**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 4**

**Episodes 189-308**

**Episode 189**

Oh shit.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to stay calm. Maybe Maya hadn’t really seen anything. Maybe she’s come in at the last minute. Maybe a tree had blocked her view. I had a pretty bad track record of jumping to conclusions at the drop of a hat. Maybe I was reading the situation completely wrong.

But if Maya had seen me with Greyson…then this was bad. *Real* bad. I already regretted making out with Greyson. It was one of the worst decisions I’d ever made, even if in the moment it had felt right. But now, the weight of what I’d just done continued to sink in and it wasn’t something I wanted to do with an audience, especially if said audience consisted of *Maya.*

But maybe she didn't see anything.

Then I saw the smirk spreading across Maya’s face, the way her eyes were shining with triumph, and my hope died.

I wanted to cry. I wanted to run for my life. But I couldn’t show weakness in front of Maya. Not now. I knew what I’d done wasn't right, and I didn't need to hear it from her.

I took a deep breath, fixed my bra, and squared my shoulders.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, trying to make my voice steady and strong, even though it took everything I had not to burst into tears. “Shouldn’t you be at the Lupo Finale with the others?”

Maya let out a cold, cruel laugh. She’d been waiting for a moment like this, and now she was going to make me suffer. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? No witness to your betrayal. I should ask you the same question: shouldn’t *you* be with the others? You know, instead of here, sticking your slimy tongue down your mate’s half-brother’s throat?”

I took a step back, pretending to be shocked by her accusation. Maybe if I pretended to be stunned and denied the whole thing, she’d think her eyes had been playing tricks on her. That she hadn’t see what she’d seen.

My voice sputtered a bit. “Listen, Maya, I don’t know what you think you saw, but—”

Maya cut me off. “Save your little act for community theater. We both know what I saw. The real question is: what do I do about it?”

I dropped the act, knowing that I wasn’t going to win by lying. Instead, I looked at her, trying desperately to find some form of humanity. Maya might not have been fully human, but maybe she had a heart—or a least an ounce of compassion that I could squeeze out of her.

“Maya, please,” I started. “Please, don’t tell Xavier. I’m the one who needs to do it, and I will. But not until after the Finale. I didn’t plan this. It just kinda… happened. I don’t know how to explain it.” Seriously, I didn’t. It was all such a hot, passionate blur.

Maya’s gaze was hard as she crossed her arms over her chest. If she had an ounce of humanity in her cold, wolf heart, I hadn’t found it yet. “Xavier needs to know how you betrayed him. Betrayed your mate bond. Once a hussy, always a hussy.”

I gaped at her. I knew I’d fucked up, but I was *not* going to stand here to be called names and get a damn ethics lesson from a psycho werewolf with morals as questionable as Maya’s.

I glared at her. “Pretty big talk coming from someone like you, Maya. *Betrayal?* You mean like the way you betrayed Colton? First you abandoned your mate to run off with Nolan, who is fucking disgusting and doesn’t respect you at all. Then you bought a fucking un-mating potion from Big Mac—yes, I know about that. You’re not the only snoop around here.”

A look crossed her face and I could tell what I’d said had shaken her, but she was quick to recover. “Those are completely different situations.”

“Not really. Still a betrayal. It’s the kettle calling the pot black.”

“Call it whatever the hell you want—at least I didn’t kiss my mate’s half-brother. At least I have the decency to try to un-mate from Colton before I swap spit with anyone else.”

“If you tell Xavier about the kiss, I’ll tell Colton about the potion!” I called out.

“Be my guest. Who’d listen to you, anyway?” she said, before turning and walking away.

“WAIT!” I shouted, running after her.

This wasn’t hers to tell.

Maya headed to the area by the old gnarly tree. Everyone was gathered there in a large circle, in both human and wolf-bear forms. I looked at the night sky. The moon was partly shrouded by a cloud. My shoulder stung as I looked. Was it hurting because of the moon? Maybe I was going to start howling at any moment. Honestly, the idea of becoming a werewolf seemed almost welcome at that moment. I’d be able to eat Maya before she told anyone. And if I died during the process, then at least I wouldn’t be around when Xavier learned what I’d done.

I lost track of Maya while I was lost in my thoughts, and cursed myself for being so easily distracted.

Fuck!

In the corner of my eye, I saw Lola standing with Jay, Colton, and the twins, and headed in their direction. Maybe if I pretended I was fine, no one would suspect anything.

But I knew that was a lie. I’d never be able to pretend I was fine.

“Hey, what did I miss?” I asked Lola as I arrived.

“Nothing yet. They’re just about to start explaining the rules,” Lola said.

“They have rules? For beating each other up? I thought the goal here was obvious.”

“Hey, even *Fight Club* had rules,” Jay said.

“Hey, we don’t talk about *Fight Club*.”

“Will you two shut up and listen?” Lola hissed at us. “Mace is about to speak.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd as Mace stepped forward, naked. He looked over at a guy at his left, who was holding a horn-shaped wooden instrument.

Jay leaned over. “That’s an ululate, carved from the sacred tree above us,” he whispered to me. “It’s supposed to be over a thousand years old.”

I watched curiously as the guy blew into the ululate, making a haunted howling sound that continued to echo in the distance.

All the wolves in the crowd began to howl in unison with the noise. I looked around, wondering for the first time where Xavier was.  
 “Where’s Xavier?” I asked, only to be shushed by Colton next to us.

I was scanning the crowd, wondering where he could be, when a glimmer of silver fur caught my eye. I did a double-take and sure enough, there was Greyson in wolf form, sitting across the circle with his eyes fixed on Mace.

Suddenly, I felt a pair of eyes staring at me, and for once they weren’t Greyson’s. I looked around until I found the source of the discomfort: Maya was standing with her pack, near Greyson. Her eyes were locked on me, and there was a sinister smile on her lips.

“All challengers who wish to enter the Lupo Finale and compete to become Alpha of the Redwood Pack, step forward now!” Mace announced.

I gasped in horror as I counted the wolves that began stepping forward. There were twenty of them, each looking meaner than the next. Xavier was tough, but *twenty wolves*, and some of them Rogues?

I’d known that a lot of people had been planning to challenge Xavier at the Finale. Hell, we’d been threatened every day since Xavier had invoked the damn thing. But honestly, I’d thought everyone had just been bluffing, or wanting to seem tough. Like, how often did people really follow up on death threats?

Judging by the number of wolves that advanced into the ring, pretty often.

I felt sick. This was not ideal at all. Were they all going to fight him at the same time? How was that fair? And where was Xavier, exactly?

As if he was reading my thoughts, Xavier’s dark wolf form stepped forward into the ring.

“Xavier!” I hissed, waving my hands to get his attention. I didn’t know exactly what I was planning on saying to him. How did you mime to your boyfriend that you needed to talk to him after you kissed his half-brother? But I knew I had to try. He needed to avoid Maya at all costs. I had to talk to him before she did.

*Please look at me,* I silently pleaded. *Please let everything be all right.*

However, all my waving was all in vain as Maya followed Xavier into the ring. My stomach plummeted, and I watched helplessly as Maya leaned down and whispered something into Xavier’s ear. I would have given anything to learn how to read lips, even though I had a pretty good idea of what she was telling him.

That I’d made out with Greyson.

That I’d been untrue to my mate.

That I’d done so right before the Finale.

Tears pricked at my eyes as Xavier turned, his gaze falling straight onto me.

**Episode 190**

My heart plummeted to the pit of my stomach as I watched Maya across the Lupo Finale clearing. Maya might have hated my guts, and might have done anything to bring misery on the pack, but even *she* wouldn’t sink this low.

At least, that was what I used to think.

Not that I’m a freaking saint in all this, but honestly, this was pretty petty of Maya and not even close to fair. I hadn’t even had the opportunity to tell Xavier about the kiss myself! I deserved a chance to explain what had happened—even though I doubted I could do that without Xavier hating me forever. Hell, I didn’t even understand the weird pull between Greyson and me.

Still, it should come from me. No one else.

Without thinking, I moved toward Xavier, hoping I’d be able to run up to the stage in time and give him my side of the story. I was aware that right before the Lupo Finale wasn’t the best time to get into relationship drama, especially when my boyfriend could literally tear me apart in wolf form, but still. I had to say something.

Unfortunately, the crowd was blocking my way.

“Hey! Excuse me! Watch your elbows!” I cried out, trying to wriggle my way through. A hand grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back.

“Hey, where the hell are you going?” Lola cried out. “Can’t you settle down for five seconds?”

“I need to talk to Xavier,” I breathed out, my chest tightening and my stomach twisting itself up into knots. The night air was chilly but I was in a cold sweat, my nerves in overdrive.

Lola looked at me like I had three heads. “Are you out of your damn mind? The Finale has to start. Can’t it wait?”

“I did it,” I whispered out.

Lola looked even more frustrated. “What the hell are you talking about? You did what?”

I bit my lip. I needed to talk about this with someone. “I need to talk to you in private.”

“*Now?* Mace is about to announce the rules. Can’t it wait?”

I shot Lola a desperate look. “Please,” I begged, grabbing her hand and dragging her from the circle. Who knew who else could be listening? I didn’t want to take my chances.

“What’s wrong with you? This is a sacred ceremony! We should be watching. We can’t just jump around and do whatever we want.”

I took a deep breath, leaned in close to Lola and whispered. “I kissed Greyson, and Maya knows.”

Lola’s eyes went wide with shock. “You did *what*?”

“A wisp led me to this lake or pool or something, and Greyson came out of the pond, and… I don’t know! There was this pull and like… I don’t know what came over me. I kissed him and Maya saw and…”

“YOU KISSED HIM?” Lola said, much louder.

“*Shhh!* Will you keep your voice down?” I hissed. “It’s not like I planned it. But yes. I kissed Greyson and Maya saw and I think she told Xavier. We are all royally screwed if she did and I don’t know what to do!”

I wasn’t entirely sure what I’d thought Lola’s reaction would be, but I hadn’t expected the anger in her eyes. She was glaring at me, her hands balled up into fists. If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought she was going to hit me.

“Why the hell did you kiss Greyson? What on earth were you *thinking*, Cali*?* Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

I gaped at her. “You did tell me to do it. Remember? Like, you said multiple times that I should kiss him and get it over with, and how hot he is, and that I’d be able to figure my feelings out if I kissed him. Well great, Lola. I kissed him and now I’m more confused than ever!” Seriously, why the hell was she this shocked and pissed? She’d practically been begging me to do this for weeks!

“I didn’t think you’d actually do it!” Lola said. “You said it was gross, so I stopped worrying about it. Besides, why would you do it *now?* Right before the Lupo Finale?”

I wanted to scream. Why was she giving me so much shit right now? I already felt bad enough as it was! “Christ, Lola! It’s not like I planned this!”

“You never plan anything! Now, thanks to you, we are totally fucked. Because if Xavier does know about the kiss, it’s going to mess with his head during the fight. He could lose! And what’s going to happen afterward? How could you do that to him? To the pack?”

“I haven’t told him before the Finale!” I said defensively. “Maya has!”

“But you kissed Greyson!”

“You told me to kiss him!”

“But I didn’t think you *would*. And I definitely didn’t think you’d be so heartless as to do it in the moments before the biggest event of Xavier’s life!”

Her words only added fuel to my rage. “Are you really going to give me an ethics lesson right now? After all the lying, and the shit you’ve pulled on me for our whole damn friendship! All you’d done up until a few weeks ago was lie to me. You’re really going to make me the bad guy here?”

“You *are* the bad guy!”

“Fine! Then tell me what to do!”

“I can’t do that. Right now, I’m going to go support my pack—something you could try to do a bit more of,” she said icily, cutting me to the core.

She gave me one last glare before turning away and walking back to the group, tossing her hair as she left.

I stood there for a moment, frozen with shock and hurt at what just happened. I couldn’t believe Lola would turn her back on me. I knew what I’d done was wrong on every single level, but she was my best friend. We were supposed to stand by each other through thick and thin. I wanted to be angry at her. I mean, she was the one who got me into this whole mess. If it weren’t for her proposing I sell my virginity, I’d be in college right now. Or with my family. I’d be broke, but my life wouldn’t be in constant danger. But she’d put me here, and lied to me about it.

Maybe her loyalty had never been with me?

I looked around and realized that I’d lost my last ally. Everyone else either hated me or barely tolerated me. And Xavier was about to if he didn't already.

I was completely alone.

Finally, I recovered enough from the shock to walk back to the group. I had nowhere else to go.

As soon as Lola saw me, she turned away, adding salt to my emotional wound.

Asshole.

I wanted to say something, wanted to provoke her into a fight so she’d at least talk to me. But then a howling horn pierced through the cave, silencing the crowd.

Mace, in all his naked glory, walked over to the fire and began to speak. “Challengers, step forward and declare yourselves. The Lupo Finale is a two-round challenge. The winner of the first round will advance to face the Initiator. The ultimate winner will be declared the Alpha of the Redwood pack.”

There was howling again, and I quickly covered my ears. I was grateful when Mace held up his hand, motioning for the noise to stop. When it was quiet, he continued speaking. “By entering this sacred ceremony, you are well aware of the risks that you are taking, which include bodily harm and death.”

I swallowed thickly.

“Those who enter the ring must do so without any weapons containing silver.”

*Silver.*

My mind began to race. Ryker had been in the woods painting his nails with something that looked a lot like silver. Something I’d forgotten to tell Xavier about. Shit. But would he have listened anyway?

I panicked and looked around, trying to figure out what my next move should be. Lola wasn’t speaking to me, Jay wouldn’t speak to me because Lola wasn’t speaking to me, and Colton would just tell me to shut up like always. I considered trying to find Mrs. Smith, but the place was too packed with people. There was no way I’d be able to find her in time.

There was one person who’d still consider speaking with me.

For once, I was happy to think of Greyson. While I had no idea what to do about the whole kiss situation, I knew he was the only person I’d be able to talk to about this. He would know what to do.

If only I knew where the hell he was.

*Greyson,* I said mentally, hoping he’d be able to hear my thoughts. *Greyson, if you can hear me, Ryker is cheating. He’s using silver on his nails. Help!*

I waited a moment. Nothing.

Great, the one time I wanted him to be in my head and he was nowhere to be found.

Fine. I was just going to have to do this shit myself. I knew I had to say something. If Ryker went into the ring, he could kill Xavier. I couldn’t let that happen. Yes, I had weird feelings for Greyson, and I might have given into those feelings at the pond, but I still loved Xavier. He was still my mate.

I knew what I had to do.

Without a second thought, I pushed through the crowd and stepped into the ring. I pointed at Ryker and yelled, “Stop! Stop everything! He’s cheating!”

**Episode 191**

As I stood in the center of the ring, I felt hundreds of eyes on me—both wolf and human. The once rowdy crowd was now silent. You could have heard a pin drop, it was so quiet. For what felt like an eternity, no one said a word. I doubted anyone was even breathing. Goodness knows, I certainly wasn’t.

*This was a terrible idea,* I thought, as I looked into the audience. My heart was hammering as I tried to keep my face steady and unemotional. I couldn’t show weakness now, in front of everyone. And I’d totally lose street cred if I threw up in the ring out of pure fear.

Then the silence was broken by a cold, dark laugh.

Out of the shadows, Ryker stepped toward me, still naked, his grin almost feral. “My, my. You *are* entertaining. The rumors were true—you do love to make a spectacle of yourself.”

Rude.

I said nothing, but continued to stare him down. I would not be intimated while my mate’s life was possibly on the line.

Ryker turned to Mace. “Are you really going to let this… *human*”—he spat out the word in disgust—“stand there and accuse me of cheating? This supposed *human* mate of the Initiator? What kind of madness is this?”

Geez, I hadn’t come up here to be insulted.

Mace turned to look at me, his gaze even more imposing than Ryker’s, if that was even possible. His eyes were searching mine. For what, I didn’t know, but it felt like I was standing in front of a bullseye.

I gulped as he continued to look at me. Mace smirked at that, seeming to like my discomfort.

“Well,” Mace said, after a moment. “Whether she’s human or not, these are very serious charges and we must treat them as such.” He finally turned away from me. “Ryker!” he called out. “Approach the center of the ring!”

Mace waved over two elderly werewolves to the center of the ring as well. I watched in horror, feeling my mouth go bone dry. As dry as their wrinkly leather skin. Seriously, these guys looked like antiques. They had to be a hundred years old, at least. I wondered how long werewolves lived—if they didn’t get murdered first.

The elder werewolves each took one side of Ryker, examining him. However, Ryker’s eyes were locked on mine, staring at me unblinkingly, pure menace in those dark pupils.

*He can’t kill me in the ring with everyone watching? Can he?*

With this crowd, who knew?

I turned back to Mace who was also still staring at me. Don’t any of these wolves know that it was rude to stare?

That probably wasn’t in their handbook.

“Why did you make this accusation?” Mace asked. “What proof do you have?”

“Check his fingernails,” I said, hoping my voice sounded stronger than I felt. “I saw him painting them with silver in the forest yesterday.”

“In the forest?” Mace questioned.

“Yes,” I said, and then paused to think. Telling Mace (and every Tom, Dick, and Wolf who was listening) that I’d followed a wisp into the forest and seen Ryker giving himself a manicure wouldn’t be the best look for me, even if it was true. If I’d learned one thing recently, it was that werewolves can be super judgmental.

“I saw Mace putting silver on his nails in the woods. At first, I thought it was some kind of old school ritual to make himself look tough or something. Or maybe he just likes nail polish, which would be fine. But when you mentioned the thing about no weapons and no silver—well, then it made sense. Check his fingernails. Ryker’s a cheater.” My whole body felt tense as I spoke, but I knew what I said was right. The wisps had brought me to Ryker for a reason. It had been a warning.

And I wasn’t going to ignore it again.

The elderly men walked over to Ryker.

“We must see your fingernails,” one of the gentlemen wheezed out.

“By all means,” Ryker said coolly, his voice oozing with confidence. He held out his large, dirty hands for the elders to look at.

As they inspected his hands, I tried to steal my own look at his nails, to get a glimpse of that silver that had blinded me a day ago.

Fuck!

I felt my jaw drop when I saw Ryker’s fingernails: they looked normal. No trace of Sally Hansen or Orly on them.

Double fuck!

I couldn’t believe what was happening. How could the silver he'd put on them be gone already? Not even mine chipped off that fast. It had to be a trick, he had to be hiding it somehow. I prayed that the elders would be able to see through it. But given how old and cloudy their eyes were, I didn’t feel too optimistic.

The elders stepped to the side for the moment to talk before turning to Mace. A wide grin spread across his face.

Yep, not a great sign.

Mace walked back toward the center of the ring. “The elders have concluded that the accusation made by the human, Caliana Hart, appears to be unfounded. Ryker has done nothing wrong and we may proceed with his participation in the Lupo Finale.”

I felt my jaw drop. “*What?* That’s impossible!” I screamed out. I knew what I saw. Why else had the wisp brought me there? What was going on? How was he cheating?

The crowd cheered wildly when Ryker’s name was cleared. Through the hooting and the cries of approval, I could make out a few boos directed at me.

“BOOOOO CALI!”

“YOU SUCK CALI!”

“DEATH TO THE HUMAN!”

I was pretty sure the last one was from Maya, but I couldn’t be sure—too many people here wanted me dead.

I felt my face flush with embarrassment. I’d known I was taking a huge risk, coming up and accusing Ryker to his face. But I’d thought I was right. I owed it to Xavier to protect him at all costs. Now more than ever.

It didn’t make sense though. I knew what I’d seen Ryker do in the woods. I’d even had the freaking wisp on my side.

Where had I gone wrong?

Maybe the wisps were actually low key mad at me? Or tricking me? At this point, I wouldn’t have been surprised.

But I couldn’t worry about that now. I was a human surrounded by very powerful wolf-bears, feeling very, very screwed.

“As custom states, the accused must approach the accuser!” Mace announced.

*Wait, what?* My eyes went wide with horror. Why had no one tell me I’d have to deal with Ryker one-on-one? If I’d known that, I never would have opened my big mouth.

I swallowed hard as Ryker stepped toward me, like a predator stalking its prey. It was at that moment I realized just how TALL he was, towering over me with a murderous look in his eyes. When I’d seen him before, he’d always been lurking in the shadows. But now he was out in the open, and I could see just how enormous and frightening he looked. His arms looked like oak trees, the veins bulging out. He had a sturdy jawline, a large scar running down his left cheek, and dark red hair cut in a military style. But it was his eyes that scared me the most. They were dark. So dark I could barely see the pupil, and filled with sadistic menace.

This was the man who had killed an entire pack without batting an eyelash.

What the hell had I gotten myself into?

I opened my mouth to speak. Maybe a bunch of dried-up old wolf bones in ugly ass robes couldn’t see through him, but *I* sure as hell could, and I was going to give him hell for it.

Or, I *planned* on giving his hell for it, but when I opened my mouth to speak, my throat had done completely dry from fear. I couldn’t even make a sound, let alone cuss out a powerful Rogue in front of everyone.

Great, the one time I needed my voice, it was failing me. Just peachy. This day was going *great*.

I opened my mouth a few more times, trying to choke out the words, but none came out. Instead, I just looked like a gulping fish, which was NOT the look I was going for. Couldn’t anyone just bring me a sip of water? Was that so much to ask?

The whole audience laughed at my failed attempts. Ryker was laughing right along with them, but even his laugh lacked warmth. It sounded hollow and cold.

“There’s no need to apologize to me, human,” he said, more to the audience than myself. “I know how weak human eyes can be. No hard feelings at all.” He turned to look at me with a smile that sent a cold chill down my spine.

Then he leaned forward, getting real close to my face before whispering so only I could hear. “I can’t wait to snap that pretty little neck of yours for everyone to see.”

**Episode 192**

*Well, this is not ideal…* I thought to myself as I glared up at Ryker. I knew I should be scared shitless because:

1. Ryker had cheated, and been able to sneak it past the old ass werewolves.
2. If Xavier didn’t win, I was totally going to be murdered by Ryker, and it wasn’t going to be quick or pretty.

But, honestly? My life had been threatened so many times, it’d probably be unusual if I didn’t receive a death threat on the daily.

I stared Ryker down, willing myself not to be intimidated by him. I finally found the strength to speak. “You can say whatever the hell you want to make yourself seem like the Big Bad Wolf, but I know the truth. And no matter what tricks you might have up your sleeve or painted on your nails, Xavier is going to defeat you in front of everyone. So wipe that smug look off your damn face. You might not have it for very long.” My voice was as low and dangerous as I could manage. After months of cowering and being pushed around by wolves and getting nothing in return other than injury and public humiliation, I was *done* with everyone’s bullshit.

“That’s enough!” Mace roared, his voice filling the cave and nearly cracking my eardrums. “The accuser must leave the arena.” He paused as a malicious grin spread across his face. “With her head bowed in shame.”

Well, that was a little petty, wasn’t it?

I didn’t have time to argue about the complete injustice of the whole situation. With no graceful way to exit the mess I’d gotten myself into, I opted to hurry out of there as quickly as possible, doing my best to keep my dignity as the crowd booed and jeered. Someone even threw a soda can at me. They were going to litter in this sacred forest cave? Really? Animals.

Yeah, this wasn’t the outcome I’d had in mind when I’d gone up there.

I felt a pair of hands pulling me back into the crowd. For a moment I was afraid that some angry wolf was going to rip me to pieces, but it was only Lola. Though to be fair, she *was* an angry wolf, and she did look like she was going to rip me to pieces. So maybe I shouldn’t have been so happy to see her.

Still, I wanted to be hopeful. She *was* dragging me back to the group. Maybe she wasn’t quite asmad as me as she’d been before.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she asked.

Nope, still pissed.

My heart sank and my gaze hardened as I pulled out of her grip, as if her touch had burned me. “I thought you weren’t talking to me anymore?”

“I’m not! I’m just curious to know why the fuck you have a death wish! You keep making everything worse! For ALL of us!”

That stung. “I was just trying to help! Ryker is cheating! I saw it. The wisps—”

“Oh please, you probably got high again and saw a two-headed cow or some shit. You know what you can do to help the pack? Keep your lying mouth shut!”

“I’m not lying! Ryker is tricking the elders! *Lola,*” I pleaded, grabbing her arm, begging her to understand, to believe. If there was any moment I needed my best friend, it was now.

But she pulled out of my grip, her eyes fierce and hateful. “You know, I don’t know why I asked. I don’t care. Shut. Up.” And with one last glare, she turned away and marched back to Jay.

I watched her go, completely dumbfounded. *Maybe I should just let Ryker kill me,* I thought bitterly. *Or just end things myself. Everyone’s life would be a lot easier if I was gone.*

With no friends, allies, or any support system to be had, I just stood where I was, feeling numb as I watched Mace continue to talk about the challenge.

“Now that that little sideshow is over,” said Mace with a smirk, causing the crowd to laugh. Thanks a lot, asshole. “I would like to remind our spectators that they are prohibited from aiding the challengers or the Initiator in any way other than with vocal support. I want to make this very clear. Any violation of this rule will result in instant death.”

A few cheers rang through the crowd as people around me started to strip off of their clothes and shift into their wolf forms.

That was the moment when it actually hit me: this was really happening. All the stalling, panicking, trips to Big Mac’s medical tent, and countless hours of hiking had finally led us here. Wolves were going to challenge and fight Xavier to become the Alpha of the Redwood pack. I thought we’d be able to find a way out of this, to pick an Alpha without bloodshed, but that was impossible: werewolves always wanted blood, and they were going to get it.

Surrounded up adrenaline-fueled werewolves, I was hyper-aware of my humanity. Everyone here could kill me in an instant, and no one would ever find out. The thought was terrifying.

*How the hell did I get here?*

Only two months ago, I’d been a normal twenty-year-old—trying to figure out who to pay for college, and for the surgery that would save my mother’s life. I’d thought I would just sell my virginity, sleep with some random creepy dude, have it be over and done with and go back to my normal life. I’d never thought that Lola would trick me, and I’d NEVER thought I’d find myself in a world of werewolves, witches, potions, wisps, and violent death. It wasn’t even that long ago that I’d seen that first werewolf ‘wolf-bear’ in the forest.

I never thought I'd fall in love after all of that either.

And now I was here, and it was too late for me to turn back.

I searched the crowd desperately for Xavier, who’d disappeared during the whole ‘accuser’ fiasco. Maybe he’d been so embarrassed of me that he’d decided to run away and never come back. At this point, I honestly wouldn’t blame him.

I was having trouble contacting Greyson with the mind thing, but maybe I’d have an easier time connecting with Xavier—he was my mate after all.

I shut my eyes and concentrated on him with all my might. *Xavier? Xavier? Please be careful. I know you tell me you’ll be fine, but you have to listen to me. Especially with Ryker. I wasn’t lying about what I said. Ryker is dangerous, and he’s cheating. I love you so much. I believe in you. You can do this.*

I opened my eyes, realizing how stupid the whole thing probably was. Chances were he probably wasn’t even listening to me in the first place. Could he even hear me? Maybe the whole mind bond was complete fiction. I was probably just going insane. I wouldn’t be surprised if that were the case.

But it was *something.* A prayer or wish to the universe, or at the very least to this magical place. For as helpless as I felt in that moment, I knew that I’d tried my best to make some kind of connection with Xavier. And I was still supporting him now by being here. That had to mean something. I tried to think about what he’d told me, in his human form, before he'd left. *I love you.*

I held onto the memories of those words like a lifeline. It was the only way I was going to get through this nightmare.

I needed to be strong for him.

There was a murmur throughout the crowd. I turned to look across the circle, and watched the wolves and spectators clear the way for Ryker to step back into the circle. He shifted on the spot into his large, dark gray wolf form. He bared his teeth and snarled for the gasping, cheering crowd. He almost looked rabid. Which, really, may have been exactly what he was going for.

His intimidating entrance had caused a large uproar throughout the crowd, as well as some second thoughts. I watched as some of the challengers started to trickle back into the crowd, their tails tucked between their legs. Mace teased them as they left, but I didn’t blame them—they were probably the smartest wolves here. Plus, their departure meant there were now fewer wolves for Xavier to fight.

And fewer lives to be lost.

After Mace finished mocking the departing wolves, he turned his attention back to the crowd. “If there are any more challengers, you must come forward now. This is your last chance for glory.”

Silence fell over the crowd as everyone looked around, each of them wondering if there was anyone brave enough to go paw-to-paw against Ryker.

And then I saw him. Through the clearing, I could make out silver fur in the distance. I’d know it anywhere.

**Episode 193**

The realization of Greyson’s betrayal hit me like nothing ever had before. My knees buckled from the weight of it and tears threatened to spill from my eyes, but I held them back. I wanted so badly to fall apart. I wanted to scream, and march up to that ring and call Greyson out in front of every wolf there. But that was what he’d be expecting. Maybe it was what he was hoping for. To humiliate me one last time before forcing me to watch him rip my mate’s throat out.

*Greyson is a murderer and a Rogue.*

*Greyson betrayed his pack.*

*Greyson is a psychopath.*

*Greyson cannot be trusted.*

For a moment, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Maybe my mind was playing tricks on me. Maybe this was all a horrible misunderstanding. Maybe Greyson had *accidentally* entered the ring. Maybe this was all an elaborate plot to help Xavier. It didn’t occur to me that the man I’d trusted, the man I’d thrown everything away for, would lie to me like this. There had to be some other explanation.

Maybe I’d made the biggest mistake of my life.

I should have known better. But those feelings, our connection, the kiss… I’d thought that what we had was special.

Maybe I was really as stupid as everyone thought.

With nothing else to do and no friends to lean on, I watched helplessly as Greyson and Ryker’s wolves snarled at each other across the ring. My only hope was that Greyson and Ryker would tear each other to bits before either of them could get to Xavier. That would solve a lot of my problems.

But when did I ever get that lucky?

“Challengers must stand apart from each other!” Mace called out over the growling wolves. He turned to the side of the ring. “Bring in the Initiator!”

The whole cave burst into shouts and jeers, boos and cheering as I strained to look over the heads around me, wishing I wasn’t so short. Where the hell was he?

Mace pointed to the fire and I watched, horrified as Xavier, in his wolf form, leaped through the flame.

I gasped in horror, expecting to see his dark fur catching fire, his body burning. Instead, he emerged from the flame untouched, and the fire exploded into a million colorful wisps. I was still pissed at the wisp for influencing the last three of my terrible life choices, but they were just so beautiful. Almost sparkling as they drifted up and away into the sky, hanging above us like stars.

I was watching the wisps, captivated by their beauty, when a guttural howl distracted me.

I turned back to the circle to see that it was Xavier who was making that horrible noise. Soon the other wolves in the crowd joined in, all howling together as one.

I quickly covered my ears. Sure, everyone always told me to shut up, but these people never stopped making noise. Couldn’t everyone just watch quietly, like golf spectators?

Suddenly, almost as if they were trying to fulfill my wishes, the howling stopped. The cloud moved from the full moon, and a beam of blue moonlight illuminated the circle.

*It’s so beautiful,* I mused, looking up at it.

Wait. The full moon.

With all the kissing, fighting, and drama that had been going on, I’d almost forgotten about the full moon and the possibility that I could become a werewolf tonight.

As if I didn’t already have enough problems to deal with.

I touched my shoulder. It felt hot, but that might have been because of the heat from the fire. I ran my hands up and down my bare arms, checking to see if I was growing fur. They didn’t *feel* any hairier than normal (note to self: shave arms more often).

Was I becoming a werewolf? Would I know if it started to happen?

I shook the thought aside, reminding myself that nothing *was* happening. My bones weren’t cracking, my body wasn’t screaming in pain. I was still human. A panicking, easily startled human, but human nonetheless.

A human who needed to control her emotions.

I took a deep breath and tried to steady myself. I took a step back to get out of the moonlight. You could never be too careful.

Above my head, four wisps descended above the challenged. They turned into a multitude of colors before splitting into two pairs: one pair of silver, and one pair of gold. The crowd watched in silence as the wisps separated, each moving to hover above one of the four challengers.

*What the hell did that mean?* I wondered, watching them, not even daring to breathe as Mace’s voice boomed through the cave.

“The silver wisps have chosen Ryker and Gunner to face off, and the gold wisps have selected Greyson and Nolan.”

The cave thundered with excitement and approval at the selection. I couldn’t help but be a little amused at the pairing of Greyson and Nolan. After the spat they’d had a few days ago, now they were finally going to have it out.

Briefly, I wondered how Maya felt about her supposed ‘mate’ being in the ring. But then I remembered that I hated Maya, along with everyone else in the stupid ring and this stupid cave.

Mace stepped away. “And… BEGIN!”

Before I could even blink, the challengers pounced on each other, snarling as claws hit fur.

I jumped at the sight, instinctively reaching out and grabbing Colton’s arm. I was prepared to have him pull away and say something mean. But he didn’t. Instead, he let me keep it there, and I had never felt more grateful for Colton in my life. If we all made it out of this thing alive, I’d never yell at him for walking in on me and Xavier ever again.

Okay, I had no intention of keeping that promise. But it was the thought that counted.

I wanted to look away and cover my eyes, but I fought against my fear and watched the wolves fight. It was just as violent and cruel as I’d imagined it would be: fur flying, teeth snapping, howls of pain and victory. I’d seen werewolves fight each other before—hell, I’d seen werewolves *kill* each other before—but I’d never seen anything like this. Before, it had been wolves trying to stay alive, to protect the people they cared about. This was different. They were fighting for sport. For a little bit of power, and for the pleasure of a bloodthirsty crowd.

It made me sick to my stomach.

I watched as Greyson overpowered Nolan and slammed him to the ground, snarling above him, acting on pure animal instinct. Part of me was terrified of the way Greyson was acting, how wild and vicious he looked as he stood over Nolan. But a different part of me couldn’t help but feel proud of him. *Yeah! Get that meatball!*

I was startled by my thought. I shouldn’t be rooting for Greyson! Not when I didn’t know why he was entering the ring at all. He’d told me he wouldn’t. He’d lied to me, and now he might have to fight my mate.

None of this was okay.

Still, Greyson did look powerful and fierce, just like all the rumors claimed. I remembered how he said there were Rogues who could defeat Ryker… It certainly looked now like I’d been right that Greyson might be able to.

Nolan struggled in vain against Greyson, trying desperately to get back up. Finally, after a few more moments of struggle, Nolan raised his front paws, signaling his submission.

“Well, say what you want about Greyson, he did just make Nolan look like a huge loser in front of everyone,” I said.

I had to admit it felt good, especially after Nolan, Maya, and the rest of the Samara pack had kidnapped me, what, a month ago? Some just desserts for once.

Colton chuckled, a grin spreading across his face. “Yeah, I want to see what Maya thinks of her Alpha now.”

“And the winner of this round is… GREYSON!” Mace announced, to a thunder of cheers from the crowd.

I watched, thinking that Greyson was about to go into kill mode and finish Nolan off. But I was surprised to see Greyson step off Nolan and back away, bowing as he went.

*Greyson is full of surprises today*, I mused. *So he's an honorable liar? Ha.*

As I tried to process what was going on, a gutted howl pierced the air. I’d been so consumed with watching Greyson and Nolan’s fight that I hadn’t paid attention to Ryker and Gunner’s.

I watched wide-eyed as Ryker slammed Gunner to the ground. After a moment of struggle, Gunner raised his front paws into the air in submission, the same way Nolan had minutes ago.

“And the winner of this round is… RYKER!” Mace announced, to more thunderous applause.

I watched, waiting for Ryker to step away from Gunner the same way Greyson had from Nolan.

With a howl, Ryker dove down and ripped Gunner’s throat out. Deep red blood spilled down his jaws and poured over Ryker’s body as the crowd went wild. I gasped, covering my mouth, unable to tear my eyes away from the bloody scene in front of me.

Ryker’s head turned and his cold, terrifying eyes locked onto mine. I knew what that look meant.

*You’re next.*

**Episode 194**

“Holy shit!” I took a step back, my body physically recoiling at what I’d just witnessed. I could smell the blood in the air, which only increased the waves of nausea that were overcoming me.

*What the hell did I just watch?*

My muscles were tight as I tried to process it all. Why had Ryker done that? Why hadn’t he just stepped away, like Greyson had with Nolan? Why had he killed Gunner? I knew it was possible for wolves to die in the ring, but Gunner had submitted! It just wasn’t fair! Wasn’t there a rule against this? Ryker should be disqualified, or at the very least given a red card.

But Ryker seemed to be above all the rules here. Instead of reacting with outrage and shock, everyone was cheering, yelling for more blood. It was clear Ryker wasn’t going to be punished for taking a life. And if he’d killed Gunner, then what would stop him from killing Xavier? Or Greyson, for that matter.

The thought made me woozy, and I felt myself go pale.

*Be cool, Cali, Be cool,* I told myself firmly. I couldn’t let the werewolves see me faint, especially since everyone else seemed to be enjoying this, screaming and chanting with pure joy.

I was just trying not to be sick.

I felt an arm wind around mine and looked up to see Colton, his face twisted with concern. It was the first time he’d shown any emotion toward me other than complete annoyance, so I musthave looked bad*.*

“Are you okay?” His voice sounded like he was underwater, rather than standing right next to me.

“Huh?” I blinked a few times, trying to understand what he was saying. My vision had gone fuzzy around that edges, and I couldn’t get it clear again. I’d opened my mouth to speak when the cave started to spin.

What was going on with me?

“Why is everything moving? Is this part of the ritual?” I mumbled, as my vision got darker and darker.

“Cali!”

Apparently it wasn’t part of the ritual.

When I opened my eyes again it was still dark, but also quiet.

*Where the hell am I?* I wondered as panic set in. Had I slept through the entire Finale? I hoped not—that would be completely embarrassing. Though maybe that was what everyone wanted. I couldn’t make a complete fool out of myself if I was asleep.

I realized that I was no longer near the circle. The air no longer smelled like blood and sweat, but warm cinnamon. My body wasn’t on the ground, but on a soft bed.

*What the hell happened to me?* I thought as I groggily tried to piece together what had happened before I’d blacked out. Ryker had ripped out Gunner’s throat, which had been very gross. I’d started feeling woozy. Colton had been talking to me, then my vision had blurred and the cave had started to spin, and…

Crap!

A new wave of panic shot through me as I tried to move, but my body felt like lead. My panic took me to the worst possible scenario:

I was turning into a werewolf.

After days of worrying and stressing and applying weird creams, the full moon was up and I was meeting my fate. I was finally turning into a werewolf.

Possibly.

I mean, I didn’t have any idea HOW it felt to turn into a werewolf, but my chest hurt, I felt sick, and my heart felt like it was about to burst out of my chest. I certainly FELT like I was dying. My body was tense again, as if it was waiting for the bone-crunching rebirth that was about to happen. At least it smelled nice where I was.

I tried to look on the bright side. At least if I turned into a werewolf right now, I’d have a fighting chance if all the wolves tried to kill me.

Okay, maybe that wasn’t really very optimistic.

I blinked a few times and the darkness started to clear as I heard muffled voices in the distance. When my vision was finally cleared, I realized that I was lying on a soft mattress in a room illuminated by candlelight.

I tried my best to stand, but didn’t even have the strength to do that. I turned to the door, watching a figure approach me. It was Big Mac, holding a steaming mug.

“Oh good, you’re up,” she said, her voice friendlier than I’d heard in a while.

I eyed the brew with caution. Yeah, right, like I was going to drink that shit. She’d either poisoned it or was going to charge me an arm and a leg for it—literary.

“What’s going on?” I croaked. “What happened? Why am I here?”

“Just drink this. It will help you feel better,” Big Mac insisted.

“No thanks.” I said firmly, still eyeing the drink with caution.

Another figure entered the room, and I smiled when I saw that it was Mrs. Smith. “Don’t worry, Cali. It’s just my white chocolate mocha,” she said, taking a seat next to my bed. “Your blood sugar’s low and with all the excitement of the Finale, it looks like you passed out. This will make you feel better. Although I can’t blame you for being wary of the witch.”

Big Mac glared at her and scoffed. “Please, how about a thank you? Her ungrateful butt is only lying there because of me. I could have easily left you on the ground, surrounded by hungry werewolves. And do I even get a thank you?”

“Thank you for not letting me get eaten,” I said quietly, taking the mug.

“Yes, you’re such a saint, MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith deadpanned, rolling her eyes.

I took a small sip of the mocha, feeling it warm my whole body with its amazing goodness. Seriously, those two really needed to team up and open the best restaurant/cafe in the world—if they didn’t kill each other first.

“Mrs. Smith, you’ve outdone yourself,” I said with a smile. “But how did I get here?”

“As I was saying, you passed out at the circle and—” Before Big Mac could finish her sentence, a group of people entered the tent, wheeling a cart with a white sheet covering it. It was easy to guess who was under the sheet. Gunner.

I could feel the while chocolate mocha trying to make its way back up, and I tried to choke it back down. I felt my eyes go wide in horror. “Is he…” I choked out. “Is he dead?”

“Well it’s kind of hard to live without a throat, isn’t it?” Big Mac said dryly.

Mrs. Smith shot her a glare. “Can’t you have a little more respect for the dead, MacKenzie?”

“I could, but where’s the fun in that?”

I stared at the white sheet as the ladies bickered, wondering about what had happened to him. Sure, ripping out Gunner’s throat may have been the cause of death—but what if Ryker had left something else on Gunner’s body that wasn’t just a bite mark?

“What about the silver?” I said.

Big Mac gave me a strange look. “Silver? What silver?”

“Can you check to see if there’s any silver in his wound?” I asked. “Maybe some scratches or something?”

Big Mac walked over to the body and pulled up the sheet. I had to turn away, nausea churning in my stomach.

Big Mac frowned as she pulled the sheet back down. “No. It doesn’t look like a silver wound. Why do you ask?”

“Because I know Ryker is cheating! He may have used his teeth to kill Gunner, but he has silver on him. He’s going to kill again, or at try to. We have to stop him.”

Mrs. Smith placed her arm gently around my shoulders. “Cali, the elders checked Ryker. They said he didn’t have any silver on him at all. Ryker is just a brutal killer. He’s more wolf than man. Some werewolves are.” Big Mac made a *tsk* sound, sharing a look with Mrs. Smith.

I was starting to think *most* werewolves were, given what I had seen lately. Still, I knew what I’d seen. Just because some old ass werewolves couldn’t see the silver on Ryker, didn’t mean it wasn’t there. Either Ryker was really good at hiding shit or this Finale was fixed, and I needed to know. Besides, why had the wisp dragged me to Ryker if he hadn’t been doing anything shady? It didn’t make any sense, and I needed answers.

Before I could voice my concerns, I heard the horn blaring in the distance.

I bolted upright in bed. The Finale was still going on! I had missed so much already—I didn’t even know if Xavier and Greyson were still in the ring. If they hadn’t fought Ryker yet, I needed to go show my support.

I needed to show Xavier how much I fucking loved him.

“I have to get back,” I said, shoving the mug of mocha back at Mrs. Smith. “Now.”

**Episode 195**

Mrs. Smith placed a gentle hand on my shoulder as I tried to get out of bed. My head was already swimming.

“Whoa, there,” she said, giving the mocha back to me. “You need to finish that drink first and rest. Your body suffered quite a shock, and it needs time to regain its strength.”

“I’m fine!” I told her, standing up. I immediately sat back down, all the blood draining from my face.

Okay, maybe I wasn’t as fine as I’d thought.

“Oh, sit down,” Big Mac said sharply, rolling her eyes.

“Xavier wouldn’t want you to neglect your well-being,” Mrs. Smith asked.

Big Mac nodded. “You need to stop rushing into everything and think for once in your life.”

Jeez, what was it, be rude to Caliana day? My goodness.

I glared at the witch, still pretty pissed at her for taking my blood without my consent. Especially since she’d told me my treatment would be ‘on the house’. Why did she need it in the first place? She may have saved me in the ring when I’d passed out, but I didn’t know her intentions. For all I knew, she was waiting to take one of my kidneys as payment.

I glared at the witch. “Or what? What are you gonna do? Paralyze me and drain my blood like you did before?”

“*What?*” Mrs. Smith gasped out, looking thoroughly horrified. Good. That was the look I was going for.

Big Mac scowled and rolled her eyes. “She’s being dramatic again.”

I probably was, but I didn’t have time to stress about it just then. As the two of them settled into a fight, I bolted out of the tent and into the night. I would deal with that problem later—right now, I needed to get to my mate.

I ran as fast as my legs could carry me, even though my whole body wanted me to stop and sleep for a million years. But I couldn’t stop. Not when there was a chance I was about to discover my whole life had changed.

I pushed my way past wolves to get to the spot where Jay, Lola, and Colton were standing.

*Okay, who hates me the least right now?* I thought quickly.

Surprisingly, it was Colton. Weird, I’d never thought I’d ever say Colton hated me the least, but there was a first time for everything.

I went over to him. “What did I miss?”

For once, Colton didn’t tell me to shut up. “How are you feeling?” he asked, his voice almost sounding concerned.

“I’ll feel a lot better when Xavier wins and this thing is over,” I said, looking at the ring.

“Well, it’s nearly done. We’re in the final round now.”

I felt my throat go dry. I was almost afraid to ask. “Who’s left?”

“Xavier, Ryker, and Greyson.”

I swallowed hard. This was not going to end well.

Why did Greyson have to do this? Xavier was his *brother*. That should mean something.

But it seemed that Greyson only cared about himself.

Mace stepped forward to the center of the ring. “Challengers, please step forward and face the Initiator!”

As Mace stepped out of the way, Xavier approached the center of the ring. He looked even bigger than I remembered, his dark fur standing out in the firelight. His muscles were firm and bigger than the others, too. Seeing him looking so strong should have filled me full of confidence, but it didn’t. Instead all I wanted to do was go to him, hold him and be by his side through it all. I had no idea what he could be thinking. I had no idea if Maya had told him about me and Greyson. Was he scared? Angry? Confident? I was his mate—shouldn’t I know how he was feeling? Shouldn’t I understand him better than anyone else?  
 I didn’t have an answer for that. Instead, all I could think about was everything I wanted to say to him in that moment. How much I loved him. How sorry I was for always making a mess out of everything.

A horrible thought occurred to me: what if I never got the opportunity to tell him I loved him ever again? What if he didn’t win? What would happen to all of us, then?

In my panicked thoughts, I was vaguely aware that more wisps were flying around the ring. But for once, I didn’t care. Those wisps had done nothing but try to screw up my life and give me salad dressing recipes. Well, I for one had had enough of weird magical shit for the rest of my natural life.

Wisp, werewolves, witches… Sometimes I thought my life was a bad dream, and I’d wake up in my bed with my apartment with Lola, broke but normal.

But the roar of the crowd was a cruel reminder that this was no dream—this fight was really going to happen, whether I liked it or not.

The Lupo Finale was happening. Right now.

I looked over at Colton, and for the first time I wondered how he was handling things. His mate had left him, and his twin brother and his half-brother were about to fight to the death against a psycho Rogue. Colton wasn’t exactly Mr. Mature Emotions, but he must have been feeling something. And while we didn’t have much in common, we did both love Xavier.

I reached out and took his hand, giving it a comforting squeeze. I didn’t know what his reaction would be to this small comfort. I thought he’d shake me off, or laugh at me, or think I was making a pass at him (as if—two Evers brothers were enough trouble as it was without adding a third).

But to my great surprise, he didn’t do any of that. He just squeezed my hand back.

A loud growl broke my train of thought, and I turned my attention back to the circle. Greyson had made the first move, jumping on top of Ryker with his fangs bared. Ryker snapped his large jaws at Greyson as he struggled against him, managing to throw Greyson off him. But Ryker wasn’t safe for long. As soon as he shook Greyson off, Xavier crashed into Ryker, knocking him back off his feet as they both fell to the ground.

Greyson quickly got back to his feet and chased after Ryker, biting at his ear, tearing off a piece and spitting it out into the crowd while Xavier held him down.

*They’re working together,* I realized as I watched the brothers tag teaming Ryker. A weight was starting to lift from my chest. Of course! That was why Greyson had entered the ring! He didn’t want to be Alpha—he wanted to help Xavier win. He’d known Xavier wouldn’t be able to take out Ryker on his own, so he’d decided to go into the ring and help him. It all made sense now.

This wouldn’t be like my dream. *It wouldn’t.*

I watched, heart in my throat, as Ryker tried to take on the Evers brothers. He charged at Greyson, taking a bite out of his side and causing Greyson to yelp in pain. While he was on the ground, Ryker advanced on Xavier and leapt onto him, digging his claws into the side of Xavier’s body. Xavier roared with pain, and I gasped in horror as I squeezed Colton’s hand. I thought he would have complained about how tight I was gripping, but Colton was too focused on the fight.

Ryker was on Xavier now, his jaw close to his throat—the same position he’d taken before he’d killed Gunner. I held my breath. *No. Don’t let him die. Please,* I silently begged.

*BAM!*

Greyson body slammed Ryker, pushing him off his younger brother. Greyson pinned him down, his teeth at Ryker’s throat as he waited for Xavier to get up. When Xavier finally rose, he lunged at Ryker and both brothers began to rip him to shreds as the crowd went wild.

I probably should have been happy that Ryker was becoming puppy chow—he *had* just threatened to kill me, not even twenty minutes ago. But, instead, I just kept looking at Ryker’s paws, waiting for them to lift in surrender.

“Why isn’t he surrendering?” I whispered. “What is he waiting for? Doesn’t he know he’s beat already?”

“Wolves like Ryker don’t surrender,” Colton said gravely. “They can only be killed.” There was a pause as I let his words sink in. “Also,” he added, “if you don’t want to faint again, I suggest turning away now.”

Colton was right, Ryker never surrendered. A few moments later, both Greyson and Xavier made the final blow and he stopped moving. For good.

I couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief when it was over. Ryker had been defeated. The worst was over. It took every ounce of willpower in my body not to run into the ring and hug Xavier. Not only would I be accused of ‘interfering’ (again) but he’d probably just tell me I was embarrassing him.

However, my relief at Ryker’s end was short lived when I noticed the blood dripping from Xavier’s side. Ryker’s claws had raked him deeply. Hopefully he’d heal quickly.

Seeing the dripping blood broke my resolve, and I took a step toward the circle—only to be pulled back by Colton. “Uh, where the hell do you think you’re going? It’s not over yet.”

I was opening my mouth to speak when I saw Greyson turn toward Xavier. He didn’t hesitate as he lunged straight at him.

“It’s brother versus brother,” Jay said gravely.

**Episode 196**

How the hell had this happened?

I knew what everyone said. That Greyson was a monster. That Greyson couldn’t be trusted. But my gut had always told me something else. My heart had told me to trust him. For the past few weeks, he’d done nothing but help us—he’d even saved my life on more than one occasion. I couldn’t—I *wouldn’t*—believe that he’d do something like this to us. To help his brother, only to betray him in the biggest way.

And yet there he was, fighting Xavier in the ring.

There had to be a reason.

I watched, my eyes wide with horror. Why didn’t they just stop? If Greyson really wanted to help Xavier get his pack, why didn’t he just submit now?

A sinking feeling hit the pit of my stomach. Maybe this was all my fault. If I hadn’t allowed Greyson to stay, if I hadn’t defended him at every turn, if I hadn’t kissed him…

Maybe none of this would have happened.

With no answers to my questions, I watched helplessly as Greyson and Xavier circled each other, snarling and snapping ferociously. All of their fighting from the last few weeks— possibly their whole lives—was now coming to the surface, and I had a front row seat to the fallout.

Their father probably would have loved it. My blood was cold at the thought.

I watched Xavier intensely. The fur on the side of his body was wet, and I could see red droplets of blood dripping out of him. His wound from Ryker was deep, but I didn’t know how bad it was. I squeezed Colton harder.

What if he won, but died of his injuries?

I tried to shake the thought out of my head. I needed to stay positive.

Though it was very hard to stay positive when the whole crowd was cheering for your boyfriend to be torn apart by his half-brother.

“Kill him, Greyson!” someone screamed.

“Rip his throat out!” cried another.

“Come on, Greyson!” A blue-haired woman screamed—Joss.

The whole thing made my blood boil. How could they be enjoying this? Someone was about to be MURDERED right in front of them, and they were cheering as a family was being torn apart?! What was the matter with them?

“Shut up!” I snarled out. “This isn’t a fucking game!”

Of course, no one paid attention to me. Why would they? I was human. Just a stupid human.

So I just watched in silence, my body shaking with fear. I closed my eyes and tried to use my connection with Greyson to get him to stop.

*Greyson…* I thought hard, trying to make my voice as loud as I could in my head. *Greyson! First of all, I’m super fucking mad at your right now. But if you can hear me please stop the fight! Please stop, before someone gets killed. Greyson! Talk to me, damn it!*

I opened my eyes, hoping for some indication that Greyson had heard me. A flicker of understanding.

But he continued to attack Xavier. His powerful jaws snapped toward Xavier’s neck while Xavier roared in fury and the crowd went wild.

Wolf bastards. All of them.

*Come on! Submit to Xavier and end this already!* I thought angrily. Maybe the more pissed off I was, the more likely it was that Greyson would hear me. *Can’t you see that Xavier is hurt? Can’t you see that he can’t take much more of this? Why are you—*

And then it hit me. The words that Greyson said to me days ago had finally come back to haunt me.

*You are his greatest weakness.*

How could I have been so careless? He’d been using me with one goal in mind the entire time.

Greyson wasn’t the misunderstood good guy he pretended to be. The good guy I’d selfishly *wanted* him to be. He was exactly what everyone said: a manipulative creep. A Rogue who would do anything to get what he wanted.

He’d played me like a damn fiddle, and now Xavier was going to pay for it.

I’d trusted him, more than I trusted anyone else in the group. More than I trusted Lola, and even my own mate at times. He’d saved my life in countless ways. We had a connection, we had an understanding.

I thought about everything we’d been through together: the night at the barbecue, getting chased at the mall, the night on Xavier’s back porch, hiking in the woods, teaching me to fight, the kiss…

*I don’t lie to you, Cali.*

*Asshole*. He was a fucking asshole. Being nice to me (as nice as a werewolf could be, anyway) had just been a way to lure me into a false sense of security and majorly fuck up my life.

He was going to kill Xavier. Then he was probably going to kill me. Or worse.

I needed to stop him.

I tried to push through the thick wall of people. My mind was half crazy with fear and betrayal. I had to do something, anything! This had to be stopped, and if I had to die in order to make that happen, then so be it.

I felt someone tugging the back of my shirt, pulling me back. I turned to see that the hand belonged to Jay. What was with people pulling me back today?

“What the hell are you doing?” he yelled “If you get up there and interfere, they’ll kill you instantly!”

“I DON’T GIVE A SHIT ANYMORE!” I screamed back at him. “I DON’T GIVE A SHIT WHAT HAPPENS TO ME ANYMORE! DON’T YOU GET IT? THEY’RE GOING TO KILL EACH OTHER!”

The realization of what I was saying crashed over me and I let out a sob, overwhelmed by what was happening. Even if I did jump on the stage, nothing would change. Xavier and Greyson would keep fighting—I’d just be dead while they did it. And maybe everyone would be better off for it, but it still wouldn’t fix the mess I had caused.

“I don’t know what to do,” I sobbed out hopelessly. Tears were raining down my face, and I didn’t care anymore.

Suddenly, I felt a hand slid into mine and give it a firm squeeze. I looked over to see that it was Lola, and my heart skipped a beat. Even though I felt angry, betrayed, and abandoned by her, I was so grateful that she was still willing to stand by my side, to see this through with me to the very end.

I smiled softly at her through my tears, and she smiled back.

“What’s going to happen?” I croaked, willing myself to voice the fear that was in my heart. “What happens if he loses?”

Lola squeezed my hand tighter. “He won’t. You can’t let yourself think like that. He’s going to win. He has to.”

But the look on her face said that she had her own doubts as well—especially when Xavier stumbled after another blow from Greyson and the crowd went wild with delight. The gash on his side looked worse than before.

*He’s not healing. Why isn’t he healing?*

I wanted to ask Lola, but then Xavier flipped Greyson off of him and pounced, making Greyson land hard on the ground.

Hope grew. Maybe that was it. Maybe Greyson would finally submit, and this whole thing would be over.

But then Xavier’s wolf winced in pain as he jostled the gash in his side. Greyson used that moment of weakness as an opportunity to reverse their positions, and he quickly overpowered Xavier.

I let out a scream of horror as I watched Greyson pin Xavier to the ground. His silver wolf was fierce, his breath was coming out in ragged pants. There was a fire in his gunmetal eyes that I hadn’t seen before. All that tension between him and Xavier was finally coming to a head. He’d obviously been waiting for a moment like this to finally get back at his brother.

Greyson staring Xavier down, the gnarly tree, the fighting… This had all been part of my dream.

*No*.

I gasped at the realization. My dream hadn’t been a dream at all, but a warning. A warning I hadn’t listened to, and that had now become a horrible reality. How could I have been so stupid? The warnings had been there the whole time. I could have changed everything, but I hadn’t. Now the dream had come true, and I was to blame.

I needed to stop this.

“XAVIER!” I screamed.

My scream got his attention. He turned to me, and with one last burst of strength tried to push Greyson away. But as he tried, he let out a howl of agony. Suddenly, his body started to shift, going from wolf to human and back again.

“He’s critically injured,” Lola gasped out. “He can’t control his shifting!”

“What?” I cried out.

A human Xavier fell back into the ground, and Greyson’s wolf pounced on him again. He let out an awful snarl as he snapped his jaws open and moved toward Xavier’s exposed neck.

**Episode 197**

A piercing scream erupted from my lungs before I could stop it. I tore away from Lola and ran up to the ring. I didn’t care about their stupid rituals. I didn’t care if my interference would make them kill me on sight. My mate was about to be killed, and I wasn’t going to just stand there a watch.

“STOP!” I screamed as Colton and Lola grabbed me, trying to pull me back.

Greyson’s wolf head looked up, and his grey eyes found mine. The same eyes I had stared into just a few hours ago, when he said he’d only lied to me once and then kissed me, were looking at me again.

*Please…* I silently begged.

Greyson stepped away from Xavier and shifted back into his human form. Then he turned to the cheering crowd and bowed.

It was finally over.

The Lupo Finale was finished and Xavier hadn’t won.

Mace stepped forward into the center of the ring and grabbed Greyson’s right hand, raising it up above his head.

“The winner of the Lupo Finale and the true, new Alpha of the Redwood Pack is Greyson Evers!” Mace announced.

The crowd erupted into a chorus of howls and screams. A rain of wisps fell from above before bursting into bright flashes of light, almost like fireworks.

And Greyson stood there, naked, with the most smug, self-satisfied smirk on his face. He was positively glowing in his victory.

Asshole.

I burst into the circle as the crowd cheered Greyson’s name, hurrying toward Xavier. I didn’t care about who was Alpha now or if I was breaking any stupid rules. All I cared about was my mate, and whether he was going to make it.

“Xavier!” I cried out, kneeling over his broken, battered body. The wound in his side looked even worse than it had in his wolf form. The three claw marks were deep and bleeding profusely. If we didn’t get him some medical attention soon, it was going to get infected.

Why the hell wasn’t he healing? Ugh, I should have brought Lola’s first aid kit.

“Xavier!” I said again, tears pouring down my face as I pulled his head into my lap. “Baby, are you okay?” I asked, petting his head, his dark hair wet with sweat. “Are you okay? Can you hear me? Are you okay?”

At the sound of my voice, Xavier’s eyes fluttered open. They locked onto mine, and I could see just how much pain he was in. “It burns,” he hissed, his voice laced with pain. Then he took a shallow breath and passed out in my arms.

“Xavier! Xavier wake up. Honey, please wake up,” I begged, stroking his hair and starting to shake him. I was desperately trying to wake him. Tears dripped down my cheek and splattered onto his face. “I love you. I love you. Please wake up.”

I looked around, anger rising in me as well as sorrow. Why the hell wasn’t anyone helping us? Helping him? Were they seriously going to let Xavier die in the ring? He was one of them!

Werewolves: disloyal, the whole lot of them.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Greyson watching me. He didn’t say anything—not a snarky comeback, or a word of support. What the hell *could* he say after almost killing his brother? I hated him for it. For everything.

Yet his gaze still made me shiver.

I didn’t know whether he could hear me, but I stared back and thought with all the strength I could muster: *Fuck. You.*

Finally, two people arrived with a stretcher, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Step away, miss,” one of them said. I reluctantly stepped aside as they placed Xavier on the stretcher and carried him away.

“Where are you taking him?” I cried out, hugging myself for comfort.

No one answered.

Hurt, fear, and anger clouded my senses. I couldn’t do anything to help Xavier right now, but I could sure as hell give Greyson a piece of my mind. And I was pissed.

I turned to face Greyson, who was still staring at me with those infuriating gray eyes of his. “Come to congratulate me, love?” he asked, with a smirk that did not meet his eyes.

That did it.

I charged toward him, jabbing my finger at the center of his chest. “YOU LIED TO ME, YOU FUCKING WOLF BASTARD! YOU LIED TO ME! I TRUSTED YOU! I BELIEVED IN YOU WHEN NO ONE ELSE WOULD EVEN LOOK AT YOU, AND YOU FUCKED WITH ME! YOU BASTARD! YOU LIAR! HE’S YOUR *BROTHER*! HE’S YOUR FAMILY, YOU MONSTER!” I shoved at his chest, tears and rage clouding my vision as I continued to scream. “YOU TOLD ME YOU WEREN’T GOING TO FIGHT HIM! YOU’RE A FUCKING LIAR! I HATE YOU! I NEVER WANT TO SEE YOUR STUPID FACE AGAIN AS LONG AS I LIVE!” I started to pound on his bare chest with my fists, knowing it wasn’t going to do me much good—hitting Greyson was like hitting a brick wall. But I did it anyway. I needed an outlet to get my emotions out.

Finally, Greyson decided he’d had enough. He grabbed onto my wrist firmly and pulled me close, within inches of his face. His eyes looked fierce and determined. “Now, that’s quite enough of that for today. You should be grateful, Cali. I could have killed him.”

I gaped at him. Was he fucking serious? I should be *grateful* that he hadn’t killed my mate? His brother? He should be grateful that I wasn’t killing his ass right now! Bastard.

Before I could yell another word, Colton stormed up to the circle and shoved Greyson off me. “Hey! Get your fucking hands off her!”

Greyson stumbled for a moment before composing himself. He smirked at his younger brother. “Be careful, Colton. I can take care of you, too. The idea of you and Xavier on twin hospital beds seems quite fitting.” He winked.

Greyson shot me one last unreadable glance before walking away into a group of spectators and adoring fans to celebrate his victory. It made me sick.

Colton looked at me. “Are you okay?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but the lump in my throat was too big. Instead I just shook my head.

He nodded. “Me too.” Without another word, Colton took my hand and led me out of the ring.

I was numb as we walked over to the rest of our pack—or rather, what was left of our pack. I could hear people talking, but I wasn’t listening. Everything felt like it was a million miles away. I was there physically, but mentally I was gone, my thoughts solely on Xavier. He’d said he wasn’t going to lose. He hadn’t even entertained the thought of defeat. He’d promised me that everything would be all right.

But everything had gone completely and horribly wrong.

Greyson had won and Xavier might die and it was all my fault.

Why hadn’t I listened to my dream? Why had I trusted Greyson? Why did I *care* about him?

Why did I always make the wrong choices?

A tap on my shoulder pulled me out of my thoughts and back to earth. I turned around to see the very last person I wanted to see: Maya, smirking.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh my god, what the hell do you want? Can’t you give us five fucking seconds before barging in where you’re clearly not wanted? Seriously, what the hell is your problem?”

My outburst only increased Maya’s smirk. “Oh, I don’t have a problem. *You’re* the one with a problem. You’ve completely fucked up your life, and it was *hilarious* to watch.”

“Oh shut up. Your precious Nolan gave up in the first round, so I wouldn’t walk around all high and mighty if I were you. You’re not special. He doesn’t want you, you’re just another piece of fucking wolf tail to him.”

Maya’s expression softened for a moment. “That’s true. But lucky for me, Nolan isn’t my problem anymore.”

I was about to ask what she meant, but then her expression changed. She was looking at Colton holding my hand. I saw the hurt in her eyes for a moment before it changed to cold anger.

“Well that didn’t take very long, did it?”

I looked at her, confused. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Maya scoffed. “Please, I’m not dumb. Now that Xavier is out of the picture, you clearly haven’t wasted any time hooking up with his other brother.”

“Shut up, Maya,” Colton growled as I bristled with rage.

*Don’t let her get to you, Cali. Don’t let her get inside your head. She just wants a reaction from you.* And if she kept pressing she was going to get one.

“So, Xavier versus Greyson. Who were you rooting for, Cali?”

That did it. That was the very last straw. After months of being teased, bullied, occasionally saved, and shit on by Maya, she’d finally taken things too far. I was done.

My rage needed some extra relief.

I pulled my hand out of Colton’s. And then, before I could think about it, I balled my hand into a fist and let fly at Maya’s nose, hearing a satisfying crunch.

**Episode 198**

That. Felt. *Good.*

I mean, don’t get me wrong, it hurt like a bastard and I was ninety-nine percent sure I’d broken my hand. But still. That *crunch.* The pure satisfaction that I had finally, *finally* shut Maya up, that I wasn’t a weak little human, felt good. She’d been on my back for far too long. All my anger and hurt had finally come to the surface, and I finally had some relief.

*Finally.*

There were gasps and even a few laughs as Maya screamed out in both shock and agony, clutching her face as she stumbled backwards. “YOU BITCH! YOU FUCKING BITCH! YOU BROKE MY NOSE!”

I didn’t say anything as I grabbed my own hand in pain. What were werewolves’ bones made of? Pure steel? Fuck, this was going to hurt later.

Worth it. Totally worth it.

Maya continued to glare at me, her eyes filled with pure rage as blood poured down her face. “I’m going to kill you,” she spat.

There was a sound of cracking bones, and Maya snarled as I slowly stepped away.

Fuck. I was in trouble.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Colton said, stepping between Maya and myself. “As much as I hate breaking up a lady fight, this is not nearly as sexy as I hoped it would be.”

“Don’t you dare talk to me right now! That little slut is finally going to get what’s coming to her!” Maya vowed.

Ugh, even with a broken nose she *still* couldn’t shut up. I didn’t think I had enough punches in me to shut her up for good—the first one was already starting to take its toll.

“Fine. I won’t talk to you then,” said Colton simply. Then, as if she were a sack of flour, Colton scooped Maya up, tossed her over his shoulder and carried her away from the rest of us, screaming and cursing the whole time.

“I’LL GET YOU FOR THIS! YOU’LL PAY FOR WHAT YOU’VE DONE CALIANA HART! I’LL MAKE YOU BLEED!” she screamed out into the night as the others looked on.

Okay, so maybe we wouldn’t ever have a girl’s night out, like I’d hoped. Still totally worth it.

“Well, it’s about time *somebody* did that,” Jay said.

“I really wish it hadn’t been me, but I couldn’t handle her for one more second. If my hand didn’t hurt so much, I’d do it again,” I said, rubbing my hand, which was now bright red and starting to swell. As if the day couldn’t have gotten any worse.

Jay glanced at my injured hand. “You’d better put some ice on that,” he suggested dryly.

“That’s for the help, Captain Obvious,” I shot back, rolling my eyes. “Where’s Xavier? Where did they take him? Is he okay?”

“They took him to Big Mac’s tent.”

Fuck. Her treatment was probably costing us a fortune in body parts. “Isn’t there a real medical tent in at this stupid thing?” Seriously? Did no one in the werewolf community have any kind of medical degree? I’d even settle for a first aid kit.

“I think we both know the answer to that,” said Jay.

I didn’t answer, just ran toward Big Mac’s tent, Jay following close behind. I prayed that I wasn’t too late. That my worst-case scenario hadn’t happened yet.

I burst into the tent without announcing myself, and gasped at what I saw. Xavier was pale and bleeding on a table in the middle of the room while Big Mac leaned over him, applying ointment to the large gash that covered his side. Her mouth was a tight, worried line.

“Xavier,” I breathed out. taking a step toward him. But Mrs. Smith pulled me back. “Don’t get too close, Cali. MacKenzie is handling him and she needs space to work.”

I stopped moving, my eyes glued to the ugly, bloody wound. “What’s she doing to him?”

“She’s applying a special herbal mixture to help with the healing process. Xavier suffered a nasty wound.”

“But he’s a werewolf. Why isn’t he healing? And it’s a full moon—isn’t this when he’s at his strongest?”

Mrs. Smith looked over at Big Mac, who gave her a troubled look in return.

Yeah, that wasn’t reassuring.

“Yes,” Mrs. Smith said, her voice hesitant. “He should be healing, but—”

“Sabine, can you help me make more salve? We’re going to need a lot of it,” Big Mac said gravely.

I gulped. Yup, not a good sign.

When the two ladies went into the back room, I walked over to Xavier, kneeling beside his head. His eyes were closed, but even unconscious his features looked troubled. I brushed his hair back and noticed just how pale he was. I wondered how much blood he’d lost.

I took his hand and kissed it.

“Xavier,” I whispered gently. “It’s Cali. I’m here. I’m right here beside you. I love you so much,” I said. “I’m so, so sorry.”

I leaned in and placed a kiss on his forehead, feeling his body heat. Except his familiar heat was almost too warm, like he was getting a fever.

“Oh, honey,” I cooed, guilt filling my heart as I looked at my battered mate, wondering what the hell I was meant do.

*I’ve ruined our lives.*

I felt tears run down my cheek. “This is all my fault. I’m sorry. I love you so much,” I whispered.

As soon as the words left my mouth, Xavier began to stir, his eyelids fluttering open.

I gasped, squeezing his hand. “Xavier,” I breathed. “He’s waking up! He’s waking up!” I cried out toward the back room as I got closer to him. “I’m here, Xavier. I’m here.”

His dark eyes met mine and for the briefest moment, he smiled up at me.

“Caliana,” he whispered, his free hand reaching out for me.

However, my joy was short-lived. A second later, Xavier’s face twisted up in pain. His mouth opened, and he let out a horrible scream.

Big Mac and Mrs. Smith ran in.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” Mrs. Smith asked, rushing over to Xavier.

“Can’t you see he’s in pain!” I screamed. “Do something!”

Xavier thrashed on the table in agony, and I tried to hold him down. “Xavier! It’s okay! We’re here to help—” Xavier’s strong arms threw me across the room, and I fell to the floor.

Mrs. Smith rushed to hold Xavier still as Big Mac placed a hand on top of his forehead and uttered a few words that I didn’t recognize.

*Witchcraft.*

Suddenly, Xavier stopped moving and lay completely still on the table.

I stood up, rubbing my side. That’d definitely bruise. “Did you paralyze him?”

Mrs. Smith shrugged. “I had to. He was in pain, and he was just going to hurt himself more if he kept moving. Not to mention kill us. He isn’t in his right mind at the moment. Plus, what I need to do is going to be painful. Don’t give me that look, Caliana, it needs to be done.”

“No, you’re right, I don’t want him to be in any more pain,” I said, looking at Xavier’s face, still frozen in agony. “But can’t you just—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Big Mac pulled a vial out of the pocket of her maxi dress and dripped some bright green liquid onto Xavier’s large side wound.

Xavier eyes flashed open, dark and intense, almost as if they were bulging out of their sockets. The muscles on his legs and arms began to tense up and try to move, almost like his body was struggling to break the paralysis. His eyes were frantic. He reminded me of a dog that had gotten caught a trap, looking for an escape but unable to move. My heart broke for him in that moment. It occurred to me that he probably didn’t know what was going on, or what was happening to him. He probably didn’t remember losing. The fear and confusion was rolling off him in waves and I wanted to cry for him, but I knew that wasn’t what he needed right then. He needed me to be brave.

“Xavier, honey? You’re okay. You’re going to be okay,” I said, trying to calm him down. I looked over at Big Mac and lowered my voice, “Is he going to be okay?”

Big Mac frowned deeply, her brow furrowed in concern as she examined the wound more closely, tutting to herself.

“What is it, MacKenzie?” Mrs. Smith asked, also looking at the wound. “Why isn’t it working?”

“It’s worse than we feared,” Big Mac said in a low, grave voice. She looked at the two of us. “Caliana was right about Ryker. Xavier has been infected with silver.”

**Episode 199**

I gasped, taking a step back in shock. A million worst case scenarios flashed into my mind. I knew it. I fucking *knew* it. Ryker HAD been cheating and he HAD used silver. Whether the old ass werewolves had been in on it or they just hadn’t seen it, I didn’t know. All I knew was that *I* had been right. I’d been right and no one had done a damn thing and my mate was going die because of the ignorance of others.

I wanted to be pissed, but I was too horrified. I could be angry later. Right now, Xavier’s life was on the line and I had no idea what a silver wound could mean. Could he die? Would it ever heal?

“Is it serious?” I squeaked out, speaking around the lump in my throat as I tried my hardest not to burst in a puddle of tears—again. Honestly, I probably didn’t have enough water left in me to cry.

“What’s serious?”

I turned to see Colton enter the tent. His eyes immediately went to Xavier, and the color drained from his face. “Is he..?”

“Xavier’s wound was inflicted with silver,” Big Mac explained.

Colton’s hands balled up into fists. “Ryker. Cali was right,” he said. “That fucking bastard. I should have killed him myself. How much silver is in him?”

“Enough. Silver is poisonous to werewolves, and can kill if not treated immediately.” Big Mac turned to Mrs. Smith. “Remember what happened to poor Vernon Deets?”

Mrs. Smith shook her head sadly. “Tragic.”

I wanted to roll my eyes. It sounded totally mean, but I didn’t give two shits about Vernon Deets. Xavier was in pain and poisoned and *right there.* Big Mac should have been doing a little more healing witchcraft and a little less taking a stroll down tragic memory lane.

“Well then treat him! We don’t have a moment to waste!” I cried out. Seriously, what the hell was she standing around for? Was she waiting to give us the bill first? I didn’t care about how much this might cost me. I understood Jay a little better, now; I’d easily give up my eye to keep Xavier alive.

Big Mac glared at me, putting a hand on her hip. “What do you think I’m doing? Taking a bubble bath?”

“Sorry,” I said quickly. I didn’t want to be on a witch’s bad side. At least, any more than I already was.

I turned to look at Colton. My rage needed to go somewhere, and he seemed like the most convenient target. “See! I told you! I told all of you! I wasn’t lying! Ryker was cheating!” While this was a horrible way to be proven right, it *was* good to know I wasn’t crazy and the wisps hadn’t been messing with me. The wisps hadn’t been trying to trick me, at least that time.

Colton shrugged. “So, you were right. But what can we do about it now? The damage is done.”

He was right. What *could* we do now?

“How about the two of you wait outside?” said Mrs. Smith. “Big Mac and I have to prepare a treatment, and it’s going to take some time. Not to mention it’ll be awful messy.”

I shook my head, standing firmly in my place. “I’m not going anywhere. Not while Xavier is like this. He needs me,” I said, my voice cracking. I was consumed with guilt and fear. It was my fault that Xavier had lost, and if something happened to him I would always blame myself. I should have warned him… I should have listened to him when he told me Greyson was bad. But it was a little late for should haves.

Colton placed his arm around me in a surprisingly tender moment. Almost like a big brother. “Come on, Cali, let’s go. There’s nothing we can do here. We just have to trust them,” he said, giving Xavier one last scared, sad look. I knew how bad he was hurting, and I put my own arm around his torso.

Mrs. Smith gave us a sad smile. “I’m so sorry that this happened. We’re going to do everything we can to restore him to health.”

“Yeah, which is why you two need to get out of here,” Big Mac grumbled. “There’s nothing you can do but wait. We don’t need you to hover over us while we’re working.”

Rude.

Feeling defensive, I took one last look at Xavier and leaned down close to his ear. “I’ll be just outside. I love you, Xavier,” I whispered, giving his hand a squeeze and planting a kiss onto his cheek before I allowed Colton to lead me out of the tent.

\*\*\*

“I can’t believe I was right about the whole Ryker thing and NO ONE believed me!” I said, as soon as we left the tent. “Actually, I *can* believe it, because no one ever listens to me. Because all of you are fucking species-ist! How did he get past the werewolf elders?”

Colton shrugged. “In our defense, you say so much stupid shit on a daily basis that we kind of tune you out. Plus, you had no proof. They checked him and he was clean. And you’re a human.”

“See! Species-ist! This is exactly what I’m talking about!”

Colton rolled his eyes. “I’m already regretting being nice to you.”

“And what about the wisps? That was my proof!” I continued.

“What the hell are you babbling about?”

“The wisps. Those flying light things. They led me to Ryker while he was giving himself a silver manicure. I tried to tell Xavier before the Finale, but—”

“Oh my *good god*, do you ever stop talking?” Colton hollered, taking his hands off me. “Enough! No one gives a shit if you were right or not! It doesn’t MATTER anymore, can’t you see that? Ryker is dead and Xavier’s been poisoned, and that’s what matters right now! For once in your damn life, you have to start dealing with reality. And for your information, wisps don’t do that kind of shit. They’re not like divining rods—they don’t lead you to shit! And anyway, it doesn’t FUCKING MATTER!”

I opened my mouth to argue more. I mean, I had a point—if they’d just listened to me in the first place, Xavier could have won, and he wouldn’t have been poisoned. And *maybe* if they all listened to me more often, we’d all be better off.

But then I shut my mouth, realizing that Colton’s little fit hadn’t been about me; he’d exploded at me because he was in pain. Colton was Xavier’s twin, after all. Even if Colton wasn’t the most emotional guy on the planet, Xavier’s injury had to be affecting him. Maybe even more than it was affecting me. We were both hurting right now, and I needed to be more mindful of that. I wasn’t the only one who loved Xavier.

I reached out and placed a comforting hand on Colton’s shoulder, which he immediately shrugged off.

I pulled my hand back. I felt the sting of his rejection, but tried not to let it affect me too much. Colton was hurting, and he didn’t know how to show emotions other than keeping them to himself or lashing out. As much as the brothers hated to admit it, they were more similar than they liked to believe. Exhibit A: hiding their emotions.

I wanted to reach out to Colton, tell him it was okay to let his walls down and feel something. But just as I opened my mouth again, Jay, Lola, Lilac, and Violet came over to us.

“How’s Xavier doing?” Jay asked.

Colton shrugged, unable to meet anyone’s eye. “I’m going to go see how Maya’s doing,” he mumbled, before walking off into the dark.

Yeah, all three of the Evers brothers needed deep and intense therapy.

“I was right,” I said, my lower lip quivering as I spoke. “Ryker was cheating. He had silver polish painted on his nails. Xavier’s wound is infected with silver. Big Mac and Mrs. Smith are working on him right now, but I’m so scared.”

Everyone exchanged worried and horrified looks.

“You should be worried,” Jay said. “Silver is some serious shit. It’s like Kryptonite to Superman.”

That did NOT make feel better. Not even a little bit. With nothing else to do, I started to pace, wondering what the hell was taking Big Mac and Mrs. Smith so long. It felt like hours had passed, days even. It was probably just a few minutes. But still, they were LONG minutes.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Lola said, grabbing me out of my pace to pull me into a bear hug. “Just chill, okay?”

I leaned into the hug, giving her one in return. I was grateful for the hug, and for Lola’s kindness. Maybe she’d forgiven me after all. Or, at least she understood my point of view a little better.

As we separated, I smiled at her. “Thank you for being so understanding, bestie.”

She did not smile back. Instead, she scowled at me before turning back to Jay in a huff. This was typical of Lola. She would hate you, then forget that she hated you, then hate you again. Still, her reaction stung, reminding me how truly alone I was in this. Between Lola hating my guts, and standing outside while Big Mac and Mrs. Smith did goodness knows what to Xavier…

*What the hell was taking so long?* I thought.Maybe it wouldn’t be bad if I just took a little peek at what was going on? Anything was better than waiting.

I walked back to Big Mac’s tent and slowly pulled back the flap, just in time to see Big Mac standing over Xavier. In one hand, she was holding a dropper filled with red liquid, and in the other was the vial of blood that she’d taken from me.

**Episode 200**

I felt my jaw drop at the sight. What the hell wasthat witch doing with my blood?Was she going to use it to finish Xavier off? Had she seen this happening in her crystal ball or some shit, and prepared for it? Without warning us? What was her sick little game anyway?

Things I was right about, number two: never trust a witch.

I knew I was being paranoid, but could you blame me? Big Mac might have helped us in the past, but it had always been at a price. Plus, she was Maya’s friend, and I couldn’t trust Maya as far as I could throw her.

I couldn’t trust anyone anymore.

“W-what are you using that for?” I stammered, shocked and angry at the same time.

The sound of my voice made Big Mac jump. She turned to look at me, wide eyed, clearly startled by my appearance. Which only made me more suspicion of her intentions.

Big Mac turned to Mrs. Smith. “Sabine, I thought I told you to get her out of here!” she snapped.

“Hey! Don’t yell at Mrs. Smith!” I shouted.

“It’s really okay, Cali,” said Mrs. Smith, gently taking my arm.

I yanked it away. “No! It’s not OKAY! Nothing is OKAY right now, and I want answers! What are you doing to Xavier? Why the hell are you using my blood? Did you plan this?”

“Sabine…” Big Mac warned.

This time, Mrs. Smith not-so-gently grabbed my arm and pulled me aside. “Calm down. Yelling isn’t going to get you answers any faster.”

“Well, no one answers me when I speak nice and sweetly,” I huffed.

“Have you even tried that approach?” Mrs. Smith asked, an eyebrow raised.

“I have a gut feeling it wouldn’t work. Now will you tell me what’s going on? Why the hell is she using my blood on Xavier? Is it like a blood transfusion or something? Because I’ve seen enough medical shows to know that what you’re doing right now is fucking unsanitary. *Please*,” I said, adding the please after seeing the annoyed look on Mrs. Smith’s face.

“It’s because you’re his mate,” she answered with a sigh.

I gave her a puzzled look. “So? What does that have to do with anything?”

Mrs. Smith and Big Mac shot each other a look that annoyed me. Couldn’t people just use their damn words?

“The blood of a mate can sometimes reverse the damage caused by certain infections. Even silver in some extreme cases,” Mrs. Smith explained.

“I’m adding it to the salve I made,” Big Mac chimed in, her brow furrowed with concentration as she bent over her workbench. “It’s going to be his best chance at survival.”

I looked at the small vial of blood and then at the large wound. Seven drops of blood didn’t seem like nearly enough to make any kind of difference. What if it didn’t work? What if it wasn’t strong enough?

“Do you need any more?” I asked, my voice on the edge of desperate. “Take as much as you want. I don’t care about what happens to me. Just as long as he’s okay.”

Big Mac’s face light it up at my words. “Well, I could always use more… Just to have on hand.”

Mrs. Smith shot her a look. “Don’t be greedy, MacKenzie! You have plenty!”

Big Mac pouted but said nothing else.

I pulled out of Mrs. Smith’s grip, stepped closer to Xavier and frowned. His face was ghostly white. “Why is he so pale?”

Big Mac shot me a look. “Look, if you want to stay here, you need to keep your mouth shut and need to stop questioning everything I do. This isn’t a teaching hospital. I don’t like my methods to be questioned, or having people constantly looking over my shoulder, checking my work. He’s pale because he has an inflection. He body has suffered a life-threatening wound and he’s not going to jump back up again and be back to normal. This isn’t the fucking movies, kid. My magic is solid, but it needs time to work. You’re an adult, learn some damn patience.”

I huffed but stayed quiet as I took my seat next to Xavier’s bed. I took his hand and shivered. Xavier usually ran hot, and was always warmer than me. But now his hand was cold and clammy. I watched him intently, his breath coming out shallow and raspy.

None of this was a good sign.

I braced myself and glanced down at the wound. It looked just as bad as before.

Big Mac saw where I was looking and covered the wound with a sheet. She probably didn’t want me to comment on her handiwork. She hadn’t even put a freaking bandage on it, or done any stitches. It was still an open wound in a dirty tent. My mother would have had a fit if she’d seen it.

“All we can do now is wait,” said Big Mac.

Mrs. Smith turned to Big Mac. “How about we get a cup of tea? I think Cali needs a moment with Xavier.”

Did people think I couldn’t hear them? I was sitting right there! Still, I was touched by Mrs. Smith’s gesture.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Fine. But I want chai this time.”

The two women walked off, leaving me alone with Xavier. I prayed that the medicine would start working soon. The guilt I was feeling was eating away at my heart, and I felt so helpless.

*This is all my fault.*

I was the one who’d supported Greyson coming along with us, who’d convinced the others that he wasn’t the murderous Rogue everyone thought he was. Who’d defended him at every turn, because he’d saved my life several times. Because I’d thought he was my friend. Because I felt…

I didn’t know what I felt for him anymore. All I knew now was the feeling of betrayal. He’d lied to me, and used me for his own purposes. He’d saved my life in order to gain my trust. He’d promised that he wouldn’t challenge Xavier, knowing I’d believe him. He’d probably done it all to screw with me, to feed his own ambition—and probably for the personal joy of fucking with me.

*Bastard! Sick bastard!*

Just because someone saves your life, doesn’t mean they aren’t out to get you. Something I’d learned the hard way.

*As soon as Xavier gets better, I’m going to make Greyson pay for what he’s done*, I vowed. How I was going to do that, I didn’t know. But I had plenty of time to figure it out.

Xavier let out a soft moan, jerking my thoughts back into the present. Revenge could wait—Xavier needed me right now.

“Oh, my poor baby,” I cooed as I swiped the glistening sweat off his forehead. Slowly, Xavier’s eyes started to open. My heart leapt into my throat. I was torn between hoping he’d be all right, and being completely terrified of what his reaction would be when he saw me. Would he still be angry with me about what Maya had said? Had she even said anything? Maybe he wouldn’t even remember.

I could only hold my breath as his unfocused eyes settled on mine. His lips quirked up in a slight smile. “Caliana,” he whispered, his voice barely audible. Still, I was filled with joy and relief that he’d recognized me. He was okay! He was conscious! And he didn’t hate me yet! Maya must not have told him that I kissed Greyson. Maybe I’d be able to get away with it after all. A flash of guilt shot through me. Great, now I felt bad for punching Maya in the nose. Though, in my own weak defense, she’d kind of had it coming.

Still, I needed to apologize. Eventually…

But for now, there was only me and Xavier.

I leaned in close and gave his hand a comforting squeeze. “I’m right here, Xavier. I’m right here and I’m not going anywhere. You’re going to be okay. You *have* to be okay, baby. I can’t live without you,” I said, my own voice barely above a whisper as the words tumbled out, tears threatening to fall as I realized just how scared I had been. Just how close I had been to losing him for good. I swore to whatever divinity was listening to me that if Xavier made it out of this alive, I would never do anything stupid and impulsive again. Or, I’d at least try very hard not to.

Xavier squeezed my hand back, his mouth opening to speak, but I couldn’t hear what he said.

“What? Speak up, honey,” I encouraged, leaning in closer so I could hear him better. His hot breath was on my ear now. It was encouraging. Proof that he was still alive. Still here with me.

Xavier opened his mouth again and I waited, on edge, wondering what he was going to say.

What did come out of his mouth was a bloodcurdling scream that nearly blew out my eardrum.

I jumped nearly a foot in the air as Xavier’s body shook and spasmed violently on the table, and he continued to scream in pain. Panic shot through my veins as I backed away from him. Was this it? Was he dying?

Big Mac rushed into the room and my panic turned into rage as I rounded on her. “WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO?” I screamed at her. “YOU’RE KILLING HIM!”

**Episode 201**

Xavier’s body shook violently on the table. The noise and my screaming had attracted Colton, who stormed into the tent. At the sight of his brother convulsing around on the table, Colton immediately slammed Big Mac against the shelves, sending bottles flying everywhere. His big hand wrapped around her throat.

“WHAT DID YOU DO HIM?” he snarled at her. I should have made friends with Colton long ago—he was great backup in most situations.

Big Mac, however, did not look frightened by the large man holding her by the neck. In fact, she looked more annoyed than anything. “If you care about your brother, you’d better let go of me. Right. Now.” she said, her tone calm but firm. “Or you’ll be very sorry.”

“I DON’T GIVE A FLYING FUCK! WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO MY BROTHER?” Colton roared.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake!” Mrs. Smith cried out in annoyance. She walked over to Xavier’s thrashing body and whipped the sheet away. “See? It’s working?”

I looked down, and sure enough Mrs. Smith was right—the wound was looking a little better, at least not as red and weepy. At the loss of the sheet, Xavier’s shaking subsided.

I gasped. “Colton, let her go! It’s working! It’s actually working!”

“What do you mean ‘actually’? I’m a fucking witch, of course it’s working!” Big Mac hissed. “Now if you want Xavier to live, you both need to calm down!”

Colton looked at Xavier’s wound before shooting me a ‘why the hell did you call me in here?’ look. And then he finally released Big Mac.

Big Mac shoved Colton away in disgust. “It’s not smart to make an enemy of a witch, young man,” she warned.

Colton shrugged. “Whatever,” he huffed out, coming over to his brother’s side, his face twisted up with concern and worry. “He doesn’t look that much better.”

“Watch,” I breathed out in amazement, watching Xavier’s body. The shaking had completely stopped. His wound was rippling before our eyes, the gash changing from bright red to a light pink as the open gash started to close. At the rate it was going, it would be nothing more than a scar in a few hours.

“Can you believe it?” I said softly, to no one in particular. My blood had healed Xavier. I’d been able to do something useful after all.

Colton said nothing, his eyes still on the wound.

Mrs. Smith walked over to us, a smile on her face. “It’s working.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Oh Sabine, must you always doubt me?”

Mrs. Smith scoffed. “Oh MacKenzie, must you always take things so personally?”

They started to bicker, but my brain had already tuned them out. I didn’t care if Big Mac had used my blood—not as long as it was working, and Xavier was going to be okay.

“Does this mean the worst is over?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper, nervous to hear the answer.

The two women opened their mouths to speak, but it was Xavier who spoke first.

To scream at the top of his lungs.

I stumbled backwards in shock, tripping over my own feet. “What the hell was that?” I demanded. “What’s wrong with him!”

Then the screaming stopped as suddenly as it had started. Xavier took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

We all watched him. Nothing happened. He was barely breathing now.

I jumped back up to my feet and glared at Big Mac. “You’ve killed him! You’ve killed him, haven’t you?”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake! Will you *please* stop saying that? You are the most dramatic person I’ve ever met, and I knew Sabine as a teenager!” cried Big Mac.

“Hey! I wasn’t *that* dramatic and dumb!” Mrs. Smith retorted.

Why the hell was everyone always so rude to me?

“Anyway, he’s not dead so you can stop being ridiculous—if that’s even possible for you. He’s just resting.”

I gave her a skeptical look. “Yes, because I know when *I’m* resting, I also like to scream at the top of my lungs.”

Mrs. Smith put a comforting arm around my shoulders, a warm, calming smile on her face. “I know how you’re feeling, dearie. It’s hard to stay calm when you’re scared about your mate and don’t understand what is going on. But you have to trust us. He’s going to be fine. His body is resting right now, and the medicine is destroying the remaining infection. Silver is a very tricky poison for werewolves, so naturally it’s going to be hard to get it out of his system—and very painful. We’ve given him as much pain relief as we can, but it’s a painful process. But he *is* healing, and he’ll be all right.”

“Promise?” I said, sounding almost childlike.

Mrs. Smith smiled. “Of course, dearie.”

I might not have trusted Big Mac, but I’d trust Mrs. Smith with my life.

“Come on kids, let’s leave Xavier and MacKenzie to get some rest. They both need it, to tell you the truth. Especially MacKenzie,” she said with a laugh.

I allowed Mrs. Smith to escort me out of the tent, Colton following right behind us.

Mrs. Smith looked over at Colton and gently touched his shoulder. “I know you’re worried about your brother, but I promise that the danger has passed. Despite MacKenzie’s arrogance about her talents, that witch can put her spells were her mouth is, if you know what I mean. Xavier is in good hands.”

“Are you sure?” Colton mumbled.

Mrs. Smith smiled and there was something in her expression that I couldn’t read. “I’ve known MacKenzie for a long time. She’s a real pain in the you-know-what, but she’s mostly okay. Sometimes. At least where witchcraft is concerned. At that, she’s a pro.”

I was relieved that Xavier probably wasn’t going to die, but I wondered how long it would take him to wake up. I had so much to tell him. If he still wanted to see me after what happened between me and Greyson, that is. I swallowed hard at the thought.

“How long do you think he’ll be out?” I asked.

Mrs. Smith shrugged. “Probably for a few more hours. Once the wound starts to heal, he’ll be good as new. As if he’d never been poisoned in the first place. But I’ll let you know the moment he wakes up. I promise.”

I smiled at her. “Thank you,” I said, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze. I was grateful that at least someone was being kind to me right now, when I needed it most.

Mrs. Smith just nodded and went back inside the tent. I sighed, wishing I could go back in and sit with Mrs. Smith. Instead, I had to go back and deal with the others. But they deserved to know what was going on with their true Alpha, even if everyone kinda hated me.

Colton and I walked over to the rest of the pack.

“How is he?” Lilac asked.

“He’s doing better. Healing. But he’ll probably be out for the next few hours,” I said, looking down at my feet.

“So what do we do now?” Lola asked, looking at everyone BUT me. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I don’t want Greyson as our Alpha.”

The rest of the pack murmured agreement.

“Greyson is a huge problem for us. We can’t trust him, and we can’t trust that his decisions will be good for the pack. He’s a complete and utter psycho. No offense, Colton,” said Jay.

“No, none taken. That prick has got to go. If he were here right now, my fist would be sending him on a one-way trip to England. Or wherever the fuck,” said Colton. “As long as it’s not here.”

“So what do we do?” I asked softly.

Everyone turned to look at me, almost like they’d forgotten I was there. Lola was glaring daggers at me, like my very existence infuriated her.

“WE don’t do anything. This concerns the pack, not some stupid human. Stay out of our business for once,” Lola growled.

I recoiled at her words, deeply hurt by what she’d said. I’d never thought Lola would turn against me like this. It had been *her* idea for me to join the stupid pack in the first place—shit, she’d basically sold me to Xavier. How could she talk to me like this?

“But I’m Xavier’s mate. My blood just *saved him*. I’m just as much a member of this pack as you are, Lola!” I shouted back, my voice rougher than I intended.

Lola rolled her eyes. “Yeah, sure. Whatever. You’re still human, and still a burden on all of us. This meeting is about werewolves only! No one cares what you do.”

*No one cares what you do. No one cares about you.* Her words rang in my head as I tried to hold back tears. I swallowed hard, rephrasing my question into something Lola couldn’t use to hurt me. “Okay… What are *you* going to do?”

Lola looked at Colton and Jay. “Should we go Rogue?”

**Episode 202**

Lola’s words hit me hard. Going Rogue? Seriously? I knew that Colton and Xavier had gone Rogue before, but things were different now. Mainly because more people wanted to kill us. And even though Lola had made it clear to everyone that I was NOT a werewolf, I was still a part of this pack. And going Rogue as a human did not seem ideal. And Xavier was going to be so pissed if we decided anything without him.

Plus, whether we liked it or not, we were a pack. A *family.* We couldn’t be separated now. Not after everything we’d been through together.

I stepped in front of Lola and the boys. “You guys can’t do that! You need to discuss this with Xavier. He’s your leader. Or he *was.* You owe him enough to at least tell him what your plans are.”

Jay shrugged. “Xavier isn’t our leader anymore, nor is he here. We don’t owe him anything right now.”

“We don’t know how long it’ll take for Xavier to recover. We have to act now, and fast,” Colton added.

“But Mrs. Smith said he’d be good as new once the wound healed,” I said.

“But we can’t wait too long. Greyson will take control of the pack by the end of the night. If we’re going to go Rogue, we need to get a head start before the others figure out what we’re planning,” said Lola.

“But what about Xavier?” I turned to Colton as I spoke. Surely Colton wouldn’t turn his back on his own twin?

Colton just shrugged. “My brother will do what’s best for him. He always has in the past.”

I was stunned by this. Was this really the same guy who not even ten minutes ago had thrown a witch against a wall because he’d been so worried about his brother? Was he really saying that Xavier was on his own?

Werewolves, so fickle in their emotions.

“What will happen if Greyson becomes your Alpha?” I asked, careful not to say *our* Alpha in front of these very touchy wolves. Not to mention I didn’t like the idea of Greyson being my Alpha in any sense of the word. He already had enough power over me as it was.

“I don’t know,” admitted Colton. “I just know that he can’t be trusted. Greyson’s not like Xavier—he only does what’s best for himself.”

*Ain’t that the truth*, I thought bitterly.

“Has anyone spoken to Greyson since the fight?” I asked.

“Other than you screaming at him? No,” replied Jay.

“I’m going to go talk to him,” I decided.

Lola glared at me coldly, causing me to look away in shame.

“You’d better stay out of this, Cali,” Lola said harshly. “Haven’t you done enough damage for one night?”

Ouch. I recoiled like she’d hit me.

Jay looked between the two of us, one eyebrow raised. “What the hell is going on between the two of you?”

I didn’t have the guts to look at Lola again. I’d thought that her holding my hand at the Finale had meant we’d kinda made up, but clearly that wasn’t the case. Part of me wondered how she could be so on her high horse after all the times she’d lied to me, and how she’d all but cheered me on to kiss Greyson initially. But I knew that, in the end, kissing Greyson had been my fault, even if he’d manipulated me. And the kiss had led to nothing but grief for everyone involved.

Maybe Lola was right. Maybe I *did* just cause damage. I’d kissed Greyson, and Maya knew about it. I’d punched Maya in the nose, making her hate me even more (something I hadn’t thought was possible). Xavier had been defeated, and now the pack was talking about going Rogue. The kiss had been—and I *really* hated to admit it—great, but not worth all the grief it had caused. Nothing good had come of it. I’d gotten us into this mess, and I was sure as hell going to do my best to get us out of it.

And that meant settling things with Greyson, and getting this whole thing straightened out.

Okay, he’d used me—but what for? For power? Becoming Alpha of the Redwood pack made him one of werewolf society’s most powerful leaders, but what did he want it for? What was going to do with it?

At the very least, he owed me an explanation. He might have been a dirty liar and a bastard in every sense of the word, but we did (or at least we used to) have a weird connection, and if he could use it against me, I could certainly try to use it against him.

I had a push-up bra and a pretty good right hook. I could handle one snotty wannabe Alpha wolf.

“I’ll be back,” I told the group, and stormed off without another word.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Lola yelled angrily.

I raised my middle finger high in response.

I hurried toward Greyson’s tent. I was surprised I was even able to find my way to it, my vision was so clouded with rage and hurt. That bastard was going to pay, one way or another.

While I was raging and breaking apart inside, everyone else seemed to be having the time of their lives. Everyone around me was drinking, laughing, making out—or more than that. It was like a Super Bowl after party and Coachella combined. Two men—men that they knew—had been savagely murdered right in front of their eyes, and Xavier had almost been the third casualty, and none of them seemed to care. No mourning, no grief, no concern. They were living it up like this was the best night of their lives. How on earth could they party after watching so much violence? This was more than just a release of tension and cathartic werewolf nonsense—it was bloodlust.

It made me sick.

In a way, I was almost happy Xavier had lost—if only he hadn’t almost gotten killed in the process. The pressure to be Luna was finally off my back, and it felt nice. I didn’t think I’d ever want to be part of this society, either as a human or as a werewolf. I wanted peace, harmony, and unity. Werewolves only wanted chaos and destruction. I’d be happy to go Rogue if it meant Xavier and I would be able to live out our lives in peace.

The only obstacle left was Greyson; the source of my tension.

As I approached his tent, I took a step back and took a deep breath. I didn’t know how Greyson was going to react to me showing up at his tent, unannounced and probably unwelcome. With Xavier no longer the Alpha, I didn’t have much protection anymore. Greyson could kill me with one blow and no one would even bat an eye. He could lie to me more, even seduce me. Who knew what went on in that brain of his? Certainly not me.

Hell, he might not even be in his tent. He could be off doing some Alpha paperwork, or taking selfies with his adoring fans. This whole effort could be for nothing.

Was talking to himthe right thing to do?Maybe it would be better if I just stayed out of it, like everyone had loudly suggested. I mean, it *was* true that I was a human, and this wasn’t really my fight. I could book the next flight home if I wanted to and, with enough therapy, I’d be able to forget all about werewolves and witches and blood baths. I could just go back to being a regular college girl. I’d even be able to find a new best friend who DIDN’T trick me into selling my virginity to werewolves, push me into horrible ideas, and then get mad me for following her advice.

I could leave all of this behind me. But… I couldn’t. Xavier, Lola, Jay, Colton—they were my friends, my family. Whether they liked me or not, I loved them, and I was going to do everything I could to protect them, to save them. They’d lost their pack, and that was partly my fault. I had to make this right. I had to prove that I wasn’t a loser. That I didn’t make everything worse, and that I deserved a place in their lives. Even if it killed me.

Now I just had to figure out what to say to Greyson.

*Fuck it,* I thought with a shrug. I’d do what I always did: wing it and hope for the best. I *was* still alive, so it had to be working.

I took a deep breath and collected all the courage I possessed before slowly pulling open the flap of Greyson’s tent. I didn’t know what I’d been expecting to see, but I was shocked at what I saw: the back of a naked woman, sitting on her knees in Greyson’s bed. Blue hair was falling down her back in waves.

“I was wondering when you’d get here. Ready for round two?” she purred.

Joss.

**Episode 203**

I jumped back at the sound of Joss’s voice. I hadn’t expected anyone other than Greyson to be in his tent, and I’d *never* expected to find a girl in his bed.

Not that I cared. At all.

“Um, excuse me?” I said, angry that my voice came out accusatory and shocked, like I was somehow the wronged woman in this scenario. I was here to kick Greyson’s ass—not gape at his love den.

Gross.

Joss spun around at the sound of my voice, her expression instantly turning into a scowl. Her coy morphed into a snarl. “What are you doing here, homo sapien?”

I crossed my arms. “Homo sapien? That’s a new one. Trying to prove that you’ve read a book or two?” I snarled. “What are you even doing here, anyway?”

Joss stretched out, giving me a good view of her breasts and stomach. *Really?* I looked away. I was more or less over my aversion to nudity at this point (hiking with a crew of naked werewolves will do that to a girl) but that didn’t mean I wanted to stare at Joss’s tits. It’s called manners. She already knew she was hot; she didn’t need to flaunt it in front of me.

Joss seemed to enjoy my discomfort, because she grinned to herself. “I’m just waiting for Greyson to finish what we started last night. Wink wink.”

I gave her a puzzled look. “Why did you say ‘wink wink’? Why didn’t you just wink?”

That seemed to hit a nerve, because she crossed her arms over her chest and huffed. “It’s called an expression!”

“Uh… Sure. Whatever.”

Great, Greyson was banging a bitch who couldn’t even wink. Good grief.

I rolled my eyes. Great, *another* thing Greyson had lied to me about. He’d claimed that he and Joss were ‘just friends’, and yet here she was, sitting naked on his bed. And who the hell did this prima donna think she was? She might have been a friend from Greyson’s Rogue days, but as far as I was concerned she was nothing more than a camp follower.

I felt my face heating and tried my best to swallow past the lump in my throat. What did I care if Joss was in Greyson’s bed? Or that she looked like a model? Instinctively, my hands went to cover my stripes on my stomach, even though she couldn’t see them. I was there to confront Greyson, not make out with him and certainly not sleep with him.

Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling. So instead, I got angry. “Where’s Greyson?” I spat out, harsher than I intended.

Joss shrugged. “Probably basking in the well-deserved attention from all the wannabe Lunas out there. But he’ll come home. He always does.”

Oh, this was going to get annoying fast. And why the hell couldn’t she put a damn shirt on? Was she trying to intimidate me? I might have been taken off guard at first, but I was done. That shit wasn’t going to work.

Still, being alone with Joss in Greyson’s tent was making me cringe. Clearly there was something going on between the two of them that he’d lied to me about. Ugh. He’d probably slept with her right before he’d kissed me. Hella gross. Who did he think he was? The wolf Casanova? God’s gift to Lunas? That was just so sleazy!

I wanted to spit in disgust even though I had no reason to. I’d slept with Xavier right before I’d kissed Greyson, so no one was a saint here.

But still…

I took a deep breath, trying to figure out where these feelings of frustration, anger and—dare I even admit it—jealousy, were coming from.

*Stupid wisps,* I thought bitterly. Those dumb flying lights had probably been setting me up this whole time, just like everyone else around here. Stupid jerks. I vaguely remembered Big Mac being very interested when I’d mentioned that the wisps had talked to me. Maybe she knew something…

But that was a problem for later. I had a hundred other problems to deal with first.

It was then that I realized Joss had been watching me the whole time I’d been going over my internal monologue. Weird. Did other people watch me do that, too?

“Greyson is a natural born Alpha,” she said proudly. “He’s way too much for a weak little human to handle. Xavier is more your speed.”

I rolled my eyes at Joss. “Listen, if I wanted the option of being a Rogue Luna wannabe, I would have asked for it. But I didn’t ask, because I don’t give a shit about you or your opinions. I came here to see Greyson. Since he’s not here, I’m leaving,” I said, turning to leave, annoyed by the whole exchange.

But as I turned to leave, I walked smack into Greyson.

*Great, he always comes at the worst and best times,* I thought bitterly as I looked up at him. He was still naked, his lean frame covered in blood and dirt from the fight. Part of me was disgusted —he’d just killed someone and almost his brother. But part of me was also strangely attracted to him as well. He looked so rugged and strong, muscles rippling on his stomach and arms, his eyes the color of steel, his…

*Focus, Cali!* I reminded myself, screwing my face up into a scowl. *He’s manipulating you!*

Greyson raised an eyebrow when he saw me. “Cali. Well, isn’t this a surprise? Why aren’t you by Xavier’s bedside, nursing my wounded little brother back to health? He needs all the attention he can get after his ego suffered such a humiliating defeat.”

Joss laughed coldly, which only ramped up my anger. How dare he talk about Xavier after what he’d done to him? After what he’d done to *me?*

I shoved him. “Don’t you dare talk about Xavier after what you did!” I hissed.

“You said you wanted to see Greyson?” Joss piped up. “Well, there he is. Now you can go.”

I wanted to scream. Why couldn’t I have a private conversation without a fucking audience? Especially an audience as annoying as Joss.

I spun around and glared at her. “Um, how about you leave? This is a private conversation.”

“There’s nothing left for us to say,” Greyson said gruffly. I turned to look at him, and saw that he was actively avoiding my gaze.

My heart leapt to my throat. Until this moment, I hadn’t realized I still had hope that we’d be fine. That we’d be able to work something out. That I’d still be able to *talk* to him.

What a fool I’d been.

“*Nothing left to say?*” I breathed out, trying to keep myself together. “You have *everything* to say to me! You have to explain why you did this to us!”

“What’s to explain? It should be obvious, Caliana, even to you,” he scoffed coldly, still not looking at me. “The Redwood pack is my *family’s* pack. I’m the eldest son, this pack is my birthright. I have as much of a right to it as Xavier, if not more. I didn’t evoke the Lupo Finale—he did. And if my baby brother wasn’t going to give me my birthright willingly, I was always going to take it. The Lupo Finale is over, and it’s time for you and others to move on and accept the inevitable.”

I looked at Greyson as if he were a stranger. He might have been a liar, and probably the biggest douche on the planet, but I couldn’t believe that this was what he wanted. He had to have another motive up his sleeve. He always did it seemed.

“Is that really what you wanted?” I breathed out.

Before Greyson could say a word, Joss chuckled. “Speaking of inevitable—have you told her yet?”

Greyson glared at Joss. “Shut up,” he growled.

Joss just shrugged. “Whatever. She’ll find out soon enough, anyway.”

I glared at Greyson, hands on my hips. “What secret are you keeping from me now? What other lies could you possibly have left to tell me? Isn’t it boring yet? To keep things so mysterious?”

Joss laughed, wrapping a sheet loosely around her naked body as she walked over to Greyson, her arms curling around his torso like snakes. She leaned up and purred into his ear, a smug smile on her lips as she looked at me. “How could it ever be boring? Greyson’s a man of mystery,” she mused, running her fingers over his grimy chest.

Half of me wanted to throw up in the nearest trash can; the other half wanted to claw her eyes out and rip off her hands.

Through the dirt and the blood, I spotted a few healing wounds on his skin. Though I was slightly relieved (despite myself) that they weren’t infected with silver, I still hoped that Xavier had caused them. Hoped that they’d never heal or fade, that Greyson would always have to wear the proof of what he’d done to his brothers, to his family.

To me.

“Can we just skip the song and dance for once? Just tell me what the hell is going on. It’ll make things a lot easier.”

Joss kissed up and down Greyson’s neck, making sure she made eye contact with me the whole time. Sicko. “Oh Grey, look at the poor thing. She’s so confused. What did you think was going to happen? That he was going to choose you? For a human, you sure are a Luna social climber. Going after any Alpha that looks at you.”

I threw up my hands in frustration. “You know what? Fuck you both. You deserve each other. I don’t have to stay here and listen to this.” I turned to leave.

“Well,” Joss drawled, clearly enjoying my torment. “Since you’re the former Alpha’s mate and all, I guess you should know.” I turned to glare at her as she continued. “Before the moon sets, as the new Alpha, Greyson must choose his Luna and decide what to do with the old one.”

**Episode 204**

I paused for a moment, thinking over what Joss had just said. *Greyson will have to decide what to do with the old one.* Which of course was referring to me.

Finally, I remembered that the winner of the Lupo Finale could choose to kill the old Alpha’s Luna if they wanted. And given Greyson’s track record of being a total dick lately, I wasn’t too sure about my odds for coming out of this alive. And while I didn’t *appreciate* being referred to as ‘old’, the title had never actually been mine to begin with. Xavier was my mate, but he’d never given me the Luna mark, so I was never technically a Luna. Greyson couldn’t do anything to me. Probably.

*Ugh,* where was a werewolf lawyer when you needed one?

That bitch Joss had to be joking. She was just trying to get a rise out of me.

I turned to try and meet Greyson’s eye, to at least try to understand what he was thinking. Was he going to kill me? Make me his Luna? Make me watch Joss and him do it? Gross.

But Greyson was still actively avoiding my gaze. I wanted to laugh. After weeks of staring at me, he couldn’t even look me in the eye.

Stupid jerk.

“You know what? You deserve each other. Good luck with your stupid pack,” I spat, then stormed out without another word. As I was leaving, I could have sworn I heard him say my name. A *Cali* in the distance.

But I ignored it. He wasn’t going to get to me again.

The situation had been bad before, but now it had just gotten a hundred times worse. Greyson was so secretive and mysterious, who the hell knew what his next move would be? He was a wildcard, and a liar to boot. Sure, he’d saved my life before, and I used to trust him. I might even have considered him a friend.

But that had been before the kiss and before he’d lied to me, and before he’d beaten Xavier in the ring and become Alpha of the pack. Now, he could easily—*legitimately*—kill me in front of everyone. Maybe this what he’d been waiting for the whole time; maybe he’d saved my life just so he’d be able to make my death a public spectacle.

But there was another option. He could pick me as his Luna.

Sure, he and Joss clearly had a *thing* going on, but our kiss at the lake hadn’t been nothing. And whether the kiss had been an act or not, he’d seemed to enjoy it much more than whatever Joss was doing to him.

Not that I really even *had* an ego, but that kind of boosted it.

*Would Greyson choose* me *to be his Luna?* I wondered, as I walked back to my tent. *Choose me over Joss, and any other thirsty Luna wannabe?* I couldn’t rule out the possibility. But did I *want* that? Would it even matter? Everyone’s always said that I might not even survive the Luna mark. And if survived it and became Greyson’s Luna, what would happen with me and Xavier? He was supposed to be my mate, after all. God, why was I even thinking about this seriously?

All I knew for sure was that I loved Xavier, but I also couldn’t deny my feelings for Greyson. Lola might have decided that I was a cheating jerk and probably a slut, but I was starting to think that the *due destini* thing wasn’t just a horrible children’s story. Big Mac was a shady witch, but I didn’t think she’d lie to me about who I was. I just didn’t understand what that meant.

I rubbed my temples and shut my eyes. All this thinking was giving me a raging headache, and I just wanted to scream. I had more questions than answers, and everyone just seemed to think it would be best for me to shut up.

I just wanted to know who I was and what I should be doing.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw a glow in the distance—a bright sparkle, slowly coming closer. I realized that it was a wisp, beckoning for me to follow.

I scoffed loudly. That wisp had to be out of its damn mind. You know, if it even had a mind. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Fool me three times and you’re a stupid jerk! Those wisps had brought me nothing but trouble and misery, and I wasn’t going to stand for it any longer.

I turned my back on the wisp but it just flew around to hover in front of me again, this time getting really close to my face. I tried to shoo it away, but it continued to buzz around me like an annoying fly, evading my swipes effortlessly.

“Could you kindly BUZZ OFF?” I screamed at the wisp, turning away from it again. “I have no time for this magical nature bullshit right now! I’M NOT EVEN AN EARTH SIGN!”

