**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 7**

**Episodes 562-691**

**Episode 562**

MAYA

Nneka was waving her shotgun around, as if she was capable of scaring me. Hilarious.

“Put that thing away before you hurt somebody!” Big Mac exclaimed. The witch who’d always looked so powerful seemed panicked now, or at least frustrated, which was seriously not Big Mac’s usual M.O.

“MacKenzie MacEvoy?” Nneka huffed, looking Big Mac up and down, her eyes narrowed. “What the hell are you doing with them?” she snapped, swinging the shotgun back toward Colton, Mrs. Smith, and me.

I didn’t enjoy shotguns moving toward my fucking face, so I growled. “Hey, watch it!”

“Werewolves are trouble!” Nneka spat, glaring at us. “All witches know that, MacKenzie! How the hell can I trust you if you bring them to my home?”

“If you stop freaking out, I’ll explain,” Big Mac snapped. “And stop waving that thing around like a flag, will you?”

“It’s no way to treat a guest,” Colton told her, like the smartass he was. Nneka glared at him but did, indeed, lower the gun.

“Who are they?” Nneka asked again.

Offering a long-suffering sigh, Big Mac said, “Maya Wright, Sabine Smith, and that’s Colton Evers next to her.”

Nneka glanced at Colton, grunting. “Ugh. How many damn Evers brothers are there? They keep springing up all over the place!”

Colton smirked. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

I rolled my eyes. “What are you even talking about?” I asked her.

“I dealt with an Evers kid not too long ago,” Nneka said, waving a hand in the air. “Two of them. Not very nie boys if you ask me. And I don’t like werewolves. Never have, never will.”

“We only want some help and then they’ll be out of your hair,” Big Mac pressed. “And Sabine’s not even that bad for a werewolf!”

“Gee,” Mrs. Smith said, snorting. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“We could shift,” Colton whispered in my ear while Nneka and Big Mac bickered.

“That will only scare the witch away,” I whispered back. “Or make her blast us. Neither one is a good option, so just chill.”

“I’m not very good at chilling,” Colton told me with a pout.

I scoffed, elbowing him. “We need to make nice with her, Colton.”

He looked at me like I was nuts. “Since when do you make nice? Next thing you know, you’ll be asking me to be friends with a witch!”

I snorted. “I *dare you* to achieve that.”

Instead of getting annoyed, Colton just smirked at me. He really was a dickhead. He was lucky he had such a nice dick to make up for it.

“So what’s with the shotgun?” he asked Nneka abruptly, interrupting her tense chat with Big Mac and Mrs. Smith. “If you’re a witch, why do you even need one? Seems a little extra to me.”

Nneka aimed it right at Colton, glowering. “Cause I like it. You got a problem with that, Evers?”

Colton blinked. “Nope! All good.”

Colton’s attempt at friendship ended as quickly as it had started, of course. He really had a talent for not making friends while also remaining infuriatingly hot. Luckily he was useful when it came to tracking and hunting, because diplomacy was not his forte.

Then again, it wasn’t like I was Miss Congeniality, what with the huge chip on my shoulder, but at least I had reasons for being the way I was. Colton was just naturally annoying.

“So are you going to let us in?” Big Mac asked Nneka impatiently.

Nneka looked at all four of us before rolling her eyes. “Okay, MacKenzie,” she grumbled. “But only out of respect to your mother.”

I wondered what kind of witch Big Mac’s mother had been, for Nneka to react this way. How did witch hierarchy even work? I needed to figure this shit out if we were going to be spending so much time around witches.

“Come on in,” Nneka grunted, lowering her gun before stepping inside. As Colton and I passed by her, though, she made an ‘I’m watching you’ gesture and glared. I had to keep myself from punching her. She was watching *me?* Well, I’d been watching her first!

Goddamn witches.

“You look mad,” Colton muttered to me once we walked inside. “You should try to chill.”

This little fuck was using my own words against me. It was enraging, but also cute, but also enraging. Fighting a smile, I elbowed him. He chuckled under his breath and looked around the convenience store’s shelves.

“This is pretty cool! Maybe we should pick up some snacks before we leave,” he said casually, reaching out to for a bag of chips and a candy bar.

Rolling my eyes, I smacked his hands away.

“What?” Colton asked, offended. “I’m hungry!”

“Don’t,” I declared. “Just don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t be yourself for like, five minutes.”

Colton gasped in offense just as Nneka hustled us into the very large back room, grumbling about greedy werewolves.

“What the hell is this about?” she demanded, looking around before her gaze settled on Big Mac. “And before you say anything, keep that cat in your backpack. I’m allergic.”

“Isn’t there a potion to protect you from allergies?” Colton asked her thoughtfully, finishing up a candy bar. When on earth had he grabbed that?

Nneka seemed to be equally surprised by Colton’s stealth, watching as he swallowed the last of the candy bar. But then she was just pissed off, because she said, “Number one, you’re paying for that. Number two, I’m the one asking the questions here. MacKenzie!” she barked, turning to Big Mac again. “Explain yourself, *right* *now*.”

With only Mrs. Smith occasionally interjecting, Big Mac gave Nneka a summary of Silas and his murderous tendencies and the deadly Orb of the Dead or whatever it was called. Nneka’s eyes were narrowed the entire time, and then she turned to face Colton and me.

“You two, wait out in the store,” Nneka declared.

“What now?” I demanded.

“I can wait outside,” Colton said, eyebrows raised. “More snacks to be had in the meantime.”

“Why the hell should we—”

“Your auras make me nervous,” Nneka told us, glaring between Colton and me. “There’s something going on between you two, and I don't like it.”

Colton just shrugged at that, shooting me a petty look. Before I could say anything, Mrs. Smith spoke up. “It’s okay, we’re taking care of it.”

Colton scoffed.

I glared at him.

“I should get going too.” Teddy—who Nneka had also begrudgingly let in after us, while Big Mac explained to the other witch what was going on—stood up. But Mrs. Smith grabbed his arm in a strong grip. “You’re staying with us, kid. I’m not letting you out of my sight.” She turned to us. “The two of you, though, go.”

Colton and I started to move backward through the store, all huffy.

“And don’t steal anything else!” Nneka called after us. “I’ve got cameras everywhere!”

Colton looked around at all the treats, his eyes shining like a child’s in a candy store. Literally. “You think she’s serious about those cameras?” he asked me.

“Are you seriously thinking about stealing more from a witch?”

Colton turned to me, raising an eyebrow. “If I see something I like, I take it.” He pointed at me, offering a smirk. “And I do see something I like here.”

“What a line.” I snorted. “Don’t even start with me right now.”

He ignored me entirely, because he was a fucking menace, and moved closer. I fought to ignore the feeling that burst in the pit of my stomach at his nearness, butterflies flapping their damn wings.

“So what do you think that old witchy woman meant when she said there was something going on between us?” Colton tilted his head to the side, leaning even closer. “That we have a little… *arrangement?*” He trailed his fingers up my arm.

My forearm broke out in goosebumps. “Cut the BS,” I snapped at him.

Colton glanced at my forearm and offered me a gorgeous—and gorgeously smug—smile. “I guess it’s pretty obvious that there’s a lot of chemistry going on between us.” He leaned forward, glancing at my lips. His scent was so intoxicating that for a second, I was tempted to give in.

But then I remembered where we were, and that at least one of us had to stay in control. I wanted him, badly, but I’d never let that take me over.

I would never be at anyone’s mercy.

“Do you think she knows we’re mates?” Colton asked, moving even closer. His breath hit my lips, and they parted. I swallowed roughly.

“She knows more than that,” I said, suddenly feeling vaguely panicked by his closeness. By how much I wanted him. By the thought of anyone affecting me to the degree that Colton did.

I bristled, a sense of resolve rolling through me. Nothing and nobody controlled me. Ever.

Without thinking, I blurted, “I tried to unmate from you.”

Colton’s mouth dropped open in shock. “You tried to *what*?

**Episode 563**

The portal felt like a vortex of power, of energy, like I was being sucked into another dimension—literally, of course. In an instant, I found myself standing on a rocky, watery surface.

My head was pounding, a slight dizziness overcoming my senses for a moment.

The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, the sound of waves echoed in my ears, and I was…

Where the hell was I?

*Wait…*

What had just happened?

Blinking rapidly, fighting panic, I looked around, taking a step forward and almost slipping—but I didn’t. Because there were two massive, gorgeous men holding each of my hands.

*Say WHAT now?!* I thought, jumping away from both of them and clumsily splashing water.

“Excuse me, but I’m not sure what’s going on right now!” I told the men. I couldn’t see their faces clearly, because the air was thick with fog. The men weren’t speaking either, making the whole scene eerie, almost frightening. My heart was pounding. My head was still fuzzy as I looked around again. Wherever I was, it was by the ocean.

*How the hell did I get myself here?* I wondered, aghast. *I wouldn’t just randomly go hiking with two hot men, would I? Where did I even find them? And why aren’t they speaking?*

I was ready to move closer to the men, just to attempt to see their faces, when a woman and a group of people came up behind me, forcing the fog apart with their silhouettes. I stared at the woman, my eyes widening as she said, “Cali!”

*Cali*

*Cali*

*Cali*

The woman’s voice echoed in the space, bouncing off the fog and multiplying, echoing in the distance. *Cali*. I knew that name. I did, didn’t I? Huh? How was any of this real? What was happening?

Fighting to keep my cool, I was staring at the rocky surface before me when two words came to mind: Haystack Rock.

It was where my journey had begun—here. *This* was the place I’d been thinking about. Relief flooded me. At least I could remember that. I wasn’t sure about what kind of journey I’d been on, but I knew that it was important.

“Hey, you over there,” a big man with a purple scarf asked me as the group of men, and the one woman, walked up to me. At least I wasn’t alone. And judging by the man’s face, I wasn’t the only one freaking out. “Do you know where we are?”

“No,” I replied, my eyes darting nervously around.

“How we got here?”

“Also no,” I replied.

The man with the purple scarf frowned at me. “For some reason, I thought you’d know more.”

“Hey!” The woman of the group stood before me. Her expression was full of caution. “Cali, do you remember what’s happening? Where you are and why?”

I stared at the woman. She had long black hair, piercing light blue eyes, and tan skin. She looked like Xena Warrior Princess.

“Don’t pressure yourself if you’re not up for it right now,” the woman told me gently. “My name is Artemis, if you’re having trouble remembering,” she said, squeezing my shoulder.

I didn’t push her hand away, because she felt familiar. She felt safe. I knew her.

“I know you,” I told her.

She smiled. “You do. I’m your friend.”

As the group of men started talking among themselves about ways to get out of there, Artemis focused on me. “You have to remember, Cali. You came here to save your mother.”

*Mother.*

I gasped and shuddered as if a bolt of lightning had struck me, rattling my brain.

*Mother mother mother!*

All the memories exploded in my mind at once. I’d come here for my mother, that much was certain. The rest, though, was jumbled—pieces of a puzzle that weren’t fitting together quite right. Like they were right there in the dark and just needed some time to come into the light.

“Something’s wrong,” I told Artemis, my throat closing up. “I can’t remember everything. Only bits and pieces.”

Artemis squeezed my shoulder, nodding. “You’ll be okay. If you remember some of it, I bet you it all comes back soon. Just you wait.”

I sniffled. “How do you know that?”

Artemis gave me a coy smile. “Because I’ve seen you fight titans and come out on top.”

*Titans?* I thought to myself, shocked. *Me?*

I wondered if I’d used a wooden spoon to destroy the titans or something. For some reason, that thought didn’t sound as ridiculous as it should have. It seemed very plausible. But then I had a flash of something—the Kollector. The thunderbird. Ashes.

*Shit*. How had I managed to forget any of that? Artemis wasn’t lying. And was, apparently, a major compliment-er.

“For now, we should get off this rock,” Artemis added. “The morning tide’s coming in.” She held out her hand to me. I stared at it, pressing my lips together.

“You can trust me, Cali,” Artemis said. “You know you can.”

I stared into her eyes until I felt settled in my own body. Until I felt like I was looking straight at a truth, and I knew that I could, indeed, trust her. I took her hand, and together we stepped off the rock and into the cold water. It came up to the middle of our thighs. The way toward the shore was slippery, a mess, and several times I had to lean on Artemis to avoid slipping. She steadied me with ease.

*Who in their right mind would even come here?* I wondered. *Is it a hot picnic spot or something?*

Making everything much worse was not being able to see through the fog—it felt like the physical manifestation of my own confused brain. It began to lift a few moments later, and we were finally able to take in the stunning view of the shore and beyond.

“It’s so beautiful,” Artemis whispered. “I had no idea.”

“It *is* beautiful,” I agreed, keeping my voice low as well. *Why are we whispering?* I wanted to ask her but stopped myself because I had no idea what the hell was going on. “But where are we again?”

Artemis stared at me. “You’re the one who needs to answer that.”

Well wasn’t THAT so helpful.

But then I recognized Haystack Rock behind me, but that was about it. I could at least hear all the men splashing around in the water. Many of them had looked a little dirty, like they’d been cleaning chimneys, so a bit of water would help them freshen up. That train of thought didn’t make much sense, but it felt like nothing did in that moment. I was really fighting to piece everything together here, but the only thing that jumped out to me right now was that one word.

*Mother.*

Artemis had said something about my mother.

“What about my mother?” I asked Artemis.

She stared at me, her expression enigmatic. “I know you can figure this out on your own, Cali. Come on. Push for your memories to come back.”

The fog had lifted almost fully now, and I could see clearly into the distance. I could see the group of men splashing around, and then the two other men—the men who’d been holding my hands earlier. Now, they headed toward me slowly.

The one with the piercing gray eyes caught up to us first. His face was chiseled to perfection, a wonderful work of art. He was tall and broad-shouldered. He stared at me so intensely it felt like he was fighting to figure out my every thought. His intense expression changed to utter hurt when he eyed me and said, “Don’t you recognize me?”

I had no idea what to say to that.

I had no idea who this man was. I could feel his name on the tip of my tongue, but it wouldn’t come.

GOD THIS SUCKED SO DAMN MUCH.

And if that wasn’t enough, the second man appeared. He was also tall and broad, also devastatingly handsome. His dark blue eyes peered into my soul, watching me like I was the most important thing that had ever entered his sight. His face twitched with uncertainty as I stared at him in confusion.

“You know me,” he said.

I suddenly felt like bursting into tears, looking between the beautiful men. But the feeling was quickly replaced by another, strong and pulsating. An attraction that became ravenous enough to make me shiver and shudder as I looked at them both. It was a feeling that I’d never experienced before—something sexual and primordial that made my body ache, my head throb, and my mind riot with pictures from what felt like another life.

The images kept flashing through my brain, images of kissing and wolves, flesh against flesh, bodies grinding together, the kissing turning into more and more. The images were dipped in burning desire and hunger, tipping into an overwhelming feeling that I couldn’t ignore.

My cheeks felt hot, the warmth starting there and spreading all over me as the two men watched me intently.

They knew me.

They had to, and I had to know them. Right? Nothing made sense, otherwise. I knew them, and I could feel the connection between us, between all three of us. Their names were both on the tip of my tongue, but I *still* couldn’t place them.

There was a resemblance between the two. It was faint, subtle, but still obvious. But the similarities between them began to fill me with nerves that had nothing to do with excitement. It was a pulsating, unsettling feeling—as if I was being pulled back and forth between them somehow. My head hurt so fucking much.

Holding my breath, I looked between the two men. “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

**Episode 564**

LOLA

The empty hospital bed seemed to loom larger by the second as I fought to control my emotions. We were too late. Panic raced through me like wildfire. I was barely able to hold back my tears as I spun to Jay, my mind racing. “Oh my god Jay, she’s not here anymore! Is she… Is Orla dead?”

“Can I help you, miss?

I whipped around, my hair flying into my face, to find a no-nonsense, stern nurse in the doorway. “Um,” I began. “Mrs. Hart. Is she…” I couldn’t bring myself to finish the sentence.

“The patient has been moved to the ICU.”

Relief washed over me so quickly that I felt weak in the knees. Orla was still alive. I’d feared the worst, but she wasn’t gone. We still had time, so we still had hope. Then, almost as quickly, fear hit me. The ICU was never a good sign. What if she was already on life support? In a coma? How could we communicate with Cali? Jay, watching me carefully, squeezed my hand as if he could sense that I was on the verge of spiraling out of control.

Together, Jay and I headed to the ICU, which was two floors up. We moved silently but swiftly, neither of us ready to talk yet.

When we were inside the elevator, I glanced up at Jay. “I was scared,” I said softly. “So scared that… that I was too late.”

Wordlessly, Jay folded me into a warm hug, his arms tightening around me. A deep sigh, nearly a sob, escaped me. It felt so *good* to be held.

After that, we walked silently to the ICU, and I had to admit I felt a little better knowing that Jay was there by my side. The nurse had given us a room number, which we looked for on each door. I’d always hated hospitals, but right now, I really despised them.

“There,” Jay said, pointing to a corner room with its door ajar.

A doctor was standing at the foot of the bed, holding a clipboard full of reports. In the bed, a white sheet covering her up to her shoulders, lay Orla. Tubes seemed to be hooked up to her everywhere, and various machines were beeping. The harsh scent of sanitizer filled the room, burning my lungs when I gasped.

I hadn’t seen Orla in a while, and the shock of seeing her so frail and weak stole my breath. This was so wrong. She was far too young to look like that.

“Ah,” the doctor said, nodding in a small expression of welcome. “Are you her daughter? I’ve been hoping you’d show up.”

I shook my head, too shocked to speak. My gaze rested on the heart rate monitor, watching each peak and valley. All of them seemed too slow, too low. This wasn’t good.

The doctor’s lips pursed. “Are you a relative?” Her voice sounded a lot less friendly now.

“No,” I managed.

“Then I’m sorry, but you have to leave.” The doctor’s kindness had morphed into professional sternness. “Only immediate family are allowed to be in the room.”

“But is she okay?” I blurted out.

“Miss,” a nurse said, stepping in as the doctor left. “I’m sorry but we can’t divulge the patient’s condition unless you’re a family member. Please leave before I call someone to escort you from the premises.”

For one heated moment, I imagined shifting into my wolf and ripping the nurse to absolute shreds. Rage coiled within me. I hated feeling powerless.

“Lola,” Jay said softly, his hand resting on my shoulder, grounding me. “We should go.”

“But—” I bit my tongue. I needed to talk to Orla, to ask about Cali. “We were supposed to talk to her.”

“If she’s unconscious, she can’t answer our questions anyway,” he replied, steering me carefully out of the room and down the hall.

“Maybe we can wait downstairs?” If we could somehow sneak past Dad and Pops... “Maybe she’ll wake up soon?”

But that didn’t seem likely, either. What would Cali have wanted me to do, if she were here?

“Hang on.” Jay snapped his fingers. “I’ve got an idea.”

He moved across the hall to where a tall, handsome nurse was just clocking in for his shift. “Sir,” Jay said. “Sorry to bother you, but—”

“Oh, it’s no bother,” the nurse replied cheerfully. “I’m Ian. How can I help?”

“Right, Ian. This is Lola. A dear friend of hers is in the ICU. She’s currently unconscious, but we were wondering if there was any way you could give us a call if her friend—Orla’s her name—wakes up?”

“Lola?” Mr. Hart came around the corner and I was so surprised I almost didn’t recognize him. “What are you doing here kiddo?”

“Mr. Hart!” I said, rushing toward him. “Are you okay? And Mrs. Hart? We wanted to visit and…” I trailed off. Cali’s dad looked like he hadn’t been sleeping well at all. And why would he have been? I couldn’t imagine how he must feel.

“Orla’s not quite out of the woods yet,” Mr. Hart said. It looked like he’d been crying. Maybe he’d had to step away earlier as the doctor worked. “It means so much that you came by, Lola. You and—”

“Jay,” I said with a half-baked smile. I reached and grabbed Mr. Hart’s hand, squeezing. “We’re here for anything you need okay?”

With all my might, I wished for Orla to recover, and quickly.

We talked a bit more with Cali’s dad, but it was clear he was tired and probably needed to sit down and rest. If possible. Dad and Pops were waiting for Jay and me in the lobby, so we said goodbye, each giving Mr. Hart a good hug and promising we’d be back. When we got to the lobby, Pops was on his phone, but Dad was pacing, which was never the best sign.

“Everything okay?” Dad asked. I shook my head.

*We need to talk babe*, Jay said, mind linking with me. There was always something that made my toes curl pleasantly when he did.

“Can we stop somewhere and grab a cup of coffee?” I asked, my eyes shifting between my dads and Jay.

Pops snorted, getting off the phone. “There’s coffee at home.”

“Wait, Pops.” I touched his arm gently. “I meant me and Jay. Could you drop us off at Mrs. Smith's cafe? I could really, really use a white chocolate mocha.” They knew that was my comfort drink of choice. And boy, did I need one after everything that just happened…

Pops remained stone-faced. Dad wasn’t looking too sold on the idea, either. “That’s too far for you two to walk home, after.”

I noticed the look crackling between them, so I resorted to my secret weapon. “*Please.”* I dragged out the word, adding my best puppy-dog eyes. “We can get an Uber back, no problem.”

Pops shook his head. “I don’t know…”

“And I’ll vacuum under all the couches in the house. Please. I really need something sweet right now.”

Finally, Dad shrugged. “Sure, kiddo.”

Relief washed over me, followed by only a bit of guilt.

I followed Jay to the car. Jay paused. “I really don’t think your father likes me,” he whispered.

“Which one?” I asked.

Jay shook his head. “Both of them.”

I rolled my eyes, sure that Jay was just being paranoid, but deciding not to tell him that.

The car ride passed in a very awkward silence. No one, not even Pops, tried to make conversation. When we reached the cafe, I nearly hopped out before the car had even stopped moving. Maybe Jay had been right.

But *why* wouldn’t my dads like him? Jay was a golden boy. The sweetest, hottest boy to roam the planet.

The cafe’s door opened with a merry chime. The lovely smell of roasting coffee, mixed with fresh baked goods, greeted our noses. “Yum,” I said, my mouth already watering with anticipation.

Jay nodded at the long line. “Looks like Mrs. Smith has quite the successful operation. Maybe she should franchise.”

I shifted my weight from foot to foot as we waited in line. Suddenly, a tall man wearing a minor league baseball cap, sunglasses, and a grey hoodie approached us. “Lola?” he asked in a low whisper.

I blinked, trying to place the voice. “Alex!?”

He pushed up his sunglasses for a moment, confirming my guess. Then his gaze darted nervously toward the door and he dropped the glasses back onto the bridge of his nose. “Ever since I got hit with that false accusation, I’ve had to disguise myself.”

Of course. Because people assumed he was responsible for Tony’s death. “I’m so sorry,” I said. “That must be really hard.”

“Yeah.” He plunged his hands into his pockets. “It’s good to see you. I’ve been missing Cali real bad. Tried texting her, but she hasn’t been replying. Any chance you know where she is? I thought she’d be here, what with everything going on with her mom…”

I swallowed hard, not sure what to say, since I obviously couldn’t tell him that Cali was deep in the Fae world right now. “She’s going through something tough at the moment, Alex. I’m sorry.”

“Right.” His shoulders slumped as he said the word. “I’m just missing my friend. And you know what?” He leaned in closer to me. “Cali’s not even the worst part. I haven’t been sleeping so well.” He took a deep breath, looking around the cafe as if he thought someone was watching us. “I keep seeing Tony. I know it sounds crazy, but I… I think he’s alive.”

**Episode 565**

COLTON

I blinked, absolutely astonished at what I’d just heard. Why the hell would Maya want to unmate from me? What the fuck was she thinking?

“Do you have any idea how many women would kill to be my mate?” I growled. “And you want to just throw that away?”

“It… It’s complicated, Colton.”

“Explain.”

“I tried to do it when I was, well…” Her gaze darted away from me for a moment. “When I was pissed off at you.”

That answered the why, leaving just one question. “How?”

She pointed toward the room where all the damn witches were gathered. “Got a potion from Big Mac.”

A deeper, more feral noise escaped my throat. “Knew I couldn’t trust that fucking witch. Who knows what shit they’re up to right now?”

“Hey, hey.” She put up a hand. “I *asked* for the potion. Did you not hear me? It wasn’t Big Mac’s idea. In fact, she wasn’t exactly thrilled to do it.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Let me get this straight, Maya. You went to a damn witch to unmate from me? You tried to use some magic crap on me? What the everloving *fuck* is going on?” I’d thought things were getting better between us. Had thought that just maybe, we were finally making this thing work. “I get that we’re not perfect, okay? But no one fucking is. You and me, we were working on things. We were in a good place. Weren’t we?” A small amount of pain slipped into my voice, revealing just how much I cared.

Shit. I shouldn’t have let that show. I had to be better than this, better than my emotions.

“I can see you’re upset,” she said, her eyes going all soft, like she pitied me.

“Damn right I’m upset,” I scoffed, bottling up my emotions once more. “How would you feel, Maya, if you found out I was the one who used freakin’ magic to break up with you? Huh?”

Rage ignited within me—the sort of fury I only knew how to deal with as a wolf, not as a human. I wanted to fight, to destroy, to run until I ran past all of this. I had to get out of here. I had to escape these damn witches, their freaky magic, Maya—all of it.

I spun on my heel and headed toward the door, shoving it open with my shoulder.

“Wait!” Maya called, hurrying after me.

I ignored her.

“Colton, wait. Where are you going?”

A low snort of derision escaped me. I hadn’t figured that part out yet. I just needed to *move.* I started walking again, desperate to put some space between us.

“Please,” Maya said, sounding more sincere than she had before. “Can’t we talk about this?”

I didn’t answer.

“Colton,” Maya said. Just that. Just my name.

But somehow, it was enough to stop me in my tracks. “I’m listening,” I snapped, and I wasn’t lying. “Go for it.”

“Look,” she said, rocking from foot to foot. She was nervous, something that I wasn’t used to seeing. Maya Wright was confident, wild, impossible—but never nervous.

“I’m listening,” I said again, a bit softer.

“You knew how angry I was about the whole being your mate thing.”

“You might have mentioned it.”

“I didn’t want to be *anyone’s* mate,” she added. “It wasn’t a *you* thing. I mean, it was. But not… I mean… I just wanted my freedom. Not to be mated.”

I’d already known that, at least partially. Freedom was important to us both. But so was the bond of being mates. We’d fought a ton, yeah. I wasn’t stupid enough to have forgotten all of that. But that was in the past. Things were different now.

Or were they?

“How the hell,” I asked, “am I supposed to trust you now? How am I supposed to believe you won’t try and unmate from me again?”

“I told you.” Maya rolled her eyes. “I was angry and confused.”

Moving so that I could see her, I studied her face, trying to understand what she was thinking. I’d have had better luck trying to move a mountain. She was impossible to read. “And now?” I asked, not sure why my heart was beating as fast as if I’d just cleared a 225-pound bench press.

She stayed quiet for a long moment. “I guess I’m still figuring things out.”

I staggered backward, utterly thrown by her comment. “*Still?* Are you for real?” I shook my head, as if I could un-hear her words. “That’s it? You’re figuring things out?”

When she didn’t speak, anger poured over me. Hurt—a deep, new-to-me hurt—hit me hard. I wanted to howl, I wanted to let it all out, and most of all, I wanted to run.

I shook my head once, making sure she saw my disappointment. Then I stepped backward, rolled my shoulders, and threw myself into the shift. My wolf form felt as comfortable as a warm bath, and suddenly my mind was blissfully clear of everything human, every emotion, every confusing memory.

Instead, all I knew was the scent of the earth and the feel of the dirt beneath my paws. I didn’t look back as I started to run, heading deep into the woods, away from her. Away from Nneka’s place.

Away from it all.

Running felt good. The air tasted sweeter here, away from other people. I was free, now—free of so much. I could stretch my limbs, moving faster than any human. I was free, and I was in control.

I had no plan beyond *get the hell out of here*,and no thought of where I might be running to. Still, I keep running, even as the tree coverage got thicker and I had to dodge low-hanging branches.

Suddenly, a pine branch behind me shook hard. A second later, Maya, in her own wolf form, leapt over the branch, coming close to catching me.

Shit.

I needed to get away. I pushed myself harder, upping the pace. It wasn’t enough. She matched me stride for stride. So I started dodging, trying to zigzag between trees, trying to lose her.

But she followed me, stubborn as ever.

Finally, with a low, frustrated growl, I gave up. I couldn’t outrun her. Not now. Maybe not ever. Maybe that was the point.

I shifted back to human, pausing under the huge trees. A moment later, I heard her paws crunch over the leaves near me, and then a soft sigh as she shifted back as well. So she *had* been chasing me.

I turned to face her. We were both completely naked, of course. I could feel the cool air on my skin, knew that she too was utterly bare, but I only looked at her face. For the longest moment, I stared into her eyes.

Then, as my heart raced, I dropped my gaze to her pink lips, watching as her tongue darted out to lick her bottom lip as she caught her breath. I imagined, suddenly, that wicked tongue of hers licking something else. I imagined her mouth on me, our bodies pressing closer…

Damn it all, I still wanted her. It made no fucking sense. I’d been so happy when I'd been unmated. Life had been easy, and so had relationships. I could do whatever the fuck I wanted, *whoever* the fuck I wanted. That freedom had been delicious. Could I really blame Maya for wanting the same thing?

No, I decided as my gaze traveled down the smooth, lithe lines of her body. I couldn’t blame her. But I *could* hate the fact that she’d felt that way. That she hadn’t wanted me.

But now? I lifted my head, looking into her eyes. Was there a glimmer of desire in them? Was her breathing shallow from the run, or from want?

My own physical need for her had already started to make my body react, in a way that I shamelessly displayed for her. I let her see how much I wanted her. How much I needed her. She’d had no complaints about my body before. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Maybe the fact that the unmating potion had failed was a sign for us both. Maybe she’d come to realize that too. After all, she *had* seemed sorry.

Once more, I looked to her face, tearing my gaze away from her amazing breasts, her luscious curved hips. Her eyes widened as I caught her staring down at my own… *endowment.*

I smirked. So she *had* noticed. Good. I wasn’t totally sure what I wanted anymore, from life. But there was one thing I was sure of.

And she was standing right in front of me.

“Please,” Maya said. “Colton, listen to me.”

I closed the distance between us, reaching out to grab her waist, pulling her tight against me. She gasped, tensing for a moment. Then, as my lips captured hers in a deep kiss, she melted against me.

I growled with delight. She. Was. *Mine*.

**Episode 566**

My gaze pivoted between the two men. They both had such pained expressions on their faces. They looked disappointed? Sad? I couldn't quite put my finger on what they were feeling, or why it meant so much to me.

Suddenly, something in my head prickled, like the start of a migraine. *Cali,*a voice whispered, echoing between my ears. The voice was urgent, but gentle.

“What?” I said out loud, stopping when I realized the voice was only inside my head. Was I going crazy?

*I know you, Cali. And you know me,* the voice urged. *I’m Greyson. You remember me, right?*

Confused, I rubbed my eyes. Which one of them was talking to me? Why weren’t their lips moving? How could I hear the voice in my head? Was this some insane dream?

Then, another somehow-familiar voice whispered inside my mind. *I’m Xavier. Your mate. Think, Cali!* His voice was like the low roar of far off thunder.

Was I losing my mind? Did I have a concussion? Why was I hearing these voices?

I turned to Artemis. “Can you hear them?”

“No idea what you’re talking about.” Artemis narrowed her eyes. “Let’s get you to shore. You need to sit down.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re hearing voices. You’re not fine.” Artemis surged forward, tugging me along. “Remember, your grandmother said your memory could be affected. I’m guessing that’s what this is.”

“Oh.” I blinked. “My *grandmother*. That’s right! I met her!” A flash of memory hit me, an image of a large room in an estate, a stern, beautiful face. “I met my grandmother. I have a grandmother. On my mom’s side?” I frowned, everything still so hazy.

“Uh. Yeah. Let’s hope those memories come back soon.”

“I think…” I blinked again as little pieces started to fall back into place. Memories of the Fae world, of magic, of impossible and strange things. Two names, so clear in my mind, the same as the voices that had whispered to me. “Do you know Xavier and Greyson? Are they your friends?”

“Why don’t you take it easy, buttercup?” Artemis suggested dryly. “You might pull a brain muscle if you try too hard.”

“But—”

“One step at a time. Hopefully you’ll remember soon.”

Our feet soon found the sandy shore, though I was pretty sure that wasn’t the whole one-step-at-a-time thing she’d meant. She led me over to a fallen log, where we were both able to sit and catch our breath.

A second later, the two handsome men—both tall, both muscular, with piercing gazes and absolutely incredible abs—emerged from the water. Others came behind them, but I only had eyes for the two hotties.

Hotties, yes. But they also seemed… familiar. I knew them. I knew them *well*. I was sure of it. But then again, if I knew them, wouldn’t I have remembered their names?

It wasn’t like I went around befriending hunks in my spare time.

I shook my head, trying hard to keep my frustration from showing. It was like my whole head was wrapped up in gauze, like a mummy. Why did everyone know me, while I had no clue who they were? But no, that wasn’t right. I sort of knew them, as if we’d met in a dream.

*Argh*. I scrubbed at my eyes. Maybe when I opened them, I’d somehow know the two men who could speak to me in my mind.

“Do you remember the pendant?” Artemis asked, pointing to the necklace. “Try for me.”

“Try what?” I asked, even as my fingers wrapped around it. Somehow, it felt comforting, like the stuffed rabbit I’d slept with as a kid. This necklace was a good thing, a safe thing. I took a deep breath. A current of warmth ran through the necklace, an unmistakable connection that, as strong as it felt, I couldn’t define.

“Open it,” Artemis said softly.

Carefully, I ran my finger around the edge until I found the latch. Inside the locket lay a beautiful white flower with the most brilliant sapphire-colored center. I knew this flower. Knew it like I knew my own name.

“It’s a moon buttercup!” I gasped out. “For Mom!” Tears welled up in my eyes as memories swam through me, each one unwrapping that gauzy feeling in my head. I’d done it. I’d gotten the flower for my mom. She was going to be okay. I’d found it. I’d done it.

I turned around, taking in the sights around me as the memories all returned. “Oh! We… We made it back! We did it! We’re home.”

One of the men stepped forward.

“*Greyson*!” Of course! I jumped to my feet and rushed up to him, throwing my arms around him. He felt so warm, so good in my arms. Relieved, I rocked up on my tiptoes to meet his lips in a kiss.

Instantly, he kissed me back, lifting me off my feet. I closed my eyes, relishing the simple moment. He was just so yummy and warm and…

Oh. Shit.

I opened my eyes to see Xavier, standing behind Greyson, watching me. He was super not happy, to put it mildly. His blue eyes were stormy, and his jaw was clenched.

Sliding out of Greyson’s arms, I turned toward Xavier. I approached him, my heart beating fast. He offered me a half-smile. At that, I ran toward him and leapt into his arms.

He pulled me close, close enough that I could hear his heartbeat. “Xavier.” I said his name as gently as I could. I’d have said anything to make him smile.

Carefully, his arms wrapped my waist, and he rested his head on my shoulder. “I thought you’d forgotten me, Cali.”

The rest of my memories slammed into me. All of them. The *due destini*, the awful position I was in with these two incredible, dangerous men. Suddenly, Xavier’s heartbeat sounded a lot more like an ominous drum.

I pulled away from him, then stepped farther back, away from Greyson too.

My mom needed me. That came first. My hot mess of a love life would just have to wait. “You two,” I started, pausing to lick my lips. Now that we were back, I really, *really* needed some good lip balm. All this nervous lip licking wasn’t helping. “Okay. You two. We need to go to my mom first, okay? We’ve gotta sort that out, get her better. Then…”

“Hey, uh,” someone behind the two werewolves called out. “Where are we, and how the heck did we get here?”

“Yeah,” someone else shouted, their voice hoarse. “Ain’t no ocean in Reno.”

A low undercurrent of panic seemed to spread through the group.

Oh, right. The miners. I’d promised to get them all out of the Fae world. I had apparently lived up to that promise, which was pretty good, all things considered. But there was bound to be some confusion in their minds. My own mind, however, was growing ever clearer by the second.

“Okay, so!” I called out, trying my best to sound perky. I channeled my inner flight attendant. Or cheerleader. Or both. “We were all on a cruise!” I announced, hands on my hips.

“Huh?”

Maybe I’d used too much pep. “Yeah! We all won tickets. It was a great cruise. We uh, had a lot of fun. Played shuffleboard.” Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Xavier mouthing the word *shuffleboard?* Oops. Well, I was in it to win it now. “But then, well, you ever see *Titanic*? Same exact thing happened to us. Big iceberg. Big problem.”

“Wait… We left survivors behind?” one of the miners asked.

“No, no.” Great. Just great. The last thing I needed was someone jumping back in the water to search for survivors floating on doors, or whatever. “We all escaped.”

“It was a very small cruise ship,” Greyson added, with that deadpan seriousness only he could pull off.

“Hurray! Now everyone can just… go home.” I yelled out, clapping until others started to join me. In the distance, I noticed a coast guard’s ship getting close. The miners would get help soon, and hopefully were too groggy to remember all the details of my story. They were all staring at one another in utter bafflement.

I turned to Greyson, Xavier, and Artemis. “So, uh…”

“Maybe don’t go into movie writing,” Xavier said.

“Yeah.” I ran my hand through my wet hair. “We need to get out of here before they ask any more questions.”

Determined, I marched forward, past the beach and into the woods. Greyson, with his stupidly long legs, caught up to me easily. “If we shift, we’ll be able to go a lot faster.”

Just then, Xavier appeared right behind him. “For once I agree.” *Thank god*. Then I saw them both looking expectantly at me, and I realized what they were both thinking—who was I going to ride with? For a long, agonized moment I stared between them, unsure of what to do.

Greyson shifted, and he moved to stand in front of me.

*Get on, Cali*, he urged in my mind.

Before I could say anything, make any moves, Xavier shifted in a split second and terrible snarling noises filled my ears. I gaped in horror as my greatest fear came true before my eyes.

Xavier had attacked Greyson. And now the two were locked in combat, apparently intent on ripping each other to shreds.

**Episode 567**

COLTON

“Colton.” Maya whispered my name again before I deepened the kiss. My right hand twisted in her hair, holding her close.

I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want to think about anything but what was right in front of me. I wanted her, completely. My kisses burned down her neck, my teeth grazing her fragile skin carefully, just enough to show her I was crazy for her.

She let out a deep gasp. With my free hand, I stroked up her thigh. My fingertips teased against her core, never quite touching where she wanted. “Colton…” she whispered.

I’d been with plenty of women before Maya, but none of them had come close to the way she made me feel. So maybe I needed to lean into that. To show her what she made me feel. With the pad of my thumb, I rubbed a little harder, exactly where she wanted me to.

Her moan echoed through the empty woods.

“There we go,” I whispered, nipping a bit at her collarbone. Her hands clawed down my back, holding onto me as I rocked her through her release.

It felt almost as good as if I’d been the one to get off. The way she cried out my name, the pleasure in her face as she melted against me, it was all so damn intoxicating. I’d never had a connection with any other woman like I did with her.

“More,” she whispered, pressing her forehead against my shoulder.

“Say please,” I replied, my hand still working her, building her up to a second release. I wanted her to feel so good, to know how much pleasure I could give her, if she’d just accept me as her mate.

And then, I wanted to fuck her. Hard.

“Please, Colton,” Maya whispered. Her nails dug into my shoulder blade, and she hooked one leg around my hips.

I didn’t need any more urging than that. I pushed in, marveling at how good she felt. She was so hot for me, so ready. I bucked my hips forward, hitting her in just the right spot to finish the work my fingers had done.

She tried to hold back her scream of pleasure.

“No one can hear us,” I promised, breathing hard as I fought to hold back my release. “Scream for me, baby. Tell me how good it feels.”

“So… *So* good.” She lifted her other leg and I moved my hands to support her thighs, bringing her down to me each time I thrust up. It was enough to drive us both wild. Maybe this connection with her was a result of our mating bond, or maybe it was something else, but whatever it was…

Sex with her was just awesome. Period.

“I feel so good,” she whimpered.

“Me too.” Then, since they were right at face level, I moved to kiss her breasts, flicking my tongue over her hard nipples. Her hands sank into my hair, tugging hard. She wanted me. I knew it now, knew it with each gasp that escaped her, each roll of her hips as she tried to take more of me.

I gave her all of me, pushing up hard, slamming into her over and over until, finally, she came again, this time with a silent howl, her head thrown back in pleasure.

That was enough to undo me. I shattered within her with a roar, barely retaining enough sense to bring us both to the ground carefully as aftershocks of pleasure hit us both.

We lay, breathless, in a pile of leaves. My hand lazily stroked her core, enjoying the simple pleasure of her happy little moans, until, finally, we both fell asleep, utterly spent.

Judging by the sun in the sky, it wasn’t long before I woke to the sweet sound of her breathing, her head on my chest. I felt like I could stay like that forever, but then she stirred, looking around at the woods around us. For a moment her eyes were soft, but when she saw me staring at her she snapped back into focus, slowly untangling her limbs from mine.

“Right. Guess we should get back, then,” I said.

Maya paused, placing a hand on my thigh. “Do you want to talk about the whole unmating thing?”

I considered it for a moment. But the truth was simple: I knew how I felt about her and, despite Big Mac’s damn meddling, I was pretty sure I knew how Maya felt about me too. Maybe we didn’t express it like normal people, maybe we’d keep fighting it because we were both stubborn fuckers, but for now… I knew what we had. I could let it lie. “I’m cool,” I said, keeping my voice light. “As long as you don’t try any witchcraft on me again, yeah?”

She nodded.

I pulled her to her feet with me and kissed her once on the lips and once on the forehead. She pulled away, but she was flushed. Good. I could still get to her.

“Colt,” she blurted out, tugging my arm.

That little nickname was enough to make me think about pulling her close and not letting her go.

“We’re naked,” she said.

I chuckled, low, freeing my hand from her grip so that I could skim my fingertips over her hips. As my gaze wandered down to her chest, noting with pride how her nipples were already stiffening at my touch, I said, “How could I forget?”

Licking my lips, I savored the moment, studying how each breath made her chest rise and fall. Damn it, she was hot as hell. Desire built within me, and I pulled her a little closer. “How about round two?” I nudged her with my hips so it was clear exactly how much I wanted that.

She rolled her eyes and smacked my bicep lightly. “You horny dork.”

“I’m only one of those things.”

“Yes. A giant dork.” She shook her head. “C’mon, I think I saw some clothes for sale at Nneka’s convenience store.”

“Think they have my size?” I asked, flexing.

“Think you’ll always be such a dick?”

I laughed. She moved ahead of me, and it took everything in my power not to pounce. I wanted her, now more than ever.

We snuck into the convenience store through a staff door, which someone had left propped open with a brick. “Probably gone on a snack break,” Maya said.

The tile floor was cold against my bare feet, and I tried not to think about whatever hillbilly germs were all over it.

“Here,” Maya called from one aisle over. I snatched a pair of sweatpants and a tee out of the air.

The pants, at least, were around my size, if a bit itchy. But the tee? I unfolded it and read the emblazoned neon-green words… ‘These ain’t love handles. They’re Dad Bod grips.’ On the other side of the tee, the same color letters proudly declared, ‘Owner of a Hot Dad Bod.’

I grimaced.

But then Maya appeared in front of me. She’d grabbed a pair of denim overalls, the kind a trucker would wear. The thick straps provided just enough coverage for her chest. If she moved a little too quickly, I’d see a lot more of her than I usually got the chance to see in public.

Holy shit, she was really sexy in those. How did she manage to make the worst clothing I’d ever seen in my life look high fashion? I blinked, taken aback. My words failed me. I tried hard to think of something to say, but nothing felt right.

Just then, Mrs. Smith, Teddy, Big Mac, and Nneka all strolled in, like some obnoxious posse. I’d have complained that they were acting like they owned the place, except for the fact that Nneka kinda did.

I quickly pulled the shirt over my head, stupid saying and all.

Nneka eyed me. “You gonna pay for that?”

I laughed and gestured down at myself. “Seriously? Why would anyone pay for crap like this?”

But Nneka didn’t smile. Instead, she glared at me like every bad thing in the world was my fault.

Mrs. Smith passed Nneka a credit card and she rang us up, glaring all the while.

“So, uh…” I plunged my hands into my pockets. “You find out anything about Demeter? Get a location on her?”

At the mention of the witch that supposedly cursed Teddy—Silas’s witch—a strange look passed between Big Mac and Mrs. Smith.

“What?” I asked impatiently. How hard was it to keep us in the loop?

Mrs. Smith waved us into the back room, where a map was spread out on the table. It was an ordinary map, except for one thing: there were glowing pinpricks of light scattered across the surface. Mrs. Smith cleared her throat. “Each one of those dots represents Demeter’s current location.”

“Huh?”

Big Mac spoke up. “It means she’s in more than one place.”

**Episode 568**

GREYSON

I gasped in shock as Xavier’s wolf form hit me like a two-ton truck. I hadn’t been expecting it in the slightest, and it hurt. A lot. I scrambled to my feet, panting, and took several steps back as Xavier and I circled each other. He snarled and lunged forward and I caught a glimpse of his crazed eyes as I danced away. *Shit*. I had to get my brother to come to his senses, to get him back under control. Now wasn’t the time to settle our mess. We had to help Cali. She needed us. Her mom needed us. We were so close to completing Cali’s mission, and now wasn’t the time to lose it.

Xavier dodged forward and his teeth snapped in the space next to my ear. I ground my teeth and tried to fight off the urge to rip out his throat. Deep down I knew that this, all this fighting, was Xavier being fueled by jealous rage.

I knew that because I was filled with the same rage. A deep, desperate desire to sink my fangs into Xavier’s neck, to kill my own brother over Cali, burned within me. The more rational part of me knew that wasn’t right. It would destroy everything I’d fought so hard for. I had battled for so long, sacrificed so much… I wouldn't give in to this anger. I couldn’t.

With a savage growl, Xavier surged forward, snapping at me like a rabid dog. I tried to dodge. I was fast, but he was faster. Hitting me with a rough tackle, Xavier flipped me over, pinning me to the ground.

“Stop!” Cali yelled, but her voice seemed distant. “STOP! Right now!”

With the sound of her voice, I found myself a little more clearheaded. I could hear the pain and desperation in her tone, and it grounded me, focused me. She had so much power over me, a connection unlike any other. Finding my strength, I threw Xavier off my back and then, just as I was about to lunge forward, a force like a lightning bolt hit me.

Suddenly, I felt cold and breathless, shivering back into human form. I only had a second to throw my hands up and protect my face before Xavier pounced.

Hundreds of pounds of angry wolf collided with me again, and this time, my human body had no defenses. My back hit the ground hard, knocking the air out of me. Desperately fighting to keep Xavier from biting me, I gripped my brother by the jaw. What the hell was going on? Why had I shifted back?

And then, suddenly, the snapping jaws were gone. Xavier rolled off me, just as he shifted back to human too. We both sprang to our feet, each of us wary, though there was something more like shock on Xavier’s face.

“What is the matter with you two?” Cali stepped between us, her arms held out like a goddess of justice. “Seriously, get it together! Do you honestly think now is the time?”

She *was* a goddess. She just wasn’t mine. But she’d kissed me, just then. Kissed me first, after everything. What did that mean?

“Cali?” Xavier asked, his voice loving, his face soft and concerned. He took a tentative step toward her.

As he moved closer to her a shard of anger broke free of my tight control. I snarled. A moment later, I was a wolf again. I couldn’t control my changes. Something was really fucking wrong.

But just as quickly as the thought entered my mind, it evaporated. The wolf part of my brain was too loud right now, overwhelming all rational thought. All I could think was that Xavier was still human. Weak. Defenseless. Easy prey. I darted forward, intent on taking him down. Maybe a bite to the calf, or the knee…

Just as I moved in, Xavier shifted again with a roar. His wolf form met mine, both of us grappling with claws and teeth.

As I darted and dodged and tried to find my opening, the feeling surfaced in me once again—the feeling that something had gone terribly wrong. This was *all* so wrong. We couldn’t fight like this. Not now.

“Stop! PLEASE! STOP!” Cali’s sobs cut into me, sharper than any blow that Xavier could possibly land. It was enough to shake me out of my bloodlust long enough to have a clear thought.

*Cali.* I reached out to her desperately, begging her through our connection. *Leave us. We can’t control ourselves. It’s not—it’s not safe for you here. Please.* My concentration shattered for a moment as I moved to avoid Xavier’s latest attack. I forced myself to focus with every ounce of my being. *Get out of here, love.*

Once more, that same cold powerful force washed over me and I was human again. This time, I reacted more quickly. I moved defensively, scrambling up onto a boulder, out of Xavier’s reach. A human didn’t stand much of a chance against a raging werewolf.

If I didn't gain control over this, one of us was going to die. But if my wolf side gained the upper hand… What would happen to Cali? Who knows what I would do in my frenzy? At best, she’d never be able to look at me with those wide, trusting eyes ever again.

I needed to subdue Xavier, now, before I shifted again. I leapt off the rock, hitting him like a linebacker. I held him down, even as he tried desperately to claw at my face.

Suddenly the paws disappeared, morphing into human hands. I dodged just in time to avoid a punch.

“Xavier, please.” I said, struggling to hold him down as he thrashed. “We have to stop!”

“I’m trying!” he admitted through gritted teeth. His eyes were pained, and I realized with a shock that he was telling the truth. What the hell was going on here?

A moment later, Artemis and Cali rushed forward, pulling us apart. I fought against Cali as she tried futilely to tug me away, knowing all the while that I shouldn’t.

“Please, Greyson,” Cali begged as I shook her off easily. “Don’t do this.”

I tried to breathe, to focus. I had to stop. I didn’t want to hurt her. I’d never be able to forgive myself.

“Are they always like this?” Artemis yelled to Cali. “Is this how werewolves act in the human world!? Why the hell do you hang out with them?”

“No! They’re never like this!” Cali’s voice was high, pitched with worry. She reached out to grasp my arm again, trying desperately to pull me back. “I think there’s something seriously wrong with them! Like they’re on wolf steroids or something?”

Artemis frowned. “Is that a thing? That doesn’t make any sense!”

Cali’s hold on me loosened and I seized the chance to leap forward, my shoulder smashing into Xavier. Artemis stumbled against Xavier with a scream.

“Hold on, Artemis!” Cali yelled, holding up her hands.

A surge of energy hit me and a moment later, both Xavier and I were knocked backward. My head went fuzzy, static prickling behind my ears.

Cali blinked, staring down at her hands. Blearily I wondered if she’d done it again, found a way to activate her Fae powers.

“Artemis,” she said, her head snapping back up. “If we can’t separate them, they’ll kill each other.”

“Got it.” She waved her hands in a clockwise circle and suddenly a cloud of what looked like purple glitter filled the air.

Suddenly, I was pinned—not by Xavier, but by something I couldn’t see. It was like I was being held immobile by invisible hands. I struggled against the force but was unable to move. A glance to my left revealed that Xavier was also frozen in place. I breathed a sigh of relief.

But that relief was short lived.

Because Xavier shifted once more.

I braced myself. Unable to move, unable to protect myself, I would be nothing more than a tasty snack.

But the impact never came.

Even as a wolf, Xavier was frozen in place.

“I can’t hold them for long!” Artemis shouted, wincing as she held up her hands. “They’re way too powerful!”

I took another breath, mustering up every ounce of my strength. I was rapidly losing control, and there was no way I wanted Cali anywhere near what might be coming next. She couldn’t even afford to take the time—not when she was so close to achieving her goal. “GO!” I shouted at Cali. “Go to your mother. NOW!”

Artemis cursed, her arms shaking. “I’m losing them, Cali. GO!”

The weird lightning bolt energy hit me again. This time, I knew what was coming. I shifted back to my wolf form.

“Watch out!” Artemis screamed again. But Cali seemed frozen in place.

A powerful blast of wind hit me. It was enough to knock me off my feet and high into the air. I slammed against a tree trunk.

Then everything went black.

**Episode 569**

Horrified, I watched as my mates were blasted apart. Both were slammed against trees before collapsing on the ground, Greyson on one side, and Xavier on the other. It was the kind of image that would always haunt me, seeing their powerful bodies so helpless… *Immobile*.

“What the—” I could barely speak as I turned to Artemis, grabbing her by the arms. “What happened? Did you kill them?” I screamed, but she just stared at me, wide eyed.

She looked as surprised as I was by all this.

“Cali, they’re alive,” Artemis said. I realized she had to be right, because I could see both their chests rising and falling. I let her go, ready to run toward them, when I realized that they were in two opposite directions, and I had to choose who to check on first.

If that wasn’t symbolism for real life, I had no idea what the hell was.

I made up my mind based solely on who looked worse and who was more likely to have been hurt. Greyson was the Alpha; he had a quicker recovery time, and even though he was unconscious, he had no oozing wounds. Xavier’s head was bleeding.

My decision was made. No matter how it made my heart hurt.

I rushed toward him, calling to Artemis, “Check on Greyson!”

Greyson, who had told me to go save my mom.

Greyson, who had saved me again and again during this trip.

*Greyson Greyson Greyson…*

The name was on repeat in my head even as I kneeled on the ground next to Xavier. I couldn’t leave Xavier like this, though—that wasn’t an option. I tore off a piece of my sweatshirt and applied it to the wound on his head to stop the bleeding. He looked so helpless, so broken.

But he was still alive.

*Thank god.*

“How’s Greyson?” I asked Artemis, turning to face her. “Is he breathing?”

Artemis made a jerky head movement that was half-nod, half-shake, which was really fucking unhelpful considering the circumstances. She started performing something that looked like CPR on Greyson, and the sight made my stomach churn.

*At least Artemis knows how to…*

My thoughts were interrupted and a scream escaped my throat when Xavier shifted, flickering back and forth between wolf and human. Gasping, I glanced at Greyson and saw that the same was happening to him.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked Artemis, but she stared back at me, helpless. Both men were flickering back and forth between man and wolf. This was a fucking nightmare.

*Please stop this! Stop this, stop this, stop!*

As if a higher power heard me, Xavier stopped flickering, finally. Choking, I reached toward him, pulling his head into my lap. “Xavier?” I asked in a soft voice, caressing his cheek.

His eyes fluttered open, and the relief I felt was a godsend. His vivid blue gaze made my heart race, reminding me of all the times I’d dreamed of his eyes.

“Xavier,” I said, sniffling. “Can you hear me?” I pressed the piece of cloth to his wound, fighting to stop the bleeding.

It took a brief moment for him to focus on me, to figure out who I was. And when he did, he offered a faint smile, squeezing my hand that rested on his chest. “You’re okay,” he whispered.

“Of course I’m okay!” I almost started yelling. “You’re the one who’s wounded!” He winced at the fierceness of my tone. “Sorry, I’ll stop yelling now,” I said.

“What happened?” Xavier asked, looking past me and toward Greyson. “Is he dead?”

I looked over my shoulder, only to find Artemis with her head lowered to Greyson’s chest. The only word I could think of was *NO*.

*No.*

Greyson was obviously not dead. Greyson was fucking *Greyson*—he was the Alpha. He had survived much worse than a simple little blast. In my mind, Greyson was nothing less than invincible.

*Don’t be naïve, Cali*, said a voice in my head, and I was filled with dread.

“Artemis!” I called, fighting not to bark at her. “Is he okay?”

“He’s breathing!” Artemis called back. Her body obscured my view of his face, but her answer was enough. Exhaling sharply, I felt settled, more certain about my earlier assessment of things than ever. Knowing that Greyson was okay made it much easier to focus on Xavier.

“Let me look at your head,” I told Xavier, removing the piece of cloth to check out his wound.

“It’s okay,” Xavier said, sitting up slightly. “I’ll heal.”

I stared at the gaping wound, dubious. “It’s not—”

“It’ll heal, Cali. You know it will,” he said firmly. *Hits his head but he’s still Mr. Bossy!* I thought, huffing. At least I was now sure that he was okay—he was back to his usual self. “We should get going. We have to save your mom.”

“But what about Greyson?” I asked, standing to my feet. “We are not leaving him here.”

Both Xavier and I turned toward Greyson, a few feet away, who still hadn’t opened his eyes. He looked so peaceful, like he was sleeping. Breathtakingly handsome, as ever. I watched, wanting to touch him, to comfort him, but Artemis already had that covered. She was cradling his head on her lap, staring down at him with an expression I couldn’t name. The sight of them together bothered me on a visceral level, but I chose to ignore the feeling.

*This isn’t the time for bullshit jealousy, Cali!* I thought, scolding myself.

“Leave him,” Xavier said. “We *can* leave him here.”

I bristled, glaring up at Xavier. “See, I know you don’t give a fuck about your brother, so I’m not even shocked right now, but how can you be so selfish? After all we went through back in the Fae world, how can you even *think* that I’d leave Greyson behind?”

Xavier reached out, tracing my chin before I flinched away from his touch. In a deep, thundery voice full of yearning, he said, “I’m only thinking of you. Greyson can take care of himself. He’ll be fine.”

I could see that Xavier was holding back—his earlier comment was just the tip of the iceberg.

I took a deep breath. “I know he can take care of himself. He’s done it for years, but—”

“Wouldn’t he want you to go find your mother? Leaving ASAP is what’s best for her, not waiting for him to come to,” Xavier said, sounding very much like the Devil’s Advocate.

*I hate to admit it, but he might be just a little bit right*, I thought to myself, scowling. The last thing Greyson had told me before he’d collapsed had been *GO! Go to your mother.* But he hadn’t been thinking clearly. Something had been causing him to shift—both him and Xavier. Was it because they were back in the human world? But that hadn’t happened before…

I glanced at Artemis.

*Is it possible that she has something to do with it?*

I pushed the thought from my mind—Artemis had been helping me since we’d rescued the miners.

“If you’re so worried about Greyson,” Xavier said in a tone that said he was REALLY trying not to lose his shit right now, “maybe Artemis can stay to keep an eye on him?” He gestured toward Artemis, who was still tending to Greyson.

*No*, I thought. *I can’t leave him behind again, not Greyson, not after all he did to help me*—

“Cali!” Artemis called, waving for me to come over. “He’s awake!”

My heart hammered in my chest. “Don’t mention leaving Greyson behind again,” I told Xavier in a low tone. The last thing I needed was for the two of them to start fighting again.

“Don’t worry about me,” Greyson said gruffly, the moment I walked—almost marched—up to him, as if all my feelings were plain as day on my face. Artemis had helped him to stand. His silver gaze was piercing, so intense I held my breath. “I meant what I said before, Cali. It’s not safe for you to be around me.”

I scowled. “What’s that supposed to mean? Look, Greyson—”

“Xavier.” Greyson stared over my shoulder, where Xavier was probably looming ominously. I made sure to remain between them.

“What?” Xavier said sharply. “You wanna go another round?”

Greyson ignored Xavier’s tone. “Take Cali. Get her to her mother.”

There was pressure building behind my eyes. “But what about you?”

He took a deep breath, looking at me intently. “Just go.”

The disappointment I felt was like a little knife digging into my gut.

“You want me to take her,” Xavier repeated. “Without you.”

“Yes,” Greyson said to Xavier, but his eyes were focused only on me.

“I’ll do it, but not because of you,” Xavier said, because he was Xavier.

“You’ll be okay,” Greyson told me gruffly, resting a hand on my shoulder. I was about to lean into his touch, unable to help myself, but Greyson pulled his palm away quickly.

“I’ll watch Greyson,” Artemis offered solemnly.

I looked between all three of them, weighing my options. In the end, no matter how I looked at it, there was only one thing I really wanted right now: to save my mom. With or without Greyson.

“I’m trusting you to have his back,” I told Artemis.

“Thank you, Cali,” she replied, shockingly earnest.

“Take care, okay?” I told Greyson. “We’ll be in touch. Thank you for… everything, I guess.” It felt far too… clinical for what we had between us.

He snorted. “You’re welcome, Cali.”

Our exchange sounded foreign. This was *not* the way I’d imagined thanking him. Everything felt awkward. Chilled. There was a part of me that just couldn’t believe Greyson and I would simply part ways after going through all that madness in the Fae world. He’d done so much for me, and now I was leaving him? It just wasn’t fair to him, was it?

But he had told me to go.

He wanted me to go. Without him.

*Why did he want me to leave him behind?*

Before I could think about it more, I jerked upward and planted a kiss on his cheek. I watched his eyes widen, saw his fingers trace his cheek before I turned my back on him. If he wanted me to go, then fine. I would.

“Let’s go,” I told Xavier. “Let’s go, before it’s…” I gulped, my chest suddenly throbbing. “Before it’s too late to save my mom.”

**Episode 570**

LOLA

I woke up on the wrong side of the bed that morning. Not literally—it was the right one, since Jay had slipped into my room during the night and slept with me. My dads had been deluding themselves thinking we’d stay away from each other, which was beyond funny. Jay being with me had made me feel much safer, comforted, but still… I hadn’t stopped dreaming about seeing Alex.

I couldn’t get him out of my mind.

Which was really fucking gross. I needed to Lysol my brain. Maybe my entire body. Extreme? No way.

For a moment, I watched Jay sleeping—he seemed so sweet and peaceful. Though that would probably change if my parents realized where he’d spent the night. I traced his full lips with my thumb, planting a soft kiss there. Looking at his face was a cleanse after seeing Alex’s for so long in my dreams. Jay felt so good, *always*. I gave him another peck, but he didn’t even stir, continuing to sleep soundly. What a big bad predator he was.

I poked him in the bellybutton this time, which was among the top three ways to wake him up. He hissed.

“*Whyyyy?* Why are you up so early?” he asked drowsily, blinking at me like a tired puppy.

*Now* he was finally awake. “You’d better go soon. My dads have an early pancake call.”

He frowned at me, still half asleep. “What time is it? It feels early. Is it early?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But I couldn’t sleep, so… good morning!”

Jay sighed, pulling me closer. He kissed the top of my head soothingly, asking, “You wanna talk about it?”

“I just…” I swallowed roughly. I made sure to keep my voice low, just in case my dads were roaming the hallway. “I just can’t stop thinking about what Alex said, and I hate myself for even saying that. About how he’s being haunted by Tony—how he keeps seeing him. Do you think it might have something to do with that ghost woman Colton, Maya, and I saw on the road?”

Jay’s expression became thoughtful. “What are you getting at?”

“I’m just wondering if the ghost sightings have anything to do with the orb.”

Jay squinted at me before yawning. “Babes, I’m not very good at speculating first thing in the morning. I don’t even know Alex—maybe he's just freaked out? Tony’s death upset him, so this might just be him coping with his grief.”

I sighed. “I don’t even know what to think anymore.”

“Let’s deal with one thing at a time. And what I’m worried about right now is having breakfast with your dads.” He arched an eyebrow, looking around. “And getting caught in your room after we had premarital relations.”

I scoffed. “My parents have to know I’m not a virgin, babe.”

Jay frowned. It was adorable. “I feel like I’m a teenager, though. I’m pretty sure that they don’t like me.”

I snorted. “Seriously? You don’t know Dad and Pops—if they hadn’t liked you, you would have spent the night at Motel 6. Pops would have smiled while sending you off, with no regrets. The man has no shame.”

Jay slowly let me go, straightening from the bed. I missed the warmth of his arms instantly. He looked down, shrugging in response to my reassurance. I wondered if he was just being insecure, or if there was something real about his worries.

I’d been so caught up worrying about Orla that I hadn’t been paying much attention to anything else.

“Hey,” I said, sitting up. Brushing my lips over his shoulder, I caressed his arm. “I promise, everything’s fine with my dads.” He melted into my touch, leaning closer. But then I added, “Just make sure you sneak back into your room before they find you here.”

Jay snorted in agreement before heading back to his room.

I was left on the bed, staring at his gorgeous back as he walked away before my gaze fell on the window. On the forest outside.

Suddenly, the only thing I could think about was shifting.

How would I be able to shift with my parents around? They had no idea I was a werewolf. I was just their little girl, apple of their eye.

The question throbbed inside my head as Jay and I got ready—separately, unfortunately, no shared morning shower—and headed downstairs. I relaxed a bit when I saw the big spread my parents had set out for our breakfast. Surely, if they had issues with Jay, they wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble.

“Good morning, kids,” Pops said once Jay and I entered the kitchen.

“Morning,” Dad said in that deadpan way of his.

It was fine. Everything was fine. At least, I thought everything was fine, but then, once we’d taken our seats, I noticed an unspoken tension between Pops and Dad.

Uh-oh.

“Isn’t the weather just wonderful today?” I asked, fighting to change the subject to anything neutral.

“Yes,” Jay replied right away, ready to power through. “Don’t you think, Daniel?” he asked Pops…

Which was the wrong thing to do.

“I’m Danny,” Pops said, eyebrows raised. He pointed at Dad. “That’s Daniel.”

Jay looked like he wanted to die. “Right. I knew that.”

“Our fault for having variations of the same name, huh?” Pops said sweetly, waving off the awkwardness.

Which Dad then brought back, when he said, “I don’t think it’s that hard to tell us apart.”

Jay gaped, eyes wide in horror.

“I’m kidding.” Dad rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, because physically they look so different—get it?” I told Jay, who nodded meekly and uttered a dry, “Haha.”

Wow, this was heading into disaster territory really fast.

“How about you eat your oatmeal now, hmm?” I told Dad, who glowered at me and then at the oatmeal.

“Thank you very much for having me. This all looks delicious,” Jay said. His cheeks were so red. I squeezed his hand under the table, to give him courage. He seemed so nervous, poor thing.

“How did you sleep?” Pops asked. Was that suspicion I detected in his tone?

“Fine. I heard you wake up really early this morning,” I said. “What gives?”

“Just preparing for my glass-blowing class today,” Pops said. “I made this, actually.” He showed me a tiny glass vase behind him.

“That’s beautiful,” Jay said bravely. I could tell he was stopping himself from adding a name at the end of that sentence.

“Danny is an artist,” Dad said. “As capricious as one too. Like daughter like father, and all that.”

Um. What was *that* supposed to mean?

The small talk rapidly died out and we were left with an awful, awkward silence, as if suddenly none of us knew what to say. It was beyond disturbing to me, because my parents *never* ran out of things to say. I could feel that same weird vibe hanging between them, still, which was also odd since they rarely fought.

The mere idea of dealing with all this *and* a nervous Jay suddenly made me feel like walking away. The feeling was sharp and random but strong, connected to that same itch to shift and run away, unrestricted by anything and anyone.

But that was ridiculous, wasn’t it?

All the people around this table loved me. LOVED ME. And why shouldn’t they? I was a fucking delight.

I had to keep it together, but that was hard to do as everyone chewed in silence. With one look at a helpless-looking Jay, who seemed like he was now more certain than ever that my parents hated him, I could no longer control my mouth.

“Okay,” I blurted out. “What’s wrong here?”

My parents exchanged a loaded look before Dad spoke. “Danny and I have been concerned.”

I gulped, squeezing Jay’s hand under the table. This was it—they didn’t like Jay! He’d been right! What was I gonna do? I could never leave Jay, he was my soulmate, the love of my life, but my dads—

“We want to know why you stopped going to school,” Pops added, cutting off my thoughts.

I blinked rapidly. That was *not* what I’d been expecting.

My cheeks on fire, I glanced at Jay, trying to stall, but it was no use. I had to say something. I had to reply. Instead, what I did was shrug while Jay cleared his throat.

“Well?” Dad pressed. “Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?”

I gulped before blurting out, “I just wasn’t feeling it.”

It seemed a good excuse as any instead of, I went back to my werewolf pack—I’m one of those BTW. I also helped “sell” my BFF’s virginity to a guy who is also a werewolf and then we just kinda stuck around Oregon for a while. Also Jay is my mate—he’s also a werewolf.

Both Pops and Dad gasped at the same time. Dad’s face, especially, turned red with anger. “Just not *feeling it?* What is that supposed to mean? School is school, Lola.”

My nervousness rising, realizing that I couldn’t tell them the truth, I started stammering out my responses. “I’m not—I don’t… I’ve just been under a lot of pressure, what with Tony’s death and Cali’s mom, you know? That’s—”

“We’ve been very patient and understanding, Lola,” Pops said, interrupting me. “But you can’t keep blowing off school. You’re a brilliant student, and we have invested financially and emotionally in your education, which we thought was something you were very excited for as well. Is that no longer true?”

I had no idea what the hell to say.

“One thing is clear,” Dad said stoically, stealing a glance at Jay. “You’re going back to school. You’re not going to continue blowing off the semester, kid.”

My dads rarely scolded me, and why should they? But I guessed that there was a first time for everything. I felt Jay turning rigid next to me at the sound of their words. Before I could say anything to dig my hole deeper, though, my phone rang.

“Hang on!” I said. Perfect timing! “I have to take this!”

My parents flinched. I picked up instantly, scrambling out of the room. I felt horrible leaving poor Jay with them—especially since he offered me a pitiful ‘don’t leave me!’ look. But I had no other choice right then.

Catching my breath, I picked up the phone.

I almost yelled into the phone as I heard Cali’s voice. “Hey Lola, I’m back.”

**Episode 571**

“What do you mean you’re back?” Lola exclaimed, practically screaming into my ear. “Should I pick you up at the airport?”

For a second, I was weirded out—I probably should have filled Lola in a teensy bit more. “Um, I’m back from the Fae world.”

“Right, of course!” Lola exclaimed, huffing as if to scoff at herself. “Sorry, it’s been a little intense over here. Jay’s meeting the parents.”

“Oh wow. Yikes.”

“I know, it’s—*Wait*!” Lola cut herself off. I felt like laughing. My friend was even more hyper than usual. “You made it back! How are you? I’ve missed you so much!”

Okay, but why did she sound surprised? *Of course* I’d made it back.

“I’m fine,” I said, a little annoyed. “Safe and sound.”

I glanced over at Xavier, who looked as amused as a dead fish. He clearly wanted to get going, but I had to fill Lola in on the basics, at least!

“I’m on my way to see my mom at the hospital,” I said. “I tried to get hold of my dad, but it went straight to voicemail.”

Lola’s chipper voice lowered in an instant. “She’s in the ICU, Cali. The sooner you go see her, the better.”

My stomach clenched at her words.

“I saw your dad at the hospital, and… he needs you Cali. This isn’t good.”

I could sense the urgency in Lola’s tone, plain as day. It was beyond unnerving.

“Hey!” Xavier said, making me jump. “Let’s get going!”

It was good to see that in some ways, Xavier remained his usual rough-around-the-edges self. How charming. I swatted him off, turning my back on him to finish the phone call.

“I’ll call you when we get to the airport to get a flight home, okay?”

“Okay. I missed you, Cali.”

“I missed you too,” I said truthfully.

I hung up the phone, and Xavier grunted. “I have to get shifted so we can get going, Cali. It’s…” I could tell he was about to comment on my call with Lola, but he about swallowed his tongue the moment he saw my expression. “Wait, are you okay?” And then he added, “Are you upset over leaving Greyson?”

I looked up at Xavier, considering my options.

*This isn’t a game*, I thought. *I need to lay it all out for him.*

He deserved the truth.

“I’m upset about a lot of things, Greyson included. But I can deal with Greyson later—I know he’ll understand. Meanwhile, my mom is now in the ICU, which is definitely not a good thing.”

Xavier squeezed my shoulder, his expression soft. “I get it.”

“You should shift—we should get going,” I said, needing to change the subject. “How far away is the Portland airport?”

Xavier shifted in one sharp movement, letting out a gruff howl. Before lowering his head for me to step onto his back, he mind linked with me.

*Not that far when you’re traveling by werewolf.*

I nodded, relieved, as I climbed on his back.

*It’s going to be okay, Cali*, he said, mind linking with me again. As if he couldn’t get enough of it, now that he had opened the floodgates with that ability. *Just hold on tight.*

I hugged Xavier close, cherishing his forest-like scent and the softness of his fur. Xavier broke into a run through the woods. This should have felt like a relief for me, but that wasn’t entirely the case. The further away we got from Haystack Rock and Greyson, the guiltier I felt. Sure, Greyson had told me to go, told Xavier to take me, which was a fucking shocker all together. Letting Xavier anywhere near me of his own volition was unprecedented for Greyson.

The only way to explain this was the idea that Greyson had always been willing to sacrifice his own feelings for me. Which was noble and all, but kind of annoying. Then again, I couldn’t be sure about any of that, because the man was full of cryptic nonsense. For example, what had he meant when he’d told me it wasn’t safe to be around him?

I should have insisted on him elaborating when he’d first mentioned it, but I’d been too overwhelmed by everything that had been going on.

*How are you feeling?* Xavier asked me. It was kind of endearing how he kept using the bond. It made me feel good. His eagerness to connect soothed me in a time like this.

*Okay. Just, worried about my mom. And…*

*Greyson?* Xavier added.

I wasn’t about to lie. *Yes.*

*Despite what you think,* Xavier started*, I want you to know that no matter what happens, I personally will never trust Greyson.*

I was getting pretty fucking annoyed. *What is it that he’s done exactly that’s so horrible, Xavier? Killed people in his pack? Killed people in general? Because I feel you’d have no qualms doing that yourself if someone bothered you enough. It’s not like you’re an innocent baby seal who’s never hurt a fucking fly.*

Xavier’s wolf made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a scoff. *It’s not the same, Cali. Believe me. For once, I agree with my half-brother one hundred percent—you’re not safe around him. Never have been, never will be.*

I rolled my eyes. *Okay. I understand your point of view, but you haven’t spent the time I have with Greyson. If you’d seen the way he kept risking his life for me, you’d feel differently.*

*I doubt it, but okay.*

We fell into silence, and I stewed over our conversation and the Greyson factor in general. Recalling all the ways that Greyson had helped me, I realized that it was really odd that he’d just let me go now, at the very end. Could there be a chance that him letting me go with Xavier had less to do with my mom’s safety and more with him putting distance between us after we’d bonded so fiercely during our trip into the Fae world?

That possibility made a sharp pain blossom in my chest.

Xavier interrupted my thoughts then, and I was grateful. *It feels good to mind link with you, Cali. To know we have that connection. And to feel you holding me. I missed that.*

Look at Xavier being open! I never thought I’d see the day, but here we were. Amazing. I couldn’t help but be moved.

*I missed it too*, I replied. *I missed the closeness we had. After you left, I wasn’t sure if we’d ever share that again.*

Xavier shook his head*. In retrospect, I realize that you’re right. But it feels like the distance gave us this, Cali. This ability to communicate in a way we barely could, before I left.*

I swallowed thickly. I wasn’t about to argue or demand explanations about Xavier’s departure right then. I felt soothed enough by his presence to hug him tighter, to feel the power and strength he exuded as he ran. I found the rhythm of his motions reassuring, steady and smooth.

It was hard to believe he was finally back here, with me.

It was surreal to think that I was actually back in the human world, after all the madness that had gone down back in the Fae realm. But as I watched the human land flashing by, the harsh reality of what was happening to my mother loomed over me. Even though I’d always known my mother was dying, I’d been too distracted to dwell on it while I was in the Fae world. With everything else that had been going on, my mother and humanity in general had seemed a million miles away. But coming back here, to the life I knew, filled me with uncertainty and dread.

Was there a chance that I’d be too late?

Was there a chance that my mother would actually die, even after all the effort I’d put into helping her stay alive?

Feeling tears welling up, I wiped my eyes and pushed those thoughts away.

*Think positive, Cali!* I told myself, fighting to keep my shit together. *No time or need for negativity.*

At least for now, I had some control over my Fae powers—maybe the energy I could manifest might help my mom feel better, too. I wasn’t exactly a master of my craft, but there was hope. I glanced at the pendant around my neck.

*Please, for the love of god, moon buttercup! Make my mom okay!*

Xavier’s sudden shift in pacing cut off my musings. I gripped his fur even tighter, but it was no use—he stopped so sharply, so out of the blue, that I was propelled into the freaking air, all “I Believe I Can Fly”, before I crashed clumsily to the ground.

“What the hell, Xavier?!” I snapped, spitting pine needles from my mouth. I heard a menacing growl behind me, and I turned to face him…

Only to see him snarling at me.

“What are you doing?” I asked, wide-eyed and breathless. “What’s happening? Xavier?”

Xavier, still in his wolf form, was eyeing me like he was ready to pounce.

I gulped.

*Shit*.

**Episode 572**

MAYA

When I woke up that morning, Colton was spooned against me, his arms wrapped around me in an unbreakable koala hug. I wanted to be all huffy about this, but it was pretty difficult. It felt good to be so close to him. It felt wonderful to wake up with him, even if it was in a mediocre motel room outside Portland.

I hadn’t even questioned it when he’d suggested we share a room, because at this point, denying what I wanted was harder than resisting. I had to admit that no matter how intensely I fought against him, we were attached to one another, and sometimes…

Sometimes, attachment felt so fucking good. It was dangerous.

I savored the feel of him around me, savored the steady rhythm of his heart and breathing, before my thoughts started drifting off to other things—less pleasant things. Like my sister, Wren. Teddy had said that the last place he’d seen her had been Montana. I hadn’t thought about Wren in a really long time. Her memory just hurt me too much, but now it felt unavoidable. Talking about my family had suddenly become a constant—first my missing sister, then the mention of my monstrous grandfather…

I didn’t know what to make of all this.

Could it be a coincidence? It seemed impossible—too many threads were converging, but I couldn’t see the connection, no matter how hard I tried. They were like scattered puzzle pieces.

“Good morning…” Colton’s gruff, sleepy whisper pulled me out of my thoughts before he stroked my side, sending jolts of pleasure down my body. He nuzzled at my shoulder, planting a kiss there. I craned my neck to face him.

He looked so beautiful in the morning that it was just plain fucking unfair.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, his nose tracing my neck.

I pressed my lips together. “Nothing.”

He arched an eyebrow, pressing against me gently, his hard-on brushing up against my ass. I felt my body respond in an instant, desire scorching the pit of my stomach. “Can you guess what I’m thinking?” he asked.

My scoff was a little too breathy. “I can feel it all right.”

He smirked, his hands starting to roam around my body, one reaching for my breasts, the other trailing between my legs. But he didn’t touch me as firmly as I’d have liked, just teased like the brat that he was. “Are you going to do anything about this?” He brushed himself against my ass once more, a steady rubbing that made me flush. “Be a shame to waste it.”

Colton could be so hot, but also very, very annoying. I felt like rolling my eyes and telling him that his hard-on wasn’t all that important in the greater scheme of things. But, ridiculously, it did feel crucial to my very existence at that moment, as if having him inside me would sate a hunger I felt only when I was around him.

“The question here isn’t what I’m gonna do about it,” I whispered. “It’s what *you’re* going to do.” I topped the sentence off by pulling him on top of me, spreading my legs for him to get in between.

He kissed me hungrily, his hardness rubbing up against my stomach, hot and messy. I arched my hips upward, locking my thighs around his waist so I could pull him closer. Kissing was fine and all, but I didn’t even need any foreplay. I was so full of craving that it drove me wild.

But then Colton cut off our kiss. “We should use a condom.”

I blinked up at him like he’d grown two heads. “Right. A little too late for that, don’t you think?”

He ducked his head, almost like he was suddenly shy. He really was an adorable idiot. “I know we’ve been pretty reckless and caught up in the moment, but—”

“I hadn’t even thought about it, Colton. I can never have kids.”

“Oh. *Oh*. Okay, that makes more sense,” he said. I arched an eyebrow. “I’m a dickhead,” he continued, “but you have a brain, so never mentioning birth control before would’ve been… Wait, *what*?” He paused. “How can you be sure you can’t have kids?”

I shrugged. “I’ve done a few routine tests in the past and my hormone levels have always come up wonky—something to do with my irregular periods. My old doctor said it would be almost impossible for me to have kids unplanned, and that I’d need to do some sort of treatment if I wanted to conceive in the future.”

Colton stared at me. “Well. That’s a relief.”

For a moment, I was struck by his words. Yeah, it was a relief because kids were annoying, and we were in our early twenties and Colton had the maturity of a fifteen-year-old at best, but still. A *relief?*

“Wow,” I said dryly. “I had no idea you’d thought about this so extensively.” I shoved his shoulder to push him off me, because he definitely wasn’t getting any now.

“No, I just mean—” He stumbled over the words. “I don’t want to start a family. Ever. Kids are a pain in the ass. It’s one of the reasons I’ve never wanted to be an Alpha—it’s like being the father of a huge family.”

“Aha,” I said, almost snapping. Okay, but why was this bothering me so much? I didn’t want kids either! I was too young! Way too young. But still, the idea of him wanting kids with me, in theory at least, would have satisfied my wolf immensely.

Apparently, though, Colton couldn’t even give me that.

“Also, let’s face it, Maya. I didn’t exactly have the best role model when it comes to being a father,” Colton added, almost defensively.

I paused, realizing what he meant.

Silas wouldn’t be winning any paternity awards, ever.

“What do you think?” Colton asked me.

I pressed my lips together. “Kids are annoying, for sure. But like, in theory, maybe not entirely horrible? For later on. I’m not sure. I’m young right now—hadn’t really thought much about it. I pushed it out of my mind when I was told that I couldn’t have them.”

Colton paused, tilting his head to the side. I could tell that he wanted to touch me, but he stopped himself. “What about Nolan, though? You wanted to be his Luna, right? How was that going to work if you couldn’t actually get pregnant? He seems pretty traditional—probably thinks Lunas are only for babies, all that bullshit.”

I rolled my eyes. “Nolan doesn't know. Nobody knows. You’re the first person I’ve told.” I paused. “And if you tell anyone, I’ll rip your tongue out. Not because I’m ashamed of not being able to have kids, but because it’s my fucking business and you being a gossipy little bitch about it would mean that you’re a douchebag who didn’t deserve to know my secret in the first place.”

Colton actually laughed. “Aw, Maya. I’m honored to be the only person who knows something so personal about you. Is it me, or are we making progress here?”

“You’re delusional,” I deadpanned, but he just laughed again and leaned closer. He kissed me, and I let him, because the little bastard was right. Things were getting better between us. I could feel it in our talks, and in our physical intimacy too—the way we held and touched each other, the way his mouth felt against mine.

I wanted him all the time now. *All the time*. Before, I could barely stand him.

“Good morning!” There was a knock on the door, accompanying the words. Mrs. Smith sure sounded cheerful as she interrupted our very important business. “Time for you kids to get up!”

Colton groaned, rolling off me. “Well, that’s a cock block.”

“We gotta get ready, I guess,” I told him. He nodded dejectedly, standing up.

I’d just missed my morning fuck, which was pretty disappointing. Then again, I didn’t want to let my thoughts keep roaming when it came to things like sentiment and intimacy with Colton, and other bullshit of the sort—including parenting.

We took a quick shower together, and I kept stealing glances at Colton as he pouted over not having sex. Very maturely. Okay, he could be a handful, but would he be that terrible a father? He could be very affectionate and caring. But what about me? Would I be a good mother?

There were no obvious answers to those questions.

Colton kept grumbling about Mrs. Smith’s cock blocking as we got dressed. I kept stealing glances at his body, still a little turned on, and also secretly amused by his pettiness. We stepped outside only to see Bic Mac and Mrs. Smith step out of an adjacent room together, just a couple doors down.

“I wonder what happened between them last night,” Colton told me quietly. “I should have cock blocked them this morning first, see how they liked it.”

I scoffed, smacking him.

*Definitely* not mature enough to be a father.

“Where’s Teddy?” I asked Mrs. Smith after we’d said our good mornings. “I still have a few questions about Wren.”

“He’s in the room next door,” Mrs. Smith said.

“I put a spell on the room so he couldn’t get out,” Big Mac added, her expression carrying a sadistic little edge.

Rolling my eyes, I headed to Teddy’s room and knocked on the door.

There was no answer.

Mrs. Smith knocked as well, calling his name, but still, no answer.

“Step back,” Colton told us with a growl. He was seriously about to ram the door when Big Mac poked his shoulder.

“There’s an easier way,” she said, waving her hands.

The door opened, only to reveal a room that was…

*Empty*.

Colton turned to me, shocked. “Teddy’s fucking *gone*.”

**Episode 573**

I stumbled backward with a cry as Xavier growled hungrily at me.

“What the hell, Xavier?” I screamed. “What are you doing? I’m not a snack, stop it!”

But instead of appeasing him, my words seemed to egg him on. He lowered his head to stare at me, literally wolfishly. He took a step toward me, still growling.

I fought to mind link with him, scrambling backward, but the look he gave me was unnerving. I couldn’t establish a connection between us. It was a jarring thing to experience—it reminded me of when I’d first met him. The danger and fear I’d always felt, both tinged with an odd spike of arousal that had made no fucking sense. And now it was back, all of it.

Xavier looked out of his mind. He could kill me, couldn’t he?

*No!* *It’s not possible*, I told myself. *It’s not—*

If he did lose control of his wolf, though, Xavier *could* kill me. But why the FUCK WOULD HE LOSE CONTROL? What on EARTH was happening here?

“Xavier, no! Bad Xavier!” I screamed at the wolf, throwing dirt at him. “GET. A. GRIP!”

My resistance seemed to fuel whatever desire he had right then, which was probably to eat me, because he moved closer, ready to pounce. This was insane. My heart thundering in my chest, I remembered Greyson’s nonsensical words that had stuck in my brain.

*It’s not safe to be around me, Cali.*

It sure looked like Xavier was the more dangerous of the two right now.

“You have to stop this!” I yelled, scolding him like a teacher, but he wasn’t amused. I stumbled backward, tripping over a root and landing on the ground. He surged closer, looming above me like a monster straight out of a nightmare, his teeth bared.

“Xavier, please,” I said, begging. “You have to control yourself!”

I fought to calm him, but the tremor in my voice was a dead giveaway. I shrank back in fear, because I wasn’t facing Xavier right now. Something had snapped inside him, and he was no longer himself. I was dealing with a wild werewolf—one who looked like he hadn’t eaten in two weeks.

*This certainly was NOT the way I expected things to go between us after our reconciliation!* I thought to myself, fighting to stand upright. But then Xavier howled, startling me so badly that I tripped again. He was like a predator cornering his prey.

*I* was the prey.

I wanted to get the fuck away from him, but knowing what I knew about werewolves, if I started running right now, I was as good as dead. Xavier’s instincts would go haywire, and he’d catch me in a second and chop off my head.

*NOT TODAY, SATAN!* I screamed inside my head, because seriously. NOT. TODAY. I had a mother to save! MINE!

“Don’t do this, Xavier! It’s me! It’s Cali, your MATE!” I shouted. “Is this how you treat your MATE?” Xavier suddenly paused, almost as if he recognized my name and tone of voice. I very much hoped so. What else did I have to defend myself with? I grabbed a stick and waved it in his face. “Step back!”

He grabbed the stick from my hand and bit it in half.

*Well, then*, I thought. *That went well.*

Then I remembered that I *did* have something to protect myself with—I was Fae. Or half-Fae. And I had my Fae power to use as a weapon, at least in theory. I didn’t want to hurt Xavier by exploding all that sparkly magical energy all over the place like I usually did when I was under attack, but it looked like I had no other option.

That was, if I managed to summon it at all.

*You can do it, Cali!* I thought, hyping myself up because there was definitely nobody else around to do it. All the birds and squirrels and deer had peaced out. I wished, so badly, that the trees around here could talk, like in the Fae world, just so they could encourage me.

Meanwhile, Xavier had moved so close that only a foot separated us.

Could I summon my Fae power?

The only way to figure that out was to concentrate. *Concentrate, Cali!* I felt my heart racing, my head pounding, but I could do this. I had to.

Xavier was so close to me now that I could hear his breathing. I had managed to stand, but now I couldn’t escape, mainly because I’d walked backward and straight into a massive boulder that was situated in the middle of the forest. Xavier had trapped me in a corner, literally, and he looked lost inside his own beastly nature, no longer man but only monster. And the worst part of it all was that no matter how hard I tried, nothing was happening with my powers!

I waved my hands. “Stay away, or I’m gonna blast you!”

But still, nothing happened. Was my power diminished in the human world? Was this how I was going to die? At the hands, or teeth, of my mate? Or, like, *one* of my mates?

*Greyson!* I screamed inside my head. *How DARE YOU LEAVE ME?*

Xavier was now so close that I could literally feel his breath on my skin. All my attempts at channeling my powers had gone to shit, and my back was pressed against the sharp, hard surface behind me.

“You can’t do this, Xavier!” I yelled. “You said you loved me!”

I felt his hot breath, saw his eyes narrowing.

“STOP!” I screamed once more. “IF YOU KILL ME, MY MOM IS GOING TO DIE!”

If Xavier killed me, my mother would die. It was just a fact. And everything I’d done would have been for absolutely nothing.

The thought rattled so hard inside my brain that the next time I screamed, it sounded more like a howl, spilling straight out of me like a force, that familiar force I’d used so many times recently, and it—

Worked!

*IT’S WORKING!* I thought as poor fucking feral Xavier was knocked out, the energy blasting him back with a flash of light, powerful enough to make the ground rumble.

“I did it,” I whispered to myself, stunned as I watched Xavier falling back onto the ground. “Oh my god, I DID IT!” I was so excited, so elated by the possibility that I had some sort of agency when it came to my powers that a feeling of euphoria overcame me.

But then I saw Xavier lying flat on the ground, and I gasped.

“No!” Oh my god, had I really hurt him? Racing toward Xavier, I called his name and fought to mind link with him.

*Xavier? Are you okay? It’s me, Cali. Do you know who I am?*

The wolf was breathing heavily, blinking slowly, still disoriented by the blast. He faced me and I sniffled, continuing to talk through the link between us.

*We were going to help my mom, remember? You said you wanted to help me! Whatever’s happening to you, you have to fight it! Take control of your wolf.*

Keeping a safe distance from the wolf, I took a step back as Xavier staggered to his feet. The animal looked lost, hazy, and then he took a step toward me…

Only to shift right back to human.

“*Cali*.” He said my name in a strangled moan, falling to the ground.

“Xavier, oh my god!” I raced toward him, relieved he was alive, relieved he remembered me. I kneeled next to him as he groaned in pain. I caressed his face. If I’d hurt him irrevocably, I was never going to use my Fae powers again.

“Are you injured?” I asked, not sure where to start as he writhed on the ground. “Should I call for help?”

He grunted in response.

*Right,* I scoffed at myself. *We’re in the middle of nowhere in the woods in Oregon—of course there’s a werewolf hospital right around the corner.*

“What’s happening to me?” Xavier choked out, looking up at me with wide eyes. He took my hand, panting as I pushed his hair back from his forehead. I couldn’t see any blood anywhere, thank god.

“Ever since we got back from the Fae world, I feel like I’m not in control,” Xavier said with a moan.

I shuddered at his words, remembering what had happened with him and Greyson after we’d gotten back. Maybe Xavier was right—maybe coming back to the human world did something to werewolves? This was such a fucking mess. UGH!

“We need to get out of here,” I said, trying to stay calm. I helped him up, almost relieved by the solid feel of his human body against mine.

“I’m so sorry for using my power on you,” I said, looking up at him. “You were out of control, and I just didn’t know what to do.”

“You… You made that happen?” Xavier asked me gruffly.

I offered a shaky nod, double-checking his body for any blood. He seemed okay, but felt so weak. Almost panicked, I asked, “Are you feeling any better?”

What was going to happen if Xavier couldn’t help me get to the airport?

My mother was losing her life bit by bit with every passing moment.

“Xavier—”

“I can’t, Cali,” Xavier breathed, looking pained. “I can’t go with you.”

**Episode 574**

GREYSON

The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was the Fae world’s starry sky. The grassy field I lay on was surrounded by woods, and then there was Cali, emerging from them.

“Greyson…” Her voice was breathy and soft as she walked toward me. Her beautiful bare body glowed under the moonlight. She was so gorgeous it took my breath away. I watched her, obsessed and besotted out of my fucking mind as she approached. She kneeled beside me on the grass, her full lips forming a pout as she said, “I’m so sorry about what happened. Are you okay?”

*Okay* was relative, because I wanted her so badly right then that I could barely fucking speak. My eyes moved from her face to her breasts to her stomach and lower, between her thighs, and up again. I was starved for the sight of her, a greedy motherfucker who’d forgive her anything if only she let me touch her, feel her, have her while we were surrounded by the Fae world’s beauty.

I wanted Cali to be mine, and mine alone.

“You don’t—You don’t have to apologize,” I said gruffly, almost stammering. I could barely speak while looking at her. I reached out to pull her closer. “I’d do anything for you.”

The last thing I saw before kissing her was her gorgeous smile.

She hugged me tight, wrapping her arms around my neck. Her fingertips ran through my hair, tugging, driving me mad. Our soft kiss became hungry, heavy as she ran her hands over my bare chest, scarping her nails against skin that suddenly felt hot, tight. Nothing else mattered in the whole wide world right then—just this moment. Just Cali.

Always Cali.

It was just me and her, in each other’s arms, her chest flush against mine, her stunning, soft body writhing at my proximity. She clung to me, making needy little sounds into my mouth that I couldn’t get enough of, needy sounds that I wanted to turn into full-blown moans. I broke the kiss just to roll us on the ground, pinning her on the soft grass beneath us.

She felt like heaven under me, and when she looked up, I felt sucker-punched, all the air evaporating from my lungs.

This was what love felt like.

“Are you afraid?” I whispered.

Her only response was to grab me by the back of the neck and give me another bruising kiss, spreading her thighs for me before wrapping them around my waist. She arched her hips upward, finding me hard and ready for her, letting me feel how wet she was, how hot she felt, how eager she was for me. How eager she was for this thing between us to be real.

I wanted this to be real so fucking badly.

“Say you love me,” I said against her mouth, holding her thigh with one hand to keep her spread for me, using my other palm to caress her cheek.

“I love you, I need you, *please*…” Her words turned into a moan as I pressed into her, a smooth, wet slide that made my head spin. Her body welcomed me greedily, clamping down on me as her hips shuddered upward to meet mine.

I’d never felt like this before in my whole damn life.

But then I heard a familiar voice behind me.

“Is this a joke?” Xavier’s voice.

Gasping, I turned around to face my brother, only to see Cali…

*In his arms.*

I was stunned, shocked into stillness while I glanced between the now empty bed of grass and Xavier, who was holding Cali as if she were his. He had her held to his front, her back to his chest, her arms wrapped around his neck, her head thrown backward in pleasure. He caressed her all over, like she was his puppet.

“Why do you look so surprised, Greyson?” Xavier mocked, nuzzling at Cali’s temple while moving his hand between her legs, touching every inch of trembling skin I wanted to mark as my own. “You told her to go with me, didn’t you?”

My shock was replaced with the kind of rage that only a beast could feel. There was nothing human about it—just instinct, the instinct to maim and tear my brother into a million pieces. With a roar that came from the depths of my being, I leaped up, ready to attack with bared teeth, ravenous for blood, when Xavier shifted into wolf form, laughing at me.

Fucking *laughing*.

He ran off with Cali on his back, still naked. She rode on him and looked over her shoulder at me with…

*With a smile.*

She smiled as if she rejoiced in witnessing my misery.

I fought to shift, to chase after them, but I couldn’t—I was trapped in this fucking human body. This couldn’t be happening. This couldn’t be real, I couldn’t lose Cali like this…

Could I?

“Greyson?” I heard a voice from somewhere behind me again. I turned around, panting, but there was nobody. Had that been Cali’s voice? Or was it…

*Artemis?*

I was startled awake, hyperventilating while Artemis tried to calm me down. She held onto my shoulders, standing way too fucking close to me. Still, her cool touch felt like relief on my heated skin.

I looked around, my chest still heaving, and I realized I wasn’t in the Fae world.

*Of course* I wasn’t in the Fae world. What the hell kind of infuriating dream had I just had? What the fuck was wrong with me?

Grunting, I sat up just as Artemis moved away from me, giving me space to breathe. At least she wasn’t a moron and could realize that space was what I needed right now.

“Where’s…” I cleared my throat that suddenly ached. “Where’s Cali?”

Artemis stared at me with arched eyebrows. She looked half-worried, half-annoyed at me. “She left. With Xavier. You told her to go, and then you took a nap right here.”

The memory came rushing back, rattling me to the core.

The warmth of my dream gave way to cold reality.

Cali had run off with Xavier.

Cali had left me behind.

“So what is it with werewolves?” Artemis asked me, wrinkling her nose. “Why are you guys always so dramatic? And why do you just shift without any reason?” She narrowed her blue-green eyes at me. “Because if you try something like that with me, I’ll go full-blown Fae on your ass.”

I scoffed, grunting as I sat up straighter. “I have no intention of doing that.”

“So what? Are you in control of your wolf now?” Artemis pressed. She really did seem annoyed. “I said I’d look after you, but that doesn’t mean I want to be your babysitter. Are you going to shift at random again?”

I stared at her. Did this Fae really think we’d be joined at the hip from now on? Ridiculous. “Okay, fine. I’ll admit I’ve have been having some control issues. Happy now?”

“Not at all,” she scoffed. “We obviously have a problem!”

“I wonder if it’s because I was in the Fae world for so long.”

“Could be,” Artemis said, eyeing me skeptically. “But now that you’re back, maybe you can try a little harder to keep it under control? Because if this is what it’s like to hang out with a werewolf, I’d rather play it safe, thank you very much.”

I scowled. Not because Artemis sounded pretty haughty, but because my loss of control was indeed an issue. I traced the scar on my torso—a Fae had done that to me.

I glanced up at Artemis, who was still staring at me suspiciously.

Who was to say that she wouldn’t turn on me?

I knew better than to attack her on purpose, but what if I did lose control again? And if all that wasn’t enough, Artemis *had* tried to sell me to the Kollector—I couldn’t just forget about that. Cali might have trusted her, but Cali trusted everyone. Cali wanted to be friends with everyone.

I, on the other hand, did not make friends easily.

I could be someone’s boss easily, but not someone’s friend.

*No.*

Being friends with someone would mean being willing to trust them at some point, and I doubted I’d ever trust Artemis. I knew so little about her, despite whatever conversations we’d had in the mines. Why was she even here?

Why was she in the human world?

Had someone invited her while I wasn’t fucking looking?

I paused, realizing that Cali had obviously invited Artemis. *Of course* she had. No surprises there. Cali was a problem that just kept on giving.

I loved her so much that I’d die if anything ever happened to her.

“So what do we do now?” Artemis asked me. “Do you need another nap? Maybe some food? With the smackdown you got earlier, you might need some recovery time.”

“I’m a werewolf,” I grumbled. “I can handle it.”

“Right, right,” she told me, in a tone that said she didn’t really believe me. “What should we do now, then? Are we still planning on going to Minnesota?”

I peered at Artemis, eyebrows raised. “We’re not going to Minnesota.”

Artemis frowned. “Come again?”

“*I’m* going to Minnesota,” I said, standing to my feet. “But you…” I pointed behind me. “You’re going back to the Fae world. Right where you belong.”

Before Artemis could speak, I turned my back on her and walked away.

**Episode 575**

COLTON

I checked in the motel’s bathroom, closet, even under the goddamn bed to make sure that weasel Teddy was gone for real. “The little bastard!” I huffed, glaring around the room. “He must’ve run off!”

“What an astute observation, Colton,” Maya said. She was super hot, but could she really not let me utter a single word without fucking commenting on it?

Rolling my eyes, I turned to Big Mac. “What was that about a spell?” I demanded. “You’d better get your witch powers checked out, because they seem to be slipping.”

Big Mac glared at me, gasping, all offended but still pretty tiny. I used to be scared of her, what with her plucking Jay’s eye out and all, but now she didn’t seem all that scary.

“That’s not helping, Colton,” Mrs. Smith told me firmly. “Maybe we’d be better off if we actually looked for Teddy, instead of placing blame.”

“Teddy is the only connection we have to Demeter,” Maya said, her expression thunderous. “He’s also the only link I have to my sister.” She turned to face me, a hint of vulnerability in her gaze that had me floored in an instant. “We have to find him, Colton.”

If Maya was acting all severe and talking to me like she didn’t want to smack me, shit had just gotten serious. “Fine,” I said, grumbling. “Why do you always have to be right?”

Maya arched an eyebrow, back to her usual pain-in-the-ass self in a second. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

If we were alone, I’d already have been fucking her on Teddy’s bed. Just saying.

“This is unprecedented!” Big Mac was talking to Mrs. Smith behind us, still pretty upset by my comment on her powers. Primarily because my comment had been right. “How was Teddy able to get out?”

“It’s okay, MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith told her soothingly. “Your powers are strong as ever, don’t worry.”

Big Mac looked up at her, pressing her lips together. “You think so?”

“Colton,” Maya told me sharply, examining my face as I watched the women.

“What?” I said defensively.

“Don’t be a douche,” she told me, as if she could imagine every girl-on-girl fantasy I’d ever had. Jesus fuck, could Maya read my mind? Even without mind linking?

Spooked and mildly turned on because Maya was a genius, I led the way as we headed outside.

Now, if I were a tiny little very ugly weasel like Teddy, where would I go? It was very hard to imagine myself that way, because I was the hottest man I knew, but you know. I had to get into character somehow if I wanted to sniff out my target.

“Teddy hasn’t even healed completely yet,” Maya grumbled. “How far could he have gotten?”

“Exactly,” Mrs. Smith said. “He probably won’t even be able to shift until he’s healthier.”

“A princess like him wouldn’t be able to handle any pain,” I added.

Big Mac agreed with that, nodding solemnly. “He has a very low pain tolerance for a werewolf. It’s weird, almost to the point where—”

And then a very cheerful voice interrupted our conversation. “Who wants coffee?”

We all turned to face Teddy, who was bearing coffees for all. He was dressed like some sort of annoying prep boy straight out of Harvard. I had forgotten how tall and built he was, though, the shithead. I glanced at Maya to make sure she remained unimpressed by him. Thankfully—for Teddy—she was just frowning.

“What in the fuck?” I muttered as Big Mac snarled, “How the hell did you get out of your room?”

Teddy blinked down at her innocently. “Um. The door?” He pointed at it, like he was trying to help with a demonstration.

I had to stop myself from knocking the coffee right out of his hands. “So you just walked out of your room?” I demanded.

“That’s not possible,” Big Mac declared, walking up to him. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “I put a spell on your door. It wasn’t supposed to open without my intervention.”

“Uh…” Teddy chuckled awkwardly. “I mean, maybe you made a mistake? Maybe you thought you put the spell on but forgot?”

“I never make mistakes!” Big Mac hissed, grabbing him by his polo shirt collar.

“Okay, don’t make me spill the coffee!” Teddy exclaimed, stepping back from her in obvious fear. I was back to kinda fearing her too, now. She looked furious. “I’ll tell you the truth.”

“Right now,” Maya added. “We don’t have all day!”

“Here, please hold the coffees.” Teddy gave them to Mrs. Smith, who shot him a look of annoyance but said nothing, because Teddy was already pulling out a ball from his jacket pocket. “I used this weird witch ball.”

He held it up, and Big Mac gasped. “Where’d you get that?”

“What the hell is a witch ball?” I asked Maya.

She shrugged. “Never heard of it.”

“It’s used to neutralize spells,” Mrs. Smith explained. “But how did you get one?”

Teddy cringed. “Um. I bought it?”

Big Mac glared up at him. “Try again.”

I grinned. *This* was the Big Mac I knew, ready to poke everyone’s eyes out. Mine included.

“I’m a bit of a kleptomaniac,” Teddy said sheepishly. “I stole it. From Nneka. She had a whole bunch of things hanging around.”

Big Mac raised her eyebrows at him. “This must be a joke.”

“Sounds like a joke to me, if a pretty unfunny one,” Maya said icily.

I was *so* glad she didn’t like Teddy.

“No, I swear!” Teddy told Maya and Big Mac. “I just got lucky! And I got coffee.”

“I guess that explains it,” Mrs. Smith said with a sigh. “Right?”

Big Mac’s eyes remained narrowed in suspicion. “You mean to tell me that you stole a magical item and used it… to get *coffee?*”

“No,” Teddy said. “I used it to go OUT and THEN get the coffee. I used my credit card and realized that this thing”—he gestured at the ball—“is too valuable to get rid of! I thought about running away, but where would I go? Besides, you guys have been so nice to me—”

“Was that before or after I threatened to smack you around?” I asked.

Maya elbowed me. Teddy powered through.

“The point is,” he continued, “I thought that everyone would like a little caffeine to start the day. Me and the boys back at boarding school used to have coffee breaks all the time.”

I looked him up and down before turning to Maya. “He went to boarding school. It all makes sense now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Teddy asked me, clearly offended.

“I need one of those balls, though,” I told Teddy, about to grab the ball out of his hands. He pulled back, holding it close to his chest.

“Get your own magic ball,” he said indignantly. “This is mine.”

“What?” I scoffed. “Didn’t you learn to share in boarding school?”

Teddy glared at me. “I don’t appreciate your tone.”

“Maya,” I demanded. “Tell him to give me the ball before I rip his head off.”

Maya rolled her eyes so hard I thought they’d pop out of her head. “*Men*.”

“So, who wants coffee?” Teddy asked, changing the subject and taking the coffees back from Mrs. Smith before he handed them out.

“Thank you, Teddy, but we should pack and get going,” Mrs. Smith said. “Montana’s not a short drive.”

“I like oat milk in my coffee,” Big Mac told Teddy, frowning.

“I’ll remember next time,” he replied seriously.

After that delightful fucking break, Maya and I returned to our room to gather our shit before we left. I watched Maya as she folded her tiny little nightie, my eyes getting a little too hung up on the curve of her denim-clad ass. I glanced at the bed.

“I wish we didn’t have to go just yet,” I said, grabbing her wrist. “We could make them wait a few minutes—”

“Don’t get any ideas, Colton,” she scoffed, shoving me before walking out of the room.

*Ouch.*

“You can’t fault me for trying!” I called after her, still eyeing that scrumptious ass. Nothing could compare to it. Or to her. Maya, the person attached to that ass. She really was amazing, even though she was mean to me sometimes.

For a moment, I thought back to our earlier conversation. It had been pretty intimate… I’d never told anyone the way I felt about being a dad. About how my own father had irrevocably fucked me up. But Maya had listened, had seemed to understand.

I shook off the thought, ignoring the growing warmth in my chest.

What was that?

Coziness?

Tenderness?

How weird.

I didn’t have time to think about that stuff anyway.

I caught up to Maya and the others in the deserted parking lot. But as we approached the car, I saw Maya scowl.

“What?” I asked.

She pointed at the car. “That?”

“What the fuck?” I muttered, just as Big Mac let out a blood-curdling scream.

My eyes widened when I saw someone sitting in the driver’s seat.

**Episode 576**

“What do you mean, you can’t come with me?” I asked Xavier. I sounded whiny and a little demanding, but honestly, tough shit! He’d promised to take me to my mother, and I did not appreciate broken promises. Especially not right now.

“I just lost control of my wolf, Cali,” Xavier told me gently. It was so weird to see him looking so vulnerable, and my indignation instantly wilted. “Instead of seeing *you*, all I could see was something to attack.”

I caressed his shoulder. “But you didn’t attack. You got close, but you didn’t.”

“Only because you blasted me away,” Xavier pointed out.

I cringed. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

Xavier took both my hands in his, bringing them to his lips. He kissed the skin there, stared at me through those gorgeous eyes of his and said, “I’m the one that should be sorry for fucking up earlier. What if I’d hurt you? How the fuck would I have been able to live with myself?”

*Wow, look that,* I thought, dazed*.*

“After all I’ve done to bring you back safely, I’d hate to risk harming you in any way,” he told me, exhaling sharply. “I can’t come with you if—”

“That’s super sweet and all, but I *did* stop you from hurting me,” I said. My tone had gotten firmer, more certain. I was sure about my decision. “And if you try it again, I’ll stop you again. I can use my Fae magic to protect myself.”

I hoped at least.

Xavier paused, eyeing me. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. “From what I can tell, all I need to do is blast you away. Not, like, actually harm you for the long term.”

He stared at me thoughtfully.

“I can’t believe this conversation,” I said, the realization making me feel a little hysterical. “This situation is insane, especially when you consider that two months ago I was just your clumsy human mate. Look at us—we’re casually discussing harming each other just in case some magical bullshit should arise.”

“Cali,” Xavier said, squeezing my shoulders. “Focus, please.”

“Right. You’re right,” I said, taking a deep breath.

*You can do this*, I told myself. *You can make it to your mother in time.*

With renewed resolve, I said, “We don’t know why you’re losing control of your wolf, Xavier, but it’s something we’ll have to deal with later. I think we should risk another… incident, though, because I can’t get to the airport in time without you. And if I can’t get to the airport…”

I stopped speaking, looking away. The image of my mother, pale and sickly, invaded my head. I traced the lines of my pendant, the moon buttercup—the one chance I had of saving my mother. My eyes stared welling up, a sensation that felt quite close to despair making me feel lightheaded. Wiping away a tear, I looked up at Xavier.

“I need you right now, Xavier.” I sniffled. “My mother needs you.”

His exhale was sharp, vibrating through him and reaching me. He lifted my chin, his touch warm against my skin. “You’re right, Cali,” he whispered. “I’ll always be with you.”

He leaned forward, brushing his lips over mine. It was a light kiss, so soft it barely landed, but I felt it in my bones. I was surprised by his gesture, by how intimate it was, but I welcomed it.

I felt comforted. So much safer.

“I’ll shift again,” Xavier said, “and carry you to Portland.”

I beamed, wiping the tears from my eyes. “That’s amazing, Xavier, thank you so—”

“But only if you promise that if I lose control again, you’ll get away from me,” Xavier said, cutting me off. “And you’ll find some other way to Portland.”

Still sniffling, I wrapped my arms around him. “If you lose control again, I’ll just knock some common sense into you, like I did before.”

Xavier hugged me, letting me melt into him before planting a kiss on top of my head. I could actually feel the smile on his lips, and it only gave me hope.

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The ride to Portland was not without its hiccups. Still, Xavier only lost control once more—and even then, he recovered quickly. It wasn’t like the first time, and it seemed the further we got from Haystack Rock, the better.

It seemed likely to me that he was improving because of our growing distance from the Fae portal. Either way, whatever the issue had been, Xavier seemed more like his old self—surly and grumpy, but absolutely endearing and lovable.

*Growth, and all that!* I told myself, still proud that Xavier had managed to communicate with me successfully without, like, running off across the country.

After buying him some clothes in a shop outside the city—as much as I wanted to appreciate the goods, I didn’t want to get arrested—Xavier and I arrived at the airport.

It was very weird to be back to something so normal.

*Do they have airports in the Fae world?* I mused. I should’ve asked Torin about that. Flying to the moon buttercup field would definitely have saved us a lot of trouble.

“Pretzel?” Xavier asked me, nodding toward an Auntie Anne’s stand.

“Yes, please.”

He got me one and kissed my cheek, and in that moment, it was like nothing had ever broken between us. That feeling remained as we boarded our flight to Minnesota, and when Xavier took my hand during takeoff.

I didn’t really know how any of it made me feel.

I leaned into his shoulder. It felt so good to be close to him like this, to feel that he was there for me, that he had come through. All my struggles in the Fae world were finally over, and now I was heading to my mom. I was filled with hope.

Xavier had already dozed off, no doubt exhausted after shifting back and forth and having been blasted by Fae power. I fought to do the same, because that would definitely make the flight seem quicker.

But every time I closed my eyes, Greyson’s face popped up.

His expression when he’d told me to leave without him, to go with Xavier, had been unreadable. Cold, almost. Jarring after the way he’d treated me, the way he’d helped me, in the Fae world.

I hoped that I’d made the right decision to respect his wishes and leave him behind.

I hoped that nothing had changed between us, and he still felt… whatever it was that he felt about me. That same feeling that had made him follow me to the end of the human world, and fight entire armies to keep me safe.

I hoped…

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“Remember when I first met your parents?” Xavier asked. We’d picked up a rental car, and he was driving. He glanced at me, his expression soft. “I was so nervous.”

I snorted. Him nervous about anything? Right.

“Yeah. *So* nervous…” I trailed off, realizing that I’d never managed to get a hold of my dad. I didn’t like it.

“Cali? What’s wrong?” Xavier asked, frowning.

“Just… My dad,” I said, picking up my phone. “I haven’t spoken to him at all since we got back.” I called him again, hoping it wouldn’t go to voicemail.

He picked up, thank *god*.

“Hello—”

“Dad!” I exclaimed. “Where were you?”

“Cali? Sweetheart?” I was struck by the pain in his voice, my stomach lurching. “I’m here at the hospital You should come as quickly as you can. Mom needs all the support she can get right now.”

I swallowed, fighting to calm my nerves. I needed to be strong, for both my parents. I hoped to hell that the moon buttercup would work. I wondered how long I’d been gone in human world days. In Fae time, it had felt like a century. Dad didn’t mention anything about me being absent for too long, though, so I didn’t bring it up.

“I’ll be there soon,” I told my dad, choked up. “Hang on.”

I needed to get there ASAP. Like yesterday!

When I hung up, Xavier stepped on the gas, almost as if he could hear my thoughts. Everything felt like a blur until we finally hurried into the hospital. The elevator was stuck on the fourth floor, so I turned to Xavier. “I’m taking the stairs!”

He followed as we rushed up. When we reached the right floor, I burst into the hallway, heading toward the ICU, my heart pounding in my throat.

And then some hospital person cut us off, pushing a cart.

“They’re going to the ICU,” I told Xavier, following the person. The second we turned a corner, I saw Dad sitting outside a room, tears streaming down his face.

“Dad!”

I rushed into his arms, and he hugged me tight. “I’m so glad you disobeyed your mother’s wishes and came back anyway,” he told me, choked up.

As I wiped the tears from my eyes, he led me into Mom’s room.

I gasped when I saw her.

She looked so pale, so frail, so… *broken*. But I was here now. I was here and I was going to save her if it was the last thing I did.

“What’s going on?” I asked Dad. “Why didn’t you tell me she was this bad?”

Dad looked nothing less than devastated.

Before he could reply, an alarm rang through the entire room—and my ears as well. The monitors started beeping like crazy, and two doctors rushed into the room, but then the alarm turned into a constant *beep!* sound.

Mom had flatlined.

**Episode 577**

I felt Xavier’s hand on my shoulder. It was a gesture that meant to soothe and comfort, but all I felt was dread. All I wanted was to rush toward Mom, to touch her pale cheek.

“Visitors out!” one of the medics barked, ordering us out of the room as two other medics dragged a machine that I’d only seen on *Grey’s Anatomy* into the room.

“We have to get out, Cali,” Dad told me.

Tears falling freely down my cheeks, I looked up at him helplessly. “But I just got here, I—that’s my mom…” I looked at one of the doctors, letting out a sob. “That’s my mom!”

“Let the doctors work, please,” Dad said, wiping his eyes.

*This can’t be happening this can’t be happening this can’t be happening this can’t—*

The doctors yelled for us to leave again, and Xavier pulled me back. I felt numb all over, like I was underwater, like all my senses had dialed down to nothing.

*I came all this way…*

*I fought so hard…*

*And all for…*

*All for nothing?*

I started shaking as Xavier held my shoulders, but this couldn’t be the end.

*This couldn’t be the end!*

“But I can help,” I told Dad, choking out the words. Grabbing onto my pendant, I repeated, “I can help!”

“Someone get her out of here!” one of the doctors yelled at a nurse.

“Hun, if you can’t leave we’re going to have to call security,” the nurse told me.

“No!” I screamed, dragged out of the room as I fought to resist, fought to go to Mom.

*All this time, all I’ve wanted was to go to her.*

We were pushed back by security, but I could still see through the window. It was an out-of-body experience to witness, to watch the doctors try to save a woman who was Fae—they didn’t know the truth, and they would never believe me if I told them.

“I have to do something, Xavier!” My voice sounded more like a sob, and Xavier caressed my face, my arms. His devastation was evident, mirroring my own, but he didn’t speak a word.

Dad whispered, “It’s okay, sweetheart.” He wrapped his arms around me tight, as if his embrace could fix everything, even though we both knew that was a lie. “It’s going to be okay.”

That sounded like a lie as well, but I wanted to believe him so badly.

I wanted to believe that Mom was going to survive this, because I had survived the whole goddamn Fae world, just for her.

As the doctors went to work, I turned to Dad. “Why didn’t you tell me things had gotten so bad?”

“I tried,” Dad said, exhaling sharply. “I tried to call you, sweetheart, but you never answered. Where have you been?”

The question was so jarring that it took my breath away.

How the fuck was I supposed to answer that?

How the hell could I look my dad in the eye and tell him the truth?

But then again, what was the alternative? Would Dad believe that I was a bad daughter, an ignorant daughter, who never picked up her fucking phone?

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I’d been away. I’d told Mom about the camping trip, and there was no signal, and…”

Dad stared at me, wiping at his eyes. He didn’t look mad. He just looked disappointed, which was a million fucking times worse.

“I’m here now, Dad,” I whispered. “I found out from Lola that Mom had gotten worse, but I never realized it would be this bad…”

Dad rubbed his eyes, but then more tears escaped. “The truth is I didn’t know what to do, Cali. Your mother didn’t want you to know, and I tried to respect that. But now I wonder if I made a mistake.”

I hugged him, kissing his cheek. “I’m not blaming you. I hope you’re not blaming me either.”

Dad shook his head, embracing me more tightly. “Never, sweetheart. Never.”

The doctors hadn’t come out yet, but a nurse told us that they were still fighting to save her life. I caught sight of Xavier over my dad’s shoulder. He looked stricken, broken, like he wanted to help but didn’t know how. He moved closer to me, slowly, and placed a comforting hand on my shoulder.

*I’m so sorry, Cali*, Xavier said through our mind link.

I didn’t know what to say, or if I had to say anything, or if I *could* say anything. A moment later, another nurse walked past us and Dad asked her about Mom. He got the same response.

“The doctors are still working on her.”

The image of my mom looking so helpless, of her life slipping away, came back to haunt me. I should’ve been quicker. I shouldn’t have stopped to rest. I shouldn’t have wasted time stopping to eat. I shouldn’t have let the Kollector capture me. I should have defeated him sooner. I should have forced Artemis to be my ally sooner.

I should have done everything much, much fucking faster, because right now…

Right now, my mother was dying.

*I can’t do this*, I thought, looking around at the waiting room. *I can’t wait here while I know she’s in there!*

Panic and resolve had never been friends, but they seemed to co-exist inside me. I eyed the security guards, chattering a few feet away, and started plotting a way to get past them, but then I met Xavier’s gaze. He was sitting on a chair as I paced up and down.

*I’m going in*, I said through our mind link. *I didn’t fight my way through the entirety of the Fae world just to come here and wait outside her fucking room while she dies! These doctors have literally no idea what they’re dealing with!*

*Tell me what to do,* Xavier said instantly. *How to help.*

Warmth spread all over me at his words. Xavier had my back, and I could do this. I glanced at Dad. He was sitting on a chair, looking totally dejected as he stared at the ground. My stomach churned at the sight, but I had to focus.

*I wish I could blast the security guys away from the door*, I told Xavier. *Or have you turn into a werewolf and make them piss themselves, but that can’t happen right now. Especially not with cameras all around. What we need is a distraction, you’ll distract them—*

*And you’ll go into your mother’s room and give her the moon buttercup,* Xavier finished.

