**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 3**

**Episodes 123-188**

**Episode 123**

“Okay. But before I tell you, I need a knife,” I told her, looking around the room for something sharp and pointy. This secret was no laughing matter.

Lola’s eyes widened. “Don’t tell me you’re going to slit my throat after you tell me this big dumb secret of yours?”

“Just your palm,” I said, matter-of-factly.

“Huh?”

“It’s a secret that requires a blood oath.” It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Lola, it was just that I’d trust her more with a blood oath. That seemed like a pretty wolf-bear thing to do.

Lola rolled her eyes. “Did you get more extra than normal during the time I was a wolf, or have you always been this dramatic?”

“THIS IS A BIG DEAL!”

“Well then just tell me, and stop being crazy!”

I sighed. “Have you ever heard of a Dua Lipa?”

Lola sat up, puzzled. “You mean the singer?”

“No! I mean the,” I struggled to find the term, “DuoLingo.”

Lola stared at me for a second, then said, “Are you trying to learn…French? Is this a bedroom thing?”

“What?”

“What?”

“Ugh, no!” I said, frustrated, trying to remember exactly what Big Mac had said. The next time someone tried to tell me something about my destiny, I was going to make them write it down. “Big Mac told me about it. It was something long and terrible sounding.”

“Well, what did she call it?”

“I don’t know, I don’t speak Latin!”

“Maybe you *do* need DuoLingo.”

I rolled my eyes at her, trying to remember. “Oh! Due destini!”

To my surprise, Lola laughs. “You mean the fairytale?”

“What fairytale?” I said. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“You’ve never heard the story of due destini? Oh my god, EVERYONE knows that story. It would be in picture books if werewolves made picture books.”

“You’re forgetting that I was not raised by wolf-bears,” I reminded her.

“Oh, right. Anyway, it’s one of those bedtime stories that everyone gets told as a kid. It’s like Hansel and Gretel, or Red Riding Hood. Only our version of Red Riding Hood is VERY different.”

I felt uneasy. Fairytales didn’t typically have the best endings: murdered, burned alive, eaten by a wolf. Something told me that this one wasn’t going to end well, either.

“How does the due destini story end?”

Lola raised an eyebrow at me. “Don’t you want to know how it begins first?”

“I was kinda hoping for the Cliff Notes version,” I said, feeling a little impatient. “Or like, presented to me in a series of memes.”

She shook her head. “Nah, you need to hear the whole thing. Otherwise you won’t understand it and ask a lot of dumbass questions like you always do,” she told me. She moved over on her bed and patted the empty space. “Sit, it’s story time.”

“Fine,” I grumbled, moving to curl up with her on the bed.

“Okay, once upon a time—”

“Does it really start off with ‘once upon a time’?” I interrupted. “I thought wolf-bears would be more creative with their fairytales.”

“See? This is what I was talking about with the asking dumbass questions. New rule: no talking during story time,” she warned. “Anyway, once upon a time there was a girl named Cassandra, and she was the daughter of the Alpha and Luna of one of the first two packs on earth. When she turned fifteen, she was told she was fated to mate with Arion, the son of the Alpha from the other pack.”

“Fifteen? Gross, that’s hella underage and mad creepy.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Chill, okay? Arion was fifteen too, and this was back in the olden days where the life expectancy was like thirty or something.”

“Depressing.”

“It’s not that weird in werewolf culture anyway. Jay and I were mated when I was ten—and we were best friends, so it wasn’t a big deal.”

“Still weird.”

“No talking during story time,” she repeated. “Anyway, on her eighteenth birthday, Cassandra and Arion were supposed to get married,”

“On her birthday? Weird.”

“*SHHH!* NO TALKING! Anyway, when the day arrived, a rogue wolf-bear named Symeon attacked the wedding party and kidnapped Cassandra. He took her to his secret lair on top of a mountain and told her that he was her true mate. He said that if Cassandra stayed with Arion, Arion would be doomed. At first, Cassandra didn’t believe him because, hellooo, you’re not going to believe anything a kidnapper says. She didn’t trust him, but she was also strongly attracted to him. It was a connection she couldn’t pull away from. She dreamed about him, felt what he felt—everything she felt with Arion, she also felt with him. In the two weeks they spent together, Cassandra was in love with both Symeon and Arion.”

I remembered my dream with Greyson. How I’d heard him talk when he was in his wolf form. I leaned in to listen closely, staring up at Lola as she talked.

“Naturally, Cassandra was fucked up over this, because she was torn between two true loves. Arion and Symeon were both her mates.”

“WAIT, WHAT?” I cried out. “HOW THE HELL IS THAT EVEN POSSIBLE?”

“WHAT DID I SAY ABOUT TALKING DURING STORY TIME? LEARN TO FOLLOW DIRECTIONS AND NOT BE RUDE!” She glared at me. “Now, where was I? Oh yeah. So, to figure out which mate she truly belonged with, she told Symeon she needed to return to Arion. After she’d spent a fortnight with him, she’d decide who she was meant to be with.”

“Oh, so like *The Bachelor*? The fantasy suites.”

“Yeah, kinda I guess, only no roses. Or film crew. Or fancy dresses. Anyway, after spending a fortnight with Arion and a fortnight with Symeon, she still couldn’t decide who her true mate was and ran away.”

I leaned forward to hear the rest of the story, but Lola was already settling back down in the bed, her head resting on the pillows.

“And?” I asked, eager for the rest of the story.

“And what? The end. Slam book,” she said, pretending to shut a book with her hands.

“*The end?* That’s it? She ran away? No, ‘and they all lived happily ever after’ bullshit?”

“They can’t all be happy endings.”

“Well that was a shitty fairytale,” I said, crossing my arms and pouting. Leave it to wolf-bears to tell shitty fairytales. What a rip off.

“Well, there are various endings,” Lola said. “I mean, it’s an old ass story. There are a ton of different interpretations of what happened. It really depends on what pack you’re from, what your parents told you. There are too many ending to keep track, honestly.”

“Well tell me the ending you were told,” I pressed, desperate to know the answer. Ugh, why couldn’t a nicer fairytale be happening to me? *Beauty and the Beast* had ended reasonably well.

“Okay, but it’s kind of depressing,” Lola warned me. “So Cassandra runs away all dramatic and shit, and her two mates run after her. They finally catch up to her at the edge of a cliff. They tell her that she has to choose. Cassandra says that she can’t, and would rather die than choose between her two loves. So she shifts into a wolf and rips her heart out and falls over the edge of the cliffs and onto the sharp rocks below.”

“THIS STORY IS FOR CHILDREN?” I said, gaping. How was that even possible? Weren’t fairytales supposed to be at least PG-rated?!

Lola shrugged. “All fairytales are horrible. Ever read the original *Little Mermaid* story?”

“So what did Cassandra do after that? Did she get up?”

“What? No! Weren’t you listening? This isn’t a Disney movie! She ripped her HEART out of her BODY, and then fell onto POINTY ASS ROCKS. That bitch isn’t getting up.”

“What the fuck? What happened to her mates?”

“They were so wracked with grief that they leapt after her and also died on the rocks below.”

“YOU WERE TOLD THIS AS A CHILD? IS THIS WHY ALL YOU WOLF-BEARS ARE FUCKED UP?” I yelled. Well, this certainly explained a lot.

“I did a book report on it once, I think.”

“Well, now I know why Disney didn’t make a movie out of this—it’s depressing as shit.”

Lola shrugged. “It’s a sexist cautionary take about promiscuity or some nonsense. Anyway, why are you so interested in wolf-bear fairytales all of a sudden? If you’re trying to distract me from your precious little secret, it won’t work.”

I thought about it. About Greyson and Xavier and my feelings for both of them. My love for Xavier, my strange pull toward Greyson. Just thinking about it made my stomach hurt. Suddenly, I understood what Big Mac had been talking about. *You will have your heart torn and tested.*

Well fuck.

“Cali, hello?” Lola waved her hand in front of me. “The secret?”

“Big Mac mentioned the story to me. Said it was my destiny.” I said, swallowing hard. “I think I’m Cassandra from the story.”

**Episode 124**

Lola laughed so hard she fell back into her pillows, tears forming in her eyes. “Are you for real?”

This was not the reaction I’d been expecting.

“SEE, THIS IS EXACTLY WHY I DON’T TELL YOU SECRETS,” I said hotly. “You either blab or you laugh at me.”

“I only laugh at you when you act like an idiot.”

I huffed. “Well, when I have to tear my heart out and toss myself off a cliff, I hope you find it just as hilarious.”

“Oh come on, don’t be so dramatic. It’s just a fairytale.”

“Big Mac said, and I quote, ‘you are a due destini’.”

Lola gave me a skeptical look. “Are you sure that’s what she said? Your Latin isn’t that great.”

“Fair, but I know that’s what she said, and the story you just told fit in perfectly with what she was talking about. Cassandra is me.”

“Um, we have to remember who you got this information from,” Lola said. “Namely, a lady who lives in a shack down by the river. I’m not sure I’d believe everything she said. She’s a little on the weird side.”

“Well, she *is* a witch,” I said matter-of-factly.

Lola ignored that. “I mean, who else makes moonshine?”

“She does make one hell of a batch of moonshine,” I said fondly. “But that’s not the point. Didn’t she help you out? Didn’t she transform you back into a human? Isn’t that some fairytale magic?”

“But—”

“But nothing! She has clearly proven that she knows about magical stuff.”

“Yes, she did save me from being stuck in my wolf form. But Cali, the due destini is just a fairytale, it’s not real. Hell, it probably wasn’t even based on real events. I mean, you can’t just rip your own heart out—you have a rib cage, for crying out loud!”

I rolled my eyes. “Big Mac said not to take it literally. That I would be metaphorically ripping my heart out. Duh.”

“You really needed her to spell that out for you?”

“Shut up!”

“All I’m saying is that I’m not putting a lot of stock in what a moonshiner has to say.”

“If the story is completely made up, then how do you explain Greyson?”

Lola turned to me. “Greyson? What about that savage, flea-bitten Rogue? What does he have to do with anything?”

“There’s something else I have to tell you. When you were in your weird coma thing, I went to visit you.”

“Aw,” Lola cooed, clearly touched.

“Yeah, it was sweet. I’m the best. Anyway, while I was in your room I overheard Xavier telling Colton that Greyson has been going around saying I’m his mate.”

“Greyson’s mate?” Lola said, sitting fully up in bed now. “That’s impossible. Everybody knows that you can only have one mate.”

“I know, but isn’t it interesting? That first Xavier is my mate, then Greyson saves my life—*twice*—and now he’s telling people I’m his mate. It’s just like the fairytale.”

“This is nothing like the fairytale because this is real life and that was a FAIRYTALE! MAKE BELIEVE! Probably something created by the patriarchy to slut-shame girls. In any case, it’s. Not. Real.”

“Then how do you explain the dream?”

“What dream?”

“Oh right, I forgot. You missed a lot in twenty-four hours.”

“Clearly.”

“Anyway, have you ever had a sexy dream about anyone other than Jay?”

Lola paused for a moment, tilting her head in thought. “I may have had one about Zac Efron, but Jay was in the dream too. So no. Why? Oh god!” she gasped. “Do *not* tell me you had a wet dream about Greyson? In Big Mac’s house? Spill all the deets—NOW!”

I rolled my eyes. “Gross! Get your mind out of the gutter. It was nothing like that. We didn’t even dream kiss.”

“Then how the hell is *that* a sexy dream?”

“Well, we were in bed together.”

“And..?”

“We had our arms around each other. Like, embracing.”

“Yeah…”

“And we were so close to each other that our lips were almost touching.”

“Go on…”

I smacked her on the arm. “Stop being a pervert for five seconds!”

Lola huffed. “Wet blanket,” she mumbled.

I ignored her and continued with my story. “Anyway, it was more like we were together—like *actually* together. And he was playing with my hair and complimenting me and I felt so safe and warm with him. It was like we were in love or something,” I admitted, blushing at the memory.

“I’ll admit it, Greyson is major eye candy. All the boys in that family are sexy as hell. But he’s also a homicidal maniac, and that shit’s not cute.”

“*Everyone* in that family is a borderline homicidal maniac,” I added.

“Maybe, but Greyson is actually psycho. You need to stay as far away from that hot mess as possible. Maybe even farther than that, to keep him out of your dreams.”

But something didn’t feel right. I didn’t feel afraid of him. I didn’t even think he was dangerous. “But what if it’s true? What I am a dewy crostini?”

Lola rolled her eyes. “This conversation is so ridiculous that I’m not even going to bother correcting you again. The point is that you’re *not* that, so stop worrying about it. You’re human, remember? These myths are all about wolf-bears.”

“Then how do you explain my dream? And what Greyson said? And his saving me?”

“A super sexy man saved your life, give yourself a break, girl. You probably had a little erotic fantasy about him being all Superman and shit. You’re human—it’s fine.”

“But why do I feel so guilty?”

“Because you are a human with a stupid guilt complex. Get over it.”

“You should totally have majored in counseling. You would have been amazing at it.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Shut up and go jump Xavier’s bones. You’ll forget all about stupid Greyson. Remember, the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else.”

Life lessons from Lola.

Still, I couldn’t help but smile. Maybe she was right—maybe I just needed to bang it out. I’d been prevented from getting laid at the hot springs, and then again this morning—maybe I just needed to laid. I may have been new to sex, but I’d always heard it solved all kinds of problems. It was like the duct tape of life.

“Thanks, Lola,” I said, giving her a hug.

She hugged me back. “Any time girl. But do me a favor and try not to make too much noise, I’m exhausted,” she said with a wink.

“Gross!” I said, giving her a playful shove that she returned.

After I said goodnight to Lola, I went looking for Xavier. I found him in the hallway with a short, square-looking man wearing denim overalls and a frown. I could tell by his face that he was getting a headache thinking about all the repairs he was going to have to do. I didn’t blame him.

“Ah, Cali, there you are,” Xavier said, smiling at me. “Phil this is my girlfriend, Caliana. Cali, you remember Phil, he’s going to be fixing your bedroom and bathroom.”

“Oh, thank god,” I said, relieved that I’d have a working bathroom again soon.

Phil looked me up and down with a shocked look on his face. “She’s your girlfriend now? She’s breaks *everything*.”

Xavier just chucked, a grin on his face. “She is a menace, but this wasn’t all her fault.”

I glared at him. It wasn’t my fault a stupid rogue wolf-bear followed me upstairs and Xavier broke my damn window.

I huffed at him, my hands on my hips. “Can I use your shower?” I asked him.

“Sure. Follow me,” he said.

“Remember you didn’t hire me to fix any plumbing.”

Xavier flashed him a mischievous grin. “Yeah, but it’ll be worth it.’

Cocky wolf-bear.

I followed Xavier up to his room.

“Towels are in the closet,” he told me.

“Shut the door,” I told him, trying to use my sexy voice. It ended up sounding like I’d swallowed something.

“I thought you wanted to take a shower?” Xavier said. “Are you okay?”

“Just shut the door,” I told him again, this time in a breathy whisper as I took off my shirt.

He immediately slammed the door, his gaze focused on my chest.

I’d fucked my way into this mess, and I was bound and determined to fuck my way out of it. I was going to get any thought of Greyson out of my system if it was the last thing I did. And my hot boyfriend was the perfect solution.

I walked over to Xavier with a coy smile on my face as I unhooked my bra and tossed it to the floor, enjoying how wide his eyes went. I didn’t quite recognize myself either, but I was leaning into it.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and hooked my left leg around this waist. Our bodies were close, our lips barely inches away from each other.

“I’m not going to take a shower until you take me,” I whispered, before pulling him into a deep kiss.

**Episode 125**

I pushed Xavier up against the wall, our tongues teasing each other as his hands moved down toward my waist, his hips grinding up against mine.

Moving my hands down from his neck to chest, I pulled his t-shirt off him, eager to get him as naked as possible. A thought he seemed to agree with. He eagerly opened up my jeans and pulled them down. I squealed with delight as I practically ripped off his pants, the button popping off. More jeans to purchase.

Xavier chuckled darkly, a sexy little grin on his face. “Demanding little thing. What’s made you so frisky tonight?”

“You don’t seem upset about it,” I said with a blush. I gasped loudly as two of Xavier’s fingers dipped into my panties, proving just how wet and horny I actually was. Which only made me blush harder.

“Doesn’t make it any less true,” he said, a wolfish look in his eyes and stopped teasing me and instead brought his fingers to his lips. I watched him lick his hand… This wasn’t at all like feeding each other in the car. The action made me both a bit embarrassed and even more aroused.

I needed his touch on me. Again. Now. “We were interrupted back at the hot springs and this morning, and I need you,” I whined out, gasping loudly when Xavier’s fingers returned to my skin and started rubbing tight circles on my clit. *Fuck,* I thought. *His fingers are amazing*. *They deserve an Oscar or an Emmy or like, a People’s Choice Award. Voted Best Sexy Fingers in the Bedroom two years running.*

“Yeah, Colton has a bad habit of turning up at all the wrong times,” he said, his fingers continued to work me as he placed kisses down my neck and chest.

“Can we *not* talk about your brother while I’m trying to sleep with you?”

“I thought you always wanted to talk,” he said. His lips moved to my left breast and started to suck, causing me to moan. Very loudly.

So much for promising Lola I would be quiet.

“Talk dirty to me,” I cried out as his tongue whirled around my nipple, sucking so hard on my skin I knew it was going to leave a mark. I moaned again.

He took my breast out of my mouth and continued to play with my clit. “If I talk dirty to you, then how can I use my mouth to suck and lick and bite every single fucking inch of that horny little perfect fucking body of yours?”

I gasped. “That was so dirty!” I yelled. “Go into that bathroom and wash your mouth out with soap!”

“Shut up,” he said with an eye roll as he flipped me around so my back was up against the door. “Now you tell me something dirty.”

I paused, trying to think of something good—an impossible task with Xavier’s fingers teasing all around pussy and his hot, wet mouth on a sensitive spot on my neck. Totally not fair.

“Your eggplant emoji makes me want to drink moonshine… in the moonlight… at night,” I managed to mumble.

Xavier stopped everything he was doing and turned to look at me. “What the fuck?” he asked, his face twisted in confusion.

“Uh, you know,” I said, biting my lip. “The eggplant emoji is supposed to represent your dick and the—” My words where cut off by Xavier’s hand over my mouth.

His body shook against mine. He was clearly trying not to burst out laughing. “How about I talk and you listen? Deal?”

I nodded, feeling myself going even more red—more from embarrassment than lust, this time. Seriously, *eggplant emoji?* What the hell was wrong with me? There was nothing sexy about nightshade vegetables. Why did I—

My thoughts were instantly cut off his Xavier’s mouth replacing his hand on my lips, talking full control of the situation—his hands went to finger me and holy shit. Holy *shiiiiiit*.

Then he stopped.

“Bastard,” I half moaned, half screamed, which only made the wicked smile on his lips grow. He leaned down and whispered in my ear. “Get on my fucking bed you little slut,” he hissed, making me both shocked and horny.

I opened my mouth to speak, but he silenced me with a light slap on my ass, grinning like the devil.

I hurried over toward the bed and laid down. Within two seconds he was on top of me again, my legs spread out. He looked down at me, his hand rubbing up and down his hard cock as his eyes raked down my body. I shivered with desire and want.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous,” he groaned. “So fucking hot and so fucking *mine*.”

I wimped out, my body aching with need. “Xavier! I need…”

He smirked. “I love watching you come apart on me. Watching you beg for me. Tell me what you want, baby.”

“I want you. I want you in me. Please…please, Xavier!” I cried out.

He leaned forward and grabbed a condom from his bedside table. In a matter of seconds, he put in on and then his cock was deep inside me.

“God, you’re so fucking wet and deep and warm,” he moaned out, waiting for me to adjust to his size. When I felt that I was ready, I told him, and he lifted up my hips and thrust into me again, making me scream with pleasure.

“It’s like your pussy was made for me. You’re mine, Caliana. All fucking mine and I’ll prove it to you by fucking you right through the mattress, because I’m your fucking Alpha,” he vowed. I clung to him, soaking in each and every one of his words as we moved together, deeper, then faster.

He continued his unrelenting pace, continued to whisper dirty things into my ear, calling me a needy slut, showing me who was Alpha. I babbled nonsense, my body on fire with feeling. How could I have ever looked at another man? No passion could ever compare to this…

“Xavier I’m close,” I said, grabbing at his hair.

“Yeah?” he asked, his voice rough. “I want you to come for me.”

At his words, I gasped and we were both there. We both gave one last cry and came together, clinging to each other.

He looked down at me, his face covered in sweat as he gave me a tender kiss on the lips. “Mine,” he said, smiling.

I smiled back. “Yours.”

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When we came down from our mutual high, we both lay down on the bed, cuddling. Xavier was already asleep, breathing steadily and deeply. I wasn’t surprised—we’d gotten pretty into it.

We’d been maybe a little too loud though, and I was sure Maya or Colton would have something to say about it. It was totally worth it, though.

*Mine*, that was what he’d called me. All his. I laughed, thinking about how stupid I’d been just an hour ago. Thinking I was Cassandra in that stupid story… Screw Greyson and that creepy ass dream. It had probably just been a weird moonshine dream. My mate was lying next to me in my bed, and he was the best.

And we’d just had the most passionate, dizzyingly wonderful sex.

So there was ya know, that.

I snuggled up close so that I was facing him. I placed a few tender kisses around his jawline and neck as my hands moved down along his ripped torso. Goodness, his body was so sexy it was stupid. How did he find the time to work out? I’d never seen him exercise. How could he possibly get and maintain this six-pack? Maybe transforming into a wolf-bear so often was like a P90X work out. Plus all the wolf-bear fights had to keep a guy in killer shape. Xavier looked like a fucking *Abercrombie and Fitch* model.

I grinned to myself and I continued to work my way down, placing butterfly kisses along his chest. Oh, if the people at school could see me now, dating a smoking hot wolf-bear who called me beautiful as he fucked me into the mattress. I thought of my old middle school bully, who used to call me all sorts of ugly names and had said that no guy would even look me, let alone date me. I wondered if I still had her number. I was very tempted to send her a selfie with me and Xavier in bed with the message: ‘Who’s the loser now, bitch? Good luck with your baby daddy drama’.

My thoughts of revenge were brushed aside when I stretched out, feeling a familiar tingling of goosebumps on my skin, a deep chill in my body. I shrugged the weird feeling off. I was right next to my mate and basking in the afterglow of really-Earth-shatteringly-good sex.

I rubbed Xavier’s strong arms, wondering if I gave him the same kind of feeling he gave me. I wondered what he thought when he thought about me. My stupid secretive wolf-bear.

Xavier’s eyes slowly started to open as I touched him. “What are you doing?” he asked, voice thick with sleep.

“I have goosebumps and I was wondering if you did too,” I explained. But Xavier’s skin was still soft and smooth.

“Are you cold?”

I shook my head. “No. But I think I get them from you. Why don’t you get them from me?”

Xavier shrugged. “Maybe it’s a human thing.”

“Maybe,” I said.

Then I turned around to see Colton, standing right in front of our bed.

I let out a scream, sitting upright in bed and covering myself with the sheet. “WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING HERE? GET THE FUCK OUT!”

DID HE HAVE NO FUCKING MANNERS? WHAT A LITTLE CREEP!

Xavier just looked annoyed. “Colton, how many times have I asked you to knock before entering? Just how long have you been standing here?”

Colton shrugged. “I don’t know. Long enough to know that you were boning recently.”

“GET OUT!” I hollered.

“What do you want, Colton?” Xavier said, through gritted teeth.

“Came up here because you might be interested that Greyson’s back.”

Ugh. *Shit*.

**Episode 126**

Xavier was already out of bed and halfway out the door, Colton by his side.

“Uh, pants?” I said.

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Fine,” he sighed, putting on his clothes. He pulled out a new pair of pants from his closet, as I’d broken the button on his jeans earlier. Payback for ruining all my nice bras.

“How long has Greyson been here?” Xavier asked, slipping on his t-shirt.

“He just got here. I ran right up to tell you,” answered Colton.

“Yeah, and then you watched us cuddle like a major perv,” I snapped.

Colton rolled his eyes.

“I don’t trust that guy for a second,” said Xavier darkly. “Maybe we should just rip out his throat and be done with him for good.”

“I’m in,” said Colton.

My eyes widened at the thought of Xavier tearing Greyson’s throat out. No! He couldn’t do that.

*Wait, what the fuck?* I panicked internally, my thoughts instantly racing as I covered myself up even more. I'd gotten goosebumps the last time I’d seen Greyson, in the dressing room at the mall, and now I didn’t want him dead. A thing I definitely should want as he, uhhh, betrayed my mate’s pack?!

Oh I was so fucked up.

Xavier turned to me, and for a second I wondered if he’d read my thoughts. “Stay here,” he said, giving me the same look one might give a puppy you were trying to teach a trick.

“Why?” I asked, annoyed.

“I told you, Greyson’s dangerous. You can’t be around him.”

“And I told *you* that’s he’s saved my life. Twice!”

“He killed members of our pack. He betrayed us all. I mean it, Caliana—you need to stay away from him.”

“I know that, Xavier, but—”

“You promised me, remember? Now go take a shower.”

I crossed my arms and huffed, annoyed at the situation and the stupid promise I’d already made.

Xavier, now dressed, followed Colton out the door. He turned to look at me before he left. “And don’t you even think about jumping out the window. I had Phil put locks on all of them.”

Wolf-bear bastard! He must have seen me eyeing the window.

“Jerk!” I cried out as he slammed the door behind him.

He could be so fucking rude sometimes. I didn’t know if it was all this Lupo Finale stuff or the Greyson stuff that had him being so hot and cold with me. It wasn’t cool. But when things were good they were *so good*. He was going through a lot, but I could remind him not to take it out on me!! I was a victim too in all these situations.

I sat in bed as I listened to their footsteps pound down the stairs. When I was sure that they were gone, I leapt out of bed and started putting my clothes on and brushing my hair. Listen, I may have promised to not go near Greyson, and a desperate sexy promise about a shower, but I *hadn’t* make any promises about saying in this room. I also hadn’t promised that I wouldn’t go into any other room. Xavier couldn’t just keep me locked up in here, though he’d definitely tried in the past. And I wasn’t going to obey all of his stupid requests—something he should have realized by now. In any case, if I just *happened* to go into a room where everyone was meeting, I wouldn’t be breaking a promise, right? It would just an accident.

At least that was what I told myself as I got dressed and did my hair.

I grabbed a chair from Xavier’s desk, holding it high above my head, ready to break it over the doorknob. If he was going to put locks on all the doors, then I was going to use his furniture to break out. Served him right for trying to keep me locked up and in the dark about everything. What was this, Beauty and the Beast?

I really needed to stop thinking about fairytales. They were giving me serious headaches as of late.

As it turned out, I didn’t need to break out at all. A small breeze entered the room, blowing the door open.

Wow, what a wolf-bear. He hadn’t even locked the door. It was like he *wanted* me to get out. Gleefully, I tossed the chair down and exited the room.

I hurried down the stairs, hearing people arguing in the living room. It sounded like Xavier, Colton, Jay, Maya, and Greyson were all there, and all talking at once. Classic wolf-bears. How did packs even survive with all this in-fighting? I was honestly surprised no-one had shifted yet. I really didn’t want them to start. We’d just fixed everything up!!

I slowly walked the rest of the way down the stairs and stood in the entryway of the living room, watching everyone yell at the top of their voices. *Children.*

Greyson stood off in a corner. I watched him for a moment, studying his movements. He was very well-dressed for a person whose clothes ripped to shreds whenever he shifted. He was wearing a pair of black dress pants, a dark purple button-down shirt, and dress shoes. His pale hair was combed and styled. He looked very out of place with all our jeans and t-shirts. Lola was right—that whole family was sexy as hell.

*Stop thinking about him,* I reminded myself sharply.

Greyson noticed me watching him, and his grey eyes met mine. A shiver ran down my spine.

“Are you okay?” he called out to me. “Did anyone try to hurt you while I was away?”

“I’m fine, thanks for asking,” I said, confused *why* he was asking. But I couldn’t help the little smile that formed on my lips, knowing that he’d been concerned.

Suddenly, the arguing stopped as everyone—even Greyson—turned to look at me.

“Nobody fucking asked about you,” growled Colton, clearly annoyed with my presence. “We’re kind of *in* something right now, Cali, so if you wouldn’t mind…”

I turned to look at Greyson, who was staring at me with all the rest, without even a hint of recognition that he’d spoken to me. He looked more confused than anything else. Had I imagined it? Maybe I hadn’t heard him, after all.

But what if I had?

Well shit. This was getting even more complicated.

My mind started to race, going into full freak out mode. My thoughts went back to when I’d communicated with Greyson in his wolf form. What if I could communicate with Greyson without needing to speak, just like mates did? What if he’d gotten inside my head? Oh fuck, maybe that stupid story Lola told me was right! No no no.

I wanted very much to go into full blown freak out where I screamed, jumped on the couch, and maybe shook someone for good measure, but it was difficult with everyone staring at me. I couldn’t let people know what I was thinking, or that I was thinking about Greyson—not until I had solid proof that the fairytale was really about me.

I rolled my eyes. “I was being sarcastic, stupid. In case you’ve all forgotten, *I* was the one who was in danger. *I* was the one who almost became wolf chow. You should be all be asking me how I’m doing or, at the very least, you should allow me to be part of a conversation that could affect me.”

“I thought I told you to stay in your room,” Xavier growled.

“Why?” Greyson asked, his gunmetal eyes still on me. “Are you worried that I might eat her, Xavier? I guess that fair, she’s positively delicious,” he said, with a smirk that sent another shiver down my spine.

Cocky wolf-bear bastard.

I ignored Greyson’s comment the best I could. “I decided not to listen to you,” I said, giving Xavier a challenging glance. “You don’t get to be sweet one minute and rude the next. It’s not fair.”

“We’ll discuss this later.” Then Xavier turned to Greyson. “Why are you even here, Greyson?”

“Yeah, nobody invited you,” Colton added.

Greyson tore his eyes from mine looked at his brothers, a cool, detached expression on his face. He shrugged. “I guess I could leave,” he said, turning to the door. “Or, I could tell you about the Rogues who are planning at this very moment to kill your little human Luna plaything. Your call.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Greyson turned to look at me again. His lips were in a sort of half smile, half smirk that was oddly charismatic. It was the same look he’d had when we first met. “Well, Cali, you tell me: prior to the disastrous barbecue the other night when you tried skydiving off the third floor window, how many times had you been attacked by Rogues?”

I shrugged. “Never, I guess?”

Greyson gestured toward Xavier. “Now, love, how about after my dear brother invoked the Lupo Finale?”

“Uh, twice,” I said, focused on the murderous look in Xavier’s eyes.

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Coincidence?”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” Colton growled, taking a step toward Greyson.

Xavier suddenly turned to Greyson, his face red, his eyes black with rage. I wanted to gasp in horror, but managed to keep my mouth shut.

“You know what else those have in common? You, Greyson. *You* sent them after us.” Xavier’s voice was a low, dark growl, his lips pushed back to reveal sharp teeth. “Allow me to pay you back in kind.” In mere seconds, he was in front of Greyson, grabbing his brother by the throat and slamming him into the wall with a loud thud.

**Episode 127**

I started screaming without realizing what I was doing.

“NO!” I cried out, my body moving before I could even command it to, running into the living room.

“Stop it! Stop it right now, both of you!” I screamed, watching helpless as Xavier tightened his grip around Greyson’s neck, squeezing his windpipe.

“Cali, stop!” Jay yelled, trying to grab me. I dodged, moving my body between the two men, my heart pounding like it was about to jump out of my chest.

“I won’t live like this!” I yelled, trying to push Xavier off Greyson. Xavier reluctantly let go of Greyson’s throat, but the anger and loathing in his expression were still there. Greyson coughed for a moment, his hands balled into fists and ready to throw a revenge punch at any moment. But I knew neither of them would try anything as long as I was standing there.

“You’re acting like wild animals!” I yelled, looking from one man to the other. “You’re brothers—how can you be so quick to murder your own blood? Can’t you see this is insane? Or at the very least, a wolf-bear version of a *Dr. Phil* episode. Dysfunctional family, much?”

“Stay out of this, Caliana,” Xavier growled, focused on his brother. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“Oh, like hell it doesn’t!” I yelled. “I’m not just going to stand here and let you idiots kill each other! Can’t anyone in this goddamn group talk things out without murdering each other? News flash: violence never solved a damn thing!”

“It does if you’re on the winning side,” Maya said acidly.

“She’s not wrong,” Greyson said, impassive given the fact that his throat was getting squeezed.

I rolled my eyes so hard I was briefly worried that they were going to roll to the back of my head and never come back.

“That’s stupid,” I said. “In fact, you’re all stupid! Go jump off a cliff if you want to damage yourselves so much.”

I froze as soon as the words left my lips. Holy hell, did I really just say that? Out loud? Talk about a Freudian slip! Stupid Lola and her stupid wolf-bear fairytales…

I turned to Xavier and forced him to meet my eyes. “Drop him and let it go,” I warned him, managing to produce a growl of my own.

Xavier stared at me for a long time before taking two steps back.

I breathed a sigh of relief. “See? That’s wasn’t so hard, was it? Now, why don’t we all just sit down and talk this thing out like adults.”

“No,” said Xavier.

“No?” I asked. Crap. I’d really thought I’d reached a breakthrough with him.

“No,” Xavier confirmed. “He needs to leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” said Greyson boldly. “You clearly need all the help you can get, protecting her. Don’t you understand yet? The Rogues won’t stop trying to kill her—not until the Lupe Finale is over. It’s a power grab, any idiot can see that.”

“So how do you fit in with all this?” Xavier asked. “Trying to make us one big happy family?”

“I’ll admit, you’ve all been very resourceful up to this point, but let’s be honest. If it hadn’t been for me, Cali would have died days ago.”

“Hey,” I cried out, turning around to face him. “I’m perfectly capable of protecting myself.”

“Yes, I really think all the saving I’ve done shows that, love,” he said. “What do you think Xavier? Should we send Cali out into the woods on her own?”

Xavier shot a death glare at Greyson. “You shut up about her. You’d like us to believe you’ve been helping us the whole time, but you don’t fool me. I can see right through you.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Did you also see right through the Alpha wolf? What did he tell you? You know I sent that wild wolf pack to protect her, Xavier. I could’ve just as easily had them tear her from limb to limb.”

I shivered at the thought, remembering what had happened to Tony.

I turned to look at Greyson. His dark grey eyes met my brown eyes as I searched his expression for something—*anything*—that would reveal that he was lying. I’d spent the last two months dealing with people who lied to me, kept secrets from me. But in that moment, when our eyes connected, I only saw truth. He wasn’t lying, at least, about this.

I turned to look at the rest of the group. “I believe him.”

Xavier, Colton, and Jay stared at me. “What?”

“Could you all listen to me for two seconds?” I asked. “I said I believe him!”

Colton snorted. “What the fuck do you know?”

“I know that Greyson has done nothing but help me from the moment we met, and that’s more than I can say for you,” I said, glaring at Colton. “Maybe it would be best if he kept an eye out until the Lupis Caliente thing?”

“LUPO FINALE!” everyone shouted.

“I don’t speak fucking Latin!” yelled back. I took a second to compose myself. “The point is, we should let him prove himself. We’re better off having more allies than enemies. All of you saw how many Rogues there were attacking us, and Greyson helped. Let him stay outside. If he ever does anything to violate our trust or threaten me, or—”

“Or kill you,” Colton interrupted. “Which would be horrible because I wouldn’t have the chance to tell you ‘I told you so’ in person.”

“Can I finish?” I asked, glaring. “If he violates our trust or kills me or whatever, then he’s gone.”

“Sounds like a perfect plan to me,” said Maya. “The chances of you getting out of any of this alive are slim. I vote yes.”

I’d never thought Maya and I would agree on anything, but I guess hell needed to freeze over every once in a while. Even at my expense.

Greyson snorted. “What is this, a goddamn democracy?” He turned to look at Xavier. “I thought you were the Alpha here? Or should I leave like you desperately want me to and make some new Rogue friends?”

“I am the Alpha,” he said simply. He moved toward me and slung a protective arm around my waist, pulling me closer to him. “And Cali is my Luna. A good Alpha listens to his Luna.” My heart fluttered. “You can stay. Outside. And if you so much as breathe wrong, I will rip your throat out in two seconds flat.”

I stared up at Xavier in pure shock. Other than the part about ripping out Greyson’s throat, I couldn’t believe what he was saying. *His Luna? Listening to his Luna?* I couldn’t help but smile. This was the start of our future: an Alpha and a Luna. A team. I hoped I could do him proud in the future, when I *officially* became his Luna.

Greyson leaned back again the wall and studied Xavier and me, his eyes unreadable. After a moment, he nodded. “Deal.”

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After the ‘meeting’, the rest of us grabbed dinner from the newly repaired kitchen and headed off to bed while Greyson went outside, giving me one last secret half smile before he left.

In Xavier’s room, I finally managed to take a shower. By the time I was out, and dressed in my thin white nightgown (a “gift” from Xavier), he was on the bed, fast asleep. I looked down at his sleeping form and smiled. He looked so peaceful when he slept, so content. No Lupo Finale to worry about or his half brother or even me.

I watched him, listening to him snore. It was so amusing to listen to him when he was asleep. He sounded like a tiny wolf when he snored. For a moment, I considered climbing into bed with him, but my body was too wide awake from everything that happened that day. There was also that feeling of goosebumps on my skin, a feeling of excitement I couldn’t pin down. I couldn’t help but think about Greyson, outside.

*Maybe he’s hungry?* I thought to myself as I stroked Xavier’s head softly. He snored, deep in sleep. I wondered how long it had been since Greyson had eaten, then shook my head, reminding myself I shouldn’t be thinking of him at all.

I kissed the top of Xavier head and slipped out of the room as quietly as I could. Then I tip-toed downstairs with the intention of bringing Greyson a snack. Wasn’t that what any proper Luna would do? I entered the kitchen and brewed a pot of Earl Grey tea. I mean, he *was* protecting me after all. The least I could do was feed him.

I opened up the cupboards, relieved to see that the guys had stocked the fridge. I grabbed some individual bags of chips and a few danishes and put them on a tray, unable to decide if Greyson would want something salty or something sweet. Then I put the teapot on the tray and placed two cups next to it.

Wait, why was I adding two cups? But I didn’t remove them. Instead, I grabbed the tray and slipped out onto the front porch. I’d thought he’d be sitting at the outdoor table on the front porch, but he was nowhere to be seen.

I placed the tray and looked out in the dark night, shivering slightly from the breeze, wishing I’d put on my coat. “Greyson?” I called softly.

No response.

*Maybe he left,* I thought to myself with a small pang of disappointment. *Maybe I was foolish to put my trust in him?*

I was turning to go back into the house when I found myself face to face with him. Greyson, leaning against the front door, his grey eyes glimmering in the moonlight, a smirk on his face.

“I’ve been expecting you.”

**Episode 128**

I took a step back, surprised to see him. My breath caught in my throat which only caused his smirk to grow.

“Expecting me?” I repeated out, annoyed by his assumption. Did every male in this damn family have an ego the size of a planet? “Listen buddy, it’s not like I was thinking about you this late at night.”

“Weren’t you, love?” He smirked, raising an eyebrow.

Cocky bastard. Calling me ‘love’ like he knew me. He wasn’t even British!

I shot him a dirty look and opened and shut my mouth a few times, trying to think of a clever comeback. But I kept coming up short.

This only amused him more, and he mocked my movements. “Oh, wolf got your tongue? Finally, I know how to shut that mouth of yours.” He laughed.

“Oh would you shut up! Here I was trying to be nice, getting you something to eat because I thought you might be hungry, and this is the thanks I get? Ugh, wolf-bears,” I said, putting my hands on my hips.

Greyson just looked at me, his eyes twinkling as they moved down my body, I found myself frozen in place by the intensity of his gaze. “I *am* hungry. Very hungry,” he said softly, with a dangerous undertone.

I felt a blush heating my face. I quickly looked away, breaking the eye contact. Why had I worn this nightgown down here?! He could probably see everything! Composing myself, I said, “Tell me, Greyson, is arrogance a genetic trait in your family?”

“That and our high cheek bones. And our natural good looks,” he said, his voice laced with amusement. But I’d had enough games for one night.

Angrily, I began to get off the porch, planning on getting into the house through the back way, since Greyson’s stupid body was covering the front door. I felt embarrassed and stupid. This had been a mistake, another typical Cali bad decision. I should have just gone to bed with Xavier. So much for being nice.

“You know what? Help yourself, and good fucking night,” I told Greyson, pointing at the tray of food before turning to leave.

“Cali,” he called, as I turned away. I felt his hand grab mind as he spun me around to face him. His face was serious now, all joking vanished. “I’m curious… What have my brothers told you about me?”

I pulled my hand out of his grasp like he’d burned me. “Don’t touch me. *Ever*,” I hissed.

“You are much feistier than my brother would like you to be, aren’t you?” He smirked again, which only made me glare at him more.

“Xavier and Colton told me all about the horrible things you’ve done,” I said. I had been so stupid to trust him. It was clear now that all of this was some kind of game to him.

“And what horrible, monstrous things have I done?” he asked casually, like we were discussing the weather. He walked over to the outside table where the tray rested and poured two cups of tea before sitting down.

I raised my eyebrows, my hands still on my hips. “Do you really need me to list them? You *did* them.”

“If you don’t mind, please do.” He took a sip of his tea. “This is very good. How did you know I enjoy Earl Grey?” He took another sip. “And my memory is a bit fuzzy after all these years. So many things have been said about me that it’s been a little hard to keep track.”

I wanted more than anything to storm back into the house. To go back into my nice warm bed with my snoring mate and not have to deal with a murderous maniac any more. But somehow, I wasn’t able to walk away. I just stood there with my hands on my hips even though it was cold and I could feel myself seriously nipping.

He looked at me again, smirking. “While I do think you look lovely in that position, why don’t just join me? The tea might warm you up a bit. You look awfully… cold.”

It was at that point I noticed that his eyes were directly staring at my tits, which were indeed pointing out of my sheer night gown because of the cold weather.

Fucking hell.

I intended to cover them up and run back into the house, but my feet had other ideas. I ended up pulling up a chair next to him.

*Why the heck am I doing this?* I screamed at myself internally as I picked up the other cup of tea and took a sip, the heat spreading through my body. Maybe he had some kind of wolf magic power that he was using on me? Maybe he’d been using it all along? Was that even possible? I made a mental note to ask Mrs. Smith about it later.

“So,” Greyson started again. “Why am I the bad guy?”

“Well for starters, you’re a murderer,” I said. “You’ve killed members of your own pack. You also actively fought against your own pack members—which makes you not only a killer but a disloyal one at that. I mean, how could you betray your people like that?” I demanded, my voice laced with disgust.

He took a long sip of his tea. “Is that all?”

I gaped at him. “*Is that all?* You’re a murderous psychopath! I can’t believe I’m even entertaining speaking to you right now!”

“You know, some people actually find me quite charming,” he said with a grin.

“Who? The people you killed, right before you murdered them?”

He chuckled, taking a bite out of one of the danishes. “Cali, did it ever occur to you that every story has two sides?”

His question reminded me of something he’d said, the first time we met: *do you believe everything you hear?* I tried to shake the memory out of my head. “So what?”

He set his cup down. “Tell me, what would you do if you thought someone was going to kill someone you cared about deeply? Someone you truly didn’t believe you could live without. Someone like, let’s say Xavier.”

“Don’t you dare think of doing anything to Xavier,” I just about growled.

I could see Greyson trying very hard to hold back a grin, which only made me angrier. “This is a hypothetical situation.”

“All right,” I said, taking a sip of my tea. If this psycho wanted to play a game with me, fine. I would play along. Maybe I could get some useful information out of him. “So what?”

“What would you be willing to do to protect the person you loved most in the world?”

His question floored me. It was so unexpected, coming from a person like Greyson. “What do you know about love?” I asked coldly.

“This isn’t about me. I’m asking you, Cali. I know what *I* would do if I was put in that situation, but I want to know what you would do. What would you do for the people you love?”

I thought about the question, remembering how I’d risked my life several times to protect Xavier, because we were meant to be together and I valued his life before my own. The things I’d done to try and protect Lola, including going after a witch with her very own broom. Hell, the only reason I’d gotten into this whole mess in the first place was because I wanted to take care of my mother—to make sure she had enough money to get the surgeries she needed to save her life. Even at the expense of my virginity, and my safety.

When I met Greyson’s eyes, I knew full well what I’d be willing to do for the people I loved.

“Anything. I would do whatever it took to protect them. I’d kill anyone who tried to hurt Xavier,” I told him seriously. “Including you.”

His piercing grey eyes studied me for a moment, and I knew what he was looking for. It was the same searching stare I’d given him, just hours ago.

Whatever he was looking for, he must have found, because he smirked at me. “Yes, I believe you would. I would, too. As you can see, love, we already have one thing in common. We’re on the same side, you and I.”

He got up from his chair and walked over to me. In one swift motion, he pulled me up from my chair and into his arms. Our bodies were touching, now, making me shiver involuntarily. But I was unable to make myself leave the embrace. Even worse, I found myself leaning into his touch,

He leaned down, tucking a strand of my hair behind my ear with his finger before whispering: “Maybe if you’re not so quick to go back inside, we could find *many* things we have in common.”

I gasped, stunned by what I was hearing. I looked up at him, my eyes wide with shock. He just grinned down at me. I looked into his eyes, watching them focus on my lips. I knew I should make a run for it, but my body stayed firmly where it was, in his embrace. Slowly, his head tilted down, heading straight towards my lips.

Oh my god, was Greyson trying to kiss me?!

**Episode 129**

For the record, Greyson was very good looking—like, crazy hot. Dark grey eyes, light blond hair, sexy high cheekbones. On any other occasion he would definitely be considered a snack—yum! And let’s not even talk about his lean, muscular figure. Greyson was sexy as hell.

But was I gonna let him kiss me? NO WAY! There was no way in HELL I was going to let that demonic wolf-bear put his lips on me, even if he HAD saved my life a million times. First of all, I had a BOYFRIEND THANK YOU VERY MUCH—a fucking MATE, for crying out loud—who would be SO pissed if I made out with his half-brother, the man who betrayed his whole pack. Xavier would *kill* me—or worse, break up with me.

Nope, I was NOT going to risk my relationship for goosebumps and a pair of grey eyes.

Also, what if this was all part of Greyson’s plot? Hadn’t Xavier warned me that Greyson couldn’t be trusted? That he had some kind of secret agenda? What if seducing me was part of that? What if he was using my human side against me so that could seduce me right before the wolf-bear death-match and distract Xavier?

Well, I was nobody’s dumb human.

I took a step back from the lips that were too close to mine and slapped Greyson hard across the face, making contact with his smooth skin.

Fuck, that hurt! Damn those cheekbones, they could really cut a person. I wanted to cradle my hand, but I couldn’t show any weakness. Not now.

For a moment we both stood there, too stunned to move. Finally, Greyson touched his hand to his cheek, feeling the spot where I’d hit him. I thought for sure that he’d yell at me—maybe even attack me.

But he didn’t. Instead, he laughed. A long, cool laugh that only made me angrier.

“Well, now I understand why my half-brother is so attached to you. Such fire. I must be careful around you, love.”

“If you want to be careful, maybe you shouldn’t be trying to kiss your half-brother’s mate, you brute!”

Greyson’s eyes widened in surprise. “Kiss you? Kiss a *human?* That would be hilarious, if the idea weren’t so disgusting.”

This only made me angrier. “Are you seriously calling me disgusting? Who the fuck taught you manners?” I hissed. I felt my palm tingle and I lifted my hand, ready to strike him again. But he just grabbed my wrist.

“Easy, love. Best not to push your luck, tonight.”

I pulled my hand out of his grasp. “You’re the lucky one. I could have taken out your eye, if I’d wanted to.”

Greyson smirked. “And I could have taken out your throat. Then what use would you be to Xavier, hmmm? Or maybe he’d thank me for ending your insufferable chatter.”

“If I tell him you’ve threatened me, you’ll be the one without a throat, or worse!”

Greyson chuckled. “I wasn’t threatening you. Just stating facts.”

“Well here’s a little fun fact for you, buster: stay the hell away from me or you’ll be sorry.” And with that, I spun away and headed back inside.

“You’ve got it wrong.” His words stopped me in my tracks. “The question is, can you stay away from me?”

I stormed off without another word. But on the inside, I was fuming with rage.

ARROGANT! CONCEITED! SELF-ABSORBED! STUCK-UP BRAT! My head swarmed with insults as I entered the house and slammed the door behind me, absolutely fuming with rage. How DARE he even THINK I couldn’t stay away from him? He was the one who was always showing up everywhere he wasn’t welcome. He was the one who’d found ME in the dressing room. I cursed myself mentally—god, I’d been such an idiot for encouraging him to stay. I should have just let Xavier rip his throat out. That would have shown that asshat a lesson.

My racing thoughts came to a complete halt when I found myself face to face with Maya as soon I came through the door. Her mouth was twisted into a sinister smile.

That was not a good sign.

“Uh, did I interrupt something? Cause it sure looks like I did,” she said, her voice laced with fake innocence.

Oh great. Another asshole to deal with. “*Please*. You’d like to think that, wouldn’t you? Do wolf-bears just love causing drama, or what? And what are you doing up? Sleepwalking? If you’re lost, Colton’s room is the third door on the left, at the top of the stairs.” I smirked back at her.

The look of triumph on Maya’s face quickly disappeared, and I was thrilled at the idea that I could make *her* feel shitty every once in a while. I deserved to get a shot in occasionally.

She got very close to me, her voice low. “I saved you once, but I’ll never do it again. Biggest mistake of my life.”

“You think you haven't made that clear? And hey, I’m not thrilled that you’re still around, either,” I hissed back as I pushed past her.

I heard her say something under her breath, but I ignored her and kept walking. I knew she was only doing this to get a rise out of me, but what she said did make me feel uneasy. I wondered if she really thought something had happened between Greyson and me. There was a chance she could tell Xavier or Colton. I didn’t think Xavier would believe her, but Colton might.

As I walked up the stairs, I debated whether I should just tell Xavier what had happened. Wasn’t that what people in real relationships did? Honesty, openness, communication—all that jazz. But when had Xavier ever been open and honest with me about everything? I knew it was petty to keep a secret based on that reasoning, but really, wasn’t this just karma? I couldn’t be sure.

There was also the fact that I could have totally misread Greyson. What if he hadn’t actually been planning on kissing me? I’d thought he had been—but I’d been wrong about a lot of things in my life, and boys had never been anything I’d known much about. What if he really hadn’t been planning on kissing me, and I told Xavier and screwed everything up for no reason? Besides, the last thing he needed was to be distracted for the wolf-bear finale thing.

Maybe it would be better if I just kept it to myself. At least for now.

I continued my way upstairs, passing Lola and Jay’s room, noticing that all the lights were out.

I rolled my eyes. Of course the lights were out—it was the middle of the night. I should have been sleeping like everyone else, not wandering the halls in a paper-thin nightgown trying to be nice to a creeper like Greyson. I could still feel the goosebumps on my skin, and a lingering feeling that I couldn’t shake but was going to have to ignore if I wanted to get any sleep that night. I hoped it would just go away on its own. But really, was I ever that lucky?

I stood outside Xavier’s bedroom and steadied myself so I could slip in as quietly. I put my hand on the knob of the door and slowly pushed forward.

SQUEAKKKKKKKK

I stood frozen in place, silently cursing Phil, who could apparently repair a house but couldn’t keep a door from squeaking.

I listened intently to Xavier’s breathing. It was even, and the bed didn’t move. He was probably still asleep.

Carefully, as slowly as possible, I tried shutting the door behind me.

SQUEAKKKKKKKKKKKKKK

Dammit! I was going to oil that door tomorrow, if it was the last thing I did.

Carefully, I tip-toed over to the bed, doing my best not to step on any squeaky floorboards. A few feet from the bed, I paused to look at Xavier in the moonlight. The sheet was half-draped over his naked form, showing off his abs and strong arms. He was so peaceful when he slept. And so fucking hot.

I smirked to myself as I looked at my naked wolf-bear boyfriend. Suck it, Greyson. I had a hot Alpha, and he was all mine.

It seemed so ridiculous when I thought about it—Greyson as my mate, gross! Lola was right, Big Mac was full of shit and that story was nothing but a dumb, highly inappropriate children’s story. I couldn’t even think of the name of it anymore, it was so stupid. Xavier was my mate and that was all there was to it. My Alpha, my boyfriend, all *mine*.

I was walking toward the bed when…

BAM!

My toe hit the bed with a painful thud. I bit my lip to keep myself from hollering out in pain, but it didn’t do me any good. Xavier shifted, and his eyes opened up to look into mine.

“Where have you been?”

**Episode 130**

Well, the good thing about Xavier waking up was that I didn’t have to pretend I wasn’t in horrible pain. As soon as his eyes opened, I let out the yelp that I’d been holding in, grabbing my injured foot as I hopped up and down. Hey, there was no point in me suffering in silence if I was already busted, and it HURT!

“I hurt my toe and all you can think about is where I’ve been?” I yelled out in pain. Men and their one-track minds. So rude.

Xavier’s expression was unchanged, without even an ounce of concern for my wellbeing. “You wouldn’t have hurt your toe if you hadn’t been sneaking into the room,” he said dryly.

Oh, screw him and his stupid logic!

In my agony, I shot him the dirtiest of looks. “I didn’t want to wake you, you brat! That’s why I was quote unquote ‘sneaking into the room’. Duh!”

Xavier sat up, the sheet pooling around his waist as he watched me struggle with my hurt toe. “Well that was an epic fail, wasn’t it? I’m awake thanks to you and I need my beauty sleep.”

Goodness the men in this family! How could so many giant egos survive in one gene pool? I was honestly shocked they hadn’t killed each other with their narcissism long ago.

“Don’t be an idiot,” I shot back.

“Yes, you’re the one with the stubbed toe, and I’m the idiot,” Xavier scoffed. He raised an eyebrow at me, his arms crossed. He looked at me expectantly. “Well?”

“Well what?” I glared at him. The pain in my foot was subsiding, but I was still pretty annoyed. Couldn’t a girl get some sleep around here without having to answer half a million questions?

“Where were you?”

I looked down, pretending to examine my toe, flexing it a bit. I didn’t want to lie to Xavier—that would make our relationship seem even more unhealthy. Plus I was a horrible liar, anyway.

A lightbulb went off in my brain. Maybe I didn’t have to lie after all.

“I went to get a snack,” I told him, conveniently leaving out the part where I’d also gotten a snack for Greyson. I’d drunk the tea, after all, so strictly speaking I *had* had a snack. A non-Greyson-shaped snack. I mean, it was a SORT OF lie, but I preferred to think of it as a rebranding of the truth. Not to mention he’d done worse to me. Karma was a bitch, Xavier.

“You’re always hungry,” he said with an eye roll, moving over to make room on the bed.

“I don’t get fed often enough!” I argued, which was pretty true.

“Did you bring me anything?” he asked.

“No. Why would I bring you anything? You were sleeping, remember? I didn’t want to wake you.”

Xavier just rolled his eyes. “Just get in here, you dope,” he said with a smile.

*There’s my guy*. I climbed into bed, feeling the soothing warmth of his body as he wrapped his arms around me. I snuggled up next to him, listening to the sound of his heartbeat. It made me feel so safe and protected. I started to close my eyes, lulling myself to sleep, feeling comforted and happy with my mate.

“Is it because of Greyson?” Xavier whispered suddenly in the dark.

My eyes snapped open, my body going rigid. “What?” I breathed, terrified that he’d found out about what had happened between me and Greyson. Maybe he *did* have secret mind reading powers.

One of his hands moved away from my waist and up to my hair, stroking it gently in a reassuring motion. “Is Greyson the reason you can’t sleep?” he asked softly. I was struck by the tenderness of his voice. “Are you afraid of him?”

I bit my lip, trying to keep it together without spilling my guts. “Should I be?”

“Uh, well yeah, probably,” said Xavier. “He’s a full-blown psychopath, completely out of his mind. You’d be insane *not* to be afraid of him. Which, let’s be honest, you kind of are.”

“Rude.”

“But don’t worry, baby,” he said, pulling me closer. “I won’t let him touch you.”

The truth was, I’d already taken care of that part. I’d prevented Greyson from touching me at all, even though that had required my touching him first. I flexed the hand I’d used to hit him. It still hurt. Wolf bastard. I wondered whether Xavier would be pleased or pissed to hear that I’d slapped his bastard half-brother across the face.

“Cali?” Xavier said gently, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Are you still awake?”

I turned to face him. “Are you mad at me?” I asked, trying to search his face in the darkness for any sign of emotion.

Xavier pulled back. It was his turn to study my face. “Why would I be? I mean, you make me mad all the damn time. But no, I’m not mad at this exact moment.”

I was both relieved and annoyed. “Are you sure?” I asked meekly.

“Uh, I think I’d know if I was mad at you.”

“You sound mad.”

“I mean, you asking me if I’m mad at two in the goddamn morning is pissing me off!”

“See, I knew you were mad!”

“What the hell is wrong with you? Why are you picking a fight?”

“I’m not!”

“Yes you are! We were completely fine up until you started being weird, Cali.”

I paused, looking down at my hands. “It’s just that… I thought you might be upset because I wanted Greyson to stay.”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “So you *have* been thinking about Greyson.”

I rolled my eyes. “Only because I was worried I’d upset you. You made it so clear you didn’t want him around.”

“You know I don’t want him around, Cali. You know exactly what he’s done.” Xavier paused. “But at least when he’s here, we can keep an eye on him. That whole, keep your enemies closer idea.”

I smirked. “See, I told you I had good ideas.”

He smiled and playfully nipped at my shoulder. “That, and I’m going to make sure he stays the hell away from you.”

I bit my lip, thinking about seeing Greyson on the porch, bringing him tea and snacks, slapping him in the face… This was totally in the realm of ‘being the hell near me’, and possibly not a great look. I knew Xavier would be livid at me for going near Greyson if he found out, and I almost couldn’t blame him—Greyson was a major prick. I prayed that Maya wouldn’t tell him what I’d been doing outside. What she *thought* I’d been doing outside.

I turn off my furious thoughts, then leaned up and kissed Xavier deeply on the lips.

Xavier smiled into the kiss. “What was that for?” he asked.

“For being so protective of me.”

“You usually hate it,” he said. “And I know I haven’t been… the easiest to be around lately. I'm sorry about that. Everything,” he huffed, “has me so on edge. I’m really sorry, Cali. You come first to me. Always.”

“Thank you, baby.” I was honestly touched. We’d had a couple of rough days, and look at us working right through it! I took his hand and squeezed. “I only hate when you’re being a massive jerk about protecting me. The rest of the time, it can be very sweet. And very fucking sexy.”

“Oh?” He grinned.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “‘*Oh*’ what?”

“You think I’m ‘very fucking sexy’?”

“Yeah, yeah don’t let it go to your head.”

A chuckle rumbled deep in his chest. I laid my head down over his heart as he stroked my hair. I fell asleep almost instantly.

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The sun hitting my eyes woke me up the next morning.

“Why is this a thing,” I mumbled to the fiery orb in the sky. It felt cooler in the bed than usual, even with the hot sun directly in my eyes. I touched the spot next to me, realizing that it was empty—Xavier was gone.

After the first wave of panic washed over me, I realized that Xavier was probably just downstairs, getting breakfast or something. Maybe he was getting mebreakfast in bed. That would be something that a sweet wolf-bear boyfriend would do.

I debated whether I should go back to sleep until someone woke me up, but my need to pee outweighed my need for sleep.

I pulled myself out of bed and shuffled over to the bathroom, and was wondering if anyone had made coffee yet when I heard a loud BANG, followed by lots and lots of yelling.

I raced over to the window to find the source of the commotion. Outside in the yard were three wolves fighting it out. For a split second I thought they were the Rogues, coming back to finish the job. But then I recognized their colors and markings—they weren’t Rogues. Rather, they were Xavier, Colton, and Jay, in their wolf forms. I nearly sighed in relief, but then I realized they were attacking each other: biting, scratching, and clawing at each other’s fur.

What the hell was going on? They were going to kill each other!

I tried open up the window, but then I stopped myself.

“No, Cali, don’t jump out of windows,” I told myself sternly, taking a few steps away from my stupid impulse. I ran downstairs and burst outside, just in time to see Colton, in wolf form, lunge for Xavier’s throat, ready to tear into flesh.

“STOP!”

**Episode 131**

I looked on at the scene with blind panic. I knew I needed to do something—they were going to kill each other. I looked around wildly for something I could use to fight Colton off, wishing for the billionth time that we had a weapons room in this goddamn house. Couldn’t Phil have put one in while he was doing his repairs? How hard could it have been, honestly?

With no weapons or weapons room in sight, I decided to leap into the fray myself, using just my hands. I mean, how hard was it going to be—it was just *Colton*. And I thought I read once that you could fight off a wolf by punching it in the nose. Or maybe that was sharks? Either way, it would probably get Colton off Xavier.

I’d started to run toward the two wolves when I heard the sound of cool laughter behind me. I spun around to see Greyson, sitting in a lounge chair with his feet up and a fresh cup of tea in his hand, sunglasses over his eyes. But what really irked me was the shit-eating grin he had on his face. He was clearly thrilled to have a front-row seat to the show.

“Jump in anytime, love,” Greyson told me with a laugh. “Plenty of fur to go around.”