Luckily, or maybe unluckily for me, the wisp flew away. For a moment, I felt bad. Even if the wisps were fucking with me, I didn’t want to get on their bad side. That could make them *really* try to ruin my life. I wasn’t sure if things could get any worse, but I didn’t want to find out.

As I watched the wisp fly away, I realized that it was still bright out, even though the wisp’s light was gone. I looked up, realizing that I was standing in full glow of the moonlight.

Shit.

Quickly, I pulled down the side of my shirt and looked at my bite wound. In the chaos of the last few hours, I’d forgotten all about it.

Gently, I touched the mark. It stung, but not as badly as it had before. In fact, in the moonlight, it almost looked like it was healing. I breathed a small sigh of a relief. I wasn’t growing fangs or fur, so that was a plus. One less thing to worry about in a day that had gone completely wrong. Though, I had to admit, becoming a werewolf would have been pretty handy. If I were a werewolf, I’d be able to put Joss, Maya, and every bitchy Luna wannabe in their place. No one would talk shit to me if I stopped being human.

I looked at the moon for a few more moments, collecting my thoughts. But then I heard voices in the distance. Saw a flash of movement at the entrance to Big Mac’s tent.

I took a few steps toward the sound to get a closer look. Up ahead, Xavier was out of the tent, supported by Colton and Big Mac as he tried to walk.

My heart swelled. *My baby!*

I raced toward him. “What’s going on? Please tell me you’re taking him to a *real* hospital?” I begged.

Colton groaned. “It was so quiet until you showed up.”

“Rude! I’m not sorry for caring about Xavier’s well-being, Colton.”

“We’re taking Xavier back to his tent. He’ll rest better there. And he’s taking up a lot of space in my tent,” said Big Mac.

“Your tent is huge!” I argued.

“Okay, fine—I just don’t want him in there anymore. Or any of you, for that matter. And if you say ‘rude’ one more time, Cali, I will *hex* you.”

I bit my tongue.

Xavier stopped in his tracks and tried to shrug off Big Mac and his brother. “I don’t need anybody’s help. I lost the Finale, but I’m not a patient,” he said gruffly. He looked at me and smiled, opening his arms wide. “In fact, this is the best I’ve felt in a long time. Come here, you.”

I accepted the invitation with joy, running into Xavier’s arms and crushing myself against him. Of course, this was one of the few times he was actually being nice and sweet to me, and I had a horrible dark secret. Typical.

Still, I didn’t care about that in that moment. Instead, I just enjoyed the moment with Xavier. I breathed in his scent, happy that he was still here with me, still alive. “You’re not going to die?” I asked, my voice small as we hugged. I never wanted to let him go.

Xavier chuckled. “Not today.” He turned to Big Mac. “Thank you for all your help, but I can handle it from here.”

Colton gave me a look before turning to Xavier. “You should take it easy, man. After everything.”

Which was just a subtle way to say: DON’T FUCK! But I had to hand it to Colton for having the tact and maturity to not actually say ‘don’t fuck’. That was real character growth.

Xavier rolled his eyes, but smiled warmly at his brother. “Thanks for all the brotherly love, but I’m really all right now. Look at this,” he said, as we broke apart. He took a step back and pulled up his shirt.

I gasped, stunned: the wound that had looked so gruesome only hours earlier was now nothing but a large scar.

“See, nothing to worry about!”

Colton paused for a moment, looking at the scar before shrugging. “Whatever,” he mumbled, before walking away.

“He was really worried about you,” I told Xavier.

“Yup, that’s Colton. Big softie of the family,” chuckled Xavier.

Jeez, what was wrong with this family if *Colton* was the softie?

“If anything unusual happens, let me know,” Big Mac said, before heading back to her tent.

“Thank you!” I called after her as Xavier and I made our way back to our own tent. A million questions raced through my mind as we walked. The silver, the wound, the pain… *Us*.

But as soon as we entered the tent, Xavier pulled me into his arms and kissed me deeply.

**Episode 205**

Xavier’s hand slid inside my shirt as we continued to kiss.

Well, someone was definitely feeling better.

I was torn. Part of me was very eager to feel Xavier’s skin on mine. To feel him near me and know he was well and everything was all right between us. To feel normal again, even for a few seconds. But another part of me was worried for him. Was he really supposed to have sex while he was still recovering from a silver wound? After almost dying? Certainly all the thrusting he’d be doing wouldn’t be good for his healing wounds?

Then again, I wasn’t a doctor. No one around here was.

Then there was a third part of me that felt horribly guilty for what I’d done. I mean, I’d kissed his half-brother moments before the Finale. *Due destini* or not, Xavier wasn’t going to happy about that. I certainly wasn’t. And I wouldn’t be much better than Greyson hooking up with Joss after kissing me if I had sex with Xavier after making out with Greyson.

Gently, I pushed Xavier’s hands down. “Xavier! How can you even think of having sex at a time like this? You almost died!”

“*Almost* is the key word there,” Xavier said, before placing a finger on my lips. “Please, no talking.”

I looked onto his eyes and gasped. His normally dark brown eyes were a deep shade of almost black.

“Xavier, your—”

“No talking!”

I continued to look into his eyes. I could see something *within* those eyes; a look of yearning, need, and something else—fiery intensity.

Within seconds, he’d pulled me to his warm, healing body. He scooped me up into his arms and carried me to the bed like I weighed nothing. He looked down at me, an enticing smile on his face as he put me on the bed.

“Take off your clothes,” he growled, stripping off his own shirt.

I looked up at him, seeing fierce determination in his eyes. Any other time, I would have argued with Xavier—told him he needed to rest, to save his strength in case something else happened. But his look was so incredibly *Alpha* that all I could do was obey, give him everything he wanted.

I needed this. *We* needed this.

I ripped off my own clothes and threw them aside as Xavier tore off his own. When we were both naked, Xavier captured my mouth in a hot, needy kiss, holding my face as he devoured my mouth. My hands roamed his body, trying to touch everything, memorizing every inch of him before I tugged at his hair. My tongue explored his mouth, greedily taking him in. His scent, his taste, his muscles…

Xavier’s hands were firmly on my hips as he made his way down my neck, biting and sucking on that special spot that made my knees weak.

“Xavier,” I moaned.

“There’s more where that came from, baby,” he said, a wolfish grin on his face as he pushed me deeper into the bed, his mouth capturing mine again.

We continued like this, exploring each other, my hips grinding against him, in need of release. But I couldn’t help but feel guilty. Xavier was making out with me, and he had no idea what I’d done. It felt wrong.

But Xavier’s mouth on my neck? Xavier’s hands on my breasts? That felt *right*. And so fucking good.

Xavier skillfully moved his hands and mouth down my body, brushing every spot that got me going. He got a moan from me by running his hands down my thighs, nibbling at my breasts. I needed him. I needed him more than air.

*Fuck Greyson*. All the desire I’d felt for him at the lake, the intensity of our kiss at the waterfall, that was all over now. Now that he’d shown me who he truly was, I wanted nothing more to do with him. Screw all that *due destini* crap. Xavier and I were mates. I didn’t know if Greyson had manipulated me, or used wolf mind control, or if there really was something between us. It didn’t matter anymore. Xavier was mine.

And I needed to prove that to myself.

I pushed Xavier off me and down onto the bed. His eyes widened in surprise as I climbed on top of him. I pulled him into a consuming kiss, tugging at his hair, trying to get him as close to me as possible. I needed to feel him all around me. I needed him to *claim me*.

I kissed all the way down his chest until I reached the base of his cock. I looked at him and he looked at me. “What do you want, Cali?” he breathed out.

“You. Always you,” I moaned back. And then I kissed my way back up his chest before I slipped his rock hard cock inside me, causing us both to moan loudly.

I rode him hard, getting out all my anger, hurt, and rage. He gripped my hips, bouncing me hard on his cock as he continued to slam into me. I ran my nails down his chest, wanting to mark him.

“Come for me, baby. Come for me,” Xavier growled out, squeezing my ass as I felt my climax rising.

“XAVIER!” I cried out with my release. Xavier followed close behind with a grunt of satisfaction.

“My mate,” he breathed out, pulling me into one more kiss.

\*\*\*

When we’d finished, Xavier held me tightly to him, absently stroking my face as we stared up at the ceiling of the tent, panting.

“You don’t know what it means to have you here safe with me,” he said. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry about everything. The Lupo Finale was stupid, and just for my ego. I should never have invoked it without talking to you first. None of this would have happened. You’ve been so frightened.” His voice was so sweet and sincere I could have melted. Where the hell had this Xavier been weeks ago? Maybe now that he wasn’t Alpha anymore, he could always be like this.

I held him close, rubbing his chest with my free hand. “I was so worried. I don’t think I’ve ever been more scared in my life. Don’t you ever do that to me again. Ever!”

Xavier chuckled. “Trust me, I have no plans to. I mean, look at me. I’m a washed-up Alpha now,” he said, his voice filled with bitter humor.

I slapped him lightly on the chest. “Don’t say that! You’re a wonderful man, and you would’ve been a great Alpha. This is all because of that cheating Ryker.”

“You were right,” Xavier said. “He must have done something to sneak silver into the fight.”

“Say I was right again,” I teased.

“Don’t push your luck, babe. How did you know he was cheating, anyway?”

I rolled my eyes. “When I was waiting for you to pee, I saw this wisp and felt like I should follow it, so I did. It led me to Ryker. He was doing something to his nails. I don’t know how he concealed it, but he was definitely using silver.”

Xavier shrugged. “Well, we could have Big Mac check it out now that he’s, you know, dead.”

I couldn’t help but gape at that. “*Dead?* More like confetti. You shredded him!”

“Greyson did most of it. But I don’t want to talk about him. Besides, that’s all in the past now,” he said, nuzzling closer to me, his hand buried in my hair. “Now we can start planning our future together. Without any of this nonsense.”

I perked up at this. Xavier and I, living a peaceful, semi-normal life together? It was more than I’d ever dreamed of.

He cleared his throat. “You know, Maya told me something before the fight…”

Whoops! Spoke too soon. My whole body tensed up. “What did she say?”

“She told me that she had a message from you. That you loved me.” He smiled, giving me a kiss on the lips, which was great—he couldn’t see the shocked look on my face. “That got me through it, Cali. Through all of this. And now that the Lupo Finale is over, we don’t have to worry about any of it anymore. You can go back to school if you want. We can do whatever we want. We can leave Greyson and everything else behind. Just the two of us, no more secrets, nothing between us. I guess the others can come too, if they want. But all I really care about is the two of us.”

I looked up at him in awe. This was everything I’d ever wanted for us. No more secrets, no more fighting, no more running.

There was just one last thing standing between us. And all of his words… it was what I’d wanted to hear from him for so long, but I’d ruined it. I’d let Greyson get in my head and now? We could never create this life if I kept this secret.

“Xavier, that sounds perfect. It’s everything I ever wanted for us. But… But there’s something I have to tell you first,” I said. Tears began to well up in the corners of my eyes.

Xavier looked at me, his eyebrows knitting together in concern. “What is it, babe? Why are you crying?”

I took a deep breath. “I kissed Greyson.”

**Episode 206**

As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew I’d picked the exact worst moment to drop the truth bomb. His face that had only a couple of seconds ago had been blissful and loving was now contorted with rage and betrayal. I didn’t blame him for his anger, I’d known my infidelity would wound him deeply. Maybe even worse than the physical wound Ryker had given him.

I needed him to understand.

“I can explain,” I said, sitting up, pulling the covers over my chest. “I didn’t mean for it to happen. He just got so close to me over the last few weeks—he gained my trust. Maybe he tricked me, I don’t know. But the kiss meant nothing. He proved that once and for all he can’t be trusted, and that he’s a huge creep. I’m so sorry, but I had to tell you, Xavier. I don’t want there to be any secrets between us anymore. I’m just so sorry,” I explained in a steady stream of nervous babbling. I knew I should probably have said all this *before* we had sex, but I couldn’t change the past now. Though I often wished I could.

I looked at him, waiting for a response—any response other than silence.

He was quiet for a moment, looking down at his lap. And then he looked back up at me. “When did this happen?” he breathed out.

I bit my lips, my face heating up in shame. “Just before the Finale. By the waterfall.” I swallowed hard, waiting for a response.

Nothing. He didn’t even look at me.

“Are you mad?” I said, my voice hesitant. “I mean I know you’re mad. But like on a scale from one to murder, how mad are you exactly?”

Nothing.

Panic started to fill me. What the hell was he thinking? Was he going to yell at me? Leave me? Kill me? I needed to know. Anything was better than silence.

“Xavier, please say something. Anything! I’d rather be screamed at than watch you lie there in silence.”

Quickly, Xavier stood up. In less than a minute, he’d put on the rest of his clothes and stormed out of the tent, all without saying a word.

*Okay, didn’t see that coming.*

I rushed to get dressed and ran after him, my heart breaking. *Please don’t let this ruin us. Please don’t let this ruin us.*

“Xavier!” I called out, catching him just as Colton came out of his own tent. Great, just great. An audience to watch my breakdown. *Perfect*.

“What’s going on? Did you guys bone already?”

So much for the mature version of Colton.

Xavier looked back at him, shooting me a venomous glare. “Cali kissed Greyson.”

Colton’s eyes widened in shock as Xavier walked off again. Where he was going, I didn’t know.

I started to follow him but Colton grabbed me roughly by the shoulder, stopping me in my tracks. “You did *what?* I should have known. Once a slut, always a slut.”

His words cut me, but I had bigger things to do than have an insult fight with Colton. I pushed his hand off of me. Why did these boys think they could keep grabbing me?

“This is a private matter,” I said sharply, running to catch up with Xavier. “Xavier! Please don’t walk away from me. We need to talk about this, and I can’t run very fast!”

Xavier stopped running and spun around to face me. His face was half-hidden in the dark, but I could feel the pain and fury rolling off him in waves, hitting me straight in the heart. “Who kissed who?” he growled out. “Did he kiss you, or did you kiss him?”

My mind flashed back to the kiss—the wisp, the waterfall, Greyson’s glistening body rising from the water. His hand on my cheek, my decision…

I stammered, “Can we talk about this in private? Please?”

“NO!” Xavier roared, reaching out to grab both of my wrists, holding them tightly in his big hands as he got up very close to my face. “YOU DID THIS, AND WE ARE HANDLING IT MY WAY. DID YOU KISS HIM FIRST? DO YOU NOT REMEMBER, OR DO YOU JUST NOT WANT TO TELL ME?”

“It’s complicated!” I cried out, trying to get away from him, but his grip only tightened, feeling like it was sure to leave bruises.

“HOW IS IT COMPLICATED THAT YOU KISSED MY BROTHER? YOU EITHER DID OR YOU DIDN’T, CALI!”

“You’re hurting me!” I cried out as he crushed my wrists in his vise grip. I was afraid he was going to break them. Tears of hurt, pain, and fear started streaming from my eyes before I could stop them.

“Quit your blubbering! I don’t care if this hurts! I don’t care if I break both your damn wrists! You hurt me first, and now you’re going to answer for it!”

“People were starting to poke their heads out of their tents, watching the show that we were putting on. Only when other people were around did he let go of my wrists.

We each took a step away from each other as I continued to cry, cradling my wrists. They were already starting to bruise.

Xavier glared at me, his voice lower now, but still firm. “Don’t to this to me, Caliana. Don’t make me look like the bad guy here. Did Greyson kiss you?”

I shook my head no, my body trembling.

Xavier paused, his expression darkening impossibly further. “Did *you* kiss *him?*”

A sob finally escaped my lips, and I nodded.

Xavier stared at me for a moment longer, his expression unreadable. “I’m done.”

His words hit me harder than the bruising grip he’d had on my wrists. “Xavier,” I gasped out, trying to reach for him. But he shoved me back, sending me falling to the ground with a hard thud.

“I'm done,” he spat out as he left.

I couldn’t get off of the ground, couldn’t do anything other than lie there and sob. Sob for the destruction of my relationship, sob for the pain I was in, for how he’d pushed me, for the fact that everything had been so public. For the fact that I had nowhere to go. No one to turn to.

So I just laid there on the ground and sobbed as my audience watched.

*I wish I was dead.*

“Cali!” A familiar voice screamed out. I heard footsteps, and a moment later Lola was by my side, followed closely by Jay. “What’s going on? What happened?” She turned to look at the crowd of spectators. “FUCK OFF! MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS!”

I opened my mouth to speak, but only let out another sob. “Great!” I finally managed. “I hope this is what you wanted, Lola! You’re pissed at me, right? You should be enjoying this.” I sobbed out.

“Cali? What’s going on? Why did Xavier leave like that” she asked softly. Then she noticed the darkening bruises on my wrists. “What happened to your wrists? Why are you on the ground? Why—” Suddenly, she pieced it together. “*Xavier* did that to you?”

I let out another sob. “I told him. I told him I kissed Greyson, and I ruined everything!”

“Oh Cali,” Lola said. She tried to pull me into a hug, but I pulled away. I’d been hurt enough today without having to suffer through more of Lola’s constant mood swings.

She seemed to understand. “I’m so sorry I was acting like a complete jerk earlier. I know I’m the one who dragged you into this whole mess. I know that you’ve been struggling with your feelings toward Greyson. I know I egged you on about kissing him, mainly because I thought it wasn’t ever going to happen. I didn’t realize the depths of your feelings. Also, I forgot about the *due destini* thing and that you tend to take stuff like that really seriously. Maybe there is some truth in that. I know you aren’t a cheater, and I’m sorry I was so mean to you.”

Stunned by her apology, I collapsed into her arms, sobbing in earnest now.

Lola hugged me tightly. “I know it hurts, but you did the right thing by telling him.”

I knew she was right, but right now it felt like I was dying. Like my heart was breaking into a million pieces, and there was nothing I could do about it.

“It’s okay,” Lola cooed. “It’s all going to be okay.”

*How? How can anything be all right now? I’ve completely fucked up my life.*

I swallowed, and was trying to stop sobbing and regain control of what little composure I had left when I heard a loud noise in the distance. It took me a long moment to realize what it was: the ululate horn.

I turned to Lola. “Why are they blowing the horn?” I asked, my eyes still fogged with tears. Plus I was still a little disoriented from the fall. “What’s going on?”

“It’s the Luna ceremony,” Lola said. “Greyson’s going to choose his Luna.”

**Episode 207**

Lola helped me to my feet and I let her, even though part of me was still hurt by her earlier behavior. Still, she was the only ally I had left at this point, so I had to take what I could get. And say what you want about Lola, but she always had my back whenever I publicly humiliated myself, and that counted for something in this crazy world.

I brushed myself off, trying to find what was left of my dignity. I wiped my tears with the back of my hands. I knew I had no right to cry about this, but I couldn’t help myself. My heart was broken, and there was nothing I could do to mend it.

“Lola, I just want to say— WHERE ARE YOU GOING?” I yelled as I watched Lola and Jay walk away toward the sound of the ululate horn.

Lola stopped in her tracks and turned to look at me, her expression sheepish.

“To the Luna ceremony?” she admitted. “Do you want to come? I understand if you just want to stay in the tent until everything’s over.”

I shook my head, even though my whole body was still vibrating. “No, I’d better go. If Greyson decides to kill me or Luna me up, I might as well be there so he doesn’t have to look for me and cause an even bigger scene.”

“No offense to your ego, but it seems unlikely Greyson is going to make you his Luna. You got played babe,” said Lola. “It’s as simple as that.”

Yeah, I was still kinda miffed at Lola.

“I don’t know,” said Jay, thinking it over. “It’s possible. I mean, who knows what goes on in Greyson’s mind? He’s either ten steps ahead of everyone or can only think five seconds into the future. Dude is a total mystery. And a dick.”

“Which is why I should be there,” I said. “Whatever he does, I want to deal with it now instead of later.”

Lola gave me a skeptical look. “Are you sure about this? No one will blame you if you sit this one out.”

“No way. If Greyson ends up choosing me, I want everyone to watch when I reject his lying, manipulative ass. This is how every episode of *The* *Bachelor* should end.”

Lola and Jay exchanged a look that made me nervous.

“Wait, *can* I reject him if he picks me? Or is this like a stupid arranged marriage deal?” I demanded. Ugh, that would suck. Being forced to marry Greyson? Hard pass.

“Well, a Luna has never actually rejected an Alpha before,” Jay admitted. “I can’t even imagine it happening. Back in the old days, the Luna had no choice in the matter. These days, a Luna *could* reject the Alpha, but ultimately everyone still views it as up to the Alpha.”

I gaped at him. “So basically, Lunas have no rights in this? Oh my god! It’s 2019! Women have rights! You know, if y’all talked more about respecting women and less about respecting your bro culture, your whole system would be a lot less fucked up.”

“Yes, the wolf patriarchy, much like the human patriarchy, sucks dick,” Lola said. “But at least you *can* object. And if a Luna rejects an Alpha, why would that Alpha force her to be his Luna? That would be a match made in hell. Not to mention super awkward.”

I thought about that for a moment, and I could immediately see dozens of reasons for an Alpha to force someone to be their Luna. Control, power, sex, the whole ‘if I can’t have you, no one can thing’. I mean, why else had Nolan kept Maya around when she not only already had a mate, but seemed completely uninterested in being his Luna? Men were possessive, and could be total douche canoes.

But what was Greyson going to do? That was the million dollar question.

I shrugged the thought off as we walked toward the circle. I’d know the answer soon enough.

As we reached the circle in silence, I tried to compose myself. Really, all I wanted to do was book a seat on the first flight home and cry for the rest of my life. But I had to deal with werewolf shit first. After that, I could cry.

“Oh look, there’s Maya, Colton, Violet and Lilac,” said Jay. “Let’s sit with them.”

*Oh great, two people who hate me,* I thought bitterly. “Um, I don’t think it’d be good for me to be anywhere near Maya right now. She probably wants to kill me.”

“To be fair, she always wants to kill you,” said Jay.

“Yes, but more than usual.”

Lola chuckled. “That punch was so good though. You got a mean right hook, girl.”

“Please don’t encourage me,” I deadpanned. Punching Maya in the face was probably one of the highlights of my life, but now that I knew what she’d really said to Xavier in the ring—that she’d actually had my back—I felt terrible. I mean, I couldn’t say she *hadn’t* had it coming. But I did feel bad.

“I mean, Maya *is* a werewolf,” Lola said. “Her nose will already have healed.”

“Sure, her *body* may be fine,” I said, “but Maya strikes me as someone who can hold a serious grudge.”

Almost as if she’d heard me (she probably had, with her werewolf hearing), Maya turned and locked eyes with me.

*Crap! Please don’t come over, please don’t come over…* I silently pleaded until I realized that she was already walking toward me.

“Great, just fucking peachy,” I muttered. That was just what this night needed—another altercation with Maya. Lovely. How could this day possibly get any worse? Maybe I’d get struck by lightning, just to truly make it the worst day ever.

“Do you want me to stay with you?” Lola asked, obviously still trying to make up for how she’d acted before.

I sighed deeply. “No, you’d better go. I’ll have to face her sooner or later. I might as well get it over with now. My life is ruined anyway. It might even be a blessing if she kills me,” I said darkly as I walked over to Maya.

I stopped a few feet away from her, trying to keep as much distance between us as possible. I wouldn’t really mind if she killed me, but I didn’t want to make it too easy for her.

Even in the darkness, I could see that Maya’s nose was no longer broken, but it was still a bit bruised. The knowledge made me feel slightly better—at least I hadn’t ruined her face, or caused her too much pain.

I crossed my arms over my chest, trying my best to feel tough even though I felt more vulnerable than ever before. I felt so *raw*, like I’d lost a layer of skin. My thoughts were consumed with Xavier. How was he doing? Was he all right? How the hell could I possibly fix our relationship when it had been so totally and completely wrecked? I didn’t know. But I *did* know that I didn’t want to deal with Maya.

But when had I ever gotten what I wanted where she was concerned?

I waited for Maya’s reaction. I was prepared for just about anything, at this point. I was expecting screaming, or snarling, or for her to call me bitch. Hell, I half-expected her to start shifting as soon as she saw me, so she could finish the job she’d started so long ago.

But instead, she did something I never could have anticipated. Something even worse than I’d imagined.

She *smiled* at me.

Fuck.

“Cali! I’ve been thinking about you,” she said sweetly.

*Oh, hell no. Why isn’t she screaming mad? Not good. Very not good!*

I tried to stay cool, unaffected. “That’s funny, because I’d forgotten all about you.”

That did it. Maya’s expression instantly darkened. Man, I really did have a death wish, didn’t I? I knew I should apologize for breaking her nose, or thank her for not ratting me out to Xavier. But you couldn’t say stuff like that to Maya. She’d hold any gratitude over you forever.

“You’re lucky the others were with you, human, or you’d be nothing but a discarded carcass right now, rotting in the woods.”

“Wow, Maya, you have a way with words. You really just paint a picture,” I deadpanned. “Listen, if you’re just going to stand there and threaten me, you might as well just kill me now. Because I could really give less than zero fucks at this moment. Goodbye,” I said, and turned to walk away. I was done with this werewolf mean girl shit.

“Actually, I have a question for you,” Maya said, her tone still even.

I stopped in my tracks and turned back to face her. There was a gleam in her eyes, now. A gleam that I did not care for. At all.

She walked closer to me, leaning close. “You might’ve broken my nose, but you just fucked over your entire life.” She laughed harshly as the horns for the Luna ceremony sounded once more. “How does it feel to lose everything in one night?”

**Episode 208**

In the very short time period that I’d known Maya, she’d said horrible things to me on almost a daily basis, targeting my intelligence, my relationship, and even my damn species. I’d heard those insults so many times, I was almost used to them by now. But that last remark hit me to the core.

Because it was true.

I opened my mouth to reply, searching for any words that might save the little grace I had left. But my mouth just stammered helplessly, which made Maya glow with pure pleasure.

After a moment of this, her mouth shifted into a sickeningly sweet smile that made my stomach ache. Sometimes I wished she’d killed me the first time we met, instead of saving my life. It would have saved me a lot of suffering later on.

“Enjoy the show,” she teased, blowing a kiss in my direction before she walked away. In my humiliation and shame, I briefly wondered if Maya had gone to a normal high school. She certainly acted like she’d never left.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself again. All in all, that whole encounter with Maya could have gone a lot worse. I still had all my body parts, and my throat was still intact. In fact, she hadn’t even told me anything I didn’t already know. I really *had* fucked up my life.

I took another deep breath, trying to calm myself down. Just because things looked bad now, that didn’t mean they’d be bad forever. It wasn’t like I’d done anything that couldn’t be fixed. It wasn’t like I’d killed anyone (Gunner and Ryker were dead, but that wasn’t a Cali problem). I was the one who’d fucked up my life, but I could un-fuck it.

I just needed to figure out how to do it.

After getting myself just calm enough to function, I walked back to the others—just as Mace strode into the center of the ring.

“And now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for… THE LUNA LEGIO CEREMONY IS ABOUT TO BEGIN!”

I couldn’t help but scoff at the name. Luna Legio? That wasn’t even Latin! These people would make up a name for anything, but they’d also take away a Luna’s right to choose her Alpha. Ugh! Maybe I didn’t want to be in this dumb world, after all. The human world was a mess, but at least we had medicine and women’s rights. Some of the time anyway…

“Will the new Redwood Alpha step forward!” Mace announced.

Murmurs rippled over the crowd as Greyson strode into the ring, still naked and grimy as he’d been when he left the Finale. Gross. Had he banged Joss without even showering first? Talk about not having standards.

The sight of Greyson made my blood boil, but I couldn’t help but stare at him. But then again, everyone else was staring at him, too. Watching him in pure awe. It was that power Greyson had over everyone. It was how he got people to trust him, how he got them to fear him and his reputation. He was magnetic and charming, in his own mysterious way.

I knew it was a load of crap, but I couldn’t look away. Like a moth to a flame.

I leaned in close to Lola. “What’s going to happen now?”

She smirked. “Watch and learn, babe.”

“Don’t call me babe.”

Mace turned to Greyson. “As the Lupo Finale victor, you are required by ancient law to choose a Luna to stand at your side. However, you do not have to choose one tonight. You can choose to wait, and make your decision at any time before the next full moon.”

Greyson smirked. “There’s no pointing in waiting,” he said. He looked over the crowd, searching until his silver eyes found mine. “There are many fine candidates here tonight. Why wait? I know this crowd loves a show.”

I squirmed, his gaze pinning me where I stood. It was like he was talking directly to me. Fantastic. He ignores me in front of Joss, then picks out my gaze in a crowd. I couldn’t understand this frustrating man. All I knew was that I wanted to slap him across his stupid smug lying face. In front of everyone. Who the hell did he think he was? The latest *Bachelor?* If I was up on that stage, I’d rip his dumb rose into a million pieces and grind the rose petals into the dirt.

It was then that I remembered no one had actually asked me to be their Luna. And considering how this night was going, it was highly unlikely that anyone *would*.

“That’s what I like to hear!” said Mace as the crowd roared with approval. Any excuse to keep partying.

“Let us proceed with the ceremony!” Mace made a motion with his hands, signaling to the elders. The old men walked into the ring, both holding up a bundle of flaming sage. They waved it in front of Greyson, who inhaled deeply.

“Don’t they know that smoke is bad for you?” I muttered. “And that you shouldn’t burn sage because the crop is being over-harvested? Hipsters fucking ruin everything.”

“Shhh!” Lola hissed, giving me a look. Hmph. My complaint was totally valid for once!

Greyson exhaled deeply, a small smile on his lips. Had he just gotten high in front of us? Was this some kind of special werewolf sage? I wanted to ask Lola, but I knew she’d just hush me again. And honestly I was just babbling to avoid thinking about what was happening in front of me.

The elders retreated with their sage bundle, and Mace took to the center of the circle again. “It’s now time for the Alpha of the Redwood pack to choose his Luna.” Mace looked out over the crowd. “Will all the candidates step forward?”

One by one, women started to step forward from the crowd and enter the ring. Each of them was dressed in an outfit that showed off her best *assets.*

*Come on, ladies,* I wanted to say. *You could do better. We could* all *do better.*

It came as no surprise to see that Joss was leading the pack of Luna wannabes. Her blue hair was styled in a soft way, and she was wearing a clingy black dress. Nice to see that she did actually own some clothing. She swaggered into the ring, her whole body glowing with confidence. Like she knew that the ceremony was nothing more than a formality, an opportunity to show off. The whole thing made me sick.

Jealousy filled up my whole body, and I tried to push it down. I shouldn’t CARE that Greyson was probably going to choose Joss. I shouldn’t CARE that she was going to be his Luna. Hell, they could do it in front of me, and I wouldn't even bat an eye. I wanted NOTHING more to do with Greyson and his lies. He’d manipulated my human feelings for him and blown up my entire life for his own selfish reasons. He was basically dead to me.

And yet… The feeling lingered, but I continued to try to swallow it down as more women shoved at each other to get into the ring. It was sad, really—these women were fighting each other for the chance to be tied down to a lying jerk. But maybe some people were into that.

*It should have been me.* The thought came into my head so quickly, so *truthfully*, that it took me a moment to understand it. To understand the feelings of jealousy, of deep longing.

Quickly, I tried to rationalize it. To be fair, it *should* have been me up there. If Xavier had won, he would’ve been standing up there in all his glory, choosing me to be his Luna. I had a right to be envious. I was supposed to be Xavier’s Luna—the first human Luna. And while I was more or less over wanting to be a Luna—I mean, the Luna mark could have legitimately killed me—I had to admit: the title would’ve been *so* cool. I’d never been the first ANYTHING before.

And I guess I never would. Because it wasn’t Xavier and me standing in that circle, showing our love to the packs. It was Greyson, and all his Alpha-hungry ladies. And not only that, Xavier hated me now and would probably hate me forever, and I couldn’t even blame him. Maybe *this* had been Greyson’s grand scheme: to hurt everyone in exactly the perfect way. I wanted to scream. This wasn’t fair. It was wrong.

“Uh, Cali?” Lola said softly, nudging me roughly out of my thoughts. “Are you paying attention?”

I jerked myself back to reality. “What?”

Lola jerked her head toward the ring.

I looked up. Greyson’s steely eyes were fixated on me, ignoring every single woman who surrounded him. He held up his hand, extending one of his long fingers, and beckoned for me to come into the ring.

**Episode 209**

Perfect. This was absolute perfection. I couldn’t have planned this better myself. Though to be fair, I’d never been good at planning things. Ever. This opportunity had fallen into my lap out of sheer dumb luck.

Thank the wolf gods.

This was my chance to humiliate Greyson in front of everyone. He thought he was such a big, important Alpha now? It was time to see how cool he looked in front of his little groupies when he got rejected by a human. Lola said I could turn him down if he had the nerve and the stupidity to pick me. The only way this plan could get any better would be if I could punch him in the face afterwards. Maybe I still could.

*This is how I can prove to Xavier I have no interest in Greyson,* I thought to myself. *Because I* don’t *have any feelings for Greyson… Right?* I tried to convince myself of that fact as I looked at him. His toned muscles were gleaming in the firelight, and the spark in his steel gray eyes made my heart skip a beat.

*Stop it,* I scolded myself. *I need to be stronger than him. I will not let him trick me again.*

“Are you sure I can reject him if he picks me?” I whispered to Lola.

She nodded eagerly. Her eyes said, *You damn well better*.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves as I stepped forward. *I’m doing this for Xavier. I’m doing this for Xavier. Stand tall and show courage.*

There was a gasp from the crowd. I could almost feel everyone’s eyes glued to me as I entered the ring.

“But she’s human!”

“The nerve of her.”

“She thinks she’s so hot.”

“I heard Xavier didn’t even make her an official Luna. Must be an Alpha jumper.”

Jeez, couldn’t anyone mind their own damn business around here? I absolutely did NOT want to enter the ring and was being forced to. God, people jumped to conclusions so damn quickly.

As soon as I stepped into the ring, Greyson’s eyes were on me, looking me up and down like he was mentally undressing me, like I was his next meal.

*Fucking. Bastard!* I thought bitterly, trying not to react. Why couldn’t he look at the other Luna-wannabes? The ones he HADN’T screwed over yet? The ones who DIDN’T know what a heartless monster he could be.

The light of the fire hit his face again, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. *Focus, Cali!* I was annoyed at myself. I should have never been *attracted* to this loser! He was a liar, and he’d been manipulating me from the moment we’d met. He’d made me believe that I was his mate—he’d even tricked me with magic somehow to make me think I could hear his thoughts. He’d made me believe that he cared for me before throwing me to the wolves—literally. Sure, I could blame the head injury I’d had when we’d first met, but I had to honest—it was my stupidity that’d made me fall for him, and his lies.

But I was never going to be so stupid again.

I finally made eye contact with him. I wanted to show him that I wasn’t afraid of him. That he couldn’t rule my life any longer. As soon as my eyes met his, the edges of his mouth curled into a smile. Or maybe it was a sneer? With him, it was hard to tell.

“Are there any other Luna contenders?” Mace asked the crowd.

I looked around. There were about a dozen other women in the ring, most of whom I didn’t recognize—apart from Joss, who was glaring at me. Girl, get a life and a fucking grip.

The only other face that stuck out was the woman standing across from me, who I’d never seen before. She was tall, almost as tall as Greyson, and powerful-looking. In the glow of the fire, I could see that her arm was tattooed with various lines and circles. I wondered what they meant. She wasn’t looking at me—her eyes were fixed intensely on Greyson.

*Ugh, I’ve got to start doing arm day. And leg day. And all the other days,* I thought to myself as I wondered who she was. Not that it mattered.

“Okay ladies, now that you’ve formed a circle, it’s time to start!” Mace announced. “You are all here because you wish to be Luna to the Redwood pack’s new Alpha, Greyson Evers. Greyson, it’s time for you to make your decision.”

Greyson stepped forward. He was radiating confidence, a smug smirk on his face.

I swallowed hard. This was my chance. My chance to show Xavier I was done with Greyson and that the kiss meant nothing. My chance to humiliate Greyson like he’d humiliated me. I looked out into the crowd. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Maya smirking at me.

*I’m on the fucking werewolf version of The Bachelor and all my enemies are looking at me. And I’m not even in a cute dress.*

Greyson stepped up to the first woman on the far side of the circle. I watched curiously as he looked at her, getting so close that his face was only a couple inches away from hers.

*Uh, ever heard of personal space?* I thought, but the girl didn’t look upset, in fact, she looked almost love-struck. Like she was just pining to be with him.

*Dream on, sweetheart,* I thought, rolling my eyes.

Greyson continued to look at her for a few moments before stepping away and doing the same to the next girl. What was he looking for? Was he doing his own test? Was this part of the ritual? I should have asked Lola what the actual process was before I’d stomped up unwillingly. But who knows? Maybe Greyson’s kink was uncomfortable eye contact. I really wouldn’t have been surprised.

He continued his staring contest with each woman as he went down the line. He was getting closer and closer to me and I could feel my palms starting to sweat. I stood up straight and tried to calm my nerves as my heart started to race. It was… odd. I’d never been nervous around Greyson before. Even when everyone thought he was evil (before I’d learned that he actually *was* evil) I’d never been nervous around him. He’d made my heart race before (under false pretenses), by the waterfall, right before we’d kissed.

But that had been *different*. Back there, Greyson had been someone I could trust, someone I cared about. Someone who’d wanted me, and who I’d wanted just as badly. He’d said that he’d been dreaming of me. That he was my mate.

But that dream was dead, and I wasn’t going to believe him anymore. The Greyson in this ring was a very different man to the one I’d been with at the waterfall. He was basically a stranger now.

Greyson had made it to the woman with the tattooed arm. He stood in front of her longer than the others, tilting his head a little as he scrutinized her. Honestly, I wouldn’t be mad if Greyson ended up picking her when I rejected him. She looked cool, and if Greyson gave her any shit she’d easily be able to take him down with her strong arms. Honestly, I’d be happy as long as he picked anyone but Joss. Joss was an asshole.

But Greyson must have been thinking the same thing I was, because he walked away from her and moved down the line getting closer to me, until I was next.

I stared straight ahead as Greyson stopped in front the girl next to me. I saw her body tense up as Greyson looked her over.

Then it was my turn.

Honestly, I’d been wondering what he’d do when he got to me. He’d refused to meet my eyes when I’d seen him in his tent with Joss. Would he brave enough to look at me now? Look me in the eyes and admit what he’d done to me? To Xavier? To the entire Redwood pack?

As it turned out, he was bold enough to look me in the eye. I felt his hot breath on my skin as his intense silver eyes skimmed over my body, taking his time before he made his way to my eyes. When he did, his gaze froze me in place. I took a deep breath and raised my chin to meet his eyes. I wasn’t going to let him intimidate me. Not now.

But as I looked into his eyes, I felt my heart in my throat. Instantly, it felt like I was back at the waterfall. How was he doing this? When he’d been so close to me, and we’d wanted each other more than anything. When I’d thrown everything away and kissed him. When he’d held me in his arms.

If he thought I was going to submit to him, he was dead. fucking. wrong.

Finally, he slowly turned away.

I felt myself slowly exhale, unaware until now that I hadn’t been breathing whatsoever. He wasn’t going to pick me. I didn’t have to do anything. An intense feeling of relief washed over me, followed by hurt. He wasn’t going to pick me.

I looked up. Greyson had turned back around and was walking toward me, his eyes fixed on mine.

“Cali.”

**Episode 210**

I held back a gasp that was threatening to escape my lips. In that moment, everything seemed to freeze—like time itself had slowed down. My heartbeat was pounding in my ears. Greyson’s voice was calling my name, but it sounded like he was miles away.

“Cali.”

He took my hand, and it felt like my heart was going to stop.

I looked at him, and all my feelings for him returned in a flash. How he’d caught me when I’d fallen out of the window, how his hands had gently bandaged me up, showing me a small ounce of kindness. Him calling me love. Him sucking the *lupus sputo* from my shoulder and holding my hand through the pain. How he’d always been there to protect me. Our countless hours spent bantering back and forth. The kiss by the waterfall, where it had felt like the whole world was on fire. Maybe I could have loved him if things were different, if I’d met him at a different time. In another life, maybe, we could have been together.

But not in this life. Not after what he’d done.

I loved Xavier. Despite everything, despite his moods, and his temper, and the small bruises that were forming on my wrists that didn’t hurt. We were *mates. Real and true mates* and nothing could change that*.* Sure, Xavier had been a total jerk when we’d first met (and continued to be a total jerk, on occasion), but we had so many good moments. The way he’d saved me from Nolan, our first kiss, our first time together, when he’d told me he loved me for the first time…

All I wanted was to run out of there, find Xavier, and have him tell me that everything was going to be okay. That everything was going to work out fine, and we would get our happy ending. But Xavier wasn’t with me. Xavier hated me right now. And I couldn’t blame him for it.

I had to do this. Not only for Xavier, but for myself. Greyson, regardless of how I felt about him, had broken my trust and ruined my life. The weird thing we had for each other was going to end, and it was going to end tonight.

As I was getting lost in my train of thought, Greyson’s eyes were on mine. Sure, he hadn’t looked at me when we’d been alone in his tent with stupid Joss, but now that we were in public with EVERYONE LOOKING AT US, he couldn’t get enough of looking at me. Humilating me.

Bastard.

But I couldn’t help but look back at him. I felt the stupid connection between us, and it felt stronger than ever. I could feel everyone looking at him, but my eyes were on his. He hadn’t let go of my hand yet, and I hadn’t pulled away. We were stuck to each other, almost like we were frozen in time together. Had he slipped something into my tea at the packhouse to make this happen to me?

*Cali.* His voice was strong and clear in my head, even though his mouth wasn’t moving. *Cali?*

I wanted to gouge out my eyes. NOW he wanted to talk? In my head? How was he even doing this? He was NOT MY MATE.

*What the hell do you want?* I mentally spat back. *You know, I never invited you into my head. Now get out.*

*Listen, I know you’re upset…*

*Upset? I’M FUCKING FURIOUS, GREYSON!*

*And you have every right to be. But…,* he whispered softly in my mind, like a begging purr. *I need you to trust me.*

I felt a lump form in my throat as I tried to fight off the tears that were threatening to fall down my face. Trust him? Wow. Fucking entitled Alpha.

*I DID trust you. I trusted you, even when it didn’t make any sense! I had the nerve to CARE about you, to DEFEND you to the pack, and look what happened! Look what you’ve done to all of us!*

*I know, and I’m so sorry, love.*

*DON’T CALL ME LOVE!* I mentally screamed. *Don’t you ever call me ‘love’ again!* I wiped the tears from my eyes. *You owe me a fucking explanation for all the shit you’ve done!*

*There are things you don’t understand right now, Cali.*

*What? Because I’m a human? I’m too stupid to understand? Because you’re so much smarter than—*

*That’s not what I’m saying.*

*Oh, I know EXACTLY what you’re saying. Well, I may not be from the world of werewolves. I may be too impulsive for my own good. I may be naïve and too trusting, but I know enough to see you’ve done everything in your power to hurt your brother. You've manipulated me, done some kind of magic on me or fucking something to explain how you’re in my head. And it’s over. Do you understand that?* It’sOVER*, the game is up, and I’m not going to let you hurt Xavier ever again.*

*Is that really what you think of me, Caliana?*

I couldn’t answer him, too afraid that if I opened my mouth I was going to sob. Too afraid that if I opened my mouth, I’d say something I couldn’t ever come back from. And it was too late for that now.

Through my tears, I could still see Greyson, but there was something different about him. He wasn’t as proud and cocky as he’d been when he took the stage. There was something in his steel eyes that I’d never seen before. For a moment, I thought it was hurt, and part of me wanted to celebrate. Celebrate that he finally knew what it was like to be *hurt*. What it was like to get your heart broken by someone you cared about.

But who was I kidding? How could I hurt someone as cold and cruel as him? The rumors were true: he was a heartless, evil Rogue, that was all he’d ever be. The least I could do was reject him, right here and now. Prove my love for Xavier—not only to the packs, but to Xavier and Greyson. And, if I was being honest, prove it to myself so I wouldn’t have to doubt my love for Xavier ever again. Love triangles could be so time consuming, and I was already under a lot of stress.

I opened my mouth to speak when Greyson stepped back from me, pulling his hand away from mine.

“I said you can go, Cali,” he said, his voice sharp and cold.

I blinked a few times, vaguely wondering why the crowd was laughing. And then it clicked.

He’d said that out loud.

I gaped at him, stunned at what had just happened. Had this fucking wolf ass loser just *rejected* me? No. No way was this happening. I was supposed to reject *him.*

Suddenly my tears dried up, replaced with white-hot fury. That bastard thought he could go around ruining people’s lives, playing with people’s hearts, and that he’d get away with it. Well, not anymore—that shit ended now. If I couldn’t humiliate him by rejecting him, I was going to humiliate him but tearing him to pieces.

I stepped forward and jabbed my finger at his chest. “Are you fucking kidding me? What the fuck is wrong with you?” I screamed, getting right in his face.

He was refusing to meet my eyes again.

“YOU’RE A COWARD! YOU LOOK AT ME, YOU NO GOOD SON OF A WOLF BITCH!” I screamed.

The crowd roared. A few people shouted “Here comes trouble!” and “Rejected!”, which only added to my anger.

I turned to look at the crowd. “SHUT UP! JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

Which only caused more laughter. But I didn’t care. All I cared about was making Greyson feel as bad as I did, and if I couldn’t do it with my words, then I was going to do it with my fists. How hard could it be? I’d punched Maya in the face earlier, and while it had hurt like hell, it had been extremely satisfying. So punching Greyson in the face was bound to be double satisfying.

That was the logical conclusion I’d arrived at when I balled my hand into a fist and pulled back, ready to strike.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough out of you,” Mace said, pulling me back from Greyson, his strong arms around my shoulders. “Rejected Lunas leave the area.”

“I’ll get out of here right after I punch Greyson in the jaw,” I said, through gritted teeth. Punching Greyson in his perfect, handsome jaw probably wouldn’t solve all my problems or make me feel better for long, but I couldn’t be sure until I’d actually done it.

The crowd was booing and laughing at me, proving that my plan had gone horribly wrong, but I didn’t care. My focus was on Greyson.

“Beat it, human. Greyson doesn’t want you. Step aside so he can pick his real Luna,” said Mace.

The words stung. His real Luna. The Luna that wasn’t me. While I didn’t *want* to be Greyson’s Luna (or Greyson’s anything for that matter), the idea hurt, and I couldn’t stop my heart from aching at the thought.

Xavier hadn’t picked me as his Luna either. And now maybe he never would.

“It’s all right Mace,” Greyson said.

I looked up at Greyson, wondering what he was going to do. Was he going to pick me after all? Was he going to say he was a liar in front of everyone? Ha.

He of course didn’t do any of that. He didn’t even look at me. Instead, he turned away from me, walked over to a woman, and took her hand. “I’ve made my decision.”

**Episode 211**

Greyson held Joss’s hand while she stared at him adoringly.

I wanted to set them both on fire.

That had not gone as expected.

In that moment, I didn’t care about everyone watching me, or the fact that a scary and powerful Alpha was holding me by the shoulders. I was furious. I was worse than furious—I was *hurt*. Whether it was because I’d just been humiliated in public for about the billionth time (stunningly, that hadn’t become any less mortifying with repetition), that I’d lost my opportunity to get my revenge on Greyson, or the fact that he hadn’t picked me, I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to sort it out. I wanted to be angry. I wanted to rage. And I really, *really* wanted to punch Greyson in his stupid handsome face.

Wolf bastard.

I struggled to get out of Mace’s grip and lunge at Greyson, but his arms were like steel bars. I couldn’t break through.

“Okay, that’s enough out of you, little human,” Mace sneered, speaking to me like I was a misbehaving child. “You’ve been rejected. Now get out!” he said, pushing me into Lola. He turned to her and growled: “Get her out of here. If I see her face or her loud mouth one more time, we are going to have issues. Is that understood?”

Lola nodded quickly, her eyes wide. “Come on, Cali. Let’s go,” she whispered to me.

I shot one last withering glare at Greyson. “HEY ASSHOLE!” I screamed out. “You fucking wolf bastard! I’ll fucking show you! I’ll—” Before I could finish my sentence and get myself in even more hot water, Lola yanked me back and dragged me off. I could hear the spectators mocking me as we left.

“Burn! Rejected!” one person laughed.

“Did she really think that Greyson was going to pick her? Gross!”

“That’s so pathetic. Having to beg to be a Luna. So sad.”

If I was a wolf, I would have mauled all of them.

“That’s not fair! He can’t just call me up on stage to publicly reject me! Not when I was going to reject *him!* You saw him pick me out from the crowd! It’s not fair!” I whined. I knew I sounded a lot like a three-year-old having a temper tantrum, but I was furious and heartbroken. This had been my one chance to make things right. My one chance to get closure on Greyson. Now everything was a mess, and I looked stupid. Even *more* stupid.

“Yeah, welcome to life, it ain’t fair,” Lola deadpanned as she dragged me away. “What the hell did you think was going to happen? This is *Greyson* we’re talking about. He’s the shadiest wolf I’ve ever met. Let’s just out of here before you get into any more trouble.”

*Right*, I thought bitterly. *That’s Greyson. I’m just the dumbass that believed he could be something other than a manipulative jackass.* I was panting, furious, and I could feel people’s eyes still on me.

“It looks like Greyson has chosen his Luna!” Mace announced behind us. “And the lucky Luna who has already her accepted her role is… Joss!”

My heart sank as I heard Joss’s squeal of delight at the announcement, and the crowd going wild with applause.

“I did it! I did it!” her shrill voice cried out, striking a nerve inside of me.

*Ugh. Why the hell did he pick her?* I thought bitterly to myself. *She’s so fucking annoying and shady. She’s cute but not* that *hot. And…*

*And it should have been me.*

The thought stopped me in my tracks as my stomach started churning with jealousy. No, there was no fucking way I could ever be jealous of Joss. What prize had she won, anyway? An asshole for an Alpha, and a pack that was falling apart. Good luck and good riddance. But still, the feeling lingered. That it should have been me on that stage. That maybe I should have…

I shook my head. *No,* I told myself sternly. *That can’t be it. I can’t want Greyson. I shouldn’t be thinking of him like that anymore.*

I felt stupid and guilty for giving into my baser instincts and whatever werewolf ‘due destini’ mumbo jumbo that Big Mac had told me. I shouldn’t have let myself be manipulated and betray Xavier. I kissed Greyson, a man that I should have never trusted, when a great man, a magnificent man like Xavier was mine.

Or at least, he used to be mine.

Maybe I was just thinking it should have been me on stage with Xavier? Yes, that had to be it.I mean, it was supposed to be me and Xavier up there, in the end. Before our lives had been completely ruined.

At the thought of Xavier, I looked around. Where the hell was he, anyway?

I pulled on Lola’s arm to stop her from dragging me around. “Do you know where Xavier is?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t seen him since he threw you to the ground.”

I suddenly felt claustrophobic. “I need to talk to him.” There was a slight panic in my voice when I said, “I need to look for him.”

Lola gave me a skeptical look. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? He looked pretty pissed the last time he saw you.”

“But I need to explain myself! I have to go find him.”

Lola sighed. “Fine, but I’m coming with you. It’s dangerous for you to wander around alone.”

“That hasn’t stopped me before.”

“But it really should have.”

I couldn’t argue with her on that.

Lola and I moved through the crowd, trying to find Xavier. Part of me doubted that he’d even wanted to hang around and watch Greyson pick a Luna, but another part of me was worried that he’d gone rogue after our fight.

Panic ran through my veins at the thought. Xavier was a strong wolf, but he could still get himself killed. If he went rogue, I might never see him again. And I needed to see him again. I needed him to listen to me, to understand why I’d kissed Greyson.

“I don’t see him anywhere,” Lola said. “Maybe he went back to your tent?”

“You don’t think he went rogue, do you?” I asked nervously.

Lola didn’t say anything.

Shit.

I looked up at the sky. *Please help me find him,* I prayed. *Please help me find him.*

Suddenly, a glowing light appeared in front of me. I gasped softly.

“Lola, look! It’s a wisp!” I whispered. Apparently wisps never gave up, even after you yelled at them—a stubbornness I was very grateful for at that moment. Maybe they’d heard my prayer and were going to lead me to Xavier.

The wisp hovered in the air in front of me for a moment, and then it flew off.

I grabbed Lola’s wrist. “Come on! We have to follow it!”

“What?” Lola said, before I dragged her out of the crowd, following the wisp.

“Come on! Keep up!” I shouted at her, shoving past everyone in my way, my eyes completely fixed on the glowing light.

“This is so stupid. Where the hell are we going?” Lola complained.

“Look!” I said, pointing to where the wisp had stopped, right above Big Mac’s tent. “That must be where Xavier is!”

Lola and I raced into the tent. “Xavier!” I called out, my voice tinged with fear and worry. Maybe he’d gone back to Big Mac’s tent because his silver wound had opened back up. Maybe he was sick. Maybe he was looking for an un-mating potion, like the one Maya had asked for.

No, I couldn’t let myself think like that.

I pushed through the tent flap and called out, “Xavier!” I expected to see him lying on Big Mac’s bed, but what I saw instead was Big Mac and Mrs. Smith…

In the midst of a passionate kiss.

Like, really, really passionate, full on the mouth, and there was some definite, very serious groping going on, the two of them glued on one another. They looked like they were having an amazing time up until Lola and I raced in.

“Oh…” I almost tripped over as I came to a sudden stop. Lola grabbed me by the arm, steadying me. “Um, sorry?”

Mrs. Smith was flustered, buttoning up her shirt. Big Mac had definitely gotten to second base. Good job.

“Don’t you ever knock?” Big Mac asked me. Contrarily to Mrs. Smith, she looked casual, and a little amused. I realized that the two of them being together made a whole lot of sense, but now was not the time to get into it. When everything went back to normal, THEN I could ask for details about their relationship because I. Had. *Questions*.

But the most pressing question was why had the wisp brought me here? To see them kiss? Were the wisps pervs? Dirty gossips? Once again, it looked like all they’d done was cause drama and be unhelpful.

“I’m so sorry for interrupting, but, uh… Do you know where Xavier is?”

“Uh, does it look like Xavier is here?” Mrs. Smith said, her face still bright red. “It’s just the two of us, and the body in the back.”

“You’re making out while there’s a dead body in the back room? Kinky,” said Lola, nodding her approval.

Big Mac winked. Gross.

I looked at them both in confusion. “But that can’t be right. The wisp brought me here to find Xavier.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “No offense kid, but you’re not experienced enough to judge a wisp’s intentions.”

I put a hand on my hip. “How do you know? If you’re so wise, you tell me why it brought me here.”

“Hey, it’s back there!” Lola said, pointing to the rear tent flap, where the wisp was hovering.

Lola and I ran to the back of the tent before Mrs. Smith and Big Mac could stop us.

“Hey, stop that! The only thing back there is Ryker’s body!” Big Mac shouted after us. “And my moonshine!”

We burst through the tent flap, ready to fight whatever was back there.

But nobody was in the room.

“Xavier’s not here,” I told Lola, panting as I came to a halt. And then I realized something.

The room was completely empty.

I turned to Lola, wide eyed. She looked as shocked as I was.

Big Mac grumbled something from behind us. Turning back to face her, I said, “There’s no body back here… Ryker’s gone.”

**Episode 212**

Big Mac and Mrs. Smith rushed into the back room and gasped.

“That’s not possible,” Big Mac breathed out, her eyes wide with horror. It didn’t make me feel good that Big Mac was surprised. Not one bit.

“Oh good lord,” Mrs. Smith said, her hand flying up to cover her mouth.

“Where the hell did he go?” asked Lola, her eyes darting around the room, like he’d just been misplaced.

“I have no idea,” said Big Mac. “We just laid him out in here and then… got carried away.” A blush finally covered her cheeks.

I gave her a look. “Are you absolutely certain he was dead?” I questioned. Great, zombie wolves. One more fucking thing to worry about.

Even in her horrified state, Mrs. Smith still glared at me. “Don’t be ridiculous. He most certainly was dead. He was torn into literal pieces!”

“So? I don’t know how werewolf biology works! Ryker was supposed to be this big, tough, scary werewolf. Maybe he healed really fast and walked right out of here while you two were sucking face,” I said, deadpan. Zombie Ryker aside, I was hella curious about Big Mac and Mrs. Smith making out. Had they done it before? Were they in love? Had they always been in love, and just pretended to hate each other? Or had this just been a one-time thing?

Somehow, I knew my question would not be appreciated at that moment. I’d have to save it for later. See? I did know when to shut up. Sometimes.

“Werewolves might be different from humans in a lot of ways, but they can’t just rise up from the dead. That’s not how this works. It’s not how any of this works!” Big Mac said. A chill went down my spine.

“So are we dealing with some kind of zombie wolf or something?” I demanded. “Because that’s where I draw the line. I’ve seen *The Walking Dead*, that’s some fucked up shit.”

Lola rolled her eyes at me. “Cali, I *told you* not to watch that marathon of season 6. Zombies aren’t real. That is ridiculous.”

I gaped at her. “Really? Werewolves and witches are real, but you think it’s ‘ridiculous’ when I have the nerve to suggest zombies could be real too? Give me some fucking credit here,” I shouted, getting more and more frustrated. “Besides, if there isn’t something important going on than WHY did the wisp bring us here?” I really hoped it had something to do with Ryker, and hadn’t just been because the wisp wanted us to walk in on Mrs. Smith and Big Mac. Not cool, wisp. Give people their privacy.

“Maybe this is why the wisp brought us here,” I said. “To find out that Ryker isn’t really dead.”

Mrs. Smith groaned loudly. “Open up your ears, child. We told you. *Ryker is dead.* He is not coming back. Get that through your head!”

“Well, there’s no need to shout,” I deadpanned. “But can you think of a better reason?”

Big Mac looked around the room, tapping her chin in thought. “Something else must be going on.”

I gave Mrs. Smith a look that said, *See?*

“Maybe that could be a key to the mystery,” Mrs. Smith cried out, pointing to a large cut in the tent.

How the hell had we all missed that?

“Maybe someone stole the body?” I wondered out loud. “But why would anyone do that?” I turned to Lola. “Come on, let’s see if we can find it. Whoever broke in must have left tracks.”

“Hell yes!” Lola said, excited. “All those mystery novels and countless hours watching *Scooby-Doo* and the ID Channelare finally paying off!” She cheered, stepping out through the flap, hot on the case. At least Lola was excited about it and not terrified that we might be murdered by whoever had taken Ryker. Or by Ryker himself. I honestly didn’t think we could entirely rule out zombies or some kind of fucking, magic…*something*.

“Hold on, Sherlock,” Big Mac said, before I could run after Lola. “Let me look at your shoulder.”

*Oh shit.*

With all the craziness of the day, I’d forgotten all about my shoulder and the full moon.

That had to be a good thing, didn’t it? Big Mac had said if I were turning into a werewolf I’d either turn or potentially die… No pain had to mean that I was avoiding death at the very least. I reached my hand up to my shoulder, gently pressing against my skin there. It felt OK. Nothing like the pain it’d been in the past few days.

“Do you think it’s still possible that I’m going to turn into a werewolf?” I asked, my voice laced with worry.

Mrs. Smith shook her head. “Oh no, dear. The time for that has passed. The moon is waning.”

I let out a small sigh of relief. Well, that was one less thing to worry about. But I couldn’t mask the massive disappointment pressing at my chest, making it hard to breath. I wasn’t shifting. I wasn’t going to be able to turn into a wolf . I wasn’t going to be Xavier’s Luna.

Great, another way stupid Greyson had saved my life. Sucking the Rogue’s spit or venom or lupus-*whatever* out of me so I wouldn’t turn into a wolf. *And* another reason why Greyson’s betrayal had blindsided me so completely. He’d done so much to gain my trust, and then he’d just turned around and ruined my life. He was a sick, twisted wolf.

Big Mac pushed my shirt aside and looked at my wound. “It’s nearly healed. My salve must have worked, just like I said it would.” Her tone was more than a little smug.

“Do I have to give you my soul in return?” I asked. “My left leg?”

“We can discuss payment later.”

Yeah, that didn’t sound good at all.

Lola popped her head through the hole in the tent and looked at the three of us. “Hey, I found a clue! There are footprints out here!”

“Great work, Lola!” I said, fixing my shirt. I turned to look at Big Mac and Mrs. Smith. “Thank you so much for all your help—and for, I guess, confirming I’m not transforming into a wolf. After…all that.” I felt like I wanted to cry, but it wasn’t time to feel sorry for myself. I went to hurry after Lola, but turned back to Mrs. Smith and Big Mac. “I’m sorry for… interrupting, uh, earlier.” Mrs. Smith and I both blushed.

Big Mac sighed. “No problem, Cali. Mrs. Smith and I will hang back here and try to find some more clues.”

“Okay, but stay focused on finding clues—don’t just start making out again. Unless detective work is your thing. I’m not here to judge,” I said, running out of the tent before they could reply.

“Cali!” Lola cried out. “Where are you?”

I ran to catch up with her. “What’s up?”

Lola pointed at the ground. “Look!”

I looked down on the seemingly normal ground. “I see dirt.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “That’s a footprint! Right there!”

It still looked like dirt. “Uh… Okay?”

“You don’t see it, do you?”

“I see dirt.”

“Well, can’t you smell it?”

I gave her a confused look. “Yeah, I don’t know if you heard Big Mac back there, but it turns out I’m not turning into a werewolf anytime soon. So no. Human. Can’t smell footprints. Also can’t SEE footprints in the dark. I see dirt. I smell dirt.”

“Oh, right. I forgot you were human.”

“You are legit the only person who forgets that I’m human.”

“Anyway, my senses are heightened right now because the moon is still out. I can still see a faint outline of footprints and I can smell something, although I can’t quite make it out.”

“Yay hybrid powers,” I said, deadpan. Thinking back to my two weeks of girl scouts, I got down on my knees and peered at the ground. “Hey! It does kinda look like a footprint. Geez, who’s walking around here without shoes?”

“Right? Gross!”

I stood up. “All right, let’s follow the tracks. See where it takes us. Use your wolf powers.”

“Whoa, slow down, Cali. What if we actually find something? Or someone? What are we going to do?”

I shrugged. “Hit them with a rock?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you serious? I’m worried that you’re serious.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. You know I’m not a planner. We’ll figure something out in the moment. It’s always worked out before.”

“Yeah… Thinking in the moment has almost gotten you killed, every single time.”

“The key word there is ‘almost’.”

“The key word there is ‘you’re an impulsive dumbass’.”

I sniffed. “Actually, that’s four words.”

“And the only reason you haven’t died yet is because someone always comes to save your ass,” she continued, ignoring my extremely valid point.

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, Lola. I don’t want to lose the trail.”

“And I don’t want to lose my life. I’m going to get Jay. Just wait there. And don’t you *dare* do what you always do, and go off alone..”

I crossed my arms over my chest and huffed. “I don’t need to be lectured. If you want me to stay here, I’ll stay here.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back with Jay,” she said, giving me one last look.

“Fine, but don’t get distracted and make out with him like *you* always do,” I said.

She flipped me off before running back toward the crowd. “Just stay there!”

“Wouldn’t dream of leaving!” I yelled back.

I waited for half a second.

“Pffffftttt,” I said aloud. “Does she really expect me to wait? It’s like she doesn’t even know me,” I turned to follow the footprints into the woods. The wisp had brought me here for a reason—and I was going to find out exactly what that reason was.

**Episode 213**

As soon as I started walking, I immediately realized that I hadn’t given myself a way to get back to where I was supposed to be waiting. To make matters worse, even though the moon was waning and had been so bright earlier, the sun was sure taking its sweet time to rise. I could hardly see a damn thing. I strained my eyes, trying to see the footprints. In a last-ditch effort, I tilted my head up and took a long sniff, trying to see if I could smell anything. Perhaps I’d been around werewolves long enough that I might have picked up some tracking skills.

Unsurprisingly, that didn’t work. All I could smell was the forest. Again, this would have been an ideal time to spontaneously become a werewolf. I would have been able to follow the footprints easily—I probably would have already found the creep by now. Or at least been able to see in the dark.

I decided to blame Greyson for my not being a werewolf. He was responsible for a lot of other shit, so he could take this on too.

I continued to move deeper into the woods, unsure if I was even following the footprints anymore or if it was just my overactive imagination playing tricks on me again.

*You just need to trust yourself,* I told myself sternly as I moved through the dark. *Even if no one else trusts your instincts, you need to trust them.*

I stopped in my tracks. There in the dirt there was a much more pronounced set of footprints. They were veering off to the left, away from the trail. Well, at least I could see these footprints without kneeling in the dirt or suddenly developing werewolf senses.

I veered to the left, running after the footprints, my eyes never leaving them. Though in hindsight, I should have really looked where I was going. It would have saved me from slipping and falling into the mud when the ground got marshier.

“Gross! Gross! Gross!” I cried out, trying to wipe the mud off of me. *Ugh! Stupid Cali! Who the hell put a damn swamp in a forest? Ugh!*

As I got the last of the mud off me, ruining my jeans for good, I looked down at the ground and gasped loudly.

“Holy shit!” I breathed out, my blood running cold as I realized what I was looking at. The footprints on the ground were no longer footprints. They were paw prints.

Werewolf tracks.

“Shit!” I cursed under my breath. Maybe I *should* have waited for Lola and Jay. But I’d never been the patient type. Though maybe I should aim to become less the impulsive type.

But it was too late now. I couldn’t change the past. But what was I gonna do about the present?

I hesitated, thinking it over. A large part of me—a part that some would call the stupid part—wanted to keep following the tracks. I’d come all this way, I might as well keep going. However, I’d been told before I even arrived at the Lupo Finale that the woods were dangerous. In fact, I was told on a daily basis that the woods were dangerous, especially for a human. Also, Lola would be really pissed at me if I went too far into the woods. Especially when she’d told me not to move at all. Maybe I should go back and wait for her. I couldn’t have gone too far to be completely lost. I’d only been walking around for a few minutes at most.

But how the hell would I get back to this exact same spot again to show them the tracks? I mean, I could tie one of my shoelaces around a tree, but that wouldn’t be the brightest thing to do if someone was lurking around here. They’d know someone had seen the tracks, and I could probably trip at an inopportune moment. The forest was filled with all sorts of creepy things with the potential to chase me and try to kill me. I wouldn’t be able to outrun them if I tripped because of a loose shoe. I was clumsy as hell on a good day.

*Lola.*

I smacked my forehead when I realized how stupid my idea had been. Why would I tie a shoelace around a tree when I had Lola, the half-werewolf? With the moon still out, her wolf senses were heightened. And even if she couldn’t track my scent, Jay would surely be able to. I wrapped my arms around the tree and gave it a good hug, hoping to leave a strong enough scent on it for Lola and Jay to follow. Hopefully if another werewolf were around, they’d think I was a weird tree hugger. I had to take the risk if we were going to try to get answers.

I walked back toward the spot where Lola had told me to wait, picking bark out of my sleeves as I walked. It was still dark, and all the trees were starting to look alike.

I stopped in my tracks. *Wait,* I thought. *Did I already pass that rock?*

Shit, I was going in circles. Fuck!

I felt my heart start racing as I looked around, wondering what the hell I was going to do now. I could call out for Lola and pray that she’d hear me. But what if there was a Rogue wolf wandering around? I didn’t want to attract its attention. I was a vulnerable human, and I didn’t have the protection of being a Luna or Xavier’s mate anymore. A rogue could kill me and get away with it.

I needed a weapon.

I looked around, frowning at my lack of choices. Then again, it wasn’t like anyone was going to leave a handgun or a sword just lying around. I’d never get that lucky.

I settled on a stick that looked pretty sharp. Hopefully I’d be able to jab it in any attacker’s eye before they ate me. It was really the best I could hope for. If I survived this, I was absolutely going to make someone teach me self-defense.

With my almost-weapon gripped tightly in my hands, I turned to find my way back. Except I’d forgotten which way I was heading. Had I come from the left or the right?

Shit! I really should have marked this path with something, or at least paid more attention to get my way back to the tracks. I couldn’t see the trail I’d been following—if I’d even been following a trail at all. I’d been going on pure instinct, after all.

A decision which was probably going to kill me.

I started to panic, my breath coming in shallow pants. Great, not only was I going to die alone in the woods, but Lola was going to be so mad when she found out I hadn’t listened to her. Where the hell was a guiding wisp when I needed one?

*Calm down, Cali. Chill,* I told myself sternly. Panicking was not going to get me out of this. I could figure this out.

I took a deep breath to steady myself. Maybe if I kept perfectly still, I’d be able to hear the noise from the campsites. The werewolves were probably celebrating again and making all sorts of racket that I could follow back. I just needed to listen, think, and breathe.

I paused, not even daring to breathe as I listened hard, trying to make out any noise.

There was a faint noise in the distance, but I couldn’t be sure what it was. Maybe I was just hoping I’d heard something. Maybe it was just my dumb imagination playing tricks on me again. I held my breath and listened again. Nothing.

Seriously, where the hell were those damn wisps! I could really use one at that moment. Why couldn’t I get them on demand? At this point, I wasn’t convinced they were playing a series of practical jokes on me.

In hindsight, I probably should have picked up some wilderness supplies before heading out on this terrible trip. I would have killed for a compass. I’d never actually used one, but how hard could it be?

And, considering I’d willingly made out with my boyfriend’s evil half-brother, I could probably have used a moral compass as well.

A sharp sound cut through the silent night air, yanking me out of my thoughts.

*Shit!* I thought, my heart pounding. It sounded like someone had stepped on a twig, making me even more nervous. Was someone coming?

My heart was hammering so hard that I could hardly hear what was going on around me.

“Lola?” I called out, my voice barely above a whisper. “Jay?” I whispered, praying it was just them and not something out to kill me and eat me for a late snack/early breakfast.

There was no answer, which only made me more nervous. I clutched my stick closer to my body, ready to strike. Or try my best to strike.

I’d opened my mouth to call out for Lola and Jay again when I heard another snapping of a twig. And another. And another.

SNAP.

SNAP.

SNAP.

I looked around, trying to see what it was, but everything looked dark. I couldn’t even defend myself, because I couldn’t see a damn thing.

SNAP.

SNAP.

SNAP.

Something was coming. And it was coming fast.

I opened my mouth to scream, but then the sounds stopped. I heard nothing but my heart beat loudly in my ears when I realized why I didn’t hear anything.

Something was already here.

**Episode 214**

Okay. So I know that everyone and their grandmother told me not to go into the woods alone, that it was dangerous, blah, blah, blah. But in MY DEFENSE, I really hadn’t thought I’d end up in the woods, about to face a zombie werewolf, and with only a stick to defend myself.

In hindsight, I probably should have prepared for this eventuality—everything else in my life up until that point had been completely ridiculous, so of course this was always going to happen. But still, couldn’t a girl catch a break? I’d been knocked down enough times recently, I didn’t need to add this too.

I tightened my grip on my stick, waiting for whatever—or *who*ever—was coming my way. It couldn’t be Jay and Lola, they would have announced themselves by now. I should have taken that gun from Greyson when we’d been training. I could have really used it at that moment. Even though I hated the idea of needing it—and I probably would’ve needed months more of training to actually use it without shooting myself in the foot—it would’ve made a much better weapon than a stick.

Looking around, I thought maybe I still had time to get the hell out of there. I didn’t have to be a sitting duck. That was getting old. I wanted to be able to fight back.

I was getting the fuck out of here.

I turned on my heel and hurried away as quickly as I could. I was running with no sense of direction, but anything was better than waiting for a zombie or a werewolf to eat me. I’d used to feel more comfortable in the woods in Minnesota, but the woods in Oregon felt different. I couldn’t put my finger on it really. Maybe I’d somehow been able to sense what was lurking in them.

My heart pounded loudly in my chest as I ran, tripping over roots, rocks, and some strange, squishy shit that I filed under ‘things I do not want to know about’. Seriously, what the hell was in these woods? How was this place physical possible? Though, I guess anything was now, huh?

I was pondering that when my foot hit something solid, causing me to trip and tumble face first into a muddy puddle. My stick flew straight out of my hand and I faceplanted into the mud.

Face pressed into the mud, I held my breath and waited for the sound of footsteps through the forest. Was I being followed? I debated just lying there for a second, hoping that if something was chasing me it would either run past me or assume I was dead.

However, the woods were completely silent. The snapping twigs had stopped.

After a few moments, I pulled myself out of the mud puddle and slowly clambered to my knees. Leave it to me to fall face first into a mud puddle, but now I supposed that my scent was more masked. Actually… *I started to rub more of the wet mud on my clothes.* Not glamerous, but something. *Wait, mud?* I looked down, confused, as it finally hit me. There a muddy puddle in the middle of the woods.

Looking around the area I’d fallen down in, I realized it wasn’t a puddle at all—it was the edge of a small little stream. That was odd. Hadn’t seen this before.

I picked up a nearby leaf and tossed it in the stream, watching it float away.

I slapped myself on the forehead. Of course! The stream had to lead to the pond!

Letting out a deep sigh, I stood back up. If I could get to the pond, I’d be able to find my way back to the campsite. I didn’t need to remember the kiss that happened there in the meantime. It would lead me back to safety and that was all that mattered.

I jumped to my feet with renewed energy and walked through the stream, ignoring that my sneakers weren’t at all water proof. I was feeling hopeful. Not all was lost. I’d figured something out in an enchanted forest without needing a man or werewolf to do it.

I stopped walking in the stream when my feet got way too cold and I realized that all the noise was probably going to attract something, or someone, dangerous. I’d only narrowly avoided danger just a few minutes ago—I shouldn’t welcome it back with open arms.

There was only one person I wanted to do that for.

I was torn between walking carefully to avoid slipping and falling on my face again, and trying to get the hell out of there as fast as humanly possible.

At the very least, next time I ran into the woods unsupervised, I’d be sure to carry a big ball of string to mark my way. Then again, perhaps a big ball of string would somehow get me into even more trouble.

But was I *really* going to stop acting impulsively? It depended whether my man or my friends were in danger. I wouldn’t apologize for trying to help them. Even if they thought it was stupid. They should be thankful to have me on their team.

While I was contemplating all this, I was trying to climb onto a boulder to keep following the stream, but I slipped.

Instinctively, I reached out and grabbed something to steady myself, which ended up being the branch of a tree.

I held on tightly as my body came to a jerking stop.

*Hey, that actually worked out,* I thought to myself.

CRUSH!

*Or not.*

As I stopped, my foot struck something hard on the ground and a bunch of sticks went flying.

*What the fuck was that? And it was so loud! Shit!* I wondered as I looked down to see that I’d stepped on a pile of sticks. Next to my foot was a little house made of twigs. In fact, there were a few more around them, almost like a tiny community of houses, one of which was now smashed.

*Faerie houses?* That was the first thought that came to mind when I saw them, the houses triggering an almost forgotten memory from when I was little. Before my mom got sick, we used to make little faerie houses out of sticks and leave them in garden in my backyard. It was one of the few memories I had of the healthy version of her.

But what are they doing out here? Besides my mother and me, I didn’t know anyone else who made faerie gardens. I couldn’t imagine parents bringing their children out into an underground forest to build faerie houses. Then again, the only people who knew about the underground forest were werewolves, and I could totally see them making faerie houses in the forest. Maybe they held a little arts and craft day for the children while the Lupo Finale was conducted?

But who the hell would bring their child to the Lupo Finale?

I didn’t want to think about that. I was too far into this train of thought, anyway. I had to get to the pond and get the hell out of there before something ate me—or worse.

I looked down at the destroyed faerie house and felt a pang of guilt. I remembered how hard I’d worked on my faerie houses to make them nice—I would’ve felt horrible if someone had knocked them down. Plus, my mother had always warned me if I ever knocked down a faerie house, or saw one that had been knocked down, I should fix it up for them. But I she’d just been trying to teach me a lesson about cleaning up after myself.

Still, I felt bad. If I’d had the time, I would’ve tried to fix it. Hell, if I’d had paper I would have left a note with an apology. But I didn’t have time, or paper. There was still a possibility that something was after me, and I had to get the hell out of there before I found out what.

“Sorry,” I whispered at the destroyed house, before heading downstream as fast as I could.

I slowed down as the forest opened up and revealed a giant pond, the water glistening in the waning moonlight. If I hadn’t been so terrified moments beforehand, I would have appreciated the beauty more.

I exhaled. Until that moment, I hadn’t realized that I’d been holding my breath the whole time.

*I made it! I actually made it without creating a total mess!*

This was kind of a first for me, and I was pretty dang proud of myself. Now all I had to do was find my back from here, which couldn’t be very difficult.

I took a step toward the pond and froze when I saw it. There was a man standing at the pond’s edge, looking at the water.

I inhaled sharply, and the man turned to look in my direction.

*Shit!* I cursed at my own stupidity—why the hell had I let myself be seen?

Suddenly, and without warning, the kiss with Greyson came barreling into my head. I couldn’t stop the memory of his scent, his kisses, the pressure of his hand on my hip. I could still see him emerging from the pond, water dripping down his chiseled white chest…

No! Greyson was dead to me.

History wouldn’t repeat twice.

As the man turned, I got a full look at him. Muscular arms, broad shoulders, dark hair, impossibly blue eyes on an unreadable face… How had I not realized it before? I’d know him anywhere. I just couldn’t believe I’d found him here, of all places.

“Xavier,” I breathed, not sure what else to say. I felt as though I would faint from seeing him. There was so much I wanted to tell him. Needed to tell him. My heart ached.

His gaze was ice cold as he stared me down. “What are you doing here, Caliana?”

**Episode 215**

My breath caught as I took in Xavier’s presence. It was almost funny—I’d spent so much time looking for him, but now that he was right in front of me, I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to hug him. Pull him into my arms and try to mend all that was broken between us. Tell him that everything was going to be all right, somehow.

I ran to him, hoping to run into his loving embrace, like in all those cheesy romance novels and movies Lola and I loved reading.

Then I saw the look in his eyes, which made it very clear that me running toward him was the very last thing Xavier wanted.

I slowed down and stopped a few feet away from him.

His eyes narrowed. “What the hell do you want, Cali?” he growled again, his cold tone chilling me to the bone.

*Oh right, he still hates my guts.*

The memory of the last time we’d talked still echoed in my mind along with the sting of my wrists. It all made my heart ache. We needed to talk, but couldn’t that happen when I *wasn’t* covered in mud? Explaining to your boyfriend why you’d kissed his evil half-brother definitely required makeup and a cute outfit, and I had neither.

I opened my mouth to explain about the wisp, and Ryker, and getting lost in the woods, but closed it again when I realized that the last thing Xavier wanted was to listen to my ramblings. I didn’t really want to hear myself either.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said quietly. “What’s important is that I found you.”

“Did you ever think that maybe I didn’t want to be found? Especially by you?”

His words hurt, but I pushed through. He needed to hear my side of things. He owed that to me.

“I understand that you’re hurt, and I’m so sorry for the pain I’ve caused you. I feel horrible, Xavier. Worse than you can ever know. But I want to make it *right*. I want to fix things between us. That’s why I’ve been looking for you. I tried to find you at the Luna ceremony, but I couldn’t. I’ve been so worried.”

Xavier turned away. “There’s nothing you can do to fix this, Cali. It’s broken, and that’s your fault.”

A surge of red-hot anger hit me. I tried to keep it contained. My fault? None of this was entirely my fault.

I reached out to him, my fingers gently grazing his back. “Xavier…”

He shook off my touch as if I’d burned him.

“I care about you,” I said gently.

That set him off.

He turned around so quickly that I stumbled backwards. There was a fire in his eyes, a fury I hadn’t seen from him before.

“Do you, Caliana?” he growled out, looking almost villainous, his teeth bared, the vein on his throat throbbing. I recognized that tone: he used it on people who’d made him deeply angry.

In that moment, I feared for my life. Maybe this had been a mistake, after all. Xavier was a werewolf, and I was a human.

Xavier—either unaware of my fear or maybe inspired by it—continued to speak. “Because it seems like you don’t care about my feelings, Cali. You don’t listen to me. You blatantly disregard your own safety for no good reason other than to prove some kind of stupid point. Do you *think*, Caliana, that when you kissed my brother, you gave one single shit about my feelings? Or maybe you did. Maybe you wanted to hurt me. Settle some kind of score. Well, if that was what you wanted, congratulations. You succeeded!”

A lump in my throat started to build, and I tried to swallow it down. The anger was back, but I didn’t know how to control it—it wanted to come out in hot tears. *No, I’m not going to cry right now.* “Xavier, that’s not what I wanted,” I said, my voice breaking. “Can you at least let me explain?”

“What? Are you going to try and it tell me it was an accident? That your lips just fell onto his?”

“Well if you’d just let me fucking explain for a minute, then maybe you’d find out! Could you please let me talk?”

Xavier shrugged. “I can’t stop you from running your mouth. Never could.”

I ignored the dig. “Look, I *know* I screwed up. I take full responsibility for my part in this. It was wrong of me to have trusted Greyson. I should have listened to you, to Colton, to everyone. I see that now, and I’m sorry.” I took a deep breath and stared at him for a long time, collecting my thoughts and trying to calm myself. “But did you ever wonder, even for a second, *why* I trusted him so much?”

Xavier scoffed. “Because you didn’t listen to me. You did exactly what you wanted to do. You were stupid, and blinded by the story he wanted to tell and—”

“IT’S BECAUSE HE WAS NICE TO ME!” I screamed. “BECAUSE HE LISTENED TO ME! BECAUSE HE NEVER GRABBED MY WRISTS! BECAUSE HE WAS THE ONLY PERSON WHO WAS EVER FUCKING NICE TO ME!”

Tears fell down my face as we stared at each other. My body shook with anger and I hugged myself. Xavier stood there silent, apparently stunned by my confession.

I took it as an opportunity to continue. “You have no idea what it’s like for me here, in your world. Two months ago, I didn’t even know werewolves existed outside of movies and Halloween. Now I’m so confused by *everything and no one* tries to help make *it any damn better*. I never have a fucking clue what’s going on and every time I ask a fucking question I get called stupid or told to shut up because I’m human.

“You were HORRIBLE to me when we first meet. You said you would kill me, Xavier. And you still *are* horrible to me sometimes. You’re cold, and mean, and distant. Your moods change so quickly that I don’t ever know which version of you I’ll be getting. And before you start, I know I can be the same… But you rarely tell me anything, and whenever you *do*, you make me feel stupid for not already knowing it..”

I took a deep breath. Afraid to say the next part, but I needed to do it. “I was lonely in this relationship, Xavier. And—I’m not sorry, but —fuck you for blaming all of this on me. Some of this is on you, too.”

I continued, trying to keep my voice steady as my whole body trembled. “I realize now that everything Greyson was doing was an act to gain my trust. That’s why he was nice to me. Why he didn’t take every opportunity to call me stupid. Why he helped me when I asked him to, and why he answered my questions. He might have lied to me every second, but in those moments he treated me like a person, not just a human. And I needed that. I’m not proud of what I did, but you can’t say you were the only one hurting in this relationship.”

The two of us stared at each other, both unable to speak. Then Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “So that’s the story you’re trying to sell me? That you kissed him because you were *lonely?* Because you considered yourself to be a forgotten mate? The victim who got tricked in this scenario? Well, what about *me?*”

I glared at him, crossing my arms. “Xavier, you kill people. You’re far from a saint.”

“Well, if you were so miserable with me, then what are you doing hanging around here? This relationship was a mistake to begin with. It was always going to be too difficult, and now it’s too broken.”

*No*. I took a step closer to him. “Just because things are broken, doesn’t mean they can’t be mended. Just because things are difficult, doesn’t mean they’re not worth the fight. We have a lot of work to do if we want to make this relationship work—if we want to make this a *healthy* relationship. And I believe it’s worth the fight. You are worth the fight, Xavier. A million times over. And I want to prove that to you, but right now, we have to figure out how to stop Greyson. We can’t let him beat us or the pack.”

Xavier scoffed. “I’m not doing anything. I think the humiliation of losing the Finale and all of *this* being publicis enough.”

“But Ryker was cheating! Can’t you have a rematch?”

“With a corpse?”

“Redo the whole thing. You versus Greyson. It was unfair! If Ryker hadn’t injured you, things could be completely different. You could have beaten Greyson, and—”

“What’s done is done, Caliana. I’m not really interested in reliving any of it,” he said, beginning to turn away. “Now, if you don’t mind. I’d like to be alone.”

I paused, unsure of what to do. I wanted to scream at him—scream my head off until I was red in the face. I understood that he needed space after everything, especially after what I’d just told him. I owed him that space, after what I’d done. I should just walk away until we’d both thought about things and had clearer heads.

But I was never going to just leave things alone. *So* not my style.

“I understand and respect that you need your space,” I said. “I know that you’re angry and hurt, but—”

“There’s always a but with you.”

“*But* I’m your mate. You can’t just ignore that.”

“I killed my last mate.”

“And I won’t let you try to kill another relationship.”

Xavier looked at me again, his face completely blank. For a moment, I was angry that the only thoughts I’d heard had been Greyson’s. Only Xavier’s once. I would’ve given anything in the world to be able to read all of Xavier’s thoughts at that moment.

I straightened my back and looked at him, my own eyes filled with determination. I was going to get him back. I wasn’t going to let Greyson win—not this time.

“We’re mated, Xavier. That still means something. Your wolf picked *me*.”

Xavier’s gaze was as hard as his voice. “Maybe so. But I didn’t.”

**Episode 216**

I took a step back, his words hitting me like a slap. “What do you mean?”

“Do I really have to spell it out for you, Caliana? *I. Don’t. Want. You.* My wolf might want you, but that doesn’t mean I have to. Truth is, I want nothing to do with you. Not after what you did.”

I gaped at him, feeling both heartbreak and deep anger. I decided to go with the anger.

“You have got to be FUCKING kidding me, Xavier. In the two months we’ve been together you’ve lied to me, kept secrets from me, killed someone I know, grabbed me violently, screamed at me in public, called me stupid a thousand times a day, threatened my life almost daily, and a hundred other things I can’t even *think of* right now because I’m too pissed off. But I fuck up ONCE, and that’s the end of things? Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

Xavier shrugged. “Maybe I just have higher standards than you do.”

I didn’t know if I wanted to fix our relationship or put him in an early grave.

“So what? We’re just going to be like Colton and Maya? Be mates who want nothing to do with each other? Do you see how well that’s worked out for them? Not very well!”

“We won’t be like Colton and Maya because WE are never going to see each other again. You, if you fucking survive getting out of here without my help, you are getting on the first plane home to Minnesota, and I’ll finally get you out of my hair for good.”

I was stunned. How could he try to kick me out of his life so easily? Like I was nothing, like I was dirt under his feet? He was lying to himself and to me. I wasn’t going to let him ruin what was between us either.

“You don’t mean that, Xavier,” I said. “You’re hurt and angry, but you don’t mean that. I know you way too well.”

“You don’t know the first thing about me,” he growled. “You think I treated you so badly? Fine. Then go be with Greyson. Oh wait, I forgot—he doesn’t want anything to do with you either and he’s a fucking psychopath. Yeah, I was there at the Luna ceremony. I watched the whole damn thing. How upset you were when Greyson rejected you. You looked heartbroken. Funny, I almost felt sorry for you.” He scoffed. “And now you’ve come back, practically begging me to forget everything that happened. But I won’t do it. I won’t be your second choice.”

“It’s absolutely NOT like that!” I protested, heartbroken that that was what he thought. *Do all the times I said I loved him mean anything? Does everything I’ve done for him mean nothing?*

“I was going to reject Greyson. In front of everyone.”

Xavier laughed bitterly at that.

“No, it’s true! I was going to humiliate him in front of everyone. But he set me up. Again.”

“Really? Is that what you honestly want me to believe? If that’s even true—”

“It *is* true!”

“Then why did you seem so upset when he didn’t pick you?”

I paused, thinking back to the mental conversation I’d had with Greyson. *I’m so sorry, please trust me.* He’d asked me to trust him again, and I hadn’t been able to do it. I hadn’t been able to let him break my heart again. But how was I meant to tell Xavier that? Would telling him about my mental connection with Greyson make things worse? It certainly felt like it.

“I was angry.” I told him, which was mostly true. “I was angry that he robbed me of the chance to reject him. He brought me up there just to humiliate me, because I was—*I still am*—your mate. It was all a stupid game he was playing because he’s our Alpha now.”

Though even as I said the words, I couldn’t quite convince myself they were true. In my head Greyson was begging, *begging* for me to trust him, to believe that he was sorry.

But maybe that had been a lie, too. I didn’t know. I didn’t know what was real anymore.

I knew what was in front of me: the man I loved. And I needed to show him how damn much.

Xavier laughed without humor. “*Our* Alpha? You’ve got to be kidding me. You have some fucking nerve.”

I shot him a look. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

He shook his head. “You don’t get it, do you? You were *never* part of the pack to begin with. You’re only here because of me, because of us. But there is no us anymore. You took that away when you kissed him. So now, you’re out.”

“We aren’t even going to discuss this?”

“Breakups are not discussions, Caliana.”

“Fuck that. You’ve never had a damn conversation in your life. It’s always been your way or the highway. But not this time. This time, we are actually going to talk about our relationship.”

“I think you’ve said enough. This isn’t a relationship anymore.”

“Why? Because I asked you to treat me nicer? Because I want you to treat me like a partner and not a thing you own? Because there are issues in our relationship that we BOTH need to work on?” I yelled, showing the bruises on my wrists in the shape of his hands.

He was unmoved. “Great. I’ll work on not being an asshole and you can work on not being such a fucking tramp, and we’ll see where that gets us.”

I gaped at him. “This is EXACTLY what I’m talking about! You can’t fucking talk to me like that!”

“I can do whatever the fuck I want. And if I don’t want to deal with an impulsive, unfeeling human, then I don’t have to. NOW GO!”

Tears were forming in my eyes as his words knocked the wind out of me. There was no way I could make this right with him. Not right now, maybe never.

“CALI! CALI, WHERE ARE YOU!” Lola shouted.

I groaned internally. Where had Lola been when I’d needed her ten minutes ago? She always managed to arrive at the worst possible moment.

I tried to ignore her. “Xavier…”

“CALI, WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU? IF YOU’RE DEAD I’M GOING TO KILL YOU!”

Fuck!

Xavier turned toward Lola’s voice and then back to me. “If you really meant what you said about wanting to give me space, now would be the time to start.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You want me to just walk away? So you can stand out here by yourself? You know what? Fine. If that’s what you want, I’ll do it. I’ll walk away right now and you’ll never have to deal with me again!” My heart was breaking inside my chest as I said those words. Would I really be able to walk away from everything we’d built together? Probably not. I’d never been one to leave things alone, even it was in my best interest to walk away. Besides, what the hell was he going to do here out in the woods? He could try to hurt himself, and I wasn’t going to let that happen.

But then I looked into his eyes and really *saw* the deep-seated pain. The pain that I’d caused. What with losing his pack, his title, and finding out that his mate had kissed someone else, this must have been, at the very least, a terrible day for Xavier. I couldn’t cause him any more pain just because of my selfish need for him to forgive me quickly. I couldn’t force him to forgive me, or love me again. And if he wanted me to leave forever so he could find peace, I would.

Even if it killed me.

That’s how much I loved him.

Xavier opened his mouth to say something. I leaned forward, waiting for his answer.

“Caliana—”

“CALI!” Suddenly, Lola ran up to us, stopping right between me and Xavier. “Oh my god! Where the hell have you been? We’ve been looking everywhere for you! You promised me that you’d stay put! How long did you wait, thirty seconds?”

It had been much less than that.

I looked down at my muddy sneakers, not trusting myself to speak, afraid it would come it in sobs. I quickly wiped my tears away.

Lola noticed none of this. “Anyway, I got Jay and we saw some tracks. Jay picked up your scent and we found you! Are you okay? You look gross.”

My best friend, always comforting in times of need.

I nodded, my eyes still focused on the ground.

Another set of footsteps got closer, and Jay appeared a moment later. “Oh, hey Xavier! Are you okay, man?”

Lola turned to look at Xavier, apparently surprised to see him there. “Xavier! Hey, hi? What are you doing here?”

Xavier didn’t say a word.

“Okay… Uh… Well, we saw the wolf print but that led to a dead end. The trail went cold, and…” Lola trailed off, looking at both me and Xavier. “What’s going on?” I could almost see the wheels turning in her brain as she finally made the connection that something had gone very, very wrong here.

“It doesn’t concern you,” Xavier growled darkly. “I’m not your Alpha anymore.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Jay said. “You’re our friend.”

Lola turned to me. “Cali, what’s going on?”

“I’m not your Alpha. I’m not your friend. I’m not your anything. Just leave me the fuck alone,” Xavier said harshly. Without another word, he turned and walked away, heading deeper into the woods.

I felt my knees go weak, and I almost collapsed onto the ground, suddenly lightheaded. It felt like my whole world had just walked away from me, perhaps gone forever.

Lola walked toward me and gently touched my shoulder. “Cali,” she asked gently. “What just happened?”

I took a deep breath, holding back the sobs that were trying to escape my throat. “I think we just broke up.”

**Episode 217**

Lola gasped. “Are you sure? Like, what were his exact words? Were they ‘Cali, we are breaking up’?”

“Yes. Because, as we all know, Xavier is always very clear with his emotions, and an excellent communicator,” I deadpanned. “No, he didn’t fucking say that. Not in those exact words, anyway. He said that he needed space, and that I was out of the pack.”

“Well, technically we’re *all* out of the pack, seeing as we’re going Rogue,” said Lola. “Anyway, if he didn’t say that you’re broken up then you’re not broken up. You’re just on a break. That’s the rule, right, Jay?” Lola said, turning to her mate.

Jay shrugged. “What the hell do I look like, a relationship expert?”

“Say something comforting!” Lola hissed through gritted teeth. This did not make me feel better.

“Well, look on the bright side,” Jay offered. “Xavier killed his last mate when he wanted to end things. I mean she also killed his mom… But this is definitely better than that, right?”

Lola and I glared at him. “Oh yes, you’re right Jay. I should be *so* grateful that Xavier didn’t murder me in cold blood. I can’t wait to put this down in my gratitude journal!” I yelled, tears falling down my face.

“*You’re not helping!*”Lola hissed at Jay.

“*I didn’t know I was supposed to be helping!*”Jay hissed back before turning to me. “What I meant was that if Xavier really wanted to break up with you, he would have made it very clear and probably very permanent. So unless he said ‘I’m breaking up with you for good’, he didn’t break up with you. Technically.”

I looked up, drying my eyes, trying not to let myself get too hopeful, but that did make sense. Xavier had said over and over again that he wanted me to leave, that he was annoyed with me, that he didn’t want to be with me—and he’d never meant it before. He’d always come back. Why would this time be any different? True, I’d never fucked up this majorly before, but today had been pretty bad for everyone involved.

“Do you guys really believe that?” I asked. “Or are you just saying it to make me feel better?”

Lola put a comforting arm around my shoulders. “We’d never build your hopes up just to watch you crash and burn.”

“Yeah, that’d just be sad to watch,” said Jay.

I sighed. Part of me really wanted to believe Lola and Jay, but this was the same Lola who’d told me over a dozen times to kiss Greyson, and Jay *had* sold his eye to a witch, so their judgment was flawed at best.

“I really hope you guys are right. I don’t want to lose him,” I said, as more tears flowed down my face.

“Not to change the subject or anything,” said Lola, “but I don’t suppose you found Ryker’s body during all this?”

I stared at her. “No.” I said flatly. “I was too busy trying not to die, and fighting with my mate.”

“Oh. Yeah, right.”

“We should probably get back to the camp,” said Jay. “It’s been a long day and we all could use the rest—especially you, Cali.”

I sniffled, wiping my eyes again. “Thanks guys.”

“Come on, bring in it,” said Lola, pulling me and Jay into a hug. “We’ll take care of you, Cali. Promise.”

Despite everything Lola and I had been through in the last twenty-four hours, in that moment I was very grateful for her. No matter what happened, at least I still had a family. We’d look out for each other no matter what.

As we made our way back toward the camp, I remembered the faerie houses I’d stumbled upon. “Did you guys see those faerie houses on the trail?”

“Oh yeah. There are faerie houses all over the place here,” said Jay.

“That’s funny. I wonder why? Are they magical, like the wisps?”

Jay shrugged. “I don’t think so. I don’t really know much about them, to tell you the truth. We just try to leave them undisturbed.”

I thought back to the one I’d flattened and felt unease creep into the pit of my stomach. A lot of horrible faerie tales started with similar unfortunate accidents. The last thing I needed was a bunch of anger faeries coming after me because I’d made them homeless. I already had one magical species hating my guts.

“What would happen if you did disturb one? By accident.”

“You’d be cursed until the day you DIE! Muhahahaha!” Lola said, her voice dark and creepy, with a dramatic evil laugh at the end.

I froze in my tracks. “WHAT?” I gasped out, my eyes going wide. Great, that would be the cherry on top of this fucking garbage day. But honestly, I already felt like I was cursed—what more could they really do to me?  
 Still, I didn’t exactly want to find out.

Lola laughed. “Ha! I’m just messing with you. I have no fucking clue.”

“You suck!”

Lola laughed again and shrugged. “Faeries aren’t exactly real. Well, not that we know of, anyway. They’re just the stuff of legends and myths. Old, ancient magic. Like *Thumbelina* or some shit. They aren’t real.”

“Right. Like how werewolves, witches, and wisps were the stuff of legends and myths,” I said flatly.

“Point taken. But I’ve never met a faerie, or known anyone who has,” said Lola.

“And I’ve never met Zac Efron or known anyone who has, but I KNOW he’s real,” I retorted.

“We don’t KNOW if he’s real, though,” said Jay. “His muscles are insane.”

Lola and I just gaped at him.

The sounds of laughter and partying got louder the closer we got to the camp, making me feel even more tired than I already was. Seriously, didn’t werewolves ever get tired of partying? We stopped in front of my tent. As soon as I saw it, my stomach twisted into knots, and I felt a deep reluctance to go in. This was the tent I’d shared with Xavier. Where we’d made love several times. Where I’d told him about me and Greyson, and he’d stormed out on me. I was haunted by that memory, and I didn’t want to go inside to face the aftermath of what I’d done.

I turned to Lola and Jay, and for a moment I thought about asking to sleep with them. I didn’t want to be alone. Not only because I felt unsafe as a human alone in this campsite, but also because I worried about what I might do to myself if I was left alone with my thoughts, my guilt.

But I couldn’t ruin their night. I couldn’t continue to be selfish. Not after they’d done so much for me already.

As if sensing my hesitation, Lola threw her arms around me and pulled me into a tight embrace. “It’s going to be all right. You’ll see. Just get some rest. It’ll all look better in the morning.”

“It is morning, technically,” Jay chimed in.

Lola shot him a look. “Not helping.”

“Sorry.”

Lola turned back to me. “I’ll stay with you, if you want? I know it’ll be scary to be alone, after everything that’s happened today.”

For a brief moment, I wanted to take her up on the offer, but decided against it. Lola had just made up with Jay, and I wasn’t going to ruin someone else’s make up sex just because I’d ruined my own relationship. Plus my sadness would be quite the mood killer.

“I really appreciate that, but I’ll be okay. Thank you so much for your help—and for just being there for me. Both of you.”

“Of course,” said Jay.

“Always. And again, I’m sorry for my behavior earlier. If you change your mind, or need anything, we’re just over there. Love you!” said Lola.

“I love you too.”

We hugged one more time before Lola and Jay headed to their own tent. I watched them go, smiling ruefully when Jay took Lola’s hand as they walked. Just a day ago, Lola had wanted to kill Jay for giving away his eye to a witch without telling her, and now there were stronger than ever. Love was certainly a wild, unpredictable thing.

Maybe there was hope for me yet.

I waited until Jay and Lola were safely in their tent before ducking into my own.

*Wow,* I thought, as soon as I entered. *Has it always been this big?*

I looked around the tent. The bed was still messy and unmade from when we’d made love just hours earlier. My bra, which I’d forgotten to pick up in my haste to follow Xavier, was still on the ground. Xavier’s backpack was still here, giving me some small comfort. He hadn’t left for good, at least not yet. And he’d have to come back to the tent to get his stuff. I’d be able to talk to him then. Maybe he’d be calmer by then.

I took off my shoes and collapsed onto the bed, praying that sleep would come quickly.

I lay down on my side of the bed, placed my head on the pillow and smelled Xavier, his scent still lingering. I took a deep breath and breathed in the strong notes of iron and vanilla.

It was then that I finally broke down into a mess of tears. I sobbed helplessly into the pillow, clinging to it like a lifeline until I finally cried myself to sleep.

Then, as soon as I’d closed my eyes, I woke up with a start. The bed had shifted, waking me from a sound sleep as someone sat down on it. I sat up quickly, instantly smacking my forehead on a lantern.

“Ow!” I cursed, rubbing my injured head.

“You never were very careful,” said a voice in the dark.

I twisted around and gasped at who I found next to me. “Xavier?!”

**Episode 218**

I sat up straighter in bed, trying to get a good look at him in the dark, my eyes still blurring from all the crying I’d done. But I knew it was him—I knew his voice, the shape of his body.

My mate had come home after all.

I was flooded with mixed emotions: hope, relief, fear, even a little anger. I was so happy he was with me, that Lola and Jay might have been right, that we hadn’t broken up. But I was also a little scared that he’d come here to belittle me. I didn’t want things to be like before. We’d both made mistakes in this relationship, and if we were going to be together we needed to grow and learn from them. And I wouldn’t go back to him if he continued to treat me like property. I’d almost sold him my virginity—I wouldn’t be selling him my soul.

I reached up and turned on the lantern, seeing him a little better in the glow. I tried to read his face but, as always, it was without emotion. Like he was wearing a mask.

I considered touching him, but thought better of it. He was like a wild animal—if I made any sudden movement, if I pushed too far too quickly, he would run. I needed to give him the space he wanted. Even if he was only inches away from me.

So for once, I didn’t say anything. I waited for him to make the first move.

It wasn’t easy.

Finally, he spoke. “You once said that I wasn’t taking the Lupo Finale seriously. That I was acting too confident. That I should have been thinking about what would happen if I didn’t win. You were right. I was too overconfident. I was blind to anything that I didn’t want to see. I thought that everything was going to be different by now. I thought I’d be the Alpha, and you’d be my Luna.”

He turned to look at me, and my heart skipped a beat.

“But now, everything I thought was mine, my birthright, has been taken from me. The brother I hate is the leader of my pack. I know I took it for granted, having a pack. I said I didn’t care about my twin or my pack, or anyone around me, but I do care. I care more than I’d ever admit. And I’m worried for my pack. I’ll never trust Greyson. I never have.”

“What about me?” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “Can you still trust me? Will you ever?”

Xavier looked down at the bed. For a moment, I was afraid that he was avoiding my eyes as a way of saying that he didn’t trust me. But then I realized what he was actually looking at: the bruises on my wrists.

“We’re mates,” he said, his voice no louder than mine. “We’re supposed to trust each other.” Then he looked into my eyes. “But we’re also in a relationship. We make mistakes—I know I have. If we’re being honest, I never gave you much of a reason to trust me. It was right, what you said in the woods. I was a complete asshole when we first met. And I haven’t been much better since we mated. I thought I was protecting you by keeping things to myself. I thought I could treat you how I wanted because our mate bond would make it all okay. But it didn’t. The way I treated you was not okay.” He looked down at my wrists again. “Caliana, I’m very sorry for my behavior toward you in the past.”

His pain, so clear in his eyes, made my heart ache. Slowly, gently, I took his hand in mine.

I could have cried tears of joy when he didn’t pull away. When he gave it a comforting squeeze.

“I’m sorry too,” I said. “I know I’ve been difficult, and stubborn, and reckless. But I love you.”

He looked down at my hand and then back up at me as we locked eyes. “I need you, Cali. Despite how much it hurts right now, I still need you.”

Moved by his words, desperate to ease his pain, and so grateful to have him back, I pulled him toward me.

He stopped me right before my lips met his. He cupped my face with a large hand, his eyes burning into mine, like he was searching for something. Whatever he was looking for, he must have found it because he pulled me to him, capturing my lips in a tender, needy kiss.

I kissed him back with just as much need. Hungry for him, desperate for reassurance that we were going to be okay, that the past was behind us. But I still felt uneasy. I didn’t want him to rush into something he wasn’t ready for. What if he regretted it in the morning? What if he changed his mind again? I wanted to give him the space he needed—even though I also wanted him in bed with me.

I pulled away from him, barely an inch, and looked him in the eyes. There was burning passion there. “Are you sure about this? It’s okay if you need more time. If you need space.”

“I’m not sure about anything except how much I’ve missed you,” he said, his voice ragged as he pulled me back to him, his kiss rougher this time as he pushed me down onto the bed and climbed on top of me.

“I *need* you, Caliana,” he whispered roughly between kisses.

“I need you too… I thought you’d left me for good,” I moaned out as his lips moved down my neck. I wrapped my legs around his waist and rolled my hips, dying for more friction.

“I thought so too,” he confessed. “But saying goodbye to you would hurt too much. I need you too much. And I’m going to have you… Right *now.*” His lips captured mine again roughly, kissing me with desperate need as his hands moved up and down my body.

I moaned into the kiss as my fingers worked themselves into his hair. “Xavier,” I moaned loudly, not caring if anyone heard. Fuck, I hoped Greyson and Joss heard.

My moan stirred something in Xavier. He moved his grip from my body to my hands and roughly pulled them up over my head.

“Mine,” he growled out, kissed my neck, leaving a trail of love bites from my throat to my breasts as he worked his way down. I knew what he was doing: he was marking what was his. Even though I’d just complained about not wanting to be considered as property, I had to admit, I found the idea incredibly hot.

It got even hotter when he pinned both my wrists with one hand and used the other to rip off my muddy shirt with one pull.

I squealed in delight and was immediately silenced by a punishing kiss as his free hand roamed my body, feeling my curves. Soon his mouth joined in on the fun, licking, sucking, and tasting each breast.

“Mine,” he growled again, placing love bites on each breast.

“Yours,” I breathed out, loving the feeling of him needing me.

He was naked in five seconds flat. Then he tore off my jeans in a fury, the buttons flying off. My underwear came next as he ripped it to shreds.

“I hope you weren’t attached to those,” he said, taking the scraps of satin that had once been my panties and throwing them to the floor.

“I don’t care about anything but you right now,” I moaned out. “I just need you, need you inside me. *Now*!”

He smirked. “That’s what I like to hear,” he said wolfishly as he inserted two fingers into my already dripping pussy, watching as he did so. “*Mine*,” he growled out again, thrusting in rougher and rougher.

“Xavier!” I cried out.

“Beg.”

“What?” I said, my eyes snapping open.

“You begged for me to take you back in the forest—now you can beg for me to take you here,” he said, his voice rough, filled with lust and need.

So this was how he was going to get back at me. I couldn’t say that it wasn’t fitting, or that it wasn’t incredibly arousing. Ordinarily, I would never beg for anything, but I needed to be fucked and Xavier already had two fingers inside me.

“Xavier, *please*. Please fuck me. I need you, I need you more than anything. *Please* *fuck me*,” I whimpered out, my voice filled with need.

He took out his fingers, then smirked as he lifted my legs up around him. “Mine,” he growled. before slamming his hard cock into me.

“Yes!” I gasped.

It wasn’t gentle. It was rough, and hot, and full of desperation. Each thrust was an act of claiming as he worked me to the edge, growling ‘mine’ every time he slammed into me, hitting my G-spot in the most perfect way.

I met each of his punishing thrusts with my hips, screaming out his name as he pushed me to my climax, his own coming only moments after.

“Mine,” he said, kissing my lips.

“Yours.” I smiled, kissing him back.

When we were finished, we held each other, shivering with aftershocks. Xavier’s arms wrapped tightly around me as I gently stroked his hair, lulling him into a much needed sleep. I felt his body relax around me, comforting me in ways that words couldn’t.

*We’re going to be okay,* was my last thought before I drifted off to sleep.

And I truly believed that. Until I woke up the next morning—alone.

**Episode 219**

I jumped out of bed, my heart practically beating out of my chest as I hurried to throw on some clothes. This wasn’t completely unusual; Xavier and I had made a pretty bad habit of waking up and leaving without telling each other (more proof that we TOTALLY needed to work on our communication skills). However, this time was different. Xavier’s words were ringing in my head as I got dressed*. Saying goodbye would be too painful.* Maybe this had been his plan all along: to give me one last goodbye bang before taking off and going Rogue, never to see me again.

*If he did that to me after all I’ve been through this week, I’ll murder him,* I vowed as I ran out of my tent. But there was nobody around.

*Shit, did they all leave without me?* I thought in a blind panic. I ran toward the gnarly tree, trying to calm myself down. Surely they couldn’t have left without me. Plus, they wouldn’t have left their tents behind. And even if everyone else hated me, Lola and Jay would have at least woken me up.

At least, I HOPED they would have.

I breathed a deep sigh of relief when I heard laughter and voices as I got closer to the tree. The smell of food woke up my stomach, making me realize how little I’d eaten in the last few days. As I got closer, I was surprised to see that the group of werewolves—who, only a few hours ago, had been fighting, raving, and cheering on bloodlust—were now having a picnic. Like it was a lovely summer day instead of the aftermath of at least two murders. I could’ve sworn someone was even flying a kite.

I was scanning the crowd, trying to spot Xavier, when I saw the Redwood Pack, clearly divided. On one side was Lola, Jay, Lilac, Violet, and Colton, on the other side was Greyson and Joss. Even from a distance, I could feel the tension simmering between the two sides.

*But where the hell is Xavier?* I wondered.

Almost as if in answer to my question, Xavier appeared, walking to the pack and sitting down next to Colton.

I hurried over to him, ignoring Joss and Greyson as I passed.

“Oh, look who finally decided to show her face,” Joss’s voice rang out.

Ugh, it was too early for this shit.

“Rough night, human?” Joss teased meanly.

I assumed she was talking about the love bites Xavier had given me, and my face heated up with embarrassment as I tried to cover them.

Greyson, who had been actively avoiding looking at me, suddenly looked up. I thought he was also going to make some snarky comment, but then his eyes landed on my wrists. The bruising was looking even worse than it had last night, which meant it was healing.

Greyson’s voice was in my head in a matter of seconds. *Did HE do that do you? When did this happen?* His voice was sharp, almost angry.

*I thought I told you to get out of my head!*

*How did I not see this last night? Are you all right? I’ll kill him.* I could hear the growl that was building low in his throat.

*I said GET OUT!*

I stormed away, still hurt by Greyson’s lies, and the way he’d used me. I walked over to Xavier and sat down next to him.

He didn’t look at me, didn’t acknowledge my presence as he leaned back in his chair. Tentatively, I reached over and touched his hand.

He pulled back quickly, like my touch had burned him.

I recoiled, hurt by his response. Hurt and *angry*. Hadn’t we said last night that we were going to work on our relationship? That we were actually going to communicate, and not be so distant?

Clearly, Xavier hadn’t gotten the memo. Figured. A wolf couldn’t change his fur.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” I asked him, my voice laced with hurt.

Xavier shrugged, still not looking at me. “I thought it would be best to let you sleep. You don’t need to be here for this,” he said, no emotion in his voice.

I shot him a skeptical look. “Is that really the reason you didn’t wake me up?”

I searched his face for an answer, for some kind of clue as to what he was thinking. But then Mace walked into the center of the ring and cleared his throat.

“May I have your attention, please. It is now time for the ceremony to take place. Greyson and Joss—take your places in the circle.”

“What’s going on?” I whispered to Xavier.

He shot me a look that made it very clear I should be quiet.

*So much for him being nicer to me*, I thought bitterly, crossing my arms over my chest.

Lola leaned close to me and whispered: “Joss is going to receive the mark of the Luna.”

Oh.

I looked over at Xavier again, wondering what he could possibly be feeling at that moment. Maybe that was the reason he was being so distant this morning, why he hadn’t wanted me around to witness the ceremony. This was supposed to be his moment. *Our* moment. He was supposed to be up there, marking me as the first human Luna and finally proving that our relationship wasn’t a joke.

But then everything had gone horribly wrong.

I watched as Greyson led Joss to the center of the ring, where there was an altar that had been constructed out of rocks. Jealously clawed at my insides, threatening to escape. Bile built up in my throat as I watched Joss smile smugly at the crowd, like she was their Queen. There was a time when I wouldn’t have hesitated to get up on that stage and try to knock that smug look off her face. Every fiber of my being wanted to do it. But I couldn’t ruin another important werewolf tradition with my impulsive behavior. I needed to be smarter if I wanted to survive.

Still, I couldn’t help but feel my heart aching inside my chest as I watched the two of them up on the stage. One savage thought kept repeating over and over in my head. *It should be me up there. Mine.*

I tried to calm myself down as I watched Mace pour a dark liquid into a golden goblet, chanting “*et factum est vinculum*” as he poured.

Ugh. Every day, I regretted not taking Latin in school. Seriously, couldn’t these people just speak in normal words? It was the twenty-first century, for crying out loud! Saying shit in Latin did *not* make you cool!