*Exactly.*

Xavier nodded, his jaw clenched. He was about to stand when a doctor walked out of the ICU room and spotted Dad.

I felt so sick I started dry-heaving.

“What’s going on?” Dad said, jumping up to meet the doctor halfway. We could see Mom through the window to her room. She was lying on the bed with her eyes closed.

The doctor looked between me and Dad, shaking his head. “I’m sorry…”

I held my breath.

“But she’s gone.”

For a moment, nobody spoke.

“What do you mean she’s gone?” I asked slowly, my mind refusing to acknowledge what he was saying. My voice sounded foreign to my own ears. I gestured through the window. “She’s right there, I can see her. She’s…”

I didn’t finish my sentence, because Dad broke down sobbing.

Everything slowed down inside me. It felt like I was swimming upstream, against the flow of doctors who were leaving my mom’s room. Xavier asked someone something about me saying goodbye to Orla one last time before they took her away. He asked someone something else to distract them, but I wasn’t listening.

I just moved toward my mom, my heart beating under every inch of my skin, but at a tempo so slow it felt like I was barely living.

*This can’t be happening…*

I sat by her side on the bed, looking at her pale, frail form, not speaking, not even moving. I’d made it back with the moon buttercup, but that hadn’t been enough, had it? It was here, in the pendant. I remembered the moment my mother had given me the family heirloom. It felt like a million years ago now.

*This can’t be happening…*

I wanted to give Mom the pendant back. It was the last thing she had of her past, of her family. It was something that would anchor her, remind her of who she truly was. Not a human man’s wife, but a Fae.

A Fae who had been my mother.

Who still was my mother.

*This can’t be happening… Can it?*

Tears streaming down my cheeks, I removed the pendant from my neck and placed it gently around hers. I wasn’t sure why, but I was certain Mom needed the pendant. I watched, holding my breath as more and more quiet tears ran down my cheeks.

I was hoping for some sort of miracle to happen, the moment the pendant touched my mother’s chest.

But nothing happened.

Nothing, not a single thing happened.

The moon buttercup wasn’t working, because it was too late, and my mom was lying there, broken, motionless…

My mom was gone.

I’d tried so hard, but I’d still failed.

I’d failed.

Crying, I held her hand gently, the need to touch her a visceral instinct. “I brought it back to you, Mom. The pendant has always been yours…”

I broke down sobbing, the pain unlike anything I’d ever felt in my life, when something changed…

Something *happened*.

Mom—my pale, breathless mother—squeezed my hand.

**Episode 578**

MAYA

I marched toward the car, about to slam the door open and cuss this person out. Whoever this woman was, she needed to get the fuck out of our car. But before I could touch the handle, the woman…

Disappeared, right before my eyes.

“What the hell?” I said under my breath, wide-eyed. “*Colton!*”

He popped up right next to me. “Maya, yes, I’m here, I—”

“Did you fucking see that? She’s gone!” I stepped back from the car, looking up at him. “Am I going crazy?”

He shook his head, swallowing roughly. “I saw it too.” He squeezed my shoulder, pulling me closer to him, as if to protect me from an invisible force. It was pretty unnerving to see him nervous, mostly because he was usually a fucking fearless child frolicking through life with no concept of danger.

“What’s going on?” Teddy asked, looking between us.

He seemed a little green as Mrs. Smith stared at Big Mac and muttered, “MacKenzie…”

Big Mac had screamed when she’d seen the vanishing woman in the car—*before* she’d fucking vanished. I hadn’t taken Big Mac for someone who panicked, ever, so this was really freaking me out.

“Talk to me, Kenzie,” Mrs. Smith said, squeezing Big Mac’s shoulder.

Blinking rapidly, Big Mac looked between the car and Mrs. Smith. “This isn’t possible.”

My mind went back to the ghostly woman Colton, Lola, and I had seen in the middle of the road the other night. The uneasy feeling inside me only grew.

“Did everyone see what I saw?” I asked. “Are we all on the same page?”

“Yes, I saw a woman’s figure,” Mrs. Smith said simply, and Teddy nodded. I didn’t wait for Colton—I already knew he’d seen her. Big Mac was the only one who didn’t say anything, just looked at the ground.

What in the hell was going on with her?

“Why did you scream?” I asked Big Mac carefully. I could sense that she was holding back. That she was hiding something, something that was making her look more like a kid than the powerful witch she was.

Big Mac stared at the car, her expression alarmingly blank. And then in an eerie, quiet tone, she muttered, “That woman… that woman we all just saw. She’s my mother.”

Mrs. Smith paled. “MacKenzie, your mother has been dead for years.” She touched Big Mac’s arm, caressing it softly. “Maybe you need to sit down? Are you feeling unwell?”

“It was my mother,” Big Mac repeated. This time, her tone was more resolved. This time, she looked at us one by one, like she was making sure we understood what she’d just said. “Or, it was something that *looked* like her. We all saw it.”

“Whatever we saw,” Mrs. Smith said carefully, “it’s not there right now. Maybe it was just the light playing a trick on us?”

I scoffed, loud and clear.

“Yeah, I doubt that,” Colton added.

“This is very scary, guys,” Teddy said nervously. “Are your lives always so scary?”

Glaring at Teddy, I yanked the car door open to see if there were any traces of whatever thing we had seen. To my utter astonishment, a torrent of water came pouring out.

“What the FUCK?” I shouted, jumping back. But it was too late, my pants were soaked.

“Oh, no!” Teddy gasped, looking down at his wet chinos. “Now look what you’ve done! Ugh, I just had these pressed this morning!”

Colton growled at him. “*Really?*” he snapped. “Does that seem important right now, prep boy?” He checked me out, patting me down as if to make sure I was in one piece. And then he glared around the parking lot. It was like he was trying to scare off any potential assholes who might stand in his way. “If I ever catch whoever did this, they’ll be sorry.”

“I can’t believe this happened to me!” Teddy said, still mourning his chinos.

“You need to cool it, kid,” Mrs. Smith told Teddy.

He gasped dramatically, but shut up. Evidently, even he could tell shit was serious when Mrs. Smith decided to scold you.

“Let’s just get in the car,” Colton said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “The quicker we get out of here, the better.”

Big Mac backed away, paling. “No way. No fucking way.”

“Are you…” I stared at her, pausing. “Are you *scared?*”

She nervously looked away, not responding.

“Seriously?” Colton scoffed. “Do you need to check under the hood for any other ghosts? Make sure your mom’s not hiding in there?”

Big Mac winced. I wasn’t the most sensitive person in any given situation, but even I could tell that what Colton had just said had been pretty shitty. Smacking him, I hissed, “Don’t be such an asshole!”

“MacKenzie, I promise it’s going to be okay,” Mrs. Smith told her.

I nodded at Big Mac. “We’re not going to let a bit of water to stop us,” I said, determined, and pulled the door open. I grabbed a towel from my bag and threw it over the seat, then sat down. Seeing me unafraid seemed to do the trick. One by one, everyone got in, using towels to cover the seats. They were thankfully only partly wet.

Before getting into the driver’s seat, Colton checked his phone.

“What?” I asked, eyeing his expression.

“Xavier’s back,” Colton said, his tone carrying a very ‘imagine that!’vibe.

“For real?” I asked. “How? The portal at the club was destroyed.”

“Haystack Rock,” Colton said. “He texted me a while ago—he’s going with Cali to see her mom at the hospital in Minnesota.”

“How’s Cali?” I asked instantly. “Okay?”

“She’s fine,” Colton said. “That girl’s pretty hard to kill. Like, super hard.”

A weird part of me felt relieved. “What about her mom?” I asked.

Colton frowned. “She’s in the ICU… Doesn’t look good.”

Shit. That sucked.

“You must be relieved Xavier’s back,” I said, changing the subject. “Alpha twins together once more and all that.”

“Eh.” Colton shrugged.

I raised an eyebrow. “I bet you missed him.”

Colton rolled his eyes but didn’t deny my words.

“Are you going to tell him about Silas? Montana?”

Colton frowned, pocketing his phone. Obviously done bonding with me, he got into the car, putting on his seat belt. “No. No yet.”

“Why not?”

He shot me a look. “Can you chill? Honesty isn’t always the best policy. I’m sure Xavier has plenty to deal with right now.”

I paused for a moment, realizing that Colton was right. And then I was kinda shocked to realize he’d taken a moment to be considerate of his brother’s feelings.

How oddly sweet.

As Colton pulled out of the parking lot, I turned to the back. Teddy was frowning, looking through the window, no doubt still mourning his chinos. Mrs. Smith was holding Big Mac’s hand, who was staring at her lap.

It was so weird to see her as anything other than a badass.

“Hey,” I said quietly. Big Mac looked up at me. “Just curious, but if that was your mom… Why all the water?”

“Yeah,” Colton piped up. “Was she a mermaid or something?”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

Big Mac looked out the window as Mrs. Smith spoke up. “MacKenzie’s mother drowned.”

I fought not to flinch.

“That’s… sad,” Teddy said carefully.

Big Mac glanced at him, but her face remained blank.

“Of course it’s fucking sad, Teddy,” I snapped. Though I wasn’t sure what kind of person Big Mac’s mom had been. Like, if she’d been an evil witch then it was probably fine that she’d died… Maybe.

Meanwhile, Teddy was staring at me, wide eyed. “Why are you snapping at me? What did I do this time?”

Mrs. Smith nudged him. “Let’s keep this car ride quiet, okay?”

“Don’t you think we should stop to let the car dry, though?” Teddy whined. “My Kenneth Coles are getting wet.”

Colton sneered. “I swear to god, Ted, if you fucking say one more thing right now, I will—”

“Colton!” I said, ready to chastise him. But then I gasped, looking down. My feet were getting wet again, because fucking *water* was bubbling up from the car floor, filling the car.

“Oh no!” Teddy screamed. “My shirt’s gonna get wet, too! It’s Gucci, guys!”

“I’m gonna kill you, man!” Colton shouted at Teddy. “You’re dead!”

“Colton, stop this car!” Mrs. Smith ordered.

“I can’t, it’s stuck!” Colton replied.

Big Mac said something, but I couldn’t hear her. I was too busy fighting to open the door and let the water out. But like the emergency break, it was stuck.

“What the *fuck?*” I screamed, and kept trying while everybody else did the same, fighting to open the doors and windows to no avail.

Colton turned to me as the water started to rise inside the car, panting, his eyes wide. “Maya, the car won’t stop! It won’t fucking stop!”

I tried to punch through the window, but nothing worked.

And then Teddy screamed, “We’re going to drown!”

**Episode 579**

My mom’s eyelids fluttered as I stared down at her. I was rooted to the spot with shock. “M-mom,” I stuttered, my voice shaky. “Mom? Can you hear me?

“Cali?” she whispered, her voice no more than a breath, her eyes barely open.

I gasped and bent closer to her, taking her hand. I blinked back tears. “Yeah, Mom, it’s me. It’s Cali. I’m here. I’m right here.”

Behind me, my dad made a strangled noise and surged forward, grasping Mom’s other hand. “Orla?”

Xavier stepped next to me. “Cali, what’s going on…” He trailed off, his eyes going wide as they traveled to my mother’s face.

“It worked,” I whispered, looking up at him. My heart was beating a mile a minute. “The moon buttercup really worked.”

My mom opened her eyes a little wider and looked up at me, smiling at the sound of my voice. “Oh, Cali, it’s you.” Her voice was still soft, like she’d just been asleep. “It’s so nice of you to come visit. Tom, look, it’s Cali. Isn’t it nice that she could come for a visit?”

My dad nodded, tears spilling down his face. “Yes, that is nice.”

A grey-haired doctor stepped forward, his expression one of utmost shock. He stared at my mom like he was looking at ghost. “It can’t be. This isn’t *possible*.” He peered up at the monitor, which was now recording a steady heartbeat, then down at the chart in his hands. “How is this possible?”

“It’s a miracle,” the nurse said, stepping next to him. She looked dazed, too, but she was smiling. She reached for my mom’s hand—the one I was holding—to take her pulse. “Excuse me, sweetheart.”

I let go reluctantly, then stepped back as the code team surrounded my mom again, checking her vitals and adjusting the half-dozen monitors that surrounded the bed. I watched them, bouncing impatiently. There was *so much* I wanted to tell my mom. She would want to hear it all. About the Fae world and seeing my grandmother and the journey to find the moon buttercup, but I couldn’t tell her. Not now, when she was surrounded by half the hospital’s medical staff.

I’d *done it*. I’d actually saved my mother.

Like she could sense what was going on in my head, my mom pulled her hand from the nurse’s grip and raised it. I stepped closer, and she touched the pendant around her neck with a small smile.

She knew. Or, if she didn’t know, she understood.

“Thank you, Cali,” she whispered.

I nodded, tears flowing freely in my eyes. “You’re welcome, Mom.”

Xavier slipped an arm around my shoulders and I leaned into him, grateful for the strength of his grip around me.

“I just don’t understand,” the grey-haired doctor said, looking at the chart as though it was written in another language. “I *can’t* see how this could have happened. None of her vitals indicated—” He looked up. “We’re going to have to run some tests.”

“Tests?” my dad said, looking up. “What kind of tests? How many?”

The grey-haired doctor exchanged a glance with his colleague. “A fair few, Mr. Hart. You must understand, what has happened is quite extraordinary.”

I put my hand to my heart, which was racing again. I’d made it just in time. Another few minutes and… I didn’t even want to think about it. The journey to get the moon buttercup had been the hardest of my life, had taken everything I had, but it had been worth the risk.

But tests? My mom had just gotten back from the brink of death. This was a happy moment; couldn’t they let us enjoy that for at least two seconds?

“Do we need to do this now?” Dad asked. “We just got her back, *please*, Doctor.”

But they didn’t listen to my dad and the nurses began to unhook my mom from the machines, preparing her for the tests.

“Give us a moment would you?” Mom said. The nurses looked to each other and then shrugged.

Mom motioned for me to step closer with a gentle wave. I moved toward the bed and leaned down, kneeling next to the bed. My mom put her hand on my hair and guided my head down so it was resting on her chest, where I could feel the steady flow of her breath. In a flash I was a child again, cuddled close to her in her bed in the early morning. I used to climb into bed with her just after my father had gone to work and we’d lie quietly together, watching as the sun rose, quiet and content with each other.

I listened to the sound of her breath—the most beautiful sound—and tears began to fall down my cheeks, leaving damp spots on the cotton of my mom’s hospital gown.

“God, Orla,” Dad said, his voice thick with emotion, “I can’t believe any of this. You really had me scared there. Don’t you ever do that again.” He paused and dashed the tears from his cheeks as he looked at the two of us. “I thought I’d lost you.”

My mom smiled up at him. “I’m right here, Tom.”

The three of us were in our own world, just as we’d always been, completely ignoring the code team as they discussed next steps.

I looked over at Xavier and he gave me a small smile. I needed to thank him. Without him, I wouldn’t have made it here in time.

Or without Greyson…

“It must have been you, Cali.”

I looked at my dad, who was looking at me intently.

“What?” I asked breathlessly. Had my dad figured something out?

He smiled. “Your mom must have felt your presence when you got here. It must have given her strength. You saved her, honey.” Tears started trailing down his face again. “I never should have tried to keep you away.”

“Dad,” I admonished, squeezing his hand. “Stop that. We’re not pointing fingers. There’s no one to blame here. We’re together and that’s what matters, okay?”

My dad nodded, though the tears didn’t stop coursing down his face.

My mom reached up and cupped his cheek with her thin hand. He covered her hand with his own. “I love you,” she whispered, gazing into his eyes.

The grey-haired doctor stepped forward. “I’m sorry, but we need to run our tests now, Mrs. Hart. Could we have some time here?”

It was framed as a question, but I could tell by the doctor’s tone that it was not a request. “I’ll be right back,” I said, leaning in to brush a kiss to her head, then I walked out of the room, followed by Xavier and my dad.

Like a puppet whose strings had been cut, my dad fell into a chair just outside the room with an exhausted sigh, though he kept his eyes on my mom.

“Dad?” I asked tentatively.

But he just shook his head. “I’m not letting her out of my sight.”

I sighed. “Can I get you anything? Something to eat? Some coffee?”

He looked up with a grateful smile. “Coffee sounds great. Thanks, Cali.”

I’d been so focused on my mom that I hadn’t really gotten a good look at my dad, and now that I was looking, what I was seeing shocked me. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked like he’d lost about twenty pounds. I dropped into the seat next to him and took his hand. “Try not to worry, Dad. Mom’s going to be okay. I know it.”

He nodded and squeezed my hand. “Thanks, sweetheart.”

“Cali?” Xavier said, and I looked up. “Should we get that coffee?”

“Yeah.” I gave my dad’s hand a final squeeze and then followed Xavier down the hall toward the elevators. But before we reached them, we passed by an open door, and Xavier pulled me into the empty room.

“What are you doing?”

Xavier put his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes. “Cali, are you okay?”

I opened my mouth, surprised. “I’m…”

His eyes were dark with worry. “That must have been really overwhelming. I just want to know if you’re okay.”

I looked into his wide blue eyes and smiled. “I’m okay,” I said. “I’ve never felt better, actually.”

I leaned in to kiss him. I did it on impulse, but the moment my lips touched his, it felt as though a weight was lifted off my shoulders. It felt exhilarating and comforting all at once, and I stepped closer, leaning into him, wanting to feel more of whatever it was he was making me feel.

He slipped a hand around my cheek, cupping it gently and angling my face as he pushed my lips open with his tongue. He used his other hand to reach behind him and shut the door.

I smiled and opened my eyes as the door swung shut, wondering what we could get up to all alone in an empty patient room—but all of that was erased from my mind as I pulled away from Xavier with a scream. Looming in front of the door was Tony, looking pale and sickly, smiling malevolently at me.

**Episode 580**

GREYSON

Behind me, Artemis tripped over a fallen log. She’d been crashing through the woods behind me for miles, following me like a lost puppy. I’d given up on telling her to go back. She hadn’t listened the first thousand times I’d said it—why the hell would she start listening now?

Hell, she’d even camped next to me last night. Near enough that I’d been able to hear her breathing all night long. It had made for a very long night. This morning when we’d—when *I’d*—started out, I’d considered shifting and just leaving her behind. But considering my recent shifting problems, I’d decided against it.

I glanced up as I walked along. The woods were dense and quiet, and the trees arched high above me, stretching into the sky. We were deep in the woods of the Pacific Northwest—the kind of woods that appear as blank patches on maps and GPS. I glanced over my shoulder at Artemis. She was struggling through a patch of thistles fifty yards behind me. I could shift now, point myself north and just not look back, but…

I knew I couldn’t. We were too deep. Artemis would never find her way back to the portal, and Cali would blame me for abandoning her. Because of ‘friendship’, and whatever the hell else.

Heaving a sigh, I trudged forward. The last thing I wanted to do right now was give Cali any reason to distrust me. When it came to Xavier and me, trust was something I had on my side. Cali and I had been through a lot of shit together in the Fae world, and I wanted her to know that she could count on me. No matter what. And no matter how annoying Artemis was, I wasn’t going to leave her behind.

My thoughts turned thorny as I strode through the woods. Xavier was trying to drive a wedge between Cali and me, that much was obvious, though I certainly wasn’t surprised by it. My hands twitched for the phone I no longer had. But I longed to talk to Cali. Had she made it to Minnesota? Had she been able to help her mom? I swallowed a bitter taste in my throat as I thought about Xavier being there with her. After everything Cali and I had been through to get it, it was Xavier who’d been with her when she’d found the moon buttercup, and it was Xavier who was there with her right now at her mom’s bedside.

“How are you feeling?”

I looked down, surprised to find Artemis at my side. I hadn’t even realized I’d stopped walking, but she’d caught up with me and was now looking at me with a concerned expression.

“What?” I snapped, irritated.

“How are you feeling?” she repeated. “Do you think that shifting thing is any better?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Yeah, thanks,” I said grudgingly. “I think it is.”

“You *think?*” she asked.

I took a deep breath, checking in with my body and my senses. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure. I feel back in control again. That was pretty messed up back there, whatever it was.”

Control was a good feeling.

“What do you think it was?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No idea. I’m just glad it’s passed.” I realized we were in the middle of what was starting to feel like a real conversation, so I turned away and started walking again.

Artemis caught up. “Then wouldn’t it be easier and, like, way faster if you shifted and carried me?”

I ignored her.

She gave a gusty sigh. “Or are you just going to keep pretending I’m not here?”

I stopped and, after a moment, gave a sigh of my own. I thought about it. I *did* feel in control again, and could probably risk shifting now without worrying about attacking everything in sight. And it *would* be a hell of a lot faster than this stroll we’d been taking through the dense Oregon woods. And, apart from not wanting to leave Artemis behind for Cali’s sake, once we got to Portland, I was going to need her to find me some clothes, so—

“Fine,” I said, turning to her. “But hang on tight. If you fall off, I’m not turning back to get you.”

Artemis didn’t blink. “Don’t worry about me. But I do wonder if I should ride with my knife.” She motioned to the blade she carried at her waist. “Do you expect any trouble from trolls or ogres?”

I stared at her for a minute, wondering if she was messing with me. “No, probably not.”

“No ondines? Is there anything else in the human world that I should know about?” she asked, peering through the trees.

“I really don’t think so,” I said dryly. “Threats that pop out of nowhere are more of a Fae world thing. Here, any danger is usually a lot more insidious than straightforward.”

When she looked back up at me, her cheeks were slightly flushed and she—rightly—guessed that I was referring to the time she’d jumped out from behind a rock and captured Cali and me. When she opened her mouth, she looked like she was going to apologize again, but I didn’t want to hear it, so I spoke over her. “The biggest supernatural threat we could face would be a Rogue werewolf or a vampire. Possibly a hunter. Just keep your head down and you should be fine.”

Artemis nodded. “I will.”

I turned, preparing to shift, but then I felt a hand on my arm. I looked down to see Artemis looking up at me, her light eyes liquid in the watery sunlight filtering through the trees. “You’re worried about Cali, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I said, but the word felt as though it had been wrenched out of me. I was worried about her, but it was more than that. I loved her, and it was making me crazy. This was brand-new territory for me. I’d come close before, but those occasions had had *nothing* on what I felt for Cali. And it was killing me that I’d had to let her go on without me.

I shook Artemis’s hand off my arm. “Hold on tight,” I growled and, with a bone-snapping crack, I shifted into my wolf and dropped down onto four paws.

Artemis carefully climbed onto my back, watchful of where her knees and elbows went. She’d listened to my admonishment, and when her arms went around me, her hold was tight. Cali held onto me the exact same way.

I shook my head, trying not to dwell, and began to run. I started slowly then built to about half-speed, to give Artemis time to adjust to the rhythm. Then, when I felt her arms cling tighter, I broke into a full sprint.

My head was spinning as I bounded through the woods, and I could almost imagine that it was Cali on my back, not Artemis. And, even though I knew it would hurt later, I let myself believe it.

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We were just outside Portland when I began to slow down. As we reached the edge of the trees, I stopped. Understanding it was the end of the ride, Artemis slid from my back. I shifted to my human form and, still winded, I looked around. “I’m going to need some clothes.”

Artemis’s eyes flickered to me, then away, very quickly. “Is there a seamstress around?” she asked, looking around. “Or a tailor?”

“Uh, I was thinking something more like that,” I said, pointing to a nearby house with a clothesline visible in the back yard. “Just borrow something from there.” Artemis started toward the house, but I put a hand on her arm. “And don’t be cute. Regular clothes, okay?”

She glanced down, taking in my naked body, then looked back up at me with a grin. “Doesn’t seem like you’re in any position to be picky about my choices.” She pulled her arm away from my grasp and strolled toward the house.

I watched as she vaulted the back garden wall and disappeared behind a hanging sheet. I gritted my teeth. If she came back with a ladies’ nightgown, I was going to leave her, Cali or no Cali.

But when she reappeared, she was carrying a bundle without any floral patterns in sight. The T-shirt and jeans she handed me were still warm from drying in the rare Portland sun.

“These look odd to me,” she said with a shrug, “but there wasn’t much to choose from. Especially not for someone of your size,” she added, her eyes lingering on my shoulders.

“They’re fine,” I said, yanking on the jeans. “We’re going to hit the city soon, so we’re going to have to walk from here.”

“Are we?” Artemis asked, her face lighting up. “This will be my first time in a human city.”

I glared at her. “This isn’t a vacation, Artemis, and I’m not your damn tour guide.”

She must not have heard me, because she peppered me with questions as we made our way through the city.

“What in the world is everyone wearing? How are these carts being pulled so quickly? And where are the horses? Is it magic? Why are so many people here so pale? What’s that smell? What are those structures?”

I tuned her out as I navigated through Portland toward my building—a grey building overlooking the river.

“What is this place?” Artemis asked when we stopped outside.

I didn’t answer, just uncovered the keypad next to the door. I typed in the long security code, and a series of lights above the knob flashed green. Artemis followed me inside and I shut the door behind us. We walked up a set of stairs to another door, which swung open.

Artemis stepped into the room and stopped, her gaze falling on the massive bed in the center of the room. She swung around to stare at me. “Why did you bring me here?”

**Episode 581**

MAYA

It took a moment before all of us—Colton, Mrs. Smith, Big Mac, Teddy, and me—realized that the water in the car was starting to rise. Teddy *freaked out*.

“Oh my god! This cannot be happening. I can’t go like this! I have so much to do! I’ve never scuba dived in Turks and Caicos! I don’t have any investment properties! I never even got to crew a boat in the Aberdeen Regatta! I’m too young to die!”

Colton stayed calm enough to pull the car over to the side of the road all the while jamming his foot on the brake. It wasn’t working well, but luckily the car began to slow, making the water in the car slosh. By this time, it was up to our chests.

I reached down, my fingers fumbling to undo my seat belt, but the damn thing must have been stuck because it wouldn’t release. I took a deep breath, trying to think logically, but I couldn’t seem to wrap my brain around what was happening. How in the world was I supposed to think logically about a circumstance that appeared to defy all logic? Water filling a car as it drove down the highway? Not logical! A ghostly woman? Not logical! The fact that Big Mac thought that the ghost woman was her own drowned mother? *Not logical!*

Colton tried to open his window, but it didn’t work. He tried to open his door, but the lock was stuck and it wouldn’t budge.

My head started to swim as he tried and tried, but nothing gave. The water was beginning to lap at my chin.

“Who knows CPR?” Teddy shrieked. “Because I think I’m going to need it!”

“Shut the fuck up, boat shoes,” Colton snapped. His face was pale but his eyes were darting around—he was clearly thinking hard and fast.

The water was at my bottom lip. I took a deep breath, preparing to be submerged, when Colton leaned back, ducking his head underwater and tucking his knees into his chest. Then, with the force of a cannon, he kicked his legs out, smashing out the window of the driver’s side door.

The water gushed out like a waterfall, draining from the car in seconds. I tried my door again and, when it opened, another rush of water burst out. Whatever had gone wrong with my seat belt had fixed itself and, with shaking hands, I released it and stumbled out of the car as waves of nausea swept over me.

“Well,” Colton said wryly from inside the car. “That kind of sucked.”

The others began to climb out of the car, shocked and soaking wet.

“My *shoes*,” Teddy whined, looking down at his brown leather loafers. “They’re *ruined.*”

“Well,” Colton said, blowing out a breath as he stood and shook off some water, “that was a little too close for comfort.” He squeezed out his T-shirt and I caught a glimpse of his abs. “I guess showering this morning was a waste of time.”

It hadn’t been. He’d been naked at least.

“What was that all about?” Colton asked, turning to Big Mac. “Some kind of dark magic? A spell?” He looked at Teddy. “You might want to think about returning that witch ball, man. Just a guess, but I think it might be defective.”

Mrs. Smith was helping Big Mac limp away from the car. Big Mac was ashen-faced, and looked like she might pass out at any moment. Mrs. Smith looked up at Colton. “Whatever that was,” she said quietly, “I don’t think it was a witch’s spell.”

Colton stared at her. “You’re kidding me, right? If that wasn’t a spell, then what the hell was it?”

Big Mac shook her head as Mrs. Smith helped her lean against a nearby tree. Her lips were as white as the rest of her face. “No spell. Something else is going on.”

“What?” Colton asked, but Big Mac shook her head, apparently unable to answer.

I knew how she felt. I was listening to the conversation, but only barely. Mostly I was just trying not to heave all over my shoes. I had no idea what was going on with me. This wasn’t how I usually responded to panic, but I couldn’t seem to calm my stomach. I put my hand on the side of the car and sucked in air through my nose, trying to clear my head.

Colton, suddenly noticing my distress, walked over. “Whoa, Maya, are you okay? You look really pale.”

“I really don’t need you to tell me how awful I look, Colton,” I warned him.

His face was lined with concern, but when he reached out a hand for me, I stepped back, out of his reach.

“Don’t touch me,” I snapped.

He flinched. Then he stepped forward and said, in a whisper, “Is this because you don’t want people to know about us?”

I shook my head. “No.” *Shit*. This wasn’t happening. “It’s because… It’s because I’m going to throw up—”

And I leaned over and emptied the contents of my stomach onto the black asphalt of the highway.

Teddy shrieked and jumped back in disgust, then—apparently unable to stop himself—dry heaved.

Colton shot him a dirty look and turned back to me. “God, Maya, are you okay? Are you seasick or something?”

I drew my arm miserably across my mouth, wishing I could just crawl into a hole and die. “Shut up, Colton,” I said, with as much of a glare as I could manage. He was teasing, but he was also looking genuinely concerned and worried and like he was about to hold my hair back if I puked again, and I just wanted him to leave me alone. I didn’t need any of that. *Ever*. And especially not with so many people watching.

Colton opened his mouth to say something, but I cut him off.

“Just shut the fuck up, okay?” I said, turning my back on him.

I couldn’t see his face, but he was quiet for a long moment.

Then, finally, he spoke. “Fine,” he said coldly. “Whatever, Maya.”

Mrs. Smith walked over, looking tentative. “Are you all right, Maya? Can I help you?”

I shook my head, biting my lip. I knew she truly did want to help, but all I wanted was for everyone to just leave me the fuck alone. My head was pounding and my stomach was still churning and all I really wanted to do was to lie down in a clean, dark, cool room. Mrs. Smith couldn’t offer me that, and I didn’t want anything else. I didn’t like all this attention. I glanced around the group, noticing—with irritation—that all eyes were on me. Except Colton’s. He was still looking away, pissed.

Good. That was how it had to be.

“Okay,” Teddy said, stepping forward, still looking pale and shaken. “Can someone please explain what the hell is going on? First we see some scary ghost lady in the car, then we almost drown in a mobile fishbowl. What the hell is up with you people? I didn’t sign up for any of this!”

Colton turned to Teddy, his eyes venomous. “You didn’t sign up for anything at all, asshole. You can leave anytime you want, prep boy.”

“I’d *love* to!” Teddy yelled, staring to look truly incensed, “but you told me I have to lead you to your father. So do I, or don’t I? Because if I can go, I’ll go! All I ever wanted to do was to just get the hell out—”

“Yeah, get the hell out with every damn thing you could fit into your pockets,” Colton spat. “How much did you steal from Big Mac before we left her house?”

Teddy turned red. “How dare you, Colton? I am a man of *honor*—”

“Oh, give me a fucking break, klepto—”

“None of this is helping!” Mrs. Smith yelled, putting her hands up for silence. “It’s not helping any of us.”

I took a deep breath and tentatively straightened. The nausea had passed, and I was starting to feel better. I turned to Colton, trying to meet his eyes, let him see that I was sorry for yelling at him, but Big Mac gasped, and we all turned to look at her.

“Mother?” she whispered. Her face had gone chalky white.

I followed her line of vision to the front of the car, and felt all the air leave my lungs. There, standing in the road, was a woman. She was dripping wet, with long, slimy strands of greenish-black kelp hanging from her arms and shoulders.

“What do you want?” Big Mac asked in a quavering voice.

But the woman turned away from Big Mac. Her dead, black eyes scanned the group of us gathered on the lonely highway, and when they landed on me, I shrank back.

“You,” the woman whispered, though she didn’t move her lips. I heard the voice in my head. It echoed down my spine.

I stared back at her, my whole body numb with terror.

“Find your family, girl,” said the woman. “Before it’s too late.”

**Episode 582**

Tony loomed closer and I moved back, tripping over my own feet in my haste to get away from him.

“Cali.” Xavier reached out to steady me as I nearly fell. “You look terrified. What’s going on?”

I pointed over his shoulder, my whole body cold as ice. “Look—”

Just as Xavier spun to see where I was pointing, I gasped. Tony had disappeared. I stared at the spot where he’d been, blinking hard. The room was dim, but I was sure—*sure*—that I’d seen him.

“Cali?” Xavier asked, turning to look back at me, his expression one of deepest concern. “What? What is it?”

“It was Tony.”

“*Tony?*” He repeated, shocked. He spun around again. “What? What are you talking about? That can’t be.”

“It was,” I insisted. “I swear it, Xavier. He was right there.” I pointed at the spot where I’d seen him. “He was standing there, staring at me.”

Xavier let go of my arm and stepped closer to the door. There was a bucket, and next to that a couple of brooms. Xavier grabbed a mop, which had been propped against the door. “Is this Tony?” he asked, turning around. I could see he was trying not to smile.

I stared at the mop, mystified. Could I have imagined it? It had seemed so real, but… how could it have been?

Xavier replaced the mop against the wall and walked back to me, taking me in his arms. “I think you’re just overwhelmed, Cali. With everything that’s happened, how could you not be? You’re so tired, and you’ve got to be emotionally spent. Your mind is playing tricks on you.”

I looked back at the door. I couldn’t help but shiver, but there really was nothing there. Just the mop a custodian had left behind when they’d finished cleaning the room. “I guess,” I said, running a hand through my hair.

“I’m sorry,” Xavier said with a small smile, “it’s not funny. I can see that it really freaked you out, but *was* it just the mop?”

I shook my head and pressed myself close to him. “I hope so.”

He held me for a moment. “So,” he said, and I could feel his voice rumbling in his chest, “does this mean we actually have to go get the coffee now? Or would you rather stay here?” He looked down at me and brushed a stray lock of hair behind my hear, a sly grin on his face.

I rolled my eyes and stepped out of his arms. “Yeah, I don’t think so. Not after something like that. Even if it was just a mop. Ghosts always kinda kill the mood for me.”

And… I wasn’t sure what I was doing in the first place entirely. Xavier had been right—I was high on emotions right now. Also known as not the best Cali decision-making time.

Xavier chuckled. “I figured.”

“Besides,” I added, “I want to get back to my mom. Maybe the doctors will be done with all their tests. And I don’t like leaving my dad alone. He’s done too much of this by himself. He needs me.”

“I know,” Xavier said. He stepped forward and kissed my forehead. Then he opened the door for me.

I steered clear of the mop as I walked out into the hall.

“Hey,” Xavier said, grasping my hand as I turned toward the elevators. “Why don’t you go back and stay with your dad? I’ll get the coffee.”

“You sure?” I asked.

He smiled and winked. “Three coffees? I think I can handle it.”

“Thank you,” I said, relief flooding through me. I was still feeling shaky, and I wanted to get back to my parents.

My dad was right where I’d left him, sitting in his chair just outside my mom’s room, watching her like a guard dog. “Hey, Dad,” I called softly, trying not to startle him in case he’d nodded off. His eyes were half-closed. “You awake?”

He opened his eyes and looked up at me, a dreamy smile on his face. “I’m not dreaming, am I, Cali? Your mother is alive, isn’t she?”

I sat on the seat next to his and took his hand. “You’re not dreaming, Dad. She’s alive, and it looks like the doctors are almost finished.”

I could hear my mom’s voice trailing out of the room, stronger than it had been when I’d left. “I’m fine,” she said. “I’m just fine. And I don’t need all these tests.”

My dad chuckled at the sound. “That’s your mom.” He looked over at me. “God, Cali, you’re so much like her. So independent. A real fighter.”

Tears filled my eyes. “She *is* a fighter.” I bit my lip. “And I am, too.” I didn’t know if this was something I’d always known about myself, but, thinking back on how hard I’d worked to find the moon buttercup, and how I’d refused to give up on helping my mom—even with the odds stacked against me—I knew it was true. I *was* a fighter.

My dad took my hand, and when I looked up, his eyes were wet. “I really am sorry, Cali. I feel so bad about trying to keep you away from Mom. I mean, look at this,” he said, gesturing toward her room. “You’re back thirty seconds and she magically recovers—”

“Dad, it’s okay,” I said. “You were just doing what Mom wanted—”

But he was shaking his head. “No. No more secrets. There will be no more secrets in this family, Caliana Hart. Do you hear me?”

He looked so stern I found myself flushing under this gaze. I swallowed hard, because I had plenty of secrets, some that only my mom knew. How would my dad react if he knew the truth?

Someone cleared their throat and, grateful to break eye contact, I looked up at Xavier, who was standing in front of us, holding three cups of coffee. He handed them to us, giving me a meaningful glance, probably wondering what was making me look so discomfited, but before I could say anything, the grey-haired doctor came out of my mother’s room.

“Well, we are just *astounded*, but everything’s come back perfectly normal,” he said, looking amazed. “We’ve all seen a miracle today, and I imagine none of us will ever forget it.”

“That’s terrific,” my dad said, brushing past him and into my mom’s room. I followed him in, and Xavier brought up the rear. “Honey,” Dad said, as soon as he was in the room. “How are you? The doctor said the test results were all totally normal.”

“I’m fine,” my mom said, smiling. She looked better than she had when we’d left. Her face had more color. “And I want to talk to all of you, but Tom, would you mind if I spoke to Cali for just a moment? Alone?”

My dad looked surprised for a moment, but then he smiled. “Of course. Of course you want to see her. We’ll leave you two alone.” He leaned in and kissed my mother, then turned to Xavier. “How about we take these coffees outside?”

“Sounds great,” Xavier said with a smile. He gave me a small wink and followed my dad out of the room.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, sitting on the edge of the bed. But she didn’t really need to answer. Closer, I could see how well she looked. Her skin had more color, her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were bright. She was sitting up straight and leaning forward. Everything about her looked strong and healthy.

“I think you know,” she said. She reached out a finger and laid it on the pendant. “Thanks to you, I’m going to be fine, Caliana. Now. I have quite a lot of questions about what possessed you to seek this out, and how in the world you even knew where to begin, and how you managed to find it and get back here, but before I ask any of those, I just want to spend a quiet moment with my one and only, strong-headed, amazing daughter.” She reached for both my hands.

I looked down at our hands, clasped together on top of the hospital blanket. I thought of the tears in my dad’s eyes and his declaration that there were to be no more secrets between the three of us, and took a deep breath. “I think we should tell Dad about what we are.”

My mom’s eyes widened. “What? Oh, Cali, why?”

“Because if we don’t, then he’ll never understand what happened. Why you were so sick to begin with. How you recovered. He loves you so much, Mom. He deserves to know. He can’t keep living like this, in the dark. Your illness isn’t going to come back. He needs to know *why*.”

My mom was already shaking her head, looking pale again.

I stood. “If you’re not going to tell him, then I will,” I said, and turned toward the door.

But my mom caught my hand with surprising strength, holding me in place. “No, Cali,” she said, her eyes burning bright. “You can’t.”

“Mom, I have to,” I said, tears threatening to spill over my cheeks.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “If you tell him, it could kill you.”

**Episode 583**

GREYSON

I closed the door behind us and was amused to see that the small sound made Artemis jump. She’d seemed like such a strong, almost feral being in the Fae world—it was funny that the sight of my bed made her so edgy. “This is my apartment,” I said.

Artemis looked at me blankly. “Your what?”

Apparently, there were no such things as apartments in the Fae world. “My home,” I clarified. “Or, I guess, one of my homes.”

“*One* of them?” Artemis asked, her eyebrows shooting up. “What does that mean? How many do you have?”

I ran through my properties quickly in my head. “Um, this one, LA, New York, Aspen, Miami, Chicago. Six? No, I’m forgetting about the one in DC. Seven. In this country. And a few overseas. Paris and London and a few others.” I started moving through the loft space, making sure everything was as I’d left it. She didn’t know that I was fucking with her, at least a little bit. I had a few places, but she didn’t need to know exactly where.

I could feel Artemis’s eyes on me, following my every move. “Why do you need so many?”

I shrugged but didn’t answer as I reset the air conditioner.

“I’ve never even had *one* home,” she said, and there was a loneliness in her voice I couldn’t ignore. “Never mind seven. And a few others,” she added bitterly

“I travel a lot,” I explained, turning to look at her. She did look odd, standing in my modern apartment in her filthy Fae clothes. I cleared my throat, refusing to feel uncomfortable. “And I don’t like staying in hotels.”

She frowned. “What’s a ‘inhotels’?”

I smiled. “A *hotel*. It’s like an inn.”

“Oh.” She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at me assessingly. “You must be very rich.”

I raised my eyebrows, remembering that Artemis was a bounty hunter and a thief. Not exactly the most luxurious career. “I’m comfortable.”

She looked away from my wary gaze and began to move through my apartment, looking closely at everything, but not touching.

I watched her for a moment. “What do you think?” I asked, genuinely curious.

Her eyebrows were drawn together as she looked at the flat screen television mounted on my wall. She looked down at the gaming console beneath it. “I think I thought the human world was going to be less… refined.” She walked into the kitchen and looked at the chrome appliances. “And much less shiny. Why is everything so damn shiny? And what the hell is that? Is that a potion maker?”

I walked closer and saw that she was pointing at my four thousand dollar Italian espresso machine. “Sort of,” I said with a begrudging smile. “It helps wake me up in the morning, which is kind of a magic trick.”

“Hmm,” she said, taking that in. The loft was open floorplan—*very desirable*, the realtor had said over and over—so everything was visible at a glance, but Artemis looked closely, taking everything in with hungry eyes. I watched her as she bent close to my couch, looking at the dark grey wool. She reached out a careful finger to feel it. I watched as her eyes grew wide as she did the same thing to the dark blue velvet pillows tossed against the back of the couch.

It hurt like hell, but I couldn’t stop thinking what it would be like if Cali was the one who was here, giving my apartment this kind of thorough inspection, instead of Artemis.

Her perusal of my couch complete, Artemis circled back to the bed. She looked down, taking in the wide wooden floorboards beneath her dirty feet, then looked back up at me. “So,” she said, folding her arms again. “Why did you bring me here?”

“We need to rest. Eat. Clean up. At least I do,” I told her. “You can do what you want.” I pulled a phone of out my desk drawer and plugged it into a charger on my desk. Now that I was back in the land of Wi-Fi, my thoughts returned to the Redwood pack. I needed to check in with them. And with Joss.

And with Cali.  
 “No, I want to do those things, too,” Artemis said, sounding contrite.

“Fine,” I said shortly. “Do what you want, then. I’m not your babysitter.”

“Am I supposed to go down to the river to bathe?”

I looked over to see Artemis pointing out one of the large windows toward the iron-grey river.

“Um, no.” I pointed toward the bathroom. “Unless you want to grow an extra arm from all the chemical waste floating around in that river. Try in there.”

Artemis walked toward the bathroom and opened the door. “Whoa!” Her voice echoed around the large, white-tiled room. “What is this place?”

She walked in and I listened as she turned faucets on and off, then flushed the toilet. When she began to giggle, I couldn’t help but smile.

“You should take a shower,” I called. “Or *bathe*, as you call it.”

She stuck her head out the door. “Okay. Um, how do I do that?”

I blew out a breath and walked in to demonstrate how a shower worked. This was not exactly how I’d foreseen my day going. “Got it?” I asked, as we both stood in my giant stall shower and she examined the dials. “If you want it hot, turn it toward the H, if you want it cold, turn it toward the C. When you’re done, lefty-loosey, righty-tighty.”

She nodded, not really giving me the sense she understood anything I just said. “Got it.”

“Terrific,” I muttered. “Towels are in the cupboard. I have some calls to make,” I said, and walked out, closing the door behind me.

My phone had charged enough that I could turn it on. There were hundreds of messages waiting for me, and I scrolled through them quickly.

“Dammit,” I whispered. None from Cali. Not that I was expecting any. I tapped the sides of my phone, thinking. Maybe I should call her. But, no, she was with her mom. I didn’t want to bother her, even if I did miss her so much it was making me ache.

And Xavier. I hated to think of the two of them there together. But *I* was the one who’d told her to go with him. Xavier and I had been fighting, and I hadn’t been able to control myself. It had been terrifying. All I’d been able to think about was keeping Cali safe, so I’d told her to go. That had been my call, and I was just going to have to live with it.

For now.

I looked down, scrolling through the messages again. Still, I was disappointed. I’d been hoping to see a missed call from her.

There was a text from Joss.

*Text me when you’re back.*

Short and to the point. Classic Joss.

I should text her back. I knew I should. I was the Alpha, and that was what I was supposed to do.

Instead I put the phone down and dropped into my desk chair. The exhaustion of the last few days hit me all at once and I glanced at the bed, thinking how good it would feel to just fall into it. My eyes moved from the bed to the rest of the apartment. It was a huge space, with tall, lofted ceilings and lots of natural light, even through the dark Portland winters. It was sparsely furnished in greys and neutrals, just the way I liked it. But, for the first time, I wondered if someone else would like it. I wondered if Cali would like it.

She’d probably wonder why I’d never brought her here. I smiled, thinking that if I had, her reaction probably would have been very similar to Artemis’s—one glimpse of that bed and she’d have thought the worst of me.

I felt a thrum within me as I thought about her. She wouldn’t have been completely wrong.

I tapped my fingers on my desk. I knew why I’d never brought Cali here—bringing her here, into this part of my life, would have felt too intimate. And we just weren’t at that place. Not at the time. But we would be. Maybe we were there already? We’d almost gotten there, back in the Fae world. I’d wanted it, she’d wanted it…

But, even then, when we’d been desperate for each other, the shadow of Xavier had still loomed over us. My hands balled into fists. I fucking hated it, but that was just the way it was. Xavier had met Cali first, and, until that situation was resolved, I was just going to have to cope.

I blew out an angry breath, then another, then another. I kept going until I felt calm enough to pick up the phone. I needed to call Joss. She’d been running the pack solo while I’d been gone, and she deserved to hear from me.

I was just about to dial when there was a bloodcurdling scream from the bathroom. Instinctively, I jumped to my feet and sprinted over, throwing the door open. “What’s going on?”

The room was so steamy I could barely see anything, so it came as huge shock when a completely naked Artemis threw herself into my arms.

**Episode 584**

MAYA

“We’re almost out of gas. I’m stopping at the next station.”

Colton didn’t appear to be speaking to anyone in particular, so no one felt the need to answer him. This did not appear to improve his mood. He hadn’t said a word to me since I’d told him to shut the fuck up, which I supposed wasn’t a huge surprise. I sighed and pushed the hair out of my face. The wind was blowing in the from the broken driver’s side window, tornadoing my hair into a rat’s next and drowning out any possibility of conversation, even if anyone had felt like starting one. Which no one did.

With the exception of Mrs. Smith and Big Mac apparently, who had their heads bent together in the back seat as they whispered to each other. Overhearing what they were saying would have been a virtual impossibility, but I glanced at them over my shoulder, wondering what they were discussing.

My hair whipped across my face again. “Fuck,” I muttered, pulling it back and holding it in place at the back of my neck. I was on edge. My skin felt prickly, like I was sitting on a bed of nails, and I was shifting uncomfortably on the still-sopping seat. Thanks to the wind, our clothes were mostly dry, but the car’s upholstery was still heavy with water. The smell of it was rank. Teddy was sitting in the back seat, his polo shirt pulled up over his nose and mouth to mask it.

What had happened had been so strange and terrifying and, though I’d been wracking my brain, searching for an explanation—*any* explanation—I still couldn’t come up with one. Why had Big Mac’s mother filled the car with water like that? Had she been trying to kill us? Why had she appeared at all? And why, for the love of god, had she spoken only to *me*?

She’d vanished into thin air just after she’d spoken, before I’d even been able to think to respond or ask a question. I chewed my lip as I watched the desolate brown landscape speed past. Was she going to show up again? Was this kind of ghostly appearance a thing we should start expecting?

I glanced over my shoulder again. This was the kind of thing I’d have liked to discuss with Big Mac and Mrs. Smith, but it was too loud to start a conversation now. Anyway, maybe Big Mac didn’t want to talk about it. Maybe she was mad about it. I might have been, in her position. It didn’t seem totally fair that she hadn’t even been able to talk to her own mother after she’d shown up as an *actual ghost*. I might have been a little salty about that, too—if talking to my family, dead or alive, hadn’t been the very last thing I wanted to do.

And, speaking of which, what the fuck had the ghost meant about me *needing my family?* They were the last people I needed. My family sucked. *They* were the assholes who’d cast *me* out, not the other way around. I kept biting my lip, though I’d started to taste blood. I’d been a defenseless kid—a child—when they’d kicked me out, and I’d been on my own ever since. Everything I was, everything I’d learned, everything I had, was because of *me*. No one else.

Not a single fucking person.

Colton pulled off the lonely highway, into an even lonelier gas station. For a minute, I wondered if it was even open, it looked so rundown and deserted. But there was an ‘Open’ sign in the dirty window.

“Thank god,” Teddy said, pushing his door open. “I can’t stand that smell another minute. Plus I’m dying for a snack. Anyone else want one?” He started toward the store. “And I need to see if they have something to treat my shoes with. Maybe this place has some leather oil.”

I pushed my door open and stood up, stretching my cramped muscles. The idea of a bathroom sounded really good to me, especially after I’d puked on the highway. “I’m going to head in, too,” I said to Colton, who wasn’t looking at me.

He got out and busied himself with the gas pump. “Fine. But don’t take all day—we need to hurry up. I’m going to call my brother, and then we’re headed out.”

I glanced up at the sun, just overhead. “How far are we going to go today?”

“I want to get to the place where Teddy was cursed.”

“You want to make it to Montana?” I said, surprised. “*Today?*”

Colton nodded, his back to me. “This isn’t a vacation, Maya. We’re just going to keep driving until we get there.”

I heaved a sigh. “Fine,” I said, and headed into the gas station, glad to give Colton some space. To my surprise, the gas station was better stocked than I would have guessed. Teddy was inside, happily perusing the shelves, and he looked up when I walked in.

“Maya! Can I get you anything? I’m a Pringles man myself.”

I rolled my eyes and turned away. Why was this guy so weird?

“Still feeling sick? I’ll get you a ginger ale. Something with real ginger. It’ll settle your stomach.”

Okay, he was weird, but kind of nice. “Thanks,” I said, barely looking at him. I looked around the small store, trying to find the bathroom. But, as I turned down the aisle with medication and toiletries, the conversation I’d had with Colton popped into my head. We hadn’t been careful—at *all*. I hadn’t even thought about using condoms. My eyes skittered down the oddly stocked shelves, past the antacids and the lube until I paused, terrifyingly, on the pregnancy tests. I swallowed hard and glanced around. There was no one looking at me. Teddy was across the store, his head inside the cooler.

I wasn’t usually an anxious person, and there was really no reason to believe I was pregnant. I mean, I’d been getting my period. And anyway, I’d been told a long time ago that I couldn’t get pregnant. It had been a shock, at first, but also a relief. My family were such monsters, especially my grandfather—why would I want to carry on that kind of tainted bloodline?

Colton’s dad was a legit monster, too, but Colton… Well, I couldn’t say he was like *that*. Because he wasn’t. And me… I used to think I knew, but I wasn’t sure who I was like anymore.

I grabbed the flimsy box from the shelf, and—my heart beating hard—raced toward the bathroom.

The fluorescent light over the mirror flickered as I leaned against the door, trying to catch my breath.

“This is insane. This is completely insane,” I said quietly. “Just take the test. Take it and you’ll see. You’re *not* pregnant. Too bad this fucking test can’t tell you that you have a stomach bug, because that’s all this is.”

I unwrapped the test and tossed the instructions. It wasn’t brain surgery—I could see which end I was supposed to pee on.

Then, annoyed, I dug the instructions back out of the trash. “How long is this thing supposed to take?”

*Results should appear in 10 to 15 minutes*.

Fine. I took a deep breath. I could wait here that long. I *loved* hanging out in gas station bathrooms.

But as soon as the wait started, my mind started to race. I tried to distract myself by reading some of the graffiti scratched into the wall, but I couldn’t stop thinking about Colton. I should probably hide this from him. The test was obviously going to be negative, but I didn’t want him to freak out about it.

I thought I’d calmed down, but apparently I hadn’t, because I jumped about a mile into the air when there was a knock on the door. “What?” I snapped.

“It’s Teddy!” he called through the door. “Colton said it’s time to hit the road! I got an industrial-sized Febreze for the car. That thing smells like a wet dog.”

I was scrambling, balling up the directions and piling crumpled paper towels on top of the box in the trash. What if someone else from our group needed to use the bathroom?

“Upset stomach?” Teddy asked, knocking again. “I got you a ginger ale. And some tums. And crackers. Good for indigestion. I should know. There was this time in boarding school when I was studying for our placement tests…”

Teddy kept talking but I stopped listening. I was staring at the stick in my hand. Should I trash it? Walk out with it? Put it in my pocket? I couldn’t hold onto it. Teddy was all drama, but he wasn’t an idiot. He’d know what this was.

“Hey, Maya,” he said, knocking again. “Seriously. You okay? Did you fall in?” he asked, laughing a little at his joke.

I opened my mouth to tell him to leave me the fuck alone, but then I glanced down at the test. I stepped closer to the flickering light, my heart hammering.

Holy shit. Was that a plus sign?

**Episode 585**

“Mom,” I said slowly, letting her tow me back toward her bed, “how could telling Dad the truth about you kill *me?* What are you talking about?” My heart was beating fast. Maybe she wasn’t as well as she looked. Maybe the lack of oxygen had done something to her brain—damaged it in some way.

“Caliana,” she hissed, holding my hand tightly. “Keep your voice down.”

I cast a look over my shoulder. Xavier was with my dad in the hall just outside the door. He caught my eye and gave me a small smile. My dad was leaning in, explaining something to him in what seemed to be great detail, and Xavier turned back, listening patiently.

I turned back to my mom, speaking in a lowered voice “Okay. I’m talking softly. Now explain this to me.”

“You remember that you made a Fae promise not to tell anyone that you’re Fae. You remember that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Mom, I remember,” I said irritably. I felt like a misbehaving teenager being reminded about curfew. “What about it?”

“*Fae promises*, Cali. You must take Fae promises very seriously. We are a people of our word. If you break a Fae promise, terrible things can happen. You cannot risk it.”

I bit my lip. I’d heard nothing but dire warnings about Fae promises, so I knew she wasn’t exaggerating. But why had she made me make such a dangerous promise anyway? “Okay,” I finally said. “But I just really hate lying. Especially to Dad.”

“I know how you feel,” my mom said, her tone growing gentle again. Her eyes looked sad as she smiled at me. “You have to remember, Cali, I’ve been keeping the truth from both my husband *and* my daughter for so long.” She leaned back on her pillows, looking tired.

“So maybe now is the time to tell the truth,” I urged. “To both of us.”

She looked at me for a moment, then nodded. “You’re right, Cali. But please, you must be patient. Your dad is so overwhelmed right now. This illness has been so hard on him. I know you think I’ve done it in the wrong way, but I’ve only ever wanted to protect you both.”

“I know that, Mom.”

She nodded. “So, just one more time, trust me, all right? Let’s just give him some time before we tell him.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I hope you’re not just blowing me off. Because if you’re hoping I’ll just forget about this, that is very unlikely to happen.”

My mom smiled. “I think I know my own daughter better than that. Give me a little credit, Cali. I know you won’t forget. I promise, I will tell you both everything when things calm down. We will sit down and have a long, long conversation.” She squeezed my hand. “That’s a Fae promise.”

I smiled and reached for her. She put her arms around me, and I melted into her hug. “I love you, Mom.”

“And I love you, Caliana.” When I leaned back, my mom’s eyes were bright with tears, though she was smiling. Then she glanced out the door. “Tom? How soon can we get out of here? You know I hate hospitals.”

My dad laughed, his eyes misty, and walked back in. “Well, we’ll see what we can do.”

Xavier hung back a little, standing in the doorway like he wasn’t sure where he should be, but my mom waved him over

“Come in, come in, Xavier.” She took his hand as he walked over. “Thank you so much for your help.”

“It was nothing,” Xavier said softly.

“Don’t do that,” my mom chided. “You have been a great help and a great support to our Cali. I can see that.” She looked at me with a smile. “I knew you’d found a good one when you brought him home to meet us, sweetheart.”

My stomach clenched. She had no idea that Xavier and I had broken up—and honestly, right now, I didn’t even know if that was still true. So I just smiled. Whatever was going on, now was not the time to discuss it with my parents.

“By the way, Cali, did you know that Lola’s here?” my dad asked.

“What?” I said, shocked. “Lola? Where?”

“In town! She brought some guy with her. Quiet fellow, with an eyepatch. Are they dating?”

“Jay’s here too!” I put my hand to my heart. The last few days, weeks, months—the last year had been such a blur, but being back in Minnesota had made me realize how much I missed Lola. How much I wanted to see her, fill her in on everything that had been happening.

“Why don’t you give her a call?” my mom said, with a smile. She looked up at my dad. “I’m in very good hands.”

“Okay,” I said, rolling my eyes happily at how cheesy my parents were together. I stepped out of the room and walked down the hall, pulling my phone out of my pocket. As I leaned against the wall, I looked up to see that Xavier had followed me out of the room, and I watched his slow approach. He was still as heart-stoppingly handsome as the day I’d met him, but there was something about the way he held himself that reminded me of someone. I puzzled over it for a moment before I realized who it was—Greyson.

I would never tell either of them this, but they were so alike in so many ways. They shared the same bone structure—the high cheekbones and strong jaw that made them both look like they should be modeling in *Vogue*—but there was also a shared sense of quiet self-possession that just radiated confidence.

And then it hit me: I had to call Greyson. I had to let him know I’d made it in time and saved my mom. He had fought so hard, right next to me, protected me and helped me. He deserved to know.

I looked up as Xavier approached. Should I tell him I wanted to call his half-brother? My gut told me *NO!*, but then I thought of the conversation I’d just had with each of my parents. No more secrets.

I took a deep breath. “Hey, I’m going to let Greyson know we made it here and that my mom is okay.”

Xavier’s jaw clenched. “Greyson?”

I waited it out. I knew he wasn’t happy, but I didn’t care. After everything, I owed this to Greyson. “You don’t even know how much he helped me, Xavier,” I said. “I’m not asking for your permission.”

He stared at me for a long moment, then shrugged. “Well, I know I can’t stop you, Cali. Do what you want.”

I waited, but when he didn’t say anything else, I realized he wasn’t going to. It wasn’t exactly a ringing endorsement, but it was all I was going to get and I didn’t need it in the first place. Xavier just didn’t get what had happened in the Fae world. He couldn’t. He didn’t know how close Greyson and I had become.

Which was probably for the best, I thought as I looked down at my phone and shuffled my feet on the patterned linoleum floor. Because if he *did* know exactly how close Greyson and I had gotten, he probably would have tried to keep me from making the call.

I blew out a breath, thinking hard. Maybe I should text, instead of calling. Xavier had propped himself up against the wall next to me and didn’t look like he was going anywhere, and I didn’t want to have *that* conversation with Greyson with Xavier listening.

*Made it in time. Moon buttercup effective. My mom’s recovering.*

I stared at the sent text. Something was missing. It was probably the huge debt of thanks I owed Greyson, but that wasn’t something an emoji was going to cover. What I owed him was more in the range of a parade.

I wanted to ask him if he was okay. If he’d made it back to the pack. If he was still having trouble shifting. And, the truth was, I missed him. I wanted to tell him that, too. I missed turning to him to plan and strategize and figure out next steps. And I missed having him there when I was scared and in need of comfort. I just *missed* *him*.

*I hope you’re okay Grey. I miss you*

I stopped typing and looked at the screen. Was that too much? He’d told me to go with Xavier. Maybe he’d… Maybe it was just too much. I stared down at the screen until the words began to swim in my vision.

Then Xavier’s hand covered my phone and I looked up into his face.

“What are you doing?” I asked, confused.

His piercing blue eyes were grave as he looked at me. “Before you send that text, there’s something I need you to know, Cali.”

“What?” I asked when he paused.

“I didn’t just come here to help you save your mom.” He took a deep breath. “I came to save us.”

**Episode 586**

MAYA

The light above the mirror flickered on and off, but that damn plus sign wasn’t budging an inch, no matter how long I stared at it.

What the hell? What in the actual fuck?

How was this even *possible?*

I glanced up as the light turned off, plunging me into darkness. But I’d been in enough shitty dive bars to know what to do, so I hit the wall until it flickered back on. It took my eyes a moment to adjust and I had a hopeful thought: maybe there was something wrong with my eyes! Maybe I had a concussion. Maybe I was seeing things due to these shitty fluorescents.

“Maya!” Teddy was pounding on the door now, “I’m getting really worried here. Colton’s screaming at me that we’re leaving. What should I tell him? Are you okay in there?”

No. I was *not* okay. I was as far from okay as it was possible to be. I was pregnant—with Colton Evers’s child, for god’s sake.

*Fuck*.

“Maya!”

“I’m coming!” I snapped, glaring at the door. I yanked a paper towel from the dispenser on the wall and wrapped it around the test. Then I jammed it into my back pocket and swung the door open, nearly smashed it into Teddy’s face. “God, Teddy, didn’t your mother ever each you that ladies like privacy when they’re using the bathroom?”

I didn’t wait for his response, just headed toward the door. I eyed the shelf with the pregnancy tests as I passed. They were right next to the condoms. Was that supposed to be a joke? Maybe I’d grabbed a defective test. I hadn’t even thought to check the expiration date—wait, did pregnancy tests expire? Was that the kind of thing I was supposed to know?

I took a shuddering breath as I pushed the door open. I needed to relax. This was impossible. Me being pregnant was *impossible*. I had been told—by a *medical* doctor in a white coat, with a stethoscope around her damn neck—that I couldn’t conceive a child. Doctors didn’t just go around telling that to people unless it was a damned certainty.

Right?

As we drew closer to the car, I saw Colton sitting in the driver’s seat, looking sour, and my stomach lurched again. I turned to Teddy. “I forgot something. Be right back.”

The dope didn’t have a chance to respond before I pushed past him and ran back into the store.

There hadn’t been anyone behind the counter when we’d walked in the first time and the ‘Back in Five Minutes’sign was still up on the plastic wall that protected the cigarettes and lotto tickets, so no one was there to give me a strange look when I snatched up practically the rest of the pregnancy tests in the store. On my way back to the front, I grabbed a red backpack for sale and started shoving all the tests into it.

Unsure whether Teddy had left any money for his snacks—he was a self-described kleptomaniac after all—I threw a couple of twenties down, hoping that covered both of us, and sprinted back to the car.

As I slid into the front seat, Colton glared at me as he eyed the backpack.

“You picked a great time to go on a shopping spree, Maya. Let me know if I can drop you by the mall later.”

I flipped him off and yanked the door shut. It slammed closed with a wrenching sound, like the water show from earlier was already starting to rust the metal, and I jammed the red backpack under my seat.

“Are you feeling better, Maya?” Mrs. Smith leaned forward to ask. “I know what happened back there was upsetting. I think we’re all pretty shaken up.”

I took a deep breath and forced myself to smile. “Yeah, I’m feeling a lot better, thanks. I just have a bit of a headache now. I think I’m going to close my eyes. Try to get some rest.”

“That’s a good idea. Best thing for you,” Mrs. Smith said, smiling, and leaned back against her seat.

And, because I’d just said it and I felt like I had to, I leaned my head against the window and closed my eyes. But I didn’t rest. My mind was racing. If I really *was* pregnant, what would that mean? Would I even have time to prepare?

Wait, prepare for what? A future with a baby? With *Colton?*

Maybe I wasn’t okay. Maybe I *was* going to throw up again.

From the back seat, I could hear Teddy describing a Pringle to Big Mac, who had apparently never had one and looked completely uninterested in starting now.

“It’s a chip, but they come packaged in this container, so they never get the rough and tumble treatment of a regular potato chip.”

“It looks like what you store tennis balls in,” Mrs. Smith said.

“It’s the ideal shape to hold the perfect curve of the Pringle. See the rounded shape?”

“Yes, wow,” Big Mac said, in a voice that indicated she was not seeing the atom split for the first time.

“That’s what gives the Pringle the maximum amount of flavor dispersal. It’s a feat of engineering, is what it is,” Teddy said knowledgeably.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to shut their stupid conversation out.

What kind of mother would I be? I was way too young.

And—my stomach roiled at the thought—what if my grandfather found out? Would he come after me? After my baby? I could feel myself start to sweat, and I pushed my head against the window.

I tried to never think about him, if I could help it. He hated me so much. But it had been so long—maybe he thought I was dead by now. God, I hoped so.

Suddenly a putrid smell hit me, and I put my hand over my nose. “God, what is that?” I asked, opening my eyes.

“Do you want a Pringle?” Teddy asked, holding the cannister just under my nose. “They’re pickle flavored!”

“Get that away from me or I’m going to throw them out the window,” I said, batting them away from my face.

“You know what?” Big Mac asked suddenly, leaning forward. “I don’t want to ride around all day.”

Mrs. Smith gave me a swift look, then turned back to Big Mac. “What are you talking about? I thought we were going to Montana—”

“Well, I’ve changed my mind,” Big Mac said quickly.

“What?” Mrs. Smith asked, surprised.

“I want to go back,” Big Mac said again, more firmly. “I can fend for myself. I’m a fucking witch.”

“*MacKenzie*,” Mrs. Smith started, her voice reasonable.

“Don’t start with me. I’ve done pretty good so far, haven’t I? I’ll be fine.”

“Forget it,” Colton snapped, sounding annoyed. “I’m going to Montana and I’m driving, so we’re *all* going to Montana.”

“Then stop the car and let me out,” Big Mac insisted.

Colton snarled, and he pulled the car to an abrupt stop, making us all strain against our seat belts. “You know,” Colton said as Big Mac started to gather her stuff, “I hope you’re not forgetting that we’re supposed to be tracking Silas. This isn’t a fun road trip.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to get involved with anything to do with that man. My mother’s appearance was an omen. We need to go back. We should all be going back.”

Colton fired back, but I was only half-listening. None of it seemed to matter anymore. The only thing that did matter was what could be growing inside me right now. If this was true—if this was really, truly happening—then I was going to need support.

Decision made, I turned to Colton. “I’m not going to look for Silas.”

Colton stopped mid-sentence in his argument with Big Mac and stared at me. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

“No. I’m not coming.”

He kept staring. “Of course you’re coming to look for Silas, Maya. Why else are we trapped in this car with this sideshow?” he asked, gesturing over his shoulder.

I shook my head.   
 His frown deepened. “Why are you acting like this right now, huh?”

I kept shaking my head, almost like I couldn’t stop. “I have no pack, no family—nothing. I don’t even want to be mated with you, and now—”

Colton flinched back at my words, pain flickering across his eyes. “And now *what?*”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Now what?” he asked again.

“Nothing!” I said louder, angry now. I wasn’t going to tell him about the test. I was too scared. There was no way he would… Not with someone like me. I wasn’t someone who could bring up a family. I didn’t have a family.

Except for Wren.

The thought flashed through my mind, painful as a branding iron. She was out there, somewhere. She had gone Rogue. Maybe.

God, I hated that I was even considering a maybe. But this was Wren. My sister.

*Maybe…*

I looked up at Colton, who was still staring at me in shock. “I’m going to go find my sister.”

**Episode 587**

GREYSON

Artemis. Naked and gasping. In my arms.

I tried to think these things through one at a time. After a moment, she pulled back so she wasn’t pressing so hard against me and looked up. We stared at each other for a long moment, then color blossomed in her face and she took another step back.

“Sorry,” she said, recovering. She nodded toward the shower, which was pouring out steaming hot water. “I nearly burned the flesh off my bones in that bathing room of yours.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said, stepping past her to grab a towel from the cupboard. I handed it to her, trying to keep myself from looking down at her naked body. “You mean the shower.”

“Right. The shower,” she repeated, looking curiously at the plush grey bath towel I’d just handed her.

She didn’t wrap it around herself like I was hoping she would, so it took a lot of effort to keep my eyes off her as I reached into the shower to turn down the heat. There was nowhere to fucking look. “Remember, when you want it to be colder, move this toward the C.” I looked up at Artemis, but she just stared back, blankly. “Shit, do you know how to read?”

“What?” she asked.

“Forget it,” I said. I reached my hand into the shower stream, adjusting it until it was the perfect temperature. “There, it’s good now. Nothing will melt from your bones, I promise.”

She smiled at me and, dammit, I smiled back. She was beautiful, I’d always known that. And, now that her shapeless clothes were gone, I could see the outline of her body in my peripheral vision. Her skin was like golden velvet, and I willed my gaze not to travel down any further, despite that her every curve seemed to beg to be caressed.

I was a man, sure. But I also had a mate.

I cleared my throat and looked into her eyes, concentrating hard. The steam of the bathroom reminded me of the first time I’d met Artemis, at the geyser. I’d been there with Cali. I’d been kissing her, and it might have turned into something else if Artemis hadn’t captured us. I waited to feel the anger I hoped was coming, but it never came. I knew I should have felt it, but I just didn’t. Artemis had apologized for what she’d done, and it felt like I’d left all that bitterness behind me when we’d left the Fae world.

I just didn’t have the energy for it at this point.

Besides, it was funny watching her try to navigate through the human world. Being angry at her would be like trying to be angry with a curious puppy. It was too funny to be completely maddening.

“Anyway,” Artemis said, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear, “I think I can handle it from here. Thank you, Greyson.”

“Sure,” I said, and stepped out of the bathroom. I pulled the door shut and leaned against it, taking a deep breath. It looked like she had recovered herself at the end, and I tried to do the same. Artemis was beautiful—anyone with eyes could see that—but all I cared about was Cali.

Just the thought of her name was enough to snap me back to reality, and I stepped toward my desk. I was going to call Joss.

As I dialed Joss’s number, I could hear the sound of the water change as Artemis stepped into the shower.

“Oh my god!” she shouted, her voice echoey. “This is *so* much better. Thank you, Greyson! I love this!”

I chuckled as Joss’s phone began to ring. Good. That was one less thing to worry about.

“Greyson,” Joss said, picking up. “I take it you’re back.”

“I’m back,” I said, dropping back into my chair with a sigh. “What’s going on?”

“A bit,” she said. “I attended a Pack Council. There was some initial trouble, but we assembled as a pack and were able to deal with it without further incident. The Blue Blood pack called a meeting to discuss the details of our truce—”

“What details?” I asked quickly.

Joss hesitated for a moment. “They were looking to end it.”

“*What?*” I exploded, jumping to my feet. “What the hell are they thinking? *Now?* When Silas is back? Do they want him to have the upper hand? This is exactly what he wants—”

“Greyson,” Joss said steadily. “Calm down. Let me finish. I explained all that to them, and they agreed to let the truce stand.”

“As is?” I asked, still breathing hard.

“As is,” she confirmed.

My heart rate began to slow. I had picked my Luna well. Joss was even better at this than I’d hoped. Calm and collected, she was able to take care of the big picture issues facing our pack, as well as the small stuff. It made me feel good that I could leave her in charge.

“We were asked to leave the pack house, but we found a place that I think will work for us. I hope you don’t mind the cash withdrawal. It was rather large.”

“How large?” I asked.

“Um, large enough,” was all she said. “But I figured cash was the fastest way to get us into a new pack house, which we really needed. And you did leave me in charge. Without any idea of when you would be coming back.”

I didn’t think I was misinterpreting the annoyed tone to her voice, so took a deep breath. “I can’t wait to see it.” I made a mental note to check the balance of the account Joss had access to. I might have to transfer some funds.

“And there have been some developments regarding Silas.” She paused for a moment, and I braced myself.

“What developments?” I asked, steeling myself for the worst.

“He has the Orb of Lefiter.”

“*What?*” This was worse than anything I’d thought. “The *orb?* Silas has the orb?”

“Yeah,” she said, and her tone took on a distinctly disgusted sound. “It seems your brothers were storing it and he found it. Which couldn’t have been that hard to find then...”

I stared at my phone in disbelief. “If Silas has the orb…” I said slowly, my brain working a mile a minute.

“Greyson?” Joss said. “Are you still there?”

I didn’t answer. My mind was racing. I hadn’t planned on Silas finding the orb. This was… not something I’d anticipated. A flash of anger pulsed through me. Neither Xavier nor Colton had never mentioned to me that they had the Orb of Lefiter. Of course, they never told me anything at all. Not that I didn’t have my own secrets, but…

“Greyson!”

“What?” I asked, jolting back to reality.

“What do you want to do?” Joss asked, sounding irritated.

“Protect the pack,” I answered automatically. “As always, Joss. We protect the pack.”

“Are you coming here?” she asked. “I’ll send you the address for the new pack house.”

I looked up as I heard the shower turn off. “I’ll let you know,” I said, and ended the call before she could say anything else.

My feet carried me to the window, and I looked out to the river. Beyond the river, I could see the dark smudge of the woods. Silas was out there, somewhere. And now that he had the orb, anything was possible. I couldn’t predict my father’s next move. I rubbed my hand across my forehead. It felt like we were playing a very complicated game of chess.

I looked down as my phone buzzed. It was a text, but it wasn’t new. It must have come in when I’d been talking to Joss, and I hadn’t noticed it. My heart began to beat a strange rhythm when I saw it was from Cali.

*Made it in time. Moon buttercup effective. My mom’s recovering.*

Artemis came out of the bathroom as I read the text. She had wrapped herself in what I recognized as my bathrobe. She must have found it hanging on the back of the door. I’d forgotten it was there. She was using the bath towel to dry her hair. She saw me looking at her and smiled.

I turned away, back toward the window, and dialed Cali’s number. I needed more than a text; I needed to hear her voice, needed to know she was really okay.

“Greyson?”

The sound of her voice felt like a fire on a cold night. “Cali. How are you? How’s your mom?”

“She’s good!” Cali said brightly. “Cured! Can you believe it?”

“I should hope so, after all you went through to help her. I’m really glad she’s okay.”

“Thanks, Greyson,” Cali said and, when she spoke again, I could hear the pain in her voice. “Listen, when I get back, we need to talk about things.”

“Things?” I asked, that same strange rhythm beating harder.

“About what happened between us in the Fae world,” she said, lowering her voice.

I gripped the windowsill so tightly, my knuckles turned white. Then, with a deep breath, I said what I needed to say. “There’s nothing to talk about, Cali,” I said, keeping my voice light. “Nothing happened between us.”

**Episode 588**

I stared down at my phone in disbelief.

*Call ended.*

So, not only had Greyson just denied everything that had happened between us in the Fae world, but he’d hung up on me, too.

*There’s nothing to talk about, Cali. Nothing happened between us.*

Nothing *happened?*

Was it possible he’d actually forgotten? That the memories had just fallen out of his head? I thought back to what my grandmother had said, about how the transition from the Fae world to the human world could be traumatic, and would wipe human memories. It had happened to the miners we’d rescued. It had nearly happened to me. I’d been so confused when we’d first come through. I hadn’t even remembered my own name at first. But Greyson wasn’t human. No… That couldn’t be it.

I looked up. Xavier was watching me from down the hall. *He* remembered what had happened there. *He* hadn’t forgotten.

Then two things hit me at once: Greyson was pushing me away, and I was an idiot. Why had it taken me so long to see that? He’d done it to me before. Right after the Lupo Finale. I rubbed my head. God, how could I have read him so wrong?

But… I hadn’t. I was sure I hadn’t. I’d had plenty of experience with Greyson going back and forth with me, but this was different. What had happened between us on our journey had *meant* something to him. I knew it had, and he could bullshit all he wanted—he wasn’t going to convince me otherwise.

It had meant something to him… Hadn’t it? I pressed my hands to my eyes. Maybe *I* was the one having memory failure. Maybe I wasn’t remembering correctly. Maybe I’d imagined it all—the closeness, the intimacy, the kisses… I shook my head. I knew that wasn’t the case. I *knew* I was remembering correctly. I remembered everything.

I dropped my hands and stared down at the floor. Why were hospital floors always so ugly? Surely there were more important things to think about, but I couldn’t wrap my mind around any of them. I felt numb with shock. After all the time we’d spent together, after everything we’d shared, how could he just pretend it had never happened? How?

Though, even as I asked the question, I already knew the answer:

Because this was Greyson.

“Are you done talking to him?”

I looked up. Xavier had walked over and was looking down at me, his eyes as stormy as the sea. I nodded and slipped my phone into the pocket of my jeans. I was still too stunned to speak.

He took a step closer. “I meant what I said earlier,” he said, lowering his voice. “About saving us.”

“Xavier—”

“I’m not going to lie, Cali. I wasn’t sure at first. But the moment I saw you in the Fae world, standing there in that burning zoo, wild and filthy, holding that sword, I just knew.” He smiled. “I wanted to help you save your mom—you know I would have done anything I could to help her—but I missed you. That’s why I’m here.”

I shivered as he ran his finger gently down my cheek.

“The time I spent away from you just reminded me of what I love about you. Your courage and your fierceness and your funny laugh and the way you just never give up. I want that back. I want it all back. I want *you* back, Cali.”

My head was pounding so hard, I was starting to feel dizzy. I grabbed the back of a chair for support. All of this was way too much for my brain to process right now.

Xavier sighed. “I don’t know what’s going on between you and Greyson. I wasn’t there during your time together in the Fae world.” His jaw worked, as though this fact made him deeply frustrated. “But you’re not in the Fae world now. You’re back in your world. In my world. In *our* world. And I want you to stay.” He paused, his eyes on me, waiting for my response.

*Greyson.*

Greyson was the only reason I wasn’t opening my mouth and telling this beautiful man that I was all his. But I couldn’t do it. Even though the idiot was pushing me away with both hands, I still had feelings for Greyson, and those feelings were making me very, very confused.

But I could something in Xavier’s eyes that I’d never seen before. It was *yearning*, and it tore at my heart. I knew he was giving me everything he could—he was speaking to me from the heart. This kind of vulnerability scared the shit out of him, but he was doing it. He was putting it all on the line. For me.

I took a deep breath. “I’m still trying to figure everything out right now, Xavier.”

“I know, Cali,” he said, brushing a tear away before it had the chance to fall from my eye.

“Now that I know my mom is safe, my whole world has changed. I’ve been so worried for so long, and now…” I shrugged. “I don’t really know what comes next.”

Xavier gave me a small smile. “Please don’t tell me that you need space.” He took a step closer so our bodies were nearly flush against each other. “We’ve had far too much of that already.”

Unamused, I glared up at him. “*You’re* the one who wanted space to begin with, Xavier, remember? Not me. And now you’ve had enough of it? Are you sure you’re not just saying that now that we’re back—”

“I’m saying it because it’s true,” he said swiftly. He gave me a hard stare. “And I think you know it, too.”

The elevator pinged and the doors slid open. A pack of medical students stepped off, led by a surgical resident, and they all started down the hall, straight toward us.

“… and what you’ll want to keep in mind about seeping boils is that clear fluid is good, cloudy fluid is no bueno!” The resident chuckled. “That reminds me of the time I was seeing a patient who’d just returned from a vacation in Cancun. He had completely forgotten to pack any sunscreen…” The resident stopped, settling into her story, and the medical students parked themselves just in front of her, scribbling notes and completely blocking our exit route to the elevator.

I was deeply uninterested in more information on seeping boils and, seeing as we weren’t getting to the elevators anytime soon, I grabbed Xavier’s hand and pulled him into a handy utility closet so we could continue our argument in private, as god intended.

Xavier pulled the door shut behind us but, as I reached for the light switch, he grabbed my hand.

“You do know it, don’t you?”

“Xavier—”

“Tell me I’m crazy then,” he said, his voice urgent. “Tell me I’m wrong about this. Tell me I’m wrong about us. Tell me, Cali.”

I couldn’t see him, but the closet was small, and I was pressed tight against him. I could feel the intensity rolling off him in waves, and I could feel myself drawn to him, leaning into him.

“I do want this,” I admitted, barely holding myself back from the inexorable pull he had over me. “But how do I *know?*”

He slipped an arm around my waist.

“Because of this,” he whispered, and caught me up in a kiss.

Its intensity shocked me. Was he doing all this just because he missed sleeping with me? Yeah, he’d come all the way to the Fae world for me, and that did mean something, but… he *was* the one who’d left me. Still, this kiss was shocking the hell out of me. It reminded me of when we’d first met, when we’d been new to each other. He was devouring me, his hands everywhere, possessing me.

“God, I missed you,” he said, whispering against my lips. He pulled back, just a little. “I missed you, tiger.”

The closet was completely dark but for the light coming through the cracks around the doorframe, but my eyes had adjusted enough to see his face as he pulled back. The look in his eyes was more than just lust—though there was a *lot* of that—it was something deeper. It was yearning. I recognized it because I felt it, too. I’d always felt it for him.

He moved his mouth down to my neck, kissing me right below my ear, sending electric pulses through my body. I was thrumming as he moved down to kiss the hollow at the base of my neck.

*We’re mates, Cali. We belong together.*

This felt right. Everything about him and me, together... It just felt right, and so I stopped resisting. He was a fire, and I let myself melt into him like candle wax.

*We belong together.*

“I know,” I said aloud, and ducked down, catching his lips and kissing him back. His hands traveled up, spanning my ribs, and I pressed against him, needing, wanting. As his tongue pushed past my lips and tangled with mine, I reached down to grasp the hem of his shirt.

**Episode 589**

My lips crashed into Xavier’s, and he poured everything into the kiss, deepening it like he was trying to drink me in. He kissed me and kissed me until I was gasping for air, and then he kissed me some more.

One of his hands sank into my hair, tugging it back for better access to my lips and throat. “I’ve missed you so much,” he rasped into my ear before kissing his way down my neck. His fingers tugged impatiently at the hem of my shirt, and electricity coursed across my skin when his warm hands made contact.

“Xavier, please,” I whispered. I tugged at his shirt to ease it over his head, and then I tossed it somewhere behind us.

Then his lips sealed over mine, and his hands were tugging my shirt over my head. My pants and underwear came off next, and my fingers made quick work of the buttons on his jeans. He lifted me by my waist and, like a seamlessly choreographed dance, my legs wound tight around his hips. He pressed me against a shelf full of… I didn’t really know what. Gloves, maybe? Boxes and bottles fell off the shelf and onto the floor, but neither one of us cared.

His hardened cock rocked against my slippery folds, and then he was sheathing himself inside me. His hand covered my mouth, smothering the cry that ripped out of my throat. Neither of us wanted to be overheard. Xavier held himself inside me for just a moment, breathing heavily into the hollow of my throat, his fingers still curled over my mouth. Then, when I relaxed a bit, he began to move.

His mouth took charge of mine, and I moaned against his lips. He lifted me against him, leveraging for just the right angle, and stars burst behind my eyes as sensation lit up my core. I cupped his face in my hands, trying to kiss him back.

White-hot light coiled low in my belly, and I wriggled against him, desperate to cross the point of no return. “Please, please, please,” I whispered frantically as my toes curled.

His hand reached between us, rubbing that bundle of nerves just right. A shockwave smashed through me, and I screamed into his mouth as my muscles clamped down on him, triggering his own release.

When Xavier set me back down on my feet, I felt blissed out. Almost separated from my body. He gently slapped my ass when I stared at his naked form for a moment too long. “You’d better get dressed before someone finds us in here.”

“Oh. Right.” I tugged my clothes back on faster than I ever had in my life.

Xavier reached for the doorknob.

“Wait!” I squeaked. “Hold on! I don’t want the hospital staff to know what we just did!” I frantically tried to readjust my shirt and fix my hair in the darkness. I honestly couldn’t tell if I was fixing my appearance or just making it worse.

“You think they’d care?” Xavier rolled his eyes. “Haven’t you ever watched *Grey’s Anatomy*? They’re always going at it in closets.”

My jaw dropped. “Wait, *you’ve* watched *Grey’s Anatomy*?”

“Um, no!” he said quickly. Too quickly. I wondered if was blushing in the darkness.

“Sure.” I smirked. “Who’s the better doctor, McDreamy or McSexy?”

“It’s McSteamy,” he said automatically, then cringed. “Dammit.”

“Ha! I caught you!” I grinned. So, my bad boy manly mate was into *Grey’s Anatomy*. “We’ll have to do a marathon when things settle down.”

“Whatever.” He scoffed and reached for the door again, and my hand shot out to catch his.

“Wait! What if my dad sees us?”

Xavier sighed, then nodded. “I’ll go out first. You count to ten and then come out.”

“I’ll count to twenty,” I said definitively. “I’ll meet you back at my mom’s room, okay?”

“Okay.” He turned around, his hand still on the doorknob, and gently brushed his lips over mine. My lips still felt swollen and sensitive after our fierce closet hookup, and the soft touch sent chills down my spine.

He smiled against my lips and stepped back. “I’m glad you’re back, tiger.”

And then he stepped out into the too-bright hallway and closed the closet door behind him.

*One, Mississippi. Two, Mississippi…*

Before I reached three Mississippis, I got tired of standing in the dark and counting. Maybe I’d just take a moment to collect myself instead. That would definitely take at least twenty seconds. I smoothed my hands over my hair, either smoothing it or fucking it up. I’d find out when I finally gathered up the nerve to walk out of here.

It had felt good to be with Xavier again, even in a supply closet of all places—not to mention right after finding out Greyson was pushing me out of his life. But our hookup had nothing to do with that last part, right? I had nothing to feel bad about.

Okay, maybe it had been *a little bit* in reaction to Greyson finally calling me and then immediately lying to me, telling me he didn’t remember how close we’d gotten in the Fae world. And he hadn’t even been willing to discuss it! He’d completely blown me off and then acted like it was no big deal. Like I was wasting his time by trying to talk through everything he oh-so-conveniently claimed not to remember.

Not only did that hurt, but it also royally pissed me off. He’d risked his life—multiple times—to stay with me and protect me in the Fae world. He’d told me again and again how much I meant to him. And now that we were back in the human world, he what? Wanted to go back to being strangers-slash-enemies with the occasional shameful benefits?

Maybe it was better that I was with Xavier now, anyway, if this was how Greyson was going to act. If our little hookup in the closet had proven anything, it was that I was still ridiculously attracted to Xavier. And, if I trusted that he was being honest—which I did—then he really wanted me back. And he was willing to prove it.

Greyson had had his chance, and he’d thrown it away. And things were good with Xavier again, so I should probably just focus on that. If I allowed myself to get caught up in this *due destini* thing, being pulled in two different directions, then I was going to experience a lot more confusion and heartache.

It would be better if I just tried to be happy. Tried to focus on Mom. She was safe now, but I was sure she still had to recover. And I would make sure she was completely back on her feet before I went back to Oregon. Greyson had bailed on me, but Xavier was *here*. That had to mean something… Right?

I took a deep breath, smoothed (or mussed) my hair one more time, and walked out of the supply closet. The group of medical students had moved on and were now gathered in front of my mom’s room.

Xavier was leaning against the wall, an amused smirk on his face.

I walked over to him. “What’s so funny?” I asked.

He leaned in. “Just listen. They think your mom is a miracle of science.”

Two med students near the back of the group were whispering to each other.

“The patient’s recovery is bogus!” one student said. “She probably wasn’t even really sick. You ever heard of Munchausen syndrome?”

The other student shook her head. “She flatlined! You can’t fake that.”

I grimaced. I didn’t like hearing about my mom’s heart stopping, even if it had actually happened and she’d come out the other side just fine. Instead of listening to the conversation more, I took that as my cue to walk into my mom’s room. The doctor was already in there with her.

“… have no explanation for your recovery,” the doctor was saying.

“Can she go home?” my dad asked.

The doctor kind of shrugged. It didn’t look super professional, but then again, he’d probably never seen a patient go from flatlining to completely healthy in a matter of hours. “Honestly?” the doctor said. “I see no reason for Orla to say here in the hospital, though I would like her to stay in touch. I’d also like to see her for a follow-up visit in a week or so.”

My dad nodded with a smile. “Thank you, Doctor.”

Once he’d left the room, I turned to my mom. “You can go home!”

She sat up. “It’s about time.”

My dad and I both helped her get out of bed.

“I never want to come back here and be forced to eat their horrible broth and grey meat again,” Mom said.

“I’m so happy that you’re coming home,” my dad gushed. “How about I cook your favorite dinner tonight to celebrate?” He looked at me. “I assume you and Xavier will be joining us?”

“You might want to put that dinner on hold,” said a voice from behind us.

I turned around. A man and a woman were both standing in the doorway, wearing conservative dark suits.

I frowned. “Who the hell are you?”

The woman flashed her badge. “We’re from the MIB.”

An image of Will Smith with a weird flashy pen popped in my head. “Like the movie?”

“No,” the man scoffed. “We’re with the Mysterious Incidents Bureau, and we want to talk to all of you.”

**Episode 590**

AVA

This house in front of me was familiar and foreign all at once. I approached it slowly, my bare feet whispering over the grass. I recognized the windows, the door, the paint peeling around the edges of the house… I knew, if I looked up into the window on the second floor, what the bedroom inside would look like. I knew that the second step on the porch creaked. That if you were to open all the windows, the house would take on the scent of the forest outside—except for that bedroom on the second floor. It always smelled the same, like pine and cedar and something masculine that made my stomach lurch.

I knew this house intimately. Somehow, I’d seen it before. Had been inside it long enough to know all of its eccentricities. And yet, the memories and knowledge both felt far away. Almost secondhand. Like they’d belonged to someone else, once upon a time, and I’d come to them by happenstance.

But it wasn’t a stranger’s dread that pressed down my shoulders, made my stomach twist and my muscles flinch at the slightest sound. No, that was all me.

But I couldn’t keep my feet from carrying me forward. I was drawn to this strange house, even as something inside me yearned to run from it.

It was eerily quiet here. The birds that normally filled the trees around the house—and *how* did I know that, exactly?—had stopped singing. The insects weren’t buzzing. Even the breeze had died.

As I approached the front door, a new scent slipped past me. Fresh paint. My eyes latched on to a section of siding that looked more vivid than the rest. So the place hadn’t been abandoned. Someone still lived here, still loved their home enough to repair that old, peeling paint job.

I shivered. I hoped they weren’t home. Whoever this house belonged to, I did *not* want to meet them. Though I didn’t know why that was.

I carefully climbed the steps to the front door—skipping the second step that would creak and give me away—and stopped short in front of the glass door. A strange woman was waiting on the other side, staring at me through haunted, sunken eyes.

I bit back a scream and stumbled back. My foot landed on the second step and it let out a high-pitched whine. The sound seemed to echo for miles.

But the woman seemed just as frightened as I was. She, too, had stepped back, her eyes wide. I stood up straight, trying to appear stronger than I actually felt, and she did the same.

Then I realized I was staring at my own reflection in the glass outer door.

Horror rushed in, making my reflection’s jaw go slack. What had happened to me? I was dishevelled, dirty, haunted. My hair was matted and hung in clumps around my head. My bones stood out sharply against my skin, like I hadn’t eaten in days. Weeks, maybe. My eyes were rimmed with dark circles, and my skin was smeared with dirt and something crusty… Was that dried blood?

What had happened to me? And, if it had truly been so awful, why couldn’t I remember it? Surely I should have been able to remember where all this blood had come from, at the very least. But my recollection was limited, broken into pieces. Images, scents, sounds, none of them fitting together to form a solid picture. None of them filling in the blanks that made up my past. If anything, they raised more questions than they answered.

I pressed my dirt- and blood-stained fingertips against my bony sternum. *I’m Ava*. That much I knew. Despite the dirt, the wild hair, and the blood, I recognized my own face. But how had I ended up here, in this state? And why was I at this house?

I put my hand on the doorknob, and another flash of memory rushed through my mind. It was… someone. He was tall. With brown hair and deep blue eyes. He was so, so handsome. The kind of guy women and men alike chased after. Something warm bubbled low in my stomach as I pictured him—and then a metallic flavor burst across my tongue. Blood. Another flash—of narrowed blue eyes and… pain. So much pain. The man’s image wasn’t so handsome anymore.

I jolted and stepped back, rubbing at the raised scars on my neck.

Whoever he was, he was angry. At me. But why? Who was he?

I slowly reached out again and opened the glass door, bracing myself for another memory. Nothing. Then I pushed at the interior door behind it. It swung open and bounced against the wall, the sound reverberating through the house. I tensed again, waiting for someone or something to pounce on me.

Instead, I was met with more silence.

I stepped inside and closed the door behind me.

My instinct was to call out, to announce my arrival. But my mouth had forgotten how to shape the person’s name, and I didn’t trust my voice.

I took another step into the foyer. That strange, foreign familiarity washed over me again. I looked to my left and knew without seeing it that the living room was beyond the first open doorway. And the kitchen was to my right.

But how did I know that?

The stairway loomed ahead and, without quite knowing why, I let my feet guide me up the steps. I ran a hand along the smooth banister, and something about the movement comforted me. It suddenly felt like this was something I’d done hundreds of times before.

At the top of the stairs I followed a hallway to a bedroom, bypassing several other closed doors along the way. They were bedrooms too, and a bathroom, but they weren’t what I was looking for.

I stepped inside the bedroom at the end of the hallway and caught my ghostly reflection in a mirror. I looked away from it and let my feet carry me toward the large bed that dominated the room. I was drawn to it, and I didn’t think twice before laying a hand on the comforter.

Another flash. Someone pressing me into that mattress, soothing me, comforting me, tender lips dragging over exposed skin, gentle but firm hands on my hips, a smooth, muscular back, rough pleasure, and then—

*Xavier.*

It was the name I’d heard while I’d been in the mirror. Was this his room? Had I been here with him? I looked around. There was a picture of a tall man and a young, pretty brunette tucked into the mirror frame. I took the picture out, drawn to the man’s face.

That same moment flashed through my mind, but with this man’s face. A puzzle piece finally clicked into place. *Xavier*. The tall man was Xavier.

I frowned at the photo. That certainly wasn’t me in his arms. Maybe my memory was wrong. Maybe I’d never been here. I ripped the photo in half and let the severed pieces flutter to the floor.

Then I found the bathroom.

There was a hairbrush, a bottle of flowery perfume that made my nose wrinkle, and other toiletries scattered across the counter. I found a bottle labelled ‘facial cleanser’ and took the opportunity to wash my dirty face in the sink. Unfortunately, no amount of scrubbing could remove the scars on my neck.

At least now I could see my pale skin. My cheeks were even a little pink from the rough scrub I’d given them.

A noise from nearby caught my attention and I froze, my senses on high alert. I paused to listen. The sound was muffled, far enough away that I was sure I was still alone in the room, but close enough that I didn’t think the sound was coming from outside. Was there someone downstairs?

I considered calling out to the newcomer, but kept my mouth closed. Why draw attention to myself when I had no idea who might be here? Instinct told me to be careful, to not give away my position, to be ready to fight, if necessary.

I quietly dried my face with a hand towel and slipped out of the bathroom. I paused in the open doorway of the bedroom, listening. Someone *was* downstairs. My muscles tensed, and my mouth went dry. I was afraid, though I didn’t know what I had to be afraid of.

I slowly crept down the hallway, and then down the stairs. Maybe I could slip outside again and hide in the woods until I knew more about this house and the person who lived in it. My eyes focused on a shadow moving across the living room floor. I just had to make it past the doorway to the living room, and then I’d be able to escape unnoticed.

I stepped onto the ground floor, and the carpeted floorboards groaned beneath my bare feet. Apparently, this house still held a few secrets. The shadow stopped, and I froze as a very tall, handsome, and severe-looking older man walked into the hallway.

“Ava,” the man said, his voice deep. “I didn’t think I’d see you again.”

**Episode 591**

I blinked at the two MIB agents, who were apparently *not* cosplaying as secret agents from the various films. Wasn’t there a new one out? With that hot guy from *Thor*? I bet he could really wear a suit…

*Not now, Cali.*

Right. Focus. Now wasn’t the time to swoon over a Hemsworth brother. There would be plenty of time for that later, when I wasn’t being stared down by two secret agents.

I couldn’t help but snort, and the male agent raised his eyebrow at me but didn’t say anything. This really was ridiculous. It had to be a prank, right? Was I being Punk’d? I looked around for hidden cameras. I couldn’t see any, but that didn’t mean they weren’t there. That was why they were called *hidden* cameras and not clearly-in-your-line-of-sight cameras.

*Not now, Cali!*

I cleared my throat. “Is this some kind of joke? I’ve never heard of this Mystery Incident Bureau—”

“Mysterious,” the male agent corrected. “Mysterious Incidents Bureau. I’m Agent Imamu, and this is Agent Fernsby.”

“What’s going on?” Xavier asked. Before any of us could respond, he shouldered past the two agents and stood protectively in front of me. “Who are you people?”

“Sir, I’m going to need you to calm down,” the female agent—Fernsby—said, her hands held up in front of her. “We don’t want any trouble. We just want to talk.”

Xavier scoffed and put a protective arm around me. “You can talk all you want, but that doesn’t mean we have to.”

I leaned into him, glad to have his protection. It was a win-win, right? If they were pranksters, Xavier would be able to scare the shit out of them and make them go away. If they were a threat, well, my family and I would be perfectly safe. I hadn’t met anything more powerful than a werewolf—at least not in the human world.

The two agents glanced at each other and had some sort of silent, telepathic conversation. At least, it looked that way. After everything I’d seen, I couldn’t rule out telepathy. Or maybe they’d just been partners for a long time.

Fernsby casually put her hand on her holstered gun while Imamu spoke up. “We’re hoping that Mrs. Hart will be cooperative.”

My mom? My eyes widened. I’d thought this had something to do with Xavier or me. We were the ones who tended to attract weird shit all the time. But the agents were here for my mom? A tendril of dread uncoiled in my stomach, and fresh possibilities popped up in my head.

Were they here because she was Fae? If so, how had they found out? I hadn’t even known the truth until recently, and I’d only found out because she’d told me. Dad still didn’t know. I narrowed my eyes. What the hell did these people want with my mother?

My dad stepped forward. “What’s this all about? My wife’s just recovered from—”

“Oh, we know,” Imamu said, cutting him off. The agents must have skipped a couple classes on polite socializing. “That’s why we’re here.”

I felt the tension in the room thicken, and I forced my voice to sound cheerier than I actually felt. “Can’t this wait? We just want to bring my mother home.”

The two agents narrowed their eyes at my response before conferring quietly with each other. They were only a few feet away, but I couldn’t understand a word they were whispering to each other. Could *they* even hear each other? Or were they just pretending because they thought it looked cool? Honestly, I wouldn’t have put it past the same organization that had copied a movie about alien hunters. And this was assuming they were, in fact, agents at all. I folded my arms and watched them. I still hadn’t completely ruled out Ashton Kutcher popping out of a closet somewhere with a camera crew.

Finally, they stopped whispering to each other and Agent Fernsby held out a business card. “We’ll be in touch. If you have any questions, you can reach us here.”

I had a metric fuckton of questions, but I also had a sneaking suspicion that they weren’t about to be forthcoming about anything.

“Goodbye, then. We’ll talk soon,” Fernsby said.

They turned to leave, but then Fernsby spun back around to face us. I half-expected her to scream *psych!* or something, or maybe even tear her face off to reveal she was actually an alien. But instead, she said, “Don’t leave the state without notifying us.” And then she turned back around, and both agents left the room.

Silence set in after they were gone, and we were left to figure out what the fuck had just happened.

“What the hell was that?” I blurted out, looking around at everyone in the room.

My dad shook his head. “I don't understand. Why are federal agents, or whatever they are, coming to my wife’s hospital room? Cali, let me see that card.” He took it from my outstretched hand and examined it with a frown. “This bureau… Is it even real? Maybe one of the guys from the office is playing some kind of joke.” He sighed and nodded, that tension and unease slipping into a begrudging smile. “Probably Jason. He’s always pulling practical jokes.”

If this was Jason’s idea of a joke, I hoped he never quit his day job. I looked at my mom. She was pale and seemed a little rattled. She clearly wasn’t in on this ‘joke’ either. The sooner we got out of here and got her home safely, the better.

“Here, mom,” I said softly. “We’ll step out so you can get dressed and then we’ll bring you home. Okay?”

She nodded, smiling weakly, and I tugged Xavier out into the hallway and closed the door behind me.

“You think those two are for real?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Do you think it’s possible they knew about her being Fae? Maybe they’re some kind of paranormal agency.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Seems unlikely. I’ve never heard of anything like that. Besides, even if they are with some kind of agency that keeps track of people like us, I don’t see how they could know the truth about your mom. You haven’t told anyone, have you?”

I shook my head. “No. Have you?”

“Just my brother. Colton,” he clarified. “Maybe a few others, now that I think of it. But nobody who’d run their mouth to some bogus agency.”

I tapped my fingertips against my leg. I wanted to write the whole thing off as a weird prank, but the timing felt too strange, too uncanny to be a coincidence. Those two agents had just *happened* to show up at my mom’s hospital room the moment she’d bounced back after I’d healed her with the moon buttercup?

No, something was up, and I didn’t have the first freaking clue about what that something might be. *I hope Fernsby and Imamu lose Mom’s number.*

The car ride home was quiet, but fairly upbeat. I tried to keep the conversation moving, to stay focused on how nice it would be to bring Mom back home and for life to go back to normal. Dad, for his part, seemed ecstatic that the nightmare was over, and when we got home he kissed my mom’s cheek and headed straight to the kitchen to make the dinner he’d promised.

Mom, on the other hand, had seemed deep in thought since we’d left the hospital, and I had a pretty good idea of what had put her in that mood. She and I needed to have a heart to heart.

“Xavier will help you with dinner,” I said to my dad. “He’s an amazing cook. Put him to work.”

“Oh, right!” My dad said with a grin. “That stir fry you made last time was great!”

Xavier looked slightly alarmed, but I just pushed him into the kitchen and didn’t stick around to hear any complaints. I needed to talk to my mom. Privately.

I found my mom in her bedroom, unpacking all the things that had been brought over to the hospital. I sat on the bed next to her suitcase. “It’s nice to see you home again,” I said.

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “You know, I’m not sure I’m going to be able to forgive you,” she said quietly.

My jaw dropped. “What? What are you talking about?”

She snapped the now-empty suitcase shut. “You risked your life by going to the Fae world when I told you not to!”

I scoffed. *After all the shit I went through to get her that moon buttercup, a little gratitude would be nice!* “Since when have I listened to everything you and Dad say? Besides, you raised me to be independent, and it saved your life.”

She sighed. “I guess you have a point. It serves me right for raising such a strong-willed daughter.” She reached out and pulled me into a warm embrace. “Thank you for not listening to me,” she whispered. “And thank you for saving my life.”

Tears burned in my eyes, and I hugged my mom tight. “I’m just glad you’re here. That I wasn’t too late.”

Mom stepped back with a teary smile of her own and wiped my face. “No more crying—we should be celebrating!”

The doorbell rang, and I cleared my throat, blinking back my tears. “I’ll get it. You get settled.”

I raced downstairs. Who could it be? God, I hoped it wasn’t those stupid agents again. I opened the door to reveal Lola and Jay.

“Oh my god!” I cried.

“Cali!” Lola jumped into my arms, hugging me so tightly it was hard to breathe. “I was so worried about you! I missed you so much!”

“I missed you too! I’m so glad to be back. Are you here to say hi to Mom?”

Lola stepped back with a smile. “That, and we have to talk.” Her smile slipped a bit, and a serious expression crossed her face. “Something really fucking weird is going on.”

**Episode 592**

XAVIER

Cali’s dad was one of the nicest people I’d ever met, and I still couldn’t decide if I liked it—his overbearing friendliness, his need to prattle on about whatever weird, boring story he had to share, the unconditional welcome I’d always received from the man. When Cali had offered me up as her dad’s kitchen boy, I’d thought Tom Hart had died and gone to heaven. Because that was how he’d reacted.

What kind of guy was over the moon about his daughter’s boyfriend helping him make spaghetti? Especially a big, imposing guy like me. Gabe had once told me I had the worst case of resting bitch face he’d ever seen. And because it was Gabe, I knew he was probably telling the truth.

And yet here I was, absentmindedly stirring a pot of half-limp spaghetti noodles—a task that truly required no assistance—while Tom taught me one of his ‘secret recipes’.

“… and that’s how I discovered that just a little bit of dill can really bring out the garlic tones in a marinara sauce,” he concluded.

This whole situation—which was obviously a thinly veiled attempt on Cali’s part to pawn me off on her dad so she could get some alone time with her mom—was beyond awkward. I didn’t mind, at least not enough to make a fuss about it, but I also wasn’t exactly accustomed to hanging out with someone’s parents. Especially not the father of my ‘girlfriend’.

I nodded and tried to pay attention even though all I could think about was what Cali and her mom might be talking about. The truth was, I actually did like to cook. There was something both soothing and satisfying about the whole thing, but after everything that had happened and all the uncertainties still hanging over my head, spices and secret ingredients were not at the top of my priority list. Tom’s eyes zeroed in on my stirring arm. “You don’t actually have to stir them at this point.”

“Oh.” I stopped, feeling my cheeks heat.

“If you haven’t added it already, a dash of salt and a little bit of extra virgin olive oil will really help things along,” Tom said kindly, like I *wasn’t* making an idiot of myself.

In this, at least, I was prepared. “Already added,” I said, a bit of pride slipping into my voice.

Tom patted my shoulder. “Of course! I forget, you’re the master chef here. Maybe I should just let you handle everything.”

If those words had been said by anyone else, I would have found them passive aggressive. But not from Tom. My smile felt a little more genuine this time as I shook my head. “You’re the head chef here. I’m just here to help.”

The doorbell rang, and I set down my somewhat useless wooden spoon. If those agents had decided to make a house call, they wouldn’t live to regret it.

However, instead of the voices of the two MIB agents—which, honestly, what the hell was with them?—my sensitive ears perked up when I heard two very familiar voices.

“Dad!” Cali called. “Lola and Jay are here!”

Tom grinned. “Guess I’d better double the recipe. It seems we might have some more guests for dinner.”

“Sure.” I glanced awkwardly around the kitchen. There really wasn’t anything for me to do here, even if I actually wanted to hang out with Cali’s dad while my packmates were here. “Um, I’m just gonna go say hello…”

I escaped from the kitchen as quickly as possible and joined Cali, Jay, and Lola in the foyer.

Jay smirked when he saw me coming. “Xavier! I love the apron. I never would have guessed you could pull off floral so well.”

I scowled and tugged the apron off, bundling it up and shoving it onto a nearby table. “What’s going on?” I asked. “Are you two here to see Orla?”

Lola gave Cali a meaningful look and then turned to me, her voice light. “Why don’t we talk outside? And Xavier? Close the door behind you.”

We stepped out onto the porch. “Why did you want me to close the door?” I asked.

“I was telling Cali about all the weird shit that’s been happening around here,” Lola explained. “Jay and I saw Alex the other day, and he’s convinced that he’s being haunted by Tony.”

Cali nodded furiously, her eyes wide, but I just raised my eyebrows. Objectively that was some objectively weird shit—but worse, it sounded kind of familiar. It hadn’t been all that long ago that I’d thought I’d seen Ava…

But it was probably just a coincidence. After all, I’d been high as a kite. Gabe and Mikah had made out, for god’s sake. We constantly dealt with weird shit.

But both Tony and Ava were dead. Did that mean something?

“We think it might have something to do with the orb,” Jay added, staring at me with his eyebrows raised.

*Well, shit.* “What?”

Cali looked from Jay’s face to mine. “What orb?”

“How do you know about the orb?” I demanded.

Lola grimaced. “We found out about it when Colton discovered it was missing. We’re pretty sure Silas stole it.”

My stomach plummeted. *No, no, no. Fuck!*

“Didn’t Colton tell you?” Jay asked.

“No,” I groaned, running both hands through my hair and tugging hard. This was beyond the darkest worst-case scenario I’d ever imagined. I let go and blew out a breath. “I haven’t been able to check my phone. I was in the Fae world, and then we had to rush here to save Cali’s mom.”

“Hey!” Cali snapped, drawing the group’s attention. “Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Silas stole the Orb of Letifer, which channels the power of the dead.” Lola launched into the whole spiel for Cali, but I was barely listening. My mind was racing with this new information and what it could mean for the pack—and the world at large.

God, this was exactly why Colton and I had gone to the trouble of hiding the orb, and why we hadn’t told *anyone* about it after the fact. And now Silas—*Silas,* of all the goddamned people in the world—had the orb. This was a clusterfuck waiting to happen.

I pulled Jay aside while Lola was filling Cali in. “You said you think the orb is connected to Alex seeing Tony?” I asked.

He nodded. “We both know what the orb is capable of.”

I did, and that was exactly what worried me.

“Hey, Xavier?” Tom called from inside the house. “I could use your help in here, bud!”

I growled and curled my hands into tight fists. Then I counted to ten and breathed as deeply as I could before calling back, “Be right there!” in my nicest, most non-homicidal voice. I lowered my voice and looked at the group. “Do *not* mention any of this to Cali’s parents? Understood?”

“Are you okay?” Cali asked, frowning.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I looked at Jay. “Can I borrow your phone? I need to call Colton.”

Colton answered on the first ring. The second he realized it was me and not Jay, he sucked in a breath. “Where have you been?” he demanded.

*Oh, just fighting for my life in the Fae world and then rushing off to save Cali’s mom’s life.* But if he wanted to skip the pleasantries, fine. We’d skip the pleasantries. “Silas has the orb? Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

*Fuck me.* “Have you seen him?” I growled.

“I haven’t…” His voice trailed off and then he added, “But I have seen someone else. Ava.”

I blinked once, twice, waiting for Colton’s words to make an ounce of sense. “Excuse me?”

“I saw Ava, Xavier.”

There was nothing but truth in his voice. He wasn’t screwing around. I shook my head, not quite able to believe it. I’d chalked up seeing Ava again to some kind of hallucination, but now Colton had seen her too? “Where?” I demanded. “How?”

“On the way back from Reno. We saw her standing in the middle of the road, covered in blood. And she’s not the only dead person we’ve seen. We just saw Big Mac’s mom, back from the dead.”

Another voice echoed dimly in the background on Colton’s end, but I couldn’t quite make out what they were saying.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“On my way to Montana.”

“Why are you—” Cali walked up to me, concern etched into her expression. “I’ll be in touch,” I said quickly, and ended the call.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “You look really worried.”

I *was* worried. But I wasn’t about to bring her into this shitshow. “I’m fine.”

She frowned. “What did Colton say?”

I shrugged. “He just confirmed what Jay and Lola told us.”

“Then why are you acting like something else is going on?” she demanded. “What aren’t you telling me?”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to bring Cali into this, but I also didn’t want to keep the truth from her. Not anymore. Especially now that I’d just gotten her back. “I think… I think Ava is back,” I confessed.

“What?” Her eyes were wide, confused. “Ava, as in your ex-mate Ava!? How could she be *back?* You told me she was dead.”

I nodded. “She is, or was. I’m not sure. Listen, I know it sounds impossible, but the orb being in play changes everything.”

She slowly shook her head. “But… If she is back, what does that mean for us?”

**Episode 593**

GREYSON

God, I hated myself.

I stood in my bathroom—alone and away from Artemis’s endless questions for a few blessed minutes, thank god—staring at my own reflection in the softly lit mirror. The person staring back at me was different than before. I had the same dirty blond hair, the same grey eyes, the same lightly tanned skin and ever-present five o’clock shadow, and yet as I looked at my own reflection all I could see was the ways I’d changed—the ways the journey to the Fae world had changed me, the ways *Cali* had changed me.

I thought about all those nights pressed up against her, starting and ending each day in the Fae world looking at her beautiful face, the times she’d put her life and our mission on the line to save someone she’d just met… Maybe some tiny piece of that kindness and compassion had rubbed off on me too.

And now that we were back, I felt changed by our experience. By everything she’d been to me, everything she’d taught me, and everything that had made me fall so damn hard for her I didn’t know if I’d ever find my way out. I didn’t even know if I wanted to.

My eyes narrowed at my reflection. I’d never hated it so much—not because of how it had changed, but because of the reminder of everything I’d thrown away.

My fingers clenched on the edge of the sink until my knuckles went white. I wished I could take it all back, run back to Cali and confess that I’d lied. That I *did* remember everything that had happened between us in the Fae world. Every fucking second of it. How could I forget? I thought about it constantly; I thought about *her* constantly. I felt like I was counting down the seconds until my life was no longer on hold and I could return to her and pick up where we’d left off—if she’d still have me.

But I couldn’t do any of that. Not yet. With Silas on the loose and the orb in his possession, I had no choice. I had to distance myself from Cali if I wanted to keep her safe—even if it meant she’d end up with Xavier.

He was her mate, too—their connection was bound to reignite, especially once I stepped back and stopped interfering. Xavier sure as shit hadn’t hesitated to swoop her up at the first opportunity.

I gripped the porcelain tighter, my fingertips almost digging into the smooth basin. I heard the sink creak, a sign that it was about to crack under the superhuman pressure, and I let go, clenching and releasing to burn off the tension coiling in my body.

It was okay, I told myself. It made sense for Cali to be with Xavier now—but that didn’t mean he’d get her in the end. Cali and I were mates, and the road we were on was long, with lots of curves and bumps and detours. This was one of those detours, but once this was all over, she’d be back where she belonged—with me.

This was a waiting game, and timing was everything. I just wished it hurt a little less to be separated from her.

There was a too-loud knock on the locked bathroom door. “Greyson?” Artemis called. “Are you almost finished?”

I sighed. “Give me ten minutes,” I called, and began to slip off my clothes. I’d promised to take her to a ‘human world’ restaurant, but all I really wanted was a human world bar, with top shelf whiskey and some goddamn peace and quiet. When I’d first met Artemis, I never would’ve imagined that she’d end up tailing me back to one of my apartments in the human world and then sticking around like a tourist on holiday.

Stepping into the shower, the hot water felt amazing on my sore muscles. It reminded me of bathing in the Absolution Geyser with Cali… I shook myself. *She’s with Xavier now. Far away and out of your reach. It’s for the best. For now.*

God, I really needed a drink.

I finished in a hurry, got dressed, and stepped out of the bathroom. Artemis was dragging a brush through her long hair and staring out the window. She turned to face me, and I had to consciously keep my jaw from dropping.

*Wow*.

I’d known she was beautiful, but with the light spilling in from the window and her freshly washed hair hanging loose around her shoulders, she looked… radiant. Otherworldly, like the magical creature she really was.

And for a split second, my sad, pathetic mind had convinced me that I was staring at Cali.

*Get yourself together, Greyson. Jesus.*

Artemis held out her arms and gestured at a dress she definitely hadn’t been wearing when she’d arrived at my apartment. “I took this. I hope you don’t mind—it was in your closet.” The dark blue dress hugged her torso and waist and then billowed out around her hips. Both sexy and softly feminine. Why the hell had that been in my apartment?

Then it hit me. The dress was courtesy of a one-night stand from a *long* time ago. The hookup had been fun, but not particularly fulfilling, which was pretty par for the course for me. The cleaner must have found the dress and tucked it away in my closet for safekeeping.

Artemis braced her hand on her hips. “So, what do they have at this restaurant?”

“Yeah, about that… How’d you like to try a bar first?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Sounds fine.”

We left the apartment and headed to a nearby bar, an old haunt of mine that I’d loved back when I was Rogue. We made it about half a block before Artemis completely lost her shit over yet another human world contraption.

A parked car. Or rather, the string of them lining the street.

She jumped back, her eyes wide. “What kind of rocks are those?” Then she snuck a little closer, like she expected the car to reach out and snatch her. She peeked in through the windshield with a frown. “Is this a tiny house?” Then she knocked on the hood. “Hello? Anybody home?”

The car alarm began blaring in response, and she jumped about five feet in the air before skittering back. “What’s happening?”

I grabbed her arm and dragged her off down the block, away from the spectacle she’d created. “I can’t take you anywhere…” I muttered.

“What was that thing?” She yanked her arm out of my grasp but kept walking, glancing over her shoulder every so often.

“It’s a car,” I said shortly. “Kind of like a horse. People ride inside them to travel.”

She frowned. “The human world doesn’t have horses?”

“We do, but…” I sighed. How did one explain the industrial revolution to a Fae? “Never mind. Just don’t touch one again, okay?”

Then a group of young men on scooters passed us on the sidewalk, and Artemis forgot all about the cars. “Why do all the men have beards?” she asked. “And what are those boards they’re riding on?”

I scoffed and then laughed. “They’re called hipsters. They dress like that to show everyone how cool they are. Grow out their beards and wear man buns. Nobody likes them.”

Artemis smiled and watched the hipsters scoot by. “Are there woman buns?”

“Sure.”

Finally, I led her inside and we took two seats at the bar. The bartender recognized me right away. “Hey, Greyson. It’s been a while.” He eyed Artemis. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Artemis. She’s visiting for a little while.” Then I turned to Artemis. “Do you like whiskey?”

“I’ve never heard of it. Is it good?” she asked.

I smiled. “Oh, yeah.” Then I turned back to the bartender. “A round of whiskey for both of us, please.”

Artemis’s eyes caught on the bottles lined up behind the bar. “You can buy any of that?”

“Luckily, yes,” I said.

“Amazing.” She grinned. “We should try all of them.”

The bartender put our whiskeys in front of us, and Artemis frowned at the small glass. “Is this just a sample?”

“It’s really strong. Just sip it.” I took a small sip. The burn felt so good. Cleansing, in a way. Just what I needed. This would help me forget Cali, at least for now.

Artemis grimaced. “Wow. This is strong. But I kinda like it.” She downed the rest of her glass.

Well, it looked like this was going to be a very quick night.

Artemis smacked her empty glass down on the bar. “I want to try another one.”

“Slow down,” I cautioned her.

Artemis scoffed. “Just because I’m smaller, doesn't mean I can’t drink with the big boys. Bring it on.”

I smirked. She knew what she wanted. Who was I to tell her otherwise?

It took five or six rounds—or was it four? Seven? I wasn’t sure. I was feeling amazing, and Artemis was somehow still standing, though her eyes were a little glassy.

“We should get some food,” I suggested. “I don’t want you to get drunk on an empty stomach.”

I slapped some cash down on the bar and took her elbow, just as a beefy hipster sauntered up to the bar, focused entirely on Artemis.

“Hey, beautiful,” he crooned. “I don’t think I’ve seen you around here before. I’m sure I would have remembered you.”

Artemis smiled placidly. “Why don’t you have one of those man rolls?”

The hipster blinked. “Excuse me?”

“We’re leaving,” I told him, but the idiot stepped in front of me.

“Why don’t you let the lady speak for herself?” he suggested.

I smiled and leaned in. My hand left Artemis’s elbow and wrapped tight around the hipster dude’s arm. “If you don’t step off, I’m going to rip your throat out.”

He winced. “Sorry.” He brushed past us quickly, no doubt trying to put some distance between himself and the murderous intention written all over my face. He bumped into Artemis on his way, and she stumbled forward into my arms.

