now. At least you’ll be all good.”

“Thank you!” I threw Artemis a glare. “At least someone gets it!”

She shrugged. “If I’m being honest—”

“When are you ever *not* honest?” I grumbled.

Artemis grinned. “I don’t think this’ll last. Maybe I’m wrong, but I’m not sure those guys can ‘share’ you. They’d sooner rip each other’s heads off.”

“Ugh, is it impossible for you to look on the bright side?” I groaned. “Even for my benefit? What if this works out? What if it’s the solution we’ve been looking for all along?”

“Then I’ll be glad to be wrong,” she said with an easy smile. “And I guess I’d like an invite to your polygamous wedding.”

I rolled my eyes, but secretly I felt nothing but relief. Artemis was acting like herself again after far too long. For a while there, things had been so up in the air and scary. I’d been beginning to wonder if I’d ever get my sister back.

But now, she seemed fine. Better than fine, really. She seemed like the blunt, opinionated sister I’d come to love.

*Maybe this means that the dark magic and whatever cloud it left hanging over her is gone?*

Between Artemis being her old self, this new arrangement with Xavier and Greyson, and the Blue Blood pack joining our ranks, I felt a new rush of hope for the first time in a long while. Maybe there was a real chance we could defeat the revenants and whatever else was thrown at us next.

“I think we all worked pretty hard,” Rishika said.

Artemis snickered. “Cali especially.”

“*Hey*!”

Rishika grinned. “How about I make us some smoothies?”

“Is that like a milkshake?” Artemis asked as we climbed the stairs.

“It’s like a milkshake, yes, but with fruit and sometimes vegetables instead of milk.”

“That sounds disgusting, why would I want that?”

Rishika bumped her hip into Artemis’s. “You’ll like it. I promise.”

We walked out of the basement just as my father walked in from the porch. I let out a gasp as I grabbed onto Artemis for support. I felt like I was about to faint.

“WHY IS MY DAD NAKED?!” I screamed.

**Episode 1493**

XAVIER

My stomach dropped as Greyson’s words echoed through the room. I couldn’t wrap my head around it. Had he seriously pulled me aside just to ask how I’d feel about killing Ava again?

The question alone elicited a response so visceral my gut clenched. It took almost nothing for me to remember what it had been like the first time I’d killed her. The bloodlust driving me beyond reason. The crunch of her throat beneath my teeth. The coppery, thick blood that had poured into my mouth. The way the light had gone out of her eyes, all that animal fear, that desperation and heartache—gone.

And the thought of doing that to her all over again?

I took a deep breath, unsure if I was about to lose my lunch or lose my shit and throw my *Alpha* through a wall. Show him who the fucking Beta was here.

“You don’t get to ask me that,” I snarled.

He pursed his lips. Greyson wasn’t an idiot—hell, he was probably smarter than most of the pack, for all the good it did him. Maybe it came from being raised by the devil himself, but Greyson knew how to read people. For as much as he was a big, tough Alpha, he was just as skilled at ending a fight without ever throwing a punch.

Which meant this fucking bastard knew exactly what he was asking me to do. He knew what it had cost me to kill Ava. He knew the pieces I’d lost when I’d snuffed out my own mate’s life—more than just my connection to my wolf.

And yet here he was, asking me to do it again.

Greyson sighed. “Yes, I do, actually. And as Alpha—”

I cut him off with a growl. “It’s still not your call.”

I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that unmating from Ava had been the right thing to do. Even if I were somehow able to trust her now (which I wasn’t), even if I didn’t hate her half the time, her time as my mate had ended the second I’d taken her life. There was no going back to a time before I’d ripped out Ava’s throat. Our future together had died with her. It had died the second she killed my mother.

Ava coming back to life didn’t change the past. I could never be with her again—not after what I’d done to her and what she’d done to me. Honestly, I didn’t understand why Ava seemed so desperate to win me back. Who went after the guy who put you six feet under? She should’ve been running from me, and instead she was like a bad penny.

But it didn’t matter. Because no matter what Ava did or would do, the future I wanted was with Cali—sharing her with Greyson or not. Emphasis on the not. Ava no longer had a role in my future, and I didn’t want anything to do with hers.

But what Greyson was asking me, whether or not I was prepared to personally make sure Ava didn’t have a future at all… I didn’t know if I could do it. I didn’t *want* to, of course. But the real question wasn’t whether I was capable of it.

There had certainly been times when I’d wished I’d just ended her life before she’d become such a problem for us—like the moment I’d found out she’d been masquerading as Cali and jerking both Greyson and me around. My temper was running just as hot now as it had the day I’d killed her, only now I had the benefit of knowing what that blaze of violence would cost.

I’d lived through that once already, and it was a hell of a lot easier to live with unmating from her—even if it meant her periodically stopping by to mess with my life—than to maybe kill her again. That being said, I would always do whatever I had to, especially if it meant keeping Cali safe.

I sighed. “I’ll watch Ava, but it’ll all be on my own terms. Iñigo will get his, and you don’t need to worry about the rest of it. It’s not your business.”

Something flashed in Greyson’s eyes. Regret? Understanding? “Xavier—”

“Shut up,” I snapped, suddenly furious. He was the one who’d brought this up, and now he was acting regretful about my feelings? I’d lock myself in a room with fucking Torin prattling on for a thousand years before I’d open up to Greyson about *anything*. “You might be the Alpha right now, and we might be sharing our mate, but it doesn’t mean we’re *friends*. I’m doing this because I want to. Not because you told me to.”

I stormed out of the room before he could respond, but the footsteps sounding on the hardwood floor behind me told me I wasn’t alone. And apparently my brother wasn’t done talking to me.

“Isn’t this mature,” Greyson said. “Running away from your older brother. Or are you running away from your feelings? It was getting pretty tense in there. And I know how you’re allergic to any emotions outside of hate and horny.”

I stopped short and spun to face him. “*Bite me*.”

He huffed. “Seriously, what’s your problem? I’m trying to have a conversation with you—”

“A conversation that I do not want to have with you. Not now. Not ever.”

Greyson put his hands up. “I know it’s a sensitive topic, and that’s why I wanted to talk to you about it first.”

“*Sensitive topic*?” I scoffed. “There are few things in my life that I regret more than killing my mate. Which I’m pretty sure you knew already. You can go ahead and drop the sympathy act. You asked, I said no. I’m handling this myself, and we are not discussing it again.”

“Xavier, you can trust me, okay? I’m not the enemy here.”

“History says otherwise.”

Greyson flinched, and I didn’t even bother to hide my smirk. There was nothing in the world that I loved more than getting under my brother’s skin. He deserved it.

I spun back around. “Fine, you want to be a part of my life so damn badly? Let’s go check in on Ava right now. Together.”

He fell into step beside me. “That’s the best idea you’ve had all day.”

We stormed down the hallway and up the stairs, our shoulders bumping as each of us tried to get in front of the other. We both grunted and snarled every time our bodies made contact, and I finally elbowed in front of him. “Let me do the talking, and you can be the good cop.”

Greyson scoffed. “What?”

“I’m the mercenary. You just let the professional deal with this.”

“I’m the Alpha,” he growled.

Christ, the dude was like a broken record. Alpha this, Alpha that… “And?”

We didn’t have any more time to argue, because Ava chose that moment to step out of her room. She stopped short when she saw us both in the hallway. “What’s going on?”

I squared my shoulders. “We need to talk.”

She leaned against her doorway. “Welcome back, Xavier. Got caught in the storm, huh?”

“That’s none of your concern,” Greyson said.

I threw him a dirty look and mind linked with him. *What the fuck did I just say? I’m the one interrogating her—stay in your fucking lane.*

Ava looked back and forth between us. “All right. What’s going on?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Greyson stepped forward. “Xavier is going to be the one making sure you kill Iñigo.”

I cocked my head, gauging her reaction. I personally wasn’t thrilled with the development, and I was even more pissed off that Greyson was *not* staying in his fucking lane, but like I’d explained to Cali, I needed to get close to Ava to figure out what the hell she was up to. Ava lied—it was as irrefutable a fact as “the sky is blue.” And I wouldn’t have been at all surprised if this was a huge cover-up for something.

Or maybe she truly was Iñigo’s victim and there was something else at play. But whatever it was, I was going to figure it out.

Ava shrugged. “Okay. Is that what you came here to tell me? I said I would do it, so I’ll do it.”

Greyson smiled. “Great.”

He turned away and headed off down the hallway, but I lingered outside Ava’s room.

Ava tilted her head. “This is how we get on a road to friendship? You making sure I kill someone?”

I snorted. Ava and I on the road to friendship? Yeah, fucking right.

Kira stepped out of the bathroom just one door down and gave me a questioning look. Just how much had she heard?

“Kill who?” she asked.

I grinned. “Your good friend Iñigo.”

Kira’s expression went dark. “If you’re going to kill him, I want in.”

**Episode 1494**

*Oh my god—my eyes!* I clapped my hands over my eyes. “WHAT THE HELL DAD?!”

“Oh, hi girls!” he said casually, as if he hadn’t just done irreparable damage to my psyche.

There was no unseeing the horror that my father had just unleashed on me—his own naked body. Sure, I’d only seen the full-frontal glimpse of him for about two seconds—but it had been two seconds too long. I could still see it in my mind’s eye. All. Of. It.

*I want to pluck my eyes out!*

Artemis seemed similarly upset about the whole situation. “Tom!” she screeched. “What are you doing? Where are your clothes? Has someone *stolen* your clothes?”

“Well, no—”

“Yes, Father,” I piped up, my hands still sealed over my eyes. “Pray tell, WHY ARE YOU NAKED?”

“Girls.” Mom’s voice sounded behind me, probably coming from the kitchen. Not that I was about to open my eyes to check. “Don’t yell at your father.”

I turned toward the sound of her voice, keeping one hand over my eyes. “He’s *naked*.” I gestured back in the general direction of my father with my free hand. “In the pack house! *In front of his own daughters!* If this doesn’t qualify for screaming, then I literally do not know what does.”

“I’m so sorry, girls,” Dad said. I felt movement brush past me, and I cowered back just in case it was my dad and his big naked ass.

*Remember the good old days when having two boyfriends was my biggest concern? Oh, those were such good and simple times, weren’t they?*

“Here,” Dad said, his voice coming from down the hallway where Mom was, and moving closer. “I have clothes on now.”

I splayed my fingers, peeking out between them—and screamed again. “THIS ISN’T BETTER!”

My dad was, indeed, wearing clothing. One article of clothing, to be precise. An apron with fake abs printed over the front, along with a Speedo. The material only made it about halfway down his thighs.

Artemis dropped her hands with a frown. “I don’t understand. Why does your garment have a fake body on it?” She looked at my mom. “Is this to impress your wife? I think she’ll find out the truth once she removes your—”

“STOP!” I screeched, so loudly I heard a flock of birds take flight from one of the large trees just outside the pack house. It was bad enough to basically get flashed by my own father—I couldn’t cope with the idea Artemis was suggesting.

Was this worse than him just being naked? I wasn’t sure. It kind of felt worse. I covered my eyes again with a whine. “Why, why, *why* is this happening? What did I do to deserve this?”

“I’m sorry, Cali,” Dad said. “I was just feeling way too warm and I wanted to go outside for some fresh air.”

“Except—*naked*? Outside?” I babbled. “DAD!”

“I’m just trying to get a handle on this nudist thing,” he explained. “If I’m turning into a werewolf then I figure I should get used to the feeling, right? I mean, the other werewolves here run around naked all the time!”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. Then opened it again. Then I dropped my hands and forced my eyes open. There my dad was, still wearing the apron—and a somewhat mournful expression. He really hadn’t meant any harm.

I took a deep breath, trying to find something resembling calm. “Okay. Well, until it’s official that you’re turning in a werewolf, we’re gonna have a new house rule: absolutely no getting naked if your name is Tom!”

My dad’s mouth twitched. He was trying not to laugh at me.

“Cali,” Mom said, coming to stand next to me. “Stop being so ridiculous. The human body is a natural thing.”

I glared at her. What a Mom thing to say. Sure. And there were some “natural” things that I never in a million years wanted to lay my eyes on—just like I was pretty sure both my parents would take issue with me wandering around the house in the buff with Xavier and Greyson.

“Girls,” Dad said, “close your eyes again, and I’ll run upstairs to grab some real clothes.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice!

I kept my eyes shut until I felt a tap on my shoulder. “Is it safe?” I asked, thinking Mom or my hopefully-clothed father would be standing there.

But Torin was the one who responded. “Yes, it is. Your dad is gone, and your mom with him.”

I peeled my eyes open and let out a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness. I’ve been scarred for life already.” No need to add another lifetime to that.

Torin shrugged and held out a mug of white chocolate mocha.

“Oh, thank you,” I said.

This was just the thing for my nerves. I sipped at the perfectly warm drink and looked around the room, hoping to avoid any sign of my parents. I’d known that moving them into the pack house would come with its own complications, but I’d never in a million years thought that *nudity* would be one of them.

Fortunately, there were just a few pack members scattered about. Artemis and Rishika were sitting over by the window, looking out at the falling snow while holding hands. It was super sweet, and one again I felt a rush of relief that my sister finally seemed to be coming back to herself—and us.

“I didn’t think it was so bad,” Torin said, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Your dad, I mean.”

I gave him a scandalized look. “If it were your dad, you’d understand.”

He nodded and looked around the room for a moment before looking back at me. His cheeks went a little red, and he cleared his throat. “Actually, I was hoping you might answer a question for me about that.”

I frowned. “Okay?”

Torin leaned in closer. “How serious are your mom and dad?”

I blinked, and Torin’s face flushed even darker. Was he… was he nervous?

“I mean, like, is their marriage solid?” he asked. “I remember it was pretty rocky there for a second…”

“I’m sorry.” I held up a hand. “What are you asking me?”

He took a deep breath. “Do I have a chance with your dad?”

My jaw dropped, and it took me a moment to pull it back up. “I beg your *what*?”

“Just asking!” Torin said quickly. “I just think he’s… I mean, he’s, uh, I think he’s kind of wonderful. That’s all.”

*Oh, that’s all. Torin wants to be my new step-dad. That’s all! As if this day couldn’t get any weirder.*

Maybe I was dreaming after all.

What I wanted to say was, “Hell no, you Fae homewrecker!” But obviously I couldn’t, because Torin looked so earnest, so hopeful. He really did have feelings for my dad. I took a deep breath.

“Um, you know, I don’t think my parents are going to break up any time soon…” I said slowly. “Or have an open marriage.”

Just saying the words out loud kind of made me want to gag.

Torin sighed. “You know, I thought as much, but I just wanted to ask. I really like Tom.”

*Oh no, I’ve broken his spirit!*

“Xavier and Greyson are sharing me,” I blurted out. The words were honestly on the tip of my tongue already, but I realized my mistake instantly. I’d just broken one of our rules. Shit. “I mean… I’m sharing them?”

*Good thing Greyson emphasized keeping things on the DL.*

Torin lit up. “I DID IT. THE *BACHELORETTE* WORKED!”

Only now I was realizing that telling Torin might not work so well with keeping things quiet.

He was jumping up and down in joy. “All the dates, all the time and effort, it *worked*!Oh my goodness, Cali! You’ve made me a very happy man today!”

I smiled as I watched him dance around the room and whoop in celebration. Well, I’d cheered him up, at least. Hopefully that would make up for any blabbing he’d do later that would result in Greyson, Xavier, and me fueling the pack house gossip mill once again.

I noticed movement down the hallway. Big Mac was dressed in winter gear and heading outside. The witch looked like she was trying to be stealthy… What was going on there?

“Big Mac!” I called.

She froze and then hurried down the hallway, away from the still-gushing Torin.

I followed after her. “Where are you going?”

The witch turned to face me with a huff. “What do you want now, Caliana?”

“Hello to you too,” I said, bristling at her tone. I eyed her bags with interest.

Big Mac sighed. “Should I skip the part where I say that what I’m doing is none of your business?”

I nodded. “Probably for the best.”

“Right.” She sighed. “If you must know, I’m going to Haystack Rock.”

**Episode 1495**

ARTEMIS

Life was good.

I was curled up next to Rishika by the window, holding her hand. Rishika was looking out the window, watching the snow with a childlike joy, but I couldn’t peel my eyes away from her. What was some frozen water falling from the sky compared to the gorgeous werewolf in front of me?

The past few days had been good—great, even. I felt more like myself than I had in far too long, felt a peace settling around and inside me where previously there had only been conflict and fear.

And I found myself clinging to that sense of peace, to the good minutes that joined together into hours and then made up the last few days. Now that I knew what I stood to lose—and how easily everything could just fall apart—each moment of clarity and happiness felt like a gift. Whether that was teasing my sister about her upper body strength and her mates, or sitting here next to Rishika and savoring the calm.

Even catching Tom in the nude—as shocking as that had been—was kind of funny, now that I thought about it. It wasn’t a thing I would have blinked an eye at while under the Orb’s influence, and the fact that my reaction to that foolish little thing was completely my own made me feel oddly grateful to Cali’s ridiculous father.

No, there was only joy to be found now. Not only was I carefully and tentatively building up my relationship with Cali again, but I also had Rishika, who had never once left my side during the chaos. It was difficult for me to wrap my head around, honestly. Someone sticking by my side even when I’d outlived my usefulness to them. Nobody had ever stuck by me unconditionally before…

Rishika turned to see me staring. “What is it? Do I have something on my face?”

My lips quirked up into a smile. “Now that you mention it, there *is* some mocha on your lip.”

Rishika reached for a napkin, but I beat her to it, swiping my thumb across her full lower lip. And then I allowed it to linger for just a moment, our eyes locked as I felt heat rush back into my cheeks.

Slowly, I pulled my hand back. “Got it.”

“Thanks.” She gave me an easy smile. That was Rishika for you—every moment spent with her was easier than the last. It wasn’t like the fleeting relationships I’d had back in the Fae world, which had felt more like transactions than anything else, or even like the ones I’d observed at the pack house.

Cali, Xavier, and Greyson made everything look impossible. Lola and Jay had a tough time, too. Even my mother and Tom had had their troubles recently—secrets and big changes that had put their relationship to the test.

But being with Rishika? It was as easy as breathing. As easy as falling asleep under a sea of stars without worrying about the sunrise. Beautiful and comforting and safe. That was her.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Good,” I said, and meant it. “I wonder if Cali’s going to want to do more of those workouts with us.”

I grinned as Rishika snorted.

“She probably should, if she wants to improve her plank time. I love your sister, but she’s kind of a wimpy noodle.”

We both burst out laughing at that. My brain helpfully drew a picture of a short, thin noodle with Cali’s face, wearing workout clothes that looked like they were still new and trying—and failing—to do a full round of burpees. Just like Cali had.

We got some strange looks from the other pack members, but we eventually collected ourselves, still chuckling.

Rishika wiped her eyes. “It’s so good to see you back to your old self,” she said, reaching out to squeeze my hand. “I missed it. I’ve been really worried about you for the past few days, with all the ghost pond and Orb stuff going on. I’m just… I’m really glad you’re doing better.”

Lately, all the comments about my welfare, and all the casual mentions of people worrying about me, never failed to set my teeth on edge. It was more annoying than anything else, because it felt like people were quietly telling me I was doing something wrong, giving them a reason to worry. And maybe there was some truth to that, but I didn’t feel that way with Rishika. She worried because she cared, and I knew just how much she cared because she’d never left my side, never treated me like a burden.

When I smiled at her, it felt real. “I’m glad too. Thank you for being there for me. I couldn’t have done any of this without you. I got my strength back because of *you*.”

Rishika’s eyes took on a glossy sheen, like she was holding back tears. Suddenly, I felt the same way. This woman had done so much for me; she *meant* so much to me. Where would I be without her?

She cleared her throat and pulled her hand back. “Do you want to get out of here and do something fun for once? Get our minds off all of this doom and gloom?”

“What do you mean? There’s just piles of snow out there. I bet we can’t even drive one of those metal horses in this weather.”

She rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “I know you know it’s called a car.”

I shrugged, holding back a grin. “My name for it is better, don’t you think?”

She tugged me to my feet. “Get your coat on. We’re going on a date.”

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“This coat is the least practical thing I’ve ever worn,” I grumbled as we stomped through the deep snow.

She looked at me. “What do you mean? It’s keeping you warm, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and that’s *all* it’s doing. I can’t even put my arms down all the way.” I tried to pull my arms to my sides for effect, and they bounced right back up. “This *thing* is so puffy. There’s no range of motion in it. How could I draw a weapon dressed like this?”

“Do you really think you’re going to need a weapon on our date?”

I shrugged. “I’m just saying. I feel like one of those things I saw Violet roast over a fire once. Marsh-ellos?”

Rishika grabbed my gloved hand. “Let’s go, marshmallow! Come on!”

She led us to a flat spot in the snow, not far from the pack house. Then she bent down and picked up some snow in her mittened hands.

My eyes widened. “What are you doing? That stuff is so *cold*!”

She just laughed. “Help me out, will ya?”

Slowly, with Rishika’s guidance, we managed to pack the snow together and roll it around into large spheres.

I was rolling a second snow sphere together, trying to make it even larger than the first one, but she stopped me. “That’s the perfect size now. We don’t want it to be too big for the base.”

“The base of what?”

“The snowman, of course.” She pointed at the large sphere we’d made. “That’s his legs.” And then she pointed at the one I’d rolled up. “And that’s his torso.”

I blinked. “You do know what a man looks like, don’t you?”

She threw a handful of loose snow at me in reply.

After a brief snow fight, we managed to get three tiers on the “snow man.”

Rishika glanced over at the shed. “Maybe there’s some stuff in there we could use to decorate it.”

The inside of the shed was dusty and full of cobwebs—obviously it was not frequented by the pack. Rishika found a broom leaning against the wall. “This could work.”

“What the heck is that for?” I asked.

“It’s just something we do to decorate it. I’ve seen it before.” She smiled. “Just you wait—our snowman is about to look a lot more manly.”

I snorted. “If you say so.”

I looked around for other decorations and jumped as a shelf suddenly fell off the wall. “Watch out!”

I rushed to Rishika and pushed her out of the way of an old metal bucket. It fell to the ground with a clatter.

And then it was silent again, with my body pressing Rishika’s against the wall. I couldn’t peel my eyes away from her.

*How is she so fucking beautiful?*

Rishika’s breath rose in white puffs, and I stepped back. “Be careful, okay?”

Before I could put any more distance between us, Rishika wrapped an arm around my waist. “Wait.” I froze as she bit her lip, and then she said, “I know we weren’t focused on making what’s between us… official… But…” She sighed.

Butterflies were doing loops in my stomach.

“I thought I was fine with that,” she continued, “but I think I’m falling for you.”

My eyes widened. *Rishika’s falling for me?*

“In love?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

I had never been in love. There was no time for it—and no one to feel that way for. I’d grown up thinking I was an orphan—that I had only myself to rely on. It was how I’d survived everything.

But was what I felt for Rishika, this blissful, hopeful, all-consuming feeling… Was that love? Even if it scared the hell out of me?

Rishika nodded. “I don’t expect you to reply. I know it’s a lot, but—”

There was nothing left to be said. All the words left my mind as I closed the distance between us and kissed her.

**Episode 1496**

“Wait, you’re going to Haystack Rock?” I asked. “To the portal to the Fae world? *Why*?”

Big Mac huffed again and rolled her eyes. “When will people around here just learn to mind their own business?”

I crossed my arms and gave her a pointed look. “If this involves the Orb, it’s pack business. And you and I might not be wolves, but we’re part of this thing all the same. So spill.”

“Fine.” The witch grimaced. “I just can’t shake the feeling that something is going on. Something bad. And I can’t say definitively whether it’s being caused by the Orb or not—though I definitely think it is. I’m worried about Vander’s message that the portal to the Fae world at Haystack Rock has opened, but none of the others have. It seems… well, very suspicious at the least. Something has to be going on out there that we don’t know about, and it’s in our best interest to find out what that something is.”

Okay, that made sense. Sort of. I couldn’t argue how essential it was to understand what we were truly dealing with, whether it was the Orb or something else entirely. But when I thought of Big Mac going off on her own and leaving the rest of us here, my stomach twisted with dread.

“But what if something goes wrong?” I asked, barely resisting the urge to wring my hands. “What if we’re attacked by revenants or Rogues or vampires or something even worse?”

Big Mac shrugged. “There’s another witch here right now. I’m sure you’ll all manage just fine. And as long as that Kira woman is here, it’s an opportunity for me to investigate what’s going on outside the boundaries of the pack house.”

Kira, help us? I scoffed. I didn’t know much about her, beyond the fact that she used to work with the vampires that had captured Xavier, and that she’d pulled him away on some kind of mission. All in all, I was not impressed with the other witch in the pack house.

“But we don’t know her as well as we know you!” I said. “She might not help us.”

“Maybe not, but either way, that’s not my problem.”

My jaw dropped. Okay, maybe a different approach would be best. “You’re leaving, then? You’re just going to leave all of us here? What about Mrs. Smith? Are you going to leave your fiancée here too?”

Mrs. Smith’s voice sounded in the hallway behind me. “No, dear.” She came up to us, a tote over her shoulder and a stack of wedding magazines in her arms. “I’m going with her.”

I looked from one woman to the other. “Have you told Greyson you’re leaving?”

The witch waved off my question. “I’m sure you’ll fill him in.”

Seriously? The pack’s witch and the Alpha’s mother were going off on a dangerous journey to the only open Fae world portal, and they hadn’t even bothered to tell Greyson about it?

I gasped, and Mrs. Smith gently put a hand on my arm. “I’ll keep in touch with my son, don’t you worry about that.”

I watched helplessly as the two women headed out the door. Immediately I went to look for Greyson. This was… Well, it was kind of bullshit, honestly. What would have happened if I hadn’t stopped to talk to Big Mac before they’d left? Would they have just snuck out with nobody knowing where they’d gone or why they’d left, leaving the whole pack house to wonder and worry until Mrs. Smith finally checked in with Greyson?

Talk about irresponsible.

And now it was apparently *my* job to fill Greyson in on this sudden turn of events. And unlike Mrs. Smith and Big Mac, I actually believed he should be kept in the loop. Not only was this obviously pack business, but it was personal too! His mother and step-mother-to-be were not only heading out into the snow, where the roads were probably still awful and treacherous, but they were also going to meddle with a Fae portal. And apparently I was the responsible one in this scenario.

What kind of crazy opposite-world had I woken up in this morning?

I was heading down the hallway and toward the stairs when suddenly a pair of hands reached out and grabbed me. I let out a shocked yip as they pulled me into the den on the far side of the house. The door swung shut behind me, the lock clicked, and I found myself pressed against the wall—face to face with none other than Greyson.

“Oh,” I breathed. “Hi. I was just—”

His mouth covered mine, hot and hungry, before trailing down to nibble at my neck. Oh god, that felt nice. *What did I want to talk to him about again?*

His breath was hot on the shell of my ear, sending pleasurable chills down my spine. “I’ve been wanting to get a moment alone with you all day,” he rasped.

He mouthed at my jawline, then nipped at my earlobe, and I let out a gasp as a bolt of pleasure-pain jolted through me.

“Now that things are good and we can be together without worry…” His lips trailed back down my neck, nipping and kissing as he went, punctuating each of his words. “I intend to spend every. Possible. Moment. I can with you.”

His words made my heart swell—and set my lust on a slow simmer. It had to have only been a moment or two since he’d pulled me in here, but already my mind was fuzzy from all the kissing. His lips brushed over mine again, claiming them hungrily. His tongue dipped into my mouth when I opened for him, and all I could do was sink my fingers in his hair and try to keep up as he kissed the daylights out of me, the warm, hard planes of his body keeping me pressed against the wall.

Maybe Greyson was onto something. Now that things between the three of us had been worked out, we could enjoy this as much as we wanted—while still being respectful and discreet, of course.

My head was spinning when Greyson suddenly lifted me in his arms. My legs wrapped around his waist on instinct, and my arms went around his neck. The kiss was broken for maybe two consecutive seconds before we picked up right where we’d left off as he walked us over to the couch.

I sighed as Greyson pressed me into the cool leather cushions, his hips settling in the cradle of my thighs. I could feel his hardness pressed against me, but Greyson never pushed it beyond simply kissing me. His mouth moving against mine, one hand cradling my face while the other held the majority of his body weight away from me.

The lack of urgency, the luxury of being able to drag this out, was startling. *He’s savoring me*, I realized. And more than that, I was *really* enjoying being savored.

And that was okay. *This* was okay. We’d all come to an agreement, and now I could savor whichever of my mates I wanted, pretty much any time I wanted. It was so weird and perfect and freeing that I felt a giggle slipping out of my chest.

I was so used to being a little on edge when kissing either of them—waiting for my other mate to interrupt us, for the *due destini* to do something awful, or even simply to stumble under the weight of all my guilt.

But I didn’t feel any of that now. I pushed Greyson back so I was on top of him and broke the kiss. Another laugh slipped through my lips.

“Is something funny, love?” he asked, staring up at me.

I smiled. “I’m just happy. But I have a question for you.”

“What is it?”

“Are you really okay with this new arrangement?” Heat rushed into my face. “With sharing me, I mean.”

“Really?” His eyebrows lifted. “You’re thinking of that right now?”

“Well, not entirely…”

He grinned. “Good.” He surged up to kiss me again, but I put my hand up to stop him.

“I’m serious, Greyson,” I said. “I really care about you and Xavier both, and if you’re not okay with any of this, you need to tell me.”

He cupped my face. “This is one of the reasons I love you. I’m good. I promise.”

Greyson kissed me again, firmly, his body pressing mine back down into the couch. He’d held back earlier, but he didn’t seem interested in holding back anymore. He deepened the kiss, rocking his hip against mine as his hands explored my body.

I was lost to sensation—the desire boiling low in my belly, the pleasurable brush of his hips against mine, the taste of him on my tongue…

Suddenly, he pulled back. His pupils were blown, and his voice was low and raspy as he asked, “Who are you going to stay with tonight?”

**Episode 1497**

MARTA

Lilac kissed me with a ferocity that I hadn’t expected from him. When I’d thrown myself at him and kissed him again, I admittedly hadn’t been thinking very far ahead, but I liked to think my intentions had been somewhere along the lines of a simple, sweet kiss. Of course, after about three seconds of my lips moving against Lilac’s, I realized *simple* and *sweet* just weren’t going to cut it.

He twined his fingers into my hair, tipping my head back and deepening the kiss. I sighed against his mouth and tugged at his shirt for a moment, then satisfied myself by gripping onto his hips and pressing myself against him.

It had been so long since I’d been able to—or wanted to—kiss someone. Bert had made sure of that. And so after a few decades without kissing, I’d kind of forgotten about it. But in a way, it was like riding a bicycle. There was a rhythm to it, a call and response that I was quickly remembering that I liked. Very, *very* much.

Lilac nudged me backward until my thighs hit the bed, and we fell backward onto the covers. It didn’t seem like he could get enough of me, and I felt the same about him. All the questions about the source of Lilac’s corporeality were gone. All that mattered was that we kept kissing, kept savoring this moment together. Every sense, every thought, *my entire world* was devoted to Lilac.

“Ouch,” I said suddenly, pushing at his chest. “Hold on. You’re, um, crushing me.”

The whole thing almost made me laugh. A ghost was crushing me. And kissing me. What a world.

“Oh, sorry.” He pulled back and rested his weight on his hands on either side of my body while I got comfortable. A silly grin was pulling at his kiss-swollen lips. “I can’t believe we’re doing this. Is this really happening?”

“Stop talking,” I whispered, pulling him down to kiss me.

Then his arms were around me, his body pressing mine into the mattress. He kissed a trail down my neck, his hand hesitantly slipping underneath the hem of my shirt, his fingertips brushing my bare stomach.

I didn’t know how it was possible either, but kissing Lilac just felt right. For the first time in… god, I didn’t even know how long, I felt like I was right where I was supposed to be. That I was where I belonged. And I wasn’t going to question that, not right now.

My fingers found the hem of his shirt, and he shuddered when my hands pressed against the lukewarm skin on his lower back. It was so strange, how some parts of him, like his mouth, felt almost too hot, while others were still warming up. A question for another time. Right now, all I could focus on was how many different sounds I could pull from his lips.

My mouth moved down to his jawline, and then to his ear. I grazed my teeth over his earlobe. Goosebumps broke out over his skin, and he gasped my name, his hands squeezing my waist. I wasted no time tugging his shirt over his head, and he pushed my shirt up so it was bunched beneath my bra. His hand ran up my side, his thumb grazing the side of my bra, and heat spiraled through my belly.

Okay, this was, um, getting kind of intense.

And if I was being honest, I didn’t want to stop. Lilac didn’t seem to want to either, but there were certain logistics that we probably needed to talk about. Like, how far were we really going to take this right now? And could a ghost use a *condom*? Not that I actually had one in my possession, but the werewolves seemed like a horny enough bunch that I’d probably be able to find plenty in the house.

But… would we even need a condom? Lilac was a ghost. He couldn’t exactly get me pregnant.

Could he?

But he also shouldn’t have been able to kiss me, or fool around with me.For all I knew, what with the special energy pulsing between us, a ghost baby was totally on the table.

*Wait a second, am I actually considering having* sex*? Right now? With Violet’s twin brother? A* ghost*?!*

Some of my thoughts must have shown in my face, because Lilac slowly pulled away, his chest heaving. His lips were swollen and pink and so goddamn gorgeous that all I wanted to do was pull him in for more.

“Should we, um, should we slow down?” Lilac asked.

“Um…”

My bedroom door swung open and Violet marched in like the official protector of her brother’s chastity. “Is everything okay in here? I thought I heard—”

She stopped just inside my room, her gaze frozen on me and Lilac.

Oh, god! Lilac and I scrambled to get him off me, to pull his shirt back on, to pull mine back down, and tame what had to be a spectacular case of make-out hair.

“Oh, everything’s fine here!” I said, way too loudly. “How are you?”

Violet had a strange look on her face, almost like she was trying to figure out how to react. “What’s going on? Is my brother here?”

I couldn’t help but snap my eyes over to Lilac, who was sitting right next to me, his face red as he adjusted his hair and clothes. Oh my god, was that a hickey on his neck? Had I hickey-ed Violet’s brother?

But there was a silver lining to all of this: she couldn’t see him. So she couldn’t tell for sure just how compromising a position she’d found us in.

Violet’s eyes followed mine and she gasped. “Is he sitting next to you right now?”

Wait, what? How did she know that? I looked down and noticed that Lilac’s body was forming an indent on the bed. *Well, that’s new. And, at this moment, horrifying.*

“This is new,” Violet said, her eyes bright. “How is this happening? Is he becoming more corporeal again?”

*Oh boy, is he.*

Violet looked at me again, and then her expression changed a bit. “Wait…”

*Oh no…*

“Did I…?” Violet began. “This is going to sound crazy, and I kind of feel like I’m going to throw up just asking it, but did I walk in on something?”

I shot off my mattress like a rocket. “No, no, no, oh my gosh. No. That’s so funny! That you—hah! No, we were just, uh, trying something that might give him enough of my energy as a medium to become more physically present in our world,” I explained in a hot, babbling rush.

Back on my bed, Lilac raised his eyebrows. I did my best to ignore him while Violet took in my response. I wasn’t sure that she’d bought it entirely, but what else was I supposed to say? That I’d just been first basing it with Violet’s (dead) twin brother? Hard pass.

“Huh.” Violet looked at Lilac’s weight on the mattress. “Is that true? Did it work? I’ve never seen Lilac’s shape when he’s sitting or anything before. He usually doesn’t have to adhere to the laws of physics.”

“It’s definitely a new development,” I said. It wasn’t a lie. I hazarded a glance at Lilac. He was frowning at me. But why? Was he annoyed? Angry? Frustrated that his twin sister had just cock-blocked us?

He couldn’t be mad at me, right?

“So it worked, then?” Violet pressed.

I shrugged. “It might. We could try to find out.”

She nodded. All the uncertainty on her face washed away and was replaced with unabashed hope. “Can we try to hug?”

“Uh, sure.”

Lilac stood up, and I took her hand to direct her where to hug him. We were just within hugging distance when Lilac suddenly stepped back and Violet hugged nothing but empty air.

He snickered, and I glared at him. “Not funny.”

But he wasn’t done yet. He stepped forward and tapped Violet on the left shoulder. As she turned, he quickly stepped to her right and did the same thing, now laughing in earnest.

Violet looked frustrated. “Great, it’s not working for me, is it?”

I shook my head. “No, he’s just being a dick.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Stop teasing your sister! Can’t you see she’s emotional right now?”

Still smiling, Lilac stepped up to Violet and wrapped his arms around her. She jumped, no doubt surprised at first to feel his touch without seeing him, but then tears welled up in her eyes and she threw her arms around him too.

I couldn’t help but smile at the cute moment, even if it was probably kind of weird for Violet—for her, it had to seem like she was hugging air. As I watched them, Lilac’s body started to flicker, and Violet’s arms began to sag, like she was no longer resting them on a person, but just air.

Lilac looked at me with a frown. “I think it wore off.”

Violet turned to me. “Is he still there? Is he okay?”

I nodded. “Yeah, he’s fine. But he must have lost the energy.”

She frowned. “Well, how did you guys do it? Can you do it again right now and bring him back?”

**Episode 1498**

CHARLIE

I adjusted the top button on my shirt, trying to decide whether I wanted to leave my collar open or closed. I decided to leave it open, as my whole getup looked just a tad more casual that way. I felt severely overdressed for tonight’s festivities in my freshly ironed black button-down shirt and tan slacks. It was a big deviation from the norm, as everyone at camp was typically decked out in athleisure—as Sandi used to call it.

I was waiting for Zachery to get ready, but it didn’t look like he was going to be done anytime soon. He’d been fussing with his hair for the last twenty minutes.

“Come on, dude!” I sighed. “Are we going or what?”

“Don’t rush art, my man,” Zachery said distractedly.

Aisha came in with Reggie. She was dressed in a formfitting dress and sparkly heels, and Reggie looked like my twin in his pressed black shirt and creased brown pants. We all looked one another over with interest and exchanged compliments. It was cool to see everyone dressed in their best as we smiled nervously at each other, anticipation thick in the air around us. We joked about how bad the music might be, depending on which of the faculty were in charge, and decided that we’d have fun dancing either way.

“How excited are you to be going to the dance with the hottest girl here?” Aisha asked, giving me a playful nudge.

I gave her a look.

“What! I’m just telling the truth. Sophie is the hottest girl here besides me, fact!” she said.

This didn’t make me feel any better about my situation. Sophie had been dubious earlier when I’d asked for her help—being purposely vague about whether she would or wouldn’t—but I hoped that maybe by the time we got to the dance she’d have made up her mind. It seemed like she was leaning toward yes.

“Yes, I’m very excited,” I said, unable to inject much emotion into my response. I wished that Violet were here, and right then I resolved myself to getting out of this place and getting back to my mate as soon as I could.

“How do I look?” Zachery asked as he bounded out of the bathroom.

We all agreed that he looked amazing. He’d put about a pound of gel in his hair, but I had to admit it looked good. He certainly cleaned up well. I took a quick look around our group, noting again how spiffy we all looked. Too bad I was too preoccupied to fully enjoy the moment.

We finally left for the dance, which was being held in a field house near the edge of camp. When we walked through the doors, I felt like I’d been transported back to high school. It was just like every dance I’d ever attended there; everyone standing around awkwardly, not dancing, and barely making eye contact for fear that someone might make a move or ask for a dance.

A few super nervous guys were leaning against the wall, beneath a large red and yellow “Welcome” banner. Multicolored streamers hung from the ceiling and covered the punch table. Yup, there was even a punch bowl. It was the main attraction for those seeking a distraction from the awkwardness hanging in the air. A bunch of campers were gathered around it, ladling punch into their red cups before scurrying back to rejoin their friend groups.

I took in the balloons on the floor and the slow revolving disco ball hanging from the ceiling. I wondered if Sergeant Pepperdine had put all this together.

I looked at Zachery, who looked like he was psyching himself up for something. He was patting his hair into place, though from the looks of things, the shiny strands were incapable of moving an inch.

“What’s going on with you?” I asked him, holding back a laugh.

“I’m going to do it,” Zachery said. “Tonight, I’m going to ask someone to dance. Mark my words.”

I grinned at him. “If you need a wingman, I’m here.”

“Yeah, if you have time,” Zachery said, pointing toward the door. I turned to see Sophie walking into the field house. She was dressed in a sparkling sequin jumpsuit—I thought that was what it was called—that shimmered under the disco ball. I felt like death. She’d gotten all dressed up and I still hadn’t even told her that I had a girlfriend. If she knew that, would she still be willing to help me?

Sophie caught my eye and grinned.

“Hey!” she said, walking over. Her strappy heels clacked on the floor, and her hair bounced around her face. It was shiny and voluminous, like she’d walked straight out of a shampoo commercial. We shared a quick embrace while Sophie commented on how handsome I looked. She pulled me close. “I’m ready to help you with whatever you need tonight,” she said. “You can count on me.”

I was so relieved. “Thank you, Sophie.”

“No problem. So, do you have a plan?” she asked.

I nodded. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while, and I came up with… perhaps pulling the plug on the music?”

Sophie reached into her pocket and fished out what looked like a bracelet. “What about this?” she asked. I didn’t know what she meant, but I noticed that the rest of her “jewelry” was made of the same marbled material as the bracelet. She grinned. “Smokescreen. Let off a few of these babies, you’ll be in the clear.”

Right at that moment, a super upbeat song came on. Sophie slid the bracelet back onto her wrist and grabbed my hand. I tensed at the contact. *Violet. Violet. Violet.* I repeated her name in my mind like a chant. I just promised myself that I would tell Violet everything as soon as I could, hoping that she would understand why I’d had to lead Sophie on this way. I felt like shit about it, though.

“I love this song!” Sophie said, throwing her hands in the air, wiggling her hips, and throwing her hair around. “Let’s dance!”

I was blushing like crazy. I looked around. We were the first ones to take the leap onto the dance floor. Heat burned across my cheeks as Sophie linked her arms around my neck and pulled me close. I was beyond awkward, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“I love the chorus,” Sophie said, as we fell into an uneasy rhythm.

She wiggled her hips and pressed her hands to my chest as she sang the words. I arched away from her as subtly as I could, trying my best to be respectful to Violet while trying not to offend Sophie. She was having a great time, and I could feel everyone watching us.

She paused, slowing the intensity of our dance as she leaned in close to whisper in my ear. “Can you tell me where you’re going?”

I hesitated for a moment.

“I can’t,” I finally said. “It’s not that I don’t trust you.” The jury was still out on that. “I just can’t risk anyone finding out where I’m going or what I’m doing. I hope you get that,” I said, trying to simultaneously be heard over the music and not scream so loudly that other people could hear what I’d said.

“I get it,” Sophie said.

I had to admit that Sophie’s warm energy was infectious. Before long, my nervousness subsided. We danced to two more songs, and I even lasted through a slow song, managing to avoid Sophie’s attempts to press her entire body tightly against mine. I threw her into a few well-executed spins, and she laughed with glee.

Emboldened by our liveliness, other people began to filter onto the dance floor and before long, everyone had shaken off their nerves and joined in, dancing and laughing and having a great time. If I hadn’t been laser focused on making my escape, I might have actually enjoyed myself.

By the time we stumbled off the dance floor, I was sweaty and tired. Sophie went to the bathroom, and I went to the punch table, where Zachery was chatting with Aisha. He poured me a cup of punch and we clinked our cups together, yelling “Cheers!” over the music. I was actually having fun—I couldn’t believe it.

“Things seem to be going well with Sophie!” Zachery said with a wiggle of his eyebrows. “Who taught you to move like that?”

I shrugged, gave him a confident smirk. “I don’t know, I guess I’m a natural.”

“I’ll say. She looks totally into you! What were you two talking about? Your future?”

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head and slurping the punch down. It was actually really good. “We were just talking about training and stuff,” I lied.

“Sure, I get it, things have to stay private between new loves. Believe me, I understand,” Zachery said. “But she is *so* hot, and she’s all about you. Come on, is she like, completely into you?”

“I mean, how would I know if she were ‘completely’ into me? I think she likes me… a little. She’s a really nice girl,” I said, meaning it. I was grateful to her for agreeing to help, and for keeping my secret. She was turning out to be one of my favorite people here, for sure. I wouldn’t tell Violet that part, though, even though it was totally innocent.

The hair stood up on the back of my neck as I watched Chad accost Sophie as soon as she’d made her way back from the bathroom to the dance floor. My defenses were up as I watched them. I didn’t like Sophie like that, but I definitely hated Chad like that. I excused myself and went over to them.

“Yo, why won’t you dance with me? I saw you dancing with Charlie, and he’s an ass. Why can’t I get a dance? I promise you’ll love it,” I heard Chad saying as I approached. I could tell that he was pushing the issue and wasn’t taking no for an answer. Surprise, surprise, he was a complete tool in every way.

“I’m not interested, Chad,” Sophie said, her gaze flicking quickly to me.

“Why not? Because of him?” Chad asked, staring daggers at me.

“No, because I’m just not,” Sophie said.

“Hey man, she said no,” I said.

“Fuck off! This is none of your business.”

Chad launched forward to chest bump me, throwing me off balance. I balled up my fists, ready to return the favor, when a loud pop rang out. Then another, and another. Smoke billowed from everywhere, filling the room in seconds.

This was it. It was time to escape!

**Episode 1499**

LOLA

I stared into Emmett’s eyes for what seemed like an eternity before I realized that I couldn’t look away. He was hot, there was no denying that, and real chemistry crackled between us like a livewire, refusing to be ignored. I couldn’t ignore the fact that I wanted him, and there was absolutely nothing stopping me from kissing him right now.

Based on his body language, I could tell that he wanted to kiss me, too. But there was still… something at the back of my mind, stopping me from taking the leap. I couldn’t quite put my finger on what that something was, but something was definitely off.

Emmett took a long look at my lips and then tipped his head down to mine. We were so close that I couldn’t believe we weren’t touching yet. I could smell his cologne, and just being so close to his powerful aura was making me weak in the knees.

“Have you changed your mind about having a mate?” he whispered.

I could tell what he wanted my answer to be. His cool breath tickled my skin, and I closed my eyes and licked my lips, imagining how sweet it would be to feel his lips on mine. I knew that he was going to be a good, sensual kisser. But what was holding me back? His hand fluttered to my waist. His touch was light, but it was still enough to send my heartbeat racing. He caressed the small strip of exposed skin under my shirt, his eyes riveted to mine.

A surge of vampire heat raced through me. God, it would be so easy to just kiss his face off right here and right now. I longed to feel his hands running over other parts of me. Despite the unexpected turn things had taken, I had to admit that his whole mad scientist thing was turning me on. There was nothing hotter than an intelligent, confident man, and Emmett was the epitome of both.

“I’m changing my mind about a lot of things,” I breathed. Part of me was still wondering what the hell he was really doing in this lab, and why he’d lied about including me in his experiments, but the other part of me was distracted by the shape of his lips… his face… that hair.

I wondered if he had any clue how undeniably attractive he was, and that his dark nature only added to it. No matter how many run-ins we’d had in the short time we’d known each other, he still managed to keep me intrigued. I could tell that he was experienced, and that he would know just what to do to push me to the edge. I wanted this. I needed this.

We slowly leaned into each other, getting closer and closer, inch by inch. Our lips were so close that all it would take was the slightest movement, and we’d be in a full-on lip lock. Just before we could finally give in to a kiss that I knew would change everything, a strong wave of emotion unlike anything I’d ever felt before raced through me.

*NO!*

I pushed Emmett away, and I wasn’t even sure why. It was like a supernatural force was repelling me from him.

“No,” I breathed, flustered and short of breath. My knees were weak, and I sagged against the wall. Emmett put his hands on my shoulders, trying to calm me down. He looked as confused as I felt.

“Don’t freak out, it’s fine,” Emmett was saying. “Take a deep breath, we can take things slow.”

I could tell that he was as frustrated as I was, though he was doing a good job of showing real concern.

“Nope, I’ve got to go!” I said. I tore out of the room, not daring to look back.

“Consider my offer!” Emmett called after me.

Once I was a safe distance away from him, I began to feel a bit better. Without thinking, I made my way to Ras’s office. Not bothering to knock, I burst in, catching her by surprise. She had her coffee cup poised in front of her lips, like she was about to take a sip.

“Yes? Is something wrong?” she asked, setting the mug down without drinking. Concern played across her features.

I sat down across from her. “You need to fess up about all the side effects of this vampire heat hypnotherapy,” I said. I should’ve known that our little hypnotherapy session wouldn’t end well, but I’d been so desperate for some sort of relief, some semblance of normalcy, that I would’ve tried anything.

“What do you mean?” Ras asked.

“I just… I just had this crazy, overwhelming feeling that I can’t describe. This unexpected, intense surge of emotions just ripped through me. It, like, took over my body and made me… cool my jets when I was hot under the collar, I guess you could say. It was like I couldn’t control myself; something literally took over and forced me to stop doing something… sexy.” I hoped I was explaining it well enough, even though I was still trying to wrap my head around what had happened.

Ras looked up at the ceiling as she mulled it over. “The hypnotherapy shouldn’t *prevent* you from acting on any impulses,” she said. “It’s only meant to make you more aware of them so that you’re able to make a more deliberate choice for yourself.”

I considered what she was saying. *Then what the hell was that feeling I had before nearly kissing Emmett?* Up until the last moment, I’d very much wanted to act on my impulses with him. It was *all* that I’d wanted, up until my entire body had turned into one giant alarm bell. It had to mean something. I couldn’t remember ever having felt that way before.

“Tell me, did this happen with your mate, Jay?” Ras asked, still trying to get to the bottom of it.

I panicked. *Shit!* I definitely couldn’t tell Ras that I’d been with Emmett. What would she think of me? She’d given me a pretty clear warning to steer clear of him, and there I was, two seconds from jumping his bones. I felt a twinge of guilt. If this Jay guy really was my mate, I’d done something completely inconsiderate. I didn’t feel good about that, though to be honest, I still didn’t quite understand this mate thing. Jay was cute and all, but how was having a mate supposed to feel? *Shit!*

“Don’t worry,” Ras said. “It could be your vampire heat reacting to you being aware of it, and not giving it the freedom it had before,” she said. She seemed confident in this assessment.

I thought this over. “I suppose that makes sense,” I said. I figured I should be happy—at least now I knew that the hypnotherapy had worked… Maybe too well.

“Good,” Ras said with a smile. “How have you been otherwise? Is everything going okay with your studies?”

“Yes, better than expected. I had a bit of a rough start, but I feel good now,” I said. “I’m learning a lot.”

*Yeah, like how to completely freak out right before getting down with a hot, mysterious vampire scientist.*

“Glad to hear it,” Ras said. “So, about Emmett. Have you been okay with him? He hasn’t tried to interact with you since that day in my office, right?”

“Oh, no!” I lied. I didn’t want to think about how quickly, how easily, the lie sprang to my lips. I didn’t feel like I had any choice but to cover the truth. I had barely figured out everything I needed to know about Emmett and his experiments, and I knew that if I brought Ras into things, I’d never get those answers.

Ras was my friend, and I really appreciated her guidance, but I felt strongly about Emmett. I needed to take my time, so I could keep evaluating the situation on my own. If Emmett was actually onto something that could help me, I wanted the freedom to leverage whatever it was without any interference.

Emmett was being forthcoming and trying his best to explain himself, and I wanted to at least hear him out. I thought back to the rat-wolf that he’d made into a vampire werewolf hybrid. It had been pretty amazing to behold such an experiment. Would that… be possible for me? I had to know.

I stood up and flashed Ras a warm smile before thanking her for letting me vent.

“Any time,” she said. “You’d better hurry off if you want some of that blood-cherry pie tonight.”

My mouth watered at the thought of it. I knew I had to be quick if I wanted any—blood desserts had a way of getting devoured in seconds flat in this place.

I said goodbye and hurried on my way to the dining room. I was just about to go down the stairs when I spotted someone stumbling down the other end of the hallway before collapsing in a heap on the floor.

“Are you okay?” I cried out, rushing over and turning them over onto their back.

It was Jacqueline. Her eyes were glowing a bright, scary orange, and she had her fangs out.

**Episode 1500**

My mind raced at Greyson’s question—was I going to stay with him tonight? I felt my defenses rising again. Who *was* I going to stay with? Was I going to hurt one of them if I stayed with the other? Were they really as agreeable to this whole arrangement as they seemed?

“Is there a schedule for that?” I squeaked. “I don’t want to hurt either of you, especially after you’ve both decided to be so cool about um… sharing me.”

I was gearing up to continue on one of my Cali Guilt Rants™ when Greyson cut me off with a chuckle. I was beyond flustered, and I calmed only when Greyson gathered me close and kissed me.

“I love that you care so much about us,” he said. “I know that you don’t want to hurt us, but remember, Xavier and I agreed to this. You know that, right?”

I nodded. “But it’s so difficult. There’s so much that’s happened in our past that I want to be sensitive to, and I’m worried about being selfish,” I said. “You know, it’s never right to have your cake and eat it, too.”

Greyson put a warm finger up to my lips, stopping me. He cupped my face in his hands.

“You have nothing to worry about right now. I love you and want to be with you. Do you love me too?” he asked. He had a sober expression on his face that drove home the sincerity of his words.

I bit my lip, trying to ride out the wave of emotions that threatened to consume me. I couldn’t believe my luck. Every time I was with Greyson, I felt protected, cared for, listened to, and respected. I thought back to when I’d first met him, how different things had been, and it blew my mind that things had come to this. We had unconditional, real love between us—love so strong that he was willing to share me with his brother, whose love was also so real and so strong. I literally had the best of both worlds, and both worlds were smoking hot.

I nodded and looked deep into his eyes. “I love you. So damn much,” I said.

He grinned and pressed his lips to mine again. The heat between us was so intense that I just knew that it had something to do with the power of our connection.

“So, back to the matter at hand,” Greyson said between kisses. “It’s true that you have a few options in front of you tonight, love.” He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me tightly against him. “But I hope you’ll choose this option right here in front of you. Let me tell you about all the perks.”

“*Perks*?”

“Oh yes, *I’m* the main perk,” he said with a laugh. “Here, you’ll also get warm arms to hold you under the covers.” He planted a series of kisses on the soft spot under my jaw. “Not to mention the sweetest kisses that you’ll find, anywhere. And I won’t mention that I am… ahem… highly skilled in all manners of intimacy. Tonight, every bit of my attention will be focused on you.”

It was good that he only had eyes for me tonight, because I was having trouble thinking about anything else but him. “So, you mean to tell me I get the undivided attention of a man highly skilled in all manners of intimacy? I’m sorry sir, I don’t quite know what you mean by that,” I teased.

“Oh, so you want me to spell it out for you,” he said, fluttering his tongue into my mouth suggestively. “Well, here’s my tongue.” He pressed his hips into mine in a brazen play at pointing out the growing bulge in his pants. “And here’s my…”

“Okay, I think I’ve got the picture,” I said.

Silence fell over the room as he continued to plunder my mouth with his tongue, his hands raking through my hair, giving it a gentle tug every once in a while.

I finally felt relaxed. I let go of all my anxiety about the details. I had to just trust that everything would work out. We’d been through a lot and come out on the other side, stronger than before, and that had to mean something.

I grabbed his hands, moving them from the small of my back up to cup my breasts. I returned the ferocity of his kiss, playfully bullying his tongue back until I was able to fill his mouth with my own. He moaned as I pushed him down onto the couch and mounted him, flipping my hair out of the way so that I could get full command of his lips.

He leaned back, rubbing my back while I did a slow grind on his lap.

“I guess that’s a yes to option number one?” he said against my lips.

I could feel the strength of his erection growing. It was deliciously hard, and I thought back to the skills he’d mentioned before.

This was an important moment between us. We could be together without any guilt or hesitation, and without worry for how badly we might be hurting Xavier. This was my mate and I loved him, and I was ready to show him how much.

I slid off his lap and dropped to my knees. I unzipped his fly, and he lifted up so that I could work his pants down his legs. I couldn’t pull his underwear down fast enough.

I sat back on my haunches as I looked at his cock, lying against his thigh. I took it in my hand and stroked it up and down while I looked him straight in the eye. His expression was a mix of amusement and expectation, and I knew he was enjoying the sight of me on my knees.

“Shit, love,” he said after a short intake of breath as I increased my speed. He’d somehow gotten even harder in my hand, and I felt moisture gathering in my panties in anticipation of how great he was going to feel once he was inside me. “Can you take your clothes off?” he asked.

“Your wish is my command,” I said. I climbed to my feet, pulled off my shirt, and slid my jeans down my legs. When I unclasped my bra to let my breasts spring free, Greyson gasped. He had that glazed look in his eyes—the one he always got at moments like this.

Once I was completely naked, I dropped to my knees again and took Greyson’s rigid cock into my mouth. He moaned and settled back into the cushions. He laid his head back and reached out blindly for me, finally finding my hair and letting it slide between his fingers as I pumped my lips up and down his warm shaft.

I came up for air, his cock slipping heavily out of my mouth and landing on his thigh again with a wet slap. He sat up and took my breasts in his hands, massaging and squeezing before pinching my nipples. He stood and motioned for me to get on the couch.

“On your knees again,” he said huskily.

I did as I was told, watching him over my shoulder as I held my breath, waiting. I sighed when I felt his lips against my wetness. He stuck his tongue inside me and the pleasure was almost too much. I arched away from him and he held me fast, moving his tongue around, just like he’d promised with our kiss earlier.