I leaned over to Lola. “What’s he saying?”

“Shhh!” Lola hissed back. “Just watch!”

Pffftttt, the words probably didn’t even mean anything.

Mace raised the goblet and offered it to Greyson. He took it, his eyes fixed on Joss, which caused even more jealousy to burn through me. Suddenly, I felt like I was running out of air.

Greyson lifted the goblet to his lips and drank. When he was finished, Mace took it back and handed it to Joss, who drank it down greedily, spilling the liquid down her face and onto the white dress that clung to her body. However, after the first few seconds, Joss’s face shifted into a grimace, her eyes squeezing shut.

I couldn’t help but smirk to myself in secret pleasure. *Good. I hope it tastes nasty and ruins your stupid dress. You deserve much worse than a little discomfort. Both of you!*

Joss’s face turned bright red and she screamed in agony, dropping the goblet as she reached for her throat, gripping it like she was choking.

*Okay, I didn’t want it to be that uncomfortable,* I thought, feeling somewhat guilty about my previous thoughts.

“Does this normally happen?” I whispered to Lola, which immediately earned me another “Shhh!”

Mace grabbed a stone bowl and motioned to Greyson. With a flick of Greyson’s wrist, the bones crackled and his hand shifted into a wolf paw, claws bared.

I covered my mouth to hold back a gasp, stunned by what I was seeing.

*Holy hell, can wolves really do that?*

Greyson took his paw and dipped it into the bowl. When he pulled it out, silver liquid was dripping from his claws.

Without so much as asking if she was all right, Mace dragged a choking, gasping Joss over to Greyson and pulled down the left shoulder of her dress. Greyson looked down at his new Luna and, with a quick swipe, used his claws to carve something deep into her shoulder blade. Joss screamed again, louder than last time as her blood mixed with the silver, dripping down her skin. The pain in her cries shook me to my bones, but I couldn’t look away.

Greyson lifted his claws and revealed the bloody crescent moon that he’d etched into Joss’s skin.

I cringed as I looked at the wound. It looked like an infected tattoo, and a painful one at that. I started to look away and then a loud howl came*.*

My head snapped back toward the stage as Joss kneeled down, standing on all fours. Some of her bones had snapped, but not all of them. Her hands and feet had been replaced by paws, but her body was human—apart from the fur that was popping out in odd places.

What the fuck was happening to her?It looked like she was stuck somewhere between human and wolf. She howled once more and I grabbed Xavier’s arm. This looked *terrible*.

Joss cried out in agony one final time, and then she collapsed.

**Episode 220**

I looked around wildly in blind panic. Why the hell wasn’t anyone helping Joss?Don’t get me wrong, it wasn’t as if I liked the girl in ANY way, but I also didn’t want her to die in front of me.

Was she dead? She sure as hell *looked* dead, sprawled out on the ground like that, barely moving a muscle. Maybe Joss and Greyson weren’t really mates, and her body was rejecting the Luna mark?

Whatever the hell was going on, I was just thankful it wasn’t happening to me. Maybe it was a good thing that I wasn’t going to be Luna. If Joss, a werewolf, was experiencing such a bad reaction, what damage could have been done to me?

Greyson stared down at Joss’s body, looking slightly bewildered.

Mace turned to him. “You must complete the bond. Kiss her.”

I couldn’t help but enjoy the slight grimace on Greyson’s face when he heard Mace’s instructions. Though I was confused as to why he was grimacing. I mean they’d already had sex, and he’d chosen her—what was wrong with a kiss?

However, the grimace disappeared as Greyson knelt beside Joss and gently kissed her on the lips, vaguely reminding me of the ending of *Snow White*. You know, if Snow White had been caught between wolf and human.

Jealousy burned my insides like poison and I tried to look away from the kiss, tried to swallow those feelings down. But they kept getting caught my throat.

As soon as the two kissed, a sudden blast of wind radiated from them. It was like being trapped in a mini-tornado. The wind whipped my hair back and I felt the space surge with energy, like I was being electrocuted with a thousand volts. But weirdly, it also made me feel like I could do *anything*. I wondered if anyone else was feeling this too. I was opening my mouth to ask when the sensation passed, leaving me when a deep feeling of emptiness.

The dying winds revealed the newly bonded couple. Joss was in Greyson’s arms, kissing him deeply.

I felt my face burn with anger. My jealousy was back, and it grew white-hot as I watched them, unable to look away. I couldn’t help but be drawn back to our kiss by the waterfall, and the thought of it made my heart ache with a longing I couldn’t name.

*Stop thinking about it!* I scolded myself harshly. But I couldn’t stop myself.

“The ceremony is now complete!” Mace’s voice boomed over the crowd. “Please welcome Joss, the new Luna of the Redwood Pack.”

The packs erupted in cheers and applause. All but the Redwood pack. Joss’s new pack just sat there, glaring at their new Alpha and Luna.

*Joss may have become a Luna, but nobody in the pack seems to like her,* I thought to myself. And who could blame them? I wasn’t sure if I’d have made a great Luna, but at least the pack *knew* me, for better or for worse. Joss was a stranger. She and Greyson were both ex-Rogues who’d taken over the pack. They were outsiders. Intruders.

No one in the Redwood Pack would stand for it for long.

When Mace finally left the stage, Colton stood up and stretched his muscular arms. “Thank god that’s over. Can we go now? I’m not interested in watching them bone in front of us.”

I wanted to make a joke about Colton usually being Captain Cockblock in these types of situations, but decided against it. I hadn’t forgiven him for calling me names last night, and I wasn’t going to start a fight with him before I’d had a few cups of coffee. Plus, I didn’t want to think about Greyson and Joss banging at all, thank you very much.

“We should grab our things and pack up,” Jay suggested. “We can be back on the trail by noon, if we hurry.”

“Please,” Colton said. “This has felt like a fucking million years.”

“We’re done here,” Xavier said, getting up out of his seat and heading toward the tents, the rest of the pack following close behind.

I couldn’t hold back a small, proud smile. Xavier might not have been the *official* leader of the pack anymore, but we still listened to him like he was our Alpha.

I got up and followed the rest of the pack. Lola held back to walk beside me, a knowing smirk on her face.

“So… What happened this morning?” she asked with a wink.

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, Lola.”

“Don’t play coy with me. I saw Xavier leaving your tent, earlier. Did he come back last night? What happened? Did you bang it better?”

I cringed at her choice of words, my face going red. I sighed loudly, annoyed by her prying. Seriously, hadn’t she already meddled ENOUGH in my relationships?

“He did. And while I don’t particularly *like* your choice of words, we did DO something last night,” I admitted, suddenly very aware of the ache in my thighs from last night.

Lola’s face split into a grin. “Ha! I told you you guys weren’t broken up! I knew things would work out for the two of you!”

I gave Lola a skeptical look, my doubts and fears bubbling up to the surface. “I’m not so sure. We had a big fight in the woods before you and Jay showed up. I told him how I felt about his behavior toward me, and we kinda agreed to work on our relationship. But then we had sex and now he’s being just as distant as before. He came back, but I don’t know how long he’s going to stay,” I confessed.

“But at least he came back. That has to mean something.”

“Yeah, it means he wanted to have angry breakup sex.”

“Angry sex is pretty hot.”

“You are not helping.”

“Hey, a relationship doesn’t heal overnight. You both aren’t magically going to get over what happened. Give it time. You know that if Xavier really didn’t care about you, he’d be gone by now.”

Lola did have a point. “You’re right.”

“Of course I’m right. And at least you’re kinda talking. That’s a great sign.”

I nodded, trying to convince myself she was right about that, too. It was definitely true that only time could fully mend our relationship. The only thing I could do now was work on my issues, and try to get Xavier to communicate. As much as someone like him *could* communicate.

“And, while Xavier was a total dick for grabbing your wrists, he does have a lot on his mind. Which might be the reason why he’s being so quiet. Greyson really fucked us over,” Lola added.

“And then some,” I said, deadpan. “But he apologized. It’s something. He has been under stress, but if he does it again, we’re done.”

“For real girl. I’m behind you one-hundred percent,” Lola said. “And again, I’m really, really sorry for how I behaved last night. I was totally out of line, and I feel horrible about it.”

“I know. And I still love you,” I said, with a small smile.

“I love you too!” she cried out, pulling me into a long hug.

When we pulled away, we smiled at each other.

“Now go talk to your man.” She pointed to Xavier, who was just up ahead, talking to Colton.

I rolled my eyes but hurried to catch up to him.

“Go get him, girl!” Lola shouted after me.

As I got closer to Xavier, I could hear him talking to Colton, their voices low. I slowed down in order to listen better.

“Are we going to stay with the pack?

“Hell no. I refuse to be a part of any pack that welcomes Greyson. I’m going Rogue as soon as I get out of this stupid place,” Xavier spat out.

Colton grinned widely. “I was hoping you’d say that. I’m with you, brother. I think we all are. We can’t stay in the pack with that psychopath and his wannabe Luna running the show.”

My eyes widened at the thought, my mind racing. *Going Rogue? Again?* Xavier and Colton had been Rogues when I’d met them. They’d been so close to having a proper pack again, with Xavier as Alpha, and now they were in exactly the same position they’d been in before. I felt a twinge of guilt as I thought about it. Was all of this my fault? Maybe it would have been better if I’d never met them at all.

I tried to shake off the feeling. Wallowing in self-pity wasn’t going to help me, or anyone else. Okay, we’d go Rogue—but would Greyson even allow us to leave? Would he be able to stop his whole pack from going Rogue? And if we did leave, would he try to come after us?

I shuddered at the thought.

My thoughts were cut off by screams in the distance.

“What the hell is that?” Colton muttered to Xavier.

I looked up to see Violet running toward us, screaming. Her hands were held out in front of her, and they were covered in blood.

“HELP! HELP!” she screamed, her voice thick with tears and fear. “IT’S LILAC!”

**Episode 221**

The sight of the blood on Violet’s hands sent a shiver down my spine, and the terror in her voice made me panic. Even in the werewolf world, this didn’t seem normal at all.

“What’s going on?” I gasped out as everyone rushed toward Violet, who was sobbing hysterically. Without words, she grabbed my hand and pulled me toward a tent, continuing to scream. “It’s Lilac! Oh god, Lilac!”

I allowed her to pull me toward the tent she and her twin had shared, Xavier, Lola, Jay, and Colton following close behind us.

“Violet! What happened? What’s wrong with Lilac?” I tried to ask, but Violet could only sob incoherently as she continued to pull on me harder, making us all break out in a run.

I didn’t know what I’d been expecting to see when we stormed into the tent, but there was no way I could have possibly prepared myself for what I found.

Blood. Everywhere.

On the bedding, the tent, the floor, their bags. The bedding was shredded and there was a large gash on the tent wall that looked like it had been made by a wolf’s claw. And there, on the floor, was Lilac. Or rather, what was left of him. His body was so torn and mangled that I could hardly tell it was him. His young face was barely intact.

I screamed. I felt like I was going to pass out, or throw up, or both.

What monster could have done this?

“Xavier,” I cried out, turning toward him, burying my face in his chest, trying very hard not to cry at the horror that was in front of us. I tried to turn Violet away from the horror in front of us.

Xavier wrapped his arm around me, stroking my hair as he pulled me close. Violet had let go of my hand and collapsed into Jay’s arms, sobbing.

“Who did this?” Colton asked, his voice low. “Someone must have seen what happened here?”

Violet tried to answer, but was overcome with a fresh wave of heartbreaking sobs.

“Jay, take Violet out of here,” Xavier said. “Take her to Big Mac’s tent. Maybe she’ll have something to help calm her down.”

I turned in Xavier’s arms, watching as Jay led Violet out.

“I CAN’T LEAVE HIM! I CAN’T LEAVE HIM!” she screamed as she left, Jay half-dragging her. She shouldn’t have to keep looking at this.

With Violet gone, I got a full view of the carnage. It was worse than seeing Gunner and Ryker. Lilac’s limbs had been torn from his body. His throat was gone, ripped out and probably tossed to some other part of the room. Yet his eyes were still intact, wide with horror.

How long had he suffered? He was just a kid… Violet’s twin brother.

The smell of the body hit me, making me double over in disgust and horror. I was definitely going to throw up.

“Who would do something so horrible?” I gasped out, tears threatening.

I looked around me to see the blank look on everyone’s faces. Clearly, they all had the same question.

It didn’t make sense. We all had enemies—except for Lilac. He was just a kid. He hadn’t harmed anyone. What was to gain by killing him? And how could it have happened with so many people around?

None of it made any sense.

“Everyone, get out of here,” Xavier said, his voice ringing with the Alpha authority that I hadn’t heard in a while. I turned to look at him, and saw determination on his face. He’d called himself a washed-up Alpha only a few hours ago, but now he looked like the Alpha he was supposed to be. The Alpha I knew he was.

Despite the horrors around us, I couldn’t help the small feeling of pride in my chest.

Gently, Lola took my hand. “We’d better go.”

I nodded in agreement, about to move out of Xavier’s arms when the tent flap opened and Greyson burst in. “What the hell is going on here?” he asked, looking around.

I watched as Greyson’s expression changed from curiosity to horror, sadness and disgust as he looked at Lilac’s broken body.

He turned to us. “Who’s responsible for this?” he demanded, his voice strong and commanding.

Xavier glared at this older brother. “You’re the Alpha now—you tell us. You wanted to be the leader so bad? It’s time to lead.”

Greyson glared back at him. “If you were truly an Alpha, you’d realize that this is not the time for stupid, petty arguments. Someone in the pack has been murdered.”

“And it happened on your watch!” Xavier shot back. “If *you* were truly an Alpha, you’d know that an Alpha is supposed to protect his pack. Great job on day one, Greyson. But this shouldn’t come as a shock to you. It was only a matter of time before you started murdering the pack again.”

Greyson’s features twisted into anger, his lips pulling back into a snarl. “I’m not going to take shit from a boy who assaults his girlfriend!”

Xavier growled. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think I do. And I’ll show you what fucking happens to scum like you,” Greyson said, looking at me, his eyes flashing with something. Concern? No… I had to be misreading.

Quickly, Xavier moved me to the side as he got up in Greyson’s face.

This was not going to end well.

Before either of the brothers could move, I stepped between them, putting a hand on both of their chests as I tried to push them apart.

“This is not the time for a fight! Lilac is DEAD!” I shouted at them. “I know you’re upset with each other, and I know I have a lot to do with that, but we have bigger issues at hand here! You need to work together if you’re going to figure this out. Preferably BEFORE whoever killed Lilac strikes again!”

Greyson glanced over at me, but still seemed unable to meet my eye. “Stay out of this, Cali,” he warned me. “Now step aside. I need to look at the body.”

I lowered my arms and watched him walk over to Lilac’s body, then kneel down beside him.

Suddenly it all became too much. The blood, the smell, the horror, the total and complete awfulness of everything. It didn't seem real. If I didn’t get out of there soon, I was going to throw up in the tent, which wouldn’t be respectful to Lilac’s memory.

I shot Xavier one last look before I stepped out of the tent, waves of nausea overtaking my stomach.

Lola was sitting on the ground a few feet from the tent, her arms around Violet. The other girl was sobbing, her whole body trembling violently as Lola tried to rock her. My heart broke at the sight. I’d never had a sibling, and I could only imagine the tragic, mind-numbing loss she was feeling. Especially since Lilac was—*had been*—her twin. I felt helpless as I watched her, wishing there was something I could do to comfort her. Something I could do to help.

But what can you do to help someone who’d just discovered her brother had been violently murdered?

*Find the killer.*

I shuddered at the thought. I knew that werewolves and their customs were very violent (we *were* at a celebration to watch people fight to the death, for crying at loud), but this was different. This was cold-blooded murder. This wasn’t part of some ancient ritual, or a wolf protecting its mate—this was the theft of an innocent life. Someone who’d had a family, a sister, who’d liked to make videos with her. I tried to think of Lilac, tried to distance myself from the corpse I’d just seen. Lilac, smiling and whole. Who’d come here to celebrate Xavier and cheer him on, to be part of the pack.

I remembered Tony, and what Xavier had done to him. Tony had been an awful person, but he hadn’t deserved to be murdered. To be torn to pieces. And Xavier hadn’t even batted an eye. Werewolves were dangerous creatures—I’d learned that the hard way.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I hadn’t realized I was crying. Quickly, I wiped the tears from my eyes with a shaky hand. I was overthinking things again, and this was a bad time to be doing that. I needed to be thinking clearly if I wanted to be useful. And Violet needed help.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves.

*Deep breaths, Cali. You can do this. It’s going to be okay.* I told myself. Then I grimaced. *Ugh, I should probably make sure Xavier and Greyson don’t kill each other.*

I turned around, ready to go back inside. But then I noticed something on the fabric of the tent that I hadn’t seen before: a deep red handprint, still dripping.

Blood.

All my air left my body as I stared at it, almost frozen in fear.

*Well, this just got a lot more unsettling.*

I turned around to point it out to Jay and Lola, but then something else caught my eye, and I ran toward the rest of our tents. Mine, Lola and Jay’s, Greyson’s, Colton’s—each of them was marked with a bloody handprint.

**Episode 222**

I stared at the bloody handprints glistening in the morning sun, and my heart stopped. Every muscle in my body was frozen with fear. It looked like something out of a horror movie. Only it was very, very real.

I opened my mouth, but was too stunned to even form words. I turned to where Lola and Jay were standing and waved frantically to get their attention.

They exchanged looks with each other as I pointed at the tents, my whole body shaking with fear.

Jay broke away from Violet and walked over to me, his face etched with concern. “Do you think now is the best time to play charades?” he asked, deadpan.

I ignored his response and continued to point until he finally looked. I watched as his expression changed from confusion to horror.

“This is…not good,” he managed to choke out, after a moment.

“Do you know what it means?” I breathed, my voice slowly returning.

Jay didn’t respond to my question. Instead, he looked around at the rest of our tents. “I wonder if any other packs have the handprint.”

It looked he was about to say more, but then Lola walked over. “Violet’s getting worse. I think she’s going to go into shock or something. We need to— Oh holy hell, what the fuck happened here?” Lola said, cut off mid-sentence by the sight of the bloody handprints. “This isn’t good.”

“Yes, that has been established,” I said, not amused. “What about Violet? How is she?”

“She’s going into shock. We should take her to Big Mac’s,” Lola said faintly, still staring in horror at the handprints.

“I can help carry her,” I offered. I looked over at Violet. She was lying on the ground, curled up in a little ball, her eyes wide open and glazed over. She wasn’t moving.

“She’s practically catatonic,” Lola said. “It’s impossible to move her.”

“Then I’ll go to Big Mac’s and see if she has some medicine to help,” I offered. Besides, I didn’t want to be around the bloody handprints longer than I had to. Or other blood. Or god, anything really. My stomach couldn’t take much more.

Lola and Jay exchanged looks before nodding.

“Okay,” said Lola. “But please be careful. Whoever did that to Lilac is still out there.”

*No shit, Sherlock*, I wanted to say, but decided against it. Timing and all. And to be fair to Lola, I did often run carelessly into dangerous situations without even listening to anyone’s warnings. But still, even I was fully aware of the dangers that lurked in the forest cave.

I moved cautiously through the campsite, trying very hard to to avoid being recognized by anyone. Luckily, no one was paying much attention to me, anyway—everyone was too focused on heading toward Lilac’s tent to pay me any attention. A part of me was disgusted by the way they were rushing to gawk at a horrific tragedy.

I shuddered at the memory of Lilac’s body. I’d faced all kinds of dangers since meeting Xavier: multiple murders, kidnapping, witches, and shrooms, but this was different. This was the murder of someone completely innocent, a senseless killing. And now the handprints. Someone was trying to send us a message and it was working, big time. Even Xavier and Greyson had looked alarmed.

I managed to reach Big Mac’s tent safely without encountering any murderers, werewolves, or wisps. It was a little sad, how happy that made me.

I entered the tent and realized almost immediately that I should have knocked, remembering the kiss between Big Mac and Mrs. Smith that I’d accidentally walked in on (and that I was still pretty embarrassed by).

I tried to double back and knock, but Big Mac spotted me. She was over at her workbench, humming softly to herself. “It’s called knocking,” she said, looking at me with a teasing smile.

My face instantly went red. “I’m sorry I—”

Big Mac laughed. “It’s fine, kid. Trust me, you didn’t delay things for long,” she said with a knowing wink. “What can I do you for? What sort of trouble have you gotten yourself into now? I’ve just brewed some tea.”

I hated to bring her out of her good mood (especially if I could’ve gotten some croissants out of the deal), but I had to tell her what happened. She’d find out eventually, anyway.

“Lilac’s been murdered,” I said softly.

Big Mac’s face paled as she sat back down, her hands shaking. “What happened?” she breathed.

“We aren’t quite sure, to tell you the truth. We were coming back from the Luna ceremony when Violet ran up to us, screaming and with her hands covered in blood. We followed her to her tent, and…” I paused, trying to hold back the sob that was trying to escape my lips. I shut my eyes and took a minute to compose myself.

I opened my eyes again. “It was horrible, Big Mac. They tore him to shreds.”

Big Mac’s face fell, her eyes holding a mix of sadness and horror. “That poor thing,” she breathed out, covering her mouth with her hand. “That’s terrible. I really liked Lilac, he was such a sweet kid.” She planted her elbows on the table, put her head in her hands, and stayed there for a very long time.

When she came back up, she looked me over. “How are you holding up, Caliana?”

“I’m all right,” I told her. “More worried about Violet than anything else. That’s actually why I came over here. Do you have anything that might help her? She’s going into shock.”

“I’m not surprised. Discovering your twin’s body would be a shock to anyone. I can give her a special sedative, to help quiet her mind and reduce the hysteria. She’ll have a dreamless sleep, and rest is the best thing for her right now. But it’s only a temporary fix. Only time is going to help reduce the pain of her loss, though it will truly never go away.” Big Mac jumped up and started mixing herbs and liquids together in one of her pots.

“Thank you,” I told her. “Whatever the price, I’ll pay it. Just as long as Violet can rest. She’s in agony right now.”

Big Mac shook her head. “No, this one’s on me,” she said as she worked.

I gave her a skeptical look. “I don’t know, the last time you said that to me, you paralyzed me and took my blood.”

“And it saved your boyfriend’s life, so if I were you, I’d do a little less complaining and a lot more saying ‘thank you’.”

I paused for a moment before giving her a small smile. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

When she finished making the sedative, she put on her shoes and got ready to head out the door with me.

“Could you make some extra for me too, please?” I asked her.

She gave me a teasing look. “Why? I thought you said you were never going to trust a witch again, or take any of my potions.”

“Well, that was before Lilac was brutally murdered and bloody handprints appeared all over everyone’s tents.”

Big Mac stopped dead in her tracks. “Handprints? What do you mean, handprints?” she asked, her voice laced with an urgency that made me uneasy.

“Right after Lilac was murdered I noticed a bloody handprint on every member of the Redwood pack’s tent. Mine, Lola’s, Colton’s, Greyson’s, and Violet and Lilac’s.”

Big Mac’s face paled as she ran out of her tent, potion in hand as she beelined toward our tents. “I need to see this for myself. It can’t be.”

Oh, this was not good. This was very very not good.

“Hey! Wait for me!” I called out after her, running out of the tent as well, desperately trying to catch up. Jeez, how could Big Mac run so fast? I needed to know what her exercise plan was.

By the time we made it back to the Redwood tents, a small crowd had started to gather near Lilac’s tent, all trying to get a good look.

“Where’s Violet?” Big Mac asked me when I finally caught up with her.

“This way,” I said, leading her over to Violet, who was still curled up in a ball on the ground, hardly blinking.

“Thank god you’re here. She hasn’t moved since you left,” said Lola, hurrying over to us.

Big Mac knelt down in front of Violet and stroked her hair. “Violet? Do you know who I am? It’s Big Mac. I know you’re hurting, and you’re going to hurt for a very long time. I’m truly, very sorry for that,” she said gently. “But I can ease your pain for now.” I was surprised to see Big Mac pulling Violet into her arms and rocking her, humming a song as she administered the medicine.

A few moments later, Violet closed her eyes.

“She’ll be asleep for a while,” Big Mac said. “Someone should take her someplace she can rest without being disturbed. But make sure someone stays with her at all times—no one should ever be left alone in this condition.”

“She can stay in our tent. I’ll watch over her,” Lola volunteered. She and Jay carefully picked up Violet and carried her to their tent.

I pointed to Lilac and Violet’s tent, where the bloody handprint shone brightly in the sun.

Big Mac shook her head sadly. “This is worse than I feared,” she said gravely. She turned to the crowd and called loudly, “Where is the new Redwood Alpha?”

Greyson stepped out of the tent, his expression stern as he walked over to Big Mac. “What do you want, witch? This doesn’t concern you. We’re handling it.”

Big Mac gave a short, humorless laugh. “Handling it? You have no idea what you’re dealing with. This is more than just a handprint—your pack’s been cursed.”

**Episode 223**

The weight of Big Mac’s words caused me to take a step back.

“Cursed?” I said, my eyes widening with shock. Was that even a thing? In the world of witches, werewolves, and wisps, curses probably weren’t outside the realms of possibility. But it was still very inconvenient. What did this mean for us?

“Move! Out of the way! I’m the Luna around here!” a voice cried out. I groaned internally as I saw Joss’s blue hair get closer and closer as she pushed her way through the crowd, heading straight for Greyson.

*Ugh, not now. I cannot deal with this bitch.*

“What the hell is going on here?” she demanded, when she finally got to us. She stood next to Greyson and looked up at him. “You aren’t going to take a word of a witch seriously, are you honey?”

“Why not? She’s been right before,” I argued, earning a glare from Joss.

Greyson ignored both of us, still staring at Big Mac. “What are you talking about?”

Big Mac gestured to the marked tents. “Only the Redwood tents have been marked, including that one,” she said, pointing to Violet and Lilac’s tent. “It’s a warning. A warning that was used a long time ago.”

“How long ago?” I asked curiously. See, THIS was exactly why there should have been a werewolf history class. People who failed to learn from history were destined to repeat it. Or at least destined to look very stupid.

“Hundreds of years,” Big Mac said. “Back when there were fewer pack than there are today. The *Manus Cruentae* was a way of marking someone for death. It’s not just a warning, it’s a death sentence.”

Greyson seemed unmoved by this grim speech, his features still set in annoyance. “Thank you so much for the history lesson, witch, but I’m not going to fall for some old wives’ tale. Come on, Joss, we’re done here,” he said, and they turned to leave.

Big Mac shot him a dark look. “It’s not an old wives’ tale. It’s a direct threat to you, and to your pack. Someone wants you all dead. This is how they mark you. You think what happened to poor Lilac was horrible? That was just the beginning. It’s only going to get worse.”

“What does *Manus Cruentae* mean?” I asked. The words felt strange on my tongue.

“Bloody hand,” Big Mac said darkly. “Straightforward for a reason. I think you should all take it seriously. Your lives depend on it.”

I shuddered at her explanation. I really had to stop asking those kinds of questions—they always had terrible answers that were sure to bring me nightmares later. Though, if we’d truly been cursed, our waking lives were about to turn into nightmares, too.

None of this looked good.

It looked like Greyson was about to say something else, but then we heard footsteps coming up behind us. We all turned to see Mrs. Smith running toward the rest of the pack. I breathed a sigh of relief. It was nice to see a friendly face around here instead of just another person to make a spectacle of our misery.

“I heard what happened and came as soon as I could,” she said when she got closer, drawing to a halt next to Big Mac. “What can I do? How can I help?”

“Well, unless you can convince the new Alpha that his entire pack is at risk of being killed off, 80s horror movie style, not a whole hell of a lot,” Big Mac said bitterly, still glaring at Greyson.

Mrs. Smith gave her a skeptical look. “Don’t you think you’re being just a little extreme, MacKenzie? Most of them are just kids.”

Big Mac shot her an annoyed look. “I’m sorry—remind me, how did things turn out the last time I was ignored, Sabine?”

*Damn, what does Big Mac mean by that?* I wondered to myself as I watched Mrs. Smith look down at the ground. She wrapped her sweater tightly around herself and didn’t say another word. I remembered how much they hated each other, and then the kiss I’d walked in on last night. Those two had more history and secrets than I could even imagine. More secrets than *Xavier*. I wondered what their story was. I’d have to ask someday, when my life wasn’t in constant danger.Though I wasn’t sure if *that* was ever going to happen.

“We’re wasting time standing around here talking,” Xavier chimed in. “If we’re truly being threatened, then maybe we should stop discussing ancient history and get back to the present. It’s time for action.”

Greyson scoffed, lifting an eyebrow. “And what would my little brother suggest? Should we just kill off all the other packs, *Hunger Games* style? *Battle Royale*? Great strategy,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

The thought of Greyson reading those books would’ve been comical in another scenario. I mean I'd just seen one of the movies myself. I couldn't help but imagine for a moment a young, non-evil teenage Greyson sitting reading all afternoon with glasses he didn’t need. The thought seemed so foreign from the man in front of me.

Xavier glared at him, flexing his fingers. “Of course that’s the first place your fucked up brain would go. Funny how killing packs seems to be your solution to everything. I wonder why that is?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It might be fun. A bonding activity to bring the two of us closer. We already have so much in common,” Greyson said with a nasty smirk.

Now he was *really* pushing his luck.

“Okay, that’s enough!” I shouted, having had enough of this family feud for one day. “Lilac is dead! Not like you two have noticed—you’ve been too busy with your petty arguing to do a damn thing about it. Quit tearing each other apart, or the murderer is going to come back and finish the job.”

“Stay out of this, Cali,” Greyson warned, not looking at me.

“No! Like it or not, I’m a part of this pack too, and I’m not getting killed because you two can’t behave like adults.”

“I’ll stop when *he* stops behaving like a spoiled child,” Greyson muttered.

“Do you want to fucking go?” Xavier threatened, through gritted teeth.

“Now that you mention it, I’d love to show you what a broken wrist looks like.”

Children. I was surrounded by large, violent children.

“Whatever you decide to do,” Big Mac started again, raising her voice to be heard over the boys’ squabbling, “you should do it soon. You might already be running out of time.”

With that ominous warning, Big Mac headed back to her tent. Mrs. Smith moved to follow her, but Greyson stopped her. “Mrs. Smith, stay here for a moment. You need to hear what I’m about to say. You *all* need to hear it,” he growled out, his eyes on Colton and Xavier.

My whole body tensed up. There was a kind of *menace* in Greyson’s voice that set me on edge. I hadn’t heard it often from him, but I knew this was serious business.

Once he’d made sure all eyes were on him, Greyson started speaking. “I am your Alpha now. I’ve earned that right, by blood and by the Lupo Finale. I know some of you might not like it, but there will be a time and place to deal with that. But as of right now, I don’t care if you like me—most of you aren’t my cup of tea either. You don’t have to like me, but you *will* show me your respect, and you *will* do as I say.”

Xavier scoffed loudly, earning a silencing glare from Greyson. “As I said, there will be a time and a place to deal with your hurt feelings and bruised egos. Now is not that time. The most important thing now is for all of us to stay together. Your lives depend on it.”

I could feel waves of anger rolling off Xavier, his face growing redder by the second as his hands clenched into fists. It was only a matter of time before he snapped. And when he did, Greyson probably would too.

As soon as Greyson finished talking, Xavier marched up to him, getting right in his face. Greyson was taller, but Xavier had more muscle. “You’re putting on a really nice show there, but when have you *ever* cared about this pack? About any of us?”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “Since when have *you* ever cared about this pack? You were Rogue not too long ago yourself. You abandoned everyone counting on you.”

The veins in Xavier’s neck were visibly pulsing. “At least I never killed any of our pack members. You showed us how much you cared, back then. Why should we believe you now? Who knows—you could be the one who killed Lilac.”

Greyson shoved Xavier hard in the chest, causing him to stumble backward. “Do you ever shut up? This isn’t a bloody *democracy*—this is a *pack*. You will do as I say. That’s how a pack operates. That’s how a pack *survives*. You obey your Alpha or leave.”

Xavier glared at him. “If you’re the one operating this pack, then count me the hell out. I’m going Rogue, curse or not.”

**Episode 224**

*Rogue*. The thought made my heart race. Out there, completely alone. Sure, Xavier and Colton had gone Rogue before but things were different now—for one, they hadn’t had a curse on their heads back then. The idea of leaving right now made me nervous, even more nervous than being in a pack run by Greyson.

Still, I knew Xavier needed my support now more than ever. I walked over to him and grabbed his hand, giving it a squeeze. “If Xavier’s going, I’m going too,” I declared. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a small smile on Xavier’s face. Good. That was a start, at least.

Greyson broke out into a cold laugh, looking the two of us over. “Oh good. Thank the lord—for a moment, I was worried about my little brother’s safety in this cold harsh world. But now with his human warrior princess at his side, he’ll have nothing to worry about. You’ll have those murderers shaking in their fur.”

I glared at him without saying a word.

Colton stepped forward and stood next to his twin. “I’m with Xavier.”

That made Greyson’s laughter die down, and his expression darkened. Clearly, he no longer found this amusing. “If either of you even attempt to leave, I’ll…” His words were cut off by the snarl that erupted from Xavier as he let go of my hand and stepped toward Greyson.

“You’ll do what? Kill us, too? I’m healthy now, Greyson. The silver that helped you earn your tainted victory is out of my system now, and I welcome the chance for a rematch. A fair one, this time.”

Greyson shook his head, like he was talking to a small child who was fighting to stay up past his bedtime. “Really? You want to discuss this *now?* In the middle of a fucking crisis, you’re thinking of calling another Lupo Finale? Are you fucking joking? Well, the full moon is a month away. You’d better start training now, while the adults are trying to figure out how to stay alive. That would be more useful than whatever you’re doing here.”

“I don’t need any practice, or another Lupo Finale. I’ll take you on right here and now,” Xavier growled, shoving Greyson in the chest.

“Oh, you really shouldn’t have done that,” Greyson said darkly, taking a step back, his hands balling up into fists. I could see it in his eyes, the fierceness of them. He was about to shift.

Internally, I sighed. Deeply. Why did I always end up breaking up their stupid fights?I *really* didn’t want to be part of this pack if I had to keep stopping fights every five minutes.

“STOP!” I shouted, once again getting between the brothers. “You both have Alpha blood and THIS is your plan? To kill each other? You’d be doing the *actual* killer a huge favor. If you kill each other, that’s two less people for the murderer to worry about—not to mention you’d be leaving the rest of us vulnerable! How fucking stupid can you both be?” I took a deep breath to calm myself down, my whole body shaking with rage and fear. “I don’t care if you hate each other.” I paused. “Well, I do actually care a whole lot, but not right now. The way you feel about each other doesn’t matter and isn’t going to help any of us. What about Violet? She just lost her twin! What about Lola and Jay? What about all of us? This thing is bigger than both of you, right now. So grow the hell up!”

I could see Joss glaring daggers at me as I spoke, but I didn’t care. Joss might have been the Luna of the pack, but she was acting more like a bitch. Luna or not, this was MY PACK, and I wasn’t going to let it be destroyed. If Joss wasn’t going to do anything to keep the brothers from killing each other, I would.

I turned to Xavier and took a deep breath, reluctant to say the next part of my speech. But I knew that what I had to say was true. “Greyson is right, whether you like it or not. We have to stick together if we want to live through this.” Even as I said the words, I knew he would *not* be happy about me defending Greyson.

Xavier glared at me, anger and hurt in his eyes. He scoffed. “Of course you would agree with *him.”*

I took a step back as his words hit me. Part of me felt angry at what he was suggesting. It was like he was trying to hurt me. To pick a fight with me. But I also understood that he was still hurting over what had happened. And fighting with him wasn’t going to solve anything. “Just until we figure this out,” I amended quickly. “There’s safety in numbers, right? Isn’t that the whole point of being in a pack? If we want to survive, we’ll have to stick together. Whether we like each other or not.”

“Cali has a point,” Mrs. Smith said. “We’ll be safer if we stick together.”

Xavier turned to Colton. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I’ve been waiting for you to say that,” Colton said, and the twins turned to leave.

I wanted to scream. My blood was boiling. How could they be so stubborn? So naive? They might have hated their half-brother, but surely they could understand Violet’s loss—they were twins, too!

I gaped at them. “Didn’t you hear what I just said!”

“I did,” Xavier said as he walked toward the exit.

Brought close to madness by my maybe-ex-maybe not-boyfriend’s stubbornness, I reached out and grabbed his arm. “Xavier, please! You used to listen to me. Please, listen to me now! Just this once. I’m begging you!”

Xavier turned, his deep blue eyes looking deep into mine as he studied my face. After a moment, he turned to Colton. “We’ll stay. Just until we figure out who killed Lilac. Then we’re out of here.”

Colton gave a curt nod, clearly displeased with this plan.

I breathed a sigh of relief and smiled up at Xavier. “Thank you,” I said softly.

Xavier said nothing.

I turned to Greyson and motioned to the rest of the pack. “There. You have your pack. You’re fucking welcome.”

Greyson smiled back at me, in a way that almost looked genuine. “Thank you, lov– *Cali*. One big happy family. Just what I always wanted.” There was a bitter edge to his voice that worried me. It was the same bitterness that haunted the smile he gave me. Something in my gut told me he wasn’t exactly telling the truth—or, at least, not all of it.

*What’s he hiding from me this time?* I wondered, but shook it off. I shouldn’t care. He’d hurt me, and seemed to want to do it. There were much bigger things to deal with at the moment than whatever Greyson’s pretty little head was keeping from us.

Greyson turned away from me to face the rest of the pack. “Okay, first things first.” He pointed to Lilac’s tent. “I want Lilac’s body removed and prepared for proper burial. We need the funeral conducted as soon as possible. Mrs. Smith, you seem like the best person for the job. Can you please see to the arrangements while the rest of us pack up? Everyone else, pack up your stuff. We’re leaving immediately after the funeral. Any questions?”

Hesitantly, I raised my hand.

Colton rolled his eyes and sighed loudly. “This isn’t a school room, Cali. You don’t have to raise your hand to speak to *him*.”

“Cali?” Greyson asked.

I shot Colton a dirty look before speaking. “Where are we going?”

“An excellent question. We’re heading back to the pack house. If someone is after us, we’re not going to stay here and make ourselves easy targets. If we want to be safe, we have to keep moving.”

“But what if they know where we live? They could be waiting for us back at the house.”

“Then at least we’ll be together. If it’s just one killer, it’ll be five against one. Six, if Lola shifts. If they bring friends… Well, we’ve taken on larger groups before. We can do it again.”

While it was a solid plan, I still groaned inwardly at the thought of making another three-day hike through the mountains, where everything and anything could—and probably *would*—attack us.

I opened my mouth to ask if we’d be taking a different route home—

A loud howl broke through the air.

I spun around to see a wolf standing before us, its teeth bared. Before any of us could even take another breath, the wolf leaped over my head and slammed into Colton, sending him crashing to the ground with a hard thud. I screamed in horror as its ferocious jaws snapped just inches from his neck, ready to take the final bite.

**Episode 225**

I gasped, stunned and immobile, as the wolf attacked Colton. Was this Lilac’s murderer? Had they come back to kill again? What if there were more coming, try to take us all down at once? I didn’t know what sick game these psychopaths were playing, but they’d messed with the wrong pack.

There was a sharp cracking of bones as Xavier shifted into his wolf form. In an instant, he pounced on the attacking wolf, knocking it clean off his brother with a loud thud. The two wolves snapped and snarled, each trying to dominate the other. The invading wolf was leading, managing to get on top of Xavier, its large mouth near his throat.

Pure rage took over. If this was the wolf who’d murdered Lilac, they wasn’t going to kill Xavier too. I’d almost watched Xavier die at the Lupo Finale—I sure as fuck wasn’t going to lose him now.

“Hey! Get off him!” I cried out. On impulse, I ran over to the intruding wolf and jumped on its back, trying to get my hands around its neck to force it off Xavier. Suddenly I was in a blur of fur and couldn’t tell who was who.

One might have thought that considering all the times I’d unsuccessfully interfered with werewolf fights—usually leaving myself in more trouble than I’d started with—that I would stop doing it. Or at least, not be so surprised when my attempts to help went horribly wrong. Sadly, this was not the case, as I was still surprised when the wolf looked at me for a half second before bucking me off its back, sending me flying to the ground with a loud thud.

*That’s gonna hurt later*, I thought to myself, feeling the pain crash down around me in waves. Seriously, I needed to start carrying a first-aid kit with me at all times.

My vision was blurred from how hard I’d landed on the ground. Someone’s hand slipped underneath me, and I was finally sitting upright. I blinked a few times until it cleared, and immediately saw a human Xavier on top of the strange wolf, pinning it to the ground as it snapped and snarled and tried to break free.

“Maya, calm the fuck down!” Xavier yelled at the wolf.

*Maya?*

I did a double-take, squinting to see if it actually was Maya’s wolf causing all the fuss. Of course. I should’ve recognized her wolf, but I’d been too focused on Xavier. A few seconds later, I felt the fear in my chest start to loosen. At least Maya was a problem we were familiar with.

“Okay, that’s it kids. Playtime is over!” Greyson yelled. I jumped, realizing he was the one who’d helped me up. Color bloomed on my cheeks as I watched Greyson march over to them. He pulled Xavier off of Maya. “You are going to settle this like adults.”

There was the sound of cracking bones, and Maya shifted back into her human form.

Colton glared at her. “What the hell is your problem this time, Maya?”

“My problem?” Maya spat. “*You’re* my fucking problem! You’re always my problem!” She pointed at him as she marched in his direction. “It’s all your fault! If it wasn’t for YOU, none of this would have happened!”

Colton’s expression shifted from annoyance to general confusion. “Excuse me? I didn’t do anything. Except look this good.”

“They’re coming after me!” For the first since I’d known her, Maya sounded frightened. Her eyes were wide with fear, and her hands were shaking. If she was afraid, it had to be because of something major.

“Who’s coming after you?” I asked.

Maya ignored my question, her eyes glued to Colton. If I didn’t know better, I’d almost have thought she was a heartbeat away from crying. “Why didn’t you just leave me alone? I never wanted to be your mate! And now you’ve fucking signed my death certificate!”

Greyson pinched the bridge of his nose, clearly annoyed. “Maya, I don’t know what you’re going on about, but we don’t have time for your dramatics right now. Go back to your pack. In case you haven’t heard, we’re in the middle of something here.”

“I can’t go back,” Maya replied, her voice cracking as she spoke. “My tent was marked too.”

My eyes widened. This was bad. *Really* bad. Whoever was after us wanted us all—mates included.

Greyson was not sympathetic to Maya’s news. “So you thought attacking Colton was the answer? Do you really have no impulse control? Or is stupidity just a trademark of the Samara pack?”

Maya spun around to face Greyson, glaring daggers at him. “First of all, you are not my Alpha, so shut the fuck up. You can’t talk to me like that!”

Greyson rolled his eyes at her and turned to Colton. “Your mate is truly a class act. Get her in fucking line.”

Colton glowered at his half-brother, nostrils flaring. “Shut the hell up, Greyson. Don’t talk to her that way,” he growled.

“A perfect match,” Greyson said under his breath before turning back to Maya, his expression deadly serious. “A child is dead. You are in danger. We all are. Get your shit together, or you’ll be dead too. Like it or not, you’re coming with us.”

He looked around at the rest of us. “We can’t afford to let our emotions get the better of us. We cannot afford to make stupid mistakes. Attend to Lilac and pack up. If anyone needs me, I’m going to check on Violet,” he said, his voice both calm and commanding. Without another word, he turned and left, Joss trailing behind him like a lovesick puppy dog. I gagged a little at the sight of it.

She was only his Luna, not his mate, too. Even I knew that there was a difference. The Luna bond would make the mate one stronger, like it would’ve done for me and Xavier.

While I was never going to say it out loud (especially not to Xavier or Greyson), I had to admit to myself that Greyson had handled that situation pretty well. Way better than I’d expected. He’d taken control of the situation without losing his cool. If Xavier had been calling the shots, we’d all either have gone Rogue or been called stupid by now. It almost seemed like Greyson genuinely cared about our wellbeing. Though who could ever tell how Greyson was truly feeling. Certainly not me. Ha.

Still, he might not have been my favorite Alpha, but I had to give him credit for not totally screwing up. And for helping me…but was I going to thank him for that? No way.

“Come on, baby,” Xavier said softly, taking my hand. “We should pack up.”

I looked at him, surprised at the term of affection, and nodded before we started walking toward the tent.

As we walked, I tried to make sense of everything that was going on. Then I remembered something. *Ryker.* His body was still missing, and we were no closer to finding it than we had been last night. I remembered seeing wolf tracks in the woods… Maybe it all added up, somehow?

Outside of book chat rooms, I’d never been one to come up with conspiracy theories, but this all just seemed too random not to be connected. First Ryker died, then his body disappeared without a trace, and now Lilac was dead and we were all marked for death. Those couldn’t all be random events.

Ryker had something to do with all this. I was sure of it.

“So, there’s something you should know,” I told Xavier, realizing that I hadn’t even gotten around to telling him about the whole Ryker situation.

He shot me a look. “If you kissed Colton, I’m disowning all my brothers right now.”

I scrunched up my nose at the thought. “Gross,” I told him.

“That’s the right answer,” he said, with a small smile.

I smiled back, grateful that he was making jokes about it. That was a start.

“No, it’s nothing like that. You know how I found you in the woods, doing whatever the hell you were doing?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Meditating.”

“Brooding. But whatever. You know how I was also in the woods, covered in mud?”

“Yes. I assumed you fell on your face.”

“I mean yes, I did. But I was in the woods because the wisps—”

“Not the wisps again,” he growled.

I rolled my eyes. “Let me finish my story. Anyway, this wisp led Lola and me to Big Mac’s tent, and we saw that Ryker’s body was gone. There was a big gash on Big Mac’s tent, so someone must have broken in—or broken out. There were tracks leading out of the tent that turned into wolf prints, but I lost the trail. That’s what I was doing out there in the first place.”

Xavier said nothing, taking in my words.

“I know I probably should have brought it up sooner, but I haven’t had a chance until now. Until we found Lilac, I didn’t think it was important. Well, I did, but I didn’t want to seem insensitive by bringing it up in front of Violet, or while we were dealing with something so serious. But now we’ve got the bloody handprints, and Lilac’s murder. I really think the Ryker thing has to be connected.”

Again, Xavier said nothing.

I turned to look at him, nerves building in my stomach. We were making progress, but what if he thought I was crazy? “What do you think? Could Ryker be alive?”

**Episode 226**

Xavier pondered this for a moment before shaking his head. “No. Greyson and I ripped him to shreds. I have no idea why you saw what you did, but we don’t have time to worry about where Ryker’s corpse is right now. *We* could be corpses at any moment. Maybe you should focus on that, instead of your silly fantasies,” he told me gruffly, his eyes darkening.

There he goes again, being mad at me for no reason. I considered arguing with him, but decided against it. He was clearly upset, and I wasn’t about to ‘poke the wolf’, as it were. We were already on thin ice. Our relationship was still mending—at a very slow rate. We were both hurting, but it’d be better if I didn’t push him.

I gave his hand a gentle squeeze. “Are you okay?” I asked softly. *Are we okay?* I wanted to ask. But it was too big a question for right now. I was too afraid of what his answer might be. And, to be honest, I didn’t know what my answer to that question would be either.

We reached our tent. Xavier held the tent flap open for me, but didn’t answer my question. Instead, he let go of my hand and walked over to our bags. Then he threw them onto the bed and began packing.

“Xavier,” I pressed gently, worried what his reaction might be.

“We have a lot of work to do. We don’t have time to talk about every single fucking *feeling* that we have,” he said. He was clearly trying to keep his voice steady, but there was an edge to it that I didn’t care for in the slightest.

I took a step back, trying to give him some space. “Maybe I should go help Mrs. Smith. No one should be doing that kind of work alone,” I said, shuddering at the memory of Lilac’s mangled body. I couldn’t imagine how Mrs. Smith was feeling right now.

Xavier stopped packing and turned to look at me, his expression unreadable. “Are you sure about that? It’s going to be pretty gruesome.”

“I know. And I’m not sure if I’m going to be much help, to be honest. But it’s better than just standing around here. I can at least be useful to someone.”

Xavier paused and then nodded. “Be careful.”

“I will. Grab my stuff for me?”

He nodded again before he went back to packing, turning his back on me.

I headed to the opening of the tent and paused. I turned, tempted to tell him I loved him before leaving. But it was too soon. It was too soon for everything.

I left without another word.

I walked to Violet and Lilac’s tent, careful to avoid being seen by anyone, a million thoughts racing through my mind as I tried to connect the dots. Why were we, out of all the packs, being targeted? And did Ryker have anything to do with it? He had to, didn’t he? He’d had some fans around before his death. Maybe the Lupo Finale hadn’t just given us a new Alpha—maybe it had given us some new enemies, too.

When I arrived at Violet and Lilac’s tent, I hesitated before going inside, wondering if this was truly the right move. Was I really prepared to do this? I’d seen some pretty gruesome stuff over the last two months—stuff that I was definitely going to need therapy for after this was over. But this was different.

I shuddered at the idea of seeing Lilac’s body again, but I knew I had to be strong. For Violet, for Mrs. Smith, for the rest of the pack. I wasn’t going to be the useless human who fled at the first sign of trouble.

I took a deep breath and entered the tent.

Mrs. Smith was placing a long white sheet over Lilac’s body when I walked in. “Cali,” she said when she saw me. Her eyes were puffy and wet. She must have been crying. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to help,” I said. “You shouldn’t have to do this alone. What do you need? There must be something I can do.”

Mrs. Smith wiped another tear from her face, too overwrought to speak. I could see her lower lip quivering.

I moved closer and placed comforting hands on hers. “I know,” I said gently.

“He was so young,” she whispered. “Too young to have a funeral.”

I could feel a lump building up in my own throat as I listened to her, and I tried to swallow it down. I couldn’t collapse into a sobbing mess when I’d come here to help. “Is there anything I can do?”

Mrs. Smith reached into her pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, drying her eyes with it. “You’re very sweet, dear, thank you for coming. Could you pack up Lilac’s things? I don’t want Violet to have to do that. She has to deal with so much already.”

I nodded and set to work picking up the clothes that had been tossed around the tent, trying to pick out things that weren’t covered in blood. What I found, I folded carefully and placed in Lilac’s bag.

“So,” I said. “How do you guys prepare for a funeral? What do you do at werewolf funerals?”

I hadn’t been to any funerals before (other than the burial of my pet bunny, Flutternutter), but I didn’t think this would be the same as a human funeral. Would there even be a coffin?

The question seemed distracting enough for Mrs. Smith to answer. She seemed to be recovering a little from her own shock. “It’s a ceremony to help return the body to nature, and the essence of the wolf’s soul to the spirit world.”

I tilted my head in confusion, trying to picture it. “How do you do that?”

“We build a pyre and burn the… the body…” Mrs. Smith choked up at the last part, sobbing into her handkerchief.

My own tears began to fall down my face as I walked over to Mrs. Smith, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her into a hug.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed something sticking out from under the sheet. I pulled away from Mrs. Smith to get a better look at it. It was a cell phone. Lilac’s. I’d been filmed by him enough times that I knew what it looked like. How the hell had it gotten there?

“How did Lilac’s cell phone get there?” I asked, pointing it out to Mrs. Smith. She stared at it, eyes wide with confusion and shock.

She shook her head. “That’s so strange. It wasn’t there when we found him.”

I shrugged. “Must have gotten overlooked during all the chaos,” I said, walking over to the phone and picking it up. I probably should have been wearing gloves, in case someone wanted to dust for fingerprints. But it seemed pretty unlikely that CSI: Werewolf was going to come and investigate.

However, when I picked up the phone, I noticed something very strange about it: there wasn’t any blood on it. Not even a drop. There was blood on everything else in the tent, but Lilac’s phone was shockingly clean. Something didn’t add up.

“What do you think we should do with it?” Mrs. Smith asked.

“Violet will probably want it,” I said. “Lilac loved this thing, and they’ve probably stored a million pictures and videos on it. It might give her some comfort.” I was about to put the phone in Lilac’s bag when it vibrated. A notification had popped up.

**Video uploaded**

I stared down at the phone, perplexed. *What video?* I wondered. And why would the notification appear now, after Lilac had been killed? Then again, the phone couldn’t have known its owner was dead.

Curiosity getting the better of me, I clicked the home button. But the phone was locked.

*Shoot!* I looked around until I spotted Lilac’s fingers, sticking out from under the sheet. I looked at Lilac’s fingers, then at the phone, then back a Lilac’s fingers.

*Don’t you dare,* I warned myself. Using a dead body to unlock a cell phone would cross so many lines.

But I dared.

Tentatively, I reached down and grabbed Lilac’s cold, dead finger in my warm hand, shivering as I did so.

*Gross, gross, gross, grosssss,* I chanted internally, feeling fully disgusted as I pressed Lilac’s cold finger to the home button. The phone vibrated again, unlocking.

*Sweet! I totally need to wash my hand after this, but sweet!* I thought, dropping Lilac’s hand. I looked down at the phone, pressing the notification button. I didn’t know what to expect from the video. Perhaps it would be a clue, or something that could comfort Violet later.

However, nothing could have prepared me for what I saw when the video popped up on the screen. The first frame showed a terrified Lilac, crying in front of the camera.

*Oh no.*

**Episode 227**

I gasped loudly, losing my grip on the phone and just managing to catch it before it hit the ground. Lilac’s face was still on the screen.

*Holy shit,* I thought, my breath coming in shallow pants as I realized the importance of what I was holding: Lilac’s final moments, captured on video. Someone had recorded him. Someone wanted us to see this. Someone was truly sick enough to—

Yup, I was definitely going to throw up before this day was over.

“Mrs. Smith!” I screamed, my hands trembling in horror.

Mrs. Smith looked up, confused by what must have been an obviously horrified look on my face. “What’s wrong, Cali?”

I didn’t trust myself to speak. Instead, I handed her the phone as carefully as my shaky hands would allow. Mrs. Smith looked down at the screen and gasped. “What is this?”

My eyes darted to the ground. I couldn’t bring myself to look at it again. “I don’t know. What should we do with it?”

Mrs. Smith sighed. “We should probably look at it. It might help us understand what happened to him.”

The thought of watching Lilac’s last moments made me sick to my stomach. “What if it shows him being killed?” I asked, my voice small, almost like a child’s.

Mrs. Smith gave me a sad, sympathetic smile as she took my hand and gave it a squeeze. “It’s all right. I’ll do it. Sometimes I forget just how young you really are.”

“I’m twenty,” I tried to protest.

“Still very young. You shouldn’t have to see this.”

I let it go. “Do you think all this could have anything to do with Ryker’s disappearance?”

Mrs. Smith shrugged. “I’m not sure, but it looks like there’s only one way to find out.” She took a deep breath and pressed play. “If you don’t want to see this, you might want to step out of the tent for a minute.”

But I couldn’t leave. Without permission, my eyes darted toward the screen as soon as Mrs. Smith hit that button. It wasn’t like I *wanted* to look, but I also couldn’t look away. It was like witnessing a gruesome car accident—you couldn’t help but watch.

On the screen, a terrified Lilac looked off-camera, his face stained with tears as he shook violently. His shirt was already torn, and there was a cut on his left cheek that hadn’t been there last time I’d seen him alive.

“I won’t say it! I won’t! Please don’t hurt me!” Lilac begged, through his sobs.

I turned away as Lilac screamed in agony. Someone *tortured* him. “Turn it off! Turn it off! I can’t watch anymore!” I said, my eyes welling with tears. It was too much to bear.

Mrs. Smith stopped the video. “This is troubling. I wonder what the murderer wanted Lilac to say? Or not say?”

“No idea,” I said, taking a shaky breath. I felt like I was going to collapse at any second.

Mrs. Smith gave me a concerned look. “You don’t look so good, dearie. Let me make you a white chocolate mocha. That’ll perk you right up.”

I shook my head. At this point, I didn’t think I’d be able to keep anything down. “No, I need to bring this to Xavier. It’s a clue to who might have put the curse on us.”

“You should probably give it to Greyson,” Mrs. Smith said, her lips a thin line. “He’s the Alpha now.”

*Ugh, great. A conversation with Greyson*. The thought filled me with dread. We hadn’t talked much since our internal dialogue at the Luna choosing ceremony, and I wasn’t Greyson’s biggest fan at the moment. Still, he was showing himself to be a pretty good Alpha.

“You’re right.” I sighed. “But whatever we do, we have to make sure that Violet never sees this. She’s been through enough already.”

Mrs. Smith nodded in agreement.

“I’ll be back to help,” I told her, taking one last look at Lilac before I left.

The warm sun had been replaced by a cold fog, making everything look spooky as I walked to Greyson’s tent. There was an ominous feeling in the air that shook me to my core. Something was definitely coming for us.

I stopped in front of Greyson’s tent, trying to avoid making eye contact with the bloody handprint on the flap.

When I entered, Joss looked up from her packing and glared at me. “What the hell do you want?” she growled.

*Fuck, I should have knocked.*

Joss’s face was looking at me, but her back was still hunched over as she kept packing. I could see the Luna mark on her shoulder, still red and raw. It made me sick to my stomach, though I wasn’t sure if that was because of what it represented, or because it looked infected.

Carefully, I slipped Lilac’s phone into my pocket. “Where’s Greyson?” I asked. “I need to talk to him.”

Joss rose to her full height and walked toward me. She about five inches taller than me, with a lot more muscle. I swallowed hard, but didn’t walk away.

“Oh, wouldn’t you like to know,” she spat out.

“Yeah, that’s why I asked,” I replied, deadpan. What the hell was this woman’s problem? “I need to speak to him now, and if you want to last more than one day as Luna—a possibility that’s growing less likely with each passing moment—then you’d better tell me where he is. *Now*.”

There was a venom in my voice that had never been there before. But I was sick and tired of this fake Luna thinking she could control this pack, control Greyson. It was clear she didn’t matter to Greyson. Hell, he was probably manipulating her somehow too. Not my problem.

Joss continued to give me her death glare, and I gave her one in return.

“I’m Greyson’s Luna, not you,” she growled. “He’s the Alpha of this pack, not Xavier. So, if you have something for Greyson, you better give it to me. Now.”

I didn’t trust Joss, not even for a second, so there was no way in hell I was going to give her what could be the most important clue we had.

I rolled my eyes. “Never mind. If you’re going to be a dick about it, I’ll find Greyson myself.” I turned to leave, annoyed that I’d wasted my time here.

“Stop!” Joss cried out. I turned around again. Her expression had changed. Now, her eyes were wild with anger, her mouth twisting up into an unsettling smirk. “If you think for one fucking second that I’m going to let you anywhere near Greyson, you’re even stupider than I thought. Even for a human.” She took another step toward me.

Seriously, why were humans so stereotyped in this world? What made these werewolves so much smarter than me? I’d met a lot of werewolves lately, and none of them had seemed like geniuses. Especially not Joss.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I demanded, crossing my arms.

“Do you really think I’m stupid?”

I tried not to laugh. “Kind of, yeah. And kind of a bitch—the human definition.”

She took another menacing step toward me. We were barely a foot away from each other, now. “I’m never going to let you anywhere near Greyson again. Not after what you did.”

I let out a cold laugh, irritation starting to overwhelm me. “What *I* did? You really *are* as stupid as I thought. Either you have it backwards, or Greyson has been feeding you more of his lies and tricks. It’s not what I did to Greyson, it’s what Greyson did to me—what he did to the entire pack. In case you haven’t figured it out yet—everybody in the pack hates you, and Greyson doesn’t seem that attached to you either.”

Joss’s face morphed into pure rage. “YOU KISSED HIM. YOU KISSED MY ALPHA!”

I smirked. “He didn’t complain about it at the time. In fact, he was a very, *very* enthusiastic participant.”

“HOW FUCKING DARE YOU TALK ABOUT MY ALPHA LIKE THAT!”

That did it. The rage and the jealousy that I’d been feeling finally came to a head. *Finally,* I was going to have the chance to unleash it. My body and heart felt wild and raw, almost animalistic as I stood in front of Joss. It was the same burning I’d felt when I saw Xavier and Pip together, only this time, it felt like it was going to consume me.

*Mine!*

“I want you to listen, and listen good,” I spat. “Greyson may be your Alpha, but you’re not his mate. I don’t care what he told you, or what lies you’re telling yourself. You’re not his mate and you *never* will be. He could have picked *anyone*. He doesn’t call you ‘love,’ does he?”

The look on her face confirmed it. “He never slept with you, did he?” She opened her mouth, but said nothing. She’d tried so hard to get him into bed and for nothing.

I smirked to myself as I walked toward her, not stopping until I was up in her face, as close as I could manage. In a low, dangerous voice that I hadn’t known I was capable of, I growled. “He’s *never* going to call you love.”

Before I could even register what was happening, Joss shoved me, hard. I lost my balance and fell backwards, landing flat on my ass.

I scrambled up into a sitting position and watched in horror as Joss got down on all fours, her bones snapping as she started to shift.

Bring it on, bitch.

**Episode 228**

Oh, I’d *really* done it this time.

I crashed to the ground, trying to roll out of the way as quickly as possible as Joss growled and snarled. The sounds of bones snapping and cracking punctuated the air.

There probably weren’t any spatulas in here for me to use. My options were to try to outrun her or get my hands on *something* that could cause damage.

I leapt to my feet and raced for the door, only to find Joss, in her wolf form, blocking the exit.

*Fuck!*

Joss and I locked eyes and stared each other down.

“I’ve had just about enough of you and your fake Luna attitude! Get out of my way, or you’re going to be sorry,” I said, trying to sound as threatening as possible.

Joss snarled, taking a step toward me.

I raised my leg and kicked her in the face as hard as I could. There was a loud thud, and Joss’s wolf rolled backwards.

“If you hurt me, Xavier will kill you. And your precious Greyson will be pretty pissed off too!” I shouted.

Joss responded by taking a swipe with me with her large claws. As I moved to dodge her strike, Lilac’s phone flew clear out of my pocket and tumbled to the ground.

*Double fuck!*

Joss and I both watched as the phone landed on the ground. It was immediately obvious that we both had the same new goal: *get it.*

I leapt for it first, but Joss beat me to it by a half an inch, blocking me from the phone. She transformed back into her human self, her clothing hanging from her in shreds. “I don’t think so, human,” she growled at me.

“Watch me,” I hissed back as I dove toward her, trying to get her out of my damn way. She grabbed my hand, throwing me down and pinning me to the ground. We wrestled for a while, fighting for the upper hand. I needed to get that phone to Greyson, and I couldn’t trust that loony Luna to do it.

“Get off me!” I screamed at her.

“Fine!” Joss growled, with a cruel little smirk.

*THUD.*

Joss’s elbow collided sharply with my stomach, making me scream with pain. My vision blurred with agony. “You fucking *bitch*!” I screamed, my hands going to my stomach as I moaned.

Joss got off me quickly, running over and grabbing the phone as I curled up in a ball.

She looked down at me and held the phone over my head. “Is this what you wanted to show Greyson?”

I reached for it, but she pulled it away. “No way. This is mine now, and whatever it is you wanted to show him, I’ll do it. We don’t need you. Stick to your own kind, Caliana. And your own man,” she said before walking out of the tent, naked and proud.

*Bitch.*

I wanted to chase after her to get the phone, but my stomach still had me pinned to the ground, unable to move. I guessed it didn’t matter. As long as Joss showed Greyson the video, everything would be fine.

*If* Joss showed him the video. Who knew what was going on in Joss’s mind. I didn’t trust her for a second. If she destroyed it, we could lose so much of Violet’s memories with her brother. And our clue as to who might have killed him.

But there wasn’t much I could do about that right now.

When I could breathe and stand on my own two feet again, I got up and left the tent, hoping I hadn’t wasted too much time dealing with stupid Joss.

I watched as everyone started walking toward the gnarly tree.

*Great. What weird-ass werewolf ritual is happening now?* I wondered to myself. Then I saw Lola and Jay running toward me.

“Cali, there you are! We’ve been looking all over for you!” Lola cried out, as soon as she saw me.

“Where have you been?” Jay asked.

“I had a run-in with Joss,” I admitted. “What’s going on? Where’s everyone going?”

“Lilac’s funeral is starting. Come on, we’ve got to go,” Lola said, and we hurried toward the tree.

“What? Already?” I gasped out, shocked by how quickly it was happening. We’d only discovered Lilac’s body a couple of hours ago. I’d thought it wouldn’t be until nightfall, at least. Another night in this stupid place, no thanks. “Shouldn’t there be like, an autopsy or something?”

“I think, unfortunately, it was pretty obvious how he died,” Jay said, frowning.

“Oh. Yeah. You’re probably right.” I felt a pang of guilt as we walked. I’d wanted to help out Mrs. Smith, but I’d left her do it alone so I could deal with Joss. I was trying to do what was right, what could maybe get Lilac justice.

I just felt so helpless. It was fucking bullshit I hadn’t shifted into a wolf at the full moon.

Almost like she’d known what I was feeling, Lola reached up and put a comforting arm around my shoulders. “When something like this happens, everyone pitches in. It doesn’t matter what pack.”

I smiled sadly, comforted by the thought.

We arrived at the gathering place, greeted by a pyre that was as tall as my parents’ house. These werewolves really could make things happen quickly when they all worked together. But why had it taken the death of a teenager to make them unite? Why couldn’t they work together all the time? There’d be a lot less death and violence, that way.

I scanned the crowd until I spotted a tearful Mrs. Smith, walking with a group of people who were carrying a shrouded body toward the pyre. It took me a moment to realize it was Lilac under that sheet, and I shuddered. When it was placed upon the pyre, I realized that the body was wrapped in ropes of lilac plants that had been braided together.

I felt tears falling down my cheeks, and didn’t bother to wipe them away as Lola and I walked over to where Violet was sitting. She was awake now and her eyes were open, but it was clear that her mind was somewhere else. She was like a body without a soul.

If I’d lost my brother, I’d have been the same.

Mace stood by the pyre, signaling to a couple of people who were holding torches. I was relieved someone was taking charge.

Where was Xavier?

I searched the crowd until I found him in the strangest place: right next to Greyson. They were talking, and for once, it didn’t look like they were seconds away from killing each other. I wondered what they were talking about.

Moments later, Xavier stepped up to the pyre and began to speak, his voice silencing everyone else. “Thank you for coming today to mourn and honor the memory of Lilac, whose life has been cut much too short. Lilac was a member of my pack and, in a lot of ways, he always felt like a younger brother to me. He was a good kid, a kind kid. He made everyone around him smile, and he made his sister laugh. His loss will leave a deep hole in our pack, and all of our hearts. We will now honor his life by returning him to the natural world. Goodbye, Lilac. You will be missed, but not forgotten.”

There was something dark in Xavier’s eyes as he turned to the torchbearers and gave a solemn nod as he walked away from the pyre. His last words had had an edge to them. A warning. The Redwood pack wouldn’t take Lilac’s death lightly, curse or not. There would be more blood.

I shuddered at the thought.

As soon as the torchbearers ignited the pyre, Violet began to sob, and her whole body started shaking. Lola and I moved to hug her, our sobs mixing with hers as the air was filled with the eerie sounds of mourning howls.

It was the most beautiful and heartbreaking thing I’d ever witnessed.

I wasn’t sure how long we stood there, watching the fire burn. But before I knew it, every member of the Redwood pack stood up and headed back to the camp, clearly eager to get their stuff and move on.

Lola took Violet and walked over to Xavier. His face was expressionless, but his eyes now were filled with heartbreak. I grabbed his hand, trying my best to comfort him without words. No one spoke, each of us too overcome with emotion.

As we walked back to the campsite, smoke started to thread through the air. When we got closer, we soon realized what it was: all of our belongings had been piled up and set on fire.

“Shit!” Colton shouted, as we all ran toward the bonfire.

“What is going on?” I screamed. In the midst of the flames, I could see someone sitting on a makeshift throne, the ghost of a smirk on his face.

“It’s Ryker!” Colton shouted.

*No way.*

But the closer I got, the more certain I was that Colton was right. I’d never forget that face—not even in death.

I turned away, unable to keep looking at the horror show that had been our campsite, only to be startled by something even more horrific.

“Xavier!” I gasped out, grabbing onto him as I stared at the tree directly behind the fire.

“What is it?” he called out. The smoke from the fire was clouding everyone’s vision.

With a shaky hand, I pointed to the tree. There, carved deep into the wood, was a message written in blood.

YOU WILL ALL PAY BY THE NEXT FULL MOON.

**Episode 229**

“Um.” I tugged on Xavier’s sleeve, pointing at the message on the tree. “What does *that* mean?”

Xavier scowled, taking in the words. *You will all pay by the next full moon.* The whole written-in-blood thing definitely added some flair. Was it Lilac’s? Overall, I gave the display a 9/10 on the Terrifying Scale.

“Not sure,” Xavier said. “But the message is clear. We need to get out of here.”

“But who could have done all this?” I asked. The pack had gotten to work putting out all the fires around the campsite before the flames expanded and burned the whole forest down. Ryker’s body was still burning, right in the middle of everything. “Who put Ryker in the fire? *Why*?”

Xavier was opening his mouth to respond when Greyson’s deep voice rang out, loud and piercing. “Everyone, grab what you can! Try to save anything that’s not burned, and then we’re gone—the sooner we hit the road, the better.”

All the tents had burned down, but some camping supplies and utensils had survived. I turned to Xavier. “Well, I guess we’d better...”

Nope, my mate was gone. *I hate when he does that*, I thought, frustrated. I grumbled under my breath about my annoying werewolf boyfriend’s constant vanishing acts and went to find Lola. I wasn’t a werewolf or a firefighter.

I found her tossing a bunch of forks into a tote bag. “Hey,” she said. “Wanna give me a hand?”

I was pretty sure I’d never seen a werewolf use a fork while camping, but whatever. There were more important things to worry about right now. Picking up a bunch of spoons from the ground, I glanced at Lola. “Do you have any idea what all this means? Is it part of the death threat thing? The Manus Cruentae?”

Lola frowned. “Not sure. Either way, it’s pretty unnerving.” She glanced into the distance, where Ryker’s body was still burning. It was one of the few sources of fire that the pack hadn’t put out yet. “Clearly someone stole Ryker’s body so they could use it to scare us. And it’s definitely working.”

“Yeah, this is creepy as fuck. I want to get out of here ASAP. Would be even better if we could apparate. Can Big Mac do that for us?”

“Hate to break it to you, but this isn’t *Harry Potter*,” Lola told me with a faint smirk, just as Jay came up to us.

“Hey,” he said, adorably reaching out to hold Lola’s hand.

Where was Xavier to hold *my* hand?

“Could you stay with Violet while we finish packing up? She’s still in shock.” Jay gestured toward Violet. The girl was leaning against a tree all alone, her face blank as she stared into the fire. I realized she was watching Ryker’s body being consumed by the flames. It probably reminded her of her brother’s funeral from only moments ago.

Poor kid. We needed to do something for her.

“Are you okay?” I asked, after walking over to Violet. I winced, cursing my stupidity. “Sorry,” I muttered. “That was a dumb question.” I wrapped my arm around her, trying to comfort. She didn’t push me off, but she seemed so far away. Broken. My chest ached at the sight of her.

“What’s taking so long?” Greyson’s sharp shout startled me. He was so imposing, it was hard not to stare. “Let’s wrap this thing up and get going!”

“What about Ryker?” Joss asked.

Greyson’s silver eyes fell on the body, still smoldering. “Let him burn.”

Okay, so I had to admit again that Greyson’s general line of action as Alpha hadn’t been all that bad so far. He’d handled the funeral well and this mess right now. However, he was still a murderer, manipulator, and a man capable of making me jealous when I shouldn’t be… but he wasn’t a bad leader.

Though I wondered if somehow the death threats were his fault, if the warning had come as a result of Greyson’s victory. I didn’t know what he’d done to other Rogues or packs other than the Redwood.

*I should ask Xavier*, I thought, before feeling the urge to slap my forehead. Yeah, that wasn’t a good idea. Greyson was a sensitive subject, especially where Xavier was concerned.

Violet murmured something then, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“What did you say?” I asked, twisting to face her. I felt heat behind me, and noticed there was another fire behind us, closing in. “Maybe we should change our waiting spot and let the others put that out, hmm?” I grabbed Violet by the hand and tugged her a few feet away.

Her expression remained vacant. Exhausted. I didn’t know what to do or say. My heart ached for her. My voice trembled as I muttered, “I’m really sorry about Lilac.”

Violet looked at me for the first time. And for the first time in the past ten minutes, there was something other than blankness to her expression. “Wow. You’re on fire.”

I sighed. “I know—that was the most cliché thing to say, and nothing I tell you will bring him back. I’m sorry about that too. I wish I could help, somehow.”

“No,” Violet said, her eyes wide. “You’re on fire!”

I looked around, behind me, and realized that the actual back of my shirt was on fire. Literally. I felt the absurd urge to start laughing and screaming at the same time, because *of course* this would happen to me. I had no idea what to do, but before I could even process what was happening, I was shoved to ground.

Face first.

“WHAT THE HELL!” I exclaimed, trying to sit up when I felt a set of very big, very familiar hands on me. They lingered on my shoulder blades, then traced my sides before slapping some dirt onto my back. For real. This was real life right now.

Greyson flipped me onto my back, and there we were.

Me, lying on the ground, covered in dirt.

Him, standing over me like some sort of god, looking flawless.

What a *douchebag*.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” I said, my words sputtering out of me. I spit out some dirt too, and slapped at his calf.

“I just put out the fire, saving you yet again.” He winked. “You’re welcome, love.”

I gaped at him. For a second, I couldn’t help but think back to the kiss I’d shared with him. I started going all hot just as he stood up, dusting himself off.

“Don’t read too much into it, though,” he said. “I’d do this for anyone in the pack.”

I couldn’t *believe* this guy.

“Are you serious right now?” I hissed, struggling to get to my feet as I looked around. I really hoped Xavier wasn’t watching this. “Are you trying to cause trouble with Xavier?”

Greyson scoffed, walking away. *That wasn’t an answer*, I thought.

I wished I had the power to set that man on fire with the force of my stare alone. “I didn’t need you to save me!” I called after him, huffing. “I could’ve put out the fire myself! Stop, drop, and fucking roll!”

Greyson just raised his hand, continuing to walk away. In the meantime, I felt a pair of eyes burning into the back of my head. I turned around and, of course, there he was. Xavier. My formerly vanished mate, who shot a glare at me before continuing to gather supplies. *Ugh! NOW he shows up!* I thought bitterly.

Today was going *great*.

“Need any help?”

“Unless you have new clothes that weren’t burned in the fire or on my body,” I dusted the dirt from my clothes. “Then no.”

Lola snorted. “You need your own fire department, babe.”

“Point. Also, firefighters are generally nice. Maybe I should trade werewolves for firefighters. Hot ones. Like, super hot ones.”

Lola snorted again, not replying to my rambling and examined the back of my shirt. “It’s only a little singed. You can still wear it.”

“Did any of my clothes survive the fire?”

Lola’s lack of expression was all I needed. “Don’t worry,” she said quickly. “You can borrow some of mine if you need.”

I hugged Lola gratefully. But then someone rudely interrupted us by grabbing me by the arm and spinning me around. Xavier. Maya and Colton were a couple of feet behind him.

“Oh, hi honey,” I told him, yanking my arm away from his hold. “Come to see if I’m alive?”

“We’re leaving,” Xavier declared, reaching for me once more. This time, he held my hand. His grip was firm but soft, and okay. That did feel nice. But *wait!*

“Wait!” I said. “What about Greyson and the pack? The curse?”

“I don’t care,” Xavier said, facing me. His expression was thunderous. Also, sexy. Maybe I didn’t need firefighters if I could mend our relationship… “I need to get you out of here. The situation has changed, it’s too dangerous.”

My stomach flipped. I had fucked up, and Xavier was right to still be angry at me—that had been repeatedly established. But right now, I needed Xavier’s attention, needed to steady myself after everything that had happened.

“Say you love and care about me, or I’m not coming with you,” I said. I wasn’t entirely joking. He needed to get me out of here, but did he need… *me*?

Xavier pulled me close, his grip tightening around my waist, his eyes blazing. “Cali, I swear to fucking *god*—”

“Okay, fine, we’re leaving!”

He looked so exasperated and exhausted I felt a little sorry for him. Before I could snuggle into his arms, though, he pushed me away. God forbid I got comfortable.

He gripped my hand once more and marched forward. Before we could even make it a few feet, though, Greyson’s voice echoed around the destroyed campsite.

“Stop!” he ordered. “If you leave the pack now, you’ll die.”

Rolling his eyes, Xavier turned to face Greyson. “Stop being so fucking dramatic. You’re not our Alpha. We don’t have to stay, we don’t have to do shit you want, Greyson.”

“I’m serious.” Greyson walked up to us. “You’re part of the Redwood pack whether you like it or not. We’re blood, Xavier, and we’ve all been marked. Which means we’re all in serious danger.” He took a deep breath. “And I can prove it.”

**Episode 230**

“We’re all in serious danger,” Greyson said. “And I can prove it.”

“Sure you can,” Xavier scoffed. “So, I should just believe whatever you say? Where’s your proof?”

“Um, not that I’m agreeing with Greyson—and I totally think he’s the worst,” I added, quickly glancing at Xavier. “But don’t the bloody messages kinda prove his point?”

Lola elbowed me, and Xavier shot me a thunderous glare.

*Okay*, I thought sheepishly. *Bad idea. Maybe I shouldn’t agree with Greyson in front of Xavier. But what about Lilac and Big Mac’s warning?*

As if the jerk could hear my thoughts, Greyson smirked at me while signaling for Joss. She slinked up to him all sexy-like—*gross*—and handed him Lilac’s phone.

“Your proof is in here,” Greyson told Xavier. “Joss found Lilac’s phone, and there’s a video message on it.”

Joss sneered at me, looking so proud of herself, and I wanted to scratch her eyes out. Technically *I* had found that phone—she’d just taken it from me after trying to eat me. She wasn’t anything more than a jealous bitch. But that was a detail I wasn’t going to touch on right now, because perhaps Xavier wouldn’t be too happy to learn that I’d been looking for Greyson earlier. Or that I’d taunted Joss with my kiss with Greyson.

“…okay, Cali?” Greyson’s voice cut through my thoughts.

I looked up, frowning. “What?”

Xavier sighed deeply, like he couldn’t believe I wasn’t paying attention to this V. IMPORTANT turn of events. I’d brought this shit up already, I knew what was happening. Sometimes it really seemed like I was the only one who cared.

“You should take Violet away,” Greyson told me. “There’s no reason for her or you to see this video.”

Me? Was he trying to protect me? I turned to Violet, looking so small and dejected as she stared at the ground.

“I’ll go with them,” Mrs. Smith said, linking her arm through Violet’s.

“We’ll join you at the entrance of Thor’s Well,” Greyson told me. I looked at Xavier, who nodded, agreeing with his brother for once. I understood why this had to happen, and I really wanted to help Violet, but I hated being left out of werewolf meetings. I had enough questions already without them excluding me like this.

Considering the circumstances, though, I kept my mouth shut, and Mrs. Smith and I led Violet away. She chose to walk in front of us, and Mrs. Smith and I stayed a step back to watch her. As we walked through the woods, Mrs. Smith shot me a look.

“You seem annoyed, Cali.”

So perhaps I wasn’t the best at hiding my emotions.

I sighed. “I just hate being left out of pack meetings just because I’m human.”

Mrs. Smith shook her head. “This isn’t about you being human. This is for Violet.”

“I know,” I admitted quietly. “But Greyson or Xavier could’ve told me to stay back after you volunteered to take her away.”

Mrs. Smith paused for a moment. “I see your point.”

“They just don’t think I’m capable of dealing with *anything*. How am I ever going to be considered part of the pack if they keep leaving me out?”

“Give it some time,” Mrs. Smith said. “It’s not every pack that will accept a human. In the past they’d usually just kill humans—can’t let them expose us to all of humankind, you know—so be glad at least for that.”

I balked. “Wow. Thanks for that. *Not*.”

Mrs. Smith snorted. Above us, the dimming sky gave way to the rocky roof of the cave. I stopped walking, turning back to take a look. In the distance, I could see the smoke from the put-out fires, and the gnarly tree where the Lupo Finale had taken place. So much had happened, and none of it had turned out the way I’d thought it would. But at least Xavier survived his injuries, and he was okay.

The nightmare I’d had where Greyson had killed him invaded my mind, making me shudder.

I was so glad that it hadn’t turned out to be some sort of weird premonition, because that would’ve been…

*No*, I thought to myself. *I shouldn’t even think of that possibility.*

I shouldn’t have been thinking about my kiss with Greyson, either. I wished—so hard—that it hadn’t happened. That I could take it back. I wished that Xavier could forgive me, could realize that I was still new to all this werewolf craziness, and that I was no match for Greyson’s mind games. Lola had said that if you were mated to someone, you normally wouldn’t even be able to think about anyone else. So I shouldn’t even have been *able* to be attracted to Greyson, and yet, it had happened. But even if the *due destini* BS had some truth to it—and was the reason why I hadn’t been able to resist Greyson, even while being mated to Xavier—I didn’t care.

I wanted Xavier. We had some stuff to work on, but he was worth it.

I was done with Greyson. I would fix things with Xavier, if it was the last thing I did.

“Look,” Mrs. Smith said, interrupting my thoughts. “We’re at the entrance.”

The cave’s massive opening beckoned us in. Further ahead, I could see the entrance of Thor’s Well and the rocky slope that would lead us up and out of it.

“Both of you, be careful,” Mrs. Smith told me and Violet. “It’s slippery here.” She glanced at me. “We don’t want any accidents.”

I would’ve been offended at Mrs. Smith’s comment if it weren’t completely possible for me to slip and break my neck right now. The last thing I needed was to fall—it would just be further proof that I was a frail, useless human. Hanging out with werewolves was definitely hurting my already kind-of-not-very-healthy self-esteem.

The sounds of the ocean soon took over my mind, and for that I was thankful. The salty spray of the waves fell on us here and there, and even though I was shocked the first time, I learned to expect it afterwards and kept my balance. I glanced behind me. Violet was following a few feet away and Mrs. Smith was bringing up the rear, watching us both.

Poor Violet was crying quietly, wiping her cheeks.

I felt a twinge in my chest at the sight. Here I was, thinking about how hard my life was as a human in a werewolf pack, and she’d just lost her brother. At least to myself, I could admit I was probably obsessing over werewolf stuff right now because the alternative would’ve been to obsess over the possibility of losing one of my loved ones, just like Violet had. Especially now that I was involved in the supernatural world, who could guarantee that my parents would stay safe?

That thought made my eyes ache, so I quickly squashed it.

I hoped that the fresh air and open sky would make everyone feel a little better.

When we reached the top, Mrs. Smith cleared her throat. “Over there,” she said, and pointed to a sandy dune that sat between the rocks. “Looks like a good place to wait for the rest of the pack.”

We started stepping around the tide pools to reach the dune. “Well, this is refreshing,” I said. I was only half-kidding—the cool water did feel nice, but now my sneakers were drenched. I wished I had an extra pair of shoes, but now that most of my clothes had either been burned or singed…

“What was that?” Mrs. Smith asked, as we settled on the dune.

“Nothing,” I said, gesturing at my shoes. “Just thinking it’s going to be a pleasant hike back to the house in wet shoes. But oh well.”

Mrs. Smith snorted, and even Violet offered the tiniest, quickest of smiles.

It still warmed my heart.

As the minutes ticked by, the sun set entirely and the moon came up. Beyond us, the ocean glimmered. It was a beautiful sight. Eventually, Violet broke the silence.

“Why would someone do this to my brother?” she asked quietly.

Holding my breath, I stared at both Violet and Mrs. Smith.

“I don’t know,” Mrs. Smith told Violet in a gentle tone. “But whatever you need, we’re here for you.”

I nodded a lot in agreement.

“I know, but…” Violet swallowed thickly. “I just want to understand. Part of me wants to know what’s on that video. Did Lilac suffer?”

I blinked in almost-panic, staring at Mrs. Smith. *Help!* I thought, trying to communicate my freak-out to her with my eyes. *What the hell are we supposed to say?*

Mrs. Smith placed a comforting hand on Violet’s shoulder. “I don’t know that watching it would be a good idea, dear. But whatever happened, whatever suffering Lilac may have endured, it’s over. No one can hurt him anymore.”

Violet sniffled. “I don’t get why someone had to hurt him in the first place. Who could have done this?”

My heartbeat raced at Violet’s words. She was right in so many ways, but nobody could change what had happened, and that was the worst thing of all.

“Can I look at Lilac’s stuff?” Violet asked Mrs. Smith.

“Of course, sweetheart.” Mrs. Smith handed her the pack of belongings that I’d gathered in the tent. Violet searched through them before she paused.

She frowned. “Wait, is this everything?”

I gulped, fighting away the image of the horrific crime scene. “Um, yeah, I’m pretty sure. Apart from the phone. Why, is something missing?”

Violet’s chest started to heave. “This.” She pointed at the amulet around her neck. “It’s missing! Lilac’s amulet is missing!” She started rifling through the pack again.

“Violet, please try to calm down—” Mrs. Smith started, but Violet cut her off.

“No, you don’t understand! You don’t understand!” she said, her voice building to a scream. “WHERE’S LILAC’S AMULET?”

**Episode 231**

Mrs. Smith and I exchanged glances, unsure of what amulet or necklace Violet was talking about.

“I’m so sorry!” I said right away, trying to soothe Violet. “I didn’t see an amulet like the one you’re wearing anywhere—I’m pretty sure we would’ve noticed it and packed it away.”

Violet looked up at me through tearful eyes. “No, no, we have to go back to make sure!”

Mrs. Smith rubbed Violet’s arm comfortingly. “I promise you, this is everything. Nothing was left behind—I checked myself. Are you sure Lilac was wearing his?”

In an instant, Violet’s expression changed. She jerked away from Mrs. Smith’s embrace and glared up at her. “Of course! We never take them off!”

“What *is* the amulet?” I asked, staring at the piece of jewelry around her neck. “It’s beautiful.”

The comment seemed to calm Violet a bit. “Lilac and I both have one. It’s the last thing our parents left us, it’s—” Violet’s trembling voice shattered, and she broke into sobs. “They took it! As some kind of sick prize! They killed my brother and now they’re going to come kill me, too!”

I stood there mutely, my pulse thudding so hard I could hear it in my ears.

*Jesus Christ*, I thought, aghast. *All this supernatural drama is out of control.*

Unsure of what to say, I glanced at Mrs. Smith for guidance. I was shocked to see that she was looking pretty worried herself. Great. We were all going to die.

“Calm down, honey,” Mrs. Smith finally said, patting Violet’s arm. But the girl just shook her head.

“No, you don’t get it!” she said. “They’re going to kill me to get the other half!”

“You can’t be sure of that,” Mrs. Smith said. But Violet was inconsolable, getting more worked up by the second. It was then that I saw familiar shadows emerging from the cave entrance, a few feet away.

Greyson and Joss—*gross*—were leading the pack, with Xavier a few steps behind. I straightened up quickly and headed toward him.

“It looks like Cali didn’t do that great of a job at comforting Violet,” Joss said to Greyson, as I passed them. “Maybe sending a human to help wasn’t the best choice?”

OH MY GOD, this literal bitch wanted to get into it right *now?* Again? My blood started to boil. I’d rip her stupid blue hair out.

“Violet is devastated and there’s a magical murderer or whatever after us all, but you still can’t just shut your big mouth about me, can you?” I snapped, glaring as I moved past her. Then I raised my voice, loud enough for everyone to hear. “Great choice of Luna, Greyson! Class act! She *totally* has her priorities straight.”

Joss paused walking, gaping in shock, but I didn’t stand around to see what Greyson said or did. The jerkface would have to live with the consequences of his actions. Goodbye.

“What did Joss say?” Colton asked me. I made a mental note that perhaps Colton was kind of a gossip. It was always the big manly men who ended up being the biggest gossips.

“Forget about that,” I told Colton, huffing before I turned to Xavier. “What was on the video?”

Xavier, who remained stoic, glanced at Colton. There was a hint of hesitation in his expression—I could tell. Colton just shrugged. “She’s gonna find out sooner or later,” he told his twin. “You might as well tell her.”

I scowled. “Tell me what?” I asked Xavier, getting all up in his space. His jaw clenched and I saw his nostrils flare, which usually meant he was feeling frisky. It was totally the wrong time for that to happen, but I was kind of flattered.

*Wait, I shouldn’t get distracted!*

“Xavier, listen to your genius brother and tell me what the hell was in that video,” I demanded. Colton preened at my compliment, which would’ve been hilarious at any other time.

With a grunt—*my eloquent mate*—Xavier grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me aside, further away from the pack.

“Violet can’t hear about this, okay?” he muttered. “I don’t want to upset her any further.”

Oh boy. If my beloved, emotionally constipated Xavier was verbally admitting to being worried about someone, we had to be in deep shit.

“Okay,” I said nervously. “This can’t be good.”

Xavier lowered his voice even more. “The video was a warning, and a threat to the entire pack.”

“Great. Wonderful. Just fucking peach—”

“—Before Lilac was murdered,” Xavier went on, “he was forced to say: ‘This is just the beginning. We will destroy every member of the Redwood Pack. You will pay with your worthless lives for what you did. You have been marked, you will die by the next full moon*.*’”

I paused. Then blinked. Then ignored the way my stomach was trying to explode with nerves. “Is that all?” I asked.

Xavier was visibly uncomfortable, which was—again—a rarity for Mr. Stoic. “Those were the last words Lilac said, before…” Xavier stopped talking. He looked away, one arm wrapping around his torso, rubbing his forehead with his free hand. His features were bathed in bright moonlight. He looked beautiful, otherworldly, and above all…

Above all, he looked shaken and worried.

It was jarring for me to witness.

The urge to comfort him vibrated within me, strong and relentless. I reached out, touching his shoulder. He didn’t push me away. “Who did this?” I asked, in a small voice.

Xavier glanced at me. “They didn’t say. We’re still trying to figure it out. But we don’t have a lot to work with.”

My breath came out shaky. “But the next full moon is in a month. We have to figure it out before then, right? If we’re not all dead?”

Xavier didn’t speak. He just looked down. This massive man looked small, suddenly, and I wanted to wrap my arms around him and never let go.

“Does anyone in the pack have any ideas about what we should do next?” I asked. And before I could think about it, I asked, “What does Greyson say?”

The second his older brother’s name left my mouth, Xavier went rigid.

*Cali, you idiot!* I internally berated myself. *Did you* really *have to mention Greyson right now?*

Xavier turned to face me, his eyes meeting mine. That sharpness had returned to his expression. He took a step back, pulling away from my touch. My chest throbbed at his rejection, but I had it coming. Though, really, what was I supposed to do from now on? Just never say Greyson’s name again in front of Xavier? What should I call Greyson then? ‘That Evil Lying Alpha Asshole’?

Okay, come to think of it, that did have a certain ring to it.

“The sooner we get back to the pack house, the better,” Xavier said, completely ignoring my Greyson question. This was going *swimmingly*. “It’s our territory,” Xavier went on, “so I’ll be able to protect you and everyone else better once we’re there.”

My heart warmed at his words. “You want to protect me?”

He raised his eyebrows, scrutinizing my expression. Whatever he saw there made him frown and cross his arms over his chest. “I just said—”

“You want to protect me, because you still love and care about me,” I finished, repeating my mantra from earlier. He instantly looked annoyed. So I made sure to dig my hole deeper. He’d said he missed me. We’d slept together! He still loved me. He had to. “How about you finally admit that too, because I’d like to hear it after all that’s happened. It’d make me feel a little better about myself.”

Xavier’s teeth gritted together. “Don’t fucking push it, Cali.”

“But I’m great at pushing it,” I said. My tone grew more agitated, because romance BS aside, this was serious. “Also, I honestly don’t want to be a burden that you always have to protect.”

“That’s not true,” Xavier said. It looked like it pained him to say it, but he did. “You’re my mate. You’re not a fucking burden.”

Under any other circumstances, I would have run up to Xavier and grabbed him and kissed him. But he looked so uncomfortable as he said those words, as if he hated admitting it. I understood why he felt that way, but it still hurt.

This whole situation, even though it was totally my fault, still hurt like a bitch.

“I need to be able to protect myself, Xavier,” I said. “I can’t be dependent on you forever. This world is dangerous for a human.”

He shook his head. “This isn’t the time to discuss that. For now, we’re part of the pack—we all look out for each other. That’s what packs do.”

I huffed. “But you can’t protect me 24/7! Wouldn’t it be better for everyone if I could protect myself?”

“I said *not now*,” Xavier snapped.

He made a move to walk away and join the others, disregarding me. This had become a habit of his—the vanishing, the ignoring—and it was hard for me to deal with.

*Come back here, DAMMIT!*

Beyond frustrated, I grabbed his arm before he could move past me. “Hey!” I snapped, forcing him to turn back. “We’re not done talking!” I got all up in his face, full of righteous indignation. “The Rogue’s bite didn’t turn me into a werewolf, so *you* need to do it, Xavier. Bite me. Turn me into a werewolf. *Now*.”

**Episode 232**

“Are you INSANE?” Xavier snapped, yanking out of my hold. “You want me to turn you into a werewolf right now?”

“*Obviously!*” I scoffed. “You can’t turn me into a were-otter, which would’ve been my animal of choice because otters are adorbs, so a werewolf will have to fucking do!”

Xavier looked at me like I’d lost my mind. Why was he so shocked every time I started this conversation? Seriously, he needed to keep up with my needs outside of the bedroom.

“Did you forget the fact that turning you could KILL you?” he demanded. “Not every human can handle a wolf bite. Or the Luna mark. You saw what happened to Joss, Cali.”

“Oh my *god*, here we go again!” I groaned, rubbing my temples. But oh no, Xavier wasn’t done talking.

“Caliana,” he said, moving closer to me to look down and stare deep into my soul, or whatever. “Maybe Joss or Maya would be willing to take that risk and bite you, but I won’t do it. I am not willing to risk your life like that.”

That was touching, truly. But no. “Oh come on!” I shoved him, beyond annoyed. “I’m a lot stronger than you think. If any human can take it, I can. *Bite*. *Me*,” I said, punctuating the words with another two shoves on his very hard chest.

“No,” Xavier said. He was so adamant about this, and yeah, I knew that he cared about me, that he was concerned about me surviving the bite. But…

What if this wasn’t just about my safety?

What if Xavier was still upset about my kiss with Greyson, and just didn’t want to bite me, didn’t want to tie us together like that while we were on the rocks after what I’d done?

The thought made my stomach churn, my heart aching with guilt once more. But I knew now wasn’t the best time to bring that up, so I pushed the bad feelings away and tried to reason with him. “My life is already in danger, Xavier. If someone is truly out to get us, what are my chances as a human? Look at what they did to Lilac. Imagine what they could do to me? They took Lilac’s family heirloom. This person *enjoyed* hurting him and took a prize for it. I need to be able to fight back, don’t you see?”

He groaned. “Christ, Cali, can you just—”

“Unless you don’t actually care what happens to me,” I finished, cutting him off. That did it. If he was mildly irritated before, now he was full-on angry, which looked great on him. But, you know, it was starting to become a habit.

“Don’t you *ever*,” Xavier started, grabbing me by both arms to pull me close, “*ever* fucking doubt me.” His voice was a grumble that sent shivers down my spine. “That’s what got us into this mess in the first place.”

He let go of my arms and turned his back on me, marching toward the others.

I was left behind—panting, shamefully turned on, and kind of confused.

But about one thing, I was absolutely certain: I’d have to figure out a way to turn into a werewolf. It would be the only way I survived.

After getting my bearings, I joined the others as they walked from the rocky beach toward the woods. Lurking at the back of the group, I looked around, thinking that I was definitely not looking forward to the journey ahead of us. The pack house was pretty far away, and someone was out to kill us all, so this was probably going to be an *extra* unpleasant experience.

“Hey,” I muttered, coming up to walk beside Mrs. Smith. She nodded. She was walking next to Violet, and both of them were very quiet.

“Where’s Big Mac?” I asked Mrs. Smith in a low voice.

She shot me a look. “Why would I know?”

I was taken aback. “Um,” I stammered. “I guess, after I caught you two—” I didn’t say the word ‘kissing.’ “You know,” I mumbled. “I thought you were… *together*? You certainly looked like it.”

Mrs. Smith’s stride remained the same. She shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, then immediately backpedaled, “Sorry, I mean, I didn’t realize you were into women, and if that’s uncomfortable to talk about—”

Mrs. Smith scoffed. “Oh please, this is the 21st century. I could tear someone apart with my teeth if they don't like who I kiss. It has nothing to do with being uncomfortable.”

“Sorry to assume,” I said. “I’m just trying to understand. You two seemed like you hated each other.”

Mrs. Smith raised an eyebrow. “You mean you want to hear the juicy details?”

I blushed, embarrassed. “I mean— I guess… Yeah?”

Mrs. Smith chuckled at my admission before her expression darkened. “That wasn’t the first time MacKenzie and I kissed, but it will *definitely* be the last.” I opened my mouth to ask more questions, but Mrs. Smith raised an index finger to stop me. “And that’s all I’m going to say about it.”

I nodded, conceding. But my mind kept wandering, because seriously—how had those two ever become involved? And what about Mr. Smith (RIP)? Was he in a love triangle with them trying to win Mrs. Smith over back in the day? I had so many questions, but the look on Mrs. Smith’s face told me I wouldn’t be getting any answers today. Sighing, I moved closer to Violet, who seemed oblivious to my chat with Mrs. Smith.

“Doing okay?” I asked Violet gently. The girl nodded, just as we came to a thick cluster of trees. I was about to move forward when Mrs. Smith grabbed my shoulder. I realized that everybody had stopped moving.

Greyson had signaled for us to stop.

His severe expression was telling everybody to shut up, quite effectively. He nodded at Xavier and Colton, gesturing for them to join him. I slithered further toward the front, trying to hear what they were saying.

“…is up ahead,” Greyson was muttering to Xavier and Colton. All three of them standing together like that was definitely something to see. They looked like a GQ ‘Man in Nature’ photoshoot ready to happen.

*Wait a minute*.

Who was up ahead? Who was coming?

“Cali!” someone breathed in my ear, and I jumped. Swallowing a squawk, I slapped my best friend on the arm. “Oh my *god*,” I hissed at Lola. “You scared the shit out of me! Not cool! Especially when there’s someone out to murder us!”

Jay grinned, and Lola stifled her laugh. “What’s up?”

“I’m sure you heard what Greyson said with your super-hearing,” I told them, in a tone that was more accusatory than I’d have liked. “Is someone going to attack us?”

“They didn’t say,” Jay told me. He seemed to empathize with me. Jay was a good egg.

“You know, if we’re attacked, I might get killed,” I babbled. “Like, that’s totally a thing that could happen.”

“Cali,” Lola said, squeezing my shoulder. “I’d never let anything happen to you.”

“You all have to defend yourselves before defending me. It’s simple math or whatever,” I rambled, my panic starting to rise. “These magical murderers are going to try to kill us, and I’ll be the easiest to pick off because I’m human, and I’ll die just like that. Like, it’s great to be human in general, but not while you’re fighting supernatural creatures. I’ll go down as a human, not fighting like a wolf. How humiliating, it’s just—”

“Cali,” Lola said, cutting me off. “Deep breaths.” She squeezed my shoulders. “Calm down.”

“This is legitimately an issue for me, Lola,” I said, fighting away hysterical laughter. “Since I am part of this insane group of supernatural beings, I need to be one myself, otherwise I will literally die. Do you see what I’m saying here?”

Lola seemed struck for a second, and Jay cleared his throat. “I’m sorry this is happening.”

In theory, I could ask Jay to turn me. But Xavier would probably kill him, or do something else equally unpleasant. Which would be a problem for Lola. This whole thing was so unfortunate.

Suddenly, a figure stepped out from behind a tree.

“OH MY GOD!” I screamed, terrified. “THE MURDERER IS HERE!”

Lola grabbed me by the arms to control my flailing while everyone from the pack turned in the direction of the shadow.

Turned out, it was just Big Mac.

“Oh,” I breathed, relieved. “It’s you.” I turned around to wink at Mrs. Smith, like, *‘Hey hey hey, your girlfriend is here!’*

Mrs. Smith remained unimpressed. I should take pointers from her aloofness to apply to my own love life.

“What are you doing here?” Lola asked Big Mac. And that was when I realized that Big Mac was holding a massive dagger. That didn’t seem very friendly.

“Um—” Before I could say anything, Big Mac raised the dagger.

Her expression was distorted with anger. Actual, real anger that freaked me out, because she was pretty terrifying for such a small woman. “YOU!” She pointed at Jay. Her eyes were blazing with indignation. “Did you *really* think you could leave without paying your debt?”

**Episode 233**

I was horrified—at least until I remembered the deal that Jay had made with Big Mac to help Lola shift back. She’d seemed serious about keeping the deal but… I mean, surely she had to be kidding, right? RIGHT?

“Um, excuse me,” I said. “But do you really expect Jay to give up an eye?”

Big Mac looked at me, and her angry expression shifted to something less aggressive but equally hostile. She raised an eyebrow, shrugging. “I know this isn’t the best timing given everything, but will it ever be?”

I gasped, shocked. I turned to look at Mrs. Smith, like, *‘Okay, is your girlfriend COMPLETELY INSANE OR WHAT?’*

Before Mrs. Smith could meet my gaze or say anything, Lola leaped forward, planting herself between Big Mac and Jay. “There’s no way you’re going to lay a finger on my mate,” Lola declared. “At least not without a fight!” The moment the words were out of her mouth, she started to shift.

*OH MY GOD!* I thought, alarmed. *This is going to turn into a total shit show!*

“Okay, let’s be reasonable about this!” I yelled, coming to stand between Lola and Big Mac. “Lola, shifting is dangerous for you, and the only person who can help you shift back is this insane witch!”

Lola growled, but Jay held her back.

“Hey!” Big Mac huffed. “I heard that!”

I turned to face her. “Don’t act all offended, here. It’s not a normal thing to just ask for someone’s eye! Oh my god, I can’t even say that—can’t you think of some other way to pay off Jay’s debt?” I pointed at my vein. “Here, do you want some more of my blood? It’s great blood! Like, red and stuff.”

“WHAT?” Xavier bellowed from somewhere behind me, and then he was next to me. Amazing. An angry Xavier was exactly what this situation needed. But also *cute*, because *look at him being all worried about me*. Wow, I loved him. He deserved nice things. Preferably of the oral sex variety.

“As tempting as that offer is,” Big Mac said, interrupting my dirty mind, “I have all of your blood that I need.” She stared at Jay, who had his hands in Lola’s fur to hold her back. “No, what I need is what was agreed upon, and that’s Jay’s eye.” She shrugged. “Either one will do, I’m not picky.”

That was definitely the wrong thing to say, because Lola snarled. She escaped Jay’s grip and started stalking towards Big Mac.

The witch scoffed. “Greyson,” she called sharply. “You’d better pull in your attack dog, or I’ll be gathering more than an eye today.”

Before an expressionless Greyson could respond, Xavier pushed me back and moved forward, coming to stand between me and Big Mac. “Forget that! What the hell was that about you getting Cali’s blood?”

“It doesn’t concern you,” Big Mac told him in an indifferent tone.

If possible, Xavier was even more aghast when he turned to me. “Why didn’t you tell me, Cali? What the hell?”

My heart was beating hard. These werewolves were going to give me some sort of condition, honestly. I had no idea what to say apart from, “I was worried about you, and I didn’t want to freak you out just before the Finale.”

Xavier looked disappointed, which was even worse than when he got mad at me.

“Can we please focus here?” Big Mac snapped. “I need that eye. Like today.”

I couldn’t believe this was a real conversation we were having right now.

*Look at me, Mom and Dad!* I thought sarcastically. *This is my new normal!*

“Everybody, calm down,” Jay said. He walked up to put a comforting hand on a snarling Lola’s back. “It’s okay, babe. A deal is a deal.” He stared at Big Mac. “We can do this, but not in front of Lola.”

Big Mac shrugged. “Whatever. I just want that eye. Follow me.” She turned her back on Jay—which was the exact moment Lola lunged forward and slammed right into Big Mac.

*HOLY SHIT!*

I jumped into the fray, ready to try and separate them, but Lola’s tail knocked me away. While I tried to make sense of the commotion—of Lola’s snarls and Big Mac’s screams and Greyson and Xavier’s roaring—I heard a growl that overcome every other sound.

Mrs. Smith.

She shifted in seconds, slamming into Lola. She truly was a magnificent wolf, a rich golden brown color, powerful and fierce as she knocked Lola to the ground.

“LOLA!” I screamed, but I knew that Mrs. Smith would never hurt her. She was just protecting Big Mac.

*Mrs. Smith has seriously bad taste in women,* I thought with annoyance.

As if nothing had happened, Big Mac stood up and dusted herself off. “And now that that’s over…” She pointed at Jay, beckoning him to follow her.

He paused by Lola, turning to caress the fur on her head. Soothingly, he said, “I’m sorry, babe. I promise it will be fine. I have to honor my word.”

Lola turned to Greyson, but he shook his head. “A deal’s a deal.”

I couldn’t believe this was happening. I was stunned into silence as they stepped out of view and behind some trees. Snapping out of it, I stood up, turning to Xavier and Colton, who were just casually standing there. Greyson, Joss, Violet and Maya had walked a few feet away, clearly not at all interested in the altercation.

“Are you just going to let her take Jay’s eye?” I asked Xavier and Colton. “He’s your friend!”

“Which is why we’re respecting his wishes,” Xavier said. “He talked to us about this. It’s a deal he made, and we have to respect that.”

I scoffed. “You can’t be serious!”

Colton shook his head. “It *is* pretty serious, Cali. You can’t just back out of a deal with a witch, even if they’re a total pain in the ass. If it were me, I wouldn’t have taken the deal, but we can’t do shit.”

I looked between them, unable to process what was happening. “This is barbaric! You’ve all lost your minds!” Turning my back on Colton and Xavier, I started to walk away.

“Cali, come on! Nothing’s gonna change, no matter what you do!” Xavier called after me.

I looked to Greyson who stood back observing everything, his arms crossed. “And you!” I said, taking large strides over to him. I jabbed a finger into his bicep. “What kind of Alpha are you? Are you really going to stand back and do nothing?”

Greyson’s lip twitched and he locked eyes with me. “This is Jay’s business, love.”

Really? That was his response?

“I’m done!” I yelled. “Werewolf men are useless, just like normal men, so thanks for not breaking the stereotype! Every man here sucks! Everyone but Jay—he’s a fucking MAN! And if none of you will do anything to help him, then *I* will!”

Xavier looked at me like I was the insane one here. And also like he was secretly amused, which only infuriated me further. “Cali, deals like the one that Jay made are just part of our world. I need you to stop throwing these annoying fucking tantrums and just do what you’re told, okay?” He made a move to grab me, but Greyson stepped between us.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Greyson growled. Xavier shoved his brother and Colton quickly stepped in, pulling him away.

Colton said something to Xavier, but I didn’t hang around to listen, because you *bet* I wasn’t going to do what I was told. Stomping away, I headed toward the gap in the tree line that Big Mac and Jay had vanished through.

I wasn’t the only one.

Behind me, I heard growling and howling. Lola had escaped Mrs. Smith’s grip, and she lunged past me. She was close enough that I could jump up onto her wolf’s back. I mentally congratulated myself for successfully grabbing onto her—who knew I’d become so athletic?—and leaned forward to talk into her ear.

“Please, don’t do anything rash,” I said, wrapping my arms around Lola’s neck. She didn’t like that. Growling, she bucked wildly, trying to throw me off.

“Hey!” I yelled, gripping onto her fur as she trotted forward. “I’m not letting go! Big Mac is a witch, and this could be dangerous for both you and Jay. We need to try and reason with her, not threaten her! What if she turns you into a newt?!”

Lola twisted around to snap at me, which was honestly super rude, and I squeaked. Holding onto her while she ran and sniffed the air and snarled at me was pretty difficult. It got even harder when Big Mac and Jay came into view. Jay was kneeling on the ground, and Big Mac was standing over him, dagger in hand.

“We’ve got company,” Big Mac said dryly, then raised her hand in a ‘halt’ gesture.

To my shock, Lola collapsed to the ground before she could leap toward the witch. Both of us flailed around on the ground, Lola shifting back to her human form and writhing in pain.

As I lay there, disgruntled and scared for my friend, I realized that Big Mac could have used magic like this earlier, too. Instead, she’d waited for Mrs. Smith to defend her. Fighting to process that piece of info, I sat up. I hadn’t broken anything, but my whole body was throbbing.

“Shhh,” I said, scrambling over to Lola. I tried to soothe my friend, who was clearly hurting after the shift. She struggled to get up, clearly trying to lunge toward the witch. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry Lola—” I started, but Lola broke out with a terrible scream. My gaze slid toward Big Mac and Jay.

What I saw made me freeze—and then scream my lungs out, too.

Big Mac was ripping out Jay’s left eye.

**Episode 234**

Big Mac casually dropped Jay’s eye into a jar, like this was just another day for her.

“OH MY GOD!” I screamed. *EVERYBODY HERE IS INSANE!* Big Mac placed the jar in a satchel, still totally casual—god, she probably did this kind of stuff like, three times a week. Ignoring her, I ran up to poor Jay. He was sitting on the ground, softly grunting while he covered his eye socket with his left hand and blood dripped down his face.

“Jay!” I kneeled down in front of him, squeezing his shoulder. “Jay, please don’t die, what are we gonna do without you? You’re literally the only sweet guy I know, this is giving me an existential crisis!”

Jay looked at me with his one good eye, blood all over his face, and snorted. “I’m okay, Cali. Just—”

“HOW COULD YOU?” I yelled at Big Mac, glaring up at her as I grabbed onto Jay just a little too hard, shaking him back and forth as I mourned his beauty. “HE IS A PURE SUMMER CHILD WHO WOULD DO ANYTHING TO SAVE HIS MATE, AND YOU TOOK ADVANTAGE OF HIM!”

Entirely ignoring my dramatics, Big Mac waved her hand over Jay’s face. I was shocked to see the blood vanishing, and when Jay removed his hand, the wound was…

Completely healed.

“*Witchcraft!*” I hissed, aghast.

“Yes, Cali,” Big Mac told me in a patronizing tone. “Witchcraft. That’s literally the point, here.”

I reached out to touch Jay, who told me again that he was fine before heading over to check on Lola. She was still recovering on the ground as he leaned over her, caressing her face, her arms, telling her he loved her. I believed him, one hundred percent. The guy had just lost an eye for her. Other men didn’t even buy flowers or chocolate, and he’d just lost an eye for Lola.

*He shouldn’t have had to do this, but he still didn’t hesitate to sacrifice himself*, I thought, still outraged. Huffing and puffing, I straightened to my feet and pointed an accusing index finger at Big Mac. “You cold-hearted bitch—I mean *witch!* You took his eye!”

Big Mac shrugged. “A deal is a deal. Now, excuse me, but I don’t have the time for your dramatics.” She turned her back on me, but oh no, I wasn’t done.

“But if you can do magic, like you just did on Jay to heal him, why did you make Lola use a potion? Why didn’t you just use magic to help her shift?” I demanded. “For god’s sake, what kind of witch are you?”

Big Mac paused, turning back to face me. Her calm was tinged with threat. “I’m a very good witch, but one who’s growing tired of you. Don’t push me.”

Too bad I wanted to do just that. Like, literally shove her against a tree. “Why, you horrible little—”

A set of very strong arms wrapped around my torso, pulling me back. “Cali, stop,” Xavier said. “It’s done.”

“Yeah,” I barked. “Because you didn’t stop it!”

“Your mate is having trouble acclimating to our world, Xavier. You need to fix that sooner rather than later. Before I lose my patience.” Big Mac and Xavier shared a look. I was about to offer my important input on the matter when Xavier pulled me even closer to him—and further away from her.

“We have to get going,” he told me. “Every minute we stay here, we’re in danger now because of this stupid curse. Do you understand, Cali?”

Xavier’s tone and expression said that I probably shouldn’t cross him right now. I nodded, defeated. “Well, okay.” I turned to Big Mac. “But just so you know, I’ll never fucking trust you again.”

“You’re breaking my heart,” Big Mac said mockingly. “I’m sure you’ll find you need something sooner or later.”

I tried to lunge at her, but Xavier hauled me back. Heading toward Jay and Lola, he grumbled, “I swear to god, it’s like you CANNOT stay out of fucking trouble.”

“How is it my fault that outrageous things constantly happen around here, one after the other?” I snapped. “Maybe I wouldn’t be so surprised by everything if you took a second to talk to me about the supernatural world and, I don’t know, perhaps ANSWER MY QUESTIONS WITHOUT MAKING ME FEEL LIKE I’M ANNOYING?”

Xavier’s only response was to roll his eyes. What a *brat*. Before I could yell at him again, we were by Jay and Lola’s side. He was helping her stand up, because he was a pure boy.

