**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 8 - Part 1**

**Episodes 692-791**

**Episode 692**

XAVIER

I watched as Greyson walked way. Again.

It seemed like my half-brother was always walking away, one way or the other. Classic Greyson—Silas showed up, terrorized everyone with his fucking mind games, and Greyson chose to split.

What a mess.

Where the hell was Colton to cuss him out?

Then again… Okay. Even though he was a total dick, maybe Greyson deserved some alone time to process the bombshell that Silas had dropped. Mrs. Smith was his mother? For real?

At first, I’d thought it was just Silas being Silas—a manipulative piece of shit who got into your head and twisted everything up. But now that I thought about it, there were some similarities between Greyson and Mrs. Smith. Especially in the eyes. And Mrs. Smith did have a tendency to defend Greyson.

Now I knew the reason.

No matter the bullshit going on between us, especially regarding Cali, this was probably the first time, in my entire life, that I was feeling sorry for my oldest brother. Maybe I’d want to walk away too if I’d just found out that someone I barely knew was actually my mother. Which would be impossible, since my mother had been killed.

At least Greyson had a mother.

That last thought made me clench my jaw.

Because it was *true*: at least Greyson had a mother, so instead of walking away, maybe what he should’ve been trying to do was make up for lost time. Hell, I had no idea what *I’d* do if I magically found out that my mother Marlene was alive, but I was pretty sure that I wouldn’t simply abandon my pack. I wouldn’t fall apart. Especially now, when Silas was tightening the noose.

I stared at the spot where Silas had appeared and then disappeared, scowling. That whole thing had been so very like him—all the fanfare and the bullshit. It didn’t surprise me that he could pop up in some kind of hologram or whatever the fuck that had been. Silas might’ve been able to scare the shit out of most people, but today’s appearance really just showed that deep down, my father was a coward.

My father was a monster, but he was weak where it counted.

“Where’s Greyson going?” Joss asked, interrupting my thoughts. “Is he okay?”

The Luna was worried, but I had no answer for her. “I have no idea. Can’t ever predict what my brother’s gonna do.”

I stepped away from Joss, looking around for Cali, who…

Wasn’t here.

Why wasn’t she here?

This was even weirder than Silas appearing as a supernatural mirage. Cali practically jumped to attention the second there was any kind of trouble or commotion. She would never admit it, but I knew that she lived for drama, even when she wasn’t the one creating it.

Why wasn’t she out here holding a fork or something, threatening to stab Silas’s eye out?

On the other hand, I was glad that she’d stayed away from danger, for once in her life. I needed to find her. Silas’s appearance had left me antsy, and I needed to see her. I couldn’t help but remember our earlier encounter—how hot it had been to kiss and touch her, to feel her. We had been so close, and yet she’d stopped me.

I still wanted her so badly I could taste it.

I should have controlled myself earlier, though—I’d known that it might’ve been too fast for her. It had to have been; it was the only explanation I could think of for the way she’d stopped me. She’d made all her reservations pretty clear—both earlier and all the other times we’d discussed it—about being together. But restraint had never been one of my strengths.

When I wanted something—someone —I wanted it immediately.

And I had never wanted anyone as much as I wanted Cali.

How much more time did she need?

A week? A day? An hour?

Having Greyson back in the picture certainly complicated everything in a way that didn’t look good for me. But maybe Greyson, after learning about Mrs. Smith, would run off.

It might not be best for the pack, but it could certainly help me with Cali.

I knew it was selfish and a little fucked up for me to think that, but it was the absolute fucking truth.

I wished Cali could understand how much I needed her, now more than ever. I could keep going on and on, explaining all the ways my whole being depended on her, on her love, on her needing me as much as I needed her. It didn’t seem like she understood the extent of my feelings, even after all this time, and I had to wonder why.

But then again, the answer was obvious. It had been there all along, much like her reluctance to give herself to me fully.

She’d spoken the truth while we were in the Fae world—she’d told that mouse-bear that she was in love with two men.

She couldn’t give herself to me if half her heart was Greyson’s.

Fucking. *Greyson*.

The more I thought about him winning her over, the more riled up I got, my whole body taut with tension as I marched across the yard and toward the house. I needed to see Cali. I needed to ask her about what she’d said to that creature in the flower.

“Hey!” Rishika blocked my way, watching me with alert eyes. “I know Greyson had to go, but, um, should we continue training the pack? Seems counterproductive to stop now.”

From what I knew, Rishika was a good fighter and a good pack member. She was also right in her assessment, but I was fucking done for the day.

I had to see Cali before I snapped.

“Talk to Joss,” I said curtly. “I’m going to take a break.”

I headed inside, leaving Rishika behind. On the upside, even though I wouldn’t admit it to her face, I was grateful to have Joss around to deal with pack business while her Alpha was off brooding over his—admittedly fucked up—life developments.

I hadn’t even finished thinking that when I walked past the living room and saw Big Mac with Mrs. Smith. Both of them were on the sofa, embracing. Mrs. Smith was crying.

She was a good woman, that much I knew about her, and seeing her like that did something weird to my stomach. After growing up watching my own mother cry, stuff like that didn’t sit well with me.

And if Silas had treated Mrs. Smith anything like he’d treated my mother…

I just—I didn’t fucking want to know.

I didn’t want to know.

*Coward*, my wolf said.

I ignored him. This wasn’t my mess to deal with. Besides, what the fuck was I supposed to tell Mrs. Smith? Sorry Greyson’s your son?

Screw that.

Screw everything.

I wasn’t dealing with any of it.

I had enough things to worry about—above all, Cali.

*Cali.*

I climbed the stairs, my gaze zeroing in on Cali’s door. A second later, I knocked, a little harder than necessary.

“Hey,” she said, blinking up at me. She moved to the side, letting me walk into her room. “What was with all the commotion?”

“My cowardly father used some sort of magical hologram to appear and fuck with everyone’s heads,” I said gruffly. She sat there on the bed, looking good enough to eat.

A little more timid than usual, though.

“Why didn’t you come down?” I asked, examining her face. “Are you not feeling well?”

Yeah, I sounded worried.

But she just shook her head. “Greyson told me to stay in my room.”

I blinked. Then paused. Then stared at her like she’d just grown three heads. “And since when the fuck do you listen to Greyson? Or anyone, for that matter?”

Cali stared at me, blinking slowly. “Well, Greyson made it pretty clear. He’s the Alpha.”

“Right. The Alpha. Fucking *Greyson*,” I said mockingly. Daring her. My bitterness was obvious, overflowing. I just couldn’t hide it.

I just couldn’t take this anymore.

“Yeah,” she repeated. “Greyson. That’s what I—”

“You know what?” I snapped, moving closer to her. She stood up, facing up at me as I spoke. “We need to clear the air between us once and for all, Cali.”

She gulped. “We do?”

“Of fucking course!” I huffed. “One minute you want space and the next you’re telling me you miss me, that you’re here for me. And then you start kissing me, but then you fucking stop, and you push me away, and I’m—It’s driving me out of my fucking mind!” I said, running my hands through my hair. “You can’t keep doing this to me, I don’t—”

“Xavier,” she said, her tone stern. “You need to get a hold of yourself.”

“Seriously? You think I’m enjoying this?” I demanded. “This has to end. It’s not good for anyone involved, and I wanted to give you more time, I did, but *fuck*—there’s a limit.”

She stared at me silently. The quiet was unnerving. Silence was so unlike Cali that her reaction wounded me.

“I can’t keep doing this, Cali. It’s driving me nuts,” I said shakily. “You have to choose. *Now*. Who’s it going to be? Me or Greyson?”

**Episode 693**

Artemis shrugged. “I’m not sure if I have mind control powers,” she said, in response to my question. “If I did, it would be news to me.”

*Well, that’s helpful*, I thought, scoffing internally. *This girl is like the gift that keeps on giving! But is she also a gift that can control your mind? Because that would certainly NOT make her a gift.*

I remembered the way Artemis had convinced the miners—all of whom she had captured and sold into slavery—not to hate her. She’d just chatted with them for a minute and batted her eyelashes and suddenly nobody had wanted to skin her alive. It had been a pretty weird thing to see—like, who liked their kidnapper? What was this madness? How had they just become friends?

Then again, *I* was the person who’d brought my kidnapper to the freaking human world, and that was also not very normal. In fact, one could argue that I had peaked when it came to treating your kidnapper nicely. I was practically the Queen of Supernatural Kidnapper Interpersonal Relations.

I recalled my urge to trust Artemis, but that could’ve been the sibling instinct speaking, right? It didn’t necessarily mean that Artemis had hypnotized me into it.

*Right?*

The girl could definitely be pretty persuasive, but did that mean she had mind control powers?

“Could you elaborate a bit on that, please?” I asked her, arching an eyebrow. “Because all I’m hearing is that you might be a mind control master, or maybe not, and all this uncertainty doesn’t work for me.”

“Cali…” Mom’s tone was lightly chastising, but this was a definite problem we could be dealing with! Her firstborn could be a diabolical puppet master, and it was my duty as the younger, overall more wonderful sibling to stop her potential future reign of terror!

*A bit much there, Cali, don’t you think?* I thought, catching myself. I took a deep breath and composed myself. Then I stared at Artemis—my not-very-beloved sister—and said, “Give us some examples, Artemis. This is important.”

Dad looked at me, amused and smirking. At least SOMEONE around here was having a good time.

“I’ve been on my own, as you know, for most of my life…” Artemis started. I wanted to say, *“We know! You have a traumatic past! I want to love you, but I’m struggling with that at the moment because jealousy is a bad thing and the whole thing where you trapped me in a net wasn’t the best introduction for us!”*

But I stopped myself from speaking, and Artemis continued.

“I have to admit that from time to time, weird stuff has happened to me,” she said.

“Like what?” Mom asked thoughtfully.

“It’s hard to explain,” Artemis said. “Mostly little things that seemed like coincidences at the time. But maybe they weren’t?”

“Wouldn’t you know if they were caused by something you did?” I asked. My tone was impatient, but we didn’t have all day here.

“Haven’t you done magic without realizing it at some point in your life?” Artemis shot back.

Wow. Rude to call me out like that.

“How am I supposed to know that?” I asked.

“Exactly,” she said.

“We’re talking about you now, though,” I said.

Dad barked out a low laugh while Mom looked between us with raised eyebrows.

“They sure sound like sisters already, don’t they?” he said to mom. Both Artemis and I glared at him.

“This isn’t the time, Dad!” I said.

“Artemis, continue,” Mom said, nodding.

“Once, I almost got swindled out of something,” Artemis said, rolling her eyes. “I’d been tracking an escaped prisoner for weeks, and when I brought the guy back to collect the reward, they tried to cut the reward in half.”

“An abomination,” I deadpanned. “Was the prisoner, like, a nice person that the Kollector wanted destroyed?”

“No, he was actually a magical bunny serial killer,” Artemis said. “Magical bunnies are sacred in the Fae world.”

That sure shut me up.

She continued. “I was so mad, I refused to turn the prisoner over. I remember thinking how I wanted not only the original reward, but a bonus for the danger I’d gone through to capture him. To my amazement, the warden suddenly changed his mind, and I was paid the full reward plus the bonus.”

“Wow,” I breathed, blinking in shock.

My parents looked intrigued, but Artemis just laughed. “It’s probably just coincidence, like I said. Guess I’ll never know.”

“Is it even possible to use your magic without knowing you have it?” I asked Mom.

“Everything is possible,” she said in that cryptic way of hers. So helpful. *NOT*.

Either way, it would’ve be cool to have more powers. Instead, I was like a half-baked loaf of bread—part human, part Fae, and barely able to get my powers to work. Sure, I was getting better at it, but still. And Artemis was always so cool—did she have to be so cool? Like, was it a necessity for her to be such a badass? Was it because she was a wild mix of Dark and Light Fae?

Mom started chatting with Artemis about the Fae world and the Kollector while Dad listened on with interest, and I wondered if all my thoughts and feelings regarding Artemis were shallow. I knew that I was being selfish and petty, that I should’ve been the gracious bigger person here, but emotions were hard to ignore.

Emotions were wild things, and unlike some stuff in my life, they were the one thing I had no control over.

“The more I learn about your life, the angrier I get,” Mom said to Artemis, pulling me out of my thoughts. “I would have never allowed you to work as a bounty hunter. It’s so dangerous—not to mention highly unethical in many cases.”

If only Mom knew I’d been Artemis’s prey, at one point.

“Definitely,” Artemis said. “But it was also pretty exciting when I caught the bad guys, you know? Far more exciting than if I’d stayed at the orphanage.”

There it was—the orphanage story again. It made my gut throb.

*But, wait a minute…*

“Why would someone take Artemis in the first place if they were only going to leave her at an orphanage?” I asked. “That makes no sense.”

“True,” Artemis said, slowly. “Why bother to steal me at all?”

Mom frowned, skeptical. “Not sure. Maybe it’s because once the Dark Fae realized you didn’t have the mind control, they had no use for you.”

“Why didn’t they just kill me, then?” Artemis asked.

Dad actually said, “Yikes!” out loud while Mom shook her head. “Don’t say such things.”

Artemis was right, though.

“She has a point,” I muttered.

“Right? I just don’t understand—that’s what I would have done, if I were an evil baby kidnapper,” Artemis said.

Mom sighed, shaking her head. “We’re lucky they didn’t touch you, Artemis. As for why they kept you… Maybe they wanted to keep you alive just in case, like a bargaining chip?”

Everybody fell silent.

Dad cleared his throat very awkwardly, bless his heart. “Well, on that note, everyone should make sure their waffles aren’t getting cold.”

I’d already almost eaten mine while nobody was looking, because I had my priorities straight.

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” I offered, looking for an excuse to step away and think about everything.

“I’ll put your last waffle in the oven to keep it warm,” Dad told me. I wanted to tell him that I was already very full from the other two I’d eaten, but he was so sweet that I just thanked him and nodded. I also reached forward and gave him a kiss on the cheek, because I had really missed this kind of easiness between us.

Heading to answer the door, I mused over Artemis’s story about mind control before reaching for the doorknob.

*It must be a package or something*, I thought. *Or someone who’d like to convert me to their faith of the one true lizard king.*

But it was Alex.

“Cali,” he said. He looked breathless but determined, like he’d spent hours emotionally prepping for this moment. He also looked like he hadn’t slept well in a week.

“Alex?” I said sheepishly, alarmed. What did he want this time? What fresh hell was this? How many problems did I need to deal with on the daily?

*Can’t I just chill for a moment? Jeez!* I thought. *One day it’s magical flowers that I have to retrieve, then it’s fight-friendly werewolf boyfriends who I have to split up—you know, during the time when they gave a shit about me and didn’t just VANISH—and now Alex!*

I had to deal with Alex.

God dammit!

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?” Alex asked. His question sounded like a dare.

“I mean, sure?” I said. Not inviting him in.

His gaze turned into a glare before he almost shouted, “You need to tell me everything about werewolves, Cali, and this time I’m not taking no for an answer!”

**Episode 694**

VIOLET

I peeked out into the hallway, looking for any signs of Jay.

Coast was clear.

I slid into the hallway, figuring that Jay must’ve cooled down by now anyway. It’d been awkward enough to have him act all parent-y around Charlie. I hadn’t given him the opportunity to go Full Dad Mode once Charlie had left, though—I’d run straight to my room and shut the door behind me, not looking forward to being lectured.

If Jay said, “I’m disappointed in you, young lady,” the next time he saw me, I didn’t know how I’d react. The whole thing was kind of ridiculous, and he was beyond extra. Jay wasn’t my brother and Xavier was already my big-brother type in the pack. Position filled. Heading down the hallway, I looked around, just to make sure that I wouldn’t bump into him. Certain that he was probably still sleeping, I walked into the kitchen…

Only to find him sitting there, as if he had been waiting for me. He’d probably been moments away from dramatically turning on the lights and examining me with a magnifying glass to make sure I didn’t have any hickies.

My face heated up at the mere thought of Charlie—beautiful, kind, super-hot Charlie—putting those plush lips of his anywhere on my body.

“Violet,” Jay said seriously.

Oh, god. This was going to be painful.

“Jay,” I said.

“Good morning, Violet.”

“Jay—”

“Did you sleep well?” Jay asked.

I had to stop myself from bursting out laughing. This was so awkward I could die.

“Please don’t start about me and Charlie last night,” I said. “It’s super annoying when you treat me like I’m some sort of child who has no idea what—”

“No, sorry,” Jay said, surprising me. “I didn’t make myself clear last night. I wasn’t upset you were with Charlie, especially if you think he’s your mate.”

I blinked. I wondered if Jay was going to play the “cool dad” card now.

“Oh?”

“I was seventeen not that long ago, Violet.” Jay snorted. “I know what it’s like.”

I cleared my throat, wary. “So if you’re not mad about me being with Charlie, then what's this all about?”

Jay took a deep breath before his pleasant expression faded into something more serious. Uh oh.

“We’re away from the pack house. Neither of us is native to Minnesota—we’re fish out of water here, and we don’t know our way around the woods.”

“Okay…” I trailed off. That did make sense, I had to give him that.

Jay continued. “We also have to remember that Silas is out there, Violet. It’s not safe for any of us to roam around, even this far from home. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I paused for a moment, letting his words sink in. Jay was worried about me, much like Lilac used to be. Like Xavier had been. Jay just… cared about me.

The realization made me smile.

Maybe it wouldn’t be that bad to have Jay as my “cool dad.” He was sort of that to Xavier already anyway.

It could be like being part of a family. It could mean that *I* was part of a family. Wasn’t that what a good pack was all about, anyway?

“You just need to be more careful, okay? Please?” Jay said. “Can you do that?”

I nodded, smiling again. “Okay. I’ll let you know next time I decide to go out.”

Jay smiled back. He really was very sweet.

“Ugh!” Lola walked into the kitchen, rubbing her eyelids. She looked pretty rough, actually. “Why isn’t there any coffee?” she whined. “And I could really use some fries… Maybe a grilled cheese.”

Jay eyed her, frowning. “Good morning to you too, Lola.” Then he muttered, “Becoming more of a petulant brat by the day, I see.”

“What was that?” Lola asked, eyes narrowed.

“Nothing, my sweet love,” Jay said innocently, standing up. “Let me make you that coffee.”

I noticed how Lola didn’t just look rough, like she hadn’t had time to brush her hair or teeth. She looked *exhausted*. As if she hadn’t slept all night.

“Forget the coffee,” Lola grumbled. “I want a milkshake.”

Jay raised his eyebrows, reaching for the fridge. “A ‘please’ wouldn’t hurt, you know.”

Lola sighed. “*Please*.”

“Are you okay?” I asked Lola. She had been pretty irritable lately, but the vibes she was sending off today were extra weird.

Lola turned to me like she’d just noticed me for the first time. Blinking up at Jay, she asked, “Am I interrupting something? Were you guys talking?”

Jay just stared at her, ignoring her question. “Violet asked you something. Are you okay?”

Lola shrugged. “Just tired. Don’t really remember much of last night…” She turned to me, smirking. “Speaking of last night, I do remember that you were out with your new guy. How’d it go? Are you mates? Is it official?!”

I paused, unsure how to answer. Last night had been beautiful, and spending time with Charlie made me feel like my heart was about to explode from happiness, but there were still quite a few… hang-ups.

“You know,” Lola went on, “now that I think about it, you’re old enough to learn about smart choices, aren’t you?”

I blinked at Lola. *She wasn’t really talking about…*

Jay groaned, throwing some strawberries into the blender for Lola’s milkshake. “Lola, please, do *not!*”

Lola waved him off, and I stared at her, mortified. “This isn’t a joke, Jay. Violet’s too young to be having wolf babies.”

I gasped. Lola was really trying to have *the talk* with me! Why was this happening right now? Wasn’t Cool Dad Jay enough? Did I also have to deal with Cool Mom Lola?

The sound of the blender spared me from answering.

“Have you and Charlie discussed contraception, sweetie?” Lola asked me a minute later, sucking on the straw of the milkshake Jay had just finished preparing. He slapped his forehead the second the question was out of her mouth, and I wanted to die from embarrassment.

“We haven’t, we—” I stammered. I was sure that my face was so red it must’ve resembled a tomato. Or a cherry. A cherry tomato. “We haven’t even kissed!” I blurted out. “Besides, he has a girlfriend!”

“Ah, the girlfriend conundrum,” Lola said. She was looking much better now that she had a sugary treat to suck on.

Jay sighed long-sufferingly. “Lola, can you let Violet be?”

“No,” Lola told him, then stared at me. “A hot guy like Charlie was bound to have attachments, Violet. The question is: what are you going to do about it?”

“Um,” I said nervously. “What do you mean? What can I do?”

“Please ignore Ms. Matchmaker over here,” Jay said, gesturing at Lola.

She gasped.

“I made you a milkshake, I get a free pass to say whatever I want,” Jay told her, which made Lola roll her eyes. And then he turned to me once more. “Don’t worry, Violet. If you and Charlie are meant to be, then it’ll work out.”

Lola rolled her eyes. Again. “Sometimes fate needs a kick in the ass, though.” She patted the seat next to her at the kitchen table. “Here, sit with me. Tell me more about Charlie—maybe that’ll give me some ideas.”

“Don’t go to her, Violet,” Jay said. “She will lure you into making some very bad decisions. She’s out of control lately.”

“Nonsense!” Lola scoffed, patting the seat next to her again. “Jay knows nothing—other than how to make good milkshakes.”

Jay looked up at the ceiling. Possibly asking a higher power to give him strength.

Sheepishly, I sat down next to Lola.

“So?” she prompted excitedly.

“I’m not sure where to begin,” I said. “It all happened so fast. Charlie is confused—he only recently learned that he’s a werewolf.”

Jay frowned. Lola as well. “So he was turned? Does Charlie know who bit him?”

“He just said that a wolf bit him and ran off,” I replied.

Both Lola and Jay fell silent.

“What?” I asked.

“A wolf bit him and left him to turn on his own? They didn’t kill him?” Jay asked slowly.

Why did he seem so concerned?

“Why? Is that a bad thing?” I asked.

“Werewolves either kill or seek to grow their pack by turning humans,” Jay explained. “But to abandon a human after biting him—that’s disruptive and unethical behavior for the entire species.”

“A new werewolf needs a pack, or at least someone to show them the ropes,” Lola added quietly.

“Exactly,” Jay said. “Turning someone and just running off is considered a no-no. The last time something like that happened, it was at the beginning of the pack war…”

Lola, for once, didn’t say anything. She looked alarmed, glancing between Jay and me. I thought about how terrified Charlie must’ve been after getting turned. Poor guy. And now, knowing this new information… What could that mean?

Who would have turned him and run away?

My heart started hammering inside my chest. “Do… Do you think Silas might’ve had something to do with Charlie becoming a werewolf?”

**Episode 695**

“*Shh!*” I grabbed Alex by the arm, pulling him into the house. “What’s wrong with you?” I demanded. “Why are you screaming about werewolves in the middle of the yard?”

Alex glared at me. Rude! It was funny how someone so sweet could look so sinister.

“Why do you want me to be quiet?” he demanded. “Afraid someone will hear the truth?”

I feigned ignorance. “What truth? Have you hit your head recently?”

Alex’s tone was demanding. “First the Tony stuff, then the wolf at the party last night… Weird things happen around you all the time, Cali!”

Freaking out, I contemplated just giving in and telling Alex everything—getting this whole thing over with. Besides, didn’t he deserve the truth after all the shit he’d been through while being accused for Tony’s murder? But then again, with the MIB agents sniffing around, the fewer people who knew about this, the better!

“You’re supposed to be my friend, Caliana!” Alex declared, continuing with his tirade. Had he always been so loud? Had he always been so vaguely mean-looking? He started pacing in front of me like a blubbering turkey. “You’re supposed to be my friend, and you can’t even do that. I try to be there for you, and you always push me away, and I—”

“Alex, please stop—”

“But then sometimes you help me and I think, okay, so we are still friends!” Alex yelled. “But—”

“But you spoke to the MIB agents without telling me first,” I declared, cutting him off. “Friends don’t do that, do they?”

“I had no choice, Cali, they wanted to speak with me! Don’t you see?” Alex told me, stopping to peer into my soul or whatever other spooky thing he had in mind. “Ever since you left for Oregon, you haven’t been the same! Remember how we used to be so close? Remember when we’d spend hours making puzzles or taking photographs? Remember when we’d build whole Lego villages…”

This was the moment that Alex lost me, because we hadn’t built Lego villages since sixth grade. Friendship was great and all, but the fact that Alex couldn’t seem to wrap his head around us growing up didn’t help. We had changed.

*I* had changed.

I had matured, gotten tougher.

I had been through hell and back—or at least through the Fae world and back.

If I told Alex even a quarter of that, he wouldn’t believe me.

Or even worse, he might go straight to the MIB.

Also, now that I thought about it, all those things that Alex and I used to do were actually his hobbies. Not mine. Alex used to dismiss my hobbies as too girly or too boring, so I’d end up playing Sims or watching movies with Lola, who—shocker—was still my best friend.

*Isn’t that interesting?* I thought.

I needed to get control of this situation before Alex did something that could threaten the pack. Or my mom. For someone who kept preaching about friendship, Alex sure had a way of making every word sound like a threat.

“Alex,” I said, cutting off his rant. “Let’s be honest here—lately, you’ve spent more time trying to date me than trying to be my friend. That’s not super friendly now, is it?”

“But you were never clear about your intentions!” he said.

“Excuse me? I’m always telling you that we’re friends only!”

He spluttered. “You were nice to me, so—”

“Wait, *seriously*?” I scoffed. “I should’ve told you to eat shit and die, then? Would that have driven the message home? Humiliating you instead of just saying no?”

“You kept throwing mixed signals my way, Cali!” he exclaimed. “I could never read you!”

“I’m not a book, Alex,” I declared. My voice had gotten louder, because I was getting pretty irritated here. “I’m not a complicated mystery book for you to read, or for you to check out of the library whenever you want! I’m a human being with real feelings, and one of those feelings is the fact that I am not ever, *ever* going to be interested in dating you!”

Alex gaped. Why the shock? You’d have thought that I hadn’t told him this *a million times before!* Maybe I hadn’t done it as explicitly as I should have though…

“But do you even still want to be friends?” Alex said, demanding.

It felt like his entire visit had been one huge demand, and I did NOT do well with demands. Or being told what to do. What would Alex’s reaction be if I told him that Tony had tried to assault me? Would he try to defend Tony, excuse him, say that I’d misunderstood? Or would he be on my side?

Part of me held out faith that Alex would side with me, but his entitlement to dating me really had me doubting… And the fact that I couldn’t answer these questions with certainty made my lack of friendship with Alex quite obvious.

*And that’s fine!* I thought. *We don’t have to be best friends! GOODBYE, Alex!*

But then Alex reminded me, again, that I couldn’t just throw him out of the house and call it a day.

“Because it doesn’t seem like you want to stay friends!” Alex screamed, stating the obvious. “You kept all these secrets, all this weird stuff—you’ve been making me think that I’ve lost my mind. Is that what you want? If so, you’ve done a good job!”

A sudden wave of guilt hit me. Yes, I wanted Alex out of my hair because he was annoying and also he gave off VERY strong entitlement vibes, but he had a point there. I *had* made him question his sanity time and time again. But what was the alternative?

How much could I reveal, and would Alex even believe the truth? He wasn’t acting like a friend—he was acting like a loose cannon that I could probably distract with sexual favors, and that did not sit well with me. AT ALL. He felt abandoned and betrayed, right? But I had felt betrayed by him for a while now, given the way he kept ignoring the fact that I’d told him we weren’t going to happen.

Bottom line, I didn’t trust Alex right now, and he didn’t trust me.

And since neither of us was acting like a friend…

*Maybe he should get off my fucking lawn! I have enough shit to deal with already!*

“I don’t want to drive you nuts, Alex,” I said, as calmly as possible. I felt like I had to at least honor whatever connection we used to have. “But I think it’s obvious by now that neither of us trust each other, nor do we act like friends. I’m not sure what you’re trying to achieve here.”

He gasped. “You think you can just RUIN MY LIFE AND WALK AWAY—”

“What is he doing here?” Artemis arrived, eyeing Alex like she could break him with a look. Which she probably could.

Alex clearly suspected as much, and he backed away. “Stay back—stay away from me!”

“I have everything under control, Artemis,” I said.

Artemis eyed Alex. Moving back down the hallway, she called, “If anything comes up, just let me know.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Alex demanded yet again.

“It means that you’ve been screaming inside my house and we don’t like that kind of disrespect around here,” I said, deadpan.

He huffed. “I don’t want things to be like this between us, Cali, but that girl just threatened me! What’s she going to do to me?”

“She won't do anything to you,” I said. That was probably a lie.

“Who is she?” Alex frowned.

Perhaps a little truth was in order here. Either way, I wasn’t going to hide my connection with Artemis forever. “She’s my sister.”

His eyes went wide. “What? The branch breaker? But you don't have a sister!”

There he went again, with the screaming.

“I didn’t know I had a sister until recently,” I said, as patiently as possible. “Kind of a shock to both of us, really.”

“Were you ever going to tell me?” he asked.

“I just did,” I said, annoyed. He was really pushing his luck here. The only thing standing between him and a beat down from Artemis was our years of friendship. Looking at him right now, I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d always been so whiny. “And Artemis isn’t what we were talking about anyway, so—”

“She’s just one more thing that you’re keeping from me!” Alex yelled.

It was a struggle not to yell back at him. Or smack him upside the head. So I just stopped trying. “This is getting ridiculous, Alex! Are you even sure you want to know? Are you sure you can deal with the truth?”

He glared at me again. “When I talked with Fernsby and Imamu, they asked me a lot of questions—some of which I knew the answers to, some of which I didn’t. But I mostly kept my mouth shut. If you don’t tell me everything, though, I’m going to go back to the MIB—Fernsby gave me her personal cell number—and tell them everything I saw at the park!” He pointed at Artemis behind me. “I’ll tell them about your sister taking down that branch with a wave of her hand!”

I stared at him, shell-shocked.

*Is he… is he BLACKMAILING ME?* I thought.

“Is that what you want me to do, Cali?” Alex asked me, panting.

**Episode 696**

GREYSON

Everything was fucking *wrong*.

I had lost all sense of normalcy, of reality.

The woman I’d known as Mrs. Smith was…

Was I supposed to call her *Mom* now? Even the thought of it riled me up. The word “mother” felt foreign to me, daunting. Terrifying. I’d thought my mom was dead for so many years that now, I saw her as a ghost. As a bad dream that had caught up with me, created—once more—by none other than my father.

How many lives did Silas have to ruin?

How many lives did he have to force into being, just to destroy them?

My whole body was shaking, rage and fury making a werewolf’s roar erupt from my throat. The forest shuddered with the sound. I broke into a run, moving faster and faster and faster as Mrs. Smith’s words roamed inside my head.

*“He took you and had left me for dead…”*

*“I’m sorry…”*

*“He forced me…”*

My mind felt like it was bleeding, too wounded by all the things I couldn’t stop thinking about. Suddenly, I shifted, needing to escape.

“*I can handle the truth*,” I’d told Mrs. Smith. And would you look at me now. The Alpha, falling apart. The Alpha who couldn’t forget, not even when he turned into a wolf and kept running deeper into the forest.

*“He took you and had left me for dead…”*

*“I’m sorry…”*

*“He forced me…”*

He forced her.

The idea that I was the result of such a hideous and horrendous act of violence gutted me. I had never claimed to be a good man, and I had never claimed to be anyone’s hero, but seeing myself in such a light ate away at whatever self-worth I had built up after years of dealing with Silas’s abuse. Mrs. Smith, *Sabine*, had said that she wanted me back, that she wasn’t afraid of me, but how could that be true?

Why would she ever love someone like me?

Why the fuck would *anyone* love me?

Maybe the rumors about me were true. I was a killer—maybe I really was as terrible as the other werewolves claimed. If the others—if Cali, Xavier, and Joss—knew all the things that I had done, would they ever forgive me? If Cali knew the way that I had come into this world, would she ever see me the same way?

The thought made me choke. It made me slow my run, catch my breath, and look around. I had gone far. Too far. I needed to go back—the pack was probably freaking out, and I couldn’t just leave them.

I was many bad things, but I wasn’t a coward.

I wasn’t a quitter.

I couldn’t allow myself to be one, because then there would be nothing good left of me.

I’d taken it upon myself to be the Alpha, which meant I had to see it through—there was too much at stake, and running away wasn’t going to solve anything. If anything, it would only make things worse for me, since it would give me more time to think, and I was done doing that.

I needed to stop thinking about all the things that hurt.

“Okay, good!” Xavier was shouting at the pack as I approached the house. He seemed to be in a mood yet again. “Let’s do that again! Keep your fists up!”

The Redwoods were listening to him, continuing their training under his and Rishika’s eye. Nobody spoke to me as I shifted back to human; they knew better. Xavier shot me a cold stare. Maybe he’d been hoping that I wouldn’t come back. Maybe he was never going to trust me, but at least he was doing as I’d asked. At least he was following orders. He seemed upset, actually, but I didn’t give a fuck.

I didn’t give a fuck whether he was upset about training the pack, or because of Silas showing up, or because he truly had hoped for me to vanish.

There was part of me that was dying on the inside, so Xavier could definitely suffer a little as well. He had always been the luckier one. He’d had Colton growing up, at least. I, on the other hand, had been all alone. To this day, even as the Alpha, I had *nothing*.

*I don’t even have Cali…*

The thought left me gut-punched as I looked up at her window. The Alpha wasn’t supposed to feel like this. I needed to get a fucking grip right the hell now, because this was what Silas had wanted: to get into my head. I couldn’t give him the satisfaction.

I *wouldn’t*.

“You can’t do that again, got it?” Joss blocked my way, interrupting my thoughts. She glared daggers at me, and I didn’t blame her. “I know what Silas said freaked you out and now suddenly you have a mom and whatnot, but *do not leave this pack*. Not again.” She shoved my chest. “Do you fucking understand me, Greyson?”

I stared at her. She spoke like I hadn’t considered any of the things she’d mentioned, and her arrogance made the rage re-emerge inside me.

“How touching,” I said sharply. “Thank you for your kind words and understanding.”

“I’m thinking about the pack!” she said. “This can’t keep happening, no matter the circumstances!”

“You think I’m *not* thinking about the pack?” I snapped. “Why the fuck do you think I’m back so soon?”

“You shouldn’t have left in the first place, Greyson!” Joss said, clearly seething. “While you were losing it over finding out your mother is Mrs. Smith, we were trying to keep our shit together because a magical Silas just showed up! You need to remember your duty and why we need to stick together. If our Alpha can’t do that, how do you expect the others to pull it off? How do you expect—”

“I’m not arguing, Joss,” I said, cutting her off.

She paused, staring at me in shock. “You’re not?”

“Everything you’re saying is correct. But I already knew it, so save the lecture next time,” I said. “I shouldn’t have walked away, *I get it*.”

Joss changed gears in a second. Whatever she saw in my face made her expression soften. “Are you feeling better?” she asked quietly. “Do you need more time?”

I didn’t speak. Just looked around the yard.

Cali wasn’t here.

*Cali…*

“I thought you said that as the Alpha, I didn’t deserve a second to myself,” I said. “That I couldn’t be selfish.”

She pressed her lips together. “That’s true. But what’s also true is that if you need a moment to regroup, you should take it so you can keep carrying the weight.” She shoved my chest again. “Just don’t fucking *vanish* without telling me first.”

“Thank you, Joss,” I told her, and meant it.

She nodded. “Whatever you need.”

What I needed right then was to stop thinking. What I needed right then was a distraction.

And there was only one person who could do that for me.

“I’m going inside,” I told Joss. “Thanks again for keeping an eye on things.”

Joss eyed me warily, probably shocked that I wasn’t being a dick. I turned my back on her and headed inside.

Mrs. Smith was nowhere to be seen. She was probably with Big Mac. At some point, I’d need to talk to her, but not right now.

Right now, I needed Cali.

I found her in her room, brushing her hair at the vanity. Just seeing her overwhelmed my senses, my entire existence clinging to her presence. Just seeing her made me feel better, more like myself.

“Hello there,” she said, staring at me through the mirror. “You okay? I heard that your father was here… Shouldn’t you be off doing Alpha things?”

I moved up to her, taking in her scent greedily. Moments like these, just scenting her could make me forget.

I needed to forget.

I ignored her question. “Thank you for staying in your room. That was a first.”

She turned to face me, getting to her feet. “Is that how you make yourself feel like an Alpha? By ordering me around?”

There was challenge in her tone, that fire that I’d always fucking adored. She was so close now, looking up at me through her eyelashes, almost like a dare. In that moment, all the reasons why I should’ve left that room and returned to my responsibilities seemed murky. I had tried to protect Cali, to keep my distance, to keep her and the pack safe, but I could no longer focus on that. Her body’s heat was fucking overpowering my logical mind, and for once, I didn’t run away from the feeling.

For once, I welcomed the distraction.

I just needed, for a moment, to stop thinking.

And Cali—my mate, my woman—could give me that gift, even if I didn’t deserve it.

“I need you,” I breathed.

And then I grabbed and pulled her into a devouring kiss.

**Episode 697**

GREYSON

Cali moaned when I pushed her onto the bed, her legs spread, her hands clawing at me to pull me closer.

“You want this?” I breathed against her lips, and she whimpered, nodding.

I kissed her again and again, my tongue invading her mouth as she wrapped her arms and legs around me. She arched her hips to find friction, and something inside me wanted to howl.

Finally, Cali me let me pull her T-shirt off, then her shorts and underwear, and there she was, in all her glory, bare and stunning. I wanted to lick her all over, devour every shaking inch of her. I nipped and bit at her neck, tasting her luscious skin as she clung to me, responding with equal fervor. I brushed my mouth over her breasts, sucking on her skin while moving my hand between her legs to find her wet and ready.

*Fucking* finally*.*

“I’ve been dreaming about this,” I said, breathing against the skin of her navel. “I’ve been—”

She didn’t let me finish. She grabbed me by the neck, pulling me upward for another kiss. I hadn’t bothered with putting a shirt back on after shifting earlier, and I was thankful for that, because Cali’s hands slid all over my shoulders, my chest, then moved downward to unzip my pants and reach inside.

“*Fuck me*,” she hissed, the second she felt how hard I was, and I was surprised. I’d never imagined her like this—so assertive, so raw—but I could work with it. I could work with her, work her up with my hand between her legs till she could no longer stand it.

“I want to eat you out first,” I panted against her mouth. “I want to feel you come apart on my tongue, and then—”

“Later,” she said, trembling. “I need you inside me.”

She grabbed my ass to pull me between her thighs, closer. Impatient. My hardness brushed up against her, and she was so ready for it that I felt lightheaded. I felt so wanted, so fucking *needed* that I could do nothing more than what she asked.

If she wanted to be fucked, I was more than happy to oblige.

I thrust inside her, kissing her at the same time, so sharp that she gasped inside my mouth. It felt so good that I shuddered. Gripping her thighs, I kept her spread, kept her open, trembling underneath me as I moved. Panting, still unable to process that this was truly happening, that I was with Cali, that we were together, I reached down to touch between us. I rubbed her just like she seemed to like, rubbed her well enough for her to say, “*Oh my god, holy fuck!*”

I definitely hadn’t expected her to say that when she came. I’d imagined her moaning my name, breathing it out, but that was just a fleeting thought when she quivered all over me. Spasms took over, and when she came, I forgot everything about my shitty day.

I moved her onto all fours on the bed while she was still shaking, and she whined, arching her hips for me. It was animalistic and dirty, and it made me feel amazing, but it wasn’t…

It just wasn’t what I’d expected.

“Please,” she begged, moving backward before looking at me over her shoulder. I grabbed onto her hips while leaning forward to kiss her neck, her shoulders, whispering that I had wanted her for so long, that I needed her, but before I could say that I couldn’t imagine life without her, she started shaking once more, cursing before her knees gave out. She fell face down on the bed, and I stayed behind her, straddling the backs of her thighs while keeping my hands on her shoulders.

She wanted to be fucked into the mattress, and I obliged. I obliged, and I came inside her, and then I kept fucking her till I came again, and she did too, but I still couldn’t…

I couldn’t believe this was happening.

Above all, I couldn’t believe that even though being inside her felt incredible and she was wet and gorgeous, there a tiny alarm going off inside me, in the back of my mind. There was an instinct within me, in the depths of my being, that screamed at me, saying that there was something wrong here.

Something was *wrong*.

\*\*\*\*

We lay on the bed after, panting as we stared at the ceiling. Absently, I realized that I hadn’t eaten her out. I had spent months thinking about putting my mouth all over her perfect body, and I hadn’t done it.

The realization bothered me so much that I had no fucking idea what to do with it.

Cali didn’t snuggle closer to me after we finished, and I didn’t pull her close either. I looked through the window, thoughts racing in my head as I fought to even out my breathing.

Our sex had felt more like fucking than making love. I’d had a lot of sex like this in my time—great sex, amazing sex, but not the kind of sex… Not the kind of sex you would have with your mate.

Cali was my mate.

I was no fucking romantic, but having sex with her just hadn’t been how I’d imagined. The way I used to feel when I kissed Cali, when I touched her, was an echo that I could barely grab onto right now.

Why did I feel so empty?

I felt hollow after the act, even though being with her should’ve felt like completion.

It should’ve felt like two halves finding each other.

It should’ve felt like the most beautiful fucking dream, but it didn’t and all I could think was that…

I couldn’t shake that feeling. Something was wrong.

I couldn’t even explain it. Why did I feel so disconnected from her? Perhaps this was about what had happened earlier—finding out that Mrs. Smith was my mother? Was this the wrong time to have been with Cali? After all that waiting we’d done?

I’d built it up in my head for so long that I’d never considered the possibility of feeling nothing afterward. Was I broken in some way?

If Cali was my mate…

*Why* did I feel like this?

“What’s wrong?” she asked, turning to face me. She really was beautiful, with her pillowy lips, her doe eyes, her gorgeous thick hair. But where was the electricity?

Where was our chemistry?

Where was the thing Cali used to have that had brought me to my knees?

“I’m just… in shock, I guess,” I muttered, forcing a smile. “Never thought this day would come.”

She looked at me curiously. “And now that it has?”

I didn’t know what to say. How to feel. This was Cali, for god’s sake—I would die for her. I *had* almost died for her multiple times during our Fae world journey, without any hesitation. I had considered her part of me for so long, that I couldn’t—

I couldn’t just let her go.

“Are you regretting it?” I asked her quietly, stroking her hair. Pulling her into my arms, like a mate was supposed to.

“No,” she said instantly. She held me tighter, scrutinizing my face. Then she cautiously added, “Should I be regretting it?”

“I hope not,” I said, trying to joke. But it fell flat. Everything about this felt flat. I had a strong urge to leave, to pretend I had some business to attend to. But I didn’t want to treat Cali that way—she was my mate.

Mates weren’t meant to lie to each other.

A new wave of emptiness hit me at the thought. It made me feel disoriented, weak. I hated the feeling. I hated that I’d felt it twice in the same day, especially considering I’d hoped that Cali would be able to make me feel better.

Why did being with the woman I’d lusted over and loved for so long feel like a mistake?

What the fuck was wrong with me?

Slowly, I got up and stretched. Before the silence could become awkward, Cali said, “I spoke to your brother. Xavier.”

I paused, gulping. Why the hell was she telling me this now?

How much more fuckery would I have to deal with in one day?

“And?” I said.

“He came to see me right after your father scared everyone,” Cali said. There was something calm about her demeanor that felt foreign. Cali was never so… *subdued*.

“What did he want?” I asked.

“He gave me an ultimatum. He told me I had to choose between him and you,” Cali said. Her eyes were fixed on me, waiting. Probably watching to see my reaction. She’d wanted me when I’d walked into her room earlier, though. There had been no hesitation when we’d touched and kissed and fucked each other.

Only need.

So much need, but with so little emotion that it was jarring to me. The thought wounded me, messed me up. But I still felt compelled to ask the question. “Was I your choice?”

**Episode 698**

“Excuse me for a fucking moment while I try to wrap my head around what’s happening right now, my dear friend Alex,” I told the boy, laughing nervously. And then I shouted, “Are you—are you BLACKMAILING ME?”

He stared at me, wide-eyed. “Cali…”

“Or is it extortion?” I demanded. “Either way, are you serious right now? You just spent forty-five eons and three millennia ranting about the importance of friendship and THIS is how you treat me? Because, correct me if I’m wrong, but fucking BLACKMAIL is a pretty sucky thing to do to a friend!”

Alex huffed. “I don’t want to do it, but you’re giving me no choice!”

“Because I won’t tell you everything you want to know? CAN’T A GIRL HAVE SOME MYSTERY IN HER LIFE?!”