I caught her instinctively, my arms wrapping tight around her and then her lips crashed into mine.

**Episode 594**

I stood there, waiting for Xavier’s response. And while the seconds dragged on and he still didn’t answer me, my mind was reeling, trying to make sense of this new world of impossibilities. I’d kind of assumed that once I finally left the Fae world behind, things would have to start making sense again.

Magic wasn’t supposed to exist here—at least not to the extent that it did in the Fae world—and magical creatures were relatively few and far between, though they did make up a huge portion of the people I spent my time with. For *most* people, magic and fairies and werewolves were things you only found in books and movies and TV shows.

Except, it turned out that all three of those impossibilities were real. Along with vampires and demons and wisps and weird MIB agents who were probably flirting with a copyright infringement lawsuit. And now there was a new one to add to the list: dead people coming back to life.

I shook my head, all too aware that Xavier *still* hadn’t responded. “I still don’t understand. How is this even happening? Are you sure it even is happening?”

“Hey.” His hands wrapped around my shoulders and he pulled me close. I clung onto him in fear. Fear that my world was changing when I’d just barely found some semblance of peace and safety, fear of Silas and what he could do with this orb thing, and fear that Xavier’s mate coming back to life might change our relationship. Was I still his mate now that Ava was back? She’d had him first, long before I’d ever come along. Did that mean he was hers again now?

*No way. He’s mine now. I’m calling dibs on him!*

“It’s all right, Cali. You don’t need to be worried about this,” Xavier murmured in my ear. “I just said that I *think* Ava is back. The truth is, I don’t know for sure. I’m only guessing, so please don’t start freaking out over this.”

Those last words were like a record scratching in my brain. I shoved him back with a huff. “I don’t freak out, Xavier!”

His raised his eyebrows, and I rolled my eyes.

“Okay, maybe a little,” I conceded. “But it’s usually for a good reason. And finding out that my mate’s former mate could be alive is a good reason. Besides, you killed her.”

“I know that,” he snapped. “I don’t need you to remind me.”

“Xavier!” my dad called again. “Come on, buddy. These noodles are ready!”

He groaned.

I turned him around to face the door and gave him a gentle nudge. “You’d better go help him. But don’t think for a second that we’re done talking about this.”

He headed back inside, and I took a few moments to collect myself. So much for a joyous moment at home, or a much-needed break from the craziness. It looked like I’d just traded one dangerous situation for another.

Plus… Xavier never had answered my question. Not really. Not the way I wanted him to. He’d only said that he wasn’t actually sure if he’d seen Ava. He’d never said anything about what might happen if she was alive, or what it would mean for our bond.

I blew out a breath. I couldn’t deal with this right now. Mom was home and safe, and that was great news. Dad was probably small-talking Xavier to death in the kitchen, and Lola and Jay were still here. There were good things to focus on in this moment, and I needed to hold onto them. Just in case.

When I returned to Lola and Jay, it looked like I was about to catch them in the middle of an argument.

“Lola, now is *not* a good time to shift,” Jay hissed.

She rolled her eyes. “It’s just a quick run. No one has to know. Just relax!”

“Wait, no,” I jumped in. “Can you please stay human for now?” With everything else going on, the last thing I needed was for my best friend to shift into her wolf form at my parents’ house. My dad still didn’t know the truth about any of us. Plus, what if she got stuck half-shifted again? How were we supposed to explain that?

Lola looked like she was going to try to argue with me, but I held up a hand. “Remember, my dad doesn’t know anything about werewolves. He thinks Xavier’s just a nice, normal guy.” Lola folded her arms but didn’t argue, and I frowned. “What’s so great about shifting anyway?”

“You only say that because you don’t know what it’s like,” she said. “How liberating it is.”

“What’s liberating?”

We spun around to see my dad standing in the doorway.

Crap!

“Um… It’s, uh… jogging! Lola thinks jogging is fun,” I managed, my tone bright. “I disagree—there’s nothing fun about jogging.”

My dad’s eyes glazed over in that way they did when he was being polite but didn’t find the conversation even remotely interesting. “Well, you two can settle your argument over dinner. It’s time to eat.” He spun around and walked inside.

I glanced at Lola. “Please don’t say anything more about S–H–I–F–T–I–N–G.”

“Your dad can spell, Cali.” Lola rolled her eyes and walked inside. I was about to follow her in when Jay stopped me.

“Hey,” he said. “Can we talk for a second?”

I nodded. “Sure. What’s up?”

“It’s this shifting thing of Lola’s…” He sighed. “I don't know what's come over her.”

“Yeah, it seems weird. Where is this coming from?”

He shrugged, looking helpless. “I don’t know, but I think it’s getting worse.”

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do.” Honestly, I had no idea what to do about it, or if anything should even be done at all. But Jay looked so sad and worried, I wasn’t going to turn him away.

We headed to the dining room but stopped short in the doorway. My mom was sitting in her usual place at the head of the table, looking happier and healthier than I’d ever seen her. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d had dinner with my family here in the dining room when Mom was still healthy. *This* was why I’d gone to the Fae world. To give all of us another chance.

Xavier walked in with a huge platter of spaghetti, followed by my dad with a large pot of sauce.

My mom beamed at them. “My favorite! Just like you promised.”

Dad leaned in to kiss her, and tears blurred my vision.

Maybe everything else around us was going screwy, but for this one moment, everything was absolutely perfect.

Dinner with my family was everything I’d hoped it would be. I laughed along with my dad’s stupid jokes, and was secretly thrilled to see my mom looking so happy again. She was practically radiant. Even Xavier joined in on the conversation, and for a little while, it felt like we were one big happy family—even though I knew Xavier and I were both thinking about Ava.

But I didn’t bring it up, just tried to force it from my mind. I didn’t want the maybe-literal ghost of Xavier’s mate to cloud our picture-perfect family dinner.

Lola was still a little off, I noticed. She seemed more jittery than normal, a little edgier, a little more emotional. Several times, she laughed too hard or talked too loud. But at least she hadn’t shifted over a plate of spaghetti. And, of course, everyone loved Jay. Despite the spectres of Silas and Ava, things were looking up.

Mom wiped her mouth with her napkin, set it down on her empty plate, and then patted her belly. “That was delicious. Thank you, dear.” She kissed my dad. “Since you cooked, I’ll clean up.”

Everyone protested this, but there was no dissuading her. “Cali, would you mind helping me in the kitchen?”

Now that my mom was going to be okay, even doing chores together sounded kind of amazing. “I’d love to.”

“That was such a lovely dinner.” Mom sighed and passed me a freshly washed plate to dry. “Jay seems very sweet. I can see why Lola loves him.”

“He’s really great. I think they’re a perfect match.” I finished drying the plate and put it away in the cabinet.

“And Xavier was so helpful. Your father is going to be singing his praises for a long time, I think.”

I smiled softly at that. “I’m glad Dad likes him.” I couldn’t deny that Xavier had certainly tried his best to play nice with Dad, even though the two of them couldn’t have been more different.

I put the last dish away and looked over at my mom. She still looked happy, but tired. “You should get some rest.”

She nodded. “Great idea. It’s been a long day.” She kissed my forehead and went upstairs with my dad. After saying goodbye to Jay and Lola, I went upstairs and crawled into bed next to Xavier. He kissed me, and I murmured something that sounded vaguely like ‘good night’. It had been a good day, but an exhausting one, and I fell asleep almost immediately.

“Cali,” called a dry, raspy voice.

My eyes snapped open and I bit back a scream. There was a woman hovering over my bed, her skin pale and her eyes dark. The woman pointed to Xavier, who was sleeping peacefully next to me. “Enjoy him while you can. Soon he’ll be back where he belongs—with me.”

**Episode 595**

GREYSON

Our lips moved against each other’s, soft and gentle, more a question than anything else. For a moment my mind went blank, the whiskey doing its job. She felt good in my arms, her body warm and her curves inviting. She smelled like my body wash, and her hair was like soft silk as I gently moved my hands through it, deepening the kiss.

This was what I’d needed. Wasn’t it? A distraction, something to keep me from obsessing over Cali being off with Xavier. The woman in my arms kissed me like she knew what she was doing. There was no hint of inexperience in her technique, despite all the liquor we’d put down so quickly.

But then something twisted in my chest, made me stiffen. There was something in the way her mouth brushed against mine… something that made me hesitate, even though in the past I would already have been devouring her. What was going on here? Why did this feel so nice, so comfortable, and yet… not quite right?

*Cali, you idiot.*

Her hands firmly pressed against my chest and at first I thought she was just exploring, but then I realized she was pushing me back. I broke away from her mouth, somehow pleased with the interruption, and stepped back. We stared at each other for a moment. Her expression was more puzzled than aroused, and even with my brain soaked in whiskey I knew my response was off too.

She broke the confused silence between us, not meeting my eyes. “That was… weird, right?”

Yes, *weird* was the perfect way to describe it.

“It was like kissing my sister.” I said it out loud before I thought it through completely, but it felt right. “If I had a sister, that is.” I wiped my lips with the back of my hand and watched her do the same. The confusion in her expression shifted to mild disgust—an expression I felt mirrored on my own face.

*Guess I’m firmly in the brother category now. Good.*

It made sense, though. And it felt right and good to have it out of the damn way. While that physical comfort had felt nice, that wasn’t our connection. I turned to the bartender. “Hey, can we get two shots of tequila? Make ‘em doubles.” I turned back to Artemis. “If you liked the whiskey, you’ll like this. Plus it’ll wash all the… me, of out your mouth, I guess.” I grimaced as soon as I said it.

*God, I* am *an idiot.*

Artemis sighed. “I’m sorry, Greyson—”

“Hey.” I held my hands up. “No need to apologize. It happened. We had a lot to drink; we both regret it. We’ll move on.”

After a moment, she nodded. “Okay.”

Relief rushed through me. Maybe if I were a slightly shittier person, I still would’ve been interested in using Artemis to forget my sorrows. But apparently I still had some good in me, and now that I’d had a second to process what happened, I was incredibly glad we’d stopped before anything really got started. I couldn’t imagine that Cali would be pleased if she ever found out anything had happened between me and Artemis, and I wasn’t willing to do anything to jeopardize our future together.

The bartender slid two glasses in front of us, salt and lime wedges on the rims. Artemis held hers up. “I would like to propose a toast.” She smiled. “How about we stick to being friends from now on?”

I held mine up as well, but didn’t clink it against her glass. Did I really need a Fae as a friend? That seemed kind of like trying to make friends with a super smart wild animal. Plus, I wasn’t really a *friends* kind of guy. Cali had been the closest thing to that for me… and look how that was turning out.

Artemis’s smile dimmed just a bit, and I found myself reaching out and clinking my glass against hers, just to keep that smile from disappearing completely. Maybe one friend wouldn’t hurt. “I’ll drink to that.” I caught her hand before she could take the drink. “Now, watch and learn, friend.”

I plucked the lime wedge off the rim of the glass, licked the salt, let the shot slide down my throat, and then bit into the lime wedge. The smooth tequila flavor burst across my tongue, tempered by the salt and lime, and that warmth in my stomach grew to a pleasant burn. Yeah, I was gonna be shitfaced. “Now you do it.”

She mimicked my actions, and her eyes went wide. “That’s delicious! What kind of whiskey is this?”

I smiled. “Not whiskey, tequila.”

“Hmm.” She sucked a bit more lime juice out of her wedge and then dropped it into her empty glass. “So, where’s the restaurant?”

“I’ll show you.” I dropped a bit more cash on the bar and steered her toward the door, where the beefy hipster stepped in front of us again. Did the guy have a death wish?

He wrung his hands together for a moment. “I’m so sorry. I never would have said anything if I’d known you two were together. Are we cool?”

My knee jerk response was to correct him. I didn’t want even some random human stranger to think I was with anyone other than Cali. But I wasn’t looking for trouble tonight, so instead, I shrugged. “Yeah, we’re cool.”

The hipster sighed. “Thanks, man. Have a good night.”

I nodded and led Artemis outside then paused on the sidewalk, pulling my phone out of my pocket to call an Uber.

Artemis had other plans. She was already walking down the street, in awe of everything from the cars parked along the street (“Those really *are* ugly horses!”) to the candy-striped barber shop light (“How did they make it glow like that?”) to the walk signal at the crosswalk (“There’s a little white man inside that box!”).

I put my phone away. “I guess it’s a good night for a walk.”

I caught up to her and she turned to face me with a wide, slightly tipsy grin. “Your world is magical.”

I smirked. “It’s not—and I’m glad for it. I experienced more than my share of magic in your world, and I’d rather live without it from now on.”

“Why are you so prejudiced against magic?” she asked, frowning dramatically. “It *can* do a lot of good, you know.”

I instinctively touched the scar on my torso. “That has not been my experience.”

Her eyes followed my hand. “What’s wrong?”

I unbuttoned my shirt just enough to show her the scar, then buttoned it back up, feeling oddly exposed. Why had I shown her that? I wasn’t really the type to go around showing off my scars—especially the ones that triggered particularly awful memories. But there was something about Artemis that made me open up, made me give in when I would have told anyone else to fuck off. It was another thing she and Cali had in common. Maybe this is what it was like to have friends.

Artemis frowned down at my torso, even though the scar was covered now. “How’d you get that scar? Wait, let me guess—a bad Fae experience?”

“How’d you guess?”

She snorted. “I mean, you said it was magic.” Then she shrugged sadly, her voice lowering. “I know better than most what causes those kinds of scars.”

There was a lifetime of untold stories in that answer, but I knew better than to ask. It was hard enough just talking about my own shit. I thought of the last time I’d shown my scar to someone—Cali.

*I’m lucky to be alive… Not all Fae are good*.

I hadn’t wanted to get into the full story then, so I’d been vague about the details. I nodded at Artemis but didn’t elaborate. I didn’t want to get into it now, either.

“You can tell me the truth,” she said, grabbing my shoulders. “I’m not all bad, you know. Maybe I can help you deal with your problem.”

“I don’t have a problem,” I grumbled.

“Sure.” She snorted again. “You don’t like magic, yet you’re in love with a Fae. That much is obvious. If that doesn’t scream *problem*, then I don’t know what does.” She grinned up at me. “Besides, if you can’t tell your new friend about it, who can you tell?”

I rolled my eyes. Trust Artemis to latch onto our shiny new friendship and use it as leverage. Sneaky Fae. Still, I found myself saying, “Before I met Cali, I fell for a beautiful Fae woman.”

Artemis snickered. “So you *do* have a thing for Fae.”

I ignored her. “She betrayed me. Left me with a broken heart—and the scar.”

Artemis stopped laughing. “I’m sorry. What was her name?”

“Maren.” I hadn’t spoken her name in years, but I knew I’d never forget it. It was embedded in my mind, the same way the scar was embedded in my flesh.

“Do you think that’s why you’re so conflicted about Cali?” Artemis asked after a moment. “Because you’re afraid she’s going to hurt you like Maren did?”

**Episode 596**

AVA

I wanted to say I’d never seen this man before in my life. But somehow I knew that wouldn’t quite be the truth.

He was tall enough to loom over me if he wanted to. His dark hair shone in the ambient light spilling in through the windows, and his grey eyes looked me up and down—but not with hunger or revulsion, despite the fact that I was naked and covered in dirt and grime and blood. He looked at me like I was a puzzle he couldn’t quite solve, a question to which he didn’t have the answer.

He was handsome. Or, at least, he would have been if his expression wasn’t so severe. I couldn’t quite put my finger on why he was so unnerving. There was just something about him that oozed cruelty, that made some animal part of my mind scream *predator*. A cold feeling spread through me the longer he stared at me, and I took an involuntary step back.

That handsome, unsettling face smirked. “Leaving so soon, Ava?”

How did he know my name? I didn’t respond. I didn’t think I could have, even if I’d wanted to. Fear had sealed my lips shut.

He tsked. “You should be afraid of me. But we actually have something in common, you know.”

I couldn’t imagine what this terrifying man and I could possibly share, but whatever it was, I didn’t want to know. He leaned casually against the wall, just a few feet away.

“Xavier.”

I froze. He said the name like he knew what it meant to me. Like he knew I’d recognize it, even when I barely knew my own name. And he was right, because there it was. That name again. Filling my mind with shattered memories, making my stomach lurch and my heart flip-flop all at once.

How did he know that name?

He eyed me again with that same calculating expression. Whatever variables he was weighing must have been in his favor, because he smirked again. “You want to find him, don’t you? Xavier?”

I blinked. It was another question I didn’t have an answer for. *Did* I want to find Xavier? And if so, why? Why would I want to find this man I’d known so intimately and yet could hardly remember? Did the memory of his gentle hands outweigh the flash of violence I’d glimpsed?

The man moved closer to me, taking advantage of my confusion. In my distraction, I’d forgotten to be afraid of him, and it wasn’t until he was standing close enough to touch that the familiar thread of fear tugged on my heart. I skittered back, but only made it a step before I met the wall. I glanced up and down the hallway, instinctively measuring the time it would take for me to dash away. The likelihood of him stopping me before I could escape.

“Ava.”

His voice was softer now, drawing me back the way someone might soothe a wild animal. I forced myself to meet his eyes. He didn’t pounce on me. If anything, he looked sympathetic. Or at least some facsimile of the emotion. He didn’t seem capable of sympathy. “This is all probably very confusing to you,” he said, in that same soothing tone. “Yet I find you here, in Xavier’s house.” He pointed to my throat. “With those scars. He did that to you.”

I gasped and immediately touched my neck. I knew, somewhere deep inside me, that he was telling the truth. And in a heartbeat, all that fear was replaced with a powerful, burning fury.

“He turned on you,” the man said. “Did you know that?”

*No*, I thought to myself. *I didn’t know. Xavier…* I dragged my fingertips over the scar on my neck. *He did this to me. He hurt me. Betrayed me.* I didn’t have a name for the tidal wave of emotion that crashed into me. Fury and loss and desperation. Grief and heartache and shock. How could he? And *why* did I even feel so strongly about someone I couldn’t even remember? Why was this betrayal more than I could stomach when I knew so little about… well, *everything?*

But that wasn’t quite right. Because some piece of me *did* remember Xavier. Remembered his body pressed against mine in a lover’s embrace. Remembered ice-cold fury in his eyes. A flash of violence. And then—nothing.

Large, callused hands landed firmly on my shoulders, and I jolted back to the present. The man must have seen my struggle and judged it safe to come closer. I couldn’t decide if letting him had been the right call or not. Part of me felt grounded by his touch, but another part wanted to put as much distance between this man and myself as I could.

I allowed him to turn me roughly, so I faced a mirror hanging on the wall. “Look,” he growled. “Look at those hideous scars and remember—Xavier did that to you.”

A memory rolled in, like images on a film strip. A slow reel of a snarling werewolf leaping into the air, his body all muscle and violence, and then landing on me. His hot breath washed over my exposed throat, those razor-sharp teeth sank in—

I jolted back with a scream, wrenched myself out of the man’s grip, shoved him back, and then stumbled away from him. My mind was reeling, and my body was poised for the fight of its life—maybe its *second* fight like that—and for a moment I couldn’t tell what was past and what was present. Where the true threat lay: in my memories or in the man standing in front of me.

He smirked, not the least bit repentant. “You remember now, don’t you? How he bit down on your throat and tore it out?”

I clutched my throat like I was bleeding out all over again and slumped against the wall. I shook my head, willing and wishing that he was lying. It was too much to accept, that I’d been the victim of such awful, horrifying violence.

The man just shook his head, like he was disappointed with me. “Don’t deny it. I can see it in your eyes. You know it’s true. If you really don’t believe me, ask your brother. He saw the whole gruesome thing. He watched you die.”

“My brother?” I echoed. My voice was raw, untested, almost more of a groan than human speech. I tried to remember if I had a brother. What he looked like. What his name was.

“Nolan,” the man supplied. Was he a mind-reader? “Your brother is called Nolan.”

I was hit by another memory—me and another werewolf running through the woods, young and powerful. The other wolf was Nolan, my protective older brother. I was never afraid when I was with him. I knew he’d do anything to keep me safe. I savored the sweet memory, the echo of freedom thinking about those days. But the man wouldn’t let me linger in it for long.

“Nolan has never forgiven Xavier,” he pressed. “And I hope you haven’t either.”

“Where is Nolan?” I asked, my voice little more than a squeak. “Where is my brother?”

The man offered me his hand. “Let me show you.”

I hesitated.

“Ava, I won’t rip your throat out. I promise,” he said.

I flinched to hear him talk so casually about my most traumatic experience. But I took his hand. He was going to take me to Nolan. To my brother. To safety. I let the man lead me outside.

Part of me was terrified, and another part was curious about all the things this man knew that I didn’t. Maybe he’d be able to teach me what he knew.

A strange woman was standing in the front yard. Where had she come from? She hadn’t been there when I’d first arrived at the house.

The woman smiled at me then looked at the man. “Bring her closer.”

I bristled to be spoken of like an object, but there was something else at work. Something dangerous. Everything about the woman was cold and menacing, just like the man I’d trusted to bring me to my brother.

All my instincts were screaming *wrong* and *predator* and *run*. I pulled back, but the man wouldn’t let me go.

“It’s okay,” he soothed. “She’s a friend.”

But the closer he dragged me to the woman, the colder I felt. I knew this feeling. I’d experienced it before I came out of the mirror. Goosebumps broke out on my skin, and I began to tremble.

When the man had finally dragged me close enough, the woman looked me up and down, just like he had. She didn’t look overly impressed. “She’ll do. She’ll do just fine.”

What did that mean? Fear and cold had my teeth chattering, and I tried again to break the man’s grip on my hand. He didn’t even move. His hold didn’t loosen one bit.

“Get on with it,” the man said to the woman.

She pulled back one of her sleeves, and I glimpsed her bare arm. It looked like it was somehow made of solid gold. The woman removed a gold bracelet from her wrist and placed it around my arm. I jerked against the man’s grip again, but to no avail.

The woman raised her golden arm and said a few strange words. Something jolted through me, and my mind flashed white.

The man smiled at me and let me go. “You need to wear the bracelet always. Don’t remove it.” Then he turned back to the woman. “It’s time to go.”

He gave me one final, lingering look. “If you find Xavier, you’ll let me know, won’t you?”

**Episode 597**

The fear and unease from my nightmare hung over me when I woke up the next morning. What the hell had that been about? And had it really just been a dream, or was it something else? Was Ava… haunting me?

A day ago, I would have thought that was impossible. Now, I didn’t know what to think. It didn’t seem too far-fetched, actually. If I’d been killed by my mate and then said mate had found someone new, I’d probably have wanted to haunt her ass too.

“Hey.”

Xavier’s low, sleep-dazed voice pulled me from my mental tailspin. He was still curled up in bed next to me, looking at me from under his long eyelashes. He’d clearly just woken up, and he looked absolutely gorgeous.

I rolled onto my side to face him. “Hey, yourself,” I said softly. “Sleep well?”

“Mmmhmm.” His arms snaked around me and he pulled me close. “I always do when I’m with you.”

I smiled at his response. I’d been too exhausted by the day’s events to appreciate it last night, but this was the first time in a while that Xavier and I had gotten to share a bed. And it had felt as effortless as ever to fall asleep with his warm body pressed against mine, the cadence of his breathing lulling me to sleep. It was the dose of normalcy I’d needed, especially after learning about Silas and the orb and the possibility of Ava.

“How’d you sleep?” he asked. “I know yesterday was… a lot.”

I dragged my hand over his cheek, and his five o’clock shadow scraped at my fingertips. He was here, next to me, loving me, staying with me. No matter what threats dream Ava made, Xavier was still here with me. And suddenly, I couldn’t remember what I’d been so worried about.

It was just a dream, brought on by all the stress from yesterday. It didn’t mean anything, and there almost certainly was not a creepy Ava ghost watching me sleep every night. Everything was fine. Better than fine, actually. For the first time in a long time, everything was good. There was no need to tell Xavier about my dream. He had enough on his plate with Silas and that orb thing.

“Slept like a baby,” I lied.

“So you’re feeling rested?” he asked.

“Mmmhmm.”

“Good.” He rolled over so he was hovering above me, and then his mouth moved onto mine. I moaned at the sudden contact and pressed my body against his. My hands moved underneath his shirt, exploring the musculature of his back. God, he was so perfect. Like one of those guys from *300*. My personal Spartan warrior. He groaned as my fingernails dragged up his back, and I took the opportunity to deepen the kiss.

And then I froze. *We’re in my parents’ house! We can’t get busy in my childhood bedroom!* I shoved him off me and practically leaped out of bed—except my foot got caught in the blanket, so I really fucked up the dismount. It was more a controlled fall out of bed.

Xavier smirked at me from his place high up on the mattress. “You okay?”

I blew my hair out my face and nodded. “Peachy.”

“You wanna tell me what that was about?”

Heat rushed into my cheeks. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea to hook up in my parents’ house.”

His lips twitched like he was trying not to laugh. “What’s the big deal? We can be quiet. It’s not like they made us sleep in separate rooms. Did Jay tell you about Lola’s dads?”

I crawled out of my nest of blankets on the floor. “What? No. That’s not it. I’m just not having sex with you while my parents are downstairs, probably having breakfast,” I muttered. *Nothing better than scrambled eggs with a side of your daughter audibly banging her boyfriend in the bedroom above you.*

“Okay, so are you one of those people who doesn't believe their parents get it on?” he asked with raised eyebrows. “Cause they do. I guarantee it.”

I clapped my hands over my ears. “Gross! Don’t ever say that again.” I stomped to the bathroom, then turned around and stuck my head out. “By the way, if you ever want to get me in the mood, bringing my parents into it is never a good idea.”

Xavier sat up with a grin. “I really missed this.”

“What?”

“Us. Our little arguments.”

That was actually really sweet. And god, he did look *so* good without his shirt.

*No, Cali!*

I shook my head. “Nope.” And then I shut the bathroom door.

After I’d showered—*without* Xavier, who had tried several times to sneak in, the horn dog—I left him to take his turn in the shower while I went downstairs. I was humming as my feet hit the ground floor. What a nice, relaxing morning—

“*What?*” my dad’s voice roared from the dining room. “You’re telling me I should believe this?!”

*Oh, shittlesticks.*

I rushed into the dining room to find my dad pushing away from the table where my mom was sipping coffee, looking for all the world like her husband wasn’t losing his shit two feet away from her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, my heart in my throat.

Dad turned to me and pointed at my mom, his face bone white. “She’s a… a *fairy?* You’re both *fairies*?”

My heart sputter-thumped, and my mouth went dry. I couldn’t move, much less form a response.

“We prefer to be called Fae,” my mother said calmly. “I know this must be overwhelming, but—”

“Cali, please call the doctor,” my dad interrupted, turning back to me. He must have misinterpreted my shock at being caught as *oh no, my mom’s gone cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs*. “Your mom clearly isn’t well. Something’s wrong. She’s acting crazy with all this fairy talk.”

I swallowed, still unable to find the right string of words for the shitshow I’d just walked into. I threw a dirty look at my mom. *Seriously, Mom!? You couldn’t have given me a heads up that you were telling dad this morning?*

I took a deep breath, then took my dad by the hand and led him back to his chair. “Dad, what mom is telling you… It’s true.”

Dad’s jaw dropped. “Are you crazy, too?”

“Perfectly sane women do not like being called crazy, dear,” my mom said. She offered him a soft smile. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I kept it a secret for all this time because I was trying to protect the two people I love more than anything in the world.”

My dad just shook his head.

Well, this was a big fat failure so far. Dad wasn’t just going to take our word for it, and I couldn’t blame him. It was a lot to take in—the existence of magical creatures, of fairies and a whole Fae world. I’d even known about werewolves, witches, and vampires by the time I’d learned about my Fae heritage, and it had still been a tough pill to swallow.

“Mom, maybe you can show Dad some of your Fae magic so he’ll understand,” I suggested.

Dad let out a strange whimper-snort.

“Sure, honey.” Mom walked over to the windowsill where a dead plant was perched and carried it back to the table. She eyed my dad. “You never were great at remembering to water my plants. Still, I suppose it’s not a big deal.” She waved her hand over the plant and it came back to life, its dead, curled leaves unfurling and turning green. In seconds, a flower bloomed in right in front of us.

“Wow,” I breathed. It was amazing to see her magic at work.

My dad gasped, his mouth dropping open. “You can really do that? It’s not some trick?”

My mom and I both nodded.

“Am I dreaming?”

Mom and I both shook our heads.

“Do you have powers, too?” Dad asked me, his eyes still wide.

“My powers are still a work in progress,” I said. “When I have better control of them, I’ll show you. I promise.”

My dad sank back in his chair. “Wow. It’s just… Wow… Wow. *Wow*.”

I looked at Mom with wide eyes. *Did we just break Dad*?

Then my dad turned to me again. “And you went to… Fae land? To save your mom?”

I nodded.

“But your mom says it’s a dangerous place. What if something happened to you? I’d have lost both my wife *and* my daughter!” He was breathing heavily and he looked like he was about to pass out. This was too much information, too fast.

“It’s okay, Dad. I’m all right. I’m here. Mom and I both are. Going to the Fae world was the only way for me to save her, and yeah, there were some dangers, but I didn't go alone.”

Xavier walked in at that moment, and I pointed at him. “Xavier was there, and he’s a werewolf so we were fine.”

There was a long beat of silence before I realized what I’d just done.

My dad’s face—already pretty damn pale—went ashen. “A w-werewolf?”

Realization dawned on me. “Oh shit.”

**Episode 598**

It was official. I was the world’s biggest idiot. Step aside, the subject of every Florida Man headline. There was a new queen in town, and she’d just outed her werewolf boyfriend to her aggressively normalsauce dad.

Xavier looked at me in horror, and I didn’t blame him. If there had been a mirror nearby, I’d have looked at myself like that too.

*What the hell, Cali? You can’t just casually out someone as a supernatural creature. UGH.*

My dad jumped back, spilling his—hopefully—lukewarm coffee down his shirt as he pointed a shaky finger at Xavier. “You’re… You’re a werewolf?”

Before Xavier could form a response, my dad turned to me. “You’re dating a *werewolf?*”

Then he turned back to Xavier, his eyes so wide I thought the stress might make them pop right out of his head. “We made spaghetti together! I taught you about my secret sauce.”

*Okay*, I hadn’t seen that one coming. *Weird flex, Dad*.

“Dad,” I tried again. “It’s all right.”

He spun back to me. The poor guy was ping-ponging between the three supernatural creatures sharing his oxygen, and if he didn’t calm down, it looked like he wouldn’t be sharing that oxygen for much longer. “How is this okay, Cali? How is any of this okay?” His voice cracked. Hopefully his brain wouldn’t follow suit. “First your mom tells me she’s been lying to me from the moment we met, that she’s some kind of fairy—”

“Fae,” my mom corrected.

He ignored her and continued on his tirade. “And then I find out that the daughter I’ve loved from the moment she was born has been keeping secrets from me too! Now, not only do I find out that my daughter is only half-human, and has spent the last several weeks wandering around in a dangerous other world, but I’m also being told that the nice guy she’s brought home is actually a *werewolf*? Tell me, Cali. How is this *okay?*”

I opened my mouth to speak, then closed it. And then opened it again. I didn’t know what to say to make him feel better about all this. And I was worried that there *wasn’t* a right thing to say. The world my dad had thought he’d lived in his entire life had just been destroyed. We’d all kept secrets from him and told ourselves it was for the best, that it was to protect him. But I was starting to realize that it had just been to make our lives a bit easier. It had to hurt to realize nobody in your family trusted you enough to tell you the truth. And while I loved Xavier, I could see objectively how a werewolf might not make the ‘Top Five Candidates for Dating My Daughter’ list.

I could feel Xavier’s eyes burning into me. “Guess you let the cat out of the bag,” he said. “Great.” He turned to my dad. “She’s right, Tom. I’m—”

“Stay back!” My dad grabbed the resurrected plant, brandishing it like a weird, flowery weapon. “I suppose you’re going to prove it too, and turn into a werewolf right here in my own dining room? Get back, young man—wolf. Whatever you are.”

“Dad, please try to relax.” I held up my hands. “Xavier’s not going to do anything that anyone is uncomfortable with.”

Dad took a deep breath. “I think you should leave,” he said to Xavier, his tone almost resembling calm for the first time since I’d come downstairs.

“Dad, that’s not fair!” I argued. “Do you have any idea how racist you sound right now? What, you’re okay with Mom and me being Fae, but you draw the line at werewolves?”

“Maybe it’s not fair,” he said, never taking his eyes off of Xavier, “but this is way too much.”

“But—”

“Cali, why don’t you and Xavier go out for breakfast,” Mom suggested.

I huffed. She was siding with Dad now? “But Mom!”

She held up a hand. “I’ll take care of this. Please.”

I looked from my mom to my dad, to Xavier, who shook his head with a growl. There was no good option here. Dad was furious and confused and reeling, but Xavier was undoubtedly pissed at me for spilling the beans. “Fine.” I sighed. I followed Xavier out of the room, dreading the conversation we were about to have.

To Xavier’s credit, he didn’t storm out of my parents’ house like I wanted to. If anything, he was almost creepily calm and quiet as he walked out and gently shut the door behind us. This was almost worse than anger.

“I know you’re upset,” I began. “But—”

He rounded on me. “Why’d you drag me into this? We were getting along pretty well, your dad and me, and now he thinks I’m going to rip his family apart. Probably literally.”

First of all, it was adorable how much he cared about what my dad thought of him. It was also a strange look on him. I was used to Xavier not giving a damn about what anyone thought. He’d certainly never cared about whether or not someone liked him before.

But most of all, it broke my heart to upset him like this. It had been a simple, thoughtless mistake, and I hadn’t meant to hurt him, but there was no taking it back now. “I’m so sorry, Xavier,” I said. “I didn’t mean to—it just happened. I saw how upset my dad was getting and I panicked and wanted to help him feel better and it just kind of spilled out.”

He scoffed. “You thought telling your dad I’m a werewolf would make him feel better?”

“Yes! I really did! I mean, I can see now that it was a mistake, but it’s how I feel about you. I’m not afraid of your wolf. It makes me feel safe, and you *have* kept me safe. Time and time again. And in the moment, my instinct was to share that sense of safety with my dad.”

Xavier sighed, but the anger on his face softened. “Well, now what? Do you want me to talk to him?”

“Oh hell no.” I waved that idea away. “My mom said she can handle it, and I believe her.”

“But your dad told me to get out,” he said.

“Dad will calm down. He just needs time,” I said. Though honestly? I wasn’t so sure. Fae and werewolves were a lot to process. It was a good thing I hadn’t mentioned witches, vampires, or trolls. He really would have lost his shit then.

“How about that breakfast?” Xavier suggested. “It’ll give him time to calm down, and all this drama has made me hungry.”

It definitely wouldn’t hurt to get Xavier out of the house for a little while. At least until Dad calmed down a bit. I honestly didn’t know if their relationship would ever be the same. “I’ll call Lola and Jay and have them meet us at Mrs. Smith’s cafe.”

Lola was all in when I called to invite them to breakfast, and I blew out a breath when I ended the call. At least one thing was going right. Xavier came up to me and rested his hands on my hips, gently pressing me against the wall.

“What are you—”

His lips brushed against mine in a feather-soft caress. It left me hungry for more and took my breath away all at once.

“What was that for?” I asked.

He smiled. “You looked like you needed it.”

We arrived at the cafe at the same time as Lola and Jay. After greeting us, Lola excused herself to go wash her hands in the bathroom. “My lip gloss exploded on me in the car,” she explained. “I’ll be right back.”

I watched her disappear into the ladies’ room and turned to Jay. “How are things going with her shifting obsession?”

He sighed. “Still going strong. Honestly, I’m getting worried. Maybe you can suggest she see a doctor when we get back to Oregon. Shifting is really dangerous for her. She’s a hybrid! Honestly, she’s lucky to have made it this far without any kind of terrible accident. But if I tell her to see a doctor, she’ll just get mad.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “I’ll see what I can do. Hopefully we can get her some help.”

I left Jay and Xavier alone to join Lola in the bathroom.

She eyed me in the mirror. “Hey. Thanks for the invite, by the way. I thought for sure you’d be having breakfast with your parents this morning.”

I snorted. “About that.”

I explained what had happened this morning at the Hart house, and Lola’s eyes got progressively wider with each new twist.

“Wow,” she finally said. “That really sucks. I don’t blame you for bailing. Hopefully your mom can talk some sense into your dad.”

“Yeah, hopefully.” I eyed her carefully, not sure how to broach the subject of her shifting. “So, how does it feel to be back here?”

Her expression brightened. “It feels great! And it was great to see your mom and dad last night, too.”

*Strike one for Cali.*

I smiled. “It really was.”

I followed Lola out of the bathroom, and I was immediately confronted by a guy wearing a hoodie. His face was hidden under the brim of a hat and the sunglasses he was wearing indoors. He reached out and put a hand on my shoulder. “I need your help, Cali.”

I’d have recognized that voice anywhere. “Alex?”

But before he could answer, Xavier slammed Alex against the wall.

**Episode 599**

I shoved Xavier back with all my might.

“What are you doing?” I cried, but he still had Alex by the front of his shirt.

“No one puts a hand on you and gets away with it,” he growled, eyes glinting.

“But… It’s Alex!” I spluttered. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Xavier’s brow furrowed in confusion. He snatched Alex’s sunglasses off his face and gave him a sniff. It must have all checked out because he let him go and took a step back, looking more than a little chagrined.

“What’s wrong with *me?*” he fired back at me. “What about him? He’s in a fucking disguise! Hiding under all that shit. How was I supposed to know?”

“Okay, yeah.” I shrugged. “He looks a little conspicuous, sure. But, still, let’s maybe take a proper look at people before we resort to violence, okay?”

Alex cleared his throat. I looked over at him, immediately feeling guilty since basically all the blood had drained from his face.

“Cali.” He sounded more forceful than he looked. “I need to talk to you. I can explain everything.”

“Then start talking,” Xavier barked.

Alex shifted from one foot to the other. It was clear he’d been planning on this being a more private conversation. But he looked desperate enough to take what he could get. My heart went out to him.

“Uh, okay.” He took a deep breath and looked directly at me. “Cali, why haven’t you texted me? I’ve been trying to reach you.”

I took Alex in. Sure, it was weird of him to surprise me out of nowhere, but I couldn’t get over how freaked out he looked. His shoulders were hunched and he was practically curling in on himself, he looked so nervous.

But what was I supposed to say to him? *Sorry for being a shitty texter! I was in a different world trying to find a magical flower to save my mom’s life! What did I miss?*

“I was out of town,” I lied, giving him a tight smile. “And with my mom being sick and all… Things have been really crazy.”

“But I needed you,” he blurted out, sounding desperate. “Nobody understands.”

“Alex, calm down.” I put a hand on his shoulder to soothe him. “It’s okay.”

“But it *isn’t!*” he insisted. “Nothing is okay, Cali. My life is destroyed and… I think I’m going crazy. I see Tony everywhere. And I know he’s dead, but it feels so real.”

My stomach flipped. I had thought I’d seen Tony in the hospital… Maybe that hadn’t been a figment of my imagination, after all.

My eyes betrayed me by glancing over at Xavier. After all, Tony’s death was his fault and had absolutely nothing to do with Alex—who was probably just feeling guilty because he was almost unbearably sweet. Xavier looked down at the floor, not wanting to give himself away.

Fine.

I’d have to deal with this myself.

“You’re not crazy,” I assured Alex. “I… I thought I saw Tony too, the other day.”

“You did?” Alex asked, perking up. “Where?”

Before I could answer, Alex looked around nervously.

“Is he here right now?” he asked me.

*Nope! I saw him in the hospital when I was saving my mom’s life with a flower. It was pretty chilling given that my boyfriend—if we can call him that—is Tony’s killer.*

Since I couldn’t say that, for a moment I considered pointing to a mop in the corner and pretending I thought it was Tony. But that seemed like overkill.

“Uh, no,” I admitted. “I think we’re all just a little freaked out by what happened. Thinking about someone who died is really normal. Grief affects everyone differently.”

I wondered if this had anything to do with the orb. It *had* been making people see ghosts. But why would Silas want to bring Tony back? And why would he torture Alex with his memory?

“Could you hang with Alex for a second?” I asked Lola. “I need to talk to Xavier and Jay about something… unrelated.”

“Sure,” Lola agreed, raising an eyebrow at my less-than-smooth transition.

I pulled the guys out of earshot.

“Very smooth, Cali,” Jay snarked.

“Yeah, yeah.” I waved his comment away. “Look, at first I thought Alex was just freaked out that someone so close to him had died. I mean, for a while, the cops thought he did it. He probably has a bunch of feelings he’s still processing, but this… Could this be connected to the orb?”

“I mean it’s possible.” Jay nodded. “But who can say? No offense, but look at him. Your friend might just be going crazy.”

I looked over at Alex. Lola was talking to him in a low, calming voice as he wrapped his arms around himself like he was holding his body together.

Xavier sighed, bringing me back to our conversation.

“The orb draws energy from the dead,” he said. “And Tony is dead.”

“And you thought you saw Ava, right?” I asked him, still not thinking it was worth it to bring up my dream. “So this *is* kind of going around.”

“What?” Jay asked, his voice shooting up an octave. “*Ava*? When did that happen? And why wasn’t I told immediately?”

“Well, I was high off my ass at a weed farm,” Xavier said. “So I wasn’t sure if it was real.”

“Okay, this is getting too weird.” Jay shook his head. “Maybe we should just get back to the pack house.”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I’m more worried about my mom and dad right now, to be honest. Plus, I can’t just leave Alex like this.”

“Why not?” Xavier asked, tension leaking into his voice.

I glared at him. This wasn’t the time for him to get all possessive.

“Because he’s my friend,” I told him firmly.

“Maybe you should rethink that,” he huffed.

“I will not,” I insisted. “And don’t you dare try to make me.”

For a moment, Xavier just stared at me. Like he had half a mind to throw me over his shoulder and take me out of this place by force. But he must have known that would start a fight he couldn’t win, because he just sighed.

“My coffee’s ready,” he grumbled, before heading over to the counter to get it.

“Is it just me, or is Xavier acting like he’s jealous of Alex?” Jay asked me.

“Xavier acts like he’s jealous of everyone.” I rolled my eyes. “Everyone who isn’t him, anyway. It’s always been a problem for him.”

“Sorry.” Jay gave me an uncomfortable smile. “I know he’s my friend and I’m supposed to be on his side and all. And I am. But you know I’m on your side too, right?”

“Only because Lola would skin you alive if you weren’t,” I teased him.

“I mean yeah, that’s like eighty percent of my reasoning, sure.” Jay grinned, and I punched him in the shoulder playfully.

After that, I joined Xavier at the counter as he sipped his coffee.

“I’m not going to apologize for being protective,” he told me, before I could even say anything. “How was I supposed to know it was just Alex? Also, I’m not entirely sure he’s not someone to worry about. Something’s always been off about that guy—”

“Xavier,” I interrupted. “We have been down this road so many times before. I really don’t want to have this fight with you again.”

Xavier looked past me at Jay, Lola, and Alex.

“Let’s not talk about this here, okay?” he asked.

He turned and headed outside and I followed, trying to be respectful of this small thing he was asking for. He led me outside to a cute wooden bench and sat down. I sat down beside him, my arm touching his—I hoped it would show that I wasn’t too mad at him. That he could talk to me.

“I don’t want to fight,” I admitted. “There’s way too much stuff going on right now to add another fight to either of our plates. But… I just wish you wouldn’t overreact to stuff like this.”

“It’s who I am, Cali.” He turned to me and cupped my chin in his hand, turning my face toward his. “You’re my mate and I’m… protective. It’s not the way I’m choosing to be. It’s instinct.”

“Is it because of Ava?” I asked. “Because she died?”

“No. Maybe.” Xavier shook his head, apparently defeated by this question. “I don’t know.”

“What do you think we should do?” I asked him.

“About Alex?” he asked, confused. “Who cares?”

I opened my mouth to remind him that *I* cared. Very much.

“Shit.” He wiped a hand down his face. “I’m sorry. I know you care. Which means that I care. It’s just really tough for me to be sympathetic to a guy that’s just waiting for us to break up so he can have a chance with you. You get that, right?”

“He’s my friend, Xavier,” I reminded him. “We’re just friends. I’ve told you that like a million times.”

“I know, I know.” He nodded. “And even if he feels differently, that’s all that should matter. How you feel. I’m sorry I let other stuff get in the way.”

“It’s time to accept it,” I pressed.

“I’ll try,” Xavier agreed. “I promise I will.”

“Okay.” I smiled at him, wanting to encourage this good behavior. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

I leaned my head against his shoulder and we sat there for a second. I really hoped Xavier meant it when he said he was going to try this time. I was really tired of being disappointed.

“So. What do we do now?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“Maybe Jay’s right,” Xavier said. “Maybe I should go back home.”

I felt thrown. Would he really leave, just like that?

“But if I did,” he continued. “Would you come with me?”

**Episode 600**

JOSS

“Exposed brick!” Sage cried, clapping her hands like it was Christmas morning. “Our kitchen has exposed brick. This rules.”

“Calm down, babe,” Zainab deadpanned, clearly biting the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling at how cute she found her.

“As if you haven’t watched House Hunters with me for hours at a time,” Sage snarked back. “This is a safe space, you can tell them you DIY.”

Rishika barked out a laugh and Zainab glared at her. Though I was glad they liked the house I’d chosen, I did feel a pang seeing them all enjoying it. I was envious of their dynamic. They were friends in such an effortless way. I wished I had someone in this pack I could care for. Someone who cared for me.

I let my eyes dart over to the corner to check in on Violet. She’d volunteered to install the curtains to help out—a job that let her be quiet and keep to herself. She’d been doing that a lot lately. Stormy, grey guilt washed over me.

I’d barely had time to talk to Violet over the last couple of weeks. I knew I should have been helping her through this period of loss in her life. Lilac hadn’t died all that long ago, and we’d all had to deal with so much since then. Violet could’ve easily been feeling forgotten.

Well, I hadn’t forgotten.

I headed up the staircase and looked over the great room, pleased with my decision to move here. It was light and airy and most importantly: new.

We all needed a chance to get away from at least some of the darkness of the past few months. And as the pack’s Luna, giving us an opportunity to move on a bit was the least I could do.

Speaking of moving on, I wondered when Greyson would be back. I’d sent him the new address, but he’d never responded.

I’d picked out a bedroom just for me, one with big bay windows and lots of natural light. I’d left Greyson the master bedroom. There was no point even pretending that we were going to stay together. I’d accepted that I was just his Luna, and nothing more.

There was no point in pretending we were mates when we weren’t, right?

I looked in the mirror and took myself in. My skin was glowing with exertion from the move. My casual athleisure outfit was comfy, but also incredibly cute. I liked what I saw. And if Greyson didn’t, that was his problem. He was missing out. I wasn’t going to pine over him, or throw fits over him and Cali anymore.

That was a headache I really didn’t need.

I looked out my window into the woods, taking a deep breath and just enjoying the sea of treetops. It was gorgeous. This was a good house in a good location. But we needed a security routine.

I added it to my mental checklist—the one that was always growing, and that I was desperately trying to keep up with. Being a Luna wasn’t easy.

I heard something in the hall, the dull thud of heavy boxes hitting the ground. Probably Rishika or someone else moving into their new room. I opened my bedroom door to see if they needed anything and was startled when I came face to face with a stunningly handsome guy straining under the weight of the box he was holding on his shoulder. His fist was raised in midair, like he was just about to knock on the door.

He had dark brown skin and long hair pulled back into a slightly messy topknot. His burgundy T-shirt looked well-worn, but fit snugly across his broad chest. He smiled easily at me.

“Perfect timing.” He dropped his free hand to his side.

“Who are you?” I asked, confused. We hadn’t hired any movers. I would have remembered. Especially if one of them was this hot.

The mysterious man laughed. “I’m Ravi.” He smiled, affable. “I’m one of the Rogues who signed onto the Redwood pack with Rishika.”

He set the box down just outside my door, like he was aware I hadn’t invited him in and didn’t want to intrude. I wished that wasn’t enough to put butterflies in my stomach, but I hadn’t been around an actual gentleman in a while. Especially one with arms like his. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t noticed him around before.

“I don’t think we’ve really had a chance to formally meet.” Ravi scratched the back of his neck. “You’ve been super busy making sure we have a place to live.”

“Don’t forget saving your ass from the guillotine,” I added, smirking.

“Oh, I didn’t forget.” He beamed at me. “Thanks. For all of it.”

“Well, thank you,” I did my best to seem casual but warm, not wanting to let on how enticing I found him. “You know, for not thinking I’m a total jackass for not finding the time to get to know you. I’m sorry. That’s not great leadership on my part.”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged, grinning. “I like having a roof over my head and not being dead. Want to call it even?”

“Sure.” I grinned and stretched my hand out.

He took it, and I tried to ignore the electricity gliding across my skin.

“Nice to meet you,” I told him.

“Likewise.” He grinned at me.

“So, what brings you to my room?” I asked, then realizing how that must have sounded, I added, “I mean, what do you want?”

“I need a room,” he admitted. “I wasn’t sure where I was supposed to stay. I thought I’d check with the boss.”

Bossing Ravi around sounded really, really nice. And for a second, my mind entertained a number of scenarios where I’d be more than comfortable being in charge of him. But after a moment, I forced myself to snap out of it. I had to be a leader right now.

“Follow me.” I brushed past him and walked down the hall.

I wasn’t proud of it, but I led him as far away from my room as possible, all the way to the end of the hall. I couldn’t afford to be distracted while there were so many pack issues to deal with. And I had a feeling Ravi could be very distracting, if I let him.

I opened the door, revealing a small but comfortable space. I remembered peeking in here when we’d toured the place. I hadn't really thought much about who would stay there, or if I’d ever be in this room much. Now, I couldn't imagine this room not factoring into my dreams tonight.

“Thanks so much.” He tossed his box on the bed.

“Sure,” I replied, starting to duck out.

“I’m looking forward to seeing you around more, now that you know my name and all,” he teased gently.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” I teased back. “I’m very important.”

And with that, I left, thrown by the not-so-new guy.

Was I crazy, or had he been flirting with me? But who would flirt with their new Luna? Or was he just being friendly, and I was going crazy from lack of male interest? Because at this point, it seemed possible.

I trudged down the stairs, hoping to clear my head. I was dismayed to find Violet sitting on a box, staring at her own lap. Lost in sorrow.

I had to deal with this now. Screw waiting for the right time or the right method or for things to cool down. This girl needed help. Now.

I made a beeline for her, wracking my brain for a strategy. I hadn’t had a little sister growing up. I didn’t know the best way to soothe a teenaged girl. I supposed I’d have to wing it.

“Hey, Violet.” I knelt down next to her, cheery. “Pick a room yet?”

Violet looked down at me with her big, brown puppy-dog eyes and shook her head. This wasn’t going to be easy.

“Maybe we should go outside,” I suggested. “We could talk a little, figure out the best place for you.”

I rose to my feet and offered her my hand. Violet took it and I led her out to the back deck. For a moment, we looked out at the small lake by the woods in silence. I took a deep breath and hoped I’d made the right decisions. Becoming Greyson’s Luna, working to become a part of the pack, picking this house for all of us to move into… It was all a lot.

“I’d ask how you’re doing, but I think I have a pretty good guess,” I started gently.

Violet just shrugged. “Yeah, well.” She squinted out at the lake. “Everything sucks without him.”

I nodded, not sure what to tell her. I couldn’t imagine losing a twin, someone who’d been beside you your whole life. It had to be devastating.

“You know,” I tried. “Time heals everything.”

Violet looked at me accusingly.

“Ugh, that was deeply clichéd.” I groaned. “I’m sorry. Just… Know that I’m here to listen, if you ever need to talk.”

But something flickered in Violet’s eyes. Suddenly, her hand was shooting out to grab my arm and she was stifling a scream. What could she have possibly seen to scare her so much?

But then I followed her gaze and saw exactly what had made her cry out.

Lilac was here, walking out of the lake toward us.

**Episode 601**

GREYSON

I pushed down a little harder on the gas than I needed to. Maybe the pack would find it ostentatious, pulling up to the new pack house in a cherry-red sports car, but I was determined to have a little fun on the way if I could. Anything to distract me from the hangover I was still feeling after last night at the bar with Artemis.

Artemis, whose entire head was currently sticking out the window of said car as she marveled at the ‘magic’ of the human world. Every car, bus, truck, or electric light she saw was a spectacular sight that had to be examined further. It had been endearing at first, but it was starting to get old.

On more than one occasion today, I’d found myself biting my tongue to keep from snapping at her to shut up and just let me *think*. But every time, I stopped myself—because when Artemis actually stopped talking, my mind went straight to Cali.

And thinking about her wasn’t easy right now.

Because thinking about Cali meant thinking about how I’d lied to her and said I didn’t remember our time in the Fae world, when the truth was the complete opposite. I couldn’t stop thinking of all the times I’d held her and touched her. How her goal to save her mother had become my own. And how, after all we’d been through, it was Xavier who’d gotten to help her find the flower, and Xavier who’d gotten to deliver it to Cali’s mother.

If I hadn’t pushed Cali away at Haystack Rock, I’d have been with her in Minnesota instead of here in a fancy car, with my head throbbing and the wrong girl—and last night’s horribly awkward kiss had proved that Artemis and I *were* wrongfor each other—on my way to a bunch of people with questions I wouldn’t be able to answer satisfactorily.

If I’d been there instead of a phone call away, it would have been much harder to lie to Cali about my feelings. But keeping myself at arm’s length had allowed me the space to wiggle away from her once more.

Artemis might have had a point about Maren. Whether I liked it or not, it seemed like Cali’s Fae ancestry put me on edge somehow. It was like part of me had a foot out the door already with her. Maybe if Cali weren’t Fae, I wouldn’t have lied to her. And then I wouldn’t have been forced to imagine what she and Xavier were doing right now.

Either way, I’d done it. Like always, I’d done what I thought I needed to do to survive. And so far, my instincts had never let me down.

But still, Maren haunted my dreams. I’d locked up all my memories of her, deep and far away. At least, I’d thought I had, until I’d said her name last night. My eyes flicked over to Artemis. Maybe she wouldn’t remember our conversation.

“So.” Artemis narrowed her eyes and fixed me with a critical stare. “Tell me about this Maren.”

I sighed. Was she a mind reader? So much for keeping that stone unturned. Cali was the same way. She never let anything lie, always had to pull it out.

“There are a few things you should keep in mind for when we get to the pack house,” I said, changing the subject as smoothly as I could. “The most important being: you’re Fae, and everyone else is a werewolf. I think you can do the math there.”

“Yeah, yeah, make nice with the hounds.” Artemis rolled her eyes. “I know our races aren’t naturally predisposed to get along, but look at you and me. I think we’re becoming fast friends.”

She fluttered her eyelashes at me, clearly attempting to look like the model of peace and gentility, but her words dripped with sarcasm.

“Look.” I pressed on, hoping she was just giving me a hard time. “As long as you play it down and don’t do your magic shit too much, I’m sure you’ll get along with everyone.”

Artemis side-eyed me. Clearly, she didn’t buy it.

“Okay, there are a few members of the pack I’m not *totally* sure about,” I admitted, flustered. “They’re new. But they pledged their loyalty to me and as of right now, I mostly don’t want anyone to kill you.”

Artemis snorted, and in spite of myself, the corners of my mouth turned up.

“I’m just asking you to play it safe, okay?” I asked. “Be smart. That’s all.”

“I’m well aware of the dangers, thank you,” Artemis replied, smirking at me. “But I’m getting the feeling that you don’t actually feel like you need to warn me, you just want to change the subject. Which—just in case you haven’t figured it out by now—isn’t going to work with me. I’m kind of like a water sprite with sugar on stuff like this.”

I eyed her skeptically. I assumed this was a Fae world ‘dog with a bone’ colloquialism that I didn’t know. Mostly the reference to water sprites reminded me of fishing Cali out from the bottom of a cavernous well. The more I talked to Artemis, the more she reminded me of Cali. So much so that I was starting to wish I had a muzzle for her.

“So…” Artemis prompted, like it was going to be that easy to get me to spill my guts.

“So?” I replied tersely.

“*So?*” she drew the word out like it had at least three syllables, and I realized she was never going to drop it.

“Fine,” I growled. “I met Maren at a bar.”

“The one from last night?” Artemis asked, leaning forward with interest.

“No.” I shook my head. “I used to go out to bars a lot. Kind of a way to meet people. To not feel so…”

I cut myself off. The last thing I wanted to do was tell this Fae girl all about how lonely I’d been for a large portion of my life. She hadn’t signed up for that.

“Anyway.” I switched gears. “We clicked right away. We started seeing more and more of each other. And the whole time, I didn’t realize she was keeping a secret—that she was Fae. But, to be fair, I hadn’t told her I was a werewolf.”

I took a deep breath, wondering how to summarize this. How could I give Artemis as little information as possible? Just enough to satisfy her?

“We figured out each other’s secrets the hard way,” I said.

I let my eyes drift down to the gas gauge and saw that we were low.

“We gotta pull off up there to get gas,” I said, slowing down.

“Pull off?” Artemis’s brows wrinkled in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“This car we’re riding in,” I explained, as I pulled into the service station. “It runs on gas.”

“Runs on?” she asked.

I took a breath and reminded myself of the time Artemis saved me from a giant snake. I owed her a primer on cars, at the very least.

“Think of the gas as energy,” I tried again. “The car needs it to move.”

“Why not just get a horse?” she asked me. “Cars seem like an inefficient mode of transportation. A horse doesn’t need energy to move. It just does.”

“But it needs food,” I pointed out, feeling like maybe I’d just reached a point she could understand.

Her eyes widened and she nodded happily, seemingly thrilled to understand something about the strange world she’d been plunged into. I remembered all the times in the Fae world when I’d gotten curious about how things worked—and how I’d always pushed that curiosity aside so I could survive. How could I blame Artemis for wanting to make sense of the strange place she’d found herself in?

“Yes!” She clapped her hands together excitedly. “The gas is your car’s food!”

“Kind of, yeah.” I nodded, feeling a little lighter for having helped someone.

I hopped out of the car and stuck my head through the open window. I was struck for a second by how small Artemis was. How dainty. I knew she could handle herself, but part of me felt like I needed to protect her.

“Don’t do anything, okay?” I tried to phrase my order as a request, so it would go down smoother. “Just stay put while I grab a few things and get us fueled up.”

“Food?” Artemis asked, brightening.

“For us and the car,” I answered, before shutting the door behind me.

“Can you fill her up, please?” I asked the service attendant.

“Of course!” he chirped, nodding jovially.

I breezed into the convenience store, eager to leave all further discussions of Maren behind. Maybe introducing Artemis to junk food would keep her occupied. If anything, it would be harder for her to talk if her mouth was full.

I scanned the shelves of the modestly sized little shop. I grabbed anything and everything I could imagine Artemis liking. Cheez-Its, Flamin’ Hot Cheetos, Oreos, and every flavor of Pringles they had. Just as I was starting to really hit my stride in the jerky section, I felt the ground start to shake beneath my feet.

Bottles rattled, snacks fell to the floor, and I heard a scream from outside.

“Earthquake!” the clerk shouted, panicking.

I ran outside before I could think to pay for anything. I found Artemis outside the car, facing a very rattled looking service attendant. He still had the hose clutched in his hand, but gas was pooling on the ground around his feet as he stared at her in shock.

**Episode 602**

Xavier looked at me, his eyes burning as he waited for my answer.

“It’s simple,” he insisted, his voice low. “Either you come back with me to Oregon, or you don’t. Which do you want?”

I hesitated. I wished it were as simple as he made it sound. But there were other factors.

I’d just gotten my mother back, and there was so much I wanted to ask her. So much I still wanted to learn about our family, and the things I could do. I’d spent time in the Fae world, but it had only left me with more questions about what it meant to be only half-human. And my mom was the only other person I knew who had a foot in each world.

But even if that weren’t the case, she was still my mother, and I’d seen her flatline. I’d lost her, even though it had just been for a few moments. I was still reeling from it. There was this well of pain inside me that threatened to burst if I didn’t take some time to sort through it.

I felt this immense pressure to have my eyes on her. To assure myself that she was safe. To spend every moment I could with her. Because I’d learned just how precious our time together was, and I wasn’t about to waste it.

Plus, my dad had just learned about Fae and werewolves. He was probably *still* hyperventilating. And for good reason. I wished all of this had been explained to *me* much more gently than it had been—I owed that to him.

Xavier’s question was so much more complicated than he understood. How was I supposed to answer it without hurting him?

“My parents,” I murmured, my eyes misting up. “I can’t just leave them.”

I could see the hurt in his eyes, but he nodded all the same. I knew that even if he understood my reasoning, it still must have felt like a rejection.

“I have to go back to Oregon to get a handle on this orb thing,” he told me. “I’d hoped you’d get it and join me…”

“I do get it,” I insisted. “But my family needs me right now. And I still have so many questions for my mother about who we are, and about my powers. Everything is changing for my family right now. I can’t leave them like this.”

“Of course.” He nodded again, conceding. “I understand. I just wish the timing was better. We just got back, too. It would be nice to really focus on us. On making something new.”

“And I promise we will,” I told him, taking his hands. “Just because I want to stay here right now, doesn’t mean I’m going to forget you.”

I leaned close and kissed him softly. His stubble scratched against my cheeks, and I appreciated the friction. Just feeling him against me felt so warm, so right. I felt an ache in my chest at the thought of him leaving.

“You could stay, you know,” I whispered against his lips.

Xavier smiled at me, his eyes sparkling. I could see the tenderness swelling inside of him, turning him into the warm protector I loved. I wondered for a second if it was my favorite version of him.

“I could,” he replied. “But let’s not forget what color your dad’s face turned when he found out I was a werewolf.”

I giggled softly.

“It’s probably best that I give him as much space as possible,” Xavier said, putting it as kindly as he could.

“Fair enough.” I grinned broadly at him, wishing I could just relax with him in this moment for forever.

Jay, Lola, and Alex came out of Mrs. Smith’s, ending our private moment. They looked at us expectantly, like they were hoping we’d have all the answers.

“So what’s the plan?” Jay asked.

Xavier looked at Alex, his expression hardening. I put a hand on his knee, silently urging him to be calm.

“We can discuss it later,” Xavier answered him in clipped tones.

“I’m gonna borrow Alex for a minute,” I announced, getting up and grabbing Alex by the wrist so I could lead him out of earshot.

I led him between two minivans and stopped, taking a look at him. He had dark circles under his eyes. I wondered when he’d last had a good night’s sleep.

“I’m sorry things have been so hard for you lately,” I told him. “The good news is, I’m gonna stay here in Minnesota for a while. But right now, I really need to be with my family. My mom just came back from the hospital, and we all have a lot of stuff to talk through. But I promise I’ll call you soon. Does that sound okay?”

Alex nodded, looking more fragile than I’d ever seen him.

“Yeah, thanks,” he mumbled. “But please don’t forget to call, Cali.”

“I promise.” I wrapped my arms around him in a tight hug.

I saw Xavier glowering at me over Alex’s shoulder, accompanied by Lola’s frown, which I think was reserved for me. I knew I needed to be a better friend to Alex. After all, everything that he was going through was because of me.

Well, almost all of it. But still. I owed him.

I walked back over to the group.

“Alex is such a limp noodle,” Lola muttered, shaking her head. “A clingy, limp noodle.”

“Exactly!” Xavier cried, like he was happy someone else had finally voiced it.

I grimaced. “Seriously, could just one of you cut Alex a break?”

“No,” Lola and Xavier said at the same time.

“You guys are the worst,” I grumbled.

“Then you’ll be happy to hear that Jay and Lola are coming back to Oregon with me.” Xavier smiled at me.

“If I can convince my dads to let me go,” Lola added. “They’re still pretty ticked off about me dropping out of school. I’m kind of worried they’re going to put me on house arrest.”

“Then I’ll just break you out, babe,” Jay teased, throwing his arm around her shoulders and making her giggle when he put all his weight on her.

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Later, when we got back to my parents’ house, I was relieved to discover that my dad was out on a walk, and consequently wouldn’t be waving any more house plants at my boyfriend. Which had been ineffective and embarrassing, to say the least. Not that I knew anything about that. A spatula was a far superior improvised weapon.

“I calmed him down,” my mother explained with a small smile. “But he’s still trying to wrap his head around things. I told him to get some air.”

“Can you guys excuse me a sec?” Xavier asked. “I gotta set up my new phone.”

“Yeah, you can use my room,” I told him, smiling.

“Xavier, Jay, and Lola are going back to Oregon,” I told my mother. “But don’t worry, I’m staying. We still have a lot to talk about.”

“I agree,” my mom replied warmly. “Maybe I should duck out and look for Tom. It would be nice to have a rational discussion with him about all this.”

“Do you think he can *handle* all this?” I asked, twisting my hands.

What if my dad decided this was all too much and left us? He hadn’t signed on to marry someone who wasn’t human.

My mother must have sensed my anxiety spiral, because she placed her hand on my shoulder and squeezed firmly. All I could think of was how happy I was that her strength had returned.

“Your dad is a lot stronger than he lets on,” she told me, her voice firm. “Don’t worry about him too much, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed, leaning in to press a kiss to her cheek.

“I’m gonna go see if I can find him.” My mom headed over to the couch to pull on her shoes.

I watched her for a second, looking at the color of her cheeks, the brightness in her eyes. It hit me that she was actually going to be okay. That I’d done that.

It felt nice.

I bounded up the stairs, taking them two at the time like I had when I was little. I opened the door to my bedroom and deflated a little when I saw Xavier packing.

“I found a flight back tonight,” he explained, shoving clothes into a mangy backpack I recognized as the one I’d used in middle school.

“That’s soon,” I commented, not wanting to sound needy. But a small part of me still ached. Hadn’t Xavier said this time would be different? That he wouldn’t leave me?

“I think it’s for the best,” he said. “Your family doesn’t need me underfoot while you sort all this stuff out.”

I nodded, a lump forming in my throat. I’d known he was leaving, of course, but I’d thought we’d have a little more time.

“If you’re sure.” I shrugged, but my voice betrayed me by shaking on the last word.

“Hey.” Xavier walked over to me and touched my cheek softly. “It’ll be okay. You’ll be with your mom and dad. It’ll be good for you. And hopefully you’ll be back in Oregon in a few days, and then we’ll be together again.”

I felt a soaring feeling in my chest and threw my arms around his neck, grateful for the way he held me so I could sink into him.

“Did I hear your mom leave a second ago?” he murmured into my ear. “Because if your parents aren’t home…”

And then his lips were pressed against mine.

**Episode 603**

XAVIER

I’d forgotten just how soft she was.

Logically, I knew it hadn’t been long since I’d last felt her skin—I was always touching Cali, wrapping my arms around her, leading her places by the small of her back. I couldn’t help myself. Hell, we’d hooked up in a hospital closet less than 48 hours ago.

But some part of me still felt like it had been *ages* since I’d felt her against me like this. Soft and warm and pliable and…

*Mine*.

I laid her down on the bed. I tried not to smirk at the sight of her against the bright pink comforter. We were in the room she’d grown up in. What would it have been like between us, if we’d both been normal? To be able to take her out on a date, to a movie, to hold her hand, to kiss her in my car, to have her sneak me upstairs…

To cover her mouth when she cried out, to swallow all her moans and whimpers so no one could hear us when I fucked her?

“Xavier?” Cali asked, shaking me from my thoughts.

She blinked up at me, her lips bruised, her hair mussed, her pupils blown with desire.

“Just admiring the view,” I assured her, planting a knee on the mattress and covering her body with mine.

I brought my hands to her waist and marveled at how I could almost encircle the whole thing. She was so delicate, so small, so soft. I’d been an idiot to leave her. I couldn’t believe I’d be going back to Oregon tonight. Was it too late to cancel my flight?

I slid a knee between her thighs, spreading her legs wide for me. I could feel the heat radiating from between them, and I wanted to be inside her.

I vowed that after all this was over, we’d get away from everyone and just spend days in a bed together. Just her and me. I’d discover every possible way to please her.

But until then, I’d have to make do with the time we had. I hooked my fingers into her waistband, marveling at the feel of her skin against mine. At the electricity hovering in the air between us. This kind of feeling was only possible between mates—this magnetic need that felt bigger than either of us alone.

“Can I?” I whispered against her throat, planting a hot trail of kisses down her neck.

“Yes,” she answered, her voice so breathy it was almost unrecognizable.

Not needing to be told twice, I made quick work of her jeans and underwear, tossing them over my shoulder after I stripped them off. When I turned back, Cali was completely bare.

Her cheeks flushed pink under my gaze, and her hands twitched with the effort not to cover herself up. I could see that old self-consciousness creeping back in. Didn’t she understand how perfect she was?

“Please,” I whispered. “I want to see you—see *everything*.”

She nodded, letting her hands drop to her sides.

I pulled my shirt over my head as fast as I could, not wanting to miss a second of her beautiful body. Her teeth sank into her lower lip as she watched me unzip my fly and shove my jeans and boxers down my legs, eager to cover her in kisses and touches.

She reached out to me, cupping my face with her hands, cradling it like I was something precious. Something to be treated carefully. No one had ever treated me like that. Before her, I’d never even considered that to be something I wanted, or maybe even deserved.

Our lips touched and I melted into the kiss. It was all I could do to prop myself up and not crash into her, crushing her under the weight of my body as I took what I needed. But I was determined to make her feel good first.

I thumbed at her clit and Cali trembled underneath me, groaning into my shoulder.

“Is that good, baby?” I asked softly, needing to give her exactly what she wanted and more.

She hummed contentedly, her legs spreading wider to give me room to do whatever I wanted. I swelled with pride at her faith in me.

I slid my length along her sopping wet core, coating myself in her wetness. She moaned at the friction. I couldn’t resist circling her entrance, seeing just how long I could deny her what she wanted.

“Please,” she sighed.

It turned out I couldn’t wait very long at all. I slid inside her, relishing how tight and warm she was around me. My name fell from her lips and I wondered if it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard.

“You feel so good,” I told her, my hands curling around her hips as I let her adjust to the size of me. “I think you were made for me. Made for this.”

I withdrew from her slowly, wanting to savor the way she hugged me, the way her legs circled me and the way her hands clung to my biceps. She was pulling me back to her but I resisted, knowing this was my last chance to draw it out.

I let my fingers trail up and down her skin, taking her in. Her smile, her pink cheeks, her tiger stripes. I had my mate back.

I pushed inside her, our hips flush against each other as I set a rhythm. Her nails raked down my back as she rolled her hips to meet mine. I covered her mouth with mine, unable to resist tasting her.

I trailed my hands down her spine and felt her shudder against me. I smirked, unable to hide how much I loved having this power over her. Mine. She was mine.

I felt the pressure building inside of me. I’d wanted to draw this out, but that wasn’t an option. We needed to be quick. I propped myself up and drew circles on her clit with my thumb.

“Xavier,” she gasped. “That feels so—*Oh god, right there.”*

I obliged, pushing in again and again, giving her just what she’d asked for. I refused to stop until she was there. Until she was trembling around me. Until she went limp in my arms.

“Xavier!” she cried, finally finding her release.

I let my fingers dig into the soft flesh of her thighs until I was sure she was done. Then I followed her over the edge, mouthing at her throat until we both just lay there, perfectly still.

“That was…” Cali trailed off, sounding completely blissed out.

“Yeah.” I grinned at her before rolling over so we were both on our backs, lying next to each other.

“I really want to lie here for like, forever,” Cali admitted, giggling. “But my mom and dad could be back any second. I should go clean up.”

She gave me a chaste peck on the shoulder and scurried into the bathroom. I leaned back and let my eyes close, occasionally peeking at her through the sliver in the bathroom door as she brushed her hair and flitted around looking for a clean outfit.

I took in her hair, her flushed skin, her tiger stripes, and vowed to remember every detail while we were apart. It was the least I could do for my one and only mate.

And that was when reality crashed back in around me. What if I *wasn’t* Cali’s one and only anymore? A terrible thought rolled through me, one I’d been doing my very best to push down—had she done any of the things we’d just done with Greyson while they’d been in the Fae world?

There hadn’t been a good time to ask her. Should I now?

Given how I’d just handled the whole Alex situation, prying further into her history with other guys would probably make me look pretty shitty right now. Even if I really, really wanted to know.

Anyway, the Fae world was far behind us. We were back in the real world. Back together.

But Greyson’s words still echoed in my head, setting my teeth on edge.

*What makes you think I haven’t had her?*

Had he just been playing his usual mind games? Or had something actually happened?

“Hurry up,” Cali urged, interrupting my thoughts. “My dad couldn’t have gone far. He and my mom will be back any minute.”

I hopped up, intentionally brushing against her ass as I collected my clothes from the floor.

“Hey!” Cali squealed, her cheeks turning red.

I tried to escape thoughts of Greyson and Cali together as I washed up. I really did. But when I came out of the bathroom and saw Cali blinking back at me, all open and beautiful and perfect… I just couldn’t keep my worries to myself.

“Before I leave,” I started, trying to keep my voice calm, “I need to know… What exactly happened between you and Greyson in the Fae world? I know you mind linked, but—”

“You’re asking if we slept together,” Cali finished my sentence, her feathers clearly ruffled.

“Did you?”

Tears sprang into her eyes, and I could see how flustered I’d made her. But I needed to know.

“You left me—”

“I know,” I said, cutting her off. “But please, answer me. Did you sleep with Greyson?”

“It’s none of your business,” she answered, not meeting my eyes.

“I’m your mate,” I reminded her, bristling. “It *is* my business. You’re my business.”

My phone rang and I glanced at the screen. Violet?

“You going to answer that?” Cali asked coldly.

“We’re not done,” I told her with a glare before answering. “Violet, why are you calling?”

“Xavier.” Her voice was shaky on the other end of the line. “You have to come back. Please.”

**Episode 604**

GREYSON

I crushed a tube of pizza-flavored Pringles in my fist.

“What the hell is going on?” I growled, not caring who heard. “I left for *five minutes.* Not even!”

The attendant dropped the gas hose and it fell to the ground with a loud clatter. He backed away from Artemis slowly, like she was a wild animal who could pounce at any second. And in some ways, he wasn’t wrong. He slowly raised a shaking hand to point at her in horror.

“She’s… She’s a witch!” he cried, like he was in a community theater production of *The Crucible*. “She… She zapped me! With her hands!”

I sighed. Fuck.

I stalked over to join them, bracing myself for whatever hijinks I was about to be pulled into. I was way too hungover for this shit.

“What did you do?” I asked Artemis directly, not in the mood to beat around the bush.

“Me?” she yelped, pointing at the attendant. “He attacked our car with that weapon. I was defending your property!”

I followed her gaze to the gas pump lying on the ground, hurting absolutely no one.

“The gas pump?” I asked, pointing down at the offending object and feeling like the exhausted parent of a rambunctious toddler. Assuming that toddler was overly violent.

“I had to protect myself,” Artemis insisted earnestly. “And the car. It’s hungry right now!”

I stared at her.

“Vulnerable!” She insisted.

I looked down at the pool of gas and tried to see it from her perspective. When the attendant had approached her, it must have looked strange, for sure. Maybe I should have taken some time to explain how gassing up the car worked. If I’d done that, maybe I wouldn’t currently be trying to avoid the nauseating smell of gasoline while calculating how big a cash bribe I’d need to give out to make this go away.

Traveling with a Fae was much more difficult than I’d thought it would be. There weren’t enough hours in the day to explain everything about the human world to Artemis. She was a defensive person who was quick to anger and even quicker to fight. I should have known better.

After this, I wasn’t leaving her alone without someone who knew about her situation. So at least I’d learned that much.

But what to do about the terrified gas attendant in front of me?

Before I could decide on a plan of action, the man bent over and grabbed the gas pump off the ground. He brandished it like a gun.

“Stay away from me!” he ordered us shakily. “Or I’ll spray!”

“See!” Artemis yelled at me, looking vindicated. “It *is* a weapon! I was right to take precautions!”

She raised her hands and held them up in front of her, ready for a fight. I ran to her side so I could restrain her if I needed to. I knew how quickly Artemis could turn to violence, and I wasn’t eager to cover up a murder today.

“Don’t do anything!” I barked at her. “It’s not a weapon. It’s the food!”

She looked at me like I was crazy. And while I definitely felt crazy, I knew this was the only way to explain.

“The car’s food, remember?” I continued, hating every word that came out of my mouth. “He was trying to feed the car. Like I explained earlier. He’s giving it gas.”

“Ohhhhh.” Artemis broke out in a broad grin, laughing to herself. “Of course. The car’s food.” She grinned toothily at the attendant in a way that she clearly thought was reassuring. “This is all a very funny misunderstanding.”

“Yeah, it’s hilarious,” I deadpanned.

I turned to the attendant, who was still gripping the gas nozzle for dear life. I didn’t think the conversation I’d just had with Artemis had eased his mind at all. Which made sense.

“Misunderstanding, see?” I tried, holding out my hands in a gesture of peace.

“Who are you?” the attendant asked, his voice trembling. “What do you want?”

*So many things, dude.*

“I want you to forget everything you just saw,” I answered, keeping my voice as soothing as I could. “We’ll just get gas and be on our way.”

“You know I can do that, right?” Artemis chimed in.

“I feel like you’ve done enough,” I told her, glaring.

“I mean I can make him *forget*,” she replied, before lowering her voice. “You know, with my magic.”

I rolled my eyes at the way she’d whispered the last word. Her discretion basically meant nothing at this point. But then it hit me: Cali had done a similar thing with Phil. She’d touched him and made him forget that he’d seen us all shift.

I’d never thought to talk to her more about that. It seemed like we were always rocketing from one crisis to another, and Cali hadn’t had a sustained period of time to explore her powers and figure out what she could do. But if we had someone around who could reliably wipe minds—either Cali or Artemis—that could be a game changer.

“If you’re trying to pay me off or something,” the attendant said, sounding agitated, “then you—”

But before he could finish his half-baked threat, the door to the convenience store opened and the clerk stuck his head out, looking concerned.

“Hey Stew?” he called out, his voice faux casual. “Everything okay?”

Artemis looked at me expectantly, waiting for my permission. Knowing it was our best chance, I gave her a nod.

Artemis raised her hands and drew descending spiral patterns in the air, lowering them slowly. The attendant—Stew—slouched, his expression turning vaguely dazed.

“Stew?” the clerk asked, apprehensive. He clearly wasn’t paid enough to deal with this kind of shit.

Stew shook his head and blinked a few times before drawing himself up to his full height. He looked around, taking in his surroundings sluggishly. His eyes widened when he saw the puddle of gas on the ground.

“Oh wow,” he murmured, before looking up at us. “I’m so sorry. I never do this. I must have just… spaced out for a moment and spilled this gas. I’ll just clean this up.”

“That would be great.” I smiled at him politely. I even bent down and snatched the pump off the ground. “Why don’t I fuel up in the meantime?”

Stew mumbled something that sounded like, “I need to get the kitty litter,” and puttered off in search of supplies. Artemis beamed at me, clearly very proud of herself. I rolled my eyes, making it clear I was not impressed.

“You’re no fun,” she whined.

“I think I proved last night that I’m extremely fun,” I threw back at her as I chose premium gas for the car.

“Anyone can be fun when there’s alcohol involved,” she grumbled.

After I was done, I stuffed a few bills into Stew’s shirt pocket, feeling a twinge of guilt as he grinned at me.

“Keep the change.” I clapped him on the shoulder as he poured cat litter on the spill, soaking up the gas so he could clean it.

Stew waved goodbye. “Have a good one.”

“We will!” Artemis assured him, grinning.

Once we were back on the road, I could no longer ignore Artemis’s staring. She wasn’t being subtle about it. I wondered if she knew how to do *anything* subtly.

“What?” I finally snapped, exasperated.

“Admit it,” she urged, leaning back and putting her feet on the dash.

“I’m not admitting anything,” I grumbled.

“Admit that you’re impressed,” she ordered gleefully.

“I wouldn’t have had anything to be impressed by if you’d just listened to my advice and stayed in the car,” I reminded her. “Seriously, if you pull shit like that again, I’ll shove you in the trunk for the rest of the trip.”

“Where are you keeping a trunk?” Artemis asked, wrinkling her nose in confusion.

I sighed. “Never mind.”

“So…” She grinned roguishly. “Were you impressed?”

“You’re about to learn where I keep the trunk.”

“At least admit that Fae can use their powers for good,” she prodded. “Despite your history with Maren, we’re not all bad.”

I gritted my teeth and cursed myself for ever having mentioned Maren. It had been a stupid thing to do. Artemis didn’t strike me as a good keeper of secrets—soon enough, everyone would know.

“What did you even do, anyway?” I asked her. “That guy—Stew. What did he mean, you zapped him with your hands? You scared the shit out of him back there.”

“It’s a way of using energy,” she explained. “Similar to Cali’s power, only—and no offense to Cali—I’m much better at controlling it.”

“Why do I doubt that?”

“If I were worse at it you would have had way more to deal with than a little spilled gas.” She smirked at me. “But I didn’t damage a thing.”

“I guess it could have been worse,” I conceded. “But, the memory thing. How good are you at that?”

Artemis narrowed her eyes, her expression critical.

“Why?” she asked. “You want me to help you forget about Maren? So you can squash your horrible prejudice toward the Fae?”

“No.” I shook my head, my stomach churning. “I want you to make me forget about Cali.”

**Episode 605**

AVA

*If you find Xavier, you’ll let me know, won’t you?*

The older man’s words echoed in my ears as I trudged through the woods. The menace behind them sent shivers down my spine. Who had he been? And who was the woman with the golden arm?

All I knew was that the memory of them filled me with dread. They were the only people I knew in the world, in a way, but I didn’t trust them one bit.

I looked down at the gold bracelet on my wrist. The one the man had warned me not to take off. I wondered why. What would happen if I took it off?

And more importantly, why would I listen to some guy I didn’t even know? Someone who’d scared me and tried to force his will on me within seconds of meeting me. He certainly hadn’t earned my trust, so I didn’t have to do a thing he said.

The anger sparking up inside me felt right. Strong. So much better than being scared. I decided to follow it wherever it took me.

I tried to slide the bracelet off my wrist, but it was too tight to fit over my hand. I pulled and pulled, but it just wouldn’t budge. All I managed to do was press red marks into my skin where the bracelet bit into it.

“Ugh,” I groaned, irrationally angry at this inanimate object.

I brought it close to my face, trying to find the clasp. After all, the woman *had* snapped it onto my wrist. It had to open somehow. Maybe I could hit the hinges with a rock? But I couldn’t find any hinges. It almost seemed like it was completely fused to my wrist… For now, I was stuck with the thing.

“Shit,” I growled, glaring at the bracelet. As if that would do anything. I hated how impotent I felt right now. No memories, no allies, no place to go, and now I was stuck with a piece of jewelry that seemed to come with strings attached. I was so stupid.

I stomped my foot in frustration and thought back, trying to remember anything beyond stepping out of that mirror. But it was like there was a wall between me and my past. It was all on the tip of my tongue—like the muscle memory was there, but I couldn’t recall the details.

I hung onto the three things I *did* know.

“My name is Ava,” I said out loud. Just so I could hear it. As if that would make it more real.

“I was wounded by Xavier,” I continued, feeling dumber by the second, but not wanting to stop now that I’d started.

The older man had told me that Xavier had killed me. Ripped my throat out. But that couldn’t be possible, because here I was, still breathing. Still alive.

But what was the third thing? What had the man said?

“A brother,” I murmured, as I remembered. “I had a brother. I *have* a brother. His name is… Nolan.”

And he could be the key. Maybe if I found him, he could help me remember what I’d forgotten. Help me break down the barrier between now and then, so I could become whole again. Because right now… I felt so empty. And I didn’t know how much longer I could bear it.

I took a deep breath and started walking. Some kind of deep-rooted instinct told me to go in a certain direction, and at this point, I had no choice but to trust that feeling. Even though the instinct could have been rooted in nothing more than me liking the look of the trees on this side of the forest.

But the farther I walked, the more I started to feel as if I’d been here before. Things looked familiar. Even though I couldn’t recall any actual memories taking place here, something about it felt… safe.

The smells, the sounds, the colors…

Just as I was trying to put my finger on it, I had a flash of memory. My feet pounding against the ground. Running through these woods incredibly fast. Impossibly fast, really. Laughter, a child’s laughter. Was it mine? Because I was a child in this memory. I could tell.

And then a face. A round, smiling face calling to me.

*Ava…*

But then, suddenly, he was screaming for me.

*AVA!*

I choked on my response. How could I answer back? I didn’t even know his name. But he sounded like he needed my help.

I stopped walking for a second, trying to get ahold of myself. I was seeing things that weren’t there. I had no memories. I knew very little about myself.

What if I was crazy?

I looked around and saw a house in a clearing up ahead.

I knew that house. Something deep in my gut told me it was *my* house. I’d lived here once. With Nolan!

Was it his face I was remembering?

I quickened my pace, making my way toward the house. Maybe Nolan would be there, or another family member. Someone who’d be able to help me with my memories. Someone who’d make sure I was safe. Someone I could trust.

And then I heard an ear-piercing howl.

I raised my hands to cover my ears, to protect them from the harsh, grating sound. But I was distracted by a flash of movement in the woods by the house.

What was that?

Something prickled at the back of my mind. Intuition. This was familiar, too. But I didn’t like it. Bone deep inside me, I knew I should be very scared.

Suddenly, I felt my neck burning. I yelped and backed away from the house, from the clearing, from the blur, from everything.

But when I turned to run I saw a large, fierce wolf running at me. I screamed and ran as fast as my feet could take me toward the house. Whoever lived there, it had to be better to intrude on their hospitality than to be eaten by a wolf.

My feet were pounding against the ground again, just like when I’d been a kid. But now there was no laughter, only my harsh, ragged breaths. And the fear seizing my chest. The wolf on my tail was fast—I wouldn’t be able to outrun it for long.

I scrambled up the porch stairs and wrenched the door open, grateful to find it was unlocked. I tumbled inside and slammed the door behind me, accidentally catching the wolf’s paw between the door and the frame.

It howled and whined in distress as it backed away on its hind legs.

I took that as my chance and slammed the door shut.

*Thud, thud, thud.* The wolf threw itself repeatedly against the door, trying to break it down. Why was it acting this way? Was it rabid?

I looked around the nicely furnished house. It looked lived in, and every piece of furniture seemed well loved. My eyes were drawn to the staircase in the corner. Upstairs seemed like my best bet. There was a bathroom there.

I was shocked to realize that I knew that for sure. I knew about the bathroom’s white and blue floor tiles, and how the shower took forever to heat up.

I had memories here!

I started up the stairs as fast as I could. I heard the front door shatter behind me, the wolf tumbling in.

I refused to look back. I knew whatever I saw would terrify me, make me freeze. I was determined to move forward. To get to safety. I was going to get to that bathroom.

I tripped at the top of the stairs and heard the wolf snarl. I couldn’t help but glance back, just in time to see its eyes lock onto me. The wolf charged.

I pushed myself to my feet and sprinted toward the bathroom. And there it was, just like I remembered. I shut the door behind me and gasped for air, terrified and winded.

I knew I only had a few moments before the wolf broke down this door, too. And I had to make them count. But I was just so scared.

I looked down at my shaking hands and tried to make sense of all this.

Why was this wolf hunting me like I was prey? What had I done to piss it off, other than walking in the wrong part of the woods at the wrong time?

I looked around the bathroom, wondering if I’d be able to find a weapon. I didn’t think the plunger next to the toilet would be sufficient, but there was a chance I’d have to make it work.

But then I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and gasped, all other thoughts flying out of my head. I wasn’t looking at my face. The face I knew to be Ava’s.

I was staring into the eyes of the woman I’d seen in that picture with Xavier.

**Episode 606**

“Woah, Violet, slow down.” Xavier’s brow furrowed in concern as he talked on the phone.

And while that worried me—I knew how vulnerable Violet was right now, and the last thing I wanted was for her to have another awful thing to deal with—I had something else on my mind. Xavier’s question: had I slept with Greyson?

Literally? Yes. I’d slept next to him multiple times, using the heat of his body to get through cold nights in the Fae woods.

Had we had sex? No.

But it bothered me that Xavier needed to ask. I should have known better than to think he’d actually drop this. He’d made himself clear. And I supposed if things had been the other way around, and he’d gone on a big romantic adventure with another girl… I’d have wanted to know. I’d have thought I had a *right* to know.

I felt anger flash through me at the very idea and shook my head to avoid getting lost down the rabbit hole of a hypothetical argument. I watched Xavier slide his phone back into his pocket, looking confused.

“This is weird,” he said slowly. “Violet thinks she saw her brother.”

“Lilac?” I asked, shocked and confused.

Xavier nodded. “Yeah.”

I couldn’t imagine what that must have been like for her. My heart had leapt into my throat when I’d seen *Tony*… Poor Violet must have been devastated to have seen her brother—maybe even been led to think he was still alive—and then discover she’d been mistaken.

“Look, I really have to get going now,” Xavier told me. “I really don’t want to miss my flight, especially now. But before I go, can you answer my question?”

So he *definitely* wasn’t going to drop it. And I definitely owed him the truth, even if it was hard. I took a deep breath and braced myself for a difficult conversation.

“I did not have sex with Greyson,” I said.

Xavier hesitated, sensing there was more to the story.

“I’m…” He searched for the right words. “I’m *glad* to hear that.”

“But I want you to know that even if I had slept with him,” I continued. “I would have had every right to do so. You and I were broken up. You left me.”

Xavier grit his teeth, but he didn’t say anything. I could tell he was trying to keep his cool, and I appreciated that. I just wished that hearing the objective truth didn’t piss him off so much.

“And, because I know your question isn’t just about what happened physically between him and me…” I swallowed hard, knowing this would be the worst part. “I want to tell you the truth. Which is… I have feelings for Greyson.”

I watched Xavier’s eyes narrow. I held my breath and waited for him to yell or throw something or storm off. But instead, he just stayed still.

Taking this as a good sign, I took a few steps, closing the distance in between us.

“You and I are still figuring things out,” I reasoned. “And I still need time to sort out my side of things. With everything that’s been going on with my mother, I haven’t had the chance to do that. So I’m asking you: can you please give me the time to do that? To figure out how I actually feel, barring any and all near-death situations?”

Xavier nodded, his whole body tense. “Cali, I’ll give you whatever you need,” he promised, his voice thick with emotion.

He reached out and pulled me into his arms. I laid my cheek on his chest and just enjoyed the feeling of his arms squeezing me against him. I let myself relax and banished every worry from my mind, promising I’d pick each one back up again as soon as this moment was over.

For now, I just wanted to enjoy the open tenderness that still existed between us. The reason I’d let Xavier in was that he could make me feel this way. I didn’t want to lose sight of that.

But the moment was interrupted when I heard the front door open downstairs. My mom must have found my dad. They were back.

“Too bad,” Xavier joked, pressing a kiss into my hair. “I was hoping to sneak out early and miss the tearful goodbye with your father. He’s going to be so sad to see me leave.”

I muffled my laugh in his shirt and inhaled deeply, wanting to remember the way he smelled, the way he felt, the way his laughter rumbled in his chest. I was the one he should have snuck out to avoid, because I hated saying goodbye to him.

I’d already done it too many times.

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As we walked downstairs hand in hand, I found myself wondering why this hadn’t gotten any easier. Maybe it was because every time I found myself saying goodbye to Xavier, I was saying goodbye to someone I knew even better and loved even more. Every time, it was a new kind of wound.

I spotted my parents and noticed my father taking a step back, his eyes pinned to my boyfriend. So it looked like I was going to have to do some work on his perception of werewolves. Perhaps a *Twilight* marathon was in order.

“Hey guys.” I gave my parents an awkward wave with my free hand. “Xavier is going back to Oregon tonight, so he’s going to take off now.”

My mom glared at my father, who turned a hilarious shade of bright red.

“I… Uh, well, I hope that’s not because of me,” he offered, in the most hollow gesture imaginable.

I squeezed Xavier’s hand, willing both of us not to laugh. Luckily, Xavier was very cordial. He gave my dad a huge smile and maintained a respectful distance, so as not to scare him.

“Not at all,” he assured my father. “I have to go back for business reasons. Some things need attending to and I’m the only one with the head for it, unfortunately.”

“Of course,” my dad mumbled, nodding like he completely understood Xavier’s vague excuse.

My mother walked over to us and gave Xavier a tight hug. I let his hand go so he could wrap both arms around her. I saw him close his eyes for a moment as he held her. I could tell he really liked my mom, and it made my heart swell. For a second, we all felt like family. Awkward, but full of love.

“I’m sorry to see you go,” Mom told him, pulling back to take him in. “Thank you so much, Xavier, for all that you’ve done for us. And especially for bringing my baby back.”

I cringed at the word. Sure, it was nice when she called me that in private, but in front of my boyfriend? I knew I’d always be my mom’s little girl, but it was like that time I’d tried to wear a sexy outfit and she’d called it ‘adorable’. Totally infantilizing.

“Of course,” Xavier answered, smiling. “Anytime. See you soon, Orla. Tom.”

My dad gave an extremely awkward wave from the other side of the room, and I decided that was the best we were going to get.

I walked Xavier outside, closing the door behind us so we could get a little privacy. He checked his phone quickly.

“My Uber’s a minute away,” he told me.

I nodded, not knowing what to say.

He cupped my cheek and kissed me. His lips moved urgently against mine, like he was trying to put as much as he could into the kiss. All the happiness and sorrow and desire flowed through me, and I sighed against his lips.

“I hope you don’t need too much time to figure things out,” he murmured against my mouth.

“I really hope so too,” I admitted, letting my hands rake through his hair, wishing we had more time.

Much too soon, his Uber arrived. He waved at the driver and held up a finger. Just a minute. He swooped down and kissed me again, his teeth clacking against mine since we both dove in hard, knowing it would be our last kiss for a while.

We finally parted and he looked down at me, eyes full of emotion.

“Bye, tiger,” he whispered. And with that, he got in the car.

I waved goodbye and watched as the tiny sedan got further and further away. I watched until I couldn’t see it anymore.

I blinked furiously, wiping the tears from my eyes so my parents wouldn’t worry. The last thing I wanted to do was give my dad another reason to dislike Xavier. I could practically hear him already—*He made her cry, Orla!*

I took a deep breath and walked back into the house. My mom was waiting for me at the kitchen table, smiling kindly.

“Your dad went to lie down,” she told me as she beckoned for me to sit down.

I took the seat next to her, eyeing her the whole time. Something was up.

“I’ve done some thinking,” Mom admitted. “And now that you’re back and I’m healthy, I think it’s time I taught you how to use your magic.”

**Episode 607**

GREYSON

My question hung in the air between Artemis and me. I looked over at her in the passenger seat, watching the landscape fly by through the window beyond her. She had a faraway look in her eye as she considered her answer.

“Artemis.” I tried to bring her back to earth. “Can you make me forget about Cali or not?”

“I heard you the first time,” she snapped. “But… it’s complicated. Do you have any idea what that would mean?”

“Obviously I know what it would mean,” I said, pushing back. “That’s why I asked. Do I strike you as anything less than a serious person?”

For a moment, I wondered if I’d pushed her too hard. Her expression hardened and she looked out the windshield, avoiding eye contact.

I hadn’t meant to push her this hard. The truth was, I was in pain. I’d been in pain since I met Cali, and I’d just been presented with a way to make it all go away. Anyone would jump on that, right?

“I can do it,” she answered softly. “But when you erase a type of memory, you can’t be selective. It’s an all or nothing kind of situation. If I erased your memories of Cali, I wouldn’t just take away moments where you connected, or where she hurt you—I’d have to take away everything associated with her. Including memories where she wasn’t the main focus. Is that really something you want?”

I tried to consider her words. Sure, right now everything made me think of Cali. Water led to waterfalls which led to the first time we’d kissed. A tree led to trees which led to watching Cali talk to a tree in the Fae woods. But eventually, it wouldn’t always be that way, right?

If Artemis took every memory of mine Cali had been present for… How bad could it really be? What exactly would it change? I hadn’t known Cali for very long, all things considered. How many of my memories could possibly be associated with her? If I went under and woke up with only the memories I’d had on the day I’d met her, maybe I’d be better off. *She’d* be better off.

I’d lose our time together in the Fae world, most of which I’d have liked to forget, anyway. Goodbye, Torin. Goodbye, Kollector. Goodbye being constantly dressed like a pirate against my will.

But the moments with Cali were tormenting me. Laying her down over the soft grass, her fingernails tearing into the flesh of my back as I kissed her that night we’d been alone. Her saving me in the stream, kissing my senses back into me. Watching her learn to use her powers, to fight with a ferocity that made something in my chest clench…

I wasn’t sorry any of those moments had happened. At the time, I’d wanted most of them more than anything. But now, I was worried that the memories had too much power over me. Even now, I felt an ache that was impossible to ignore. One that pounded at a door in my subconscious, begging to be let in.

I worried that part of me would never quiet down as long as those memories were still inside my mind. Thoughts of Cali were just too powerful, too alluring—and they would only lead me into trouble.

Trouble for me, for Cali, and for everyone we cared about.

As an Alpha in charge of an entire pack of wolves, this was exactly the kind of chance I couldn’t take.

“What if it is something I want?” I asked Artemis.

“Memory wipes are never my preferred method of problem solving,” Artemis told me coolly. “Tampering with the past can have grave consequences for the future. At least if you have your memories, you know you’ll always have your own pieces of the puzzle, so to speak.”

I nodded. I knew it was no small thing I was asking of her. I wanted her to know I was taking it as seriously as she wanted me to.

“You may have a point there,” I admitted.

“I usually do,” Artemis replied, the ghost of a smile on her lips.

We rode in silence for another long moment as I wrestled with the awful feelings swimming in the pit of my stomach. Was this a cowardly choice, or the only choice?

“What about Cali?” she asked, turning to face me. “Shouldn’t she get a say in this? You must know how she feels about you. It’s written all over her face every time she looks at you. You really want to throw all that away?”

I swallowed. Of course I didn’t want to hurt her, but…

Cali was entrenched within me. I hadn’t known her long, but she’d woven herself into the fabric of my being in so many ways. In the Fae world, I’d learned to put her safety above everything else. How would I react if those new parts of me were taken away?

I’d be a different man. And without me, she’d be a different woman.

I’d be making a decision for her, and I wasn’t sure I had the right to do that. In fact, I was positive that I didn’t.

Suddenly, the car came screeching to a halt. I gripped the wheel tightly and pulled us over onto the shoulder of the road. Cars swerved around us. I heard a cacophony of honks, and was given the finger by many of my fellow motorists.

When I looked down to see if there were any lights on the dashboard, I realized that Artemis had her hand on the emergency brake.

“How did you even know how to use that?” I demanded, incredulous.

But she didn’t answer. She was too busy looking out the window, mouth agape and eyes alight.

“What is that?” she pointed, her voice full of glee.

I followed her gaze and was surprised to see… a moose. A huge one. Stripping the bark off a tree with its impressively sized teeth.

“What?” I asked, still shocked I’d managed to avoid a fatal car accident.

“That huge horse with the antlers!” she shouted. “Is it a unicorn? I’ve heard of them, but I haven’t seen one until now. This is like… the best day of my life.”

“Are you drunk?” I demanded. “You still haven’t seen one. That’s a moose!”

“*Moose*,” Artemis repeated to herself, testing the sound of the word on her lips.

The moose stared at us, docile and bored as it chomped on the bark in its mouth.

Undeterred, Artemis started to open the door.

“Can I pet it?” she asked excitedly.

I reached across her and pulled the door shut.

“Do not try to pet a moose,” I ordered her, feeling once again like a dad with a sugar-high child.

“*Why?*” Artemis whined, only feeding the image in my head.

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Because,” I began through gritted teeth, a number of legitimate reasons not to pet a moose flooding my brain, “they don’t like Fae.”

I watched to see how she’d take my lie. I hoped it would be enough to keep her in the car, because I really didn’t feel like watching her get impaled on its massive antlers. Or seeing her blast its body across the highway.

“But it’s so huge,” she groaned, disappointed. “And it looks soft. I want to meet it.”

“Another thing not to do?” I waved at her, making sure I had her full attention. “Don’t ever touch the emergency brake again.”

“Sorry,” Artemis grumbled. “Won’t happen again.”

I sighed and pulled the car back onto the road.

“You can thank me for not letting you die at the hands of a moose later, I guess,” I told her after a few moments of silence.

“You’re positive it wasn’t a unicorn?” she asked.

I wasn’t going to dignify that with a response. The rest of this drive was going to be *long*.

“So.” She clicked her tongue. “Still want me to erase all your memories of Cali?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’m not sure yet.”

I knew it would be almost impossible to explain my reasoning to Artemis. There was no need for her to know about Silas. About how my brothers and I had grown up. About what it meant that Silas was coming for us.

But as I tried to untangle everything in my mind, it hit me: if I let Artemis take all my memories of Cali, it could affect things I knew about Silas. And none of us could afford that.

No matter how much my memories hurt, I had to bear it. There wasn’t an alternative. My decision had just been made for me.

“Also, if Cali really is your mate and I erased your memories of her,” Artemis wondered out loud, “then wouldn’t all of this start all over again the second you saw her, anyway?”

And then I got a sinking feeling in my stomach as I realized what I needed to do.

“Then maybe I just shouldn’t go back.”

**Episode 608**

AVA

I stared at the woman in the mirror, reaching up to touch my face and suppressing a scream when I saw the unfamiliar woman do the same.

What was going on?

Where was my face?

The pounding on the door stopped. Had the wolf grown tired of chasing me? And why didn’t that thought make me feel better?

I heard a strange cracking sound, and wondered if the wolf had bitten down on something. The bannister on the staircase? I imagined splinters littered everywhere. But what I heard next made me gasp.

“I’m going to rip your throat out like Xavier ripped Ava’s throat out,” a man’s voice roared through the door. Where had he come from?

As much as those words scared me, I couldn’t help but feel like I knew that voice. But who did it belong to?

“But…” I had no idea what question to ask first, all of them bottlenecked at the tip of my tongue. “But I *am* Ava.”

The man laughed bitterly at my admittedly uncertain words.

“You think I don’t know my own sister?” he growled through the door. “You think I’d forget?”

He pounded on the door again—and he was just as strong as the wolf, because the thing was shaking on its hinges. I hugged myself tightly, feeling trapped and terrified.

“I’ll never forget what Xavier did, Caliana!” the man shouted.

I shook my head, even though I knew he couldn’t see me.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” I yelled. I knew how I sounded. I was an intruder hiding alone in a bathroom with no memories. There was no way this guy would ever buy what I was saying if I didn’t even *look* like myself. But I had to try.

“I’m not Caliana,” I insisted, looking in the mirror and seeing that strange other face. “I’m Ava!”

“Ava’s dead,” the man responded, his voice cold and wounded. I felt a strong desire to comfort him. To open the door and hold the man threatening to kill me. It was a strange compulsion. Maybe I really had lost my mind.

“You said Xavier killed your sister,” I repeated. “Are you Nolan? If you are, I’m here to find you.”

There was a pause on the other side of the door. “Why?” he asked, his tone slightly less angry.

“Because you’re my brother,” I replied, wishing he’d believe me.

Instead, he just attacked the door again, his fists loud as gunshots.

“Stop lying to me!” he screamed. “She’s gone and *your mate* killed her!”

I wondered if I could prove that I was telling the truth. I knew in my bones thatI was Ava. But if I didn’t have the memories to back it up, how could I convince him?

I tried to focus on his voice, his name, the flash of his face that I’d seen. Maybe if I tried, I’d be able to remember more. I took a deep breath and felt some of the thick fog around me beginning to lift.

I saw myself running through the woods again, laughing my head off with Nolan hot on my heels, arms outstretched to grab me and tackle me to the ground for some stupid game we were playing.

We used to race through the woods to see who could get to our secret hideout first… *Rivia*. The word hit me like a lightning bolt. Only we had called it that.

“Do you remember Rivia?” I blurted out, desperate to form a connection.

I held my breath, waiting for him to respond. But I only heard silence. After a long pause, Nolan spoke again.

“How do you know about that?” he asked, his voice accusatory and angry. But there was a certain childlike vulnerability beneath it. Like he was scared of being too hopeful. “Did Ava tell Xavier about it?” he asked, his anger returning and clearly snowballing into rage. “Did he tell you so you could come here to torment me? Well, you can fucking stop it right now!”

But more memories were coming back to me. They were disjointed, like I was receiving an ocean’s worth of memories in an arbitrary, random order.

“Do you remember breaking Mom’s ceramic bowl?” I asked, the memory of Nolan’s stunned face when he’d knocked it over flitting through my mind.

“Please just stop,” Nolan pleaded with me.

But how could I stop? What else could I do to convince him that I wasn’t the Caliana girl from the mirror? I was his *sister*. The sister who’d loved him fiercely and loyally her whole life.

In a shock, I remembered how Nolan had arrived here. He *was* the wolf that had chased me. He was a werewolf!

It was the only thing that explained why the wolf had pursued me so angrily—and why Nolan had started yelling at me before we’d even had a chance to speak.

I thought about that memory in the woods. I had been running so fast. Faster than any normal kid could run. Did that mean I was a wolf too?

I looked back at the mirror, wondering if it was possible to tell. I bared my teeth at my reflection, and something stirred inside me. Something feral. Something dangerous.

There was a wolf inside me. And it was calling me.

The wolf knew who I truly was. If I could just find out what she knew…

I shut my eyes and fell to my knees. I heard that same cracking sound I’d heard from the other side of the door. I’d shifted.

I stood on my hind legs and saw my reflection in the mirror. I howled at the sight of myself. My reflection was no longer a stranger. It was my wolf.

Strong, fierce, and sure.

“What’s going on?” Nolan shouted, his voice confused.

I reared back and smashed the door down, slamming into my brother and pinning him to the floor. I snarled at him, showing him my fangs. I didn’t want him to have any doubt in his mind. His sister was back.

I stared at him, chest heaving, waiting for a flicker of recognition.

Finally, his eyes went wide.

“Ava?” His voice broke on the question. Suddenly, tears were forming in his eyes and he was looking at me like I couldn’t possibly be real.

Wanting to talk to him, I shifted back and rolled off him. I stared up at the ceiling of our house, waiting for my brother to say something.

“Nolan,” I choked out, my eyes filling with tears as well. “It’s me. It’s Ava. I *promise.”*

Nolan rolled over onto his side to look at me. He studied my face carefully, and I just lay there and let the tears roll down my cheeks. I felt exhausted. I knew I’d played all my cards. All I could do now was wait.

“But…” He barked out a nervous laugh. “You look like that human, Caliana.”

He laughed again, like he was giddy. Like he couldn’t believe his eyes. And if what he’d said was true, and he’d really thought I was dead, then I had to look like a miracle to him.

“What happened to you?” he asked, questions coming out in a rush. “Where have you been? Where did you come from just now? How can this be?”

He broke out into a crooked smile I recognized from our childhood. From pictures on our mantel. From his fourth birthday party, when he’d had a T-Rex cake that he’d bragged about repeatedly to the entire pack.

I felt a dam burst in my chest and suddenly I was sobbing. I crawled into his arms and wept. I gasped for air, wanting just one part of this to be easy. But none of it was.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Honestly, I don’t. I just… came to. And I couldn’t remember anything but now I’m starting to and… I need help, Nolan. Please, can you help me?”

“Of course.” He held me tightly against him, his voice full of wonder. “You’re my *family.*”

A fresh wave of tears came with that word. I’d convinced him. I’d done it.

He took my wrist in his hand and examined the gold bracelet.

“Where did you get this?” he asked, confused. “And why didn’t it break off you when you shifted?”

“I met these people,” I said. “An older man and woman. She had a golden arm. She put it on me—forced me to wear it. I don’t know why…”

Nolan looked like something had just hit him. An epiphany. A grim smile overtook him. He lifted us both to our feet and I found myself leaning against him, limp from the fear and pain of the last several hours.

“Ava, I think you’ve been brought back to us for a reason.” His eyes were still glistening with tears. “And I know exactly what it is.”

I braced myself for a purpose. For something that would fill in all the holes in my memory.

“You’re going to help me take down the Evers brothers.”

**Episode 609**

The weather was great, the sun was shining, and my mom was looking hot. Not literally hot. Metaphorically. Pretty and vibrant, with a healthy flush to her cheeks. She was wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt, her hair tied up in a knot. Not exactly what you envisioned when you thought of the word ‘fairy’, but she looked amazing to me. She’d already finished removing three pots from her garden shed, each holding a dead or dying plant.

“How did you move those pots all by yourself?” I asked her.

She smiled. “I’m feeling great.”

“Have you always been this strong?”

She snorted. “This is pretty normal, Cali.”

I eyed a pot with a dead massive cactus in it suspiciously. “For a Fae, perhaps.”

Mom kept smiling, wrapping one arm around my shoulders. “I’m really glad you’re here, sweetheart.”

I refused to think about everything that was awaiting me back in Oregon. “I’m glad I’m here too,” I said, meaning it. “But Mom, I’m ready to learn. I need you to tell me everything, from the beginning.”

“The *very* beginning?”

“Yep,” I said.

Mom sighed, her hands on her hips. “Well, when I first became aware of my power to affect nature and grow plants, I was around thirteen years old.”

I blinked. “That’s very young.”

“Didn’t seem that way to me,” Mom said. “I’d been pretty frustrated—every birthday up till then, I would wonder when I would get my powers. My mother preached patience.”

I imagined Hera, in all her regality, repeating the word ‘patience’ over and over again. As an extremely impatient person myself, I scrunched up my nose. “Sounds like Grandma.”

Mom’s eyes widened. “You met her?”

“She actually helped me when I first arrived in the Fae world,” I said.

Mom seemed even more shocked now. “How did this happen?”

Mom and I took a seat on the bench by the pots, and I explained everything that had taken place in the Fae world as briefly and compellingly as possible. I excluded all my mate and *due destini* drama—a constant problem I couldn’t seem to shake, but I also didn’t really want to tell my mom about me getting it on. Instead, I focused on Grandma Hera and all the ways she’d helped me on my quest to save Mom.

Mom’s expression switched from surprised to emotional as we kept talking. Finally, she spoke. “I didn’t think my mother would do that.”

My voice was tentative. “She misses you.”

Mom arched an eyebrow. “Like a dog misses its fleas?”

I gagged. “*Mom!* Gross!”

Mom rolled her eyes, snorting. “I’m just saying, that’s how your grandma always saw me—as a nuisance who kept bringing her trouble.”

I ignored the fact that both Xavier and Greyson might have felt that way about me from time to time. I shook my head, staring at Mom. “No. She misses you. I bet she loves you too—in her own Ice Queen way.”

“She loves me like a squirrel loves—”

“Please, god, no,” I groaned. “No more gross analogies!”

Mom smirked. “I’m just saying.”

“Well, I promised Grandma Hera that I’d return to the Fae world at some point. Maybe we can go together?”

Mom looked away, at the dead plants. Her shoulders were slouched. Her tone had suddenly lowered. “I’m not ready to think about that. Things between Hera and me did not end well. I’ve accepted for a long time that I’m never going to go back. That I’m never going to see my mom again.”

I scoffed. “Dramatic much? What happened between the two of you?”

Mom sighed. “I think we should talk about that later. One thing at a time.”

I frowned. “But whatever happened between the two of you was years ago! Maybe Grandma’s changed. Why would she have helped me, otherwise?”

Mom shrugged. “You never know with Hera.”

I eyed her suspiciously. “You guys are weird.”

Mom shook her head, standing up. “We’ll talk about all that again later. I’m glad she was able to put anything with me aside and help you. Now, onto our little lesson.”

Mom walked up to the plants and looked at them. I followed. I was quiet for a couple of beats and then said, “So are you gonna stare them to life? Is that how it works?”

Mom smirked. “When I first gained my powers, they didn’t work more often than not. It was so frustrating.”

“How did you even know what your powers were?” I asked.

“I just sneezed in front of a boy I liked and a daisy nearby turned into a full-on bush.”

I grinned. “Okay, that’s cute. My reveal was much more disconcerting and annoying.”

“What happened?”

I bit my lip. “Well, first of all, it was by accident, because my mother hadn’t told me shit about being a freaking fairy—”

“Language, Cali.”

“Right, correction: my mother hadn’t told me shit about being *Fae*,” I went on, ignoring Mom’s eye-roll, “so it happened by accident. I’m pretty sure I erased someone’s memory.”

Mom stared at me, alarmed. “Okay. If that is your magic, it’s a very powerful magic. You have to be careful how you use it.”

“With great power comes great responsibility?” I asked.

“Exactly.”

I snorted. “Easy for you to say—you figured out what magic you could do at thirteen. Why did it take me so much longer to even realize I have powers?”

Mom hummed thoughtfully. “I’m not entirely sure. It might be because you’re half-human.”

That was comforting. Not. As a half-human, it looked like not even my own Fae mother could give me solid, entirely certain answers. But perhaps I’d be able to answer all the questions I had myself, at some point. After all, nobody had been sure if Phil was lying about not remembering what happened, but somehow, I had been one hundred percent positive that I’d done something to him. It’d been instinctual for me.

Hopefully, my instincts would keep helping me out.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” Mom said, caressing my arm. “Whatever powers you possess, one factor remains the same: the key to using that power is focus, concentration. Any distraction can be a problem, sometimes with serious side effects.”

*Is being stuck in a horrid love triangle with two super hot werewolves considered a distraction?* I thought. *But is it even a triangle if Greyson is just… not paying attention to me because he forgot, or doesn’t want to remember what happened in the Fae World?*

I was torn between being pissed off and devastated.

“Do you have any other powers that you’re aware of? Apart from potentially being able to affect someone’s memory?” Mom asked me gently.

*I occasionally blow my werewolf mates and sometimes-boyfriends apart when they’re being annoying*, I wanted to tell her. But what I actually said was, “I’ve been able to generate power surges. Like energy flowing out of me and going ‘boom’.”

Mom grinned. “*Boom?*”

“I’m not even kidding.”

Mom chuckled. “That’s just like your grandfather, Innes. He was very powerful.”

I was puzzled. “I don’t know anything about him. Why didn’t I see him when I was in the Fae world?”

Mom’s expression darkened. She looked away, breathing deeply. “He went off to fight in the war. Like so many others, he never returned.”

I examined Mom’s face. She seemed sad for a moment, so I wrapped her in a hug. “I’m sorry.”

She smiled softly, facing me. “It was a really long time ago, sweetheart. Let’s focus on something good,” Mom said. “Let’s work on your powers. I’ll do a demonstration of mine first.” She turned back to the pots with the almost-dead plants, waved her hand fluidly, and a moment later…

All three of them bloomed.

What seemed like a ball of weeds turned into a small bush full of pink baby roses. A dried-out bird of paradise plant became green, its leaves shiny and plump again. The heavy cactus perked up instantly, a yellow flower sprouting at the top.

“This is amazing!” I gasped, staring at Mom. “You didn’t even stop to concentrate—you just did it!”

“It looks easy, but it’s really not. Not when you’re first learning,” Mom said. “Once you work on your powers, and grow comfortable with them, you’ll be able to teach your mind to focus in a fraction of a second.”

Well. I wondered how that would work with a brain that moved in a million directions at once, like mine did. But I would try to be optimistic here.

“Now, you should try to knock the plants down, using your energy power,” Mom said.

I gasped. “Excuse me? Why would I do that? I don’t want to hurt them!”

Mom raised an eyebrow. “I’ll take care of them, Cali. They’ll be fine.”

“Still seems cruel to me.”

“*Cali*.”

“Oh my god, okay, fine,” I grumbled, staring at the pots. I tried to keep all other thoughts out of my head—plant cruelty and annoying hot werewolves included. There were so many things floating around my mind that it was beyond difficult to keep them out of my brain and focus only on myself, my magic, and the plants.

I concentrated, hard, eyeing that penis-shaped cactus especially. Then the air around me shifted. There was a rumbling surge, and then…

The shed’s door slammed closed. The sound of rakes and shovels falling from inside made me jump.

The plants, especially Mr. Penis Cactus—who suddenly looked a little smug to me—remained unaffected.

“Okay, that’s just rude,” I told the cactus.

Mom snorted. “It’s okay, Cali. Don’t be discouraged, it takes time.”

“How much more ti—”

The house’s backdoor opened and Dad came up, so I cut my sentence short. Contrarily to Mom, Dad still looked wary and worn. “What’s going on here?” he asked us carefully. “I heard a crash.”

Mom said, “I’m just trying to teach our daughter how to use her… magic.”

Dad gulped. “Right,” he said. “I’m still trying to get used to all this. In the meantime, though, there’s something I wanted to talk to both of you about.”

He seemed oddly serious. “What is it?” Mom asked. “Is everything okay, Tom?”

Dad looked at me. “I’ve made up my mind about something, Caliana.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

Dad frowned. “I’m putting my foot down, kid. You’re not going back to Oregon.”

**Episode 610**

LOLA

“I cannot believe them!” I paced up and down my room, pissed off. “How dare they force me to stay here and finish school? They’ve never treated me like this before!”

“It is really shitty of them, yeah,” Jay said. He was sitting on the couch, all serious and businesslike. “Especially since your school costs a small fortune, and they’re paying for it. It’s not like other people wouldn’t kill to be in your position.”

I stopped pacing and turned to face Jay, eyes narrowed. “Are you saying that I’m acting like a spoiled brat?”

Jay’s expression remained deadpan. “I would never.” He raised an eyebrow. “Truth is, I’m not so thrilled about this either—Minnesota’s nice and all, but Oregon is my home. And the pack’s.”

“I know I’m lucky to have parents who give a shit and can afford amazing things for me, but this isn’t for me right now, Jay!” I huffed. “How am I going to be able to focus in class? How will I be able to shift if I have to deal with assignments and papers and attendance? It’s just not practical right now!”

Jay frowned, his expression growing worried. “How does shifting factor into that? You can live without shifting for a while, can’t you?”

I ignored him. “Not to mention I’ll most likely run into stalker boy Alex! Who even likes him anymore?”

Jay sighed deeply. “Should you be quite so hard on Alex? The guy’s been through hell because of all our supernatural shit. He’s freaked out, probably with good reason.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, coming to stand in front of Jay. “Why the hell are you defending Alex? Don’t you realize how *obsessed* he is with Cali? Always has been.”

“He was in love with her, Lola,” Jay told me slowly. I gave him a look. “Okay, yes, a little obsessed. It did seem like that.”

“Yeah, and continuing to fixate on her after she has repeatedly rejected him is a major red flag! It’s time Alex got over it.”

Jay pressed his lips together. He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. “Maybe it’s time *you* got over it, honestly. It’s not like he’s your mortal enemy.”

I scowled. “I don’t know, Jay—something about him just puts me off. My wolf instincts go haywire, like I need to protect Cali, but Cali—she just keeps enabling him!”

“Cali enabling people is nothing new,” Jay said, standing up. He moved closer to me, eyeing me up and down. “It’s Cali’s problem, not yours,” he said, his tone gentler. He rested his palms on my shoulders, staring into my eyes. His touch felt as amazing as ever, but then he kept talking. “What’s really bothering you here, babe?”