“So?” Jay forced a smile as he stared at Lola. “What do you think of my new look?”

Lola rightfully kissed him. Like, full on the mouth, and okay—it got a little PG-13, real fast. “I don’t care about your looks,” Lola breathed against Jay’s lips, caressing his face. “You sacrificed part of yourself, for *me*.”

“I’d do anything for you,” Jay whispered. “And now you’re alive, and I’ve still got one good eye. So it’s a win-win.” He winked at her with the aforementioned one good eye.

“Aren’t they the cutest?” I asked Xavier. Or the space that Xavier had once occupied, because he’d vanished again. Ugh. The urge to shout *COME BACK HERE AND LOVE ME!* into the woods was a strong one.

“There you are,” Mrs. Smith said, walking up to us. She held out an eyepatch to Jay.

“Why did you have an eyepatch with you?” I asked.

Mrs. Smith shrugged. “You never know when you might need one.”

Well, then.

Jay put the eyepatch on just as Colton arrived, patting Jay on the back. “Damn, man. You make a pretty shitty pirate.”

“*Colton!*” I hissed.

“What?” he asked innocently.

Jay shoved him. “Even with one eye, I can still beat you at checkers.”

Putting her arm around Jay, Lola whispered, “You’re the sexiest pirate I’ve ever met.”

*Aww*.

“As if you’ve ever met a pirate? *Please*.” Maya’s very annoying voice broke right into the nice moment. I turned around and saw her walking over.

Colton glowered. “You’re still here? I was hoping you’d run away at the first sign of trouble.”

Maya grabbed Colton by the neck of his t-shirt. “You want to join Jay with the one-eyed look?”

Colton gulped. But before he could reply, His Majesty the Alpha decided to grace us with his presence.

“Party’s over, everyone,” Greyson said. “We need to get moving now—we’ve already wasted too much time.”

“I’ll say,” Maya mumbled.

“We need to get to the pack house ASAP,” Greyson continued. “The fastest way will be to shift.”

“Um, excuse me?” I piped up, raising my hand. “But I can’t shift.” I looked pointedly at Xavier, who’d just reappeared.

His only response was a long-suffering sigh.

“Why don’t you just leave her to the wisps or the faeries or something, like a sacrifice?” Joss asked cheerfully.

I wanted to smack her, but this probably wasn’t the right time. I’d take her on at some point, but not right now.

“Cali can ride on someone’s back,” Greyson said in a serious tone, ignoring Joss’s comment. He stared at me real hard, kinda like he wanted to see inside my head. I hoped he could, because what I thought was: *Hah*, *I’d never ride on your back.*

Quickly, I turned to Xavier. “You’re responsible for me not being able to shift, therefore I am your burden now.”

It did dawn on me that this wasn’t entirely true. Greyson had sucked the lupus sputo out after the Rogue had bitten me, not Xavier. But Xavier was the one who needed to bite me now—in the non-sarcastic way—if I had any hopes of surviving this curse or… really just the entire werewolf world.

Snickers all around. Xavier gave me a cold look. “Fine. Whatever.”

“Don’t die from enthusiasm,” I deadpanned, just as Lola came into my line of vision. “Wait, though, what about Lola?”

“What about her?” Xavier asked, as everyone looked at me questioningly.

“She just shifted,” I said. “It’s dangerous for a hybrid to shift again so quickly.”

Lola snorted. “I’m fine, Cali.”

“Don’t let her do it,” I told Jay, voice pleading.

“Babe, maybe you shouldn’t—”

Nope. Lola was already taking a swallow of the potion Big Mac had given her.

“Let’s do this,” she said.

Before I could object any further, they all started to shift. I was suddenly surrounded by the entire snarling pack. Xavier moved up to me, his deep dark eyes pinning me to the spot. He truly was magnificent, in every form. Lowering his head, he allowed me to climb onto his back.

“Thanks,” I grumbled. I zipped up my jacket and pulled my hood up, covering my ears to avoid the cold air. Xavier’s wolf made a rumbly kind of noise in response. Before I could even get a good grip on him, everyone was off and running. Squeaking, I struggled to hold onto Xavier’s fur, and looked back to see how Jay and Lola were doing.

What I saw instead was phosphorescent green light.

A wisp!

It floated along behind us, following. Following *me*. I gasped.

“*Cali*…”

Was this wisp talking to me?

Tightening my grip on Xavier, I fought to control my heartbeat. Xavier had said wisps were part of ancient magic connected to nature, so it didn’t seem likely that the wisp was a spy for the curse or something. I hadn’t seen any outside of the cave forest before we’d come here… was this one lost? An uneasy feeling formed in my stomach as I clung to Xavier.

Had this wisp *followed* me out of Thor’s Well?

**Episode 235**

My arms were cramping from riding on Xavier’s back, and my chin was red from rubbing up against his fur. Also, my nose and fingers were freezing. I had no idea how long we’d been traveling, but I knew that I was reaching my limit. I kept nodding off, waking up when I was almost ready to slide off Xavier’s back.

Overall, I wouldn’t recommend riding on a werewolf’s back as a method of transportation.

When Xavier finally slowed, I hoped it was to rest. Even werewolves had to get their beauty sleep, right? My prayers were answered when everybody came to a slow halt. Xavier lowered himself to the ground, and I was finally able to slide off. My muscles were stiff and achy, and I started stretching to get the blood flowing again.

Greyson was the first to shift back to human. He was naked—*naturally*—and I quickly looked away. But I couldn’t help the eyeful of abs I’d seen. How was that fair to do to me? He was standing really close to me. With Xavier so close by, I wasn’t even going to admit to myself that I was still maybe slightly affected by Greyson. I had no time for my dumb hormones, or that stupid *due destini* fated mates BS.

Greyson was a liar. It was that simple. It didn’t really matter how hot he was…

While I was busy berating myself and hating on Greyson, the others shifted back too. I was now the only person around who was wearing clothes. Not awkward at all.

“We should rest,” Greyson said. “I’ll take the first shift on watch, and we’ll rotate every hour till sunrise.”

*How noble of him*, I thought sarcastically. Now *he decides to be nice.*

As everybody started setting up to sleep, using the camping supplies they’d saved from the fires, I looked around awkwardly. Jay and Lola were all kissy-kissy, so I guessed that they probably wouldn’t want me sandwiched between them in their sleeping bag.

The back of my neck felt hot.

When I turned around, I saw Xavier watching me.

I cleared my throat.

He raised an eyebrow. I felt my whole body flush.

“Hi,” I said. “How are things?” As if I hadn’t been riding on his back for hours.

Silent, he lay down on a camping mattress and pulled a blanket over himself. He tucked his hands behind his head, every muscle of his arms bathed in the light of the fire that the pack had lit. He didn’t respond to my question, so I just kept talking. “You look pretty comfy down there.”

He stared at me. I sat down next to him. He was expressionless, and I felt so vulnerable under his gaze. “Can I sleep here?” I finally muttered.

Xavier shrugged. I took that as a positive sign, all things considered. I lay down next to him. “I like your blanket. It looks warm,” I said.

He pressed his lips together. I was pretty sure he thought I was cute, so that emboldened me. I moved under the blanket next to him, snuggling closer. He was so warm, and he smelled so good. Like the woods and something else, something heady that made my heart-rate spike.

The second the back of my hand made contact with his side, though, his whole body stiffened. I tried to ignore the way my stomach twisted at his reaction. “Sorry,” I whispered.

I was about to pull away when he said, “It’s fine. I don’t want you to freeze.”

It was obvious that Xavier was still upset with me. I didn’t blame him because I was still upset with me. At least there’d been a few signs that things could get better between us. Baby steps were great.

I leaned closer to him, cuddling into his side. He wrapped an arm around me. I felt so restless, so greedy for this kind of tender contact between us that I wrapped both my arms around his torso like an octopus and squeezed.

“Don’t push it, Cali,” he grumbled.

I ignored him and kept squeezing. “How are you?” I whispered.

“We just covered 130 miles. How do you think I am?” he asked dryly.

“That’s not what I meant. How are you *feeling?*”

He grunted. Eloquent as ever.

“I know you don’t like to talk about your feelings, but I still want to know that you’re okay.”

He remained silent. I was, of course, undeterred. “I care about you, Xavier. I’ve never felt like this about anyone. I want to know what I can do to make things right between us.”

More silence.

“The kiss with…” I didn’t say Greyson’s name. “The point is, it was a mistake. It shouldn’t have happened, especially considering that you and I are mates. So there’s definitely a glitch in the system here, don’t you think? It’s not right—”

“I don’t know how I feel,” Xavier interrupted. “Right now, I just want to get some sleep, and when all this is over and we’re back at the pack house, we can discuss my…” He wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Feelings.”

I glanced at his mouth. I wanted to kiss him. Our hook-up in the tent the other night… My throat went dry at the memory. The passion we’d shared, the way he’d held me, the way he’d touched and kissed me. “You still care about me, though, don’t you?” I asked, desperate to hear him confirm it.

Xavier didn’t answer the question. He glanced at my hands. “How are your wrists?”

I was confused. “What?”

“Your wrists. I held too tight, the first time we fought about Greyson. I said… I said some pretty fucked up things about hurting you.”

I realized that my wrists had never even throbbed. This kept happening to me—healing faster, or just not being as fragile. I wondered if it was some werewolf mate-related nonsense.

“I’m okay,” I said.

He looked pained. “I should’ve never been so rough with you, no matter how mad I was. No matter what you did. If we were a normal couple—”

“If we were a normal, human couple, Lola would’ve punched you in the face and called the police the moment you started manhandling me,” I said, cutting him off. “But we’re not normal. You’re a werewolf and not entirely in control of your baser instincts. The only long-term solution for us is for you to turn me into a werewolf too, so I can rough you up in return whenever we fight. That way, we’ll *both* be unstable, violent monsters. It’s a great idea.”

Xavier’s formerly pained expression changed to one of absolute shock. And outrage.

“What?” I raised an eyebrow. “Did you really think I forgot about that conversation?”

His jaw clenched. “We’re not talking about my fucking feelings, and we’re not having that conversation either right now, Cali. Not again. Do I make myself clear?”

“Oh my god, *fine*. If you don’t want to talk anymore, just go to sleep.”

Shaking his head at me, Xavier closed his eyes. But despite his huffiness, he held me tight. Kissing at his neck, I whispered, “I’ll never stop fighting for you.”

A few moments later, I felt his slow, steady heartbeat under my palm.

After that, I tried to sleep too. The sounds of the forest kept rattling me, though, and if that wasn’t enough …

*Laughter. Music.*

Startled, I opened my eyes and looked around. Where was that sound coming from?

I gasped.

*WHOA!*

The pack was surrounded by a circle of incredibly beautiful dancers, their faces full of joy. I was rendered speechless by their grace and gorgeousness. It was almost painful to take them in, and I felt the crazy urge to join them in their dance.

Was Xavier seeing them too?

I turned to him, but he wasn’t there.

Suddenly, I was on my feet, wearing a ruby red gown that glimmered in the light of the fire. I was getting ready to start dancing when I heard a startling growl. I turned back and saw the entire Redwood Pack—Xavier, Greyson, one-eyed Jay, Colton, Maya, Joss, Violet, and Mrs. Smith—all in wolf form, eyeing me and snarling.

Xavier and Greyson’s wolves stepped forward, closing in on me, seemingly ready to protect me from the dancers. But why? They dancers were so beautiful… The boys shouldn’t be so ready to pick a fight. I thought werewolves liked parties!

I was about to tell them as much when I heard the sound of an echoing horn.

Heart pounding, my eyes opened wide.

It was morning.

The dancers had been a dream, and the pack was still sleeping, all of them in human form. The horn echoed again, though, and that was very real. What the *hell* was going on?

Xavier’s arm was stretched over my chest, so at least I had that as an anchor. My baby was protecting me, even in his sleep. I opened my mouth to whisper good morning when a whole different hand covered my mouth, making me squeak. It was Greyson’s hand. Wait—

*GREYSON?*

I was in shock. My heart pounded. Greyson was lying on my other side, and the moment I looked at him, he gestured for me to stay silent. He pointed at the clearing. When I looked in that direction, beyond the trees, I saw two men.

Two men coming toward us, carrying swords.

**Episode 236**

Men with actual *swords* were coming at us, and I wanted to scream.

Thankfully—or not, that was up for debate—Greyson’s hand was still pressed over my mouth. Leaning closer, he whispered in my ear. “Keep still.”

His voice was a grumbly, smoky mutter, his breath hot again my skin. Goosebumps rose all over me. *Go away, goosebumps!* I thought. *This can’t be happening!*

Thankfully—or not, that was still up for debate—Greyson released me. The feeling of his touch lingered over my mouth, scorching hot. Ugh. I hated the way he could affect me. I absolutely despised it, especially considering Xavier was like, five inches away. I glared at Greyson.

“What are you doing here all up in my business?” I hissed, furious. “Who are those men? Shouldn’t you do something about them?”

Greyson smiled—which was super gross and not at all gorgeous. “Would you like me to shift and shred them to pieces, then?”

What a *smartass*.

“Cut the BS, Greyson. Who do you think those men are?” I asked.

“I think we should wait and see,” Greyson mumbled, his silver eyes following the men, who’d paused at the edge of the clearing. I was surprised to see that they were wearing chainmail and leggings. They looked like extras from a low-budget Robin Hood movie production.

“I’m going to wake the others,” Greyson told me. He straightened up, and I did the same, but then I stepped on something. Leaves. *Dammit!*

Greyson just looked amused at my gaff, but one of the men had heard the leaves crinkling. “Who goes there?” he called, in a bad English accent. “Announce thyself!”

He raised his sword and advanced toward us. I yelped, taking a step backwards, my ankle brushing up against Xavier’s foot. He startled awake. “What’s going on?” he asked, wide-eyed and adorably sleepy.

No time to think about that, though, because the two men had gotten way closer, their swords raised to strike.

“Um,” I said. “Hi?”

“Ah.” One of the men looked around the naked pack, all racing to get dressed, and grinned, lowering his sword. “Alas, I believe we’ve happened upon an orgy.”

The other guy’s eyes just about popped out of his head as he took in Lola, currently putting on her underwear. “Whoa,” he said. Then he cleared his throat. “I mean—wow. Er, huzzah.”

“What the hell is happening?” Xavier asked from behind me, pulling on his clothes. I shrugged at him, helpless.

Greyson, who was now blessedly clothed, approached the two men. “Good morning,” he said casually. “Who are you?”

The first guy cleared his throat again, moving into a weirdly official-looking stance. “We are knights of the royal realm of King Bastidious.”

“If it’s all right with you,” the other guy said, “we would like to join the orgy.”

Oh my god, GROSS!

“Hey!” I barked, marching up to them. “This is not an orgy!”

The first guy was startled by my loud voice. He dropped his sword on the ground, and I noticed it was made of wood. I frowned in confusion. Why were their swords made of wood?

As Greyson and the two men started chatting about the advantages of nudity while enjoying nature, I saw another guy approaching, but this one was on horseback—a knight! With a lance. For real.

What in the HELL was going on? Had we travelled back in time?

“Can werewolves travel back in time?” I asked Xavier, who stared at me like I’d lost my mind. He did that a lot, actually. I was starting to get offended.

In the meantime, the rest of the pack had gotten dressed. They were eyeing the two men with varying degrees of interest. Maya in particular had a murderous glint in her eye.

“Well, well, well,” she muttered. “I see someone brought us breakfast.”

“Looks pretty unseasoned, though,” Joss commented.

Mrs. Smith laughed, and I was beyond alarmed. Were they joking? Or not? I couldn’t fucking tell with any of them anymore. If these two idiots in fake wooden swords weren’t careful, the pack would shift again and tear them apart.

Clearly, I had to help them. It’d be best if they just left altogether.

“Okay, everyone, keep your shit together,” I said to the pack, who either ignored me or rolled their eyes and started talking to each other. I turned to the two guys, interrupting their chat with Greyson. “Where’s your king? Take me to him at once!”

The two guys looked at each other. “We would,” one of them said, “but he hasn’t arrived yet. Got caught up in traffic.”

I blinked. “Wait, *traffic?*”

Behind the two men, I saw the knight on the horse getting closer. Looking past him, I spotted a massive tent and flags in the distance.

“Wait a minute!” I exclaimed. “Is this a Renaissance faire?”

The two men nodded. “Every weekend throughout the month.”

“Oh, thank god!” I said, relieved. I really hadn’t been too keen on the time-traveling idea. I’d watched *Back to the Future* enough times to know that it wasn’t smart to mess with stuff like that.

“Can you two show me to the bathroom?” I asked the men, moving closer to them because they were now my friends. I also bowed at them, to get on their good side.

“Really?” Someone groaned from behind me. I turned to face Colton. Of fucking *course*.

“Can’t you just use a tree or something?” he asked me, huffing.

Unbelievable.

“I’m not an animal, you know,” I said sharply. “Not like you lot, anyway.”

Colton opened his mouth to protest before shutting it.

Satisfied I had won this round, I turned to Greyson, who nodded. “Go ahead,” he said.

I smothered the ‘thank you!’ that was hanging from the edge of my tongue and waved at Xavier. “I’ll be back,” I said softly. Xavier gave me a curt nod, so I knew he’d heard.

After Lola forced me to eat a granola bar and gave me a toothbrush/toothpaste and some clothes to change into, I walked away with the two guys. I was pretty pleased, honestly, ready to do my business in a normal bathroom like a normal human being instead of a wild, well, wolf. I missed running water and the scent of liquid soap and popping blackheads in the mirror while wondering if I was growing mustache hairs.

But then the men led me to a line of port-a-potties.

“Great,” I grumbled. “Spectacular.”

“These are the toilets, fair maiden,” one of the guys said, bowing to me.

I sighed. “Well, it beats the woods, which is all I’ve been using this past week.”

Both men winced in sympathy. “Does thy group partake in orgies often, out in the wild?”

“Oh my god,” I said, huffing. “It was not an orgy!”

It was very clear that neither of the men believed me.

Rolling my eyes, I shooed them away. I found an empty port-a-potty, which didn’t smell and had toilet paper in it—thank *god*. I used the antibacterial wipes they had to wipe down every surface possible. Then I changed into the clothes Lola had given me, throwing the old ones away because they were torn up and/or charred from the fire. When I was in the lovely clean clothes, I quickly peed and washed my hands and face before brushing my teeth.

Dental hygiene was important, and I wasn’t about to ignore it because my new group of friends was a bunch of heathens who probably self-cleaned and never got any cavities. My hair was a mess, full of mud and god knew what else. I combed through it with my fingers before wetting it slightly so it was easier to deal with. In the end, I tied it in a ponytail and called it a day. There was no mirror in here, of course, so whatever my face looked like right then, it would have to do.

Pretty happy with myself considering the circumstances, I started whistling and opened the port-a-potty’s door.

Only to be shoved back inside by Greyson.

“GAH!” I exclaimed, acutely aware that the space was barely big enough to fit *me*, much less a guy who was like thirty feet tall and broad as a tree. “What are you doing?” I snapped, shoving him on the chest.

“Shh!” He shushed me, the jerk, and squeezed himself even closer to me—if that was even possible. His body heat felt obscene, honestly. *Obscene*.

“*Shh?* Are you serious!” I snapped, shoving him once more. He remained an unmovable mountain. “What the hell are you doing? I could’ve been—”

“I waited for you to finish,” he said, like that was totally appropriate.

“YOU LISTENED TO ME WHILE I PEED?” I screeched.

“Oh, come on.” He gave me a mocking look. “It’s not like you were masturbating.”

Oh. My. God.

My entire body lit up like a fucking Christmas tree.

“I needed to warn you to act natural when you head back out,” he said, once he realized I was too stunned by his comment to clap back.

“Why?” I managed to bite out, hiding my beet red cheeks with my hands.

His silver eyes sliced through me. “Because we’re being followed.”

**Episode 237**

“Are we actually being followed, or is this just some game you’re playing to piss off Xavier?” I demanded, poking Greyson in the shoulder.

It was a very nice, hard shoulder, but I was not going to think about that. Especially because Greyson was a stupid dick. “As tempting as that sounds, I’m only looking out for your safety—and that of the entire pack.”

I glared up at him, my body still pulsing at his accusation that I’d been masturbating. “So in order to ‘look out for my safety’, you shove me into a stinky port-a-potty? That’s your way of protecting me? Because this place is full of germs and other gross shit, and that includes *you*,” I snapped, and tried to push past him.

He didn’t move an inch. And if that wasn’t enough, he grabbed me by the arm, too. His silver eyes were fixed on me, his gaze so intense it felt like it was burning me. It was like his entire being was unfazed by the disgusting setting, and he’d decided to be as sexy as possible.

Liar. Manipulator.

“Do everything you can to blend in,” he told me, in a severe tone. “You can’t stand out in any way right now. I don’t know who’s following us, but until I find out, you’re a target. And I don’t want to lose another member of this pack.”

Lilac’s name remained unspoken, but there was something more than his specter in Greyson’s gaze. I could feel it. I narrowed my eyes at him. “I don’t believe you. Why would you care about me?” I yanked my arm away from him. “I think it’s more likely that this little meet-up is a trap for you to get rid of me.”

He rolled his eyes. “Cali, you’re being completely paranoid.”

“Am I?” I scoffed. “I bet you’d love to see me ripped to shreds, just for fun.”

His jaw clenched. He was no longer amused in any way. “You’re a member of this pack. I need to fulfill my duty as Alpha and take care of everyone in the pack, you included.”

I snorted. “Oh, okay. So this is just some new Alpha saving-face bullshit.”

“Call it whatever you want,” Greyson said, crossing his arms over his chest. It was a defensive gesture, and that was super weird. Bottom line, though: what Greyson was thinking didn’t matter. I would never trust him again, and Xavier was it for me—Greyson needed to remember that.

“I’m doing everything I can to fix things with Xavier,” I said. “If you decide to get in the way just because you’re some sort of sociopathic mastermind who loves fucking up people’s lives for your own entertainment, I *will* make you pay. Mark my words.”

He leveled me with a stare. “You know, most people would laugh at your face after that threat, but I’ve taken note. You can be quite resourceful—I’ll give you that.”

I blinked in shock. “Did you just pay me a compliment? Are the port-a-potty fumes messing with your brain?”

“It wasn’t a compliment, and I’m not looking out for you for any reason other than the fact that you’re pack. Don’t mistake my concern for anything else.”

I rolled my eyes. “We get it, Greyson! You don’t want me! It was all a game and you’re the fucking douchebag winner! Well, guess what? Joke’s on you because kissing you was the worst, and I’m in love with Xavier, so—”

A harsh knock on the door interrupted my rambling, along with a loud voice. “Are you done?” a woman shrieked. “My little Johnny has to go number two, and you’ve been in there forever!”

I was about to yell back when Greyson gave me a *look*. His voice lowered. “Remember. Blend in.”

“Stop patronizing me,” I said, as he opened the door.

Behind it was an irritated woman and her young son, who was jumping in place, holding it in. I felt a little bad for the kid, but as we stepped out, the woman glared at us. She seemed especially appalled by me, because she shot me a vicious glare. “This is a family event!”

“Listen, lady—” I stopped talking when Greyson’s grip on my forearm tightened and he pulled me away.

“I tell you not to draw attention to yourself and your response is to try to get into a fight with a mom two seconds later?” he asked, his voice collected but sharp.

“Yeah, maybe because that mom thought we were *hooking up* in there,” I said, indignant.

My comment was followed by Greyson looking like everyone’s favorite teacher, disappointed in his student. All *‘I expected better from you, Cali’* and *‘I know you’re capable of so much more.’* Also, *‘Look how hot I am, maybe I should take off my shirt next time I’m teaching.’*

Ugh! Why did I have to interact with him at all?!

“Be smart about this, Cali,” Greyson told me. “I know you can do it.”

I huffed, pulling away from him. What was it with werewolves and touching? It was like I was a tennis ball or a stick or something, and their inner puppy couldn’t help but drag me around. Annoyed, I narrowed my eyes at him. “Okay, *fine*.”

I’d barely managed to get the words out when a flower was shoved into my face.

“Greetings!” a jester exclaimed, giving me a wide, creepy smile. He bowed deeply and kissed my hand, keeping the flower under my nose. It was quite pretty. “A beautiful flower for a beautiful maiden. Will you take this, my lady?” He straightened up, staring at me. “And if you do, that’ll be three dollars.”

Apparently I wasn’t beautiful enough for him to give me the flower for free, in which case, *rude*. I grabbed the flower and threw it in his face. “I am NOT your lady, you—”

I was cut off my Greyson’s glare. And okay, maybe I was starting to see what he was talking about. “Right,” I grumbled, moving past the gaping jester. “I’ll blend in. From now on.”

“I mean, you can at least try,” Greyson said sarcastically.

“I don’t appreciate your tone.”

“You’re constantly getting into trouble just by existing, Cali,” he said, in that same tone. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“Whatever. It shouldn’t be too hard to blend in here,” I said, but Greyson’s attention had already shifted. His expression darkened, and then I felt his palm in the small of my back—again with all the touching! Quickly and firmly, he led me toward a crowd.

“Where are we going?” I asked. My pulse had quickened. Not because his hands were on me again, but because he seemed alarmed. “What’s wrong?”

“I smell a werewolf who’s not from our pack,” he muttered.

I frowned. “Could it be a Rogue?”

“Maybe. But for now, just trust me—you’ll be safer mixing in with a crowd.”

I looked around. The people were dressed up like peasants, maidens, and knights. “I don’t have a costume,” I told him. “I’ll stand out even more, hanging out here.”

Greyson’s expression was severe. He gazed around before spotting a large tent. Steering me toward it, he said, “Wait in here. I’ll bring the others one at a time, so we don’t draw attention.”

I wanted to help instead of wait around like a meek little human, but Greyson’s attitude told me not to push it. There was a fierceness to him right now, an air of absolute power. He wouldn’t respond well to me doubting him. “Okay,” I conceded. “I’ll do as you say—just this once. Don’t get used to it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he scoffed. And then he watched as I entered the tent, like he was making sure I actually did as I was told.

*Asshole.*

It was very dark inside the tent, and it took her a moment for my eyes to adjust from total sunshine to the dim light. Out of nowhere, a woman rushed over. “Oh hello!”

“Um, hi?” I said awkwardly. Why was this random lady so happy to see me? Not that I minded—it was always nice to encounter friendly people, considering my current group thought growling was the best form of communication.

“You must be Stephanie Watts!” she said, looking relieved.

Before I could tell her that I was not, in fact, Stephanie Watts, another woman walked up to us, and I was shoved toward her like a sack of potatoes. “Mary, Stephanie’s finally here! Quick quick quick, everybody’s waiting!”

Oh my god, what had I gotten myself into this time?

“Who’s waiting?” I asked, confused, as the new woman presented me with a whole-ass suit of armor. Like, the whole shebang. “What’s happening?”

“Hope it fits,” the woman told me, shoving it in my hands. “Since you’re late, we can’t really do a fitting.”

“What?” These people were out of their minds. “I’m not getting into that!”

The woman huffed. “Oh come on, you have to get dressed if we want to stay on schedule! You’re next!”

I stood there, staring at her like she’d just grown flowers out of her ears. “I’m next…” I blinked rapidly, trying to search the tent for any trace of Greyson. “Next for *what*?”

**Episode 238**

The woman rushed off, leaving me alone in the tent, holding the very heavy armor. I was about to turn around and yell at her to come back, tell her that she was out of her mind and that I had no idea what was happening. But then I remembered Greyson’s words. They roamed around my head, loud and obnoxious.

*Blend in, Cali.*

*You’re constantly getting into trouble just by existing.*

*You can’t keep running into fights.*

*BLEND IN.*

“Shut up!” I grumbled at the Greyson in my head, who—surprise surprise—was as horrible and annoying as real-life Greyson. That face and body were wasted on him. Although he wasn’t a completely horrid leader, I had to give him that. And his blend in advice did make sense, all things considered. But that seemed like pretty standard hiding-from-someone-who-might-want-to-kill-you advice.

Taking a deep breath, I eyed the armor.

Well, at least now I had a costume? Blending in while wearing that would definitely be a lot easier. No enemy would ever figure out who I was if I put it on. Invigorated by that realization, I spent the next what felt like three hundred years clumsily putting on the armor.

It weighed approximately fifteen million pounds, and the helmet was hot and stuffy. I could feel myself sweating already. The openings for the eyes weren’t in the right place, which made it hard to see, and I spent another full minute trying to fix that.

Getting dressed as a wench or something would’ve been a lot easier, honestly. I wouldn’t have minded showing off some boob at this point in my life. I was probably going to die sooner than later, what with Xavier refusing to turn me and all, and getting attention for my bosom was one of the things that had never happened to me so far in life. In the magic period before you got sick of everyone staring—which as I had been told was a horrible side effect—I was ready to bet showing off your cleavage felt like being an all-powerful wizard or something.

*Bow, peasants! Bow before the force of my boobs!* I thought, trying and failing to thrust out my now armor-clad chest. I took a step forward…

And stumbled right into some guy dressed as a peasant.

“Watch where you’re going, Stephanie Watts!” he snapped.

“Wish I could, bud,” I said, because the net thingy was covering my line of vision again. “Where am I even supposed to go?”

Another dude walked up to me. “There you are, Stephanie Watts!”

This Stephanie Watts person had to be pretty well-respected, considering everybody kept full-naming her. I wished I could relate.

“Follow me,” the guy said, and led me a little further down to a… A stall? A stable stall.

“Um, excuse me, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Your steed awaits!” he said excitedly.

*Wait, I’m sorry my* what*?*

Next thing I knew, three men were helping me onto the back of a massive horse.

“Easy, horsie,” I told the horse, which seemed pretty calm. It was also beautiful, with really long eyelashes and gorgeous brown eyes and *Oh mY GoD i aM on ThE BacK oF a HorSE WHAT IS HAPPENING???*

So I hadn’t been on a horse since that time I took a pony ride with my dad at the state fair, which had been a whole long while ago. Out of all the ways I’d expected to die, death by horse had been pretty low on the list. Starting to panic, I squeaked, “Sorry, but you gotta help me get off! I’m not—”

“Ready?” one of the men said, thrusting a massive wooden stick into my hands. “But now you are!”

I blinked down at my lap and realized I was holding a huge lance. “What the heck?”

“Good luck, Stephanie Watts!” someone called.

“Good luck?” I asked the person I couldn’t see, because AN ACTUAL HORSE WAS IN MY LINE OF VISION. “Good luck for what?”

The voice giggled. “Oh, Stephanie Watts, you’re a delight!”

“I’m definitely not!” I shouted, grabbing the reins with one hand and the lance with the other. “You gotta help me with—”

Suddenly, the stable door opened, and the dark was flooded by sunlight and the sound of a cheering crowd. I squinted through the light and saw rows and rows of people, up in a bunch of bleachers like we were in the Colosseum. And then an announcer’s booming voice spoke over the PA system.

“The next match shall be between Sir Freddie Flagmire of Oak Grove and Lady Stephanie Watts of Hillsboro!”

“Wait, NO!” I screamed, through the helmet. “I don’t know how to do this! I CAN’T FIGHT THIS FREDDIE FLAMINGO GUY!”

Someone slapped the horse’s rear, and the poor thing whinnied. It galloped out of the stall and into the arena with me hanging on for dear life.

“Good horsie!” I yelled. “Please don’t let me fall!”

Thankfully, the horse was not only a beauty queen but pretty chill. My muscles were still super stiff and sore from riding on Xavier’s back all night, and I had to really work at not falling off, but at least the horse didn’t make my life *harder*. This whole situation was already horrible enough—I could barely keep my balance while holding the lance.

And as if all that wasn’t enough, I heard a war cry in the distance. “Aha! STEPHANIE WATTS!”

I looked up and saw a knight charging toward me, his lance pointing straight at me. Was this dude going to impale me? Like, FOR REAL?

*Oh god,* I thought. *The horse didn’t kill me, but that lance sure will.*

There was no montage of my life flashing before my eyes, by the way. Though imagining Xavier crying over my dead body and Greyson admitting that I was a genius was a nice fantasy to have. Lola would yell at them both for not appreciating my greatness sooner.

My poor parents. I should have called them again before going into this deceptively cute Renaissance faire. Then again, I’d technically said goodbye when I’d climbed up that tree. And then I’d almost died falling out of that same tree, but anyway. Details.

As my inner rambling escalated, I closed my eyes and waited for the clash that would probably take my life, or leave me badly injured.

It never came.

Opening them, I realized that somehow, we’d missed each other.

“I’m ALIVE!” I exclaimed, patting my beautiful and chill horse’s back. “I’m glad that’s over.”

The announcer decided it was time to speak again and ruin my short-lived happiness. “The knights will line up for round two!”

“YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME!” I shouted for the entire world to—hopefully—hear. “I’m done here—GET ME OUT OF THIS DAMN ARENA!”

A sinister laugh followed my words. “What’s the matter, Stephanie Watts?” Sir Freddie Flamingo jeered.

Jesus Christ, if ONE MORE PERSON CALLED ME BY THAT NAME, I SWEAR TO GOD—

“Is the Lady too scared?” Sir Freddie Flamingo taunted, and I froze.

*Excuse me?*

“What did you just say?” I demanded, fury overcoming every inch of my body. I’d been ready to die a minute ago, but that had been different. *This* was a challenge—Sir Freddie was challenging me. And I was many things, but scared of this whiny flamingo son of a bitch was NOT one of them. I hadn’t survived fighting werewolves just to go down because this random fake knight wanted me to.

Fuck. This. Guy.

“Are you scared?” He laughed. “Because I—”

“Prepare to die, asswipe, because I’m going to DESTROY YOU!” I bellowed, and grabbed the horse’s reins. My horse riding knowledge was truly limited—mainly that pony ride at the fair, but also watching Westerns with my dad. With the memories of them vivid in my mind, I steered my horse back around, trying to do it like the cowboys did.

Shockingly, it worked.

I was surprised by myself, and I fell more in love with my horse than ever. I wished I could wipe the sweat from my eyes, though. By the way, thank god I’d already used the bathroom, because seriously—what did knights do when they had to go?

The crowd’s jeering, mixed with cheering, interrupted my thoughts. I turned toward them and saw Xavier. He was just standing there, entirely motionless—a gorgeous, scowling, terrifying man, taller than everybody else. He was totally blending in—if blending in equaled looking like scary Greek statue in a sea of people.

*Aww, my grumpy mate*, I thought fondly, smiling to myself. *Look at him trying to be normal and failing miserably.*

“Can’t blame you for being scared!” Sir Freddie yelled, rudely interrupting my appraisal of Xavier. “After all, jousting is a man’s sport!”

My fury returning tenfold, I faced the asshole. “Are you for real right now? Have you forgotten this is the 21st century, dickhead?”

Sir Freddie laughed like a sinister, ugly tyrant. “Bring it on!”

“Oh, I WILL!” I screamed, and with a war cry, I kicked my heels into the horse’s sides. The horse, who was probably pretty pissed off too by now and just wanted a break, galloped forward. Charging toward Sir Freddie, I held the lance tightly, riding flawlessly—until my focus was ruined.

With a gasp, I watched as someone came up behind Xavier and grabbed him.

**Episode 239**

I pulled on the reins and turned my now, somewhat trusty steed toward the stands. The way my heart was pounding, I had to wonder if people could hear it echoing through my armor. But honestly, the only thing I cared about was Xavier. He’d been grabbed by someone in the crowd—was it the wolf Greyson had warned me about?

I had to save him.

I kicked my heels and urged my horsie forward, forcing people to leap out of my way. I looked around, trying to figure out where Xavier could have gone. My visor fell down with a clank, and suddenly I could barely see. The lance was heavy in my grip, and my horse galloped so hard it felt like I was about to bounce right out of the saddle. But I couldn’t give up.

Xavier wouldn’t give up on me.

At least, I hoped he wouldn’t, not after everything we’d been through together. I knew we were still figuring out how to move forward after everything that had happened, but… You didn’t just fall out of love that quickly. I definitely didn’t.

But where *was* he?

The people in empire waisted dresses and chainmail were all blurring together. Xavier and his captor were lost in the chaos. What if I never found him? How could he have been moved so fast?

“This shouldn’t count!” I heard Sir Freddie complaining loudly behind me. Every second, his voice was getting more whiney and less period-appropriate. I turned around to see him pulling his helmet off. So much for Freddie Flagmire of Oak Grove. More like Freddie Freckles of Ginger Hair and Patchy Goatee. Such an asswipe.

“You come back here and fight me like a man!” he called, stomping his foot. “Even though you’re just a *girl.”*

I rolled my eyes. Fuck. This. Guy. If I’d been able to figure out how to give him the finger in these weird gloves I was wearing, I would have. But I had to find Xavier—he was the priority. I slowed my horse as much as I could and scanned the horizon.

Then I saw him. Half-concealed by the stands, Xavier was being dragged behind bales of hay lining a fence that must have been at least a hundred yards away. I kicked my heels again, wheeling my horse around to try and find a way out of this arena. But far from taking off, my horse reared up on its hind legs instead, leaving me clinging to its neck.

“Stop!” A security guard wearing a navy blue polo under a plastic-y looking breastplate approached me on his own horse. “HALT THY STEED, MA’AM.”

“Are you for real?” I asked. Was everyone here required to speak that way? “Sorry, but… NO WAY!” I was determined to find a way out of there. I could feel the beat of my horse’s hooves in my chest as we wheeled around the arena. The whole thing was lined with bales of hay. Jeez, did this place have a deal with a farm?

And thanks to my incredible, amazing luck, the lowest of the hay walls was lit on fire like some kind of decorative torch. Wonderful.

My horse, also sensing the danger, lurched to a stop, and I almost flew right over her—or his, I wasn’t really sure—neck. I heard a whinny behind me—the security guard was gaining on me.

“Now is thy end, fair—” He stopped, clearly frustrated with the lines he’d been told to use. “Ma’am, you need to stop!”

For a second, I found myself wondering how much he was being paid to stick to this stilted Olde English. But then I shook my head. I didn’t have time to worry about this man’s wages! I needed to get out of there and get over to Xavier before it was too late.

I looked around. There was chaos everywhere. But the path to the flaming wall was clear. I tugged on my horse’s reins, wondering if I should just hop off and try my luck on foot. Maybe it would have been easier if I’d been less conspicuous, and blended into the crowd a bit more.

But my horse was *not* paying attention to me because, if anything, it sped up. And it was barreling right toward the fiery hay wall. *Great*. I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for impact. Would this hurt worse than a wolf bite?

I held my breath and waited. But the seconds went by, and instead of feeling my hair burning off my skull I felt… weightless. And while I definitely felt heat, it didn’t feel like I was actually on fire. I opened my eyes and found myself *airborne*.

My wondrous, gender indeterminate horse had leapt over the fire and gotten me away from my enemies! Er, faire security… This place was getting to me.

“Let’s go, horsie!” I cried, giving my four-legged friend a pat.

Back in sync, my horse picked up the pace and took me toward the tent I’d seen Xavier being dragged in. I really had a way with animals. ‘Lady Caliana Hart, Lover of Wolves and Whisperer to Horses’. That had a nice ring to it. Maybe if I had a rematch with Freddie, I’d be able to kick his ass for real.

But then I spotted Xavier, over the fence, beyond the bales of hay. He was struggling with a man dressed in black, who was taller than him but also skinnier. But Xavier’s rippling muscles were no match for whatever strength this guy was packing.

I spurred my horse onward.

“Come on, we got this!” This next wall was higher, but the lack of fire made me confident that we’d be able to clear it.

My horse’s breath was coming in heaves. I didn’t feel much better as I felt us lift off to clear the hay wall. Xavier couldn’t die. Not without knowing that I loved him. Not *ever*.

For a moment, I felt the peace of being suspended in the air, with a view of everything around me. And then we began to descend.

We slammed to the ground and I almost fell right off my horse. We were still gunning for Xavier and his opponent. How could I get to this guy without hurting Xavier?

“Xavier!” I screamed, trying to let him know I was here, hoping he’d be able to shove the man in black in front of my horse for a good old-fashioned trampling.

But before Xavier could even turn to look at me, the man on black slammed him into the ground. He and Xavier grappled, a blur of limbs.

I wondered why Xavier didn’t just shift. At least partially. Sure, it was possible a few people would see, but it was worth the risk. He couldn’t just let this maniac kill him!

What was I supposed to do? My palms were sweating inside my armor, and I felt more useless with every passing second.

I could try to aim my lance at the guy. But what if I missed and hit Xavier? Trying to help Xavier in the fight would be pointless if I hurt him. And this stupid armor would really slow me down.

I was getting closer and closer… There wasn’t much time left for me to decide.

The man pinned Xavier to the ground, and I pulled on the reins as hard as I could. Trampling Xavier was NOT an option. My horse began to skid to a stop, neighing angrily from the sudden change. But the horse stopped.

I wasn’t so lucky.

I hurtled forward, my stomach turning over. My heart caught in my throat, and I wondered if this was it. This was how I died, at a fucking Renaissance faire in full armor looking like a massive nerd. Soaring out of the saddle, I sailed over the horse’s head, and flew toward Xavier and the man in black. I gripped my lance tightly, even though there was no way it could help me now.

The man fighting Xavier must have sensed me coming, because he turned my way. *Shit*. I was only able to make eye contact with him for a second before my lance pierced him in the chest and pinned him to the ground, impaling him.

GROSS GROSS GROSS!

Clinging to the lance asit stuck straight out of the guy’s body, I must have looked like some kind of violent pole vaulter. But even this didn’t stop me.

I was still moving, still hurtling forward. I tried to brace myself, not looking forward to hitting the ground in my armor. Going at this speed, there was no way I wasn’t going to knock myself out with my own momentum. But at least Xavier was safe. I’d stopped his attacker!

And now I was a murderer.

Instead of hitting the ground, I felt strong, powerful arms seize me in a tight grip. I heard a sharp exhale and then a soft thud. Xavier had caught me, and now we were lying on the soft grass together. My helmet rolled off, and suddenly there was nothing between us.

I looked into his eyes, the lance casting a shadow across his face. And for a second, I was elated. I’d *saved* him! He was still here! That had to count for something!

We both looked into each other’s eyes, breathing heavily… I opened my mouth to say something to Xavier, but then closed it. A proper reunion could come later.

Jolting upright, I turned to where the man had been. I expected something gruesome. I’d STABBED HIM. WITH A LANCE. This absolutely had not been part of my expectations for the day.

But instead of seeing an impaled opponent, all I saw was a smoldering pile of ash.

**Episode 240**

What. The. HELL!?

I looked at Xavier, his eyes glinting through the smoky haze coming off the charred remains of the MAN I’D JUST IMPALED. Silently, I begged Xavier with my eyes to give me some kind of explanation. When he didn’t give me one, I composed myself the best I could and got out a, “WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED, XAVIER?! DID THAT GUY JUST DISAPPEAR?”

He took a breath, looked at me completely seriously. Was I about to get some answers for once in my damn life? “Vampire,” he said.

I rolled off of him, coughing up the—apparently undead—remains I’d just inhaled. I struggled to my feet, my armor clanking.

“*What*?” I asked, my voice sounding faint and tinny inside my metal suit. I was SO not in the mood to be pranked right now. *Vampires*?

But before Xavier could even open his mouth to explain, there was a roar of excitement from our left. Xavier clenched his jaw, shooting me a look before turning to face the crowd that had gathered around us. Renaissance fair attendees of all shapes and sizes where hooting and hollering at the show we’d just put on. Which, of course, hadn’t been a show but a supernatural crime scene.

“That was the best jousting competition ever!” shouted a girl in milkmaid braids, clutching at her pink cheeks.

“Lady Stephanie isn’t a jouster.” I heard Freddie of Freckle’s voice whine out from the back of the crowd. “Jousters follow the *rules!”*

*What a tool*, I thought. But nobody seemed to care what he thought. They just kept clapping, which didn’t make a lot of sense to me. We hadn’t put on a show, but they looked so happy, I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. I didn’t dare look at Xavier, because I was sure he’d find a way to make my saving his life a bad thing. But what was I supposed to do? Let him die rather than risk exposing a little paranormal BS?

“Kiss!” Milkmaid Braid’s squire friend shouted.

A chant of “*Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!”* began, and now I HAD to look at Xavier. His lips were pursed, and I could tell that he was trying not to murder everyone. All I wanted to do was feel his stubble against my cheeks and taste his lips. So I leaned forward and pressed my mouth to his.

His hand snaked up my back to cradle the back of my head as his lips captured mine. I felt my body melt inside my suit of armor as he slid his tongue inside my mouth. I tried to force myself to remember we were being watched. And I was shy! Or at least, I used to be.

“Cali,” Xavier murmured against my lips.

“A little more,” I mumbled, nibbling on his lower lip.

“We have to go.” Xavier was clearly losing patience with me, and I wantedto care, I really did. But it just felt so *right* to be kissing him after our fight. And I could tell he felt the same way. Even if he didn’t want to. It would be so easy to get caught up in each other instead of vampires, secrets, and curses.

But he gently took me by the waist and gave me the softest push away. I obliged him and did my best to stand up. But my muscles screamed at me, exhausted from riding both Xavier and my horse.

“Cali.” Xavier’s voice was sharper than it had been before.

“I’m trying,” I promised. “This armor’s just really heavy.”

Xavier got up and turned his back to me. For a second, I thought he was going to leave me there and I opened my mouth either to scream at him or beg him to stay, I wasn’t sure which. But then I turned and saw him grab something off the ground and turn back toward me, a bemused look on his face.

And with one swift movement, he scooped me up in his arms and carried me back toward the tents. The crowd went absolutely wild, and I couldn’t resist blowing a kiss or two to our fans.

Once we were definitely out of earshot I turned to Xavier.

“So what the hell happened?” I asked. “Did you seriously say ‘vampires’, or was I hallucinating? That guy totally disappeared, right?”

“Not here, Caliana,” Xavier answered gruffly. Full name. I was somehow in trouble. And not in a sexy way.

I huffed, and Xavier grimaced down at me. If ‘stoic’ had a picture next to it in the dictionary, it really should be of him.

“Not now,” he insisted, before I could pester him more.

“Yes now!” I said, frustration mounting inside of me. “How about this? If you don’t explain, I’ll scream.”

Xavier sighed. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re very difficult?”

“No, just that I’m incredibly good looking,” I deadpanned. The corner of his mouth lifted, slightly.

“Then be proud of yourself, good looking,” he said. “You just staked your first vampire.”

I groaned in frustration. First werewolves, then witches, and now vampires! I was so sick of always getting half of the story. *Less* than half.

“I have a serious question: Am I actually just living in *Twilight*?” I asked. “Or *The* *Vampire Diaries* or *Buffy*? Do I have to worry about anything else just popping up randomly?”

“If you don’t shut up,” Xavier said, clearly reaching the end of his rope, “I *will* drop you.”

“You can’t just say ‘vampires’ and not expect me to have questions.” I threaded my fingers through his hair. Now, if he dropped me, he could enjoy a not-so-attractive bald spot. Then again, knowing him, he’d probably find a way to pull it off.

Xavier didn’t say anything.

“You get that, right?” I continued. “Also where did he *go?* I just stabbed him in front of a huge crowd and he disappeared.”

“I’m not going into it in front of all these people.” Xavier was starting to sound like a broken record.

“Fine.” I let it go, relaxing into his arms. “But the least you could do is thank me for saving your life.”

Xavier scowled and I beamed up at him, sweet as pie.

“I would have handled it,” he grumbled. “I just didn’t want to kill him in front of everyone.”

“If you’re waiting for me to apologize, it’s not going to happen,” I told him. “And whether you admit it or not, you needed me and I was there. That’s how it’s supposed to be.”

He just kept looking straight ahead. But was that a smile I saw on his face? I liked to think it was.

Xavier carried me past the crowds. Past the people clamoring to congratulate us for putting on the best show ever. How we’d managed to disintegrate a dude without any of them seeing was beyond me. Xavier slipped around countless tents and booths until we were in the back, out of view in a small tent at the edge of the fair.

“I want to know what happened.” I asked, now that we were alone.

Xavier didn’t answer me. He just stood there with that infuriatingly blank look on his face. I squirmed in his arms, feeling like a child.

“Put me down!” I ordered, through gritted teeth.

“Fine.” Xavier dropped me, and I crashed to the ground like a basket full of canned goods.

“You can be a real dick, you know?” I looked up at him from the ground.

“So can you,” Xavier fired back. “What the hell were you doing? Entering a jousting match?”

“It kind of just happened,” I felt my cheeks flaming as I rose to my feet. “Greyson shoved me into the tent. He told me he smelled another wolf, and then he left to go get the rest of the pack.”

“You shouldn’t be talking to Greyson.” Xavier’s expression darkened at the sound of his brother’s name.

I sighed. I knew this was a sore spot for him. For both of us. But we WERE traveling together. And Greyson was the Redwood Pack’s Alpha, at least for now. What was I supposed to do?

And even if we never figured that out, even if Xavier and Colton went Rogue and I went with them… Would we ever really be free of what Greyson had done to us? What I’d done?

“I didn’t seek him out, Xavier.” I tried to keep my voice even, not looking for a fight.

“Whatever.” Xavier shrugged it off. “But I’m pretty sure Greyson didn’t tell you to make a spectacle of yourself. We need to keep a low profile, and you did the opposite of that.”

“What do you suggest we do?” I struggled not to sound sarcastic. Xavier needed to be in control right now, and I could give him that.

“First, we need to get you out of that ridiculous costume,” Xavier clearly wanted to lecture me for my wrongdoing. But I wasn’t going to make it easy by cooperating.

“Okay.” I smiled sweetly. “But on one condition. First, you’re going to tell me about vampires.”

**Episode 241**

Xavier narrowed his eyes, annoyed at my question, which I thought was extremely valid given the circumstances.

“Fine. Like werewolves, vampires are also real.” Xavier all but rolled his eyes at me. “You’ve seen them in movies, read about them—you get the general idea.”

That wasn’t enough. Not NEARLY ENOUGH.

“No.” I shook my head. “I *don’t* get the general idea, Xavier. You can’t just toss vampires out there like they’re a normal thing everyone’s used to! Like fruit, or kittens!”

“Kittens?” Xavier raised an eyebrow. “Cali, what the hell? You’ve heard of vampires, right? I’m telling you they’re real. That’s all you need to know.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but he cut me off.

“Let’s go.” He took my hand, and my stomach fluttered. “We need to get changed so we can blend in out there.”

We stuck our heads out of the tent. For a second, I had an image in my head of us peeking outside, looking all *Scooby-Doo*, and it almost made me giggle. But Xavier, his mind fully on the task at hand, found an opening in the sea of people spilling out from various tents and other attractions and pulled me into the center of the crowd.

“I saw a costume tent when I was walking around before,” Xavier told me, booking it toward a red and blue striped tent. Jeez, how was he walking so fast? Wasn’t he tired from running like, a hundred miles yesterday? I was tired, and all I’d done was cling to him for dear life.

“Don’t try to change the subject,” I growled, hustling after him. “Mr. ’I’m telling you they’re real.’ You can’t expect me to be satisfied with an explanation as lukewarm as that.”

“I don’t sound like that,” Xavier snapped at me.

“Umm, you do,” I told him. “Now tell me about vam—”

“Do not say it.” Xavier turned to me, his expression hard.

I took a deep breath and tried to think of a way for both of us to get what we wanted. Relationships were built on compromise, right?

Xavier looked back at me, and he must have seen how red in the face I was from trying to keep up, because he slowed down ever so slightly.

“Can you please tell me more about… *kittens?*” I gave him my sweetest smile.

Xavier huffed out a little laugh, clearly appreciating my restraint. My heart soared; at least I was breaking him down bit by bit.

“What do you want to know?” he asked, keeping his eyes on the tent up ahead.

I racked my mind for questions, but where was I even supposed to start?

“Well, they drink blood,” Xavier murmured, clearly taking pity on me. “They don’t like garlic, and they can’t see themselves in mirrors. Some turn into bats, but not all of them—”

“Stop it.” I tore my hand out of his grip, annoyed. “That’s a Wikipedia entry, not an explanation. I want to know the real story.”

Xavier slowed his pace even more to match mine, which I really appreciated. We walked in silence for a few seconds while he thought about the best thing to say.

“Honestly, I don’t really know.” He shrugged. “Colton and I have had run ins with… *kittens* in the past. But as a general rule, kittens and…”

He trailed off pointing to himself and looking to me for a code word.

I beamed at him. “Puppies.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Kittens and *puppies* aren’t really each other’s biggest fans.” Xavier looked like he couldn’t believe the words that were coming out of his mouth. “So we try to avoid crossing paths.”

“Makes sense.” I nodded, sidestepping the ‘Village Drunk’, who was spilling mead all over the place. “But why did he attack you? You were just watching the jousting match.”

“Who knows how vam— how *they* think?” Xavier shrugged. “Maybe he didn’t like my face. But if I came across one, I’d want to kill it, too. It’s in our nature, I guess.”

As much as I wanted to object to someone not liking Xavier’s face, I knew that was far from the point.

“This is *so* stupid.” I shook my head. “You’d kill someone on pure instinct?”

Xavier looked at me, his eyes flashing with anger. “I know all I need to know about *them*,” he told me, fists clenched. “They’d do the same to me. It’s about survival. And that’s what I’m focused on now. Surviving. So get out of that armor so we can find the others and get out of here. That guy you took care of could have friends, and if Greyson’s right—which I’m *not* saying he is—and there’s another wolf here who’s not with us, that could be trouble. Not to mention the Manus Cruentae curse. The longer we stay here—separated from the pack—the easier it’ll be for our enemies to pick us off.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. I didn’t like the set of Xavier’s jaw, either. And I REALLY didn’t like being someone Xavier felt he had to look after, instead of someone who could actually help when things got tough. But I was human, I guess. Before I could say anything, Xavier pulled me into the back of a tent.

Rows of costumes separated us from the people working the front of the tent. We were completely surrounded by corsets and thigh high boots and puffy shirts. This might have been really fun in another context. I started looking through the outfits, but my armor was starting to seem fan-freakin-tastic. I wondered if there was a single thing here that wouldn’t make me look like a total dork.

Xavier scanned through the racks next to me and plucked a gown off a hanger, holding it out to me.

“That one is *way* too low cut.” I shoved it away. “You want me to blend in, not get arrested for indecent exposure.”

I saw a dark green—significantly more modest—dress, with flowers stitched into it in gold thread. That would do and make me feel like a little wood nymph. I pulled it off the hanger, threw it over the rack and started stripping off my armor and everything under it.

Xavier laughed. I wondered if I had something on my face or something.

“What?” I asked, self-conscious.

“Remember when we first met?” he asked, a smile turning up the corners of his lips. His eyes were soft. “How shy you were? Look at you now. Losing your clothes without a thought.”

I felt my cheeks flush.

“Maybe that’s because I’m so used to seeing you werewolves naked all the time,” I shot back, unable to keep from smiling. “I think I’m actually starting to get used to it. But don’t ever call me a nudist, okay?”

Xavier just grinned at me as I pulled the dress on over my head.

“You look pretty in that.” He watched me lace up the leather vest that came with the dress—the one that made my waist smaller, and pushed my boobs up. *Tastefully*. “Being a wench suits you.”

I smacked him and he laughed as he pulled on his costume, which was honestly just a white shirt and pants. And the leather pants were tight. Very tight. And very complimentary.

“I’m not a wench,” I said, bringing my gaze up to his face when he turned around. “I’m a fucking lady.”

I peeked at myself in the mirror. Huh. I actually looked pretty good, sans the mud still kind of in my hair. The skirt was full and had a nice swish to it. If I were younger, or drunker, I’d probably have spun around to watch it fan out.

“Whatever,” Xavier scoffed. “Stop fawning over yourself, we have to go.”

My cheeks heated. Had he been checking me out, too? Xavier peeked out of the back of the tent, looking for another gap. After a few seconds, he offered me his hand and I took it.

Just like before, we weaved in and out of the crowd. But now, it felt different. It felt like Xavier and I were doing it as a team.

“There she is!”

*Shit.*

We turned, and I saw a few security guards lumbering toward us. Xavier pulled on my arm and hurried us in the opposite direction, pushing through the crowd—maybe a bit rougher than was necessary.

I knew we were in danger, but my stomach was full of butterflies. Xavier’s tight grip on my hand, the way we’d been checking each other out… Yeah, we were in trouble, but we were in trouble *together*. And being together with Xavier in any way after everything we’d been through felt… amazing. Like old times.

Xavier slowed down, and I almost collided with his back. I peeked over his shoulder and saw more security heading right for us.

Xavier slid his arm around me, putting his hand at the small of my back. And so much was going on, I was sure he didn’t feel me shiver at his touch as he pushed me in another direction.

“We have to hurry.” We rushed through the crowd. At this point, I was jogging to keep up with Xavier’s brisk walk.

We approached a small circle of tents—

“THERE'S THE CHEATER!” Sir Freddie cried, pointing right at me, more guards flanking him. “THAT’S HER!”

We immediately turned around, but there were more security guards behind us. We were totally trapped.

“SEIZE THAT WENCH!” Freddie yelled, his voice cracking.

**Episode 242**

Xavier and I scanned the area frantically, searching for a way out. But it was no use. We were surrounded. And now, even the people who weren’t after us were staring at us. I looked at Xavier and saw that his jaw was clenched, and there was a grim look on his face.

For a second, I was worried that Xavier was going to go all werewolf and start ripping limbs. But he wouldn’t risk it… Right? No. No way…

Sir Freddie approached us, his helmet in his hands and sneer on his stupid smug face. He pointed at me theatrically, and it was all I could do not to roll my eyes.

“Guards!” he cried out, having regained his period appropriate accent. “Arrest that wench!”

“Are you fuc—freaking,” I quickly corrected myself, seeing some kids watching, “kidding me?”

The guards glanced at each other uneasily. A clear “*Should you do it, or should I?”* energy passed between them. Maybe this situation wouldn’t be as hard to slip out of as I’d thought.

Freddie cleared his throat.

“In the name of King Bastidious,” he said, laying it on even thicker, clenching his fist and waving it around in his fury, “I *demand* you arrest this destructive excuse for a knight at once! I have no doubt he would want this insolent dolt brought before him. *Lady* Stephanie, indeed!”

“Dude, are you for real?” I blurted out. “Do you not understand what century we’re in?”

Perhaps now would be a good time to let them know I wasn’t actually Lady Stephanie Watts. At least to clear her name—she hadn’t done anything wrong. Before I could decide the best course of action, Freddie’s backup finally spoke up.

“Bro.” One of the polo-wearing security guards stepped forward. “We’re just security guards. We can’t arrest anybody.”

Freddie’s face practically matched his hair at this point. Maybe if this had been a less stressful time, I might have laughed at his near-implosion. But right now, I was too busy trying to keep an eye out for murderous werewolves and vampires. This all definitely went against Greyson’s “blend in” advice.

“Then I demand she be brought before the king!” Freddie cried.

“Okay, roger that.” The security guard nodded. “Will you please… accompany us? My lady?”

“Fine.” I stepped forward, pulling Xavier along. Going with them seemed like the best option. That way, everyone in the immediate area would stop staring at us. Freddie sneered at me before turning on his heel to lead the way, seemingly satisfied that I was complying.

We moved forward and—now that we weren’t going to have a dramatic public duel or anything—we were largely ignored as we walked through the crowd.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Xavier whispered in my ear, and I tried not to shiver at the feeling of his hot breath on my neck.

“What else am I supposed to do?” I asked. “We were attracting too much attention. At least now Freddie’s not screaming and making everyone stare at us. Now we can *blend*.”

“Freddie, huh?” Xavier sized up the gangly nerd strutting his stuff in front of us, clearly proud as punch to have ‘caught’ us.

“That’s *Sir* Freddie Flagmire of Oak Grove, to you,” I joked, elbowing him in the ribs.

Xavier snorted. “God.” He rolled his eyes. “I’m not taking my eyes off you, okay? And if Freddie the Fuckwit pulls any bullshit, I’ll make sure he loses his lance up his own ass.”

Normally, that kind of joke would be funny. But considering what had happened to Tony when he’d made a move on me… The whole, getting dismembered thing… While Freddie sucked, I didn't think he deserved to die.

“Just play it cool,” I warned Xavier, squeezing his hand. “This is just a stupid Renaissance faire. It’ll be fine. They’ll like… poke me with a foam sword or charge me a bunch of fake coins or something, I’m sure. I’ve survived murderous Rogue werewolves, witches, underground caves, subterranean forests… mushrooms.”

“Maybe you should be a knight.” Xavier squeezed my hand back and I grinned.

“Oh, I’m already brainstorming potential titles,” I assured him. “But, what I’m trying to say is, we’ve handled worse than this.”

Of course, that was the moment I spotted that weird jester from before. He was juggling and laughing at his own crude medieval limericks. *“There once was a squire from Nantucket…”*  I rolled my eyes for the millionth time since arriving at the faire. Suddenly, I wasn’t so sure this jester wasn’t the worst thing I’d ever seen. Maybe it’d be easier to take my chances with another vampire. At least they disappeared.

Trumpets blared up ahead as we approached a stadium, rimmed by colorful flags. A large sign read, *The Royal Court of King Bastidious.* I actually felt my stomach clench for a second before I reminded myself that all of this was fake. I wasn’t in trouble with anyone in possession of any actual authority.

“Are you sure about this?” Xavier asked, presumably seeing my face fall.

“I got this.” I nodded, smiling at him. “How bad could it be?”

And with that, I held my head high and walked into the stadium.

The crowd in the stands was larger than I’d anticipated. I recognized a few faces from the fencing match, looking at me and whispering to each other. Some of them even booed as Xavier and I marched toward a platform that stood just beneath a large throne that had been slathered with gold paint.

The duo of trumpeters I’d heard from a distance bleated out a short melody as a man with a tiny harp—a lute?—rose his voice to the heavens. “All rise for the honorable and just King Bastidious!”

On his heels was a man who looked a lot like a middle school math teacher, wearing purple velvet, a plastic crown, and drinking out of a mug. He stumbled toward the throne, clearly having overindulged on the mead, and the fake jewels around his neck rattled loudly.

The crowd burst into thunderous applause, screaming for King Bastidious like he was a rock star instead of a dude in a cheap costume. If people were taking this that seriously, I didn’t know what that meant for the “trial.”

To the King’s credit, he played the part fairly well. He waved to his constituents and placed a hand over his heart, showing them all how touched he was by their enthusiasm. I had a 50/50 shot that he thought he really was a king and not a guy in a costume.

“What charges have befallen this fair maiden and her strapping companion?” the king asked, in a much better accent than Freddie’s.

Speaking of… Sir Freddie stepped forward and took a deep bow, his head almost touching the ground.

“The defendant”—he pointed at me with a flourish—“is charged with the impersonation of a Lady of the court, stealing a horse and armor, and endangering the welfare of your Majesty’s loyal peasants.”

“Wait, seriously?” I asked without thinking. I heard Xavier sigh behind me. I turned to see him looking at me, awestruck. I couldn’t resist giving him a wink. Was I Luna material now?

It was good for him to know he’d bagged a badass for a mate. He shouldn’t forget that.

The King took a big swill from his mug.

“These are serious charges, m’lady.” He rested his chin in his hand as he mulled it over. “Does the defendant have anything else to say for herself before I pass my judgement?”

All eyes were on me, and I suddenly felt far from badass. I was in a stolen dress in front of a bunch of people speaking old English. How was I supposed to convince them to let me go?

“If I may, your Royal…” I searched for the right word. “King…liness? Sir Freddie shouldn’t be trusted as a witness. You see— Well, he’s kind of a little bitch.”

I heard an equal smattering of gasps and laughter from the crowd. The king choked on his drink, and one of his footmen had to pat him on the back. Hard.

Freddie spluttered, clearly not used to be called a bitch when he was playing knight.

“My liege, I *do* take offense—”

But the King slammed his scepter on the ground and cried “Enough!”

The crowd fell silent, and even I waited breathlessly for him to pass his sentence.

“The accused will prepare for my judgement,” the King decreed, really milking it. He looked to the crowd, drinking in their anticipation as much as whatever booze was in his mug.

This was so, so stupid. These people had no idea of the real dangers that surrounded them. Werewolves and vampires and who knew what else, at this point? I wasn’t ruling anything out. If I saw a zombie tomorrow, I probably wouldn’t even be fazed. I was still kind of holding out that they were real after everything with Ryker.

The King rose from his throne, his cape billowing out behind him. He pointed at me and I gulped, despite everything.

“Lady Stephanie Watts.” He made his voice carry as far as he could. “You have been found guilty of all charges. Execute her immediately!”

So much for blending in…

**Episode 243**

“WHAT?” I cried out, but my voice was drowned out by the roar of the crowd. People were cheering and stomping their feet at the thought of my imminent ‘death’.

How had this stupid thing gotten even stupider? I had REAL PROBLEMS, FREDDIE!

“That’ll teach her.” Freddie puffed out his chest, extremely proud of himself. I felt the urge to punch him right in the face. Had hanging out with werewolves made me more violent?

The King drained whatever was in his mug, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. He topped off the display by belching loudly. *Eww*.

One of the security guards grabbed me by the arm, murmured an apology and led me toward the center of the arena. My palms started to sweat when I saw a man in a black robe, holding a huge axe as he walked over to meet us. He was the textbook definition of an executioner. Obviously, all this stuff was fake—but still, it didn’t feel great, being led to a big guy with a huge decapitation axe, in front of a crowd that was calling for my death.

I looked out at the crowd. Surely these people didn’t really want to watch me fake die. What was fun about that? But when I looked over, all I saw was animated faces and people grinning and gesturing wildly to each other in anticipation as they got up from their seats and filed out of the arena.

I looked over my shoulder at Xavier, wondering if he’d help me break free. But he just looked back at me and shook his head. His message was clear: I was on my own.

What had I gotten myself into? I was a sitting duck for a vampire or that other wolf. And the laughing stock of the faire.

“Hey.” I turned to the security guard at my shoulder, who had STEVE embroidered on his polo. “What’s going on here? Where’s everyone going?”

“All I know is we’re going with them,” Steve admitted. “Sorry—I usually do night shifts at Target, so I’m new to all this too.”

“Great, thanks.” I shuffled along as we wound through the crowd.

Melded cheering and jeers filled my ears. Among the random noise, I definitely made out “Chop her head!” and “Freddie IS a bitch!” That second one made me laugh a little, but mostly I just wanted all of this to be over. I needed to get back to the pack and make sure everyone was safe.

I saw a flash of blond and turned my head to see Greyson watching me from the crowd. His eyes were cold, and his mouth was set in a hard line. Disdain rolled off of him in waves as he watched me walk to my ‘death’. It looked like shaming silly girls was hereditary, because disappointment in me was one of the few things Xavier and his brothers had in common. And yeah, maybe I deserved it. Greyson had told me to keep a low profile, and I definitely hadn’t managed it.

But maybe he shouldn’t have shoved me into the jousting tent!

As we continued our march, I wondered if I’d ever stop feeling like a nuisance. I’d killed a vampire today, and I still was being made to feel like a total zero. How was that fair? Couldn’t they cut me some slack? There was a learning curve, here!

Eventually, we reached a clearing with a few basic carnival attractions. Including a colorful, giant, dunking tank.

Shit.

The tank was dressed up with cheesy, cardboard cutouts to make it look like a medieval castle. But it wasn’t fooling anyone.

“A dunk tank?” I stopped in my tracks. “This is my punishment? I didn’t even do anything!”

Steve raised his eyebrows, and a small part of me felt betrayed. I’d thought Steve was kind of on my side. Now, he was just another person who thought I was at fault.

“I didn’t do anything INTENTIONALLY!” I said, amending my statement. The water looked so cold. And what if it wasn’t clean? Who knew how many kids have splashed around in there?

I wrenched my arm out of Steve’s grasp.

“I don’t want to do this,” I told him, hoping he’d maybe take pity on me. That, or I’d be able to make a run for it.

“Sorry.” Steve gave me a not unkind smile. “It’s part of the waiver you signed to get in. I saw someone dropping chlorine tablets in the tank a while ago, if that makes you feel better.”

It did. But only a tiny bit.

“Fine,” I sighed. This wasn’t Steve’s fault. It was just my horrible luck.

Steve helped me up the rickety stairs to the dunk tank and onto a super precarious looking wooden plank that hovered just above the water. My legs dangled below me, my toes skimming the water. It was *definitely* cold.

I took a breath. It was just water. And maybe the nerds around here had super terrible aim, and I wouldn’t even have to go in.

As if on cue, Sir Freddie emerged from the crowd. Maybe I wasn’t as unlucky as I thought—there was no *way* that guy had a good arm.

“I demand the first opportunity to extract justice from this unlawful crone,” he called at the top of his voice, arms spread wide.

God, this guy SUCKED*.*

Freddie approached a mark on the ground with the solemnity of an Olympic gymnast getting ready for their floor routine. He turned to the executioner, who handed him a leather ball.

“Any last words, you miserable wench?” Freddie sneered, looking me up and down in my new dress.

“Yeah, bite me!” I yelled through cupped hands, annoyance bubbling up inside me. “And maybe reconsider that goatee, because it’s not a great look!”

The crowd oohed and ahhed, and Freddie’s face went a shade of red I hadn’t seen yet. He clenched his teeth, and his face contorted with concentration. He wound up like a softball player and hurled the leather ball my way.

I tensed, preparing myself for the ice-cold water.

But there was no need for that. Freddie’s ball fell just short of the target and rolled to a stop on the ground.

The crowd burst into laughter. I joined them. Seriously, that was an embarrassing showing. And I knew a thing or two about public humiliation.

I stuck my tongue out at him Freddie unable to resist rubbing it in a little bit. Maybe that would teach him to play a little better with others. I waved to him like a Miss America contestant as he disappeared back into the crowd, head hung low.

“Bye Freddie!” I called out. “Hope you’re a better jouster than you are a thrower. But I kind of doubt it!”

Then there was a commotion in the crowd.

“I’m next!” a voice called out. My happiness died a quick, painful death.

Maya pushed her way to the front, beaming. I shook my head and looked to Steve, full of desperation. Maya wasn’t one of them. She wearing *jeans,* for god’s sake! She had no right to get involved in this! I really didn’t want to have to fight werewolves and vampires in wet socks. That just wasn’t fair!

I opened my mouth—maybe to repent for my crimes, or maybe to call Maya a witch and say she shouldn't be allowed a turn. But it was too late.

The executioner dropped a ball in Maya’s hand and she shot me a wolfish grin.

It stung when I realized Xavier wasn’t going to stop her. Was it because he was dealing with more important things? Or because he thought I deserved to be punished?

The next thing I knew, the ball was hitting the bullseye. Dead center. And then the air was knocked out of my lungs by the freezing cold water that engulfed me.

At least under water, I couldn’t hear the crowd’s laughter. The chlorine stung my eyes, and I found myself a little comforted by the fact that Steve’s promise had held true.

I looked at the crowd through the plexiglass. Most of them were almost falling over laughing and clapping. But there was something else.

A small, green light was hovering just over the crowd.

A wisp.

And it was floating above the head of someone I couldn’t quite make out.

I swiped at the plexiglass, trying to make out the shape of the person the wisp was trying to show to me. But they were still blurry.

I heard a voice whispering in my ear. But its words were garbled. Something about… crustaceans? Were there shellfish at the bottom of this tank? That couldn’t be sanitary. Or healthy for them given the chlorine.

But as I rose to the surface to breathe, the voice kept whispering.

“*Blood… Death…*”

What? These messages would be so much easier to interpret if they were actually *intelligible*.

A strong arm grabbed me by the back of my dress and yanked me to the surface. I gasped, filling my lungs with air and feeling goosebumps erupt across my skin. I gasped—partly to get more air, but also because I’d just realized something.

The voice wasn’t warning me about crustaceans. Of COURSE it wasn’t. It was warning me about the Manus Cruentae.

They were here.

**Episode 244**

I wiped frantically at my eyes as Steve the Security Guard pulled me from the water. I whipped my head around until I spotted Xavier pushing through the crowd.

“Thanks, Steve,” I murmured as I tripped over my feet and into Xavier’s arms.

“Bye, Stephanie!” Steve called out behind me. “There’s hot chocolate at the stand near the parking lot if you need to warm up!”

Xavier pulled me forward, in the exact same direction I’d seen the wisp and the blurry figure… the Manus Cruentae. I couldn’t let him get any closer. I felt panic rising from my chest into my throat. I had to stop this. I couldn’t let Xavier get hurt.

I planted my feet and Xavier turned to look at me, his expression annoyed. Would he ever realize that I didn’t do stuff like this just to inconvenience him?

“We have to get everyone out of here, now,” I told him, teeth chattering. Fucking HELL it was cold!

It was hard to imagine a fight Xavier couldn’t win. Even after the Lupo Finale. But I couldn’t risk it. I couldn’t let us cross paths with the people who’d killed Lilac. I’d let them kill me before I let them hurt him. Didn’t Xavier know that?

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” Xavier said through clenched teeth. “But you’re not moving, and that’s making it kind of difficult.”

“We can’t go that way.” I tugged on his arm, desperate to get him away from the danger. I wished I was bigger, stronger, more convincing. I searched for the words that would make him understand quickly, that would save our lives.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Xavier asked, refusing to budge.

“The Manus Cruentae are here,” I blurted out, my words running together. “I saw them. Sort of. In a vision, when I was underwater. I saw a wisp hovering over someone over there, and a voice told me!”

“Are you sure you’re not just in shock, or maybe swallowed some water or something?” Xavier asked, brows knitting together. “That water seemed really gross and cold.”

“*It was*,” I growled. “But that’s not it!”

He stared at me, deciding whether to believe me. And that filled me with anger. Why the hell would I lie about this? I knew things between us weren’t perfect, but he had to believe I wanted him to be safe. Right?

I wondered what was worse—Xavier not trusting me because he thought I was more loyal to Greyson, or Xavier not believing me because he thought I was just some silly girl. How many times would I have to throw myself head first into danger to prove to him that I cared, that his fights were my fights?

And that was when my desire to be rational fled my body.

“Look, you expect me to believe in all your weird shit?” I pulled my arm out of his grasp. “It’s your turn to believe ME. You casually tell me that vampires exist—”

“Kittens,” he interrupted, looking around to make sure no one had heard us. But I was yesterday’s news—now, they were all watching some guy swallowing swords over by the turkey leg stand.

“Whatever,” I continued. “If vampires can be real, why can’t I have a vision? I know what I heard, and what I saw. And something told me that there’s somebody who wants to kill us in the crowd over there. So we’re going this way. Deal with it.”

This time, I grabbed his hand and dragged him away in the direction *I* wanted to go. And for once, Xavier let me.

After a few clumsy steps—I was kind of shaking from the cold—we ran right into Maya. She grinned at me, her arms crossed over her chest.

“How was deep sea diving, Cali?” On another day, I might have punched her again. But right now, I was busy trying to save all our lives.

I saw surprise flicker across her face when I didn’t take the bait and just kept walking. But unsurprisingly, she followed after us, looking to get another dig in.

“Cali, I’m loving the drowned rat look!”

I just gave her the finger with my free hand, and scanned the crowd for the rest of the pack.

“What’s wrong with her?” Maya asked Xavier. “Did she get TMJ from the bacteria in that dunk tank?”

*There!* Greyson, Joss, Violet, Mrs. Smith, Lola, and Jay were clustered together by a blacksmith’s stand. I sped up to meet them—and not just because the blacksmith had a huge warm forge I could stand by.

I let myself take in a deep breath, enjoying the warmth of the blacksmith’s fire. Before I could say anything, Colton pushed forward to meet us.

“Huzzah!” He was decked out in every single piece of memorabilia possible, and was clutching a turkey leg the size of my fist. “Have you guys tried this turkey? Holy shit, it’s so fucking good. They wrap it in bacon; it’s better than sex.”

“Maybe sex with you,” Lola murmured, rolling her eyes.

If Colton heard her, he didn’t care. He held out a mug in his other hand, toasting us.

“To meat and mead, bitches!” He looped his arms around Mrs. Smith and Jay, and for a second he looked like a kid on a field trip. It would have been sweet, if we weren’t about to run for our lives.

“You’re an idiot.” Maya snuck up from behind us and stole Colton’s turkey leg so she could take a bite.

“We have bigger problems than Colton’s appetite,” I said. “Please, just believe me when I tell you that the Manus Cruentae are here. And we have to go.”

“Cali’s right. We don’t have time for this bullshit,” Greyson snapped, using every bit of his Alpha authority. “Now that we’re all together, we should get the fuck out of here.”

I tried not to let it show how pleased I was with myself. God forbid anyone saw me happy because of something Greyson had said, especially Xavier. But after being ignored so often, it was a nice turn of events to have the person in charge actually agree with me.

But there was no time to gloat.

Greyson led the pack away from the arena and the crowd. I was hustling as fast as I could in my soaking wet dress. I gathered my skirts and tried to wring the water out of them, hoping to at least START drying off. But it was no use. I was drenched and probably going to get a cold.

“You all need to keep a look out,” Greyson barked over his shoulder. “The Manus Cruentae could be anywhere. I smelled another wolf earlier, but they’re crafty. I keep losing the scent. Who knows how many of them there are? Anything could be a trap.”

Greyson sped up, and suddenly I was running again to keep up with everyone. We were almost at the edge of the woods again.

“Stick together,” Greyson ordered, and Xavier slid his hand into mine.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Honestly I was so relieved Xavier was listening instead of starting a pissing contest, because I had no intention of going anywhere on my own.

Whatever it was that had helped me see the Manus Cruentae—whether it was made up, or something I just didn’t understand—it felt important. It meant something. I reminded myself to talk to Mrs. Smith about the wisps, when I had the time. She always seemed to know about that kind of stuff and given her connection to Big Mac…

The further we walked in, the darker the woods got. Darker by the second. The deeper we went, the colder I got and the more I had to rely on Xavier to guide me forward. I stared at my feet, willing my night vision to get better so I wouldn’t trip over the roots and rocks on the ground.

How close were the Manus Cruentae? Would they go back to a camp before they came after us, or would they leave all their stuff behind? Did Greyson have a plan, or were we just running back to the packhouse as fast as we could?

And GOD. Werewolves were so much better at running than humans. Even when they were still on two legs. Just another thing to add to my list of reasons for wanting the bite. Instant cardio boost.

If the Manus Cruentae caught us, that would never happen. We might be screwed before we could blink. They’d killed Lilac without any remorse, or at least that’s how it seemed. How else did you explain it? They hated us so much they put a curse on us. There was no telling how far they’d go…

Without warning, I slammed into Xavier’s back. I choked on my demand to know why he’d stopped so suddenly when I realized that the whole pack had frozen.

Goosebumps formed on my skin. I wanted to ask what was going on, but then I saw something over Xavier’s shoulder.

Glowing eyes peered at us from all directions.

**Episode 245**

Reflexively, I leapt back. I felt a rock slide beneath my foot and almost crumpled to the ground, but Xavier’s grasp kept me upright. I stared at the glittering eyes in the darkness, and they stared back at me.

Fucking hell. This did not look good for us.

“Stay near me,” Xavier whispered, just loud enough for me to hear. “Please don’t try to be a hero, Cali.”

I felt a spark of anger but I listened, stepping behind him. There was something desperate in his voice. Something that made my heart hurt. He wasn’t telling me not to defend myself if I had to. He was just asking me not to throw myself out on the front lines before the fight even began.

And he was right. What good would I be in this fight?

I peeked out from behind Xavier’s broad shoulders and saw the eyes moving forward. Twigs snapped under their paws as they stepped into the slivers of light that streamed through the canopy above us. Eight werewolves. All huge. One by one, they each revealed themselves with a growl or a snarl.

A chill ran up my spine as they moved closer, and it had nothing to do with my time in the freezing cold dunk tank. As they got closer, I could see the light glinting off their fangs, the mud packed into their fur, and the steam coming out of their nostrils.

They formed a circle around us. A circle that got tighter and tighter as they walked forward.

“Leave.” Greyson’s voice was deep and authoritative as he spoke to the wolves. “Before it’s too late.”

I gripped Xavier’s arms, wanting to pull him out of this fight. As if I could. I held my breath and willed all these crazy-ass werewolves to just give peace a fucking chance.

“If you attack,” Greyson continued, his voice even, “you will be killed.”

Maybe they’d listen to him. I wanted to believe that violence could be avoided and that we could all leave here unscathed. I’d seen enough death, especially in the last few days. There had to be some kind of compromise to this curse. Things didn’t have to be this way. But they kept moving forward, their eyes unblinking as they stared us down.

Something hard pressed into my back and I whipped my head around to see if it was one of the wolves. But it was Maya.

For a second, I thought she was threatening me with the knife she was holding. But her expression wasn’t aggressive. Her eyes were wide and entreating as she urged the knife toward me. Oh. Duh. She was offering it to me.

“Just in case,” she breathed, so only I could hear. “I got it at the fair. It’s silver, so don’t spaz out and stab one of us.”

Aw, Maya. If we were in another circumstance I would’ve said she cared about me. She wanted me to have a chance!

Instead, I nodded, taking it from her and clutching it tight. Now I was a little more than useless. If I could figure out how to take out one werewolf’s eye, to wield a spatula, and to survive a werewolf bite, I could do this.

Why hadn’t I taken Greyson up on more training before he’d gone and betrayed me?! I wished I knew how to wield this thing in battle—in a way that would actually be effective against our enemies. I wanted to make it not feel so foreign in my hand. I wished I were some badass chick who could do flips and knew how to use a whole bunch of weapons and shit. I just needed to practice.

I prayed I’d get the chance to.

“Thanks,” I murmured to Maya with a nod. We didn’t always get along, but this meant a lot. If we lived, maybe things would be different between us.

Maya stepped away from me as Greyson continued to address the wolves, his voice firm but not aggressive. I knew he was trying to strike a balance. He wanted to sound ready for a fight without provoking one. It was smart. It was probably what Xavier would have done, too.

“Just stay back,” he urged the wolves, his hands in front of him, palms open. “No one has to die here.”

But they didn’t stay back. They stalked forward. I’d never felt more like prey in the eyes of a predator than I did at that moment.

I held my knife out in front of me, pointing it at the nearest wolf—a brown and grey one, with hazel eyes. I tried to keep my arm steady, but the blade was wavering in my shaking hands.

No matter how this went down, I promised myself I would defend myself and my friends until the bitter end. I thought about what had happened to Lilac. How horribly they’d ended his life. These people didn’t negotiate. And my pack wouldn’t surrender. All we could do was fight.

So much for no one having to die.

A cracking sound told me that Xavier was the first to shift. I stepped back as he fell to his hands and knees, his body taking on its other form.

The air filled with the sound of cracking bones and bodies thudding to the ground as my friends shifted around me. I watched hair sprout and their hands turn into paws. In just a few seconds, I was the only one in the pack left on two legs. What I would’ve given to have joined them.

If I survived this, I was NOT going to let Xavier say no to turning me.

None of us had time to think when a black wolf charged at Xavier, its mouth wide open as it went for his throat. I screamed without meaning to, throwing my hands up to shield myself.

Xavier sprang forward, angling himself so he locked jaws with the other wolf. They snapped and bit at each other, both searching for a weak spot. Xavier was strong, he was smart, he was a good fighter. He could handle this.

Could I? I needed to find a safe place before I was in the middle of a frickin’ wolf hurricane.

Still, I wanted to slash at the black wolf with my knife. But it was no use—he and Xavier were moving way too fast. It would be easy to hit Xavier by mistake, and I’d seen Xavier hurt before, and I wouldn’t let it happen again—especially not because of me.

Behind me, Greyson leapt at two Rogues, knocking them to the ground. Violet pounced on the smaller of the two, snarling viciously. Fights were breaking out all around me, and I didn’t know where I could be useful. Or would I just be better off trying to stay out of the way? That’s probably what Greyson and Xavier would tell me to do.

*Run, Caliana!*

*Just stay out of the way.*

*And what, be a werewolf snack waiting to happen?* I wondered. I swung my knife around, hoping the perfect direction would reveal itself to me. I tried to keep track of all the sets of glowing eyes, and vowed to stop any one of those Rogues dead in its tracks if it came anywhere near me. I felt adrenaline coursing through my veins.

I didn’t feel cold anymore. Just ready for a fight.

That was when I saw it. A lighter colored wolf, almost blonde. The smallest in the pack. It was ignoring the chaos, choosing instead to focus its blood red eyes on me. I backed up instinctively, brandishing my knife.

I felt a ray of sunlight hit my face and blinked at the sudden shift in light. I saw the small Rogue lower itself to the ground, ready to attack me. I raised my knife into the light and angled the blade to reflect the sunlight at my attacker. The brief flash of light seemed to blind the wolf, just long enough for it to hesitate. I charged forward and lashed out with my blade, as fast and hard as I could.

All my senses became disconnected. I felt the brush of fur against my hand, I tasted the metallic blood on my lips, and I heard a loud, piercing howl of agony as the wolf stumbled back. I had wounded it.

I HAD WOUNDED IT!!

The Rogues all turned toward their injured comrade. I watched the wolf, horrified as it writhed around on the ground, blood pouring out of the gashes on its neck. I looked down at my hands, stained red with blood, and dropped the knife. My stomach churned with disgust. Had I really done that?

I didn’t have time to think because out of the corner of my eye, a black—almost blue—wolf, bounded toward me. I screamed and closed my eyes, waiting for its claws to tear into me.

**Episode 246**

Something knocked me to the ground. I curled my arms around my head to protect myself, still waiting for something sharp to tear into me. Was this it? Was this where I finally got eaten by a wolf-bear? After all the near misses and close calls, I was finally going to bite it while we were on our way home.

Irony had a cruel sense of humor.

Would I really never get to tell Xavier I still loved him? Despite everything? *Because* of everything?

Well, if this was when I was going to die, at least I’d helped a little. I’d stepped up for myself and my friends.

I waited, bracing myself, but after a few moments of not being ripped to shreds, I opened my eyes. Immediately, I saw the blue-black wolf who’d attacked me being snatched out of the air by Xavier’s powerful jaws. He slammed the other wolf against a tree, a loud crash echoing through the forest.

My heart jumped up into my throat, and I knew I couldn’t let Xavier fight alone. I scrambled for the knife I’d dropped. My hands were still sticky with blood, and I coated them with dirt as I ran them over the ground, searching for my weapon. Weaponless meant a bloody mess…

I looked up and breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Xavier ripping his opponent to pieces. Maybe he didn’t need my help as badly as I’d thought. But that relief was short lived, because just off to my right, I heard an agonized howl.

*Fuck*.

Screaming, I watched as Greyson ripped out a wolf’s throat right next to me. Blood splattered everywhere, including all over my face. Greyson’s normally stark fur dripped with blood as he turned to look at me. He’d saved me. Again.

Needing to look away, I wiped at my eyes, surely further streaking my face and my hair with dirt and blood. I didn’t want to be in debt to Greyson again, not when I didn’t know what that meant to him as Alpha.

Finally, I spotted the silver blade of the knife, glinting in the faint light that streamed through the trees. Yes! Good! I had a chance! If I could get to it.

I crawled toward it on my hands and knees, feeling naked and totally exposed as the wolves fought all around me. In my peripheral vision, I saw Greyson jump on a dark brown wolf as it snarled. I quickly looked away before I’d see a repeat of moments ago. But the carnage was impossible to escape, and the noise around me was deafening.

I reached the knife, immediately overcome with a sense of relief. My fist closed around the hilt, and I jumped to my feet.

In the clearing, Lola was charging in wolf form toward Jay who was cornered. Spinning, I saw Colton and Maya ripping a wolf in half, good ole teamwork style, and in front of me Mrs. Smith slammed her assailant into the ground.

I raised the blade, ready to strike. I wasn’t about to take any fucking chances.

But then something strange happened.

This other pack—what was left of them—started retreating into the darkness of the woods.

Xavier chased after them, and I found myself following him. But Greyson blocked us, shooting me a warning glance. Head high, I held his gaze, stunned by its intensity. He wouldn’t intimidate me.

When he broke eye contact, I sucked in what felt like my first breath in minutes. Around me, I heard more cracking as the pack all shifted back. We were safe.

For now, I guessed.

How did the wolves all know to shift back at the same time? It was like when a flock of birds or a school of fish changed direction. The many becoming one. It had to be instinctual. Just another werewolf special skill Xavier wouldn’t let me have.

And then I was surrounded by my naked, bloody, but alive friends.

It could have been worse. Like, so much fucking WORSE. Somehow that didn’t really comfort me that much. Funnily enough, the most comforting thing was being surrounded by a bunch of naked people. Maybe I was becoming a nudist for real this time. Though it probably would’ve been even weirder if I took my clothes off to blend in.

“I know it seems tempting to go after them.” Greyson’s voice took me out of my thoughts of getting naked. He was looking directly at me, and I instantly blushed. Had he somehow heard what I was thinking? Greyson’s eyes flickered away from me as I tried not to blush deeper at the thought of him seeing me naked. “Chasing after them, hunting them down… We could do it, but it’s not the smart option.”

Colton snorted, stepping forward to show everyone just how little he thought of what Greyson was saying.

“We should have finished them off while we had the chance.” Colton ran a hand through his hair, exposing claw marks on his bicep that were already starting to heal.

“And maybe we could have.” Greyson nodded. “But they surprised us. What if it was to lead us all into a trap? What if we chase after them into those woods, and they separate us? Then we’d be isolated, every one of us alone and outnumbered. Picked off one by one. Do you really want to risk that?”

I watched Greyson’s words registering on everyone’s faces. Colton looked down at his feet, clearly done poking holes in his Alpha’s plans. No one had a comeback. At least at the moment.

“The faster we get back to the pack house,” Greyson continued, standing up even straighter, “the more prepared we’ll be. Take a second to heal, and we’ll move on.”

There were a few mumbles, but everyone started to go gather their things that had been strewn about.

Slowly, I approached Xavier. He hadn’t found any of his clothes yet, and I forced myself not to let my eyes wander. He had cuts across his chest, which made me wince. I reminded myself that they would heal soon. That he was used to this kind of pain. That it had to be *nothing*, compared to silver poisoning.

“I suppose you’re coming over to thank me for saving your ass from that wolf who wanted to tear out your throat?” He smirked at me, still full of bravado from the fight.

Um, excuse me?

“Like you thanked me for saving you from that vampire?” I shot back, raising an eyebrow.

“Keep your voice down.” Xavier’s expression darkened. “I haven’t told the others about that yet. And I don’t want to get them more worried than they need to be.”

I felt my blood start to boil a bit. I knew I shouldn’t open up another fight right now, but I couldn’t help it. I was sick of never having a say in anything. Why did I always have to wait?

“You realize that you wouldn’t have to save me ever again if I were like you, right?” I asked, resisting the urge to stomp my foot. “Think of how much I could do. How much I’d be able to contribute—”

“We’re not talking about this,” Xavier interrupted, making me see red.

Nothing I cared about was worth a conversation. Wasn’t that always the way? I wanted to slap him.

But then, somewhere in the distance I heard a strangled, whimpering cry. I looked over my shoulder and saw Jay spinning around, his eyes wide with fear.

“Lola?” he croaked, his lone eye widening. I could sense the panic in his voice. He was Lola’s mate—he could feel her pain, her fear. Had one of the wolves lingered and launched another attack?

I spun around, walking in the direction I thought the sound had come from. But I wasn’t sure… Where was she? My heart started hammering in my chest, and I knew it wouldn’t slow down until I had eyes on my best friend. One look at Jay told me he felt the exact same way.

The whole pack was alert now, and we hurried over toward a huge oak tree.

Lola had to be okay. Because if she wasn’t, I’d lose my entire damn mind.

The pack stopped, clustering around one spot and all but blocking me out. Seriously? I squeezed my way through—Lola was my best friend—I wouldn’t let them shut me out.

“Lola!” I cried out, pushing my way through. “Are you ok—” But the second I saw her, my stomach dropped.

Lola was on the ground, whimpering in pain. She was in human form… mostly. One of her legs was just *wrong*. It seemed stuck between human and wolf. It was covered in hair and awful to look at. Lola’s teeth sunk into her bottom lip as she tried not to cry out in agony. She writhed on the ground, and you could just tell that she didn’t feel right.

She thrashed her head back and forth, tears spilling down her cheeks. Jay slid a hand behind her head, cradling her in his arms. Unable to stand it a second longer, Lola threw back her head and screamed.

The sound made my blood run cold.

“I’m stuck,” she sobbed into Jay’s shirt. “I can’t shift all the way back.”

**Episode 247**

Speechless, I stood over Lola, looking down as her face contorted in pain. I dropped to my knees beside her and took her free hand.

I had to help her. But *how*?

She was a hybrid wolf, which meant shifting was difficult for her—dangerous even. It was WHY we’d gone to Big Mac the first time when she’d been unable to shift back. It was why Jay lost his fucking EYE.

Part of me was super pissed she kept shifting. I knew more than anyone about wanting to help the pack, but for all my own stupid shit, this was another level.

“Where’s your potion?” I asked her, trying to keep my voice soft and soothing instead of angry. It wouldn’t help to get her any more worked up than she already was. I’d get her the potion and then she’d shift all the way back. Everything would be fine.

Lola looked at me, and her face relaxed a bit. Like she knew she was safe if I was here. I smiled at her, trying to encourage her to go limp. Maybe that would help with the pain.

“It’s in my bag.” She grimaced, almost like she was trying to smile.

I leapt to my feet and ran toward where I remembered seeing Lola during the fight. I spotted Lola’s backpack at the base of a tree. I recognized the patches on it, from when I used to sit behind her in stats class. Was that really so long ago? Everything had been so uncomplicated then.

I reached into the bag, but recoiled when I touched its contents. All of her clothes, everything she’d brought, it was all wet.

*Shit.*

“No, no, *no*,” I groaned, tipping the bag over and emptying it out on the ground.

A pile of sweatshirts and leggings fell out, along with broken glass and a small pool of liquid.

“Fuck!” I beat my fists into the dirt, ignoring the shards of glass that were now on the ground. I swept everything back into the bag and ran back to Lola’s side, trying not to cry.

How could she do something so *stupid*?

When Lola saw me, her eyes widened and she almost smiled through the pain. She thought I was going to save her. And I wanted to, so badly.

“It’s broken,” I told her through the lump forming in my throat. “The potion broke in your bag during the fight. It’s all gone.”

Lola shook her head. “I *need* that potion, Cali. It was probably stupid forest water or something. The potion is in my bag. It’s there. Check *again*.”

I grabbed her hand, squeezing as tight as I could to let her know I was there. “We’ll go to Big Mac and get more.”

I looked at Jay, whose mouth was set in a hard line as he looked down at his mate.

“We have to,” Jay said.

“Except I’ll do the negotiating this time,” I told him sternly. We weren’t going to fuck around with body parts this time. “You’ve only got one eye left to sell, and I think you should save it for something else.”

“I don’t want Jay anywhere near that bitch,” Lola growled.

“Well she’s the only person who can actually help you right now,” I said. Since when was I the one to reason with everyone?

“I’ll be okay,” Jay assured her. Lola bared her teeth in a pained smile. “Big Mac doesn’t need another eye. We’ll make a different deal.”

“I told you to stay away from her.” Lola’s eyes got wilder. “You can’t lose something else for me. I won’t let you. Cali, you’ll stop him, right?”

My heart broke as I looked down at my amazing, unstoppable best friend, curled up on the ground. We had to do SOMETHING to try to alleviate the pain coursing through her body, but if she hadn’t shifted in the first place... *Ugh*.

“Jay will wait outside while I deal with her,” I promised Lola. “I’m much smarter than him. I won’t promise my firstborn child or anything.”

“The day you procreate is the day I’m officially out of here,” Maya said as she draped her coat around Lola. The niceness of the gesture actually surprised me. Something to hate Maya less.

Ish.

“Maybe you can give Big Mac some of your attitude,” I started.

Greyson’s voice interrupted me. “We’re not going to the witch.”

I looked up and saw him, fully dressed, his hands on his hips. His expression as serious as a statue.

“We’re going to the pack house,” he continued. “We can deal with Lola’s situation once we get there.”

I wanted to scream in his face. But Jay beat me to the punch.

“Absolutely not,” Jay said as he leapt to his feet, his face turning red with fury. “We are not leaving my mate in pain!”

Jay’s anger and fear was so thick in the air, it felt like I could choke on it. Lola and Jay were *mates.* Greyson had to understand that. Right? Or maybe he didn’t.

It wasn’t like he had a real mate, himself.

Xavier pushed himself between Greyson and Jay, planting a hand on his friend’s chest.

“Jay’s right,” Xavier told Greyson. His eyes were flashing with anger, but his voice was even. “We’re going to Big Mac’s.”

I felt something in my chest unclench. Xavier must have known that I’d do anything for Lola. That I’d go *crazy* if we didn’t help her. Sure, she and I hadn’t been on the greatest terms during the Lupo Finale, but we’d always have each other’s backs when it counted. And now was one of those times.

“I agree, we’re going,” Colton said, stepping forward.

Mrs. Smith nodded, stepping forward as well, and when I looked around at the rest of the pack, I found that most of them were doing the same. Violet and even Maya were murmuring in agreement. Maybe Greyson would see reason now.

But then Joss stepped between Xavier and Greyson.

*Great, exactly what we needed*.

“You don’t have a say in this, pup,” she snarled at Xavier. “Greyson’s our Alpha. He decides what we do. And he says we’re going to the pack house.”

“HEY!” I yelled, unable to stand another second of everyone’s posturing. “You don’t get to call him that!” I felt like I could hear the blood rushing in my ears.

Stalking over to Greyson, I jammed my finger into his chest. I got into his face, filling his field of vision. “Is this what you want?” I spat. “To be the kind of Alpha who makes his pack suffer? You want Lola to be in agony just so you can get your way?”

“How many times do I have to tell you, Caliana?” Greyson said slowly. “This isn’t a democracy. It’s a dictatorship. And I’m the fucking Alpha, love.”

Greyson’s words felt like a slap. There’d been a time when I’d been able to reason with him. Things had clearly changed. But I couldn’t let it show that he’d hurt me. I still had a chance to get my way. For Lola.

“I’m trying to help my friend.” I said, not backing down. “Lola is part of your pack—the pack you became the Alpha of. You’re *supposed* to give a shit about her. She needs help. And if we split up, we die—those were your words.”

Greyson said nothing. He clenched his jaw and avoided my gaze as he thought it over.

“We don’t have the time.” He met my eyes, and I wondered if I was imagining the flicker of defeat in them. “We don’t even know where Big Mac went after taking Jay’s eye, and if we go looking for her, we could lose whatever advantage we have right now. The Manus Cruentae are probably regrouping as we speak.”

“Lola was injured defending your pack!” I was yelling now, even though I’d promised myself I’d stay calm. “You owe her the chance to heal since she was defending not only us but YOU!”

I felt the rage building inside my belly and I kept going—partly because it felt fucking good to yell at him.

“Besides.” I took a breath, realizing I hadn’t really been breathing since I started yelling. “You owe me.”

Greyson scoffed, crossing his arms. “I’m sorry, I what, love?”

“You’re only the Alpha because of all the bullshit you pulled at Thor’s Well,” I reminded him, feeling tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. *Manipulating me. Ruining my relationship with Xavier.* “You hurt people to get what you wanted, and you came out on top. But that comes at a price. You want to be Alpha? Then pretend you actually give a shit.”

I stepped back, feeling everyone looking at Greyson, waiting to see what he’d say. I was curious, too. Had I convinced him? Or had I just dug myself deeper into the hole I felt I’d never crawl out of?

Joss scoffed, taking attention away from her mate.

“Don’t listen to her, Grey,” she soothed, snaking her arms around Greyson’s shoulders. “She’s just jealous because she’s not your Luna.”

Joss spared me a pitying glance, and I felt my cheeks flush.

“Are you fucking serious?” I spluttered. I couldn’t BELIEVE she would bring that up at a time like this.

“Is that true?”

I turned to see Xavier looking at me, waiting for an answer.

**Episode 248**

I gaped at Xavier. What in the world had made him think this was the time or place for this conversation? Was he really dumb enough to listen to *Joss*,of all people?

“How could you ask me that?” I asked Xavier, before turning to Greyson to hear his ruling. I refused to give this fire more oxygen right now. If Xavier wanted to drag this out in front of everyone, that was his problem—not mine.

“Stop arguing,” Greyson snapped, taking control of the conversation. “I’ve made my decision. We’ll go to Big Mac’s and get Lola healed. We can’t afford to be a wolf down the next time we fight the Manus Cruentae. And there will be a next time.”

Joss glared at me before turning away, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

“Someone help Jay with Lola,” Greyson ordered. “Let’s make this quick.”

Xavier and Colton sprang into action to help Jay with Lola. They held her up, acting like human crutches so she could support some of her own weight.

“Thank you,” Lola mouthed at me and I nodded, smiling back at her.

I looked at Greyson, who was staring at me. Why had he agreed to help? Did he feel guilty?

No. I was projecting wishful thinking. Greyson didn’t care about anyone but himself. He just didn’t want to lose out on more people to fight the Manus Cruentae.

“Thanks,” I mumbled. That was the most I felt like giving him right now. I stepped forward to join the others, but Greyson put himself in my path.

We were only standing a foot apart. And now that everyone was walking away, it was almost like we were alone. His stormy eyes searched my face for something, and I tried to make my expression a mask. I didn’t want to give him whatever it was he wanted. He reached for my arm and tightly held to keep me from leaving.

“I will give you this.” His voice was cold and sent shivers down me. “But don’t you ever cross me again.”

I couldn’t help but look at his lips for a second. I remembered how soft they’d felt on mine. How he’d molded my body to his. How he’d made me feel warm… Which was the opposite of how I felt right now.

He’d tricked me before. I wouldn’t let it happen again.

“Whatever,” I said, trying to shrug him off.

I didn’t. Instead, Greyson used his other hand to lift my chin, forcing me to look him in the eye. I felt my breath catch. His grey eyes bored into mine, and his intensity kept me from saying a word to stop him.

“Why do you always assume, Caliana,” he said, his voice softer, huskier. “That the obvious choice is the right one?”

I opened my mouth to speak. What the hell was he even talking about?

Then a shaft of sunlight caught his eyes, making them twinkle, and I felt the air leave my lungs. My cheeks heated, and my palms were suddenly slick with sweat. Would he dare kiss me again?

Did I want him to?

He let me go. “Catch up with the others,” he said. “Witches don’t like to be kept waiting.”

Then he moved past me, walking after the others. I stood for a moment, stunned. What had that been? How did he still manage to get me so flustered?

*Ugh*.

He was a fucking hot jerk, and he knew it.

Quickly, I hurried to catch up to the others, Lola’s backpack on top of my own. And yes, it WAS a strain to carry two of the things, but I was a team player. The second I saw Xavier, I remembered how annoyed I was with him for his question.

“Jay, Colton, can you take Lola on your own for a minute?” I asked.

The boys looked at Xavier, who stared back at them, blank-faced.

“Just fight quietly, okay?” Colton told us as he helped transfer Lola into Jay’s arms. “I know you think you guys aren’t bothering us when you have your ‘long talks’, but it’s fucking annoying, okay? It’s not like I can bring headphones in the woods, you know?”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I deadpanned, grabbing Xavier’s hand and leading him to the back of the pack so we could trail behind everyone else.

“Can we talk about what you asked me?” I tried to sound civil, even though I still really wanted to scream at him.

“I don’t want to.” Xavier shrugged. “So just say whatever you want to say.”

“You keep avoiding this,” I sighed, exasperated. “How are we going to fix our relationship if we never talk about it? You can’t push me away forever.”

“Actually, I can,” he snapped. “It’s what I do, Cali. Get over it.”

“You’re the one who needs to get over it,” I said.

Xavier stopped in his tracks, turning his gaze on me fully. He leaned in, getting in my face.

“That’s your move?” he asked. “Reminding me that you kissed my brother? My brother who is now my Alpha? You need to give me some fucking *time*, Cali.”

“How much time?” I asked without thinking. I didn’t want either of us to feel like this anymore. If I could do something—anything—to make the pain in my chest go away when I looked at him, I would.

Xavier didn’t answer me. I stepped closer and put a hand on his cheek, trying to show him I was there for him. That I loved him.

“How much time is enough for us to be like this?” I asked, my voice cracking as I cradled his face. “I can’t keep going on like this forever. It hurts too much without you Xavier.”

Xavier sighed, looking at the forest ahead of us.

“I don’t have an answer for you,” he admitted. “There’s not a timeline for something like this. I’ll get over it when I get over it.”

I wished I could hold him. Wished I could force him to just be here with me, just for a minute. I let him go, my hands falling back to my sides.

“*If* I do,” he added, so quietly I almost didn’t catch it.

“What?” I spluttered. I blinked away tears, not wanting him to see me cry. “But Xavier… I *love* you.”

I waited for him to say something, but he just looked at me. His expression was completely unreadable.

There was the cracking of bones up ahead. I glanced over to see Jay shifting. Violet and Colton were helping Lola get situated on his back before they shifted along with the others.

Xavier took my hand and when I turned to look at him, his expression was gentle.

“Hold on tight, okay?” He looked at me, and I could tell he needed something from me.

“I will,” I promised, hoping that was enough for now.

Xavier shifted and dropped down so I could climb onto his back. I wrapped my arms around his neck, enjoying how warm he was. Maybe I preferred Xavier like this.

\*\*\*

The ride went by in a blur of trees and branches. I would’ve nodded off if I hadn’t been so hopped up on adrenaline from the fight. I tried to enjoy being close to Xavier and not fighting. I hadn’t realized how much of a novelty that was until now.

Still, by the time we passed the hot springs where we’d played truth or dare, I was counting the seconds until I could get off Xavier’s back. I loved the feel of him beneath me, but I was starting to majorly cramp.

Finally, when the wolves came to stop, I slid off Xavier’s back and helped Lola down from Jay’s while everyone else shifted back to human.

I hugged Lola. “You’ll be feeling better soon,” I said. “We’re going to find Big Mac and make a deal. She’ll help us, don’t worry.”

“Where is it?” I heard Jay ask.

“Huh?” I let Lola go and looked around. “What do you mean?”

“Her house,” Jay said, gesturing wildly at the open space. “It was here, wasn’t it?”

“Don’t look at me,” Maya piped up.

I stared into the open space before us. It was truly breathtaking at night. You could see the stars and hear a whisper of water bubbling nearby. I hadn’t appreciated it the first time we were here.

But Jay was right. Big Mac’s house was gone.

“MacKenzie did say she might disappear for a while,” Mrs. Smith said.

“Did she mean literally?” I asked her. “Because I know she’s a witch, but does that mean you can move a whole fucking house?”

Mrs. Smith shrugged. “She’s been a little… tense, lately,” she admitted.

Well, I supposed she would know.

“This was a waste of time,” Joss said.

“No one asked you,” Xavier and I said at the same time.

I looked to Xavier, smiling briefly, before looking back out at the open space. There was something… It was just over Joss’s shoulder. Something shimmering. It looked like waves of heat on a hot summer’s day. I blinked for a second, thinking I was just losing my mind after being in an underground forest cave for days on end. But when I opened my eyes, the shimmer was still there. It distorted the trees, almost making them wiggle.

I felt myself drawn toward the shimmer. Like it was calling me.

“Uhh, Cali,” Maya called out from behind me. “Where are you going?”

“Don’t you see it?” I asked, pointing at the shimmer.

“Maybe the human hit her head during the fight.” Joss sounded giddy at the thought.

“No,” Maya said. “She’s actually just as stupid as she looks.”

I looked at them over my shoulder. “Can you cut it out?” I asked. “There’s something there.”

I kept getting closer and then felt Xavier by my side. “Cali, there’s nothing there,” he told me, sounding slightly annoyed. “Just air and trees. Big Mac is gone.”

Even as I reached my hand forward, I knew that what I was doing looked crazy. I honestly FELT crazy too. I was reaching toward a shimmering mist where a house used to be that was now gone. But it was *there*, and I could *see it*, and I had to help Lola.

I shook Xavier’s comments off. “I know I’m right. There’s something here.”

And that was when I saw my hand disappear inside the shimmer, and I felt the solid, smooth wood of Big Mac’s front door.

**Episode 249**

I jerked my hand back and glanced down, half-expecting it to be gone. I flexed my fingers, reassuring myself that I was still in one piece.

*What the hell was that?*

“What the fuck just happened?” Xavier asked, giving me a confused look.

“I’m not sure,” I said, looking at the spot. “But there’s something there. It feels like Big Mac’s house or something.”

Xavier raised his eyebrow at me. “But there’s nothing here.”

“Did you not see my hand fucking disappear into the void?” I demanded. “What do you think that was, a magic trick?”

“Well, there’s no need to get hysterical about it,” he said gruffly.

Hysterical? I was going to lose my temper, and I was going to lose it NOW. “Look!” I plunged my hand into the shimmering light, and it disappeared again. My fingertips brushed against the wood and brick that made up Big Mac’s house—or at least some type of building. “I can feel it!”

“Welp, it finally happened, Cali’s lost her last marble,” said Colton.

I glared at him before taking Xavier’s hand. “Come on, try it,” I said, before plunging his hand forward into the shimmering light.

Nothing.

Xavier’s hand was still visible, and Xavier was looking very, very annoyed at me. “It’s just air.”

I turned back to the others. “Am I seriously the only one who can see this? You guys are werewolves, for goodness sake! Don’t tell me you haven’t run into something like this before?”

“Yes,” Colton sneered, “because this sort of situation is on page six of the werewolf handbook.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why don’t you come up here and try it, if you think you’re so smart?”

Colton scoffed as he stepped up to the shimmering light and reached into it.

Nothing. His hand was still there and visible.

“Pffffftttt, you see?” he said. “Nothing but space. Just like between Cali’s ears.”

I glared at Colton. As soon as we were out of mortal danger, I was going to find a way to get him to shut his big mouth—even if it meant sewing it shut myself.

Still, I knew I wasn’t crazy. My hand HAD disappeared, and I HAD been able to feel something on the other side. Why couldn’t they just believe me? For ONCE in their lives.

“Obviously Big Mac has moved on,” said Greyson, looking at the rest of the pack. “We can’t waste any more time here. We need to get to the pack house so we can help Lola and protect ourselves.”

“How the hell can we help Lola by ourselves, SHE’S STUCK!” I gaped at him. “And why the hell are you all so quick to think she just upped and left! She a WITCH! She has MAGIC! How can your wolf brains not understand that? She’s got to be here. I know she is, I can feel it. Somewhere…”

“Cali, we should go,” Xavier said.

I pulled away from him, furious. If no one was going to believe me, I was going to have to prove it myself.

I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and stepped into the shimmering light.

I heard gasps from behind me, and was pleased. Partly because I’d just proven that I wasn’t crazy, but also because right in front of me was Big Mac’s cottage—looking exactly the same as it had last time I’d seen it. Like an ugly shack on the outside and a beautiful penthouse inside.

I turned around. “Ha! Told you so!”

But no one seemed to hear me. On the other side of the shimmering light, the others were staring at where I’d disappeared, their eyes darting around.

“Cali!” Xavier yelled, his voice laced with panic.

“Where the hell did she go?” Colton asked.

“I’m right here!” I called out, but I knew it was useless—they couldn’t hear or see me. Honestly, this wasn’t all that different from how they usually treated me, but at least they’d NOTICED that I was gone. But it was still frustrating.

“Ugh!” I grunted as I stepped back through the shimmering light. “I’m right here!”

Everyone turned to look at me, and this time they ACTUALLY saw me.

“Cali! Where the hell did you go?!” Xavier snapped. He actually sounded scared.

Okay, maybe it wasn’t so great that everyone could see me again.

“I didn’t go anywhere,” I tried to explain. “I was right here the whole time.”

Joss rolled her eyes. “Stop fucking with us, human. We all know that you disappeared. Did you pull some of magic trick?”

“Yes, I’m secretly a magician,” I deadpanned, rolling my eyes. “I perform at children’s birthday parties on weekends.”

“I knew she was a clown,” Maya said.

I looked over at Greyson, giving him a ‘you really picked this bitch?’ look before I turned to face the rest of the pack. “I didn’t do anything or go anywhere. I just walked through the weird shimmering light,” I said, motioning toward it, growing more frustrated by the second. Why couldn’t they just believe me for once? We were wasting time.

Everyone looked at me like I’d grown two extra heads. Ugh, I hated when they looked at me like that.

“Cali, there is no light. There’s no shimmering anything. It’s just the woods,” said Xavier.

“Maybe she hit her head again,” Colton offered.

“Or she’s back on the shrooms,” said Maya.

“Maybe we’re all on shrooms,” Xavier said.

I looked at the shimmering light again, confused as to what was going on. Why was I the only one who could see it? I knew it was real. I’d felt it, seen it.

But maybe I WAS going crazy?

“Here, do you want me to prove it to you?” Xavier asked.

Before I could answer, Xavier ran past me, right toward the shimmering light.

“Watch out for the house!” I screamed, as he ran through the light and disappeared.

*There! I fucking told you wolves!* I thought triumphantly as I turned to the others. “See? He’s gone!”