He grunted. “This affects me as well, Cali!”

“Not anymore!” I said. “If you just stayed the fuck away, this wouldn’t affect you! But you just love snooping around—do you even realize how obsessive you sound? I can’t believe it’s come down to this. You have no idea what harm you could do!”

“Then tell me—”

I moved closer to him. “If you really cared about me, Alex, you would just *drop it*.”

He paused, breathing heavily. “Cali, I can’t keep living like this. I can’t keep keeping secrets,” he said, voice low.

“I think your issue is that I won’t tell you *my* secrets,” I said, arching my eyebrows.

He huffed. “You know what I mean! You’re so important to me, Cali, but after being accused of Tony’s murder, my whole life has changed. Don’t I deserve the truth, too?”

That gave me pause. His face was strained, wounded. His words reminded me that, indeed, I was responsible for a lot of the things that Alex had been through. Or at least, if not me, then my mate—Xavier had killed Tony, after all. But there was something about Alex’s insistence that didn’t feel so innocent to me. There was something about his eagerness, his thirst to know that felt weird, especially combined with the way he was threatening me.

*Going to MIB about Artemis?* I thought, bristling. *Surely they can’t have a way to tell whether someone is Fae…*

But what if they did?

What if they took Artemis, and then they took my mom as well, after I’d risked my life multiple times to save her? What if the MIB actually believed Alex and they forced my family apart?

I couldn’t let Alex do this.

For all our sakes, and for his as well.

I didn’t know about Greyson—perhaps he’d forgotten all about me—but there was no way Xavier would let Alex get away with ruining my life. He was already suspicious of Alex, and everybody knew that Xavier didn’t need much encouragement to turn to murder.

“Maybe I should handle things from now on,” Artemis said, interrupting my thoughts. Before I could speak, she pushed past me and got in Alex’s face. He gulped and jumped back.

For someone who wouldn’t stop threatening me, Alex sure didn’t seem all that brave when it came to Artemis.

“You know, I can do a lot more than break a few branches,” Artemis told him through gritted teeth, shoving him against the wall. “Would you like to see?”

Alex squealed, “No, please! CALI!”

Artemis grabbed Alex by the neck of his T-shirt, smiling.

“Stop her!” Alex shouted. “She’s insane!”

“Artemis, NO!” I grabbed her arm, trying to push her back. “Stop!”

Artemis did not budge an inch. She was a girl in her early twenties with the force of a boulder, and Alex was kind of doomed.

“Cali, come on now,” Artemis said. Alex struggled against her grip like a pinned bug, while she barely flinched. “Don’t you think it’s time to do a little magic?”

“MAGIC?” Alex gasped, still flailing.

*Good god, why can’t he just let things be?* I thought, frustrated. *LET IT GO, ALEX! LET. IT. GO!*

I was about to break into song—I’d fucking do a whole Elsa dance sequence for him if he needed me to—when Alex suddenly stopped struggling against Artemis’s grip.

“You need to stop this madness, Alex!” I sounded like I was mad at him, but also pleading and guilty. A bit of a mixed bag. “You need to calm down and JUST STOP—”

“You’re right,” Alex breathed.

“NO, ALEX!” I scolded. “YOU CAN’T KEEP—Wait, what?” I blinked, staring at him in shock before turning to Artemis. “Did he just say what I think he said?”

Artemis squinted at him suspiciously, slowly letting him go. “I think so.”

“I’m really sorry to have bothered you both,” Alex said quietly and moved away from Artemis. His earlier hysterics entirely forgotten, he started heading toward the door, walking briskly.

“What the hell just happened?” I asked Artemis, bewildered.

She didn’t answer, because she was too busy following right after Alex, snorting. “I’m not buying this for a second!”

I heard the front door open a second later and scrammed to follow them both. I couldn’t leave Artemis alone with Alex. No matter how annoying he was being, he still used to be my friend and I was still at least partly responsible for him.

“Dammit, wait up!” I called after them. All three of us ended up on the sidewalk. There were families out here, enjoying the day while Alex, Artemis, and I formed a very weird, fast walking chase.

“Stop!” I hissed at Artemis and Alex. “People are looking at us!”

Nope. BOTH OF THE LITTLE ASSHOLES KEPT GOING!

“Hi, Mrs. Mueller!” I told our neighbor, who was trimming her rose bushes and looking at us funny as we passed. “What a beautiful day, huh?”

The woman said something that I didn’t catch. I looked straight ahead at Artemis, who was still following Alex like a colossal squid about to attack a very small crab. I gazed around, just to make sure that nobody was watching us, when I saw the Gundersons’ house.

There was a white van parked by their driveway.

*I hate white vans!* I thought, alarmed. *Maybe it’s the MIB, spying? Or maybe it’s just the cable company…*

I was getting paranoid.

But what if this—a crazy whiny Alex—had all been some kind of elaborate plan to draw me and Artemis out of the house? And since *when* was Alex such a fast walker?

*He used to trip all the time during P.E.!* I thought. *He couldn’t even—*

Before I could finish my thought, Alex actually broke into a run. God dammit, people would see!

“Alex, no!” I whisper-hissed, but nobody listened. Certainly not Artemis, who was in hot pursuit. Looked like I had to start running as well, even though I hated it.

I’d thought I was in great shape in the Fae world, but I was beginning to suspect that it had been something to do with the climate there, because in the human world? I was back to being myself. Which was not athletic AT ALL.

When I got back to Oregon, Rishika and I were going to do some *serious* training.

“Got you!” Artemis said, leaping at Alex the second we went around a fenced yard. She slammed into him with a *BOOM!* and they both tumbled over the fence.

“Stop it!” I yelled. “Stop fighting!”

Alex was about to scream, but then Artemis pinned him to the ground. Panting, I caught up to them. Artemis was straddling Alex’s chest now, with one hand covering his mouth; his face was beet red. I looked over my shoulder, and no one was around, so I hopped over the fence as well…

Only to trip and tumble to the ground.

Artemis snickered. “Nice move.”

I glared at her.

“Mffffppffff—” Alex stared at me with wide eyes as he fought to break free. To no avail, of course, because Artemis had captured trolls, so Alex was a mosquito in comparison.

“If you don’t stop, I’ll snap you like a twig,” Artemis threatened.

*Snap him like a twig?* I screamed inside my head. *I know Alex is being difficult, but snapping him IN HALF?*

It sounded like a joke, but if anyone could actually do it, it was probably Artemis.

“What do you want to do with him?” Artemis asked me.

“Um, let him go?” I asked awkwardly.

Artemis rolled her eyes.

Alex kept struggling. He really was stubborn, and he had blackmailed me, and this just wasn’t going to stop. This looked like an obsession for him, to the point where he didn’t even have the self-preservation instinct to just fucking *drop it.*

I had no idea what to do.

I couldn’t let him turn in my family, and I also couldn’t tell him the truth.

I no longer trusted him enough to tell him the truth.

“Should I erase his memory?” I said tentatively.

Even before the words were out, I felt terrible about even suggesting it.

But as Alex’s eyes went wide with fear, Artemis said, “Do it.”

“What if something goes wrong?” I asked, panicking. “What if I damage his brain?”

“MFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFMMMMMFFF!” My words only made Alex struggle more.

He really had ZERO self-preservation instincts!

Artemis said, “Either you do it, or I’ll damage more than his brain.”

When our eyes met, I knew that Artemis 100% meant it.

She had done far, far worse things to far worse people.

Her ultimatum made me feel trapped, but Alex had made me feel that way as well, earlier. And even though I was caught between a rock and a hard place, I made my own decision.

*This is it.*

“I’m sorry, Alex…” I whispered, swallowing thickly.

And then I focused on my magic to erase his memory.

**Episode 699**

AVA

Greyson was staring at me, his grey eyes dark, the expression in them impossible to read. “Was I your choice?” he asked again. “Cali?” he prompted when I didn’t answer.

I met his eyes. “I haven’t made my choice yet,” I said, keeping it vague.

He looked at me for a moment longer, searching my face for something, then looked away. Something flickered across his eyes. Disappointment, maybe? Could that be it? I wondered what he’d been expecting from sex with Cali. For me, it had been fine. Pleasing, but having been with Xavier—my true mate—nothing else could compare to that kind of deep connection. But still, sex with Greyson had been a hell of a lot better than the clueless fumbling of the guys I’d hooked up with before Xavier and I had gotten together. Greyson had been very pleasing—he’d known what he was doing. He’d been very much the Alpha in bed, as I’d expected. And I liked that. I’d let him guide me—I’d figured Cali would have done the same. But… maybe I was wrong? Had he been expecting something else?

How could he, though? He’d never slept with her—he’d told me that much—so there was no way he could have known what it would be like. Sleeping with Greyson had been an experiment. I’d wanted to see if I could get him to completely believe that I was Cali, and I’d wanted to learn as much as I could about him. The experiment had been very beneficial on both counts.

Greyson was pulling on his jeans, not looking at me. The air in the room had changed. I could feel it. It seemed flat and tense, the way it typically felt after a failed hookup. I watched him, curious to see how uncomfortable he was suddenly looking.

“You can go,” I said, and he looked up at me quickly. “I won’t be upset if you have to leave.”

“Oh,” he said, looking startled. He reached for his shirt, his brows drawn into a frown.

I drew the bedsheet around me, covering my breasts. “I’m sure you’re concerned about the pack right now, with everything that’s going on—”

“Right,” he said, nodding. Though from the expression on his face, pack drama was probably the last thing on his mind.

I shrugged. “This was a… nice diversion. For both of us.”

He looked at me quickly, his eyes registering shock and—was that *pain?* He studied my face—scrutinizing it, like he was trying to work out a puzzle—then turned toward the door. “I should check in with Joss. I’ll see you later.”

“Sure,” I said, but the door was already clicking shut.

With a sigh, I dropped back onto the pillows. I traced a finger down the bridge of my nose—*Cali’s* nose—and sank into my thoughts. What had I learned so far?

For whatever reason, two Evers brothers were desperate for Cali. To love her, to sleep with her, to possess her. *Desperate* wasn’t even a strong enough word. They were *obsessed*. Xavier was tough as hell on the outside, but I was his mate, so I knew the depths of his passion. But Greyson… he was the Alpha, and as tough as he was, now I knew his weak spot. Cali was his Achilles’ heel. His fatal weakness. And I could use that—weaponize it.

But I knew I had a weak spot too: Xavier. My hand traced over my mouth, remembering not Greyson’s kiss, but Xavier’s. What if I hadn’t stopped him? What if I hadn’t refused him? Or, better, what if that cursed witch had never put this damned bracelet on me? I stared up at the ceiling. Would I be able to seduce Xavier as easily if I didn’t have Cali’s face?

The thought made my temperature rise. It felt like my blood lit on fire as I fisted the sheets on the bed, twisted them until I felt the fabric ripping beneath my fingers. Hot, angry tears spilled silently down my face. Everything I’d ever had had been ripped from me, and now this. I’d never know how Xavier really felt. Never know if he would rewrite history to be with me again. Because of this stupid bracelet and this stupid face, I’d never, *ever* know.

Not that it would change anything for me. I’d come here for revenge, and that was what I was still planning to get. But… I turned in bed, burying my face in the pillow. I could still feel Xavier’s hands on me, feel the heat of his breath on my skin. The very thought of Xavier lit me on fire, even when I could still smell Greyson’s scent lingering in the sheets. I’d come here with one thought crystal clear in my head: *revenge*. But the more time I spent with Xavier, the murkier everything seemed to get.

I’d come into this cold and calculating. I hadn’t anticipated how hard it was going to be.

Yanking the sheet from the bed, I stood and wrapped it around myself. I walked to the mirror over the dresser and gazed into it. A stranger’s face looked back. Cali. Xavier’s obsession. Greyson’s weakness. I hated this face. I understood why Nolan had reacted badly when he’d first seen me. I didn’t have his history with Cali, but I hated her face to the depths of my soul. I just wanted to be myself. I wanted my face.

With a deep, shaking breath, I shook my head. I didn’t know how much longer I could do this. Everything was getting so complicated. Maybe it would be better if I just ended things before they got worse. If I just killed Xavier and Greyson the next time I saw them. God knows, it wouldn’t be hard. Those two were weak as putty around Cali. She was never a threat to them.

The gold encircling my wrist felt suddenly tight and I held up my arm, looking closely at the bracelet. If I killed them, then would I be able to have the bracelet removed? Would I get my face back? Or was this permanent? Was I going to be trapped forever on the other side of Cali’s face?

I folded my arms on the top of the dresser and dropped my head into them. I just wanted to be myself. I wanted to look into a mirror without a jolt of shock and fear. And I didn’t want to kill Xavier. At least not yet. I looked up into Cali’s tearstained face. I’d come here to do one thing, but I hadn’t known how much the unanswered questions were going to torment me. I had to know. I *deserved* to know. Could Xavier and I have a chance? Even now, after everything that had happened, was it possible?

I’d come back by walking through a mirror, for god’s sake. If that wasn’t a second chance, I didn’t know what was. And I wanted a second chance. I wanted Xavier and I to have a second chance. We’d been so young when we’d first met, when we’d first gotten together. We could have been so much more—

He’d killed me. Brutally attacked me, ripped my throat out without giving me warning or a chance to fight back. I could never forget what he’d done to me. But… But I could always make him pay later.

Nolan wanted me to act quickly—*now*—but I thought this deserved some thought. I was willing to wait.

There was a knock on the door and I looked up, jolted out of my thoughts. Before I could answer, Joss opened the door and stepped into the room.

My eyes narrowed. I didn’t like her. “It’s normal to wait for an answer after you knock, Joss. Usually people wait for someone to let them in. Or *not*, as the case may be.”

Joss shut the door behind her back. “It’s my pack house, Cali. My rules.”

I glared. “Real nice. Make a lot of friends that way?”

Joss took a deep breath. She darted a glance around the room, taking in the messy bed and the sheet I had wrapped around my naked body. Her face looked strangely bloodless. It took a moment—I was a little rusty—but I realized I was sensing that she was upset. I tuned my senses into her, focusing, trying to figure out why. There were a few possibilities, but I suspected this didn’t have anything to do with earlier’s surprise visitor.

I watched as her eyes went back to the bed, and I suppressed a smile. No, Joss’s disquiet didn’t have anything to do with Daddy Dearest or the rest of the pack. She knew I’d just fucked her Alpha.

Joss looked at me and might have caught a satisfied twinkle in my eye, because the expression in her own eyes hardened. “You can stop the bullshit.”

I let my eyes grow wide. “What do you mean?”

She wasn’t fooled. “I know what you’re up to.”

**Episode 700**

“Okay, okay, I can do this!” I said. “I can erase his memory. I’ve done it before.” And I had, when I’d erased Phil the handyman’s memory. It had saved his damn life, too, when he’d seen a little too much and the pack had wanted to kill him for it.

Artemis frowned. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather have me do it—”

“I’m sure,” I snapped.

“Okay,” she said, sounding wary. “What do you need?”

“I just need to concentrate,” I said sharply. “So shut up for a second.” I had left out the part about how erasing Phil’s memory had been kind of an accident. And how I hadn’t exactly tried it since. Alex was already looking terrified enough. And—while Phil was a perfectly nice guy and I was glad I’d figured out that situation—Alex was a friend. I’d known him since we were kids. What if something went wrong? What if I messed up? I swallowed, though my throat felt dry as sand. What if I erased too much? Like his own name, or how to tie his shoes? Or, like, the information in his brain that instructed his body to perform basic lung and heart functions? What if he ended up comatose in a hospital? Because of me?

As I took a deep, shaking breath and stared down at Alex’s petrified face, these and a thousand more worst-case scenarios cycled through my brain. *All my fault. All my fault. All my fault.*

“Cali, are you going to do this or what?” Artemis demanded, sounding irritated. I guessed she wouldn’t have been hesitating so much…

Alex, possibly sensing my hesitation, surged upward, struggling to free himself from Artemis’s grasp. But she was freakishly strong, and held him fast. He didn’t know the half of what she was capable of.

“I’m trying, I’m trying,” I bit out, annoyed. “Just give me a second. I need everyone to be quiet.”

Alex’s pleas became muffled as Artemis put a hand over his mouth.

I closed my eyes. *How the hell was I supposed to do this*? What was I supposed to focus on? Alex? That probably wasn’t a bad place to start. I thought about Alex. About everything he’d seen and experienced that he shouldn’t have. Tony’s ghost and the werewolf at the party and Artemis causing that branch to break. Was it possible to selectively wipe his memory? To get rid of his knowledge of werewolves? Of Fae? Of ghosts? How could I pick and choose what do get rid of from someone else’s brain?

“If you don’t do something soon, Cali,” Artemis growled, “I’m going to handle this myself. Family friend or not.”

That was not a good option, and Alex knew it too, because he gave a terrified squeak. I concentrated hard, scrunching my face up, trying to remember everything my mom had said about using my powers.

Suddenly, I could feel my senses sharpening, like I was tuning in. The wind felt sharper on my face. The world around me got quieter. I could feel the individual blades of dry grass against my hands.

*Please Cali! Don’t do it! You’re strong and beautiful and a wonderful woman! You don’t need to wipe my memory! We grew up together!*

I shook my head. I couldn’t have Alex arguing in my head—well, me arguing as Alex against myself. I needed to just do this. I needed to take ownership of the situation. Why hadn’t my magic done anything yet?!

Before I could answer that question, I felt a jolt of energy surge through me.

My eyes flew open. “Did you feel that?” I gasped, looking at Artemis. “Did you?”

She looked startled. “Maybe?”

“I think I did it!” I exclaimed jubilantly.

“Did you?” Artemis asked, looking surprised but pleased. She lifted her hand from Alex’s mouth. “Well, all right. There’s only one way to find out.”

Alex looked blankly up at us. His eyes looked a little hazy, like we’d just woken him up from a nap. “What happened? What am I doing here?” He looked down at Artemis’s hands, which were still pinning him to the grass. “Why are you holding me?” He looked up at me. “Who are you?”

I stared at him, stunned, then looked at Artemis. “Did it really work?”

Artemis gave Alex a hard look. “Tell me what happened at the park party the other night.”

Alex stared at her for a moment. “Party?” he asked, baffled. “What party? What’s a park?”

“I think it worked!” I said.

“Do you think he really doesn’t know, or is he just lying?” Artemis asked, still peering warily at Alex.

“Oh. I’m not sure,” I said slowly. I was almost positive I’d tuned into something with Alex, and I was *certain* I’d felt the energy surge that usually accompanied the use of my powers, but I was never sure about their effect.

“I swear,” Alex said, his eyes wide, “I don’t know who you are or what I’m doing here, and I don’t remember anything about werewolves or ghosts or anything.” Almost immediately, he realized his mistake and clamped his mouth shut.

Artemis and I both shrieked.

“I knew it!” Artemis said hotly, kneeling on his chest as he tried to scramble away. “He’s lying.”

I rocked back on my heels. I was angry at Alex for lying, but disappointed, too. I’d really hoped that was going to work, but if Alex remembered what he was supposed to have forgotten, then clearly my magic wasn’t quite so magical.

“Please don’t hurt me,” Alex pleaded, looking at me.

“We’re not going to hurt you, Alex,” I said soothingly. Then I looked over at Artemis. “But what *are* we going to do?”

Artemis stared at him for a moment, thinking hard. “You’re sure you can’t erase him? Maybe you should try again. Try harder this time.”

I closed my eyes again, but I wasn’t feeling positive. My confidence was rattled, and I could hear everything around me. A dog barking. A car alarm going off three blocks over. Alex’s scared whimpers.

“You *have* done this before, haven’t you?” Artemis finally asked, when nothing happened.

“Yeah, I’ve done it. But…”

“But what?” she asked. “Either you have or you haven’t.”

“It wasn’t that simple,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I accidently knocked someone out and when he came to, his memory was gone.”

“Are you sure he wasn’t trying to fake it, like this idiot?” Artemis asked, giving Alex a little shake. It made him whimper harder.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “It’s possible, I guess. But if he did, he was a lot better at pretending than Alex.” I looked at him. “You’re not going to win any Oscars with that performance, pal.”

“I promise, Cali—if you let me go, I swear I won’t tell anyone anything. I won’t go to the MIB. I only did that because I was angry,” he said, his voice desperate.

I looked down at him and bit my lip. I wanted to believe him. He sounded sincere, but Artemis was shaking her head.

“Don’t fall for it, Cali. Desperate people will say anything to be set free.”

“You should know,” I muttered.

She ignored this. “Most Fae have one or two things that they’re really good at.” She shrugged. “Clearly memory erasing isn’t one of your stronger powers.”

“Thanks,” I said flatly.

She gave a resigned sigh and leaned forward, right into Alex’s face. “Okay,” she said, locking eyes with him. “How do we get you not to tell anyone about what you saw? Any of it?”

She wrapped her hands around his shoulders and started to shake him, emphasizing each word with a shake.

“Maybe we could get him to make a promise to us. Maybe it would count as a Fae promise?” I ventured.

But Artemis wasn’t listening to me. She was still shaking Alex, and getting rougher. “You will not tell anyone about this. Ever! Is that understood? Ever!”

Artemis was shaking him so hard that Alex’s eyes were starting to roll back in his head.

“You’re hurting him,” I cried, pulling her away. It took a moment, but she finally let go of him and Alex moved quickly away, pulling himself through the grass. He looked like was going to be sick. This was awful. This wasn’t what I wanted at all. I felt terrible for Alex. He’d been through so much. He was making things harder on himself than they needed to be, but he was still my friend and I hated to see him hurting.

“Alex,” I called, hurrying to draw level with him. He looked over at me. “You won’t tell anyone about this, will you?”

Alex opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out.

“Alex?” I said, tipping my head, confused. “Are you okay?”

His mouth was still open, but his eyes had gone wide and were now filled with fear.

“Alex? What’s going on?” I asked, my heart starting to pound with fear. Alex was opening and closing his mouth, like he was trying to speak, though no sound came out. I wheeled around, rounding on Artemis. “What have you done to him?”

**Episode 701**

JOSS

It wasn’t hard to do the math: Cali was naked underneath that sheet, and the blankets on the bed were twisted in a way that could only mean one thing. Even without the rest of it, I could smell Greyson in the room. I knew she’d just had sex with him, and the thought made my stomach turn.

“You should have stayed in Minnesota,” I said coldly.

Cali drew the sheet more tightly around her. “And why is that?”

Like she didn’t know. I shook my head, disgusted. “All you’re doing is causing trouble between Greyson and Xavier, and you fucking know it.”

She took a deep breath, drawing herself up. “I didn’t force Greyson to do anything, Joss.” She narrowed her eyes. “Did it ever occur to you that Greyson chose to be with *me?*”

Her emphasis on the last word wasn’t lost on me, and I ground my molars. “That’s fine, Cali. Greyson can fuck whoever he likes. But don’t forget, *I’m* the one he chose as his Luna. So maybe it’s time you made yourself less available.”

She gave me a long look. “Is that a threat?”

“It’s advice,” I said evenly.

“Thanks for the tip,” she said icily, and turned away.

“Do you think I don’t know what you’re doing?” This stopped her. She didn’t turn back to look at me, but she stopped, listening. “All this nonsense about *due destini*. It’s a fucking fairytale. Being mates with Greyson and Xavier… It’s all just a distraction.”

She turned, her eyebrows raised. “Is it?”

“Of course it is,” I said, taking a step closer. “It’s nothing but a twisted scheme to undermine Greyson. You want Xavier to take over as Alpha and you think this is the way to do it.”

“I think you’re jealous,” Cali snapped back.

“*Jealous?*” I said, surprised. “Jealous of what?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Have you ever had a mate, Joss? Do you have any idea what it feels like? To see that person for the first time? To know that you share something with them that is just yours, and yours alone? Do you have any *idea* what that feels like?”

There was a fire burning in her eyes I’d never seen before, and I took a wary step back.

Her intensity was new, but I was stung by her words, too. The fact was that I *hadn’t* had a mate. I remembered the first time I saw Greyson—I’d been practically knocked off my feet. I’d *thought* what I’d felt was the connection she was talking about. I’d been looking for so long, and I’d really hoped that I’d finally found it. And then, when he’d chosen me as his Luna…

But I’d moved past that loss. Greyson and I were Alpha and Luna. We ran the pack together. Our relationship was—if nothing else—clear. We were not mates. And if there was a mate out there for me, I had yet to met him. I took a deep, steadying breath. But that did not mean that I was going to let this human waltz in here and disrupt my pack with her wild fantasies.

“I’m just curious,” I said, crossing my arms. “Does Xavier know that you just fucked his brother?”

“That’s none of your business,” Cali shot back.

“Well, there’s that question answered,” I said bitterly. I was furious. How could she act so fucking carelessly? “And as for it not being my business, you’ll find that it very much *is* my business, Cali. Anything that affects my pack is my business. I don’t want to care about who you’re screwing, *human*. In a perfect world, we’d never have this conversation. But you made it my business when you slept with the Alpha of my pack.”

“I think you should leave,” Cali said, wrapping her arms around herself.

I shook my head, outraged. How did she have the balls to act like the victim here? When she’d been behaving with so little regard for anyone else’s feelings or well-being? “Yeah, fine, I’ll go. But I’m going to tell you something else, Cali. You think you’re making a choice here, between Greyson and Xavier, but I wouldn’t be so sure. You’re being pretty damn reckless. If you’re not careful, you might not just end up without either one of them—you might end up dead.” I smirked at the frozen look on her face. “I’ll see myself out.”

I yanked the door shut behind me and stood in the hall for a moment, breathing hard. Something in my brain tickled. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but Cali was hiding something. Something was going on with her. Cali and I had never been great fans of each other, but she’d been acting strange ever since she’d come back from Minnesota. I’d always been suspicious of this *due destini* bullshit, but she’d seemed to take it seriously before, and had always tried to make thoughtful decisions about how she behaved with Greyson and Xavier. Especially when they were in close proximity.

But this… She was being so reckless. I’d found her kissing Xavier one night, and today she was screwing Greyson? She was playing a very dangerous game. I’d thought she was aware of that. I knew there was tension between the three of them. Everyone did.

I leaned against the wall, thinking hard. Part of me was surprised for another reason, too. I was surprised that Greyson had given in to her. Given everything that was going on with the pack, I’d thought he would have shown more restraint. He’d looked pretty shaken when he’d found out that Mrs. Smith was his mother, though. He’d said he was okay, but maybe he was more upset than I’d thought.

I shook my head with a sigh as I looked back at Cali’s door. I guessed I’d just thought he was smarter than that. I pushed off from the wall and headed downstairs. I needed some fresh air.

On the back porch, I stopped with a jolt of surprise. Greyson was leaning against the deck railing, looking out the lake, holding a very large whiskey. I could only see half his face, but he looked very pensive.

“Whiskey in the afternoon? Should I be worried?” I said, raising an eyebrow.

He must have been too deep in his thoughts to hear my approach because he looked over, startled. “Hey, Joss.” He looked at his drink. “No, I just needed to think.”

About Cali, of course. I wondered if I should bring her up, or wait to see what he said. I decided on the slow approach. “Everything okay?” I asked, coming to stand next to him. I didn’t look at him, but out at the lake, which reflected the dull gray of the sky.

Greyson’s mouth pulled into a tight line. “Things are a bit more complicated than I’d like at the moment.”

“Because of your mother?” I asked.

“That’s part of it.” He sighed. “But mostly it has to do with Cali.”

“Because you slept with her.”

Greyson turned to look at me fully. “And how the hell do you know that?”

I shrugged and walked over to the wooden deck steps to sit. “I’m the Luna of this pack, Greyson. Knowing what’s going on is part of my job.”

He looked at me for a moment, then walked over to sit next to me. “You are a very good Luna, Joss,” he said, leaning back on his elbows.

I suppressed the pleased smile that threatened to spread across my face and turned to study Greyson, who was looking more melancholy than ever. His eyes were the same flat grey as the lake. “Well, for someone who’s just gotten laid, you don’t look very happy about it. Buyer’s remorse?”

He glanced over sharply, then shrugged. “It’s complicated. Hard to explain.”

“Try,” I said. A cruel wind came up off the lake and swirled around us. I drew my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them.

He leaned forward, thinking. “The mate bond I was feeling between Cali and me…” He shook his head. “Maybe it’s not what I thought it would be.” He stared into his whiskey for a moment, then took a long drink.

I waited, thinking he was going to say more, but he didn’t. I wanted to *know* more, but I didn’t want to push. I nodded, like I understood, and leaned back, content to wait for him to speak again.

“Maybe I’ve been thinking about this in the wrong way,” he finally said.

“What do you mean?” I asked, looking over at him.

“Maybe mates aren’t everything, for an Alpha,” he said, still looking into his drink. Then he looked up, his grey eyes intent on mine. “I wonder if I’ve been running from things I should have been embracing.”

There was a thrum of something deep within me at the look in his eyes. “I still don’t know what you’re talking about, Greyson.”

“I wonder if it’s time for me to fully embrace my role and really be with my Luna.”

**Episode 702**

“Oh my god,” I muttered, staring at Alex. “Why can’t you say anything?” I turned to Artemis. “What did you do?”

“I don’t know,” Artemis said, looking genuinely baffled. “I didn’t do anything. I was just trying to scare him, you know. I wasn’t trying to—you know—*do* anything to him.”

“Well, what happened?” I demanded.

She shook her head. “I have no idea. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“Great! That’s just great!” I looked back at Alex. “Alex! Can you hear me? Nod if you can hear me!”

“He can hear you, Cali,” Artemis said, rolling her eyes. “He just can’t talk.”

Alex opened and closed his mouth, trying to speak, but no sound came out.

“Is he just scared?” I wondered aloud. “Did you just scare him so much that he’s literally lost his voice?”

“*Me?*” Artemis demanded, sounding offended. “I wasn’t the only one, Cali. You weren’t exactly trying to comfort him, were you? You were talking about erasing his memory.”

“Shut up, Artemis,” I hissed. She was right, but I didn’t want to think about it right now. “Is that even possible? To scare someone that badly?”

Alex kept trying to speak, but no sound escaped him. His eyes grew large and he started to breathe hard. He was starting to panic. His face turned red, then went pale, so he ended up looking mottled, which was even more frightening.

“Hey,” I said, in my most soothing voice. “Hey, Alex, calm down.” I walked toward him, but he scuttled away, clearly afraid of me. I swallowed hard. “Don’t panic, okay? We’re going to figure this out. This is not a big deal. We can figure this out.”

But internally, I wasn’t so sure. What the hell had happened? What had Artemis done to him? Or was she right? Was it something *I* had done?

“Maybe he’s faking again,” Artemis said, eyeing Alex warily. She took a threatening step toward him. “Maybe if step on his foot really hard, or punch him in the stomach, he’ll scream.”

Alex’s eyes went even wider and he stumbled backward, shaking his head, but still he made no noise.

“Stop it, Artemis,” I said sharply. “We’re not hurting him. We need to help him.”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “And how do you suggest we do that?”

I had no idea, but I wasn’t going to say so in front of Alex. “Maybe we should ask my mom. She might know what to do.”

Artemis thought about this for a moment, then turned and grabbed Alex by the shoulders. “Speak!” she shouted into his face.

He opened and closed his mouth, like a fish who’d been pulled out of the water, but made no sound.

Artemis was losing her temper. She shook his shoulders again. “Say something, Alex! Say something!”

I stepped forward, reaching out a hand to stop her. She was stronger than she knew, and I was worried she was going to hurt Alex. But, before I could stop her, Alex took a deep breath.

“Something! Something! Something!” he shouted.

Artemis let him go and he collapsed onto the grass.

“See,” she said in a satisfied voice. “I told you he was faking it.”

I looked down at Alex, who was in a jumbled heap on the ground, wheezing, muttering, “*Something, something, something*,” over and over.

“Hang on,” I said, crouching down next to him.

“Alex?” I said.

He looked up at me, his eyes wild. “Something?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I snapped. “Can you say anything else?”

“*Anything else, anything else, anything else*.”

“Oh my god.” I looked up at Artemis. “Look what you’ve done!”

Artemis looked down at Alex, her expression deeply disturbed. “He’s freaking me out. Make him stop!”

Suddenly, Alex went quiet, like someone had put him on mute.

“This is great!” I snapped, standing and pacing the yard. “You’ve turned him into a fucking parrot, Artemis.”

“Well, I didn’t mean to,” Artemis said, managing to look offended.

“This is not good,” I muttered, shaking my head. “He repeats what he’s told—” I looked up, suddenly wary. “Is this the mind control thing? Like your father could do? Can you do it, too?”

“I don’t know,” she said, looking suddenly uncomfortable. “I guess it could be.”

“Well, whatever it is, undo it!” I hissed.

“I don’t know *how!*” Artemis fired back. “I don’t even know what I did to make it happen!”

Alex stood and waved at us, getting our attention. He pointed to his mouth, which was silent again, though his eyes were speaking volumes. He looked terrified.

I grabbed his hand. “We’re going back to my house, Alex. We need to talk to my mom. It’s going to be okay. She’ll know what to do.”

As we walked back to my house, I kept shooting Artemis sideways looks. I was thinking about what my mom had said, about her father. About how he’d had the power to control the minds of others. And how the power was very daunting, but knowing it was a dangerous power, he had always been very careful. Artemis was a lot of things, but *careful* wasn’t one of them. My stomach twisted at the thought. What if Alex was permanently damaged?

We passed Mrs. Mueller’s and Mr. and Mrs. Gunderson’s houses, and I waved, smiling, trying to look normal. Like we were just three normal people out for a very normal walk. I was desperately hoping none of them had seen or heard anything that had happened during our little altercation with Alex. The white van I’d noticed earlier was gone, so that was one load off my mind, at least.

My mom was in the back yard when we got back to the house. She was on her knees in front of a flower bed, her gardening hat pulled low over her face, blocking the autumn sun. When she looked up at our approach, I saw she had dirt smudged across her nose. “Oh, hello, Alex,” she said with a friendly smile. “It’s nice to see you.”

Alex gave her more of a grimace than a smile and my mom looked over at me, a flower bulb in her hand.

“What’s going on? What did you do to him this time?”

“*I* didn’t do anything,” I said quickly. “Artemis told Alex not to say anything and then he couldn’t speak. And then she told him to say something, and then that was the only word he could say. Watch. Tell him to say something, Artemis.”

“Say potato, Alex,” Artemis directed.

“*Potato!*” Alex screamed, terrified. “*Potato! Potato!*” He screamed it like he was trying to call for the vegetable police.

“Make him stop,” I told her.

“Stop, Alex,” Artemis said, casually, and Alex stopped mid-word—almost like he’d choked.

My mom turned to Artemis, her eyes wide. “Well, it appears you did inherit your father’s mind control power after all.”

“So what does that mean?” I asked desperately. “For Alex?”

“It means she needs to be the one to break the spell,” my mom said.

“How am I supposed to do that?” Artemis asked, flummoxed. “I didn’t even know I could do this. I have no idea how to break it.”

“Well, you must have tried to use it,” my mom said reasonably. “Just try to undo it.”

“How does that work?” I asked curiously. I was deeply interested in any information on Fae powers.

“It varies,” Mom admitted. “Depending on the power.”

“I can’t just undo it,” Artemis said, looking hard at Alex. “I mean, I get that this parrot thing isn’t ideal for him, but if I undo the spell, he’ll just tell everyone about all the stuff he’s not supposed to and then we’re right back to where we started.”

“Hmm,” Mom said, looking thoughtful. She stood up and brushed dirt off her jeans. “Have you tried being more specific about what he can’t say?”

“No,” Artemis admitted. “I guess that might work.” She strode over to Alex and took him by the shoulders. He cringed and looked up fearfully into her face. “Okay, listen up, Alex. You can talk about anything you want—except for werewolves, ghosts, and Fae. And magic of any kind. Okay?”

Alex nodded quickly and she let him go. He stumbled back a few steps and we all stared at him nervously.

“Alex?” I asked cautiously.

He held up his hands. “I swear I won’t talk about—” He choked and coughed for a moment. He took a deep breath. “You know, those things you don’t want me to talk about.”

“It worked!” I gasped. I was so happy I ran to Alex and threw my arms around his neck, hugging him tight. “You’ve got your voice back! I’m so sorry about everything!”

When I turned back around to congratulate Artemis on a job well done, she was standing there, looking dumbstruck.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She looked stunned. “It worked. I can’t believe it worked.” She turned to my mom. “I can do it! I can control minds!” She turned Alex, who shrank back. “I wonder how else this can work…”

As she rushed toward him to sweep him into a hug, my mom grabbed my arm. “Cali, we need to help Artemis hide this power at all costs,” she said urgently.

“What?” I asked, surprised.

“I’m certain this power is the reason Kadmos was killed.” Her face was grave and pale. “If we don’t hide this power, I’m afraid the Fae war could spill over into our world.”

**Episode 703**

VIOLET

Try as I might, I couldn’t stop looking at my phone. I had texted Charlie, inviting him to meet me at Mrs. Smith’s cafe for a coffee, and I was waiting for his reply. I felt desperate as hell, just staring at my blank screen, but I couldn’t help it.

With a sigh, I rolled over on my bed and stared up at the ceiling. I kept thinking about what Lola has said about fate. About how sometimes, it needed a kick in the ass. I liked that attitude. It felt badass and proactive. She thought I should take matters into my own hands. I knew Jay was more of a fate-traditionalist. An “if it’s meant to be, it’ll be” kind of guy. And I liked that, too. That was romantic, and the way fate was supposed to work.

At least, the way I’d always imagined it was supposed to work.

Who was right?

Charlie and I were destined… weren’t we? I *thought* we were. It *felt* like we were. I knew Charlie was my mate—I could *feel* it—even if he didn’t exactly realize it just yet.

And, if Jay was right, then it was just a matter of time.

But… how much time? I sat up and sat cross-legged on my bed. A few days? A week? A year? A few years? I mean, I wouldn’t mind waiting a little, but if Lola was right, then was I making a mistake by not doing anything? By not urging Charlie to leave Sandi?

My face scrunched up at the thought. Even if I was willing to do something to try to get him to break up with her, what in the world would it be? I’d never had a boyfriend. I’d never broken up with anyone, or had anyone break up with me. How could I plot to get Charlie to leave Sandi?

Besides, I thought, flopping back onto my pillows again, it was much more romantic to think of Charlie *choosing* to leave Sandi. Of him choosing me over her, instead of me plotting to get rid of her. It was more like *Romeo and Juliet*—but with a less tragic ending.

Ideally.

I looked at my phone screen again. Still no notifications. Unbidden, I thought back to Jay’s deeply unnerved expression when I’d told him about Charlie being bitten by the werewolf. *The last time something like that happened, it was at the beginning of the pack war*. I shivered at the thought.

But that just didn’t make any sense. No matter how I looked at it, it didn’t make any sense. Charlie had been a human up until a month ago. He had no allegiance to any packs, or to anyone like Silas. How in the world could he possibly be connected to anyone so dark? Besides, how could someone as sweet as Charlie have anything to do with the pack wars? And how would him being turned into a werewolf help *Silas?*

I was so deep in thought that the ping of my phone made me jump and I fumbled for it, knocking it off the bed. I lunged for it, practically falling off the bed in my haste to read the message. With a soaring heart, I saw that it was from Charlie.

*I’d love to meet you at Mrs. Smith’s. 20 min?*

I read the message three times, just to make sure I’d understood it, then I leapt into action. I tugged all my clothes off and started fresh. I tried a dress, then threw that to the ground. I didn’t want to look like I was trying too hard. I tried a pair of leather pants I’d never worn but packed just in case. I looked cool as hell and not a bit like myself, so I pulled those off, too. I finally settled on a pair of skinny jeans that hugged my ass and a blue sweater that fell off one shoulder in what I hoped was a flirty way. I flipped my brown hair around, trying to make it look sort of *accidentally* gorgeous, then headed downstairs.

I’d promised to give Jay a heads-up if I was going out, so I did exactly that.

“Hey, Jay,” I said, sticking my head into the kitchen where he was sitting at the table looking at his phone. “I’m heading out. See you later.” Then I sprinted away before he had a chance to stop me.

It wasn’t far, so I walked to the cafe, hurrying, excited at the prospect of seeing Charlie. We had so much to talk about. And I really loved Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mochas—and was in a serious withdrawal—so I was looking forward to that, too. As I rounded the corner and the cafe came into view, I forced myself to slow down. I took a deep breath. I needed to relax and stay calm. I needed to be chill. I did not want to scare him off before things even really got started for us.

I stopped at the door and, giving my hair one final tousle, pushed it open. My eyes went right to Charlie. He was sitting at a small table by himself. He was wearing a tan sweater and his shock of black hair fell into his golden eyes. I knew it couldn’t actually be the case, but it felt like he was sitting under a spotlight. Everything else in the cafe paled next to him. He looked just as good dressed as he did naked.

That last thought just popped into my head, and heat rushed to my face. I glanced around the cafe. I didn’t think I was imagining the furtive looks that were being cast his way. The cozy cafe was filled with college students, and there were a lot of admiring glances being thrown at Charlie. I smiled to myself, wondering if his little fan club was going to be jealous when they saw me sitting next to him. I would’ve been.

I had just stepped forward, toward the empty seat next to Charlie, when I saw someone approaching him from the counter. I stopped, staring, as I watched Sandi walk toward him, carrying two cups in her hands. She set them carefully on the table and settled herself into the empty chair next to Charlie.

My instinct was to turn around and run. I still could—he hadn’t seen me. I hadn’t even told Jay where I was going. No one needed to know about this.

But, before I could even finish this thought, Charlie looked up and caught my eye. “Violet!” he said, smiling. “Over here!” he called, waving me over.

The smile on my face felt like a grimace, but I kept it there. “Are you using this chair?” I asked the girl at the table next to Charlie’s. When she shook her head, I dragged the chair over. It made an angry, scraping noise on the tile floor, and I flinched. This was a nightmare. How could I talk to Charlie about anything werewolf-related with Sandi sitting next to us? And *why* was Sandi here, anyway?

I looked up, ready to glare at her, but she was already looking at me, her expression apologetic. “I’m sorry, I didn’t get you anything. I wanted to, but I didn’t know what you’d want.”

Her earlier silliness was gone, and her explanation seemed genuine. Dammit. She was nice. I hadn’t been expecting that. From a distance she’d seemed vapid, and I’d been comfortable with that. It gave me just enough of a reason to hate her. But now I saw that her smile was friendly. *Double dammit*. I didn’t want to like her, but I couldn’t justify hating her just because she was with Charlie.

“It’s fine,” I lied. “I didn’t want anything.”

“The white chocolate mocha is heavenly,” she said. “You should try one.”

The smell wafting up from her cup made my mouth water, but I shook my head. “I’m okay, thanks.” The truth was that I didn’t want to leave her alone with Charlie, even if it was only for the amount of time it would take me to order a drink.

Sandi shrugged, accepting my explanation, and took a sip of her mocha. She looked down as her phone began to ring. “Oh, it’s my mom,” she said quietly. She glanced at Charlie. “I’d better take this, sorry. Hey, Mom.”

Charlie looked over and gave me a wan smile. I returned it half-heartedly. I wondered if I could still leave.

“No, I’m not going to be there. Monica said I didn’t have to come because they’re not practicing my sequence.” She paused, her face pinched with frustration. “No, I don’t think I should just go anyway.” She looked at Charlie. “I’m going to take this outside,” she whispered, and slid out of her seat.

I watched her walk out of the cafe and, as soon as the door shut behind her, felt Charlie move his chair so it was closer to mine. I looked over, surprised.

His face was close to mine, his golden eyes intent on me. “So, Violet,” he said in a low voice. “What do you know about mates?”

**Episode 704**

“This is incredible,” Artemis said, staring with fascination at the television screen.

“I’m glad you like it,” my dad said, sounding amused.

“This is one of Tom’s favorite shows,” my mom told her, smiling.

Artemis shook her head. “So, they go through this obstacle course just for fun?”

“Not just for fun,” my dad said quickly. “For pride. And to win money.”

“They win *money?*” Artemis asked, her eyes going wide. She watched in fascination as a contestant in a bright red spandex launched himself from a raised platform, reaching desperately for a slender pole… and missed. The contestant in red splashed down into a pool of water and the crowd groaned in disappointment. “This is amazing. I could do this. This is far easier than some of the things I encountered in the Fae world,” she murmured, looking at the complicated obstacle course. “But what are those huge balls?”

I stifled a giggle and my mom shot me a warning look.

But Artemis hadn’t noticed. “How do I get to compete in this giant ball test?”

My dad looked slightly interested in the possibility that he might have a ninja warrior prodigy in his home, but my mom just smiled and sighed and settled back on the couch. She turned to me. “Thank you, Cali,” she said in a low voice.

“For what?” I asked.