I put a hand on my hip and shot daggers at him. “How can you just sit there and watch your brothers kill each other?”

“Very easily,” he said, taking a sip of his tea.

Deciding not to waste another conversation on the impossible wolf-bear, I turned back to the task at hand, stalking toward Colton and Xavier.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Greyson sang out.

I turned sharply to face him. “Of course you wouldn’t. You love a good blood bath, don’t you?” I spat. “At least I’m smart enough to know they’re going to kill each other. And at least I’m brave enough to stop them! Unlike you.”

And with that cutting remark, I turned and ran over to Colton and Xavier.

“STOP IT! STOP IT RIGHT NOW!” I shouted.

“They’re in training, you nitwit,” Greyson drawled.

I stopped in my tracks. “*What?*”

Greyson rolled his eyes. I was *really* getting sick of people rolling their eyes at me. If I were a wolf-bear, I would have clawed them all out by now. “For the Lupo Finale, of course. And based on what I’ve seen, your Alpha’s going to need a lot more training before the big event, or he’s going to be puppy chow.

I glared at him. “Do me a favor? Don’t talk to me before 10 a.m. In fact, just shut the hell up in general.”

Greyson just grinned, raising his drink in a toast. “As you wish, love.”

Asshat.

Before I could get another word in, the front door opened and Maya and Lola walked outside.

“What’s going on? It’s too early for shouting.” Lola yawned, rubbing her eyes and squinting against the harsh sunlight.

“The boys are supposedto be training, but it looks like they’re just trying to kill each other,” I complained.

“Well, what did you think training would look like? Baking a blueberry pie? They’re *supposed* to look they’re trying to kill each other. That’s kind of the whole point,” said Maya. “It could happen. Xavier needs to be prepared.”

Jeez, why was Maya still here? Couldn’t Colton just hit it and quit it?

All at once, the fight stopped. They must have realized that we were all watching, because the three wolf-bears shifted back into their human forms, winded from the fighting. While the fighting had looked intense, the boys only had a few cuts and bruises on their bodies—their very, *very* naked bodies.

“Can I get any of you guys a change of clothes out here? A bathrobe? Something?!”

As usual, everyone ignored my complaining.

Jay walked over to Lola, touching her arm gently. “What are you doing out of bed? Shouldn’t you be resting? You know you have to conserve your energy. You were shifted for way too long as a hybrid.”

“Yeah, but it’s kind of hard to with all this noise. Do you think you could train a little quieter?”

I looked over at Xavier. “And why *are* you training, exactly?”

Xavier just shrugged, his muscles tense. “We’re always training.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “Not like that. Especially not this early in the morning. You guys looked like you were about to rip each other’s throats out.”

“It is part of a balanced breakfast,” Greyson called out from his seat, a smirk on his face. “Wouldn’t it be a pity if you all killed each other before the Finale?”

Xavier turned to Greyson, his dark eyes fierce. “Shut. Up.”

“It feels like people are telling me to do that a lot today,” said Greyson, giving me a subtle wink before turning back to his half-brother. “Don’t tell me you haven’t told her yet, Xavier?”

“Told me what?” I demanded, crossing my arms and glaring at Xavier. It was far too early for this shit.

A look flickered between Xavier, Colton, and Jay. It only fanned the fires of my anger. Why was I always the last to know *everything*? Especially things that directly involved me and my future? Asshats, the lot of them.

I sighed deeply, annoyed. “I’m giving you five seconds to explain this to me or I’m finding the first flight back to Minnesota. I’m sick. of. this. bullshit.”

“We’re training for the Lupo Finale,” said Xavier.

I raised an eyebrow. “So I’ve heard? Don’t you have, like, plenty of time to do that? I mean, we just got back, everybody’s tired. At least brew some coffee first.”

Greyson chuckled darkly, in a way that made me uneasy. “I’m sorry that this doesn’t align with your busy schedule. Our ancient customs do not abide by the wants and moods of a mortal. Besides, time is a relative term.”

His words only made me more frustrated and angry. It was too fucking early to wade through metaphors. Not without coffee and a decent breakfast, anyway.

“I’m going to pretend that any of us understood that nonsense just now from this One Direction, British wannabe.” I turned back to Xavier. “Tell me what’s going on right now, or I swear I’ll—“

“I have five days to train,” Xavier said, cutting me off.

That floored me. “What?” I breathed. “You mean the Finale is in five days? *Five days?*”

Panic started to squeeze my chest. I could feel my face growing hot as every nightmare possibility flashed through my mind. I’d known that the Finale would come up eventually, but not now, not this quickly. I wasn’t ready.

Xavier moved to embrace me, but I stepped back. My head was spinning.

“That’s not enough time! Isn’t the Finale like, really really dangerous? Like, people *die* dangerous? And won’t all those Rogues be after us?” My breath started to come out in rough pants, my words choked off. Lola walked over and put a calming arm around me, trying to get my breathing and heart steady again, but I was too far gone in my panic. It felt like the ground had been pulled from my feet, and I was free-falling. I had no idea what was going on, which only made me more nervous.

“Let’s get you some coffee,” Lola said gently, but I pulled out of her grasp.

“I don’t need coffee, I need answers! I need to understand what’s going on, right now! Why is this happening right now!” I said, nervous tears stinging my eyes.

“That’s just how it works, Cali,” Xavier said gently. “Once you invoke the Finale, it must occur on the next full moon. That’s the law. It just so happens that the next full moon is five days away…”

“And you didn’t consider that when you invoked the stupid thing?”

Xavier shrugged. “What, am I supposed to have the lunar calendar memorized?”

“Well, maybe you should! You’re a WEREWOLF, XAVIER—shouldn’t it be instinctive? And there’s like, an *app* for that!” I took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to settle my fraying nerves. After a moment, I looked at Xavier, meeting his eyes. “Will you be ready?”

Xavier shrugged. “I guess we’ll find out.”

I could have killed him right then and there. Could have lunged right at him and ripped out his heart with my bare hands. He *guessed?* He *guessed* that he’d find out then? When his life was on the line? My heart? Our happiness? My vision went white with anger, and I felt frustrated and helpless at the same time.

“How can everybody be so casual about this? You’re acting like you’ve got a dinner party in five days, not a death match for your title and your life!”

Greyson took a sip of tea and looked at Xavier. “Bit dramatic, isn’t she?”

Xavier shot him a death glare. “What did I say about talking about her?” he growled as he stalked toward Greyson, who didn’t move an inch.

“Whoa, easy man!” Colton yelled, holding his brother back. “He’s not worth it. We’ve got a long journey coming in the next few days. You need your strength.”

“Journey?” I demanded. In a few days? What was Colton talking about? “What journey?”

**Episode 132**

No one said anything in response my question. In fact, no one was even looking at me. I threw up my hands in annoyance. “Well, isn’t anyone going to tell me where we’re going? What kind of clothes I should pack? Do I need a dress?” My mind was racing, and packing was something I could easily focus on. Plus, it was something I could actually control.

Maya snorted loudly. “Clothing’s optional, human.” She looked me up and down. “Though in your case, it might be mandatory.”

I was not in the mood to deal with Maya today—or any day for that matter. But especially not today. I couldn’t deal with giving her any opportunities to tell Xavier what I was really doing last night with my snacks.

“Shut up, Maya,” I shot back. I turned back to Xavier. “Inside. Now!” I snapped, pointing to the door.

Greyson and Colton ooooohed, and were shut down by my dirty looks.

Xavier turned to Jay. “Start packing,” he said, before following me inside.

I waited until we were both in the house before completely blowing my top. “When the fuck were you going to tell me about this? When you were out the door? Were you going to leave a fucking note?” I screamed.

Xavier’s face was expressionless as he walked to the kitchen with me at his heels. “What difference does it make? I have to go, regardless of whether I tell you or not.”

“*What difference does it make?*” I repeated, almost screeching. “The difference is that I’m your fucking mate! We’re in a relationship, Xavier, for crying out loud! You’re supposed to confide in me, make me part of your life.”

“You *are* a part of my life.”

“It doesn’t always feel like it.”

Xavier started to snort, but I cut him off.

“No, I’m being serious,” I said. “We talked about this last night Xavier! You keep so much shit from me that it feels like you don’t want me to be part of your life. Like you don’t think highly of me as a mate.”

Xavier looked down, his expression softening. “That’s not true, Cali. You are my mate, but all of this Lupo Finale shit… I’m trying to protect you and I’m sorry if I’m doing a shit job of it. I didn’t want you to worry, Cali. That’s all.”

I shook my head. "I’m not a *worrier*, I’m a *warrior*.”

That made a smile crack across his very serious face. “I know that, baby. But let’s be honest, you do tend to have big reactions sometimes… How was I supposed to tell you, ‘hey, we have to travel to it to be with hundreds of other wolves and packs. It won’t be a chill hang’ You’d be way too…high-strung.”

I brushed that off. “It’s called having passion, dummy. And if I’m passionate about anything, it’s YOU! Because I care about you!”

“If that’s true,” Xavier mumbled out.

“IF?” I screeched, my eyes almost popping out of my head. How could he say something like that? “OF COURSE IT’S TRUE, YOU IDIOT. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t. I’ve picked you a hundred times over.” My voice cracked a little with hurt.

Xavier held up his hand. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m new to all of this too, so I’m going to make some mistakes…”

I wanted to push it, the pain in my chest his words had caused demanded it, but I knew getting caught up in that fight would distract me from our current fight.

“Fine,” I sighed. “I understand, but if you keep one more thing from me, I swear I am going to officially lose it.”

“Deal.”

“Good. Because I will murder you, I freakin’ swear, Xavier.”

“Hey, can you do me a favor?” he said, when we got to the kitchen.

“What?”

“Will you make me a sandwich?”

“*What?*” I said, low and deadly. Was this guy for real?

Xavier shrugged. “I’m hungry after all the ass-kicking I had to dish out. Training burns calories, you know?”

I huffed loudly in annoyance. “Make your own damn sandwich. You can’t plan a secret wolf-bear death match road trip and then expect me to make you a sandwich. What is this? The 1950s? And while you’re making it, you can tell me where *we’re* going.”

Xavier rolled his eyes and opened the fridge. “Do we have any ham?”

“I’ll tell you where the ham is when you TELL ME WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON!” I raged.

“See, this is excitable behavior,” Xavier quipped, slamming the refrigerator door. Then he sighed. “Have you heard of Thor’s Well?”

“What, like from the movie? Is that where he keeps his hammer?”

“What? No, it’s a massive sinkhole on the coast.”

“Wait, we’re going to a sinkhole? That’s our vacation? You’re taking me to a sinkhole?”

“It’s not a vacation, it’s a fight to the death.”

“Oh yeah, right.”

“Anyway, Thor’s Well is said to be the gateway to hell. Do you believe in hell?”

“I cannot handle theological discussions without coffee,” I deadpanned. “Are you trying to scare me or something? Because it ain’t going to work, buddy.”

Xavier shook his head as he made his sandwich. “It doesn’t matter. We’re not *really* going to Thor’s Well, but the Lupe Finale takes place nearby, in a remote campground.”

“So, we’re going camping near a sinkhole. Sounds wet. Gross,” I said, wrinkling my nose.

“What did you think?” he said. “That we’d have the Lupo Finale at a five-star all-inclusive resort?”

“A girl can dream.”

Xavier cracked a smile. “Why are you like this?”

“Like what?”

Xavier shook his head. “This silly,” he said, taking a bite out of his sandwich and handing me another one on a plate.

I smiled at him. “Thank-you, baby,” I said sweetly, not having realized just how hungry I was until I saw the sandwich. I took a bite and munched cheerfully. “How far away is this sinkhole, anyway?”

“About four days’ drive, more or less.”

I almost choked. “Four days’ drive? That’s so long! And Jay’s car is totaled.”

Xavier chuckled. “Yeah, he was pretty pissed about that. He’s still trying to figure out what to tell the insurance company. Can’t just say a wolf-bear landed on his roof.”

“Carjacked by wolves?” I suggested. “So what, are we gonna rent a car or take one of yours?”

“We’re not taking a car?”

“Party bus?”

“This isn’t a vacation. And anyway, we’re not taking a car.”

“We’re not?”

“We’re going on foot. Through the mountains.”

I nearly choked on my sandwich. “What? Wait, how far is it?”

Xavier shrugged. “I’ve never measured the distance. I haven’t been there since my bastard father took me, but I know it takes a long time. And it’ll take even longer, traveling with a human.”

“Ugh, a hiking trip?”

“You are more than welcome to stay home where it’s safe,” said Xavier, his mouth full of sandwich.

“Hey! Stop chewing with your mouth open. Just because you can shift into a wolf doesn’t mean that you have to act like an animal!” Then something dawned on me. “Oh my goodness! You’re still naked!” I looked down at my own body, realizing I was still in my nightgown. “Shit, I have to change. Then I’ll make us a real breakfast.”

“Promise?” Xavier asked hopefully.

I smiled. “Promise.” I leaned over the kitchen island and kissed him. He smirked into the kiss and tried to deepen it, but I pulled away. “Wait till I get cleaned up first, you animal.”

Xavier smirked. “Why? You’re just going to get dirty again.”

“You’re bad!” I gasped, still smirking.

“Hurry back.”

“I will.”

I’d left the kitchen and was starting to head upstairs and when I noticed that Maya was right behind me. I gulped. I knew Maya wouldn’t be anywhere near me unless she wanted to torment me. So her following me up the stairs was not a good sign. Maybe she was heading up to use the bathroom. I really hoped she was heading up to use the bathroom.

“So, you think you can handle the trip?” she asked in her nasty voice.

I shrugged. “I don’t see why not. It’s just hiking.” I mean, *I* wasn’t the one who had to fight all the wolf-bears. Or… I hoped I wouldn’t have to fight any wolf-bears. I made a mental note to pack my curling iron.

Maya scoffed. “This isn’t a regular camping trip, sweetie. You’re going to slow us down. Maybe you should stay here.”

I turned around on the stairs to look at her. My eyes narrowed. Maya had never cared about my safety before. Far from it. “Why do you care?”

Maya shrugged. Her innocent act was failing, big time.

“Well, maybe instead of worrying about me and what I’m doing, you should worry about Colton, your *mate*. In fact, why are you even coming with us at all? Why are you even here? Don’t you have a pack to deal with or bother or whatever?”

Maya just smiled darkly, like a cat who had their prey cornered and was taking her sweet time eating it. “Oh please, Cali, I wouldn’t miss this for the world. Especially when it’s your turn. *That* I can’t wait to see.”

My eyebrows knitted together in confusion. “My turn?” I asked. “My turn for what?”

Maya smirked, clearly enjoying torturing me, knowing something that I didn’t. “Didn’t Xavier tell you?” she asked, her voice thick with fake innocence.

**Episode 133**

“What is it, Maya?” I crossed my arms, waiting for Maya to drop her big important information bomb so I could go ahead and take a shower.

But Maya didn’t seem interested in telling me right away. She just kept smiling her psychopath smile. “Maybe you should ask Xavier? It’s not my place to get involved in *your* relationship.”

I huffed in annoyance. Greyson called *me* dramatic, but Maya really took the drama queen crown. “Ugh, just tell me what the fucking secret is, Maya. This game you’re playing with me is stupid and childish, and I want to put on real clothes.”

“Oh, but I just *love* fucking with you, Cali. You’re so gullible and stupid.”

If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a million times: Maya was a psychopath. Xavier was wrong—if there was anyone in this house to be afraid of, it was her.

I rolled my eyes. “Tell me what you want or I swear I will poke your eyes out!”

Maya laughed coldly. “Go right ahead. I’d love an excuse to kill you and call it self-defense.”

I wished I was wearing a watch at that moment, just so I could pointedly check it. Seriously, this was the most boring conversation ever. “Yeah, okay, knock-off-Disney-villain, can we get to the point, like, *today*? I have things to do like pack for this stupid journey. So tell me what you’re talking about. What’s this ‘my turn’ business?”

“Oh, it’s pretty straightforward, human,” she said, twirling her hair. “When the Lupo Finale comes to its end, it’ll be your turn... to die.”

Oh, *come on!* Couldn’t I ever catch a break?

I was hit with a brutal wave of annoyance and fear. Like, what the fuck? It was too damn early in the morning for this nonsense. “My turn to die? Are you being serious right now, Maya? Whoever said anything about me dying?”

“I do,” said Maya with a far off look in her eyes. “Every single night.”

Uh, obsessed much?

“But you should talk to Xavier about this. I have to get ready,” she said as she passed me and jogged up the stairs.

I’d opened my mouth to speak, but my own phone cut me off. I’d forgotten that I had pockets in this nightgown. I reached into the pocket and pulled out my vibrating phone. The caller ID said the call was from Alex. I didn’t have time for this.

I considered hanging up—I had much bigger fish to fry around here—but then I remembered how upset Alex had been, the last time I’d heard from him. When had that been? A couple days ago? Time got so blurry when you had to continuously deal with wolf-bear shenanigans. Alex was probably still really upset about Tony even though, I mean arguably, Tony fucking sucked. Maybe I should pick up?! I’d been a super shitty friend to him lately: not replying to his text, not telling him where I was, kinda accidentally causing his friend’s brutal, disgusting death…

So really, the actual least I could do was take his call. Even if I was dealing with my own possible death.

“Hey, Alex! How are you?” I said, trying to keep my voice light and cheery, even though my head was still reeling from Maya’s cryptic but threatening vibe. What had she even meant? Had she even been telling the truth? Xavier and I had literally JUST made a deal to keep no secrets from each other!

“Hey Cali,” Alex said. His voice sounded scratchy, like he’d been crying.

“Hey, what’s gotten you so glum? You got to turn that frown upside down!” I said, in my chipper voice.

“Today was Tony’s funeral,” Alex replied, his voice nearly cracking.

Shit! I wanted to curse out loud, but couldn’t with Alex on the line. Ugh, I was the worst friend ever! “Oh, Alex, I’m so sorry. How’d it go?”

“How do you think it went? It was a funeral.”

On the inside, I was screaming, kicking myself for being so insensitive. Alex was my friend, Alex had feelings. “I’m sorry, I know today must have been very hard for you.”

“It was. I could have really used a friend today.” He sighed into the phone, breaking my heart a little.

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry, Alex,” I said, and I meant it. I mean, Tony had been a major douche, but he hadn’t deserved to die—especially the way he did. And Alex was hurting really bad.

“You know, I kept thinking I was going to see you. At the funeral.”

*You might see me at mine if I don’t figure out what the hell is going on,* I thought to myself. But I at least had enough tact not to say that out loud. “I’m sorry I couldn’t make it. Life has been kind of stressful lately.”

“When are you coming back home?” Alex asked.

Home? The word hit me like a knife. I’d been so busy with crisis after crisis, I hadn’t even had time to think of home. Of how my life used to be. I hadn’t even had time to think about my *parents*, and they were the whole reason I’d ended up in this position. Did I even consider home *home*, anymore? Maybe this new life with Xavier was my home now.

“I don’t really know when I’ll be going back, to be honest,” I told Alex.

“You don’t *know?*” he repeated. “What about school? You’ve already missed a ton of classes.”

“I don’t think I’m coming back to school,” I admitted. “I thought I’d told you that.”

“WHAT?” Alex yelled into the receiver. “What do you mean you aren’t coming back to school? What about your dreams? Your future? Your goals?”

“Things change?” I said weakly. “And we both know I wasn’t the best student in the world.” Really, the only class that would have been useful to me in my new life was some kind of wolf-bear history class, but I didn’t think my college offered that as a major. Or even a minor.

And truth was, I didn’t know what my dream was. I’d been taking general education classes and had been putting off declaring a major big time.

“What are you even doing out there, anyway?” Alex asked. He didn’t sound *mad,* exactly*—*more concerned and scared.

“I mean, right now I’m going camping?” I said, wincing as soon as the words left my mouth. It was the truth, but it sounded so lame when I heard it out loud.

“What? What do you mean, you’re going camping? You’re quitting school to camp? Like a backpacker or a forest ranger? You’ve never even spent a day in the woods before. Is this because of that guy? Xavier something or other?”

“I’m living with Xavier, he is my boyfriend now and all so…” I trailed off.

“Cali, it doesn’t seem like you to drop everything for some guy.”

*He wouldn’t feel that way if it was HIM*, I thought bitterly. “You don’t need to worry about me, Alex. I’m okay. I can make my own decisions.”

“But I do worry about you, Cali.” Alex sighed. “That’s what friends do. You used to tell me everything, and now you’ve run off to Oregon with some complete stranger. You’re throwing your whole life away to be with him. This is a true crime podcast episode waiting to happen, and I’m terrified. What happened to *us*, Cali?”

*Yup, there it is*. There wasn’t any ‘us’—that was the problem. “Things are just very complicated for me right now,” I told him. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Xavier coming up the stairs and quickly started to panic. The last thing we needed was hearing me defend our relationship on the phone to Alex.

“Cali!” Alex yelled down the line. “Cali, are you there? Is he hurting you? Does he make you feel unsafe? Cali, answer me!”

“Got to go. I’ll call you later. Bye.” I said quickly, before hanging up and shoving the phone back into my nightgown pocket.

Because that didn’t look shady at all.

I looked up to see Xavier looking at me and cursed internally. I was so dead.

“Who were you talking to?” Xavier asked casually.

For a split second I considered lying, but who else could I say had been calling? A telemarketer?

“Alex,” I admitted, looking away.

“Why did he call?”

“He was upset because today was Tony’s funeral.”

Xavier snorted. “He should be happy he’s gone. That guy was an animal.”

“Oh, that’s ironic coming from the guy who shifts into a wolf. And who *ripped Tony’s leg off!*”

Xavier shrugged. “He deserved it. He attacked you. Nobody can attack you and live. Period. End of story.”

All this talk of dying made me remember what Maya had said. “Speaking of death—because that’s a lovely early morning topic of conversation—what happens at the end of the Finale?”

He gave me a look. “I become the Alpha.”

“And what about me?”

“What *about* you? Must you make everything about you, just because I love you?”

I rolled my eyes. “I mean what happens to me after the Finale, and after you become Alpha?”

“You would become my Luna—officially. We’ve been over this already.”

“Goodness, can’t you give me a book with all this stuff in it?” Maybe I should have actually checked to see if my college offered wolf-bear history and culture classes. Lola would know.

“Why are you asking me this, anyway?” Xavier asked.

“Maya said something,” I told him simply.

His expression darkened. “What did she do this time?”

“Other than being a raging jerk? She said that at the end of the Lupo Finale, I’ll die.”

Xavier shifted uncomfortable on the stairs, his gaze not meeting mine, confirming all my worst fears. “Maya says a lot of shit to get a rise out of you,” he mumbled weakly.

I climbed a few steps higher so that our eyes were level. “Is there any truth to what she said? Be honest.”

Our eyes met for a moment before he looked away. “Yes.”

**Episode 134**

For a moment, my heart stopped. It was like the world had slowed down for a second, giving me a chance to understand *exactly* what he was telling me. To understand that there was a possibility I might *die* if he didn’t become Alpha.

Then the world sped up again, and I smacked his dumb wolf-bear chest. “Asshole!” I screamed.

“What was that for?” he asked, rubbing the place where I’d smacked him.

“Don’t you think you should have, I don’t know, MENTIONED that at some point? We LITERALLY TALKED ABOUT THIS NOT EVEN AN HOUR AGO, XAVIER.”

“I’ve told you it was dangerous to be a Luna,” he said, in the stupid I-told-you-so-voice that I hated with a passion.

“You know, there’s a difference between ‘dangerous’ and ‘death’. Like, a big difference. You need to tell me everything—and I mean EVERYTHING—right now!”

“Cali, both are an option. You *know* that. You were already attacked once. Maya’s messing with you for who knows what reason and it’s clearly working. What do you want to know?”

“What part of *everything* do you not understand?” I snapped. “You promised to stop being so damn evasive! It is *so* not hot.”

Xavier opened his mouth to speak, but stopped when we heard Lola and Jay’s voices heading toward the stairs.

“Does it always feel that awesome when you shift?” Lola asked Jay.

But I didn’t hear Jay’s answer. Instead, I pointed at the two of them. “Do they know?” I screamed. Was this just *another* instance where everyone knew something important but me?

“Huh?” Lola questioned, her eyes darting between Xavier and me.

“I swear to wolf-bear god, Lola, if you’ve kept another secret from me I’ll make sure you stay a wolf forever!” I cried out.

“What?” Lola asked again.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Xavier said, his lips a tight line as he took me by the arm and dragged me toward the bedroom. “We are taking this offline.”

I struggled against his strong grip. “Stop manhandling me! And what does that even mean? Going offline? This is real life, not the internet!”

“It means come with me into the fucking bedroom and I’ll tell you,” he said, through gritted teeth.

Normally, I would be ALL ABOUT Xavier dragging me into the bedroom, but at that moment, I wanted to bang him on the head with a mallet more than I wanted to bang him between the sheets. I wanted to storm out of the bedroom, furious that he thought he could just drag me around the house whenever he damn well pleased. *And* withhold secrets. He might have been Alpha, but he didn’t have to behave like a wild animal. Maybe I’d just slap him again. Slapping Xavier always seemed to make me feel better. Or maybe I’d wait to hear what he had to say and *then* slap him. Either way, that man was getting slapped.

I stopped outside the bedroom door, tugging my arm out of his grip with a glare. “If I go in, will you actually tell me everything?”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Yes.”

*“Everything?*” I demanded, giving him a suspicious look.

“Ugh, yes.”

“*Everything*, everything?”

“Oh my god, you are the biggest brat I have ever met in my life. Just get in here!” he all but growled. With one mighty tug, he pulled me from the doorframe and into the bedroom, slamming the door behind him. Did he have to make a scene out of everything?

“Do you have to be so damn pushy?” I demanded.

“With you, I have to be,” he growled.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Okay, we’re ‘offline’ and I’m waiting. Start talking. Now.”

Xavier sighed, and sat on the bed. “When the Lupo Finale begins, anyone can challenge me. From any pack. Usually, each challenge ends with one of the contestants being forced to submit to the winner.”

“Submit? Kinky. Is that a sex thing? Because I don’t want to go if it’s a sex thing.” What was this? A death-match or a dominatrix den?

Despite the seriousness in his dark eyes, Xavier managed to crack a smile at my comment. “Look who’s the pervert now.”

“You’ve all corrupted me. You and your naked fur ways.”

“Sure, sure. Keep telling yourself that, babe. Anyway, it’s not a sex thing. Pervert,” he said with a mischievous glare. “Submission can take make forms, depending on who’s submitting. But usually it means the person will admit defeat by lying in a docile position on the ground.”

“Like a dog?” I asked, trying to picture it. Would Xavier ask the loser to sit? Maybe roll over? That could be fun.

Xavier sighed deeply, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Yes, kind of like a dog.”

“But how do I fit into all of this?”

“I’m getting to that. Lola’s right, you always interrupt stories.”

“Only because you guys take like a billion years to get to the point.”

“Shhhh, no talking during story time,” he said. “Anyway, what happens next depends on who the challenger is. But more importantly, it depends on who the victor is.” He smirked. “Which, of course, will be me.”

“Cocky much?” I said. “But what if the victor *isn’t* you?”

Xavier scoffed. “Do you doubt me? That’s not very supportive mate talk.”

“I don’t doubt you, but what if something happens to you?” I remembered what Greyson had said outside, that Xavier needed a lot of practice. He’d probably just said it to be a dick, but still…

“Then it’s the victor’s choice.”

“Huh? Are riddles the main language of wolf-bears? Just tell me!”

“You’re such a pain in the ass.”

“Oh, you have no idea of the depths of annoyance I can reach if you don’t tell me what you’re holding back.”

Xavier sighed deeply. “All right. If, for some reason, I’m defeated—”

“Or killed.”

Xavier shot me a lot. “What did I say about interrupting? Anyway, if I lose, the last challenger standing wins. Then they get possession of the defeated Alpha’s pack and, if there is one, the pack’s Luna. They can do whatever they wanted with her. Which, in the past, has traditionally resulted in her death.”

It was like a sucker punch to the chest. Like all the breath had left my body.

All the color must have drained from my face, because Xavier got up from the bed and walked over to me. “Baby,” he said gently, gripping my shoulders with his strong hands. “It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be okay, I promise.”

“How do you know that? How can you possibly know that?” I screamed, my voice thick with tears. Oh my god, they were going to kill me. I *knew* they were going to kill me. I’d pissed off so many wolf-bears. They were going to kill me, just for the fun of it.

“Because firstly, that’s old school shit,” Xavier said firmly. “People don’t do that anymore. It’s 2019. Secondly, no one is going to defeat me. Colton and Jay will make sure of it. That’s why we were training and that’s why I didn’t tell you about all of this. What Maya said is a moot point and just to get a rise out of you.

“And lastly, you’re not a marked Luna. Putting aside the physical risk involved in marking you, if you were marked, you’d be at the mercy of the victor. As confident as I am in myself, I still won’t take that risk with you. I will always keep you safe Caliana. No matter what.”

I looked up at him, my eyes filling with tears. “Is that the only reason why you haven’t marked me yet?”

“That, and the fact that we don’t know exactly what will happen to a human with a Luna mark. But yes.” He looked down and saw the tears spilling from my eyes. “Aw, baby, what did you think was keeping me from doing it?”

“I don’t know,” I wailed, wiping my eyes. “The fact that you didn’t want me?” The tears were coming to so fast now that I couldn’t stop them.

“Oh Cal, of course I want you. You wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want you. You’re my mate. You have my heart.”

“But I was worried that you didn’t want to make it official,” I sobbed out. Geez, why the hell was I crying so much? Probably because too many things had happened before 10 a.m.

“Why would you think that?”

“Because I’m a pain in the ass!” I wailed.

“Well, yeah. But I love you.”

I smiled back. “Even when I’m a pain in the ass?”

He grinned down at me. “Yeah. I guess.”

“Good!” I said, wrapping my arms around his neck. I leaned up and kissed him, and he quickly deepened it, putting his hands on my waist.

The bedroom door opened, and in walked none other than Captain Cockblock. “Hey, knock it off!”

Xavier and I pulled apart. “You really need to start locking that door,” I told Xavier.

“I’m going to pay Phil double to double bolt it,” Xavier said, glaring at his brother, who only grinned like the naughty boy he was.

“You two can bone in the woods. It’s time to go.”

Time to go? Already? But what was I going to *wear?*

**Episode 135**

“Um, yeah, we’re not going anywhere yet,” I said, arms folded across my chest. If these wolf-bears thought for a second that I was just going to leave with them whenever they decided, they hadn’t met Caliana Hart. Also, how inconsiderate were they? You had to give a gal at least three hours to pack before departing on a major trip. Especially if said stupid trip was camping.

Colton and Xavier exchanged looks. Colton shrugged. “Classic woman, always changing her mind.”

“That’s sexist and stupid,” I informed him.

Colton shrugged again. Jerk.

“Come on babe, of course you’re going,” Xavier said, making it very clear that he was holding back an eye roll.

“I’m not going anywhere until I call my parents,” I stated.

“What, you need a permission slip?” Colton teased.

“Shut up!” I glared at him. What if something did happen to me at that stupid sinkhole, and I ended up becoming dinner?

I turned to Xavier. “I want to talk to my parents before it’s too late.”

“Oh, so you told her?” said Colton.

Xavier shrugged. “She asked. What was I meant to do?”

I looked back and forth between the two of them. “You know I’m standing right here, right? Listening to every word we’re saying.”

“We know.”

“Well, stop talking about me like I’m not here!” I yelled.

Xavier sighed. “Call your parents while we pack up. Tell them I said hi.”

“Don’t forget my curling iron!” I called out, as he and Colton were leaving.

“I’m not listening,” he shot back, shutting the door behind him.

I waited until they’d left to huff out my frustration about the whole situation. Sure, I was thrilled that Xavier did want to be with me—and that not giving me the Luna mark was nothing personal—but why had that been such a big secret? Why hadn’t he just told me before? Why had he waited to tell me until just before we left for the Finale? Would he even have told me if I hadn’t thrown a fit? Wolf-bears loved secrets more than a dragon loved gold. God, what was the next secret going to be? Did wolf-bears eat their pups? Yikes! I would SO NOT be having puppies.

I shook off the thought of puppies and sat down on my bed, pulling out my phone. It dawned on me that I hadn’t spoken to my parents in a while. Living here kinda made time all blurry. Guilt started to creep into my heart. I’d done all of this to help my mother, and I hadn’t even spoken to her in ages. I’d gone from being the daughter of the year to the worst ever in the span of like a month.

To be fair, it wasn’t completely my fault that I hadn’t been able to call: Rogues, witches, and hot sex had really eaten up my free time. But I should have been a better daughter. And if I got back from the wolf-bear Finale alive, I was absolutely going to be a much better daughter.

As I stared at the phone, I thought about what Alex had said, about coming home, and what I was doing out here. It was weird, how I was already thinking of this place and this life as my home . I wondered what my parents thought about what I was doing.

Only one way to find out.

I scrolled through my contacts and clicked on the ‘Home’ button.

“Hey honey!” My father’s voice filled me with warmth and comfort.

“Hi Dad,” I said, smiling into the phone.

“Your mom and I were just talking about you.”  
 “How is Mom?” I asked, feeling an old fear build up in my stomach—what if something had happened? What if the surgery hadn’t worked? I cursed myself internally. I should have called sooner, maybe I’d missed something.

“She’s doing good, honey! Still resting! We were wondering when we’re going to see our favorite daughter?”

“I’m your only daughter.”

“That’s why we want to see you. We miss you, Cal.”

A chill ran through my spine. If they knew what I’d just found out, they wouldn’t just be missing me—they’d be in a full-blown panic. In fact, my whole life was a perfect catalyst for parental panic. Wolf-bear battles in the middle of nowhere, duels to the death, wild jumps out of window… Oh, yeah, and I lost my virginity to a wolf-bear. *That* would go over well.

For a split second, I wanted to tell them everything. To spill my guts and have a good long cry while my parents told me everything was going to be all right. Like when I was little and used to run into their bedroom and cry about the monsters under my bed, and they’d hug me until I was calm again, telling me that monsters weren’t real and that everything was fine.

But monsters were real this time. Very, very real.

I shook my head. I couldn’t tell them, and not for the obvious reason—namely that they would never believe even HALF of the shit I’d been through. No, I couldn’t tell them because of my Mom. She was still recovering.

“Well, it probably won’t be for a few more weeks. I’m going… camping?” Even the word felt strange in my mouth.

There was a pause.

“Camping?” my father questioned. “Like in the woods? With tents?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “Yes Dad, camping. What’s so weird about me going camping?”

“Because you’ve never gone camping before? Or shown interest in it, ever?”

There was another pause as I sat there, annoyed. I could go camping. I could be a *boss* at camping if I wanted too.

“Is that Caliana?” I heard my mother’s voice in the background, and my heart skipped a beat.

“I’m putting you on speakerphone Cali,” my dad announced.

“Hi, Mom!” I called. “How are you feeling?”

“Never mind me, what’s this I hear about you going camping? You hate the outdoors!”

I was beginning to remember why I hadn’t called them.

“I do not!” I protested. “Lies!”

My parents just laughed. It was way too early for this nonsense. “Oh, come on Cali. Remember Hannah Claire’s birthday party?”

I shuddered at the thought. “That was a completely different situation! We were in her backyard! And her brother Jorden ran at us with a hockey mask screaming at the top of his voice. It was scary, and my fear of camping is justified.”

“Is this because of Xavier?” Dad asked.

I gulped, thinking about Alex. What if Dad thought my relationship with Xavier was a bad idea, too? “Uh, he’s going with me, yes.”

“Well, I for one think that’s great. I think he’s the best thing that’s ever happened to you. He’s opening your mind.”

I smirked. “Oh, you have no idea. Anyway. I just wanted to check on you and Mom, and tell you how much I love you both before my trip. Now will someone please tell me how my favorite woman is doing? Seriously.”

My mother laughed. Her voice sounded good and strong, starting to sound like she had before her illness. I’d been so afraid that I’d never hear it again.

“I’m doing much better, honey. I’m recovering even faster than the doctors expected. Thanks to that mysterious donor.”

I smiled into the phone, thinking of what Xavier had done. Wait, Xavier! Everyone was getting ready to go, and I hadn’t even changed.

“Hey, guys. I’ve got to get going. We’re leaving for our trip soon. But I’ll promise to call you if I get back—-*when* I get back!” I said, smacking myself in the forehead.

“What was that?” Dad asked.

“Nothing! I love you!”

“We love you too, Cali! Be safe out there!”

“I’ll try!” I said, trying to laugh. But really, I kinda wanted to cry. “Xavier says hi!”

I hung up and turned around to see Xavier standing by the doorway, watching me.

“Were you eavesdropping on my private conversation?” I asked.

Xavier shrugged. “Why would I eavesdrop on your conversations? You never say anything interesting.”

“Excuse me?!” I said, temped to throw my phone at him.

Xavier laughed. “I’m kidding! Have you packed yet?”

“Um, how could I have packed? I found out”—I looked at my phone clock—“thirty minutes ago that we’re going on a fucking camping trip. When would I have had time to pack?”

“When you were making that speech?” he suggested.

“Get out.”

“Well, everyone’s ready so you’d better get moving,” he told me, tossing a massive backpack my way and nearly knocking me over.

“What the hell is this?”

“Uh, a backpack? You’ve got five minutes to pack.”

“*What?*”

“Time starts now,” he said as he exited the room.

“Xavier!” I shouted after him.

I looked around the bedroom, trying to figure out what to pack. I’d never been camping, so I decided to just pack whatever I could fit into the backpack, plus my curling iron.

“Don’t forget to pack your sexy lingerie!” Lola said as she entered my bedroom.

“I think hiking boots would be more useful,” I said.

She winked. “Well you don’t own hiking boots, but you *do* own sexy lingerie and you’ll want it for when Xavier wins.”

“Ugh, stop it,” I said, but packed it anyway. Better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it.

After I was packed, I followed Lola outside. Greyson, Colton, Xavier, Jay, and Maya were all standing around with their backpacks on.

As soon as Xavier saw that we were all outside, he started towards a wooded trail.

“Wait,” I said. “Where exactly are we going?”

Jay pointed at an ominous mountain in the distance, shrouded in clouds. “There. We climb that and continue toward the sea.”

I gasped. “You want me to climb a frickin’ *mountain?*”

Maybe I should just let the Rogues kill me.

**Episode 136**

*Seriously?* Like, were these people for real? That mountain was like, a million feet tall and surrounded by mist like it had come straight from the *Lord of the Rings* movies*.* I got winded going up the *stairs*,for crying out loud. No way. Nope. My parents had been right: I didn’t camp.

Maya turned toward me and snorted. “See? I knew you wouldn’t be able to handle it. I knew this would be too much for a weak little human. You might as well turn back now, you’ll only be in our way.”

I shot her the dirtiest look I could muster and squared my shoulders. I had to do this; not only to shut Maya up (although that was always a bonus) but because I needed to prove myself as a Luna. I needed to be with my pack—regardless of how rag-tag it might be. I couldn’t let Xavier show up without his mate, his future Luna, by his side. No, I needed to go. I was a goddamn Luna.

“Pffffttt, you wish,” I told Maya, with a snort of my own. “Let’s do this.” I said, slinging my backpack over my shoulders. I guess I’d packed a bit more than I thought, because as soon as the backpack was on my back, I could feel its weight pulling me down. I nearly fell backwards onto the ground.

So much for being a badass Luna.

But before my ass could hit the ground, I felt a firm, steady hand on my pack, guiding me back to my feet. I turned to see it was Greyson, a sly smile on his smug face “If you fall, I’m here to catch you, love. Again.”

Asshat!

I moved away from him and his hand. “I can handle myself just fine, thank-you very much,” I told him gruffly, before turning away from him and his handsome, annoying face (OMG did I just say handsome? NO!) and back to the rest of the group, hurrying to catch up to Xavier. But I could still feel Greyson’s stare lingering on me. The feeling sent a shiver down my spine, and raised goosebumps across my skin.

Xavier looked at me. “You cold?”

“No.”

“Then why are you shivering?”

Shit. “It’s a human thing,” I said, which was more or less the truth.

Xavier seemed to have bought it, because he dropped the subject.

As we continued down the path, I was shocked to discover just how much I was enjoying myself. There was beautiful weather, plenty of pretty trees to look at, and even some cute wildlife. I even spotted a family of bunnies.

“You doing okay, baby?” Xavier asked.

“Of course. How hard can it be to walk on a path like this?” Maybe I *was* a hiker, after all.

Xavier shot me a look. “It’s not going to be like this for long. It’s going to get rough in spots.”

“Pfffttt, I like it rough,” I said, with a mischievous wink.

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Not that kind of rough, babe. Just promise me you’ll let me know if it gets too hard. I mean it, Cali. Just tell me.”

For a moment, I allowed myself to melt over the tenderness of his words. My wolf-bear baby really did love me, and wanted to openly communicate his feelings with me! This was what the women’s magazines I used to thumb through at the doctor’s office called ‘progress’.

“I promise,” I told him with a smile.

Xavier took my hand, sending a jolt of excitement through my body. Who knew you could get turned on just by holding hands?

I head Maya snort behind me. “Ugh, gross! If I’d known I’d be watching this gross shit, I would have stayed home.”

“Well, maybe you should head on back,” I told her through gritted teeth. I wanted to turn around and smack her, but Xavier squeezed my hand gently.

“Ignore her, baby. She’s just trying to bait you, remember? She’s like a schoolyard bully, tugging on your pigtails.”

“You mean she has a crush on me? That’s not a healthy way to show it.”

Xavier shrugged. “Maybe, but I don’t think that’s it.”

“You know I’m right behind you, right?” said Maya.

I smirked.

My feel-good attitude about the trip quickly shifted into annoyance the more we traveled. Xavier was right—this trail sucked some major ass. Not only did the smooth path disappear, but the trees that I’d thought were so beautiful were now smacking me in the face with their pointy branches. Fucking horrible.

“You totally did this on purpose,” I pouted, as a really long pine branch hit me across the face. It didn’t help that I was the only one getting hurt.

“After all I’ve done to protect you, do you really think I’d purposefully try to hurt you with twigs?”

“Well, when you say it out loud it just sounds ridiculous,” I admitted.

“That’s because it is.”

“But knowing you, you’d do it for the joke.”

“It is pretty hilarious watching you get slammed by twigs.”

“Rude.” I told him. I looked around, wondering just how far we’d have to go to get to the mountains. There were too many trees in the way, and I couldn’t even see the sun. I was wondering where it had gone when it started to rain, answering my silent question.

Well, this was off to a great start. Yuck!

A loud crack of thunder interrupted my thoughts, causing me to jump almost a foot in pure panic. The thunder only caused it to rain more, putting us in a full-blown downpour. Great. Just GREAT.

“Shouldn’t we stop and find shelter?” I asked, wrapping my jacket more tightly around me.

“Not until we get to the caves,” Xavier yelled over the rain.

“Caves? What caves? No one told me about any caves!” I cried out.

“Let me guess,” said Maya. “You’re claustrophobic?”

“Get lost, literally,” I told her, before turning back to Xavier. “Why are we going to caves?”

“Um, maybe because they’re shelter?” said Maya. “You know, big holes in the rocks? Do you even know what a cave is?”

“Don’t push it, Maya,” Colton warned. He turned to Xavier. “You know, if we shift, we could get there much quicker.”

Lola perked up at this news. “I’m in! I want to be a wolf again!”

“No way,” Jay said. “It’s too dangerous for you. Look what happened last time. I’m not dating a wolf. You’re a hybrid, and I love you. You need to be safe and sensible.”

Lola just shook her head and pulled out a strange little bottle of bright blue liquid from her bag. “I’ve got Big Mac’s potion to help me out!”

“No,” said Jay firmly.

“The longer we stand here, the wetter we get. Make up your minds!” said Greyson roughly, causing Xavier to glare at him.

“I have a right to do what I want! My body, my choice!” Lola yelled out, pulling the top off the bottle and taking a gulp of the potion before anyone could stop her. She screwed up her face in disgust. “Ugh, I really wish Big Mac had made this with a better flavor.”

“She does have a point,” Greyson said, taking his backpack off before he stripped out of his clothing.

I covered my eyes so I wouldn’t have to see him naked. By the time I uncovered them, the silver wolf was in front of me, Greyson’s backpack on its back.

“Is that like a special kind of wolf-bear backpack?” I asked.

“Just grab onto me after I shift,” said Xavier. Within seconds, he’d stripped out of his clothing and shifted. In wolf form, he lowered his body so that I could climb on.

Well, I’d been hoping to climb on top of Xavier today, but not like this.

In my head, I’d thought this would be more cute and romantic. Me on the back of my wolf-bear lover, looking royal and elegant as we crossed the wooded landscape. In reality, I was just holding onto my mate’s fur for dear life as his big stupid backpack kept hitting me in the face, while the rain continued to pour, blocking most of my vision. From what I could barely see, Maya, Colton, Jay—and somehow Lola—had all stripped and shifted into their wolf forms. At least they’d had the good sense to actually *take off* their clothes before shifting into wolves. Yay, learning!

The rest of the group started forward, racing into the darkness of the woods. I held onto Xavier for dear life. I thought about Greyson and how I’d almost fallen when I’d been on his back, and it hadn’t been raining then. What if something happened and I fell off? Or got trampled by the rest of the pack by accident? Or on purpose, if it was Maya?

A chuckle rang into my head, deep and familiar. ‘*What did I tell you, love? I’ll catch you if you fall…*’

Greyson? AGAIN!?

**Episode 137**

Okay, how did Greyson keep getting inside my head? I’d never given him permission to be there. I hadn’t even given him permission to talk me again! Did wolf-bears have manners at all?

While I was a little pleased with myself, knowing that I’d been right about the fact that wolf-bears could indeed read minds (suck it, Xavier), I was still pretty pissed that Greyson was *actually* reading my mind. Or, at the very least, getting inside my head somehow.

I’d show him! I’d stop him from sending his stupid voice to me and reading my thoughts. I just wouldn’t think of anything—I’d blank him out.

*Yup, just think about nothing.* He wouldn’t be able hear anything if I didn’t *think* of anything. I wasn’t going to think about his stupid lean but muscular body, with his stupid crazy hot abs. I wasn’t going to think about his dumb face with its beautiful grey eyes and its *cheekbones*. And I for sure wasn’t going to think about that little moon-shaped scar on his face. Nope! I wasn’t going to think of any of that. I wasn’t going to think about his annoying laugh, or his wicked smile, or the obnoxious way he called me ‘love’. Nope. I wasn’t going to go *there.* Much like the Taylor Swift song, I was going to be a blank space.

WHACK!

So lost in my not-thoughts, I hadn’t seen the branch until it slapped me across the face, clearing my thoughts and replacing them with pain.

I looked around the rain soaked forest, realizing that Xavier was slowing down. We had to be near the caves. Though I couldn’t be sure—the rain and the darkness made it almost impossible to see. I didn’t even understand how Xavier or the rest of the group could see where they were going, it was so dark.

I craned my neck to get a better look at what was up ahead, losing my grip on Xavier’s wet fur in the process. I nearly slid off, but managed to catch myself just in time. Luckily, I managed to spot a little light up ahead, which illuminated a large jutting rock face that we were heading toward, and a cave entrance. I shivered as I looked at it. It did *not* look like a friendly cave, but what cave did?

Xavier slowed to a stop as we neared the cave’s entrance. He lowered his wolf body to the ground to allow me to climb off.

I stumbled slightly as my feet touched the ground, still not used to the traveling by wolf-bear. Even though the thick rainfall, I could hear the crackling of bones as everyone but Lola shifted back into their human form.

I looked over at Xavier, who was naked except for his backpack. How did that stay on so well? Was it some kind of special wolf-bear technology? Maybe they’d start making clothing that wouldn’t tear to shreds when they shifted?

I looked over at Lola, who yipped. Her furry face bore a look of concentration, frustration, and a little fear. My heart sank to my stomach. What if we couldn’t get her to change back? What would happen to her? Big Mac was too far away, and I didn’t think we even had her cell number.

I walked over to Lola. “Come on, Lola! You can do it! Just shift back, think about human things and your cool human body.”

“Didn’t think I’d have to add ‘shifting cheerleader’ to your list of annoying habits,” Maya scoffed.

I shot her a look. “At least I’m trying to help. Do you think standing there naked with your arms crossed, rolling your eyes is ever helpful? Well it’s not.’

Lola gave a loud cry of pain that was a mix between a wolf’s howl and a human scream as her bones cracked, and she shifted back into her normal, naked self.

Jay and I hurried to Lola’s side, helping her to her feet as she shivered in the cold.

“Are you okay?” I demanded, making sure she didn’t have any paws or extra fur. (Apparently Lola had thought it would be a good idea to do a bikini wax before the trip. Classic Lola).

“I’m fine, really! Just a little shaken, is all. Still not used to shifting like that,” she said, putting her weight onto Jay, who lifted her up and carried her bridal style. “It’s kind of awesome though, if I’m honest.”

I started to follow them when goosebumps rose on my skin. A shiver ran down my spine that I knew for sure wasn’t from the rain. I turned to see Greyson, naked like the rest, staring at me, his face expressionless. But his gaze captivated mine, tugging at me inside.

I spun away as quickly as I could, breaking our eye contact. The whole thing left me more than a little unnerved. I needed to stop worrying about Greyson and his creepy ass stare and his freaky mind powers. I had bigger issues to deal with. Like the fact that everyone was still naked, it was raining, and we dind’t exactly have shelter going for us.

“We need to find shelter. It’s pouring out, and if we stand around here naked you’re all going to get wolf-bear pneumonia.”

“We’ll get dressed in the cave,” said Xavier as he headed towards the entrance.

Oh HELL no.

“Um, no. Not being into camping dind’t mean I’d like camping more in a cave with a group of naked people!”

“Excuse me?” Maya and Lola said in unison.

“You know what I mean. I’m not getting in a dark cave with a bunch of naked people. This is like a start of a porno, or something. Or a weird sex cult. This is how those 20/20 episodes begin.”

“What kind of porn are you watching exactly?” Maya asked.

I rolled my eyes. “Wouldn’t you like to know,” I spat. “Anyway, I’m not like the rest of you. I wasn’t raised to run around with my private bits exposed for everyone and everything to see while we sleep in a forest.”

“Well, if you’re going to be a Luna of a pack, you’d better get used to it. Stop being a damn baby about it. It’s just some tits and dick,” said Colton.

Xavier glared at Colton. “Oh, shut up,” he said, taking off his backpack and pulling out pants. “Cali’s right, we need to stay warm and dry.”

Everyone followed his lead and got dressed. I couldn’t help but be impressed by Xavier’s Alpha mode, getting everyone to listen to him without effort. With my influence, too! Even Greyson was putting on his clothes.

I turned to Xavier, getting closer to him so the others couldn’t hear. “Thank you.”

He nodded, a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. I wished we were back home with his giant bed and an electric blanket. We could have hot cocoa and snuggle and watch—

*CRACK*!

I screamed as a bolt of lightning struck a nearby tree, only half a foot away from us. The tree exploded instantly, and even in the heavy downpour, there were still flames. My heart beat wildly in my chest—I’d never had lightning strike so close by. Was that good luck or a bad omen?

“We should put it out!” I screamed over the rain, my ears ringing. “What if it spreads? We don’t want to burn down the whole forest!”

Everyone stared at me for a moment.

“It’s raining, Cali, hard,” said Jay, holding out his arms. “There’s not going to be a fire. Look, it’s already starting to disappear.”

And sure enough, the fire that had started so quickly was already going out.

White hot embarrassment filled me as I looked down at the ground, my face heating with a blush. I always had to say the wrong thing, didn’t I? “You’re right, sorry. The storm must be getting to me.”

“Yeah, it was the storm that suddenly made you stupid,” Maya yelled, trying very hard to make her insult heard over the raging storm.

I looked away, my body shivering, the rain soaking through my clothes.

Xavier came closer to me and placed a strong arm around me. I leaned into him, soaking in the feeling. How warm and safe it was to be near him. How protected I felt, like nothing could hurt me—not a stupid rain storm or mean comments from Maya. I smiled gently to myself.

“Everyone move, we need to get inside the cave *now*. We’ll get sick if we stay out in this weather for too long,” said Xavier to the rest of the group.

As we moved toward the cave, there was a flurry of motion behind me. Suddenly, Greyson pushed his way to the front of the pack, and came to a dead halt right by the entrance.

“What are you do—” My question was cut off by Greyson holding up a calloused hand to silence me. I watched as Greyson sniffed the air. His bright eyes searched through the darkness, his expression serious. He was always so intense, truly like a wolf on the prowl.

“Could you stop being so fucking dramatic?” Xavier asked, his voice rough and serious. I could see him suppressing an eye roll. “What’s wrong?”

Greyson’s long arm pointed ahead to the darkness of the cave. I squinted, trying to see what he was pointing at, which seemed like a whole lotta nothing.

In a hushed voice that could barely be heard above the roar of the storm, he said, “There’s something in there.”

**Episode 138**

Greyson’s words hit me hard, causing my heart to skip a beat.

“What?” I breathed, glancing from Greyson to Xavier, trying to figure out what he was saying. What exactly wasin the cave? Rogues? A family of bears? More naked people? Thinking of the possibilities only made me more nervous. Couldn’t he have been a little more specific?

Greyson glared at me. “Shhhh,” he hissed, sniffing the air again. Then he walked over to Xavier as quietly as could, careful not to step on a twig or a leaf. “I’ll go check it out. You wait here with the others.”

“No,” Xavier told him firmly. “I absolutely do not trust you. This could easily be a set up.”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Are you honestly going to play that card *again?* Don’t you think you should come up with some new material? It would at least be more interesting. I may be your half-brother, but I’m still your brother. Your *older* brother, in fact, which should give me a little seniority around here.”

“You think I care about that? I don’t. I’m the Alpha, I make the decisions, and I decide who goes into the cave. And it won’t be you,” Xavier growled.

“You’re not Alpha yet, brother,” Greyson growled back, stalking over to him so that they were eye-to-eye.

Well, this was annoying.

“Oh my god, enough of this pissing contest. You both need to get a freakin’ grip! If you two are so busy sizing each other up to go in that cave, I’ll do it myself.” I shouted as I started toward the cave. In my head, I knew this was a little stupid. Did I know what was in there? A big no. Was I being my usual impulsive self? Definitely yes. I might not have known everything about werewolves or Lunas, but I was a fearless enough to get shit done while the men just stood around arguing, trying to out-Alpha each other. *Boys.*

Besides, Greyson was probably just trying to scare us. There was probably nothing in the cave and this was all some weird joke or Alpha hazing. I wouldn’t have put it past him. Maybe it was a family of deer seeking shelter from the rain. A family of cute little deer would be much less scared of me than of Greyson—especially if they could smell the wolf on him. Plus, it would give me a chance to live out my dreams of becoming a Disney princess.

However, before I could take a single step, Xavier pulled me back roughly. I looked up at him, annoyed. “What’s the problem? I’ve got this covered.”

Xavier looked back at me, his expression stern and serious. “ You’re not going anywhere near there yet—it could be dangerous.”

I put my hands on my hips and glared at him as I pulled out of his grasp. “If I don’t do it, who will? No one’s stepping up. All you two do is fight and stare each other down like big tough guys without actually doing anything. At least I’mgoing *something*.”

Colton walked up to the rest of us, pushing his brothers out of the way as he headed toward the cave. “Step aside nerds. Clearly, if you want something done right, you’ve got to ask the best to do it.”

No one protested. Honestly, Colton was the best option to go in since he was Beta. We all watched as Colton disappeared into the cave entrance. I wanted to call out to him, tell him good luck, but he was gone before the words could escape my mouth. Instead, I held my breath and waited, a million terrible scenarios playing out in my mind. What if there was a family of cougars inside, or a pack of Rogues? Or worse! Maybe it was really a group of boy scouts who’d gotten lost in the rain while trying to get their merit badges! Would Colton rip them apart? Oh god, I needed to stop watching true crime shows before bed.

Xavier turned to me as I bit my lip, my panicked thoughts taking control of my brain as my body went rigid with worry. “Relax, Colton can take can take care of himself.”

I turned to him. “Forget about Colton—what about those poor boy scouts?”

“What?” Xavier and Greyson said in unison.

“Who the fuck said anything about boy scouts?” Maya screamed, walking toward me, her eyes furious. “Are you on fucking drugs?”

“Hey, don’t yell at me because your mate’s in a cave eating boy scouts!”

“He is NOT my mate!”

“Hah! That’s the biggest lie I’ve ever heard. Otherwise, why are you even still here, Maya? Hmm? Did you loooove kissing Colton?”

“Oh, shut up!”

Just then, a blood curdling scream pierced the air, and all of our heads snapped toward the cave.

“Colton?” Maya breathed. She raced toward the cave, the rest of us following quickly behind her.

“Not you,” said Xavier, pushing me back toward my backpack. “You’re going to wait here.”

I scoffed. “Have you even met me? Colton might be a perverted dick sometimes, but he’s my friend. And I will always try to keep my friends from being murdered!” I said as I ran toward the cave, Xavier close behind me.

I’d never been inside a cave before, so I had no idea what they were supposed to look like. But this cave looked pretty gross, as far as caves went. Pitch black, with a lot of dripping water and moss covering the ground. Still, it was big enough for all of us to fit inside the mouth of the cave comfortably, and it looked pretty deep. Who knew how far Colton had made it before the scream happened? What if it would take us hours to find him in the dark? What if we never found him at all?

I meant what I’d said to Xavier. Maybe Colton wasn’t always my BFF, but he was still Xavier’s brother and why we were together. We needed to me sure he was safe.

“Colton?” Maya called out, as soon as she entered the cave.

“Shhh!” hushed Greyson, covering her mouth with his hand. “Be quiet!”

I couldn’t see anything beyond a few feet in front of me. A cold draft sent a shiver down my spine. Remembering I’d snagged an old looking flashlight before leaving, I took off my backpack and unzipped it. I fumbled around in my bag, searching around until I grabbed it. Good for me for being prepared.

I clicked it on.

SLAP!

Xavier’s firm hand slapped it from my grip, and it hit the cave floor with a thud and shut off, rolling away.

“What on earth are you doing?” Xavier hissed.

“Uh, trying to see?” I hissed back. “Was I the only one smart enough to bring a flashlight.”

“We can see without flashlights.”

“Pffffttt,” I said. “What, have you got like, wolf-vision, or some shit?”

I could see the outline of Xavier’s grin in the darkness. “Actually, yes.”

I gaped at him. “Are you for real? Is that a thing? How can that possibly be a thing?”

I made a mental note to ask somebody about wolf-bear special powers, because apparently I knew next to nothing about them. Maybe they had X-ray vision, too.

“What part of ‘shhhh’ do you people not understand? Shut the fuck up, or I swear I will tear you to bits.?” Maya hissed, turning to face us.

“When will all of you stop acting like children?” Greyson asked. I could vaguely make out Maya glaring at Greyson in disgust.

He turned to me, and even the dark I could see his smirk. “If you don’t watch yourself I may have to punish you.”

I gasped. The nerve of him! Bastard! “What? Like ground me?”

“Watch it,” Xavier growled. “We already have a problem here, but I can make it ten times worse.”

Greyson turned to the rest of the group. “I suggest we proceed with caution.”

“Yeah, no fucking shit,” I mumbled.

Greyson turned to me. “Careful, love. Or, I’ll take you over my knee and spank you right here,” he threatened. It looked like he waved his hand in a spanking motion that made me gasp again.

Xavier growled. “If you so much as *look* at her, I’ll—”

“I know, I know, you’ll rip my throat out, tear me to ribbons, turn me into a human pretzel, blah blah blah. But if you don’t discipline your little mate there, I’ll be more than happy to.”

Gross. Abso-frickin-lutely not.

In the corner of my eye, I could see Jay and Lola huddled together.

“Babe, you’re shaking,” Jay mumbled, pulling her closer.

Lola tried to smile through chattering teeth. “I’ll be fine. I’m just cold. Really, really c– c– cold.”

“Lola, you stay here with Cali. The rest of us will keep going.”

“No way!” I protested. “You can’t just leave us—”

My words were cut off by Maya’s scream.

“COLTON?” Maya’s voice was laced with dread. The rest of us hurried over to her, following the sound of her voice. Part of me was honestly surprised. She sounded genuinely upset for someone who didn’t want Colton as her mate. I could feel goosebumps forming as we hurried toward Maya. What if there really was something dangerous in here?

My stomach dropped as we turned the corner to see Colton’s large body, splayed motionless on the ground.

**Episode 139**

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Colton, lying on the ground, looking pretty close to dead if he wasn’t already. Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t *love* Colton, but I didn’t hate him either. In fact, after Maya, he was probably my least favorite person there like if I had to rank everyone. But I didn’t want him to *die*. He was Xavier’s brother and a member of our pack—for better or worse. My brain just couldn’t understand what I was seeing, and cold waves of panic were washing over me.

And no one was doing a damn thing!

I looked around. Everyone was staring down at Colton with varying degrees of horror and shock, but no one was lifting a finger to help him—not even his own brothers. Was everyone just frozen from shock?

Well, to quote the possibly deceased Colton: ‘if you want something done right, you gotta do it yourself.’

I took a step toward Colton, but Xavier immediately grabbed me.

“Wait,” he breathed.

“Wait? For what? For him to be *dead?*” I demanded, shoving at him.