I huffed. “Right now, YOU are bothering me!”

I moved away from his touch, and he stood there, gaping. “*Me?* What did I do? You asked me to come here, so I did, and all I’ve done is be supportive.”

Sometimes it bothered me how *nice* Jay was. How was he so damn *nice*?! For a moment, I didn’t know what to say, but then something came to mind, and it was just a little bit true. “For one, you could have worked a little harder to win my dads over. How about that, huh?”

Jay gaped even more. “*Seriously?*”

“I’m pretty sure they think I dropped out of school for a boy,” I said. “It’s not like I can tell them about mates. And you could stop taking Alex’s side!”

“I’m not taking anyone’s side!”

I grunted, starting to pace again. It was hard to stop my hands from flailing about. “Why can’t you see things from my perspective?”

“First of all,” Jay said, sitting back on that damn chair, “being with someone doesn’t mean I can’t have my own opinions. We are mates, not brain twins. I won’t just accept whatever you tell me without engaging in logical dialogue with you.”

I gasped, turning to face him. How ridiculous! “Logical dialogue”? What was this, *Reddit*? Why wouldn’t he just accept whatever I told him? I was right, anyway! Who did Jay think he was, effing Socrates?

“Listen here, you—”

“Also,” Jay continued, cutting me off, “I’m a little confused here. What *is* your perspective, exactly? If you’re so mad, why won’t you tell your dads you’re not going back to school?”

I glared at him. “You think it’s that simple? They have dreams for me, dreams that I wanted myself, not too long ago, before this whole werewolf mania. I used to love coding, but now just the thought of being stuck in a room looking at a computer screen makes me feel antsy. I need to be able to shift whenever I want, I need to—”

“What on earth is with you and shifting these days?” Jay asked, scowling. “Should I be worried, Lola?”

I threw my hands up. “Oh my god, I have two dads already, I don’t need a third!”

Jay rubbed his temples, shaking his head. “Just talk to them about the college issue. They deserve that much.”

“Kids!” called a voice from downstairs. Pops. “Lunch is ready!”

My whole body started twitching, and I glanced at the window. What I wouldn’t give to shift and run away, run through the woods instead of having lunch with my dads and Jay. This was a *mess*.

“Great,” I said, jaw clenching. “Just what I need right now.”

Jay stood up, straightening his shirt like the good boy he was. Also, the very hot boy. That distracted me from all my frustrations. “I’m not thrilled about facing them again either, Lola. But it’s what we have to do.”

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my temper in check. I was bouncing off the walls, and this couldn’t keep happening. This urge to flee kept hitting me, but I couldn’t let it overcome me.

I sighed. “Just… let me deal with them. Promise you won’t say anything about school or Oregon, okay?”

Jay nodded. He slid his hand up my arm, to my shoulder and then my neck, leaning closer. He smelled so clean and minty. “I’m not saying anything other than ‘how’s the weather?’”

I felt like I was about to jump out of my skin, but Jay remained solid opposite me, like an anchor. I needed him to be my anchor, even when he was annoying me. Even when I could tell he was nervous as well about having lunch with my parents.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he said, planting a peck on my lips.

I kissed him back, hoping the beautiful sensation would relax us both.

It didn’t work.

When we got back down to the kitchen, Jay looked around like he wanted to become invisible, and I looked for the nearest exit. Dad was just about finished setting the table. He looked up at us through his glasses, raising an eyebrow. “Look who decided to stop by.”

The man really wasn’t helping, here.

“Come, gather around,” Pops said as he set a casserole on the table. “I have a classic Minnesota favorite for you today. Tater Tot hotdish.”

“At least we’ll be eating something delicious, despite everything,” Dad grumbled.

“What was that?” I asked him.

He just shrugged as Jay told Pops, “It looks great and smells very good, thank you.” Then he awkwardly added, “Nice weather today, huh?”

I couldn’t have rolled my eyes harder. “I know what you guys are doing,” I told my dads after we’d all sat down around the table.

“What are you talking about, sweetheart?” Pops asked, filling a scowling Dad’s plate with salad.

“Tater Tots?” I gestured at the dish. “Hotdish? When this appears at the table, something’s up. And that something is usually bad news. That’s why it’s called comfort food—to help cushion the blow.”

“Our daughter should be a detective,” Dad said dryly.

“She’s a multitalented miracle,” Pops added.

Jay looked awkward enough to keel over. I just groaned. “Cut to the chase, can you? What is it you want to tell me this time?”

Pops cleared his throat. “Well, your father and I’ve been talking about your school…”

*Here it comes.*

“Right, darling?” Pops nudged Dad.

“Huh?” Dad looked up from where he had been dumping his salad back in the bowl. “Yes, right. We also talked to Caliana’s dad.”

“We think the two of you need to stay in Minnesota and finish up your semester,” Pops said.

I frowned. “You decided this with Cali’s dad?”

“We discussed it, and think it’s for the best,” Dad told me coldly while packing his plate with potatoes.

My fidgeting was getting out of control. Bouncing both knees under the table, I was fighting not to explode. “Best for *who?*”

All I could think about was shifting, getting the fuck out of here as fast as possible.

“We thought we could talk about it today,” Pops said. He cleared his throat before glancing at Jay and adding, “As a family.”

I gripped Jay’s hand under the table. He was rigid. “Whatever you want to discuss as a family, it has to include Jay.”

“I don’t think she’s getting it,” Dad told Pops, cleaning his glasses with a napkin.

“What aren’t I—”

“You know, I might as well be blunt,” Pops said, cutting me off. “Your dad and I want you to stop seeing Jay. Immediately.”

**Episode 611**

GREYSON

“Wait, hang on,” Artemis said, her eyebrows scrunching up. “How can you just *not* go back to your pack? I’m no expert, but I thought you were the king.”

“I’m not the king—I’m the Alpha,” I corrected her.

“But aren’t you, like, the one who orders them around?” Artemis asked, looking even more confused now.

“Yes.”

“And aren’t they kind of forced to do what you ask them to?”

“I don’t actually force them to do things,” I said. Though I wasn’t sure if that was true. I’d probably forced people to do my bidding before. Mostly because I was always right. Like 99 percent of the time. I just couldn’t help it.

“Oh,” Artemis said. “So you listen to what they have to say, but then you just make them do whatever you want anyway?”

“Yes,” I answered automatically, then realized what I’d just said. “Wait, *no!*” This Fae was really getting on my nerves.

“The point is that it’s not really a democracy,” Artemis said. “It’s more like a monarchy, isn’t it?”

I grunted. “What do *you* know about politics?”

She scoffed. “Please. At least three Ancient Greek philosophers were Fae. They’d come brag about it all the time.”

It felt like these weird fucking fairies were *everywhere*.

“So, since you are the king—”

“The *Alpha*—”

“From what I know about you, it sounds like you’re a good leader or king or Alpha or whatever. So your pack needs you. Right?”

I paused. Then, sighing, I said, “You have a point. I suppose.”

I just wished that Cali wasn’t tied up in all this.

I wanted her away from this entire mess with Silas, safe and sound. The idea of her getting hurt and me being the reason why messed me up with worry. It also infuriated me—if I didn’t feel this way about Cali, she wouldn’t be in danger. I glanced at Artemis, who kept looking at me expectantly, like…

Like Cali would.

I was struck for a moment, disturbed by how much she reminded me of Cali. They didn’t look that much alike—they were both slender brunettes, but that was about it. What was it about Artemis that made me think of Cali? Her expression? How innocent she looked in that moment?

Like I said, fairies were fucking weird.

And now—if all the shit I had to deal with wasn’t enough—the thought of Cali was back in my mind, full-force. I missed her so much it physically hurt. But I needed to keep my distance from her. Silas was lurking, danger was lurking, and my being the king of the pack—the *Alpha* of the pack—would put Cali in a terrible position. Everybody knew that the Alpha’s mate was their biggest weakness, the softest spot to attack. And of course, if I explained all this to Cali, she would just look up at me stubbornly and insist that she could help, putting herself right in the line of fire.

When it came to Silas, that could be a fatal mistake.

“So what are you going to do?” Artemis asked, interrupting my thoughts. “Just sit there and brood? Seems practical.”

I rolled my eyes. “We’ll go to the pack, see how things are.”

“And then what?”

I snorted. “Be patient. One step at a time.”

Artemis fidgeted. Even that reminded me of Cali.

I needed to get a fucking *grip*.

“Um, the closer we get to meeting the pack, the more I wonder if this is a good idea,” Artemis said.

“If you keep a low profile, everything will be fine. They don’t have to know you’re a fairy.”

“Fae.”

“Whatever.”

Artemis smirked. “So, wolf king, you don’t want your memory erased? Sure about that?”

I paused, thinking how much easier it would be to forget. But something told me that how I felt about Cali couldn’t be avoided, one way or another.

Being in love was really fucking inconvenient.

In the end, I said, “No. I don’t want you do to do anything. Not yet.”

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“I like cars,” Artemis told me, on the ride to the pack house. I’d had to jumpstart the battery in the apartment’s garage, but it still had a tank of gas in it. “Are all the cars in the human world just like yours?”

I shot her a sideways glance. “Nope.”

“I like *your* car then. Can I drive it?”

I had to laugh. “I’d rather kill you.”

“Please,” she scoffed. “I’d kill you first.”

The GPS told me to turn right. The first time it had spoken, Artemis had shrieked. It had been pretty funny. I was off the main road now, continuing to follow the directions. I kept driving until the residence came into view.

“Wow,” Artemis breathed, blinking in awe.

The house was more like a mansion. It was massive, with a lot of woods and a lake. No wonder it had been so expensive. Joss had chosen well, but I wasn’t surprised about that. Of course she’d make a good decision—that was why I’d picked her. No matter the romantic feelings she had for me at the time—which had hopefully vanished while I’d been away—Joss was smart, practical, and resourceful.

“So is this like a castle?” Artemis asked me excitedly. She looked like a kid, not someone who’d threatened to kill me ten seconds ago.

“Not a castle. It’s just a big house,” I explained. “People in the human world don’t generally live in castles.”

Artemis pointed all around the trees as I drove deeper into the estate. “It’s not that different from the Fae world—lots of woods. Do these trees talk?”

I shuddered at the thought. The last thing I needed was a talking forest. “*No*.”

Artemis looked at me funny, like she couldn’t figure out why I suddenly looked so pissed off. But before she could ask any annoying questions, I pulled up to the house’s driveway. “Remember,” I told Artemis, “don’t do anything Fae-like. It’s better if they don’t know anything about that.”

Artemis nodded solemnly. As we got out of the car, Joss and Rishika walked up to us. Joss’s expression was cold, almost aloof. And then, instead of saying hello, she gestured at Artemis. “Is this your new girlfriend?”

“Hello to you too,” I replied dryly. “And thank you for taking care of everything.”

In the blink of an eye, Joss slapped me *right across the fucking face.*

I stifled a groan, holding my throbbing chin.

“Whoa!” Artemis exclaimed.

Rishika looked stunned, glancing between us like she couldn’t believe this was real life. I didn’t want know whether it was because I was back or because of the slap. Well, who was I kidding?

Fighting the urge to tell a still-excited Artemis to fuck off, I turned to Joss, making sure not to flinch. “You gonna tell me what that was for?”

Joss’s eyes shone dangerously. “For leaving me to deal with pretty much everything. We could’ve all been killed while you were gone, off with Cali.”

Okay. I probably deserved the slap.

“Nobody died, though, because you were able to pull through. Like I knew you would,” I said to Joss. I didn’t miss the flash of pleasure that decorated her features for a moment. “I’ll explain everything to you later. Meanwhile, if you ever do that again, I’m going to rip your throat out. With my teeth. Are we clear?”

“*Fine*.”

Rishika smiled at me. “Good to have you back, Greyson.”

“Good to be back.” I gestured to Artemis next to me. “This is Artemis—she’s going to be staying with us for a while. Try to treat her nice.”

“He thinks he’s the only one who’s allowed to be rude to me,” Artemis informed both Rishika and Joss. Rishika snickered while Joss arched an appraising eyebrow.

Artemis and Rishika stayed a couple of steps behind, talking about the house, as Joss and I headed toward the front porch.

“Is there anything new I should know about?” I asked her.

“Other than seeing Lilac walk out of the lake? No, business as usual.”

I paused. “Lilac did… *what*?”

After Joss explained, I was more certain than ever that this had to do with the orb. Dead kids didn’t just walk out of lakes. Uncertainty ebbed in my stomach.

“This must be Silas. He controls the orb. He’s the one doing this.”

“But why, exactly?” Joss asked. “What’s his plan?”

“That, we need to figure out,” I said, scowling.

We were about to enter the house when a low rumble drew our attention—a motorcycle was heading toward us. My eyes narrowed as my half-brother and his bike screeched to a stop a few feet away.

“Isn’t that Xavier?” Artemis asked.

“Wait here,” I told all three women before heading for the driveway.

Xavier eyed the house calmly. “Nice digs.”

I frowned. Xavier being here could go either way. I didn’t need any more chaos at the moment, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to let him mess things up for the pack.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, glowering.

**Episode 612**

“Um, excuse me?” I asked Dad incredulously. “You can’t actually stop me from going to Oregon.”

Dad looked more serious than ever. It was so weird. He was usually all smiles, couldn’t hurt a fly let alone yell at a fly. I didn’t like this side of him one bit. “I think I can, Cali. I’m still your father.”

“And I’m an adult,” I replied, huffing. I turned to Mom, gesturing at Dad. “Can you believe him?”

“Your dad is right,” Mom said.

I gasped.

*What a TRAITOR! AFTER ALL I WENT THROUGH FOR HER!*

“Cali, please,” Mom said in a pleading, soothing tone. “I think it would be a good thing for all three of us to spend some time together right now.”

“I agree with that,” I told them both. “But it sounds like Dad doesn’t want to me to go back to Oregon, *ever*. Like he wants to keep me in Minnesota till the end of time. I’m not gonna be Rapunzel, Dad.”

He snorted, shaking his head. “Of course not.”

I smiled. He really was so sweet.

And then, he kept talking. “Either way, I’m not about to let you run off to live with a werewolf, Cali. No father would. I don’t know much about werewolves, but I have enough common sense from what pop culture has taught me to know that the situation just isn’t safe for you.”

I gaped. “But I thought you liked Xavier!”

Dad shrugged. “No offense to Xavier. He seems like a fine young man.”

I stared at Mom, helpless. “Why do I feel like Dad’s talking like a politician right now? Making statements and backtracking on them at the same time?”

“It’s your Dad’s way,” Mom told me, pressing her lips together. Was she amused by this? *RUDE.*

“After everything we’ve been through,” Dad said, walking up to me, “almost losing your mom, and now this magic stuff, I want you here, where I can keep an eye on you.” He rested his hand on my shoulder, squeezing softly. “It’s important for me to feel that you’re safe right now.”

“I get that, Dad, but—”

“Not to mention, you need to get a college degree!” he exclaimed, startling me. I wasn’t sure what was going on here—was he mad at me? Frustrated? Trying to convince me? Trying to bargain with me? All at the same time?

It was seriously disorienting.

“I want to get a degree, of course I do,” I said. “Just not right now.”

Dad scowled. I had never seen him like this before. “You’ve always wanted to go to college, Cali. We sacrificed so much to pay for school, and this is how you want to repay us?”

I flinched. That did sound pretty bad.

“Running off to Oregon?” Dad went on. “With a boy?”

Oh god, now it sounded worse…

“Running off with a *werewolf?*” Dad corrected, and now it sounded like I was out of my mind. Like I was some sort of impulsive, selfish teen who didn’t care about anything else in this world other than the guy she was in love with.

But that wasn’t the case with me—Xavier and Greyson were my mates. Sooner rather than later, I was going to feel some sort of compulsive need to see them. I also wasn’t sure what was going on with Artemis. I needed to be there for her. And I was pretty sure that whoever had trashed Big Mac’s house hadn’t been just been passing by. Something was fishy there.

“Are we clear, Cali?” Dad asked me seriously. I’d had no idea he could be so strict. My entire life, I had basically been free as a bird. My parents had rarely said no to anything I’d asked—especially Dad.

“Dad, come on, please. I just need a break from school right now…” I tried to make puppy-dog eyes at him, but he looked away.

“No! Stop that!” He covered his eyes, swatting at me. “I know what you’re trying to do! It’s why I agreed to let you leave in the first place!”

Mom looked between us fondly. What a traitor, for real. I was about to speak again when my phone rang.

“I need to get this,” I told my parents. “Excuse me.”

“As long as it’s not a werewolf calling,” Dad yelled after me as I rushed inside.

*Unbelievable.*

I answered the phone and closed the door behind me. “You won’t believe the conversation I just had with—”

“My dads just told me I can’t see Jay anymore!” Lola exclaimed, cutting me off. Was she sobbing? What the HELL?

*Is the sky falling?* I wondered.

“Lola, calm down and explain to me what happened,” I said, as soothingly as I could. She started rambling again, more hyper than I’d heard her in a long time.

“They want me to stop seeing Jay! To leave him! They asked me to dump him right in front of his face, it was horrible!” Lola said. “All because they think I dropped out of school for him!”

That did sound horrible. On both sides. But poor Jay! He was such a good, wholesome guy—he did NOT deserve this. What were Lola’s dads thinking? They were usually pretty reasonable.

Your *dad is usually pretty reasonable as well, Cali*, I thought to myself. *But these are not normal circumstances, are they?*

“How am I even supposed to let Jay go? He’s my mate!” Lola continued, in full-on drama mode. “You can’t just break up with your mate!”

I paused, thinking for a moment. “Actually, both Xavier and Greyson, who are supposed to be my mates, have essentially broken up with me before. So it’s definitely possible.”

Now that I thought about it, why the *HELL* did my mates keep breaking up with me? I should’ve been the one breaking up with them! How dare they break up with me?

I took a seat on my bed, trying to keep my shit together.

Meanwhile, Lola had barely registered what I’d told her. “I’m just so mad at them, I don’t know what to do. I can’t believe they’d do this!”

“What does Jay think?” I asked.

“He’s mad at me, too. I don’t understand—if he’s my mate, he’s supposed to act like one,” Lola declared.

I moved the phone from my ear, eyeing it as if to make sure that I had heard what she’d said correctly. “Um. Lola, being someone’s mate doesn’t mean you just blindly agree with them and act like the sun shines out of their ass.”

“But that’s how Jay used to treat me!” she said. “And now—”

“Now, real life has caught up,” I said. “It doesn’t mean that he loves you any less.”

I felt a sudden lump in my throat. I didn’t want to think about the fact that I had no idea whether either Xavier or Greyson truly loved me. Maybe this *due destini* thing wasn’t as powerful as I’d thought.

“And if all that isn’t enough,” Lola went on, “there’s still the issue of them wanting me to stay here to work on my degree.”

“My parents just told me the exact same thing,” I said. “My dad, primarily.”

“Yeah, my dads spoke with him about it!” Lola huffed. “They’re joining forces.”

“Ugh!” I gasped. “Our fathers have never been sneakier. My dad also doesn’t want me to hang around werewolves, which yeah, now he knows about…”

She groaned. “What do we do? The world’s against us.”

I sighed, plopping back down onto my bed. “I’m not sure. But I guess I do want to stay for a little while so Mom can teach me how to use my Fae powers.”

Lola’s voice came out grumbly, suddenly. “Right. By the way, thanks for sharing that Fae thing with me. Were you ever going to tell me? I had to find out from Jay, who found out from Xavier, who found out from *I don’t even know*. I had to go to some grungy gross club to get him through to the Fae world and—ugh!”

I scoffed. “Pretty sure this is the same as when you didn’t tell me you’re a werewolf. I just learned that I was Fae, whereas you kept that secret from me for years!”

After a few seconds of silence, Lola cleared her throat. “Call it even?”

I smirked. “We’re even.”

“So what’s it like to be Fae?” Lola asked. “And what was it like to be with Greyson all that time you were in the Fae world?”

“I’m still learning what it means to be Fae.” I swallowed, looking out the window. “And as for Greyson, we got close, but… I put a stop to anything more.”

I could hear the frown in Lola’s voice. “Why?”

To be honest, I didn’t have a reason that made much sense. It hadn’t felt like the right time, which now seemed ridiculous. “I was more worried about saving my mom. I didn't think getting involved further with Greyson was a good idea, not when I wasn’t thinking straight.”

No, I’d most definitely been thinking with my ovaries.

“Okay, I thought we were being honest. That sounds like a bunch of lame excuses.”

Ugh, she knew me too well. But if I had gone all the way with Greyson, how would I be feeling now that he’d basically withdrawn from me entirely?

I couldn’t even consider that possibility without feeling my chest ache.

“Greyson isn’t our immediate problem right now,” I told Lola seriously. “What do we do about our dads?”

Lola groaned. “Speak of the devil—Pops just called for me. I’ll call you back.”

We hung up, and I got up from the bed. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go out and face my parents again—or think about the fact that I needed to deal with both Xavier and Greyson, one way or another. Above all, I needed a nap.

Just as I was about to kick off my shoes and get comfortable, I heard the bedroom door creak.

And then…

“Hello, Cali.”

The voice was jarring, so familiar that it sent a shiver down my spine. Gasping, I turned around and—

Tony was leaning in my doorway, holding his severed leg, a crooked smile on his face.

**Episode 613**

XAVIER

“Not happy to see me?” I asked Greyson in a flat tone.

I could feel the agitation radiating off him. What was his deal? He hated me, but this was a bit much, even coming from him. It was as if he was… nervous?

The Greyson I knew, the cold-blooded bastard, was never nervous.

It was a nice change of pace, honestly.

“You shouldn’t be here, Xavier,” Joss piped up. Her tone was sharp. “You went Rogue, remember? You kicked us out of the house.”

There as an imposing regality about Joss that made it hard to look away from her, I had to give her that. But I wasn’t about to bow down to my brother’s Luna. Not now, not ever. I wondered what Joss would do if I ripped Greyson’s throat out right this instant. Would she beg me to spare her? Or would she try to attack me?

I was strong, but I was certain that she’d be a cunning, dirty fighter.

I scoffed at both of them. “It wasn’t the pack house just because you two assholes made that decision. It’s *my* house. I decide who gets to stay.”

“And then you went Rogue,” Greyson told me through clenched teeth. “You know you shouldn’t have done that. How’s it going to look if we just take you back?”

“I’m not taking him back,” Joss snarked.

“I missed the part where I *asked* to rejoin the pack.” I stared at Joss. “Also the part where you asked my permission before taking over my house. Both of you know that since Greyson is the Alpha, the house should’ve come out of his pocket. Glad to see that it finally has.”

“Okay, that makes sense,” a voice piped up from behind us.

Artemis.

I arched an eyebrow at her as Greyson spoke to Rishika. “Take our guest inside. Feed her something.”

“Do you want a white chocolate mocha?” Rishika asked. Artemis was instantly intrigued, and the two skedaddled inside.

“Artemis is still hanging around?” I asked Greyson. “Seriously? Why?”

“Well, you got Cali, so—”

“I got Cali to Minnesota when you *couldn’t*,” I told Greyson sharply. I was unable to control the smugness in my tone, and the son of a bitch noticed.

I could tell that he was holding himself back from pouncing at me. “And why aren’t you with her now?” he asked, gaze cold. “Where is she?”

I didn’t like questions in general, and I liked them even less when Greyson asked them. I shouldn’t have to answer to him, even if he was the fucking Alpha. Shrugging, I moved to walk past him toward the front door, but he grabbed me by the arm.

“Let me the fuck go before I bite off your hand,” I snapped, glaring at his grip on me.

Greyson eyed me severely. “Where. Is. Cali?”

I shoved him, my temper rising. “She’s still in Minnesota with her mom and dad. Satisfied?”

Joss rolled her eyes. “Well, at least she’s not dead.”

“Do you think leaving Cali alone was a smart thing to do?” Greyson asked me, ignoring Joss’s jab.

“Jay and Lola are there. And she wanted to stay. Unlike you, I don’t boss Cali around,” I said.

Greyson, the motherfucker, laughed. In my *face*.

“You spent months treating Cali like she was a fucking useless nuisance, and you have the audacity to comment on *my* behavior toward her?” He sneered. “Compared to you, I’m a saint.”

“I wonder why she stayed with me, then,” I spat. “She can probably tell that my feelings for her are much stronger.”

Greyson growled at me, and Joss came to stand between us. “Okay, Xavier. Let’s not get off topic. Why are you here?”

“Everyone’s suddenly so interested in me. And here I thought that you had only wanted me around so you could live in my house rent-free,” I said.

Joss looked like she was done with my BS. “Stop being petty, Xavier. We have a new house now, stop being a child. And for the love of god, answer my fucking questions.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. I came because I got a call from Violet. She was upset. Is it true, about her seeing Lilac?”

“Yes. I saw him too,” Joss said, nodding.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you and Colton had the orb?” Greyson asked, crossing his arms.

“It was on a need-to-know basis,” I replied with a shrug.

“And you didn’t think I needed to *know*?” Greyson asked me, his nostrils flaring. “You endangered everyone with your recklessness.”

“You know what? I’ve had enough of your fucking lecturing,” I said, pointing between him and Joss. “You think you would’ve done things better? Why the hell would I have trusted you with the orb, anyway?”

“I’m the Alpha,” Greyson said with a growl.

My head started pounding with rage. The son of a bitch had won *one* Lupo Finale by sheer luck while I was injured, and now we were stuck with him as our boss. If he said he was the Alpha one more time, I didn’t know what I’d do.

“Why the hell would I tell you about the orb?” I snapped. “So you could just give it to Silas?”

Greyson shoved me hard enough for me to lose my balance. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

I pushed him back as hard as I could, and he stumbled as well.

“Hey!” Joss barked. “Both of you, cut it out!”

“You may have fooled Joss”—I pointed at the Luna—“and you might’ve fooled Cali, but I *know* you can’t be trusted.”

“You fucking—” Greyson’s claws were out. Good. He was about to come at me when Joss leaped between us, shoving at both our chests. She was strong enough to make the move feel like a punch, and for a second, I choked.

“You both need to shut the fuck up and grow up!” Joss snapped. “This isn’t a playground, and you two aren’t goddamn children anymore. Your father is probably laughing at us right now—by fighting, you’re doing exactly what he wants.”

Greyson and I paused.

We stared at each other, sharp breaths becoming even.

I hated looking at him, sometimes. I wished he’d never gotten out of that fucking zoo.

We didn’t look alike, not that much. But sometimes, when I looked in a mirror, I could swear I saw something of him in me. And I despised that. In some ways, I despised it even more than any resemblance I had to my own father.

If I looked like Greyson, even a little, did that mean that when Cali kissed me, that when Cali fucked me, she was reminded of Greyson as well? Did she think of him?

The thought made my gut churn.

“You may think I'm working with Silas, but you're wrong,” Greyson said.

There was absolutely no reason for me to believe Greyson. He’d proven time and time again that he was cunning and ruthless and backstabbing. I was no innocent daisy myself, but at least I wasn’t a traitor. At least I wouldn’t hurt my own pack. Case in point: Violet had called me for help when she needed someone. I took care of my people.

Joss was right about one thing, though—I shouldn’t waste any more energy fighting with Greyson. Silas was the biggest threat right now. And if I played along for the time being and kept an eye on Greyson, perhaps I’d be able to get to the truth. The truth about all the horrible things Greyson had done, and the truth about what Silas needed that damn orb for.

“Okay. Fine,” I told Greyson. “Let’s believe that you’re the good guy for a second.” I faked a smile. “Now what?”

Someone called for Joss from inside. She rubbed her temples, looking between us. “Can I leave you two alone for a minute, or will I come back and find limbs all over the yard?”

I glanced at her. “I promise not to bite first.”

Greyson stayed silent.

Huffing, Joss headed back into the house. “You better not make a mess out here,” she called over her shoulder. “We just bought this place, and I like things neat!”

“I’m confused—who’s the Alpha? You or her?” I asked Greyson.

“She does what she’s supposed to do,” Greyson replied coldly. “And she’s damn good at it, so stop your fucking whining.”

I took a moment to consider that. Either way, it was a good thing that he hadn’t picked Cali. A good thing that Cali wasn’t here. I wondered what she would do, if she were here. Who would she side with? She was always quick to defend Greyson, and that had always bothered me more than I liked to admit. I couldn’t get over the way she’d said that she hadn’t slept with Greyson—she’d used the same cold, indignant tone that Greyson had used when he’d said he wasn’t working with Silas.

I supposed I would have to deal with all my fucking doubts.

Or, mostly, I would have to force them into the back seat, since the pack was clearly worried about the orb and Silas right now. The danger was real. Even Greyson seemed nervous, and that was a hard feeling to fake for someone as arrogant as he was. But still—that didn’t mean that he was innocent, no matter what Cali believed.

She didn’t know Greyson the way I did.

But hey, for her sake, I could at least pretend to indulge Greyson’s lies.

“You want me to trust you?” I asked him.

He eyed me severely. “That’s up to you.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s start with this: tell me everything you know about Silas.”

**Episode 614**

Tony was standing there.

In my bedroom doorway.

Tony was standing there, in my doorway, holding his severed leg, and there was no goddamn mop in my room this time, so I… didn’t have anything to fight him off with?

*OH MY GOD!* I screamed inside my head. *What is HAPPENING?!*

“Am I dreaming?” I whispered to myself, eyeing Tony’s crooked, disgusting smirk. “Is this a nightmare?”

He chuckled. I shuddered.

“You shouldn’t be surprised to see me. You think I’d just die in peace after *this*?” he asked, shaking his severed leg.

I stumbled backward, behind the bed, horrified. He looked dirty, like a dug-up corpse, and I felt like throwing up. It was like, after all the shit that I’d dealt with, a ghost was all that was left to come over and start tormenting me. What FRESH HELL WAS THIS?

“You shouldn’t be here. You’re dead,” I said. “Go away!”

Tony used his severed leg as a crutch, moving toward me slowly. I choked, gagging.

“Where should I be, then? The school?” He sneered. “Where your boyfriend murdered me?”

Would my magic work on a ghost? I hoped my powers worked on a fucking ghost. But could I focus and channel them right now? Could I focus at all on *anything* other than the literal corpse standing in front of me?

*WHY DOES THIS SHIT KEEP HAPPENING TO ME?* I thought, aghast and totally panicked. I grabbed my pillow, fighting to be as menacing as I could. “Why are you even here?” I demanded. “What the hell do you want, Tony?”

“You owe me, Cali.” He pointed at me. With his fucking *severed leg.*

I was about to throw up all over my bed.

“Owe you for what?” I said, my voice rising. My horror was mixed with rage. “You attacked me, Tony. You tried to assault me!”

Tony rolled his eyes. “You’re so dramatic.”

“And you’re a fucking rapist! Eat shit and die! *AGAIN!*” I snapped, backing up into my desk. There was a stack of books there—if I threw them at him, would he feel it? Probably not. He was a ghost, wasn’t he?

“Wait, you’re a ghost, aren’t you?” I asked. “Like, you are dead. Right?”

Tony laughed. “Boo!” he shouted. “Did I scare you?”

In general, he did. But not when he shouted fucking *boo*. “No,” I said, frowning.

Tony’s sinister smile faded. He moved closer to me, slowly, and I felt the temperature in the room drop. As if I’d stepped into a freezer. I could even see my breath.

“Don’t!” I raised my hand, fighting to channel my power. “Don’t come any fucking closer!”

“Oh, Cali,” Tony hissed. “You’ve always been—”

The bedroom door burst open. I gaped at my dad, who gaped at Tony, a look of utter shock on his face. “What the…”

Before Dad could finish his sentence, Tony glared at me and vanished.

Dad marched up to me, aghast, his face painted with horror. “Cali! Are you okay? What the hell—what the hell was that thing?”

Dad patted me down, as if to make sure that I was alive and well, while I tried to calm him down. And failed. What the hell was I supposed to say? *Sorry, Dad, for bringing a ghost to our house?*

“You saw him, didn’t you?” I asked Dad, swallowing roughly.

“Of course I saw him!” Dad screeched. It would’ve been funny if the situation weren’t so terrifying. “He was right there!” He pointed at the spot in the room that Tony had occupied. “Where did he go? How did he vanish like that?”

Dad started looking around, inside my closet, under my desk. He picked up my lamp too for good measure, looking underneath. After he’d finished checking my drawers—because that was totally a place a man with a severed leg would fit into—Dad turned to me, looking green.

“Dad…” I swallowed. “It was… He’s a ghost.”

Dad’s jaw dropped open. He made a horrified sound before exclaiming, “Don’t tell me that!” He got on his knees, looking under the bed and mumbling, “He has to be here somewhere.”

“He was never really here, Dad,” I muttered. “He was a ghost. If it makes you feel any better, I think you scared him away.”

Dad stood to his feet, looking at me like he was about to explode. “A ghost. A GHOST. You’re telling me there was a ghost in my house and I’m supposed to be *okay* with that?”

Mom decided to walk in right then, just to make matters worse. “Why are you guys screaming? What’s going on?”

“GHOSTS!” Dad exclaimed, flailing—much like I would have in his position. “Ghosts, that’s what’s going on!” He stormed out of the room. I had never, ever, EVER in my entire life seen him so upset.

*Oh my god,* I thought. *I have BROKEN MY DAD!*

“What was that all about?” Mom asked me, her tone cautious.

I sniffled, plopping down onto my bed. I hated how badly this was hitting Dad. But then again, what else should I have expected? That he’d invite the ghost for dinner, or tell me that a semi-feral werewolf was the ideal partner?

“There was a ghost. For real,” I said. “And unfortunately—or fortunately, since he scared it away—Dad saw him.”

“Who was it?”

“Who was what?”

“The ghost,” Mom said cautiously. “Who was it?”

No need to explain that the ghost was Tony. That would open a whole other issue that I didn’t want to discuss right then. I had enough on my plate already.

“Just a ghost,” I said.

Mom sighed, wrapping her arms around me. Her hug felt comforting, but nothing could fix this mess. “We’d better go downstairs and calm your dad down.”

“I just wish…”

“What?” Mom asked, caressing my cheek.

“I hate how all this is affecting Dad,” I mumbled. “I don’t know—it’s just very scary to see him lose his shit like that. He’s always been so calm and sweet, and now he wants me to be Rapunzel and never see my kinda-boyfriends again.”

Mom raised an eyebrow. “Your what now?”

I realized what I’d just said and cleared my throat. “My friends, I meant. My friends from Oregon.”

“This is just a lot for him, Cali,” Mom explained, thankfully not getting hung up on my nonsense. “For anyone, really. Let’s go see him, okay?”

I nodded and followed Mom downstairs. In all fairness, I’d freaked out when I’d first found out about werewolves as well. Dad was dealing with much more—all the supernatural things were coming at him at once. And he had just learned that both his wife and daughter were Fae, so that had to take the cake when it came to weirdness. The world as he knew it had come to an end.

We found him pacing in the living room, mumbling to himself.

“A ghost! GHOST! In MY house! Who the hell invited him in? Not me!”

And then:

“A werewolf boyfriend. WEREWOLF. He turns into a wolf and dates my daughter! Is this considered real life *Beauty and the Beast*? Oh my god!”

Followed by:

“Wait, is it ghosts that need to be invited into someone’s house, or is it vampires? I am NOT going to be inviting any vampires into my house! This is my property! Get off my lawn and out of my daughter’s bedroom!”

A short pause, then:

“Thank god Cali’s boyfriend isn’t a vampire, though. Because if she—”

Finally, Mom cleared her throat.

Startled, Dad grabbed the TV remote, ready to throw it at an imaginary intruder’s head. I wasn’t about to judge his choice of weapon, though. I had also been known to use everyday objects in extraordinary ways.

“Tom,” Mom told Dad gently, walking up to him. “I know all this is a shock to you. But you need to calm down. The ghost is gone.”

Dad blinked, breathing deeply. “Right. So you are agreeing that that… *thing*… was a ghost? Or should I say poltergeist?”

Dad still looked a little green. I felt so horrible about all this. I used to have an existential crisis every day over not being a powerful supernatural being, and now that I kinda was one, it had come with many, many pitfalls.

“Calling it a ‘ghost’ is fine,” Mom told Dad. She stroked his shoulder soothingly, but Dad flinched away.

“It’s not *fine*, Orla,” he said, huffing. “There’s nothing fine about being haunted by a ghost! In what world does that sound okay to you?” He raised an index finger. “But wait, I know! I’m sure that in the Fae world ghosts are probably no odder than cats or dogs. But in this world, the world I live in, they aren’t normal. No, siree!”

I sighed. “Dad…”

“I don’t know what to think anymore!” Dad cut me off, continuing to rant. My sweet, wholesome dad. I had definitely broken him. This was so horrible. I felt like crying.

“What the hell is happening?” Dad snapped. “Faes, werewolves, and now *ghosts?*”

The knock on the front door made all three of us jump and gasp.

“Jesus Christ!” Dad huffed, glaring at the door. He glanced at me, heading to answer. “Is that a ghost too? Or don’t they knock?” he asked, swinging the door open.

Two people dressed in black were standing on the other side.

My stomach dropped.

Agents Imamu and Fernsby of the MIB were at our front door.

“What was that about ghosts?” said a serious-looking Fernsby.

**Episode 615**

GREYSON

I thought over Xavier’s question. How much should I really tell him about Silas? Could I trust my hot-headed brother to handle the truth? But at the end of the day, perhaps I didn’t have a choice. I had to give Xavier something, just to keep the peace in the pack. Even if Xavier had technically gone Rogue, the people in the house behind me trusted him.

I was supposed to play nice, and I fucking hated it.

But it had to be done.

Part of being an Alpha was putting the pack’s well-being above your own. I had somewhat ignored that rule when I’d gone off with Cali, selfishly focusing on the need to protect her, to be with her at all times. I couldn’t do it again.

“I’m waiting, Greyson,” Xavier told me.

“Not sure where to begin,” I said.

“How about why you’ve murdered members of your own pack?” Xavier asked.

That was a sore subject, no matter how the fuck you looked at it.

“I never hurt anyone for fun, Xavier. I had to kill or be killed,” I said. Every word was the truth.

“What are you talking about?” Xavier asked, eyes narrowed.

“Everything happened because of Silas,” I said. “He was inciting the packs to turn on each other, to start a civil war. He would kill anyone who stood against him. Anyone who could threaten him.”

Xavier paused. “Who are you talking about?”

“Us,” I said. “You, me, Colton.”

Xavier stared at me for a moment. “Are you saying our father wanted to kill his own sons?”

I offered a bitter snort. Xavier had to know that by now. It was absurd to think of it, to think that the man had brought kids into this world just to get rid of them. “And he didn’t care who did it, our pack or another. Father of the year, our dear old dad.”

Xavier pinched the bridge of his nose, looking away. “So you expect me to believe that? It’s a great story to cover your ass, to make yourself out as some kind of hero.”

I had to laugh. “I’m not a hero. But you wanted the truth, and don’t tell me you’re that shocked Dad wanted to off you. Murdering us sounds more realistic than him wanting to hang out and play baseball.”

Xavier sneered. “Right. Silas is a monster, and this whole time, you’ve been nothing more than a concerned older brother helping his brothers. If what you’re saying is true, then why didn’t you tell us what really happened from the beginning?”

“I hid the truth to protect you and Colton,” I said. “I thought you deserved better than Silas. Maybe I should’ve been honest with you both, or maybe someday you’ll thank me. Who knows.”

Xavier glared at me. “What about Cali, though? Are you using the same methods? Are you trying to protect her by lying to her as well? How’s trying to ruin our relationship working for you?”

I couldn’t let my feelings for Cali get in the middle of this, because Xavier and I would end up tearing each other apart. As calmly as I could, I said, “If you really think I was trying to break the two of you up, ask yourself why I didn’t choose her as my Luna.”

Turning my back on him, I headed into the house.

“We’re not done here, Greyson,” Xavier called after me. “You won’t earn my trust that easily!”

I wanted to shout that I didn’t give a shit about his trust. I didn’t need it. I had accepted for a while now that he and Colton would never see me as their brother again. It was the price I’d paid for my choices—dumb or not, it didn’t matter. We all lived with the consequences of our actions.

I didn’t want to think what pushing Cali away right now would mean for us in the long run.

At least the house looked amazing on the inside. Hardwood floors and high ceilings, fully furnished in a simple but modern style, big windows. It really was a nice house. I found Joss standing at the living room doorway, watching Artemis chatting with a few other pack members.

“Where are you from?” Rishika asked Artemis.

Artemis caught my eye and I gave her a warning look. Werewolves hated Fae—nobody needed to know that she was one. I had enough shit to deal with already without adding her to the mix. “I’m actually from Portland,” Artemis said, breaking our eye contact.

“And how did you meet Greyson?” Violet asked Artemis curiously.

“Through Cali. She’s a mutual friend,” Artemis said. At least technically, that wasn’t a lie.

“Your new friend is already part of the gang,” Joss said after walking up to me. “She doesn’t seem so bad.”

I shrugged.

“Are you going to tell us why she’s here, or should I just quit asking?” Joss said conversationally.

“Quit asking,” I deadpanned. “Good job on the house, by the way.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. “I put a lot of effort into this. Let me show you upstairs.”

We climbed up the stairs and she showed me a few of the bedrooms, the bathrooms, and the library/office. She then showed me my room. It was a master bedroom, all white and cream decorations that looked like they were out of some catalog. It looked great, but it seemed kind of… cold.

“This is my room?” I asked Joss.

“Yeah. Mine is just across the hall. We sleep separately, obviously, because I’m not interested in fucking you anymore.”

“Noted.” I looked around. The room and bed were gorgeous, but so massive. Too much for one person. I didn’t like the idea of being in here alone. I could almost see Cali waking up in that bed, her hair a complete disaster.

God, I missed her so fucking much.

Joss took in my expression, snorting. “What? Scared of sleeping alone?”

I rolled my eyes, brushing it off.

She gestured across the hall. “Remember, I’m just over there. Nothing to worry about. And if the boogeyman comes to get you, all you gotta do is scream.”

I ignored her jab. “Thank you, Joss. For everything.” I knew I had to elaborate further and tell her how important all the things she’d done were, how well she had dealt with the council, how much of a good idea it had been to find this house. But after my talk with Xavier, all I had the energy for right then was a simple thanks. No fireworks, no further chatter.

Joss didn’t seem to mind. “No problem. Just don’t run off again without telling me what you’re doing, though. I won’t go as easy on you next time.”

“You almost broke my jaw with that slap,” I said.

She smirked. “Exactly.”

Scoffing, I shut the door in her face. I heard her laugh and walk away, so I gathered we were good.

*I* didn’t feel all that good, though. My head was pounding. It had been a really fucking long day. If I could just clear my mind and rest, I would be better equipped to deal with the looming threat from Silas. There was a chance that Xavier and Colton would never believe me, and perhaps some people would always consider me a deadly Rogue, but even if I could have done it over differently, I wouldn’t.

I would never give Silas the pleasure.

Taking a deep breath, I eyed the bed. I needed a fucking nap. But first, a hot shower. I headed to the bathroom and started stripping, catching a glimpse of my scar as I ran the shower.

A Fae had done this to me.

But not just any Fae. Maren.

Someone I’d deeply cared about. Once.

As I got under the hot spray, I thought that Cali would never betray me like that. At least not in the same way Maren had. No matter how hard Xavier tried to distort the truth or turn Cali against me, Cali would never harm me on purpose. She just wasn’t that kind of person. Silas’s attack hadn’t even formally started, and I was already going nuts waiting for the moment when I’d be able to reconcile with Cali—when I’d be able to tell her that I loved her. That I was sorry for excluding her from this madness, but it had been for her own good.

Being with her parents, away from here, was basically the best thing for her at the moment.

If only things were different, though.

If only Xavier was out of the picture, and Silas was gone, and Cali was here, with me.

I moved my head under the shower, closing my eyes.

If only Cali was here, with me…

*“Greyson,” she whispered, and my eyes opened. There she was, under the shower, smiling up at me. Her glorious bare body looked incredible under the water, drops sliding down her shoulders, her chest, her stomach, lower…*

*“Kiss me,” she said, wrapping her arms around my neck. Her voice was a plea, and I could never resist. I wanted to kiss her all over. I moved from her mouth to her jawline to her chin, then her neck, feeling her pulse thundering. She squeezed herself against me, greedy for more. I kissed her shoulders, her collarbones, then her breasts, caressing everywhere I could reach. I did it softly, gently, just to savor the incredible feeling of her perfect skin under my lips, against my tongue, between my teeth.*

*When I got on my knees in front of her and moved her body to rest against the slippery shower wall, she gasped. She was shaking, flushed all over, and I couldn’t wait to kiss her again, to keep kissing… I moved her leg over my shoulder, mouthing at the soft inside of her thigh, and she gripped onto my hair so hard that I had to grin.*

*The sounds she made were delicious, as delicious as her skin, as her reactions… I pressed my lips to the apex of her thighs and gently sucked and licked at her while she whimpered, calling my name, telling me how good I made her feel, how amazing. She could barely keep herself upright, almost fell two or three times, convulsing every time she orgasmed, but I kept her standing.*

*Until she was the one who got on her knees in front of me, looked up at me, licked her lips, and said, “My turn.”*

My eyes snapped open. I was panting, alone in the shower. Cali was gone.

The fantasy was gone too.

How the hell could I ever get over her?

**Episode 616**

Alarmed beyond belief, I looked from my dad to the MIB agents, Fernsby and Imamu. This was a horrible nightmare that wouldn’t stop. The last thing we needed right now was *Law & Order: Special Supernatural Assholes Unit* knocking on our door!

*How much did these agents actually hear?* I thought, panicked. *This is a disaster.*

“Someone said something about ghosts?” Imamu said, perking up like a dog that had sniffed out a squirrel.

Mom cleared her throat, quick to answer because she was a goddamn Fae genius. “Oh! We were talking about Halloween, weren’t we, Tom?”

Dad stammered. He really had always been bad at lying. This whole situation was only making his lack of skill even worse. “H-halloween?”

“Yes,” I added quickly. “We were trying to decide on costumes—you can never get too early a head start on it.” I started rambling, pointing at my parents. “Mom wants to be a witch, I think I’m going to be a zombie, and Dad, he wants to be a ghost.”

“*What?*” Dad exclaimed, as if appalled by the idea. He really NEEDED TO GET WITH THE PROGRAM HERE!

“Is there a problem, Mr. Hart?” Imamu asked Dad, raising an eyebrow. “You don’t want to dress up as a ghost? Perhaps a werewolf would be a better choice for you?”

My stomach clenched at his words. *No*. This guy couldn’t know about Xavier or Greyson. He was just an irritating smartass. I really wished I could blast this agent and his annoying partner with my Fae powers, just so they’d leave me and my family alone. We’d been through enough!

“I assume you’re not here to talk about Halloween costumes,” Mom said smoothly, before Dad could offer another stuttering reply.

Agent Furby—sorry, Fernsby—cleared her throat. “No. But we wanted to pick up the conversation we had started in the hospital. We still have some questions.”

“Can we come in?” Imamu asked Dad, his tone gentle. Almost alluring.

I felt the urge to slam the door in their enraging faces and lock it. They were seriously interrupting our family crisis! We had things to do, things to fight about! How dared they just butt in like this? I didn’t want them here, especially not now. Probably not ever.

But Mom remained calm and collected, like she’d spent all her life lying and was a pro at it. Which was kind of the truth, wasn’t it?

“Of course,” she told them. “Come on in.” She led the way to the living room, and the agents followed. Dad and I stayed a few feet behind.

“We’re not talking about… that thing… we saw,” Dad whispered harshly in my ear. “Okay?”

Gulping, I nodded.

*Seems like Dad isn’t done being dramatic* at least, I thought. This whole situation had seriously ruined his vibe, and it was at least half my fault. The other half was Mom’s because she had given birth to me, and also because she had spent a whole lot more time lying to Dad.

“Can I offer you some coffee?” Mom asked the agents, like they were her BFFs. “Tea?”

It was kind of scary how cool she looked. Wow. Dad looked as alarmed as I felt as he took her in.

“I don’t like coffee or tea,” Fernsby started. “In fact—”

“No, we’re good,” Imamu said, cutting her off. These guys were so fucking weird. And in a bad way. “We were hoping to ask you some questions,” Imamu added.

Mom sat at the sofa across from them while Dad and I loomed over her awkwardly. Super normal.

“I’m not sure how helpful we can be,” Mom said smoothly. “Our daughter just returned from Oregon, and, as you know, I was just released from the hospital.”

Fernsby arched an eyebrow. “That’s exactly what we want to talk to you about.”

“You made quite the recovery,” Imamu said. “Baffling to the doctors. They called it a miracle.”

“And we don’t get paid to believe in miracles,” Fernsby added.

“And I don’t get paid to wax my eyebrows,” I said. “So I’m not sure what’s going on right now. What exactly is it that you’re after?”

Fernsby and Imamu stared at me. Silently and stoically. Had these people learned social cues from werewolves?

“I need a drink,” Dad blurted suddenly. “Can I get anyone something? Maybe a lemonade, if you don’t drink coffee or tea?”

“We never drink anything when we’re on duty,” Imamu said.

Dad blinked. “Not even water?”

“Not a drop,” Fernsby declared.

Dad shook his head at them and headed to the kitchen. I looked between the agents, sitting next to Mom. This was outrageous. “What are you guys?” I asked suspiciously. “Gremlins?”

They both stared at me like I was insane.

“They were little monsters in an old 90s movie that multiplied when water touched them,” I explained.

“Oh, we know,” Imamu said cryptically.

I got the urge to bash their heads together.

“Anyway,” Mom said, breezing through the awkwardness, “I’m still not sure what there is to talk about. We’re just as baffled as the doctors about what happened. But we feel very, very lucky. I am so lucky, and I think…” Mom reached out and squeezed my hand, sniffling. “I want to believe that my speedy recovery had to do with my only daughter’s return.”

Mom was *seriously* selling this. Was that a *tear* in the corner of her eye? Could she cry on cue? WHAT WAS THIS SORCERY? Also, shouldn’t she have been more worried about this whole agent situation?

“Um, yeah. Either way, we do feel super lucky,” I said, feeling my mouth dry up as the agents studied us.

Clearing his throat, Imamu opened a notebook. “When was it, exactly, that you first needed medical attention?”

Mom shrugged. “You mean the first time? That was years ago.”

“We mean in regards to this latest episode,” Fernsby clarified.

“I’m not sure,” Mom said with a shrug. “It’s been on and off for a while.”

“And what exactly was the nature of your most recent illness?” Imamu asked.

“I have a feeling you already know that, so why are you asking me?” Mom said cryptically.

“Ah, yes,” Imamu said, checking his notes. “Systemic organ failure.” He glanced up at Mom. “Yet, here you are.”

“Excuse me,” I said, bristling, “but aren’t all these questions covered by doctor/patient confidentiality? Why are you two even here? What right do you have to question my mom at a time like this? She needs to rest, not answer weird questions!”

“It’s our job to ask questions,” Fernsby said.

“And it’s *my* job to keep my mom happy and well-rested,” I said, getting angrier by the second. “What can we tell you that the doctors haven’t already disclosed?”

“A lot of things,” Imamu told me with a smile.

“No,” I declared. “Don’t do that. Don’t use that weird tone with me.”

“What tone?” Imamu asked, feigning innocence.

“The ‘oh, I’m so important, I know something you don’t’tone,” I said.

“Cali,” Mom said, squeezing my hand. “Calm down. Let the agents do their work.”

“There are things we can’t reveal,” Imamu said, staring at me. “But I can tell you this. There’s something mysterious about your mother’s sudden recovery, and our job is to investigate the mysterious.” He turned to Fernsby. “Maybe we need to play a little one on one.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, eyes narrowed.

“We’d like to question all three of you individually,” Fernsby said.

I did not like the sound of that. AT ALL.

“You mean talk to my mom, then me, then my dad?” I asked.

Fernsby nodded slowly. “With your cooperation, of course.”

I was fighting the urge to tell them both to get their nosy asses out of here when Mom spoke up. “Why don’t we get back to you on that? I’m feeling a little weak at the moment.” She leaned into me and poked my side lightly.

Mom was very obviously pretending, but if I hadn’t known that she was, I would have bought it in a second flat. She really was VERY, VERY GOOD at lying. Jeez.

“Of course,” Imamu said, standing up from his chair. At least they weren’t insisting. For now.

“We’ll contact you and set something up in the next few days,” Fernsby told us as we escorted them out.

The moment the door was shut behind them, I grumbled, “Good riddance!”

Mom shushed me, pulling me deeper into the house. “They might hear.”

“What do they have?” I asked. “Bionic ears?”

Mom stared at me, eyebrows raised.

“Oh god, do they have bionic ears or other gadgets? Is the US government spying on us? OH MY—”

“Cali, stop,” Mom said, squeezing my shoulders. “Calm down.”

I calmed down, focusing on my breathing. “We can’t let them question Dad. There’s no telling what he’ll say. He’s too upset and confused.”

Mom nodded slowly.

An idea entered my mind, like a lightbulb. I felt horrible even considering it, but I had to at least bring it up. “Maybe… Maybe we should erase Dad’s memory.”

**Episode 617**

XAVIER

I had to admit that the house was nice. At the very least. I wasn’t about to shell out any compliments to Joss or to Greyson. I didn’t like either of them. Though it wasn’t as if I liked anyone in general, really. Perhaps Gabriel was fine. Colton, too. Jay was a good guy—he also knew a lot about how to do your taxes, so that was helpful. Violet was sweet, and Mrs. Smith.

And of course, Cali. I definitely liked Cali.

I saw Artemis when I walked into the living room. She was talking with some of the pack members, all casual and cool, as if she belonged here and it was totally normal for her to be hanging out with us. These guys had no idea she was Fae, and I was pretty sure that Greyson wouldn’t want them to know, just to avoid the fuss.

How did Artemis play into all this, anyway?

Why would Greyson have brought a Fae here in the first place?

And why would Artemis have agreed to come here?

For her, walking into a pack full of Fae-resenting werewolves seemed like suicide. Or at least a recipe for a mild concussion. I wasn’t sure how easily Fae got hurt or died. I shrugged at the thought, because Artemis was not my problem. Good luck to Greyson. My eyes moved away from her and over to Violet, who was standing near a window that overlooked the lake.

She looked so tired. So small.

Poor kid.

“Hey,” I said, tapping her on the shoulder.

She jumped back, startled.

“You okay?” I asked her.

She gulped, squeezing my arm to pull me closer. She pointed at the lake. “I saw him. I saw my brother right there.”

“Okay,” was all I said.

The girl was about to cry. I hated it when people cried—especially young girls like Violet.

“I hope it wasn’t too much of a bother to come here,” Violet added, sniffling. “I called you because I didn’t know what to do. You’ve always been like a brother to me.”

That was surprising to hear. I had never dwelled on the fact that I’d let Violet and Lilac stay with me and be part of the pack, even when we weren’t a pack. I should’ve figured that feeding and clothing her would create this kind of bond between us. I liked it. Even if I’d never admit it to fucking Greyson, it felt good to know that Violet depended on me. That I’d done something *good*.

“I’m here for you now,” I said. “I know you’ve been under a lot of stress—”

Violet cut me off. “Don’t tell me I imagined it. *Please*, Xavier. Joss saw Lilac too.”

“I would never tell you that. I want you to trust your instincts, always.”

Violet sniffled, nodding at me.

“It’s just that there’s a lot of weird stuff going on…” Like Greyson, Silas, the orb? To name a few. “Things I don’t understand completely yet.”

“So I should quit trying to understand them as well, right?” Violet asked me. She wiped her eyes, her expression shifting to something sharp.

“Huh?” I asked, confused.

“Since you can’t figure out what’s going on, why would I?” Violet exclaimed. “It’s not like I can do anything other than mourn my brother. It’s not like I’m in any way *useful* to the pack!”

I stared at Violet, gaping. Not in a million years had I expected this outburst. “I never said that, Violet. I never meant that you—”

Her voice started rising, her fists clenching to her sides. “I’m tired of the pack treating me like I’m a broken child!”

“You’re not *broken*—”

“But you think I am, don’t you?” she snapped. I really had no fucking idea how to deal with an angry Violet. She was like an infuriated kitten who could claw your eyes out. “I’m nearly an adult, and I want to be treated like one.”

I sighed. I’d never been much of a therapist, but I decided that honesty was the best policy. So literally the exact opposite of everything Greyson did in his life.

“I’m sorry for all the shit you’ve gone through, Violet,” I said in an even tone. “I know it doesn’t change anything to say that, but I’m still saying it.” I felt bad for the kid. What had she ever done to deserve all this? I knew what it was like to be kept in the dark, and to keep people in the dark, and it was rarely fun either way. It was more like a necessity that easily became toxic.

A thought struck me, then. Was there a chance that what Greyson had told me about Silas was true? That Greyson had truly tried to protect me and Colton?

I shook away the notion, refusing to acknowledge or process it. I faced Violet and continued. “I get what you’re going through, and I promise to fill you in the moment I learn anything. Are you okay with that?”

Violet paused, her anger melting away. She let out a sigh, nodding. “Knowing what’s going on with Lilac is so important to me. Thank you.”

“Least I can do,” I said. Violet looked so fucking melancholy that I desperately needed to change the subject. “Um.” I cleared my throat awkwardly when inspiration hit. “Meanwhile, maybe we can start planning for your eighteenth birthday party. It's coming up pretty soon, right?”

Violet nodded, allowing a hint of a smile. But then it faded. “I’m not sure I want to celebrate, though,” she whispered.

“That’s exactly why you should. I promise it will be fun.”

Violet looked up at me, sniffling again. She wiped her eyes, then her cheeks, and then moved closer to me, wrapping her skinny arms around my torso. For a second, I froze, not used to this kind of level of attention or affection, but then I leaned into it. The kid sure could give a mean hug.

“I’m sorry I made you come back here, to the pack,” Violet said a moment later. “I know how difficult it is for you to be around Greyson.”

I shrugged. “Well, someone needs to keep the pack safe, right?” I joked.

Violet didn’t seem to take my words as a joke, though. “Right,” she said, and hugged me once more. It made me feel weird, but not bad weird. Not at all. Just warm and fuzzy and nice. Someone called for Violet from outside, so we concluded our little heart-to-heart. I headed toward the living room where the others were, and ran into Artemis.

She looked up at me, her eyebrows arched, haughty. So I spoke in a way that fit her expression. “Weird to see you here, Artemis.”

“And why is that?” she asked.

I made sure to lower my voice, just for peace’s sake—we didn’t need any more drama right now. “You’re a Fae, hanging out with a bunch of werewolves,” I muttered. “It’s like a baby antelope becoming friends with a pack of lions.”

Artemis snorted. “Please. I’m the lion here. By the way, I thought you were with Cali? Where is she? Is she okay?”

The mention of my mate made something in my gut throb. My wolf whined and begged for her, and I missed her too. But she had asked for this, and after all that had happened, I hadn’t been able to refuse her.

“She’s fine. She’s with her parents in Minnesota,” I said. And then, to distract myself, I switched back to the earlier subject. “Are you planning on staying here long? Between you and me, probably not the best idea to overstay your welcome.”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “I’ve been told that, thanks. But I have nowhere else to go for now. Is that a problem?”

I snorted. “Not for me. Not sure about Greyson, though.” I squinted at her. “What do you think about him in general?”

“I think that if you could get past your fears concerning Cali, you might be able to see that Greyson is actually a pretty good guy.”

God, no. Not Artemis too. She used to be a badass bounty hunter—how the fuck had Greyson managed to manipulate her?

“You’re brainwashed,” I scoffed. “My brother sucks.”

Artemis shrugged. “Then I guess I suck, too.”

“I don’t know you well enough to offer a verdict,” I told her flatly. “Give me time.”

Artemis snorted. Just as she was about to offer some probably snarky response, there was a noise from outside. The rest of the pack moved toward the door, and I bumped into a tall, well-built guy I didn’t recognize.

“Hey, who are you?” I asked, cutting to the chase.

“Ravi,” the guy said. “You must be Xavier. Violet talks about you a lot.”

“Can’t say the same for you,” I said.

Then, there was the sound of tires on gravel. We turned to see a car pulling up. It was Mrs. Smith and Big Mac, stretching as they stepped out of a car.

“What’s going on?” I heard Greyson’s voice from behind me. I turned around to see him climbing down the stairs, drying his hair. He eyed me before someone said, “It’s Mrs. Smith!”

Greyson went outside to greet them, and I followed. The look on both of their faces didn’t spell out anything good. A witch showing up didn’t really inspire confidence ever, did it?

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“I’m glad to see you’re here,” Mrs. Smith said, acknowledging both of us. Then she turned to Greyson. “We need to talk. Halloween’s going to be a bloodbath unless we do something.”

**Episode 618**

GREYSON

“What are you talking about?” I asked Mrs. Smith. I was cautious, on guard, fully aware that I was also in the presence of Big Mac. If I didn’t watch my tone, something told me I would end up as a newt or something.

I glanced at Artemis who came outside, and I clenched my jaw.

Great—I had a pack that was under siege, and a Fae and a witch for fucking garnish. How was this a thing now? Could this situation get any more complicated? At least—contrarily to Artemis, who had captured my ass and sold me to a Fae maniac—I’d never been given a reason not to trust Big Mac. So far. But could I trust anyone, really? The only person I did trust was in Minnesota, safe but far away from me.

Sometimes all the thinking I had to do was fucking exhausting.

I just needed to not worry about things, for just a little while—preferably during a vacation with Cali where she would wear nothing but a bikini. Or where we didn’t even go sight-seeing because she never left my bed. But that fantasy wasn’t about to become reality anytime soon.

“We should talk in private,” Mrs. Smith told me, looking around at the aghast and whispering pack that was coming out of the woodwork. It was definitely not a good idea to mention the word ‘bloodbath’ around them. What had Mrs. Smith been thinking? Had she wanted to get my attention? Because she sure fucking had it now.

I eyed her sharply before turning to the pack. “We’ll discuss our next moves later, everyone. As you were.”

The pack split as I led Mrs. Smith and Big Mac away from them.

“Sorry for bringing this up in front of them,” Mr. Smith said, “but this is very urgent.”

I took a deep breath, keeping my temper at bay. Mrs. Smith had never done me any harm, I reminded myself. “What’s going on?” I asked. I glanced at Big Mac, who was looking at the ground. “Something happen to you two?”

Neither of them spoke for a moment.

I arched an eyebrow. “How bad was it?”

“As we were coming back from Montana,” Mrs. Smith started, “we stopped to see one of Big Mac’s many, many old flames.”

*Ouch*. Mrs. Smith had really dragged out the word ‘many’ there.

“Tefirna was just a friend!” Big Mac snapped.

Lover’s spat? How interesting. Mrs. Smith hadn’t struck me as the jealous type, but apparently appearances were deceiving.

“Whatever. I don’t care,” Mrs. Smith said, rolling her eyes. She definitely cared. “The point is that Tefirna has certain abilities that allow her to connect with the spirit world.”

That caught my attention all right. “What did she say?”

“She told us that there's been a lot of chatter about a call to arms. That someone is summoning the undead,” Mrs. Smith said.

I narrowed my eyes at her. I wasn’t sure how much of this to believe. “Who is this Tefirna? And how do we know she’s for real? Any details that can help us?”

“She didn’t offer anything specific,” Mrs. Smith said. “But she did mention Halloween.”

I looked between them, scowling. “Am I missing something here? I don’t deal well with riddles, spit it out.”

“Halloween isn’t just any day,” Big Mac said seriously. “It’s an important event for witches.”

I felt like laughing. This shit was ridiculous. “An important event?” I parroted. “For what? To dress up and roam round with your broom? To arrange play dates for your black cats?”

Big Mac gasped, clearly offended. Mrs. Smith shot me a glare. “Don’t joke about this, Greyson. If Silas has the orb, then Halloween is the perfect time to use its powers.”

“Why?” I asked, impatient.

“The dead are especially vulnerable during this time,” Mrs. Smith said.

Something clicked inside my brain. Of fucking course. It was a spirit holiday. I really shouldn’t be making fun of this. Fuck—where the hell was my brain? Why wasn’t I focused? Just the sight of Xavier and the reminder of Cali had thrown me off my game. Apparently, jerking off to the thought of Cali in the shower had only made me need her more.

I was so fucking unsatisfied, I wanted to punch something.

Preferably my dear little brother, who knew what it felt like to kiss my mate.

I needed to get a fucking grip. Right. *Now*.

Me being distracted could mean someone’s death, and I already had enough bullshit to deal with when it came to my conscience.

“Greyson?” Mrs. Smith asked me cautiously. “Are you okay? You seem a bit—”

“I’m just fine. Thank you for the information,” I told both Mrs. Smith and Big Mac. I made sure to remain calm. I had to. “This helps,” I added. “I’ll call a meeting of the pack and see what everyone else has to say. Meanwhile, you two should come in and get settled.”

“How polite,” Big Mac said dryly.

“I try,” I replied in the same tone.

She grinned, so I knew she probably wasn’t going to murder me tonight.

The two women followed me inside, and then Xavier walked over, blocking our way. Just great. Fucking peachy.

“Is what you talked about something I should know about, or aren’t we at the stage yet where we tell each other everything?” he asked me, a mocking edge to his tone.

“I’m going to explain everything to the pack,” I told him. I wasn’t about to fight. I wouldn’t let any of his shit get to me. “Everyone! We have a matter to discuss.”

There was a commotion as the pack came together.

Xavier sat on a couch in the middle of the living room, watching me. Judging me. “This had better be good,” he quipped.

Since when had he become so fucking chatty? I preferred him stoic and silent. The very frequent urge to punch him was rising yet again. I reminded myself, once more, that there were more important things to deal with.

“Thank you for gathering,” I told the pack after they fell silent, staring at me expectedly. “I know everyone’s on edge right now. There’s a lot going on, so our first order of business is to remember that we are a pack. Jay and Lola, Maya and Colton are gone right now, but they will be back. So even when, for whatever the reason, we are apart, we must never forget who we are, who we belong to.”

I looked at everyone, one by one—Violet, Mrs. Smith, Big Mac, Artemis, Rishika, and then all the new people. I avoided looking at Xavier. “We are the Redwood pack. We are united, we are strong, and we will not be defeated. We weren’t by the Manus Cruentae, and we won’t be by anything else.”

The pack stirred in response. The energy in the room heightened, but the buzz was a good thing. They were hyped. They were watching me, feeding off my certainty.

I needed to be certain.

I needed to be the Alpha, to survive, and to make sure that everyone else survived as well.

And after that, maybe I’d finally manage to be with Cali. To be worthy of her.

“As some of you know,” I said, “we are under a grave threat. I want to assure you that we will meet this threat head on and, if we remember who we are, we will be victorious.”

The moment I uttered the last word, the pack started cheering, clearly pumped. I smiled, and was looking around at their faces once more when I noticed that someone was missing…

Joss.

Fucking *Joss*.

What the hell?

Here I was, lecturing about staying united, and my fucking Luna was nowhere to be seen. She was the one who’d slapped me for being gone, and now she had vanished. *Unbelievable*. I looked around, walking through the crowd who patted my back encouragingly, when I caught Rishika’s eye.

“Where’s Joss?” I asked her in a low voice. I didn’t want Xavier to hear that Joss was missing. He’d probably have something snarky to say about it, and I wasn’t interested in his bullshit.

“Last time I saw her, she was heading upstairs,” Rishika told me, wide-eyed. She could tell that I was pissed off, and rightfully so. What kind of fuckery was this? How could my Luna ignore my order to assemble?

Who the fuck told her that she could do whatever the hell she wanted?

Okay, I hadn’t informed her before I’d run off with Cali, but still—this was bullshit. Ignoring me in my own house? That she’d bought with my money? That wasn’t about to fly. Storming upstairs, fuming, I realized that Joss might have been punishing me for leaving the pack, for letting her deal with the council shitstorm alone. Joss was smart and resourceful, but she was also petty.

I didn’t do well with pettiness. It was fucking immature, and I had no time for that.

“Joss!” I called as I walked down the hallway, fighting to keep my tone even. The pack didn’t need to know that I wanted to cuss out their Luna. “Joss? Are you in there?” I knocked on her bedroom door.

When I heard someone move inside, I opened it wide, only to see Joss and Ravi—naked in bed together.

**Episode 619**

“Cali!” my mom said, looking shocked. “We can’t *erase* your father’s memory.”

“Mom, just think about it,” I said, scooting closer to her on the couch. “He’s so freaked out about all of this. Maybe it was too much too fast. Erasing his memory would help ease his mind a little bit, and then we could tell him again, just little by little—”

We both spun around when we heard the sound of glass shattering.

“*Tom*,” my mom gasped, surprised.

My dad stood in the doorway to the kitchen, staring at us. And there, at his feet, were the shattered remains of what had once been two glasses of water.

“Dad…” I started, unsure of how much he’d heard.

“You are *not* going to erase my memory, Caliana Hart,” he said angrily.

Okay, so he’d heard quite a lot.

I glanced at my mom for support. “That’s not what I mean, Dad. Not exactly—”

“I heard what you said, Caliana, and you said you want to erase my memory.” He looked furious, like the time he’d caught me sneaking through my window two hours after curfew. Lola and I had snuck out to a see a concert in a dive bar across town while we were in high school. I’d been grounded for a month after that.

“Cali was only discussing it as an option, dear,” my mom said soothingly.

He turned to her, his eyes flashing. “And don’t *I* have some say in this? I know I’m not magical or anything, but it is *my* memory, after all.”

“Dad,” I said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. Really, I didn’t. I was only suggesting it as an option because—well, you just seem so freaked out by everything. And it’s not wrong that you feel that way! I just thought it might be easier if you just… forgot about it all for a while. It has been a lot, don’t you think?”

My dad’s expression softened a little, but he shook his head. “Cali, I appreciate your concern, but no, honey. I don’t want to forget. Not about any of it. Even the stuff that’s really throwing me for a loop right now.” Stepping carefully over the broken glass, he came into the living room and sat down next to me on the couch, looking between my mom and me. “My life is made up of memories, pumpkin. Some are good, some are bad. Some are really, *really* weird—”

I giggled nervously despite myself, and he smiled back at me.

“—but they make up who I am, Cali,” he said, taking my hand. “That’s how it is with memories. They become who we are. You can’t take that away, or start to change that. I would lose a part of myself.”

“I get that, Dad, but maybe there’s a way to do it where it would just erase *some* of the memories—the stuff that’s really freaking you out,” I said. I darted a glance at my mom, not knowing if this was actually possible. “You know… like about Xavier, for example?” *Being a werewolf because my big mouth let that slip?*

But my dad was shaking his head. “No, Cali. What if something went wrong? What if I forgot something I wasn’t supposed to? I would never want to forget you. Or your mother. *Anything* about you. I couldn’t bear to lose even a moment. I love you both too much.”

I knew he was right, and tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. “I know, Dad. I know you do. I love you, too.”

He leaned in to hug me and my mom came in from the other side, sandwiching me in the middle, the way they used to do when I was a kid. I gasped for air, laughing a little through my tears. “Okay, okay!” I said. “You’re squishing me!”

They pulled away, smiling.

“Are you going to be okay, Dad?” I asked, wiping tears from my cheeks. “With everything?”

My dad sighed. “I won’t lie, ladies. It’s a lot. Especially for one day. With the magic and the fairies and the werewolves and the ghosts and the agents in dark suits. I know this is going to be hard to wrap my mind around, but I’m working on it.” He looked up at us. “But I’d rather have it this way, where I know fully who you are. Both of you. I love you both, no matter what.”

I knew he was telling the truth—I had never doubted his love—but I still had some questions. “How are you going to do that, though? Like you said—it’s a lot…”

My dad shrugged. “Just little by little, I guess. Take it step by step. That’s all I can think to do. And if I have a question, I’ll ask it.” He looked up sharply. “But I expect an open, honest answer in return. From both of you. Do I have a deal?”

My mom wiped a tear from her cheek and nodded. “Of course, Tom. Total transparency.”

He smiled at her and leaned across me to kiss her. I leaned back, rolling my eyes, but smiling. And, for a moment, I was totally content. We were all together and there were no more secrets.

“Now,” my dad said, leaning back. “What about that ghost we just saw?”

And, just like that, my contentment disappeared like a puff of smoke.   
 “I’m pretty sure he wasn’t the friendly Casper type of ghost. So, what are we going to do about it?” Dad looked at me. “I don’t want those MIB agents poking their noses around your mother for long. They’re too fixated on her recovery.”

I chewed my lip. For a moment I was the verge of explaining that the ghost was Tony, the kid the private detective had been looking for a few weeks back, but I stopped myself. Mentioning that detail might spur some unwanted questions—particularly about Xavier’s involvement in Tony’s death. And—given my dad’s less-than-fuzzy feelings about Xavier at the moment—that was the last thing I wanted.

“I mean, the Mystery Incident Bureau? What even is that?” Dad asked.

“*Mysterious Incidents Bureau*,” I corrected. “They were pretty specific about that.”

“Whatever,” my dad said, waving a dismissive hand. He looked better now. Less pale, more confident. “Who do these agents think they are? I’ve never even heard of this bureau. Do you think it’s even real?”

I shrugged. “Honestly, at this point I have no idea.”

He thought for a moment. “Maybe I should ask my cop friend Chris about it. See if he’s ever heard of them. Maybe it’s some kind of scam…”

Dad kept talking, musing to himself about the MIB, but I stopped listening. Whether officially sanctioned or not, I didn’t think the appearance of the MIB was good news. I chewed my lip, thinking hard. It seemed like the only way to get rid of them was to act like everything was normal with mom and to get rid of the ghost. If they saw Tony’s ghost, it was going to be a long time before we heard the last of them. But how the hell was I supposed to do *that*?

“Anyway, I’d better clean up that glass. No one come into the kitchen until I finish sweeping,” Dad said, getting to his feet.

“Mom?” I said quietly, as my dad walked into the kitchen. “Will you come upstairs with me for a minute?”

“Sure, honey. What’s up?” my mom asked, looking surprised.

“Um… I just want to show you something.”

She didn’t look entirely convinced, but my mom followed me upstairs and into my room. “What’s going on” she asked, shutting the door behind us.

“Do you remember Tony? That kid from my college who went missing?”

“That private detective was here a while back, asking about him. Mikah, right? The vampire.”

I heaved a sigh. My mom had in inconveniently good memory. “I’m pretty sure Tony’s the ghost. Is there a way we can scare him off? Some kind of Fae power we can use?”

My mom’s eyebrows drew together as she thought. “Oh, honey, I don’t know.” She was quiet for a moment. “Well, I don’t know how we could scare him away, but we could trap him.”

My mouth fell open in surprise. “Like *Ghostbusters*? Are you kidding me? I didn’t know you could do that. Do you have a device or something that does—”

“Cali, slow down,” my mom said, holding up her hands. “I’m not a ghostbuster. The only way we could trap a ghost as Fae is with a Fae triangle.”

“Um, Mom, a triangle has three sides, and there are only two of us. We could make a Fae straight line.” My mom gave me her even stare. “So, for a Fae triangle, we need—”

“Another Fae. We’re one short,” she supplied.

“Great,” I said, deflating. I leaned back against my desk. “So what are we going to do then?”

My mom sighed and shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Hang on,” I said suddenly, standing up straight. How could I have been so stupid? “I know another Fae!”

My mom stared at me. “Another Fae? *Here*? In our world?”

“Yes! Her name is Artemis!” I grabbed my mom by the shoulders in excitement. “She can be the third for our triangle. I just have to figure out how to get her out to Minnesota.”

**Episode 620**

AVA

I stared at Nolan. “Who are the Evers brothers?” I asked, though I had the niggling sensation I should have known the answer to the question.

Nolan took my hand and led me down the hall, into a small bedroom. He pulled a chair away from the desk and guided me into it, then sat down on the edge of the narrow bed.

I looked around the room, flashes of memory returning. I had lived here. I ran a hand over the scarred dark wood of the desk. This had been my room. I had slept in that bed, beneath a yellow quilt. I had looked out of that small window with the sun-bleached curtain. There used to a be an aspen tree just outside the window, but now there was nothing. I stared hard. Had something happened to it, or was I just imagining it?

Nolan’s eyes were on me as I looked around the room. He sketched a smile when I looked at him. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “I’m still just trying to process everything.” He shook his head. “You’re alive.”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“Do you… How did you get here?”

“I walked.”

Nolan took this in. “Do you remember anything else about the woman with the golden arm? Or the man who was with her? You said he was older, right? Older than us? How old?”

I cast my mind back, but it was difficult. My memory was so foggy. “The man was older than us, yes, but not an old man. He seemed powerful. I was frightened of him.”

“Why?” Nolan asked quickly. “Did he say something? Hurt you?”

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t know why I felt afraid. It was just… an *instinct*.”

“And the woman?” Nolan pressed.

I shrugged.

“Have you ever heard of Demeter?” he asked.

I tried to remember something—anything—but there was nothing. “No,” I finally said. “I’ve never heard of her. Who is she?”

“She’s a witch,” Nolan said grimly.

“A witch?” I asked, confused.

He nodded. “There’s only one person I know of who has a golden arm. Demeter. She’s known for using her magic in very dark ways.” He looked down at the bracelet I’d been given. “May I?”

I nodded and held out my arm. “Go ahead.”

Nolan hesitated for just a moment, then reached out to touch it, to take it off. An instant later he was thrown back against the far wall with a blast, like he’d just been struck by a bolt of lightning.

“Nolan!” I gasped, jumping to my feet. “Are you okay?” I asked, hurrying to him.

Nolan was already picking himself up off the floor, though he looked stunned. He shook his head, like he was clearing it. “I’m okay, I’m okay.” He looked at the bracelet on my arm. “There is very powerful magic in that. We had better be careful.”

I helped him up and he shuffled back to the bed and sat back down.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked. He was looking at me with an odd expression.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding quickly. “Yeah. I’m okay. I mean…” He shook his head and his eyes shone bright. “No, I guess I’m not okay. You were—you *are*—my only sister. And you’re back, Ava.”

A tear slipped down his cheek and I watched as he dashed it away with the heel of his palm.

“I’m sorry,” he said, taking a shaking breath. “It’s just… overwhelming.”

My brain was too muddled—I wasn’t sure how to respond—but my instinct told me to do something, so I stood and moved toward the bed, sitting next to him and putting a hand on his shoulder.

He looked up, surprised for a moment, then covered my hand with his. “I just never thought I’d see you again. They took you away from me,” he said, his voice thick with pain and anger.

“Who did?” I asked, confused.

Nolan’s face registered shock at my question, then he looked away, out the window. His expression grew hard. “The Evers brothers. Xavier Evers, and Colton, his twin brother.”

“*Xavier*,” I repeated, feeling the name on my tongue. The effect the sound had on me was strange. A combination of yearning and terror. And anger.

Nolan’s eyes were on me again, flashing with banked rage. “Do you remember what he did to you, Ava? What they did to us?”

I opened my mouth to say no, I didn’t remember, but before I could I was hit with a flash of memory. Xavier in his wolf form, bearing down on me. He lunged with a snarl that shook my bones. He attacked me, sunk his teeth into me. Automatically, I put my hand to my neck. He’d killed me.

My fingers played over the ridges of scars on my skin. What had made him hurt me? Kill me?

“Greyson played a part, too,” Nolan said, not looking at me, lost in his own thoughts. “He isn’t without guilt. He has to pay for what he did to me—humiliating me in front of everyone like that at the Lupo Finale…”

*Greyson*. I thought hard, trying to place the name. I felt like I knew Greyson from… somewhere. I pressed my hands to my head as it pulsed with pain.

“I’m sorry,” Nolan said. When I looked up his eyes were on me, and he looked apologetic. “I don’t mean to overwhelm you, Ava. We don’t need to talk about this all right now.” He gave me a watery smile. “You’re back. We should be celebrating.”

But there was a note of hesitation in his voice. Even in my bewildered state, I could hear it. “What’s wrong?”

For a moment, Nolan hesitated, and I wondered if he was going to answer my question at all. Then he stood and took my hand. “Come here.”

The room was small, with only the desk, the bed, and a small dresser in the corner. Hanging over the dresser was a dusty mirror, and Nolan led me to it. He put his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes. Deeply, like he was trying to see inside me. “Ava, I’m so happy you’re back. Words can’t describe how I’m feeling right now, but… It’s just going to take some time for me to get used to your face.”

“My face—” I stopped talking with a gasp. When I turned to the mirror, the stranger’s face was staring back at me. *Cali*, Nolan had called her. I put my hand to my cheek. How had I forgotten? I had seen this face in the mirror in the bathroom. I looked closer, into the wavy glass of the mirror. I was me, but the face that looked back at me wasn’t.

Nolan stood behind me, a foot taller than me, looking at my face. He took a deep breath. “I just have to tell myself—” He flinched. “I have to *remind* myself that when you shifted, it was definitely you. You have her face, but it’s still your wolf, Ava. I’d have known you anywhere. You’re still my sister.”

I touched my hand to the eyebrows on my face, then ran a finger down the narrow nose, up the high cheekbones. It was a pretty face, though not mine, and I looked at it curiously. “You do not like the girl with this face, do you, Nolan? This Cali.”

Nolan’s expression darkened. Everything about him drew back, pulling in on itself. “I *hate* her, Ava,” he said, and the coldness of his voice made me shiver. “I hate her almost as much as I hate the Evers brothers.”

“Who is she?” I asked.

“She is *nothing!*” Nolan spat. “She is a *human*. Nothing. And yet she attacked one in our pack. Took out his eye!”

I stared at him in the mirror, shocked.

He shook his head, disgust written all over his features. “A human, doing that to one of us! And now I hear rumors that she’s involved in a *due destini*.”

“A *due destini*?” I repeated. This roused something in me. Sitting in bed as a child, listening to a story. *Cassandra*.

Nolan was nodding. “It was rumored at the Lupo Finale that both Xavier and Greyson are her mates,” he said, his eyes flashing dangerously. Then he looked down to me, our eyes meeting in the mirror. “And that, dear sister, is where you come in.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, a thrill of fear shivering through me.

“They need to pay for what they’ve done. The Evers brothers, Cali—all of them. They need to feel the pain they’ve inflicted on both of us.” A hunger flared in his eyes. “I want to take from them what they took from you.”

I stood before him, letting the pain and anger that rolled off him flow into me, feeling it fill all my empty spaces. I looked up, meeting his eyes in the small, cracked mirror, and nodded. “Tell me how I can help.”

**Episode 621**

GREYSON

Shit. I half-turned away, staring determinedly at the oak doorframe. Anything was better than looking at a very surprised and very naked Joss. God, I did *not* need to see this today—or ever. I was never going to get that image out of my mind. Joss and this guy all… tangled up together. I wanted to press the heels of my hands to my eyes and push, but I kept it together. This moment didn’t need to be any more awkward than it already was.

Not that I minded seeing Joss like… *that*. She *was* beautiful and I did have eyes. I’d chosen her as my Luna because she was a leader. It was something I knew about her from our past run-ins. I’d known early on that she wanted me, and we had hooked up in the past. But that’s all it had been, a hookup. The feelings part was never mutual. She was beautiful and sexy, but did nothing for me.

She just wasn’t… Cali.

But still, it wasn’t like I *wanted* to see Joss in that position.

The bedfellow looked at Joss, who was looking at me, then looked up himself, noticing me for the first time. “Oh shit!” he said, and rolled off Joss. He spun on the bed, grasping at the sheets, trying to cover himself, and managed to tumble off the bed and onto the floor, landing with a thump.

I couldn’t help myself—I snorted with laughter.

Joss looked up at me. “Can we help you with something, Greyson?”

“Um,” I said, still not looking at the two of them. “I called a pack meeting downstairs. I came up to see why my Luna wasn’t there.”

She stared at me for a moment. Then she gestured to the bed. “And do you have your answer now?”

“I suppose I do.”

I glanced down at the guy on the floor, who was now covering himself with a small corner of the sheet. He grinned up at me with very white, very even teeth.

“Ravi, right?” I offered.

“Sorry you had to see that, man,” he said. “We just got carried away.”

I had nothing to say in response to that, so I ignored him and turned back to Joss. “Listen, I don’t care what you get up to on your own time, but you’re still the Luna of this pack, and I need your ass downstairs more than this guy needs it up here.”

She didn’t look amused, but she knew what being a Luna required, and she pressed her lips into a thin line. “Give me a minute. I’ll be right down.”

“Good,” I grunted. Then, glad as hell to get away, I pulled the door shut behind me and headed back downstairs.

The pack was where I’d left them, and I paused just before re-entering the room. They were murmuring among themselves, and I listened for a moment.

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know what’s going to come next.”

“Greyson will know.”

“He’s been gone. Does he even know what’s been going on?”

The room went quiet again as I walked back in, and I could feel everyone’s eyes on me as I walked to the front. Everything about this situation reminded me why I’d never wanted to become an Alpha. Too much responsibility, too many expectations. Too many decisions to make, too many people relying on you. The safety of everyone in the room rested on my shoulders, and I could feel the weight of that with every step I took.

I took a deep breath. There was no backing out now. I was their Alpha, and they needed me to act like it. I glanced over at Xavier, who was sitting in the corner, his arms crossed, his expression sardonic. I gritted my teeth. I had to be the Alpha—even for the people who didn’t think they needed one.

“Until we are sure the threat has passed, no one is to leave the pack house unless they’re paired up with another member of the pack,” I said. “And, even when you do leave, don’t go far. We have to be cautious; we have to be smart. This danger can come at us from any side, so the Redwood pack must be prepared on all fronts. Starting today. Starting this minute.” I looked around. “Do I make myself clear?”

Everyone nodded.

“You all know what’s expected of you. Don’t forget it,” I growled. “You’re free to go.” I stepped back as everyone got to their feet and drifted away, talking quietly again.

“That was quite a speech.”

I looked over. Xavier had walked over and was standing in front of me, smirking. Assuming he was being sarcastic, I only nodded.

“Really rousing and everything,” Xavier said, “but you left out one major detail.”

“What?” I finally asked when Xavier didn’t go on. He could be such a fucking drama queen.

He narrowed his eyes. “When this all goes down, who’s to say you’re not going to run off and do your Rogue thing again?”

“What?” I asked, fury flooding me.

He shook his head. “Let’s face facts, Greyson. It’s not like you don’t know what I’m talking about. You’ve already abandoned the pack once before. Who’s to say you’re not going to do it again? Why should any of us believe you now?”

I ground my teeth in frustration but fought to keep my expression neutral. He was trying to rile me up—and doing a damn good job of it—but I wasn’t going to let him see that. “That’s an interesting question from the brother who had just announced he was leaving the pack to go Rogue.”

Xavier’s smirk deepened. “It’s funny you should bring that up, considering you weren’t even around to hear that little announcement. On your little fairy road trip at the time with my girlfriend, weren’t you?”

I breathed out hard through my nose. I was getting sick of the constant back and forth with Xavier. “Let’s just let our personal shit rest, man. Silas is back. Let’s deal with that. That’s bigger than both of us.”

Xavier crossed his arms. “Bigger than Cali?”

I froze. “Don’t,” I said, my voice icy.

He looked down as his phone began to ring. Looking at the screen, his smirk grew into a grin. “And look, it’s her now.” He looked up at me. “Hey, I’ll let you know if she asks about you.” He turned, answering the phone as he left the room. “Hey, babe.”

The envy snaking through my body felt like a living thing as I watched Xavier walk away, but I fought against it—fought for control. I couldn’t lose focus. Or control. Not now.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Joss coming down the stairs. I strode over. “Come with me,” I said forcefully, grasping her arm and pulling her toward the back of the house and out the door, where we could be alone.

“Greyson, listen, I’m sorry about what you walked in on,” Joss said. “It really was an accident. I didn’t mean to rub it in your face.” She stopped for a moment, clearly thinking. “Well, okay, maybe I did a little, but—”

“I really don’t care, Joss,” I said, interrupting. “Who you’re screwing is your business.”

“Oh,” she said, surprised. But she recovered herself. “Okay. Then what’s up?”

“I’ve been thinking about Silas—”

“Who hasn’t?” Joss muttered.

“—and the orb.”

“I know,” she said, nodding. “It’s bad news.”

“That’s an understatement,” I said darkly. “What I’ve been thinking is that we can’t handle this alone. We shouldn’t even try.”

Joss leaned against the porch railing and folded her arms. “Okay. So, what do you have in mind?”

Xavier, still on his phone, rounded the western corner of the house and walked slowly toward us. He wasn’t paying attention to anything around him. His eyes were down, and he was too far way for me to hear what he was saying. I ignored him and turned back to Joss. “I want the Blue Blood pack to join us against Silas.”

Joss looked grim. “Well, that might be a problem.”

“Why?”

“The last time I saw Mace, it he didn’t seem like he’d be open to that kind of agreement. Or any agreement at all. He decided to uphold the pact with us, but it was against his will and with a *lot* of reservations. I don’t think he’d be willing to do much of anything except stay out of the way.”

Xavier was leaning against the side of the house now—I was tracking him without looking at him. Joss’s news didn’t surprise me. “Then I guess we’ll just have to change his mind, won’t we?”

“*We?*” Joss asked, looking surprised. “What do you mean, we?”

I gave her an even stare. “You and I are going to convince Mace and the Blue Blood pack to join us.”

**Episode 622**

XAVIER

“It’s just good to hear your voice,” I said. And it was. Hearing Cali’s voice was like taking a shot of good bourbon; it made me feel warm all the way down. Feeling her body next to mine would have been better, of course, but I’d take what I could get. I leaned against the side of the pack house. “I miss you.”

“It’s good to hear your voice, too,” she said. Nothing about missing me, however.

A stab of doubt speared me. Maybe I shouldn’t have left her in Minnesota. It had felt like the right thing to do at the time, especially with her dad suddenly so unwelcoming, but maybe it had been the wrong choice. Maybe I should have stayed. She and I still had so much to work out. But she’d called me, I reminded myself. *Me*, not Greyson. And after the way she’d hedged when we’d talked about him back in Minnesota, that was definitely something.

I looked up. Greyson was standing on the wraparound back porch, speaking quietly with Joss. He wasn’t looking at me, but he knew I was talking to Cali, and I’d have bet every dollar I had that he was tracking my every move. I smiled and waved. He was trying to cover, but I could see it was killing him to see me growing closer to Cali again, and I was more than happy to rub salt into the wound.

“How are you, Xavier?” Cali asked, bringing my thoughts back. “How was the trip back? How’s everyone there?”

“It was fine. I’m fine. Everyone here is fine. They’re in the new pack house.”

“How’s that?”

I looked up at the pack house, a huge, dark home set against the backdrop of a dense pine forest. “It’s big,” I said simply. “Everyone seems happy with it.” I didn’t want to keep talking about Oregon. It was too close to talking about Greyson, so I shifted the subject. “How’s your mom?”

“She’s good,” Cali said, her voice warming. “She’s so good. So strong and healthy, it’s insane. I can’t remember the last time I saw her like this. I mean, you saw her—she’s like a new person.”

“I know,” I said, smiling, glad to hear the happiness in her voice. “You must be so happy, Cali.”

“I am. And she is, too. It was all worth it.”

I paused for a moment. “And how’s your dad?”

“Oh.” Cali’s voice faltered a little. “He’s okay. He’s fine, really. Still dealing with everything, but he’s adjusting. He’s getting there. Has a lot of questions.”

I laughed. “That must be fun.”

“There is something, though,” Cali said.

“What?” I said, suddenly tense.

“Well, a couple of things. Those agents, for one. You know, the ones from the MIB? They’re still around. And Tony made another ghostly visitation just before they showed up at the door asking a bunch of questions.”

“*Tony?* Wait, are you sure?” I asked. That guy would not fucking stay dead.

“Um, yeah, I’m sure. I checked. No mop to blame it on this time. It was definitely him. Severed leg and everything,” Cali said, and her voice was scared.

“Fuck.” I chuckled darkly. “I should have torn that little shit limb from limb. He’d have had a hard time hobbling around then.”

“*Xavier!*” Cali gasped. “Don’t say that. That’s horrible.”

I bit back a sharp response. It was hard to hear about something scaring Cali when I was so far away. How was I supposed to protect her when I wasn’t there? “Okay, one thing at a time. Don’t worry about the agents. Don’t let them in, don’t tell them anything, and they’ll go away. Works every time.”

But Cali wasn’t letting it go. “I’m serious, Xavier. You shouldn’t joke about what you did to Tony. You wouldn’t, if you’d seen what I’ve seen.”

“He deserved what he got,” I snarled, anger coursing through me again. “He deserved worse, and you know it.”

“Dammit, Xavier. Is this what you want to do right now?” Cali snapped. “Argue with me?”

I glanced over. Greyson was still talking to Joss and, unable to stop myself, I said, “I can give the phone to Greyson, if you’d prefer. Maybe you want to argue with him instead.”

There was a long beat of silence. When Cali spoke, her voice was threaded with pain. “Why are you being such an ass right now?”

I’d gone too far. I tried to pull back. “Cali,” I started, my voice gentler. “Listen, it’s just hard being away from you—”

“You know what?” she said sharply, speaking over me. “We don’t even have to talk. Maybe that would be best for both of us.”

“What?” I asked.

“Maybe we need more than just distance, Xavier,” she said, her tone hard. “Maybe we need complete silence.”

“Cali, wait—”

“Is Artemis there?”

“What?” I asked, thrown by the question.

“Artemis,” she said shortly. “Is she there? I need to talk to her.”

“What does she have to do with this?” I asked, baffled.

“This has nothing to do with you,” Cali snapped. “I need her to come to Minnesota to help me deal with this Tony situation. I know you think the whole thing is so fucking funny, Xavier, but Tony’s started haunting my bedroom and I’d like to get rid of him. We need another Fae to do that.”

“Okay, fine,” I said quickly. “I’ll bring Artemis to Minnesota.” This would be great, actually. I was glad to have a reason to go back. I shouldn’t have left. I needed to get back to Cali to explain, to apologize. We were always better face to face—

“No,” she said flatly.

“No what?”

“I want her, but I don’t want you.”

I was quiet for a moment as the sting of her words settled into me. “Well, she can’t come by herself,” I said testily. “She’s a freak. She’s never been on a plane before. She’ll flip out.”

“Then find someone else who can bring her,” Cali said coldly. “And do it soon.”

“Fine,” I said, matching her icy tone. “Here. Talk to her yourself.” I strode around the house and through the front door. Artemis was in the living room, gazing out the front window.

She looked up at me, perplexed, as I pushed the phone into her hand.

“It’s Cali. She wants to talk to you. Speak into this end,” I said, pointing. Then I turned on my heel and walked out of the room.

*But I don’t want you*. The thought of the iciness in Cali’s voice made my blood run cold and I walked onto the front porch of the pack house, thinking hard. How had our conversation gone off the rails so quickly?

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Greyson walking toward me, his expression tense. That was probably why. I’d let fucking Greyson get to me. He hadn’t even reached me before I rounded on him. “What the fuck do you want?”

This brought him up short, but only for a moment. Then, recovering himself, he said, “If you give a shit about what’s going on with Silas, I need you to do something for me.”

“What?” I demanded, crossing my arms across my chest.

“Keep an eye on the pack while I’m gone.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Leaving so soon? What a surprise.”

Greyson took a step toward me. We were the same height, so he looked me dead in the eye. “This isn’t about me or you right now, Xavier. This is about the pack. I’m going to the Blue Blood pack tonight to convince Mace to join our fight.”

“So leave Joss in charge. She did a bang-up job the last time you went on a little vacation,” I snapped.

Greyson’s nostrils flared with anger, but he kept it together. “Joss is coming with me. She was the one who negotiated with them last time, and I want her there.” He gave me a hard look. “That leaves you to watch over the pack until we’re back.”

“What an honor,” I said sarcastically.

“Can you handle it?”

I stared at Greyson, looking for the trick. There had to be one. I knew I couldn’t trust him, but I was having a hard time seeing what his angle was here. If he was planning on just taking off, why would he take Joss? For all her many faults, she was the last person who’d go Rogue. There had to be something. There was no way I trusted Greyson enough to take anything he said at face value.

“Well?” Greyson demanded when I didn’t answer. “*Can you handle it?* Will you watch over the pack?”

Artemis appeared in the front doorway, my phone in her hand.

“Hey,” I said, clapping Greyson on the shoulder. “Have fun with Joss. You two deserve a honeymoon.” And I turned to Artemis.

She held out my phone, looking worried. “It started to make a strange sound. I don’t know what I did.”

I groaned, hoping she hadn’t broken my phone or scrambled the data with her weird magic. But when I took the phone, I saw it was just a text notification. The message was from Colton.

*Sup uncle Xavier. I’ve got some news… Maya’s pregnant.*

**Episode 623**

I looked down at my phone, but I was thinking about Artemis. It had *seemed* like she’d understood what I was asking her when we’d spoken about the Fae triangle, but she had seemed kind of distracted by the phone. I shook my head. Not that I blamed her. Everything had to be so baffling to her.

“Are you sure you’re not using some kind of Fae power?” she’d asked, sounding mystified. Her voice had been distant, like she wasn’t holding the phone to her ear, but looking at it in confusion.

“Positive,” I’d assured her. “It’s technology. There’s a perfectly logical explanation for it.”

“Oh, what’s that?” she’d asked.

“Um,” I’d said. “Let me get back to you on that.”

And, even better, she’d agreed to come to Minnesota. She’d even sounded excited about it. She’d said it sounded like another adventure. “I really like your human world, Cali,” she’d said. “I want to see more of it.”

I’d tried to explain to her how she’d get here, but ‘giant metal tube that flies through the sky’ wasn’t the best explanation of an airplane, and Artemis had remained bewildered. When she got here, we’d have to have a long talk about the human world and all the things in it. Phones, planes, Wi-Fi, cold brew coffee, skincare—everything.

I sighed and looked around my room. Who was going to bring her here, though? Clearly, it wasn’t going to be Xavier. I’d made that much clear. Not after he’d been such a dick to me on the phone. “Ugh!” I grunted, putting a hand over my eyes.

WHY WHY *WHY* had I hooked up with him while he’d been here? It had felt right at the time and—I had to admit it—the sex had been *great*, but it had only made things between us more complicated. Like our relationship wasn’t complicated enough to begin with. *Together, apart. On a break. On again, off again.*

I tossed my phone onto my bed and paced around the room like a caged tiger. My skin felt like it was on fire. Greyson had pulled away from me, and Xavier had been here for me, and—for a second—I’d thought things were just kind of working themselves out. Like, maybe the decision was going to be made for me. But, now… I just didn’t know. I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror over my dresser. The girl in the mirror scowled back at me. Maybe werewolves and boys were just something I needed to avoid for the foreseeable future.

Downstairs, the doorbell rang, and I froze, all other thoughts erased from my mind. Were the agents from the MIB back again? What were their names? Imamu and Fernsby?

Then the sound of Lola’s voice came floating up the stairs, and I unfroze and hurried downstairs toward it.

“It’s been too long,” my mom was saying, holding Lola tight in a hug. “We’ve missed seeing you around here.”

“I know, I know.” Lola laughed, pulling back to look at my mom in amazement. “But I’m here now, and I’m so glad to see you looking so well.” She looked over at me and her eyes lit up. “There you are, Cali!”

My mom shot me a quick, questioning look, and I nodded.

“The *thing* is solved. She’s on her way. I’ll explain later,” I said, keeping my voice low. Then I turned to Lola. “Hey girl, what’s up?”

Lola grabbed my arm, a little too tightly. “I was hoping we could go for a little walk,” she said, her smile forced.

“But you just got here!” my mom protested, but Lola was already pulling me out the door.

“What’s up?” I asked, yanking my arm free as she dragged me onto the porch.

“We *have* to talk,” she said once the door was shut behind us. “I’m desperate.”

My stomach dropped. “What’s going on?” I asked, my throat going dry. “You didn’t see Tony, did you?”

Lola rolled her eyes. “I wish.”

“What?” I asked, shocked.

“At this point, I’d honestly prefer that. No, it’s my dads. They’re driving me *insane*.”

“What are they doing?” I asked, bewildered.

“They still want me to break up with Jay!”

“But… Why?”

Lola shrugged theatrically. “Who even knows at this point? They’re mad I’m not in school? They hate his eyepatch? They think he’s a bad influence?” She glared at me when I snorted. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” I said, trying not to laugh. “Just that… Well, if *anyone’s* a bad influence, it’s you.”

“Okay, okay, you’re *not* helping,” Lola snapped.

“Well, maybe they’re just worked up right now. Maybe they just need some time to calm down.”

“I doubt that,” Lola said darkly.

“What does Jay say?”

“He doesn’t know what to do! I don’t think this has ever happened to him before,” Lola said, exasperated. “I mean, how can you not like *Jay*?”

I squinted into the afternoon sun. “So, what do you want me to do about it?”

“I want you to help me!”

“Help you do what?” I asked.

“Get them to like Jay!”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” I asked. I kind of had bigger fish to fry right now than Mr. and Mr. Spillane not liking Jay.

“I don’t know.” Lola rolled her eyes. “Make me a love potion or something.”

I stared at her. “That’s really not something I can do.”

“Are you kidding me?” Lola looked irritated. “You’re always coming up with crazy plans! You have to do something to help me, Cali, or else I’m going to be stuck here for another semester. And there’s no way I’m doing it without Jay.” She thought for a moment. “Maybe you could sweet talk Pops a little. Really talk Jay up. If you can get him on Jay’s side, Dad will cave.”

I kicked a rock out from under my bare foot and thought about this. “Maybe. We’ll figure something out.”

Lola nodded, like I’d just agreed wholeheartedly to her plan. “That’ll be our first priority when we move back into our apartment.”

“God, the apartment,” I said, surprised. “Honestly, I haven’t even *thought* about the apartment.”

“Cali.” Lola leveled a stare at me. “There is no way I can stay with my dads. I mean, I love them and all, but if I keep living there, we’re going to kill each other. I need some space.”

“Right…” I said, though I felt unsure. “I’ll think about it. I’ll talk to my parents, see what they think. But in the meantime, you just need to calm down, okay? Just chill and try not to antagonize your dads more.”

Lola nodded, but before she could answer, a bike bell sounded and we both looked up. It was Alex, peddling toward us, though he was still wearing his dark glasses and hooded sweatshirt—his ‘disguise’.

Lola groaned. “Here comes the stalker on his chariot.”

“*Shhh*,” I hissed. “Chill out, Lola. Alex has been through a lot.”

She rolled her eyes. “I have to go anyway. I left Jay alone with my dads. He might shift and eat them if I don’t get back soon.” She sighed. “Or the other way around.”

“Hi, Cali. Hi, Lola,” Alex said, pulling to a stop in front of us.

“Hey, Alex,” Lola said flatly. “Listen, man, you might want to think about dropping the disguise. Everyone knows it’s you. Later, Cali,” she said, glancing at me, then she walked off toward her car.

I watched Lola pull away and then turned to Alex. “Hey! What’s up, Alex? I’m so glad to see you.”

“Hey,” he said, not returning my own smile. “I hope you don’t mind me stopping by.”

I shook my head. “I don’t mind.”

“I just needed someone to talk to. And you did say you’d call me. I’ve been waiting.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m sorry,” I said, feeling a stab of guilt. “Things just got busy with my mom. But I’m here. Honestly, Alex—I’m always here for you. We can talk now.” Alex brightened and glanced toward the house, but I didn’t feel like inviting him in. I didn’t want Mom and Dad making a big deal about him being here, and I especially didn’t want him here if the MIB agents—or Tony—decided to make another appearance. “How about a walk?”

“Sure,” Alex said with a smile. He leaned his bike against my dad’s car and we started off down the street, heading toward the park at the end of the block.

We were quiet for a while. “This is nice,” Alex said, looking over.

“Yeah,” I said, smiling up. “It is.”

“Like old times.”

I nodded.

There was another beat of silence.

“So, where’s your boyfriend?”  
 I gave Alex a sideways glance. There was a strange edge to his voice, but I chose not to read too much into it. Anyway, I didn’t want to talk about Xavier. So I kept it simple. “We’re not together right now.”

Alex stopped abruptly. “Really?” he asked, surprised.

I stopped and looked up at him. “Really.”

Alex took that information in. Then, quick as lightning, he pulled me into a kiss.

**Episode 624**

XAVIER

I stared at the message on my phone in disbelief. My brother was going to be a *father?* Colton? Of all people, *Colton* was going to be a father?

My phone buzzed again.

*?????????*

I realized I’d been staring in shock for a while—I should probably respond. My fingers fumbled over the keypad.

*Wow dude. Just… wow.*

Then it hit me like a punch to the face. What if the situation were reversed? What if I’d been the one sending Colton this message? What if Cali were pregnant, and *I* was about to be the father? How would I feel about that? How would Cali feel? Would she still be mad at me?

My fingers tightened around my phone. I already knew the answer to that question: yes. She’d still be pissed.

I let my mind wander for a moment, imagining what it would be like to be a father. To have a child of my own that looked like a mini version of me and Cali. Never having had a functional example of a father, it was kind of hard to picture what it would be like to actually be one. Neither Colton nor I would ever consider Silas our dad, even though technically he was our father.

I looked at the messages again, trying to read between the lines. Was Colton happy about this?

*This is good news, right?*

I waited for a moment, then Colton replied with a laughing-crying emoji. I stared at it, puzzled. What the hell did that mean? Was he kidding? He was probably kidding. Or was he really upset?

Irritated, I dialed Colton’s number. I needed to just talk to the guy.

The call rang for a moment, then went to voicemail.

“Are you kidding me? You can’t just give me news like that and then leave me hanging, Colton! Call me back, you dickhead.”

Head spinning, I ended the call and slipped the phone into my pocket. When I looked up, it was into Artemis’s eyes. I hadn’t realized it, but she’d been standing next to me the whole time, watching me.

“How do I get one of those?” she asked, pointing to the pocket where I’d stashed my phone.

“Um, we could… Maybe we could get you on the group data plan. You know what? I’ll just explain it later,” I said decisively. “Right now, I need to get you on a plane to Minnesota.”

“Oh, right. Min-e-soda. That’s where Cali is, right?” Artemis said, brightening.

“Right,” I said flatly, feeling the pain of Cali’s rejection once again. I looked around, into the living room of the pack house. “Now, who am I going to get to go with you?”  
 “Why do you have to find someone?” Artemis asked, looking puzzled. “Why aren’t you coming with me?”

I clenched my jaw in frustration. “I can’t. Thanks to Greyson, I’m stuck here, minding the herd like a fucking sheepdog.” I frowned as I looked around. I really did wish I could go. Cali and I always did better in person. And maybe if she saw me, she’d welcome me back. Or perhaps if I could get close enough to pull her into a utility closet, I’d be able to talk her into it.

But on the other hand, Cali could be hard to predict. And she was so damn stubborn. There was a chance going back would have a great outcome, but it was just as likely to be a disaster.

I peered through the living room and into the kitchen. Mrs. Smith was moving around, wiping off the counters. “Perfect,” I muttered, walking into the house and toward the kitchen, Artemis trailing behind me. Mrs. Smith had lived in Minnesota, and she was probably the most responsible person around here, making her the perfect choice. “Mrs. Smith,” I started when I walked into the kitchen. “How would you like to take a little trip back to your old stomping grounds?”

She looked at me, confused. “Sorry? My old *what?*”

I pointed to Artemis. “Cali needs Artemis in Minnesota and Artemis needs a travel buddy. What do you say?”

She opened her mouth to answer, but Big Mac spoke over her.

“No way.”

I looked at Big Mac. “What?”

Big Mac was shaking her head. “There’s no way Sabine’s going to leave me here with all of these werewolves.”

Annoyed at being blown off by Big Mac, I looked at Mrs. Smith, but she gave her head a small shake. “I’m sorry, to both of you, but I think it’s for the best if I stay with the pack for now.”

“You mean if you stay with Big Mac,” I said.

Mrs. Smith’s cheeks flushed a light pink. “I hardly think that’s any of your business.”

I huffed an irritated sigh and looked around again. The pack was scattered around the house. Some were in the den, others probably outside or upstairs in their rooms, unpacking. I needed to find someone to play babysitter for Artemis, fast. If I didn’t get this Fae girl safely on a plane in the near future, Cali was going to blame me. And the last thing I needed right now was for Cali to have another excuse to be mad at me. I needed to make this happen.

When I spun around, I found myself face to face with Artemis again. “Fuck,” I said, surprised, taking a step back. “Give a guy a little space, okay?”

She smiled at me expectantly. “So, when do we leave?”

I stared at her for a moment, wondering what would happen if I just drove her to the airport and shoved her on a plane by herself.

Disaster. That was what would happen. Complete and utter disaster. Pandemonium, but in the air. A panicked Artemis wreaking havoc in a 747. Airplane peanuts everywhere. It didn’t bear thinking about.

“Why does Cali need you to get rid of a ghost, anyway?” I asked, suddenly curious. “I didn’t know that was something Fae did.”

Artemis shrugged. “Me neither. I have no idea what the plan is. I asked, but Cali didn’t seem to know. Something about a Fae triangle? She said her mom had an idea that should work. And she needs me, so I said I’d come. If I can help her, I will.”

I eyed her warily. “So you came all the way from the Fae world just to help Cali?

She laughed. “No. Not even close.”

“So why did you come here?” I asked.

She gave me a half-smile. “Because I have nothing to lose.”

“What does that mean?”

Artemis crossed her arms and leaned her hip against the kitchen counter. “It means I wasn’t leaving anything behind, and I wanted something new—a new adventure. And if I can help someone like Cali along the way, why not?”

I eyed Artemis for a moment, then moved into the kitchen and opened the fridge. I grabbed a couple of sodas, and, opening both, handed one to Artemis. “I guess I’m a little confused. From what little I understand, you captured Cali and Greyson and a couple of their friends and sold them or something.”

Artemis had taken a drink of the soda, and promptly choked on the bubbles. “That’s not *exactly* true,” she spluttered. “Greyson went to the zoo. Cali was sold into the Kollector’s harem.”

I came closer to growling at her. “Listen, I don’t give a damn about my asshole of a half-brother, but Cali’s a different story. After all that, why did she bring you back here? And why is she looking for your help? Why does she trust you?”

Artemis wiped the soda off her now somber face and shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t really know. I get the feeling that’s just kind of who she is.”

My heart thumped painfully in my chest. “It is. But it’s not who I am,” I said. “So why should I trust you?”

I didn’t know much about Artemis, but I learned right then that she didn’t scare easily.

She stared back at me without flinching. “Why should *I* trust *you?*”

There was a long moment of silence while she and I sized each other up.

I raised an eyebrow. “I guess that makes us even, then.”

A corner of her mouth quirked up, almost a smile.

“Hey, guys,” Violet said, walking into the kitchen. She gave me her sad smile as she headed toward the fridge. “What’s going on?”

“Artemis, this is Violet. Violet, this is Artemis,” I said absently, and the girls smiled at each other.

“We were just discussing my trip,” Artemis said proudly.

“What trip?” Violet asked curiously, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge.

“I’m going to the land of Minnesota to see Cali. It seems I need someone to accompany me, but we can’t find anyone to—”

Violet’s face lit up like a candle. She looked at me, her eyes wide. “Do you need someone to go with her?” She looked at Artemis then back to me. “I’ll go!”

**Episode 625**

*Alex is kissing me!*

My brain was screaming this at me, but my body was strangely frozen.

But just for a moment. I put my hands on his chest and shoved him back as hard as I could, sending him sprawling. “What the *fuck* was that?”

Alex looked up from where he lay on the sidewalk, shocked. He looked unable to speak.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “*Alex?* What. Was. That?” I demanded.

He jumped to his feet. “Cali, *ohmygod*. I am so, *so* sorry. I have no idea what came over me. I’m so sorry—”

I stared at him. “You have no idea what came over you? *You kissed me!* That’s what came over you!”

“Cali—”

“I thought we were *friends*, Alex!” I shouted, not caring that Mrs. Capone was watching us through her front window.

“We *are*,” Alex said quickly. “We are. I just thought…”

“What?” I demanded. “What could you have possibly thought?”

He shifted on his feet, looking uncomfortable, but didn’t respond.

“You actually *thought* about kissing me?” I asked, astounded. “What just happened was a *conscious* decision? God, Alex, at the very least I was hoping you were just in a terrible accident and had a head injury you could blame this on!”

“I’m sorry, Cali,” he said, his voice cracking. “I wasn’t thinking… I’m sorry. If I could take it back…” Then, to my horror, his face crumpled, and he broke down in sobs. “I’m sorry,” he wailed.

This was quickly going from bad to worse. I pinched the bridge of my nose. I hated to see him like this—he had just kissed me, yes, but now he was sobbing in the middle of the sidewalk and it was making me feel really bad.

I’d known Alex for a long time, and I knew that we’d had a somewhat romantic-*ish* past. But between side stepping all of his attempted dates and coming back with Xavier as my boyfriend the last time… He should’ve had a pretty clear picture that I wasn’t interested in him. And I knew he’d been having a hard time lately, but still. Ugh. I sighed. Maybe I shouldn’t be so hard on him—though I had every reason to be.

I could still feel the pressure of his lips sliding against mine, and a fresh wave of anger broke over me. And that was just *me*. If *Xavier* ever caught wind of what Alex had just done… Let’s just say Tony would have a friend in the afterlife.

“Listen, Alex,” I finally said. “Stop crying. I’m sorry I yelled at you. I was actually more surprised than anything else. You just… caught me off-guard.”

“I know, I’m sorry, Cali,” he said, sniffling. “I really am. Everything’s just been so messed up lately. Everything’s going wrong.”

“What’s going wrong?” I asked, though I was slightly afraid of hearing the answer.

“What’s going *right?*” Alex shouted through his tears. “That would be easier to answer, because the answer is *nothing*. Becky stopped returning my calls. My own little brother doesn’t want me to pick him up from school anymore. Everyone still thinks I killed Tony, and—you remember Joe’s Pizza, over on Elm?”

“Yeah?” I said warily.

“They stopped making that mushroom pizza I really liked. Which I know doesn’t seem like a really big deal, but it was kind of the last straw in what is already turning out to be a pretty shitty year for me.”

I resisted rolling my eyes and put my hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Alex. I know things have been really hard for you.” He nodded, tears still leaking from his eyes. “But—come on, man. You’re stronger than you’re giving yourself credit for. You are. I’ve seen it in you. Things are tough right now, but you just need some time. Things will calm down.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Alex said, taking a shaking breath.

“I know I am,” I said. “You just need some time. Let things fall into place, okay? And I meant what I said. I’m your friend, Alex, and I’m here for you.” He looked up at me, his eyes bright. “But any ideas you may have about us becoming anything *more* than friends could ruin our friendship—for good.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry, Cali. I really am.” Alex looked at me. “I’m really, really sorry.”

“Okay,” I said. I glanced around. Mrs. Capone was still glaring at us. “Maybe we should just head back to my house. I have some things I need to take care of.”

“Yeah, okay,” Alex said, looking dejected, and turned back toward my house.

He retrieved his bike and I watched as he gave me a sad wave and pedaled away. My first instinct was to pull out my phone to call Lola, but if I told her what Alex had done, she’d kill him. And anyway, she had problems of her own. Problems she had kindly handed to me. How the hell was I supposed to convince her dads to like Jay?

I blew out a sigh of frustration. I was going to have to put that question on the back burner for now. I had other things to think about. Like that damn apartment.

I headed back inside, wondering how I was going to broach the topic of me moving back into my apartment. Truth be told, I wasn’t even sure how I felt about it. Sharing it with Lola was one thing, but—with Jay in the mix—things could start feeling real small, real quick.

And, even though I knew what Lola meant about needing space, I was enjoying the time I was getting with my parents. We hadn’t been together like this in such a long time. But, as I opened the front door, I wondered how long it would be before living here with them started feeling confining. It was probably just a matter of time before I missed my independence. I looked down as my phone buzzed with a text. It was from Lola.

*Meet us at the apartment.*

My mom and dad were in the kitchen and didn’t notice when I walked in, so I just watched them for a moment. My dad was cutting up an apple and my mom was leaning against the counter, talking to him and stealing the pieces of apple as he cut them. I smiled as I watched them. Being here was just like old times.

“I’m going to go say hi to Lola,” I said, walking into the kitchen. “I’ll be back later. Is it okay if I take your car, Dad?”

“Sure thing, kiddo,” Dad said with a smile.

As I drove the familiar route to the apartment, my mind turned to the tangle of thoughts about Xavier and Greyson. Every time I started thinking about either of them, I could feel my blood pressure rising. They weren’t even in the same state as me, and they were still stressing me out. Alex wasn’t the only one with problems, I thought grumpily as I pulled into the parking lot of the apartment complex. I pulled into my regular space, right next to Lola’s car, where Jay was pulling boxes out of the trunk.

“Hey, Cali,” he said, smiling at me as I climbed out of the car.

“Hey,” I said, slamming the door shut. I looked over at Lola, who was hefting a couple of suitcases. “So, your dads want you to break up with Jay, but they’re fine with you moving back here?”

“Um, they don’t know about it yet,” Lola said, shrugging. “I’m planning on telling them after I get things smoothed out with Jay.”

“Lola,” Jay groaned, shifting the heavy boxes in his arms. “I don’t think that’s going to happen anytime soon.”

“Don’t even worry about it,” Lola said soothingly. “I’ve got this taken care of.”

“What does that mean?” Jay asked, suspiciously.

“Cali’s going to help,” Lola said brightly, then turned and headed for the apartment.

Jay shot me a long-suffering look, but I just shrugged and followed Lola.

“Listen, Lola,” I said, catching up to her. “I really do want to help if I can, but I have no idea what I’m supposed to do. I don’t have the slightest idea how to get Pops to like Jay.”

Lola pulled the rolling suitcases up the short set of steps to our front door. “I’m not totally sure either, but how hard can it be? Jay’s very loveable.” Jay rolled his eyes. “Come in and let’s brainstorm some ideas. I’m sure we can think of something.”

“Okay, I just don’t want you to get your hopes up like I’m going to have some kind of magic cure-all for this,” I said cautiously.

“I don’t,” Lola said. She shifted both suitcases’ handles to one hand and patted her pockets for her keys. But, when we reached our front door, we both stopped dead, staring at it.

“What the hell…” Lola said quietly.

Our front door was already open.

Heart pounding, I reached out and pushed it open with a finger. It was black as night inside—all our blinds were closed—but even in the darkness, we could see shadows moving around.

There was someone inside.

**Episode 626**

GREYSON

Shirts, jeans, and a jacket all flew across the room and into the duffel bag on my bed. I just needed to throw in my toothbrush, and I’d be ready to hit the road to see the Blue Bloods. I looked up when I heard the knock on my door. “Come on in.”

Mrs. Smith cautiously pushed open the door. “I hope I’m not disturbing you—”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Come on in. what’s up?”

She stepped into the room. “I just wanted to ask you—” She stopped suddenly, her eyes falling on the bag on my bed. “Are you going somewhere, Greyson?”

“Oh.” I glanced at the black duffel. “Yeah, I am.”

She looked at me, confused. “But didn’t you just get back?”