“I know this has all been a lot for you, but I know you’ve made it easier for Artemis to adjust to the human world. Thank you,” she said, giving me another smile. She glanced at Artemis, who was looking avidly at the television. “It looks like she’s doing okay.”

“Um…” I rubbed my tired eyes. “You’re welcome. Yeah, she’s doing… okay. I’m just glad she was able to figure out the Alex problem without causing even more trouble.”

“Yes, that was a relief,” Mom said, with another sigh. “I’m glad we got that taken care of. Alex is feeling better?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I said. “But you should know that it wasn’t exactly all for the greater good with her.”

“What do you mean?” Mom asked, frowning.

I glanced over at Artemis to make sure she wasn’t listening. “She was just kind of messing with Alex—toying with him. Trying to see how much control she could exert over him. It was a little disturbing.”

My mom looked over at Artemis, who erupted into cheers as a contestant beat the obstacle course and pressed the buzzer at the top of the tower. “I can see how it might have been disturbing. But you must understand, when a Fae discovers a new power, there is always a period of exploration. You have to test the limits, so you can come to master them. That’s only natural. But…” She looked back at me. “We have to make sure she doesn’t use her mind control powers again.”

“Why not?” I asked curiously. “I mean, I don’t love it, but they did get us out of a jam today.”

But my mom shook her head. “The very existence of these powers will draw the attention of the Fae world. I worry that allowing her to use them would only invite trouble. We have to protect Artemis, Cali.”

“But what about *my* magic?” I said after a moment. My mom looked at me. “I’m still exploring my own power, just like you said. Testing the limits.”

“You’re right,” she said. “What are the powers you have demonstrated so far?”

“I can kind of manipulate energy. It hasn’t been very focused yet, but it’s been strong. Maybe erasing memory? It’s only happened once, though. Do you think it could happen again?” I asked.

My mom gave her shoulders a delicate shrug. “It’s hard to say, sweetheart, I really don’t know. I’ve only ever had one power—to make things grow.” She smiled. “And I’m perfectly happy with it. That said, powers can fluctuate as they develop. You are half-human and your magic has showed up late, so I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s finding itself.”

“Maybe I should be training. Practicing. So I can learn how to use my powers and find out what exactly they are. At this point they just sort of randomly show up.”

“That’s a good idea. But I want you to be careful—especially if you do have a memory ability. If you truly have the power to erase or modify memory, that could be very messy if things go wrong.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I can see that.” And after the shitshow with Alex this afternoon, I was a little gun-shy about trying any of my Fae powers.

“Well,” my mom said, yawning, “I’ll be happy to help you, but I’m going to call it a night. I have a romance app on my phone and I’m in the middle of a series about these two boxers who start out hating each other.” She giggled. “But you’ll never guess—”

“Do they end up falling in love?” I ventured.

Her eyes went big. “How did you know?”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. “Good night, Mom.” I watched her walk to her room and, feeling a sudden wave of tiredness, stood to the do the same. “Goodnight,” I said, but Dad and Artemis barely looked up.

In my room, I shut my door and walked to stand in front of my mirror. I was hesitant to practice using my powers on anyone else, but maybe I could practice on myself. Not the memory power, of course, but maybe I could use the energy power to get myself ready for bed.

I shrugged at myself in the mirror. It seemed absurd. Impossible. But I was starting to realize that when it came to Fae, nothing was really impossible. And what had my mom called it? Testing limits? There was only one way to find out.

I took a deep breath and met my eyes in the mirror. I looked down and concentrated on my shirt. I was going to make it rise off my body. Manipulate the energy around me. I focused my mind so I was thinking of nothing but my grey T-shirt. When I felt the air begin to stir around me, my heart leapt. *I was doing it!* The room seemed to vibrate, as though there was a brief, sharp earthquake, and then, like a punch in the stomach with a fist the size of a tree trunk, I was blasted backward, onto my bed.

I was lying there, gasping for air, trying to blink the stars from my vision when I heard it.

*Cali*.

I looked up. It was Greyson’s voice. The sound wasn’t in the room, it was in my mind. Was he mind linking with me? How was that possible? He was in Oregon… wasn’t he?

My heart sped up. Was he here? In my room?

And then, as if in answer to my question, there he was, at the foot of my bed. The room was empty one moment, then I blinked, and there he was. Shirtless.

My eyes ranged over the architecture of the muscles of his chest and my breath hitched in my throat. “Greyson. How are you here? Is this real?”

His eyes were so focused on me, I felt paralyzed beneath their intensity. He knelt on the bed and moved toward me, crawling so he covered me, his body hovering over mine. “So,” he breathed. “You’ve been trying not to think about me.”

Every drop of blood in my body rerouted. Half rushed to my cheeks, staining them red, and the other half traveled further south, pooling below my stomach. I didn’t answer. I licked my lips, which had gone suddenly dry.

Greyson’s eyes followed the movement of my tongue. “And how’s that going?”

He knew the answer to that question. I could see it in his satisfied smirk. So I reached for him without a word, drawing him down on top of me, and crushed his mouth against mine. The weight of his body pressed me into my mattress, and the pressure was delicious.

I was mad with desire—I hadn’t realized just how much I’d missed him—and my hands traced up his back, feeling the softness of his skin beneath my fingers. I could feel his hard, muscled body against mine, and I knew that this was wrong. That this wasn’t going to solve anything. That this was only going to make things more convoluted and confusing, would only make any decision I had to make that much more complicated, but—in that moment—I didn’t give a fuck.

I *wanted* Greyson. I’d missed him so much that it took my breath away, and now he was here, with me, on top of me, kissing me, holding me, feeling me…

“Greyson,” I panted, arching up, pressing against him. “Greyson.”

Why wasn’t he answering?

“Greyson?” I opened my eyes.

He was gone. I was alone in the room. I put my hands on my cheeks, which were flaming hot. I looked around in confusion. No, he wasn’t gone. He’d never been here. He was in Oregon. I must have been dreaming.

But there was something else. Something was… wrong. What was it? I wrapped my arms around myself as a chill ran down the length of my spine. I was still looking around, like I expected him to reappear at any moment, and I caught sight of my face in the mirror over my desk. The sight of my flushed face jogged something in my brain, and I managed to put words to the shivery feeling on my skin.

It was my connection with Greyson—the bond I’d felt for so long. Something had changed.

**Episode 705**

XAVIER

I paced the room, trying to breathe deeply, but my heart was still racing. I just couldn’t calm down. I knew I’d been too hard on the others during our training session. Rishika had had to tell me to ease up. More than once.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she’d finally asked, after the fifth time. “What’s going on with you, Xavier? Why are you beating the shit out of my guys? You know we’re all on the same team, right?”

“I’ve… got a hangnail,” I’d mumbled.

She’d stared at me, flabbergasted. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“My hand is bleeding. I need to go take care of it.” And I’d wiped the sweat from my face and gotten the hell out of there. It was a bullshit excuse, but I didn’t have the energy for anything else.

I could still hear the pack downstairs on the wide lawn. Rishika was leading them through some training exercises. She was a good fighter, but she wasn’t pushing them hard enough. She was cool and had seemed genuinely concerned with what was going on with me, but there was no way I was going to drag her—or anyone else—into my messy drama with Cali.

Because *that* was what was going on with me. *That* was why I was beating the shit out of everyone who crossed my path. That was why my heart wouldn’t stop racing, whether I was running or fighting or just sitting still. Because I’d asked Cali to choose—me or Greyson—and she’d refused to answer me.

My hands balled into fists and I could feel my fingernails digging into my skin. I was just so fucking sick of all this up-and-down, hot-and-cold bullshit. Cali was *my* mate. Why wouldn’t she just accept that? We’d both needed distance, and we’d both gotten it, but enough was enough. I wanted her. Every bone in my body longed for her. And I knew she felt the same way—I could feel it whenever I touched her, whenever she kissed me.

Maybe I was being too possessive and letting my Alpha blood get the best of me. I huffed out an angry breath. I was fucking trying to ease up on that, but she wasn’t making it easier.

“Damn her,” I muttered, into the darkness of my room. Downstairs, I could hear the rest of the pack finishing up their training for the night and straggling inside, laughing and calling to each other. I felt so apart from the rest of them, it was like they were speaking a different language.

I paused at my desk and checked my phone, but there were no notifications. I’d even tried to do the adult thing and talk to someone about my feelings. I’d called and texted Jay—he seemed like the most obvious choice as the most sensitive guy I knew—but he hadn’t responded. Lola had to be keeping him pretty busy. I tapped my fingers on my dresser, thinking. I hated to bother Colton—I hadn’t heard from him since he’d told me he was going to be a father, and that prospect had to be a fucking daunting one. Not to mention the fact that Colton wasn’t exactly the best at giving advice when it came to feelings or relationships or anything that didn’t involve video game strategy. But I thought about it for a moment. He was my brother, and I could always count on him to give it to me straight. That was something I could use right now.

And on top of all that, I just missed the guy. It sucked not having him around.

Decided, I picked up my phone and dialed his number. I’d been expecting it to go to voicemail, so I was surprised when he answered.

“Hey, bro,” he said, sounding happy to hear from me.

“Hey, Colton, what’s up, man?” I looked around my dark room. “I was just wondering how you were doing.”

Colton laughed. “Yeah right. Since when do you call to check in on me, Xavier? What’s going on?”

“Well—”

“No, wait, let me guess,” Colton said. “Starts with a *C* and ends with an *ali*.”

I rolled my eyes. Calling Colton might have been a mistake. “Yeah, maybe,” I said reluctantly.

He laughed again. “All right, out with it. What happened this time? Did she attack someone with a fork or something? Try to chainsaw her way into the pack again? Or is this about matters of the heart?” He asked the last part of the question in a soft, simpering voice.

“Fuck off, man,” I snapped, ready to hang up.

“Wait, wait, let me guess,” he asked, still chuckling. “Is she still sending mixed signals?”

“*Yes*,” I said, relieved that I wasn’t going to have to explain it. Colton knew Cali. He knew what I was asking about.

“I fucking knew it,” he said. “I should go on *Jeopardy*.”

“She came back from Minnesota. I didn’t ask her to come back. I was going to, but she came back before I could. I didn’t even call her. She said she did it because she missed me. Which I thought was great. But now she’s all over the place. Honestly, Colton, I have no idea what that girl wants.”

Colton was quiet for a moment. “Have you boned since she got back?”

“Oh my god,” I groaned. “Just when I think you’re an actual human being, man, you prove otherwise.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so,” Colton said in a businesslike way. “Listen, Xavier, for what it’s worth, I go through some shit like this pretty much every day.”

“Yeah?” I asked, interested. “And what do you do about it?”

“You deal!” he yelled. “But you need to give a little, too. Quit being such a fucking hardass about everything. Let your wolf down a little. A *little!* Don’t give in too much. And take charge of the situation before Greyson does. You’re an Evers, man. Act like one!”

I thought about this for a moment. It all seemed pretty contradictory and I wasn’t sure how to do any of these things without royally pissing Cali off. But before I could answer, Colton spoke again.

“Listen, I gotta bounce. Let me know how all this shit turns out, man. I’ll tell Maya you say hi. Miss ya, boo.”

Shaking my head, I tossed my phone onto my bed. Colton was such a dick. I mean, he was my brother and I loved him, but he was a dick. Still, he meant well.

With a sigh, I threw myself onto the wide bed after my phone. It was late—the sky outside my window was velvet black. The wind had pushed the clouds away and the yellow moon was hung in the sky, perfectly framed in my window. It was late. I should try to go to sleep. But even as I dropped my head onto my pillows, I knew I wouldn’t.

My brain was racing, still turning things over, rearranging them, looking for patterns. Cali, Silas, Ava’s wolf. The bloodbath on Halloween, the orb. Mrs. Smith was Greyson’s mother. There was so much happening, it was going to take more than me closing my eyes to get my brain to shut down.

I turned over, still looking out the window, and thought about Silas’s appearance. Of all the things that had been happening, that one was pretty fucking disturbing. How had he managed that? Everyone had been on edge since then, me included.

Sleep wasn’t going to come, so I stepped out of bed. As long as I was up, I might as well do something useful. I headed downstairs to check the perimeter of the pack house. It needed to be done, and it would keep my mind occupied. Away from circling, endless thoughts of Cali, anyway.

The night air was crisp as I stepped outside, and I took a deep breath of the sharp pine smell. I looked around at the moonlit night. Everything *looked* quiet, but I’d been around long enough to know that nights like these could be deceiving. I headed down to the road. I’d start there and work my way around. The night was silent around me as I jogged. I quieted my mind and tuned in to the world around me, smelling, listening, feeling.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. There was something. Something unexpected… but oddly familiar. What was it? I lifted my nose as the wind blew from the east. Whatever it was was coming from that direction—from the woods, down by the lake—and I turned and sprinted toward it. My heart was beating hard—not from the run, but from the thrill of terror of what awaited me. I had almost reached the lake when I saw it. The moonlight was bright enough to cast shadows, so the instant she moved from the cover of the trees, I saw her. Ava’s wolf.

Without another thought—or even breaking stride—I shifted and, dropping to four paws, sprinted toward her to attack.

**Episode 706**

AVA

Xavier was so quiet, I never even heard him coming until the second before he slammed into me. I closed my eyes as we both crashed to the ground, allowing myself just a moment to experience the weight of his wolf over me before I reared up and managed to throw him off.

He hit the ground, but sprang back up like he had springs attached to him and came charging back at me. His fury was nearly palpable in the air around us, as was his confusion, his fear. He charged hard, knocking me back, and I let out a whimper as I landed on my back. He snapped his jaws down, but I wriggled out of the way, freeing myself. He snarled and paced back, looking for a point of attack.

He had warned me that he’d kill me if he ever saw me here again. Maybe I should have taken that warning more seriously. But the moon had been so beautiful out the window, and I’d missed my wolf so much, I hadn’t even thought of him when I’d come outside for a run.

Xavier charged again, his teeth bared, but I dodged and came around, gripping onto the back of his neck with my teeth. He shook me off, but I could taste his blood in my mouth and I’d heard his whine of pain. We were fighting for control. He was strong, but at least this time I had a fighting chance. That last time, I’d had no chance at all. I’d been so shocked, so betrayed. I hadn’t even fought back. I hadn’t been able to make my mind believe what was happening.

But this time was different.

Xavier jumped on me, pinning me to the ground, but I kicked with my powerful back legs and managed to throw him off. I was breathing hard, my heart was racing, and I darted a look around. I couldn’t keep this up for much longer. I had to get away from him. The only escape was through the woods, so I’d have to run for it, but I wasn’t sure I could lose him. He knew these woods better than I did, and I didn’t know if I’d be able to outrun him.

The pause I took to think about this cost me—Xavier, taking advantage of my loss of concentration, lunged at me, sinking his teeth into me, tearing at my side. The pain was excruciating, and I howled in agony. My heart raced. This was what had happened last time—he’d caught me off-guard. I was starting to panic. It was all happening again. I stumbled back, trying to get away from him. My back legs splashed into the lake. I was at the water’s edge. Xavier advanced on me, snarling.

I took a deep breath, suppressing the fear that threatened to overwhelm me. This was *not* like the last time, I reminded myself. If I was going down, it wasn’t going to be without a fight. It wasn’t going to be because I had given up. I dug my paws into the rocky ground at the lake’s edge, preparing to lunge, but before I could move, another wolf appeared from the woods. It barreled right into Xavier, knocking him down.

Nolan’s wolf shot past Xavier’s prone form and circled back, coming to stand protectively in front of me.

I turned my attention to Xavier and watched as he got to his feet, his eyes darting back and forth. He was doing the math—weighing his chances. Xavier was strong, but he knew that Nolan was, too. And with me on Nolan’s side, he must have known that he’d be outmatched. With a threatening snarl, Xavier shifted to his human form.

Nolan shifted as well and moved to stand between Xavier and me. I stayed in my wolf form, of course, but I watched them both carefully.

Nolan turned to me. “I warned you not to come here. You must leave Xavier Evers alone.”

I stared at Nolan, confused. What the hell was he talking about? Why was he doing this?

“If both of you don’t leave right this minute,” Xavier growled, still sounding like the wolf he’d just been, “I’m going to kill you both.”

Nolan looked at him for a moment, then motioned for me to follow as he walked into the woods. I could feel Xavier’s gaze on us as we walked slowly into the trees. The darkness covered us quickly, and, when he could no longer see us, he turned and walked back toward the pack house.

As soon as he was gone, I shifted back, hissing as I put my hand to my side, which was bloody and hurt like hell.

“That was close,” Nolan said, still looking up at the empty lawn in front of the pack house. “Too close. What did you do to piss him off?”

I pulled my hand away from my side and looked at the sticky red blood slicked across it. “What are you doing here?” I asked, looking up at him.

Nolan looked down. “I wanted to check on you. You weren’t answering my calls. I wanted to make sure you were okay.” He gave me a sad smile. “I don’t want to lose you twice, Ava.”

It was so good to hear my own name that I closed my eyes, listening to the sound of it in my head.

“Anyway,” he said briskly, “from the looks of things, it’s a good thing I did come. He looked pretty pissed off.”

“So you told him that you’d warned me not to come here?” I asked, still rattled.

Nolan grinned, looking proud of himself. “Pretty good, huh? I thought of it on the spot.”

“What the hell?” I asked, still baffled.

“What?” Nolan said, looking confused at my reaction. “It worked. Xavier bought it, didn’t he? You’re alive.” He frowned. “So what were you doing out here, anyway?”

I sighed and shifted my position, a sharp spear of pain shooting through me. “I just wanted to get away for a few minutes. Obviously, I wasn’t expecting to run into Xavier.”

“How are things going?” he asked. “Xavier’s not getting suspicious of Cali, is he?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t think so.”

Nolan nodded. “I should go, then,” he said, but he made no move to shift or leave.

“Is there anything else?” I asked.

Nolan looked at me, but it was dark in the shadow of the trees and I couldn’t see the expression in his eyes. “You’re not having second thoughts, are you? About the plan?”

I opened my mouth to deny any second thoughts, but I hesitated, thinking for a moment. When he’d attacked me, Xavier hadn’t just been trying to scare me off, he’d really wanted to kill me. And he might have, if Nolan hadn’t shown up. The truth was, I *had* been having second thoughts—thinking about the past, wondering what could be—but those were gone. I didn’t have the scars on my neck, not in this body, but the wound in my side was a sharp reminder of what Xavier Evers was capable of. And my second thoughts were no longer an issue.

“No,” I said firmly. “No second thoughts.”

“Good,” Nolan said, sounding relieved.

“But you need to stop breathing down my neck,” I added. “I’m here. I’m reading the situation. I’ll take care of Xavier when the moment is right. And when I’m ready.”

Nolan nodded, clearly pleased. His eyes flickered down to the blood on my side, which was starting to drip onto the carpet of leaves. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said tightly.

“I’m sorry he hurt you. I heard you two fighting and I ran as fast as I could. You’re sure you’re okay?”

I nodded.

“Okay, I’m going to go. You take care of yourself,” Nolan said with a smile, then he shifted and ran into the trees, disappearing into the night.

I sighed and looked down at my side. The wound hurt, but it would heal quickly enough. But it would need to be cleaned. I couldn’t have the smell of blood trailing me into a house filled with werewolves. I got painfully to my feet and headed toward the lake. I crouched at the side and splashed water onto my ribs, trying to be gentle as I scrubbed the already drying blood away.

The night was strangely balmy for October and I was still hot from the fight, so, after a moment, I slipped into the lake. The water closed around me and I pushed off from the weedy bank, gliding smoothly across the black surface. The moon shone across the water and I ducked my head under, feeling my heartrate finally starting to slow. I closed my eyes and let myself float to the surface, feeling the moonlight on my body. I had always been able to feel the moonshine as strongly as sun’s rays, and I felt the wound beginning to heal.

It felt good to be outside, alone, in the lake, but I knew Cali was closely watched, so it was time to head back to the pack house. I stepped out of the water, wrung out my hair, and started up the lawn toward the back porch. I’d come down with clothes but had lost them when I’d shifted, so I was walking naked when I glanced up at the house.

There, in an upstairs window, was the outline of a person. The light was on in the room so I couldn’t make out who it was, only a black outline, but they seemed to be looking right at me.

I stopped, looking up, my whole body going suddenly cold. Who was it, and how much had they seen?

**Episode 707**

I knew it had just been a dream—that Greyson wasn’t anywhere near Minnesota—but I also knew I couldn’t shake the weird, ominous feelings the dream had left me with. It was like I was wearing a heavy weight on my shoulders and couldn’t shrug it off. I brushed my teeth and washed my face and—giving up on trying to use my Fae powers to do it—just changed into my pajamas the regular way. Then I turned off the light and lay down in bed, staring up at the dark ceiling with my eyes wide open.

Something was wrong. I could feel it. But what could it possibly be?

I flipped over in my bed, spinning like an eggbeater, wrapping the blankets around myself so tightly that I had to kick myself loose.

“Dammit,” I breathed, sitting up in the dark. This was no good. I needed to talk to someone about this. I thought about my options. I couldn’t talk to my mom. I loved her, but we’d never had a *talk about boy trouble* kind of relationship. There was Artemis, of course. She did know Greyson. Then I thought about how they had—apparently—*spent some time together* after Xavier and I had left them on the Oregon coast, and my jaw tightened with anger.

So that was a *no* on talking to Artemis about this.

Which left only one person who could possibly understand: Lola.

When I grabbed my phone, I flinched when I looked at the time. It was later than I’d thought, but I texted anyway.

*I know it’s late, but can you meet?*

I sent the text, not sure if she was even awake, but the response came back right away.

*sure. treehouse in ten?*

I smiled. The treehouse. My secret hideout. Where Lola and I used to play as kids, long before I’d ever even heard of werewolves.

*Treehouse. See you there.*

I slipped out of bed and pulled on a pair of jeans in the dark. I didn’t want to risk turning on the light. I didn’t want to risk waking my parents—or Artemis. I wasn’t worried she’d rat me out, but she was so hungry for human experiences, if she saw me leaving, she’d want to come along. I tiptoed over to the window and looked down. There was an ancient trellis outside the window. I could try to climb down. I’d done it a few times in high school, though the last time I’d tried it a piece of wood had splintered and I’d had to cling on for dear life like a character in an action movie. I’d barely made it back through my window. I turned back toward the door. It would probably be better if I just used the back door.

Quiet as a shadow, I slipped down the carpeted hallway. As I passed my parents’ room, I could hear my dad’s snores. I shook my head, wondering—as I always did—how in the world my mom slept through all that noise. Maybe that was one of her hidden Fae powers—the ability to block out snoring.

As I went down the stairs I hugged the wall and skipped the second to last step, which creaked. I crept into the kitchen and grabbed a candle and a box of matches out of a drawer, and, on impulse, a bag of cheesy puffs. They were an old treehouse favorite, and I knew they’d make Lola smile.

I headed out the back door, sliding the glass door soundlessly shut behind me, and sprinted to the treehouse in the far corner of the back yard. Once I was under it, I looked up. It had been a while since I’d really looked at it, and I was surprised at how small and shabby it seemed. As a kid it had loomed so large and majestic. Even in the moonlight I could see it could use a coat of paint. I walked around the base of the tall elm, examining the house.

My dad had built it the summer I’d turned nine, in the throes of my princess phase. I’d needed a tower, and my dad had come through. I grinned and climbed the ladder. I lit the candle and set it in the middle of the floor, then spread the blanket I found stashed in the corner. It was a little cold and a tiny bit damp, but it looked clean enough on the cramped floor of the treehouse.

The candle shivered a little and I knew Lola was climbing the ladder. I looked over as her face appeared at the entrance.

“Hey, Princess Cali.”

“Princess Lola,” I said, bowing my head in mock reverence.

She pulled herself onto the little platform and we giggled. “This is so much fun. It’s been years since I was up here.”

“I know,” I said, looking around at the posters of One Direction we’d tacked up on the walls. “I’m glad you suggested it. It’s like old times. Look!” I said, pulling out the cheesy puffs.

Lola laughed and dived for them, ripping the bag open. “Thank god,” she said, shoving a handful into her mouth. “Okay, so what’s going on, girl? I’m pretty sure you didn’t text me in the middle of the night just for a walk down memory lane.”

My face flushed hot in the darkness. “No,” I admitted. But I didn’t go on. I wasn’t sure where to start.

Lola crunched on her cheesy puffs. “How are things going with Artemis?” she asked cannily. “She’s kind of an odd duck, isn’t she?”

I might as well start there. “Yeah, about that.” I took a deep breath. There was no point in keeping secrets from Lola—especially not one this big. “I didn’t know it when I brought her here, and neither did she, but… Artemis is my sister.”

Lola froze, a puff halfway to her open mouth, and her eyes bugged out of her head. “*What?*” she finally managed, sounding half-choked.

I nodded. “Yeah. I know. It’s nuts, but apparently true. My mom was married before she met my dad, and she had a baby. She thought it didn’t survive, but it did, and it was Artemis.”

“You are going to have to give me more than that,” Lola said, wiping cheese dust off her face and staring at me. “Come on, Cali. This is *huge*.”

“I mean, I’m a little fuzzy myself. My mom was married to this guy who was a Dark Fae. He died, and when she had the baby, she was told it died, too. But the baby—Artemis—was actually kidnapped. She was raised as an orphan and became a bounty hunter. She didn’t have any idea who her parents were until a couple of days ago. It’s been pretty crazy. For all of us.”

“I’ll bet,” Lola said, stunned. “So, you have a sister. Who is *Fae*.”

I didn’t think I was imagining the note of pain in Lola’s tone. “I guess an entire family. But you know you’ll always be my favorite sister, Lola. Whether we share blood or not, we’re sisters for life.”

Lola was quiet for a moment, then she reached for me and pulled me into a hug.

I hugged her back. Lola was a mess sometimes, but she was my mess. We’d been through so much together—our connection was unbreakable.

“So,” Lola said, sitting back and reaching for her cheesy puffs. “Everything cool with Alex now? I don’t know why you put up with that guy, Cali. He’s such a pain in the ass.”

“Yeah, he’s fine. Artemis managed to take care of it. He won’t be talking about werewolves or ghosts or Fae magic anytime soon.”

“That’s a relief.”

“But, there is something else I wanted to talk to you about,” I admitted.

“What is it?” Lola asked.

“Greyson.”

She raised her eyebrows. “What’s up with him? Did something happen? Did he do something?” Her expression darkened. “Do I need to go kick his ass about something?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s not like that. You don’t understand—”

“What is it?” Lola asked, looking at me with concern. “What’s going on, Cali?”

I took a deep breath. “Greyson and I… got pretty close, when we were together in the Fae world.”

“Yeah?” she asked, interested. She was practically wiggling her eyebrows at me. “How close?”

“Um… close.”

“Come on,” she said. “I’m going to need more details, Cali. I went to *Reno* for you, for god’s sake.”

“What?” I asked, shocked. “*Reno?* What are you talking about?”

“Yeah, to help Xavier get through the portal.” She waved a dismissive hand. “It was a whole thing with Gabriel and Mikah. I’m pretty sure me going is half the reason why Jay’s mad at me.”

“What’s the other half?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

“We’re talking about *you*,” Lola said, glaring right back at me. “So tell me what’s going on with Greyson. What are you feeling?”

I was surprised when tears sprang to my eyes. Maybe I was just tired, or maybe the question had caught me by surprise. Maybe with all the stress of Artemis, my mom, the ghosts, and Alex, I hadn’t given myself a chance to really process the situation with Xavier and Greyson, and it was just hitting me, but I started to cry.

“Hey,” Lola said, looking surprised. She put her arm around me. “Cali, it’s okay.”

I cried harder, thinking about what I’d said to the mouse-bear. *I’m in love with two men*. I took a deep, shuddering breath, and looked up at Lola. “Do you think Greyson has rejected me as his mate?”

**Episode 708**

VIOLET

When I felt my phone buzzing in the back pocket of my jeans, I let out a long, irritated sigh. I knew exactly who it was. And when I picked it up and checked the text, I saw that I’d been right. It was Jay, checking up on me.

*Hey, Violet, just checking in. Give me a heads up about what’s going on with you tonight. Let me know when you’re headed home. I promised I’d keep an eye on you.*

What I wanted to type back in response was:

*Stop. Fucking. Bothering. Me. Jay.*

What I actually wrote back was:

*Thanks for checking in, Jay. I’m totally fine. Won’t be too late. Don’t worry!* 😊

Then I turned off the ringer and slipped my phone back into my pocket. I didn’t get what Jay’s problem was. It wasn’t like I didn’t know how to take care of myself. I looked around the nature preserve, which was dark and quiet and completely abandoned in the dim moonlight.

Okay… so maybe meeting Charlie here—by myself, in the middle of the night—wasn’t *exactly* playing by Jay’s rules, but that was why I hadn’t told him where I was going. And I could take care of myself. Besides, nobody was going to fuck with a werewolf. I’d fought in multiple battles. So I wasn’t worried about that.

What I *was* worried about was seeing Charlie again. Every time I saw him, I got this strange feeling in my stomach. Kind of a mix between excitement and fear and this deep, gnawing hunger. I liked seeing him, but I wondered if it was normal to feel this nervous. And then there was Sandi to think about. It was weird that she didn’t even know that her boyfriend was a werewolf. I hated that I even had to think about Sandi whenever I thought about Charlie, and that I had to think of him as *her* *boyfriend*, but facts were facts, and—as much as I hated to admit it—she had been nothing but nice to me. It would be so much easier to hate her if she was just awful.

Why couldn’t anything just be easy?

Anyway, I thought with a smile, boyfriend or not, *I* was the one he wanted to talk to about being a werewolf. Not Sandi. It was our little secret.

I turned as I heard a rustle in the trees behind me. Someone was drawing near. With a thrill of excitement, I realized it had to be Charlie. My face flushed and my stomach was suddenly filled with a swarm of butterflies as he emerged from the trees. He spied me and gave me his crooked smile.

“Hi, Violet,” he said, and my knees went weak.

“Hi,” I managed, holding onto the thin sapling next to me for support.

“Listen,” he said, walking over. “I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry about earlier.”

“For what?”

He shrugged, looking abashed. “For leaving the cafe so abruptly.”

It’d been pretty awkward. Charlie’d just asked me about mates when Sandi came bursting back inside. She started talking all about her mom and to be honest, I tuned out. It was nice she had a mom at all.

“Sure.” I nodded. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I do feel kind of guilty, keeping this secret from her, but…” He shook his head. “I know it’s not something I can share with her. There’s just no way. Even before I really knew what was going on, I knew I couldn’t tell her. Or anyone.” His eyes shone bright in the dark clearing. “You’re the only one I’ve told.”

His words made the heat rise in my cheeks again. “Should we walk?” I asked, looking around, trying to look anywhere but his intense gaze for a moment.

“Sure. Let’s go this way,” he said, pointing down the path to our right. “So, I did a Google search on werewolves—”

“You did?” I asked, surprised. “Did you get any results?”

“Yeah,” he said, looking embarrassed. “But it was mostly for TV shows and books and stuff. But there were a couple of articles. A few about mates.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, looking down at my feet.

“Yeah, but it was strange. Everything I read said something different. A lot of it seemed really contradictory. That’s why I wanted to talk to you about it. What’s the real deal with them?”

“With mates?” I asked casually, as though I hadn’t been thinking about the topic nonstop. Charlie nodded. “Well, a werewolf’s mate is very special. Kind of *the one*. Someone who will always have your back. Someone you have this complete connection with, someone you love and who loves you with every fiber of their being. It’s more than an attraction—it’s a soul connection.”

“Wow,” Charlie said, looking impressed. “That’s incredible.” He was quiet for a moment, clearly thinking about this, and my heart beat wildly, wondering *what* he was thinking. Then he looked over at me. “Have *you* ever felt like that?”

My throat constricted, like it had once when I was a kid after I’d eaten lobster stew. That was how I’d found out I was allergic to lobster, but what I was feeling now had nothing to do with shellfish. I took a deep breath. I needed to play it cool. I did *not* want to freak him out by telling him that we were mates. That I was sure of it. That I’d known it from the moment I’d laid eyes on him.

“Um, yeah,” I said vaguely. “I felt it once. I saw this person, totally out of the blue. I didn’t even know him, but he looked at me and it was like I had known him my whole life. There was such a familiarity in just an instant. And this insane attraction, like I’d been struck by a bolt of lightning and my whole body had been electrified.” I realized I was breathing hard and tried to calm down. “I’ve never felt anything quite like it.”

I watched Charlie out of the corner of my eye as we walked. He seemed to be taking this in, thinking. I held my breath, waiting for him to respond. The longer he was quiet, the more nervous I became. What if I’d completely misjudged this situation? What if Charlie was perfectly happy with Sandi and just wanted to meet with me to get some information? What if—

“That’s good to know,” Charlie said, breaking into my thoughts. He nodded and looked down at his walking feet.

I stared at him, feeling somehow deflated. I’d fantasized about what he’d say in a conversation about mates, and “good to know” had never once been a part of his response.

But I tried to keep my disappointment to myself as we walked up toward a ridge. The ridge was a high point that sloped gently downward toward a valley, and it was rimmed on either side by tall trees. These weren’t the lofty pines I was used to in Oregon, but oaks and maples, with their leaves all orange and fiery red, though everything looked pale and grey in the moonlight. Charlie stopped walking, suddenly, and when I looked up at him, I saw that his expression had gone dark and stony.

“Are you okay?”

He looked down at me. “Do you want me to show you where I was bitten?”

I hesitated. Was he going to take off his clothes and show me his scar? Did I want to see that? I mean… yeah, of course I did, but—

Before I could make an ass out of myself, Charlie pointed to a spot a few yards away. “It was right there,” he said, his voice low and harsh. The memory of the attack was clearly still painful for him.

“What were you doing out here?” I asked, looking around at the lonely trail.

“I was jogging. I like to go jogging at night.” A muscle in his jaw twitched. “At least I *did*. It knocked me over. I hit my head, so I was really confused. At first I thought it was a wild dog or something. A bear, maybe. A *wolf-bear*, if that’s even a thing. I didn’t even tell anyone what happened. I just didn’t think it was that big of a deal. The bite hurt, but it didn’t look that deep. But then later, when I…” Charlie had gone pale. He swallowed hard. “When I *changed* for the first time—when I turned into a wolf—I had to start thinking about what happened. And then I found you,” he said, looking down at me, his expression brightening.

I smiled up at him. “You almost hit me with a lacrosse ball.”

Charlie grinned. “It must have been fate.”

My bones felt like they were turning to liquid. *YES!* I wanted to scream. *It was fate!* *Because we’re mates!* But I kept my shit together. I smiled and even managed to laugh, though it came out sounding unnaturally high and nervous.

Then there was a growl from just behind us and I spun on the spot, my heart beating fast. I scanned the trees and suddenly a werewolf emerged from the darkness, charging toward us at full speed.

**Episode 709**

Lola stared at me in confusion. “Why would you think that Greyson rejected you?”

I shook my head. How could I explain how much it had hurt that he’d pretended not to remember our time together in the Fae world? That he’d tried to push me out of his life as soon as we got back, despite everything we’d been through together and how close we’d grown? Despite the fact that, as a result of all that time with him, I knew that he was my mate too?

And now things between us just felt so distant, so wrong. I didn’t understand what had happened, how it had all fallen apart, and I didn’t know how to fix it.

Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I shuddered out a breath. “I can’t r-really explain it.” A sob slipped through my lips and I wiped my face. “It’s just a feeling I got, like something is wrong between us. Terribly wrong. Like… our bond is broken, or something?” I hated how crazy I sounded, how I couldn’t even articulate what was wrong because I didn’t really know what had happened. It was just… wrong. Messed up, somehow. And I just hated that I felt it at all.

I’d thought for so long that once we got through the Fae world and saved my mom, *then* I could really focus on Greyson and see if what we had was worth exploring, worth fighting for—maybe even worth choosing, given that everything with Xavier had been so toxic recently. I’d never imagined that once we got back Greyson wouldn’t want me anymore.

Lola gently squeezed my hand. “Hey. Whatever it is, I’m sure it’s not as bad as you’re thinking.”

I shook my head. She didn’t understand. *I* didn’t understand. “It’s just something I felt in my body. Like it knows that something’s wrong between us, that maybe…” My lower lip trembled and I took a deep breath to compose myself. “Maybe we don’t have a connection anymore. Maybe he’s chosen someone else.”

Her eyebrows lifted in understanding and she looked down at our hands, processing the hot mess of word vomit I’d just spewed all over her. “I guess it’s a possibility?” she finally conceded. “People have rejected their mates before. It’s not terribly common, but it does happen. I don’t really know how that works, though. I’ve always kind of thought that both mates had to reject each other to break that bond, but who knows?”

My heart plummeted. Lola had pretty much just confirmed my worst fears. A fresh wave of tears slid down my cheeks, and I started crying harder.

“Shit,” Lola muttered, and then her tone brightened. “But I doubt Greyson rejected you, Cali. He’s always been crazy about you. What would have changed? Why would he do that?”

I slowly shook my head. “I don’t know. Maybe the *due destini* thing got to be too much for him to handle. Maybe after all that crazy shit we went through in the Fae world, he realized it was all too much for him. Too much drama. Too much danger. Too much infighting with the pack. He’s the Alpha of the Redwood pack now, and with Silas back… Maybe he just decided he needed to take something off his plate.” I sniffed. “And maybe that something was his formerly favorite snack.”

There was a long stretch of silence, and I looked up at Lola, frowning when I saw her studying me closely. Why wasn’t she comforting me? Couldn’t she see I was going through a crisis? I might be losing the man I loved, the man who was my destined mate!

Finally, she offered me a small smile, though her words were hesitant. “Don’t you think that maybe that would be a good thing? If he truly did reject you, it would sure make your choice a lot easier.”

My jaw dropped. How… What the… Greyson was my mate, and, yeah, Xavier was too. I was in love with them both, and they loved me back and hated each other and it was an uncomfortable reality on a good day and an impossible choice pretty much all the rest of the time, but that didn’t mean that I wanted to lose either one of them, no matter if it would make things “easier.” And what did that even mean? Easier for whom? Choosing Xavier wasn’t going to cure the pain and grief of severing my bond with Greyson, and vice versa. So what the fuck was she even talking about?

“A good thing?” I snapped. “Did you seriously just say those words to me?”

She put her hands up defensively. “Listen, you’re my best friend, and I love you. I care about you, and it hurts me to see you hurting. And I’ve been watching you agonize over those two since you met them! This *due destini* thing, this impossible choice you have to make, being torn between these two Alphas, it’s making you miserable! And as your best friend who loves you, I do not want to see you miserable! All I’m saying is that if Greyson bows out, it gives you a chance to be happy with Xavier. Really, truly mated, and all in. Isn’t that what you want? To be happy and committed to your mate?”

I stood up. “I shouldn’t have expected you to understand. Nobody does.”

Lola stood as well. “Why are you getting so angry?” she demanded. “I’m just trying to talk to you, to offer you a chance to look on the bright side.”

“Don’t you get it, Lola?” Fresh tears stung in my eyes, and my chest felt like it was going to crack open. “It’s not that simple! I can’t just walk away from a connection like the one I have with Greyson. Whether he wants me or not, he matters to me. I love him! He’s my mate!”

“And what about Xavier?” Lola asked. “What about your connection with him? What about your love for him? He’s your mate too.”

“Exactly!” I practically screamed. Did she think I didn’t know that Xavier was my mate? Did she think that I didn’t care for him too? That I didn’t love him too? He meant the world to me, and so did Greyson, and that was the one thing I couldn’t seem to get anyone to understand—not even Xavier and Greyson themselves. Everyone just kept telling me to pick a side and be happy with my choice, even if it meant walking around with only half of my heart.

They didn’t get it, and I was beginning to think they never would.

I started to climb down from the treehouse, my movements jerky from the anger pulsing through me. Lola, of course, immediately followed me. “Cali, come on!” she called. “Don’t just walk away from me!”

We crossed the lawn, with me stomping toward the house and Lola following after me, begging me to talk to her. But I was done talking. It was pointless. No matter how good people’s intentions, they just didn’t understand. I was all alone in this, and talking about it wasn’t going to do a bit of good.

“Cal—”

Lola’s voice abruptly cut off and I turned to see Lola’s wolf form staring at me. She’d shifted. In my back yard. “What the fuck, Lola?” I snapped.

She snarled at me, turned away, and bounded off into the woods. “Lola!” I called. What had happened? Had she been so upset that she’d shifted without meaning to?

“Shit,” I muttered, staring off at the tree line where Lola had disappeared.

I pulled out my phone to call Jay, but he didn’t pick up. He was probably asleep. *Ugh, what is up with Lola and her shifting? She* knows *it’s not safe for her to be shifting this often! Doesn’t she give even a single shit about her own safety?*

“Lola!” I whisper-yelled into the darkness, but there was no answer.

Suddenly the porch light came on and Artemis walked outside. “What’s going on? I heard shouting… It sounded like a fight.”

I blew out a breath. “I was just talking with Lola, but—classic her—she shifted and took off.”

Artemis’s head cocked to the side. “What were you fighting about?”

I thought back to our shitshow of a consoling conversation, how Lola thought it would be *so much easier* for me if Greyson just rejected me. Tears welled in my eyes at the thought of Greyson truly rejecting our bond. I didn’t think I’d be able to bear it if *either* Greyson or Xavier rejected me, even though it made me a selfish monster to feel that way. But Lola did have a point: where did this leave me? What was I going to do? How could I ever choose between the two men I was equally destined to be with?

Suddenly, a searing pain tore through my chest, and I gasped, clutching at my heart. I collapsed to the ground at Artemis’s feet, and my body started to seize.

**Episode 710**

VIOLET

A snarling, vicious werewolf was coming straight for us. I screamed as it bounded closer and then, completely on instinct, I shifted and leaped in front of Charlie.

Whatever happened, I couldn’t let Charlie get hurt. He was just barely coming to terms with this world. He was barely more than a human, for all intents and purposes, and he certainly wouldn’t know how to fight a vicious werewolf. Not that I knew a whole lot about fighting, but I’d fought before, when the Manus Cruentae had attacked us, and I’d come out of it all right.

And now I’d have to fight again. I tensed, readying myself to pounce on the incoming werewolf. Behind me, I heard the cracking of bones and then felt a warm, large presence at my side. Charlie had shifted as well—he wasn’t going to let me face this new threat alone.

Together, we leaped at the wolf. It was big and vicious and no doubt a better fighter than we were, but what we lacked in finesse we more than made up for with pure energy and enthusiasm. We bit and scratched and tackled any inch of our attacker we could reach. We growled and snarled and barked, matching our voices to the threat our bodies presented.

It was messy and clumsy and at one point I actually scratched Charlie’s leg instead of the strange wolf’s. Xavier probably would have been embarrassed for me if he’d seen the fight, but in the end, Charlie and I managed to scare off the wolf.

We watched in silence as it retreated, its tail between its legs, and disappeared into the forest. Then I shifted back to my human form and Charlie followed suit.

“That was…” He panted, breathing heavily. “That was… totally wild! Did you see that? Oh my god. My instincts totally just took over. It was like my body knew what to do!”

I gave his naked body a quick once-over—to check for injuries, of course—and then smiled at him. “You did great, and now we’re safe. Thank god.” I was glad he was all right, but it was kind of odd for him to be so amped up after his first fight. He should have been worried—we both should.

He turned and stared in the direction the wolf had disappeared. “That was totally the wolf that attacked me. I’d know those eyes anywhere. Did you recognize them?”

I just shook my head helplessly. “I have no idea.” Now that the adrenaline was wearing off and we were safe, I suddenly felt shaky. What kind of werewolf just attacked people in the woods? “It has to be some kind of Rogue—a wolf without a pack. It’s really unusual for wolves to just attack people out of nowhere.”

Charlie nodded but didn’t take his eyes off the forest ahead of us. “Well now that I’m a werewolf, I can totally take him on! Let’s go after him!” He looked at me when I didn’t move or respond, his eyes wide and searching. “Violet, that’s the dick who fucked my life up!”

I grimaced. By “fucking up” Charlie’s life, that wolf had given me my mate. I couldn’t write it off so easily. Plus, we’d probably gotten lucky. It probably hadn’t known we were werewolves when it had attacked. We’d probably taken it by surprise and that, more than anything else, was likely what had kept us alive.

“We should go back, Charlie. It’s too dangerous to follow after it. I know you want to keep the fight going, but that’s just your adrenaline talk—”

He shifted and bounded away without another word. “Charlie!” I cried. I shifted and chased after him. He was too emotional right now, and that volatility wasn’t safe. He still didn’t know how to control himself; he was going to get himself hurt, or worse.