I was just about to come when he stood up and slid inside me. He caressed my back as he pumped in and out, expelling a loud breath every time he plunged deeper inside. He leaned forward and put his lips to my ear, telling me over and over again how good I felt and how much he loved how tight and warm I was. How he couldn’t wait to spend the rest of his life with me.

I opened my legs wider and met each of his thrusts with a swirl of my hips. We didn’t say much after that, there was only the slap of my ass against him and his small grunts of pleasure.

When he came, he fell on top of me. He peppered my back and neck with kisses as his hand slithered around to my belly and down to my clit, where he gave it three savage rubs that put me over the edge. I screamed, making sure to muffle the sound in the couch cushion.

When we were done, we collapsed onto the couch, and I snuggled into the crook of his arm.

“Maybe this will work after all,” I said, my mind still recovering.

“It *will* work,” Greyson agreed. “It’s a bit unconventional, to be sure, but maybe this was the solution we needed.”

“Maybe so. It’s worth a try,” I said.

“Of course you think that—I just made you come,” Greyson said.

My cheeks warmed with embarrassment, and I swatted him on the arm. “Well, you certainly convinced me.”

“About what?” Greyson asked, confused.

“To stay with you tonight.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I’ll get my things so I can just hop in the shower first thing in the morning. Should I bring over my toothbrush too? Maybe I should have a drawer to myself. I’ll ask Xavier what he thinks about that, too. God, am I going to have to get new clothes?”

Soon, I realized that Greyson wasn’t responding. I turned to look up at him. His eyes were closed, and I noticed that his hold on me had gone limp.

“Greyson!”

**Episode 1501**

ARTEMIS

I nibbled at Rishika’s warm neck, breathing in her scent, and noticing how hot it made me. I loved the way she smelled. It was a mixture of soap, flowers, and the minty shampoo she used. We held each other tight and kissed slow and deep, taking our time.

It was a little funny, being this close with all the layers we had on between us to combat the cold. I was sure we would’ve looked comical to anyone who happened upon us in our big coats and scarves and gloves as we made out. Our kissing intensified, and I ran my hand up her back to the base of her neck, so I could pull her in closer.

Rishika broke away, her skin flushed and her eyes hazy. “Do you want to be with me?”

I felt a jolt of emotion I’d never quite felt before—was that love? It was all so foreign to me, but there was only one answer screaming out inside me.

“Yes, I want to be all yours,” I answered. I leaned forward and brushed my lips across hers. She returned my kiss with less urgency than before, but it was still just as nice. “Are you my girlfriend?” I asked.

Rishika’s face brightened as she broke into a wide grin. She nodded. “Girlfriend.”

I couldn’t hide my smile. I’d never in a million years thought that this would be something I’d have. This emotion, this *person.* I’d lived a different life before, a very solitary one where my work had ruled my every thought, and every moment of my existence.

I’d never even considered the idea of having someone by my side on my journey—much less a beautiful, fun woman who was so sexy I couldn’t keep my hands off her. I’d never thought I would trust someone enough to tell them exactly how I felt. I’d never pictured having a partner, a person to tell all my secrets, a person to kiss whenever I wanted. I leaned forward and planted a quick kiss on her lips. Her smile deepened.

Rishika reached out and unzipped my coat, just enough that she could snake her hand behind my back and into the warmth. “My hands are cold!” she squealed.

I laughed and leaned forward so that she could link her other hand inside. I bent down and kissed her neck, then dragged my lips to hers. She opened her mouth to receive my tongue, and I backed her against the wall, causing the shovels and rakes hanging beside us to clang loudly. We giggled.

“You think anybody’s ever hooked up in here before?” Rishika asked.

I pulled away and looked around at the rustic space; it was dark and shadowy and more than a little dirty. “No,” I said. We laughed again. “But we can definitely change that.”

I slyly removed one of my gloves and stuck it in my pocket. I reached down between us and lifted Rishika’s coat so that I could get to her pants. I unbuttoned her fly expertly with one hand.

Rishika laughed. “Are we really going to do this?”

“Yeah, if you spread your legs just a bit,” I breathed. Rishika widened her stance, and I tunneled my hands into her pants, where it was deliciously warm. “It’s a toasty heaven in here,” I said to her. She laughed again.

I reached down and ran my hand gently along her sex, noting how wet she was already. I parted the slick folds and pressed my middle finger against her clit. She gasped. I pulled my hand out and put my finger in my mouth, then put my hand back down, this time pushing inside her with one finger, then two.

“*Yes*,” Rishika said.

I kissed her, first licking her lips and then plunging my tongue into her mouth while my fingers explored her hot, wet depths. Her body vibrated with the force of my movements, and soon I could feel the throb of my own arousal. I held Rishika close, catching her weight a few times as her knees weakened.

“Is that good?” I asked her.

She didn’t answer, but her body told me everything I needed to know. She had parted her legs more, and she bucked against my hand as I kept up my rhythm.

“I’m coming!” she said, before too long. I felt her tight channel pulsing around my fingers, and then her warm wetness ran over my palm. I pulled my hand out of her pants and stuck my fingers in my mouth. She looked up at me, her eyelids low and her breath still coming in soft bursts. “Now you.”

Rishika dropped to her knees, and we both laughed as she struggled to hold up my coat and get to my pants. She pulled my pants and my undergarments down at the same time, and I heard a sharp intake of breath as she saw just how wet and aroused I was.

Without a word, she nudged my thighs apart and buried her face between them. She snaked her tongue back and forth against my clit, and I fell back against the wall, arching my back and spreading my legs more as she dove further in, her tongue lapping at my fluttering opening. She worked her hand out of her gloves and slid a finger inside me as her tongue and lips teased me closer and closer to climax. I moved my hips in time with the stroking of her fingers, and I came with my eyes closed while my hands caressed the sides of Rishika’s face.

When we were done, we leaned against the door of the shed and held each other, rocking back and forth a little without saying a word. I felt even more vulnerable now than I had when we’d decided to make things official moments ago.

“What does this all mean for us, now?” I asked. “What do girlfriends actually *do*?”

Rishika looked at me with amusement in her eyes. “You’re adorable. It just means that we’re going to be there for each other. We’re each other’s person.”

I was blown away by how simple Rishika made it all sound, but it made sense.

“I’d really like that,” I said.

“Good!” Rishika said as she leaned forward for another kiss. “Now, can we get our clothes back on again because *fuck* it’s cold!”

We slid our underwear and pants back up and tucked our sweaters back into our jeans. We zipped up our jackets, then plucked our scarves from one of the metal hooks behind the door and wrapped them around our necks.

I took my glove out of my pocket and used it to swat Rishika’s ass. She did the same, and soon we were slapping each other silly with our gloves, chasing each other around the small space, taking care not to knock anything else over.

Once we’d tired ourselves out, we left the shed, bracing ourselves against the cold that hit us like a punch as soon as we opened the door. We made our way back to the pack house hand in hand. As soon as we walked through the door, Zainab came running up.

“Hey! I need your help fixing one of the back doors that broke off its hinges during the blizzard,” she said.

I’d hoped to spend more time with Rishika, but she promised she wouldn’t be gone long, and obviously we could catch up later. She gave me a peck on the lips before going off with Zainab. I went into the kitchen, on the hunt for hot chocolate. I’d recently learned how to make it, shortly after hearing about it for the first time in my life.

Pip was in the kitchen, stirring a cup of tea at the counter. She was looking a bit listless.

“Hey!” I said, coming up beside her to grab a mug from the cabinet. Pip didn’t answer. I shrugged. *What’s up with her?*

I felt a mild pang in my head, almost like the beginning of a headache, but it I shook it off and opened a package of marshmallows before dumping a pile of hot chocolate mix into my cup. There was still hot water in the tea kettle, and I poured it over the chocolate.

I was in the middle of dunking the marshmallows into the steaming hot drink when the pang returned, gaining intensity until it began to feel like a migraine. *What the hell is going on? Where is this coming from?*

I dropped my spoon to the counter as a weird sound filled my head. It sounded like millions of voices all speaking at once. I looked around. There was no one but me and Pip in the kitchen. *What in the hell?* I was scared now. I abandoned my hot chocolate, doubled over against the kitchen cabinet, and pressed my hands to my ears, trying to quiet the voices.

I jerked when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I could just make out Pip’s voice cutting through the pain and chaos that had taken over my body. I looked up as she spoke again. Her eyes were open wide and glowed bright orange.

“Mistress, are you okay?”

**Episode 1502**

GREYSON

I opened my eyes slowly. It felt so great—amazing, even—to have Cali back. I turned to face the window. The curtains were wide open, allowing the early morning sunlight to stream inside. Birds chirped loudly right outside the window, which was open a crack to let in a stream of cool air that tickled over my skin. I yawned. Damn, I must have passed out. I rolled over to pull Cali close, but she wasn’t in the bed anymore. I sat up. She’d probably gone downstairs to join the rest of the pack for breakfast or something.

As that thought crossed my mind, Cali poked her head in through the door.

“Good morning sleepyhead!” she sang, coming into the bedroom.

She looked so beautiful. Her hair was freshly washed and cascaded down over her shoulders. Her eyes shone brightly at me, and her pink lips were pursed as she held back a smile. I got out of bed and lunged at her. It felt good to not have to restrain myself. I scooped her into a bear hug, kissing her playfully on the back of her neck. Overcome with happiness, I picked her up and cradled her in my arms while she laughed.

“Put me down!” she squealed.

I spun her around, pretending that I was going to drop her, which made her laugh and swat at me.

“This arrangement isn’t half bad, is it?” I said.

Cali gave me a perplexed look. “Arrangement? Is that what we’re calling this now?”

She held up her hand and wiggled her fingers, bringing my attention to the ring sparkling on her finger. Was that a wedding ring? It was my turn to be confused. Slowly, I set her down on her feet.

She gave me a warm smile. “Now hurry up and get dressed and come downstairs. It’s a snow day today, and your son has been bothering me all morning about you taking him sledding. Sabine went next door for a snowball fight.”

Sabine? My son? As Cali left the room, it hit me that this wasn’t my reality. I looked around my bedroom. Everything looked normal enough, but I knew it wasn’t. Dammit! Could I just have *one* fucking normal day without being invaded by witchy visions?

I stalked around the room trying to wake myself up. I stomped my feet and slapped my face harder and harder until I realized that wasn’t going to be enough to pull me out of this dream. I went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. Nope, still here.

I went back into the bedroom, opened a dresser drawer, stuck my hand inside, and slammed the drawer shut on my hand, hoping that it would be painful enough to do the job. *Shit!* It hurt like hell, but nothing happened. I was still in the dream.

“Use your words, Greyson,” I said to myself. “Wake up, this isn’t real. You’re stuck in this place, and you need to be in the real world with the real Cali.”

I opened and closed my eyes, taking deep, calming breaths, trying to meditate my way back into reality. Fuck. It wasn’t working.

I plopped down on the bed and buried my face in my hands, defeated. Finally, I decided that it would probably be best to just see the dream through. If this time was anything like the other times this had happened, I would wake up when I was ready.

I got dressed quickly and went downstairs.

As I made my way through the house, I realized that this wasn’t the pack house that I was used to. It looked like a family house, complete with subtle, tasteful décor that was a far cry from the expensive modern vibe of the pack house. It was kind of familiar, though. Was it the same house from the dream about Cali’s and my rehearsal dinner?

As I went down the stairs, I examined the pictures lining the staircase wall. They showed me and Cali smiling and hugging in front of exotic backdrops, as if we’d traveled the world. There were also a bunch of pictures of me, Cali, a little girl, and a small boy who looked just like Cali. Our kids, no doubt.

As soon as I got to the kitchen, the same boy ran over to me, bursting with excitement as he asked me what we were going to do with our day off. I smiled down at him, knowing that I needed to act the part. The faster I went with the flow of the dream, the faster I’d wake up—at least I hoped so.

“We can do whatever you want today, my boy!” I said, watching him run excitedly around the kitchen. I considered him with interest, still trying to stay calm and act natural in this totally unnatural place.

Cali was leaning against the countertop, giving me strange look.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No, nothing’s wrong,” I answered. “Maybe I just need some tea.”

“You sure? You’re definitely not acting like yourself,” Cali pressed.

I gave her a kiss. She felt stiff and cold in my arms, yet another sign that this wasn’t the real world. Cali was always warm and soft and inviting. I longed to be back with the real her. In the back of my mind, I wondered if she was currently lost in one of these strange dreams, too.

“I’m fine, really. Nothing to worry about,” I said.

After breakfast, we all got into our coats and gloves.

“You’d better put your warm coat on,” I said to Cali, trying to sound normal and nonchalant.

The three of us went outside together. Cali clearly wasn’t buying it, and she still watched me closely, like she was waiting for me to make a wrong move.

Cali sighed. “Oh, you’re catching on, aren’t you?” she said in a voice that wasn’t hers.

I watched in shock as the scene melted down around us. Everything went dark as the house crumbled into shadows. I forced myself to remain calm. This was usually the part where I woke up. I braced myself, hoping that I would open my eyes soon and be back home, safe and sound.

No such luck. I landed with a thud in a soft pile of dark snow. I was still outside, and it was still winter, but I couldn’t feel the chill in the air, or the bite of cold snow against my skin.

The moon was full and high, and looked way bigger than usual. I was all alone in the woods, and I could see the sky’s reflection in the pond water at my feet. I stood up and looked around. The woods were all wrong, too. The trees were strange looming figures in the darkness, and it was completely silent.

The pond began to churn and bubble, spitting rivers of foamy water up onto the banks. I stepped back and watched the familiar figures of the three witches rise up out of the roiling water. And then Chloe, Lauren, and Posie were right in front of me, and I couldn’t have been more annoyed.

“Can you three stop fucking with me and leave me alone? Xavier, Cali, and I have found a new way to handle the *due destini* curse. Just let the spell run out and be done with it,” I said.

It figured that they would decide to visit just as I was feeling like we could kick this *due destini* thing in the ass, and I was way past losing my patience for these games the witches apparently couldn’t help but play.

“You keep telling me over and over that I’m running out of time, so when is that time up? Just do it already!” I said.

Anything would’ve been better than this extended torture of walking on eggshells, never knowing when the next shoe was going to drop, looking over my shoulder, having these strange dreams.

“Foolish boy!” Chloe rasped. “Your little truce won’t last!”

“You’ve already agreed to our spell,” Posie continued. “It’s too late to stop it. It will end when it ends.”

“Regret is only natural,” Lauren said. “Or… it will be, after what’s coming.”

An intense feeling of foreboding overtook me.

“Maybe if you just told me what was coming, I’d have time to warn the others—just so we can be ready if there’s danger that we’ll have to face,” I reasoned.

“The future is ever changing. It would be impossible to show you for sure. There are millions and millions of possibilities—limitless scenarios that could come to be,” Lauren said, her voice echoing strangely against the deep silence that enshrouded us.

The three women looked up at the moon. “You should hurry before it comes!” they said, all at the same time.

“Before what comes?” I asked.

“The helm of destruction,” they said, again in chilling unison.

I wondered if they practiced this whole thing in the mirror, making sure to be as creepy and unhelpful as possible.

“You’d better act fast, before everything is gone!” Chloe said.

“Before everything turns to ash,” Posie said.

Lauren was the last one to tear her eyes away from the moon to look at me. “Your future might have already changed.”

My eyes jerked open as I woke from the dream. “What the fuck does *that* mean?”

**Episode 1503**

Greyson’s eyes fluttered open, and I was happy to see that he was okay. I started in on him as soon as I knew he was awake for sure.

“Did you just have a dream?” I demanded.

He looked out of it. His eyes were open, but his expression was blank, and he looked around the room like he wasn’t quite sure where he was. I’d seen this look before, after the last strange dream he’d had.

“Oh my gosh. When will these things end?” I said.

Greyson was beyond groggy, and I helped him sit up. He lolled back against the couch, staring straight ahead. He wasn’t responding, which freaked me out even more.

“Do you remember what Marta said at the pond?” he asked suddenly.

I shook my head. At that moment, I didn’t care about Marta. “What happened to you? What did you see?” I stroked the side of his face. His skin was clammy.

“Cali, do you remember the prophecy?” Greyson pressed.

I definitely remembered the prophecy, and how scary Marta had looked as she’d spoken it. I thought hard about what Marta had said, trying to remember.

We both sat in silence as we struggled to recall the exact words, exchanging any fragments that came to mind and dismissing those that didn’t sound quite right. Finally, we pieced it together and Greyson recited it.

“The hour of Letifer is upon us—the Helm of Destruction will bring about the end of the world and begin a new kingdom of death. All who stand in its way will pay.”

The words sent chills up my spine, the same way they had when I’d heard them the first time.

I’d prayed that the words would amount to nothing, and as I looked at Greyson, I hoped that we could stay clear of whatever the words implied. I hated that he was bringing this up, but it was clear that it had something to do with his dream, and how strangely he was acting.

“What the hell happened in that dream?” I prodded.

“It was weird—and I’m struggling to remember everything that happened, but I think I received a warning from the witches. Why they’re choosing to actually help right now is beyond me,” he said.

I was about to press for more when the door to the den jiggled, and someone knocked.

“Hello, is someone in there?”

I didn’t answer, feeling equal parts flustered and frustrated as we both scrambled into our clothes while attempting to make as little noise as possible. I tried to make the moment light.

“So much for being discrete. I guess we’ll have to get some more practice in?” I teased, poking Greyson in the side.

I stared over at him, hoping to see that twinkle in his eye, but it didn’t come. He looked completely spent, and *worried*. I hated seeing him like that, especially since we’d been enjoying ourselves so much before. Greyson was my Alpha, my mate, the man who always had a plan, no matter what. If he was this worried, then I didn’t even want to think about the worst-case scenario. But I didn’t like it. If he was worried, then that meant that I should’ve been worried ten times over.

There was another knock on the door, and this time both Torin’s and Astrid’s voices filtered through. “Hey, is everything okay in there? The door is locked!”

I stood and offered my hand to Greyson. “We’d better get out of here.”

Greyson still wasn’t with it, and he was staring at the wall with a blank expression on his face. He blinked up at me when I rubbed a hand through his hair.

I frowned and reached out to him via our mind link, so that we wouldn’t be overheard.

*Is everything okay? Talk to me, Greyson. Please!*

There was a loud thud against the door, followed by a howl of pain. The noise finally seemed to snap Greyson out of whatever trance he’d been in.

“What the hell was that?” he asked, getting to his feet. We unlocked the door and pulled it open just as Torin came barreling through. I yelped and jumped out of the way as Torin ran straight into Greyson and fell to floor like he’d hit a wall, completely dazed.

“Are you okay?” Astrid shrieked, running to Torin’s side. “Torin, what happened?”

Torin struggled to sit up. He held his forehead and looked up at Greyson. “I guess that’s why they call them rock-hard abs. Ow.”

“We’re sorry for interrupting,” Astrid said slowly.

She looked back and forth between Greyson and me, as if piecing together how we’d ended up locked inside. I avoided her gaze, as I knew I was blushing like crazy, which would remove any doubt from her mind that we’d been hooking up in here.

“I, um, left a book in here and I really wanted it and I’ve never seen this door locked before…” Astrid continued.

“It’s fine!” I told her, trying my best to laugh the whole thing off. I noticed the book she was talking about, as I’d seen her reading it before. I also remembered that we’d knocked it to the floor during our heated session earlier. “There it is, I think!” I said, pointing to it sheepishly.

Torin was slowly getting to his feet. He looked like a fawn taking its first steps.

“You good?” I asked him.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, smiling at us. “Just got the wind knocked out of me a bit.”

I dragged Greyson out of the den by his arm, slightly annoyed at how sluggish he was being. I needed to figure out how to get him talking. It was rare to see Greyson so shaken. What in the world had he seen in that dream to make him act like this? It couldn’t have been the witches alone. At this point, it seemed like we saw those three life-ruining witches more than we saw our family and friends.

We lingered in the hallway while I stared at Greyson, willing him to open up.

“What happened?” I asked. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Greyson said. “Don’t make a big deal out of this.”

I scowled at him and planted my hand on my hip before I could stop myself. “Don’t make a big deal out of this, you say? You could barely say a word when we were in there—it was like you were in a fog. So don’t say nothing’s wrong. Don’t you realize that I can read you and your emotions the same way you can read mine? I know that something’s up, that something’s on your mind, and no amount of ‘I’m fine, Cali’ or ‘drop it, Cali’ or ‘mind your business, Cali’ is going to make me stop asking! You should know that by now!”

Greyson sighed and pulled me into a hug. I wrapped my arms around him tightly, laid my head on his warm shoulder, and closed my eyes. I just wanted him to be okay. I just wanted all of us to be okay. I just couldn’t shake the feeling that something awful was going on.

He kissed the top of my head. “I *will* be fine. We’ll talk later, okay?”

I nodded up at him. That would have to be enough for now. At least he was talking again, and his eyes had lost that faraway look.

“I’m going to shower,” I said.

This perked him up. “That an invitation?”

“*No*.” I playfully shoved him, laughing as he raised an eyebrow. “My own shower. Do you want some tea after?”

“Tea sounds great,” he said, smiling.

Finally, that twinkle was back in his eyes. I breathed a little easier. I knew that things weren’t right, but I was okay to let the issue rest for now.

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Once I was showered, I headed to the kitchen to make Greyson’s tea, and probably a little mocha for myself, and found Artemis and Pip standing near the counter together. Something weird was going on. Artemis was doubled over against the countertop, holding her head and crying out in pain.

“Oh my god!” I cried out, rushing to her side as she started to collapse. “What are you doing?!” I looked at Pip, then yelled, “Someone help!”

Greyson rushed into the room. He was in full Alpha mode as his eyes darted from Pip to Artemis as he assessed the situation. “What’s going on here?” he asked.

I was about to reach out and touch Artemis when I realized that Pip’s eyes were glowing bright orange. I rushed to wedge myself between Pip and Artemis.

“You get away from her!” I yelled at Pip.

Greyson rushed to put himself between me and Pip. He thrust out his hand and grabbed Pip’s shoulder as he lunged toward her, as if to subdue her.

In a flash, Mace was there, and his face was screwed into a mask of anger. He launched forward and shoved Greyson. “Get the fuck away from my Luna!”

**Episode 1504**

XAVIER

I sat across from Kira, wringing my hands in frustration. I couldn’t believe this. Once again, she was hell-bent on getting her hands dirty. She was insisting on being included in taking Iñigo down. Unbelievable. Before, I’d barely been able to convince her to kill Garren—and once she had, she’d completely freaked out and been absolutely riddled with regret. Now, she was raring to go up against a vampire who ran a booming ring of venom dens and who knew what the fuck else?

I knew better than most how dangerous Iñigo was. After what I’d gone through at his hand, I could only imagine what else he was capable of. Kira had to know, too, seeing as she’d worked closely with him—which was why it was so surprising that she thought she could go toe to toe with a professional terror-bringer like Iñigo.

I unclasped my hands and drummed my fingers against my knee, which I couldn’t stop jiggling. I was impatient and bored with this entire situation. I just wanted to get this next thing checked off my list. Kill Iñigo? Check. Done. I knew that it was only a matter of time before something else came out of left field to fuck me over, so I wanted to get this Iñigo thing taken care of pronto.

“Well?” I said. “Are you going to say anything about your new vendetta against Iñigo, or are we going to keep sitting here like we’re in the principal’s office?”

“I meant what I said!” Kira huffed. “I want in on killing Iñigo! In fact, I’d prefer it if I could just do it myself.” She tossed her hair over her shoulder like she thought she was a badass.

It was true that she’d come through for me in a pinch and had totally gone badass on all those werewolves and vampires that had tried to attack us on the road, but this wasn’t about whether she *could* handle Iñigo.

I laughed a little. “That’s not an option. Ava needs to kill Iñigo, because that’s how ultimatums work. If you just went and took care of it, how would I keep the upper hand with her?” I said, shaking my head. “I need Ava to show her true colors. If she fails to do it, I’ll be happy to let you have a go at him.”

“Yeah?” Kira asked, her eyes flashing. She had a hardcore side, that was for sure.

I shrugged. “I’ll want a piece too, of course. But yeah, it’s a deal.”

I considered Kira for a moment. She looked contemplative. I didn’t blame her—there was a lot going on, and more than enough to reflect on.

I thought back to my time as Iñigo’s blood bag. At the time, I’d known that Ava had done something, had had a hand in how I’d ended up in Iñigo’s clutches. Kira had thought so, too, but we’d been fuzzy on the details. I did consider the fact that Ava had run away with us… But *ugh!* I curled my hand into a fist. Ava was so damn complicated that I hadn’t managed to get a full read on whether her behavior was fear of Iñigo or something more calculated.

“Iñigo used me, and I’ve stood by and witnessed him do… a lot of horrible things,” Kira said, casting me an apologetic look. “Iñigo has to go. He’s like a bad wound, festering and festering, getting worse and worse over time. It would be in everyone’s best interest to just take his head off.”

“I agree completely. You know that. But you’re not allowed to make any kind of move on that bloodsucker until Ava has a chance to act—or not act, depending on what she’s up to. Either way, Iñigo is the only way I’ll get to the bottom of whatever Ava’s truth is,” I said. “Do you understand?”

Kira nodded. “I do, but I won’t hold my breath. There’s something off about that girl.”

“You’re telling me,” I replied.

We both jumped when we heard a shout from the kitchen. We exchanged a look and got up to investigate. I recognized Cali’s voice in the confusion and broke into a run. I peeled around the hallway corner and dashed into the kitchen, Kira hot on my heels.

Cali had her arm around Artemis, who was clinging to Cali like her life depended on it. She didn’t even look like she could stand upright. He face was pale and drawn, and her eyes were pressed shut. She didn’t look good at all. Greyson was standing between them, and he and Mace were practically at each other’s throats.

“What the hell is going on? Everything good here?” I asked.

Mace didn’t look at me. He had handfuls of Greyson’s shirt in his fists as Greyson countered by aiming a rigid strong-arm at Mace’s chest. They were in a literal lock-up, and it looked like things were only getting more heated.

I edged closer, my hands up, just in case Mace decided to turn on me.

“Cali, Artemis, step out of the way,” I said. I didn’t hesitate as I slid in between Greyson and Mace and pried them apart with no small amount of difficulty. I had to yank Mace a little more as he refused to give up his hold on Greyson’s shirt.

Greyson swiped at him like he wanted to take his head off, narrowly missing hitting me in the face.

“You’d both better calm the fuck down!” I said, pushing each of them to opposite sides of the kitchen.

Greyson and Mace growled at each other, trying to tear past me to finish what they’d started.

“This is how you’re going to act after your beautiful love and peace speech earlier?” I asked. “Is this how you set a fucking example, brother?”

“Things are under control,” Greyson growled at me.

Mace barked a laugh. “You call laying hands on someone else’s mate *under control*?”

I shot a quick look at Greyson, taken aback. I was surprised to hear this. Greyson was a lot of things, and I’d made sure to call him most of the bad things, but putting his hands on someone like Pip didn’t really fit his M.O. There had to be more to the story, but I knew that Mace and Greyson weren’t in the headspace to have a calm discussion about what had gone wrong between them.

“This is just a big misunderstanding!” Cali shouted. “I jumped in between Artemis and Pip because it looked like she was about to hurt Artemis.”

I looked at Pip. She looked about as bad as Artemis did. I couldn’t imagine that she had the strength to attack anyone in the state she was in, but it wasn’t like Cali to misread something like that. She was extremely protective of Artemis. Maybe that was the problem. Still, it was strange that Pip looked so bad—she’d been on the mend last time I’d checked.

“Well, I didn’t hurt her, did I?” Pip said. “Quite the opposite. I was trying to see if Artemis was okay! She started screaming and fell across the counter. Something was wrong, and I was only trying to help.”

Her eyes kept darting back and forth between Greyson and Mace, like she was afraid they’d start fighting again at any moment. “Greyson’s the one who came in and made it a fight,” she said.

“No, that would be YOUR mate,” Greyson shot back. He looked like he was about to lunge at the both of them all over again. What was *with* him?

*Xavier*, Cali’s voice came in my head. *There was something with her eyes…*

I tensed. *What?*

*I was going to say something, but Mace is so volatile right now…*

“Everyone, shut the fuck up!” I yelled. I was already over this, and we hadn’t even been in here three minutes. Silence fell over the room. I was shocked that Greyson and Mace had listened to me. I looked at Cali and gave her a small nod. “Take a step back, both of you. Cool the fuck down. Going head to head in the kitchen of all damn places? Don’t cause trouble in my house, got it?”

I swear, I was the only person in this entire pack house who actually took care not to break and ruin everything in sight. When folks weren’t bursting in trying to attack us and ruining the paint job in the living room, it was my brother starting fights in my kitchen. Where I kept the good crystal.

I looked back and forth between Greyson and Mace. It seemed like they were both finally calming down for the most part, though their eyes still stared daggers across the room.

“Fine, agreed,” Mace finally said. “We can sort it out later.”

He put an arm around Pip’s shoulders as they left the kitchen, Mace casting one final heated glance over his shoulder before they disappeared.

“What the hell is your problem?” I said, turning to Greyson.

As I waited for his response, I caught a whiff of a particular scent in the air. Cali’s shampoo… *Wait.* I looked from Greyson to Cali, and back again. Both of them had wet hair.

“Did you already sleep together?” I asked.

**Episode 1505**

CHARLIE

Despite my normally cool head, I fell right into the chaos that broke out the moment the smoke bombs started going off. Smoke rolled in from every corner, blotting out the lights and throwing the entire room into a strange darkness. How many of those things had Sophie used? The smoke was so thick that I could barely see what was directly in front of me. I was coughing and choking, just like everyone else. My eyes watered and burned, and tears ran down my cheeks. Talk about overkill.

Everyone was screaming and running around in a panic, materializing in and out of the thick clouds of smoke as they scrambled, presumably searching for an exit—or at least some fresh air. I wondered, for a split second, if it was possible to choke to death on this stuff. Someone turned up the lights, which threw the whole room into a hazy glow.

Sergeant Pepperdine’s whistle tore through the confusion, followed by his disembodied voice. “HUNTERS ASSEMBLE!”

I looked around quickly, trying to see if I could spot him. I didn’t see him anywhere, but his message had travelled successfully to every corner of the room.

I watched, shocked, as every hunter in attendance pulled out a weapon—including Sophie, who whipped out a red baton with pointed ends. It had her name written in cursive on the side.

“Everyone! Check the perimeter of the fieldhouse—we might have an intruder! The exit is to the north. Get your head in the game, hunters! A little smoke never hurt nobody!” Sergeant Pepperdine yelled.

Zachery stumbled over to me. “Are you okay, Charlie? Have you seen Aisha or Reggie?”

I couldn’t help but notice that even in all the commotion, not a hair on Zachery’s head was out of place. One day, if I ever saw him again after this, I would have to ask him to teach me his ways with the hair gel.

“No, but I’m sure they’re fine,” I said.

I scanned the room, hoping that Sergeant Pepperdine remained as far away from me as possible. I knew that I was the first person he’d come looking for once the confusion was over. Not to mention the fact that Chad was most likely already figuring out how to blame me for this whole thing. At least this time he’d be right.

“I’m going to go around the back of the fieldhouse and check the woods,” Zachery said. “See if I can find Reggie or Aisha and make sure no one’s hurt. Watch your back, man—a few years ago, a group of vampires attacked the camp and some hunters died.”

“Wow, really?” I was surprised to hear this. “I’ll be safe, Zachery, you do the same.”

We clapped hands and pulled each other into a quick hug before Zachery sprinted off toward the exit. I knew that Zachery would be okay—none of this was real, anyway—but I took note of the fact that he would be a calm, collected resource in a crazy situation.

Our plan seemed to be working almost too well. I just had to stay out of Sergeant Pepperdine’s way, and I’d be home free. Sophie bounded up to me and grabbed me by the arm.

“We’d better hurry if we’re going to get you out of here!” she said.

We went outside into the dark and chilly night. I wondered if Sophie was cold—the fabric of her jumpsuit was all beauty and no brawn—but I dismissed the thought as she took the lead.

We did a quick circle around the outside of the fieldhouse, watching as other pairs of hunters cased the place with their weapons ready, prepared to attack anything that moved. I felt bad for putting them all on alert like this—I never would have agreed to do anything like this if I’d known about the camp’s dark history. I couldn’t believe that had happened here. It was almost too awful to think about.

“Hey, do you know anything about an attack that happened a few years ago?” I whispered to Sophie as we moved quickly along the side of the building, trying not to look suspicious. “Zachery told me some campers were killed by vampires…”

Sophie didn’t answer, and I didn’t have time to push the issue. I watched a group of campers go into the woods, and I made a mental note not to go that way when I finally got out of here.

We waited as a patrol ran by, and then we sprinted off toward a cluster of bushes where I’d stashed my duffle earlier. I opened it and took quick inventory of what was inside. I reached in and felt around, relieved when my hand hit the wood of the stake that my mother had given me. I pulled it out, just to get my eyes on it. Good, I was ready.

I zipped the duffel closed and threw the bag onto my shoulder, already scanning the trees that surrounded the camp as I considered which route would be the best.

“I’m ready to go,” I said, turning to Sophie. She was crying. I dropped my bag, shocked. “Are you okay? What’s going on?”

“It’s nothing, it’s nothing. I’m sorry,” Sophie said, brushing the tears from her eyes gingerly, so she wouldn’t mess up her makeup. She turned away from me, obviously embarrassed.

“It doesn’t seem like nothing,” I said. “What is it?”

“It’s just that my older sister died on a night kind of like this one,” Sophie said. She looked up at the sky and fanned her face, trying to dry the tears before they could escape down her cheeks and put her makeup in peril.

“I’m so sorry, Sophie,” I said. “I had no idea.”

I was learning more tonight than I had in all my time at camp so far—too bad none of it was good.

“It’s all right. Don’t worry about me. I just didn’t think that helping you with this would remind me so much of what happened eight years ago. I didn’t realize the feelings were still so fresh,” she said.

I was itching to leave, but I wasn’t going to be the dick who left a crying girl out in the woods. That wasn’t who I was. I took a quick look around. There were campers everywhere, scanning the horizon for anything that didn’t look right.

I was confident that at the moment, we just looked like everyone else—not taking Sophie’s emotional state into account. But I knew that when the smoke cleared, literally, there would be a lot of questions thrown around, and I didn’t want to be around to be forced to answer them.

I needed to get out of here while everyone was completely distracted, or I might not get another opportunity. Sergeant Pepperdine was already watching me like a hawk, and I wouldn’t dare ask Sophie to help me again after seeing how this whole thing had affected her. It was now or never.

“My sister was a hunter at this camp when that group of vampires attacked. I was always told, over and over again, that there’d been an accident at my sister’s school and that she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Sophie said. She cleared her throat then continued. “But after I came here and learned about vampires—and after I learned the real story, that a vampire killed my sister…”

Without hesitating, I reached out and pulled Sophie into a hug. She sobbed against my chest.

“I thought I was doing something good, helping you,” she said. “I thought I could handle it, but just thinking that I’m walking around the same way my sister had been… She had no idea what was coming.”

“It’ll be okay,” I said. I couldn’t just leave her here. I had to get her back into the fieldhouse, where it was safe. I draped an arm over her shoulder and guided her back toward the fieldhouse. “Thanks for sharing that with me, Sophie. I’m really sorry that happened.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry again for losing it,” she said, sniffling. She’d wasn’t sobbing anymore, and she gave me a weak smile. “Thank you for listening. You’re really a nice guy,” she said.

She calmed down and refocused as we got closer to the fieldhouse.

“Shit, you’ve got to go!” she said. “You have to get out of here! That was the whole point of this. Don’t let me distract you!”

She gave me a little push back toward the woods. She was right—if I didn’t get out of here soon, this whole thing would have been for nothing.

I hugged her again, really grateful that I had her on my side, but then I heard someone calling my name. I broke away and looked over my shoulder.

It was my *mom*.

*What the hell is she doing here?*

She walked toward us slowly, a grin on her face as her gaze turned to Sophie. “Charlie, who is this?”

**Episode 1506**

LOLA

I reeled away from Jacqueline, pushing her away before she could get her needle-sharp fangs anywhere near me. Why was she trying to attack me? What the hell was going on with her?

Jacqueline collapsed back onto the floor and whimpered. She pulled her knees up into her chest so that she was in a fetal position. I’d never seen Jacqueline in this state before—she was usually too busy being a Regina George clone and trying to make my life a living hell to show any level of vulnerability. I had to say I preferred her that way far more than like this…

“Hey, are you all right?” I asked her, watching her closely just in case she tried to take another swipe at me.

Her eyes shot open. They were back to their normal color, no longer glowing bright orange. I was still trying to make sense of what had just happened. Was she okay? What was going on?

Jacqueline covered her face with her hands and began to cry. “I don’t know what’s happening to me! I just need help. I was trying to get to Irma when something just took me over!” she sobbed. “I couldn’t even move; it was like I’d lost control of my mind!”

I looked up and down the hallway. It was just the two of us, and luckily, Jacqueline wasn’t trying to lunge at me anymore.

“I’ll help you get to Irma,” I said, already struggling to help her to her feet. I hooked my arm around her waist and pulled her upright. She leaned heavily against me, her head lolling back on her neck. She was clearly too weak to hold herself up.

“What are you doing?” Jacqueline asked weakly. I almost didn’t realize she’d said anything, she’d spoken so softly.

“I’m going to help you,” I answered.

“Really? Even when I’ve been so mean to you?” Jacqueline asked.

“*Well*,” I began, mulling over her words. “I’ve had my fair share of shitty interactions with people, but whatever’s going on with you seems serious. I’d never just leave anyone to suffer on the ground, even if they were my biggest enemy,” I said.

Truthfully, Jacqueline *was* my biggest enemy at the moment. I was proud of myself for being able to put that behind me to deal with the matter at hand.

I struggled to handle Jacqueline’s weight as we started a slow crawl down the hallway toward Irma’s office. Suddenly, Jacqueline threw her head back and cried out in pain. For a split second, her eyes flashed orange again, and fear slid into my stomach.

Her mouth was an inch away from me—if she wanted to, she could take me out. Was she really going to try to attack me again?

She went limp in my arms again, and I pushed down the fear. No, she needed my help, and I was going to help her, no matter what.

“Just leave me! Don’t bother!” Jacqueline said.

“Jacqueline, I know you’re going through it right now, but stop with the defeatist bullshit! It’s not helping,” I snapped.

We continued down the hallway, but it was hard holding all of Jacqueline’s weight, and we weren’t making much progress. I glanced up at the closed doors around us and realized where we were. I knew where I needed to take Jacqueline.

I slowly led Jacqueline to a wall, and she leaned against it as I helped her slide back down to the floor.

“Hang here for just one second,” I said. “DO NOT MOVE!”

I ran to Emmett’s office. It had to be way closer than wherever Irma was, and Emmett was a scientist, right? He had to be able to do something about this—or at least manage her symptoms until someone else could come and help. A scientist was more of a doctor than I was, that was for sure. Plus, he was definitely the take charge type. He also seemed like the type that was good under pressure. He could go get Irma once we’d calmed Jacqueline down, and then we could all figure something out together.

I ran to the door, praying that he was still there. Deciding to skip knocking, I threw the door open. He was sitting at his desk, his eyebrows arched in surprise.

I cut him off before he could speak. “Jacqueline needs our help! Now!”

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Emmett picked Jacqueline up and brought her back to his office, where he placed her gently in his office chair. I waited, watching anxiously as Emmett examined her, trying to figure out what was going on. He shone a light in her eyes and checked her temperature, telling me that everything seemed normal—he just couldn’t figure out where the pain was coming from and had no clue why her eyes were flickering orange like that. He didn’t look like he had any more of a clue than I did.

“Have you ever seen anything like this before?” I asked.

Emmett shook his head. “No, I haven’t.” He had his hand on his chin and looked lost in thought.

As another wail of pain escaped Jacqueline’s lips, I asked, “Can you do anything to help her?”

He gave me a look. “Like what?” he asked, dubious.

“Well, I don’t know!” I said, waving my hand at the vials and opaque bottles that lined the shelves behind his desk. “You have all those serums and concoctions—use one of them to do… something!”

Emmett nodded his agreement and yanked open his desk drawer. He dug around inside for a few seconds before he pulled out a syringe.

“Which one is that?” I asked.

“It’s the one I showed you earlier,” he said, a bit of excitement coloring his words. I knew that he wasn’t happy about Jacqueline’s state and genuinely wanted to help her, but there was no doubt that he was more than interested in seeing what effect the serum might have on her. He leaned over and showed the syringe to Jacqueline. “I have something here that might help with whatever it is that’s going on with you. Do I have your permission to use it on you?”

“Yes,” Jacqueline whispered, right before her eyes flashed orange again and she lunged forward in the chair, as if she wanted to rip Emmett’s throat out. I grabbed Jacqueline’s arms, keeping her pinned to the seat.

She seemed to be getting worse, and it was getting harder and harder to keep her under control. Her eyes had gone fully orange now, and they stayed that way. Her fangs were bared again, and they shone menacingly in the light. She looked like she wanted to kill us both. I thought about how scared I would be to see Jacqueline coming at me in a dark alley. Or a brightly lit alley.

“USE IT!” she shrieked over and over, her head snapping back and forth on her neck like she was possessed.

I tried to hold her steady so that Emmett could administer the serum. She relaxed for a split second, and Emmett took that opportunity to stick the needle in her arm and push down on the plunger. Jacqueline calmed down immediately, slumping back into the chair. We watched as her eyes began to droop, like she was sleepy.

She blinked up at us as her eyes faded back to normal.

“What happened?” she asked. She sat up straight in the chair and looked around at Emmett’s office, clearly confused. “How did I get here?”

“Well, that worked,” I said to Emmett.

Emmett breathed a sigh of relief. He looked like he’d been through a battle. His shirt had come untucked, and there were dark rings of sweat under his arms. I could see the hard planes of his chest, as the first few buttons of his shirt had come undone during the confusion. *Lola, focus!*

“I’m not sure why that worked,” he said, “but I’m very glad that it did. It seems like there was some kind of supernatural force trying to take over her body. I should run some tests to find out exactly what was going on.”

He had that look in his eye again, like the type of look a mad scientist got when he’d just come across an interesting specimen.

I was about to ask about what kind of tests he planned to run when when my phone rang in my pocket. The ringtone was Ariana Grande belting out “Love Me Harder,” and a picture of that guy Jay’s face filled the screen. I was about to answer it, but then I hesitated. Was he really my mate? I should answer, right? It probably wasn’t right to avoid your mate’s calls.

The phone stopped ringing, and I breathed a sigh of relief. My relief was short lived, however, because he called right back.

I answered on the second ring. “Hello?”

“It’s me,” Jay said. His deep voice rumbled through the phone, sending a thrill straight through me. “I’m outside.”

**Episode 1507**

I was beyond embarrassed, and Xavier’s stony, no-nonsense stare had me rooted to the spot.

*Did you already sleep together?*

Had I done something wrong already?

Xavier had his arms crossed over his chest—a stance that made his biceps look impossibly bigger—and one eyebrow arched as he looked back and forth between me and Greyson. This moment threw me back to the last time this exact thing had happened, right in front of the entire pack. It had been embarrassing then, and it was definitely embarrassing now. At least this time it was only Artemis in the room, and she was in no shape to pay attention to our bickering.

Artemis’s condition hadn’t improved. She was still lethargic and clung to me while I worked overtime to keep her upright.

“I thought you were okay with sharing me,” I sputtered.

Even as I said the words, I knew that I sounded like a huge jerk. I felt like one, too. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt Xavier, right out of the gate. Greyson and I should have been more careful—it was clear that this was still the sensitive subject that it had always been, no matter how many compromises we tried to throw at it.

Greyson stepped forward and came to my defense. “Cali’s right. If we’re going to continue with this arrangement, we have to keep in mind what it means for both of us and what might happen at any given time. We can’t tiptoe around worrying that we’re hurting someone’s feelings at every turn—that would be a nightmare.”

“Yes, I know that,” Xavier huffed. “But I didn’t think that agreeing to this whole thing meant that you two would sleep together five minutes after the decision was made!”

When he put it that way, he really made the both of us sound like assholes.

“Hold on… We said that we weren’t going to get jealous, or mad, or any of that stuff,” I reasoned.

Xavier’s jaw was set. He wasn’t happy, and I was panicking. What if he decided that he didn’t want to be with me? That this was too hard for him to manage? From the look on his face, he was moments from making that exact decision. I’d known that this was all too good to be true!

“Yeah, stand down, man,” Greyson said to Xavier. “Remember, this was just as much your idea as it was mine—let’s not muddy the waters a few hours in.”

I stood there, glancing between both of the men. I had to figure out how to fix this. I didn’t like seeing Xavier upset. Or Greyson. Or anyone, for that matter. *Gah!* Maybe there was an appropriate, Band-Aid-level remedy that would work for now, and then we could revisit the discussion when we were calmer.

I cleared my throat. “Um, I promised Greyson that I would stay with him tonight, but maybe I can stay with Xavier instead?”

That wasn’t the right move, and it seemed to only push Xavier’s buttons more. He turned to look Greyson in the eye.

“You already made her promise that?” he asked, his teeth clenched. “I should have known that you’d do everything in your power to manipulate the situation and hog all of her time!”

“Stop being such an asshole, Xavier,” Greyson said. “Step up and own up to the fact that this entire thing was *your* idea! It’s going to happen in reverse, too. We both have to figure out a way to handle it.”

I hated seeing them fight like this, especially when I was in the middle of things. I’d gone to great pains trying to keep both of them happy, and I was failing yet again. I didn’t want either of them to feel like I treated the other differently, or like I loved one of them more than the other, because it just wasn’t true. I loved them a lot, and I loved them the same.

All I could think was that it hadn’t even been twenty-four hours, and this whole arrangement was already falling apart right before our eyes. How could I have been so naïve—how could Greyson and Xavier have been so naïve, for that matter! To think that something like this would work had been wishful thinking at best. There was just too much history between the brothers, and it wasn’t pleasant.

Artemis lifted her head. I turned my attention to my sister, helping her clamber to her feet.

“Water,” Artemis rasped. She looked like she’d just been through a battle. I had to stop arguing about this. I had more important things to think about.

“Help me get Artemis to the couch—and, no, we don’t have time to argue about who will do it!” I snapped at my two mates.

Xavier and Greyson exchanged a glance.

“Allow me,” Xavier said. He scooped Artemis up into his arms. Her head lolled to the side, as if she didn’t have a bit of energy left in her body.

“I’ll get water,” Greyson said.

Xavier set Artemis down gently on the couch, and I sat down next to her. Artemis laid all the way back so that her head lolled against the back of the couch.

“Are you okay, Artemis?” I asked, even though she looked far from it. “What happened back there with Pip?”

Artemis shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said. She looked up as Greyson appeared with a glass of water, and she took it graciously. She tipped the glass to her lips and drank it down in one gulp. “I was coming in from hanging outside with Rishika and went into the kitchen to make some hot chocolate, and Pip was in here. All of a sudden, I got this splitting headache. Next thing I know, I’m nearly passed out on the counter and Pip’s standing over me.”

“Did Pip do something to you?” I asked. I would never let her get away with it if she had. We’d welcomed her into our pack house and nursed her back to health, only for her to attack my sister for no reason?

Artemis shook her head. “I don’t think so? But it’s all so fuzzy, you know?” she said. “I don’t have a clear memory of any of it.”

Artemis was in really bad shape, and I didn’t like it.

“Drink more water,” I said as Greyson reappeared with another, bigger glass.

Artemis took the glass and sipped from it, choosing to savor it rather than slam it down this time. I got up and motioned for Xavier and Greyson to follow me.

We circled up in the kitchen.

“We need to find out what happened,” I said.

Xavier shrugged. “It’s clear she has no idea,” he said. He wouldn’t look me in the eye, and it was clear he wanted to be anywhere but here.

“But that’s what worries me,” I said.

I had the sinking feeling that dark magic was trying to have a go at my sister again. I couldn’t let that happen. There was no way I would stand for losing Artemis, but it was clear that something strange was going on. From the looks of it, Artemis was, again, in the middle of things. I’d thought that things were improving, but maybe I was wrong.

I thought of Pip’s glowing orange eyes. Had I seen that right? Had they seen it? Xavier hadn’t said anything through the mind link before. Or… maybe I was seeing things again. I would’ve thought that improving things with my mates—well, at least up until a few seconds ago—meant I wasn’t going crazy from *due destini*. But maybe there was nothing I could do. Maybe the *due destini* curse would follow us no matter what, despite all the workarounds we tried.

“It seems like it could’ve been fatigue,” Greyson said, breaking me out of my thoughts. “Your sister hasn’t had the best couple days. I wouldn’t be surprised if she isn’t one hundred percent, yet.”

“That could be true,” I said. That made a lot of sense. For all intents and purposes, Artemis was still recovering. Maybe she should’ve still been on bedrest, and maybe she’d overdone it with the workout and hanging out with Rishika before she was really ready.

“Cool. Are we done here?” Xavier asked.

I was over his attitude.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, there is something bigger than the three of us happening right now. If you’re upset about the whole sharing thing, then you should never have agreed to it!” I said. “I care about both of you way too much. If this whole thing is only going to end up hurting us in the long run, then maybe we should call this off before we get in too deep.”

“Cali—” Xavier started.

“No, we all have to be on the same page with everything going on,” I said. “There was something I saw with Pip—”

Someone cleared their throat. “Sorry, am I interrupting?”

I turned. It was Pip.

She gestured to Xavier and Greyson. “Could I talk to you guys? It’s about Silas.”

**Episode 1508**

GREYSON

I flinched at the sound of my father’s name. Every time something threw the pack into chaos, my father always seemed to be lurking in the background, whether real or imagined. It just never ended.

Speaking of never-ending, another thing that fell into that same category was my little brother’s assholery. Why did he have to be such a hypocritical dick? It had been his idea to try to share Cali, hadn’t it? How the hell had he thought that was going to go? By definition, there was going to be *literal sharing*, with all the weird and slightly taboo and fucked up connotations. If he wasn’t cool enough to deal with that, he shouldn’t have suggested it in the first place.

I really wished I could just leave with Cali. Just sweep her off her feet, run away, and live the dream life. Forget everything else. But of course, I couldn’t do that. The pack was my responsibility, and since I had assumed this position for reasons that had to do with primal instincts and my bloodline, I took my role as a leader very seriously. Even if it sometimes annoyed or pissed me off me.

Did I mention that I hated everything?

“I’m sorry about Mace,” Pip said, interrupting my thoughts. “He was just being protective of his mate.” She glanced between me and my younger brother. “I guess that’s something both of you understand.”

I arched an eyebrow. Where was she going with this exactly? “I get it. But I also made it clear to him that I am the Alpha where he’s staying right now. He needs to remember that, or we’re going to have a huge problem.” I stared at my brother. “And you need to remember that too, Xavier.”

Xavier scoffed, because he was an annoying little shit. He just couldn’t stop pressing my buttons, the jackass. Sometimes I wondered what would’ve happened between us if we weren’t brothers. Would we have killed each other by now?

Meanwhile, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cali looking at Pip oddly.

“I assure you, I was only trying to help Artemis,” Pip went on as Cali kept staring at her. “It was all a misunderstanding. I’m sorry it escalated from there.”

I nodded briskly. “Fair enough. But what started this whole thing? Does it actually have something to do with my father?”

Pip looked suddenly shifty. She looked away, to her side and then at the floor, fidgeting. “You’re not going to believe me, no matter what I say…”

I had to snort. I had heard so much bullshit in my lifetime that at this point, nothing shocked me. “Try me.”

Pip took a deep breath and glanced up at me. “Just before Artemis started hurting, I saw Silas.”

The sentence landed like an anvil between Xavier, Cali, and me. We exchanged looks, and my anxiety started to grow. What was Silas’s angle here? How was he doing any of this?

*What is she saying right now?* Cali asked through our mind link*. Do you think we’re in danger?*

*I think we’re about to find out*, I replied.

I stared at Pip. “Can you elaborate?” I asked gently. “When did you see Silas, exactly? And how? If you know.”

Pip swallowed roughly. She glanced up at me, looking oddly vulnerable. “I was in the kitchen. And when I looked out, Silas was just standing there in the yard, watching us through the window. And that was the exact moment when Artemis doubled over in pain.”

Well. That sounded pleasant.

I had to admit it, though—strange things had been happening for a really long-ass time. And this wasn’t even the first Silas sighting. Both my brother and I thought we’d seen him the other day, and so did Cali and Artemis. I glanced out the window, clenching my hands into fists to stop them from shaking.

Could our father be watching us right now? Could his dark, sinister eyes be fixed on Cali, staring at her like she was his next target? The thought made my chest tighten.

I would send him back to hell if he tried to touch my mate.

*I don’t trust her*, Cali said. *I thought I saw something earlier in the kitchen.*

*But that’s not—*

Cali cut me off. *Quiet for a second*.

I frowned. *What? You talked to me first.*

Cali’s eyebrow twitched. *Xavier is trying to mind link, and I can only talk to one of you at a time.*

That motherfucker.

*Stop trying to talk to her, she’s talking to me now*, I told Xavier.

He glared at me. *You wish. She’s talking to me!*

*She mind linked with me first, so I think it’s obvious who she chose to speak to*, I said. *I’m the—*

*If you say you’re the Alpha one more time*, Xavier snapped, *I will fucking punch you!*

I huffed. *I’d like to see you try!*

Cali rolled her eyes. *Oh my god, are you mind linking Xavier? You both need to stop it!*

I groaned. Then presumably she passed the same message along to Xavier who grumbled.

“Stop it, you two,” Cali said under her breath, looking between Xavier and me. “This is important.”

Pip sighed. “I understand how this sounds. And the truth is, I wasn’t even sure myself, earlier. But I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Silas showed up just when Artemis was in pain.”

Xavier stared at her, crossing his arms over his chest. “Sounds to me like you have a theory. Spit it out, then.”

*I ask the questions here, jerk*, I said.

*Shut up*, he replied.

*No—*you *shut up, before I make you*, I shot back and turned to Pip. “What’s your theory?”

While Xavier kept glaring at me, Pip faced me and pressed her lips together. “I think Silas is trying to hurt the pack, starting with Artemis. He’s using supernatural methods.”

Cali gasped. “But why is he picking on my sister?”

Pip shrugged. “I can’t be sure. Maybe because Artemis is weak and susceptible to dark magic. Or maybe because he knows she’s your sister, and you’re directly tied to the brothers.”

I didn’t like this at all. Mostly because it sounded *extremely* possible. I wouldn’t have put it past Silas to try and hurt Cali indirectly.

I made a move to wrap my arm around Cali protectively—

Only to see that Xavier had beat me to it.

*You really have a death wish, don’t you?* I told him.

He arched an eyebrow.

“Maybe we could try to come up with a plan to take care of Silas once and for all?” Pip said helpfully. At least one of us here was focused on the problem at hand. “I know he’s terrorized the pack before. He sounds awful, but I never really knew why he was so obsessed with that Orb thing.”

*I don’t know*, Cali said. *She still seems super shady to me. Why would she mention the Orb right now? We need to be careful of what we say to her.*

I gave a tiny nod. *Okay. I’ll take care of this.*

“Thanks for telling me what you saw, Pip, but I think I’ll have to discuss some things with my pack before we come up with a plan.”

Pip nodded, looking sincere. A little too sincere, really. There was something about her that was off. I could see that as well. But I wasn’t sure.

In the end, she said, “Sounds good. Excuse me for now, I need to talk to Mace.” Her voice lowered. “He’s still pretty upset.”

I was glad that Pip could babysit Mace, because I was getting sick of it.

“So, what’s the plan?” Xavier spoke up, his arm still fucking wrapped around Cali’s shoulders.

Cali, acting like she hadn’t registered my brother’s neediness, looked up at me. “I’m telling you, we can’t trust her. Something’s not right.”

“There *is* something off about her, but I can’t put my finger on it…” I trailed off, still unable to stop looking at Xavier’s fingers, wrapped around her shoulder. “Why do you feel that way about her?”

Meanwhile, I was fighting the urge to throw Xavier right off her. So that was fun.

“It’s what I was trying to tell you before Pip showed up,” Cali said. Her voice lowered to a whisper. She looked around, as if to make sure that nobody was in hearing distance. And then she muttered, “When I tried to stop Pip from hurting Artemis, I saw something…”

“What?” Xavier prompted, his brows furrowed. How many times did I need to tell him that I was the one asking the questions here? *Asshole*.

Cali took a deep breath. “I saw Pip’s eyes glow orange.”

The revelation made me pause. This was not good. Not good at all.

Cali looked between me and my brother. In a voice that was as breathless as it was shaky, she whispered, “I think that Pip is a revenant.”

**Episode 1509**

LOLA

I gaped at my phone as Emmett spoke up. “Is now the best time to be taking a call, Lola?”

His imposing tone barely registered with me. I was half-listening, internally freaking out because my so-called mate was on the other line. And he was here! At Tottenville!

“Yeah, sorry,” I lied, to both Emmett and Jacqueline, because I was not sorry at all. “This is an important call from one of my dads. I have to take it.”

Emmett arched an eyebrow at me. He clearly wasn’t buying this, but I didn’t care. “You don’t say.”

“I do say,” I mumbled, clearing my throat awkwardly. “Anyway, got to go, see you later!”