Colton raised an eyebrow. “What are you talking about? He’s right there.”

I looked back. Sure enough, Xavier had stepped back out of the simmering light and into the real world.

“But you vanished. I saw it.” I turned around, looking wildly at the others. “Come on, don’t tell me you didn’t see that! What’s going on here?”

“I think I have an idea,” said Mrs. Smith, stepping forward. “It’s a cloaking spell. One that probably only affects werewolves.”

Leave it to Mrs. Smith to step forward only after everyone’s insulted me.

Xavier glared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, like Cali said, Big Mac is a witch. And a powerful one at that. Maybe—”

Before Mrs. Smith could finish her sentence, Lola let out a howl of agony that sounded hauntingly half-human and half-wolf. Jay flinched back from the sound—it was clear that it hurt him to see Lola in pain.

I shuddered as I watched my best friend give another strangled cry of pain. I couldn’t watch this for much longer. Everyone could think I was crazy and that was fine. They already thought that, so what was adding some fuel to the fire if it would help Lola?

“We have to do something for her!” I said. If the werewolves couldn’t see Big Mac’s house, then it was up to me to go get help. I couldn’t waste time arguing with the rest of the pack about something I knew was real. “And if none of you wolf-bears will, I will.”

It was time for action.

Without waiting for the others to reply, I rushed back through the shimmering light and came face-to-face with Big Mac’s house. I could hear Xavier and Greyson shouting for me, but I ignored them and stepped up to the front door. I started pounding on it. “Big Mac! Big Mac! It’s Cali! I need your help! Lola’s hurt! Please!” I pleaded, banging my fists against the wood.

Nothing.

I ran to a window and peered inside. The inside of her house was completely dark. Not even a candle had been lit. I tried to sort through the shapes of her furniture, searching for the old witch’s form. Was she sleeping? Was she gone? Was she hiding from me? I wasn’t sure, but I wasn’t leaving until I got an answer.

I was so focused on trying see inside the house, I barely heard the door opening behind me. A hand grabbed my shoulder, and I jumped. The hand spun me around, revealing Big Mac.

The sight of her would have made me happy, if not for the look on her face. I had pissed Big Mac off in the past, but I’d never seen her so angry before. Her eyes were bright with rage, her mouth twisted into a hateful scowl, her nostrils flaring. But the most horrifying thing about Big Mac wasn’t how she looked—it was the silver blade in her hand, pointed right at my throat.

Coming here had been a huge mistake.

I opened my mouth to scream, but Big Mac clamped her hand over my mouth and pressed the blade against my throat, the cold chilling me to the core and silencing me.

My eyes widened as I stared at her. How was this the same woman who’d helped us before? Who took Jay’s eye? Big Mac seemed like she never showed fear, and here she was disheveled and… looking terrified.

Big Mac spoke in a harsh whisper, right into my ear. “I don’t care who or what you are—one more word and I’ll slit your throat.”

**Episode 250**

Well, this had escalated quickly.

The cold blade pressed against my throat, and fear shot down my spine. Big Mac and I had never had the *greatest* relationship in the world, and this wasn’t even the first time she’d pulled a knife on me. Still, this was a little much, even for her.

“Cali! Cali! Where are you?” I heard the others shouting as Big Mac dragged me into her house at knifepoint.

I wanted to scream for help, but Big Mac’s rough, sweaty hand was covering my mouth (gross). It wasn’t like it mattered—none of them could hear me anyway. How did she not recognize me? Or did she think I was a trick of some kind?

The witch slammed the door shut and glared at me. “Why the hell did you bring werewolves here?” she hissed at me.

I tried to answer, but my words where muffled by Big Mac’s hand over my mouth.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “I’ll uncover your mouth, but if you scream it will be the last stupid thing you ever do.”

I glared at her, my whole body trembling with fear. I didn’t know why the hell Big Mac was behaving this way, but I didn’t like it one bit. It didn’t take a genius to know that a mentally unhinged witch was a dangerous thing to be around.

I took a deep breath, trying to collect myself. “Big Mac, it’s really me, Caliana. We aren’t here to hurt you, I swear. It’s Lola again—she’s hurt. She’s stuck between her wolf form and her human form. She’s in so much pain, and,” I could hear my voice quivering as I tried to hold back tears, “and I’m worried that she’ll be stuck forever—or just die from the pain. You have to do something. *Please*.”

Big Mac was unmoved by this, and kept glaring at me. “You shouldn’t have come here, Cali. There are other ways to treat your friend without bothering me. Doesn’t Sabine have any answers? Or is she just as useless as she’s always been?”

Ouch. Rude much? “We don’t have any other options,” I pressed. “We aren’t witches, and Mrs. Smith doesn’t have the right medicine in her bag to help Lola. The one you’d given her spilled. Please, we just need some more of the potion you made for her the last time and we’ll be on our way, I promise.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “What does this look like, a CVS? I don’t keep bottles of that shit in my fridge. It’s a potion, and potions take time to make. Time I don’t have a lot of right now.”

“Please. You have to do something. Lola could die! She’s only half werewolf!” I pleaded. I knew it wasn’t a brilliant idea to tangle with a witch, but I’d fight with FIVE witches just as powerful as Big Mac to save Lola. Whatever it took.

“I don’t have to do a damn thing,” she retorted. “Saving werewolves is not part of my job description—nor is it my problem. Take your pack drama elsewhere. I really don’t care.”

I took a step back, shocked by her words. “Bullshit,” I said flatly. “You can’t say you don’t care about Lola or us. You’ve saved Lola, Xavier, and ME, so many times. You feel something for Mrs. Smith even if you say you don’t. You can’t turn us away now. Not when Lola is in agony.”

“Well, believe it, kid. Witchcraft is a heartless profession, and I haven’t lived as long as I have by developing a soft spot for broken down packs and werewolf hybrids.”

“But you helped us before.”

“Before was different.”

“Why?”

Big Mac huffed, tossing her blonde and purple hair over her shoulders. “Because the last time I saved Lola, I was promised *payment*.”

I crossed my arms. Was she really going to play this game? She should’ve figured out by now I’m too stubborn for this bullshit. “And we paid you! Well, Jay paid you. But fine, whatever. Since payment is all you seem to care about, let’s make a deal. I’m ready.”

Big Mac laughed coldly at that. “What do you possibly have to offer me?”

I thought about it for a moment. What *did* I have to offer a witch? She didn’t take cash or credit, and most of my stuff had been burnt up in the fire. And there was no way in hell she was getting one of my eyes. Or any body part, for that matter.

Then I remembered something. Once, I’d paid Big Mac with some of my blood. And when I’d offered more when Xavier was wounded, she’d looked pretty eager.

And she seemed pretty desperate for *something* right now.

“Well, you seem very interested in my blood. You can have as much as you like. Have it all if you want it so damn bad. Just heal my friend.”

Big Mac lowered her knife and studied me. I gave her a questioning look of my own, remembering how she’d acted a moment ago, like she hadn’t recognized me. It was so… odd.

“What did you mean before?” I demanded. “When you said you didn’t care who or what I was. What did you mean by that? Did you think I was someone else?”

For a brief moment, Big Mac looked flustered. As if I’d caught her off guard. Her eyes darted around, unable to settle on me.

Had the witch let something slip?

But then she composed herself and glared at me. “I meant that because you’re human with a werewolf mate, you get special treatment. You don’t have to suffer the consequences of your actions. Really, you’re just as much of a threat as they are.”

A threat? That was a new one. No one ever thought of me as a threat.

I kinda liked it.

“Threat?” I asked. “What do you mean? No one’s threatening you. Are they?”

Outside I heard Lola scream again, ripping another hole in my heart.

I turned to Big Mac. “Please, you have to do something. I know you heard that. She’s in pain, MacKenzie.”

She turned away, looking almost ashamed. “You should go before I change my mind about killing you.”

I glared at her, the hold I had on my temper starting to slip. I had not come all this way to lose Lola, and I had not survived everything I’d survived just to be taken down by some arrogant witch.

“No dice,” I snapped. “You said I’m a threat? Well, I am. If I leave here without the potion for Lola, I’ll tell every fucking werewolf in the world where you’re hiding. I’ll post your location on social media, I’ll draw a map if I have too. Whoever it is you’re scared of will find you. We both know it’ll only be a matter of time until they do.”

Before I knew it, I was shoved up against a nearby shelf, the silver blade back against my neck, lightly pressing into my skin. Bottles of potions and liquid cascaded down as Big Mac got in my face. “I warned you, kid.”

I stood my ground. “Yeah, and I’m warning you now. If you harm even a hair on my head, my pack will hunt you down. Mrs. Smith knows you put a protection spell on this place. It’s only be a matter of time before they figure out how to break through it. And even if you try to run, they’ll find you and rip you to shreds—witch or no witch.”

Big Mac laughed coldly and released me from her death grip. “You got a lot of balls, I’ll give you that. But I doubt werewolves will risk that much just to save a human. They’ve already told you how worthless they think you are.”

I moved to the window and looked out at my pack, who were still unaware that I was only a few feet away. Xavier, Colton, and Greyson were moving around, shouting my name and trying to find me. Jay was kneeling beside Lola, who was still writhing in pain, her fact twisted with agony. Joss was standing to the side with her arms crossed. It looked like she was laughing. Big Mac did have a point. How many times had each member of the pack (Lola included) called me a dumb human? Made fun of me? Treated me like crap and acted like I was a burden?

*How far would they go to save me? Or would they just be relieved not to have to deal with me anymore?* Suddenly I was feeling less sure of myself—and of my odds for survival. Besides, how would they find me if they couldn’t even see the house?

I looked over at Xavier. His face was twisted up with worry and concern I rarely saw from him as he ran around, screaming my name. Greyson was also walking around in circles, his eyes searching, his brows knitted together in both worry and confusion. I watched him turn and yell something at Joss that made her stop laughing, and made me smile.

In that moment, I knew that Xavier and Greyson would never stop looking for me, would never rest until they found me, and nothing could change that. Not even a witch.

I turned back to face Big Mac and saw that she was also looking out the window. However, she was not looking at Xavier or Greyson, but at Lola, who let out another scream of pain.

“You know Lola,” I said quietly. “She has a mate, and a pack, and a life that might end if you don’t help her. Please, we already lost one packmate. We can’t lose another.”

Big Mac hesitated for a moment, seemingly weighing my words in her head. “Okay. I’ll do it. On two conditions. One, I get as much of your blood as I need, and two, as soon as this is done, you and your damn pack leave me the fuck alone. Deal?”

**Episode 251**

I shot Big Mac a skeptical glance, letting the weight of her words settle in my head as I analyzed them. *As much as I need.* What the hell did that mean? What if she decided to take all my blood and drain me dry? I certainly wouldn’t put it past her. Big Mac was crazy enough to take all my blood and sell it to a vampire for some quick cash. Hell, maybe *she* wasa vampire. I wouldn’t have been surprised.

Still, what choice did I have? Big Mac was our only hope to save Lola, and I didn’t have a lawyer on hand (note to self: go to law school when all this is over, make it easier to argue with magical beings). But if Jay could give his eye to save Lola, I could give my blood. I’d rather be drained dry than let anything happen to her.

Plus, I didn’t want Jay to give up his OTHER eye.

“Fine, whatever,” I said after a moment of consideration, trying to shake off my doubts. “So what do we do? None of the werewolves can see past your werewolf protection magic. How can you help Lola if nobody can even get into the house?”

“Just leave that to me,” Big Mac said, stepping toward the door. She rested her hand gently on the door knob before turning back to look at me. “Remember, you’ve made a deal—you know what happens when you make a deal with a witch.”

I swallowed hard and nodded, already having second thoughts about my decision.

Seeming satisfied with my answer, Big Mac opened the door and I followed her out, stopping in front of the shimmering light. I saw Maya turn to look at me, recognition on her face. “Hey, look! It’s the human and the witch!”

“We have names!” I called back.

Everyone turned to look at us as Xavier rushed over, taking me in his arms. “Are you okay? What happened? Did the witch hurt you?” he demanded, looking me over. I could feel the tension in his body, like he was ready to pounce at any moment.

“Hey!” Big Mac barked. “I resent that!”

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” I cooed, cupping Xavier’s cheek, trying to calm him. “Big Mac is going to help Lola. We came to an agreement.”

“Yes, as soon as everyone gets the hell out of my way!” Big Mac announced, shoving past the rest of the pack to get to Lola.

Jay looked up at the witch, a plea in his eyes as held Lola’s hand. “Please, you have to do something, she’s in so much pain,” he begged. “I’ll do anything.”

“Save it. Your human friend took care of the tab this time,” said the witch, nodding in my general direction.

Xavier looked down at me, his expression full of anger and fear. “What did you promise her?”

I shrugged. “Chill. I’m keeping both my eyes.”

“You’d better be keeping *all* your parts,” Xavier mumbled.

Big Mac looked from Lola to Mrs. Smith, her lips in a tight line. “I’m going to need your help with this one, Sabine.”

Mrs. Smith nodded, but said nothing.

The witch turned to the rest of us. “Go set up camp by the hot springs. This is going to take a hot second.”

Greyson scowled at her, making it very clear that he did not like this. Or her, for that matter. “We aren’t staying here. We’re going back the pack house,” he told her roughly.

Big Mac gave him a scowl of her own. “Fine. Go to your precious pack house. Go wherever the hell you want—I’m not stopping you. Just stay the hell away from me. I’ve got work to do.”

Greyson growled. “Don’t order me around, witch. This is my pack, I’m the Alpha, and *I* make decisions for the pack.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Oh, you Alphas are all the same. You think you’re hot shit. Well fine, big tough Alpha, you have a decision to make. But you’d better make it fast—you’re wasting time.”

“Come on guys, just do as Big Mac says,” I said. “She’s going to help Lola. *Lola*, who shifted to help protect all of you. To protect me. This pack. We owe it to her to get her help.”

“Why would we waste time on what *she* wants?” Joss scoffed, spitting in Lola’s direction. She turned to Greyson. “Come on, honey, let’s get to the pack house. We don’t need a broken half-wolf and a stupid human slowing us down. Ditch the dead weight.”

“SHUT UP!” Xavier, Colton, and Jay yelled at the same time.

God she was so much worse than Maya. She at least tried to be funny.

Xavier glared at Greyson, his hands balled into fists. “You’re the one who told us that we had to stick together, remember? And we did—regardless of whether we liked you, or your half-baked Luna.”

“Hey!” Joss yelled out.

“Shut up!” Xavier hissed at her before looking back to his half-brother. “I won’t speak for Violet or Mrs. Smith, but Lola is our friend and if you go on without her, you’re going to lose Jay, Colton, Maya, Cali, and me. We are not leaving her like this.”

A tense silence filled the air as the brothers stared each other down.

“I’m not going without Lola.” A tiny, fragile voice broke the tension. We all turned to see that Violet was stepping forward, tears staining her cheeks as she looked at Xavier and Greyson.

“I don’t want anyone else to get hurt, the way Lilac was,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. But she managed to keep her sobs at bay. “We’re sticking together. With or without you.”

I was surprised by how firm her voice got at the end, by the way she stood up to Greyson even after all the trauma she’d just gone through. My heart swelled with pride as I went to wrap my arm around her.

Mrs. Smith nodded in agreement. “I’m staying with Lola.”

Xavier smirked at his older brother. “Gonna be a small pack with just the two of you. Some Alpha you turned out to be, huh?”

A dangerous look passed over Greyson’s face. Shit.

Joss glared at Xavier before turning back to Greyson. “Come on Greyson, we don’t need these losers.”

Greyson ignored Joss and shot a look at Big Mac. “Be quick about making that potion, witch. We don’t want to stay here any longer than necessary,” he said, before he stormed off toward the hot springs with Joss in tow.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Yes, because I *love* having a bunch of horny twenty-something werewolves hanging around my house. Asshole,” she muttered.

“Well, I don’t care where Greyson sets up camp—I’m not leaving Lola,” said Jay, holding Lola’s hand as she shuddered with pain.

Mrs. Smith walked over to Jay and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. “You should take Lola to the hot springs. The water will be good for her. It will ease her pain.”

“It’ll be okay, Jay,” I said, trying to assure him. “I’ll stay with Big Mac and make sure Lola gets the potion.”

Jay nodded, worry still etched onto his face. “Thank you, Cali,” he said softly, before kissing Lola’s forehead and squeezing her hand. “I’m going to pick you up, okay, honey? It might hurt a little.”

“Everything hurts,” Lola whined as Jay lifted her up, carrying her bridal style.

Lola winced at the pain, but said nothing as he carried her toward the springs.

Sometimes I forgot just how long Jay and Lola had been together—mainly because I hadn’t even known Jay even existed until two months ago. But in moments like this, the strength of their bond was obvious. It was almost like he could feel her pain. He’d do anything—even give up an eye—to keep her safe. To be by her side.

I turned to look at Xavier, who was following the rest of the pack to the hot springs. I wished he’d stay with me now. Squeeze my hand, like Jay squeezed Lola’s. Could he not feel how much I needed him right now? Or maybe he just didn’t care.

I thought back to the last time we’d been at the hot springs. It felt like forever ago. We’d almost had a really fun time before Colton and Maya had interrupted.

Lost in my memories, I almost didn’t hear Big Mac say that she needed to get to work and then head back toward her house. As the rest of the pack set up camp with what was left of our supplies, I followed Big Mac.

“Hey, wait a minute,” I called after her. “I’m not giving you a drop of my blood until you heal Lola.” Part of me was worried that Big Mac would take my blood and turn the rest of us into toads, or something worse.

Big Mac gave me an annoyed look. “Do you really think I’d trick you like that?”

“Uh, yes?”

She shrugged. “I guess that’s fair. Fine, I’ll make your stupid potion first. But you’re not leaving without giving me your blood.”

“Blood?”

Big Mac and I turned to see Mrs. Smith staring at us, eyes wide with alarm. “You want more of Cali’s blood?” She walked over and grabbed Big Mac’s arm. “MacKenzie, who are you hiding from?”

**Episode 252**

“Is it vampires?” I blurted out, before Big Mac could even open her mouth. Internally, I cursed myself for speaking without thinking, but this HAD to have something to do with the vampires. Why would she need my blood if she *wasn’t* tangling with them? Unless she was using my blood for some weirder purpose, like opening a blood bank, or selling it on the black market. Honestly, I wouldn’t have been surprised.

“I knew it!” I crowed. “You’re worried they’ll come after you, just like the ones who attacked Xavier.”

Big Mac shot me a dirty look. “Can’t you stay out of other people’s business for twenty seconds?”

I shrugged. “Well, I’ve never actively tried to keep out of other people’s business, and I don’t really plan on starting now.”

She rolled her eyes. “You should, you might live longer. And for your information, I don’t worry about vampires. Ever.”

I scrunched my eyebrows together at her words, confused. “Then why do you want my blood? I thought you wanted them to drink mine instead of yours. Or sell it to them, or do something gross with it.” Hey, maybe Big Mac *was* a vampire. A vampire-witch. Honestly, it wouldn’t have shocked me. I doubted anything would shock me these days.

A look passed between Mrs. Smith and Big Mac that I didn’t like.

“What?” I demanded.

“No, you’re exactly right. I’ll use it to keep the ‘vampires’ off my tail,” she said, but her eye roll suggested that this was more sarcastic than anything. Ugh, why did witches have to be so difficult? Just tell me what you fucking MEAN!

Another look passed between the two women, making me feel left out and very annoyed. Hadn’t these women learned that secrets didn’t make friends?

“You’re lying,” Mrs. Smith said quietly to Big Mac, barely above a whisper. “Why are you lying to her? To me?”

“Yeah! What are you lying to me about?” I asked quickly, my hand on my hip. “What’s so special about my blood, anyway? It can’t just be that you can’t go down to the blood bank and pick up a pint of human blood. What aren’t you telling me?” I was so sick of everyone lying to me, and I’d had enough.

“I’ve already told you, kid,” Big Mac said. “Your blood has special properties because you’re a human whose mate is a werewolf. It’s unusual, and it might come in handy for some of the more complicated spells I might have to do. Or if your idiot mate decides to get himself torn up again. Really, you shouldbe thanking me.”

I huffed, still not convinced that was truly the reason Big Mac wanted my blood. Still, if I wanted her to help Lola, pestering her with a ton of questions was not the way to go about it. Something I’d learned from experience.

I rolled my eyes, not sure what to think anymore. “Fine, whatever. Enjoy your stupid secrets—I don’t care right now. But at some point, you’re actually going to have to tell me the whole story. I can wait. I’m pretty patient.” I wasn’t patient at all, but I was still determined to hear their secrets, eventually. If Big Mac felt the need to lie to me, in front of Mrs. Smith no less, it had to be over something really important.

Why was my blood so special to her?

“No, hold on, Cali,” said Mrs. Smith, still staring at Big Mac. “You still haven’t answered my question, MacKenzie.”

Big Mac sighed dramatically, throwing her hands in the air. “What? Are you going to pester me too, Sabine? Can’t a woman just disappear into the woods, hide her house from werewolves, and make a deal to take some girl’s blood in exchange for saving her best friend’s life without a million fucking questions?!” she spat. “Maybe you should both go to the springs and leave me the hell alone! I have work to do.”

Yes, because that was TOTALLY normal behavior. Evasive, secretive behavior! I’d learned everything I knew about it from the Evers brothers.

Big Mac stalked away in a huff, heading off toward a wild patch of herbs and other plants, some of which looked pretty bizarre. Seriously, most of them looked like they could be extras on the set of *Little Shop of Horrors.*

“Is that your garden?” I asked. I’d never noticed it the first time we came. But also we’d gotten drunk on moonshine, so. You know.

Big Mac just shrugged, not even willing to tell me *that.* “Something like that,” she said, poking around the plants, picking a few leaves. She twisted and rolled them between her long fingers, occasionally lifting them to her nose. It was almost… intimate. I felt uncomfortable enough to look away.

Witches were weird, I swear. Even weirder than werewolves.

Mrs. Smith glared at the other woman, her mouth firm. She didn’t like that Big Mac was keeping secrets from her either, and she was just as stubborn as I was. “Well, I’m not going anywhere until you explain.” She pointed at the house, or, at the general area where the house would have been, if it hadn’t been hidden. “Why are you using an invisibility spell? An invisibility spell against *werewolves,* no less. You only do that when you’re feeling threatened. So who’s threatening you?” she demanded, on the verge of begging.

“You don’t know me. You don’t know the first thing about me,” Big Mac said, studying the leaf in her hand intensely.

Mrs. Smith clenched her fists, clearly pissed off. “You aren’t twenty years old anymore—don’t give me that moody attitude. I get enough of it from the kids. No offense, Cali.”

“No, I understand.”

Mrs. Smith put one hand on top of Big Mac’s. “This isn’t just about you anymore, MacKenzie,” she said gently.

Big Mac narrowed her eyes, confused. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s about us now. We’re together.” She gave the witch’s hand a squeeze.

My eyes widened at her words, and I thought back to the kiss Big Mac and Mrs. Smith shared. Was Mrs. Smith asking Big Mac to be her girlfriend? Damn, that was a bold move. Especially now.

I knew I should probably leave, but I couldn’t. The drama was too good to resist.

Big Mac glared at Mrs. Smith as she pulled her hand away.

*Harsh.*

“Uh, no,” she said. “We’re not together.”

*Oh shit! Double harsh!* My eyes widened even more, and I wished I had popcorn.

Mrs. Smith gave Big Mac a puzzled look. “Uh, yes we are. We’re literally standing here, in the middle of the woods, with you. Together. And in danger.”

“What?”

Okay, I HAD to do something. I couldn’t keep watching this relationship drama. I had enough of my own to worry about.

“Is it the black hand you’re worried about?” I asked. “The… What’s it called? The Manus Crouton thingy? Did you get a bloody handprint on your tent too? Are you marked, like the Redwood pack?”

“I wish it were as simple as a bloody handprint on my tent,” Big Mac mumbled darkly. “But no, I haven’t been marked with the Manus *Cruentae*.”

“Well, if it’s not vampires, or werewolves, or the Manus Cruentae, then what the hell are you hiding from?” I didn’t understand why she couldn’t just tell us.

This struck a nerve. Big Mac bristled at my questioning, her mouth twisting back up into a scowl. But her eyes looked deeply troubled. She was scared. Really scared.

“Do you want to help Lola or not?” she barked out at me. The explosiveness of her question made me take a few steps back, confused.

“What the hell is your problem?” I asked.

“Currently? You and your annoying fucking questions. I’m a grown ass woman. I can handle my own life,” she growled.

Mrs. Smith reached out and put a calming arm around the witch, pulling her close. “Calm down, MacKenzie. There’s no need to get testy. We’re just concerned about you. Maybe there’s something we can do to help.”

Big Mac laughed darkly, without humor. “There’s nothing you can do for me now. There’s nothing anyone can do. In fact, as soon as Lola has the potion, you and your whole lousy, cursed pack need to get as far away from me as possible. Preferably to another continent.”

“Wow. Tell us how you *really* feel, Big Mac,” I huffed. “I thought you liked us.”

“I do. It’s just… *complicated* right now,” she said, her expression softening fractionally. “I just need you to stay the hell away from me for the time being. Until everything blows over.”

“Until what blows over?”

“For Salem’s sake, do you ever stop asking questions?”

“Not until I know the truth.”

“Oh god.” Mrs. Smith gasped, covering her mouth as understanding swept over her features. She turned to Big Mac, obviously alarmed and scared. “No. No, it can’t be. MacKenzie… Is he back? Did he find you?”

**Episode 253**

I glanced between the two of them, hanging on every word they were saying. Who was ‘he’, why was he looking for Big Mac, and what made him so powerful that even a witch was scared of him? I still didn’t understand the history between Mrs. Smith and Big Mac, but I was eager to find out more.

“We are not discussing this here,” Big Mac said sharply, glancing at me as she spoke.

I crossed my arms over my chest and huffed, annoyed that another secret was being kept from me. “You can’t do that!”

“Can and did, kid,” she said. “Maybe you should join your little wolf friends at the hot springs and leave the potion-making to me?”

“That’s not fair! Everyone has been keeping secrets from me from the moment I showed up in the supernatural world. Everyone looks down on me like I’m a helpless child or a second-class citizen, just because I’m a human. Well, I’m still a person, and I’ve come so far. I deserve to be treated like an equal. If some creep is threatening you, shouldn’t we all know? Maybe we could help you.”

Big Mac shook her head. “I assure you, there’s nothing you or that ragtag group you call a pack can do for me. Besides, this is a private matter. It doesn’t concern you. Like I said, I’m a grown-ass woman and I can take care of myself, like I always have. You’re much better off staying the hell out of my way.”

“I think Cali has a point,” Mrs. Smith chimed in. “Maybe you’ll be better off if you stop shutting people out, like you always do. You don’t need to take him on alone,” she said, gently trying to touch the top of Big Mac’s hand.

The double meaning of Mrs. Smith’s words was killing me. I felt like my whole body was going to explode from the lack of knowledge and the secrets. “Who the hell are you talking about? The suspense is KILLING me!”

Big Mac took the hand that Mrs. Smith was touching and used it to point at me. “If you want my potion, you’d better get your ass to the springs and leave us alone. NOW.”

“If you want my unusual blood, you better start talking, witch, or you won’t get a single drop. I’m not playing games anymore.”

Mrs. Smith walked over to me and pulled me gently toward the door. “Let me handle this, Cali,” she said, her voice low in my ear as we walked out the door. “MacKenzie really needs to calm down and focus on the potion. And she can’t really do that if you keep making her angry.”

“But she—”

“Nothing matters right now but the potion, right?” Mrs. Smith said. “For Lola.”

I sighed, defeated. “You’re right,” I said reluctantly.

“Now go, enjoy the springs,” she encouraged, and I rolled my eyes.

“Go here, human. Do this, human. Stop talking, human. It’s pretty ironic, having people who turn into big fluffy animals treat me like a dog,” I huffed out.

“Cali—” Mrs. Smith started, but I was already storming away.

“Whatever,” I called over my shoulder as I stomped all the way to hot springs. I knew I was behaving like a child, but I was so sick of people keeping secrets from me. It was like everyone was trying to drive me crazy.

By the time I got to the hot springs, the camp was mostly set up. At least, as much of a camp as we could cobble together.

“How’d things go with the witch?” Xavier asked as soon as he saw me.

Greyson turned to face me. “Where’s the potion?”

“What does this look like, a CVS?” I asked him, repeating what Big Mac had said to me. She always had the best comebacks. “She doesn’t have bottles of this shit in her fridge. It’s going to take time make it right. So just chill out.”

He continued to look at me, not saying another word.

I turned to see Jay sitting with Lola at the springs. Her wolf leg was under the water, so she looked a little normal.

I walked over and sat down on her other side. “Hey, girl,” I said gently with a small smile. “How are you feeling?”

Lola managed a small smile, but her eyes were still bright with pain. “This sucks balls, but I’m all right. The water’s helping.”

I felt goosebumps on my skin and a moment later Greyson was in front of me, his arms crossed. “How long until the potion is ready?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’ll be ready when it’s ready, Greyson. This isn’t a thirty-minute meal. If you want to leave so badly, you’re more than welcome to go. No one’s stopping you.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but then turned to Lola instead. “How are you feeling?”

Lola and Jay both glared at him. “Other than the fact that I have a paw for a foot and my Alpha and his Luna wanted to leave me for dead? *Aces*.”

Greyson sighed, annoyed. “Look, I—”

But before he could say another word, Maya came over to Lola and knelt beside her. “Here, I got you some bark.”

I wrinkled my nose at the offering. I couldn’t imagine it tasting good, or being clean. “You’re giving her bark? From a tree?”

Gross.

Maya rolled her eyes at me. “It’s white willow.”

“What is that? Is that an Avenger?” I asked.

“You have to be fucking with us,” mumbled Jay.

I looked back to Maya. “Seriously, I don’t know what the hell that is.”

“It’s an anti-inflammatory. It will help ease some of Lola’s pain. Here,” she said to Lola, handing over a small piece. Lola placed it in her mouth and started to chew, her face twisting up in disgust.

“It had better do something, cause it tastes like shit.”

“What did you think it would taste like? Candy apples?” Maya shot back. “Don’t make me regret trying to help you.”

I studied Maya for a moment. “How do you know about the willow? Are you some kind of witch?” That would help make sense of how Maya knew Big Mac. It would also make Maya about twenty times scarier.

Maya rolled her eyes. “Don’t be stupid. It’s a natural remedy.”

*Note to self: Maya is probably a witch.*

Greyson turned to the rest of the pack. “We might be here for a while, so we need to get a fire going.”

Maya was the first to jump up. “I’ll get the wood,” she said, and started to disappear into the forest.

Curious about what she was up to, I followed close behind. “Wait, I’m coming with you.”

“Don’t go too far—I can’t afford to waste time looking for you,” Greyson warned. His words stung, but I tried not to show it. There’d been a time when I’d counted on Greyson to come to my aid. When I’d trusted that he’d always be there for me, and never make me feel like a burden.

A part of me missed that Greyson. A part larger than I cared to admit.

I ran to catch up with Maya. Mainly so I wouldn’t have to deal with my Greyson angst.

Maya was not happy I was joining her, a fact made very clear by the glares she kept giving me as we collected the firewood.

“No one asked you to come,” she said sharply.

“No one asks me to do anything around here,” I said. “How did you really know about the willow? You don’t seem like the type to Google alternative medicines in your spare time.”

“You seriously never let up, do you?”

“Nope.”

She sighed. “I picked it up from my family.”

I was struck by this. “You have a family?”

Maya chuckled without humor. “Everyone has a family, Cali.”

“I know that,” I said, feeling my face go slightly red. “It’s just that you never talk about yours.”

Maya shrugged. “So? What of it? Are you just going to stand there while I do all the work, or are you actually going to help?”

I grabbed a few sticks, but continued my questioning. “You know, you don’t have to do that—there’s no one here but us.”

“Do what?”

“Act so tough. You treat me like I’m your enemy, but you know I’m not. And you can’t hate me more than you hate Joss.” There was only room for one sassy she-wolf in this group.

Maya paused. “Fine. I hate Joss more than I hate you. But I still hate you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re human. That’s enough for me.”

I dropped my firewood, feeling my frustration and anger starting to rise. “See! That’s what I mean. I don’t understand why you hate humans so much, but I do know that you use sarcasm to distance yourself from everyone. Maybe you want to be alone. Maybe you’re just afraid of getting hurt. Is that why you wanted the un-mating potion?”

Maya’s eyes glittered with anger. “How the fuck do you know about that?” she growled.

I put my hands up. “Look, I’m not judging. I just want to understand. I mean, are you actually going to use it on Colton?”

Maya paused, her eyes darting to the firewood on the ground.

I gasped in shock, taking a step back. “Oh my god. Did you *already* use it?”

**Episode 254**

There was a long pause as Maya looked around, not meeting my gaze. My heart hammered as I waited for her to respond. I’d known that Maya wanted an un-mating potion from Big Mac, but I hadn’t thought for a second that she’d actually GIVE it to her—or that Maya would actually TAKE it. Maya and Colton swore up and down that they hated each other, but it was so obvious to everyone but them how in love they were.

*Colton will be devastated,* I thought. Though I was never going to be the number one member of the Colton fan club, my heart broke for him.

Soon, the tension was too much to bear. “Maya,” I started, “Did you *take* the un-mating potion?”

She huffed, crossing her arms. “Yes. I did. Is that what you want to hear?” She looked back down at the ground and kicked at a rock. “I drank half of it, but stupid thing didn’t work.”

My eyes widened. “Did you use it on Colton, too?”

She nodded. “I put it in his water, and I watched him drink it. But nothing happened. We’re still mates, and I hate it more than ever.” She spoke the last part of her sentence in a frustrated growl. I could tell she was seconds away from stomping her foot.

I paused for a moment. “Does Colton know you did this?” I asked quietly.

Maya scoffed. “Of course not. The big idiot thought it was just a fancy flavoring.” She turned to me and pointed, her eyes suddenly hard. “And if you say one single word to him about any of this, I will rip your head off.”

She probably would, too. Hell, if she could’ve gotten away with it, she already would’ve ripped my head off, just for fun.

But Maya had kept a secret for me—the least I could do was keep one for her.

“I won’t tell him, I promise. Or anyone else. But can I ask, is it really that bad to be mated to Colton? I mean, he’s not my favorite Evers twin, and he did buy my virginity off the internet to give to his brother and all…” As I spoke, I started to understand why Maya didn’t want to be mates with Colton. “But he’s not ALL bad. And he seems to care about you, in his own Colton way. And you in your… murder-y way.”

Maya rolled her eyes. “That’s just the mate bond.”

“So why don’t you want to be mated to Colton? Is it because of Nolan?” Ugh, I couldn’t imagine Maya having feelings for a meatball guy like Nolan, but the heart wants what it wants.

“Nolan’s part of the Samara pack, my pack,” Maya said. “I belong with them, not here.”

“But Nolan treats you like shit. And he’s an asshole. And he tried to kill me. Do you really want to be part of all that?”

She rolled her eyes. “Are you really that naive? Do you think the Redwood Pack is any better? With Greyson, pack murderer, as your Alpha, and his psycho bitch Luna? And let’s not forget that your precious mate killed Ava. I knew Ava! She was Nolan’s sister, Cali. And Xavier won’t even say her name! Do you ever sit up at night and wonder if he’s going to do the same thing to you?”

I didn’t know how to respond.

“Nobody’s without blood on their hands here,” Maya said finally.

“Well, if everyone is ‘guilty’ of something, why not be with your mate?” I demanded. “Go where your heart is.”

Maya scoffed. “Oh, don’t give me any of that Lifetime movie shit. I don’t want to be with Colton because I hate Colton.”

“Oh, cut the crap, Maya—we both know that’s not true. I saw what happened at the hot spring between you the two of you, that intense eye contact.”

“That was a dare, and nothing else. Don’t read too much into it.”

I crossed my arms. “I see how you look at each other.”

Maya shrugged, but couldn’t seem to meet my eyes. “So what? I’m not going to be his mate, end of discussion.” She turned and started back toward the group. “We’d better get that fire started.”

I rolled my eyes as I followed, annoyed that ANOTHER person was being dishonest with me. But at least Maya had a reason. It *was* her personal business, after all.

I was so busy thinking about this, and trying to catch up with Maya, that I didn’t see the large log in my path until…

CRASH!

I tripped over the log and tumbled face first into a stinking pile of stagnant, slimy mud. The wood that I’d been carrying flew out of my hands and clattered to the ground.

I groaned in annoyance and embarrassment and tried to spit out the mud as I pushed myself up to my knees.

“Why does this always happen to me?” I groaned out, wiping the mud from my eyes. I could hear laughter, and it wasn’t until my eyes were clear that I realized who it was coming from: Joss.

“Wow, you really were able to manage that, huh?” She continued to howl, her laugher like nails on a chalkboard.

I was really getting sick of her. Maya was an asshole, but at least she helped out.

*Great. Just great*,I thought. Yet again, I’d humiliated myself in front of everyone. I could feel my cheeks heating, but at least no one could see them under all the mud.

Quickly I got to my feet and gathered up the firewood, muttering to myself all the while.

When I got back to the tent, I threw the wood at Joss’s feet. “Clearly you’re not busy—how about you do something useful and light the fire?”

Joss’s face darkened. “Don’t push your fucking luck, human. I can slit your throat in half a second. Besides, I don’t have to do anything you say. I’m the Luna, not you.” With one last glare she stormed away, probably on her way to tell Greyson what I’d done.

I rolled my eyes. Seriously, we were going to have to get rid of this bitch. She was dead weight.

Xavier walked over as I was putting the firewood away. “You really shouldn’t antagonize Joss so much.”

I glared up at him. “Whose side are you on?” I demanded, hands on my hips. Hey, if he was my mate, the least he could do was defend me.

Xavier looked my mud-covered body up and down. “I’m not sure.”

I rolled my eyes, but felt a glimmer of anger in my core. I pushed past him and headed toward the hot springs.

“Where the hell are you going now?” he called after me.

“To wash this crap off, where do you think?” I shouted back, but then I stopped. Shit! I had to take my clothes off to get clean, and the rest of my clothes had been destroyed in the fire, which meant I didn’t have any clean ones.

*Fuck it*. I’d been in so many forests and ponds and dirty shit to last a lifetime. I was taking a damn bath.

Xavier ran over to me. “Where are you going?”

I pointed to a large boulder, sticking out from the spring. “I’m going to take a bath in the hot spring. It’s your job to keep everyone else away.”

Xavier shook his head. “Yeah, I’m not doing that.”

I rolled my eyes, my patience already running thin. “Yes, you are. I need to get this mud off.”

“There’s no way in hell I’m going to let you out of my sight with everything that’s going on around here.”

I sighed. “Fine. You can stand guard while I bathe, okay?”

Without waiting for his reply, I marched over to the boulder and started to undress, putting the muddied clothes into the water and hoping they’d get a little cleaner. They were my favorite jeans, after all.

I looked around to make sure Xavier was still on guard before I tiptoed into the hot spring, allowing my body to adjust to the heat. It felt much better than last time, the heat not so overbearing. The water smoothed my aching muscles, and various bruises I’d developed. For the first time in what felt like years, I started to feel myself relax.

I hummed a little to myself as I washed the mud off, enjoying the bath. Taking a deep breath, I went under the water to rinse out my hair.

When I came back to the surface, there was a pair of eyes watching me.

I gasped when I saw Xavier leaning against the boulder, a smirk on his face. Instinctively, I tried to cover up.

“What are you doing?” I breathed out.

Xavier shrugged. “I’m guarding you, like you wanted.” He took a step toward me, a wolfish smirk on his face.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Now what are you doing?”

Xavier knelt down in front of the spring and reached a hand out to me. “You missed a spot.”

SPLASH!

I shrieked as Xavier splashed water in my face.

“YOU JERK!” I screamed, and he used my shock as an opportunity to take my hand in his and pull me toward him. Suddenly, my body arched toward him, aching to kiss him.

Still, a nagging thought tugged at me, just as his lips were about to touch mine.

“Wait,” I breathed out. “What’s going on between us?”

**Episode 255**

Xavier looked down at me, his eyebrows knitting together with confusion. I could feel the heat of his breath of my skin, and it made me dizzy with want.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he breathed out, before capturing my lips in a searing kiss.

Caught by surprise, I had no choice but to give in and kiss him back, my resistance crumbling as his touch swept my bottom lip, asking for access that I readily granted. I needed him, I ached for him. And I was going to have him, right then and there.

We continued to kiss, hungrily, passionate with need. We only broke apart for a moment so Xavier could take his clothes off and get into the water with me. His hard, muscular body was immediately on mine, pressing against me. I could feel his hard arousal on my stomach, and knew exactly what would happen if we continued this way—Xavier was going to fuck me, and then he was going to ignore me again.

It was this knowledge that jolted me back to reality.

“Wait,” I gasped out, pushing him off. Between the heat of the spring and the passion of the kiss I barely had enough oxygen to breathe, let alone think. “Don’t use your sexiness to distract me! You know exactly what I’m talking about. What’s going on between us?”

Xavier only looked more confused. Probably because his blood was only going to one of his heads, and it wasn’t the one that did the thinking.

I sighed, exasperated. “I’m talking about us. About our relationship. What the hell are we doing? You can’t just make out with me and have sex with me and refuse to forgive me. That’s not fair.”

Xavier just shrugged. “You’re my mate, what more is there to say?” He moved to pull me close again, kissing up and down my neck. A shiver of pleasure worked its way down my spine as I moaned softly at his touch. The warm water of the spring was making me think all kinds of dirty, hazy thoughts.

*Focus, Cali. Focus!*

I pulled away again, keeping my palm on his chest to create some space between us in the water “That’s not an answer, Xavier! We need to figure out what we’re doing and where we’re going in this relationship if we want to make it work.”

Xavier sighed. “Why can’t we just play it by ear? Why do you have to make everything so complicated?”

I huffed. “No, we can’t just play it by ear. You’re either with me one hundred percent, or you’re not. Which is it?”

Xavier took the hand I’d planted on his chest and interlaced my fingers with his as he softly kissed me again. I tried to pull back, but he held me there, his other hand cupping my cheek. “Let’s just say that for right now, I’m one hundred and fifty percent with you,” he said with a devilish grin, grinding his hips against me for emphasis.

I was no longer amused.

I shoved him back, watching him lose his balance and trip back into the water. “I don’t mean just right now. What about when you’re not horny anymore? I know that you’re angry with me, and you have a right to be. But this situation sucks. You can’t have sex with me and then act like you hate me when it’s over, rinse and repeat. It’s messing with my head, and isn’t fair to either of us.”

Xavier straightened and spat out water as he regained his balance. “Do we have to decide any of this right now? Can’t it wait until we get back to the house?”

“We might not be alive by then!”

“All the more reason not to waste this time together.”

There was a flirty look on his face, and I blushed as he eyed the parts of me not totally submerged in the water. He reached for me, his hands twining around my waist. Playfully, I shoved him back. “Stop turning on the charm! I’m being serious!”

Xavier shoved me back lightly, his eyes laughing. “I’m being serious!” he said, mocking my tone, causing me to retaliate by splashing water at him.

This caused a splash fight between the two of us, the sounds of our laughter filling the air.

*Why can’t it always be like this?* I wondered as I splashed water at Xavier’s face. *Why can’t we have fun together and enjoy each other all the time?*

As I was pondering this, Xavier used my distracted state to scoop me up into his arms and toss me deeper into the springs.

I screamed in shock as my body plunged back into the water.

“YOU ASSHOLE!” I screamed, spitting water out of my mouth as I tried to regain my balance. “You did NOT just do THAT!”

Xavier crossed his arms and smirked. “Clearly, I did.”

Smug jerk.

I swam toward him, fully intending to dunk his head into the water. But then he caught me around the waist, wrapping his whole body around me so I couldn’t move my arms.

Caught in his embrace, I could clearly feel his hard dick pressing against me. “Are you seriously getting turned on from me splashing you, and you throwing me in the water?”

He chuckled darkly. “What can I say? You’re so sexy when you’re mad. And you’re super fucking sexy when you’re mad and wet. In every sense of the word.”

There was a mischievous glimmer in his eyes that went right to the core of me. I could feel myself getting wet, completely at the mercy of his gaze, of his hands, that were moving down my slippery, wet body to cup my ass. My nipples were hardening—this was so unfair! How could I not be turned on? My sexy kind-of-boyfriend was holding my naked body against his, and he was grinding against me. Wet or dry, Xavier was hot as hell. So what if our relationship status was ‘it’s complicated’ for now? Didn’t we deserve a good time, away from all the stress?

Xavier looked down at me, smirking. “So what’s it going to be, babe? A boring conversation where we talk about our *feelings,* or…” He grinned wickedly.

*Ugh.* How could I resist?

I reached for him under the water, wrapping my hand around his arousal. It had been so long since we’d had a moment to ourselves, and even longer since I’d gotten him off.

Time to make up for lost time.

I pulled him toward me, but he put a hand up to stop me. “Easy, tiger,” he chuckled, with a seductive grin.

I took my hand from his cock and looked up at him, confused. “Why?”

I felt his hand on my thigh, moving up and down, lighting my skin on fire. He moved closer to me, whispering in my ear. “Me first.”

I gasped loudly as he gently pushed me up against the cold stone of the boulder, cooling my heated skin as he pressed his lips against mine. He kissed me hungrily as his hands slipped between my thighs, two fingers entering me as his thumb rubbed my clit in a circle motion. I moaned loudly into the kiss, spreading my legs wider to give him better access.

His touch was sending shockwaves through my whole body, his fingers working their magic on my pussy. I kissed him back just as hungrily, my hips bucking wildly against his fingers, desperate for friction. My hands roamed his whole body, feeling his strong, wet biceps and the ripples of muscles on his abs. The feel of him pulled another loud moan from me. Then I got to his long, thick dick, wrapping my hand around it and moving up and down.

Xavier moaned loudly at my touch, burying his head in my neck as he whispered my name over and over. “Caliana…”

“Oh God, Xavier,” I whimpered. His free hand kneaded at my left breast, twisting my nipple. The fingers in my pussy were moving faster now, almost touching my G-spot but not quite, which only caused me to speed up my own movements.

Closing my eyes, I got so lost in pleasure that I didn’t realize my foot was slipping on the slimy rock until I was already falling backward.

I screamed, about to fall into the water. But then Xavier’s strong arms caught me.

“I got you babe,” he chuckled, lifting me out of the water and onto a large rock.

The cold air hit my naked flesh, making my nipples harden and my skin turn into a million goosebumps. I was completely exposed before Xavier, water dripping down my body, my breasts bare, my legs shaking.

Xavier took a step back, taking it all in. His eyes gazed at me hungrily as he licked his lips. “You’re fucking amazing, Cali,” he breathed out, making me blush. “Want to keep going?”

A weird tingling sensation went down my back, causing my oversensitive body to flush deliciously.

Then, out of the corner of my eye I saw Greyson, coming around the corner of the boulder.

**Episode 256**

Greyson and I locked eyes for the first time in what felt like ages. I felt both vulnerable and almost… comforted. The weird tingling sensation must have been a warning that Greyson was near. I wondered if Lola felt that way when Jay was around. Or maybe it was the due destini? If Big Mac got into a better mood, I’d have to finally ask her about it. She wouldn’t be able to distract me with croissants this time.

Greyson’s gaze was so intense that I almost forgot I was naked, and completely exposed in front of him. I knew I should turn away, to at least cover myself. After all, Xavier was right there. And if he realized Greyson was watching us… I shuddered to think about what would happen.

Almost reluctantly, I slid under the water, keeping my eyes on his. I left only my shoulders visible, though I was pretty sure Greyson had seen everything already.

Greyson turned away first, averting his eyes and breaking our connection.

“Greyson?” I breathed out, unable to explain why my heart was beating so fast, why my face was heating up—not from embarrassment, but from pleasure. I knew I should have been totally freaking out that Greyson had just seen me completely naked—completely naked and aroused. I should’ve been even more freaked out that he had been MAJORLY HOLDING EYE CONTACT with me, but I couldn’t help but enjoy it. Enjoy the tingling feeling from him being near that had made want to moan.

Ugh. Hanging out with werewolves had turned me into a major pervert. I guess that was what I got for selling my virginity on the internet.

Xavier spun around to face his brother, shock and fury clear on his face. “What the fuck are you doing here, you psycho? How long have been watching us?”

For once, I saw Greyson flustered. No witty retort, no glare or knowing smirk. Instead, his eyes were on the ground and his ears were bright red as he tried to find his words.

Finally, he recovered. “I heard someone yell. Is everything okay?”

Xavier continued to glare at him. “We’re fine. Go away. Creep.”

Greyson stood up straighter and locked eyes with Xavier. “You’ve both been gone long enough. You need to come back. Now,” he said firmly.

Xavier rolled his eyes and swam closer to me, wrapping his arms around my waist. “Whatever, dude,” he said, before moving to kiss me.

“I mean it!” Greyson said loudly, an edge to his voice. “It’s not safe here.” Before we could say anything else, he turned and quickly walked away.

Was Greyson really concerned about the pack, or was he just trying to keep me and Xavier from hooking up? Was he jealous? He’d turned so red… I’d never seen him flustered like that in all the time I’d known him.

This was too much of a headache to deal with right now.

I started to head toward the shore, but then Xavier grabbed my hand, stopping me. “Where do you think you’re going? We’re just getting started.”

I turned and looked at him. “You heard what Greyson said,” I told him. Plus, people knowing we were fooling around had absolutely ruined the moment for me. I also didn’t want to keep kissing Xavier when Greyson had already seen us. Something about it made me feel extremely guilty, and I’d rather just avoid it all together.

“So?” he said. “Since when do you listen to anyone?”

“He’s our Alpha,” I replied simply.

Xavier glared at me, dropping my hand. “How could I ever forget?”

Clearly, I’d hit a nerve.

I reached the shore, very aware that Xavier’s eyes were following me the whole time.

Consider the mood officially killed.

I stopped in front of the ruined clothing that I’d left to soak in the spring, wrinkling my nose in disgust. It was still muddy, and now sopping wet.

*This is going to suck,* I thought to myself. These were the last clothes I had here, and I didn’t have much more back at the house. As soon as we got back to the pack house (provided we didn’t die on the way), Lola and I were going to have a serious shopping trip. I was even going to use Xavier’s credit card this time. It would serve him right for diving into the whole Lupo Finale mess in the first place.

I huffed a resigned sigh and was about to step back into my drenched, filthy clothes when I heard someone coming toward us.

*If it’s Greyson again I’m going to flip out,* I thought, but I couldn’t help the butterflies that burst into life in my stomach at the thought. What the hell was wrong with me?

As it turned out, it wasn’t Greyson at all but Maya, coming toward us and carrying a pile of clothes.

“Christ, who the hell else is going to come watch?” Xavier grumbled to himself.

“I’m surprised Colton hasn’t burst in yet,” I said dryly.

“Yeah, I’m not here to watch, pervs. I’m just here to give you some dry clothes.” She said, handing them over. I looked down and immediately realized that she’d given me her own shirt and jeans.

“They might be a little too long, but at least they’re dry.”

I smiled at Maya, touched. I knew she liked me! Deep down, she really did like me!

“Thanks, Maya. That’s really kind of you.”

She shrugged. “Don’t get mushy on me. It’s no big deal. It just didn’t make any sense to let you catch a cold from wearing wet clothes. You’d slow us down even more than you already do.”

I continued to smile at Maya. Under that hard shell was a sweet center. It was a start, at least. Proof that she wasn’t as bad as she made herself seem. Maybe I’d invite her to go shopping with me and Lola when we got home. I needed as many allies as I could get, now that Joss was the head bitch in charge. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Or something like that.

Maya left as Xavier and I got dressed, Xavier pouting the whole time.

“Don’t pout,” I said teasingly. “Maybe when we get back, we can pick up where we left off.” I winked. Behind a closed door with no audience.

Xavier smiled. “I hope so.”

He took my hand, and we walked back to camp in silence.

When we joined the others, Jay was sitting with Lola who looked calmer now, though her face was still twisted with pain. Maybe Maya’s willow bark had worked? Or maybe the heat from the hot spring had calmed her down. Colton was building a fire as Joss watched, her arms crossed. Neither of them was speaking. Maya was sitting with Violet, talking quietly. Violet’s head was resting on Maya’s shoulder.

The only one missing was Greyson. Where had he gone? It felt *weird* when he wasn’t around.

I was about to point out his absence to Xavier when he asked me a question of his own.

“Hey, I meant to ask you earlier, but what happened between you and the witch? You seemed really upset when you got back after you talked to her.”

“It was just a really weird conversation. She, like, freaked out when she saw me and pulled a knife on me,” I said, shuddering at the memory.

“She what?” Xavier burst out. “She actually pulled a knife on you?”

“I wish I could say it was the first time.”

“We have got to stop hanging around witches.”

“It was fine. She calmed down after a few minutes. It seemed like she was really scared. She really didn’t want to help Lola at first. So I…” I paused, trying to choose my words carefully. “Well, I made a deal with her.”

Xavier narrowed his eyes, his mood instantly souring. “You what? What the hell did you do? I pray to God that you didn’t make a deal as stupid as Jay’s. Don’t tell me you’re giving her one of your eyes. I *like* your eyes. Both of them.”

“Oh, I love it when you compliment me, honey,” I teased.

He rolled his eyes. “Did you agree to give her your eyes?”

“No.”

“A leg?”

“No.”

“A boob?”

“Gross! God, no!”

“Good. That’s another pair I wouldn’t want to part with.”

“You’re so gross.’

“Your virginity?”

“Xav, you know that’s *long* gone.”

“Then what did you promise her?”

“Will you chill? I’m not stupid, contrary to popular opinion. I didn’t promise her a body part or a social construct,” I said. “I just said I’d give her some blood.”

Xavier raised an eyebrow at that. “Again?”

I shrugged. “Hey, it saved your life once. If it helps save Lola, then it’s a small price to pay.”

“But why *your* blood?”

“I don’t know,” I said, getting tired of his questions. Could we just thank me for making the deal and be done with it? “I’m O negative. The universal donor.”

“Cali, can you please be serious for once?” Xavier huffed.

I sighed. “I don’t know,” I repeated. “She didn’t tell me why. And honestly, I’m just so tired of all the secrets and having to explain my decisions. Between werewolves and witches, it’s hard to keep track of who has more that they’re running away from.”

“Running away from?” Xavier questioned, his eyebrows knitting together in confusion. “What do you mean? What did you find out from the witch?”

**Episode 257**

I looked around, making sure that no one else was listening before I moved closer to Xavier. “When I was in Big Mac’s house, she and Mrs. Smith were talking. Apparently there’s someone after Big Mac, but neither of them will tell me who he is or why he’s after her.”

“So? Doesn’t sound like an ‘us’ problem. I don’t know why you get so involved with these things. They don’t concern you, you’re just being nosy,” said Xavier.

“Rude.”

“It’s the truth. Big Mac is a witch, and witches have a lot of enemies. I wouldn’t worry about it. The last thing this pack needs is to get involved with witches and their problems. In case you haven’t noticed, we have enough problems of our own without adding magic.”

“First of all, Big Mac saved Lola’s life twice and yours once, AND stopped me from turning into a werewolf or dying, so it’s safe to say we’re already involved. Second of all, if she put an anti-werewolf guard on her damn house, then a werewolf is probably after her. Maybe it’s the same creepy thing that’s after us. We should at least *try* to figure it out.”

“And how do you propose to do that, Lady Detective?”

I pointed at Mrs. Smith, who was walking toward us. “Why don’t we try talking to Mrs. Smith? She’s a member of the pack and has a close relationship with Big Mac—maybe she knows something. We should at least find out whether this is something to be worried about. If it’s not, I’ll drop it and we’ll never have to worry about Big Mac or witches ever again. But what if it’s something we need to know?”

Xavier sighed, probably realizing that I wasn’t going to drop the subject unless he did something about it.

“Fine,” he said. “If this will help ease your fears, then fine.”

A grin slid across my face. I was happy to have Xavier on my side for once. “Thank you,” I told him earnestly. “Come on, let’s go!” I said, already standing up.

“Easy, tiger,” Xavier said, grabbing my hand to stop me. “Let me do the talking here, please.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine, but don’t do that thing you always do.”

“What’s that?”

“Act like a jerk so no one says anything at all of importance.”

It was his turn to roll his eyes at me. “At least I don’t have big mouth that takes me on a million different tangents.”

“See, right there—that’s the jerk thing.”

He walked over to Mrs. Smith, and I followed close behind. “Hey, Mrs. Smith, can I talk to you for a second? Alone?”

“Um, excuse me?” I said. He was NOT going to have a private conversation without me.

“Alone, plus one?” he amended.

“That’s better.”

Mrs. Smith looked between the two of us and sighed, sounding defeated. “Fine,” she said, and led us away from the fire.

“I suspect I know what you two might want to talk about,” she said, eyeing me. “You really are terrible at keeping secrets, Cali.”

“He asked!” I protested. “And open and honest communication is the cornerstone of any healthy relationship. Seems like a lot of werewolves opt out of it.”

Both Mrs. Smith and Xavier rolled their eyes at me. The truth hurts, doesn’t it?!

“What do you know about Big Mac’s behavior lately? Why is she acting so odd? Is there someone after her?” Xavier asked.

“That’s something you need to discuss with MacKenzie. It’s her business, and her secret to tell. Not mine.”

Xavier took a deep breath, clearly trying very hard to remind calm, but I could see that the veins in his neck were starting to bulge out. “I’m not discussing it with Big Mac, I’m discussing it with you,” he said. “So spill.”

That was not the right choice of words.

Mrs. Smith’s eyes narrowed, and her mouth pursed into a tight line. “Don’t get sassy with me, Xavier. I’ve been standing up to Alphas since before you were born—and since you’re *not* an Alpha, you definitely can’t order me around, or threaten me.”

I could see the fire of anger in Xavier’s eyes. His teeth were clenched, his lips nearly just about pulling back.

This would not end well.

“I’m not threatening you,” he said. “I’m asking you a simple question. Nicely. You don’t want to experience the not-so-nice way.”

“Yes, I’ve seen your ‘not-so-nice way’,” she said, her eyes darting to my wrist. The bruising was faded, but not totally gone. I hurried to cover it up. “I respectfully decline. Good night,” she said, before turning to walk away.

Wow. I didn’t know Mrs. Smith had it in her to be so frank. I almost wanted to praise her for her take-no-shit attitude, but then I remembered the goal had been to get answers. And now we had none.

Xavier’s fist clenched, and the sight filled me with panic. Quickly, I stepped between them, keeping my back to Xavier.

“I thought you cared about this pack!” I yelled at Mrs. Smith, hurt lacing my voice. Seriously, how could she keep something secret that could affect the entire pack? Just because she hooked up with Big Mac ONCE? Where did her loyalties lie?

Mrs. Smith turned back to face me, laughing harshly. “I care more than you or that big lug you call a mate will ever know.”

“Well you sure have a funny way of showing it!”

“Cali, I love you to pieces, but can you do us all a favor and shut the hell up?” Mrs. Smith hissed.

Her comment took me aback. She never spoke to me this way. Sometimes she was a bit sarcastic, but never outright mean. Maybe something was going on that would be better to stay in the dark for once…

“Hey don’t fucking talk to my mate like that,” Xavier growled, moving past me.

“What are you going to about it, Xavier?” Mrs. Smith growled back.

Okay, well this whole argument was escalating very quickly.

“Will you three shut the hell up?” Greyson yelled, emerging from the darkness and stepping between Mrs. Smith and Xavier and me. His silver eyes were not pleased as he scowled at us. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? Are you stupid? Are you children? Yelling in the middle of the woods while we’re being pursued… Can’t I leave you alone for a minute?” he hissed. I was relieved he was back. The last thing we needed was another fight. “I swear to god, I feel like I’m running a daycare center instead of a pack,” he said, running his long fingers through his hair. “Now. Someone tell me, *in their indoor voice,* what the hell is going on.”

“Mrs. Smith knows something that might affect the entire pack, but she won’t tell us,” I explained. “Someone is after Big Mac—that’s why she’s hiding her house and doesn’t want us hanging around. It must have something to do with a werewolf, because none of you can see her house and I can.”

Greyson stroked his chin, turning what I’d said over in his mind for a moment. “Go on.”

“They said something about someone being *back*. Which is cryptic as hell,” I said.

“Yes, I know,” Greyson said, and I remembered all the hushed whispers that had occurred when I’d first met him. Whispers about how *Greyson was* *back.*

“Anyway, Mrs. Smith looked horrified at the thought of it, so I know it has to be bad.”

Something flickered in Greyson’s eyes that I couldn’t interpret before he shifted his gaze back to Mrs. Smith. They stared each other down for a few moments before Greyson turned back to me.

“Drop it, Cali,” he said. He was looking toward me, but not AT me.

Something *was* wrong.

I opened my mouth to speak, but he cut me off. “We’re getting out of here as soon as Lola is ready to move. The witch’s problems, whatever they may be, are none of our concern.”

“But what if this guy is dangerous and—”

“I SAID DROP IT, CALIANA!” he shouted, his grey eyes wild with rage.

I took a step back, shocked at his reaction. A hundred different emotions came over me—anger, hurt, surprise, curiosity—but the one that hit the hardest was one I’d never felt around Greyson before. Fear.

He must have noticed my body trembling, or maybe the intensity of my fear was rolling off my body in waves, because his expression instantly softened, the anger in his eyes replaced by regret and something else. Something I couldn’t quite name, but that was powerful nonetheless.

*I’m so sorry, love. I shouldn’t have lost my temper.*

He took a step toward me but was instantly blocked by Xavier, who stepped between us. “You stay the fuck away from her,” he growled, his teeth showing.

Greyson just turned and started to walk back toward the camp, his whole body tense.

“Hey!” Mrs. Smith shouted, grabbing Greyson by the shoulder and turning his body to face her. “I always knew that you were up to something, Greyson Evers. That you were keeping something from us. But this is a new low, even for someone like you.”

Greyson gave her a hard look. “What are you talking about?”

“You know, don’t you?” Mrs. Smith said. “You’ve known this whole time.”

**Episode 258**

Greyson’s eyes turned dark and cold as he glared at Mrs. Smith. His hand balled up into a fist, and his whole body tensed up.

But I could tell, beneath his calm exterior, that something was wrong. He was lashing out to hide something. Shocker.

But it made me even more nervous. What did Greyson have to be worried about?

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said to Mrs. Smith.

*Liar!* I thought fiercely, almost hoping that he would hear it.

“I don’t know who this fucking character is, and quite frankly I don’t give a shit. While you’re all busy talking nonsense, you’re forgetting that we still have a death curse on our heads. This isn’t a bloody sleepover, or a game of Clue,” Greyson said, looking at everyone as he spoke. “Do you think this is a fucking joke?

“Well, here’s the punchline: Lilac is dead, Lola is seriously hurt, and we have a fucking Manus Cruentae after us. It’s my responsibility to keep this pack safe. Like it or not. Regardless of your personal feelings, you people need to drop this and focus on getting Lola healed so we can get back to the pack house.” Greyson then turned to look directly at me. “Where the hell is that damn potion? The longer we stay here, the more opportunities we’re giving our enemies.”

I wasn’t going to let his attitude rattle me. “Big Mac needed time, sorry if that’s inconvenient for *you*.”

Greyson turned to look at Colton. “You and Maya can take the first watch while the others get some rest. Might as well get something out of this.”

I opened my mouth to question him further, but I could feel the tension coming off him in waves. Now was not the time to poke the wolf.

Briefly, I thought about trying our mind link, but using it didn’t feel appropriate anymore. Not now that Joss was in the picture. There’d been a time when I’d felt like I could talk to him about anything. When I’d known he’d answer my questions and call me love and make me feel safe and wanted.

But those days were long gone, and my heart couldn’t help but ache at the loss.

Plus, it wasn’t like I could actually go up and have a conversation with him anymore, anyway. I didn’t know who would kill me first: Xavier or Joss.

Fine. If I couldn’t talk to Greyson, maybe Mrs. Smith would answer my questions.

I was starting to follow her when Xavier pulled me back.

“Hey!”

“We’ve bothered Mrs. Smith enough for today,” Xavier said, directing me toward a blanket that had been spread out on the ground.

“But I have—”

“Questions, I know. But you need rest. We all do.”

I watched as Mrs. Smith headed back toward Big Mac’s cottage, and wondered whether she was going report that Greyson knew something. Or maybe she was just going back to the cottage to do some naughty stuff with Big Mac.

*And* I grossed myself out.

I allowed Xavier to lead me to the large plaid blanket, grateful that the night was still warm enough that we didn’t need a tent.

We lay down next to each other, pressing close, my head resting on his chest. Listening to the sound of his heart beat soothed me. Neither of us said a word.

In the silence, I thought about the hot spring—or rather, what had almosthappened at the spring. It had been nice to have some alone time with him, to feel him against me, to remember how *good* me made me feel with his mouth and fingers…

And then we’d been interrupted by Greyson. Apparently, being a cock block was an Evers family trait.

However, while I’d been shocked to see Greyson, I had to admit it hadn’t *bothered* me that he was there. Hadn’t bothered me that he’d seen me naked, even though I’d always PANICKED at the thought of other people seeing me without clothes on. I’d even covered up when Xavier had seen me naked in the spring, and he’d seen me naked A LOT.

But with Greyson, I was completely… comfortable. I’d been spread out like a *Playboy* centerfold, and it hadn’t bothered me at all. In fact, part of me (a very naughty part) had *liked* that he was looking at me. Liked that he’d liked what he’d seen. I hadn’t even thought about covering myself until I’d remembered Xavier was there.

*Xavier*. A twinge of guilt made my heart hurt, and I snuggled closer to his sleeping form. He held me tight, mumbling something in his sleep.

“Good night,” I mumbled back, closing my eyes as I tried to fall asleep. I shouldn’t have been thinking about Greyson—my mate was *right there.*

But why couldn’t I stop feeling this way?

\*\*\*

A couple hours later, I woke up with a start. The sky was still dark, with just the first gleam of light trying to break through. It would be dawn in a couple hours. Everything was quiet. Almost too quiet.

Xavier was breathing steadily beside me. Sometime during the night, we’d ended up spooning, his arms wrapped tightly around me. I smiled at the feeling of his body against mine. It was nice. It felt nice. I lived for moments like this.

Still, I couldn’t get rid of the nagging worry: how was Lola doing? She wasn’t whimpering anymore, but it bothered me that I couldn’t hear her at all.

Carefully, I slipped out of Xavier’s grip and went over to Lola's blanket, finding her fast asleep. Jay was sitting next to her, still awake, watching over her. My heart swelled at the sight, admiring how vigilant he was even though he had to be exhausted. I was approaching from his literal blind side, so he couldn’t see me. I felt bad for Jay—he’d done so much for Lola, had been so supportive and fiercely protective of her. While I was still a little miffed that Lola had kept him a secret all these years, I was happy she had a mate like him. Someone who loved her, treated her well, and would do anything for her.

I accidentally kicked a small rock, causing Jay to finally look in my direction. He smiled wearily. “Hey Cali,” he whispered.

“How is she?” I whispered back.

He sighed. “She’s had a hard night, but she’s finally comfortable.”

“And how are you doing? Have you gotten any sleep?”

Jay shrugged. “I’m a werewolf. I can sleep later.”

I gave him a skeptical look. Even in the dark, I could see the exhaustion clear on his face. I sat down next to him. “Thank you for looking after Lola.”

Jay smiled. “I should be thanking you, Cali. You’ve always been a good friend to her. You know, when we were separated, we would talk all the time and she would *always* talk about you. And while the separation was excruciatingly hard, I knew that Lola was okay, because she had a friend like you.”

I felt a tear slip down my cheek and reached down to grabbed his hand, giving it a squeeze. He squeezed back.

We sat there for a moment, neither of us saying a word as we watched Lola twitch in her sleep.

Suddenly, footsteps sounded from behind us. Both of us jumped up at the same time, only to see that it was just Mrs. Smith and Big Mac.

“Is the potion ready?” Jay asked breathlessly.

Big Mac said nothing, but held out a dozen bottles, packed into a small crate. Mrs. Smith took one of the bottles and handed it to Jay.

“Lola should drink all of this,” she told him.

“How long will it take before it starts working?” I asked.

“It should start working almost immediately because I’m that good,” said Big Mac. And then she turned to me, a greedy look in her eye. “I believe you owe me something.”

I sighed. I’d known that this moment was coming, but couldn’t she have waited until after breakfast? Well, at least she wasn’t taking an eye.

I followed Big Mac through the shimmering light and into her house. My anxiety was starting to rise, my chest tightening. I’d never been good around needles. I’d passed out after almost every shot I’d ever had.

“Sit down,” she told me roughly, pointing to one of her kitchen chairs. Then she went into one of her cupboards and pulled out a large syringe, the sight of which sent my heart into overdrive.

I gulped loudly.

“Wait, what’s with that?” I demanded. “I thought you were only going to take a few drops of blood, like last time. I didn’t know this was a fucking blood drive.”

Big Mac shrugged. “You said I could take as much as I wanted—that was our deal. So I’ll take as much as I want.”

I glared at her, even though my whole body was trembling. “And how much would that be? Remember, I only have so much. Wouldn’t be very smart to drain your whole supply dry on the first go. I can’t make more blood if I’m dead!”

“Calm down,” Big Mac said, trying to give me a comforting smile. “Don’t worry, I’m not greedy or cruel. I’ll be sure to leave you with enough blood to survive.”

“Ha ha, very funny,” I deadpanned. “That syringe had better be sterile!”

“Shh,” she said, taking my right arm and wiping the crook of my elbow with an alcohol swab. Then, without warning, she jabbed the needle into my arm.

“Ow!” I screamed, jumping a little in pain. “Give a girl a little warning, jeez!”

“You would have just tensed up. It’s easier this way,” she told me, watching as blood flowed into the syringe. She seemed so hyper focused on it, like it would solve all of her problems. I watched it as well, almost mesmerized.

“So, level with me here, Big Mac. Just between you and me—why do you need human blood? Are you trying to stay young forever, or something?”

Big Mac scoffed, waiving her free hand. She was still watching the blood intently, not paying much mind to me. “I don’t have any use for human blood.”

Wait, *what?*

**Episode 259**

“*What*?” I squawked, jerking my arm out of Big Mac’s grasp.

Big Mac sighed, exasperated as always.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “If you keep making sudden movements, you’ll tear the vein and only have yourself to blame.”

“I’m sorry.” My voice dripped with sarcasm. “I just was kind of shocked to hear that you don’t *have any use* for the blood you’re making me give you!”

“That’s not what I said.” Big Mac slid the syringe out of my arm, and I winced at the feeling. “Now, kindly get the hell out of my home.”

“But I—”

“Out,” she repeated, handing me a band-aid with rainbows on it.

I snatched the band-aid and stormed out. A million questions swirled around in my head. What the hell was that about? No use for human blood? Then why take mine? Could Big Mac be a vampire *and* a witch? Some kind of witch-pire? And if not, what was she hiding?

I arrived at the campsite, trying to tug my sleeve over my rainbow band-aid—I really didn’t need any more shit than everyone was already giving me.

Xavier spotted me and jogged over, his eyes soft and his hair adorably rumpled. I felt myself smile. He’d been so concerned about the entire deal in the first place.

“I’m sorry for sleeping late,” he murmured, taking my hand. “Did things go okay with Big Mac?”

I wanted to tell him everything. I knew it would help me to talk it out. Even if he didn’t know the answers to my questions, we could not know together. But a little voice in my head reminded me that the last thing Xavier needed was more drama. This could wait.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “How’s Lola?”

“Why don’t you check for yourself?” he asked, pointing over his shoulder.

I followed his gaze and saw Lola, sitting up, her eyes clear, and her face calm and pain-free. Her legs were stretched out in front of her—and both of them were human. Without thinking, I ran toward her.

“Cali!” she shouted, catching my eye. God I was so happy to see her smiling and all right again.

I sank to my knees next to her and wrapped my arms around her, squeezing maybe a bit too tightly. “You’re okay,” I sighed into her neck, squeezing her as tight as I dared.

Lola squeezed me back. “Thanks to you.”

I pulled back and saw her eyes dart to the band-aid on my arm, which I covered up as quickly as I could.

“Xavier told Jay who told me about what you did. The deal,” she told me, her voice soft. “I hope it didn’t hurt too much.”

“It didn’t,” I promised her. “And even if it did, who cares? I’m just glad you’re better. I know we’ve been having some ups and downs Lola, but—”

“I would die for you and I love you?” Lola cut me off, grabbing my hands.

“Yes. Exactly,” I agreed, my cheeks hurting from smiling so hard. My Lola was okay! I’d done that! Kind of. Minus actually making the potion myself, but that was just details.

Behind me, I heard someone clearing their throat and I turned to see Greyson, Joss hanging off him like she couldn’t stand on her own. Ugh.

“It’s time to move out,” Greyson said, towering over us. “Now that Lola’s healed and you’ve fulfilled your debt to Big Mac, we don’t have time to just hang out here waiting to get killed. We’re going back to the pack house and we’re going *now*.”

I opened my mouth, ready to sarcastically apologize for basically bleeding out for my injured friend—a PACK MEMBER—when Jay appeared beside us.

“Ready to ride, babe?” Jay asked Lola with a grin.

“In front of all these people?” Lola clutched her imaginary pearls with indignation. “But I’m a lady!”

Well she was definitely feeling better then. No one argued with Greyson and they began to shift. Xavier had shifted too and he nudged me with his nose. *Hop on*.

In an extremely un-ladylike manner, I pulled myself on Xavier’s back and enjoyed the feel of his black fur in between my fingers. If they conditioned their hair, did it condition their fur?

With a sigh, I let myself lean into Xavier, letting my cheek rest against his back. I wrapped my arms around his neck, snuggling up to him. It felt right, to be with him like this.

The woods passed by in a blur as we made our way toward the pack house. It was surreal that we were heading back and with an entire pack. A new Alpha. But on the plus side, it would be amazing to be back with real showers. And refrigerators. And real beds! I was going to take a fucking hour-long shower.

I peered up ahead and saw a streak of Greyson’s silver fur. I felt heat spread across my skin as I remembered the look on his face when he’d seen me at the hot spring. He’d actually seemed flustered. For someone who was both naked and around naked people as often as he was, you’d think he’d be cooler about nudity. What had he thought when he’d seen me?

Nope. Shut up Caliana.

But I had a lot of questions on my ‘Huge Questions About Greyson’ list: 1) What was with him shutting Mrs. Smith down when she’d asked about the mystery person Big Mac was scared of? 2) Who was this person? 3) Who could scare both witches and werewolves? 4) And why were they covering it up?

I looked at my rainbow band-aid, thankful that my arm didn’t hurt as much as I thought it might. What had Big Mac meant about not needing *human* blood? Was she saying that my blood… wasn’t human? Was she low-key insulting me? Was she just out of her mind because of whoever this person was?

Ugh. Why weren’t there more humans mated to werewolves? I wished I could talk to another one. Did they have the same problem with so many secrets? If more human mates were out there, I wondered if their lives were as ridiculous as mine? It’d be nice to swap stories and feel less alone.

At least Lola, the only person I could really talk to, was healed now. Maybe I’d be able to share all this weird blood stuff, and my suspicions about Greyson, with her. But she’d been through so much already—I couldn’t give her something else to worry about. Plus, the last time I’d confided in her about Greyson, it hadn’t really ended well. Maybe it’d be better if I waited until I had more answers… For now, I’d let her relax and heal and let my own anxiety take the wheel.

Finally, we came to a stop. I rolled off Xavier, wishing I knew a graceful way to dismount a werewolf. I stretched painfully; my muscles were begging me to just fly next time we needed to travel.

We were in the woods near the pack house, and I was shocked that I was actually happy to be there. It wasn’t long ago that this place had felt like a prison to me, but now it was starting to feel like home. There were good memories here. Some wild ones too. But this was where Xavier and I had fallen in love. This was where it had all begun.

The rest shifted back and we all made our way toward the pack house together. I took Xavier’s hand in mine, surprised that he took mine.

“Happy to be home?” I asked, reveling in how warm he felt next to me.

“Beats peeing on shit in the woods,” he said with a silly grin.

“I call the bathroom first!” Lola shouted, running ahead.

“No you do not,” Colton said back.

As we neared the house, Greyson held up his hand in warning.

Instantly we all stopped. Greyson’s eyes darted around, and I didn’t know how, but I could sense how worried he was.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Yeah, man, what gives? I want to be watching *Bojack Horseman* naked in bed.” Colton asked. He turned to Maya and winked. “You can join.”

“Disgusting,” Maya said, emphasizing every syllable.

“Can everyone shut up?” Greyson asked. He held a finger to his lips.

I turned to Xavier, who squeezed my hand in reassurance before walking over to Greyson with Colton.

“Seriously, what’s wrong?” Colton whispered to Xavier.

Maybe Greyson was just being cautious. We had been away a while with various people trying to kill us along the way. Safety was paramount.

“Stay close,” Xavier murmured.

I watched all the wolves around me straining to hear something, anything. All I could hear was the whistle of the wind between the trees. Whatever Greyson was worried about, I couldn’t figure out.

I couldn’t help but think that if I were a wolf, I’d be able to hear and smell whatever danger was coming. I wouldn’t be so small and helpless and human. What would it have been like if the bite *had* turned me?

Was my blood not human enough for me to turn? Was *I* not human?

I was gonna have a serious talk with that witch next time I saw her.

“We need to be careful,” Greyson said as he began to walk toward the house. We all followed him, slowly and quietly. I kept my eyes on the back of Greyson’s head, hoping I’d be able to read his response if he sensed something. “Everyone follow my lead.”

Finally, I saw it. The front door of the pack house had been smashed in. And there was a bloody handprint right next to it.

Fucking hell.

**Episode 260**

I pulled back, covering my mouth to keep myself from letting out a terrified noise. The Manus Cruentae had been here. They’d found us. Was this a trap? Were they about to attack us? Maybe Greyson had been right—maybe we’d spent too long in the woods waiting for Lola to heal, and now we’d lost any advantage we’d once had.

I snuck another peek at the bloody handprint. The blood was dark red, almost brown and dry. That meant the handprint was old. It could have been put here a while ago. But this fact didn’t really give me much relief. Knowing that a group of killers knew where we slept kind of had that effect.

Sure, I could *hope* the person who’d done this had left when they’d realized the pack wasn’t home. But we couldn’t be sure until we’d searched the place. I wanted to ask Xavier what we were going to do next, but I knew I shouldn’t make any noise.

And then I heard it. A sound from inside. And since it was loud enough for me to hear, it was also loud enough to make the whole pack tense.

I froze, my hand still in Xavier’s. Were we about to be attacked?

*Fuck*.

Why hadn’t anyone taught me more self-defense? Seriously, I needed to get into that. If we survived this, I was enrolling in a class—no one around me seemed interested in helping.

Xavier pulled his hand from mine, and I winced at the loss of his warmth. He held out a hand, motioning for me to stay where I was. He, Colton, and Greyson crept toward the shattered door.

Watching and holding my breath, I saw something through the splintered wood. There was someone inside. There was a shout and I saw Xavier disappear from my view. Instinctively, I ran toward the door, but Mrs. Smith pulled me back.

“Best to let them handle this, dear,” she said.

My heart leapt into my throat as we all heard a crash from inside. Straining, I saw both Greyson and Xavier wrestling someone to the ground. Then there was a, “WOO! TAKE THAT BITCH!” clearly from Colton. Did that mean they were safe? Had they subdued the intruder?

*Nope*. Colton crashed out the already broken door. We all screamed and Jay ran to Colton to help him. He spit out blood onto the ground, his white skin getting blotchy. “Asshole,” he said.

*Xavier! Greyson!* Fuck Mrs. Smith’s advice. I was pissed at her anyway. I ran toward the doorway, grabbing the biggest piece of broken glass I could find. I didn’t care if it cut me, I wanted to join in and help. Running inside, I made it in time to see the intruder flip Xavier over the kitchen island.

Greyson went to tackle the person and they smashed into the kitchen archway. “Caliana!” he shouted. “Get out of here!”

Xavier came back strong—he rushed the intruder from behind, grabbing him by his jacket. With a grunt, he shifted his weight and lifted the guy over his head, sending him crashing down into the coffee table. Then everything went silent for a moment, all of us seemingly stunned by the turn of events.

And then I heard… laughter?

*Wait, what the fuck?*

“*Gabriel*?” Xavier asked, with a shit-eating grin spreading across his face.

The man rolled over and groaned, a smile spreading across his face. “Hell of a way to greet an old friend,” Gabriel said. “You haven’t lost your touch.”

My jaw dropped. Did Xavier know this guy? The guy he’d just pulverized in the living room?

Xavier offered a hand down to Gabriel, which he clasped in his own. Once Gabriel was on his feet, he and Xavier hugged, giving some good pats on the back as they laughed. When they pulled back, I could see Gabriel more clearly. He had short, black, curly hair, golden brown skin, and cheekbones that could cut glass. Did Xavier know *any* short, non-model looking people besides me?

Too late, I felt a sharp pain in my hand. I realized I’d been gripping the shard of glass way too tight, and now I was bleeding. I dropped the glass, eager to not do any more damage to my own skin. Lucky Big Mac wasn’t here to bleed me out for more.

Gabriel looked in my direction. “Who’s the little glass warrior?” he asked, eyebrows lifting.

“Cali,” I said with an awkward wave. Seriously, why was everyone always so damn gorgeous around here?

“Who the hell are you?” Greyson asked him. “And what are you doing in my pack house?”

Gabriel brushed the glass from the coffee table off his jacket, as casually as if it had been a bit of dryer lint.

“I came to see my friends.” He grinned, his smile far from innocent, but it didn’t feel dangerous either. Just the slightest bit mischievous. I mean, Xavier had *hugged him*. How many people did Xavier HUG?! “I have a job or two I thought might interest the Evers twins.”

“Everything okay in here?” Mrs. Smith stood in the doorway with Lola and Jay holding Colton.

“Gabriel? Shit, that’s you?” Colton said, the same sloppy grin coming over his face. He let go of Jay to give Gabriel a huge bear hug. I hurried to Lola, who was watching them with the same confused look on her face I was sure I was wearing.

“Who’s this guy?” I asked her quietly.

“No fucking clue,” Lola whispered back. “But he’s fun to look at, huh?”

That certainly seemed to be the thing with these werewolf boys. I could tell just by looking at Gabriel that he was ripped, just like the rest of them. I knew that if I’d met him before I’d met Xavier, he probably would have reduced me to a mumbling, blushing pile of goo.

I watched Colton slap Gabriel on the back, grinning, and felt a little better. They were clearly close with each other. But why hadn’t Xavier ever brought him up? He didn’t have a lot of friends, but to have a good friend and say nothing? But to be fair, it was far from the first secret he’d kept from me.

“Maybe next time,” Greyson added, eyeing Gabriel, “you give us a heads up before you drop by or I’ll rip your fucking throat out.”

“I think I got that, yeah.” Gabriel rubbed the back of his neck with a laugh, a little bashful. “I saw the bloody handprint on the house and thought I should take a look around. You know, make sure my boys could still handle themselves.”

Colton and Xavier both chuckled at this. Greyson glared at them and then turned to the rest of us. “We got lucky it was only him. We’ve still been marked, and we have work to do. I want this mess cleaned up, and then we need to figure out a defense strategy for the house.”

As plans went, it wasn’t revolutionary, but it was what needed to be done. I couldn’t help but feel a strange tingle as he walked away from everyone to the next room. Greyson was continuing to wear authority very well.

Everyone filed into the house and started cleaning up. We’d definitely need Phil to come fix the door. As I moved to the coffee table to pick up the pieces—it was total trash now—I saw Gabriel pull Xavier aside.

“I heard about the Finale, man.” He patted Xavier on the shoulder. “Sorry about that. Must suck.”

“You don’t fucking know the half of it,” Xavier murmured, his brow furrowing.

“Sounds like we have a little catching up to do.” Gabriel grinned, throwing a supportive arm around his shoulders.

“How’d you even hear about what went down?” Colton asked him.

“Word travels fast amongst scoundrels, thieves, and other bad people,” Gabriel told him, waggling his eyebrows. The three boys laughed.

“Excuse me,” I interrupted, inserting myself into their conversation. Was I really going to clean? Pffffft. “Is anyone going to explain how you guys know this guy?”

“This guy?” Gabriel clapped his hands over his chest, as if I’d shot him in the heart. His eyes sparkled, even as his expression went all faux-anguished. “Ouch, sweetheart. You mean they haven’t been talking about me? Their better-looking brother in arms?”

I turned to look at Xavier, not wanting to believe he’d kept something this huge from me *again.*

“You have another brother?” I asked, hearing my voice jump an octave.

“No, he’s joking. Relax, Cali.” Xavier cupped one of my cheeks in his palm. The pressure was warm and comforting. “Gabriel’s an old friend.”

“*Just* a friend?” Gabriel grinned as he punched Xavier playfully in the arm. “That’s harsh, bro.”

Xavier smiled back. It was nice to see him happy, even if it was because of some mysterious stranger I didn’t know.

“Yo.” Jay appeared next to me, waving to get Xavier’s attention. “Should someone call Phil about the front door? And the window? And the living room?”

“Why can’t that someone be you?” Maya said over her shoulder as she rummaged around for cleaning supplies under the kitchen sink.

Jay rolled his eyes. “Because I don’t know his number.”

Maya exchanged a glance with Colton, who shrugged as if to say, ‘Don’t look at me.’

“Fine,” Maya groaned, drawing the word out. “I’ll do it.”

But before she could dial, a howl pierced the air, loud and plaintive. I scrambled after everyone as they rushed to the door to look. Damn wolves and their super speed—they were always faster than me.

Catching up, I peeked between everyone’s bodies and gasped when I saw what was outside.

There were at least a dozen werewolves, staring at us.

*No*. Another fight? So soon? Were we ready?

Greyson pushed past all of us, walking out to meet the wolves with his shoulders squared and fists clenched. What was he doing?! We couldn’t handle another scuffle so soon.

The wolves all watched him carefully as he walked toward them. He stopped once he was halfway between us and them. I grabbed onto Lola, scared for what would come next.

None of us expected it when all the wolves bowed to him.

**Episode 261**

What the fuck was going on?

Why were the Manus Cruentae bowing to Greyson? Unless these werewolves were a different pack entirely… Then what were they doing here?

Greyson motioned for the wolves to rise and they obeyed, their eyes locked on him. Their stares were docile but focused, and they hung on Greyson’s every gesture. I couldn’t believe what I was witnessing—how powerful he was in this moment. And how naturally he wielded that power. I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t impressive. It was like something out of the *Lion King* if it had been werewolves.

Greyson nodded to the wolves once they’d straightened. And, as if on cue, they all began to shift back into their human forms.

“They’re Rogues,” Mrs. Smith murmured to me. Maybe she’d seen the supremely confused expression on my face and decided to give me an explanation.

I felt something in my stomach clench. Rogues? I didn’t really have a lot of positive memories associated with that word. Most of the rogues I’d met in the past had been pretty bad news. And facing down a bunch of them seemed like cause for alarm.

Greyson walked over to meet them and a woman stepped forward. She was a young, petite Indian woman who radiated a serene kind of authority. Her brown eyes were calm but cautious as she watched him approach.

“Why have you come here?” he asked her, straightening his shoulders. This woman was a full head shorter than him, but she didn’t give an inch.

“We’ve come to join the Redwood pack,” she told him, and her companions nodded in agreement.

Greyson’s eyebrows rose. Clearly, this was the last thing he’d been expecting.

Was this normal? These people seemed like strangers not only to Greyson but to everyone in the pack. Why would they want to join us if they didn’t even know us?

“I’m Rishika.” The woman held out her hand for Greyson to shake. “We heard what you did to Ryker. That’s why we’re here.”

He shook her hand, still looking baffled, even though he hid it under a layer of authority.

“Why would that bring you to us?” Greyson asked, his jaw tense.

“Because we want to thank you and pledge our support,” Rishika answered simply. “Each one of us is here because Ryker terrorized us in one way or another, killing family members and friends.”

I felt a lump form in my throat as I remembered how vicious Ryker had been in the short time I’d known him. He’d honestly scared the shit out of me, and it hurt to think about all the loss these people had faced because of his vile behavior.

I searched the faces of the other werewolves behind Rishika—it was people from all walks of life and ages. There was such pain across their features at the mention of Ryker’s name. It made my stomach twist. I’d never been happy someone was dead before. At least not someone I’d met. But the werewolf world was different.

“When we heard you defeated him once and for all…” Rishika continued, shaking her head. “It made us want to join you. To follow you. We’ve wanted him dead for a long time.”

Greyson was speechless. Which was rare. He blinked back at Rishika, surprised and—if I wasn’t seeing it for myself, I’d never have believed it—*moved*.

“I appreciate your support,” Greyson told her, running a white hand through his blond hair. “And how far you must have traveled. But I’m afraid you’ve made a mistake. Our pack has been cursed. Marked for death.”

He pointed to the bloody handprint on the side of the house. Rishika’s eyes widened when she saw it, and her lips parted in surprise.

“Do you still want to take the pledge of loyalty?” Greyson asked her with a sigh. “Because it’s a death sentence at this point.”

“Yes,” Rishika answered immediately, along with a few other members of her pack. She took a moment to look to each one of them, conferring silently. They all looked at her with an immense level of trust in their eyes. She seemed like a pretty damn good leader to me already.

“We want to help you and be part of a pack again,” Rishika told him after a moment. “Even if it means death.”

I looked to Greyson, not sure how he’d respond. I wasn’t sure how *I’d* respond, if I were in his shoes. How did he know this wasn’t some kind of trick? What if they were part of the Manus Cruentae?

“How can we tell if they’re actually on our side?” Lola asked, making me to wonder if *we* were telepathic.

“I don’t know,” Greyson admitted, before he turned back around to address Rishika and her pack of Rogues.

“Look, given our situation, the Redwood pack is not in a position to trust everyone who shows up at our door,” he explained. “But that doesn’t mean I’m rejecting your offer to join. I hope you understand if I ask you to stay outside the pack house until we can test your loyalty.”

“I understand.” Rishika smiled and something in her shoulders seemed to relax. “I’m just grateful you’re willing to give us a chance. Thank you.”

“Why not roll the dice?” I heard Gabriel ask from behind me. “I say give ‘em a shot.”

“Thanks for your input, Gabriel.” Greyson glared at him, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “You might be friends with my brothers, but that doesn’t make you a friend of mine. I’d appreciate it if you keep your thoughts on this to yourself.”

Gabriel put his hands up in a gesture of peace. “Easy, Big Guy. Just trying to be supportive.”

Xavier and Colton both snorted and I couldn’t help but smile a little.

Greyson ignored the boys and turned back to Rishika. “Can we talk more?” he asked. She nodded.

As Greyson and Rishika began their private conversation, I turned back to Xavier to see what he was thinking about all this, but he was busy talking to Colton and Gabriel. Lola walked past me to get back into the house.

I followed her. “Do you know anything about this Gabriel guy?”

“Not really,” she answered, shrugging. “Only that I think they all used to work together. Him, Colton, and Xavier.”

“Doing what?” I asked, cringing when I heard how high pitched my voice had gotten.

“Why don’t you ask your mate about that?” Maya said, smirking at me as she passed us. “I’m gonna call Phil and get the door fixed.”

“Want to swap jobs?” I asked her, teasing.

“I’m good,” Maya deadpanned, walking away and leaving me standing there. For a second, I wondered if that little exchange meant Maya and I were getting closer. But who could tell with her.

Lola and I spent some time cleaning up the shattered glass around the doorway, putting it into the trash. Outside, Xavier, Colton and Gabriel were still talking and they all started laughing like one of them had just told the funniest joke ever. I tried not to feel self-conscious, being on the outside of their friendship, but he was a complete stranger.

I needed to go re-introduce myself. Right? That was the kinda-sorta-Xavier’s-girlfriend thing to do. If Gabriel did turn out to be just a normal guy, I certainly didn’t want to make a bad first impression. Tying off the trash bag of glass, I went to join the boys.

“God, that job in Vancouver got so fucked up.” Gabriel ran a hand through his hair as he laughed. “What were the odds we all made it out of that alive? We should have hit Vegas right after, *that’s* how lucky we were.”

Colton nodded. “It was a close call, for sure.”

“Thanks again for saving my ass.” Gabriel clapped both boys on the back. “Great memories, right?”

Okay, I *desperately* wanted to know what the hell they were talking about. I’d never been told anything about a job in Vancouver! Was it the one in Canada? Wasn’t there a Vancouver, Oregon too? I NEEDED DETAILS. I marched right up to Gabriel and stuck my hand out and put on my friendliest smile.

“Hey, I don’t think we were properly introduced before. I’m Cali.” I tried not to glare at the boys for not introducing me.

“Well aren’t you a hot commodity,” Gabriel said, taking my hand and holding it for a beat as he eyed me. “Are you X’s girlfriend?”

“No.” I shook my head as I withdrew my hand. “I’m his mate.”

“Interesting.” Gabriel arched a brow and shared a glance with Xavier. “Is that right?”

Heart beating in my throat, I looked to Xavier too, who didn’t dispute it. Gabriel looked back at me with renewed interest, a small smile forming. Like I was a piece in some puzzle he wanted to solve.

“How long are you planning on staying?” I asked, hoping I sounded polite and breezy.

“Depends.” He shrugged, looking at the guys.

“On what?” I asked, annoyed at his evasiveness.

“Well, Cali, I came here because I need a little help, and you seem like a sensible girl,” he explained with a wink. “I have a job for the boys. But the question is, do you think they’re up for it?”

**Episode 262**

Xavier glanced at me, and I made no move to hide how annoyed I was with this guy and his presumptuous attitude. Xavier and Colton couldn’t just up and leave the pack right now. We were LITERALLY CURSED. Didn’t he see we were dealing with bigger things than whatever *job* he was offering?

“We’ve got a lot going on right now.” Xavier shrugged. “Might not be the best time.”

Gabriel’s eyes darkened for a split second before he pulled the mask back on and grinned.

“There does seem to be a fair amount of shit hitting the fan around here.” Gabriel nodded toward the cleanup happening inside the house.

“We wouldn’t mind having you stick around, though,” Xavier told him, slapping him on the shoulder. “We could use the help.”

“Y’all can always count on me.” Gabriel grinned. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Besides, I could use a bit of a vacation.”

What kind of guy saw helping a cursed werewolf pack as a fucking *vacation*? And why did he seem so calm while everyone around him was just trying to stay alive?! I really couldn’t decide whether I liked this guy.

“Xavier, could I have a minute?” I didn’t wait for him to answer as I tugged on his arm and pulled him inside and over to the stairs.

“What’s got you in a mood now?” he asked, his voice gruff.

I stared at him, not entirely sure I wasn’t turning purple. Was he serious right now?

“Do I really have to explain?” I asked. “The reason for my mood is right over there, *X*.”

I sneered as I used Gabriel’s little nickname, wanting to make my point. But all it did was make Xavier shrug.

“He’s my friend,” Xavier told me, like that answered any question I could possibly have.

I. Wanted. To. Scream.

“Oh don’t give me that BS! He’s more than that.” I jabbed my finger at him, annoyed to have caught him in another half-truth. “He’s a *good* friend. An *old* friend. And you’ve never mentioned him.”

Was I wrong? I felt like a crazy girlfriend getting paranoid at everything, but the wolves had made me this way! It was their fault 100 percent. I regularly hated feeling out of the loop, but I especially hated it where Xavier was concerned. We were making progress…

“It didn’t seem important to mention him,” Xavier said. “He usually doesn’t visit and we text maybe once a month.”

I groaned internally. This was going to be a classic Evers investigation. “I mean, Gabriel seems friendly enough and all, but… Xavier, you have inside jokes with this guy! What the hell happened in Vancouver? And what kind of ‘jobs’ do you do with him?”

Xavier crossed his arms, avoiding my gaze. Nuh-uh. We weren’t going to play this game right now.

I reached forward and twisted his nipple. He yelped. “Don’t you DARE pull any ‘I don’t wanna talk about it’ shit on me. I am tired of waiting until you feel like opening up to get answers to the million questions I get per day, just living with you fucking werewolves. I’m your *mate.* That’s supposed to mean something. You’re supposed to trust me.”

Xavier looked like I’d slapped him. And in a way, maybe I had.

“I *do* trust you,” he said, dumping gasoline on the fire.

“Then prove it,” I practically snarled. “Tell me about Gabriel. Actually, no—I want more. Tell me about *everything*.”

Xavier clenched his jaw, and I saw a shiver run through him. Like he was suppressing something. What did he want to do? Growl? Yell at me? Break another door in the house?

He leaned forward into my space. Without thinking, I took a step back. Our chests were almost flush, and his breath tickled my cheeks.

“You want to know *everything*?” he asked, his voice a low rumble.

Before I could open my mouth to answer, he grabbed me and slid his arm around me, his fingers digging into my waist. Oh. He was a professional distractor, wasn’t he?

“Let’s go chat,” he said with a sparkle in his eye.

I nodded, gasping as he led me upstairs, my legs going where he guided. Xavier led me to our bedroom, and he slammed the bedroom door behind us and rounded on me, closing the space between us. I saw his muscles rippling under the shirt he’d pulled on, and felt my mouth go dry.

*Fuck*. I had to remind myself to breathe. In, out. In, out. I knew I was in for it. I just didn’t know exactly what ‘it’ was. But I wanted—*needed*—to find out.

Xavier slammed his hand into the door inches from my head, pulling me out of my trance. He towered over me, anger rolling off him in waves. It reminded of me of how he’d acted when we first met. How forceful he could be… and how turned on it made me.

“Are you sure you want to know everything?” he whispered into my ear.

At this point, I was grateful I was leaning against the door, because my knees were weak from the liquid heat building behind my belly button.

“You think you can handle everything?” he asked.

Xavier flattened his palm against my chest, just beneath my throat, and pressed me into the door for good measure. *Double fuck*. I was completely at his mercy.

I nodded. “Yes,” I whispered.

“Yeah? You sure? Because you might not like it,” he warned in a taunting voice, his breath heating my collarbone.

I had no control over the blush I felt painting my cheeks. But I narrowed my eyes, trying to keep my gaze steely. I took a deep breath, praying my voice would come out even.

“I’m sure,” I told him, and he pulled back so he could watch me carefully. “I can handle anything. As long as it’s the truth.”

Even though it felt like my heart was about to beat out of my chest, I knew I was telling the truth. Since meeting Xavier, I’d endured things that should have broken me. But they hadn’t. I’d faced off against werewolves, I’d nearly lost him, I’d seen him kill for me.

I was strong.

“I know you’ve done things in the past that might scare me,” I told him. “But after everything I’ve been through since I met you, I doubt there’s much that would shock me now.”

Xavier took my hands and pinned them to the door above my head. I gasped as he leaned in, letting his lips brush against mine.

“Don’t be so sure, Caliana.” His voice was velvety smooth. Seductive, but cold. It felt like I was standing at the edge of a cliff, and Xavier was promising me it would feel so, *so good* to step off the edge. And while I knew better—knew that if I jumped, I would fall to my death—he made it sound so fucking tempting.

*Shit!*

I bit my lower lip, hoping it would tempt him. Before I knew it, I was consumed by how hungry I was for the taste of him; I needed what we hadn’t finished in the hot springs.

“I have more skeletons in my closet than a fucking graveyard,” he said in my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

*Jump off the cliff, Cali. It’ll feel better than anything.*

“So I’ll ask you again,” he continued, his eyes boring right into me.

*Just one little step, and you’re there.*

“Are you sure you want to know?” He was so close. His eyelashes practically touched my cheeks. I leaned forward, struggling against his hold, but his grip was like iron. I couldn’t move.

*It won’t feel like falling. It’ll feel like flying.*

His chest pressed against mine, and our eyes were locked. My breath went ragged. I sounded liked the trapped animal I was, cornered by a dangerous predator.

And it felt fucking *hot*.

“Tell me,” I whispered, hurling myself off the cliff.

“Only if you’re a good girl.” His mouth curled up into a wicked smile, and I thought I might burst into flames.

I tried to push my hands off the wall so I could tangle them in his hair and pull him down to me. But his grip was too strong. All I could do was tell him what we both knew.

“But I’m never good,” I replied, letting my teeth sink into my lower lip.

Xavier’s smile grew wider. There was a menacing quality to it that should have set my teeth on edge, but instead it made me press my thighs together, searching for some kind of relief.

Xavier must have noticed, because his grip loosened for a second and that was all I needed. With a very unladylike grunt, I shoved him off me. I saw shock play over his face as he stumbled backward.

I felt a surge of pride as he regained his footing only to glare at me.

“You’re right,” Xavier told me, taking a step closer. “You’ve been a very, very bad girl. And now you’re going to pay for it.”

I didn’t have time to think of anything witty to say. Xavier moved so fast that I didn’t even realize he’d grabbed and thrown me onto the bed until my back hit the mattress.

I stared up at him, a dangerous thrill buzzing through me. This was how he’d looked the first time we’d kissed. I hadn’t seen this volatile side of him in a while. Unrelenting. Refusing to give up control.

Maybe Xavier had realized how much it used to scare me, and had tried to banish that part of him. Obviously, he hadn’t realized how much it turned me on—even though I knew it shouldn’t.

He climbed on top of me, his movements slow and deliberate. He drew out the moment, knowing that every second I had to wait left me needing him exponentially more.

He kissed my neck, biting and sucking as his lips traveled down my throat. The pressure on my skin made me gasp with pleasure.

I reached for him, wanting to thread my hands through his hair and tug on it, giving back the mixture of pleasure and pain that he was giving me.

But Xavier pinned my wrists again, this time to the pillow.

“No,” he growled, close to my ear. The sound made me shiver, and my hips instinctively bucked up into his. I whimpered into his mouth, needing more. “You’re not allowed to touch.”

**Episode 263**

Xavier captured my mouth in a searing hot kiss, then slid his tongue into my mouth and groaned when he tasted me. I wanted to wrap my legs around his waist, but didn’t know if that would be considered ‘touching’.

I didn’t want to find out what happened if I broke the rules.

Well, I mean… I kind of did.

I settled for planting my feet on the mattress and letting him fall into the cradle of my hips. I ground against him, his hard cock pressing between my thighs.

He clenched my wrists in one hand, and let the other snake down to pull up my shirt. He tore at my bralette, ripping it in two and throwing it across the room.

I yelped in indignation. “Hey! Those are expensive!”

“I’ll buy you another,” he growled, kissing and nipping at the undersides of my breasts. “I’ll buy you as many as you want if you’re good.”

“I’ll be good,” I promised breathlessly as he took one of my nipples into his mouth and sucked.

*Shit that felt good.*

“Hold onto the bed frame,” he ordered, his voice low.

I grabbed onto the slats of the headboard so hard my knuckles went white. Xavier tore his shirt off and I let my eyes devour the long, broad planes of his chest. He quickly removed my shoes and my jeans, but not my underwear. Fucking tease.

He crawled slowly up my body, until his face was level with the apex of my thighs. He pressed chaste kisses over my panties. It was just enough friction to tease me, but not enough to bring me any kind of release.

“God, you’re wet,” Xavier murmured, before licking a stripe over my clothed core. “Does being bad do this to you? Or is it me?”

He nuzzled at my clit, pressing on it just hard enough to make me cry out.

“Answer me, Caliana,” he ordered, pressing down on my clit with his thumb.

“Both,” I breathed, knowing I had to be honest.

“That’s what I thought,” he growled, before nipping at my inner thigh. I winced at the sting, but sighed as it faded into a pleasant tingling sensation.

Xavier pushed himself off the bed and I whimpered, missing his warmth. I looked over and saw pride gleaming in his eyes. He enjoyed giving me a bit of what I wanted, only to take it away. And I couldn’t say I didn’t enjoy it, too.

“Edge of the bed,” he ordered, stripping off his jeans.

Scrambling to obey, I scooted to the edge as he stood by.

“Panties off,” he continued, sounding almost bored. “Spread your legs as wide as you can, and hold them open for me,”

I locked eyes with him and spread my thighs slowly, caressing them as I pulled them apart. I licked my lips, hoping he’d reward me with a kiss for doing what he’d asked. I could feel how wet I was, and considered touching myself to show him what he was missing.

Almost as if he sensed I was about to misbehave, Xavier moved forward and ate up the distance between us. He wrapped his hand around my throat and pushed me down into the mattress.

I felt myself gasp for air as he put the slightest bit of pressure on my windpipe. It was dizzying, the way he took charge.

“This okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “My god, yes.”

“Watch.” He tilted my head up ever so slightly, his hand still squeezing my throat.

I did as he asked, looking down as he slid his cock against my core. Getting himself nice and wet so he could slip inside. The tip of his cock hit my clit every time he thrust, and I let out soft, strangled moans. Then he got up off me, making my head scream with the loss of contact. He rummaged in a drawer and pulled out a condom.

“You like watching me?” he asked as he put it on. “You like being teased?”

“Please,” I whispered, looking up at him through my lashes, completely bared to him. I needed him inside me NOW.

“Okay, baby,” he murmured, before plunging inside me.

I gasped, reveling in the stretch. It felt like so long since we’d been together. A horrible injustice to the world, if you asked me.

He gripped me tightly by the hips, moving me up and down on his cock. He pushed in and out, over and over again, whispering the filthiest, sweetest things into my ear.

“You should beg me more often, you little slut. I think you liked it.”

“You feel so fucking *good*, Xavier.”

“This is what good girls get. Do you like being good?”

And I *did*.

Eventually, the punishing pace Xavier set started to waver, and his hips started to deviate from their rhythm. He swiped a finger across my clit.

“Want you to come with me,” he grunted against my neck.

I nodded, circling my arms around his neck, not caring about his rules anymore.

I felt the pressure start to build again, and looked Xavier in the eye. For the briefest moment, his eyes looked gray.

“Come for me, Cali.”

I cried out as I felt myself clench around him. Xavier collapsed on top of me, spent, his hips pinning mine to the edge of the bed as I closed my eyes.

**\*\*\***

Xavier stroked my tiger stripes gently, and I tried not to wiggle when he touched a particularly ticklish spot on my waist. He traced the lines, pausing occasionally to plant a kiss on my hip or beneath my belly button.

The gears in my mind started to turn once more as I remembered that there was a world beyond this bed. Beyond Xavier, and the way he and I could make each other feel. I wondered about Gabriel, and all the things I didn’t know about Xavier’s past.

I reached down and tugged Xavier up by the chin so I could look into his eyes.

“I’m waiting,” I singsonged.

“For round two?” he asked.

I playfully hit his arm. “No, for you to spill all the secrets. Tell me!”

Xavier smiled, and my heart warmed to see that it was genuine. There was no threat in it, no desire to dominate or intimate. “You can still back out if you want to,” he reminded me.

“You know I don’t back down,” I replied gently.

Xavier rolled onto his back beside me and stared up at the ceiling. He took a deep breath, preparing himself for whatever barrier he was about to cross with me, and began.

“Colton and I met Gabriel on a job,” he said.

“Yes, we’ve established it was a ‘job,’” I interrupted, hoping to steer him out of vague territory. “But what *kind* of job?”

Xavier sighed. “Colton and I were sort of like… bounty hunters. Whatever you want to call it.”

I struggled to make sense of this. I didn’t want to overload him with questions. I knew that it wasn’t easy for him to talk about his past, or himself. Or anything, really.

“Did you work for the police?” I asked.

Xavier laughed softly. “Cops aren’t really in with werewolves, Cali,” he told me. “It was something we did more on the DL.”

“But don’t bounty hunters… Hunt people? Who were you hunting, then?” I asked, confused. “And who were you hunting them for?”

“This is going to sound a little murky,” Xavier said, his eyes still fixed on the ceiling. “But some wolves, after they’ve gone Rogue, they go even further. They can start to take pleasure in hunting humans. They get a little too cocky and start crossing lines.”

“They *murder* us?” I asked, horrified. Despite myself, I had another flashback to Xavier attacking Tony. A human/werewolf fight was basically never a fair one. The thought of it made my blood run cold. That was certainly a line crossed…

“That’s why they have to be stopped,” Xavier explained. “Our job—Colton’s and mine—was to stop them.”

“Stop them?” I asked, wondering how you’d even do that. “Do you mean…”

“By any means necessary.”

I tried to take that in. I knew that Tony couldn’t have been the first human to die at a wolf’s hands, but I’d assumed he was an outlier. That humans only got in trouble when they got themselves tangled up in werewolf business, knowingly or unknowingly. But this was different.

“And Gabriel?” I whispered, almost afraid to hear the answer. “Is he a bounty hunter too?”

“He’s something worse.” Xavier turned to me, deadly serious. “He’s a mercenary. If the price is right, Gabriel will do just about anything.”

I shivered, and Xavier pulled the comforter up and around me.

“Usually, he’s on the right side of things,” Xavier continued, as if it would make me feel better. “So don’t judge him too much. He’s a good guy. I’d trust him with my life.”

But I wasn’t so sure. How good could he be if he made his living *killing* people?

I squeezed my eyes shut in anticipation of my next question. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer.

“So did you work for him?” I asked, my voice quavering.

“Not exactly.” Xavier shrugged. “Our paths crossed sometimes, and occasionally we worked toward similar goals and would help each other out. But please don’t ask for details, Cali. You don’t want to know.”

I could feel him watching me, trying to see how I was reacting. I wanted to be able to accept this and move on. To stop him from worrying about my reaction. But it just wasn’t that easy.

“It’s a little overwhelming,” I admitted. “You know, finding out my werewolf mate is a hired killer.”

I always had wondered how he and Colton could have even afforded to pay 400 thousand dollars for my virginity. I guess the black market has its perks…

“Bounty hunter,” he corrected. “There’s a difference.”

My phone rang before I could ask him if there really was. I dashed over to where Xavier had tossed my pants, and found it before it could go to voicemail. The screen told me Alex was calling.

Oh *shit*—ALEX! I’d completely forgotten about him with everything going on. Why was he calling now? I hesitated, wondering if I should pick up. But why shouldn’t I? It had been a long time since we’d spoken, and he was MY old friend.

“Hey Alex.” I tried to sound chipper, even though I was still shaken by what Xavier just told me.

“Hey Cali.” Alex sounded nervous. “I know we haven’t talked in a little bit, but do you have a minute? We need to talk about Tony.”

**Episode 264**

“What about Tony?” I asked Alex, locking eyes with Xavier. I felt my palms start to sweat. Shit, I thought this had been taken care of… “Has something turned up?” I asked, trying to keep my tone concerned but not overly worried.

“Yeah, you could say that.” Alex sounded angry, which was unlike him. “The police, they’re calling it a murder. They're starting an investigation. An official one. I know you’ve been away camping, but I thought you should know.”

Double shit. Panic started working its way through my body. This couldn’t end well.

I covered the phone with my hand and looked at Xavier, who was watching me intently.

“The police are *still* investigating Tony’s death,” I told him. “As a *murder*.”

Xavier shrugged, and I considered strangling him. If he wasn’t going to take this seriously, I would have to.

I spun around and listened as Alex kept talking.

“Tony’s family hired this private investigator from Minneapolis,” Alex explained. “Some guy named Mikah something. Apparently, he’s charging them a fortune. It’s so crazy.”

“But I thought you said the police were already on it,” I interjected, confused.

“They are,” Alex said. “But Tony’s parents hired this guy after the rumors of it being a murder started. They just don’t trust the police to solve it. Can you believe that?”

I gulped. Holy shit. This was way too close to the truth for comfort. The police investigating and some P.I.? I snuck a glance at Xavier. He looked almost bored.

“Thanks for telling me, Alex,” I managed to get out. “You’re okay, right? I’m sure all of this must be crazy for you.”

“Yeah.” I could see him in my mind’s eye, rubbing the back of his neck. “Maybe you should come back to Minnesota, Cali. You know, in case this Mikah guy has any questions for you.”

“Are you sure you’re asking for Mikah and not you and Leroy?” I joked, changing the subject. It felt like I hadn’t seen that kid in ages.

Alex laughed softly. “Look, the whole Chevere family misses you,” he admitted. “School’s been hard with the investigation going on, and if you were here… I feel like it might be easier.”

“I wish I were there, too,” I told him, knowing that a part of me really meant it. Sometimes I really wanted the comfort and lack of life-threatening danger that came with my old life.

But I wanted to be here so much more. I couldn’t possibly ever explain it to Alex or my parents in a way that would make sense. Probably.

“But I’m still tied up here,” I told him. He didn’t need to know that Xavier and I were complicated right now. “So you and Leroy will have to wait and save me some popcorn for our next movie night.”

“That sounds good, Caliana,” he said.

An awkward wave passed through my stomach. Was Alex still holding out that I’d come back and we’d go on our date? Was that too presumptuous of me?

There was an awkward pause.

“Are you ever coming back?” Alex blurted out. I could tell he was frustrated and worried, and it made my stomach hurt to know I was doing this to him.

“Of course,” I assured him. “I am. I just… don’t know when.”

I felt Xavier’s hand on my waist, and knew it was time to wrap the call up.