I put on a burst of speed to catch up to him running up ahead. He’d clearly picked up on some kind of scent that he was barreling after with absolutely no forethought. I had no choice but to follow him, to try to mitigate any damage that might come from his rash decision to chase after the wolf that had attacked him.

We ran through the woods, following the tracks, but then he suddenly veered off the path and began cutting through the bushes and shrubs on the forest floor. I sensed the change, too. We were definitely on the trail of a wolf. My heart pounded in my chest—and not just because of our impromptu sprint through the woods.

I’d never been a huge fighter. It wasn’t my strength. And it was one thing to rise to the occasion when Charlie and I were about to be attacked, but to seek out some kind of Rogue battle? Charlie still didn’t know how to control himself—he was going to be more of a liability than an asset. I didn’t see how this could end well unless we got lucky and either didn’t find the wolf again, or they were somehow a worse fighter than either of us.

Still, I’d follow after him and do whatever it took to protect my mate.

We entered a clearing, and I saw a wolf at the far edge. A wolf I recognized.

It was Lola.

Charlie put on a burst of speed, ready to lunge at the wolf, but I shifted suddenly, coming to a skidding stop through the forest on my bare, human feet. “Charlie, stop!” I screamed.

Both wolves turned toward me, then Lola ran off into the woods. Charlie, still in his wolf form, tensed, ready to go after her.

“Stop, Charlie!” I called. “That’s not the wolf you’re looking for!”

He paused, staring into the woods after Lola for a long and terrifying string of seconds. Then he shifted back as well. I ran over to him, and when he turned to face me he looked confused and kind of pissed off.

“What do you mean?” he demanded.

I shrank back a bit. Why was he upset? Or was this just the adrenaline talking? It had probably been traumatic to come face to face with the wolf who’d turned him against his will. It made sense for him to be angry at losing an opportunity to face them. Still, I felt nothing but relief. For now, we were safe again. I had exactly zero interest in looking for more trouble. Not when it had a way of finding us all on its own.

“That was Lola,” I explained.

“Lola?” he echoed. “Your friend Lola?”

I nodded.

He looked back to where Lola had disappeared into the woods and then turned to face me, blinking slowly. “Are *all* your friends werewolves?”

Artemis and Cali’s faces popped into my head, and I smiled softly. “Um, not exactly. But Lola’s in my pack. That’s why I recognized her wolf form.”

“Your pack,” he repeated. He stared at me for so long I felt heat crawl up my cheeks. “That’s right. You have a pack, don’t you?” He shook his head. “This is all so crazy. I still can’t wrap my head around it all.”

“It is.” I nodded. “There’s still so much you don’t know about being a werewolf. That’s why you can’t be running off in the woods after Rogues. It’s too dangerous.”

I half-expected him to get angry again, but he grinned. “You worried about me, Violet?”

I blushed. I wanted to say *of course I’m worried about you, you’re my mate!* But then I squared my shoulders and replied, “I’m right to be worried. The woods are dangerous. We should get back. Where do you live?”

He pointed back in the direction we’d come. “Can we at least run back?”

A reluctant smile tugged at my lips. “Sure.”

We shifted and ran back toward his dorm, enjoying the sensation of being free and running wild through the woods. Finally we could make out the dorm building through the trees, so we shifted back and Charlie did a double take at my nakedness. He probably just wasn’t used to it yet.

He laughed. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to this part of being a werewolf.” He gestured vaguely at our naked bodies, and I couldn’t stop the heat that flooded my cheeks.

I wouldn’t either, but for a reason I could never tell him.

“Do you want some clothes to wear home?” he asked.

I almost laughed. It would be easier to just shift and run back home, but I’d take just about any excuse to spend time with him. “That would be great.”

“There’s a back entrance,” he said. “We can sneak in that way. No one’s around this time of night, anyway.”

We crept in through the back entrance, up the staircase and down the hallway to his room, sneaking stealthily through the building and suppressing our giggles at how ridiculous the whole thing was.

We finally got to his room and Charlie opened his door. We rushed into the dark room and Charlie flipped on his light—

And we saw Sandi sitting on the bed, her arms crossed, staring at us.

**Episode 711**

I came back to the world with the taste and scent of grass on my tongue and in my nose. I gagged and spat out a few blades of grass. What the hell had happened? Why was I lying on the ground… in my back yard?

And why did I feel like I’d just gotten hit by a bus? I tried to move, and groaned when a dull pain spread through my body. I shifted slightly and noticed Artemis standing over me, staring down at me in concern. Her eyes were wide and her face was pale. Her mouth was moving, but the words sounded far away and nearly impossible to make out.

“Wha-what?” I mumbled, trying to sit up. My muscles refused to cooperate at first, and then screamed when I tried again.

Artemis’s hand wrapped around my shoulders, and she gently eased me back down to the ground, erasing all my good work. “H-hey!” I protested. “Do you know… how hard I tried—”

“Just stay there, Cali. Okay?” She cut me off. “I’m going to get Orla. You just had some kind of fit or something. I’m not sure what’s going on.”

I shook my head sluggishly. “No, *no*.” It came out like a drunken whine, and I cleared my throat. How had my mouth gotten so dry? I guessed I’d have to blame the grass for that one. Though how I’d ended up with half a lawn mower's worth of greenery in my mouth, I still didn’t know. “Please, Artemis,” I tried again. “I don’t want to worry her. What happened?” I vaguely remembered talking to her after… after Lola had shifted and run off. But everything after that was sort of hazy. It was still nighttime though, so I could only imagine that whatever had happened to me, it hadn’t taken long.

*Unless I fell into a wormhole, like in those sci-fi movies and time—*

*Not now, Cali!*

Artemis stared at me like I’d gone crazy. In all fairness, it was probably too early to rule that one out.

“*What happened?*” she repeated. “What happened was your eyes rolled back in your head and you clutched your chest and went all wobbly and jerky and fell over.” Her expression turned pinched, and for a second I thought she might cry. Instead she asked me tentatively, “Is that… normal for half-humans?”

I sat up again, ignoring the gentle pressure of her hand on my shoulder. My head—and Artemis, and the back yard—started spinning around me. I took a long deep breath and closed my eyes until the world decided to stay in one place. “I might just need some rest.”

Painfully slowly, I got up and started to stumble toward the porch, but Artemis took my arm. “Cali, come on. That wasn’t just needing some rest. I know human bodies are naturally weak and frail and sickly, but that seemed… extra.”

“Weak, frail, and sickly?” I repeated, taking a seat on the edge of the porch. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Cali—”

“I’m sure it was nothing.” Still, I felt kind of stupid. Randomly passing out or having a “fit” or whatever had happened… That did make me seem pretty frail.

Artemis was nothing if not persistent. It was a quality that had probably served her very well as a bounty hunter. “You seemed really upset when I came out,” she said. “Was it Lola?”

I sighed. “Um, yeah. I was just upset about Lola.”

There was a beat of silence, and I felt Artemis’s eyes on me. “You’re lying,” she finally said. “What is it really?”

“You’re a mind reader now too?” I snapped.

She shook her head and took a seat next to me. “No, I just had a feeling.”

I tried to think back to what had happened before I’d passed out. Lola and I had been fighting, and she’d shifted into a wolf and run off… But that hadn’t been it. That hadn’t been what had set me off.

Greyson. It had been Greyson, and my confession to Lola that he might have rejected our bond. But I was *not* about to get into that with Artemis. She still looked pretty worried, though. She pressed the back of her hand against my forehead like she was my mom and not my long-lost half-sister.

“Should I call Greyson?” she asked.

Okay, maybe she *was* a mind reader. “No!” I cried.

“Xavier?”

“NO!”

She put her hands up. “Okay, okay! That’s clearly a sore spot. Did you guys have a fight?”

“What’s with the third degree?” I shot right back. “I told you, I’m fine!”

“Clearly you’re not!”

Suddenly the porch door slid open and my mom stepped out. “Girls?” she whispered. “I heard a racket out here. Is everything okay?”

“Yes!” I immediately answered, right as Artemis said, “No, Cali just toppled down out of nowhere.”

*Ugh. What a narc!*

“She was grabbing her chest,” Artemis continued, “and then she was unconscious for a moment.”

“What?” Mom gasped. She rushed over and knelt down next to me. “Cali, that sounds like a heart attack!”

I grimaced. God, could I feel any stupider? It was nothing! “I’m totally fine now,” I insisted. “It was probably just stress or something. Look, I’m fine!”

I stood up and did a few jumping jacks for my worried audience. “See?” I panted. “Healthy as a horse.”

“Cali, stop that.” Mom grabbed my arm and led me toward the door. “You should both come inside now—”

I pulled my arm out of her grip. “I can’t come in right now. I need to go after Lola. She shifted, and—”

Mom interrupted me. How rude. “You’re in no state for that. You can talk to Lola tomorrow.”

“Jay will look after her,” Artemis informed me helpfully. “After all, he’s her mate.”

“Thank you, Artemis, for that completely new information,” I deadpanned. I tugged on my arm again, but Mom’s Fae strength was showing because I wasn’t going *anywhere*.

“Come sit down, Cali.” She pulled me inside and all the way to the couch. “I’m going to check your pulse.”

Mom settled me on the couch without tolerating another word of argument and proceeded to check my pulse, then check my temperature with the back of her hand like Artemis had. She went digging in the freezer for a cold compress to put on the back of my neck. It sent chills down my spine, and I yanked it off and shoved it back into Mom’s hands. “Enough! I’m fine!” I stomped back upstairs before either one of them could doctor me any further.

Up in my room with the door securely locked behind me—though it probably wouldn’t do a whole lot of good if Mom or Artemis really wanted to come in—the first thing I did was call Jay.

“Hey, Jay. I know you’re probably asleep, but Lola ran off tonight. We were arguing and suddenly she shifted and ran off and… I don’t know, I just have a bad feeling about the whole thing. I think her shifting might really be out of control, and I hope she comes home soon. Call me when you find her, okay? Bye.”

I dropped my phone onto my bed and flopped down onto the mattress. How had everything gotten so complicated? I’d thought that after I’d saved my mother everything would get easier, and it’d all go back to normal, but somehow everything felt even harder now. I was fighting with Lola, I wasn’t speaking to Xavier or Greyson…

I looked around my bedroom. It had been such a long time since I’d been here, since the first time Xavier had come to Minnesota to meet my parents. I’d thought things were complicated back then, when I’d just been a human girl romantically linked to an Alpha werewolf. But the reality was that things then had been simple. It had just been me and Xavier, and I’d been so sure we were meant to be.

But then I met Greyson, and everything changed. I’d been told again and again not to trust him, to stay as far away from him as possible, but I’d always been drawn in—to the detriment of my relationship with Xavier. And in time I’d learned to trust him, had begun to want him the same way I wanted his brother. I’d even fallen in love with him.

And now… Now, I had absolutely no idea what to do, or if Greyson even wanted anything to do with me anymore. What if we really were over? What if he’d decided all of this was just too hard? I wouldn’t blame him. It had never been easy, not even for one second. And maybe he deserved better than that. Maybe we both did—

Another crushing pain rolled through my chest. I staggered and gasped, putting a hand up to my chest. It felt hot to the touch. Too hot.

I spun around to face the mirror over my vanity and peeled back my pajama top—

And saw a swirling pattern of black veins creeping over my heart.

**Episode 712**

JOSS

I stood at the stove, mindlessly making breakfast. Something simple, since my mind kept flashing back to my conversation with Greyson yesterday. I grabbed a bowl out of the cupboard and then reached into the fridge for some eggs and milk.

I couldn’t believe what he’d said yesterday—not any of it. Especially not the part about “embracing his role” and “really being with his Luna.”

I cracked the first egg on the edge of the bowl so hard it practically shattered in my hand, splashing shells and egg yolk all over the bowl, the countertop, and my hand.

“Shit!” I muttered. *Great work, Joss. Since when is making scrambled eggs so damn hard?*

*Since Greyson gave me this new mind puzzle that makes focusing on simple tasks nearly impossible.*

I grabbed a paper towel and mopped up the mess before tossing the soiled towel into the garbage. Then I rinsed out the bowl and took a deep breath, staring at my new nemesis—the remaining eggs. My stomach grumbled, adding insult to injury.

When I picked up another egg, I was much more careful, focusing entirely on making sure that it cracked just right. I carefully cracked a few more eggs into the bowl and added a bit of milk before grabbing a whisk. As I began whisking the eggs, Greyson’s words ran through my mind once more.

*I wonder if it’s time for me to fully embrace my role and really be with my Luna.*

How could he even say that? After all the time I’d spent pursuing him, all the jealousy and inadequacy I’d felt when he’d kept me at arm’s length and instead played mind games with Xavier over his mate; when he’d actually ditched both me and the pack he’d fought so hard to lead to chase after Cali and go to the Fae world; after all the care I’d taken with the pack in his absence, and the fact that we’d finally fallen into an understanding that worked for both of us… How could he just casually ask if we could start acting like a more traditional Alpha and Luna?

But maybe I’d misunderstood him. That was probably it.

A droplet of yolk and milk flew up and splashed against my chin, and I blinked away the rush of emotion. The scrambled egg mixture was well beyond mixed now, closer to thoroughly obliterated.

I set the bowl down and heated a pan over the stove. Honestly, Greyson finally seeing the light where Cali was concerned wasn’t the worst thing in the world, not by a long shot. She’d been toxic for this pack for too long, and considering the fact that she had a knack for pitting both the Redwood Alphas against each other, the sooner he put some distance between himself and Cali, the better.

But I couldn’t shake away my uncertainty about what he’d asked me. Did that mean he wanted to be in a relationship? The thought made my stomach flip. Or was he just intending to take his role as Alpha more seriously?

I poured the mixture into the pan. Yes, that had to be it. He hadn’t meant that he wanted to be with me like that—and I wouldn't have wanted that anyway, no matter how strange our current situation was as the Alpha and Luna of the pack. I was nobody’s second choice. I’d rather be alone than be Greyson’s backup plan.

So he wasn’t going to pursue me, but he was finally going to choose his pack over that human girl. And honestly, it was about time. The pack needed their Alpha now more than ever, and I’d been carrying the responsibility of caring for them for far too long.

Not that I wasn’t proud of the work I’d done. Quite the opposite. I’d managed to guide and protect this pack through some terrifying scenarios, all while earning their trust and dealing with internal conflict in the pack.

Greyson might not have been taking his job seriously, but I sure had. And even he had to see that I’d been an amazing Luna. Maybe now that things with Cali—his so-called mate—were fizzling out a bit, he was finally going to start living up to the example I’d set.

With Silas breathing down our necks, some additional leadership definitely wouldn’t hurt.

I was plating my perfectly cooked scrambled eggs when Xavier came into the kitchen. He looked like shit, and I did a double take. There were huge circles under his eyes, and his body was slouched forward like he didn’t have the strength to stand upright. What the hell was wrong with him?

“Long night?” I asked as I took a bite of egg.

He just poured himself a cup of coffee and slumped into a seat at the kitchen island.

I decided to take that as a yes.

“Did you see anything when you were out patrolling?” I asked.

He opened his mouth and then paused. He was clearly hesitating, though I wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t like I’d asked a difficult question. Was he so tired he was brain dead, or was he trying to hide something from me?

“What is it?” I pressed. “Tell me.”

He looked down at his coffee, his lips pursed.

“Xavier,” I said sharply. “I’m the Luna here. If you’re hiding something from me—”

Rishika came in then, looking like Xavier’s worn-out twin. How bad had patrol been last night? I frowned as I watched her pour a cup of coffee that was even bigger than Xavier’s. “We’ve got a problem,” Rishika began. “When I was out patrolling last night, I saw a Rogue wolf. I tried to hunt them down, but their tracks just… disappeared. It was the weirdest thing. They must have shifted back, but I don’t know where they would have gone out here in the middle of nowhere.”

I looked over at Xavier. Did he know anything about this? Was that why he was looking so terrible this morning? If so, why hadn’t he just told me?

“Dammit.” I set my fork down. I’d been hoping we’d get a moment of peace, at least until Halloween, but it didn’t look like we were going to be that lucky. We’d have to increase the number of nighttime patrols for a while.

“Hey, Joss?” Ravi stepped into the kitchen doorway. He gestured for me to join him in the hallway. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

I glanced at my half-eaten breakfast with a sigh. It wasn’t the first time my pack responsibilities had pulled me away from a meal, and it probably wouldn’t be the last. I just hoped that this time around, my meal would still be waiting for me when I got back. More often than not, one of my “helpful” pack members got to it first.

“Not a single bite, you understand?” I growled at Xavier, then followed Ravi out onto the front porch.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I saw something weird last night,” he said.

A thousand possibilities flashed through my mind, and 999 of them pointed to Silas. I tensed. “Weird how?”

“I was up late and I saw something from my window.” He paused.

“Well? Spit it out.”

“I saw Cali,” Ravi confessed. “She was coming out of the lake.”

“Out of the lake?” I frowned. “She was swimming in the middle of the night?” That *was* weird, I guess. But it hardly seemed like it was worth getting pulled away from my breakfast.

“I guess so.” He frowned, then added, “It was more like skinny dipping, really. She came back to the house totally naked.”

“*What?*” My eyebrows nearly touched my hairline. “Naked? *Cali?* She’s always been such a prude about that.” Confusion and fury raced through me. What would she have been doing out there anyway? Cali knew just as well as the rest of us that the woods were dangerous right now. And despite everything I’d been doing to keep the pack safe, Cali continued to put herself in danger—even after I’d spoken to her about it. I couldn’t protect the pack if the people in it refused to take the danger seriously.

I sighed and shook my head. “Thanks for telling me, Ravi. I’ll have to talk to Cali about this. In the meantime, keep an eye on her? She’s acting so strangely; something’s up with her.”

He nodded and left me alone. I thought about returning to my breakfast, but suddenly I wasn’t hungry anymore. What was going on with Cali? She had admittedly never been my favorite person, but lately she’d been acting so off. Something was definitely going on with her.

Greyson had told me things with her hadn’t been anything like he’d hoped they would, but… No, this wasn’t about Greyson and Cali being together, or my own personal feelings. If Cali’s behavior was affecting Greyson and Xavier, it affected us all. It was time to put my foot down.

I noticed Cali through the living room window and stormed back into the house.

I stopped in the doorway to the living room and pointed at her. “You. We need to talk.”

**Episode 713**

GREYSON

What was happening to me?

I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong—terribly and irrevocably wrong, deep inside my soul.

I lay in bed, unable to focus, unable to force myself to crawl out from under the covers. I drew in a deep breath, ignoring the way that it felt like self-loathing was coating my lungs with each gulp of air I pulled in.

Even though I’d told Joss I was ready to focus one hundred percent on my Alpha duties, I couldn’t stop thinking about Cali, couldn’t stop replaying every moment of the time we’d spent together in bed. As much as I’d loved every second of it when we’d finally, *finally* consummated our bond, I hadn’t been able to shake that ache deep in my chest that told me I’d made some kind of mistake, that something was missing.

I’d spent so long imagining what it would be like when I finally had her all to myself, her body moving against mine in that age-old rhythm, allowing me to finally show her how much she meant to me. And the reality had been all right, I guess. But nothing compared to what I’d been expecting. And it wasn’t just disappointment—I felt broken. Like sleeping with Cali had torn some piece out of my soul, and I had no idea if I’d ever get it back.

I let out a huff. *Dramatic much, Greyson? What, fucking Cali turned out to be just like fucking any other girl and now you’re waxing poetic about hooking up not being some kind of transcendental experience? Get over it!*

But it wasn’t just the sex. Everything felt… off, now. I’d even had the strangest feeling last night, like Cali was in some kind of danger, but when I’d gone to her room to check on her, she’d been fast asleep. Perfectly peaceful and not in any danger that I could see.

I rolled over onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. I’d been so sure that once Cali and I finally slept together, it would be a sign that she knew we were meant to be. We’d waited so long, and she’d seemed to know exactly how much it would mean to me—to both of us—to cement our bond and be together in that capacity. But it hadn’t even really changed anything—not the way I’d wanted it to. She’d told Xavier she hadn’t even chosen me, and now I honestly wasn’t sure that we even had the bond I’d been so certain we had.

A wave of nausea passed over me, and I rubbed my face. What had happened to us? After everything we’d been through together, I’d never thought that things would go this way. I just couldn’t understand what had changed between us.

Was it my fault? Had I ruined everything when I’d pushed her away after we’d come back from the Fae world? Or was it something else entirely?

And, more importantly, what was I going to do about all of this?

There was a knock on the door and I tensed. Was it Cali? I didn’t think I was ready to see her just yet. And I didn’t want to talk to Joss, either. I’d probably made a complete ass of myself with her yesterday, and I didn’t want her to see me wallowing less than twenty-four hours after I’d told her I was going to focus on being a better Alpha. Maybe if I ignored the knock, she’d leave me alone or go try to find me elsewhere. Maybe that would buy me enough time to pull myself together.

I didn’t know which was more likely—that she’d kick my ass for lying around, or that she’d shrug and continue to shoulder the burden of the entire pack herself.

She was a better Luna than I deserved.

The knock sounded again.

“Greyson?” a familiar voice called. “Can I come in? We need to talk.”

Only it turned out the person at the door wasn’t Cali or Joss, or a pissed off Xavier, or even Silas finally coming to kill me.

It was Mrs. Smith, who, somehow, was about a thousand times worse than any of those other options.

I let out a low groan. I wasn’t up for any of this, least of all speaking with the woman I’d known almost my entire life who’d never once bothered to tell me that she was my real mother. *Sorry, Mrs. Smith, or should I call her Mrs. Mom?* Either way, I didn’t have the bandwidth for some forced estranged mother-son bonding time.

The Cali baggage was heavy and all-consuming, but at least it didn’t make me want to run a thousand miles in the opposite direction.

The doorknob turned, the door opened, and Mrs. Smith slipped in all the same. She glanced at me, her expression turning mournful as she took a seat on the edge of my bed. Looked like I wasn’t allowed to say no to our little chat. It was going to happen, whether I was ready or not.

“I’m so sorry,” Mrs. Smith said softly. “You must be so confused right now. I can’t imagine what learning something this big must be doing to you. I just want you to know that I never wanted you to find out like this.”

The loud bark of a laugh climbed up my throat and shot out of my mouth before I could even think about holding it in. “No?” I laughed again and sat up. “And how did you want me to find out? Let me guess: never. Was that the plan? To let me go my whole life thinking my mother was dead when she was living in my fucking house all along?”

I didn’t know when my mournful, confused wallowing had turned into barely restrained fury, but I welcomed the shift. Anger felt a hell of a lot better than that aching loneliness. Now I didn’t have to worry about that hole in my chest, that missing piece I couldn’t figure out how to fill. Because now I was so pissed off I couldn’t feel anything at all—save for the vicious, fiery rage that pumped through my veins.

She didn’t fight back though, and that didn’t make me feel even a single bit better. “I understand that you’re angry, and that’s okay—”

“Thanks for giving me permission to have my feelings,” I snapped.

“—but I need you to know that I never stopped thinking about you,” she continued. “And I wanted to tell you, truly I did. You will never know how badly I wanted you to know the truth about where you’d come from, but you’ve already had to deal with so much, and with your father being back…”

My hands squeezed into fists. “My father.” A whole new kind of fury erupted inside of me. He’d waited till now to share the truth, and he’d done it for a very specific reason: so that I’d be the exact mess I was right now. So that I’d be practically useless to my own pack.

Mrs. Smith watched the emotions flashing across my face. “It’s important that you know you’re not responsible for your father’s sins. You’re a good man, Greyson. I know that. I’m so proud of who you’ve become—especially because I know that you only have yourself to thank for it.” She dared to reach out and squeezed my hand, which was still curled into a loose fist. “I’m new to this too, and I can’t promise I won’t make any mistakes, but if you’re open to it, I would love nothing more than to be your mother in every sense of the word. To make up for lost time.”

I froze, unable to process exactly what she was offering me. Her arms wrapped around me then, and it was too much. I didn’t know what I wanted from her, didn’t know what I felt about this shitshow beyond anger and that cold ache in my chest. Suddenly her arms were too confining, suffocating. I shrugged out of her embrace and rushed out of the room and downstairs to the lawn outside.

I passed Rishika and Zainab on the way and vaguely heard them calling to me, asking if I was okay. I didn’t stop, couldn’t stop. I shifted and sprinted off into the woods. Running had always given me a sense of peace, but so far that wasn’t working. I couldn’t stop thinking about Cali, about Mrs. Smith, about Silas.

I pushed harder, desperate to turn off my human mind and dive deep into my wolf mind, to focus on nothing more than the ground beneath my paws, the sweet smell of pine…

As I burst through a line of trees, that feeling of claustrophobia finally began to fade. Finally, I was free. No more thoughts of my mother, my father, and—most of all—Cali. I wanted nothing more than to run away from everything, the way I always did when things got too complicated. That was exactly why I’d been so much better off as a Rogue.

I lifted my head and let out a howl, savoring the feeling of the wind whipping past my face. Suddenly I caught a scent—a wolf’s scent.

I snapped back to myself and reluctantly circled around. A new wolf scent more than likely meant danger for the pack.

I followed the scent to a small clearing, where I found a torn pile of clothing. It took me a split second to recognize it.

The torn, tattered fabric on the ground belonged to Cali.

**Episode 714**

I woke up face down on the carpet in my bedroom. Sunlight filtered in through my windows, and the ache in my limbs told me I’d spent a long, stiffly positioned night on the floor.

“We’ve really… gotta stop meeting like this,” I mumbled to the floor. My pajama top was still tugged up around my neck, and the carpet had left indents in my skin along my chest and stomach. How long had I been lying here?

I blinked slowly and groaned as I tried to urge my body into a sitting position. What the hell happened? Why was I on the floor *again*? It had been bad enough outside—

Realization and fresh memories rushed in. I’d passed out in my bedroom after seeing those horrifying, creepy dark veins inching their way to my heart. I leaped up off the floor and instantly grabbed hold of my vanity for support when spots appeared in front of my eyes. “Easy does it…” I groaned. *Ugh*, why did the world keep spinning?

When my equilibrium—or lack thereof—stopped threatening to toss my ass back to the floor, I tugged my pajama top aside and checked the mirror again. Maybe the marks had been some kind of weird hallucination—I had passed out earlier, after all. I’d probably bumped my head a little too hard and gotten some kind of concussion, which had caused me to see trippy black veins where there were none.

Or maybe I’d passed out on the floor *before* I’d seen the marks, and they’d been part of an *Inception*-y nightmare. Yeah, that definitely seemed more likely than strange pulsing veins crawling around my heart—

I gasped in horror at my reflection in the mirror and let out a tiny, strangled scream.

The veins were still there, swirling under my skin and taunting me with their creepy-ass necrosis vibe. I blinked, just to make sure I wasn’t imagining things, but they were still there. The only shred of comfort I had was the fact that the marks looked lighter than they had last night.

But it was a pretty lousy comfort because, you know, creepy-ass veins hanging out by my heart couldn’t mean anything good.

There was a knock at my bedroom door, and Artemis’s voice filtered through. “Hey, Cali? Are you all right?”

I let out a maniacal-sounding cackle. *Yeah, sure I’m all right. Just checking out my fancy new skin condition! I seem to be turning into a zombie or something. Classic Cali, amirite?*

“Cali? Is there someone in there with you?” Artemis pressed.

“I’m fine!” I choked out. But, Artemis being Artemis, she barged in anyway, and I rushed to tug my shirt back down and cover up my latest problem.

I spun to face her with a groan. “Listen, just because we’re technically sisters doesn’t mean you can barge into my room whenever you want—”

She rushed over to me, essentially bulldozing my TED Talk on boundaries. Artemis grasped my shoulders, looking intensely into my eyes in a way that only someone who hadn’t been raised and socialized by humans would. “I’ve had a weird feeling all night that something was wrong with you, that there’s something you’re not telling me. So what is it?”

I shrugged out of her weird little embrace and stepped back to put some much needed space between us. Honestly, I didn’t know if I wanted to confide in Artemis. I still didn’t really know her all that well, all things considered. I mean, she was a Dark Fae bounty hunter, right? That was how we’d met; she’d captured me and sold me off to the Kollector. And yeah, we’d had some decent interactions on our way home to save my mom, but that didn’t mean I could trust her.

And… even if I could, did I even want to? She wasn’t just some random Fae woman I’d met and befriended. Now, she was my sister—half-sister, at least—and despite the fact that we shared half a set of DNA, ever since Mom had dropped that bomb on me, I’d felt more distant from Artemis than ever. It had all happened so quickly, and I still hadn’t come to terms with what it meant to have a sister—a whole other person to share my mom with, an independent woman with her own agenda who I was now kind of stuck with, for better or worse.

I mean, she’d knocked out Alex, for god’s sake. And then she’d done that freaky mind control thing. I… I honestly didn’t know if I even *wanted* Artemis here anymore, much less if I should invite her to be part of this new problem.

“Cali, talk to me,” she pressed, her eyes wide and worried. “Please.”

I looked away from her pleading eyes. Maybe she did really care about me then, despite how things had started between us. And… god, those marks were terrifying. Maybe Artemis would know something about them—maybe it was some kind of sickness or something that I’d picked up in the Fae world?

I took a deep breath. “Okay, I’m going to show you something, Artemis. But you have to promise me you won’t freak out and run to Mom, okay?”

She frowned, looking even more worried by my strange request.

“Okay?” I pressed.

She nodded. “Okay.”

I slowly peeled back my pajama top.

“Wow!” Artemis covered her eyes. “What are you doing? This was not what I had in mind—”

“Hush.” I rolled my eyes and revealed the strange marks over my heart.

She peeked through her splayed fingers, and then gasped in horror. “What the hell is *that?*” she screamed.

I looked down at my chest and saw the dark veins swirling beneath my skin again. I looked back up at Artemis. “You promised not to freak out!”

“That was before I knew what was going on with you! Seriously, Cali, what the fuck is that?!” She backed away a bit, like just standing near me put her at risk of picking up a matching fancy new magical tattoo.

“I was hoping you could tell me!” I hissed, trying to keep my voice down. “It’s not something from the Fae world? I don’t know, some spooky but easily curable magical flu?”

She shook her head, wordlessly staring at the marks on my chest. “I’ve never seen anything like that before. It doesn’t look like Fae magic to me.”

“Okay, then what is it?” I demanded. Panic was beginning to bubble up in my stomach. I’d been hoping Artemis would know what it was and calmly explain that it was some weird Fae rash or something and that I just had to chase a unicorn under a full moon and it’d go away. But she looked even more terrified than I was.

Ugh, what good was it having an older, wiser, Fae sister if she couldn’t diagnose your supernatural malady?

“Okay, but it’s clearly something freaky!” I said. “I’ve watched like, all of *Grey’s Anatomy* and I’m pretty sure swirling dark veins aren’t a typical human problem!”

We stared at each other, quietly freaking out together, when another knock sounded at the door. We both jumped at the sound.

“Girls?” my mom called. “Are you okay in there? I thought I heard shouting. What’s going on with you two?”

We both froze, staring wide-eyed before simultaneously bursting into action. “It’s nothing, Mom!” I called.

“We’re okay!” Artemis answered.

The doorknob began to twist and I hurriedly tried to tug down my top to cover my mark, but I wasn’t fast enough.

The door swung open and my mom’s eyes immediately landed on my exposed chest, and the dark swirling mark over my heart. She went white as a sheet and dropped the cup of tea she’d been carrying. It hit the carpet with a muffled thump and spilled tea everywhere, but Mom didn’t seem to really notice. Her entire world seemed to have narrowed to the mark on my chest.

I tugged my shirt down and rushed over to her, and she snapped out of it.

“Mom, don’t panic,” I rushed to say, even though I was very clearly panicking myself. I’d just gotten her back. I couldn’t risk her health now by pulling her into… whatever the hell this was. “I know you’re still weak and recovering, so please just take a breath. Everything’s fine!”

She ignored me and pointed at my chest. “Caliana, when did you first notice that mark?”

Oh, shit. She only used my full name when something was terribly wrong. Like when she’d pulled me aside and told me she was sick for the very first time. “Um, I think it started last night,” I stammered, “w-when I had that weird pain in my chest. But don’t worry—it doesn’t hurt anymore—”

Mom held up a hand.

“What is it?” I asked.

She finally raised her eyes to meet mine. The grave terror in her gaze sent my insides into convulsions. “You’ve been cursed.”

**Episode 715**

LOLA

*Ugh… What the hell happened and who dropped a dump truck on my head?* It was so, so bright, and I didn’t want to open my eyes even a teensy little bit. It was cold, and it felt like a rock was digging into my ass.

“Is she alive?” I heard a soft, feminine voice murmur above my head.

“I’m not sure…” another female voice responded. The air around me shifted, and I felt a pair of soft, warm hands close around my shoulder. The woman gently shook me. “Hey. Can you hear me? Are you okay?”

Probably not, but that had never stopped me before.

“She’s clearly not okay!” The other voice hissed.

I peeled my eyes open to find two women crouched over me, staring down at me with matching expressions of horror and concern. I blearily looked around. What was I doing out here in the woods? Naked, I belatedly realized. Shit. Had I spent the entire night out as a wolf?

“Ma’am?” The woman shook me gently again.

I lurched upright, instinctively trying to cover my nakedness, a conditioned response around humans. One of the women, the one crouching nearby but not touching me, slid out of her jacket and offered it to me.

“Thanks,” I managed. My mouth was dry, my head was pounding, and if I hadn’t been fairly sure that I’d been playing wolf all night long, I might have thought I was hungover. Either way, I felt like complete and utter shit.

I shakily stood up, grateful that the jacket covered me down to my thighs. At least I wouldn’t be walking around with my ass hanging out. The women stood as well, still staring at me.

The one who’d gently shaken me back to consciousness stepped forward. “I’m Anna. You’re safe now, okay? If you come with me, I’ll take you to the police.” She nodded at her friend. “That’s Lauren. I don’t think we have cell service all the way up here, but if you think you can walk, we’ll just go back down to my car, and we’ll wait with you till the police get here?”

I blinked at her offer for a moment, confused until the realization set in. They thought something had happened to me. Something very, very bad. It was a logical conclusion—after all, they’d just found a naked, unconscious woman in the woods. I shook my head. “N-no, thanks! I’m fine! There’s nothing wrong. All is good here,” I babbled.

Inside, though, I was panicking. What had happened to me? When I tried to think back to the sequence of events that had brought me to this hiking trail, there was nothing but… darkness. I couldn’t remember anything. What had I done last night!?

Lauren stepped forward. “You’re clearly not fine. You’re naked in the woods,” she said sternly, but with enough gentleness that I knew she wasn’t trying to scare me—not that she could. “Whatever happened to you, you’re safe now. Just come with us, okay? We’ll make sure you get help.” She tentatively reached out, but I backed up.

“I’m totally fine!” I repeated, then spun around and took off in the other direction.

The two women called after me, telling me to stop, that they could help me, that I shouldn’t be afraid.

They were wrong. They couldn’t help me, and I knew deep in my bones that I needed to be very, very afraid.

I shifted, shredding the jacket I’d been given—sorry, Lauren!—and ran all the way back to my dads’ house, shifting back into a dirty, naked human once more to sneak inside. I shimmied in through the basement window and managed to creep up to my bedroom without anyone noticing—thank god. The last thing I needed was for my dads to see my current state and actually call the police.

When I opened the door to my bedroom, I found Jay inside, pacing back and forth. His eyes locked on to me and a breath of relief rushed out of his lungs. In half a moment, he’d pulled me into his arms, hugging me so tightly I couldn’t breathe. I hugged him back with every ounce of strength in my body.

“You’re okay,” he breathed into my undoubtedly dirty hair. “I was terrified. God, Lola. What the fuck?” The words were said without any venom, and I clutched him tighter, burying my face in his chest.

He pulled away from me for half a second, trying to get a good look at me and probably ready to scold me now that he knew I wasn’t dead in a ditch or locked up by animal control or some other weird and terrible scenario. “Where the hell have you been? And… why are you all covered in dirt?” He tipped my chin up. “Is that blood on your face?”

Each question was a knife to the gut—not because he was being cruel, or even because he was unreasonable for asking any of them, but because I honestly didn’t know the answers. To any of them.

Tears burned in my eyes and I felt my lower lip trembling as emotion—fear, panic, and shame—all tightened in my chest. Jay still held me tightly, tilting my head up so I couldn’t hide from him. It seemed like now that he’d spent all night worrying about me, he wasn’t about to let me go.

“Lola, answer me. What the hell is going on with you?” Jay asked.

I burst into tears.

“I don’t know what happened!” I confessed brokenly, tears streaming down my face. “I was in a f-fight with Cali and then—nothing! I woke up this morning in the woods and I don’t know what I did last night.” I drew in a deep breath, but it wasn’t enough to quench the panic bubbling up inside me, so I pulled in another and another until I was hyperventilating. “J-Jay, what if I h-hurt someone?” I sobbed. “What if I killed someone?”

His expression softened, and his hands slid down to my arms, rubbing up and down softly to try to soothe me. “Cali called last night and left a voicemail. I had no idea where you were. I was out looking for you all night, and when I couldn’t find you I hoped you’d come back here.” He gently swiped a dirt smudge off my cheek. “Lola,” he said softly. “I think you have a problem, babe. The way you feel about shifting, it’s not normal. It’s like you’re addicted to it, and you clearly can’t control it.”

It was almost worse that he wasn’t angry with me. A sob rattled its way out of my chest and I collapsed into his arms. Jay wrapped me up in a hug and held me close as we sank to the floor. “It’s going to be okay,” he murmured.

“How can you know that?” I hiccupped. “You just said it wasn’t normal!”

He held me tightly and kissed my forehead, dirt and all. “I may not know how to make this better, but we know someone who will. I think it’s time you talk to Big Mac again. She knows more than we do about all things paranormal. If she can’t help you, she’ll know who can.”

I shook my head with a wail. “I don’t want to bother her, and it didn’t work the first time anyway. And besides, you can’t lose another eye, you’re running out!”

He rubbed my back. “Lola, this is serious. So serious that we need outside help. You can’t be blacking out and running around the woods. You could hurt someone. Or yourself.”

A fresh wave of tears slid down my cheeks, but I nodded. “Okay. I’ll… I’ll call her.”

Jay handed me my cell phone and I pressed Big Mac’s contact. When she answered, I got right to the point. “I need your help.”

“What’s going on now?” she asked in a long-suffering tone.

I explained everything that had been going on with me—the constant urge to shift, how I was slowly losing control of it, how I’d woken up on the trailhead with no memory of the night before. I managed to keep my tears under control by avoiding looking at Jay as I confessed everything to Big Mac. How he was still with me after all this, I had no idea.

He was a better mate than I deserved.

Big Mac listened to my whole spiel, and then sighed heavily. “I can’t help you.”

“What?” I gasped. “But I don’t know where else to turn! How am I supposed to deal with this if you can’t help me?”

Jay looked like he was ready to offer up his other eye for a better answer.

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone, and for a second I was worried that she’d hung up on me. “I might know where you can turn,” she finally said. “But I’m warning you right now, Lola. It will be very dangerous.”

**Episode 716**

I gaped at my mom. “Cursed?” I repeated. “What do you mean I’ve been cursed?” Everything I knew about curses was limited to *Harry Potter* and Disney films. Did this mean I was going to fall into an enchanted sleep and only my true love could save me?

Man, that would really put this whole *due destini* thing to the test. What would happen if both Xavier and Greyson tried to wake me? Since they were both my mates, would it be a first come, first awaken a cursed mate-type situation, or would the curse reveal who I should really be with? Or would neither of them even try? That dull pain shot through my heart again, and I winced, but this time I managed to stay conscious.

Beside me, Artemis was still staring at our mother in shock. “You think it’s a curse, truly?”

Mom suddenly looked a thousand years old as she trudged across the tea-stained carpet and took a seat on the edge of my bed, her eyes still glued to my chest, though I’d tugged my shirt down to cover the marks already.

I picked up the spilled teacup and set it on a nearby bookcase, unnerved by the feeling of Mom’s eyes on me. Well, not on me. On the mark. The curse, apparently. I suddenly had a flash of understanding about how she must have felt all that time she’d been in and out of the hospital. All those years when every time I’d looked at her, I’d been checking against a mental catalog, trying to determine her health and any threats to it. Half the time, I’d only been looking at the symptoms of her wasting away. I hadn’t been really seeing her at all.

When I turned around, she still hadn’t answered. “Mom?”

She slowly drew in a breath and let it out. “I’ve only ever seen a mark like yours once, Cali. Long ago—”

“So it *is* a Fae thing?” I interrupted.

Artemis shook her head. “It can’t be! I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“I didn’t realize you were the definitive source on all things Fae,” I snarked. “My mistake.”

“Girls!” Mom snapped.

We both froze, and our mouths snapped shut before we could bicker any more.

“I can’t be sure,” she continued, “but I once had a friend, another Fae, long ago, who was cursed by a witch. Her body reacted just like that—though the marks were all over her legs, not on her chest…” She trailed off.

“And?” I pressed. “What happened to her? Did she find a cure? Or…”

Mom stared at me for a long moment but didn’t answer.

My mind filled with horrifying scenarios: the curse transforming me into a monster, or it giving me a prolonged and grisly death, like the sickness my mom had faced, only much worse. Honestly, a long but glamorous coma and then being awakened by true love’s kiss sounded kind of fantastic, by contrast. I’d been wanting a nice long nap for a while now, anyway.

Mom shook her head. “My friend tried everything, but they were never able to remove the curse, and eventually, she lost the use of her legs. They just stopped working.”

“*Stopped working?*” I shrieked, pointing at my heart. “Um, I kind of need this! What am I supposed to do?”

We all stared at each other and then I realized the truth. Not a single one of us knew what to do. And if we didn’t figure it out—and soon—I was going to die.

\*\*\*\*

Hours later, we were huddled in the kitchen around the table. Mom had brewed more tea for us all at some point, but nobody had touched theirs, and eventually the tea had gone cold. We’d been running through possible sources of the curse for hours, thinking that if we could figure out where it had come from, we could then work backward to try to suss out a cure.

I was seesawing from abject terror to disbelief. No, I couldn’t be cursed, because curses weren’t real. They were something you read in books and saw on TV, but they couldn't happen to a real person in real life. And certainly not in the human world. We didn’t have magic here! How could a curse exist in a world without magic? I huffed in frustration, realizing that we did, of course, have magic here—I knew a witch, after all.

When the pendulum swung from denial back to fear of my impending and probably terribly uncomfortable death, I started thinking of possible sources for my curse—yes, I was acknowledging it. The first step was admitting you had a problem, right? Or maybe that didn’t apply here. Since we knew almost nothing about this, who was I to say what did and didn’t apply?

But who could have cursed me? Had I pissed off someone badly enough to earn a slow and painful death back in my home world? I’d definitely made a lot of creatures angry in the Fae world though, and one thing I’d learned quickly in my time there was that Fae creatures were often sadistic monsters. The list of people we’d come across who might have enjoyed cursing me was lengthy, but they all would have wanted front-row seats. I doubted they would have given me something that would take weeks to set in…

Maybe the Kollector? He’d been as sadistic as they come, but maybe there had been some kind of curse set into motion when I’d destroyed him. Like a horcrux or something. Except there was no real way to prove that, was there? No lead to follow to find out if I could be cured.

Mom set some cheese sandwiches on a plate in front of Artemis and me, but I couldn’t bring myself to eat. I’d never felt less hungry.

“Did you happen to eat a Wrinkled Sprogut in the Fae world?” Artemis asked suddenly. “Fae children’s nursery rhymes always say that those are cursed.”

I shook my head. The weirdest thing I’d eaten in the Fae world had been amazingly delicious cupcakes lightly sprinkled with a water sprite’s tears. It hadn’t exactly been a normal snack, but I didn’t think the creature who’d made them would have wanted to curse me.

Maybe it didn’t have anything to do with the Fae world at all. “Do you think it could somehow have something to do with Tony, or the haunted mansion?” I asked. Either one of those seemed a more likely source for the curse than the Fae world.

“Or what about those MIB agents?” Artemis asked. “Maybe they put some kind of cursed tracker on you?”

Mom shook her head. “I’ve never heard of either of those things. No, it has to be some kind of witchcraft at work, like what happened to my friend.”

I didn’t disagree, but Mom’s theory—like pretty much every single half-assed explanation we’d come up with so far—seemed possible but not provable. I was pretty sure Big Mac wouldn’t have cursed me though. Maybe I had better call her to ask.

Just then there was a knock at the front door, and Lola rushed in without waiting for an invitation. Her face was red, her eyes looked swollen like she’d been crying, and she could barely meet my eyes. “Cali, I’m so sorry—”

I rushed over and enveloped her in a hug. “I’m so glad you’re okay, and I’m so sorry for getting mad you last night,” I blurted out. My shiny new curse hadn’t been the only thing on my mind today. “What’s going on?”