I rushed out as Jay kind of yelled at me through the phone. “Lola? Are you okay? What’s going on?”

There was a hint of worry in his voice, which was low, deep and sexy. I hadn’t noticed that the first time, but now I was certain that it was the sexiest voice I’d ever heard. *Damn.*

“I’m right here,” I said, a little breathily.

“Are you coming to get me?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m on my way!” I said and paused in front of one of the hallway’s decorative mirrors. They were literally there just as an ornament, because vampires didn’t have reflections*. Ugh!* I fiddled with my clothes and hair, trying to make myself presentable, hoping that I looked good. I technically knew that this shouldn’t have mattered, but there was something very exciting about seeing the guy I’d been hypnotized to forget.

It felt dangerous—like, in a hot way.

As I made a beeline for the main exit, still bubbling with excitement, Irma—of all people—appeared and blocked my way. “Oh, Lola! How are you?”

This was definitely the last thing I needed right now, but I did my best to pretend.

“Great—everything’s great. I’m great, Jacqueline’s great, we’re all great!” I said enthusiastically. “Swell, even.”

Irma arched an eyebrow at me, but before she could ask me anything else, I started walking away.

“Anyway, hope you’re doing great too!” I called over my shoulder.

She grumbled something that I ignored as I rushed toward freedom.

As I headed outside, I wondered why I was doing all this lying. It wasn’t like I really knew this Jay person—for all I knew, he wasn’t even worth the scheming. But I also knew that he was the reason I was supposed to be having so much trouble controlling my vampire heat. I needed to meet the man—I couldn’t just avoid him. I had to figure out what all the fuss was about. Plus he was a werewolf coming to a vampire school… I had to take care of that.

When I got to the front door, I took a deep breath and put my thoughts in order.

Honestly, I was doing this for science. This was just for research, to help me deal with all my heat problems. Maybe Emmett would’ve approved. Though I wasn’t about to tell him that.

I swung open the door, and what I saw took my breath away.

Jay looked even better in person. He was bigger than I’d imagined—taller, slender, with really broad shoulders. When he lowered his phone to look at me, my heart skipped a beat. I swallowed and reminded myself to calm down. Technically, I didn’t know him. He could’ve been a criminal! A serial killer!

He didn’t seem like a serial killer when he smiled at me, though.

“There you are.” He pulled me into a hug—okay, his arms were very strong, *wow*—and murmured, “I missed you so much. I was worried.”

As he nuzzled the top of my head, squeezing me tight, I didn’t mind at all. There was something comforting about his embrace. But then he pulled away slightly to face me, glanced from my eyes to my lips, pursed his, and leaned in to kiss me.

*Oh, I don’t think so, buddy!*

I smacked him straight in the mouth. “Hey, slow the fuck down!”

He flinched away, rubbing his jaw as he stared at me in shock. “What the hell? What’s going on with you?”

I blinked rapidly. I wasn’t sure what to say. This guy was supposed to be my mate, and I assumed there had to be at least some level of intimacy between us. *Yikes!*

“I’m… I mean… You surprised me, I guess,” I mumbled.

Jay’s eyebrows shot so far up his forehead that I thought they would vanish entirely into his hairline. “*Surprised* you? Usually by now you would have already stuck your tongue down my throat, and also groped my ass. Like, it’s a happy coincidence if you don’t do that while other people are around.”

My face heated up so intensely that I probably looked like a tomato. Oh my god, no wonder I’d needed to be hypnotized—clearly I had no sense of boundaries! What kind of deviant *was* I?

And why did I like the idea of that?

“Lola, seriously,” Jay muttered, reaching out to hold my hands. “I came all the way here because I’m worried about you, and this is how you treat me? You’re acting so weird.”

“I’m sorry,” I stammered. “I guess I’m stressed about exams.”

Jay frowned. “Wait, you have exams? You never told me that.”

My voice sounded as awkward as I felt. “I guess it slipped my mind.”

Jay gave me a fond smile. It was very interesting how his eye patch made him look all badass, but his smile was so sweet. He pulled me in again. His scent was delicious—earthy and masculine. It stirred something inside me.

“I’ll let that slide…” He cupped my cheek and brushed his lips softly over mine. I didn’t hit him this time, and I didn’t mind the kiss at all, but I did feel like I was kissing a stranger—a stranger who could kiss really, *really* well. He tasted nice, too.

Bottom line, I knew who Jay was… But I still didn’t really *know* him.

He stared at me after breaking the kiss. “Are you okay?”

He was looking at me intensely, and I swallowed roughly.

“Of course!” I said, nervous. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Jay frowned. “Like I said, by now, you’d normally be rubbing yourself all over me. You seem much more reserved than normal.”

Oh, wow. I really was out of control, wasn’t I?

“Plus,” Jay went on, “you didn’t sound okay when I talked to you on the phone. That’s why I came to see you—to find out if you’re really doing well.” Jay’s frown deepened. “Or did that Emmett guy do something again?”

At the sound of Emmett’s name, I blushed. My mate knew about him. What else did he know? I had no idea how to respond to what he’d said, and he scrutinized my face.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” He glanced around. “I don’t want to risk getting attacked by the vampire children again.”

I nodded instantly. “Sure.” The further away we were from Emmett and Ras, the better.

The night was crisp, and as we made our way through the garden, I shivered. I should have brought a freaking jacket. Before I could comment on that, though, Jay took off his leather coat and smiled at me.

“Here you go. It’s like that time at the lake.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but a jolt of excitement rushed through me at his touch as he slipped the coat over my shoulders.

“You know,” he went on, when I didn’t reply. “You remember that time at the lake, when the boat we borrowed started to leak, and you panicked, and we got soaked?”

He seemed so earnest that it broke my heart to lie to him. “Yes. It was so scary.”

Jay paused, arching an eyebrow. “Scary? We laughed about it for a week…” He cupped my chin, his grip soft but intense. “You do remember, don’t you?”

He seemed so sincere and dreamy and kind that I felt horrible lying to him. *Horrible*.

“I don’t remember the lake, and I don’t remember you!” I blurted out without thinking.

He snorted, following it up with a laugh. “That’s funny.”

But I wasn’t laughing. My body was aching, my head throbbing. I felt overwhelmed.

“I’m so sorry, Jay…” I sniffled. “But this isn’t a joke.”

Jay’s good humor vanished. His brow was furrowed now, his scowl deep. “What are you talking about?”

I didn’t know how to say this, but continuing to lie to him felt almost unbearable. He was just an innocent bystander, a victim in a way. He hadn’t done anything wrong—at least not judging by what I’d been told about him, and from the way he’d been treating me so far. Even though he was a stranger to me, I could tell that he was a good person.

“I’ve been hypnotized to try to curb the vampire heat,” I said shakily. “And there was an unexpected side effect…”

“Which was?”

I fumbled my words, “That I forgot who you are.”

Jay’s mouth dropped open in shock. “*What?*”

**Episode 1510**

Greyson was talking to me but staring at Xavier’s hand around my shoulder. “Why exactly do you think Pip is a revenant?”

Xavier snorted. “She just told you why. She saw Pip’s eyes turn orange.”

Greyson’s gaze snapped from Xavier’s arm to his face. “I missed the part where I asked you instead of my mate.”

I cleared my throat and gently pushed Xavier’s arm off me, because that whole vibe seemed to be having a very disruptive effect on the dynamic. I was also pretty annoyed at him and Greyson.

*Here we are, in the middle of a crisis, and the two of them are back at it again!* I thought. *Then again, it probably doesn’t help that I literally slept with Greyson just hours ago… But it was their idea! What’s a girl to do?*

Ignoring those thoughts, I refocused.

“I’m not entirely sure what I saw,” I told Greyson. “Everything was kind of hectic, and I was worried about Artemis. I still am.”

Greyson frowned. “Then what was that about the orange eyes?”

I winced. “Part of me questions if I saw anything at all. Maybe this is all because of the curse, and I’m slowly going mad, seeing things that aren’t really there…” There was worry, and stress, and a whole lot of pain in my tone. This really was a possibility.

But both Greyson and Xavier shook their heads.

“You’re not going mad,” Greyson said seriously.

“We believe you,” Xavier added.

I blinked, looking between them, stunned. “Wait, you BOTH believe me? When does that ever happen?”

Xavier was severe. “When it comes to revenants, everything is possible.” He turned to Greyson. “We should question Pip—”

“Hang on a second,” Greyson cut him off. “Did Artemis see anything, Cali?”

I swallowed roughly. “I can’t be sure. Artemis was in so much pain… I don’t know if she was aware of anything at all in that moment.” I glanced between the brothers. “But if Pip is a revenant, we should investigate. We should do something.”

“What do you have in mind?” Greyson asked me.

“I wish that Big Mac hadn’t gone to Haystack Rock,” I said. “Maybe there’s a spell that can reveal if someone’s a revenant or not? Something like what Big Mac did to Artemis to find out whether there was dark magic inside her.”

“Big Mac isn’t the only witch around here, though,” Xavier told me.

I nodded. “That’s true! Maybe we could get Kira to find out if she’s a revenant.”

A deep voice came from the doorway. “Who’s a revenant?”

I turned to face Mace. He was standing there, looking all angry, with Pip hovering behind him. *Oh no! This is trouble!* I thought.

Greyson stepped in front of me and stared at Mace.

“Have you noticed anything… *different* about Pip?” Greyson asked Mace.

At the same second, Mace growled. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Things tended to catch fire from one moment to the next when Alphas were involved. I really needed to defuse the tension, but I had no idea how much to say to keep things peaceful. I couldn’t even look at Pip, who was peering at me.

In the end, I settled for something neutral. “I just think you’ve been acting strange, Pip.”

Mace pointed at me, waving a thick finger in my face. “If anyone’s acting strange, it’s you! And you’d better stay away from my mate!”

Xavier stepped in front of me, situating himself beside Greyson. “You’d better watch yourself, Mace.”

The massive man scoffed. “I will. As soon as Cali explains what she means about Pip.”

I had no idea how to answer that, but clearly Mace wasn’t going to let it go.

*You’d better pull off the Band-Aid, Cali!* I told myself.

“I believe that Pip might be a revenant,” I said.

Pip gasped. Mace stared at me, clearly dumbfounded. “Seriously? You think you’re allowed to just stand there and accuse my mate of something like that?” He pointed at Pip, who still looked shocked. “Does she seem undead to you?” He growled at me. “Why are you making this up?”

“Mace, please calm down,” Pip started, squeezing his shoulder, but he brushed her off.

He stepped closer to me, cracking his neck to the side.

“What did Pip ever do to you? Why are you accusing her of this bullshit?” he demanded.

But before he could take another step closer, Greyson shoved him back. “You’re going to want to try that again,” he said. “There’s too much weird shit going on for us to just jump down each other’s throats, Mace.”

We were back where we’d started. *Shit shit shit!*

Before I could say anything else, Xavier spoke up. “If Cali says she saw something, we ought to listen.”

I looked at my mates—Greyson literally holding Mace back, and Xavier speaking evenly to him. No matter what they said about each other, they could be a great team.

“I understand that Cali might be worried about me, but I feel fine!” Pip protested. “This is all probably happening because of Silas.” She pointed among the three Alphas. “He’s just making you fight amongst yourselves.”

I paused. After processing, I admitted, “There’s some logic to that. If Silas has the Orb, he could be orchestrating the tension. Like last time, when the Orb was in our house, and it made everything negative, forcing people to fight.” I stared at Pip. “Or distracting us from the real danger.”

Mace, meanwhile, was still glaring at me. “Where is your proof to back up your allegations against my mate?” he demanded.

I tensed. “There was a moment where I thought… I saw Pip’s eyes turn orange.”

Mace laughed, full of derision. “That’s preposterous.” He gripped Pip by the arm and pulled her closer to him protectively. “Come on, baby, we’re getting out of here.”

Greyson scoffed. “Are you serious right now? Given what happened to Pip, what Cali’s saying isn’t farfetched.”

Mace gritted his teeth. “I’ve had enough. I came here looking for help, but all you’re doing right now is ganging up on Pip. I’m taking her and the rest of my pack back to the Blue Blood pack house.”

I couldn’t believe this guy. He was so easily offended.

“Um, excuse me?” I spoke up. “We did save your mate—at least in theory, right? You can’t just disregard everything the Redwoods have done for you just because you don’t like something I’ve said.”

Mace was about to reply to me, no doubt shout a little, but Greyson spoke first. “Pip herself just told us she thought she saw Silas out there. We have to listen to Cali and consider every possibility, just to keep everybody and every pack safe. Whether we like it or not, there’s more going on than any of us actually know.”

Mace paused at those words. His scowl softened slightly before he nodded. “Fine,” he grumbled. “But that doesn’t mean I’m happy.”

“That’s fine. It’s not like you’re ever happy about anything,” Greyson said dryly. Before Mace could protest, he continued, “Furthermore, I didn’t allow you to bring Pip here just for her sake. It was to bring the packs together and make sure we’re better able to handle whatever is going on. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Mace huffed. “Go on.”

“If you leave now, I think it would be a death sentence for the entire Blue Blood pack. Is that what you want? For your pack to break like the Samaras?”

Mace let Pip go, just to step closer to Greyson and stare into his eyes. I had witnessed this kind of Alpha posturing approximately ten million times since this whole werewolf thing had entered my life.

“Are you ordering us to stay?” Mace asked through gritted teeth.

“Let’s just say that I’d prefer it if you stayed. Until I say otherwise,” Greyson told him.

*Umm, that sounds like an order to me!* I thought, alarmed. *Isn’t it an order? Or is it, like, a polite order? I really have no idea about the social cues between Alphas!*

This was so stressful. Were they going to start fighting? My dad would be so upset if they ruined the kitchen! And where would he make me waffles then?

I was ready to speak up to protect my waffles when Pip whispered something to Mace. Nobody spoke for a moment.

In the end, Mace said, “We will stay.”

I exhaled in relief. Waffles were still on the menu.

And nobody would die today—that was also important.

Of course, Mace got right back to it, waving his finger at me. “If you have any more questions or unfounded theories about Pip, you’d better come to me first.”

He turned his back on us and practically plowed over Torin and Astrid, who had been hovering behind him, listening in like the shameless gossips they were.

Pip followed him silently, but not before she glanced at me, looking disappointed. Oh great. All I needed right now was to feel guilty over calling someone a revenant!

“How’s it going, you three?” Torin said casually, as if he hadn’t just witnessed a near-explosion.

“What do you want, Torin?” Greyson asked briskly, while Xavier narrowed his eyes at the two Fae.

“Oh, nothing!” Astrid spoke up. “We’re just happy that you’re all here.”

“Why?” I asked, curious.

Torin looked between me, Greyson, and Xavier, and then he broke into a big smile. Staring at me, he said, “Astrid and I made a bet. Which of your boyfriends are you sleeping with tonight?”

**Episode 1511**

MARTA

My whole face felt like it was engulfed in flames. I couldn’t explain to Violet that I’d just been making out with her twin brother! And regardless, that couldn’t be the reason why Lilac had appeared… Could it?

“Please, you have to do something!” Violet said urgently.

At the same time, Lilac was peppering me with questions, one after the other, all of them intense and overwhelming—just like his gaze. “Why did I lose my presence? I was really enjoying that—did you stop whatever it was that you were doing to help me because you had second thoughts about sleeping with a ghost? Because I’ll have you know that the way I feel about you isn’t just—”

“Both of you, stop it!” I exclaimed, shaking. “I need to think, and I can’t do that with everyone shouting at me!”

Both twins fell silent. My chest was heaving, undeniable pressure gathering and releasing in my head.

Violet sat down next to me, her voice turning gentle. “I’m so sorry. I just want my brother back.”

I glanced at her. She seemed so devastated. “I know how you feel. I understand, Violet.” I wondered if I felt that way because I also wanted Lilac back. For myself, not for his sister. Not as a favor to her, but as a necessity for me.

The thought was spooky in a way no ghost had ever been to me.

“You must have done something to make Lilac appear like that, though,” Violet said hopefully. “Am I wrong?”

Lilac snorted, the little shit. “Well, we almost did do something, but then Marta got cold feet. Which is fine—she shouldn’t feel embarrassed about that. I want her to be one hundred percent certain when it comes to—”

“Oh my goodness, this is not about that!” I declared. “And I am not having this conversation with you right now.”

He was such a brat, though. If Lilac had been in the flesh at that moment, I would’ve smacked him up the head for being a teasing jerk.

“What are you two talking about?” Violet asked me, looking intrigued. *Great*. Just what I needed right now, more questions.

“Just a thing between us.” I glared at Lilac, who kept on smiling.

“Could you please tell me everything that happened, leading up to Lilac appearing?” Violet asked me gently.

It was hard to ignore her when she was being so nice and pleading, but…

“Everything?” My cheeks started heating up all over again. At this point, I had to be running a fever, and it was all a ghost’s fault. He didn’t even have a pulse, and mine was racing. How annoying.

“You seem a little rattled there,” Lilac told me cheekily. “You should go ahead and tell Violet everything. And if you need me to fill in any of the juicy details, just ask.” He winked.

He was a winking ghost, and somehow he managed to pull it off—instead of looking ridiculous, he looked sexy. It was infuriating!

I cleared my throat and turned to his sister, ignoring him. Even though I could feel his gaze on me like a physical touch. This was getting out of hand, wasn’t it?

“I was only trying to use my medium energy,” I told her, as simply as I could.

Violet’s entire face lit up. She seemed so innocent. How the hell was I supposed to tell her that her brother and I had just been rolling around on that bed?

“That involves magic of some kind, right?” Violet asked me, clearly intrigued.

“I suppose so,” I said awkwardly.

“Then why don’t we talk to that witch, Kira? She might know what to do now that Big Mac is gone,” Violet said.

I was all too happy to agree with her. Anything to escape the awkwardness of Lilac staring at me, his gaze almost burning. How could he *feel* so alive? It boggled my mind.

I followed Violet out of the room, but of course, Lilac followed me. “You’re embarrassed, aren’t you?”

“Shut up,” I muttered.

Lilac sighed theatrically. He truly was the worst. “You just can’t admit how good a kisser I am, can you?”

I groaned. The guy was like a puppy who wouldn’t stop following me around—I just couldn’t shake him. He was haunting me. Literally.

“What’s going on?” Violet asked as we paused in front of Kira’s room. “I thought I heard you say something.”

“Yes. She said that I was very handsome and the best kisser ever in the history of the world,” Lilac told his sister, deadpan.

“It’s nothing,” I said dismissively and pointed at the door. “Let’s talk to Kira.”

Violet nodded and knocked, and a few moments later, the witch was telling us to take a seat. She looked between Violet and me, so dignified and serious that she was kind of intimidating. She wasn’t scary, exactly—not like Big Mac—but there was something about her that made you eager to gain her approval.

“Basically, Lilac appeared, only to disappear,” Violet was saying. “Can you help?”

The witch raised an eyebrow. “That’s definitely strange.” She turned to me. Her gaze was piercing. “What exactly were you doing before it happened? Were you messing with any spells? I’ve heard that there are a few pack members who insist on trying their hand at spells.”

She was talking about Cali, but I didn’t want to throw her under the bus. At this point, I realized I had no choice but to tell the truth. I glanced between Violet and Kira and took a deep breath. “I do want to help Violet, but I’m not sure how she’s going to react to what I’m out about to say.”

Violet squeezed my shoulder comfortingly. “Whatever it is, I can hear it.”

Lilac, the infuriating rascal, smirked at me. “Go on, tell her. She’s chill.”

I didn’t know if I felt comfortable with sharing something so personal with *anyone*, though. I didn’t even know how I felt about what had happened, anyway. Even though kissing Lilac had felt really, really good.

“Marta,” Kira said gently. “We just want the truth.”

I turned to Violet, and when she nodded encouragingly, I blurted out, “I kissed Lilac.”

Violet gasped. “*What?*”

I fought really hard to play it down, not make it seem like that big a deal, even though it had been a big deal to me. “I just did it because I thought I could give him some of my energy. Something like that.”

Lilac laughed, the *menace*. “Right. We believe you. You just did it to help me, not because you think I’m hot. Which I am, clearly.”

If he hadn’t already been dead, I would have killed him by now. He was out of control.

“You better shut up,” I declared. “This is so embarrassing!”

Lilac kept laughing. Violet still seemed stunned. And Kira narrowed her eyes at me. “You really kissed a ghost?”

I felt my throat dry up. “I was… I was only trying to help.”

Kira hummed thoughtfully. “I’ve heard of weirder things happening. Especially with mediums.”

Violet seemed to have snapped out of her surprise. “I wish I hadn’t heard any of that. I will be forever scarred. I don’t want to know about my brother’s ghostly entanglements.”

For some reason, Violet sounded mortified. She didn’t sound mad at me, though. Which was pretty nice, actually.

“Anyway,” Violet continued. “Can you explain any of this?” she asked Kira.

Kira took a seat at her vanity and tapped her fingers on the table. “It must be the power of three.”

“Huh? What’s that?” Lilac asked, finally taking a break from teasing me. Thank god.

“What does that mean?” Violet asked the witch.

“I believe that when Marta kissed Lilac, it brought him back, but only temporarily. For thirty minutes.”

Violet blinked in surprise. “But why?”

“Marta isn’t a witch and doesn’t have any magic, but her medium powers are strong enough to cause something like this.” Kira seemed thoughtful as she stared at me.

“I’ve dealt with ghosts before, though,” I said. “Why was Lilac the only one who came back?”

Lilac gasped, offended. “Wait, I’m not the first ghost you’ve kissed? I thought I was special!”

I rolled my eyes. “I haven’t kissed any other ghosts. But I have talked to many of them.”

“This isn’t about the kissing,” Kira said. “It’s because of the third element.”

“What third element?” Violet asked, looking confused.

I was also pretty confused here. “What’s that?”

“It’s the power of three—Marta, Lilac, and feelings,” Kira explained in a serious tone. “Three important elements. And when Marta kissed Lilac, their feelings for each other were enough to grant him corporeal power. But just for thirty minutes.”

Nobody spoke for a moment. My heart was beating fast enough that it felt like my chest would crack open. Butterflies had invaded my stomach, making it throb.

“Wait,” Lilac said slowly, staring at me. “Does that mean you *do* have feelings for me?”

“No,” I quipped, lying. “Why—do *you* have feelings for *me*?”

He huffed. “Oh my god, why won’t you just admit you think I’m adorable and devastatingly hot?”

I glared at him. “You are the most infuriating, arrogant little—”

“Hold on a second!” Violet said. Her expression was uncharacteristically severe. “I need to know, for real—what’s going on between you two, Marta?”

**Episode 1512**

XAVIER

The two meddling Fae stared between me, Greyson, and Cali.

I was not about to indulge their nonsense, but there was a fucking limit to how nice I could be. And I had already reached it.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked, growling. I looked at Cali—her cheeks had instantly flushed red.

“Sorry, what?” Greyson asked. “You’re making a bet?”

“I might have accidentally told Torin when he ran into me and Greyson earlier,” Cali squeaked.

So Cali already broke one of the rules? Great.

“She’ll stay with me tonight,” I said trying to keep my tone even.

“Xavier! Are you even listening to yourself?” Cali looked offended, but her cheeks continued to flush a bright red.

For this to work, though, even a little, she’d need to split her attention equally. Otherwise, there was no way both Greyson and I would make it out of this agreement alive. Werewolves were territorial on a good day, so this was definitely pushing the envelope.

“Not that it’s anyone’s business,” Greyson said gruffly, glaring at me before turning to the Fae, “but I already asked Cali to stay with me tonight. There’s no schedule yet anyway.” He turned to Torin and Astrid. “And didn’t you two have some Fae stuff to tend to?”

Astrid smiled at him sheepishly. “I’m sorry. Torin shouldn’t have asked…”

I huffed. *You bet your ass he shouldn’t have.* At least Astrid seemed to be a lot less nosy, not like—

“But since the cat’s out of the bag now, as the humans say,” Astrid went on, cutting off my thoughts, “what does Cali say? Who are you choosing tonight?”

I couldn’t believe this. I should have known not to trust either of these two.

“I refuse to answer.” Cali scoffed. “I literally can’t choose, remember?”

I smirked. “How about I do the choosing for you, then?”

Cali’s cheeks were still flushed, and I could see from her bobbing throat that she was affected, even though she was annoyed. Of course, at that moment Greyson decided to fucking step in.

“Now’s not the time for this bullshit,” he declared. “We have important things to figure out, and this isn’t one of them.”

I had to laugh. This was obviously very important to both of us, otherwise we wouldn’t even have been attempting this madness.

“Why does it sound like you’re chickening out, Greyson?” I pointed at him. “So it’s all fine and dandy when Cali stays with you, but not the other way around? Figures.”

“Wow, that was a sick burn,” Torin said, impressed.

I was about to thank him, suddenly liking him again, when Greyson barked, “Show’s over. Both of you, go away.”

It was one of the rare times that Torin looked annoyed. “Fine!” He huffed. “But I’m going to find out, one way or another.”

That did sound a little ominous.

After the two Fae skedaddled, Cali looked at Greyson and me. I thought that she would finally make her decision obvious, but instead, she said something else entirely.

“We need to figure out what to do about Pip,” she muttered. “You do believe me about what I saw, right?”

“Of course we do, baby,” I said, stroking her arm for a brief moment. “Do you really doubt us that much?”

It was nice to watch Cali shiver under my touch. It was also a little fun to feel Greyson scowl at something as simple as me comforting her. But that was his problem, not mine.

“Figuring out what’s going on won’t be easy with Mace guarding Pip and watching our every move like a hawk,” Greyson said.

Cali frowned. “Could Mace be protecting Pip for the wrong reasons? What if he’s gone revenant too?”

I wished he would. There were too many Alphas under this roof. At least that would give me an excuse to get rid of one.

“I should assign someone to keep an eye on Pip. Someone who can handle her if things get ugly,” Greyson said seriously.

At the same time, all three of us said, “Rishika.”

“I’ve seen Rishika train and work out,” Cali said. “Her fighting moves are incredible, and she’s toned as hell. She could be an Alpha if she put her mind to it.”

Greyson nodded. “That’s true. I’ll go talk to her.” He started to turn his back on us before pausing. He faced Cali and me, his eyes moving between us before he pinned me with them. “Nothing regarding where Cali sleeps tonight has been decided.”

“I’d appreciate it if you two don’t talk about me like I’m some sort of pet,” Cali said dryly.

“You’re not a pet, love. You’re the woman for whom we would fight each other to the death, so it’s probably best for all three of us to figure out logistics before taking another step,” Greyson said.

Cali seemed infuriatingly appeased by his words.

I scoffed. “I love how you’re ready to talk logistics now, but not before you took her to bed.”

“I said what I said,” Greyson declared.

I wanted to laugh in his face but refrained, because I was pretty sure this could lead to both of us bleeding. Him the most. As he walked away, I turned to my mate. And then, the thought hit me.

Assuming that Cali slept with me tonight—something I believed was the only fair thing to do, given the fact that Cali was supposed to be equally attracted to both of us—Greyson would spend the entire night knowing that she was with me. At least I hadn’t been dwelling on my brother being with Cali earlier. I hadn’t known.

But going forward, we would both know.

This was… not good for an Alpha werewolf.

Something dark and possessive gnawed at my chest.

I wasn’t sure how much more of this either of us would be able to take. It sounded like a recipe for disaster. Maybe this whole thing was a fucking horrible idea.

My thoughts were interrupted when Cali took a timid step closer to me. Her scent overwhelmed me, and I instantly reached out to hold her hand. She sighed, looking at our intertwined fingers. “That was awkward.”

Her voice was small. Soft. I loved it.

“It was awkward for Greyson,” I said, shrugging. “But I don’t care. We all agreed to this, didn’t we?”

Cali nodded and moved slightly closer to me. I liked that. I liked knowing that she felt comfortable with me. “Torin is sweet, but he has no sense of boundaries.”

“I know I broke one of the rules, and I hate it. I hope this doesn’t spread.” She shook her head. “I don’t like the idea of the whole pack house knowing what’s going on between us.”

I arched an eyebrow, stepping closer to her. “You think you can stop that from happening?”

Cali nodded vehemently. “I need to. Torin is one thing, but his tendency to gossip is another. If we don’t watch it, everyone will be placing bets, and that would be fucking *mortifying*.”

I was trying to be understanding, and I knew that I shouldn’t joke or smirk. But I did get a certain satisfaction from the knowledge that Greyson wasn’t happy.

“And then there’s Pip…” Cali sighed. “What would it mean if she really is a revenant?”

I winced. “That didn’t work out so well for York, did it?”

Cali shook her head. She was about to say something, but then she closed her mouth.

“Hey, what are you thinking?” I asked, squeezing her shoulder. “Wherever it is, you know I’ll help.”

“I’m just worried about Artemis,” she said. “I thought she was doing better, but if Pip… If what Pip said is true, then could Silas really be targeting my sister?”

Cali looked up at me with huge, vulnerable eyes, and I felt my heart ache. I pulled her closer, wrapping my arms around her.

“Whatever Silas has planned—real or not—I will make sure that you and your family are safe,” I promised.

The moment the words left my mouth, I felt Cali relax in my arms. She melted against me and settled closer, embracing me tightly. I loved the feel of her. She felt *mine* in that moment. I kissed her forehead, her cheek, and she shuddered. She nuzzled my neck, her hand gripping the back of my T-shirt firmly, all the tension there making me feel needed.

“I love you so much, Xavier. Thank you.” Her voice was tender, and I adored everything about it.

I eyed her, arching an eyebrow. “Look at us. I wonder what the bookies would say if they could see us.”

She snorted. “What are you talking about?”

“I was just wondering whether Torin was betting on you sleeping in my bed tonight,” I said cheekily.

Cali gasped and shoved me lightly. “Stop joking about it!”

“I’m not joking,” I said, gripping both her wrists as she took a step backward. Her back hit the wall, and she swallowed roughly, looking up at me. “Only a fool would bet against me.”

She licked her bottom lip and stared. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I tilted my head to the side. Leaning closer, I murmured, “It means that I don’t care what Greyson might have asked you earlier. You’re sleeping with me tonight—got it?”

**Episode 1513**

CHARLIE

My mind was racing. What the hell was my mom doing here? Tonight, of all nights?

She shot Sophie a look and moved closer to us. At the same time, Sophie took a step away from me, obviously intimidated. But the second my mother realized who she was, she broke into a huge smile. “Is that Sophie Slayton? Paul and I have known your parents for a long time, sweetheart!”

*Oh, boy…*

Mom turned to me, her eyebrows arched meaningfully. “Sophie belongs to one of the most respected hunter families around, Charlie. It’s so good to see you making a friend like her.”

I wanted to run away and hide. My mom’s timing couldn’t have been worse. All I wanted to do was get out and go see Violet, but how the hell was I supposed to escape when my mom was here?

“Nice to meet you,” Sophie said to my mom as politely as possible. At least she was acting naturally enough.

“Nice to meet you too, but what are you two doing out here?” Mom asked, staring at me. “Shouldn’t you be at the dance?” She gave me a small, mortifying smirk . “Unless of course you both needed to get some… *air*.”

That was a pretty heavy implication that fell on my head like a brick. I hated this.

“That’s not what’s going on, Mom,” I said, swallowing down a groan.

“The dance was interrupted, actually,” Sophie spoke up. “There could be a vampire attack.”

I knew that Sophie was trying to help, but I wondered if her telling my mom that would only make matters worse. Both of us knew that there weren’t any vampires around, but I’d seen how excited my mother got when there was a chance for her to stake a vampire. Now she would *never* freaking leave.

Her excited expression was definitely a bad sign. “If that’s true, then perhaps we should go back inside?”

Called it. The woman loved drama and fighting.

Impatiently, I asked, “Why are you even here, Mom?”

My mom gasped, her face falling. *Oh, great. Get ready for the guilt trip…*

“Aren’t you glad to see me?” she asked.

“Of course I am, but this is surprising. Why are you here? In the middle of the dance?”

“Oh,” Mom said casually, “I just happened to be in the area, thought I’d stop by to see my only son. Is that a crime?”

This camp was in the middle of nowhere, hours away from our house. How the hell had she “just happened” to be in the area? I knew her well enough to assume that she was checking up on me. A.k.a. spying on me.

The guilt trip technique wasn’t working on me anymore—I could see right through her.

Meanwhile, there were campers running around everywhere, searching for vampires. In the distance, I heard Sergeant Pepperdine barking orders. Typical.

Sophie cleared her throat. “I’ll go check with Sergeant Pepperdine—see if anything’s happened.”

She gave me a look that told me that she was giving me privacy to talk to my mother. I wasn’t sure if I really wanted that, though. I was sure that Sophie wasn’t trying to cause any problems for me, but it wasn’t like she knew better, and there was no mind link between us for her to understand what I needed.

Sophie wasn’t Violet, and she never could be.

The second she was out of earshot, of course, my mother gripped me by the arm. “She’s such a wonderful girl! What a great choice for you. Sending you here was the best decision we’ve ever made!”

It was almost jarring to see my mom so enthusiastic about something like this, especially after the way she’d treated Violet.

I frowned. “I thought you sent me here so I could be a good hunter.”

My mother waved me off. “Of course, dear. But perhaps Sophie can join us for brunch this weekend?”

I blinked, very slowly. The realization that my mother was planning to stay the whole weekend dawned on me. I remembered what Zachery had told me, about parents using the camp to have their children meet other hunters—and *mingle*.

My whole plan to run off and see Violet was blowing up.

“So?” my mother said hopefully. “Are you going to ask your girlfriend to join us?”

I had to fight to control my temper. “Mom, she’s not my girlfriend.”

She got a playful glint in her eyes. I knew that that look spelled trouble. “You don’t have to be shy, Charlie. It’s all right.”

I felt like screaming from the rooftops that Sophie and I had nothing romantic going on. I had a mate, and the instinct to protect the bond between us was fierce inside of me. But I realized that if I did object, if I did deny that Sophie and I were together, it would only bring more questions from my mom. And the main thing I didn’t want right now was for her to be suspicious.

If my mom found out that I was still seeing Violet, she would freak out—in a bad way, not just a mom way. I had no idea what she could do, how dangerous she could be. The thought was sobering, and almost scary.

“I’ll ask Sophie.” I made sure to appear as normal as possible. “But don’t be disappointed if she says no. She has a very tight schedule.”

My mother’s face lit up. She opened her mouth—no doubt to endorse Sophie some more—but our conversation was cut short by the blast of Sergeant Pepperdine’s whistle.

“All hunters assemble in the fieldhouse for a head count! This situation needs to be reassessed, right this instant!” he barked, his voice echoing.

I couldn’t believe I was actually grateful for Pepperdine’s screaming, but there was a first time for everything, apparently.

“Let’s go,” I said, looking at my mom. “We have to follow orders.”

My mother nodded, for once without objection, and we both jogged back to the field. I wondered if and how I’d be able to get out of this mess. All I wanted was to see Violet. To make sure she was okay.

But now, it was going to be impossible to get out of here. The distraction had failed, and I wouldn’t be able to get out of camp in time. Especially not when my mother was here. There was no way that she wouldn’t notice if I just vanished. She’d probably call the hunter FBI, or something. How far was MIB’s reach?

We joined all the other campers and staff as Sergeant Pepperdine started talking again.

“It appears to be a false alarm,” he announced. “We’ll set up some extra patrols, just in case, but no intruders have been detected.”

His words were met with a sound of relief from the crowd. Apart from my mother, of course, who was on the bloodthirsty side. And to think we all talked shit about vampires.

“Such a shame there’s nothing to hunt,” she said. She was so wholesome.

“I’m proud of how well we all came together,” Pepperdine continued. “If there had been an intruder, I’m sure we all would have risen to the occasion. You should all go back to your rooms for the night.”

The crowd started to disperse, conversations returning to normal.

“I’m going back to my hotel for the night,” Mom said, to my eternal relief. “But don’t forget to invite Sophie, okay?”

Just then, just to make my life worse, Sophie popped up. “Invite me where?”

She looked so nice and innocent. This was a disaster.

It became even worse when my mother winked at me. *Jesus*.

“I’ll see you both tomorrow,” she said.

She headed off, and I took a deep breath, turning to face Sophie. She was looking at me with a weird, hopeful expression. What was I supposed to do with *that*?

“My mom wants you to join us for brunch tomorrow,” I said begrudgingly.

Oblivious, Sophie smiled. “That sounds great—your mom seems pretty cool.”

My mother hadn’t tried to kill Sophie recently, so of course she would think that. And in general, my mother *was* polite and beautiful, so most people tended to think she was an angel. Ironic.

Issues with my mother aside, I needed to be clear with Sophie. I couldn’t let her get the wrong impression, but I still didn’t want to tell her about Violet. She already knew so much; I couldn’t make her keep yet another of my secrets.

“My mom thinks that you and I are seeing each other,” I mumbled.

Sophie blinked at me, looking surprised. But then she broke into a smile. Her expression was soft. “Is that such a bad thing?”

Of course it was a bad thing, because I was in love with someone else, would die for someone else. Sophie didn’t deserve any of this. I couldn’t string her along. I needed to squash any hope she had for us to be together. But at the same time, I couldn’t say no to my mother. Not when she was still a threat.

I felt cornered. And the only thing I could think to say was, “Sophie, could you be my fake girlfriend?”

**Episode 1514**

Before I could even reply to the arrogant bastard, Xavier scooped me up in his arms, bridal style.

I squealed. “Oh my god, where are you taking me?”

“I think you know,” Xavier said with a wink, and that did not appease me one bit. I gasped, gripping him tightly as he carried me into his room and threw me onto his bed, in full caveman mode.

*This is ridiculous!* I thought, infuriated. *But also hot! Fuck it all, UGH!*

“Seriously?” I huffed, sitting up. “If Torin and Astrid haven’t already spread the sharing news everywhere, this is gonna make it pretty damn obvious!”

Xavier literally didn’t say a word, just started stripping in front of me. I stopped talking and swallowed thickly as he took off his shirt and reached for his belt. As I stared at his abs and felt the temperature in the room rise, I suddenly remembered that this was, technically, what everyone had agreed to.

*Granted, I didn’t expect it to play out this way*, I thought. *Greyson earlier, Xavier now…*

At least I’d showered. I knew that werewolves freaked out about scents and stuff.

*Oh my god, what am I* thinking*?* I couldn’t do something like that to either of them.

Except thinking wasn’t exactly my priority when Xavier was stripping in front of me. Neither he nor Greyson were entirely thrilled about this new arrangement, but even though I kept voicing my concerns, they seemed to want to continue with it. At some point, I’d probably just have to believe them. And wouldn’t that be better than all of us denying the feelings we shared?

*This is mighty convenient for you, Cali*, a very judgy voice said in my head. *Do you have ANY SHAME AT ALL?*

My heart was beating fast, and I was most definitely blushing. When I refocused on Xavier, my voice came out low and shaky. “I asked you a question, and I expect an answer. You’d better not be doing this to get even with Greyson.”

Xavier scoffed, kicking off his jeans. He stood there in his briefs, and his body was—as always—carved to perfection. He looked like a gorgeous statue, and if not for the cursed veins on his chest, I would have believed he was as unaffected as he looked.

“This has nothing to do with Greyson,” he said sharply.

As I was about to protest, Xavier took a step closer, and my breath hitched. The way he looked at me made everything murky in my head. And his almost-nakedness… My eyes moved from his lips to his neck, down to his broad shoulders and chest, his abs, and then even lower.

He was ready for me, and we hadn’t even touched.

“I don’t ever, *ever* want you to say his name again when we’re alone,” Xavier said in a gruff, low voice. I didn’t have it in me to protest. Not when he pushed me back on the bed and his knees landed on either side of my waist as hovered over me.

I felt like I was on fire, and then he tugged on my shirt. “Take this off.”

It was an order. I felt hazy, drunk on him, and there was no way that I would ever deny him. It was simply impossible. I sat up slightly and removed my top. He helped me with the bra, his motions slow and much gentler than normal. He was still hovering over me, knees on either side of my chest, looking glorious and sexy as hell.

It was really hard not to reach out and touch him.

I moved my fingers over his briefs first, just to hear him hiss, before I lowered them and stared at how much he wanted me. He stroked himself, looking like he was about to catch fire, and I felt the same. I wanted to lick him all over, but when I sat up to bring my lips closer, he shoved me back onto the mattress again.

My heart was pounding, my insides trembling.

“I think I want you to watch, first,” he said gruffly, still stroking himself. I was semi-hyperventilating. “I want you to touch yourself while watching me,” he said, and I nodded frantically, overeager, my hand slipping down to my leggings, the other at my chest.

He bit his lip and groaned, his gaze scorching.

He didn’t last like that for too long, though—he kept glancing between my mouth and my breasts, and then down to where my hand worked. He arched over my face, bringing his crotch to my eye level.

His movements became frantic and shaky, and I was so insanely turned on that it felt like I was melting. I opened my mouth for him, gripped his hip to bring him closer to my lips, to my tongue, and swallowed everything he gave. This was what I wanted, this was what I’d signed up for, and I couldn’t wait for more of it. Of him.

When he tore off my leggings and returned the favor, I came in seconds. I had been so worked up for so long, burning all over, that all he had to do was rub me the right way and I was set. But he continued with his head between my thighs, sucking on me, kissing, then using two of his fingers. I moaned, so loudly that I had to cover my mouth. With the other hand, I gripped his hair, arching my hips up to his mouth.

He looked up at me with a wicked smile. “You taste fucking incredible. I can’t get enough.”

He moved up to my body and kissed my mouth, then spread my legs. When he moved inside, I was so wet that it made an obscene sound. But he said he loved it. He said he loved me, and then he fucked me to within an inch of my life.

By the end of it, we were both shaking and shivering, staring into each other’s eyes.

And Xavier whispered, “I love it when you’re mine.”

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Xavier and I showered together, and he rubbed my shoulders and all the sore spots, whispering sweet nothings in my ear. Which was great for me.

*Oh my god, I really don’t have any shame*, I thought to myself, blushing. I should have been more mortified, but I just couldn’t bring myself to feel that way. All the pheromones had clouded my judgment. That and Xavier.

Afterward, Xavier stroked my hair, pulling me closer to him as I nestled in the crook of his neck. He was really good at that.

“When we first got together, things seemed much simpler,” he muttered then, brushing his lips over my temple.

I looked up at him, my high taking a slight hit. “Do you regret meeting me?” I sounded vulnerable, even to my own ears.

Thankfully, Xavier scoffed, loud and clear. “Never. I just wish that things could go back to the way they were before all the drama. Just the two of us, like it’s supposed to be.”

I exhaled in relief. But then I paused. “I understand that. But that’s impossible now. The *due destini* robbed us of that.” I swallowed roughly. “And if you feel that way, then why did you even agree to share me?”

He looked into my eyes, and I could feel the connection vibrating between us. The mate bond was glowing like something tangible, hot, never-ending. It made my heart ache.

“I would rather do this than the alternative,” he whispered.

“Alternative?”

“Not having you at all,” he said, shifting closer. His lips hovered over mine. “We’re inevitable, baby. Never forget that.”

I inhaled sharply, the raw magnetism in his expression affecting me in ways I couldn’t even express. I didn’t say that I couldn’t imagine not being with him or Greyson. They were both so important in my life. But given the tension between the brothers, I doubted Xavier would want to hear any of that.

And yet, here he was, fighting for me.

This whole arrangement might have been weird, but at least everything was out in the open now.

There were no more lies, no more tears, and the veins on the brothers’ chests didn’t seem to be spreading. For a long moment, I contemplated not carrying any more guilt over this.

For a long moment, I dared to think that I could be happy.

“I love you, Xavier,” I whispered, and he smiled, gorgeous as ever.

The happy moment was interrupted by a pounding on the door. I instantly thought of Colton, but then Astrid burst in.

“Xavier, it’s an emergency! It’s—” She paused, registering what she was seeing, namely the two of us in bed. Thankfully, she didn’t mention anything about a fucking bet. Instead, she said, “Come quick, both of you! It’s Rishika—Pip attacked her!”

She ran off, and I gasped. What had happened to make that happen?

Xavier didn’t waste a second. He leapt from the bed and immediately put his clothes back on. I grabbed my leggings and shirt and scrambled to get dressed too.

“How could this even have happened?” I demanded, shaking and upset. “Could it be the dark magic inside her?”

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t bet against it.”

I felt horrible for having recommended Rishika to Greyson for Pip’s guard duty.

*I’m why Rishika was assigned to look after Pip! Oh my god, this is my fault!*

We raced down the hall, but then Mace blocked our way. He growled and advanced on Xavier. “Watch yourself, Xavier.”

“Me? When your mate just attacked a Redwood pack member?”

“You’re not one to point fingers,” Mace growled.

Xavier’s jaw was set. “It seems pretty fucking clear.”

Just then, Greyson came out of the side room, his presence as imposing as ever. “You’d better stop laying blame. Rishika is hurt, and Pip is AWOL.” He turned to me, his eyes narrowing. If my spending time with Xavier just now had hurt him, he wasn’t showing it. Greyson was all business. All Alpha.

But then he fixed his gaze on Xavier, making me question his true feelings.

I didn’t have time to ponder any of this, though—not when there was real danger all around us. And then Mace actually started to push past Greyson.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” Greyson barked, grabbing Mace by the arm. The massive Alpha glared at Greyson. He looked haunted. Determined. Furious.

“You know damn well where I’m going!” he growled. “My mate is out there; I’m going to find her! So get your fucking hands off me!”

Mace’s mate was out there? Out where?

*And where’s Rishika?* I wondered, my heart pounding.

Xavier stepped between the two Alphas, peering at his brother. “What the hell happened, Greyson?”

**Episode 1515**

ARTEMIS

I was in Rishika’s and my room. It was ours together now, wasn’t it? Was I meant to be moving my clothes in here? I wanted that. I wanted to get dressed with her every morning, after an amazing night together. All the nights I’d spent with her had been amazing, carved into my memory, despite all the things that my brain had been through.

Nothing had managed to erase Rishika from my mind.

She was there to stay.

“Quick!” Astrid burst into the room, interrupting my thoughts. I flinched. “You need to come downstairs!”

Astrid’s scared expression rattled me. With the door open, I could hear a commotion coming from the first floor. But when *wasn’t* there something going on here?

“What happened this time?” I asked Astrid, expecting to hear something dramatic about the Evers brothers.

“It’s Rishika!” Astrid almost yelled. “She was attacked by Pip. Hit her with something while she was outside.”

“What?” I asked, my entire body freezing.

“We don’t know where Pip is, but Rishika needs you,” Astrid said. “You need to come quick!”

My stomach dropped, my heart starting to race. I was instantly in fight mode, ready to destroy anyone who’d dared to hurt my girl.

I rushed downstairs, my mind reeling. Rishika had told me that she was going on patrol, which was normal. I shouldn’t have let her go out on her own, though. There was danger everywhere at the moment, but I had thought—

Stupidly, I had thought that someone as powerful as Rishika wouldn’t need anyone’s help.

But what could have prompted Pip to attack her? I didn’t know much about Pip, but hitting someone out of nowhere seemed odd, even for her. Could it be the dark magic? Was it coming back for her?

Could it come back for *me*?

“What happened?” I asked Astrid, shaking off my feelings, but she wasn’t listening. I followed her past Greyson, Xavier, and Mace, who were in the throes of something, and we both burst into the side room.

I was stunned to see blood everywhere.

I had to swallow a scream when I saw Rishika lying on the bed. She was horribly banged up. Torin was using his powers to heal her, purple glow spreading all over the room, but all I wanted to do was hold Rishika. I wanted to be close to her, to make sure she was okay.

I had no idea what I would do if anything happened to her.

I was hit by an unfamiliar yet powerful emotion—one that I knew had the power to incapacitate me. Longing and concern and worry for someone I cared about. And then, I realized that this had to be what it was like—this was what it meant to be in a relationship.

We would be there for each other, no matter what.

And that was all I wanted to do right now. I wanted to be with Rishika, do everything in my power—anything in the world—to make her safe. To keep her safe.

If Pip tried to hurt Rishika again, she’d be sorry.

I hadn’t even realized that there were tears running down my cheeks until Astrid gave me a tissue to wipe them. I hovered over Rishika as Torin worked his magic, and I couldn’t even speak, I was that horrified.

Her bruises started to fade under the purple glow, her wounds too, and relief started to settle over me—very, very slowly.

Torin stepped back. “She should be okay.”

“Are you sure?” Cali asked. I hadn’t even noticed her.

I was scared to touch Rishika’s hand, to squeeze it. She was still unconscious, and I didn’t want to hurt her in any way. She seemed so fragile with her eyes closed like that.

“The wounds were very deep,” Torin told Cali. “But I’m confident in my healing powers, so yes.” He glanced at Rishika and took a deep breath. “With her natural werewolf healing, she should be as good as new in no time.”

I admired how composed Torin was. I’d always considered him a goof, and a little annoying, but I couldn’t help but remember how important he was in the grand scheme of things. He had saved every one of us numerous times.

“Thank you, Torin,” I said. My voice didn’t sound like my own.

Torin shrugged. “Just doing my best. She should come to in a few seconds.” He glanced at Astrid and Cali. Cali was clinging to me a little too tight, but I felt comforted all the same. “Let’s give the girls some space, okay?” Torin said.

Cali stared at me. “Are you sure you can be alone with her? Are you okay?”

I nodded, and then Torin basically dragged both my overprotective sister and his best friend out of the room. I was so grateful to him. I sat down gingerly at Rishika’s side, still scared to touch her. My heart was pounding so hard.

There was some dried blood on her forehead. I grabbed a wet paper towel and gently removed the red from her beautiful skin. As I was finishing up, her eyes flickered open.

She was so stunning, she took my breath away.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

Rishika smiled weakly. “The bark is much worse than the bite. Besides, you heard what Torin said—I’m already healing.”

“You heard that?” I asked. “I thought you were unconscious?”

“I couldn’t see anything, but I could hear. It was more like being sedated—I felt kind of high,” Rishika said. “Like I was underwater, floating. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling.”

For some reason, I felt like crying all over again. But I held it down, because I was certain that Rishika wanted someone strong to stand by her right now, not a whiny baby. Besides, I was afraid that my voice would betray how I felt, exposing my emotions like an open wound.

“You’d better not be lying about being in pain,” I whispered, taking Rishika’s hand in mine.

“I’m fine.” She started to sit up, but I shook my head.

“You’d better lie down,” I said. “Torin healed you, but I know it would be best if you stayed put and rested for a bit.”

Rishika rolled her eyes. I looked around and realized just how much blood there was in this room. At the same time, I remembered that nobody had told me what had happened yet. But first things first—Rishika needed to rest, but she didn’t need to do it in here.

“I’m taking you to our room,” I said, determined. “It’s much less… *red*.”

Rishika actually laughed at my words. The sound faded when I carefully slid my arms underneath her and picked her up. She seemed surprised that I could do that, as if she had forgotten that I had powers of my own. I realized that she was so strong that she probably wasn’t used to being taken care of like this.

I wanted to take care of her.

Even if she raised an eyebrow at me, wrapped her arms around my neck, and smirked. “Are you seriously just flexing that you can lift me right now?”

I smirked. “Maybe.”

I hurried past the quarreling Alphas and carried Rishika upstairs, bridal style. Once I placed her on the bed and we got settled, I asked, “Do you want me to make you some tea?”

She snorted. “Fuck the tea—get me some of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha. Spike it.”

Her grin gave me so much hope. I headed back down to the kitchen quickly, unable to stop thinking about how scared I’d felt to see Rishika hurt. I was new at this whole relationship thing, but the very thought of losing her, of something bad happening to her, made me panic.

A feeling rose inside me, full of fear and sadness, and I heard dark whispers in the back of my mind. They told me that caring made me weak and vulnerable. That the connections I’d been making would only weigh me down.

My hands were shaking as I mixed the mocha, and I pushed the thoughts and voices away. I couldn’t keep listening to them. I wouldn’t.

The only thing that made me feel weak was the very thing that made me feel anything at all. My emotions toward Rishika were surprising—both the most amazing thing in the world and the most painful. Was that…

Was that what love was about?

Could this be *love*?

With these thoughts twisting in my head, I was about to bring the mocha upstairs when my mother blocked my way. “I heard what happened. Is Rishika okay?”

My tongue felt heavy in my mouth. I just stared at my mother and nodded.

Somehow, Orla understood. “It’s okay to be worried, Artemis. To have feelings.”

I just nodded again, excused myself, and headed upstairs. I couldn’t deal with my mother right now. Our relationship was complicated. I had lost my Fae magic because of the promise that she’d forced me to make. And right now, I knew I wouldn’t be able to handle the conversation that had to happen between us.

When I got back to the room, Rishika smiled at the cup in my hand. “That’s the good stuff. They could have healed me just with this.” She took a sip and groaned deeply.

I loved looking at her satisfaction. Her pleasure.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Rishika asked, raising an eyebrow.

*I think you’re amazing*, I thought. Then I shrugged.

“Thank you for the mocha, but you don’t need to fuss over me,” Rishika said. “I know you’ve been feeling under the weather lately.”

I realized then that for the first time all day, my headache was gone. And so were the whispers. I wondered if I should tell Rishika about the voices. Would she still want me if she knew? How much truth could a relationship bear? If there was anyone who would be on my side and help me fight them, though, it was Rishika.

Perhaps it was time to find out what our feelings were made of. Perhaps.

“I feel much better,” I admitted. “Maybe being around you helps.”

Rishika smirked. “Is that so?”

I swallowed. “Actually, there’s something I wanted to tell you…”

Before I could continue, Rishika leaned in. My breath hitched. Against my lips, she murmured, “You can tell me later. Right now, I’m feeling a whole lot better.”

And then she dragged me close and gave me a passionate kiss.

**Episode 1516**

LOLA

Jay stared at me, gaping. There was so much pain in his eyes.

“Did you *try* to forget me?”

“*No*,” I said quickly. “No, no, you’re misunderstanding. It was just this weird side effect that happened. It wasn’t on purpose, I swear.”

He shook his head, taking all of this in. “So when… When will you remember me again exactly?”

“I don’t know…” I trailed off, bracing myself for his reaction.

Jay was looking past me, back at the school. His glare was so fierce that I was taken aback. “I’ve fucking *had it* with this fucking school and that professor.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I’m going to kill him,” he declared, and I squeaked. Mostly because I knew, deep inside, that Jay was capable of doing just that. It was terrifying, and kind of thrilling? But regardless, I couldn’t let him just murder someone for me! *Jesus!*

“No, wait!” I grabbed Jay by the arm, blocking his way. “Emmett didn’t do anything!”

Jay narrowed his eyes—his eye—at me. “Don’t lie to me, Lola. I should have taken care of that asshole the last time I was here. I got a bad, creepy vibe from him the moment I saw him. Where is he?”

I grabbed Jay harder. “I mean it, Jay. You need to calm down. This isn’t the place to make a scene. Do you understand?”

I could feel how protective Jay was, and I really liked it in a way, but I also didn’t want to cause any trouble. I’d already had my share of that at Tottenville.

“It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve made a scene here,” Jay told me seriously.

I blinked at him in shock. “What? Seriously? When? *What?*”

“Forget about that, Lola,” he said. Joke’s on him—I’d already forgotten it. Hah! “The point is, if you don’t want me to do anything rash, you need to tell me what’s been going on,” Jay continued. At least now he seemed more composed. I could work with this.

But then again, I wasn’t sure where to begin. How to begin.

“Well?” Jay prompted.

“I don’t know what to say,” I said.

He arched an eyebrow. “Why not start from the beginning? You haven’t been yourself since you got here,” he said with a sigh. “I’m your mate, Lola, and you need to tell me everything. That’s how it’s supposed to work—we’re always there for each other. We need to be.”

The way he spoke now was so steadying and soothing that I found myself impossibly drawn to him. I wasn’t sure what the whole mate thing entailed—I’d forgotten all about it—but I had to admit that I sure liked the sound of it. Jay was my mate, and he wanted to help me.

*Not bad. Not bad at all.*

I felt something churning within me. Was this part of the vampire heat? Or was it the mate bond that I, apparently, had with him? I glanced at his lips. My *god*, he had beautiful lips. Would it be okay if I acted on the heat? The bond? Maybe a little? Would it even hurt, since we were meant to be together and all that?

“I’m waiting, Lola,” Jay said gruffly.

I swallowed, bringing my gaze back to his eyes. “You really want to know *everything*, everything?”

Jay nodded, all severe. I swallowed again, noticing his muscular arms as he crossed them.

It was hard not to. “I’m not going anywhere until you explain.”

I took a deep breath. “I told you about the vampire heat, right? Before I forgot?”

Jay nodded again.

“Right. You know I was having trouble dealing with it,” I continued.

He gave me yet another nod. Wow, what a conversationalist. This was going to be a lot harder than it needed to be. I could tell that whatever I said was only going to hurt him. And I was surprised by how bad that made me feel. I *hated* hurting him.

“I’m really sorry,” I said. And I was. “I never meant for any of this to happen.” I sniffled. “I did the hypnotherapy because I was told it was the only way I could control the heat. The only way to make my own decisions again. It was tearing me apart, Jay. Probably because we were mates.”

Jay flinched at that. His arms dropped from his chest. Suddenly, his expression was raw. “We still *are* mates, Lola. Nothing you did, nothing you could ever do, will change that.”

I was moved by his words, by the way he spoke about us. I didn’t remember what was so great about having a mate, but based on Jay’s reaction, it had to be pretty intense. And with the way I was feeling, a little intensity might be just what I—

*No!* I was supposed to be in control, dammit!