“I’m sorry Alex, but I gotta go.” I put my hand over Xavier’s and squeezed. “Bye!”

“Bye, Cali. Hope to see you soon.”

I hung up, feeling nervous and guilty. I wished I could be a better friend to Alex. But how? ‘Hey Alex, werewolves and I live in a pack house in Oregon now’? Yeah, no.

“What was that about?” Xavier asked.

I spun around so I could see him. Looking him in the eye made me feel better immediately, reminded me that I was with him, and that we were together and safe. At least for now.

“The same as I told you. The cops are still on Tony’s case, and his family has hired a private investigator.” I frowned. “I’m really worried, Xavier. What if they find out it was a werewolf?”

That it was *you*?

He cupped my face in his hands. “They’ll never trace it back to me. They’ll think an animal did it. Humans don’t believe werewolves exist,” he assured me, giving me a soft kiss on the forehead. “Remember how hard you were to convince?”

I shrugged, mind still racing.

“You can relax,” he promised, before grimacing. “Plus, don’t forget what Tony tried to do to you. He doesn’t deserve your sympathy. He wasn’t a good person, Cali.”

I pulled out of his grasp, pissed.

“Trust me,” I said, clenching my fists, “I will never forget. But we’re talking about murder. This is serious—people aren’t just going to let it go. They’ll try to find someone to blame, and even if they don’t land on you, that’s a problem.”

“Cali, I am telling you not to worry about this. They’ll know it was an animal,” Xavier looked down at me, exasperated. “Can you just trust me, please?”

“Sure.” I nodded, biting back what I really wanted to say. Something along the lines of: *oh, silly me, I forgot how much more experienced you are than me with killing. Supposedly only* bad *people.*

I took a deep breath and tried to push that thought from my mind. Xavier came from a different world, with different rules. Rules I was still learning.

“We should find out what’s going on downstairs.” Xavier headed for the door, but stopped when I cleared my throat. “Rejoin civilization.”

“Maybe you could put on some clothes?” I offered, grinning at him.

Xavier looked down at his naked body, then up at me. He shrugged.

“Why not?” He smiled, sauntering over to the closet to pick out a clean outfit.

God, the muscles in his *back* alone. How could a back be hot?

“I think I’m gonna take a quick shower,” I told him, stretching my muscles—now sore from having ridden Xavier two different ways.

“Go for it,” he told me. “But…”

He walked over to stop me before I could get to the bathroom and kissed me softly. I melted into his touch, enjoying how warm his body felt next to mine.

“Promise me you won’t drown in there?” he joked. “Knowing you, you’ll find a way.”

I swatted at his arm and rolled my eyes before pushing past him and into the bathroom. I didn’t have a good comeback. Because knowing my luck, he was totally right.

I turned on the shower and made the water as hot as I dared. I needed to wash off days of dirt from our journey, and I wanted to linger for a while. A shower a hot spring was not. I shampooed my hair a few times for good measure, and let the heat of the shower turn me a little pink.

As I soaped up my back, I caught sight of my shoulder. The wound from my rogue bite had faded so much, I could barely make it out. Huh.

As I ran my fingers over the raised scar marks, I wondered how different my life would be now if the bite had changed me into a wolf. If Greyson hadn’t saved me from the lupus sputo. Would I feel less like an outsider? Would my connection with Xavier have changed or deepened? Would I be happier?

By the time I got dressed and went downstairs, the living room was clean and Phil had arrived.

“I’m running out of spares,” he murmured as he replaced the glass door. He was always such a joy.

I stifled a laugh as I walked over to Lola, who was looking way more like her usual self. Her cheeks were pink, her smile was wide, and the second she saw me she bounded over.

“I saw you and Xavier head upstairs; how’d things go?” she asked, giving me a very not-subtle wink. “Are you two doing okay?”

I smiled, feeling my cheeks turn pink. “We’re okay,” I mumbled.

“I’d say you guys sounded better than *okay*.” Lola continued to twist the knife of embarrassment. “More like, very, *very* *bad*—*”*

“Shut up.” I giggled, shoving her playfully.

Lola mimed zipping her lips shut and throwing away the key. I rolled my eyes at her dorkiness.

“We have a ways to go,” I admitted. “But I think we’re heading in the right direction, and that feels nice.”

I heard laughing across the room and turned to see Colton, Xavier, and Gabriel huddled together, each nursing a beer. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. Especially now that I knew Gabriel was a paid killer. But I’d seen Xavier and Colton kill enemy werewolves in battle… It was different and yet it wasn’t.

Looking around I found Greyson. He was talking with Joss, Jay, Maya, and Mrs. Smith in the living room. His gray eyes caught mine for a second, but before I could acknowledge him he looked away. Suddenly I felt myself go hot.

Would Xavier still go rogue after all this stuff with the Manus Cruentae was over? Would Greyson fight him over it? It kind of felt nice to have everyone here. Like family. I wasn’t so sure I wanted to leave that so soon.

Then, from out of nowhere, I heard a high, piercing scream. *Shit, that can’t be good*. Greyson hopped up, sprinting to the sliding glass door. The others did the same, and I was close behind them.

Rishika was running toward us. Her face and chest were covered in blood, and her expression was wild. “They’re here!”

**Episode 265**

“*Who’s* here?” I asked, as we all hustled out the door to meet Rishika.

I mean, I knew the obvious answer. The Manus Cruentae. But knowing our luck, it was probably some new awful adversary, eager to tear us to shreds.

“You wanted us to prove our loyalty?” Rishika asked, pointing to Greyson. “We’re doing it, right now. We were attacked in the woods, and we’re holding our own. But we could use some help.”

Greyson nodded, his expression hardening. I could tell he was upset about how quickly the fight had come to us, but not surprised. After all, this is why he had pushed us through the woods so fast. But with most of us still tired from the journey, I wondered how much of an advantage it was to fight on our turf.

“You know what to do,” he told the rest of the pack.

And with that, he strode forward, not wasting a moment before he shifted into his silver wolf. Colton followed suit and so did the others, running after him—Xavier included.

“Xavier!” I shouted. I’d hoped I’d be able to share a final word with him before the fight, but he didn’t turn back. What was I supposed to do?! What if the fight came here?

I watched my huge black wolf bound off into the woods, and tried not to feel like half of my heart was leaving my chest to go into battle.

“Let’s fucking do this,” Lola purred.

Next to me, she was bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. Readying herself to shift. Jay, still in his human form, grabbed her by the wrist.

“Um, no way,” I told her. “You are not shifting. Like less than 24 hours ago you were STUCK SHIFTING.”

“You don’t need to risk it,” he told her, his eyes wide with concern.

I could hear the concern in Jay’s voice as he tried to reason with Lola. I understood how he felt as I watched Xavier disappear into the woods. I could still see Lola half shifted and hear her crying out in pain. Just like the images my subconscious was constantly planting into my nightmares, of Xavier nearly dying of silver poisoning.

I looked at Jay, and I could tell he knew we were in the same boat.

“I have plenty of potion left,” Lola insisted, shaking Jay off. “I’m not going to NOT help.”

“Lola, *please*,” he begged. But in the blink of an eye, she’d shifted and was bounding off.

“They wouldn’t be the people we loved if they were different, right?” I asked Jay, trying to put on a brave face.

“Guess not.” He gave me a small smile. “Stay and hide in the house, Cali. We’ll take care of this.” Then Jay turned on his heel and took off after Lola, shifting mid stride.

Well. I was officially useless. What could I possibly do to help? Go get my trusty spatula from the kitchen?

Phil appeared at my shoulder, sighing. I’d totally forgotten he was here. Had he seen everyone shift?

“You’re Xavier’s girlfriend aren’t you?” he asked, sounding like he was on his last nerve. “Could you tell your boyfriend to stop fucking breaking his own damn house?”

But I wasn’t listening to him. I was running back into the house and digging through Phil’s toolkit for something more useful than a spatula.

“Hey! What are you doing?” he cried, trying to stop me. But I’d already found what I needed.

The electric circular saw fit perfectly in my hand, and had just enough heft to help me pack a punch. I ran outside, Phil’s protests fading into a dull buzz.

I tried to enter the woods in the same spot I’d seen Lola and Jay disappear through. I hoped I’d find them all quickly. Navigating the woods wasn’t quite my specialty.

There was a snarl to my left and I ran toward it. Maybe not the smartest thing to do, but at least I was armed. As I approached, I saw a ball of fur, jaws, and claws that I couldn’t even begin to split into two wolves. Was one of them Mrs. Smith? Or Violet? I couldn’t really tell. And even if I could, with so many strangers from Rishika’s group, how was I supposed to know who was on our side and who wasn’t? I didn’t know what they all looked like yet.

I ran past the two wolves, and found a clearing that looked like it’d become the heart of the fight. My fist tightened around the saw handle as I spun around, trying to tell who was Manus Cruentae and who wasn’t. I couldn’t afford to be part of this and hurt the wrong wolf!

Figuring that the wrong wolves would probably find their way to me, I turned the saw on and it buzzed to life. I swung it back and forth. *Damn*, I needed to get one of these.

In the distance, I heard a murderous howl. Was it Xavier? I shivered, almost dropping the saw and saying goodbye to a few of my toes. Slowly I turned in a circle, trying to see any enemies that might be lurking in the dark. Then, a familiar glow descending from the trees above.

A wisp!

It was blood red and pulsing with light. Calling to me somehow, letting me know that it was here to help. I felt my spirits lift and my fear turn to adrenaline. This had to be the same wisp that had helped me at the faire. I could trust this one. I *knew* it.

“Show me what to do!” I called to it.

The wisp hovered for a moment, like it was considering actually helping me. I held my breath and resisted calling it several choice swear words.

My patience was rewarded when it suddenly zoomed forward. I followed it through the fray, blood, spit, and hair flying through the air around me. Werewolves were tackling each other to the ground, tearing out each other’s throats, and roaring loud enough to hurt my ears. Somehow the wisp was weaving me through everything without getting a scratch.

Then it stopped. The wisp hovered over two wolves, who were rolling around on the ground, fighting to the death. I didn’t recognize either of them. I looked to my wisp.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do?” I called. “Attack them both?”

I focused on the wolves in front of me and saw a swish of silver. Wait, I knew that wolf! That was Greyson! But he and his opponent—a white and brown wolf with a grey tail—were moving so fast, it would be nearly impossible to help without hurting.

My blood ran cold when the wolf noticed me. Quickly it advanced and I leapt back as the other wolf snapped at me, and looked up at the wisp for guidance.

It sank through the air, entering the battle. For a second, I wondered if the wisp was going to magically attack the other wolf. But instead, it made its entire body glow a dark, bloody red. It was suddenly impossible to mistake the other wolf for Greyson. Now, I’d know exactly who I needed to attack.

I raised my saw, but before I could move, the white and brown wolf slipped a foot beneath Greyson and tripped him. Greyson slammed into the ground. His attacker got ready to pounce. And that was when I knew I had to act.

I hit the button, and the saw whirred to life. I took a deep breath, then let it out in a primal scream as I ran toward the wolf. It started to turn to face me, but before it could do anything to defend itself I was swinging the saw in a wide arc, closing my eyes, and screaming at the top of my lungs.

The wolf snarled at me, and for a moment I thought I could start celebrating—the saw had cut through the wolf like it was nothing! But then I opened my eyes and realized all I’d done was give the wolf a haircut. An ugly one, at least. But I hadn’t done any lethal damage.

Thrown off by the momentum of the heavy saw in my hand, I tripped to the side and shuffled my feet, trying to keep myself upright. This ended up turning into an awkward grapevine as I started circling the wolf.

It opened its jaws wide, ready to lunge at me. Without thinking, I thrust the saw forward to protect myself. I did it just as the wolf bit down.

The spinning blades sliced right through its mouth. I watched the saw rip through its jaw and its head. Blood splattered in my face, blinding me, and all I could hear was the buzz of the saw.

Frantically, I wiped at my eyes with my free hand, and saw the mangled body of the beast lying at my feet. I looked over to Greyson, who’d shifted back into his human form.

“It’s not safe!” I shouted to him.

He stared at me, looking almost as dumbstruck as I felt. Our eyes locked, and I felt a weird sensation course through me. My heart was pounding, but my body was frozen. I couldn’t move. Greyson walked toward me, and I didn’t know what he was going to do.

He bent down and picked up the still-buzzing saw. He shut it off and offered it to me, placing it in my hand. For some insane reason, the sticky plastic handle was comforting to hold.

And then Greyson wrapped his arms around me, hugging me tight against his chest.

**Episode 266**

Greyson buried his face in my hair and inhaled deeply. I found myself taking in his scent too, gripping him back desperately. Gasping, I breathed in his woodsy scent, happy to feel him in my arms. Happy he was okay. Happy he was *alive*.

Before I could process what had happened, Greyson was letting me go. Part of me wanted to reach out and hold onto him, keep him from returning to the fight. But the other part of me knew that the rest of the pack needed him. We wouldn’t survive this without him.

So I kept my hands by my sides and watched him as he shifted. He fell to the ground on all fours and bound off into another fight.

What the hell had just happened?

Why had he hugged me? Greyson had barely even acknowledged me, these days. Mostly because there wasn’t a moment Joss wasn’t hanging off him and insulting me. And because we still hadn’t had a moment to discuss the kiss and whether it was all a game.

Without thinking, I started to jog after him, hoping to follow him into another fight where I could be useful. Clearly, he needed me.

Before I could get very far, I was knocked to the ground. The momentum of the hit dragged me across the forest floor, screaming. Then suddenly with an *oof,* I was pinned down. I looked up and found myself staring into the eyes of a murderous werewolf.

The sandy wolf bared its teeth at me, and I didn’t have to wonder if it was one of my friends. I had my answer—no wisps required. I tried to fire up my saw, but my arm was pinned under my attacker. Flustered, I kicked at the wolf with my free leg, but it didn’t budge.

Fuck.

Its tongue darted out of its mouth to wet its lips, and I shuddered. It was toying with me. Playing with its food before the meal.

I screamed again.

And WHAM, the wolf was knocked off me. Dazed, I rolled over to see who had saved me. I was stunned to see a white wolf pinning my adversary to the ground. It was unmistakably Maya. She snapped her jaws at the wolf, and they started to grapple.

I fired up my saw, comforted by the buzzing. But as I drew closer, I found it difficult to tell where Maya ended and our enemy began. They were moving so damn fast! I couldn’t hurt Maya—especially not after she’d just saved me. But I also couldn’t just stand by without helping her.

Before the panic could set in, my wisp appeared and lowered itself into the fray once more.

I sighed with relief, fully aware this was a weird emotion for me to be feeling in the middle of a werewolf battleground.

Once again, the wisp made the strange wolf glow blood red. It pulsed with menace as it pinned Maya to the ground. I raised my arm to strike, but before I could, I was spattered with fresh blood.

Maya had ripped the other wolf’s throat out. She grabbed its corpse in her jaws and tossed it away like a sack of flour. I stared at her, dumbstruck. Maya did not fuck around.

“Thanks.” I nodded at her, still shaking with fear.

Maya nodded back, then turned away to find another fight to sink her teeth into.

“Wait!” I called after her, and was shocked to see her actually freeze. “Where’s Xavier? Is he okay?”

She looked back at me, and I could’ve sworn I saw something like sympathy in her eyes.

“Could you take me to him?” I asked.

Maya considered that for a moment, and I considered begging. But this was Maya—I doubted she’d be swayed by that. After a moment that felt like a lifetime, she lowered her head slowly.

Taking her cue, I sprang forward and crawled up onto her back. Before I could even get a real grip on her, she took off. She galloped forward, and I nearly flew right over her head and into a tree when she took a sharp turn. I gripped her hair as tightly as I could, not worrying if it hurt—Maya clearly didn’t care about *my* comfort.

As we cut through the woods, I heard the savage sounds of the fight echoing around me. Snarling, howling, gnashing teeth, the wet sounds of bodies being ripped apart. Wails of pain. Whimpers that proceeded death. This wasn’t a forest anymore, it was a graveyard.

I shivered and clung to Maya even tighter. For a second, I flashed back to my life before all this. Shoving popcorn in my face and watching funny YouTube videos with Lola. Studying with Alex. Cooking with my mom before she got sick. All those rose-colored, safe memories were the opposite of my life right now. A few months ago, Lola and I had just been trying to make rent. And now we were struggling to survive an all-out werewolf war.

Would we both even be alive in a few hours?

Maya lurched to a stop, and my thoughts jerked back to the present. I looked up and saw Xavier snarling at a powerful-looking wolf with reddish fur.

I slid off Maya’s back and charged forward.

“GET THE FUCK OFF MY MATE!” I screamed, pressing the button on my saw.

But instead of roaring to life, my saw wined and sputtered to a dead stop. I screamed—pissed off but undeterred—and slammed the saw into the reddish wolf like it was a battle axe.

The werewolf hissed as I dug the saw into its leg. It kicked me off, sending me crashing to the ground. I scrambled to my feet as quickly as possible, and winced when pain shot through my left leg.

I looked down to see a bloody gash on my calf. I winced at the sight of it, and at the pain radiating from the cut. My head snapped up when I heard Xavier roar.

He pounced on the red wolf, grabbing it in his jaws and throwing it against a tree. I gasped at the sound its body made when it hit the trunk.

Xavier looked back at me, and his eyes told me just how worried he was. They darted from my leg to my face, begging for answers.

“I’m fine!” I yelled. “Take care of yourself!”

Xavier, for once, listened. He turned back toward the red wolf, who’d pulled itself off the ground and was retreating into the woods. I wanted to run after it, but my leg hurt too much.

Perhaps sensing this, Xavier ran to my side. I looped my arm around him, mainly so I could stay upright. He nosed at my leg and lapped at my wound, coating it in his saliva.

My heart swelled—he was helping me. I could already feel the pain easing, and I sighed in relief. *My mate*.

“Thank you,” I murmured to him.

He nuzzled my cheek, and all I wanted was for him to shift back and hold me. But I couldn’t ask for that. I couldn’t be selfish right now.

“Go after that wolf,” I told him. “Don’t worry about me. You can’t let it get away.”

Xavier looked after the red wolf, which stopped in its tracks. It turned to face us, lip curled, showing off its fangs. It raised its head to the sky and howled.

The sounds of the fight faded around us. And then more howls filled the air and a shiver went down my spine. Suddenly, all the wolves began to leave the fight. Were they giving up? They all ran to the red wolf, gathering behind it in a menacing cluster.

I looked to Xavier, wishing he could tell me what was going on. If he even knew.

Xavier shifted back into his human form. I winced at the sound of his bones cracking, but I definitely felt a whole lot better when I saw his face.

“*Cali*,” he said, pulling me into a tight, urgent hug. “Are you crazy? What are you doing coming out here like that? Thank god you’re all right.”

I didn’t protest as he took my face into his hands and kissed me. He tasted like blood.

“I’m okay,” I reassured him when we broke apart. “What’s going on? Why are they gathering?”

“They’re retreating,” he told me, out of breath.

What? That didn’t make any sense. By all accounts everything had seemed almost… too well matched. We hadn’t been losing by the looks of things, but we definitely hadn’t been winning either. So why retreat? There was an uncomfortable flip in my stomach. I didn’t like this. At all.

“Why would they do that?” I asked. “What changed?”

There was another howl and we both looked at the red wolf, whose eyes were locked onto us. It stretched out its limbs, and I heard the cracking sounds of transformation as it shifted back into human form.

When she stood to her full height, I gasped. The red wolf was a woman and her long red hair and tattoos were hard to forget.

She’d been at the Luna ceremony.

**Episode 267**

“I recognize her!” I told Xavier, pointing at the redhead. “She was at Greyson’s Luna ceremony. Maybe she’s upset Greyson didn’t pick her? Could that be why she cursed us?”

Were we really in this mess because someone couldn’t handle rejection? Like, *seriously*? This had to be some kind of joke.

“I don’t know,” Xavier admitted, wrapping an arm around me and tucking me behind him, ever so slightly.

I looked up at him, at his strong jaw and his steely eyes. He was protecting me without thinking. Putting his body in front of mine, always willing to be in the more dangerous position.

“Shouldn’t we go after her?” I asked, the desire to fight still roaring in my veins. I’d kind of kicked ass, hadn’t I? “She attacked us! Don’t we have to finish this? She’ll come back.”

Greyson pushed past us, blood dripping from his mouth. When I saw him, I felt a pang of something in my chest. Greyson was dangerous, violent, and he’d made himself vulnerable during the battle to hug me. I still didn’t know why he’d done it, but I’d felt the same comfort I had with Xavier right now.

“Hold off,” he ordered us, his voice like gravel. “We need to look after our own.”

“But you’re letting them get away!” I cried out.

Xavier stepped forward. “She’s right. They’re only going to come back and regroup. If we run after them now we might be able to take them down.”

Greyson turned back to look at me, fury in his eyes. I could tell he was still keyed up from the fight, ready to return to it if need be.

“Keep yourself in check, brother,” he snapped at Xavier, not even looking at me.

I bit my tongue to keep from yelling more. Why did Greyson run so hot and cold? One moment he was hugging me, and now he wouldn’t even make eye contact. Plus he didn’t have to be so flippant with Xavier. He had a point. I felt the anger boil up inside me, but I knew now wasn’t the time to unleash it.

Rishika strode to Greyson’s side. She spat blood onto the ground and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “We lost two,” she told Greyson, her eyes dark with grief.

*Damn*.

I saw pain flicker across Xavier’s face. This was still his pack.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Greyson told her, sounding like he meant it. “Thank you so much for your help. There would have been far more casualties to the Redwood pack if it weren’t for all of you.”

My anger turned to a simmer as I watched Greyson speak to Rishika. No matter how pissed I was at him, I had to acknowledge that he was saying the right thing. Rishika had put her life on the line as had so many other werewolves I didn’t even know the names of. If we’d been alone, could we have lost Lola or Jay? Or even Xavier? I shuddered at the thought.

“I hope this proves our loyalty.” Rishika’s words and tone were professional, but her expression told me everything. She was feeling the loss of the others deeply. In my eyes, they’d all more than proven themselves.

Joss stalked over, her hair more unruly than usual. She snaked only one arm around Greyson—remarkable restraint, for her.

“Why is that red-haired woman after us?” she asked. “I recognized her from the Luna Ceremony. Is all of this because you picked me?” I bristled thinking that Joss and I remotely had the same thought process. "Because that’s fucking *ridiculous*. I mean, if *I* hadn’t been picked, I guess I’d be upset too. But this seems more above and beyond, don’t you think?”

“I don’t mean to butt in,” Rishika interjected. “But I don’t think that’s why she’s after you.”

We all turned to her, eager to hear what else she had to say on the matter. The rest of the pack gathered one by one. Colton was limping, and Jay was bleeding from a huge scratch down his arm on what he’d started calling his ‘blind side’. We still didn’t know why this curse had been placed on us. Maybe if we knew, we’d be able to solve things peacefully. If werewolves knew how to do that…

“Do you know who she is?” I asked.

“Her name is Adra,” Rishika said. “We’ve crossed paths before.”

“And why would she want to hurt us?” I pressed.

Rishika looked at me, and I tried not to shrink under her serious, piercing gaze. “She was Ryker’s mate,” Rishika said. “And your Alpha—Greyson—killed him.”

*Fuck*. I gasped, and the others buzzed around me.

So that’s what it was. The Manus Cruentae thing was all about revenge for Ryker’s death from a scorned lover. Really, it should’ve been obvious. What else had we done at Thor’s Well to earn such a punishment? Make some bad s’mores?

“It makes sense,” Greyson said, clearly thinking aloud. “I should have expected this.”

Rishika continued. “Ryker was a rampaging, murderous psychopath, and the kind of people he attracted… They all thought of him as a messiah. I truly don’t believe that they’ll stop until all of you are dead.”

My stomach twisted. *Double fuck*. We were seriously in trouble.

“The Manus Cruentae aren’t just an enemy pack,” Greyson said, with a gravity that made it hard not to take him seriously. “They’re a cult. This won’t be the last time we hear from them. They’ll attack again.”

I looked around at my friends. I couldn’t imagine enduring another battle like this. They all looked spent and hurt, even with the reinforcements from Rishika’s pack. If they hadn’t retreated, we could have all been slaughtered.

“Let’s head back to the house for now,” Greyson continued. “Rishika, why don’t you gather the others? We’ll hold a proper funeral as soon as possible.”

Rishika nodded, her eyes brimming over with tears she refused to let fall. I could tell she appreciated Greyson’s words. I did too.

Xavier’s hand slid into mine, and I let out a breath. At least he was okay. We all were.

Colton limped over to us, looking relieved to see that his brother was safe. I frowned when I saw Gabriel standing close behind him, smiling like we were at a fucking birthday party. Had he *enjoyed* this?

I mean, I guess he WAS a mercenary. But still.

“You good?” Colton asked, scanning his brother for injures.

“Yeah, you?” Xavier asked, glancing at Colton’s injured leg.

“Already half healed.” Colton shrugged before looking at me. “And Evil Dead over here?”

I smirked at him. “Not dead yet.”

Colton grinned back. “That works for me.”

Before I could punch him, Colton danced away from me on his good leg, and we all started walking back to the house.

Peeking up ahead, I saw that Jay was helping Lola walk, her arm looped around his neck. She looked exhausted and haggard. I pulled Xavier over to them.

“Is Lola hurt?” I asked Jay, my worry already going into overdrive. We’d just gotten her healed; I couldn’t handle another scare.

“It’s just the shift,” he told me. I could tell he was trying to be reassuring, but I could hear the pain in his voice. Lola was hurting, which meant Jay was too.

“Don’t worry,” Lola ordered. “I shifted all the way back this time. I just need a little potion and I’ll be good as new, I swear.”

I hoped she would be.

Once we reached the house, I remembered my own injury. All I could feel was a dull ache, thanks to Xavier’s ministrations. I looked down and saw that the wound had closed already. I squeezed Xavier’s hand in thanks. I was so lucky to have someone like him.

“You were pretty good out there, tiger,” Xavier whispered to me, the corner of his mouth rising. “Saw and all.”

I smiled back at him.

“You were okay,” I teased him. “I have a few notes.”

He laughed.

Maya interrupted us. “For a human, she can kick some serious ass. I guess.”

“I agree,” Rishika added, a gentle smile on her face. “Caliana *was* badass.”

I got the feeling that while Rishika was a generous person, she didn’t give out compliments easily. She gave my shoulder a squeeze and I smiled.

“Thank you,” I told her, meaning every word. “And I’m sorry about your pack.”

“Thank you.” She nodded, holding her head high. “I’m going to go check on the others if you’ll excuse me.”

“Don’t let this give you a big head, okay?” Xavier cautioned, ruffling my hair as Rishika walked away “You’re still just a—”

Suddenly, there was a scream and we all froze just outside the pack house.

Inside, Phil was backing away from the doorway, pale as a ghost, holding out two broken pieces of wood in front of him. He hid behind his makeshift cross like it was a shield and looked ready to pass out at any second.

Oh no. *Oh shit*.

“DON’T COME ANY CLOSER,” Phil yelled. “What the fuck are you guys?”

**Episode 268**

“Dude, what the fuck is wrong with you?” Colton asked, like he WASN’T naked and post-werewolf transformation.

“Don’t call me ‘dude’!” Phil yelled, his voice breaking on the last word. “You all… You turned into WOLVES. You’re werewolves, aren’t you?”

“You’re not?” I blurted out.

I’d always just assumed that was why the pack worked with Phil—because he was in on the secret. But I took in Phil’s wild eyes, shuffling feet, and shaking hands. He was afraid. Exactly how I’d been the first time I’d seen Colton shifted as a wolf.

I turned to Xavier, confused. “Phil’s human?” I asked. “I’m not the only one? Why didn’t you say anything?”

There was another shriek and I turned back to Phil, my heart completely going out to him. I’d been totally panicked when I’d first found out. When were these guys going to get that there was no way to be chill about the supernatural when you first found out about it?

“Well, this is gonna be a fucking problem.” Colton sighed, still upsettingly casual about the whole thing. “Now he knows.”

“Of course I know!” Phil cried out. “You were all wolves! Like… big wolves. Like, bear-sized wolves! And then you turned human again, and I just… And now you’re all naked? I mean, what the fuck, man? What’s going on?!”

He fished around in his pocket for his phone, but by the time he found it, Greyson was at his side, snatching it from his grip and crushing it in his hand.

Phil’s eyes widened as he watched Greyson open his fist and let the bits of metal, glass, and plastic fall to the ground.

“It’s a shame you saw us,” Greyson admitted grimly.

A gnawing fear started to creep up my spine. I didn’t like this, and Phil probably didn’t either.

“What are you guys going to do about this?” I asked, very worried that I already knew the answer.

Gabriel pushed forward. “Allow me,” he offered, grinning wickedly. “It’s kind of my specialty.”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT!” I cried out, before I could consider whether or not it was the smartest course of action. “Are you guys seriously going to *KILL* PHIL?”

I limped forward, shoving Greyson as hard as I could, ignoring how hard his chest had been under my palm. Focus Cali! I stepped in front of Phil, planting myself between him and everyone else. Clenching my fists, I bared my teeth, hoping I looked at least slightly formidable.

“YOU’E BEING CRAZY!” I told the pack. “You can’t just *kill* him. It would be wrong! He’s been helping you out for like… a while. Right, Phil?”

I turned around, looking for confirmation from Phil. He just nodded, his mouth glued shut with fear. I turned back and watched my pack murmuring to each another. None of them looked happy, but no one spoke up to agree with me either. Greyson’s eyes burned into mine.

“What do you suggest we do, then?” Greyson asked me, his tone icy and his arms folded.

“Why do we have to *do* anything?” I asked, planting my hands on my hips. “Can’t we just leave him alone? Phil hasn’t hurt anyone. He’s fixed the doors on this place so many times! He’s priceless.”

Colton snickered, and I glared at him.

“Sorry!” He threw up his hands with a grin. “You can just be so human sometimes.”

Xavier smacked his twin’s arm. “She’s right,” he reminded his brother. “Phil’s been helping us for a while. Bit of an attitude problem, but he’s good.”

“THAT’S NOT THE POINT!” I yelled. “I mean, it’s not the only point. What really matters is, Phil is a *person.* He didn’t do anything to us!”

“He saw us,” Joss said, stepping forward. Ugh. Of course. “That’s all he needed to do. We can’t risk him talking about us to other humans.”

It was hard to admit that Joss had even the slightest of a point. I guess it was true that Phil was kind of a liability at this point… But I wasn’t budging.

“Greyson.” Joss turned to him, her voice silky. Gross. “You’re the Alpha here, and you know what a danger *humans* can be. There’s only one way to deal with this—the same way we always deal with *humans.”*

She sneered at me and I had to remind myself that if I launched myself at her right now, I’d be abandoning Phil. And I’d also likely get my ass handed to me.

“I suppose there are *exceptions*.” Joss narrowed her eyes at me as she approached Greyson. “But I don’t see the point in those.”

“THAT’S FUCKING IT!”I yelled.

And before I could think, I slammed my hands into Joss’s chest as hard as I could. Joss stumbled back, grabbing at me as she tumbled. I felt her hand close around my wrist, her grip tight enough to bruise, and I yelped at the pain. She soared back up, her eyes gleaming with anger.

“ENOUGH!” Greyson yelled, pulling us apart. His tone should have made me want to run and hide under the couch, but I stayed where I was. I wasn’t afraid of him. Mostly I wanted to learn how to drop kick so I could do it to Joss.

“We are not hurting Phil,” I said, my eyes glued to Joss. I stayed standing between Phil and every wolf in the room.

“You don’t understand, Cali,” Greyson told me, his eyes flashing, but voice now gentle. “Humans don’t understand us, and Joss is right. They can be a liability for our survival. We’ve survived for centuries because they think we’re just a story. We can’t risk finding out what they’d do if they all knew the truth.”

I saw his gaze land on Phil, who was cowering behind me. How could he possibly view this man as a threat? He was a repairman!

“I’m sorry he saw us,” Greyson told me, sounding genuinely remorseful. “I wish there was something we could do. Trust me. But there really aren’t a lot of options.”

“Don’t kill me!” Phil cried out, finally breaking his silence. “Please! I’m begging you.”

“You’d seriously do this?” I asked, horrified that Greyson would even be considering it. That any of them would be. “Would you have killed me, just because I’m human and I know about you?”

“You’re different,” Greyson told me, drawing closer. “You’re someone’s mate.”

“And how do you know Phil isn’t too?” I asked. “How do you know he doesn’t have a family?”

“I DO HAVE A FAMILY!” Phil yelled.

“SEE?” I cried out. “Did you even think about that? His family can’t get a phone call to find out he’s become werewolf kibble!”

“I’m sorry, Cali,” Greyson told me. “But there’s no other way.”

Fuck. No! There had to be another way. Something they weren’t considering!

“Greyson,” I started slowly. He was reasonable. He would listen to reason. Right? “We can talk about this. *Please*.”

“I’m sorry, Cali,” he repeated, looking to Colton, then to Gabriel, and then nodding.

*What the fuck was that?* Some kind of werewolf code for ‘let’s kill the human even though he did nothing wrong’?‘Even though one of our own—practically—made some very good points’? There HAD to be a plan B or C!

This wasn’t going to happen. Not on my watch. Holding my head up, I still stood between Phil and the rest of the wolves. Slowly, they began to circle around us, getting closer and closer, and I lost that advantage.

“Gabriel,” I said, my voice shaking. “Don’t.”

“The best way is if you move,” he said.

Dread plunged into my stomach. So this was really the pack’s decision. They were really going to kill Phil, just like Xavier had killed Tony. Which still had an active murder investigation. And a private investigator looking for the person who’d killed him. If Phil had a family, why would we risk such a bigger problem coming back to bite us in the ass?!

If they wanted to keep their secret, maybe they needed to stop fucking MURDERING people. And Phil hadn’t even done anything, not like Tony had. HE JUST FIXED FUCKING WINDOWS!

It wasn’t his fault the handprint had turned up. That the Manus Cruentae had attacked while he was here. No. This wasn’t going to happen. I needed to help him escape.

But how?

“Please, you guys,” I said, not sure which one of them I should try to appeal to. Greyson wouldn’t look at me. “People will notice he’s missing. They’ll ask questions. They’ll know he was here.”

But no one stopped. Fear rose on the back of my neck.

“Phil, you’ll forget this ever happened, right?” I asked, looking back at him desperately.

Phil nodded. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. He was too scared to speak. I watched sweat drip down his face in rivulets, and felt sick to my stomach. I knew what it was to be scared. To be at the mercy of things bigger and more powerful than you.

To be only human.

“Cali, please,” Greyson said behind me.

A sob burst out of me and I reached to squeeze Phil’s hand. He was going to die. I hadn’t done enough. *This was all my fault.*

Then suddenly, there was a strange electric charge in the air. It danced all over my skin—like static, but much more powerful. I exhaled.

It was then that Phil started to shake violently. I screamed as his eyes rolled back in his head, and he fell to the ground.

**Episode 269**

“Is he dead?” Colton asked, poking Phil’s side with his shoe.

I wanted to yell at him for being such an insensitive brat, but I felt dizzy. I sat on the ground by Phil’s body, breathing heavily. *What the hell just happened?* I thought to myself.

“Damn,” Gabriel said, sighing. “I was looking forward to taking him out—you know, just for fun. My life’s been pretty boring lately.”

We’d just had a pack of werewolves attack us and this guy considered his life boring. And I thought Colton was insane.

“Cali!” Lola, the only normal supernatural person here, ran to me. “Are you okay?”

“What just happened?” I asked. The lightheadedness was subsiding, but I still didn’t feel like I was all there.

“Your pupils are dilated.” Lola checked my eyes before helping me stand. “I’m not sure what’s going on.”

Xavier had made his way to my side. Silently, he watched as Lola fussed over me, his gaze concerned and searching. My head still aching, I looked at Phil, who remained on the ground. He opened and closed his eyes slowly, clearly in shock. My stomach twisted with worry.

“Did Phil just have a seizure?” I asked. “We have to help him!”

“You really don’t look so good.” Maya eyed me. For a moment, I had the wild impression that she gave a shit about me.

“This is certainly odd,” Mrs. Smith said. She stared down at Phil, who looked up at us blankly.

“We should get rid of him,” Greyson told Colton and Xavier. “Dispose of him outside, away from everyone.”

Despite the fact that I was pretty out of it, it didn’t take a genius to realize that when Greyson said ‘away from everyone’, he meant away from me.

“Um, excuse me?” I snapped, moving to stand between Greyson and Phil. My dizziness was subsiding, my recovery fueled by righteous indignation. “You’re not going to *dispose* of anyone!” My voice got louder as I stared at Greyson. “How have I not made myself clear?”

Sighing, Xavier took my hand in his, which I didn’t appreciate. How was I supposed to focus on protecting my fellow human when Xavier was trying to be all sweet?

FOCUS CALI!

“Are you feeling better?” he asked. “Maybe you should lie down.”

I removed my hand from his. I still felt too weak to yell at everyone, so I did the second best thing, which was glare with all my might. “I’m not leaving Phil,” I said. “And I’ll never forgive you or any of the others if you hurt him in any way.”

Xavier groaned quietly, exchanging a look with Greyson and Colton while Mrs. Smith checked me over.

“Forget about that.” Mrs. Smith’s tone was concerned. “Are you feeling anything unusual, Cali?”

“I’m fine,” I said defensively. Which was kind of a lie. My legs were wobbly, and my head was still throbbing. I felt like I’d lost myself for a second there, when I’d touched Phil… What could that mean? Maybe I was the one in shock. I had killed a werewolf with a freaking saw, only a few minutes ago. That was something that would probably fuel my nightmares for years to come.

But what was I supposed to do, really? Just let him kill Greyson? I’d had no other choice but to hurt that werewolf—it had been either him or Greyson. I needed to keep telling myself that, rather than let the guilt take over me. I would probably emotionally collapse if that happened.

The pack should be bowing to ME for saving the Alpha during that mess.

Maybe they would congratulate me or offer me some flowers and a card. Or a flower crown! I loved flower crowns. A ‘thank you’ Cheesecake Factory gift card also would’ve worked.

“No need to keep discussing this,” Gabriel said. His cheerful tone interrupted my thoughts, along with the fact that he grabbed Phil by both his legs and started to drag him away. “I’m happy to take care of this.”

*Oh NO YOU WON’T!* I thought, and jumped in Gabriel’s way. I nearly lost my balance, but I was still able to say, “STOP!” I wagged my finger at him like he was a puppy (if that puppy could murder you in three seconds flat). “Nobody’s taking Phil anywhere!”

“Cali, please calm down,” Xavier said. “This is pack business, so just let it go—it doesn’t concern you.”

Rude! Fuming, I tugged out of his hold. “Last time I checked, I was part of this pack, Xavier. We’re mates, so this *is* my business!”

“Stop, all of you,” Greyson said, before either Xavier or Gabriel could respond. “I want to talk to the human—*Phil*—first.” He paused. “Let’s give him a chance.”

I stood there, blinking in shock. I’d thought Greyson was just as happy to murder Phil as the rest of them—really, I’d been waiting for him to just snap his neck like it was no big deal. Apparently, I’d been wrong—unless Greyson was just doing this to stop my complaining, of course. I’d take it.

I’d been starting to realize that werewolves would do a lot of out-of-character things just to avoid me annoying them.

Then again, maybe Greyson…

Maybe that hug that Greyson had given me after I’d saved him from the wolf had truly meant something to him. Maybe he was grateful to me.

Maybe he wasn’t such a horrible person after all?

*NO, Cali!* I thought, scolding myself. *Stop thinking positive things about him! He betrayed and manipulated you!*

If Greyson was defending Phil just to trick me, I would be very, very pissed off. And good luck shutting me up then!

“Whatever. Can you please just go lie down?” Xavier told me, like there were currently no other pressing matters to deal with. “You seem unsteady—you need to rest.”

For a moment, I was struck by the worry in his face. Vulnerability was such a rare emotion for Xavier to display that I was eager to witness it. In the meantime, though, while I was distracted, Colton and Gabriel had lifted Phil up.

“Hey, careful!” I called after them. “Where are they taking him?”

“Just out to the porch,” Maya told me, rolling her eyes. “Perhaps he just needs some fresh air.”

I scoffed at her casual tone and followed the others outside. Phil was entirely silent, sitting on a wooden chair. He was no longer pleading—in fact, he wasn’t saying much of anything.

“Why’s he so quiet?” I asked Mrs. Smith, who just shrugged silently. “Maybe he had a stroke? Phil, buddy, how are you feeling?”

Phil kept looking around, seeming bewildered. I waved my hand in his face.

“Nothing’s going to happen. You’re gonna be fine,” I said pointedly, shooting a warning glare at Greyson.

He remained expressionless. Huh?

“Phil, talk to me,” I said. I reached out to take his hand, but then paused. The last time I’d touched him, it had felt like I was being zapped. This whole thing was beyond weird, and I needed to be careful. I had no idea what to do, other than ask him, “Are you okay?”

Phil’s gaze focused on me. He blinked many times, slowly.

“It’s fine,” I said soothingly. “Don’t be afraid.”

Phil’s blank expression gradually turned to one of utter confusion. The first words out of his mouth were: “Why everyone is naked? Is this some kind of weird orgy thing?”

I was torn between happiness over Phil speaking, and total outrage over the fact that 90% of all humans I met thought I was some sort of honorary clothed member of a group full of orgy-enthusiasts. *GROSS*!

“I’m not judging,” Phil added quickly, bless his heart. “But I’m a happily married man. Good for you guys, though.”

“This isn’t—”

Colton cut me off, finishing my sentence. “This isn’t an orgy, Phil. It’s more like a trial.”

Phil looked even more confused. “A trial for what? What happened? What am I doing here?”

Gabriel laughed mockingly. “Really? He’s pretending he doesn’t know? There are ways to make him remember…” He cracked his knuckles.

“Um, take a step back there, hotshot,” I told Gabriel, shoving at his chest until I could move between him and Phil. “Ignore everyone else, Phil, and focus on me. What’s the last thing you remember?”

Phil’s gaze turned hazy. “I was going to my car to get an extra tool… Did something happen? Did I fall and hit my head? Maybe I should go to the doctor. I don’t feel good.”

I stared at him. “You really don’t remember?”

Phil frowned. “Remember what? Xavier called me a few minutes ago to fix the door—again. You guys break your doors a lot. I was just about to start, but then I…” He rubbed his forehead, clearly struggling. “I don’t remember anything other than that.”

Gabriel, the dickhead, started clapping. Loud enough to make both Phil and I jump in surprise. “He should win an Oscar, great performance!”

Before I could snap at Gabriel, Xavier gripped him by the arm. “Gabriel,” Xavier said slowly, realization growing on his features. “I think it’s real. I think Phil’s memory has been wiped.”

**Episode 270**

“Seriously?” Gabriel said to Xavier. “Are we believing human bullshit now? Have you gone soft, Xavier?”

Before I could protest, Phil spoke again.

“Wait, my memory is gone?” He seemed beyond confused. “I have amnesia?”

Greyson was the one to reply. “Before you fell and hit your head, you were freaking out. Now you’re calm, like nothing’s going on.”

Staring pointedly at Gabriel, Colton said, “Nobody, especially Phil, is that good an actor.”

Phil looked a little offended. “I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not.”

“It’s a compliment,” I said, attempting to reassure him.

Maya frowned. “Does that mean we have to let him go?”

“Might as well,” Colton said, shrugging. “It’d be a shame to lose our handyman. Things are always breaking around here. He’s pretty good at his job, too.”

“Excuse me?” Phil piped up. “Is anyone going to explain what’s going on?”

“They’re just complimenting you!” I said awkwardly. “You’re a really great repairman!”

Continuing to act as if Phil wasn’t there, Mrs. Smith said, “Phil’s no longer a threat. We’re good.”

Phil was alarmed. “Wait, is *that* a threat? Did I do something to you guys? I’m sorry, I really think I'm missing something here.”

“Nothing,” I said quickly. My legs still felt a little wobbly, but I wasn’t about to complain—I just needed to get this over with and make sure Phil would be okay. “You didn’t do anything.” I stared at Greyson as I kept talking. “You can go home now, Phil.”

Greyson stared back at me for a moment. Then he nodded and turned away.

*That’s that then! Thank GOD!* I thought to myself. I had to admit, I felt a little triumphant. I’d talked them out of murdering someone who’d just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. That was something, right?

“So, I should just go?” Phil asked, standing up. He seemed pretty steady now, oddly enough.

“Let me escort you to your car,” I said.

“You guys are really nice,” he said. “Thanks for helping me out after I fell.”

“No need for thanks,” I said, fighting down either hysterical laughter or hysterical sobbing. IF ONLY Phil new the truth. “Seriously, you really are a great repairman.”

Phil preened. He was so nice. Thank god they hadn’t killed him.

“Yeah, no,” Xavier said, reaching out to gently take my arm. “You need to rest.”

*Ha!* I thought. *As if I trust any of these wolf-bears to go anywhere near Phil right now!*

As if she could read my thoughts, Mrs. Smith stepped up. “It’s fine, Cali. I’ll go with Phil and make sure he’s okay to drive. How does that sound?”

“Thank you,” I said quietly. She squeezed my shoulder and started leading Phil toward his truck.

The man suddenly seemed awkward, looking away from her. “Excuse me, but could you please put some clothes on?”

I watched Mrs. Smith’s round, perky butt as she walked next to poor Phil, who seemed to be looking ANYWHERE else. Mrs. Smith was beautiful inside and out, really. It made sense Big Mac wanted to tap that.

“Cali?” Xavier touched my shoulder softly. “How you feeling?”

The moment Xavier uttered the words, I became very aware of the weight on my shoulders. “I guess I’m suddenly feeling very… tired?”

Xavier wrapped his arms around me and led me upstairs. As he closed the bedroom door behind us, I plopped down onto the bed. My whole body was aching now. I was officially exhausted, the adrenaline wearing off.

“Why am I so exhausted?” My tone was wary.

“Something seems off with you ever since Phil collapsed,” Xavier said. He sat next to me on the bed, taking both my hands.

I frowned. “Are you worried about me?”

“I am,” he admitted. It was a heady thing, to hear him admit something so raw and real.

*Is this growth?* I wondered, pleasantly surprised. *Is Xavier becoming a more empathetic person?*

“Do you really believe Phil?” I asked Xavier. “That he forgot everything?”

Xavier shrugged. “There’s no other way to explain it. Phil’s a working man, not some mastermind or major werewolf foe. I’m certain about that much.”

I was certain about that, too.

“What I can’t figure out is what happened to make Phil lose his memory,” Xavier said.

I nodded. “It was weird. One minute I was defending him, the next I touched him and felt this… *shock*.”

Xavier stared at me, his expression impassive. “A shock?”

“Yeah, like I was hit by a lightning bolt.”

Xavier smirked, pushing a strand of hair behind my ear. “Okay, Zeus’s daughter, but—”

“I’m not joking, Xavier,” I interrupted. “It was really intense. Only it didn’t hurt.”

Xavier eyed me cautiously. “What do you mean?”

“At first I thought it might have been static electricity, but it was something else. Something I can’t fully describe. Just a sensation… A spark.”

Xavier kept staring at me. “A spark?”

“Yes. Have you ever felt anything like that?”

Thoughtfully, Xavier shook his head. “No. But I’m also not human. Humans experience things differently.”

His words made me fall silent. What did he mean by that? Xavier stood up and headed to the bathroom. When he returned, he was wearing a pair of jeans and holding a damp washcloth. He sat down next to me. “You have some blood on you,” he muttered, and gently wiped my cheek. “Are you hurting anywhere?”

I shook my head, but he kept inspecting me, moving the washcloth down my neck and across my collarbones. It felt so good to have his attention, his care, his eyes on me. Sighing, I leaned closer, resting my head on his shoulder as he pulled me into his arms. His tenderness felt so amazing, so sweet, that I found myself shaking slightly.

“Are you cold?” he whispered in my ear.

“No. Keep cuddling me.”

I felt him smile against my temple before planting a kiss there. “Demanding.”

“It’s part of my charm.”

He kissed my temple once more, chuckling low in my ear. I pressed myself against him. He smelled so amazing, and it was unbelievable that his body was still calling to me like this after we’d just been in a literal battle. Maybe the werewolf way was rubbing off on me? For a while, we kept quiet.

Finally, Xavier spoke. “The sensation you felt when Phil went down—you said it felt like a spark… Did anything else happen?”

I looked down at our intertwined hands. And then I remembered. “There was a flash of light.” I tilted my head up to look at him. “Did you see it?”

His brow furrowed. “I didn’t see anything like that. Maybe some of the others did? I can ask them later.”

“Don’t forget to ask Gabriel. He’s such a nice guy.”

Xavier raised an eyebrow. “*Cali*.”

“What? Your friend is wonderful. A lamb, really. I’ve never met a more innocent psychopathic murderer in my life.”

Xavier shrugged. “Gabriel has a certain way of dealing with things. He’s been that way forever.”

“It’s not like the rest of you are that hard to convince when it comes to getting rid of someone, though,” I said. It made me so uncomfortable to say it out loud.

Xavier shook his head. “You’re not wrong. It’s just that werewolves don’t have the same levels of empathy as humans. We can’t afford to if we want to survive. In our world, there’s an ‘eat or be eaten’ rule. Any threat needs to be eliminated immediately, no questions asked.”

“So it’s a cultural thing,” I said dryly.

Xavier snorted. I wasn’t sure how to feel. I knew I wanted to be here with him, but today had shaken me to my core. Hurting someone—even if it had been to save Greyson, and even if I didn't know what to make of him still… It made me feel unsteady.

“What was it like?” Xavier asked. “The light you saw?”

I pressed my lips together. “It reminded me of the wisps.” A realization started to dawn on me. “Could this have something to do with them?”

“I don’t know,” Xavier said. “But it does seem like you’ve been attracting them lately.”

“One of them helped me during the fight.” Xavier’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, and I kept going. “But I didn’t see any wisps around Phil. Do you have any idea why I’m the only one who sees them?”

“Uh, no,” Xavier said. “I don’t know much about them.”

“It’s weird that I’m seeing wisps instead of anything else, though,” I said. “Like, what’s with them? Also, why didn’t I turn into a werewolf after I was bitten?” Before Xavier could speak, I kept talking. “Also also, why did Big Mac want my blood?”

Xavier’s jaw clenched. “She shouldn’t have fucking done that.”

I waved him off. “That’s not the point. The point is, *why* did she do it? And why did she then make a weird comment about not having any need for human blood? And now this weird thing with Phil, it’s like, what if...” My throat went dry as I stared at Xavier, squeezing his hand. The signs had been there all along, hadn’t they? “What if I’m not what I think I am?”

Xavier scowled. “Huh?”

I tried to wrap my brain around the possibilities. “Xavier, what if I’m not human?”

**Episode 271**

Xavier stared at me. His intense gaze made me feel lightheaded all over again. “You smell human.” He glanced at my lips, his nostrils flaring. “And I mean that in the best way possible.”

*Rude!* And he was getting me all flustered, but we were having a very important conversation. “Stop it,” I said, annoyed. “I’m being serious. All these things that have happened, how else do you explain them?”

Xavier sighed. “But if you’re not human—”

“AHA!” I exclaimed, poking him in the ribs. “I KNEW IT!”

“—*if you’re not human*,” Xavier repeated patiently, “which I am *not* admitting to, then what do you think you are?”

Oh wow. That got way too existential in three seconds flat.

“I mean…” I frowned. “I have no idea, and that’s kind of freaking me out. Something weird is going on with all this.” I gestured at myself. “Can’t you see that?”

Xavier’s eyes stayed on my chest for beat too long—*men*—before he looked up at my face. His expression was so open, so kind, that I felt my stomach tighten. Softly, he reached out and took my hand, raising it to his lips. Planting a tiny kiss there, he stared at me. My eyes zeroed in on his beautiful lips as he spoke. “I don’t care what you are. I wouldn’t even care if you were an ogre.”

“XAVIER!” I shoved him. He laughed. “I’m being serious right now, stop joking!”

He smirked, raising his hands in surrender. “I’m not! I’m telling the truth.”

“Well, I’m not an ogre—I’m not from ​*Shrek!*” I declared. “Do I fucking LOOK like Princess Fiona?”

Xavier shook his head, giving me a small smile. He needed to go back to being a grumpy asshole, just to make it easier for me to stay mad at him. “Okay, calm down,” he said. “I’m not great with words. All I meant was that my feelings for you wouldn’t change, no matter what.”

His words were very reassuring, after all we’d been through. There had been so much progress between us these past few days, and for that, I was beyond happy. “Are we redefining our relationship right now?” I asked.

He just raised an eyebrow in response. I rolled my eyes at him. “Okay, just answer me this: would you love me, even if I were a witch?”

He stared at me. “You’re definitely not a witch. I’d know. Werewolves always know.”

“Do they, though?”

Xavier snorted. “You’re not a witch, Cali.”

I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest. “But I need to be *something!* Everyone is something. I just want to know what my something is!”

Xavier took my arm, draping it across his bare chest. Why would he do that? COULDN’T HE SEE I WAS TRYING TO CONCENTRATE HERE?

“Cali?”

“Hmm?” I snapped my head up to face him, tearing my gaze up from his abs.

“You don’t have to be anything else,” he said softly. “You’re Cali. Isn’t that enough?”

I frowned, pulling my hand away from him. “Well, the pack still makes comments about me being human. If I were a wolf, there’d be no questions, no doubts about me.”

Xavier raised both eyebrows. “But you’re not a wolf.”

“Yes,” I said between gritted teeth. “I’m not a wolf because you won’t turn me.”

Xavier’s expression darkened. “This again? I won’t do it, Cali. I won’t bite you and risk hurting you.”

I huffed. “Then maybe I should find someone who will!”

Xavier’s fists clenched. “Like Greyson?”

*Oh my GOD!* I thought. *Why would he bring him up now?*

“You KNOW that’s not what I meant,” I said.

Xavier rubbed his forehead. It seemed like he was talking himself down. All his growth or whatever was making it harder not to be attracted to him while we were fighting.

“Don’t you get it?” he asked me quietly, moving closer. “Turning you into a wolf is too risky. What if you’re right, what if you’re not just human?” He caressed my face, tracing my jawline with his thumb. My heart was pounding. “Who knows what a wolf bite would do?”

*Oh, come on!*

“Really?” I snapped, shoving him away. “So NOW you think I’m not human? How convenient—you can use that as an excuse not to turn me.”

Xavier and his abs seemed disappointed in me. “But why do you want to be a wolf? Why do you want to change what you are?”

“Because I want to be like you!” *To be with you!*

Xavier blinked.

“I want to have your powers, your strength—and everybody’s respect. I’m tired of being the token human that all of you boss around!”

Xavier’s surprise slowly shifted into amusement, and then he started laughing. *Ugh!*

“Why are you laughing?” I demanded. “I’m being serious, Xavier!”

“And I’M being serious when I say that being a wolf wouldn’t make anyone suddenly respect you,” he said. “You’re already gaining everyone’s respect, just being who you are.”

Okay. I had to admit that did sound nice. Xavier still had a small smile on his lips. “But what if we’re attacked again?” I asked. “How am I going to defend myself next time? Should I pick up a rake? A screwdriver?”

Xavier shrugged. “How about a whisk?”

I smacked his arm, trying and failing not to laugh. “Xavier! I’m not joking!”

“Sorry, sorry,” he said, in an indulging tone. One that someone would use with a fussy puppy. Or the girlfriend that they wanted to keep happy. For some reason, I didn’t hate being either of those things.

“I just wish you’d take a moment to think this through,” he said. “We still don’t know what happened with you and Phil. There are just too many questions.”

I narrowed my eyes. “When did you become level-headed and, like, not completely the worst?”

Xavier leaned in close, his nose brushing against mine. “I guess it’s because I like you. Just a little.”

My breath started getting quicker. “A little?”

His palm, so large and warm and heavy, moved from my hip to my thigh. His grip was electrifying. He kissed my cheek, nuzzling at my jawline. “A lot.”

My lips parted. His gaze fixed on them before he leaned forward. I was almost tasting him when the door was shoved open.

Looming in the doorway, Greyson was an impassive statue with a razor-sharp voice. “I need everyone downstairs.”

And with that, he turned and walked away.

“Um, what was that?” I asked before standing up and facing Xavier. I pointed at him. “We’re not done with this conversation.”

He smirked.

“I’m not talking about kissing. I’m talking about what I really am, and you turning me into a werewolf.”

He frowned.

“Ha!” I scoffed. “You REALLY thought I’d forget about that? My identity crisis cannot wait!”

Xavier sighed deeply, looking up the ceiling. Patting him on the head, I headed out of the bedroom, ready to go downstairs for the meeting. Xavier was less than a foot behind me a second later, of course, which was a great change from all his disappearing acts.

“Cali,” he started, but I cut him off.

“Don’t think I’m not still upset,” I said. “Because I am.”

He sighed. “I’m just tired of fighting about the same shit over and over again, Cali.”

“I am too,” I said. “Imagine how much easier your life would be if you just did whatever the hell I asked you to and turned me, because I’m a genius who’s always right.”

He rolled his eyes, nudging me.

“This doesn’t have to be a problem, you know,” Greyson said, appearing behind us, pulling a shirt over his head. Thank *god*, he was at least dressed now. “If you don’t want to turn her, I’d be happy to.”

That was the absolute worst thing Greyson could have said right then.

Xavier went rigid. “Back the *fuck* off,” he told Greyson with a scowl, coming to stand between us. “This is none of your business.”

“It’s pack business,” Greyson said matter-of-factly. “Not only is everyone tired of listening to the two of you going at it like an old married couple, but there’s a practical side to it—the Manus Cruentae are still out there, and Cali’s present state is a liability. Another wolf in the pack could only strengthen us.”

My eyes were wide. Was Greyson really on my side? Was this real life?

“Just think about it,” Greyson finished, staring at a glowering Xavier before heading toward the stairs. I wanted to do some hardcore gloating right now, but this was fishy. Was Greyson for real here, or was he just messing with us?

I didn’t have the time to process his words further, because Greyson stopped walking and turned back to face us again. He looked at Xavier, holding eye contact in a way that made my metaphorical hackles rise.

“Think about it, Xavier,” he repeated. “Because if you don’t turn her, *I* will.”

**Episode 272**

I stood there like a pile of salt as Greyson headed downstairs. I felt Xavier tense next to me, and I instantly started babbling. “Wow, can you believe that guy?” I laughed, trying to diffuse the tension. “Was that a threat? How dare he? I would NEVER!”

Xavier turned to stare at me. His deep voice was sharp. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m just saying that I don’t care what he says! I’d never let him turn me, I—”

“Don’t do that,” Xavier said harshly. “Don’t try to smooth things over for Greyson.”

“This isn’t about him, Xavier. It’s about you and me. I would never let him turn me.”

He looked at me for a moment. Then he offered a curt nod, which didn’t make me feel great. I reached out to touch him, quite ready and eager for some more cuddling and general affection, but Xavier had apparently filled his quota for the day. He moved past me and headed downstairs. I took a deep, calming breath before I followed him. I was 99% sure he wasn’t mad at me, per se—more like mad at the situation. But still.

*Ugh!* I thought bitterly. *Why does Greyson have to always screw things up?*

When I got the chance, that Alpha ass was going to get an earful.

The rest of the orgy enthusiasts—*not*—were already gathered in the living room, fully clothed for a change: Mrs. Smith, Jay, Lola, Maya, Colton, Joss, and Greyson.

Wait—where was Violet?

I made a mental note to ask Mrs. Smith later, and moved to stand right next to Xavier. I wanted to know that she was okay. I ignored Greyson, and decided I wasn’t going to pay any attention to him. He had to be playing his little game. Why else would he offer to turn me?

“The Manus Cruentae are not going to stop,” Greyson told the group, interrupting my thoughts. “They’re seeking revenge for Ryker’s death and they won’t stop until they get it—or die trying. And I’m going to make sure it’s the latter.”

“Hear hear!” Joss said.

“I wasn’t done talking,” Greyson said sternly.

Joss nodded, giving him a thumbs up.

*This is so painful to watch*, I thought, cringing.

“The point is,” Greyson said, “that in order to eradicate this threat, we need to increase the size of our pack.” He pointed outside, where I could see Rishika and some of her Rogues. “They’ve proven themselves, and we wouldn’t have survived without them.”

*Huh*, I scoffed internally. I wanted to yell at everyone, *Greyson wouldn’t have survived without me!* But I supposed that right now wouldn’t be the absolute best moment for that. Besides, I didn’t really want to take credit. The jury was still out whether Greyson was the shadiest person/individual/supernatural being/man/werewolf I knew. Had his promise to turn me really been a threat, though? Would he really do it if Xavier didn’t, or had it all been for show?

Did I *want* him to?

I needed to talk to Lola, figure this thing out. Or Maya. I could talk to Maya. Maybe? She had been a tiny bit nicer to me recently, so I guessed that made us super close in comparison to how we’d been before. But were we friends now? I couldn’t quite tell. Perhaps this was just how Maya treated her friends—mean and condescending and constantly rolling her eyes while threatening to rip your throat out. Did she *have* friends?

She had style, though, I had to admit that. Being terrifying required a lot of dedication.

“Well if they’re joining, there’s only one thing we can do!” Colton said loudly, startling me. “A barbecue!” He looked very happy with his idea.

“What?” Wide-eyed, I looked around. These people actually seemed to be contemplating this. “Are you serious?”

Mrs. Smith, the only sane werewolf in this entire operation, pursed her lips. “I don’t think it’s the best idea—to have a party while the Manus Cruentae are still out there. Seems a little… stupid.”

Colton gasped, offended. “How could a party ever be stupid?”

“No offense, Colton,” Mrs. Smith added.

Colton was no longer offended. “Oh, come on!” he appealed. “We need to have Rishika and the others take the pledge, and the team could use a little morale boost to get us pumped up to keep fighting, so why not?”

Oh, wow. That wasn’t entirely outrageous. Did Colton just have a good idea? What was happening anymore?

“Actually,” I piped up, “that kinda makes sense, Colton. For once.”

“See? Cali gets it!” Colton winked at me. Xavier snorted, shooting me a look.

“What?” I said defensively. “I’m kinda hungry too.”

Xavier, whose mood seemed to have improved, leaned closer to my ear. “No spatulas though, okay?” he whispered.

I frowned, about to tell him off, but then Xavier put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me into his arms. He smiled, and I realized he was just teasing.

*Xavier! Teasing! That is GROWTH, people!*

As the others kept chatting about Colton’s idea, I smiled back and wrapped my arms around Xavier’s bare torso. I also splayed my palm over his abs, because they felt amazing. My nails scratched lightly at his skin, and he gripped my arm.

“Don’t do that,” he muttered, raising an eyebrow.

I looked up at him innocently. “I have no idea what you mean.”

He chuckled, pulling me against his front and wrapping his arms around me. He also held both my hands over my chest, trapping me there, like he was worried I’d keep fondling him in public and accidentally turn him on. I would never!

*Have I already, though?* I thought to myself, smirking.

In the meantime, I could actually *feel* Greyson staring at us, so that was great. Not at all awkward. What did he even *want?*

“I agree. The timing may be a little off,” Joss was saying. “But a barbecue would definitely be helpful to diffuse tension.”

“Okay,” Greyson said, agreeing with his annoying Luna. “Let’s invite Rishika and the others inside. We’re having the barbecue tonight and we’ll perform the pledge of loyalty and unite with the Rogues.”

As everyone kept talking about that and Greyson barked orders about organizing it, I turned to Xavier. “I think I’ve done enough for one day. I’m going upstairs to shower, okay?”

“I should come with you,” he said, in a tone that couldn’t be more obvious.

“Um, no, because then we won’t shower, and seriously, Xavier, everybody’s awake right now, how can you think—”

He chuckled. “Okay, okay, next time.” He squeezed my waist before releasing me. Flustered but content, I headed upstairs while the rest of the pack made themselves useful.

A few moments later, I was under a hot shower, definitely not thinking about: 1) Xavier’s abs; or 2) having killed someone—even if that person had been a horrible supernatural being who would have killed Greyson or me.

Both trains of thought would be ridiculous.

The first because I wasn’t about to get frisky all alone in the bathroom with a pack of werewolves prowling the grounds, even if I’d done it before. We were post-battle and it was a big-no. The second because I didn’t want to figure out how far I could push my sanity after entering this crazy supernatural world.

*I hope this barbecue goes a little smoother than the last one*, I thought to myself, towel-drying my hair after the shower. *What was it with wolves and barbecues? As long as I didn’t jump out a window, we were good.*

I was about to walk out of the bathroom when I caught sight of my naked reflection. Despite all the questions I’d been having about my real identity, I definitely LOOKED human. And I even ached like a human—the battle in the woods had caused a few bruises.

The wound on my pale leg was nearly healed, though—Xavier’s lick had worked its magic. Tracing my hip, I looked at my stretchmarks. Tiger stripes, Xavier called them, and the name still made me smile. It seemed silly to worry about something like that while my life was in constant danger. But it wasn’t my fault that society brainwashed us girls to give a shit about stuff like that. I was growing comfortable with my stretchmarks, actually, and Xavier liked them.

But what about…

What about Greyson?

Not that I cared what he thought about my naked body, but he must’ve seen every part of me when I’d been in the spring. Werewolf sight and all. I frowned at my reflection—no, I definitely didn’t care what Greyson thought. And honestly, why should I give a damn anyway? This was what I looked like, and if any of these werewolves didn’t like it, well tough shit. I’d sic my spatula on them.

Happy with myself, and hoping my sudden confidence didn’t vanish in the next minute, I put on underwear and combed through my hair. It was so long now! I could hear the others moving around the house. Strange as it seemed, I couldn’t help but think we were actually behaving like a family, living together in a real house. It was nice—like having siblings, something I’d never experienced before. It’d always just been me, Mom, and Dad.

My phone rang, and I smiled when I saw the caller. Speaking of family… It was my parents. They probably wanted to check in and pester me about coming back to visit. When I picked up the phone, though, my dad’s voice was unexpectedly stressed. “Cali, honey?”

“Dad? Hi—is everything okay?”

“Cali, honey, I’m so glad I could finally reach you. You need to come home on the next flight,” he said. “The police want to talk to you about Tony.”

**Episode 273**

This was definitely not what I’d expected when I’d picked up the phone.

“Dad, calm down,” I said.

“Cali, this is real. It’s turned into a whole crisis, and we’re being forced to deal with it,” he said. He only talked like that when he was three minutes away from a freak-out, which wouldn’t help anyone.

“I know. Alex has already told me about the murder investigation.” I tried to change the subject. “How’s Mom?”

“Honey, I’m being serious!”

Okay, so apparently changing the subject was a no-go.

“Ever since the police determined it was a murder, the whole town has been on edge,” he went on. “The school too.”

“Oh, great,” I commented, fighting down my anxiety over the situation.

I didn’t think Dad even heard me, because he just barreled through. “The sooner you come back to talk to them about Tony and what happened that night, the better.”

My worry only grew at his words. If I talked to the police, there was a huge chance it would make things worse for everyone. Given how the pack had first reacted to Phil, what would Xavier do if he thought the police were looking into me? Would he kill the police? Like, the whole police department, along with the guy who sold hot dogs outside the station?

And what had the hot dog guy even done? What had our town’s police department even done—they were only trying to do their jobs, and my murderous kind-of-boyfriend would just eat them all! And it wasn’t just Xavier—the whole Redwood pack could just descend upon my town and start killing people, just to cover up Tony’s murder. Xavier had said it, after all: his kind had a very casual relationship with killing. It was a ‘cultural difference’ between humans and supernatural beings.

*Oh my god, shit!* I thought. Fighting to calm myself down, I managed to refocus my thoughts on something else. I had to stall. “Wait a minute, why didn’t the police contact me directly?”

Dad’s voice was impatient. “They tried, but you were camping. Your mother and I thought it would be best if we contacted you directly so you wouldn’t get worried, sweetheart.”

“Right,” I said, biting the inside of my cheek. *Because that worked, Dad.* My voice had become shrill. “Because now I’m not worried at all!”

“I’m so sorry, Cali—”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s fine, it’s not your fault.” If anything, it was Xavier’s fault. “It’s just that you and Mom worry about everything, so now I also worry about everything. My genes are practically hardwired to react like this.”

“I just wish you were here with us to sort this thing out with the police,” he said. He sounded apologetic. “They’ve been very intense about it. When’s the soonest you can fly out?”

I exhaled loudly. “I promise I’ll look into flights and let you know. Okay?”

Dad sounded relieved. “Okay.”

*Shit.*

The moment I hung up, Xavier walked into the room. He took in my expression and frowned. “What’s wrong? Who were you talking to?”

For a moment, I felt the urge to lie, but I disregarded it. There couldn’t be any lies between Xavier and me. It just wouldn’t be right, not after all we’d been through.

“It was my parents,” I said slowly. “I need to go back to Minnesota.”

He sat on the bed next to me, taking my hand. He looked concerned. “What’s going on? Is your Mom okay?”

“It’s not about mom, or my dad. It’s about…” I paused. “It’s about Tony.”

Xavier stared at me.

“The police want to ask me a few questions,” I said, shrugging. I tried to play it down, not wanting Xavier to do anything rash. He had a pretty bad history of making decisions in the heat of the moment. “It’s no big deal.”

“You’re not going,” he said seriously.

I shook my head. “I have to go. It’s the police.”

“So what?”

“Well, they can *make me* go,” I said. “And it’ll look worse if I stay away.”

Xavier paused. I could see that he was processing. “When would you have to leave?”

*Thank god.*

“I told my dad I’ll look into flights,” I replied. “I figure I can stall for a few days, but I can’t put it off indefinitely.”

“But what about the Manus Cruentae?” Xavier asked. “It’s not safe for you to leave the pack behind. I’ll go with you.”

“Oh no you won’t!” I exclaimed, alarmed. “I don’t want you going anywhere near the police—it’s fine. I’ll be okay. It’s not like the Manus Cruentae are going to fly to my house. That stuff just doesn’t happen.”

Xavier kept scowling. “Anything could happen. I’m coming along.”

I patted his shoulder. “I really, REALLY appreciate your concern, Xavier, but I’m also worried about what you’d do if you came with me.”

“What would I do?” Xavier asked, in the most oblivious way possible.

“Well, I don’t know? Accidentally murder someone because they looked at me funny?”

He shrugged. “I’m still not sure if I want you to go by yourself.”

I waved him off. “I’ll be fine!”

“The biggest problem is going to be Greyson, Cali,” Xavier said. “I doubt he’s going to be thrilled about you leaving the pack under these circumstances.”

“Then we need to talk to him,” I said. I was still pretty happy that Xavier seemed to understand the reasons why he couldn’t come with me. Or he was lying. Unless of course he changed his mind again, or he was just being evasive right now because he didn’t want to fight. Werewolves could be pretty crafty.

“You should talk to Greyson, yeah,” Xavier said. “But we should wait until after the barbecue.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Trust me, it’s just better to wait until all the fuss is over.”

I frowned. Stalling wasn’t going to help with my stress over the matter.

In fact, it was the only thing I could think about as I got dressed and we went downstairs, finding everyone out in the back yard.

They’d built a funeral pyre for the two dead Rogues.

Rishika was standing a few feet away from the pyres. We all bowed our heads as she said a few words about her comrades, finishing with: “They were great companions. Brave friends. They will be missed.” Leaning forward, she lit the pyres.

The scene had an otherworldly quality to it.

I finally spotted Violet, standing a couple of feet away from me and Xavier. I walked up to her. She seemed so lost. I reached out and took her hand. She didn’t pull away. I didn’t know what to say. I just wanted to be there for her right now. To be supportive. Lilac’s loss was still so raw, and I couldn’t even imagine how much she was hurting. Especially at another funeral. These past few days must have been a lot to handle.

Greyson stood across the circle from us. The red glow of the flames flickered on his face, the angles of it deeply pronounced. Xavier had said that I should wait to talk to him, but he hadn’t realized or understood how worried I was. How worried my parents were, too. Who knew what the stress was doing to my dad’s heart? To my mom’s?

I needed to deal with this ASAP.

I slipped away from Violet. She was so fixated on the flames that she didn’t even seem to notice my absence. Poor kid. Taking a deep breath, I walked up to Greyson. Joss glared at me the second I approached.

“What do you want?” she snapped.

Someone was touchy.

I ignored her, turning my attention to Greyson, whose face was expressionless.

“Do you have a minute?” I asked him. “Something’s come up.”

Greyson looked me up and down, like he was making sure I was in one piece. *Rude!*

“More problems?” Greyson said. “You seem to attract them.”

*Ugh*.

“I don’t appreciate your tone,” I told him sharply. “I need to talk to you. As Alpha, you need to listen to everyone in your pack. That includes me.”

He rolled his eyes. I wanted to smack him. But then he turned to Joss. “Can you please give us a minute? I’m sure this won’t take long.”

Shooting another glare at me, Joss walked away.

*Victory!* I thought gleefully, before I remembered what I wanted to talk to Greyson about. My concern and stress returned as I explained what had happened with Tony, and my dad calling. He looked at me like I was talking about the barbecue’s meat options, but at least he was listening.

“Basically,” I finished, “the cops want to talk to me.”

Greyson’s expression remained impassive. “So?”

“*So*, I need to go home. I can take a bus or a plane. It doesn’t matter, but I need to go.”

Greyson turned away from me, staring at the fire. He shook his head.

“What?” I asked, alarmed.

“No, Cali,” he said, shrugging.

I blinked, not sure I was hearing him right. “Um, excuse me?”

He turned back to me, the firelight flickering in his dark gray eyes. It was a smoldering, intense look that had my insides in knots, and butterflies fluttering inside my stomach. “You’re not allowed to leave without my permission, Cali.”

**Episode 274**

“Excuse me?” I asked, crossing my arms.

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “I thought I made myself perfectly clear. You can’t leave—I won’t allow it. Anything else I can help you with?”

He was such an ASS!

“I wasn’t asking for your permission,” I fired back, livid. “Who do you think you are?”

Greyson clicked his tongue and looked at me. “I think we both know I’m the Alpha, Cali.”

I wanted to scream at him. “Well, you aren’t the boss of me.”

His eyes met mine, challenging. “Why did you bother coming to talk to me if you’d already made up your mind?”

“I… You… That’s—” I cut myself off, flustered. “That’s got nothing to do with anything! I just thought maybe you’d want to know. You know, because you’re not the boss of me, but you *are* the Alpha. Ugh, whatever!” I started to turn my back on him, but he blocked my way.

He loomed over me. He still had that intense look on his face—that gaze that made me feel scrutinized. Broken apart. *Warm*. “I meant what I said, Cali.” His voice was low, but it still sent chills down my spine. “You can’t leave the pack house. It’s too dangerous—for you *and* the pack. Once the danger has passed, I’ll consider your request.”

I scoffed. “It’s not a *request*.”

I took a step away from Greyson, just as he was reaching for my arm. He stopped as Xavier came over to interrupt. Storming past him, I snapped, “Your brother’s a dick!”

Xavier shrugged. “What else is new?” He reached out and found my hand as I walked by and pulled me back to him. “I assume you went ahead and told him about going back to Minnesota?”

I nodded, shooting Greyson a glare. He was only a few feet away. He raised an eyebrow at me. *Asshole.*

“You should have listened to me and waited until after the barbecue,” Xavier told me.

It was now time for me to glare at Xavier. “Seriously? I don’t need you telling me *I told you so*.”

Xavier ignored my tone. “We could always send Gabriel to take care of it.”

I blinked in alarm. “It? What do you mean, ‘it’?”

He shrugged again. “You know, the police, the investigation.”

I pulled my hand from his, shaking my head. “Don’t you dare!” My pulse was thundering, stress levels getting higher by the second. My annoying mate was going to be the death of me—the last thing I needed was a mercenary werewolf ‘to take care of it.’ He’d only make things worse.

Infuriatingly, Xavier just said, “Let me know if you change your mind.”

He was UNBELIEVABLE.

As I was stewing and stressing and Greyson was glowering at me and Xavier was probably secretly plotting how to kill a whole town, the pack moved away from the funeral pyre and started to gather around the barbecue pit.

Okay, how weird was that?

One moment they were honoring the dead, and now they were getting ready to roast hot dogs. Maybe I hadn’t thought this through—maybe becoming a werewolf wasn’t all that. They seemed to always have a million things going on at the same time, and they had to deal with a million tragedies. But then again, they resolved their issues as best as they could and moved on in the blink on an eye. That part was probably good, though—moving on after a big loss, not dwelling on it, not stressing over it. Maybe that was how they dealt with their rough way of life.

Not every werewolf seemed to be that way, though.

Violet clearly hadn’t gotten over anything. The struggle was obvious in her expression. The sadness there, the anger. I couldn’t even imagine how hard it must’ve been on her to go to another funeral so soon. I spotted her among the others and walked over, wanting to make sure she knew I was there for her.

“Hi,” I said.

She gave me a little nod.

“Do you want anything?” I asked. “Something to eat or drink?”

She shook her head. I took a seat on the deck chair next to hers, and we watched the others as they celebrated their victory. They seemed to live and die by the law of the jungle—survival of the fittest. The rest—the death and horror and murder—was just part of their way of life.

It was jarring to think about.

“I’m jealous,” Violet suddenly told me.

I was confused. “What do you mean?”

“Of you. You got to kill one,” Violet said. Her expression sent a chill down my spine. “I wanted to. I wanted to rip their hearts out.”

Cold sweat gathered at the back of my neck. This was a dark side of Violet that I hadn’t seen before. Maybe this was the anger stage of grief. I had no idea what to tell her. She turned to me. The fire from the pit added a sinister look to her eyes. “What was it like?”

“What?” I muttered.

“To kill one of them. What was it like to kill one of them?”

I stood there speechless for a moment. This was too much for me to deal with, to process. I hadn’t even allowed myself to think about it much, anyway. That would be overwhelming, and I had no time for those kinds of feelings right now. “I haven’t had the time to think about it,” I managed to say. “But when I do, I doubt I’ll be happy about it.”

Violet scoffed. The sound startled me. “I would relish the moment. I will enjoy it when I get the chance to taste the blood of the werewolf who killed my brother.” Then she lowered her voice. “These monsters killed my brother.”

I worried so much about Violet. Her words were shocking. I understood them, but they still freaked me out. I leaned closer, hugging her. She let me. I couldn’t help but remember how goodhearted Violet had been—how Violet and Lilac had helped me and Lola escape when they were trying to get to the airport. But now…

Violet was thirsty for revenge, and that frightened me.

It was horrible that she’d lost her brother, especially to those cruel Cruentae psychos. But all that rage that Violet harbored—it couldn’t be a good thing in the long run, not for anyone.

Beyond concerned, I looked around and spotted Mrs. Smith. I gestured for her to come over. Maybe she’d be able to help bring Violet back from the darkness. As if the woman knew what we had been talking about, she instantly walked over to us. She sat on Violet’s other side.

“Hey,” she said softly, placing a comforting hand on Violet’s shoulder. “How about we get you something to eat?”

As Mrs. Smith spoke to Violet, I took the opportunity to slip away. I’d only made it a few feet before I ran smack into Gabriel.

*Ugh!* *Good job sneaking away undetected, Cali…*

“Hey,” Gabriel said cheerfully. He had a half-eaten hot dog in the one hand and a beer in the other. He looked like he was having a great time. “What’s up with you?”

“Nothing,” I said nervously, moving to walk away.

He blocked my way. “Well, the dogs are really good. Can I get you something?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Why are you being so friendly?”

He shrugged. “Just wondering if I could do anything for my friend’s girl. Nothing wrong with that.”

I paused, taking in his words as I processed the situation. “Aren’t you, like, a mercenary?”

He burst out laughing. What I’d said hadn’t even been that funny. But who knew what annoying werewolves found amusing these days?

“I prefer to be known as a Ninja Werewolf Assassin, but sure—I’m a gun for hire.” He leaned closer to me, winking. “Do you need someone erased?”

This dude was so happy with the idea of murder that I graduated from WORRIED to VERY VERY WORRIED. *Talk about enjoying his job!*

“Who could it be, who could it be?” Gabriel said, looking around. “Don’t tell me, I’ll guess.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s really not necessary—”

“It’s Joss, isn’t it?”

“Excuse me?”

Gabriel took a huge bite from his hot dog. “I mean, I’ve noticed that she’s been glaring at you a lot, so it would be normal for you to want to get rid of her.”

He chewed and stared at me expectedly, all excited. Seriously. SERIOUSLY.

“*No*,” I said adamantly. “I really, really don’t want you to kill anyone for me. Not even Joss. But thank you for the offer.”

“You’re welcome,” he said cordially. How nice. A totally normal friendly conversation.

“But I could use your help on another matter,” I said.

Gabriel’s eyes lit up. “Go on.”

I moved closer to him, looking around before I whispered, “I need to get out of here. Can you help me?”

**Episode 275**

“Get out of here, huh?” Gabriel got this twinkle in his eye. He glanced back at the house, waggling his eyebrows. “We could slip up to one of those rooms…”

I gasped. “What… You… EXCUSE ME?”

Gabriel laughed, throwing his head back. “Just testing you!”

“Hilarious,” I said blankly. “I’m taken, you know.”

“Chill, you are definitely not my type,” he said dryly. I had no interest in Gabriel, *obviously*, but still, his comment stung. What was it with werewolves and throwing punches at my self-esteem? Did they see mocking me as a hobby? Did *I* ever go around telling people that I wouldn’t sleep with them? No, I didn’t, because I had this thing called TACT!

All in all, approaching a loose gun like Gabriel had been a really bad idea.

“I’m done talking to you now,” I grumbled, ready to walk away.

He inserted himself in front of me, all smiles. “No, wait! I really was kidding. How about you explain what you mean by getting out here? Does Xavier know about it?”

I fidgeted. “Um…”

He raised an eyebrow. “Since you and Xavier are mates, aren’t you two supposed to, like, stay glued together at all times? Braid each other’s hair? Why are you running away from him?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not running away from Xavier. I would never do that.”

Gabriel took a sip of his beer. “Okay, cool, because I really don’t want to get caught between two mates. That’s really bad karma.”

*Right*, I thought. *Because all the murdering you’ve been doing would totally make for some* amazing *karma.*

“I just need to get away for a couple of days, but Greyson won’t let me,” I explained.

Gabriel looked over at Greyson, who was still sitting by the fire, looking frowny and stoic. “Sounds about right. I don’t know what to make of the guy. Heard he’s done some pretty bad shit.”

“Does that mean you won’t help me?” I asked impatiently. “Just because you’re scared of Greyson?”

Gabriel burst out laughing. “Seriously? You think that old psychological trick’s gonna work with me? I *invented* reverse psychology, girl.”

I crossed my arms. “What do you want me to say, then?”

“I don’t give a shit about Greyson, Cali, but I do care about Xavier,” Gabriel said, more serious now. “He’s saved my life on more than a few occasions.”

“That’s touching,” I said. “But will you help me or not?”

Before Gabriel could answer, Xavier walked up to us. “What’s going on with you two?”

Freaking out just a little, I stared at Gabriel. Was he going to tell on me?

Gabriel held up his beer, all casual. “I was just gonna tell Cali about that time in Cuba when we stumbled into a vampire den. What a fuckin’ riot.” He downed his beer as Xavier grinned.

“That was a close one,” he said. His expression was so at ease that I felt something tug in my chest.

“Too bad Cali wasn’t there—she could have sawed a few of them in half,” Gabriel said, winking again. What was it with all the winking? Also, did he really have to remind me of that horrific event? I was worried I’d have nightmares about it sooner than later.

But before I could say anything, Gabriel put his arm around me.

“She’s a good one, man,” he told Xavier. “I’d keep her.”

Xavier kept smiling. It was the only good thing about that moment. “I know,” he murmured.

“She’s much better than Ava, that’s for sure,” Gabriel noted.

Xavier’s smile vanished in an instant.

*Ava?* I thought. *Wrong thing to say…*

Thankfully, Xavier maintained his composure. It was a great thing to witness. Xavier had a lot of baggage, but I could work through that. We could work through that together, just like we’d work through his freaking former job and everything else. I kept telling myself that things were different when you were a werewolf. Different standards. Less empathy. More senseless violence.

Did I REALLY want to be a werewolf, though?

“Don’t you have anything else to do?” Xavier asked Gabriel, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Go bother Colton—I gotta talk with Cali.”

Gabriel nodded, letting me go. But as he walked away, he shot me a glance. “We’ll have to share more stories sometime soon.”

As I watched him saunter off, I wished I’d never asked him to help me. He felt like the type of person who’d hold this over me till the end of time. The moment he was gone, Xavier nudged me. “How you doing?”

I shrugged.

“Do you still feel the need to run off to Minnesota?” he asked, and I glowered.

“I’m not running off, Xavier, and you know that,” I said firmly. “I’m going to take care of things with the police and then come back. I made myself clear about that.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And so did Greyson.”

I huffed. “So you’re taking HIS side? A few days ago, you wanted to tear him apart, and now you’re all cool with him being Alpha? What happened to change your mind?”

Xavier shrugged, putting his hands in his pockets. “Nothing. But the fact is, he’s right. It’s not safe for you to leave the pack.”

What was it with werewolves? Why did everyone love telling me what to do?

It may not have worked on Gabriel, but reverse psychology definitely worked on me. If anyone told me I couldn’t do something, I’d burn this world and the next to get what I wanted. Simple as that.

“What if I was Jay, huh?” I demanded. “Or Colton—would you tell them they couldn’t leave?”

Xavier snorted. “Of course. They’re part of the pack. The same rules apply.”

I grabbed him by the neck of his T-shirt. “You’re lying to me right now, and you know it. This is about me being a fragile, weak, little human.”

“Cali—”

“Nope, I’ve heard enough!” I declared, and stormed off.

“Where are you going?” Xavier called after me.

“The bathroom! Or is the bathroom as dangerous as *Minnesota*?” I barked over my shoulder.

I kept walking away, Xavier grumbling behind me, and headed toward the house. I really had to pee, actually. All this conflict had affected my bladder. I used to pee every ten minutes during exams in high school. Having a nervous bladder was a real struggle.

The closest bathroom was in the downstairs bedroom, so that was where I was going to go, because life was short. Besides, if there was a chance I was going to become a werewolf, I’d have to start practicing marking my territory with urine. *Ha!* Joking aside, I wondered if they really did do that, just like wolves.

With these totally normal thoughts roaming around my head, I closed myself into the bathroom. I was about to unzip my pants and sit when I heard the bedroom door open, and someone walk inside.

“I can’t believe this!” a female voice said. I recognized it instantly.

*Joss!*

“Keep your voice down,” the male voice said, and that was—

*Greyson?*

Shit.

“And stop overreacting,” Greyson added.

*Oh, this is the wrong thing for me to hear,* I thought as I couldn’t help but inch closer to the door, straining to hear. I made sure to stay absolutely silent.

“Of course you’d call it overreacting,” Joss snapped. “You weren’t the one who was completely misled!”

She sounded upset. Greyson sounded… bored. “I haven’t misled you. You’re the one who misread the situation.”

“But we—”

“We hooked up in the past, Joss, yes. But I’ve repeatedly told you that it didn’t mean anything, but you chose to believe otherwise. You also chose to believe that what’s going on between us right now is more than it is, ignoring the way I see things—for a second time.”

Joss’s voice rose again. This time, it was in absolute fury. “You *chose* me, Greyson! I’m supposed to be your goddamn Luna.”

Greyson still sounded bored. “You are my Luna.”

“Then why the hell won’t you sleep with me?”

In an instant, Greyson’s tone shifted. It went cold as ice, sharp. “Because you’re not my mate.”

I held my breath. Hearing him say that, accept it, made the memory of the *due destini* fairytale pop up in my mind.

*What if…*

No. It couldn’t be. Maybe Greyson didn’t even have a mate—I had no idea how that worked, if every werewolf had to have a mate. But then I remembered overhearing Xavier talking to Colton outside Big Mac’s house. He’d said that Greyson thought *I* was his mate.

My pulse was racing, palms sweating. There was a small silence on the other side of the door, so heavy that I was dying to see both Greyson and Joss’s faces. Without thinking, unable to resist the temptation, I pushed the door open just slightly and peered out.

Joss was furious, her whole body trembling. Greyson remained stoic.

“If I’m not your mate,” Joss spat, “then who the hell is?”

**Episode 276**

My eyes were wide, bouncing between Joss and Greyson as she stared at him. She waited for an answer, and instead of giving her one, Greyson pinched the bridge of his nose and looked away.

This was definitely the wrong thing to do.

“You ASSHOLE!” Joss shouted, furious, and threw a whole glass of beer in his face.

*OH MY GOD!* I screamed inside my head. *DID SHE REALLY DO THAT?!*

“How can you expect me to be your Luna if you won’t even talk to me?” Joss yelled.

Greyson calmly wiped the beer foam from his face. “This isn’t about talking to you, Joss. This is about *fucking* you. I’m not sure why you’re so confused. Hooking up in the past doesn’t make us mates. Everybody knows that.”

Joss gaped at him. His tone was so indifferent that I actually felt bad for her. I couldn’t believe this was happening—both the fact that I was empathizing with Joss, and the fact that Greyson wasn’t sleeping with her. What was happening? What kind of diabolical plan did he have in the works?

“Maybe you shouldn’t have offered yourself up as a Luna during the ceremony if you couldn’t handle it,” Greyson continued, in that same cold tone.

Apparently, that brought Joss to the end of her rope.

Angry tears streamed down her cheeks. “Fuck you, Greyson,” she said, and stormed off, slamming the bedroom door behind her.

Well, then.

That went *swimmingly*.

I was also swimming in my thoughts, trying to figure Greyson out. Why hadn’t he given Joss an answer? Why hadn’t he told her who his mate was? Did he even have one? What was this all about? The suspense was killing me.

My heart was pounding so hard that I was worried Greyson would be able to hear it through the door. The room was so quiet now. He was being so quiet.

Gathering all my courage and holding my breath, I leaned forward to peer out through the tiny space between the bathroom door and the frame.

Greyson was getting undressed.

Of course he was.

*Don’t look at him, Cali!* I told myself. *Don’t do it, it’s wrong! THINK OF XAVIER!*

It felt like I couldn’t tear my gaze away, though. He was like a magnet, and I was helpless to resist his pull. He was standing so close to the door that I had to turn my hands into fists, digging my nails into my palms to resist the crazy urge to reach out and touch him. His body was so muscular, so flawlessly built… I could make out a few silvery scars on his arms and back—probably from past fights.

*Stop this, Cali!* I thought, scolding myself. *How would you feel if Xavier ogled another woman like this?*

That thought snapped me out of my trace. Resolved, I forced myself to look away. Something about this felt much more intimate than when all the werewolves stayed naked after shifting. It was just wrong, watching Greyson like that without his knowledge.

Of course, that didn’t change the fact that I was stuck in the bathroom with him in the bedroom. *Should I make a noise to let him know I’m here?* I wondered. *But then he’ll know I heard everything…*

The bathroom door swung open, interrupting my inner rambling.

*Shit.*

Greyson stared at me. He was naked, holding a towel. I resolutely did NOT look anywhere other than his face. My cheeks were on fire.

“Get out,” he told me, unflinching, like he couldn’t have been less surprised by my presence. “I need to take a shower.”

Had he known I was in here all along? Also, how dared he order me around? *Ugh!*

“I was just, I—” I was about to make an excuse to justify my presence, but then I thought better of it. “You know, it wasn’t my fault you and Joss barged in while I was in the bathroom. I have nothing to apologize for.”

Greyson raised his eyebrows at me. “I didn’t ask for an apology, just a shower, love.”

“I don’t understand you,” I said, through gritted teeth. He didn’t wait for me to step out of the bathroom. Instead, he decided it would be a great idea to walk in and brush against me as he passed by.

The jolt I felt down my spine the moment the back of his hand brushed my forearm made me choke down a whimper. Why had he gotten so close? Was he going to hug me again? The thought filled me with dread. “What the hell was with that hug?” I burst out, turning around on my heel. “Seriously, I kill someone and you *hug me*? Is that a wolf thing?”

He took another step closer to me, and I was forced to look at him.

*Just look at his face, Cali!* I ordered myself. *It’s fine, just look at his face!*

It wasn’t fine. He was standing so close, and he was staring at me like he was the Big Bad Wolf and I was Little Red Riding Hood. “You killed someone,” he said. His voice was quiet, low. It made me shiver. “I thought you’d need a hug.”

*Ha!* As if I’d believe he’d suddenly grown a conscience.

“I don’t buy it,” I declared. “Your whole family just makes up stuff depending on what story you’re trying to tell.”

The asshole chuckled. *Chuckled*, like I was so amusing instead of three seconds away from stabbing him in the eye with a toothbrush. I’d taken out an eyeball with less.

“What is it that you want to hear?” he asked. When he moved closer this time, I took a step back, away from him, but my back hit the wall. “That I hugged you because I wanted to kiss you?”

His husky voice was soft as he said the words. It was a sensuous whisper that had my whole body pounding with both lust and fury. Who the *fuck* did he think he was?

“Who the *fuck* do you think you are?” I said out loud. “What kind of game are you playing this time?”

“What if I’m not playing a game?” He eyed me up and down, his gaze scorching every inch of me. “What if I only hugged you because I wasn’t allowed to kiss you?” He moved *even closer*, lowering his face to mine, now staring at my lips. “What if I what I really wanted to do at that moment was grab you and kiss you breathless because you’d just saved my life?”

My heart was beating so fast that my ears were ringing.

Greyson’s proximity, his words, his scent… They were making my brain short-circuit.

“I don’t… You… Um? *What?*”

“You’re blushing.” His smile was beautiful. Dangerous. “Seeing you blush gives me ideas, you know…” He bit his lower lip as he murmured, “It makes me think that the hug wasn’t enough for you, either. Like you want something a little… *more*.”

I couldn’t believe this was happening. *Again*. It felt like I was in a trance, my body and mind on fire, stuck in this place where nothing mattered other than Greyson and the way he looked at me and the way he smelled and the way he made my knees weak. It wasn’t right. Something about this wasn’t right—it was dark and powerful, suffocating my free will.

It was like Greyson was my mate, and I couldn’t think long enough to answer him.

I simply couldn’t think long enough to say fucking *NO*.

“What’s going on with you and Xavier?” he asked huskily. “Are you two broken up?”

*XAVIER!* I screamed on the inside. *That’s right, XAVIER is the one I should be thinking about!*

Shaking my head, I broke our eye contact. Greyson’s gaze was too distracting, too charged. He was only wearing a towel so I couldn’t look at his body either, or the floor. Where the fuck could I look? I stared at the bed behind him, which only made things worse.

I wished I’d never chosen this damn bathroom.

But breaking eye contact had done the trick—I felt more in control, less drunk on this infuriating asshole. I reminded myself who he was, what he was good at, how he loved toying with people…

*I also still need to pee*, I thought to myself, and that did it.

“I was here first,” I declared, finally getting my words back. My voice was shaky, but at least I was speaking again. As long as I didn’t meet his eyes again, I’d be able to speak.

“You need to leave. Go take a shower somewhere else,” I continued, gesturing at the door.

Greyson snorted. “Do you really want me to leave, love?”

*Fuck*.

“*Yes!*” I snapped, fighting not to hyperventilate from all the tension. “Get out! I don’t need you or your perfect body staring at me while I pee!”

He paused.

“Fine,” he said, *finally.* Stepping out, he brushed past me once more, sending that same jolt through my body. At the same time, someone walked into the bedroom.

Xavier glared at Greyson, who was standing right next to me, naked except for the towel around his waist. And then Xavier’s dark eyes fell on me.

**Episode 277**

I jumped away from Greyson. “This is not what it looks like!” I told Xavier, shoving Greyson out of the bathroom and slamming the door shut.

*Oh my GOD!* I thought. *Did that really just happen?*

I locked the door for good measure. I felt like crying, or laughing. Like Chandler Bing would say, could this BE any worse? I couldn’t believe I’d really said ‘It’s not what it looks like.’ That was the worst excuse ever! But I hadn’t even done anything wrong, had I? I’d just been minding my own business when Greyson had walked in with Joss. And then, I’d been trying to pee and Greyson had gotten all up in my business! The way he could affect me was spooky, unsettling, but I’d fought it. I’d told him off, I’d moved past him. I’d tried really, really hard not to let this turn into a disaster…

And then Xavier had walked in.

Though, strangely, Xavier wasn’t banging on the bathroom door. I’d expected him to lose his shit at me, but all I could hear was him arguing with Greyson, their voices getting louder by the second. Not that I didn’t appreciate his newfound maturity when it came to our relationship, but he and Greyson were shouting now. So his growth definitely didn’t include his relationship with his half-brother. I was getting worried, even more so when I heard a scuffle, and then a crash.

*Shit.*

I unlocked the door, and was nearly hit by a flying chair that crashed into the doorway.

“STAY THE FUCK AWAY FROM CALIANA!” Xavier screamed.

He and Greyson were facing off, both clearly ready to kill.

Greyson laughed at Xavier, but before he could respond, Xavier lunged at him like a predator out for blood.

“No, stop it!” I yelled. My heart pounding, I watched as they wrestled, rolling around on the floor.

“Feeling insecure?” Greyson mocked, which made Xavier roar and flip them over, slamming Greyson onto the ground. This was ridiculous! Were they going to shift? Were two wolves about to tear each other to shreds because of me? UGH! I was going to get a water gun and hose these assholes down!

“I said *STOP IT!*” I screamed, hurling a cushion at them. “You’re behaving like children in a playground and I’VE HAD ENOUGH OF BOTH OF YOU!”

My shout, and my ferocious pillow attack, was enough to make them pause for a moment. Panting on the floor, still gripping each other’s necks, they looked up at me.

“I want you both to calm down and forget all this bullshit,” I said strictly. My voice was shaking but loud. Authoritative. “We need to stick together right now, be a team. We can’t afford any weakness with the Manus Cruentae out for blood.”

A moment passed where they stared at me, both wild-eyed, their mouths hanging open as they panted. Having the attention of both of them at once hit me like a truck. I struggled to stand straight, to make sure they realized I was being serious here.

And then the moment was over.

“KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF HER*!*” Xavier snarled, shifting into his massive wolf form. He slammed onto Greyson, who’d also shifted, so that was just GREAT. FUCKING *MARVELOUS!*

I yelped, pulling back as these two absolute beasts started fighting like they wanted nothing more than to end each other’s lives.

“OH MY GOD!” I screamed. “FUCKING STOP IT!”

I was ignored.

They wrestled and bit and snapped at each other, trashing the entire bedroom before they crashed through the door and spilled into the hallway. I ran after them, my whole body fueled by adrenaline and concern and vague terror.

*What the hell are they going to do to each other?* I thought to myself, panicked.

I had to figure out a way to stop them.

“Hey, what’s up?” Colton said, popping up in front of me. He blocked my way as I ran toward Xavier and Greyson, who were now tumbling through the living room. The sounds they were making were straight out of a nightmare—otherworldly, and very far from human.

“COLTON!” I shouted. “DO SOMETHING!”

Colton took a bite from his hot dog, glancing over at the two massive wolves. His eyebrows shot up. “Oh. I thought I heard a noise.”

*BAM!*

I squealed, jumping back. I realized that Greyson and Xavier had smashed through the recently repaired glass door. Oh my god, HOW MANY TIMES WOULD POOR PHIL HAVE TO REPAIR THAT DOOR?

“WAIT!” I bellowed as they rolled onto the front porch. “COME BACK HERE! STOP ROLLING AWAY FROM ME, GODDAMN IT!”

In the meantime, the entire pack had followed them outside into the yard. While I was freaking out, they were watching curiously, split between amusement and interest.

“I’m taking bets!” Gabriel exclaimed, looking around. “Gather round, everyone! Who do you think is gonna win? Xavier or Greyson?”

I was stunned silent by his cheerfulness.

“Oh my god, Cali!” Lola came up to me and squeezed my arm. “What’s going on? What happened?”

I was shaken out of my stupor. “No time to explain! We need to separate them!”

Lola stopped me. “No! Don’t get between them when they’re like that, you might get hurt!”

“I’d try to stop them, but Xavier would never forgive me,” Jay told me. “When he starts a fight, he likes to finish it.”

I realized that both Lola and Jay were right. I looked at Gabriel, who was still taking bets. “Are you INSANE?” I yelled at him. “Can’t someone stop them before they kill each other?”

“Don’t hate the player, Cali,” Gabriel said, taking Maya’s money. “Hate the game.”

Horrified, I stared at Maya. She shrugged. Mrs. Smith was sitting on the porch, plucking her eyebrows. *MRS. SMITH, I THOUGHT YOU WERE THE ONLY NORMAL ONE HERE!*

“Have you all lost your minds?” I shouted. “COLTON!”

He choked on the last bite of his hot dog. “What did *I* do?”

I grabbed him by the T-shirt. “Stop them!” I demanded. “They’re your brothers, why won’t you do something?”

“And get caught in between two werewolves trying to rip each other in half?” He snorted. “Uh, no thanks.” He turned to Gabriel. “But I’ll put fifty on Xavier.”

Gabriel winked at me.

“UNBELIEVABLE!” I smacked Colton upside his thick head. “You coward!”

“*Ouch!*” He cradled the back of his head, all hurt and puppy-like. “What did you do that for? They’ll be fine.” He gestured at his snarling brothers. Greyson had Xavier pinned on the ground, his teeth snapping, about to sink into Xavier’s neck before Xavier raked his cheek with his claws.

“This is no big deal, I swear,” Colton told me reassuringly.

My racing pulse was telling another story, though. What if one of them killed the other? What if Greyson won and killed Xavier? Or what would happen to Xavier if he killed the Alpha of the pack? Would they turn on him? I had so many questions and so few answers. But one fact remained: they were fighting over me.

*ME*.

This was about me, so I had to stop this.

*STOP. THIS.*

There was no other way.

“Every single one of you is *useless!*” I hissed. Producing a sound that resembled a growl, my fists clenched to my sides, I marched toward the snarling mass of fur. But then Colton gripped my arm.

“Stop fussing over them,” he told me. For once, he sounded serious. “You can’t get involved—you’re only going to make it worse, and you’ll probably get hurt.”

“*I don’t care*,” I said through gritted teeth, pulling away from his grip. “They need to be stopped, and if none of the pack will do it, then I’ll have to! This stops NOW!”

I pushed past Colton, just as Xavier slammed Greyson down on the ground. The impact of the crash, the sound of it, rattled me to the core. My bones ached, just seeing such a monstrous display of strength. But I didn’t stop moving toward them, shaking with frustration and fury and fear, all at once. I gasped when I saw Xavier reaching for Greyson’s throat, his claws ready to sink in, when…

When everything turned into slow motion around me.

My voice rose from the depths of my being and up to the surface, traveling through me with a menace that rivaled their own as I screamed.

“*STOP!”*

With force I hadn’t known I possessed, with power I hadn’t known I could produce, I put my hands on both of them—fur under my palms, two beasts ready to devour each other—and the moment all three of us were connected by my touch...

Everything *did* stop.

Temporarily.

Shock and adrenaline ran through me as my feet were lifted off the ground. I was blinded by a violent flash of light, and wind rose around the three of us. There was a palpable clash of energy that immediately turned into an explosion.

*BANG!*

We were thrown apart, my body flying backward before I crashed to the ground. The bangechoed in my ears, slowly fading. Energy lingered all over me. Disoriented, dizzy, I found myself panting, looking up at the sky, suddenly exhausted. My cheeks were wet, and my whole body ached like a giant bruise. But Greyson and Xavier…

Greyson and Xavier had finally, *finally*, fucking *stopped*.

There was absolute silence all around me.

Not a single sound other than the ringing of my ears.

Finally, Maya broke the silence. “How the *hell* did you do that, human?”

**Episode 278**

The world was still spinning around me.

I tried to sit up but then thought better of it, falling right back down.

“*Ugh*,” I groaned, just as Maya and Lola ran to me. Their eyes were wide.

“How’d you do that?” Maya demanded again.

I was just as confused as she was. “I… I didn’t do anything,” I said, my voice trembling. I eyed Xavier and Greyson as they shifted back to human, still lying on the ground. They were both alive. The horrible immature jerks were fucking *alive*.

“Cali,” Lola said, helping me sit up. She rubbed my arm, her face full of worry. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’m bruised all over,” I said honestly.

“We all saw what happened,” Colton told me seriously. “You broke them up somehow. It was a whole thing—wind and light and shit.”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t understand what was happening.

“*I* broke them up?” I asked, looking around to make sure there was no new supernatural creature around to blame for this. “That was me?” My voice was small. “It couldn’t be…”

“It’s like that Phil guy all over again!” Gabriel sauntered over to Xavier, all excited. He was clearly loving this, the maniac. “Have you all lost your memories now?” He lowered his face to Xavier’s eye level. “Dude, do you know who I am? I’m the hot one.”

Xavier glared up at him, looking exhausted. “Fuck. *Off*.”

“Xavier’s fine, everyone!” Gabriel confirmed.

Xavier walked over to me, bending down to meet my gaze. He was muddy, dusty all over. His voice sounded scratchy but tender. “Are you okay, Caliana?”

I forced myself to nod, dazed. I made a move to stand, but didn’t have the strength. Xavier sat down next to me, his touch careful as he checked me for injuries.

“That’s it, everyone,” Greyson said gruffly, getting to his feet. He eyed me from a few feet away, his silver gaze severe. “Show’s over, for now.” He turned to Xavier, and his tone shifted to something mocking. “Just a bit of brotherly bonding.”

A low growl rumbled up Xavier’s throat, and I finally noticed the massive gaping wound on Greyson’s arm, red and dripping. Gasping, I turned to Xavier and saw that he was also wounded. There was a massive, bloody slash across his stomach.

I knew they would heal, but I felt sick.

“Why’d you do it?” I asked, trembling as I looked up at him. “Why did you have to attack him?”

Xavier didn’t answer. Silently, he scooped me up in his arms bridal style and carried me inside. I held onto him. The contact felt good after what had happened, but plenty of other emotions had invaded my brain and heart. I was still shaking with adrenaline, too.

“Xavier—”

“Not here,” he interrupted. “Not in front of everyone.”

For once, I let it go. I was so spooked by everything that even my stubbornness had died down. I caressed Xavier’s face as he started up the stairs. He stumbled against the banister a second later, sending a jolt through me. He wasn’t fully healed, but he still wanted to carry me.

*Cue the waterworks*, I thought, sniffling.

“No, it’s okay,” I said. “You’re not healed yet, put me down.”

My mate shocked me by agreeing. That could only mean that he *really* wasn’t feeling well, which made me worry for him even more. We leaned against each another as we climbed the stairs to our bedroom.

He nearly collapsed onto the bed when we walked in. I was so concerned for him—there were wounds all over his naked body. I had to help him.

“I’m getting some bandages and alcohol,” I said quietly.

“No,” he said. I froze. “I don’t need that, I’ll heal. I just need you to come sit here next to me.”

I was touched, I truly was, but this was getting more outrageous by the second. I took a seat on the bed. “We need to talk, then,” I said.

He looked at the ceiling. Not a good start.

“Xavier, look at me,” I said. I was still so riled up by everything that it was hard to control my feelings.

He shot me a look. “Why was he naked in a room with you?”

I felt gut-punched. “Do you really think there was something going on? All I’ve been trying to do is to fix us, to make everything right between us.”

Xavier just stared at me. His gaze was like steel. “I saw what I saw.”

I suddenly felt equal parts exhausted and frustrated. I’d fought so hard against the way Greyson had affected me, and I’d come on top until Xavier had walked in. I didn’t know what the fuck was going on between me and Greyson—why he could affect me like that when I was mated to Xavier, and if the due destini werewolf bullshit was to blame. But the truth was that I HAD battled the haziness, and my attraction to Greyson. I HAD told him to stay away.

I’d done everything in my power to stay faithful to Xavier.

“You saw what you wanted to see,” I said firmly.

He sat up, his eyes narrowing. “Well, I don’t fucking want to see that ever again.”

“When are you going to trust me again?” I asked. “What do I have to do to prove myself? Because I think I already have. But you’re too consumed by your anger at Greyson to admit it, and I’m just stuck between the two of you like—”

“He thinks he’s your mate.”

Xavier’s words left me reeling.

*Get a fucking grip, Cali!*

Shaking my head, I composed myself. “So what? You clearly know I’m *your* mate. We’ve been having sex and cuddling and whatever the hell, but we haven’t even re-defined this relationship, and yet you’re still allowed to get mad at me, get all possessive?” I realized that I sounded more desperate than angry. “Is that how you’re supposed to act with your mate, Xavier? Because I’m trying here and this doesn’t feel fucking fair.”

He fell silent.

“And to be honest with you,” I went on, “I’m freaking out after what just happened.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Because Greyson and I had a little fight?”

LITTLE, he said. *LITTLE!*

I reined in my irritation at that gross understatement. “No, but because of what happened when I touched you both. What it felt like.” Now I *did* start to panic, the events of the day finally crashing down on me. “Something or someone blew us apart out there, and I don’t understand it. How can I NOT freak out, Xavier?”

He stared at me for a moment before he reached out and caressed my face with the back of his hand. His skin was rough, but it still felt so good against mine. “I know. I don’t know what to make of what happened either. We were literally blown apart.”

He kept caressing my cheek, then moved his hand to my shoulder, my neck. His hand made me feel warm all over, a comfort like no other. This wasn’t just a beautiful man touching me. This was my *mate*, and when he was close to me like this, it felt like everything was good in the world. It felt like I could be honest with him.

“I hate this, Xavier,” I muttered. “I can’t even begin to process this nonchalant relationship all of you have with violence. Nobody wanted to help me stop you two from fighting.”

He gave me a soft smile. “So you decided to do it yourself. That’s so like you.”

“But I don’t *feel* like myself,” I said in a small voice. “You looked like you were going to kill each other. Do you have any idea how scary that was?”

He took my hand and brought it up to his lips. He kissed my knuckles, trying to comfort. The intimacy was dizzying. “I feel a little off, too,” he admitted. “The last few days have been crazy and intense. Losing the Finale, finding out you kissed Greyson… It’s a lot.”

A lump grew in my throat. I couldn’t stop myself from telling him the truth, yet again.

“I don’t know why I kissed him,” I whispered. “I don’t know why I have such strong emotions around Greyson, sometimes. I don’t know if he’s got some sort of Alpha hypnotism going on or if it’s just plain old manipulation, but I do know that I walked out of that bathroom with nothing having happened between us. Nothing will *ever* happen, because I love you. But this whole thing between me and Greyson is confusing and weird, and it shouldn’t even exist. I’m *your* mate, Xavier, not his.” I paused. Stared at him. “Right?”

He looked away, rubbing his face. His silence was killing me.

“Xavier?” I asked.

He faced me. This time, when he met my gaze, his expression was serious. “When I was a kid, we were taught that there’s a lot of magic around mates. Really powerful magic. Unbreakable.” He paused, and I held my breath. “There’s this thing called a ‘*due destini*,’ Cali... And I think that’s what you are.”

**Episode 279**

“*Due destini*?” I asked, my voice a stunned whisper.

“Have you ever heard of that?” Xavier’s eyes were boring into mine.

“Why would you think that’s what I am?” I asked, without answering his question.

He shook his head, his eyes still on me. “I just can’t come up with any other explanation for all the weird shit that’s been happening.” His eyes darkened. “*Have* you heard of it?”

My heart was beating hard, but I tried to keep my tone casual. “Lola mentioned it to me once. She said it was a fairytale.”

“Yeah,” he grunted, “I used to think so, too. But look around—every myth comes from something real. The stories get twisted as they’re retold, but they all have a basis in reality.” He couldn’t seem to take his eyes off me, like he was seeing me for the first time. “What if *due destini* is real?”  
 I didn’t answer. I didn’t *want* to answer. It had struck a weird chord when Lola had told me about *due destini* the first time—like she’d been telling me something I already knew but had forgotten. Now, sitting with Xavier, I didn’t *want* it to be true. But…

If *due destini* WAS in play, that would explain everything that had happened between Greyson and me. I chewed the corner of my lip as I thought. Or was I just searching for an explanation, when really it was nothing more than Greyson messing with me to piss off Xavier?

Before I could come up with an answer, Xavier winced as he repositioned himself on the bed, and I turned my attention back to him.

“Are you okay?” I asked quickly.

“Fine. It’s healing.” He shook his head. “It’s probably complicated because you’re not a werewolf. Who even knows if *due destini* applies to humans?”

God, I hoped it didn’t.

I helped him settle himself back on the bed. He didn’t need my help, not really, though his teeth were gritted with pain. I reached toward him to wipe a smear of mud from his face. “But we’re mates, right?”

“We’re mates,” he said, a smile playing around the corners of his lips. But then, as I watched, his expression darkened again.

“What is it?” I asked, worry edging my voice.

He didn’t answer for a moment. “Ava was my mate, too.”

I looked at him, surprised. He never spoke about Ava.