“Can we talk in private?” she asked.

I nodded and we moved into the living room. Lola turned to face me, her eyes filled with tears. “I woke up this morning naked, alone, and on a nearby trailhead. I still don’t know how I ended up there or what I did before that.” She wiped at her eyes. “I realize that I have a shifting problem, and I need to do something about it. I talked to Big Mac and she said she couldn’t help me, but if I was really serious about fixing my problem there was one place I could go: a hidden magical library on Vancouver Island. Apparently it’s like a gajillion years old. She thinks maybe I can find something there that can help me.”

“Wait, what?” I perked up. “An ancient magical library, full of ancient magical wisdom?” Maybe this was my chance to learn more about my curse—including, I hoped, how to break it.

“Well, yeah. I think that’s the point. Apparently they’ve got books on like, everything magic, or whatever. And somehow it’s super dangerous, I guess.”

I groaned internally. *Of course it is. Not even when I’m facing down a deadly curse can anything ever be easy for me.*

“I just came by to tell you that Jay and I are leaving to go find it,” Lola said. “We’re leaving tonight.”

“That’s perfect!” I grinned.

“What?” She blinked, confused.

“I’ll explain on the way,” I said, “but I’m coming with you.”

**Episode 717**

XAVIER

“Great work everyone,” I said as we wrapped up a training session with Rishika. “I’m proud of you all for pushing yourselves so hard. Everyone needs to be on their A-game right now. We don’t know when or how Silas will come after us, we only know that he will. And every bit of training and preparation that we can fit in will go a long way toward keeping us all alive.”

I forced my lips into a small, proud smile as I took in the sweaty, red faces of the pack members clustered around Rishika and me—even though I wanted nothing more than to grimace. *Pretty damn hypocritical, talking about them being on their A-game when I’ve never been further from my own A-game.*

I’d been far too distracted by everything that was going on with Cali, and with Ava. I sighed. What the hell was I supposed to do about Ava? She was alive again, running free in the world and apparently hanging out close enough to the pack house that it was a huge problem for everyone—not just her former mate who had killed her.

The thought sent my insides into convulsions. I didn’t want to think about that, about taking her life and the complete fury and sense of betrayal that had led to that. I hadn’t been lying the other night; I regretted killing her. Ava and I had made so many wonderful memories together and even now—when so much time had passed since she had died, and with Cali in my life—I still couldn’t quite believe I’d done it.

But that didn’t mean I wanted her around. She was back somehow, and I could only assume my father had something to do with that. He’d always taken such great pleasure in messing with my head. But I’d moved on. I had a new mate now, one I loved with everything I had. There wasn’t room in my life for Ava anymore. So why couldn’t I get her out of my head?

I’d been so close to telling Joss everything this morning, especially when she’d given me that steely Luna look. But what was going on between Ava and me wasn’t anyone else’s business. Every time I thought about it, I got more and more confused. Were Ava and I still mates? And, if so, where did that leave Cali and me? It was a mindfuck I wasn’t even remotely prepared to deal with.

I glanced toward the forest. Maybe I should go out for another run. Not to find Ava again, of course, but to try to clear my head and sink into my wolf mind and take a break from everything else—

There was a flash of silver on the edge of the tree line, and then Greyson was tearing out of the woods in his wolf form, holding something in his mouth. Was that… Was he carrying a bundle of rags? He shifted mid-stride and sprinted the remaining distance toward me, tossing the bundle to my feet. His eyes were absolutely wild, his pupils only pinpricks, and I took a step back. I’d never seen him completely lose his shit like this. I didn’t know which was more likely at this point: for him to attack me, or start crying. I also didn’t know which would be worse.

“Um, what the hell is going on?” I asked.

“Something happened to Cali!” he cried, his voice hitching and his breath coming in large gulps. “I’ve been getting these weird feelings the last couple of days, feelings like she’s in danger, and I just found her clothes all torn up in the woods. I scoped out the area but couldn’t find any signs. We have to go after her!”

*What the hell is he talking about?* I shook my head and held up my hand. “Whoa, whoa, Greyson. Hey, calm down.”

He snarled. “I can’t—”

“Cali’s fine!” I interrupted quickly. I needed to defuse this before he truly became unhinged. “She’s in the kitchen with Joss.”

He took a step back. “What?” Greyson’s eyes snapped over to the kitchen window, where we could both clearly see Cali inside, talking to what looked like a very displeased Joss. Greyson looked down at the clothing on the ground and then back at Cali, blinking slowly and shaking his head.

I rolled my eyes. *Guess it was only a matter of time before Greyson lost his marbles. Just couldn’t handle the pressure.* I snorted.

Just then Big Mac came striding across the lawn, whispering conspiratorially with Mrs. Smith. Greyson and I turned toward them just as Mr. Smith threw a hand over her mouth and gasped, “Oh no!”

Greyson frowned, and I felt his energy shift. I knew he was probably still reeling from Silas’s little maternity stunt earlier. Maybe that was where all his Cali delusions had come from. The guy had mommy issues, and now he was cracking.

Greyson rushed over to them with a snarl. “What are you two gossiping about?”

*Jesus, dude.* I quickly followed after him. He looked like a bomb that was about to explode, and I didn’t really want to watch him eviscerate Big Mac and Mrs. Smith for no good reason.

Big Mac waved him off. “It’s nothing.”

He just glared at them both. “Keeping secrets again, are we?” His eyes narrowed on Mrs. Smith. “*Mom*.”

I tensed. I honestly couldn’t imagine what it would be like to learn that a woman you’d always known as a friend and pack mate had been your mother all along, but I couldn’t bring myself to feel sorry for him. He still had a mother, after all, and once he was finished with his hissy fit, he and Mrs. Smith had the chance to build a real family together.

Not all of us were so lucky. If I ever got a second chance to have my mom in my life, you could bet I wouldn’t be stomping around like an angsty teenager about the whole thing.

The manipulation was obvious, but it worked. Mrs. Smith shot Big Mac an apologetic glance and sighed. “It’s Lola.”

“Oh.” That fire in Greyson’s eyes snuffed out as he seemed to lose interest.

“What about Lola?” I pressed. Cali would want to know if something had happened to her best friend.

Big Mac glowered at Mrs. Smith, then turned that fearsome look on me. “Just a heads up, she and Jay aren’t going to be back anytime soon. I had to send her to the Obaltarion.”

“The what?” Greyson asked.

“It’s a big ancient library. Super magical, super dangerous.”

He frowned. “You sent two of my pack members to a super dangerous library? Why?”

I rolled my eyes. He hadn’t seemed to care about those pack members ten seconds earlier, so I didn’t see why he was throwing his weight around now.

Big Mac shrugged. “Lola’s having serious trouble with her shifting and she was desperate to find some kind of answer, some kind of cure.”

I noticed Greyson look down at the bundle of clothes in his hand while Big Mac spoke. He wasn’t even listening, really. He waved a hand. “Fine.”

“Have you told Cali yet?” I asked.

Big Mac raised an eyebrow at me. “Do I look like a carrier pigeon?”

*I’ll take that as a no.*

I glanced over at Greyson. He’d want to be the one to break the news to Cali, I assumed. But he still looked distracted, almost completely disinterested. “I need to talk to Joss,” he muttered, glancing at the kitchen window. Joss was alone in the kitchen now. He strode off without waiting for a reply.

I watched him go, trying to parse this new puzzle. *That’s interesting. It almost seems like Greyson’s avoiding talking to Cali, even though he was literally just ranting about protecting her. Did something happen between them?*

A small bubble of hope welled up in my chest.

“What’s up with him?” Big Mac asked.

I shrugged, and the two women continued their stroll across the lawn. Mrs. Smith, I noticed, kept looking back toward the house, like she was trying to catch another glimpse of Greyson.

I headed into the house. Since Greyson didn’t seem interested in the job, I’d be the one to break the news to Cali about Lola. It was so strange that he hadn’t tripped over himself to go talk to her… The hope that had bubbled in my chest suddenly grew. Maybe Cali had finally made her choice. Maybe she’d told Greyson that she hadn’t chosen him, and that was why he was avoiding her. And maybe that was why he’d left for his run in such a huff this morning.

I’d find out the truth soon enough, right from Cali’s lips.

A smile tugged at my mouth as I bounded up the stairs to Cali’s room. Were we finally going to get the chance I’d been wanting for so long? I knocked lightly on the door. “Cali?”

There was no answer.

I pushed the door open—and locked eyes with a topless Cali.

**Episode 718**

AVA

I spun around, my own wide eyes meeting Xavier’s shocked ones, and I saw his gaze slip down from my face and lock onto my breasts. Heat flared low in my belly, and I bit my lip. No, this wasn’t the right time for this. I needed to… needed to stop all this. I grabbed my tank top off the edge of the bed and slowly tugged it on. My fingers shook, but not just with lust.

Joss had been absolutely relentless in the kitchen earlier. She’d asked me so many questions about where I’d been going and what I’d been doing, they’d all made my head spin. It was getting harder and harder to keep my story straight. Joss was obviously suspicious.

It felt like it was only a matter of time before I was found out, and the worst part of that was that I’d lose time with Xavier. After our encounter in the woods, when we’d been our true selves, it had become very clear that he didn’t want me—Ava—anymore. Our time was over. The best I could hope for now was a few more stolen moments with him as Cali.

Xavier’s eyes were dark with lust as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. “We should talk.”

The trembling in my fingers increased, and I sat down on the edge of the bed and tucked my hands beneath my thighs to hide them. Did he want to talk about Joss and all her suspicions? “Sure. Um, what about?”

Somehow, the idea of Xavier being suspicious of me made everything feel much worse. Ever since we’d met in the woods, I hadn’t been able to shake the nervousness I felt around him. After all this time, something about him still had the power to completely unnerve me.

“It’s about Lola.”

I blinked. “Lola?”

He nodded. “Her shifting problems have gotten worse.”

“Mmm? Really?” I had no fucking clue was he was talking about.

He eyed me. “Yeah. She’s going to get some help. It sounds like it’s going to be pretty dangerous.”

“Oh no,” I said, trying to add some emotion to my voice, though I didn’t know how much was appropriate for this situation. “Well, I think that’s good that she’s getting help.”

He frowned at my response, and I immediately knew I’d fucked up. “I kind of expected you to dash out of here right away. You know, the classic Cali rescue mission.”

Shit! I needed to get this situation under control. I stood up and moved close enough that his scent washed over me, calming the nerves that fluttered just beneath my skin. “How can I leave right now when things are so complicated with us? I’m not leaving you.”

His breath hitched. “What are you saying? Are you… Are you choosing me?”

I stepped even closer. I couldn’t stop myself. It was that same pull I’d always felt with Xavier, tugging me into his orbit. I couldn’t help myself. And when I answered, it wasn’t as Cali. It was 100% Ava.

“Yes, Xavier. I choose you.”

His lips crashed into mine and his hands threaded into my hair, yanking my head back to deepen his access. His teeth sank into my bottom lip, and his tongue moved into my mouth when I gasped. I completely lost myself. For the first time since I’d come back to life, I felt truly alive. It was like something inside me was melting, all that anger and betrayal and hurt giving way to something animalistic. Something true and simple. Just me and my mate. In our time together, no matter how hard we’d fought, sex had always been where we’d come back together, and this felt no different.

This was everything I’d wanted from the moment I’d seen him again.

My mate and me. Together again.

He lifted me up, and my legs locked around his waist. He pressed me into the bed, letting his tongue and lips work their way down my neck. I tugged his shirt off then dragged my nails down his chest, leaving angry red lines in their wake. Xavier groaned, and we roughly yanked away every scrap of clothing we could find on each other.

He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled me into his lap, his hands cupping my breasts.

The softest moan slipped through my lips, and he rolled my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, feeling it tighten and harden before he covered it with his mouth. God, this felt so good. So right.

His teeth grazed my nipple and my hips bucked against his, a keening sound slipping through my lips. My back hit the bed, and his tongue burned a trail down my stomach, and my breath caught when he dragged his tongue over the waistline of my panties. Sensation coiled between my legs and I moaned, dragging my fingers through his hair. I wanted all the layers between us to disappear, but he took his sweet time, licking my slit over the fabric, nibbling at the inside of my thighs when I opened myself to him with a whine.

His fingers finally hooked around my panties and slid them off. He lifted one leg and then the other, letting my knees drape over his shoulders. His breath washed over me—I was practically dripping for him—and he gently spread me apart, lapping at my core.

I let out a small scream of pleasure, my hips canting up against his mouth. I couldn’t control it. This felt too good. Too perfect.

My cry made him pause, but I gripped his hair tightly, holding him in place, and he experimentally dragged his tongue over my center once more. I let out a low moan that shifted into a squeak when he wrapped his lips around my clit, sucking gently. My hips came up off the bed again, and he pinned them back down to the mattress.

Slowly, repeatedly, he teased me, licking and sucking on my most sensitive area, then covering my hips and thighs with kisses when I got too close.

"Please," I finally begged, moving my hips erratically, almost crazy in my desire. God, I’d never needed to come so badly in my entire life.

He slid a single finger inside me, gently rubbing against that mass of nerves as his tongue flicked at my clit. "Please what?"

My entire body jerked, and my slick muscles coiled around his digit. I was more than ready. I was rigged to explode.

“Please, Xavier—”

He slid a second finger inside me, adding more pressure to my g-spot and sucking my clit lightly. My hips tried to move, seeking any kind of friction, but he pinned them against the mattress. There was no place for that tensile energy to escape, so it all collected between my legs. I felt close enough that the lightest of touches would send me over the edge. His lips pressed a trail of kisses down my thighs, and I literally screamed in frustration.

I emitted a strangled, frustrated cry, tugging sharply on his hair. “I want to come!”

His fingers slid out of me, and I whined as he crawled up my body. He kissed me again, and I kissed him back hungrily, moaning at the taste of myself on his tongue. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so needy, so desperate.

Only my mate could make me feel this way. I reached down and wrapped my fingers around his hard cock, gently working them up and down his length. “Please,” I murmured against his lips.

With moan, he finally positioned himself between my legs, pressing himself against my hot, wet entrance. I gasped at the initial intrusion, and then moaned as he slid deeper. I felt so complete, having my mate inside me once again. He took his time, allowing my body to adjust and stretch around him, and I was panting by the time his pelvis pressed against mine, unaccustomed to the fullness and still desperate for release.

Xavier began to move inside me, circling and thrusting gently. His fingers entwined with mine, pressed above my head as he kissed me slowly, his tongue sliding against mine at the same pace that he thrust inside me. My legs wrapped around his waist in response, and I met him for every thrust. This was perfect. Everything I’d dreamed of. I never wanted it to end.

“Xavier,” I softly moaned. I was so close to my orgasm, I could practically taste it.

He broke away from my mouth with a moan, thrusting faster and deeper, losing himself in the sensation. One hand released mine and slid down to where we were joined. His thumb pressed against my clit, flooding me with that last bit of pleasure I needed.

My hand slid down to tug on my ear as the world narrowed to pure sensation. I came hard, clenching onto him with a small scream of pleasure—

And then everything stopped.

Still on top of me, still inside me, Xavier looked directly into my eyes and horror flashed across his face.

He jerked back, breaking our connection and scrambling off the mattress entirely. “You’re not Cali.”

**Episode 719**

XAVIER

Every ounce of pleasure and desire dried up the instant I saw Cali tug at her ear. I blinked, shook my head, my mind reeling as I desperately tried to process whatever the hell I’d just seen. I couldn’t understand it—my brain and my eyes were telling me two very different stories.

I scanned the woman on the bed. She looked exactly like Cali. She had Cali’s eyes, her hair, her heart-shaped mouth. And yet… I knew with utter certainty that I was staring at Ava. I knew it deep in my bones, my body knew it in a way that defied all logic.

The way she’d kissed me, moved underneath me, the lilt in her voice as she’d begged me to make her come, the rough way she’d grabbed my hair when I wasn’t moving quite fast enough for her… And then that tug at her ear. I’d seen it dozens of times.

But not with Cali.

She sat up, still completely naked, her skin flushed pink from the force of her release. She looked so much like Cali that it made my heart hurt. It twisted my brain in on itself, telling it not to worry, that I was imagining things. I still couldn’t stop myself from taking another step back, from putting distance between myself and this stranger wearing my mate’s face.

No, not a stranger. *Ava*. My first mate.

My mouth went dry, and I took in a deep, shuddering breath, fighting the nausea that was rapidly rising in my stomach. “Ava.”

It wasn’t a question, wasn’t even an accusation so much as a statement of truth.

She stared at me with Cali’s face, Cali’s wide eyes, but she didn’t refute my claim. She didn’t insist that she was someone else, the someone she’d pretended to be when all this had started. When she’d let me kiss her, let me touch her, let me be inside of her, all the while thinking I was with the woman I loved.

Rage slammed into me, and I suddenly leaped back onto the mattress, pouncing on her and pinning her down when she yelped and tried to back away. My fingers wrapped tight around her wrists as I pinned her to the bed that still smelled like sex, no longer playing the part of willing and eager lover.

“What the fuck are you playing at?” I snarled, getting right in her face, my nose inches from her own. Then a new and terrifying thought hit me, and I gripped her wrists so tightly, I felt my knuckles turning white. “What have you done with Cali?”

She jerked under my grip, the blood fleeing her face. “Please, Xavier. Wait, I can explain.”

“*Explain?*” I roared. “You’d better start right now, before I kill you all over again!” I was dimly aware of her face turning ashen, her eyes widening and her pupils narrowing to terrified pinpricks. She knew I meant every word I’d just said. I’d killed her once already; I could do it again now in half a second. I doubted anyone would blame me.

Her body was trembling beneath me, and her chest let out little hitching breaths. Despite the fact that she wore Cali’s face, I didn’t soften, didn’t ease my unforgiving grip on her. I needed to know where Cali was, what had happened to her. Had Ava hurt her?

“P-p-please, Xavier,” she tried. It was Cali’s voice, but the tone and cadence were all off. How had I not noticed it before? How had I never picked up on all these clues, all these signs that had been right in front of me, screaming that this woman wasn’t my mate? This was some kind of witchcraft I’d never seen before, never even heard of, and my blood ran cold as my mind considered all the different ways Cali could have been hurt just so that Ava could wear her face.

“WHAT HAVE YOU DOWN WITH CALI?” I shouted into her face, and she let out a terrified cry right back, her eyes slamming shut and her face turning away from mine.

“Cali’s f-fine!” she managed, her eyes welling up with tears. “She’s fine. I’ve n-never even met her. When I… when I came back, this was what I l-l-looked like. It’s not my f-fault!”

Fury was pounding beneath my eyes, pumping through my veins and wrapping tight around my chest. She didn’t get to play the victim here, not after everything she’d done. “I don’t want to hear your fucking sob story. I want you to explain what the fuck is going on. What game are you playing here?”

Tears rolled down her colorless face. She was shaking so hard she could barely speak, and I realized the hands I was pinning so tightly to the mattress were turning white. I let go and backed off, if only so she’d calm down enough to answer my questions.

She sat up, clutching the blanket to her chest as tears rolled down her cheeks. “Please, Xavier. I didn’t mean for this to happen!” She clambered onto her knees, scrambling closer to me in a body that suddenly seemed like a stranger’s. “You can’t tell me you didn’t feel it too. You wanted me. I know it. I felt it too!”

“Yes! I wanted *Cali*!” I roared. “I wanted my mate!” I stood and began to pace around the bedroom. I had to physically restrain myself from wrapping my hands around her throat and watching the light go out in Cali’s stolen eyes.

I didn’t understand how or why this was happening, and it felt like the floor was falling out from beneath my feet. How long had Ava been pretending? How many of the new memories I’d thought I’d been making with Cali had been with Ava?

Ava cried harder, sobs racking her chest. “I’m your mate too, Xavier! You can’t deny the connection between us. It’s still there!”

I froze, disgust washing over me. How could she say that? After all the lies, after pretending to be someone else just so she could get close to me…

The realization hit me. “You’re working with Nolan, aren’t you?”

She didn’t respond, and I realized suddenly that the past was repeating itself. I thought back to that night in the woods when I’d come across Ava’s wolf, and the strong connection I’d felt to her then. “I never should have let you go that night in the woods. For a second, I thought…” I trailed off. For years, I’d felt so much regret over killing Ava, for letting myself lose control like that. And when I’d seen her again, alive and seemingly well—

“You thought what?” Ava asked.

I sneered. “I thought wrong.”

She moved to the edge of the bed, still clutching the blanket to her chest as a meager defense against my wrath. Her red-rimmed eyes still held fear, but there was something else there now, something that looked a lot like hope.

“Xavier,” she breathed, saying my name like her favorite prayer. “I’m so sorry, but don’t you think that this can mean something? We both felt it, I know we did. Things aren’t over between us. Maybe this is our second chance. Maybe now we can put everything right, leave all that ugliness behind us.”

I stood there frozen, unable to believe what she was saying to me after all the betrayal she’d caused. She stood up and placed a hand on my chest. I looked down at Cali’s hand on my chest and then up at Ava. How could she be so deluded?

I grabbed her wrist to push her hand away, and her bracelet slid down her arm and around her wrist just as my hand made contact. A sudden shock ran through me, and Cali’s face suddenly shimmered to reveal a flicker of Ava’s behind it.

Even though I knew the truth already, seeing the shift stunned me so much that I stumbled back, breaking contact with the bracelet. Just like that, Cali’s face snapped back into place over Ava’s. I thought for a second I might throw up. How could I ever have thought this was Cali? My mate? And how could Ava have let me believe it for so long?

I opened my mouth to tell her in no uncertain terms that we would never be together ever again, but then a pounding at the door cut me off.

“Xavier!” Joss called through the closed door. “Uh, the entire pack house can hear you shouting. What’s going on in there?”

Ava looked up at me, her eyes wide and desperate. For a moment I thought she might ask me to cover for her, to protect her against the Redwood pack. And then that desperation shifted into horror and she suddenly shifted into her wolf form and leaped toward the window, shattering the glass and making her escape.

**Episode 720**

VIOLET

The sun was high in the sky by the time I woke up in my bed at Lola and Cali’s apartment. I blinked the offending brightness away and rolled onto my side with a wince. My muscles ached, and I groaned a bit—then sat bolt upright as the events of yesterday came rushing back to me.

Fighting that Rogue and chasing Charlie halfway across Minnesota in pursuit, then racing back to his dorm… and walking in to find Sandi sitting on his bed.

*Oh god.* What a nightmare. At least nobody had been home at the apartment by the time I’d snuck back in. I didn’t think I could have handled any more awkwardness at that point. It had been bad enough trying to explain myself to Sandi, and watching Charlie also try to explain why he’d been sneaking naked back into his dorm room with a naked girl in tow. It had been so horrifying that I’d pretty much just bailed and left Charlie to clean up the mess we’d made.

I groaned and tried to push the embarrassing memories out of my head.

I reached over to my phone, which was charging on the nightstand. I’d pretty much passed out as soon as I’d gotten home last night—everything had just been so chaotic, and I was exhausted. But Charlie had probably texted me after he’d settled things with Sandi. He’d probably wanted to check on me after the crazy night we’d had.

There were no new messages in my inbox. *Oh*. Disappointment pinched at me, but I brushed it off. He’d had a hell of a night too, probably more so once I’d left and he’d had to deal with Sandi. Plus he was still trying to come to terms with his new reality, with being a werewolf and everything that came with it. Things would never be the same for him. When that Rogue had bitten him, it had changed the trajectory of his entire life. It was a lot to handle. It was okay if texting me wasn’t at the top of his to-do list, but there was no reason I couldn’t just text *him*. Hopefully he wasn’t angry with me for leaving him to deal with Sandi alone last night.

*Hey*, I wrote. *I’m so sorry I panicked and just ran away and left you to deal with Sandi. I hope everything worked out.*

I was ready to set my phone aside and focus on getting ready when I saw those three little dots appear on the screen. He was already writing back!

Then the three dots disappeared, but no new message popped up.

I frowned, bringing my knees up to my chest while I watched the text thread. The three dots were back again, but then they disappeared again with no new message. What was he writing and then *not* sending?

I texted him again. *Are you okay?*

The three dots appeared again immediately, and this time a message came through. But it wasn’t a good one: *Fine*.

That was it. Just *fine.* With the period and everything.

I wasn’t the biggest social butterfly, but even I knew when “fine” definitely did not mean *fine*. I groaned and slumped back against the pillows. Were things already ruined between us? How could I have been so stupid, sneaking naked into a dorm with my mate, who just happened to have a human girlfriend?

*Guess love really does make you crazy*.

I heard a door slam in the apartment and heard Lola chattering away, probably to Jay. I leaped out of bed immediately. I could definitely use some girl talk. Lola and Jay were mates, right? Maybe she’d have some advice for how I could navigate this huge mess.

Before I reached the door, Lola walked in. “Oh, good. You’re awake,” she said. “We need to talk.”

That didn’t sound good. I frowned. “What’s going on?”

Lola took a seat on the edge of the bed I’d been sleeping in and patted the spot next to her. I didn’t sit. She shrugged. “All right then. Cali, Jay, and I have to go find a library. A very dangerous library.”

I blinked. That was about as clear as mud. And wasn’t the phrase “dangerous library” an oxymoron? Paper cuts weren’t fun, but they hardly qualified as dangerous. “What? Why? How can a library possibly be dangerous? When are we leaving?”

This abrupt quest was going to be a problem where Charlie was concerned. Would he agree to come on a big journey to find a dangerous… library, with a bunch of people he hardly knew? Wasn’t school still going on right now, too? I didn’t want to throw another wrench into his life, but there was no way I was going to leave him behind.

Lola shook her head. “No, you don’t understand. You’re not coming.”

My jaw dropped. “What?”

“It’s too dangerous,” she said. “Cali and Jay are only coming because they have to, but there’s no point putting more people at risk.”

I crossed my arms and resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Lola was being super condescending. Ugh, why did everyone think it was their responsibility to protect me? Yeah, I was young, but I’d been through more than my fair share of shit, and I’d come out of it just fine. Plus, I was practically an adult, and I was more than capable of taking care of myself.

They thought they were protecting me, but all they were really doing was isolating me, excluding me, and leaving me all alone.

My eyes began to burn with the beginning of tears, but I held them back. I wasn’t going to give her another reason to think I was some kind of baby. “Fine,” I said brightly—too brightly. I sounded a little unhinged. “No problem!”

Lola’s expression softened. “You can stay here as long as you want, okay? You don’t have to go back to Oregon if you don’t want to. Make yourself at home. I know you’re still getting to know your mate, and you’ll want to stick around. Plus you know you’re always welcome at Cali’s parents’ house.”

She stood up and gently wrapped her arms around me. Despite myself, I hugged her back.

“We’ll see each other soon,” she said softly. “Hopefully.”

\*\*\*\*

By that afternoon, I’d already gotten sick of hanging around in the apartment all by myself. It wasn’t big by any means, but I was used to Lola and Jay and even Cali and Artemis’s voices filling the space. Now it was just me. Left behind, like always.

I checked my phone for what felt like the twentieth time. Still nothing more from Charlie. Nothing beyond his obviously unhappy *fine*.

Unsure of what to do and feeling like I was going to lose my mind if I spent any more time alone in the apartment, I ran to the woods and shifted, running over to his dorm building. But, of course, I didn’t dare go inside and knock on his door.

So I hung out in the woods, like a creeper, waiting for him to come out.

When he finally came out of the building, he was thankfully alone. I stepped out of the woods and motioned to him. “Charlie!” I whisper-yelled.

I thought his expression darkened when he saw me, but that might have been a trick of the light. He glanced around to make sure nobody saw us and then headed my way.

As soon as he reached me, I jumped to apologize for everything he’d gone through last night. “I’m so sorry for leaving! I just totally panicked. What happened? Did you smooth things over?”

On the way over, I’d kind of been hoping that Sandi had left him in a huff and that Charlie had realized that Sandi wasn’t the right one for him, that maybe there was someone he had much more in common with… But I could tell just from the look on his face that my little fantasy probably wasn’t going to go the way I’d hoped. He looked angry—at me.

Charlie shook his head and scoffed. “You shouldn’t have come here. Things are already complicated enough for me without wolf girls hanging around outside my dorm.”

His words were like a punch to my gut, and the pain must have been clear on my face because his expression softened. “Listen, I appreciate you helping me out, but I’ve had some time to think about last night, and… this is all just too fucked up and complicated for me. I love Sandi. I love school. I’ve got my whole life here, and I don’t want to mess that up with a bunch of crazy wolf shit. I just want to get back to my normal life.”

Each word made dread and fear wrap tighter around my chest. He was leaving me. Just like Lola and Cali. Just like Lilac. I was going to be all alone. “But I *am* a part of your normal life,” I blurted out, desperate to keep him. “I’m your mate!”

As soon as I said it, I wanted to take the words back. This wasn’t how I’d wanted to tell him, and I knew how it would sound to drop this bomb on him when he was trying to put up some boundaries.

Somehow, his reaction was even worse than I’d imagined. He recoiled with a grimace. “Your *mate*?” He shook his head. He looked horrified. Disgusted. “I think I’d know if we were mates. Just go, Violet. Leave me alone.”

**Episode 721**

Mom wrapped her arms tight around me. “I wish I could come with you,” she whispered into my ear.

We stood outside the airport with Lola, Jay, and Artemis. Once Lola had told me about her plan to find this apparently dangerous library—I still didn’t understand how that was a thing—and I’d told her all about my freaky and mysterious curse and how perusing the curses section of an ancient, magical library might be just the thing to put the pep back in my step and remove my terrifying and literally heart-stopping magical prison tat, everything had moved very quickly.

Mom had been reluctant to send her ailing and cursed daughter off on a quest to find a magical library, but since she didn’t have any better ideas on how to cure me, she’d given in pretty quickly—with the caveat that Artemis would join us. We’d managed to find a flight to Vancouver out of Minnesota that night, and from there all it had taken was a little time to pack our bags and a quick trip to the airport, and here we were. Going on yet another dangerous adventure, only this time instead of a Lupo Finale or a long and terrifying trip to the Fae world, we were hitting up a library, which sounded more like the plot of a children’s book than an actual thing that real-life people did.

But *c’est la vie*. My *vie*, at least. Breaking my curse and fixing Lola’s shifting addiction was more important than anything else.

I hugged Mom back, holding her as tightly as I could without hurting her, and breathing in her calming, floral scent, committing it to memory. I wished she could come with us too, but it was for the best that she stayed home. We’d just barely gotten her back from the brink of death and whether she was willing to admit it or not, my mom was still recovering from her prolonged illness. Plus, someone familiar needed to stick around in case Violet needed help.

I pulled back and smiled. “You're still recuperating,” I reminded her. “Besides, I made it through the Fae world—which, by the way, was hands down the worst place I’ve ever been, in every sense of the word—and was fine. I think I can handle a library.”

Mom smiled back, but I could tell it was forced. She’d worry from the moment I set foot inside the airport until the moment I was curse free. “I’ve never heard of this Obaltarion, and Vancouver is so far away… I can’t stand to think about you being sick and so far away from me.”

Lola butted in. “We have good directions from Big Mac,” she assured my mom. “We’re going to be fine.”

“I’ll be okay, Mom,” I said softly, reaching out and squeezing her hand. I understood where her anxiety was coming from. Leaving her here in the human world when she was dying had been the hardest thing I’d ever done, but look where we were now. It had more than been worth it, and I was certain this little jaunt to the library would pay off too. Or I was at least certain enough to take the risk, but for Mom’s sake I needed to show that I was all in. “I’m sure we’ll find information on how to cure me.”

“I know.” She held my hand in both of hers, clearly reluctant to let go. “But still, I’d feel better if I could be there. But at least Artemis will be there with you. It never hurts to have another Fae around, and I like the idea of my girls looking after each other.”

“Right.” I fought the urge to grimace at Mom saying “my girls” so casually. Like we were a package deal now, even though we were two very different people and maybe I wasn’t ready to be lumped in with my shiny new sister for the rest of my life and—

*Easy, Cali. One thing at a time.*

I forced myself to take a deep breath. Artemis’s powers were certain to come in handy, and if this library did turn out to be dangerous—but really, what was the biggest risk? A magical paper cut?—then I’d be happy to have her along for the journey.

A loud *yippee* sounded behind me, and I turned to see Artemis standing on the luggage belt, addressing the people clustered around it like she was their queen. “Bow down to me, humans of Minnesota! For I have tamed this mighty steed!”

Heat rushed into my face, and I ducked my head.

*Or maybe Artemis is going to make every moment of this trip as painful and embarrassing as possible.*

We hadn’t even checked any luggage, so I had no fucking clue what she was doing over there besides being obnoxious.Lola and Jay rushed over to usher Artemis off the luggage, and I turned back to my mom with a long-suffering sigh.

“Sure you don’t want her to stick around while we’re gone?” I asked, only half-joking.

She smiled and hugged me close again. “This will be good for you both. I can feel it. I love you, Cali.”

“I love you too. I’ll be in touch.”

By the time we were finally boarding the plane, it felt like an eternity had passed. An hour in a crowded public space with Artemis was like giving an entire classroom of kids a bunch of soda and candy and then setting them free in a toy store. She’d wanted everyone to know that she’d been to an airport before, and while we’d waited at our terminal for our plane to arrive and be prepared, she’d regaled us with the tale of her flight from Oregon with Violet. Twice.

I was seated beside Artemis, something I hadn’t thought twice about when we’d bought our tickets, but that I now sorely regretted. She read the security instructions from the card on the back of her seat, mouthing along and following the flight attendant’s hand gestures.

“That,” she said, gesturing with her arm just like she’d been taught, “is our emergency exit.”

I tried very hard to pretend I didn’t know her, and in front of me I heard Jay snicker. I kicked the back of his seat.

The plane took off and I watched through the window as Minnesota slowly disappeared behind the clouds. All of this was happening too fast for me to keep up. *I should probably get some rest while I can,* I thought, *but I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep a wink.*

I leaned back against my seat and closed my eyes, and despite the roller coaster I’d been through today, I managed to fall asleep almost immediately.

*I turned over in bed, sleepy and cozy and warm, and found Xavier next to me, staring down and looking at me tenderly. We were in his bed in his old house back in Oregon. He pulled me close and I sighed as his hands slid down my side, brushing along the side of my breast as he dipped his head down and kissed me. I pressed against him, ravenous in a way that only he could satisfy, and deepened the kiss. He nipped my full bottom lip, then trailed his mouth down my throat as his fingers skimmed over my stomach and down between my legs. I moaned and closed my eyes, lost in the sensations.*

*When I opened them again, I was with Greyson, back in a beautiful meadow in the Fae world. He was kissing me deeply, picking up right where Xavier and I had left off, his fingers skimming over my slick folds. I wrapped my arms tight around him and moaned against his lips as a single fingertip slid across my clit—*

*Xavier’s scent wrapped around me as he nipped and sucked at my throat. “You’re so gorgeous, tiger.” I blinked, confused, but bucked my hips when he slid two fingers into my dripping core, curling them just right—*

*And a fresh wave of pleasure slammed into me. “Come for me, sweetheart,” Greyson murmured against my throat. Desire sparked low in my belly, but I couldn’t keep up with the ever-changing dream.*

*I pulled back and shook my head. The setting shifted and suddenly I was standing in the woods and both Greyson and Xavier stood before me, speaking in unison. “I knew* *you’d choose me, Cali.”*

*An inexplicable rage burned through me and I shifted into a wolf and lunged at both of the men I loved. My teeth sank into flesh as I ripped out their throats—*

I lurched awake, gasping and shaking from the violent dream. My chest was on fire, and my head was spinning.

Ignoring Artemis’s questions, I unbuckled my seat belt and stumbled down the aisle toward the bathroom, pushing past the flight attendant who snapped something at me about landing soon. I didn’t stop until I reached the restroom.

I locked the door behind me and turned back to the dimly lit mirror, and then I took a deep breath and pulled up my shirt.

I gasped in horror, swaying—the dark veins had spread, swirling across my entire torso.

**Episode 722**

XAVIER

I raced through the woods in my wolf form, desperately trying to pick up Ava’s scent. I’d lost precious seconds while Joss had been banging on the door and demanding to know what was going on in Cali’s bedroom.

By the time Joss had finally burst in, no doubt worried by the sound of shattering glass, I was already shifting and leaping through the broken window after Ava. When I landed on the lawn outside, I caught a fleeting glimpse of Ava disappearing into the woods and I was after her like a shot.

Still, I wasn’t fast enough to catch up to her. I’d forgotten how fast she could be, especially when she tried. We’d spent countless hours racing through the woods together during our happier, younger days, and I’d never managed to beat Ava’s speed. It was probably good for her to have this one physical advantage over me. If I’d been able to catch her as quickly as I’d have liked, I probably would have ripped her throat out a second time without thinking twice.

My mind was still reeling from everything I’d seen and discovered, and with each second I tried to come to terms with the way my world had shifted, I grew more and more furious. How could she have betrayed me like that? I’d thought—foolishly—after seeing her alive in the woods, that we’d be able to go our separate ways. That my years of regret had taught me a thing or two about forgiveness, and that Ava coming back to life and being out there in the world somewhere—but far away from me—would be the best kind of solution. I could move on with Cali, a mate I loved and trusted. The woman who’d helped me piece my shattered heart back together.

And Ava could move on, too. Leave the history and baggage behind and live happily somewhere. Maybe she could find a new mate too. One who she would never fear, one who had never hurt her like I had.

But now I realized how fucking stupid I’d been to think that Ava and I could live peacefully in this world together. Any chance I might have given her had been ruined for good now that I knew what she’d been doing to me. Now I had one goal in mind: find Ava’s scent, track it to the source, and then end her for good.

What had I been thinking before? Getting soft and thinking she wasn’t my enemy anymore? She’d killed my mother, for god’s sake. And now it turned out she’d been parading around the pack house, pretending to be Cali.

Cali… Had Ava been telling the truth? Was she really fine? I knew I couldn’t trust a single poisonous word that came out of Ava’s lying mouth, no matter how much I desperately wanted to believe that Cali was truly safe.

What if Cali was in danger? Or worse? What if she was… I couldn’t even let myself think that far. No, I needed to focus on the task at hand: finding Ava. She was clearly dangerous, and I needed to stop her.

Suddenly, Greyson’s behavior earlier didn’t seem so unhinged. He’d found Cali’s clothes in the woods—but, I realized, they hadn’t been Cali’s clothes. Just like the woman I’d been spending time with hadn’t been Cali. They’d been *Ava’s* clothes.

It was all coming together now. This was why Cali had been acting so strangely lately—because she *wasn’t* Cali. How had I not realized this before? I should have known. I should have acted more quickly.

How could I call myself Cali’s mate when an imposter had been walking around with her face and I hadn’t even thought twice about it?

I finally caught Ava’s scent and put on a burst of speed, following it through the woods. I was so close…

“Xavier!” a taunting voice called out.

*Nolan.*

I put on another burst of speed. If he did anything to Cali—the real Cali—I would make him beg for death.

Suddenly, Nolan—strong and ferocious in his wolf form—leaped out ahead of me in the middle of a clearing. Rather than skidding to a stop, as I was sure he expected me to do, I kept moving as fast as my limbs could carry me and lunged forward to rip Nolan to shreds.

He dodged sideways at the last moment, coming so close to my claws that I felt the barest tip of them skim over him as he shifted back into his human form. He turned and watched me skid to a halt, *tsk*ing at me and shaking his head. “Xavier, allow me to invite you to think this through. If you kill me now, you’ll never find out what happened to Cali.” He raised his eyebrows and grinned at me smugly.

I was stuck, and he knew it. Rage and desperation hummed just beneath my skin, but I snarled and shifted back to my human form as well. I was so furious I couldn’t see straight. My whole body trembled with rage, and my wolf—still ravenous inside me—growled at me to end this here and now. To make both Nolan and Ava pay with their lives for all the harm they’d caused.

“Where is she?” I roared. “Where’s Cali?”

Nolan just shook his head. “All in good time.”

I took a step forward, scanning over his body, hyperaware of each vulnerable point I could sink my teeth into. “I know that you’re working with Ava,” I said. “What are you planning? If you wanted to kill me you could’ve tried it yourself. You’re a coward.”

He laughed, and my vision went red. I was going to murder him *so good*. “This is Silas, isn’t it?” I snapped. “His dark, twisted witch set this up.”

Nolan’s expression darkened, finally showing an emotion other than smug satisfaction. “I’m not part of your daddy’s twisted plans. I have plenty of my own reasons for wanting the Evers brothers dead. The Redwood pack has been a thorn in my side for as long as I can remember.” His teeth flashed in a feral smile. “I think it’s high time to rip it out.”

I took a long, deep breath, trying to stay focused, to keep my bloodlust from running the show when I needed to show restraint—if only for just long enough to determine where Cali was and how to find her. “What have you done with Cali?” I asked, trying to keep my voice low and calm. Reasonable. Or as close to reasonable as was possible when my world had been turned upside down. My mate was in danger, and a threat to both of those things was standing in front of me, smirking like the monster he truly was. “None of this is her fault. Leave her out of it. If you have a problem with me or my brothers, you can deal with us directly.”

“Oh, but this is so much more fun!” Nolan laughed, a big deep belly laugh that made me want to sink my teeth into his throat and tear at his flesh until that laugh turned into a blood-filled gurgle. “From what I’ve heard, your little mate doesn’t even know if she even *wants* to be your mate, does she? Sounds like she might want your Alpha brother.”

I growled, my fingers instinctively curling into tight fists. I hated to be reminded of that inconvenient little fact that Cali still didn’t know who to choose, and that all the progress I thought I’d finally made with her recently hadn’t been Cali at all. It had just been another layer of Nolan and Ava’s deception. He was right to laugh, I realized. He’d played me like the lovesick pup I was.

He laughed again. “See? It’s just too easy! I could have just attacked you outright, but Cali is kryptonite to you and Greyson. You both turn into blithering idiots whenever she turns up—of course I was going to use that. You’re both weak. And your little mate, she’s the weakest of all.”

“You’d better leave my mate out of this!” I shouted. “You—”

“Your mate?” he interrupted, his voice suddenly deadly soft. The quiet before a predator pounced. “Your *mate?* But your mates don’t tend to live very long, do they? Since when are you so sentimental, Xavier?” Nolan’s eyes narrowed, his voice hardening. “After all, you didn’t bat an eye when you killed my sister.”

That thin thread of control that I’d been holding onto snapped, and I shifted, ready to rip Nolan limb from limb.

He shifted as well, and as he lunged toward me I saw in a flash that he’d painted his nails silver. Just as we were about to collide in an explosion of teeth and fur and silver claws, I saw something moving out of the corner of my eye.

It was Ava, and she was moving fast.

I tried to adjust midair to throw them both off. I couldn’t take them both on at once, not when I’d have to be on alert to avoid Nolan’s claws.

But Ava slammed into Nolan—not me.

She shifted back to Cali’s form and stood in front of her brother. “Don’t kill him!” She glanced at me over her shoulder. I couldn’t read the expression in her eyes. Nolan shifted into his human form, and Ava turned back to him. “Not yet, anyway.”

Then Nolan grabbed something from behind a shrub and tossed her a bag. Before I could react, she spun around, pulling out a tranquilizer gun mid-motion, and shot me in the chest.

**Episode 723**

My rapidly growing curse marks haunted me for the rest of our journey. Artemis in particular had been adamant to know what had come over me on the plane, but I’d brushed it off and told her it was just motion sickness.

Still, I felt her eyes on me more than once as our journey continued, and she wasn’t the only one.

We stepped off the ferry to Victoria on Vancouver Island, and I zipped my jacket up as high as it could go, self-conscious about my marks spreading beyond the boundary of my torso. What did it mean that they were already spreading so fast? How much time did I have before the curse did what Mom’s friend’s curse had done and took away every part of me it touched? I’d been terrified enough when I’d thought the curse was limited to my heart, but now… I could barely breathe around the panic. What was to stop the curse from spreading to the rest of my body? From climbing down my arms and onto my hands? From creeping up my neck and finding a new home on my face?

God, that would really freak Mom out. Just another reason I had to find a cure at this library. I couldn’t go home to her wearing a curse mark face tattoo. I didn’t want any of my travel companions to know about the curse spreading. I didn’t want them to panic, mostly because I felt like I was keeping a lid on my own panic with just the barest shred of control, and if they freaked out then I would most definitely lose my fucking shit and go from the scrappy, lovable, glue of the friend group to the crazy woman with a face tattoo, rocking herself and sobbing in the corner.

It wouldn’t be a good look.

“Oh, it’s so beautiful here!” Lola cooed.

Artemis watched the ferry embark on its return journey and turned to me. “Do you remember what happened the last time we were on a boat, Cali?”