“Are you mad at me?” I whispered.

Jay sighed, taking me in. “I’m not mad at you. I could never be mad at you.”

Well. That sounded nice. So nice it made my entire body tingle all the way down to my toes.

“I just love you. That’s why it’s so hard for me,” he said, and something broke inside me. How was he so sweet? It was outrageous. “I love you, Aaliyah Lyn. You know that. And I don’t understand any of this vampire stuff,” he continued. “But maybe the vampires don’t understand what it’s like to be a werewolf. What being someone’s mate is really about.” He glanced back at the school again. “I don’t trust that they won’t harm you, so I’m going to stick around.”

*He would risk staying in a vampire school for me? How brave. How romantic.*

He was so romantic.

I reached for him, and I could feel the tension building within me, the heat spreading. I pulled my hand back, afraid I’d get burned.

*Control*, I told myself.

*Control. Control. Control.*

“You’d really do that?” I asked in a hoarse whisper. “Stay here to protect me?”

“I don’t know if that’s a great idea,” a familiar voice said from behind us.

We spun around to face Ras. My stomach dropped. How much had she heard?

“And you are?” Jay’s expression was blank. Serious.

“I’m Ras, and I’m the one who helped Lola with the hypnotherapy,” the woman said.

Jay glared at her. “So you’re the one who’s been filling my mate’s head with nonsense. And now you’re trying to get rid of me? I don’t think so.”

I shook my head. “That’s not how it happened! I went to Ras for help, I—”

Ras held up her hands. “I’m trying to help you, too. This is a school filled with vampires, and not all of them have the best self-control. A werewolf hanging around might… upset some of them.”

Jay tilted his head to the side. That move alone sent my heart into a spiral. “I’ve been to war, Miss. I’ve killed more enemies than I can count. I can take care of myself.”

Okay, then. That was really hot, and it did not help me AT ALL*.* But also, I was worried, because even though Jay was a secret badass, he’d still be in danger if he stuck around. I didn’t remember him, sure, but a part of me was *really* fucking disturbed by the idea of him getting hurt.

Was that part of the mate bond that Jay was talking about?

“I don’t care about the risks,” Jay said calmly. “It was a mistake to leave Lola here alone, and I’m not doing that again.”

Ras sighed. “Fine. But at least let me talk to Irma and clear it with her on your behalf. It’s the least I can do.”

“I don’t—”

I grabbed his hand to stop him from talking. “Thank you, Ras,” I said. “We’d appreciate that.”

She looked between us and sighed again before walking away.

Jay frowned. “Do you really think we can trust her?”

I cringed. “I mean, at this point I know Ras better than I know you.”

Jay’s frown deepened so much that I could feel it. Like, I could *physically* feel how upset he was, and it upset me too. His feelings were obviously hurt, and I needed to figure out a way to smooth all this over. I needed him to be happy again. Smiling. He was so beautiful when he smiled. And also when he talked about killing enemies and surviving. That was problematic, but also very hot.

I cleared my throat. “Um—do you maybe want me to show you around?”

“Let’s do that tomorrow, when there’s light,” Jay said.

I was feeling a little unsettled. Confused. Sad that he seemed sad. “Okay. Well, what do you want to do then? I think we missed dinner.”

Jay’s dark expression brightened slightly. With a small smile, he said, “Well then, since you say you don’t know me anymore, let’s fix that. Why don’t I take you out on a date?”

**Episode 1517**

VIOLET

I glared at Marta, waiting for an answer.

“I don’t have any feelings for your annoying brother. That’s crazy!” she sputtered, waving her arms around. “After all, Lilac is still a ghost! And annoying! Did I mention he’s annoying?”

Wow. The lady was protesting too much.

She was madly in love with him, wasn’t she? I didn’t really know how the thought of that made me feel. Was it a step too far? Or a step in the right direction?

Not willing to let this go, I said, “But you already admitted you kissed him.” I looked around, searching for my brother. “I wonder if he kissed you back. Knowing him, he probably jumped at the opportunity.” I turned to Marta, looking at her up and down. “Now that I think about it, you *are* kind of his type.”

“What’s his type?” Marta said. “Not that I care.”

“I don’t really know. I just think he likes people who find him annoying,” I said seriously. Somewhere out there in the realm between the living and the dead, Lilac was probably dying laughing.

“That’s ridiculous,” Marta said, very uptight. *God*, they were made for each other. What a problem. “The only reason I even kissed your brother in the first place was to see if it would help bring him back. It wasn’t, like, a romantic kiss. Don’t be silly.”

I blinked at her, very slowly. “Right. Because whenever *I* want to help someone, I always stick my tongue down their throat.”

Marta gasped, then said, “I don’t know how you met Charlie! I don’t have *feelings* for your brother. Period.”

“That’s what you’re saying, but it wouldn’t have brought him back if you were faking your feelings,” Kira said seriously. She was always so serious, but at the same time I felt like I could trust her. “Remember—the power of three.”

And then, I did remember what Kira had just said. I pointed at the medium. “So you *do* have feelings for my brother! Admit it!”

Marta stared at me. “My feelings for him are friendly. Nothing more.” She said the words so convincingly that I started to believe her. That did seem possible. But I really wished that I could see Lilac—I could always tell when he was lying. Something this big would be hard for him to deny without giving it away.

“I hope we’re done here,” Kira said, interrupting my stare-down with Marta. “I’m tired.”

I liked that Kira wasn’t dismissive, exactly—just honest. Because then she added, “I hope that whatever’s going on here, you can work it out.”

We headed out as Kira mumbled something about teenagers. How old was she, even?

“I was trapped in a house for fifty years!” Marta called after her, like she was offended.

I wasn’t offended, but I also didn’t know what to believe. All I knew for sure was that I wanted my brother back. And if Marta had to kiss him to make that happen, would that really be so bad?

I decided that it wouldn’t be bad at all. I liked Marta, after all. She would be good for my brother, especially because she could resurrect him. That was possibly the best thing about her.

“Why don’t you kiss him again?” I blurted.

Marta froze. “Right here? In front of you?”

I shrugged. Werewolves didn’t have a lot of taboos. Well. What Cali was doing with Greyson and Xavier—now *that* was a little taboo. Especially considering the Alpha territorial factor. And all, um, *you know*, scents and stuff. Anyway. That was their problem.

It looked like I’d found a new solution for *my* problem.

“I don’t mind,” I said. “It’s not like I need to *look*.”

Marta blinked at me. “But he’s your brother, so there’s that. And it’s also really draining for me, as a medium.”

I was about to ask her if she could do it on another day, then—if she *had* enjoyed it, that was—when I noticed Charlie had been tagged in another post on Instagram. I’d been a little paranoid to say the least, checking his IG a little too much because of that very pretty mystery girl, who’d seemed very happy to have taken a picture with him. I didn’t like thinking so badly of a stranger, but my worst fear was confirmed when I saw that the photo was another one of him with that girl!

*Seriously?*

And this time, it looked like they were at a dance? What the hell?

I’d never been so angry in my entire life. I literally wanted to set something on fire. And because I didn’t want that something to be the medium who was saving my brother’s life, I told Marta, “This isn’t over, but I need to deal with something else.”

I stepped out of the room quickly. There was lots of yelling going on throughout the house, I realized. Something had happened yet again. It probably had something to do with Cali and the two Alphas, but I’d had enough of that. My own problems couldn’t wait.

I rushed into my room and stared down at the Instagram picture. My blood was boiling. This was just too much. I couldn’t accept it, I couldn’t believe it, and I couldn’t fucking *allow it.*

I called Charlie, my heart and hands shaking. He answered right away.

“Oh, I was just about to call you,” he said. He sounded happy to hear from me. I, on the other hand, wanted to bite him.

“Who the hell is that other girl?” I demanded.

There was a pause. Then Charlie slowly said, “What are you talking about? What other girl?”

Gritting my teeth, I stared at the Instagram post. “The one who has her arms around you, the one who calls herself ‘Sophie\_Slayz’, like she’s in goddamn middle school. THAT girl.”

Charlie had to be shocked by my use of profanity—I was kind of shocked, myself—but I was completely infuriated right now.

“Violet, please come down.” Charlie’s voice was calm, but that just made me even madder. Especially when he added, “Her name is Sophie Slayton, and this is not what you think.”

I scoffed. “Do you realize how stupid that sounds?”

“Violet, I’m your mate.” His voice was suddenly sharp. “I would never, not in a million years, cheat on you.”

He sounded so believable, but the picture… A picture was worth a thousand words.

But then, Charlie said, “I had a plan to sneak out of the camp to come to you, but my mom showed up.”

I was struck by his confession, my anger suddenly overwhelmed.

“Why would Iris show up at camp?” I asked breathlessly.

“That was exactly what I was wondering, too,” Charlie said. “She claimed that she was just passing by, but I’m pretty sure she’s just meddling and checking up on me. I think it’s obvious.”

I paused, taking a deep breath. Here I was, yelling at him when he was having so much trouble with his mom. His very *dangerous* mom. “What happened? Are we in trouble? Did your mom find out we’re secretly dating?”

Charlie snorted bitterly. “No. But when it comes to my mom and my dating life, we’ve got another problem.”

I did not like the sound of that. At all. “What do you mean ‘your dating life’?”

Charlie blurted it all at once. “My mom kind of thinks I’m dating Sophie, and I maybe didn’t correct her.”

I was no longer angry. I was now just freaking out. What was happening? What the hell was *happening*?

“Violet, please listen to me,” Charlie said in a soothing tone. My heart instantly calmed at the sound of it. “I did it to protect you, so we can see each other.”

I was silent for a bit, forcing myself to think logically, not emotionally. Though this was about emotion, too. Charlie was being truthful, because he loved me, and he was my mate. Mates did not lie. Mates did not cheat. And Charlie wasn’t just my mate—he was everything I’d ever wanted in a soulmate, too.

“Violet? Please say something,” Charlie pleaded. There was a devastation in his words that shook me out of my stupor. What we had was solid.

“I trust you,” I admitted. “Even though I hate seeing pictures of you with Sophie\_Slayz.”

Charlie let out a sound of relief. Then he chuckled a little. It was music to my ears. “So we’re good?”

I nodded. “Yes. I love you.”

“I love you too,” he said tenderly. “I have to go now, though. Sergeant Pepperdine’s doing a room check.”

We hung up. My screen still had that Instagram picture on display. That girl was holding Charlie too tight, her fingertips digging into his bicep, beaming as she stared at him. She stared at him like she wanted him for her own, but he was mine.

Charlie was all mine.

And then I decided, as simple as that, that I needed to go get my mate back.

I was going to Minnesota.

**Episode 1518**

I tried to keep pace with Greyson and Xavier as they followed after Mace. He’d suddenly torn away to search for Pip right in the middle of our conversation about what the hell had happened.

I didn’t make it far before my mates stopped in their tracks, realizing I was on their heels.

“Cali, no,” Xavier said, catching my arm.

“You stay here,” Greyson ordered.

“Are you kidding me?” I demanded, shaking free. “I’m going—”

“Cali,” Xavier said, his voice a warning. “Stay with your sister. Keep an eye on her.”

I gritted my teeth. I hated being told what to do, but as I looked at the men in front of me, I figured that three Alphas could probably handle going after Pip. And as much as I hated to admit Xavier was right, I knew that Artemis probably needed me more. What if the dark magic affecting Pip came for my sister too?

“Fine,” I finally said. “But not because you told me to. Both of you be careful.” My gaze couldn’t help but fall on Greyson and Xavier. They were totally capable of taking care of themselves, but these revenants were something we still didn’t quite know how to fully deal with. Anything could happen.

They both nodded and headed out after Mace.

With a sigh I started back toward Rishika’s room with the intention of checking on Artemis, and seeing if Rishika needed anything else, but as I drew closer, I slowed. There were strange sounds coming from the room, and I stopped, listening.

There was a muffled moan, and then someone giggled.

*No way!*

I took a step back, my face warming. Maybe now wasn’t the best time to check on them. Artemis sounded… healthy. I could always check on her later. Much later.

Doing a sharp about-face, I hurried back down the long hall and down the stairs. At the bottom I ran into Torin, who was coming out of the kitchen, holding a mug of hot chocolate.

“Hey, Cali,” he said brightly, smiling at me. I gave him a wave. Nothing ever got that Fae’s spirits down.

“How’s Rishika doing? I was thinking I should check to see how her wounds are healing.”

“Oh, um…” I sputtered. “She seems to be doing fine. I think you should probably check back later. Artemis is, uh, tending to her right now.”

“Great.” Torin looked pleased. “I hoped she would be. She’s so strong, and I think I did some of my best work with healing her injuries. What do you think?”

I nodded emphatically. “It’s working *a lot* better than anyone could have hoped for, pal.”

Torin smiled, and, sipping his hot chocolate, continued upstairs.

Coming into the kitchen, I looked out the long bank of windows to the sloping lawn, the frosty lake, and the ice-tipped trees beyond. I bit my lip, thinking about Xavier and Greyson, out there, looking for Pip. I was worried about them. Things were tense enough between them already, even without adding the volatile Mace to their already fragile dynamic—they’d almost come to blows a couple of times already because of Pip.

“Cali.”

Pulled from my dark thoughts, I looked over to see my mom coming out of the laundry room.

“Hi, Mom.”

She gave me a wan smile. “Hi, sweetheart.”

I frowned. She looked tired and strained, not at all like her usual lively self. “Are you okay? Greyson and Xavier are going to find Pip. I’m sure everything will be alright.”

The smile slid from her face, and she leaned against the door frame. “Oh, it’s not that, but I’m glad to hear it. I guess I’m a little worried about your father, sweetheart.”

Right. Of course, in all the chaos I had almost forgotten. “Because he’s turning into a werewolf.”

“No,” she said quickly, shaking her head, “that’s not it. It’s not the turning *into* a werewolf that’s the problem. It’s how your father is handling it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He’s acting so strangely. He keeps running around naked—”

I shuddered, remembering my encounter with him and wishing I could pour acid on that very specific part of my memory.

“—and he’s not sleeping well. He’s staying up late, and then when he does finally go to sleep, he *howls*.” She sighed and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “It’s all very strange.”

I took a seat at the long wooden kitchen table. “So, it seems like you’re not quite as chill with the whole ‘my husband is turning into a werewolf’ thing as you first let on, huh? I guess that’s probably pretty normal, as these things go.”

She gave me a wry smile, joining me at the table. “It’s just that I didn’t take into account the *little* changes that would happen with the whole transformation business, and how they might affect our relationship.”

My stomach gave an unpleasant lurch as I remembered the problems my parents had dealt with recently. “Well, we won’t know for sure that he’s turning until the full moon… But, Mom… Do you think you and Dad are going to be okay?”

The worried look on my mom’s face faded, and she gave me a wistful smile. “Cali, your father and I have been through a lot. This is a new level, for sure, but we’ll get through this, too.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s good to hear.”

My mom put her hand on top of mine. “But that’s enough about Dad and me. What’s going on with you?” Her eyes narrowed. “How’s it going with your two… Xavier and Greyson?”

Horror gripped me as my eyes widened and my face flushed. Why was she asking me that? What did she hear? If a convenient hole in the earth had opened up, I would have gladly sunk into it. I was *not* prepared to talk about my situation with Greyson and Xavier with my mom today.

“Um,” I said, looking down at the table as my cheeks burned like lava, “we’ve all agreed to, um… *co-exist*. More peacefully.” That was honest enough, right?

“Oh,” my mom said, more brightly. “Well, that sounds nice. But will that solve the *due destini* problem?”

I winced—it almost physically hurt to hear that question. “No,” I admitted. “But hopefully it’ll make life easier around here.”

My mom’s expression softened. “I imagine it’s very difficult for you. I know it can’t be easy on the boys, but you’re the one caught in the middle.”

I nodded, my throat growing tight. “It’s… not the best. But what can you do, right?”

“Oh, Cali.” My mom leaned her head on her hand. “I wish things were different for you.”

I shrugged. If I wallowed in my inability to choose between my mates for too long, I’d start spiraling into despair, and that was something I could *not* handle right now. I took a deep breath. “So do I, but it’s a step forward that Xavier and Greyson are trying. We can’t ask for much more.”

I swallowed hard, dying to change the subject. I cast my eyes around, looking for an idea. Anything at all would do.

“Truthfully, I wish things were easier for both my girls,” my mom admitted. She rubbed her temple delicately, as though she had a headache, then looked up at me. “How are things between you and Artemis?”

I was so grateful for the change of subject. “Things are good,” I said quickly. “Fine. Artemis seems like her old self again. Except…”

My mom looked at me quickly and frowned. “Except what, Cali?”

I looked down at the table, remembering the way Pip’s eyes had flashed that fiery orange. I bit my lip, wondering if I should mention it. Wondering if I should be more forceful about making sure my concerns about her were addressed.

Some of what was going on in my head must have shown on my face, because my mom frowned at me.

“Cali? Is there something you’re not telling me about Artemis?” When I didn’t answer, her expression grew grimmer. “When it comes to family, I don’t want any more secrets.”

I looked over at her. She was right, of course. No more secrets.

“I’ll admit, I am a little worried—"

“Why?” my mom demanded.

I debated for another moment, then, “I think Pip might’ve done something to Artemis, Mom. She had orange eyes. I saw them. They were glowing, like the revenants’.”

My mom gasped, and I watched the blood drain from her face. “We should go check on Artemis,” she said, bracing herself to stand.

I thought of the sounds coming from Rishika’s room and grabbed my mom’s hand. “No!”

“Cali—”

“Artemis is… *resting*, right now,” I finished lamely.

My mom stared at me. “Cali, this is serious. We can wake her up for something like this.”

I didn’t let go of my mom’s hand. “I know it’s serious, I just…” I shook my head. “Maybe I just imagined Pip’s eyes changing…”

My mom raised her eyebrows. “Did you?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I don’t know. I didn’t think so, but I can’t get it out of my head. The good news is that the last time I talked to Artemis, she was fine. Totally herself.”

My mom sat back down, though she didn’t look completely at ease.

But my attention was caught by movement out the window. I stood and stepped closer, peering outside. By pressing my forehead against the pane and craning my neck, I could make out the source of the fluttery movement—it was Violet, a bag over her shoulder, sneaking out of her window!

“Thanks for the chat. It really helped,” I called to my mom in a flurry, yanking the door open and hurrying out onto the back deck.

*What the hell is going on?* I raced down the steps and over to the scrap of lawn beneath Violet’s window, reaching it just as Violet dropped to the ground.

Heart pounding from my impromptu sprint, I crossed my arms and narrowed my eyes. “And just where do you think you’re going?”

**Episode 1519**

GREYSON

The trees dotting the edge of the deep woods were ominous against the dull, grey November sky. The air was chilled, but it carried a distinct scent that made our path clear.

“You getting that?” Mace asked, lifting his nose into the air.

Xavier nodded. “Yeah.”

Pip had been here.

“She shifted, then took off that way,” I said, pointing into the trees. “She’s heading east.”

Mace nodded, his expression grim. I could practically feel his panic for his mate. I’d have felt the same way if it had been Cali out there, hurt, weak, and lost. Hell, given the way Cali attracted trouble, I’d been worried about her since the day we’d met. But I set my jaw; we had to find Pip, and we couldn’t let Mace’s feelings about her interfere.

“Let’s just remember that Pip’s not herself,” I said. “She attacked Rishika—”

“We don’t really know what happened,” Mace snapped, glaring at me. “We only heard Rishika’s side of the story—”

“Come on, man,” Xavier said, rolling his eyes. “Get real. Yeah, we only heard one side, because Pip ran off, leaving Rishika lying on the ground, bleeding. Why would she do that if she was innocent?”

“Well, she’s not *guilty*!” Mace snarled.

“It’s doesn’t matter,” I said, putting my hands up to stop their argument. “All that matters right now is finding her. We’re not going to hurt her,” I assured Mace, who had opened his mouth to argue. “But we do need to bring her back to the pack house in order to get some answers.”

I shot a glance at Xavier, feeling a rush of anger rise up in my chest. I could’ve used a few answers myself, about what had happened between him and Cali, but this wasn’t the time or the place, so I looked back to the trees.

“Where do you think she would go?” Xavier was asking Mace.

Mace shrugged, peering into the trees. “Hell if I know. This isn’t even our land. She doesn’t know it very well.”

I sighed. “I think we should shift and follow her scent. We’ll be faster as wolves, we’ll be able to pick up her trail better, and if we run into trouble, we’ll be in a better position to protect ourselves.

Xavier nodded, but Mace narrowed his eyes.

“Remember, no one touches Pip,” he reminded us, glaring.

We nodded, shifting and taking off into the trees.

As we moved through the quiet woods, I let Mace take the lead even though it went against my Alpha nature—and I had to keep reminding myself to hang back—but I knew if we’d been out here looking for Cali, I would’ve been right out front, aching to get to her first. I could give this to Mace.

I shot a sideways glance at Xavier as he ran beside me. Though, if we *had* *been* out here looking for Cali, I probably would’ve been fighting tooth and nail with my brother for the lead. I huffed an icy breath and focused on my tracking.

Pip’s scent was fading in and out as we moved. I concentrated, looking for it again. I had promised Mace we wouldn’t harm his mate, but if she attacked us in these woods we’d have no choice in defending ourselves. We ran a high risk of angering our already tentative relations with the Blue Blood pack. The last thing we needed right now was a civil war.

As we crested a small hill, her scent came back, stronger than ever. We all picked up on it, lifting our noses into the air, and—as one—quickened our pace.

*Cali’s worried we’re each using her to make the other jealous.*

I looked over at Xavier, who had mind linked with me.

*I assured her that we could handle it*, Xavier went on.

*Did you?*

He looked at me from the corner of his eye. *You’re not jealous that Cali and I slept together, are you?*

Wolf emotions differed slightly from human emotions, but only in complexity. Human emotions tended to be mixed—anger with sadness, happiness with longing—that kind of thing. In wolf form, you were still the same person, with the same thoughts and feelings, but everything was simpler, more basic. There were fewer nuances. So, the anger I felt in response to Xavier’s question was just that: pure fury.

I bit my tongue, though I would much rather have bitten Xavier’s throat. I knew what my brother was doing. Xavier was trying to rub it in—he had something I wanted, and he didn’t want me to forget it, even for a moment.

*I’ll ask you the same question the next time Cali spends the night with me, brother.*

Xavier gave a snort that almost sounded like a laugh. *You’re assuming she’ll even want to go back to spending time with you. And we both know what happens when you assume…*

The anger was growing, blooming in my chest. I’d always hated Xavier’s smug confidence—his absolute certainty that he couldn’t possibly be wrong. It was obnoxious as hell at the best of times, but it was fucking unbearable when it came to Cali.

*I wouldn’t push so hard if I were you*,I warned him.

He laughed. *Did I find a sore spot?* he asked, his voice tinged with malice. *Is the mighty Alpha suddenly worried he might not measure up?*

That was it.

With a snarl, I pushed off the path and lunged, throwing myself at Xavier and slamming him to the ground. We rolled in the deep snow, crashing against trees and shaking snow from the branches, creating a little blizzard as we snapped at each other. He kicked hard, dislodging me from on top of him, and I flew into the air, tumbling into the snow. He was on me in a moment, jaws wide to bite, but I smacked him hard across the face, claws outstretched, drawing blood.

He snarled and drew back before readying himself for another attack. He came at me again with a nasty look in his eye. I’d gotten to my feet, ready to take him, when Mace appeared between us, looking furious.

*What the hell is wrong with you two?*

Neither of us answered. We stood there, staring at him, panting hard. Blood dripped from Xavier’s face, dotting the white snow.

*You know what? I don’t even fucking care. But I will tell you this—if the two of you can’t control your jealousy, then just get the hell back to your pack house. I don’t need any of this.*

With a sinking stomach, I realized that I’d fucked up. I’d been worried about Mace’s feelings interfering with our search, but here I was, letting my own do that exact thing. I should never have attacked Xavier. It had been childish as hell, and I knew it.

I glanced over at Xavier. Even in his wolf form, he somehow still managed to look smug.

*I’m serious—one more fucked up scene like this from you two, and you can forget any cooperation with the Blue Blood pack, Greyson. The Redwoods will be on their own.*

*It won’t happened again, Mace. I swear.*

Mace stared at me for a long moment. *It had better not.*

When he finally turned away, I glared at Xavier. *Will you grow up?*

Xavier huffed, spraying the ground with more blood, but before he could respond, Mace spoke again through the mind link.

*Her scent is strong. We’re close.*

I followed Mace around a copse of trees and—with a jolt—realized where we were. Focused on Xavier, I hadn’t noticed it, but we’d been running dead east, toward the ghost pond. Being so close to it brought back the terrifying memories of pulling Cali out of that dark, freezing water. My whole body felt cold as I remembered how still she’d been, how cold, how blue her lips had been, how it had felt like ages before she’d started to breathe again…

*Keep your eyes open*, I warned the others as we drew closer to the pond.

Just as I spoke, there was movement up ahead. I couldn’t see what it was—it was only a flash of something through the trees—but we all stopped, staring, our hackles raised.

*Come on*, I said. *Slowly.*

We moved slowly, silently, through the trees, until we reached their edge, where we could clearly see the pond.

Pip was there. She had shifted back to her human form, and she was standing at the edge of the pond. She must have been freezing, but she wasn’t shivering. She was standing stock-still, staring into the water as if hypnotized by it. She lifted her foot, and there was a long, suspended moment where nothing moved, and then—before we could do anything—Pip stepped into the water.

Mace gave an ear-splitting howl and lunged toward her—to stop her or drag her back—but it was too late. Faster than he could get to her—faster than I would have thought possible—Pip was gone, swallowed up by the water.

**Episode 1520**

ARTEMIS

I was deliriously, absurdly, ridiculously happy. I stretched out beside Rishika and decided I was *into* having a girlfriend. I really didn’t know what had taken me so long.

Turning on my side, I felt a strange ache in my heart as I looked at her. I let my eyes follow the arch of her nose and the gentle curve of her cheek. I had missed out on so much, being alone for so long in the Fae world. I’d thought I was happy, and in a way, I had been. I’d been self-contained, which I liked. I hadn’t relied on anyone, but now knowing what it was like to *really* feel happy, I knew that what I had felt back then hadn’t really been happiness. I had been lonely—I just hadn’t let myself admit it.

I smiled to myself, thinking of how Rishika would kick ass in the Fae world. With our combined skills, we would *dominate*. We could work together—be bounty hunters, maybe. A Fae and a werewolf. No one would have seen that before. Together, the two of us would be unstoppable.

“What are you thinking about?”

The sound of Rishika’s voice drew me out of my wild thoughts.

Rishika had turned onto her side and propped her head up on her hand. “You were smiling to yourself. I just wondered what you were thinking about.”

Caught off-guard, I wasn’t quite sure how to answer. “I was… I was just thinking about how I’m glad you’re okay. You *are* okay, aren’t you?” I asked, running my hand over her shoulder.

Rishika laughed. “I’m fine. It’s going to take a lot more than one little Pip to take me down.” Her gaze softened, and she reached out to stroke my hair. “I’m sorry if you were worried.”

“I’ll admit, you had me for a second,” I said quietly.

She gave me a half-smile. “I kind of like knowing that. That you were worried about me. Does that make sense?”

I nodded. “I think it’s all part of this girlfriend thing.” I took a deep breath. This was new territory for me. It was exciting—terrifying—but thrilling at the same time.

Rishika grinned and flopped onto her back. She stretched with a groan. “I should probably go downstairs. Find out what’s happening with Pip. See what I can do.” She threw back the covers and hopped out of bed. But then—as if she’d had second thoughts—she leaned back over to press her lips against mine.

Her kiss was so immediately intense, it shocked the hell out of me. This was no sleepy, morning-after kiss. Her tongue pushed past my lips, tangling with mine, pressing and demanding. Arousal pulsed through me, and I bit down on her bottom lip.

“Get back in here,” I murmured, reaching for her.

She pulled back with a smile. “Hold that thought for later, okay?”

I dropped back with a sigh but contented myself with watching her get dressed.

She glanced at me over her shoulder and—catching me staring—laughed. “You need to get dressed, too, don’t you?”

“Ugh, can the world stop falling apart for a few hours so we can just stay in bed?” I grumbled, forcing myself out of the covers as Rishika snickered at my fake complaints.

I kept sneaking glances at her as I pulled on my own clothes, and, when we were both dressed, Rishika opened the door.

“Orla!” she said in surprise.

My mom was standing in the doorway, her hand raised to knock. “Hello, girls. I was just coming to check on you.”

Rishika threw a glance at me over her shoulder. “Well, I was just headed downstairs to see if I could help with the whole Pip-sitch. See you later.”

I shifted on my feet, feeling slightly uncomfortable as my mom turned to look at me.

She smiled faintly. “Can we talk?”

I shot a glance at the messy, rumpled bed and felt a flash of embarrassment. That Rishika and I were together was certainly no secret, but I didn’t like the idea of having my mom staring at the obvious, so I tipped my chin toward the door. “Let’s go down to the kitchen. I could use a snack.”

“All right,” she agreed, and followed me down the stairs. “I can make you something,” she offered, as we headed into the kitchen. “What would you like?”

“Anything. Tea and toast would be fine.”

She turned and started opening cupboards and drawers, pulling out mugs and boxes of teabags.

“So,” she started, clearly striving to sound casual. “How have you been feeling?”

I looked at her, unsure how to respond. Was she asking how I was feeling in general, or how I was feeling about Rishika? I didn’t know if I was comfortable going into that at the moment, so I decided to keep it vague.

“Fine,” I said with a shrug. Okay, maybe that was a little too vague.

My mom dropped a teabag into a mug and looked up at me. “I’m worried about you, Artemis.” She took a step closer. “How’s your head?”

“It’s fine,” I said, dodging away as she reached for me. I had to come up with a different response other than “fine” or her mom senses were going to sniff me out.

*Be careful. You can’t trust her.*

The voice came from somewhere behind me. I didn’t look around for it—I knew there was no one there. I gritted my teeth.

My mom frowned. “Are you sure you’re okay? You look pale.”

I nodded, but as I did, I could feel the familiar headache returning, pounding into my temples.

*You can’t trust her.*

*You can’t trust her.*

*You can’t trust her.*

I clenched my jaw, fighting to keep myself from snapping back at the voice, telling it to shut up. I knew *that* would be hard to explain to my mom. But it was a lot to do—trying to ignore the pain *and* block out the voice. I gave my head a shake, trying to clear it, but that only increased the throbbing in my brain.

“*Artemis!*” My mom was shouting now, for some reason. “Sit down, sweetheart. You’re sweating. You look like you’re going to pass out.”

There was a high-pitched buzzing in my ears, like a swarm of bees, and it grew louder and louder. I put my hands over my ears, but it didn’t block it out. It was drowning out every other sound—even my thoughts—until everything went black.

In the blackness, the buzzing just grew louder, until it became a scream. It was unbearable—it felt like my head was about to explode—and then, everything stopped.

The pain subsided, and the darkness began to fade.

I opened my eyes and looked around, confused. What the hell had happened? Where was I?

Completely disoriented, it took me a moment to get my bearings. I was still in the kitchen—only… it was different. I looked around, baffled. What had happened? The room was darker, like the lights had been turned down, but that wasn’t the only change. Everything looked old and worn. Dusty. The air was cold and lifeless, like the house had been shut up for months. There was a long crack in the glass door that led to the back deck.

The tea kettle began to whistle on the stove, steam curling from the spout. The screech of the kettle seemed sharper, more piercing that normal. I stood shakily to my feet, heart pounding, and walked over to turn off the burner, making the shrill noise fade to nothingness.

My hands felt strange—sticky and wet. I looked down at them, and my eyes widened in surprise. They were covered in blood.

But *whose* blood?

I looked around, then down at myself. Had I cut myself? Maybe it had something to do with the crack in the window? Then I noticed a trail of blood leading out of the kitchen.

My heart continued to slam against my ribs as I followed the trail, walking slowly. My senses were on high alert, and I flexed my sticky fingers, feeling my Fae magic coursing through me. I was ready to defend myself against any threat that might be waiting for me, but the house was quiet as I moved through it.

The trail led me out of the kitchen and down the short hallway to the basement door. I frowned at it: there was blood smeared on the knob. Whoever left the trail had descended through here. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to follow, but I felt compelled.

I pushed the door open and gazed down the darkened stairs. When I hit the light switch, nothing happened. I took a deep breath and started down the stairs slowly, hoping that my eyes would adjust to the darkness quickly.

When I reached the bottom, I took a step, grateful to be done with the stairs, and immediately tripped. I fell, sprawling on the hard concrete floor.

“Gross,” I muttered, hauling myself up. The floor was wet and sticky, and whatever was making it that way was all over me. The coppery, metallic smell of blood was everywhere, filling my senses. I looked around, searching for what I could have tripped over, and what I saw made my whole body go rigid with fear.

I screamed and scuttled backward across the blood-streaked floor as Orla’s lifeless eyes stared up at me.

**Episode 1521**

LOLA

I looked around the restaurant, examining the flower-patterned wallpaper, the votive candle flickering in the center of our round table, the small, hand-printed menu—anywhere but right at Jay, who was sitting across from me. I wondered if he felt as awkward about all this as I did. Though, if he did, he wasn’t showing it. He looked easy and comfortable—and handsome—as he lounged in his seat. I had been hesitant to accept his offer when he’d asked me out, but in the end, my curiosity had gotten the better of me. I hazarded a glance up at his attractive face, which was aimed at me. I mean, how could I have resisted?

Jay smiled at me and glanced down at the menu. “Oh, look, they have grilled cheese, your favorite.” He looked up, a look of worry flashing across his face. “You still like grilled cheese, right?”

“Of course,” I said quickly, a little thrown. Grilled cheese *was* a favorite of mine, and it was strange that he knew that about me when I knew absolutely nothing about him. “Though maybe instead of tomato soup with it, something with a little more iron would be better.”

He grinned. “I’m glad that hasn’t changed, at least. We’ve had some good times over meals.” His smile faded as he looked down at the menu again. “Even if you don’t remember.”

I shifted in my seat, uncomfortable again.

He looked up. “Do you remember hanging out at Mrs. Smith’s coffee shop?””

“Well,” I said slowly, “I definitely remember being at the café—that white chocolate mocha…” I closed my eyes dreamily. “Who could forget that?”

“But you don’t remember being there with me?” Jay asked.

I hesitated. He looked so crestfallen that I hated to tell him, but I shook my head. “No.” I didn’t remember a thing about Jay specifically, though everything else about my life remained crystal clear. “The hypnotherapy erased a lot of stuff.”

A shadow of pain passed across Jay’s face. He took a deep breath and shrugged. “Well, that’s why we’re starting over. Hang on.” He pulled out his phone and scrolled quickly through. “Look.”

I looked at the photo he’d pulled up. It had been taken in Mrs. Smith’s café, and it was of me—younger, with shorter hair—and I was sitting next to Jay. I gasped. “You have two eyes.”

Jay laughed. “Yeah, this was before I lost it.”

“What happened?” I asked. “Was it an accident?”

Jay closed his phone, his expression growing thoughtful. “Actually, I gave it up, to Big Mac.”

“Why?” I demanded.

He looked me right in the eye. “To save you, Lola.”

I stared back at him, floored. “Really? You did that for me?” How fucking romantic was that? He had given his left *eye* to save me? I would’ve loved to shove that right in Emmett’s smug face. I shook my head. “I wish I could remember.”

“Let me show you a few more,” Jay said, looking down at his phone. “Here’s another one. This is just after we met.”

I leaned over to see a photo of the two of us looking much younger and standing close, but slightly awkwardly. It made me laugh.

“This one is from the time we went sledding.” Jay scrolled some more and held up his phone, showing a shot of the two of us, so bundled up our faces were barely visible. We were sitting in a giant black innertube in the snow, and Jay had his arms wrapped tightly around me.

“Oh!” A sudden idea had struck me, and I reached for my own phone. I scrolled through my photos, searching for pictures with Jay. “Look!”

Jay looked at my phone and broke into a smile, which lit up his whole face. “That’s from the Minnesota State Fair. I took you there on your sixteenth birthday.”

I looked down at the photo. We were standing in the bright sunlight in front of a butter sculpture of a woman—that year’s dairy princess. Jay had his arm around my shoulders, and he still had both eyes.

“We were determined to try every food on a stick they served. And we almost did it.” He laughed. “Though you almost barfed after you ate butter on a stick and then went on the Zipper.”

I kept going through my photos, even after our dinner came, finding more and more of us, all at different stages of our relationship. I found one of us standing in front of a giant Christmas tree, one of us on a roller coaster, and—the one that made me blush—one of us at the beach.

It was sunset, and we were standing with our feet in the water, kissing. No, not *kissing*—we were *making out*. I was wearing a tiny red bikini and Jay was shirtless, in a pair of boardshorts, and we were both getting pretty handsy.

“Who took this?” I asked, my face flushed.

“Um, self-timer, maybe?” Jay guessed. He pulled my phone from my hands and looked down at the photo. “I’m *really* grabbing your ass in this shot.” He paused for a moment and pressed a few buttons. “I’m just going to send this to myself, if that’s okay.”

I laughed and tugged back my phone. I’d been right when I’d spoken to Cali the other day—Jay *was* nice. And funny, and so easy to be with. I couldn’t deny the strong sense of connection and attraction I felt toward him, even if I didn’t remember why I felt it. I was enjoying our time together so much that when the waiter dropped our check at the table, I felt my heart sink with disappointment.

Jay and I both reached for the check, but he got there first.

“Let me,” I said quickly. “You came all the way out here—”

“Come on, Lola. I asked you out. I’m paying,” he said, slipping his credit card into the leather case and handing it to the waiter.

“Well, thank you,” I said. Another romantic gesture.

When we stepped outside, the air was crisp and cold, but the sky was clear. I leaned back to look up at the stars.

“There’s Orion’s Belt,” Jay murmured, pointing.

“And Cassiopeia,” I added.

He smiled. Damn, that was the most gorgeous smile I thought I had ever seen. I realized I was grinning back like a complete idiot. Jay didn’t seem to mind. I flushed bright scarlet and cleared my throat.

“This way,” I said, pointing toward campus.

We walked in silence for a while, then Jay asked, “Can I hold your hand, Lola?”

To answer his question, I reached for his hand myself. It was warm, and it felt… familiar in a strange way. Like this was something I used to do all the time.

My gesture was rewarded with a bright smile. *If I’d known a side effect of the hypnotherapy was forgetting this man*, I thought, *I never would’ve done it. He’s sacrificed so much for me.*

“How long do you plan on staying?” I asked, looking down at our clasped hands as we walked.

“I’m not sure,” Jay said. “There’s a lot going on at the pack house right now, but I wanted to make sure that you were okay.”

“What’s happening back home?”

Jay sighed, looking worried. “More stuff with the Orb. The usual bad news. And Ava is at the house, which isn’t making anyone happy.”

“Ava?” I thought of Cali. Having Ava there had to be hard on her.

We got back to campus faster than I would have thought possible, and I looked up, surprised.

“We should stop here,” I said. “The other vampires… and werewolves. You know…” I trailed off.

Jay nodded. “Got it. I’m not looking to get jumped by your dorm-mates again.” He seemed reluctant to remove his hand from mine. “Did you have a good time?”

I grinned. “I had an amazing time, Jay. Thank you.”

He beamed. “I hoped you would. I want to ask you out on another date—if you’re okay with that.”

“*Yes!*”

Jay laughed. “You don’t even know what I have in mind.”

I shrugged. “I may not remember you, Jay, but I’m beginning to trust you. So, what *did* you have in mind?”

He smiled teasingly. “It’s a surprise.”

We laughed, but as the laughter died away, the silence that followed was strained.

My thoughts went to Ras, Irma, and even Emmett. They had all warned me against mates.

“What’s it like to be someone’s mate?” I asked, before I’d even finished thinking about the question.

“It’s the most amazing thing in the world,” Jay said automatically. His eyes flashed as he looked at me. “When you get your memory back, you’ll understand.”

“I wonder when that will be,” I mused. “Ras said the memory loss would be temporary, but she never said *how* temporary.” I tipped my head. “How disappointed would you be if I just never remembered?” I thought about all the photos. “It doesn’t seem fair, does it?”

Jay took a deep breath. “It *would* suck. But maybe there’s something I can do to help jog your memory.”

“Like what—”

I had barely gotten the words out before Jay reached for me and pulled me into a kiss.

**Episode 1522**

Tears began to leak from Violet’s eyes. “Please, Cali, can’t you just leave me alone?” she pleaded.

Leave her alone? With people disappearing and revenants popping up out of the ground? “Are you out of your mind, Violet?” With all the crazy shit going on, I wasn’t about to turn a blind eye to Violet sneaking out and running off. I couldn’t even believe she was asking me. “Where are you even going?” I demanded.

She sighed. “I’m going to see Charlie,” she admitted. “Obviously.”

“Charlie? Obviously?” I repeated, dumbfounded. “Isn’t he back in Minnesota? At a hunter boot camp, or something?”

Violet shifted her backpack on her shoulder. “Yeah, but I have to go. He *needs* me.”

“Oh my god, Violet.” I had to work hard not to roll my eyes. “You’re a *werewolf*, remember? It’s a *hunter* boot camp. They’re training to hunt werewolves. It’s not safe for you to go anywhere near that place.”

I could see the tears starting in Violet’s eyes again, and I felt my stomach tighten. I knew she was worried about Charlie—we were all worried about him—and I felt for her. I sighed. And then shivered. “Listen, it’s freezing out here. Why don’t we go somewhere where it’s not as cold, and we can talk?”

Violet hesitated. “I really don’t want the others to know anything.”

“Oh, come on—you know no one in there pays attention to anyone but themselves. Let’s go,” I said, leading her back into the warmth of the pack house.

There were pack members milling around, drinking hot chocolate and watching TV, so I looked around until I found an empty room, and shut the door.

It was the same room Greyson and I had hooked up in, but I tried to push that thought away as I focused on Violet.

She was looking down at the floor, clearly miserable.

“What’s going on, Violet? Did something happen with Charlie?” I asked. “You said you were worried for him. Is he in some kind of trouble?”

“I’m not sure.” She pulled her phone out of her pocket and opened it. When she handed it to me, I looked down at an Instagram photo of Charlie at what looked like a school dance. Next to him—okay, *hanging off him*—was a pretty, smiling girl.

Violet looked at me, her eyes blazing. “What would you do if this was either of your mates?”

*Spontaneously combust*. “I would want some answers, that’s for sure,” I admitted. “Have you talked to Charlie about this?”

Violet took a shuddering breath and wiped away a tear. “Yeah, I did. And I really did believe him when he said he would never cheat on me—I mean, of course I believe him, he’s my mate!—but I’m still upset about this picture.”

“Of course you are,” I murmured. “I would be, too.”

“And especially because Charlie’s mom thinks that Charlie and this girl Sophie are dating.”

“What?” I asked, shocked.

Violet’s eyes narrowed. “That woman hates me. Charlie’s mom is out to get me, and she’s going to encourage Charlie to stay with Sophie so he’ll stay away from me. Cali, can’t you see? I *have* to go!”

I looked at the tears shining in Violet’s eyes. It was an insane plan, but I knew that if I’d been eighteen, and in her shoes, I would’ve felt the exact same way. So, how was I meant to justify convincing Violet not to go?

“Are you going to try to stop me?” Violet asked, eyeing me.

“You’re an adult, Violet,” I said, shrugging. “I can’t stop you from doing what you want to do. You’re not a prisoner in this house. All I can do is try to convince you not to go.” Violet rolled her eyes and looked away, but I pressed on. “Being away from your mate is hard. If anyone understands that, I do. I tried to stay away from both my mates, and it didn’t work. Hell, I don’t even like short absences. Xavier and Greyson are off looking for Pip in the woods, and it’s making me feel antsy. I can only imagine what you must feel like with Charlie not only so far away, but now with a girl he’s fake dating to keep his mom from finding out about you.” I shook my head. “That’s super messed up.”

“Yeah,” Violet whispered, wiping her eyes. “It really is.”

“But we’re under siege here, Violet,” I reminded her. “We don’t know what’s happening outside the safety of our borders—you’ll only be endangering yourself. And the pack needs you here. You’re an asset.”

“I know,” Violet said, looking like she was trying not to cry.

“And what about Lilac?” I added, remembering *that* whole situation. “How long will he be tethered to Marta?”

Violet sighed. “I don’t know. No one does—trying to bring him back is risky right now with the portals closed. It could send him into oblivion.”

“So shouldn’t you stay here and have every moment you can with him in case something happens? Plus, you have to learn to trust your mate,” I said, gentling my voice. “Even when it’s hard to do.”

Violet was still for a moment. Then she nodded. “You’re probably right.” She sighed. “You *are* right. I’m not going to go. I won’t leave.” She looked up at me. “I promise.”

I nodded and pulled her into a hug. I felt terrible for her—I knew she was hurting, and I wished there was something more I could do to make it better. “Charlie won’t be at that boot camp forever. You’ll be together again before you know it.”

We broke apart at the sound of a cry of alarm from the other side of the closed door.

“It sounds like the guys are back,” Violet said.

Speaking of not wanting to be separated from mates… I flung open the door, but the first people I saw were my mom and Artemis in the kitchen. My mom had her arm around Artemis, who was looking pale and dazed, like she’d just woken up.

I stopped short. “Oh my god, what’s wrong with Artemis? Is she okay?”

“She’s a little dazed, but she’s doing better. I think she’ll be okay,” my mom said, though her lips were thin with worry.

*What* was going on with my sister? She had seemed okay, so much so that I’d let myself stop worrying about her, but now she didn’t look well at all.

I was trying to think of ways I could help her recovery further along—anything I hadn’t thought of yet—when the front door flew open and a strong, cold wind blew in. Xavier charged into the living room, quickly followed by Greyson. They were both panting as though they’d just sprinted a huge distance. They were both naked and soaking wet.

I felt my eyes widen, and something powerful expanded in my chest at the sight of both my mates—wet and completely, powerfully naked—standing before me.

But then I was distracted by Mace, who came in just behind them, carrying Pip in his arms. They were both soaking wet as well, and Pip looked pale, and so limp and lifeless that my breath caught in my throat.

*Holy shit, is Pip* dead*?*

“What happened?” Astrid called, hurrying down the stairs.

“Who’s hurt?” Torin asked, following close behind.

There were running footsteps in the hallway up above as more pack members heard the commotion and headed downstairs.

“What’s going on?” I asked, turning to look at Xavier and Greyson and very carefully keeping my eyes on their faces. “What happened to Pip?”

Xavier wiped some water off his face. “We tracked her through the woods. We got to her just as she tried to drown herself in that ghost pond.”

“We don’t know if that’s what happened!” Mace snapped, glaring angrily at Xavier.

I gaped at Xavier, then at Pip, whose still face was blue with cold. “Why would she do that?”

Mace glared at me, but Greyson spoke, cutting off whatever furious diatribe he was about to spew at me.

“Zainab, get some blankets for Pip. Mace, why don’t you put her down on the couch over there. We need to get her warmed up.”

“I’ll throw some blankets in the dryer. That might warm her up faster,” Astrid said, gathering an armload and running out of the room.

Mace walked Pip to the couch and laid her down as though he thought she might break apart at any moment.

Maybe he was right about that. She looked so thin and fragile, I could understand why he was being so careful. Mace was angry, but I couldn’t blame him—I couldn’t imagine the anguish he had to be going through.

The milling group drew back with a collective gasp as Pip sprang suddenly to her feet. Her eyes flew open, and they burned bright, flaming, unmistakable orange. She stared around for just a moment. Then, with a terrifying, feral snarl, she lunged toward Greyson and Xavier.

**Episode 1523**

AVA

I rinsed another dirty plate and loaded it into the dishwasher. What the hell was wrong with this pack? Who the hell just used a plate and left it stacked in the sink? Or on the counter? Or the table? Who did they think was going to clean up after them? Did they think there were pack house fairies who came in at night to do their damn dishes?

Maybe that was what I was now. A pack house fairy. After everything, that was what I’d been reduced to. A fucking *maid*.

I tossed a detergent tablet into the dishwasher and kicked the door shut, grinding my teeth. When I’d worked at Iñigo’s creepy-ass diner, at least I’d been paid to do this kind of shit.

I grabbed the sponge from behind the faucet and started to scour the sink, thinking hard.

Greyson had told me that I would have to kill Iñigo to prove my loyalty to the pack, but—I kept turning the question over and over in my mind—how the *hell* was I supposed to do that?

I moved my frantic scrubbing to the counters, debating my options.

On the one hand, if I did manage to kill Iñigo, I wouldn’t have to deliver the Fae as part of our deal. It would also remove Iñigo as a threat, which would be a huge relief to me. I thought about him all the time—he was always there, looming in the corners of my thoughts. And killing him just might be enough to convince Greyson and—more importantly—Xavier that I was loyal to the Redwood pack.

But, on the other hand, Iñigo was *not* going to be easy to kill. Not by a longshot. A vampire like him did not live to be as old as he was by being careless. He didn’t often make mistakes. And if *I* slipped up—even a little—I was going to be the one who died. Again.

I stared down into the sink, watching my options swirl down the drain along with the soapy water.

Shouts from the living room drew my attention away from my conundrum. Throwing down my sponge, I strode toward the noise.

The Redwoods and Blue Bloods were all there, all in a tizzy, and a wild-eyed Pip was being held back by a very angry—and very naked—Xavier.

A bolt of annoyance flashed through me as I paused in the doorway. What the hell was going on here? That was my mate that crazy, little, bitch was trying to claw at.

I started into the melee but stopped myself after a step. Xavier wasn’t technically my mate anymore. The thought made a bitter taste rise up in the back of my throat, but I swallowed it down and looked around, trying to get a quick read on the situation. He might believe he was no longer my mate, but there was still no way I was going to let anything happen to him.

I stepped forward to help him contain Pip—who was small, but fighting back hard—but then Cali pushed past me.

Of-freaking-course. *Cali*.

Before I could reach Xavier, Mace surged forward and wrestled him away from Pip, shoving him back. He grabbed Pip and pulled her toward him, holding her close even as she fought to get away, burying his face in her neck.

I looked over the scene, baffled. What the hell was going on?This pack house had more drama than a Shakespearean tragedy.

“Are you okay?” I asked quietly, slipping through the crowd and stepping close to Xavier.

He flinched, surprised, and glanced at me. “I’m fine,” he said gruffly, angrily. “Like you even care,” he added dismissively, turning his back.

I gritted my teeth against the sharp sting of his rejection. I *did* care—I cared about him so much it kept me up at night. How could he not see that? Everything I’d done, everything I’d gone through, had been to get him back. Xavier unmating from me had been cruel, and a blow I hadn’t been expecting, but I wasn’t going to accept that it was the end. It didn’t mean that I couldn’t regain his trust and his loyalty. And his love.

I looked at him—at the smooth, curving shape of the muscles of his back as moved. Despite my hopes, he hadn’t really warmed up to me since I’d been back at the pack house.

The rest of the pack had rallied around me after Iñigo’s attack, which had felt nice, but that had been pretty short lived. Since then, they’d gone back to acting like I was invisible. No one had even come to check on me—not even to accuse me of anything. Not that I wanted to be accused of anything, but maybe that would’ve been better than nothing. Right now, it felt like no one cared that I was here.

Like limbo.

It reminded me of when I’d been dead—of that strange, quiet time I had spent wandering the spirit world. I had known no one, and no one had known me. I couldn’t cross over with all the unfinished business I still had left in this world, but I couldn’t be content with merely observing my mate from the back of some shitty mirror, either. That was the closest I’d ever like to get to hell.

I looked over at Cali, standing between Greyson and Xavier, and rolled my eyes. Why couldn’t she just choose Greyson already and get the hell out of my way? It would make my life so much easier—and would probably be a lot easier on Greyson and Xavier, too.

Pip gave another throaty growl, and I took a hesitant step back. I didn’t exactly know what they were, but I didn’t like whatever was happening with these revenant things—not one bit. They were creepy as hell, and if someone as powerful as Iñigo could be affected by them, then they had to be really bad.

And they just kept showing up—all these people with the creepy orange eyes. I took another step back. Maybe it was time for me to just leave—disappear for a little while, until things calmed down a bit. But I glanced over at Xavier, and my heart sped up. I didn’t want to leave him. Damn my stupid, lovesick heart.

I had stepped back enough that the group around Pip had forgotten about me, and, as they bent their heads together, I eavesdropped on their conversation.

“We need to get her out of here,” Xavier said roughly. “Now. Before she does any more damage.”

“*What?*” Mace demanded.

“We need to get her somewhere safe,” Greyson amended, glancing at Mace. “The basement has a room where we can keep her safe and comfortable—”

“And locked up,” Xavier added.

“*No*.” Mace shook his head, holding Pip closer, even as she struggled in his arms. “You’re not putting her in a cell. She didn’t come here to be a prisoner.”

“Well, we gotta put her somewhere,” Xavier said.

“I’ll take her upstairs,” Mace said. “To our room.”

Greyson’s jaw worked as he thought about his options. “Fine,” he finally said. “As long as we’ve got someone watching her. Around the clock.”

Mace didn’t look happy, but he nodded. “I’ll get someone from my pack to do it. She’ll be more comfortable with that.”

“I mean it, Mace,” Greyson growled. “Around the clock. No sleeping on the job. Not this time.”

“I heard you,” Mace growled back. He turned to his pack. “Lester! You take the first shift of guard duty.”

A guy with tight black curls nodded, and Mace picked up Pip and headed upstairs.

It looked like the situation had been resolved, and I was about to head back to my upstairs exile when something caught my eye.

I looked hard at Pip, who was lying in Mace’s arms. She had gone limp, and her eyes were closed, but there was a faint orange light emanating from her. It was almost like an aura. I blinked hard, but the orange light stayed the same. I rubbed my eyes, but still nothing changed. What the hell was going on? Was something wrong with my vision?

Looking around the room, I checked everyone else. If there was something wrong with my eyes, I should’ve been seeing orange auras around everyone, but everyone else was free from the strange, shimmering light.

I looked back at Pip, baffled. The color was oddly familiar. It was the same color—a fiery, burnt orange—that I’d seen burning in Iñigo’s eyes. Everyone kept saying that that was how you could tell if someone was a revenant—their burning orange eyes.

My stomach tightened as I flashed back to that strange moment with Iñigo, when his eyes had flashed orange. It had only been for a moment—barely more than a second—but it had been so strange. Could that somehow be related to all of this, too?

I looked back at Pip, and the orange aura seemed to glow even brighter. No one else seemed as affected by the aura as I was. In fact, no one seemed to be paying any attention to it at all. Was I the only person who could see it?

**Episode 1524**

MARTA

There were screams from downstairs, followed by angry yells, and the sound of something—or some*one*—falling or being pushed into a wall. I sat up in bed, my heart thudding, and looked at the door, wondering if I should go down and check it out.

“Well?”

I looked over.

Lilac was sitting next to me on the bed, his arms folded across his chest, and not looking the least bit concerned about the commotion downstairs.

“Well what?”

He made a show of looking around the room. “Well, we’re alone now.”

“So?”

“Aren’t you going to kiss me?”

My stomach fluttered in an annoyingly nervous, excited way as I remembered our last—rather memorable—kiss.

“No,” I said firmly. “Definitely not.”

There was no point in lying to myself—I had enjoyed kissing Lilac—a lot, actually—but it had probably been a mistake. He was a ghost, and I was not. And that was that.

“Why not?” Lilac asked. “It’s been a while. You’ve probably had enough time to recharge your battery, or whatever it is mediums use.”

With a huff, I stepped off the bed, and away from Lilac. “I’m *not* kissing you, Lilac, and that’s final.”

Lilac frowned at me. “So you want to curse me to being a ghost forever.” He sighed dramatically.

“No! I-I don’t know!” I sputtered, completely flustered. “You know, it wasn’t so long ago that you were begging me not to bring you back,” I reminded him.

Lilac didn’t deign to respond to that.

“And Big Mac warned us that it was dangerous to even think about bringing you back. For everyone involved, but especially for you.” I ran my hand through my hair. “I mean, isn’t there enough dangerous stuff going on around here? Do we really need to go looking for more? And it sounds like there’s already something happening right now,” I said, pointing at the door.

Lilac looked at the door, beyond which we could hear a scuffle taking place and deep voices yelling. He narrowed his eyes. “I wonder if Violet’s down there causing trouble. She hasn’t been the same since she found her mate.”

Before I could respond, there was a knock at the door, and I jumped. Damn, all this revenant, resurrection, and ritual talk had me anxious. More anxious than usual.

“Hey,” Kira said, popping her head in. “I just wanted to check in on you. There’s something going on downstairs, and other than Ava, you and I are the only non-pack members around here.” She gave me a half-smile. “We have to stick together.”

I gave her a halting smile back. I was a little hesitant. I just wasn’t sure how I felt about making a witch my ally. Though it would be better than making a witch my enemy. And with Big Mac off at Haystack Rock, I knew I could use someone else with powers to help look after me, in case anything went sideways. And Kira was right—it was just the two of us. And Ava.

Lilac nudged me. “Ask her about bringing me back.”

“I’m not asking her that,” I hissed.

“What?” Kira looked at me, her brows drawn together in confusion.

I shook my head, color flooding my cheeks. “I wasn’t—I was talking to Lilac. He doesn’t shut up. Ever.” I turned to Lilac. “We already talked about that with Big Mac.”

“Yeah, and why not get a second opinion?” Lilac asked.