“Yeah, I did. But this is pack business. I’m going to see the Blue Blood pack. Joss and I need to talk to Mace about teaming up to fight Silas together. I think it’s our best bet for survival.”

Mrs. Smith went a little pale. “Joss is going, too?”

“Yeah. But don’t worry, Xavier will be here.”

“Xavier?”

I nodded. “Yeah. He agreed to stick around while we’re gone. Keep an eye on things.”

“Yes, well…” She trailed off. “Truthfully, I’m not too concerned about that.” She eyed me keenly. “I’m more concerned about you, Greyson.”

“Me?’ I said, surprised. “Why?”

“Well,” she said slowly, “I worry whenever anyone leaves the pack. Especially now that Silas is back, and now that he has the orb.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m not too pleased about that either, but don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself,” I said grimly. “I’ve been doing that for a long time.”

“Yes,” she said, giving me a small smile. “I know that. And I know you can.” She turned away from me and looked out the window. The room Joss had chosen for me faced north and looked out over the valley, which was filled with soaring pines. Mrs. Smith’s gaze was focused out the window, on the landscape beyond it, but something told me she wasn’t really seeing any of it.

“Was there something else?” I asked slowly.

She kept her eyes out the window as she answered but sagged a little, like she was suddenly exhausted. “There’s been so much pain these last few months, Greyson. I’m just not sure I can handle any more. I’m not sure any of us can.”

“I know,” I said. “That’s why I’m going. We have to join forces with the Blue Bloods and put an end to Silas. That should make you feel better.” A thought struck me and I took a step back, my tone hardening. “Unless you’ve been talking to Xavier.”

She looked at me. “Xavier? What does he have to do with this?” she asked, puzzled.

My jaw tightened. “My brother is certain I’m working with Silas. And he’s telling anyone who will listen.” I gave her a hard look. “What do you think?”

“I wouldn’t believe that for a second,” Mrs. Smith said, without hesitation. “Others may choose to think the worst of you, but I know better than that.”

I stared at her for a moment, then my face cracked into a smile. “That’s good to hear. It’s nice to have somebody on my side.”

She nodded once.

“Well,” I said, stepping to the bed and grabbing my duffel bag, “I appreciate your support, but I really do have to get going.”

I was looking down, fiddling with the zipper of my bag, so I was surprised when Mrs. Smith took my hand. I looked up into her face, which hovered just in front of mine.

Her eyes were liquid and her expression tense. “Promise me you’ll be careful, Greyson,” she said. “Silas is not one to hold anything back.”

“Sure,” I said, giving her half a smile. “I’ll be careful.”

“*Promise me*,” she said firmly.

I held up my hand, like I was making a vow. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

She gave me a long look, then nodded.

Slinging my duffel onto my shoulder, I grabbed my toothbrush out of the bathroom and headed downstairs, leaving Mrs. Smith in my room. Joss was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Let’s go,” I said, and we headed outside.

Xavier was out there, lounging on the wide lawn in a chair. He was looking moody—glowering out at the trees—but when he saw me, he gave me sarcastic smile and a thumbs-up. “Have fun!” he called.

I sighed and turned my back. It wasn’t even worth responding to such a dick move. I nodded at Joss and we slung our bags over our shoulders. And then, with a bone-cracking sound, we shifted and sprinted into the dense pine woods.

Between the journey to the Fae world with Cali and then being saddled with Artemis since I’d returned, it had been a while since I’d really run. I took a deep breath of the sharp, cool air, letting it fill my lungs. The quiet of the woods pressed against my ears and I opened up my stride, feeling my body stretch as I leapt over fallen trees and across streams.

*It shouldn’t take us long to get there*, I mind linked to Joss. It felt strange to mind link with anyone other than Cali, but it was the only way the pack could communicate as wolves. I’d been so away from the pack, and other wolves really, that it felt somewhat foreign now.

*You look like you’re having a good time. Feels good to be a wolf again, doesn’t it?*

I smiled at the sound of Joss’s voice in my head.

*Hell yeah, it does.*

She was quiet for a moment, then asked, *So, everything’s cool right?*

*What do you mean?* I wondered.

*No, nothing.* She paused for a moment. *I was just still wondering how you felt, after seeing me with Ravi.*

I dropped my head and cleared a tangle of thorny bushes strung across the rough path we were following.

*Honestly, I haven’t given it a second thought. As long as it doesn’t interfere with the running of the pack, you have every right to sleep with whoever you want, Joss.*

I could feel her running to the right of me, her long stride easily keeping up with mine.

*I guess I just wonder what exactly you expect of me now, Greyson. I mean, it’s clear that you don’t want to be with me, so it doesn’t seem likely that I’ll be fulfilling the traditional Luna role. I mean, there are no babies in our future.*

I didn’t respond right away. I felt guilty as hell. The thing was, I hadn’t chosen Joss as my Luna so she could make my babies. I’d chosen her because she was smart and strong. I’d needed someone who could be tough as nails when the moment called for it. But I might not have made that totally clear to Joss initially.

And now, on top of all that, as the Luna, she was in danger. Maybe more than she knew. When Silas came for me, he’d be coming for her, too. The best way to destabilize the pack was to take out the leaders. Joss had a bullseye on her back.

Joss had been great, and I just hoped she could be strong enough when the time came.

*Listen, I’m sorry. I should have said something before. I didn’t mean to mislead you when I chose you. You were the best choice for Luna for a lot of reasons, but…*

I could hear the sound of her chuckle in my head.

*You don’t have to do this, Greyson.*

*Come on, Joss.*

*I’ll admit, I was surprised when you chose me. I’ve always wanted to be a Luna and for a minute there I thought you and I… But I thought it was going to be Cali. I was kind of shocked when you didn’t choose her. I knew there was something between you two, and, even then, I knew you and I would never have anything like it.*

She was right, of course, and I felt like an ass.

*But I deserve to have that with someone, even if it’s not you.*

*Do you have it with Ravi?* I wondered.

Joss laughed. *Who knows?*

*Fair enough. It’s not my business.*

We ran in companionable silence for another couple of miles through the thick pine forest. I’d known it when I’d first come back, but I was even more certain now: Joss had been the perfect choice for my Luna. Competent, capable, savvy, and low maintenance. I was about to tell her that when we entered a small clearing and the fur on the back of my neck stood up. My senses—always heightened when I was a wolf—went on high alert. I slowed, trying to quiet my footsteps, listening hard to the forest around me. There were no sounds that we weren’t making, but I knew something wasn’t right.

*Do you feel that?*

Next to me, Joss slowed, and her ears pricked up. She felt it, too.

We came to a stop and both lifted our noses, sniffing the air.

*We’re not alone.*

Then, as sudden as a flash of lightning, there was a deafening howl from behind us and we were under attack.

**Episode 627**

LOLA

“Oh my god,” I murmured, my eyes on the shapes moving inside the apartment.

“Let’s get out of here,” Cali muttered next to me, her whole body starting to shake with fear.

Behind us, Jay dropped the boxes to the ground and stepped forward, around Cali and me. “Let me handle this,” he said firmly.

“Jay, *don’t*,” I said anxiously, keeping my voice low. “Someone’s broken in. They’re in there right now. Now’s not the time to go all macho on me all of a sudden—”

“I can handle this, Lola,” Jay hissed, stepping into the darkened apartment.

Cali and I exchanged nervous glances, then followed. Cali reached over and flipped on the overhead lights, illuminating the living room. There, standing in the tiny kitchen, were two figures in dark suits, bearing flashlights. There was a strange beat of eerie silence, then everybody screamed.

“Who the fuck are you?” I demanded hoarsely, shouting over the screaming. “And what the hell are you doing in my apartment?” I moved toward them. The urge to shift and rip them both apart—whoever they were—was so strong, but Cali put a hand on my arm.

“Hang on, Lola, I know them.” She looked over at them, her brows drawn down in confusion. “Agent Imamu? Agent Fernsby? What the hell are you doing here?”

“Wait,” I said, turning to Cali in surprise. “Are you kidding me? You know these two?”

The woman in the dark suit cleared her throat in an annoyed sort of way. “We have a warrant, Miss Hart.” Right. I always forgot that they could get those. She held up an official-looking piece of paper.

I squinted at it. *Pursuant to the claim of… Property that constitutes evidence of the commission of a crime or mystery…* Ugh. It was all in legalese. Well, it probably served me right for skipping out on that pre-law class. Even at the time, I’d had a feeling my laziness was going to come back to bite me in the ass.

“A warrant for *what?*” Jay asked, his expression suspicious. His body was still tense, prepared to attack.

“A warrant to search the premises,” said the agent Cali had called Imamu.

“*What*?” I said, flabbergasted. “*Search the apartment?* Are you fucking kidding me?”

Agent Imamu looked down at the warrant. “This *is* the residence of Lola Spillane and Caliana Hart, isn’t it?”

“Who the hell do you think you are?” I demanded. I turned to Cali. “Who are these people?”

Cali sighed. “They’re agents from the Mystery Incident Bureau or whatever—”

“*Mysterious Incidents Bureau*,” Agent Fernsby corrected, looking irritated.

Cali ignored this. “They showed up at my house, too.”

“What the fuck for?” I demanded.

“I don’t know?” Cali said, shrugging. “Mysterious stuff, I guess.”

“Well, what are they looking for? We haven’t lived here in ages.” I gestured around at the apartment. “The place is nearly empty.”

I wasn’t wrong, either. There was still a couch and chair and a few posters on the walls, and our beds in our rooms. But we’d taken most of our stuff to Oregon and I’d managed to get my dads to send some stuff too.

Agent Fernsby took a step toward us. “That’s for us to decide, Miss Spillane.”

“What could you possibly be looking for here?” I asked, waving my arms around. “Cali’s old accounting textbooks? My concert ticket stubs? Knowing I saw Lady Gaga last summer is going to help your investigation?”

“We can’t comment on ongoing investigations,” Agent Fernsby said, narrowing her eyes at me. “But we’re done here.”

“Hope we didn’t inconvenience you,” Agent Imamu said briskly, as the two of them walked toward the door.

I stared after them in shocked silence as they pulled the door closed behind them. Then I turned to Cali. “What. The. Fuck?”

Cali walked to the door and flipped the lock. She folded her arms and leaned back against the door. “I think they’re looking into my mom.”

“Your *mom?*” I asked, confused. “Why in the world would they be looking into your mom? And why would they need to come into our apartment to do it?”

“Her miraculous recovery,” Cali said dryly. “I guess they’re not the type to believe in miracles. I don’t even know how they could have heard about it, but they showed up at the hospital right after it happened and started asking questions. A lot of questions. And they’ve been to the house, too. Xavier told me to just ignore them. You can see how well that’s working.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand why they’re asking questions about your mom. Why would they care that she got better?” I said, even more baffled.

“Um, hello? My mom’s *Fae*. She was fully dead and then completely recovered. I think that qualifies as ‘mysterious’,” Cali said, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said slowly. “Well, I tend to agree with Xavier. It’s not good, but maybe they’ll just go away if they don’t get the answers they’re looking for. I think we’re just going to have to be really careful.”

“I guess,” Cali said, but she still looked nervous.

“In the meantime,” I said, “Jay, will you get those boxes you left outside and put them in my room? It’s that one right there,” I said, pointing.

“Sure thing,” Jay said, walking past Cali to retrieve the boxes from the hallway.

“There should be a law against mysterious agents from a mystery agency just showing up in your home like that. That was very disconcerting.” I grabbed the suitcases out of the hall and dragged them into the living room. “I’m going to hop online and find out what this agency is all about. There’s too much weird stuff going on already.”

Cali went a little pale. “Hey, speaking of weird stuff, I have something to tell you.”

“What?” I asked, growing a little nervous as I watched Cali get nervous. “What’s up?”

“Um, Alex kissed me.”

My mouth fell open. “WHAT? WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!” I screeched. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

Cali grimaced. “I’m not. It was awful.”

“I *told* you!” I shouted. “I told you he was a creepy stalker dude—”

“*Stop!*” Cali cried, looking upset. “It’s all worked out; we talked about it. It’s sorted out. He’s just in a really bad place right now, but we have it all straightened out now.”

“Are you sure?” I asked keenly. “Because if you don’t straighten him out, I will—”

She nodded. “It’s taken care of, Lola.”

“If you need any help—” I started, but Cali was already shaking her head.  
 “I don’t,” Cali said. Then she smiled, probably because I was looking at her like I believed her. “I really don’t. But if I do, I’ll call you. But I told you—it’s taken care of.”

I watched as Cali walked out the door, pulling it shut behind her, then I rounded on Jay. “Can you believe that?” I hissed.

“What?” he asked, looking confused.

“That limp noodle Alex *kissing* Cali? God, I knew this was going to happen. I just knew it! Man, if Xavier finds out about this, he’ll burst a fucking blood vessel. Cali’s like*, we’re just friends*, but Alex has been *dying* to get into her pants for years! Then she shows up here *once* without Xavier and he jumps her! How dare he do that to her! I’m going to murder that little shit! I’m going to—”

“Lola, calm down,” Jay said firmly, interrupting me. He gave me a long stare. “See? *This* is what I was talking about.”

I looked back at him. “What?”

“You’re here, with *me*, but all you can talk about is Cali and Alex,” Jay said, biting out the words.

“That’s not what I’m—” I was so caught off-guard I stumbled over my words. “Alex *kissed* her. I was just—She’s my friend!”

“I’m not saying you can’t care about Cali, or be concerned for her—of *course* you can, I know you’re friends. But…” Jay shook his head. “Can’t *I* ever get a break with you?”

I rolled my eyes and turned away. “You don’t understand—”

Jay snapped and slammed his fist into the wall, making the whole apartment shudder. “Enough!”

I whipped around to stare at him, shocked. This kind of outburst was *not* usual for Jay. I looked from him to the wall, then back again. “Did you just punch a *hole in my wall*, Jay?”

Jay looked at the wall, then down at his fist, which was now covered in dusty white drywall. He shook it out, like it hurt. “Shit. I’m sorry about that, Lola. I… I don’t know what came over—”

“Shut up,” I said, moving to him and covering his mouth with mine. “Just shut up.”

“What’s going on?” he asked, though his arms went around my waist as he asked the question.

“*Fuck*, Jay,” I said, pushing myself against him and tumbling both of us into my room and onto my bed. I climbed on top of him, straddling him, and looked down into his surprised face. “You’ve never been hotter.”

“Lola,” Jay started. His hands were tight on my hips. “What are you—”

I put a finger on his lips, stopping him. “I’m all yours.”

**Episode 628**

VIOLET

I leaned back onto the headrest of my window seat and took a deep breath, closing my eyes. Maybe I’d even be able to go to sleep. It was a long flight from Oregon to Minnesota.

But I felt someone pressing uncomfortably against my shoulder and opened my eyes to see Artemis leaning across me, staring avidly at the clouds outside the window.

“Unbelievable,” she whispered, speaking to herself. “Just unbelievable.”

She was shoving me hard against the side of the plane, but I didn’t mind. I didn’t blame her for being so impressed with the view. She had never been on a plane before—apparently—so it was bound to be pretty amazing to her. I really liked that she wasn’t too cool to be excited about it.

I smiled as she leaned back a little, and I settled into my seat again. Lilac had been like that, too. He’d always loved adventure, even when we were little. He was always leading me on great voyages and quests, even if they were just through our bedroom. He’d been able to make anything exciting. Under the bed had turned into an unexplored cave, the back yard a wild jungle. He’d loved visiting new places, and he would have loved this trip too, and—though he might be a little jealous—I knew he’d be glad to see me doing this.

*I* was glad to see me doing this—doing anything, really. And it wasn’t just the adventure part. Taking this trip was just what I needed. I needed to get away from the pack, get a chance to breathe. To give myself room to do so. A chance to get out on my own.

I cast Artemis a sidelong glance. I was in charge of looking out for her. This grown woman. That had to mean something. Xavier had trusted me, and this was my chance to prove to everyone that I wasn’t just a sad little girl. That I could be capable and responsible, and could take care of myself.

Smiling to myself, I closed my eyes again. Lilac would be proud of me.

“You know, I’ve always wondered how birds saw the world—and now I get to see it.”

Opening my eyes, I looked over at Artemis. She was looking out the window again, her eyes wide with wonder.

“I never thought I’d get a chance to see it, of course. Why would I?” She shook her head. “Life is so funny. It never turns out the way you think.”

“That’s true,” I murmured, though I wasn’t thinking about birds.

Artemis’s eyes were on the marshmallow clouds. “No wonder birds fly so much. I’d never want to land if this was my view.”

I smiled at her. Artemis was nice. Nicer than I’d thought she might be, when she’d first walked into the pack house with Greyson. I wondered what Minnesota was going to be like. When I thought about the Midwest, it was all farms. I’d heard the people there were supposed to be nice. Cali was nice, so maybe the place where she came from would be nice, too. I hoped so.

Artemis sat up and reached for the can of soda the flight attendant had brought to her. She took a sip and her eyes opened wide. “What is this liquid? Xavier gave me something like this at the pack house. It tickles my tongue.”

“Um, it’s Diet Coke,” I said, amused.

“*Diet Coke*,” Artemis repeated in a whisper, looking closely at the silver and red can. She put it down on her tray table and tugged at her seat belt. “Do I *have* to keep this constraint latched? It’s so uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, you kind of do. Just for right now.” I pointed to the little seat belt light illuminated above us. “But once that light goes off, you can take it off and go to the bathroom or whatever.”

“Bathroom?” Artemis asked, confused. She looked around. “There is a bathing vessel aboard this flying ship?”

“No,” I said with a smile. “Just a toilet. No shower.”

She nodded, taking this in. Then she looked over at me. “It’s really nice of you to come with me, Violet. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad to do it,” I said, returning her smile. *More than you know.*

She was quiet for a moment. “Xavier told me about your twin brother. I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

I looked over quickly, my heart beating hard. My hand went instinctively to the pendant at my neck. “Thank you,” I murmured.

Artemis tipped her head, looking closer at my neck. “That’s a very beautiful amulet. Where did you get it?”

My hand tightened around my pendant. “It was a gift from my parents. They gave Lilac and me matching amulets for our birthday.”

“Where are they now? Your parents?”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “They died.”

Artemis was silent. Then, “I’m sorry. I lost my parents, too. I hope you’ll believe me when I say I understand how lonely that can feel.”

I nodded. Lonely was almost too kind a word for it. “Yes.”

She took a deep breath and spoke without looking at me. “There’s no one who can replace your parents, but I have found that it is possible to build a family.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She glanced at me. “Here I am, flying in this giant silver-winged beast to help Cali, just because she asked. She asked and I’m coming, so it’s like we’re forming a family.”

I looked at her curiously. “How exactly did you meet Cali?”

Artemis opened her mouth to answer, but stopped herself. Her cheeks flushed pink and she looked around, a little flustered. “I was… a miner. Cali rescued me from a terrible circumstance.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised. “Did the mine collapse or something?”

“Um…” Artemis grabbed for her soda and looked around a little wildly. “Can I get another one of these Diet Cokes?”

It was obvious Artemis was holding something back, and I narrowed my eyes, but I didn’t say anything. There was no hurry. I had all of Minnesota to find out the real story. Which I suspected didn’t actually involve a mining accident. Lilac would’ve loved all of this. “So, why does Cali want you to come to Minnesota?”

This question didn’t seem to be any easier for Artemis to answer. “I’m not totally sure, to be honest.” She gave her head a little shake. “Let me ask you something since you seem knowledgeable,” she said, turning to me. “What’s the whole thing with Cali, Xavier, and Greyson?”

My eyes widened. “Your guess is as good as mine. I really don’t know, but it’s pretty weird.”

“*Right?*” Artemis said, nodding. “Thank you.”

“Do you think that has something to do with why you’re going to Minnesota?” I asked.

Artemis’s face—so open a moment before—seemed to close up. “I’m… not sure. Maybe.” She shrugged. “I guess we’ll have to find out when we get there.”

“I guess so,” I said slowly. I’d heard some of the pack rumors about Cali and Greyson and Xavier. I didn’t know if I believed them all, but there were too many to ignore completely. And one thing was always the same, no matter who you talked to: no one knew who Cali was going to end up with. I didn’t know myself. I liked both Xavier and Greyson. They’d both always been kind to me, though Xavier was warmer, more like a brother. He and Colton had my and Lilac’s backs for a long time. Maybe that was the kind of family Artemis was taking about.

I smiled, thinking about that. I could do that—I could build a family.

A moment later, however, I was jolted out of my thoughts when the plane gave a huge shudder.

“We have hit a pocket of very rough air, so we’re going to need all passengers and crew to take their seats until we’ve cleared it. All passengers and crew to their seats with their seat belts fastened,” came the voice of the pilot over the loudspeaker.

“What’s going on?” Artemis asked, looking over at me, her eyes wide with fear.

“It’s just turbulence,” I said, tightening my seat belt and gripping the armrests of my seat. It *was* just turbulence, but I’d never felt anything like it. It felt like we were on a roller coaster. The plane would rise, then suddenly drop, making everyone scream. Drinks were flying, babies crying, and the plane was rattling ominously, like it was about to come apart. “We must be flying through a storm or something,” I murmured, speaking mostly to myself.

“I don’t like this,” Artemis said, shaking her head.

“I don’t either, but just hang on. It’ll be over soon.”

“I don’t like it at all,” she said.

She closed her eyes, like she was trying to forget what was happening. The plane went through another turbulence bump and Artemis’s hands shot up. Suddenly I felt a pulse in the air, like electricity was moving around me—around *Artemis*. The cabin lights flickered on, then off, then burst with a shower of sparks.

I stared back at her, dumbstruck. “Did you just do that?”

**Episode 629**

LOLA

“Come on, Jay,” I whispered in his ear, and then nipped at his earlobe. “I’m all yours.”

He pushed me into the mattress, his fingertips skimming over my thighs. I nipped at his neck, and he responded by gripping my thighs and pulling my hips flush against his, grinding into me despite the layers that separated us.

“*Yes*,” I moaned.

“You… You like that?” he asked.

I smiled. My mate had many strengths, but he’d never been one for dirty talk. Maybe it was time to change that, among other things. “Yes,” I breathed. “I want it harder.”

Apparently pleased with my response, Jay rutted against me again, and I responded by pulling his shirt over his head. My mouth sampled the skin of his chest, moving upward until I found the crook of his neck.

“Fuck, Lola,” he moaned. His fingers sank into my hair, pulling tightly as he tugged me close. Little shocks of pleasure-pain zinged across my scalp.

My fingers made quick work of his belt, the buttons and zipper on his pants following suit. Then my hand slipped inside his boxers, stroking him once, twice, until his body curled forward and he lifted me on top of him with a pleasured groan. My legs wrapped around his hips and I ground against him, devouring his mouth, sinking my teeth into his bottom lip.

“Come on, Jay,” I murmured. “Don’t you want me?”

With a snarl, he shoved me off him and tugged me up to stand next to the bed. “You think I don’t want you?” he rasped.

As soon as my bare feet touched the floor, he tugged off my clothes, so roughly I heard the fabric tearing. He tossed my ruined shirt over my head, his lips and teeth marking the freshly exposed skin on my neck and shoulder. “Is this enough for you?”

I grinned. “I want more.”

He spun me around and unclasped my bra, and the fabric pooled on the floor around my ankles. A clinking noise announced his pants joining my discarded clothes on the floor. I tried to face him, and groaned in frustration when he held me in place, pressing his hips against my lower back. My frustration turned desperate when his fingers slipped beneath the waistband of my panties.

He caressed me slowly, teasingly, just enough to set my blood on fire and leave me wild with desire. I bucked my hips, a desperate keen escaping my mouth, and I turned my head, seeking his lips. “Please,” I whined.

“You want me to take control, right?” His voice was just as teasing as his goddamn fingers.

“Not like this!” I groaned and canted my hips into his hand, desperate for a bit more pleasure.

He trailed his lips behind my ear, nipping playfully at the sensitive skin he found there. “You’ll take what I give you, and you’ll thank me for it.”

My mind went blank. What had happened to my shy, sweet mate? Because holy hell, I loved it.

Suddenly, he released me. I turned to him, and his arousal pressed against my belly as his mouth crashed into mine, lips, teeth, and tongue tasting my skin as his mouth descended lower. When his lips sucked savagely at my hip bone, my head spun and I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep standing. His fingers skimmed up my thighs, hooking around the fabric of my panties and slowly—too slowly—pulling them down my legs. If I weren’t so fucking turned on, I would have admired his restraint.

The flimsy fabric eventually joined our clothes on the floor, and I stared at Jay through half-lidded eyes as he took in my naked form, his eyes dark with desire. His eyes softened for just one moment, and then I let out a pleasure-pained yelp as his teeth nipped at the sensitive skin of my inner thigh.

“Jay!”

He smirked. “Where’s my thank you?”

Before I could protest, he spun me around and pushed me onto the mattress on my hands and knees, yanking my body up by my hips. His fingers dug in around my hip bones, and I felt his hard cock glide against my folds before he sank into me with a groan, his pace grueling, sensation slamming across my base with every unforgiving thrust.

My eyes rolled back in my head. “Oh *god*.” Yes, this was what I needed. For him to completely own me. Make me forget about everything except how he made me feel.

“Do you have something to say to me?” I heard him growl.

“Th-thank you,” I managed.

Then his hand eased off my hip and slipped beneath my belly till it made contact with my clit once more.

“Fuck!” Electricity buzzed in my veins, and stars lit up behind my eyes as I grabbed the bedsheets and held on for dear life.

“Say it!” he snarled in my ear.

“Thank you!”

Before I could come back down from my high, he grabbed a handful of my hair and wrenched me up against him, my back against his chest. His mouth moved over my neck and shoulder, his teeth wreaking havoc along the way. I couldn’t speak, couldn’t get my mouth to form words around the moans and cries that erupted from my throat.   
  
Jay gasped raggedly into my ear, driving relentlessly into my core until pleasure overloaded my senses, erasing everything but his touch. I couldn’t stop myself from crying out his name. He fell over the edge moments later, his grip on me almost painful. He released me, and I collapsed gratefully into the bedsheets, my eyes fluttering closed as I fought to catch my breath.

His weight pressed into the bed next to me, and his arms wrapped around me, stroking my sweat-slicked hair away from my neck and pressing a gentle kiss to the skin there. For a few precious moments, I just lay there with him, boneless and totally satisfied, savoring the feeling of his chest rising and falling against mine.

I grinned. “That was fucking amazing… Or amazing fucking. Well, both, actually.” I’d never felt more alive in my life than when I’d been held tightly in Jay’s arms, my body humming with sensation and my mind whiting out from pleasure.

There was only one thing that could compare to that feeling: how I felt when I shifted, when I let my wild side take over, free from inhibitions and human limitations.

Jay smiled softly and gently slapped my ass. “I’m glad you thought so. Wanna take this into the shower?” He winked. “Get all soapy and maybe see where things go from there?”

The thought was all kinds of tempting, but I had something else in mind. Something that sounded even better. “How about we go for a run instead?” I suggested.

His eyebrows lifted. “You want to go for a run now? After what we just did?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “Don’t you? Aren’t you just itching to get outside and run around?”

Comprehension dawned, and his expression flattened out. “You mean you want to shift.”

I’d been getting that look from him a lot lately, and I had to say I wasn’t a fan. It was like parental disapproval and loving concern all wrapped up into one giant buzzkill. Ugh. I tried to play it casual, not let him know that my blood was practically singing for the opportunity to shift and run free.

“Well, yeah,” I said. “We’re werewolves, so that’s kind of what we do, right?”

He shook his head. “*I’m* a werewolf, Lola. You are a hybrid. It’s not the same for you. It’s not safe, and frankly you’ve been pushing things too far already. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I scoffed. “We’ve been through this a million times. Other than some bad luck once or twice, I haven’t had any problems. And don’t forget: I still have vials of Big Mac’s potion. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” he said, finally relenting. “But let’s make it a short run.”

“Yay!” I grabbed his hand and started to drag him outside. “You’re not going to regret this!”

He stopped me before I could pull us more than a couple feet. “Can I at least put on my pants first?”

“But they’re going to get ripped up, anyway.”

“Yes, but we’re in an apartment building, remember? You have neighbors.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

We wasted a few minutes getting dressed before Jay finally allowed me to lead us outside and into the nearby woods. We were barely under the cover of the trees before I was shifting, every cell in my body alight with the power running through me. I instantly took off, knowing Jay would catch up.

A few seconds later, I heard and felt his powerful body running alongside me. He could probably outrun me with hardly any effort, but it was fun to compete. I pushed myself harder, running even faster and savoring the wind whipping through my fur.

Yes, this was exactly what I’d needed.

I burst out onto a trail—and nearly collided with Alex, who swerved at the last second and fell off his bike and right onto his ass.

*HA!* I let out a chuff of a laugh as he cursed while Jay and I disappeared into the woods.

Once we’d put some distance between the trail and ourselves, Jay signaled for me to stop.

I slowed down. *Why?*

He shifted back, panting. “Because I think you’ve had enough.”

I shifted back too. “What do you mean I’ve had enough? I was just getting started!”

“You almost hit that guy on the bike.”

“So? I wish I did. That was Alex, the stalking noodle. I should have knocked him right off and slammed him into a tree.” Jay just stared at me in shock. “What?” I asked.

“Lola,” he said sternly. “I think you have a problem.”

**Episode 630**

GREYSON

The howl ripping through the air was the only warning I received before I was thrown to the ground by a wolf—a *real* wolf, not a werewolf. Where the hell had it come from? And why was it attacking? It snapped at me, and I just barely avoided getting my neck caught between its jaws. I shoved it back, but it was relentless and pounced back onto me before I had any time to gather myself to fight back.

*Joss!* I shouted.

There was no response, though I was sure she was nearby. I could hear her grunting and panting. I managed to glance over the top of the wolf that was trying to turn me into lunch meat. Joss was still here, all right, and she was locked in a struggle with a couple other wolves.

What the hell was going on?

She caught one of the stray wolves around the neck, and it spun around in her grip and clawed at her torso. Her yowl ripped through the air around us, and I momentarily forgot the wolf I was still fighting and lurched toward her. *Joss!*

Taking my eyes off the wolf for even one second had been a monumental mistake. A sharp pain lanced up my flank. I jerked my gaze down to see the wolf’s teeth buried in my side, blood gushing out around its foaming mouth. The wolf jerked back, its teeth still embedded in my flesh, and my vision whited out.

Hands shaking, running on adrenaline, I grabbed the wolf by its scruff and tossed it away from me—a knee jerk response to keep myself alive.

As soon as I got some distance between the wolf and myself, two of the wolf’s pack mates leaped on me. I was knocked back down to the ground, right onto my injured side. They growled at me, their teeth gnashing at me and just barely missing as I clawed back at them, kicked, and jerked out of the way. With each moment, more blood gushed out of my side, filling the air with its hot, metallic scent.

After everything I’d been through, all the nasty beasts I’d fought, and all the times I’d emerged victorious when the odds had been stacked against me, there was no way in hell I was going to die here and at the hands of a pack of regular-ass wolves. Mother nature had a shit sense of humor.

Silas was still out there, and Joss and I still had to convince Mace to unite the packs. If I couldn’t do that, then none of this mattered, and everyone was going to die.

A keening shriek ripped through the forest, and I glanced over to see Joss literally rip one of the wolves apart.

*Holy shit!*

She dropped the wolf’s corpse, spun, and attacked one of the wolves that was attacking me—without even breaking her stride. Hot breath washed over my neck, and I remembered I wasn’t out of the woods yet. As if the white-hot pain radiating up my side wasn’t already reminder enough.

I shoved the wolf back again, my arms weakening more and more with each passing second. It came at me again, snarling and growling, snapping its teeth. There was something off about this one, about the look in its eyes. I’d confronted real wolves before, but they were usually smart creatures—they didn’t tend to bite off more than they could chew, or attack without being sure that they would win the fight. Unless they felt threatened, they tended to ignore me.

But this one… This bastard that had already gotten a bite of me and seemed desperate to keep coming back for more. It didn’t seem like he was attacking because he felt threatened—it seemed like he was attacking because he wanted to.

The thought sent chills sliding down my spine.

The wolf lunged and snapped at me once more, and I made my move. I wrapped one powerful hand around its snout and the other around its neck—and then I ripped it to shreds.

I tossed the dead body away from me as Joss finished off the last of the pack. She shifted back and I struggled to my feet to survey the damage as I did as well.

“What the fuck was that?” Joss gasped out.

I shook my head. “I have no idea. In all my encounters with wild wolves, I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Yeah, something’s wrong.” Joss looked at me with a thoughtful frown, and then her eyes widened in horror. She pointed at my side. “Oh my god! What happened to you?”

I looked down and tried not to vomit. My side looked like a mess of bloody raw beef. The bleeding had slowed down—hopefully more to do with my werewolf healing abilities than anything else—but it still hurt like a bitch. “I’d like to say it’s just a flesh wound, but the truth is it hurts like hell.” I took a deep breath as a burning sensation torpedoed through me, and I stumbled back against a tree.

“Hey,” Joss said. “Let me take a look.”

It didn’t even occur to me to argue. I wasn’t typically the type to let an injury slow me down, but it looked—and felt—like that wolf had turned me into hamburger. I slumped down onto the ground, my head spinning and throbbing pain radiating from the wound.

Joss gingerly poked around the edges, and it took every ounce of self-control I possessed not to rip her hand from her body. Instead I flinched back and hissed. “Fuck.”

“Sorry.” She looked genuinely remorseful as she glanced up at me. “It looks like you’ve been bitten.”

*No shit.* I nodded and tried to shrug—and was rewarded by another flash of pain up my side. “I’ve been bitten by pretty much everything with teeth, but this feels… different.”

She frowned. “How so? They were just regular wolves.”

I tried to shift my position to relieve the pain, and grimaced when it only made things worse. “I hate to admit it, but this hurts like hell. And it’s getting worse.”

Confusion and concern flashed across Joss’s face. She looked down at my wound again, and then at the scattered wolf corpses. She kicked one of the heads so the snout was pointing up and gasped. “Look.” She pointed to the wolf’s head. “This one was foaming at the mouth.” She looked at the rest of the pack. “They all were.” She looked back at me. “Is it possible they had rabies?”

I tried to look at what she was pointing at, but the pain was beginning to blur my vision. The white-hot pressure seemed to be spreading up my side and across my abdomen. I huffed out a breath and shuddered, trying not to think of the implications of what she was saying. “I just… I just need to rest and then I’ll be fine. Just a little rest…”

And then the world went dark around me.

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When I came to, I was alone in the forest. The wolves’ remains were gone; Joss was gone too. Had she gone to get rid of the bodies? She wouldn’t really have left me here, would she? I tried to get up and let out a bark of pain when my torn muscles shifted.

“Fuck, fuck,” I gasped as I pulled myself into a sitting position. Chills ran over my skin, and my body ached with each breath and movement. Yeah, something was seriously wrong here. Even the simple act of lifting my head made the world around me tilt on its side.

“Joss?” I called out, my voice weak and cracking. I tried to swallow, but my mouth was dry as a bone. “Joss!”

The woods were deathly quiet. There was no response from Joss, and even the birds had stopped singing. I tried to look around, forcing my head to stay up and my eyelids to stay open, but I didn’t see anything.

Then I heard the crunch of a boot against the dry grass, coming up from behind me. I tried to lean back on the tree and use it as leverage to turn around. That didn’t work so well, and pain lanced up my side again at the movement, but I at least saw who was coming.

Xavier stepped out of the darkness of the woods, a twisted smile on his face.

I blinked up at him, trying to shake the disorientation from my mind. “Why aren’t you back at the house? You promised me you’d take care of the pack.”

He just sauntered closer, one hand tucked behind his back. “I am taking care of it. I’m taking care of everything.” Too fast for my dulled mind to follow, he shoved me into the dirt and pinned me to the ground, raising a silver knife high above his head. “I bet you didn’t see this coming.”

And before I could fight or scream or even *breathe*, he buried the knife in my chest.

**Episode 631**

JOSS

Something was wrong with Greyson.

His face was ashen—from blood loss or whatever poison had been in that wolf’s mouth, I wasn’t sure—and he seemed to be in an incredible amount of pain. His eyes shot around, glancing vacantly left and right, his eyelids fluttering, and then he mumbled something about resting for a minute.

“Hey, no. Don’t do that.” I reached out and gently shook him. “Greyson, I need you to stay awake, okay?”

He didn’t respond. He’d completely passed out. *Shit.* Just what I needed—to be stuck with an incapacitated Alpha in the middle of the woods. We’d only left the safety of the pack house to strike a deal with the Blue Blood pack so that maybe, just maybe, we’d stand a chance at survival when Silas finally decided to stop lurking in the shadows.

But now Greyson couldn’t make it across the clearing, much less use his authority and insight on Silas to convince Mace to join us. And if any more wolves or other creatures decided to take a shot at him… I groaned.

What the hell was I supposed to do?

I reached out for him again, and he lurched backward with a primal, soul-wrenching scream. The wail of a fatally wounded animal.

I stumbled back, my heart slamming against my ribcage. “Greyson, it’s okay. It’s just me,” I said.

He was looking around wildly, breathing hard. At first I didn’t think he even saw me, though I was crouched on the ground right in front of him.

I’d never seen him like this before. Not that Greyson and I had ever been particularly close, but I’d been around him through enough shit to know what he looked like in battle, or wounded. When he was pissed off or contemplative, or even plain horny.

Right now, he looked… terrified. And the thought of this indomitable Alpha looking like a frightened child made my mouth go dry.

His eyes suddenly focused on me. “W-where’s Xavier?” His voice was rough and frantic, raw from his screaming, and he clutched his chest tightly with one hand.

I held my hands out and tried to make my voice soft and soothing. “He’s back at the pack house, remember? He’s watching over the pack for us.” I inched closer to Greyson. “You must have had a nightmare.”

Slowly, I reached out and placed my hand on his forehead. His skin was hot to the touch and sweaty. His eyes slid in and out of focus as he stared back at me. *Not good. Shit.*

I glanced down at the vicious wound the wolf had given him. It was starting to heal, the skin knitting together, which would have been great news under normal circumstances. But I was pretty sure the attacking wolves had had some kind of rabies, which was highly unusual. Especially for so many wolves to have been infected… Even more unusual—Greyson was starting to show signs of the infection, despite his healing.

I’d never seen rabies in a werewolf before, but from what I knew about the disease in non-magical animals, this wasn’t going to end well unless we got Greyson help. Fast.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, eyeing his face and complexion. I had a pretty good idea of what he might be experiencing, just based on how he looked, but I was hoping to be proven wrong.

“I’m in pain,” he said simply and tried to climb to his feet. “I’ll be fine. We should get going.” He stumbled back against the tree as he tried to stand.

“Hey, slow down.” I caught him by the shoulders and helped ease him back down to the ground. “You’re hurt. You need to rest right now.”

“But—”

“No,” I said, cutting him off. “You’re no use to me—or anyone else—in this state. Now stay and rest, or I’ll make you. I mean it, Greyson.”

I expected him to fight me on it some more, but instead his objections began to drift into nonsensical mumbling. His eyes lost focus, and he stared off at some point over my shoulder, muttering to himself, his face still pale and shining through a sheen of sweat.

In this state, he was definitely a liability. I stood up and glanced around the forest, then looked down at the out-of-commission Alpha leaning against the tree. I weighed my options. The truth was, I didn’t know much about rabies full stop, let alone how the disease might affect a werewolf. It seemed like it was spreading extremely quickly. So maybe it would pass, like most infectious diseases tended to do, faster than it might otherwise.

But what if it didn’t? Rabies was deadly to humans and animals alike. And to werewolves? Could I risk Greyson’s life by waiting around for it to pass? And it wasn’t like we had an unlimited amount of time to reach out to Mace…

“No, Cali,” Greyson mumbled, his gaze fixed on the ground near my shoes. “It was Xavier. Him and Joss… In Oregon… Thor’s Well, and Silas, he’s…”

I tried to make sense of the names and places he’d strung together and came up empty. Oh god, was it already affecting his mind? He needed help. Badly.

Unfortunately, the only place I could think to go to for safety was Mace’s. I’d have to drag Greyson the rest of the way myself, but it couldn’t be much farther than we’d already gone, right?

But even if it was, that didn’t matter. Not when Greyson’s life was on the line. He was the Alpha. We needed him, and right now he needed me.

“Can you stand?” I asked him.

He looked at me with a dazed expression, and then his eyes slid away from mine. Great. He had no idea what the hell I was asking. I crouched down next to him and slid one of his arms over my shoulders. “Let’s get going, Greyson.”

His legs crumpled the moment he put his full weight on them, and it was only my own strength that kept him from collapsing face-first into the dirt. I wasn’t sure if he was too weak or simply too unsteady, but either way he wasn’t making it anywhere without a lot of help.

With a grunt of effort, and using all my strength, I helped him to his feet, bearing most of his weight as he leaned on me. I kept one of his arms slung across my shoulders and grabbed him around the waist, and we slowly continued our journey toward Mace’s house and the Blue Blood pack.

It was slow going, and every step was agonizingly difficult, but I was glad we were alone. I wouldn’t be able to avoid Mace and the Blue Blood pack seeing Greyson like this, unfortunately, but at least the Redwood pack wouldn’t be privy to this. I knew firsthand how difficult it was to earn their trust. And it didn’t matter that Greyson was their Alpha—if they saw him like this, he’d lose the control and respect of the pack. It wouldn’t do well to see their leader this incapacitated.

“No, Cali,” Greyson murmured, his head lolling on my shoulder as we walked.

I sighed. *I never imagined this would be part of my Luna duties.*

By the time we reached Mace’s house, sweat was running down my body, and my every muscle burned and ached from dragging Greyson’s helpless ass. Mace’s house had not been nearly as close as I’d hoped.

The last mile or so, I’d just dragged Greyson’s limp body, draping him over my back like a backpack and letting his long legs and feet trail behind me. His rambling had finally gone silent, but his fever seemed worse. Heat was radiating off him, and he’d begun twitching every so often.

Relief rushed through me when I saw Mace’s house. “Help!” I cried. “We need some help!”

A couple of Blue Blood pack members rushed out onto the porch—Shaggy and Pip.

“Joss?” Shaggy called. “What are you doing here?”

I’d always thought Shaggy was a bit of an idiot, and now I was completely convinced. “Isn’t it obvious?” I panted. “Greyson’s hurt. I need help bringing him inside.”

Pip was a bit quicker to understand, and rushed over to help me bear Greyson’s dead weight. I let out a groan of relief.

“What happened?” Pip asked.

I started to explain. “We were attacked—”

“What the hell is going on here?” Mace demanded as he stomped out of the house. “I thought I told you to stay away from the Blue Blood pack!”

I cut to the chase. “What can we do about rabies?”

Shaggy, Pip, and Mace all looked at me with wide eyes.

“Rabies?” Pip echoed. “Greyson has rabies? How the hell did that happen?” She cringed like she was going to drop Greyson, and I braced myself to keep the Alpha upright.

Mace slowly approached us and looked Greyson up and down. “The only time I’ve seen it in a werewolf, things didn’t end well.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He looked me dead in the eye. “Greyson is going to lose his mind.”

**Episode 632**

VIOLET

What the hell was going on with this Artemis chick? Had she really just blown out all of the lights on the airplane? Was she some kind of witch or something?

Artemis continued to sip her Diet Coke, staring out the window as if nothing had happened. But I’d seen her hand gestures—and those sparks! Was I losing my mind? Was the cabin air pressure going down? Was I going to have to finally put on one of those masks?

I crossed my arms and frowned. When I’d asked her if she’d had anything to do with the plane overcoming the turbulence, she’d been a little vague. She’d even seemed uncomfortable, just like when I’d asked her how she knew Cali, and where she was from.

She’d seemed friendly enough since she’d showed up at the pack house with Greyson, but I got the sense that she hadn’t been honest with me since we’d started this journey together. She was either avoiding giving me a straight answer, or outright lying. Either way, why would she do that? What did she have to hide?

It was obvious that she’d done something to the plane’s lights, even if she wouldn’t admit it. I glanced over at Artemis and, as if sensing my eyes on her, she looked over and offered me a friendly smile. Like she *wasn’t* keeping secrets.

I didn’t smile back. This wouldn’t do. If she and I were going to spend time together on this journey, we needed to trust each other.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the pilot said over the loudspeaker, “we’re about to make our descent into Duluth.”

Artemis looked around in awe. She’d gotten that expression every time there had been an announcement during the flight. It was like she’d never been on an airplane before. No, that wasn’t quite it… It was like she didn’t even know how airplanes worked. Like she’d never even seen a movie about people on an airplane, or anything like that.

I leaned in. “I want to know how you did what you did,” I pressed, my voice low and serious.

Artemis’s eyes widened a bit, and then she shrugged. “I didn’t really do anything—”

“Save it.” I cut her off. “If you don’t tell me, I’ll stay on the plane, go right back to Oregon, and I won’t help you get to Cali.”

This finally seemed to earn the kind of response I’d been hoping for. Artemis grimaced. “Fine. I promise to tell you, but I can’t do it here, whispering, in front of all these humans.”

I sat back. *In front of all these humans.* Was she not a human herself? That would make a lot of sense, considering the sparks, but hearing her say it out loud was still jarring. Did Cali know that Artemis wasn’t human? Did Xavier? What was I getting myself into?

“Okay,” I said. “But only if you promise me.”

“I promise,” Artemis said solemnly.

I glanced at her fingers to make sure they weren’t crossed. They weren’t. Good thing, too, because I was going to hold her to that promise.

The landing was kind of rough. Not the airplane. Thanks to the weather, or the experience of the pilot, the airplane itself landed very smoothly. I only got a slight lurch in my belly as we neared the ground.

The rough part was keeping Artemis in her seat. She’d definitely never been on a plane before, and as we got closer and closer to the ground, her eyes got wider and wider. Was she worried that the plane was going to crash, or something?

She unsnapped her seat belt and tried to stand up, and I reached over and shoved her back down. “Sit down and buckle your seat belt,” I whispered. “You can’t stand up and walk around while we’re landing. It’s not safe and the flight attendant will yell at us.”

Artemis scoffed. “The woman with the funny hat who brought our Diet Cokes? I’m not afraid of her.”

“What exactly are you trying to do here? We can’t get off the plane until it lands and the flight attendants say we can go. We’re stuck here a while longer, so you might as well just sit down and not cause trouble.”

She begrudgingly buckled her seat belt again and stared out the window as we made our final descent.

Artemis clutched my hand. “I can see the treetops! And the buildings! And look, there are other planes here!”

I almost laughed. “Yeah, airports have lots of them. Did you think this was the only one?”

She didn’t respond, too excited by what she was seeing through the window. When the plane finally touched down onto the tarmac, she let out a cheer and a clap. “We did it!” she cried. “We conquered the sky and have returned to Earth!”

*Oh my god. She’s someone who claps when the plane lands.*

Heat rushed into my face and I tried to avoid the looks of the other passengers. *This is so embarrassing.*

When the plane finally came to a stop and connected to our gate, I practically tripped over myself to disembark. The sooner we left the airport and found Cali, the sooner this embarrassing nightmare would be over.

“Stay close to me,” I told Artemis as we shuffled off the plane.

I paused at our gate to adjust my rolling carry-on bag, and when I looked up Artemis was already ahead of me—on the moving walkway, with her arms spread out like wings. “Violet!” she shouted. “I’m moving!”

For a split second, I considered not acknowledging her, but Cali probably wouldn’t like that. It was now very clear why Artemis hadn’t been able to make her way to Cali on her own. Instead of ditching her and avoiding a giant heap of humiliation, I chased after her, dodging all the startled people in her wake.

I finally reached Artemis and pulled her hands down. “You know, for someone who was worried about exposing herself to so many humans, you’re kind of doing that exact thing,” I whispered.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “Can you tell me how the magic works?”

I blinked. The magic?

“If I had this magic back in—” She stopped herself.

“Back in where?” I asked.

Artemis pointed over my shoulder. “What’s that?”

It was a McDonald’s. I rolled my eyes. “I’ll explain Egg McMuffins later. Watch out, the walkway is ending soon.”

When the walkway came to an end, I led her off it, and then out of the airport and into the passenger pickup area.

Artemis screamed the second we walked outside. “Why is it so cold?”

“Welcome to Minnesota, I guess?” I shrugged and then glanced around, spotting a car about fifteen feet down the sidewalk. “There’s Cali!”

We approached Cali’s car and she hopped out for a minute to hug both of us and help me stow my bag in the trunk.

“Violet, thank you so much for bringing Artemis,” Cali said with a grateful smile. “I’m glad you guys made it safely!”

*Almost*, I thought.

We all piled into the car, with Artemis in the passenger seat and me in the back. As Cali pulled into traffic, I leaned forward. “Artemis, when are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

Cali glanced at me in the rearview mirror. “What do you mean?”

I explained what had happened on the plane, and how weirdly Artemis had been behaving. “She was acting like she didn’t know what an airplane was. Or a McDonald’s. Or an automatic walkway—or even a Diet Coke.” I looked at Artemis with a meaningful expression. “And she promised she’d tell me the truth.”

“I did,” Artemis hedged, glancing at Cali.

Cali nodded. “It’s okay. You can trust Violet—plus she might as well know what she’s getting into.”

“What?” I asked.

Artemis turned around in her seat as much as she could while staying buckled in. “I’m a Fae from the Fae world, and I have magic. I might have accidentally used some on the plane…”

Cali gasped. “Artemis! You have to be careful! You can’t just use magic wherever here! It’s how you become a science experiment!”

Artemis shrugged. “I think it was fine. No one really seemed to notice.”

While the two argued back and forth a bit, I sat, stunned, with my eyes wide. I’d thought maybe Artemis was some kind of witch, but a Fae? I didn’t really know what that entailed. Were they supposed to be good? Evil? Artemis didn’t seem evil. I guess it made sense that Greyson had brought Artemis to the pack. She’d probably come back with him from the Fae world.

“So you have magic powers?” I asked. “Like a witch? Could you turn this car into a horse?”

Artemis laughed. “Not that kind of magic. Plus, why would I want to do that? This car is so much faster and more comfortable than a horse.”

“So how did you two meet, then?” I asked Cali.

The questions continued for a while, and Artemis and Cali were both honest and told me everything. As I listened, I felt myself gaining a newfound respect for both of them. It was like a new family was being made, right here in front of me.

We finally pulled up at Cali’s parents’ house and piled out of the car. There was a woman working in the front garden.

“Violet, Artemis,” Cali said. “This is my mom. Orla Hart.”

“Oh excuse me, one second,” Cali’s mom said. “So lovely to meet you two girls. Hello— ” Cali’s mom turned to face us, a large smile across her face. The smile fell when she saw Artemis, and her eyes went wide as she dropped her tools. “Oh my god.”

**Episode 633**

GREYSON

I awoke in a strange bedroom. That in itself was an uncommon occurrence, but it wasn’t unheard of. When I was younger, I liked to blow off steam by drinking and finding some companionship for the night. That tended to result in me waking up in strange beds in unfamiliar rooms. Except this didn’t feel like a one-night stand. For one, I felt like complete and utter shit. My side ached terribly.

Also, I didn’t have one-night stands anymore. Not since meeting Cali. And it would have taken the earth shifting on its axis for me to break that highly frustrating pseudo-celibacy and hook up with someone else.

So, once again, I was left with more questions than answers.

I blinked, trying to recall the exact string of events that had led me to this rather plain-looking bedroom. I tried to sit up and sharp pain radiated up my side, knocking the air out of my lungs. I lifted the sheet covering me and gasped at my wound.

It looked like something had tried to take a bite out of me and had failed miserably. The wound had knitted itself back together, but there was still some bruising and a clear outline of teeth cut into my skin. Honestly, it didn’t look that bad. I’d had worse injuries that hurt a hell of a lot less than this one did.

*What the hell happened to me? How long have I been out?*

Flashes of memory rushed through my mind: the real pack of wolves we’d stumbled upon, a vicious wolf bearing down on me, Joss ripping another wolf apart, Xavier plunging a silver knife into my chest—

I gasped and touched my chest in horror, but found only smooth, unmarked skin. It must have been a dream.

I tried to sit up again, gritting my teeth at the sharp pressure on my side, when a cool hand pressed against my chest, and a soothing voice said, “Easy, Greyson. You need to rest, okay?”

The voice was familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. I followed the cold hand up to a face that loomed over me. Joss. It was Joss. She was here with me in this strange room. She pressed a cold compress to my forehead. The ice felt like heaven against my heated skin.

“Joss…” I tried to voice the question that was sitting at the forefront of my mind, but I couldn’t quite find the words, and my tongue felt heavy in my mouth. I eased back against the pillow, my eyes skipping around the room from the pale, empty walls to Joss’s worried face, to—

*Mace*? What the hell was he doing here? If I thought hard about it, I could sort of remember wanting to talk to him about something. Maybe ask for his help? But I didn’t remember any actual talking. Urgency rushed into my chest, along with an unease that told me I had something incredibly important to discuss with him. Something that couldn’t wait.

Except… what had that been? *Fuck*, I hated being so foggy.

Joss grimaced. “He’s burning up.”

She had to be talking about me, right? Mace looked fine.

Joss lifted the sheet and prodded at my wound. Fire poured into my veins and I let out a cry, my body jerking away from her touch. It was definitely me who was burning up. Shit.

“Just fucking skewer me next time, why don’t you,” I said, my voice sounding like gravel.

Her eyes widened. “Sorry. I was trying to be gentle.”

If that was what gentle felt like to her, then I hoped I was never on the receiving end of Joss trying to cause actual harm.

Mace, on the other hand, didn’t seem too worried. “I doubt the bite will be a problem. It’s already healing. It’s the infection that’s the problem.”

Infection? What infection?

Joss gently eased the sheet back down, mindful of making any contact with my wound, and sighed. “You said he’s going to go mad?”

He nodded. “I’ve seen it before.”

“Well, what the fuck are we going to do about it? Greyson’s an Alpha—the Redwood pack needs him. Silas is on the attack. You of all people should know that,” Joss said, her eyes flashing.

Realization rushed in. *Silas*. That was why I’d wanted to talk with Mace—to warn him about Silas and see if he’d be willing to rejoin the alliance with us. Except that wasn’t the biggest concern on my mind right now. Mace’s calm declaration that I was ‘going to go mad’ rated slightly higher on my priority list.

“You need to calm down,” Mace said to Joss. “I’m well aware of who Greyson is.”

“So what do we do?” Joss demanded. “Is there some kind of medicine?”

My body flushed with heat, and the argument around me went hazy for a moment. I didn’t want any medicine. I wasn’t going to lose my mind. These two needed to calm the fuck down and let me go. I needed to find Cali. Once I found her, everything would be okay.

I opened my mouth to explain that to them, but the words came out garbled. More sounds and grunts than actual words. What the fuck was going on?

Mace ignored me. “There isn’t any medicine. This is rabies we’re talking about. He will go mad—but only while his body overcomes the infection. He should come out of this fine.”

I choked. *Rabies?*

“He *should* come out of it *fine*?” Joss gasped. “First he’s going mad and then he’ll be fine? How don’t you know for sure?”

“Nothing’s set in stone.” Mace shrugged. “I won’t lie to you, Greyson could die. But, as you pointed out, he’s an Alpha. He’s strong. He should be okay, but it will probably get pretty ugly. I can have one of the pack members keep an eye on him—”

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Joss said, cutting him off. “I’m his Luna.”

“Fine. He’s all yours.”

This was bullshit. I didn’t need a babysitter. *I’m an Alpha, for god’s sake.* I tried to sit up again, but my body sort of gave out halfway through and I slumped back down against the bedsheets.

Mace continued to act like I wasn’t there. “Well, good luck with that.” He left the room and shut the door behind him.

Joss reached for something on the bedside table. “Do you want some water?”

I tried to sit up only a small bit this time, bracing myself on my elbows while she held the glass to my lips. God, I felt like a fucking toddler. As soon as the first sip of cool water slid down my throat, my body broke out in a hot flash and sweat slid down my skin. I fell back onto the bed with a grimace, the world spinning around me while my body flashed hot and cold.

When I opened my eyes again, Joss was gone. Why did she keep bailing on me? I reached out, and a warm, gentle hand took mine.

“Cali?” I gasped out. How was she here with me now? Had she known I was hurt? Had she come to take care of me? I gripped the hand firmly to pull her toward me. “Cali.”

But it was Joss. She was back. Or maybe she’d never left at all. I wasn’t sure.

“Try to get some rest, Greyson,” Joss said softly. “Maybe you can sleep this off.”

*Sleep*. *That did sound nice…*

My body lurched and I tumbled down an endless dark hole, spinning wildly, completely out of control, my stomach lurching with each movement.

*This can’t be real*. I knew it couldn’t be. For one, my side wasn’t hurting. And if I was really spinning and thrashing around so badly, I would definitely have felt it. *I’m hallucinating. It’s the rabies. It’s affecting my mind*. *I need to fight back*.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, I stopped falling. I was back in bed. Not, not back. Where I’d been all along.

Where was Cali? She’d been here with me, for a while. Hadn’t she?

Flashes of Cali rushed through my mind—kissing her, growing hard against her, my whole body aching with a burning lust. I missed her. I needed her. She was like oxygen, and I was going to die without her. I craved her so badly my body was shaking with desire. Why had she left me?

Or… had I left her?

A shadow fell over me. Was it Cali?

No, it couldn’t be. She was with someone else. Kissing someone—no, wait. She was kissing me! I reached for her, but then I heard a cold-blooded laugh.

It was my own voice. My own self. “Greyson,” I said to myself.

Cali turned to the other Greyson, except he wasn’t me. He was Silas. *No.*

I lunged toward them, but as I moved I heard Joss’s distant scream. “Mace!”

I tried to call out to Cali, to Joss, to anyone, but my words were smothered by the bubbling, gurgling noises coming from my own mouth.

Joss screamed again. “He’s having a seizure!”

**Episode 634**

Something was wrong here. I looked from Violet to Artemis and finally to Mom, who was staring at Artemis like she was a ghost. My mom’s face was ashen, like she’d gotten sick all over again, and she was trembling. What could have possibly caused this? She’d been fine when I’d left to pick up Artemis and Violet from the airport.

“Mom?” I moved toward her. “What’s wrong?”

Her mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. I reached for her hand, which was cold to the touch. Was she going into shock or something? “Mom?”

Violet inched around me, eyeing my mom like she was expecting her to keel over any second. “Is your mom okay?”

I didn’t know. I hadn’t seen her like this since she’d been in the hospital, and even then, she’d had her wits about her. I took her gently by the arm, trying to rub some warmth into her cold skin. “Mom, tell me what’s wrong. *Please*.”

My mom jolted, seeming to snap out of whatever state of mind she’d been in. “I, um… I was just surprised. I must have forgotten that your friend Violet was coming along too with this young lady.” Her voice trembled, and her face was still ghostly white. I could tell she was trying to be strong, but she didn’t need to. Whatever was wrong, she didn’t need to hide anything from me.

I patted her arm again. “I’m sorry. I thought I told you that Violet was coming.” I glanced over at Violet and gave her a warm smile. “We’re really happy you’re here, Violet, so please don’t worry about surprising us.” I didn’t want her to think she’d done something wrong. It was Mom who was acting strange.

My mom nodded and gave Violet a small smile. “You’re both welcome here any time. I’m sorry for alarming you. Why don’t we go inside?”

“That sounds good,” Artemis said, rubbing her arms. “It’s so cold here! How do you live like this?”

Violet glared at her and then jumped in. “I think Duluth is gorgeous. It must be a really lovely place to live.”

I rolled my eyes at Artemis’s antics and wrapped an arm around Violet to lead her inside. It was amazing, really. Artemis had lived in the Fae world—hands down, the most terrifying place I’d ever been—under the control of the Kollector, and Minnesota’s weather was the thing she struggled with?

“Thank you for bringing her here,” I whispered to Violet. “I hope she wasn’t too much of a handful.”

“You know, I *can* hear you,” Artemis deadpanned.

Violet giggled.

My mom walked into the house ahead of us, and I watched her head to the kitchen while Violet and Artemis took in the house. I still couldn’t figure out why Mom had reacted like that when we’d gotten out of the car. She couldn’t truly have been that shocked by Violet, right? Or was it something related to her illness? My chest constricted.

*Maybe Mom’s not doing quite as well as I thought? Could the flower really not have fixed everything?*

We followed my mom into the kitchen, and Violet was wide-eyed as she took in the house. “This is such a gorgeous home,” Violet breathed. “I can’t believe you grew up here.”

I glanced around my parents’ house, which, while comfortable, had always seemed pretty mundane to me. It must have been a change of pace from growing up in a werewolf pack. “I had a nice childhood,” I said, still keeping an eye on my mom, who’d started nervously flitting around the kitchen, stealing glances at Artemis.

I frowned. What the heck was going on here? Was she wary of another Fae coming into her house? I could understand that, especially considering my mom’s history with her people. She’d spent a long time building a life outside of the Fae world. It had to be jarring to see her own kind again. Maybe she was worried that inviting another Fae into her home would put Dad and me in danger?

“Is your mom always like this?” Violet whispered. “No offense, but she seems a little spaced out.”

I paused. Maybe it was worse than I thought. Clearly something was up with my mom if Violet—who’d never even met my mom before—had picked up on the strange vibes.

My dad walked into the kitchen and smiled at the newcomers. “Hello there girls! I’m Tom, Cali’s dad.”

Mom finally turned around to face us again, a very weak-looking smile plastered to her face. “This young lady is Violet—she’s a friend of Cali’s—and this…” She paused, and for a moment I thought she was going to throw up. She gestured to the other Fae in the room. “This is… Artemis.”

Silence set in. Violet, Artemis, my dad, and I all exchanged a look while my mom kept staring at Artemis with that sickly, almost terrified expression. What the hell was going on here?

“How about we have some tea?” I blurted out, to ease the awkward silence.

“Great idea,” my mom said. “I’ll get it started.”

Violet, helpful as always, stepped forward. “I’ll help!”

Mom and Violet turned away from the rest of the room and began busying themselves with making tea.

Artemis sidled over to me. “What’s going on here?” she asked.

I shrugged, feeling totally useless. “I wish I knew.”

“Your mom keeps looking at me,” Artemis whispered. “She already knows I’m Fae, right? And that you both asked me to come here.”

I nodded and looked back at my mom, who was staring at Artemis again. Was she just being weird because she hadn’t seen another Fae in a long time? It wasn’t like Artemis was going to report my mom to the Fae authorities or something for being in the human world.

*Mom, stop being a creeper!*

“Cali, why don’t you and Artemis go get comfortable in the living room? No need to stand around in here,” Dad suggested.

I nodded. “Great idea.” Frankly, anything would be more comfortable than this. My mom was freaking me the hell out.

My dad led us into the living room. I was glad to escape from Mom’s weirdly prying eyes, but now I had to keep an eye on the dynamic between my father and Artemis. Hopefully she didn’t do anything too weird. I hadn’t really gotten to spend time with her since we’d left the Fae world, but based on Violet’s stories, Artemis was still adjusting to a lot of the things humans took for granted.

I took a seat on the couch and Artemis sat down beside me. My dad sat down in an armchair near us. “So, Artemis, right?”

She nodded. “That’s right.”

“I understand you’re from the Fae world,” he continued, in the same tone he might have used to ask one of my college friends about their major. I had to admit, my dad had come a long way. He was really trying to take this whole ‘supernatural creatures walking among us and/or living in parallel worlds’ thing in stride.

“Yes,” Artemis said, then looked at me with a shy smile. “That’s where I met Cali.”

I smiled back. It was crazy to think that the same Fae who had sold Greyson, Torin, Astrid, and me to the Kollector was now sitting in my parents’ living room, making small talk with my dad. She’d come a long way too, and I was suddenly so grateful that she’d decided to come back to the human world with me. But my heart did ache—I missed Astrid and Torin a lot.

My dad and Artemis continued their chat, and I noticed that my mom was no longer making tea. Instead, she was standing in the doorway of the living room, staring at Artemis again. What the hell was going on? Had it truly been so long since she’d seen another Fae?

I got up to confront my mom while Artemis and my dad kept talking.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” I asked in a hushed tone. “I know you’re hiding something from me!”

My mom opened her mouth, hesitated, and then grimaced. “It can’t be.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “I told you I was bringing another Fae. Why are you so surprised?”

My mom ignored me and approached Artemis, interrupting her and my dad’s conversation. “So, you met my daughter in the Fae world. Do you live with your parents?”

What the fuck was happening now?

Artemis frowned but shook her head. “I never met my parents.”

“Oh. Oh, I’m sorry,” Mom said. She didn’t sound all that sorry, though. More shocked.

Artemis shrugged. “It’s all right. They died a long time ago.”

My mom moved uncomfortably close to Artemis, right into her personal space, and started examining her face like my grandmother had. “When were you born?” my mom asked Artemis.

“Mom!” I gasped. “What are you doing?”

She held up a hand to silence me, and Artemis glanced at me with a confused expression and then looked back at my mom. “I don’t know exactly, but I’m twenty-three years old. I was born during the Great Blizzard of Nasmuth… That’s about as interesting as it gets.”

My mom’s face went ashen, and she stumbled back and fell into a chair.

I rushed over to her. “Mom, what is it?”

She looked past me to Artemis, her expression heartbroken. “Cali, dear, I don’t really know how to tell you this,” she said, eyes darting between us. “But Artemis is your sister.”

**Episode 635**

JOSS

“Mace!” I screamed. “Mace, he’s having a seizure!”

Greyson was foaming at the mouth now, his body jerking back and forth and his eyes rolling back into his head. I climbed onto the mattress next to him and turned him onto his side so he wouldn’t choke.

I’d thought he was doing better, or maybe that had just been me hoping he was improving. He’d seemed to actually be resting, and while he’d still been muttering to himself when he’d fallen asleep again, he’d seemed almost lucid when he’d woken back up.

*Except for the part where he’d called me Cali*. Man, Greyson had it so bad for that girl that even when he was sick out of his mind, he was still completely focused on her.

So maybe he hadn’t been on the mend after all. Maybe Mace had been overly optimistic. Maybe after everything, this was still going to kill him. I couldn’t let that happen.

I tried to keep a grip on him, but Greyson’s body was shaking so violently he almost bucked me off the mattress—all that strength and muscle put toward a chaotic end.

“Mace!” I screamed again.

The door burst open and Mace finally hurried in, followed by Shaggy and Pip, both of whom grimaced at the sight of me desperately hanging on to the writhing, uncontrolled Alpha.

Mace blinked. “What happened?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I snapped. I adjusted my grip on Greyson so he didn’t accidentally break his neck. I glanced around. Was there anything I could shove in his mouth to keep him from biting his own tongue off? Was that even something you were supposed to do for people with seizures, or would that just make things worse?

“He’s having a seizure,” Mace said, his voice way too calm for the situation. “That’s not unusual given his condition.”

There was nothing ‘usual’ about any part of this nightmare of a situation! The strongest Alpha I’d ever met had been attacked and bitten by a rabid wolf, and in a matter of hours he’d gone from strong and seemingly invincible to a garbling, feverish, hallucinating, seizing, hot mess. How the hell could Mace be so calm about this?

“Isn’t there something we can do about it?” I demanded. I couldn’t stand the way he was looking at me, like I was some kind of idiot and, worse, like he didn’t care one way or the other if Greyson died.

Mace shrugged. “Sorry, but I don’t have any anti-seizure drugs. Like I already told you, he’s just going to have to ride this out.”

He didn’t sound even a little bit sorry, and if I hadn’t had my hands full with Greyson I would have been sorely tempted to smack some sense into the Blue Blood Alpha. I took a deep breath and held tight to my own Alpha. I couldn’t fail him. Not when I was apparently the only one here who gave a shit about whether he lived or died.

“You can leave,” I said shortly. “I’ll let you know if there are any changes.”

Mace rolled his eyes and left the room, followed by Pip and Shaggy.

I leaned in and whispered to Greyson’s still seizing form. “You’re going to be okay, Greyson. I promise. I’m here, and I’m not going to let anything happen to you. Just try to relax, okay? You can stop fighting now. I’ve got you, and I’m not going to leave you alone.”

I kept murmuring to him, trying to soothe him as much as possible. I didn’t know if it would make even a tiny bit of difference, but I also didn’t know what else to do. And I couldn’t just sit by and watch him thrash around.

Little by little, the tremors eased, until they finally stopped completely. Greyson’s breathing steadied and he slumped back onto the bed, unconscious. I helped ease him onto his back and off his wounded side, as if that would make some kind of difference to his recovery. Then I looked around for something to wipe his face, which was wet with sweat and his own saliva.

I found a small stack of towels folded on the dresser, and carefully cleaned him up. It was an oddly intimate task, and I had a feeling Greyson would have been mortified about all this if he’d been conscious.

*And yet another task that goes way above and beyond my responsibilities as a Luna*, I mused. *I should get a promotion when this is all said and done.*

By the time I was finished, Greyson looked peaceful, clean, and calm. Maybe the worst had passed? That seizure had certainly been horrifying enough to be considered some kind of peak in his illness. I watched him for another few minutes, just in case his condition changed again, but he still seemed peaceful. It really did seem like he’d survived the worst of it.

Maybe he’d be okay if I left him alone for a minute. I’d been at his bedside for hours now, and I was still covered in dirt and sweat and blood from our fight, and the subsequent trek to the Blue Blood pack house. I needed some fresh air.

I stepped out of the room and was heading for the front door when Mace poked his head through a nearby doorway. “Tell me more about why you and Greyson were in this area to begin with?”

I bristled at the blunt question. No greeting, no polite asking after myself or Greyson. Just down to business.

I sighed. Apparently it wasn’t break time just yet, after all. I changed my trajectory to head toward Mace. He was standing in the doorway to his office, and I nodded at the room behind him. “Would you like to talk inside?”

I’d been hoping that Greyson would carry the Alpha’s share of this conversation, since it had been his brilliant idea to begin with, but it looked like it was going to be up to me to save the Redwood pack. Again.

Mace rolled his eyes but stepped out of the way to let me inside.

As soon as he closed the door behind him, I said, “We came here to solidify the alliance.”

Mace waved a dismissive hand at me. “We’ve already been through that, but why bring him here? Greyson’s name alone puts everyone in the pack on edge.”

“And what about Silas?” I countered. “Does his name put you on edge? Because if we don’t work together on this, there’s a good chance Silas will destroy us all.”

He frowned. “I’ll think about it.”

“The time for thinking is coming to an end, Mace,” I warned him. “We have to start acting before it’s too late. We want you on our side.” I left my words hanging in the air and strode out of the office, down the hallway, and out of the house. The fresh air was crisp and cool on my skin, almost cleansing.

After the day I’d had, it was exactly what I needed. God, I hoped Greyson recovered soon. I wanted to get back to my pack. Even if Silas was coming and we all ended up dead this time next week, I’d rather die with them than surrounded by strangers.

The door swung open and Shaggy walked out onto the porch. “Do you think this is a bad time for a barbecue?”

I rolled my eyes. “Why is it that every wolf pack wants to have barbecues at the least opportune time?” I shoved past him as Pip stepped out onto the porch as well.

“I can watch Greyson for a while,” she offered. “You look like you need a break.”

“That would be amazing. Thank you. Let me know if anything changes.” I wandered away from the porch and found a quiet spot under a tree to rest. What if we’d come this far only for Greyson to die and the alliance not to be salvageable?

I needed to clear my head.

By the time I returned to the pack house, the sun had set and the sky was dark. I ignored the other Blue Blood pack members and went straight to Greyson’s room. Pip was sitting at his bedside, a book propped up in her lap.

“He’s still sleeping,” she informed me.

“Thanks. I’ll watch him now.” I looked Greyson up and down. He looked a hell of a lot better than he had a few hours ago. His skin no longer had the sweaty sheen of a fever, and his breathing was steady. I reached out and touched his forehead. It was cool, just as it should have been.

I pulled down the sheet to look at the wound, revealing his bare torso. As Mace had noted before, the bite was practically healed. I’d started to pull back the sheet further to examine the wound more closely when Greyson’s fingers wrapped around my wrist.

“You came back,” he murmured.

“Of course I did. I wasn’t going to leave you with Mace and his sidekick Shaggy.” I gave him a small smile. “How do you feel?”

“I feel much better. Especially now that you’re here.” His grip on my wrist tightened, and then he pulled me toward him and kissed me.

**Episode 636**

XAVIER

I checked my watch. It had been three hours since Greyson and Joss had left and… seven minutes since the last time I’d checked my watch. How had it only been a short amount of time since the pack had been left in my hands? Screw a few hours—it felt like I’d been here for days, weeks even.

I leaned back in my chair on the porch of the new Redwood pack house with a long-suffering sigh. I was struggling with why I’d initially wanted to be Alpha. Because the reality was boring as hell. For the last three hours, I’d been little more than a glorified babysitter.

If this was any indication of what it was truly like to be an Alpha, then Colton was right—it wasn’t worth the power struggle. I’d already had to break up an argument between two of the newer members—Zainab and Sage—about who got to use the bathroom first. The bathroom, for Christ’s sake.

I thought this was a pack of adults, not a preschool for werewolves. I suddenly understood why Greyson had been so quick to bail on everyone to go after Cali in the Fae world. How Joss had managed to keep this motley group from tearing each other’s throats out while he was gone, I’d never truly understand.

Still, there was part of me that did want this. It was supposed to be mine, and Greyson took it from me. Sure, not all of being an Alpha would be glamorous, but the Redwood pack was mine.

I wished Colton were here. At least we’d have been able to bicker with each other over some stupid shit Colton did. I missed that. Colton was part of me, being my twin and all. I’d thought after I came back from the Fae world that I would see him again. I’d guessed wrong. He was off in Montana somewhere with Maya, and I had a feeling I wouldn’t be hearing from him in a while.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket. Maybe I could call Cali and talk to her instead. My finger hovered over her contact information. But she’d said she wanted space, and that probably meant more than just a few hours. I sighed again.

I’d thought that once we’d made it back to the human world and saved Cali’s mom, it would just be me and my mate and our happily ever after—or at least as close to happy as I could get with my homicidal maniac of a father running around. But things between Cali and me seemed as complicated as ever, and I didn't know how to fix it. The gap between us from when I’d left her to run off with Gabe was still there, and every time I thought that maybe we’d managed to build a bridge across it, the gap just widened further.

When we were good, we were so *good*. I needed to fix things.

I slid my phone back into my pocket and listened to the sounds coming from inside the house. I hadn’t seen much of Mrs. Smith and Big Mac in a while. They must have slipped away somewhere. That was fine by me. I liked it a hell of a lot better when we were witch-free around here. I leaned back and caught sight of myself in the semi-opaque window.

Lounging on a porch, I didn’t exactly look like the fierce Alpha I’d always imagined I’d be. Maybe I could squeeze a little exercise in while I waited for Joss and Greyson to get back. Not that I was getting soft, of course, but the exertion might help break up some of the monotony while I played babysitter to an entire pack of werewolves.

I ducked inside long enough to put on some workout clothes and then headed back out. As I passed the kitchen, I heard Rishika and Zainab bickering.

“I bought these apples, Zainab!” Rishika hissed. “Have you never had roommates before? At least ask first!”

I snickered to myself and kept moving. That Zainab was definitely turning out to be a problem child, but that wasn’t my problem to solve. They could sort it out themselves, right? Surely Joss hadn’t been holding their hands through each petty, insignificant dispute that popped up.

I headed outside and found a clear, quiet spot on the grass to do some push-ups. I made it just shy of forty before I felt a presence behind me, and I rolled my eyes. What was happening now? Had someone pushed another pack member down on the playground?

I glanced over my shoulder. It was Ravi—one of the newer additions to the pack, if I remembered correctly.

“Hey, can I work out with you?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Knock yourself out.”

I resumed my push-ups, and Ravi took a seat on the grass near me, but not too close. He started doing sit-ups, and for a lovely span of about three minutes, we worked out silently together.

Then Ravi sat up. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

I didn’t stop doing push-ups. I hoped he wasn’t going to bitch to me about his room assignment or some other bullshit that really, truly, I didn’t give a shit about. “Sure.”

“Um, what do you know about… Joss?” Ravi asked, his face coloring a bit.

I stopped and sat down on the grass and narrowed my eyes at him. “Why do you want to know about the Luna?”

“Oh, no reason.” He held his hands up. “I don’t want to cause any trouble. It’s not like that.”

I lifted an eyebrow at his awkward, flustered reaction. He was so red in the face, it looked like he’d been working out for hours, not minutes. Who the fuck was this guy? And what kind of trouble could he possibly cause? I looked him up and down. Sure, the guy was built like a tank, but he hardly seemed threatening.

“I… I kind of like her,” Ravi confessed. “Sorry, I know she’s with Greyson. Or that they’re Luna and Alpha, and Greyson’s your brother and all. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea—”

I burst out laughing. Oh my god. This was, hands down, the best part of my day so far. “You don’t need to worry about me telling Greyson about you and Joss. I couldn’t give less of a shit. Is that really what you needed advice about?”

Ravi sighed in relief. “I, um, I just feel like I’m in a little over my head. Is it even okay for me to be hooking up with the Luna?”

I shrugged. “What did Joss say about it?”

“She, uh… She doesn’t care. And she kind of implied that Greyson wouldn’t care either. Like, they’re Alpha and Luna, but only as far as their responsibilities to the pack are concerned.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about,” I said simply, hoping this would end the conversation.

“But Greyson saw us together,” he blurted out.

Really? How interesting. Greyson had walked in on his Luna getting fucked by another man. How terrible for him. I forced my expression to stay neutral. This was just getting better and better. “Then you’re definitely okay.”

“Why?

“Because if Greyson cared, you'd be dead.” I smirked. “So, enjoy.”

“Thanks, man.” Ravi smiled. “I appreciate your help.”

He headed back into the house soon after that, and I watched him go with a smirk on my face. But as soon as I was alone, the smile slipped away. “Fuck!” I groaned.

If Greyson really didn’t care about Joss sleeping with someone else, then what did that mean? Did he still have strong feelings for Cali? Did Greyson not care who Joss slept with because he truly believed Cali was his mate? The idea still seemed laughable to me, *due destini* or not.

But if that were true—if Greyson really thought that Cali was his mate—then it meant Greyson hadn’t just been saying all that shit to mess with me and the pack. “Fuck,” I muttered again. I’d need to keep an eye on that.

But first, I needed to clear my head. No more pack bullshit arguments, no more stupid advice. Just me and the outdoors. I stood up and started jogging around the property, sticking to the path that ran along the woods. Just as I settled into a comfortable pace, a howl ripped through the forest.

I slowed to a stop and looked around. A chill went down my spine as I looked around the area. I knew that howl… Didn’t I?

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement and turned as something ran past me. It was a blur at first, but then I saw it again and realization hit me.

It was Ava’s wolf.

My mind went blank. And I didn’t stop to think about what I was doing, or how a dead woman’s wolf could be running past me.

Instead, I shifted and ran after her.

**Episode 637**

My mom’s words hung in the air around me.

*Artemis is your sister*.

Mom had delivered the statement with utter certainty, like that string of words wasn’t impossible, was one hundred percent fact—no matter how heavy that truth might have been. No matter the implications—all the years I’d spent as an only child, the years Artemis herself had spent all alone in the world, without the love and care and safety I’d taken for granted before my mom had gotten sick…

Mom stared at Artemis with unabashed grief, heartache written into the lines of her face. I just shook my head. How was this even possible?

And who was her dad?!

Artemis blinked at me. “She thinks I’m your sister?”

My dad rushed up in a panic and kneeled at my mom’s side. “Orla, honey, are you all right?” He squeezed my mom’s limp hand, no doubt finding it just as cold as I had, because he took it between his palms and tried to rub some warmth into it. “Orla, what are you feeling right now? Are you having any numbness?”

My mom didn’t respond. She just kept staring at Artemis, who was now staring back with confusion and… Was that anger?

“Cali,” my dad said. “Call an ambulance. I think your mother’s having a stroke.”

My mom held her hand up. “I’m not having a stroke,” she said quietly. She got up and left us by her newly vacated chair as she approached Artemis. “It’s too uncanny,” Mom murmured to herself as she stared at Artemis’s face. “You look too much like him.”

Artemis glanced over my mom’s shoulder and looked at me nervously. I couldn’t help her. I was still frozen in shock, still trying to piece together how my mom’s declaration could possibly be true.

Then my mom reached out to touch Artemis’s face, and I lurched forward, grabbing my mom’s hand and pulling it back. Maybe she was having some kind of episode? She’d been acting totally creepy from the moment Artemis had gotten out of the car. Almost like… like she was seeing someone she’d been convinced was dead.

I shook myself. No, that couldn’t be it. Coming back from the edge of death had to leave a mark on a person, after all. Maybe this was just my mom hitting some kind of wall after all she’d been through. Maybe this didn’t have anything to do with Artemis at all. “Mom, stop that. You need to sit down. I… I don’t have a sister.”

“I know it seems crazy,” my mom said, “but…” She trailed off, staring at Artemis once more.

“Would you please stop staring at her like that?” I snapped. “You’re freaking her out!”

“I will say I am feeling pretty freaked out,” Artemis said slowly. “What’s going on exactly?”

My mom’s eyes snapped down to the floor.

Violet walked in with a cheery smile. “The water’s boiling. What kind of tea…” She stopped when she saw my mom and me clustered around Artemis, and my dad still kneeling by the chair. “Oh. What’s going on?”

My dad stood up. “I’m calling the doctor.”

“No, Tom, there’s no need,” Mom said. She still looked pale, still kept sneaking glances at Artemis.

Maybe she didn’t need a human doctor, but she did need something. I’d never seen her so… spooked? “Mom, how could Artemis be my sister?” I repeated. “That’s not possible.”

My dad grabbed a magazine and began to fan my mom with it. She waved him away with an irritated scowl. “I’m fine, Tom.”

I was frozen in place as I watched them. What was I supposed to do? What *could* I do?

My mom’s expression softened, and she met Artemis’s wide eyes. “Twenty-three years ago, I gave birth to a daughter,” she began.

“Yes, and Grandma told me the baby was stillborn,” I cut in. In the back of my mind, I knew I probably sounded kind of bratty, but I didn’t want a story, or for Mom to tell me things I already knew. I wanted her to skip to the part where she explained how and why she believed Artemis, this Fae I’d randomly come across in my journey, could be my sister.

“I know.” Mom nodded. “That’s what I was told, too. It was the most heart-wrenching day of my life. I was devastated. I…” Her voice broke. “I never saw my baby. They took her away, scared that the sight of her would prove too traumatic for a young, grieving mother.” She looked at Artemis again. “And up until I first laid eyes on you, Artemis, I believed my firstborn daughter was dead.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand. Why would your mom lie about something like that?”

“And who exactly is the father?” Dad asked.

“I will tell you all everything in time,” Mom said. “My mother Hera wasn’t there during the birth. There was no way she would have known about the baby being taken on purpose. The nurses, I thought, had no reason to lie to me. It was a chaotic time—the war between the Dark and Light Fae was raging. Everything was uncertain.”

I shook my head again. This couldn’t be happening. This still wasn’t a good enough answer. That my mom had thought her baby was dead because of someone’s lie? Or maybe just a misunderstanding? I looked at Artemis. She was pale, and looked just as heartbroken as my mother. What must it be like for her to receive this news?

Assuming it was true, assuming she even believed it. She’d spent her whole life alone, depending on nobody but herself for her own survival and fought to escape the Kollector. She hadn’t told me much about her life in the Fae world, but I got the impression that she hadn’t made very many good memories. And now she’d learned that she’d had a mother all along somewhere… someone who would have loved her and taken care of her—if she’d only known Artemis was alive.

Tears streamed down my mom’s face as she stared at Artemis. “But the second I saw you, I knew they had lied to me. Impossible as it seems, something deep inside me *knows* that you are my daughter.” She paused. “Can… Can I hug you?”

“Um, sure,” Artemis said softly.

Slowly and gently, Mom wrapped her arms around Artemis. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. Her breath hitched as she began to sob.

Beside me, I heard Violet sniffling, and I took her hand and squeezed it gently. She’d lost her family too, only she wouldn’t get to reunite with them. This had to be hard for her.

I watched my mom hug Artemis, feeling like I was in some kind of touching and bizarre dream. I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around any of it.

Finally, my mom pulled away and admired Artemis’s face. “You’re so beautiful,” my mom whispered. She wiped her face. “Tell me, what have you been doing all this time?”

Artemis froze, her eyes widening. “Um…” She looked past my mother, her eyes pleading with me.

*Oh, right.* The truth was, whether Artemis was actually my mom’s daughter or not, she’d spent most of her life as a bounty hunter, prowling for rare creatures, humans, and Light Fae and selling them into enslavement. Not exactly the kind of thing a mother would want to hear about her long-lost daughter right off the bat.

“Artemis is sort of… a detective,” I told my mom quickly. Hopefully Artemis knew what a detective was, or this lie was going to die really quick.

Mom’s eyebrows lifted. “Really?”

Artemis just nodded, and before she could reply, my mom hugged her again. “I want to hear all about your life—but right now I just want to hold you.”

I glanced over at my dad, who was looking fairly shell-shocked. I hoped he was okay. It couldn’t have been easy for him to hear that my mom had a kid with another man, and that said kid was now in our house. Hopefully this wouldn’t set him back.

I looked back at my mom and Artemis, who were still locked in an embrace. Well, this was definitely not how I’d seen today going. Artemis looked over my mom’s shoulder at me, and we stared at each other in quiet shock, both of us seemingly seeing each other for the first time.

The two separated from the hug, still close. Artemis cleared her throat. “I, um, have a lot of questions,” she said. “About you and… my father?”

Orla laughed, wiping a tear from her eye. “I’m sure you do. I’m going to tell you everything, dear.”

And with that they hugged again.

I examined Artemis’s face, trying to find myself or my mother there, trying to wrap my head around this new, seemingly impossible development. Was this why I’d felt that strange connection to Artemis from the beginning? Even after what she’d done to me and my friends?

I’d thought it was just friendship, but maybe it had always been something more. Maybe some part of me had looked at Artemis and recognized her as family. As a sister with whom I shared half of everything I was.

But even that was hard to accept. The closest thing I’d ever had to a sister was Lola. I’d known her for years, and I’d known Artemis for, what? Weeks, at most. I’d come across her entirely by accident. And if she hadn’t come back to the human world with me, if Mom and I hadn’t needed another Fae for the ritual, Artemis might never have come out here and met my mom. It all seemed so senseless, so random, so impossible to believe.

Could Artemis really be my sister?

**Episode 638**

GREYSON

I pulled Cali into my arms and kissed her. It felt like it’d been so long since my lips had touched hers. My mind felt hot and fuzzy as I tried to deepen the kiss, and it was hard to string a full thought together. But she was here. Cali. My Cali. I ran a hand through her hair. It was blue… like an ocean…

Wait. Cali’s hair wasn’t blue.

The kiss lasted what seemed all of three seconds before Cali shoved me back. If there hadn’t been a soft bed to land on, it probably would have hurt.

I blinked, confused. “What’s going on?” I asked, but then I felt my head spin. It was throbbing. “Something’s wrong.”

“What the fuck?” Joss demanded, coming into focus in front of me. “I thought we made it crystal clear that we don’t want each other, remember?”

I blinked. Wait a second, had I just kissed *Joss*? Joss my Luna, Joss? So Cali wasn’t at my bedside nursing me back. Where the fuck was I?

“Where am I?” I said, my voice rough.

“You’re *safe*,” Joss said. “We were on our way to the Blue Blood house. You had a seizure, remember?”

I blinked slowly at her, trying to piece together what she was saying. “A seizure? Really?”

She nodded. “You were foaming at the mouth.”

“Shit.” I shook my head. I couldn’t think straight, not when everything was suddenly blurring and moving simultaneously. Not when my memories and feelings felt just as mystifying. “My side hurts…” My mouth was dry, and I tried to swallow. “I remember an attack? Wolves. Rabies.”

Joss nodded again. “That’s good, Greyson. Do you know where you are?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but the specific string of words eluded me. I knew this room, but where was it again? And why couldn’t I tell her? It wasn’t a hard question. It shouldn’t have felt like a monumental task for me to answer.

Joss put a hand on my shoulder. “We’re at Mace’s. I carried you all the way here. You’re still sick, Greyson. You need to rest.”

I leaned back against my pillow and closed my eyes. *Rest. I need to rest*. What I needed and what I needed to do were constantly two different things.

When I opened my eyes again sometime later, my vision was finally clear. The ache in my side tugged at me with dull pain, like an old bruise or a pulled muscle. It was more a nuisance than anything else—a small token from what had happened in the woods.

I slowly sat up and looked around the room. I was in a spare room in the Blue Blood pack house… where I’d ended up after Joss and I had been attacked by rabid wolves. The hazy memories began to rush in. I’d been bitten and gone down hard, and Joss had somehow brought me here and… taken care of me while I’d fought off the infection. She’d come back for me, and she hadn’t left since. It didn’t sit well with me that there had been a pack of regular wolves that rabid. It wasn’t right.

Joss was asleep in a chair, not far from my sick bed. I took in her exhausted expression, and another memory rushed through my mind: taking Joss’s hand and pulling her into me. Kissing her.

I’d thought she was Cali.

I shook myself. No, I couldn’t have kissed Joss. That must have been a dream. I slowly rose from the bed, testing my strength before I stood completely. Then, carefully and slowly, I put one foot in front of the other to see if I could handle walking. I felt surprisingly good, considering I’d been a writhing, feverish, maddened mess just hours before. I’d never known any werewolf to have rabies, but I made a note to never get bitten again.

I glanced over at Joss. Should I wake her? Let her know I was all right? That we could continue with what we set out here to do? She’d definitely seemed worried about me, more so than I would’ve thought. When I’d chosen her to be my Luna, I’d known she was strong, but I’d never imagined she would turn out to be this brave and capable. I was lucky to have her by my side as my Luna. The entire pack was.

I’d let her sleep, I decided. She’d definitely come out of this as the hero, but the whole ordeal must have been hard for her. It hadn’t been any better on me.

I still couldn’t shake Cali from my head. Apparently even when I was at my most delirious and sick, she was who came to mind. Fucking hell. I needed to clear my head and cure my dry mouth.

I padded out of the bedroom and went in search of the kitchen. I was in desperate need of a glass of water. I quickly found the kitchen, rummaged for a cup, and started gulping down water like I was dying of thirst.

“Well. It looks like the Redwood Alpha will live to see another day.”

I wiped my mouth and turned to see Mace standing in the doorway behind me. “Did Joss tell you about Silas?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

That answer told me exactly jack shit, and Mace didn’t offer anything more. I could sense his wariness in the way he watched me and seemed to be weighing his options. He’d given me shelter while I’d been fighting the rabid bite, but he wasn’t exactly tripping over himself to ally with us. What was his holdup? Was this caution because he didn’t trust me? Or was something bigger at play? Didn’t he know that we were all stronger together?

Either way, I didn’t have any more time to waste on this task. “If you know about Silas, then why the fuck would you not want to join my pack with an alliance? You think you’re going to defeat him by yourself?”

“I think we have a better chance alone than if we were to join with you,” Mace said evenly. “You and your brothers pinned a big target on our backs, you know.”

I sighed. “You don’t have a choice, Mace. If you want to survive this, you need to put aside any preconceived idea of who and what I am. This is about our packs. About *survival*.”

He seemed to consider this, then he finally nodded. “I agree. I want the survival of my pack and I’m willing to do what it takes to keep everyone safe,” he said. “But if I find out you’re lying to me, you’ll wish the rabies had killed you. Got that?”

“Crystal clear,” I said, downing the rest of my water without a word.

On that happy note, the Alpha left me alone and I continued guzzling the better part of a gallon of water while I stood at the kitchen sink. I felt stronger with each passing minute. Good. I couldn’t afford to be out of commission any longer.

Mace and I would have to work out the details later, but at least for now, I knew I could count on the Blue Blood pack. It was something. But it didn’t feel like nearly enough.

“You should have woken me up.”

Joss stood in the doorway, her eyes narrowed on me.

I held out my glass. “Do you want some water?”

“Sure.” She joined me next to the sink, and I fished another cup out of the cupboard and handed it over.

“How are you feeling?” she asked. “I was really worried about you.”

“I’m better now. I think the worst is over. Even the pain is better.” I met her gaze. “Thanks for helping me. I know it must not have been easy.”

She hummed noncommittally and took a long pull from her glass. As she licked her lips dry, a flash of memory flooded in. My lips pressed against Joss’s. Why was that popping up again? I’d thought I was kissing Cali in a feverish delirium, so why did I keep remembering a fistful of blue hair?

I set down my cup. “Can I ask you something?”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

“This is going to sound weird,” I started. “But, um, when I was in the bedroom recovering, did I—did we—kiss?”

Joss arched an eyebrow. “You don’t remember? Wow, I guess that says something, doesn’t it?”

I paused. Shit. So it hadn’t been a hallucination of some kind. “I do remember,” I finally admitted. “It’s fuzzy, but I thought it’d been a dream. I remember being in the throes of the rabies, and it was like I lost control and I thought I saw Cali in front of me. I had the strongest desire to kiss her and thought it was her. Not you—no offense.”

“None taken,” she mused. “I got the feeling you weren’t quite yourself.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad you understand, but there’s one favor I’d like to ask you.”

She looked at me questioningly, waiting.

“When Cali returns to the pack house, because we know she will,” I said, “can you promise me you won’t tell her?”

**Episode 639**

I looked at Artemis. Artemis looked back at me.

My mother—*our* mother—had just dropped a bombshell on us. I had a sister. And that sister was the Fae bounty hunter who’d kidnapped and sold me.

We should probably keep that story to ourselves for the time being.

“I know this must be a shock to everyone,” my mother said, her brow creased with worry. “But… it would mean so much to me if I could see you two embrace as sisters for the first time. Please.”

I eyed Artemis. I could tell we were both less than thrilled about this. It wasn’t like we’d been given much time to adjust to this piece of news. Or any time at all, really. But I didn’t have it in me to disappoint my mom. Especially considering she was on the verge of tears.

What was one hug, anyway?

I stepped forward and held my arms out. For a moment, I just stood there with my arms spread, feeling like a complete and total idiot. Was Artemis really going to just leave me hanging? But after a few seconds, Artemis shuffled over to me and awkwardly threw her arms around my middle.

I rested my chin on her shoulder, which was a bad choice because she was just a little taller than me. So I just stood there for a second, craning my neck. Artemis gave me a few robotic pats on the back and we both sprung away from each other.

“This is just so wonderful,” my mom cried, tears rolling down her cheeks. She was completely oblivious to how weird that had been. Although, considering how things had been lately, this was probably the most normal experience I’d had with either of my parents in a while.

“Tom, could you take a picture?” my mom asked excitedly.

“We’re going to have our portraits done?” Artemis asked, eyes narrowing. “Right now? You’re not in the best color for that.”

“We do it with a camera,” I snapped at her, trying to rise above Artemis’s comment on my outfit. “It only takes a second. It’s a human thing.”

My dad rushed off to get the ancient digital camera I’d won selling wrapping paper at school in the fourth grade. I couldn’t believe he still had it. Or that it still worked.

I tried to look on the bright side. My dad was taking the whole ‘Meet the long-lost Fae daughter I never knew existed!’ thing much better than he’d taken the werewolf news.

My dad came back and I posed next to Artemis, pasting a smile on my face for the picture.

“Say ‘cheese’!” my dad called, but I could hear the strain in his voice. He was doing this for my mom, nothing more.

I gamely replied “Cheese!” while Artemis just asked “Why?” and SNAP. My first family photo with my sister.

“You like it?” my dad asked, showing us all the picture. I couldn’t help but notice our resemblance in the photo. It was pretty striking.

“How does it do that so fast?” Artemis asked, dazzled.

My dad, apparently unable to handle his wife’s new Fae daughter a moment longer, walked out of the room. I was pretty sure I heard him mumbling some excuse about needing to get some water. I hoped, for his sake, that he’d pour himself something a little stronger.

Worried about him, I hurried after him into the kitchen, hoping I’d be able to help him with all of this.

I found him standing in by the kitchen window, just staring out at the back yard. It wasn’t a hopeful image.

“Dad?” I asked softly, not wanting to startle him. “You okay?”

My dad just smiled at me, still looking a bit dazed.

“I could ask the same of you,” he replied. “I’m assuming you didn’t expect to gain a sister today.”

“It’s pretty shocking,” I admitted. “And I definitely have lots of questions, but… I’m fine. I’m kind of starting to get used to shocking revelations, if that makes sense.”

“It does, yeah.” My dad nodded. “Wish I could say the same for myself.”

But I could sense there was something he wasn’t telling me. Something it might be helpful to get off his chest. I sidled up to him and took his hand in mine.

“Dad, please talk to me.” I gave his hand a squeeze.

“Look, I just started getting used to the idea of my wife and daughter being Fae,” he admitted. “But… the hardest part to grapple with is that your mother hid it from me, all these years.”

I nodded. I knew exactly how that felt.

“Are you mad at her?” I asked, feeling anxiety prickle inside me.

“No.” He shook his head with a sigh. “Who could ever be mad at your mother? She has the biggest heart in the whole world, and I love her with everything I’ve got. I just… I thought we shared everything with each other. That we were open. And now I’m finding out that I was the only one of us doing that.”

“I’m sorry, Dad,” I told him, my heart breaking for him. “But if it helps, I think Mom had her reasons. Not many people would be able to understand this, let alone accept the truth. I think she was scared.”

“She had a whole relationship I didn’t know about. A baby. I was just so sure I knew her, but all these secrets… It’s a lot to drop on someone.” My dad’s eyes glistened with tears and for the first time ever, I worried for my parents’ marriage.

“To know that she had this pain that she kept to herself… A lost child.” He took a shaky breath. “I just wish I could have been there for her and helped her with it. I would have, if she’d told me.”

He gave me a watery smile, and I saw in his eyes that nothing was broken between my parents. My dad was just trying to figure everything out.

“You can still help her, Dad,” I assured him. “Now that we all know about Artemis, we can support Mom like she needs. And no one’s better at that than you.”

“I’ll always be there for your mother, it’s true.”

“And Artemis?” I asked.

“We need to make her feel welcomed and loved,” he told me. “This must be just as much of a shock for her as it is for us. If not more. The best thing we can do in uncertain times is be kind to each other.”

He kissed me on the forehead and we headed back into the living room. I felt so grateful for my family in that moment.

“If I’d known you were alive,” my mother was saying, holding Artemis’s hands, “I would have never stopped looking for you. I’m so sorry you were alone.”

If my mom had never left the Fae world, she would have never met my Dad. I would never have been born. I felt selfish for even thinking this, but it stuck in my mind—the reaction of an only child.

Well, I wasn’t an only child anymore. I shook my head and watched as Artemis give my mom one-word answers to all her questions about her upbringing and her life back in the Fae world.

Artemis was more reserved than usual. I wondered if she was freaking out internally. Finding out that the mother you’d never met was alive had to be jarring, to say the least. But shouldn’t Artemis have been curious, or happy, or emotional? Anything but quiet.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked her, realizing that my sister needed my support.

But Artemis just shook her head, the faraway look still there on her face.

“Can I use the bathroom?” she asked.

“Of course, follow me.”

I led her down the hall to the guest bathroom at the front of the house. I wanted to ask her how she was feeling, but I didn’t want to be selfish. I was sure she had a lot going through her mind.

When I walked back into the living room, I saw my parents hugging on the couch.

“I think I’ll make that cup of tea now,” Violet piped up, before scurrying off to the kitchen. Poor girl—I was sure this was more family drama than she’d signed up for.

“How are you doing?” my mom asked, once Violet was gone. “I know this is a lot.”

“It is.” I nodded, sitting on the arm of the couch. “Honestly, I don’t know how I feel. Ask me again when the shock wears off?”

“Will do,” my mom answered with a kind smile.

I heard a sound, some kind of thudding somewhere in the house.

“What was that?” my dad asked.

I headed back toward the bathroom to check on Artemis. It stood to reason that the loud noise had something to do with the most impulsive supernatural being in the house.

“Artemis?” I knocked on the bathroom door. “Everything okay?”

But there was no answer. I knocked a few more times, then I opened the door, covering my eyes just in case. But when I didn’t hear any shouts for me to get out, I opened them.

And I saw that the window was open. Artemis was gone.

**Episode 640**

XAVIER

I raced after Ava’s wolf, trees whipping past me in a blur. I’d lost sight of her, but I could still pick up her scent.

Her scent, which brought back so many memories. Happy ones, sad ones, angry ones…

I knew this was crazy. Ava was supposed to be dead. I had killed her myself. I had lived with her death for months, had lived with the consequences of my actions. The heartbreak, the anger, the wish that I could somehow reverse it, go back in time and steer us in an entirely different direction. Since she’d died, I’d lost my wolf and gotten it back, all because of Cali. I was a different person.

But the more I ran, the less certain I was that Ava was gone.

I needed to track her, to find her, whether she was a ghost due to the orb or something else. But I also had a responsibility to the pack. Greyson—as much as I hated him—had left me in charge. And that meant something. Running off by myself to chase the ghost of my ex-mate while we were under threat from Silas probably wasn’t the best idea.

This could all be a trap, an attempt to lure me away from the people I’d sworn to protect. And as much as I wanted Greyson’s tenure as our Alpha to be unsuccessful, I didn’t want anyone in the pack getting hurt.

Because deep down, they were still a part of me. Even if I didn’t know what my place within that pack looked like anymore.

I slowed, coming to a stop in a small clearing. I looked around. I wasn’t even sure what I was hoping to see. It wasn’t like Ava was going to pop out from in between two trees and say hello. But whatever I was looking for, it wasn’t here. The woods around me were empty, and Ava’s scent was growing weaker and weaker.

I turned and tore off back toward the pack house, wishing I could delete the last few minutes from my mind and feel like less of a fool. I shifted at the edge of the woods and walked the rest of the way back to the house.

I really wanted to talk to Mrs. Smith and Big Mac. Maybe they’d have some idea of what was going on. I headed to the room I’d been assigned by Joss before she’d left and threw on some clothes.

It was weird, having a pack house that wasn’t *my* house. I was so used to being at the center of the Redwood pack, and now it wasn’t even my house. I shook off those thoughts and decided to search for Mrs. Smith and Big Mac.

I walked through the halls, peeking into rooms and trying to find them. I did my best not to feel like an intruder, even though I technically was. Finally, I spotted Mrs. Smith in one of the bedrooms, through a door that had been left ajar.

“Hey.” I stuck my head in and gave a little wave. My last interaction with Mrs. Smith hadn’t been the friendliest, and I wanted to prove that I came in peace.

“You could knock,” I heard a voice say.

I looked to my right and was surprised to see that Big Mac was there too. And from the sound of her voice, I’d interrupted something.

Shit.

Unfortunately for them, I had important things to discuss.

“Maybe try locking the door next time,” I shot back at her. “Plus, I couldn’t care less what you guys do in here. I just really need to talk to you. About Ava, my old mate.”

I winced. That had come out a bit harsher than I’d intended. My desire not to alienate anyone was off to a rough start.

“What about Ava?” Mrs. Smith asked me, her voice full of concern.

“I saw her wolf in the woods,” I said. “It smelled like her and everything. I chased her for a bit, but I didn’t catch her.”

“And you’re sure it was her?” Big Mac asked, clearly skeptical.

“I mean, I can’t be one hundred percent sure,” I admitted. “My view wasn’t totally clear. But I’m pretty sure it was her. It smelled like her and looked like her. I heard her howl…”

Mrs. Smith nodded, understanding immediately. You didn’t forget those kinds of things about your mate. I was sure that if she somehow caught a glimpse of her late husband, she’d recognize him immediately. Wolf or not.

“So you saw her and ran after her,” Mrs. Smith repeated back to me. “But you lost her trail?”

“I gave up,” I corrected her. “I didn’t want to leave the pack house. I was left in charge and for all I know, it was a trap. I didn’t want to be impulsive.”

“I think that was wise.” Mrs. Smith nodded. “No one should be out wandering the woods alone right now. Not when so much is up in the air.”

“But what do we do about Ava?” I asked, nerves still boiling inside me. “It was her, I can feel it. And it isn’t the first time I’ve seen her.”

Mrs. Smith looked over to Big Mac, her eyebrows raised. There was a silent exchange between the two of them. It was clear they had a shorthand. I felt the slightest prickle of jealousy.

“It’s possible,” Big Mac started, clearly trying to be tactful even though it wasn’t her strong suit, “that Silas may be manipulating you.”

“How?” I asked, bristling at the implication. “I haven’t seen him. No one has.”

“I think there’s a good chance that he could be using the orb,” Big Mac said. “And Demeter. It’s hard to be sure.”

I clenched and unclenched my fists, wishing I had an outlet for my frustrations. I didn’t like the idea of Silas trying to get into my head. And if Silas *was* manipulating me, was he trying that shit on Colton and Greyson as well?

Or was I just the one he thought was the weakest?

“Do you think he’s doing this to other people?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Mrs. Smith said. “But the important thing is to be aware that it’s a possibility. Question everything. Don’t take anything for granted. As you know, the orb’s full powers are unknown. Who knows what kind of tricks it can play on us?”

“You’re right.” I nodded, wishing this were simpler. “Thanks. And sorry for… interrupting.”

Big Mac snorted a laugh and Mrs. Smith just smiled at me as I headed back downstairs. I found myself tearing apart the last week or so. Was it possible I’d fallen prey to more than one mind trick?

How was I supposed to know what was real and what wasn’t?

My mate was a Fae who could blast energy out of her hands. I’d found Big Mac hiding in a mirror. I’d watched Cali have a conversation with a tiny creature in a flower that had cured her mother of a deadly illness. Nothing in my life was normal.

I walked into the kitchen, trying to avoid the living room, where a few pack members were hanging out and watching TV. I needed time alone to think. I wondered how much longer Greyson and Joss would be gone.

Not that I missed Greyson—it was basically the opposite. I just hated being in charge like *this*. A temporary Alpha. It was the worst of both worlds. All of the responsibilities, but none of the respect—none of the actual decision-making power.

I glanced out the window and saw Rishika standing at the edge of the woods by herself. What was her story? I hadn’t had a chance to learn much about her. The same went for all the new recruits (except for Ravi, whose sex life I’d already heard more than enough about). They were basically strangers.

Was it possible any of them were working for Silas? Had he sent them here as sleeper agents? To infiltrate the Redwood pack and give him intel on all of us? Our strengths, our weaknesses, details of all our infighting…

Maybe it would be useful to question all the newcomers. Not only would it be a chance to get to know them, but it could be a way for me to subtly secure their loyalty to the pack. That was the kind of thing an Alpha was meant to do. What I would have done if I were in this position.

I was sure Greyson hadn’t even thought to do it.

I breezed out the back door and approached Rishika, who was still staring into the woods.

“Looking for something?” I called out to her, just in case she hadn’t heard me coming. Sneaking up on a werewolf was rarely a good idea.

“I am.” She looked over her shoulder at me. “I think there’s a lone wolf. Somewhere out there in the woods. I heard her howling.”

My heart stopped.

*Ava.*

“You heard her too?” I asked.

**Episode 641**

GREYSON

“So…” Joss’s eyes narrowed as she looked down at me. “Are you *asking* me not to tell Cali about you trying to kiss me, or are you *telling* me not to tell her?”

“Asking,” I clarified. “I can’t prevent you from doing anything. I thought you’d have realized that by now.”

She smirked at me. Looked like I’d given her the right answer.

“I’m curious.” She tilted her head, looking at me appraisingly. “Are you afraid of how Cali would react if she found out her mate kissed another woman? Are you scared you might break her heart?”

I swallowed, thinking on that.

In weird way, I *would* want Cali to be hurt by this mistake, because I wanted her to still have feelings for me. The idea of her eyes flashing with jealousy at the thought of another woman’s hands on me… It stirred something in me. Would she feel the same fierce protection that I did when Xavier touched her?

But I had no right to expect that from her. At least not now—not when I’d pushed her away.

But when *would* be the right time? It wasn’t like Silas and Xavier were our only obstacles. I had stuff I needed to work through. I had huge trust issues with basically everyone I’d ever met.

Would Cali be able to trust me if she found out I’d kissed Joss? Sure, I’d done it when I was overcome by fever and delirium and thought she was Cali, but would she be able to understand that? Had I broken something?

Joss laughed, and the sound snapped me out of my spiral.

“Seems like it’s complicated,” she noted.

“If anyone is going to tell Cali, I just want it to be me. That’s all.”

Joss nodded. “I get it.”

If Joss wasn't going to tell Cali, then neither would I. There was just no point. What had happened had nothing to do with her, and everything to do with getting bitten by a rabid wolf.

“Don’t worry,” Joss assured me, like she could read my mind. “I’m your Luna. I’ll always have your back. Just don’t ever try to kiss me again. Like, *ever*.”

I laughed.

“I’ll do my best,” I joked. “But I’m glad we’re on the same page. I really want to get back to the pack house ASAP. But we should talk to Mace first, right?”

We found Mace downstairs with Pip.

Mace smirked when he saw me. “He lives.”

“Thanks for the hospitality,” I offered, trying to mend fences. I definitely owed Mace one for letting me recuperate here. “Can we talk strategy?”

“What are you thinking?” Mace asked, clearly wanting me to go first.

“Well, we need to stay in touch and coordinate our movements,” I said. “You share any information you come across on Silas—his plans, his whereabouts, people you think he might be working with—and we’ll do the same. You and I can split the leadership role fifty-fifty.”

I watched Mace bristle at that last point, but I held firm. I wasn’t letting anyone else lead the charge against Silas, especially someone as reactionary as Mace. If we were going to take down Silas, we needed to be able to outthink him.

Plus, I wasn’t going to put someone in charge who’d made it clear that he barely wanted to be involved. I also just really didn’t like the guy. And I knew the feeling was mutual.

This should be one hell of a good time.

At least Pip and Joss seemed to have some mutual respect going. That could only help us. Hopefully, Mace listened to her advice.

“Sounds good,” Mace agreed, with a complete lack of enthusiasm.

But it was still a yes, so I decided to take the win.

“Good.” I nodded. “And thanks again for the room, and the help. Let’s set up a meeting soon, both packs, all members. That way we can all get on the same page.”

He agreed, and we said our goodbyes. As Joss and I walked away, I felt the slightest weight disappear off my shoulders. I’d done something to protect us against Silas. It wasn’t much and there were no guarantees, but it felt better than nothing.

“Do you think Mace thinks he’s being subtle about completely despising you, or what?” Joss quipped, once we were out of earshot.

“It was that obvious?” I asked. “I thought I was the only one who ever picked up on it.”

Joss smirked at me. “In my experience, men are never as subtle as they think they are.”

“Fair enough.” I nodded. “I think Mace mostly just hates Silas, and takes it out on me. But who knows? I’ve never been very popular with… well, anyone.”

“Well, I’m Team Greyson,” Joss assured me. “And for the record, I’ve decided to dislike him even more than he dislikes you.”

“Thanks for the solidarity.” I gave her a half-smile.

“It’s more than just that.” Joss shook her head. “It’s total bullshit for him to only care about himself right now. And it’s not just selfish, it’s bad strategy. He needs us as much as we need him.”

Once more, I found myself really grateful that I’d picked Joss as my Luna. She was a good partner with a head for strategy and pack politics. And maybe we could be friends. Even though I’d never admit it to anyone, it could be good to have some friends.

“Remember to be on the lookout for rabid wolves,” Joss said with a wink, clearly about to shift.

I opened my mouth to reply, but was interrupted when my phone rang. I grabbed it, worried it could be Xavier with bad news about the pack. What if he’d been the wrong person to leave in charge?

But it was Cali.

Shit.

Joss must have seen the look on my face, because she gave me a sympathetic smile.

“I’ll walk ahead and give you some distance,” she offered. “Catch up when you’re done.”

She jogged ahead and I felt myself appreciating her again, for what felt like the millionth time in the last 48 hours.

I looked down at my phone, at the name lighting up on my screen like a beacon. *Cali*. I was going to get to hear her voice.

But then I remembered—I couldn’t let on that I was happy to hear from her. That listening to her talk would probably be the highlight of my day, no matter what she said to me. That I was smiling in spite of myself.

I answered, forcing myself to sound terse. “Yeah?” I grunted.

“Greyson.” She sighed, sounding like a nervous wreck. “I’m sorry to bother you, but Artemis is missing. She escaped through my parents’ bathroom window. We dropped some pretty big news on her, and I think she’s freaking out. I don’t know what to do, but I know it can’t be good for her to be out there by herself.”

The concern in her voice made something in my chest hurt. I wished I could pull her into my arms and soothe her. Help her. But I had to play the role of the analytic Alpha.

“Slow down,” I told her, trying to get her to calm down by sounding calm myself. “What do you mean, she’s missing?”

“Well, it’s a long story,” Cali admitted, and I could practically see her biting her lip as she decided how to word it all. “But, well. We’re sisters.”

“Wait,” I said, stopping her. “You’re *what*?”

“I know!” she cried. “But I don’t have time to explain all that right now. My mom told us, and Artemis went to the bathroom. And she must have taken it harder than we thought, because I heard this sound and when I checked the bathroom, the window was open and she was gone. She ran away.”

Sisters?

I *knew* there’d been something familiar about Artemis. Something that had drawn me to her, made me comfortable with her. Even though she kind of drove me crazy.

But other than being someone who cared about both girls—both *sisters*—I didn’t know what my part was in all this. Obviously, it wasn’t good for a Dark Fae to be running around Minnesota who could cause all kinds of supernatural mischief. I mean, the girl couldn’t even be left alone with a gas station attendant.

“Cali.” I ran a hand through my hair in frustration. “Why did you call me? I mean, I know this is bad, but what do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know,” Cali admitted. “I just… I didn’t know who else to call. You’re one of the only people in this world who knows Artemis. Who cares.”

I closed my eyes. I could picture Cali in front of me, picking nervously at her nails, her cheeks pink and her eyes wide with worry. My heart went out to her. I wanted to be the person who could fix it all for her. Or at least, the person who could hold her while we figured it out together…

“Cali, I’m in Oregon,” I said, reminding both her and myself that I couldn’t help her. “I don’t think there’s anything I can do.”

“That’s it?” Cali asked, anger sparking in her voice. “You know, this has nothing to do with what’s going on between you and me. I didn’t call you because of any of that. I’m worried about Artemis, can’t you see that?”

I swallowed. I knew that what I was about to do would hurt both of us, but it had to be done. I needed to put all my focus on Silas. And that couldn’t happen when a voice in my head was begging me to run to Cali as fast as my legs could take me.

But she wouldn’t be safe until I’d stopped Silas.

“Cali, I hope you find her,” I said. “But you can’t call me anymore. Not for stuff like this.”

And then I hung up.

**Episode 642**

I stared at the phone in my hand, hardly believing what I’d just heard.

*You can’t call me anymore.*

And then he’d hung up on me. Was he really that mad at me for leaving with Xavier? He’d *told* me to go. How could he be so petty at a time like this?

I wanted to hurl my phone across the room, I was so angry. I wanted to call him right back and shout that I had no interest in speaking to him ever again if he was going to be such an asshole.

But he probably wouldn’t take my call.

I wanted to scream.

Returning to the living room, I simmered with an anger that I didn’t want to unleash on anyone. When I saw my mother pacing in front of the couch, she looked at me hopefully.

“Any luck?” she asked.

I shook my head.

She deflated. “This is all my fault. I handled this all wrong. I sprung it on her. On both of you. Maybe if I’d gotten to know her first…”

“You had no way of knowing how Artemis would react,” my dad assured my mom, stroking her back. I saw his eyes dart around the room a bit. I could tell he was still adjusting to it—anxiously anticipating more supernatural bomb drops. But he was still putting my mom first, like always.

“Maybe she just needs a little time,” he continued. “Then she’ll come back.”

“I hope so,” my mother said, wiping her eyes.

I handed her a tissue, wishing I could do more to help. But I didn’t know how to find Artemis. She was a wild bounty hunter. She could be anywhere, doing anything.

“Cali, maybe we could look together.” My mom broke out into a hopeful smile. “Do you have any idea where she might have gone?”

“Not really,” I admitted. “Violet, did she mention anywhere she might want to go?”

“She didn’t, no,” Violet answered, her voice clipped. She seemed angry, and I hoped we hadn’t done anything to upset her. But even if we had, it wasn’t like I had much time or bandwidth to deal with it.

My mom grabbed my hand.

“Let’s go. It’ll be better than just sitting here.”

“I’ll join you,” Violet offered.

“And I’ll stay here,” my dad offered lamely. “In case she comes back.”

I looked at his awkward, pasted-on smile. Did my dad want to take advantage of the alone time to do some processing? Or was he hoping we wouldn’t find his new step-daughter?

“Thanks, Tom.” My mom smiled at him.

We headed outside and took off down the block, looking around at the suburban midwestern neighborhood. It looked… normal.

“Artemis hasn’t burned it all down yet, at least,” I quipped, trying to lighten the mood.

“But it’s really cold,” Violet reminded us. “And she’s not used to the temperature. She could freeze.”

Shit. I wished I’d thought to give her a jacket when she’d come in. A parka to wear while she was visiting. I reminded myself to get her one as soon as possible. She could borrow one of mine until she found one she liked.

That was what sisters did, right? Borrowed each other’s clothes?

I took a deep breath and tried to focus on the task at hand. None of this would matter if we didn’t find her. We called out her name, we checked neighbor’s yards. I even climbed up to check the Robertson’s old tree house. But Artemis was nowhere to be found.

Over an hour later, we were all cold and feeling hopeless.

“Maybe we should get back home,” I said, breaking the gloomy silence. “I can call Jay and Lola and get them to look, too.”

“That’s a good idea,” my mom said flatly. I could tell how disappointed she was. Given that she’d gained and lost a daughter in less than a day, I couldn’t blame her.

“We’ll find her, mom,” I assured her. “I promise.”

When we got home, we found my dad staring out the kitchen window again, lost in thought.

“No luck?” he asked.

My mom shook her head.

I ducked back into the living room to call Lola, wanting desperately to be productive. To solve this. For my mom, for me, for Artemis. She shouldn’t be out there alone.

I called Lola and she picked up almost immediately.

“Hey,” she answered eagerly. “Did you find her?”

“No.” I tried not to let all the hopelessness seep into my voice. “We need help. Can you and Jay come over and help us look?”

“Of course,” Lola said. “We’ll be over in a flash.”

“Thanks,” I said, clenching and unclenching my fists, wishing I could do something with all this nervous energy.

“We’ll find her, Cali. I promise.”

I went back to the kitchen to check on my parents.

“Jay and Lola are on their way,” I told them.

“That’s good.” My mom gave me a watery smile, but I could sense the despair in her voice. This was not what I’d imagined Artemis’s visit would be like. I’d thought that maybe my mom would be excited to see someone from her world. That they’d swap Fae stories and teach me more about my magic.

But not this.

Who could have predicted this?

When Lola and Jay arrived, I hustled them into the back yard. The last thing I needed was for our nosy neighbors to start asking questions.

“What can we do to help?” Jay asked.