I wasn’t really paying attention. Instead I stared down at my phone, wondering—for the umpteenth time since I’d woken up on my bedroom floor with a curse mark over my heart—if I should call Xavier or Greyson. I knew deep in my bones that they would want to know about the curse, and that if something happened to me they’d be pissed I hadn’t told them about it, but I couldn’t bring myself to reach out to either one of them.

It was easy to rationalize my feelings. To remind myself that they were busy trying to take down Silas and it was best if I stayed out of their way until the threat had passed. I didn’t want to distract them and have someone end up getting hurt. It was a kind thing, I told myself, to not bring them into this until I had some concrete information to offer.

But I knew all that rationalizing was bullshit. I knew why I’d been dragging my feet about telling them. It was the same reason I’d stayed so long in Minnesota, more or less putting off my return to Oregon.

I hadn’t made my choice yet, and I didn’t know how I could face either one of them again while my heart was torn in two.

“*Cali?*” Lola gasped, her eyes wide. She pointed at my neck. “Oh my god!”

I instinctively clapped my hand over my neck to cover up what I was almost certain she’d just seen. Were the curse marks spreading already? “What?” I asked.

They were all staring at me in horror now. “It’s the veins,” Jay explained. “They’re all the way up to your neck.”

“It’s getting worse!” Lola cried.

I gulped. Somehow, knowing it was coming hadn’t helped a bit. “Stop staring at me!” I snapped. Lola’s panic was triggering my own, and we didn’t have time to lose our minds over this. We needed to focus and get the hell into that library. “Lola, pull up the notes you took. Everything Big Mac told you. Are we close to the library?”

Her hand was trembling as she pulled her phone out of her pocket, but she managed to complete the task. “Okay, so we’re looking for Ross Bay Cemetery.” She plugged the address into her phone and brightened. “Hey, it’s less than a mile away!”

The mile we ran to get to the library was easily the fastest mile I’d ever run in my life, and we soon arrived at the entrance to a completely desolate and overgrown cemetery. Fog rolled in from the shore, rendering most of the headstones invisible. Though, from what we could tell, nobody had been buried at Ross Bay in centuries.

Lola shivered. “It is creepy as fuck here. This better not be some practical joke from Big Mac.”

I looked around, feeling anxious and impatient. “What’s next?”

Lola consulted her phone again. “The entrance is a mausoleum. We’re looking for the Eliades family.”

“Let’s split up,” Jay suggested. “But be careful—we don’t know what kind of ‘danger’ Big Mac was talking about.”

We all split up to search the larger structure. I didn’t have to glance through headstones for long before Jay called out, “It’s here!”

We all rushed over. He was standing in front of a crumbling door that seemed to lead directly into the hillside. Lola frowned. “This? There’s a massive magical library stuck in the hill?”

I shrugged. Now that we were here, I wasn’t leaving until I’d searched every inch of this damn cemetery. “I’ve seen weirder shit. But how do we get inside?” I pushed the door, but it didn’t budge.

Artemis appeared at my side. “Stand back.” She held up her hands and used a burst of energy to try to blast the door open. There was a loud bang that seemed to echo around us for miles, and a huge cloud of purple glittery smoke… but nothing happened. Despite myself, I felt a little relieved. I’d half-expected her to cave in the whole cemetery with the force of that blast.

I moved next to her again and raised my hands. “Maybe we can try it together?” It had worked before, when Artemis had forced Xavier and Greyson apart after we’d gotten back from the Fae world. I’d even seen that same purple cloud.

But the memory of that day sent a bolt of agony through me and I dropped to my knees, clutching my chest.

“Cali!” Lola cried. She rushed over to me as Artemis wrapped her arms tight around me.

“Are you all right?” my sister asked.

Before I could respond, I heard a strange voice. “Well, well, well. What have we here?”

We all looked up and saw that a gargoyle on top of the mausoleum had shaken to life. *What the what?*

Jay instinctively shifted, snarling up at the gargoyle, who eyed him with a smirk. Lola grabbed my arm, pointing wordlessly around us, her breath hitching with fear.

All around the cemetery, shadowy figures had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. The four of us crowded together, and Artemis moved into a fighting stance. “Back. *Off*,” she snarled at the ghosts.

Lola had gone pale, looking around helplessly and pushing herself into Jay’s side. “What do we do now?”

Suddenly the gargoyle stretched, sounding loud cracks through the fresh, piney air. Enormous clouds of dust billowed down onto us. “Wow,” he said brightly. “You have *no* idea how good that feels! I’ve been asleep for ages. Centuries, really.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Why’d you wake up now?”

The gargoyle shrugged. “Well, you’re Fae, aren’t you? It’s not often we get Fae around these parts! Had to get a look at what you think you’re up to.”

The ghosts had crowded closer to us now, and I could hear them murmuring about us to each other.

“What in the world is he wearing?”

“Are those… breeches on women?”

“Is that really how women are wearing their hair these days? Her head looks like the backside of a horse!”

I waved my arms to make them back the fuck up and turned to the gargoyle. Maybe I would have been scared of it at a different time in my life, but I’d dealt with my fair share of scary creatures in the Fae world, and I knew I could handle a gargoyle. “We need to get inside the library,” I told him firmly. “Is there like, a special key, or…?”

The gargoyle puffed out its chest, proudly displaying the key around its neck.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “Uh, that. Would you open the door for us?”

Lola pulled me back and whispered, “Cali, you can’t just *ask* him that! Big Mac said it would be dangerous, remember?”

But the gargoyle was already eyeing us with interest. “Normally I don’t do this, but I’ve gotta admit, I’m pretty curious to see what a couple of Fae and”—he shot a glance at Jay and Lola—“two werewolves are doing hanging out together.”

Surprisingly nimbly for a creature made of stone, the gargoyle hopped down and slid the key into the lock. My jaw dropped. Was it really going to be this easy? There had to be a catch, right?

The gargoyle stood aside with a dramatic flourish as the doors swung open to reveal a gaping black hole.

**Episode 724**

Lola approached the doorway, but before she could go in, I grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her back. Friends don’t let friends walk into mysterious mausoleums with smoky, pitch-black entrances.

“Cali.” Lola turned around, frustrated. But I could see the fear in her eyes.

“Let’s be careful,” I insisted. “Maybe Artemis and I should check it out first. You and Jay can stay out here in case it’s a situation where we need someone to pull us out.”

At least, that was how the Fae portal had worked. I didn’t know how this spooky graveyard library would differ, but it couldn’t hurt to try and cover some bases, right?

“Did you forget?” Lola asked, puffing out her chest. “This was *my* quest first.”

I rolled my eyes. You don’t get to call dibs on a quest. But since that would have been a petty and childish thing to say in front of the gargoyle, I held my tongue.

I knew that Lola was just putting on a brave face. Neither of us wanted the other in danger. But I knew I was better off taking this risk.

“I just meant that Artemis and I can use magic, and you guys can’t,” I explained. “That makes it safer for us.”

Obviously, I could only sort of use magic. Sometimes. When the magic felt like letting me use it. Which was not the world’s greatest option, but whatever! I could do more magic than Lola, which meant I was going.

Lola raised an eyebrow in judgement, but I didn’t let her stop me. I’d made up my mind.

“We’ll just poke our heads in and check out the situation,” I told Lola, attempting nonchalance. “Then we’ll come right back.”

Lola eyed the gargoyle and ghosts nervously. I didn’t blame her. It certainly wasn’t something you saw every day. But they seemed mostly harmless.

“I’ve been wanting to scratch an itch on my wing for *centuries*!”one of them crowed excitedly.

Jay stepped up and took Lola’s hand, clearly sensing her nerves. I knew things weren’t perfect between the two of them right now, but it felt good knowing they had each other. That we weren’t leaving them alone.

“Cali and Artemis have got this,” Jay assured Lola.

“Fine,” she said begrudgingly, looking at me. “But come right back, okay?”

“We will,” Artemis promised.

We walked toward the mausoleum, and I tried not to obsess over the black pit of darkness beyond the doorway. I tried to tell myself that it just *looked* like a terrifying abyss of nothingness but in reality was probably way less scary.

I glanced over at Artemis before stepping over the threshold. This was our last chance to not do this. But she didn’t hesitate, so neither did I.

We stepped in and immediately, darkness enveloped us. I felt a whooshing sensation inside my head, and I reached for Artemis only to find she was doing the same thing. We clutched each other’s arms and leaned in close in an attempt to shelter each other from whatever we’d just stepped into.

I squeezed my eyes shut and waited for it to end.

Eventually, the whooshing stopped, and a brilliant light shone through my eyelids. I felt myself wince as I slowly opened my eyes into a squint.

Artemis and I both gasped in amazement.

In front of us was a cavernous room full of books. An ornate golden chandelier hung in the air, full of flickering candles that lit the room beautifully. Huge ladders curled up toward the sky, appearing on shelves of books that seemed to stretch out forever.

The place didn’t look like it had been abandoned for ages. I couldn’t see a speck of dust anywhere. It looked like there had to be some kind of staff that kept everything clean, and kept all the candles lit.

Seeing all of it laid out before me, one thing was clear—this place could definitely have answers for both me and Lola. It probably had answers for every question anyone had ever had.

“This is incredible!” Artemis cried, her eyes the size of dinner plates. “I don’t even *like* books. But this… Wow. There’s just so many.”

And that was when a crushing feeling settled in my chest. There had to be thousands of books in here. Millions, maybe. How the hell were we supposed to find what we needed to lift my curse and to help Lola with her shifting? I didn’t see a directory anywhere.

“Oh,” Artemis mumbled, as if she’d just realized the same thing. “Did Big Mac have any… specific instructions on how to look things up?”

“Like a Dewey Decimal System for magical libraries?” I asked. “Not that I’m aware of. But we should check in with Lola before we start looking.”

We turned to head back to Lola and saw—ourselves. The door had completely disappeared behind us. And now, hanging in its place, was an old antique mirror. I looked at my reflection and groaned.

“No no *no!*” I cried. “What do we do now? How are we supposed to get back to Jay and Lola?”

Artemis tugged on my arm.

“Look!” she hissed, pointing at a small table that was next to one of the many crackling fires in one of the cozy, sunken areas below.

On the table was a steaming mug of tea.

“Who built that fire?” Artemis whispered. “And who’s drinking that tea? We’re not the only ones here.”

That was either very good news or very bad news.

Artemis took a few quiet steps down the carpeted hallway toward one of the many huge staircases. I followed, careful not to be louder than her. I allowed myself to feel a little competitive with her as I tried not to make a sound. After all, Big Mac had warned us about danger. I knew she wouldn’t have said that for no reason.

When we reached the stairs, I took the first step. But the moment I put my weight on it, my body lurched to the side. For a second, I found myself confused and struggling to remain upright. But then I realized what was happening—the staircase was moving.

“Artemis, jump!” I screamed, not wanting to get separated.

Artemis leapt onto the stairs and wrapped her arms around me. She clung to me as the staircase continued to move, not only to the side but somehow upside down. I felt all the blood rush to my head, but we didn’t fall. We just kept hurtling toward wherever we were going.

“Artemis!” I shouted. “It’s like *Harry Potter*!”

Artemis looked at me blankly. “Is that a friend of yours?” she shouted back. “Why would you bring him up?”

I groaned. Of course I got to ride a magical staircase with the one person in the world who’d never heard of Hogwarts. Just my luck.

“Never mind,” I shouted back.

Finally, we came to a stop. The staircase had taken us to a completely different area, away from the table and the fire. We were in a dark, empty stone chamber.

Artemis and I stared at each other.

“What now?” she asked.

I could only shrug.

The empty space was dark and creepy. I didn’t think I had it in me to miss a library—especially not after my last round of finals, back when I’d still actually gone to school. But I did.

I rubbed my arms, trying not to focus on the cold. It made me wish Greyson and Xavier were with us. But the exact moment it even occurred to me to think of them, I felt a sharp pain in my chest. I gasped from the shock of it.

“Are you okay?” Artemis asked, worried.

I nodded and fished around in my pocket to distract myself. I pulled out my phone to see if I still had a signal. Or if it still even worked. We had to find a way back to Lola and Jay.

When I saw the time, I gasped again.

“What the hell? It says here that it’s been hours since we first walked in here,” I told Artemis. “How is that possible?

“I guess time moves differently here,” Artemis offered, her expression hardening. We both knew that this was bad. That we were unprepared for this place and all of its twists and turns.

“We have to get out of here,” I said looking around. “Now.”

We took off toward the nearest doorway. But the second we moved, we found ourselves all the way back at the ornate mirror we’d first seen at the entrance.

“What!?” I asked at the same time that Artemis barked, “How did we get here?”

A gargoyle on the wall came to life. Not fully, but just enough to flap its mouth to speak. It was kind of alarming.

“Well, you did ask to exit,” it pointed out. “So… go.”

The door opened, and we leapt out and back into the cemetery. The second my feet touched solid ground, I felt beyond relieved.

“Oh my god!” I cried, running to Lola and Jay. “You guys must have been so worried.”

“I’m so sorry we were gone so long,” Artemis offered. “We didn’t mean to scare you.”

“What?” Jay asked, looking at Lola, who seemed equally baffled.

“Did it not work?” Lola asked us. “Like, was it empty or something?”

“What do you mean?” I replied. “Haven’t we been gone for hours?”

Lola stared at me. “Cali, you just went in a split second ago.”

**Episode 725**

GREYSON

Joss and I had called everyone to a pack meeting in the living room. Ravi, Rishika, Sage, Zainab, and all the rest were looking at us expectantly. The mood was tense and everyone was on edge. We’d gathered to discuss the situation with Xavier and Cali, but it wasn’t like we had much new information to share. And what we did know didn’t make sense.

I still couldn’t believe it. Joss had heard Cali and Xavier arguing from the hallway. A complete blowout, from the sounds of it. She’d walked into Cali’s room just in time to see Xavier as a wolf. And then, according to her, he’d leapt out the window and bounded into the woods. Cali had been nowhere in sight.

Afterward, I’d searched the house and the grounds for her. But before I’d been able to shift and start searching the woods, Joss had stopped me. She’d known what I hadn’t been willing to admit to myself.

Xavier and Cali were gone.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Rishika said, voicing what we were all thinking. “Xavier has been training the pack with me. He takes it very seriously. We both do. Why would he run away? He knows that Halloween is getting closer, that we’re all in danger. I know I don’t know him all that well, but it just doesn’t seem like him to ditch us.”

“I don’t know,” Ravi piped up, his brow furrowed. “Cali has been acting really weird lately. Is it possible the two of them ran off to blow off some steam?”

Shit.

*Would* Xavier and Cali have run off together? It was possible. But Cali and I had just slept together for the first time. She’d put it off in the Fae world, and I’d put it off once we’d gotten back. But we’d finally come together and… it had kind of fizzled.

Sure, the sex had left me hollow, but Cali hadn’t mentioned not enjoying it. Although neither had I. I guess it was possible that we were both keeping secrets. Maybe Cali had felt the same strange certainty that something had been deeply off. That our night together hadn’t been quite right. But to leave without talking about it? That wasn’t like her at all.

Cali loved talking. Sometimes to her own detriment. So why hadn’t she talked to me before leaving?

I didn’t know how I was supposed to feel. What the mature reaction as a mate or an Alpha was supposed to be. But I was starting to get angry. It felt like something had been taken from me, and I didn’t like it one bit.

Maybe one bad night had been enough to send Cali running straight back into Xavier’s arms. Maybe she’d made her choice. Something twisted in my stomach. I couldn’t help but feel like something was terribly, terribly wrong. Something I couldn’t see yet.

“Maybe Silas took them?” Sage suggested, her voice thick with worry.

“Or maybe they’re just boning somewhere in the woods,” Zainab countered dryly. “Those two are constantly eye fucking.”

“Cali wouldn’t be so reckless,” Rishika said, shaking her head. “Xavier can get carried away, it’s true. But Cali cares about this pack and the people in it. I don’t think she would just go radio silent on us like this. She’d know what that would look like.”

“Enough,” Joss called out, silencing everyone. I took a second to really look at her. She was practically seething. Her fists were clenching and unclenching—a gesture I didn’t even recognize from her. I wondered if I’d ever seen her this pissed off, but she was clearly making an effort to keep it in check.

“Listen,” she started, her voice grim. “We don’t have time for this kind of speculation. Everyone knows that the threat around us is growing. And if Xavier has decided to run away from our pack with someone who is continually getting us into trouble, then maybe it’s for the best.”

I felt a flame of anger lick up my spine. I wanted to defend Cali, to say it was never *for the best* to lose someone. Especially not her.

But Joss was way ahead of me. She shot me a look—*see what I mean?* Because this was exactly what she’d been talking about, and what I’d suggested the other day. It was time for me to put the pack first. After all, I was the Alpha.

But how could I do that when I didn’t even know where Cali was? If she was safe? If she’d left of her own free will?

I hesitated. And that was all Joss needed to know. She looked at me, wounded and disappointed. She turned back to the rest of the pack, her shoulders back and her voice authoritative.

“This meeting is adjourned,” she told them. “For now. But no one is to go off into the woods without a patrol partner until further notice. Watch each other’s backs. We’re all we have. Last time Silas showed up, it was only through magic. Next time, we might not be so lucky. And Halloween isn’t far. So stay alert.”

She nodded and everyone split off. I heard people murmuring to each other, trying to process everything that had happened. I knew things were far from okay.

Any unease between Joss and me would only worry the pack further. We had to get on the same page, and fast. I hated letting her and the rest of the pack down. But another piece of me was angry that no one could see things from my side.

Most of them seemed to have been practically expecting Cali and Xavier to leave together. Like they’d always been the real couple, and whatever Cali and I had shared had been a detour. And that was fine—none of them knew the truth. Except for Joss.

\*\*\*\*

Later that night, I was out checking the perimeter on my own. One perk of being the Alpha: you could ignore the partner rule if you felt like being alone.

I scanned the woods obsessively, unwelcome questions flooding my brain. Was Cali out there? Was she with Xavier? Were they sleeping together? Had she officially chosen him?

I couldn’t stand the thought of them together. Even though things had been weird between us lately, I just didn’t know how to throw away everything I felt for Cali. And I couldn’t throw away the part of me that believed—or maybe just hoped—that she felt it too.

If Cali was in danger, I couldn’t just sit here and do nothing. I had to go to her. Had to save her. I glanced between the pack house and the woods. Between my pack and her.

I groaned aloud, unable to help myself. I was going to look for Cali.

I shifted and bounded off into the woods. Almost immediately, I picked up an unwelcome scent. One that felt acrid in my nostrils and made me bare my teeth in anger.

I shifted back and shouted through cupped hands. “NOLAN!”

Almost instantly, Nolan stepped out from behind a tree in his human form. He smirked at me, like he’d known I was going to come looking for him.

I rushed over to him and got in his face. I felt white-hot with rage and shame. I should have known. This shifty piece of shit was always up to something. And we were no strangers to fighting over whatever stupid, reckless, awful thing he was doing next.

I hadn’t seen him since we’d all been at Thor’s Well and I’d destroyed him at the Lupo Finale. I should’ve known he’d retaliate. I should have expected it and been prepared.

“What kind of game are you playing here?” I spat. “Did you have something to do with Xavier and Cali disappearing?”

Nolan lit up like a fucking Christmas tree, making me realize I’d made the wrong move by putting my cards on the table like that. I’d just given Nolan a valuable piece of information. Insight into my hurt and instability. Things he could exploit. And that was a huge mistake.

“They’ve disappeared?” Nolan repeated, feigning shock. But his glee was obvious. He could tell I was miserable, and he was happy about it. Had he planned this? Or was he just excited to see me suffer?

“Have they?” he continued. “Run off into the night, hmm? Ah, young love. I remember it well.”

“If it’s me you want,” I growled, “then leave Cali out if it. That’s hardly a fair fight for you—even if she’s ten times the person you are.”

But Nolan just laughed at me.

“That would be far too easy for you,” he replied, words dripping with venom. “Far too slow. I want you to suffer. I want to hit you as close to home as possible to enjoy your misery. So you’d better hope I don’t find your precious Cali first.”

He paused, savoring the panic that flooded me.

“Because if I do,” he told me, practically whispering, “I’ll kill her.”

**Episode 726**

Lola and Jay laughed at our dumbstruck faces. Artemis and I exchanged glances—I couldn’t believe what had happened. She shrugged, looking equally confused.

“Wait, you’re serious?” Jay’s face fell when he saw that we weren’t laughing too.

“What do you mean?” Lola asked, still smiling. “You were literally gone for a second.”

I heard the scratchy sound of the gargoyle laughing behind me. I turned to see him, still perched on top of the mausoleum with his hands holding his belly as he guffawed at us.

“Oh, I never get sick of that one,” he cried, gleefully. “That’s part of the library’s charm, you see? Once you’re in, you never know when you’re going to pop out!”

Well, that would have been helpful information to have before we’d stepped inside.

“What does that mean?” I pressed him for information, trying not to show how annoyed I was.

But the gargoyle just waved a hand. Like he’d just said something perfectly normal. Like he’d casually said that the sky was blue, not told us an *incredibly crucial* fact about the place we’d just traveled to.

“I wouldn’t worry.” He shrugged gleefully. “I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

He looked at us, his eyes bright with excitement. Like he just couldn’t wait to see what we’d do next. I didn’t like it one bit.

“So you just want to watch us.” I crossed my arms over my chest, suspicious. “Like we’re some kind of reality TV show?”

The gargoyle’s brows furrowed as he looked down at us.

“I don’t know this reality teehee you speak of.” He shook his head. “But I absolutely cannot wait to see how all of this plays out.”

Great, we were here to amuse the animate gargoyle.

I took a deep breath, still shaken from the pain I’d felt in my chest while we’d been in the library. I didn’t want to let on, but I was worried. Freaking out, more accurately. About the weird rules of the library we had no way of knowing, about not being able to trust the gargoyle, and about the possibility that we wouldn’t find any answers until it was too late.

But I knew that nothing would happen if I just stood here. So I pushed my shoulders back and looked at my friends, hoping I seemed authoritative and convincing.

“Well.” I shrugged. “There’s nothing we can do but move forward, right guys? We just have to remember to stick together—and track our steps so we don’t get lost.”

Lola held out her hands to me and Jay.

“School field trip rules?” she joked. “Everyone got their partners?”

“I don’t have a better idea,” I answered, taking her hand, and Artemis’s as well. Jay took Lola’s, and together we made our way toward the stone entrance. It was slightly less scary this time, but not much.

We stepped over the threshold and into the darkness. Just like the last time, I couldn’t see a thing—just black nothingness all around me. I could hear Lola scream next to me when the whooshing sound appeared.

But then the brightness came.

“Holy shit!” Lola screamed. “Oh my god! Cali, this is like *Beauty and the Beast* on steroids! How are you not losing your entire mind?”

She dropped my hand and Jay’s and darted forward immediately to inspect the nearest shelf. I felt my stomach clench with fear.

“Lola!” I cried out. “Stop!”

“What?” she asked, turning around.

“Things… move here,” I tried to explain. “You have to be careful. I stepped on a staircase a second before Artemis and it took me to a different room. If she hadn’t hopped on before it was too late, we could have lost each other. We can’t afford to get separated. I don’t know how we’d find each other in all this.”

Lola sheepishly returned to us.

“Okay, but can we not *literally* hold hands?” Lola asked. “No offense, but your palms are hella sweaty, Cali.”

“Fine.” I rolled my eyes. “Just stick with your buddy.”

Lola grinned back at me. “Yes ma’am.”

We moved forward together through the stacks. This time, we avoided the staircase in favor of one of the numerous grand hallways. I swallowed thickly when I saw how huge it was. This place really felt like it went on forever.

I looked over my shoulder and saw the halls behind us rearrange, right before my eyes. Shelves slid and popped up and dissolved, like the library was a living thing. The exit was closed off, and I didn’t know how we’d find our way back to it. Hopefully we could just ask a gargoyle again.

“Lola, how are we ever going to find the right book?” Jay asked, looking around in awe. “Did Big Mac say anything?”

“Of course she didn’t,” Lola huffed. “Cryptic bitch.”

“There is definitely someone or something here that takes care of this place,” Artemis said decisively. “Cali and I saw a mug of tea before, still warm. We just have to find whoever it belonged to and convince them to help us.”

“They’ll probably be happy to have some company, right?” I offered, trying to look on the bright side.

We reached a huge, imposing door made of dark wood and painted in gold leaf. It looked important, but it was closed.

“Should we check it out?” I asked the group.

Jay shrugged. “I can’t see why not.”

I steeled myself. I really thought this place might have answers for me—about Lola, about all my problems with the *due destini* stuff, and especially about the curse. I had to focus on that stuff. Hopefully that curiosity and desperation would get me through.

“Behind me,” I told the others, and they complied, all taking a step back.

I reached out and tried to focus on not letting my hand shake. I placed it on the knob and turned it slowly. I half-expected it to be locked. But instead, it gave and the door creaked open.

At least *that* part had been easy.

“Follow me,” I mouthed to the others, not wanting to give us away in case the mysterious keeper of the library was in this room.

We slowly made our way inside. But suddenly, I found myself face to face with Artemis, Jay, and Lola, coming through an open door on the other side of the room. I whirled around to see what was behind me. But I just saw a black wall with no door. God, this place was freaky.

We rushed to meet each other in the center of the room, all wild-eyed and a bit shaken. The physics of this place were throwing us off. But once we were all clustered together, it became a little easier to breathe. We hadn’t lost each other yet.

We looked around the ornate room.

“Looks like an office,” Lola mused.

She wasn’t wrong. There was a huge mahogany desk that glistened in the crackling light of a nearby fireplace. A very cozy-looking burgundy velvet chair was set behind it.

“Seems about right,” I agreed.

*Thud.*

We all whipped around to find the source of the sound. A book must have fallen off one of the room’s many shelves—one was lying on the carpet.

Lola screamed and jumped back, directly into another bookshelf. Knocking into it started a full book avalanche. Volume after volume toppled onto Lola and the floor around her. Each one that opened seemed to emit a weird—and *loud*—amount of noise.

I picked one up, wanting to shut them all as fast as I could so we wouldn’t be discovered. It was emitting a loud, thundering sound. I grabbed it and scanned the pages. It was a book on weather. I heard more noise from above me and looked up to see that there were thunderclouds above us.

I heard a hissing sound and screamed when I saw a FUCKING DINOSAUR leap out of a book—presumably one about dinosaurs.

“That’s a Maiasaura!” Jay cried.

I didn’t have a second to react to the level of nerd that Jay was clearly on when the second dinosaur suddenly appeared. This one had some kind of webbing around its neck that fanned out like the cones dogs wore when they got surgery.

“And a Dilophosaurus!” Jay shouted.

Almost as if it was responding to the sound of its name, the second dinosaur spat at us. We all leapt back, not wanting the spit to land on us, especially if it was poisonous somehow—could dinosaur spit be poisonous?

“STOP NAMING DINOSAURS, JAY!” Lola screamed.

Despite the fact that we were all thankfully free of dinosaur saliva, the room had become complete chaos. All of the sounds were ear-shattering. If we’d been trying to keep a low profile, the jig was up now.

All this noise was going to attract the danger Big Mac had warned Lola about.

“We have to stop this!” I cried, reaching for the first book I could find and slamming it shut. But suddenly all the noises just cut out, leaving a deathly terrifying quiet in their place.

And then a frightening hiss filled the room.

“*Shhhhhhhh*.”

**Episode 727**

AVA

The silver cage glinted in the low light. I paced, watching Xavier through the bars. He’d passed out before I’d locked him inside, but now I was anxious for him to wake up. That way I could start to explain everything and try to make him understand. Because he didn’t know the whole story. And I hoped that if I could find the right words, he’d see things my way.

Finally, he stirred. I rushed to his side, clutching the bars until my knuckles went white.

“Xavier,” I whispered, just in case loud noises hurt his head. “You’re awake!”

But my happiness was short-lived. Xavier’s eyes snapped open and he rushed to the bars. His face was so contorted with rage and hate that I leapt back reflexively, afraid of him.

“Let me out of here!” he roared. “Where’s Cali? I need to see her *now* so I can be sure she’s okay! I want fucking proof!”

I blinked back at him, hoping he’d calm down when he saw that it was just me and that I didn’t mean him any harm.

“Now, Ava!” he barked, impatient and not looking any calmer.

I held up a hand and he quieted down. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at me, still looking angry. But at least he was quiet now.

“I can explain everything,” I told him softly. “I promise.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” he snapped, looking completely disgusted at the sight of me. “I want proof that Cali is okay and I want it NOW.”

She was all he cared about. I was back from the *dead* and it was still Cali, Cali, Cali.

“That isn’t possible,” I told him. “But trust me, this is the safest place for you right now. I’m sure it’s disorienting to wake up like this. But… I had to keep you from going anywhere. I’m trying to save you from Nolan.”

“Trying to save me?” Xavier repeated, incredulous. He barked out a harsh, bitter laugh. It was nothing like his real one—the warm cackle where he’d throw back his head, the kind of laugh that made you want to laugh along with him. No matter how stupid the joke.

I missed that laugh. I used to be able to pull it out of him better than anybody.

I glanced at the door, hoping Nolan wouldn’t show up before I could explain. I knew I had to be quick to avoid him barging in and making this even harder.

“Yes,” I assured him, desperately. “This whole thing—me posing as Cali—it was Nolan’s idea. And I went along with it. But when I agreed to do it, I had no idea how it would feel to see you again.”

I paused, tears welling up as I recalled the surprise and the warmth I’d felt toward him. The fascination, even though he’d hurt me. How warm and safe and good it had felt to be in his arms. What it had been like to be looked at by him like I was the most important, precious thing in the world.

“The second I laid eyes on you,” I started again, shakily, “I knew I couldn’t go through with the plan. I want all the bloodshed to end… And I want you to know about Marlene.”

Xavier flinched at the sound of his mother’s name, and I couldn’t find it in me to blame him. Of course he was still angry. That wasn’t a wound that just healed over.

I opened my mouth to tell him that I regretted killing her. That I hadn’t meant to do it. That I hadn’t known what I was doing until it was too late, and that just the sound of her name made me feel sick with guilt. But Xavier cut me off before I could finish.

“I don’t care,” he spat at me. “It’s too late for that.”

Suddenly, Xavier’s face was flooded with light. I turned to see that Nolan had opened the door so he could slip inside. He didn’t even spare his enemy a look, just made a beeline for me.

“You were sloppy,” he told me, an edge to his voice. “But I fixed things back at the pack house. I had a little chat with Greyson. Now, when you return as Cali, I’ve ensured that he’ll be keeping you closer than ever.”

He smirked at me and I felt queasy, like my own brother was pimping me out. But I pushed that thought aside. Nolan was my *family*, and no one else seemed to care whether I lived or died.

“So you’ll need to take advantage of that,” he ordered. “And don’t let me down this time. Can you do that?”

He stood with his back to Xavier’s cage. I looked at my old mate. Xavier was staring directly at me. I didn’t break eye contact when I whispered my answer to Nolan. “Yes.”

Nolan placed a silver dagger in my palm, and I slid it into the pouch I wore around my waist. I hated touching silver. It sent shivers down my spine to know how lethal it was to our kind. I’d always been taught to be careful with it.

Nolan patted me on the back, a little too hard.

“I’m counting on you, Ava,” he told me, his voice soothing. “You’d better get back before you miss something important.”

I looked at Xavier. I wished more than anything that I could stay with him. That we could talk and I could try to make things right. But it was useless if Nolan was here. Xavier would be too on edge, and Nolan would be furious if he knew my feelings had returned.

I’d have to wait.

I bit my lip and gave Xavier one last apologetic glance before I turned on my heel and took off for the door.

As I slipped outside, I heard Xavier roar as he rattled his cage.

“I *will* get out of here!” he swore. “And neither of you will want to be anywhere near me when I do!”

I knew I had to travel as a human. There had already been too many close calls with me running around as my wolf. I couldn’t afford to get caught like that.

My mind reeled as I trudged through the woods. I was so deep into this plan and I didn’t know what to do, or how to get out of it. I’d been so sure that it was righteous, that Nolan and I deserved payback for what had been done to us.

But now, I wasn’t sure what to do.

Seeing Xavier again, being close to him, sleeping with him—it had allowed me to feel our connection again. I was so sure that it was still alive, that we could be together again if we could just forgive each other.

But what did good sex or meaningful moments mean if they were based on a lie?

And now that everything was out on the table, could I ever make things right with Xavier again?

Based on the way he’d yelled at me and threatened me and my brother, it didn’t seem likely. He clearly hated me, and I knew he was capable of keeping a grudge. Xavier did not forgive or forget. He got mad and he got even.

But if he had a chance to calm down, a chance to learn what I intended—that I wanted to try again, to take this miracle of rebirth as an opportunity to start fresh—maybe then he’d understand.

At least I had Nolan. Nolan had always had my back, for as long as I could remember. He’d kept me safe from anyone who’d wanted to kick me around. He’d taught me how to kick them back once he’d decided I was old enough. Nolan had always been my rock.

I had to remind myself that no matter what, I had him to lean on.

I picked up the pace and started jogging through the woods. I knew it was un-Cali-like to run, but I wanted to try and make it back to the pack house as soon as possible.

But then I heard something. Someone moving through the woods. I froze, worried. Would it be someone I knew? Or was there another group I had to worry about? A figure stepped out from behind a tree, and I braced myself for the worst.

But it was Greyson.

He froze the second he saw me, his expression completely unreadable. I wondered if the running had given me away somehow. But surely, Cali would run if she was alone in the woods. The girl had to have *some* sense, right?

But before I could decide what to do, Greyson darted at me and wrapped his arms around me in a tight hug.

“Oh my god, Cali,” he murmured into my hair. “Are you hurt? What happened?”

I was wrapped so tightly in his arms, I almost couldn’t breathe. But I looked over his shoulder and tried to listen, to make sure we were alone. I couldn’t hear or see a soul.

So I slowly loosened the drawstrings of my waist pouch. Then I reached inside and closed my fingers around the handle of the silver knife.

**Episode 728**

We all spun around to find out who the hell was shushing us. I wondered if they’d stopped all of the books and gotten rid of the dinosaurs. If so, I couldn’t imagine they’d be happy with us.

What we saw has a woman with dark hair and pale skin. She clapped her hands together twice. There was a practiced and authoritative rhythm to it. All the books zoomed back to their shelves.

I opened my mouth to ask who the hell she was and how the hell she’d done that, but before I could, Lola and Jay both descended into chaos. Lola let out a roar and shifted before we could stop her. Jay followed almost immediately, and suddenly two snarling werewolves were leaping at the woman who’d seemingly saved us.

“No!” I screamed. “Stop!”

Artemis raised her hands, and Lola and Jay froze in midair. I looked at her, shocked. I’d had no idea she could do that.

“Sorry, I didn’t know what else to do,” she said, shrugging.

“Artemis, don’t apologize,” I told her. “That… *rules*.”

“Ahem.”

Artemis and I both turned to look at the mysterious woman—wearing twin sheepish expressions, I was sure. She looked distinctly unamused.

“Werewolves never do take kindly to my kind,” she mused, speaking in soft but clipped tones.

I gasped. “Are you a vampire?” I asked, backing away instinctively. After all my dealings with Mikah, I wasn’t really eager to hang around a vampire again. Mikah hadn’t ever hurt me, but he *had* been a pain in the ass. And hard to trust.

But the woman just chuckled dryly.

“Technically, that is part of it,” she said. “But those labels and loyalties mean nothing to me after all these centuries. When you are as ancient as I am, you don’t care much about petty feuds between magical races. This library is all that matters to me. Especially after I lost another one to a fire so many centuries ago.”

“How do you eat?” I asked, still feeling suspicious. For all we knew, this woman would want to keep us as blood farms. “And who are you?”

She ignored my first question.

“I’m the librarian,” she told me. “You can call me Hypatia.”

The name sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it. But honestly, why the hell would I have advanced knowledge of a vampire librarian? We definitely hadn’t covered that in school.

“Cali,” Artemis interrupted, through gritted teeth. “They’re really fighting me here.”

I followed her gaze and saw Jay and Artemis start to wobble. Like Artemis was losing her grip on them. A second later they both crashed to the ground, unfrozen.

Jay immediately shifted back to human and put his hands up in a gesture of peace.

“Lola,” he called, his voice stern but calm. “Stay calm. You can do it.”

Hypatia eyed Lola’s wolf, who was growling and gnashing her teeth. She looked skeptical but far from scared.

“Is there something wrong with her?” she asked.

Jay’s eyes snapped over to Hypatia. He seemed pissed she’d interrupted, but he shook it off admirably fast. He seemed to understand that this wasn’t someone to fuck with.

“She… Yes,” he answered. “That’s why we’re here, ma’am. She’s having trouble shifting. She’s only half-werewolf, and lately she can’t control when she shifts.”

Lola’s wolf let out a low growl, and Hypatia wrinkled her nose in distaste as she took her in. She lifted her hand about an inch, wiggling her fingers just so and a wall of bookshelves suddenly sprung up from the ground, surrounding Lola and Jay and trapping them inside.

And now we were separated.

“Hey!” I cried, rounding on Hypatia. “I thought you didn’t buy into all the werewolf and vampire feud stuff!”

Xavier had told me that there was no love lost between the two species, but Mikah had ultimately been okay, right? He’d backed off trying to nail Xavier for Tony’s murder, and even helped him and Gabriel in the end. He may have been slightly creepy, but… he wasn’t evil.

But this woman? I couldn’t get a read on her. She was so still and deliberate with her movements. Her voice was clinical and her expression was disarmingly neutral. She was intentionally not giving anything away, and that worried me.

“Relax, please,” she urged. “I can’t have an out-of-control werewolf running loose in the library. I work hard to keep this place safe and in order.”

I nodded, trying to understand. After all, she’d only enclosed them. It didn’t seem like she’d hurt them in any way.

“Now.” She narrowed her eyes at Artemis and me. “Why don’t you two tell me exactly what you’re all doing here.”

“Right.” I nodded. “Well, Lola over there is a hybrid. Shifting has always been tough for her. But then she got this potion that helped her. And things were good for a while. Until she kind of started to like shifting too much and we all got worried. But *now*—”

“We’ve got a bigger problem than the wolf,” Artemis interrupted, pointing at me. “She’s cursed.”

I winced.

“We need to figure out how to stop it,” Artemis insisted, a hardness in her voice that surprised me. Was she really that determined to save me? Did she… *like me?*

Hypatia looked at me with renewed interest, which I tried not to bristle at. My curse was far from the most interesting thing about me. I was a half-Fae *due destini* mate who could still do a back handspring, thanks to high school color guard.

A candle suddenly appeared in Hypatia’s hand as she approached me. Except she didn’t walk—she floated. I yelped, leaping into the air a bit. But she didn’t seem to notice or care. She just stared at the spiderwebbing dark veins that were creeping up my neck, which I could oh-so-helpfully view in the mirror behind her. Her eyes widened in… what?

Interest? Fear? Delight?

She brushed an ice-cold hand against my throat and I flinched, even though her touch was light as a feather.

“Interesting,” she murmured. “Very interesting.”

She stepped back and closed her eyes, holding her hands out toward me. For a moment, she went completely still. I glanced over at Artemis, wordlessly asking *“What the hell is she doing?”*

Artemis just shrugged.

Suddenly, a wave of images flooded my mind, all of them memories of Greyson and Xavier. It felt like I was getting punched in the gut by sadness, longing, desire, excitement, and heartbreak. It was overwhelming.

I clutched at my chest and cried out in pain—I wouldn’t be able to take it for much longer.

Hypatia’s eyes snapped open, suddenly an icy blue. She gave me a piercing stare and I shivered under her gaze. This couldn’t be good.

“You’re a *due destini* mate,” she told me.

Artemis and I gaped at Hypatia as she floated up in the air to one of the top stacks. She ran her hands lightly and lovingly over the spines in front of her. Her love for the books was obvious, and might have been touching in another context.

She found the book she was looking for and plucked it from the shelf before gracefully descending to the floor. She took the dark-blue tome to her desk and slammed it down. She blew a layer of dust from the cover before she started paging through it.

Artemis and I hurried to her side so we could look over her shoulder as she skimmed. Finally, she stopped and pointed dramatically at an entry.

“Look,” she said, tapping on the page.

Artemis and I squinted, trying to read the clearly ancient book. The text was handwritten and spidery, and it wasn’t in any language I’d ever seen.

“Not that we aren’t grateful,” I started, “but what am I looking at here? I only speak English. And some basic Spanish.”

Hypatia quickly ran her finger down the page, as if she were reading quickly. And then, rather than answer me, she slammed the book shut and gave me a satisfied look.

“Well, that’s that,” she said, sounding a bit smug.

“That’s what?” I asked, feeling dumber by the second.

“You’re a very unique girl,” Hypatia told me, looking at me carefully. “It’s been millennia since the last known *due destini* mate.”

Hypatia shook her head and looked at me, her eyes sad.

“And the cases we know about didn’t always have happy endings,” she said. “All that drama with Cleopatra… And you’re not a werewolf. You’re not even really a human, are you?”

“Not exactly,” I answered, starting to feel impatient. “What does the book say? Who cursed me? How do I get rid of it?”

Pity flickered across Hypatia’s face as she looked at me in silence.

“It’s a curse, certainly,” she admitted. “But no one placed it on you. It’s a manifestation of your refusal to choose.”

My stomach sank. That couldn’t be true.

“What does that mean?” I asked, desperate for another explanation.

“It means,” Hypatia said, “that if you don’t choose between the sides of your heart, all three of you will die within a month.”

**Episode 729**

GREYSON

I stared at Cali while she looked around, like she was searching for an upcoming threat. Or maybe she just wanted to make sure that we were alone. As we embraced, she loosened the drawstring of the pouch at her waist, so slowly that someone who wasn’t a werewolf wouldn’t have noticed.

But I did.

Did she really think she could protect herself, or both of us, with that little knife?

Unless it was made of silver…

“What happened, Cali?” I asked again. She tensed up, facing me, breaking our embrace. She took a deep breath. I got even more fucking worried, because normally she would’ve told me off approximately ten times by now. She would’ve snapped at me to stop treating her like a child, to stop being so concerned about her when she was perfectly capable of protecting herself. She would’ve said something along the lines of, “*My god, Greyson, stop fussing over me, ugh!*”

It was a little spooky how I could hear her yelling at me in my head, but the Cali in front of me just stared at me solemnly. The troubled, vulnerable expression on her face freaked me the fuck out.

“When I saw your clothes scattered, I was really worried, Cali. Did someone—”

“I was attacked,” she blurted, taking a step away from me. “I was attacked, and uh…” She gestured at the knife she was holding. “Thank goodness I had this to defend myself.”

I paused for a moment, fighting to process. Since when did Cali use a knife to protect herself? Where were the spatulas? The broomsticks? The forks and pans and mixers and chainsaws and whatever weird and not-at-all subtle weapons that she usually used?

We had spent so much time in the Fae world, and Cali hadn’t picked up a knife, not even once.

Speaking of the Fae world, wouldn’t Cali just use her Fae powers to defend herself?

She seemed upset, so I didn’t ask her any of these questions. I wanted her as calm as possible. “Who attacked you?” I asked carefully, glancing around. “And where the hell is Xavier?”

“It was Nolan,” Cali breathed instantly. “He took Xavier.”

Nolan had threatened to kill Cali, so seeing her alive and well settled something inside of me. But… Xavier? He’d been taken? How had Nolan managed to capture a fighter as good as Xavier? Could he have killed my brother? My stomach lurched at the thought.

One thing at a time. First, I had to make sure that Cali was truly okay.

“Let me see.” I moved all up in her space to check for wounds. She flinched, which was pretty fucking worrisome considering that not too long ago, we’d hooked up, and she’d been moaning nothing more than *yes*. She had to be really shaken right now, I realized, and made sure to examine her quickly without pushing any boundaries.

And then a thought hit me.

“Where did you get new clothes?” I asked, tugging at the hem of her cotton T-shirt.

“I… found them,” she said, clearing her throat.

I squinted at her. “You found clothes? In the woods?”

Cali stammered, “I—um, I just… Campers, you know? They’d left some lying around.”

So Cali was most probably lying right now. But why? She rarely, if ever, lied to me, so this situation was entirely foreign. There were more urgent matters at hand, though.

“Where did Nolan take Xavier, Cali?” I asked.

She averted her eyes. “I don’t know.”

Cali’s story had too many holes. Why was she *lying*? What was happening here? I moved closer to her, and she didn’t move away this time, so I took that as a good sign. I reached out and held her chin up so she was facing me. Her gorgeous eyes were filled with an emotion I couldn’t pinpoint. Grief? Sadness? Remorse?

What was she regretting?

Me?