I stared at him. “They’re witches, not doctors!”

“Please?” he asked, his eyes going big, like a puppy’s.

I rolled my eyes. “Ugh. You’re impossible. Fine.” I turned to Kira, but there was another clatter and a round of yells from downstairs.

Kira looked at me, alarmed.

“Maybe we should go see what’s happening down there?” I suggested.

“Yeah, that might be good,” Kira agreed.

Lilac followed me out the door and into the hallway. “You’re just afraid to kiss me again, aren’t you?”

“Shut up,” I shushed. Kira looked back at me and I smiled, pointing to where I knew she couldn’t see Lilac. “Just the ghost… *thing* again. Not you.”

Kira raised her eyebrows—clearly thinking I was a loon—and headed downstairs.

The room was crowded with people, and I took an immediate step back. “Whoa.” I had *not* expected to see so many naked werewolves. Both Greyson and Xavier were completely nude, as was Mace. Pip appeared to be naked, too, but at least she’d been wrapped up in a blanket.

“Yeah, it’s a shock,” Kira said, glancing over at my flushing face. “I’m still not used to it.”

“You can look away,” Lilac muttered in my ear, which made me blush even hotter.

“… and then we saw her just walk right in,” Xavier was saying, shaking his head. “That ghost pond is scary as fuck.”

The *ghost pond*? Was that where they’d been? Was that why they all looked so wet? My stomach tightened painfully, remembering how terrifying a place it was. Why the hell would anyone want to go anywhere near that creepy place—never mind go *into* the water?

“Where’s Violet?” Lilac asked suddenly, his voice bursting into my rapidly spiraling thoughts.

I looked around, grateful for the interruption. The room held members of the Redwood pack, most of whom I recognized, but there were a lot of strange faces, too. They had to be from Mace’s pack—the Blue Bloods. I scanned their faces, frowning. Where *was* Violet?

“I don’t know,” I murmured. “I don’t see her.”

“Ask someone,” Lilac urged, starting to sound worried.

I was near Cali, and she seemed far less likely to bite my head off than an agitated wolf would, so I took a step closer. “Cali, do you know where Violet is?”

Cali looked over at me “I thought she was with—oh no.” Her eyes widened. “Come with me,” she said, grabbing my wrist and pulling me into a small, private office just off the living room.

“What’s going on?” I asked as she hauled me in behind her.

In the smaller room, Cali turned to look at me. “Is Lilac with you?”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s always with me.”

“Okay, and he hasn’t seen her either?”

“How could I have seen her if I’m attached to you?” Lilac said, agitated. “Ask Cali to get to the point.”

“We don’t’ have to be rude,” I snapped back at Lilac. “Sorry,” I said to a very confused Cali. I took a breath, forcing myself to be calm. It was too easy to pick up on Lilac’s panic. “What’s going on with Violet? Is she okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, she’s fine now. I just caught her trying to sneak away to be with Charlie—”

“*What?*” Lilac roared.

“—but don’t worry. We talked all about it, and I talked her out of going. But I do want some extra eyes on her right now. I think she’s feeling kind of vulnerable, and she could use them. Maybe Lilac could spend some extra time with her? I know she’s been missing Charlie a lot.” Cali shrugged. “He’s her mate. Who can blame her for missing him? But when she left me I thought she was going to find you and Lilac. At least I assumed…”

“Yeah,” I said vaguely, then looked over as Lilac started to tug on my arm. “*Will you stop that?*”

“Let’s go. We need to go check on Violet.”

I yanked my arm away from Lilac’s filmy grasp and looked back to Cali. “Do you happen to know where Violet is? I didn’t see her in the living room.”

Cali shook her head. “Maybe she’s sulking since I caught her? Try her room.”

“Okay, thanks. We’ll check there first,” I said, trying to ignore the feel of Lilac tugging on my clothes. I gritted my teeth. This was what I had to remember—whenever I was tempted to kiss him again, I had to remember just how *annoying* he was. That would take care of that itch in my brain that made me want to kiss him really quickly.

“Let’s *go*,” Lilac said, grabbing my hand and giving it a tug toward the stairs. There really wasn’t much he could get me to do to move. His grasp was really more like the suggestion of a tug, but I let myself be pulled toward the stairs.

“You know, you could try saying, *please, Marta*, and *thank you, Marta*. Use some manners for once in your life.”

“I don’t have time for a lesson on manners,” Lilac snapped. “Let’s go,”

“Do you always have to get your way?”

“I do when it comes to my sister,” he said tersely. “In those cases, I always get my way.”

When we got to Violet’s door, I reached for the knob, like a normal human being, but Lilac—being a ghost—glided right through.

He was still holding my wrist in his hand, so he pulled me—face first—into the hard, wooden door, and I stumbled back, rubbing my head as a knot of pain started to form.

“What the hell?” I muttered. “That *really* hurt.”

Lilac, without seeming to have heard me, was gone for a moment, then returned, his eyes alight with fear. “Oh god.”

My heart sank. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Violet. She’s gone.”

**Episode 1525**

ARTEMIS

I stepped out of the pack house, taking deep breaths of the cold, still November air, trying desperately to clear my spinning head. I heard a shuffle behind me in the house and—spooked—I stumbled down the porch steps and out across the snowy lawn, heading toward the trees. I had to get away from that house, and everyone in it.

My mother had asked me if I was okay, and I’d lied to her. I’d told her I was fine. Truth was, I was anything *but* fine. My head was killing me—pounding like it was being whacked with a sledgehammer—and then there was the voice. It seemed like it was always there, whispering to me, trying to speak to me.

But that wasn’t even the whole reason I’d had to get out of the house. I’d left mainly because of that nightmare—that waking nightmare. It had felt so real.

I looked down at my hands. There wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. They were clean. Blood-free, but I wiped them nervously on my jeans anyway. I kept expecting to look down and see them covered in my mother’s blood, like they had been in the dream.

My whole body shuddered. It wasn’t as though I could have told my mom what had happened when I’d blacked out. It was just too awful. What was I supposed to say? *What happened?* *Oh, not much. Just had a little dream that I brutally murdered you. Nothing to worry about.*

I knew it had only been a nightmare, but it was still with me. I could feel it, like a specter in the corner of the room, haunting me. I’d had bad dreams before, same as anybody, but I couldn’t shake the sick feeling off of me. Was I really capable of that? Of killing my own mother?

Gritting my teeth so hard my jaw ached, I shook my head. I wished I’d returned to the Fae world when I’d had the chance. It would’ve been safer for everyone in this world—my mom, Cali, everyone.

*Not to mention Rishika.*

Thinking of her, I glanced over my shoulder, back at the pack house, which looked small in the distance. I could barely see it through the trees.

Our time together felt so long ago now, though I knew it hadn’t been. How could we have had such an amazing—and mind-blowingly sexy—short few days together, only to have it overshadowed so immediately by such a terrifying nightmare?

I didn’t understand what was going on.

But I knew things would be better if I left.

So, I walked on.

A cold breeze blew up, and I stumbled to a stop, looking around in surprise. I didn’t know how long I’d been walking—and I hadn’t been paying attention to where I was going—but I found myself staring at the ghost pond.

I looked around the quiet clearing, baffled. Why in the *hell* would I have come back here? This place was so sinister. There was no reason for me to be here. I turned to leave.

But something stopped me, and I turned—slowly—back toward the water. There was something about the pond that drew me in, and I stepped slowly toward its shimmering, glass-like surface. The moon had just appeared from behind a thick, woolen blanket of clouds, and its pale blue light reflected off the water.

As I drew closer, a breath of wind rippled across its glassy surface, and an image flashed through my mind of Cali and me struggling beneath the water. The water was dark and icy cold. I could barely see Cali, though she was right next to me, but I could feel the hands on me—the ghosts reaching for me, wrapping their freezing hands around me, pulling us both down toward the icy depths of the bottomless pond.

A bone-deep chill passed through me, and I shivered hard enough that my teeth chattered. I wasn’t supposed to be here. This place was nothing but bad news. I balled my hands into fists and was about to turn to go when something caught my eye.

It was my reflection, shimmering on the surface of the water.

But it wasn’t the same Artemis I usually saw when I looked in the mirror.

This Artemis was… *different*. This Artemis had eyes that bored into me. This Artemis had a darkness about her. She radiated… something, from deep within her. A power I could feel moving just under the service.

I stared at her for a moment, transfixed, and then pulled back, my heart beating hard.

“How much longer do you think you can fool them?”

I blinked. Had my reflection just *spoken* to me?  
 The pain in my head swelled, throbbing hard in my temples and just over my eyes. The buzzing grew louder until it was almost a shrieking.

I set my jaw and shook my head. “You are *not* me.”

My reflection narrowed her eyes. “Aren’t I? Why are you resisting this? You can’t fight your fate. You can’t fight your destiny.”

The pain in my head grew more intense. I gasped and bit down hard enough on my lip that I tasted blood. Dark spots were starting to bloom in my vision. Was my reflection trying to kill me?

“Stop!” I screamed, putting my hands over my ears, trying to block out the buzzing. “Please, stop.”

My reflection reached out her hand, as if to beckon me closer. “I will when you stop turning away from me. From yourself.”

Was I going crazy? Maybe I was. Maybe I was dying. Maybe that would’ve been easier. The pain was so intense, and the air around me had grown colder. It felt like I was freezing from the inside out.

“Everything you’re feeling—all this pain—I can make it go away. Touch me and you’ll see.”

I opened my eyes to see my reflection’s hand, dripping with water, getting closer to me. I watched it. Would it work? The pain was turning me inside out.

“If I touch you, will it stop?” I whimpered.

There was no reply, but I knew the answer.

The pain in my head pulsed, and I heaved. I had to do something. I reached out and cautiously touched the cold, clammy fingers.

There was an intense flash of light and a jolt like an earthquake that made me rock backward. I fell, landing hard on my ass, but—just like that—the pain in my head was gone. The noise was gone, too. Everything was quiet, and I felt fine. Perfect. Better than ever.

I stood up again and leaned over to look at my reflection in the ghost pond. I touched my face—my reflection did too. It was me.

*Welcome back. We’ve got to make up for lost time.*

The voice in my head was back.

I straightened up and turned, looking into the dark trees surrounding the pond.

“I know you’re there,” I called. “You can come out now.”

There was a rustle in the underbrush, and York stepped out of the woods. His orange eyes burned in the darkness.

“I am here, Mistress. And I’ve brought another.” He looked over his shoulder and waved.

Pip stepped out from the trees, her eyes glowing that same fiery orange.

I stepped closer to Pip. “Do you know why I’ve called you here?”

Pip dropped her eyes to the ground. “No, Mistress. You called and I came.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why did you give so much information to Greyson and Xavier about Silas?”

Pip looked up. “I was almost caught. They were suspicious. I needed to assure them that I was on their side—”

“Silas is not a tool for you to use!” I snapped. “I created that illusion as part of a very delicate plan, and you almost *ruined* it.”

Pip clasped her hands together as tears began to run down her cheeks. “I’m so sorry, Mistress. I’m so sorry. Please forgive me. Please, I beg of you…”

I took another step toward her, my mouth curving upward in a smile. “Don’t worry, my child,” Pip sucked in a breath as I reached for her, running a finger down her cheek, wiping away a tear. “I do forgive you.”

She closed her eyes, sighing in relief as my hand continued down her face to her neck. But her eyes flew back open in surprise as my hand wrapped tightly around her throat. Orange energy glowed around my hand as my grip grew tighter and tighter.

Pip gagged and choked. She reached up to clutch at my hand, clawing uselessly. She struggled, but the energy was being pulled out through her nose, her eyes, and her mouth. It was gathering around my hand and wrapping up my arm. It was being absorbed back into me.

York moved toward me, his brows drawn in confusion. “Mistress, she was one of us. She served you. What have you done to her?”

I whipped my head around to glare at him. “I am doing exactly what must be done to those who disobey me. And the punishment for failing me is death.”

**Episode 1526**

Knowing that Pip was safe—and being watched by someone from the Blue Blood pack—made me feel a hell of a lot better. I breathed a sigh of relief as I rose from the bottom of the stairs, wondering how Mace was holding up. He’d looked tense as hell earlier, snapping at everything and everybody.

This whole revenant thing was getting to everyone—I could see it on the faces of every pack member. Everyone was afraid, everyone was edgy. Like they were waiting for the other shoe to drop. Or in this case, another revenant to come falling into our house.

I knew how they felt. I was rattled, too. I shrugged my shoulders and rolled my neck, trying to work out some of the stiffness. Maybe it was time for Greyson to give another one of those speeches of his—the ones where he was like a football coach rallying his team during halftime. Those always seemed to lift everyone’s spirits.

He had left the living room, so I headed down the hall, looking for him.

I found him in the kitchen, making himself a cup of Earl Grey. I was a little disappointed to see that he had gotten dressed—though his hair was still damp from his dip in the freezing ghost pond—but my stomach still fluttered at the sight of him. I could hardly help it when he looked this good. I hadn’t had a chance to talk to him since I’d spent part of tonight with Xavier, and I felt… strange, seeing him. I couldn’t help but wonder how he was handling everything.

He looked up as I walked in and smiled. “Hi there. How are you holding up?”

God, I loved his smile. Even when awful things were going on all around me, his smile seemed to cut through it all. It was such a simple gesture, but when he aimed it at me, it felt like the only thing tethering me to the earth.

I smiled back. “I was about to ask you the same thing.”

He glanced down at his tea, stirring it. “There’s a lot going on.” His eyes caught mine again. “But if you’re asking how I feel about you and Xavier, what happened between you is what I agreed to.”

I tipped my head. “Greyson—”

“I don’t have to like it, love, but I’ve got no right to complain. Not to you.” He smiled at the look on my face and reached over to take my hand. “I don’t want you to worry about it, okay?”

His hand was warm from the heat of his mug, and I loved the feel of his fingers lacing through mine.

“I can’t help but notice that ever since we made our agreement, you and Xavier have been at each other’s throats,” I ventured.

Greyson chuckled. “What else is new?” He sighed, and his smile slid away. “Xavier wants a lot of things. And not just you—I know he wants to be Alpha again. But I can handle Xavier.”

I looked up into Greyson’s light eyes. He was acting so casual about everything, it was hard to tell if he was being completely honest.

The quiet moment stretched between us, but then it was broken by the sound of angry voices. We looked over as Mace and Xavier stormed into the kitchen.

They had both gotten dressed as well, and both looked furious. Xavier paused for a moment, his gaze flashing down to our clasped hands as Greyson and I pulled apart.

“I’m done with him,” he growled, nodding over his shoulder at Mace. “He’s all yours.”

That wasn’t a good sign. I knew relations between rival Alphas could be—tense was putting it mildly—but I couldn’t fathom what else those two had to argue about given our current circumstances.

Mace pushed past Xavier, glaring at Greyson. “Your brother,” he started, jerking a thumb at Xavier.

“*Half*-brother,” Xavier corrected.

Mace made a low sound in his throat like a growl but didn’t look back at Xavier. “Your *brother* wants to lock my mate up in your basement cell like she’s a fucking criminal. Absolutely not. I won’t allow it.”

Greyson, who had been looking back and forth between Mace and Xavier as they spoke, abandoned his tea and walked around the kitchen island to stand between them, using his body to physically separate them.

But before he could say anything, Torin strolled into the kitchen.

He took one look at the scene and gave a low whistle. “Whew. Looks like an *Alpha-bet* soup in here.” He grinned at me. “Am I right?”

A what now? Torin’s jokes were getting worse by the day.

His grin faltered. “I’ll just see myself out.”

As he fled, Xavier turned to Greyson.

“Let’s just stop fucking around here. Mace can pretend all he wants, but we all know Pip isn’t really Pip anymore. She’s a revenant. And revenants are dangerous as hell. We all saw it with Arlo, we saw it with York. Pip’s already attacked Rishika—Rishika! Who’s a fucking badass!” He turned, fixing his eyes on me. “Who knows who’s next? She needs to be locked up. It’s the only way to keep everyone safe.”

“*No!*” Mace yelled. “I brought her here because I thought your pack would help her, not lock her up. We don’t even know what’s going on with her. I’m not having her wake up in some jail cell in your basement. She’ll be scared as hell down there—”

“Everyone needs to calm down,” Greyson said, holding up his hands. He took a deep breath. “Do you trust the guard you assigned to watch Pip?” he asked, turning to Mace.

“Of course I do,” Mace sneered. “Why would I put someone up there I didn’t trust? Lester’s one of the best.” Xavier scoffed, and Mace prickled. “You don’t believe me? Let’s go see together, then.”

“We really don’t need to—” Greyson started.

But I had a feeling this wasn’t going to end until Mace proved his point, so I stepped forward. “Why don’t we all go up and check on Pip?”

All three looked over at me, and, to my surprise, Greyson nodded.

“Sounds like a great idea.”

As the four of us headed upstairs, I felt glad that Greyson had taken my suggestion, but also tense. It was hard not to feel that way—the tension between the brothers was so thick, it was nearly palpable.

I shook my head as I climbed the stairs. Despite what they said, this arrangement they’d come up with was not going to be easy—for anyone.

We stopped in front of the door and Mace knocked.

“Lester?”

There was no answer.

Mace frowned. “Lester?” He knocked again, then tried the doorknob. It opened easily.

And as the door swung open and the smell hit me, I gasped.

It was the metallic smell of blood, and it filled my nose. Lester was there, eyes closed, lying on the floor of the bedroom in a pool of blood. A freezing cold breeze blew through the room from the window, which had been smashed open. Small shards of glass were scattered at on the floor, but it was clear that the window had been broken from inside the room.

Pip was gone.

Greyson stepped over Lester and strode to the window, looking out into the night. “Pip must have done this.” He looked out onto the roof, then at the grounds. “She can’t have gone far.”

He, Xavier, and Mace pivoted and sprinted out the door.

I didn’t follow right away. Instead, I looked at the window, thinking frantically of Artemis. If dark magic had caused Pip to do all this, could it affect Artemis too? What I wanted to do was sit down and have a long think about this, but I couldn’t—not now. There wasn’t time to figure anything out now. Greyson and Xavier and Mace were already out the door, and I hurried after them.

They were rushing out the back door by the time I sprinted down the stairs, along with Rishika and Kira, and I ran after them, down the lawn and into the forest.

Greyson and Xavier were out in front, clearly following Pip’s scent, but Mace was there, too. No one had shifted, which was the only reason I was able to keep up as we sprinted through the trees.

We were heading deep into the forest, and I was about to call out for them to slow down when I looked around and realized where we were heading. We were moving toward the ghost pond. The air grew colder as we drew closer, and I shuddered. Everything about the place was chilling—it just wasn’t meant for the living.

Up ahead, Xavier slowed, and Greyson and Mace stopped as well, looking at the still glass surface of the pond.

“What’s going on?” Kira asked.

“Her scent stops here,” Xavier said, frustrated.

I clutched at a stich in my side. “Didn’t you guys say she’d come out here before? Do you think she tried to come back?”

Everyone looked at Mace.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly.

I turned, peering into the dark trees, and then I gasped. Lying on the ground, just a few feet from where we stood, was Pip’s dead body.

**Episode 1527**

XAVIER

Mace’s anguished howl echoed through the clearing. It was a sound filled with so much raw, aching pain, it made my bones hurt and set my teeth on edge.

He fell to his knees, staring wide-eyed at Pip’s body.

As annoyed as I always was with the guy, I couldn’t help but feel for Mace. His heart was breaking, and hell, mine was breaking along with it, just watching him. Instinctively I reached out for Cali, taking her hand. The feel of her small hand wrapped around mine filled me with warmth, and the assurance that my mate was still with me.

But a sneaking suspicion tugged at my brain, and I glanced over—Greyson had taken her other hand.

Tears had started to course down Cali’s face, and I tugged her toward me.

“Don’t look,” I murmured, pulling her into my chest. “You don’t need to see that.”

Greyson, letting go of Cali’s hand, stepped forward. He looked over to Rishika, who was also staring dumbfounded at Pip’s body. “Take a walk around the perimeter. Scout around, but keep your eyes open, and don’t leave the area. Stay within sight of the house.” He looked over at Mace, and his gaze softened. “Mace, I’m so sorry.”

Kira brushed past my arm, moving cautiously toward Pip. “There’s something wrong with that body,” she said slowly.

I frowned at her. “What do you mean?” I looked at Pip’s still form. It looked like what a dead body was meant to look like. Not great, but not unusual. I’d seen enough of them to know.

But Kira shook her head, continuing toward where Pip lay. “No, it’s that she’s… she’s *hollow*. Can’t you sense that? She’s completely hollow. Like she’s been dead for days, not minutes.” She crouched down and reached out to touch Pip’s pale face, but—from out of nowhere—Mace surged forward and shoved her back into the snow.

“Don’t you touch her!”

His eyes streaming with tears, he turned and grabbed Pip, clutching her body close.

It was awful to watch, and I had no idea what to do—and then it got so much worse. Something strange started to happen. Pip started to move. Not to come alive, but her body started to stiffen and jerk. It started to shrink, her skin started to dry like paper, her limbs began to stiffen, and her belly began to bloat.

“Holy shit,” I muttered, horrified. It was like watching a body decompose at warp speed.

Mace let out a feral scream and released her, jumping back in terror. “*What’s happening?*”

None of us had an answer. Even Kira was silent, and pale at the sight.

I stared at Pip as she continued to jerk on the ground. It reminded me of watching a dying vampire, only this was exponentially more grotesque. I’d never seen anything like it.

After seconds that felt like they had lasted hours, Pip’s body had wasted away to nothing. Parchment-thin skin stretched across her bones, with her mouth gaping open in a silent scream.

“She’s gone,” Kira whispered.

“What?” I asked.

Kira’s eyes were on Pip. “The revenant magic finally let go. It released its hold on her body.”

“But… why?” Cali asked, her voice shaking.

Kira shook her head. “That’s the question isn’t it? And one I don’t have an answer for at the moment. That’s why her body has returned to its natural state of death. She *truly* died days ago.”

Mace stared up at us, his eyes wild with fear and pain. “*What are you talking about?*” he screamed. He lunged at Kira. “What do you mean she’s been dead for days, *witch*?”

I stepped in front of Kira, catching Mace by the shoulders before he plowed into her like a charging bull. Kira and I weren’t friends, exactly, but I felt a certain loyalty toward her, and I wasn’t going to let Mace take his grief and anger out on her just because she happened to be standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“*Get out of my way!*” Mace shrieked, spit flying from his mouth. He was fighting to break free of my grip, but I held tight.

“Mace, stop!” Cali called, tears streaming from her eyes. “I know you’re hurting, but this isn’t Kira’s fault.”

I shot a glance at Cali. That was just her way. She was always trying to do the right thing. It was crazy—and sometimes a fucking waste of time—but it was one of the things I loved most about her.

Mace glared. “Then whose fault *is* it?”

Cali dashed the tears from her face. “That’s why we can’t afford to turn on one another. There are too many questions without answers. For all we know it could be the Orb. Or it could be Silas?”

“Silas is dead,” Mace spat. He turned to Kira, seething. “Either you don’t know anything, or you’re lying. We all talked to Pip. You saw her yourself. She was walking around. She was as alive as any of us.”

Kira, looking terrified, took a step back from Mace, but she held his gaze. “That’s what revenants do. They kill the host body, they use it, and then they just…” She glanced down at what had once been Pip. “They *dispose* of it when they’re done.”

There was a beat of terrible silence.

Then Mace threw back his head and howled. “*Pip!* Not my Pip.” He dropped to his knees and covered his head with his arms. “She’s my *mate*. This can’t be happening… not to her.”

I had just about had my fill of watching this horror show. At the very least we owed the guy some privacy.

Greyson stepped forward and put a hand on Mace’s shoulder. “She’s gone, Mace. I’m sorry. We all are.”

Mace didn’t look up. His sobs shook his body, and the sound filled the clearing.

Greyson glanced around, then over to me. “We should get out of here. Get back to the pack house.”

I looked at Mace and raised my eyebrows. “I don’t think he’s going anywhere.”

“I can help,” Cali said, stepping forward. She knelt next to Mace and put her arm around him.

“*Not my girl*,” Mace sobbed, leaning into Cali. “Not my Pip. I’ll fucking *kill* whoever did this. I swear…”

I watched as Cali spoke quietly to Mace, comforting him. When I looked up, I saw that Greyson was watching her, too.

He caught my eye, and as we listened to Mace’s aching grief, our rivalry felt suddenly very… small. At least, despite the curse, despite everything, our mate was still alive.

Greyson looked down, then over to Kira. “What else do you know about revenants?”

Kira’s eyes widened. “Well, I’m not exactly an expert. I’ve just picked some things up here and there. Mostly hearsay, when you get right down to it. Iñigo mentioned something about them a while back, but I hadn’t given it much thought until now.”

I bristled at the mention of Iñigo’s name. That bloodsucker was number one on my hit list, and I was just itching to take him out. I shook my head. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Iñigo was somehow involved in all of this.”

“Me neither,” Greyson agreed. He looked thoughtfully down at Pip’s desiccated body. “Maybe it’s time we got a little more aggressive and took care of our old pal Iñigo—sooner rather than later.”

Kira shivered. “Fine by me.”

“Hey, guys,” Cali interrupted. Her arm was tight around Mace’s shoulder, and her eyes were red with tears. “We can’t go anywhere. Mace is refusing to leave. He says he can’t leave Pip.”

My chest ached. Cali had such a soft heart, and she was feeling Mace’s grief right along with him. I could understand why, but I couldn’t let myself do the same. I couldn’t even let myself *start* to think about what I would be feeling if I were in Mace’s position—if something had happened to Cali. If I had watched her die right in front of me…

I gritted my teeth. I just *couldn’t* let my thoughts go in that direction.

Greyson sighed and rubbed his forehead. “We have to get out of here. Fast.” He looked around. “Rishika! We’re heading back.”

In the distance, Rishika waved and started jogging back toward our position.

Greyson walked over to Mace and crouched down. He looked at Cali. “I’ll take it from here.”

When I got Cali to her feet, she was trembling, so I pulled her close and wrapped my arms around her.

“It’s going to be okay,” I murmured, dropping a kiss onto her hair. “We’re going to keep you safe. We’re going to protect you. I promise.”

I felt her nod against my chest. “I know that. I just—” She stopped speaking and dragged in a ragged gasp.

“Cali?” I looked down at her.

Her eyes were wide with fear, and her mouth was open like she was trying to scream, but no sound came out. She was looking at a spot over my shoulder, frozen with terror.

I spun around, my heart beating so hard it felt like it was going to crack a rib, and then I saw what had frightened Cali so much.

There, in the glassy pond, was a dark, vaporous cloud, so black and thick it looked almost solid. Rising from it was none other than Silas. And he was holding Artemis in front of him, his hand gripping her throat.

**Episode 1528**

Horror and gut-wrenching fear froze me in place. Silas had Artemis.

He sneered at us as he held my sister in front of him, using her body as a shield as his fingers dug into her throat.

“No,” I breathed.

Her mouth opened and closed wordlessly, and she was paler than I’d ever seen her. Her face wasn’t going purple, so I had to assume he wasn’t cutting off her oxygen entirely, but that was a small comfort when the most dangerous werewolf in history had my sister by the throat.

*This is a nightmare! I just got her back! She’s finally getting better. I can’t lose her now!*

Panic and desperation spilled into my veins. Every protective instinct in my body was screaming at me to run and save her, but *how*? His grip on her neck looked brutal, and I knew that if we made one wrong move, he’d snap her neck right in front of us. And besides that, he was using Artemis as a shield. If I used my Fae power, my chances of hitting my sister by mistake were far higher than miraculously landing a precision shot to Silas’s face.

*This isn’t* Wanted*! And I am* not *Angelina Jolie with a Fae magic-powered gun!*

“My sons,” Silas drawled, watching Xavier and Greyson. “Did you miss me?”

There was a good chance I was going to vomit all over the grass. Silas was supposed to be dead! I’d been there when Greyson, Xavier, and Colton had killed him!

*Is he even real? Or…* An impossibly more terrifying thought occurred to me. *Am I going mad? Is this the* due destini *taking its toll?*

As fan-freaking-tastic as it would’ve been for my sister to *not* be held captive by a reincarnated sociopath, I didn’t think I’d be able to handle it if this wasn’t real. I didn’t want to fight Silas again. I didn’t want my sister to get hurt.

But I really, *really* didn’t want to lose my mind.

I looked around and relief mixed with dread, pulsing in my chest, as Xavier and Greyson edged toward Silas, probably searching for weak points to get Artemis away from him. They wore matching expressions of shock and fury.

*They see him too. Oh, thank god. It’s not all in my head.*

“Let my sister go!” I screamed. Silas wasn’t imaginary, and I couldn’t blast his freaking brains out, but maybe I could distract him long enough for Xavier or Greyson to swoop in and free Artemis. Maybe kill him a second time, for good measure.

Slowly, lazily, like he had all the time in the world as he held my sister by the throat, Silas turned his head to look at me. His smile was a promise made in blood. “My sons’ mate… How nice of you to join us.” His voice rose and fell in volume, echoing through the forest as he added, “And you brought my sons. What a lovely reunion!”

I glanced over at Xavier and Greyson. They had stopped moving, and their hands were balled into fists. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what they were going through, seeing their father again—the man who had hurt them, who had ruined their lives in so many ways. The man who had single handedly presented one of the greatest threats that the world had ever seen. The man they’d killed so that they could escape him.

But apparently Silas wasn’t interested in staying dead—though Xavier and Greyson both looked like they were ready to put him back in the ground any moment now.

*Are they going to shift and attack him?* God, I hoped not. I understood the urge, but who knew what Silas would do to Artemis if Xavier and Greyson attacked?

As if reading my mind, Silas flexed his hand around Artemis’s throat, and she let out a pathetic wheeze-whimper. My vision went red.

“If you hurt my sister, I will *kill* you,” I snarled, suddenly every bit the bloodthirsty beast I’d been worried about my mates shifting into.

Silas just laughed, and the sound sent icy claws down my spine. “That didn’t work out so well last time,” he said. “But please, go ahead and try.”

Then he tightened his grip on my sister’s throat, and her face began to darken.

I didn’t even think. I lunged forward with a scream—and Xavier stepped right in front of me, blocking me from Artemis, and Silas from me. I moved to step around him, but he held a hand out to stop me. He never took his eyes off his father.

“What do you want?” Xavier asked Silas.

“*This* is what I want.” Silas shrugged. “Your attention. You certainly didn’t make it easy. I had to go to some pretty creative lengths, but in the end it worked out in my favor. It always does.” He gave us a grim smile.

Xavier growled. “How did it work in your favor when we ripped your throat out?”

“*Enough*.” Greyson ordered, with the full power of his Alpha voice. He faced Silas. “You’ve got our attention. Great. Now that you’ve got it, why are you here?”

*Ugh! We don’t have time for chit-chat! Artemis is choking!*

I stepped slowly around Xavier. Maybe I could sneak around the pond and grab Artemis while Silas was busy rehashing the past with his sons.

“Oh, no, dear,” Silas said, his gaze cutting over to me. “One more step, and I’ll infect her with dark magic. It was so easy before. And what a perfect little soldier your sister made. I think she would have done just about anything I asked of her.” His eyes lingered on me. “Even rip out your heart and bring it to me.”

Greyson and Xavier snarled in unison at the threat, but all I could do was shudder. Artemis kept gasping for air, clawing at Silas’s grip on her neck. But I didn’t take another step.

It was true that I’d only just gotten Artemis back. Because even though she hadn’t left the boundary of the pack house in a long, long time, she’d acted so strangely for so long. And it had been kind of terrifying. That Artemis had been a danger to herself and those around her. That Artemis… I still didn’t know what she was truly capable of, and I didn’t *want* to know.

*Did Silas cause all that?*

If so, I didn’t want to risk losing Artemis again. But would Xavier and Greyson be as careful? I didn’t know. I remembered Greyson had once asked me, what felt like a hundred years ago, “What would you do for the people you love?”

Seeing Artemis in danger now, my answer was exactly the same as it had been back then.

I would be willing to kill. For Artemis, for Xavier and Greyson, and for the safety of our world, I would happily blast Silas into oblivion. But would I even be able to do it if I tried? Could anyone really kill Silas? Xavier, Colton, and Greyson had nearly lost their lives in the fight against him, and I’d thought they’d done a thorough job of ending him.

*And yet here we are.*

Xavier’s voice slipped into my mind. *Cali, don’t do anything stupid.*

I scowled. *I’m not stupid!*

*I know that. Just… stay back, okay? I promise I won’t let anything happen to Artemis.*

I knew Xavier meant it, but the problem was that he wasn’t even remotely equipped to keep that promise. Already, Artemis’s face was shifting to a terrifying shade of deep red.

“I asked you why you’re here,” Greyson pressed. “Are you gonna answer my question, or do you want to talk in riddles all damn day?”

“Such a temper you have.” Silas shook his head. “I’m back to take what is owed to me—all of it.”

I blinked, confused. “What do you mean, ‘it’?”

“Someone like you just wouldn’t understand,” Silas said.

“Try me.” I crossed my arms, willing myself to not run at him flailing and screaming. *Don’t make this worse for Artemis.*

Xavier put a hand on my shoulder. “Take it easy.”

I jerked away so his hand slid off.

Silas smirked. “Everything you see, everyone you love—it all belongs to me.”

Rishika scoffed. “Enough of this megalomaniac bullshit.” She stormed toward Silas. “Get your fucking hands off my girlfriend!”

The outburst jolted us all into movement.

“Rishika,” Greyson began. “You—”

Silas tightened his grip on Artemis. “Stay back—”

“Fuck that!” Rishika wasn’t stopping. “I said to take your motherfucking hands *off* *my* *girlfriend!*”

*What the hell is she doing? Is she really going to try to throw down with Silas, the undead werewolf demon?*

“Rishika!” Greyson’s Alpha voice was back. “*Stand down*. We need to be careful here.”

She shook her head. “If anyone needs to be careful, it’s that rotten bastard.” And then, before anyone could stop her, Rishika shifted in a cacophony of snapping bones and lunged across the pond.

“*Rishika, no!*” I screamed.

But rather than making contact, the werewolf passed right through Silas and into Artemis. Both of them went crashing to the ground.

I saw my opportunity—Silas wasn’t using my sister as a shield any longer—and I didn’t hold back.

I threw my hands up with a battle cry and threw every bit of power I had at him.

The blast slammed into Silas, rocking him for a moment, but instead of falling down, he seemed to grow in size until he was towering over us.

My jaw dropped.

*What have I done?*

**Episode 1529**

LOLA

Oh. My. God.

Jay was possibly the best kisser I’d ever had the pleasure of making out with. Seriously. Maybe the best kisser in the entire *world*, to be honest.

Jay’s lips moved gently against mine, coaxing and urging me to reciprocate. His fingers sank into my hair, firmly tilting my head just so and allowing him to deepen the kiss and take my mouth the exact way he wanted to.

And oh, boy, did he want to. The hardness pressing against my hip made that *very* clear. But honestly? I couldn’t really think about that. Couldn’t focus on anything beyond the sensual drag of his full, warm lips and the taste of his mouth.

There was no hurry. Jay kissed me like we had all the time in the world, like he wanted nothing more than to worship my lips and drive me crazy with need.

And if that was what he was going for, then *mission accomplished, sir*. I couldn’t remember ever having had a kiss this good. A kiss that sparked all that lust burning low in my belly without making me want to rush forward and move on to more physical things.

But kissing Jay? It was absolutely nuts. Off the charts.

We were barely at first base and my toes were curling. He was overwhelming every sense. If this was even a small fraction of what we’d had before, it’s no wonder why I was having trouble controlling the vampire heat.

But seriously, how could anyone be *this good* at kissing? One of Jay’s hands slipped down to cup my jaw, and as he continued to kiss me, his fingers threaded through my hair and skimmed over the shell of my ear. Pleasure crackled through my body like I’d been electrocuted, and I let out a sound that wasn’t even remotely human.

My god.

Again, I had to wonder what the actual hell I’d been thinking when I’d agreed to hypnotherapy. And beyond that—how was it physically possible for my brain to forget this gorgeous, sweet, smart, master of kissing?

Just going by eye candy alone, Jay had it all—but add in mouth-to-mouth fun times? It was better than blood, better than pancakes, probably.

A rush of desire rolled through me.

Suddenly, I was ravenous for Jay, but not in a bloodsucking way. More a vampire heat, take-me-to-bed-you-strong-sexy-man kind of way. Which—somewhere in the back of my mind, where things like logic and rational thinking were possible—I knew probably spelled trouble.

It was sweet of Jay to come all the way out here and take me on a date. Honestly, he was literally the nicest person I had ever met in my entire life, and I had no freaking clue why he would stick around with someone like me, who had caused him so much trouble. But seeing as how Ras had therapized me to get the vampire heat under control, feeding it this delicious werewolf man who—if his kissing skills were any indication—would probably make me come so hard I went blind was probably not the best idea in the world.

*But maybe he’s exactly what I need to satiate my lust?*

I was still weighing the relative merits of saying goodnight to my mate versus taking him back to my room and fucking his brains out when he suddenly pulled back.

“Well?” he asked.

In the absence of his kiss, I suddenly realized my lungs were burning, and I gasped to catch my breath. I had no regrets, though. It seemed terribly wasteful to use my mouth for anything else but kissing Jay.

“Well, what?” I asked breathlessly.

He grinned, his lips just an inch away from my own. Oh, was a second round on the table?

“Do you remember anything?” he asked.

The question was like a record scratching, and I was yanked brutally back to reality. Right. Because as wonderful and patient and all around perfect as Jay was being to me, it still had to majorly suck that his mate didn’t remember him.

And the thing was, that kiss transcended anything and everything I’d ever felt—but I still didn’t remember him. Remember us. And I kind of hated to admit that when he’d been so wonderful.

I winced. “Sorry, I don’t remember. But,” I added when I saw his face fall, “I sure as hell will never forget going forward. How did you learn to kiss like that?”

His lips quirked up into a smile, one I’d seen several times tonight. I was pretty sure it was the face he made when he thought I was asking him something ridiculous. He laughed, a gorgeous, rich sound that made my muscles relax. “How did I learn to kiss like that? With *you*.”

*Excuse me while I swoon.*

God, was it possible for him to be anything less than perfect? Even just for a minute? If Jay really was my mate, I couldn’t wait to get my memory back.

His smile faded a little bit. “What happens now?”

I didn’t really understand what he meant, but I *did not* like seeing his brilliant smile slip away. “Um, like, for the date?”

“I mean, has being here at Tottenville helped you deal with the blood cravings? Do you feel more like yourself? More under control?”

Did I feel more like myself? I wasn’t sure how it was possible to feel like myself when I was missing such an apparently crucial part of my memory. “I’m not sure. They’ve been serving blood at every meal, so it’s hard to tell if I have better control now, or if I’m just, you know, well fed.” I blushed, suddenly desperate to change the subject to something that might brighten Jay’s fading smile. “Uh, did you know they even have blood Twinkies?”

His brows lifted. “I’m kind of surprised they serve junk food at a fancy place like this.”

“Everyone loves junk food, so…”

“I’ll take your word for it. Blood Twinkies don’t sound very appealing—at least not to a werewolf.”

“They’re actually pretty tasty.”

“Okay…”

Silence slipped between us, and I looked away from him. Suddenly, I was very aware of how different we were. And without my memories of our past together, it was so easy to see those differences.

*Maybe we should just go back to kissing.*

Jay cleared his throat and tilted his head, exposing his neck. “Do you want a taste now?”

“*Oh*!”

I stepped back in shock. Somehow, I’d never considered that our dinner date could escalate into blood drinking. I stared at his neck, at the visibly pulsing artery he was offering up to me. I could hear his blood pumping, could almost taste the hot, viscous fluid as it filled my mouth. It would have that salty, savory flavor I found in all blood, but with hints of werewolf. Maybe that would add some sweetness to the flavor?

It was definitely tempting, but to my own surprise I stepped back and shook my head. “No, thank you. No offense, but Tottenville has trained me not to live by impulse.”

Jay was quiet for a moment, and I worried he was hurt that I refused to drink from him. Then he asked, “Did *he* teach you that?”

I swallowed. It was plain as the hurt and jealousy on Jay’s face that he was talking about Emmett. And while I didn’t remember being with Jay, I still hated that anything I’d ever done caused him pain.

I cleared my throat. “It’s not just Professor Laurence—the whole curriculum is designed to help me. Help all of us.”

“So it’s good that you’re here, then?” he asked.

“I miss the pack,” I admitted.

“But not me.”

It wasn’t a question.

“It’s only temporary,” I reminded him gently. We’d had such an amazing night together. I didn’t want it to end with him feeling bad.

Jay sighed. “Okay, well, I guess I should get you back to your room—don’t want to tempt you to do something you might regret.”

He brushed a kiss over my cheek, and a swarm of butterflies took flight in my stomach. It was like my first crush all over again.

I opened the main doors to the school. “Be careful. Not all the vampires here can handle a werewolf.”

“You mean a sexy werewolf like me?” he teased.

I gasped. I hadn’t even thought of that. *Would* the other vampires find him sexy? The thought filled me with pride and jealousy in equal parts.

*You have got a* serious *vampire heat problem.*

“Stop flirting with me,” I said with a smile, and took his hand. A jolt of heat buzzed through me from where we were touching, and we snuck through the hallways toward my room. Fortunately, nobody else seemed to be around.

Once we reached my door, I turned to face him. “You remember, this is my room…”

“I don’t think I could forget. Are you going to invite me in?”

Oh, boy, did I want to. “Is that a good idea?”

“I just want to make sure you’re safe.”

“Okay, then.” I opened the door and entered, and Jay followed me in. “Oh.” I turned back to him. “You never told me—where are you staying tonight?”

“Right here.” He closed my bedroom door behind him.

**Episode 1530**

I’d thrown everything I had at Silas, fueled by my hatred for him and what he’d done to my mates—along with a hefty dose of protectiveness for everything that monster had done to my sister—only instead of killing him, or even hurting him, my magic was… making him grow?

I could only stare in shock as Silas continued to grow—his body shooting outward and upward proportionally like some real-life, evil Ant-Man, threatening to envelop us all.

*What have I done? Or… did I even do that?* Can *I do that?*

My Fae powers had never super-sized anyone before!

In a flash of movement, Greyson and Xavier appeared on either side of me. They grabbed my arms and pulled me away from the pond, which was bubbling furiously as Silas continued to tower over it.

As my mates pulled me away from the threat, Kira stepped up to cover our backs. She called out an odd incantation and did some fancy hand movement, but the spell didn’t seem to have any effect on Mega Silas.

My brain was threatening to explode. It had been one thing when Silas had popped up, back from the dead as if he’d just taken a long vacation to work on his evil schemes, but this was just *insane*. How were we supposed to fight someone who was twenty feet tall? And what if he shifted and became even bigger? A wolf as tall as the Space Needle?

*Do we call Godzilla for backup, or—*

My body jolted as Greyson and Xavier kept hauling me backward.

*Okay, Cali. Focus. You’ve gotta make do with what you have.*

Silas finally stopped growing, and he was huge—tall enough that I basically had to fold my neck in half to look up at him. I couldn’t see Artemis or Rishika on the other side of the pond anymore. Dread clutched my heart in icy fingers.

*I hope they’re okay*. If anything happened to Artemis, I would never forgive myself.

Silas fixed his eyes on me and they flashed that same sickly orange color I’d come to associate with the revenants and all things terrible and deadly—and then *poof!* Silas was gone in a puff of vapor.

*What the…?*

The bubbling in the pond subsided, and all I could hear was the rapid pounding of my heart. Greyson, Xavier, and I were standing together, and Silas was nowhere to be seen.

But my sister was.

I broke away from my mates’ grip and sprinted over to where Artemis and Rishika were lying on the ground. “Are you guys all right? Are you hurt?”

Rishika had shifted back at some point and seemed unscathed. Artemis, on the other hand, had a ring of nasty-looking bruises circling her neck. Her voice was hoarse when she spoke. “Yes, we’re okay.”

“Oh, Artemis.” She sounded like she’d swallowed a pound of gravel. I threw my arms around her with a whimper. “I was so worried about you! If anything ever happened to you…” My voice broke, and I cleared my throat. “Thank god you’re okay!”

Artemis weakly patted my back until I let her go. “Thank god for Rishika,” she rasped, turning to the werewolf. “That was a really stupid, dangerous thing you just did. Thank you.”

Rishika gathered my sister up in her arms, hugging her gently. “Let’s get you out of here.”

She helped Artemis to her feet, and my sister leaned heavily on Rishika as they started to make their way back to the pack house.

“Be careful,” I warned them. “Artemis, you don’t have to rush. Just take you time, okay?”

“I’ve got her,” Rishika assured me.

Behind me, I heard Xavier and Greyson going over what happened. Now that Artemis was more or less okay, they were clearly trying to come to terms with the bigger problem: Silas.

“What do we do?” Xavier asked, oddly deferring to Greyson. I could count on one hand the number of times Xavier had looked to Greyson for answers.

Greyson, for his part, didn’t seem to *have* an answer, and I couldn’t blame him. Was there really even anything we could do? Silas had been dead, and then he’d been strangling my sister, and then he’d been thirty feet tall.

*And now he’s… gone? Resting? How did he even come back in the first place?*

“We all need to get back to the pack house,” Greyson finally said, raising his voice to address everyone. Then he walked over to where Mace was still kneeling by Pip’s remains. “Mace,” he said, quietly but firmly. “Come back to the house with us. Let us help you. I can’t even begin to imagine how this loss must feel, but I promise you Pip wouldn’t want you to give up everything else you have in her absence.”

I was struck by Greyson’s capacity for empathy. I knew Mace wasn’t his favorite person in the world, but Greyson was big enough to put all of that aside to help a fellow Alpha.

Mace slowly nodded and wordlessly rose to his feet, following behind Greyson. Mace didn’t look like an Alpha anymore. He looked like a puppet with severed strings, like his entire world had just been destroyed.

But then again, it kind of had been.

Is that what it would be like if I had to choose one of my mates? I’d be free from the *due destini*, but crushed by the loss?

My eyes stung with tears at the thought, and I looked away. *You’ve got bigger problems than* due destini *right now.*

“Hey.” Xavier appeared next to me. “Are you okay?”

“Physically, yeah.”

His eyes scanned my face. “And… not physically?”

I let out an empty laugh. “Ask me tomorrow.”

Xavier took my hand and led me back toward the pack house. We followed behind Artemis and Rishika and walked in front of Greyson and Mace. I personally couldn’t wait get the fuck away from that ghost pond. I hated it.

*I wonder if Phil could fill it with cement? Maybe that would fix our spirit problem.*

But then again, what did I know? None of this made a bit of sense. The revenants, the Orb, what had happened to Artemis, and what had ultimately killed Pip, Silas coming back from the dead, literally larger than life…

My head swam with so many questions, I didn’t even know where to begin.

*Let’s take it in order…*

First, Pip had become a revenant, attacked Rishika, and run off to the ghost pond. We’d brought her back, and then she’d killed Lester, returned to the pond, and died.

I looked at Rishika. *Pip attacked her—could Rishika become infected and become a revenant? I’ll have to keep a close watch on her.*

Back to the chain of events. Pip had then decomposed, and Silas had appeared with Artemis, who’d been saved by Rishika. *But what really happened to Silas?*

“Cali, seriously,” Xavier said suddenly, interrupting my thoughts. “Are you okay?”

Biting my lip, I shook my head. “I’m worried about Artemis—and Rishika.”

The rest of the journey back to the pack house passed in a blur, and before I knew it, Xavier, Greyson, Rishika, Artemis, and I were all gathered in the kitchen. Mace had gone off to be with his pack members and deliver the news about Pip.

Torin immediately set to work healing the ring of bruises around Artemis’s throat.

He grimaced as he inspected them. “With bruises like this, I’m kind of surprised you’re still breathing.”

Artemis waved him off. “I’m okay. He didn’t really hurt me.”

I scowled. “I’m pretty sure choking you out does, in fact, count as hurting you.”

“Rishika,” Greyson said suddenly. “Do you remember what happened with Pip?”

She was seated next to Artemis, holding her hand. She’d been glued to my sister’s side since we’d left the pond, and there didn’t seem to be any sign that she was going to let up soon.

“Pip just attacked me out of nowhere, hit me with something, and escaped. I never saw it coming, and by the time I knew what was happening, it was already too late.” She sighed. “I’m sorry. I should have been more careful.”

“Did Pip…” I hesitated. “Did Pip *bite* you or anything?”

She raised a brow. “No.”

“Oh.” I blew out a relieved breath. “That’s good.”

Maybe Rishika wouldn’t get infected and become a revenant herself, if that was even how it worked.

“The bigger question here,” Xavier began, “is what the hell are we going to do about Silas?”

I looked over at Greyson, who suddenly seemed hard and imposing as stone. I’d never seen him look so tense—not even when we’d fought Silas the first time. I hated seeing him like this, and I wished there was something I could do besides worry.

“When I tried to attack him, I passed right through him,” Rishika said. “It was like he was nothing more than a ghost. But I did feel something… *cold*. It filled me with dread.”

“Okay…” Xavier mulled this over. “And since we were right by the pond, it’s possible we saw his ghost, I guess. But why did Silas grow like that?”

Guilt hit me hard. “It was my fault. I used my Fae magic—he must have absorbed it or something.”

The room fell silent for a moment, and I was sure they could all hear my racing heart.

Then Greyson shook his head. “It’s not your fault, Cali.”

But there was no stopping the dread spiraling through me. “Even if it wasn’t, it doesn’t matter. If Silas can just appear—and absorb magic—how are we ever going to stop him?”

**Episode 1531**

GREYSON

The thing about being Alpha was that everyone acted like it was some great thing. You were the boss. You got to call the shots, have all the control and power and prestige. I was pretty sure that Xavier thought that, to a certain extent.

He knew that the power came with responsibility, but I could see in the way he threw his weight around with me that he wanted to be Alpha because he wanted, more than anything else, to be in control. Because for Xavier, control was power. Control was *safety*. And we’d both learned back when we were still losing baby teeth that safety was worth just about anything.

But the thing that so many people, even Xavier, never realized about leading a pack was that it wasn’t just about being the boss. About commanding and protecting and being the king of the goddamn mountain.

When you were Alpha, everyone looked to you for answers. For safety and logic and a road map to better things. You were supposed to dole out wisdom the same way you assigned patrols. Like the Alpha ceremony imbued you with a fucking crystal ball that told you how to lead your pack even through the most fucked up, nonsensical, batshit terrifying of times.

And when your pack—your mate—when they were scared and in need of answers, and they turned to you, you were supposed to make everything better for them. You were the Alpha, dammit. If you weren’t able to serve up happily ever after for your pack, then what good were you anyway?

And fuck me, but I didn’t have *any* of the answers. Forget happily ever after—the way things were going, I didn’t know if my pack was going to make it to next week. I didn’t know what was happening to the world around us, and I didn’t know how to protect them—or even *what* to protect them from.

People were rising from the dead, and others were dropping dead and then turning rabid. Ghosts were making house calls, and don’t even get me started on the fucking bloodsuckers who were just waiting for us to show a hint of vulnerability.

I’d thought I had things under control, at least a little bit. Mace and the Blue Bloods had joined forces with us. We’d been steering clear of that damn pond. Xavier was working on Ava to take out Iñigo.

But nothing could have prepared me for seeing my father return. The sheer horror and panic and desperation when I’d seen him holding Artemis at the pond… It had been crippling. It echoed back to a time when I’d been far too young and too small to protect myself against him. And it didn’t matter that I’d fought him and won, that I’d ripped his throat out myself. That *I* had been the one to put him in the ground.

Some wounds were beyond even a werewolf’s healing abilities.

And some, apparently, weren’t nearly as fatal as I’d been led to believe. Because there was no mistaking what I’d seen at the pond. My father was back, and he was wreaking havoc like he’d never even left. Whether Silas was a ghost or something else didn’t matter even a little bit to me—because it didn’t change the fact that he was back.

So the bigger question was, *why* was he back?

And like so many other goddamn questions haunting my pack, I didn’t have the answer to this one either.

I didn’t want to worry the others—I *was* the Alpha, after all. I should have been able to bear the brunt of all this. I needed to show them that I had a plan, that I was still in command and that they could rest easy knowing I’d take care of them.

I looked over at Cali, who was sitting with Artemis, holding her hand. There had been no mistaking the fear and desperation in her tone when she’d asked me how we could possibly stop my father, and the knowledge that my mate felt that way ripped my chest wide open. How was I supposed to lead the pack through this if I couldn’t even assure my own mate’s safety?

I repeated the exact same thing I’d been telling myself ever since I’d first laid eyes on her.

*I would die to protect you, Cali.*

Could I do that? Keep her safe *and* still keep the pack safe? Because the thing that was becoming more and more apparent was that I wasn’t just responsible for one of them.

*Fuck.*

I needed to talk to Xavier.

The two of us knew more about Silas than anybody else, though I kind of wished there was literally anything else in the entire universe that I could’ve been the expert on. We’d have to work this out between the two of us.

I glanced down the hallway, where Mace had disappeared to share the news with the rest of his pack. Though he was an Alpha, Mace was as good as useless right now. And who could have faulted him? He’d held his dying mate in his arms, and he hadn’t been able to save her. He’d have to live with that for the rest of his life—which might not be very long. I was pretty sure that if I hadn’t convinced him to come back to the house with us, he would have stayed curled up in Pip’s ashes until a revenant, a vampire, or some other monster had decided to turn him into a snack.

I hoped he would rally. The Blue Blood pack would need leadership more than ever, now that they’d lost their Luna.

A pang of regret ran through me as I remembered what it had been like to lose Joss. It had been an incredible blow, and I still counted myself lucky that Joss had led the pack so well for so long.

But I also knew that losing Joss would be *nothing* compared to losing Cali. It was all too easy to recall how Silas had almost killed her during the battle—and now he was back.

I pushed the image from my mind. I needed to focus, and I needed to talk to my brother. It was more important than ever that we worked together, and there were two things that would make that very difficult—Xavier wanted to be Alpha, and we both loved Cali.

There wasn’t much I could do about the Alpha thing, at least not right now, but I needed to talk to Xavier about Cali before things got out of hand. We couldn’t fight against every force of nature outside the pack house while we were fighting another one inside. We’d fall apart.

Xavier was lingering near Cali, and I put a hand on his shoulder. “Hey. We need to talk. Alone.”

He broke free. “Fine.”

We headed outside to the porch, and I snuck one lingering look at Cali on the way out. God, I wished we could just put all this behind us. The fantasy the witches were taunting me with seemed so remote, so impossible.

*How could Cali and I possibly have that future now?*

Xavier turned to me the moment we stepped outside. “Okay, what’s the plan?”

I sighed. “I don’t have one. But we do know our father better than anyone else. I have faith that we can brainstorm and that we’ll be able to find a weakness, something to put an end to this. But that’s not the reason I brought you out here. We need to talk about Cali.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re full of talk, aren’t you?”

“I don’t need your sarcasm right now!” I snapped. “We—all *three* of us—made an agreement, and if we’re going to survive whatever fresh hell Silas has planned, we need to make sure that you and I can get along without killing each other.”

“*Fine*.” He huffed. “I don’t want another Lupo Finale, though I do think the outcome would be very different this time.”

I rolled my eyes. “We don’t have time for a Lupo Finale, and we can’t afford it either.”

“What are you proposing then? We draw straws to see who gets to be with Cali?”

“Don’t be an asshole. We *both* care about her,” I said. “We need to make sure she’s aware of that.”

He smirked. “Oh, don’t you worry about that. Cali is fully aware of how much I care for her.”

Sometimes I really wanted to beat some empathy into my brother’s thick skull. “Can you please stop acting like a child? I’m trying to have an honest to god conversation with you about our mate—who, by the way, is *terrified* on top of all the other shit she has to deal with.Can you be a grownup for like two minutes, or should we just table this now?”

Xavier held his hand up. “Fine.” He sighed. “I… I’m just a little anxious about what happened at the pond—and not because of Silas.”

“What do you mean?”

“You saw her back there. Cali was ready to attack our father. She actually *did* attack him. You know how she gets when people she cares about are at risk.”

I nodded. “I did notice that. Honestly, I was surprised it was Rishika who jumped the gun. I thought she had more control.”

My brother’s eyebrows raised. “Seriously? Open your eyes, dude. They’re not having sleepovers because they’re *friends*.”

“Fair enough.”

We stared out at the woods in silence for a moment before Xavier turned back to me. “So, what do you have in mind about our agreement?”

“I’m not sure that’s something that either of us can decide. We should ask Cali.”

Xavier nodded at the door. “Let’s go.”

And then, like magic, our mate stepped through the doorway and onto the porch. “Hey, I was wondering where you two went.”

“Perfect timing,” Xavier said.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

I met her eyes. “Who are you going to stay with tonight?”

**Episode 1532**

MARTA

“Where’s my sister?” Lilac demanded. His eyes were wild, and worry was etched into his face. “We have to find her. Now.”

I held my hands up. “I don’t know where she is. I tried calling her—”

“Call her again!” he snapped. “Call her a million times until she answers!”

Since finding out that Violet wasn’t in the pack house—and had recently been talked down from running to Charlie at hunter camp—Lilac had been up in arms about finding his sister. He was clearly scared and frustrated that Violet had run off at such a dangerous time, to a place literally filled with people who wanted to kill werewolves. While I understood that his frustration was coming from a good, loving place, I didn’t love that he was directing it all at me. Since, you know, there was nobody else in the living world he could direct *anything* at.