“We can track her if we shift,” Lola offered, eager for any opportunity to use her wolf abilities.

I noticed an anxious look flicker across Jay’s face at the mention of shifting, and wondered if there was something going on between them that I didn’t know about.

“It could be helpful,” I admitted. “If you sniff around the yard by the bathroom window, you should be able to pick up her scent.”

“I don’t know if we need to—” Jay started, but Lola cut him off.

“This is the best thing we can do to help,” she insisted.

I bit my lip. I knew shifting came with risks for Lola. Maybe it’d be better if Jay did the tracking. But before I could suggest it, Lola started stripping out of her clothes. And then there was her wolf, bounding over to my parents’ bathroom window.

I just hoped she wouldn’t howl. How would I explain that?

“I guess Lola liked that plan.” Jay sighed, resigned, and started to strip too. “Watch our clothes?”

I nodded, and then suddenly I was watching two werewolves sniffing at the bathroom window sill. Just a normal day in my life.

I went back inside and found my mom full of nervous energy. She couldn’t sit still. I was pretty sure I even saw her chewing her nails—a habit she’d chided me for all throughout elementary school.

“This is my fault,” she murmured to herself. My heart went out to her.

Unlike Mom, I barely moved at all. I just kept checking the time, wondering how much longer this could last. My mom was barely hanging on.

We had been sitting in silence for who knows how long when there was a rap on the window, making both of us jump. I looked and saw Jay gesturing for me to come back outside. He was, of course, naked.

“I’ll get that,” I piped up, and raced outside.

“You couldn’t have put on a shirt first?” I grumbled. “My parents are here.”

“We found her.” Jay retreated into the bushes for modesty’s sake. “She’s at Aerial Ferry Bridge. Lola stayed behind to keep an eye on her. But we should go get her as soon as possible. I really don’t want to leave Lola alone for too long. She’s been acting weird lately…”

“This is great!” I squealed, overjoyed. “Apart from the Lola thing—which we *will* talk about later. Your clothes are on the bench over there, so get dressed. I’m gonna tell my parents.”

I darted inside and my mom looked at me, anxious and hopeful.

“I think Lola and Jay found her,” I told her. “We’re going to check now. I’ll call as soon as I know more.”

“Can I come?” Violet asked.

“Of course,” I answered.

Jay, now fully clothed, motioned for me to meet him at the car. Violet and I raced outside. My heart was hammering. Why would Artemis have gone to the bridge? What had drawn her there?

It was a short drive. We were all tense, Violet most of all. She only spoke once.

“I don’t understand why Artemis would run away,” she said, almost to herself. She sounded so sad and lost… I vowed to try to help her out once Artemis was safe.

When we pulled up to the bridge, I spotted Artemis almost immediately. She was just standing at the railway, looking out over the water. She looked almost peaceful. Violet and I hurried over to her while Jay parked and went to look for Lola.

I stopped a few steps away from Artemis, not wanting to spook her.

“Artemis?” I asked, hoping she wouldn’t bolt.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, surprised and affronted. “Leave me alone.”

I couldn’t believe she was acting like this. We were clearly worried about her. How could she be pissed at us for that?

“I know you’re upset,” I told her, trying to keep my voice calm, “but could we at least talk about this?”

But before she could answer, Violet pushed past me.

“You left your family,” she cried out angrily. “What you did was dangerous and reckless and… and mean!”

Violet gestured violently, her anger getting the best of her. Then I gasped when I saw her hand transform into a paw. She was shifting.

**Episode 643**

AVA

I should have gone back to Nolan ages ago, but I hadn’t been able to resist the lure of racing through the woods. That soaring feeling in my stomach. The freedom that was almost like flight. I could only be that fast when I was a wolf.

I’d planned to be back sooner, but hopefully my brother would understand. Once I was close, I shifted back and walked into the house.

Nolan was waiting for me in the living room. He had a book open in his lap, but he clearly wasn’t reading. He’d been waiting for me.

“How was your run?” he asked, clearly trying to hide how apprehensive he was.

“Exhilarating,” I admitted, grinning at him.

“And?” he pressed.

Ah yes, the answer he was really looking for.

“I saw Xavier,” I answered, giving him a knowing smile.

“But did he see you?” Nolan asked, getting excited.

Judging by the way he’d run after me, panting desperately as I outran him? Yeah, he’d seen me. I’d felt so powerful staying just out of reach, leading him, teasing him. I was still flush with it.

“He followed me for a while,” I told Nolan, knowing he just wanted the facts. “But either I lost him or he gave up.”

“If he’s smart, he stopped,” Nolan mused. “He probably knew it wasn’t safe for him to wander too far from home. But that works. For now, all he has to do is suspect something. You’ve done well. I’m so glad to have you back.”

He broke out into a broad smile, and I found myself wondering for a second: was he glad I was back because he’d missed me, or was he happy to have me back to use as a pawn in his war against Xavier?

“I’m gonna go clean up,” I told him, not wanting to dwell on this question.

“Come down when you’re done,” Nolan said with a nod. “I have some questions for you.”

I trudged up the familiar set of stairs, relishing the normalcy of it. The feeling that I’d done the same thing a million times. After having been a blank slate for a while, it felt so good to remember.

I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. I was gradually getting used to seeing Cali’s face instead of my own. It was like seeing a version of myself. A shadow. Separate from me, but connected to who I was.

I touched my neck. It was smooth; the scar was gone. I ran my fingers over the unmarred flesh. It was nearly perfect. I was still touching it absentmindedly when I stepped under the hot spray of the shower.

Something about the heat must have triggered a memory, because suddenly I felt Xavier. His hands stroking my neck. His lips kissing my stomach…

It had been early on in our relationship. By that point, we each learned what the other liked. It had been easy to please him. There had still been discovery, but I’d known what he wanted.

He was so strong and powerful… I’d relished being able to let go, and to let him use a little of that strength on me. To let him dominate me a bit.

*The second time we were together was hurried, a stolen moment. Not like the first time, when we’d planned out the details. I straddled Xavier’s lap as we made out on someone’s couch. His hands felt so hot against my skin, I thought I was going to explode.*

*Especially now that I knew how good they could make me feel.*

*I’d thought we were just going to kiss, but then his hands found the buttons on my shorts. I gasped at the feeling of his knuckles brushing up against my bare abdomen.*

*He looked at me, waiting for permission. I thought he held his breath. But when I nodded, he tangled his hands in my hair and pulled me to him. He slotted his lips against mine and devoured me.*

*I felt so completely* his*. He pushed my hips back, encouraging me to stand up so I could wiggle my shorts off. I obliged him, even though we were still connected by the lips, unable to stop kissing entirely.*

*I kicked off my shorts, leaving my tank top on. There wasn’t time. Xavier shimmied his jeans down his thighs until they pooled at his ankles. I looked at him for a minute, letting the anticipation build. I’d never wanted anything so badly, and I could see in his eyes that it was the same for him.*

*I planted my hands on his shoulders and placed a knee on either side of his hips. He slid into me like a hot knife cutting through butter. I gasped at the feeling of him inside me.*

*“Fuck,” he whispered into my ear. “Ava, you’re so—”*

*He gasped when I started to roll my hips. I sighed with pleasure. I wanted to moan, to be as loud as he made me want to be. But I knew we couldn’t risk it.*

*“You too,” I told him in a breathy whisper.*

*He grabbed my hips and I found myself hoping his fingerprints would bruise me, so I could carry him wherever I went. I kissed along his neck, noticing that he growled when I nibbled at a particular spot between his throat and his shoulder.*

*He repeated my name over and over again, like a prayer. Like I was something sacred. Like* we *were.*

*One of his hands crept under my shirt, splaying against my spine and pulling me close. Our lips met in a messy kiss as we met each other thrust for thrust. We swallowed each other’s moans, our speed increasing.*

*We weren’t going to last long.*

*As if he sensed this too, Xavier started rolling his thumb over my clit in tight circles that made me dizzy. I clapped a hand over my mouth to muffle the cries of pleasure that were desperate to escape my lips.*

*He looked at me, concerned, but then I nodded, begging him with my eyes to keep going. I pushed down on his shoulder with my free hand, ensuring he could go deeper. He groaned, leaning his forehead against mine as that perfect pressure started to build up inside me.*

*And then the bubble burst and I was limp in his arms as he kissed my neck and found his own release…*

I dropped my shampoo, and the sound of it clattering to the floor brought me back to the present. I blinked back tears, hoping all the wetness on my cheeks was just spray from the shower. I didn’t want to waste a single fucking tear on that asshole. Anger flared up inside me, making me reach for the cold tap. This shower had gotten entirely too hot.

I shook my head and tried to focus. That memory was just proof that Xavier was a shitty person. If we’d shared that kind of intimacy and he’d still been able kill me… He was a monster.

Later, I bounded down the stairs freshly showered and dressed. I was still thinking about Xavier, but I tried to push him aside and focus. This was the best I’d felt since I’d stepped out of the mirror. I was home, I was healthy, and we had a plan.

I just wished I actually looked like myself, instead of this Cali person.

Nolan pushed himself off the couch and threw his arms around me. I welcomed the hug, squeezing him back as tightly as I dared.

“I’m so proud of you, Ava,” he told me, pulling back to take a look at me. “I really can’t believe how well you’re adjusting to… to being back.”

“Back from the dead, you mean,” I said.

“I was trying to be tactful,” Nolan teased, a glint in his eye. “But, yeah. That’s what I meant.”

“I’m starting to feel more at ease in this body,” I told him. “It’s not as good as being a wolf, but I’m adjusting. It’s seeing her face in the mirror instead of mine that’s tough.”

“I can’t imagine,” Nolan offered. “It must be really difficult.”

“It is.” I nodded. “But I’m working on it.”

“How prepared do you think you are to be Cali?” he asked me, switching gears and leading me over to the couch. There were notecards spread out on the coffee table. “Did you study the profile I made for you from her social media?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Is this a pop quiz?”

“Is that a problem?” he retorted.

“Go ahead,” I said, waving him on. “I’m ready.”

“Where were you born?” he asked me, his expression hardening a bit.

“Duluth, Minnesota.”

“Correct.” He nodded. “Where do you go to school?”

“Duluth,” I answered.

“And who was your best friend growing up?”

“My *best* friend…” I pretending to mull it over for half a second. “Lola Spillane. But I was also pretty close to Alex Chevere, so maybe don’t tell him that.”

Every question he asked me, I answered with more and more confidence. I knew Cali inside and out. And considering what a crappy boyfriend Xavier had been, historically, I probably knew her better than he ever had—or ever would.

After a few more questions, Nolan took my hand, looking excited. There was a nervous energy about him too, and I didn’t know what might come next.

“You look like her, you sound like her…” Nolan smiled. “I think you’re ready.”

**Episode 644**

VIOLET

I was shaking. My hand was starting to shift, but I didn’t care. I was seeing red, and I was full to the brim with rage.

But before my transformation could complete, Cali pulled me back.

“Violet! What are you doing?” she asked, eyes wide.

And then I realized that I was standing on a very public bridge, on the verge of turning into a werewolf in front of dozens of humans. Several of whom were already staring at me.

I stuffed my hand into the pocket of my sweatshirt and took some deep breaths. Closing my eyes, I willed my hand back into its human shape.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Artemis glaring at me.

“Don’t ever try that again,” she snarled at me.

I tensed up, not sure if I wanted to fight back or burst into tears. I felt raw, overwhelmed with emotions I didn’t even understand.

“Violet, what’s wrong?” Cali asked, her voice thick with concern.

But I didn’t want to talk. I wanted to shift and get the hell out of here. I wanted to run. I wanted to rid myself of all the horrible feelings twisting inside of me and just be empty of it all for a minute.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I told her through gritted teeth.

“Please,” Cali said. “Just tell me what’s wrong. Why would you threaten Artemis?”

“Because she’s being stupid!” I spat, feeling like a child.

A crease appeared between Cali’s eyebrows, and I knew I’d upset her. Which I hated doing. Cali was super nice. She had been nothing but friendly and sincere to me since I’d met her, and here I was yelling at her for something that wasn’t even her fault.

“She’s upset, just like you are,” Cali told me. “You’re gonna blame her for that?”

“I can and I will,” I responded, clenching my fists.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Artemis said, interrupting us.

“I’d like to know the same thing.” Cali rounded on her sister. “How did you even know to come here?”

“I needed some air.” Artemis crossed her arms over her chest, and I was struck by how normal a sibling fight this was. The angry sibling versus the withholding sibling. It was a classic.

And that made jealousy boil inside me.

“*Air?*” Cali screeched. “You couldn’t get air in my back yard? You had to run off into a world you know almost *nothing* about? A world where you could have hurt someone, or someone could have hurt you, because you don’t know the rules? You *have* to be more careful than this.”

“You don’t understand!” Artemis snapped.

“What’s not to understand?” I piped up, unable to keep my mouth shut. “Cali had the same bomb dropped on her that you did.”

Cali and Artemis whipped around to look at me, and I was struck by their resemblance. I didn’t know how we hadn’t seen it earlier. Apparently, your mind will do a lot to hide a potentially painful truth.

“You can’t just pretend you don’t know why she cares,” I pressed, eyeing Artemis.

“Okay.” Artemis dropped her hands to her sides. “I ran away when I shouldn’t have. I understand.”

But that admission meant less than nothing to me. It didn’t fix a thing.

“No, you don’t!” I yelled. “You don’t understand anything!”

I could feel hot tears spilling down my cheeks, almost freezing on my face in the cold. But I didn’t care. I just tried to ignore them. Everything that was welling up inside me was too much to keep in. I had to let it out.

“You have a sibling,” I sobbed. “A *family*. She’s right here, and you can hold her and talk to her and laugh with her. How could you run away from that? It’s a gift, and you’re fucking it up. You have no idea what you’re messing with.”

I shut my eyes to try to keep the tears from spilling out. I held my breath to keep from sobbing more and making a scene. I was a mess, and I just wanted to be alone.

I felt Cali touch my shoulder gently and let myself lean into her, just a little bit. I couldn’t resist the comfort. I needed it.

I heard her murmur something about ‘losing Lilac’—probably explaining away my outburst to Artemis. But it still didn’t feel like I’d done enough to prove to the Fae girl what a huge mistake she was making.

“Losing Lilac was the most painful experience of my life,” I told Artemis, opening my eyes. “Because I’m alone now. I don’t have my other half. Everyone has someone. You have each other, and I… Who do I have?”

I took a huge, shuddering breath, unable to stop the words from coming. It was a relief to say them. They’d been stuck in my throat for weeks.

“I don’t have a family,” I choked out. “You *know* what that’s like, Artemis, but now you have a chance to have one. And you’re gonna throw it all away? What? Because it’s ‘too much’? Well, you can jump off this bridge for all I care, because you’re spitting in the face of the only thing that matters.”

I broke down, sobbing into Cali’s shoulder. She took me in her arms and held me tight.

“It’s going to be okay, Violet,” she said, rubbing my back in circles.

And her touch was comforting, but it didn’t fix the hole in my heart. It didn’t make me believe that I would ever be anything resembling okay.

My life was ruined.

I’d been foolish enough to think I could build a new family—with Cali, and maybe even with Artemis, who I’d thought I was beginning to understand. But I should have known better.

Artemis approached me tentatively, her eyes full of worry.

“You’re right,” she told me stiffly. I could tell it wasn’t easy for her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. Can you forgive me?”

I sized her up, trying to gauge if she was being sincere or just trying to get me to calm down. Her jaw was set, and she was making unwavering eye contact. But who knew? I’d just met her. There was no real way of knowing.

“How about we go back to the house?” Artemis suggested gently.

“Sounds good,” Cali said, starting to guide us both back to Jay’s car.

“I’m glad you came,” Artemis told us. “It’s fucking freezing out here. Why do people live in this place? Is it a punishment of some kind?”

Cali snorted a laugh, and I couldn’t help but smile a little at that.

“I guess it could be, depending on the person,” Cali said.

I saw Jay and Lola up ahead, walking toward us. They both looked rattled. Lola was clearly pissed about something—she refused to hold Jay’s hand when he reached for hers. I wondered what was going on between the two of them. Things had seemed a little rocky for a while.

When we all got into the car, neither of them said a thing. How could they be mates when they fought this much?

As Cali drove, Artemis looked down at her lap.

“How’s Orla?” she asked. “I didn’t mean to make her upset, but I get that I probably did. I feel really bad about it.”

“She’ll be really happy when we bring you back to the house,” Cali told her. “And when she’s happy, she’ll forgive just about anything. Trust me.”

I guess that was what good parents did. Forgave you, even when you hurt them. Even when it wasn’t easy.

“Why are we stopping?” Artemis asked. “This is not your parents’ house.”

“You’re right,” Cali said, with the bright patience of a kindergarten teacher. “This is an intersection. If you look at those lights there, you’ll see a red one is lit up. That means we can’t go, and that people going in the other direction should drive. They have a green light, which tells them it’s okay to drive. It keeps us from crashing into each other.”

“Why don’t you just… not crash into each other?” Artemis asked, brow furrowed.

“Because we go really fast?” Cali replied, sounding a little unsure. “And we want to give people who are walking a chance to cross the street if they need to, as well.”

I gazed out the window, letting their conversation fade into the background. Then I saw something that made my heart skip a beat.

Out in front of us was a tall, well-built guy, jogging across the street. He looked about my age, with brown hair and full lips. He turned to face me, almost as if he could sense that I was thinking about him.

His amber eyes locked onto mine, and I drew in a sharp breath.

The light changed and Cali moved forward. I strained to look back, wanting to know who the hell that beautiful guy was.

All the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck lifted. I had goosebumps, and it felt like I’d been punched in the stomach, but not in a painful way. More the shock of it.

I’d never felt this way before.

And then it hit me. That guy was my mate.

**Episode 645**

JOSS

Greyson and I emerged from the woods, both sighing in relief. Mercifully, we’d managed the trip back to the pack house without running into any more rabid packs of wolves. One had been more than enough.

We shifted back into human form, blinking in the direct sunlight and taking in the view of the new pack house. Without thinking, I found myself staring at it, scrutinizing it, looking for something out of place. A sign of danger or unease. But everything looked more or less normal. The same as when we’d left.

I sighed again.

“I should talk to Xavier,” Greyson told me. “Make sure everything’s okay.”

“I’ll join you,” I said as we walked up to the house. “Someone needs to make sure you don’t tear each other’s heads off.”

We found Xavier in the kitchen, nursing an afternoon coffee. He didn’t seem overly surprised to see us. Maybe he’d noticed us walking out of the woods, or caught our scents. He just let his eyes flick over us.

“Too bad.” He shook his head. “I was hoping you’d take more of an extended vacation.”

“I wouldn’t describe what we just went through as a vacation,” I replied, sinking into a kitchen chair, exhausted from the trip’s events.

But Xavier just smirked at me. Greyson gave his half-brother a hell of a lot of latitude. He was allowed to mouth off to his Alpha with basically no consequences, and I didn’t like it one bit. If I had it my way, I’d *regularly* make it clear that Greyson was the Alpha and Xavier was not.

I knew they didn’t like each other, and I didn’t need Xavier to shower his brother with affection, but I *did* need him to show his Alpha some respect. At least publicly.

“What did we miss?” Greyson asked, getting down to business.

Xavier shrugged. “Other than me feeling like an underappreciated kindergarten teacher to a bunch of petulant students who are more likely to eat paste than do anything else?” Xavier snarked. “Not much. All’s well.”

Rishika walked into the kitchen and rolled her eyes at Xavier.

“Might want to tell them about that wolf,” she prompted.

“What wolf?” I asked, bristling with concern.

Were there more rabid packs around? Would I end up with a house full of rabies cases, rambling and sweating and trying to kiss me at every turn? The life of a Luna was proving to be much less glamorous than I’d thought it would be.

“This is going to sound crazy,” Xavier said, looking as sincere as I’d ever seen him. “But I think I saw Ava. Her wolf. She was running around in the woods outside the house.”

“Isn’t she dead?” I blurted out, before I could think better of it. I’d heard that Xavier had killed his first mate. Rumors like that had a way of circulating.

“Yeah,” Xavier said coolly. “I wasn’t sure at first, but it looked just like her. And her howl… It was exactly the same. I chased after her, but after a while I slowed down. Something didn’t feel right. I talked to Big Mac and Mrs. Smith afterward, and they said exactly what I was thinking—that this could be a mind game, courtesy of our dear loving father. Something he’s doing with the orb, maybe. It would’ve been stupid to follow where it led.”

Greyson nodded, taking in his brother’s words. “It’s possible,” he acknowledged. “Whoever it was could have been trying to lure you away from the pack. You didn’t go far, right?”

“I came right back,” Xavier snapped.

Then, almost as if he realized he’d just overreacted, he put his hands up, palms out in a gesture of apology. Greyson waved him off, his message clear—*don’t worry about it.* I wondered if I was seeing the beginnings of a truce between the two of them. But maybe that was naïve of me.

Xavier took a deep breath. “Here’s something else,” he said. “If this *is* some kind of mind trick, or if Silas is just using the orb to conjure up some kind of… ghost of Ava, how was I able to smell her?”

“That’s weird,” I agreed. “Aren’t ghosts supposed to be incorporeal?”

Greyson furrowed his brow at me.

“Like, they don’t have a real form,” I explained, rolling my eyes. “You can put your hand through them and stuff.”

“Like in movie shit?” Xavier asked.

“Yeah, that is weird,” Greyson agreed. “I don’t know much about ghosts, to be honest. Or what the orb can do. But everything else aside, we need to get the pack together. Tell them about the truce with Mace, and the plan going forward. Maybe at dinner tonight?”

“Sounds good,” Xavier agreed. A shocking thing to hear.

Just then, Mrs. Smith came into the kitchen. Her eyes lit up when she saw that Greyson and I had returned.

“Glad to see you’ve made it back safe and sound,” she told us, putting her mug in the dishwasher.

Greyson shot me a knowing look, and I knew it was a thank you. As stressful as the trip had been, I was happy we’d done it. It had solidified my partnership with Greyson. We could be Alpha and Luna without worrying about romance or jealousy, and that was a relief.

I headed up to my room once it became clear that the Evers boys weren’t going to tear into each other. I grinned as I laid eyes on my bed, still mussed from my hookup with Ravi. I wondered how he was doing.

I washed up and got dressed, taking a little more time at my closet than I’d done in a while. It felt nice to have someone to dress up for.

When I joined the others in the back yard, I looked past Rishika and Sage and let myself check Ravi out a bit. He was sipping a beer and laughing with a few of the other guys.

Almost like he felt my gaze, his eyes locked onto mine. He gave me a nod of acknowledgement, and I felt a tingling sensation rush over me. Maybe there was some hope there.

Greyson stood up on the porch and called for attention. I stood at his side, dutifully nodding and smiling as he recapped our trip. But honestly, I was only half-listening. I didn’t need to hear it again. I’d been there.

Mostly, I was just trying not to look at Ravi too much. But every time I did look at him, his eyes were on me and his smile was wide. But there was something behind it. Something… hungry?

God, it had been too long.

After Greyson wrapped up, Ravi made a beeline for me. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from grinning at his attention.

“Hey,” he said with a smile. I could tell he was nervous, but it didn’t bother me. It just meant he was eager to please, which was quite all right with me.

I looked up at him through my lashes. “Hey, stranger.”

“I’m glad you’re back,” he told me, and something about the shyness in his voice made me melt. I’d been planning on slow playing this a bit, letting the anticipation build. But I abruptly changed my mind. I wanted him now.

“Just how glad are you?” I asked, reaching for his hand and making a show of slowly interlocking our fingers.

He opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again, but no sound came out. I giggled, loving how easy it was to push his buttons.

I leaned in so I could speak in a sultry whisper. “If you can’t *tell* me, then maybe you’d like to *show* me.”

I tugged on his arm, and he followed eagerly as we slipped away together. We rushed up the stairs, the carpet muffling our heavy footsteps. We went to my room.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Ravi pulled me into a kiss, cupping my face in his hands. I relaxed into his touch, feeling so supported and held.

But as good as he felt against me, I knew I had to be smart here. I planted both my hands on his chest and pushed him away, as gently as I could.

“Hold on,” I said breathlessly.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “I thought that was what you wanted. Did I misread the—”

“You didn’t misread anything,” I said, cutting him off. “I just think we should lay down a few ground rules.”

Ravi paused for a second, like he was buffering or something. I tried not to laugh at how endearing I found it.

“Oh, sure.” He smiled easily. “Fine by me.”

“Great.” I nodded. “First things first: we’re just hooking up. We’re not mates, or anything like that.”

Ravi nodded, and I wondered if he’d agree to anything. Especially based on the way his hands twitched at his sides, like he was just aching to touch me again.

“Secondly, as far as the pack is concerned, let’s keep this under wraps,” I told him. “I’m the Luna and I don’t want to look like I’m playing favorites or anything.”

“Got it.” He took a step toward me, reaching for my waist.

But I took a step back, holding up a finger. One more thing.

“Lastly, we *always* use birth control.” I made sure my voice was firm. “I have no interest in raising your pups. You know how complicated that would be. So let’s just take that off the table right now.”

“I…” Ravi searched for the right words. “I agree to your terms.”

“Splendid.” I smirked at him as I reached down and pulled my top off.

Ravi’s jaw dropped. I took that moment of surprise and used it to pull him against me.

“Now,” I said. “Show me just how glad you are.”

**Episode 646**

“Cali, did you find her?” my mom called from the living room the second I opened the door. The desperation in her voice made my heart hurt.

But before I could answer, she rushed into the entryway and saw us standing there. She clapped a hand over her mouth, muffling a cry of excitement when she saw her two daughters standing in the doorway.

But her excitement was short-lived. She tamped it down, her eyes growing watery as she forced her hands to her sides.

“Sorry to make such a scene,” she said, clearly not wanting to put Artemis off again. “I’m just so happy they found you. I apologize for coming on so strong. I didn’t mean to scare you away.”

“I’m the one who should be sorry,” Artemis admitted, a bit stiffly. “It was wrong of me to run off in the first place. But can I ask—before you knew I was related to you, why did you want me to come here?”

“You’re our third,” I answered, belatedly realizing how that would sound.

Violet shot me a confused look.

“Our third *for the Fae ritual we need to do*,” I clarified, shooting her a look. “To deal with the ghost of a dead guy who isn’t my biggest fan.”

“Oh.” Artemis shrugged. “All right?”

I took a deep breath, trying to think of a way to diffuse some of the awkwardness. Artemis’s trip was supposed to be about getting rid of Tony, and now it had become something entirely different.

Plus, I really wanted to talk to Violet. When we’d been driving back after her big outburst, she’d gotten really quiet and then… oddly happy? It was concerning, to say the least.

“Cali,” Violet asked softly. “Could I speak to you for a minute, in private?”

I looked at my family and friends, all of whom I needed to have tough and awkward conversations with. Whatever Violet had to say to me had to be the most painless, right?

“Sure!” I chirped. “Excuse us.”

I led her upstairs to my room and closed the door. I brushed off the déjà vu I felt from shutting myself in my childhood bedroom to have a secret talk with a friend and sat down on my bed, patting the blankets next to me.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked, giving Violet what I hoped was a bright smile. “If it’s about what happened at the bridge—”

“It’s not,” Violet said. “I just wanted to ask… Do you remember what it was like when you met your mate?”

Well that was not what I’d expected.

“I, uh…” I trailed off, searching for the words.

*Well, the first time? I let Lola convince me to sell my virginity. I thought I was selling it to Colton, but Colton had bought it for Xavier. And he didn’t even* tell *him. So imagine our surprise when…*

“My situation was a little complicated,” I offered lamely.

“Okay.” Violet bit her lip. “But did you know right away?”

“I mean…” I remembered what those early days with Xavier had been like. “I knew Xavier was special. But I’m human—I mean, part human. I didn’t know anything about mates. I wasn’t looking out for the signs. What’s got you so curious about it, anyway?”

Violet picked at her nails, her cheeks turning bright red. “I was just wondering,” she mumbled, avoiding eye contact.

But I could tell she was holding something back. I hoped it was something good. The girl deserved a win.

“But why now?” I pressed as gently as I could. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I saw him today!” Violet blurted out. “I saw my mate.”

Her eyes were sparkling with delight. I didn’t know if I’d ever seen her this happy. After seeing her down for so long, it was a huge shock.

“What?” I yelped. “How is that possible?”

“It was in the car.” Violet was talking so fast her words were running together. “When we stopped at that traffic light, and you were explaining them to Artemis. There was this guy jogging and I looked at him and he looked at me and it just… it felt like nothing I’d ever experienced. I knew right away. I was just flooded with all these feelings. And Cali, he’s so *beautiful*.”

I pursed my lips, forcing myself to keep my mouth closed. Because as great as this could be if it were real… I wasn’t sure it was.

Violet was so young. She wasn’t even eighteen yet. And she was gushing about this guy like he was a schoolyard crush. I looked around at all the One Direction posters in this bedroom and got another surge of déjà vu.

“Are you sure?” I asked, interrupting her. “Is it possible you just saw a really handsome guy? Just because you’re attracted to someone, it doesn’t make them your mate.”

Violet’s face fell. And for a second, I thought it was because she hadn’t considered the possibility that this was just a crush-at-first-sight situation. But then she practically bared her teeth at me in anger.

“He *is* my mate,” she insisted. “I could tell. You’re not a wolf. You wouldn’t understand. You couldn’t. You’re a human and I’m a werewolf. Werewolves have mates, and I found mine. You’re just jealous because you don’t know which guy is yours.”

It felt like she’d slapped me. Before today, I’d never seen Violet like this. What was going on? Why did she want me to be jealous of her?

“I should never have come to you.” Violet shook her head, pissed. “I need to talk to someone who understands. I’m going to Lola.”

And with that, she stormed off, leaving me staring at the life-sized poster of Harry Styles on the inside of my bedroom door.

“What the fuck is up with her?” I asked him.

Obviously, the poster didn’t answer. Thank god. I had enough to deal with without also juggling a psychotic break. But, still. What the hell?

Maybe Violet just needed to chill. I grabbed my phone out of my pocket to send Lola a warning text, but before I could, it rang.

“Perfect timing,” I told Lola. “Violet’s on her way over to give you an earful.”

“Fucking Jay!” she yelled, cutting me off.

Was there something in the water in Duluth that was making all the werewolves go crazy? Everyone was so pissed.

“Take a breath, Lola,” I encouraged, using my soothing voice. “What did Jay do?”

“He ordered me to stop shifting,” she growled. “Like I’m some 1950s housewife he can just boss around. Who the hell does he think he is? Not a feminist, that’s for damn sure!”

Before I could continue my attempts to calm her down, she tore off on a new tangent.

“Plus, *Violet* is the one who totally lost her shit and almost revealed her wolf to half of Duluth today,” she pointed out. “Not me. I know better! I stay hidden in the woods!”

“Lola,” I said forcefully, hoping to get her to slow down. I knew she’d been really excitable and frustrated lately. It was natural, with everything going on.

But maybe Jay had a point. Lola had been so eager to shift lately, and it wasn’t always safe for her. We needed to make sure she didn’t hurt herself.

“What’s your plan here?” I asked, trying to redirect her.

“I’m not sure,” she answered huffily. “But I’ve had it with Jay.”

“Please don’t do anything drastic,” I urged her.

“You mean like *shift?*” she asked, her tone bitter. “You want to order me around, too?”

“Of course not—”

But before I could finish my sentence, the call ended. Lola had hung up on me.

I stared down at my phone. Two hang-ups in one day. First Greyson and now Lola. Was the world conspiring against me?

Artemis came into my room without knocking. Rather than bristle, I tried to remind myself that this was us playing catchup on years of sisterly annoyance.

“You won’t believe what just happened,” I told her. “Violet and Lola are both freaking out.”

“Cali,” Artemis said. “Just because we’re sisters doesn’t mean we have to be best friends, okay?”

I gaped at her for a second, shocked by her harsh words.

“I…” I felt my cheeks turning pink. “I thought we were friends.”

Things had been getting so much warmer between us—at least until we’d found out we were related. Still, I’d thought we’d come a really long way.

“Well, you thought wrong.” Artemis looked down her nose at me. “Don’t forget I tried to sell you to the Kollector.”

“Trust me, I won’t,” I answered through gritted teeth. “I just… I thought we’d moved past it?”

“All this shit you’re throwing at me…” Artemis’s hands balled up into fists. “Your friends, your father, your mother… None of this is my problem.”

“But she’s your mother too,” I replied, feeling like I was going crazy.

“That’s what *she* says,” Artemis shot back. “Did it ever occur to you that she might be out of her mind? ‘Recognizing’a baby you haven’t seen in twenty-three years sounds like senility to me.”

I felt tears stinging my eyes.

“You don’t mean that,” I breathed, my voice coming out choked. “Why are you saying such horrible things?”

Artemis’s expression hardened. “Because I don’t belong here, and we both know it. I’m going back to the Fae world.”

**Episode 647**

Artemis’s words rang in my ears. I stared up at her, hurt and worried and confused. But mostly scared.

It would break my mother if Artemis went back to the Fae world. I knew it in my bones. She’d nearly fallen apart when Artemis had run away for a few *hours.* How would she handle her leaving forever?

Actually, I knew exactly how she’d handle it—she’d blame herself, she’d be inconsolable, and it would push her that much further away from my dad. And he’d feel that much more out of sync with her. I had to convince Artemis that this was the wrong move.

But how?

“Please, Artemis, let’s talk about this,” I pleaded. “Doing this to Mom—”

Artemis flinched, clearly uncomfortable with that word.

“To *Orla*,” I corrected, before continuing. “Even if you’re right, even if she’s wrong about you being her daughter… Why would you hurt her like this? Why would you be so cruel? She and my dad have been nothing but kind to you since you got here. I don’t understand.”

I couldn’t believe I’d thought we were becoming friends when it was this easy for her to turn her back on me. I stared up at her, holding my breath to keep from letting out a shaky sob. I didn’t want to cry in front of her, but the fear and the stress from an admittedly emotional day were threatening to turn me into a blubbering mess.

“I’m sorry,” Artemis told me, her voice ragged. “But you have to understand how all of this—leaving the Fae world to come to the human world, learning I have a mother when I’ve gone my whole life thinking she died giving birth to me, finding out you’re my sister… It’s too much. I don’t know how to handle it, or where to put it.”

I nodded. To be honest, I didn’t feel all that different from her. I just had roots here, and she didn’t. I knew I had no idea what her life was like, back in the Fae world. It didn’t seem like it had been a happy one. I had to keep that in mind if I was going to convince her to stay.

“You’re right,” I replied. “It’s a lot. But is that a reason to reject it all? I’ve had a lot of stuff happen to me in the past few months, and a lot of it has been overwhelming. But I haven’t run away. I’ve pushed past the weirdness. When I first met you, I was scared and pissed off, but I was also impressed by your strength and your confidence. You’re intimidating as fuck.”

Artemis snorted softly.

“Where’s that Artemis?” I asked gently. “Because I feel like she would be brave enough to stick around. So why don’t you see if you can face your fears instead of running away from them? Just to find out what it’s like.”

Artemis sniffed. For a second, I wondered if I’d given a speech so good it was going to bring this stoic Fae warrior to tears. But instead, she just nodded.

“Maybe I could see myself giving it a chance,” she said. “But no promises.”

I leapt to my feet, arms open to embrace her. But Artemis automatically stepped out of reach.

“Small steps, okay?” she said.

“Fair enough,” I conceded, returning my hands to my sides.

“I’m gonna go wash up, okay?” she told me. “I need to wash all these feelings off me.”

I pointed her toward my bathroom and flopped down onto my bed once she was gone. Well, that was one out of three problems handled. Which was better than nothing.

I sighed.

I realized I should probably text the pack to let them know what was going on. They’d stuck their necks out for me and I really appreciated it. I opened my phone and started tapping out a text to Greyson.

But then I remembered.

He’d told me to stay away.

And Xavier and I weren’t exactly in the best place, so it probably wouldn’t be a good idea to reach out to him either.

I shoved my face into my pillow and groaned with frustration. Under normal circumstances, I’d have been more than happy to be the bigger person and talk to them. But I knew that talking to Xavier or Greyson would be like pulling teeth. My own teeth. With my dad’s pliers and no anesthetic.

I decided to send Mrs. Smith a check-in text. She replied right away, and I sighed with relief. It was nice to know that one member of the Redwood pack was reliable.

*Things mostly suck in Minnesota*, I admitted via text.

My phone dinged with Mrs. Smith’s response. *Is your mother okay?*

*She is, thanks*, I replied. *But it’s complicated. I’m having problems with Violet and Lola. There’s a chance I might have to come back to Oregon sooner than I thought.*

*I’m sorry to hear that*, Mrs. Smith texted back. *But keep me posted. I’ll be glad to see you when I can.*

When Artemis had finished in the bathroom, I walked her downstairs. My mom and dad were sitting at the kitchen table, looking braced for serious news. But I couldn’t tell if they were prepared to receive it or give it.

“I know you all probably want answers,” my mom told the two of us. “So I’d like to tell you all about my first marriage. My husband’s name was Kadmos.”

“*What*?” Artemis asked, her voice betraying how eager she was for information.

“I’ll explain it all,” my mom promised. “Just sit down. Please.”

We sat, and I considered giving Artemis’s hand a reassuring squeeze. But I thought better of it and clasped my hands in my lap instead.

“I was the only daughter in a very influential Light Fae noble family,” my mother explained. “When the war broke out between the Light Fae and the Dark Fae—a war that’s still going on now, Tom—my grandfather believed that the only way to resolve the conflict was a union between two bitter enemies. The Light and the Dark. It was decided that I would be married to the son of an equally powerful Dark Fae family.”

She took a deep breath, as if this part of it was particularly hard for her.

“I didn’t want any part of it,” she admitted. “I was desperate to marry for love.”

She met my father’s eyes, tears glistening in her own.

“So I schemed to make this would-be suitor hate me.” She huffed out a little humorless laugh. “I was ready to be awful—rude, poorly mannered, I dressed terribly to meet him. But to my surprise, he was incredibly kind in return. More than that, he was witty and charming and strikingly handsome. He swept me off my feet the moment I saw him. And it seemed that I had the same effect on him.”

She gave us all a watery smile, and for a second, I saw what she must have looked like at my age. It made me incredibly sad.

“So instead of beginning our marriage kicking and screaming, we were married as two eager lovers, bound to each other for life. And when I became pregnant with our first child, I was so thrilled. But then Kadmos went off to fight in the war.”

A tear slid down my mother’s cheek, and she wiped it away as quickly as she could. Almost like she was embarrassed.

“He died before I gave birth,” she practically whispered, clearing her throat before she continued. “And then, as if my grief wasn’t deep enough, our daughter was stillborn.”

She took a deep, shuddering breath. My father took her hand.

“I was so devastated,” she told us. “The war was still raging, and the life I’d planned was over. I didn’t want anything to do with the Fae world any more. It had brought me nothing but pain and misery and loss. Everything there reminded me of wounds that were still healing. So I ran away and came here, to the human world I’d always heard stories about as a child, and I’d seen some humans come and go. I wanted a fresh start, and I got it. I left without knowing I’d left a daughter behind.”

I looked over at Artemis. Her eyes were wide, her jaw slack. I was sure that if I looked in a mirror, we’d look nearly identical, both speechless from our mother’s story.

“I have no idea why they lied to me,” Mom said. More tears were coming now. “Why they *took* you from me. I can only think it had something to do with that war.”

My father was wiping away his own tears at this point. I could see how much it hurt him to see her like this. I realized abruptly that my mother had been hiding her entire identity from us—hiding all this pain, just because she didn’t want it to hurt us too.

It had been an act of tremendous love, for her to carry this alone.

My dad took my mom’s hand again. He leaned in close to her, pressing their foreheads together. And for the first time in a while, I really thought of my parents as a couple—a married couple, who loved each other. Who fought and joked, and who had built a home together.

“Maybe I don’t have the right to ask you this,” Dad said, right to Mom, like there was no one else in the room. “But if Kadmos hadn’t died, would you ever have come to the human world?”

**Episode 648**

XAVIER

It was first thing in the morning, a time when I was never at my friendliest. So I was especially unprepared when Greyson approached me, looking like he had something to get off his chest. Good morning to me.

“Here to confess your evil plan?” I asked, knowing it was snarky but not exactly giving a shit.

“We need to deal with Cali,” he replied, ignoring my jab.

I barked out a laugh, thrown. “*Deal with Cali*,” I repeated. As if it were that simple—something we could sort out with a quick chat.

“You want to talk about Cali now?” I asked, shaking my head. “In the middle of all of this? You don’t think we have enough on our plate?”

This had to be some kind of trick.

“I think it’s important that we don’t let Cali interfere with what we’re doing,” Greyson said.

“What do you have in mind?” I asked, wary. “Arm wrestle? Flip a coin? Split her down the middle so we can each have half? If so, I think you’re missing the point of that whole story.”

“Stop fucking around,” Greyson snapped, like I was the absurd one. “I asked Mrs. Smith and Big Mac to talk with us. They might have some answers about all this shit. I think we can both agree that it’s far from a standard situation.”

“Fine,” I said through gritted teeth. I wondered what the hell Greyson was up to. He didn’t play fair, ever, so coming to me like he was a great negotiator for peace gave me pause.

Even if I tried, I didn’t think I’d ever be able to take anything Greyson said at face value. Even if he was a saint for a decade, I’d probably still doubt him. Some wounds went too deep to ever fully heal.

We went to Mrs. Smith’s room and found her and Big Mac lounging on a loveseat in the corner. Greyson shut the door behind him.

We sat down in two armchairs, opposite the women.

“What’s this all about?” Big Mac asked, almost as annoyed as I was. “I really don’t have time for your squabbles.”

“*Due destini*,” Greyson answered.

I glanced over at him. So we were getting down to brass tacks.

“We all know the story,” Greyson continued. “It’s always been explained to us as a myth, but… Xavier and I have found ourselves in a difficult situation.”

“They know about Cali, Greyson,” I interjected, annoyed that he felt the need to set the scene. Big Mac and Mrs. Smith had agreed to help us, not attend his fucking Ted Talk.

“Like I said,” Greyson said, shooting me a look, “we’ve all heard the fairy tale. But is there any truth to it?”

Big Mac just scoffed, crossing her arms. “Who knows? Why would we be able to answer that for you? We’re not experts in the area.”

“The legends or myths or whatever you want to call them… they go back a long time,” Mrs. Smith offered. “That can’t mean *nothing*.”

“But it doesn’t really matter, does it?” I asked, annoyed. “Truth or fiction, it’s the same problem. We’re both attracted to the same woman.”

“But it *does* matter,” Greyson snapped at me. “Being mates is so much more than being attracted to someone.”

“I don’t need you to lecture me about mates.” I leaned over to get in his face. “But let’s make one thing clear—Cali is *my* mate.”

Greyson bared his teeth in an angry grimace. I watched his hands ball up into fists. The tension between us built, and I wondered if it would finally boil over.

“Calm down,” Mrs. Smith ordered us, leaping to her feet. “Another testosterone-fueled pissing contest isn’t going to help anyone. Greyson, why are you even bringing this up right now? It’s hardly a productive topic of conversation.”

“Because we’re about to go to war with Silas,” Greyson replied, taking a deep breath to calm himself. “And when we do, we can’t let our feelings for Cali cause… exactly what they’re causing right now. A divide.”

I could tell Greyson was trying to play the bigger man, but I wasn’t buying it. He always had an angle of some kind.

“So what do we do?” I asked. “Pinky swear that we’ll stop fighting over her until we kill our dear old dad?”

“I propose that we both back away from Cali,” Greyson told me through gritted teeth. “Let her have her space. Let her decide what *she* wants while we both fight for the safety and survival of our pack—something we both want.”

I eyed him. It sounded like a good plan. Assuming Greyson was the dutiful Alpha he claimed to be, it *was* what we both wanted. And Silas had to be our number one priority if we were going to have any chance of beating him.

But could I trust him? Was this another setup? A bait and switch, like the Lupo Finale?

“We need to work together to defeat Silas,” I agreed. “If we don’t, neither of us will live to fight over Cali for much longer. For now, let’s keep our distance and let her choose what she wants. But once that piece of shit is dead, all bets are off.”

“Agreed.” Greyson stuck out his hand to shake.

We shook on it, both of us squeezing harder than was strictly necessary. But it was a deal, nonetheless.

“Now if you’ll excuse me…” I stood up and left, not interested in any brotherly ribbing about who Cali would ultimately choose. I wanted to run.

I wondered if Greyson understood what he’d just agreed to. I knew that Cali was my mate. I was more than certain. There was no way she wouldn’t choose me. I just had to stick to my plan, and let Cali come to me.

We’d already started rekindling things a little bit. We’d hooked up twice in Minnesota—once in that supply closet in the hospital, and again at her parents’ house. I smiled at the thought.

Greyson had had his chance with Cali in the Fae world. And despite what I was sure had been his best efforts, Cali hadn’t slept with him. She’d told me as much. So clearly, any attraction between them was resistible.

I just had to stick to the plan.

Which in my defense, *sounded* easy. But I knew better. I knew from experience that staying away from Cali was going to eat away at me. The pain I felt when I let myself think about her… it could affect me in plenty of detrimental ways. It was the kind of all-consuming need that could drive a person crazy.

Whatever Silas was planning on throwing at us, could it really be worse than the agony of finding out Cali had gone away to the Fae world with Greyson? Finding out that she’d disclosed her identity to him rather than me? Knowing that they’d kissed? Knowing that she’d slept in his arms? Knowing that part of her… cared about him?

I’d left the house at this point and was now on the porch, looking out at the woods. I wondered if I’d be able to pick up Ava’s scent if I went in. Had I been seeing things before, or was she really out there somewhere? Did Silas actually have the power to bring people back from the dead? And if so… was I going to have to face Ava?

Unable to stand still any longer, I took off into the woods. I shifted once I passed the trees and ran as fast as I could. I just wanted to clear my head. To see if I could sense anything out of the ordinary.

It felt good, being in my wolf form. Things often seemed simpler when I was on four legs. My problems felt further away.

After a few miles, I slowed down. I hadn’t been able to pick up Ava’s scent. As of now, nothing seemed out of place. I could almost pretend I’d imagined her.

Part of me wished I had. Hallucinations would’ve been the easier option.

I turned around and headed back to the house. I wished I had more of an excuse to stay out, but I’d already been on my own for too long. It wasn’t safe. I shifted as I reached the edge of the trees then took a deep breath and stretched out, trying to enjoy the feel of my human body. To hang on to the freedom I’d felt as a wolf.

Just as I walked out of the woods, I saw a car pulling up to the pack house. I bristled, ready for a fight. Ready to shift back and howl to alert everyone we had an intruder.

But then the door open and out stepped… Cali.

I felt the air leave my lungs. For a second, it felt like I’d been sucker punched. I wasn’t prepared in any way to see her.

I froze, only one thought in my mind.

Cali was back.

**Episode 649**

“If Kadmos hadn’t died, would you have ever come to the human world?” Dad asked Mom, sniffling. It was devastating to see him like this.

Of course, my mother had gone through hell and back, losing a husband and a child. But then she’d come to this world, the human world, and found Dad. And me. She’d found happiness. Surely Mom would have come to the human world anyway, no matter what…

Right?

“If Kadmos hadn’t died, if I hadn’t lost my child,” Mom whispered, wiping a tear from her eye, “I don’t think I would have come to the human world.”

Her answer made Dad’s devastated expression turn into one of anguish. I swallowed roughly, feeling gut-punched. How could I blame him? I wasn’t sure how I felt about Mom’s admission either.

I glanced at Artemis.

*Is she the daughter my mom should have been with all along?* I thought, then instantly regretted it. I refused to entertain those kinds of musings. They wouldn’t do me any good. Also, all the fucking identity crises needed to chill for a bit. It wasn’t enough that I was the mate of two werewolves, as well as part Fae—now I was no longer an only child! After, like, almost twenty years of reigning supreme in this household and enjoying my mother’s undivided attention, I had an *older* *sister*.

I didn’t know much about sibling dynamics, but I was pretty sure there was always some sort of mythos surrounding oldest siblings. Like, they inherited the kingdom in every story ever, were first in line for the throne.

I narrowed my eyes at Artemis.

“I’m sorry, Tom,” Mom went on, interrupting my totally normal musings. “But if tragedy hadn’t struck, I don’t think I would’ve risked coming to the human world. I wouldn’t have had a reason.”

“I understand,” Dad mumbled, looking down. Defeated. My heart ached for him. For everyone in the room. Apart from Artemis? Nope, for Artemis too. She’d grown up without a family. I glanced at her, and she had an unreadable look on her face. And then Dad kept talking. “I never used to believe in fate, you know…”

Oh god. Dad was going to make a speech. I could feel it. This was going to be painful.

“I never used to believe in fate, but meeting you all those years ago felt preordained. It was like I was struck by lightning, love at first sight and all that.” Dad held Mom’s hand for a moment, gazing deep into her eyes. “But now, knowing all this—maybe it was just luck. It makes more sense that way.” Dad’s voice lowered. “How else would a guy like me end up married to an amazing woman like you?”

Jesus fucking Christ, I’d thought this would be painful, but did Dad REALLY have to hit me right in the gut with this?

“Dad, no,” I said instantly, “that’s not true!”

“Of course it’s not true,” Mom chimed in, thankfully. It would’ve been so awkward if she’d agreed with him. “If anyone’s lucky, that’s me, Tom.” She moved closer, squeezing both his hands in hers. “I’m married to a man I love and respect who does the same for me, and we have Cali to show for it. You’ve *always* been an incredible husband. I can’t imagine my life without you.”

Dad stared at Mom. God, this was the saddest love story of all time. I didn’t care about Romeo and Juliet, this was slamming me right in the feels! In a bad way! Dammit, Kadmos! None of this was his fault, the dude had died because of a war, but it wasn’t my dad’s fault either. Or my mom’s. So who was to blame here?

Artemis—my older sister who I would *maybe* share my room with, if I was in a good mood—cleared her throat. “Uh, perhaps I should excuse myself now. All this warm and fuzzy family stuff feels very strange to me.”

I recalled for a second time in the last few minutes that Artemis had been raised in an orphanage. I subsequently felt pretty horrible about my earlier thoughts regarding kingdom sharing. Poor kid—I’d share anything she wanted with her. “No, stay,” I told her. “Sit next to me.”

Artemis did. I felt the sudden urge to hug her, but she didn’t seem the touchy-feely type, so I refrained.

“Tom,” Mom said, squeezing Dad’s shoulder. “You know how much I love you. Right?”

Dad kissed Mom on the cheek and stood up. “I’m going out for a walk. I need some fresh air.”

Dad walked away. I felt like running after him, telling him that everything was going to be okay, but I suspected that it wouldn’t help. He needed time to think, that much was obvious.

“Is Dad going to be okay?” I asked Mom quietly. “I think we broke him.”

“He’ll be fine,” she reassured me. “He just needs a little space.”

“But how do we know if—”

“Sorry, but I can’t keep listening to this,” Artemis said, cutting me off. She looked between us. Her voice wasn’t loud, but it sounded coarse. Like she was fighting to keep her shit together. “I’ve spent the past fifteen minutes hearing you guys ramble about how much you love each other, so I’m a little confused here. Why did I have to fend for myself growing up? In an orphanage, no less? It’s not exactly fair, is it?”

That was a very good question—one that I definitely did not have the answer to. I turned to Mom, silently urging her to do something, but she was already on it.

“I know how difficult this must be for you,” Mom said, staring at Artemis with a fond, almost longing expression, “but I don’t have the complete answers to your questions. It’s hard to say what happened and how you ended up being taken from me. It’s hard to make sense of the past when you don’t have all the pieces.”

“But somebody *stole* Artemis.” I looked between the two women. “Is it possible Grandma Hera knows more than she admitted to?”

“I’m not sure, but I doubt that,” Mom said. “Hera was as devastated as I was when we lost the baby. If she knew her granddaughter was still alive…” Mom trailed off. She seemed choked up with emotion. “I know it’s going to take time for all four of us to feel like we belong as one family, but I hope…” She stared at Artemis. “I hope you will be willing to give it a try, Artemis.”

“We’ll see what happens next,” Artemis said. She seemed withdrawn, like she still hadn’t found her footing after all these revelations.

I wondered if working together to capture Tony’s ghost would bring us closer together, or drive us apart. The thought made me change gears.

“Mom,” I said, “I hate to change the topic, but we kind of need to because there’s a lot of other stuff going on right now.”

Mom paused. “You mean…”

“Tony’s ghost,” I said. “With Artemis here, we have three Fae. With our combined powers, isn’t it possible for us to stop him?”

Artemis looked intrigued now. This was familiar territory for her—unlike all the weird family stuff.

“I’ve done a lot of things before, but I’ve never captured a ghost,” she said, the corners of her mouth turned down. It was hard to know how she was feeling. “At least not that I was aware of.”

“It’s not that hard,” Mom told us casually, heading toward the cabinet. She removed a vase from inside and placed it on the living room floor. “All we have to do is hold hands while we stand around this vessel and try to summon the ghost.”

I frowned. “Is there something special about this vase?”

“I got it at Ikea, but it’s as good a container as any,” Mom said.

I wondered what kind of money Ikea would give us if they realized the ways we could promote their products in the Fae world.

*No, Cali! Stop thinking random useless things right now!* I thought, scolding myself.

Mom took both Artemis and me by the hand, and we formed a ring around the vase.

“Ready?” Mom asked us.

“For what?” I asked.

Artemis shushed me. She seemed to be taking her role as the bossy older sibling seriously already, which I did NOT appreciate.

Mom closed her eyes and started chanting something in Latin. Or Ancient Greek. Or both. Either way, I didn’t understand anything other than the word ‘Tony’.

The moment she said his name, the air around us stirred. The temperature plummeted and a cloud-like mist formed in the center of our circle, right over the vase. I gaped at it, then gasped when the mist transformed into Tony. His expression changed from bewilderment to anger.

“I command you.” Mom’s voice was loud and eerie. Thunderous. “I command you to enter the vessel!”

A flash of light and rumble of thunder followed her words.

I watched, wide-eyed and shaken, as Tony was sucked into the vessel. It looked like a vacuum sucking up dust.

“That was insane!” I choked out, just as Mom broke the circle and ran to put a stopper in the vase.

The second she did, the room returned to normal. Apart from my pulse, which was hammering so hard that I could actually hear it.

“That was…” I stared at Mom, bewildered. “That was it?”

“Yep,” Mom said casually. She picked up the vase.

“That was a lot easier than capturing a troll,” Artemis noted, looking surprised and pleased herself. Mom gave Artemis a look as she put the container on the table, and I followed to examine it.

“I wonder if he can hear us in there,” I said. Before I could ask another question, though, the vase started to vibrate…

Before breaking into a million pieces.

**Episode 650**

AVA

I froze for a moment.

Xavier, a man who used to feel like he was mine, was walking toward me, pinning me with his gorgeous blue eyes. The closer he got, the more I was hit by memories. Memories of being with him, kissing him, touching him, caressing his body all over… But those memories belonged to me, to Ava, and I had to remember that to Xavier I was Cali.

I looked like Cali.

I needed to be Cali for my brother’s plan to work.

In my mind, I quickly ran through the questions and answers that Nolan had made me memorize. I was all set, and yet there was already a problem. Xavier seemed surprised to see me.

Had I already blown my cover? Why would Xavier be surprised to see his mate?

I needed to think quick.

“I wasn’t expecting this,” he said, closing the distance between us. “I didn’t think you would—”

I cut him off with a tight hug, grabbing his arm and pulling him in. It worked—he was distracted, and his line of questioning stopped all together. As he wrapped his arms around me, I felt a jolt down my spine. The feel of him was both familiar and strange, filling me with a longing that felt like ache and regret and desire all at once. He smelled amazing. I breathed him in, fighting to control myself as he squeezed me against him once more.

Doubt entered my mind.

Maybe this was a big mistake?

Even if I played my part perfectly, Xavier would know that I wasn’t Cali. How could he not? What kind of man didn’t recognize his mate? What kind of werewolf?

*Be Cali. Be Cali. Be Cali.*

I had the words in my head on repeat. But I didn’t want to be Cali.

I wanted to be myself.

Xavier had once been in love with *me*. With me, Ava.

Before killing me, he had loved me.

Maybe he still was in love with me, despite everything?

It was pretty messed up, seeing as this guy had literally murdered me, but the thought of Xavier with anyone else drove me up the wall with jealousy. The feeling was acidic as it bloomed inside me, but then Xavier faced me once more. His eyes were searching, almost cautious but still eager. “What’s going on?” he asked. “Did something happen in Minnesota? Is your mom okay?”

I swallowed roughly, entirely unsure about what the hell was going on. I offered him a nod and leaned forward, hiding my face in the crook of his neck. He caressed the back of my head, and then, thankfully, he filled in the blanks himself. “Your mom is okay health-wise, right? Otherwise you wouldn’t be back so soon.”

I had to speak.

I needed to, otherwise this would get weird—it already had. But what if my voice didn’t fool Xavier? As well as Nolan had prepped me, it was impossible for him to have known what Cali’s voice sounded like.

I should’ve thought of this sooner, because I couldn’t stay silent forever.

It was now or never.

The only words I could think to say were: “I missed you.”

At least that was true. Despite the baggage and werewolf politics between us, I—Ava —had missed Xavier. He watched me for a brief moment, and for a second I was certain that I’d just blown my cover. But then Xavier’s frown turned into a smile, and the relief I felt was outstanding. This could work. This was really working, because even my voice didn’t sound like my own.

It sounded like Cali’s.

“I missed you too,” he said, picking up my hand from his chest and planting a kiss across my fingertips. How tender. Was he always like this?

I couldn’t remember. Not exactly.

I just knew that this felt really good.

I just knew that even though I was furious at him for hurting me, for *killing me*, touching him again was amazing. The contradicting emotions were confusing, all jumbled up inside me.

“But what about Greyson?” Xavier demanded, and now his smile was gone. As if he’d just been reminded of a very bad thing.

I paused. “Greyson?”

Why was Xavier asking me—Cali—about his own brother? What connection was there between Cali and Greyson?

“Greyson, Cali,” Xavier said slowly. There was a ‘duh’ in his tone.

I decided to play it safe and vague. I shrugged. “Like I said, I missed you.”

His eyebrows arched in surprise, but he also seemed pleased. I decided to focus on that second part and consider the meeting a success. He hadn’t thrown me out or anything, after all.

“What happened to the others, though?” Xavier asked. “Violet? That Fae girl, Artemis? Jay and Lola?”

He fired the questions at me one after the other, and I was pretty sure that this wasn’t like him. I didn’t remember him being so chatty, or attentive, or curious. The change wasn’t a bad thing, it was just pretty inconvenient at the moment.

I fought to focus on his questions, on the people he’d mentioned. I knew that Lola was Cali's best friend, and I vaguely remembered Jay, Lola’s mate. But Artemis? Violet? I had no idea. This girl had way too many friends.

“I think the most important thing right now is that I’m back,” I said carefully. “Don’t you?”

Xavier squeezed my shoulders, nodding. “Mrs. Smith did say that you might come back early by yourself… But I didn’t believe her.”

I offered him a small smile. I hoped it was convincing. “But here I am.”

Xavier looked pleased once more, like he wanted Cali to be here so badly that he was willing to believe whatever bullshit came out of my—her—mouth. It was fascinating. And infuriating.

And it really aided Nolan’s plans.

I needed a break now, though. Just to recuperate.

“Well…” I feigned a yawn, looking around. “I’m pretty tired. The trip was pretty long. Maybe we can talk more later? I think I want to rest for a little bit.”

“Of course,” Xavier said, nodding. He really was eager. I wondered how Cali spoke normally. Nolan had said that she was a rambler, a chatterbox, but it looked like Xavier hadn’t even noticed any differences. He was too excited to see me, to see Cali, that it looked like the only thing that mattered to him was us touching.

Holding my hand, he picked up my bag like a gentleman, and then he led me toward the house. “What do you think about the new pack house?” he asked.

“It’s nice,” I said. “Bigger than I thought.”

Xavier shot me a sideways glance. He really was gorgeous. *Damn*. “You ask me, it’s way too fucking much,” he said. “It’s not like the Redwoods are royals.”

I snorted. “I’m not so sure about that.”

He smirked. “I prefer my house. Can’t wait until I can go back.”

“I agree,” I said.

The look he shot me was so hopeful. “You do?”

“Of course,” I said as Xavier led me inside the house.

The way he smiled at me made my whole body clench.

“Cali!” someone called cheerfully. I turned to see a young woman staring at me. “So glad to see you’re back already! How’s everything back home?”

Once again, I was hit by the feeling that I’d made a grave mistake in coming here. I had no idea who this woman was.

“They’re, um, fine,” I supplied, looking to Xavier.

“Cali’s a bit exhausted now, Rishika,” Xavier said, saving me from myself again.

*Rishika.* I made sure to file her name and face in my mind. I wished that Nolan had mentioned her while prepping me. I also wished that we’d taken more time to research Cali and the Redwood pack, because it seemed like there had been a lot of changes since Nolan had last interacted with them.

Rishika gave me a quick hug and I told her we’d talk later, while vaguely dreading talking to her later. What the hell was I supposed to say to someone I didn’t know anything about? I would obviously need to improvise. That seemed to be working for me so far, at least. Xavier led me upstairs, still holding my bag like a doting boyfriend.

I really had no memory of him having been so attentive before.

But then again, I didn’t remember a lot of things.

Jealousy and anger returned, mixed with grief over what we’d lost. The contradicting sensations bubbled up within me as we finished climbing up the massive staircase. Xavier then headed down the hallway and stopped in front of a room. He opened the door and let me enter first, watching me the whole time like he couldn’t get enough.

The weight of his gaze was heady.

I looked around the bedroom. It was roomy, bright. This would be perfect. Would definitely give me the time to think clearly.

“So?” Xavier said. “Cat got your tongue? You’re not usually so quiet.”

I blinked up at him, fighting to hide my alarm. “Uh…”

“The room,” Xavier said, snorting. “What do you think?”

“It’s very nice,” I managed. “Thank you.”

Keeping his blue eyes fixed on me, Xavier plopped down onto the large bed, leaning back into it. “Glad you approve. It’s my room.”

**Episode 651**

VIOLET

The day was cold but nice, sun shining. I headed toward Lola’s house, still mulling over what had happened with Artemis and Cali. Didn’t either of them realize how devastating it had been to lose my brother? And Artemis had run off, just like that—how could she be so ungrateful for the gift that life had given her?

Finding her family again was a blessing, no matter how difficult.

I would have given anything to bring Lilac back, even for just a day. Everything had felt wrong since my brother’s death. I was walking around with a piece of myself missing, an ache that wouldn’t go away…

Until I’d seen that boy jogging by our car earlier.

I pulled the feeling up front and center and, as if by magic, the permanent pain of Lilac’s absence was smoothed over. Softened. What could that mean, except that the running boy was my mate? Who else was capable of having such intense power over me?

I couldn’t believe Cali had just dismissed the way I felt when I’d mentioned the boy to her. Or maybe I could—she was too overwhelmed by everything going on with Artemis, her mom, her dad… But still. I wasn’t asking for that much, was I? Cali had always been good to me, so I’d expected her to understand. I’d expected her to care. I definitely hadn’t expected her to say that I’d randomly caught feelings for a passing jogger, just because he was hot.

Although he was hot. Like, very, very hot.

Maybe Lola would understand the way I’d felt when I’d locked eyes with the boy.

My heartbeat spiked every time someone jogged past and I found myself wishing, hoping, that it would be *the* jogger. I’d never felt that kind of connection with anyone or anything. It was much more than attraction—I could feel it. No matter what Cali said, this had been my instinctual response to him, and I knew how I felt.

Maybe Lola would understand. Maybe Lola would listen to me.

I just needed someone to listen to me.

Lilac always used to listen. Always. Sometimes I missed him so much that the constant pain of his loss became overwhelming. Paralyzing. Even during the moments when I could pretend that everything was okay, Lilac remained in the back of my mind.

Only when I’d seen that boy running had I felt truly calm.

Lilac would want me to find my mate. Lilac would want me to fall in love, to be happy with…

I wondered what the boy’s name was. His face was gorgeous, his amber eyes piercing. They looked like a lion’s eyes. Maybe his name was Leon. The thought made me smile, my mind starting to wander… What would our first conversation be like? I would probably be too embarrassed to talk to him in real life, at least in the beginning, but in my head, I could be bold. Right?

I would say, *“Hi! Do you like jogging?”*

He’d smile and say, *“Yeah. How could you tell?”*

And I’d go, *“Um, I watched you running the other day. Wait, no, not watched, I mean I saw you. For just a moment, as you were passing by. I didn’t* watch *you—that would be creepy… Haha.”*

I frowned, scoffing at myself. Why did I have to come across as an awkward weirdo even in my imaginary conversations? What a disaster.

I really needed Lola’s help.

I found her apartment building, but I was so flustered about, well, everything that I couldn’t remember which number her apartment was. Oh well. I pressed all the buttons and got yelled at by some random old lady. At least she sounded old, judging by her voice. But then someone buzzed me in.

“Thank you!” I said to the interface.

“Kids these days,” the old lady grumbled as I pushed the gate open and stepped into the yard. I recognized the outside of Lola’s pretty little apartment and knocked.

Jay was the one to open the door. His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Hey,” he said. “What’s up? Where’s Cali?”

Before I could say anything, Lola piped up from behind him. “Everything’s fine, Jay! Cali gave me a heads up.”

“Everything’s okay,” I told Jay. I didn’t tell him that I was mad at both Cali and Artemis, because it wouldn’t do any good. I hated being annoyed with Cali, anyway—she was usually so sweet to me.

“You don’t have to act like my bodyguard, Jay,” Lola told her mate from down the hall. Why did she sound mad? Jay hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Domestic bliss,” he grumbled under his breath, shooting a glare in the direction that Lola’s voice had come from. I was about to ask him what had happened, but he didn’t seem in the mood for a chat, which was weird in the first place. Jay was usually super nice and helpful.

“I’ll head to the bedroom,” he told me. “Let you girls talk, okay?”

I nodded, making a mental note to ask Lola what was going on between them. This definitely wasn’t normal. He pointed me in the direction of the kitchen and then went into the bedroom, closing the door behind him quietly.

At least he hadn’t slammed it.

“What’s going on?” Lola asked when I reached the kitchen. “Do you want anything to drink?”

“No, I’m good. I just wanted to talk a bit,” I said, and she steered me to sit at the kitchen table with her.

“So?”

I stared at Lola, pressing my lips together. “I just…”

Lola started tapping her foot under the table. She really was a very impatient person. “Come on, spill!” she finally burst out.

“What was it like when you realized that Jay was your mate?” I blurted. I felt my cheeks heat up, but Lola rolled her eyes.

“Honestly, right now I wish Jay wasn’t my mate. He’s being such a pain in the ass.”

I blinked in shock. Jay? But he was so nice. “For real?”

“Yes!” Lola snapped. “Can you believe that he wants me to stop shifting? What kind of werewolf would I be if I didn’t shift? Also, how dare he think that he can just tell me what to do?”

I remembered that shifting was different for Lola than it was for other werewolves, seeing as she was a hybrid and all. Shifting had caused plenty of mishaps for her during our trip back from Thor’s Well, so it wasn’t like Jay was crazy to worry about her. He loved her. He cared about her. Why couldn’t she see that? Why was she so mad at him?

I would give anything for someone to love me like that.

Nevertheless, I kept my thoughts to myself—mostly because I wanted to stay on Lola’s good side, considering the questions I wanted to ask her. When I cleared my throat, she realized she’d been ranting for a little longer than was appropriate and shook her head.

“Jeez, sorry,” she said sheepishly. “Didn’t mean to unload on you like that. Pretty sure you didn’t come here to hear about my relationship drama.”

I pressed my lips together. “Don’t forget that he loves you, Lola.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Now, onto you. Why are you suddenly so interested in the concept of mates?”

After Lola’s rant, I was a bit more cautious. I didn’t want to get another dismissive response. I needed this discovery of mine to be important.

I needed to feel something nice.

“Um, I guess…” I took a deep breath and spoke carefully. “I’ve just never fully understood how the whole mating thing works.”

Lola shrugged. “It’s not like you have a lot of choice—your mate is your mate.”

“But how do you know?” I pressed. “Like, how did you know Jay was your mate? Was it like in the movies, where you get hit by a sudden sensation?”

Lola’s troubled expression changed, becoming dreamy. “Something like that…” She sighed. “I knew that Jay was my mate just by instinct.”

“But weren’t you just a kid at the time?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Lola said. “Like I said, your mate is your mate.”

The definitive way that Lola was speaking helped me. It all made sense now—the certainty I’d felt when I saw the boy with the amber eyes. When I’d looked at him, we’d gazed deep into each other, even if only for a second. And in that second, I’d *known*.

“Did something happen today?” Lola asked me curiously.

“I saw him,” I admitted, almost breathless. I couldn’t keep it inside. I wanted to burst with excitement. “I saw my mate.”

Lola perked up. Her expression was encouraging, intrigued, and it made me feel even better. “Where? When? *Who*?”

Lola believed me.

Lola wanted to listen, and I wanted nothing more than to be heard. In what felt like a torrent of words, I explained to Lola everything that had happened earlier, when I’d seen the boy jog by. Everything I’d sensed deep inside.

When I was done, I held my breath, waiting for Lola’s reaction.

She smiled, standing up. “Come on.”

My heart fell. “You’re taking me back to Cali’s?”

Lola snorted. “Fuck that. We're going to go find your mate!”

**Episode 652**

I covered my face as the pieces of vase flew right at all three of us. The last thing I wanted was a scratched up, bloody face. I did not need any more problems to deal with at the moment. It was more than enough having a Fae mom, who was currently also covering her face, and a Fae older sister who looked merely mildly interested in the destruction happening in front of her.

When the room quieted and I opened my eyes, I was stunned to see Tony standing in the middle of the room. Was it just me, or did this fucked up asshole look more menacing than the last time I’d seen him?

*GODDAMMIT!*

His eyes bored into me before he pointed a finger at all three of us in turn. “Now you all owe me!”

Artemis, flipping her hair over her shoulder to dust off any vase pieces from her impeccable presence, stepped toward Tony. “I don't owe you anything,” she snapped, and lunged at him.

I held my breath, anticipating the upcoming collision, but Tony dissipated into thin air.

*That sneaky fucking son of a bitch!* I thought, bristling.

“Where’d he go?” Artemis looked around, shocked. Then she scowled, sniffing the air like a hound dog.

I sighed deeply before turning to Mom. “Well that didn’t work,” I said. “And now he’s even more pissed.”

“So maybe things didn’t go as planned—” Mom started, but I cut her off.

“*Maybe?*”

She gave me a sheepish look. “Okay, definitely. Nothing went as planned.”

“But why not?” I asked, frustrated. “Did we do something wrong?”

Mom shook her head. “The only mistake was mine. I misjudged Tony’s power.”

Didn’t that sound just *great?* “Wait, what?” I asked, fighting away panic. “Does that mean he’s more powerful than the average ghost?”

Mom nodded. “I’m not sure why Tony was able to break the vessel… Even if it was from Ikea.”

The memory of Xavier telling me that the orb might be messing with the ghosts popped into my head. Could that have anything to do with our Tony situation?

“Xavier…” I swallowed thickly. “Xavier knew about this.”

“What do you mean?” Mom asked. Both she and Artemis watched me silently as I explained the situation with the orb—what it was, and that someone really bad had it.

“Well, then,” Mom said. “This could be far more challenging than I thought.”

“I wish I had one of my Fae nets,” Artemis said darkly. There was a weird glint in her eye that clearly spelled danger. “Maybe one of those would stop that demonic ghost.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But that’s only an assumption—I know about as much about ghosts as you do. Which is close to nothing.”

The front door opened right then and Dad came back inside. He paused by the door, looking around the room. Then he noticed the mess from the vase.

He shook his head, offering a long-suffering sigh. “I don’t even wanna know.”

And then he promptly headed off to the kitchen.

“It’s better if he doesn’t, for now,” Mom noted.

I stared at her. “Aren’t you worried about Dad? Not even a little?”

“He’s a sweet but very strong man,” Mom said. “It’s one of the reasons I fell in love with him. Also, he and I will talk about things more tonight in bed.”

Artemis wrinkled her nose and I gagged.

Mom shook her head at both of us, disapproving. Before she could go on a hippie-inspired rant about having a healthy marriage and sexual chemistry with your partner even after being together for years, I changed the subject altogether.

“Forget that!” I waved a hand. “Let’s focus on what Tony said earlier—about us owing him. What the hell does that mean? Can he actually hurt us?”

Mom paused for a moment. “Mere ghosts can haunt and scare people...”

“*Mere*​ ghosts?” I blinked. “So there are there other kinds of ghosts?”

“Well, sure. Ghosts can gain power and transform into poltergeists,” Mom said.

“Oh no,” I said. “They can *level up?*”

Mom nodded solemnly. “And when they do, that’s when you have to be careful.”

“Is it possible that the orb is turning Tony into a poltergeist?” Artemis asked Mom.

Her question was pretty spot-on. I wondered if the orb was doing this to other ghosts as well… Other ghosts, like maybe Ava’s ghost. If so, we could be in a lot of trouble. Like, tons of it. I figured she probably wasn’t thrilled that Xavier, you know, killed her. Why couldn’t Xavier have a *normal* ex? And he dared to say that *I* was the one who kept getting into trouble!

Ugh, werewolves. I wondered what they were doing right now. If they missed me. They’d better be missing me. Xavier probably did since he’d been keen to keep talking through everything with me, but I had no idea about Greyson. Why did he have to be so annoying? I’d thought things had been getting better between us, seeing as he’d repeatedly risked his life for me while we’d been in an actual other realm, but *no*… He had actually told me not to call him anymore, and I planned to do just that from now on.

I was never, ever, ever EVER GOING TO CALL HIM AGAIN.

*EVER.*

I would rather explode than call him.

I would rather eat dung beetles than call him.

I would rather throw hot sauce in his eyes than call him.

I would rather PUNCH HIM THAN CALL HIM.

The same went for Xavier, now that I really thought about it.

*Is this what holding a grudge feels like?* I thought to myself. *Because it feels very powerful.*

“I wish I could be more reassuring about all this,” Mom told Artemis, interrupting my very healthy thoughts. “But the short answer is yes—the orb can definitely enhance the power of a ghost. But for now, our main concern has to be stopping Tony before he hurts your sister.”

Artemis frowned. “My sister?”

“That’s me!” I pointed at my chest, and Artemis flinched. “Get with the program, Artemis!”

“Right, sorry,” Artemis said, nodding vigorously. “But how do we trap Tony? Because the vase thing, uh, didn’t work.”

“We’re going to need a stronger vessel,” Mom said. “I wish I had more Fae items, but I’d discarded everything except for my necklace when I’d come to the human world. Something magical would’ve been better for the triangle.”

I pointed at the pendant around Mom’s neck. “What about that? Can we use it?”

Mom shook her head. “No, it’s too small. It’ll have to be a larger vessel, if we want to contain such a big and powerful force.”

Big and powerful force. That sounded wonderful. Amazing. Tony, the big and powerful force.

*We are fucked*, I thought, panicked.

I looked around. “Could Tony still be here? But, like, invisible?” I asked Mom. I gasped. “What if he appears before Dad and tries to hurt him?”

Mom seemed struck by the thought. Before she could speak, I ran into the kitchen, but Dad wasn’t there. My stomach dropped. “Dad!” I ran around the house till I heard him calling me from the den.

There he was, watching TV, sitting on his favorite comfortable sofa. The sight was so normal that it instantly made me feel better. He looked up at me, clearly weirded out. “What? Any other catastrophe I should be aware of?”

At least he could make fun of things.

“Right,” I said awkwardly, clearing my throat. “I was just wondering if you’d seen anything… unusual.”

Dad eyed me up and down. “Besides the three Fae gathered in my living room standing around a smashed vase? No.”

“I love you so much,” I blurted out.

He seemed surprised, but gave me a small smile. “I love you too, sweetheart. Always.”

At least we still had that, amidst all this chaos.

“Everything okay?” Mom asked nervously as she and Artemis walked into the room.

I nodded, just as Artemis marched straight up to the TV. She dropped to her knees in front of it, looking like a bewildered puppy seeing its reflection for the first time. “What is that?”

Dad chuckled. “It’s a TV. I’m watching some show about the Glenngreen murders from the seventies.”

“Murders?” I asked him, blinking. “Are you sure you should be watching that right now?”

He gave me a dry look. “Couldn’t be weirder than my real life at the moment, hon.”

He had a point.

“I guess we could watch something else though,” he said, picking up the remote. “Maybe *Wheel of Fortune*, or *The Bachelor*. I actually enjoy reality TV because—”

“Wait!” Artemis stopped dad, gasping. She pointed at the TV, to the images of the interior of the famous mansion and now museum. “That’s it!”

I frowned. “That’s what?”

She looked between Mom and me, grinning. “That’s how we stop him.”

Dad scowled. “Stop who?”

Artemis stared at me, her face alight with excitement as she continued to point at the television screen. “How we stop Tony’s ghost!”

**Episode 653**

VIOLET

I was in the passenger’s seat in Lola’s car, trying not to fidget. It was so hard to sit still, though—I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d felt so excited.

Lola and I were out to search for my mysterious mate, and I was vibrating with anticipation. Lola had listened to me, she had believed me, and I was so glad to see that my hunch to trust her had been right. As we drove, she kept firing cheerful questions at me about the jogger.

“So how tall was he? How was he built? Did he jog on the right or the left side of the road? How fast was he going? Did he look kind? There are just some people who have a kind face, you know? That’s my beautiful Jay—who I hate right now, by the way, but still, a kind face is definitely an asset! Speaking of, did you see his ass?”

I blushed. “Lola!”

She smirked. “What? I need a description. Was he hot?”

I had a clear picture of him in my mind, which came down to one thing only.

“He was so amazingly, stunningly beautiful that it hurts just thinking about him,” I said, telling the honest truth.

Lola’s eyebrows shot up her forehead. “That’s definitely your primitive brain recognizing your mate,” she said, looking back at the road.

“Primitive?” I asked, puzzled.

“Yep. It’s only a theory, but I’m pretty sure everyone’s mate looks breathtaking to them. Not unlike humans, in theory—they do say that love has rose-colored glasses.”

“Don’t they say that love is blind?”

“That too,” Lola said, waving a dismissive hand. “Either way, your mate might be hot, but they probably look a million times hotter in your eyes. So I’m going to need a little more detail to help you find him. What’s his hair color? Hairstyle?”

I looked at my lap, twiddling my thumbs. My voice was small, shy, when I spoke again, but it was firm. “He looked like Jungkook, only taller and hotter.”

Lola looked confused. “Who now?”

I gasped. I didn’t have time to explain to her how out of touch she was with the rest of the world, so I googled Jungkook for her. She took my phone and scrolled through a bunch of photos while I stood blushing.

“Okay,” she said, handing my phone back. “He’s a certified hottie. I think I have a good idea of who I’m looking for now.”

“I’ll play you some of his music sometime,” I said. For a moment, I was scared that I’d gone a little too far by presuming that Lola and I would be hanging out again, but Lola just grinned.

“Let’s find your sexy mate first. What else can you tell me about him?”

It felt so nice to have someone to talk to like this. Like I was… normal. At least as normal as a werewolf could be.

“He had the most incredible eyes,” I murmured. “Amber and deep, like a bottomless well.”

Lola let out a low whistle. “Damn. You’re pulling out the romantic descriptions. You got it bad, babe.”

I felt my cheeks heat up. Was my face just going to be an inferno from now on?

“Maybe we shouldn’t even look for the guy, though,” Lola said. Her expression was mischievous.

“What do you mean?” I asked, a little worried now.

She chuckled. “Well, you’ve built this guy up into a god—what if you find him and realize he’s only a mere mortal?”

I shook my head instantly. “That’s not possible. I got a clear look at him.” I paused and then, unable to help myself, I muttered, “I bet he is built like a god. A Greek god.”

I wondered about his name again. I imagined his voice, deep and strong, speaking my name and felt a chill run down my spine. Lola was right, I had it bad…

“Sounds very approachable,” Lola teased.

I buried my face in my hands, embarrassed. “You’re right. Why would he like me back? He could have anyone!”

Lola’s mischievous expression turned serious. “Hey, none of that. You’re a wonderful girl. Also, if he’s your mate, he’s stuck with you anyway, so you don’t even have to worry about any of that. I haven’t shaved in a while now and Jay doesn’t even notice. He’s always good to go in five seconds flat.”

I wasn’t sure how to process this information. I also wasn’t sure if I exactly understood what Lola was hinting at. Had she just talked about Jay having… *an erection?*

My face had probably just turned tomato red. *Nope!*

“Anyway,” Lola went on casually, “I need you to slow down on the daydreaming for a moment here and tell me more about this mystery mythical man, who we need to find. You know, in order for you to take that shirt off and admire his godly physique.”

Suddenly, I felt anxious. “But is it really possible for us to find him? Where should we be looking?”

“Hard to say,” Lola said. “I’m new to sleuthing. Maybe we should start at the local high school? It’s like looking for a specific fish in a very large ocean, so if you could remember anything about him that might help clue us in…”

I focused for a moment, bringing back the memory of him. His look had been so intense that I hadn’t been paying attention to much else.

Disappointment settled in my stomach. Pressing my lips together, I turned to Lola. “I can’t remember anything. It’s just—” My eyes widened when they fell on her sweatshirt. It had a lynx embroidered on it. “That’s it!” I screamed in excitement.

“Shit!” Lola exclaimed, jumping in her seat while still driving the car. “You just scared the crap out of me!”

“He was wearing that same thing—a sweatshirt with a lynx!” I said, undeterred.

Lola gasped. “He must be a student at my college!”

I was about to start squealing like an idiot when Lola’s happy expression dimmed. “Okay, let’s think about this reasonably. A lot of people in town wear the college colors. It doesn't necessarily mean he’s a student. Maybe his brother went there or something.”

I nodded vividly, not ready to give up hope just yet. “True, true. But it’s a good place to start, right?”

Lola sighed, rolling her eyes. “My dads wanted me to get back to school, but I doubt going on a boy hunt is what they had in mind.”

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As we approached the college campus, my nerves were on edge. This was brand new territory for me. I hadn’t ever even really liked a boy before. And ever since Lilac had died…

I just hadn’t felt anything other than pain.

This moment, for me, was incredible.

“Do you believe in destiny?” I asked Lola quietly.

“Yes,” she told me with a smile. “Absolutely.”

“I wasn’t sure before today, but…” I paused. “But I feel like perhaps everything that’s happened to me over the last year has led me to this—coming to Minnesota to meet my mate.”

Lola was silent for a moment. “It’s hard not to see it that way. Those kinds of things are usually preset by the universe. Or the werewolf gods. Or something like that, not sure.” She gave me a soft smile. “But hey, we still haven’t even found him yet. I need you to chill a bit, okay? Don’t want you to be disappointed.”

I nodded. Logically, I knew that Lola was right. But it was so hard to keep myself from hoping.

What felt like a long moment later, we pulled into the college’s parking lot and Lola put the car in park. When I looked around, my heart dropped. There were dozens and dozens of students walking around, and a bunch of them were wearing that same sweatshirt.

“It’s like a sea of people dressed in the same exact way,” I muttered, shaking my head.

“If your guy is here, though, he’s gonna stand out,” Lola told me encouragingly. “K-pop meets Greek god, right?”

Her cheeky little grin made me smile back, even though my stomach was still in knots.

“How about we take a walk around?” Lola asked, taking off her seat belt.

I nodded. But just as I opened my door…

*THUMP!*

A ball bounced off the car’s windshield. Shocked and then immediately pissed off, Lola jumped out of the car. Whoever had done this was going to get an earful, I had no doubt about that. Lola had been pretty irritable lately, and I wasn’t sure if it was because of Jay or something else. Either way, the person who’d just endangered her precious car was about to be met with her wrath.

“What the hell?” Lola barked, looking around. “Who did this?”

I was about to ask the same question when a deep male voice from behind us said, “Sorry about that.”

I turned around, my eyes widening when I saw the man in question. I gasped.

It was him.

My mate.

We’d found him!

**Episode 654**

XAVIER

I finished moving my stuff into what was supposed to be Colton’s room. I figured my brother wouldn’t be needing it for a while, since he was off with Maya now. It was the safest thing to do, considering Silas was around and Maya was pregnant. With a child. In her belly. That my asshole brother had put in there. I still couldn’t wrap my head around that. Now anything could happen between them—if they didn’t murder each other first.

Jeez.

At least, despite our drama—and there was a lot of it—my relationship with Cali wasn’t quite so potentially outrageous. I still couldn’t believe she’d come back so soon. Not that I minded, of course. I was just surprised, especially after the way things had been going between us. All that talk about needing space, and dealing with her parents’ drama, her mother’s health…

I hoped Cali didn’t take my offering her my bedroom in the wrong way. I didn’t want her thinking that I was disrespecting her wishes or something. But then again, it had been hard to read her—she’d just genuinely seemed pretty tired. Much quieter than usual, like she normally was whenever she felt exhausted. The trip to visit her mom must have been tough, so I wasn’t going to push things. I hadn’t even kissed her, because I’d known that if I took that step, I wouldn’t have been able to hold back. I would’ve wanted more and more and more, and I wasn’t sure if she would have put a stop to it.

I needed to let her be for now, even if it was hard.

Seeing her had reminded me of every reason why I’d missed her so much. Even though she’d been tired, she’d looked as beautiful as ever, and she’d felt even better in my arms. Her scent was incredible, like always. Mouth-watering. The way she’d looked at me had made me feel so good, like coming home.

I was so glad to have her back.

And above all, I was so glad to have heard her say, *I missed you, Xavier.*

*Me*. She’d missed me. Not fucking *Greyson*. I still couldn’t get over it, and I didn’t have to. I thought back to my conversation with him, how we’d ‘agreed’ to keep our distance from Cali. But Cali had returned to see me, and had entirely ignored my question about Greyson when I’d mentioned him. That had to mean something.

Allowing myself a smile, I walked out of the room and eyed Cali’s door. Maybe I could go check in on her? I imagined finding her on the bed—on my bed, with my scent all over—and my throat turned dry. I raised my hand to knock, but decided against it at the last minute. I didn’t want to come on too strong, wouldn’t force things—not when she’d repeatedly told me that she needed time. I would hate to annoy her for many reasons—above all, because I wasn’t the only one that who’d feel the impact if I made a mistake with her.

Greyson would exploit any kind of hole in my relationship with Cali at the first opportunity. So I just wouldn’t give him the pleasure.

Resolved in my decision, I headed downstairs. I found Mrs. Smith in the kitchen, squeezing some orange juice with a little more strength than was necessary.

“Mrs. Smith?”

Uncharacteristically agitated, she looked up at me before pouring the juice into a glass. She gulped it down all at once, like a shot. I cleared my throat. “Everything okay?”

“I’m fine,” Mrs. Smith said.

“Okay,” I said, and turned to leave.

“Xavier!” she called after me.

I faced her, weirded out. “Yeah?”

“I’m not fine,” she said miserably.

This had just taken a turn.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, frowning as I walked back into the kitchen.

“It’s Big Mac,” she said, patting the spot next to her on the kitchen bench, gesturing for me to sit. Like we were about to braid each other’s hair and chat about our relationship problems. Honestly, I could probably have used her advice, but this wasn’t the way I dealt with life. I’d already overcome my usual self, just by talking to Cali. About anything. Because of Cali, I’d forced myself through enough emotional growth to last me a lifetime. I didn’t need any more. So I rolled my eyes. “I don’t wanna be a dick about this—”

“But you’re going to be a dick about this,” Mrs. Smith completed my sentence, scoffing.

“I just don’t want to hear about your relationship drama, okay? I have enough shit to deal with on my own.”

Mrs. Smith stared at me, unimpressed. “Don’t be stupid, Xavier. You’re the last person I would ask for relationship advice.”

Okay. That hurt.

Though she probably had the right idea.

“What’s going on, then?” I asked.

“I’m worried about MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith said. “She’s been doing some kind of spell for the past hour.” She gestured for me to follow her, and we headed to Big Mac’s room.

When she opened the door, the smell of sage hit me like a train.

Big Mac was in the middle of it all, waving around sage leaves. It would’ve been funny if the smell didn’t make my eyes water.

“What do you want? I’m busy!” Big Mac barked at us. At me, specifically. Probably because I wasn’t her adoring girlfriend. Did this witch ever chill? What was bothering her this time?

“MacKenzie, Xavier is here to help,” Mrs. Smith said soothingly, patting Big Mac’s shoulder.

Big Mac glared at me. “Since when is he capable of helping anyone with anything?”

“Watch your fucking tone if you don’t want me to trash your entire sage stash,” I replied.

Big Mac rolled her eyes.

“See?” said Mrs. Smith nervously. “He just wants to help. Now, tell Xavier what you told me.”

“He won’t understand. He’s a wolf!” She then turned to her girlfriend. “No offense.”

The two were two seconds away from making heart-eyes at each other, and I’d just about had it. “*Seriously?* Just tell me what the fuck is going on.”

Big Mac sighed deeply before conceding. “Something is upsetting the spiritual world.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked. “You mean because of the orb?”

“It could be,” Big Mac replied. “It could be the house. New houses are literally new territory when it comes to the earth’s vibrations. Whatever it is, I don't like it.”

I turned to Mrs. Smith. “I get that she’s not feeling good about the house, or the air around it, or whatever other witchy thing she’s sensing. But unless she has something a little more tangible, I can’t do anything for either of you.”

“See?” Big Mac huffed, waving some more sage leaves around. “He’s not helping at all!”

I fought to keep my temper. “Keep her down,” I told Mrs. Smith. “She’s freaking me out, and we don’t need her to do that to everyone else.”

Big Mac gasped, clearly offended. I turned my back on both women and closed the door behind me. I really, really didn’t like witches. Their weird obsession with the spiritual world, and the way they stunk up rooms with plants, and mumbled spells… It was all a pain the ass. And entirely unnecessary, as well.

As far as I knew, the house was fine. No shady history, and it wasn’t built on top of a cemetery or anything weird like that. Couldn’t Big Mac just sit down, make out with Mrs. Smith, and leave everything else alone?

Speaking of making out, I paused by the staircase, glancing up the hallway where Cali was resting in my bedroom. I wondered if she was awake now. I’d asked her too many questions before, and she’d looked a little overwhelmed. Maybe she’d be more receptive to giving me answers after she’d had a chance to rest. I still wasn’t sure why she’d come back so soon, but I couldn’t wait to see her, to spend time with her.

*I missed you, Xavier.*

Perhaps missing me was the only reason she’d come back.

A part of me desperately wanted to believe that.

Maybe I’d take a peek into her room, offer to bring her some tea or something. She wouldn’t be upset about that. She would like it. She liked it when I took care of her, when I took her feelings into consideration. That was something I’d never done for anyone before. Ever. Even with Colton and Gabriel, we just did whatever and cussed each other out if we bothered each other and then ended up back on our bullshit. But I couldn’t be like that with Cali. Cali required special care, and I liked giving it to her.

I was really, really trying here.

I loved trying for her.

I started climbing the stairs, feeling empowered as I reminded myself that being good for Cali had paid off. She was here for me, not Greyson. And as for my deal with him—I hadn’t done anything wrong. I hadn’t sought Cali out. I hadn’t asked her to come back. It wasn’t my fault that Cali wanted to get closer to me.

It wasn’t my fault that she’d missed me more than Greyson.

Too bad for him.

Grinning to myself, I quickened my pace and reached the hallway.

Just in time to see Greyson slip into Cali’s room.

**Episode 655**

GREYSON

I paused after walking into Cali’s room, closing the door behind me.

She was asleep.

When I’d heard that she was back, when I’d caught a whiff of her scent in the air, I’d nearly lost my shit. This was a mess. Was she trying to make me combust? Was that her long-term plan? Because I couldn’t fucking explain why she was here, otherwise. Watching her lie there in a little pair of shorts and tank top made my brain throb before all the blood in my body traveled south*.*

I didn’t have time for nonsense like hard-ons. It just wasn’t practical right now, not when I’d told her I didn’t want to speak to her. Also—and above all—it was dangerous. Her being here while Silas was roaming around, crafting whatever horrible plan, was dangerous for her.

Why was she so goddamn stubborn? Why couldn’t she just do as she was told? Couldn’t she see that I wanted what was best for her? What the fuck would I do if anything ever happened to her? Did she have any idea the pressure I was under as the Alpha of the pack while she—

Her eyes opened.

My god, she was so beautiful it hurt.

“Sorry for bothering you,” I said. “But not really. I’m actually glad I woke you up. What did you expect?”

She blinked up at me slowly, clearly shocked. She had a lot of nerve to be shocked. Also, this was weird—her reaction. I’d expected her to yell at me, which would have been the usual, but no. She remained silent, studying me, so I repeated, “What did you expect? That you’d come back to my house, get huddled up in one of my rooms, and I wouldn’t seek you out? This isn’t a game, Cali.”

“Greyson.” She said my name slowly, almost as if she wanted to try it out. As if I was of no importance when it came to any of her decision-making. Sure, I’d told her not to call me, but still—this was some bullshit. I was so fucking mad, I didn’t know what to do with myself. Losing my composure was a big no-no. Throwing a fit was very non-Alpha, but right now, I was *this close* to snapping.

“Why are you saying my name like that?” I asked. “Were you expecting someone else?”

*Like fucking Xavier?* I thought but didn’t say. I needed to save some face here.

“Look, Greyson—”

“I’m looking,” I said, moving closer to her. It reminded me of the ondines—how I hadn’t been able to hold myself back, even knowing I could drown.

I could fucking drown in Cali right now.

She sat up as I neared her, sliding up like some sort of temptress, and this was a problem. Everything was a problem. The urge to tear her clothes off was getting out of hand. Just—why the fuck was she here? Jesus fucking *Christ*.

“How long have I been asleep?” she asked me.

I paused, standing over her. I didn’t sit on the bed next to her. That would be dangerous. I couldn’t trust myself at the moment—seeing her after so many days was doing bad things to me. My instincts were all over the place. The need to claim her was so intense that I had to actively fight it.

“I don’t know how long you’ve been sleeping,” I said. “You know, since you didn’t even bother to tell me you were coming. Not that I care.”

Fucking god, I sounded like such a passive aggressive little *bitch*.

What was this woman doing to me?

Also, had she told Xavier that she was coming? Probably yes. The idea made me clench my jaw.

“If you don’t care that I’m here, why are you in my room?” Cali asked, challenging. This sounded more like her.

“I could ask you the same question. Why are you in my house?” I asked.

She arched an eyebrow. “Why do you think? I bet you can guess.”

I couldn’t believe her. But then again, I also could. Of course she’d get all up in my face like that. *Fuck*. “I don’t know, Cali. What happened between you and Xavier in Minnesota?”

“That’s none of your business,” she said. “If you want to know, you should ask your brother.”

Her words gave me pause. I actually did *not* want to know any details about what Cali was doing—or had done—with Xavier when I wasn’t around. Just like I was sure she didn’t need to know that I’d kissed Joss. That kiss had meant nothing, though, but what Cali had done with Xavier…

I hated the distance between us.

I hated that I had to keep up with this fucked up ruse of not wanting her, even though wanting her was my first priority. But then again, what good had lying to keep her safe done me? Here she was! Besides, the frostiness between us only existed because of the way I’d treated her.

In my mind, if I told Cali the truth about the way I felt about her, she would run into my arms. Into my bed.

She would forget Xavier in a second flat.

At least… At least I hoped that was how it would happen.

In the meantime, though, the only thing I could say was: “I suppose I owe you an apology for what I said on the phone.”

Her face remained blank. That was a bad sign.

“About you not calling me again,” I elaborated.

She flipped her hair over her shoulder. “So is that an apology? Cause it didn’t sound like one.”

This girl was seriously testing me.

“This is all the apology you’re getting, Cali,” I said. “I still meant what I said. You shouldn’t be in Oregon. Also, where’s your entourage?”

She looked away, shrugging.

“Seriously?” I demanded. “Did you leave without telling them? Where are Artemis and Violet? Weren’t they supposed to be with you in Minnesota?”

“They decided to stay,” Cali said.

“But you didn’t,” I said.

The words came out angry, but I wasn’t angry, not exactly. I was frustrated, and I was needy, and I wanted to grab and kiss her and get this madness over with. I wasn’t sure how much longer I’d be able to play this game—pretending I didn’t want her when she was all I wanted. When I was ten seconds away from crawling at her feet and begging for forgiveness.

“Do you want me to leave?” she asked. Her tone was bland, with none of her usual fire. And that hurt, actually. Seeing her dejected hurt.

If it weren’t for Silas, I’d never let her go anywhere without me, ever again. But I had to think of the pack as well. I had to think of everyone’s survival. I had so many responsibilities to deal with as the Alpha. And then there was also my deal with Xavier—though I’d mainly instituted that because I hadn’t wanted to give Xavier any more time with Cali. But I wanted to protect Cali, always.

I wanted to protect myself as well, because I didn’t know what I’d do if anything ever happened to her.

Seeing her here, though, so close… It was driving me a little out of my mind.

My resolve was slipping.

My control was waning, and that was unlike me, but at the same time, the temptation was too grand to ignore.

“Greyson…” Cali’s voice was smooth as she said my name again. She got out of bed, dressed in those little shorts and that tight T-shirt. Not looking at her tits, at her legs, at her lips was a struggle for me. “You haven’t answered me,” she added, “and I need an answer right now. I can go back to Minnesota if you want.”

If I want…

If I want…

If I—

“No,” I said. My voice was coarse. My heart was pounding. Her scent was maddening, and I just couldn’t lie to her. “I don’t want you to go.”

“Then what do you want?” she asked quietly, biting her lower lip.

I could see the look in her eyes, and I knew exactly what I wanted. And that was her. I wanted to take her, mate her, fuck her right here, right now. We’d waited so long, and now that she was back, all my reasons—being a strong Alpha for the pack, protecting her and them from Silas—were getting increasingly difficult to remember.

It was hard to focus on logic when Cali was igniting a fire in me that was fueled by raw emotions. Emotions that I could barely grasp and deal with with her standing there, watching me like that, after we’d spent so much time apart.

I didn’t know what I’d do if I stayed in this room another second.

I turned my back on her, heading out, my whole body shaking with adrenaline as I tried to keep myself in check.

But Cali blocked my way.

“What were you going to say?” she asked, looking up at me through her eyelashes.

And that *fucking did it.*

Something snapped inside me and, with a growl, I scooped her up in my arms.

**Episode 656**

I stared at Artemis, weirded out. “What does the Glenngreen house have to do with Tony?”

Artemis was extremely excited as she tried to explain. “I don’t understand how that magic TV box works—”

Oh my god, my sister thought TV was magic. Was she cute or was she *very* cute? I couldn’t decide. Also, I still wasn’t sure if I liked having a sister, but anyway…

“—but was that really the inside of the Glenngreen house?” Artemis finished.

Dad let out a short laugh, shaking his head. “That is really the inside of the house, yes,” he told her indulgently. At least he seemed to not *dislike* Artemis, which was impressive, considering she was the kid of the only other man my mother had ever loved.

I realized that if my dad had been a different kind of man, like a demented villain with an inferiority complex, this situation could have taken a VERY dark turn. I could think of at least five TV shows—and also *Cinderella*—where the main plot of the story was about a bad step-parent who made the kid’s life a living hell. Not that Artemis wouldn’t be able to defend herself against an evil step-dad, but still.

“Actually,” Dad went on wholesomely, fortifying my musings, “the place is now a museum. I haven’t been to it in ages, but what they just showed is pretty much what I remember.”

“Why are you asking, Artemis?” Mom asked. “What did you see?”

“There were lots of objects and stuff on the shelves in the museum,” Artemis said, “but there was one that I recognized immediately—a vase.”

“A vase?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “Groundbreaking.” My tone was sarcastic, and for a second I panicked.

*Am I turning into an evil step-sister?* I thought, alarmed. But then I realized that I was Artemis’s real sister, if only half, so that couldn’t happen. It wasn’t like I was jealous of her, or anything. Okay, maybe I was just a *teensy* bit jealous. This was my turf!

Why was *my* dad talking to her so nicely?

“The vase didn’t look like anything special,” Artemis replied, “except for the seal that was visible on its left side. Didn’t you notice it?”

I stared at her. “No, Artemis. Not everyone is paying attention to everything all the time like you are.”

Mom gave me a funny look but Artemis continued, undeterred. “It was the Kollector’s seal.”

I paused, realizing. “You mean it’s from the Fae world?”

Mom gasped.

“Not only is it from the Fae world,” Artemis said, “but it’s also made from clay from the Kollector’s grounds. It’s an ugly vase, but it’s made *in* the Fae world, *from* the Fae world, so it’s strong. It’ll work.”

“She’s right,” Mom agreed, an excited glint to her eye. “That would keep our poltergeist locked away for years.”

“Wow,” I said, eyeing Artemis. “That was really impressive that you saw that.”

Artemis preened, looking very pleased that I approved. She was quite sweet in that moment, so I found myself liking her again. “Thank you,” she said.

“But how are we supposed to get the vase?” I asked. “I doubt the museum will lend it out.”

“True,” Dad said seriously. “I used to know one of the security guards who worked there, and he treated the place like it was Fort Knox.” He paused for a moment, glancing between all three of us. “What was that about a poltergeist?”

“Don’t worry about it, honey,” Mom said, patting his shoulder. “We have it covered.”

And then she bent slightly and gave him a peck on the lips.

“Are you sure?” Dad asked, wary.

“Definitely,” Mom said, kissing him again. He pulled her into a hug.

“I trust you,” he said. Mom smiled before caressing his arm.

“She distracts him with affection. Smart,” Artemis whispered in my ear as we headed back to the kitchen. I elbowed her, aghast.

“That’s not what it was!” I hissed back. “She just wanted to kiss him!”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “Okay, believe what you like.”

I frowned, processing Artemis’s words before eyeing Mom. Did Artemis have a point? Could Mom really be distracting Dad with tenderness, just to keep him appeased during this very stressful time in our lives? It couldn’t be… My mother didn’t have a manipulative bone in her body! Though she *had* been lying to her husband and child for years upon years. And she *had* also escaped the Fae world—that would’ve taken more than niceness to accomplish.

I stared at Mom, a little worried. Was she, perhaps, kind of a diabolical genius?

Maybe?

“It might be difficult to get the vase, but that doesn’t mean it’s impossible,” Mom said.

*Spoken like a true diabolical mastermind*, I thought, unable to help myself. I kind of wanted to start laughing, because this whole thing was truly incredible. In a good way, mostly. If nothing else, Mom being affectionate with Dad right now was a good thing for both of them. He seemed to enjoy it, and she seemed to feel more confident after embracing and talking with him.

“This is very exciting!” Artemis said, clearly excited. About breaking and entering. My god, my family was trouble. “Maybe I’ll get the chance to use my skills in the human world.”

*Um, excuse me?* I thought, that tiny bit of jealousy making a comeback. *What about MY skills?*

I had a lot of skills.

“Ha, right,” I said. “But we need to think first. I’m pretty good at making plans, actually, as Mom knows, since I brought the moon buttercup back from the Fae world and saved her actual life.”

“That’s true,” Mom said fondly.

“What we really need right now,” I continued, feeling empowered, “is a seriously good plan, and we need it fast—Tony made it clear he’s not going to just go away. He's getting stronger.”

*… and he’s coming for me*, I added in my mind, my throat suddenly dry.

“Maybe we should take a trip to the museum,” Mom said. “Scope it out.”

I blinked. “Now?”

“Why not?” Mom shrugged. “It’s not like we’re going to do anything—we’re just going to see what we’re up against.”

“Let’s go!” Artemis enthused.

Well, damn. I guessed we were going to the museum.

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“Can I try driving the car?” Artemis asked as she got into the back seat.

“NO!” both Mom and I yelped. Artemis jumped.

“Sorry for yelling,” Mom said sheepishly, “but you need to have a license to drive. You have to learn first.”

Artemis frowned. “How long does that take?”

As the two of them kept talking about the potential terror that was Artemis getting her driver’s license, I checked my phone. I had no phone calls or texts from anyone. Not Lola, not Violet, not Xavier… not Greyson, either. Not that I’d expected anything from him.

The asshole had hung up on me—to my FACE—and said that I shouldn’t call again. I SURE WOULDN’T, especially after his behavior. I didn’t care if he remembered nothing from the Fae world—when he’d hung up that phone, he’d humiliated me, and I hadn’t gone through hell and back with him to be ignored like that.

*How dare he, honestly?* I thought, bristling.

As for Xavier, I’d told him that I needed space, and I meant it.

But still, I hadn’t been expecting both of them to stay out of touch. What about the *due destini* thing? Weren’t they supposed to be supernaturally attached to me? HOW were they able to just not give a shit about me? Why were NEITHER OF THEM GROVELING? I would have appreciated some groveling! And attention! I liked attention! Or at least Xavier could’ve shot me a text. And Greyson should’ve apologized about—

*Ugh, it doesn’t matter!* I told myself. I shook my head, focusing on the situation at hand. My annoying mates couldn’t be occupying my thoughts right now. We needed to take care of Tony, once and for all. Thinking about Xavier and Greyson was not the right move here.

I put my phone away, just as Mom pulled into the museum’s parking lot. There were barely any cars. Maybe this was good. There wouldn’t be any witnesses seeing us snooping around. Hopefully we’d manage to be casual about it, and wouldn’t get caught. Though it wasn’t like Artemis was the most subtle Fae to have walked the human world.

“We’re not actually breaking in today, right?” I asked Mom.

“No, of course not,” she said. “We’re just looking around.”

“Why aren’t there as many cars here?” Artemis asked. She looked annoyed. Why was she so fascinated by cars?

“Why do you like cars so much?” I asked Artemis.

“I don’t know. They look like they’d be fun to drive,” she said, shrugging. “Greyson had a really awesome one.”

So Artemis had spent time in Greyson’s car. That I didn’t even know he had. That was fine.

*FINE.*

Just. FINE.

“Girls, look,” Mom said, interrupting my petty musings. She gestured at the entrance, where there was a sign*. CLOSED FOR MAINTENANCE*.

I scowled. “Now what?”

But Mom smiled. “This is perfect. We’re going to get the vase tonight.”

**Episode 657**

VIOLET

I stood there, paralyzed by fear and something else I couldn’t name. The boy approached us, and it looked like the air around him sparkled, like the clouds over his head parted, like all the colors became more vibrant the second he came into view.

It was him.

My *mate*.

My heart was beating so fast, I thought I was going to die.

“Sorry if I scared you,” he told Lola in the politest tone possible, scooping up the ball with a lacrosse stick. “The ball got away.” He shot me a look, smiling sweetly, and a whole forest of butterflies exploded inside my stomach.

“No big deal,” Lola said. Her anger had evaporated pretty easily.

I stared at the boy silently, internally screaming at myself to say something. *Why won’t I say something?*

I was doomed.

“Toss the ball!” someone called from behind the boy, and he smiled once more.

“Gotta go. Have a good day,” he said, looking between us. He was that kind of person. The person who told a total stranger to have a good day. After saving their car from a lacrosse ball. Amazing. Incredible!

Also, was it wishful thinking, or had his gaze just lingered on me a beat too long? Was I going nuts already?

He turned his back on us and ran off, throwing the ball as he went. He was so athletic. It was so wonderful. He was perfect, perfect, perfect in every way!

My heart was pounding so hard that it had scared the butterflies inside my stomach.

“He was cute,” Lola said, distracted. “Good thing he apologized, because I was about to hand him his ass. Anyway, should we go look for your man?”

I didn’t speak, still spellbound.

Lola paused, staring at me. She arched an eyebrow. “What’s wrong?”

“That’s…” I gulped, pointing after the boy. “That’s him!”

Wide-eyed, Lola turned toward the lacrosse players. “Lacrosse dude is your guy?”

“Yes,” I said breathlessly. This was getting ridiculous, but I just didn’t care.

That was my guy.

*My*. *Guy*.

Oh my god!

“Why the fuck didn’t you say something, then?” Lola asked, looking like she wanted to grab and shake me.

“I-I was taken by surprise,” I spluttered. “I don’t know. I thought I was going to die when he looked at me.”

Lola burst out laughing, draping her arm across my shoulders. “You’ve got it bad, much worse than I thought, don’t you?”

I did. And then I started panicking. “Was it that horrible? Did I blow it forever? Is it too late now?”

Lola smirked, shaking her head. “You didn’t do anything horrible. You just didn’t speak, which is—”

“Horrible, if I want to kiss a boy. Right?”

Lola waggled her eyebrows. “So you want to kiss him, huh?”

I buried my face in my hands, groaning. Lola chuckled. “You were right, by the way—he really is hot. And very polite. I love that.”

“Isn’t he?” I gasped. “But I ruined everything!”

She shook her head. “No, don’t worry. If the guy really is your mate, it’ll be pretty hard for you to blow it. He’s hard-wired to respond to your presence. To notice you. It’s kind of awesome, in a way.”

I removed my hands from my face, sniffling as I looked up at her. “What should I do, then?”

Lola shrugged. “How about you try that thing I suggested earlier?”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Talk to him!” Lola said, laughing.

I pressed my lips together. “I know you’re right, but I’m just… I’m so nervous. What if I say something stupid?”

Lola shook her head, scoffing. “None of that! The more you stress over it, the worse it’s going to be.”

“But what do I do? What do I say?” I whispered as Lola grabbed my hand and started walking in his direction. She was literally pulling me toward him.

“Just say hi and let nature take its course,” Lola said. “It’s going to be okay, I promise!”

I swallowed thickly, feeling so nervous that my palms were sweating. The closer we got to him, the lower my voice became. “You think so?”

“Of course!” Lola enthused. “What guy would be upset when a beautiful girl says hello? No guy. *Ever*.”

At least Lola thought I was beautiful. She started rambling about how flirting between mates came naturally and other things that I could barely listen to as we approached the field. The closer we got to the group of boys, the drier and more constricted my throat became.

I’d never felt this way before. I’d never done anything like this before.

I kept stealing glances at him as he ran around with the other guys. He was taller than all the other boys, so easy to spot. And so athletic. And so handsome. And so kind. He’d been so kind to us earlier.

He was basically perfect.

And I was… me.

Lilac used to think that I was great, though. But he had to say that because he was not only my brother, but my twin.

Feeling a little better at that thought, I squeezed Lola’s hand. She squeezed back and muttered, “You can do this.”

“What do I do after?” I asked her in a rush.

“After what?” Lola asked.

My mind started racing. “What if he says hi and we tell each other our names, and then—what? What happens after that? Should I talk about the weather?”

Lola stared at me, alarmed. “No. For the love of god, do *not* talk about the weather!”

“Okay, but what do I do after?” I insisted.

Lola shrugged. “I know what I’d do. I’d take charge, ask him out—you know, for coffee or a smoothie or something.”

I gulped, really trying to ignore the pit in my stomach. Lola and I were standing close enough to the lacrosse guys that I could feel the breeze when they raced by.

He passed by me, shooting me a glance, and I inhaled sharply.

Lola rolled her eyes. “Come on!” she whispered, nudging me. “Say something!”

I kept my mouth shut and stood there like an iceberg.

Lola groaned, rolling her eyes. Then she yelled, “Hey, you guys seen our frisbee?”

“What are you doing?” I whisper-hissed at her. My pulse was racing.

Lola grinned. “Just getting the party started, babe.”

The guy jogged over to us—he jogged so well—his amber eyes flashing with interest and mirth. “Frisbee? You two play?” he asked in a friendly tone.

He was here.

Right in front of me.

Oh. My. *God*.

“We disc,” Lola said, shrugging.

*We disc?* I internally screamed. What the hell was Lola doing? What did ‘disc’ even mean? Why was she saying it that way, like we were part of some sort of cool club that nobody knew about? Because I didn’t know anyone who played frisbee and considered themselves a badass. The guy seemed to be thinking the same, because he stared at her for a brief moment with an arched eyebrow. But then he turned those amazing eyes on me and smiled.

His smile was breathtaking. And the way he looked at me…

I felt my cheeks burning under his gaze.

My heart was beating so hard I could feel it throbbing inside my chest.

“Hey, don’t I know you?” he asked. His voice was so smooth. So gentle.

The thought of him whispering something—*anything*—in my ear had me fighting a shiver.

Lola squeezed my hand. Right, I had to *speak*.

“Uh… We—” I cleared my throat. “We sort of met.”

He looked puzzled. “You sure? I think I’d remember.”

“Hear that?” Lola told me, in a way that I assumed carried some sort of meaning. “He would have *remembered*. Because you are *memorable*.”

I just stood there. Staring at him, because he was a wonder. And I was going to die. But no, I couldn’t let that happen! I needed to force myself to speak, to say anything. It didn’t have to be smart or witty, just *something*. I was a nervous wreck, but he didn’t need to know that. Right?

*I have to pull myself together!*

Fighting to even out my breathing, I said, “My name is Violet.”

He broke into another dazzling smile. “Like the flower? Cool. I mean, that’s pretty.” He coughed. “They call me Charlie.” He blinked. “I mean, my *name* is Charlie. That’s my name. That people call me with.”

He stopped talking, and I was awestruck. Was he as nervous as I was? If so, was that a good sign? Was falling apart around the person you liked a good thing? His name was Charlie. *Charlie*. What an amazing name. Ten times better than anything I could have thought up. It was as cute and sweet as he was.

Then I remembered what Lola said earlier.

*Take charge. Ask him out.*

What if he said no, though? But what if he said yes? It would be amazing if he said yes.

It was now or never.

I was about to open my mouth and ask when a beautiful girl bounced up to us.

“Charlie!” she squealed.

And then she threw her arms around him and planted a big kiss on his lips.

**Episode 658**

AVA

I hadn’t expected to see Greyson in my room when I’d woken up, watching me with burning eyes. I definitely hadn’t expected him to pick me up and pin me to the wall either, but I wasn’t about to complain.

He was even stronger than he looked.

His whole body felt pent-up, coiled with vibrating energy.

With *want*.

Burning, aching desire.

It was fascinating to feel—you know, after having been dead for a while.

“What are you doing to me?” he breathed as I wrapped my arms around his neck. I did it instinctively, just so I could keep my balance. Though he actually had that covered—his large palms were wrapped around my waist, one moving dangerously close to my ass, with my back balanced against the door.

No, not *my* back.

Cali’s back.

I looked into this man’s eyes—because we were talking about a *man* here, 100%—and right away, I could tell he wanted this girl. Everything about him screamed that he needed to kiss me, kiss *Cali,* in that moment. But something was holding him back.

What was going on between these two?

Why was the pack’s Alpha inside the human’s room, picking her up like a ragdoll and breathing heavily against her?

My heart was hammering from the adrenaline. Greyson wasn’t exactly my type—blonds never had been—but it was hard to ignore someone so powerful. So big. Especially with this kind of sexual energy being directed at me. But not *me*. I hadn’t answered his question, but I didn’t think he was expecting an answer, anyway. He seemed lost in me, in these eyes that were Cali’s. His closeness, his gaze, was very intense—I had to give him that. He leaned closer, his lips parting, and for a second I thought that this was it.

Greyson would kiss me, and I wouldn’t know what the fuck to do.

But before I could fight or give into panic, Greyson’s mouth closed and he abruptly swung me back down.

That was pretty lucky.

“I’m sorry,” he said, rubbing his face roughly. He was definitely struggling. He desired Cali, but he wouldn’t give in. But why could that be? He was so ramped that the inside of his head had to be hell on earth. Mr. Alpha? More like Mr. Blue Balls.

Suddenly, I was more amused than anxious over my performance around him. I hadn’t expected this to really be the dynamic.

It looked like all he needed to burst with longing was to just *look* at Cali, and I had that in the bag, seeing as I looked like her right now.

“I can’t do this, Cali.”

This guy was entirely under Cali’s spell. Amazing. The feeling had to be mutual, considering the way he’d been talking to Cali—to me. But why would Cali be into this blondie when she had *Xavier* for a mate? I didn’t understand that. Wasn’t Xavier supposed to be her one and only?

Also, the way I saw it, Xavier was much more handsome than both of his brothers anyway.

Sure, Greyson was rugged and attractive in his own way, but there was nothing like a guy with dark hair. A guy like Xavier.

The thought of him made my heart rate spike, and it had nothing to do with Greyson’s presence.

“I only meant to check on you,” Greyson said, taking a step back away from me. He seemed apologetic, uncomfortable, and it was pretty entertaining. The big bad Alpha of the Redwood pack, who should have been Xavier, losing his cool because of a human girl.

“Okay,” I said. “Thank you for dropping by, then. I’m feeling a bit better after the trip.”

He just stood there, staring at me. It looked like he wanted to fuck me into the mattress. I didn’t feel intimidated, though. Mostly, I was amused, and also a little flattered, because no matter my usual tastes, Greyson was still a man who would turn heads left and right . Yes, I currently looked like Cali and not myself, but I allowed myself to enjoy the attention anyway. I wasn’t dead—anymore.

Especially because this whole Greyson situation had the potential to become very, *very* interesting on multiple levels.

“Are you done checking on me?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “Or was there something else?”

He recognized the hint of mockery in my tone. His expression darkened. For a moment, I thought he’d snap at me—who talked to their Alpha that way? Who challenged and teased their Alpha? Cali did, that was who. I was pretty sure that she had Greyson wrapped around her little finger. That much was obvious.

The only thing he managed to say was, “Forget what almost happened. It won’t happen again.”

“Right,” I said slowly. What I loved most about this conversation was that *he* had attacked *me*, not the other way around. I’d been minding my own business when he’d scooped me up, and now he was making it sound like I—Cali—was at fault here. Communicating with this guy was probably a headache for Cali. Served her right for fucking around with someone else while she had Xavier.

I ignored the anger bristling inside me as Greyson kept talking. “This can’t happen again. I won’t allow it. You’re a distraction. You should have stayed in Minnesota, Cali, like I told you a million fucking times.”

I paused, eyeing him. I crossed my arms and flipped my hair over my shoulder to gain more time as I thought about how to answer this. I should probably just get him to leave—I wasn’t ready to deal with him right now, not without knowing what the hell was happening with this apparent Cali/Greyson relationship.

In the end, I decided to reply to Greyson in the only way that made sense to me right then. This guy was saying one thing and doing another, and I wasn’t Cali, so I wasn’t about to indulge it. “If you see me as a distraction, the easiest thing would be for you to get out of my room,” I said. “Unless you *do* have something else you’d like to discuss?”

Greyson’s nostrils flared. He really didn’t seem to enjoy getting called out on his bullshit.

But this had to be the norm between them, didn’t it?

He certainly didn’t seem shocked to see me, a.k.a. Cali, mouthing off at him. Noted.

Pressing his lips together, he didn’t say a word. He just marched out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Talk about touchy.

Smirking to myself, I was walking toward the vanity when I caught my reflection in the mirror. Seeing Cali’s face instead of my own wasn’t as jarring as it used to be. I also felt a little more self-assured now—Greyson wanted to kiss me. Her. That meant he believed I was Cali, for sure. And, so far, Xavier seemed to believe it too.