Xavier ignored me and hurried over to his brother’s side, dropping down to his knees in front of him. “Colton, are you okay? Colton, it’s me. Xavier. Colton wake up, dammit!” Xavier grabbed Colton’s head and shook it, hard.

“Uh, I’m not a doctor but I don’t think you’re supposed to be doing that?” I said. Like, that just couldn’t be good for anyone, right?

Xavier ignored me. “Colton?”

Suddenly, Colton opened his eyes and burst out laughing. “Haha, got you again,!” he said with an evil grin.

Xavier immediately lifted his hands from Colton’s head, stood up, and kicked him. “Bastard! If you ever do that again, I’ll make sure you never get up!” he yelled.

“Let me make sure right now!” Maya screamed, her eyes wild as she lunged at Colton, which only made him laugh harder.

“What the hell was that?” I yelled. “Is this some kind of wolf-bear joke? Cause it’s not funny!”

More laughter filled the cave, like an echo. The rest of us turned around as Violet and Lilac emerged from behind a large rock. There was a phone in Lilac’s hand—he’d clearly been recording the whole thing.

Lilac laughed as he filmed. “This is sooooo going viral.”

OMG! The twins! I remembered Lilac and Violet from when Lola and I had been trying to escape from Xavier’s. As I recalled, it had been a bit of a mess.

I turned to Violet. “Aren’t you the one who stabbed your own foot? Did it end up healing?”

Iwas bad, but at least I hadn’t stabbed myself in the foot. Yet.

I made a mental note: wolf-bears are jerks.

Greyson snorted in disgust. “I hate to interrupt this little tea party, kids, but we actually have work to do. So we can, oh I don’t know, *not die.* We need to fortify this place if we’re going to spend the night here.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “You don’t need to tell *me* that,” he said gruffly.

Colton was standing now, rubbing the knee that Xavier had kicked. “Okay let me see the video! I need to see their faces,” he told Lilac. The three conspirators watched it gleefully, laughing their asses off the entire time.

If I were a wolf-bear, I’d…

“I swear, if you don’t put that phone away, I’ll smash it to bits,” Xavier said darkly. “Now, why are you two here alone?”

Violet stepped forward. “We’re heading to the Lupo Finale. Everybody’s going. It’s like, the event of the year.”

“Yes, but why are you *here?* In this cave?”

Violet and Lilac exchanged a look. “We were chased,” Violet admitted reluctantly.

I raised an eyebrow in concern. “Who was chasing you? Are they still after you? What if they’re heading this way? We should get ready to defend ourselves—”

My questions were cut off by Xavier’s glare.

“Have you *ever* heard of a filter?” he asked me. “One question at a time. You aren’t a god damn reporter, Cali.”

“We think it was a Rogue. It was all kind of a blur,” Violet said.

Greyson chuckled darkly, rubbing his hands together in glee. “Ah, this is gonna be fun.”

“Hold up. We’re traveling through a forest filled with killer Rogues?” I choked out.

“They don’t want to kill *us*,” Maya interjected. “Just you.”

“But yeah, Cali, that’s the basic situation,” added Jay.

Violet rolled her eyes. “Take a chill pill, everyone. We only saw one Rogue.”

“And we’re pretty sure we lost him, if it even was a Rogue,” Lilac added. He held up his phone. “That why we decided to have a little fun with you, guys.”

“It really makes a hike go faster,” said Violet.

“So what do we do now?” I asked.

“Light a fire, eat, and then figure out our next move. The first thing we should do is make a schedule,” Xavier said. “There are probably Rogues out there, and we need to be careful—one of us needs to guard the entrance at all times.”

“We’re far superior to canines, in every single way,” Xavier said haughtily.

“Well, some of us are,” mumbled Colton.

Xavier turned to Jay. “Jay, you take the first shift.”

Jay shifted uncomfortably. “Uh, can I take a later shift? Lola still isn’t fully recovered from shifting yet. I think I should look after her.”

Lola was still clinging to Jay, her body shaking uncontrollably. There was no color in her face, except for her lips, which had a bluish tint to them. “I— I— I’m f-f-fine. D-don’t worry about me,” Lola managed to say, through chattering teeth.

“Hmm,” Xavier said, eyeing her critically. “I think you have a point.”

I raised my hand. “I’ll do it! I’ll take the first shift!”

Maya burst out laughing “Are you kidding me with this, bitch? What do you think this is*,* the Hunger Games?No, you can’t volunteer as tribute, unless it’s for me to tear you into pieces.”

Colton just rolled his eyes, but Xavier shook his head.

“You’re not taking a shift,” he said.

I fought a mighty urge to roll my eyes at him. Instead, I stamped my foot—a far more adult response. “Stop ordering me around! I’m not just going to lie around while everyone else pulls their weight.” I paused, then said, in a lower voice, “Can I talk to you in private?”

“We’re in a cave, Cali,” said Xavier.

I huffed in annoyance, then grabbed him by the arm and pulled him to the other side of the cave.

“Yes, because this isn’t causing a scene at all,” Xavier mumbled, deadpan.

I glared at him, resisting the urge to hit him. I took a deep breath. “You want me to be your Luna, right?”

“Of course, but—”

“But nothing, Xavier. Either I’m your Luna, or I’m not. It wouldn’t be very Luna-ish of me to hang back in the cave like a coward while everybody else risks their lives.”

Xavier paused, thinking it over. Then he sighed. “Fine, I guess you’re right.”

I grinned smugly. “No guessing. I’m right: facts.”

“Don’t push it,” Xavier growled. “You can be on lookout, as long as I’m nearby.”

I rolled my eyes, but knew this was the best deal I was going to get. And weren’t relationships all about compromise? “Fine. Like a guard dog watching the guard dog. Only I’m not a dog. I’m human. So more like a guard dog watching the guard human.”

Xavier just stared at me. “Oh my dear lord, do you ever shut up? Ever?”

I huffed, turning away from him. “I’m taking the first shift. Bite me,” I yelled as I headed toward the mouth of the cave.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” Xavier shot back. “I’ll be there in a second, I just have to talk to Colton about something. Don’t do anything stupid. If you see something, say something!”

I rolled my eyes. ‘Don’t do anything stupid’. It was like he had no faith in me. Why didn’t anyone ever trust me around here? I was a strong, capable woman, and I could handle shit. Maybe I had a few mood swings here or there, but I mean I was a human learning about the paranormal. This was some wild shit.

I sat down by the entrance of the cave. The rain had stopped, but it was still windy. I took off my pack and pulled out a blanket before I wrapped it around myself, trying to get warm.

I heard footsteps coming up behind me, and turned around to see Maya.

“Where are you going?” I asked her.

“Uh, to pee? Do I need a permission slip, cave monitor?”

I said nothing, reminding myself not to let her bait me into an argument.

“You know, you’re not as tough as you pretend to be,” I shot back. Okay, so much for the ‘don’t let her bait me’ plan.

“What?”

“You act all tough, but deep down you’re a softie.”

Maya glared at me. “Don’t think I won’t kill you, human? Because I will.”

“Puh-*lease*,” I scoffed. “Stop pretending and spill: you love Colton, don’t you?”

**Episode 140**

Apparently, this had been the wrong question to ask. As soon as the words left my lips, Maya was up in my face, inches away from me, her eyes furious.

“Do *not* test me today, human,” she snarled. “I’m tired, pissed, and have acquired a taste for flesh. *Human* flesh. And I’m hungry.”

*God*, this shit got old so fast.

“Oh please,” I said, rolling my eyes. “What cartoon villain did you rip that little speech off from? Despite your best efforts, you don’t scare me, Maya. You’re too chicken shit to admit your true feelings. You love Colton.”

“I have to pee,” she retorted. “Peeing is what I love.”

I scoffed. “Sure, sure, avoid the truth. Classic wolf-bear move. But I saw how upset you were when you thought Colton was hurt. You can’t fool me.”

“As usual, you have no idea what you’re talking about. Now I really do have to go.”

“Just tell me the truth. I saw that kiss in the hot springs. I saw the look in your eyes when you heard Colton screaming. You aren’t that good an actress Maya—that wasn’t just playing.”

Maya sighed, clearly exasperated. “That’s just the whole stupid mates thing. You can’t help but feel drawn to them. Protective. It’s annoying.”

“But isn’t finding a mate a good thing? Like, isn’t it something you hope for?”

Her laugh was bitter and hollow. “What am I, some ‘50s housewife who does the cooking and cleaning, waiting for her big strong mate to get home? Yeah, I’ve waited my whole life to become a bride.”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” I said. “I mean, isn’t it nice that you found your ‘other half’? You know, someone who’ll always have your back?”

“That depends,” Maya said. “How would you feel if you were in an arranged marriage? Like, if you had to marry some guy and he had to marry you. Wouldn’t you always be wondering if he really loved you?”

“But doesn’t it work out, sometimes? In real life and in wolf life?” I said. “I mean, it worked out for me and Xavier.”

“But don’t you wonder?” Maya persisted. “Don’t you question whether he loves you for *you*, or if he only *thinks* he loves you because his biology or some bullshit fate tells him to?”

I hadn’t thought of it that way.

“So you want Colton to love you?” I asked.

Maya snorted. “Once again, you’ve missed the point.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “To be honest, I think Colton’s kind of a dick. You could probably do better.”

I swore I could see the corners of Maya’s mouth tilt up. Just a little. “Yeah, he’s a major dick. That’s one of the many reasons why I want to kill him.” She paused for a moment. “I don’t just want to be somebody’s mate. I want to be my own person.”

I met her eyes. “Maya, there is literally no one like you. You’re always going to be your own person. You’re too stubborn not to be.”

She looked away, and if I didn’t know better, I could’ve sworn she was smiling.

But when she looked at me again, the smile was gone. “Allow me to gift you with a little friendly advice—being a mate isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. And the sooner you know that, the better off you’ll be.”

Before I could reply, she took off into the rain that had started up again.

How dramatic.

“Hey!” I shouted after her. “Stay close to the cave! Don’t wander off!”

“I can handle myself,” she shouted back. “I’m not a fucking child!”

While I waited for her to get back, I mulled over our conversation. I guess Maya wasn’t so bad, once you got to know her. Sure, they all had a weird habit of avoiding their feelings and keeping secrets, but maybe that was just how they were wired? Or maybe it was, like, a cultural thing? A species thing? Or maybe all wolf-bears just had troubled pasts, like Xavier did. Perhaps under her hard outer shell, Maya actually had a gooey caramel center.

Perhaps, it might eventually be possible for Maya and I to become… friends? I *had* just made her smile—that was a start. We could go on double dates, give each boy advice, even have girls’ nights with Lola. I guess Maya would be my sister-in-law, if Xavier became Alpha and she and Colton got their shit together.

For a moment, I tried to picture all of us having Thanksgiving dinner. Xavier and Colton would definitely end up burning the turkey, Jay would fall asleep watching football, and Lola’s coffee would be awful post-dinner. Maya would make the stuffing because she seemed like someone who thought her stuffing was the best (even though it was just fine.) I’d make my mother’s pumpkin pie… It wouldn’t be so bad. It sounded kind of nice. If we ever got out of this Lupo Finale hell.

But Maya as my sister-in-law… I still wasn't sure how I felt about that.

The thought of Xavier also troubled me—especially after what Maya had said. I was Xavier’s mate, and there was no denying our connection. But what if what Maya had said was true, and he only had feelings for me because of his biology? Was it possible that he didn’t love me for me, but because I was his mate? I knew I loved him for him, but what if *he* thought love was more like a responsibility, a duty—like an arranged marriage? If his wolf hadn’t returned to him and chosen me, would I even still be around? Or would he have kicked me to the curb after taking my virginity? Maybe he would’ve killed me, like he always threatened to do. Would I even be alive right now if we hadn’t mated? I didn’t know, and that scared the shit out of me, a little.

“Babe?” Xavier’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “How are you doing out here?

I turned to look at him, slightly annoyed at both him and my thoughts about him. “You know, you don’t need to check on me every five minutes. I can handle this.”

“I have no doubt. Where’s Maya?”

“Peeing, where else?” Seriously, how could anyone pee outside? Especially when it was raining. Hella gross.

“Maya?” Xavier called out.

Somewhere among the flora and the fauna, Maya’s annoyed voice rang out. “Oh my fucking hell! Can’t a girl take a piss in peace?”

Xavier snorted. “Classic Maya.”

“Hey, can I ask you something?” I ventured.

His face twisted in annoyance. “What’s up?”

I crossed my arms. “I’m being serious.”

Xavier sighed. “Okay, what is it?”

“Why do you love me?”

This clearly had not been a question that Xavier expected to hear, judging by the shock and confusion on his face. “Uh, what?”

“Why do you love me?” I repeated.

“What kind of question is that?”

Okay, not the answer I’d been hoping for. “It’s a legitimate question. Are you going to answer it, or are you going to keep making dumb faces at me?”

“I’ve never made a dumb face in my life.”

I pursed my lips, still waiting.

Xavier sighed, running a hand through his dark hair. “Okay… I love you because you’re outgoing. You don’t put up with any bullshit and you’re fearless—perhaps a little *too* fearless, which I kinda dig. Majorly. You’re my tiger.” He leaned down to kiss me.

I pulled away, annoyed. “You’re not getting off the hook so easily. What else? Give me more.”  
 Xavier stood up. “Cali, what’s this really about? We’re in the middle of the woods—why is this on your mind now?”

“For once, just give me the truth,” I said. “Do you really love me, or do you love me because I’m your mate?”

Confusion flicked across Xavier’s face as he absorbed my question. “I don’t understand. Of course, I love you and you’re my mate.”

I felt my face going red with frustration. “But is that the *only* reason you love me? Are we only together because we’re mates and your biology tells me you have to like me? Like, if you weren’t a wolf-bear and we met at college or at a bar, would we still be in a relationship? Would you still love me if your wolf had never come back?”

Xavier’s brows furrowed in puzzlement. “No. Yes. I don’t understand. Babe, we’re in a cave looking for Rogues, do you really think—”

“Holy shit I’m cold! Have any of you nerds started a fucking fire? I’m freezing my tits off!” Maya yelled, cutting Xavier off as she ran back to the cave, soaking wet.

“Colton is supposed to be lighting a fire,” Xavier offered.

Maya rolled her eyes. “Which means he probably hasn’t. The dumbass, he’ll probably light *himself* on fire. I better do it.”

Yeah, she loved him. Like, *really* loved him.

I was about to press Xavier more when something outside caught my eye. I looked beyond the cave and saw something moving in the trees.

“What is that?” I breathed, not wanting whatever it was to notice us.

“What’s what?” he asked.

I raised my arm and pointed to a pair of glowing gold eyes in the distance.

**Episode 141**

I pointed out into the darkness, toward the glowing golden orbs.

“Don’t you see them?” I whispered urgently. “The eyes!”

Xavier turned to look in the direction I was pointing. At that moment, the eyes disappeared as quickly as they’d appeared. “I don’t see anything.”

What the fuck?

“Wait, no. I just saw them, someone’s watching us,” I said, doing a double take. I *knew* there was something out there. I’d seen it. Where the hell had it gone?

Xavier gave me a strange look. “Uh, are you sure you’re not seeing things? You do have a weird imagination.”

I shot him a look of my own. “I’m not imagining anything, Xavier. Something or someone is out there, and I’m going to find out who.” I stood up, threw my blanket off and started to walk out of the cave. Xavier didn’t believe me, so I was going to prove him wrong.

He groaned in frustration. “What are you doing now?”

“I’m not going to let some creeper get away with creeping on us.”

“Cali, come on, get back in the cave! It was probably just an owl.” he said, grabbing my hand and trying to pull me back inside.

I shook off his hand. “I don’t give a whoot—Well then I’m going to go see it for myself!”

I could sense Xavier rolling his eyes at me, even though my back was turned. “You can be difficult or you can make puns, you can’t do both.”

*Rude.* I spun around to look at him, my hands on my hips. “We need to see what’s out there. What if it’s a Rogue?”

“And what if you’re right and it *is* a Rogue?” he said. “You know how dangerous they are—you can’t just go charging out to meet it.”

I turned to look at the forest again. Nothing. Had I really seen anything at all, or *had* my eyes been playing tricks?

“It’s probably nothing,” Xavier coaxed. “You’re just nervous. It’s been a hell of a day.”

Maybe he was right. Maybe I *was* seeing things. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d let my imagination get the better of me. One time, I’d been absolutely sure I’d seen Zac Efron at the Dairy Queen, but it had ended up being a plastic fern.

I turned to look in the forest again, and gasped when I saw them again: two golden eyes, staring right back at me. “Look!” I breathed.

Xavier tensed next to me, finally seeing them too. “You’re right.”

I smirked. “Told you so.”

He put his hand out in front of me and stepped forward. “Stay here, I’ll check it out.”

I rolled my eyes. “Uh, no. I got this.”

Xavier turned to look at me, and even in the dark I could see the seriousness on his face. “Don’t argue with me right now. Trust me. Just stay here and don’t go anywhere. I’ll be back in a minute,” he said, before disappearing into the darkness.

Well, wasn’t this just freaking *peachy?*

I stood there, shifting back and forth as nervous energy ran through me. I strained to see through the darkness, but I couldn’t make out so much as a shadow as I waited for Xavier to get back. Ugh, I’d packed most of my bedroom but had failed to remember my damn watch. Classic Cali move. I wondered how long it had been since he’d left. Five minutes? Five hours? If felt like a lifetime. Where was he? Was he okay? Was I supposed to go get help?

A thousand terrible possibilities raced through my mind, but I tried to shake them off. I was a Luna, dammit. I could handle anything that came my way.

Even a murderous Rogue wolf-bear that wanted to eat me for dinner.

Slowly, carefully, I moved in the direction Xavier had taken. I bent down and picked up a broken branch. Sure, it was no sword or bazooka, but it was also the best weapon option I had. It was for sure better than a spatula.

I held the branch up like a baseball bat. There. No Rogue was going scare me off from protecting my man and my pack.

SNAP!

I turned slowly at the sound of a twig snapping. I looked at the weapon I’d picked: a weak little tree branch. If I hadn’t been holding something, I’d have smacked my palm over my face. Had I *really* thought a little twig would scare a full grown beast? File that under: ‘Cali makes another bad decision: volume three’. I wondered if I had time to sharpen one of the ends. Maybe I’d be able to use it as a spear and poke out those stupid yellow eyes? But what if there was more than one Rogue out there? I only had two arms and one stick. If they surrounded me, I’d be completely screwed.

“Cali!” a voice cried out in the distance.

“Xavier?” I shouted back, moving toward the sound. Maybe he was in trouble and needed my help? I tried to focus my thoughts—maybe Xavier would be able to read them, like Greyson did. *I’m coming to help you,* I thought. *I’m coming to help you, Xavier. Just hold on. Your Luna’s coming to the rescue.*

I tightened my grip on my stick as I moved through the trees, grateful that it had stopped raining, at least.

In an instant, I was knocked to the ground, hard. My stick flew out of my hand. In my daze, I looked up to see a giant wolf-bear snarling above me. His pointed teeth glimmered violently in the dark, and he was looking at me like I was a snack—and not in the sexy way.

I screamed, rolling to the side to avoid the jaws that were lunging for my face. I kicked as hard as I could, trying to get him off me. I grabbed his coarse fur, trying to shove him away, and ended up grabbing his tail, hard. He gave a howl of surprise, which I used as an opportunity to run.

My escape was short lived. Moments later, the Rogue snapped at me again, and he sank his teeth into my shoulder through my coat.

Oh, *shit.*

The Rogue lifted me up high into the air with his powerful jaws.

I should have been terrified that I was legit *in the mouth* of a bloodthirsty Rogue wolf-bear, but honestly? I was more annoyed than anything. I must have looked so stupid, dangling from that smelly dog’s mouth. I would have laughed at me too. Hopefully Xavier was about to come and save me—again because apparently that’s all I was currently capable of—or at least have the good grace to let me die of embarrassment.

That was what I was thinking about as the Rogue dragged me deeper into the woods, arms crossed and everything. The wolf was probably dragging me away so he could rip me into bite-sized pieces.

Wait, bite-sized pieces? SHIT. It hit me that I should probably try and figure out how to get out of this jam or I was going to be Rogue kibble.

I moved my foot and stomped down on one of his paws. He whined but continued to drag me. I felt his hot breath on my neck, his sharp teeth pressing through my coat and into my skin. I remembered the thought I’d had earlier in the day, about hitting a wolf-bear in the nose. Well, now was a good as time as any to test the theory. I balled my hand up into a fist and took a swing. The punch connected—but immediately bounced off the wolf and into the side of my own face.

“OW!” I cried out, holding my face. How the hell had I managed to punch myself in the face?

The Rogue continued to drag me along, either not knowing or not caring that I’d almost knocked myself out. I couldn’t decide if I that made me thankful or fearful.

Finally, after what felt like ages, the Rogue stopped. Saliva dripped out of his mouth and onto my scalp, making me gag.

Great. Just *great*. He was going to drown me in his nasty drool to soften me up before he tore me to shreds. What would my parents think when they found out how I’d died? I’d told them I was going on a simple camping trip with my loving boyfriend, not getting eaten by a wolf.

My depressing thoughts quickly disappeared when I found myself airborne.

I hit the side of a tree hard, taking part of the impact on the side of my face that I’d punched. All the breath rushed out of my body, limiting my ability to breath as I slid to the ground. ‘Ow’ didn’t even begin to cut it. The Rogue looked at me through its angry, yellow eyes, obviously getting ready for the pounce.

No. This couldn’t be how it ended. Not here, not now. I needed to do something. Fight back.

The wolf-bear flashed his sharp teeth at me, stalking over to my slumped body. I fumbled to grab a stick nearby, but couldn’t quite reach. My heart beat in my ears as I watched the Rogue open his mouth, ready to pounce forward, bite down, and—

Everything turned into a blur as the Rogue disappeared from in front of me, and was slammed into a nearby tree with extreme force.

*Xavier?!*

**Episode 142**

When I’d hit the tree, the force had been so great that it hadn’t just knocked the wind out of me—even long seconds later, my vision was still blurred. I sure as hell had taken a *lot* of hits to the head*,* lately. Shit, maybe I had brain damage that was causing my mood swings? Like, *actual* brain damage.

That thought had to wait for later, however. While I couldn’t see it, I could *hear* a very vicious wolf-bear fight going on in front of me. Giant balls of fur rolled past me like tumbleweeds. I could hear the sickening sound of claws slicing into flesh, as well as harsh growls and snapping teeth.

My breath was coming in short, quick, pants as I tried get back on my feet, gripping the tree for support. I brushed the hair out of my eyes as I stumbled forward, trying to take inventory of myself. The spot on my shoulder where the wolf had bitten down on my coat ached fiercely, to the point where I could almost feel it in my whole body. The side of my face where I’d slugged myself was throbbing, and my whole body ached like I’d spent the day tied to an elliptical machine.

I tried to move forward, but instantly felt lightheaded and grabbed onto the tree for dear life. Clammy sweat started to build on my forehead and lip.

Even with all the fear and panic I was experiencing, I still managed to find room to feel disappointed in myself. Some Luna I’ll turn out to be. I couldn’t go five seconds without being dragged to my death. But to be fair, I knew next to nothing about Lunas. For all I knew, this could totally be part of the job description: getting your dumb ass into terrible situations. Maybe they made special painkillers for wolf bites?

Ugh, who was I kidding? No *proper* Luna would ever be dumb enough to get dragged into the woods like a baby. They probably didn’t accidentally punch themselves in the face, either.

I was opening my mouth to yell for help when I saw a flash of silver fur.

*Greyson*!

My first emotion was pure joy. Greyson was here and he was saving me!

My second was pure dread. Greyson was saving me. *Again.* Xavier was going to be so pissed when he found out. Honestly I was pissed too.

Of course that annoyed man—and a huge *jerk*, at that—had to save me again. It bothered me that I kept ‘owing’ him for saving my life. When would that come back to bite me? He had to think I was a completely helpless idiot by now. The pitiful, dumb human every wolf-bear seemed to think I was.

Maybe they were right. They seemed to be, didn't they?

I watched in a daze as Greyson’s wolf ripped the rogue’s throat out with one terrible bite, spraying blood everywhere. The edges of my sight blurred—I felt like I was going to pass out.

Maybe I should have been taking everyone’s warnings about ripping my throat out a little more seriously.

I tried to focus on Greyson’s wolf, my vision somewhat coming back to me. After blinking a few times, I could see his sleek silver wolf clearly, now. His snout and fur were stained with blood. And he was coming right toward me. Stalking.

Fear caught in my throat.

“*No*,” I whispered, trying to back away from the scene. He was cornering me. He had to be. I needed to get away, to find Xavier, to find something to defend myself with.

But I was cornered.

And there was nowhere to go but down.

My foot got caught on a rock and I fell ass-backwards, tumbling down into a rocky crevasse.

I should have stayed in the damn cave.

Every part of my body that hadn’t already been bruised by the rogue was battered as I fell down, down, into the rocky crevasse. This without a doubt was a thousand times worse than jumping out a window—at least that had been a short fall. This free fall felt like it was going to last forever—

*Thud*.

I slammed to a halt at the base of a large tree.

Ha! Just as I’d planned it. Okay, not really. Falling ass-backwards had not been part of any official plan, or one of my proudest moments. But at least I’d had the good sense to land on a wonderful tree.

I looked down at the amazing tree that stopped me from becoming a Cali pancake. I would have kissed it if there hadn’t been like a billion bugs crawling all over it. I silently vowed to plant some trees in its honor. *If* I ever got out of there.

I looked around as my heart started to beat normally again, finally coming down from its adrenaline high. Where the hell was I? I couldn’t even tell how close I was to the cave—everything looked the same.

Fuck, I was going to die out here, wasn’t I? I was going to die out here, and no one would know what happened to me until some unfortunate hikers found my dried up old corpse and brought it to my grieving parents. Ugh, my parents! They’d be so worried sick about me that they’d put up missing person flyers. Knowing my luck, they’d use my senior year photo—the one where my eyes looked slightly crossed.

Okay, maybe I *did* sometimes let my imagination run away with me. But I had a good reason this time.

Fuck camping. Seriously.

If I ever got out of there, I was never going into the woods ever again. Five-star hotels only.

Slowly, I tried to move, but my whole body hurt like I’d been run over by a truck multiple times. This was so much worse than leg day. My body legit BURNED.

The only thing I could do was hold onto the tree, but my body was so exhausted that my grip was starting to loosen.

Again, might I emphasize: *Fuck*. *Camping*.

A cascade of dirt and rocks started to come down on top of me, hitting me in the face. As if I wasn’t in enough pain already.

Panic tightened in my chest again. Someone was coming down—either to rescue me or finish me off. Knowing my luck, the latter seemed more likely. And if it was Greyson, I didn’t know if I wanted to be found.

The tree and the dirt rustled around me as a pair of powerful jaws grabbed me gently by the coat, lifting me up.

I opened my mouth to speak, to scream, when then the wolf tossed me onto his back.

Silver fur.

“Greyson,” I breathed.

“Shhh.” Greyson’s soft voice vibrated inside my head, soothing me as he moved. “You need to be quiet. There could be more Rogues.”

Realization hit—Greyson hadn’t been trying to corner me at all. The hit to my head had definitely confused me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face in his soft fur. I could freak out later about Greyson being in my head. At that moment, all I could feel was relief that I was safe.

I gave the tree one last loving pat, thanking it for its services as Greyson worked his way up the crevice. I leaned down and whispered low in his ear. “Thank you.”

“Quiet,” he gently reminded me.

*Right, sorry,* I said in my head. I paused. *Can you read my mind?*

Silence.

I looked at Greyson’s face and saw no recognition that I’d said anything.

If I’d had any breath to spare, I’d have breathed a sigh of relief. At least Greyson couldn’t actually get inside my head and dick around in there. He could just send me little mental messages. It was still pretty fucking weird, but better than him getting all up in my brain. At least I had *some* privacy. I wondered why Xavier hadn’t sent me any mental messages. Then again, Xavier could barely talk to me out loud, so mental messaging might have been a bit of a stretch.

Also, why the fuck was Greyson the one saving me? Like, don’t get me wrong, I was happy *someone* had saved me, but did it *have* to be Greyson? *Again!* I mean, I had a mate for this kind of thing.

And while I wasn’t afraid of Greyson like everyone else, I also wasn’t dumb enough to think he was a wolf-bear Superman. He wasn’t going around saving the day for everyone all the time. (Side note: did wolf bears have superheroes? Super-wolves?). Something was definitely up. What the hell was Greyson playing at? What was his game?

I pondered this as we reached the top of the crevice. He lowered his large body down by the base of an oak tree and allowed me to slide off. I tried to be graceful, but in the end I just flopped off like a dead fish. Every muscle and bone on my body was sore, but my shoulder hurt the worst. It felt like someone had stabbed me about a hundred times with a knife, and the blade had been on fire the whole time.

Behind me, I heard bones crackling and groaned internally, knowing there was a naked Greyson behind me. Why couldn’t I have normal problems?

I craned my neck to see Greyson standing before me, covered in dirt and blood.

“Take off your shirt,” he said.

**Episode 143**

Um, did I just hear what I *thought* I heard? Because if I did, some stupid wolf was about to die.

That was one of the many things that was running through my head when Greyson spoke. That dude *had* to stop trying to see me topless—once had been more than enough.

“Uh, *what?*” I questioned, hoping the pain in my shoulder and body was making me delirious enough that I was hearing things.

“Take off your shirt,” Greyson repeated.

Okay, so I wasn’t going crazy. *Yet.* But he certainly was.

“In what world do you think I’m going to fucking take off my shirt for you? First of all, you’re naked. And dirty. And COVERED IN BLOOD. Hard pass. Just because you’ve saved my life, doesn’t mean you get to see my tits.”

Greyson took a deep breath and shut his eyes, and I knew he was trying very hard to control his temper. When he opened his eyes again, they were almost black. “Cali, take off your shirt or I’ll *tear* it off.”

I searched his eyes for anger, maybe even lust, but I found nothing but concern. Something was wrong.

“Okay,” I said hesitantly. “But turn around.”

Greyson growled in frustration. “For Christ’s sake, we don’t have time for games!” he hissed, reaching out and ripping my coat off my body.

I screamed in shock and fright, slapping him hard in the face and chest. “Get off me!”

“Stop doing that!” he said. “I need to see if you’ve been bitten.”

That stopped me cold. “Bitten?” I demanded. “What do you mean?”

“Please just let me help you. I promise I won’t look at anything exciting,” he said, hands up as he tried to look less threatening.

I didn’t believe him for a second, but I was too scared to do anything but nod. *Bitten.* What would that mean? What would happen to me?

Greyson walked back over to me, and his hands gently but quickly moved to my shirt and lifted it up over my head. I blushed with embarrassment. “If the Rogue bit you, we only have a short time to deal with it,” he said tightly.

I bit my lip, wondering how many panic attacks a girl could have per day without exploding.

“What’ll happened if I *have* been bitten? Am I going to die? Or become a wolf-bear? Will my shoulder fall off? Will I grow fangs?” I asked, my voice high-pitched.

“Just let me see it first,” he said, his voice filled with concern as he finished removing my shirt. I could feel the blood sticking to it as it came off, leaving me in just my bra. At least I’d been smart enough to wear the cute blue lace one.

I saw his mouth slide into a tight grimace, and my stomach dropped.

“Is it bad?” I asked, my voice small.

“He broke the skin.”

My eyes widened at the realization. “What do we do? Airlift me out of here? Go to the werewolf emergency room?”

“Even if there were such a place—which there isn’t, fun fact—there isn’t enough time. Not even a helicopter could get you out of this forest.”

I felt faint, my vision blurring with tears that I tried to blink away. “So what are we going to do?”

“I need to clean the wound,” he said, his eyes piercing mine. For a moment, I thought I saw some of my own panic in his eyes.

I looked around, seeing nothing but trees and dead leaves. “With what? There’s nothing sanitary for miles.”

Greyson licked his lips with an awkward expression on his face. Then, all of a sudden, he looked like a wolf eyeing off a tasty meal. Which, in a way, he was.

I leaned away slightly. “Wait, you’re going to *suck* it out of me? Are you out of your fucking mind?!”

Greyson shrugged. “Fine. Your choice. Either I do this, or I leave you here with a fifty-fifty chance of turning into a wolf, or dying alone in the woods. Which would you prefer, love? Though for what it’s worth, I think you’d make a very pretty wolf.”

I glared at him. Sure, I occasionally found myself thinking how cool and useful would be to become a wolf. But I’d never actuallythought it would become a *possibility*. Now that it was, the idea didn’t seem nearly as enticing it once had. Shifting had been so hard on Lola, and she was a hybrid. I didn’t know if it would be worse for me or not if I were turned into one. Not to mention all the nudity. Maybe it’d be best if I held off for a while. It would be nice to do some serious research before taking the leap into wolf-bear-dom—even my impulsive self couldn’t just jump into that mess.

And as for dying? Hell no. I had too much shit to do. I hadn’t even called my mom!

I looked up at Greyson again, meeting his eyes. He could be lying. Making up this whole thing to get with me, make fun of me, get at Xavier, or, you know, kill me—maybe a combination of all of them. A collect them all situation. I wouldn’t have been surprised.

“How do I know you’re not lying?” I demanded.

Greyson scowled at me. For a moment, I could have sworn a flash of hurt flickered across his face. But moments later, it was replaced with annoyance. “This again? How many times do I have to save your—” He cut himself off and took a deep breath. “The truth is, you don’t know if I’m lying. But if I am, then this a pretty weird request. You may not trust me, but I would *hope* you think I’m smart enough to ask for better things than licking your open wound.”

He may have had a point.

“Fair, but wolves are weird and I don’t know what turns you on. Maybe you have some really weird kink you want to try out?”

“You’re right, I could totally have a stupid ass kink,” he said. “Or maybe my stupidest kink is wanting to SAVE YOUR STUBBORN LIFE. You’ll never know. Do you trust me or not? Time is of the essence here.”

“Why? Am I turning into a wolf already? Are my teeth getting sharper? Am I growing fur?” I turned around to make sure I wasn’t growing a tail.

“You know, I might just leave you to turn into a wolf if you keep chattering on like this. Please, just keep quiet. And I have to warn you, this may hurt.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “How much?”

He swallowed. “We’ll see.”

Gulp.

I nodded. I wanted to become a wolf, I think. Maybe? But I knew I’d rather have the choice, and the Rogue took that away.

Without another word, Greyson lowered his body so his mouth was directly over the bite wound. I gasped loudly when I felt his warm breath on my skin, giving me more goosebumps than normal. I stole a glance and saw him pressing his lips to my skin.

That weird, familiar tingling was back and stronger than ever as I felt his moist tongue on my skin.

*Oh my…*

I bit my lip hard as I squirmed, trying desperately to control myself as warmth emanated from the shoulder that Greyson was sucking on. It was like someone had put a comforting heating pad on my shoulder. The cool of the air contrasted with his warm saliva, giving my body a feeling of relief.

Slowly, I felt my eyelids start to close as my muscles relaxed. Okay, this wasn’t so bad. In fact, it was actually kind of *nice?* His mouth on my skin created a soothing sensation throughout my entire body that made me feel so comfortable and safe. Like being embraced in a warm hug. For a minute, I forgot that I was shirtless in the middle of the woods with my boyfriend’s older half-brother sucking poison out of me. For a minute, I almost felt safe.

Maybe a little too safe.

*Snap out of it!* This was fucking *Greyson*. I shouldn’t be thinking about him like that. Sure, he was being heroic right now, but he was still a pack murderer. He was still an egotistical jerk. He was still someone everyone had warned me about. I needed to be on my guard. I needed to keep my eyes open.

But it felt so fucking *good*.

I opened my mouth to moan in pleasure, but instead a scream of agony came out.

*Pain.* Hot, white and blinding, it filled every molecule of my body, striking me to the core. My muscles tensed again, and every ounce of pleasure was wiped clean and replaced with torment. It felt like my body was trying to kill me from the inside.

My eyes shot open and they were filled with tears. I turned to look at Greyson and tried to open my mouth to ask what was happening. Instead, I screamed again, a fresh wave of pain rolling through me.

“Cali,” Greyson gasped out, reaching out to gently squeeze my hand. He tried looking me in the eye, but pain blurred my vision. “Cali. Cali, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, but this only going to worse. You have to hang on.”

Could I?

**Episode 144**

I couldn’t get my mouth to make words at that point, agony clouding my thoughts. How on earth could this Rogue bite pain possibly get worse?

Through the pain, I could barely hear Greyson’s voice. “Hold my hand and squeeze when it hurts, okay?” His grey eyes were filled with compassion, and even pain of his own as he watched me struggle for air. “I’m sorry,” he repeated.

There was something I wanted to say to him, something urgent, but it died in my throat as his lips touched my wound again. Instead, I let out a horrible scream that I hadn’t known I was capable of until that moment. It was like I was being jolted by 10,000 volts of electricity. Then again, I didn’t even know what one volt of electricity felt like. Maybe it actually felt like ten volts? Either way, it fucking *hurt*.

Then, as instantly as the pain had started, it disappeared.

I slumped forward, my head swimming. The last time I’d felt this dizzy was the time I’d stayed on the merry-go-round too long because I’d gotten the unicorn to ride on and hadn’t wanted to give it up. When I’d finally disembarked from the ride, I’d puked up cotton candy all over my brand new sneakers. To this day, I’d never eaten pink cotton candy again.

“Cali,” Greyson said, snapping me back to reality.

He was looking at me intently. I looked down to see that my nails were digging into his hand.

He didn’t let go.

Neither did I.

I knew I should.

“Are you okay?” he breathed.

I parted my lips to speak, but couldn’t make a sound. My voice hadn’t returned yet, and my whole body was quaking.

I looked at Greyson again, realizing just how close we were. His lips were now only centimeters from mine. He smelled so good, and his scent of sandalwood and tobacco filled my nose. We were camping, how did he smell so good?

It would have been so easy to kiss him. Just a tilt of my head, a little movement forward… For a second, I wanted to do it. Just like in the dream.

“Cali,” he breathed again. His voice sounded strained, and he brushed a strand of hair from my eyes.

I nodded, my breath caught in my throat.

“You do taste very sweet.”

Behind me, there was a sound of rustling leaves and movement. Before I even had a chance to move, Greyson’s hand was ripped from mine and he was knocked to the ground.

My first thought was that the rogues had found us, that my screams of pain had acted like a beacon.

I scrambled up and toward Greyson, but a wave of pain hit me full force, knocking me off my feet as I dropped to the ground, feeling the sudden urge to vomit everywhere.

It was the pink cotton candy all over again.

I lifted my head to see two naked bodies, fighting. Huh? Was I seeing things again? At least they were hot.

Except…shit. That wasn’t just any naked dude—that was *my* naked wolf-bear.

Xavier, in all his naked glory, was standing over his older half-brother, one large fist ready to strike Greyson’s skull in on itself.

“No,” I cried out weakly, my voice slowly returning. “Don’t!”

My voice was loud enough to attract Xavier’s attention. He turned to look at me, giving Greyson the opportunity to shove Xavier off him.

Xavier jumped up and ran to me. “Caliana! Oh my god, I was so worried! I thought—” His voice died when he saw the wound on my shoulder. And the fact that I was only wearing my bra. He growled. “Did he do this to you? I’ll kill him, I swear. I’ll murder him right now,” he spat, turning to Greyson.

I shook my head. “Rogue,” I managed to croak.

Greyson pointed to the mangled wolf body on the ground. “Did you miss the throat-less Rogue body on your way to beat the shit out of me?” he demanded. “He’s the one who bit her.”

Xavier’s eyes widened in alarm. “We have to treat it,” he said. His hands moved to my shoulder, but I pushed him away with the last of my strength.

“No,” I breathed, every word a strain on my body. “Greyson saved me. He sucked me.”

Xavier scowled at me, and I blushed as I realized what I’d just said. Dirty-minded wolf-bear. Or dirty-minded me?

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” I said, heat rising in my cheeks. “I mean, he sucked the fang juice out of me.” Still not great, but better than what I’d said originally. Maybe sucking fang juice *was* a wolf-bear kink?

Greyson spat on the ground near Xavier’s feet to emphasize the point. “Once again, you should be thanking me for saving your little girlfriend’s life. As usual, she made it very difficult and more trouble than it was worth,” he said, like he hadn’t been holding my hand seconds ago. I didn't know how to feel, except I knew I shouldn’t have held his hand back either.

“I’ll never thank you,” Xavier growled, standing up to his full height to face Greyson. I lay on my side on the dirt ground.

Maybe death would be better than listening to this wolf bear nonsense. Or if I turned into a wolf, I could run away from this awkward confrontation.

A long howl rang through the woods, sounding like it was coming from a distance.

Greyson turned toward the sound. “They’ll find us soon and we won’t want to be here when they find their friend.”

“We need to get out of here,” said Xavier tensely. He turned to me. “Can you move?”

I took a sharp breath and moved my body upright using the tree as a crutch, my legs shaking like they were made of Jell-O.

“Here, baby,” said Xavier, grabbing both of my hands to help me up.

“No,” I gasped out. “I’m okay.”

He shrugged. “Okay, then,” he said, releasing both my hands.

I fell down on my ass with a small thud. I was too tired to care. Maybe they’d be better off just leaving me here to rot.

“Baby, are you okay?” Xavier cooed gently, scooping me up into his arms, his body instantly warming mine.

I looked at him, noticing a large cut on the side of his left cheek. “Are *you* okay?” I asked softly.

He nodded as he started to walk. “The sooner we get you to the cave, the better.”

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We were farther from the cave than I’d realized. I passed out from the pain, and by the time I woke up we were still walking. I almost cried when I finally saw the cave. All my resistance to sleeping inside was washed away by the knowledge that I’d be somewhere safe. Xavier carried me inside and sat me down by the fire next to Lola, wrapping me up in a blanket. Lola was looking much better than before, and I was looking much worse. It was like we’d traded places.

“I’m so glad you’re alive. We were so worried about you,” said Lola, wrapping me up in a warm hug. I winced when her arm touched my shoulder, still very raw and sore.

“Correction,” Maya interjected. “*We* weren’t worried. That was just you, Lola. No one else.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Ignore her. She’s just grumpy.”

“I am not!”

Lola ignored her. “I’ll get some bandages and tape you up. You’ll be good as new in no time.”

I nodded, still shaky after everything had happened. “Do you think I’m going to be okay?” I asked, my voice small.

“If you let me bandage you up, then yeah, you’ll be fine,” Lola said. “The last thing you want is an infection. I’m no registered nurse or anything, but I did take a first aid course back at school, remember?”

I did. I also remembered saying I’d never need that class and that it ‘sounded boring’. I should have taken that instead of my philosophy class.

“No, I meant about the bite,” I clarified. “Am I going to become a wolf-bear or something? What if Greyson didn’t get all the fang juice out?”

Lola raised an eyebrow. “Fang juice? Oh, you mean the lupus sputo?”

“Oh my god, do you guys have a weird word for everything?”

“Kinda, yeah,” said Lola with a shrug. “Anyway, we won’t really know if he got it all out until there’s a full moon.”

Full moon. “The next one’s the day of the Lupo Finale, right?”

“Yup.”

“Shit, that’s like four days away.” My stomach twisted uneasily. Great. Just fucking *great*. As if the Lupo Finale hadn’t already been stressful enough, now I was going to turn into a damn wolf-bear by the time it was done.

“This is the worst camping trip I’ve ever been on,” I grumbled. “Zero out of ten stars, would not recommend.”

Maya smiled at me, unnerving. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about shifting,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because remember? You’re probably going to die that night, anyway.”

**Episode 145**

You know, for a moment or two before I’d been chomped on by a Rogue, I’d actually thought Maya and I had had a breakthrough. That maybe she wasn’t a complete and utter psychopath. I hadn’t assumed we’d instantly become BFFs, but I *had* thought she’d at least wait a bit longer before telling me that she wished I was dead. Especially so loudly. And with so much glee.

I should have known better.

“You know, you don’t have to say that with such pleasure,” I hissed at her.

Maya shrugged. “Just stating facts. If the Lupo Finale doesn’t kill you, then that bite will, infection or not.”

“Well, facts or no facts, if you don’t have anything nice to say, keep your big mouth zipped,” I said. “Or do they not teach manners at wolf-bear school?”

Maya glared at me and I gave her the worst look I could muster. Which wasn’t much.

“What should we do?” Jay asked. “We could try hunting the Rogues down, see if there are any more out there.”

“Maybe we should just get out of here. Mask our scent and find a different trail. We’ll be safer if we keep moving,” Colton suggested.

“We’re better off in the cave,” Xavier said. “We can defend ourselves better here.”

Maya shot him a skeptical look. “Are you sure that’s really the best idea? Or are you only saying that because of *her?*” she said, jabbing her thumb at me. “What? Are you afraid she’ll break if we move out? Try it. It might do her some good.”

Whatever happened to women supporting women?

“You know I have a name, right?” I asked.

Xavier glared at Maya, his Alpha self coming out into the open. “Shut up. *Now.* No one asked you to speak,” he growled at her. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m thinking of the pack. We’re in unfamiliar territory. It’s night time, and two of us are injured. At least in the cave, we have the advantage. We aren’t exposed in here.”

I was a little taken aback by his words, and was reminded again of my conversation with Maya: did Xavier really love me, or were we only together because I was his mate? How could anyone be sure about these things? Especially where secretive wolf-bears were concerned.

And now that I thought about it… He never had answered my question, earlier.

“I’m not going to break like a pretzel. I’m okay. I can move,” I said, not wanting to slow my pack down or make anyone feel sorry for me. To prove my point, I tried standing up on wobbly legs, and immediately felt all the color drain from my face.

Lola placed a hand on my shoulder and guided me back to my seat on the ground.

“Quite frankly, I don’t think we should risk moving her,” offered Greyson.

We all turned to look at him in surprise. His face had been cleaned of blood, and his body was wrapped in a warm blanket. I was both touched and suspicious.

“She’s been bitten, for god’s sake,” Greyson said. “She needs time to heal. It’s dark, we have no idea what’s out there, and it’s dangerous.”

Xavier nodded, considering what his half-brother had said. Then he placed his hand on my shoulder and looked at the wound, frowning.

He turned back to Greyson. “You’re right. We’ll stay here as planned. We’ll make up for any lost time by leaving early tomorrow.”

“It’s about time you start seeing things my way,” Greyson said smugly.

“Don’t push it,” Xavier warned.

“This heartwarming moment is so fucking stupid. I’m going to bed,” Maya yelled out in annoyance, standing up.

“You’re on next watch,” Xavier informed her.

“Fuck you and your watch. I’m going to bed and that’s final!” she yelled, taking her blanket and matching over to her part of the cave, huffing and muttering to herself as she went.

Yup, Maya was still a drama queen.

“I’ll take the next shift,” Jay volunteered. “Lola’s doing better now, and I feel pretty wide awake.” He gave Lola a quick kiss before heading to the entrance.

“I’ll get you some bandages from my bag. That wolf bite does not look good, babe,” said Lola, heading over to her backpack.

Greyson yawned loudly, standing up. “Well, I’m going to get some sleep before the next catastrophe. Wake me up if anything happens that you think I should know about.”

Colton and Xavier watched Greyson move to the other side of the cave before Colton pulled Xavier to the side. In a low voice, he said, “Are you sure this is this the best idea? Staying here, with *him*?”

I tilted my head up to listen better. Not that it was hard—they were only standing a few feet behind me.

“Are you questioning me?” Xavier growled darkly. “Or are you just sticking up for your little mate?”

Colton scowled. “Oh, don’t go Alpha on me right now. This isn’t about Maya or Cali or anything. I’m talking about *him*.” He pointed to Greyson. “Are we really going to listen to him? How do we know he didn’t bite Cali? How do we know he isn’t leading the Rogues straight to us? Doing all this to gain our trust and betray us later?”

“Uh, you know I can hear you, right? This cave has an echo and you are the worst whisperer in the history of whispering,” I said, turning to face both of them.

“You really need to stop eavesdropping on us,” said Colton.

“You really need to get better at having secret conversations, then. Anyway, I was there, remember? I saw Greyson kill a Rogue to protect me. He pulled me from a crevasse when he could have easily left me. Then he sucked out all the lupus spotato so that I wouldn’t die.”

They both gave me a funny look. “What?”

I rolled my eyes. “The fang juice. What, I can’t come up with a stupid name, too?”

“That’s all you do,” Colton said.

I waved a hand. “Greyson sucked that stuff out when he didn’t have to. Whatever you may think of him, he did actually do all of those things. And this isn’t the first time he’s saved me.”

Colton clenched both fists. “And I repeat: he could be doing all that just to gain our trust and then turn against us later.”

“I know what you’re saying Colton, and I’m not saying I disagree with you. It’s true that he can’t be trusted,” said Xavier. “But right now, I have to do what’s best for the pack. That means keeping an an eye on Greyson, and the best way to do that is to keep him with us.”

Colton shrugged. “Whatever bro, it’s your funeral,” he said, before heading off farther into the cave to lie down.

Xavier turned to me. “I’m gonna check on Jay, see if he needs anything.”

I nodded as he left; we hadn’t had a moment alone since we’d returned to the cave.

Luckily, I didn’t have to think about that for too long, because Lola came back with her bandages.

“I knew one of us would end up getting hurt on this trip,” she said cheerily. “I just thought you’d get hit by a branch, or accidentally punch yourself in the face. I didn’t think you’d get bitten by a wolf-bear.”

“To be fair, the first two things also happened,” I said as Lola started to bandage up my shoulder wound. It stilled ached, and Lola’s firm hands were not helping matters.

“Ouch!” I cried out. “It’s tender!”

“Sorry,” she said. “This probably going to hurt a little, then.”

If I had a nickel every time I heard that, I wouldn’t have needed to sell my virginity on the internet.

“You’re really lucky, though,” Lola continued. “Most humans don’t survive wolf bites. Especially from Rogue wolves. They tend to kill their prey more often than they wound it.”

“If you’re telling me this to make me feel better, you can stop. You’re doing a terrible job. In fact, you’re making me feel worse.”

There was a pause as Lola worked. “How did it feel?”

I looked at her, confused. “Um, it was like the worst thing I’ve ever felt in my whole life. The Rogue bit through my coat, dragged me around the woods, then threw me against a tree and—”

“No,” Lola whispered, so only the two of us could hear. “I mean, how did it feel when Greyson sucked out the lupus sputo?”

I paused, biting my lip, thinking about the feeling of pleasure, the way Greyson had held my hand. “It hurt like hell, like my body was being electrocuted or something. I thought I was going to pass out. I thought my body was slowly killing me from the inside. But then…” I paused, my face heating as I thought about what I was going to say. “It also felt good. Really good. Like…” I bit my lip again, feeling both embarrassed and a little ashamed.

“Come on girl, spill,” Lola pressed.

“Lola…” I said. “Like, after it was over and he was so close to me and…I wanted to kiss him. Is that normal?”

**Episode 146**

Lola’s eyes widened at my confession. “*What?*” she breathed. “That’s totally not normal. It’s like, the *opposite* of normal!”

Okay, NOT what I’d wanted to hear at that moment.

“So you’re saying I’m *ab*normal?”

“In many ways, yes, but primarily in this situation. You shouldn’t want to kiss anyone but your mate.”

“But I didn’t *actually* kiss him. It was like something was making me *want* to kiss him.”

“You know that’s weird, right?”

“YES I KNOW THATS WEIRD, LOLA! THIS HAS BEEN A VERY WEIRD DAY!” I whisper-yelled. Ugh, I knew I shouldn’t have told her about this. I loved her to death, but she didn’t tend to make things easier where boys were concerned.

“Okay, okay, calm down,” she whispered. “Maybe you were just, I don’t know, delirious or something. You said that you punched yourself in the face and got flung head first into a tree—maybe your brain got scrambled for a moment.”

“Is that the technical term for it? Is that what you learned at your first aid class?” I deadpanned. Though maybe she did have a point. I *was* very confused, but… I’d known it was Greyson the whole time. And as wrong as it had been, I’d still wanted to kiss him.

I was the worst Luna ever. The worst mate ever.

“What do you think would’ve happened if I had kissed him?” I asked, feeling my heart race a little.

“I’m not totally sure, to be honest. It’s not *supposed* to happen. You’re not supposed to be attracted to anyone else but your mate. I’ve never wanted to kiss anyone but Jay. Except…” Lola wrinkled her nose. “Do you remember Ryan Fitzwilliam?”

I cringed at the memory. “Ew! That one kid who was always picking his nose? In *high school*? Gross!”

“Ew! No! That was Tanner Douglas. Gross, how could you even think that?”

“Hey, anything’s possible. So what about Ryan?”

“I used to think I wanted to kiss him. It would have been my first kiss. I knew exactly where I was going to kiss him, too—right under the bleachers. But then I realized that I was only attracted to him was because he kinda looked like Jay, and I only wanted to kiss Ryan because I missed him.”

“So you never actually kissed Ryan Fitzwilliam?” I asked, remembering a certain rumor from high school.

Lola shook her head. “Jay was my first kiss. And he’ll be my last.”

I sat there for a moment, mulling over what Lola had said. It was so sweet that Jay had been Lola’s first and only kiss, and they’d only want each other forever. Xavier had taken my virginity, but would he always be the person I went to bed with, every night? I wanted to believe it. I knew I hadn’t been Xavier’s first kiss or first time, but I was hopeful that I’d be his last. But I didn’t know… Maybe I knew even less about wolf-bear culture than I’d realized. And wolf-bear biology.

“Do you think something’s wrong with me?” I asked.

“I mean, I love you, but you do enjoy jumping out of windows. Like, a lot.”

I rolled my eyes. “No, do you think there’s something wrong with me *right now?*”

“Well yeah, you were bitten by a Rogue. It can fuck up your head in major ways.”

“But why does it have to be Greyson? Of all the possibilities,” I groaned. Then again, maybe this was like Lola’s situation with Ryan. Greyson and Xavier didn’t look exactly alike, but they *were* half-brothers, with similar features. Maybe my brain really did get a little confused. It wouldn’t be the first time that had happened.

“But you have to remember that you actually didn’t *do* anything,” Lola reminded me. “You thought about kissing him, but you didn’t actually do anything. So stop beating yourself up over nothing. It’s not a big deal. Besides, he *is* kinda hot.”

“Oh, what happened to the ‘I’d never be interested in another man as long as I live. Jay is my first kiss and my last kiss’ bullshit you were trying to sell me a minute ago?” I said, doing a pretty decent impression of Lola’s voice.

“Hey, I can look, but I’m not gonna touch. There’s nothing in the werewolf code to say that I can’t look at some nice hunk of man,” she said, licking her lips. “Yum!”

“Again, you’re not being helpful.”

“Look, like it or not, you’re human, and mated with a wolf—an *Alpha* wolf, for that matter. That’s not a normal situation, by any stretch of the imagination. There are probably side effects to being a human mate that we don’t even know about yet.

I thought about that for a moment. She was probably right—all of this was deeply abnormal. There was no handbook for the situation I was in. If I ended up surviving this, maybe I’d write a book on the subject. *Everything You Wanted to Know About Being a Human Luna But No One Would Tell You,* by Caliana Hart. There’d definitely be an audience for that book. I’d be a wolf-bear bestseller.

“Maybe you’re right,” I said, rubbing my shoulder after Lola finished bandaging it.

Lola gave me a pointed look. “You *know* I’m right. And no matter what your brain and your anxiety might tell you or me, you didn’t actually *do* anything with Greyson. Anyone with half a brain can tell that you love Xavier and Xavier loves you. Case closed.”

“Thank you.” I looked over at Greyson, who was asleep on the other side of the cave. “I hope you’re right.”

“I am,” said Lola, yawning. “Come on, let’s go to bed. You must be exhausted.”

And I was. But as I lay alone in my sleeping bag (Xavier had taken the night watch), I couldn’t help but think about Greyson. *You taste very sweet.*

Would I have kissed him if Xavier hadn’t shown up? I didn’t know. And I didn’t think I wanted the answer.

As my brain finally drifted off to sleep, my last thoughts were of Greyson, Xavier, and the fairytale Lola had told me.

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The next morning, I became less concerned about my non-kiss with Greyson, and more concerned about the grueling climb ahead of us. Xavier woke us all up at the ass crack of dawn so we could start hiking again to make up for lost time. By the time the sun was high, we still had miles and miles of trail to climb with no end in sight.

Fuck. Me.

I stared down the path ahead, and my whole body ached at the sight of it. How the hell had I even gotten myself sucked into this mess? I should have exercised more. Coach Calloway had been right—we really *did* need P.E in the real world. My whole life had been a lie.

The only bright spot in this never-ending journey was that the twins had finally gotten bored of recording me every time I stumbled or was hit by a tree branch. Becoming a meme after the trip was now close to the top of my list of concerns. Third only to Xavier dying, and me growing fur.

“How much farther is it? Are we there?” I asked, slightly out of breath. Okay, it was slightly more than slightly.

“Uh, we’ve got three more days of this, babe,” Lola said.

“Can someone remind me why we didn’t take a plane or a party bus to this shit?” I grumbled. “Who’s fucking idea was it to walk all the way there?”

Lola raised an eyebrow at me. “Are you okay?”

“No, I feel like shit,” I snapped. “My entire body aches like it’s been run over by numerous vehicles, and I’m panicking that I’m going to start howling at the full moon in a few nights while my mate fights for his life. And, as if things could possibly get any worse, I might become a meme!”

“You know, contrary to popular belief, we don’t actually howl at the moon, full or otherwise. It’s a stereotype.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Look, if you need to rest, just let Xavier know and we’ll stop.”

I shook my head. My run-in with the Rogue had made us late enough already. I couldn’t screw up again. “No, I can’t. Everyone will think I’m weak.”

“Uh, I hate to be the one to break this to you, but like it or not; you’re human. And no matter what, we’re going to think you’re weak. You just have a different body then we do.”

“Some offense taken,” I huffed out in annoyance, pouting as I crossed my arms over my chest. Even my best friend was a species-ist. You thought you knew a person…

Just then, I heard the sound of leaves moving, and pounding footsteps. Lola and I turned to see Colton running toward us, panic written all over his face.

“It’s Maya! She’s gone.”

**Episode 147**

I gasped. Maya being missing was a very unsettling thought. She was a strong wolf and could hold her own, so the thought of anyone overpowering her was frightening. She could have been attacked by Rogues, or fallen off a cliff, or ditched us for another pack. The possibilities were endless, and I didn’t like any of them.

The rest of the pack buzzed with unease.

“Where did she go?” I asked.

“She was walking ahead of us,” Colton said. “I went to catch up with her and she was gone.”

“Rogues?” I suggested.

Xavier just shook his head. “Maya is more than capable of handling a couple of Rogues though. We would have heard a struggle.”

“I mean I agree, but I don’t think we can rule it out. So what are we going to do?” I asked.

Colton looked at the path ahead. “I’m going to find her,” he said, fierce determination in his voice.

“No. It’s too dangerous. We’ll—”

“No, I have to go find her.”

“But—”

“She’s my *mate*.”

His voice—so deep with desperation, fear, and longing—struck me. I never expected Colton to be so… *caring* toward Maya. So worried about her wellbeing. Colton and Maya were mates, but he *never* spoke sentimentally about their mate bond. And the only time she’d seemed to really care was when the twins pulled the prank in the cave. I knew what he had to do—Xavier and I would do the same for each other.

I turned around to see Greyson looking at me. Moments later, he turned away, sending another shiver down my spine.

*Nothing happened,* I reminded myself. *Nothing happened.*

Xavier nodded at his brother. “Make sure you’re at Thor’s Well in time for the Finale.”

“I will,” Colton promised, and took off without another word. Geez, why didn’t wolf-bears ever say goodbye?

I turned to Xavier. “So that’s it? We let him go? What are we supposed to do now? What if there really is a threat out there?”

“We keep moving,” he said simply, and started walking again. “And face any of it head on.”

I gaped at him. “But he’s your *brother*,” I said. “You shouldn’t just let him *go*.”

How could anyone let their own family just run off into the wildness by themselves? How cold was that!

Xavier shrugged. “Colton’s a big boy, he can take care of himself.”

My stomach felt uneasy. “I hope you’re right.”

We continued our climb up the mountain, but each mile felt like hell on my body. My lungs were aching, and couldn’t seem to collect oxygen fast enough. Each and every step felt like agony on my calves, like I was wearing ankle weights.

And the climb was only going to get more difficult.

“Let’s all sing a song to pass the time!” Lola said cheerfully.

“Is climbing on top of a mountain not an exciting enough activity for you?” Greyson shot back.

“Oh, hush. It could be fun! And it’ll keep bears away. Who wants to start?”

“What’s that song about the city boy and the midnight train?” asked Jay.

Even in my exhausted state, I managed to shoot him a look. “How do you not know *Don’t Stop Believing*? How is that even a thing?”

“Also, that’s the most basic song ever,” Greyson said. “What are we, a bunch of white college kids at karaoke night?”

“We *are* a bunch of white kids,” I said. Then, “Oooh, how about *Sweet Caroline*?”

He groaned. “The only acceptable group song to sing at a time like this is *We Will Rock You* by Queen.”

We all looked at Greyson.

“What?” he grumbled. “It’s a good song and Freddie Mercury is a legend.”

“You are the most basic person I have ever met,” I informed him.

“You are also wrong,” said Lola. “The only correct song to be singing at a time like this is a camp song!”

“Oh! I got one,” I said. “You can’t ride in my little red wagon. Front seats broken and the axle’s dragging!”