This spiritual anchor stuff was for the birds.

“Okay, okay!” I grabbed my cell phone off my desk. “You don’t have to yell. I’m doing the best I can—these weird phones aren’t the easiest things to use.” My thumbs fumbled over the flat screen, accidentally opening a few other game boxes—what were they called, again? Applications?—before I finally remembered where the phone icon was. I pressed it and then dialed in Violet’s number. She’d apparently programmed it into my phone, but it was easier for me to just memorize it and not have to toggle through yet another “application” on this complex piece of technology.

The phone rang, and rang, and rang. Just like it had all the other times I’d called Violet. She wasn’t going to answer. And why would she? Violet already knew none of us agreed with what she was doing. She hadn’t bothered talking to anyone about it before she’d left, so why would she now?

I was about to hang up—I *hated* leaving talk mail messages—when she finally answered the phone.

“Hi, Marta.”

I nearly dropped my own cell phone in shock. “She answered!” I told Lilac.

His eyes widened, and then he scowled at the phone in my hand. “Ask her where the hell she is and what the hell she thinks she’s doing.”

“Um, Violet?” I cleared my throat. “Lilac wants to know where you are and what you’re doing there.” I did too, for that matter, but any communication with her dead brother was a gift, so she was a lot more likely to answer the question if I told her he was asking.

I heard her sigh. “I’m at the airport.”

I relayed the information, and Lilac’s face contorted with shock and fury. “The *airport*?” If he hadn’t already been dead, I would’ve been worried that he was about to pop something important. “Where is she going?”

I continued playing spirit telephone, while on the actual telephone.

“I’m going to Minnesota to see Charlie,” Violet said. “I need to talk to him about the people he’s spending time with at hunter camp, and—”

“Well, what did she say?” Lilac snapped, his much closer voice drowning out his sister’s.

“Hold your horses! I can only go so fast.”

He rolled his eyes, and I decided then that the next time he was corporeal, I was going to smack him. “Okay, this clearly isn’t working,” he said. “Just put it on speakerphone.”

I blinked. “Put it on what now?”

He hovered over me, so close I could almost feel his hand touching mine—almost. He pointed at a little icon that kind of reminded me of the megaphones the cheer squad used at pep rallies, back in the day. “Press that icon, and I’ll be able to hear Violet.”

Pushing away the fact that his nearness made my stomach flip-flop, I pressed the icon, and suddenly Violet’s voice filled the room. *Wow! How can this little device suddenly sound so loud?*

“I know you guys are worried,” Violet was saying, “but Charlie needs me. He’s… He’s making a mistake, and he’s out there at that camp with no backup, and I have to help him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before you left?” Lilac demanded.

I repeated the question to her and Violet’s voice was small. “I didn’t really have time. Everything got crazy, and I only had a tiny window to sneak out. I kind of feel bad for lying to Cali. Will you tell her I’m sorry?”

Lilac was unmoved. “Tell her yourself when you get your butt back home.”

There was some kind of flight announcement echoing in the background of the call. “They’re boarding now,” Violet said. “I’ll call when I land. I love you.”

Lilac shook his head. “No, Violet! Don’t you—”

The call cut out, and then it was just Lilac and me.

He growled and started pacing the length of my room, mumbling angrily about his sister. “I can’t believe she ran off like that. Does she even realize how freaking stupid and dangerous that is?”

Each time he reached one end of the room, my body was tugged forward by our tether until I found myself in the middle of the room—until Lilac paced to the opposite far edge, and the tugging started again.

Finally I couldn’t tolerate it any longer. “Can you *please* just hold still?”

Lilac spun around with a glare. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Somebody has to. You’re being rude and annoying.”

I half-expected him to keep pacing, maybe even storm out of the room to prove his point—and catapult me into the door. Instead he moved even closer. “You didn’t seem to think I was so annoying before, when we were kissing.”

I rolled my eyes and moved to push him away—and of course, my hands passed right through him. “Don’t flatter yourself. It wasn’t that great. I’ve had better.”

That was a boldfaced lie. The kiss with Lilac had been pretty damn good. Even better than that time Stephen Rogers and I had kissed in his father’s basement closet during a Halloween party. But I was never in a million years going to admit that to a ghost.

Especially when he was being such a dick.

Lilac smirked. “You’re blushing. Maybe you liked kissing me a little more than you let on?” He raised his eyebrows.

“No.” I scoffed. “It’s just the light.”

“Sure it is.”

Fun or not, kissing Lilac had been a mistake—one I didn’t intend to repeat. I sighed. “Have you already forgotten that your sister is on her way to a hunter boot camp?” I pressed. “Shouldn’t you be focused on that?”

“I mean, yes. But Violet’s pretty headstrong. I mean, when was the last time you talked her out of doing something she really, *really* wanted to do?”

“Umm…”

“Exactly. There’s not much we can do to stop her. I mean, if I was actually in the flesh again, that would be different.” He gave me a pointed look. “But since you won’t help me, I guess there’s no point discussing it further.”

“Hey! That’s not fair. I never said I wouldn’t help you. I just think there must be a better way, one that’s more permanent and—”

“And doesn’t involve kissing?” he finished.

I groaned. “Seriously? You’re back to that again? With everything going on in the house, you have a decidedly one-track mind.”

He shrugged. “I’m a guy. Do the math.”

My jaw dropped. “You’d kiss any girl tethered to you then?”

I expected him to go on the defensive, but instead his eyes sparkled. “Are you jealous, Marta?”

“Ugh, no. That’s not—you know what? Never mind. You might be a guy, but you’re a ghost guy. That’s different.”

“That’s offensive,” he objected as I started for the door. And thanks to our handy-dandy tether, he drifted right along after me.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I should probably tell someone that your sister ran away. “

“But that would be telling on my sister. You can’t do that.”

“I’m sorry, are we in the second grade now? There’s a *lot* of bad stuff going on, and your sister’s not here. Somebody should know. Now, if you don’t mind…” I gestured to the space in front of me, and he begrudgingly stepped aside.

“Fine, but when Violet finds out, I’ll make sure she knows who to blame.”

“Oh, no! The wrath of Violet?” I deadpanned. “How terrifying.”

I exited the bedroom—and nearly ran smack into Orla.

“Oh, excuse me,” she said.

“Actually, Mrs. Hart, could I talk to you for a minute?”

Cali’s mom seemed as good a person as anyone to tell. I quickly explained what Violet had done.

“Thank you, Marta. I’ll let Greyson and the others know.”

Then she headed off, and Lilac drifted back in front of me.

“You happy now? You ratted on my sister. You know what they say about snitches.”

I frowned. “No, I actually don’t.”

“Oh. Well, never mind, then. But you know what you said earlier? About me being a ghost guy? It’s not going to change anything.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Lilac moved close to me, so close we would’ve been touching if he’d been corporeal. His eyes were fixed on mine. “I’m going to make you fall for me, Marta Zhao.”

**Episode 1533**

LOLA

Logically, I knew I should have told Jay that staying with me overnight was a really bad idea and would do nothing to keep the vampire heat subdued—the reason I’d done all this to begin with. But then again, when had logic ever stopped me before? I had to be honest with myself—me knowing something was never a guarantee that I would follow the best course of action.

*C’mon Lola, be strong!*

I glanced at Jay. How the hell was I going to tell him to leave? And really, what would be the harm if he stayed? I gave an inward sheepish grin at how stupid this was. Even I knew the answer to that one. As I stood, not knowing what to do, Jay cupped my chin. His fingers were warm and gentle against my skin.

“Hey, I don’t want to cause trouble.” He looked down into my face with a mixture of concern and tenderness that made me feel breathless.

I swallowed roughly. Jay’s touch alone was driving me completely crazy. Oh well, there was nothing I could do now. I nodded and headed to the bathroom to get ready for bed.

I stood in front of the mirror and cursed that I couldn’t even check myself out. What if I had something in my teeth or on my face?

“What the hell is the matter with you?” I scolded myself. “Nothing’s going to happen anyway.”

*Right.*

I pulled on a pair of my most non-sexy pajamas and a robe for good measure. The more layers between Jay and me, the better. I would also shut the lights off as soon as I could… Except Jay was a werewolf and could see in the dark. Great. I paused for a final pep talk before I opened the door.

*Okay Lola, you got this girl, you can do this!*

Then I stepped out.

“Oh my god!” I almost screamed.

Jay was removing his shirt, leaving me staring straight at his—forget six—*eight* pack! This was going to be so much harder than I’d thought.

He was coming closer. I felt like I was going to pass out.

“Excuse me.” He headed for the bathroom and passed inches away from me. The hair stood up on my arms, my skin prickled with gooseflesh, and my mouth was dry. I tried to swallow, but I couldn’t.

*For goodness sake Lola, get a grip on yourself!* But it was no use. I didn’t know if it was the vampire heat that was making me feel this way—all I knew was that I wanted to pull off my clothes and grab him.

Like NOW.

I tried to take some calming breaths, but it didn’t work. I shut off the lights and moved quickly to the bed. I covered myself with the sheet and comforter, pulling them right up to my chin. Not a great move. What with the blankets, the pajamas, and the robe, I was already sweating like crazy.

Jay stepped out of the bathroom. He was wearing shorts and was silhouetted in the doorway. I gulped; I couldn’t help it. The guy looked like he’d walked off the cover of a romance novel. My knuckles turned white as I tightened my grip on the covers. I was holding on for dear life. Jay flicked off the bathroom light, and I heard his footsteps as he drew closer. They were almost in perfect sync with my heart, which was practically pounding its way out of my chest. Jay slid under the covers.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

It was all too much.

“Of course, I am!” I spluttered. “Why would you ask that? I sleep here all the time, it’s my bed after all.”

I bit my lip. I was rambling, and I sounded like a total idiot, but I couldn’t help it—he was just too damn beautiful.

To give Jay credit, he didn’t lose it.

“I just meant, aren’t you hot?” As he spoke, he reached over as if to pull down the covers.

“Don’t!” I yelled.

Jay paused while I thought about turning into a puddle. “You know, Lola, we don’t have to do this. I can easily sleep on the floor.”

“NO!” I cried. Jay stared at me. I swallowed. “I mean, that’s not necessary.” Inside, I was dying. I knew how ridiculous I sounded. I tried to calm down. “I mean, you shouldn’t have to put yourself out just for me.”

As soon as I said that, Jay snapped on the bedside light.

“Lola, listen to me.” He leaned over me so I was forced to stare at his flawless chest, his hard muscles, his perfect skin… “I know you’re nervous.”

I swallowed. I would have responded, but I found it hard to talk.

“But I just want to make it clear that I am not trying to rush you into anything,” Jay continued. “We can go as slow as you want, as slow as you need to. I’m fine sleeping on the floor if you want. I just want to be with you.”

I nodded, still unable to talk, and we lay down again. Jay switched off the light. I stared up at the ceiling, trying and failing to stop my fingers from twisting and fiddling. I could have sworn there were pins tingling all the way down my spine. I’d never felt so antsy in my whole damn life.

*Oh, fuck it.*

I rolled over to face Jay. I tried my best to meet his eyes and not let my gaze stray to his ridiculously perfect bare chest. I failed.

“Maybe we’re going about this the wrong way.”

“What?”

Jay stared at me. Even in the darkness, I could feel the intensity of his gaze

I was getting excited. Could I be on to something? Maybe taking care of this vampire heat situation was all about leaning into it.

Like, *seriously* leaning into it.

I trailed my fingers down his irresistible abs. They were hard and smooth under my touch.

“Maybe if we do… *that*, it will go away?”

“What do you mean, go away? What are you talking about?” I could hear confusion in Jay’s voice, but also his breath shifting as I moved my fingers across his skin.

I couldn’t hold back any longer. I leaned forward and kissed him like I’d been dying to do from the minute he’d stepped into my room.

Jay didn’t waste any time. He kissed me back—hard. His lips pressing mine were warm and firm, his tongue expertly teasing, circling, moving in a rhythmic way that was driving me out of my mind. Currents of electricity shot up my body, and every single part of me was crying out for his touch, his kiss. I wanted his hands, his fingers, his tongue everywhere.

This was beyond familiar. This was *right*. This was true. Caught in Jay’s embrace, vague and misty visions swam and rose through my mind. I saw myself locked in the throes of passion with someone I couldn’t make out. Was that Jay? Was it a memory? Abruptly, I pulled away.

“Lola? Are you okay?” Jay looked concerned

“I’m fine!” I almost snapped. “I just need a glass of water.”

Without waiting to hear his reply, I practically leapt out of bed and headed out of the room. Once I was out, I admitted to myself that it was a lame excuse, but it would have to do for now. The truth was, I needed a moment.

I wanted Jay, and I felt like I needed him, but I didn’t want to get hurt, or to hurt him. Was I really doing the right thing? I was just so uncertain. My head filled with swirling thoughts, I made my way toward the communal kitchen, where I was surprised to see that all the lights were off. Weird. I thought I saw someone moving around in the shadows, and I peered into the darkness, trying to make the figure out.

“*Jacqueline*?” I was surprised. “Is that you? What are you doing out here?”

Jacqueline slowly turned to face me, and I let out a small cry. Her eyes were glowing orange.

Before I could even draw breath to react, Jay had jumped in front of me. He let out a low, menacing growl as he partially shifted. I didn’t know where he’d come from or how he’d moved so quickly, but I was grateful. Jacqueline blinked, and her eyes went back to normal, the orange light fading away so quickly that it made me wonder what the hell I’d seen in the first place. She blinked again, and her eyes traveled downward. She gasped as Jay’s werewolf claws came into view, but in the darkness his face wasn’t visible.

“Werewolf!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. “*Werewolf!*”

Doors banged open all up and down the hall as at least half a dozen vampire students poured out of their bedrooms and headed to where Jacqueline was still shrieking. They streamed into the kitchen, a crowd quickly forming. Searching heads turned, groggy muttering voices rising—and then they spotted Jay. Instantly, the energy changed, sharpening and turning dark.

As one, the students bared their fangs at him, and faster than I could believe, we were completely surrounded.

**Episode 1534**

I stood there frozen like a deer in the headlights, unsure how to answer. With all the crazy shit going on, being asked out of the blue who I planned to sleep with that night was the last question I’d expected. I’d already spent part of the night with Xavier before all this craziness started… We just hadn’t exactly…*slept*. I swallowed hard, blinked, and tried to focus. Both Greyson and Xavier were staring at me. I didn’t think this situation could have been more awkward, but I’d been wrong before. I cleared my throat.

“Do we have to discuss this, like, right this minute?”

To my irritation and surprise, both of them nodded.

“Yes, we do, Cali. This is important.” Greyson’s tone was stern as he looked at Xavier. “We have to put this to bed.”

Xavier smirked. “Preferably my bed.”

Greyson gave him a look.

“You brought it up,” he said.

“And you just had to finish it, didn’t you?” Greyson growled.

“You never seem to be able to.”

“Oh, grow up. You’re just pissed off that I asked Cali before you could.”

“No, I’m pissed off because you won’t let her choose,” Xavier said. “Are you scared of who she might actually pick, Greyson?”

I had to stop this before it escalated further. The truth was that they were right. If we didn’t resolve our sleeping arrangements (if we ever got to sleep tonight, *ha*), Silas and the revenants and everything that was actually important would stay on the back burner. I took a deep breath.

“Before you rip each other’s heads off, I want to remind both of you that it’s only been twenty-four hours since we started this.” I stared hard at both of them, my heart beating fast in my chest. “I thought we all agreed that we could do this?”

To Xavier’s credit, he did look mildly ashamed of himself. “Yes, Cali, but—”

I put my hands on my hips and narrowed my eyes.

*But?*

Greyson cleared his throat. “But it would be helpful if you could decide who you want to spend the night with.”

I sighed and looked at both of them. Xavier and Greyson. I couldn’t lose either one of them. Still, their jealousy was going to make this whole thing so difficult. We weren’t supposed to be doing this… It’d been their own rules! All I cared about right then was making sure they didn’t kill each other, and making sure that Artemis was okay.

“All right,” I announced. “I’ve decided.”

“You have?” Xavier perked up.

Greyson nodded. “Who’s it going to be?”

I couldn’t stay with either of them. Not if it was going to be like this. We clearly had a few things to iron out… It’d been their own idea—I thought they’d thought it through more. I rubbed my temples, trying to figure out what I was actually going to do. I didn’t want to hurt anyone, and I was suddenly in a more precarious situation than before. Great.

“I’m staying with Artemis tonight.”

“*Artemis*?” Xavier echoed.

“Are you sure?” Greyson asked. “Cali, it doesn’t have to be like that.”

I studied their faces, then nodded. “For the sake of no one tearing each other apart, yes. We can figure all this… *sharing* stuff out later. Right?”

They both nodded, both frowning.

“I’ll stand guard, then.” Xavier crossed his arms. “Just in case.”

Greyson shot him another cold glare. “Cali doesn’t need a guard.” He shifted on his feet and seemed uncomfortable. “But…”

I felt a growing apprehension as I watched Greyson fidget. This didn’t bode well.

“But what?”

“There is something I think we have to discuss.” Now, he looked me dead in the eye. He wasn’t smiling.

“What?” I asked. The way he was talking was kind of freaking me out.

Greyson sighed. “You can’t leave the house unless you have one of us with you.”

I couldn’t help it. I snorted. “What?” I couldn’t stop it as I started to laugh. But I stopped when I scanned his face for the answering smile. There was none.

“Greyson, *really*?”

“I’m serious,” he said.

To my complete amazement, Xavier started nodding. “I have to say, I’m actually in agreement with Greyson on this one.”

“What the *hell*?” I asked. “What does that even mean? Are you trying to make me a prisoner here?”

“No, *no*.” Greyson shook his head. “It’s not like that at all. You can go wherever you want. But you have to try to see this from our perspective, Cali.

“And what perspective is that?” I was still fuming. “I can’t believe this! Don’t you guys trust me?”

Greyson sighed. “It’s not that we don’t trust you Cali, it’s just… It’s just that we want to keep you *safe*,” he said. “If you haven’t noticed, you seem to be a bit prone to danger lately.”

Xavier snorted. “That’s an understatement.”

I sighed. Was this seriously the only thing that would keep the peace between them…?

“*Fine*,” I said. But after a pause I added, “For now. Don’t think that either of you is off the hook for anything that you just did. And now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go check on my sister.”

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Hours later, I shifted in the armchair again, for probably the hundredth time. But it was no use.

As hard as I tried, I simply could not get comfortable in the chair in Artemis’s room. A chair was not a bed, but I only had myself to blame. I’d known where I’d be sleeping when I’d said no to both Greyson and Xavier and told them that I’d be with Artemis tonight.

I was really lucky that Artemis and Rishika had said yes. I could tell when I asked that they weren’t exactly thrilled, and I didn’t blame them. I wasn’t either. I’d done a bang up job of explaining the situation to them in not so many words—I didn’t want to break one of the rules again if I could help it. Even if the boys weren’t following the rules (um hello! no jealousy?) I needed to do my part.

I turned toward my sister, who lay in bed. She was on her side, eyes closed, breathing deeply and lost in sleep finally. I could totally understand. She was probably exhausted after what had happened at the ghost pond. There was a small sigh as Rishika turned over and flung her arm over Artemis. I smiled, laughed quietly, and looked away.

Sure, staying here made me feel like a third wheel, but I was determined to keep an eye on Artemis after everything that had happened. And to be honest, there was no way in hell I was going to stay with either Greyson or Xavier tonight. I needed some space.

I shifted again and finally found a comfortable spot. A miracle. I felt myself start to drift…

I was no longer with Artemis. I looked up, and Greyson was looking down at me, his normally stern expression relaxed. His eyes were warm, and a small smile played on his lips. He reached out and gently ran one finger down my cheek. I shivered, and my skin prickled with gooseflesh. It was insane how the simplest touch could drive me so crazy.

I looked down and gasped. No, wait, it was Xavier here, kneeling by the chair.

Oh *no*.

I glanced at both the brothers—one vanishing once I looked at the other. I tried to prepare myself for the inevitable all-out brawl, but it seemed like they didn’t even know the other was there. Could they even see each other?

Greyson had traced his fingers all the way down my arm and was holding my hand. He raised my hand to his mouth, never breaking eye contact, and began to slowly and deliberately kiss my knuckles, then softly bite my fingertips, pulling each finger into his warm mouth. The sensation was totally heavenly. Then I gasped and looked down, Greyson disappearing.

Xavier was leaning over my feet. He had them clasped in his strong, warm hands as he kneaded and massaged the muscles. Then he leaned over my big toe. Enveloping it in the warm, dark velvet of his mouth, he began to suck. It was so unexpected and felt so fucking amazing at the same time. I leaned back and tried not moan too loudly.

But when I looked up, Xavier was gone again, and it was Greyson in front of me. He dug his hands into my hair, raised its mass, then leaned forward and deliberately bit the nape of my neck, grazing the skin with his teeth.

Looking down again, Xavier was now pushing his hands up my legs, slowly but firmly, kissing every inch of my skin as he progressed. I didn’t know how much more I could handle before I started moaning with ecstasy.

I bit my lip. I didn’t know why this was happening, but I never wanted it to end. I closed my eyes, and it felt like there were hands all over my body, my breasts, my thighs, massaging, stroking, caressing… I felt that familiar deep heat pooling up within me, welling up and up. I was about to lose my mind and explode when I heard an odd noise. A swirling, murmuring, hissing sound. Was it… whispering?

The whispering grew louder and louder, and then I heard harsh caws of laughter. *Laughter?*

I snapped my eyes open and stared right into the gleeful, laughing faces of three witches.

I gasped in shock and woke up, falling to the floor as I did so. My heart was practically pounding out of my chest, and I felt my cheeks burning.

Were the witches trying to send me a message?

**Episode 1535**

XAVIER

After Cali stormed off, Greyson and I walked on together, heads down, both of us still fighting. It was petty, stupid, and infuriating. It was probably a complete waste of time, but I just couldn’t help myself. The disappointment was crushing. I couldn’t believe Cali had rejected me like that. I’d really hoped she would choose to spend the night with me.

“You did this to her.” Greyson’s voice was low and angry

“*What*?” I turned to him. “This is your fault. We should have just waited for a fucking schedule. You’re the one who created this mess.”

“No, you did with your immaturity and selfishness.”

I laughed harshly. “Again, *me*?”

“That’s right.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? If you wouldn’t have asked Cali to spend the night with you before we had a schedule, then none of this would’ve happened!” This was really too much. My hands balled into fists. I could feel my heart pounding. “And in case it slipped your mind, I was the one who met her first.”

Greyson narrowed his eyes. “So?”

“*So?*” Was he seriously trying to get me to deck him? “Uh… not to make a big deal about it or anything, but since she met me first, I should get the first night with her. She was a virgin before she met me.”

Greyson turned around and glared at me.

It was a low blow, but I experienced a mean kind of pleasure in hurting him, and I was pleased to have gotten a shot in. We had reached the living room by that stage, and I was about to hammer the point home when Greyson and I stopped mid-argument. There, in the living room, with the lights off, sat a lonely figure. What were they doing?

My eyes adjusted in an instant, and I saw it was Mace. Mace, sitting by himself in the darkness, drinking whiskey. I was instantly reminded of how incredibly and amazingly stupid Greyson and I could be.

I stared at the man. I had never seen him looking so bad—dispirited, hollow, and sad. At that moment, Mace looked up at us. His eyes were red from weeping. He started to say something then paused, swallowed, and took a large, trembling gulp of his drink instead. The ice chattered in his glass, as his hand shook ever so slightly.

Greyson glanced at me and motioned for us to approach Mace.

I did so reluctantly, not sure if it was a good idea. If I’d been in Mace’s shoes, I wouldn’t have wanted to speak to anyone. Maybe ever again. The guy was clearly in a bad place. But I knew my brother—once he started in one direction, that was where he went.

“Hey man, how are you doing?” Greyson kept his voice low and kind. That was the thing about Greyson—he knew how to come through. For other people, that was. Not his own blood.

“Not so good.” Mace coughed. His voice quavered, and he attempted to smile. It was horribly worse than his previous expression of grief. “I’m trying to drink myself numb.”

I could tell he was fast approaching total shitfaced-ness, though I had my doubts that he’d ever reach his goal. I felt truly bad for the guy.

“Since you’re here…” Mace swallowed. “I hope you both know this, but don’t ever take your mate for granted. You can love her with all your soul and then have that soul ripped away in an instant.” As he spoke, he wiped at the tears in his eyes with the back of his hand and stared listlessly into the distance.

*Shit*.

Mace’s grief was so raw that I could barely stand it. I knew exactly what he meant. I’d never forget the day Ava had betrayed me and I’d been forced to kill her. It had felt as though my whole life had been destroyed. It was only when Cali had come into the picture that I’d begun to realize that I had a chance to recover.

I put a hand on Mace’s shoulder in solidarity and hoped it gave him some comfort. I wanted him to know he wasn’t alone. What had happened to him was a tragedy. I liked Pip. I’d known her for a long time, and she deserved better. That was all.

Greyson and I left Mace to mourn in private and headed to the kitchen. I’d wanted to stop fighting, but after seeing Mace, I couldn’t help myself—it had to be said.

I stopped and turned to my brother. “Greyson?”

Something in my voice compelled him to look at me.

“Yes?” He looked guarded, his defenses up and ready.

I took a breath and tried to control the rising emotions that threatened to overwhelm me.

“How many more people will we have to lose before Silas is gone?”

Greyson stared back at me. For once, he seemed truly thrown. He started to say something, stopped, and shook his head. Then he walked off. In a way, it was an answer.

I also needed to clear my head. I stepped outside. The air was sharp, cold and refreshing. I took a deep breath, then another, until I started to feel calmer. I glanced up at Artemis’s bedroom window. I pictured Cali asleep in there. I swallowed hard. The memory of Mace haunted me—the depth of his grief, and how distraught he was. I knew deep down that it could have easily been me sitting there in dark, mourning the loss of Cali and trying to drink away my pain.

I was beyond grateful that I hadn’t lost her, but Mace was right—I should never ever take Cali for granted. Standing in the cold darkness of the night, I vowed to do whatever I had to, even if it meant cooperating with Greyson, as long as it meant we could make this situation with Cali work. Because one thing was for certain—I would never go through another unmating ritual again, and I would never lose Cali.

No matter what.

I stared out at the dark woods, wondering if my father was there, watching, waiting. If so, I would be ready.

I shivered. It was time to go home. I crunched back through the snow to the house, feeling more focused and clearer of purpose. Once I made it into the kitchen, I was surprised to find Torin, wide awake. I wondered if Fae ever sleep.

He was at the stove, stirring a pot. “I’m just heating some water for some leaf water.”

“*Tea*?” I asked.

He nodded enthusiastically. “Would you like some?”

“No, thanks.” I leaned against the counter, thawing out and enjoying the tingling warmth in my limbs.

“So…” Torin sounded a little tentative. “How are you doing? After Mace?”

“I’m devastated.” I was surprised by how easily and simply I was able to admit the truth.

Torin looked crestfallen. He sat down heavily at the kitchen table, and his expression crumpled. He put down the mug and wiped at his eyes.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything to help. Maybe if I had been there…” He trailed off, looking miserable.

I grabbed a mug and poured myself some water and grabbed a peppermint teabag. “On second thought, I’ll take some after all.”

I sat next to him, cradling my mug.

“You know, Torin,” I said, “you’ve done a lot for the pack.”

Torin looked up, suddenly hopeful.

“Really? You mean it?”

“Yeah, I do. I mean, I admit that when I first met you, I thought you were just annoying.” I took a sip. “But I was wrong. Really wrong.” I raised my mug. “Cheers. Thanks to you and Astrid for helping out.”

Torin smiled and raised his mug in return. We clinked.

“You know…” Torin took a sip. “I have to confess, I’ve always been fascinated by werewolves. It’s been more of an obsession really, so thank *you*, for allowing me to hang around.” He took another sip. “I mean, take someone like Tom—I’m actually able to watch him turn into a werewolf. It’s amazing, really.” He shook his head in wonder.

I couldn’t help but smile. “How about we make you an honorary werewolf? I mean, you’re basically already part of the pack.”

Torin spat out his tea in surprise. “You mean it?”

*Oh shit. This might have been a mistake.* I paused. Mistake it might be, but for some reason I hated the idea of disappointing Torin. And it was true—he had done a lot for the pack. I turned to him.

“You know what? I’ll bring it up at the next council meeting.”

Torin could barely contain himself. “Oh my goodness! Would they give me a medal, or a patch?” His words came tumbling out. His eyes were shining with excitement. “Is there a buffet?”

I winced a little and wondered what I had started.

“We’ll see,” I said, and finished my tea.

I left the kitchen, with Torin sitting at the table still flushed with anticipation and hope, no doubt imagining all sorts of incredible honorary werewolf rituals. There was nothing I could do about it now. I sighed. No good deed went unpunished.

As I headed up upstairs, I ran into Ava. After the night I’d been having and all the memories of our painful past that had been stirred up, it felt strange to see her in person.

Ava stared at me intently, her dark eyes unreadable. “I’ve been looking for you.”

**Episode 1536**

LOLA

It was an incredible sight, the way his muscles stretched and bunched, the shape of him, the fur… As a wolf, he was enormous. Jacqueline kept screaming, destroying my eardrums and making it hard to think straight. Worst of all, her screams were alerting even more vampires. They were already surrounding us, their fangs bared, ready to attack.

“Stop!” I yelled at the top of my lungs. “Stop! Please! He’s a good werewolf! He’s a friendly werewolf, he won’t hurt you if you stop, I promise. Please!”

My yelling did no good at all. There was too much chaos, and I couldn’t even begin to compete with Jacqueline’s volume.

I didn’t know what the hell to do. I only knew that I had to help Jay. After all, none of this was his fault! If Jay got hurt now, his blood would be on my hands. And you didn’t want blood anywhere near these folks.

My head spun as the vampire crowd grew and Jacqueline’s screaming intensified. *Oh god, help me…*

*Get on my back.*

What? Was that a voice? In my head?

*God? Is that you?*

*No, don’t be insane, it’s Jay!*

Wait, what? But how had I heard his voice? He was a *wolf*.

*Get on my back, Lola. Right now!*

I was amazed and excited that Jay was able to communicate with me. With a shock, I realized that he was mind linking with me, and that meant… That meant we were definitely mates! That did it—nothing and no one was going to stand in my way.

I pushed fiercely through the growing swarm of vampires. One of them leapt after me and grabbed my arm, her nails digging deep into my flesh. I twisted away hard and shook her off, and as she stumbled backward, I recognized her as one of the mean girls. Even in the middle of the chaos, I felt a flash of satisfaction. Good, it served her right. Then I leapt onto Jay’s back, holding on for dear life.

The feel of his thick fur under my fingers, his calm voice echoing in my head, flooded my mind with memories, both distant and familiar. We’d done this before—we must have. I didn’t remember anything specific yet, but the feeling of it was so strong.

I loved it. It was like coming home. I tightened my hold on his neck, and Jay, who must have sensed that I was ready, didn’t hesitate. He bounded over the vampires, raced down a hall, and burst out of a door to a balcony. He leapt over the wall and landed effortlessly on the ground, many feet below. Without a pause, he headed to a thicket of bushes. Finally, we stopped.

*Are you okay?* he asked.

Was I okay? *Was I okay?* Was he kidding me? My heart was pounding, and adrenaline was still surging through me.

I was beyond okay—I was ecstatic. I hastened to reassure him.

“That was amazing! Incredible! Could we do it again? Please, *please*?”

*Uh, I don’t think that would be the best idea.* Jay’s voice in my head was rueful and amused. *I mean, we were lucky to get out of there in the first place without anyone getting hurt.*

*Oh*. I knew he was right, but I couldn’t help feeling a little disappointed. Maybe next time.

*In some ways, you haven’t changed at all*, Jay told me, walking deeper into the bushes.

“What are we doing now?” I asked.

*We need a place to hang until things calm down.*

Fair enough. I hopped off Jay’s back and immediately wished I hadn’t. There was still snow on the ground, and I was barefoot. Ow!

*Climb back up*, Jay’s voice urged me. *I can keep you warm.*

I didn’t hesitate for a second. I clambered back on—any excuse to be close to him was worth it. And furthermore, if he was my mate—which logically he had to be, if he was able to mind link with me—then we were meant to be together, no matter what happened.

It was only then that I remembered it—the dreaded vampire heat. Would this make it worse? But really, what choice did I have right now? It was freezing, and we couldn’t go back to the school. Then again, temperatures were plummeting—would we even be able to survive out here?

Jay’s voice broke through my thoughts. *If we can get to my car, we can stay in there.*

“Good thinking!”

I relaxed a little as Jay padded toward the parking lot. Then suddenly, he stopped.

*Oh no.*

“What’s wrong?”

*There’s a vampire search party between us and my car.* Jay sounded frustrated.

I took a breath. “I think you should leave.”

Jay gave a derisive snort of laughter. *As if.*

“No, seriously. I can face the consequences. I mean, what’s the worst they can do to me? Expel me? At this point that wouldn’t be so bad.”

*There’s no way in hell I’m leaving you!* Jay sounded stern, almost harsh. *I came here to be with you, and I’m not going to leave you again—not unless I know you’re going to be okay.*

I couldn’t say anything to that. I was truly moved. Even if I didn’t remember being his mate, I sure *felt* it now, with every fiber of my being. And that wasn’t the only thing I felt.

Jay turned back, searching for somewhere we could take shelter. Eventually, a run-down greenhouse came into view, glinting in the moonlight. It wasn’t perfect, but it would have to do. We entered it and looked around for a place to settle in for the night. Jay set me down, cleared a spot, then lay down.

*Come on, Lola—come here and snuggle close. I’ll keep you warm.*

I came over and lay down next to him, wriggling in as close as I could. Jay enveloped me in his warm, soft fur.

*It’s going to be okay*, he said. *Don’t worry, and go to sleep.*

His voice soothed me, and his warmth and presence made me feel safe and secure.

*I can’t believe I’m so lucky*, I thought as I drifted off to sleep.

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I woke with beams of sunlight shining into my face. I experienced a brief moment of confusion, and then I remembered where I was. I rolled over and… *abs*!

Jay must have shifted back at some point during the night. I stared and stared at the amazing body beside me. My vampire heat started stirring deep within me, but I couldn’t look away. Then, almost of its own volition, one of my fingers stretched out and trailed down his chest, as if to prove to me that something so perfect was actually real. As my finger touched his skin, Jay opened his eyes.

“Good morning,” he rumbled.

“Good morning,” I said, a little breathlessly.

He looked down and then started to sit up. “I’m so sorry. I must have shifted in the night without realizing.”

“Jay,” I said, cutting him off. “Stop.”

He stopped talking and looked at me, surprised. But there was no way I was going to let him hide from me.

“But you must be cold,” Jay protested. “I’m going to shift back.”

I put my hand on his arm. “Not yet. I just… I just want to snuggle like this.”

He smiled, then leaned over and gently brushed a leaf from my hair. “You know, Lola, I really miss you. I just wish you remembered.”

I could feel the vampire heat building, growing hotter and hotter.

“I’d like to remember everything,” I told him. Then I put my arms around him, pulled him close, and kissed him like my life depended on it.

We fell back together. Jay lips were on mine—warm, firm, expert, and eager. He bit down gently on my lower lip and ran his tongue along my upper one. His tongue guided my own, working me into a frenzy. The horses had truly been let out of the barn—there was no stopping me now. I wanted him, I needed him, and I was going to have him, now, now, now.

I pulled him on top of me, wanting to feel his warm, strong hands everywhere on my body. I loved the feel of his skin against mine. His touch was smooth and tender. He was devouring me, and I was devouring him, and it felt so good, so right. He was my mate, after all—of course he knew how to give me pleasure, how to drive me completely crazy.

Jay dug his hands through my hair, pulling me even closer, and kissed me like he’d been dying of thirst and I was a well brimming with water. I moaned with desire, my blood singing in my ears.

“Lola,” Jay said loudly. “Lola!”

“Jay,” I murmured. “Jay…”

“Lola! Lola!”

Eventually, I realized that there were other people calling my name. Other people who were close by. An audience, in fact. We pulled hastily apart.

Irma, along with several faculty members, was standing in the greenhouse doorway, staring down at us.

“Lola Spillane, we’ve been looking for you all night!”

**Episode 1537**

CHARLIE

The next day, I was completely on edge. I still hadn’t been able to reach Violet since I’d told her about Sophie and my mom’s surprise visit. That didn’t bode well, and the whole thing was making me tense as hell.

Where was she now? How was she feeling? I just wanted to talk with her and tell her how much I loved her. As I got dressed for brunch, still lost in thought, Zachery and Aisha burst out laughing. They took in my more formal look and made impressed *ooh* noises.

Zachery winked. “Nice look, Charlie!”

“Yeah, but why are you so fancied up?” Aisha asked.

I sighed, but I knew there was no point in trying to avoid the topic.

“It’s because I’m having brunch with my mom.” I paused and then reluctantly added, “And Sophie.”

Zachery flashed me a wide, merciless grin. “Sophie, huh? I knew it! I totally knew it!”

“*No*!” I protested. “It’s not what you think. The whole thing was my mom’s idea.”

As I spoke, I realized just how weird that sounded.

Aisha had heard it, too. “Kinky,” she said with a smirk. “And what else does your mother do for you?”

“Oh, *gross*, Aisha.” I groaned. “Don’t go there.”

They laughed like idiots.

“Can both of you just stop it? It’s only brunch.”

As I spoke, I wondered how I was going to be able to eat anything at all when my stomach was so tied up in knots.

Zachery saw my grimace and took pity on me. “Okay, okay,” he said, and collapsed onto my bed. “I’ll stop.”

“Thank you.”

“But seriously,” he continued, and now he looked both serious and curious. “Why is your mom here in the first place? I mean, it’s not like it’s even Friends and Family Weekend or anything like that. What’s going on?”

“Yeah,” Aisha agreed. “It’s strange. Or is she just one of those helicopter parents? The kind of mom who has to keep a close eye on her precious little boy?”

I couldn’t even take offense. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “She’s friends with Romilly, the groundskeeper. Maybe she was coming to say hi to her?” I knew that was unlikely.

Both Zachery and Aisha’s eyes went wide with shock.

“Wait!” she said.

“Yeah, hold on,” Zachery said. “Your mom is friends with Romilly Vonn?”

I shrugged, unsettled. “Yeah? I don’t know what the big deal is. I mean, just because Romilly’s a groundskeeper, doesn’t mean—”

Aisha cut me off mid-sentence. “Charlie!” She spoke to me like I was an idiot. “Charlie, that is actually a big deal.”

“Why?” I really did want to know.

“The thing is,” Aisha continued, “Vonn isn’t just a groundskeeper.”

“What?” Now I was totally confused. “What do you mean?”

“She designed this place.” Zachery spoke in an awed tone.

“Oh.” I’d had no idea. “Well, I guess that’s… cool?”

And explained how she probably knew where I was at all times.

“*Cool*?” Aisha’s voice was scornful. “She’s more than just cool—the woman is a total legend.”

Zachery nodded earnestly, driving the point home.

“Oh,” I said again.

I didn’t know exactly how to respond to this new information, other than by feeling more than a little uneasy, knowing that my mother had conspired with Romilly. It all came down to the same thing—a way to keep tabs on me while I was here.

Maybe Aisha was right. Maybe my mom was a helicopter parent after all.

“You’d better get going, brunch boy,” Aisha said, standing up.

Zachery grinned. “Yeah, you don’t want to be late for Sophie.”

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An hour or so into the brunch, I was not feeling any calmer. The whole experience was turning out to be incredibly awkward. Sophie was wearing a smooth, well-fitting skirt and a pretty blouse that managed to look tasteful yet sexy, and she was really playing up the girlfriend thing.

When we’d all met at the restaurant, she’d reached for my hand, and after that she hadn’t stopped touching me. Now she leaned in and nuzzled against me, calling me “Shmoopie Bear” as she brushed a crumb off my cheek. She touched my thigh, my arm, the nape of my neck. It might have looked good to the outsider, but it was making me increasingly uncomfortable.

I remembered Zachery insisting that Sophie liked me. While I knew that Zachery loved to take the piss, it seemed he might have been right about this. But the truth was, I didn’t know if she actually liked me or not—it was so hard to tell if she was acting.

*Oh shit. This isn’t good. What am I going to do if she actually likes me?*

My mother, meanwhile, had been eating up Sophie’s act with a spoon.

“Tell me, how long have you two been dating?” she asked, beaming.

Fuck. I hadn’t prepared for this line of questioning at all. I froze, but Sophie swept in immediately.

“Oh, Shmoopie Bear?” she gushed delightedly and gave a little laugh. “I’ll never ever forget it. I saw him in his dorm the first day, and things kind of just took off from there. We’ve been together ever since.” She held up our fingers, twisted together.

For a moment, I prayed for the ground to swallow me up. There was a ringing in my ears, and I felt like I was dying. This act was going way, way too deep. I remembered meeting Sophie that first day. I played the scene back in my mind, wondering if I’d totally misread it. Had she really fallen for me then and there?

My mom, meanwhile, looked completely thrilled.

“That’s so lovely! You know, your story reminds me of Dave and Maureen. They saw each other across the camp cafeteria on their first day, and just six months later they were married!” She beamed. “And now they run a spa in Colorado. Do you know that there are more vampires in the Centennial State than people used to think?”

Sophie shook her head, apparently utterly fascinated.

Thank god the waiter came and interrupted this tale with offers of dessert. When he left, I leaned forward and asked my mom in what I hoped was a casual tone, “Mom, how long are you planning on staying?”

My mother grinned. “I’ve got good news!”

My heart sank.

“It turns out that I’ll be sticking around—I was asked to be a guest lecturer and trainer as an alum of the camp!”

Sophie gave a little squeal of excitement. “That’s amazing news! I’ll be the first to sign up!” She squeezed my hand, and I gritted my teeth as she turned to me. “Won’t that be great?”

I coughed. “Great doesn’t do it justice.”

Time dragged on and on, and it seemed like an eternity passed before we were back at the camp and saying goodbye to my mom.

When she finally left, I turned cautiously to Sophie. “Thank you so much for helping me out.”

I knew I sounded as stiff and uptight as hell, but after what had just happened, I had no idea how she actually felt about me.

Sophie surprised me by giving a mischievous grin. “No problem at all—it was actually super fun. If you ever need us to ‘fake date’ for your mother again, just let me know.”

Before I could do or say anything in response to this, she launched herself toward me and gave me a massive hug. Then, without further ado, she walked away.

I stood there, staring after her. I’d been convinced that saying goodbye would be far more awkward. Maybe I was just being paranoid? I couldn’t help but worry that I’d made an even bigger mess of the situation, if that were possible. My mom was now convinced that not only were Sophie and I deeply in love, but that we were meant to be. And to make matters impossibly worse, she was going to be sticking around.

I was starting to head back to my cabin when I stopped, held in place by a strange scent in the air. I lifted my head to smell it, breathing in deeply. And then it hit me. I would’ve known it anywhere—the scent of a werewolf!

Without a moment’s hesitation, I turned and headed into the forest, following the scent. As I went further in, the smell grew stronger and stronger until I knew that it wasn’t just a random werewolf scent. It was Violet!

*What?* How was that possible?

I sped up then, moving faster and faster through the forest, but looking behind me as I went, making sure that no one was following me. So far so good, it seemed.

“Violet!” I whispered. “Violet, are you there? Where are you?”

I heard rustling in some nearby bushes, and a figure suddenly jumped out, pushing me backward. I stumbled, caught off-guard, and blinked in surprise as I took in Violet’s scowl. Then I felt a huge smile take over my face. I moved to embrace her, but then she pushed me back again. This time with even more force. I stared at her. She wasn’t smiling. At all.

“Are you cheating on me?” she snarled.

**Episode 1538**

I woke up and squinted against the bright sunshine glaring horribly through the space between the curtains. *What time is it? Why is the sun so bright?*

I stretched out, wiping the drool off my face and wincing through the aching pain in my joints. This chair had to seriously be the most uncomfortable thing in the world. It was clearly meant for decoration, not for someone to sleep in for hours. If what I’d just experienced could even be called sleep.

I stole a glance at Rishika and Artemis, jealous that they’d clearly slept better than I had. They were cuddled beneath the covers, still fast asleep. I was tempted to peek under their eyelids to make sure their eyes weren’t orange—just to be on the safe side.

I couldn’t believe how bad my sleep had been—probably the worst I could remember in the recent past. And then that dream… which had been way too steamy than I had any business thinking about.

The spike of heat that prickled my skin at the memory was eclipsed by images of the witches. What were they doing in my dreams, anyway? They’d only affected me when they’d also affected Greyson… Did he have the same dream? Had Xavier? My skin flushed again at the thought. *Please god, do not let that be the case.* How would I be able to face them? How would they face each other?

I had to get my mind out of the gutter. I checked my phone. It was early, but not too early for coffee. *White chocolate mocha, here I come.*

I stood and stretched again, doing a little jog in place to shake all the kinks out.

I wondered if Mrs. Smith and Big Mac were doing okay. They hadn’t checked in with anyone yet—unless they’d called Greyson after I’d fallen asleep in the torture chair. I figured Mrs. Smith would want to check in on Greyson to let him know she was okay.

I got up and padded to the door, taking care not to wake Artemis and Rishika. I cast one more glance at the both of them. Damn, they were pretty—and even more so when they were together. *Ugh.* Did I look like that when I slept? Or when I slept next to Xavier or Greyson? I flashed back to the stream of drool I’d squeegeed off my face. *Maybe not.*

I toed the door open and yelped when a body fell at my feet. “Xavier! Are you hurt? Were you attacked by a revenant?” I gasped out, dropping to my knees beside him. “What are you doing here?”

“Stop yelling,” Xavier rasped as he slowly opened his eyes. “I was sleeping.”

I glared at him in disbelief.

“Why the heck were you sleeping outside the door?” I whisper-yelled at him, taking a quick look back at Artemis and Rishika to make sure we hadn’t woken them up.

Xavier took his time to answer. He was still waking up, and he sat up with considerable difficulty, rubbing his eyes. “What do you *think* I was doing? I said I would guard you.”

I looked at him, still in complete disbelief. What was I going to do with him? I hadn’t thought he had been serious when they’d talked about guarding me all night. I’d never agreed to that—in fact, I’d been very adamant about the fact that I could take care of myself. I’d only agreed that I wouldn’t leave the house unless I had one of them with me—which was already bad enough.

I got to my feet and stepped over him.

“Where are you going?” he called after me with a wide-mouthed yawn.

I turned and shot him a look over my shoulder. “None of your business. And *shhh*! Don’t wake them up!”

I made a show of stomping down the stairs, making sure my footfalls weren’t loud enough to wake Artemis and Rishika while also making sure Xavier got the message that I was not in the mood for his behavior.

I couldn’t help the anger boiling in my stomach. I absolutely refused to be made to feel like a prisoner again—I’d had enough of that when Big Mac had cast that spell on me to make sure I couldn’t leave the property. There was no way I was going to let anything like that fly again.

On my way to the kitchen, I caught a glimpse of Torin, standing outside. He was dressed only in a pair of plaid pajama pants as he wailed up at the sky. Was he howling? What next? Was he going to start running around the house naked like my father? This place was making everyone crazy.

I shook my head and went into the kitchen, where I whipped up a mug of steaming hot mocha. Looking to avoid Torin’s antics—which I’d heard loud and clear as I prepared my mocha—I decided to steer clear of the back yard and took it out to the front porch. I sank into one of the Adirondack chairs, which was somehow more comfortable than the cushioned chair in Artemis’s bedroom. This wasn’t surprising, as I figured a bed of nails would probably have been more comfortable than that thing.

I kept my mind pleasantly blank as I blew into the mug to cool down the steaming liquid inside. I’d only been out there for a few seconds before I heard the sound of footsteps behind me. It was Xavier, of course. Guarding me from burning my tongue on my mocha, probably.

“I’m in no mood, Xavier,” I said. “I’m mad at you right now.”

Xavier furrowed his brow and held his hands up in surrender. He finally looked fully awake, and his handsome face was a mask of concern as I turned away from him.

“I’m sorry about guarding you,” he said. “Well, no. I’m not sorry about that. But I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you that I was going to do it—even though you told me not to. I couldn’t help myself, really. But I’ll check in with you first next time to make sure you’re okay with it.”

“Whatever,” I said, making a point to keep my back to him as I took a cautious sip of my mocha. It tasted as delicious as I’d hoped, though it was missing Mrs. Smith’s special touch. I hazarded a side glance at Xavier. He looked like a sad puppy dog.

Damn those beautiful eyes!

I tore my gaze away from him, and we shared an uneasy silence, both of us looking out over the property. The snow was just beginning to melt, exposing the tufts of grass and mud beneath.

“The melting snow makes me sad,” Xavier said suddenly.

“Really? Why? I think it’s so pretty.”

“It reminds me of how it was, staying with you in Rutherford’s cabin—just the two of us, trapped together.” He grinned. “It was perfect. I’ll take you to be a little snow bunny somewhere else one day.”

His words prompted a clear memory of the time we’d shared there, entwined in one another’s arms, exploring each other’s bodies, bringing each other the type of pleasure that solidified our bond a million times over.

“Stop trying to butter me up,” I said, hoping he couldn’t hear the huskiness in my voice. “I’m not falling for it.”

We fell into another awkward silence that was interrupted by the sound of the side door slamming shut. We both looked to see Ava stretching near the driveway.

“What’s she doing?” I asked, annoyed already, even though she hadn’t even done or said anything to me yet. Her very presence was a thorn in my side.

Xavier shrugged as he turned to get a better look. “She’s probably going on her daily run.”

We watched as Ava jogged in place for a few seconds before taking off down the road, her long silky hair in a high ponytail that cascaded over her shoulders. Damn, she was annoying. We watched as Zainab snuck off after her, a safe distance behind.

Xavier laughed. “Zainab’s not going to fool Ava.”

Ugh. I hated even hearing Ava’s name, especially coming out of Xavier’s mouth. I also didn’t like how he’d sounded as he’d mentioned that she was going on her daily run—like he’d taken pains to learn her schedule. I didn’t understand why she was still here, and I said as much to Xavier.

“She won’t be here much longer,” he assured me. “I hate being anywhere near her. Even last night, when she tried to talk to me—”

“*What?*” I screeched, anger blooming inside me.

Xavier shrugged it off. “I wasn’t in the mood for a chat, but she was persistent.”

“What did she want to talk about?”

“She insisted that she can see revenants.”

I sucked my teeth. *Yeah, right!* “Big whoop, we can all see them.”

Ava would’ve said anything to get a few moments of Xavier’s time. She was like a hungry snake looking for someone to swallow whole, and her favorite food was Xavier.

“No, this was different,” Xavier said. “She mentioned something about an aura—I don’t know, probably some new age stuff.”

My posture went ramrod straight as I considered this. An aura? Intriguing. “What are you saying? What did she mean by that?”

“Hell if I know. It was Ava, I barely listened,” he said.

I jumped out of my seat. Were we all wrong about Ava? Could she actually help us fight Silas?

**Episode 1539**

GREYSON

I was on my way downstairs, hoping to find Cali and see how she was doing and how her night had gone. I’d hoped that she would spend the night with me, but I hadn’t wanted to make a big deal out of it. She’d been on edge last night, and I’d known it wouldn’t have been wise to push the issue. I was going to have to make a lot of compromises if I wanted this arrangement to have even a shred of a chance at working out.

I was surprised by how well I’d slept—once I’d actually managed to fall asleep. I’d been pretty confident that I was going to be haunted by more witch dreams. Luckily, though, if I’d had any, I couldn’t remember them, which was okay by me.

I followed the sound of Cali’s voice to the porch. She was sitting with Xavier. *Damn*. For a moment, I wondered if they’d both pulled the wool over my eyes and had actually spent the night together. The thought twisted my stomach into knots, but then I chided myself for thinking such a thing. She’d said she was spending time with Artemis, and I owed it to Cali to trust what she told me. At least she was safe, and that was all that really mattered in the grand scheme of things.

Cali, clearly sensing my presence, turned to face me as I walked out onto the porch. She opened her mouth to say something, but I interrupted her, hoping to thwart any attempts at making me feel better at seeing her and Xavier together.

“I’m looking for Mace,” I said quickly, ignoring Xavier’s smug look.

It was hard to walk away, but if this was going to work out, I couldn’t crowd her—even when she was canoodling with my brother. Even if it tore me apart.

I went back into the house and checked the living room, trying to push the image of Cali and Xavier out of my mind. I half-expected to find Mace passed out in the chair where we’d left him the night before, but he was nowhere to be found. I searched a few other places before I went back upstairs to the room he’d shared with Pip. Bingo. Mace was sprawled on the floor, an empty whiskey bottle tipped over beside him. He was a mess, but who could blame him?

I hated to leave him on the floor, even though that was probably where he wanted to be. I hooked my hands under his arms and helped him onto the bed. He was just a hair lighter than dead weight, and I had to lift his limp legs onto the bed and pry off his boots. I covered him in a blanket and turned to leave.

“We have to have a funeral,” Mace slurred. “For Pip and Lester.”

“Yeah man, you’re right, and we will, don’t worry about that. Get some rest, okay?”

Mace managed to nod before his head fell back onto the pillow. He was already snoring when I clicked the door shut.

I leaned back against the door, feeling overwhelmed all of a sudden. I’d never been one to get lost in self-pity, but I couldn’t ignore the weight of the world bearing down on me. It felt like there’d been a lot of funeral pyres around the pack lately, and all under my watch.

I sighed and hung my head. I thought about Cali, about the good parts of my “domestic” dreams. I just wished all the other stuff would go away. If it did, I’d be able to step down and gladly let Xavier take the Alpha role that he wanted so much. Even as I thought it, though, I knew I’d never do it—as tempting as the idea was. I felt an ironclad allegiance to the pack—and no amount of dreaming was going to change that.

My phone rang, pulling me out of my thoughts. It was Sabine. In all the craziness, I’d forgotten that she and Big Mac had taken off for Haystack Rock.

“Hi honey,” she sang. Good, at least she sounded okay. I couldn’t handle any other tragedies right now. “Just checking in with you! MacKenzie and I spent the night at Nneka’s—not the best arrangement, I must admit. Nneka and MacKenzie are like an old married couple, constantly sniping at each other. It’s a nightmare—I’m actually looking forward to leaving and getting to the portal. MacKenzie is convinced that we’ll find some answers.”

“Well I hope you two find something there to help us,” I said. I left “Mom” unsaid. I was slowly getting used to the idea that that’s what she was, but it still felt pretty weird.

“You and me both. But enough about that. How are you? You sound… blue.”

I sighed, trying to figure out how to best present the newest rash of tragedy that had crept up on us.

“Where do I start? Pip and Lester are dead,” I said, deciding to rip off the Band-Aid.

“*What*? They’re dead? Are you okay? Is everyone else okay?”

“More or less. I should probably back up a bit—before Pip died, she attacked Rishika. Luckily, Torin was able to heal her, but after that Pip ran off. We brought Pip back and put Lester in charge of keeping an eye on her, but then she killed him and took off again. Not long after that, we found Pip dead down by the pond,” I explained, deciding not to go into the gory details, and choosing to not mention our encounter with Silas. I didn’t want her to worry too much, especially when she was so far away.

“Honey, I’m so sorry—that’s a lot for you to deal with. Are you okay? Is there anything I can do?

“No, no, it’ll be okay, I just wanted you to know. I’ll handle it,” I said, even though I wasn’t sure how, exactly. There was so much to deal with that I barely knew where to start.

Mace’s words echoed in my head, and a chill raced down my spine at the thought of building more funeral pyres for people I cared about, people I’d promised to protect.

“Don’t avoid your feelings,” Sabine said. “No matter how far down you think you’ve pushed them, they can always bubble back up to the surface and cause big problems—believe me, I know. Allow yourself to feel, Greyson. It’s okay.”

Sure, that all sounded nice, but I wasn’t sure that “feeling” was a luxury I could afford. I heard Big Mac’s voice in the background.

“Hold on,” Sabine called to her. “MacKenzie wants to go—I think she’s finally had about all she can take of Nneka.”

“Hold on a sec,” I said, making a decision. It was better that they knew everything. Just in case. Silas was unpredictable, and more than that, he was dangerous. If he was on the loose, everyone needed to know so that they could be vigilant. “There’s something you both need to know. Silas isn’t dead.”

There was a long silence, and I could only imagine the dread my mother had to be feeling.

“Are you sure?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“No, I’m not completely sure. You know how Silas is—nothing is ever as it seems. I just know that it looks like he’s back, alive or dead. He’s back, and he hasn’t gotten any nicer,” I said. There was another long pause. “I saw him,” I added. “We all did. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, stop apologizing. This isn’t your fault, sweetie. I’m the one who’s sorry that you’ve been left to deal with this again.”

I couldn’t respond right away, overcome by the strength of the connection I felt with Sabine at that moment. It was stronger than just feeling connected with her as a pack member—there was something more, now. It was comforting, having her to confide in, and for the first time I felt hopeful about a stronger connection developing between us. Was this what it was like to have a mother in your life? Someone who comforted and supported you through your darkest moments?

I pulled myself out of my deepening rumination.

“Make sure to let Big Mac know,” I told Sabine. “I know how threatened she feels about Silas, and I know you feel the same way, too. As much as or more than anyone, you went through something with Silas that you never should have had to go through—so I know this isn’t something you take lightly, and I don’t either. He’s dangerous.”