It was amazing how easy men were to trick under the right circumstances.

Either way, I needed to figure out more about this unexpected dynamic.

Cali with Xavier *and* Greyson?

How did that work?

Frowning, I moved closer to the bedroom door to listen and make sure that nobody was in the hallway. It sounded empty. Grabbing my phone, I walked into the bathroom, locking the door behind me.

When I called Nolan, he picked up at the first ring.

“Good to hear from you so soon,” he said. He sounded pleased. “How’s it going?”

“There’s been an unexpected development over here,” I said.

“What sort of development?”

“Greyson does seem to have a romantic relationship with Cali.”

Nolan made a sound of surprise. “Come again?”

“You heard me,” I said.

“I can’t believe the rumors are true,” Nolan said, his voice turning harsh. “Are you joking?”

“Of course not. This is serious, Nolan.” I clenched my jaw, shaking my head. “How is it that Cali seems to have both men wrapped around her very human finger? Especially if Xavier is her mate? I think you were right about the *due destini*.”

I paused, processing this information.

Truly fascinating.

“I know that tone, Ava,” Nolan said. “What are you thinking?”

I caught sight of my reflection once more. Cali’s cheeks were flushed. Her eyes glowed.

She had her own kind of power over these men, and that meant only one thing: that power was mine now, too.

“What are you planning?” Nolan asked. His voice was intrigued.

I smiled at my reflection. She did have a nice smile, that Cali. Despite whatever feelings of jealousy I had over her being with Xavier, I had to admit that her smile was to die for.

Perhaps someone *could* actually die for it.

“I’m not sure about the exact way to do it yet,” I told Nolan. “But maybe I can pit the brothers against each other… and take them both down.”

**Episode 659**

LOLA

Violet’s small face fell as she looked at the girl, taking in her high, swinging ponytail and long—*clearly* false—eyelashes. Poor Violet was trying to rally, but failing. She turned back to Charlie. “Who’s your friend?” Violet asked in a small voice.

Charlie shifted the lacrosse stick in his hand, looking a little awkward. “Um, everyone, this is my girlfriend, Sandi. Sandi, this is Lola and Violet.”

I couldn’t help notice how his voice lingered on Violet’s name.

Sandi turned her uninterested gaze toward Violet and me and, after a quick survey, rewarded us with a frosty smile. Well, sort of. She barely turned up the corners of her lip-glossed mouth before she turned back to Charlie. “Remember, Charlie-bear, you promised to take me to rehearsal this afternoon.”

“Oh, right,” Charlie-bear started, his ears going a little pink. “I—”

“—and if we don’t get going, I’m going to be late. And everyone knows Sandi is never late.”

*Ugh*. What kind of person referred to herself in the *third* person? And was *never* late? This girl was freaking me out.

Then, things got worse.

Before Charlie could respond, Sandi bounced up on her toes, paused for a moment, then dropped into a split, right there on the sidewalk. Violet and I stared down at her, shocked.

“Holy shit,” I murmured.

Charlie’s face was completely red as he looked up at Violet. “Sorry again about that ball. I hope I didn’t scare you too much. It was really great meeting you, Violet. Maybe I’ll see you around campus?” He reached down to grab Sandi’s hand to help her up. She popped up and linked her arm through his, smiling up at him dreamily.

Violet’s face was a mask of misery. I gave her a nudge, trying to get her to respond to Charlie, but she didn’t say anything.

“Sure,” I said, desperate to fill the weird silence. “Another time.” I felt horrible. This was supposed to be a memorable meet-cute (a lacrosse ball bouncing off the car? Adorable!), but it had turned into a total shitshow.

Charlie pulled his arm from Sandi’s vice grip. “I have lacrosse practice for a few more minutes, Sandi, and then I’ll walk you over.”

Sandi stuck out her lip in a pout. “Charlie-bear—”

I had to close my throat to keep from gagging.

Charlie tightened his grip on his lacrosse stick. “We’ll still have plenty of time to get you to rehearsal on time.”

“*Okay*.” She smiled and rolled her eyes at us. “Boys. Am I right, ladies?”

Neither Violet nor I responded, and Sandi slipped her arm possessively around Charlie’s waist as they started back toward the playing field.

Violet just stood there and stared after them for a long moment. Then she spun on her heel. “Let’s get out of here,” she said, starting back toward the car.

But before we could reach it, Jay walked over to us, his phone in his hand.

“Hey,” he called with a smile, waving.

I stopped and stared at him. “What the hell are you doing here?”

The smile slipped off his face and he eyed me warily. “What?”

“How’d you know where I was?” I asked, growing agitated. “Are you fucking stalking me now, Jay?”

He narrowed his eyes. “No.” He held up his phone. “You’re logged into Facebook, posted a photo of campus, and tagged the location. You told *everyone* where you are. It’s literally *publicly accessible* information. That’s not exactly stalking.”

I made a grab for his phone, trying to snatch it away, but he moved it out of my reach. “That was for my dads, you stalker—so they’d see that I was here and think I was really thinking about coming back to school. That information wasn’t meant for you, Jay!”

Jay rolled his eyes. “I think it might be time for us to have a conversation about what happens when you put information on the internet, Lola. It’s not a fucking telegram service. It doesn’t just go to the person you’re intending for it to reach. Write a letter if you want to do that.”

I was irritated as fuck and my hand shot out before I could stop myself, slapping the phone out of Jay’s hand. It flew off and slammed into the sidewalk, bouncing a couple of times for good measure before it landed in an empty parking space.

Jay glared at me. “What the hell, Lola! What’s your problem? My screen is probably shattered now. Thanks a lot!” He moved to pick it up, but stopped suddenly when a car pulled into the parking spot, the fat racing tires of the bright red sports car rolling right over his phone, crushing it. He stared at it, horrified, then rounded on me. “Great! Happy now?”

I glared right back. “Maybe if you weren’t so possessive and following me all over town, that wouldn’t have happened! You ever think about that?”

“Lola—”

“If you think I’m going to take the blame for that, Jay, you’ve got another thing coming,” I raged. I didn’t feel great about the phone, but I was too mad at Jay to admit it.

He blew out an angry breath through his nose, and his jaw worked like he was biting back a stream of angry words. Then he walked over and yanked the shattered remains of his phone out from under the car and stormed away.

As I watched him go, the adrenaline of the fight began to ebb away, and my heart slowed to a normal rate again. I sighed as Jay disappeared into the crowd of students. That had *not* gone well.

“Can we go?”

I looked at Violet, who was staring up at me, her face pleading.

“Yeah, fine, whatever,” I said vaguely, still shaken from the fight with Jay.

Violet dropped her head into her hands. “God, I’m so embarrassed.”

“About what?” I asked, staring at her, confused. I was having a hard time finding the thread of the conversation again after seeing Jay.

“About what? About *that!*” Violet shouted, gesturing toward where Charlie and Sandi had disappeared. “He’s got a *girlfriend*. I had no idea! Of course he does! He’s so gorgeous and nice and… I was so *certain* he was my mate, but…” She shook her head. “I just feel like such an idiot.”

“Please, Violet,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Please don’t tell me you’re going to let little Miss Jump-Splits intimidate you. The girl refers to herself in the *third person*. That is the behavior of psychopaths. You can’t let her interfere with your plans for Charlie. If he’s your mate—”

“But she’s his *girlfriend*,” Violet wailed miserably. “What am I supposed to do?”

I smiled. Even though I was mad at Jay, this first-time-mates thing was tugging on my heartstrings. Then I laughed. “Oh, Violet, Violet. You have so much to learn.” Violet looked up at me, confused. “Mates are complicated, girl. So he’s got a girlfriend. Big fucking deal! That doesn’t make him any less your mate. And if you really think he *is* your mate—”

“I *do!*” Violet said, with certainty.

“—then you should keep going for it.”

“Going for it?” she asked.

“Keep fighting for him. You can’t just give up,” I said, ignoring that I should probably take my own advice.

“So I can end up fighting like you and Jay?” she asked, her tone suddenly turning bitter. She shook her head. “No thanks.”

“Violet—”

“No *thanks*,” she said firmly, and her dark eyes flashed. “This whole thing was a stupid idea. I don’t want to do it anymore.”

“Violet,” I said, surprised. “It’s not always like that, with me and Jay.” Violet turned to looked at me, her arms crossed over her chest, a look of deep skepticism on her face, and I suddenly felt the overwhelming need to defend my relationship with Jay. “Listen, we’re having some problems right now, me and Jay, but every couple has issues at some point. The important thing is not to give up.”

Violet’s eyes flicked up, past my shoulder, and then went wide with surprise. “He’s… he’s…”

“What?” I asked, spinning around, freaked out by the shock on her face. “Who? What’s going on?”

“He’s coming back!” Violet whisper-shouted, grabbing my arm and digging her fingers into my skin. “Charlie! What do I do?”

“*Chill out*,” I hissed, shaking off her grip. I turned to see Charlie jogging toward us—Sandi-less, this time—holding his lacrosse stick with the ball cradled in the net. His eyes were fixed on Violet as he approached.

“Hey,” he said when he reached us. “I don’t usually do this, but, you two seem really cool.”

He still hadn’t so much as glanced at me. *Cute*. He tossed his shock of dark hair away from his hazel eyes, and I felt Violet shiver next to me.

“A bunch of us are hanging out at the park later tonight. Maybe you want to come?”

I stepped forward. “She’d be delighted.”

Charlie finally looked at me. “Cool,” he said. “See you then?”

As he walked away, I was feeling pretty damn proud of myself. That is until Violet turned me toward her and said, “What did you do?!”

**Episode 660**

“I’m *sorry*,” I said slowly, turning to look at my mom. “I just want to make sure I’m hearing you correctly. Are you saying that we’re going to break into that museum tonight, Mom? Is that what I’m hearing?”

My mom shrugged casually and ran her gaze over the stone building. “We don’t really have a lot of choice. Look at the pattern—Tony’s getting stronger, so the longer we wait, the stronger he will become. It’s not a difficult decision when you think of it like that, Cali.”

“I guess…” I said, looking back at the museum with trepidation.

“Well, I’m in,” Artemis said, sounding excited. She clapped her hands, looking more at ease than I’d seen her since we’d left the Fae world. “I was made for this.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just fantastic. What about security? What are we going to do about that? It’s not like we can just waltz in there like it’s no big deal. I’m sure there are alarms and cameras. Security guards. Maybe a vicious, man-eating watch dog.”

“Really?” Artemis made an interested noise and began to glance around the empty lawns, searching avidly for the man-eating dog.

I glanced back at the building. “Look,” I said, pointing, “I see a camera right there. Next to the entrance. It’s mounted against the wall just above the doors. See?”

My mom leaned over and looked up to where I was pointing. Her mouth thinned into a worried line. “I see. Well, we’ll have to prepare. Do some research.” She sighed. “If the museum were open, it would’ve been easier to get the vase, there’s no doubt about that. We could’ve just gone in and created a distraction and stolen it that way. But, now that it’s closed for maintenance, it’s going to be trickier. It’s just going to require more planning.”

I shook my head. She was talking about this like it was a school project that we needed to get cardboard and markers for, not a dangerous and illegal heist.

“Let’s head home, girls,” my mom said, waving us back toward the parking lot. “We need to start planning.”

“Well,” I said, as we climbed back into the car, “I think we should call Lola and Jay. Lola’s good with computers. Maybe she could help us get into the mainframe and override their security system.”

My mom looked at me, surprised. “How do you know about any of that stuff?”

I shrugged. “That’s how they do it in the movies.”

“What’s a computer?”

I looked over my shoulder at Artemis, who was leaning over into the front seat, her eyes wide with interest.

“Um…” I started, wracking my brain as I tried to figure out how to explain a computer to someone with Artemis’s frame of reference. I glanced at my mom, but she just shrugged and started the car, no help whatsoever. “It’s a machine—”

“Oh, like a pulley system?” Artemis asked, interested.

“No, not exactly. It’s a machine that takes in information—or data—and processes it. Then it spits out that data as a different kind of information.”

Artemis drew her brows down in confusion. “*Data*… *processes*…” she muttered to herself quietly. She looked up at me. “What is the point of it?”

How was I supposed to explain that? “Mostly looking up ex-boyfriends.” I shrugged.

“Cali,” my mom said warningly, giving me a sidelong glance as she turned onto Walnut Avenue.

I sighed. “Computers are used to control machines that used to be controlled by humans. Things that were too dangerous or time-intensive for people to do, computers can do now.”

“Wow.” Artemis leaned back in her seat, her expression amazed. She looked out the window as Duluth whizzed by. “This is an amazing world you live in, Cali.”

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“So, I was thinking I’d take Artemis back to my apartment tonight,” I said as I swung the car door shut in the driveway.

My mom shook her head as she walked up the steps to the porch. “Of course not, Cali. Artemis is a member of our family, not some out-of-town friend. She’ll stay with us tonight. You two can share your room.” She turned to look at me as she reached the door, her face shining with happiness. “Like sisters.”

My stomach clenched. “We’re not six-year-olds, Mom. Are you going to get us bunk beds next?”

I was joking, but there was a stab of jealousy in my heart that I couldn’t ignore. I’d just risked my ass to save my mom, and now I was going to have to share her with Artemis? What the hell?

“Well,” my mom said casually, pushing open the door, “if you’re going to stay at your apartment tonight, then that works out fine, too. Artemis can just sleep in your room.”

“That’s—That’s not what I meant,” I said quickly. My face had started to burn.

My mom dropped her purse and pulled off her jacket. “Well what did you mean, sweetheart? Are you staying or are you going?”

“I-I…” I didn’t know myself.

“Of course, I hope you *will* stay,” my mom said. “I’d like everyone here tonight. Our first night together as a proper family.”

Her smile was so pure and happy, there was nothing I could do but nod in agreement.

She clapped her hands. “Wonderful.”

It *wasn’t* wonderful, but I couldn’t exactly say why. When I was a kid, I used to dream about having a sister to play with. I’d imagine my dolls as a passel of younger sisters, with me as the long-suffering oldest. But what I’d really wanted was a big sister. Someone to look up to, and someone who would look out for me. But now that I actually had one, I wasn’t so sure. This was *my* family and I’d just gotten them back.

I glanced over at Artemis, who looked the same she always looked—deeply uncomfortable inside a structured house. This had to be overwhelming for her, too, and I felt for her. And maybe I *was* being oversensitive and selfish, but I couldn’t deny how I felt.

“Maybe we could all make dinner together,” my mom suggested brightly. “Me and my girls.”

“Oh, I love food,” Artemis said, sounding genuinely thrilled at the prospect.

My mom looked at me expectantly, but I shrank back.

“I’m going to…” I gestured vaguely toward the stairs. This was all happening too fast. I needed some time to think. “I’ll be down later,” I said, and headed upstairs.

As I walked into the familiar room, I wondered if this was the last time it would be just *my* room.

I flopped down onto my bed and spent a few minutes feeling pretty sorry for myself. But, after a while, the smell of caramelizing onions floated up the stairs, along with the low hum of Artemis and Mom’s conversation. I stood reluctantly and walked back downstairs.

Still slightly unwilling to join in, I perched on a barstool and reached for a carrot stick. “What’s for dinner?”

“Artemis has never had stuffed shells. Can you believe it?” my mom asked.

“Um, yeah, I can believe it,” I said flatly. “She grew up in a war-torn Fae orphanage. They probably didn’t have ‘Cuisines of the Human World’ theme nights.”

My mom gave me a hard look, but I saw Artemis bite back a smile.

“We were just talking about the museum,” my mom said, as though I hadn’t spoken. “If we’re able to take down the security system, it should be child’s play to break in and take the vase.”

“That’s true,” Artemis said, tearing lettuce into the salad bowl. “I’m really good at taking things.”

“That’s *also* true,” I said, my voice laced with bitterness. “I should know.” Since she did try to sell me and Greyson to the highest bidder. I wasn’t likely to forget that.

My mom’s eyes darted to me. When I met her gaze, her eyes were doing her classic ‘not now, Caliana’ look. She obviously didn’t fully grasp the reference—she probably figured Artemis and I had had some kind of petty disagreement. I decided not to burst her bubble about her newest firstborn daughter just yet that she was a bounty hunter and had kidnapped me. “I think that it’s important that we don’t dwell on the past. Don’t you agree, Cali?” She waited until I nodded. “Now is the time to look forward. We’re at the start of so much, girls. And right now we need to think about our plan. Now, Cali, where’s Lola?”

“Oh, I didn’t call her yet,” I said, reaching for my phone. But, before I could grab it, it started to ring. “It’s Lola,” I said, looking at the caller ID. “Must be fate. Hey, Lola—”

“No time for that, Cali. I need your ass over here right now!”

“Whoa, Lola, slow down,” I said, sliding off the barstool and walking into the back yard for a little privacy. Lola sounded pretty freaked out. “What’s going on?”  
 “What’s going on? *What’s going on?* I’ll tell you what’s going on! I’m at some random kegger at the park with Violet—”

“What?” I asked, surprised.

“Not the point,” Lola ground out. “Alex is here and he’s super drunk and saying all kinds of crazy shit! You need to get over here. *Now!*”

**Episode 661**

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked Lola, pulling the sliding door shut behind me so my mom couldn’t hear me.

“Alex. Here. Drunk. Crazy talk,” Lola said, sounding more annoyed than ever.

I huffed an irritated sigh. “What kind of stuff is he saying?”

“I don’t know. A lot of if it makes no sense—he’s just jabbering nonsense—but he keeps talking about Tony.”

“Oh shit,” I muttered.

“Yeah, exactly,” Lola said. “I keep trying to get him to shut up, but he keeps screaming about talking to you.”

“*Me?*”

“Yeah,” Lola said testily. “He’s been pretty insistent, actually. I can’t get him to shut up about it. So can you just do me a huge favor and get your ass down here?”

“Um…” I glanced behind me into the kitchen where Artemis was talking to my mom, who was laughing. “Sure,” I finally said. “Is it okay if I bring Artemis?”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” Lola muttered. “Bring whoever you want, Cali. Just get down here. I’ll send you the pin for our location in the park. Hurry!”

I pulled open the sliding door. “Mom, I need to head out for a minute. Lola needs some help with something, and I can talk to her about the security system and stuff.”

“Oh,” Mom said, looking surprised. “Okay, are you going to be back for—”

“Artemis, do you want to come?” I asked, grabbing the extra set of keys from the bowl on the kitchen counter. Before she had a chance to answer, I grabbed her arm and yanked her out of the kitchen and toward the door.

“Where are we going?” she asked as I hauled her out.

“Every been to a keg party?” I asked, hustling her toward the car.

“What do you think?” Artemis said. “What the hell is a keg party?”

I yanked open the door and unlocked the passenger side. “It’s where a bunch of people hang out in a park and drink beer. Totally fascinating. Wouldn’t want you to miss it. Come on.”

“Oh,” Artemis said, looking interested. She pulled open the door and slid into the car. “I know about beer. That’s like ale, right?”

“Right.”

“Yeah, they had that at the bar Greyson took me to in Portland.”

That stopped me cold. “What?” I asked, looking over at her. “What bar? What are you talking about?”

“When you and Xavier left, I went with Greyson back to his apartment in Portland.”

“Back to his apartment? In Portland?” I repeated, dumbfounded.

Artemis nodded. “Yeah. He said we needed to rest and clean up and stuff before he went back to the pack house. And then he took me to a bar. It was fun. There was beer, but I didn’t have any,” she finished casually.

I stared at her, my mouth hanging open as I tried to process this surprising information. I mean, Greyson was certainly free to entertain anyone he wanted, and I knew I shouldn’t have been concerned, but…

Not only was Artemis moving in my mom, but now on Greyson, too?

“Hey, can I try driving this time?” Artemis asked brightly.

“No,” I snapped. “Now’s not the time.”

It didn’t take long to get to park, and I swung the car into the parking lot.

“What is this place?” Artemis asked, eyeing the trees.

“Just a park,” I muttered, looking at my phone for the location Lola had sent. “Like the forest.”

“Oh, great,” Artemis said brightly. “I’m dying to go hunting. I have my whip, but—I don’t have my bow. Do you have one I can borrow?”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t, and we’re not going hunting. It’s a park for people, not hunting. Let’s go.” I climbed out and led Artemis past the playground, toward a small amphitheater and a couple of covered picnic tables. I had Lola’s directions to lead me, but I didn’t really use them. I just followed the rowdy sound of people laughing and screaming and talking way too loudly.

“Perhaps we should take them by surprise,” Artemis said, slowing to a stop as we approached the group.

I rolled my eyes with a sigh, but gave an unwilling smile. “They’re expecting us.” Artemis was fast becoming an interloper in my life, but there was something so pure about her complete lack of knowledge about the human world that made it hard for me to be mad at her. But I was trying.

There was a bonfire burning in one of the fire pits, and people were grouped around it, sitting in camp chairs or on closed coolers. There was a guy strumming a guitar and singing along, his voice carrying over the din of other conversations.

Artemis looked over at me. “Its it just me or does he have a terrible voice?”

I laughed. “It’s not just you.”

“So why is he playing? Why isn’t someone stopping him?” Artemis asked, shuddering as the guy his a particularly high, particularly off-key note.

“Welcome to your first college keg party,” I said ruefully. “I don’t even think you’re legally allowed to have one without some rando with a guitar present.”

“Is that a *guitar?*” Artemis looked over curiously. “I wondered. I thought it was too big to be a lute.”

“It’s not a lute.”

“Okay,” she said, rubbing her hands together. “I’m ready for some beer.”

“It’s over there,” I said, pointing to the silver keg. It was surrounded by a bunch of frat bros, but I knew Artemis could take care of herself. “Just don’t drink too much, okay? And don’t mention anything about being Fae!”

She gave me a dismissive wave and disappeared into the crowd surrounding the keg. I looked after her for a moment, then turned my attention to the rest of the party, looking around for Lola. It only took a moment for me to locate her. She was standing on the other side of the bonfire with Violet and some guy. A tall, good-looking guy, who Violet couldn’t stop staring at. Lola spotted me and waved me over.

As I walked over, I saw Jay, standing a ways away from Lola, holding a red cup, drinking alone. I walked over to Lola, intending to ask her about it, but I forgot about that when I saw the way Violet was looking up at the good-looking guy. Up close, he was even more attractive than I’d thought—his skin glowed golden in the light from the bonfire, and his hazel eyes sparkled as he looked down at Violet. They were looking at each other like they were the last two people on earth. Their apparent devotion was fascinating, and I stared for a moment. Wait*,* could this be the guy Violet had been talking about earlier? The one she was so convinced was her mate? I guessed maybe the joke was on me. They looked pretty smitten. Either way, there was no way I was getting her attention now, so I’d have to ask her later.

I looked over at Lola. “Where’s Alex?”

Lola raised her eyebrows and pointed, using the hand holding her red cup. “How could you miss him?”

I turned. Alex was behind me, apart from the group. He was wobbling on his feet, like he was trying to get somewhere but having a hard time, and about every other step he stopped to chug more beer.

“Oh god,” I muttered, and walked over. “Hey, Alex.”

“Cali!” Alex yelled, lighting up when his bleary eyes focused on my face. “It’s Cali, everyone!” he said, speaking to no one. “Everyone! It’s my friend, Cali!”

“Yeah, Alex, it’s me. I think you’ve had enough to drink. Why don’t you let me take this.” I reached for the red cup in his hand, but he was too quick for me and pulled it away.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Cali. Nobody here believes me,” he said, speaking too loudly.

“Believes you about what?” I asked with a sigh.

“About Tony!” Alex said, clearly shocked. “That he’s here!”

My heart stuttered. “What?” I looked around, every shadow suddenly looking very suspicious. “Tony’s here? Where?”

Alex curled a finger, beckoning me closer, like he wanted to tell me a secret, so I took a step closer. “*Everywhere!*” he yelled, right in my ear. “I feel him all the time.”

“Alex—” I started, then stopped when Alex stumbled, spilling the rest of his beer down his shirt. I sighed. “This is not good, man.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he said, snorting with mirthless laughter.

“Okay,” I said, reaching for him, “I think you’ve had enough. Why don’t you let me take you home?”

“*No!*” he said, drawing back, his face going pale. “I can’t go home!”

“Why not?” I asked, surprised.

“I can’t go home. I’m afraid to go home!”

“We’re going to take care of this,” I said soothingly. “We are, Alex. It’s going to be okay. I promise.”

Alex looked at me for a moment, then took a step toward me and dropped his head onto my shoulder, weeping sloppily. “Thank you, Cali. Thank you.”

“Okay,” I said, awkwardly patting his shoulder. “Let’s get you out of here.”

He let me lead him through the party, past the bonfire. But, as we passed the keg, I felt his body stiffen.

“Tony?” he gasped, and, before I could look or speak or even think to react, the keg exploded.

**Episode 662**

XAVIER

I paced the length of Colton’s room again and again, seething the entire time.

Because Colton hadn’t been around when rooms had been given out, his was small, and I could only make it four paces before I had to turn and go the other direction. Anger pulsing through me, I clenched and unclenched my fists, breathing hard through my nose.

*Go get him*, my brain screamed at me. *Go after him. Rip him to shreds*. *You can do this. Greyson’s had it coming for years.*

And there was a huge part of me that wanted to do just that. This was so fucking typical of Greyson, warning me to stay away from Cali—for the good of the pack—and then slipping into her room behind my back. This kind of misdirection was classic Greyson bullshit. I should have known something like this was going to happen, and I felt like an idiot for not having seen it coming a mile away.

I knew Greyson couldn’t be trusted, and watching him slide into Cali’s room when he thought I wasn’t looking had only proved that point.

But… while half my brain wanted to yank his heart out of his chest with my bare hands, the other half reminded me that it didn’t matter. Cali had come here to see *me*. She’d missed *me*. She’d said so when she’d arrived, and I believed her. Cali and I had our problems, but I wanted her back, and for that to happen, I knew I needed to trust her. And, if nothing had happened between her and Greyson while they’d been traipsing around the Fae world, then there was no reason to believe anything would happen here, while I was in the next room.

And, as much as I hated to admit it, some of what Greyson had said about Cali actually did make sense. I did another few laps of Colton’s room while I let the shock of that realization settle in. Silas *was* out there, and he *did* need to be stopped. Those were just facts, and no amount of bickering between us brothers was going to change that. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy, and—in that regard—Greyson *was* right. We couldn’t be distracted. And Cali was one hell of a distraction.

I took a deep breath. She was here. A few rooms over. Mere feet from where I stood. But she’d asked for distance, and even now that she was back, I was still going to give it to her.

Even though… I turned and looked at the closed door. She had said that she’d missed me. I heard her words in my head again, and I smiled. Suddenly, Colton’s darkened room seemed very small, and I strode to the door and yanked it open. I needed to get the hell out. I wasn’t in the mood to talk to anyone, so I hurried down the front stairs—avoiding the living room—and out the front door, heading outside. Maybe a moonlit run would clear my head. That usually did it for me, and now that Greyson was back to babysit the pack, it wouldn’t matter how far I went.

Once I reached the bottom of the porch steps, I stepped onto the lawn and looked up at the wide expanse of sky stretching above me. It was a beautiful night—clear, and so cold I could see my breath puffing into clouds of frost. The sun was down, but the sky was still in the process of turning black, the stars still sharpening from dull points of light to little diamond pinpricks. The front lawn sloped down toward the road, but the side lawn meandered its way down toward a natural lake. Even though I’d been here for days, I hadn’t had a chance to check it out, so I headed down that way.

The scent of pine was sharp in the cold night air, and I took a deep breath. I missed my own house and my own forest. It would be good to get back there, when this was all over. It would be good to have Cali back there, too. And, since Colton was still away, it would be just the two of us.

I ran my hand through my hair as I walked, thinking about this possibility, running through it in my mind. It had never been just the two of us. We’d never had a chance to be alone—like a real couple. This would be a first.

God, if only. I’d had no idea how good I’d had it.

I looked up when I reached the shore of the lake and was startled to see a form silhouetted against the moonlight. It took me by surprise, but I knew in an instant who it was.

Cali.

She might have come back because she’d missed me, but I’d missed her, too. So much that it had felt like a constant, gnawing hunger, deep in the pit of my stomach. But, true to my word, I kept my distance and just watched her for a moment, unobserved. She stood there, watching as the sky deepened its velvety blackness.

The moon was dim tonight, but I could still see her as she put her hands on her hips and looked down at her feet. She walked slowly through the water, watching as the water rippled away from her, moving in ever expanding circles. Everything about the scene made my body ache for her. I wanted to give her distance, but why did she have to be so fucking enticing all the damn ti—

“Xavier?”

I jumped when I heard my name and looked up. She’d noticed me and was looking over, a smile on her beautiful face. I didn’t even hesitate before I walked toward her. I’d intended to give her distance, but she’d called for me, and I wasn’t going to ignore that. Greyson could go fuck himself.

*Besides*, I told myself, *there’s no harm in talking*.

But, as I joined her at the edge of the lake, every cell in my body knew I wanted to do a hell of a lot more than just *talk* to her.

She turned her face up to mine. “It’s so beautiful here.”

I had to tear my eyes away from hers to look out at the lake and the forest beyond. “Yeah,” I said, my voice husky. “It’s nice.”

She looked around at the picturesque scene almost sadly. “I can’t remember the last time I was anywhere so beautiful.”

“I know,” I said. My whole body was buzzing, being so close to her, and it was hard to focus. I cast around for something to say. “The water is really… clear. And quiet. The fish must all be asleep.”

Her brows furrowed and she looked up, confused. “What?”

If I could have snatched that statement out of the air, I would have. *The fish must be asleep?* What the fuck was that? Since when was I nervous around Cali?

I cleared my throat. I *was* nervous, so I might as well ask the question that was making me feel so unsettled. It was a question that had been racing through my mind all day. I turned to look at her. “Why’d you come back, Cali?”

Her face was shadowed in the moonlight, but I could see that she looked surprised by my question. She didn’t quite meet my gaze. “I told you, Xavier. I missed you.”

It wasn’t exactly the answer I’d been looking for—I’d been hoping for more information—but it was good to hear again, and I smiled. I reached for her. The skin of her shoulder felt feather-soft beneath my hand, and I ran my fingers down the length of her arm. “I meant what I said,” I said, in a low voice. “In the Fae world.”

She was quiet for a moment, watching the passage of my hand across her skin, then she looked up, her dark eyes meeting mine. “You said a lot of things, Xavier.”

I smiled. “I’m talking about when I said that I’d chosen you. I have.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, a frown flitting across her brow, almost too fast to notice.

But I saw it, and I knew what I had to do. I had to erase all doubt from her mind.

“It means this,” I said, stepping toward her. I slipped my arm around her waist, wrapped my free hand around the back of her neck, and drew her toward me, pressing my lips to hers, claiming her—once again—as my own.

Mine. Not Greyson’s.

*Mine*.

She responded instantly, her whole self ready for me—hands reaching, mouth opening. The cold of the night disappeared as we grasped each other, melding together, setting each other on fire. I could get lost in her, and maybe I already was.

Then, after a long moment, I pulled away.

Cali looked up at me, her lips kiss-swollen, her eyes dark with desire and confusion. “Xavier, what’s wrong?”

**Episode 663**

Cold, sticky, smelly beer foam coated me from head to toe. I looked at Alex and saw that he looked much the same, if—in his drunken state—slightly more surprised. Like he couldn’t figure out how it had happened. I looked around at the rest of the party. Everyone was starting to stand from where they had crouched down, bracing against the impact of the exploding keg. Everyone was rattled and soaked with beer, but no one looked hurt, which was amazing. Some of them were even starting to laugh.

“Cali!”

I looked around and saw Artemis jogging over. She looked shaken, but mostly dry, so she must have been far enough away to avoid the beer waterfall.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked, looking me over. “That was crazy. Is this what keg parties are usually like? Seems like a waste of beer. Why did they blow up the keg?”

“They normally don’t,” I said grimly. I wiped foam from my face and scanned the darkening park. “That was definitely not normal. Something’s fucked up around here.”

“It’s Tony!” Alex yelled, looking around wildly. “Can’t you see? Tony’s everywhere! He’s following me! He’s trying to ruin my life!”

Covered with beer foam and peering into the empty trees above us, Alex was starting to look truly deranged, and I stepped away from him. He was really testing my resolve to be a good friend. I caught sight of Violet and turned to make sure she was okay. She and that hazel-eyed guy were both covered with beer, but looked completely unbothered by it. They were both laughing and wiping foam from their eyes. I narrowed my eyes at Violet, trying to see if she was love-drunk or drunk-drunk. I really hoped Lola hadn’t let her drink. She was way too young for that. And, I thought, pulling my soaked T-shirt away from my skin, beer tasted disgusting.

“So, is that it?” Artemis asked, looking around, her expression crestfallen. “Is the party over? I was starting to have a good time. One of those guys over there was telling me about something called a keg stand? I didn’t totally understand, but it sounded fun. Does someone get another keg from somewhere? Who makes the kegs? Who brings them?”

Before I could even start to answer her questions, I spied a couple of the fraternity guys walking over with cases of beer in their arms.

“I just had these in my trunk!” one guy yelled, holding up a case of beer

“It’s a miracle!” another guy yelled back, sounding close to tears.

“There,” I said, pointing. “Beer problem solved.”

“Oh, great!” Artemis said, grinning, and headed over toward the beer-carriers.

“What am I supposed to do?” Alex cried, putting his hands over his face. “He’s everywhere!”

I turned to Alex with a sigh. “Calm down, Alex. It’s okay. It’s going to be okay. God, this would be a lot easier if you weren’t so drunk.”

“I *know*,” Alex wailed into his hands.

I rolled my eyes. He’d always been a lightweight when it came to drinking. “I really think you’re reading too much into this, Alex. That keg probably just had too much air in it. It wasn’t a ghost. It was just an accident.”

But Alex was already shaking his head, even before I finished speaking. “No it wasn’t. Don’t lie to me, Cali. I heard what you said to your cute friend. You said it was fucked up. You know.”

“Wait, you think Artemis is cute?” I asked, surprised.

Alex gave me a face of exaggerated surprise. “Are you kidding me? She’s *beautiful*.”

“And you’re drunk,” I said, matter-of-factly. I’d deal with the fact that Artemis was systematically taking over every person in my life later. “Let’s get you home.”

He let me lead him away from the party and, except for some gentle weeping (from him, not me, though I was pretty tempted) we walked without incident. As we neared the parking lot, I pulled out my phone to text Lola to ask her to give Artemis a ride home. But before I’d typed a word, I felt Alex go stiff with fear.

“It’s him!” he shrieked, pointing.

I opened my mouth to tell Alex to calm down, but when I looked where he was pointing, I went silent with horror. Standing in front of us was Tony, a strange, benevolent smile on his ghostly white face.

“How *nice* it is to see you two together. My two best friends. Hanging out. Having fun together.”

His voice was familiar, but there was an edge to it that ran painfully along my spine, searing every nerve.

“What do you want?” Alex demanded, his voice edged with madness. “Leave me *alone*, Tony!”

“*Shh!*” I hissed. “Stop yelling, Alex!” Every noise was jangling my nerves, and I gripped Alex’s arm tightly.

But Tony only laughed, a hollow, mirthless sound that made my jaw ache. “It’s fine, Alex. Yell all you want. It won’t do you any good.”

“You’re such an asshole,” I spat, before I could stop myself. “Why are you doing this to Alex? What did he ever do to you? And what about them?” I nodded over my shoulder, back toward the party. “Why are you bringing them into this? They didn’t do anything to you. Some of them were your friends.”

“Please,” Tony snapped, his voice sharp as breaking bones. “They weren’t my friends. They forgot about me before I was even buried. Most of them didn’t even come to my funeral.”

“Yeah?” I asked, hefting a sagging Alex higher on my side. “Maybe that’s because you suck. Did you ever think about that?” Tony’s eyes narrowed, and I spoke quickly. “But maybe it’s not too late. Maybe you can make amends. You know, finish whatever you have left unfinished.”

Tony didn’t respond right away, and my heart rate sped up. I needed this to tip my way. If he could make the keg explode, then my mom was right—he was becoming more powerful, and more dangerous.

But before Tony could say anything, I heard a crunching sound behind me, and I looked back to see Artemis stumbling toward me.

“Cali, listen, I’m not sure beer is the drink for me—” She looked up, her bleary eyes focusing on Tony’s manifestation. “He’s back!”

“Right you are,” I muttered. “Artemis, don’t do anything stupid—”

“This time you won’t get away!” she screamed at him and, bending, picked up a rock and hurled it at Tony.

I looked over, expecting it to go right through him. And it did, but—to my horror—he caught it as it came out the other side. Then he wound up and hurled it back at Artemis. She ducked in the nick of time and the rock smashed into the tree just behind her, embedding itself into the bark.

“We have to get out of here,” I said, starting to back away. Tony’s powers were changing from moment to moment, and I didn’t want to stick around to see what was next. “Artemis! Let’s go.”

But she wasn’t listening. She was fuming and glaring at Tony. “How dare you! Who the hell do you think you are?”

Tony looked at me, his dark eyes like bottomless pits. “Who is this girl?” he asked. “Your friend is all bark, Cali. No bite.” He rose up from the ground and settled on the lowest branch of the nearest maple tree. “This is fun, actually. Looking down on you,” he said, with his menacing smile.

I hated to turn my back on him, but I glanced back at the party. Thankfully, no one seemed to be noticing. I waved, trying to get Lola’s attention. “Get out of here!” I called to her, when she looked up. She looked confused, but nodded.

When I looked back, Artemis had stepped over to the base of Tony’s maple tree and was glaring up. “I’m not afraid of you, little ghost boy.”

Tony leaned over and spat, sending down something green and putrid, which landed right on Artemis’s shirt. She looked down at it, horrified.

“I think I’m going to puke,” Alex mumbled, stumbling out of my grasp.

“That does it!” Artemis roared. “That’s it, ghost boy! You’ve pushed me too far!”

“Artemis! Stop! What are you doing! Whatever you’re going to do, don’t do it!” I yelled.

But there was no stopping her. Despite my warning not to do anything Fae, Artemis raised her hands and focused her energy on the low branch of the maple tree where Tony was perched. I saw her narrow her eyes in concentration and felt the pulse of energy in the air as it surged through her hands.

There was a loud crack, like the report of a gun, and Tony’s branch snapped off the tree and crashed to the ground, only a few feet away from where Alex stood. He looked down at the branch, up at the tree, over to Artemis, and began to scream.

Tony dissipated in a wisp of smoke and Alex, his face twisted with horror and shock, turned to Artemis. “How the hell did you do that?”

**Episode 664**

AVA

“Xavier,” I said again, my heart hammering in my chest. “What’s wrong?”

For one heart-stopping moment, Xavier just looked at me, his eyes searching my face. But then he pulled me closer and brushed a soft kiss across my lips.

“I just don’t want to mess things up. Part of me wants to give you the distance you wanted, but…” He shook his head. “But seeing you again is making me want to throw the rules out. We’re mates, Cali. Us being apart… It just doesn’t feel right.”

I felt a strange surge of anger flare in my chest. Xavier was *my* mate. Had he forgotten that? He must have, because now he was looking at me—at *Cali*—with such love in his eyes, saying these words to her. Now he believed he was mates with *her*.

I channeled my anger away and regained my focus. I pulled him close. “So throw the rules out,” I said, my voice low. “What’s stopping you?”

His jaw worked mutely, and I could tell he was doing everything he could to hold himself back. Even that tiny movement made my heart flutter in my ribcage. The power he still had over me was staggering.

“I just want to make sure we’re thinking this through. I want things to be good with us again, Cali. I want to make sure I’m not just reacting to this situation—to the surprise of seeing you again.” He took a deep breath and stepped back, further up the scraggly bank of the lake. “You said you wanted space. That was *your* idea.”

“Yes,” I said slowly. So Cali had wanted space. Interesting. I wondered why.

“And Greyson and I spoke about it, and we agreed.” He took a deep breath. “Given the *due destini*, we decided it would be for the best if we both kept our distance.”

I looked at Xavier, frankly surprised. He was… *different*. More mature than I remembered. The Xavier I had known was headstrong and stubborn, unable to compromise or consider any perspectives other than his own. But this version of Xavier seemed so much more thoughtful. A thorn of jealousy speared my heart as I realized that the real Cali was getting this version of Xavier, when I’d only had the cruel, impatient version. I had loved him, of course, but he’d only ever thought of himself. I hadn’t even known that the man standing before me now was possible. I swallowed hard, pushing down my feelings once again.

“But,” Xavier said, closing the space between us again, “you were the one who asked for space, and if you don’t want it now…” He trailed off, his eyes hopeful.

He was *aching* for me—I could practically feel the desire humming in his body. I could almost hear it. I knew that if I so much as crooked a little finger, I could have him begging for me. He was so certain that I was Cali, too. Too bad for him. But…

I bit my lip, thinking hard. Cali had wanted space. Maybe a little space wasn’t such a bad idea. My relationship with Xavier had always been marked by his dominance over me. I’d liked it that way—it had been exciting to be possessed the way he had possessed me—but now, seeing him so hungry for me, I felt a new kind of power surging through me. There was something very tantalizing about the thought of stringing him along. Making him wait.

Besides, it would give me more time to figure out what was going on between him, Cali, and Greyson. And *due destini*? What in the world was that about? That was just a bedtime story. Wasn’t it?

I took a deep breath. “No. Maybe you’re right. Maybe we *should* slow it down. Or…” I paused for a moment, relishing the tension in the air as he waited for me to speak. Then, quick as lightning, I reached for him, pulling him into a kiss.

His response was even faster. His hands were everywhere, mapping my body, claiming me, and I melted into him, just like I always had, like no time had passed. *Only I can do this to him*, I thought to myself as I felt his breath hitch and his pulse begin to race with desire. *Only I have this power over him. He thinks this is Cali, but this is what* we’ve *always had. This fire, this spark*. He dropped his mouth to my neck and I leaned my head back, my breath catching in my throat.

I would never forgive him for what he’d done to me—what he had done to my family—and I was going to make him pay. I had committed my life to that. But, until that moment came, there was no reason I couldn’t enjoy myself. I fisted handfuls of his shirt as he ran his tongue along my collarbone and into the hollow of my throat.

“Xavier,” I panted into the night air. “Oh god, *Xavier*.”

Revenge aside, I couldn’t stop the fact that he was what I had always wanted. I had always loved him, from the moment I’d laid eyes on him, and our connection had never waned. Even now, after all that had happened between us, my body still slid against his like they were made to fit together.

“Cali,” Xavier whispered. I ignored this. He slipped his hands under my shirt and slid them upward, his fingers playing against my ribs until he reached my breasts. He ran his thumbs along the soft undersides, making my whole body shiver with pleasure.

My breath caught with a gasp and I pressed myself against him, desperate to feel more. His lips met mine again and then his tongue was in me, exploring, claiming, possessing. How could I have forgotten what this felt like? Kissing him was like being drunk—all warm and intoxicating. I pushed my hips against his, grinding myself against him, feeling him grow hard against me. I knew what I wanted, and he knew it too—with a low growl, he leaned down and picked me up, and I wrapped my legs around his waist.

Then, he stumbled. He slipped on a water-slick rock and, for a moment I thought he’d managed to catch himself, but then he tripped again, splashing into the water. We both tumbled down, plummeting into the icy lake water.

“What the *fuck!*” Xavier shouted, splashing to the surface and shaking water from his eyes. He reached out for me. “Are you okay, Cali?”

It took me a moment to remember he was talking to me. “I’m okay,” I said quickly. But I wasn’t. Instead of hot, passionate sex with Xavier, I was sitting waist-deep in freezing cold water, with wet hair dripping down my back.

He stood, shaking his head with a chuckle, and reached for my hand, hauling me to my feet. “I’m sorry, baby. I just lost my footing there. I wasn’t, you know, paying that much attention to where I was putting my *feet*.”

“Yeah,” I said, not smiling. I wiped water from my eyes and tried to wring out my sopping wet T-shirt.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked, eyeing me warily.

“Maybe not,” I said, trying to squeeze the lake water from my hair.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, pulling me closer. “Maybe I can warm you up.”

I let him pull me close, but part of me was wondering if he’d actually meant to fall into the water. Xavier was one of the most agile men I’d ever met. In all the time I’d known him, I’d never seen him so much as trip. Maybe it had been an accident, or maybe it hadn’t been. Maybe he was playing some kind of game. But what?

And, I reasoned, so what if he was playing a game? I was too. I relaxed into his chest, pressing against him. His arms were strong around me, and his body was so warm.

Unbidden, a flash of memory came to me. We were young, barely twelve, playing at a watering hole near my parents’ house. It was back before any of the pack war had started. We’d been at it all day—a big group of us—jumping in and out, wearing ourselves out, daring each other to do stupid things like hold our breath and jump in holding a heavy stone. Then Colton had dared Xavier to kiss me. He had done it, a smirk on his face, and I had been thrilled. I’d gone to bed that night with my finger pressed to my lips, remembering the pressure of his kiss. It had been my first kiss.

At least, that was how I remembered it. I wondered if Xavier remembered.

He brushed a hand down my cheek, bringing my thoughts back to the present, and I looked up, surprised. He raised an eyebrow. “Is that better?”

“Yes,” I murmured.

He smiled and leaned down to kiss me. But, before his lips met mine, we both heard a voice that made us freeze.

“Well, you two don’t waste any time, do you?”

**Episode 665**

JOSS

It was with a mix of irritation and begrudging amusement that I stared at Xavier and Cali as they turned to face me, both looking startled. They were soaked—I’d seen them tumble into the freezing cold lake after a kiss—and Cali had started to shiver, but she stepped away from Xavier’s embrace and looked down. That was strange. Cali was usually so stubborn and outspoken, I was surprised she wasn’t yelling, or at least glaring at me.

But Xavier was doing both. “What the hell are you doing out here, Joss? I didn’t realize it was in your job description to patrol the lake.”

“My job description covers a lot of territory,” I said ruefully, crossing my arms.

He didn’t look impressed. “You’re telling me you don’t have anything better to do?” he asked, pulling off his sopping wet jacket and draping it over Cali’s shoulders. She glanced up at him with a small, intimate smile.

My hackles went up. They often did with Xavier. There was just something about his tone—condescending and dismissive—that always put me on edge. Like he was barely putting up with me. It made me crazy. “You might be well-served remembering that I am the *Luna* of this pack, Xavier. *Your* Luna. And I don’t have to answer to anyone but the Alpha. And,” I said with a smirk, “that’s Greyson, if you’ll recall.”

Cali looked up at me, her eyes wide with surprise, like this information was news to her. Then her gaze went quickly to Xavier.

“You know,” I added, just to twist the knife in a little deeper. “Your dear *brother*.”

Xavier’s derisive expression hardened to anger. “What the hell do you want, Joss?”

Something was bothering me. I looked over at Cali, who had stepped closer to Xavier again. She was standing a little behind his shoulder, almost like she was hiding behind him. That was strange. It was also strange that she hadn’t said anything. It was normally impossible to get her to shut up, but now she was standing silently, looking down at her feet in the dark, moonlit water.

“I was patrolling the perimeter—which actually *is* part of my job description as Luna—and I saw a commotion over here. Honestly, I thought it was a couple of goats in heat or something. So I came over to see what the hell was going on,” I said.

Xavier stared at me for a moment, then raised his eyebrows and gestured between him and Cali. “Um, is it obvious now, Joss? Or do I need to sit you down for a little talk about the birds and the bees?” He smirked. “God knows where else you would have learned about that.”

I bristled. “You two should get inside,” I said sharply. “It’s not safe out here. Especially when you’re not paying a scrap of attention to anything around you.”

“Are you my fucking babysitter now?” Xavier asked, taking a step toward me.

“If I am, it’s because you’re both acting like children—”

“I’m tired.”

Xavier and I both looked over in surprise. Cali was looking up at Xavier, her eyes wide. She was still shivering and, in the moonlight, her face looked pale and her lips had turned blue.

“What?” Xavier asked, his tone gentle.

“I’m tired,” she said again. She wrapped her arms around her body, pulling Xavier’s wet jacket tighter around her. “And cold. I’m going back up to the house.”

“Yeah, let’s go get you into a hot bath,” Xavier said kindly. He put his hand on the small of her back and helped her up the rise of scraggly ground from the lake to the lawn.

Back on even ground, she started up the lawn toward the pack house. Xavier went to follow her, but I put a hand on his arm, stopping him.

“We need to talk.”

He heaved a huge sigh and rolled his eyes. “What now?”

I glared at him. “You don’t think a lot, do you?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I shook my head. “I just wonder if you ever think beyond your dick.”

“Joss, I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking—”

“Did it ever occur to you that what you do impacts that pack?”

“What are you talking about, Joss?” Xavier snapped, looking crazed.

“I’m talking about you and Cali and Greyson!” I snapped. “I’m talking about *due destini*! I’m talking about how—legend or not—it’s fucking crystal clear that the three of you are somehow linked together! That’s what I’m talking about!”

Xavier’s jaw worked. “What’s your point?” he spat.

Shocked, I stared at him. “What’s my point? Are you kidding me?” I stepped closer to him, crowding into his face. “Do I really have to remind you about Silas? About the danger we’re facing as a pack because of your dear father? Thanks to you and Colton, he’s got the orb, which makes him way more powerful and way more dangerous. We have to be even more on-guard, even more vigilant. And you’re out here, eyes closed, ready to tear your clothes off out in the open in the dead of night. God, you’re such an idiot! You and Greyson agreed to back off, to fucking focus. But all you can think about is hooking up with your mate.” I gave a hollow laugh. “If she even *is* your mate.”

Xavier made a sound like a low growl. “You’d better watch yourself, Joss. Don’t push me too hard, or you’ll regret it.”

“Yeah, I’m not worried too about that,” I said, rolling my eyes. “What I *am* worried about is Silas and the fucking orb. Maybe I *should* push you. Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe no one’s pushed you enough. Greyson doesn’t get in your face nearly as often as he should. Maybe if someone pushed you a little harder, that’s what it would take to get you to understand that you’re playing with fire.” Xavier shook his head dismissively, blowing me off, and my anger flared. “This isn’t the time for your selfishness, Xavier. Whatever issues you and Greyson have with Cali need to be put on hold. For the good of the pack—”

“You need to mind your own fucking business, Joss,” Xavier snapped, pushing past me, ramming hard into my shoulder.

“Hey,” I snarled, turning and grabbing his shoulder to spin him back around to face me. “This pack *is* my business!”

“Don’t you fucking touch me,” Xavier growled, his face livid with fury. He shoved my hand away and turned to walk up the sloping lawn toward the house. Cali had already disappeared inside.

“Don’t walk away from me,” I shouted after him.

Xavier turned, an angry smile contorting his face. “Or what, Joss? You’re going to fight me? Take me on yourself? Or are you going to ask Greyson to help you? Because, if I recall correctly, you haven’t always been able to rely on your Alpha to have your back, have you?”

He’d touched a nerve, and, by the way his smile grew, he knew it. My anger was bubbling up inside me, but I took a deep breath. I needed to keep it together. I was not going to let my emotions dictate the course of this conversation, no matter how Xavier tried to needle me. I knew what was true: I was the Luna of the Redwood pack and Greyson had chosen *me* for a fucking reason.

“This is the wrong argument to be having,” I said, trying to keep my voice reasonable. “There’s no reason for there to be in-fighting. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. We need to be united against Silas and whoever he’s gathering to fight alongside him.” I took another breath, forcing myself to be rational. “We’re all on the same side, Xavier. I just want to make sure that’s how you see it, too. For everyone’s sake.”

He was quiet for a moment. He might have been thinking. A cloud passed over the moon, casting us both into shadow, so it was too dark to read the expression on his face. After a moment, he spoke. “You don’t have to worry about me, Joss.”

There were about a hundred ways to interpret this statement, and I hadn’t even begun to think of them all when I felt a prickling sensation on the back of my neck. My senses suddenly electrified, I spun around with a gasp and scanned the tree line beyond the lake.

“What is it?” Xavier asked. His voice had dropped its defensive edge, and he took a step closer to me. “What do you see, Joss?”

I held up a finger to quiet him, my eyes straining in the darkness as I peered into the dense woods that bordered our property. “Can you feel that?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

Xavier paused, and I could feel him casting his own senses out. “There’s… *something*. What is it?”

“There,” I said, pointing to the trees beyond the lake. “We’re being watched.”

**Episode 666**

“Are you *kidding* me right now?” I fumed, glaring at Artemis. Not only had she just used her Fae magic—out in public—but, on top of that, she’d done it in front of Alex. If werewolves had a strict policy about not being found out by humans, then Fae probably should have similar priorities!

“Did you see that?” Alex was staring at the fallen tree branch at his feet with wide-eyed shock. Shit. “Did you see that, Cali?”

“See what?” I asked innocently.

Alex stared at me, then pointed wildly at Artemis. “She made this branch break! Something she did made this branch break off from the tree and it scared Tony away! Didn’t you see it?” He looked at Artemis. “How the hell did you do that?”

“Um…” Artemis glanced over at me, clearly unsure how to respond.

I rolled my eyes. This night was turning into a total shitshow.

“Hey, Cali! What the hell’s going on?”

Lola jogged over, looking confused. She looked around, taking in Artemis’s guilty look, the fallen tree branch, and Alex’s shocked and fearful expression.

She looked over at me, one eyebrow raised. “Care to explain?”

Alex stepped over the tree branch and strode closer, his eyes frantic. “Tony was here! And he was in that tree! And then she”—he pointed to Artemis —“did *something* that made the tree branch fall. Some kind of crazy magic thing!”

“Alex,” I said soothingly, trying desperately to shut him up before anyone else heard him. “Artemis didn’t do anything. How could she have? The branch fell because of the wind. You’re drunk. You’re just confused.”

“There’s no wind! And I’m not drunk!” Alex shot back, looking highly offended. “Okay, maybe a little,” he conceded. “Maybe a lot. But I’m not confused! I know what I saw!”

“And what did you see, exactly?” Artemis asked, her voice cool.

Alex looked at her, confused. “You did something to that tree to break that branch.”

“But what did I do?” she asked, her expression icy.

“You… You raised your hands and…” Alex trailed off, looking confused.

“And what?” I asked, seeing where Artemis was going with this.

“I-I guess I don’t know.” He faltered. “I guess that’s all. Just, this,” he said, raising his own hands, like Artemis had done.

“God, you’re such a drama queen, Alex,” Lola said, rolling her eyes. “Why are you even here?”

Alex looked wounded and I stepped toward him. I didn’t like making him feel like he was going crazy when he actually wasn’t. “How about we go for a little walk? Get a little air? See if we can sober you up a bit?”

He nodded mutely.

“Do you still want me to get Violet out of here?” Lola asked.

We both looked over to where the bonfire was still burning. Violet was still standing with her hazel-eyed hunk, laughing at something he’d just said.

“I guess she’s fine. And now that Tony’s gone, we’re probably safe. Just make sure she doesn’t get drunk, okay?” I said.

“You mean like this idiot?” Lola said, glaring at Alex, who was still looking back and forth between the fallen branch and the tree.

“Just keep an eye on her, Lola,” I said firmly.

Lola took a drink from the red solo cup in her hand. “Got it, Mom.”

“Come on,” I said, reaching for Alex’s arm as Lola left. “Let’s get going.”

“You know, Cali,” Alex said, as he stumbled next to me, “I think I might be drunk after all. I don’t feel so good. It’s been a long night.”

“Yes it has,” I agreed.

“Do you know how to get poltergeist spit off clothes, Cali?” Artemis asked, falling into step beside me. She had pulled her shirt out and was looking at the green smear Tony had left on the fabric.

“I have no idea,” I said. “And, honestly, I think that’s the least of our problems—”

“Whoops!” Alex called out, stumbling over a tree root. He nearly fell to the ground, but I pulled him up and propped him up against the tree.

When he was safely deposited, I turned to Artemis. “I’m worried about Tony, Artemis.”

“Really?” she asked, looking up from her shirt. “Why? He’s not that tough. He disappeared pretty quickly when I scared him off. Next time he shows up, I’ll just do it again.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Don’t you see? Tony’s ghost used to just appear. Apparitions only. But now he can *do* things, control the world around him. He exploded the vase, spat, threw that rock. He’s changing, getting more powerful. Getting more violent.”

“So what do you want to do?” Artemis asked.

“I’m hoping we can just put an end to him with that vase from the museum,” I said thoughtfully. I turned around as Alex slid down the tree trunk to sit on the ground. “Because it’s affecting him, too. He’s getting worse.”

“And who is *he?*” Artemis asked, eyeing Alex.

“He’s a family friend. Which means he’s your friend, too.”

Artemis didn’t look pleased to hear that. “I don’t need a friend like him. I don’t like him. He’s cute, but it ends there.” I glared at her until she caught my eye and put her hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay, he’s our friend.”

I turned away with a sigh. Having a sister was not exactly how I’d imagined it would be.

“So, what do you want to do with… our friend,” Artemis asked warily.

Alex’s eyes were closed, but he was mumbling to himself. There was no way I could leave him here.

“We need to bring him home, I guess. Let him sleep it off. He’s a mess when he’s sober, too, but that would be better than this. Help me get him to the car.”

“Are you kidding me?” Artemis asked, irritated. “I didn’t sign up to be this kid’s guardian.”

“You’ve got something better to do?” I asked, walking over to Alex and starting to pull him to his feet.

“Yes, actually,” Artemis said, planting her feet and putting her hands on her hips, the gesture defiant. “I want to stay here. I’m having a good time at this keg party, and I want to learn more about it. There’s this pack of brothers over there who seem very friendly. They tell me they have a house they would like to show me—”

“You *can’t* go to their house,” I said quickly. “It’s a frat house and it’s not what you think. And the keg is in a million pieces now, anyway.”

“There’s still beer,” Artemis said stubbornly.

I pulled Alex’s arm across my shoulders and he leaned against me unsteadily. “There is no way I’m leaving you here by yourself,” I told Artemis.

“Why not?” she asked, looking offended.

“Are you kidding me?” I gestured to the fallen tree branch. “I can’t trust you to not use your Fae powers. Any time you’re threatened or challenged—*boom!* You Fae it up.”

Artemis looked a little sheepish as she glanced at the branch. “Okay, I panicked a little, and I don’t like that Tony guy. But it won’t happen again. I promise.”

“No way,” I said, shaking my head. I staggered a little as Alex leaned against me. “Besides, my mom would kill me if I left you at some random party. Come on, we’re taking Alex home. *Together*. Now help me, would you?”

With an irritated sigh, Artemis walked over and slipped her shoulder under Alex’s other arm, propping him up and taking half his weight. Artemis was freakishly strong, and she hardly seemed to struggle at all with Alex’s nearly dead weight.

He looked up as she appeared at his side, his hazy eyes brightening. “Hey, you—magic girl. You’re so pretty.”

“Thanks,” Artemis said flatly.

“You want to dance?” he asked.

“Maybe later,” she said, her tone grim.

“We’re taking you home, Alex. The dance is over,” I said.

He looked crestfallen. “That’s too bad. I love to dance. Do you remember the Sadie Hawkins dance in high school, Cali? The one you asked me to?”

“Yep. The car’s that way,” I said to Artemis, pointing toward the lot.

But we’d barely gone fifty feet before we heard a chorus of screams and cries of terror—coming from the direction of the bonfire.

“Holy shit, what now?” I asked, my heart racing. As one, Artemis and I dropped Alex—who collapsed like a sack of potatoes—and turned back toward the party.

“What the hell’s going on back there?” Artemis asked, squinting in the direction of the screams.

My pulse was racing as I scanned the dark park. Between the brightness of the bonfire and the absolute darkness that lay beyond it, it was impossible to tell what was happening. “I just hope it’s not another Tony visit. Where’s Lola? Where’s Violet?”

“How am I supposed to know?!” Artemis said.

Then, Jay came sprinting toward us from the darkness, his expression a mix between shocked and terrified.

“What’s going on?” I asked, running toward to meet him.

He was breathing so hard he could barely speak. “She’s—shifted!”

**Episode 667**

VIOLET

Charlie’s eyes were so distracting that it took me a while to realize that the people around me were screaming. Actually, it was only when Charlie glanced away, looking around the picnic area, that I followed his gaze and noticed the massive freak-out.

“*Wolf!*”

“GET OUT OF HERE!”

“RUN FOR IT!”

“Wolf on the loose!”

Charlie looked back at me, the expression on his handsome face oddly nervous. “A wolf? What do you think they mean? Do they really do see a wolf?”

I looked around. “I have no idea.” Cali, Jay, and Artemis came sprinting toward me, looking harried. “You guys, what’s going on?” I asked.

“That’s what we need to figure out,” Cali said, looking around. “Wait a second. Where’s Lola? She was supposed to come watch you.”

I turned to Jay, whose eyes were darting around nervously. “People are saying there’s a wolf on the loose. What’s going on, Jay?”

“It *is* Lola,” he said miserably. “Lola’s the wolf.”

“*What?*” Cali yelled, making all of us jump. “Are you *kidding* me? She was gone for like, five seconds!”

“You know what Lola’s been like, lately,” Jay said. “She got mad I told her not to have another drink, and said she’d just run home if I was going to be like that, and then she shifted.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding. What was she thinking?” Cali muttered. She glared at Artemis. “First you with the tree, and now this?”

From somewhere in the darkness I heard a wolf howl, and I knew it was Lola. I recognized the sound.

“That’s my girl,” Jay said, looking grim as everyone at the party flipped out, bottles breaking, people screaming. One of the frat guys starting trying to rip up one of the picnic tables.

“We can use it as a barricade!” he called to some of the others.

Cali blew out a breath. “Okay. We need to calm everyone down before there’s a fucking stampede.”

“Can you do that, Cali?” Jay asked. “I need to find Lola, before she causes even more problems.”

“Is this something werewolves do a lot?” Artemis asked curiously. “Randomly shift, just to shake things up?”

“Not really,” I said, watching as a pack of frat guys raced past holding a case of beer, like they were trying to run it to safety.

“I mean, I was with Greyson for *a while*, and he barely shifted,” Artemis continued.

Cali shot Artemis an angry look at this, but Artemis didn’t seem to notice. Somewhere in the darkness Lola howled again, eliciting another chorus of terrified screams from the partygoers, but I wasn’t worried about Lola. She was kind of a wildcard, but she wasn’t dangerous. And Jay was going to find her. She was going to be fine and all the people at this party would have a crazy story for tomorrow.

It was Charlie I was worried about. He’d disappeared from my side and I looked around, trying to spot him. I did, and my stomach dropped. He was standing with Sandi, who looked pretty scared. She was crying and clinging to him like he was a life raft in the middle of the ocean.

Something flared in my chest, but it wasn’t sadness or disappointment—it was anger, and it surprised me. Yeah, Sandi was *technically* his girlfriend, but Charlie and I had been having *such* a good time together. We’d only been talking, but we’d really been connecting. I’d had crushes before, and—no matter what Cali said—I knew that this was more than that. This was a real connection. I glared at Sandi, who was now pressing herself against Charlie. There was *no way* he had that same connection with her, or with anyone else.

“Hey! Everyone!”

My attention was pulled from Charlie and Sandi and over to Cali, who had climbed onto one of the picnic tables and was yelling at the crowd.

“Everyone! Calm down! It’s *not* a wolf!”

The partygoers—terrified and panicked a moment before—stopped and looked up at Cali.

“It’s just a dog! A big dog, but just a dog! Nothing to worry about!”

“See!” a guy in a panther sweatshirt shouted, pushing his friend. “I told you! I told you it looked like a German Shepherd!”

“No way!” his friend said, pushing him back. “It was a husky!”

This caused a break in the tension and there was a near audible sigh of relief. A few people laughed, and the guy with the guitar sat down and started strumming again.

“Oh god,” Artemis muttered. “Someone tell the guy with the lute that it *was* a wolf. Maybe he’ll leave.”

I looked at Cali as she jumped down from the picnic table. I didn’t know much about her, but I really liked her. She seemed really smart, and always seemed to know what to do or say—except when it came to mates. But that wasn’t Cali’s fault. There was no way she could fully understand how I was feeling. I snuck another glance at Charlie. He was still with Sandi. I gave her a critical once over. She had taken out her high ponytail and her long hair cascaded over her shoulders in crisp, unnatural waves. How could Charlie be seriously interested in someone like her? I mean yeah, I guess she was pretty and nice and outgoing, but she wasn’t a wolf. Not like me.

The party had picked up again—the cases of beers had re-materialized and people were laughing and talking again, almost like the wolf scare had never happened. Cali walked back over, looking worn out. “Okay, Violet. Are you about ready to go?”

“What?” I asked, surprised. I looked over at Charlie.

“I need to get Alex home, and I think you should come with us. Artemis is coming, too. I’ll let you figure out Lola,” she said to Jay, who had just joined us, looking frazzled.

“No, I’m not ready to go,” I said quickly. I wasn’t going anywhere without Charlie. Or, at least not without finding out more about him.

Cali—looking fed up—rolled her eyes. “Violet, I really don’t have the time for this—”

“I can take her home if she wants to stay a while longer,” Jay said, coming to my rescue. He shrugged when Cali looked over at him. “I have to find Lola’s clothes, anyway—who knows where the hell she threw them. I’ll just bring Violet back with Lola when we head out.”

“Oh, that’d be great,” I said to Jay. “That’s okay, then. Right, Cali?”

Cali eyed me for a moment, then shrugged, clearly giving up. “Whatever. Just try to keep your eye on her, okay, Jay?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, like I’ve got nothing else to do.”

She gave him a grim smile, and she and Artemis headed off toward the parking lot.

My instinct was to rush over to Charlie—who knew how much time I had left to talk to him before Jay found Lola and we had to leave?—but I resisted. I didn’t want to seem desperate. So I hung back, watching Charlie and Sandi interact. She seemed to have recovered from her scare and, to my delight, bounced over to join another group when some guy in a backward baseball cap waved her over to play a game of beer pong on one of the picnic tables.

Charlie looked around and, when our eyes met, his face lit up. “Violet!” he called, waving at me, and we walked toward each other. “I’m glad to see you. That was pretty crazy, huh? I was worried.”

“Why were you worried?” I asked.

“Oh,” he said, confused. “Because of the wolf. Or I guess big dog. I thought you might have gotten scared or run off or something. That was pretty wild.”

I looked at his face, which still looked tense. I remembered how nervous he’d seemed when people had started screaming about the wolf. No, not nervous—*scared*. “Are you afraid of wolves?” I asked, with a little smile. Funny, I mean, couldn’t he smell that I was one just like I could smell he was?

He laughed, but there was an edge to the sound. “Sure. Isn’t everyone?”

“I don’t know. Are they?”

He smiled, and his golden eyes warmed as he looked at me. “Well, Little Red Riding Hood wasn’t scared, and look where that got her.”

I laughed. God, this guy was hot as hell *and* he knew how to flirt? If I’d known Minnesota was going to be like this, I would have come a lot sooner. I looked around at the party still happening around us—the drinking and the bonfire and the guy on his guitar. “Well, they all seemed to be afraid. But it’s not the same for us, is it?”

The smile on Charlie’s handsome face slipped a little. “What do you mean?”  
 “You know what I mean,” I said, laughing a little. I leaned closer, feeling the warmth emanating from him. It felt like standing next to a fire, and the low, peppery scent of his cologne only drew me in more. “It’s not the same for us. Being werewolves.”

Charlie was close enough that I felt his body go still as stone for a half-second, before he stepped back. “What are you talking about?” he demanded.

I looked up into his shocked face and my confidence faltered. Wait. Did he really not know what I was talking about?

**Episode 668**

GREYSON

My room felt too small. It wasn’t—it was one of the largest in the house—but that wasn’t the point. Any room with four walls would have felt too small in that moment. The night was cold, but I threw open my window and leaned out, desperate for a breath of air. I drew it in, smelling the sharp, cold scent of the pine trees that surrounded the house. I longed for a run, but I knew it wouldn’t be enough. A run around the lake—around the perimeter of the property—would only make me feel worse. I needed… something else. I *longed* for something else. For the days when I’d been Rogue, when I hadn’t been answerable to anyone, when I hadn’t been confined by walls. When I’d been able to just shift and run wherever and whenever I pleased.

That was what we all wanted. What any werewolf wanted. We stayed in packs because it was safer, but we all longed for freedom. I gripped the windowsill until my knuckles turned white. Running away wasn’t an option, so I was going to have to think of something else. I pushed away from the window and pulled my shirt off over my head. Push-ups were going to have to do.

I dropped to the floor of my bedroom and got to work, pushing until sweat ran down my face, dripping onto the floor and spotting the dark wood even darker. It wasn’t a run through the woods with no destination in mind, but it felt good to move—to push my muscles past the point of pain. I finished a set, rested in a plank position, then did another. Then another. My biceps were screaming, but I did one more, then got to my feet, shaking out my quivering arms. I pulled my right arm across my chest, stretching the muscle.

Then, as I stretched my left arm, I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror over the dresser. It was shadowy in my room, lit only by the soft glow of the lamp beside my bed, but it was enough light to see the long, angry scar that stretched across my abdomen. I let my finger run across the ridge of healed skin, thinking.

For years I’d been fearful and wary of the Fae, all because of Maren and what she’d done to me. I’d told myself I could never trust one again. I shook my head, a smile playing across my lips. It figured that I’d be mated to Cali—another Fae. Irony, I think that was. Because resisting the draw I felt to Cali required every bit of resolve I could muster. Especially now that she was back. I turned and looked out the window. The sky had turned black and the stars had scattered themselves across it. What had brought her back? Was it that phone call? When I’d told her to stop calling me? Was that what had compelled her to come back? Was she testing me?

“Fuck,” I muttered, dropping down for another set of push-ups. My arms were aching, but I was desperate. I *had* to keep Cali from my thoughts.

I felt the vibrations in the floor before I heard the footsteps drawing closer to my room, and for a moment my heart raced, and I hoped it was Cali coming to me. But, when there was a knock on my door, it was Joss’s voice calling my name.

With a sigh, I got to my feet. I grabbed my T-shirt and used it to wipe my face as I opened the door. “What’s up, Joss?”

Her eyes were wide and she looked seriously spooked. “Can I come in?”

“Sure,” I said, surprised, and took a step back.

She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. Then, strangely, she moved to the window and looked out.

“What’s going on? Is everything okay?” I asked. Her behavior was starting to make me nervous.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe not. I was just down by the lake. Xavier was down there, and we were arguing—”

“About what?” I asked.

She shook her head impatiently. “It doesn’t matter. But I sensed something. Someone’s watching us, Greyson.”

“*What?*” I asked.

She nodded, taking a deep breath. She was out of breath, like she’d sprinted all the way up to my room from the lake. “Xavier could sense it, too. I’m sure someone—or *something*—was out there. Watching us.”

“*Dammit*,” I swore, striding to the window and looking out. Everything had looked so benign a moment before, but now it looked dark and sinister. Still, though, I couldn’t see or sense anything amiss. “What were you doing down at the lake with Xavier, anyway?”

She rolled her eyes. “We weren’t there *together*. I was patrolling and he was just down there.” Her gaze darted away. “Getting some air or something.”

I looked back out the window. “It was just a matter of time,” I muttered, staring out at the darkness.

“What?” Joss asked. “You’re not worried? Are you kidding me?”

“Of course I’m worried,” I snapped. “I’m just not surprised. We’re not exactly hiding, here. You can find this house listed on fucking Zillow, Joss. It was just a matter of time before someone found us.”

“So,” Joss said, her voice tense. “What does that mean? Who’s found us?”

I raised an eyebrow. “You want the truth?”

She nodded.

“It probably means Silas already knows about our cozy new home,” I said.

“Oh god,” Joss moaned. She walked away from the window and sank down onto my bed, looking pale.

“The question is, if he does know, what is he going to do about it?” I said, speaking mostly to myself.

“Remember what Big Mac said,” Joss said. “She warned of a bloodbath on Halloween. Halloween’s not that far off. Could what I sensed tonight be connected to that?”

“I imagine it could be,” I muttered, my eyes still on the velvety blackness out my window. After a moment, I pushed away from the window and turned back to Joss. “Okay, thanks for letting me know. First things first: will you go secure the house?”

“Sure,” she said, getting to her feet. She was already rallying, and there was color in her cheeks again.

“I’m going to try to find out more—about anything I can. I’ll let you know.”

She nodded and let herself out of my room. I stared at the closed door, thinking hard, running over everything Mrs. Smith and Big Mac had told me. They had mentioned a friend of theirs, Tefirna. Maybe she could be of use.

I walked into the hall and to Big Mac’s room, resolved to ask her about it. But, when I knocked, it was Mrs. Smith who answered the door.

“She’s sleeping,” she whispered when I asked for Big Mac, “and I hate to wake her. She’s been having such horrible nightmares lately.”

“Oh?” I asked. “About what?”

Mrs. Smith nodded. “About Silas, you know. And the orb.”

“Right,” I said, nodding. “All right, but as soon as she’s up, I need to talk to her. I have some questions about the warning she relayed about Halloween.”

Mrs. Smith frowned. “I don’t know if she knows anything more than what she’s already told you, Greyson—”

“*Anything* more she might be able to tell me would be helpful,” I said.

Mrs. Smith tipped her head thoughtfully to the side. “Why, Greyson? Did something happen?”

I paused. “I’m… not sure. Just let Big Mac know that I need to talk to her, okay?”

Mrs. Smith nodded, and I headed back to my room. Part of me wanted to barge in and wake Big Mac now, demand some answers, but there was no reason to do that. This wasn’t the moment to panic. My questions could wait until morning.

Back in my room, I returned to my spot at the window. The lake was an ink spill, barely reflecting the weak moonlight. My eyes went to the trees beyond it, searching through their blackness. I could see nothing, of course. And from this far away I couldn’t sense anything either.

I felt the familiar itch under my skin. Maybe I should slip out to do a bit of searching. Maybe I could surprise the mystery watcher, or at least catch a scent to follow. I was considering this—and planning an escape route out of the house—when there was another knock on my door. I sighed. It was probably Joss again, reporting back that she had secured the house. She was nothing if not thorough.

But when I opened the door, it wasn’t Joss standing framed in the hall light. It was Cali.

She was dressed for bed, in short shorts and a strappy tank top, and she was leaning one delicate shoulder against the edge of my doorframe. She looked up as I opened the door. “Hi,” she breathed.

“Hi,” I said, stunned into a response.

Her mouth curved into a shy smile. “Can I come in?”

**Episode 669**

VIOLET

Charlie lurched back in shock, shaking his head. “What do you—I’m not—How—What are you t-talking about?” he spluttered. “There’s no such thing as *werewolves!*” He said the last word in a whisper, like he was afraid of our conversation being overheard.

I frowned as I watched my newfound mate literally trip over himself to put some distance between us. The way he was acting seemed like he had no idea he was a werewolf. But he *had* to be, right? Seeing as how he was supposed to be my mate and all. Unless I’d made some kind of mistake?

No, this wasn’t a mistake. I *knew* the scent of a werewolf. I’d grown up surrounded by it, after all. And I’d spent enough time around humans and other creatures to know the difference in those scents too. There was no way I could’ve screwed that up, even if I hadn’t felt that soul-deep connection to Charlie. He was definitely a werewolf. So why was he acting so weird about it? Did he truly not know? I couldn’t imagine how he could have made it this far without learning the truth, but stranger things had happened.

I watched the emotions flash across his face. Fear, disbelief, then back to fear again. If he truly didn’t believe that werewolves were real, didn’t believe that he was one of us, then what was he so afraid of?

I took a step closer, gratified when he didn’t take another step back. “You should be proud to be one of us,” I said softly. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

He just shook his head, not meeting my eyes. “One of what?”

“Are you worried about what your friends would think?” I asked. “You shouldn’t tell them. You can’t. But don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone either. It’ll be our little secret.” I gave him a small smile, trying to reassure him, to show him he could trust me. I wasn’t going to hurt him, and as long as the humans in his life didn’t know the truth either, everything would be okay.

Charlie was still looking at me like I’d delivered some kind of awful, world-changing news. The kind that was almost too terrible to be believed. Was he worried about Sandi? I wasn’t going to be the one to break *that* news to him—the whole mate situation—at least not yet. Honestly, I wasn’t even sure why he was spending so much time around humans if he wasn’t one of them. Didn’t he want to be with his pack? Didn’t he want to belong?

He stepped back. “Maybe I… Um, maybe I should get going.”

“Wait!” I closed some of the distance between us again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. Please don’t go.”

He looked over at the party, where all of his friends were, and then back at me. “Can you promise to stop talking crazy?” he asked.

My shoulders curled forward. “It’s not crazy,” I insisted, my voice weaker than I’d intended it to be. None of this was going the way I’d thought. Charlie was my mate, and we’d found each other through sheer luck. Weren’t we supposed to ride off into the sunset together now? Have our happily ever after, instead of hanging out at some human college party?

I looked around with a sigh. Everyone was partying on, as if nothing life-changing was happening for us. As if it was just another wild night. “Can we talk somewhere private?” I asked.

Charlie grimaced, his eyes traveling back over to his friends, and I knew he was moments away from saying no and letting me down gently.

“Please?” I pressed.

Charlie’s eyes finally met mine, and that connection thrummed between us again. He sighed. “Okay.”

We silently moved to a spot deeper into the woods, away from the others. On the way there, I took in Charlie’s profile, lit by the light of the party. He was so handsome. I couldn’t believe he was my mate.

I came to a stop and took a deep breath. I needed to make him understand who he was, at the very least. “When I first saw you, I was pretty sure you were a werewolf. But then when I met you again this afternoon at the college, I knew.”

He frowned. “You knew what?”

“Your scent. It’s pretty hard to cover that up.”

He stepped back, his eyes widening, and I thought I caught him sniffing himself like he was checking to make sure he’d put on deodorant. “Wait, what? My *scent?* You’re saying you smelled me?”

“It’s a nice smell!” I told him quickly. “Not like… body odor, or anything like that. It’s just a scent. Like an identifier. It makes it easier for werewolves to find each other.”

He continued backing up, shaking his head. “No, I don’t think so. This is way too weird. I’m sorry. You seem nice and all, but—”

“Can’t you smell me?” I asked him. He stopped his retreat and blinked at me like the simple question had fried his brain. I got the sense that if I’d asked him to stay, he would have just run away faster. But this request was strange enough to hold him in place for just a little longer.

“You want me to *smell* you?” he asked.

I nodded and gave him an encouraging smile. “Give it a try.”

He slowly and tentatively took a step forward, sniffing the air. Something about it, the knowledge that my mate was drawing in my scent, learning this personal detail about me, sent a thrill through me. Who would have thought that smelling another person could be so sexy?

*Wait, sexy?* I’d never thought that about another person before. Whoa…

While I’d been ogling him, Charlie’s expression had changed from fear and skepticism to wonder. “I didn’t know what that smell was,” he admitted, his voice suddenly soft.

“Do you… Do you like it?” I forced myself to ask, my heart thrumming against my ribcage. What if he didn’t like how I smelled? How could I be mates with someone who didn’t like my scent?

He nodded. “I like it a lot. Is that why I feel drawn to you? Because you’re a werewolf?”

I paused for a moment. Should I tell him the truth? That he was drawn to me because we were mates?

No, that’d probably be too much. If he somehow didn’t know the truth about himself and about our world before we met, then he was already processing a lot. No need to throw a shiny new soulmate in there too. At least, not yet.

“Um, yeah. That has something to do with it,” I finally said.

He looked back to the party, where we could see Sandi drinking with some of her friends through the trees.

“Charlie, you can’t ever let a human know who you really are,” I reminded him. “They generally have a hard time coming to terms with this. Most of them don’t even think we exist. And if you do come across one who does, I’d avoid them.”

He finally looked back at me. “Why?”

I smiled. “They’re usually a little… off.”

“But what about Sandi?” he asked.

I fought the urge to growl at him. It made sense that he’d want to share this with Sandi. She was his girlfriend, even if he was *my* mate. He’d come around sooner or later. We were meant to be, after all. Sandi might be his focus right now, but I was his future. “She can’t know,” I told him.

His face fell. “What am I supposed to do?”

“You could try to accept the truth of who you are, for a start,” I suggested. “How long have you been keeping this a secret? Does anyone else know?”

Charlie shook his head. “Nobody knows, and I want to keep it that way. I…” He sighed and looked down at the ground. “I’ve only known for a short while, and until you approached me about it just now, I wasn’t really even sure. I didn’t understand it. And now that I *do* know… I’m frightened. I don’t know what any of this means. Or what to do…”

I reached out and gently squeezed his hand. I could only imagine what it must be like to not know the truth about yourself until this late in life, to not know how to shift, or even what it meant to smell another werewolf. He clearly didn’t have a pack, didn’t have anyone to show him the ropes.

But he had me. And since I’d lost Lilac, I knew exactly what it was like for the future to be one big question mark. To not know how you fit in, and to be afraid that even if you did figure it out, you wouldn’t like the answer. “I understand.”

He looked up at me, his amber eyes pleading. “Can you help me, Violet?”

**Episode 670**

AVA

I waited on the threshold of Greyson’s bedroom as he considered whether or not to let me in. Well, not me. Cali.

“Please, Greyson?” I pressed. I gave him my best replica of Cali’s doe-eyed look—one Nolan had spent hours grading me on. “I’d like to talk now, if that’s all right.”

My demure, pleading expression shifted into a grateful smile as Greyson stepped aside to let me into his room. I wondered briefly if he’d be so generous with his time for anyone else. Obviously not me, Ava, Xavier’s formerly dead mate. But it seemed even Greyson—a man with a reputation as a hardass and a traitor, an opportunist and a ruthless bastard—was reduced to little more than a lovesick puppy when it came to Cali. His so-called mate.

What was it about her that made these strong, self-possessed Alphas turn into absolute idiots?

“Thanks.” My cheeks were starting to ache, but I kept smiling. This Cali girl smiled far too much.

I looked around Greyson’s bedroom. It was plain and gave pretty much zero hints about the Alpha who slept in it.

Greyson closed the door behind him and leaned against it, watching me move around his room. “Why are you here, Cali?” he asked.

I dragged my fingertips over a spotlessly tidy dresser. It was a good question, one I could never be honest about. The truth was, I was trying to learn more about whatever strange, kinky thing was going on between Greyson, Cali, and Xavier, and taking advantage of Greyson’s rather obvious attraction to Cali to gather intel seemed like the easiest approach.

But of course, I couldn’t exactly tell him that.

I spun around to face him, no longer smiling. “Do you really want to know?” I moved toward him and lowered one shoulder so the strap of my tank top slid off, skimming down my arm until it hit my elbow. His eyes zeroed in on the thin strip of fabric. I kept moving till I stood directly in front of him, and his eyes finally lifted to meet mine.

If he were Xavier, the heat in his gaze would have set me on fire.

But he wasn’t. And I still had a job to do. “I tried to do what you wanted,” I began. “I tried to stay away. But you know as well as I do how difficult that is. It…” I sighed. “It feels impossible.”

I grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and pulled him into a deep and powerful kiss, moving my lips—Cali’s lips—against his urgently and pressing myself against him. I hoped to hell that he was buying what I was selling, that this wasn’t about to blow up in my face.

Greyson was a little stiff at first, like he was trying to decide whether or not to reciprocate. Then his mouth softened against mine for a split second before he took control of the kiss, twining his hands in my hair and tipping my head back so he could kiss me more deeply. His tongue slid over mine, and he growled and pulled me even closer.

I felt… absolutely nothing as his lips moved against mine. But that didn’t matter. Because I had him hooked. I broke away from his mouth. “I missed you so much.”

Greyson’s response was to hoist me up and spin us around, pressing me into his closed door. My thighs locked around his hips and he pressed against me, picking up right where we’d left off. Again, it felt more mechanical than the hormone-fueled frenzy I remembered from my time with Xavier. I kissed him back, ground my hips against his, gasped and moaned as his mouth trailed down my neck, as he tugged my other strap down with his teeth.

But on the inside, I didn’t feel a thing.

“Greyson,” I moaned.

My hands explored his chest, his back, and dragged through his hair, and my thighs readjusted around his hips so I could press myself against the hard, thick line of him. His hips canted against mine as he groaned—and then he froze and set me down, practically tripping over himself in his haste to put some distance between us.

I pretended to pout. “You sure run hot and cold, don’t you?”

His eyebrows lifted. “I could say the same to you. I already told you: I can’t do this. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but I thought I made my position clear.”

Well, that was no fun. How was I going to pry information out of him if he didn’t even want to be around me? “But you *are* attracted to me,” I pressed.

He rolled his eyes. “I know I don’t have to answer that. We’re mates. Of course I’m attracted to you, but that’s not the point.”

Then what the hell was the point? Based on everything I’d heard about Greyson, he wasn’t particularly picky about who he chose to sleep around with—or at least he hadn’t been until Cali had come along. Still. The man had needs, didn’t he? “Xavier doesn’t have to know,” I added quickly. “It can be our secret.”

“It’s not about secrets!” he snapped. “It’s about everything that’s going on right now. Yes, of course I’m attracted to you—but that makes you a distraction. One that neither of us can afford to get caught up in right now.”

Was he talking about *due destini*, or something else? If so, did that mean he was really going to reject his mate? That seemed impossible. Mates were meant to be together. Their very biochemistry made it so. Did he really think he could just push his mate out of his life?

And, if so, how was I supposed to get any information out of him? What was the use in wearing this stupid face around if I couldn’t use it to take the Redwood pack down?

I nodded quickly and pushed my straps back up my shoulders. “I’m sorry I upset you. It’s hard for me, too. To keep away. Especially when I know how tense you are. I only want to help.”

I watched him closely for a sign that I’d pushed too far. I didn’t want to alienate him. It’d take twice as long to build that trust back up. But instead, he gave me a tentative smile. “It’s a tough time for everyone. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

“It’s okay. Why don’t you sit down?” I suggested, and pointed toward the bed. “I know how I can help you relax.”

He shook his head. “No.”

“It’s fine, Greyson!” I gave him my brightest, most Cali-like smile. “I promise to behave! I just want to rub your shoulders. I promise there’s nothing else. You don’t have to say anything at all, and I promise I won’t ask for anything else.”

He stared at me for a long string of seconds, and I honestly didn’t know if he was going to sit down and let me “help” him, or kiss me again, or push me out of his room entirely. I kept my expression sweet, hopeful, doe-eyed, and vacant—like Nolan had taught me.

Finally, Greyson took a seat, and I slowly eased myself onto the mattress behind him, kneeling so I could better reach his shoulders. My hands—Cali’s hands—began massaging his back and shoulders.

He actually did need the massage. Greyson was a man-shaped clump of knots. I slowly teased the worst of them out of his shoulders and back, noting how he relaxed a bit more with each knot of tension that I eased loose.

“That… feels nice,” he sighed, dropping his head forward so I could gently knead his neck, and around the base of his skull. I smiled at the low purr of pleasure that rumbled through his chest.

Manipulating men was like playing with putty. You shaped and formed them to fit your vision, your needs—and you did it with pleasure. Even with Alphas like Greyson. Against an enemy wearing his mate’s face, the man was absolutely helpless.

A sense of power rushed through me, and my smile widened. Maybe this whole thing wasn’t going to be a bust after all. “Is that any better?” I asked softly.

He nodded. “I didn’t realize how tense I’ve been lately. Pretty much ever since I found out that my father’s back.” His voice was deeper now, and his words almost slurred together. He was definitely relaxed.

I processed this information, my eyebrows lifting. His father. Why had he come back? When I thought of Xavier’s father nothing was coming to mind—a still infuriating memory problem. Some things were still fuzzy. But, Xavier was opening up to me about this. Was there a way I could use this information?

One of Greyson’s hands closed over mine on his shoulder. “Thank you, Cali.”

*Dammit! I was so close!* But at least I hadn’t messed anything up. Maybe now he’d be more forthcoming with me. I just had to keep working on him. I forced a warm smile onto my lips. “Good night, Greyson.”

I left him alone in his room, a genuine smile tugging at my mouth as I closed the door behind me.

When the time came, it was going to be such a pleasure to kill both Greyson and Xavier.

**Episode 671**

When I came downstairs for breakfast the morning after the party, Artemis was sitting at the kitchen table with Lola. Artemis looked terrible—her white skin was pale, almost taking on a greenish tinge, her hair was limp, and she held her head in her hands, letting out a low groan every minute or so that let everyone know just how miserable she was.

I dragged a chair out from the kitchen table and sat down next to her. She cringed at the sound of the chair’s feet dragging across the linoleum and glared at me. “Can you be a little quieter please?” she rasped.

I (barely) resisted the urge to laugh. “Well, good morning to you too.”

Artemis groaned again, frowning down at the scrambled eggs on the plate in front of her as if they were to blame for her hangover.

Lola frowned at my tone. Artemis might not have noticed it, but Lola did. “Don’t give me that look,” I told her. “Little Miss Shifting In The Middle of the Party. What the hell was up with that?”

Lola clicked her tongue. “I’d had a little too much to drink, that’s all. It won’t happen again.”

I wasn’t so sure about that…

Flicking the light on in the kitchen, Artemis groaned. “Guess you don’t tolerate beer as well as whiskey, huh?” I asked breezily as I poured myself a glass of orange juice. “You’ll have to let Greyson know the next time he takes you out.”

The slightly too sweet jab that didn’t make me feel even a little bit better about the fact that my long-lost sister, who seemed to be constantly finding new parts of my life to invade and take over, had gone on adventures with Greyson. Meanwhile, he’d been busy pushing me away and pretending like he didn’t remember the time we’d spent together in the Fae world. It fucking sucked to say the least.

I scowled down at my orange juice. Maybe once this was all over, Artemis would come back with me to Oregon and she’d ride off into the sunset with Greyson as BFFs.

“Are you going to drink your juice or glare it into submission?” Lola asked. “Because I’ll take it if you’re not drinking it.”

I grabbed my juice and took a swig as my mom came into the room, joining us at the table.

Lola scoffed and then gestured to the laptop next to her. “Well, now that you’ve joined us, Cali, I was just showing Artemis the layout of the Glenngreen museum that I found online.” She spun the laptop around so I could see the map.

My heart sank. “It looks even bigger than when we saw it from the parking lot. How will we ever find that Fae vase?”

“Artemis, do you remember which room the vase was in when you saw it on TV?” Mom asked.

Artemis shook her head and then winced. “No, I have no idea. It was the first time I’d ever seen a TV, and I wasn’t paying close attention to the details on the screen.” Maybe it was her hangover, but she looked especially embarrassed to admit this, and I felt myself softening just a little bit toward her. It had to be scary to be in a whole new world that you knew nothing about, complete with a family you’d never realized you had. And yet she was still here, and she was still going to help us find that vase and contain Tony.

Lola turned the laptop back around and scrolled down the screen. “Judging by the layout and what I’ve been able to google about the house, it could easily take us over an hour to search each room. Their website says they have hundreds of items. It could be anywhere in that house, and it’s not like we have an unlimited amount of time to pull this off.”

“Do you think Dad would know?” I asked my mom. “He’s the only one of us who’s set foot inside the house.”

Mom shook her head as she made herself a plate. “I already asked. He has no idea. It was a long time ago and between you and me, he wouldn’t know a vase from a candlestick holder.”

From the living room, my dad shouted, “I do too know the difference!”

I smiled, but Mom had already moved on. She speared a bit of egg on the end of her fork, took a bite, and then chewed thoughtfully and turned to Lola. “What about the security system? Can you do anything about that? I’m seeing such a new side to you—I don’t know exactly what all you’re capable of.”

I tried not to grimace at that. *If that’s not the understatement of the year, I don’t know what is*. I thought of Jay’s worry for Lola’s health after all the times she’d been shifting lately. She didn’t seem super inclined to stop anytime soon, either. I hoped she’d be able to keep it together long enough for us to pull off this heist. God, I sounded so selfish…But we really did need to take care of Tony before he caused any more trouble.

And once all that was set to rights, I’d be able to start helping Jay with Lola. We’d set her to rights too. But first, the vase.

Lola thought about my mom’s request. “I can try to hack into the museum’s server and override the alarms and cameras, but it’s going to take some time.”

My mom nodded. “That’s fine. We have a lot of planning to do, and we’re not going to break in until nightfall.”

“I’ve been wondering about something else,” Lola said. “Once we’re inside, we’re going to need to be able to communicate with each other.”

I cocked my head. “Why can’t we use our cell phones?”

Lola waved a hand dismissively. “They're too unreliable. And not at all right for a heist. We need walkie talkies.” She reached into her bag, which was sitting on the floor next to her chair, and pulled out a set of walkie talkies and set them on the kitchen table.

I blinked. “Where did you get those on such short notice?” It wasn’t like RadioShack was still around.

She grinned. “You never know when you might need to go off the grid.”

Artemis frowned. She picked up one of the bright yellow walkie talkies and pressed the large red button on the side. Feedback squealed through the speaker, and she dropped it with a gasp. “What is this?”

“They’re kind of like cell phones,” Lola explained, ignoring my dubious look. Seriously, why couldn’t we just use actual cell phones instead of the things that were just *kind of like* cell phones?

Lola held up another walkie talkie. “These will allow us to talk to each other, even if we’re in different parts of the house.”

Artemis’s eyes lit up, and she picked the walkie talkie up again. “Wow, that’s so cool!” She pressed the button and the feedback squealed again. I took the walkie talkie out of her hand and set it back down.

“We need to focus on the plan,” I said calmly, ignoring Artemis’s frown. Maybe I was being a little petty, but Artemis did have a way of being overeager, and I didn’t want naïve, everything-in-the-human-world-is-new-and-shiny Artemis. I wanted the badass huntress who’d made my life hell for a little while. That was the Artemis who would help us pull off this heist.

My mom tapped on the laptop and showed us the screen. “We can break into the museum through this spot in the back. It’s not visible from the road and it’s adjacent to the woods.”

“That’s perfect.” Lola grinned. “I can shift there.”

I bit my lip, remembering all too well the close call we’d had the night before when Lola had shifted at the keg party. “We can talk about that later.” I turned to my mom. “How are we going to break in?” Whenever I tried to imagine it, we were all dressed in tight-fitting black clothes, with masks that covered our noses and mouths—like ninjas. But then instead of throwing stars and fancy swords, we would use crowbars or maybe some kind of special tool that cut glass. Did we own a crowbar? Did I even own a full black outfit?

“We’ll figure it out,” Mom said. “But—”

The doorbell rang, and all further heist planning came to an abrupt end as we all froze.

I looked around the table. “Who could that be?” Everyone I knew in town who had business at my house was here already. Maybe it was Jay?

Mom sighed. “I hope it’s not those annoying MIB agents.”

The doorbell rang again.

“Do you want me to answer it?” my dad called out.

“I’ll get it!” she called back. “If it *is* the MIB agents, I’ll need to get rid of them. We don’t want them coming in and stumbling across our heist plans.”

Mom opened the door to reveal Alex standing on the doorstep—but not for long. He burst past her and headed into the house, bypassing my dad in the living room and heading straight for the kitchen table.

Straight for me.

He stopped right in front of me. “I want to know what really happened last night. I know you lied to me, and I’m not leaving until you tell me the truth!”

**Episode 672**

XAVIER

I was sitting with Greyson, Joss, Mrs. Smith, and Big Mac in the kitchen to talk about Silas’s plans for Halloween. I glanced around, kind of surprised that Cali wasn’t joining us. She had a tendency to insert herself into the middle of everything. I wouldn’t have thought she’d miss this.

But it was probably for the best that she wasn’t here. Things were already messy enough between Greyson and me. We could barely stand to co-exist in the same house for the duration of our little truce—and that had been *before* Cali had shown up. If she got involved now, in the middle of what was supposed to be Greyson and me setting aside our differences long enough to take our father out, well, I couldn’t guarantee that I wouldn’t say or do something that I’d regret. Especially since Cali and I were back together. Greyson wasn’t going to be happy about that. Our truce might come to an abrupt end at that point. And in that case, we might as well just give up and let Silas do whatever the hell he wanted, come Halloween.

Greyson eyed me as I took a seat. I couldn’t read the expression on his face, but I wished I could. Wished I could understand what was going on in his head. Maybe then things would be easier between us… or not. That would depend on what I found there.

Big Mac, Mrs. Smith, and Joss eyed us like they half-expected us to start snarling at each other any moment. They were probably right to be wary.

Greyson turned to Big Mac. “So, tell me more about this alleged Halloween bloodbath my father’s planning for us.”

The witch shrugged. “I can’t offer much more than that. That’s all she told me.”

“Tefirna is not one to exaggerate,” Mrs. Smith added.

“I don’t know what Silas has in mind.” Big Mac dragged her fingers through her long hair with a sigh. “But whatever he’s planning, we should prepare for the worst.”

That sounded more obvious than prudent. Where my father was concerned, if you planned for the worst then you might have a chance at survival. There was no being pleasantly surprised whenever he was around.

Greyson nodded at Big Mac. “I agree.” He glanced over at Joss and then looked back at Big Mac and Mrs. Smith. “Joss saw someone watching the house from the woods last night.”

I looked over at Joss and our eyes locked. What else had she told Greyson? Had she told him about me and Cali being back together? She wouldn’t be that reckless, would she? She was supposed to be looking out for the pack, and sharing information that would inevitably pit two Alphas against each other seemed pretty much the exact opposite of that. Joss stared back at me but said nothing, giving no indication of anything else she might have told her Alpha.

I looked over at Greyson, who was still focused on Big Mac. No, if he’d known that Cali and I were back together, he wouldn’t have been acting so mildly. Joss hadn’t told him.

Big Mac let out a shuddering breath and shook her head. “If he’s got someone watching the house, then Silas is going to know I’m here. He’s going to know I’m helping you! I’m not going to be able to escape him again.”

Mrs. Smith rubbed her back. “You’re not alone here. It’s going to be all right. We won’t let anything happen to you.”

When nobody rushed to jump in and support Mrs. Smith’s claim, she threw meaningful looks at Joss and me.

“Um, Mrs. Smith is right,” Joss said quickly. “Allying yourself with us is the right call. At least if Silas finds you here, you have backup.”

Big Mac just shook her head. “You werewolves are terrible at offering comfort, you know that?”

Greyson, never one to err on the side of warm and fuzzy, pressed on. “And if Silas does know that you’re here, then we need to prepare for the possibility that the conflict will be here sooner than we’d hoped.”

Joss leaned in to Greyson and whispered something I couldn’t hear. My brother's eyes snapped over to mine and narrowed. “I’d like to speak to you. Alone.”

I sat back in my seat with a sigh. So Joss had told Greyson about me and Cali. *Figures. Just when I was beginning to think she was a decent Luna, she has to go and show her true colors.*

Greyson nodded toward the door, and we both stepped out into the back yard where we had less chance of being overheard. I crossed my arm and waited for Greyson to speak. I still didn’t know for sure if Joss had thrown me under the bus, and I didn’t want to accidentally be the one to break the news that Cali and I had kissed. Greyson was admittedly doing an good job at keeping his feelings separate from his role as Alpha, but I didn’t want to push it.

“You’re a good fighter,” Greyson finally said. “A damn good one. I remember watching you during the Lupo Finale. I… I didn’t know you could fight like that.”

I frowned, instantly wary. Why in the world would he bring that up? Did he just want to rub it in my face again that he was Alpha of the Redwood pack and I wasn’t?

“But you beat me,” I said flatly. “I’m sure you didn’t forget that, either.”

Greyson shrugged. “You were wounded. If I’d faced you when you were at the top of your game…” He blew out a breath. “Well, things might look a little different now.”

I blinked. This was the first time that Greyson had seriously acknowledged that Ryker had cheated by painting silver onto his nails, almost killing me with silver poisoning after I’d fought him. I’d thought all along that Greyson didn’t care about that. But maybe I’d been wrong.

Greyson must have mistaken my shocked silence for something else, because he just nodded. “Well, I’ll cut to the chase. I think you should work alongside Rishika to train the pack. Joss told me that you’re a good fighter and a good teacher, and I’d like you two to get everyone here ready—we have no fucking clue when to expect an attack, or even what that attack might look like.”

“Um…” I didn’t know what to make of any of this. Was he trying to butter me up or something? Make nice since we’d been fighting over Cali? “I, um… I guess I’ll do what I can. Whatever you need—”

“Hey.” Greyson held up a hand. “Do you understand that I’m asking you not because I want to, but because you’re the most qualified? This has nothing to do with anything else.”

The edge in his tone put me strangely at ease. This was safety, something I was much more comfortable with. We weren’t friends; we were reluctant allies. And when this fight with Silas was over, we’d go back to being enemies.

I nodded. “Got it.”

After the meeting concluded, I went back upstairs to my room. I wanted peace and quiet. I needed to mull everything over, maybe even rethink a few things. The conversation with Greyson played through my head. It seemed so out of character for him to ask me for anything, let alone acknowledge that I was half-decent at something. And yet he’d done both of those things. At Joss’s suggestion.

Apparently, she wasn’t against me either. She was even keeping mum about my kiss with Cali, keeping a secret from her Alpha in the process.

Cali. I needed to see her. To talk to her. I stepped out of my bedroom and paused by her room. Was she asleep? I raised my hand to knock but stopped myself. Now wasn’t the time. I needed to clear my head before I saw her again.

I went outside and headed for the woods. Maybe I’d be able to pick up the scent of whoever had been watching us last night, do some scouting to see just how worried we needed to be where Silas was concerned.

“Hey, Rishika,” I said as I passed her on the way to the woods. “Let’s talk when I get back from my run.”

She nodded, then I shifted and passed the lake on my route. It was all too easy to remember how Cali had looked the night before, her skin glowing in the moonlight. I shook off the thought and headed deeper into the woods, trying to pick up any unusual scent. It only took a few moments before I caught something—someone. Another werewolf.

I put on a burst of speed and followed the scent, enjoying the freedom, the thrill of the hunt.

I burst through a thick patch of trees and came to an abrupt stop, nearly tripping over myself.

I’d found the werewolf.

Standing right in my path, facing me, was Ava’s wolf.

**Episode 673**

I stared wide-eyed at the very angry Alex who had just stormed into my house demanding ‘the truth’ while I—a half-Fae who was mated to two separate Alpha werewolves—sat at the kitchen table with my werewolf best friend, Dark Fae half-sister, and Light Fae mother as we planned a heist to steal a magical vase that might have the power to contain the vengeful spirit of Alex’s dead friend Tony.

*Well, crappers.*

“You’re lying to me! You’ve been lying to me for… How long is it, now?” he demanded.

Alex’s eyes were wide and rimmed in red, and his face was ashen. He looked worse than the very hungover Artemis, who was wincing and covering her ears next to me.

I tried to remain calm, to appease him and get him to calm down enough that I could keep him away from the truth for a little bit longer. As stressed out as he was right now, he was willing to believe just about anything, no matter how far-fetched, which was pretty much the nature of the truth.

But if I could get him to calm down a bit, to see logic and reason, he’d talk himself out of seeing the truth for what it was, and I’d be able to find another way to divert him. Because one thing was for sure: I didn’t want to bring Alex any further into my fucked-up supernatural world. He’d just get even more freaked out, or hurt, or worse, and I couldn’t let that happen. In Alex’s case, ignorance was bliss, but it was also safety.

I gave him a gentle smile. “Alex, why don’t you sit down and have some breakfast, and—”

“Enough with the lies!” he shouted. “All of you have been lying to me. You’re all plotting against me, trying to make me think I’m crazy or something!”

My heart sank, but I forced my voice to remain soft and even. “What are you talking about?”

“Stop gaslighting me! I’ll admit I was drunk last night, but I know what I saw!” His gaze zeroed in on Artemis, who still had her hands pressed over her ears and was staring blearily back at him. I honestly wasn’t sure how much of the conversation she’d caught so far.

*So much for a fierce huntress. Give her a few beers and she’s practically helpless.*

“Now that I’ve had time to think,” Alex said in a rush, his voice at least a few decibels lower now, “I’m certain that Artemis made that branch break and scared Tony’s ghost away. Which makes me question my own sanity, but I know what I saw. I was there.” He stopped and pulled in a deep breath.

I sighed. I felt so bad for him. He was so clearly freaking out, and I was at least partly responsible. I wished I could tell him, because I could definitely see his point here. He’d been exposed to some truly shitty things, and I’d lied to him every single time and told him not to trust his own experiences. God, I was an awful friend. But what else was I supposed to do? Explain to my very breakable human friend that he was way lower on the food chain than he thought? Tell him that all the monsters from the movies were real, and that he was right to be terrified? That didn’t seem like it would help—plus, telling him about all of this would only put a target on his back.

“So either you tell me what happened last night, or I tell Agent Fernsby what I saw. I’m sure she’d be interested—and she’d probably believe me,” Alex said, jutting his chin out defiantly.

*Ugh, an MIB agent is literally the last thing we need—especially right now when we’re planning to break into a museum. Alex* cannot *call them!*

“How do you know about them?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

“They contacted me,” he said. “Asking about what killed Tony.”

Well shit. That meant they probably suspected werewolves. But how could I explain any of this? Should I just go ahead and add fuel to the fire by admitting that Artemis was Fae? That seemed like a truly terrible idea. Alex could overreact and freak out even worse, or he might just think I was lying and tell Fernsby anyway.

Artemis tugged on my hand. “What’s going on?” she asked in a very loud whisper. “And why is everyone screaming? My head feels like a troll sat on it.”

Alex lurched backward. “Stay away from me!”

Artemis blinked at him and then looked back at me. “What did I do?”

I was *not* in the mood to deal with her sweet naïveté right now. How was it even possible to look that hungover and still sound that adorable? Like some kind of Disney princess the morning after a rager. And why the hell hadn’t I gotten those genes?

I sighed. “Alex is confused about what happened last night at—”

“I’m not confused!” he interrupted. Artemis winced again, but he continued at the same volume. “I’m sick and tired of being lied to!” He turned to Artemis. “Tell me the truth! Admit that you used witchcraft to scare off Tony’s ghost last night!”

Artemis scowled. “Witchcraft? What kind of charlatan do you think—”

It was my turn to cut her off. “Alex had a lot to drink last night,” I said meaningfully. “Obviously he’s misremembering some things.”

“That has nothing to do with it!” he insisted. He pointed at Artemis. “She is a witch. Or a warlock, or something.”

Artemis snorted and then burst out laughing. She looked at me for confirmation. “He’s kidding, right? Me? A witch?”

“Then what are you?” Alex demanded, frustrated.

She sized him up. “Do you think maybe you’re still drunk? I still feel half-drunk after last night, and all your shouting is really hurting my head. Maybe you need to sleep it off.”

“No!” He shook his head so hard I worried he was going to give himself whiplash. “You’re both against me, aren't you?” His face crumpled. He looked like he was about to burst into tears. “I thought you were my friend, Cali. But now…” He turned to the door.

“Alex?” I called after him. “Where are you going?” I didn’t want him heading out like this, so agitated and volatile. I didn’t want him to get into any kind of trouble, or to get hurt. Plus, I had a funny feeling that I knew exactly where he was going next.

He headed to the door. “Fernsby will believe me. She’ll understand.”

*Man, it sucks being right all the time.*

I stood up and followed Alex. I couldn’t let him do this. He’d ruin everything if he brought the MIB down on us. “No! You can’t tell them!”

He spun to face me. “Why not? Because it’s all true?”

Artemis followed us from the kitchen to the foyer. “Who are you going to tell?” she asked. She was looking a little bit less like a hungover Disney princess and a little bit more like the scary, heartless bounty hunter she’d been when I’d first met her. I couldn’t decide whether it was a good thing or not that this side of her was coming out right as Alex was threatening to go to the MIB.

“None of your business, witch!” Alex spat.

She snorted at the insult. “You’re not going to tell anyone anything.”

Alex’s eyes widened, and he pressed himself against my closed front door. “Are you going to put some kind of spell on me?” He frantically groped for the doorknob with one hand and sketched a cross in the air with the other.

Artemis frowned at the gesture and then glanced at me. “Is he having some kind of nervous fit?”

I shook my head. “I’ll explain later.”

“I’m l-leaving now,” Alex stuttered. “D-don’t you d-dare try anything!”

With the wave of her hand, Artemis locked the door. Alex’s face went even pale as he grappled with the lock that suddenly refused to budge. “Let me out! Please!”

“Oh, now he remembers his manners.” Artemis rolled her eyes and waved her hands again. A surge of energy rushed through the room and Alex was lifted up into the air, his head brushing the ceiling. And then he was dropped to the ground in a motionless heap.

“Oh my god!” I gasped, running over to the body crumpled on the floor. “What did you do?” I turned to look at Artemis in horror. “Is he dead?”

Artemis scoffed. “I’m not a murderer. I just knocked him out.”

“For how long?” I demanded.

She shrugged. “It depends.”

“Very helpful,” I deadpanned. I knelt down next to Alex and eased him onto his back. He seemed to be breathing fine, and his pulse was steady when I checked it. Despite having been knocked out, his color was better now than it had been when he’d first rushed in. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t prefer knocked out Alex to the version who’d screamed in my face. *Why did he have to go ballistic?*

I turned to Artemis. “What should we do with him?”

My mom walked in before Artemis could answer. “What happened to Alex?”

I quickly explained Artemis’s brilliant plan to keep him from leaving. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Put him in the closet,” Mom said, her expression grave.

My jaw dropped. “Why?”

“Don’t argue. Just do it.” She pointed through the front window, where Agents Fernsby and Imamu were walking up the driveway.

**Episode 674**

AVA

When Xavier’s wolf burst into the clearing, I forgot how to breathe.

For the longest time, we just stared at each other, taking in each other’s scents, the sound of our breathing filling the silence between us. Then he moved, and so did I. But rather than run toward each other, we began to circle, keeping as much distance between us as possible without running right out of the clearing.

And I should have run. If I’d been smarter, if I’d had even an ounce of sense, I would have turned tail and fled. It was too dangerous to be here with him. With my mate. My murderer. The other half of my soul, and the wolf who’d snuffed out my life.

I was afraid, and I was in awe. He looked absolutely magnificent. His rich coat gleamed in the light, and he was absolutely huge. A force of nature that took my breath away—that had *literally* taken my breath away.

How had I forgotten about this, the way his wolf never failed to mesmerize me? I should have been more afraid of the power he had, considering our history, but there wasn’t any room for fear in my mind or my heart.

But what was he doing here in the first place? Was he tailing me? Did he suspect something? That his perfect little human mate might not be so perfect after all? Had he already managed to piece things together? I’d taken too big a risk coming out here, but I’d needed the space to run, to breathe, to exist in my true body—to look at my reflection in the lake and see a face that was actually mine, even if it wasn’t a human face.

I’d thought it was safe to take this time to myself. The pack had been trying to stay close together lately, and none of them were supposed to go wandering off alone. They were afraid of someone picking them off one by one it seemed.

I felt Xavier’s presence in my mind for the first time in far too long. There was a delicate brush as our minds linked, then, *Ava?*

His voice in my head was just as deep as it was when he talked to me out loud as Cali. Except now, there was this tentative edge to his voice, like he couldn’t bring himself to believe what he was seeing.

*Ava,* he repeated.

I cautiously reached my mind out to his. *Xavier…*

The voice I heard in my own head wasn’t the one I’d grown used to. It wasn’t Cali’s. It was my own, and I almost didn’t recognize it. I was flooded with relief to hear my own voice after so long, to be able to keep another small part of myself that was all my own.

*It is you?* Xavier asked. *Or am I dreaming?*

*You’re not dreaming*, I answered.

*Why are you here?* he asked. How *are you here?*

I paused. How was I supposed to answer that? I obviously couldn’t tell him the truth—not one tiny bit of it, because even the parts that didn’t cast me as a villain were nearly unbelievable. I still wasn’t sure I believed everything that had happened, and I’d lived through it.

*Why are you out here by yourself?* I asked instead. *Shouldn’t you be with your pack?*

He took a step toward me, and I tensed. Fear and adrenaline rushed through me, ready to add speed to my flight and ferocity to my fight, if it came to that. As… right as it felt to talk to him like this—to my mate—I couldn’t ever let myself forget that this was the same wolf who had ripped my throat out. Who had left those horrifying scars that would never heal. I couldn’t trust Xavier. Not ever again.

I had no doubt that he’d noticed me tensing, but he took another step forward and seemed to be looking me over. *You were dead, Ava*, he finally said. *How are you here?*

That was a question I didn’t know how to answer—mainly because I genuinely didn’t know the answer. How I’d ended up in that mirror, *or* how I’d walked through it and become a flesh-and-blood person all over again. But I knew from Xavier’s tone that I had to tell him something. I couldn’t avoid his questions forever.

*Maybe it’s fate,* I suggested.

*Or maybe it has more to do with my father*, he said, snarling. *Are you working with him?*

How had he jumped straight to that? I took an involuntary step back. *Why would you think that?*

*Oh, I think you know exactly why I’d jump to that conclusion*. His voice was turning sharp as shock and awe gave way to bitter anger. *And that’s the only way to explain you coming back.*

*I don’t know how I’m alive again, but I don’t have anything to do with your father,* I insisted.

*That wasn’t the case when you murdered my mother*, he hissed.

A memory flashed through my mind, and I flinched back at the images that assaulted me. Images of Xavier’s mother… Marlene. And blood. So much blood.

*Why did you do it?* he demanded, his voice taking on a raw edge. *You didn’t have to kill her*. *We were mates. You could have chosen me instead.*

I shook my head. *It wasn’t so black and white. The pack wars forced everyone to make life and death decisions without having time to think, and I…* I paused and took a deep breath. *I doubt you’ll believe me, but I didn’t know it was your mom until it was too late. And you never gave me a chance to explain.* Another wave of memories rushed through me, but I recognized these ones. They’d been haunting me ever since I’d remembered who Xavier was to me—the good and the devastating. I flinched again, trying to shake off the memory of his teeth around my throat.

He growled and took another step forward. *You didn’t deserve a chance! You certainly didn’t give my mother a chance when you ripped her throat out.*

I wasn’t prepared for the rage that boiled through my veins. This wasn’t the first time I’d seen Xavier since coming back to life, but this was the first moment that felt like it really mattered. The first time I was standing in front of him as his mate—his real mate—and acknowledging the violence and ugliness and love and horror between us. All the ways I’d hurt him, and the terrible thing he’d done to me in return.

I’d known it wasn’t going to be a happy reunion, and I’d been all too eager to go along with the plan as long as it meant reuniting with my brother—the only person who really loved me—and getting revenge. But somehow, I hadn’t expected Xavier to throw my mistakes at me the first time he saw me alive again. Where was that sense of wonder I’d felt when I’d seen his wolf again after so long? Where was the man who’d loved me, once upon a time?

*You said yourself that we were mates*, I snapped. *You should have thought of that before you attacked me.*

*I could do it again*, he threatened. *No one would blame me.*

He certainly could. Right here and right now, alone in the woods with me. I was fast and so full of adrenaline that my heart was threatening to beat its way out of my chest, but Xavier was huge and strong. He could catch me, and he could kill me all over again.

Maybe I shouldn’t give him that chance. Maybe I should get the upper hand, take care of him right now and personally make sure that he never hurt me again.

*So why don’t you?* I asked. *If you still blame me, why not?*

A long silence set in, and I tensed, waiting for him to lunge.

*Because I couldn’t live through that again,* he finally said. *And if what you say is right, then you don't deserve that either.* There was a long pause before he added, *I wish you well, Ava. But don’t come back here again.*

And then he turned around and ran off, back toward the pack house.

I watched him go, just staring at the place he’d been for a long time. What had just happened? Why had he let me go? And an even better question: why hadn’t I just killed him and been done with it? Nobody would’ve blamed me. He was my murderer. He’d done damage that nobody would ever be able to undo.

So why hadn’t I leaped at the opportunity to hurt him back? Was it because I would have been making the same mistake that had caused us so much pain?

I lowered my head and let out a breath. I’d been brought back from the dead, given another chance at life. Was this really how I wanted to spend it?

**Episode 675**

Apparently, there was some universal law ensuring that as soon as you manage to neutralize the threat of your hysterical human friend blabbing about witches and ghosts and werewolves to a couple of maybe federal agents, said agents will decide to drop by for a house call. Thank god Violet wasn’t at the house. The last thing we needed was another werewolf for them to discover.

Artemis and my mom scrambled to get their arms under Alex’s limp body and lift him. Mom managed to grab him under the arms and Artemis got his legs. They dragged him over to the coat closet next to the front door and stuffed him inside.

Alex’s head smacked against the doorframe in the shuffle, and I winced. “Be careful!” I whisper-yelled. “He’s precious cargo!”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “If he were really that precious, we wouldn’t be shoving him into a closet.”

After setting him down, Mom carefully eased her arms out from under him and shut the closet door, right as the agents rang the doorbell. What were they doing here anyway? We’d been doing our best to keep a low profile, last night’s paranormal rager aside. They probably had a sixth sense or something, because it seemed a little too convenient for them to be dropping by for a house call when we were in the middle of planning a very illegal heist to steal a vase so we could capture and contain a vengeful spirit.

Artemis and I scurried out of the foyer and hung back, peeking around the doorway and into the living room as Mom opened the door, pretending to be surprised to see the agents on the other side. “Oh, hello Agent Fernsby, Agent Imamu. What can I do for you?”

“We’re actually here to talk to your daughter, Caliana,” Fernsby answered. “There was an incident last night at Hunter’s Park, and we have reason to believe she might be able to shine some light on the situation.”

Mom folded her arms. “Oh, dear. What kind of incident?”

“We’re not at liberty to say, ma’am,” Imamu said.

I glanced at Artemis with a frown. If Alex hadn’t gone to speak with them yet, then why did they want to question me about the party? How had they found out about what had happened? Somebody else must have told them about Tony and the tree, or maybe they’d mentioned the wolf on the loose. But who would have told them about all that?

My mom stayed in front of the door, blocking both agents’ paths. “Well, I’m sorry agents, but your information is all wrong. My daughter was with me and my husband last night. She never went to Hunter’s Park, so I cannot imagine how she could help you with your questions.”

Imamu and Fernsby exchanged a look before looking back at Mom. “That’s not what we were led to believe,” Fernsby said.

“I don’t give a hoot about what you believe,” Mom said simply. “And if you have nothing else to discuss, I have a dinner party to plan.” She slammed the door shut before either of them could reply.

We stood in silence, waiting for the agents to confer with each other and then head back down the walkway.

“Mom!” I grinned, stepping into the foyer. “That was awesome!”

She shrugged. “Nobody bullies my family.”

We spent the rest of the day lying low and going over our plans for the heist a few more times for good measure. I wanted to make sure Artemis in particular understood and memorized every aspect of our plan. Mom seemed completely at ease, and Lola was approaching our collective crime with the same confidence with which she approached everything. I, on the other hand, was a complete mess.

I knew the plan inside and out. I’d researched the house and its artifacts as much as I possibly could, quadruple-checked the batteries on our walkie talkies, and had even checked the weather forecast just in case. Even after all the insane situations I’d been in, something about breaking the law set me on edge.