Then Lola and I, in unison, screamed: “SECOND VERSE, SAME AS THE FIRST! A WHOLE LOT LOUDER AND A WHOLE LOT WORSE!”

We continued like this for a couple more verses, getting Jay, Violet, and Lilac in on it. Even Greyson looked like he was beginning to crack and hum along.

“EIGHTH VERSE, SAME AS THE FIRST! A WHOLE LOT LOUDER AND A WHOLE LOT WORSE!”

“I swear to whatever deity is listening that I will throw each and every one of you off this mountain if you don’t SHUT YOUR DAMN MOUTHS!” Xavier said.

“Even me?” I questioned.

“ESPECIALLY YOU!”

We were all quiet after that. Way to ruin our fun, party pooper.

As the climb grew steeper, I could feel my body weakening rapidly. My movements were slow and stilted, and I was getting lightheaded and dizzy, my vision blurring in and out.

“How much farther—” The question couldn’t even leave my mouth, because I’d collapsed to the ground.

“Cali!” Lola and Xavier yelled as they ran over to me.

Lola helped me to my feet, and I clung to her for support.

“Do you think we could, c-c-could take a break, f-f-for a moment,” I gasped out, feeling like I was going to be sick. I hated myself for admitting I was too tired to continue, but I knew if I kept going I was either going to pass out or vomit. Probably both.

“What’s wrong? Is it your shoulder?” Xavier asked, looking down at me with concerned eyes.

“It’s everything,” I groaned. “And I feel lightheaded. Maybe I lost too much blood?”

“You barely lost any blood, I made sure of that,” Greyson chimed in. “It’s probably the altitude. It’s easy for wolves to adjust, but not so much for your kind.”

Xavier checked his watch. “If we rest, we’ll fall behind. I can’t be late to my own Lupo Finale.”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “But of course. Why should you let the health and safety of your little girlfriend get in the way of your glory?”

Xavier growled darkly. “Watch it.”

“Let’s just shift, then,” said Jay, trying to break up their fight. “You carry Cali and I’ll carry Lola.”

“Uh, excuse you?” said Lola, looking at her mate. “I don’t need to be carried. I can shift myself. I don’t need a man to help me!”

Jay shot her a look. “No way. Look what happened to you last time. You could barely stand when you were done.”

Lola brushed it off. “Don’t worry about me, darling. I’ve got this.” She went into her bag and pulled out Big Mac’s potion, taking a large gulp of it. Then she looked at the rest of us. “So, are we going to do this, or what?” A moment later, her bones started to crack and she was a wolf again. Well then.

Within seconds I was surrounded by wolves, all ready to run. I climbed onto Xavier’s back, and he took off up the mountain. As much as I hated to admit it, it was nice to get a break from all that walking—even if my shoulder still ached as I held onto Xavier’s dark fur.

This whole trip had been a wake-up call in many ways: showing just how physically different than I was from wolf-bears. The hike was definitely taking its toll on my body and slowing the team down. If only I could shift like Lola. I could be running through the woods, just like everyone else. Lola had said that she felt invincible when she was a wolf. I wanted to feel that way, too—I wanted to be more than just some girl who got beaten and chewed up and needed some man to save her. I didn’t want to be rescued anymore.

If I were a wolf-bear, then I’d finally be a true Luna. I’d be able to wear the mark without worrying about it killing me, and no one would ever cross me again. No one would ever dare to call me a ‘stupid human’, or doubt my good ideas and leadership. Xavier and I would finally be able to lead the pack together.

Maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, if I turned into a wolf-bear at the full moon.

*Don’t be stupid*, I chided myself.

Greyson had sucked out all the fang juice to make sure that I wouldn’t turn into a wolf-bear. But maybe he hadn’t gotten it all out? That was certainly a possibility. How many chances could he have found to practice sucking fang juice out of someone? He couldn’t exactly be an expert at it. And how much did you need in your system to turn into a wolf-bear? Just a drop? Or was it a whole mouthful? *Why* were there no class on wolf-bears? I knew nothing about anything.

Then it hit me. What made a Luna a good Luna? I did know the answer to that. Strength, resilience—someone who was ready to defend her people.

If I wanted to be the best Luna I could be, I had to become a wolf-bear at the Lupo Finale.

**Episode 148**

As my decision to become a wolf washed over me, I knew it wouldn’t be as simple as just saying ‘I want to be a wolf-bear’. What if Greyson actually *had* sucked all the fang juice out, and I didn’t turn into a wolf during the full moon? What then?

I needed a back-up plan if I was going to go through with it.

I thought about this for a few moments. I would need someone to bite me.

The first person I thought of was Xavier. He was my mate after all, and the Alpha. He would probably be the best person to do it. If I didn’t become a wolf-bear at the Lupo Finale, I’d ask him to bite me. Not hard, or in a kinky way. Just enough to draw blood.

But would he agree to do it?

That part, I wasn’t so sure about. He hadn’t ever asked me to be a wolf-bear before. Would he even want me to become one? How did you have the ‘will you turn me into one of your species?’ conversation with your man? Before or after sex? Maybe he wouldn’t want to do it. Maybe he’d be scared that he’d hurt me, or that it’d go wrong.

*Or maybe he doesn’t want me.*

I shook the thought out of my head. I couldn’t think like that, not when he’d been assuring me so much recently. I was going to become a wolf-bear, and that was that. If he didn’t do it, I’d just ask someone else. Lola would do it if I asked, but she was a half-breed so it might not work. Would that make me a quarter wolf? What if I got stuck halfway, like some kind of dog wolf thing. That wouldn’t be cute at all. And how would I explain *that* to my parents? Ugh.

Maya was an automatic no. She would bite my whole head off, given the opportunity. If we even found her. Jay wouldn’t do it—he’d be too worried that something might happen to me, and Lola would never forgive him.

And then there was Greyson.

*You’d make a very pretty wolf*, he’d said. He was probably the only one who knew what he was doing, in regards to biting people. But that thought didn’t make me feel any safer. He may have saved my life three times, but I wasn’t going to trust him with such an important task. Plus, there was that unsettling connection I had to him, and the weird feelings I had about wanting to kiss him. If I let him bite me, would that make our connection stronger? Was that something I wanted?

I shook my head. No. Besides, thinking about it was irrelevant, anyway—Xavier would never allow it.

Which left Xavier as the only person who could bite me. If he didn’t want to do it, I’d have to convince him, by any means necessary. Maybe Lola had been right about bringing lingerie along on this trip. I might use it to celebrate Xavier’s victory, but it could also put it to good use in other ways. I knew people often used sex to get what they wanted (I was certain Lola did) but I’d never thought I’d have to seduce my boyfriend into making me a wolf-bear. When had my life turned into one of the paranormal romance novels I used to read?

I was so lost in thought, I barely noticed Xavier starting to slow down. Thank god. My shoulder was killing me, and if I had to continue riding for another second I was going to detach it from my body.

Xavier lowered my body down so I could dismount, nearly collapsing to the ground as soon I got off. I’d need a week-long coma to even *start* feeling better. And maybe like five double cheeseburgers. And a pedicure for good measure. After that, I might start feeling like my normal self.

But instead of all that, I just rubbed my shoulder as the rest of the pack started to shift back into their human forms—Lola still being the last to do so. At least she didn’t seem as wiped out as she had last time. That was good sign. I’d been worried that if she wasn’t able shift back, the twins might put that on the internet too.

As soon as they shifted, they pulled clothes out of their backpacks. I was pretty impressed—and grateful—that they all got dressed without me having to nag. Maybe they were finally listening to me.

Xavier looked at me after he’d finished getting dressed. “How are you feeling? How’s your shoulder?”

I wanted to lie and say I was feeling okay, but I knew he could tell—I was already slumping to the ground. “I feel like shit, but at least I’m not dead. Yet according to Maya if she were here.”

Lilac aimed his phone at me. “You know, if you wanted to start turning blue right now and collapse, I wouldn’t mind. Think of all the views I’d get! I have so many subscribers.”

I sneered. “If you don’t turn that god damn thing off right now, I’ll toss it off this mountain!”

Xavier grinned. “You must not be feeling too bad. You still sound like the Cali I know.”

He scooped me up in his arms and kissed me deeply, making me feel it in my bones.

“Ewwww!” Violet and Lilac cried out.

I turned to look at them. My first impulse was to smack them, but instead I said, “Put this on your blog,” and kissed Xavier deeply, reveling in his warmth, love, and passion. I couldn’t help but smile to myself as we kissed. It had been so long since we’d had a moment like this, and even though we were in front of people, I had to make this chance count. I slipped my tongue into his mouth, deepening the kiss. His strong arms pulled me in closer, and he was clearly enjoying it—even though everyone else was groaning in mock disgust (and real disgust).

*Babies,* I sneered mentally, enjoying myself.

Even after all the craziness we’d been through, he wanted me. He loved me.

We were mates and we loved each other, and the knowledge of that made me feel all warm and tingly, and not just because of my shoulder pain or the high altitude.

“How much farther?” I asked, when we finally pulled away from each other.

Xavier pointed ahead. “Just over there.”

I looked. Over the horizon, there was a glimmer of the deep blue ocean.

“That’s where Thor’s Well is,” Xavier explained.

But I could only see a glimmer of it. “Just over there?” I asked. “It seems so far away.”

Xavier looked down and rubbed the back of his neck, a small blush crossing his face. “Well, it is far away. We’re only halfway, but at least it’s all downhill from here!”

I gave him a look. “I really hope you mean that literally.”

He smiled. “Yeah. Don’t worry. It’s going to be okay?”

“Promise?” I asked.

“Promise.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and hugged him. The warmth of his body relaxed some of my tense muscles.

When we broke apart, I felt a scratchiness in my throat. I looked through my bag to find my water bottle. Empty. Fuck. I couldn’t *believe* I’d forgotten to refill it before we’d left. Then again, Xavier had woken up at 3 a.m., so many things had been forgotten about.

“I’m thirsty,” I said. “Is there any water that *isn’t* on the other side of the mountain?”

“Yeah, there’s a stream right there,” Xavier said, pointing across from us.

How had I missed that? Between the kiss and the shoulder pain I really was getting lightheaded.

Nevertheless, I was very pleased. A real stream? I felt like a proper camper. Maybe I’d even see a baby deer or something on the way that I could pet. At least that would be a bright spot in this otherwise dreadful hike. Maybe I’d be able to take a picture with the baby deer and show Alex and my parents that I DID like camping and COULD survive in the woods (regardless of whether that was actually true or not). They were going to look so stupid when they saw me surrounded by friendly wildlife.

“Awesome!” I said. “I always wanted to drink from a mountain stream like one of those cold wilderness people. And Disney princesses!”

Xavier smiled, clearly amused. “Well, now’s your chance. Don’t say I never made all your dreams come true.”

I ignored his sarcasm and was walking to the stream when I stopped in my tracks, every muscle in my body suddenly frozen.

There was no baby deer ahead. It was something much less adorable and friendly. And something they definitely don’t teach you to prepare for.

In the steam, half in the water and half out was a body. It was bloated, battered and bruised. I resisted the urge to puke right on the spot. Pulling my shirt over my nose, I stepped forward. Someone could need our help. As I got closer my stomach dropped.

I knew who this was.

“Oh no,” I gasped. Then I took off running toward the others. “Help! Please come quickly! I think’s she dead!”

**Episode 149**

As soon as the words left my mouth, the seemingly lifeless body of Mrs. Smith moved, her clear eyes opening and looking into my own. I screamed.

“Do I look that dead?” she asked, her voice sounding dry and raw.

“Uh, yeah? Kinda,” I admitted, my entire body shaking. I was horrified that I was most likely talking to a corpse, maybe even a zombie. Did the wolf world even have zombies? I wasn’t sure.

“I’m wounded, Cali. But I’m not dead. It’s a flesh wound.”

I rushed over and helped her to into a sitting position. I took one last longing look at the stream. My throat still ached with thirst, but considering Mrs. Smith had been lying in the water for god knew how long, it was looking significantly less appealing.

By then, the rest of the group had made their way over.

“What happened?” Xavier asked. “We heard Cali shouting and came right away.”

Mrs. Smith took a slow deep breath to steady herself. “I’m not really sure. Everything was kind of a blur. I was stopping at the stream to fill my canteen when I was attacked by a pack of Rogues.”

The rest of us gasped. So it wasn’t just me they were after—they were attacking everything that moved. It made my blood boil. First me, maybe Maya, and now Mrs. Smith? Something had to be done.

“Those Rogues are out of control! They even attacked someone as kind as Mrs. Smith! We’ve got to make them pay!”

Everyone looked at me like I had three heads.

“Calm down, killer,” said Lola, deadpan. “We are trying to *avoid* the Rogues, remember? Especially after your little run-in. There might be way too many to take on and Xavier can’t afford to lose any strength in a fight.”

I supposed she hada point, but I was still pretty steamed about the whole thing. It wasn’t fair.

Mrs. Smith looked down at her body, checking the wounds on her arms and legs. “I need some medicine,” she mumbled, mostly to herself.

I looked around. Lola had a first aid kit, but that wasn’t going to help with Mrs. Smith’s severe injuries. “Do you think there’s a CVS anywhere nearby?”

Again, everyone looked at me like I had three heads. I really hated it when they looked at me like that.

“Cali, we’re on a mountain.”

“And there could be a highway rest stop like a mile away, I don’t know,” I said. “CVSes have shown up in weirder places than this. I once found one in the middle of a field in Minnesota.”

“We have to get going, we’re behind as it. We don’t have time to play doctor,” Xavier said harshly.

I gaped at him, stunned by the callousness of his words. How could he even think about leaving Mrs. Smith here? She was a woman—from his old pack even—who’d just been viciously attacked by a gang of bloodthirsty Rogue wolf-bears, and he couldn’t even show an ounce of compassion? Not to mention the fact that she’d been so kind to Lola and me. I knew Xavier had a big death match he had to get to, but if an Alpha couldn’t stop to help a person in need, what good was he?

I stomped down hard on the ground. “No! We’re not leaving Mrs. Smith here. She’s injured, and the Rogues could come back.”

“Cali’s right, there’s no way we’re going to abandon her,” Lola said. “What kind of medicine do you need? I have some ointment and some aspirin in my bag, but that’s about it.”

“Do you need something special?” I asked. “A pill? A lotion? Some kind of secret potion?”

Mrs. Smith’s body started to slump, her eyes getting droopy.

“Mushrooms…” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I need… mushrooms.”

And then she passed out.

Great, now I had to give a woman shrooms. As if my life wasn’t weird enough already. Also, did I look like a freaking botanist? How the hell was I supposed to know which mushrooms to pick? I didn’t even eat them on pizza.

I looked around, trying to figure out what sort of mushroom she might have been talking about. “Mushrooms?” I said, beginning to panic. “Aren’t they like, dangerous? I mean, what if we end up giving her a toadstool and she dies? What is a toadstool, anyway? How do I tell the difference?”

“What did you go to college for again? ” Jay asked. “Like, what did you study?”

I shot him a dirty look. “Sorry that I didn’t think I’d have to know about mushrooms in the real world."

Greyson looked at me, raising an eyebrow. “You’re not really the best in emergency situations, are you?”

Xavier glared at him, which did nothing to quell my anxiety.

I started trying to forage. Or move around doing what I thought foraging might have looked like. Digging? “Everybody start looking!” I called out desperately.

For the third time in twenty minutes, everyone looked at me like I’d gone crazy. I didn’t really blame them this time—I must have looked a little deranged, digging through the dirt.

Lilac pointed to a nearby fallen tree. “There’s a bunch of mushrooms growing over there.”

I looked up at him. “You couldn’t have told me that BEFORE I started digging?”

It was at that point I realized that their phones were all pointed at me. Yup, I was definitely going to become a meme. Mushroom girl. The bastards.

I ran over the fallen tree and instantly jumped back. Under the tree was a long strip of green mushrooms. They looked like mold that had gone moldy.

“Ew! There’s no way in hell I’m touching those things!” I yelled, gagging. They even smelled gross, like rotten old gym socks.

Mrs. Smith’s eyes snapped open again. “No, not those!”

“GOODNESS GRACIOUS!” I screamed, startled. “Stop doing that! Either be conscious or unconscious!”

“Those mushrooms are poisonous. I need the aurantiaco fungi.”

I groaned. Ugh, more fucking Latin. That name sounded like a goddamn Harry Potter spell.

“Okay, what do *those* look like?” I asked.

“It’s an orange mushroom with a black speckled top.”

“*Okay*,” I said. “Not creepy-sounding at all. What’s so special about the orange teriyaki mushroom?”

Everyone, including Mrs. Smith, groaned.

Greyson rolled his eyes at me. “At this point we’re simply wasting time.”

“Back off, or I’ll feed you the mushrooms,” Xavier growled.

“The aurantiaco fungi has healing properties. It makes you strong… and…” Mrs. Smith passed out again before she could finish her sentence.

I rushed into the forest, hoping to prove my Luna skills by being the first to find the orange teriyaki, or whatever the hell it was called. This was what Lunas did—finding things, healing people, making the pack strong. Leaving no one behind. I was determined to be the best Luna I could, even if no one else believed in me.

“Don’t wander off too far,” Xavier called after me. “The Rogues could still be hanging around.”

“Isn’t that what I have you for?” I called back. “To protect me from shit?”

I couldn’t see it, but I could feel Xavier rolling his eyes at me. But I didn’t care, I had bigger fish to fry.

After a minute of walking, I spied a cluster of orange mushrooms with black speckled tops.

I heard footsteps behind me, and turned to see that Xavier had followed. I pointed at the mushrooms. “Do you think those could be it?”

Xavier shrugged. “Only one way to find out. Give her one.”

His statement alarmed me. What if I was wrong, and I accidentally poisoned Mrs. Smith?

“I can’t just give her one without making sure it’s right,” I protested. “What if they’re poisonous? There must be a way to make sure.”

“Does it look like I give a shit if they’re poisonous or not?”

I stared at him, stunned. “You don’t care if something happens to Mrs. Smith?”

“Why *should* I care?” Xavier said flippantly. “She isn’t my problem.”

“But she was in your pack before.”

“And now she’s not,” he said. “Right now *my* problem is getting to the Lupo Finale on time. That’s it.”

“THEN GO!” I yelled. “If you’re more concerned about your precious death match than the wellbeing of your pack, then go on without us!”

“Cali,” Xavier said, walking toward me, but I pushed past him, heading back to Mrs. Smith and the group.

“Don’t try to convince me otherwise!” I shouted at him. “You may be the Alpha of this pack, but you have a lot to learn about being a decent person. You all do. I might not be perfect, but I’m trying my fucking hardest.” And with that, I stormed away, mushrooms in hand. If Xavier wasn’t going to take care of his pack, I’d do it myself.

I found Mrs. Smith unconscious again on the ground, Lola trying and failing to rouse her.

“Where’s Xavier?” Jay asked, when he saw me.

“Being an asshat, but that not important right now,” I said, and I could have sworn Greyson smirked at the comment. I turned to Lola. “How is she?”

“I can’t wake her,” Lola said, her voice cracking with fear. “What should we do?”

I looked down at the mushrooms in my hand and remembered what Xavier had said: there was only one way to find out if they were the right ones.

I took a deep breath, and popped one of the mushrooms into my mouth.

**Episode 150**

Everyone gasped. Lola’s eyes bugged out of her head, and even Lilac and Violet stopped filming. To be fair, it was a pretty extreme thing I’d just done—a fact that was becoming painfully obvious as I chewed. The mushroom had to be the worst thing I’d ever tasted. It was hard, and oozing with some unpleasant gooeyness.

“What the fuck did you just do?” Xavier asked.

That was an excellent question. An answer to which I could not articulate, mainly because I was trying very hard not vomit the monstrosity all over everyone.

“This tastes horrible,” I said as I swallowed. “Like old man feet times a thousand.”

“Of course it tastes horrible!” yelled Lola. “You ate a strange mushroom you found on the ground! Which you didn’t even wash first! And how do you know what old man feet taste like anyway?”

I wanted to tell Lola that it was a figure of speech, but I was still fighting my gag reflex.

Instead, I pushed past Lola and ran for the stream, desperate for a drink of water to get the taste of gross old man mushroom out of my mouth. I dipped my head in the stream and gulped, easing the burning in my throat. I prayed this wouldn’t turn out to be one of my *major* Cali mistakes.

When I looked up, everyone was staring at me.

Yup, definitely a major Cali mistake.

It was Greyson who broke the silence, chucking to himself, like he was amused by my antics.

I was not tolerating any of his shit today.

I glared at him. “Would you rather we let Mrs. Smith die? Every one of you strong, powerful wolf-bears had your thumbs up your asses—*someone* had to see if these were the right mushrooms!”

“But it didn’t have to be you!” Xavier’s voice boomed out as he emerged from the forest. “In case you’ve forgotten, we are WEREWOLVES! Chances are we can handle poisonous mushrooms better than a frail human like you.”

“Hey, none of you were volunteering, were you? I thought you said that Mrs. Smith wasn’t your problem! And I’m not frail!”

“YOU are my problem! How could you do something so thoughtless? Do you have a single *shred* of self-preservation?”

“Clearly not,” remarked Greyson.

“Maybe we should pump her stomach?” Lola suggested, looking at me with concern. “Make her throw up?”

“Gross, that sounds messy. Besides, I feel fine.” And I did feel fine. In fact, I felt better than fine. Like my whole body was vibrating in the best possible way, like I’d just drunk ten cups of coffee in a row. My bones had stopped hurting; I felt like I could run up this mountain in my sleep.

“Actually, this is the best I’ve ever felt,” I admitted, jumping up and down. Mrs. Smith was right—I did feel strong and powerful. These had to be the right mushrooms.

Then, the sound of cracking twigs and footsteps came from the forest. We all turned, bracing ourselves for another attack. Wondering if it was a Rogue, an animal, or somehow something worse. Everyone looked ready to shift.

“Well, if you would quit arguing with me, we wouldn’t—” Colton’s voice echoed through the woods as he emerged from the thicket, his face stained with mud and dirt, his shirt ripped. “Oh, there they are.”

Maya came up behind him, her face caked with dirt, her hair matted and with twigs sticking out of it. She looked down at Mrs. Smith’s unconscious body and her tired eyes went wide. “What the hell happened to her?”

*What the hell happened to* them?I wondered. But still, I was happy to see them back—even Maya. It had been weird not having them with us, even though all they did was bicker and fight. I wondered what had happened in the woods to make them look so worn out… I made a note to ask Maya later, even though I knew she’d bite my head off for asking.

But that would come later. Right now, I had to help Mrs. Smith.

“I found Mrs. Smith in the stream,” I said. “She was attacked by Rogue wolves. She woke up long enough to say that she needed some magical mushrooms to make her better. So I found some mushrooms, but Mrs. Smith was out cold, so I didn’t know if they were the right ones. And because NO ONE ELSE WAS DOING A DAMN THING, I ate one to make sure it was right, and now—”

“Wait wait wait wait wait, hold up,” interrupted Colton. “Are you telling me you *ate* the mushrooms? Without knowing what they were? Are you serious? Not even *you* could be that stupid.”

“I’m sorry, this is from the guy who ran after *Maya—*the same Maya who wants to *kill* you*—*alone in the Rogue filled woods?”

“I don’t know, we *are* talking about the girl who tried to take on a werewolf with a spatula. She’s stupid enough to do anything.” Maya sneered. “Personally, I hope they’re poisonous.”

On second thought, I had NOT missed Maya.

“They aren’t poisonous,” I huffed, annoyed that everyone thought I was stupid, wished I was dead, or both. “For your information, these are great. I feel like I took some kind of wolf-bear super vitamin. I feel like I could do anything!”

A low moan slipped out of Mrs. Smith. We all turned to look at her, and I rushed over to kneel in front of her.

“Here, Mrs. Smith, I got the mushrooms you wanted, they’re really good!” I said, trying to slip one into her mouth. Maybe I’d be able to massage her jaw and get her to swallow.

However, Mrs. Smith wasn’t having any of that. As soon as I put the mushrooms in her mouth, she spat them out. “No,” she said, her voice weak. “You must boil them first.”

I scrunched my eyebrows together, confused. “Why? I took one, and I’m fine.”

Mrs. Smith didn’t answer—just drifted back to unconsciousness.

“Did anyone bring a pot to boil water in?” I asked.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Let’s just leave her with a bunch of the mushrooms and get going. We’re burning daylight and she’s old enough to take care of herself.”

“As much as I hate to agree with Greyson on anything, he has a point. We have to keep moving,” added Xavier.

My blood started to boil. They may be heartless wolf-bears with no empathy, but I wasn’t.

“I can’t believe you’re being so heartless!” I yelled. “She’s a saint! She has the best white chocolate mocha this side of the Mississippi!”

“I’m with Cali,” said Lola. “I’m not going anywhere unless we all agree to help Mrs. Smith.”

“Who?” Colton asked, confused. Lola and I rolled our eyes.

“Fine,” said Xavier with a growl. “Boil the damn mushrooms, give her a cup, and then we move on.”

Colton nodded his head. “Yeah, with or without her.”

I glared at him.

“If it’s without Mrs. Smith, then it’s without me,” Lola said, determined.

“Or me!” I added.

“And I’m not leaving without Lola,” said Jay.

“Awww,” I cooed, touched by Jay’s gesture. “That’s so sweet.”

Maya fake gagged. “Ugh, I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Really mature, Maya,” I told her.

“Says the woman who swallowed unidentified mushrooms.”

I ignored her and turned to Jay. “Could you light a fire? We need to boil some water.” I turned to look at the three brothers, who were all watching with their arms crossed and identical frowns on their faces. They might never agree on anything, but they were undeniably family.

“Well?” I said, looking at the three of them. “If you need to leave so damn bad, you better go. Come on, the sun’s moving on without you.”

None of them moved. I got some satisfaction out of that.

I smirked and turned away, tossing my hair back. I walked over to the stream to gather some water. Lola looked at me as she handed me the pot.

“Seriously though, how do you feel?” she asked.

“I told you, I’m fine.”

She remained unconvinced. “Are you sure? Because that was either the bravest thing you’ve ever done or the stupidest and I am counting the windows. Actually, now that I think about it, it could easily be both. The two don’t have to be mutually exclusive.”

I rolled my eyes. “Relax, I feel fantastic,” I said. “I wasn’t going to stand by and not help her. That wouldn’t be right, not after how much she’s helped us. She told us more about the Luna mark and protected you back in Minnesota. We owe it to her.” I turned to look at Xavier, who was still scowling by the clearing. Why had he been so antsy to leave?

*Look at the big jerk*, I thought. *Acting like he’s the devil when I know he’s not.*

As soon as I thought the words, I saw large, sparkling devil horns begin to grow out of Xavier’s head.

*Wait what the hell was happening to me?*

**Episode 151**

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Admittedly, I didn’t know a ton about wolf-bears, but I *did* know they didn’t just sprout horns out of their heads at random.

I shook my head and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, Xavier’s horns had vanished.

“What the hell?” I breathed out. Suddenly, I started to feel woozy. It was like the merry-go-round all over again.

“Cali!” Lola’s voice rang in my head like a sharp bell, but it felt distant, like she was a million miles away.

“Cali!” she yelled again, this time grabbing hold of my face and looking at me. “Your eyes look weird.”

I pulled away. “Hey! I don’t make fun of your eyes!” I shot back, annoyed that even my best friend was making fun of me now.

I looked back over at Xavier, who now had a large unicorn horn sticking out of his head, with a bright red pompom on top.

Seriously, what the *hell* was going on?

I turned to look at Lola. Instead of two eyes, she had one grey eye in the middle of her forehead.

A twig snapped, I turned to see Greyson morphing into a half-human, half-wolf-bear. His body was smooth and marble-y, almost like a Greek god, but with a little more fur and pointed ears. Still crazy hot, though.

“Caliana! Caliana!” I heard Xavier’s voice like it was coming from underwater. He grabbed my arm. “What’s wrong?”

I couldn’t say anything, too transfixed by his unicorn horn, glittering in the sun.

“So pretty,” I cooed, trying to reach out and touch.

“Ow! Damnit Caliana!” he yelled, clutching his eye. “Why the hell did you do that?”

I blinked, and the unicorn horn disappeared, leaving the image of Xavier holding his eye and cursing.

“Oh shit, oh shit,” I muttered, putting the pieces together. This was bad. This was very, very bad. The mushrooms really were poisonous—I was going to die.

I raced back towards the stream and started to drink, hoping to flush the poison out of my system. But the stream didn’t taste like water. It tasted exactly like pink lemonade.

Oh, this was very, very, *very* not good.

I heard Maya’s cruel laugh. “Holy shit, I think she’s tripping!” She cackled with glee. “This should be fun to watch!”

Tripping? I wasn’t even walking.

“Caliana,” Xavier said sternly. “You’re having a hallucination. You’re okay, you’re safe.”

“Hallucination?” I said. The word tasted funny in my mouth, but that might have been because I’d just gulped down a ton of unfiltered stream water. “You mean I’m not dying?”

“Not now, but give it time. It’s still early,” said Maya.

Xavier turned to her. “If you don’t shut up right now, I will come over there and *make* you shut up,” he growled.

*That’s my man!*

“Wow, those mushrooms seem pretty epic, can we have some?” Lilac asked. “It would make this trip go way faster.”

“No one else is getting high on mushrooms!” Xavier yelled.

“What’s that now, dearie?” Mrs. Smith asked, finally coming back around. “Who’s getting high?”

“Cali ate the mushroom to test it,” Lola said in a sing-song voice. Suddenly there was music everywhere. When had my life become a musical number?

“She ate them to see if they were poisonoussssss. Now I think she’s tripping balllllllls!” Lola belted out. I’d had no idea she could hit notes that low.

“We think she’s tripping balls,” the rest of the group sang in a high falsetto.

“Am I going to die from all of the hallucinating because of the orange teriyakiiiiiii?” I sang.

The music stopped, and suddenly everyone was looking at me.

“Why is she singing?” Violet asked.

“Because she’s high as fuck,” Colton answered.

“No, you won’t die,” said Mrs. Smith, in a non-singing voice. “But you can stop drinking the water.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” I told her. “I was only drinking lemonade.” I dipped my head back into the water and started to drink again.

“Cali, no!” Lola yelled, yanking me out of the water.

*Rude,* I thought. *I just wanted some more pink lemonade.*

“What do we do with Cali in the meantime?” Lola asked.

“Yeah, how long is she going to belike this?” Xavier asked.

“I’m not quite sure,” admitted Mrs. Smith. “It’s hard to tell with humans, their biology is so different from ours. But I’d expect it to go on for a few hours.”

Everyone groaned.

With not much else to do, Jay started to boil the water, and my stomach started to grumble. I wondered what he was making.

“Are you making hard-boiled eggs?” I asked Jay. “Because I’d love one. Or maybe a rainbow-colored Easter egg!” I said, getting really excited now.

“You know what’s so sad about this situation? Her high thoughts are exactly the same as her sober thoughts, so I can’t tell the difference,” said Colton.

Maya laughed But I didn’t care, I had more important things to do—like following that nymph. Maybe she had water, and food, and magical beads.

“Everything is just so beautiful here!” I moaned as I started to dance around in a circle. I felt just like the wood nymphs in the stories my mom used to read to me as a child. I always wanted to be a wood nymph—they always seemed so happy and free. That was what I wanted to be. Happy, and free.

I danced around Xavier. “Baby, come dance with me!”

“No,” he said with a scowl.

“*Why?*” I cried out.

“Because you are ridiculous.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Yes.”

“*Whyyyyyyyyyy?*” I whined out.

“You know why.”

I stopped dancing. “You disapprove of me all the time and you make that face—yeah that one! The one where you’re all pouty and broody and your eyebrows go all caterpiller-y,” I said, reaching for his face. “Also you should know I will not dance sexy for people who do not approve of me!” I yelled, and stomped away from him. I looked over at the stream, where it was filled to the brim with lemonade. My throat was dry. Couldn’t I have a sip?

*I’ll show stupid Xavier,* I thought, as I ran toward the stream. *I’ll drink all the lemonade so that he can’t have any!*

“Cannonball!” I yelled, jumping into the stream. I heard yelling coming from behind me, but I was too busy splashing around.

A strong hand grabbed my wrist and pulled me harshly out of the lemonade. I spun around and came face-to-face with one angry wolf-bear. Xavier’s eyes shone with frustration, his mouth a tight line. “You need to stop drinking that water and acting like a child.”

I burst into tears. “WHY ARE YOU YELLING AT ME?”

Xavier’s expression softened into panic as he held my shaking, crying form. “Shhh, I’m not really mad. Please don’t cry. Please just be regular Cali,” he begged as he petted my hair.

“I’m just really thirsty,” I sobbed out.

“I know, but you can’t drink anything right now,” he cooed.

“BUT I WANT TO!”

“Oh, let her drink,” said Maya with an evil laugh. She looked like a huge spider with a million eyes. “Maybe she’ll die faster.”

“SHUT UP!” Xavier yelled in his Alpha voice.

Suddenly, the tears stopped, and I couldn’t even remember why I’d been crying. I was far more focused on a butterfly that was fluttering overhead. I wanted to fly.

“Xavier, let me go! I want to float!” I cried out, jumping up and down to get out of his grip. “I wanna float! I wanna float! I wanna float!”

If I was in my right mind, I would have noticed the exact moment when Xavier’s patience with me and my shit finally broke. Unfortunately, I was too busy flapping my arms like a butterfly to notice.

Which was why I was pretty freaking surprised when a few moments later I found myself airborne, and slug over Xavier’s shoulder.

“WHAT ON EARTH DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?” I screamed, kicking my legs wildly.

“You’re giving me no choice, Caliana. This is for your own good!” he said sternly as he walked over to a large tree.

“BUT I WANT TO FLY!”

He didn’t answer me, just pulled me off his back and shoved me against the tree.

“Colton, get a rope! We have to tie her up!”

“Kinky,” Colton said.

I screamed. “You can’t do that! You dickhead!”

“Do you want me to gag her as well?” Colton asked brightly. “Make things really interesting?”

Xavier thought about this for a moment. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

IT WAS NOT A GOOD IDEA.

“But I want to float,” I protested.

“Well you can’t. You need to stay on the ground with the rest of us, where you won’t get hurt,” Xavier told me. “I’m trying to protect you Cali. If I let you run away after something you see you could run into something dangerous. This is for your own good.”

I was struggling against him and Colton, trying to break free from them, when I froze.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a pack of giant Rogue wolves.

**Episode 152**

Even in my mushroom haze, I felt panic deep in my core. Those Rogues couldn’t just be in my imagination—they looked so real. Then again, Xavier’s unicorn horn had looked convincingly real, too.

I opened my mouth to scream again, but instead of my voice coming out, it was the sound of a violin hitting a sweet note.

*Hey,* I thought. *That actually sounded really pretty*.

Why hadn’t I taken violin lessons instead of getting talked into flute lessons? When was I gonna use *that* in real life? Never! No one wanted to listen to a flute. Especially the way I played.

File that one under: ‘Useless Cali skills’, next to geometry and being able to quote *She’s All That* in its entirety.

I shut my eyes and opened them again, still seeing the Rogues. Their massive bodies were still stalking toward the group. How could they not see what was going on? Where they blind or taking magic mushrooms too?

“Rogues!” I screamed.

Xavier glared at me. “Calm down! You’re hallucinating!”

But I didn’t think I *was* hallucinating. Not when I could see them, clear as day. Maybe the others just couldn’t hear me?

“ROGUES!” I screamed again. “BEHIND YOU!”

This time, things started to move again, but very, very slowly. Just like in the movies, Greyson, Colton, Lola, Lilac, Violet and Jay all turned their heads in the direction I was pointing at.

The Rogues stepped out, one by one, moving slowly toward the group. I’d assumed that by this time, everyone would be cracking bones and shifting in to their wolves. But no one seemed to be moving. Why weren’t they fighting? Why weren’t they afraid? I was definitely panicking enough for all of us.

Then Maya walked up to one of the Rogues and spoke to him. Maybe it was the orange mushrooms talking, but I thought she looked a little afraid. Her eyes seemed drawn to the ground, and her voice soft, almost… submissive?

Yeah, that had to be part of my hallucination. Why would Maya be doing that?

I didn’t have much time to wonder. Colton tossed Xavier a rope and he put it around my waist, binding me to the tree I was standing in front of.

*What the hell?*

“What the fuck are you guys doing? This is barbaric!” I screamed out, trying to fight my way free of the ropes. But they’d tied them too tight.

“This is for your own good!” Xavier growled.

My own *good?*

I started hyperventilating. What where they going to do to me? Maybe the Rogues were here because they were going to have some kind of weird, wolf-bear sacrifice ceremony before the big fight? Maybe all of this had been a trick to lead me here?

“Are you going to sacrifice me? Because that’s some seriously messed up shit, dude,” I yelled. No one answered me, but I kept talking. “This is some sacrifice ceremony isn’t it? Are you going to dress in robes and speak in wolf-bear tongues?”

Xavier only shook his head as Colton finished tying me up, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“We really should gag her,” said Colton. “I think at this point it’d be for our own good.”

I struggled against the rope, desperate to get free before the ritual started.

There had be something I could do to stop this.

“I’M NOT A VIRGIN ANYMORE!” I screamed at the top of my lungs.

I really hoped my parents couldn’t hear me from the mountain, because everyone else was staring at me.

Wait, why were they staring at me? Maybe they were going to eat me alive instead? Was that why Jay had made the fire? Because they were going to roast me alive and then eat me? Oh god, I was gonna be sick…

“Lola, take care of her,” Xavier yelled, walking over to where Maya and the rest of the group were standing.

I was shaking badly, and gagging a little because of how hard I was hyperventilating.

Lola raced over and gently touched my shoulder. “Shh, it’s okay. It’s okay. No one’s going to hurt you,” she cooed softly.

“But the Rogues!” I spluttered.

“Those aren’t Rogues, they’re Maya’s pack.”

“Maya’s pack?” I gasped out. That didn’t make me feel much better. Last time I checked, they weren’t part of the Cali fan club, either—unless they were going to eat me for dinner. “The Samara pack?! They’re going to eat me!”

“Shhh,” Lola cooed again, brushing the hair from my face. “No one’s going to eat you.”

“Not yet, at least,” Maya chimed in as Xavier talked with her pack leader. “But the day is still young.”

“Oh my god, will you shut the hell up? You are the opposite of helpful!” Lola yelled.

“I wasn’t *trying* to be helpful.” Maya shot back.

“Why am I tied to a tree?” I wondered aloud, touching its trunk. Wait? Was this the same tree that had saved me yesterday? I almost went to hug it, but then I noticed that it had different colored leaves from yesterday, and large golden apples—or was that just the mushrooms talking? Unimportant. I didn’t want to be tied to it. Especially if Maya’s pack was here. I was an easy target with no way to run.

“I wish I had a fork to defend myself with,” I mumbled.

Lola looked at me, confused. “Why would you use a… It doesn’t matter. The point is, Colton and Xavier tied you up here to keep you safe. You’re a danger to yourself right now.”

I gasped louder than I meant too, offended. “That’s so fucking rude! I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself!”

“You tried drinking the water. Multiple times,” Lola deadpanned.

“Hmm, that doesn’t sound like me,” I said, turning to look at the stream that was now filled with wine. I scoffed at her. “Nice try, Lola. Everyone knows I don’t drink wine.”

“You know, if you don’t shut up, they *will* gag you. I might not stop them.”

“Whatever. Why is Maya’s pack here? And why are we so chill about it? They could attack us at any moment. They tried to kill me, remember? Someone give me a fork!”

Lola looked at me. “Okay, I’m done. Someone else take over,” she said, throwing up her hands up and walking away.

Well that was a little uncalled for.

Greyson walked up to me, hands in his pockets and a smirk on his face. He leaned up against my tree and turned to face me. “Well, at least you’re asking for a fork instead a spatula. The stabby one. That’s growth.”

I rolled my eyes at him, ignoring the fact that he was still in his Greek god form. “Just because you’re sexy, doesn’t mean you can talk to me.”

He chuckled at that, grinning. “I think I might like you this way, love. So honest.”

“Well don’t get used to it! I don’t trust Maya’s pack! They could kill us all, and no one’s doing a damn thing!” I said as I struggled against my bonds.

“Yes, and your opinion has been noted,” he said. He leaned close to me, until we were almost touching. “But you have to be quiet, or they *will* sacrifice you.”

My eyes went wide. “They will?”

Greyson nodded. “And I don’t want that to happen. So you have to say nice and quiet, okay?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he put his finger to my lips to silence me. “Shhh.”

I turned to watch as Xavier confronted the Samara pack’s Alpha. He was a little shorter than Xavier, but much beefier. I remembered him of course. You don’t forget your first werewolf kidnapper…

I had to stop myself from laughing. I leaned forward and whispered to Greyson. “He looks like a little meatball.”

Greyson covered his own mouth to keep himself from laughing.

“What are you doing here?” Xavier asked in his Alpha voice. Oh, I loved it when he used his Alpha voice. It made me want to rub my hands all over him.

“They want to eat me, duh,” I said, under my breath. My eyes darted upward and locked onto a beautiful blue butterfly, soaring above me. I wished I were a butterfly. I’d be able to fly around all day and get into concerts for free. Plus, you couldn’t tie up a butterfly.

“We’re on our way to the Lupo Finale, obviously,” the Samara Alpha growled out. “We wouldn’t miss the opportunity to see you defeated. After all, it’s what you deserve for killing my sister.” He grinned. He had an ugly smile. His teeth were all yellow, and some were missing. Fitting for such a horrible person on the inside, too.

“Are you challenging me?” Xavier asked.

He smiled that horrid smile again. “We’ll certainly see, won’t we?”

“You’re going to be pretty disappointed when you get your butt handed to you, ‘cause my wolfie baby is the best,” I called. “He’ll kick your meatball ass faster that you can say spaghetti!” Damn, spaghetti would’ve been tasty right about then.

Greyson would have shushed me, but he was too busy laughing so the task fell to Lola. “Good lord, stop talking!” she hissed. “Don’t make things worse!”

The Samara Alpha had the grace to ignore me. “We’re also here to bring Maya back.” He put his arm around Maya’s waist. “It’s time for my Luna to come home.”

**Episode 153**

Wait, his *Luna*? MAYA? She was the Luna to the the giant meatball man? No, that couldn’t be right. Then again, there was also a bikini-clad gnome running around, so anything was possible.

But I didn’t have time to worry about sexy gnomes. I was too busy being pissed off. It was clear to me what had happened: something I’d known was coming for a long time. Why hadn’t anyone else seen it? And *why* was no one else doing a thing about it?

I turned to Maya, my vision clouding with anger. “Traitor,” I hissed out. “You led them straight to us!”

“Cali, stop!” shouted Lola. “You don’t understand!”

“What’s so hard to understand? She disappeared into the woods all of a sudden, and now she’s back. And it just so happens that her pack magically comes back too? That’s mad shady!”

Xavier walked over to me, his expression fierce. “If you don’t shut up right now, I swear on my blood I will gag you, do you understand me?” he said, his voice pure Alpha.

Okay, so I know I said that I liked it when he used his Alpha voice, but I did NOT like it when he used it on me like this!

I glared at him. “Try it, Alpha tough guy, and I’ll poke you in the eye! But first you’ll have to untie me.”

Xavier dropped his angry face for a moment to look confused. “Wait, you want me to untie you so you can poke me in the eye?”

I nodded. It seemed pretty obvious to me.

“Yeah, I’m not arguing with someone on shrooms,” said Xavier, walking away.

Rude. How was I supposed to know that the mushrooms would make me high as a kite? I’d done it to help Mrs. Smith and honestly, I stood by that. I’d thought at their worst that the mushrooms would just poison me, and I’d die. Not make me hallucinate stupid shit.

Colton stepped in between the Alpha and Maya, pulling her out of the Alpha’s grip. “Maya’s not going anywhere with you,” he growled, showing his teeth.

I knew I should be worried that our beta and a rival Alpha were exchanging death looks, but I all I could think about was the fact that Colton was the color of a grasshopper. It wasn’t the best color for him, but it did make him look more interesting. Maybe he just wanted to change things up? Maybe he was doing it to impress Maya? Or maybe it was another wolf-bear thing I didn’t know about yet. I wondered if Colton could hop like a grasshopper. Wait, no. Rabbits were the ones that hopped…

Ugh! Focus, Cali! Colton was clearly green because it was obvious even to shroom’d up me that he was jealous. But then all I could think about was tiny little bunnies. I wondered if Xavier would let me get a pet. Would he eat a bunny if I brought it home?

The strange Alpha stepped up to Colton and laughed harshly. “Do you think she gets a say in this? She doesn’t have a choice. She belongs to us—she knows it, and so do you.”

“And I said that she isn’t going with you,” Colton growled loudly.

“Uh, shouldn’t Maya have a say in this?” I said. “In case you haven’t noticed with your nudity and shitty Latin, it’s 2019 and women have rights. You guys are the biggest sexist jerks I’ve ever met. Ordering women around like we’re your servants or sex slaves or wolf baby makers. Well, news flash: we’re not! We are strong! We are independent! We are—”

“You are tied to a tree,” said Greyson dryly. “So save your feminist speech—that I for the record agree with—for later and *hush*.”

“Pfff, I’m not taking orders from the patriarchy,” I scoffed. “Or should I say the paw-triachy?”

Everyone groaned. No one liked my puns.

“Hush!” Greyson warned.

“Oh, hush yourself. If you weren’t trapped in a prism right now, I’d poke your eye out.”

Why was everything multiplied with rainbows? Why had I eaten that mushroom? Why did I always feel the need to be a big shot around these stupid wolf-bears? Why couldn’t I think ahead for five flipping seconds? This was so embarrassing. Could this high just start fading already? I tried so hard to prove myself as a good Luna, but every good decision I tried to make only ever ended up proving everyone right: I was just a dumb human. I wanted to cry again, but I wasn’t going to give anyone the satisfaction.

Lost in my thoughts, I almost didn’t notice Xavier, Jay, and Greyson walking up to join Colton.

“If you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us,” said Xavier darkly.

The Alpha noticed Greyson and frowned. “What’s *he* doing here?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

Greyson just smiled. “Push us a little more, and you’ll die finding out.”

The Alpha looked startled by his reply, and so was I. Had Greyson really just intimidated an Alpha? What was that Alpha’s name, anyway? Probably something stupid.

“Hey, what’s your name?” I asked the beefy Alpha.

The Alpha ignored me, still staring Greyson down.

Ugh, wolf-bear men!

“Hey asshat!” I yelled. “I asked you a question! What’s your name!”

“Holy shit!” Lola whispered, running to my side. “If I untie you, will you please shut the fuck up before you get us all killed?”

Haha, no.

I nodded eagerly and Lola begrudgingly untied me. *Sucker*.

“His name is Nolan,” Lola said, as she untied me. “And need I remind you he has almost killed you once before?”

I had to choke back a laugh. “Nolan? Are you kidding? What kind of hipster name is that? That’s not an Alpha name. Like, I can see ‘Mace’ and ‘Clay’, they’re tough guy names. But *Nolan*—” I collapsed in a fit of laughter.

“Oh my god, shut up!” Lola said, smacking me on the shoulder. “You promised you’d stop talking if I untied you!”

“Technically, I only nodded. I never actually promised anything,” I said. “Plus, did you *really* believe me?”

She smacked me again.

“Ow!”

Lola glared at me. I would have been more upset by her anger if a delightful pack of multi-colored teddy bears hadn’t swum by. They waved to me as them swam in the grape juice stream. “Hi Cali, have fun at the Lapis Fettuccine!” they sang in unison.

I waved wildly toward them. “Thanks teddy bears! Be careful swimming in the grape juice! It was a lot of sugar in it! Oh, and you could drown!”

But it was too late, they’d already sunk to the bottom of the stream.

“Okay, I’m tying you back up again. This clearly was a mistake,” said Lola, grabbing the rope.

“Too late now,” I sang out as I pushed past her and made my way to the front of the group, coming face-to-face with the Alpha. I didn’t know if it was the shrooms talking but this Alpha was UGLY, with a capital UGH. He had a white, shaved, round egg head, beady black eyes, and a large, misshapen mouth.

Gross. Maya could totally do better than *that*.

“So Alpha, we meet again,” I said, sizing him up. I shrugged. “I’m not impressed once again. We can take you.”

I felt three pairs of hands trying to pull me back, but I swatted them all away. They were probably another hallucination, anyway.

Nolan smiled darkly. “So good to see you again Caliana. How have you been? How has Xavier been treating you? Better than his last mate?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “You're not going to intimidate me or Xavier…”

My train of thought went off the rails as a bowl of Lucky Charms suddenly appeared in front of me. My stomach rumbled. Apparently, getting high on mushrooms gave a gal a wicked case of the munchies.

Nolan looked at Xavier and smirked cruelly. “I see that things are going well. She’s clearly fit to be a Luna.” He laughed. “Tell me, how’s the little slut working out for you?”

Xavier growled, his teeth bared, but I was mesmerized by the floating box of Lucky Charms. What were they even fighting about? Were they after me Lucky Charms? Wait, had that douche just called me a slut?

“In all honesty, Xavier, wouldn’t it be better if you let us kill her? It’d be a lot less humiliating for you in the long run. Besides, it’s not like you haven’t lost a mate before.”

There were low murmurs from the crowd. That was a low blow. Xavier had killed his mate, Nolan’s sister, but only because she killed his mother. How could a mate do something so vile? Xavier had done everything to help my mother, and his mate had killed his. Probably at Nolan’s command.

“If you say one more word,” Xavier said. I could feel him shaking with anger.

Nolan took a step forward and poked Xavier in the chest. “You don’t have what it takes,” he said. “I’ll kill you at the Lupo Finale and you won’t be able to stop me when I make your little Luna mi—”

With a deep growl, Xavier threw me behind him. He surged forward toward Nolan, going straight for his throat.

**Episode 154**

I screamed as the packs started to attack each other. Xavier was on Nolan, and two other wolf-bears were going after Colton and Jay.

“What do I do? What do I do?” I whispered to myself as I watched the chaos.

“You do nothing,” Greyson said, grabbing my hand.

Suddenly, my panic subsided, replaced with a soothing, comforting feeling. Like when Greyson had sucked out the poison, before the pain had started. Without meaning to, I clung to him as he wrapped his arm around me, leading me out of the fray. His hold was so soft and gentle, like sliding onto the best mattress in the world after a long day.

He guided me to the tree, and I tried to stop. “You aren’t going to tie me up again?”

“No, love. Apparently, tying you to a tree doesn’t keep you out of trouble, but you’ll be safe here,” he said, sitting me down. He leaned down so his face was level with mine. “Listen, I know you want to be helpful, and I know you think you’re helping when you throw yourself into dangerous situations. But this is not the time or the place. You need to stay out of this one, okay?”

I nodded.

“Good,” he said, and hurried back to the fight.

Pfft, what an idiot. Had he even *met* me? I’d never let my man fight without my help.

I stood up on shaky legs and hurried back to the fight. I made it a few steps before tripping over something large and falling face first to the ground.

I cursed under my breath, wondering what on earth I’d just tripped over. A log? A rock? Another log?

As it turned out, I’d tripped over the unconscious body of Mrs. Smith.

Holy shit, I’d forgotten all about Mrs. Smith.

*Great, Cali—you had ONE JOB and that was to take care of Mrs. Smith, and you totally blew it*.

I tried not to panic. Maybe this was just another mushroom hallucination, and it wasn’t actually Mrs. Smith.

I kicked her sleeping form, and instead of turning into a log or a rock, she just groaned in pain. So, *not* a hallucination.

*OH MY GOD YOU JUST KICKED A SICK PERSON! WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU? SHIT!*

I turned around to see Xavier and Nolan facing off. I knew that situation could get real ugly, real quick. And I couldn’t let Mrs. Smith get hurt in the process. Well, more hurt than she already was.

I grabbed hold of Mrs. Smith’s legs and started to drag her toward the tree. I couldn’t let anything happen to her. Who’d make me white mocha hot chocolate if she died? She’d made it very clear she was taking that recipe to her grave, and I really wanted another one.

Ugh! Focus Cali! *God,* I’d been an idiot to eat those mushrooms. I could barely focus on a good day, but Cali on Shrooms was a whole new level of distracted.

“Calm down, Cali. Don’t let the mushrooms carry you away,” I muttered. I wished Xavier would carry me away in his arms. His firm, strong, muscular arms…Ugh! I was doing it again! Focus, Cali!

A loud groan disrupted my floating thoughts. I looked down to see Mrs. Smith sitting up, rubbing her head. “Stop dragging me!” she moaned out.

“Oh shit!” I gasped, dropping her bare legs onto jagged stone. “I’m so sorry! I just wanted to get you away from the fighting!”

“You think dragging me though a pile of rocks is *helping?*”

I turned around to check the path behind us, and only saw a long line of gumdrops. “Those are gumdrops,” I said, pointing at them.

Mrs. Smith just sighed wearily. “You don’t have to do all of this. I’ll be fine if you just bring me the mushroom tea.”

*OH SHIT I FORGOT ABOUT THE TEA! DAMN IT CALI! FOCUS!* I screamed at myself, annoyed that I’d let Mrs. Smith go so long without her medicine.

“Sorry, I’ve been a little tied up. I promise I’ll get the tea for you, but right now I have to stop this stupid fight!” I said, turning away from her.

“No… Tea,” Mrs. Smith gasped out.

I stopped and turned back around, my eyebrows knitting together in confusion. “No, I’m pretty sure there’s a ‘T’ in fight,” I said, and quickly hurried away, skipping through a field of beautiful sunflowers. Stopping a fight would be the perfect way to prove my worthiness as a Luna. The sunflowers were just an extra touch.

I skipped over to Greyson. “Hiiiiiiiiii!” I sang out.

He gave me a look of pure annoyance. Why was everyone giving me that look today?

“God damn it, I TOLD you to stay by the tree. And I even asked *nicely*. You promised me you’d stay put!”

“No, I just nodded my head,” I said. “I didn’t give verbal confirmation.”

“See, this is why people want to eat you.”

“Uncalled for.”

“Go back to the tree, Cali.”

“No!” I said, stomping my foot.

“Ooh, the stomping of the foot,” Greyson said. “Well, you sure convinced me you can take on an Alpha wolf.”

I rolled my eyes. “Look, I may be seeing things because of that stupid mushroom—”

“Which you ate.”

“Details,” I said airily, waving my hand. “Anyway, I may be seeing things, but even I know that this is a stupid fight. You have to stop it.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Are you worried about your mate? Don’t you think he can take on another Alpha?”

“I’m worried that my mate will get injured before his big fight night! And you should be worried too! He’s *your* brother.”

“*Half*-brother.”

“*Details!* Look, if you really aren’t here to kill us, now’s your chance to prove it.”

Greyson looked at me for a moment and grinned. “Very well. If I must.”

Wait, that was too easy.

I watched as Greyson strode into the chaos with confident and authority. He stepped in front of Xavier and Nolan and, with one firm tug, pulled them apart.

“That’s enough,” Greyson growled. He looked directly at Nolan who seemed ready to lunge again. “You so much as move again, you will come to regret it.”

Much to my amazement, everyone stopped what they were doing to look at Greyson. Even the flock of electric goats that were passing by stopped to look at him, and they were typically very hard to impress.

Nolan opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off by Greyson’s long fingers wrapping around his thick neck and squeezing. Hard.

“No. Now it’s my turn to talk,” Greyson said in a clipped tone. “It was very unwise to attack my brother and threaten his mate like that. You mess with them and you mess with me—and you don’t want me as your enemy, Nolan. If half the rumors you’ve heard about me are true, you should be very, *very* afraid of me.”

Aw, Greyson loved us! Maybe now, he and Xavier could start mending their relationship. Maybe we’d all turn into a nice family, like the Hemsworths. Xavier could be Liam, and Greyson could be Chris. Wait, would that make me, Miley? I didn’t know how I felt about that.

“I’ll give you a choice, just because I’m feeling generous today,” Greyson continued. “You can try to fight my brother, in which case I’ll have to rip your throat out. Or, you can walk away and save it for the Lupo Finale. The choice is yours.” When he was finished, he released Nolan’s neck and stepped back, watching with clear satisfaction as Nolan gasped for air like a fish.

Nolan sank to his knees, gasping, his beady eyes fixed on Greyson. “I’m not going anywhere. Not without Maya.”

Colton stepped past Greyson to face Nolan, kicking him off his knees and onto the ground. “Over my dead body is she going with you!”

Greyson smirked at Nolan. “It appears that you’re a little outnumbered, here.”

“Is that a fact?” Nolan said coldly. The other members of the Samara pack stepped closer, growling.

I tried to count pack members to see who truly had the upper hand, but I kept mixing up the numbers in my head, and counting the same guys twice (they all looked so similar).

All I knew was that our group was staring down the Samara pack, tension filling the air so thick it was hard to breathe. I braced myself for the crackling of bones and the appearance of fur.

“Wait!” Maya called out, stepping between Colton and the now standing Nolan. “Stop!”

Colton grabbed her arm. “What are you doing?”

She looked him in the eye, and they stared at each other for one long moment. In that moment, anyone could’ve seen that they were mates. The way they were naturally drawn to each other, the way their bodies moved together, the look in their eyes… Not even *they* could deny their connection.

Maya pulled away from Colton’s touch and turned to Nolan. “I’ll go with you.”

**Episode 155**

I was stunned. Was Maya really going to go with Nolan over Colton? Nolan looked like a meatball, for goodness’ sake! Plus he was a major creep who’d tried to kill me. But maybe that was a turn on for Maya?

Sure, Colton wasn’t the world’s most eligible bachelor, but he was a hundred times better looking than this creep. And sometimes Colton was nice. *Sometimes.*

I swatted at a pesky purple fairy that was flying around my face as I moved closer to the action. “Get out of here fairy! I’m trying to pay attention, and it’s not easy right now!”

Colton looked at Maya, hurt and pain clear on his face. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to go be with my pack,” she said, her voice sure and strong. The only thing that gave her away was her eyes, filled with misery and torment.

Colton took a step back. “Is that really what you want, Maya?”

Maya paused. “Yes. It’s what I want.”

“No,” I said, walking up to them. “She’s lying. I mean, who the hell would choose this clown?” I said, pointing at Nolan. “He looks like a meatball!”

Xavier put a hand on my shoulder. “Go attend to Mrs. Smith. You were supposed to make her tea, remember? Wasn’t that the point of this whole shit show?”

“I don’t know how the hell I’m supposed to make tea at a time like this,” I said, shooing that same purple fairy away from me. “You can’t go, Maya! Colton is your true mate.”

Maya shot me a death glare. “Stay out of this, human. You’re as high as a weather balloon.”

As soon Maya said that, a dozen colorful balloons floated out of her head and drifted up into the sky. Ugh. Maybe she had a point this time around.

“I want this to wear off already,” I whined.

“Shhhh,” Xavier said, petting my hair.

Colton took another step toward Maya and grabbed both her hands. He opened his mouth to speak, but said nothing. Instead, they just stared at each other. They must have been communicating with each other—not in words, but in some other way. Maybe like how Greyson could speak to me in his mind? Sometimes? I wished I had these kinds of powers. I’d give anything to tap into their heads and listen in on their conversation.

After what felt like a lifetime, Maya broke their eye contact and turned to face Nolan. “Let’s go,” she said. Without another word, Nolan wrapped his fat arm around Maya’s waist and guided them back into the woods. Maya didn’t even look back. She didn’t even say goodbye.

I’d never liked Maya exactly, but I couldn’t help but feel sad that she was leaving. She’d become part of the group—the grump who wanted me dead sometimes, but part of the group nonetheless. I knew she didn’t want to go with her pack. She may have claimed to hate us, but she couldn’t have hated us enough to go back to them.

Something was wrong.

None of us said anything as we watched her go. We must have been in collective shock. There was a sad flute playing in the background.

I looked around. No one was moving. No one was doing anything. I was surprised no one else tried to stop her. I’d have thought we’d be planning our next move to get her back.

I gaped at all of them, throwing up my hands. “Well? What are we waiting for? We can’t just let them kidnap Maya! She’s our friend!”

“Who’s being kidnapped? She left pretty willingly,” said Lilac, already on his phone.

“And she really wasn’t our friend,” added Violet.

Could those two stop talking for *five seconds?* No one liked a chatterbox.

I turned to Colton. “Why did you let her go?”

Colton didn’t look at me, his face a mixture of pain and anger. His chest was heaving, like he was trying to control himself. “Do me a favor? For once in your pathetic little life, *mind your own business*,” he snarled, though gritted teeth.

Before I could even answer, he shoved his way past me.

I turned to the others, and saw that their faces were shifting around like mismatched puzzle pieces. Soon, Lola’s eyes and Jay’s nose were on Violet’s face. Greyson and Xavier’s faces combined into the sexiest superhuman alive. I had to shut my eyes in order to focus. These stupid mushrooms needed to wear off. *Now*. “What kind of pack are we, letting another pack boss us around like that?”

Xavier rolled his eyes (which were looking very much like Greyson’s). “No one forced Maya to go,” he said, shooting a look at Colton, whose head was now a dolphin’s. “It was her choice to go with Nolan.”

I remembered the look that had passed between Colton and Maya not more than five minutes ago. I took a step toward Colton. “But she told you something, didn’t she? Not in words, but I could see something going on between the two of you.”

Colton looked at me. For a second I thought I’d gotten through to him—that he’d be honest with not only himself, but us too. Then he broke eye contact with me and said, “You’re right. She said, ‘goodbye asshole’.”

Then he walked away again.