He shook his head. “Maybe I— I don’t know, maybe I messed something up when I killed her. Maybe *I’m* the *due destini*’s target, and that’s why you and I are mates?” He looked around, angry, and scrubbed a hand through his hair, shaking his head. “Or maybe this is all bullshit. I don’t know.”

He sounded so frustrated and lost that I reached for him. He hissed with pain and I gentled my hold, then snuggled next to him on the bed. “Here’s what I do know,” I said, getting comfortable. “We’re mates, and we’ll stick together. No matter what. Agreed?”

Xavier turned to look at me. “Agreed,” he said after a moment. He leaned forward, brushing his lips over mine. When I responded, he deepened the kiss, slipping a hand around the back of my neck. He slipped his tongue along mine, and I felt the thrum of desire deep in my body. He pulled back and looked at me, his eyes twinkling with amusement, probably at the lust-filled look I was giving him. “Look at me, talking about fairytales. I hope I didn’t freak you out.”

I shook my head. “Not at all,” I lied.

He took a deep breath and squeezed the back of my neck. “I’m feeling a lot better. Maybe we should head down to the barbecue.”

Xavier did look better, but he was still moving slowly, so I helped him pull on a clean black T-shirt and pair of dark blue jeans.

“What the hell is going to happen with you and Greyson?” I asked, staring at the bloodstained shirt and shredded jeans he’d just pulled off. “You can’t go on like this.”  
 Xavier shrugged as he buckled his belt, looking unconcerned. “We’ll work it out.”

I gave him a hard look. “Will you? You’re not still angry?”

He gave me a dismissive glance as he headed toward the door. “Of course I’m still angry. I’m always going to be angry when it comes to Greyson. Things are complicated with him.” He held the door open and waited for me to walk through.

“Well, could you just *try* to control it?” I asked as we headed down the stairs.

“Hang on.” Xavier reached for me, grabbing my wrist to stop me at the bottom of the stairs. “There is one thing that’s bothering me.”

*What now*? I wondered, my brain immediately spinning out all the worst-case possibilities. “What?” I asked, swallowing hard.

“When Greyson and I were fighting, I had him. I could have taken care of him for good. Everyone saw that. Even you must have seen it.” His eyes narrowed. “But then you stopped me. With magic, or whatever. Why’d you do it?”

I shifted, uncomfortable. “Are you really asking me why I broke up a possibly lethal fight?” I asked. I was getting pretty good at dodging his questions.

Xavier wasn’t fooled. “Why’d you protect Greyson?” he demanded.

*Shit*. I opened my mouth, praying that the right words would just start falling out. “That’s not what I did, Xavier. I had to do *something*… I– I’m tired of being in between your problems with each other. You *know* that I’m yours…” I shrugged, sweating now. “And I was worried that if you killed Greyson, the rest of the pack and the Rogues would turn on you.”

There was a long beat of silence.

When he spoke, Xavier’s voice was chilly. “I hope that’s the *real* reason you stopped me from killing him, Caliana.”

I flinched, like he’d slapped me. “What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?”  
 Xavier didn’t answer. He just grabbed my hand and turned toward the doors leading outside. “I’m hungry. Let’s get something to eat.”

I shook my head at his idiocy but let him pull me outside. I let go of his hand as we reached the porch. Xavier didn’t seem to notice, and headed right for the fire pit where meat was roasting.

The pack and the remaining Rogues were gathered around the fire. Everyone had a plate in their hands, and a beer. People were talking and laughing. It was so... *normal*. Like any other backyard barbecue I’d ever been to, werewolf and otherwise. But this *wasn’t* normal.

But if there was one thing I’d learned since entering the strange and terrifying werewolf world, it was that there *was* no normal. Not anymore.

Especially now.

It wasn’t so long ago that my life had been very much normal. College, classes, papers, calls home to check on my mom. Wondering what to do about Alex, and trying to figure out how to pay rent. Just regular things. And now… Now, I had such different thoughts swirling through my mind. *Due destini*, the nature of true mates, magic… and a police investigation.

My stomach dropped at the thought. No one here seemed very worried about the investigation, but I was. Even if the police couldn’t hurt us, something told me they could make life very difficult for the whole pack. But I couldn’t get anyone to see that. Sometimes it felt like I was speaking a different language around here.

I looked over at Greyson, who was standing near the fire, talking to Rishika. He leaned close to her and said something that made her toss back her head and laugh. I watched as Greyson smiled and took a long pull of his beer, like he was at a Sunday picnic. Like we hadn’t just gone through a brutal battle. Like the dark spot in the dirt a few yards away *wasn’t* a puddle of blood.

The thought of it made my knees weak, and I reached out to grip the wooden railing of the porch for support. I needed to be more like them. Not so weak. God knew, I’d tried. But there was something more to it now. It just felt… harder.

Maybe it was the investigation. That was probably what was making me feel so troubled. Even more so because I was the *only* *one* taking it seriously. Why couldn’t the others see how bad this could be? The knowledge that I had to do something about it dogged my steps.

I couldn’t let anything happen to Xavier. If I could do something to protect Xavier—to protect everyone here who was just *living their life*—I had to.

I scanned the crowd. Everyone was relaxed and talking. No one was paying a scrap of attention to me. Determined, I spun on my heel and headed back into the house to start packing.

I wasn’t going to find a better moment to make my getaway.

**Episode 280**

Jeans, hoodies, pajamas, socks, and underwear flew across the room and into my backpack. I dashed around our room, scooping all my toiletries into my bag with one big arm-sweep. Then I dug through my purse for a pen and a scrap of paper.

*I have to do this to protect all of you. Please don’t follow. I’ll be back soon.*

*I hope you understand.*

*I love you,*

*Caliana*

I folded the paper and placed it on Xavier’s pillow, resting my hand on it for a moment, imaging I could still feel his warmth. Then I shouldered my backpack and headed back downstairs. I could hear the sounds of the barbecue through the back doors. My eyes scanned the door’s broken frame. The wood was splintered and jagged in its broken places. It was going to be a hell of a job for Phil. I just hoped he’d be able to do it without getting into trouble with the pack. I wasn’t going to be around to protect him a second time.

I could see Xavier through the glass. He was leaning against the porch steps, talking to Colton, a bottle of beer held lightly by the tips of his fingers. I gazed at him for a moment, surprised—as I somehow always managed to be—by his beauty. I felt a stab of guilt, and I hoped to god he’d understand why I was doing this. I hoped he wouldn’t be angry. Well, who was I kidding? Xavier was going to be PISSED.

But even if he was, I knew I *had* to do this.

Turning away from the back door, I walked to the side door and slipped out, shutting it quietly behind me.

Outside, I stopped and looked around. That was when it hit me. I had hurriedly booked the flight to Minnesota on my phone, but I realized now that I’d skipped a step: how the hell was I going to get to the damn airport? I looked around and saw nothing but pine trees and empty road in every direction. Shit. What had I been thinking? It wasn’t like I could walk to Minnesota from here.

I huffed a sigh, frustrated at myself. I could call an Uber, but after what almost happened to Phil, that seemed like a bad idea. What if Xavier saw me leaving and came after me? What if he attacked the driver? I’d spent a lot of time working for my perfect Uber rating. I was prouder of those five stars than I was of my GPA, and I wasn’t about to risk them.

Think of the comments. *Quiet and tips well, but boyfriend is a murderous werewolf. Heads up.*

No, I needed to get away on my own, which unfortunately meant I was going to have to borrow one of the pack vehicles. I narrowed my eyes and looked around, considering my options.

They were not great.

Xavier’s car would have been my best bet… if I had thought of this scenario earlier and remembered to grab his key. Going back inside now would be too risky. *Genius, Cali.* Jay’s car, even if I’d had the key, was completely demolished: the wheels had been removed and it was now resting on cinderblocks.OrI could have my pick of the pack of rusted bicycles at the side of the house. The only other option was the one that made my stomach drop like I’d just missed a stair: a motorcycle.

Desperately, I turned back to the bicycles. Maybe I could make one of them work. But the airport was too far away—I’d never make it in time.

I took a deep breath and strode toward the motorcycle. It was really the only option. I’d never driven one—I’d never even been *on* one—but how hard could it be? I could ride a bike. It had to be just like that. But with a motor.

I put my hands on the handlebars and gave the bike a heave. It nearly gave me one back. I gasped and struggled, trying not to let the bike fall on top of me as I tried to push it to the end of the driveway. At least, I was *hoping* I’d make it that far. If I started the bike here, I risked drawing the attention of someone—or everyone—at the party, but I was already straining under the weight of the damn thing. I was in the midst of second-guessing every decision that had led me to this moment, when suddenly, the motorcycle got lighter. I was pushing it! Was I getting stronger? Had I just been bitten by a radioactive spider or something?

I looked around and there was Gabriel, pushing the back of the motorcycle, grinning his daredevil grin at me.

“Oh!” I said, letting go of the bike and backing away, so quickly I nearly tripped over my own feet.

“You know,” Gabriel said, arching his eyebrows, “if you want to steal my bike, you’re probably going to need these.” He held up a small ring of keys.

I stared at him. “I didn’t know it needed keys,” I said, watching the keys swing before my eyes like a hypnotist’s watch.

His grin turned into a smirk. “How did you think it started?”

“I just thought you kind of—you know…” I gestured vaguely. “Kicked the kickstarter?”

Gabriel tossed back his head and laughed. At me.

My ‘plan’ was headed south. Fast. “Are you going to turn me in?” I asked, annoyed.

Gabriel stopped laughing. “I should cuff you first. You might be dangerous.”

I scowled. Was this guy *ever* serious? About anything? This was not a moment for jokes. My heart was pounding through my chest and he was still chuckling.

“You getting out of here now?” Gabriel asked, still smiling. He winked. “Why are you sneaking off, anyway? And where to? Secret rendezvous?”

“What does it matter to you?” I asked. “You weren’t going to help me anyway.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” he said with a shrug. “Why such the rush?”

Honestly, I hadn’t intended to tell Gabriel a damn thing, wanting to leave, but maybe the stress was too much because it just came spilling out. “What choice do I have?” I asked, exasperated. “You saw them back there, Xavier and Greyson. Those idiots nearly killed each other, and it’s all because of me!”

“You were already going to leave before that even happened.” Gabriel looked at me, scanning me from head to toe. “I gotta say, I’m pretty impressed a human can cause so much drama.”

“Not funny,” I ground out, hefting my backpack strap higher on my shoulder. “I’m going back to Minnesota. The police have been asking questions about the death of some douchebag, and I think it would just be better if I went back and took care of it in person.”

Gabriel raised his eyebrows. “Murder, huh?”

“It looks like a wolf attack, but the cops say there are suspicious circumstances,” I said flatly, feeling my dread spike.

Gabriel blew out a low whistle. “Okay. So, say you go home and succeed in making the police believe that there’s a mad wolf roaming the hills of Minnesota, tearing humans to shreds.” He smiled as I flinched. “Then what?”

“Then I come back,” I said shortly. Gabriel raised an eyebrow at me, and even though I knew it was none of his business, I felt this wild desire to defend myself to this crazy man. “I *will* come back. Hopefully by then Xavier will have calmed down, and things can just go back to the way they were.”

Gabriel looked at me for a moment more, then turned his gaze into the trees that surrounded the house. He watched a bird take off from a high branch in a nearby pine tree before he spoke. “It’s an interesting plan.” He tilted his head. “*If* you’re telling the truth.”

“Of course I’m telling the truth,” I snapped. “What could I possibly gain by lying to you? Besides, *I’m* not the one with honesty issues around here.”

Gabriel laughed. “Is that directed at me, Cali? You barely know me. I’m deeply hurt.”

“I seriously doubt that. And I’m talking about all of you,” I said, gesturing to the world at large. I glowered toward the back of the house—specifically in Xavier’s direction. I didn’t know if Gabriel knew who that comment was aimed at, but he laughed.

I huffed out an irritated sigh and pulled my phone out of my pocket to check the time. “Okay,” I said briskly, turning to him. “If I don’t leave right now, I’m going to miss my flight. Are you going to help me or not?”

There was a quick battle in Gabriel’s eyes. Moments later, he grinned at me. “Xavier is going to fucking kill me.” He popped a shining black motorbike helmet onto my head and swung his leg over the bike. “Hop on,” he called over his shoulder.

I didn’t need to be told twice. I hopped on behind Gabriel and put a hand on either side of his waist.

He laughed. “You’re going to have to hold on a hell of a lot tighter than that,” he said. Grabbing my hands, he wrapped my arms around his waist so I was hugging him tight from behind. “Hang on,” he said. With a squeal of tires and a shower of gravel, he peeled out of the drive.

**Episode 281**

XAVIER

“I don’t know, man,” Colton was saying, flipping a bottle cap mindlessly between his fingers. “You know how it is with Maya and me. I mean, don’t get me wrong, she’s still a fucking piece of work and we’re not getting through our trust issues anytime soon, but I guess we’re somewhat cordial now.”

“Right. Great,” I said, nodding absently.

“Are you even fucking listening to me?” Colton snapped.

“What?” I asked. “Yeah, I’m listening. What’s up?”

Colton rolled his eyes. “Give me a fucking break.”

“I’m just watching for Cali. I’m listening,” I insisted. “You’re talking about Maya. So, does that mean you’re going to accept her as your mate? It would be a fucking relief for the rest of us not to have to listen to you two fight constantly.”

Colton grinned. “I kind of like the fighting.” He grinned wider when I shook my head in disgust. “I think Maya likes it, too. It’s the one thing we have in common.”

“You’re a mess, you know that?” I asked, laughing.

“Maybe,” Colton said, laughing too. Then he sobered and his eyes darkened. “What do you think?”

“About Maya?” I asked.

Colton nodded. “Do you think it’s a good idea?”  
 I was about to give a sarcastic answer, but then I stopped myself and really tried to think about it. Colton with a mate? Someone he was loyal to?

“I’m pretty sure,” I said slowly, “that it’s important to understand what it really means to have a mate. To have someone you share that connection with.”

I stopped, thinking about Cali. The moment Colton had brought her into our house, I’d been frozen. How she’d stood there, eyes wide, gripping her backpack. I hadn’t known it then, but my whole world had shifted that day. “Your mate is your whole world,” I said, my voice thick. “You think about that person all the time. You care about what happens to her, even when you’re so fucking mad at her.”

Colton raised his eyebrows. He fidgeted, suddenly looking uncomfortable.

“What?” I demanded. “You clearly have something to say, so say it.”

“It’s just… Well, you had that connection with Ava too, didn’t you?” Colton said hesitantly. “And that didn’t exactly work out, did it? *Bitch*.”

I glared at him. “That was different, Colton, and you know it.”

“Different from what?” Colton pressed. “Different from Cali?”

“What does that mean?”

Colton shrugged. “You two seem to be so hot and cold. Especially since that thing between her and…” He trailed off, but tipped his chin in Greyson’s direction. “Big bro over there.”

Anger rose high in my throat, but I wasn’t going to talk about this. Not now, and not with Colton. “It’s complicated,” I snapped, and turned away from my brother. Fuck if I was going to let Greyson get under my skin more than he already was. “Where the hell *is* Cali?” I asked, looking around the party again. “I know she came down earlier.”

Colton took a long drink of his beer and shrugged. “Maybe she went back inside. She’s probably waiting for you upstairs so you two can bone. Isn’t that how you work out your problems?”

Quick as lightning, I smacked the back of Colton’s head, hard enough that he stumbled forward and choked on his beer. “You’re a fucking asshole. You know that, right?”

Colton shrugged, laughing as he wiped spilled beer from his chin. “Oh, yeah. I know it.”

“Why don’t you go find Maya so you two can fight. That’s what *you* do, right?” I turned away from Colton and scanned the party. Greyson was near the fire, standing with Rishika. He was laughing, but his eyes went cold when he saw me watching him.

“Excuse me,” I heard him say to Rishika, then he strolled over to me, a smug smile on his face. “Xavier. Glad to see our little squabble didn’t push you and Colton into going Rogue.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” I said. I was pissed as hell, but I kept my voice light. “This pack’s got a little problem, doesn’t it? I don’t turn my back when things get tough, but, once this Manus Cruentae problem is resolved, you and the rest of the Redwood pack might be just a distant memory to me.”

There was a flash of something dark and vengeful in Greyson’s eyes, but it cleared in an instant and when he shrugged, he was as casual as one might be when discussing the weather. “I guess we’ll just have to see how that plays out.”

If anyone was watching us talk, they might not have been able to see the undercurrents of bad blood running between us, but I could feel the tension in the air. So could Greyson. I could see it in his eyes. I knew the pack needed me, and I doubted very much that Greyson would let me go Rogue without some kind of confrontation.

After all, this was a man who’d learned every lesson our father, Silas, had ever taught his sons. This was a man I’d seen slaughter and torture and terrify—I’d seen him kill members of his own pack. I knew the things Greyson had done, and I knew the look on his face when he’d done it.

I didn’t understand Greyson, but I didn’t need to. He’d done enough damage since returning—kissing Cali being at the top of my list. I knew enough about Greyson not to trust him.

And I would never trust him.

Ever.

“Well, I’m not here to discuss the future, man,” I said, “I’m here to talk about the present. You want to tell me what the fuck’s going on with Cali?”  
 Greyson rolled his eyes. “Really?” he asked with a sigh.

“I heard that you called Cali your mate. From those wolves you sent to ‘protect’ her. That true?” I was working hard to keep my voice even, even as rage bubbled just below the surface.

Greyson smiled his cocky smile and shrugged. “You know, I say a lot of things. Some of them are true, some of them aren’t.”

“What does that mean?”

“Sometimes I say things that might be misleading. Sometimes intentionally so.”

I was getting sick of his fucking games I was going to throw him across the yard. “Why don’t you just answer the damn question, man? It’s a simple yes or no.”

Greyson and I had drawn closer to each other, our chests pushed out, our body language dangerously aggressive.

He looked down, then back into my eyes. “We going to fight again?”

“Be a shame to do that,” I said, not meaning it, “but I will if I have to. Why don’t you just admit it—you called Cali your mate just to get an edge over me at the Lupo Finale, because you knew you couldn’t win on your own. You got in her head to take it out on me.”

Greyson cracked a hard smile. “Well, if I did, then I’m a fucking genius, because it worked. If you’ll recall, I kicked your ass.”

My hands curled into fists. “You can shoot me that shit-eating grin all you want, man, but I’m going to figure out the truth.”

Greyson looked at me for a long moment, then he shook his head, his eyes hard. “You know, I used to believe that you’d make a great Alpha one day—but I don’t believe it anymore. You’re too wrapped up in all your personal shit.” He stepped back and threw his arms wide. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’ve got things going on right now that are bigger than your little soap opera.”

I shook my head. “Fuck this,” I said dismissively and turned away, setting off to find Cali.

Then his voice came again. “It kills you not knowing whether she kissed me because she wanted to, doesn’t it?”

I spun around, ready to shove Greyson into the fire pit and watch the flesh melt from his bones, but I stopped myself. I breathed hard, out my nose, and shook my head. *Fuck this guy*.

Greyson raised a mocking eyebrow at me. “Control? From Xavier Evers? Never thought I’d see the day.”

I turned back around before I did something I’d probably regret.

God, where the fuck was Cali? I pushed through the pack, looking around. She wasn’t near the fire or on the porch. I asked a few people if they’d seen her, but everyone shook their heads.

I checked the bathrooms downstairs, then, starting to get really worried, took the stairs two at a time.

“Cali!” I called, pushing open the door to our room. But it was empty. I was about to turn back and keep looking when something caught my eye. I strode over and snatched up the scrap of paper lying on my pillow, my heart rate ticking up as I read.

“Fucking shit, Cali,” I muttered, crushing it in my fist before racing back downstairs.

“Whoa,” Colton huffed as I slammed into him at the bottom of the stairs. He stumbled back a few steps, nearly losing his balance, then he glared at me. “Where’s the fucking fire, man?”

I shoved the crumpled note beneath his nose and watched his eyes grow wide as he opened and read it. “What the hell is she doing? Does she have a death wish?”

“I’m going after her.”

**Episode 282**

Gabriel drove so fast and so wildly that I just stopped watching the road. It was the coward’s way out, but I closed my eyes and clung to him until I finally felt the motorcycle ease to a stop.

“This is as far as I’m allowed to take you,” Gabriel said, grinning as he pulled up in front of the terminal. “Riding my baby right to the gate is frowned upon these days.”

I swung my leg over the bike and got unsteadily to my feet. “Thank you. I don’t know how I would have made it without you, Gabriel.” As I handed back his helmet, I felt a stab of guilt. “I hope this doesn’t cause too much trouble between you and Xavier.”

Gabriel shrugged. “Not gonna lie to you, Cal, it might.” He winked. “But I get why you’re doing it. For the pack, right? For Xavier?”

I nodded. “Yeah, exactly. I’m just trying to protect them.”

“Then do what you have to do, girl,” Gabriel said. “Fuck, I understand that, maybe more than anyone.”

Gabriel was a wildcard and kind of a stranger, but having his blessing on my trip actually made me feel a hell of a lot better. I smiled at him. “Thanks, Gabriel. And slow down, for fuck’s sake,” I said, hiking my backpack higher on my shoulders and turning toward the doors that led to the terminal.

“Hey.” When I turned back, Gabriel was smiling at me. “I like you better than Ava.”

That stopped me. “You met her?” I asked, curious.

Gabriel winked. “Maybe a few times. But my lips are sealed. Talk to Xavier when you get back,” he said, pulling the black helmet over his head. He tipped his chin up as a final goodbye, and then, with a roar of his engine and a squeal of tires, he was gone.

I felt oddly sad watching him go. He was a piece of work, that was certain, but there was something about him I really liked. He was a loose cannon, but I got why Xavier was friends with him.

He was gone now, disappeared through the slow-moving airport traffic. So, with a deep breath, I walked into the airport.

I kept an eye on the time as my boarding pass printed. I was thinking I just might make it if I could get through security fast… But then I saw security.

The line snaked around and around, and I joined the end of it with a sinking stomach. The line was moving agonizingly slowly, and I bounced on my toes, willing the TSA agents to move faster. Then, because I absolutely needed something *else* to worry about, a question suddenly hit me: what if someone followed me here? I turned around, scanning the line that had formed behind me, but luckily, no faces stood out. I looked out at the ticket counters. There was a large travel group in front of the airline counter—all redheads—and, as they shuffled out of the way, I saw a glimpse of—

*Holy shit.*

I spun back around, my whole body going tense. *Was that Maya*?

A million questions raced through my head, but I didn’t have time to figure out any answers. I had a plane to catch. Face burning, I ducked down, pretending to tie the lace of my beat-up Converse. I untied and re-tied the laces a dozen times before I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“What?” I gasped, looking up.

“The line has advanced,” a gray-haired woman said frostily, pointing at the giant gap that had opened up in front of me. “Please move forward, young lady.”

“Sorry,” I breathed, standing back up.

“Well, get a move on,” the woman snapped, eyeing me suspiciously.

I walked forward as a bored looking TSA agent waved me over.

“Boarding pass and ID,” he said, barely looking at me.

I handed them over, then glanced over my shoulder again, scanning the crowd for Maya.

When I looked back, the TSA agent had lost his *over-it* expression and was eyeing me suspiciously. “You all right, miss?” he asked warily.

“Fine,” I said breathlessly. I cleared my throat. “Just worried about missing my flight. My parents would kill me.” I tried out my most charming smile on him.

He stared at me for a moment more, then a corner of his lip quirked up as he almost smiled back. “Okay,” he said, handing me back my license and ticket. “Go ahead.”

“Thanks,” I said gratefully and hurried forward, practically throwing my bag onto the belt for the X-ray machine. I looked behind me and froze. Maya was standing at the back of the snaking security line.

“Shoes off!” someone barked.

I looked up into the face of a glowering TSA agent. “What?”

“Shoes off,” she said again. She pointed to a sign—*Please Remove Shoes, Coats, and All Items From Pockets.* “Can’t you read?”

Shit. The last thing I needed to do right now was draw attention to myself. “Sorry,” I said.

Over my shoulder I saw that the gray-haired woman was still behind me, still glaring at me. I pulled off my shoes and tossed them onto the belt next to my backpack, then sprinted through the scanner without looking back again. I slipped my feet back into my shoes and snatched my backpack as soon as it emerged from the X-ray machine, then I took off down the terminal. I just felt so exposed. Why hadn’t I thought of wearing a disguise—or at least sunglasses or something. Why hadn’t I planned this better? Or at all?

*Take Home a Piece of Oregon!*

I stopped in my tracks and ran back to the gift shop I’d just sped by. The walls were lined with mannequins in Oregon T-shirts, sweatshirts, and windbreakers. There was a whole wall of baseball caps, and two giant racks at the registers filled with sunglasses. Short of discovering a false mustache department, I’d just hit the jackpot.

Ten minutes later, I was a changed woman in dark sunglasses, an *Oregon is for Lovers* baseball cap, and an oversized sweatshirt with a top hat-wearing beaver smiling toothily on it. The clerk had given me a strange glance when he’d seen my choices, but I’d ignored him. The only thing that mattered was getting on that plane.

I stepped back into the terminal feeling a little less anxious. The sunglasses were a tad darker than I’d estimated, and I had to squint hard to see the gate numbers as I walked the terminal’s thoroughfare.

“Flight 201 to Duluth, Minnesota is now boarding Group C. Group C, you are now free to board flight 201 to Duluth.”

Glancing down at my ticket, I sped up. I was Group C and I knew I’d be the last to board, so there wasn’t any more time to waste. As I drew closer to my gate I stopped, my heart thudding hard in my chest.

Maya was standing at the gate, speaking to the agent behind the desk.

I was about to turn away, ready to run for it, when Maya *laughed*. Well, no, hang on—the girl at the gate laughed, but it wasn’t Maya. Maya didn’t laugh. I wasn’t even sure she had teeth. And this girl’s laugh was high-pitched and bubbly. Even if Maya did laugh—which she didn’t—there was no way she had the laugh of a high school cheerleading captain.

I breathed again. This was just someone who looked like Maya.

My heart was still pounding, but I felt a lot better as I boarded the plane. Why would Maya, of all people, have followed me here? Even if Xavier had asked her to—actually, *especially* if he’d asked her to—there was no way she would have come.

I shoved my backpack into the overhead compartment and dropped into seat 13C with a sigh of relief. I’d made it. I was on the plane. I was going home. I pulled my phone out of my pocket.

*I’m coming home! Any chance you could pick me up at the airport tonight?*

Alex’s response came instantly, a thumbs up accompanied by an explosion of confetti.

I smiled down at the screen.

*10. Terminal 3. Thank you!*

Then I dialed my parents.

“Cali?” My dad answered immediately. “You okay?”

“I’m okay. I’m just wanted to let you know that I’m headed home. Like, right now. I’m on a plane.”

“Oh, Cali.” My dad’s voice was choked. “That’s great news. Great. What time are you getting in? I’ll pick you up.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve asked Alex to pick me up,” I said quickly.

“That’s great. Really great.” I could practically hear my dad beaming. “I’ll tell your mom as soon she wakes up—”

I barely noticed when someone paused next to my seat. “Excuse me?”

“Hang on, Dad,” I said. As I looked up, my heart thudded to a stop.

Maya smirked down at me. “I think you’re in my seat.”

**Episode 283**

I blinked, praying this was just a bad dream.

“Cali?” my dad called from my phone. “Are you there, honey? Did we lose you?”  
 My hand was trembling as I brought the phone to my ear. “I have to turn off my phone, Dad. We’re about to take off.”

“Okay, sweetheart. See you soon.”

I ended the call and looked up at Maya. “What are you doing here?”

“Scoot,” she commanded, pointing to the middle seat, which was still empty.

Numbly, I moved over, sliding into place next to a teenaged boy who was already asleep, his hood pulled down over his face.

“Now, you didn’t think you were going on vacay without me, did you?” Maya said, in a mock-chiding tone.

Shit.

My brain still hadn’t caught up with what was happening. “Did Xavier send you?”

“Please,” Maya snapped. “I don’t do Xavier’s bidding, but there’s no way you’re doing this on your own. Whatever dumbass plan you have, I’m going to make sure you don’t make things worse for everyone.”

I narrowed my eyes, annoyed now. “I’m not going to make things worse. I’m going to help protect the pack, Maya. I can handle this on my own, I don’t need a babysitter.”

This made Maya laugh. “That’s the perfect way to put it. Because you’re *such* a baby.”

Bristling, I glared at her. “I can take care of myself.”

“I have to admit,” she said generously, “your chainsaw action was a step in the right direction. But overall, you’re still kind of useless, you know?”

The flight attendants were just starting their safety demonstration. I glanced up at the slim man closest to us, then back at Maya, doing some quick calculations. “So you’re not here to stop me?”  
 She settled back into her seat. “I considered it, but”—she spread her arms, gesturing around the full plane—“how would I actually do it? Stuff you into a duffel bag and drag you off the plane? I’m not in the habit of drawing human attention.”

I stared at Maya, puzzle pieces falling into place. “Did you come after me because you were *worried* about me?” Maya snorted but I continued. “Are we friends now?”

She rolled her eyes. “We are *not* friends, human. I never even use that word, and I have no intention of starting now.” She looked me up and down. “Especially not on *you*. I’m here because of the pack.”

I settled back in my own seat as the flight attendants strode down the aisles, checking seatbelts. “Okay. Say whatever you want. I think that’s why you came. I think we *are* friends. You’re not even officially in the pack.”

“Oh my god,” Maya groaned. “Think whatever you want, human, but keep your saccharine thoughts to yourself. I’m don’t want to use the barf bag this early in the flight.” She looked around. “Tell me they serve booze. I could destroy a whiskey.”

I half-stood and glanced toward the galley at the end of the plane. “I think they start serving after takeoff.” When I sat back down, Maya’s eyes were on my beaver sweatshirt. She did not look amused.

“By the way, I’d prefer if you pretended that you didn’t know me. I don’t want to be associated with someone who dresses like…” She took a long, slow look at the beaver’s top hat and monocle, and her lip curled into a sneer. “Like you.”

\*

When I woke up, the plane was bouncing and there was a squeal of tires against solid earth. We were landing. I blinked, trying to remember where the hell I was.

Oh yeah. On a plane to Minnesota.

My head was—bizarrely—resting on Maya’s shoulder, and I sat up quickly, leaving a suspiciously damp spot on her leather jacket. Face flushing, I tried to wipe off my drool before she woke up, but that only woke her up faster, and she eyed me suspiciously.

“Why the fuck are you touching me?” were the first words out of her mouth.

“Uh,” I started, trying to stall. “We’ve landed.”

Maya rolled her eyes and put a hand up to her neck, rubbing the stiffness out. “Obviously.”

When the plane eased to a stop at the gate, the seatbelt light went off and everyone stood and started gathering their things. When the door opened and people started forward, streaming past our seats, Maya put a firm hand on my arm.

“This is going to be a very short trip,” she informed me.

“What?”

Maya raised a warning eyebrow. “You do your thing with the police and then we fly back to Oregon. Got it?”

I shook off Maya’s hold. I was sick of being bossed around. “I’m going to see my parents.”

“Fine,” Maya said dismissively, standing up.

“And Alex.”

She turned. “Who’s Alex?”

“My friend. He’s picking me—us—up. So behave yourself.”

Maya pulled her backpack onto her shoulder. “Hey, I’m always polite to strangers.” She smiled. “Even if they’re humans like you.”

“Don’t do that,” I said urgently. I glanced back at the sleeping teenager, who was awake now, but thankfully wearing headphones. “Don’t call people ‘humans’,” I hissed in a low whisper. “That’s not a normal thing to do. Just try to act as normal as possible. In fact, the less you say the better. Actually, maybe we can just say you’re foreign.” I looked at her dark hair. “We’ll say you’re from Italy and don’t speak a word of English.”

I gave Maya a gentle push into the now empty aisle, but she smacked my hand away.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” she snapped. “And you need to worry a little less about me, and a lot more about yourself. Let’s just stick to the plan and get the hell out of here.”

She stepped into the aisle, and we headed off the plane and into the terminal. I pulled out my phone as we walked toward the exit, checking for a text from Alex. I stopped when I felt a pull on the back of my sweatshirt. “What?” I asked, looking back at Maya, who was glaring again.

She tipped her chin toward the women’s bathroom. “You have to change. I can’t walk around with you in that stupid outfit.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re just going to have to suck it up, Maya. Alex texted. He’s waiting at the curb.”

My nerve faltered as we reached the exit. “Just behave yourself, okay?” I said nervously.

Maya’s answer was an irritated huff.

I peered through the crowd of people and there, standing next to his car, was Alex.

He grinned when he saw me and ran over, sweeping me up into his arms and spinning me around. “You’re here!” he said happily. Then, setting me back down on the ground, he leaned in to whisper in my ear. “I’ve missed you, BFF.”

My heart gave a weird, painful pull. Behind me, I heard Maya groan. I turned to glare at her.

“Sorry,” she said, with a fake smile. “I must still be a little airsick. Suddenly I feel like I’m going to puke.”

I turned my back on Maya and smiled at Alex. “Thank you for picking me up. My dad doesn’t like to leave my mom, so I didn’t want to ask him to—”

“It’s fine,” Alex said, still grinning at me. “I’m glad you called.”

There was something intense about his gaze and I turned away, anxious to break eye contact. “Alex, this is my friend Maya. Maya…” Panicking, I realized I had no idea what Maya’s last name was.

She rolled her eyes at me and turned to Alex with what appeared to be a genuine smile. “Maya Wright. It’s nice to meet you.”

“And this is Alex Chevere,” I said, blushing. “He’s an old family friend.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Maya,” Alex said, shaking her outstretched hand. “So you’re from Oregon, huh? That’s exciting. I’ve never met a real Oregonian.”

Maya shot a look at me. “Actually, I’m from all over.”

“Well, hop in,” Alex said, gesturing to his car.

I stared out the window as we drove, drinking in the familiar sights. It was densely wooded in Oregon, of course, but Minnesota’s trees were so different, and I couldn’t take my eyes off them.

Alex kept up a running monologue, reeling off the names of people from school who—according to Alex—were all going to be *so excited* to see me. Considering they’d never been that excited to see me when I was actually in school, I doubted this very much, but didn’t bother to correct him.

“Remember, Cali,” Maya said from the backseat as Alex started in about a series of parties being thrown by college friends. “We don’t have that much time, what with this being such a short trip.”

I glared at her. I didn’t want to go to any of these parties, but I didn’t want Maya bossing me around either—especially not here. We were in Minnesota now. This was *my* territory.

“So, breakfast? Tomorrow?” Alex asked as he pulled up in front of my apartment building.

I nodded. “Sure.”

“It’s so good to see you,” Alex said again and reached for me, pulling me into a hug. I couldn’t help but remember the date I’d promised him eons ago. I hoped he didn’t remember…

With admirable restraint, Maya waited until we were standing on the sidewalk and Alex had driven off before she pretended to throw up.

“What?” I snapped.

“Why do you humans have to be so damn sentimental about everything? Everything’s such a production. You’re all so… *gushy*.”

I ignored her and dug my keys out from the bottom of my backpack, where they’d been since Lola and I had stepped onto that plane to Oregon. But before I could put the key into the lock of my door, Maya grabbed me and pushed me behind her, shielding me from the man who’d just appeared.

He looked past Maya’s glare to meet my eyes, a smile on his face. “I have a few questions for you, Caliana Hart.”

**Episode 284**

With an irritated huff, I stepped out from behind Maya and looked up into the tall, dark-haired man’s handsome face. He was still smiling at me, showing off straight, white teeth. The smile was perfect, and I was momentarily drawn in. But on closer inspection, I noticed the charm of his smile didn’t quite reach his brown eyes.

“Uh, yeah, I’m Caliana Hart. Who are you?” I asked, trying to shake off a feeling of quiet unease.

“I’m sorry,” he said, smiling even more brightly, “where are my manners? I’m Mikah Navarro, and I’m so glad I was finally able to connect with you, Caliana. I’ve been trying to catch you at home for a while now.”

*Mikah*. The name rang a bell. Alex had mentioned that Tony’s family had hired a private investigator named Mikah something. This had to be him.

“So, what are you, a cop?” Maya demanded, still trying to shove me behind her back.

“No,” he said, aiming his smile at her now, “I’m not a cop. I’m a licensed private investigator, but I’m working in concert with the police investigation. I’m looking into the murder of Tony Blanchet at the request of his family.”

Maya looked unimpressed. “You can have all the licenses you want, pal, but if you’re not a cop, then Cali is under no legal obligation to talk to you.” She grabbed the keys out of my hand and opened the door, shoving me roughly into the dark apartment.

I stumbled, nearly tripping on the door mat, and looked at Maya, surprised. She was blocking the door now, glaring up at Mikah. She was also being crazy rude, even for her. I found my feet and looked back at Mikah, trying to formulate an apology for her behavior.

“Maybe this isn’t the best time, Miss Hart,” he said, taking a step closer to the open door. “Why don’t I call you tomorrow?”

“Whatever,” Maya said, and, stepping into the apartment, slammed the door in his face.

I stared at Maya in the darkness, too stunned to even reach for the light switch. “What the hell was THAT?”

“What?” Maya asked thornily. I could see her defensive expression in the light coming from the floodlight outside the window.

I goggled at her. “You can’t just do that.”

“Um, I did just do that, so I guess you actually can. And you should be thanking me,” she said, putting her hands on her hips.

“For *what?*” I exploded. “What exactly should I be *thanking* you for? For following me like a freaking stalker? For bossing me around all the time? For treating me like shit? Or for acting like a lunatic in front of that PI? What happened to acting normally? I told you to behave yourself. You have to be nice around here. And not just nice, you have to be *Minnesota nice*, which is next level nice. You got me?” I angrily flipped on the living room lights, squinting into the brightness that flooded the room. “I mean, do you even realize how crazy suspicious you made me look back there? Not to mention you were just plain rude. Jeez, who *raised* you?”

Maya ignored my tirade and dropped her backpack, looking around the small apartment. “So this is where you lived, huh?” She took in the dingy couch, and the water-stained coffee table. I watched as her eyes traveled over the scarred, smudged walls, coming to land on the armchair Lola and I had found on the street last summer. We’d lugged it three blocks home. Maya walked over and nudged the chair with her toe, looking a little sick to her stomach. “No wonder you went for Xavier. Anything’s better than this, I guess.” She pulled her phone out of her pocket.

“While you’ve got that out,” I said, pointing at her, “call the Better Manners Bureau and see if they have an intensive training program you can take. My treat.”

Maya didn’t even bother looking up as she rolled her eyes. “I’m calling Xavier.”

“What?” I cried, looking up as a shot of electricity jolted through my body. “You can’t do that!”

I lunged for the phone, but Maya was too fast and moved easily out of the way. I stumbled over an upturned corner of the area rug and then scrambled after her, still reaching for her phone. Maya wasn’t even breaking a sweat avoiding my outstretched hands and I was—*once again*—reminded of the shortcomings of being a human. If I were a werewolf, at least I’d stand a fighting chance with her. “Give that to me,” I growled.

“Hey,” Maya said into her phone, sidestepping me smoothly as I lunged again. “Yeah, I’m with her. No, she’s fine, unfortunately. She’s right here, acting like an ass. Yeah, hang on.” She held the phone out. “Xavier wants to talk to you. Heads up, he sounds super pissed.”

I stopped in the middle of the room, breathing hard after my chase around the living room, and glared at her. “I wish you hadn’t come,” I hissed.

Maya clearly couldn’t have cared less.

Feeling defeated, I reached for the phone, thinking hard and fast about what I was going to say. I cleared my throat. “Hey. Let me explain—”

Xavier didn’t let me finish. “Will you please explain to me why the FUCK you would run away right now. You know we’re all under a blood curse, right?” he asked, his voice glacial.

Anger made my heart beat hard. “Yeah, I do know that. But I left because the curse isn’t the only problem you have, and someone has to take care of things here. You know—with the police and the *murder investigation*. None of you seem to realize what’s at stake.”

“So you decided you could handle this all yourself, is that it?” he asked.

Rude!

“Yes,” I snapped. Xavier didn’t respond, but I knew he was still on the line. I could hear him breathing angrily. “And you didn’t have to send Maya after me,” I added petulantly.

“I didn’t,” he said coldly. “She did that all on her own. But I’m glad she did, because what you’ve done—”

I was so done with this conversation. “Oh, no! The battery’s dying. Gotta go!” Without waiting for him to answer, I ended the call and tossed the phone back to Maya.

She caught it deftly, smirking. “Did you just hang up on your mate, Cali? Real nice. Awesome power move, there.”

“At least I’m not trying to kill him,” I fired back.

If my reference to her relationship with Colton bothered Maya, she was *great* at hiding it. All she did was shrug casually before moving off to do a lap of the apartment. She walked into my room, walking the perimeter and looking out the window before she closed the blinds. She popped into the small bathroom and turned the taps in the sink on and off. “Just the two rooms?” she asked, emerging from Lola’s room. “And the bathroom?”

“Yeah.” I sighed, dropping down onto the couch. I’d been expecting everything to feel comfortable and familiar, but it didn’t. It felt weirdly foreign now—like something from a dream I’d once had, and could only kind of remember. I couldn’t get comfortable.

Maya nodded and moved to the window over the sink in the kitchen. She flipped the lock on it, opened the window a quarter of an inch, then slammed it shut again and locked it. She went to the living room windows and closed the blinds, and then she locked the front door.

“What the hell are you doing?” I finally asked. My voice sounded too loud in the quiet room.

“What the hell does it look like I’m doing?” Maya asked, staring at the deadbolt on the door like she was trying to see inside it.

“I mean, apart from acting like a lunatic, I have no idea. What are you so worried about?”

“I’m just making sure no one can see us in here. Making sure we’re as safe as this shitty place can allow us to be.” She stood up straight and peered out the peephole.

I rolled my eyes. “You can take it down a notch or two. We’re fine. This is practically rural Minnesota, Maya. You can relax. The crime rate would make you laugh.” I yawned, the day suddenly catching up with me. I stood to go to my room. “You can sleep in Lola’s room, or on the couch.

“Hang on,” Maya said firmly, turning away from the front door. “We need to talk.”

“About what?” I snapped, walking toward my room. I was tired and hungry and just about at the end of my rope. “I know the plan: get out of here as fast as possible. I get it, okay. Now let me go to bed.”

“Yeah, we’ve actually got another problem,” Maya said. She waited until I turned around to face her before she spoke again. “That private investigator? He’s a vampire.”

**Episode 285**

I stared at Maya. “A *vampire*?” I repeated incredulously. I shook my head, refusing to believe her. “Stop trying to scare me. He wasn’t pale, he wasn’t wearing a cape or speaking with one of those Eastern European accents. He didn’t even have fangs—”

“He would have had them if you’d invited him in, which it looked like you were about to do,” Maya snapped. “There’s a lot of bullshit swirling around about vampires—the garlic and the glittery skin and the mirror thing—but the thing about inviting them in is legit true.”

I folded my arms. “Okay, *if* Mikah Navarro, PI is a vampire—and that’s a *big* if—how the hell did you know?”  
 Maya rubbed her head like she had a pounding headache. “God, I keep forgetting how stupid you are. Werewolves can sense vampires.”

“How?” I asked skeptically.   
 “They smell like death,” Maya said simply, shrugging.

“Gross.” I was halfway through rolling my eyes when I stopped. Xavier had known that guy who’d attacked me at the Renaissance faire was a vampire. Well, and I guess he had disappeared in a puff of dust after I’d stabbed him… I wrapped my arms around myself, feeling suddenly cold. “Is that same thing true for vampires?”

“What do you mean?”

“Could he sense that you were a werewolf?”

Maya’s tone was matter of fact. “Of course.”

I stared at her, baffled by her calm demeanor. “Then he knows,” I breathed. “All that shit about me screwing things up—well, you just screwed this up way more than I ever could. He probably suspected, but now he knows for sure.”

“What are you talking about?” Maya snapped.

“Now he *knows* werewolves are involved in Tony’s murder. God, Maya, you should never have come here.” I glared at her.

Maya’s gaze grew cold. “How about a thanks, Cali? You were about to invite a vampire into your home. If you had, you’d probably be dead right now.”

“He’s a private investigator!” I yelled.

“Who’s also a bloodsucker!” Maya yelled right back. “Don’t ever forget that.”

I shook my head, thinking hard. “But why,” I asked slowly, trying to piece it all together, “would Tony’s family hire a vampire detective?”

Maya made a derisive noise. “They can’t possibly know he’s a vampire. It’s not like they advertise. They keep their true selves hidden in the shadows.”

“You mean like werewolves?” I retorted, before I could stop myself.

But Maya just smirked. “Something like that. But there’s one thing I know for sure—werewolves hate vampires, and vampires hate werewolves.”

“Why?” I asked. Xavier had said something similar but hadn’t elaborated much.

Maya shrugged. “Who knows. It’s one of those feuds that’s older than anyone alive today. At this point, it’s just the way things are.”

My fingers twitched toward my phone. Part of me—a big part—wanted to call Xavier back. It was my instinct to turn to him when I was scared or unsure. He was good at just taking care of things—of me. But I stopped myself. I’d come here to take care of the Tony situation, to get some space from him, and to remind myself that I could take care of things on my own. And I’d bet my bottom dollar that if I told Xavier about the vampire outside my door, he’d *freak out* and hop on the next plane to Minnesota.

Maya yawned. “Anyway. It’s late. We should get some sleep.”

“Sleep?” I stared at her. “How can you even think about sleeping?”

“Um, because I’m tired?”

“There is a vampire out there,” I said, pointing toward the door. I lowered my voice to a hoarse whisper. “He might be out there *right now!* That doesn’t worry you?”

“Oh my god, Cali,” Maya said with a roll of her eyes. “I told you, you’d have to invite him in. So here’s a tip: *don’t*.”

“Maya—”

“I’m serious,” she said—and she looked it, her gaze steady on me. “Don’t invite him in. Not here, and not anywhere else. Not at your parents’ house either, okay?”

I didn’t answer but wrapped my arms more tightly around myself.

Maya flopped down on the couch and stretched. “Do you have Netflix? I want to watch *Oh My Ghost*.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“This K-drama I’ve been into lately,” she murmured, aiming the remote at the TV and pressing buttons at random.

I huffed an irritated sigh. “It’s the other remote.” I walked to the kitchen table and dropped down. I was tired—exhausted, really—but I was too freaked out to shut my eyes. So instead, I tallied the facts: in addition to dealing with a murder investigation, I was now also dealing with a vampire private eye.

I dropped my head into my hands and thought about Mikah Navarro. He was tall and powerfully built, with dark brown hair and one of those lantern jaws—like Superman in the old-school comic books. So yeah, he was a pretty hot vampire private eye, but still also a vampire.

My eyelids were starting to droop, so I pushed myself up and headed to my room, praying that I’d be able to sleep.

\*

When I opened my eyes the next morning, they felt like they’d been sandblasted during the night. I closed them again and lay still for a long time, wondering if I’d ever felt so exhausted waking up. It had been a rough night. Thanks to Maya watching TV at top volume, it had taken me hours to fall asleep. And when I finally had, it had been a light, fitful sleep, disturbed by vampires in black capes lurking in corners and alleyways.

Reaching out blindly, I felt for my phone.

*Rough night. Gonna have to cancel breakfast. We’ll catch up later.*

My phone pinged as Alex texted right back with a row of sad face emojis, followed by a bacon emoji and an egg in a pan.

*Free for brunch later today? After you wake up?*

I closed my eyes again. It didn’t feel like I was ever going to wake up.

*Maybe. I’ll let you know.*

That task done, I hauled myself out of bed and into the shower.

“Where are we going?” Maya asked when I walked into the living room half an hour later.

I glared at her, finally feeling human after my shower. “*We’re* not going anywhere. *I’m* going to my parents’ house. Alone.”

“Um, I don’t think so,” Maya said, switching off the TV. “If you’re going to your parents’ house, then *we’re* going to your parents’ house.”

“Maya—”

“Listen, shortcake,” she said flatly. “I’m not looking forward to seeing the pod from whence you came, but if there’s one vampire out there, you can bet your ass there are others. And, being human, you can’t detect them. Now, if you were even slightly more capable, like me, it would be a different story—”

“Okay, okay,” I snapped, cutting her off. I hated giving in, but I knew she was right. “I don’t have time to argue with you. If you’re coming, let’s go. I want to get this over with.” I pulled out my phone and ordered an Uber.

Once we got in the car, I knew I had to lay down some ground rules. This was Maya I was dealing with. She was a loose cannon by nature of being herself.

“Okay, so first of all, you’re going to be nice to my parents,” I said. “My mom has a collection of silver forks and if you think I won’t stab you with one, you’ve got another thing coming.”

Maya looked at me across the backseat of the car. Her gaze was mildly startled. “God, Cali, there’s no need for the theatrics. I can be nice.”

“I hope so,” I grumbled, as the car pulled to a stop in front of my childhood home.

Walking up the path to my house filled me with a strange mixture of comfort and a low, pulsing dread. Before I had time to figure out where *that* had come from, my dad had pulled open the door.

“Come in! Come in!” he called, waving excitedly.

My mom appeared next to him, looking pale and thin, but smiling eagerly at me. They both bundled me into their arms as I made it to the door.

“We’re so happy to see you,” my mom said, pulling me close.

“Mom, Dad, this is Maya Wright,” I said, managing to extract myself.

Maya smiled a genuinely kind smile and shook their hands.

“Well, come in,” Mom said, waving us inside. “I hope you don’t mind, Cali, honey, but we have a visitor ourselves.”

“You do?” I asked, following her into the kitchen. “Who is it?” But then I stopped in my tracks in the doorway, frozen in horrified shock.

“This is Mr. Navarro,” my mom said, smiling. “He’s a private investigator.”

“Just Mikah, please, Mrs. Hart,” he said. Then he raised his teacup—my mother’s teacup—at me. “Nice to see you again so soon, Caliana.”

I turned to my mother, my eyes wide as saucers. “What’s he doing here?”

My mom looked surprised by my reaction. “He arrived this morning. He said he had a few questions about Tony for you, so I invited him in.”

**Episode 286**

Mikah sipped casually at his tea. The flower-patterned cup looked absurdly small and delicate in his massive hands—like one slight move from him would crush the delicate china. I tore my eyes from him and darted a look at Maya, but she wasn’t looking at me. She was looking at Mikah, her eyes narrowed.

“Oh,” my mom said, drawing my attention to her. “I didn’t realize you two had met.”

“Yes,” Mikah said, smiling blandly. “We bumped into each other last night.”

I swallowed hard. This wasn’t good. It wasn’t good at all. I could feel Mikah’s eyes tracking me as I moved into the kitchen. I pretended to fetch a glass of juice, but I was really scanning the cluttered countertops for possible weapons. There were knives in the knife block, but regular steel was probably useless against a vampire. A hand mixer to the eyes? A rubber spatula shoved down his throat? Maybe I could stake him with the wooden spoon my dad used to stir spaghetti? It was no lance, but it might work in a pinch. Bad news for spaghetti night, though.

I wished I knew more about vampires. I wracked my brain, trying to remember any tips from the *Twilight* books, but all that came to mind was that vampires were obnoxiously rich, bad drivers, and liked baseball. Not helpful. My head popped up when I heard Mikah say my name.

“What?” I gasped out, my heart beating fast.

Mikah’s smile grew. “I was just inviting you to join us.” He tipped his head toward the seat next to his and raised his teacup. “The cinnamon tea is to die for.”

I forced myself to smile, trying desperately not to show how scared I was.

“I made a coffee cake, Cali,” my mom said, waving me over. “With that brown sugar streusel topping, just like you like.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said, walking over to take the only empty seat left, right next to Mikah. Every muscle in my body was tense, and I was fighting hard against my fight or flight instincts. Maya was sitting across from me, and took the plate of coffee cake my mom offered without removing her eyes from Mikah.

“Mr. Navarro—sorry, *Mikah*—is investigating the murder of that boy, Cali. The one from school. Didn’t Alex know him?” my dad asked, looking up at Mikah questioningly.

“Tony Blanchet,” Mikah supplied smoothly.

“That’s right. What a terrible thing. His poor parents,” my dad said, shaking his head sadly.

My mom slid a slice of cake in front of me with a tired smile. She was right—the streusel topping *was* my favorite. But my mouth was as dry as the Sahara, and swallowing anything seemed like an impossible task.

“So,” Mikah said, turning and leaning toward me. “As I said last night, Cali, I have a few questions for you about the night of the attack. I’m sure it’s a difficult thing to think about, but anything you can remember would be invaluable. I wondered if we could speak about it privately.”

I glanced up at Maya who looked back at me, the expression in her eyes unreadable. *What the hell should I do?* I wanted to scream at her, but I could feel the eyes of both my parents on me, so I took a deep breath, trying to keep it together. “Shouldn’t I have a lawyer or something?”

My parents stared at me. “What?” my dad finally managed.

I cleared my throat. “I mean, on TV, don’t people usually have a lawyer present when they’re being questioned? When it’s about a police investigation?”

Mikah laughed, the sound easy and warm. It was so convincing that I almost let myself feel comfortable before I remembered what he was. “I promise that’s not necessary, Cali. I’m not the police. You’re under no legal obligation to answer any questions I ask you.” He shrugged. “I just thought you’d *want* to help catch the cold-blooded killers responsible for Tony Blanchet’s murder.”

I swallowed hard.

But Mikah wasn’t done. “A young man, full of promise, cut down in his prime.” His blue eyes bore into mine. “Don’t his parents deserve to know what happened to their only son?”

My mom wiped a tear from her eye and my dad cleared his throat, obviously moved.

Part of me wanted to stand up and scream that Tony got exactly what was coming to him. But that part of me was the one that was going to get me thrown in jail.

“Of course they do,” I mumbled. “You can ask me anything you want, though I don’t know how much I can help.” Maya shifted in her seat and I shot her a glance. “I really don’t know anything.” I was working hard to keep my expression impassive, but poker faces were not my strong suit.

I obviously knew *everything* about Tony’s murder. More than I wanted to know, if I was being honest. He’d been ready to hurt me and Xavier had stopped him. There was no way I was telling this Mikah guy anything, but I was already starting to feel the strain of the lie. My pulse pounded in my neck, I could feel myself starting to sweat, and my ears were burning, the way they always did when I was under pressure. I shook my hair forward, making sure it was covering my ears, but I knew that wasn’t going to be enough. Before I could face Mikah in a one-on-one situation, I was going to need a moment to collect myself.

I stood, so quickly my parents looked up in alarm. “I’m going to the bathroom.” I paused for a moment, as though waiting for a response, which of course never came, so I spun on my heel and headed for the bathroom.

I shut the door of the small powder room next to the kitchen and bent double, my hands on my knees, breathing hard. I felt like I was going to be sick. I stayed still until I caught my breath and the nausea went away. When I looked up into the mirror over the sink, my heart sank. If I was going for ‘innocently baffled’, I was screwed. I looked pale and scared and guilty as hell.

Which was crazy. I *wasn’t* guilty. *I* hadn’t done anything wrong. So why was Mikah after me?

I kept looking into the mirror, but I wasn’t really seeing myself. I was thinking. A thought had just occurred to me, and it made my blood run cold. Was Mikah really here because of Tony, or could it be because of what had happened at the Renaissance faire? Could he tell somehow that I’d staked a vampire? Could that be what was going on?

My eyes flickered back to my face in the mirror, and I shook my head. No, that was crazy. There was no way. I had been dressed as a knight, for crying out loud. No one could have recognized me. And I’d been there entirely by accident—no one but Xavier knew that I’d been there at all. Besides, that had been in Oregon, all the way across the country. There was no way Mikah knew.

I took a deep breath in and watched my nostrils flare a little as I breathed out. I kept going until my heart returned to a normal rate. *I can do this*, I told myself. *I can do this*.

I remembered to flush the toilet and run the water in the sink before I opened the door.

And then I stepped out and nearly screamed.

Mikah was standing in the hallway, towering over me.

“Sorry,” he said with a small smile. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I’ll bet,” I muttered, my heart rate jacking back up again.

“I just wanted to talk to you,” he said, taking a step toward me.

“So talk,” I said, but my eyes darted around wildly. Where the hell was Maya? What was the point in letting her tag along after me if she wasn’t going to be around when I needed her?

Mikah dropped his voice, and in the small space, it took on a strangely intimate quality. “I just got the sense back in the kitchen that maybe you were hesitant to speak the truth. Why is that?”

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, willing my hand not to shake. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I lied. “Excuse me,” I said, starting to move past him.

But Mikah stepped in front of me, blocking my path. When I glared up at him, I saw his smile had changed. Gone was the charming glint in his eyes, and the smile had turned cold.

“*Move*,” I said, trying to infuse my voice with anger when all I actually felt was stone cold fear.

“You can lie to your friends, Caliana Hart, but you can’t lie to me,” he said, his husky voice reverberating in the small space. “I know what you really are.”

I stared up at him, as baffled as if he’d started speaking a different language.

Something shifted in his eyes as he took me in. “But maybe *you* don’t,” he said, wonderingly. “You should ask your mother.”

**Episode 287**

*My mother?*

My heart thudded to a stop. “What does my mother have to do with anything?” I asked, my voice a hoarse whisper.

Mikah looked at me for a moment, then he chuckled, looking amused. “You really don’t know, do you?”

I huffed an irritated sigh. My fear was starting to fade, replaced with irritation. Were all vampires this annoying? “If I knew, I wouldn’t have asked.”

He shrugged. “I’m not here to talk about your mom, Cali. I’m here to solve a murder, and I know you can help me with that. After all,” he said, his tone quietly mocking, “wasn’t Tony a friend of yours?”

I shifted uncomfortably, remembering the last—very unpleasant—interaction I’d had with Tony. “He *wasn’t* a friend,” I said shortly.

Mikah’s eyes bored into mine. “I believe you’re finally telling me the truth, Cali.”

I knew it wasn’t possible, but his eyes were so intense, it felt like they were looking into my soul. He looked at me like he was aware of everything I wasn’t saying. I looked away.

“I have a theory about what happened that night, Cali. Do you want to hear it?” He didn’t wait for me to answer. “I think you and Tony were speaking, and then Tony did something ungentlemanly. I think it was something that made you feel threatened, and I think some of your friends weren’t overly pleased with him. But these friends I’m talking about aren’t like most people around here. In fact, I don’t think these friends are *people* at all.” He paused for a moment, letting his words sink in. “And I think they killed him. How am I doing so far?”

I forced myself to look into his eyes, which were now burning with a strange fire. “If you’re so sure you’ve got it figured out,” I said, trying my hardest to stay calm, “then why haven’t you gone to the police?”

He chuckled again, but the sound wasn’t warm anymore. It was hard, and the edges sounded sharp. “You can be really funny when you want to be.” I looked up, watching as the smile slipped off his face completely. “We both know what we’re dealing with here, don’t we, Cali? And we both know that the police aren’t equipped to handle this truth. Aren’t you seeing Xavier Evers?”

In the kitchen, my mother laughed.

My heart raced, and I swallowed hard. There was so much at stake. I started to feel dizzy and put my hand out to brace myself against the wall. “What does Xavier have to do with anything?” I rasped out.

Mikah looked at me closely. “I was hoping you’d tell me.”

Talking to Mikah was like sitting in front of a roaring fire on a cold night, where you were half-sweating and half-freezing. I was terrified, of course. Who wouldn’t be, cornered in a hallway by a hulking vampire? But I was fucking annoyed, too. And I was sick of his games. I wasn’t going to play cat and mouse any longer.

I glared up at him. “There’s nothing to tell. And even if there were, you’re a detective. Figure it out yourself.”

I started to push past him, but he stepped in front of me, and there was nothing subtle about the way he blocked my only exit point. “I’m warning you, Cali—the truth will come out, not matter how hard you try to cover it up. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

His lips curled up into a smile, showing off his perfectly white teeth and—

My hand slipped against the wall. Nestled in his mouth were two sharp, deadly fangs.

*Shit*.

I started at the gleaming points, transfixed. How had I not seen them before? Maya was right. This guy was a vampire.

Mikah put a cool finger under my chin and brought my gaze up to meet his. “Think about it,” he said with a wink.

Then he stepped out of the way, and I brushed past him as fast as I could. I stepped into the sunlit kitchen, trying to catch my breath.

“You okay, hon?”

I looked up at my mom, who was smiling at me from her seat at the table. “What? Yeah, I’m okay.”

Her smile grew teasing. “You were gone for a while. We were starting to get worried.” Then her brows drew together. “Are you feeling okay?”

Mikah stepped up to stand next to me.

I swallowed. “I’m fine,” I said, watching as he walked to the table and drank the last of his tea.

Maya was staring at me. Actually, as I scanned the table, I realized that everyone was staring at me. I directed my gaze to Maya and gave her a pointed look. “Just fine.”

“Well,” Mikah said, wiping his mouth with a linen napkin, “I should probably get going. Maybe we can talk more after you’ve had some time to think things through, Cali.”

I shivered at the sound of my name in his mouth.

“Mikah,” Maya said, just as he reached the back door, “I wonder if you have a second. I have a few questions for you.”

Mikah opened the door with a smile. “Of course. After you.”

With a belly full of nerves, I watched Mikah follow Maya out the door. What the hell wasshe up to?

“Well,” Dad said, rising to his feet, “I’d better get going, too, or I’m going to be late for work.” He walked over to me and threw an arm around my shoulders. “It’s so good to see you, honey. I really hope you can stay a while.”

I let myself relax into his familiar embrace—just for a moment. I’d missed him so much. “It’s good to see you, too, Dad. I’ve missed you.”

He dropped a kiss onto the top of my head. He was quiet for a moment and when I looked up, he was watching my mom, who was gathering up all the plates of uneaten coffee cake and carrying them to the sink.

“How is she really?” I asked.

Dad lowered his voice. “I want you to keep an eye on her. She’s putting on a good show, but she’s not doing well.”

“Oh god,” I murmured as my stomach dropped. I tried to be subtle as I looked back at my mom, who was now loading the dishwasher.

Dad nodded somberly. “The doctors are pretty concerned. We all are—” He broke off, his eyes glittering with tears. “Anyway,” he said briskly, trying to get ahold of himself again. “Have a good day, sweetheart.”

He brushed a kiss onto my cheek and disappeared into the garage.

What the hell was he going to do without my mom? They were soulmates. I’d never known anyone more in love than my parents. My heart ached as I listened to his car pulling out of the garage, and I moved to join my mom at the sink. “Let me help, Mom. You go sit down.”

“I’m fine, Cali,” she said with a small smile, but she was moving slowly, carefully, as though every movement pained her.

We worked quietly for a moment, shoulder to shoulder, but we both looked up when we heard a sound. It was low and dangerous, and it chilled my blood.

“Was that a growl?” my mom asked, looking out the window over the sink. “Did Rudy get out again?”  
 “Who’s Rudy?” I asked breathlessly.

“The dog who lives next door,” my mom said distractedly, peering out the window.

I stepped closer to her and looked out. And when I saw what I saw, I dropped the plate I was holding. It shattered against the cold porcelain of the sink.

Maya and Mikah were facing off in the middle of the back yard, right next to my dad’s propane grill. Mikah’s mouth was wide open, as if he was hissing. I had no idea how I’d managed not to see his fangs right away, because right now I could see them even from this distance, glistening menacingly in the sunlight. Maya was in full attack mode. She was still in her human form, but judging by her fighting stance, she was probably going to shift at any moment.

*Fuck!*

I turned to my mom, thinking fast. How much had she seen? What did she *think* she was seeing? How the hell was I going to explain any of this? My mind started spinning, trying think of a way to explain the scene unfolding in the back yard. Specifically, a way that didn’t involve use of the words ‘werewolves’, ‘vampires’, ‘supernatural’, or ‘decades-old blood feud’.

But before I could launch into my totally plausible explanation story (community theatre rehearsal? Maya trying to make the wrestling team for the next Olympics and needing to practice? LARPing?), my mom spoke.

“Cali, honey, I think we need to talk.” She looked tired as she turned to me, and there was a look of resignation on her face. She smiled sadly. “There’s something I should probably tell you.”

**Episode 288**

“Let’s sit down, Caliana,” my mom said, leading me to the table. I sat down and watched as she eased herself into a chair. She took a long swallow of her tea before she spoke. “I knew this day would come.”

I stared at her, not sure what to say exactly. “What day?”

This whole situation was so bizarre, it was making me feel dizzy, like I was about to pass out.

She reached for me, and her hand felt cool as she took mine. She was scaring me. “I wish I’d prepared some kind of speech for you.” She smiled sadly. “Over the years, I’ve thought about what I would say to you, but I never got around to writing any of it down. I should have. It would have made this easier.”

Her eyes were wet with unshed tears, and my heart stuttered. What was happening? Was the pain causing some kind of mental episode? Was it one of her medications? I suddenly wished that my dad was still here. “Are you okay, Mom? Why don’t we get you into your room so you can lie down for a bit—”

“Caliana, no,” she said, so firmly I sat back down in my chair. She gave me a level stare. “It’s time you learned the truth.”

“Seriously, Mom, what are you talking about? You’re really freaking me out right now.” My mouth was dry, and my palms were sweating.

She raised an eyebrow. “You know your friend Maya is a werewolf, don’t you?”

I must be hearing things. I stared at her, dumbfounded.

“Cali, you do know, don’t you?” she asked.

Numbly, I nodded. “Yes, I know.”

“I thought she might be, when she came in, but it’s obvious now. Now that I’ve seen her confront Mikah.” She gave me a small smile. “She seems nice.”

I gaped at her. “How did you know?”

She sighed, like I was missing something obvious. “That’s what I’m trying to explain to you, Cali. Humans have a hard time accepting all of these things—usually they find out what’s real after it’s too late.”

“*Humans?*” I repeated stupidly. Mom sounded like she was speaking in riddles. “What do you— Why are you saying it like that? *You’re* a human.”

“No, Cali. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I’m not human,” she said, giving my hand a warm squeeze. “I’m Fae. And you are, too.”

I—*what?*

“*Fae*?” I asked, stunned. This sounded so absurd I wanted to laugh. “I’m a fairy? You’re a fairy? Is Dad a fairy?”

“No, sweetheart. Actually, you’re only half-Fae. Your father is one hundred percent human.”

My mind spun, thousands of questions swirling through my head. “I think I should sit down,” I said faintly.

“You are sitting down, honey.”

I pressed my hand to my forehead, trying to quiet the noise in my brain, and asked the only question I could manage to formulate. “What does this all mean?”

“I know it’s a lot to take in, Cali,” my mom said, giving my hand another reassuring squeeze. “Let’s go into the living room. We’ll be more comfortable.” She gave me a sideways glance. “Maybe you can lie down.”

My mom, frail as she was, helped me into the living room. Then she sat beside me on the couch, and there was beat of uncomfortable silence. I turned to look at her. Everything about her was familiar—her eyes, her hair, the shape of her nose, the delicate sprinkle of freckles across her cheeks. I knew her face better than I knew my own. But, staring at her now, I realized I didn’t know her at all.

She endured my scrutiny. “I know you must have questions, sweetheart, but let me explain a little first. Maybe I can answer some of them. And maybe others that you wouldn’t know to ask.”

She looked at me, waiting for a response, but I could only nod. I was imagining tiny fairies with tutus and wings and sparkling crowns, buzzing around, sprinkling fairy dust. I was imagining Tinkerbell and the Tooth Fairy.

“My family—*our* family—we were… I suppose you could say we were a sort of aristocracy. Almost like a royal family. And as their daughter, I was expected to take my place with them. I was ready do just that. I had spent my whole life preparing for it. But then…” Her eyes unfocused a bit, and her gaze turned faraway and dreamy. “But then I met your father.”

“Dad?” I squeaked.

She nodded, still smiling that faraway smile. “It was love at first sight. I was young and a little too impetuous, maybe, but I fell for him. Oh, Cali, I fell hard.”

“What happened?” I asked, feeling like I was listening to a bedtime story.

“I left my family, left the Fae world, and I married him.”

Question after question scrolled through my head. This certainly sounded like a fairy tale… “Dad let you do that?”  
 She shook her head. “He never knew. Like I said, it’s hard for humans to comprehend things outside their own world. I had no intention of returning to the Fae world, so there was no need to tell him. The knowledge would just have been a burden for him.”

I leaned back on the couch as a steady stream of memories began to scroll through my brain. The clues were all there: the weird way the wisps communicated with me, the way I could see them and hear them when no one else could. That fairy circle dream and the fairy houses. Then there was the wolf bite, and the way I’d erased Phil’s memory. The fight I’d managed to break up between Xavier and Greyson using that power no one could explain. Big Mac’s need for my blood, and that cryptic statement about having no need for human blood. These had all been clues. How could I have missed them?

As if she could read my thoughts, my mom shook her head. “Don’t blame yourself for not realizing it, Cali. Why would such an explanation ever occur to you? No, this wasn’t for you to discover on your own. I should have told you.”

“Why *didn’t* you?” I asked, a plea in my voice as my hands shook.

“I’d hoped I wouldn’t have to,” she said. “Half-bloods are unpredictable. There are so few of you, and you never showed any signs of your Fae bloodline. I thought perhaps it was dormant or non-existent, and you could escape having to deal with it at all. I chose to raise you as human—and only human. I see now that I was wrong,” she added, looking paler than ever. “You have a right to know who you are.”

I leaned my head against the back of the couch and closed my eyes. This was all just so much.

“Do you remember my tattoo?” my mom asked.

“Of course,” I said, and opened my eyes as she pushed up her sleeve.

It was on her forearm—a lightly shaded abstract design, all swirling, curved lines. It followed the shape of her delicate arm perfectly, almost as though it were a map of her circulatory system. I’d always loved it. As I child I’d spend hours in her lap, tracing the swirling pattern with my finger.

“It’s not just a tattoo,” Mom said.

I looked down, surprised. But then… I frowned. In twenty years, her ‘tattoo’ had never faded or spread. It hadn’t changed, not one little bit.

“If it’s not ‘just’ a tattoo, then what is it?” I asked.

“It’s my family crest. *Your* family,” she added gently. “I’m sorry for not telling you all this before, Caliana.”

I’d found it. The question I most wanted to ask. “Do I have magic?”

“It’s complicated—”

“But don’t fairies have magic powers?” I pressed, twisting on the couch until I was facing her.

“The *Fae* possess powerful magic, sweetheart, but it’s not so straightforward. You have to learn how to wield it. To grow into what you’ve been given.”

*Powerful magic.*

I stared at my mom. She was pale and thin. Her lips were dry and cracked, and the whites of her eyes were tinged yellow. “Then why, Mom?” I asked, tears on my face. “If you’re so powerful, then why didn’t you use your magic to make yourself better? You’ve been so sick.”

She reached forward and brushed a tear off my cheek with her thumb. “I’ve been in the human world too long, sweetheart,” she said with a sigh. “This is the price I’ve paid to stay with you and your father.”

A warning bell rang in my head. “What?” I asked, baffled. “What price? What are you talking about?”

She took both my hands in hers and squeezed them. Her hands were even colder, now. “There’s so much I still want to tell you. I should have told you about this when I had more time.”

The bell in my head clanged louder and louder, until I could barely hear her frail voice. “Time?” I demanded. “What do you mean, Mom? What do you mean about time?”

Her hands were freezing now. The coldness was moving up my arms, toward my heart. “I’m dying, Cali,” she said simply. “I’ve been dying. That’s the price I have to pay.”

**Episode 289**

“But…” I was at a total loss for words. I just stared at her. I’d heard my mother, clear as day—she’d just told me she was dying. But I couldn’t get it to compute.

This couldn’t be real.

“But you’re getting better,” I blurted out, flustered. “What do you mean you’re dying? Should we get you to the hospital? I can pay—you don’t have to worry about the money. It’s not a problem anymore.”

My mom put her hand over mine and I looked at her, searching her expression for something reassuring. There was no panic on her face. She was calm.

I thought about all the times in my life I’d spun out with her holding my hand. Bad grades, school dances I hadn’t gotten dates to, pimples on special occasions… so many things I’d fretted over that she’d been calm about. Even when I’d introduced her and Dad to Xavier, they hadn’t batted an eyelash. Not even when I said I was moving in with him. I’d always assumed we had many more of these occasions ahead. More firsts. But it looked like I was wrong.

“There’s nothing you can do, honey,” she told me, her voice gentle. “There’s nothing anyone can do.”

I didn’t understand what was happening. How was she being so levelheaded about this? It was like we were talking about two completely different things. I wanted to grab her, shake her, make her acknowledge how serious this was. It was her LIFE.

“Of course there is!” I cried out. “You’re not going to die. You’re *not*.”

My mother just shook her head.

“Why are you being so casual about this?” I asked, a lump forming in my throat.

“Cali, when I left the Fae world,” she began, rubbing her thumb over the back of my hand, “I knew it would cut my life short. It was a sacrifice I had to make. And I’d do it again. I’d do it all again for you and your father.”

“Then we get you back there,” I said, a plan snowballing in my mind. My mom wasn’t going to die. She wasn’t. “Where *is* the Fae world? How do we get there?”

“Stop it, Cali,” my mom ordered, her expression stern.

I hiccupped, the precursor to a sob. She squeezed my hand.

“You have to accept this,” she told me, firm but gentle. “I don’t want to spend any more time on this when I have so much more to tell you.”

“How much longer do you have?” I asked, my eyes filling with tears.

I tried not to let those tears spill, because I knew that wasn’t what my mom wanted. And I didn’t want to fight with her right now. I wanted to be a good daughter. I didn’t want to make her worry about me. But I was worried about her. How could I not be?

“I don’t know,” she admitted, the first flicker of anxiety passing over her face.

I squeezed her hand, wanting to support her the way she was asking me to. But it wasn’t easy. My mom had never needed anything like this from me before. It was one thing when I thought doctors could help her, but to be dying because she’d been away from the Fae world for so long? How did a doctor prescribe something for that?

“But there are other things I *do* know.” My mom gave me a watery smile. “Why don’t you try asking me some more questions?”

My head was spinning. A thousand questions sprang to mind. So many things I had taken as gospel were suddenly up in the air. There were so many corners of my life that were complete mysteries to me now.

“Do I have a family besides you and Dad?” I asked. “Grandparents? A brother? A sister?”

My mom hesitated and looked down at my hand clasped in hers. I could tell I was reminding her of very painful things. I felt guilty making her reflect on things she’d clearly buried.

“You have grandparents,” she finally admitted.

I felt a spark of anger light up inside of me. These people had existed for my whole life, and I’d never known.

“Why can’t I see them?” I asked, questions tumbling out of my mouth. “I mean, I get why I never saw them before but… Do they know about me? Do you think they would want to meet me? Are they— Would they be ashamed of me?”

“Honey.” My mom’s voice broke. Her eyes were full of love as she reached up to stroke my cheek.

I sniffed, feeling like I was four years old again.

My mom squared her shoulders. “If they knew how amazing you were, they wouldn’t be ashamed. They would be so, so proud. But they’ve never forgiven me for marrying a human. They disowned me for it.” I could hear the anger behind her words.

“But what’s so bad about loving a human?” I asked.

As I said it out loud, I realized how loaded the question was for me. I wasn’t accepted in the Redwood pack because I was human—or at least because they thought I was. My mother had had to leave her family because of her love for my human father. So many secrets could be laid at the feet of supernatural creatures and their fear and hatred of humans.

“Fae are impossibly beautiful to other creatures,” my mother explained. “My family would never trust your father’s love for me. They couldn’t trust that it was real, and not just because of the way I appeared to him. But I knew he loved me. I felt it, as sure as I can feel your hand in mine. I never wanted you to be exposed to the way my people see him—to the way they see all humans. And I’m sorry for what you lost because of that.”

I nodded, understanding what a tough choice that must have been. My relationship with Xavier had taught me that love wasn’t always something you could explain to people on the outside of the bond.

“Do you have any pictures of them?” I asked, still yearning for a piece of all of this that I could hold and understand.

“I don’t,” my mom answered. “But I have something better.”

She took my hand and led me to her bedroom. She opened her jewelry box—the one I’d painted for her in third grade. The yellow and purple butterflies sloppily smeared all over it made me smile.

She took out a gold necklace with a pendant that looked just like her tattoo.

“It’s beautiful,” I told her, taking in the swirling design.

My mom placed it around my neck, and I felt the cold metal settle against my skin.

“It’s a family heirloom,” she explained. “And I want you to have it. I think you’re ready to wear it.”

I looked in the mirror, admiring its beauty. I didn’t usually wear jewelry, but I’d make an exception for this.

“Was it my grandmother’s?” I asked, stroking the necklace.

“It was.” My mom smiled wistfully. “And her grandmother’s, too. It’s centuries old.”

“Wow,” I murmured. I’d never thought much about my family history before, but I couldn’t have expected this. Knowing that my family was so vast stirred something inside me.

“I want you to wear it so you’ll always remember your Fae ancestry.” She placed her hands on my shoulders. “Never forget that, okay?”

The sadness was creeping back into my mother’s voice, and I tensed. “Mom, what—”

But before I could ask her what was going on, I heard Maya calling me from downstairs.

Right. Maya.

Shit.

“I know you must have more questions.” My mom chucked me under the chin. “But I have a few for you as well. Such as, how long have you been hanging out with werewolves?”

*Only since I sold my virginity to one to pay your medical bills. You know, like* Breaking Bad *or something.*

“I…” I hesitated, searching for words I was comfortable saying in front of her. “Since I met Xavier. Does it matter?”

My mom shut her jewelry box with a snap.

“Just be careful, all right?” she said. “Werewolves and vampires—all supernatural beings, really—know that Fae possess great power. But only vampires can sense what you are without you revealing yourself. And because of that, they may try to use you.”

“I won’t tell,” I swore. “I promise. Am I allowed to tell Xavier?”

“*No*.” My mom shook her head. “You can never tell anyone. I don’t care how much you think you can trust them.”

I nodded, swallowing around the lump in my throat, thinking of how lonely it must have been for my mother to keep this secret her whole life. How lonely it would be for me, going forward.

“I’m serious, Cali,” my mom said, voice urgent. “Promise me.”

“I promise,” I assured her. “I’ll never tell anyone.”

My mom wrapped me up in a tight hug. She felt frail in my arms, and it was all I could do not to break down crying.

“Don’t ever break that promise, Cali,” she whispered fiercely into my ear.

After that, we went back downstairs. I was relieved to see that Maya was waiting, still in human form. But before I could open my mouth to talk to her, my mom pulled me back out of earshot.

“One more thing,” she whispered. “The supernatural world will do anything to use Fae power. You can’t let them.”

“How would they use my power?” I asked, confused.

“With blood,” she answered, deadly serious. “Don’t ever give your blood to anyone.”

**Episode 290**

My eyes must have been the size of dinner plates. I didn’t want to alarm my mom, but the cat was absolutely out of the bag on the whole ‘don’t give anyone your blood’ thing.

Not only had I given my blood to Big Mac—I’d done it twice.

Fucking hell.

“What’s the plan?” Maya called up to us, her voice only barely concealing how annoyed she was to be dealing with the whole Mikah issue. “I have a bad feeling after meeting that dude. The sooner we get back to Oregon, the better.”

My mom’s mouth opened in surprise as she looked between us.

“Surely Cali can stay for a few days, right?” she asked, reaching for my hand. “She’s barely even seen her father. And there’s *so much* we need to catch up on.” She paired these words with a squeeze of my hand, and I knew she meant that there was more tell me more about my ancestry. My powers. My identity.

My general Fae-ness.

I looked down at Maya, who was looking completely perplexed. How could I justify staying longer without telling her how important it was for me to stay?

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be here.” I turned back to my mother. “I still need to talk to the police. And Alex wants to see me.”

I saw Maya roll her eyes. “Why don’t we get you down to the police station and just get it over with, then?” she asked, exasperated.

But I wasn’t so sure about that. I still had questions for my mom. I still had worries about involving everyone in this investigation. I wasn’t sure of the true best way to handle it. But I couldn’t ask my mom for advice with Maya around.

“Okay,” I agreed numbly. I didn’t care about the police or Tony or any of that mess, to be honest. But taking care of it would tick something off on my list. And that was better than nothing.

“Can we borrow your car?” I asked my mom.

“Of course.” She handed me the keys, pressing them into my palm. “Be safe, please.”

I knew she was talking about more than my driving, and I felt the urge to hug her and never let go.

“Of course.” I nodded. “And I’ll call you when I’m done.”

I gave in and hugged her again. I could feel the necklace she’d given me between us. My mom’s arms, thinner and weaker than I could ever remember them being, encircled me. I could feel tears prickling at the corners of my eyes, and I knew I needed to get out of here if I was going to avoid Maya’s questions.

I murmured a goodbye and hustled off to the car, keeping my face angled away from Maya as I tried to compose myself.

I slid into the driver’s seat, my hand shaking as I put the key in the ignition. I heard Maya clear her throat. I looked over her and saw her staring at my hands, which were white-knuckling the steering wheel.

“Everything okay?” she asked. Her tone was casual, but it was clear she was watching my face carefully for a tell. “You seem rattled.”

I knew I couldn’t answer her truthfully. No matter how good it would feel to get it off my chest. I’d promised my mom, and that meant more to me than almost anything.

“Maybe I’m rattled because you almost went all apex predator on Mikah,” I shot at her, hoping that being antagonistic would throw her off the sent.

Maya scoffed, and I felt myself relax. I put the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway.

“He’s a fucking vampire.” She shrugged, as if that were the only answer necessary. “If you were a werewolf you’d understand. Vampires suck in more ways than one.”

“My mom was around,” I reminded her as I turned out of my neighborhood. “What if she’d seen you shift?”

“Then I’d have had to kill her,” Maya answered, an edge to her voice.

I slammed on the breaks and twisted in my seat to glare at her. I heard someone honk their horn behind me, but I couldn’t have cared less.

“GO AROUND,” I hollered, waving my arm.

Maya had the audacity to look bemused and I glared at her, seeing red.

“What did you just say?” I growled.

“Relax, oh my god.” Maya said. “I was *kidding*, Cali. Your mom seems like a nice lady. I’m not here to kill people’s moms. I’m here to make sure you don’t do anything *stupid*. If she’d seen anything, we’d have blamed it on her meds or something. Said she must have hallucinated it. I swear.”

Maya sounded more earnest than I’d ever heard her. I tried to let that fact calm me. But still, I was pissed.

“You’re not funny,” I grumbled, turning my attention back to the road. “And it was stupid of you to go after Mikah. Maybe you should stop watching me and start watching yourself.”

“He started it,” she deflected.

I didn’t dignify that with a response. I tried to focus on the road, on what I should say to the cops, but all I could think of was my conversation with my mother.

*I knew it would cut my life short. It was a sacrifice I had to make. And I’d do it again.*

*I want you to wear it so you’ll always remember your Fae ancestry. Never forget that, okay?*

*Don’t ever give your blood to anyone.*

That last memory made me wince. I’d failed my mother before I’d even had the chance to promise her I wouldn’t.

“Hey.” Maya brought me back to reality. “I’m no expert, but your mom’s not looking too good, is she?”

“You’re right,” I snapped. “You’re *not* an expert. So maybe you should keep your mouth shut.”

“Sorry.” Maya put her hands up. “I didn’t mean to upset you, I just—”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Maya,” I interrupted as we pulled up to the police station, a pit forming in my stomach.

I looked at the red brick police station. I’d been there on a field trip when I was seven, and I remembered being so scared to go inside. *This is for bad guys,* I’d told my teacher, pleading to stay outside, my voice shaking. *I’m not bad.*

“Maybe you should wait here,” I told Maya, trying not to let my voice shake.

“But I’m here to support you,” Maya reminded me patronizingly.

“You’re here because you don’t trust me,” I corrected, getting out of the car and slamming the door behind me.

“You’re right.” Maya followed after me. “So I think I’m gonna join. Think of me as your silent attorney.”

I glared at her. “As long as you *stay* silent.”

Just before I got to the door of the station, Maya grabbed me by the shoulder. I stopped in my tracks. Her grip was soft, for her, but I still shifted uncomfortably in her grasp.

“Don’t blow this, okay?” Her eyes bored into me and I hated how much I wanted to shrivel up into a ball.

“I’ve got this,” I told her, lifting my chin up and trying to remind myself that I was a badass Fae with powers and everything.

We walked into the station, the heels of our boots clicking on the linoleum. I shivered at how quiet and official it felt in here. *This is for bad guys*.

I waved at the guy at the front desk whose plaque read ‘Desk Sergeant’. Not the world’s most creative title, but okay. “Hi there,” I said. “My name is Caliana Hart. My dad told me the police want to speak to me about um, Tony Blanchet?”

He stared at me blankly before pointing behind us to a set of chairs. Maya and I sat in uncomfortable plastic chairs and waited until two white, plainclothes detectives approached us, their badges on their belts.

One of them was tall, with salt and pepper hair and a mustache. His eyes were ice blue and his mouth was set in a hard line. His partner was shorter, rounder, and wearing a much cheaper suit.

“I’m Detective Hardstark,” the taller one said. “And this is my partner, Detective Weber. Thanks for coming in, Miss Hart. Your friend can wait for you out here.”

He turned on his heel, obviously expecting me to follow him. I glanced over my shoulder at Maya, who gave me a nod. Her eyes were hard, and I could practically hear her telling me not to fuck this up.

Hardstark and Weber led me through a maze of desks and into an interrogation room with a scratched metal table. I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans as I sat down.

“This shouldn’t take long.” Hardstark sat down across from me and took out a notepad.

“But it could,” Weber interjected, his eyes searching my expression and then turning to his partner.

They shared a look, and I wondered if I’d made a face or something that had given me away. I didn’t *think* I had.

“How can I help?” I asked in my most polite voice. I wondered if I should smile. Or would that send the wrong message?

“We’d like you to tell us about your relationship with Alex Chevere,” Hardstark said, pulling out a pen.

“Alex?” I asked, beyond confused. “I thought you wanted to know about Tony. What does Alex have to do with anything?”

Hardstark and Weber exchanged another glance. I wondered what they were silently conferring about. A sense of dread crept in my stomach.

“Well.” Hardstark leaned toward me, a conspiratorial expression on his face. “We have reason to believe that Alex Chevere was the person who murdered Tony Blanchet.”

**Episode 291**

I burst out laughing. Admittedly, this might not have been the smartest or most respectful thing to do in front of two cops, but I couldn’t help it.

“Seriously?” I asked, trying to stifle my giggles. “Is this like, good cop/bad cop or something?”

“Miss Hart, please try to remember that this is serious,” Weber said, looking disgusted by my outburst. “I fail to see what exactly is so funny about my partner’s question. We’re talking about a murder, here.”

I shook my head, trying to remind myself that I was in a serious place with serious people. It was just that so much of my life had been surreal lately. But it looked like the non-magical parts of my life still had the potential to be completely baffling as well.

“I’m sorry.” I looked down at the table, my cheeks burning. “But… You really think Alex—Alex Chevere—killed Tony? What would make you believe that?”

“We ask the questions around here, Miss Hart,” Hardstark reminded me, eyes flashing. “So why don’t you answer ours? What’s the nature of your relationship with Mr. Chevere?”

I shrugged, almost lost for words. “We’re friends. Very old friends,” I answered truthfully, not knowing what else there was to say.

“Is that how Alex sees it?” Weber asked me, clearly eager to trip me up.

“We’ve been friends since we were kids,” I said, shrugging. “Our families have been close for years. Why are you asking? I’m sure he told you the same thing.”

“Are you sure you’re being truthful, Miss Hart?” Weber asked, barely concealing a sneer.

I bristled at the implication that I was lying. I mean, I was definitely withholding the fact that my boyfriend was the actual person responsible for the murder. But I wasn’t lying about Alex.

“About what?” I tried to keep the annoyance out of my tone. “I told you, we’re friends. You can ask anyone.”

“We have reason to believe that Mr. Chevere thinks differently,” Hardstark told me, his face unreadable.

I blinked at him. I couldn’t believe they were asking me about Alex. They couldn’t actually believe he had something to do with all this.

“If you think Alex would hurt anyone, you’re wrong,” I told him, starting to get frustrated. “He’s not like that.”

Hardstark looked to Weber and gave him a nod. Weber smirked, then pulled out a photograph and placed it on the table.

“This is a photo of Mr. Chevere’s closet,” Hardstark said.

I looked at the photo. In it, there were about a dozen photos of my face thumbtacked to a wall. Everything from extreme close-ups to photos taken from afar, photos I hadn’t posed for. I immediately understood why they’d pressed me so hard. I mean, it LOOKED bad.

Hardstark and Weber watched me carefully, clearly believing this was their ace in the hole.

So they were pretty shocked when I laughed out loud again.

“That was for a school project,” I said, happy to prove them wrong. “I did one of him, too. Mine’s way worse though. I kind of hate photography, to be honest. I don’t really know my angles or anyone else’s.”

“Really?” Weber cocked his head. “Because, to me, this looks like a shrine.”

“Well, Alex got an A minus on his shrine, then,” I shot back, rolling my eyes. “You can ask our photography teacher, Professor Llewyn.”

Hardstark wrote the name down and looked back up at me.

“Would you say Mr. Chevere’s feelings for you are completely platonic?” he asked me.

“Yeah,” I said, annoyed at his smug tone. “We’re friends. I mean, we kissed once, but—”

Hardstark’s eyebrows lifted, and I immediately felt like a total idiot—I’d just given him exactly what he wanted.

“*But* it was just a kiss,” I insisted. “It didn’t go beyond that. It was like kissing my brother. If I had a brother. Which I don’t, but you get it, right?”

“Do you have a boyfriend now?” Weber asked, putting a stop to my word vomit.

“I do.” I took a breath, trying to slow myself down. I wasn’t going to get into how complicated the “boyfriend” thing was. “He’s not from around here, though.”

“And did Alex meet this boyfriend when you attended the event on campus?” Hardstark asked. I hadn’t told him I’d been there, but I guess someone else had. “Or Tony?”

“I don’t think so.” I tried to remember that night more clearly, but there was really only one instant of it that was etched into my memory.

“Was Alex friends with Tony?” Weber asked, leaning in.

I shook my head. “Yes, but not really. Alex thought Tony was a jerk,” I admitted, not wanting to get caught in a lie.

Weber and Hardstark shared one of their infuriating looks. I knew I’d just confirmed some suspicion of theirs, and I started to feel a strong desire to run out of the station and never look back.

“What are you trying to get at, here?” I asked, hearing the desperation in my voice and wincing.

“Two witnesses from that night claim to have seen you leave with Tony for a while,” Hardstark said, watching me carefully.

I tried to keep my face as blank as I could. I couldn’t afford to give anything away.

“That’s true.” I folded my hands in my lap, trying to slow my breathing. “Tony told me he needed some air, so I went with him.”

“Isn’t it true that Alex hated Tony?” Weber asked, his mustache twitching. “He’s the reason why Tony’s ex-girlfriend broke up with him, correct?”

*Shit*. I hadn’t even remembered that. Weber was technically right. And I could see how that might make Alex look bad if you didn’t know the whole story.

“That’s only because Alex knew Tony was cheating on her,” I explained. “Not to mention, Tony could be sort of… emotionally abusive to her. Alex was trying to help her, not backstab Tony.”

I cringed at my choice of words. Great job trying to clear your friend’s name, Cali…

I took another deep breath. “I just mean that Alex never tried to ruin Tony’s life. He’s way too nice a guy. Some would say too nice! Ask anyone!”

“I’ll level with you, Miss Hart.” Hardstark set his notepad down on the table. “We think Mr. Chevere was obsessed with you, was hurt that you had a boyfriend, and snapped when he saw you and Tony go off alone together.”

Images from that night flooded my mind. Going off with Tony, him grabbing me, the look in his eye… I wished someone else had seen us, and I could tell the cops what had happened next*.*

But giving them more information now would only make me and Xavier seem guilty. And if they had decided Alex was in love with me, it wouldn’t get rid of his motive, either.

Weber shrugged. “When you look at the evidence, it’s obvious that your ‘friend’ Alex killed Tony.”

I felt my jaw drop. This couldn’t be happening. Were they serious? I needed to throw them off. I knew lying to the cops was wrong, but I had to save an innocent man. My only other option was to tell the cops about werewolves, and that seemed like the wrong choice.

“When we went outside,” I started, “there was this weird sound. Sort of like an animal? I thought it was a bear and kind of freaked out. And then we went inside. Could it have been an animal? Like a wolf or a bear or some kind of wolf-bear hybrid? Have you considered that?”

Hardstark rolled his eyes. “*Wolf-bear?*” He sneered. “Have you taken any illegal substances, Miss Hart?”

I shook my head, feeling my cheeks flush. So much for my attempt at a half-truth.

“We believe Alex tried to make this look like an animal attack,” Hardstark continued. “But the odds of it being an animal are extremely unlikely.”

“Look, I’ve answered your questions.” I stood up. “But I told you, your theory is wrong. I don’t know how else I can help you. So, can I go now?”

“Of course.” Hardstark nodded.

Weber got to his feet and opened the door for me. I could feel both of them watching me. Waiting for a clue or a tell. But I wouldn’t be giving them anything.

“Miss Hart?” Weber asked.

“Yeah?” I turned around, worried they were about to throw a fresh mountain of evidence at me.

He smirked at me. “Which one of us is the good cop?”

“Huh?” I had no idea what he was talking about.

“You said one of us was good and one was bad,” Weber reminded me. “Which is which?”

I resisted the strong urge to roll my eyes. “You’re both bad cops,” I told them before turning on my heel and getting the hell out of there.

When I got to the lobby, I made a beeline for Maya, walking as fast as I could without looking suspicious.

“How’d it go?” she asked. But I just grabbed her hand and walked her out of the station as fast as possible.

“They think Alex did it,” I whispered to her as we walked out into the parking lot. “Can you believe that?”

“That’s great!” Maya clapped her hands. “Problem solved.”

I glared at her. “Problem *not* solved, Maya.” I barely resisted shoving her. “Alex is my friend, and we both know he didn’t do this.”

I slid into the car, waiting impatiently for Maya to hop in the passenger seat.

“Look, them’s the breaks, kid.” Maya plopped down in her seat. “Can we go back to the pack house now and get back to our regularly scheduled bullshit?”

“No.” I threw the car into drive. “I need to go talk to Mikah. Now.”

**Episode 292**

GREYSON

*Last night*

I’d never wanted this. To be Alpha.

I watched the pack—*my* pack—having fun as the barbecue picked up in full swing. Meat sizzled on the grill, music blasted, and the beer was flowing. Everyone was releasing the tension from the fight with the Manus Cruentae. Except for me.

I’d never wanted to be an Alpha. And now that I’d been one for a short amount of time, I could safely say that I’d been better off as a Rogue, and not responsible for anyone’s skin but my own. I’d been able to cut and leave any time I started to feel too settled. Never too much a part of something, or too much on the outside. I’d never been comfortable owing anyone anything. And being an Alpha was all about duty. Not sure I was the best guy for that one.

And then there was *her*. Fucking. *Her*.

Maybe I should have let Xavier win the Lupo Finale. I watched him now, holding court with Gabriel and Colton and Jay. Their little boys club. It was so obvious that they’d follow him anywhere. And why wouldn’t they? Xavier had the spirit of a leader; he always had even since he was young. It was why the pack loved him. Why they’d been ready to follow him to the Lupo Finale and as an Alpha. Maybe I should go over and kiss some babies, make friends.

Hard pass.

Maybe someday, they’d understand why I did what I had to do. But if they didn’t, I could handle the pack’s hate. If I’d needed validation to live, then I would have died a long time ago.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Joss approaching me and tried not to visibly tense. *Fuck me*, I thought. Just because I wasn’t breaking out the beer bong at this party, didn’t mean I wanted her to kill my buzz. Dealing with upset women wasn’t necessarily my strong suit the past 26 years.

I knew I’d pissed her off. But she was my Luna—it wasn’t like I could avoid her forever. I watched her work her way around the fire, her eyes flickering with determination. Joss was ambitious and strong. That was why I’d picked her—because I knew she’d be best prepared for what could come.

She wasn’t just a fling anymore that I could leave town to avoid having to let down gently. We were bonded now. Because I’d made a choice.

We’d been lucky to have her with us during the fight. Whether I felt comfortable as an Alpha or not, I had the weight and responsibility of this role on my shoulders. And Joss had helped keep the people I’d sworn to protect safe. It was enough. It had to be.

At least that’s what I told myself.

I watched Joss work her way around the fire, her eyes flickering with determination. For as fierce as Joss was in a fight, she was even more brutal when she felt ignored. But what was I supposed to do? There wasn’t exactly a polite way to tell someone their feelings were basically at the bottom of your list of priorities.

Joss wanted all of me, and I couldn’t give it to her.

And even if I didn't want to be, I was Alpha.

“I haven’t forgiven you yet,” Joss slurred as she approached me, her eyes hooded as she took me in.

I was not nearly drunk enough for this.

“For?” I asked, bored.

I knew how this dance went. She’d act wounded, play the affronted party. Eventually, when she thought I felt bad enough for her, she’d toss her long mane over her shoulder and give me a come-hither stare. She would remind me how much she wanted to sleep with me again—if I decided to indulge her.

Yeah, no thanks.

There was no way I would. Things had been different when we were Rogues. But now I was Alpha.

And there was Cali.

I couldn’t get my run in with her in the bathroom out of my head. It’d been nearly impossible not to close the door and give in to temptation. I’d done it before. When I closed my eyes, I could still feel her body molded to mine at the pond.

And now I’d seen her naked in the hot spring. I hadn’t even seen Xavier, not at first. I’d only seen Cali.

A lot of fucking good *that* had done for my imagination. *Christ*.

Now my dreams were all filled with her soft, dewy skin. My lips over every inch of her, tasting her collarbone, biting her neck, and hearing her moan as I reached between her legs…

Did she *know* what I wanted to fucking do to her?

I was losing my goddamn mind.

“Xavier’s gone Rogue, did you know?” Joss said, interrupting my thoughts.

I was tired of this. “And what makes you think that?”

Joss gave me a slow, secretive smile, lording her knowledge over me. I refused to lean forward or probe any further. This was yet another ploy from her to get me into her bed. She was getting crafty, that was for sure. She only had leverage if she thought I wanted what she had.

“Because I heard your little half-brothers talking,” she said, trailing her fingers over my chest and shoulders. “Xavier’s headed out. Tonight.”

I grabbed her arm, stopping her. “What did you say?”

I was going to fucking kill Xavier.

Why would he do this now? Because of our fight? Xavier had always let his emotions get the better of him. But he wouldn’t abandon the pack when it needed him. He loved these people, and putting them at risk just wasn’t in his DNA.

Would he really leave *Cali*? The thought left me boiling with rage.

“I just wondered what the mighty Alpha was going to do about it.” Joss wet her bottom lip with her tongue and let her eyes rove over my body.

“Thanks. I’ll talk to him,” I muttered tersely before heading toward the house.

Joss wrapped her fingers around my wrist and batted her eyelashes at me. “You could thank me, you know?”

I did the nicest thing I could at the moment, which was rip my hand out of her grasp and walk away without a word.

I caught sight of Xavier after I’d entered the pack house. He was headed to the front door. “What’s going on, brother?” I asked, eyeing the duffle bag slung over his shoulder. “Going somewhere?”

Xavier clenched his jaw, not answering as he turned around. Once we made eye contact, he raised an eyebrow. I watched him swallow and mentally count to ten—or whatever it was he did to keep himself from ripping my head off every time we spoke.

Every time I looked at him, I could see our father. Unpleasant to say the least.

“I asked you a question,” I said. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“It’s none of your business,” Xavier said, practically grunting as he tried to move past me. “I won’t be gone long.”

I stepped back into his path, refusing to take that bullshit as an answer.

“You’re still a member of the Redwood Pack, Xavier,” I reminded him. “And that makes me your Alpha. In case you forgot.”

I knew it was a dick move to rub it in, but I wanted to know what he was doing—why the fuck he was leaving Cali here alone.

Xavier didn’t look me in the eye. “I’m going after Cali.”

“What?” Something in my stomach clenched, and I made sure I didn’t let it show. “Where is Cali?”

“She went to Minnesota.” Xavier hiked his bag further up his shoulder, clearly eager to get going. “Which I see you didn’t know.”

“Of course she did,” I murmured, thinking about Cali’s determined face when she’d asked me about leaving. I should’ve known she’d defy me. “I told her she couldn’t leave.”

“We both did.” Xavier shrugged, like it didn’t matter. “If you knew her as well as I do, you would have predicted this.”

I bristled and saw the ends of Xavier’s mouth turn up. I was giving him exactly what he wanted. Which only pissed me off more.

“If you were so ahead of the game,” I said, “then why didn’t you stop her? She’s your *mate*, after all, isn’t she?”

“Because I’m not the Alpha.” Xavier took another step forward, invading my space. “It’s *your* job to keep the pack in line. Not mine.”

I saw red. I wanted to grab him by the shirt and toss him across the room. But Xavier wanted a reaction. That was why he was pulling this shit like a damn child. I would never give him the satisfaction.

I shrugged. “Looks like Cali’s going to have to handle that human’s murder all on her own,” I told Xavier. “Because you’re sure as shit not going anywhere.”

As if I wouldn’t have done the exact same thing for Cali. As if I wasn’t itching to get in a car and onto the next plane out of here. As if I wouldn’t have done worse to any piece of shit who tried to lay a hand on her.

What if she’d been followed to Minnesota? What if she found some kind of trouble there that I couldn’t anticipate? That I couldn’t protect her from? What if she fell prey to one of the million things that could kill a human? She was so fragile, and so confident that she wasn’t.

If I were still Rogue, I’d be able to go after her. Fuck the pack. Fuck Xavier. Fuck all of this.

“I did what I had to do,” Xavier said forcefully, pulling me out of my head. “And I’m doing the same thing now by going after her.”

“You will stay here to help protect the pack,” I said.

“I *need*,” Xavier ground out, his hands balled up into fists, “to be with my mate.”

He pushed past me and walked out into the night. Part of me wanted to drag him back into the house. I was the one to protect her. Not him. But I didn’t have it in me to keep someone who could protect her so far away. Xavier hadn’t won. I was letting him go after Cali.

It was what I’d do, in his position.

What I wished I could do in mine.

**Episode 293**

“You’re kidding, right?” Maya asked, incredulous.

I kept my eyes on the road as I drove us back to my parents’ house. I watched landmarks from my childhood fly past our windows as I sped home. I’d always felt safe here until now.

“Why would you want to talk to a bloodsucker like Mikah?” Maya continued, clearly fuming. “I should have staked him when I had the chance.”

“You are not staking anyone,” I said. “And I just want to ask him some questions.”

I’d thought talking to the police would make me feel better. Take something off my list of things to do. But it had only made me feel worse.

Now the to-do list read:

1. Make sure Xavier doesn’t get convicted for Tony’s murder.
2. Make sure *Alex* doesn’t get convicted for Tony’s murder.
3. Make sure Maya doesn’t kill—or get killed by—a vampire private investigator.
4. Find out everything about my Fae ancestry while also keeping it a secret from everyone who isn’t my dying mother who seems to be getting weaker by the second.

My heart threatened to beat right out of my chest at the thought of accomplishing any of these impossible tasks.

“Mikah isn’t your friend, Cali,” Maya told me, bringing me back to reality. “He’s trying to figure out who killed Tony, and we both know who did it. What if you let something slip and he’s able to prove it was Xavier?”

I winced at the thought.

What would even happen if Xavier was found out? Would he run? Would he kill the cops? Would they believe me if I told them that Tony had attacked me and Xavier had just been protecting me? But it was too late for that. Maybe if we’d gone to the police in the first place. But it was tough to explain. *My werewolf boyfriend ripped this asshole’s leg off in an attempt to protect me, officer!*

“And remember.” Maya, obviously sensing my increasing worry, was on a roll now. “Mikah’s not on this case because he wants to help that kid’s poor, grieving parents. Vampires always have a hidden agenda. And who knows what kind of skeevy bullshit *that* entails.”

“The police think it’s Alex, though,” I reminded her, feeling helpless. “And he’s innocent. Like, super innocent. Never-done-anything-wrong-in-his-life innocent.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Maya’s voice softened slightly.

“Get what?” I asked, my voice jumping up an octave. What had Maya thought of that I hadn’t?

“There’s no third choice, here,” Maya told me. “It’s either throw Alex under the bus to protect Xavier or risk your mate getting caught. And we both know you can’t do that.”

My heart sank. I knew she was right. If it came down to a choice between Xavier and Alex, I’d choose Xavier every time. But caring more about one person shouldn’t have to mean abandoning the other. Alex was a friend—a good friend from my past before all of this wolf-bear nonsense began. I couldn’t turn my back on him. It didn’t feel right.

“So you’d put an innocent person in jail for Colton?” I asked her, squeezing the steering wheel so hard my knuckles went white. “Last I checked, you wanted to kill him.”

“That’s different,” Maya shot back, glaring at me. “And you know it.”

“Fuck this.” I pulled the car over to the side of the road, sick of having this conversation with someone I could only partially see. “I don’t even know how to reach Mikah, so isn’t this whole thing kind of moot?”

“And that’s probably for the best,” Maya chirped, eager to leave all this behind. “So why don’t we just get the hell out of here and go home?”

“THIS IS MY HOME!” I cried.

I looked out the windshield and realized I’d pulled over by the ice cream shop I’d worked at when I was in high school. It was so weird to think that my mom had been Fae back then, too. That all of this magical craziness hadn’t just manifested when I’d hopped on that plane to Oregon.

Just looking at the sun-faded ice cream parlor sign made my heart hurt. This town, these people, had only changed in my mind. Really, they were just living their same old lives, and I was the one who’d changed.

“Or it was my home,” I said out loud. “You know?”

Maya opened and closed her mouth, which led me to believe I’d probably just been spared something snarky. I pressed the heels of palms into my eyes, trying to block out the headache I felt coming on—and to stifle the tears I really didn’t want to shed in front of someone who made fun of me so much.

“Could you just shut up while I try to think of a plan?” I grumbled.

Maya sighed. “I’ll try. You talk enough for the both of us.”

She had to be wrong. There had to be a third option. Maybe I could use my Fae powers to find Mikah, somehow? But I still didn’t really know what those powers *were*. Shit.

I heard a knock on the window and all but jumped out of my seat. Was I about to get a ticket in my mom’s car, on top of everything else?

I turned to see Mikah standing outside the window, waving at me.

“WHAT THE FUCK?” Maya shouted, directly in my ear.

I wasn’t doing much better. My mouth was hanging open, and I wondered if I’d somehow summoned Mikah with my thoughts. I made a mental note to ask my mom if Fae could do that.

Mikah tapped on my window again and made a ‘roll it down’ gesture.

“Kind of hard to talk through glass,” he half-shouted at me.

I turned to look at Maya, who was shaking her head furiously.

“Behave yourself, okay?” I told her.

As I rolled the window down, I told myself I could just floor it if I got any bad vibes from Mikah.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked him. “Are you following me?”

“I’m a detective.” Mikah smiled. “Why don’t you figure it out?”

Maybe summoning supernatural creatures *wasn’t* a Fae power. That was kind of a bummer.

“How’d it go with Hardstark and Weber?” he asked, leaning down so we were closer to eye level. “Aren’t they cute? You know, in an off-brand *Law and Order* kind of way.”

“It didn’t go great,” I admitted. “I’m ready to talk to you more, now.”

“Fantastic.” Mikah’s smile widened. “Are you going to invite me in, or do I have to stand out here waiting for a semi to turn me into road kill?”

“Sure.” I shrugged. I had nothing to lose at this point. “Come on in.”

Mikah reached for the door and Maya screamed—again, right in my ear.

“What the fuck, Cali?” Maya wailed. “Have you not heard a single thing I’ve said? Don’t invite vampires in fucking anywhere!”

“But this isn’t a house.” I eyed her, confused. “I didn’t think—”

But before I could say any more, Mikah slid into the backseat and Maya basically leapt out of the car.

“I’m not sitting in a car with him!” she told me, shaking her head. “I’ll wait out here.”

And with that, she slammed the door behind her.

“Your werewolf friend is very hot-headed,” Mikah noted. “Perhaps I should have fanged her when I had the chance.”

“This isn’t about the two of you fighting,” I reminded him, glancing at the rearview mirror so I could look him in the eye. But he wasn’t there.

I whipped around to see where he’d moved to. But he was exactly where I’d thought he was.

“Yep.” Mikah’s eyes sparkled. “That one’s true. No reflection.”

“Can you eat garlic?” I asked.

“I mean, I *could*.” Mikah scrunched his face up. “But it’s super gross. I’d prefer not to.”

I almost laughed at the idea of an immortal creature being scared of a vegetable. The best one overall IMO. Then I had to bite my tongue before I could ask him if he sparkled in direct sunlight.

Mikah’s eyes narrowed. “You didn’t just invite me here to talk about vampire lore, did you?”

“I didn’t invite you anywhere,” I pointed out. “You just showed up.”

“But you did invite me in and said you wanted to talk,” he reminded me. “Your friend is right, by the way. That was a dangerous move. You shouldn’t have done that.”

“If you’re trying to scare me, don’t bother.” I tried to sound as tough as possible. “I’ve dealt with your kind before.”

I glanced outside, only to see Maya glaring at the both of us. I sighed.

“I want to talk to you about Tony’s murder,” I told Mikah, switching topics.

“We can talk about that in a moment.” Mikah leaned close and I tried not to flinch. “But I have a question first.”

I stiffened, remembering what my mother had said.

“Why ask me what vampires can and cannot do?” His eyes bored into mine. “Shouldn’t a Fae like you know everything about supernaturals?”

I grimaced. *Shit.* My mom had been right—he *could* smell it on me.

“Ahh, so I was right,” he said. “You spoke to your mother I take it?”

Double shit. But I hadn’t told him I was Fae and therefore hadn’t broken my promise to my mother. Maybe this was my chance to get some unbiased information on what being a Fae actually meant.

“Why don’t we make a deal?” I asked him.

**Episode 294**

Mikah chuckled from behind me, and I felt a shiver run down my spine. My toes curled in fear and I could feel sweat slicking my palms. The gravity of this situation hit me like a ton of bricks. I was alone in a car with a vampire.

And the problems didn’t stop there. I was alone in a car with a vampire who was *this* close to having everything he needed to frame someone I cared about for murder. I’d been a fool to think I had the upper hand here. Maybe Xavier was right. Maybe everyone would’ve been better off if I’d just stuck with the pack in Oregon.

“You want to make a deal with me?” Mikah let the words fall from his lips slowly, like he was savoring the taste of them. Enjoying the power he had over me.

I felt sick to my stomach. Here I was, sitting in the car I’d learned to drive in, talking to an immortal being with a thirst for blood who was being paid to find out who murdered a guy my boyfriend killed for attacking me.

Maybe I should have listened to Maya and driven away as fast as possible the second I saw Mikah.

“I don’t think so.” He shook his head. “Making a deal with a Fae is a terrible idea.”

I felt my eyes widen in surprise. Perhaps I was in a better position than I’d thought.

What did Mikah mean? Were my mother’s people—*my* people—untrustworthy? Or did we have so little power besides looking pretty that we had nothing much to offer? And why hadn’t *I* gotten that power, by the way? I was pretty sure if I’d been given the choice at thirteen to either have special powers or to be so pretty it was almost impossible for people to look at me, I would have chosen the latter.

But that was beside the point.

How could I get Mikah to make a deal with me? And how could I learn more about being Fae from my mother without *worrying* my mother?

“Besides,” Mikah said with a shrug, oblivious to my internal dilemma, “what’s in it for me?”

“I could…” I racked my brain for something to offer. “I could help you prove it was an animal that killed Tony.”

Mikah’s eyebrows rose, and I wondered whether I’d just said something very smart or very stupid—or both.

“You’re joking, right?” His brow furrowed. “Unless you consider her”—Mikah pointed to Maya, who gave him the finger—“and others like her to be animals… Which I suppose I could understand.”

I wriggled in my seat as he drew closer, until he could whisper directly into my ear.

“Caliana, we both know it was a werewolf that ripped Tony Blanchet to shreds,” he said. “I think the only difference between us is that *you* know which werewolf it was. And I won’t give up until I find out, so why don’t you save everyone a lot of pain and just tell me?”

What would he do if he found out Xavier was the killer? Would he turn him over to the police? But he had to know what Xavier would do if he felt cornered. Why would Mikah want to risk supernatural exposure?

I turned to him. “If it *were* a werewolf—which I’m not saying it is, incidentally, but if it were—would you turn them over to the police?”

Mikah looked out the window, avoiding my gaze. “I’d make sure justice was served,” he said, his voice taking on an edge I really didn’t like.

“That’s not what I asked,” I reminded him through clenched teeth.

I glanced at Maya, who was pacing a few feet away from the car. Maybe she was right. Maybe vampires really couldn’t be trusted.

But Mikah was the only person besides my mom who knew I was Fae. Maybe I could wring some answers out of him that my mom might not give me.

“There’s something I don’t understand about your questions.” Mikah turned to me, his eyes searching. “What’s in it for you?”

Before I could open my mouth to answer, Maya was pounding on the window.

“Are you going to take all day?” she shouted, looking pissed.