I cursed Silas again. I was just getting the opportunity to explore my relationship with my mother—a relationship that Silas had nearly destroyed, just like everything else he touched. Silas coming back was like reopening a barely healed wound. I would keep Sabine safe, by any means necessary. Not only was she part of my pack, she was my mother.

I took a deep breath before I spoke, feeling a renewed desire to keep the people I loved close so that I could do my best to keep them out of harm’s way. “I understand if you don’t want to, but would you want to come back home to the pack?”

**Episode 1540**

VIOLET

Charlie put a hand on my shoulder in an attempt to quiet me down. I was well past that.

I slapped his hand away. “I will not keep quiet!”

I could see the pleading look in his eyes, and I couldn’t care less. He should have thought about how I would feel, seeing him plastered across social media with some *girl*.

Charlie yanked me toward a supply shed.

“Hey, what’s going on? What are you doing?” I asked.

Charlie didn’t answer. He pulled me into the shed and shut the door, kicking up a cloud of dust.

“Hey! This is place is ultra gross!”

“We have to be careful. Someone might hear us—or worse, they’ll see you and know that you’re a werewolf. This isn’t a game, Violet. You don’t know how serious these people are about eliminating people like us.”

“Being a werewolf is the least of your problems right now, Charlie!” I pulled out my phone and showed him the pictures I’d seen of him and Sophie on Instagram.

“What? Those pictures don’t mean anything, Violet,” he said. “And *cheating* on you? Of course not! I would never, ever do that! We’re mates!”

“Yeah, so you keep telling me. But you haven’t told me much about this girl… Sophie\_Slayz, or whatever!”

Charlie sighed. “Her name is Sophie Slayton.”

“Excuse me? Slayton, Slaze, Sleaze, I don’t care—just tell me what’s going on!”

“I saved her when she fell through the ice, and that was a whole thing. Then I decided that I wanted to get out of here to come see you, and Sophie agreed to help me last night during the dance—that’s where that picture is from. But then that plan fell apart and…”

I was only half-listening, too distracted by, well, Charlie. It had been a long time since we’d seen each other, long enough for me to miss all the things that made him so irresistible, from his deep brown eyes and prominent cheekbones to the way his hair fell across his forehead over his bushy eyebrows. He was as handsome as the day I’d first laid eyes on him, and it was making it really hard to stick to the subject at hand.

Why was life so damn unfair, anyway? I’d found my mate, then we’d been forced apart, and now this Slayton chick had to come in and make things even more complicated. And was her name really “Slayton”? It felt like too much of a coincidence for a hunter to have that last name. Either way, it was hard to face the cruel reality that Sophie was getting to spend more time with Charlie than I ever could.

“Are you even listening to me?” Charlie asked, staring at me.

“I’d listen if you were saying something *worth* listening to!” I snapped, my annoyance rising by the second.

Charlie slid his warm hands onto my shoulders, biting through the chill that seeped through my coat.

“Look at me,” he said. I did. We locked eyes, and again I lost myself in how deep and sincere his eyes looked as he stared at me. There was so much intensity there that I kept my mouth shut, waiting. “Look at me and tell me that you really think that I would cheat on you. After everything we’ve been through together.”

I went down the list in my head as he mind linked with me.

*Remember the Rogue that bit me? Or how much we went through when we first found out we were mates?*

*Not to mention the Silas battle*, I said.

*Yes! That was something I didn’t even think we’d come out of alive, and we did. Then, me finding out I was a hunter. You were right there beside me, supporting me every step of the way.*

*Oh, and Bert’s creepy house*, I added.

*Me almost getting killed by my parents*, Charlie said. *And all the way up to this forced separation. After all that, all those things that have bound us together forever, do you really think I’d toss our relationship down the drain for someone named Sophie Slayton?*

I was getting more emotional with every word he spoke. He was right. We had been through a lot, and never, through all of that, had I ever lost faith in him—so why now?

I looked into his eyes and squeaked out an answer. “Of course not.”

“Yeah?” The pleading look in his eyes had gone away, and now he looked hopeful and relieved.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “I’m sorry for doubting you.” Tears sprang into my eyes. “It’s just… It’s been really freaking *hard* being away from you. And when I saw those pictures on Instagram, I just lost it. I was jealous. I wished it was me in those pictures with you. But I knew deep down that you would never hurt me, ever. We’re mates, and that’s not what mates do.”

Charlie smiled at me, another reminder of why I couldn’t get enough of him. It was like his entire face lit up when he flashed those perfect teeth of his.

“Exactly,” he said. “I love you, Violet. I never stopped. I don’t plan to.”

I let out a sob, but it was a happy one. “I love you too.”

We hugged in the dusty darkness, clinging to each other like we never wanted to let go. It was hands down the best hug of my life. It reminded me of just how much I’d missed him. It was really hard not having him with me in Oregon. But being here now? All doubt, all uncertainty, all suspicion melted away.

I took a deep breath of his scent. It was familiar and comforting, and it brought up memories of all the amazing times we’d shared, in spite of all the hard stuff we’d dealt with in our short time together. I ran my hands over his chest, reveling in how solid and warm he felt.

We pressed our foreheads together, our eyes closed. I was so happy that I couldn’t stop crying. Charlie laughed and reached up to wipe away my tears.

“Everything’s going to be okay, Violet. I promise,” he said. “We’re together. Finally. That was all I wanted.” He chuckled. “I can’t believe that you just up and left the pack house and jumped on a flight here overnight!”

“Yeah, I’m pretty crazy, I guess,” I said with a laugh. “Are you happy?”

“Happy? I’m beyond happy. Like I said, I was on my way to you just last night.”

“Good thing you didn’t make it out—we would’ve flown right past each other.”

We tightened our embrace. I pressed my ear against his chest, basking in his heat, and closed my eyes and sighed as I listened to the rhythm of his heartbeat. We stayed that way for a while, rocking back and forth in each other’s arms.

It wasn’t clear who started the kiss, but once it began, it showed no signs of stopping. I tunneled my hands under his coat and rose onto my tiptoes to get better access to the softness of his lips. I’d missed this, so damn much. I couldn’t stop the tears from flowing down my cheeks, and Charlie held me so tight that I felt like I never wanted him to let me go.

I couldn’t imagine being apart from him again. It was then that I knew that there was nothing I wouldn’t do for us to be together. I didn’t care what his mother said, or what obstacles stood between us. It was clear that we belonged together, and I just didn’t feel right without him by my side. We’d been apart for way too long, and I hadn’t even realized until now just how empty my heart had felt without him.

Charlie leaned deeper into the kiss, running his tongue along mine in slow strokes that sent a wave of electricity through my body. I ran a hand through his hair and peppered kisses along his cheeks and up to his eyes before I stretched up to place a few on his forehead. He laughed at me when I stumbled a bit as I dropped down from my tiptoes.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” he said, caressing my cheek. “I can’t believe you’re here in front of me. That we’re together. It’s the one thing I’ve been wanting, more than anything.”

He bent down to press his lips to mine, meeting me at my level so that my calves could take a break.

We got lost in each other. I’d heard people say that before, but I hadn’t understood what it meant until now. We kissed until my lips were raw, and even then I didn’t want to stop. It felt like if we broke apart for even a second, I would open my eyes and realize that this whole thing had been an amazing dream.

I had no plans to stop, to break the connection that vibrated through me and turned my heart into a hammer in my chest. As Charlie ran his hands up and down my back, a thought crossed my mind. Were my mate and I finally going to do it?

**Episode 1541**

“Stop teasing me, Xavier!” He’d been razzing me for the last few minutes about being “a little detective.” “You’d better stop joking around—I’m still upset with you for sleeping at my door because you didn’t trust that I wouldn’t go anywhere last night!”

Xavier groaned. “Are we still on that?” He gave me a wicked grin that I could tell he was using to distract me. It wasn’t going to work.

I nodded, bringing my mocha up to my lips for one last sip before dropping my mug into the sink. We were back in the kitchen, and I was in the mood for eggs. I fetched a pan from the hanging rack over the kitchen island, and a carton of eggs from the fridge.

“Until you apologize, I’m going to be mad at you,” I said. “Why can’t you stop being annoying for five seconds?”

“Me? Annoying?” Xavier guffawed, slapping his knee for emphasis. I stuck my tongue out at him, figuring that it was the most fitting response to his indignation. His laughter dried up, and he came up beside me, peering at what I was doing. “You want to throw a couple of eggs in there for me?” he asked, fluttering his eyelashes.

I laughed and swatted him on the butt with the spatula. “You’re so bad! Always up to something.” *Damn it.* It was hard to stay mad at him when he was like this. I paused for a moment to look up at him. “So, do you think what Ava told you last night might be worth looking into?”

Xavier groaned loudly. “Why are you like this?”

I frowned up at him. “It sounded like she was saying something important for once. If Ava has a way to see revenants because she was dead once, then we need to use that ability. She should be doing *something* to earn her keep. Don’t you agree?”

“What are you saying?” Xavier wasn’t making eye contact, which was never good.

I returned my attention to the eggs sizzling in the pan. I busied myself with the spatula before I spoke. “That… maybe we ask for her help.”

Xavier sucked his teeth and whirled away from me as if I’d just told him the sky was green. “Absolutely not!”

He didn’t sound like he was going to be convinced, and I had to admit I was surprised by how quick and staunch his “no” was. He could’ve at least considered it for a second, especially when we were trying to do our best to build a worthy response to the revenant threat.

“Why not?” I pressed.

“*Why not?* Do you have amnesia all of a sudden? Do you remember all the shit Ava’s done? Impersonating you, for one, killing my mother, in case you forgot—and she’s definitely in deep with a vampire. So remind me—why would we trust her to help us?”

“Believe me, I remember,” I said. “But we need all the help we can get. Listen, I know that I might be being a little naïve or altruistic about this, but… it might be for the good of the pack if we have an edge like a revenant sensor. Or something.”

Xavier glared at me. “Listen to me, Caliana. No. No, as in, there’s no way in hell I’m asking Ava to help us. I have other plans in mind for her, anyway. Do not ask her—this is a non-negotiable.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” I said.

Greyson probably would’ve said yes. He was a bit more reasonable about Ava, after all—though I understood Xavier’s hesitation completely. I thought about seeing Greyson, earlier. We’d made eye contact, but he’d seemed a little sad, and more than a little distant. I wondered if it was because I’d been on the porch with Xavier.

I couldn’t shake the thought that Greyson wouldn’t have laid in front of my door last night—because he trusted me, unlike Xavier. I wished that Xavier would be a little more trusting. I knew he was being protective, and I could see that he was trying to mind my boundaries—and I appreciated that—but clearly he just couldn’t let go of some of his old ways.

That was the man I’d fallen in love with, though, and I could feel myself falling deeper every time he trained those beautiful, lake-blue eyes on me.

“The eggs are smoking,” Xavier said, breaking through my thoughts.

I yelped and slid the spatula under the eggs and flipped them over, noticing that the edges had browned. “I hope you like your eggs extra crispy.”

The sliding door opened, and Torin came in. He took one look at the eggs and wrinkled his nose.

“That’s not how your dad showed me to make eggs. Let me work my magic,” he said, hip checking me out of the way. I conceded my spatula easily. His cooking abilities were head and shoulders above mine already.

I was primed to keep pressing the Ava issue with Xavier when Greyson came in. He looked a little better than he had this morning.

“Hey!” I said, a little too cheerfully.

“Good morning.” He flashed a look at Xavier that could’ve melted steel. “I just got off the phone with Sabine.”

“Oh,” I said, happy that she’d checked in. “Did they make it to Haystack Rock okay? Were they able to find anything out about the portal?”

I braced myself to hear what he had to say. At this point, I never took for granted that things were going smoothly—not after everything that had happened to us.

Greyson shook his head, his eyes flickering for the quickest second between me, Xavier, and the eggs frying on the stove. “No, they haven’t made it there yet. They stayed at Nneka’s shack last night, and apparently Nneka and Big Mac aren’t really getting along too well.”

*No surprises there*,I thought. Apart from Mrs. Smith, I couldn’t think of anyone who Big Mac *did* get along with.

“They’re heading to Haystack Rock today, and they’ll be back late tonight—which is great. I want to have everyone under the same roof, now that we know for sure that Silas is on the loose—more or less,” Greyson said.

I was a little on edge. We didn’t know why Haystack Rock was the only portal that had opened, and there was a good chance that they could be walking into something horrible, something neither of them could expect.

“Maybe I should try to summon Vander to give them some back up?” I suggested.

“No,” Greyson said with a thoughtful look on his face. “Let Sabine and Big Mac be. They can take care of themselves, and I don’t think Big Mac would let anything happen to my mother. I’m sure they’ll call if they need anything.”

I didn’t really want to accept his answer—we all knew how quickly things could go bad, and often, there wasn’t enough time to make a phone call—but before I could insist, Greyson cut me off.

“I actually need to speak with Xavier about the funeral pyres for the losses from the Blue Blood pack,” he said. His voice sounded tired and sad, and he had a strange look in his eyes.

“Can I help?” I asked.

“No love, it’s okay.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Xavier flinch at Greyson’s words. He rolled his eyes harder than I’d ever seen him do, but in the end, he agreed.

“Yeah, let’s go chat,” Xavier said, then glanced at me. “You don’t have to wait for me—go ahead and eat your breakfast.”

As much as I didn’t want to admit it, I was a little deflated by being ditched by both of them, and thinking about Pip and Lester didn’t help. We’d built a lot of funeral pyres, lately. I thought about the last pyre, York’s, and how I’d spotted him walking out of the ashes that night. At least I thought I’d seen that. Hopefully this time, the funeral pyres wouldn’t leave any nasty surprises behind.

“I’ll be right back,” I said to Torin. He nodded, his attention on saving the eggs I’d butchered and managing the two additional eggs he’d cracked into the pan. As I made my way to my room to grab a sweater, Ava sidled out of her bedroom. We locked eyes for a moment, enduring an awkward stare and a strained silence.

No matter how much he wanted me to forget about it, I couldn’t shake what Xavier had told me about Ava’s supposed ability to see revenant auras. I knew that having that sort of advantage would be good for us, especially when we were still trying to figure out how to take the things out.

“You’re staring,” Ava said. “Why are you staring?”

I watched her closely for a few seconds, deciding whether I was actually going to go through with it.

Then I moved closer to her and kept my voice low. “I think we need to team up.”

**Episode 1542**

CHARLIE

Violet’s lips were even softer than I remembered. Apparently, absence made the lips grow softer. I nearly laughed at my own joke, but I stopped myself so that Violet wouldn’t think I’d totally lost it. Or maybe we’d both lost it. We’d been kissing for what felt like hours, and neither of us was backing off. I still couldn’t believe that she was here, kissing me like this. I couldn’t get enough of her.

I wrapped my arms around her waist, gripping her tighter, trying to bring her even closer, if that were possible. I thought about how just last night I’d been ready to move heaven and earth to get to her. I couldn’t believe she was here. Was she really here? As we kissed, all my anxieties about being away from her and keeping my werewolf secret here at camp fell away. I felt safe with her, which was something I hadn’t felt from the second I’d set foot in hunter camp.

I hadn’t even realized how on edge I’d been until this moment. I deepened the kiss.

“I love you,” I repeated softly in her ear. She smelled so good, like the flowery shampoo she always used mixed with the light scent of the musky perfume she liked to dab behind her ears.

“I love you,” Violet repeated between kisses. She put her hands on either side of my face, holding me rooted to her lips.

I pulled away for a split second. “Is it okay if I touch you?” I whispered.

“Touch me.”

I unzipped her jacket, hoping to feel the warmth of her skin against mine. She nibbled at my lip. I couldn’t believe we were doing this.

“Can I touch *you*?” she asked playfully.

I nodded, and her hand brushed slowly along the hem of my shirt and slid around into my back pockets. I loved feeling her hands all over me, and I could admit that my wildest dreams were coming true. I was with the girl I loved, the girl I couldn’t get enough of. I couldn’t believe how comfortable I felt with her.

I pulled back to let her kiss take over. She moved her hands around in my pockets, warming me up in the best way. I returned the favor, arching my hands down her back and reveling in the warmth of her bare skin. I shoved my other hand into her back jeans pocket.

She laughed. “Now we’re stuck together.”

I pressed myself into her, hoping that I wasn’t taking things too far. We were heading in a direction we never had before. I couldn’t help but wonder if we were going to have sex in a shed for our first time together. I stepped back a bit, nearly tripping and falling on my ass after my foot got tangled in a coil of something on the floor, causing us to break contact for a second. I cursed and kicked the cord out of the way so that Violet wouldn’t hurt herself.

No, this place wasn’t ideal. There were spiderwebs everywhere, it smelled like gasoline, and the dim lighting coming from the buzzing bare bulb above us made the room look like a dank cave. This wasn’t really how I’d envisioned things. It wasn’t like I had the perfect fantasy built up in my mind, but I knew that this would be Violet’s first time. It wasn’t like it had to be in some super classy place, like a five-star hotel or something—unless that was what Violet wanted, but I didn’t think she did.

Still, she deserved to have it happen… not in a shed.

We melted back together, the kissing still as intense and hot as it had been before the cord on the floor had nearly taken me out. I could feel the intensity building again, and even though I hated to stop kissing and touching her for even a second, I finally broke contact.

“We should stop—I don’t have a condom,” I said.

“Really?” Violet said breathlessly. “God, this has to be the worst scenario ever.”

“Believe me, I don’t want to stop. I’m so sorry.”

Violet shook her head. “No! Don’t apologize! It’s fine.”

“I just don’t want this to be like, ‘we’re never going to see each other again’ sex.”

Violet stepped away from me. “What? What does that mean? Why wouldn’t we see each other again?”

“I—um—” I stumbled over my words, trying to find the best way to put it. Plus, all the blood hadn’t made its way back to my brain just yet, and I was still quite flustered. “We’re still at this damn hunter camp. If something happened to you because I did something stupid or reckless, I’d never forgive myself.”

Despite my bad delivery, it was the truth. This place wasn’t safe when I was here on my own. Between Chad riding my ass on the daily and me trying to make sure that no one found out what I really was, I had my hands full trying to keep things under control.

Romilly was watching me pretty closely as well, and there was no guarantee that she didn’t know exactly where I was right now. There was no doubt that my mother had enlisted her to watch my every move, and from what the other campers had said about Romilly, she was damn good at handling whatever was thrown her way. Tracking me would be a piece of cake.

Also, there was the matter of my mother being here. I didn’t want to ruin the moment and tell Violet that she’d shown up out of nowhere. All in all, it was good that we’d stopped. The last thing I wanted was to a) get caught having sex; or b) get caught having sex with my werewolf mate at hunter camp.

Violet cupped my face in her hands. “Nothing’s going to happen to me, okay?”

I wished that were true. She was so sweet, and so innocent. I couldn’t imagine anyone laying a finger on her. I shuddered as I thought about what I would do to anyone who tried to hurt her.

“Violet. I’m sorry, but that’s wishful thinking. Just last night, there was a scare, and you should’ve seen how quickly everyone got into hunter mode. They were pulling silver throwing stars out of their purses and pulling out their wooden stakes—all because they thought that there might be a vampire nearby. It was complete chaos. These people really mean business. I don’t want you to get hurt. I’d never forgive myself.”

“I get it, Charlie, but not to toot my own horn—I’m a little bit of a badass.”

I grinned at her. “That’s for sure.”

“I’ve seen so many battles, and I’ve come out okay. If I can deal with vampires and other werewolves, I’d have no problem taking out a few hunters. So, don’t worry—if push comes to shove, I’ll be able to handle it.”

I blushed a little as I realized that her speech had turned me on again. I liked how strong and powerful she sounded, and how her sweet demeanor belied the hardcore person she was.

“I get it, you can kick everyone’s ass. But we still need to be really careful,” I said. “So, where are you going to stay?”

*And more importantly, how the hell am I going to get you out of this hornet’s nest safely?*

“I’m staying at a bed and breakfast nearby. It’s a really cute place—lots of special touches with the décor, and a super soft bed,” she said, arching an eyebrow. “Maybe one of these nights, you could come and stay with me there?”

Every thought that had crossed my mind while we were kissing returned with a vengeance. I’d come prepared next time, and I’d be sure to make her first time special—if that was what she wanted to do.

I growled and pulled her close, covering her face with kisses so that she squealed and laughed. “I’d love to come have a slumber party with you,” I said.

We both quieted down when we heard voices outside. I held a finger to my lips and mouthed, “Wait.” I crept over to the door and cracked it open, shoving my head out just enough to take a good look around. I spotted a patrol of hunters walking by, stakes in hand. A few of them had thick silver chains hooked to their belts. They looked like a bunch of sadistic bounty hunters. *Damn.* Sergeant Pepperdine must have really amped up the security after last night’s scare.

I turned and held my finger up to Violet, telling her to wait just a second longer. Once the patrol had passed and was out of earshot, we snuck out of the shed.

My heart was beating like crazy as I led her back to the edge of camp, right near where I’d bumped into her. We rounded a corner and, as luck would have it, came face to face with Chad. I cursed internally and considered simply making a break for it, but I knew that nothing would look guiltier. In the end, I stood there frozen in annoyed shock, appalled at how I’d just walked into the literal worst-case scenario.

With a satisfied look on his face, Chad eyed Violet’s hand in mine, smiled, and said, “What do we have here?”

**Episode 1543**

LOLA

I sat there sulking next to Jay while we got an earful from Irma, who couldn’t stop telling me how disappointed she was. Her hands were clasped together on her desk, her posture was ramrod straight, and her eyes were stern as she pinned me to the spot with her unwavering stare. I was really in for it. I braced myself.

“I’ve already warned you about causing trouble at my school, Lola,” Irma said. She leaned back and crossed her arms. From the way things sounded, I might never come back from my latest faux pas.

I sighed. “I understand, Irma. You can stop right there. I get it.” I took my ID card out of my pocket and slid it across the wide expanse of Irma’s cherrywood desk.

Irma arched an over-plucked eyebrow. “What’s this?”

“I assume you’re kicking me out,” I said.

Irma slid the ID card back to me. “Certainly not. I’ve had worse troublemakers than you, believe me. If I kicked you out, it would reflect badly on Tottenville—and I won’t allow that to happen. Not while I’m headmistress.”

Jay slipped his hand under the desk and squeezed mine, setting off a major surge of vampire heat. I remembered the feel of his lips on mine.

“Ma’am,” Jay began, “I just want to let you know that you shouldn’t really blame Lola for this. It was all my fault, and—”

“You keep out of this, Mr. Young!” Irma said sharply, silencing him. “You’ve done enough already.”

I heard a growl rising in Jay’s throat, but probably thinking better of it, he stopped it almost as soon as he’d started. I felt really bad. This was all my fault. If I hadn’t agreed to the hypnotherapy, I never would’ve forgotten Jay, and he never would’ve gotten worried enough to come here.

But kissing him had been worth it.

I was still tingling all over from the delicious memory of it, and even Irma’s scolding couldn’t stop the afterglow—nor did it ease the burn of my vampire heat. It seemed that the hypnotherapy hadn’t totally worked… Unless Jay was the problem? The heat was flaring up something ridiculous… It was so intense that I squirmed in my chair, struggling to pay attention as Irma droned on about the proud history of the school, the dangers of uncontrolled vampire heat, and everything else under the sun.

“Probation,” Irma said, pulling me back into reality. “If you remember, Lola, the last time I had to talk to you about your behavior at Tottenville, I threatened to put you on disciplinary probation.”

“Disciplinary probation? Is that different from regular probation?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s for students like you who would benefit from more… disciplined guidance.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you are being assigned a monitor.”

“A *monitor*?” I gasped. “Is it, like, something I’ll have to wear around my ankle?”

“No, not exactly. It means that for the duration of your probation, you will be escorted to, and from, class.”

“By whom?” Jay cut in.

Irma shot him an icy stare. “Please don’t interrupt me, Mr. Young,” she snapped, before turning her attention back to me. “Your monitor will be selected from an elite group of students. In addition, you’ll be expected to maintain no less than a B average.”

I gasped again. “That sucks!” I couldn’t believe this! It was like I was back in elementary school or something. “I’m twenty-two,” I said. “I don’t need grades, and I sure as hell don’t need a watchdog.”

Irma leaned in close, and I leaned back, realizing how scary she could be when she put her mind to it. “You have forced me to do this. You’re here because you need help, and today’s little incident has only underscored how much help you need. Tottenville is here to ensure that you get that help. But if you continue to disrespect our rules, vampire heat or not, then I will have to ask you to leave.”

Feeling more than a little chagrined, I shot a glance at Jay. “What about Jay?” I squeaked, not wanting to rock the boat further.

“Mr. Young needs to leave, and it’s best if he doesn’t return. Ever.”

My heart sank as I looked at Jay. It surprised me how strongly this was affecting me. Maybe I didn’t fully grasp the mate bond these days, but my heart was starting to get it. There was something between me and Jay, something real.

Were my memories of being with Jay coming back? Would I suddenly remember being his mate? If so, how was I ever going to survive this place without him? More than anything, I regretted doing the hypnotherapy in the first place.

Irma stood up. “Do you have any questions?”

I shook my head. What more was there to say?

“Good,” Irma said tersely. “I hope we’ll be on the same page from here on out.”

Jay and I stood to leave, exchanging sheepish glances as we did so. We had just walked out into the hallway when Irma stopped us with an emphatic clearing of her throat.

“Oh, and as a reminder, Mr. Young—you are to leave the premises at once.”

With that, Irma slammed the door behind us, reminding me of the phrase “don’t let the door hit you in the ass on the way out.” Sheesh. She was not happy with me in the least.

I felt like crying. Everything was so messed up now. I felt like things had gone wrong from the moment I’d set foot inside Tottenville. Yet, as much as I wanted to leave, I knew that Irma had a point—there was still so much for me to learn. Jay pulled me into a hug, and once again I felt like I belonged in his arms.

“Are you really going?” I asked him, my voice muffled in his chest. He smelled so good, like soap and man all mixed up together.

Jay lifted my chin so that we could look into each other’s eyes. “You know that the last thing I want to do is leave you, but if I stay, it’ll only cause more trouble for you, and I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I did that.”

I was touched. How could a man be this hot *and* this sweet? I examined his simple black eye patch, reminded of the story he’d told about how he’d lost his eye. He’d given it up to a witch for *me*. If that wasn’t full and total devotion, I didn’t know what was. My connection with Jay was so strong right now that I didn’t want him to leave. I was afraid that if he left right now, we might never get this amazing connection back.

“I’ll go with you,” I said, deciding that nothing was worth losing him. Maybe I could go to the library and check out books that would teach me what I needed to know about my newfound vampirism. There had to be some way for me to deeply understand who I’d become and control my urges without having to be isolated here in this place, away from Jay.

More and more, I was coming to realize the strength of the mate bond—it was so strong that it seemed to disregard the fact that I had no idea who Jay truly was.

Jay smiled down at me, and even though I didn’t know him that well, I still knew what he was about to say. “I’d like for you to come with me, Lola. But you’re not ready. You came to Tottenville so that you could figure out how to control your bloodlust—and not suck the entire pack dry. That’s really important,” he said with a crooked smile. “If you come back before you’re ready, things might only get worse, and I’m worried about how the pack would react—and then I’d have to protect you. I wouldn’t let anyone hurt my mate.”

My heart swelled when he called me his mate, even if I was still learning what being a mate really meant. What I did know, without any confusion or doubt, was that I was happy that Jay was the one I was mated with. Jay leaned down, his lips inches from mine—but then Emmett appeared, interrupting him.

“What’s going on?” Emmett asked. He looked like he was ready to pounce on Jay, and like he didn’t care if I was in the way. I tensed and stepped between the both of them, not willing to see either of them hurt.

Jay turned to face Emmett head-on. “I have no choice but to trust that my mate will be safe here,” he said. He stepped closer to Emmett, his voice dropping a few octaves. “Stay away from her.”

“Oh, you’re leaving?” Emmett asked innocently.

Jay gave me a meaningful look, and mind linked, *I love you—remember that.*

He gave me one final kiss on the cheek before he turned and headed toward the exit.

“Wait!” Emmett called out. Jay and I both looked at him, confused. “I might have a solution for you both.”

**Episode 1544**

Ava chuckled like I’d just told her the funniest thing in the world. I wondered if she was capable of unironic laughter, too.

“You can’t be serious. You want to be teammates?” Ava did one of her patented hair flips and rolled her eyes, and I had to bite my tongue to keep from ruining the whole thing before it started. It was hard to be the bigger person sometimes. It was horribly overrated, as well.

I absolutely hated being this close to Ava, who once again looked even prettier up close than she had any right to be, especially considering how ugly she was on the inside. Why couldn’t she just look like the Wicked Witch from all the fairytales? She definitely would’ve been easier to handle if she had a wart-filled witch nose, massive moles all over her face, coarse hair jutting out of her ears—*something*. Instead, she was the hot princess incarnate; absolute perfection from head to toe, to my utter chagrin.

I forced myself to be calm. This was for the greater good, after all. I kept telling myself that we needed her, and that if I managed to have a normal conversation with her for a change, some good might come of this whole thing.

“I’ve never been more serious in my life,” I said stiffly.

She raised an eyebrow. “Why do you want to team up with me?”

Somehow, she seemed to be getting prettier by the second. Her teeth shone like literal pearls, her tanned skin looked great against the soft pink of her tank top and leggings, and she was one of those people who knew exactly how to dress herself. I really couldn’t stand her.

“I spoke with Xavier, and he mentioned that you told him you have the ability to see revenant auras.” I waited a beat to see if she would make this easy on me and pick up the thread of the conversation. Nope, a blank stare. Great. I charged ahead. “Xavier didn’t seem to see the value in that, but I do. So, is it true? Can you see the auras of revenants?”

Ava arched a meticulously plucked eyebrow again. “Auras? Are you high? Or did you drink another witch potion by accident?” She laughed again, though this time it was less sarcastic and a lot more mocking.

I balled my hands into fists and used every bit of self-control that I had to not haul off and sock her in her pretty face. I gritted my teeth. “No, I’m not high, I’m perfectly fine. Just answer the question.”

“I thought I did.” Hair flip. How was her hair that long and so glossy?

I wasn’t convinced that she was telling the truth—but then again, did she ever?

“Listen, I’ll get to the point since you don’t seem to understand,” I said. “The pack is in danger. This is our chance to put our personal differences aside for the good of the pack. You really want to belong? You want to feel part of this pack? Then this is the way. Help us.” I relaxed my fists and unclenched my jaw, trying to take my own advice. “Together, we can protect everyone.”

“Sorry to disappoint.” *Another lie.* “I don’t know what Xavier *thought* he heard, but I don’t do auras.” This time when she flipped her hair, I literally had to restrain myself from catching her by it and yanking her to the floor.

She moved past me in a cloud of expensive-smelling perfume, heading downstairs to do who knows what. It burned me up, watching her move around like she owned the place. I watched her go, unable to believe that she couldn’t just do the decent thing, and leave her attitude at the door and help. If she could identify revenants, the pack deserved her help in fighting them. She’d clearly gone to Xavier about it for a reason. We needed every advantage—why couldn’t she see that? She owed it to us after all we’d done for her.

It didn’t escape me that she was probably being like this because she didn’t like me. Well, the feeling was more than mutual. *Ugh*. I just needed to find a way to wear her down into admitting the truth and agreeing to help. I knew it was going to be a tall order, but it was for the greater good of the pack. Maybe of everyone.

I was so hot with anger about Ava’s flippancy over something so important that I no longer needed the sweater that I’d come upstairs to get. My hatred for Ava would keep me warm enough, for sure. I headed back into the kitchen, where my dad was lecturing Torin about the origin of umami paste.

“Did you know that it comes from a tomato?”

“Oh my gosh, no I didn’t!” Torin replied, taking notes.

My dad’s eyes lit up when he saw me. I was just happy to see that he’d decided to wear clothes today. “Cali! How’s my daughter doing? Have you had breakfast yet?”

I spotted my burnt eggs in the sink. “No, I haven’t had breakfast yet, Dad.”

I took a seat at the kitchen table and relaxed. I was still trying to calm down, wondering, in the back of my mind, where Ava had run off to. She’d probably gone for another jog. She seemed like the type to exercise more than once a day.

In a flash, my dad slid a plate of eggs in front of me, warning me not to eat too much. “Save some room for later,” he said cheerily.

“Save room for later? What are you two up to, Torin?” I asked, spearing a section of egg and shoving it into my mouth. It tasted amazing—better than mine would have by a long shot.

“Well,” Torin began, nearly shaking with excitement, “we’ve decided to throw together a little Thanksgiving tasting table. I mean, it’s not actually the table that we’ll be tasting, but the things that we put *on* the table.”

“I get it,” I said. “I’d love to taste whatever you’re planning.”

I was starting to really appreciate the small pleasures in life, especially in the face of all the stressful events going on.

“Oh yeah, for sure! You don’t want to miss this. It’s going to be amazing, I promise! There’ll be nice, bite-sized servings of everyone’s Thanksgiving favorites, and the portions will be so small, no one will feel guilty about trying a little bit of everything!” Torin clapped his hands in naked glee. “Okay, I have to go tell Astrid, she’s going to lose it!” He pushed away from the table and bounded off.

I took another bite of my eggs. It was uncanny how much better Dad’s eggs tasted than mine. Granted, I didn’t add all the extra touches he did, but somehow, I knew that even if I tried to dress them up a bit more, they still wouldn’t melt in my mouth like these did.

“Dad,” I said, my mouth full, “I’ll try the Thanksgiving tasting table—on one condition.”

“Oh?”

“You have to promise that you’ll stop running around naked.”

I shuddered at the memory. Nightmares did come true. The full moon was coming up soon, and the last thing I wanted to see was him running around in the buff again.

“Okay, honey. I’m new to all this, of course, but I promise to do my best.”

Mom came in soon after, having overheard our conversation.

“I agree with Cali,” she said. “As much as I believe in the natural beauty of a body like my Tom has, it’s probably best that he keeps it to himself—as long as he gives special viewings for yours truly.”

I winced. They were really starting to kill my appetite, and it would be a shame to let eggs this good go to waste.

Torin came racing back into the kitchen. “Astrid’s excited—she asked if we’d be serving those amazing mashed potatoes?”

I tuned out as he and Dad started discussing tonight’s menu.

I’d just cleaned my plate when Mom pulled me aside to talk about Artemis. “I know you’ve been really worried about your sister, honey, but on the bright side, I’m sure we can both agree that Artemis has seemed a lot better lately.”

I could tell that she wanted to believe that above everything else, everything would turn out okay. She was still trying to build her relationship with Artemis, and all of this strange dark magic stuff was definitely standing in the way of that.

“Yeah, but we also have to remember that Artemis is susceptible to dark magic. We both have to keep an eye on her and do what we can to protect her,” I said, thinking about Silas’s threat. He wanted to infect her, but there was no way in hell I was going to let that happen.

We both turned as Rishika came in, yawning.

“Something smells good!” Rishika sang, rubbing her eyes. She looked around. “Where’s Artemis?” She ducked into the refrigerator and poured herself a glass of orange juice.

“What are you talking about? I left you two sleeping in bed!” I said, panic rising sharp and hot in my stomach.

“Yeah, but when I woke up, she was gone. I overslept,” Rishika said sheepishly.

Mom jumped up, alarm marring her features. “So wait, then where the hell *is* she?”

**Episode 1545**

XAVIER

I braced myself for impact as I swung my axe down, splitting the log in half. I used my shirt to wipe the sweat from my brow before throwing the perfectly split pieces of wood into the pile we were building for our latest funeral pyre.

Despite the unfortunate circumstances that had me out here chopping wood in the cold, I had to admit that it felt good to break things, to use my strength. I’d done a lot more of that when I’d been a mercenary. I made a mental note to not let myself go soft, and vowed to add more reps to my workout to make up for what had become a pretty sedentary lifestyle—for me, anyway. I didn’t even shift into my wolf to go running as much anymore. There wasn’t much time for fun, these days.

I was just about to split another log when I heard Cali and Rishika arguing. I dropped the axe and strained my ears to see if I could make out what they were saying. If I could hear them all the way out here, it wasn’t good.

*Good god, what now?*

I jogged back toward the pack house, throwing my shirt over my bare shoulder, preparing for the worst. I couldn’t help imagining what waited for me inside. Were Rishika and Cali literally fighting? Had someone been hurt? Had Rishika succumbed to dark magic and attacked someone? Had Cali? My heart jumped at the thought. Knowing our luck, it could be any one of those things.

I barreled into the kitchen to find Orla, Cali, and Rishika looking upset. Tom and Torin stood off to the side, looking like they were doing their best to stay out of it. I stood there for a beat, trying to figure out what was going on, not wanting to interrupt and put myself in the women’s crosshairs. They were talking over each other, and I couldn’t follow what they were saying. It was total chaos.

“We were both supposed to watch her!” Cali yelled.

“She’s *your* sister!” Rishika shot back.

“Well you’re dating her!” Cali replied.

“Both of you, calm down; let’s be clearheaded about this,” Orla pleaded.

It went on like that for several more moments before I finally snapped.

“Everybody, stop talking!” I shouted. The room fell silent. That was easier than I’d expected. I turned to Cali. “What the hell is wrong?”

Rishika jumped in, trying to tell her side of the story while Orla tried to convince them both to be kind to each other.

“I asked Cali first,” I said. Silence fell again, thankfully.

“Rishika lost Artemis,” Cali said. I could tell that rubbed Rishika the wrong way.

She shot a sharp look at Cali and shook her head. “I didn’t *lose* Artemis, I was *asleep*. We were both *sleeping*. Don’t I have a right to sleep? Or is that not allowed because princess Cali doesn’t allow it?”

Cali gasped and put her hand to her chest, like Rishika had just hurled a vulgar insult.

My head was starting to hurt. I longed to be back outside, driving my axe through the wood, feeling the breeze on my skin—even if the only reason I’d been chopping wood in the first place was because of the chaos we’d found ourselves in the middle of. I pushed that thought out of my head.

“May I remind you all that we’re all friends here?” I said. “We don’t have to argue. What exactly happened after that?”

“Artemis went missing,” she answered.

I could tell by the nearly imperceptible quiver in her bottom lip that she was on the verge of tears, and it was clear that she was panicking. It hurt me to see her this upset. I wished that things could just calm down for a fucking second so everyone could relax, so that Cali could stop worrying so much. I hated seeing her like this.

I felt a little guilty, too. Hadn’t I promised Cali that I would protect Artemis? I had to make good on that promise. I couldn’t let Cali down. I couldn’t let the pack down.

“When was the last time you saw her?” I asked Cali.

“Right before I tripped over you sleeping outside her door. Maybe you should’ve stayed there instead of following me!” Cali said.

This hit me hard. Maybe I should have. Of course, had I done that, Cali would’ve still been just as angry. When she got like this, there was really no consoling her. Another thought crossed my mind, and the small shred of calm that I’d gained while chopping wood gave way to a sharp strike of apprehension. Could Artemis’s disappearance have something to do with Silas? I hoped to hell not.

I turned to Rishika. “Head out front. See if you can pick up Artemis’s scent. I’ll check out back. If either of us picks up anything, we shout.”

I glanced around the kitchen. Everyone looked worn out, freaked out, overwhelmed. I felt exactly the same, and I wondered if they could see it on my face, too. I took Cali by the hand, as much for her comfort as for mine.

“Don’t worry. I will find your sister,” I said.

“I wasn’t aware I was missing.”

Everyone turned to see Artemis standing in the doorway. She was the picture of relaxation. She looked well rested and fresh faced. She had on a thick bathrobe and was drying her hair with a towel. She had a perplexed look on her face as she looked around the kitchen.

“Where were you?” Rishika and Cali demanded in unison.

Artemis looked at them, the confused expression still frozen on her face. “Aren’t I allowed to take a shower?” She pulled her robe tighter around her and smirked.

Orla rushed up to Artemis and hugged her. “Of course you are, honey. We were just concerned, weren’t we?”

Orla cast a glance back at us, and we all nodded our agreement. Torin and Tom nodded the hardest, looking like they would’ve preferred to be anywhere but here.

“There’s no reason to be concerned about me. There’s no reason to worry about me. I’m fine. I’m right here. I’ve been here in the house all morning.”

I was relieved, happy that there was one less crisis to deal with. I wished it were later in the day. I’d have had a few beers. I wondered if Mace had polished off all the whiskey in the liquor cabinet. Which reminded me—I needed to finish getting the wood together for the pyre. Maybe I could take a bit of whiskey out with me, to drink while I finished up chopping the wood. I doubted anyone would judge.

“Is everything good?” I asked, giving everyone a pointed glance. I didn’t want to go back outside only to be called back by another catastrophe.

Cali was just about to answer when Artemis said, “Why does everyone keep saying that around me? Sure, last night was bad, but I’m fine. Look at me.” She did a twirl. “Do I look like I’m in danger?”

Artemis was clearly exasperated. On the one hand, I understood her frustration—she wasn’t the type who liked a bunch of extra attention—but on the other hand, she’d had more than a few strange episodes that more than explained why we were on edge when it came to her.

I couldn’t shake how like Cali she was. Not necessarily in the way that they looked, but in how outspoken they were, how dramatic they could be. How independent they were. I thought about Cali’s outburst that morning and smiled. I wouldn’t want Cali to be any other way. It was that very disposition that had drawn me to her, that kept me intrigued by her.

I took one last look at Artemis as she returned to towel drying her hair. Something caught my eye. There was quite a bit of dirt under her fingernails. *Weird.* I shrugged it off. Who was I to judge other people’s hygiene? It was none of my business.

I stepped toward Cali, motioning for her to follow me outside. Once we were a safe distance from the house, I asked her if she was okay.

“I am,” she said. She kicked at a patch of melting snow. “I might have overreacted just a little, but it’s hard not to when it comes to Artemis.”

I thought about this. Maybe Greyson and I had the same issue—whenever it came to Cali, we acted first and thought later. Yet another thing we had in common. I bent down and kissed Cali on the forehead. I yearned to do more, but the wood wasn’t going to chop itself.

No sooner had my lips left Cali’s skin than Sage came running up. “Hey guys, where’s Greyson?”

And there it was—something was happening, for real this time.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Sage turned and pointed into the distance. “It’s York.”

**Episode 1546**

MARTA

Somehow, I’d finally managed to find a quiet room—which wasn’t easy in a house that was filled with not one, but two werewolf packs. They were everywhere: knocking on the bathroom door, emerging sleepily from the basement, lazing on all the couches, tumbling out of the attic. It was pretty funny if I really thought about it. They were literally bursting out of every nook and cranny.

I’d gone from seeing zero werewolves to too many to count.

I settled into my seat and propped my up feet on the large leather ottoman in front of me. Tom had been nice enough to lend me his newspaper, explaining that they weren’t as popular as they used to be. I flipped it open and searched through the pages, wondering why there weren’t any comics. What had happened to the comics? Comics were the best part. Maybe that was why people had stopped reading the newspaper.

“I can find the comics for you,” Lilac said.

“No, you can’t. You’re a ghost. Stop interrupting.”

I flipped through the pages, trying to make sense of the world I’d been kept out of for fifty years. My eyes scanned the headlines, taking them in and trying to compare them to the headlines from half a century ago. There was lots of stuff about technology, now. I thought back to Colton’s laptop, and how shocked I’d been to see how far computers had come. It was strange to realize that laptops were just the tip of the iceberg, apparently. It was all a little overwhelming.

“If you have any questions, I’m happy to help,” Lilac said. He was smiling at me like a maniac. I wondered if his cheeks hurt.

I put the paper down. “If you really wanted to help, you’d stop interrupting me,” I snapped. “I just want to read, if that’s okay with you?”

“Sorry, my bad. You know what? You look like you could use some tea.”

I glared at him. “What exactly does ‘I need tea’ look like?”

Lilac pointed at my face. “That.”

I groaned. “I don’t need any tea. Thanks.”

“Oh? Well what about one of Mrs. Smith’s famous white chocolate mochas?”

“No.”

“Hmmm. How about a glass of artesian well water?”

“Excuse me?”

“I have no idea what that is, but I heard Tom mention it to Torin and thought it sounded fancy and delicious, like you.”

I chose to ignore the last part of his sentence. “Why are you being so weird? Or should I say, weirder than normal?”

Lilac made a face. “Am not.”

“Are too.”

He looked hurt for a moment before he spoke, yet again. “Why do you think I’m weird?”

“Because you’re trying to be nice.”

“I don’t have to *try* to be nice.” Lilac sniffed. “And what makes you think I’m not nice?”

“Because you’re not. You’re annoying.” I picked the paper up and snapped it open, using it as a shield. That was one thing newspapers still had going for them—they were the perfect thing to hide behind while appearing to care about current events.

I tried to read, but I couldn’t concentrate. I kept wondering why Lilac was acting like this. The way I figured, there could only be two reasons—one possibility was that he was trying to sweet talk me into kissing him so that he could become corporeal again.

I understood why he’d try that, but it still pissed me off. I didn’t like to be used. The other possibility was that Lilac really did have feelings for me and was trying his best to make me fall for him, which was crazy, because there was no way in hell that I was going to do that. Even if he was nice to be around, sometimes. When he wasn’t being weird.

Lilac interrupted my thoughts, of course, by appearing right next to me. “Whatcha thinking ‘bout?”

“With all due respect, my thoughts belong to me and me alone,” I said. All I could think about was how I hadn’t signed up for this. “What I’m thinking is *none* of your business.”

I threw the paper down, realizing that I was never going to be able to read anything with him hanging around being so annoying. I got up and headed for the door.

“Where are we going?” He hopped to his feet, clapping his hands in excitement.

I stopped in my tracks. “*We* aren’t going anywhere.”

Lilac yanked on our tether, and it tugged at the very depths of my being. “I’m like your shadow,” he said. “Where you go, I follow.”

I whirled to face him, angry and so over this whole song and dance. I just wanted a few moments of privacy. Some time to myself to think about absolutely nothing. Was that too much to ask? “I know what you’re doing!”

Lilac smirked at me. “Is it working?”

I scowled at him. “Absolutely not. And if you don’t stop trying to sweet talk me, I’ll find a different rule of three that will make it impossible for you to speak.”

“You wouldn’t!” Lilac said, his face scrunched up in horror.

“Try me.”

Finally, Lilac fell silent. I sighed, only feeling a little bad. Maybe now he’d leave me alone.

I stomped up to my room, knowing that he was still right there with me, but maybe now he’d keep quiet. He was driving me absolutely mad. Between him watching my every move and Violet using me as a ghost phone line, I was exhausted. How long could a person survive without a single quiet moment to reflect?

I slammed my door shut—for emphasis—and flopped face down on the bed. Would this *ever* end? A chill raced down my spine. I was being watched. I rolled over on my side and screamed. Lilac was there, right beside me, his gaze fixed on me.

“What. Are. You. Doing?” I demanded.

“Looking at you.”

“You do know that’s super creepy, right?” I asked, though it was becoming clearer by the second that Lilac didn’t care if he came across as weird. Whatever his motives were, he was always unapologetically himself, and I kind of admired that about him.

I flinched as he reached out, as if to brush my hair out of my face. My hair didn’t move, but I shivered as his ghostly touch passed through me.

“You’re something else,” he said.

What was up with the look that he was giving me?

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Not only was I lying in bed nose to nose with a ghost, I was letting him get me all hot and bothered. I could still feel the tingle of his touch. The sensation had travelled all the way from my forehead to the tips of my toes. I couldn’t remember ever having experienced anything like it before.

“I know you think I’m just a ghost, but the truth is… Marta, you get more beautiful every day. You take my breath away, every time I look at you.”

“You don’t have any breath,” I pointed out.

He raised an eyebrow and then there was that look again.

I swallowed. He was looking right at me, and his lips were so close… I knew that I shouldn’t. He was probably just saying those things to get to me—and it was working.

*Would it be so bad to kiss him just one more time?* *Maybe it would even shut him up.*

Before I could decide, a ringing sound filled the air, startling me upright. “What’s that?”

“Your phone,” Lilac said, pointing to it where it sat, lit up and vibrating on the bedside table. It looked like a little strobe light.

My cell phone! That’s right! I’d seen a lot of ads in the newspaper about them. They were all the rage, it appeared. I wondered why. In my day, a telephone was just a heavy thing that sat on a table next to the phone book. I approached the phone, enjoying the futuristic ringing sound it made. Big Mac had given it to me, but I never would’ve thought I’d use it so much.

I picked it up, nearly dropping it as it buzzed in my hands. I tried tapping it. “What do I do?”

“You have to slide it!” Lilac leaned over and pointed at the blinking thing on the screen. He was so close that he sent that ghostly jolt through me again. “Press that and pull it.”

My finger hovered over it, ready to press when I noticed Bic Mac’s name flashing on the screen.

I turned to Lilac. “Why is she calling me?”

Lilac shrugged, his eyes wide, like he knew that whatever the reason was, it wasn’t good. That was maybe the first thing we’d agreed on today. Dread filled my stomach. I hoped I wasn’t about to get dragged into something else. I knew that Big Mac and Mrs. Smith had set out for the portal, and I knew that they were probably going to run into trouble there. I’d never heard of a portal that didn’t cause a shitload of danger and confusion.

I pressed the screen and slowly brought the phone up to my ear. “Hello?”

**Episode 1547**

The mere sound of York’s name made my blood run cold. I thought back to the last time I’d laid eyes on him. He’d tried to attack me—and Artemis had stabbed him. Again, I replayed the image of him rising from the remains of his own funeral pyre. Was he back from the dead *again*? How many times had he been killed?

“Sage, calm down,” Xavier said. “Where exactly did you see him?”

She turned to look back in the direction she’d come from. “I was cutting some timber down by the shed when I turned and saw him standing in the woods, watching me.” She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself.

Without another word, Xavier took off toward the shed, telling Sage to come with him. “Cali, you stay here,” he barked, like he was already prepared for me to protest.

I huffed. He was so predictable. I guess I was, too. “Remember, you and Greyson both said that I wasn’t a prisoner, but that I shouldn’t go anywhere without one of you. So I’m going with you!”

Xavier rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t argue. “Fine, just… don’t *do* anything. Let me handle it.” He led the way down to the shed. “Be careful, the both of you,” he called over his shoulder. “We don’t know what we’re dealing with.”

On our way to the shed, he picked up the axe I’d seen him using earlier to chop wood for the funeral pyre. I tried not to think too much about that. I needed to stay focused if York was on the loose again.

Xavier slung the axe over one of his broad shoulders. He was still shirtless, and there was something so sexy about the vision of Xavier, bare-backed with an axe. He looked like a sexy lumberjack. Why did he even need an axe, anyway? He was a werewolf. I wasn’t questioning it, though. I loved it.

“I saw him right over there,” Sage said, pointing into a dark tangle of trees to the left of the shed.

Xavier held up his hand, signaling for us to be quiet and stay still. I was distracted by how the movement made his rock-solid bicep flex. I wished we weren’t looking for a murderous revenant so I could really enjoy how good Xavier looked right now.

Xavier hunched low and took a few steps toward the woods, his axe at the ready. If I were York, I’d definitely hate to see Xavier coming.

“I don’t understand, he was literally right there,” Sage whispered to me, her eyes trained on the woods.

I took Sage’s hand. It was cold, and she was shaking just a bit. “Don’t worry, we believe you,” I said. “If he’s anywhere around, Xavier will find him.”

Xavier edged into the woods and poked around a bit, sniffing the air every so often. He peered around a couple of trees and took one last, final survey of the area before he turned to look at us.

“York must have left,” he said. “I want everyone to return to the pack house. We need to warn the others.”

On the way back, we speculated about what York’s now-you-see-him-now-you-don’t meant. What was he up to? Why couldn’t we ever find him when we needed to? York was always so good at evading us.

We passed by Greyson, who was hard at work building the funeral pyre. We locked eyes as I passed.

*Is everything okay?* Greyson asked through our mind link.

“Hey, I’m going to fill Greyson in,” I said to Xavier.

I hustled over to Greyson, purposely not looking back to see the displeasure that I knew I’d find on Xavier’s face, another indicator that this whole progressive arrangement that we’d walked into wasn’t working—especially for Xavier. I couldn’t say I was surprised. Xavier was definitely the type that hated sharing.

“Cali stop!” Xavier called after me.

“Don’t worry, I’m using the buddy system!” I answered, jogging up to Greyson. He was also shirtless and sweaty. Werewolves ran hot, didn’t they? Greyson and Xavier’s bodies were so different, but both were broad and chiseled, and equally great to look at. Seeing them shirtless and glistening kind of took the edge off all the bad shit that was happening.

“What’s going on?” Greyson asked.

“Sage saw York, but when we went to look for him, he was gone.”

“Shit, I don’t like the sound of that,” Greyson said, doing a quick scan of the woods around us. “I wonder if Silas is doing something to attract more revenants. You shouldn’t have gone to search with Xavier. You should have been inside, where it’s safe.”

“Stop treating me like a child.” I was so tired of this. It was like they got more overprotective as the days went by.

“It’s not like that, Cali. It’s just that after what happened with Pip, I can’t help but want to keep you save. Like always, love.” He pulled me close. “I couldn’t survive what Mace is going through. There’s no question about it. He’s a wreck, and I totally get it. If something was to happen to you Cali, I—” He stopped and looked away from me.

I hated seeing him so worried. I hadn’t thought about the impact Pip’s death might have had on my mates. I couldn’t imagine how I’d feel if something happened to him or Xavier, either. The thought of them getting hurt was something that I always tried to push out of my mind.

“Greyson, I’m fine,” I said, placing my hand on his warm, sticky cheek. He had a five o’clock shadow, and his stubble felt rough against my skin and sent shivers down my spine. It was hard to stay on topic around him. When it came to Greyson and Xavier, the smallest things turned me on.

He hugged me, and kissed me tenderly on my forehead. “We’ll get through this.”

I buried my head in his chest, noting how he smelled faintly of fresh cut wood. I felt safe and protected in his arms. I just hoped he was right, that we would all make it through this in one piece.

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A bit later, both packs gathered by the pyre, the fire burning brightly and casting orange flickers across everyone’s faces. I took my place between Greyson and Xavier. Though sad, I felt secure standing between my two Alphas. In this heavy, somber atmosphere, I was glad that neither of them was acting jealous.

Mace stepped forward to give the eulogy. His eyes were puffy, like he’d been crying all day. His hair and clothes were disheveled, and he looked like he hadn’t slept in days. He probably hadn’t. His voice was hoarse when he spoke.

“Pip was more than a mate. She was more than our pack’s Luna…” He got so choked up that he couldn’t get the words out, and he dissolved into body-shaking sobs.

Xavier dropped my hand and went over to whisper something into Mace’s ear before placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. Mace’s sobs died down a bit, and he lowered his head. My heart ached as I watched the tears spill from his eyes and splatter into the dirt at his feet.

“We all know how difficult this is, how much Pip will be missed,” Xavier began. “She was, as Mace said, more than a mate.” Xavier and I locked eyes, and his voice faltered a bit. “But what Mace still has, what we all still have, is her memory. She was a smart woman, a fierce fighter, and an amazing friend. Mace, she cared deeply for you.” Murmurs of agreement filtered from the crowd. “And when things get really hard, remember all the amazing moments that the both of you shared, and know that those memories can never be taken away from you.”

I was getting choked up. Pip had been good to me, too. She was one of the first werewolves who’d actually bothered to take the time to explain things to me. And now she was gone. It was unreal. We’d lost so many people, and if we didn’t get things under control, we’d lose more. I’d already seen enough funeral pyres to last me a lifetime.

I got really hot all of a sudden, and I looked up to see that the fire had grown to almost double its original size. *What’s going on?* In a flash, the heat became too intense. The pack shrank back from the fire, everyone clearly wondering what the hell was happening.

And then, out of the flames, Silas appeared, his eyes glowing as orange as the fire that had brought him forth.

I screamed, and both Xavier and Greyson pulled me back as Silas, in his weird, echoey, wavering voice said, “The fear that you are all feeling right now is just a taste of things to come.”

Lester stepped out of the flames, his orange eyes shining as the flames crackled loudly.

Greyson and Xavier pulled me away, just as the tongues of the fire reached out and ignited the house.

**Episode 1548**

The pack house was on fire.

I screamed, terrified, as the flames got higher and higher.

*Oh my god, is anyone inside the house?*

Everybody was supposed to be out here for the funeral, but someone could easily have slipped back inside. How ironic was it that as we burned Pip’s body, something else was going up in flames? We could *not* catch a break!

Fighting to keep my shit together, I looked around, scanning the group of people outside. I breathed a selfish sigh of relief when I saw my parents and Artemis just a few feet away. But what about everybody else? Frantically, I looked around and saw Torin, Astrid, Rishika, Kira, Ava, Mace and his pack… Craning my head, I saw Marta’s head bobbing about near the Blue Blood pack. I wasn’t sure if there were any missing faces, and to everyone all at once, I shouted, “We have to make sure no one’s in the house!”

I made a move to charge toward the house, but Xavier blocked my way with a growl.

“Get out of here, okay?” he said firmly. “Run toward the lake!”

What the hell was he saying? I wasn’t a coward!

“No!” I shouted over the chaos. “What if someone’s inside?”

Xavier gave me a look that was both outraged and worried. “Let the Alphas deal with that—that’s literally in our job description. You take care of yourself!”

I did not like Xavier’s tone, and I was about to keep fighting him for reasons that didn’t make a lot of sense but definitely matched my emotional state, when suddenly there was a *POP* from the fire behind us. A loud clash followed that startled both Xavier and me. Some of the shingles started to fall off the house.