A hand tapped my shoulder, and I turned to see Mrs. Smith standing behind me. “How are you feeling, dearie?”

HOLY SHIT, I’D FORGOTTEN MRS. SMITH AGAIN! I WAS THE WORST PERSON EVER!

“Oh my goodness, Mrs. Smith! I’m sorry! I totally screwed up! How are you feeling? How’d you—”

My words were cut off by Mrs. Smith raising a mug in the air. “The tea. Made it myself while you were all off banging your chests.”

OH MY GOD THE TEA! I WAS THE WORST!

“Mrs. Smith, I’m so sorry. I just got a little… distracted…” My thoughts were interrupted by a fireworks display overhead.

“And the vivid hallucinations, I’m sure,” she said.

“Ooooohhh…” I said, watching the fireworks. “Do you like fireworks, Mrs. Smith?” I asked, as I watched my name being spelled out in lights.

“Oh dear, what are we going to do with you?” said Mrs. Smith. I looked down to find she was shaking her head at me. “You shouldn’t have eaten those mushrooms. It was very brave, but also pretty stupid.”

I nodded. She did have a bit of a point. “Yeah. That sounds like me: stupid, but hot. Brave, but stupid. The world’s crappiest Luna.” I said bitterly. Once again, I’d screwed everything up.

Mrs. Smith leaned in close. “Do you want to know a secret?”

“Is it your white mocha hot chocolate?”

“No, and don’t ever ask about that again.”

“All right, all right,” I said, holding up my hands. Apparently, she was very serious about her white chocolate mocha recipe. “What’s the secret?”

“If you want to prove to everyone that you’re a Luna, you need to stop trying so hard.”

Easy for her to say—she wasn’t a human. All this stuff came so instinctually to the wolves. I was just a girl from Minnesota in love with an Alpha.

“Yeah, I know,” I said with sigh. “I know I’m trying way too hard to be good at this, but it’s so hard when everyone expects me to fail…and then I *do*. When everyone expects me to fall apart it’s hard not to. I just wish they wouldn’t treat me like…”

“A human?” said Mrs. Smith.

“Exactly! I just want to be seen as their equal. And I want to be helpful and I try. I really try. Sometimes I wonder if things would be different if I were a wolf like everyone else.”

Mrs. Smith opened her mouth to say something, but Greyson’s voice cut through all conversation.

“So, what are we going to do now? Stay here and lick our wounds?” he asked. His eyes met mine as he said this—I swore they did. It reminded me of the night we’d first met, when he’d healed me by licking my wound. “Or are we going to go to the Lupo Finale?”

Lola looked over at Mrs. Smith. “How are you feeling, Mrs. Smith? Are you well enough to travel?”

“Oh, I feel lovely. This mushroom tea never fails. It’s an old recipe I learned from someone…” She trailed off, probably lost in her memories.

“Okay, we need to keep moving,” Greyson said. “If we hurry, we can still get there in time. Everyone remember that Cali is still hallucinating, so let’s keep an eye on her and make sure she doesn’t do anything stupid. Or more stupid than normal.”

“Hey! I’m perfectly—” I was interrupted by a large pink elephant stomping by. “Oh yeah, that’s fair,” I said, shutting up.

Xavier walked over to me, reaching for my hand. “Are you doing okay, baby?”

The sight of his hand made me gag. A wave of revulsion swept through me and I recoiled in disgust, trying to get as far away from him as possible.

“Don’t touch me!” I screamed.

**Episode 156**

Xavier pulled his hand back like I’d burned him. His expression was a mixture of shock and hurt, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. My mind was clouded with disgust and fear; even though the logical side of me (yes, despite popular belief, I did have a logical side) was wondering why I was reacting like this. He was my mate. I loved him.

He’d touched me earlier. What had changed?

Lola rushed over to my side. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?” she demanded, her voice laced with concern as she brushed a strand of hair out of my face.

“I don’t know,” I said, my whole body trembling. “I never felt that before.”

I was too embarrassed to make eye contact with Xavier. He was my mate, I should have been reaching out to him, not recoiling from his touch. He was here to comfort me, and he’d been trying to. What the hell was wrong with me?

“Oh, it’s probably just the mushrooms,” Mrs. Smith said matter-of-factly, with a kind smile. “They can cause all kinds of mental somersaults and sometimes physical ones as well.”

I nodded, watching as the previously drowned teddy bears did somersaults in front of me. “Yeah, maybe,” I said, but I was still unsettled by it. I was no expert on drugs, but could they really make me feel disgusted by Xavier’s touch? Was that really something that hallucinating could cause? Or was my revulsion being caused by something else?

“Did he look different than usual?” Mrs. Smith asked. “Like, did he have weird octopus arms? Or a face that looked like a fly’s?”

“No, he looked the same,” I said, which made it all the more upsetting. I loved Xavier, I was turned on by Xavier. Why would I be disgusted by his touch?

I paused my thoughts to let an army of day-glo ants march by.

Don’t do drugs, kids. Stay in school.

Lola must have left while I was lost in thought, because when I looked up from the ants, she was walking toward me again. “We have to keep going if we want to make it in time. Do you think you’re well enough to handle this?”

I smiled at my best friend, a surge of confidence rushing through me. “Of course I can. I’m a fucking Luna-to-be, right?”

“Well, technically I guess,” said Lola.

“Right! So I’m ready for anything,” I said, striding over to the rest of the group.

And promptly tripping over a rock.

I braced myself for the fall, but it never came. Instead, a warm hand wrapped around my waist, stopping my fall. My whole body exploded with delight, a sugary tingling radiating from my fingertips and spreading through my body.

Yes, *this* was what it should feel like when a mate touched you. Maybe Mrs. Smith was right, and that last time had just been a side effect of those crazy mushrooms.

I looked up, expecting to see my mate. But instead, Greyson’s deep sliver eyes bored into mine, and he smirked at me.

“You are not the most graceful of creatures, are you?” he said, his voice like honey. “You keep falling over your feet.”

I shivered as I pulled free of his grip, and he let me go without a word as I silently fumed. The bastard had probably tripped me in the first place.

Still, I shivered at the loss of contact, almost craving his touch. It was like being thrown out into the cold after being wrapped up in a warm, toasty blanket.

*Keep it together, Cali!* I couldn’t be having those thoughts about Greyson. Those were bad thoughts.

Still, the whole situation was a big mental somersault like Mrs. Smith said. What the hell was going on? Why was it that Xavier’s touch repulsed me, but Greyson’s felt like cotton candy heaven? Was it the mushrooms, fucking with my reality? Or was it something more? Maybe it was Greyson, using my weakened state to do his wolf-bear mind tricks on me?

Or had I just…liked his touch?

I shook my head at the thought, trying to banish it from my mind. It was probably just the stupid mushrooms. I needed to talk to Lola. Maybe she’d know something. Or at least be able to pull me out of the full-blown panic attack I was having.

I hurried to catch up with Lola, who was walking by herself. Jay was up ahead, talking to Xavier.

“Lola!” I cried out, gasping for breath from all the running I’d done to catch up with her. Wow, I really was in horrible shape despite all this damn hiking.

“Hey, shroomy,” she said, with a smile. If this turned into one of my many nicknames, I was going to be super pissed. You try to do one good thing, I swear.

“Rude!” I said, rolling my eyes. “How was I supposed to know those mushrooms would do this?”

She shot me a look. “Yeah, that’s why you’re not supposed to eat anything you don’t recognize—especially mushrooms. Have you *never* seen an after-school special?”

“I must have missed that one. Anyway, Greyson touched me.”

“Hot.”

“No,” I hissed. “*Not* hot. Stop being a pervert for once in your life. His touch made me feel all warm and tingly, but Xavier’s made me feel… revolted. Shouldn’t it be the other way round? What the hell is going on with me?”

“Chill,” Lola said. “It’s probably just a combination of the mushrooms and your usual overthinking. Or as the professionals call it, anxiety.”

I considered that for a moment. I was usually accused of *not* thinking (e.g. jumping out of windows, eating weird mushrooms, selling my virginity on the internet…), but maybe I just *over*thought everything so hard that it seemed like I wasn’t thinking at all. Maybe it was both.

“You think?” I asked her. “*Am I* overthinking? I don’t think I am, but maybe I am. How do you know when you’re overthinking?”

Lola just stared at me. “You’re doing it literally right this second.”

“What?”

“Overthinking.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“I can’t tell if it’s you or the Shrooms that’s annoying the shit out of me,” Lola said. “Then again, this isn’t the first time you’ve mentioned Greyson having a strong effect on you.”

I nodded. There were still goosebumps on my skin from the last time he’d looked at me. Remembering it made me shiver, but I didn’t know why. “That’s true, but that does it mean?”

Lola shrugged. “What do I look like, a werewolf dating expert?”

“Maybe we should ask Mrs. Smith. She seems to know just about everything.” I didn’t know if Mrs. Smith had ever had to deal with being attracted to two men at the same time, but maybe she had? Hell, maybe she knew the real origin of that fairytale.

Lola tapped her chin, thinking. “Maybe. But before we go to her, we should make sure this isn’t just the Shrooms talking. We don’t want to start any unnecessary drama right now. Because if there *is* something going on, this could lead to some serious shit. We’re talking Taco Bell that one time freshman year kinda shit.”

Oh *yikes*. I gulped at the thought. The last thing I wanted to do was to cause any problems for Xavier. Well, any *more* problems than I’d already caused. He was tense and pissed off at me already. Saying I might be attracted to his evil half-brother, and had wanted to kiss said evil half-brother on more than on occasion, might be the final straw. Especially if it all ended up being nothing. “So what do we do? Just wait and see if it happens? What if I have the due destini?”

Lola rolled her eyes. “You say that like it’s a disease.”

“It seems like one, and— HOLY SHIT LOOK OUT!” I screamed, ducking to avoid the fire-breathing donkey with bat wings that was braying by a nearby tree. “DID YOU SEE THAT?”

Lola just looked at me. “No. I’m not the one who ate unidentified mushrooms.”

“Uncalled for.”

“Facts.”

I looked over at the fire-breathing donkey, wondering whether it would be possible to roast marshmallows with a fire-breathing donkey. I’d be able to make myself some s’mores—something that REAL camping trips had. Did fire-breathing donkeys like s’mores? Maybe I should ask him. Or her.

OMG, FOCUS CALIANA! FOR FUCKING SAKES.

“What were we talking about again?” I asked Lola.

“Greyson.”

“Right. So what do we do?”

“Hold on, I’m thinking,” she said. “We could talk to Greyson and see if he’s up to something? But personally, I don’t trust him. He kinda terrifies me, and he’s a killer. So I’m not going anywhere near him.”

That was the other thing that was bothering me. Everyone was terrified of Greyson. Well, everyone but me. Did he simply have psychopathic tendencies which were lulling me into a false sense of security?

“So, what now?” I asked.

Suddenly, Lola smiled wide, looking a little too eager. “I’ve got the perfect idea. I know a way we can figure this out without having to tell a single person about it.”

I had a really bad feeling about this.

**Episode 157**

We stopped in a fork in the path, and I waited to hear Lola’s plan. You know, *despite* the presence of a spinning spoon, dancing to R&B music. Everyone ignored me when I tried to bring this up. In my defense, I’d really thought everyone would find it interesting.

“We should keep going to the right, yeah?” said Colton, the first thing he’d said for hours.

Xavier shook his head. “No, look at those tracks. Rogues.”

“Pfffff, those are just regular wolf tracks. Don’t you know anything?” Colton scoffed.

“Yeah, I think I do. Because I’m an Alpha.”

That led to a fight between the brothers. Greyson watched, amused. I used this opportunity to whisper to Lola. “So, what do we do?”

Lola rolled her eyes. “There’s no WE here, babe. It’s just you, I already have a mate. I’m only telling you what you *could* do, not what you *should* do.”

“Spare me your plausible deniability and tell me. Unless it involves killing people. Killing people is where I draw the line.”

Lola sighed dramatically. “See, this what I was talking about—you’re a terminal over-thinker. And don’t be an idiot—I’d never suggest anything as messy as murder. This time around anyway.”

Somehow, this did not calm me even a little bit.

“All you have to do is kiss him,” Lola said, like it was simple.

I scrunched my eyebrows together in confusion. “But I’ve kissed Xavier before. Like, a bunch of times. And I *like* kissing Xavier, a *lot*.” I kinda wished I was kissing him now, like hardcore making out. Maybe the mushrooms had just made me extra horny? All I wanted to do was crawl into bed with Xavier, feel his strong hands on my body, his lips moving down…

“Hey, focus!” Lola yelled, clapping her hands in front of me. “I’m not talking about Xavier, I’m talking about *him*.” She pointed at Greyson. And just as she pointed, Greyson’s eyes caught mine, and he smirked at me. I felt a rush of heat flood my whole body, and I turned away.

I shoved Lola roughly. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” I hissed. “Don’t fucking *point*—he’s looking at us!”

“Uh, technically he’s looking at *you*, not me,” she said. “So, are you gonna do it?”

Lola was the worst.

“Um, did you take some magic mushrooms while I wasn’t looking?” I asked. I could feel my eyes bugging out of my head at her suggestion. Did she *want* to get us all killed? “Are you really suggesting that I kiss Greyson? Here? With Xavier watching? Have you completely lost your mind? Also, secondly, GROSS!”

Lola was unfazed. “What’s the big deal? You told me before that you wanted to kiss him.”

Kissing Greyson… His full lips parted, his dark eyes half-closed as I ran my fingers through his hair. His long fingers grazing my waist, pulling me closer and I leaned up to…

*OH MY FUCKING WOLF-BEAR GOD! FOCUS, CALI! YOU ARE NOT HAVING NAUGHTY DREAMS ABOUT GREYSON—AGAIN!*

“Yes, but wanting to kiss him is very, *very* different to actually doing it! Xavier is my mate, or he’s supposed to be—I’d never do that to him. Especially right before he has to fight for his life! *Especially* after all he’s been through. What kind of person would I be, if I did that? I love him, Lola.” As soon as I said the words out loud, I knew that they were true. I loved him. I loved him more than anything. I’d die for him if I had to.

Lola was not amused. She threw up her arms with a huff. “Well I don’t know what to tell you, then. That’s the only way you can figure this thing out. It’s like kiss and tell. Only if you kiss Greyson, we can tell if there’s something going on between you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Well, forget it. I’m not going to kiss another guy. This isn’t one of your shitty reality shows, Lola. And I’m not a cheater!”

“Well then quit whining about it.”

“I will,” I retorted. “And remind me never to open myself up to you again. Ever. You and your bad ideas.” This was classic Lola. Telling me all her horrible ideas and then getting mad when I had the good sense not to listen. I could think of terrible ideas all by myself, thank you very much.

“Cali—”

I stopped and looked around. “That’s strange,” I muttered.

“What?” Lola asked. “Are you seeing limbo-ing unicorns, or some shit?”

I shook my head. I could only see trees and sky, and everyone had the right face. “Everything looks… normal? I think the mushrooms are starting to wear off.” I felt a wave of relief—being on drugs was not fun. Zero out of ten, would not recommend.

Lola gave me a puzzled look. “Are you sure? Cause sometimes it seems like you’re hallucinating, even when you haven’t taken anything,”

“I happen to have a very vivid imagination. My rising sign is in Pisces.”

“Oh god, not the astrology again,” Lola groaned.

I laughed as we kept walking.

Two hours later, I was missing the mushrooms. The hallucinations had made the hike more interesting. Now, as the effects of the mushrooms were leaving my system, I could feel every bump and bruise on my body—and a few new ones that had formed during the day. My body ached, and I was completely bored. I wondered if I could sneak some of Mrs. Smith’s tea while she wasn’t looking, but everyone would probably get mad at me if I did that, despite its healing properties.

“I think I’m getting a blister,” I said. “Maybe instead of hitting the lingerie shop we should have gone to the wildness supply store to buy useful things, like *real* hiking boots.”

“I have no regrets, I got laid,” Lola said.

I glared at her. Sure, it was easy for her to say that. She could turn into a wolf and run in the woods like it was nothing. If I even made it off this stupid mountain alive, I was going to go to the mall and buy some real hiking shit.

And maybe when all of this was over, Xavier and I could go somewhere together. *Alone*. It seemed like the overthinking and anxiety was stemming from the Lupo Finale. If I were honest with myself, that was exactly it. I didn’t want anything to happen to Xavier. It was that simple, and I was doing anything to ignore that it was a possibility.

I stopped and turned to Lola. “I’m going to check in on Mrs. Smith, okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” she said. “I’m going to walk with Jay for a bit.”

I winked at her. “Ooooh, get some.”

She winked back. “You know it.”

I walked over to Mrs. Smith who, unlike me, did not look tired at all. In fact, for a woman who’d nearly had her face ripped off by a pack of bloodthirsty Rogues and had been found half-dead in a stream, she looked pretty damn good. She was wearing a cherry red velvet tracksuit and listening to music on an iPhone. She was even humming along. It sounded like Katy Perry.

I hoped I’d have that much energy at her age. Then again, I’d probably be grateful just to *make it* to her age. Forty was seeming a reach age if Rogues kept attacking us.

“How are you doing, Mrs. Smith?”

She took off her headphones and smiled at me. “Oh, I’m doing okay. Holding my own with you all. Thanks to that mushroom tea, I could run up and down this hill. I’m mainly worried about you, dear. I’m happy to see that you’re coming down from your little mushroom journey. I was pretty scared for you, for a minute or two.”

I smiled. “I could say the same for you. Anyway, how can you tell I’m sobering up?”

“Well, before, your eyes were the size of dinner plates, but now they’re more like Vegas poker chips. You still have a ways to go, but the worst is over. It shouldn’t be long until you’re back to your normal, happy self.”

Mrs. Smith had been to Vegas? I’d have to ask her about that later. Maybe she, Lola, and I could do a girls’ trip. Mrs. Smith seemed like a hoot.

“I’m glad to hear it, even though I’m exhausted now.” I laughed, but it quickly turned into a yawn.

“Well, you have been through a lot,” Mrs. Smith said.

I nodded. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot. You can ask me anything you like.”

“That thing you said before, about my reaction to Xavier touching me? Were you being honest? Was it really the mushrooms? Or were you just saying that to help me save face?”

“I was being honest,” said Mrs. Smith, taking her time to answer.

“*But?*” I pressed, waiting for the real answer.

“But I guess the real question is, when it comes to Xavier, are you being honest with *yourself*, Cali?”

Wait, *what?*

**Episode 158**

What the hell was *that* supposed to mean? Stupid wolves and their stupid Latin, and their stupid cryptic messages… Could they *never* speak in plain English?

I looked at Mrs. Smith, frowning. “This may be the mushrooms talking, but I don’t understand the question. How am I not being honest with myself?”

“Only you can answer that,” she said.

Oh great, more non-answers. Just peachy. Werewolves were so forthcoming with their advice and information.

“Perhaps you haven’t accepted the reality of the Lupo Finale, yet,” Mrs. Smith said. “How it will change everything.”

“Um, I think I’ve got a pretty good understanding of that whole mess,” I said. And was actively repressing it. “It’s all anyone’s been talking about since forever.”

“Yes, but have you thought about what’s going to happen *after* the Finale? What the consequences will be if Xavier doesn’t win?”

Of course. I couldn’t forget what Xavier had told me—that if he was defeated, I might be killed.

“If he doesn’t win, I die,” I said. “But what else is new? Everyone’s been out to kill me for two months now. I’m not afraid anymore.”

“You’re very brave,” she said. “But what if the one who dies isn’t you? What if it’s *Xavier* who dies?”

I stopped walking. My whole body froze at the thought of it. Xavier… dead? Hearing someone say it out loud…I shook the thought out of my mind. I couldn’t think about it. I *refused* to think about it. He couldn’t die—wouldn’t. If anything happened to him, a part of me would die, too. I needed to keep him alive, keep him safe.

Even if it killed me.

“Of course I’ve thought of that,” I said. “I didn’t want him to do the stupid thing in the first place. All I’ve ever tried to do is to protect my stubborn, smoking hot mate. Sure, it might not have always worked out the way I intended, but I’ve been trying. I would do anything for Xavier. I love him.”

“Yes, but once the Lupo Finale begins and Xavier enters that circle, there is nothing you can do to protect him,” Mrs. Smith said. “He’ll be on his own as every ambitious Alpha-wannabe tries to defeat him. How are you going to feel, watching helpless from the sidelines?”

I gulped loudly, feeling sick to my stomach—like I’d eaten a dozen more mushrooms. I hadn’t thought about that, but it was suddenly all I could think about. Xavier, alone in the ring as he took on wolf after wolf. I might watch him die, and I wouldn’t even be there with him. Next to him.

Holding him.

“I don’t know.” My voice cracked a little. “I assumed I would be there. I thought I’d be able to rush to his defense somehow, if he needed me. Or just be there with him, so he’d know he wasn’t alone.”

Mrs. Smith smiled sadly, and took my hand in her bony fingers. “That’s very sweet of you. Noble, even. You have a good heart, Caliana. But, that’s not how these things work. You won’t be able to help him. As a human, there’s not much you’d be able to do, regardless. Xavier has to do this on his own. And I think on some level, you know that, and that’s why your subconscious is trying to reject him now.”

“Wait, hold up,” I said. “I am *not* rejecting Xavier. I’m still *very* *much* into him.”

“Yes, you mentioned that when you yelled that you weren’t a virgin anymore.”

My face went bright red. Had I said that out loud?! Okay, it was official—I wasn’t going to die from Rogues, I was going to die from embarrassment.

“You recoiled from his touch—why else do you think?” Mrs. Smith said. “You saw the look on his face when you did it.”

It had looked like I’d burned him. Betrayed him. The hurt and pain had been clear on his face. All in all, it had been a terrible day to be my boyfriend. Poor Xavier. I needed to apologize. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

Mrs. Smith shook her head. “You *have* figured it out, dearie.”

“I have?”

I saw her fighting very hard to not roll her eyes at me. “You are trying to distance yourself from Xavier because you’re afraid of losing him. You’re afraid that the next kiss will be your last.”

“Wait, no. No, that’s not why. *Is it?*”

Mrs. Smith sighed wearily. “You’re a very pretty girl, with a good heart. But you’re very easily distracted, and you can’t blame it all on the mushrooms.”

I smiled sheepishly.

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I couldn’t remember how long we’d been hiking down the mountain. It felt like forever. Lola was talking to Jay, Xavier was with Colton, and Mrs. Smith was listening to her music (that lady had a lot of Drake on her iPhone).

But I couldn’t stop thinking about what Mrs. Smith had said. Could this whole thing with Greyson be nothing but a way of dealing with my fear of losing Xavier? What was that called again? Transference? I should have paid more attention in Psych 101. Maybe it would have helped me figure this stuff out.

But I wasn’t completely sure that Mrs. Smith was right. I’d met Greyson right before Xavier had announced the Lupo Finale, so there were some feelings from before it had happened. Plus, I didn’t think my brain had the ability come up with something so complicated. My psyche didn’t hate me that much. Or maybe it did.

I looked over at Xavier, who was looking gorgeous in the light of the waning sun. I loved that man. I loved him with everything I had. I couldn’t bear the thought of never being able to look at him again, talk to him, touch him…

An idea formed in my mind. Suddenly, I knew exactly how to fix things between us. To show my subconscious that I wasn’t pushing him away and didn’t want to.

Xavier stopped walking. “Okay, the sun is getting low. We’ll spend the night here and leave at first light.”

I looked around, noticing my surroundings for the first time. We were standing in a small clearing with dirt, rocks, and leaves—and no rainbows or unicorns. Thank *god.*

“Are we going to pitch a tent or something?” I asked. “Are we sure we want to sleep out in the open?” I couldn’t help but think about all the animals and creepy crawlies that could come out at night. Not to mention the Rogues, and the rain. The idea of sleeping outside made me feel way too exposed. Plus, I needed a little privacy for my plan to work. “Can’t we find a cave, like last night?”

“Do you want to hike another ten miles?” Jay asked.

The thought turned my legs to jelly. “Hard pass.”

“I want a tent, too,” Lola said. “I’m not sleeping where some stupid ass spider can get into my hair.”

This led to a very loud argument between Lola and Jay—though Lola was obviously going to win.

Xavier walked up to me. For a moment, I almost didn’t recognize him. His head was bowed, and he was keeping a safe distance. I was both touched and heartbroken when I realized what was going on. He was submitting to me; he didn’t want to hurt me again. He was also protecting himself from future rejection.

I would’ve cried if I weren’t so damn tired.

“I can pitch a tent, if you’d like one,” he said softly.

I tilted my head up, staring at him until he had to meet my gaze. When he did, I smiled at him. “Yes, Xavier. I would like that very much.”

Watching Xavier pitch a tent was a sight to behold. His muscles shone in the setting sun as I watched him go to work. I’d never gone camping before, but if I’d known watching someone pitch a tent could be that hot, I would’ve gone a long time ago.

I considered offering to help, but I knew I’d be no use to him. I might even have managed to burn down the tent somehow, knowing my luck. Plus, my shoulder was still aching. So instead, I asked Xavier a question. “So where did you learn to pitch a tent like that?”

“I used to go camping a lot.”

“With your father?” I asked. Then immediately grimaced. Wrong question.

“No,” he said softly. “With my mother.”

I reached to grab his hand. I gave his a good squeeze. “I would have loved to have gone camping with the two of you.”

Xavier smiled. “She really would’ve gotten a kick out of you.”

When he was finished with the tent, I gasped as I walked around it, admiring it with ooohs and ahhhs. “This is amazing! It looks just like the tents you see on display in nature stores.”

He smirked at that, clearly pleased with himself. “Of course. That’s because it was done right.” He bent down and unzipped the entrance of the tent. “Would you like to see inside?”

Inside, it was just a regular tent of course. But Xavier had set up our sleeping bags so they were zipped together to make a giant one. He’d even put the thin mats underneath for more padding. It was the most romantic thing ever.

“Do you think this will help you sleep?” Xavier asked. “Will it be okay for your shoulder?”

I didn’t answer him. Instead, I wrapped my arms around his neck, ignoring the burn in my shoulder. This time, neither of us pulled away and I felt like I was floating on cotton candy—in real life, not a hallucination. I looked into his eyes and smiled, my stomach all aflutter. “I can think of something that will definitely help me sleep.”

And then I planted a kiss on his surprised lips.

**Episode 159**

I kissed Xavier, hard and deep; it had been too long since I’d been alone with him. When you had a newly awakened sex dive, two days could feel like two years. Especially after the stressful few days I’d just had. Actually, every day had been stressful. All I wanted was to feel safe and treasured in my mate’s arms.

I needed this.

For a moment, I froze, afraid that trying this had been a mistake. I feared that the wave of disgust would come crashing back, creating another headache for me to deal with.

But as soon as Xavier’s lips started moving against mine, all my doubts and fears melted away in a tide of burning pleasure. Our spark was still there, even hotter than before, and I loved every second of it.

Take that, stupid Greyson.

I wrapped one leg around Xavier’s waist, trying to pull him closer. He pulled away. Only a few centimeters, but I still groaned from the loss of contact.

“Cali, we—”

“No talking, kissing please,” I said, my lips making their way to his neck.

“But, Cali—”

“But *kissing*.”

“But—”

I shut him up with a long kiss, and he quickly deepened it. I didn’t want to talk and risk getting into a fight. It felt like we’d barely seen each other since this whole Lupo Finale journey started. I just wanted a moment together.

“Are. You. Sure. You. Want. To. Do. This?” he breathed out, each word punctuated by kisses. He pulled away again. “What about the others? This is only a tent, and you’re pretty fucking loud.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “I don’t care if the whole fucking werewolf community hears me. I want you, and nothing is going to stop me.”

His smirk was positively wolfish and it sent tingles all the way down to my toes.

We made out hungrily, our mouths battling for dominance as he lifted me up, his hands cupping my ass, and I wrapped both legs around his waist, grinding against his hips. I moved to run my hands through his hair, but then I winced as my shoulder ached.

Xavier noticed my discomfort. “What’s wrong? Is it your shoulder? We don’t have to do this.”

I shook my head and got off Xavier, only to push him back. “I don’t care. I want you,” I said breathlessly, reaching for the hem of his t-shirt to pull it off. I’d seen people do that in movies, but to be honest, taking Xavier’s shirt off was a whole lot sexier.

But reality could be very different to the movies. A fact I realized very quickly as I tried to pull off his t-shirt, and it got stuck halfway. It looked so easy when people were ripping off Ryan Gosling’s clothes.

Xavier chuckled softly, smirking at me. “Would you like a little help?” he teased.

I shook my head, my body aching for him in a way I’d never experienced before. I could feel my panties getting wet, and for once I wasn’t embarrassed. I was going to have him, right then and there. Tents be damned.

I put my hands on his stomach, feeling the ripples of his abs and I moved my hands up his chest, kissing whatever skin I found. With a few more tugs, I finally managed to his shirt off. Once it was off, I marveled at his body, wondering how on earth I’d gotten so lucky*.*

He raised an eyebrow at me, clearly enjoying my ogling. “Like what you see, babe?”

I nodded, licking my lips.

He chuckled again, reaching for the hem of my shirt, but I grabbed his hands.

“I got this,” I told him, pulling my own shirt off in a way that I *hoped* was sexy, even as I winced at the pain in my shoulder. I pressed up against him, then leaned up to his ear and whispered: “Get on the ground.”

He grinned. “Yes, ma’am.”

Xavier moved onto our sleeping bags and lay down. I climbed on top of him, my fingers moving to his pants, surprising both of us by unbuckling them on the first try. I unzipped them and cupped his cock through the thin fabric of his boxers. He was rock hard with his arousal, which only made me smirk.

“Excited?” I teased.

Xavier only moaned in response, and I finished pulling down his pants, leaving him completely naked. I felt my own arousal overwhelming me. I remembered the first time Xavier and I had sex; how nervous and hesitant I’d been. Now I was on top of him, my hand running up and down his hard cock, in the middle of the woods, near a bunch of werewolves. The old Cali would have been totally freaked out by this (to be fair, if I weren’t so horny, I *still* would’ve been freaked out by the idea of getting freaky in the woods, about a foot away from Mrs. Smith).

But this was my mate, the man I loved, and if I was going to lose him during the Lupo Finale, the very least I could do was bang his brains out before he went.

I pulled off my jeans and panties quickly. I briefly considered doing a striptease, but there was only so much foreplay you could do in a tent.

When I was fully nude, I didn’t go to cover my stretch marks or my tits. Instead, I let Xavier see me properly, watching with pleasure as his eyes raked down my body.

*Yes,* I thought, remember this. *This is why you need to win. This is why you need to come back to me when it’s all over.*

“You are the most gorgeous creature I have ever seen,” he breathed out.

I responded to his praise by capturing his cock in my mouth. I moved my tongue up and down his thick member, paying special attention to the tip. Xavier groaned loudly.

I looked up at him and smirked. “Who’s being loud now?”

He rolled his eyes, his breathing ragged. “Fuck me already, before I cum all over the place.”

I didn’t need to be asked twice.

I crawled on top of his and straddled his hips, my hands moving between us as I tried to figure out how to get him into me from this position. Seriously, it looked so much easier in sexy camping movies.

After a few false starts and a small struggle, Xavier guided his cock into me, sliding in easily.

My brain exploded with pleasure and I moved my hips up and down, moaning as I gained the sweet friction I was craving. Let the others hear me—this was too good to keep to myself.

Xavier let out his own moan as he grabbed my hips, holding tight as he thrust into me, as I followed his punishing pace.

“Fuck me, Xavier! Fuck me harder!” I said, my head falling back in pure pleasure.

“I said you’d be loud,” he grumbled.

“I CAN BE AS LOUD AS I FUCKING WANT!” I screamed out.

That shut him up.

I could feel myself getting closer as I kissed Xavier roughly. “I’m going to come,” I moaned out.

“Me too, baby, me too,” he moaned, squeezing my ass.

We both reached our climax at the same time, our moans mixing together as I collapsed on top of him, completely spent.

“I love you,” Xavier whispered, leaning to kiss the top of my head.

I mumbled something that sounded like ‘I love you too’. But I was still on orgasm brain, my body still buzzing from the high I was experiencing.

Which was why it took me more than a few minutes to realize that the low hum outside our tents was the sound of voices.

Oh. Oh that’s right.

Shit.

DID I REALLY JUST HAVE SEX IN A TENT NEXT TO A TON OF PEOPLE?

I would absolutely 100 percent never live this one down. Was it worth it? Oh hell yes. But I could almost hear the jokes now. Internally, I shrugged. It *was* totally worth it. Not only because I’d had a killer orgasm, but because I knew for certain that the bond between Xavier and me was real and solid. Nothing was going to break it. Whatever weirdness that happened earlier must have been the mushrooms. Thank god that was over with.

Xavier and I kissed for a while longer, almost ready for round two, until my need to pee overwhelmed my need to keep making out.

I untangled myself from Xavier and stood up and started to unzip the entrance of the tent.

“Caliana, you might want to put some clothes on before you go out.” Xavier chuckled.

Right.

Dressed, I slipped out of the tent, hoping to find a good place to pee without running into anyone. I was passing by Lola’s tent when I heard the sound of a zipper. I turned to see Lola’s grinning face in the dark as she gave me a thumbs up.

“Way to go, girl!” she whisper-shouted.

My cheeks heated with embarrassment. “Shut up!” I hissed, and moved to the wooded area of the campsite. Ugh, I didn’t want to piss on a poisonous snake, or anything. Reason number 105 why we should have taken a party bus.

When I was done, I was heading back to our tent when a noise stopped me. I turned to see Greyson, right behind me, dressed in nothing but a pair of black shorts.

“What the hell, Greyson! Were you just watching me pee?” I said in disgust. Couldn’t a girl get some privacy around here?

He smirked. “Sorry, love, not my kink,” he said. I did my best to avoid glancing at his sweaty body and abs for days. He was like a frickin’ P90X commercial. “I went for a run—it was too noisy to sleep.”

My face burned with embarrassment. Greyson had heard me and Xavier… I suddenly felt ten times more awkward than I wanted to.

“Well, sorry to disturb you. I’m going back to bed… Goodnight,” I said, refusing to make eye contact with him. I hadn’t been feeling ashamed and I wasn’t going to start now.

I started to leave, but he called me. “Cali.”

I turned back, barely meeting his eyes. “Yeah?”

“Do me a favor and be careful, all right?” Greyson said. “You’re his weakness.”

**Episode 160**

I turned away from Greyson and walked back to my tent without another word, hugging my chest, but I couldn’t tell if it was because of the chilly night air, or the chill of Greyson’s words. I unzipped the opening of my tent and slipped inside, trying very hard not wake Xavier.

Evidently, I shouldn’t have tried so hard. Xavier was fast asleep, snoring loudly. I smiled down at him, kissing the top of his head before I curled up next to him. The heat of his body helped warm me, but I couldn’t shake off the uneasy feeling Greyson had given me.

*Just go to sleep, you’ll forget about it by morning*, I told myself sternly as I closed my eyes. I would have been passed out like Xavier from post-sex bliss if it weren’t for stupid Greyson.

*You are his weakness.*

What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

I sat up in our sleeping bag, my mind racing and restless. Stupid wolves and their stupid vague warnings… Did they really have to be so damn shady? What had Greyson meant? How was *I* Xavier’s weakness? And why was he lurking around when I’d been trying to pee? Going for a run? Pppfffftttt, he’d probably been listening to me and his half-brother banging. Not to kink shame, but that was *hella* gross. Seriously, were all Rogue werewolves major creepers? It seemed likely. It was probably in their DNA.

I ran my hand through my hair, trying to shake off Greyson’s foreboding words. I was probably doing the overthinking thing that Lola had mentioned earlier. Maybe Greyson was trying to mess with my brain again. Some kind of psychological mind fuck. I honestly wouldn’t put it past him.

I made a mental note to keep an eye on him (or to keep the hell away from him like I SHOULD have done from the beginning) and drifted off into an uneasy sleep with one last nagging thought: if Greyson *was* trying to trick me, why had he sounded so concerned?

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I was standing in a rocky clearing, surrounded by a moonlit forest. Near me was a weird, gnarly-looking tree that looked like something out of a fairytale. Ahead of me were hundreds of wolves, standing in a circle, growling. They were watching something, and seemed to be deeply enjoying it.

I walked over to the crowd, trying to see what they looking at. Eventually, I saw it: two werewolves were in a circular arena, snapping and growling at each other as they fought. Strewn around the arena were dead, maimed wolves; ignored as the survivors fought on. The smell of death and fear twisted in my gut, but I had to keep going to get a better look; who was fighting?

I pushed past a few laughing wolves who barely noticed me, then I stopped as I spotted a patch of black fur moving around the area.

Xavier.

I gasped as a flash of silver flew by me.

Greyson.

“Oh no,” I breathed out, putting my hand to my mouth to hold back a scream as I realized what was going on: Xavier and Greyson were in the Lupo Finale—fighting to the death.

“STOP!” I screamed out. I wanted to run into the fray, but my feet wouldn’t move. “DON’T DO THIS!”

Xavier’s dark wolf looked up at my screams, and Greyson’s wolf jumped on top of him, gaining the upper hand.

“Xavier!” I screamed, looking around wildly for something, *anything*, to use as a weapon. The crowd roared in approval as Greyson continued his attack.

Xavier’s wolf eyes turned to meet mine, and I reached out to him. “Xavier,” I breathed out.

Xavier’s wolf gave only last bloodcurdling howl as Greyson ripped out his throat.

I screamed, lurching upright in our sleeping bag. My heart was hammering and I was gasping for breath. I looked around to find Xavier, in his human form with his throat still intact, looking at me with alarm. Still, I reached out to touch his throat, relieved that he was still alive and whole.

“Cali, what happened? Are you okay? Why are touching my throat?” he asked, his voice laced with concern.

“You’re alive!” I gasped out, marveling at the fact that my mate had not been mauled to death by his older brother.

“Of course I’m alive. Do I look dead to you?” he asked, a hint of a grin on his face, even though his eyes gleamed with concern.

My breathing started to settle. “Must have had a bad dream,” I said, running my hand through my hair.

“What was it about?” he asked, taking my free hand in his. “God, you’re shaking like a leaf. Was it that bad?”

I nodded, trying and failing to steady myself. “I dreamed about the Lupo Finale,” I said. “It was terrible. You died in front of me.”

Xavier pulled me into his arms and stroked my hair. “It was just a dream, baby. It was probably those silly mushrooms you ate.”

“But it felt so real. And there was nothing I could do. I was so helpless.”

“I know you’re anxious about the Lupo Finale, but Cali, you need to have faith in me. I can do this, and I don’t need your help. Or anyone else’s. So don’t worry about it.”

“I do believe in you,” I tried to assure him. “But in the dream, I distracted you and Greyson ended up ripping your throat out.” Tears started forming in my eyes. “I was the reason you died.”

Suddenly, Greyson’s words came back to me. *You are his greatest weakness.*

“Shhhhh,” Xavier cooed. “You’re not going to lose me. Ever. You’re stuck with me,” he said teasingly as he leaned down to kiss me.

I kissed him back, trying to lose myself in it, but Greyson’s warning still nagged at me.

I pulled away and looked at Xavier. “What if I’m your weakness?”

He gave me a puzzled look. “How could you be a weakness to me?” His expression softened as he wrapped his arm around my smaller frame. “Baby, you’re not a weakness to me. Not at all. You are tough and resistant and brave. If anything, you give me strength.”

“I do?” I said, looking up at him. “Even when I’m a pain in the ass?”

He chuckled, brushing my hair back. “Yes, even when you’re a pain in my ass, you still give me strength.”

I cuddled close to him, wrapping my arm around his chest. My heart swelled with his admission. “I love you,” I said softly.

“And I love you too. And knowing that you love me makes me strong. Strong as—and I can’t believe I’m even saying this right now, and if you ever repeat it I will deny it—a big tough wolf-bear.”

I giggled in delight. “See? I knew that phrase would catch on!”

He rolled his eyes and kissed me, deeper this time.

We stayed like this for a little while, holding each other in the darkness. I was almost ready to say fuck it and go for round two, but my shoulder wasn’t cooperating. Instead, we snuggled down into the sleeping bag, holding each other tightly. For a brief moment, it felt like we really were just a couple of kids camping in the woods.

Xavier cupped my cheek and kissed me softly. “I never thought I could find happiness like this again, after Ava,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

My eyes widened at the sound of the name. He’d never said his former mate’s name before. I repeated it over and over in my head. *Ava. Ava. Ava.*

I wasn’t the jealous type, but I retroactively hated her—even though she was dead.

I reached up and stroked Xavier’s hair comfortingly as he talked, the way he said her name revealing the deep pain that was still there. He’d never told me her name before. But for once, I didn’t press. I knew he’d tell me in his own time, in his own way.

“And then I met you,” he said, after a moment. “And I felt… alive again. Like I’d been asleep for a long time and now I’m awake and everything’s wonderful. And now that I have you, I’m not going to let you go. No Rogue, Lupo Finale, or your own clumsiness is going to stop me.”

“Never ever?” I pressed, with a small smile.

He grinned. “Never, ever. Dork.”

“Hey!”

“Come here.” He pulled me close and kissed me again as he moved on top of me. I let him kiss me, enjoying the warmth of his body on mine, comforted by the knowledge that he was still here and whole, and that he was going to fight to stay with me.

Still, even as I closed my eyes to enjoy the kiss, the chill of the dream still lingered. Making out couldn’t quite push out my nagging thoughts. And even as we drifted off to sleep, I couldn’t help but wonder: what if Greyson was right?

**Episode 161**

I woke up the next day with the same lump of worry in my stomach. To be fair, a nightmare about your boyfriend getting his throat ripped out by his hot older half-brother wasn’t usually easy to shake off. At least not without coffee and a plate of scrambled eggs.

As quietly as I could, I untangled myself from Xavier’s sleeping form, wiping some of the drool from his chin (see, werewolves *did* drool, facts!), put on my clothes and slipped out of the tent. Pffffttt, and everyone said I wasn’t graceful. I did have my moments.

I headed over to the stream to wash off. After everything that had happened yesterday (and last night) I definitely needed a clean-up. I couldn’t walk into the Lupo Finale smelling like sex—some people already had strong opinions about me and I didn’t need more. It seemed like most people either loved or hated me. Couldn't win ‘em all.

I’d hoped that Lola would be up early so I could talk to her about my dream, but she hadn’t come out of her tent yet. So I had to overthink all by myself.

Or maybe not.

When I reached the stream, I found Mrs. Smith, not unconscious in the stream like she had been yesterday, but doing chin ups in a tree, wearing a red velvet tracksuit.

Okay, so I’d just found a new role model.

I marveled at her for a moment. I knew people who’d frequently wake up barely able to move because they’d partied all night, and Mrs. Smith—who’d almost legitimately *died* yesterday—was working out like nothing had happened. Impressive.

I made a mental note to get the recipe for that mushroom tea, and to find out what her workout routine was—those things would certainly come in handy if I was going to continue to tangle with wolves. Especially those biceps, *damn* Mrs. Smith.

Hopefully she didn’t guard those secrets as closely as she guarded her mocha recipe.

“Good morning, Cali. It’s so good to see that you’re back to your normal self.” Mrs. Smith greeted me with a smile that I returned. “How are you feeling?”

“A little sore, but I haven’t had any freaky visions, so I’m feeling pretty good,” I said, stretching out my arms above my head, moving my tense, sore muscles. If I wanted an Olympian body like Mrs. Smith, stretching might be a good place to start.

However, my shoulder did not agree with this plan, and it sent me a wave of pain as I moved it. I grimaced. Okay, maybe I wasn’t ready to have a rock-hard body just yet.

Mrs. Smith noticed my pain and walked over, her lips turned down with concern. “What’s wrong?”

“I was attacked by a Rogue two days ago when we were hiking,” I explained, rubbing my shoulder. “The stupid guy broke the skin as he was dragging me off to kill me. I had someone try to suck out all the fang juice, but it still hurts like hell.”

Mrs. Smith’s eyes went wide, like she’d just eaten one of those strange mushrooms. “Oh, let me see! I hope it’s not too late.”

Yeah, *that* was the first thing I wanted to hear in the morning…

Dread filled my body, weighing me down like lead as I tried to backtrack. “No, really, it’s fine,” I said. “Greyson slimed it up with the lupos potatoes, so I should be okay. No need for ominous warnings.”

Mrs. Smith’s face scrunched up. “Potatoes?”

I sighed. I really should have taken a Latin class at some point in my life. But who’d have thought it would have come in handy? “I mean wolf spit,” I corrected.

Mrs. Smith did not look relieved. “That’d be fine if you were another wolf, but you’re a human; things aren’t always so cut and dried with your species.”

“Tell me about it,” I deadpanned.

“It would’ve been better if an established Alpha had done it, but…”

Her sentence hung in the air, freaking me the hell out. A hundred different scenarios flashed through my mind, each one worse than the next.

“What do mean ‘it would have been better’?” I demanded. “What’s going to happen to me? Am I going to start howling during the next full moon? Get all hairy? I didn’t bring enough shaving cream!”

Mrs. Smith laughed. “Oh, Cali, don’t be so dramatic. It’s not like in the movies.”

“It’s not?” That was a relief. Sort of.

“Heavens, no,” she said. “First, your bones would start breaking. That’s very painful. Then you might do a bit of whimpering.”

“Oh, so it’s *worse* than it is in the movies! Fan-flipping-tastic,” I said bitterly. And *New Moon* had made it look so easy…

“Sorry, dear. We’re getting ahead of ourselves anyway. Let me see the wound first, and we’ll take it from there.”

I gave her a skeptical look, but Mrs. Smith hadn’t steered me wrong yet. There was even a chance she’d be able to fix the bite, or at least dull the pain.

I pulled off my shirt and turned to show Mrs. Smith the large bite mark on my shoulder. She started to pull off the bandages.

I turned my head to watch out the corner of my eye as Mrs. Smith covered her face and gasped in horror.

It was at that moment I realized I should’ve stayed in my sleeping bag with Xavier. Or, better yet, I should never have let Lola talk me into this whole crazy scheme. I could have been safe at college, eating ramen and studying for mid-terms.

Instead, I was probably gonna lose my arm and die on top of a mountain in Oregon.

Stay in school, kids.

I gasped. “Oh my god, how bad is it? Am I going to lose my arm? How fast do you think I can get a replacement? I don’t want to walk around with just one arm, I know there have been great technological improvements, but I don’t think any of those surgeries were done in the woods? I think we should just wait until we’re back in civilization? I’ll survive.”

Though a robot arm could have its perks…

“My, you have a very active imagination, dearie,” she said. “Are you always this dramatic?”

“My rising sign is in Pisces,” I explained.

“Ah, I see. I knew you were watery.” Mrs. Smith nodded. “Anyway, it’s not that bad. I’ve seen much worse cases than this.”

The thought calmed me a little. “So I’m not going to lose my arm? You’re not gonna have to cut it off?”

She smiled gently and shook her head. “No, child. But you are going to need some iuniperorum ointment.”

“Gesundheit,” I said, eagerly awaiting to hear what I needed to heal my bite mark.

“No, *iuniperorum ointment*.”

I tilted my head in confusion. “I’m sorry, what?” Was this another Latin thing? Maybe I needed to buy one of those translator things.

Mrs. Smith sighed heavily. “The ointment you need is called iuniperorum.”

“Ohhhhh,” I said. The word meant nothing to me. “Whatever it’s called, I’ll take it. Can I have some? Does it sting? Can it cause an allergic reaction?”

Mrs. Smith gave me an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry Cali, but I didn’t bring any with me. I only had so much room in my bag.”

“Okay, let’s go stop at a pharmacy,” I said. “I need to pee anyway, and I’d prefer to do that in an actual toilet instead of in the woods with snakes and poison ivy.”

And creepy werewolves.

“Are you forgetting that you’re in the middle of nowhere?” Mrs. Smith said. “There are no pharmacies!”

“Oh, right.” I said, though I wasn’t convinced that there wasn’t a pharmacy nearby.

“In any case, you can’t buy it in any store. It has to be made from an ancient recipe.”

“Are you kidding me?” I gaped at her. “It’s 2019, what the hell are you doing still using ‘ancient medicine’? We have modern medicine now! And drug stores! Some of them are even *drive-through!* Geez! What is it? Just essential oils, like on Instagram?” Someone needed to tell these damn wolves to join the modern world of medicine, and women’s rights, and *tear away* *pants*.

“You’re being dramatic again. Sometimes it’s quite exhausting dear.”

“Sorry.” I sighed. “Okay, what’s the recipe? I’m not the greatest cook in the world, but I can probably make it if the directions aren’t in some ancient language. A YouTube video would be preferable.”

“I don’t think that’d be the best idea,” Mrs. Smith said. “If you make one slight mistake, just a little too much of this, or not enough of that, you’ll make things worse. And to be honest, you don’t seem like the most careful person in the world.”

Panic seized me as I realized my situation: I couldn’t buy or make the ointment. What was going to happen to me?

“So what the hell am I supposed to do?” I demanded. “Who can help me?”

**Episode 162**

Despite everything that had happened to me up until that point, I was still optimistic that Mrs. Smith was just going to suggest I order the special cream online. Or maybe she’d say there was some weird herb I’d be able to find nearby and mash into an ointment.

My optimism quickly died and was replaced with bone-deep dread when I saw Mrs. Smith’s expression darken. Never a great sign.

“There’s only one person I know who can help you,” she said gravely.

Ominous, much?

“Who?” I asked. “Is it a sorcerer? A warlock? A real doctor? Oh, please tell me it’s a real doctor.”

Mrs. Smith shook her head. “Just someone who knows a lot about these things?”

The suspense was killing me. I wanted to scream. “*WHO?*” I bellowed out.

“No need to shout,” said Mrs. Smith.

“Sorry, I’m just really hungry and extremely terrified by your ominous statements. You make so many of them.”

“It’s all right, dearie. I know this is a troubling time for you. I just hate to say her name. Leaves a terrible taste in my mouth. Her name is… MacKenzie MacEvoy.” She said the name like a curse word. “The *snake*.”

My eyes went wide. “You mean Big Mac?”

Mrs. Smith rolled her eyes in disgust. “Pffffttt, she’s still going by that stupid nickname? Well that doesn’t even surprise me. But yes, as hard it is to believe, that wench is probably your only hope.”

I looked at her, confused. Why would anyone say such mean things about Big Mac? She made great croissants, and people who made croissants could not be bad people. That was just a fact.

Then again, she *was* a friend of Maya’s, so maybe she was a little shady.

“Are you sure we’re talking about same Big Mac?” I asked. “She seemed so nice—she helped Lola when she was stuck in her wolf form.”

Mrs. Smith just snorted. “Pffftt, I’m sure she did, for a price.”

I looked at her, confused, trying to remember if Big Mac had charged us. “I don’t think we had to pay her. In fact, she let us stay with her that night. And she fed us.”

“I’m sure she did, but I know MacKenzie. There’s always a price.”

Those words left an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach that I decided to deal with at a later date.

I pulled my cellphone from my jeans pocket and turned it on. “What’s her number? Maybe she could fly the ointment up here on her broomstick.”

“First of all, there’s no signal up here, this is a mountain. And secondly, I wouldn’t have that gutter bucket’s number.”

Damn, Mrs. Smith was savage.

I sighed in frustration as I shoved my phone back into my pocket. This was too much to deal with without coffee or mushroom tea. “So how do I get a hold of her? Is there some kind of signal I can use? Maybe I could send her an owl? I need to talk to her now—the full moon is coming!”

Mrs. Smith shrugged. “Maybe she’ll be at the Lupo Finale. Not even that hippie shut-in would miss an event like that. In the meantime, let me put some red adler leaves on the wound, and we’ll see how things progress.”

Somehow, that didn’t comfort me, especially when I saw what red adler looked like—muddy, wet leaves that looked they’d fallen three seasons ago.

Gross.

“Uh, are you sure it’s okay to put those leaves on an open wound? Like, what if I get infected by one of those weird parasites that eat flesh? I read a headline about it once,” I said, feeling like I was going to be sick.

“Shhh. You’re a pretty girl, dearie, but you talk too much,” Mrs. Smith cooed, putting the wet leaves on my skin.

Rude.

Despite my earlier reservations, I was surprised how *good* the leaves felt, how soothing. Maybe there was something to these ancient medicines. Plus, if I used leaves to heal myself, I wouldn’t have to pay a co-pay. Much cheaper than going to CVS.

When Mrs. Smith was finished, she wrapped up my bite mark with a fresh bandage and helped me put my shirt back on.

“Well, we should be heading back to the campsite. Don’t want them to leave without us,” Mrs. Smith said with a laugh. I knew she was making a joke, but I also knew Colton would try to convince everyone to leave me behind.

By the time Mrs. Smith and I arrived at the campsite, all the tents had been packed up, and I could hear the sounds of a heated argument.

I turned in the direction of the sound, and saw that it was coming from Colton and Xavier.

Ugh, *boys!* I couldn’t leave them alone for a minute without them getting into some kind of argument.

I turned to Mrs. Smith. “Better see what my wolves are up to now,” I said, and walked over to the brothers.

“What on earth are you fighting about now? Don’t you know it’s too early for squabbling? That shit starts at nine,” I told them.

As soon as they heard my voice, they shut up. Colton shot me an angry glare and stormed off.

“Geez, what’s his problem?” I asked Xavier. “It seems like he’s hating me more than normal.”

“It’s not you,” Xavier assured me, watching his brother walk away.

“Does it have to do with Maya?” I guessed.

He nodded. “He’s really pissed that Maya went off with the Samaras. He feels like she betrayed him.”

“I mean, we all knew Maya would turn tail and leave as soon as she could,” I said. “She made it very clear that she didn’t like us.”

Xavier nodded. “Very.”

“For someone who claims he doesn’t like Maya, your brother sure seems to act like he does. You think he’s jealous of Nolan?” It was hard to think ANYONE could be jealous of a man who looked like a meatball, but Maya had still seemed pretty eager to be with him—that was bound to sting.

Xavier shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t have time to worry about Colton’s stupid love life. We have to get to the Finale today, and we’re running late.”

The Finale? The words hit me hard. We’d been talking about it non-stop for days, but somehow it had always felt so far away. Distant. But hearing that we’d be there by the end of the day twisted my guts.

I wasn’t ready.

Lost in my silent panic, I didn’t see Greyson walking up until he was in front of us. I turned so I wouldn’t have to look at him, even though I could feel him looking at me. I remembered the dream I’d had last night, and shuddered.

“What path are we going to take?” Greyson asked Xavier, but I knew he was looking at me. I could feel it. I walked away so I wouldn’t have to face him.

I walked over to Lola, who was putting sunscreen on her face. Only Lola would use a trip to a werewolf death match as an excuse to work on her tan. She was a pro at multi-tasking, I’d give her that.

“Let’s go!” Xavier called out to the rest of us.

And so we left.

We hiked for most of the morning and the better part of the afternoon, but it felt like days. My legs ached, and all I wanted was a breakfast sandwich and a nap. Finally, I heard the sound of the surf crashing onto the rocks. “Do you think we’re close?” I asked Lola hopefully.

Lola shrugged. “We must be, if we’re coming closer to the shore.”

I leaned in close to her. With so much going on, we hadn’t had time yet to gossip about the Colton-Maya drama. “Has Jay said anything about Colton and Maya? I have no idea what’s going on with those two.”

“Neither does Jay,” said Lola. “It’s so weird. Either be mates or shut up about each other.”

I wanted to say more about the look I’d seen Maya give Colton, but the roar of the surf paused that train of thought.

We were really close, now.

We emerged onto a rocky bluff, and I looked out at the vast ocean. It was the deepest shade of blue, and I stared at it in wonder. This totally beat the community pool in my home town. Minnesota was beautiful and all but this… This was the ocean. I’d never seen it before and honestly it was breathtaking.

I watched in awe as the waves pounded onto the shore. Xavier pointed at the rocky shore below. “We’re here,” he announced. “That’s Thor’s Well.”

I followed Xavier’s gaze down to a giant sinkhole that had waves splashing over it. My eyes grew wide with the realization of what I was looking at.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

Xavier answered me by walking down the slope. “We go in.”

**Episode 163**

Xavier’s words threw me off balance—literally. Go in? Go in *where*? I lost my footing and felt myself slowly starting to slide down the slope. Instinctively, I grabbed onto Xavier’s arm to steady myself.

“Easy, babe,” he said as he pulled me back to more solid footing. I couldn’t help but marvel at how strong his arms were. If he hadn’t been wearing sleeves, he’d have given everyone free tickets to that gun show he had going on.

The knot in my stomach had started to loosen. Why was I worrying about the Finale? Xavier had Alpha blood running through his veins, and he looked like he could be on the cover of *Men’s Health*. He could easily take on a few annoying Alphas. No one would be able to beat him.

Maybe Xavier was right—maybe I just needed to believe in him, and everything would be fine.

Or, at least, that was what I thought until I saw the sinkhole looming ahead.

“Uh,” I said. “What exactly did you mean when you said ‘we go in’?”

“How is ‘we go in’ a confusing statement to you?” Xavier shot back.

“Well, I don’t see any stairs, or a ladder. And I certainly don’t see an elevator— Don’t roll your eyes at me! Are you going to scuba diving or something?”

“Maybe,” Xavier said sharply.

I did not like the sound of that. I’d never gone scuba diving in my life, except for when I used a snorkel to hold my breath at the community pool, but something told me that those two things where very different.

“I feel like I should warn you now that I’ve never gone scuba diving in my life, and the odds of me being good at it are very bad,” I said. “Also, are there sharks in that water?”

“Why would there be sharks in the water?”

“Um, this is the ocean? Have you seen *Jaws?*” I retorted. *“*There are sharks everywhere, and I don’t know if it’s safe to go back in the water, and—”

“Caliana!” Xavier yelled, turning to face me, his dark eyes filled with frustration. “Please, for once in your life, stop talking.”

“But—”

“No! This time you actually have to listen and do what I fucking ask. *For once.*”

I closed my mouth and crossed my arms over my chest, glaring at him. What kind of asshole did he think he was, talking to me like that? I was only asking a question—well, a lot of questions.

“Look,” he said, taking my hand. “I understand that you’re worried, but the more you worry, the more I worry about you. You just need to trust me, okay?”

I thought back to the dream, how Xavier had only lost focus when I’d gasped. My worrying had gotten him killed. Ugh, stupid Cali. Why did I have to vocalize every little fear and worry that ran through my head? It certain didn’t help me, or Xavier. I just needed to chill and not overthink things. Hah. Easier said than done. I needed to trust Xavier and believe in him—it was the only way to keep him alive.

“Okay,” I told him. “I trust you. I won’t worry.”

But I knew that was a lie. I’d worry enough for the both of us. Guaranteed.

We walked closer to the sinkhole, watching as the ocean swept over it. While I’d promised Xavier that I trusted him and that I wouldn’t worry anymore, it would still be nice to know how this was actually going to work. I should’ve known to pack water wings.

“Okay, but how are we actually going to do this?” I said, looking down at my not-waterproof shoes. I wished Lola, who’d known we were going to the Lupo Finale, had dragged me to a sporting goods store instead of a lingerie shop. Lace panties were not going to help me here.

“The tide’s already going out,” said Jay. “It should be a few more minutes.”

I looked at the water dubiously as I watched the waves crash into the rocks. “Are you sure about that? The surf looks pretty dangerous.” Quickly, I bit my lip, feeling angry at myself for already breaking my vow to keep my worries to myself. It had been less than five minutes.

Chill Cali. Smooth Cali. No worries Cali.

Xavier squeezed my hand. “Hey, it’s all right,” he told me. “Once the water level drops, you’ll understand what we’re talking about.”

I gave him a skeptical look, but squeezed his hand anyway. “Okay.”

Xavier let go of my hand and walked over to Colton to talk to him. I just stood there, trying not to let my anxiety swallow me whole.

“How does your shoulder feel, dear?” Mrs. Smith asked, coming up from behind me.

My shoulder? I reached back to touch it, not feeling the sharp sting that had been there before. In fact, I hadn’t thought about my injury since Mrs. Smith had put those gross ass leaves on it.

“Much better, thanks to you,” I said. “I feel great. Maybe there’s nothing to worry about, after all? Maybe I’m just healing?”

But Mrs. Smith shook her head. Come. On. I should have known I wouldn’t be able to get out of it that easily.

“I’m afraid not. The leaves will help heal the wound, but they won’t do anything to keep you from turning into a wolf.”

Of course not. Why would anything ever be simple for me?

“Yikes,” I said. I’d been going back and forth on my decision to become a wolf in general. Was I really ready to take that step? Or would this backfire on me horribly? There was so much to consider and in the grand scheme I’d only just learned that werewolves existed. Was I ready to *become* one?

I shook off the thought. I could only panic about one thing at a time.

Zen Cali. Yoga and smoothies Cali.

“The water’s low enough now,” Greyson announced. “Let’s go.”

Xavier nodded. “Come on, it’ll be okay,” he said slowly, taking my hand as he led me down into the sinkhole.

I took my time as we walked, trying to be as careful as possible. With the sun slowly setting, I knew my clumsiness would not be helpful here. Well, it wasn’t ever helpful. But in a sinkhole, it was potentially deadly.

Suddenly, we were standing at the watery entrance to a dark, foreboding cave. Couldn’t there have been a much less creepy place to hold their dumb rituals? Why on earth couldn’t this thing be held at a conference room at a Marriott?

“I’ll go first,” said Greyson. “In case there are any Rogues hanging around.”