My heart was pounding as I spoke. “Cali, please. Whatever it is, whoever you’re trying to protect, let me help you. Tell me the truth. What happened?”

Cali stared at me for a moment before shaking her head. She looked away, sniffling, and seeing her like this made me ache as well. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “He made me do this.”

“What?” I asked, fighting to keep my cool. “*Who?*”

“Greyson, I just…” She didn’t finish.

I had to ask. “What are you talking about? Who fucking dared—”

She showed me the knife. “Nolan wanted me to kill you.”

I paused, my mind spinning.

“He told me that if I didn’t, he would kill Xavier,” Cali said, getting choked up. She seemed so devastated. “But I can’t go through with it… I can’t hurt you.”

I’d been hoping for more of a “*I could never hurt you, you’re the love of my life*” kind of confession, but I wasn’t about to complain. At least now I could make sense of the remorse that seemed to be decorating her features; I could make sense of her vulnerability and her failure to tell me off. But whatever it was that had felt wrong after Cali and I had had sex the other night remained. I didn’t know how to touch her, how to be near her without feeling a weird twinge.

It was as if something had gone wrong between us.

As much as the thought hurt me, I moved forward. I was the Alpha, and this was a threat to all of us.

“It’s okay,” I murmured, caressing her shoulder. “Nolan put you in a tough spot. You don’t have to do anything he said. Do you know here he took Xavier?”

Cali sniffled, looking at the ground instead of my eyes. “Nolan has him trapped in a silver *cage* at his house.”

I glanced at the knife in her hand. “There must’ve been a struggle…” I trailed off. “How come you didn’t defend yourself?” She’d blasted me once or twice just for fun—you’d think that Xavier getting kidnapped would have called for a little firepower.

Cali paused for a moment. “Oh, I tried,” she said, nodding vehemently. “But Nolan must have knocked me out. When I came to, I was wearing this bracelet…” She fiddled with a golden circle around her wrist. “And he gave me the knife.”

I scowled, looking at the thing with narrowed eyes.

“I tried to remove it, of course,” she said, still fiddling with the piece of jewelry. “But it won't come off.”

I could’ve sworn that that bracelet looked familiar. Hadn’t she been wearing it before? I felt like a douchebag for not paying more attention to her accessory choices, but then again, this was beyond strange. Why would she lie to me about a bracelet? About what had happened with Nolan?

I couldn’t call her out on the bracelet thing, because I wasn’t sure if I was remembering correctly. I was just certain that something was happening here that made no sense.

“Let me see,” I said, grabbing the bracelet. I tried to pull it off, but it wouldn’t budge. If Cali was telling the truth, then where the fuck would Nolan have gotten a hold of a bracelet like this?

There was only one logical explanation: Nolan had to be working with Silas and Demeter. And if that was the case, then Nolan was going to deliver Xavier to Silas on a platter. Xavier had been captured, Xavier would be hurt, and…

Everything I had ever done to protect my family from Silas had failed.

*I* had failed.

The thought made my chest grow tight. I kept trying to break Cali out of that bracelet. It felt more like a cuff. I told myself that, maybe, if I managed to rescue Xavier, I would be able to fix all this fuckery and un-mess this mess, which had been my responsibility all along.

It remained my responsibility, and I needed to hurry.

“Greyson?” Cali spoke in a low voice. “What happens now?”

Everybody was counting on me. Cali was counting on me, and I couldn’t fail again.

“We don’t have the time to go back to the pack house,” I said. “Every second is precious in an abduction.” I wasn’t going to leave Cali here to fend for herself either, of course, so I added, “I’m going to shift and bring you to Nolan’s. We’ll rescue Xavier.”

Wide-eyed, Cali nodded as I shifted.

She climbed onto my back and held on as I raced through the woods.

I hoped to god that I wasn’t too late.

I hoped that Silas hadn’t laid a finger on my younger brother.

The kid was a pain in the ass, and I hated him more than I loved him, but I’d die before I let anything happen to him.

At least Cali was with me, and I knew she was okay.

When we arrived at Nolan’s house, I had to make sure she stayed safe. “Wait out here,” I told her.

She shook her head, pressing her lips together. Seeing some of her stubbornness made me feel better. She seemed more like her normal self as she spoke. “I’m coming with you. You might need my help.”

“No. Stay here. If you’re in any danger, let me know.”

Cali just huffed. I almost felt like smiling at the familiarity of it. At least some things didn’t change. Then again, Cali would normally have just come with me anyway and also smacked me for trying to keep her out. I half-expected her to do so right now, but she didn’t.

This was fucking weird.

Was Cali maturing or something? Was this how non-feisty women dealt with being told what to do?

Shoving these thoughts away, I shifted back to wolf form and cautiously headed toward the house. The closer I got, the more sure I was that Nolan wasn’t there. I could sense it.

Mind linking with Cali, I said, *Nolan’s gone.*

Silence.

*Cali? Can you hear me?*

Silence again.

*Cali?*

What the fuck? Why couldn’t I mind link with my mate?

**Episode 730**

I choked. “Um, excuse me? What do you mean *the three of us are going to die?*”

Hypatia raised an eyebrow. “I thought I explained it pretty well.”

*Pretty well*, she said. Nothing was going WELL right now!

“But you mean, death? Like, real death?” I spluttered. “In real life?”

Hypatia tossed her hair over her shoulder, all haughty. What was it with librarians and being high-brow? “It’s simple,” she said condescendingly, because she was probably immortal so the concept of death was merely mildly interesting to her. “If the *due destini* mate, in this case you, fails to choose her mate by Halloween, she and her two mates, in this case Greyson and Xavier, will perish.”

I gasped.

Everybody else behind me gasped as well, a beat later.

*Seems like we’re all a little slow keeping up with this madness right now*, I thought, freaked out.

“So it’s like… It’s like the legend when Cassandra threw herself off the cliff and the two mates followed,” I said.

“Yes!” Hypatia said enthusiastically, like she hadn’t just told me I’d die if I didn’t choose my forever person. Only one man, only one penis for me, forever. Or else both men I was in love with would die! And I’d die too!

*FUCK*.

*This does not bode well*, I thought, swallowing thickly. *Why is this happening to me? What did I ever do to deserve* this*?*

“Jeez, thanks for the info,” Lola told Hypatia dryly. “But what are we supposed to do about this? How can we fix it?”

Hypatia shrugged. “I’m just telling you the facts. I’m a librarian, not a throuples therapist.”

As my panic continued to climb, Artemis decided to very helpfully pipe up. “What’s a throuple?”

“Oh my god,” I hissed. “Not now!”

“I'll explain later,” Lola whispered to Artemis. Good to see that my best friend and my sister had their priorities straight when I had literally just been sentenced to death.

*I’m in danger of dying! AGAIN!* I thought wildly. *The Fae world didn’t kill me, the trolls and werewolves and witches didn’t kill me, but I’m going to die because of my two kinda-boyfriends!*

Some might have considered it romantic to perish because of the love(s) of your life, but I wanted to live. I had a lot to live for that had nothing to do with stupid boys, no matter how well they kissed. I had a great family, when they weren’t being extra or kidnap-y like Artemis, great friends, when they weren’t being annoying, and great Fae powers, when they worked. And also waffles!

If I died, I would NEVER EAT WAFFLES AGAIN!

I stared at Hypatia. “You mean to tell me,” I said, gesturing at all the shelves of musty old books and journals, “that with all this knowledge, there’s nothing that can tell me how to fix this?”

Hypatia sighed in that wonderful disdainful way of hers. God forbid I felt good about myself. “I never said that.”

“You pretty much just did!” Lola snapped.

Hypatia gasped.

Alarmed, I pulled Lola back. “We don't need to irritate the only person who might be able to help us…” I whisper-hissed at her. Even though I would also have liked to knock Hypatia down a notch or two. She was just so smug.

“What are you two talking about over there?” Hypatia asked Lola and me. Artemis and Jay just blinked at everyone dubiously. At least they’d realized they needed to keep their mouths shut.

“Nothing!” I said, dragging a grumbling Lola back. “Now, what were you saying?”

“While I don’t know how to help you, I never said there isn’t guidance to be found here,” Hypatia clarified.

I tried not to scream at her. “Can you show me where that might be, please?”

Hypatia pursed her lips. “There’s a journal. Somewhere.”

“*Somewhere?*” Lola snorted. “Isn’t it your job to know where stuff is?”

I elbowed Lola as Hypatia glared at her. “Impudence will get you nowhere.”

“See?” I mouthed at Lola. She rolled her eyes as Hypatia pulled a huge binder from under her desk. “Let’s see…” She trailed off, leafing through it one page at a time.

I was literally dying here.

“It must be here somewhere,” Hypatia mumbled to herself. “If only I could remember the catalog number.”

*Oh my god!* I thought. *COME ON!*

“While you’re looking up the *due destini* stuff, how about checking out info on werewolf hybrids?” Lola asked Hypatia innocently, suddenly no longer keen on pissing her off.

The woman glared up at Lola. “One subject at a time, please.”

Jay sighed deeply. Artemis yawned.

This was like watching paint dry. And if Hypatia was right—if all my symptoms and creepy dark veins were happening because I had to choose my mate, what the hell was I going to do? I definitely wasn’t ready to make that choice. This was like being at the cereal aisle—it took me two hours just to decide on a breakfast staple, and the universe wanted to rush me into choosing a mate? A mate who I’d have to deal with—I mean love and cherish—forever?

Decisions of this kind were definitely NOT my forte.

I couldn’t even decide if Greyson was the equivalent of Lucky Charms, or if Xavier was Cookie Crunch. I couldn’t even decide how to make my analogy work! And no matter who I chose, I’d probably always wonder if I should have chosen the other one. And what would happen to Xavier if I chose Greyson? Or to Greyson if I chose Xavier? Or would we all just end up at the bottom of a cliff, bloodied and mangled?

I did NOT like that idea. Blood made me squeamish. And I was too young to die! I hadn’t even travelled anywhere yet! I hadn’t even gone to Hawaii! Or Rome! Or Santorini!

*OH MY GOD, WHAT IF I REALLY DIE THIS TIME? WHAT IF ALL THREE OF US DIE?* I thought, my mind spinning. Then Hypatia suddenly looked up at me.

“Here it is.” She grinned. My heart was pounding in my ears—not only because of the fucked up situation, but also because her grin was disconcerting. It almost looked friendly, which weirded me out. Could she be getting actual pleasure from her job? Probably yes, if she’d been doing it for so long.

“Where are you going?” I asked, but she shushed me and disappeared behind a row of shelves.

Lola, Artemis, Jay, and I looked at each other as the sounds of books falling and ladders moving accompanied Hypatia’s search.

“What’s she doing?” Lola mouthed at me.

I shrugged, while Artemis yawned again. Good to see that her sister dying was of no consequence! What would our mother say?

*Ugh! I’m telling on her the minute we get home!* I thought darkly.

But then Artemis whispered to me, “Don’t worry. It’s going to be okay.”

Aww, she wasn’t that bad. Best older sister ever. I should make her an award.

… I really wasn’t very stable right now, was I?

“Here we are,” Hypatia announced, returning with a faded leather bound journal. She placed it in front of me, nodding with satisfaction. She really loved this stuff. Weirdo.

“It’s all in there,” she said proudly.

Fighting not to scream *FINALLY!*, I was reaching out to grab the journal when Hypatia pulled it back. “Ah-ah. Library card?”

I felt my eye twitch. “*Excuse me*?”

Unamused, Hypatia pointed to a sign above her. Had that been there all along? It read: *All checkouts require a valid library card.*

“Oh my god!” I snapped. “I’m about to die and you won’t let me look at this because of a *technicality?* Why are you like this? What did I even do to deserve such—”

Lola snatched the journal from Hypatia’s hands. “We’re only going to look at it here, so chill.”

Hypatia glared at Lola, huffing. “Fine.”

I’d expected her to throw more of a fit, but I wasn’t about to question a good thing. Fighting not to hyperventilate, I brought the book to a table and opened it. Jay, Lola, and Artemis stood over me, watching. “So what is this?”

Scowling, I fiddled with the first page and started to read.

Interesting*.*

Very, very interesting.

“It’s like a diary, actually,” I said, realization dawning.

“Whose diary?” Jay asked.

I checked out the back of the front cover, reading the faded letters. “It says ‘Property of Cassandra’.”

Something clicked inside my head. I looked up at Hypatia, who was filing her nails. “Wait, I thought that Cassandra wasn’t real? I thought she was just a legend?”

“Yeah,” Lola said, frowning. “She’s a story, meant to stop young werewolves from having premarital sex. Very rude. And ineffective.”

Jay snorted, and Artemis looked intrigued. “But if Cassandra was a legend, then what is this journal?”

Hypatia shook her head at me. “Cassandra was as real as you and me, child.”

I gasped. The realization made me feel dizzy, lightheaded.

“Then the legend isn’t a legend…” I looked at my friends, panicking. “It’s *real?*”

**Episode 731**

I stood there, stunned, and also VERY, *VERY* worried.

“Is this…” I cleared my throat. “Is this some kind of joke?”

Nobody else was talking. Jay and Lola were probably as freaked out as I was, and Artemis could—thankfully—read the room.

“Because if Cassandra was a real person, then that means the story Lola learned was real, and it does not have a happy ending. For anyone,” I finished, my voice cracking.

Hypatia raised an eyebrow. “Do I seem like the sort to joke about anything?”

I gulped. “Is that a trick question?”

Hypatia huffed. “If you stop asking me questions and actually read Cassandra’s journal, perhaps you’ll learn something that can help you.”

The “because that’s all the help you’re gonna get from me!”at the end of Hypatia’s sentence was implied, but I heard it loud and clear.

This whole thing was fucking surreal. A few months ago, I’d been minding my own business when freaking Xavier had barged into my life—okay, maybe I’d barged into his with the whole sold virginity thing, fine—and then Greyson, and now…

Now, I was reading the diary of a real person who I’d thought was a myth up until only a moment ago. I’d thought it was a fairy tale, a grim one at best. But it wasn’t. Was this real life? HOW was this real life?

“How old is this freaking journal?” I asked Lola. “Do we have any idea *when* Cassandra lived?”

Lola shook her head as Artemis pointed to the first line of a page. “It’s nearly… three-thousand years old.”

“Wow,” I breathed. “That’s really fucking old.”

“That was when the first werewolf packs started forming,” Lola pitched in. “They didn’t even have cell phones then.”

“Among other things,” Jay said.

I wondered what life must’ve been like for Cassandra without cell phones and other things, like… women’s rights. Oh my god, this was outrageous!

“There are a lot of entries,” Lola noted, vibrating with excitement. “Start reading!”

“But where do I even start?” I asked, leafing through the pages. “I don’t need to know what she ate for breakfast or how much she hates not having a phone.”

“Helps that they didn’t even know what phones were back then,” Jay noted casually. Lola chuckled at her mate’s not-very-funny joke, and then a thought struck me.

I stared at Lola. “What were the names of Cassandra’s two mates again?” It’d been so long since she’d told me the story.

“Arion was the son of the Alpha of the first pack. Symeon was the Rogue,” she said. I wondered how many times she’d read this story before. How many times she’d heard it. She started flipping through the pages of the journal impatiently. “Okay, but why are you wasting time? Let’s skip to the good parts—did Cassandra sleep with both of them?” Lola gasped. “I bet there are details!”

“The erotica section is upstairs, if you’re interested,” Hypatia noted from her desk, a few feet away.

Lola thanked her while Artemis said, “Can we please focus here?”

I rolled my eyes—leave it to Lola to turn a historical diary into an erotic romance story. “This girl dies at the end, Lola!” I huffed. “A little more respect wouldn’t hurt!”

“It’s still a love story,” Lola said stubbornly. “And at least she got to fuck two probably very hot men beforehand.”

Jay shot her a look. “Was that a hint, Lola? Would you like to experience more than one man as well?”

Lola smirked. “I would never.”

Artemis waved the couple off, turning to me. “Ignore them. We need to figure this out as soon as possible. Preferably *before* you die. After the Tony fiasco, I’m pretty sure I don’t like ghosts.”

“But I’d be a friendly ghost!” I said, offended.

Artemis rolled her eyes. “*Cali*.”

“Right,” I said sheepishly. “I’m reading now.” I nodded, starting to skim through the pages. For the first time, I realized the diary was written in English.

“Um, since this is three thousand years old, how am I able to read it?” I asked Hypatia, alarmed.

Hypatia lowered her glasses—of course she had glasses, she was a smug librarian. “The library knows the languages the reader is familiar with and enchants the books. It translates its contents accordingly.”

“That’s amazing,” I said, awed.

“Thank you,” she said. I didn’t question her further, because my companions were starting to fight over who knew more languages, and I needed to get this party started. Safe to say, I was beyond relieved I didn’t have to translate the text from ancient whatever-language-this-really-was. Probably Ancient Greek, if you considered the names of everyone involved.

I suddenly felt so cultured.

“There it is!” Artemis said, gesturing at a page where the names Symeon and Arion had both been written down. The handwriting was calligraphic but still legible. I shushed all three of my friends and stared at the page. Taking a deep breath, I started to read.

*After spending the night with Symeon, I feel light as air. But have I betrayed Arion by sleeping with Symeon? It was amazing… I couldn’t hold myself back any longer. How am I meant to choose between them? I thought sharing a bed with Symeon would give me clarity, but it hasn’t. Is this guilt going to spread through me and strangle me?*

I paused. Cassandra sure loved her flowery prose. It was pretty purple, but actually quite pleasant. What wasn’t pleasant was her obvious angst about choosing one of the two men.

“She had sex with both of them!” Lola exclaimed, excited. She’d been reading over my shoulder, very rudely. “Get it, girl!”

I shoved Lola. “Oh my God, *contain her!*” I said to Jay. “Cassandra literally died because she had sex, some sympathy wouldn’t hurt!”

Jay shook his head at Lola.

“That’s some misogynistic bullshit!” Lola said. “She didn’t die because of sex, she died because she couldn’t choose between them!”

“There does seem to be a distinction,” Artemis noted with a shrug.

“Okay, everyone, stop it!” I exclaimed. “I’m reading now!”

They finally shut up, and I read through another entry.

*I am at a loss*, Cassandra wrote. *Is it my destiny to choose between Arion and Symeon? My struggle consumes me—every day I seek answers, but no one can help me. How to explain the unexplainable… Am I the only one confronted with this? Surely there must be others like me who could help.*

“Does any of this help you?” Lola asked.

This time, she looked more worried, more serious, the reality of my situation sinking in. I didn’t speak, just shook my head. I was too struck by the similarities that I had with Cassandra: the indecisiveness, the uncertainty, the shame and guilt. But also the great pleasure she found in both men, the connection she felt with them. The agony of having to choose between them had overpowered her…

And then all three of them had ended up as a pile of bones at the bottom of a cliff.

The diary felt like a dead end, and my chest tightened.

It was as if a vice was closing in on me, and I knew—I knew, even without looking—that the black veins had returned.

Artemis frowned, eyeing my face. “Are you okay?”

“Do you need some water?” Jay added. “You look pale.”

“It’s… It’s my chest again. I just need to sit for a minute.”

Lola stared at me, frowning. “Joking aside, this is fucked, Cali. Why did this have to be you? Like, a few months ago, you didn’t even have one boyfriend, and now you’re being forced to choose between two? That’s some bullshit.”

It didn’t seem like not choosing was a choice at this point. Like Lola said, not choosing is what did Cassandra in.

Lola fussed over me for a little longer while Jay gave me some water from his backpack—which Hypatia said wasn’t allowed in the library. I breathed slowly, fighting to calm my nerves and the fucking black veins that were squeezing my heart like an evil squid’s tentacles. And then Lola started pacing.

“Lola, you’re stressing me out even more,” I said, and my friend apologized.

“Hey, maybe we should look up the hybrid situation now?” Jay offered, distracting Lola. I shot him a grateful look.

“Great idea!” Lola said, turning to Hypatia. “Where’s your werewolf section? And the subsection regarding hybrids?”

“How do you know there’s a subsection?” Hypatia asked, clearly amused.

“I assume there’s a subsection. It sure *feels* complicated, being a hybrid—we definitely deserve our own subsection.”

Hypatia rolled her eyes. She picked up a Post-it-like piece of paper and wrote something on it before holding it toward Lola. There was a number on it, and Lola frowned.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“The volume you seek is in the restricted section,” Hypatia said.

Lola kept frowning. “What does ‘restricted’ even mean, here?”

Hypatia looked like she was bored with answering all our questions, but had no other choice. She sighed deeply. “No more than two can enter the restricted section at a time.”

Lola’s eyes widened as she processed the information. I certainly did NOT like this turn of events, either. Only two people? Why not more? What weird fresh hell was this?

“Are you coming with me?” Lola asked Jay.

“Of course,” he said, like the wholesome boy that he was.

“The restricted section is down in the vault,” Hypatia said.

And then I realized something, and my anxiety spiked all over again.

“Wait,” I blurted out, looking at Jay and Lola. “This place is dangerous! Are we going to split up?”

**Episode 732**

AVA

Greyson froze.

He looked back at me, his wolf’s silver eyes piercing. My heart was pounding so hard, I was worried that he’d hear. That he’d suspect. Or maybe he’d think that I was just enraptured by seeing him as a wolf. He was massive and looked immensely powerful—it was obvious that this werewolf was no teddy bear.

If Greyson realized the truth about me, I had no doubt that he would rip my throat out without hesitating.

Did he suspect something?

Was that why he was coming toward me?

I weighed the pros and cons of using the knife. Or would I stand a better chance at surviving if I shifted? But what if I was wrong? What if he didn’t suspect anything and was coming over for some other reason? In that case, shifting would give me away for good.

Xavier had all the subtlety of a sledgehammer, so I could always tell whenever he was preparing to attack. Greyson, on the other hand, was sneaky. Tricky. I couldn’t afford to blow my cover so easily right now, though, so I decided against shifting. I tightened the grip on the knife as Greyson shifted back to human.

I fought not to show my relief. Taking in his strong form—much like Cali would have, because the man was seriously ripped—I stared at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Why can’t I mind link with you?” he asked, scowling.

*Shit*.

I hadn’t thought of that. I wasn’t Greyson’s mate, and I was—luckily—not part of his pack either, so of course he couldn’t mind link with me. But he was an Alpha… *Shit*. I needed an explanation. I thought quickly, bringing up the first excuse that came into my mind.

“It must be the bracelet,” I said, gesturing at the thing that woman had forced upon me.

Greyson eyed me carefully. I could see the wheels in his brain turning. He wasn’t fully buying any of this. It had been happening earlier, as well—Greyson had kept shooting me these odd, dubious looks. Perhaps sleeping with him had done more harm than good. As enjoyable as it had been, it was nothing compared to the connection I felt with Xavier, and I suddenly wondered if Greyson had been able to sense that there was something missing between us. Then again, from what I knew, Greyson and Cali hadn’t had sex before, so he had nothing to compare it to.

I felt a sharp pang in my chest, much like guilt, as I mulled everything over. All the bad things I’d chosen to do in the name of some fucked up revenge on Nolan’s behalf.

I’d always been so desperate to please my older brother.

“We’ll have to ask Big Mac about that bracelet when we get back to the pack house,” Greyson said, eyeing my wrist suspiciously.

I didn’t want to imagine what Big Mac would say about it—I needed to worry about one thing at a time, otherwise I’d explode. This double agent situation was getting old.

“Are you still going into the house?” I asked cautiously.

“Not sure,” he said, glancing behind him. “If you stay here, I have no way of warning you of any danger, since we can’t mind link right now. And you can’t contact me either.”

It looked like I was lying myself into a hole.

*Fuck.*

And what the hell was going happen if Greyson did free Xavier? Xavier knew the truth about me, and he’d definitely tell Greyson who I really was right away, and then Greyson would kill me. Or Xavier would kill me.

Or they’d do it together, both of them.

“Are you going to be okay?” Greyson asked calmly. “I’m just going to look, check things out quickly and come back out.”

I wanted to tell him not to go inside. I wanted to keep him from seeing Xavier, before it was too late. But how could I do that without raising his suspicions? Maybe I should have just stabbed him when I’d had the chance.

Why didn’t I? What was holding me back?

The truth was that as much as I wanted to help Nolan, Greyson was his problem, not mine. The only Evers brother I’d ever hated was Xavier, since he’d literally murdered me, but my feelings for him were growing more complicated by the second. I couldn’t imagine killing him at this point. Not after the night we’d had together. Not after feeling our mate connection again after so long.

Nolan was the one out for revenge against Greyson. But so far, Greyson had treated me well, whereas Nolan had treated Xavier like he was a wild animal, locking him in a cage. Nolan had always been that way, rough and violent. He’d had to be. The memory of Xavier locked up angered me—I should have done something, should have stopped Nolan from harming him in such a sadistic way. No matter what, Xavier was still my mate.

Xavier was *mine*.

There was a part of me that wanted to love him, to grow old with him, to laugh with him, to leave everything behind and just be with him.

I needed my mate.

For a split second, I considered my options—was it possible to have Xavier all to myself, but not by killing Greyson? What if I could make Cali choose Greyson as her mate? That would probably break the bond between her and Xavier right away. And it would finally put an end to this messed up game I’d been forced to play.

Maybe I’d taken pleasure in messing with the brothers for a while there—I could admit that—but the endgame for me had always been Xavier. When I’d realized that I didn’t want to kill him, that I no longer wanted to destroy him, Xavier had returned to my heart…

Even though *he* wanted Cali.

I could kill Cali, in theory. But if Xavier ever found out, he’d never forgive me.

No, the best option was to make Cali choose Greyson. And as long as Greyson thought of me as Cali, I had the chance to make that happen.

I mulled all those things over in seconds, then brought myself back to this moment—to Greyson staring at me with a frown, clearly skeptical but also worried. Could I prevent him from going into Nolan’s house, finding Xavier, and learning the truth?

I would have to figure that out.

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “Uh. Go. Be careful.”

The last two words seemed to make Greyson soften. He caressed my arm, and I tried to look at him like I really was worried about him as well, and not just about myself. He seemed satisfied, and I felt a little sorry for him. For a moment, I felt sorry for lying to this man who was so clearly in love with someone else. But Greyson could also kill me for lying to him, so I didn’t allow myself to dwell on this newfound feeling for too long.

I watched Greyson anxiously as he checked out the house. I could just run away before he talked to Xavier, right? Then again, that would only buy me a little time. Greyson would be able to track me down easily in the end, and the result—a.k.a. my death—would be the same. I was too young to die more than once.

I swallowed roughly as Greyson approached one of the windows and peered inside. He moved around to the other windows, his every movement methodical and predator quiet. I’d have been fascinated by his methods if I hadn’t been so terrified about my future. Greyson finally turned back, waving for me to come over.

Reminding myself that he was sneaky and this could be a trap, I walked over. My knife was still ready if I needed it.

“What did you find?” I asked.

Greyson shook his head. “I can’t explain it. The house is empty… Nolan and the entire pack are gone.”

I was struck by Greyson’s words. Had Nolan abandoned me? Had I gone through all this mess just for him leave me behind? What had he done with Xavier?

I felt sick at the thought of Xavier being harmed in any way.

“Where did Nolan put Xavier?” Greyson asked me, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“He had him in the basement,” I said. Then instantly regretted it.

I should’ve taken this opportunity to walk away. Instead, here I was, putting myself in danger.

On a subconscious level, it was like I felt I deserved to die.

“Can you sense if he’s here?” I asked Greyson.

“I can’t tell either way,” Greyson replied. “You said the cage was silver—that may have something to do with it. There’s only one way to find out.”

Before I could speak, Greyson kicked the door open like it was made of foam.

I held my breath at the impact—I needed to be ready for the worst, now. And the only thing worse than Greyson killing me over finding out the truth was Nolan killing Xavier and leaving him here to rot. Or leaving him here alive to die of starvation.

My decision had been made all along: I couldn’t leave my mate in this house, dead or alive, even if freeing him meant my own death.

Greyson led me in. “Stay behind me,” he said. “This could be some sort of trap.”

I squeezed the silver knife in my hand, eyeing Greyson’s back.

We moved through the house quickly and headed toward the basement, down the stairs. Greyson paused. I took in the scene, my heart pounding.

The door to the silver cage was open.

The cage was empty.

Xavier was gone.

**Episode 733**

“We shouldn’t split up!” I said vehemently, but Lola just looked at me like I’d grown two heads.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Have scary movies taught you *nothing?*” I exclaimed. “The moment people split up, something bad happens! They all die! Or, even worse, one of them stays alive and then they’re haunted by guilt forever! Or until there’s a sequel.”

“Sounds interesting,” Artemis noted. “Can I be the one who survives?”

I glared at Artemis. The sheer AUDACITY of her wanting to be the Final Girl. Obviously *I* would be the Final Girl—I’d gone through way too much shit to die now. And that included the *due destini* bullshit.

*You’ll never defeat me alive!* I thought, internally yelling at the universe. And then I remembered that the universe did, in fact, want me to die. And also that Artemis had been through some pretty bad stuff herself… That orphanage couldn’t have been a walk in the park. So maybe she could indeed be the Final Girl.

*God dammit, why am I always so conflicted about everything?* I thought. My indecisiveness was what had gotten us here in the first place!

“What scary movie, Cali?” Lola said. Poor thing. She hadn’t even realized that since she and Jay were in a relationship, Scary Movie Rules said that they were both doomed. “Sure, this place is creepy AF, but it’s just a library with a bunch of musty old books,” Lola continued, gesturing around. “What could possibly go wrong?”

“You just said the most famous last words of all time.” I groaned. “Jay! Tell her!”

Jay looked at his mate sheepishly. “Okay. Maybe Cali isn’t entirely wrong here.”

Lola huffed. “Jay, I need you to back me up with these things!”

Great. They were already fighting. They’d die while they were in the middle of a fight—what a horrible way to go.

“Based on everything that’s happened,” I told Lola patiently, “I know that anything and everything can go wrong. It always does.”

“But—”

I cut Lola off. “And this library looks like a maze—we could get lost for days!”

“Artemis?” Lola turned to my sister. “Tell her she’s exaggerating. You’re not afraid of this place, are you?”

Before Artemis could speak, I glared at Lola. “Do not bring the resident badass into this! She’s not afraid of anything, ever!”

“I thought *I* was the resident badass. I have an eyepatch and all,” Jay mumbled to himself with a frown. Poor clueless baby.

Artemis patted his shoulder comfortingly.

“The best solution is for you to wait here while I do my research,” I told Lola. “Then we can all go to the vault together.”

“But I’m so tired of waiting!” Lola whined. “I’m getting antsy here! Why don’t *you* wait?”

I eyed Lola. There was a flush to her cheeks, and her energy was climbing. I realized these were all telltale signs of an uncontrollable hybrid who would shift if she got any more agitated. And who knew what fresh hell *that* would serve up?

“Okay,” I grumbled, grabbing the diary. “We’re going together. I’ll take the book with me.”

“Absolutely not!” Hypatia’s voice boomed through the space, startling all four of us. I turned to face her thunderous expression. “The journal *never* leaves this section.”

“Oh, come on,” I snapped, huffing. “I’m about to die here! Can’t you make an exception?”

“Rules are rules,” Hypatia deadpanned.

“Rules are meant to be broken!” I declared.

She did not seem impressed by my war cry.

“You have to leave the journal here,” she said.

I offered a long-suffering sigh. Nothing, *nothing* was going my way, and I resented that. How rude was she, honestly? Why couldn’t I have just one good thing happen to me without some sort of new problem popping up? *Ugh!*

“Fine,” I grumbled. I marched toward Hypatia and placed the journal on her desk. “But put it on reserve, I don't want anything to happen to it.”

Hypatia scoffed. “Nothing happens to my books. Since I became head librarian, we’ve never had a missing book.”

“What century was that?” Artemis asked.

“Yeah,” Lola said, eyeing Hypatia. “Have you ever done any Botox?”

I shushed both of them and turned to a now-amused Hypatia. She was so weird.

“So?” I asked. “How do we get to the vault?”

Hypatia removed a pamphlet from her desk drawer, putting her glasses back on. She showed it to me, gesturing at what looked like a library map. “Follow along this line, turn at the fourteenth row, and then follow non-fiction until you reach the stairs.”

Jay cleared his throat. “You mean the moving stairs? That make you lose your way?”

Hypatia continued as if she hadn’t even heard him. “There are signs that will guide you from there.”

I took the pamphlet, turning it upside down as I tried to make sense of it.

“I hate maps,” Artemis grumbled helpfully as Jay said, “I’ll deal with it. Let’s get this over with.”

“He’s great with maps,” Lola told Artemis while we started walking down the rows of books. “Map drawing is, like, his hobby.”

“Sexy,” Artemis deadpanned.

“I know!” Lola enthused.

I tried not to laugh at the madness of it all.

“Hey!” Hypatia barked behind us. “Don’t forget that you can’t remove anything from the restricted section. And only two of you can go in at a time.”

I wanted to yell back at her, “*I know, okay? I’ve seen/read Harry Potter, I get it, I know what I’m doing! STOP BEING SUCH A PAIN IN MY ASS!*”

But I stopped myself, because it felt like Hypatia would probably not appreciate my tone.

All four of us stopped talking as we started counting rows. Jay was in the lead, but he was as confused as I was. It was as if the numbers were randomly arranged.

“Did Hypatia mean to go to the row numbered fourteen or to count fourteen rows?” I asked Jay. “Because if I’m wrong, we could be looking for days. And I don’t have days to waste.”

Jay scowled. It looked so foreign on his cute face. He checked out the pamphlet. “If the structure of the library changes constantly because of the moving stairs, this is useless.”

Well, that was encouraging.

We then arrived at the 14th row.

“Thirty-seven,” Jay read out loud, frowning at the marking at the top of the row. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I have no idea,” Lola said.

“Nobody does,” I said. I could see that Lola was getting antsy again. We couldn’t stay here—I didn’t want her to shift and eat the books. At least not before I got that journal from Hypatia!

“Guys?” Artemis tugged at my sleeve before gesturing ahead. “There’s a door down this way.”

Holding my breath, I marched toward it, but Artemis held me back. “We should leave a trail so we can find our way back.”

“I can leave my scent behind,” Jay offered.

“Great idea, both of you!” I said, feeling proud of my comrades and also a little useless as a leader. This was going so well. Not.

Jay rubbed his wrist against one of the shelves, and we proceeded toward the door. I hoped that Jay’s scent was enough. This was such a strange and confusing place, and I definitely wouldn’t want to get lost in here. I glanced at some of the book titles as we walked, and was met with:

*How To Train Your Pet Dinosaur* byArthur Somestuff.

*One Day You’ll Be Resurrected as a Dung Beetle* by Maxine Allergy-Flores.

*Penetration in a Matriarchal Society: Penises Are Entirely Optional* by Domenicus Philosophus Randomus.

So this was definitely nothing like the library I remembered back in Minnesota. I wondered how many books were even here. Millions? Billions?

This beautiful place suddenly felt very daunting.

We stopped at the door and Lola instantly reached for the handle, like the impatient problem child she was.

“Wait,” I said firmly, grabbing her forearm. “We should be careful.”

Lola glared at me, and I felt my stomach twitch. At this point, I was pretty worried about her; she was more agitated and irritable than her usual fun self. She was far more grouchy and aggressive in general, lately. It wasn’t a good thing for anyone, herself included. I hoped that whatever we found down in the vault would help her move past this. Whatever it was.

“If anything goes wrong,” Jay said, “we’re heading back right away.”

Artemis’s earlier calm demeanor changed, out of the blue. She glared at Jay. “Who put you in charge?”

“Okay, we’re in this together!” I said, before Jay could speak. “No fighting.”

Lola huffed, rolling her eyes. “I don’t even understand why you’re all so worried right now! Where’s the drama? We’re just getting a book.”

And before I could stop her, she swung the door open.

I gasped, only to be faced…

With a brick wall?

“Uh,” I said awkwardly. “This isn’t what I had in mind.” I scowled, narrowing my eyes at it. “Is it even real?”

I reached out to touch it, but before my fingertips could make contact, the floor under us started shaking, and then—

It opened up and we all fell through.

**Episode 734**

XAVIER

I had tried.

Again and again and again and again and fucking *again*—I had tried to break the chains and cuffs binding me. But it wasn’t working. It wouldn’t work, because they were silver, and Nolan had a pretty good idea of how to trap someone. He’d probably done this a million times before.

Still, even though I knew that I couldn’t break the chains, I couldn’t help but keep straining against them. It was like an itch that I wouldn’t stop myself from scratching, a hope that kept me from losing my mind.

How the hell had I ended up here?

*Ava.*

Fucking Ava.

Ava, my once-mate, had betrayed me once more. She kept saying that she loved me, that she would never hurt me, but she just continued hurting me at the same time. It was amazing how she could say one thing and do the exact opposite, continually twisting the knife in my back.

Ava had betrayed me again and, for some fucked up reason, it still hurt.

Not because I loved her. No, I wanted to eradicate her, recoiling at the mere idea of her hurting Cali. But I also felt a profound bitterness when it came to Ava, a feeling that I’d never experienced before. In the past, her betrayal had hurt the most—more than Silas’s, more than Greyson’s—and now it was happening again.

I wondered if she was happy with herself. If her remorse had been yet another lie. I wondered what she would think if she saw the way Nolan was treating me, pulling at me like I was a dog on a leash.

“Keep up, would you?” he barked. “We don’t have all night!”

I was going to kill him.

The first opportunity I got, I was going to kill him, rip his throat out and tear his head off, then offer it to Ava on a platter just to see her eyes widen in horror. His pack would kill me afterward for attacking him, but it would be worth it. Even if it cost me my own life, killing Nolan would be worth it, because I’d never felt so dehumanized and humiliated in my whole life.

I’d never felt more like a beast.

Nolan tugged at the leash again as he and Leroy walked ahead. The two of them had moved me from the basement cage and into a car. We’d driven for quite some time, and now we were on foot, moving deeper and deeper into the woods. Both of them had mocked me earlier, asking why I wasn’t questioning where they were taking me. They’d been challenging me to show fear, but I hadn’t allowed myself to display any.

My fear would make them happy, content, full of sadistic pleasure, and that realization had left me more determined than ever to hide my true feelings. I’d been a mercenary, yes, but I’d never humiliated anyone like this. It clearly took a certain special someone to do this shit.

It was getting dark, now. It had to be early evening—hours had passed since we’d left that basement, and I still had no idea where they were taking me, or why. I made sure to take in my surroundings, though, just to clue myself in for later. For when I made my escape.

A dark shadow loomed up ahead against the fading sky. A mountain?

The two sons of bitches were chatting and laughing. They’d made sure to keep me a few feet behind them. The silver was stopping me from using my werewolf hearing to listen in on their conversation, but my fury kept climbing.

“We’re here,” Nolan said loudly, speaking to Leroy, when we reached a clearing at the mountain’s base. There was a covered entrance there. Both men paused and Nolan tugged the leash to bring me closer. I choked, the cuff around my neck tightening hard enough that I couldn’t breathe.

“What is this place?” I asked, growling.

Nolan’s smile was sick. “It’s your new home.”

Laughing at his Alpha’s fucked up joke, Leroy shoved the door open, revealing a set of stairs that led down into darkness. Nolan started moving downward and jerked the chain, this time hard enough that I almost tripped down the stairs.

All I could think about was tearing him limb from limb.

I would send every single bloodied piece of him to Ava.

Every. Single. One.

Growling, I regained my balance, my eyes adjusting rapidly to the darkness.

“Hope you like it here,” Nolan said mockingly. “It’s all you’re going to be seeing for a while.”

I realized that this was a bunker, deep beneath the surface of the earth. This piece of shit was seriously pushing his luck.

“Let me out of these cuffs for two seconds,” I told Nolan as Leroy attached the leash to the wall. “Two seconds, and I’ll destroy you just like I did in the Lupo Finale.”

Nolan glared at me. His ego was wounded. *Good*.

“Shut the fuck up,” he snapped. He moved toward the wall, checking the chains to make sure they were secure.

He’d never admit it, but he was afraid of me.

He knew what I was capable of.

“Go keep an eye on things upstairs,” Nolan told Leroy, who nodded solemnly. He walked out without sparing me a glance, leaving Nolan and me alone in the room.

I could smell the blood of whoever had rotted in here before today.

“What is this, Nolan?” I asked sharply. “You already had me locked up in a cage, why bother bringing me here?”

“I just thought you’d be more comfortable here,” Nolan said. “I think the lack of light really sells it.”

I charged at him, roaring, but the chains pulled me back.

“Ah, Xavier,” Nolan said. “You gotta relax.”

My jaw clenched. “You fucking lunatic, why the hell are you doing this? You sent Ava in to seduce me—who the fuck uses their own sister like that?”

“I never asked her to seduce anyone.” Nolan laughed. “I guess she did that for her own amusement.”

I felt like I was about to hurl.

Ava had been a good person… Once. Or at least so I’d thought. But this kind of deceit was beyond anything she’d managed before.

“Ava killed my mother, and I had to kill her. If you plan on murdering me for what I did to her, why bring me here on this fucking road trip? Why go through all this trouble? You’re acting like a villain from a James Bond movie, and a fucking bad one at that—your backstory is bullshit!”

“I’ve always wanted to kill you, Xavier,” Nolan said coldly. “I would like to kill all of the Evers brothers, wipe your family off the face of the earth. I’d be doing everyone a favor.”

“Then what’s stopping you?” I demanded.

Nolan glared at me. Just as he was about to answer, his phone rang.

“Where the fuck are you going?” I snapped.

Nolan gripped his phone and headed outside. Before closing the door behind him, he said, “Fortunately for you, I need to take this.”

The door shut, and then I was alone in the bunker.

What the hell was Nolan talking about?

What the fucking fuck was happening right now?

I’d been captured a fair number of times in my life, but this took the cake. This place made me feel claustrophobic, and the scent of dried blood made me want to vomit. I fought to break the chains once more, roaring, wishing I could wrap my hands around Nolan’s throat.

The chains cut into my skin, the scent of my own blood adding to the disgusting essence of the bunker.

Panting, I looked around, wondering if there was anything I could use to escape. I needed to get out of here—needed to warn the pack, to let them know about Ava. About Cali…

Where the hell was Cali?

I hadn’t called her, had given her the space she’d craved, and look where that had gotten us. I had no idea where she was now. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t realized that Ava had been pretending to be the woman I loved—how stupid was I?

I should’ve realized it right away.

I should’ve listened to my instincts when they’d screamed at me that something was wrong every time Ava had stared at me timidly instead of telling me off. Cali didn’t fucking stare at *anyone* timidly, *for fuck’s sake!*

How the hell had I fallen for this?

If anything had happened to Cali because of my stupidity, I would never forgive myself. I’d done some pretty shitty things in my lifetime, but this had nothing to do with me. This was about Cali, and I had…

I had failed her.

The thought left me reeling, just as the door swung open.

Nolan was here, and my fury returned tenfold. “Back so soon? Hope I’m not keeping you from something more important.”

“Oh, not at all,” Nolan replied casually. “I was just confirming everything is as it should be.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” I demanded.

Nolan peered at me coldly. “Your father’s on his way.”

Stunned, I watched as Nolan left once more, sealing the door shut behind him.

**Episode 735**

I was screaming and free-falling downward, feeling like I was already dead. I’d thought the goddamn *due destini* curse would be what ended me, but apparently there were a million different ways for me to die.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—”

I crashed into a chute that rudely interrupted my scream. Then I was sliding down, down, down while Lola, Jay, and Artemis bumped into me. All four of us became one tangled ball of yarn.

“Oh my god!” Lola yelled.

“When is this going to end?” Jay shouted.

Artemis laughed, sounding hysterical. We were all losing it. And of course the first one was Artemis, my dear, mildly murderous sister. I couldn’t believe this was happening, but I also kinda could.

*It’s like, what else did I need today? Why, for the floor to open!* I thought, just as we came to a sudden stop, crashing unceremoniously onto a hard surface. The air was knocked out of me, because Lola was on top of me, and I was on top of Artemis, and somehow Jay was grabbing my ear?

“Everyone, get off me!” Artemis huffed, clearly no longer having a good time. Suited her right. We started to disentangle, shoving each other and grumbling.

“How the hell did that happen?”

“The floor really opened up, didn’t it?”

“I loved it up until you guys almost crushed me. It brought me back to that one time I almost died when a troll stepped on me.”

“This is all Hypatia’s fault!” Lola seethed. She was getting angrier by the second, and that could be a problem. “She tricked us!” Lola looked around in the semi-darkness. My eyes had adjusted enough to see her flushed cheeks. “This has to be a trap!”

“Lola, calm down,” Jay said, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Why would Hypatia trap us? She doesn’t have anything to gain from it.”