*How the hell is this happening so quickly already?* I screamed inside my head.

Did Silas somehow magic it? Also, where the fuck *was* Silas? Was the fire just a big distraction?

“Xavier—”

He didn’t wait for me to finish my sentence, just scooped me up and tossed me over his shoulder like I was a sack of potatoes, then started striding away as I screamed and punched his back. It was a matter of principle.

I could see Greyson fighting Lester in the distance, and I realized that Silas was gone. Lester remained, unfortunately. He and Greyson were both wolves, clawing and roaring as they went at each other. Lester’s eyes were the same exact shade of orange as the flames. The fire behind the two looked so close that it terrified me.

“Greyson! Get away!” I shouted. Of course, he couldn’t hear. I tried to mind link with him, helpless to do anything as I was carried away.

*Greyson, please get out of there!*

“Put me down!” I yelled at Xavier.

“No,” he growled, adjusting his grip on me.

He carried me to the lake, where most of the pack had already gathered, huddling together. It was good that so many of them were safe, but Greyson was still over by the house—the house that was BURNING! Who was helping him fight out there?!

The blood rushed back down from my head as Xavier let me land on my feet. He steadied me, but I glared at him—and everyone else.

“Are you guys serious right now?” I said, looking around. “Why are you all just standing here? We have to go fight, we have to go put out the fire!” I turned to Xavier, smacking him on the shoulder. “Greyson is fighting a revenant right now! He’s your *brother*!”

I groaned and made a move to leave, but Xavier was just *there* again, blocking my way. “Cali…”

He was trying to speak to me, but I wasn’t listening. I didn’t have time to listen. I ducked underneath his arm, focused on Greyson in the distance. I had to get to him. I had to help him. I couldn’t just leave my mate to fend for himself, Alpha or not.

Just then, Lester tackled Greyson on the ground, and my heart doubled its frantic pace. Xavier’s arms we are around my stomach, pulling me back, but my hands were free. I didn’t think before raising them and sending a wave of furious energy toward Lester.

*Stay. The. Fuck. Away. From. My. Mate!*

I wasn’t sure if I had said that out loud or not, but the result was the same. My fingers tingled with aftershocks as the blow landed on a nearby tree instead of goddamn Lester.

*UGH! Do I* really *need to miss right now?*

One of the tree’s biggest branches fell to the ground, sending up a cloud of dust. The smoke and chaos were disorienting, and I couldn’t get a good look at the fight. And if that wasn’t enough, Xavier turned me around to face him, grabbing the sides of my arms.

“You have to stay here where it’s safe, Cali! Can you just listen to me for once?” he demanded, but at the same time he looked devastated.

I was hit by the expression on his face and finally realized why he wasn’t out there helping Greyson. He’d stayed back to protect me. And as much as I wanted them both to be okay, I needed to get out of their way. I was a liability, no matter how determined I was to be a badass. I needed to get more training—especially when it came to my aim.

My voice was shaking when I whispered, “Greyson is in danger, what—”

“Just promise me you’ll stay here,” Xavier said, “and I will go help my brother.”

I nodded vehemently.

Xavier sighed, leaning forward to kiss my forehead one last time before letting go. “Stay here. I’m going to fix this.”

My heart broke as I watched Xavier shift and charge toward the house, in the direction of Greyson and Lester’s fight. There was this strange feeling inside me, something else other than worry or love or desire. Was I…

Proud of him?

There was a time when Xavier had left Greyson behind at the Kollector’s zoo. They had come a long way, their relationship evolving, and for that, I was so grateful and glad. It was a jarring feeling to have while there was havoc all around me.

And then Mace’s wolf followed Xavier.

The Alphas were doing what Xavier had said they did best: fighting. But this time, they were fighting together, helping each other out. It was a rare thing to witness.

“Oh my god, Cali!” Μy mother rushed toward me, hugging me tight. Dad was a couple of steps behind her. “Are you okay?”

Dad looked haunted. Instead of answering, I hugged both of them, so grateful that they weren’t inside. I was still wondering if anyone was stuck in the house. I looked around frantically, counting heads again.

*Thank god, everyone’s here!* I thought, relieved.

“We need to do something,” I shouted. “Help them or subdue the fire!”

“Listen up, everyone, and listen right now!” Rishika yelled then. I turned to see that she had climbed on a rock to talk to the entire pack. “Cali’s right! We need to stop the fire!”

It was a relief to see Rishika taking charge, but at the same time, I couldn’t stop myself from freaking the fuck out. “How can we stop it? It’s already started to spread!”

“There are buckets in the shed,” Artemis said.

Rishika started to yell orders, looking at the closest pack members. “Sage, Zainab! Go get the buckets—and be careful!”

The girls nodded instantly and dashed away.

Rishika turned to Astrid, her voice sharp. “There might be a fire extinguisher in there as well—go with them!”

Without a word, which was a rare feat for her, Astrid ran to catch up with the other two.

“Wait, what I can do, though?” Torin yelled, bouncing up and down in a way that made me feel that he was either excited or really, really scared. Perhaps both at the same time. That sounded like his style. “Can I get water?”

“You’re our most valuable player right now,” Rishika told Torin. “Stay here and protect yourself in case anyone gets hurt. We’ll need you.”

Torin stopped bouncing and offered a solemn nod. If *he* had realized the gravity of the situation, it had to be pretty bad. I swallowed roughly.

“What can I do?” I asked, grabbing Rishika’s hand.

She stared at me. “Honestly?”

Her expression was unreadable, and I felt antsy as I waited for her to reply. But then I heard an agonizing cry.

It was a sound of pain from one of the wolves.

*Oh, no…*

My blood ran cold when I realized it was Greyson’s wolf. I knew that voice. I knew that roar. My ears were pounding with my pulse, energy rising inside me as our mate bond ached. I could think of nothing else other than the safety of my mate.

“Cali—”

Not intending to waste another minute, I turned around, ignoring Rishika, Artemis, and my parents’ screams as I ran into the smoke. Frantic, I saw the outline of Greyson’s wolf, and I was almost there, almost ready to touch him, when—

*BANG!*

A huge explosion knocked me backward.

**Episode 1549**

MARTA

“Yes, we made it to the portal,” Big Mac was telling me through the phone. I was about to ask her an array of questions when—

*BANG!*

There was a huge explosion, shaking everything up. I stumbled, unable to hold onto the phone that flew from my fingertips and landed on the other side of the room.

“What was that?” Big Mac’s voice was a shout. “Marta? Are you okay?”

I was decidedly *not* okay. I had fallen beside the bed, gripping onto the side of it and panting. I still felt immobilized by the shock, but at least now the house wasn’t shaking.

“What the hell was that?” Lilac demanded, rushing to my side. With his ghostly touch, he tried to help me to my feet. “Did you get hurt?”

I shook my head, my eyes fixed on the phone, where Big Mac was still yelling. “Just a little disoriented and dizzy,” I told Lilac, and scrambled for the phone.

“Marta?” Big Mac called, sounding pretty worried for someone who was usually fairly cold. “Are you there?”

“I’m all right, but there’s something going on. I’m going to have to call you back.”

Big Mac agreed, and then I hung up.

Still panting, I turned to Lilac. “What the hell was that?”

Even for a ghost, Lilac looked pale. “I’m not sure…” He frowned, his gaze flickering to a point somewhere behind me. “Oh shit, is that *smoke*?”

I turned in the direction he was staring at only to see that there was smoke coming in from the bottom of the doorway.

“Crap!” I choked out, running for the door.

“Marta, wait! Don’t open the door, we don’t know what this could be!” Lilac said, and I froze. When I touched the doorknob, the metal was warm. My stomach dropped.

“Where is everyone else? Can you see if there’s a fire?” I asked Lilac, pointing at the door.

He stuck his head through the wood and came back in the room quickly. His eyes were wide. “That’s a big time *yes*!”

“What the hell! Where is everyone else?” I asked again as I rushed to the window. Outside, I could see the flames licking up the side of the house. How on earth was I going to get out of here?

“Did the others forget I was in here?” I wondered out loud as I fought to open the window. It wouldn’t budge. And at the same time, there was more and more smoke filling the room.

“God dammit, I can’t help!” Lilac groaned as he fought to help me with my escape. Of course, it wasn’t working, because his hands just moved through the glass.

Dread washed over me. How was I supposed to get out of here?

Panicked, I looked around the room, trying to think. Was there anything in here I could use to break the glass? Something big and heavy enough to go through it?

“Maybe we could try—”

Growling, I grabbed the vanity stool and threw it against the window.

Lilac blinked. “I guess that could work.”

But it didn’t. The piece of wooden furniture just fell back to the floor, one of its legs breaking. The glass was too thick.

“Oh my god! What do I do now?” I said under my breath.

Lilac’s voice was loud once more. “Hey, *Mission Impossible*! Come over here and try the window in the bathroom!”

Lilac’s idea sounded good in theory, but in practice, I felt sluggish from the smoke. I was starting to cough, and I had no idea if I’d have enough strength to toss anything at any window in order to break it.

“You can do it, Marta!” Lilac said, clapping his hands like this was some sort of wrestling match, me versus the fire. Me versus saving my own life. I got into the bathtub and fought to open the window above it, but it was such a weird and difficult angle that I was having trouble getting enough leverage.

“I can’t!” I told Lilac, tears threatening to escape my eyes.

I slid down into the bathtub, my breaths coming out frantic. The bathroom was starting to get extremely hot. I touched the wall, and it was scorching. The fire had to be right next to this room. My throat constricted, my lungs protesting.

*How horribly ironic is it that I’m going to die trapped in a house?*

“You’re not going to die! Not on my watch!” Lilac said, his tone thunderous. I realized that I’d said that last part out loud. “You can do this, you just have to get up! I looked outside—the hallway is filled with smoke, but if you crawl, you should be able to make it out. Okay?”

There was agony in Lilac’s expression, in his voice. He seemed genuinely worried, and I was getting dizzy.

“I don’t think this is going to work—” Before I could finish my sentence, I started coughing, started tasting the smoke. My eyes were watering. “I can’t go out there—it would mean inhaling too much smoke.”

Lilac shook his head and got down on his knees beside me. His cool ghostly hand stroked my cheek. “Marta? Are you listening to me?”

I coughed once more and looked up at him. There was something steadying about the look on his face. Something hopeful that felt almost jarring under the circumstances. He looked hopeful and terrified at the same time.

“I’m going to help you get out of here, okay?” he said. “You just have to follow the sound of my voice. Can you do that?”

It was shocking to see someone who was already dead look so afraid of death. Of *my* death. I sniffled. I didn’t want to go like this, trapped in a bathtub—I had come way too far since my time with Bert. This was supposed to be my second chance at living. I needed to grab it, grab the opportunity and run with it. I needed to summon the last of my strength and make this work.

“Are you with me, Marta?” Lilac asked. He seemed frantic but determined. I felt lucky to have him here with me, so I nodded.

I eased myself out of the tub, moving the neckline of my T-shirt over my nose and mouth.

“Show me the way,” I told Lilac.

Without another word, he helped me get on the ground, and gestured for me to crawl out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, where the knob of the door was blistering hot. I winced, flinching back and letting out a cry.

“No, we’re going to fix this. I’m going to get you out of here, you hear me?” Lilac said, severe. “You can trust me.”

*You can trust me*. Four words, and they helped me so much.

I knew that I could trust him, that he was a good person, even if he could be annoying. To his core, he was valiant.

I used a towel to turn the knob and opened the door, and then I headed out into the very, *very* smoky hallway. I was having such a hard time breathing, especially because I couldn’t keep my shirt over my nose as I crawled on the floor.

I didn’t see any flames, but the smoke was so thick it felt like a cloud that was threatening to suffocate me. I could feel the heat all over, and I was in the middle of it, fighting to breathe and failing.

But Lilac stayed by my ear, murmuring instructions. “Go straight,” and, “Turn right here,” and, “It’s over there!”

But it was getting so hard for me to move. My elbows couldn’t carry my weight—not while any and all oxygen was leaving my lungs. I collapsed to the floor, coughing and choking. The tears that poured down my cheeks were a result of both the smoke and my sorrow.

*Is this it? Is this how I go?*

“Keep going!” Lilac urged, still not giving up on me. It was almost charming. “You’re so close to the staircase and then outside. You can do it!”

I coughed once more, wincing. “I don’t think I can.”

The smoke above me took Lilac’s shape. Every curve and corner of his handsome face. He looked so utterly devastated that it was almost comforting. Everybody else had left the house without checking up on me, but it was good to feel that at least one person cared about me. At least a little. Not a lot, but just enough to be sad that I would be gone. It might have been because I was Lilac’s only shot at becoming real again, but still. There had to be some real feeling to his reaction as well.

I just didn’t want to die thinking that nobody cared about me.

“Thank you for trying to help me,” I whispered before coughing once more.

My eyes felt heavy. I closed them, and then the sight of Lilac was gone. But I could still hear his voice. That smooth voice in my ear. “No! I’m not going to let this happen! Don’t you die on me! I’m supposed to be the only dead one here, dammit!”

His voice was growing more and more distant, same as my senses, everything surrounded by smoke, ready to drown me. But then, something changed.

Then, I felt the press of Lilac’s lips against mine.

**Episode 1550**

GREYSON

I was bobbing and weaving, trying to dodge both the licking flames and Lester’s chaotic, unhinged attacks. He was fast and powerful, sliding through the air like some sort of weapon instead of a supernatural being.

He *was* a weapon, actually.

Silas’s weapon.

Everything had happened so fast—the fire, Lester returning—that I’d barely managed to fucking process. I was used to putting out fires in the metaphorical sense, but this was something else completely. And now Lester and I were circling each other, teeth bared, smoke darkening the sky around us.

The explosion had made the ground shudder underneath me, but the surprise had since worn off. Lester’s orange eyes were narrowed, fixing on me before darting over to Mace and Xavier. He had returned from the dead and was stronger than ever—stronger than the average werewolf, perhaps even stronger than the average Alpha.

I hadn’t thought I’d ever fucking say this, but I was grateful for Mace and Xavier.

I mind linked with them both. *The explosion that happened when Lester came into contact with the flames seems to have hurt him. He’s limping.*

*Let’s force him into the fire, then*, Mace said.

*Won’t that make things worse? We don’t know what kind of explosion that could cause*, Xavier replied.

*It’s a risk I'm willing to take*, I said. *We need to do away with Silas’s revenant puppet. The motherfucker tried to bite my goddamn leg off!*

I could feel the wound on my leg—it was like I’d been stabbed with fire itself. It hurt like hell—I didn’t think I’d ever had a more painful wound in my life. I was managing, of course, but still. I didn’t like it.

As if Lester could hear my thoughts, he growled.

*You think you are the hunter, but you are the hunted*, he mind linked to all three of us.

A chill ran through me at his words. I ignored it. I wasn’t about to back down. Not now, not ever.

*How poetic*, I sniped. *Silas teach you that one?*

The second I said my father’s name, Lester sneered, clenching his jaws. He glanced between Mace, Xavier, and me, his orange eyes making me think of hell. And then, in an eerie, chilling voice, he started chanting, his words infecting our heads all at once, like a disease.

*The hour of Letifer is upon us—the Helm of Destruction will bring about the end of the world and begin a new kingdom of death. Those who stand in its way will pay. The hour of Letifer is upon us—the Helm of Destruction will bring about the end of the world and begin a new kingdom of death. Those who stand in its way will pay. The hour of Letifer...*

*That’s enough of that!* Xavier growled.

*Yeah, we got the memo*, Mace added.

Lester continued chanting, as if hypnotized.

This was our shot.

*We need to tear Lester apart and burn the pieces to make sure that he stays down*, I told the other two.

*It’s too risky*, Xavier countered. *We don’t know anything about the magic we’re dealing with.*

*We need to fucking do something!* Mace retorted.

*We all know this is a mess*, I said. *But what other choice do we have?*

Xavier finally nodded.

*Lester’s fighting style is erratic, just like the other revenants*, I said. *If we have to hold him down in the flames, we’ll do it… You need to be careful, Xavier.*

To my surprise, Xavier wasn’t an asshole about this.

*You too*,he said. *Be careful.*

Where the hell was Cali? We were getting along, and she was missing it.

Shaking my head, I reminded myself that it was actually good that Cali wasn’t here, because she would probably try to attack Lester on her own.

I nodded at the other two, and slowly, Mace, Xavier, and me began to advance on Lester, who remained frozen, chanting the same words over and over, the messed up prophecy nobody wanted to hear.

We couldn’t stall any longer.

I knew we needed to just go in for the attack. The house was starting to really burn up, and—

What the fuck was that? *Sirens?* Had someone called the fucking *fire department*?

*Who the fuck decided it was a good idea to involve humans?* I snapped at the other two.

*Not me*, Xavier said.

*Me either*,Mace muttered. *The flames must be too big and someone called it in.*

*This just made things a million times worse*, I huffed. *We need to get rid of Lester before the humans see him. Before they see* us*!*

The other Alphas agreed, and the pressure was on.

I roared and went for it, lunging at the revenant, who snapped out of his hypnotized chanting to defend himself. We tumbled back into the flames toward the house, the heat rising from the ground. Multiple awful scents invaded my senses—the smoke, the stench from Lester’s body…

A wave of falling embers came from a burning crossbeam, stinging my ears and my head as I shook the burn from my fur. I yelped at the heat just as Lester barreled into me with the force of a bull.

The impact was sudden, but I wasn’t alone.

My brother and Mace had my back, cushioning Lester’s blow. All three of us—using claws and teeth and all the power we could summon—dug into Lester, ripping at his limbs. The sounds he made were nightmarish, the sight and scent of blood something straight out of a battle. His orange eyes leaked red, too. We tore him apart, tore at whatever was left of him, because this wasn’t him.

This was what Silas had turned him into.

The sight was gruesome. We each tossed different parts of Lester into the flames. The pieces reacted like gasoline, making the fire ignite and pop ferociously.

*We did it*, Xavier said, panting. *We fucking did it!*

Mace laughed, and I let out a howl of victory, but then…

*CRACK!*

I looked up and saw a gutter, ready to fall onto us. Mace jumped out of the way, and I yelped and tackled Xavier, who’d been standing there like a fucking dumbass.

Younger brothers were so annoying.

*We need to get out of here!* I said, and for once, nobody disagreed with me.

A few moments later, we fell to the ground by the woods.

We were all choking on the smoke.

*This day just won’t end*, Mace said, sounding exhausted. Devastated.

He had just mourned his mate an hour ago.

My stomach clenching, I scanned the area for Cali. She had tried to help me earlier—I’d heard her voice and seen her magic—but was she safe? Where was she now?

As all three of us, still in wolf form, headed to the woods to get away from the smoke, I saw that a little assembly line had formed—Cali, Rishika, Artemis, Zainab, Sage, and Kira were all passing buckets from the lake toward the house, trying to push the flames out.

Just as I took a moment to pause, Cali made to run toward the house and out of the little water perimeter they were creating.

*Cali, no!* I mind linked, running up to her. *I'm here now, you have to stay away from the house. The flames are only getting worse!*

She turned to face me, gasping. “Greyson! There you are! Oh my god, you’re hurt!”

*I’m fine. The fire—*

“Greyson, we can’t let the fire keep spreading! The house—that’s our home! I don’t want it to burn down,” she said, sniffling. She was trembling, her hair in disarray, her face all smudged with ash, her sweater torn up. But to me, she was still gorgeous.

She was exactly what I needed to look at after facing hell itself in Lester’s eyes.

*I heard sirens; the fire department must be on its way*, I told her. *I’m not hurt, I’m fine okay, love?*

The moment I said that, my leg throbbed. It was calling me a liar. It hurt like hell. What was going on with that wound? It didn’t feel like it was healing, which wasn’t normal. It felt like it was… on fire.

Like it was a fire starting from within me and spreading out.

Cali touched my fur, her expression filled with worry. “You need to see Torin, just in case. You need to protect yourself too, Greyson!”

She said this without having noticed the wound on my leg. I was pretty sure she’d go into full freak-out mode if she did, so I shifted my weight to hide it from her.

And then, I remembered my mission of stopping her from going to the house.

Groaning, I tried to take the bucket from her.

“Greyson, just stop—”

The fire truck pulled into the driveway, the brigade hopping out of the truck instantly. The person who had to be their captain pointed at the house, yelling, “GO GO GO!”

Cali choked out a sound, staring at me with wide eyes as humans swarmed the grounds.

Shit. I was still a wolf.

**Episode 1551**

VIOLET

Charlie’s hand felt so good in mine, but the moment had been interrupted by this douchey-looking guy who reminded me of an arrogant frat boy from a TV show. The tension between him and Charlie was instant—I could sense that our being seen by this dude was not a good thing. Who was he?

Charlie’s energy had changed entirely. He pulled me to his side and wrapped his arm around me, a slow, low growl thundering inside his chest. It wouldn’t have been audible to the average human—including the frat guy—but as a werewolf, I could hear it. Charlie’s entire stance was screaming protection. He wanted to protect me, like this human was dangerous.

Which was weird, since I probably could have broken the guy with a single paw, but at the same time, I didn’t know what to think.

*Who is this?* I asked Charlie.

His grip tightened on my arm, but Charlie’s eyes stayed fixed on the guy.

“Chad,” Charlie spat. “What the hell are you doing out here?”

Of course the guy’s name was Chad. *Figures.*

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” Chad said, a sleazy smile on his face.

Suddenly, the tension emanating from Charlie became even stronger, and his grip on me got tight enough for me to let out a muffled, “Ow!”

Charlie instantly let go, but he didn’t move his gaze away from the guy. Was Chad my mate’s enemy? How could he possibly have earned a title like that? And Charlie was so nice—too nice to have enemies. I stared up at my mate, taking in the fierceness in his expression, and okay…

It was kind of hot.

I shook my head to clear it, feeling my cheeks heat up. And then it hit me: did this guy know that Charlie was supernatural? Was that the reason why Charlie was being so protective of me and so wary of him? Did Chad somehow know what I was, just by looking at me? Could hunters do that?

My heart started thundering at the thought.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your lady friend?” Chad said in that sleazy way of his. “Or were you planning to keep seeing my Sophie at the same time?”

I cringed. Had this boy just called someone who wasn’t his girlfriend “my Sophie”? *Ew*.

“I’m not going to introduce you to anyone,” Charlie snapped, impatient. “And get the fuck over yourself, dude, Sophie isn’t yours. She rejected you at the dance. You need to learn how to take no for an answer.”

Chad scoffed. “Not that it’s any of your business, but that was all a misunderstanding. I’m sure she’d be interested to know that you’re out here with other girls. There’s nothing to say that you haven’t done this kind of thing before!”

I was so angry. Who did this *Chad* person think he was, talking to my mate like that? And how delusional was he?

“You have no idea what you’re talking about, Chad,” Charlie said sharply.

Chad rolled his eyes before they landed on me, daring. Appraising. He made me feel like a piece of meat, but I held his gaze, aggravation and outrage bubbling up inside me. If I could’ve turned into a wolf right now without blowing Charlie’s cover, I would have torn this guy a new one.

“Well, this is interesting,” Chad said under his breath, and tore his creepy eyes away from me. Thank god. He stared at Charlie once more and offered a sneer. “You’d better come back on the grounds and start doing your portion of the patrols. It would be unfortunate if Sergeant Pepperdine found out that you’ve been ignoring your hunter duties.”

Charlie went rigid once more. “Seriously? Go ahead, tell him. I knew you were gonna snitch on me anyway.”

I wanted to yell at Chad, call him a liar and a meddler, but I kept my mouth shut, pushing down the anger. It was like I was being affected by Charlie’s animosity. My mate’s enemy was automatically mine as well.

Without another word, Chad shot us a contemptuous look and walked away. He disappeared into the woods, his steps heavy. The second he was gone, Charlie let out a sharp breath. He started walking quickly in the same direction. I needed to jog to keep up, bewildered and confused by the whole situation.

“What was that? Who was that guy?” I asked.

Charlie just shook his head, which freaked me out a bit. Why wasn’t he answering? Could this have consequences for him at the camp? Was I missing something here?

“Charlie, why aren’t you answering me?” I asked, gripping him by the arm, pulling him around to face me. When our eyes met again, he drew in a sharp breath.

And then he abruptly pulled me into a tight hug.

I slowly wrapped my arms around him. He felt warm and firm, and I felt protected in his arms, as always. He pulled back to face me, his gaze full of tension. He leaned closer, and when he kissed me, there was a slow, vibrating intensity to it that made my toes curl.

But I couldn’t let myself get distracted right now. I rested my hand against his chest and pushed him back slightly, breaking the contact.

Looking up at him, I murmured, “Charlie, seriously. What’s going on here?”

My mate let out a shaky breath and looked away, a bitter smile forming on his lips. “I’m just… I’m scared, actually.”

I scowled. “Is that guy going to get you in trouble?”

Charlie snorted, shaking his head, but there was no humor to his expression. “That’s the least of my worries. I’m scared because Chad saw *you*.”

I blinked, flinching. “Me? Was coming here a bad idea?”

I’d been so ecstatic to see Charlie again, and I knew that the feeling was mutual, but had I just messed things up for my mate? Had I accidentally made everything worse for him?

The thought gutted me.

“None of this is your fault,” Charlie told me quietly.

We continued walking, back on the route that I had used to come to the edge of the hunter campgrounds.

“If it’s not my fault, then what’s going on?” I asked.

I was impatient, anxious, but I didn’t want to upset Charlie further. He and I had now reached a little property line fence, and my feet felt like lead.

Finally, he took a deep breath and said, “There’s this family friend of my mom’s—Romilly. She’s meant to watch out for me, but it’s more like 24/7 surveillance.”

I hated the sound of that. “For what? Why?”

Charlie sighed deeply. “She keeps an eye on me and then she reports everything I do to my mom.”

*Oh shit*, I thought. *Iris has eyes in here? Of course she does.*

As the realization settled, I started to feel queasy. “Do you think Romilly knows I was here? Is that Chad guy going to say something?”

Charlie scowled. “I’m not sure. But I can bet that somehow, my mom is going to find out I was with a girl. And when she figures out it was you…”

Neither of us spoke for a long moment. The silence was heavy, and Charlie pulled me into another hug. My mind was racing. If Iris found out that I was here, it would only make things even more complicated. Potentially even dangerous.

I hadn’t even told Charlie that Iris had all but threatened me in the past. She hated that Charlie was a werewolf now, and she hated me even more for being his mate. It was the whole reason why we were pretending to have broken up already.

This was such a mess. My eyes were burning, suddenly, and I squeezed Charlie tighter. Looking up at him, I finally said, “I just got here. I just got you back, but I… I need to go, don’t I?”

The second I said the words, an ache grew in my chest. I had missed him so much.

Charlie kissed my forehead and stroked my cheek. His touch was comforting and warm, and I didn’t want this closeness between us to end.

He took off his bracelet. “Take this.”

I stared at the little chain, skeptical. “Why?”

“It’ll keep you safe,” Charlie said, tucking my hair behind my ear. “I would do anything—give anything, even my life—to keep you safe. You know that.”

There was a lump in my throat. A shiver run down my spine as Charlie and I maintained eye contact, the mate bond vibrating between us as if it were a living thing. I wished that it could be just me and him somewhere—happy and carefree and in love.

But I knew that wouldn’t be happening anytime soon.

Charlie helped me over the small fence, his hands steady on me, and when I jumped over it, he stared at me. “I promise we’ll be together soon.”

I didn’t want to let go of his hand. Leaving him actually hurt. My body was protesting, and my eyes were burning with tears.

“We’ll figure this out, Violet,” Charlie said in that deep voice of his. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I said. “So much.”

With a heavy heart, I let go of his hand.

And at that exact moment, a blaring alarm echoed throughout the campus.

**Episode 1552**

XAVIER

It was total chaos.

The firefighters had gotten out their ladder and were now spraying the house with their giant hoses. I’d never thought that a bunch of humans would ever end up helping us, and I’d *definitely* never believed that the pack house would go up in flames. But apparently, there was a first time for everything.

This was maybe a bit above Phil’s paygrade.

Greyson was in my line of vision, in the distance, and I realized that if I could see him, at some point the firefighters would too. He was so stupid for having stayed shifted. He should’ve shifted to human the second he could’ve.

*Get out of here*,I told him. *If the humans see a giant wolf roaming around, they’re going to have questions, idiot.*

Cali had certainly had a lot of questions, back in the day. The last thing we needed right now was the fire department nosing around in our business. Humans knowing about the existence of werewolves never ended well. As a mercenary, I knew that humans finding out usually meant that they needed to die. I wasn’t exactly in the mood to kill an entire fire department today—a massacre would only raise more questions, and also the firefighters were just trying to do their job.

Greyson’s wolf nodded at me and took off like a bullet into the woods, listening to my advice for once. Cali was wide-eyed and breathless as she watched him go. She seemed panicked, worried, and even though I hated seeing her like this because of my brother, I knew it was a given.

I also knew that I needed to do damage control.

I dashed toward Cali and pulled her away, letting the firefighters come through. It was too late, though.

“Did you see that?” one of them asked another, pointing toward where Greyson had vanished. “What the fuck was that thing? It was massive!”

“A wolf, maybe?”

“Have you ever seen a wolf so big, though? Damn.”

The two men seemed dubious, but they continued with their work. At the same time, another firefighter came up to us. He had a big mustache and a huge gold badge. “You two, get back. It’s not safe.”

I rolled my eyes, and Cali gave me a pointed look. “How do *you* like being told to stay back?”

I scoffed and pulled her away, because this girl never learned, did she? Granted, I’d run straight into the flames after my brother, but I was, objectively, a lot more effective than Cali. And unlike her, I hadn’t almost died approximately three million times in the past few months. More like three. That was a manageable number.

I wondered if it was time for us to offer Cali more combat and battle awareness training instead of yelling at her to stay out of danger. Maybe that would be the solution to all our problems, and a healthier alternative to constantly telling her what to do, which pissed her off no end. And Astrid, Torin, and Orla seemed to be sticking around for the long haul, so it would be good for them to help her explore and evolve her Fae powers.

As everybody—including my mate, thankfully—stepped back toward the lake, I noticed Mace talking with one of the firefighters, a massive redhead. He gave Mace a blanket to cover himself, and then Mace headed over to make sure that the Blue Blood pack was okay. Good. The less Alphas around here, the better. I could handle this situation myself.

The redheaded firefighter then stepped up to me, arching an eyebrow. “I see nudity is a thing around here. What happened to your clothes, sir?”

I kept my expression deadpan. “They were on fire.”

My answer seemed to satisfy him. He nodded solemnly and glanced down at my wounds. They had mercifully healed to simple scratches.

“Get me blankets over here!” the redheaded firefighter yelled to his group, and then there were blankets for everybody. He made sure to give me one, even though I didn’t really need it. Still, I accepted it and thanked him.

These humans were actually pretty nice.

But who knows how “nice” they’d be if they’d seen a werewolf?

“Here’s one for you too,” the redhead told Cali.

The moment she moved it around herself, I pulled her close, wrapping her in a warm cocoon. She was freezing cold, but I felt her start to get warmer. I kissed her forehead, and she leaned into me, pressing herself against me. Moments like these made me feel so protective and fucking in love that they made my heart grow ten sizes. Cali looked up at me, her head poking out of the blanket folds. She was adorable.

But what came out of her mouth was not.

“Do you think Greyson is okay?” she whispered, looking around conspiratorially. “Do you think any of them saw him?”

They might have, if comments I’d heard earlier were any indication. But it was hard to tell though whether they thought we just had a huge dog. Like a Great Dane or something. Luckily, the firefighters had other things to be preoccupied with.

And I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes. Greyson was fine. He would be fine. He always survived, sometimes it seemed to spite me. He was a strong fighter, and he’d only gotten hurt earlier because Lester’s powers were unpredictable. It’d been a difficult situation, but between him, me, and Mace, we’d gotten lucky.

The battle with Lester had been pretty difficult, and of course that coward Silas had let the revenant do the fighting for him. Even in ghostly form, Silas would let others die first. Classic. And as for Greyson, I had to give it to him—he’d done a good job during the fight. I was pretty sure he’d return in the next hour or so, when his wounds were better. But if he wanted to stay away longer so I could have Cali all to myself, I wouldn’t be mad.

“I’m sure Greyson’s fine,” I told Cali. “No one will believe what they might have seen, anyway. There’s so much smoke that it’s hard to tell.”

“What about the fight with Lester, though?” Cali asked. “I heard Greyson howl in pain.”

I was trying my best not to get annoyed.

“Cali, Greyson is fine. Werewolves heal, remember? Besides, your buddy Torin can always help if necessary—but only after all these humans leave.”

Cali frowned, but thankfully nodded. Just then, Rishika, Artemis, Tom, and Orla

walked up to us. They each had a blanket, their faces smudged with ash.

“Are you kids okay?” Orla asked, moving to pat Cali down.

My mate snorted and gave her mother a slightly shaky thumbs up. She was still shivering, but not as much. I tightened my grip around her.

“How the hell was Silas able to manipulate Lester and the fire at the same time?” Artemis asked, looking among the group before her gaze settled on me. She seemed expectant, like I was obligated to have an answer. I guessed that that was one of the side effects of me being Silas’s son. One of many.

Rishika nodded in agreement. “I thought that the Orb just dealt with life and death. Now it can mess with the elements, too?”

“None of this is good,” Cali’s mother whispered. “You had the Orb at one time, Xavier. What do you think?”

“I don’t know. It messes with the entire spirit realm; who knows what kind of shit that can do?” I said. “But I sure as hell hope that Artemis’s guess about it controlling the elements isn’t true. Otherwise, we’re screwed.”

The severe faces of everyone around me seemed to indicate their agreement.

“Where did Silas even go?” Tom spoke up, his stance rigid. “And how can we even get to him?”

I didn’t have the answer to that. But I was certain that I was itching to fight my father again. To see him bleed, even if he was a ghost. I’d thought that we were done with him, finished. But I had killed him once—I could do it again.

“I don’t know how to get to him, but it’s just ridiculous that he keeps popping up like this and running away like a coward,” I said. “He needs to stay, fight us, and try to take what he wants if he’s strong enough.”

Cali looked up at me with wide eyes. “But, Xavier, we really don’t know what he’s capable of. The fire, Lester—everything that’s happened today is a testament to that.”

I shook my head. “I don’t care. Silas has been using gimmicks. He’s probably still weak from his death. He’s just a fucking coward, and when he shows his face we’ll destroy him once and for all, the way he deserves.”

Cali swallowed roughly, her fingertips digging into my chest. For once, she didn’t seem to disagree. She opened her mouth to speak, when suddenly, shouts rose from the clump of firefighters.

“What’s going on?” Cali said under her breath before letting me go. She waved at the firefighters and yelled, “Hey! What’s happening?”

I squinted, looking in the direction the firemen were pointing, and my blood ran cold. There was a figure emerging from the house, surrounded by smoke and dust. My hackles rose instantly, ready for a fight.

My voice was gruff when I spoke. “Someone’s coming out.”

**Episode 1553**

There was a shadow moving through the smoky ruins.

I took a step back, closer to Xavier. The possibility that the shadow was Silas had the entire pack frozen for a long beat.

Until Xavier said, “It’s not him. It’s…” He frowned. “One of us?”

Xavier sounded uncertain, and my stomach dropped. Oh my god, I’d been worried about someone getting stuck inside! How many times had I told them to go check? But at least if they were walking out of the ruins, it meant that they were okay. Right?

*Right?*

“It’s not Silas. Whoever it is is leaner, shorter, but we need to be careful,” Xavier said in a heavy voice. “It could be Lester.”

The thought made me grow rigid. Both Rishika and Artemis looked alarmed.

“Do you seriously think that’s possible?” Rishika asked Xavier.

“I don’t know what Silas could be doing,” he said, “but we burned Lester once before, and he came out of that fire pretty easily, so…”

*This is really bad!* I thought, freaking out. *Especially because there’s a bunch of firefighters around!* *They didn’t do anything to deserve this. They’re just people doing their jobs—and probably not getting paid enough!*

But before my anxiety could reach the sky, the smoke settled, and I saw the figure’s face. And it was…

*Lilac? LILAC! OH MY GOD!* He was holding Marta! How, I had no freaking clue, but… MARTA! She was safe!

And I immediately felt horrible. I thought she’d been outside already. I hadn’t looked closely enough. Thank god somehow Lilac was able to do this.

I gasped, leaving the safety of Xavier’s embrace and blanket bundle and dashing toward the house.

The really big redheaded firefighter blocked my way. “Ma’am, we’re going to have to ask you to stay back.”

*Ma’am?* I thought, aggravated. *Have I aged so much, just being around these werewolves and their stressful lifestyle?*

I was utterly appalled. More offended than I’d been in a while.

“But it’s my friend!” I said, deciding to ignore the “ma’am” thing. It was probably the best decision at the moment, considering that my friend, Lilac, was a ghost and shouldn’t have been able to carry Marta at all. Let alone be seen by me. Or anyone. *Ever*.

*What the hell is happening right now!*

The redheaded firefighter didn’t have the time to deal with me, though, because just then, Lilac brought Marta over to a group of his colleagues. My stomach clenched when I realized she was unconscious.

“Is she going to be okay?” Lilac asked them, looking frantic. Looking alive.

Actively not dwelling on that last part, I shouted to Lilac, “Is anyone else in the house?”

Through the commotion, Lilac turned to me, his gaze meeting mine. “No!”

“What about Marta?” I yelled. “Is she okay?!”

“She’s breathing,” Lilac said as they put an oxygen mask on Marta’s face, his chest heaving.

I nodded, exhaling in relief. Poor Marta. I could have fucking *sworn* I’d seen her out here with us earlier, but it had probably been one of the freaking Blue Bloods. Guilt continued to wreck me, but hey, what else was new?

“We swept the house and it’s empty,” the redheaded fireman told me then. “Y’all didn’t have any pets, did you?”

I frowned. “Pets?”

He made a face. “That huge, what was it, a *dog*? I had no idea that dogs could be so huge…”

*Shit*. Had they seen Greyson earlier? I stared up at our ginger savior, unsure of what to say, but then Xavier came up behind me to save the day. “Yeah, we have a few dogs here.”

The firefighter seemed confused. “That one was pretty big, though.”

Xavier shrugged. “We have a few pretty big dogs here.”

The firefighter raised a thick eyebrow. “Y’all might need a permit for that. Dogs mixed with wolves need one.”

I knew that Mr. Fireman meant well, I really did, but the thought that we might have to add meddling humans to our never-ending list of problems was unbearable.

“I assure you that everything is in order,” Xavier said, keeping his composure. “Thank you for your help with the fire, by the way. It’s a huge relief to see that it’s under control.”

I looked up at the house. The damage was substantial, but not insurmountable. We would have to do some repairs for sure, and I wondered if Phil did this kind of thing.

*At least the house is still standing. If the entire thing had burned down...*

I didn’t want to think of that. The image was too much to bear. So much of my life had revolved around this house. Well, the pack house before this one, but this one too! They were part of my story with the Redwoods. With my mates.

I sniffled, and the redheaded firefighter gave me a sympathetic look. “Hope you feel better soon, ma’am.”

I decided not to be offended by the “ma’am” thing and thanked him. I also made a mental note to ask Lola what kind of cream she used to battle under eye circles, because I was not a “ma’am” yet. *God!*

As the fireman walked away, Xavier stared down at me with intense eyes. “It’s going to be okay. These guys really know how to do their job.”

I glanced over at Lilac, who was hovering over Marta as the firefighters treated her and gave her oxygen. I was still fighting to wrap my head around Lilac’s actual existence—HOW?—and I hoped that nothing weird—weirder—would happen.

Lilac needed to stay corporeal, because I had no idea what we’d tell the firefighters if the boy who’d brought out the unconscious girl suddenly vanished.

Over the next fifteen minutes, the firefighters put out the rest of the flames. The damage seemed to be contained to a portion of the house, in the left wing. I was so relieved. Both packs, the Redwoods and the Blue Bloods, were okay overall. Marta was recovering. I still felt guilty over not double-checking the house, but I was so happy that she’d been saved.

Lilac remained by her side, just casually existing.

*HOW?* That was my biggest question.

But, my biggest worry right now was that I couldn’t see any sign of Greyson. I assumed he had to be nearby. He wasn’t seriously hurt, was he? Was that why he hadn’t come back in his human form? We could just get him a blanket if he shifted back. I’d assumed that he had been waiting for his wounds to heal, and that was why he hadn’t returned yet.

But seriously, it had been a while, so why wasn’t he back?

“You’re all right!” Rishika’s voice echoed, catching my attention. I turned to see her stroking Marta’s shoulder as she sat on a log. Lilac was still next to her, a living shadow.

I rushed toward them, both stunned about Lilac and relieved about Marta. I put my arms around her as gently as possible and tried not to sniffle. “I’m so glad you’re okay! I looked for you earlier, and I was so certain I saw the back of your head, with the long hair and everything, so I didn’t think to ask for you.”

“That wasn’t me,” Marta said calmly, like this was some sort of debate instead of an almost-tragedy.

“I know!” I said, wiping my eyes. “It must have been one of the Blue Bloods! I don’t know them all, so I didn’t pay enough attention. This is horrible, I just—I’m really, *really* glad you’re okay.”

Marta stared at me, startled. “Are you crying?”

I sniffled. “Kind of?”

“Um, thanks?” she said awkwardly, looking genuinely surprised by my reaction.

I didn’t have the time to process her expression because Lilac—*LILAC!*—was right here, hanging out, looking really healthy. His cheeks were flushed, albeit a little smudged from the smoke. His T-shirt and jeans were also smudged, his hair sticking out in every direction, but he had a very normal human boy look that definitely did not suggest that he was dead.

“*So*,” I said, staring at him before glancing at the firefighters. They were still trotting around and helping people, so I couldn’t exactly ask Lilac the question that was in my mind at the moment. Which was:

*Oh my god, WHY AREN’T YOU A GHOST?*

“Lilac,” I said, staring at him.

He arched an eyebrow. “Cali.”

“You look…” I glanced at the redheaded firefighter who was passing by. “You look—”

“Handsome?” Lilac said, smirking at me.

Marta scoffed, rolling her eyes. For someone who had inhaled a lot of smoke, she seemed to be doing a lot better. I wondered if being a medium helped her heal faster, like it did with werewolves. Either way, I needed to refocus here. On Lilac.

“You look alive,” I said awkwardly, finally finishing my sentence.

Lilac chuckled. “I know. Cool, right?”

I reached out to touch him, to make sure that this was real, but then Xavier walked up to us. He looked like he was ready to pounce.

“Hey!” he barked. He stepped forward, coming between Lilac and me. He grabbed him by the shirt. “How the hell do we know you’re really Lilac?”

**Episode 1554**

LOLA

Jay and I were walking down the hallway. He was supposed to be leaving “at once” per Irma’s instructions, but I’d been able to postpone it, just for a little bit. Just so we could say goodbye. He was my mate, after all.

I felt weird thinking that, still.

*My mate.*

*My… mate.*

I mulled over it and looked up at him, my heart skipping a beat. Because, *right*, it could still beat! And do all that other fun stuff, like send blood rushing to my cheeks. It still felt a little foreign to me as a concept, the whole mate thing, but that kiss earlier really said otherwise.

It made me feel all tingly just thinking about it.

Still, though, I really didn’t remember the feeling, so it would probably be best if Jay left and I continued to get my vampire tendencies and lifestyle under control.

“Do you have any idea if Winifred is going to keep breathing down my neck?” Jay said then. “It feels like she’s a little obsessed with me, honestly.”

I scowled and turned to see Winifred. The tween girl was literally bouncing on her feet directly behind us. *Ugh*, couldn’t Irma have picked someone else to be my guard? This one was just so eager, and she kept staring at Jay like she wanted to eat him. Like, literally.

On the upside, though, at least it wasn’t Jacqueline who was following us around. Not that she was really fit to do something like that right now, with her eyes and everything…

“As long as you are still on the premises, you should be glad that my breath is the only thing on your neck, and not my fangs, wolf,” Winifred told Jay sharply. Her voice was so high-pitched and annoying, I wanted to swat her away like a fly.

“Can you just stop?” I said, rolling my eyes. “We’re spending our last few moments together, as it was *agreed*. Because we are *mates*.”

I emphasized that last word, glaring at the girl, and grabbed Jay’s hand for emphasis.

The second our fingers locked, my heart swelled. He squeezed my hand, a tender move that he executed with so much ease. His gaze was soft on mine, and I just about melted like a stick of butter. It was weird how easily he could do that to me, with just a look, with just a touch. I wasn’t sure exactly how it happened, the mechanics of it, but I knew it felt intense.

Did my reaction have to do with the mate bond?

Was the hypnotherapy I’d done with Ras not strong enough to combat it?

Because that would certainly explain what had happened earlier…

“Isn’t this that guy’s office?” Jay said curtly, pulling me out of my thoughts, making my heart start racing all over again. I was a little turned on and very much startled, and I wondered if this was just what life was like with a mate. Having a constant rush of emotions fluttering inside you.

“Lola?” Jay pressed, and I realized he was pointing at a door to our right. Sure enough, we were right outside Emmett’s office. He’d told us to meet him there just before Jay left. He’d mentioned a possible solution for us.

The man was not trustworthy.

Nevertheless, I had been playing his words over and over in my head, and I couldn’t help but wonder what he could possibly have in mind. And after everything that had happened between us, why would he be willing to help me out? What if this was a trap?

I’d kind of flipped out about the lab, stealing my file and everything. And I mean, Jay had fought Emmett, had almost torn the guy apart. Jay hated Emmett, so the fact that he was entertaining the thought of seeing him again was… odd.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I whispered to Jay.

He shrugged. “At this point, why not?”

He seemed so cool and collected that it grounded me as well. Taking a deep breath, I nodded.

Jay squeezed my hand and muttered, “Don’t be nervous, okay?”

I stared at Jay and realized that, surprisingly enough, I wasn’t nervous. “I’m fine,” I said truthfully.

Jay raised an eyebrow, looking at me up and down. “You’re practically bouncing on the balls of your feet. You do this when you’re on edge or nervous. I’ve seen it many times.”

His observation was a little weird. He spoke like he knew me better than I knew myself. I didn’t know what to make of it, but I didn’t have the time to ask him to elaborate, because Emmett opened the door. His green eyes flickered between us, and then he smiled.

It was sketchy. A beautiful smile, but very sketchy.

“Oh, there you are!” he said pleasantly. “Come on in.”

Winifred cleared her throat from behind us. “Excuse me?”

All three of us turned to look at the demon child.

“Not so fast,” she said, raising an index finger. “I’m supposed to be guarding her.”

I was the “her.” Winifred said the word with so much derision that I huffed.

Emmett eyed Winifred carefully and put on an even more charming smile. “Lola is just meeting with a professor. Surely she can come in while you wait out here?”

Winifred squinted at Emmett, frowning.

He continued to put on the charm. “I’ll be sure to tell Irma what a wonderful job you’ve been doing.”

That appeased the tween vampire. She shrugged. “Okay then, I guess.”

Emmett glanced between Jay and me and offered a curt nod. He opened the door wider to let us in. I swallowed roughly. We moved over the threshold, and Emmett closed the door behind us. His pleasant smile vanished, and he didn’t waste a second on pleasantries.

“Come with me,” he said, gesturing for Jay and me to follow.

He went straight for the bust and pushed it over. The door to the lab opened, just like I had known it would, but Jay froze next to me.

“What the hell is *that*?” he demanded. “Where are we going?”

He had put himself in front of me protectively, and it made me feel funny.

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to reassure him. “That’s just the extension to his office.”

Emmett nodded. “It’s just my lab. It would be better to chat there.”

Jay gave Emmett a suspicious look. “Before we go in, I want to know more about the deal you have in mind.”

Emmett’s voice was indulgent. “I assure you, it would be better to discuss this in my lab. You’ll find out exactly what I have in mind in just a moment.”

Grumbling, Jay nodded, and all three of us moved past the secret chamber and into Emmett’s lab. I noticed there were different test tubes, new samples, and a few other small changes. Emmett had been busy. Maybe the encounter with Jacqueline had sparked something.

Jay looked shocked as he pointed at a baby bat, floating in a jar. In a whisper, he told me, “The hell is that? So creepy, I—”

“I’m glad you’re both here,” Emmett said, whipping around to face us. “I believe that what I’m about to say will help everyone out.”

Jay arched his eyebrows. “That’s probably what you said to the baby bat in the jar, huh?”

Emmett ignored him and turned to me. “I’m being honest, Lola.”

“What did you have in mind?” I asked, even though I didn’t trust him.

“Jay can stay here in the lab. He won’t have to leave Tottenville,” Emmett said.

Silence.

Jay stared at Emmett, his grip on my hand getting tighter.

“What’s the catch?” he asked, his voice gruff.

Emmett looked amused, almost. There was something so arrogant about his expression that I wanted to punch it. “If Lola agrees to be my lab assistant, then the two of you can see each other.”

That sounded too amazing to be true.

“Again, what’s the catch? Why would you agree to this?” Jay asked, voicing my concerns. It was kind of freaky how in sync we were sometimes. Maybe it was a mate thing?

“I need the help,” Emmett said, looking between Jay and me. Then he just stared at me. I tipped my chin up, holding his gaze. “Especially after what happened with Jacqueline. And I know I shouldn’t have told you to push your mate away.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You’re right about that,” I said. “But what’s the catch? You’re being way too nice right now, Emmett.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” he said defensively. “This is my way of apologizing.”

I was starting to think that this could be good. It could be good for me and my, *you know*, mate. I snuck a glance at Jay. His handsome face and sexy mouth were very concerned.

But then, Jay spoke up again. “If Lola’s your assistant, then what am I gonna be?”

Emmett took a step closer to Jay, leveling him with an intense stare. “The perfect test subject.”

**Episode 1555**

GREYSON

I was in the woods by the house, still in my wolf form. I was keeping a close eye on the house in the distance. It looked like the fire had been contained, but I was pretty sure that substantial damage had been done to the residence.

*I’m sorry, Joss.*

My old Luna had put so much time and effort into picking out that house, and she had done an amazing job. The two of us had had our differences, but she’d been good at her job. Mindful. The idea of her seeing the house as it was right now made me wince.

It just wasn’t right.

I should have taken better care of the house. I should have protected it from Silas.

I should have protected *Joss* from Silas.

Ignoring the way my chest hurt at that thought, I tried to figure out whether the firefighters had actually seen me in my wolf form or not. I wanted to be mad at the humans for meddling, but at the same time, we wouldn’t have been able to deal with the fire on our own. If it hadn’t been for them, the entire forest could have burned down.

Yet another way that I’d failed my pack.

Angry at myself and my dead father and the universe, I trotted closer to the scene, just enough to see everybody huddled up together. I was pretty pissed off—I wanted to be there for Cali and the pack. Instead, I was stuck here, in wolf form, healing. When I got a glimpse of Cali under a blanket with Xavier, I internally cursed.

Did he really have to hold her so close? Was that a necessity? Next thing you knew, they’d start making out in front of everybody. In front of the firefighters. The firefighters did not get paid enough to see my brother make out with my mate. They probably had problems of their own, without adding any of our nonsense.

I was very much fucking bothered that Xavier was there for Cali, and I was not. I knew that I wasn’t supposed to be feeling this way, especially not after the million talks we’d had about it, but it was in a wolf’s nature to be territorial. It was a miracle Xavier and I hadn’t slit each other’s throats yet. It was—

*Wait...*

I squinted. Was that Lilac? Was that *Lilac* standing over Marta and fussing over her? Had I lost my fucking mind? Wasn’t the kid supposed to be a ghost? Then again, death was occasionally questionable around here. But still. Could it really be him? In full, real person mode for all to see?

What the hell was going on?

Determined, I was moving closer to get a better look when a sharp pang went through my leg. My leg buckled, and I winced in pain. There was blood coming from the wound on my thigh. It was still bleeding, even though it should have healed by now. Growling, I moved my snout over the wound and licked it, trying to clean it up.

It started hurting so damn much that any kind of friction made everything worse.

I had no idea why it hadn’t healed yet.

Grunting, I shifted back to human to inspect it. Blood ran all the way down my left leg. I crouched down to take a closer look. The wound was really deep, and it was definitely a piercing wound from one of Lester’s wolf claws. *Fuck*. Why the hell wasn’t it healing?

This wasn’t normal.

And then a thought hit me.

Pip had died after being wounded by a revenant.

Great. Just great. I was going to die. Or, maybe I wasn’t, but this definitely didn’t look good.

I stood up, hissing. I tried to shake off the pain as I looked back through the trees and toward the house. I decided that since the wound wasn’t healing, it wouldn’t matter if the firefighters saw me. I started to walk closer, but after a couple of steps, the pain became so overwhelming that my knees gave out, and I fell into the snow.

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When I opened my eyes again, it wasn’t winter, and there was no snow. It was a crisp fall evening. I was sitting in front of a bonfire that I was apparently making. Because that was my style—having visions in which I was building fires after being possibly fatally wounded by revenants.

To my right, there was a blue tent, and just as I was wondering what the hell that was about, Cali emerged from it. As ever, she looked good enough to eat.

“I just managed to get the sleeping bags zipped together,” she said, glaring at me. “Why did you want to go camping again?”

“Mostly to torture you,” I said in a deadpan tone.

She huffed and threw a bunch of leaves at my face.

I laughed. “I know you don’t love camping, but you have to admit that it’s beautiful out here.” I pointed at the sky. “The stars are going to start coming out soon.”

Cali rolled her eyes and zipped up her coat all the way. “Stop being such an annoying romantic and build that fire. I’m going to freeze my ass off!”

“We can’t have that.” I nodded, focusing on the fire.

She scoffed.

I got it going, and in just a few moments, the flames were intense. I turned to look at her, smirking. “Is that better?”

Cali sat down next to me on the log, a small smile on her lips. “That helps a lot.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You know, I could help you warm up faster…”

She huffed, swatting my arm. “Stop teasing.”

“No teasing. I plan on delivering,” I said, leaning forward to kiss her cheek, wrapping my arm around her. I brushed my lips over hers and felt her melt against me, looking up at me through her eyelashes.

“I mean, you can do that again if you want,” she said, and I chuckled.

I pulled her onto my lap, and she yelped, giggling and wrapping her arms around my neck. My hands moved from her hip to her ass, pulling her closer to me as I nuzzled her neck.

She squeaked when I brushed up between her legs, shivering. “I am *not* going to have sex with you out here in the open and get eaten by bears, Greyson.”

I licked the corner of her mouth. “I’m the most dangerous thing in this forest, love. I think you’re fine.”

She blushed so hard that it was beyond fucking sexy. She grabbed my face and kissed me so enthusiastically that I was sure I had this in the bag. She writhed on my lap and moaned into my mouth, pulling my hand to slide it up her back, under her coat. Her skin had grown hot, and I was adoring every second of this.

I adored her.

I broke the kiss, my hand cradling her cheek, my thumb brushing her lower lip as I whispered, “Happy one year anniversary, love.”

She grinned, kissing my nose. “I love you.”

I arched an eyebrow. “By the way, my mom keeps nagging me about when we’re going to start having kids…”

Cali made a face. “She needs to chill out.”

I laughed. “I don’t know. It doesn’t sound so bad though, especially the making them part…”

Cali rolled her eyes and was about to respond when suddenly…

She was torn away from me.

She was pulled and hauled and clawed away from me, her scream echoing through the forest and in my ears. I roared and chased after her, after something I knew wasn’t real, but still felt terrifying.

What the hell was going on?

Where was…

Where was she?

I was running through the forest, calling her name, panting, when suddenly, the air around me changed.

It got heavier.

I was shocked to see Silas’s cabin before me.

My heart dropped.

“*Get away from her*,” I growled.

Silas laughed. He was holding the Orb with one hand and a struggling Cali with the other. “Life can be so fragile, can’t it? One moment you’re happy, and the next, it’s all gone.”

“If you hurt my mate, I’ll—”

“What?” Silas sneered. “Will you try to kill me again? That didn’t work so well last time, did it?” My father smiled, and it was an awful sight.

The Orb’s blue light started to glow brighter.

“I can see why you’re so drawn to her,” Silas said, squeezing Cali’s throat and making her whimper.

I needed to figure out how to get my mate away from him.

“Let. Her. *Go!*” I hissed.

“Actually, you’re the one who needs to let her go. It’s the only way for you to reach your full power,” Silas told me with a cold smile.

“I don’t want that! I’m not like you! I don’t want power!” I shouted.

Silas’s terrifying grin grew. “Don’t you?”

I didn’t have time to speak. To move. To breathe. The second he finished his sentence, Silas broke Cali’s neck in one swift motion.

I howled in agony as her body fell to the ground.

This wasn’t real—this couldn’t be real, but it still hurt so much I could’ve died. I was frozen, unable to move, to run to her, but then…

Cali stirred.

She picked herself up in a smooth, quick movement.

Her eyes were glowing a sinister, burning orange.

She stared at me, tilting her head to the side like she didn’t know me.

“Join me, son,” Silas said, reaching out his hand.

*Join me.*

\*\*\*

When I came to, I was on the ground, in the snow. My whole body felt like it was burning. I looked down at my gaping wound. It was pulsating, on fire.

Could that really have been Silas in my dream?

Could fighting with Lester have had a lasting effect on me? An… *infection*?

The question was a ghostly whisper in my brain.

*Could I be turning into a revenant?*