“Be my guest,” Xavier said, waving his arm.

My heartbeat started to race as we followed Greyson into the cave. What if there were Rogues hidden in the shadows, ready to strike at any time? The sea shells crunching under my feet echoed in the air. I wondered if I’d be able to use them as a weapon. I really needed to start carrying some kind of weapon on me at all times.

The darkness of the cave only got worse, leaving me unable to see anything around me. I clung to Xavier to make sure I didn’t fall, my anxiety worsening with my loss of sight. Wolf-vision would have been so nice, at that moment. Being a plain old human sucked, sometimes. Maybe it’d be best if I just let the bite do its work and turn me into a werewolf. It would make things so much easier.

But then I thought about all the nudity. I guess you can’t win 'em all.

Behind me, the crashing of the surf started to fade as we walked for what felt like an eternity. But there was a small glimmer of light up ahead, giving me hope that we wouldn’t be in the cave forever. Which was nice, because I really wanted to lie down after all this walking.

The light grew brighter and brighter, until we finally stepped out of the dark cave and into a subterranean wooded area. I gasped as I looked up at the sky. Above us, a nearly full moon peeked out from behind a silvery cloud. Holy hell, we’d been walking in that cave for hours.

Finally out of the darkness, my eyes hungrily took in the scenery around me. I breathed a sigh of relief. It didn’t look anything like my dream. Thank wolf-bear-god for *that*. My dream hadn’t been a premonition, after all. It had probably just been the last of the mushrooms, working its way out of my system. And stupid Greyson for putting that ‘weakness’ thought in my head.

The knot in my chest started to ease as we walked. But the relief only lasted for moments. Far too quickly, I heard the buzz of a crowd of people, all talking at once. Wait a minute…

I froze mid-step, wanting to scream at the top of my lungs. In the middle of the clearing, towering above us, was the gnarly tree from my dream.

**Episode 164**

My heartbeat was pounding in my ears as we entered the clearing, every muscle in my body tight with nervous tension. The tree, the crowd of people—they’d all been in my dream, and the knowledge of that made me sick to the pit of my stomach.

Xavier wrapped an arm around me, pulling me tight to him. “Stay close to me.”

I was so nervous that I couldn’t even roll my eyes in annoyance. “Despite popular belief, I’m not an idiot. This place is crawling with wolves.”

“Exactly, and any one of them could kill you, so play it safe and don’t do anything reckless.”

*Okay, fair.*

Greyson chuckled as we walked. “The same can be said about you, dear brother. Haven’t you noticed? Take some advice from your older, wiser brother: don’t do anything stupid. Either of you.”

I huffed. “I’m not a child. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. Also, don’t you think you’re being a little dramatic?”

But I could feel everyone’s eyes on us, sizing Xavier up, whispering as we passed.

Greyson turned to look at me. “I can be dramatic *and* right.”

I said nothing. I had a feeling talking a lot in this setting would only make things worse. I could feel my chest tighten and my palms tingle as I watched the other werewolves. How many of them would challenge Xavier? How many wanted a piece of the action? I spotted a couple guys staring at me, their eyes menacing. A chill went down my spine.

Rogues. Were they part of the ones who chased us all in the forest?

I cursed internally as the realization hit me: it wasn’t just normal wolves who were here to challenge Xavier, there were definitely Rogues here too.

I wanted to cling tighter to Xavier, but resisted the urge. I couldn’t look weak in front of these people. I held my head up as we walked, ignoring the glares and keeping my distance. My ears rang with Greyson’s warning: I *was* Xavier’s weakness. If they killed me, it would kill him too.

Just as I thought things couldn’t get any worse, I heard a shrill shout. “Xavier!”

I groaned internally, knowing exactly who that voice belonged to.

“Hey Xavier!” Pip said, pushing past people to get to him. She looked the same as always, still tall, and fit, and beautiful. Bitch. “I’m so glad you could make it!”

“Well, I couldn’t miss my own Lupo Finale, could I?” he said with a grin. “How are you doing, Pip? Glad you and the rest of the Blue Bloods could make it.”

“Oh, come here,” she said. She was opening her arms to pull Xavier into a hug when she finally noticed his arm around me. “Oh, it’s you again.”

I bit my tongue, glaring at her. *Be cool, Cali*. *Be cool.*

Pip gave me one last look before turning back to Xavier. “You brought your human friend? Do you really think that’s the best idea? Things can get kind of crazy here. You know that.”

Friend? *Friend?* Was this bitch kidding me? Oh, it was so fucking on.

I moved to make a step toward her, but Xavier held me back by squeezing me tighter to him. Dick waffle. He wasn’t even saying anything to correct her.

“My name is Caliana, by the way, which I’m sure you remember from the barbecue,” I said. “My name is not ‘human’, and certainly not ‘friend’. It’s Caliana, got it?”

Pip blinked, then started to respond.“I—”

“And secondly, I can take of myself,” I said. “I’m not some kind of trophy Luna.”

Pip laughed. I did not care for that, at all. “Right,” she said. “You’ll use your spatula to defend us all. I should warn you now, that probably won’t do you much good here. But you never know.”

I glared at her. Suddenly, I was hoping that I *would* turn into a wolf with the full moon. I had a list of people I wanted to eat, and she’d just made it to the top.

“Come on! We’re all staying over there,” Pip said, pointing to campsite on the edge of the clearing. “Your pack should join us! There’s plenty of space.”

*Fuck. No.*

I looked over at Xavier and shouted loudly in my mind: DON’T SAY YES, DON’T SAY YES. I DON’T LIKE HER. Maybe I’d suddenly developed the ability to send him messages, like Greyson somehow did with me. Or maybe he’d be able to hear the messages I was sending him because we were mates. I didn’t like Pip, and I ESPECIALLY didn’t like that Pip and Xavier had some kind of past together. Even if she claimedthat they had ‘no sexual past’, I could *feel* they had some kind of history, and I didn’t care for it.

“Thank you so much, Pip,” Xavier said with a grin.

Asshat.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could feel Greyson smirking. For a second, I wondered if he’d heard me mentally chiding Xavier.

As we followed Pip, I bit my tongue to keep from groaning at how lame this whole situation was. I didn’t like the girl, but I was smart enough to realize that insulting a wolf-bear around here wasn’t the smartest move. I knew from experience.

As we moved through the crowd I could feel everyone’s eyes on me. As I passed, I heard the words ‘human Luna’ coming from their mouths. I was only too happy to have Xavier’s arm wrapped around me, giving me a touch of protection.

I looked around as we entered Pip’s area, getting a good look at our temporary neighbors. I cursed Xavier silently, wishing that we’d gotten our own private area. It would’ve made me feel a tiny bit safer, instead of being out in the open with all these werewolves who could turn on us at any second. Hell, they were even doing sparring practice, like they were waiting for us to fail.

I watched them spar for a moment, envious over the cool moves that they could do. I trusted Xavier’s ability in a fight, and I knew he was good, but what about *me?* I couldn’t kick my way out of a paper bag, let alone do half of what those guys were doing. How the hell was I going to fend off Rogues when Xavier wasn’t with me?

And why the hell had he brought me here without even thinking about that!

I pulled myself out of Xavier’s grip. He glared at me, clearly annoyed. “What is it now?”

“I cannot believe you dragged me here without teaching me how to fight.”

“I *dragged* you here?” He gaped at me. “You have to be fucking kidding me with this shit, Caliana.”

“Well, that changes now,” I said, ignoring him. “You are teaching how to fight werewolves. And honestly, the fact that you didn’t teach me months ago is borderline appalling. Maybe if I’d learned how to fight, I wouldn’t have had to use a stupid spatula and people wouldn’t be laughing at me.”

“Oh my god, will you calm down?” he asked. “Don’t embarrass us.”

“I can be a lot more embarrassing than this and you know it.” I crossed my arms. “Teach me how to fight. I’m not going to ask again, Xavier.”

“Why do you want to learn *now?*”

“Because I am surrounded by wolf-bears, and if they decide that they want to take a bite out of me while you’re in the ring, I’m totally fucked. I need to learn some kind of self-defense, and you already know how to fight. Can’t you just teach me a few of the basics? You know, just so I don’t get my *head bitten off?*”

“First of all, no,” Xavier said. “You’ll just hurt yourself. And even if I wanted to teach you, I can’t. I don’t have time for your dumb bullshit right now.”

“That’s not fair!” I said, stomping my foot. I didn’t even care if other people could see us—I was scared. “You brought me here, and now I feel like I have a bullseye on my forehead! There was one in the forest!”

Xavier’s eyes grew dark. “Let’s get one thing straight. You *begged* me to let you come. Do you think anyone fucking *wanted* you here?”

“Are you *serious* right now?”

“Uh, guys?” Colton said, tapping on Xavier’s shoulder. “Not to break up this very public fight you’re having, but Mace wants to talk to you.”

“Thanks, I’ll be right there,” said Xavier, then he turned back to me, his expression stern. He pointed at me. “Stay,” he said firmly, like he was speaking to a poorly behaved puppy.

I opened my mouth to yell more things at him, but he and Colton were already gone. Asshats, both of them.

“HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO DEFEND MYSELF?” I shouted after him. What a lost cause and now we were in a stupid fight.

“I suppose I could be of service.”

I turned to face Greyson, who was leaning against a stone wall, a smirk on his face.

“Don’t worry about a thing, love,” he said. “I can teach you everything you need to know.”

**Episode 165**

“Don’t you ever just say ‘hello’ when you greet someone, instead of sneaking up on people and listening to their private conversations?” I asked Greyson, hands on my hips. He’d shaken me a little by his abrupt entrance.

He seemed amused by my stance, chuckling to himself in a way that I did not care for. Nothing that was happening was actually funny.

“It’s more fun this way,” he teased.

I shot him a look of pure annoyance. “Don’t you have to go be obnoxious somewhere else?”

He shrugged. “Not until later.”

“Well, buzz off. I have bigger things to deal with than you trying to pull your silly little mind games on me. In case you forgot, my mate’s life is at risk.”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Are you *sure* Xavier’s really your mate?”

I gaped at him. “What kind of fucking question is that? See, this is what I’m talking about! You’re always trying to mess things up between me and Xavier. You are a *horrible* older brother.”

Greyson seemed unfazed by my rant, only shrugging. “Just calling it as I see it. It’s not my fault I’m highly observant.”

“And just what are you observing?”

His silver eyes looked up and down my body—I knew he was doing it to get a rise out of me, but I covered myself anyway. I didn’t like how red I could feel my cheeks getting. He smirked. “All I’m saying, love, is that if I had a mate—a *human* mate—I wouldn’t leave her to defend herself. I’d make sure she knew how to fight, especially when she was surrounded by enemy wolves. But that’s just me. You two seem like you have everything under control. I can tell by how well you two communicate.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he cut me off. “Nope, you’re right, I shouldn’t be butting in on your relationship. Just trying to help. Maybe you’re just more comfortable facing hundreds of Rogues with nothing more than your bare hands. Who am I to judge?”

I looked around, seeing the crowds of bloodthirsty wolf-bears. If I weren’t human, this wouldn’t be an issue. As a wolf-bear, I’d be on equal ground. As a human, I was fucked.

But could I trust Greyson?

I turned to look at him again, watching him yawn. He’d saved my life countless times, but was that enough?

It was gonna have to be.

I sighed. “You’re right.”

He smirked. “You just said my favorite phrase, love.”

I rolled my eyes, already regretting even considering accepting his help. “Don’t make me regret this.”

“So, is that a yes?”

I nodded. “Show me what you’ve got.”

That sounded way dirtier than I’d meant it to.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Don’t be naive. We’re not going practice out here in the open where anyone can see us.”

“Why not?”

“Do you *really* want people to realize how truly helpless you are? You’d be painting an even bigger target on your back.”

“If you think I’m going to go somewhere with you in secret, you have another thing coming. I’m not as stupid as everyone likes to believe.”

“Yes, jumping out of a window was clearly the move of a genius,” Greyson said, deadpan. “Look, just meet me over by that salt wall in a half hour. If you’re even a second late, I’m leaving you to fend for yourself,” he said.

I opened my mouth to argue, but he sauntered off, going to do what goodness knows what. Briefly, I wondered if I’d just made another huge Cali mistake, but at this point I didn’t have any other options. I wasn’t about to stay here like a sitting duck waiting for some big dumb man to save me. I was going use a different big dumb man to teach me how to fight. Goodness knows I should’ve been doing this earlier…

I started to head in the direction Greyson had indicated, figuring it’d be safer to get there early than risk being late. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Big Mac climbing out of a small tent.

Wait—BIG MAC WAS HERE?!

Suddenly, I remembered what Mrs. Smith had said about the ointment and my weird gross wound. If I was able to get the ointment, it’d be one less way to die for me to worry about. Quickly, I pushed through the crowd, waving my arms wildly at Big Mac, who was still dressed in her maxi dress and one of her many shawls. I breathed a sigh of relief—it was nice to see a friendly face.

Big Mac’s eyes met mine and she waved back, using her other hand to beckon me closer. I hoped she had croissants.

I’d almost reached Big Mac’s tent when a hand grabbed my wrist and pulled me back. For a moment, I panicked, worried that it was some Rogue—or worse, Pip.

Luckily, when I turned around, it was only Mrs. Smith. “I wouldn’t go in there if I were you.”

“No offense, but *you* don’t have to go in. You said yourself that Big Mac is the only person who has the medicine I need. I have to go in,” I told her, shaking off her surprisingly strong grip and charging into Big Mac’s tent.

I gasped as soon as I entered. I’d expected it to look like a small vendor’s tent, like I’d seen at the Minnesota state fair—not a whole freaking store! Along the walls were shelves of goods for sale, and a bar stocked with moonshine. A freaking moonshine bar? How the hell was that even possible?

Witchcraft. Definitely witchcraft.

“Cali!” Big Mac greeted me with a large smile, pulling me into a hug. “It’s so good to see you. How was your journey up here?”

We broke apart, and I saw her smile start to fade.

I turned to see Mrs. Smith had followed me inside. She looked around the tent with distaste. “MacKenzie,” she greeted curtly.

Big Mac looked just as displeased to see Mrs. Smith, folding her arms over her chest. “Sabine.”

*Sabine?*

I looked between the two of them, puzzled. There was definitely a vibe in the air, but I couldn’t totally place it. “How do you two know each other?” I asked.

My question was ignored, both women too busy shooting death glares at each other.

“What are you doing here?” Big Mac said. The tone of her voice was pure ice.

“Trust me, MacKenzie, I’m not here to look at your tacky goods and watered-down moonshine. I’m only here because I promised Xavier that I’d keep an eye on Cali while he was gone. Nothing more.”

Her words did nothing to soften the sour look on Big Mac’s face. “Cali is a grown woman—she doesn’t need a keeper. Especially someone like you.”

I liked Big Mac.

“So if you know what’s best for you, keep out of my way,” Big Mac said.

“Well, if you stay out of my way then there won’t be a problem, will there?” snapped Mrs. Smith.

Big Mac and Mrs. Smith continued to bicker, getting on my very last nerve. Take it outside ladies, we had bigger fish to fry right now. Like me not dying from a Rogue wound.

“Hey!” I shouted, trying to get their attention. “Helllooooo!”

Still nothing.

“OH MY GOD, PAY ATTENTION TO ME I’M IN A BIT OF A CRISIS OVER HERE!” I yelled at the top of my lungs.

*That* got their attention.

Big Mac took a deep breath and looked at me. “I’m sorry, Cali. What is it that you need?”

I cleared my throat. “Uh, some special ointment if you have it?” I said, pulling the shirt off my shoulder and revealing my bandaged bite wound. The leaves were already starting to leak through.

Big Mac’s eyes went wide. “Goodness, what happened?”

“I got bitten by a Rogue werewolf on the way here. My friend—well, he’s not really my friend, but Xavier’s evil-ish, kind of nice, we really can’t tell if I’m honest, half-brother, Greyson—sucked out the poison and licked it. But it’s not as gross or sexy as it sounds.” I said, even though it had actually been kind of both those things.

“A Rogue wolf bite?” Big Mac said concernedly. “How deep was it?”

“I don’t know, but it hurt really bad for days afterwards. It still does.”

“Hmmm. Well, if Greyson sucked out the poison, it should be all right. I know a lot of people *overreact* to such things. Turning everything into a crisis,” said Big Mac, shooting a pointed look at Mrs. Smith who scowled.

“Let’s see what we’re working with,” Big Mac said. “Sit down, Cali.”

I sat down in the chair that Big Mac indicated, and she slowly removed the bandages and leaves. I gritted my teeth as she peeled off the leaves, feeling the pain roar back, worse than before. Tears welled up in my eyes and I squeezed my hands into fists.

I looked to see Big Mac’s eyes grow wide with concern, covering her mouth as she said, “This is bad.”

**Episode 166**

Panic shot through my body at Big Mac’s words. *This is bad?* What the hell did she mean by that? Were they going to amputate my whole arm? Maybe they’d give me some kind of cool robotic arm? I’d definitely have a better chance of fighting off wolf-bears if I had a robotic arm with a mallet attached to it. Or some steel spikes. Perhaps both. Hopefully Xavier would splurge and get me both.

*And* I was overthinking again.

I looked over at Mrs. Smith, who was staring at my wound.

“I thought you said the leaves were supposed to make it better?” I demanded. I didn’t want to think that Mrs. Smith would *intentionally* poison me, but I couldn’t really trust *anyone* these days. Even ladies who always gave you discount mochas could be suspicious.

“They did make you feel better, but I told you the leaves aren’t a cure,” Mrs. Smith said, a touch defensive.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Pffffttt, and what do you know about cures, Sabine?”

“I didn’t know you had such a cool name, Mrs. Smith,” I said.

“What, did you think ‘Mrs. Smith’ was my first name?”

“No,” I said. “Just the ‘Mrs.’ part.”

I did not appreciate the look Mrs. Smith was giving me. But I did appreciate Big Mac’s laugh. It was a JOKE PEOPLE.

“Can I call you Sabine?” I asked, hoping I could get on a first name basis with her. I had helped to save her life and all. Well, kinda.

“You can call me Mrs. Smith.”

Guess we weren’t as close as I’d thought. I really should’ve made her that tea.

“Okay, but what about this gross thing on my shoulder?” I said, pointing at the wound. “Can either of you fix it?”

“Let me see what I have on hand,” said Big Mac. “I did bring a handful of supplies in case things get messy around here, which they most certainly will.” She went over to a drawer and started to search, pulling out various tinctures, ointments, gels, and potions—all things I definitely hadn’t seen in any average drug store.

“She needs iuniperorum ointment,” said Mrs. Smith, also looking at the medicine she was pulling out.

Big Mac glared at the other old woman. “I know what she needs. I don’t need help from someone like you.”

“Someone like me? Oh, you’ve got a lot of nerve for someone who—”

“Oh my god, can you *please* stop acting like children? I’m in kind of a situation here!” I shouted. Seriously, I could have dropped dead right then and there, and they would’ve kept arguing. Alex’s little brother Leroy was better behaved than these two.

The women quickly shut up. Thankfully.

“Oh, here it is,” Big Mac sang out, pulling out a yellow tube. “I should warn you now, Cali, it’s going to burn.”

“Yes, everything around here involves pain, I’m aware,” I said, deadpan. “I can handle it. When haven’t I been able to?”

My brave act lasted all of five minutes after she rubbed the ointment onto my body, when the pain hit me like a ball of fire. It wasn’t as bad as when Greyson had licked the poison out, but it felt very similar. I gritted my teeth and tried very hard not to scream.

“This doesn’t just burn, it fucking hurts like hell!” I said.

Mrs. Smith scowled. “Watch your language!”

“Well, it fucking hurts! I’m sorry!” I said.

Big Mac shrugged. “I did try to warn you.”

Fair enough. “Okay, fine. But so after this burning stops what’s going to happen to me? Am I going to grow fur? Canine’s grow in? What?”

The look that passed between Big Mac and Mrs. Smith did not inspire a lot of hope and comfort in me.

“Okay, spill it,” I said. “What aren’t you two telling me this time?”

“We just aren’t sure, Cali. It’s as simple as that. We’ll have to wait and see what happens,” said Big Mac.

“Wait for what?” I said hesitantly.

“For the full moon, of course,” said Mrs. Smith. “Fortunately, you don’t have much longer to wait.”

“Yeah, you’ll either be healed, turned into a wolf, or…” Big Mac trailed off.

“Or…?” I questioned. “Please tell me that ‘or’ ends with ‘have beautiful skin and healthy hair’?”

“Or… die,” Big Mac finished, not meeting my eyes.

“DIE?!” I cried out, my eyes bugging out of my head. “Why the hell is ‘die’ still on the table? I did everything I was supposed to do to eliminate that option. I got the fang juice sucked out, I got the gross old leaves, I did the burning ointment! And you’re telling me dying is still an option?!” Had I seriously gone through all that pain—this entire *journey*—just to drop dead on the full moon while my mate fought for his life? That was totally unfair.

“Well, doing all that reduces the risk of death, but there is still a risk. And if it makes you feel better, wolf bites don’t usually end that way, anyhow,” said Big Mac, with a comforting smile. “In fact, since Greyson applied his saliva, I’d say your chances of dying are down to about twenty percent.”

I knew that she’d said that to make me feel better, but my jaw dropped at her words. Seriously, what was wrong with these people?

“Twenty percent?” I screeched. “Are you freaking kidding me? I got twenty percent off my last pair of Tevas, and that was a LOT. Is there really nothing else we can do?”

I knew I was acting frantically, but they weren’t behaving much better before. And how was one SUPPOSED to react to this kind of news? Oh gee thanks Big Mac so glad I could learn that werewolves existed and then die not even a month later. Just send my parents a fruit basket, it’s cool.

“Relax, dearie,” said Mrs. Smith, taking my hand. “You’ll probably be okay. Just try not to worry.”

Why was everyone telling me to not worry? Didn’t they know the first rule about worrying was 1) Worry more whenever told not to?

“No offense, Mrs. Smith, but saying that I’ll ‘probably be okay’ is not as comforting as you might think.”

“I guess, but can we go now?” she asked. “I don’t want to stand in this house of horrors for a second longer.”

“Yes, we’d better get going. I’ve got some stuff to do,” I said, keeping it vague. I couldn’t have Mrs. Smith tailing me to my training session with Greyson. She’d blab about it to Xavier, and that would be a whole extra headache for me to deal with.

I needed to find some way to ditch them both. But that would be difficult—Mrs. Smith was very fast.

We were turning to exit the tent when Big Mac called out to us.

“Sabine?” She grabbed Mrs. Smith’s shoulder and pulled her aside. “I think we need to talk.”

Bingo! Now was my chance to escape.

Quickly, I slipped out of the tent and hurried away as fast as my legs could carry me. Briefly, I wondered what the bad blood was between Mrs. Smith and Big Mac. What had made them hate each other so much? Had they gotten into a fight? Had it been over a guy? I hoped they’d become friends. It would be nice to get my croissants and white chocolate mochas at the same place. Plus, they were both my magical adult figures in all of this—I couldn’t have them fighting.

But the Big Mac/Mrs. Smith feud would have to wait. I had bigger things to worry about. Speaking of, where the hell was I?

I looked around wildly, past the crowds of werewolves. It was getting darker now, and I was all turned around. I looked for the salt wall, but couldn’t remember what direction it was in. I cursed myself quietly, why hadn’t I actually looked where I was going before I ran into Big Mac’s tent? Ugh, I should have had Greyson draw me a map to the salt wall.

Walking, I looked desperately for some kind of sign, trying to avoid anyone murderous—Rogues and otherwise. I wanted to ask for help, but I didn’t know who to trust. Any one of these wolves could easily take advantage of me, sending me somewhere so they could get me alone and kill me. I was Xavier’s mate and who knew how many people had it out to get him? I’d seen it done in countless cheesy horror movies, and it never ended well.

Well, that wasn’t going to happen to me. I wasn’t going to be the silly girl at the start of a horror movie who makes a stupid mistake and gets murdered by the serial killer before the opening credits even finish rolling. I wasn’t going to be a helpless victim anymore. I was going to make myself into a fighter if it was the last thing I did.

Comforted by my newfound determination, I headed in what I thought I was the right direction—and ran right smack into someone.

“Watch it asshole!” a familiar voice shrieked.

Maya*.*

**Episode 167**

Never in my life had I thought I’d be so happy to see Maya. Sure, she might have been in the same group of wolves who wanted to murder me. And it was true that she wasn’t a ‘friendly’ face. But she *was* a familiar one. And it was better to meet a murderer that you knew than a murderer you didn’t know. Or something like that.

“Maya!” I cried out, pulling her into a tight hug—another thing I’d never thought I would do. “I’m so happy I ran into you! How are you? Are you okay?”

“The feeling is *not* mutual, so get the hell off me,” she said, shoving me away. “God, I’m shocked you’re still alive after all your *high*-jinks.”

“Did you just make a pun?”

She looked even more pissed off than usual. “I re-joined my pack to escape you and here you are again. Just leave me alone. I don’t have the time or the patience to talk to a human right now. Or ever.”

Yup, still the same old Maya.

“I don’t have time to argue with you, either. I have to go to the salt wall, wherever that is,” I confessed, still feeling all turned around. Why didn’t they hand out maps here? It would have made everything easier. Even just a simple ‘you are here in the magical underground cave-forest’ map, like they had at the mall.

She raised an eyebrow at me. “Why? Getting some salt to rub in Xavier’s wounds?”

“Oh my god, why are you so damn annoying? No wonder Colton is constantly pissed off at you. You can be a real dick!”

Maya’s expression softened at the sound of Colton’s name. “Colton? Where is he? Have you seen him around?”

I couldn’t help but smirk at her concern. “Why? Have you been looking for him?” I asked. “Looking to find a new way to betray him?”

She bristled. “No. Don’t be ridiculous. I’m glad to be rid of that stupid loser.”

“He’s with Xavier,” I told her. “Colton took him to meet up with Mace.”

Maya shrugged. “They’re probably talking about the rules. But whatever, I actually don’t care.”

Ooookay sure. Silence fell between us as I tried to figure out how to phrase my next question.

“Sooooo…” I started. “What’s the deal with you and Colton? Pre and post-betrayal.”

Maya rolled her eyes with dramatic flair. “Oh my god, you really need to get it through your thick skull? Like I told you a million times, there *is* no deal between me and Colton.”

“Yes, you’ve saidthat many times. But I *saw* the look between the two of you, before you ran off with your pack.”

Maya scoffed, but if I didn’t know any better, I swear she was blushing. “What look? You were high on Shrooms and have a very active imagination. The look you saw was *actually* one of disgust.”

I crossed my arms and looked at her. “And what about the hot springs? The tongue wrestling of hate? You can deny the hot springs or you can deny the look, but you can’t do both. It’s still burned to the inside of my eyelids. You’ve got it bad. Both of you.”

Maya glared at me. “I can deny whatever the hell I want.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes, not wanting to piss her off without anyone around to defend me. Still hadn’t had those lessons yet, had I? “Just admit it, Maya and get it over with. I know we aren’t ‘besties’ or even close to friends, but I understand what you’re going through.”

“How could you *possibly* understand what I’m going through?”

“Because I understand how complicated it is to be with an Alpha. Especially one in *that* family. So what happened between you two in the woods?”

Maya looked at me for a long minute, and then she sighed. “You’re not going to stop until I tell you, huh?”

“Nope,” I said, popping the ‘P’. I was waiting for her to hurl another insult at me, or lie, or just storm off. Much to my surprise, her expression softened.

“I ran off to find my pack. I knew they were coming to the Lupo Finale, and I knew they’d take a similar route to ours. And I could just *feel* that they were near. Colton caught up with me and we started to fight. Like *really* fight. It got pretty bad, to tell you the truth. Then he finally got a hold of me, and we were inches apart and…”

“And?” I said, on the edge of my seat waiting for her to finish.

“And… I almost kissed him,” she admitted. Blush bloomed across her face. It was so weird to see her like this. We were actually having girl talk! Keep calm Cali and don’t ruin the mood.

“Almost?” I gasped out. “*Almost?* You didn’t actually lock lips?”

Maya rolled her eyes. “Don’t use that phrase. And no, we didn’t. I don’t even know why I wanted to kiss that stupid jerk in the first place. It was just something that felt really right in the heat of the moment. Like my body was telling me one thing and my head was telling me another.”

I nodded, knowing exactly how it felt. That was what it had been like when I’d been alone in the woods with Greyson, right after he’d sucked the poison out of me. Every fiber of my being had been screaming at me to kiss him, even though my head had known it was a stupid idea.

“So what happened next?”

“Nothing. I stopped it.”

I looked at her, confused. “Why?”

Maya shrugged again. “I don’t know. I came to my senses, I guess. Colton didn’t push me, and we both kinda just stood there. It was extremely awkward. So we came back to you guys.”

“But what about now? Colton’s here. Are you going to see him? Talk to him?”

“I don’t have time to think about Colton now. I have to focus on the Lupo Finale. Which is what I was planning on doing right now—at least until some loser decided to have fucking girl time with me,” she said, pushing me out of her way.

“Wait!” I cried out. “Who do you want to be with: Colton or Nolan?”

“Girl time is over, and we are never doing it again. Goodbye stupid human!” she said, waving me off as she disappeared into the crowd.

Shit! I should have asked her where the salt wall was.

Well, it was too late to worry about being late now. I walked in the direction I thought the salt wall could be. Greyson had warned me not to be late, and I couldn’t have one more person mad at me today; my anxiety wouldn’t be able to take it.

As I walked, the crowd started to thin out, making me uneasy. It was easier to stay hidden in a crowd, but I stood out when I was by myself. I wrapped my arms around myself, very conscious of the bullseye painted on my head. My eyes darted toward every little thing that moved, until I finally saw a tall, rocky structure glistening in the moonlight.

The salt wall!

Relieved that I was approaching somewhere even remotely safe, I ran to it and found Greyson leaning against it. He turned and grinned when he saw me, his grey eyes sparkling. I couldn’t help but return the smile, even though I didn’t know why I was happy to see him.

“There you are. I was getting worried about you,” he said, checking his watch. “But you’re right on time. Ready to learn how to be a stone-cold killer from the best?”

I couldn’t tell if he was teasing or not. Instead, I stood my ground. “I don’t want to kill anyone. I just want to learn to defend myself so no one *kills* me.”

“Details,” he said, shrugging.

“So what should I do?” I said. “Do I assume some kind of ninja stance? Do I get wolf-bear nunchucks?”

Greyson shook his head in amazement, laughing. “What do you think this is, *Karate Kid?* Did you really think I was going to teach you some kind of martial art?”

“Uh… Yes?”

He shook his head. “You’ve seen too many movies. Luckily, you have me.”

“Yes, I’m very lucky I have an accused pack murderer on my side. The universe has truly blessed me,” I deadpanned.

“Hey, that’s *handsome* accused pack murderer.”

Oh, just shoot me.

I put my hand on my hips and shot him a look. “Okay, god’s gift to the werewolf world, how are you training me to protect myself? Thumb wrestling? Maybe a rousing game of rock paper scissors?”

“Oh, I was thinking something a little more modern. I know how you love your weapons. You know what this is, don’t you?” he growled, an evil smile on his face.

In a flash, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver pistol, aiming it right at me.

**Episode 168**

Welcome to another episode of: *Cali Makes A Big Fucking Mistake*. This episode will include Greyson and his special guest: a goddamn gun.

*What the hell?* I cursed, looking down the barrel of his pistol. I should’ve listened to Xavier when he told me Greyson couldn’t be trusted. I was such an idiot, and now I was going to pay the ultimate price for my reckless decisions: my life.

Great, this was just freaking peachy. Who was going to explain my death to my parents? Probably no one. I’d be just like Tony: torn up into ribbons, or just lost in the woods—forever. And as my parents grieved the loss of their only child, they’d recall how I was never any good at camping.

I hadn’t thought I’d die in an underground forest, shot with a gun. Whoever had bet on this outcome in the Cali dead pool was going to make a lot of money.

I held my hands up like I’d seen in so many cop shows, and closed my eyes. “All right, you win. Go ahead and do it already. Stop torturing me and get it over with.”

I braced for the impact of the bullet… But nothing happened.

I cracked open my eyes and saw Greyson smiling, his grey eyes wide with surprise. The pistol was the exact same shade of gray as his eyes.

“I must admit, I’d hoped for a little more fire out of you, love. Isn’t the great spatula warrior going to fight back? I didn’t think you of all people would lie down and surrender.”

He had a point. I said I wasn’t going to sit around like a lame duck, and this was my chance to prove it. And, honestly, taking on an armed Greyson wouldn’t even be my dumbest idea this week.

With his encouragement, I lunged at him.

In only occurred to me in hindsight that it was pretty stupid to lunge at someone who was holding a gun.

Greyson chuckled and sidestepped me before I made contact with him—or the gun. I tripped over my feet and crashed headfirst into the salt wall.

Pain shot through my skull, hitting the same place I’d landed on when I’d jumped out of the window. I cursed as the world spun.

I tried to stand up but I was too dizzy, and I fell back onto the ground.

Yup, that was gonna hurt in the morning.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Greyson’s smiling face inches from mine. He might have been a major asshole, but he *did* have a great smile. Both of those seemed to run in the family.

“Did you honestly think I was going to shoot you, Cali?” he asked, his voice soft and gentle.

“It wouldn’t have shocked me,” I said, rubbing my forehead.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “The gun’s not even loaded.”

I sat up. “It’s not? Why?”

“Well, for starters, you’re not exactly the most coordinated human I’ve ever met. In fact, most toddlers have better fine motor skills than you do.”

“Rude.”

“*Accurate*. So, putting a loaded gun in your hand? Not a very prudent move.”

I used what was left of my strength to get up and face him. “You are such a bastard, do you know that? Saying you’re going to help me, then using the time as a private session to mock me? You can be so cruel, sometimes. What am I supposed to do with an empty gun? Go around waving it at people?”

“When has that stopped you before? While I admit that it would be amusing to watch you wave a gun around like some kind of cowboy, I was serious when I said that I’d help you,” he said. “You’ll get the bullets *after* we do some target practice. Trust me, I’m more scared of the idea of you with a gun than you were of me.”

That made me smirk. “Fine. Give me the gun,” I said, holding out my hand. What was the worst that could happen?

He looked at me skeptically, which pleased me. “Have you ever fired a gun before?”

“Not unless you count that time at the county fair when I played that water game where you shoot water into a clown’s face and try to blow up a balloon before the other players. I wasn’t very good at that game, either—I ended up shooting water at the carnie.”

Greyson sighed deeply. “Little life tip: when someone asks you a yes or no question, answer with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. Do not give them your whole bloody life story.”

“I was providing context,” I said. “Some people appreciate it.”

He sighed again. “Maybe we shouldn’t start with a gun after all.”

I nodded. “That’s fair. What if I lose the gun? Or drop it? Or miss? Or do all three at the same time?”

He thought about it. “Valid point, love. You’d probably shoot yourself by mistake. Or me. And I have such a pretty face.”

I rolled my eyes. “Dork.”

“You also have a pretty face,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to see it ruined.”

I looked down, feeling a blush coming on. Talk about whiplash: making me fear for my life one minute and blushing down to my toes the next.

“How about a few hand-to-hand techniques?” he asked.

I grinned, excited. “Now we’re talking! What are we doing? I’ve seen a lot of action movies, so I think I have a good grip on the basics,” I said, jumping up and down with excitement.

“Again, this isn’t the fucking *Karate Kid*. And if you do not stop your bouncing, I will load this gun and fire it, and I’m not sure whether I’ll be aiming at you or at myself.”

I stopped bouncing.

“Now who’s the dramatic one?” I teased. “Okay, show me what you’ve got.”

“All right, stand right here,” he said, pointing to a spot on the ground. I walked to it, and he started to circle me, rolling up his long sleeves. I couldn’t help but notice how toned his arms were. He looked like he’d done a million pushups. I bet he could do pushups with me sitting on his back…

*Focus, Caliana.*

“Now, suppose someone tries to grab you like this.” He reached out and grabbed my wrist tightly, squeezing it ever so slightly.

“And…?” I said. We were so close now, only a few inches away from each other. I needed to keep ignoring those arms.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “*And* how do you get away? What would your first move be in this situation?”

I thought about this for a moment. How hard could it be to escape Greyson’s grip?

Harder than I’d thought, apparently. I spent what felt like ages trying to pull my wrist away from him, but the more I pulled the tighter he held on, until I was just flailing around, trying to get away from him and going nowhere.

“Congratulations love, you’ve found the perfect way to get your wrist broken. Now, let me show you how it’s done. Here, take my wrist. Hold onto it as tight as you can, okay?”

I did what he asked and held onto his wrist, using as much pressure as I could. In a split second, he moved his arm with a certain twist and was freed.

“See? You have to twist your arm. Let’s try again.” He took my wrist, and I tried to repeat what he’d done did. *Just twist*, I told myself.

But instead of twisting my arm, I twisted my whole body, sending myself tumbling to the ground.

“That was a very good first try,” he said, helping me to my feet.

“You don’t have to lie to me,” I grumbled. “I know that was crap.”

“Okay, it wasn’t the best move I’ve ever seen,” he said. “But the key is confidence in your abilities. And practice. Let me show you again.”

I took his wrist, and he slowly showed me how he’d pulled out of my grasp.

“*Ugh*! Why is this so hard for me?” I cried out in frustration. “I just want to do this right! It’s basic shit!”

“You’ll get it right, Cali,” he said softly. “You’re learning, you’ll get it.”

“Grab my wrist, I want to try again,” I demanded.

“As you wish,” he said, grabbing my wrist again.

I twisted my arm and spun, tripping over my own feet. Greyson moved to grab me, but I ended up pulling him down with me. We both fell to the ground with a thud.

“Okay, that time was not so great,” admitted Greyson. His face was only inches from mine as we breathed heavily, sweat dripping from our bodies. The smell of his skin surrounded me, overwhelming. How could anyone smell so good?

“That was a close one,” I breathed out. “We could have gotten seriously hurt.”

Greyson’s eyes looked deep into mine as he cupped my cheek with his large hand. I was about to say something else when his lips moved toward mine…

**Episode 169**

Greyson’s lips were hovering above mine. Just one slight movement from either of us, and they’d be touching. My heart was pounding so hard, I thought it was going to burst. But was it out of fear… or desire.

*Is he going to kiss me or what?* The thought startled me, but was quickly replaced by a warm, tingling sensation that vibrated through my entire body. It was like standing in front of a cozy fire on Christmas morning; warm and anticipatory.

I tried desperately to cling to reason: Xavier, the Finale, the fact that were out in the open. But reason jumped out the freaking window as soon as I gazed into his steel-colored eyes, pulled in by a magnetic force that was greater than myself. I couldn’t have looked away if I wanted to. I could feel his hot breath on my skin, clouding my senses and raising goosebumps on every inch of my skin. The world could have burned down around us, and all I would have cared about were those eyes, that strong muscular body pressed against mine, and our heartbeats coming together in perfect sync.

I could have stayed like this forever

“Is this what you want, Caliana?” Greyson asked in a husky whisper, causing a shiver of desire to run down my spine. One of his hands were still holding my wrist, and the other was cupping my face.

The sound of his voice jerked me back into reality. The gravity of the situation shook me to my core. I was the mate of a future Alpha. I should be with my mate as he prepared for the fight of his life.

This was not my mate.

So why couldn’t I say no?

I opened my mouth will the full intention of telling him to get the fuck off me. But nothing came out. Only a gasp of air.

Greyson’s gaze hardened at my lack of response. “I thought so,” he said darkly. He took his hands off me and pulled away.

When he put that distance between us, I felt a pang of something that I couldn’t quite name. Loss? Pain? Need? I didn’t understand, but I couldn’t dwell on it; I needed to think of Xavier and the Lupo Finale.

And almost kissing your mate’s evil half-brother was not a good look for a future Luna. Or just a regular human…

Greyson’s eyes looked away from mine and moved to my shoulder. His lips tilted down into a frown, and he looked concerned.

“What’s wrong?” My voice came out breathless after such close contact, and I felt my cheeks heat up with a blush. *Be cool, Cali.*

Greyson sat up, reached out, and gently touched my shoulder where I’d been bitten. “Your shoulder. Does it hurt? Is it itchy? How do you feel?”

“What?” I asked, blinking in confusion. What sort of question was that? How did I feel? Where the hell did I even begin?

*Wait,* I thought, my brain starting to come out of its almost-being-kissed fog. He was talking about my shoulder. So many things had happened at once that I’d almost forgotten completely about my wolf bite.

“Oh yeah. It feels fine. Why?” Without being conscious of it, without really realizing what I was doing, I reached out for Greyson, to touch his face. What was the deal with the moon-shaped scar on his face?

I wanted to know. I wanted to know everything about him.

But he pulled away.

“You’re getting a rash,” he said simply, standing up.

Mood: killed.

Well, I wasn’t going to put up with this shit. Especially from the Rogue wolf who kept dropping into my life.

“Are you saying that to scare me, or are you just trying to avoid talking about what just happened?” I asked. I wasn’t gonna let him almost kiss me and get away with it. He couldn’t pretend nothing had happened—he wasn’t that cool. Okay, maybe he was a little. But not to this extent!

He offered a hand to help pull me up. “You should have that bite looked at.”

I rolled my eyes at him. Classic werewolf move, changing subjects like clothes. I took his hand anyway, feeling the same tingling sensation from before. The exact opposite of the revulsion I’d felt at Xavier’s touch when I’d been high as a kite.

I. Hate. Feelings. Especially the kind you’re not supposed to be having in the first place.

*Stupid jerk,* I thought bitterly, standing up. Where the hell did he get off, having this affect on me? Giving me a major case of the feels when he knew damn well I was in love with his brother? It wasn’t right, and neither was the fact that I was feeling so drawn to him. I wished I could make it stop with the snap of my fingers. Maybe Big Mac had something that could do it.

“Okay, real talk: are you using Rogue mind control powers over me? Because if you are, you’d better knock it off,” I warned him, one hand on my hip.

Greyson only laughed, the sound filling the dark air giving me goosebumps. “You have your paranormal romance creatures mixed up, love. Vampires do mind control, or so I hear. We shift. And growl.”

“Are you a vampire, too, then? Like a vampire-wolf-bear hybrid?” Hey, I could see it. He was pretty damn pale.

He shook his head ruefully, a small smirk on his lips. “Why do you insist on adding to that dreadful nickname?”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“*You* need to get your shoulder checked out,” he shot back.

I rolled his eyes. “I already did that and the jury’s out. It’s just a waiting game now to see if I’m either a wolf or dead. I’d feel better if there were a REAL doctor around here, instead of all this herbal witchy nonsense. Mrs. Smith put some magic leaves on the wound, and then Big Mac put some weird ointment on it that burned like hell.”

Greyson shrugged. “Maybe you’re having an allergic reaction?”

I glared at him. “Maybe I *am* having an allergic reaction. To you.”

He gaped at me, his expression torn between shock and amusement. “*Me?* What, you’re allergic to good looking men? My condolences. I can see why you picked the least handsome of my brothers.”

“First of all, *Colton* is the least handsome of your brothers.”

“Good point.”

“And second, every time you’re around, something happens to me!”

He smirked at that. “Have you considered that maybe that’s just you? Things tend to just happen to you, whether I’m around or not. You’re quite the oddity, love.”

“Rude!”

He shrugged, looking at his watch. “We should head back.”

“Wait, what about my training? I haven’t mastered the wrist thing!”

“There’s no time now.”

I put my hands on my hips. “You tricked me!” I accused. “This was a ploy to get me to spend time with you!”

He grinned. “Is that what you think, love? Is that what you wanted?”

I scowled at him. “As if.”

He laughed. “In any case, your friends will make sure nothing happens to you.”

I looked at him. “What about you?”

“Oh, Cali, I didn’t know you cared,” he teased, his silver eyes glittering.

I snorted. “No, I mean are you going to protect me?”

He chuckled, moving closer to me. His long fingers brushed the hair out of my eyes, then he cupped my cheek. “When have I *not* protected you?”

Goosebumps erupted across my skin as we stood, our eyes locked. My skin felt like it was on fire. I couldn’t move away from him. I didn’t know if I wanted to.

Then, the moment passed.

Greyson pulled away from me, looking into the distance. “In any case, you have Xavier for that. You don’t need me,” he said gruffly.

I blinked, and he was walking away. I watched him go, fuming. Who the hell did he think is was? Acting so… *mysterious,* all the damn time. Never giving me a straight answer—just like everyone else in that damn family.

I huffed all the way back to the camp, the itch on my shoulder burning as I walked. Finally, the urge became too great, and I started to scratch.

*Okay*, I thought. *Itching is good. Itching is healing. It can’t be as bad as Greyson made it out to be. I’m sure it’s fine.*

I pulled my shirt to the side and glanced at my shoulder.

*Shit*.

I gasped, my eyes widening in horror. The wound itself was looking okay, but a bright yellow rash that was starting to spread outward from the healing wound, in a circular pattern. It looked oddly familiar. But what…

Double shit.

I began to feel sick as I continued to look at it, realization hitting me like a ton of bricks. The rash looked like the craters of the moon.

*Moon…*

My whole body froze. I had to be turning into a werewolf.

**Episode 170**

Oh no. This was not good. Like, very very not good. Horrible, even.

I was turning into a werewolf, and I didn’t have another outfit to change into if these clothes ripped.

Fuck!

“EXCUSE ME! GET OUT OF MY WAY PLEASE!” I hollered, pushing past people on my way back to the Redwood pack camp, earning a few glares and snarls. Okay, this was not gaining me any Luna points with the other packs, but I’d worry about that later.

“Lola!” I said, as soon as I reached the camp. I ran straight to her tent and found my best friend sitting on the floor, eating ramen. Where the hell had she gotten ramen?

“Lola!” I gasped out. “It’s happening!”

She did not look as concerned as I’d hoped. She didn’t even stop eating her ramen. “*What’s* happening? The Lupo Finale isn’t until tomorrow.”

I rolled my eyes. “You know, there are other things in the world that do not revolve around the stupid Finale!”

She narrowed her eyes and slurped noodles loudly. Then, mouth full, she asked, “Like what?”

“Like this!” I pulled my top to the side to side, revealing my wound. “What is this, Lola? What’s happening?”

Now Lola stopped eating her ramen. Her eyes went as wide as poker chips as she stared at the moon rash. “Whoa, it’s like a sweet tattoo. Maybe I should get one.”

Again, not the reaction I’d been hoping for.

I shot her a look, holding out my hands. “Are you serious right now, Lola? This is not cool! This is not even kinda cool! This is scary! What if it spreads all over my whole body! What if I turn into a werewolf? And turning is probably super painful, and maybe even *deadly!* What if I start to shift right in the middle of the Lupo Finale? What if my bones start breaking?”

Sure, I’d thought about becoming a werewolf, but I hadn’t wanted to do it right this second, when I wasn’t in a safe space. When I wasn’t even sure what the hell was going to happen to me. Or to Xavier. I didn’t want to be vulnerable—it would only negatively affect him.

“Okay, breathe,” said Lola. “You’re doing the overthinking thing again.”

“Something tells me this is the perfect time to overthink,” I said, feeling the urge to tear out my hair.

“Have you spoken to Big Mac about this?”

“I did before, and this has to be a result of whatever she did to it. Though she said I had like a twenty percent chance of death the last time I saw her,” I said bitterly. “Anyway, I only noticed something was wrong because of Greyson.”

Lola’s eyes grew even wider. “Greyson? What were you doing with him?”

“I love that I just told you I have a twenty percent chance of dying and you only care about Greyson.”

“Cali, your probability of death is *always* at twenty percent. Maybe even higher.”

I sighed. “He was supposed to show me how to defend myself, but I think he actually just wanted to kiss me.”

“Shut up!” Lola gasped. “Did you do it?”

“Of course not! I’m a one wolf kinda gal!”

“But were you *going* to do it?”

“Um, didn’t you say that I should kiss him?”

“Yes, but I didn’t think you’d actually *try to do it*. Girl, you’re crazy.”

I gaped at her. I hoped I *did* turn into a wolf right now because I was going to eat her face for all the stupid bullshit she put me through. “Then why the *fuck* did you tell me to do it?”

Lola shrugged. “I don’t know. I couldn’t think of anything else to suggest.”

“You are a horrible friend.”

“But you *love meeeeeee,*” she sang out.

Yup, I was totally going to eat her face.

“Despite your horrible relationship advice, I didn’t kiss him. But that’s on the bottom of my list of concerns right now.” I pointed to my shoulder. “*This* is at the very top of my list.”

“Well, let’s go talk to Big Mac again. Maybe she has something else that can stop your overthinking.”

Hopefully. She did seem to have a lot of potions and ointments and stuff in that tent…

We walked out of Lola’s tent and headed over to Big Mac’s, trying to find our way in the dark.

SMACK.

I walked right into someone’s firm chest. I looked up to see my very angry boyfriend looking down at me, his lips in a tight line.

“Hey babe,” I said sheepishly, trying to back away.

“Where the hell have you been?” he asked. Other people stopped to stare at us.How many people had to witness our fights?

“I wasn’t gone very long,” I said.

“I asked you not to go anywhere, Cali! How hard is it for you to follow directions? Why can't you do one single thing I ask?”

This would be the absolute worst time to tell him about the whole Greyson thing. He was mad enough at me already. If I told him I’d been hanging out with his half-brother, who he’d told me to stay away from, who knew what might happen.

Then there was the dream. I couldn’t distract him when he was so close to the Finale.

“I went to see Big Mac,” I began.

“So you disobeyed me?”

*Oh, hell no.* I may have be close to tears, but my mother had not raised me to bow down to men yelling me in public because I ‘disobeyed’ them.

“*Excuse me*?” I asked, feeling my fire coming back as I crossed my arms over my chest. “*Disobey* you? If you must know, I had to see Big Mac about my shoulder. I needed medicine so it doesn’t get infected or worse.”

Why was he acting like this? My heart was racing from the adrenaline of the fight. I had to take care of myself the only way I could.

“You don't get to talk to me this way, Xavier,” I continued. “I don't know what kind of Lupo Finale bullshit is going on with you, but I’m your *girlfriend*, not your fucking pet Yorkie. You don’t own me and you don’t get to speak to me this way.”

Xavier grunted, but notably didn't apologize. He did soften his tone as he said, “You can’t just walk around here like it’s the Minnesota State Fair, Cali. This place is dangerous.”

“Do you really think I’m that stupid?” I asked. “I’m still learning about all of this, Xavier, but trust me, I get it: werewolves are dangerous. But If I don’t get my shoulder fixed, I could die in case that's something you're invested in or anything.”

Instantly, his expression softened. “Your shoulder still hurts?”

“Yes. And your attitude hasn't helped me feel any better.”

Anger was replaced with regret in his eyes. “Cali,” he breathed out. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t—”

“We need to get her to Big Mac,” Lola interrupted.

“I’ll go with you,” Xavier volunteered, moving forward as I backed away. I didn’t want to be anywhere near him—I needed some serious space right now.

“It’s fine. Lola can protect me,” I said.

Xavier opened his mouth to say something else, but he was cut off by Colton, who’d just walked over. “Come on, Xavier. You need to light the flame and put on the golden amulet.”

*Golden amulet?* I wanted to ask about it, but Lola pulled me away.

Maybe it was for the best if we didn’t talk for a while.

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Lola and I hurried over to Big Mac’s tent, my body hurting more with every step. My bones were aching, my head was throbbing, and my rash itched more than ever.

“I think it’s happening,” I gasped out. “My bones hurt really bad, and I feel like my hair is getting longer.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “You’re overthinking again. Nothing can happen until the full moon, okay, Cali?”

“I know my body, and I know how it feels,” I said. “And it feels like shit.”

“You could worry yourself into growing wings if you wanted, with your overthinking. And FYI, if you *do* start shifting, your bones won’t ache like a headache—they’ll just suddenly crack. You won’t have *time* to think about it. It’ll just happen.”

“Yes, I forgot, you’re an expert on wolf bites,” I said. “Is that what you taught you in that first aid class? I’m a *human* with a *werewolf bite*. Anything fucking goes.”

“Well, you don’t have to panic about that because we’re here,” Lola said, coming to a stop in front of Big Mac’s tent.

We entered the tent to find Mrs. Smith and Big Mac sitting inside, having a cup of tea. You could cut the tension with safety scissors.

Normally, I would have been all over the drama, but this was a life or death situation. “Hey so, uh, I'm shifting!” I cried out.

Both of them looked at me like I just had fur coming out of my ears.

Mrs. Smith shook her head. “No, Cali. That’s how it works.”

“Well what about this?” I said, pulling my shirt to the side. I swallowed hard as both Mrs. Smith and Big Mac exchanged a look of concern.

“See? I told you it was bad.” I said, “Can you help me? *Please*?”

“That depends,” Big Mac said coldly, putting down her cup of tea. “I’ve been doing a lot for free lately, and I’m not doing anything else until I collect the debt I’m owed.”

**Episode 171**

Not to say ‘I told you so’ or anything, but if I’d learned one thing from fairytales (human fairytales, not that werewolf nonsense), it was that if you made a deal with a witch, you were gonna end up screwed. Big time.

I remembered what Mrs. Smith had said while we were hiking. *Big Mac doesn’t do anything without a price.* I guess she’d been right, but I hadn’t thought we’d be stuck with the bill.

But to be fair to Big Mac, she had provided us with food, shelter, and medical attention for Lola, so she did deserve some form of payment. And the fact that Jay and the boys had left without paying was majorly shady. But how were you supposed to pay a witch?

“All right, we’ll pay you. Do you take MasterCard? Venmo?” The one good thing about having a rich boyfriend was using his money to get out of situations. Though, if my boyfriend was such a millionaire, wouldn’t he have paid earlier? Odd.

Big Mac gave me a funny look. “What on earth are you babbling about?”

I huffed in frustration. “Don’t tell me you only take bitcoin? That would seriously be a dick move.”

Big Mac scoffed. “I don’t accept anything as trivial and meaningless as currency.”

Wow, she was really leaning into the whole hipster, free-spirit wasn't she?

“Well what’s the debt then, if you’re too cool for cash?” I asked.

She turned to Lola, a look of amusement and fake concern on her face. “Didn’t your mate tell you?”

Lola’s face twisted in confusion. “Tell me what?”

“Oh, don’t be so cruel, MacKenzie,” said Mrs. Smith. “They’re just kids. Haven’t you learned not to play with your food by now?”

“Yeah, I’m a grown ass adult. Not a kid, and definitely not a piece of food. Please treat me like one,” I demanded. I was so sick and tired of people either keeping secrets from me or treating me like I didn’t have a brain in my head, and Big Mac was doing both. She’d just lost her position as my role model.

“Oh dearie, please don’t overact. It’s not a good look on you,” Mrs. Smith said gently.

Mrs. Smith was well on her way to losing her role model position, too.

“But what does Jay have to do with this?” Lola pressed.

Big Mac gave her a cruel, cold smile. “It’s all fun and games… Until someone loses an eye.”

Okay, I’d had just about enough of these damn riddles. “What the hell are you talking about? What does this mean? My arm is about to start orbiting something, and you’re talking about *eyes?* If you start speaking in Latin, I’ll burn this whole place down.”

“Oh, Caliana, please calm down. You’re not about to turn into a wolf. Not yet, anyway,” said Mrs. Smith, with a weary sigh.

“Yes, that last part is really comforting, *Sabine*,” I snarked. Frustration was consuming me, gnawing at me like teeth.

I turned back to Big Mac. “Look, whatever Jay owes you, he’ll pay it. I’m sure of it. But right now, *what about my shoulder?* It’s really starting to hurt. I’ll do a payment plan.”

“Forget your shoulder!” Lola said. “Tell me about Jay. What does he owe you?”

Yup, that was my best friend for you. More interested in her boyfriend’s debts than my possible death. But it was extremely weird Jay hadn't told Lola about anything… He was one of the good ones. The one who answered some of my questions in a timely fashion. And now he had secrets too?

Big Mac smiled again. “It’s quite simple, really. I’m a witch. Your mate asked for a favor, and he promised me something in return. Understand?”

“No!” Lola said. “You haven’t answered my question.”

At the same time I said, “HA! I totally knew it. Everyone called me crazy, but *I knew* you were a witch! Do you have a broomstick, or do modern witches use, like, scooters or something?”

Big Mac scoffed at my question. “A longboard is more my style, sweetie. But no. Whatever you think you know about witches, you don’t. So please don’t waste my time babbling about black cats, or cauldrons, or warts. They’re awful stereotypes.”

*Did I really just get sassed by a witch who looks like she should be on the cover of Vogue: Elegant Hoarder Edition?*

I groaned internally. All I’d wanted to was sell my virginity and take care of my mom. Now I was turning into a werewolf, getting yelled at by my boyfriend, and talking to a witch. Maybe I’d spent the last few months high on Shrooms, and this all actually just a weird trip that I’d come down from soon. Honestly, I’d probably prefer that.

“So, do I owe you something too, for putting that shitty painful ointment on my shoulder? Because I don’t remember signing a contract with you. Or promising you my first born, or some shit.” At least, I hoped I hadn’t.

Lola turned to Big Mac. “What does Jay owe you?”

Big Mac shrugged as she stirred her tea—like we were talking about the weather and not Jay’s potentially horrible fate. “Perhaps you should ask your mate. Good communication is the cornerstone of any good relationship. Keeping secrets from your girlfriend is always a terrible sign. Makes you wonder what else he’s hiding, doesn’t it?”

Preach, sister.

Lola threw her hands up, annoyed. “What? Are you gonna charge me for that gold nugget of relationship advice too? Just tell me what I actually want to know!”

“No, the advice is free, honey. Maybe you should take it,” Big Mac shot back. “In any case, I don’t like to reveal the terms of my dealings to outside parties. It’s a witch-client thing.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Are you for real? That can’t be a real thing. Is that like attorney-client confidentiality?”

Lola groweled at Big Mac, her teeth bared. I was worried she was about to shift right then and there. “Listen, you witch bitch—if you don’t tell me what’s going on, then I’m going to tell every Rogue here that you’re creating a potion that will make them lose the Finale,” she hissed.

I’d always admired the balls on Lola—even if this stunt was totally going to get us killed by a witch.

“Oh, MacKenzie, just tell them already!” said Mrs. Smith. “Can’t you see that they’re scared out of their minds? You’ve had your fun, making yourself seem like a big deal, but stop playing games. This is borderline cruel.”

Big Mac glared at Mrs. Smith and huffed. “Don’t tell me what to, Sabine. It’s not my fault that I’m more powerful than you. And more successful. I can do whatever I want,” she said, flipping her hair back.

“Goddess, you can be so childish sometimes. Once a bully, always a bully. If you made a deal with Jay, *out with it*.”

They stared daggers at each other, the tension between them filling up the whole room. Oddly enough, it reminded me a lot of Colton and Maya’s relationship. Where they’d say horrible things to each other, but couldn’t be apart (and clearly still wanted to make out). Big Mac and Mrs. Smith had just had a screaming match, but they were still sitting there, drinking tea. There was a connection there that I didn’t understand.

*What was going on between those two?*

But I couldn’t focus on the drama right now—no matter how juicy it was. Jay owed Big Mac a debt, and until he paid it I was shit out of luck. And the stupid rash was really itching, now.

Ugh, I would’ve given anything to see a real doctor.

“I don’t know what Jay promised you, but you can just forget it!” Lola said. “He never would have made some stupid deal with you in the first place. You clearly want something else from us and are using him to lie.”

Big Mac narrowed her eyes. “You shouldn’t speak of me in such negative terms.”

“And you shouldn’t be butting into my business, or my relationship!”

“If I hadn’t butted into your life and Jay hadn’t made that deal with me, you’d be dead.” Big Mac said, her tone low and intense. “He saved your life. So instead of getting angry with me, why don't you give me a big thank you for doing the job he asked me to.”

The severity of her words stopped all of us. It was completely quiet for a moment, the tension weighing us all down.

“Please, Big Mac,” I ventured. “We’ll pay the debt for Jay, if we can. How big can it be? What’s so important and secretive that you can’t tell us? His wolf? His first born child?”

“She is *NOT* getting that!” Lola shouted. I quickly reached to hold her back from lunging forward.

Big Mac smirked to herself as she sipped her tea, clearly enjoying the spectacle. “Oh, it’s nothing much, really. Just his right eye.”

**Episode 172**

Well, that was unexpected.

“I’m sorry, did I hear that right?” I demanded. “Did you just say Jay owes you his *eye?* His right eye?”

No, that couldn’t possibly be true. Big Mac was a witch, but she said a lot of the stereotypes weren’t true. This seemed to not fall into that spectrum.

“Or his left eye.” Big Mac shrugged. “I’m not particular. Either one will do. All eyes look the same out of the socket.”

Lola’s jaw dropped. “You are out of your fucking mind, lady! There is no way in hell I’m letting my mate give you one of his eyes!”

“It’s not your decision to make,” said Big Mac. “It wasn’t then, and it isn’t now. Jay knew exactly what he was agreeing to when I created the potion that saved your life. I’m a fair woman. I don’t put any small print or hidden terms in my contract, like other witches. I told him upfront what I wanted, and he was willing to pay. But he *does* have to pay. I’m nobody’s fool. And *no one* gets out of their debt to me once the ink has dried on the contract.”

“What did the contract say, exactly?” I asked. “‘Give me your eye and I’ll save Lola’?” I *knew* we shouldn’t have trusted her. A friend of Maya's was an absolute disaster for the rest of us.