I held up a finger. “Just a minute,” I yelled back. “And don’t break my mom’s window! I *will* make you pay for it, Maya!”

I turned back to Mikah, who looked like he was trying very hard not to laugh at me. I took a deep, cleansing breath, hoping it would relieve me of the desire to break Maya’s nose. Again.

“Alex is my friend,” I told Mikah plainly. “We both know he didn’t do this, and I want to help him in any way I can.”

Mikah nodded, his expression softening a bit. Did that mean he was sympathetic? Or just that he wanted me to *think* he was sympathetic? If I could just have ONE conversation that didn’t involve three-dimensional chess about everyone’s motivations, that would be awesome.

“I appreciate your loyalty,” he admitted. “The police won’t be able to prove Alex’s guilt if he didn’t do it. The evidence just won’t exist. But you still haven’t told me what it is you want from me.”

I thought on it. Mikah wouldn’t give me any help without something in exchange. And the only thing I had that he wanted was Xavier.

He would never get that from me.

I heard the door open and wondered if Maya was getting back in. But when I looked, she was still outside. I checked the rearview mirror reflexively and saw no one there. Rolling my eyes, I turned around and saw that Mikah was gone.

“It was nice talking to you.” I yelped when I realized Mikah was standing just outside my door. “Good luck with whatever it is you’re up to, Caliana.”

He waved to Maya. “Beast,” he gave her a sarcastic salute and headed back to his car, which was parked across the road.

“Bloodbag,” she growled before sliding back into the car next to me.

“Ugh.” She wrinkled her nose. “It smells like death and bad cologne in here. I hate you.”

I shot her a look. “You can really smell death?” I asked, intrigued.

“*Duh*. How’d it go with Detective Dracula?” she asked.

I sighed, wishing I had better news for her. “He knows the killer was a werewolf,” I told her. “And since I’m here with you, he knows that werewolf is someone I know.”

“You know they used to call private investigators ‘dicks’, right?” Maya asked. “It’s fitting.”

I started the car, not in the mood for Maya’s jokes. I thought about where to take her. Honestly, a part of me wanted to just go back to Oregon with her.

I wanted to see Xavier. I wanted him to hold me. I wanted to find out that the Manus Cruentae had given up, and that my mom was all better, and that everything was going to be okay from now on.

But that wasn’t possible.

So I decided to drive us back to my parents’ place.

The silence between Maya and me was broken when my phone buzzed in the cup holder. Maya snatched it up and looked at the screen.

“It’s that Alex guy,” she told me. “Want me to text him that he’s going to jail? I could tell him to skip town for you, if you want.”

I grabbed at my phone, but Maya held it out of my reach.

“Don’t text and drive, human,” she teased. “You don’t have my supernatural reflexes.”

“You shouldn’t do it either,” I grumbled, relenting.

Maya looked down at the buzzing phone. “Oh, he’s calling now.”

“Don’t pick up, Maya,” I ordered. “I really don’t want to—”

“Hi Alex,” Maya said into the phone, her voice faux cheery. “It’s Maya. Cali’s driving us into a ditch. What’s up?”

“Alex!” I cried out, hoping he could hear me. “Sorry! Don’t listen to anything she says! Maya’s deeply unstable!”

I grabbed at the phone and we wrestled over it for a second. I thanked my lucky stars that the road was totally empty. I must have accidentally hit the speaker button, because suddenly Alex’s voice filled my car.

“Cali?” He sounded nervous. “Are you there?”

I snatched the phone from Maya and gripped it as tightly as I could. “Yep,” I chirped. “I’m here.”

“How was talking to the police?” he asked me. “Are you doing okay? I know it can be kind of stressful.”

I snuck a glance at Maya, who just gestured for me to watch the road. I considered giving herthe finger.

“Umm, it was fine.” I tried to figure out exactly what to tell him. “I guess. It was very… police-y.”

“Yeah,” Alex agreed. “Those two officers came to my house a few times. They seem nice, though. They’re just doing their job and trying to find Tony’s killer, you know?”

I could practically see Alex’s hopeful smile as I listened to him. That sweet, sweet buffoon. I wanted to yell, *they were only nice to you because they were hoping you’d let slip that you did it!*

But that probably wouldn’t be helpful. I opened my mouth, hoping to say something that straddled the line between ‘sorry my boyfriend committed this murder you’re getting framed for’ and ‘pack your bags and change your name!’.

But Alex kept talking.

“I hear they have a suspect,” he said. “Did they tell you who they thought it might be?”

**Episode 295**

Maya, the insensitive monster that she was, burst out laughing.

“Shut up!” I whisper-yelled, covering my phone and staring daggers at her.

Maya held her hands up in a gesture of peace, and in return I tried to stop willing the earth to open up and swallow her whole.

“Sorry,” I told Alex. “Maya chose a really inappropriate time to look at cat memes. Remember what I was saying about her being unstable?”

I knew I was stalling. But he’d asked me if the police had suspects, and I couldn’t exactly say

‘Yeah Alex, they think *you* did it. But don’t worry, it was actually my boyfriend and I fully intend to save you! I just haven’t figured out how, yet. But don’t worry!’

“Uhh, no,” I lied. “They didn’t mention anyone in particular to me. They must still be figuring things out. It’s a big school, and there were a lot of people at that party. And Tony! I mean, he had so many friends, so it just— Well it really could be anyone when you think about it, right?”

I forced myself to stop talking before my motor mouth betrayed me.

“Yeah, he was super popular,” Alex conceded. “I mean, he was a total dick, but he knew everyone. But even though he pissed just about all of them off, I can’t think of anyone who would want to kill him. It’s just so crazy.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I willed a solution to magically fall into my lap. Mainly because I had no idea what to do next. But I had to say something. I had to *do* something. I felt pressure building up inside me. I was trying so hard to come up with an idea, it felt like steam was about to shoot out of my ears.

“Tony had a gambling problem!” I blurted out, surprising even myself.

“*What?*” Alex and Maya both replied, aghast.

Maya was staring at me like I’d hit my head. Or she was about to hit me in the head. It wasn’t totally clear.

“The cops said that it’s possible Tony owed thousands to some local mob.” I kept talking, unable to stop myself now that I’d started. “It’s frightening, but it makes so much sense to me now. That night, he told me that he just needed more juice. And I think ‘juice’ was code for money or like, luck. For the gambling. That he did. Tony.”

Maya shook her head, clearly disgusted by the poor quality of my lie. I just shrugged at her, exasperated. What else was I supposed to do?

“That’s so crazy.” Alex sounded stunned. “No one ever said anything about Tony gambling to me. Was it horse racing or cards or something?”

“Both,” I answered, my voice shooting up an octave as my lie sprouted details. “Everything. The ponies, poker, roulette… Anything you can think of.”

“Wow.” Alex’s voice was tinged with regret and concern—that sweet, sweet idiot. “I had no idea he was in so much trouble. No wonder his body was all messed up. It was probably like, a message. To make sure everyone in town pays their debts.”

Maya rolled her eyes and started to make a gagging noise. I swatted her arm, trying to get her to shut up. Because no matter how bad my lie was, Alex was buying it. And that was gonna buy me some time to figure out how to fix this whole mess.

“Look.” I tried to switch gears—mostly because I didn’t know anything else about gambling. “I’m really sorry we couldn’t make brunch happen, but would you maybe want to get together tonight?”

Honestly, I had a pretty terrible track record when it came to Alex. The time I’d stood him up for that second date and run off to Oregon to sell my virginity came to mind. And while Xavier and I might not have been officially *on* right now, I wasn’t interested in Alex. But I still wanted to see my friend.

“There’s a party tonight,” Alex told me. “A real deal college party. Remember those? Maybe you want to come—see what you’ve missed, being away all semester? And you can bring your unstable friend, too.”

Maya glared at me. And not just because of the instability remark. She shook her head furiously, like she was *daring* me to say yes.

But could she not hear the anticipation in Alex’s voice? The boy I was nowhere close to saving from jail? This could be his last party! What else was I supposed to do?

“That would be awesome!” I chirped, looking anywhere but at Maya.

“Oh, great!” Alex sounded so excited I could have cried. “I’ll send you the address. Oh, and bring bathing suits! I heard they have a *pool.* Like a real adult-sized pool, and it’s heated if it gets cold and everything! I’m so glad you’re back, Caliana!”

And with that, the phone went quiet. Which meant I could no longer ignore Maya, whose eyes I could feel boring into me.

“Okay.” Her voice was cold. “We need to talk.”

Shit.

“About who the fuck this clingy little bastard thinks he is,” she continued, making my jaw drop.

“I— What— First of all,” I spluttered, feeling my cheeks turn red with anger and embarrassment. “Alex is not a bastard. He’s maybe a *little* bit clingy, yeah. But he’s a really decent guy.”

“From my perspective,” Maya said, crossing her arms over her chest, “he’s practically peeing his pants waiting for you to come to this stupid party tonight. And what the fuck was he saying about the pool? Adult-sized? Is his *brain* even adult-sized?”

I couldn’t believe Maya. Had she just never met someone who was nicer than they were cool? Judging by the company she kept… probably not.

Maya grumbled something under her breath about humans, and I rolled my eyes at her. But then I caught myself. Because maybe that didn’t even apply to me anymore.

Was I still human?

I needed to talk to my mom.

“Alex and I have been through a lot,” I tried to explain, hoping that Maya might get off my back if she could understand this. “He was my first kiss.”

Maya barked out a laugh. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she said pityingly.

“Can you cut the sarcasm for once?” I asked, annoyed.

Maya put her hands up in a gesture of peace.

“It was actually really sweet,” I explained. “He took me on this date and I was super nervous because it was my first. I spent forever picking out my outfit. And even though the date wasn’t all that romantic, Alex was so, so nice. He made me laugh and smile and feel like I maybe deserved to do this with someone I actually liked. And at the end of the night, he told me I looked really, really beautiful and said he’d really like to kiss me, and I let him.”

“I guess Alex saw that kiss as a happily-ever-after type of thing?” Maya asked, her voice a bit gentler.

I nodded, feeling the same guilt twisting my stomach that always appeared when I thought about kissing Alex.

Maya scoffed. “*Men*.”

“It’s not like that,” I insisted. “He’s not some entitled douche who thinks he owns me because we kissed one time. We’re close. We’re really friends.”

But Maya didn’t seem to get it.

“Have you never had a similar relationship?” I asked, trying to get her to see my side of things.

Maya considered it, then shook her head. “Not really. My first kiss wasn’t anything special. A bunch of us played spin the bottle before anyone was mated. You know, stupid kid stuff. It was before all the pack wars… A lot of the people who were in that circle with me are dead now.”

I watched her shrug, quick to brush it off like it was nothing. Like it was a sad thing that had happened to someone else. I knew I shouldn’t press. I felt guilty for even bringing it up. Maya was guarded for a reason, and this was probably it.

“You never kissed Nolan, did you?” I asked her, curious.

“Ugh, gross.” Maya stuck her tongue out. “No way. It was never about that with him.”

She sighed and got a faraway look in her eye. I wondered if we were about to bond a little bit.

“I just liked the idea of being a Luna,” she explained. “Even if it meant I had to be Nolan’s.”

“I get it,” I said with a nod. “I felt the same way with Xavier. When I saw Joss get chosen, all I could think about was that it was supposed to be me.”

Maya side-eyed me.

“With *Xavier*!” I cried out. “God!”

Maya raised an eyebrow. “Can you blame me?”

“Umm, yeah, I can,” I told her, laughing even though it was a super bitchy comment. It was the kind of joke Lola would have made, which made me miss her. But it also made me wonder if some day Maya and I could be close like that, too.

“Okay, so,” I started. “A few years after that spin the bottle kiss, you met Colton. What did that feel like?”

“Nope.” Maya held up her hands like she was going to shove me. “No, no, no. No way. I’m not doing this with you. This girly road trip girl talk thing. We’re practically enemies!”

“Oh, come *on!*”I whined. “You heard my story. Tell me yours! What’s the deal with you and Colton? It’s time to come clean.”

**Episode 296**

Maya looked out the window, that faraway look back in her eyes. “Colton’s a jerk,” she mumbled, shrugging. “Whatever.”

I wasn’t buying that. I was gonna get some platonic feminine intimacy out of Maya if it killed me. Or her. Or both of us. Probably me.

“You use sarcasm as a shield,” I informed her, breaking out my Oprah language. “Why can’t you just be honest with me? I’m not gonna tell anyone. Cone of silence, I swear.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” she snapped. “He’s my mate. It is the way it is.”

“But do you *love* him?” I asked, trying to get her to put some kind of label on it other than the one magically forced on her.

“Ugh,” she groaned. “Cali—and I’m asking you politely—will you *please* shut the fuck up about this? Let’s talk about the pool party we’re going to. The one your ‘just-a-friend’ invited us to.”

I bristled at the description. But I knew she was just trying to bait me into getting mad about something else. But she couldn’t fool me that easily.

“Nope.” I shook my head. “You’re not getting off the hook that easily. At least tell me if you *like* Colton. That’s easy, right?”

“Sometimes relationships between mates are complicated,” she told me primly. I almost laughed at how proper and pinched her voice sounded.

“Sorry, Miss Manners,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Okay.” Maya smirked. “But it’s true. Colton and I are complicated. Especially on his end of things.”

“But why?” I asked, wishing she didn’t have to be so closed off. She was nice when she let herself be. If things were simpler between her and Colton, maybe she’d be less of a huge pain in the ass.

“If you both want to be together, why not just *be together?*” I asked. “It would be ten times easier! You wouldn’t have to always be threatening to kill each other. Things could be… nice. And you could do a triple date with me and Xavier and Lola and Jay.”

“Kill me.” Maya mimed shooting herself in the head, and I had to laugh. I’d known as soon as I said it that I’d just described her worst nightmare.

“Cali, you just don’t get it,” she told me, sounding earnest. “I hate that I’m mates with him. Our packs were enemies for so long. We were both basically raised to hate each other.”

“That’s so stupid.” I wished I could understand how she was feeling, but I couldn’t. I didn’t feel that kind of hate toward anyone.

Maya just shrugged. “Maybe it is,” she admitted. “But it’s instinct, and it’s hard as fuck to shake. And him being a total dick doesn’t exactly help.”

“Yeah, that’s probably true.” I laughed. “But… He’s kind of lovable? Sometimes?”

“You said that, not me,” Maya was quick to point out.

“I’m sensing that you’ve reached your limit on being open,” I noted.

“Does your intuition know no bounds?” Maya asked sarcastically.

But after that she softened, giving me the smallest of smiles.

“I hope you have fun at the party tonight,” I told her. A peace offering.

Maya looked at me, her gaze piercing. “Just remember, we’re going home after this,” she told me. “You did what you came here to do. You’ve talked to the cops, and you’re seeing your clingy friend. Nothing else is keeping us here.”

Besides keeping Alex from going to jail. And finding out more from my mom about being Fae.

\*\*\*

Back at the apartment, I dug through my drawers. I was happy to reunite with some of my favorite clothes that hadn’t screamed *Lose Your Virginity in This!* but that I would now definitely be taking back to Oregon.

“You can borrow any bathing suit you want from me or Lola,” I told Maya as I surveyed my options. “In case you want to go swimming.”

Maya shrugged. “Whatever.” She plopped down on my bed. “Can’t we just like, get this over with?”

I stared at her, annoyed. “You’re not gonna be like this at the party, right?”

“What, bitchy?” Maya asked, batting her eyelashes. “It’s the only way I know how to be, Cali.”

I snorted. “That I already knew. I meant… No offense, but your hair is— Well, it looks like you fought off a bunch of werewolves in the woods the other day. Which I know you did, but you don’t want other people to know that, right?”

Maya sat up and looked in the mirror on my door, touching her super tangled hair. She shrugged.

“Maybe you could let me help?” I held up a brush and wiggled it in the air.

“*Fine.*” Maya groaned, sitting down in my desk chair so I could help her out.

I rushed to get started before she could snap out of this rare moment of agreeability. We were brushing hair and sharing clothes before going to a party. Maybe Maya was on drugs.

I ran the brush through her hair. Underneath the knots, it was actually really silky and thick and beautiful. Xavier’s was the same way. Did all werewolves have nice hair? Because, if they did, that was just unfair.

“Maybe I could do your hair,” Maya piped up.

“You’re being sarcastic, right?” I quipped, brushing through a particularly bad tangle.

“You’re catching on.” Maya grinned and I rolled my eyes.

“I wouldn’t want you to fuck mine up anyway,” I told her, re-parting her hair on the side so it spilled over her eye. “What do you think?”

I saw Maya check herself out, biting down on her lip to keep herself from smiling.

“Not terrible,” she deadpanned.

“Wow, that was almost a compliment,” I teased. “Now move so I can do my hair.”

Maya obliged, but when she stood up something caught her eye. “That necklace is really cool.” She pointed at the Fae necklace my mother had given me today. “Where’d you get it?”

“It was a gift from my mom,” I answered, giving her a tight smile. In that moment, I wished I could tell her what was going on. It would be nice not to be alone in this with someone who wasn’t a vampire. But I’d made my mom a promise, so instead I just started working on my hair.

One thing at a time.

\*\*\*

By the time we showed up at the address Alex had texted me, the party was in full swing. Music was blasting, the floor was sticky with beer, and the place was packed wall to wall with loud, tipsy college kids. Basically, it was Maya’s worst nightmare.

“How long are we staying at this fucking thing?” she grumbled as we squeezed our way through a pack of drunk frat boys, heading toward the kitchen, where Alex had said he’d be.

“Cali!” Alex yelled when he saw me, running over to give me a huge bear hug.

The second I saw his beer hat, I knew Maya would have a lot to say. But I didn’t care.

“Want a sip?” He offered me one of the straws connected to head beers.

Maya eyed me as I took a polite sip.

“Yum,” I lied, choking it down. I would never like the taste of beer. But maybe it tasted better when it was cold. And not from a wearable accessory.

“I’m so glad you’re here!” Alex was slurring a bit from all the hat beer.

“Told you so,” Maya mouthed at me from behind Alex’s back. “He’s obsessed.”

I glared at her.

“It’s good to see you,” I told Alex, meaning it. Hoping I’d be able to find a way to save him.

“Your timing is perfect.” He grinned. “I got us into the next round of beer pong!”

“What?” I spluttered. “Alex, I don’t—”

“It’ll be *fun!”* he wheedled. “Especially after we go to the kitchen and grab drinks!”

Before I knew it, I was being whisked away to a table full of cups in a familiar diamond pattern, and surrounded by people I knew from school.

For a second, my heart ached for a simpler time. When I’d been worried about my grade point average rather than my life. When I’d been ignored by boys instead of stuck between two of them. When I’d been worried about hating the taste of beer and how it would affect my chances of getting a boyfriend… Well, to be fair, right now I *was* worried about my hatred of beer.

“Ready to play?” Alex shouted down our table. “I’ve got my partner.”

A white girl with strawberry blonde hair and freckles turned at Alex’s voice and glared at me.

“What did I do to piss her off?” I asked Alex, trying to keep my voice low, but still audible over the loud music.

“Becky’s just super competitive,” Alex reassured me. “But she doesn’t stand a chance against the Dream Team.”

“Are we the Dream Team?” I asked, brow furrowed.

“Hell yeah we are!” Alex laughed, holding up his hand for a high five.

Not wanting to leave him hanging, I gave him five and pasted a grin onto my face. “Beer pong!” I cheered. “Love it!”

Becky stared at our cups with laser focus, holding the ping pong ball in her hand and aiming. I was stunned by her concentration. And by how fast she tossed the ball.

Which sunk into the cup directly in front of me.

Annoyed, I drained the cup as fast as I could, wincing at the taste.

I lined up my shot and tried to hit the center cup, hoping that if I missed, it would go in another cup. But the ball bounced off the table.

Shit.

I waited to see it hit the floor, but instead someone scooped it up midair. Someone with huge hands.

I looked up to see the identity of my knight in shining armor, and was shocked to find it was Xavier. And he looked pissed.

**Episode 297**

My jaw dropped as I watched Xavier crush the ping pong ball in his fist.

“Xavier?” I asked, wondering if I was hallucinating.

But he was real. Oh, was he real.

My heart sped up as I took him in. A dark grey long sleeve shirt stretched across his chest, and his black jeans fit him like a glove.

God, I’d missed him.

But when he tossed the now flattened ping pong ball into one of the cups in front of me, splattering me with cheap, foamy, disgusting beer, I realized that he was less than excited to see me. My heart sank, more than a little.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, at the same time Becky said, “You have to drink that” in a nasally voice.

“I’m taking over,” Xavier practically growled at Becky’s partner—a lanky kid who backed away quickly, clearly not wanting to risk a fight with my very angry kind-of-boyfriend. “You can take a break.”

Well then. He could really be menacing when he wanted to be. And not just when he was a wolf. Seeing him in this familiar setting was bizarre.

“Whoa!” Alex cried. “I didn’t know Xavier was here! Not that I mind or anything. You just should have said something.”

“It’s a surprise,” I told him, with a half-hearted smile. “For everyone.”

I watched Xavier, who was staring right back at me. His eyes studied me, and I felt the urge to sink under the table and hide from him.

“You know, you’re kind of cute.” Becky eyed Xavier, shooting her shot.

Xavier grunted, ignoring her. Which was fortunate, because it meant I wouldn’t have to rip her hair out.

Xavier nodded at Alex. “Nice hat.”

Alex smiled a dopey smile. Not realizing he was being insulted, he reached for one of his straws and took a long pull of hat beer. I tried not to worry about how every time he drank from his hat, he became a worse beer pong partner.

“Drink up,” Xavier told me, his voice cold and impersonal. I knew he was mad at me, but I hated being treated like some stranger. Actually, it kind of pissed me off.

I chugged the gross, sour beer, keeping eye contact with my pissed off boyfriend the whole time. When I was done, I tossed the cup over my shoulder, not caring who I hit.

“We can’t play anymore,” I told Xavier, propping a hand on my hip. “*Someone* smashed the ball.”

“Not to worry!” Alex chimed in, undaunted. “There’s a whole box!”

He offered up a box full of multicolored ping pong balls, and I sighed. Looked like this wasn’t over. I fished out a neon pink ball, which I chose mainly out of spite.

I looked around for Maya and spotted her behind Xavier, surrounded by frat guys who were cheering her on as she downed a shot. I saw her place it on a little tower she was making of discarded cups and rolled my eyes. So much for hos before bros.

I focused on Xavier, wishing I could just throw the ball at him. But given that it was extremely light, there wasn’t much use in doing that. Why had he even come here?

But then I heard a cry and saw some guy in a Vikings jersey stumble right onto the table in front of us.

It buckled under the weight, crashing to the ground and drenching the guy in beer. Cups flew everywhere, soaking everyone around him.

This was my chance.

In the commotion, I wove through bodies and grabbed Xavier by the wrist. I dragged him a few feet over to a closet I’d noticed earlier and pulled him inside.

“What the hell?” I shoved Xavier against the wall—not that it was a very far distance. This closet was super small.

I forced myself to speak slowly, remembering how quickly I tended to talk when I was angry. I wanted Xavier to understand every word I was about to hurl at him.

“Why are you here?” I demanded. “And why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“I’m sorry, but what are *you* doing here?” Xavier retorted, and I wanted to shove him again for being such a child.

“You know why I’m here,” I hissed. “I’m cleaning up the mess *you* created. And protecting my friend. Not to mention visiting my parents.”

“But none of that kept you so busy you couldn’t go to this frat party?” Xavier sneered. “You remember the pack is in trouble, right?”

Really? That was what he was pissed about? That I was at a party? Maya was right. Men were ridiculous.

“Xavier,” I sighed. “Just listen—”

“We should leave,” he said, cutting me off.

“No.” I shook my head, fuming. I refused to give in to him. He didn’t get to tell me what to do. Not always, at least.

“I came here to help Alex,” I said.

“Help him with what?” Xavier’s voice was cold and mocking. “Winning at beer pong?”

“The cops think he killed Tony,” I whispered, hoping Xavier would feel guilty that Alex was getting set up to take the fall for his crime.

But Xavier just stared at me. Intensely. Like, really intensely.

I threw my hands up in the air, pissed. “Are you even listening to me?”

“No.” Xavier smirked at me, pulling my attention to his full lips. Lips I had been missing. Lips I knew would feel so, so good against my neck.

I made a strangled sound of frustration. I couldn’t be thinking about Xavier’s mouth right now. I had real stuff to worry about.

“You’re distracting,” Xavier told me, his voice husky. “Give me a break.”

He reached for my waist. I thought about how his hands were so big, his fingers could almost span the whole width. It made me want to melt into his arms and never worry about the rest of the world ever again.

“Not now!” I backed away as much as I could in the tiny closet. “This is serious! I can’t let Alex go to jail for something he didn’t do.”

Xavier took a deep breath and shook his head, as if that would clear his mind.

“I get it,” he told me, sounding much more sincere. “But you know what’s also serious? The fact that an evil fucking werewolf cult wants to kill everyone in our pack, and you’re states away where I can’t protect you. You *and* my brother’s mate. Not to mention you left without consulting anyone. People are pissed.”

‘People’ meaning Greyson. But Xavier wouldn’t say that. I didn’t know how that even made me feel. He’d told me I couldn’t go. Fuck him anyway.

“Look.” I took his hand, looking up into his eyes. “I get that Alex isn’t your favorite person. But he’s my friend. And he has been for a really long time. He’s practically family. He’s… He’s like my pack—”

Xavier cut me off by crashing his lips into mine. He cupped my cheeks, like I was water that threatened to slip through his fingers. His mouth moved insistently, like he wanted to devour me. And honestly, being devoured sounded nice.

I let myself melt into him for a moment, basking in the hard contours of his body against mine. But then I stepped on a mop handle and remembered where we were.

“Hey!” I shoved him off me. “Not now. Not here.”

“Isn’t hooking up like the whole point of these parties?” Xavier asked me, staring at my mouth. “Find somewhere quiet, grab your pretty girl…”

He wrapped his hands back around my waist, and god he was so big. Everything about him was big, really.

He trailed a hot line of kisses down my neck, and I sighed. Fuck it. Alex could wait a little bit. I needed to feel Xavier against me. I tangled my fingers in Xavier’s hair, loving the silky feeling and the little growls I could pull out of him when I tugged on it.

Xavier bit down on my throat and I moaned, in spite of myself.

The bass of whatever song was playing pulsed through the door, and I found myself rolling my hips to the rhythm.

Xavier bent down, grabbing me by the back of the thighs and hoisting me up.

I squealed as my head almost hit the low ceiling. I held my arms up to protect my head as Xavier spun me around so my back was against the wall.

“Sorry,” he murmured, trying to squeeze himself around the water heater so that he could nestle between my thighs.

“Fuck,” I groaned as he pushed his hips into mine. I could feel him getting hard.

“Are you wearing a bikini?” Xavier whispered in my ear, toying with the straps around my neck.

“Wanna see it?” I replied, looking up at him through my lashes.

Xavier backed up to give me room to shimmy out of my shirt. But the second I felt the cool air rush between us, I realized we couldn’t do this.

We weren’t even really together right now.

What if Mikah showed up? Or the cops? And they wanted to talk to my mysterious out-of-town boyfriend, a.k.a. the killer they were looking for?

Before I could say anything, the closet door swung open and we both turned to see who’d found us.

Maya shook her head.

“Are you seriously wasting time playing seven minutes in heaven right now?” Maya looked like she’d had it.

“No,” I lied, covering up my swimsuit clad chest. “I mean not just that. We were having a really serious conversation, Maya.”

I snuck a look at Xavier, who was wiping my lip gloss off his cheeks.

“Okay,” Maya said sarcastically. “But I thought you might wanna know—Alex is being arrested outside.”

**Episode 298**

I ran through the party, pushing and shoving anyone that got in my way as I retraced my steps to the front door. I gasped when I felt the cool evening air hit my skin and shivered, wishing I hadn’t left my coat, or shirt, inside.

But I forgot all about the weather when I saw Alex in handcuffs, tears streaming down his face. I sucked in a deep breath and fought a wave of nausea.

“Cali!” Alex cried out when he saw me. “Call my parents, okay? Tell them what’s going on!”

It was only when I got closer that I realized Hardstark and Weber were the ones arresting him. I watched them recognize me and exchange one of their signature infuriating glances. But I didn’t care. They could look at each other all they wanted. I needed to save Alex.

“Please, stop,” I begged Hardstark as he shoved Alex into the back seat of their police cruiser. “Alex didn’t do this.”

“I understand he’s your friend, Miss Hart.” Hardstark’s voice was cold and impersonal as he slammed the back door. “But this is police business. Please, stand back.”

“We don’t want to have to detain you,” Weber cautioned me. “Sometimes people aren’t who you think they are, all right?”

Boy, did I know that. More than Weber could ever understand. First, Xavier had shocked me by turning out to be a werewolf. And then his half-brother had turned my world upside down again by gaining my trust only to betray me. Kind of?

My life was beyond confusing, and it didn’t look like it was going to get any less complicated any time soon.

“Alex would never hurt someone like this,” I said, trying in vain to convince them. “You have to believe me.”

“If you were a cop, you’d understand the darkness of the soul,” Weber told me, his voice dripping with condescension. “Forgive me if I don’t see you as the be-all and end-all judge of character.”

“But I *swear* that I heard an animal that night,” I said urgently.

“There hasn’t been a wild animal attack reported in this area in years.” Hardstark frowned at me, turning to leave.

“Wait!” I cried out. “Please, let me show you the place on campus where I saw the animal. Maybe there’s evidence of it there. Please…”

I trailed off. I didn't want to keep begging, but I’d do it for Alex. I couldn’t let his life get ruined just because he knew me.

Mikah’s words about how the supernatural could really mess with human lives echoed in my ears. He was right. If I didn’t do something, Alex would go to jail for Xavier’s crime, and Xavier would face no consequences.

Who knew how many innocent people had been declared guilty because of supernatural creatures? It turned my stomach to think about it.

Detective Hardstark walked over to one of the uniformed officers in the squad car behind them, and I felt the invisible hand crushing my heart loosen just a bit. Hardstark talked and the uniform listened, nodding. When they walked back over to me, I almost couldn’t stand still I was so anxious to hear what they’d say.

“Okay.” Hardstark didn’t look happy. “You’ve got one chance to walk me through what you remember about the scene.”

Relief washed over me, and I fell over myself to agree to his terms. “Yes, great, thank you,” I blabbered. “Just let me run inside and tell my friends where I’m going!”

I whipped around, ready to charge back through the sea of bodies to find Xavier and Maya. But I was surprised to see a figure lurking in the shadows outside.

It was Mikah.

“Are you seriously going to let this happen?” I asked, approaching him before I could decide if it was wise or not.

He shrugged, keeping his infuriating composure. “I’m just a private investigator,” he said, then smiled innocently. “I have no authority over the police.”

“But you know Alex didn’t do it,” I challenged through clenched teeth. “The cops might listen to you if you say something.”

“Ah, yes,” he conceded. “But you know who *did* do it. And for some reason, you’re willing to let your friend go to jail to keep the guilty werewolf safe.”

His words stung like a slap and I searched for a comeback.

“And why *are* you doing that, exactly?” Mikah asked me, not giving me a chance to speak for myself. “Werewolves only care about their own. Whatever you’ve been promised in exchange for keeping this one safe, you’re never going to get it.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.” I struggled to keep myself from shouting. “All you have is hate for werewolves. Maybe if you tried to get to know them, you wouldn’t be so quick to write them off.”

Mikah sneered at me. “I’ve met my fair share. Never met one I’d send a friend to jail for, though.”

I saw his gaze settle on the cop car behind me.

“Good luck with your friend.” But then I saw his gaze shift to the door to the house. “Seems like someone’s waiting for you.”

I turned and was surprised to see Xavier watching me, his brow furrowed and his jaw clenched at the sight of me talking to a vampire.

I turned away from Mikah and hurried to the house. The party was surprisingly still going, despite the fact that someone had just been arrested outside.

I grabbed Xavier’s shoulder, trying to get him to look at me rather than over my shoulder at Mikah. I turned to follow his gaze and realized that Mikah had disappeared. Maybe that was why Xavier was still standing here with me and not busy wringing the vampire’s neck.

“Who was that guy?” Xavier’s voice was laced with fury. “Why was he talking to you?”

“I don’t have time for this.” I threw my hands up, exasperated. “They’ve arrested Alex. They think he killed Tony because he’s obsessed with me or something. I have to save him.”

“He *is* obsessed with you, Cali,” Xavier threw back at me. “Maybe I should have ripped his leg off too.”

I felt my blood start to boil. Alex was not Tony, and Xavier knew it. And even if he were, why exactly did Xavier feel so entitled to my attention? He’d never officially claimed me as his mate. He ran hot and cold with me all the time. He wouldn’t give me the bite, no matter how much I asked. Why did our relationship always have to be on *his* terms?

“If you go ripping the legs off everyone who likes me, you’ll end up killing a lot of people, Xavier,” I hissed at him.

“A lot of people, huh?” I watched Xavier’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. His voice was sarcastic, and it made me even more angry.

“That’s not the point right now!” I cried out. “I have to go. I’m showing the detectives where *you*—”I paused so I could jab a finger into his rock-hard chest. Honestly, it hurt. Not a lot, but still. “… bit Tony’s leg off,” I mouthed, just in case anyone could hear us.

“Why the hell are you doing that?” Xavier ran a hand through his hair, shaking his head in disbelief. Like he couldn’t possibly understand why I might want to help *my friend not get convicted of murder.*

“Because Alex shouldn’t suffer because you got jealous,” I growled. “Jealous over a mate you won’t even claim, by the way.”

Xavier grabbed my arm and dragged my ear to his lips.

“That scum was going to hurt you.” His voice was deep and low in my ear, and it made my toes curl even though I knew we were supposed to be fighting. “Jealousy had nothing to fucking do with it. And if you want to talk about that, answer me this—how is what I did to Tony any different than Greyson killing that Rogue to protect you?”

I huffed, pulling free of his grip. I put my hand on his chest, determined to keep distance between us.

“It’s different and you know it,” I told him, my voice wrecked.

Xavier’s gaze hardened. I wondered how he was feeling. Was he disappointed? Did he think I was siding with Greyson? Was he regretting what he’d done to Tony?

“So what do you want me to do?” Xavier asked, towering over me. His words were agreeable, but nothing about his attitude matched.

“I don’t know!” I wrapped my arms around my waist, hugging myself. “We need to help Alex. Prove he didn’t do this.”

Xavier shrugged. “Well, I don’t know how to do that,” he said flatly. Like he was saying we should wait for AAA to change a tire.

I wanted to scream at him. Why was he acting like this? Couldn’t he see that this was important to me? That I didn’t want Alex hurt?

And more than that, couldn’t he just see that it was the right thing to do?

“If you don’t help Alex,” I said, cold and quiet, “then I’ll never forgive you.”

**Episode 299**

“If you don’t help Alex, I’ll never forgive you,” I repeated.

Xavier had the nerve to look surprised. “What do you mean?”

What kind of relationship had I gotten myself into if this guy couldn’t even understand the basics of giving a shit about someone?

“Xavier,” I said as calmly as I could, even though my blood was hot. “How can we be mates if you don’t understand what this means to me?”

He frowned. “But Alex is human.”

“What is that supposed to mean? I’m human too!” *Sort of*. As far as Xavier’s knowledge went, at least…

“But why are you getting so upset about Alex? It’s *Alex*,” Xavier said, frowning. “It’s not like you’re together.”

I stood there, fighting the urge to scream at him. How could he not get this? Was the empathy gene entirely missing from these werewolves?

And then, as a cherry on top, Xavier said, “You should be pleased that the cops aren’t arresting *me*. Who cares about Alex?”

“*I* CARE!” I shouted, pointing at my chest. “I am standing here REPEATEDLY FUCKING TELLING YOU THAT I CARE ABOUT ALEX! And YOU’RE. NOT. LISTENING!”

“Cali—”

“Listen to me, Xavier, and listen to me *good*,” I hissed, pointing at his chest instead. I wasn’t shouting anymore, which seemed to alarm him even further. I felt like I was finally losing it. This was the moment, after everything.

He looked kind of nervous.

*Good*. I wanted to alarm him. I wanted to fucking punch him, but I also wanted to alarm him in order to activate his COMMON FUCKING SENSE.

“Not everything I feel or do revolves around you and your world,” I said, glaring up at him. “What about *me*?”

“Cali, of course I’ll always—”

“I’m *not* done talking,” I snapped, cutting him off. “I’ve done everything I can to be part of your world, and it doesn’t feel like you appreciate my efforts. I was even willing to become the Redwood Luna in order to fit into your world. I ignore it when you only seem to want sex, and I give in because I miss you and want you too. But when I ask you to do something to HELP ME in my world, you won’t even TRY!”

He huffed. “I just don’t understand—”

“I’M EXPLAINING IT TO YOU!” I went to shove him. He grabbed my hand, stopping me, but I tried again. Honestly, if Xavier didn’t care about the human world, what would he make of the Fae world? Would this guy EVER understand or care about anything other than himself and his pack of murder-happy mutts?

This was a legitimate question, and a definite worry of mine.

“It shouldn’t be so hard for you to understand basic human decency, Xavier,” I said, my hands shaking.

“But I’m…” Xavier paused. “I’m not *human*, Cali.”

I felt the urge to laugh. “I’ve always known that you don’t care about humans, but I thought you cared about *me* more than that!”

“Of course I care about you,” he said, caressing my arm. He was trying to soothe me, which was mostly infuriating because all this could’ve been solved if he just did what *I asked him to do.*

“Do you care enough about me to help Alex?” I sounded impatient, frustrated, absolutely aggravated, and Xavier could tell. Right? Surely he realized he was in deep shit right now. Because if he didn’t, then our communication was literally the worst EVER.

My worries were confirmed when Xavier looked over at Alex, sitting in the back of the cruiser, and shrugged. I felt gut-punched as he said, “I won’t help him, Cali.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. “I fucking *hate you* right now.”

Turning my back on him, I stormed off toward the detectives. My cheeks were wet. Fantastic—now I was really crying. I wiped the tears away, ignoring Xavier calling after me.

We’d gone through absolute madness together, but it felt like this would be the thing to break us.

“Are you okay, Miss Hart?” Detective Hardstark asked me after I got into his car. Detective Weber was in the passenger seat. The other cop car, the one that held Alex, had already driven away.

I grabbed a tissue from my pocket and blew my nose. I felt sick to my stomach, but I tried to hide it. “Yeah, I’m fine.” I cleared my throat. “Let me call Alex’s parents.”

The phone call was probably among the top three most awkward and unpleasant calls I’d ever participated in. How did you make ‘Hey, it’s been a while Mr. and Mrs. Chevere! So your son has been arrested’ sound upbeat and fun? You couldn’t. After hanging up, I just sat there at the back of the cruiser, breathing deeply.

I hadn’t talked to Alex’s parents in a long time. Telling them such horrible news really sucked. It was so sad. And they’d have to tell Leroy, too. *Ugh*. Everything about tonight was making me the saddest I’d been in a while. As for my talk with Xavier… What was I supposed to do with him now?

Could mates break up?

My chest physically ached at the idea. Fresh tears ran down my cheeks, and I quickly wiped them away.

“… Miss Hart?” Detective Weber was saying. I flinched, looking up at him. How long had he been talking to me while I was phased out?

“Excuse me?” I asked.

Detective Hardstark gave me a funny look. “We’ve arrived at the woods by the college.”

It was so weird to be back here. It hadn’t even been that long ago, but everything felt different. To think that only two months ago I hadn’t had sex, hadn’t had a boyfriend, and hadn’t known werewolves existed.

“Let’s go,” Hardstark said, glancing at me. “Follow us, Miss Hart.”

Walking behind Hardstark and Weber, I felt so small. The college campus itself made me feel even smaller. *Lost*.

A few moments later, Hardstark paused.

“There,” he said, pointing to an area just ahead. “That’s where we found Tony’s body.”

Weber cleared his throat. “Well, we found some of him. Then we found the other pieces of him nearby.”

I grimaced, trying to keep it cool. “This is such a horrible tragedy,” I muttered, looking around. Maybe I’d be able to find something to cast doubt on Alex’s guilt without giving up Xavier. Mostly because I didn’t trust Xavier not to kill every cop in sight as he escaped.

If only I could use my Fae powers… Maybe they’d let me do a mind trick thing and make the detectives forget about Alex? Or make them think it really was an animal? *Ugh!* I wished my mom had given me more info about this whole Fae situation. Also, where was a wisp when you needed one? I expected some assistance, dammit!

I looked up, hoping for some supernatural glow to lead me to a solution. All I saw was the trees around me, disappearing into the night sky.

“Miss Hart, why exactly did you want to come here?” Detective Hardstark asked me gently. At least *he* could tell that I was upset. Unlike certain mates I could mention.

“Our CSI team has been over the area thoroughly,” Hardstark continued. “If there was something to be found, we would have found it already.”

“But they didn’t look for animal tracks, did they?” I asked. “Like, how did Tony get all shredded in the first place? A human can’t have done that kind of damage. There must’ve been an animal involved.”

Hardstark and Weber shared a look.

“There were some undefined prints in the area,” Hardstark said. “But they could have been anything. Even—”

“I told you I heard something that night,” I said, cutting him off. “Couldn’t it have been a bear? Did you check for bear tracks?”

Weber sighed. Hardstark maintained his composure, but he sounded sympathetic. “I know you want to help your friend, but chances are he’s down at the station right now, confessing.”

I froze at his words. I’d watched enough crime movies and listened to enough podcasts to know that suspects could be made to confess by dirty cops. Like, it was rare, but still. I glared at the detectives, but Weber and Hardstark kept looking at me sympathetically.

*Okay, so maybe these particular two aren’t like that,* I thought wryly. *But still!* *Who knows about the others? Police brutality is a major issue.*

There had to be something I could do. But what?

“I think that’s enough for tonight,” Weber said, glancing at his watch. “It’s getting late. We should get back to the station. Can we give you a ride home, Miss Hart?”

Exhausted and unsure, I nodded. We all turned our backs on the woods to head back to the car…

A low, ferocious growl echoed through the trees.

All three of us stopped walking.

“Um,” Weber said, eyeing Hardstark nervously. “Did you hear that?”

Hardstark glared into the darkness, nodding. There were beads of sweat on his forehead as he looked around.

I searched the darkness, fighting to see through it.

There was nothing.

As Hardstark scanned the woods, Weber chuckled nervously. “Huh, you know, it must just be our nerves. Right?”

“It was a growl,” I said dryly.

Weber flinched when Hardstark nodded at my words.

Weber’s jaw clenched. “Okay, let’s get out of here. I never liked these woods.” He took a step toward the car, and then there was another growl.

This one was louder.

Closer.

My heart was pounding in my chest, because I recognized that growl now. I knew him before I saw him.

Xavier.

He had shifted into a wolf, prowling in our direction.

His red eyes were fixed on the two startled detectives.

“Holy shit,” Weber breathed.

“Watch out,” Hardstark hissed, “no sudden movements!”

My eyes widened when I saw the detective draw his gun, aiming at Xavier.

**Episode 300**

I wasn’t about to let Hardstark shoot my mate, who was currently helping me—*What? Xavier came back?!*—so I screamed, jumping back. “Oh my god, it’s a monster!”

I purposefully knocked into Hardstark just as he was about to shoot at Xavier, causing the detective to fire and miss.

“Son of a—” Hardstark stumbled back, glowering, as Xavier howled once more and then ran off.

He really was majestic in his wolf form. My mate that had finally pulled through after he’d made me cry and scream at him to get a fucking grip and give a shit, but still—he had COME THROUGH!

I could count on him!

He cared about me!

I felt like crying all over again.

“Miss Hart, are you okay?” Weber asked me, helping me clamber to my feet.

Hardstark shot me a frustrated, annoyed look. “I could have gotten a clean shot on that… *wolf*.”

“Sorry,” I said sheepishly. “I just got really scared.”

Weber’s voice was shaky. “Understandable. That was the biggest wolf I’ve ever seen. More like a bear.” He turned to Hardstark. “Maybe we should alert Animal Control?”

Hardstark—who seemed pretty annoyed by the fact that he hadn’t gotten to kill a wolf, so *maybe* the human species wasn’t all that different than the werewolf one—nodded.

Either way, I felt victorious. Super pleased with myself, and with Xavier.

HE HAD COME THE FUCK THROUGH!

“That thing looked dangerous…” I told Hardstark, trailing off. “Do you have proof now that Alex didn’t kill Tony?”

He shook his head. “It’s not proof of anything other than the fact that there’s a large wolf out here.”

I frowned. “But doesn’t it prove that an animal could’ve killed Tony?”

“Or that Alex killed him and then animals tore him apart,” Hardstark said. “That’s also very likely.”

“Either way, it will be up to the prosecutor to determine that, since Alex has already been arrested,” Weber told me. He walked over to where Xavier had appeared, pointing at the ground. “Look at those footprints—”

“Paw prints,” I piped up helpfully. It was really hard to hide my bursting excitement.

Weber gave me a funny look. “Yeah, the paw prints. They’re huge. They should be gathered as evidence.”

Hardstark, who had been examining the area, said, “There’s also some fur stuck to that tree.” He turned to Weber. “We should call CSI and have them investigate.”

“Sounds great!” I enthused.

Both men turned to eye me. I cleared my throat. “I mean, great that you have evidence. Evidence is good. Anyway, could you please drop me off at my apartment on your way to the station?”

Half an hour later, I was back at my apartment. The ride in the police car had been quiet and tense, but thankfully the cops hadn’t seemed mad at me. Just weirded out by the situation, and by seeing a wolf the size of a bear.

MY wolf, who had come through.

When I opened my bedroom door, there he was.

He shot me a smirk, the monster. “Happy now?”

Making a squealing sound that I couldn’t contain, I rushed into Xavier’s arms. He opened them wide, embracing me tightly as I clung onto him, my hands wrapping around his torso as I squeezed him tight.

“You *asshole!*” I said, huffing as I faced him. “Why did you have to piss me off first before doing the right thing?”

He smirked. He was so handsome that I felt my cheeks heat up. “You wouldn’t have exactly had a good surprised face if you’d known I was coming, would you?”

I smacked him on the chest before nestling back into his arms. He kissed the top of my head.

“Thank you,” I said quietly. “Thank you for doing this. For helping Alex.”

Xavier made me face him. His expression was intense. “I didn’t do it to help Alex. I did it for you. I realized how important it was to you.” He winced. “And I hate it when you cry. It freaks me the fuck out.”

“I don’t care why you did it,” I said. I felt so close to him right then, my whole body alight with our embrace. “I’m just happy that you did do it. It means a lot to me.”

“Is Alex off the hook now, then?” he asked. “Because I almost got shot over this.”

I told him what the detectives had said. He seemed thoughtful as I kept talking. “Hopefully this will lead to Alex’s exoneration. So everything should be okay.”

Xavier glanced between my eyes and lips. “The last time we spoke, you were pretty upset…” He leaned closer, his grip tightening around my waist. “I should have agreed to help Alex when you asked. I’m sorry for that. Can you forgive me for being such an asshole?”

My pulse was racing. I knew he could hear it, feel it under my skin as he held me so close. I reached up, brushing my mouth over his top lip, then the bottom one. His lips parted and I deepened our kiss, my hands threading through his hair. He groaned, shivering.

It felt amazing to be in control like this. Powerful.

When I broke off the kiss, he was ready to dive back in. But I stopped him.

“You’ve done pretty well,” I whispered, “but I’m pretty sure there’s still something else you can do.”

He gave me a wolfish grin, his gaze fixated on my lips. “What did you have in mind?”

I was shaking with adrenaline after what had happened, and with anticipation about what was about to come. Gripping the neck of Xavier’s T-shirt, I pushed him against the wall. “I think you know.”

He swung us around, and now I was the one pressed against the wall.

He rested his forehead against mine, my wrists pinned on either side of my face as he held them there. “How about something like this?” he asked against my mouth, before kissing me like he was starved for it. I felt the same way—starved for him.

“Tell me what you want,” he said huskily, pausing the kiss as I squirmed in his grip.

My body was caged between him and the wall. The tension and heat between us made me feel lightheaded. Dazed with need. “You,” I whimpered. “I just want you.”

It was the right thing to say.

Xavier grabbed me and picked me up like I was made of air, carrying me to my bed. He dropped me onto it unceremoniously, but that was fine and great and dandy, because then he pulled his T-shirt over his head.

*Oh my god, that view.*

I scrambled to take off my clothes. If I didn’t hurry, Xavier would probably just rip them off in his haste to get down and dirty. That was fine in general—who was I to stifle his enthusiasm?—but I hadn’t brought enough clothes with me to allow what I was wearing to be ruined. But if I ever bought expensive lingerie and he ripped it, I might kill him.

I’d just managed to get my bra off when Xavier *pounced*. There was no other way to describe the way he pushed me on the bed. His gorgeous lips moved from my mouth to my neck and ears and then back down my neck, his breath scorching my already heated skin. He touched me and caressed me all over before trailing kisses down my breasts, then my stomach, nibbling at the sides of my waist hard enough to make me yelp. I opened my legs wide, urging him to move even closer. He gripped the sides of my thighs and spread them, lowering his face in between.

When he looked up at me, his dark gaze so hungry, I thought my pounding heart would fly right out of my chest.

“Say it again,” he murmured, nuzzling the inside of my thigh.

“I want you,” I choked out. “I want you so much…”

He smirked and lowered his face to the top of my thighs. I gripped onto my pillow, crying out at first and then moaning as he used his tongue and fingers to work me over. He kept going and going, building up the intensity while I writhed under his mouth, making my whole body quiver and spasm. My hips arched up, chasing the amazing feeling he gave me, an inner explosion that left me reeling.

*Is this real life?* I wondered as dark spots decorated my vision.

“You taste amazing,” Xavier mumbled against my thigh, wiping his chin against my skin. I’d gotten his face so wet that… Oh my *god*. Though Xavier didn’t seem to mind at all. He looked enraptured as he climbed up my body, his hardness brushing against my stomach.

He made me feel so sexy. He made me feel *wanted*.

My oversensitive body was still going haywire, greedy and restless as I grabbed onto him. I pulled him in for a kiss, wrapping my legs around him. He kissed me back, a gentle peck followed by a sharp thrust inside me that left me breathless.

“You like that, baby?” he asked against my mouth, his hips snapping hard but slow and steady against mine as I grabbed onto him for dear life. “You think you can come for me again? Let me feel it?”

I felt so open, so needy for him that I could only nod and whimper. He grinned, a gorgeous vision as he moved over and inside me, a pounding pulse. He reached between our bodies to rub circles where we were joined, where I needed him. When I came this time, I clawed at his back. He devoured my cries with his lips, making a sound that was more animal than man as he climaxed inside me.

His tender kiss at the end made me shiver.

We lay there afterward, panting and smiling in each other’s arms.

“I could never resist you, you know,” Xavier whispered in my ear, caressing my face. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.”

His words startled me out of my post-orgasmic haze.

*What did Mom say?* I asked myself, panicking. *That Fae were impossibly beautiful creatures?*

I suddenly felt sick.

Could… Could Xavier’s attraction to me not be because of my natural appeal or because we were mates, but because I was Fae?

**Episode 301**

Shivering, I moved away from Xavier. I sat up on the bed, fighting to settle the queasiness in my stomach.

“What’s wrong?” Xavier asked me, puzzled.

“I’m thirsty,” I lied, swallowing thickly. “I’m just going to get a drink of water. Do you want any?”

“I’m good,” he said, eyeing me speculatively.

Before I could stand up from the bed, he gripped my wrist lightly. “Cali?”

I faced him. I hoped he had no idea what was going on in my mind. He probably didn’t, considering what he said next.

“I love you.”

He looked so sincere, so sweet, that for a moment I was struck by it. Leaning in, I gave him a peck on the lips. “I love you too.”

Leaving him behind, I hurried into the bathroom, closing the door. Taking a deep breath, I stared at myself in the mirror.

*How beautiful am I, really?* I thought, squinting at my reflection.

I’d never thought I was model material. Though legendary supermodel Tyra Banks did say that you didn’t need to be pretty to be a model, and many models—apart from the Victoria’s Secret ones—weren’t classically pretty anyway. Not that I’d ever wanted to be a model. It looked like a lot of work, and what if I didn’t like the clothes that the designer put me in? Too much stress right there.

I preferred my werewolf stress, which brought me to my next point: Would someone as hot as Xavier really go for someone like me? And what about Greyson? Whatever was going on between us, *due destini* or not… Was he being seduced by Fae magic, too? Though my legendary best friend Lola did say that men weren’t very bright and could easily get wrapped up in someone’s personality for the long-term instead of just their looks.

Well, I did have a lot of personality. I could be certain about that.

I also suspected that storming off on Xavier had kind of made him want me more. It was a little messed up that it had to come down to that for him to see the light. But I could work with what I had, especially if it led to more sex like we’d just had.

*I should start a relationship advice column*, I thought to myself, tracing my stretch marks. Xavier had kept kissing over them when we’d been together earlier. It couldn’t *all* just be due to me being half Fae, could it? Like, was I casting some sort of glamour on myself? I needed to talk to my mom and find out more about the Fae world. Now that the excitement of having helped Alex was wearing off, the reality of what my mother had revealed was hitting me big time.

Taking a deep breath, I headed back to my bedroom.

Xavier was sleeping like an angel. My murderous, wolf angel. I slipped into the bed next to him. The warmth of his body was amazing, but sleep didn’t come. My head felt heavy with thoughts, and I needed to clear it.

I got up again, putting on some clothes. Xavier kept snoring lightly, much like a precious angel, as I walked out. The night air was soothing, the quiet really helping me to get my bearings. I wasn’t even sure why I’d gone outside—it had just felt like I needed to. Like all the answers to my questions would be found out here. Looking around, I tightened my jacket around myself, and my eyes fell on a tree.

Someone stepped out from behind it.

I was about to scream bloody murder when I realized that it was Mikah.

“Jesus fucking *Christ*,” I hissed under my breath. “So much for being alone!”

“Good evening, Caliana,” Mikah said in that mysterious way of his. It was really getting old.

“Do you, like, adore creepily stepping out of the darkness? Is that a thing for you?” I snapped.

He sighed. “It’s what vampires do.”

I scrutinized his expression. He wasn’t teasing. The guy was being serious.

*How ridiculous*, I thought. *Why are all supernatural beings so fucking extra?*

“What are you doing here? *How* did you get here?” I asked impatiently.

He stared at me. “I’m here for you, Cali.”

I squinted at him suspiciously. “For me? What do you want?”

Smirking, Mikah looked at the apartment. “Is Xavier sleeping?”

I nodded. Then it hit me: Had this creepy creeper watched us earlier? No, that would have been impossible. But listening in on us wasn’t outside the realm of possibility… I’d been pretty loud.

*Oh god,* I thought. I fought to maintain my composure as Mikah stared at me. “It’s good that Xavier isn’t awake,” he said. “I wanted to speak with you alone.”

Well. Wasn’t that just *amazingly pleasant?*

Mikah kept talking. “Your little trip into the woods with Hardstark and Weber was interesting. Xavier made quite a splash—so much so they had to wake up the prosecutor to discuss Alex’s case.” He raised an eyebrow. “She wasn’t thrilled.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” I asked, huffing. “What are you after?”

He shrugged, like this was a totally normal conversation that was boring him a little. “I just want to know why Xavier did it.”

“Well, Xavier knows that Alex isn’t guilty, so—” I cut myself off, realizing the implications of what Mikah was saying. He meant the murder, not the little show that Xavier had pulled off tonight.

“Who did it, Cali?” Mikah glanced at the apartment. “Was it him? Did Xavier kill Tony?”

Taking a deep breath, I kept my cool. I had to. There was no other way to get rid of this asshole. “Why do you think that Xavier would do something like that?” I asked. “Do you even have any proof to support your theory?”

Mikah looked at me. His piercing eyes made me feel like I was under a microscope. It was beyond unnerving. *Wait*, I thought, *can vampires read minds? Is that what he’s doing right now? GO AWAY, MIKAH! GET OUT OF MY HEAD! LALALALALA!*

As I stared back at him, I started thinking about the kittens and other adorable animals I followed on Instagram. Good luck to him sorting through all that!

“I asked you a question first, Cali,” Mikah said. He didn’t seem bothered by the kitten parade in my brain. Either he couldn’t read minds, or he liked kittens too.

I scoffed. “Why should I give you any kind of answer when you haven’t even told me what you’d do to Tony’s killer if you caught him?”

Mikah looked into the distance, all haughty and stoic. MyGOD, he was annoying.

“What are you even doing right now?” I demanded. “Pondering the universe while staring into the distance?”

“I’m just wondering why you seem so quick to defend werewolves, Cali.”

I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest. “I’m not defending anyone. I’m just trying to make sense of all your nonsense.”

He took a step closer to me. I held my ground.

“Perhaps I should remind you that while you’re part Fae, the other part of you is human,” Mikah said. “Shouldn’t that part be more concerned with the human world than the werewolf world? I’m sure you know werewolves have a history of slaughtering humans.”

“And vampires don’t?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Mikah shook his head. “You’re making assumptions about something you know nothing about. I want *justice*.”

“Do you really believe that going after werewolves is justice?” I asked, glaring up at him.

“I didn’t choose this life, Cali,” he said, “and I’m doing what I can to live with it. To make things right.”

“Make things right?” I frowned. “What does that mean?”

He shook his head. “That I’m looking for a killer while you’re protecting him, Cali.”

I wasn’t going to let this massive walking leech play me like that. I refused to take the bait. “I don’t appreciate your unfounded accusations, you know. This is outrageous.” I shook my head. “I have no idea who killed Tony, and I’m not protecting a killer. You’ve made up this whole scenario in your head, and let me tell you, you’re not as clever as you think you are.”

Mikah took another step closer to me. He stared down, deep into my eyes as he said, “You think you know Xavier, don’t you?”

Suddenly, the darkness in Mikah’s expression intimidated me. “What are you talking about? Of course I know him.”

“Do you have any idea what he’s done?” Mikah snapped. “Did he tell you about Vancouver?”

A chill ran down my spine.

“This is hardly the first time he’s killed humans, and unless you help me, it won’t be the last.” Mikah lowered his face to my eye level, his voice laced with anger. “It’s your choice, Cali. What are you going to do?”

**Episode 302**

Mikah was talking to me as if I had no idea that Xavier used to be a mercenary. I hadn’t even really processed the things that Xavier had confessed, yet, but I *had* accepted them. Especially given he’d told me that the humans he’d killed were bad ones.

*What about Tony?* a small voice asked in my head.

Tony had been a shitty person, too. He would’ve hurt me if it weren’t for Xavier. I was worried about Xavier harming innocent people in an attempt to cover up his crime, but the crime itself had been justified in my eyes.

“You’re very dramatic, you know that?” I asked the vampire, yawning exaggeratedly.

“Listen to me, Cali—”

“No, you listen,” I said, cutting him off. “I know that Xavier is a mercenary, and I’ve accepted it. And now, I’m going back to bed.” I raised an eyebrow, taking in Mikah’s dark circles. “Maybe you should find a coffin and get some rest too—you look a little tired.”

“You can’t fool yourself forever, Cali,” Mikah said.

I rolled my eyes.

“When you wake up from your daydream, I’ll be waiting,” he declared.

“Good night!” I said in a sing-song voice before turning my back on him. I wondered if Mikah was bluffing about this—would he really be *waiting?* Like, forever? According to what I had read about vampires, they lived for a really long time.

I wished he were more reasonable. It would’ve been very interesting to ask him questions about the Fae world, but I couldn’t do that now—not when he was threatening Xavier. If it came down to it, would I be able to defend myself against Mikah?

Perhaps Fae magic worked against vampires in some way—but that was another question to ask my mom. I glanced behind me as I walked, just to make sure Mikah wasn’t following.

He’d already vanished into the night, silent and creepy as ever.

I shivered at the thought, heading inside. I locked the door for good measure, trying to remember if I’d invited Mikah in at any point. I was pretty sure I hadn’t. Walking into the bedroom, I got undressed again and slipped back into bed. Xavier stirred, pulling me close with a lazy smile. He looked half-asleep still, and didn’t ask where I’d been. He just hugged me tightly, and we fell asleep in each other’s arms.

\*\*\*\*

“I can’t believe what lightweights humans are,” Maya scoffed, looking outside at a random guy doing some—pretty unhealthy, did not recommend—day drinking. I was parking the car for us to go to the police station, so I wasn’t paying her much attention.

But then she said, “I barely got buzzed doing shots last night at the party, but all those horny frat boys were completely wasted. Humans are a waste of flesh.”

I faced her, taking off my seatbelt. “Excuse me? I’m human too. Watch your fucking mouth.”

Maya raised both her hands in surrender. “Just saying.”

“You know, I could also tell you that werewolves are a waste of flesh, horrible beasts that you guys are.”

Maya raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that a compliment?”

I rolled my eyes, getting out of the car.

“I’m sure you don’t feel that way about your precious Xavier, though, do you?” Maya teased as we walked toward the station. I’d told her all about what Xavier had done earlier, in the woods.

“Xavier is…” I paused. “Something, all right.”

Maya smirked. “He must really like you, to put himself at risk like that.”

“We are mates, aren’t we?” I gave her a smile. It fell once we turned the corner and I saw the small crowd gathered outside the station. Some were bearing signs saying *Justice for Tony!* Others said *Alex is Guilty!*

Wrinkling her nose, Maya followed me into the building as we pushed past the commotion.

“Let me do the talking,” I whispered to Maya once we reached the reception.

“Why? I’m, like, super polite.”

Elbowing her, I smiled as the receptionist looked up at me. “How can I help you?”

“Hello,” I said. “We wanted to talk to Detective Hardstark. Is he here?”

“He’s been here all night,” a familiar voice said from my left. I turned to see Hardstark. He was holding a cup of coffee. He hadn’t shaved, and he looked really beat.

“What’s going on?” I asked him.

Before Hardstark could speak, another door opened and the prosecutor barged out, followed by…

“Alex!” I exclaimed. He looked exhausted, ragged, but he gave me a small smile. What had they done to him? *Ugh!* They probably hadn’t let him sleep at all. His parents—who were just a few feet away, I belatedly realized—rushed to hug him. Then he was herded outside by the prosecutor, and Maya and I followed.

“While the investigation is not complete,” the prosecutor was telling the reporters, “the state has dropped all charges against Alex Chevere. He’s a free man.”

The crowd went wild with excitement. The reporters shouted more questions while Alex and his parents moved to the side.

“Stay,” I told Maya.

“I’m not a dog!” she called after me as I headed toward Alex.

His mother saw me first. She thanked me for supporting her son, sniffling. Alex then hugged me too. It felt amazing to know that he was okay, and that I was the one who’d made sure of it. It was horrible that he’d been forced to spend the night at the station, but at least now he was okay.

“Thanks so much for helping me,” he said quietly. “For telling them that I’m a good guy.”

“Of course,” I said. “I never believed that you’d ever do something like that. You’d never harm anyone.”

*Unlike my boyfriend*, I added internally.

Ignoring the pinching feeling in my stomach, I hugged Alex again, and we agreed to talk later.

\*\*\*\*

“I can’t wait to get back to the pack house,” Maya told me, once we were back in the car. “I hate being around so many humans.”

Okay, all her ‘humans’ comments were getting old. What the fuck was wrong with her? Apart from being a werewolf. I wanted to scream at her, *You don’t know what you’re talking about! I’m not even human so take* that*!*

“Are you even listening to yourself?” I asked her. “You keep talking shit about humans, but you seem to have forgotten that *I’m* human, and I’ve already killed a vampire and a werewolf. Pretty easily, I might add. Also, you can’t do anything to me, because Xavier would end you. So basically, I’m the more powerful one here, and you just keep acting like an annoying little—”

“What are you even talking about?” Maya interrupted, snorting. Was she enjoying this?

“I’m just saying that the way you keep dragging humans makes you sound pretty species-ist.”

She paused, frowning. “What?”

“An asshole, but specifically for werewolves.”

She burst out laughing.

This WASN’T FUCKING FUNNY, OKAY?

*Why do I even bother?* I wondered to myself, rolling my eyes. “I need to talk to my awesome *human* parents, Maya”—another snort from her—“so I’ll be dropping you off at my apartment first.”

“Don’t take too long,” she said, suddenly serious. “We need to get back home. I hope things with the Manus Cruentae haven’t gotten worse.”

“Whatever,” I said. “Just tell Xavier to be patient, and that I’ll come back as soon as possible.”

Thankfully, Maya didn’t offer any more objections for once. I dropped her off at my apartment before driving to my parents’ house, thinking about all the human vs. werewolf BS. Had humans ever actually DONE anything to werewolves? Like, were werewolf hunters a real thing, like in the movies?

Still mulling these things over, I let myself into my childhood home. My dad was alone in the kitchen, sitting at the table with a cup of coffee.

“Hey,” I said, squeezing his shoulder. “How are you?”

“Okay.” He looked up at me. He seemed so tired. “Your mom is resting.”

It was almost noon, and Mom was still in bed?

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I noticed the photo that my dad was holding. It was of the two of them together, years ago. Mom was holding me, a newborn baby, and Dad was holding her. Both of them were beaming at the camera.

“Your mother…” Dad trailed off, his thumb moving over the picture. “She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.”

For a moment, I froze.

*Isn’t that what Xavier told me?* I thought to myself.

“When I met your mom in that bookstore,” Dad started, “I had no idea how much life she’d bring into mine. And now… Now, all I do is worry about her.”

“I get it,” I said, sitting down next to him. “I know she doesn’t look well, but I thought the surgery had helped?”

“We were hopeful, but there’s something about her immune system that didn’t respond as the doctors had hoped.” Quietly but firmly, Dad added, “We have to do everything we can to help your mom, Cali, but the doctors… They don’t know what’s wrong with her, exactly.” His voice broke. “I feel so helpless.”

My stomach was in knots. I stared at Mom’s smiling face in the picture and felt helpless too. Unless…

Wait.

Hadn’t Mom said that she was sick because she hadn’t been to the Fae world in so long? My mind started racing. So what if…

What if I could somehow bring the Fae world *to* her?

**Episode 303**

My brain felt like it was being overloaded.

How could I bring the Fae world to my mother? My mom couldn’t possibly travel when she was this frail. But how could I even get TO the Fae world? Was there a portal somewhere? Did Mikah know? Or Big Mac? The werewolves had the secret cave forest, so the Fae probably had something similar, right? Those wisps had definitely been magical. Maybe they could lead me somewhere. If only I could get those suckers to show up again.

“Cali…” My thoughts were interrupted by my dad putting a hand on my shoulder, squeezing comfortingly. His voice was gentle but pleading. “Promise you’ll come back soon? I don’t think we can go so long again without our honey-bear.”

I forced a small smile, even though I was holding back tears. “Of course,” I mumbled. “Gotta go check on Mom, okay? I’ll be right back.” I kissed Dad’s cheek and headed upstairs.

Mom smiled weakly when she saw me. She was lying in bed. She looked so pale, so tired, that I felt like crying all over again.

Before I could speak, she said, “You’re going back, aren’t you?”

“I am,” I admitted, sitting beside her. “The pack needs me.” More like they wouldn’t let me go and I just kind of went along with it, which actually sounded extremely Stockholm Syndrome-y.

My mom nodded. “I understand.”

Looking around the room, I noticed that the plants and flowers that my mom had always taken care of seemed wilted and dying now. The sight made something inside me flinch.

“Should I…” I cleared my throat. “Should I water your plants?”

Mom waved me off. “I know you didn’t come here to water my plants.”

“That’s true,” I admitted. “I’ve been thinking about what you told me. I need to know more.”

“More?” Mom stared at me. “More about what?”

“About any magic I might have.”

Mom sighed, taking my hand in hers. Her skin was so cold that I caressed her palm with both of mine to warm her up. “I was hoping my daughter would never need magic.”

*Ha!* I thought. *Talk about wishful thinking.*

“Um,” I said, snorting. “Need I remind you that I’m living in a world with werewolves and vampires? I could totally use a little help to deal with all that. How am I even supposed to find out what my powers are?”

“Every Fae’s magic reveals itself in a unique way,” Mom said. “There might be a few bumps before the dust settles and you know.”

“But how did you know?” I asked. “How did you figure out what your powers were?”

A tiny smile decorated Mom’s face, like she was reminiscing. “I always had a green thumb. My magic was with plants—I could grow them, keep them thriving. It was wonderful, surrounding myself with flowers like that.”

I remembered growing up with plants all around the house and the garden. Plants that were always in bloom.

“We come from nature,” Mom went on, “so we should always give back to it.”

I glanced at the wilting plants. With growing dead, I realized that for them to be dying now, my mom’s magic must’ve been waning.

I fought to maintain my composure, ignoring the urge to cry. “Um, plants and flowers are definitely not my strength. I could kill plastic plants, given half a chance,” I said, trying to joke.

Mom chuckled, but it turned into a cough.

*Ugh!* I thought, offering her a glass of water. *It feels like she’s getting worse by the second.*

She took a slow sip of water. “Don’t worry, Cali. You’ll come into your own. You just need to be patient and open-minded. It’s like love—you’ll know it when it hits you.”

A great thing to say to a girl who probably had a bunch of *due destini* drama to deal with.

“This isn’t fair,” I said. I was getting disappointed and frustrated, but I fought not to show it. I didn’t want to upset Mom. “You’ve kept me in the dark all my life, and now you tell me all these things when you’re about to die?”

Mom caressed my forearm, shaking her head. “I know, sweetheart. But I only did what I thought was best.”

I sniffled. “It wasn’t for the best. Things have been happening, strange things that I don’t understand.”

“When the right time comes, your powers will help you understand everything,” Mom said with certainty.

“Sounds awesome,” I said sarcastically. “Do you even realize what this stress has been doing to me? Not knowing who I am, *what* I am, has given me a full-blown existential crisis.”

“Cali,” Mom muttered, looking at me fondly while she stroked my arm. “You don’t need to agonize over anything. You won’t be harmed. Fae are powerful in ways—”

“That I don’t know about,” I finished. “If you’d told me about all this earlier, maybe I would’ve been able to deal with it better.”

“I was only trying to protect you, Cali.”

“No matter how much you try to protect the people you love, shit is obviously gonna hit the fan sooner or later. You robbed me of the chance to figure all this out with you by my side… Do you understand that, Mom?”

For once, she fell silent. Her eyes were glistening. “I’m sorry, Caliana,” she finally said, quietly. “I just had no idea what to do. You were a kid. You still are a kid, in my eyes. I chose not to tell you because telling you would’ve been beyond upsetting. Don’t you see?”

“Well, you made a mistake,” I said. “And now you have to fix it. You have to let me fix it, Mom.”

She sighed. “This can’t be fixed, Cali.”

“I don’t care. I’m not going to let you do this.”

Mom sat up slightly, concerned. “What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

Taking a deep breath, I stared at my mother. I needed her to realize that I wasn’t about to change my mind—not now, not ever. “I’m going to save you.”

Mom’s mouth dropped open in shock.

“I’m going to the Fae world to get you some help, Mom,” I finished.

“Absolutely not!” Mom’s voice got louder. With strength I hadn’t known she had, she squeezed my hand. “I forbid it. For your own good, you will NOT be doing that.”

When I sniffled this time, tears followed. They dropped down my cheeks, grazing the skin there. I didn’t wipe them away. I was so angry, so frustrated with the entire situation—and with my mother. “I’m going, Mom.” I was shaking as I said the words. Standing up from the bed, I let her hand go. “I’m going to find a way.”

“*Cali*—”

“Remember when I was four and you told me I couldn’t have candy for dinner?” I asked, cutting her off.

Mom paused. “You had your dad buy you a whole bag of mini Twix and hid them all around the house.”

Dad had always been kind of a sucker.

“You were the only one who knew where the candy was, and you wouldn’t tell us,” Mom went on. “And then you—”

“I had Twix for dinner for a whole week. Just because you said no to me that one time,” I finished. “So you know this isn’t going to work. Whatever you say right now, you won’t change my mind.”

Mom looked somewhat amused. But also dejected. “We were both really bad at disciplining you. It was just so hard. You were the cutest kid.”

That was sweet, but we had to focus right now.

“I’m going to figure out a way to save you, Mom,” I said. “And you can help me or not, but you can’t stop me.”

My phone started vibrating in my pocket. I ignored it.

Mom looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “Cali, please. *Please* think of this logically. You have so many things to live for. My time has—”

“How can you do this?” I demanded. “How can you sit there and expect me to just accept your death? To let you lie here until you’re gone?”

That made her stop talking. She stared at me, and she looked as devastated as I was.

“I’m so, so sorry, Cali,” she whispered. “I love you so much.”

My phone kept vibrating in my pocket. Wiping the tears from my face, I groaned. “Who the hell is it?” I grumbled. “Don’t they know that we are having a MOMENT—”

The caller ID read *Greyson*. Of course he had to call right now and be annoying. I wasn’t even surprised. I would’ve been significantly more surprised if he *weren’t* annoying.

“Who is it?” Mom asked gently.

My phone just started vibrating again. I wanted to throw it out the window.

“The Alpha,” I said, fuming.

“It might be something important,” Mom said.

“Um, excuse me?” I demanded. “Since when are you on *his* side?”

Mom sighed, wiping her eyes with a tissue. “Think about it, Cali. Take a calm breath and think about it.”

Following my mom’s advice begrudgingly, I stared at the still-ringing phone and took a deep breath. It calmed me, made me think more clearly.

Mom was right.

Suddenly, I was certain that for Greyson to be calling me, it had to be about something important.

Bringing the phone to my ear, I accepted the call, trying to keep my voice even. “Hello? Greyson?”

**Episode 304**

“Why aren’t you back yet?” Greyson demanded.

Was Greyson taking a *tone* with me? Like, seriously? Who died and made him the boss of everyone?

*Technically*, I thought, *the Lupo Finale made him the boss of everyone. So…*

I huffed at Greyson, and myself. But before I could reply, he kept talking. “I need you here, Cali.”

His tone had shifted, and there was an urgency to it that made me pause. And something inside of me flip not too unpleasantly. It also made me withdraw my earlier vitriolic response and calm down. “What’s wrong?”

“I need the pack back at full strength. There’s been some trouble with the Manus Cruentae.”

I glanced over at my mother. She watched me worriedly. “Is everything okay?” she murmured, gesturing at the phone.

I shrugged as Greyson said, “Get back here, Cali. Don’t disobey me again.”

I’m sorry, *what*? His dominating tone created a mixture of emotions within me. Was I outraged at him for downplaying the importance of my trip? Yes. Was I concerned because of what he’d said? Yes. Was I vaguely and secretly turned on? Who knew? I certainly didn’t! And it really didn’t help my emotions when Greyson added, “Please be careful, love.”

With that, he hung up the phone.

Feeling heavy, I pondered his last words. *Be careful, love.*

Had he said that because he was worried for the pack, or because he was worried about *me?* Suddenly I felt my cheeks warming. But I didn’t have the time to keep dwelling on Greyson’s words, though, because my mom spoke up.

“What’s wrong, Cali?”

I tried to downplay it. “Nothing. I just have to get back to Oregon.” I walked up to her and leaned down to hug and kiss her goodbye. Fighting away tears, I told myself that I wouldn’t let this be the last time that I hugged her. That just wasn’t going to happen.

I was going to save my mom, no matter what.

As if reading my thoughts, Mom grabbed my hand. “Don’t search for the Fae world, Cali. It’s too dangerous.”

“But why?” I pressed. “Aren’t I part Fae? Wouldn’t I be accepted?”

Mom shook her head. “Just promise me you won’t go to the Fae world. Give me your word.”

I’d learned that breaking a Fae promise was dangerous. I was certain about that, so I wasn’t going to let my mom do this. “Hah,” I scoffed, poking her shoulder. “You can’t trap me with that trick. I’m not promising anything.”

Mom groaned, rubbing her forehead. It was interesting how frequently people did that around me. My middle name should’ve been Frustration, because I sure seemed to make others feel that way about me. Which was honestly their own problem.

Personally, I thought I was delightful. A sparkly little ray of sunshine who never bothered anyone. Unless they bothered me first.

“Cali—”

“Kay, good talk, but I gotta go!” I said, and kissed Mom’s cheek again. “See you later! When I save you!” I hurried out despite my mom’s protests, blowing a kiss at her.

When I got back to Oregon, I was going to find Big Mac and ask for her help to find the Fae world. My mom wasn’t going anywhere.

\*\*\*\*

Half an hour later, I arrived at my apartment. I was getting out of my car when I felt someone’s breath at the back of my neck.

“Have you decided to help yet?”

Squealing, I jumped around… only to be faced with that vampire, Mikah.

*UGH!*

“Um, excuse me?” I snapped, shoving him in the chest. “Will you stop doing that?”

He raised an eyebrow. “What?”

This guy had a death wish. Too bad he was already dead and I couldn’t off him. Or could I? Maybe I could use a pair of chopsticks or something.

“Cali?” he asked patiently.

“Hmm?” I said, looking up, drawn away from my innocent thoughts. “Right! Nothing has changed, Mikah. You’re wasting your time. Leave me alone and all that.”

“Time is the one thing I can afford to waste.” He grinned. “It means little to vampires.”

“Well, *I* don’t have the time for this,” I grumbled, moving past him. “I’m leaving.”

“It won’t do you any good,” he called behind me.

I paused, turning back to face him. “Is that a threat? Are you threatening me?”

Mikah laughed. “Oh, of course not. I’m just stating a fact. It’s not that complicated.”

“I cannot WAIT to get out of here. I’m sick and tired of your bullshit and the cops,” I declared, and moved toward the apartment again.

Only to smack right into him once more.

“Mikah!” I yelled, huffing. “Stop appearing out of nowhere, my *god!*”

“Fine. Maybe by then you’ll have realized the mistake you’re making.” He stepped out of my way. “Go back to Oregon. Maybe I’ll see you there.”

“The only mistake I’m making is talking to you instead of bathing you in garlic yogurt sauce. Good luck getting that out of your all-black outfit!” I snapped and hurried into the apartment before he could do more of that vampire popping-up-out-of-nowhere thing.

When I got inside, Maya and Xavier seemed to have just finished packing.

“There you are!” Maya said. “I thought you’d died, but no such luck apparently.”

“I could say the same about you,” I shot back.

She laughed and winked at me, as if we’d just become best friends. Werewolf friendship was really, *really* fucking weird. Xavier shot Maya a look before walking up to me. He wrapped his arms around my waist while giving me a peck on the lips. He’d showered, and smelled like my orange and eucalyptus body wash.

“How did things go with your parents?” he asked.

I wished I could tell him everything. I wished things were much less complicated. I wished that we’d all get out of his mess unscathed.

“She’s had a setback,” I said.

That was technically not a lie.

Xavier wrapped his arms around me, kissing the top of my head. “Let me know if I can do anything to help.”

I pressed myself against him, breathing in his scent.

“All right, this is gross,” Maya clapped her hands together, interrupting the moment. “We have to leave or we’re going to miss our plane!”

\*\*\*\*

The flight back to Oregon was the epitome of unpleasant. The plane didn’t fall and there were no snakes on it, but every time I dozed off I had weird dreams featuring Tony, Alex, my mom and the Fae, and Mikah and vampires. There was one dream where Alex punched Tony’s face in, literally; another where my mom’s dress was made of a bunch of glowy wisps that started tickling her to death; and then there was Mikah with a bunch of vampires, eating Greek food and talking about how great tzatziki, a.k.a. that garlic yogurt sauce, was.

By the time we landed, I was on edge.

I was glad that Alex had been released, but my trip back home had left me with so many questions that any relief I felt was overshadowed by the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

“Cali?” Xavier said when we got to his car. He gestured to the passenger seat. “Shotgun?”

I got in, squeezing his hand in thanks before Maya got in the backseat, grumbling about the unfairness. “I wanted to sit in the front,” she said, huffing.

As he drove back home, I couldn’t stop thinking. Everything felt surreal. I was Fae, and nobody in this car knew it. I promised my mom I wouldn't tell, and Mikah had warned me that I couldn’t break a Fae promise without serious consequences. Why would Mom do that to me? Then again, my mother had already gone to such lengths to protect me…

*But why?* I wondered. *Why is it so dangerous to be Fae? What would Xavier think?*

I turned to him, catching him glancing up the rearview mirror. As I watched him, I saw him do that another three times. His face had gone taut. Intense.

“Hey,” I muttered, frowning. “Is something wrong?”

His jaw clenched. “We’re being followed.”

My eyes widened. I turned around, looking behind me. A lone car was zooming toward us. What was *happening?*

“Who the hell is it?” I asked. “Maya, can you see?”

Maya didn’t respond. I turned around and saw that she was sound asleep. It was funny how cute she looked right then—like an innocent girl instead of a murderous, sometimes-friendly nightmare.

“Should I wake her up?” I asked Xavier. He didn’t seem to register my question.

“I’m not going to sit here and have this son of a bitch tailgate me. Fuck this,” he said, and stepped on the gas. Thank god I was wearing a seat belt. Xavier kept gaining speed, but the car followed at the same pace.

Maya yawned, stirring awake. “What are you guys mumbling about over there?” She huffed, rubbing her eyes. “Can’t even let me take a nap without—”

*BOOM!*

Maya never finished her sentence, because the car crashed into us from behind.

**Episode 305**

“OH MY GOD!” I screamed, clutching at my seat belt.

“I’ve got this,” a disturbingly calm Xavier told me. He fought to keep control of the car as the homicidal asshole in the back slammed into us AGAIN!

“Who the FUCK IS THAT?” Maya exclaimed.

“No idea, hang on,” Xavier said. He was tense but focused, his voice loud but controlled, hands wrapped tightly around the wheel. His gaze was sharp as he glanced up at the rearview mirror and sped up once more, swerving to evade the chaser. Even as we were being attacked, he maintained his air of confidence. It made me feel just a tiny bit better, despite the deafening sounds of screeching tires and roaring engines.

The car behind us dropped back after what felt like a really long moment later. For a second, I thought everything was going to be okay.

“You saved us!” I leaned forward to kiss Xavier’s cheek.

Xavier shot me a smirk, shaking his head as Maya made gagging noises behind us. “Have they stopped?” she asked, twisting to look out the back window.

Just as the car raced up to coast right next to us.

“Spoke too soon,” I said.

“Hold on!” Xavier said, expression blazing.

He steered into the other car, fighting to force them off the road. Both Maya and I screamed, but Xavier continued his efforts to throw the car off. My mate had BALLS OF STEEL, JESUS CHRIST!

It was kind of sexy, not gonna lie.

But the *CRUNCH!* sound of clashing steel quickly made me forget about my inappropriate thoughts. Xavier fought to keep control of his car as Maya cussed out our attackers. I took off my seat belt, changing my position in the seat while trying to see into that damn car, but the windows were dark.

“Come closer, you coward!” I shouted at them, shaking my fist. “SHOW YOUR FACE!” I turned to Xavier. “How the hell are we gonna get away from them?”

“Who said we wanna get away?” Xavier said, raising an eyebrow. But then he glanced at me, growling for the first time since this whole thing had started. “CALI, PUT YOUR SEAT BELT BACK ON!”

The second I had my seat belt buckled, he yelled, “Brace yourselves!”

We sure had to, because then Xavier swung the car around, causing the other car to slam into us! The impact shook me to the core—thank god for that seat belt. The two cars skidded off together, coming to a stop on the side of the road…

My ears rang with the sound of my pulse, every inch of my body covered in sweat. I could already feel bruises forming, and I was panting, my chest heaving so hard I thought it would burst. But before I could speak or even think, Xavier had leaped out of the car, shifting in the middle of the road. Maya was just a step behind him, the two of them turning into massive deadly monsters in seconds.

As for me?

I was the useless piece of flesh left behind in the car. WITH MY GODDAMN SEAT BELT ON.

*This ends right now!* I thought, battling to take off the seat belt. It was stuck after the impact. I actually managed to release myself, very glad about winning that little battle. It did wonders for my ego—small victories and all. But then I had to kick at the door to get out, because that was also stuck from the impact, and that proved to be another grave obstacle for me.

*Dammit, Mom!* I thought. *Why couldn’t you have helped me learn more about my Fae powers?*

Finally jumping out of the car, I was determined to do something to help. Like, anything. But before I could take a step forward…

*BOOM!*

I was blown back, slammed to the ground as the other car exploded.

*CAN THINGS JUST STOP FUCKING EXPLODING OR CRASHING INTO ME, PLEASE?*

My ears ringing all over again, I managed to sit up, groaning. Where was Xavier?

A snarl answered my question a second later. I turned to see Xavier fighting another werewolf, the two of them tearing at each other’s throats. Gasping, I got to my feet, ready to march toward him when a flaming ball of fur slammed into me.

“DIDN’T I JUST SAY THAT I’M NOT INTERESTED IN ANY MORE CRASHES? STOP IT!” I screamed, kicking at the werewolf. The beast roared, taking my words personally despite the fact that they’d just been a general observation. It growled, charging toward me. And then it was ripped away.

A massive grey wolf tore the flaming wolf apart, spilling blood everywhere.

Greyson…

*GREYSON!*

He was here. He was *here*. And he’d saved me—again. Behind him, I could see Colton’s wolf attacking a werewolf that had cornered Maya. How on earth had Colton and Greyson gotten here?

As I clambered to my shaky feet, I saw Gabriel in wolf form, ripping another enemy apart. He was here too?! The heat from the flaming car hit the side of my body, and I was forced to move back. I had no fucking weapon, and I couldn’t access my freaking Fae magic—if I had ANY AT ALL. This really sucked.

And if all that wasn’t enough, a flaming tire from the attacker’s car rolled toward me, clearly trying to murder me. I jumped out of the way instantly, stepping onto a stick that lay in the middle of the road.

It was the perfect choice for a weapon, clearly.

*Aha!* I thought, looking between the stick and the flaming tire before sticking the stick in the tire’s fire… Did I just rhyme?

Anyway, a wolf was attacking Xavier a few feet away, and me and my non-magic flaming stick were ready to do some SERIOUS DAMAGE!

“Hey, DIPSHIT!” I screamed, charging toward the enemy werewolf with my stick. I poked the werewolf in the ass with it. “GET OFF MY MATE!”

The stick snapped immediately.

Gasping, I lost my balance and fell backward…

Only to be swept up by Greyson and carried into a safe distance. I clung to his wolf’s fur. I felt angry that he’d just taken care of me—AGAIN—and relieved that I was alive.

As the fight wound down, the only sounds on the empty road were a few whimpers, and the sound of the car burning. Xavier, Colton, Maya, Gabriel, and Greyson shifted back. Their faces were bloody, their bodies marked with scrapes and cuts.

Greyson’s voice was imposing. “Clean up this mess quickly.” He gestured at the attacker’s smoldering car, and at the dead human bodies that used to be werewolves. “We need to get back to the house.”

Everyone did as he ordered, putting out the fire first. While they worked, Greyson turned to face me, his expression thunderous. “Now you know why I told you not to fucking leave.” He towered over me, his whole body emanating fury. There was something in his eyes I couldn’t place. Concern? “Next time you defy me, don’t.”

*Um, EXCUSE ME?* I opened my mouth to defend myself, say that this particular mess hadn’t been my fault, but Greyson had already walked away. I was left behind, boiling, finally just yelling, “I’m not scared of you, Greyson!” at his retreating back.

*That’ll show him*, I thought to myself, satisfied.

In the meantime, the rest of the pack was busy pulling the dead bodies and ruined car into the woods. I eyed Xavier, who mercifully seemed okay enough, ready to walk toward him. But when our gazes met, he glanced away.

I frowned. Was he avoiding me all of a sudden? And if so, why?

Deciding that this was perhaps not the best time to start up this conversation, I helped with clean-up as much as I could. Then we all piled up in Xavier’s banged-up car. It could still move. Toyotas were really hardcore.

“I’m driving,” Greyson told Xavier, who didn’t protest.

“Shotgun!” Colton exclaimed, rushing to the passenger seat.

“Double shotgun!” Maya squeezed herself in next to Colton, elbowing him and slapping him on the face when he tried to protest.

Gabriel pouted. “I wanted to sit in the front.”

As the three of them bickered, Xavier and I got in the backseat, and a very put-out Gabriel followed.

Xavier, bruised and full of cuts, sat right next to me. He wouldn’t look at me, and that made my stomach throb. I tentatively reached out to hold his hand, and he…

He let me.

Taking a relieved breath, I twined our fingers together and squeezed. Xavier squeezed back. It was so hard that I yelped, pulling my hand away. “Ouch!”

He flinched, realizing his slip-up. Staring at me like a broken puppy, he whispered, “I’m sorry.” Wrapping his arms around me, he kissed my forehead. “I got lost there. I was so fucking worried I’d lose you today…”

“I’m right here,” I whispered back.

Xavier took my hand again, kissing the top of it before placing it against his chest.

I could feel Greyson’s eyes on us, glancing into the rearview mirror throughout the entire ride. I ignored him, but I could still feel the burn of his gaze on me.

When we pulled up to the pack house, Rishika ran up to Greyson just as we got out of the car. “Hey!” she said, her eyes alert. She gave the rest of us a nod as we got out. I couldn’t quite read her—she seemed torn between dread and excitement.

“You need to look at this.” She showed Greyson a piece of paper with a bloodied handprint. “It’s from Adra.”

*Shit.*

“What does she want?” I asked, unable to help myself.

Greyson scowled, examining the paper. “She wants to meet.”

**Episode 306**

Greyson gathered everyone together in the pack house living room, calling a meeting to discuss the message. Rishika and the other former Rogues, along with Maya and Colton and Joss, sat on the couches on the left side. Gabriel, Violet, and Mrs. Smith, along with me and Xavier, Lola, and Jay, settled on the right side. We’d become so much bigger so quickly.

Greyson stood in the middle, buck naked after the fight, glorious like a statue of a warrior. And of course, he was super casual about still being naked, as ever. Werewolves were truly fucking *ridiculous*.

“So what even is that?” Maya asked, looking at the paper with the bloody handprint that Greyson was holding.

“It’s a request for a meeting,” Greyson said. “A truce offer from Adra and the Manus Cruentae.”

Murmurs erupted around the pack. Colton laughed. “They attacked us just an hour ago, and now they want a truce?”

Gabriel nodded. “I don’t trust them. I say we finish them off for good.”

There were a few cheers and hollers from the group. Rishika whistled loudly. We knew where her opinion stood at least.

“Okay, everyone calm down,” Greyson said sternly. “We have to think about this carefully. As most of you already know, Adra and her pack can’t be trusted. A truce with them would be meaningless when we know they’re just out for Redwood blood.”

Greyson kept talking while the others listened. I just stared at Xavier. He was sitting next to me on the couch, looking at the floor. He’d been so quiet since we’d arrived at the house. If he was upset that I was in danger, I didn't know what to tell him. That wasn’t anything new. I’d been in danger before.

I’d basically be in CONSTANT danger for as long as I interacted with these werewolves. Perhaps even if I stopped, the Fae blood in me would attract its own trouble in the future. I was basically a magnet for supernatural bullshit, and that was all there was to it. And yet, Xavier seemed much more upset than normal this time.

“We’re going to arrange for a meeting,” Greyson said, pulling me out of my thoughts. “A dinner, at the old Sandstone mansion. It should be easy enough to figure out what Adra has in mind.”

There was some grumbling around the pack. “Any questions?” Greyson asked pointedly.

Everybody fell silent.

Then Gabriel piped up. “I’ve got one. What’s for dessert?”

Some of the new pack members snickered, but I glared at Gabriel. Now was not the time for jokes! When I made eye contact with him he smiled and winked. Why did he have to be so damn charming?!

“I’ll send word to Adra,” Greyson said, looking around. “This is apparently a ‘formal dinner,’ so make yourselves presentable.”

*Formal*? Was she for real? That was the last thing I’d expected to hear. But I guess if we were going to go die, might as well look our best.

\*\*\*\*

A blue silk gown, pretty and light, had appeared on my bed after I showered. Lola didn’t have a second formalwear piece with her, so Maya had given me something she found in one of the closets upstairs. Xavier was nowhere to be seen. He didn’t have a dress to lend me, obviously, but I just wanted to know where he was. I’d asked Colton, and he’d said his brother was showering downstairs.

Okay, so it really seemed like Xavier was officially avoiding me.

And WHY couldn’t I wear this dress with a bra?!

“Because that’s no fun,” Maya told me seriously when I asked her, before sauntering off to get ready too.

“But—”

“No bra, Cali!”

*Totally comfortable to wear during a battle, then,* I thought sarcastically.

Fighting not to stew over the bra situation—and also Xavier—I got ready. I combed through my wet hair and put it up in a ballerina bun because I couldn’t find the blow-dryer. These werewolves were heathens so they’d probably chewed on it or something. I then put on some concealer to cover my dark circles, applied mascara, then patted some burgundy lipstick on my lips and cheeks to bring some life to my face. Lola had taught me well, it seemed.

Walking down the stairs, I fidgeted with the pendant that Mom had given me. It looked good, and it matched the fancy silk dress, but it hadn’t proven particularly useful so far. Perhaps it would help me cope with my Fae powers at some point? I was looking forward to that day.

I caught sight of my reflection in the hallway mirror. I looked great, if I did say so myself. No bra and all. The silk dress was double-padded over the chest area, and it actually had built-in support for your boobs, so I wasn’t that mad about it anymore. It was still super weird to get dressed up for something that had the edge of a battle to it. I had no idea what to expect when we got there, but a nice dinner seemed like it wasn’t it.

“Cali!” Lola called, running up to me. Jay waved at me. Both of them looked wonderful—especially Lola with her red cocktail dress. I was pretty sure she was wearing a real bra, too.

“You look stunning,” I told her.

“You too,” she said and hugged me tight. She’d done that a couple of times since I’d gotten back from my trip. Felt nice to be missed. “When all this is over, you have tell me everything that happened back in Minnesota. Did you see Alex?”

“I’ve already promised you that,” I said.

Lola winked. “Well, just thought I’d remind you.”

Snorting, I nodded just as Maya walked into the foyer.

“Hey, human,” she told me, raising an eyebrow. “Looking good. I was afraid you wouldn’t be able to pull it off.”

Was that a kind-of compliment? I blinked in shock. “Thanks, I guess. You look great too.”

“I know,” Maya said casually, fastening a large knife to her thigh, beneath her slitted black dress. I frowned. Why didn’t my dress come with one of those?

*I should get a secret weapon,* I thought to myself*. Why is nobody giving me a weapon?*

As I was mulling that over, Xavier walked out of the downstairs bathroom. He looked dazzling in a navy suit. *Whoa*. I grinned at him, wanting to walk up to him and say, *‘Hey, look! We kinda match, different shades of blue!’* But before I could even take a step forward, he was already strutting away toward Colton.

He either hadn’t seen me, or he was continuing to avoid me.

Either way, I was NOT happy.

What had I even done to make him react like that?

I wanted to stomp my feet and go, ‘*Come back here and tell me I look pretty!’* But I refrained, maintaining some of my pride. As more of the pack gathered around, Greyson joined us.

He cleaned up well and looked unfortunately phenomenal in his perfectly fitted grey suit. It complimented his eyes and everything. I couldn’t help but notice how his hair looked—pushed back in a lazy way, but also like he’d tried. Had he tried?

My breath caught as he turned to me, drinking me in for a short moment before turning away. Feeling my cheeks heat, I held his gaze until he looked away first. I felt a twinge in my stomach at what felt like indifference on his behalf. Were *both* Xavier and Greyson avoiding me?

It couldn’t be my imagination.

“This ends tonight,” Greyson told the pack, looking around at everyone. Apart from me.

*RUDE!*

“Play along until I give the signal and then attack, understood?” Greyson went on. “And remember, Adra is mine.”

The realization that I could actually die tonight kind of crashed right into me, so I told myself to stop thinking about petty BS like bras and asshole werewolf brothers. It was hard to do this, however, when Greyson made eye contact with me.

“When it starts,” he said, “stay out of the way, Cali.”

I felt the urge to tell him off, but I suppressed it. For once. His look told me that he was being serious here, and any objections from me would lead to a blow-out. We didn’t have the time for that. I understood that, but damn if I didn’t like being told what to do by him.

“You’re gonna be okay,” Lola said, hugging me from the side. “I’ll be there with you. I’ll protect you.”

Nodding, I followed her as we headed out to the cars. I rode with Jay and Lola and Maya, because Xavier still wouldn’t look at me, let alone ride in a car with me now. Fighting not to think about that, I turned to Lola. “So what’s this place called again?”

“The Sandstone mansion,” she said. “It’s an elegant but pretty much abandoned mansion nearby.”

When we arrived and parked outside, I stared at the residence looming in the distance. It reminded me of the house where the barbecue had taken place—only this one was bigger. *Much* bigger. We went inside, navigating the massive foyer and family room. I looked around, fighting to take it all in. It was still fully furnished and everything. I mean, also decrepit and kind of rotting slowly, but still. Wow.

“She’s here!” Someone said. “Adra is here.”

Silence fell.

I could feel the tension heighten and explode as Adra and about a dozen Rogues entered the mansion. She was dressed to the nines in a slinky black dress. Without a bra for sure. Slithering up to Greyson, she smiled. It sent chills down my spine.

“Adra,” Greyson said. His voice was deep, commanding.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with us,” she said, walking before taking her place at the front of a long table. So it was a dinner party. Ha. “We’ve both suffered casualties. It’s time for a truce.”

I wanted to scoff right in her face. The woman was QUITE OBVIOUSLY evil! I could tell just by looking at her. I really hoped Greyson wasn’t buying into this. He was too smart for some reverse psychology bullshit.

“I look forward to hearing your offer,” Greyson told her tersely from his end of the table.

In the blink of an eye, Adra whipped out a knife, throwing it straight at Greyson with tremendous force.

The knife’s blade was silver.

**Episode 307**

I covered my mouth to stifle the scream that almost escaped as the knife flashed through the air—

And into Greyson’s outstretched hand.

His face distorted into a grimace when he caught it and slid it out, clenching his hand into a fist. Blood dripped out through his fingers as he dropped the knife.

It was silver. The knife was fucking *silver*.

*Greyson!*

For a second that felt like a century, everyone stood still.

*Silence.*

And then, Greyson’s roar made the whole mansion vibrate.

Everything burst into motion while he leaped at Adra, shifting mid-air as he rammed into her. Gasping, I looked around to see the Redwood pack shifting to attack the rogues.

*I guess that’s what Greyson meant by ‘wait for my signal’!* I thought hysterically before scrambling for the silver knife that Greyson had dropped. *OH MY GOD, WHERE’S A HIDDEN WEAPON WHEN YOU NEED ONE?*

I should’ve SERIOUSLY strapped something to the inside of my thigh! Or under the fucking built-in bra of this dress—how stupid had I been not to do that? Cursing myself, I fought not to screech and squeal as I evaded the werewolves, all trying to tear each other apart, and made a beeline for the knife.

I grabbed into its handle, wiping the blood on my dress and seeing the silver blade gleam. Now I could join the fight. No one would fuck with this knife.

But Greyson. He was cut already.

*Fuck*.

“*Cali!*” someone yelled, but I didn’t know who, or from where. I twisted around quickly and saw two massive beasts rolling in a corner. It was Xavier, with a Rogue from Adra’s pack on top of him, and they were snapping and snarling at each other.

Here was my chance.

Entirely unsure about my odds for survival but strongly determined nonetheless, I lunged forward and buried the knife between the wolf’s ribs. It keened, warm blood spilling onto my hand.

“OH MY GOD!” I screamed, half-sobbing.

The wolf roared and tumbled off Xavier, writhing on the floor in agony.

“Shit,” I whispered, panting. “That really must’ve hurt.”

Taking many, *many* steps back, I stared at the knife, stuck inside the whimpering werewolf, before I switched to staring at Xavier. His wolf locked eyes with me, and for a moment, I felt safe. I felt that we were connected and together. Okay.

But then he broke eye contact, howled, and leaped past me…

Only to slam into another wolf.

*Werewolf fighting has no finesse*, I thought, scrambling away from the bleeding wolf while continuing to hyperventilate like I was about to die. Speaking of dying, the werewolf I’d just stabbed was definitely dying, so he wouldn’t need the silver knife I’d just stuck in his ribs. Right?

Trying not to scream or cry, I made a move to withdraw the knife from him, ready to keep helping Xavier when I heard a terrifying snarl just behind me. I turned to see a smaller, auburn wolf.

Its eyes were fixed on me as it prowled closer.

“Good wolf-bear,” I said, giving it a thumbs up. It seemed unmoved, and charged toward me. I squealed, leaving the knife behind as I jumped over the dying wolf and scrambled to GET THE FUCK OUT OF THE LIVING ROOM.

The hallway looked better, actually. No blood here yet, hurrah! But which way to go? I saw a set of winding stairs, which looked better than imminent death, so I headed toward them. Hopefully I’d find something to use to defend myself upstairs. Because I was a fucking moron who hadn’t armed herself BEFORE THIS BATTLE STARTED!

“Such an idiot,” I hissed, running up the stairs. Then I realized that that smaller auburn wolf was still following me.

But it wasn’t running or frantic like I was.

It was following me slowly, its head tilted to the side like it was amused. Like it was ready to play with me.

Like I was a mouse, and the wolf was a cat.

“I’m not a mouse, asshole! Eat shit!” I snapped at the wolf before continuing to run away from it. Bravery in action right there. But seriously—I was Fae, so if I couldn’t do something badass right now, when would I?

At the top of the stairs, there was a room. Opening the door, I hurried inside, but my goddamn flimsy silk dress got caught on the handle, making me stumble. *Dammit!*

“Sorry dress,” I grumbled under my breath, pulling at it until it ripped free. I looked up, and sure enough the fucking wolf was at the staircase, only a few feet away from me now.

I banged the door shut and locked it, because, you know… BRAVERY.

“Ohmygodohmygodohmygod,” I chanted under my breath, looking around for a weapon. There was a fireplace with a poker. Perfect! I grabbed the poker—if I could spear a vampire with a lance, I could stop a werewolf with a poker. Right?

RIGHT?

I heard a howl outside the window, interrupting my inner pep talk. Fuck!

“Oh, no,” I whispered, moving cautiously toward the window. I peeked outside.

Down below, Greyson and Adra were tumbling around in a brutal fight.

My stomach clenched at the sight, but I didn’t have the time to freak out, because the fucking door burst open! And I had bigger problems right then—like the auburn werewolf that was glaring at me hungrily.

“Stay away!” I exclaimed, waving my poker around. “I WILL end you!”

The werewolf showed me its teeth while I spent a whole three seconds contemplating my choices:

1) Stay and face the wolf.

2) Escape through the window and try to help Greyson.

3) Die falling out a window—third time’s the charm right?

I hadn’t forgotten that Greyson was wounded—I remembered what the silver had done to Xavier at the Lupo Finale…

*Greyson could die*, I told myself. And just like that, my decision was made.

“Not that you haven’t been great company,” I told the wolf, stepping out onto the window ledge. “But I gotta go now!”

Greyson and Adra were ramming into each other just below me, the sounds they were making straight out of a horror movie.

The auburn wolf moved slowly toward me, like it didn’t actually believe I’d jump out of the window. It wasn’t like I WANTED TO DO IT, OKAY? Why did I always have to jump out of windows anyway? It wasn’t fair! Now that I thought about it, it also wasn’t going to work, because the ground was too far away. I’d break my neck.

*I shouldn’t do this!* I thought. *I—*

The werewolf lunged at me. I screamed, adrenaline coursing through me as grabbed onto a vine and swung off the ledge, channeling my inner Tarzan. The wolf didn’t follow my lead—it literally jumped over the edge of the window and howled as it crashed to the ground.

“*Oops*,” I whispered, horrified, looking down as I dangled from the vine.

Terror engulfed me when I looked at the ground. It was so far away! But my grip was slipping, the vines were breaking, and a second later I was falling. Below me, the wolf had recovered and was waiting with an open mouth, just like in *Little Red Riding Hood*. I screamed myself raw, slamming right into the wolf.

*BANG!*

The impact shook me, my terror still fresh. And then I realized that I was still holding that fucking poker, which…

Had sliced through the wolf below me.

*OH MY GOD!* I screamed inside my head. *THAT COULD HAVE BEEN ME! AM I LITERALLY JUST STAYING ALIVE BY ACCIDENT?*

The auburn wolf was… dying.

Hyperventilating, I stumbled away from the wolf, stunned. I had no time to process what the shit had just happened, or to gloat. Greyson and Adra were still fighting, snarling and roaring at each other while ripping at each other’s fur.

“Holy shit,” I hissed under my breath, grabbing the poker to remove it from the auburn werewolf’s body. But it was stuck. Torn between hysteria and frustration, I groaned, grabbing onto it with both hands and yanking…

It came free and I tripped, falling right into Adra.

The impact made me feel like I’d shattered, but Adra was distracted and I managed to strike her with the metal.

I screamed as Adra snapped at me, exposing her throat.

That was all Greyson needed to attack her, sinking his teeth into her neck and biting down. Adra screamed in pain while I panted, still lying on the ground, my whole body aching while I felt my heart beating under every inch of my skin.

For a moment, nothing moved.

Adra shifted into her human form, lying on the floor at Greyson’s feet.

He had shifted back too, panting.

Blood pooled at Adra’s neck, spilling out of her throat.

“It’s done,” Greyson told her in a gruff voice, more terrifying than anything I’d ever heard. “You lost.”

Her eyes were full of hatred as she glared up at him. With red-dipped teeth, she hissed, “I hope he finds you and slits your throat…”

And those were her last words.

**Episode 308**

“What the hell is she talking about?” I rasped, turning to Greyson.

But Greyson had no answer.

I watched, wide-eyed and shaking as he dropped to his knees.

The silver wound.

“Greyson!” I skidded to my knees beside him. He was covered in blood, with bites and scraps and cuts all over him. But that wasn’t anything I hadn’t seen before. “Your hand?”

He turned his hand over, looking at it.

And all the air was knocked out of my lungs.

The cut from the knife was spreading, and the area around it was turning black.

“Fuck,” I whispered, violent shivers moving through me. “We need to get you help!” I exclaimed, gripping onto his shoulders as he tumbled backward, sitting on the ground.

I’d never seen him like this before.

The Greyson I knew *always had a plan.* He was always ready. Nothinghad prepared me to see him like this—shocked. Despondent*.*

It was the most terrifying thing I’d ever witnessed.

“*Greyson*—”

“It’s okay. I’m fine,” he muttered. He looked up at me, blinking dazedly. He smiled at me, so soft that it was devastating, and showed me his hand again. “It’s not that bad.”

“Are you INSANE?” I yelled. “You know what silver does to werewolves! We have to get you to a witch!”

Greyson winced at my harsh tone. “Do you—do you have to yell at me right now?” he asked quietly, looking like a scolded child. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I didn’t want to believe it—I fucking REFUSED to believe it. Greyson wasn’t going to die.

*No fucking way.*

I looked around desperately, wishing for Big Mac just to pop out of nowhere to help. She’d fixed up Xavier so easily, by…

By using my blood.

An idea formed in my mind.

“Cali,” Greyson said in alarm. He hunched forward, holding his horrifying wounded hand over his lap as he sat on the ground. “I know that face. What are you thinking?”

Ignoring him, I straightened up and marched toward Adra’s body. The poker, my trusty weapon, was still there. Grabbing the handle, I wrenched it out, grunting with effort. Greyson squinted at me, still dazed, before his eyes widened.

“What are you…” He cut himself off, watching me in shock. I wiped the bloody poker on the edge of my dress, as best as I could. The blue of it had turned a nice purple, and…

*This is definitely going to hurt*, I thought, panicking as I stared at the poker’s point. But I couldn’t let Greyson die—that was non-negotiable. The moment I raised my fearsome weapon, though, Greyson said, “Caliana, answer me right now: What are you doing?”

I turned to him. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. His brow was furrowed, and he actually looked a little stronger. Imagine that! Pissing him off apparently worked as an agent to fight off silver.

“I’m trying to save you,” I said, an edge of hysteria in my tone. I fought not to burst into tears. I practiced plunging the poker into my forearm. Fuck, why didn’t I still have the knife?

Greyson gaped, looking more incredulous than I’d ever seen him. “By stabbing yourself? Have you lost your fucking *mind?*”

I paused.

*Okay, maybe he has a point*, I thought. Huffing, I inspected the poker, looking for another way. I found a rough spot on the top of the poker. Then I shrugged.

“Cali! Don’t—”

Too late. Ignoring Greyson, I slashed through my palm with the poker. Blood dripped out instantly. This would have to do.

This would have to work, because I had no idea what I’d do otherwise.

Greyson would not die on me.

*NO!*

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked again, using a stray piece of my torn dress to wrap his wound.

“No need for bandages,” I said, marching toward him with my bloody hand, which really hurt, actually. *Please don’t die*, I thought desperately.

“Hold out your hand,” I ordered, kneeling next to him again.

He eyed me suspiciously. He definitely looked better just from being mad at me, which was great. The ends justified the means. “What for?” he asked.

“Just do what I tell you, okay? For once in your goddamn life!”

Shockingly, Greyson sighed and held out his hand.

I could feel him staring at me as I held my bleeding palm above his gaping wound. Holding my breath, I let the blood drip into his flesh.

*Please,* please*.* I thought it again and again. *Don’t die. I can’t lose you.*

Greyson raised an eyebrow at me. “Human blood doesn’t do anything to werewolves, Cali.”

Fighting away tears, I said, “Shut up, Grey! Just, please, shut the hell up for once!”

He fell quiet. My mind raced. He didn’t know I was Fae, and I couldn’t tell him. Maybe my blood wouldn’t even work anyway. I glanced at him while my blood dripped into his wound. He watched me, his expression becoming more dazed by the second.

“Just trust me right now, okay?” My voice had become a shaky mutter. “*Please*.”

His wound remained the same, though. Black and terrifying, spreading.

Why wasn’t my blood working?

“It’s probably too late,” he whispered. His eyes closed for a second and he fell forward, his spine unable to keep him straight.

“Greyson, *no!*” I sniffled, holding him up, both my hands on his face, pushing his hair back. “Stay with me.”

He let out a groan, the pain rapidly spreading. I could *feel* it. Feel his wolf abandoning him, the silver taking over. Winning. He fell back to the ground.

*It’s not working!* I thought frantically. *My blood isn’t working!*

“You’re crying,” he said in wonder, once his eyes opened again. He faced me, reaching with his good hand to touch the corner of my eye. I *was* crying. Tears streamed down my cheeks, silent ones, the kind that turned everything inside me into a dull ache.

*This can’t be happening…*

*Please, please don’t die…*

*Please, this can’t be happening…*

I realized I was saying those things out loud when he caressed my cheekbone with the back of his hand. His eyes roamed every inch of my face in a way that made goosebumps rise all over me. He smiled at me, and it was tainted by pain, but there was something more in it too.

Something powerful enough to make my tears turn into a sob.

Greyson looked at me like I was the only reason he’d stayed alive these past few moments. And when he spoke next, his longing was even stronger than his pain.

“If I’m going to die right now,” he said, “there’s one thing I need to do…”

I couldn’t breathe as he moved his hand behind my neck, his touch soft. Was he trying to sit up? No! He needed to rest. I was about to tell him as much when he pulled me gently closer. Then he brushed his lips against mine.

My brain stopped working. I forgot that we were in the middle of a battle. I forgot that Greyson had a silver wound. All I cared about for the moment was Greyson’s lips on mine. And I would hate myself for this later, but I didn’t even think to resist. Because this wasn’t a trick. This wasn’t a lie.

This was Greyson losing his life, and me being the last person who would ever see him alive.

I *couldn’t* think long enough to tell him to stop.

Not for a second.

Not right now, when Greyson was dying. Not right now, when Greyson was putting the last of his strength and power into the kiss, the feel of his mouth against mine making me weak. My body vibrated from the inside out, his grip at the back of my neck tightening to pull me even closer as my lips parted and his tongue slid against mine.

I moaned into his mouth, my hands moving to caress his face, his bare chest and shoulders, anywhere I could reach. He groaned, his skin hot and hard and perfect under my touch, trembling with our contact. His reaction was so intense, so overwhelming, that I wanted to keep touching him like this for as long as I could.

For as long as he was here, with me, breathing into me with this kiss and the passion behind it, this craving he shared with me… It made me feel like I could break. It was unlike anything else, a sudden surge of energy running through my body that left me reeling.

The feeling made me gasp, breaking the kiss.

Greyson was panting, his heart hammering under my bloody palm. Still breathing, still alive as he stared at me, his pupils blown. Was it lust? Desire?

Whatever I felt, he felt it too.

He stared at me wide-eyed, exhaling sharply as his gaze moved from my face down to himself. To his hand…

His hand that had started healing.

Healing.

*HEALING*.

“Um…”I trailed off, astonished. My heart beat so fast I thought it was going to explode.

Greyson looked between his hand and me, his expression torn between shock and something else. Something fierce enough that I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. Admiration? Awe?

*Love*?

His voice was raspy. Broken. “Cali,” he breathed, tracing his rapidly healing wound. “Are… are you Fae?”