*Come on, Cali. You can do this. You’ve been in much scarier and more difficult situations than a heist in an abandoned, if creepy, old house. You slayed the Kollector! You’ve fought werewolves! You can do this.*

When nighttime rolled around, there was no turning back. We changed into dark clothing, packed up our gear, and headed for the car.

I glanced at the closet, which still contained Alex’s unconscious form. “What about Alex?” I asked, uneasy that he still hadn’t woken up.

“He’ll be fine,” Artemis assured me, opening the closet door to take a quick look at him. “I’ve knocked out much bigger prey than him with that trick. From the look of him, he should be out for at least another three hours. Probably a little longer.”

Great. He’d been in our coat closet all day long. So at this point even if the heist did go off without a hitch, we’d still have a potential missing person hanging out in our closet when all was said and done.

My mom appeared in the doorway to the foyer, gear bag in hand. “If everyone is ready, it’s time to go.”

I peeked in at Alex before we left. He was sleeping peacefully, his head resting on some luggage. “Bye, Alex,” I whispered. “We’ll be right back.”

We piled into the car, Artemis and me in the back seat, Mom driving, and Lola in the passenger seat with the laptop and the walkie talkies. We drove to the museum in complete silence, which didn’t do much to keep my nerves from reducing me to a sweaty, shaking mess.

Mom parked the car just down the street from the museum and Lola handed out the walkie talkies. “Set them to channel two, and we should have no problem communicating with each other.” Then she turned back to her laptop. “I’ll take out the cameras first so you guys can sneak around to the back. I’ll radio you when I’ve disabled the alarm.”

“Okay, let’s do this.” Mom pushed her door open and Artemis and I followed her lead.

Artemis clutched her walkie talkie to her chest like it was some kind of treasure. “This is going to be fun.” She grinned.

I just nodded and followed after Artemis and my mom. This was going to be fine. We had a fool-proof plan, and I’d personally made sure we all knew it by heart. Plus, nobody was actually around to catch us, especially if Lola was taking out the alarms. This wasn’t exactly a high stakes situation.

*Except not only are we about to break into a museum, my mom is helping! I worked so hard to save her life and now she’s putting it in danger by committing a crime!* I frowned. *Is this what she meant when she said she wanted us to ‘be a family’?*

*Nope. That’s way too fucked up to even think about.*

The walkie talkies crackled, and Lola’s voice came through. “The eagle has landed.”

Artemis looked around. “Where?”

Mom looked at me. “What is she talking about?”

I sighed and spoke into the walkie talkie. “Come again?”

Lola groaned. “Don’t you guys ever watch action movies? The cameras and alarm are out—hurry!”

We snuck around to the back of the museum, and my mom pointed at a freight entrance. “Let’s try that.”

We headed over to that entry point, and I tried the door, just to see if it would be that easy. Of course, it was locked.

I turned to Artemis. “Can you use your powers to unlock this door?”

“Easy.” She waved her hand and the door unlocked and swung open.

Wow. I really needed to practice my powers more.

We stepped cautiously inside, and I tensed, waiting for… I wasn’t sure what. Attack dogs? Booby traps? Though, if I could take a werewolf or two, I could probably handle an attack dog.

Mom handed out flashlights, and we slowly and carefully proceeded into the dark museum.

Artemis apparently had never seen a flashlight before, because she waved the beam of light around with a giddy laugh. “What is this light stick? I could have used a few of these back home.”

“It’s a battery-powered light bulb. I’ll tell you more about that when we’re done here,” Mom told Artemis quickly, sounding so much like a mom that my heart constricted. Then she looked from Artemis to me. “Remember the plan. We’re going to start on the second floor, split up, and each of us will search a room. If someone finds the vase, they use the walkies to alert the others.”

I nodded. “Got it.”

We started toward the huge staircase, our footsteps reverberating as we went. God, this place was huge. I’d be lucky if I didn’t get lost, much less find the vase on my own.

*Confidence, Cali. You’ll do great. This is all going according to plan. You’re going to get in, find the vase, and get out—no hiccups, no problems, and no one will be the wiser—*

“What are you doing in my home?!”

**Episode 676**

I let out a small scream and lurched back down the stairs, almost knocking my mom and Artemis to the floor in my haste to get away from whoever was speaking to us.

“Don’t go!” the voice called. “I’d like to talk to you, please!”

What the hell? We shone our flashlights around the dark museum and found nothing but the same creepy, empty building we’d just broken into. I thought the museum was supposed to be empty! That nobody lived or worked here anymore. So who was speaking to us? And why weren’t they turning the lights on or chasing us out or threatening to call the police?

Maybe they’d already called the police and were just trying to get us to stick around so we’d be arrested? I looked around wildly again, about ready to call the whole mission off. So Tony was a vengeful spirit. We could find another way to soothe his anger, right? We didn’t need to spend the next five years in jail just because we wanted that vase.

My flashlight lit up the face of an elderly woman suddenly standing at the top of the stairs and I screamed again.

“Oh, there’s no need to be afraid, dear,” the woman said with a grimace of a smile. She was dressed in some kind of old nurse’s uniform—the kind I’d only ever seen in historical films and TV shows. Her hair was grey and her face was lined with wrinkles. Her skin, too, had a greyish tone to it—but maybe that was just the cheap flashlight washing her out.

She glided elegantly down the stairs toward us. Again, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Did this lady still live here? How could all of our research have missed the very obvious fact that this house still had an occupant?

“Who… who are you?” I asked shakily. *Please don’t call the police. Please, please, please don’t call the police…*

She stopped a few steps up from us. “I’m Selma Pierta. And who are you? What are you doing in my house in the middle of the night?”

“I… I… We’re…” My words failed me, and thankfully my mom stepped in.

“I’m Orla,” Mom said, in a tone of voice that was far too calm for someone who’d just been caught breaking and entering.

“Mom!” I hissed. “You’re supposed to use a fake name!”

She ignored me. “What are you doing here, Selma?”

“Oh, well I work here,” Selma explained eagerly. “Or rather, I used to work here. Before I was murdered.”

Just like that, my brain short-circuited. “*What?*” I looked her up and down again once, then twice. She was a *ghost?* Here, in the dark, I never would have noticed.

Selma gave me another grimace of a smile. I got the distinct impression that the expression was supposed to be comforting, but it had the opposite effect. “You act like you’ve never seen a ghost before. Well, don’t worry! I assure you, I’m one of the friendly ones.”

I let out a breathy laugh. *Selma the friendly ghost.* Had the orb awakened her too? How many ghosts was Silas sending out into the world!?

“Forgive me if I seem a little rattled,” she continued, “but I wasn’t expecting any guests. In fact, I haven’t had any guests in quite some time.”

Oh. So Selma wasn’t like Tony, then. If she’d been here for a long time, then it couldn’t have been Silas and the orb that had brought her back… hopefully. Maybe she was just one of those old-fashioned ghosts. The kind that stuck around in old places, long after they’d died.

Mom took another step forward. “We’re so sorry for startling you, Selma. We had no idea you were here. These are my daughters, Cali and Artemis.” She gestured to us. Artemis smiled, but I froze.

*Daughters*. That sounded so strange, coming from my mom’s mouth. And even though I knew it was true, I still couldn’t quite wrap my head around it.

“I’ve heard about the Glenngreen murders,” Mom continued. “I’m very sorry about what happened.”

Selma nodded sadly. “I’m sorry too. I miss my mistress, Victoria Canton.” A pearlescent tear slid down her cheek and she wiped it away with a sniffle. I hadn’t realized ghosts could cry, but it made sense, now that I thought about it. They probably had plenty to be sad about, being dead and all.

The ghost woman cleared her throat and smiled again. “I would invite you all upstairs for tea, but being a ghost makes that difficult. I can’t even boil water.”

“Thank you.” Mom smiled, her face still completely serene and polite. Maybe she was made of much tougher stuff than I’d thought. I’d been a nervous mess from the beginning of this plan, but nothing had seemed to faze Mom—at least not yet.

“Unfortunately we don’t have time to socialize,” Mom continued. “Maybe some other time.”

“Ah.” Selma nodded. “I understand. Everyone is so busy these days, aren’t they?” She looked directly at me while she said this, and I forced a polite smile onto my face. What exactly was the etiquette for making small talk with a ghost?

“Selma, would you mind if we looked around?” Mom asked.

She shrugged. “I see no reason why you shouldn’t. It’s not as though the mistress will complain.”

I gave her a shaky smile and headed up the stairs.

“It was a piece of firewood, you know,” Selma added, when I was only a step away from her. “That was what did me in. Conked me right here, on the back of my head.” She pointed to a spot on the back of her head, where the gray hair was matted and dark. I was relieved to not be able to make out any further details in the darkness. “I never saw it coming,” Selma said.

I smiled politely. “That must have been frightening.”

“Oh not at all, dear,” she said cheerily. “I was dead in an instant.”

*Okay….* I had zero idea what to say to *that*, so I continued to the top of the stairs. As soon as I reached the landing, the temperature dropped, and I rubbed my arms. God, this place was massive. How would we ever find that vase?

Artemis and Mom followed me up.

“Remember,” Mom said, “we need to stick to the plan. That’s the only way we’ll find what we’re looking for.”

“Oh, are you on a treasure hunt?” Selma asked. “Can I join you? I miss playing games. I used to be one heck of a bridge player, back in the day.” Her expression took on a dreamy quality.

Actually, that sounded like it would be super helpful—way more useful than hanging around and casually bumming us out with the story of her murder. “We’re looking for a vase with a fancy K on it,” I told Selma.

She brightened. “Oh, why didn't you say so before? It’s in the sun room! I so love the sun room.” She beckoned us back downstairs. “Come on. I’ll show you!”

So we followed the long-dead matron downstairs to the sun room. Selma chattered happily as we walked, sharing various details about the house and her time working in it. If she was to be believed, each room held a story of the people and parties that had occupied it. It was actually a pretty comprehensive tour—the kind people usually paid money for.

If we weren’t in the middle of a heist, and it hadn’t been dark and creepy as fuck inside the museum, and we weren’t being led around by a ghost whose head had been bashed in… Well, the whole thing wouldn’t have been half-bad.

*If Alex thought last night at the keg party was weird, what would he make of this? A ghost leading us to a Fae vase.*

Finally, we reached a large room with stained glass windows and green mosaic tiles on the floor. Moonlight filtered in through the large windows, illuminating the furniture and knickknacks around the room. It was actually a stunning room. I could see why it was Selma’s favorite.

She pointed to a cabinet. “The vase is in there. I’m not sure when or where the mistress acquired it. It might have belonged to her grandfather, but the vase has been in this case for as long as I can remember.”

We gathered around the case, and there it was. The Fae vase that was strong enough to capture and hold a poltergeist. I’d been convinced that this heist would be a nightmare, but thanks to Selma, everything had turned out pretty much painless. We’d only been in the mansion for maybe twenty or thirty minutes, and already we’d found what we were looking for. Maybe we really were going to pull this off and be on our way.

“There it is.” Artemis pointed out the Kollector’s seal.

I reached for the vase, but as soon as my finger brushed against the smooth surface, an ear-splitting alarm shattered the silence.

**Episode 677**

JOSS

I was standing on the porch watching for Xavier’s return when I spotted him coming out of the woods. He was completely naked. He must have shifted and run off. Great. This whole unlikely-allies-coming-together thing was off to a fan-fucking-tastic start.

I met him on the lawn. “Where have you been?” I demanded. I hated that it was down to me to talk to him this way. That I had to be the bad guy who bossed around one of the Alphas, but I had a feeling that if Greyson were to try to enforce this new arrangement we’d fallen into, one or both of them would end up dead.

I expected a snarky response. Xavier had made it pretty clear in the past that he wasn’t my biggest fan, and even when he liked a person, that didn’t mean he tolerated them telling him what to do.

But instead of snark, his head snapped up in surprise and he blinked at me for a moment. I’d been standing right in front of him, in plain sight. Had he really not noticed I was there? He shook his head and mumbled, “I went out for a run, guess I lost track of time.”

“Out for a run? You know you’re not supposed to go out alone. We’ve talked about this,” I said.

“I know.” He tried to brush past me, clearly not interested in having this conversation right now. Maybe not ever. But he didn’t seem to be outright insulting me. He seemed more distracted than anything else, but I couldn’t just let him ignore his responsibilities.

I held out a hand to stop him. “You were supposed to start training everyone with Rishika hours ago, but you blew them off. Rishika ended up having to do it by herself.”

He didn’t answer. I wondered if he was even hearing me. Where was this behavior coming from? The Xavier I knew wouldn’t think twice before ripping someone’s throat out for daring to try to tell him what to do.

But now, he seemed to be in some kind of daze. If I didn’t know any better, I would say he was in shock. “What’s wrong, Xavier?” I asked. “Did something happen in the woods?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but then shut it and shook his head. “I uh… I just needed some air.”

I frowned. I’d never heard a worse lie in my entire life.

“I’m sorry about skipping the training session,” he added. “I’ll do better next time. I’m gonna shower and go to bed.”

He continued on toward the house without waiting for a reply. I watched him go, confusion washing over me. What the hell was going on with him?

When I’d suggested to Greyson that Xavier could teach our pack members how to fight, I’d known we’d be in for a bumpy ride. His history with Greyson was toxic and volatile, and he and I didn’t get along much better. We were allies for the moment, and the moment only, and friction was an inevitability.

But Xavier had seemed willing to help out, from the way Greyson told it. He’d taken his brother’s request seriously and had seemed eager to have a role in the pack. To play his own part in helping to protect the others from Silas. And when he hadn’t shown up, I’d been convinced it was some kind of powerplay.

But now I wasn’t so sure.

I looked back at the dark woods. Had Xavier been telling the truth, or had he actually seen something in the woods? There was nothing out there, as far as my senses could tell, that posed a risk or contradicted Xavier’s story. I’d have to talk to Greyson about it. If we were going to count on Xavier to train everyone, then his head needed to be in the right place.

I sighed and followed Xavier back into the house. A lump of tension was knotting in my shoulders, and I rolled my neck as I walked back inside. It felt like the whole house—hell, the future of our existence—was a powder keg, ready to explode any second. All it would take was one spark, whether that spark was Xavier’s odd behavior, Greyson and Xavier fighting, that weird shit with Cali, or Silas and his alleged Halloween bloodbath.

I felt strung out and in need of something to take the edge off. God, I’d have loved to sleep through the night. Some of the wolves were in the kitchen, playing cards. Ravi was with them. He met my eyes when I walked in and smiled.

I smiled back. Suddenly I knew exactly what I needed, and it was a hell of a lot better than a sleeping pill.

“Ravi,” I said sharply, using my Luna voice and pointing toward the door. “Follow me.”

Like the good boy that he was, Ravi followed me upstairs and into my room. “What’s up?” he asked.

“Things have been pretty stressful lately,” I admitted. “I was hoping you could help me take the edge off?”

He grinned and closed the distance between us. “It would be my pleasure.”

Then his lips pressed against mine, and I didn’t have to think about anything except how good he made me feel.

His hands threaded through my hair as he kissed me. I melted against him and he deepened the kiss, moving his tongue against mine. I moaned. My hands moved to his torso, slowly feeling the ridges in his chest and stomach over the fabric of his shirt. I bit his bottom lip, and a deep groan escaped him.

Ravi's eyes darkened, and he pushed me back against the mattress with a primal growl. Before I could register it, he'd unbuttoned my jeans and tossed them onto my bedroom floor. He pulled me upright and lifted my shirt over my head, then unclasped my bra.

He was a man possessed by a singular need, and his body pressed into mine as his mouth devoured me. I tugged at the hem of his shirt. He broke the kiss and pulled the material over his head, and my mouth went dry. I explored the planes of his chest for a moment, earning a groan of approval before he pinned my wrists above my head, pressing them into the mattress and making my body arch up. His mouth hovered over my breasts, and his lips wrapped around my nipple. Shit, that felt good. I bucked my hips, keening when he lightly bit down and shockwaves travelled to my center.

“Ravi…” I groaned.

He smirked at the need in my voice and rolled his hips against mine in a rhythm that had me aching for more. His lips continued their path up my neck, and he whispered, “You have no idea how much I’ve wanted you.”

Desire twisted in my stomach and he got off me long enough to remove his pants and underwear. He slowly slipped my panties down my legs, kissing his way back up. When his tongue dragged over my slit, sensation exploded between my legs and I bucked my hips, begging for more. He'd lit a fire low in my belly, and I'd have done anything to extinguish it.

“Ravi,” I whined, and that smirk grew. I wanted to slap it away.

He lay beside me on the bed, drawing his fingertips down my side. They circled briefly over my hip bone before dipping lower.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he whispered, pushing two fingers inside me.

I gasped again as my eyes rolled back and he started moving his fingers in and out, brushing his thumb over my clit with each stroke. I bucked my hips against his hand, pushing the tempo up. Oh god, I was almost there. I was so close to falling right over the edge—and then he stopped.

“Ravi!” My eyes opened and locked on his.

His weight shifted, and then with one movement he filled me to the brim, but not with his fingers. Pleasure sparked through me, and he muffled my cry with his mouth.

I panted for a moment, adjusting to the fullness, and then nudged his hips with mine. He immediately snapped into a rhythm that had my eyes rolling back.

“Please, Ravi,” I breathed, and he complied, slamming into that spot over and over until my crazed, tightly strung body broke and I shattered in his arms with a cry.

He too found his release, letting out a groan and settling against my skin, wrapping his arms around me. I lifted my heavy arms and embraced him, clumsily dragging my fingers across his scalp.

I brushed my lips over his. “Thanks for this. It was exactly what I needed.”

He grinned. “Oh, any time.”

I sent Ravi back to his own room and stretched out on my bed, enjoying the satisfied ache in my muscles. This was what I’d needed. I felt so much better, almost good as I felt in my wolf form. Maybe just as good. But I could use some water.

If I’d been more on the ball, I could have had Ravi get it for me. *Next time*.

I slipped out into the hallway and headed downstairs to the kitchen. It was quiet and peaceful now. It seemed like nearly everyone had gone to bed. I smiled as I glanced around the kitchen. This really could be a great home for myself and the pack—if only we didn’t have the specter of Silas hanging over us.

I grabbed a water bottle from the fridge, just as the back door opened. Cali stepped inside, quietly closing the door behind her. My eyes narrowed. What was that annoying little human getting up to now?

I flipped the light on and she spun around to face me, her eyes wide.

“Where have you been?” I asked.

**Episode 678**

As the deafening alarm filled the air, I was convinced that I’d never heard a louder sound in my entire life.

I jumped back, snatching my hand away from the vase. “What the hell?”

The alarm was somehow shrill and booming all at once. I clapped my hands over my ears and glanced at Mom and Artemis, who both looked as shocked as I felt. I’d thought Lola had disarmed the alarms! Why were they suddenly back online? Had something happened to her?

I looked over at Selma, who was wide-eyed and grinning at all the excitement. “Did you know this would happen?” I demanded.

She shook her head. “I’ve never heard this sound in my life!”

A headache was beginning to pulse between my temples, no doubt due to the alarm that was trying to melt my brain. I pulled my walkie talkie out of my pocket and shouted into it. “Lola! What’s going on out there? We tripped the alarm!”

Static echoed through the line, but Lola didn’t respond. Where the hell was she?

“Cali, grab the vase!” Mom snapped. “We have to get out of here before the police show up!”

I grabbed the vase out of the case, and it nearly slipped out of my grip. “Shit,” I muttered, barely catching it before it hit the ground. That would be just my luck, breaking into a house to steal a rare and priceless Fae artifact only to break it before I could bring it home and then still get arrested when the police inevitably showed up.

“Here, I’ve got it.” Artemis grabbed the vase, holding it from the bottom, and we managed to slide it into the satchel. She hefted the bag over her shoulder, and we were off.

Selma followed us as we rushed out of the sun room. She was practically giddy with excitement. “This is more fun than I’ve had since we hosted the bicentennial ball!”

“Goody for you!” I snapped.

We stopped in the hallway and glanced at each other. “Do you remember the way to the back entrance?” Mom asked.

I glanced around helplessly, then shook my head. Selma’s endless commentary on the way to the sun room had distracted me from paying attention to my surroundings. Thanks to the resident ghost, I knew all about which rooms had been used as clandestine meeting places for various couples, but I didn’t even know how to get back to the grand staircase.

*Oh my god. We’re going to either wander around in here until we die, or get caught by the police!* Selma probably wouldn’t mind the company if we *did* die here, though I couldn’t help but wonder what Tony might be capable of doing to me and Artemis if we ended up as ghosts, too.

“Are you really leaving so soon?” Selma asked us, looking somewhat dejected. “I didn’t finish showing you all the rooms—just wait until you see the dining hall! You’re going to absolutely love it.”

“We’ll have to come back some other time,” Artemis said. “Can you lead us to the back entrance? You know, the way we came in?”

The ghost nodded. “Of course!”

As Artemis and I moved to follow her, Mom grabbed us both by the arm and stopped us. “Wait, look!” She pointed up to ceiling, where a red light was blinking periodically. The security camera was back on, and pointed directly in our path. If we followed Selma back the way we’d come, we’d end up on the surveillance footage.

Selma glided back over to us. “Is something wrong?”

“Is there another way out?” Mom asked, looking around frantically. “We can’t go back that way.”

The ghost shook her head. “Not to the back service entrance.”

I let out a shaky breath. God, I wished those damn alarms would stop screeching for half a second so I could think! “What do we do?! How do we get those to shut up?!”

As part of our preparation for the heist, Lola had taken the time to show me where all the surveillance cameras were in the building. If I remembered correctly, we’d managed to stay out of range of the cameras so far, but that was kind of a small miracle. They were posted in almost every large room and hallway in the house.

A wave of frustration and worry washed over me. Where the hell was Lola? She was supposed to take care of all of this for us! Hell, the only reason she’d even shown me where the cameras were was because I’d pressed the issue. When I’d first asked, her response had been, “You don’t need to worry about that. I’ll take care of you guys.”

Apparently not.

“Stay put,” Mom said. She focused on the camera and waved her hands. At the end of the hallway, just below the camera, a plant began to grow up the wall. Its vines slowly spread out, crawling up toward the top of the doorway until they completely obstructed the lens.

My jaw dropped. I’d never seen such a blatant display of her power, even when she’d been teaching me to use my own powers. She was such a badass!

“Selma,” Mom said. “Lead the way, please.”

Artemis and I raced after my mom and Selma, and we passed through a series of halls and rooms—so many that I knew for certain I would never have been able to find my way back on my own. I’d been right about the cameras; they were everywhere. But Mom took care of that—every camera we passed on our way to the back entrance was covered by leaves and vines.

*Mom is amazing! If only we could do something about the alarms…*

We finally reached the doors that we’d come in through. Mom, ever the gracious and polite thief, turned back to Selma. “Thank you so much for all of your help, but we have to run.”

Selma nodded, smiling weakly. More pearlescent tears began to slip down her face. “I understand, and I wish you all the best.”

My heart broke a little bit for the ghost. I wished we could stay a little longer and keep her company. It had to be lonely, being stuck in that creepy museum all by herself. If we weren’t on the verge of being arrested, I would have asked her for the grand tour.

“Bye, Selma!” Artemis waved before rushing out of the house.

“Thank you, Selma!” I called. “We couldn’t have done this without you!”

“Come visit again soon!” she called to us as we raced out of the building.

That seemed pretty unlikely, but stranger things had happened. Hopefully I’d be able to visit her eventually, once the dust had settled from this heist. *I wonder if she can come out during the day as well? Or maybe she’s only a nighttime ghost…*

*Not now, Cali!*

Once outside, we could hear the wail of police sirens growing closer and closer with every passing second. We were maybe half a block away from where we’d parked the car, but heading that way would mean heading straight for the police.

“We’ll have to take the long way back to the car,” Mom said. “Hopefully Lola’s ready and waiting. Once this is over I’m going to give her a piece of my mind for her shoddy work on those alarms. She’d better have a good excuse.”

No kidding. We headed down a side street and past several yards before ducking into the forest that skirted this area of town, taking the circuitous route back to our getaway car. What the hell had happened to Lola? She was supposed to be our tech guru, our guy in the chair, and our getaway driver. Only, the alarms and cameras had definitely been functional, and Lola wasn’t answering us through the walkie talkie.

Had she fallen asleep? She *had* partied pretty damn hard the night before. Maybe she was more hungover from last night’s adventure than she’d let on. Though she’d seemed just fine this morning, and even when we’d started the heist. She’d been perfectly normal. So what the hell was going on with her now?

Whatever her excuse, I was pissed. We could have been arrested!

Artemis fell into step beside me. “That was fun! Makes me miss the days I spent hunting my prey, using all of my hard-won skills and a dash of magic to capture my bounty.” She grinned.

“And bring them to the Kollector?” I asked dryly.

“Girls, quiet,” Mom shushed us as we emerged from the woods. The car was just down the sidewalk, and the police sirens were over by the museum now, the red and blue flashing lights shining periodically down the street.

We got closer to the car, and I couldn’t wait any longer. I broke into a sprint and rushed to the car, ready to confront Lola.

But something was very wrong. One of the windows was smashed, and Lola was gone.

**Episode 679**

VIOLET

Jay was a super nice guy. And under normal circumstances, spending a night eating pizza with him would probably be… perfectly nice. But, as I was doing it in Lola and Cali’s unfamiliar Minnesota apartment while making tense small talk because we were both waiting for our friends to finish up a literal heist, I wished that I was anywhere else.

After last night’s keg party—which had featured ghosts, and werewolves running wild, and Charlie—this was a huge let down. I wanted to be doing something, not sitting here waiting for other people to finish doing something. Plus, the company wasn’t exactly ideal.

Not that Jay wasn’t great. He was! He was easily the nicest guy in our entire pack. I had a soft spot for Xavier because he’d always looked out for me, but sometimes he could be too intense to just relax with. But right now, even Jay was distant, clearly just stewing in worry over Lola.

But it wasn’t like I was totally present, either. I was thinking about someone else, too.

Charlie.

I couldn’t stop thinking about his eyes, how beautiful and open they’d been when he’d asked me for help. I’d never realized someone that strong could be that vulnerable with me. It made me want to give him everything I had. I’d never felt like that before.

And yeah, he’d probably just asked me to help him out because I was the only werewolf he’d ever met. In fact, he hadn’t even known for sure that he *was* a wolf until I’d told him. Which was crazy. But maybe there was another reason he’d asked for my help. Maybe he was starting to feel what I felt.

“Violet, have you noticed anything strange about Lola?” Jay asked me, his words coming out in a jumbled rush. “Anything unusual?”

I looked back at him, surprised. He looked so worried, like he’d been deliberating asking me this question for a while. It made my heart ache a little, to see him in such clear distress. I’d sensed tension between him and Lola for a while, and I really didn’t want to take sides, but I also wanted to be honest.

“I’m not sure what you mean.” I shrugged. “Lola’s been really nice and helpful. She made me talk to Charlie, which was, like… the nicest thing ever. I wouldn’t have found him if it weren’t for her.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Jay sighed. “Violet, I’m worried she’s getting reckless about shifting. It feels like she wants to be a wolf all the time. And I get it. All werewolves like to be in their wolf form. It feels nice, simple, primal. But… Lola’s taking it a bit too far. She’s a hybrid, she should know better. Shouldn’t she… *biologically* not have the urge to do it so much? Like… her instincts should protect her, right?”

“I don’t know,” I told him honestly. “She’s the only hybrid I know.”

“I started to notice it after she came back from trying to get into the Fae world,” Jay said. “I’m worried it was my fault. Maybe I pressured her too much about staying with the pack. I made her choose between me and the pack and everything else—Cali, school, her dads. That kind of pressure would hurt anyone. It was so thoughtless of me.”

Jay put his head in his hands and I felt a pang in my chest. His love for Lola was so obvious. It was written over every inch of him—every expression, every action, all of it was out of love for Lola, and it was impossible to miss.

I wondered what it would feel like if Charlie ever felt that way about me. If he rushed to get every door for me, pulled out my chair when we went to dinner. If he worried about me when I was out late. If he protected me in every fight.

If he got jealous because another guy looked at me the wrong way. It was a heady idea, the thought of belonging to someone else. Of someone wanting me to belong to them. I wanted to feel it so badly, I didn’t know what I’d do if I didn’t get to.

“The way she shifted at that keg party was so reckless.” Jay’s words were a little muffled, but I could understand him just fine. “At least she had the good sense not to shift out in the open, but people saw her. They got scared. At least they thought she was just a normal wolf. After all, there are wolves in Minnesota. But what if that kind of thing happened somewhere else? What would it be like then?”

Jay dropped his hands and looked at me, his brow wrinkled with nerves.

“Can you imagine what would have happened if those kids had seen her shift?” he asked, his voice grave.

“Jay, I understand that you’re worried.” I tried to speak in a soothing voice. “But you should remember that Lola is smart. She wouldn’t do something like that.”

“I know she’s smart,” Jay told me. “Trust me, I do. I haven’t won a single game we’ve played in… well, ever. Lola is bananas smart. But I’m worried she’s losing the ability to make smart decisions. I hope she keeps it together tonight when they break into the museum.”

Jay’s eyes darted over to the clock on the wall, and he relaxed a little.

“They should be done pretty soon,” he said, more to himself than to me. “I’m really sorry to bother you with all this stuff. The last thing I want to do is put you in the middle of anything.”

“Thanks, Jay.” I gave him a small smile. I hoped that talking about this stuff had taken a little bit of the weight off his shoulders. No matter what was going on with Lola, she wouldn’t want Jay to have to worry about her. I hoped he knew that.

Jay smiled back. “You must be tired.”

“I am, yeah.” I nodded. “I think I’m gonna call it a night.”

“Well, goodnight, Violet.”

“Goodnight, Jay.” I gave him a little wave as I got off the couch and walked back to the room I was staying in.

I shut the door behind me and let myself revel in the privacy for a second. Jay was right—it was exhausting to get tangled up in other people’s couple drama. I didn’t know how Cali was able to stand it, if she really did have two mates.

I flopped down onto the bed and shut my eyes. But instead of darkness, all I could see was Charlie. His dark hair, and his amber eyes, and his full lips…

God, what would his wolf form look like? It had to be so gorgeous and strong.

I sighed.

Lilac would have liked Charlie. What was there not to like?

Lilac was always a little bit overprotective of me, but even he would have to agree there was something special about Charlie.

I felt that ache I associated with the new reality of Lilac being gone. It didn’t make me want to lose my mind crying and screaming and tearing everything apart anymore. It had settled into this steady numbness. But now that I’d met Charlie, I felt… different.

I still missed Lilac. Deeply and profoundly and painfully. It hurt even more when I realized that our eighteenth birthday was next week—a day we’d always shared and celebrated together. This would be the first one I’d have to get through alone. Would it ever not remind me of him?

I knew that he’d want me to celebrate. That he’d be pissed off if I spent our day feeling sorry for myself. He would have wanted a huge party. With… What could you buy at eighteen? Porn? Spray paint? Cigarettes?

Lilac would have made me invite Charlie. Like, forcibly. He would’ve bugged me about it, threatening to invite Charlie himself if I didn’t ask him. I wondered who else I’d even want there. I didn’t have a ton of friends, especially in Minnesota.

If I invited Charlie, I’d have to invite Sandi, too. Little Miss Third Person herself. But maybe she wouldn’t come. Cheerleading practice could keep her away.

Of course, I’d invite Lola, Jay, Cali, Artemis… But I wished there were a few more people around who were my age. Charlie’s friends had seemed nice when I’d met them at the keg party. Maybe I could ask him to bring them along.

I grinned as I closed my eyes again and pictured the birthday cake. Candles blazing, my name written in frosting. Charlie laughing as I deliberated over what to wish for.

But then I heard a rapping sound. I looked at the door. Did Jay want to vent about Lola some more? Because I wasn’t sure if I was interested in that.

But then I heard the sound again and realized that it wasn’t a knock at the door—it was a tap at the window.

What the fuck?

I hopped out of bed and scurried over to the window. I spread the blinds to check what it could be, and stifled a scream when I saw who it was.

Charlie was staring right back at me.

**Episode 680**

I stared at the shattered glass on the sidewalk. The pit in my stomach grew into a gaping hole of fear, threatening to tear me apart. Whatever had happened here, it didn’t look good.

I rushed to the car, Artemis and my mother right behind me. I wrenched open the door. It was so weird—this was the car I’d learned to drive in. I remembered being so scared every time I sat in the driver’s seat. So worried that I wasn’t ready to be in charge of this huge, heavy, metal object. I hadn’t trusted myself not to get into trouble.

And now here I was, back in the driver’s seat as I scrabbled around, searching for I didn’t even know what. And I felt the exact same way—small, shaky, and out of my depth.

I spotted Lola’s computer on the floor of the car. She’d left it here… Or she’d had no choice but to leave it behind. Had she been taken? Or had she bailed on us for some reason I didn’t understand?

I grabbed for my walkie talkie from my back pocket and brought it to my lips, hitting the button and hoping this was all a misunderstanding.

“Lola! Lola, where are you?” I asked, the words coming out desperate and rushed.

But as I spoke, I heard my voice echoing from inside the car. A tinny, crackly copy of what I’d just said was emanating from Lola’s walkie, which had somehow fallen into the back seat.

“She left it behind,” my mom said, her voice thick with worry. “What could have happened?”

I shook my head, looking at her wide-eyed. I didn’t know. But I couldn’t imagine the walkie talkie getting back here under calm circumstances. It was a sign that there had been a struggle of some kind.

My head buzzed with possibilities. Had someone kidnapped my best friend? Had the police gotten her? Maybe those MIB agents could have followed us—maybe they’d takenLola. Or was there some other kind of magical threat I hadn’t even considered yet? Another new and terrifying thing I’d only heard about in stories?

“What if something really bad happened?” I asked, looking at my mom and feeling younger and smaller than I’d felt in quite a while.

My mother didn’t answer me. I watched her search for the right words. And seeing that she didn’t know any more than I did made me feel like I was going to throw up or pass out or both.

“We need to search the area,” Artemis piped up, her voice calm and authoritative. “Whoever took her must have left a trail. They might have left things behind that we can use to follow them.”

Mom pointed over my shoulder and back toward the museum, shaking her head nervously. Reminding us of the crime scene we’d fled moments ago.

“When the police realize someone’s broken in, they’re going to start searching the area too,” she reminded us. “We can’t afford to run into them. Especially not while we still have the vase.”

“But mom.” My voice sounded high pitched and breathy with nerves. “We can’t just leave Lola.”

“I know, honey,” my mom assured me. “And we won’t. But we have to be smart. I think we need to move the car away from the museum. Park it somewhere secluded. Then we can come back here and start looking for Lola.”

“I can do it,” Artemis volunteered.

“No,” I snapped. I didn’t trust Artemis behind the wheel of a car. If I was being honest with myself, I didn’t trust her not to make this harder than it was already going to be. Artemis was such a wild card in so many ways. Having her around in a crisis wasn’t always comforting.

“I’ll do it,” my mom suggested. “I’ll drive the car a few blocks away and meet you over there.”

She pointed to a section of woods a ways away from the museum.

Mom slid into the car, her expression hardening. I could tell she was on a mission. She rolled down the window and gave us one last look.

“Please be careful, girls,” she murmured, looking at us pleadingly. I didn’t like seeing my mother worry like this. For a second, I wished that everything could just be normal.

No werewolves, no Fae, no ghosts, just the normal, human family I’d thought we were a year ago.

But that wasn’t an option.

So instead, I just nodded.

“We will,” I promised.

It wasn’t lost on me that Artemis remained silent. I was sure it wasn’t lost on my mother either, but she drove off with the vase anyway. She kept her headlights off so she could move more stealthily and for a second I wanted to shout after her to come back. To not leave me here where it was so dangerous.

“Let’s go.”

Artemis’s words brought me back to the present. I followed her into the woods, wishing that I were a wolf. If I were, I’d have had no problem picking up Lola’s scent. If I’d been in a position to call Xavier or Greyson for help, they could have been here, helping me find her.

But Greyson didn’t even want to speak to me. And everything with Xavier was just too complicated to touch right now.

I tried to remind myself that I knew Lola better than anyone. She was my best friend, and that meant I could find her.

Just as we crossed the tree line, I heard a howl in the distance.

Artemis and I locked eyes. Was the sound coming from Lola?

“I don’t know exactly what her howl sounds like,” I admitted, feeling guilty. “Maybe I should have spent more time trying to learn which one was which. It could be her, but it could be another werewolf. Or just a normal wolf.”

If Artemis was disappointed in me for not being able to recognize the call, she didn’t show it. She just led me deeper into the woods. I watched her move, every step calculated and cautious.

“I really miss my net,” she grumbled under her breath.

“Ah yes,” I said, glaring at her, “I did notice, you know, while I was inside of it, that you two were quite the dynamic duo.” If she was going to keep bringing up my kidnapping, I was going to keep being pissed about it. I imagine most siblings had things like this—old wounds that never healed. But I doubted most of them involved abductions.

“It worked, didn’t it?” she snapped back at me.

Before I could confirm that it *did* work, *very* well—on me and Greyson—another howl pierced the air, this one much closer than the last. Artemis and I froze.

I listened carefully. I could hear the wind rustling the leaves around us. An owl hooting. The low chatter of the police radio. But nothing like a wolf.

Artemis beckoned me to keep following her deeper into the woods. I watched her footfalls carefully, trying to only step where she stepped. My heart was pounding in my chest as doubt filled my mind.

What if the wolf we’d heard wasn’t Lola? Would we have to fight it? Would I be able to actually use my Fae powers this time? Or would I just stand there like an idiot with my hands extended uselessly in front of me while the mystery wolf tore me to shreds?

Between the two of us, Artemis and I should be able to deal with a lone wolf, right? Unless there was more than one. What if we ended up having to face an entire pack?

I heard some branches rustling up ahead and flinched at the noise. I put a hand over my heart, as if I could slow its hammering pace just by pressing down on my chest.

Artemis took my free hand and hunched down, pointing ahead. I mimicked her, assuming that if she was doing it, I should too.

“There’s something in those bushes,” she whispered to me, so softly I could barely hear it.

I strained to see in the darkness. There was just enough moonlight for me to see something moving. But what was it?

Then I heard a low growl. Artemis’s grip on my hand tightened, and I readied myself for a battle I didn’t know we could win.

A large wolf stepped out of the bushes, its eyes trained on us. Artemis and I leapt back instinctively, craning our necks to see the creature.

Artemis raised her hands, clearly prepared to do some kind of spell. But then I got a better look at the wolf.

“Stop,” I hissed at Artemis. “That’s Lola—don’t hurt her.”

Artemis dropped her hands, breathing a sigh of relief. I looked back at Lola’s wolf, who was still staring right at me.

“Lola, it’s me,” I told her, in what I hoped was a soothing voice. “It’s Cali.”

The wolf drew closer to me, but I kept my hands out and my voice calm.

“It’s okay, Lola,” I promised. “You can shift back now.”

But then Lola snarled, baring her enormous, sharp teeth. She reared back on her hind legs and sprang forward, lunging right at me.

**Episode 681**

VIOLET

For a second, I wondered if I was dreaming. A cute boy was tapping on my window—that sure as hell didn’t sound real.

But then he did it again, grinning at me insistently.

I pulled the blinds up, eager to take him in. To not just peek at him, but really get a look.

Charlie motioned for me to crack the window, looking playfully impatient. I pulled it up a few inches.

“Charlie,” I breathed, loving the way his name sounded coming out of my mouth. “What are you doing here?”

“You said you’d help me,” he reminded me. “And I need help.”

He bit his lip and ran a hand through his hair, looking nervous. All I wanted was to take him in my arms and soothe him, but I knew that would be too much. Still, I could help him.

“It would be a lot easier to talk if you could come downstairs,” Charlie admitted. “I’m kind of hanging from your ledge and it’s a long way down…”

“Got it.” I nodded, feeling butterflies in my stomach. “I’ll meet you outside. Just give me a second.”

I shut the window and then the blinds, feeling like I should put everything back in place. Then I hurried over to the mirror and combed my fingers through my hair before I threw on some extra lip gloss and mascara. I looked at my reflection. This was as good as it was going to get, considering I didn’t have much time to prepare.

I padded down the hallway, holding my boots in my hand so I wouldn’t disturb Jay. I snuck all the way to the door before sliding my shoes on and slipping out the door.

I spun around just in time to see Charlie’s face light up when he saw me. My heart lurched, like it was attempting to leap toward him. But luckily, I kept it together and managed to just smile back at him.

I walked over to him, and he waved excitedly.

“I’m sorry it’s so late,” he said. “I just really needed to see you.”

“It’s okay.” I hoped I wasn’t smiling too broadly at him. “I’m glad you came to me. How did you even know which room I was in? Was I, like, the third bedroom you tried?”

Charlie laughed and gave a little shrug.

“No, it was actually the weirdest thing. I just kind of… knew without knowing,” he told me. “Does that make sense?”

I felt a tingling sensation in my limbs that had nothing to do with how cold it was outside.

“It makes perfect sense.”

*Because we’re mates.*

“My brain is kind of overflowing with questions.” Charlie gave me a guilty smile. “Is it okay if I ask you a million?”

I giggled, unable to resist how cute he was. “Easy there, tiger,” I said. “Calm down. Have you talked to your parents? What about your pack? They can probably answer these kinds of questions.”

Charlie’s eyes went wide with fright.

“Oh no, I can’t say anything about this to my parents.” He shook his head. “They have no idea about this. They’re not werewolves. And I don’t have a pack.” Suddenly he looked concerned. “*Should* I have a pack? Where do you find them? Are you… assigned to them?”

I held up my hand and he stopped asking questions.

“Sorry, million questions,” he admitted, chagrined.

“It’s okay,” I assured him. “But if your parents aren’t werewolves, how are you one?”

Charlie looked down at his feet for a second, and I wondered if I’d asked something too personal. I kicked myself for making him feel uncomfortable. But a second later he was looking back at me, that sweet, open look in his eyes.

For a second, I forgot how to breathe.

“I was attacked by a wolf last month,” he admitted, his voice wavering just a bit. “I had to get a rabies shot and everything.” He chuckled softly, then looked grave. “The doctors told me everything would be fine afterward, but I could tell something was different.”

“Wow,” I whispered, taking it in. I felt this overwhelming urge to ask where he’d been bitten. To see the scar, to run my fingers over it… If he hadn’t been bitten, would we still have been mates? Would I ever have found him? It was hard to be thankful for an experience that must have scared the hell out of him.

“That must have been really scary,” I said, before I could think if it was the right thing to say.

“Yeah.” He nodded, clearly a little embarrassed. “It was.”

“I’ve been a wolf my whole life,” I said. “There was never anything to get used to for me. I just… was. Have you shifted yet?”

“I had an… experience during the last full moon,” he told me, a bit nervously. “It’s hard to explain, because I’d never felt anything like it before. I was in my room and then I started feeling hot and sweaty—like my insides were burning. I just knew I had to get outside. So I ran out to the back yard and fell to my knees. It was just so painful, I couldn’t stand up anymore. And I was looking up at the sky—at the moon, like somehow I *knew* the whole thing was its fault.”

He looked at me questioningly, like he was wondering if I understood. I nodded, encouraging him to go on.

“For a moment…” He got a faraway look in his eye. “For a moment, I could hear everything, smell everything. It was so overwhelming I wanted to scream, and when I did, it came out a howl. My voice wasn’t mine. It was an animal’s.”

He shuddered at the memory and I reached out to touch his arm, wanting to offer some kind of comfort. He put his hand over mine, like he appreciated the support, and I felt warm despite how cold it was.

“After that, I collapsed,” he admitted. “And when I woke up, I was back in my bed. I thought it must have been a bad dream. Or that someone had slipped me something and I’d been tripping or whatever.”

“And that was the only time?” I asked him, trying not to think about Charlie in his bed, burning up with heat, sweat on his brow, the sheets pushed down around his ankles. But I could feel my cheeks burning anyway.

“Yeah. I guess I’ll have to wait until the next full moon to experience the heart-stopping body horror again,” he joked.

“That’s just a myth,” I told him, laughing. “You can pretty much shift anytime you want. Would you… I mean, I could show you, if you wanted.”

Charlie’s eyes widened, and his lips parted in alarm.

“You mean right here, right now?” he asked.

“Why not?” I shrugged. Shifting was as normal to me as breathing. I didn’t want him to be scared. It was going to become a natural part of his life—and being the one who taught him how to embrace it felt right.

“But how do I do it?” he asked, leaning closer to me, so close I could almost smell the anticipation on him.

I tried to think of how to put it into words. Shifting had never been a thing that needed to be explained to me.

“You need to connect with your inner wolf,” I said.

“Inner wolf,” Charlie repeated. “I wonder if that’s why I’ve been feeling strange ever since. If that’s what’s new.”

He laughed self-consciously.

“Everything I’m saying sounds crazy,” he told me apologetically.

I squeezed his arm and bit my tongue to keep from coming on too strong. All the things I wanted to say to him caught in my throat.

*I understand.*

*I can show you how easy it can be.*

*You don’t have to be shy. I want to belong to you. For us to belong to each other.*

“Doesn’t sound crazy to me,” I finally said. “That new feeling is probably the wolf. When you want to shift, you just… let it take over. It’s hard to explain, but you’ll get the hang of it.”

“Can you shift first?” he asked, almost breathless.

I grinned, excited to show him. “Of course.”

A few seconds later, I was on all fours and Charlie was stumbling back a few steps, his eyes wide with fascination.

“Wow,” he breathed. “Your wolf… You’re so wild and—and beautiful.”

I wanted to throw back my head and howl with happiness. But after all Jay had said about keeping a low profile, I forced myself to show some restraint.

Charlie took a deep breath, making unwavering eye contact with me.

“I can do this,” he murmured, closing his eyes.

I held my breath and waited. Then suddenly, he was shifting. It was a bit awkward. He went in fits and starts. But when I saw his wolf, it felt like all the air in the world had disappeared.

He was better than I ever could have imagined—large, powerful, with dark, thick fur. He howled, his voice powerful and thundering. I snarled with approval—an instinct. Then I took off running, and he chased after me before falling into step.

We ran through the woods and I felt so exhilarated, so alive, so… so much a part of something. I could feel Charlie, and I could just imagine what this had to be like for him. To know he could trust me while doing this for the first time… It filled me with joy.

We burst out of the trees and onto a plateau that overlooked Lake Superior. It was gorgeous.

Without any communication, we both shifted back. Neither of us said anything, just listened to each other’s ragged breaths.

When I looked at him I saw his eyes sweeping over my body, a look of awe on his face. But after a second, something seemed to hit him. His jaw dropped, and a gasp escaped his lips.

“You’re naked!”

**Episode 682**

I screamed, forgetting all about the nearby cops as Lola charged at me. Artemis and I scrambled backward to avoid Lola’s lunge.

Why was she turning on us? Did she not recognize me? Was she under some kind of spell? Was she sick?

I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for the impact of Lola smashing into me. But instead, I felt nothing.

I heard a thump and a growl and opened my eyes to see a flash of fur as Lola was knocked to the ground.

Artemis leapt to her feet, hands out and ready to strike. For a second, I wondered if she had knocked Lola to the ground with magic. But then I saw the second wolf.

“It’s Jay,” I told her hastily, before she could use any magic.

“You need to get me pictures of all of them in and out of wolf form or something,” Artemis growled at me, annoyed, letting her hands fall.

Jay pounced on Lola, pinning her to the ground, growling in her ear with his paws on her chest. A gesture of dominance.

For a moment, I worried Jay was going to hurt Lola. He looked so angry and vicious. But I reminded myself that Jay would never do that. Lola was his mate. I had to trust that he knew how to subdue her. That he knew what was best.

“Lola, please,” I pleaded. “Calm down. It’s okay.”

Lola’s eyes darted around, taking in her surroundings. She looked like she was having trouble focusing on any one thing. But I kept talking to her, hoping it would pull her out.

“It’s just Jay and me and Artemis,” I told her, in what I hoped was a soft but authoritative voice. “We’re your friends. Please just shift back.”

Finally, Lola stopped struggling against Jay’s hold on her and shifted back. Jay joined her and soon my friends were both back in their human forms, lying on the forest floor.

Just like her wolf, Lola looked around bewildered, trying to take in her surroundings.

“What’s wrong?” she asked me, all the usual humor and energy gone from her voice.

I could tell right then she couldn’t remember trying to hurt us. That she’d never meant to. I couldn’t get over how small her voice sounded. How vulnerable she looked in Jay’s arms.

“Uh.” Artemis broke the silence. “You tried to kill us?”

Lola laughed nervously, shaking her head. “Umm, no, seriously,” she pressed. “What’s going on? Because I would never do that.”

“I know *you* wouldn’t,” I assured her. “But you… Your wolf was sure acting like it was going to do *something*.”

Jay turned to look at Lola, his face gravely serious.

“This has to stop,” he told her. And he was telling, not asking. I knew there’d been something going on with them lately, but I hadn’t realized it was this.

Lola actually had the audacity to roll her eyes. “Here we go again,” she grumbled.

Jay rolled off her, clearly pissed. “Why won’t you listen to me, Lola?” He sounded like he was at his wit’s end with her.

He reached into a bag and pulled out a pair of sweats before he tossed Lola a dress.

“Thought you might need this.” His words were passive aggressive, and Lola bristled at them.

I reached over to help Lola up. She was my best friend—I had to take care of her first and ask questions second.

“What happened?” I asked as I pulled her to her feet. “You were supposed to be monitoring the alarms. We were so scared someone had taken you.”

“I’m sorry, Cali.” She sighed. “I was totally on top of things, but then I just got this overwhelming urge to shift.”

She pulled her dress on, avoiding eye contact with me while she did. I tried to remind myself to be patient. To give her the benefit of the doubt. But I was still pretty keyed up from her almost making me her midnight snack.

“I know it was wrong,” Lola told her feet instead of me. “I knew at the time that I shouldn’t do it, but before I could even tell what was happening, I’d shifted. I felt trapped in the car, confined. It was really scary. So I smashed the window to get out and ran into the woods so I could get some air.”

She swallowed hard and looked up at me, her eyes wide with innocence.

“I hope your dad won’t be too upset about it.” She sniffed. “I can totally pay for the repairs.”

“Mr. Hart’s car is the least of your worries, Lola,” Jay told her, his voice low and angry. He stepped away for a second, shaking his head.

“Also, thanks to you bailing on us, we could have been caught in the museum,” Artemis said, clearly miffed. “The alarms and the cameras both turned on, and now the police are here.”

“I’m sorry,” Lola repeated, looking stricken. “I really don’t know what came over me.”

I looked at my friend, honestly not sure what to think at this point. But now that we knew Lola was okay, our priority had to be getting out of here.

“My mom’s probably worried,” I reminded everyone. “We should go meet her.”

Artemis led us through the woods, and I fell into step with Lola. We walked in silence for a bit. She was buzzing with nervous energy. I could tell she knew she was in trouble and she desperately wanted to get out of it. Like an animal chewing its leg off to escape a trap.

“Lola, what’s going on?” I asked, as softly as I could. “I’m worried about you. Jay’s not the only person who’s noticed you have shifting issues, you know?”

“I don’t know,” Lola admitted, her voice thick. “I think something might be wrong with me.”

“Lola, it’s okay,” I assured her. But I didn’t know if it was. What if this was because she was a hybrid? Maybe she’d shifted too much and now she would always struggle with it.

“You’re still using the potion Big Mac gave you, right?” I asked.

“Of *course* I am,” Lola said, clearly frustrated.

“But…” I took a breath, bracing myself for how pissed off this next question was going to make her. “Why are you even shifting at all? You know it’s dangerous for you. And you know the whole pack doesn’t expect you to constantly be risking yourself.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” she snapped at me. “Neither of you could.”

I sighed. I really didn’t want to fight.

I was well aware—sometimes painfully aware—that I wasn’t a wolf. This was why I’d asked Xavier to turn me so many times—because I knew exactly what it felt like to feel like you didn’t belong with a pack, even if you were already a part of it.

But I also knew that Lola had been warned that shifting was dangerous for her. That she had to handle it with caution, and that she should do it sparingly.

Still, I didn’t want to fight.

“I just want to help you, Lola,” I told her, trying to keep any edge out of my voice. Because it was true. Even if I *was* a little pissed, it all came from a place of love. I just wanted Lola to be okay.

“I’m sorry.” Lola took my hand and squeezed it.

“It’s okay,” I said, squeezing back. “Maybe we can talk to Mrs. Smith and ask her for some advice? She always seems to know about stuff like this.”

“Do you think he's going to stay mad at me?” Lola asked in a small, wavering voice.

I looked ahead at Jay. His fists were clenched and his shoulders were tense. I was very well-versed in dealing with werewolves who were mad at you for being reckless. It had, in fact, become one of my main areas of expertise.

Who’d seen that coming?

“I bet he’ll get over it,” I told her. “*If* you talk to him, and tell him everything. Because he can’t understand if you don’t give him a chance to.”

Finally we reached the edge of the forest, and I felt weak with relief when I saw my mom pacing on the street.

“You found her!” she cried, eyes lighting up when she saw Lola. “I’m so glad. But we have to get going now. This place is crawling with police.”

We all hustled into the car, explaining that Lola was fine and it was all a misunderstanding. I took shotgun, and my friends piled into the back. It felt oddly like carpooling home from a birthday party with my friends. Flush with excitement, and maybe some misbehavior.

“Did you guys get the vase?” Lola asked, apprehensive.

Artemis pulled the vase out of the satchel she was holding between her legs.

“Safe and sound,” she answered with a grin.

Most of the drive was spent in tense silence. My mom eventually turned her lights on, once she felt like we were out of the police radius for the area.

“Don’t want to be unsafe,” she murmured to me, like she was still teaching me to drive. I nodded, humoring her. It felt nice to almost be a kid again, even if it was just for a second.

We pulled into my parents’ driveway, and then I remembered—

“Alex!” I burst out. “We left him in the closet!”

I leapt out of the car and sprinted through the garage. Then I tore open the door to the house and ran to the closet as fast as I could.

I wrenched open the door and saw… nothing.

Alex was gone.

**Episode 683**

JOSS

Cali seemed surprised. She looked at the floor, hanging her head. I had caught her, that was for sure. But what had I caught her doing, exactly?

I took a few steps toward her, knowing that my closeness would likely intimidate her—something I might have felt a bit guilty about under other circumstances. But the girl had been acting fishy lately, and I couldn’t afford not to know what was going on under my roof right now. Not when things were so tense.

“Kind of late for you to be out and about, isn’t it?” I asked, keeping my tone conversational, hoping to lull her into a false sense of security.

“Oh. Joss.” Cali blinked at me, her eyes widening in gesture of innocent surprise. “I didn’t know you were awake.”

“It’s tough to sleep with so much going on.” I shrugged, turning up the heat on the conversation ever so slightly. “You know it’s not safe for you to be out right now, right? I know you know that, but it’s my job to look out for you. You’re part of this pack.”

As much as Cali annoyed me, I meant what I said. Either she was Xavier’s mate or she was Greyson’s, and that made her part of the Redwood pack. And as much as it pained me to admit it, I was pretty sure the girl had a good heart. If I gave her a nudge in the right direction, it would probably bring her back in line. Because we couldn’t afford for anyone to be out of line right now. Not with Silas out there.

“I agree that it was risky.” Cali lowered her eyes, demure. “But I needed to get some air.”

I nodded, trying to show some sympathy. If she thought I didn’t understand, then she might decide to keep doing this. I’d been a rebellious adolescent before, I knew the logic.

“It must be difficult,” I acknowledged. “Feeling torn between Xavier and Greyson.”

“Yeah.” Cali shrugged. And something about it just seemed a little too casual to me. I bristled a bit. Maybe I was still annoyed about our past rivalry, but something told me she was being cagey. And I didn’t like it.

“Cali.” I let my voice harden just a bit to let her know I wasn’t kidding around. “You had no right to wander off like that. It’s not only dangerous for you—it’s dangerous for the pack.”

I could hear the frustration building in my voice. I took a deep breath, trying to regain my calm. I didn’t want to bring my own feelings into this. Just because Greyson wanted Cali for his mate, it didn’t mean he wanted her to be his Luna. My job, my place in this pack, was not in danger. At least not yet. And if it were, that would’ve had everything to do with Greyson going back on his word, and nothing to do with Cali.

The girl was annoying, but she didn’t scheme.

“I hear you,” Cali insisted, clearly bristling herself. “It won’t happen again.”

Something felt wrong. Cali wanted this conversation to be over a little too much. There was something defensive and desperate about her that didn’t make sense to me. I took another step closer and watched her tense up.

What was she hiding?

Cali started to back away, heading for the staircase. Apparently, she’d decided our conversation was over. And I didn’t have much ground to stand on if I had to order her to come back.

“Where’d you go?” I asked, knowing it was the only card I had left on the table. If I was being honest, Cali didn’t strike me as the late-night-walk type. She struck me more as a listening-to-Taylor-Swift-and-painting-her-nails kind of person.

Cali paused at the foot of the stairs and turned to face me, her expression almost overly neutral.

“I just took a walk by the lake,” she said with a shrug.

Still unsatisfied, I sniffed, taking in her scent. She just smelled like Cali, but I definitely also smelled the lake on her. But I smelled more than that. The woods, dirt, trees… She’d been in the forest for sure.

Was Cali lying?

And if she was, then why?

“The lake,” I repeated, letting my skepticism show. “You do remember that I’m the Luna of this pack, right?”

“I do,” Cali replied, frustration starting to show in the set of her jaw. “What’s your point?”

I really didn’t like her tone. Who was Cali to speak to me like this? As if it wasn’t already enough that she had our Alpha and our best fighter distracted and wrapped around her finger, now she expected to just be able to come and go as she pleased? Did she really think that whatever inane secret she wanted to keep was more important than the safety of everyone in this house?

“Part of my job is to keep an eye on the pack for Greyson,” I reminded her, my voice steely. “That means being aware of what’s going on at all times.”

“I told you where I went and why,” Cali snapped. I delighted in the knowledge that I’d broken her composure.

“But you left out the part where you went into woods,” I pointed out, enjoying the way her eyes widened with surprise. “Why would you risk going out there? Alone? At night? It doesn’t make sense.”

And that was when I knew I had her. Her teeth sank into her lower lip as she searched for the right words. Innocent people didn’t have to do that.

“It didn’t seem like a big deal,” she finally said with a shrug. “This whole area is woods, and I didn’t go far. I’m not stupid.”

“Then don’t *act* stupid,” I told her forcefully. I wouldn’t let her recklessness endanger my pack.

Just then, Ravi came barreling down the stairs, shirtless and grinning. His eyes widened in surprise when he saw us.

I watched him zero in on the glass of water in my hand, and I didn’t think I imagined him swelling with pride. What I didn’t realize was that he completely missed Cali, who was tucked into an alcove by the stairs.

“Looks like we both needed hydration.” He smirked at me. “You really wore me out, you know?”

I glared at him. As cute as he was—and as much as I didn’t mind hearing him admit to the effect we had on each other—now wasn’t exactly the time.

“Hey.” Cali gave Ravi a nod.

“Oh hey, Cali.” Ravi grabbed a water bottle out of the fridge. “I didn’t see you there.”

“I guess we’ve all got secrets,” Cali mused, looking right at me. “I’ll keep yours if you keep mine.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but I had no idea what to say to that. Was she trying to blackmail me?

Cali must have taken my silence as permission to leave, because she just smiled and walked up the stairs.

“Goodnight, you two,” she threw over her shoulder, her voice sounding smugger than I’d ever heard it.

Ravi and I stood there in silence until we heard Cali’s door click shut. But before I could even turn to look at him, Ravi was apologizing.

“Joss, I’m so sorry,” he gushed. “I never would have said that if I’d known Cali was there. I didn’t mean to make things weird for you in any way.”

I just shrugged, still reeling a bit from Cali’s ruthlessness.

“It’s fine,” I told him. “Like I said before, I don’t feel like we have anything to hide. I just don’t want to make a huge deal out of it, either. Maybe you just need a little practice being discreet.”

Ravi sighed with relief. I enjoyed the slow, easy smile that spread across his face. As bad as it would’ve been to say out loud, I kind of liked being with a guy who was a little scared of me.

“I’ll try,” Ravi murmured, leaning in close and letting his nose graze my cheekbone as he went to whisper in my ear. “But it’s pretty tough when you’re so tempting.”

He let his lips brush against my neck, and I relaxed into his touch. I threaded my hand through his hair as he kissed a line down my throat.

And it felt good. It really did.

But I couldn’t keep my mind from going back to Cali. What had she been doing in the woods? Why was she being so evasive? What was she hiding?

Ravi stepped back, clearly better at reading my body language than I’d given him credit for.

“What was all that about, with Cali?” he asked, his soft concern tugging at my heartstrings a bit.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted.

“I’ve heard rumors about that girl,” Ravi told me. “Something about her and *due destini*. Is that for real?”

“I’ve heard the same thing.” I reached for his hands and put them back on my waist. Just because he’d stopped kissing me didn’t mean I didn’t like the warmth of his body against mine. “But that’s not what’s bothering me,” I continued.

Why would Cali have gone into the woods? Every time we’d camped, she’d looked miserable. She’d said she’d needed some air, and I’d assumed she’d been out there alone.

But what if she hadn’t been alone? What if she’d been meeting someone?

“We should keep an eye on Cali,” I told Ravi, knowing I’d need a partner in this. A partner who’d be loyal to me first.

“Why?” Ravi asked, eyes widening in surprise. “Isn’t she Xavier’s mate?”

“I think she’s up to something.”

**Episode 684**

“Where the hell is he?” I asked as Artemis rushed to my side. Staring at the empty closet, I felt panic rising up inside me, like my heart was trying to escape my body by leaping up my throat. Where the hell had Alex gone?

“He was supposed to be knocked out for the night,” Artemis said, surprised.

“Clearly he’s not!” I practically yelled at her, my voice jumping up an octave. Maybe Artemis was able to keep her cool because she’d knocked lots of people unconscious and trapped those people in small enclosed spaces only for them to ultimately escape when they woke up early. But I hadn’t done any of that before, and I was freaking the hell out.

“He should have been out for a while, but he must have come to and run off,” Artemis said in a still-too-calm tone for my liking. “Hell of a tolerance that kid must have.”

“I can track him,” Jay offered, speaking for the first time in a while. His gaze was trained very pointedly on Artemis and me, and decidedly away from Lola.

I was sure that didn’t escape her either. And while normally, I’d have been very worried to see how she would take that, right now I was busy trying not to short circuit.

“We can deal with Alex later,” my mom decided, having finally caught up with us. “We have the vase and we should use it while we have the chance. Just in case the police figure out we stole it and come looking for it.”

I bit my lip. Right, we had just stolen something from a museum. We had committed a crime, and the cops could come and arrest us. And then we’d go to jail. For theft. But we’d avoided the cameras, and we hadn’t been found at the scene. Technically, there shouldn’t be any evidence tying us to the heist. So hopefully, it wouldn’t come to that.

Hopefully.

It was at that exact moment that my dad padded down the stairs in sweatpants and socks, clearly surprised to see all of us just standing outside the hall closet looking panicked.

“What was that I heard about the police?” he asked, sounding alarmed. I couldn’t blame him.

“Nothing for you to worry about, Tom.” My mom gave him a big smile that I was sure didn’t convince him for a minute.

“Your crazy plan worked, then?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

“More or less,” my mom answered, shrugging.

My dad nodded. “Never thought I’d be condoning theft,” he reasoned. “But I guess I didn’t expect a lot of things, huh?”

I smiled at my dad. He was a bright spot in this stressful situation. I couldn’t believe how well he was taking all of this. Sure, it seemed like it had boggled his mind a bit. But I couldn’t believe how loved and supported he still made me feel, no matter how bad things got. Ugh, the cinnamon roll.

It was nice having my family in on everything. It helped more than I could explain.

But that didn’t mean Dad had to know everything. The thought of explaining Selma the ghost, or Lola’s uncontrollable urge to shift, or the fact that she’d almost attacked us in the woods gave me a headache. That was the kind of stuff Dad didn’t need to be privy to.

“There were a few hiccups,” I told him, hoping that would explain away how tense we all must have looked. “But we got it.”

“Let’s take this into the living room.” My mom urged me and Artemis to follow her. “Everyone else, stay in the kitchen, please. Tom, you can heat up that chili I made if anyone’s hungry.”

“Fine by me,” my dad called after her. I was struck by how normal this moment seemed, even though we were about to summon and capture a revenge-hungry ghost. “I don’t want any part in whatever it is you’re doing.”

He turned to Jay and Lola, still radiating awkward-but-sweet dad energy. Which, right now, was the most comforting thing in the world.

“Can I get you two some beers? You are over twenty-one, right?”

I rolled my eyes and followed my mom into the living room, eager to get this thing done.

I watched my mother gently place the vase in the middle of the floor and remove the stopper. We stood in the same formation we’d used when we’d tried trapping Tony in the Ikea vase.

“If things don’t go as planned,” Artemis told us, “I can use my powers to fend the ghoul off. Just say the word.”

“Will do,” my mom agreed.

She started chanting again, in that same language I couldn’t understand. I tensed, hoping this time it would work. I really didn’t want our night at the museum to have been for nothing. I wanted Tony gone and my family safe. We’d all been through too much to have to deal with this too.

I felt goosebumps start to form on my arms and legs as the temperature in the room dropped.

Suddenly, Tony appeared in the center of our triangle. He blinked, glancing around the room. He was clearly stunned.

Until he saw me.

Then his eyes flickered with recognition, and his mouth twisted into an angry scowl.

“Why have you summoned me here?” he growled, his rage palpable.

But I didn’t let him intimidate me. I straightened to my full height and balled my hands into fists at my sides.

“It’s time for you to go away,” I told him. “For good.”

Tony looked at each of us, smirking.

“You do remember you tried this once before, right?” he asked, condescending even in death. “It didn’t work.”

He scoffed, clearly amused by our past failure. The little shit.

“And you.” He pointed right at me. “You still owe me.”

I thought back to Tony trying to assault me and felt anger rising in my chest. “I don’t owe you anything, Tony,” I spat back at him. “It’s time for you to fucking go.”

I could feel the adrenaline numbing me. I was getting tunnel vision. I just wanted to take care of this asshole.

“Are we going to do this?” I asked my mom.

She nodded, raising her hands and waving them. A rumbling sound started softly, gradually growing louder and louder.

“Hey!” Tony’s face fell and his body began to stretch. It was like he was being sucked into the narrow opening of the vase.

He began to laugh, his unsettling chuckle filling the room and sending shivers down my spine. God, he was a fucking creep.

“No piece of pottery is going stop me from getting my revenge,” he taunted us, full of confidence.

“Then it’s a good thing this isn’t just any old piece of pottery.” I grinned at him, shaking off my fear. “It’s Fae-made, and it’s going to hold you for as long as we want it to. And that’s a long-ass time.”

Tony’s eyes went wide, all his previous bravado gone, and he shook his head violently. “No.”

“Believe it, asshole,” I barked out.

Tony began to scream and thrash around, but it was too late. Seconds later, the last of him disappeared into the vase. My mom leapt forward, put the stopper back in the top, and stepped back, watching the vase like a hawk.

The three of us stared at the vase in tense silence.

Would it hold? Or would it shatter like the last one?

Artemis was the first to relax. She scooped up the vase into her arms, grinning.

“Not so tough now, are you?” she asked the vase mockingly.

I turned to my mom, knowing she was the only one of us who knew anything about this. The only person whose opinion I could trust.

“Did we do it?” I asked, still half-convinced Tony could pop out of that thing any second.

My mom just smiled at me. “Tony’s not going anywhere, honey.”

Relief flooded through me. Tony wouldn’t be hunting anyone anymore. Alex was safe from him, and so was my family, and so was Xavier. He was gone for good. The nightmare that had started at that party was finally over.

“What do we do with the vase?” I asked. “Do we bury it or burn it or something?”

“I think it might look nice next to the set of salt shakers Tom’s grandparents gave us for our wedding,” my mom mused. “But it might be safest to just put him in the basement. Don’t you think?”

She’d started to move toward the basement doors when I heard the sound of wood splintering.

In horror, I turned and saw that our front door had been smashed open. Imamu and Fernsby rushed in, guns drawn.

“Freeze!” Fernbsy cried. “Everybody!”

“What are you doing here?” my mother asked, radiating authority and anger.

Fernsby didn’t answer. She just looked at Imamu, who walked over and snatched the vase from my mother’s grasp.

“We’ll be taking this from here.”

**Episode 685**

I sprang forward to try and grab the vase from Imamu.

“You can’t have it!” I insisted, wild with fear.

We had worked so hard. Tony couldn’t just go free again.

But Imamu jerked it back, and the vase slipped from his hands. I watched it fall to the ground in slow motion. I tried to run for it, but it hit the ground before I could reach it. I braced myself for it to shatter. For all our work to have been for nothing.

But instead, it hit the ground with a thud, and stayed perfectly intact.

I didn’t think I imagined everyone in the room sighing with relief. Which meant we all knew the stakes here.

For his part, Imamu just bent down and scooped the vase back up into his arms. He looked at me coldly, like he could see right through me.

“Do not attempt that again,” he ordered.

I gritted my teeth, not liking being told what to do by someone who had smashed their way into my family’s home*.* But before I could open my mouth and tell him exactly where he could shove his orders, my mom spoke up instead.

“I demand to know why you’re taking that vase.” She stepped in front of me, seemingly without a thought. Like it was her basest instinct to protect me. But I worried that the MIB agents might be too much for her to take on by herself.

“Imamu, why don’t you check it?” Fernsby asked her partner.

“Don’t open it!” I cried, ready to do anything I could to ensure that vase remained sealed and Tony stayed imprisoned inside.

Tony couldn’t escape. Not now, not after all we’d done. He’d be twice as angry and vengeful as before, and I couldn’t bear for him to have another chance to unleash his wrath on my family.

Imamu, clocking my fear, slowly brought the vase up to his ear and shook it gently. I couldn’t hear anything, but Imamu must have understood something because he looked to Fernsby and nodded.

“It’s secure,” he told her.

“Great,” she replied, turning to face my mother.

“What’s your plan here?” my mom asked. “I think we have a right to know that.”

“The MIB is better suited to handling malicious supernatural entities,” Fernsby replied matter-of-factly. “Or MSEs, as we call them.”

I scoffed, uninterested in learning another of their acronyms. It was almost enough to make me miss the cops who’d investigated Tony’s murder. At least they’d been straightforward.

“Are we just going to let them steal the vase?” Artemis asked, blunt as always. “We just stole it ourselves.”

I glared at Artemis. Apparently, in the Fae world, you could just admit your crimes without fear of consequence. She looked back at me, confused.

“What?” she asked.

But instead of slapping cuffs on all of us, Fernsby just smirked.

“Oh, I’m well aware that you stole it,” she told Artemis. “But I’m willing to look the other way. There’s no sense in drawing attention to any of our… activities. Let’s just call it even. You give us the vase and we won’t breathe a word of any of this to the police.”

“And why should we let you walk away with what’s ours?” Artemis snapped, her hands balling into fists.

But my mother just placed a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s all right,” she promised. “As long as they understand what we’re giving them…”

My mom looked at Fernsby, a question in her eyes. And even though Fernsby was the one with a gun and badge, it felt like my mom was radiating authority.

“I assure you,” Imamu’s voice was deep and resonant, “we understand very well. MSEs are our specialty. This will be taken care of.”

My mom nodded. “Very well then.”

“I’m glad we’ve come to terms.” Fernsby’s professional smile didn’t reach her eyes. “Although I would caution you to be more open, should we come into contact again. After all, we’re with the good guys.”

I held back a snort at that. Who exactly were the “good guys” they were in league with? And what stake did they have in the supernatural world?

I wondered what the MIB would think about my family’s association with werewolves, or our Fae ancestry. Under different circumstances, would they be trying to dissect us in a lab somewhere, like E.T.?

Yeah, I planned on doing my best to make sure there wasn’t a “next time.”

Fernsby and Imamu left, walking out the front door that they’d kindly broken down. After a moment of deliberation, I took off after them, my head full of steam.

“Do you promise you won’t open the vase?” I asked, realizing I didn’t have much of a choice about whether or not they took it. But maybe I could convince them to do the right thing.

But before I they could answer my question, I saw their car. More importantly, I saw who was sitting in the back seat.

“Alex,” I whispered to myself, stunned into silence.

He was staring right at me, looking hurt and angry, tear tracks still shining on his cheeks. Without thinking, I ran to the car to ask what was wrong.

But Alex just turned away and looked in the other direction. A clear rejection. Alex didn’t want to talk to me anymore.

He must have cooperated with the MIB. He had to be feeling so betrayed. All those times I’d told him that he was just imagining Tony, or that he couldn’t hurt him…

He knew those had all been lies, now.

Before I could get him to talk to me, the car pulled out of the driveway and I watched it disappear down the street. Alex got farther and farther away, and the rift between us grew.

I hoped I could fix things with him someday, but I didn’t know if they could ever be the same.

I walked back inside, feeling numb and exhausted from the day’s events. I found everybody in the kitchen. Empty bowls of chili and steaming mugs of tea littered the table.

“Do I want to know what all that commotion was about?” Dad asked.

“You do not, dear,” Mom told him kindly.

“Fair enough,” he replied before he started gathering the dishes and bringing them to the sink.

Lola yawned and pushed herself out of her seat. “I’m going home,” she told us. “I’m beat.”

As she said her goodbyes to my parents, I looked at Jay. He was already looking at me, a knowing expression on his face.

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” he assured me softly.

“I hope you two work it out,” I told him. “Lola needs your help, and she can’t get it if you’re fighting. So maybe give her a chance to make things right, okay?”

“Okay.” Jay gave me a half-smile. “Thanks, Cali.”

“Of course.” I nodded. “I’ll come see you guys tomorrow so we can all talk.”

“Text first.” Jay grinned. “We all need to sleep for a while, am I right?”

“Probably,” I agreed, watching Lola hug my mom.

“Why don’t you get this sleepy girl home?” my mom asked Jay.

“Can do, Mrs. Hart,” Jay assured her, offering Lola his arm.

“Please, call me Orla,” my mom insisted, lighting up when Lola took Jay’s arm. I hoped that was a good sign. Maybe it meant the two of them could figure things out.

As I watched them leave, I made a mental note to call Mrs. Smith in the morning and discuss Lola. If I could come to Lola and Jay with information that would help us work toward a solution, that would probably be really helpful. I just hoped Mrs. Smith knew something relevant—or at least knew someone who could help.

Artemis asked my mom something about the door, and they started going back and forth on whether or not Artemis should try to repair it a bit for the night so the house didn’t get too cold. I still couldn’t get used to the sight of them together. I knew my mom was from the Fae world, so it shouldn’t have been odd to see her get along so easily with someone from the same place. Someone who was her own daughter, no less. But still… It felt like watching worlds collide.

I wondered what my life would have been like if Artemis had always been here. If I’d just grown up with a sister. Would she have felt like a regular family member?

Maybe I would feel like that someday. But not yet.

My mom squeezed Artemis’s arm appreciatively, and I felt my inner only child bristle. Deep down, I just didn’t like sharing my mom. I wondered if I’d ever get over it.

“Orla,” my dad called from the stairs. “I’m gonna turn in, okay?”

“Coming!” my mom called to him.

But before she left, she turned back to Artemis.

“In the morning, we need to discuss your father, Kadmos,” she said. “There are things you need to know.”

**Episode 686**

VIOLET

I drank in the shocked look on Charlie’s face. There was something sweet about seeing him scandalized like this, and knowing I’d been the one who’d caused it.

But then I realized—humans weren’t used to seeing each other naked. Or at least not this often. And not for non-sexual reasons.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out. “Not for being naked—that’s kind of part of the deal. But for not warning you in advance. It’s just one of those things you’ll have to get used to. After all, you’re naked too now. So it’s not like it’s just me.”

Charlie’s eyes went wide. As if he’d been so distracted by my nudity he hadn’t noticed his own state of undress until I’d mentioned it.

He instinctively tried to cover himself, stumbling back a bit. I couldn’t help but notice the muscles rippling under his skin.

I’d seen my fair share of naked bodies. I was surrounded by them fairly often, after all. And honestly, I didn’t usually think about them much. Nudity was just a natural part of werewolf life.

But something about seeing Charlie like this, for the first time… It was different. He was breathtaking.

I wanted to smile at him, to let him know I was happy to see this part of him. But he already seemed so embarrassed, and I didn’t want to make it worse.

“So werewolves are nudists?” Charlie asked, breaking the silence.

“I mean, not really.” I tried to see it from his perspective. “We’re just… werewolves. Clothes aren’t necessary in your wolf form. If you plan a little, you ruin fewer pairs of jeans.”

Charlie nodded, still looking a little dazed. I could tell he was trying to relax, and I didn’t want to push him or make him feel like he had to pretend to be fine.

“How do I—” He looked at me, obviously still feeling awkward but trying to push through it. “How do we get back home like this?”

“Don’t worry.” I gave him a small smile. “We’ll figure something out. I’ve done this enough times to know you can always find clothes when you need to.”

He nodded, taking that in. I missed the easy connection we’d had as wolves. I wondered if we could get it back.

“What did you think about shifting into your wolf?” I asked.

All the nervousness on Charlie’s face disappeared as he broke into a huge smile.

“It was fucking incredible!” he admitted, gesturing excitedly. “If I could run half that fast during a lacrosse game, we’d totally win more.”

I felt myself swell with pride and joy at having given him this feeling. I knew I hadn’t really *given* it to him—whoever changed him had done that. But being able to have control over the feeling, to experience the joys of shifting for the first time… I knew it was a powerful thing.

“I knew you’d like it,” I told him, beaming.

“My friends are going to be so jealous,” he said in excitement.

“You can never tell your friends,” I said quickly. He knew it, but he was still new to this… Seemed like it bared repeating.

He sighed. I felt a pang in my chest, realizing how isolated he must feel.

“I know. But if I could.” He grinned. “They’d be losing their minds.”

I moved closer, resisting the urge to touch him, to cup his face in my hands. “What are you thinking about?”

“Sandi,” Charlie said. “What am I going to do about her?”

I felt a sharp flash of jealousy run through me. I wanted to say, “*Tell her to fuck off.*” But I knew that was selfish, and not what he needed to hear. Right now, he needed a friend who would support him. And that meant I needed to be that friend.

“I promised I’d help you deal with being a werewolf,” I reminded him, forcing myself to put my own feelings aside. “And dealing with Sandi is a part of that. How do you feel about her, with all this?”

“Honestly?” Charlie tilted his head, considering it. “Right now, I feel kind of guilty.”

“Why?” I asked, concerned. “For being a wolf? There’s nothing shameful about being who you are. This is another piece of your identity now, but it’s not the whole thing. You’re still you.”

“That’s not what I meant.” He shook his head. “It’s—I feel guilty because I’m out in the moonlight, talking to a beautiful girl… A beautiful *naked* girl.”

“Oh,” I heard myself say. I could feel my cheeks heating up in what I was sure was an absurd blush. He’d called me beautiful. Twice!

It felt like my entire body was on vibrate. I felt warm and full of adrenaline and… *present*, in a way I hadn’t for so long. Maybe not since Lilac had died.

“Violet, I’m really confused,” Charlie told me, bringing me hurtling back to earth. “I don’t know what to do. My parents would freak out if they knew. It feels like my whole world is blowing up.”

“Your world is just changing,” I assured him. “It’s not blowing up, I swear. Like I said, being a werewolf is just a new part of you. It doesn’t have to be a negative thing. It can be whatever you make it, I swear.”

Charlie nodded, taking that in. I hoped I was saying the right things to him. I’d never done this for anybody before. The responsibility of my role hit me in that moment. I had to treat Charlie with care—not just because of how I felt about him, but because he was in a really fragile place.

“I guess I have a lot of thinking to do,” he said. “I should probably get home.”

But then he froze.

“I don’t have clothes.” He looked at me, panicked. “How do we fix that again?”

“Just come with me,” I told him, grinning. “I can grab something of Jay’s for you to borrow. I’m sure it’ll be no trouble—werewolves get used to clothes sharing pretty fast, for obvious reasons.”

“Thank you,” Charlie sighed. “Seriously, thank you so, so much. I really appreciate it. I’m sure it’s annoying to have to explain all this stuff to me when it comes so naturally to you. I know you didn’t sign up for this.”

*It’s no trouble, really Charlie. I’m falling head over heels for you. If anything, I should be apologizing to you for picturing shoving your girlfriend down the stairs a few seconds ago.*

But instead of saying something quite so incriminating, I just shrugged.

“Eh, you know,” I offered lightly. “Birds of a feather and all that.”

Charlie gave me a polite laugh and I tried to give him a nice, friendly smile. But inside I was on cloud nine. I couldn’t believe how wonderful it felt to be with him. To share something with him. Just to see him and be seen by him.

“Would it be okay if we shifted and ran back?” he asked nervously.

I swooned a little bit at the way he looked to me for permission. Even though he was much taller than me, it felt like he was looking up to me. There was something more than a little intoxicating about that.

“You don’t need my permission, Charlie,” I reminded him, enjoying the opportunity to tease him a little.

“I get that.” He rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously. “But I was kind of hoping you’d shift with me. And I just… I felt like I should make sure that was okay with you.”

God.

I couldn’t stand here a second longer without kissing him.

It was unbearable.

*He* was unbearable.

Unbearably sweet and handsome and funny and just… perfect.

Instead of answering his question, I shifted and bounded back toward the woods. Charlie’s wolf was on my heels a moment later, and together we raced back to Lola and Cali’s apartment.

I let him pull ahead every once in a while, just to impress him with my agility. I knew how to run circles around him. I could trail at his heels, nipping at them playfully. I could dance just out of his reach, pushing him to run faster and faster just to keep up.

I could feel the excitement and enthusiasm rolling off of him. I could tell he loved this just as much as I did, and it felt so good to be part of this moment with him.

When we reached the apartment, we shifted back. Charlie was out of breath and grinning, and I was sure I looked the same.

I led him up the stairs to the apartment, feeling like I was floating. I couldn’t believe I felt like I belonged somewhere—and with someone—after losing Lilac. But I felt it now.

I felt like I could just let go and be myself.

I reached for the doorknob, ready to tell Charlie to be quiet as we snuck in. But before I could touch it, the door swung open, revealing a very angry Jay.

I felt Charlie jump in surprise behind me. After all, it wasn’t normal for him to be confronted by an almost stranger while totally naked. It was barely normal for *me* to be in this situation, so I got it.

“Where the hell have you been?” Jay hissed at me.

**Episode 687**

AVA

There were a few blissful seconds after I woke up where I didn’t remember my conversation with Joss last night. During those seconds, I took a deep relaxing breath as I stretched and opened my eyes to meet the new day.

But then I remembered.

*Why would you risk going out there? Alone? At night? It doesn’t make sense.*

Whether I liked it or not, Joss had caught me in a lie. She didn’t know what I’d been lying about, but she was smart enough to figure it out. And that worried me.

I rolled over onto my stomach and groaned into my pillow. I hadn’t meant for anyone to see me last night, let alone the Luna!

I hoped I’d played it cool enough. But I’d been so shaken from seeing Xavier in the woods. Seeing his wolf form yesterday had brought back so many memories of how things had been with the two of us, before everything had gone to shit.

Roasting marshmallows at barbecues. Him kissing me against a tree in the woods, just because he “didn’t think he’d kissed me against this one yet.” Racing with him, everywhere and anywhere.

When we were kids, we used to race to this old pool out in the woods by the pack house. We’d leap off the shore in wolf form and shift in mid-air, diving into the cool water and bursting out naked and soaked to the skin. Then we’d make out for hours. Back then, it was the best I’d ever felt.

I’d thought it was heaven.

But Xavier had ruined that. Or maybe I had.

I had so many confusing feelings swirling around inside me.

I’d been so sure that this whole revenge plan was going to be easy. That it would feel incredible to get back at Xavier, to hurt him like he’d hurt me. But now that I was spending so much time with him, remembering what it felt like to be loved by him…

It wasn’t quite so straightforward anymore.

I found myself wanting him back, but not as Cali. As myself. I wanted to go back to the way things used to be.

Before I’d killed his mother.

I didn’t like to think about that, but it was a fact I couldn’t ignore. Especially not if I was longing for a future where Xavier and I could forgive each other.

Silas had been awful to Xavier’s mother. As a result, Xavier had always been super protective of her. He’d never broken curfew, because he hadn’t wanted her to worry. He’d opened every door, pulled out every chair, and always made sure she had everything she needed.

I’d never told him, but it was something I’d always admired about him. He was just so sweet with her, so tender. She was the center of his universe in so many ways, and she had always cast her light on him—no matter how dark things got.

But the pack war had changed everything. For all of us.

It had become hard to tell who was the enemy. Lines blurred, and things happened that none of us could take back.

But wasn’t the fact that I was here and alive proof that we could start again?

My phone rang, and I checked the number. It was Nolan. Probably calling in to check in and see if I was making any progress.

I let it go to voicemail, not feeling like telling him what had happened with Joss. Maybe I could turn it around before I talked to him. If I could make things right with Joss and erase her suspicions, then I wouldn’t even need to tell Nolan I’d been caught out last night.

My door opened, and I was surprised to see Xavier coming in and kicking the door shut behind him. He held a steaming mug of something that reeked of syrupy sugar.

“I’m assuming you missed Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha, so I persuaded her to make a batch.” He set the mug down on my nightstand, grinning at me.

*Who the fuck is Mrs. Smith?*

“Thanks.” I gave him a sweet smile, patting at my messy hair self-consciously.

“Of course.” Xavier sat down on the bed next to me. “It’s one of the good things about living here. Having her around.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. I could tell he didn’t like living here at the new pack house. I wondered what had happened to the old Evers house, but I knew I couldn’t ask.

“Drink up,” Xavier urged, nudging me.

I leaned into his warmth and shook my head.

“No thanks,” I answered, giving the mug the stink eye. I’d never been a fan of hot chocolate.

“I thought you loved these,” Xavier said, looking confused.

Shit.

Of course Cali liked this putrid-smelling concoction. It reeked of her girly-girl Midwestern charm. A dessert in a cup for breakfast.

“Of course I do,” I said quickly. “I was just planning on going for a run this morning—I don’t want to have a belly full of chocolate weighing me down.”

Xavier’s brow wrinkled in confusion, and I realized I’d fucked up again.

“Wait.” He held a hand up. “You’re going *running?*”

How the fuck had I managed to make two back-to-back mistakes? I was supposed to be prepared for this.

“Ha ha.” I gave a mocking fake laugh. “I know it doesn’t sound like me, but it’s part of my new training regimen. I’m trying to get in shape. It’s tough being around all you werewolves. You’re like, super buff and it makes me feel totally inadequate.”

“Oh, wow.” Xavier lit up. “That’s really cool, Cali. Maybe I could run with you sometime? If you don’t mind the company.”

I smiled, warmth spreading through me.

“Sure.” I nodded, not knowing what else to say. Despite all my studying, it felt like my command of the situation was dissolving. There was a lot to know about this Cali girl, not to mention all these other new people. I hadn’t expected everyone to want a piece of me like this.

“I always used to love running with…” Xavier trailed off, not finishing his sentence.

But I knew what he was going to say.

*Ava*.

He used to love running with *me.*

I tried not to visibly swell with pride. Clearly Cali hadn’t filled this particular void. I hated how good that felt.

I kept myself from pressing him, reminding myself that I didn’t need to hear him say it. I already knew what he was thinking.

“You know, I—” he started, but then he cut himself off.

I felt a sudden desperation to know what he was going to say. Was he going to tell Cali he’d seen me? Was he going to say what he missed about me? Had our talk made him rethink things?

“What?” I asked, unable to resist fishing for more.

“I…” He sighed. “Never mind. It’s not important.”

But I could tell it *was* important. He just didn’t want to talk about it. Loving Xavier meant knowing how to pull things out of him. Just because he didn’t wantto talk about something didn’t mean he didn’t *need* to talk.

I scooted closer, trying not to let his scent or the warmth of his skin distract me. But the proximity was intoxicating.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?” I asked, looking up at him through my eyelashes in the hope that Cali’s girlish charm would work on him.

But Xavier just smiled back, his eyes alight. I felt so warm under his gaze, I looked down my lap, unable to return it. It felt like too much, like I was overwhelmed by him. But I could still feel his eyes on me.

He waited for me to look up at him, and I was struck by this new patience of his. It was something new. Something he’d developed for *her*. I felt a stabbing pain of jealousy and sadness in my heart, but it went away the second I returned his gaze.

He was looking at me like I was the only person on earth. Like there wasn’t a single other thing that mattered. That was how it felt to be with him. Being Xavier’s first priority was heady.

I felt an overwhelming urge to tell him who I was. To tell him everything. To beg him to say my name again. To hear it come from his lips. I wanted to be like we used to be.

Two mates. Two lovers. Ava and Xavier.

He reached me for, tucking his index finger under my chin and tilting my face up so he could look at me more easily.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, like he’d do anything to fix it. Like it was his mission in life to keep me from ever being sad or hurt or lonely ever again.

“Xavier,” I whispered, for once not thinking about playing a part or disguising my voice.

I crashed my lips into his and kissed him, utterly lost in the moment. I wasn’t pretending anymore. I forgot myself as his arms wrapped around me.

Xavier and I were back. Because how else could he be holding me like this? Holding me like I was the most precious thing in the world? Sighing against my lips because he felt just as perfect as I did right now?

But then I remembered that it *wasn’t* perfect. He thought I was Cali.

And that hurt like hell.

So, without thinking, I pushed him away. He looked down at me, confused, his eyes cloudy with love and lust, his lips swollen.

“I can’t do this!” I blurted out.

**Episode 688**

GREYSON

This run was supposed to clear my head. To give me time to tire myself out and sort out my tangled emotions, all of which revolved around one thing.

*Cali*.

I was doing everything I could think of to resist going up to her room, but my memories of our time in the Fae world were torturing me. Memories of the way we’d worked together, the way she’d let me touch her. How she’d felt in my arms. How good it had felt to please her.

I wanted her so fucking much.

And now I had to see her every day and pretend she didn’t mean a thing to me. And given how I’d scooped her up in my arms just about the second I’d seen her, I wasn’t doing a great job.

As I neared the pack house, I saw Xavier and Rishika out on the lawn with the other wolves. Rishika was demonstrating a flying attack on Xavier. She pounced on him and he tumbled, rolling them over until he had her pinned on her back. Everyone watched, rapt with concentration.

Xavier and Rishika both shifted back and began to explain the move from both sides. I felt the tiniest bit of relief. Good. It seemed like training was going well.

Even if Xavier was a bit more aggressive today than he probably needed to be.

Still, I was glad to see him doing something to help the pack instead of going Rogue and disappearing.

Despite what I’d told him, I did think he had what it took to be a good Alpha someday. Maybe even a great one. He just wasn’t ready yet.

I couldn’t help but wonder what our childhood would have been like if we’d grown up in a pack like this one—or at least like the kind of pack I was trying to make Redwood into. A united group of wolves. A healthy community. A family.

Would we have ended up like him and Colton?

Would we have been even better? Not just allies, but friends?

I shook off that thought. No good ever came from playing the “what if” game. Things were as they were. Xavier hated me, and I wasn’t fond of him either. We were working together for now, but it would be foolish to pretend that would last. That we’d ever be anything other than two men on either side of an uneasy truce.

As I passed the training group, Joss walked over to me from the porch.

“Morning,” I said.

“Looking good, right?” She nodded at the training session.

“Definitely,” I agreed.

“I need to tell you something,” Joss said hesitantly. “It could be nothing, but just in case it isn’t…”

I leaned forward, bracing myself for awful news. Was Xavier leaving again? Were there signs of Silas around?

“Cali was out late last night,” she told me, a strange look on her face. “In the woods.”

“Out?” I responded, confused.

Privately, I was concerned. It wasn’t like her to go out alone, and it was dangerous for her to be outside unprotected. But I never felt comfortable talking about anything Cali-related to Joss.

“She’s probably just having a tough time in the house,” I told Joss, trying to shrug it off. “With both me and Xavier around, I bet she just wants space.”

Joss raised an eyebrow at me.

“Joss,” I warned her. “I’m gonna ask you to drop this for now, okay?”

“Okay.” She nodded, stepping back and heading back toward the house. “But you know I’m around if you decide you want to talk. Sometimes it can actually be *healthy* to talk about your feelings rather than bottling them up in your chest to try and make your pecs bigger.”

I snorted a laugh and Joss skipped back into the house, clearly pleased with herself.

I followed after her, deciding to head to Cali’s room and solve this with her once and for all. Clearly too much had been left unsaid, and the air needed clearing. Or whatever.

Joss wasn’t wrong about me not being used to talking about my feelings.

But Cali was important enough for me to try.

I knocked on the door gently. I hated how scared I was to talk to someone half a foot shorter than me. It was ridiculous. I was a werewolf. An *Alpha.* I wasn’t meant to be scared of anyone.

“Hey.” Cali opened the door and looked up at me in confusion. “Want to come in?”

I did. Cali closed the door behind me and I tried not to focus on her unmade bed. Or on the way she wasn’t wearing pants. Or a bra.

I forced myself to look her in the eye.

“Why were you out in the woods last night?” I asked, refusing to beat around the bush.

“Joss told you?” she asked, her face falling.

“It doesn’t matter who told me,” I insisted, trying to be gentle but firm. “I need you to answer me.”

“I wanted some air.” She shrugged, not meeting my eyes.

“There’s air on the porch,” I told her, immediately wishing it hadn’t come out so angry. “Cali—going into the woods? With everything going on right now? What the hell were you thinking?”

She picked at her nails, still avoiding my gaze.

“Were you trying to practice away from everyone?” I asked, trying to think of any sort of logical explanation. “Did your mom teach you some stuff?”

“Yes.” She nodded eagerly. “But it’s okay. I swear, I was careful.”

I sighed. “I know you want to figure it out,” I told her, trying to be understanding. “And you have a right to get better at all of this stuff. But you *know* that you can’t be out on your own right now.” I felt frustration rising inside me. “Are you trying to give me a fucking heart attack?”

Cali took a few steps toward me. “I’m sorry.” She looked up at me. “I know things must be really hard for you right now…”

She didn’t say my father’s name, but we both knew what she was referring to.

“You have no idea,” I admitted. “I feel like I’m going insane trying to protect you *and* stay away from you at the same time.”

She reached up and cupped my cheek. “I’m okay,” she promised. “It was just a walk. I swear.”

Our eyes met and she leaned forward to kiss me. I didn’t have it in me to stop her.

I knew I should move back when I felt her lips touch mine. But after a moment, I leaned into her touch, shaping my lips to hers, unable to resist.

My mind went back to our time in the Fae world. We’d come so close to sleeping together, back when everything had been—somehow—way less complicated. She and Xavier had been broken up. We’d been away from Silas. I wished I’d had her then. All of her.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her into my lap. And even though there were a million reasons *not* to do this. I could only think of one thing: I wanted her.

And that want was so much more powerful than all the reasons not to do this.

I looked up at her for a moment, sure that she’d tell me to stop. That she’d tell me this wasn’t what we should be doing right now. That she wasn’t over Xavier, or that she knew I was supposed to be focusing on Silas.

But instead, she just said my name again and threaded her fingers through my hair.

I pulled her against me by her hips and captured her mouth with mine. I let my hands glide over her bare thighs. I delighted in just how *soft* she was, even though her kiss was anything but.

She was aggressive, biting down on my lower lip and sucking it between her teeth. I groaned into her mouth, suddenly ravenous for more of her.

I stood up and threw her down onto the bed, enjoying the way she bounced on the mattress for a moment. Before she could get her bearings, I moved my body over hers and let my hands explore the patch of skin between the waistband of her panties and the hem of her shirt.

“This okay?” I asked, kissing her neck, lost in the moment.

Cali just nodded. Her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. I wondered if she was trying to make herself stay quiet and I couldn’t help but think about what it would be like to have Cali somewhere she could make any delicious sound she wanted. I’d be able to take my time pulling those sounds out of her, savoring each one and cataloguing her every response to my touch.

But then I heard something else. An unmistakable scream from outside.

Shit.

I pulled back, feeling dazed but knowing I had to stop. I couldn’t believe it, but I’d completely lost control of myself. Kissing Cali was the last thing I should be doing right now.

Fuck.

“Greyson,” Cali whispered, her eyes pleading with me.

She wanted me to come back to her. I could feel it.

But I couldn’t. I untangled my limbs from hers and shoved myself off the bed.

“Stay here,” I ordered her. “And maybe get dressed.”

I raced downstairs and burst outside, worried about what I would find. Something had gone wrong. Of course it had—I’d lost track of my duty as an Alpha. All because I’d been busy with Cali, chasing after her when I’d promised myself and others that I wouldn’t. I felt disgusted with myself—how did I lose all control anytime I got anywhere near Cali?

I looked out at my pack. Xavier and the others were all looking toward the woods, frozen. Something about their silence worried me.

I followed their collective gaze to see what they were looking at. And when I saw it, I stopped short.

Standing before them was my father.

*Silas*.

**Episode 689**

GREYSON

Silas was here.

Silas, my monster of a father, was standing thirty feet away.

I couldn’t fucking believe this was real.

I sensed a presence and then heard a heavy growl from my right. Xavier had walked up to me, fury coming off him in waves, matching my own.

“Hello, my sons,” Silas said. His voice was low, far away, but both Xavier and I heard. Both of us shuddered, almost in sync. Silas was the common threat, the common enemy, and in that moment, our common roots connected us.

In that single moment, I didn’t see Xavier as a rival or a nuisance.

I saw him as someone I could depend on.

“Aren’t we going to get him now, while we have the chance?” Xavier muttered as Silas stared at both of us, at the rest of the pack. What was Silas waiting for? Why wasn’t he coming closer?

Something was wrong.

“Greyson, he’s alone,” Xavier pressed.

I eyed the woods. Xavier was right—there was nobody else here. Why would Silas show up alone? This made no sense.

Something was wrong.

But there was no time for discussing, no time for a plan. And with Xavier standing behind me, having my back both literally and figuratively, I shifted. Xavier followed in an instant, and both of us leapt toward Silas in wolf form.

The son of a bitch stayed still.

He stayed in his human form.

He stayed smiling and silent, even though two massive werewolves were charging toward him. Even though the rest of the Redwood pack followed my lead and shifted as well.

Why the fuck wasn’t Silas *doing* anything?

I reached him first, but as I opened my jaws to bite his goddamn head off, I realized that something…

Something was wrong.

*Fuck!*

I tumbled to the ground, but I hadn’t missed.

I’d just passed right through Silas, as if he were transparent. A veil.

A *ghost*.

A second later, I heard Xavier yelp before he crashed into me. We both turned to face Silas, growling.

Silas remained smiling and casual, like this was a fucking social visit.

“Nice to see you, sons.”

Xavier leaped off of me and snarled, lunging at Silas. I did the same, driven by instinct, by denial, but then it happened again…

We both passed right the fuck through Silas.

I growled, standing in front of Xavier to stop him from charging Silas again. He needed to retain his strength to deal with whatever fresh hell this was.

Silas tutted, shaking his head in disapproval as he gestured at us. “I’m disappointed you would think it would be so easy to attack me, boys. I thought you were smarter than that.”

I did think I was smart. At least I used to.

But this—what the fuck was this? A magical hologram? Because Silas couldn’t be a ghost. He was way too goddamn cocky and happy with himself to be dead. The pack kept circling Silas, all of them shifted. I could feel their energies calling to me; they were waiting for me to give them a signal.

My decision was swift, and I didn’t pray for it to be the right one. I didn’t have that luxury. I was the fucking Alpha, so instinct would have to do.

“Stand down,” I told the pack, after shifting back to my human form. Half of them shifted to human, but they all took a few steps back.

Silas eyed me, seemingly amused. “Why so hostile? I was hoping that my sons would join me as one big family.”

“Why?” I challenged. “So you can slit our throats while we’re sleeping?”

Xavier, shifting back to human with a snarl, came to stand next to me. The hatred in his face as he stared at Silas only fueled mine.

“If you boys continue to resist, there will be unnecessary bloodshed,” Silas said, glancing between Xavier and me, as if he were asking us to show him our homework. This was one of the things that had always been the most jarring about Silas—how he could take so many forms, appearing normal enough in one second, and like a ruthless bloodthirsty killer in the next.

“Why the fuck are you here?” I snapped. “And what the hell are you?” I gestured at his form. “Because this isn’t *you*.”

“Did you just come here to taunt us?” Xavier added. “What kind of mirage bullshit is this?”

Silas sighed, shaking his head. His “I’m just here to talk” routine was just as chilling as him attacking with bare claws. “I missed my sons. I missed my family. Is it so wrong for a father to want to see his progeny?”

Xavier scoffed, staring at him like he was insane. “You should’ve thought of that before you tried to kill us!”

Joss slid up to my side, whispering, “What’s going on?” She eyed Silas with defiance, hiding her fear very well. I could smell the emotion on her, but she appeared to be composed. More than ever, I was glad to have her as my Luna.

Before I could reply to her, Silas spoke. “Is this your Luna?”

For a split second, my mind went to Cali—to the woman I’d wanted to be my Luna. Alarmed, I glanced back, sniffing the air just to make sure that she wasn’t here. And she wasn’t. She had remained in the house. I couldn’t believe that she’d actually stayed back like I’d asked. It was very unlike her…

It was almost shocking.

But she was safe from Silas.

“I am the Redwood pack’s Luna,” Joss replied, her eyes sharp as she stared at Silas in challenge.

“Ah,” Silas said, smiling. He looked Joss up and down. His gaze was revolting, malicious, and I found myself wanting to stand between him and Joss. But she kept staring back at him, not cowering or hiding her bare body, even though I could see that the hairs at the back of her neck were standing up. “My oldest son has exquisite taste…” He raised an eyebrow. “I hope I’ll have the opportunity to test your Luna’s ability to serve the pack.”

“You goddamn—” Joss made a move to charge at the hologram, but I put a hand on her shoulder to calm her down.

“Save your strength for when he’s here for real,” I muttered. She nodded, taking a deep breath. I would need to talk to her about this later: my father loved playing psychological games.

“This is ridiculous,” Xavier said, glaring at Silas with disdain. “You’re all smoke and mirrors. So tough that you couldn’t actually show yourself, had to use some kind of magic to protect your sorry ass.”

Silas sneered. “Oh, Xavier. When the time is right, you will *all* wish that I was just a puff of smoke.”

“And when is that time going to be?” I demanded. “Because all I’ve been hearing here is a coward’s threats.”

The moment I uttered the words, my father’s expression shifted to something sharp. This was the man I knew—the man who could slit your throat in a heartbeat.

But then the sound of a branch cracking rang through the air, and the absolute silence of the forest was interrupted. Silas shifted his gaze to my left, where Mrs. Smith had joined us. Why the hell had she come so close?

Why would she put herself in the line of fire like this?”

“Sabine,” Silas breathed, before letting out a chuckle. I felt my stomach flinch. “I’ve been looking for you for years…” Was that longing in his tone? Either way, it made me sick. “We had such a nice time, the two of us.”

I resented the implications in Silas’s tone.

My hatred was hot and scathing, raging on the inside, but Mrs. Smith’s expression remained hard. Intense. “You’re just as much of a disgusting, evil monster as I remember, Silas,” she said.

Silas scoffed. His cheek twitched, a sign that he was losing his temper. She’d gotten under his skin, and that was a shock as well. “Are you finding safety in numbers, Sabine?” He glanced at me. “Or are you just sticking around the Redwood pack because you feel guilty?”

Mrs. Smith was about to speak when Silas added, “Mommy issues are the worst, you know. A kid just won’t *ever* get over them.”

Mrs. Smith opened her mouth to speak, but I was faster. “I have no idea what you’re going on about, or what kind of show you’re putting on right now, but I assure you, *Father*…” I stared at him. “When the time comes, you will be destroyed.”

Silas shrugged. “We all have a part to play. It just warms my heart to see that you’re not on your own anymore, Greyson.” He stared at Mrs. Smith. “A boy needs his mother.”

I looked between the two of them, my forehead furrowing. Resentment mixed with confusion. I turned to Mrs. Smith. “What the hell is he talking about?”

Silas kept staring at Mrs. Smith. “You haven't told him?”

“Told me what?” I demanded.

Silas laughed. His image starting to fade, he stared at Mrs. Smith. “Haven’t you told him that you're his mother, Sabine?”

**Episode 690**

The smell of waffles woke me up.

*Am I dreaming?* I thought. *Is this real life?* *Or is it just my waffle fantasy?*

I washed my face and brushed my teeth quickly, and then I rushed downstairs.

The waffles were on the counter.

*It’s real! What a time to be alive!* I thought, wiping a tiny tear from my eye. But then my cloud of happiness was interrupted when I realized that it wasn’t just me and the waffles in the kitchen. My parents were here with Artemis, the apparently very important firstborn. Mom was humming, shooting Artemis adoring glances while Dad explained to her what brunch was.

“… in the middle!” Dad told her happily. “So in between lunch and breakfast!”

*Oh my god, Dad, that is NOT your child!* I thought, annoyed. *Stop being so cute with her!*

And then Mom placed the whole plate of waffles in front of Artemis.

Stabbing me in the heart would’ve hurt less.

“Cali?” Mom said with a smile. “Good morning.”

I stared at her. “Why didn’t you wake me up? You know waffles are my favorite, and you haven’t made them in a really long time!”

“There are plenty, sweetheart,” Mom told me indulgently, leaning forward to kiss my cheek.

*Yeah, yeah, but where are the WAFFLES?* I thought darkly, taking a seat opposite Artemis at the table. Mom then thankfully placed a plate in front of me as well. I’d always been a pretty easy and very food-motivated child. Drowning my waffles in whipped cream, I looked around the table.

I couldn’t believe that we were all… *domestic* now. Everyone was acting like this was a regular family event. Dad wasn't awkward at all, and he kept explaining things to Artemis. Mom laughed at something Artemis said, and I couldn’t help but be a little bit jealous at how easily the two of them had bonded. Just a little bit.

A tiny, TINY bit. Of course.

“Did you hear?” Dad said, interrupting my thoughts. “There were some headlines about the mysterious break-in at the Glenngreen Museum.”

I snorted. “Hope it stays mysterious.”

“Indeed,” Dad said. “I would hate for my family to get thrown in jail.”

He said that while looking at Artemis, which was absurd because she wasn’t even his child. *I* was his child. *Me*. The fruit of his loins and other disgusting comparisons like that.

“Don’t worry,” Artemis said, “I’m good at breaking in, but even better at breaking out.”

*Show off*, I thought.

“How are you doing, Mom?” I asked her as the other two chattered about all the ways you could break out of rooms and dungeons. Artemis was definitely corrupting my father. “It seems like you’re getting stronger every day.”

Mom smiled. “It’s true. I'm feeling a lot better, and I have my two daughters to thank for it.”

*Um,* excuse me? I thought. I *was the one who went to get the moon buttercup! In fact, Artemis almost ruined the whole thing!*

Even though being a petty monster was usually more fun, I decided to be the bigger person and not say any of these thoughts out loud. I wondered when Artemis was going to tell Mom the entire truth about her past, though.

“You said something earlier about wanting to discuss Kadmos,” Artemis said, staring at Mom. “My, uh, father.”

Artemis sure looked awkward saying that last word. I couldn't even imagine what it was like to grow up in an orphanage. To think that nobody was looking for you. That nobody wanted you.

*And you were thinking mean things about her earlier, Cali!* I scolded myself internally.

I felt a wave of sympathy toward my sister that overpowered all my dumb issues. The way Artemis had grown up wasn’t her fault. And she had helped me during the trip.

*After selling me to the Kollector, but she* did *help in the end*, I thought to myself, appeased.

“Kadmos had the rare ability to control minds,” Mom said to Artemis a moment later.

That sounded very interesting and very dangerous. Even Dad was listening, intrigued. This was probably like science fiction to him.

“When he was young,” Mom went on, “before I met him, he used to use it to play practical jokes.”

Oh great. Kadmos used his highly powerful magic as a joke.

“But as he grew, he realized the danger of his gift, and began to take it very seriously. When I first learned about this and realized I was falling in love with him…” Mom paused, and I glanced at my dad. Did he really need to know all this? Did he have to hear about his wife falling in love with someone else?

I hoped he wasn’t hurt or anything. He didn’t *seem* hurt, but still. I didn't like the idea of continuing to push Dad with revelations until he exploded.

“When our relationship first started, I was worried that Kadmos might have used his power to make me fall in love with him,” Mom continued.

That instantly reminded me of my situation: how I used to be worried that Xavier was attracted to me only because I was Fae.

“How did you figure that out?” I asked Mom. “How did you know he wasn’t controlling you?”

Mom took a deep breath, her expression softening. She looked away, outside the window. “Because he promised me. It was a Fae promise, and I believed him.”

*Sounds pretty freaking convenient to me,* I thought.

Artemis watched our mom, silent.

“Did Kadmos ever use his power?” I asked.

“He resisted his power, hated it, but there were others who saw it as a great weapon,” Mom replied.

Dad swallowed audibly. Imagine being a human, minding your own business, and then having all this information explode into your life.

“What did the people who wanted his magic do?” I asked.

“They tried to have him use it in the war, but he refused,” Mom said.

Well, that sounded like some supervillain shit right here.

“What happened after that?” Artemis asked quietly.

Mom stayed silent for a moment. Then, looking at her folded hands, she whispered, “When he wouldn’t cooperate, he was killed.”

I blinked. “I thought… I thought you said he died in the war.”

“That’s true,” Mom said. “But I’ve always suspected that he was murdered for refusing to comply.”

Mom’s sadness made me feel sad as well. These circumstances sounded like a nightmare. She wiped away a tear as Dad squeezed her forearm. Mom nodded her thanks before turning to Artemis.

“After, when they learned I was pregnant, there must have been a group of Fae that plotted to steal you in the hope that his power would be passed on to you,” Mom told Artemis. “It’s the only thing that makes sense to me.”

“Me?” Artemis gasped. “Why would I have his power?”

She seemed shocked, and I didn’t blame her. This was truly a mess. But this new information was quite alarming as well.

“Is that how it works? Powers get passed on from our parents?” I asked Mom. “So will I have the power to grow things like you do?”

Mom shook her head. “It doesn’t always work that way. It pulls from generations of family magic. But…”

“But what?” Artemis asked.

“Even if it did, no one could have predicted what Artemis’s powers would be, since I’m Light Fae and your father was Dark,” Mom said.

Dad seemed wildly lost but also very invested in this story, so at least he had that going for him. I, on the other hand, thought that my situation wasn’t all that different from Artemis’s—only I was half-Fae, half-human. But my dad wasn’t a potentially destructive force who could make people kill themselves, so I guessed that was where the similarities ended.

Along with the way Artemis and I had decided to use our powers.

“Is that how you were able to do so much work for the Kollector?” I asked Artemis.

The moment I mentioned the tyrant, Artemis had the decency to look ashamed. I didn’t want to make her feel guilty, but it was hard to forget when she’d done so many bad things to so many humans and supernatural beings alike. I hoped that her remorse was real and not a ruse, but all the new information I’d just learned about her genetic make-up was far from encouraging.

Was I being paranoid?

Was I overreacting?

Or had I just been stupid to trust Artemis and bring her in my home?

Mom saw her as her daughter—of course she wouldn’t turn her away. But I was the one who knew the entire truth about Artemis—about her life in the Fae world. About all the harm she had done.

Was there a chance that Artemis had been playing me for a fool this entire time?

“What are you talking about?” Artemis asked me cautiously.

“The ability to control minds,” I said in an even tone. I was trying to keep my shit together here, but it was very hard considering all the revelations that just kept coming. “Do you have Kadmos’s power, Artemis?”

**Episode 691**

GREYSON

I watched in stunned silence as my father vanished.

Then I spun around to face Mrs. Smith. “Is this one of my father's sick jokes?”

Mrs. Smith appeared to be too shaken to answer. Why was she shaken? Was she in shock after seeing him? She opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it, her eyes suddenly watery. I realized that the entire pack was looking at us, clearly expecting a showdown over a matter that couldn't have been more personal—or potentially messed up.

What the hell was happening here?

I grabbed Mrs. Smith by the forearm and led her a few feet away, out of earshot. This had to end. *Now*.

“What did Silas mean?” I asked her. I tried to keep my tone even, because she was upset, and I could deal with a lot of shit, but not a crying woman. “Why would he lie about something like that?”

A tear rolling down her cheek, Mrs. Smith squeezed my shoulder. “Your father is telling the truth, for once. I...” She wiped her eyes. “I am your mother, Greyson.”

For a moment, I stared at her.

This made no sense.

Of all the things that didn't make any sense, this one took the cake.

“This isn’t right. It can’t be,” I said slowly. “My mother is dead.”

Or at least that was what I’d told myself, all these years.

“Greyson, I—” Mrs. Smith started speaking, but I cut her off.

“No. *No*.” Shaking my head, I took a step away from her, but she moved forward. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. My head was pounding hard enough that it felt like it was going to explode.

“Please, Greyson, I—”

“You’re lying,” I said. Denial was the greatest fucking thing in the world. “I don’t know why, because none of this makes any fucking sense, but if you’re not lying, what—*why?*” My voice cracked. “Why are you telling me this now? If this is true, why have you kept it a secret? For god’s sake, I…” I stared at her, and suddenly, her face seemed foreign.

Sabine Smith was saying that she was my mother, but I’d never felt further away from her. I’d never considered her a stranger, and yet here we were.

“We’ve been around each other for *months* now!” I snapped.

She wiped the corners of her eyes quickly, swallowing roughly. “I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid,” she whispered.

“*Afraid?*” The word made my stomach convulse. “You were afraid of me? Did you think I’d hurt you? Did you think I was just like—”

I didn’t say Silas’s name, but it hung in the air between us.

We were out in the open, with trees and wind all around, but I’d never felt more claustrophobic. More like I wanted to vanish.

“I was afraid *for* you,” she explained. “Not *of* you.”

I could barely wrap my head around this fucked up madness. “So you pretended all this time?”

The second the words were out of my mouth, tears escaped her eyes once more. It was a jarring sight—everything about this moment was disturbing, painful. I had experienced war and slaughter, but for some reason, this felt worse than anything else I’d lived through.

I had been telling myself that my mother was gone for years now. Time and time again growing up, I’d put myself to sleep with the thought of her saving me from Silas, of her taking care of me, of her taking me away—if she could.

Turns out, she just hadn’t been around.

“It’s the most painful secret I’ve ever kept,” Mrs. Smith said. “I’m sorry you found out the way you did, but I’m not sorry you know the truth.”

“But I don’t even understand what the hell the truth is!” I snapped. “How is this even possible? You were involved with Silas? What he said earlier about you two, it was…”

I stopped speaking.

I couldn’t imagine this kind woman in front of me being in any kind of relationship with my father. I couldn’t even imagine them breathing the same air.

“Well?” I stared at her. She wasn’t talking, but her expression spoke volumes, and creeping suspicions started rolling inside my mind. My thoughts took a dark turn in a second flat, but I needed an answer.

I needed the truth, otherwise I would fucking lose it.

“I wish I could…” She swallowed, wrapping her arms around herself as if she needed protection. “I wish I could say this differently. That I could phrase it in a way that would be less painful for you…”

“I just need the fucking truth,” I declared. “Right now. I can handle it.”

Could I?

Could I listen to her while she admitted the reality of what had happened to her?

“Silas forced himself on me.”

I’d suspected it.

I’d suspected it the moment he’d laid eyes on her—when he’d taunted her, when he’d stared at her like she was a piece of meat. But suspicion was one thing, and the truth was another, and perhaps not knowing would’ve been better.

Perhaps lying to myself about how I’d come to be would’ve been less of a nightmare.

“He forced me to… I… I’m sorry,” she whispered.

And if I’d felt sick earlier, now I needed the earth to break apart and swallow me whole.

“Don’t apologize. What my fucking father did to you—it wasn’t your fault. He’s…” I shook my head, and she watched me, and for a moment, I thought about hugging her.

For a moment, I thought about telling her that I’d protect her, like she’d never protected me.

And a second later, I wanted to just walk away from her. To stop listening.

“He’s destroyed a lot of people’s lives,” I said hoarsely.

“I know how hard this is, Greyson.” She moved forward, about to touch me. But when she saw me flinch, she thought better of it. “It’s been rough for me, but I—I went to therapy over the years, and I have learned to cope, but what happened with you, it’s—”

“You left me with that monster,” I said.

I didn’t mean to make an accusation, but it did sound like one.

“He took you from me,” she said. New tears fell from her eyes, but this time, I felt nothing as I looked at her. This time, I was numb, fighting to process as realization sunk in. As all the years of being Silas’s son came crashing down on me.

“He took you, and he had left me for dead,” she murmured. “If it hadn’t been for MacKenzie, I would have died. But she saved me, got me out of there, away from Silas.”

“And you forgot about me.” My voice was hoarse.

“Of course not!” She grabbed me by the arms, as if to shake me into understanding, but I stepped away from her like she’d just slapped me. She looked struck herself. “I always thought about you, Greyson,” she said. “*Always*. The first time I slept well after what felt like a decade was the day I saw you again. And we tried over the years to get you back—years of trying, but Silas…”

She trailed off.

I could imagine the rest. But still, I had to wonder. I had to wonder how hard she’d tried.

“I know you blame me for leaving you, but I had no choice,” she said. “He threatened to kill you if I didn’t stay away.”

Growing up with Silas, I’d wished I was dead from time to time.

“Why didn’t you just tell me when we met again?”

“I wanted to,” Mrs. Smith said. “I didn’t care about the vicious rumors about you, because I know you, Greyson. But then, with all the conflict between the packs, the Lupo Finale, the Manus Cruentae, and now Silas—I was worried that the knowledge would do more harm than good, that it would distract you, that—”

“That sounds like an excuse,” I said. There was no passion in my voice. Just a dejected, exhausted numbness as I struggled to take it all in.

“I wasn’t sure *how* to do it!” she said, her expression desperate. “And the longer I waited, the more difficult it seemed.”

Difficult.

*Difficult.*

The woman before me had been through hell at the hands of my father, and I was the product of that. Someone else would’ve hated me from the second I was born, and yet here she was, saying that she had looked for me. There was part of me that was grateful to her for not looking at me with disgust, with resentment, with as much fury as she looked at my father.

But another part of me was fucking furious.

Another part of me wished that I could forget everything I’d just learned.

*I can handle the truth*, I’d said earlier.

Me, the Alpha, the man who could deal with anything and anyone.

Turns out, that was all a bunch of bullshit when my whole life seemed to have been turned upside down.

“Are you going to be okay, Greyson?” Mrs. Smith said softly. She looked like she was holding her breath.

“I don’t know,” I said. My voice was barely audible, and I walked away from her.

I needed space, needed time to think, to make sense of this, even though…

Even though nothing could change the truth.

“Greyson!” she called after me.

I ignored her, marching into the woods.

“Hey!” Xavier barked, bumping into me. “Where the hell are you going?”

I just pushed past him, walking away from him and from the woman who called herself my mother. From everyone.

Because in that moment, I wanted to disappear.

*Should I even go back?*