Big Mac just smiled. “Yes, something like that.”

Lola was shaking now, tears threatening to spill out of her eyes. “Well when is he supposed to give you his eye? Why didn’t he tell me?”

“Hey, after the way you spoke to me when I tried to give you relationship advice, I’m not going to get into that. What your boyfriend tells you or doesn’t tell you is not my concern. And as for when, the sooner the better. Like, right now would be good,” Big Mac said coldly.

“Why the hell do you even *need* an eye? Are you just going to pluck it out?” I asked, trying to block the image from my mind before I hurled all over the place.

“OH MY GOD, WILL YOU SHUT THE HELL UP? THIS ISN’T FUCKING ABOUT YOU, CALI!” Lola seethed at me, shouting at the top of her voice.

I blinked at Lola. Her words stung. A lot. I was trying to help her figure out what this situation was… A lump was forming in my throat, and I tried to swallow it down. Fine, if she wanted it to be like that, I’d never say a word to her again.

“Uh, girls? You might want to step outside for a minute,” said Mrs. Smith. “I’ll have a talk with MacKenzie and see if we can’t sort things out.”

“Oh, hell no,” I said with a hollow laugh. “You’ll probably make a deal that means Xavier will have to give you his nose or his dick or some weird shit.”

Mrs. Smith just rolled her eyes and ignored me as she turned to look at Big Mac. “Why do you want the young man’s eye, MacKenzie? That’s really old school. Even for you.”

Big Mac only glared at the other woman, straightening her back and holding her head high as she took another sip of her tea. “I will not discuss my reasons with these two here—or with you, for that matter. It’s absolutely none of your business. *Any of you,*” she said, giving us all a pointed look.

“Um, for your information, *everything* is my business. Especially when it concerns me or my friends. What my pack does is my responsibility.”

Everyone looked at me.

“Little life tip for you, kid—stay out of everyone’s business, you’ll live longer. And look less stupid,” Big Mac said, finishing up the last of her tea. “Okay, my tea is gone, and so is my patience. I want the two of you out,” she said, pointing a long, sharp looking manicured finger toward the door. This was not the sweet, kind, croissant-making witch I’d met a week ago.

“But—” I started.

“No buts. Get out before I turn you both into newts.”

“MacKenzie!” Mrs. Smith gasped. “Don’t say that!”

I gaped at the witch. “What the hell is wrong with you? Are you seriously threatening us with curses right now? For asking a few questions?”

Lola’s face was a bright red, and the vein on her neck started throbbing. For a moment, I was afraid Lola was going to get so angry that she’d shift into her wolf form and get stuck again. Then I remembered that Lola had yelled at me, and that I really didn’t care what happened to her right now.

“How can you do this right now?” she asked, hateful tears running down her face. “Don’t you have a fucking heart? How can you do this right before the finale and with all these Rogues around? Jay needs both his eyes or we’ll be slaughtered!”

Mrs. Smith turned to Big Mac. “She does have a point, MacKenzie. Can’t you wait until the Finale has been decided? Do you really need the eye right now?”

“Hmm, let me think,” Big Mac said, twirling her hair. Yeah, I could *totally* see how she and Maya were acquaintances.

“Fine, I’ll come collect my payment at the end of the Finale,” she said. “But don’t you dare try to avoid it. What is done cannot be undone. Jay knows what he did and why he did it. Besides, you can’t break a contract with a witch.”

Lola was practically shaking with fury. She got up in Big Mac’s face. “If you ever touch my man again, I will rip your throat out, you bitch.”

“Keep it up, little girl,” Big Mac said in a cold, calm voice. “I’ll make sure you shift into something worse than a wolf.”

Oh this was not going to end well.

Mrs. Smith turned to me. “You’d better get her out of here before someone really gets hurt.”

I sighed deeply and broke my vow to never talk to Lola again by getting behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist, lifting her up, and all but dragging her out of the tent as she kicked, screamed and hurled insults.

“IF SHE TOUCHES JAY I’LL MANGLE HER!” she screamed, when we were safely out of Big Mac’s tent. “I’m going to burn that witch's tent down to the ground!”

“Everyone’s staring at us,” I gritted out.

“I don’t give a shit! I’m gonna rip Big Mac’s throat out! Maybe I should shift right now and do it!”

“First of all, that’s a stupid idea. What if you don’t shift back? Big Mac can’t make you human again if her throat is missing. And it’ll cost Jay another eye to fix you again. And secondly, if you kill Big Mac what’s going to happen to me?”

Lola huffed as we walked back to our camp. “Oh my god, will you shut up about this already? You’ll either turn into a wolf or you won’t. Either way, you’ll still have both your eyes.”

“Lola, there’s two things happening. Of equal importance. Jay’s going to lose an eye or I could die. We don't need to pick and choose here!”

“OH MY GOD! SHUT UP ABOUT DYING! NOT EVERYTHING IS ABOUT YOU, CALI!” Lola screamed at me.

I should have kept my vow of silence.

“Look.” I turned to face her again. “I’m sorry. I wish there was something I could do, but it seems like Big Mac really wants Jay’s eye.”

Lola growled at the sound of his name. “I’m just so mad at him! Why would he agree to such a stupid thing? His *eye?* Idiot!”

“Was it stupid?” I said. “Yes. But it was also amazingly romantic if you think about it?”

I wondered if Xavier would do the same thing for me. Would he give up his eye for me? Some days. I felt like he wouldn’t give up a cent for me, much less an eye.

Lola rolled her eyes. “It’s only romantic if you’ve lost your damn mind. He should have discussed it with me first. I mean, it’s a decision that affects both of us, and we should have made it as a couple! Ugh! Men are assholes.”

“I know what you mean. I wish Xavier had talked to me about the Lupo Finale before invoking it,” I mumbled, still very bitter about the whole thing. “But—not to take his side or anything—I can see Jay’s point. He was really worried about you. He didn’t have time to make other arrangements. And it’s not like he could have talked to you about it—you were a wolf and passed out! You couldn’t speak. And if he hadn’t made the deal, you would have died.”

I looked over at Lola to see real tears flowing from her eyes. “But I don’t want Jay to do this. I don’t want him to lose an eye for me. How I am supposed to live with the fact that he made that kind of sacrifice for me? He might not have to see it every day, but I will!”

“But you’ll still have him, and he’ll still have you,” I said. “It’s an eye. It’s a nice to have human body part, but not necessary.”

Lola kind of nodded along as we walked. We were near camp, now. I could see all the guys standing around a picnic table: Xavier, Colton, Greyson, and Jay. I thought we were doing OK and she hadn’t really noticed them until she took a run for it.

“BASTARD!” Lola shouted, running toward Jay before I could grab her. She stormed right up to Jay and slapped him hard across the face. “You have some explaining to do!”

I winced. That was gonna leave a mark.

**Episode 173**

Colton burst out laughing when Lola pulled away from Jay. “Damn! She really went for it! *Burn!*”

I glared at him. “Will you shut the hell up and stop being a jerk for once in your life?”

“Doesn’t seem likely.”

“You’re a dick,” I said.

Neither Lola or Jay were laughing. Jay was holding his face, where a large angry red mark was already starting to show. Lola was standing over him, her whole body heaving, seething with anger. I’d never seen her like this before. Really, I was pretty terrified.

“YOUR EYE? YOU PROMISED THAT WITCH BITCH YOUR FUCKING *EYE?* WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU, JAY?”

Jay eyes widened as he opened and shut his mouth several times, unable to say more than “I—”

“YEAH, YOUR FUCKING EYE! DID YOU THINK I’D NEVER FIND OUT?”

“I can explain, Lola.”

“What the hell is going on?” Xavier demanded. “We have to prepare for the *Et Murmur Flamma*—we don’t have time for this bullshit!”

Just what all of this needed: more Latin. I wasn’t even going to ask what the hell it meant.

“It’s not bullshit, but it’s good to know how much you care about your friends and your pack. Can’t you think of anyone but yourself?” I shot back at Xavier, still upset about how he’d treated me earlier.

Xavier rolled his eyes. “What did Jay do? Forget their anniversary or something?”

“No, Jay made a deal with Big Mac—who IS a witch by the way, so ‘told you so’—to give her his right eye in order to save Lola’s life, and he hasn’t paid up yet, and now she’s coming to collect what’s hers.”

Xavier’s expression changed from annoyed to furious in five seconds flat. He immediately shoved past Lola and punched Jay on the other side of his face. “You made a deal with a witch? You made a deal with a witch AND DIDN’T PAY?” he howled. “Do you understand the gravity of this situation? You could bring the wrath of a witch down on our entire pack. During the most important fight of my life!”

Jay glared at Xavier, standing up to his full height. He shoved Xavier away from him. “What the hell do you *think* I did? You think Big Mac saved Lola for free? You know how witches work—you don’t get something for nothing!”

“But did it have to be your eye?” I questioned. “Couldn’t you have offered her something else? What’s wrong with giving her a new broomstick? Or an Etsy gift card? You know, something that doesn’t involve losing an appendage!”

Jay continued to stare down Xavier, who was still glaring at him. “I did what I had to do to save my mate. I knew full well what I was agreeing to. Wouldn’t you have done the same for Cali?”

I held my breath, waiting for his answer. But none came.

Instead, it was Greyson who spoke. “While this all very charming, there *is* a ring starting to form. You have the amulet, dear brother—you need to start the opening ceremony, since you were the genius who invoked the Lupo Finale in the first place.”

Xavier glared at Greyson. “Don’t tell me my duties,” he growled out. “I’m fully aware of what I need to do.”

“Well then do it.”

They glared at each other for a moment longer. I couldn’t help but notice the increased tension between the two of them. Had Greyson said something about what had happened between us at the salt wall?

I shook the thought out of my head. Greyson was many things, but he wasn’t a rat.

“So what are we going to do about Jay?” Lola demanded. “How are we supposed to return from the Finale if he’s recovering from losing an eye? Especially if something happens during the Finale and he gets injured.”

“Don’t worry,” I assured Lola. “Big Mac said we don’t have to do anything until after the Finale. Hopefully we’ll think of something by then.”

Jay just shrugged. Both sides of his face had hand prints on them. “I’m honestly not that worried about it, to tell you the truth. Thor looked pretty badass with an eye patch.”

Lola stomped her foot and groaned loudly. “NOT EVERYTHING IS ABOUT THE HEMSWORTHS!”

“Uh, it kinda is. They’re like, crazy hot,” I said.

Jay nodded in agreement, which only made Lola angrier.

“Lola, I'm sorry baby that I didn't tell you. I didn’t know how to. Are you really that mad?” Jay leaned over and kissed Lola's cheek. “Don’t worry, it’ll be okay.”

Lola shoved him off, fire in her eyes. “Don’t try to kiss and make up with me, mister. You can sleep by yourself tonight! I’m sleeping with Cali!”

Wait, what?

“Uh, no. I need my beauty sleep and I’m not having a threesome with you!” There was no way three people could fit in our tent, and I was pissed at Xavier and kinda mad at Lola. I didn’t want either of them in my tent, to be honest, but at least Xavier wasn’t a blanket hog like Lola.

“Besides, it’s Xavier’s last night before the Finale, and he needs me to be there for him, and…” My voice and thoughts trailed away when I saw Greyson out of the corner of my eye, a sly smile on his face that made my heart skip a few beats.

*Not my mate, not my mate,* I reminded myself sternly.

“Come on, let’s go!” said Xavier. Then he turned to me and gently took my hand.

My heart swelled momentarily and I squeezed his hand. I was grateful for the distraction as we headed off towards the *Et Murmur Flamma*, the rest of us following.

Was I still a little pissed at Xavier for how he’d treated me earlier? Yes. Did I feel like the fucking Queen of England walking up to the *Et Murmur Flamma* with everyone looking at us like we were royalty? You bet. Still, I wished Xavier had told me to dress up a little. If I’d known so many people were going to be looking at me, I would have worn something better than old jeans and a shirt with a stretched-out neck.

Still, my pride shifted to dread as we approached the gnarly tree from my nightmare. Where Greyson had killed Xavier, and it had been my fault. I shuddered as I passed it, squeezing Xavier’s hand.

*No*, I told myself sternly. *That won’t happen. I won’t let it.*

He squeezed my hand in return. “I'm sorry about earlier, Cali. You’re right, I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that,” he said, his voice low.

“Thank you,” I said. He might have been a jerk sometimes, but he was *my* jerk.

A crowd had started to gather in full, forming a large circle around the tree. They cleared a path for us as Xavier walked with confidence, like he’d been born to do this.

I was just hoping I didn’t look like an idiot.

Xavier led us to the center of the circle, near the tree where a pyre had been laid out before us.

I didn’t like the look of it. What the hell was he going to do with that thing, anyway?

I was about to ask, but then I noticed where I was. We were totally surrounded by Rogues.

Yeah, maybe I’d be better off just staying silent. The Rogues hadn’t exactly been taken in by my charming personality yet.

Colton appeared next to his brother and handed him a gold dagger, the handle covered in the most beautiful jewels I’d ever seen. They sure hadn’t gotten that at Zales…

My eyes went wide when I saw it, my stomach dropping. “What the hell is that for?” I whispered, my heart beating wildly. “Are you going to sacrifice me?”

Yup, I’d known this was going to happen. There was no way a hot guy like Xavier would put up with my bullshit unless he needed to use me for something, and here it was: a human sacrifice.

At least I’d gotten laid before my untimely death.

Xavier shot me a look. “No. And will you please step away before this starts? A *safe* distance, Cali."

He tried to let go of my hand so I could step back like he asked, but I clung to him for dear life. I was so scared. I didn’t know what was going on. Why did he need the knife? What was it for? Our hands released one another and Xavier stripped, revealing a gold amulet that was hanging around his neck.

“Take care of her, Pip,” Xavier said, pushing me lightly away from him.

I fell backwards into a pair of strong arms. I looked up to see Pip holding me. “Come on, Cali, I’ll get you to a safe place to watch.”

I opened my mouth to speak but Colton glared at me, giving me a look that clearly said

‘if you say one word, I will throw you onto that pyre and light it’.

And even I wasn’t dumb enough to challenge that. Not went the stakes were that high.

Instead, I allowed myself to be escorted away by Pip, my eyes never leaving Xavier. He raised the dagger above his chest.

**Episode 174**

I watched in terror, my entire body frozen as Xavier sliced open his palm with the blade. A trickle of crimson blood dripped down his bare arm, making me sick to my stomach. I was immediately very grateful that werewolves healed so fast. But why the hell did he have to cut his palm? What was even going on?

For a moment, I wanted to scream. Scream at the top of my lungs for him to stop. Scream out that this whole thing was stupid, and that we needed to leave. That he never should have invoked this stupid death match, and we could still back out. That he didn’t have to be an Alpha. That I would still love him if he wasn’t.

But I didn’t say a thing. What was the point? He wouldn’t have listened anyway.

Xavier held his bloody hand over the pyre and said, in a loud, commanding voice: “I, Xavier Evers, of the Redwood pack, am the one who invoked the Lupo Finale. I hereby call forth the flame of the forest to spark a new beginning.”

Flame of the forest? What was that?I felt my eyebrows knitting together in confusion at Xavier’s words. Was this another metaphor that I was supposed to unravel? Why couldn’t these people speak plainly?

I turned to Pip. “Flame of the forest? What does that mean?”

Pip had opened her mouth to say something when my ears were flooded with a high-pitched screech. I quickly covered my ears and bent down, desperate to escape the shrill noise that was threatening to explode my ear drums. I looked around to find the source of the terrible sound only to see that everyone was acting normal, like nothing had happened.

“Can’t anyone else hear that?” I tried to say over the noise. I saw Pip’s lips moving, but I couldn’t make out a word she was saying. What was wrong with everyone? Couldn’t they hear it?

Finally, the sound receded into a whisper.

Above my head, brightly colored lights began to appear from the forest, circling high, swirling around like rainbows against the pitch black sky. It was one of the most beautiful things I’d ever seen.

Wait, was I having another mushroom episode? That would certainly explain the strange noises and the trippy light show. Honestly, I wouldn’t put it past any of these Rogues: if they couldn’t maul me outright, I wouldn’t be surprised if they tried to poison me instead. Or maybe Big Mac had cast a spell on me. The possibilities were endless.

I felt something touch my hand, and I jumped. What if it was one of those scary creatures? Or a Rogue?

I looked and saw it was just Pip, pulling my hands from my ears.

“Don’t be afraid,” she told me. Finally, I was able to hear her. “They won’t hurt you.”

*They? That weird ass stuff in the sky is a living thing?*

“They? Who’s they? What are they?” I asked, new fear beginning to rise in me. Great, what could we possibly add to this mix that we didn't already have?

Pip smiled at me. It was the kind of smile a mother gave to a young child who’d just asked a dumb question. “They’re the wisps. Please lower your voice, you don’t want to disturb them.”

Honestly, if a dragon flew out from the forest at that moment, I wouldn’t have been surprised. I was almost expecting it at this point.

“Great, another weird magic thing,” I mumbled, rolling my eyes.

You’d think someone at this point would have warned me about all the magical critters that would be popping out at this thing. Between Xavier, Colton, Jay, and Lola one of them could have told me about this. Someone could have easily mentioned there’s things called wisps. Or the fact that Xavier’d have to cut open his damn palm and put it in a FIRE. I mean, we’d been hiking for three days and he hadn’t even mentioned a single detail about the ritual. I’d only been high for one of those days. Why couldn’t he tell me anything? So I wouldn’t worry? And he wondered why I got so anxious all the time.

Pip glared at me. Apparently, I was testing the very last of her patience. “Please just shut up and watch—in silence. Don’t ruin the magic.”

Gosh, if I had a nickel for every time someone told me to shut up, I’d be able to afford medical care that didn’t come from a witch’s tent. Boy, that would be nice.

I turned as the wisps began to descend toward the pyre in steady stream of movement, like a wave crashing onto the shoreline. It sounded like a thousand tiny voices were whispering all at once. There was certainly nothing magical about the headache I was getting.

*Focus, Cali,* I told myself, trying very hard to concentrate on what they were saying. What *were* they saying, anyway?

*“Calianaaaaaaaaaaaa…”* one of the voices called out, and then another, and another. Soon, they were all chanting my name. *Caliana, Caliana, Caliana…*

I’m sorry, what?

Immediately, I began to cold sweat. There had to be a logical explanation for what I was hearing, which was hundreds of small magical beings saying my name. It made no sense. But I knew I wasn't high again (thank *god*) so what explanation did that leave?

“They’re calling me,” I said to Pip. “Do you hear them saying my name? Why are they calling me?”

Pip rolled her eyes, clearly not thrilled that I was still talking. “Why would they be talking to you?”

Oh, this bitch…

“Do you think I’m making this up?” I asked. Where the hell did she get off, basically calling me a liar to my face? I might have had a *tiny bit* of an overactive imagination, but I was usually right.

And oh my god, couldn’t these voices just shut the hell up already? If they kept talking, I was going to start screaming.

But before I could open my mouth to say anything else to Pip, the first of the wisps reached the pyre and disappeared into a spark with a small pop. Soon the rest of the wisps became sparks, until…

BOOM!

The pyre burst into flame. As the fire erupted, all the voices suddenly stopped as quickly as they’d started, blanketing the crowd in a strange silence. My ears rang and I looked around to see if anyone else had reacted to the explosion. The area was jammed with werewolves and Rogues, but not one of them had made so much as a peep.

It made me uneasy.

My eyes were drawn back to the fire, watching the growing flame. So the wisps had gathered to create the fire… If I’d been on better speaking terms with Lola I’d ask her why. Maybe they were part of the forest that we were in and the ritual was to thank them. Either way, I found myself completely mesmerized by the flames of the fire. It was pulling me in and holding me there, almost against my will.

It took great force to pull my transfixed gaze from the fire and onto Xavier, who raised the dagger again, holding the blade to the flames.

*How does he know how to do this?* I pondered, watching him in fascination. Had he learned this somewhere, or was it Alpha instinct—something he knew deep in his bones?

And then I almost slapped my forehead as the answer came to me: his father. Of course. His dad was an Alpha, and had brought him to the Lupo Finale as a kid. No doubt Xavier had seen all too much at those, especially when he was so young. Xavier must have learned how to do all of this from him.

I shuddered at the thought, at the memory of Xavier telling me that story. All the men he’d watched his father kill. How he’d hoped that his father would lose.

In that moment, my heart ached for him. I wondered how he was feeling right now, knowing that, in some ways, he was walking in his father’s footsteps. Did that bother him? Did it scare him? I needed to know.

Except Xavier would never tell me a damn thing.

So I just watched helplessly as Xavier pulled the blade out of the fire. It was bright red and smoking.

*What is going to going to do with… Oh my god!*

I gasped in terror as Xavier pressed the burning hot blade against the palm of his hand. The hideous sizzling sound of his melting skin shook me to my core, worse than the sounds of the wisps. I wanted to throw up, I wanted to faint.

I wanted to kiss him so hard he’d forget how badly his hand must hurt.

Xavier held out his palm to the crowd and screamed, both from pain and pure adrenaline. His scream made all the wolves in the crowd scream back, coming together like a howl. A different kind of chill crawled down my spine. This was a primal call, one that humans were never meant to hear.

“LET THE LUPO FINALE BEGIN!”

**Episode 175**

I hadn’t heard this much screaming and cheering since that time Lola dragged me down to Minneapolis to an Unlikely Candidates concert—and this crowd was just as bloodthirsty as that one had been. Three people had gotten into a fist fight to get to the front of the stage, and I’d almost lost a tooth when someone elbowed me the jaw.

I could see this place getting just as violent. These people had fur and fangs, and no one’s dad was going to come and pick them up at ten.

Seeing Xavier in the crowd, I ran to him, throwing myself into his arms. A weight lifted from my chest as he wrapped his arms around me, squeezing me tightly. I buried my face in his chest, breathing all of him in. He was all pines mixed with smoke and metal—the blood.

“Let the Lupo Finale begin?” I said, stepping back to look up at him. “I thought you weren’t going to fight until tomorrow because of the full moon?”

Xavier smiled down at me, pushing my hair out of my face with his non-bloodied hand as he kissed me. “You’re cute when you’re worried about me.”

*Then I must look like a fucking model right now.* “I’m terrified, Xavier. This is all happening so quickly. I thought we’d have more time.”

To decide on a plan. To figure out a strategy. To be *together*.

He chuckled. “Relax, baby. Like you said, the fighting doesn’t start until tomorrow, but the celebration begins right now,” he explained. “For them, this is a way to vent all of the tension they’re feeling.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You had to cut your hand then burn it shut to start a party? You guys are so weird.”

“It’s a ritual we’ve done for hundreds of years. I don’t know any other way,” he said. “I know it can seem a little weird, especially when you don’t understand them,”

I pulled away from him. “I’m trying to understand them. But it’s a little difficult to understand them when I’m not prepared for it! Why couldn’t one of you have told me about the wisps and the ritual?”

Xavier’s jaw tensed up, and I could feel a fight brewing between us when Colton, Jay and Lola appeared. Just in time. They congratulated Xavier on what he’d done at the pyre.

*Wait, where’s Greyson?* I wondered. Apparently unable to stop myself, I searched for him in the crowd, and found him talking to a young woman with pale blue, almost kind of silver, hair. I also couldn’t help but notice when she put her hand on Greyson’s shoulder, throwing her head back to laugh at something he must have said. She was a little too loud, a little too close.

A pang of something hit my chest, and I didn’t like it one bit.

I pulled Lola aside and pointed at Greyson and the woman. “Who’s that?”

Lola shrugged. “I don’t know and I don’t give a damn—about them *or* your stupid problem!” she spat, before stalking off.

I watched her go, a little stunned by her response. She was clearly still really pissed at Jay for what he’d done. I didn’t blame her, though—my mate has kept a million secrets from me. At least she now understood why I flew off the handle when Xavier kept shit from me. At least *my* secretive boyfriend hadn’t been stupid enough to bargain away his eyes.

No, just stupid enough to drag us into a Lupo Finale with who knows how many Rogues eying him up.

“You’d better hurry along too, nerd.” Colton sneered at me. “I need to talk to my brother—alone.”

Okay, I was at my breaking point with the Evers Brothers. If any one of them said one more snotty thing to me, I was going to lose my shit. Starting now.

“Um, no. You two have been having secret meetings all day. I’m not going anywhere.”

Colton opened his mouth to say something, but Xavier cut him off. “It’s okay, she can stay. What’s up.”

Colton looked between me and Xavier, then sighed. “We have confirmation—Ryker is here.”

Xavier’s expression changed from relaxed to concerned in a flash.

“Who’s Ryker?” I asked.

As soon as the question left my month, Xavier’s face shifted into unreadable calmness. He shrugged. “Just another Rogue who’s going to lose tomorrow,” he said simply, not meeting my eyes.

Okay, Ryker was clearly somebody. I shot him a searching look. “If he’s just another werewolf, then why is it so important to know he’s here?”

“I just like to know who’s challenging me.”

Sure Jan.

I didn’t want to pester him for information. Honestly, I was tired of doing that and shouldn’t have to. Fighting with Xavier wasn’t something I wanted to be doing. Especially not right now.

I watched Colton pull Xavier away and I turned to Jay, my arms crossed. “If you don’t want to get slapped for the third time today, you’re going to tell me who this Ryker guy is.”

Jay made a face at my thinly veiled threat. “He’s bad news.”

Trusty Jay. “How bad?”

“Promise you won’t fly off the handle? You know, like always?”

“I promise,” I said. I needed information to make my own plan.

“A few months ago, we heard about a Rogue who attacked a small pack in Washington. The only person who escaped alive said it was Ryker who attacked them.”

Anxiety twisted in my stomach. Xavier was good, but he’d never destroyed a whole pack. At least, I hoped he hadn’t. How could someone do that, werewolf, Rogue, or human? Ryker was definitely bad news—bad news that was probably going to be entering the ring with Xavier tomorrow. And there was no way he was going to submit.

What would Ryker do then?

“Is the survivor here?” I asked, coming out of my thoughts. “Maybe we can talk to them. Dig up something that Xavier can use against Ryker.”

“That would have been a great idea,” Jay said. “Except he died a week later.”

I winced. Guess it wasn’t a survival story, after all.

“Wait, what happened? I thought werewolves could heal any kind of wound?” I asked.

“Ryker used a silver weapon.”

“Silver can actually kill werewolves?” I said. “I thought that was only true in books and movies.”

Jay shrugged. “Some of that stuff comes from the truth sometimes.”

When I opened my mouth to reply, Xavier returned with Colton. He took my hand and we said nothing as we started to walk back to camp.

Silver. Ryker had used silver to *slaughter* an entire pack.

When we arrived at camp, we were greeted by a variety of parties who seemed to appear from everywhere. People were fighting each other, people were making out (clothing seemed optional), and there even people doing keg stands and shots. I swore we passed a beer pong table.

Xavier had told me that the wolves and Rogues needed to ‘blow off steam’ occasionally, but I couldn’t understand why everyone was treating this like the world’s biggest frat party. Did they not understand what was going to happen tomorrow? That they might not be *alive* by this time tomorrow? Not if Ryker was fighting.

My anxiety and fear must have been clear on my face, because Xavier groaned. “Are you going to worry about this all night, Cali?”

I pulled my hand from his. “Yes! How are you *not* worried about it? First, you’re going to fight all these Rogues—including Ryker, who is a stone-cold killer. And second, I might be turning into a wolf as we speak. Or dying. Or both.”

Xavier’s expression softened. “Does your shoulder still hurt?”

“Yes,” I said, taking a breath. “A lot actually.”

“Cali,” he said softly, trying to pull me to him despite how rigid my body was. “I’m sorry you’re hurting. And I’m sorry for being dismissive, but you’re not the only one who worries, okay?”

I looked up at him. “I’m not?” I asked, my voice small.

“Of course, not. I worry about you all the time, baby. Please don’t be scared. It hurts me to see you so upset. I promise it’s going to be okay.”

I stared into his dark eyes, finding a softness there that I rarely saw in him. I cupped his face and pulled him closer. I loved him when he was like this. Sensitive and emotional, like he was finally opening up to me. When he was like this, I didn’t have to try so hard to break through his iron clad walls.

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked quietly. “I’m so afraid of losing you. I love you so much.”

Xavier looked down at me, pressing his forehead against mine. Suddenly, he scooped me up into his arms and kissed me deeply, like he was trying to silence each and every one of my niggling thoughts. “If this is going to be my last night, I want to spend it with you.”

**Episode 176**

The kiss surprised me so much and I couldn’t pull away—not that I really wanted to. Sure, I was annoyed with Xavier, but he was right—this could be the last night we spent together. He could be dead by this time tomorrow! *I* could be dead by this time tomorrow! And if this is was our last night together, we needed to go out with a bang—in every sense of the word.

I kissed him back just as deeply and fiercely as he carried me into the tent. I could hear people wolf whistle as we passed (or would they just call it whistling?) but I didn’t care. All I cared about was being in Xavier’s arms. He carried me so easily, like I weighed nothing.

He pushed open the flap of the tent and gently laid me down. I opened my mouth to say something, but he was already beside me, kissing the words out of my mouth, like he was trying to consume me.

His lips moved down to my neck, nibbling and tearing on the soft skin, causing me to moan loudly. This is what I needed. This reassurance from him, and the reminder that he was all mine. It wasn’t about whether he loved me because I knew he did. But feeling him kiss me, touch me… it was reassurance he would fight tomorrow, not only for himself but for *us*.

“You make me so happy,” he moaned against my skin as he started to unbutton my shirt. Any other day, he would have ripped off my shirt and torn it to ribbons, but now he took his time, kissing the exposed skin revealed by each button. Then he did the same with my bra and jeans, leaving me in just my panties.

“You are so beautiful,” he breathed out, his eyes raking over my body, hunger, need, and lust in his eyes. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” I cooed breathlessly as I moved to kiss his neck, my hands exploring his toned chest, his muscular abs…

“Let me take care of you,” he said, his voice tender as pushed me back onto the sleeping bag, paying my breasts some well-deserved attention with his mouth until we were both satisfied. Then he kissed his way down to my panties, slowly removing them before rubbing my clit, finding wetness there.

I gasped in pleasure as he continued. “Xavier,” I moaned.

He smirked mischievously. “Yup, people are *so* going to hear us tonight.”

“Maybe it’ll show people just how Alpha you are,” I said.

“It might. But first, I want to show *you* how Alpha I am,” he said with a wolfish grin as his mouth devoured my pussy, causing me to scream in pure pleasure, continuing until I edged closer to orgasm. Then he pulled away.

I gave a long, needy moan. “Xavier,” I gasped out. “I need you.”

“That’s the type of dirty talk I like to hear,” he teased.

I made a face at him. “If you keep that up, you won’t get any at all.”

“Come on, you know you want me.”

I moaned my answer as his lips attacked mine. We made out for a while, until his cock brushed up against me.

“May I?” he asked, kissing me gently.

“Please,” I begged, causing Xavier to smirk as he pushed into me. I cried out in pleasure as he slowly moved in and out, both of us keeping up a gentle pace as we explored each other, whispering ‘I love yous’ to each other until we finally came together.

“I love you, Caliana Hart,” he breathed.

“I love you too, Xavier Evers,” I said, as we kissed again. “Soon to be official Alpha of the Redwood pack, starting tomorrow.”

We spooned afterwards, our bodies still tangled up in each other, exhausted by the day we’d had, and what we’d just done. Xavier fell asleep almost immediately, which was good—he needed his rest, even if I’d had to bang him into exhaustion in order to gain it. Totally worth it.

If only I could sleep, too.

I tossed and turned for what felt like hours, my mind unable to shut down. I felt bad for the way things had gone down with Lola. The sex I’d just had with Xavier was great, but I should have let her stay with us. I knew firsthand what it was like to be blindsided by your mate keeping secrets from you. I should have been kinder, instead of flying off the handle and only worrying about myself.

She was right, and I needed to apologize.

I needed to go talk to her ASAP. It was the only way I’d be able to get some sleep.

Slowly, carefully, I untangled myself from Xavier’s body, pleased when he stayed asleep. Though I couldn’t say I was surprised. Post-sex Xavier could sleep through three hurricanes and a twister.

I put on my clothes and kissed the top of Xavier’s head before I slipped out of the tent and into the night.

The dark sky was tinted orange by the coming sunrise coming through different holes in the cave. It was so surreal that I was even here: an underground forest cave with wisps and werewolves and who knows what else.

I pressed on and made my way to Lola’s tent. The partying was finally seeming to come to an end now that the sun was rising. Most of the others had gone back to their tents, or were sleeping on the ground.

Well, at least it was quiet.

OOOOOOFFF!

I stumbled as I approached Lola’s tent, tripping on a log or a rock.

Except then I looked down at the log and saw that it wasn’t a log—it was Jay, snoring loudly on the ground, not even in a sleeping bag. I guess he really *was* in the dog house. Oof. I needed to repair things with Lola fast.

I tip-toed past him to peer inside Lola’s tent, and saw her sitting up in her sleeping bag.

“Can I come in?” I asked quietly, still making her jump.

“Jesus!” she said. Then she glared at me. “What the hell do you want?”

Okay, this wasn’t going to be easy as I’d thought.

“I wanted to apologize,” I said, entering the tent. “I was being a total jerk when you were freaking out about Jay. I knew you were worried and I shouldn’t have made everything about myself. I’m sorry. I was being a really shitty friend.”

Lola gave a small smile. “Thank-you. I’m sorry for yelling at you. I know you were just freaked out about your shoulder, and Xavier, and everything else. And you have good reason to be freaked out.”

“Yeah, but I still should have been better. Your feelings matter to me, Lola.”

“I should have been better, too,” she admitted. “I just…god, Cali, his *eye*? I guess I’m glad it’s not his dick, but I mean—”

“—We’ll figure it out,” I said quickly. “I promise.”

Lola gave a small sniffle and I sat down next to her sleeping bag. I opened my arms and we hugged. It felt good to have my best friend back.

“How’s your rash doing?” she asked, when we broke apart.

“It’s still there. It hasn’t spread, but it still itches and hurts. Especially after the crap Big Mac put on it.”

“How’s everything with Xavier? Are you guys good now?” she asked.

“Banged it out,” I said with a wink.

She laughed. “You’re so bad!”

“You made me this way! Anyway, I saw that Jay is in the dog house. Or, outside the tent? Things haven’t gotten better?”

“Nope. I’m so pissed off at him at him I could scream. But… I also really miss him. Even though I want to punch him in both eyes. Is that weird?”

“No, I understand. Xavier and I have these stupid fights and they seem like the only thing in the world at the time… and then we make up. Every time.” I smiled. “It’s funny, how tangled up everything is. All the emotions and feelings. Part of the package, I guess. The more you love someone, the more it hurts when things go wrong.”

Lola nodded. “That’s true, and things go really wrong when your mate agrees to give up an eye for you.”

“Or invokes a werewolf death match,” I added glumly. “At least Jay did what he did to save your life. Like it or not, it was really brave and sweet. Why don’t you bring him in? It’s kinda cold out there, and people can trip over him. Like me. Wake him up, and you guys can talk this out in the privacy of your own tent. And if you do kill him, at least there are lots of places nearby to bury the body.”

Lola laughed. “I guess you’re right. I guess I do kinda miss my big silly wolf-bear.”

I snorted. “Ha! I knew that was gonna catch on eventually!”

“It’s not catching on!” She laughed. “Go grab my mate. Tell him I’m willing to talk to him on a probationary basis.”

“To see *eye-to-eye*?”

Lola groaned, and I laughed as I stepped out of the tent. I was *so* going to make wolf-bear happen.

However, my laughter died in my throat when I looked down at the ground—Jay was gone.

**Episode 177**

I looked around in the dark, searching for Jay. Where the hell had he gone? I’d only been gone for a few minutes—and it wasn’t like Jay could run that fast in his human form. And he’d been asleep when I left him.

Lola came out of the tent. “Okay, where is he? Where’s Jay?” she asked, looking around. There was nothing—not even footprints. I shrugged, looking around.

“He was right here,” I said. “I swear.”

A puzzled look came across Lola’s face. “Okay, for real. Where is he?”

“I’m not sure…” I said, still looking out into the empty night. I pointed at the ground. “He was out cold right there. Maybe he heard us talking and got upset?” A panicked thought seized my mind. Maybe Big Mac had gotten a hold of him. Maybe she’d decided she couldn’t wait until after the Finale to get his eye. Maybe she’d put him under some kind of spell. Maybe he was already in her tent, and she was in the middle of plucking out his eye.

I opened my mouth to voice my fear to Lola, then quickly shut it. No, I was going to learn to keep my thoughts to myself. Plus, there was no reason to scare Lola when I had no evidence. Yet.

Instead, I tried a different question. “Is he a sleepwalker?”

Lola nodded. “Yeah, he’s done that a couple times before. The first time he did it, he made a seven layer bread sandwich, the dope. It’s rare though.”

I tilted my head. “A bread sandwich? What’s that?”

“I guess he didn’t have any meat in the house, so he just kept layering bread slices,” Lola said matter-of-factly. “He sent me a photo in the morning. No recollection of it.”

“Couldn’t he have made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?”

“That’s what I said!”

“Were there, like, different kinds of bread? Or was it just wheat bread on top of wheat bread?”

“I’m not sure—wait, we’re missing the point. We have to stop focusing on the bread!”

“Right, right, right, sorry!” I said, trying to focus (of course, now I was hungry for carbs). “What did he do the other times he sleepwalked?”

Lola sighed deeply, looking almost embarrassed. “Well once he started a fire.”

“What?! Did anyone get hurt?”

She scowled at me. “Don’t be so dramatic. It was only a little fire. When I found him, he was completely mesmerized by the flames.”

“A little fire is still a fire, Lola!” I said. Jay could probably burn down half the forest.

*Wait, flames*!

“Lola, there’s a fire here! Maybe he was drawn to it.”

“Maybe…” Lola said thoughtfully. “Certainly isn’t the worst idea and we’ve got nothing else to go on.”

“Let’s go,” I said.

As we set off toward the fire pit, I noticed that the sky had started to lighten, the inky black now a lighter shade of blue. The sun would be fully up in a few hours. This was the calm before the storm. The Lupo Finale was only hours away now.

I pushed the thoughts out of my head. I needed to focus at the task at hand: find Jay without losing my shit—or getting eaten.

We walked quietly past the sleeping Rogues, curled up in a circle in their wolf forms. I figured that most of them were murderers who’d have happily torn my throat out for half a corn chip, but they looked so peaceful sleeping like that. Like little puppies. That was the thing about werewolves—in their wolf forms, they looked so soft and cuddly until they showed their fangs. Sometimes I wished Xavier would stay in his wolf form so I cuddle with him that way. Maybe I just needed to get a dog. Or would Xavier feel weird about that?

Lola grabbed my hand and tugged me away from the dangerously cuddly-looking Rogues. “Come on! We have to find Jay! We don’t have time for this!”

Werewolf life tip: do not pet a sleeping wolf; especially if they hate you.

The warm orange glow of the pyre was just ahead of us. There was a silhouetted figure of a man sitting before it. God, it better be Jay.

Lola lit up as we got closer. “That’s him! That’s my idiot wolf-baby.”

“Well, let’s grab him and get him back to the tent before someone grabs us,” I said. "There are so many Rogues out here, it can't be totally safe.”

We hurried over toward him. “Jay!” Lola cried out, running toward him.

He didn’t seem to notice us at all. He just sat there on the ground, his legs crossed and his eyes glued to the flames, his mouth hanging open. He wasn’t even blinking. Hm. Very strange.

“Okay, this is weird,” I said, waving my hand in front of Jay’s face. Hopefully he was really sleepwalking, and not under a Big Mac spell. Or having a weird side effect from sleeping pills.

“Jay, come on, baby, we’ve got to go!” Lola said, about to tug on his arm. “I’ll get a nice comfy sleeping bag for you.”

“Wait!” I cried out, grabbing her hand to stop her from touching him. “Don’t you know it’s dangerous to wake a sleepwalker? They could hurt themselves or something.”

“But he isn’t sleep*walking*. He’s sleep *sitting,*” she pointed out.

“He had to walk to get here, didn’t he?” I asked. “Anyway, that’s not the point! The point is that you don’t know what he’s thinking about. We might scare him and then *boom*: fangs.”

Lola sighed. “*Fine*. I’ll be gentle.”

I let go of her hand and watched closely as Lola kneeled beside her mate and gently took him by the shoulder. She leaned close to his ear and whispered something I couldn’t hear.

After a few seconds, Jay blinked a few times, snapping out of his trance. He looked around, his eyes widening in surprise when he saw Lola and me. He seemed even more surprised to see himself sitting in front of a giant bonfire.

“What am I doing here?” he asked Lola.

“You were sleepwalking again, honey,” she explained. “Come on, get up. We’re going back to the tent. You need a good night’s sleep—without any wandering around.”

Jay gave her a skeptical look, clearly not sure if he should accept her change of heart so quickly, but also not wanting to push his luck. “Are you still mad at me?”

“We’ll talk about it later, come on,” she said, planting a kiss on his forehead.

Lola helped Jay to his feet, and held his hand as they turned to go back to their tent. I was turning to follow them when I heard a strange noise behind me, almost like a whisper.

*“Caliana… Caliana…”* it echoed.

“Huh?” I said, turning around. But there was nothing but the fire. It had been the same voices calling me as during Xavier’s ritual.

“Who’s there?” I called out. Was there something out there, or was my imagination just playing tricks on me again?

My question was met with nothing but the sound of the flames, crackling and hissing. Figures as much. I walked closer to the flames, edging around the base of the pyre, trying to discover the source of the whispering.

Maybe I’d made a mistake? I looked around, the chill of the night air putting me even more on edge. Maybe it was just the wind making that sound? Or the fire?

*The fire.*

I gasped. The wisps had all entered the pyre when Xavier called them, but before they’d dived into the flames, they’d been saying my name. I remembered the sound that the wisps had made earlier, the horrible screeching that sounded like a thousand voices all talking at once. But this… This was different, and I didn’t care for it.

“*Caliannnnnnnnnnnaaaaaa,”* the voice said again, with the same eerie tone of the wisps. But this time, it was only one voice, and it sent a chill down the back of my neck. Who could be talking to me? Was it a super wisp? Maybe it was the Queen of the Wisps. I didn’t know if I should be flattered or terrified at the thought. Probably both.

I waited for the voice to speak again, but there was nothing. I waited a few more minutes. Still nothing.

*Ugh, this isn’t giving me any answers and I have to pee*, I thought bitterly. Xavier was still in our tent, fast asleep, and he’d be pissed if he woke up and I wasn’t there. And I didn’t want to get in trouble right before the Finale.

“Okay, fine, whatever,” I said to the fire, before I turned away.

*“Caliana,”* the voice called out again, as soon as my back was turned.

“Oh, are you finally ready to talk to me?” I grumbled, spinning back around. I could feel the heat of the fire on my face, instantly warming me, drawing me in like a moth. I imagined this was how Jay had felt: transfixed by the dancing flames, unable to move a muscle.

Then I heard the voice again, as if was coming from the very fire itself, wrapping around me and whispering into my ear with heated breath. “*Oil and vinegar do not mix.*”

**Episode 178**

I used to love reading fantasy novels where girls went on magical adventures to find love and save kingdoms, and they ran into things like unicorns and talking trees. I’d seen my fair share of Disney movies. But now I knew that in real-life-meets-werewolf-life, cute woodland creatures didn’t come up and sing with you. Werewolves would come snarling up to you instead and bite your shoulder.

But apparently, the most you could expect was a fire telling you how to cook.

Needless to say, I was more than a little fed up.

“You have *got* to be kidding me with this shit,” I muttered, glaring at the flames. “It is who-even-knows in the god damn morning and you’re giving me cooking tips? You don’t even have hands! How dare you tell me how to cook! And news flash, I don’t need you to teach me Kitchen 101. Every idiot knows that oil and vinegar don’t mix. Unless you’re making salad dressing, in which case I prefer blue cheese dressing anyway. But if you’re going for a vinaigrette, there’s no other way. You *have* to mix oil and vinegar.”

I looked around, this *had* to be a joke—probably Colton trying to make fun of me, like always. Maybe I was on some kind of werewolf prank show, or Violet and Lilac were trying to make another virtual video. I was certain that any second now, someone would pop out and say ‘gotcha’ and I would pretend to laugh while planning the perpetrator’s demise.

I peered out from behind the fire, thinking I’d find some kind of recording device, or a speaker that was creating the voice. Instead, I just got a front row seat to the Rogue walk of shame as different Rogues snuck between tents. I hoped they were too preoccupied with their own horniness and drama to pay attention to me arguing with the fire. Xavier had warned me to be careful around them—around everyone. And for once I agreed.

SNAP SNAP!

I jumped back as some embers burst from the fire, drawing my attention back to it—almost as if the fire was *trying* to pull me back. The flames started to move, swaying back and forth hypnotically, dazzling me. I could see why Jay had been drawn in—this was absolutely mesmerizing.

The voice repeated that phrase again and again. “*Oil and vinegar do not mix, oil and vinegar do not mix…”* Slowly, it built up into a chorus of voices that overtook every other sound around me, until my brain was filled with nothing but the words: *oil and vinegar do not mix.*

I covered my ears in a desperate attempt to block it out, but it just continued pounding into my ear drums. I tried to focus on what the words meant, but I was too overwhelmed by the sound of them. I thought I was going to scream, or throw up, or both…

Then, the voices stopped.

I looked up to see the flame had died down into a small fire. There wasn’t any noise to be heard, even the wind. Utter silence.

What. The. Fuck. Was. Happening.

Well, I wasn’t going to hang around to find out what horrible thing was going to pop out this time. I was going to get my ass out of here ASAP.

I turned around and ran as fast as my legs could take me, trying to catch up to Jay and Lola, but they’d disappeared. I looked around wildly, but they were nowhere to be seen.

Could they not hear that? Couldn’t anyone? I knew I wasn’t crazy, or on Shrooms—I’d heard something, even though the message had been pretty confusing. I’d always thought that if I ever heard messages from the ‘beyond’, the speakers would have something better to say. Or at least they’d give me the lotto numbers. Maybe I was just being haunted by a spirit of a Food Network star?

*Why do I always get the stupid powers?* I thought bitterly. But I couldn’t get hung up on my own problems right now, especially since Jay was going to lose his right eye when this whole thing was over (*if* we made it out of this situation alive, which was a pretty decently sized ‘if’). I wished I could do something for them. Lola deserved a boyfriend with two eyes.

Maybe I *could* do something.

I wondered what time witches went to bed. Probably really late, if they slept at all. Maybe Big Mac was still up. Maybe I’d be able to talk to her about Jay’s situation, one-on-one. What was the worst she could do? Turn me into a frog? That was the least of my problems at the moment. Besides, my rash was still itching like crazy. I had nothing to lose.

Hopefully, getting my rash looked at wouldn’t cost me an eye. What was the point of having a rich boyfriend if I couldn’t even pay for good health care?

I headed over to Big Mac’s tent, surprised that I knew the way at all. Lucky for me, I saw candlelight flickering from inside her tent. Score! She was awake!

I stood in front of the tent, trying to decide the best way to go about this. The most polite thing to do would be to knock on the door, but there wasn’t really a *door* so much as a *flap,* and how were you meant to knock on a flap?

*Fuck it,* I thought, opening the flap. I was just going to walk in and see what happened. If Big Mac didn’t want visitors, she should have put up a ‘closed’ sign.

As I entered the tent, I saw Big Mac sitting at her long table, alone, her back to the tent flap. She shifted slightly in her chair, her body tense, as if she could sense my presence.

“I told you not to bother coming back, Sabine,” she said darkly, turning toward me. But her face shifted when she saw that I wasn’t Mrs. Smith. She moved a hand to her face, wiping away a tear as her expression hardened. “Oh, not you again. What do you want?”

I should have stuck to the subject at hand. I should have just talked about my shoulder, and begged for her help. I *should* have kept my curiosity to myself.

But I wasn’t that strong.

“What’s the deal with you and Mrs. Smith?” I asked, in a voice I knew sounded really annoying. But I just couldn’t help myself.

“Pardon me? Do have any manners at all?” Big Mac asked. “You burst into my tent and start demanding answers about my personal life?”

Yup, I shouldn’t have asked that. Apparently, that was a sore spot, and I had much bigger fish to fry than their lady drama.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“What do you want, Cali?” she interrupted, sounding exhausted and frustrated.

“I wanted to talk to you about your deal with Jay,” I said firmly.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “I thought we discussed this already. A deal is a deal, and what is done cannot be undone. You make a deal with a witch, you pay the price,” she said. “Jay knew exactly what he was doing.”

I felt my own anger and frustration bubbling up inside me, but I did my best to swallow it down. I couldn’t lose my temper like Lola had earlier. I couldn’t blow my chances of helping Jay and Lola and, hopefully, myself.

“Please, Big Mac. I don’t know anything about this witchcraft stuff. I just want to help my best friend and her mate. Could you please just give me a break and let me help her?” I asked, doing my best to appeal to her empathetic side (if she had one). “It’s bad enough that my mate’s going to be in a death match later today, but my shoulder also looks like the dark side of the moon. Oh yeah, *and* the fire’s started talking to me. So I could really use a break here.”

Big Mac’s eyes widened. I took that as a good sign.

“And maybe a lot of therapy,” I added. “But you can only help with the first thing. Jay’s eye. Please?”

Big Mac stared at me for what felt like forever, just to the point of it being awkward. Then suddenly, she walked over to me, not making a sound as she circled around me, like an animal and its prey. The thought sent shivers down my spine. Was it something I said?

“Uh, Big Mac? At the risk of sounding like a rude guest in your house—well, tent—uhhh, could I ask what you’re doing? You know, other than making me feel super self-conscious?”

Suddenly, she stopped her pacing and stood in front of me, her eyes wide as dinner plates. “I’m not sure I heard you right, Caliana,” Big Mac said. I didn't quite like the look on her face. It made my stomach go uneasy. “Did you just say that the fire *spoke* to you?”

**Episode 179**

I seriously didn’t like the look in Big Mac’s eyes when I told her about the fire. She was looking at me like I was some kind of medical mystery. Or a piece of meat. Either way, I didn’t care for it one bit. Something told me you never wanted a witch looking at you this way.

I raised my eyebrows. “Uh, I don’t know. It was pretty weird. I’ve also recently been on some forest hallucinogenic mushrooms.”

“Tell me what the fire said,” Big Mac said.

“Salad dressing.”

Now it was Big Mac’s turn to give me her own look of confusion. “*What*?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“No, what did the fire ‘say’ to you, exactly? Word for word.”

“Umm…” I tried to think. So much had happened, and it was a little difficult to keep track of everything—especially since I hadn’t thought I’d have to take notes on the fire. “It said… It was something stupid… ‘Oil and vinegar don’t mix’. Who doesn’t know that? And what’s it supposed to mean to me?”

Big Mac stared at me for a few moments longer. She really had to stop doing that. “How much have you had to drink, Cali? Everyone gets a little wild, the night before the Finale.”

I gasped, offended by what she was implying. I may have seen a lot of crazy shit and done a lot of stupid things, but I hadn’t been ‘under the influence’ of anything. Almost everything I’d done had been achieved while I was stone-cold sober.

“For your information, I haven’t had a drop to drink. Not since that moonshine you gave us at your house that made me streak through the woods, not that it’s any of your business. Was that also added to the bill? And the croissants?”

Big Mac ignored my jab. “What about mushrooms? I heard from Mrs. Smith it was a pretty good trip you went on a few days ago,” she said, with a knowing smirk. I was going to have to speak with Mrs. Smith. Where did she get off?

I scowled at her. “That was an accident, thank-you very much. Plus, with what happened with the fire didn’t feel like the hallucinations I had. I *know* it was real. The fire spoke to me, just like you’re talking to me right now. The only difference is that it didn’t have a face. Or a mouth.”

Big Mac stared at me for another moment, and I stared right back. If she could look, so could I.

“Let me see your shoulder,” she said after a minute, surprising me.

I shot her a skeptical look as I crossed my arms over my chest. “What’s it gonna cost? An arm for an exam and a leg for treating it? No thanks. I know I’ve been having a major learning curve with all of this stuff, but my mom didn’t raise me not to ask questions. And had she known about witches, she would’ve taught me to never make deals with one. Or people who sell leggings from home.”

Big Mac just rolled her eyes. “Just show me.”

“Fine. But remember, we don’t have a contract. I don’t owe you anything,” I said, giving her one last look before pushing my shirt over my shoulder.

Big Mac looked at my shoulder, touching the skin with her bony fingers. “Well, the good news is that it’s not any worse.”

“What’s the bad news?”

“It’s not any better.”

Yikes.

“Well, it feels awful, it itches like crazy and it certainly *looks* worse. Am I gonna be all right?” I asked, my voice betraying the worry I was feeling.

She didn’t answer my question, but motioned me into a chair. “Sit down. I’m gonna put some more salve on it.”

I watched with wide, curious eyes as Big Mac mixed ingredients together. I couldn’t get a look at what she was using, but I could see some of it: bay leaves, what looked like frogs’ legs, and some kind of gold dust.

“Hey, how much do I have to pay for that salve? I’d rather use the co-pay at the CVS than lose an eye,” I said. “I don’t care how ‘organic’ that salve may be.”

Big Mac shook her head, almost looking amused. “It’s on the house. I know we haven’t gotten along perfectly today, but witches really aren’t all that bad. I’m not without a heart.”

“Yeah, I always wondered what the deal was with witches, anyway. Like, how do you become a witch? Is it something that you’re born with, or is it something you can learn? Did you learn from somewhere?” Maybe if the whole werewolf thing didn’t work out, I could learn to protect myself by becoming a witch. No one would want to tangle with a witch—or get stuck with the bill.

Big Mac shot me an annoyed glare. “Witchcraft is nothing like that fabrication of misguided lore in *Harry Potter*. Witches are *born* witches. My mother was a witch, as was her mother, and her mother before that. I come from a very long and very dangerous line of witches.”

Well, that ruled me out. I didn’t think my parents could be witches. If they were, my mother wouldn’t have been as sick as she was, and we’d be able to afford nice things. Plus, my parents went to actual doctors—they didn’t put weird-ass leaves on themselves.

“Now, hold still while I put this on. It’s going to feel hot, so don’t move around so much,” she warned as she walked over to me.

I held my breath as Big Mac applied the salve to the wound. I was waiting for the almost searing pain I’d felt when she’d first put the ointment on me, but I was surprised when it felt kind of… nice. Warm and tingly, like stepping into a hot bath, only with a thin wisp of smoke drifting up.

I looked up at Big Mac, wide-eyed with amazement. “Is that magic?”

She smiled back. “It’s a little magic and a little medicine.”

I watched as she worked, thinking back on what had happened when I’d walked in here earlier—when Big Mac had thought I was Mrs. Smith and gotten very upset.

“So,” I said, trying to find the right words. “What’s up with you and Mrs. Smith?”

I could feel Big Mac flinch as she put on the rest of the cream, using just enough pressure to make me wince slightly in pain. Ugh, sorry I asked.

“We knew each other a long time ago,” she said curtly.

“Yeah? So what happened? Did you have a fight? Was it over a boy?” It must have been a really cute boy, to make these women fight for each other for so long.

“Yeah, not exactly.” Big Mac paused. “We had a falling out, and that’s all I’m going to say about it. And I’ll gently remind you to keep your nose out of other people’s business,” she said, rubbing the cream into my skin.

“Yeah, that’s not very convincing,” I said, flinching in pain.

“Sorry,” she said, seeing my flinch. Her touch got softer.

I was a little disappointed that I hadn’t gotten the juicy gossip I wanted, but I decided not to push it. I didn’t want Big Mac to get so mad that she hexed me, or something. Plus I still needed to ask about Jay, and I wasn’t going to get anywhere with that if she was in a bad mood.

“Okay, so Mrs. Smith-related questions are out. What about the talking fire thing? Should I be worried? Or, more worried than normal? Does it have anything to do with the bite?”

“I’m not sure. The fire thing is strange, but I don’t think it’s anything you have to worry about right now,” she said, taking her hand off my shoulder. “Okay, we’re done. This should do it.” I turned to look at the rash. It looked a little better than before, and it had definitely stopped itching.

“Will this keep me from becoming a wolf?” I asked.

Big Mac shrugged. “We won’t know until the full moon.”

*That’s in a matter of hours.* The thought filled me dread. What good was magic if it couldn’t fix everything?

“But is there anything else I can do? You have a shit-ton of potions and magic and all sorts of things. Can’t one of those things fix me for certain? Please, Big Mac, you have to help me. I don’t want anything to happen to me—it could affect Xavier in the Finale.”

I thought back to my dream, which seemed so long ago now. I didn’t want to distract Xavier in any way, and dying from this bite was sure as hell a way to do it. He needed to win the Finale, and I needed to do what I could as a human to make it happen.

“Not so fast. You don’t get something for nothing. I did you a favor, and now I need one in return.”

“*What*? But we didn’t make a contra—”

Before I could even finish my thought or even blink, Big Mac whipped out a silver switchblade from the pocket of her maxi dress. Her eyes were suddenly as wild as her hair and she snapped the blade open, cutting the air.

“Time to pay up, Cali dear.”

**Episode 180**

Well, this was fucking peachy.

I knew it, I totally knew it. Never EVER ask a witch for ANYTHING, or you’ll end up paying for it. But I hadn’t listened to my own good advice, and now I was being held at knifepoint by a crazy witch.

Even with all the times I’d nearly died, this scenario was the biggest surprise.

I took a step back, trying to get away from the blade, and tripped over my own feet. I stumbled backwards, knocking into the table and sending the contents crashing to the floor.

*Shit, shit. shit. shit, shit!* I tried to hurry out of the tent. *I shouldn’t have come here in the first place.*

“Get away from me, or I’ll do something really bad!” I screamed, hoping to buy myself some time to find a weapon or something. I should have taken Greyson’s pistol—that could have been *really* useful right about now now.

Big Mac scoffed at me, holding the switchblade lazily in her hand. “Oh please, what are you going to do? You’re not going to do anything, so just stop acting like a baby and stand still.”

The calmness of her voice made me uneasy. I looked around wildly for something to fight back with. “We didn’t make a deal! You said you were a fair witch who does contracts and shit! You said this was ‘on the house’! If I’d known it would cost me, I would have left here in five seconds flat!”

“That’s why I didn’t tell you. I knew you’d freak out. All I need is your blood. It’s not even that big a deal. So stop moving, or I could cut an artery. We wouldn’t want that, now would we?”

That did not calm me down in the slightest.

“*WHAT?*” I screamed. “You are messed up, lady!” I reached for a large jug of moonshine and held up over my head. “Don’t come any closer!”

Big Mac looked like an exasperated parent whose child was having a temper tantrum. “Cali,” she breathed out. “A jug isn’t going to hurt me.”

“Maybe, but if I drop it on the floor, it’ll cost you a lot of money. Can’t lose your valuable product, right?”

Big Mac just looked at me. “Okay, I’m done with this,” she said, and pointed a long, bony finger at me. She mumbled a few words under her breath.

*What the hell? What was she doing?*

My thoughts stopped as my whole body froze in place. I couldn’t move, couldn’t blink, couldn’t even scream.

I stared at Big Mac, wide-eyed, as my brain went into overdrive with fear. What the hell was going on with me? Had she paralyzed me? Was I dying? Was Big Mac going to kill me? She said a little blood, but who know how much that meant to a witch.

The witch moved closer to me. Her knife gleamed in the candlelight. If only I could scream or had told someone I was coming here.

*Another stupid mistake,* I thought bitterly. I hadn’t been thinking straight, and I’d trusted the wrong person. I should have stayed with Lola. Hell, I should have stayed in my own damn bed with Xavier. But no, I couldn’t stay out of other people’s business. I’d thought I’d be able to save Jay’s eye all by myself, and I hadn’t even gotten that right. I had to make all the bad choices, and now I was going to pay for my stupidity—once and for all.

My eyes widened in terror as Big Mac came closer. “This will only hurt a bit,” she promised, but I could barely hear her over the sound of my own heartbeat. She pressed the blade against the side of my index finger. If I could have moved my mouth, I would have screamed at the searing pain that rippled through my body as the blood rushed out.

‘Only hurt a bit’ my ass! Another lie from the witch’s mouth. Mrs. Smith was right—Big Mac was a snake. With my luck, she’d probably put poison on the blade and I’d need her to heal it too. I’d get stuck in a loop of owing her something.

A cold, cruel, *familiar* laugh came from behind me.

“Oh, this is the best! Big Mac, you have to let me help! I can rip out her throat.” Maya’s voice was clear as she entered the tent.

I tried to turn my head, but I was still frozen in place.

Big Mac gave a dark laugh. “That won’t be necessary, dear; she didn’t trade her throat, and I don’t need that much blood. Just a little is fair.” I watched as she pulled a small vial from her pocket and deposited several drops of my blood into it, making me sick to my stomach. I usually wasn’t so squeamish about blood, but I think I could make an exception in this case.

When she closed the vial, she pointed her finger at me again and mumbled something under her breath. What was she saying?

I fell to the ground with a thud. Then I was able to sit up and I flexed my bloody hand, relieved that I could move again. My relief that was quickly replaced with red hot anger.

I jumped up and glared at Big Mac. “I did NOT give my consent for this!” I yelled, feeling completely violated. She’d just frozen me. She could have done ANYTHING to me. I was shaking as I waited for her to say something about what she’d done.

Big Mac looked completely unfazed, which only made me angrier. “Well, you couldn’t really have given consent while you were frozen.”

I should have let Lola rip her face off.

“Oh boo hoo, does someone need a band-aid??” Maya jeered.

I ignored her and continued to glare at Big Mac, who was cleaning her knife with the hem of her skirt. That couldn’t be hygienic.

“What the fuck was all that about?” I demanded.

“Language,” Big Mac scolded.

“You FROZE ME. I’m allowed to say fuck if I want to. How did you freeze me, anyway?”

“It was a simple calming spell. You were freaked out, and I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“CALMING SPELL? YOU PARALYZED ME AND CUT ME WITH A KNIFE! WHAT THE FUCK?”

“It was lots of fun to watch,” added Maya. “Can you do it again, Big Mac? I missed some of it.”

“Could you shut up for once in your life, Maya?! Not everything needs your Disney villain commentary.”

Big Mac tutted. “Oh Cali, stop being such a drama queen. I only needed a few drops for a potion I’m working on. It wasn’t a big deal. Consider us even.”

I was fuming. I did *not* like witches anymore. To think I’d dressed up as one for Halloween when I was ten. I was done with all of them—especially Big Mac.

“Okay, so you took my blood, but what about Jay’s eye? Are you still planning on taking it? I can give you more of my blood for it,” I offered. I knew it was a weak offer, but she *had* wanted my blood badly enough to take it by force.

Big Mac scoffed. “I have all the blood that I want from you. And what I do with Jay’s eye is none of your concern.”

I wanted to scream. I was so mad, I wanted to completely trash the place. If I ended up becoming a werewolf and managed not to die, I was going to rip her face off.

“Fine,” I huffed, furious at myself for not being able to save Jay’s eye.“I’m leaving! You two demons have fun.”

“Don’t I get a thank you?” Big Mac asked coolly.

“MY BLOOD SHOULD BE PAYMENT ENOUGH!” I shouted before storming off, brushing past Maya. I was glad that she’d gone back to her own pack, I never wanted to see her again. In Big Mac’s tent or anywhere else.

I stepped outside to the pink morning sky. Well, that had been a complete and total bust.

Even in my fury, I could hear Maya and Big Mac’s voices from inside the tent. Well, I might not have gotten any gossip on Mrs. Smith and Big Mac, or saved Jay’s eye, or even received any firm confirmation about whether I was going to turn into a werewolf. But I was going to get some gossip on Maya. I mean, if she was going to visit Big Mac, she had to have a very shady favor to ask, and I wanted in.

Slowly, I walked back over to the window so I could hear better.

“What can I do for you, Maya? I thought you said you’d never ask for my help ever again.”

“I did, and believe me I wouldn’t be here if there were any other option. But I need something, and only you can get for me.”

“And what’s that?”

There was a pause before Maya said, “I need an un-mating potion.”

**Episode 181**

I know, I know, eavesdropping was bad, and if Maya caught me, she’d rip out my throat. She’d probably sell it to Big Mac for one of her potions.

But come *on.* This was way too tempting. Maya asking for an un-mating potion? How could I walk away from that? Also, Colton was my almost-brother-in-law; if Maya was trying to un-mate with him, I needed to let him know.

These were the excuses I was giving myself as I got closer to the window of Big Mac’s magical tent, straining to hear what was going on.

“I should warn you, Maya.” Big Mac’s voice was serious. “This isn’t your run-of-the-mill potion. This is serious stuff. Much more serious than you may realize.”

“I’m in a very serious situation,” Maya replied. “Trust me, I wouldn’t have come to a witch unless it was important. I need the potion. More than anything.”

“You know it’s an urban legend, right? It’s nearly impossible to control one’s attraction toward someone else. Especially when mating is concerned. The bond is far too powerful.” Maya scoffed. I could almost *feel* her rolling her eyes at Big Mac. “Yeah, I’ve heard all the rumors about the ‘all powerful bond’ between mates. But everyone knows that the potion will work on a full moon, which just so happens to be tonight.”

I heard Big Mac inhale sharply, like she was about to speak. Then Maya cut her off.

“Spare me your warnings. I’ve made up my mind. Colton and I can’t be mates, and I have to put a stop to it, once and for all.”

“Does Colton know anything about this?”

There was a pause. I leaned in to listen closer.

“No, he doesn’t,” Maya said. “But this is for the best. For both of us. We shouldn’t be together, and we have to end this mating bullshit. I’d rather kill him.”

Another pause.

“Are you sure about this, Maya?”

“I am.” But I could hear her voice quiver.

Big Mac let out a deep sigh. There were sounds of movement, and the opening and closing of cabinets. “If you take this,” she said. “Be warned that…”

I stood on my tiptoes, holding my breath, waiting to hear whatever dire consequence Big Mac was about to reveal. What could it be? Warts? Sudden death? Hair loss? Maybe Maya would have to give up both her eyes as payment. Personally, I was hoping for her vocal cords.

The entire request did and didn’t make sense to me. Maya and Colton were both volatile, sure, but that seemed to be both of their way with dealing with everything. I still remembered when Colton said he was going to kill Maya the first time…and the second time…and the third. They talked a good game, but the kiss in the hot springs had spoken volumes.

They wanted each other and it was killing them.

Before I could hear the rest of what Big Mac had to say, a tingling feeling shot up my spine, causing me to shiver. I could feel goosebumps rising on my skin, and then a hand landed on my shoulder. It took everything I had not to scream and give myself away.

I spun around to see Greyson, standing in front of me with a smirk on his face. “Hello, love,” he said. “Snooping around?”

For a moment, I wanted to ask where he’d gone after I’d left, but I was too focused on the Maya gossip. And that I’d been two seconds from clawing his eyes out.

“*Shhhh!*” I hissed, nearly tripping over myself. “I’m trying to listen!”

His smile got even wider, and he learned over to whisper in my ear. “Eavesdropping, I see. Hear anything juicy?” he teased.

I ignored the chill that went down my spine when he’d whispered in my ear. “What part of ‘Shhh’ do you not get!” I hissed again*.* “I’m trying to find out what Maya is doing.”

“Hasn’t anyone ever told you it’s rude to eavesdrop?” he asked, gently taking my arm and trying to lead me away from the tent. “Come on, love. Time to get back to your own tent. You shouldn’t be out here by yourself with all these bloodthirsty Rogues around. Where is that brother of mine?”

“He’s asleep. I wanted Big Mac to look at my shoulder,” I said, scowling at the memory. Without thinking about it, I sucked on my wounded finger. The knife wound still stung at bit, but at least it had stopped bleeding. Why the hell had she wanted my blood, anyway? She was probably going use in some awful potion or something. I shuddered at the thought.

Greyson looked at my finger and raised an eyebrow. “What did you do now? Trip and cut your finger? Here, give it to me. Let me have a look.” He took my wounded hand and studied it for a moment. Then he looked up at me and smirked. “Do you want me to lick it better?”

I pulled my hand out of his grip. “Stop that! Sometimes you’re an even bigger perv than your brothers! Stop trying to lick me.”

Greyson laughed. “Just trying to help, love.”

I glared at him. “Well don’t!”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

I looked at him, thinking. If I couldn’t eavesdrop on Maya, maybe I could ask Greyson what un-mating potions were. He’d certainly been out in the cold and cruel werewolf world, maybe he knew something. And he was generally a little more forthcoming than Xavier.

I decided to just go for it. “Hey, do you know anything about un-mating potions?”

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. “Why? Thinking about un-mating from my brother? Trouble in paradise?”

I scoffed. “Don’t hold your breath. Maya asked Big Mac for a potion to un-mate from your other brother, Colton, if you recall.”

“Oh, well that’s understandable. Can’t blame Maya for wanting that. Colton can be so juvenile. Maya can do better—she’s quite the firecracker.”

I ignored a pang of jealousy. “Can she really get an un-mating potion? I don’t think she’s rushing to be Nolan’s mate, just not Colton’s.”

“I doubt it. They’re an urban myth. Even a witch as cutthroat as Big Mac wouldn’t want to get involved in the mess that is werewolf mating. It’s dangerous for everyone involved.”

I looked at Greyson for a moment, wondering what he meant. How much DID Greyson know about werewolf mating? But he didn’t elaborate.

“So, are you ready for the Lupo Finale?” he asked. “It’s really a shame that the self-defense class didn’t work out better.”

I huffed, still miffed about our little ‘self-defense class’, and what almost happened because of it. My face heated at the memory. “I’m perfectly capable of handling myself, thank you very much.”

He chuckled. “Yes, I plan on staying far away from you next time you get a weapon in your hands.” I glared at him as he continued. “But you certainly have the right attitude, that’s for sure. But are you ready to watch Xavier fight to become Alpha?”

I thought about back to what Mrs. Smith had told me. How my fear of losing Xavier was affecting me. How could it not? The thought of losing Xavier threatened to break me into pieces. He was my everything—the person who understood and loved me no matter what. It’d taken a bit of an unconventional way to get us together, and honestly I was grateful.

But the Lupo Finale was something that Xavier needed to do alone. It was a bitter pill I had to swallow.

“I’ll be fine,” I said, looking away.

“You are a horrible liar, love.”

“I know,” I told him, desperately trying to think of a way, *any* way, to change the subject.

I turned to look at him again. “Do you know a rogue named Ryker? He’s supposed to be a pretty big deal around here, I guess.”

Greyson smirked. “You’re such a little gossip. Yes, I know about Ryker*. Everyone* knows about Ryker. He has just as big a reputation as I do. But unlike me, Ryker’s reputation far exceeds his ability.”

“Really?” I asked, starting to feel more relieved.

“Oh yeah. I could take Ryker down without a second thought. Child’s play. He’s all show and cheap tricks. Cowardly, if you ask me.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, giving him a skeptical look. “Why do all the men in your family have to be so damn cocky?”

“A healthy ego is part of our DNA—blame genetics and good looks. Anyway, don’t get too comfortable, love. There are plenty of other Rogues superior to Ryker. Those are the ones my brother Xavier needs to focus on. Advice I already tried to give him, incidentally, but who’d ever listen to *me?* I’m only always right.”

“What other Rogues should Xavier be worried about?” I asked, concern seeping into my voice and thoughts. Who could be tougher than Ryker? He used silver, for crying out loud.

*He has a reputation as big as I do. But unlike me, Ryker’s reputation far exceeds his ability.* That was what Greyson had said, and Greyson had a pretty intimating reputation. Even Nolan had been afraid of him. If Ryker wasn’t the main threat to Xavier, then that had to mean…

“Wait, are you talking about yourself?” I rounded on Greyson, my eyes fierce, and blood pumping in my ears. “Are *you* going to challenge Xavier in the Finale?”

**Episode 182**

I searched Greyson’s steel-colored eyes for the truth. But his gaze was distant, like he wasn’t seeing me. I didn’t like it.

“Greyson,” I repeated. “Are you going to challenge Xavier, yes or no?”

He snapped back into reality. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “No, of course not. I’m only here to protect my brother. Whether he wants that support is up to him.”

I gave him a skeptical look, crossing my arms. “Don’t lie to me, Greyson.”

His eyes met mine again, this time with more intensity. “I have never lied to you, Cali.”

Suddenly, the tightness in my chest started to ease. I knew I had no reason to trust him, but everyone else had lied to me so much, so consistently, that the mere promise of honesty was comforting. It was like getting a taste of water after being lost in the desert for days. I started breathing again.

I smiled at him. “Thank you.”

At least I wouldn’t have to worry about Xavier facing Greyson. It made sense that everyone was talking about Ryker, but there were so many other wolves here… Ones who might have done things that didn’t have a survivor to tell anyone about it. If I’d learned anything about werewolves it was that some could be ruthless.

Greyson smiled back at me. “How’s your shoulder?” he asked gently. “Was the witch able to give you anything for it this time?”

“It’s all right,” I said. “It probably doesn’t help that I’ve been stressed, everything feels so much worse. Xavier and I fought and he yelled at me earlier.”

“He yelled at you?” Greyson’s voice changed to a fierce growl. His eyes had gone darker.

“Well yeah, we were arguing and he started yelling at me outside the camp and—”  
 “He was shouting at you in public?” he demanded. “While you’re hurt? That fucking ass.”

I fidgeted, feeling small. “Well, I did—”

“You didn’t do *anything* that meant you deserved to be yelled at that way. Nobody deserves that, and you need to understand that,” he said, his voice both urgent and worried. I looked down to see his hands were shaking. I didn’t understand. Why was he reacting like this? Why did he care?

He closed his eyes, trying to compose himself. When he opened them, his eyes were full of concern. He brushed a strand of hair out of my face. “Are you okay?” he asked gently.

My heart was in my throat as we stared at each other for a moment, unable to say anything.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I finally managed. “Big Mac put some stuff on the wound, though she didn’t say what it was.”

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Of course she didn’t. Witches will always act mysterious and string you along until the bill comes. Never trust a witch.”

Wasn’t that the truth. I wouldn’t need to be reminded again.

Suddenly, I remembered something. That blue haired woman Greyson had been talking to, earlier.

“Hey,” I said, trying to shake off some of the tension. “Who was that person you were talking to, after the opening ceremony thing? The lady with the blue hair?”

“Nosy,” he teased, with a smile. “That was my friend Joss.”

“She looked like more than just a friend,” I said, before I could stop myself.

A wicked grin spread over his face. “Oh did she?”

“Yes. She had her hand on your arm, and she was talking very close.”

“Scandalous.”

“You said that you’ve never lied to me. Why are you starting now?”

“I’m not lying. Joss and I go way back. I met her before I became a Rogue.”

“Did you guys date? Screw?”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Do I detect a hint of jealousy, love?”

“No,” I said, a little too quickly and a little too loud. “I’m just saying that she seemed into you, and she’s pretty. Why not go after her? A Rogue on the streets, a Rogue in the sheets, eh?”

“And why are you so interested in my love life, all of a sudden?” he asked, eyes sparkling. “Starting up a matchmaking service?”

I didn’t *know* why I was suddenly so interested in Greyson’s love life. Maybe it was because if Greyson started dating someone, he wouldn’t bother me so much. *Tempt* me so much. He was just so…*distracting.* And I couldn’t afford any distractions right now—not when Xavier needed all my support and attention before the Lupo Finale.

Of course, I had left him alone in a tent all by himself, so I already wasn’t necessarily doing a great job. He needed rest though!

“It just seems sad that you’re not with anyone,” I said. “Do Rogues have mates? Don’t you ever get lonely?”

“Not when you people provide me with such endless entertainment,” he deadpanned.

“I’m being serious!”

“So am I. It’s sweet of you to care, love, but you don’t need to worry about me. I’m exactly where I should be. Come on, let’s get you back to your tent.”

We didn’t say much to each other as we walked. I was thinking over what he’d said earlier. He’d claimed that he’d never lied to me, and I’d believed him. By the time we reached the pyre, I realized how close we were to Xavier and my tent. I knew Xavier would be mad if he woke up and I wasn’t there, and I also knew he’d be *super* pissed if he found me out of the tent with Greyson. I couldn’t risk him getting upset about anything before the fight.

I looked at Greyson. “I can make it the rest of the way back alone.”

“With your track record? Not very likely. What’s wrong, love? Am I your dirty little secret?” His tone was light, but there was something else below the surface.

I didn’t know how to reply to that.

We both paused, staring at each other. I opened my mouth to say, I don’t even know. You can only be a secret if there’s something going on? But a female voice called out Greyson’s name.

“Greyson!” the female voice called out again.

We both turned to see the blue-haired woman, Joss, walking toward us. “Where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Greyson cleared his throat and plastered on a smile. “Cali, this is Joss. Joss, this is my brother’s girlfriend, Cali. I was just escorting her back to her tent.”

I held out my hand to shake Joss’s. She linked arms with Greyson and batted her too long eyelashes at him. She didn’t even look at me once.

“Nice to meet you,” Joss said, but it clear that Greyson was her only focus.

“Nice to meet you too,” I said slowly. I dropped my arm and looked at Greyson. “If I’m keeping you from something, I really can make it the rest of the way back. It’s literally just over there.” I pointed in the direction of the tent.

“I don’t know…” Greyson said hesitantly.

“I’ll be fine,” I insisted. The last thing I wanted to do was stick around as a third wheel.

“It seems like she’s got this, Grey,” said Joss.

*Grey?* Was she serious right now?

“I really do, *Grey*,” I said. “I’l be there in two seconds if I stop talking to both of you.”

“All right, if you insist. I’ll see you later, Cali. Be careful,” he said, giving me one last look before heading off with Joss, their arms still intertwined. I wondered how close they really were.

I turned around with the full intention of walking back to Xavier’s tent. But then the fire caught my eye.

That damn troublemaker.

I looked around. There was nobody nearby. I took this as an opportunity to circle the flame, determined to figure out whether the thing had *actually* been talking to me. Big Mac may have implied that I was drunk or on magic mushrooms when I’d told her the details, but her initial reaction had been curiosity. There had to be something to it.

I paced around the fire, searching. For what, I didn’t know. Maybe I needed to ask it a question. I watched the fire for a little while longer. I had to admit, there was something pretty freaking soothing about it. No wonder Jay had sleepwalked all the way over here and I was back now. I could already feel my muscles start to relax. Why weren’t more people over here, relaxing by the fire? Instead of fighting, they could roast hot dogs or toast marshmallows.

*Yeah? What are they going to do? Gather around and sing campfire songs?* I chided myself. These wolves were not here to socialize and make friends—they were here to take down my mate. No wieners or s’mores for them.

I scratched my shoulder. Stupid witch, her cream hadn’t done me any good. I wondered if I should ask for a refund, but what could she do? Put my blood back in? Maybe the heat from the fire was having some kind of effect on the cream’s properties. Still, I wished Big Mac wasn’t so mysterious. Maybe I should ask Mrs. Smith about what to do. At least she’d always been helpful.

I stared into the flames again, wondering whether I should try talking. I glanced around to make sure that no one around to hear me before whispering to the fire. “Can you hear me?”

Nothing.

“Can you hear me?” I asked again, a little louder.

Nothing.

Okay, now I was just annoyed. “Come on, wispy-fire-thing, talk to me!” I said, even louder.

Still nothing.

I was really starting to lose my temper. “Talk to me, you fucking Burning Man piece of shit!” I said into the flames.

Suddenly, I heard a voice. “The Alpha’s mate…”

My whole body stiffened. Had the fire really talked to me again? Funny, it had sounded different, earlier—

A cruel, harsh laugh came from behind me.

I spun around, coming face to face with two menacing Rogues. Their eyes were red from the glittering fire. I felt all the blood drain from my face. I didn’t recognize these two Rogues at all… Greyson had been right—there were so many here, Ryker couldn’t be our only problem.

I didn’t have any more time to dwell on it when the Rogues stepped toward me, ready to lunge.

**Episode 183**

I took a step back, my heart pounding. I could feel the heat of the fire on my back, reminding me that there was no way to run.

It looked like I was going to have to fight my way out of this one—or at least stall until someone came to save my ass.

I shouldn’t have let Greyson get away.

“Hey! Back off!” I screamed at them, hoping that if I sounded tough, they might be scared off. Or maybe my yelling would attract Xavier or Lola and Jay.

The Rogues continued to move toward me, and no one was coming save me.

*Fuck.*

*Okay, breathe, this is not the time to panic. Remember what Greyson taught you.* I hadn’t by any means mastered the wrist thing Greyson had shown me, but maybe I’d be able to get it in a life-or-death situation—like right now.

I stood tall, ready to fight. If there was just one of them, I might have had a chance.

The one on the left had a jagged scar across his cheek that looked like a lightning bolt. He smirked at me before snapping his hand out toward me, grabbing my wrist.

*Showtime*.

I flicked my wrist the way Greyson had shown me. But instead of effortlessly breaking out of the Rogue’s grip, I accidentally twisted my whole body. I tripped over my own feet and spun the Rogue around as I fell.

*Well, that didn’t work.* I stared up at the ugly Rogue and did the only thing I could think of.

I kicked him in the nuts.

The Rogue let out a shrill cry as his hands automatically went down to his little wolf-bear. He was so shocked, he stumbled backward into the fire. He gave another scream as he fell to the ground, and the smell of burning hair and flesh filled the air.

*Hey! That actually worked!* Maybe I wasn’t too bad at the whole self-defense thing and just needed to learn more.

I turned to the second Rogue, who was moving towards me, clearly hoping to finish the job the first one couldn’t. I looked over to the fire and grabbed a burning stick that was poking out near the edge. It wasn’t a gun or a curling iron, but it was a whole lot better than a jug of moonshine. Or a spatula.

I swung the burning stick at the Rogue with all my might. But he was faster than I was, dodging the stick with ease. In one quick movement, he slapped the stick out of my hand and snarled at me.

I looked at the Rogue again, feeling much smaller and less confident then I had a few moments ago.

“Hey!” I cried out, trying to keep the shakiness from my voice. “I wouldn’t do this if I were you. I’m Xavier Evers’s mate, and he’ll rip you into pieces if you touch me!”

The Rogue slowed down, just a little. I almost breathed a sigh of relief until I saw that he wasn’t slowing down to retreat; he was slowing down to attack. Moments later, he crouched down and jumped toward me.

I closed my eyes, bracing myself for the blow.

There was a loud a scream, and my eyes snapped open just in time to watch a shirtless Xavier slam into the Rogue, sending both of them crashing to the ground.

I felt a shooting pain in my shoulder as I tried to move out of the way. I gasped in pain, clutching my injury as Xavier and the Rogue wrestled, sparks and embers flying.

I looked on, stunned by my mate’s sudden appearance, but happy nonetheless. I’d always known Xavier would save me, and hey, I’d held my own pretty well. Now, if he could just rip off the Rogue’s head, I’d be thrilled.

But there would be no bloodshed, or head ripping. Instead, Xavier grabbed the guy roughly by the shoulders, pulling him to his feet. He got right in his face, lips pulled back in a snarl.

“Save it for the Finale,” he growled out. “I’ll make sure to kill you where everyone can watch.” He shoved the Rogue and glared at him defiantly, looking like a true Alpha.

The Rogue ran off. The other Rogue managed to roll out of the fire, most of his hair gone and large burn covering his face and arm. He ran off as well. Where he went I couldn’t say, because Xavier was quickly in front of me, blocking my view.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice soft, full of concern. “Did he hurt you?” He took my hand as he looked me over, checking for any damage.

My heart was still racing as I shook my head no. “Just tweaked m- m- my shoulder a b- bit.” My body trembled, making it hard to get the words out.

Xavier moved my shirt to look at my shoulder. “It looks okay,” he assured me, before wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close into his chest. “I was so worried when I woke up and you weren’t there. I was so scared that something happened to you. Where have you been?”

I quickly recounted for Xavier the hunt for Jay that Lola and I had gone on. Finding him at the fire hadn’t been where the strangeness ended of course—there had been the voices from the fire. *Oil and vinegar*. All that. I even included trying to reason with Big Mac on behalf of Jay. When I got to the part about her taking my blood, Xavier was visibly pissed.

“So she took it without your consent?” he asked darkly.

“With a knife,” I said. “That witch is bad news. And then I came back to the tent and those Rogues jumped me, and that’s where you came in.”

I decided to leave out the part about Greyson. The less I talk about Greyson, the less upset Xavier would be. And it wasn't like anything had happened. He’d been looking out for me, that was it.

Xavier looked at me for a long time, clearly trying to understand my story. “So the fire told you about salad dressing?” he finally asked.

I sighed. “Is that really the part about the fire you’re choosing to address, here?”

“I don’t *understand* the story. “

“It doesn't matter. Though you have to admit, I handled that first Rogue pretty well all by myself.”

I was hoping that Xavier would be impressed that I’d taken down that Rogue, but he looked upset.

“Caliana, I mean this in the best possible way,” he said. “How many times do I need to ask you not to wander around? I keep telling you it’s not safe, and you keep doing it, and danger keeps finding you. Which is *why* it’s not safe. Do you want to worry me to death?”

“No,” I said. “I’m trying to keep you and our friends safe however I can.”

Xavier pulled me into a tight hug that surprised me. I hugged him back, resting my cheek against his chest.

“How can I be mad at you when you’re this fucking *cute*?” he asked, pressing a kiss to my temple

*You are his weakness.* The words rushed into my mind. Instantly, guilt set in. I probably should have told Xavier where I was going, or at the very least left a note. It was a horrible feeling knowing that the things I was doing to try to protect not only Xavier but his pack could wind up hurting him somehow.

“I’m sorry,” I told him earnestly. “I won’t do it again. But what were *you* doing wandering around? Youshould have been sleeping, saving your energy.”

“I had to take a piss,” he said bluntly.

“Gross, seriously?”

Xavier shrugged. “I still have to, actually. And now you’re coming with me. I’m on official Cali duty.” He started toward the woods, pulling me along with him.

“Hell no! I’m not going to watch you pee!”

“I’m not letting you wander off again. You’re coming with me.”

I sighed. “Fine, but I’ll wait over here, thank you very much.”

“Fine. But stay here, okay? Don’t go wandering off,” he warned, before heading a little further into the woods.

Roger that. The only thing on my mind was getting back to sleep. It didn’t seem like there was much more I could do for anyone by wandering around anyway.

A light flickered up above me. It was a wisp, no bigger than a firefly. It was pulsating in various colors, from bright red to deep violet. I couldn’t quite understand it, but I felt a strange pull toward it, like it was telling me to follow as it moved towards the woods.

*No*, I thought, hoping the wisp would somehow understand. I’d just decided not to go off and worry anyone needlessly.

The wisp grew in size, continuing to change from color to color. I watched as it began to float through the trees. Follow me, it was saying.

Shit.

Giving one last look over at where Xavier was, I took off following the wisp deeper into the woods. My heart was pounding as I ran after the wisp. I needed to find out what it was trying to tell me and then get back. As quickly as I had started running, the wisp stopped. We were in the middle of the woods. The wisp flared one last time before fading away.

What the hell? Where did it go?

Moments later, I heard movement coming from ahead of me. My whole body froze in place.

Someone was there, and it wasn’t Xavier.

**Episode 184**

Without thinking, I dove behind a nearby bush to take cover. I’d been in enough crazy situations to know that the best thing to do when you see a stranger is to hide—especially in a place infested with werewolves and Rogues.

I peered out through the branches. My gaze was immediately drawn to a large, intimidating man, sitting calmly on a rock. He was predictably shirtless, showing off his muscles. Actually, he looked more muscle than human. What, was there a Mr. Universe pageant after the Finale?

I studied him some more, noticing that he was doing something with his hands, though I couldn’t see exactly what. Who the hell was this guy? And what was he doing?

I pushed a few branches out of my way to get a better look, craning my neck a little. With the rising sun coming up over the trees, I could get a better look at what he was doing. I watched as he took out a small brush and carefully painted each of his nails.

I covered my mouth to keep myself from laughing. I wasn’t a big believer in gender roles, but there was something very surprising about this big beefy bro doing his nails alone in the woods.

*Who in his right mind would give himself a manicure right before the Lupo Finale?* I thought to myself. Even *I* wouldn’t do that, and my nails were pretty bad. *Maybe he’ll give me a manicure too, after he’s done.* If *he doesn’t rip me to shreds first.*

Suddenly, the man looked up as if he’d heard something. His eyes scanned the area around him. I didn’t blame him—I’d be self-conscious too if I was painting my nails alone in the woods. These woods were not the most friendly feeling in the world.

As he moved, his nails became more visible. They were bright, so bright that the glint of the sun hitting the silver nearly blinded me. I gasped as I covered my mouth again and looked away.

*Shit, did he hear me?* Panic filled me as I held my breath, praying to whichever deity that was listening that he hadn’t heard me, or seen me hiding in the bushes. I eased myself deeper down behind the bush, trying to make myself as small as possible. My heart was beating so fast, I was worried that the man would hear it.

I was so scared—and not just for myself. What if Xavier ended up having to fight him, as well? He looked pretty strong, and Xavier had to save his strength for the Finale.

After a moment, the man turned his attention back to his nails. I took the opportunity to clamber quietly out of the bush and move as quietly as possible to the spot where I was meant to have waited for Xavier.

I looked around the clearing, wondering why the wisp had led me to that man. What had it been trying to show me? More to the point, why had I followed it in the first place? I couldn’t explain it—it had just felt like the right thing to do.

*This has been the weirdest trip ever. Next time I take a vacation, I’m going to Hawaii.*

“Oh good, you’re actually here,” Xavier said, with a mixture of sarcasm and genuine surprise. I’d made it back just in time it looked like. “Seriously though, if you keep running off I’m putting a bell on you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t need to look even more like a pet to the other packs,” I said. “Let’s go. These woods give me the creeps.”

Xavier gave me a puzzled look and a sigh. “You've never liked them, have you?” He followed me anyway as I quickly led the way out of the forest.

When we were safely out of the forest, I pointed at the trees. “Did you know there are Rogues in there?” I asked. “And that by leaving me alone for five minutes, I was in more danger than when I’ve been running around on my own?”

Xavier stared at me, raising an eyebrow. “Of course there are Rogues in the forest. There are Rogues all over. The difference was that I was like, two feet away, Cali. If someone were to come up, I’d be there in a second. That’s why I don’t want you wandering around by yourself.”

“But you shouldn’t always be worrying about me,” I pressed. “then people will know to come for me to get to you. Like those other Rogues did.”

Xavier sighed deeply. “I have no idea what I’m going to do with you.”

“Love me?”

He smiled.

I used his good mood to ask another question that had been bothering me. “Do you know anything about wisps?”

Xavier shrugged. “Wisps are some magic bullshit.”

Oh, I really hoped they hadn’t heard that.

“Like Big Mac magic?”

Xavier sighed, rolling his eyes. “No. Yes? I don’t know. I only know that wisps are ancient nature magic, and we’re surrounded by fucking trees.”

“I understand that, Xavier,” I said evenly, trying very hard not to lose my temper. “But why are they appearing *here?* Why were they part of the ritual to begin the Lupo Finale?”

“Werewolves and nature are bound together. Wisps often appear during important werewolf rituals, though I’ve only ever seen them at the Lupo Finale. Some people believe they act as guides, or something. I’ve never really thought much about them.” He gave me a look. “Why are you so interested?”

“I saw one while I was waiting for you,” I admitted, waiting to see his reaction before I launched into the story of the wisp leading me to the nail-painting Rogue.

But Xavier just shrugged. “Let’s get back to the tent.”

I hesitated. It’d probably be best if I didn’t tell him about the wisp and the Rogue. He’d bite my head off if he found out I’d wandered off again. Literally. Plus he didn’t need more stuff to worry about, when the Finale was so close. I needed him to be well-rested.

I put my arm around his strong torso and cuddled close to him. “Yeah, let’s get you to bed.”

Xavier smiled down at me. “Do you want to go back to bed? Or to sleep?” he said, with a mischievous wink.

“You’re bad!” I cried out, smacking him across the chest with my free hand. “Stop thinking dirty thoughts! You need sleep. *Actual* sleep. You have to get ready for tonight.”

Xavier laughed as we reached our tent. “Are you sure?” he asked, kissing me.

I leaned into the kiss for a moment, enjoying the tenderness of it.

*Xavier has to sleep! No sexy thoughts.* I reminded myself, pulling away. “Bed, mister! Right now,” I said sternly, pointing at the sleeping bag.

He chuckled at that. “You’re cute when you tell me what to do.”

“And you’re cute when you do what I say. Now sleep!”

He smirked. “If you say so. But watch—as soon as we get in there, you won’t be able to keep your hands off me, babe.”

I rolled my eyes as we crawled into the tent. Moments later, my head was resting on his chest as he wrapped his arms around me. I’d thought he might try to make a move on me—or at least kiss me some more which I would've welcomed—but instead, Xavier’s body relaxed around me as he fell into a deep sleep.

I smiled into his chest. Good. He really did need the rest.Now all I had to do was fall asleep.

Somehow that turned out to be much more difficult than I’d expected. My guilt over my fight with Lola was gone, but I was still on edge. You’d think that going through multiple near-death experiences in a short period of time would make you exhausted, but I was wide awake, adrenaline still coursing through my veins.

*Come on, get to sleep. You’re going to need it, too, considering the night ahead of you,* I told myself sternly, closing my eyes, determined to force myself to fall asleep.

However, instead of restful sleep, I kept seeing images of the wisp in my mind, and the fire that kept calling out to me, saying ‘oil and vinegar don’t mix’. And then there was that man, painting his nails in the forest. I didn’t know why he’d been doing it, but the image made my stomach twist up in worried knots. Greyson’s words kept replaying in my mind on a constant loop: *You are his weakness, you are his weakness…* I tried to push it all out, to get some sleep. Instead, I tossed and turned and worried.

Finally, after what felt like hours, I drifted into an uneasy sleep.

Five seconds later, our tent flap burst open, filling the room with bright, almost blinding sunlight.

I was PISSED.

I had JUST fallen asleep. Whoever had opened up my tent and blinded me was going to get their werewolf ass kicked.

I sat up in my sleeping bag to see Colton standing over us. Of COURSE it was Colton. Who else *other* than Captain Cockblock would burst into someone else’s tent without knocking?

I glared at him. “Have you ever heard of knocking?” I hissed.

He glared back, but didn’t say anything. Instead, he prodded Xavier to his feet.

“What’s going on?” Xavier mumbled, his voice heavy with sleep.

“Brother, it’s time.”

**Episode 185**

*It’s time.*

The words hit me like a bucket of ice cold water, freezing all my muscles. I couldn’t comprehend what Colton was saying. *I thought we had more time.*

For a while, I’d thought that I’d welcome this moment—in a few hours, it would all be over. One way or another. But now that it was here, I was quickly discovering that I’d give everything I had to delay it as long as possible. My stomach was all twisted, my chest felt tight, and I had the strongest desire to run away as fast as I could and never look back.

But I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t even cry or complain. I had to be strong. For Xavier’s sake.

So I said nothing as I dressed and walked over the campfire. Xavier, Jay, Lola, Colton, Pip, Mace, Violet, Lilac, and Shaggy were all already there, eating breakfast. Or I guess breakfast for dinner. However we wanted to look at it.

“Here, I saved you a plate,” said Xavier, handing me a plate of bacon, eggs, and toast.

The smell of it turned my stomach, but I knew I needed to eat something. I’d need my strength for whatever happened tonight.

I forced a smile. “Thanks babe,” I said weakly, sitting down between Xavier and Lola. Xavier was talking to Mace about something or other, their voices low. Probably more werewolf secrets that no one would ever let me in on. Right now I was thankful. I didn’t need more on my plate than I had already.

I picked at my food and turned to Lola. “Why is everyone here?” I asked quietly.

“It’s kinda like a pep rally. Everyone’s here to support Xavier in the Finale. To show their allegiance to him as the Blue Bloods pack.”

I nodded. “That’s nice,” I said. Even though it would be nicer if there were more people here. We could use all the support we could get.

“How’s your shoulder feeling?” Lola asked. “Sorry I lost track of you last night.”

“It’s fine. My shoulder still itches like hell. How did things go with Jay? Did you talk to him about everything? I went over to Big Mac’s tent to try and get her to change her mind.”

“Did it work?” Lola asked, a little too loud, her eyes wide.

I shook my head sadly. “No. I’m sorry. Instead she attacked me with a knife and stole my blood. How messed up is that?.”

“Well, thank you. At least *you* tried. Jay won’t even try to bargain again with that crazy witch. I swear, if she didn’t have magic powers, I’d bite her face off.”

“You know what’s bothering me too? Something’s going on between Big Mac and Mrs. Smith. Big Mac seemed really upset about her last night. She almost looked like she was crying.”

“Good, let her cry. At least she has two eyes to cry with. I don’t know what the deal is between them, other than the fact that they *really* don’t like each other.”

I’d opened my mouth to say something else when I heard chanting in the distance. I couldn’t make out what the hell they were saying, but chanting was never a good sign—except at a sporting event, and even that was never great. “What the hell is that?” I asked.

“Just the Rogues preparing for the Finale. Nothing to worry about,” Lola added quickly, when she saw the anxious look on my face. “It’s just a thing they do.”

“Well, I wish they’d stop. It’s very annoying,” I grumbled. *Some people* hadn’t gotten any sleep last night.

“That’s kind of the point. It’s to psych you out. All of us.”

“It’s like when my Dad used to have us go to basketball games. We’d have to chant at the other team when they tried to make a free-throw, so they’d miss. It didn’t work that much, and it we can’t let it work on us.”

*Dad.*

I gasped, like lightning had hit me. My parents! With everything going on, I’d completely forgotten about my parents. They were probably worried sick about me!

I grabbed onto Lola’s arm. “Shit, Lola. I have to call my parents.”

Lola looked at me like I’d grown three heads. “What? Why? And *now*?”

“What if I turn into a werewolf tonight?” I said, my voice laced with panic. “What if I die? I want to hear their voices and know that they’re both okay. What if this is the last time I ever talk to them? I have to call them.”

Lola wasn’t as sympathetic as I’d hoped. She didn’t even stop eating her breakfast. Even though she had her dads to think of too!

“Well, good luck with that, because there’s no way you’re getting any signal down here.”

“We’ll see about that,” I said, pulling my cell phone out of my pocket. Hey, if Lilac and Violet had service to upload prank videos, why couldn’t I call my mom?

My optimism was short-lived. I turned on my phone and saw that I didn’t have a signal bar, not even wifi. Really? Big Mac had an enormous tent and bar of moonshine, but she couldn’t work a little router wifi magic?

“Told you so,” Lola said, through a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

“Hey! You can either be part of the solution or you can be part of the problem,” I huffed. “And don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Well, Big Mac is selling service. You can try her.”

I scoffed at that. Of course. She would have it, but only for sale. “Yeah right, like I’d go back to that witch. I might have sold my virginity to help my parents, but I draw the line at selling a body part.”

“Priorities,” Lola said, deadpan.

“There must be service somewhere,” I said, looking around. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a small, glowing wisp, moving toward a tall tree. Well, Xavier had say that wisps served as guides—maybe this one was guiding me to cell service. It couldn’t hurt to try.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Lola as I stood up.

Before she could respond, I raced over to the tree and started to climb, my eyes trained on the wisp as it led me up toward the top. Once I’d made it up, the wisp faded away.

I pulled out my phone. *Come on, come on,* I thought, trying to keep hold of the tree branch while I held up my phone. I was delighted to see a single bar on my screen. *Maybe it’ll be enough…*

It was a struggle between me and gravity as I tried to maintain my balance while making the call. I couldn’t believe the situation I was in: hanging out in a tree, calling my parents while hundreds of bloodthirsty werewolves were just below me, ready to kill me and my mate. It was absurd! And probably not something I should tell my parents.

The phone rang twice before my dad’s comforting voice came through on the other line. “Cali! Baby! How are you? Honey, it’s Cali! I’ll put you on speakerphone.”

As soon as I heard his voice, I wanted to cry. I was so happy to hear that he sounded okay. It wasn’t until I heard their voices that I realized how much I missed them, how much I missed home.

“Dad! Hi!” I called out, smiling. “How is everything?”

“Cali?” Mom’s voice sounded stronger than ever, and it pushed me even closer to tears. “Cali, how are you?”

“Mom! You sound so good! How are you feeling?”

“Feeling great, honey. But what about you, how’s camping going? You aren’t hurt are you?” Mom asked.

As soon as she said that, my shoulder started to itch and my finger throbbed. I looked down, just as the Rogues began to assemble underneath the tree. “Oh yeah, I’m fine. Having a great time. Wish I’d started camping a long time ago. Would’ve been fun,” I lied, swallowing past a large lump in my throat. Though I *did* wish I’d gone camping a long time ago—at least that way, I’d know what I was doing now.

“Honey, what’s wrong? Are you crying?” Mom asked.

*Snap out of it,* I told myself sharply. This could be the last time I ever heard their voices, and vice versa. I needed to be as upbeat as possible for them.

“No, I’m fine! Just the smoke from the campfire getting in my eyes,” I said.

“When are you coming home to visit, honey?” Dad asked. “We miss our favorite girl.”

I really wished my possible last conversation with my parents didn’t have to be filled with lies. “I’m not sure yet. I’ll let you know as soon as I get back, though,” I told them. If I ever got back.

“Well, we can always come to you, sweetie. Mom’s feeling so much better—we’ve been talking about coming to visit you if the doctors clear it,” said Dad.

I instantly felt sick to my stomach at the thought of my parents anywhere near a werewolf. Or a Rogue.

“Wow, I really wish you could, guys. That would be so awesome. I’m so happy you’re feeling better, Mom,” I said, trying very hard to keep my cool. I wasn’t ten anymore. I couldn’t break down and cry to my parents.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Cali?” Dad asked.

Okay, maybe I wasn’t doing a great job at maintaining a brave face.

“I am, Dad. Don’t worry about me. But I have to go. I love you both. So much.”

“We love you too, Cali,” said Mom.

“With all our hearts, kiddo,” said Dad.

“Okay, goodbye.” As soon as I hung up, tears started to fall down my face. I sat there and let the tears fall, the seriousness of everything hitting me hard. I just wanted to go home.

I took a deep breath and looked down, hoping I’d be able to climb down as easily as I’d climbed up.

And that was when I saw a muscled, sinister-looking rogue, staring up at me with his silver claws glinting.

**Episode 186**

I was so startled by the man’s appearance that I nearly slipped, fear throwing me off balance.

The man sneered at my struggle to stay on the branch. His fat, wet tongue darted out of his mouth to lick his lips. I would’ve gagged if I hadn’t been so frightened.

I watched with wide eyes as he slipped on a black glove, catching a glimpse of the silver nail polish he was wearing.

*Silver…* The realization came crashing down. Silver could kill werewolves. Good thing I wasn't one yet, then. If this beefy bro entered the ring having silver tipped nails, Xavier didn’t have a chance.

The Rogue seemed to be reading my thoughts, because in a deep, menacing voice he said, “First, I’ll take care of your mate. Then I’ll come for you.” He moved his hand to his neck and made a slicing motion across his throat.

Before I had time to take another break he was gone, heading toward the gnarly tree at great speed.

As soon as he was gone I gasped, unaware that I’d been holding in my breath until I started breathing again. My whole body was shaking. Who the hell was that guy, and why did he have silver on his nails? Wasn’t that cheating? Weren’t there rules in this stupid competition?

I didn’t know. In fact, all I knew for sure was that nail polish dude scared the living shit out of me.

I needed to get out of here, now.

However, I was so deep in my fear and desire to get the fuck out of the tree as soon as possible, that I climbed down too carelessly. In my rush, I accidentally let go of a branch and fell.

*Way to go, Caliana,* I thought bitterly as I hurtled toward the ground. When would I learn not to fall out of things? On the bright side, at least I’d talked to my parents before I died, and told them I loved them; that was more than most people got. I braced for impact, hoping I’d die fast—

But instead of hitting the ground, I was engulfed in warm, strong arms. My eyes snapped open and I saw Xavier looking down at me, holding my body close to his chest. I opened my mouth to speak but no words came out, my brain in too much shock that he was here.

Xavier did not look as happy I felt. He was scowling down at me, his eyes angry and serious. “What the hell is wrong with you?” he growled out. “What if I hadn’t been here to catch you? You’d be splattered all over the ground! DO YOU EVER THINK ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR ACTIONS?”

I could feel him physically shaking with fury. “I- I- I’m sorry!” I gasped out, trying to get my mouth to work. “I- I- I needed to c- c- call my parents. I didn’t want to die without hearing their voices one last time.”

Xavier was not as moved by this as I hoped. “And you had to go all the way up there to hear them?” he demanded.

“It was the only place I could get a signal,” I said weakly, feeling embarrassed. I really should have been more careful.

Then I remembered the man with the silver nails. “But Xavier! When I was up there, I—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Caliana!” he growled. “I don’t want to hear you word-vomit an explanation. You are not making things easier for me, here. Why do you always have to run off! We talked about this literally a half hour ago. I shouldn’t keep feeling I need put a bell around your neck. But at least that way I’d be able to keep track of you.” He gave me a long kiss, then pulled me into a long hug. “I hate being so worried about you, Cali.”

Another deep pang of guilt hit me as Xavier held me. Here we were, on the eve of the Finale, and I was stressing him out and distracting him. Greyson had told me I was Xavier’s weakness, and maybe he’d been right. I certainly wasn’t his strength, right now.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled into his chest. “I just didn't want my parents not to hear from me, in case.” I considered pushing the silver nail polish issue, but decided against it. I could tell him later, when he wasn’t so upset with me.

“We should go back to the tent,” he said, putting me down. “The Rogues are starting to gather, and they’re all on edge. It’s not safe for you here.” He took my hand, and we walked back to the tent without another word.

“Take off your shirt,” Xavier said, when we were inside the tent.

I gaped at him. “Are you serious? You want to do it right here? Right *now?* Are you out of your mind!” There were a lot of hormones in the air especially after last night, but sex couldn't be the only thing on werewolves’ minds right now…

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t be stupid. I want to check your shoulder. Lola told me it’s still bothering you. Let me see it.”

“Fine, you perv,” I said, lifting my shirt over my head, smirking a little when I noticed Xavier’s eyes going straight to my chest. “My shoulder is up here, dearest,” I teased.

He moved closer to me, his warm hands touching my shoulder as he looked it over. I might have called Xavier out a few seconds ago for being a perv, but when he was so close to me, I just wanted to kiss him. I almost turned around to do just that, but decided against it. I couldn’t keep distracting him.

But it was Xavier who pulled the trigger by leaning in and gently kissing me on the shoulder.

“Are you scared” I asked, leaning into his kiss without thinking about it.

“Not scared, exactly,” he said, thinking it over. “More anxious than anything else. Like I just want to get it over with. But no, I’m not afraid. And you shouldn’t be either.” He was standing in front of me now, cupping my chin to make sure I was looking at him. “I love you, Caliana Hart. And no matter what happens today, I will always protect you.” He kissed me gently.

I could feel tears running down my face. My cheeks were bright red, and I was embarrassed and mad at myself for crying. I wanted so badly to be strong for him, and there I was, sobbing.

“I love you too, Xavier Evers,” I whispered out, my voice thick with tears as I kissed him back.

When we pulled apart, Xavier was looking down at me, a bittersweet smile on his face as he rested his forehead against mine. With a surprising gentleness, he took his thumb and wiped each and every one of my tears away.

“Shh, don’t cry, baby,” he cooed gently, as he kissed the top of my head. “I don’t want the last think I see in my human form to be my mate crying.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” I said, trying to force a smile. “I just love you so much, and I get so scared for you.”

“I know. And I know I haven’t been the best at explaining everything to you, and I understand why you’ve been scared. But Jay, Lola, and Colton are going to be with you at all times. They’ll keep you safe. I promise.”

“Even Colton?” I croaked out.

He chuckled. “Even Colton. I forced him to, but deep down he loves you too. He’ll do whatever it takes to protect you if anything happens to me. Trust them like you trust me. Will you do that, babe? Will you do that for me?”

I nodded, trying very hard not to start sobbing again.

“Good,” he said softly, before leaning in and kissing me again. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. I never wanted to let him go, never wanted this moment to end. If I kept kissing him, if I kept them in my arms, at least he’d be safe. There wouldn’t be Rogues, or a full moon, or a Lupo Finale. There’d only be us.

If only I could have made that moment last forever.

But I couldn’t.

Instead, Xavier gently pushed away from me, untangling himself from my arms, despite my best efforts to keep him with me.

“See you soon, Luna,” he said with a wink.

I could only nod as my heart swelled.

He took a few steps back and locked eyes with me for a moment before he started to shift. The sound of cracking bones filled the room, and I watched as the clothes were torn from his body, his bare skin replaced with fur as he fell onto all fours.

When he was done, the man that I loved was gone. In his place stood a powerful black werewolf, his dark eyes on me.

“I love you,” I whispered.

The wolf nodded before he turned around and walked out of the tent, taking my heart with him.

**Episode 187**

I took a step toward Xavier as I watched him leave, my whole body aching to stop him.

*Don’t go*, I wanted to screamed at him. *Please don’t go.* I couldn’t believe this was actually happening. I’d always thought we’d find a way out of this. If this had been a book or a movie, I’d have found a way out, outsmarted the Rogues and the other packs. No way would Xavier have ended up in the ring.

But this wasn’t a movie, and our time was up.

*No.*

My breath started to come out in quick pants as my chest tightened. I tucked my head between my knees as I hyperventilated, panic filling my whole body. I couldn’t do this. I couldn’t stand there and watch him die. I couldn’t watch and wonder with every battle if this was where my world was going to fall apart…

“No!” I gasped out, speaking to myself as I lifted my head back up. Having a panic attack in our tent wasn’t helpful. The Finale was going to happen, whether I wanted it to or not, so the least I could was be strong for Xavier. I *had* to be strong for him. That was the most important thing I could do at that moment. More important than anything I’d ever done. I couldn’t freak out like normal. Xavier deserved better than that.

I needed some air.

I exited the stuffy tent. The chill of the early evening winds was a relief, making me feel something else other than mind-numbing anxiety. I looked around. The camp area was completely vacant.

I wondered where everyone had gone, until I remembered that everyone was probably at the Finale clearing, by the gnarly tree. I shuddered at the thought. I knew that I should join Lola and the others, but I wasn’t ready yet. I was too shaken to move. I needed to breathe before I could put my brave face on. I couldn’t face the Rogues and packs looking like the crying mess I’d been twenty minutes ago. I needed a minute to decompress.

Plus, all the Rogues were at the Finale. They weren’t going to bother with me when the promise of blood was so close. In fact, this was probably the safest I’d been since I’d started out on this wild journey.

I wandered around the campsite, trying to take my mind off my nagging thoughts and get my breathing back to normal. Fun fact: werewolves were probably the messiest creatures to ever exist. Seriously, there were broken beer bottles, pizza boxes (how it was possible to order pizza here, I had no clue), and ripped clothing everywhere. And judging by the amount of ripped panties on the ground, it was safe to assume that there were going to be a lot of wolf puppies born nine months from now.

As I was fighting the impulse to clean up after everyone, I felt something behind me.

I knew what it was before I saw it. A tiny wisp, no bigger than a firefly. It twirled in front of me, almost like it was beckoning me to follow.

I looked at the small creature, my eyes widening. Why was it here? Where was it going to take me? The wisp track record wasn’t exactly good. So far, they’d guided me to a Rogue giving himself a manicure and up a tree to get cell reception. Where would they lead me next? Off a cliff?

Still, it wasn’t like I could ignore them. They hadn’t technically gotten me hurt or anything. They’d been pretty useful. If I refused their help, would they keep following me around, or worse attack me?

And besides, I did want to know what they had to do say? What they wanted me to know?

I sighed. “Okay, I’ll come with you, but it had better not be too far,” I warned, before following the wisp.

I wanted to be hopeful. The wisp didn’t seem openly hostile toward me. Maybe it was going to show me something that could help Xavier win the Finale. It was that hope that made me hurry after it. I knew I was getting further and further away from the camping area and closer to the woods, but I wasn’t worried—I would have done anything to help Xavier. Plus, the wisp would have to be a real jerk to lead me deep into the woods and then ditch me. Then again, in my experience, most magical creatures were, in fact, jerks.

However, as I watched the sun sink over the trees, another fear hit me: the full moon would be rising soon, and my fate would be revealed at any moment. The thought made me gulp loudly, but I tried to push it from my mind. It might be too late for me, but I could still be with the man I loved.

So, with only the light from the wisp to guide me, I hurried on.

*How the hell am I supposed to dodge all of these branches?* I wondered to myself as I made my way through the trees, still pretty impressed that I hadn’t run directly into one of them. Even though I had gotten smacked in the face with a branch a few times, but that was kind of inevitable here it seemed.

I could hear running water ahead of me. Maybe the wisp was taking me to a stream or something? A magical lake? But the closer I got to it, the stronger the sound got, until it sounded more like a waterfall than a stream.

Finally, the forest opened up into a small clearing. I watched as the wisp circled above the glimmering pond in the center, spinning around until in vanished into the night.

*Stupid wisp, what the fuck was I supposed to gather from this?*

I squinted up at the sky, trying to see where the wisp had gone, but I couldn’t see a thing. Maybe I needed glasses.

I approached the edge of the water, taking off my shoes and stepping in. I looked across to that the waterfall on the opposite side. I felt goosebumps on my skin.

*Why did the wisp lead me here*, I wondered, looking around for some kind of sign. Anything to point me in the right direction.

“Um, what am I supposed to do?” I called out, rolling my injured shoulder.

Suddenly, the water before me began to bubble. Without, warning a man breached the surface, complete with a *Little Mermaid-*stylehair flip.

I gasped when I realized who it was. “Greyson,” I whispered.

And it was him. Greyson, in all his glory. I watched, almost hungry as the water streamed down his bare, toned chest. I usually looked away when Greyson was naked, so I’d never noticed the tattoo on the side of his torso. I couldn’t see exactly what it was, my eyes too distracted by his muscled arms as he pushed his blond hair back from his face.

Hot damn.

Why was everyone in the Evers family a freaking GQ model?

*OH MY GOD, STOP OGLING YOUR MATE’S BROTHER!* I mentally yelled at myself, when I realized I was licking my lips. *SNAP OUT OF IT.*

I needed to get out of there, fast.

I nearly tripped over my feet as I hurried away. Maybe I’d be able to just slip back the way I’d come, before Greyson saw me. That way, no one would be the wiser. Stupid wisp, this was the third time it had screwed me over. I was never going to trust them again!

My stumbling caused a small amount of splashing, and Greyson turned toward the noise. His features lit up with surprise when he saw me. “Cali?” he called out.

I stopped what I was doing, frozen by his gaze. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you while you were… bathing? Swimming? I’m not sure what you’re doing,” I admitted, trying very hard not to look at his abs.

“It’s okay,” he said gently. “I’m just preparing.”

“Preparing for what?”

He didn’t answer, just waded toward me as I watched him. I was grateful he was wearing shorts under the water, but curious about what he was up to.

“I’m really glad you came,” he admitted. “I didn’t know if I’d see you before the Finale started.”

“Well, I should be getting back. The others are expecting me, and—”

My words were cut off when he took my hand. The water was ice cold, but his hand was warm. That tingling feeling I kept getting with him was back, and stronger than ever.

“I wanted to see you before everything. I have a confession to make.”

I gave him a skeptical look, very aware that he was still holding my hand. That I was ALLOWING him to hold my hand. “What is it, Greyson?” I asked.

He paused, his silver eyes looking deep into mine. “I’m sorry I lied to you.”

**Episode 188**

I looked at him, confused.

“You lied?” I asked. At this point, I really shouldn’t have been surprised: men in the Evers family lied as easy as breathing. I took a step away from him, feeling defensive. “About what?”

Greyson’s hand was still holding mine as he moved closer to me, his silver eyes locked on mine, like they were searching for something. “When I told you I’d never lied to you before, that wasn’t true.” His voice was deep, filled with need and urgency, and it made my heart race. What was he going to confess?

He was very close to me now, our bodies almost touching. Despite having been submerged in the ice-cold water, his body felt fire-hot. I couldn’t pull away. I could barely breathe. I was hanging on his every word. Every fiber of my being needed to know what he was going to say.

“When we were at the house,” Greyson said, leaning close. “And I told you I didn’t want to kiss you.” His head dipped down and moved to my ear, his lips brushed against it as he whispered. “That was a lie.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out. What could I even say to that? My mind was blank, unable to focus on anything but Greyson’s words. I breathed in his scent, so comforting and temping. It was the scent of a man who’d saved me countless times, and who I couldn’t get close enough to right now. My whole body was trembling. With fear… or desire. My emotions were so mixed up that I could no longer figure them out.

I knew what I *should* do: I should pull away from him and run away as fast as I could, back to Xavier, back to where I was needed.

But why couldn’t I move? Why couldn’t I leave?

Why was I squeezing his hand back?

“What?” It was all I could manage to say.

“I wanted to kiss you then. And again, by the salt wall. And in the woods when you were injured. And in the clearing, the first time the Rogues attacked us,” Greyson said. His lips moved up, kissing every inch of my skin before they reached my cheek and sent a shockwave of desire down my spine.

He continued. “And in the dressing room. And every single moment, from the first time I held you in my arms at that party. I’ve tried to push it aside, but I can’t. I can’t lie to you anymore, love.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but only a breathy moan came out as he moved closer. His breath was hot against my skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps. I couldn’t stop staring into his moonlight eyes, and my own body betrayed me by moving closer to him, trying to close the gap between us.

*I can’t do this,* I thought, my heart racing. *I* shouldn’t *do this. But… I want to. More than anything.*

Kiss me. *Please*.

“I know this is right,” I heard Greyson say, though his lips never moved. “It’s not wrong to kiss your mate, is it?”

I pulled back for a moment and raised an eyebrow at him, searching his eyes for the answer to that question. Everyone had told me about him: that he was a liar, a murderer, a Rogue, a pack traitor. But then there was the man who’d saved my life more times than I could count. Who was there for me whenever I needed him. The man who’d only lied to me once.

I knew the answer to his question.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I closed the space between our bodies, until my lips met his in a greedy haze.

My whole body was engulfed with a raging fire, the likes of which I’d never, *ever* felt before. His lips were soft and full of need and desire, as he kissed me back. His hands moved down my waist, giving my ass a squeeze before lifting me up and carrying me out of the water. My legs wrapped around his waist tightly as we kissed, making me feel as light as a feather.

His tongue brushed against my lips, gentle yet demanding as he begged for more, which I granted. Immediately, he deepened the kiss, making my toes curl. After having been denied for so long, our mouths were famished for each other.

I felt cool, rough bark against my back as he pressed me against a tree, his hips grinding ever so slightly up against mine, teasing, tempting. His hands were everywhere… my hair, my neck, my cheek. I moaned loudly as he dipped his hand into my shirt to cup my breast.

In the back of my mind, I knew I should have been trying to resist. But I couldn’t. And honestly? I didn’t want to. Not when the need was this great, not when we’d been waiting so long. I melted against him as every feeling I’d ever had about Greyson flooded to the surface. The dam I’d built to hold back my feelings for him burst. And if I was going to hell for this, I was at least going to enjoy it.

I moved my lips down his neck, grabbing a fistful of his hair as I kissed and sucked his skin. He let out a groan of need, his hand coming away from my chest to grab my ass again. In one smooth motion, he adjusted his hold on me, and I gasped. Greyson bent his head back down to recapture my lips, pulling me even closer.

“You are so beautiful, love,” he breathed out, when we had to part for air, his hot mouth still on my neck. His hips did circles against mine, making me want to faint—did he know how fucking *good* that felt? “I’ve wanted you for so long, Cali. Needed you. You have no idea how long I’ve been dreaming of you.”

A moan left my lips in response. My own hands trying to touch as much of his skin as possible as the found their way to his chest, then his shoulder, then his arms.

“Cali,” he growled, kissing my collarbone before he moved back up to my face. He looked into my eyes as both of us breathed heavily. “Cali, I—”

His words were interrupted by the sound of a trumpet, blaring in the distance. Greyson’s whole body tensed up at the sound, and my brain finally came back online.

“What was that?” I breathed out, like we hadn’t just been making out ten seconds ago.

Greyson wasn’t looking at me, his head turned toward the source of the sound. “It’s a call to arms,” he said. Gently, he sent me back down on my feet. His body pulled away from mine, and both of us grimaced at the loss of contact. “The Lupo Finale is about to begin.” He looked at me and cupped my cheek again, looking deep into my eyes. He looked conflicted. “I have to go.”

He pulled me into one last kiss before turning and running away. I stared after him, my lips still parted.

Holy shit. What had I just done?

What had I just *done*?

I stood there on wobbly legs, too stunned to move. I wanted to run after him. To do what, I wasn’t sure. To slap him? Kiss him? Ask him what the hell just happened? Probably a combination of all three, to be honest.

I sank to the ground as a growing terror filled my body. While parts of me still tingled with excitement, I was also consumed with dread as the weight of what had just happened fell on me. What had I done? I’d kissed someone who wasn’t Xavier. That wasn’t supposed to happen, right? That wasn't supposed to be something I wanted, let alone acted on.

What the fuck was I going to do now? Confront Greyson about it? Maybe he’d tricked me with all of these werewolf mind games?

No, even as I was thinking it, I knew it couldn’t have been a trick. I’d wanted Greyson. Badly.

But what about Xavier? Had I just betrayed my mate? Making out with your partner’s half-brother was probably a betrayal in anyone’s book.

*Fuck.*

Bitter tears rolled down my cheeks as I thought of Xavier. What had come over me? Why had I done that? I should never have followed that damn wisp. Leading me into temptation… That was the last time I ever trusted a magical creature.

I wiped my tears away, desperately trying to calm down, to return to reason. There was only one thing to do: pretend it never happened. There was no way I could tell Xavier. It would kill him—or he could kill ME, and I’d end up just like Ava. *No*, that was such a horrible thought.

I couldn’t tell him. And Greyson wouldn’t say anything to Xavier unless he wanted to be ripped to shreds. This was going to be a dark secret that I’d take to my grave. Xavier had kept a ton of secrets from me because he was protecting me ‘for my own good’. Now I had a secret to keep forever. It was only fair, right? Yeah, probably not…

I stood, trying to tidy myself up. I could arrive at the Lupo Finale with tears streaking down my face. *Okay,* I told myself. *Just act like it never happened. It’s going to be just fine.*

There was a sudden snap of a twig nearby and my head shot up. Quickly, I rubbed the remaining tears from my cheeks. Standing up, I called out, “Hello? Who’s there?”

I looked to my left where the sound had come from. Out from the trees stepped Maya, a wicked smile on her face.

“Well, well, well.”