“That we know of!” Lola barked. “She might be bored. She might have decided to toy around with a bunch of dumb kids!”

“I’m with Jay, Lola,” Artemis said. “Like I said, up until the crushing part, the ride was kind of exhilarating. Besides, nobody seems hurt.”

My big toe was hurting, but I wasn’t about to complain about that when everybody else seemed fine. I looked around once more, trying to take in my surroundings. “What even is this place? The depths of the earth?”

“Just the Archives Vault,” Jay said, pointing at an “Archives Vault” sign that was literally over my head. Figured.

“Couldn’t they have an elevator or something to get down here?” I grumbled. “How the hell are we supposed to get back up? Because that chute seems unclimbable to me.”

“We’ll worry about getting out later,” Lola said impatiently. “The pamphlet said the restricted section is inside the vault there. Did it say anything about how to get in?”

Jay scowled, checking it out. “It’s not very helpful.”

“Hypatia said there’d be signs to guide us,” I said. “So let’s look for them?”

All four of us looked around.

“I don’t see any signs,” Lola said with a scowl.

“There are more rows of bookshelves over there, though,” Jay noted. “And there’s another door at the end of this one. Maybe there’s a sign there?”

Artemis wasted no time in heading toward it, and I followed, along with Jay and Lola, who said, “God dammit!”

“What?” I asked.

“Is anyone else noticing how cold it’s getting down here?” Lola asked, rubbing her palms over her arms, up and down. “Maybe the librarian is going to deep freeze us.”

I gasped in horror. “Lola, *no*.”

“Why not? If she’s a vampire or whatever, we’d be, like, her popsicles.”

I gagged at the image. “Oh my god, *stop*!” Just as the words left my mouth, I felt a chill as well. But it wasn’t like the temperature was dropping…

It was more like someone with cold, icy fingers was touching me.

*Ew, no! Gross!* I thought, shuddering as I patted my arms down. “Did you guys feel that?” I asked, looking around. Nothing.

“Feel what?” Jay asked.

“Like someone cold was—never mind,” I grumbled. “The quicker we get to the vault, the better.”

Artemis stopped walking, so suddenly that I almost crashed into her back. “What?” I gasped. “What’s happening?”

She faced me, panting. “Something… Something just brushed past me.”

I gulped. *Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit!*

“I didn’t see anything,” Jay said cautiously.

“I didn’t see anything either,” Artemis said. “But I felt something.” She raised her arm, and it was smeared with black fingerprints.

*Fingerprints!* I thought, panicking. *Why are there fingerprints on her arm when there’s nobody here?*

I blinked in fear, more creeped out than I’d been since I’d hung out with the Kollector in the Fae world.

“You know what?” I said nervously. “Maybe we should just head back. Maybe we took a wrong turn, how about that?”

“No, Cali,” Lola said. “We’re here now.”

“But we have no idea where we are!” I exclaimed, trying to look at the pamphlet. All the images were now blank.

Lola snatched it from my hands. “If you knew how to read a map, we wouldn’t be lost!”

I gasped, pointing at Jay. “Um, *excuse me?* He was supposed to be the map expert!”

“Stop arguing,” Jay said firmly. “You’re acting like children.”

“Hey!” Lola barked, shoving him on the shoulder. “Watch your tone!”

“Don’t shove him!” Artemis told Lola. “He didn’t do anything wrong!”

Lola glared between them. “Didn’t do anything wrong? He just yelled at me!” She stared at Jay. “You’d better stop fucking ordering me around right now, *or else!*”

“I’ll stop when you stop acting like a brat, Lola!” Jay snapped, and I blinked in shock.

My irritation toward Lola was suddenly clouded by the fact that Jay was mad, which happened super rarely. I knew they had their little fights when they were alone, as a couple, but Jay had never snapped at Lola in front of me before.

*What’s happening right now?* I wondered. I could see my breath now—the temperature had seriously dropped. *I don’t like this!*

“Okay, I get that everybody’s nerves are on edge, but let’s calm down now,” I said. The others were all scowling. “We should either go back or keep going—either way, we can’t stay here.” I swallowed thickly, looking around the dark place. The passage between the bookshelves was making me feel claustrophobic. “I don’t like anything about this place.”

“Me neither. Especially not with the handsy whatever-the-fuck that was,” Artemis said, rubbing her arm. The fingerprints had disappeared.

*It’s fine, Cali, calm down! Everything is going to be okay!* I thought, heart pounding. *Right?*

I followed Artemis, only to realize that the passage between the bookshelves was getting narrower and narrower.

“Guys? What is happening?” Lola coughed. “It’s fucking *cold*!”

“Is it me or do the columns of books seem to be moving in on us?” I asked, my tone rising in panic.

“Don’t worry, Cali,” Artemis said. “I’m right here—”

Before she could finish her sentence, a book fell down and hit her on the head.

“Ouch!” Artemis moaned.

“Artemis!” I squeezed her shoulders. “Oh my god, are you okay?”

She nodded, rubbing her forehead.

I looked upward, glaring at the shelf. “Who did this? Is it you, weird creepy thing that left those fingerprints on Artemis? What’s your problem with her?”

My voice echoed through the room, and Artemis huffed.

“I’ve had it with this bullshit.” She looked upward, her eyes narrowed at the shelf. “You think this is a game? Because I can play!” She grabbed the fallen book and threw it back up.

“That’ll teach that creepy thing,” I told Artemis proudly, patting her shoulder.

“I know, right?” Artemis dusted off her shoulder.

“Uh, guys…” Jay trailed off nervously, looking around.

“Stop being such a wuss, Jay. Artemis totally showed that thing who’s boss,” Lola said. “We can defeat anyone and anything. Go girl power!”

And then the book came right back down and fell on Lola’s head.

“Fuck!” Lola snapped, groaning as she held her head. She then turned to glare at Artemis, her “girl power” speech clearly forgotten. “Did you do this?”

Artemis looked at her like she was nuts. “That’s a different book than the one that fell on me. You’d have noticed that if you weren’t so ready to snap at everyone all the time.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Lola growled, shoving Artemis.

I gasped, horrified. Jay did as well.

“Both of you! Stop it!” I called, but they ignored me.

It was as if they couldn’t even hear me.

“You did not just do that!” Artemis shouted. “I ate little hybrids like you for breakfast when I was in the Fae world!”

And then she shoved Lola as well.

WTF was happening anymore?! Artemis was a reforming bounty hunter, but Lola wasn’t. She shouldn’t have been shoving anyone around. What was with both of them?

“NO! STOP FIGHTING!” I yelled even louder.

They stopped fighting. And for a second I was feeling really proud of myself. They were listening for once! But then I realized why they’d stopped fighting and it wasn’t because of me.

They stopped because more and more books had started to fall on our heads.

“What is it *THIS TIME?*” I screamed, but nobody heard me.

My words were drowned out as I was buried in an avalanche of books.

**Episode 736**

GREYSON

The silver cage in Nolan’s basement was empty.

Xavier was gone. What the fuck?

“Where is he?” I asked, turning to face Cali.

She looked like she’d just seen a ghost. “I—I don’t understand,” she stammered. “He was right here…” Her voice cracked, and I was entirely certain that her devastation was a real, pulsating thing. It hurt to witness—to see my girl hurting for someone else like this—but on the other hand, I *was* worried about that son of a bitch Xavier.

I was worried about Cali, too.

She hadn’t chosen between Xavier and me yet, and something still felt wrong between us. But I shouldn’t even have been thinking about this bullshit right now, anyway. I had a fucking infuriating brother to save, apparently.

“I’m going to search the house and try to find his scent,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose before turning my back on her.

I could feel her following as I inhaled deeply. Finding Xavier’s scent under a sea of so many other werewolves’ was a task, but I figured it out quickly enough. I caught the scent and followed it to the driveway of the house, where it ended.

They’d fucking left with him.

“What’s wrong?” Cali asked.

I turned to face her. Her eyes were wide, vulnerable. “We might be able to track the car, but the scent is so clearly cut off that I figure Nolan must have masked it.” I said, fighting to balance out jealousy and concern.

“Do you think they hurt him?” Cali whispered.

“Not sure. But they must have chained him up good,” I said. “Xavier wouldn’t have left you to fend for yourself if he could help it…”

If nothing else, I knew that to be true about Xavier.

But what was Nolan’s real angle here?

“What do we do next?” Cali asked.

I glanced at the knife, still in her hand. I still didn’t understand that part—why would Nolan want Cali to kill me? Why would he even think it would be possible for Cali to kill me? I would’ve thought that, as my mate, Cali was incapable of doing something like that. Then again, Xavier had killed Ava. But either way, Nolan seemed like the type to want to commit murder all by himself. He’d drink some whiskey to celebrate it afterward, too.

Something felt off about this entire situation, and I couldn’t put my finger on what was going on exactly, but I was glad that Cali was safe and with me right now. She seemed so miserable and shaken by everything that had happened, and I felt for her. I wanted to hug her, to protect her from everything, but I couldn’t escape the thought… ​

Had ​Cali run away to be with Xavier?

The question was gnawing at my insides, but it didn’t feel like the right time to ask. Not yet. Especially because then, Cali said, “This is all my fault.”

She sniffled, and I shook my head. “Hey, no. None of that.”

I caressed her arm, about to hug her when she took a step back. “Believe me on this, Greyson—this is all my fault. And I have no fucking idea where Nolan might have taken Xavier.”

“Still not your fault,” I said. “I have no idea where Xavier is, either.”

I was genuinely at a loss, and it was getting dark as well, so overall… Fuck this day. For real.

“We should go back to the pack house,” I told Cali. “It’s not safe for us to be out here. Something’s not right about this whole thing, anyway.”

Sniffling, Cali nodded.

She didn’t argue, and I was surprised once more. I’d figured that she’d want to keep looking for Xavier until both of us were tired. Or dead. She was normally that kind of stubborn. She would’ve done the same for anyone in the pack—Cali would help out every living soul, if it was up to her, going against all and any self-preservation instincts she had. Most of the time, I wondered if she had any self-preservation instincts at all.

Her vibrant, uncontrollable urge to save everyone had always driven me fucking nuts, especially because she kept putting herself in danger, but now…

Now that she wasn’t that way, I missed it.

“Let’s go,” I mumbled, taking her hand. She held me, moving closer, her eyes on the ground. She seemed so dejected. So sad. Her grip on my hand wasn’t all that tight either—it usually felt like a vice.

An electrifying vice.

Where was that feeling?

Where had it gone?

*When would I get it back?*

Fighting off my pointless thoughts, I looked around the woods. It was getting darker by the minute. “I’d shift to speed things up,” I told her, “but then we wouldn’t be able to communicate.” I glanced at the bracelet. “Not while you have that thing on.”

Cali just nodded. Not a word from her.

The quiet was so eerie that it made me antsy. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d tried to do something akin to small talk with Cali. She usually talked my ear off about anything and everything, from murderous trolls to her favorite color nail polish, determined to let me know about it. I was fucking mad at myself for not remembering her favorite color right now, and it felt too weird to ask her.

Everything was… *weird*.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We’ll have Big Mac use her magic to get that thing off of you.”

For the first time in minutes, Cali tensed. She looked up at me. “Can we trust Big Mac?”

I raised my eyebrows. What an odd thing to say. “Uh, haven’t you trusted Big Mac before?”

Cali just stared. “I mean, yes, but… you know.”

No, I didn’t know. But I wasn’t about to get into it right now. Not when Cali seemed so out of it. “It’s not like we have another choice if we want that bracelet off,” I said. “Besides, Big Mac has no reason not to help us.”

Cali nodded. “Right.”

*Right*? That was all I got? The last time Cali had given me a monosyllabic answer…

I actually couldn’t fucking remember the last time she’d given me such an answer.

“It’s gonna be fine,” I said, as encouragingly as possible, and squeezed her hand. We hiked in silence for what felt like forever, and then we arrived at the Redwood pack house. We paused outside.

“You feeling okay?” I asked.

She nodded, gazing around at the property. The lake sparkled in the moonlight behind us, and she looked so breathtaking in that moment that I wanted to kiss her, to pull her close.

But then I was hit by the thought of our first time sleeping together.

Everything had felt so wrong, and I couldn’t let it go. I couldn’t ignore it in that moment, couldn’t help but wonder: had I felt that way because I’d been able to sense her being torn between me and Xavier?

Or maybe it was all in my head.

It had to be.

The love I had for Cali couldn’t just fade away.

Sighing, I hugged her. “I promise you, it’s all going to be all right.”

She seemed ready to cry, but she smiled at me. It was just as gorgeous as she was. She gazed into my eyes, and I didn’t stop myself from leaning closer.

I brushed my lips over hers.

And right away, I sensed it again. Something was wrong.

“Hey,” Cali muttered. “What are you thinking?”

I cleared my throat, covering up my alarm and anxiety. “Nothing. We should get inside.”

But as we headed toward the pack house, my head pounded.

My mind started to spin, every thought I’d had about Cali over these past few days multiplying and screaming at me. There was definitely something different about her, but I couldn’t pinpoint what it was. Was the stress of everything getting to me? Was I losing it? Gaslighting myself to sabotage my relationship?

But why would I want to sabotage the one thing I’d ever wanted?

I knew how I’d felt after we’d had sex for the first time. That couldn’t have been a lie. And that bracelet…

I glanced at her wrist as we arrived at the front porch.

I could have sworn she’d had that thing it on before she’d met with Nolan. Was it really the reason why I couldn’t mind link with her? Truth was, all that aside, the girl next to me just *wasn’t* acting like Cali. She hadn’t called me a jerk in what felt like forever. She hadn’t even yelled at me about coddling her or telling her to stay safe. Where was Cali the spitfire? Who wielded objects she shouldn’t as weapons and asked questions later?

I glanced at her again as we walked inside the house.

She was so fucking *quiet*.

I felt crazy for even thinking it, but…

Was this even Cali?

**Episode 737**

My face was pressed in between two books that were uncomfortably squeezing my cheeks. It was pretty hard to speak, and I hated everything. Not only because I loved talking, but also because the books had betrayed me! I used to enjoy reading, and now look what had happened!

*I THOUGHT I COULD TRUST YOU, BOOKS!* I screamed inside my head. Because I couldn’t scream on the outside. I also couldn’t move my arms, because they were also buried in books. My legs were covered too, and my torso, and my entire body in general. I was being throttled by piles and piles of books, and I was miserable.

I could hear the others grunting, groaning, trying to talk and move as well.

I finally managed to shift enough to speak, moving a book about magical warts away from my face. “Is everybody okay?” I asked.

“Yes,” Jay said, huffing. “Okay.”

“We’re good,” Artemis said. I supposed that after slaying dragons, a few books were nothing to her.

“If being buried by a bunch of old books is okay, then I sure am!” Lola said in a bitingly sarcastic tone. I was a little hurt there, because it wasn’t like this was my fault! Lola was the reason we had come down here in the first place. My business had been upstairs, with Hypatia.

“Are we going to stay here for long?” Artemis said impatiently.

I moaned, realizing that I couldn’t climb out of this massive book cocoon. *UGH!*

“Hang on, everyone,” I said, “I’m going to use my Fae powers to move the books.”

But before I could even take a breath, Artemis cut in. “Please,” she scoffed. “You’re not good enough to use your powers in a situation like this.”

I gasped in shock. And also offense. “*Excuse me?*”

“You’re just not qualified yet, Cali. Face it. I, on the other hand, know what I’m doing,” Artemis said in a patronizing tone.

Suddenly I felt so angry I could fucking taste it. Was this what having an older sister was like? “You’d better watch it, okay? I can handle a few books!”

“Like you could handle getting us to the vault?” Artemis said in a deadpan tone that sounded mocking.

“It’s Lola’s fault we’re here in the first place,” I said, throwing my friend under the bus. Served her right for snapping at me earlier.

“How fucking *dare* you!” Lola exclaimed. “I needed your help this one time, Cali, and you—”

“Oh my god, both of you, shut up!” Artemis groaned. I felt something shift, and then…

All the books were blown off us in a second flat.

Pissed off, I got to my feet and dusted off my clothes. I glared at Artemis. “Are you trying to show off here? Is that what’s happening? Because if so, you’ve achieved your goal!”

“Okay, seriously everyone calm down,” Jay said. “We didn’t come down here to fight and the sooner we stop, the sooner we can get our shit and leave.”

“She started it!” I yelled, glaring at Jay.

He gaped at me. “Seriously? What’s wrong with you?”

I choked on my sharp, sudden, absolute fury. “*What’s wrong with*—I’ll show you what’s wrong!” I grabbed a stray book about the benefits of eating magical butterflies and threw it right at Jay’s face.

“Cali!” Jay managed to shout before ducking to avoid the book. “What the *fuck?*”

Everybody turned to look at me in shock.

I was quite shocked at myself as well, actually.

*Holy shit?! What came over me?* I thought, alarmed. *I’d never hurt Jay!*

“Sorry,” I stammered. “I don’t know what just happened… It was like I couldn’t control myself.”

“Bullshit!” Lola snapped. “You did it on purpose, and you could have hit Jay in the eye! His *one* eye! Then he’d have lost the other one, and it would have been your fault!”

I gaped, more offended than I’d ever been in my whole life. “EXCUSE ME? I practically begged Big Mac not to take his eye in the first place after he sacrificed it for *you*, Lola, and your fucking obsession with shifting!”

Lola looked horrified. “I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU JUST WENT THERE!”

“She’s right, though!” Jay exclaimed. “She’s fucking right—your obsession with shifting has gotten out of control, and that’s why we’re in this bookish shithole anyway! We’ve taken you to Big Mac far too many times!”

“Please, that’s all Cali’s fault!” Artemis scoffed. “It’s like the second she sees any trouble, she has to run into it!”

I grabbed a book and threw it at her face, and this time, I wasn’t even fucking sorry!

But it didn’t hit Artemis, because she was a fucking Dark Fae Satan spawn who used her powers to throw the book right back at me. “See?” Artemis said. “That’s how you use your powers!”

“Oh fuck off!” I spat. “You think you’re so much better than me? You literally kidnapped me and tried to sell me, you monster!”

“—no, you’re the monster!” Jay was yelling at Lola at the same time. “When you shift, it’s like you lose yourself!”

“How many times do I need to apologize for kidnapping you, Cali? I did it to survive! When will you trust me?”

“You don’t trust me, Jay! You never have, even though you’re my fucking mate!”

“If Mom found out that you almost stopped me from getting that flower and helping her—”

“You won’t let me help you, Lola! You just pout and whine like a fucking brat, like—”

“You’re such a brat! Is that a younger sister thing, or have you always been this way? Is it just because you’re desperate for attention? I bet that’s why you keep toying with two guys at the same time!”

I gasped at Artemis’s words. Lola and Jay’s fight continued. When Artemis marched up to me and gazed at me with menace in her eyes, I felt those cold fingers grabbing at me more, just like earlier.

I felt them on the back of my neck.

“Well?” Artemis snapped. I’d never seen her like this, so angry. I’d never seen Jay and Lola like this, either. “Aren’t you going to defend your—”

“Something’s here,” I rasped. Rubbing my neck, I shuddered and looked around. “Something just grabbed my neck! Do you feel it too?”

Artemis paused. Her expression softened. “It happened to me earlier, too. We can’t be…”

“We’re not imagining it,” I said with certainty. “What about those black fingerprints on you?”

Lola and Jay’s fight kept escalating as I fought to settle my panic.

“Do you think the gargoyle tricked us somehow?” I asked Artemis.

“I wouldn't put it past him, but it doesn't matter,” Artemis said, rubbing her forehead.

I felt the sudden urge to argue with her, and right then I realized that she was right. Those cold fingers I’d felt… Could this be the same creature that had thrown the book at Artemis earlier? Lurking here among the books just to creep people out and cause them to fight?

*OH NO NO NO!* I thought, freaking out. *ABORT MISSION!*

“… you NEVER understand me, Jay!” Lola was screaming.

“What the hell are you talking about? I’m a SAINT for putting up for all your bullshit!” Jay screamed back.

“Guys?”

“Listen to me, Lola—”

“I don’t want to listen—”

“GUYS!” I shouted, shocking both my friends out of their stupor.

“WHAT?” they both shouted simultaneously.

“We should get out of here,” I said. “Scratch that, we *need* to. Something’s wrong here.”

“Something is making us argue,” Artemis added.

Realization seemed to dawn on both Lola and Jay. Thank god.

“We should head that way,” I said, walking off.

“No, wait,” Lola said. “We should go this way!”

“You’re both wrong,” Jay scoffed. “We should go…”

Jay started arguing with Lola again as Artemis started climbing up the shelves. “You dumbasses, this is the right away! We need to get out from up here!”

The mysterious presence was causing us to start fighting all over again—I was *certain* of it.

“STOP!”

My voice echoed through the room, making the others freeze. I was shocked that this neat little shouting trick had worked for a second time in a row.

“Don’t let this thing win,” I said. “Remember that these fights aren’t real.” I pointed in the direction we’d been heading before the books had collapsed. “We need to keep going, and arguing isn't going to solve Lola’s problem.”

All three of them nodded seriously, sheepishly apologizing while Lola whispered a thank you to me. All I could think about was that if we didn’t get back to Cassandra’s journal soon, I could die. From the curse or from this fucking library.

*I can’t die! I won’t allow it!* I thought stubbornly.

Not surprisingly, the sheepish apologies from my friends quickly turned into grumbling as all four of us began to move. We climbed over piles of books and finally reached the door. I paused in front of it. “Okay,” I said. “Stand back!”

And then I used my Fae powers to open the door.

*Take THAT, Artemis!*

“Show off,” Artemis scoffed, but I waved her off. All four of us checked to see if the floor was still the freaking floor. All good. For now.

The door led to a room, and Jay turned the handle, walking in first because he wanted to be chivalrous and I wasn’t about to stop him. We cautiously entered the space.

“What is this?” Artemis whispered to me.

“I have no—”

I didn’t get to finish my sentence.

The moment we turned to the left, we came face to face with…

Ourselves?!

**Episode 738**

VIOLET

I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling.

My heart was heavy, and it felt like it hadn’t stopped pounding since I’d left Minnesota. Being back at the Redwood pack house should’ve felt like home, but I was too sad about Charlie to focus on anything else.

*Oh, Charlie…*

I sighed, recalling the way I’d left without even texting him goodbye. There was a part of me that felt appalled, sick with guilt over it, but a voice in my head was insisting that it was for the best. What else was I supposed to do after Charlie had shut me down?

Lola had wanted me to fight for my man, but fighting to have your mate love you seemed like something a loser would do. I couldn’t be with someone who liked me one day and snapped at me the next. I couldn’t be with someone who needed me to beg him for attention. I wanted my mate to love me just because. I wanted them to want only me, to love spending time with me, to smile the moment I walked into a room. Maybe that was the stuff of sappy romance stories, but it was what I wanted, and what I…

It was what I deserved.

I deserved to be happy.

Lilac would agree, I was sure.

I wished he was here to talk about all of this with me.

I deserved to be loved and not hurt, and I needed to keep telling myself that, just to feel a little better about everything. My heart ached to be parted from Charlie, but if he needed to stay away from me, then I had to let him go, at least for now. I’d offer him whatever it was that he needed—the “give him time and space” thing seemed to be popular among relationship blogs on the internet, anyway.

And okay, maybe the distance between Minnesota and Oregon was too much space, but what could I do? I couldn’t take being tortured by watching Charlie with Sandi. Just thinking about him touching her, laughing with her, kissing her… It made me feel sick to my stomach. I hated the feeling. It made me think horrible, mean things, and then I felt guilty over my jealousy.

I just wanted Charlie all to myself. God, was that so bad?

Was that so hard?

I’d always thought that finding my mate would be something purely exciting and happy, something special and sweet. But so far, it had kind of been anything but. I hadn’t expected Charlie to have a girlfriend he was happy with, or for Sandi to be so nice… I hated thinking that I might’ve hurt either of them, but also… I just wanted Charlie.

What was I supposed to do? NOT want him when I really, really did?

I couldn’t help the way I felt. For god’s sake, we were mates! We were destined to be together, but what I was experiencing actually felt more like a mean prank than anything magically organized by fate. Why couldn’t I just… *have* Charlie? Why were there so many obstacles? I would be the best mate ever to him, I knew, but how was I meant to do that if he wouldn’t even let me try?

*God dammit, Charlie! I just…*

My phone vibrated. Pouting, I checked the text. My breath caught when I saw Charlie’s name. OMG! Was this really happening? Was this really happening, even after I’d told him that we were mates, acting like an absolute blubbering moron? I couldn’t believe I’d just blurted it out that way. Everything was so new to him—I should’ve taken more time and care to tell him. I should’ve sat him down and explained the werewolf birds and bees first, discussing the topic of mates in general. I could imagine it now:

*“So does being someone’s mate mean you’re in love?”* Charlie would have asked timidly.

And I would have said, *“YES! Please love me!”*

… Yikes. I was a disaster who couldn’t stop herself from blurting things out, even in her daydreams. Charlie had been right to freak out. Maybe if I’d handled it better, if I hadn’t sprung it on him… Maybe then he’d have seen that Sandi wasn’t the one for him. No matter how nice or sweet or pretty she was.

Charlie was *my* mate, and that was all there was to it!

Everybody else needed to kindly back off.

My phone vibrated again, and I desperately wanted to read the text, but I was afraid. He’d told me to leave. I’d confessed my truth to him, and he hadn’t been able to handle it, and so I’d left. I wouldn’t be bothering him anymore, so what more was there to talk about?

But of course, I couldn’t *not* look at his text.

Dying with excitement and dread, I picked up my phone and checked it out.

*Where are you? I’ve been looking all over for you*

Oh my god! He’d been looking all over for me! OH MY GOD!

*I’m really sorry about what I said, Violet… It’s just, you really caught me off guard.*

He was sorry! He’d been looking for me! This was *amazing*.

My heart pounding, I stared at the texts over and over again. Sighing deeply, I pictured Charlie sending them. Was he sitting on his bed right now? Was he running his fingers through his hair nervously while I left him on read?

I wanted to answer, but I knew I had to be careful. I didn’t want to seem too eager and spook him again. But I also wanted him to know that I still cared about him. That I always would. That we would be madly in love forever and ever till the end of—

I caught myself. Perhaps I needed to take this down a notch.

Taking a deep breath, I started typing.

*hi. I had to go back to Oregon… hope I didn’t ruin things with Sandi. I thought it would be best to give you space. Sorry I didn’t say goodbye.*

His response came a second later.

*I wish you had.*

I gasped, staring at the reply. What did that mean? Was it a good thing? It sounded like a good thing, but I couldn’t be sure! I wished I could ask someone, someone I trusted, because when it came to Charlie, I didn’t trust myself. Maybe I needed to talk to someone who really understood guys. Someone like Xavier.

My thoughts and daydreaming were interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Come in!” I called.

Joss walked in. She always looked so regal and composed that it was kind of daunting, but cool at the same time. Probably the blue hair.

“Did you get dinner yet?” she asked, straight to the point.

“Uh, I will. I wasn’t really hungry earlier so I forgot,” I said.

Joss sat on my bed, eyebrows raised. “Is everything okay?”

I swallowed roughly. *Hell no!*

Joss smirked, eyeing the phone. “Who was so fascinating you forgot to get dinner? Texting someone special?”

I felt my cheeks burn and cleared my throat. I was too embarrassed to share this with Joss, so I decided to play it down. “Just some friends I met in Minnesota,” I said awkwardly.

Joss didn’t look like she believed me, but she thankfully dropped it. “If you wanna talk to your friends later and eat now, Mrs. Smith has left you a plate on the table.”

I smiled a little and nodded. I loved Mrs. Smith’s cooking. Besides, I had no idea what to say to Charlie anyway, and waiting for a response seemed way too stressful. Better to eat dinner first and do all my worrying on a full stomach.

Joss and I headed downstairs.

“It’s good you made some friends,” Joss said. “Too bad they’re so far away.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just agreed. Groundbreaking on my part.

Thank god my mouth was full a few moments later. Mrs. Smith’s carbonara was amazing. I started eating after taking a seat.

“Bon appétit!” Joss said.

She was being very nice to me, and I had no idea what to do with that. Xavier would’ve known how to act, though. He also definitely would’ve known how to reply to Charlie’s text.

Joss was about to leave the kitchen when I spoke up. “Hey,” I said. “Where’s Xavier?”

Joss sighed, facing me. “He ran off with Cali.”

I frowned. “Oh. I didn’t know he was going to go to Vancouver Island.”

Joss raised her eyebrows, surprised. “Vancouver Island? Why do you think they’re there?” she asked.

But before I could answer, Cali walked into the kitchen with Greyson. She didn’t even shoot me a look, just stared at Greyson as he mumbled something.

What the heck? I hadn’t been allowed to go with Cali and Lola on their quest because it was too dangerous, and now Cali was here? It hadn’t even been a day.

Confused and a little frustrated, I turned to Cali. “You’re back already?”

**Episode 739**

I stared at the four figures in front of me. We were facing a mirror. We had to be facing a mirror. What else could it be? But when I lifted my hand, my theory fell apart. My “mirror half” didn’t move.

“Who are you?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from shaking. There was something about this that was very, *very* wrong.

My mirror half didn’t respond. None of the figures moved. They just stared at us, unblinking.

“They probably don’t speak English, Cali,” Lola scoffed. “We’re not exactly on American soil down here.” She looked around the room. “Maybe this is some kind of library thing?”

Artemis frowned at her, confused. “What does that mean? What is a *library thing?*” Without waiting for an answer, she turned to the shadowy figures. The shadowy Artemis eyed the real Artemis with a dark look. “Maybe these are the signposts we’ve been looking for.”

“What do you mean?” Lola asked, not taking her eyes off shadow Lola, who was rocking back and forth on her feet, looking ready for a fight.

Artemis gave an exasperated sigh. “We’re looking for the vault, right?”

“Yeah,” Jay said.

Artemis pointed at her shadow self. “Maybe they’re supposed to lead us there. Hey!” she called, yelling at her shadow self. “Where’s the vault?”

Again, there was no response.

Jay gave his head an irritated shake. “We’re wasting time. These are probably just illusions. I’m sure we can just move past them,” he said, brushing past me and heading toward the figures on the other side of the room. But as he moved closer to them, the shadow figures began to loom larger. They grew taller and wider with every step he took.

“Stop!” I yelled, my heart starting to pound with fear. “Jay, stop.”

“Don’t yell at him,” Lola snapped. “He’s not your dog, Cali.”

Artemis whipped her head around to glare at Lola. “Don’t talk to my sister like that.”

Wait, was *this* what having an older sister was like?

Lola spat back a response, but I wasn’t listening anymore. I kept my eyes on the shadow figures. Whatever creeping tension had caused us to argue in the bookshelves was still with us. The figures were watching us closely as Artemis and Lola sniped at each other. Maybe they were the ones who were causing it.

“So, what are we supposed to do?” Jay asked, turning to look at me. “They’re not talking and they’re in our way. We need to get moving if we’re going to make it to the vault. That *is* why we came here, remember?”

“I’ll shift,” Lola growled, glaring up at her shadow self, which was looming above her now. “I’ll tear them apart.”

“I’m ready, too,” Artemis said, bunching her hands into fists and narrowing her eyes. “Bring it on.”

“Something tells me we’re not going to get anywhere by fighting them,” I said, shaking my head. “And you shouldn’t be shifting, Lola. *That’s* why we’re here.”

“Oh, great,” Lola snapped. “That’s just what I need. Someone else telling me what to do. Listen, Cali, I already have two parents and Jay, which is more than enough—”

“Hey, I’m just trying to help,” Jay cut in, sounding offended.

“And since when are you some kind of alternate world expert?” Artemis asked me. “*You* don’t think it’s a good idea? Let me tell you something, Cali—I’ve been in a lot more supernatural situations than you and I’ve gotten out of plenty of them by fighting, and…”

I glanced over at the shadow figures as the other three continued to bicker. They seemed less shadowy now—their outlines were more clearly defined. I could even make out… smiles? A shudder went down my spine. Something was making them stronger, more… *realized*. Was it our fighting? Were they feeding off our anger?

Suddenly, the icy fingers were back, grabbing me, wrapping around my arms, pulling me forward. I was being towed toward my shadow-self, who was watching me with a cold, sinister smile on her face. Terrified, I fought back, trying to wrench free, but the icy grasp was too strong.

My shadow-self slowly raised her arm and pointed at me. The air around me began to vibrate, then there was a surge of energy. I felt it pass above me like a breeze, but it didn’t touch me. My shadow-self narrowed her eyes, glaring in frustration before she lunged, reaching for me. I squirmed, struggling to get away before she could touch me. She was drawing nearer and—holding out my hand—I focused my powers like I never had before. Energy surged from my hand, and my shadow-self stumbled back.

A moment later, Artemis was at my side. Holding out her own hand, she added her power to mine and together we forced the figures back. As one, we stepped forward to drive the figures even further away, but then Artemis gasped. There was a rumbling, and the ground shook beneath our feet. The light in the room—already dim—flickered for a moment. The figures just before us—shadow Cali and shadow Artemis—flickered as well, like candles guttering in a strong wind. Then they were gone, and two new figures were standing before us: Xavier and Greyson.

My blood felt like it had been turned to ice. “What’s going on?” I asked, though my voice was barely a whisper. What was this place that could make these visions appear so real and so lifelike?

Shadow Xavier and shadow Greyson—though they didn’t look a bit like shadows; they looked as real as I’d ever seen them—didn’t seem to notice me. They were glaring as they paced around each other. I sensed what was about to occur a moment before it happened, so my cries mingled with their snarls as Xavier lunged, attacking Greyson.

“This can’t be real,” I gasped. The cold grip on me tightened. I couldn’t breathe. This was my worst nightmare, come to life.

I grasped Artemis’s arm, but she was standing frozen next to me. She shivered a tiny bit, like she was trying to move—struggling to break free of something—but couldn’t.

Behind me I could hear Jay shouting. “Lola! Don’t! Don’t do it, Lola!”

But I could already hear the bone-cracking sound that only meant one thing: Lola had already shifted. Out of the corner of my eye I saw her wolf form leap forward, tackling her shadow-self and knocking her to the ground.

Jay gave a roar of frustration and shifted too, jumping into the fray as his shadow-self leapt onto Lola’s wolf.

I watched in horror as all hell broke loose. Greyson had gained the upper hand while I’d been distracted and now had Xavier flat on the ground. Greyson was punching Xavier’s face, and blood was pouring from Xavier’s nose and mouth. Then Xavier gave a wolfish growl and arched, unseating Greyson, rolling him over, and slamming his head into the hard, wooden floor.

“Stop!” I screamed. “Stop! Xavier! Stop! Please!”

But he didn’t seem to hear me. He just kept slamming Greyson’s head onto the ground, over and over and over again, long after Greyson’s eyes had rolled back in his head. The sound was sickly wet and the spot on the floor was slick with blood before Xavier finally stopped, dropping Greyson’s lifeless body.

“What have you done?” I screamed, staring at the spreading blood and Greyson’s ashen face. I looked up at Xavier, who had gotten to his feet. “Oh my god, Xavier,” I said, whispering now. “What have you done?”

Xavier’s eyes were cold as ice, and he spat a mouthful of blood to the ground at his feet before he smiled. The smile was nothing like his true smile, and it chilled me to my core. From the darkest corner of the room, a woman emerged. I didn’t recognize her, but as she walked toward Xavier, he reached out his hand and pulled her close, kissing her.

The veins over my heart tightened, and I gasped as the pain flashed through me. I shook my head. “This isn’t real!” I screamed, pressing my hand to my heart, trying to force the pain away. “None of this is real! You can’t fool me!” I held out both my hands and let my anger pulse through them. A surge of energy shot out, shaking the whole room.

Xavier and the shadow woman broke their kiss and looked at me, surprised. Then they looked at each other, laughing at me as they began to fade. I glanced around. All the shadow figures were fading. Greyson’s body was disappearing, and Lola and Jay stopped fighting and looked up as their opponents faded to blackness.

When the room stopped shaking, everything was eerily quiet.

Artemis was the first to break the silence. “What the *hell* just happened?”

I breathed out a sigh, but before I could even think about answering her question, there was a loud *click* and we all jumped. Turning, we watched as one of the room’s walls swung open.

**Episode 740**

We all looked in wonder at the open wall, though none of us made a move toward it.

“Do you think this is the vault?” I asked.

“I guess so,” Artemis said, peering into the darkness. “I suppose that’s what those shadow things were for.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She shrugged. “You know, like a test or something.”

I turned to Jay and Lola, who were still in their wolf forms. Jay shifted back, shaking his hair away from his face. “So that’s it, huh?”

Lola growled and began to shift. We all looked at her, watching, and when she stopped shifting halfway through, we all froze. Her head and shoulders were human, but her torso and legs were still wolfish. I stared at her for a moment, then darted a look at Jay, who’d gone pale. This had happened before, and it had been terrible. Had it happened again?

But I didn’t say anything. There was a look of intense concentration on Lola’s face, and I let her get on with things. She bit her lip and took a deep breath. Whatever was happening was clearly incredibly painful—sweat was beading on her face and her whole body shook with the effort—but, with a shudder, the remainder of her body shifted back to her human form. Jay rushed toward her and she collapsed into his arms, breathing like she’d just finished a marathon, clearly exhausted.

“Lola, are you okay?” Jay asked quietly.

She nodded, still breathing hard, and looked up at him. “I’m okay.”

“You sure? For a second there…”

“I know,” she said when he trailed off. “It didn’t go quite as smoothly as I’d hoped, but I’m back.” She grinned. “And we kicked some serious ass, didn’t we?”

But he didn’t smile back. “This is exactly why you shouldn’t shift, Lola. What if you get stuck again? You’re almost out of that damn potion, and it’s not really working for you anyway—”

“You know, we’re here to find out about hybrid wolves, so maybe we should just do that,” Artemis said, interrupting what had sounded like the start of a pretty long lecture from Jay. She nodded at the vault. “The answer might be in there. Maybe we should go find out. You know, instead of just arguing about it.”

“She’s right,” I said, nodding. “And we should keep moving, anyway. We don’t know if those shadowy things are going to come back.”

“Okay,” Lola said, getting laboriously to her feet. “Those shadow figures aren’t my favorite.”

“No kidding,” I said grimly. “And not only are they scary as hell, they make us argue.”

“I know. We can do that all on our own,” Lola said. She leaned on Jay as she slipped her clothes back on. They must have undressed before they’d shifted. Now dressed, Jay slipped his arm around Lola’s waist as they walked forward.

I eyed her. “Are you sure you sure you’re feeling strong enough for this?”

She stood straighter, leaning away from Jay. “Of course I’m sure,” she scoffed. “I’ve never felt better.”

Jay rolled his eye and reached for her hand, moving toward the open wall.

We stepped toward it as a group, but as soon as we reached the lip of the darkness, there was a gust of warm wind—strong as a hurricane—and we were all knocked back.

We landed hard, all asses and elbows, and looked around, baffled.

“What the hell?” I asked, rubbing my butt. If this library could stop trying to maim me, that’d be great.

Artemis got to her feet, her eyes blazing. “I am getting so *sick* of this place,” she growled, marching toward the open wall, her arms outstretched.

“Stop!” Jay commanded, holding up a hand. “Hang on, Artemis. Before you go all Fae power overload on this place, let’s just think for a second. Hypatia told us that only *two* people can be admitted to the vault at a time, remember?”

I hadn’t remembered, not until that moment, but it made sense.

“We’re going to have to split up,” Jay continued. He got to his feet and pulled Lola up after him. “Cali, you and Artemis wait here while Lola and I go into the vault.”

“What?” I said, blindsided. “No way. This place is way too dangerous. What if there are more of those shadow figures, Jay? What if this is a trap?”

Jay gave Lola a sideways glance and looked back at me, his expression grim. “We really don’t have much of a choice. And it doesn’t make sense to have you or Artemis come in with us. This is werewolf lore. It’s something Lola and I have to deal with.”

I looked at Lola, who was still looking pale. “Maybe I could go in your place?” I offered.

“Jay’s right,” Artemis said. “Lola needs to go, and Jay’s the one who needs to go with her.”

I wanted to argue, but I knew there was no point. She was right—Jay was right. And I knew Jay would do everything in his power to protect Lola, so I finally nodded. “Okay.” I pulled Lola into a hug. “Please be careful. *Please*, Lola.”

“I will,” she said with a little laugh. She patted my back softly. “I’ll be careful, I promise. I’m sorry if I scared you, but I’m going to be fine.”

I nodded and stepped back, watching as Jay and Lola stepped into the vault.

It was quiet with them gone. Artemis and just I stood there for a moment, looking into the darkness of the vault, where we knew we couldn’t follow.

“You know,” Artemis said, turning to me and walking to the other side of the room, “I have seen some weird-ass things in my time—snakes with two heads, spiders that lay their eggs in frog’s eyes, a lizard with feathers—”

“What’s your point, Artemis?” I snapped.

“Those shadow figure things were weird. Like, top three, for sure. Up there with that two-headed snake.”

I rubbed my eyes, suddenly feeling tired. “Yeah, they were pretty scary.” *Scary* wasn’t the word, really. Neither was *terrifying*, *horrifying*, or *chilling*. There wasn’t a word to describe what I’d seen, and how I still felt haunted by the images of Xavier and Greyson fighting, of Xavier beating his brother to death, of him smiling that chilling smile, of him kissing that strange woman. I put my hand over my chest, still feeling the echo of pain.

“Are you okay?”

I looked up. Artemis was watching me, a frown on her face.

“Yeah,” I said breathlessly. “I’m okay.”

“It must have been pretty hard for you… seeing Xavier and Greyson fighting each other,” she offered. Then she shrugged. “But I really don’t get why you’re so obsessed with the two of them.”

This snapped me out of my thoughts. “What?” I asked, shocked, looking up at her. “What are you talking about? I’m not *obsessed* with them, Artemis. It was upsetting to see that because I’m *mated* to both of them.”

And we weren’t just mates—I was in love with them both. But I didn’t say that part out loud. Not to Artemis. I’d said it to the mouse-bear in the Fae world, the truth I’d never admitted to anyone else. Even myself. I looked away from Artemis, annoyed. She was infuriating. “I’ve told you about all this and you heard earlier. *Due destini* and everything. Cassandra and her two loves—”

But Artemis was already rolling her eyes. “Don’t feed me excuses, Cali. All that junk about love? Please. Love is not as important as everyone makes it out to be, okay?”

I shook my head, irritated. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Maybe you haven’t felt it yet, Artemis, but you will.”

“God, I hope not.” Artemis sounded worried. “Not if it makes me into an indecisive mess,” she said, gesturing at me.

“Just shut up,” I snapped, leaning my head against a wall. “Let’s trying being quiet while we wait.”

Artemis was quiet for approximately ten seconds before she spoke again. “And of *all* the people to love, you chose Xavier and Greyson? Those two? *They’re* your choices?’

“What’s wrong with them?” I looked up, offended.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. You just have to wonder, Cali—are they really worth dying over?”

This was a hard question to answer, so I didn’t answer it.

But Artemis didn’t bother waiting for my half of the conversation. She started pacing the room. “I mean, are they hot? Yeah, they’re hot, so I can see where you’re coming from there. Good hair, great faces, excellent bodies. I’ve seen them both naked, so I can say that you really can’t complain with what you’re working with. Or who rather.”

I glared at her, but she didn’t notice.

“—but Xavier’s got a hot temper, so that’s not great. And Greyson—”

“What’s wrong with Greyson?” I asked, outrage growing.

“Well, I mean, let’s face it—he’s just an okay kisser.” Artemis shrugged, turning to look at me. “And extremely broody.”

I stared at her, my mouth hanging open in total shock. “He’s—I’m—*what did you just say?*”

Artemis took a wary step back. “What? That he’s broody?”

I stared at her, my brain slowly putting everything together. When I exploded, my voice bounced around the small room. “*Did you kiss Greyson?*”

**Episode 741**

XAVIER

Rage coursed through me as I paced as far as my chains would allow. It wasn’t far. If I could just break free for a moment—a *second,* even—that was all I’d need to kill Nolan. My hands flexed as I imagined how easy it would be to just *snap* his spindly little neck. Like crushing a twig.

My mind spun as I thought about what he’d just said. He’d brought me here so he could hand me over to Silas. I shook my head. Maybe Greyson had been telling the truth. If he had, then all Silas wanted was to kill us all—Colton, Greyson, and me. On some level, I’d always known it was going to come to this, but knowing it as a certainty felt different, somehow.

Or maybe it was just the fact that I was trapped—chained to a wall—awaiting his arrival like live bait that made it feel so different.

I forced myself to stop pacing and really thought about it, trying to examine the situation from all angles. How had Silas contacted Nolan? And for what purpose? Why was Nolan cooperating? If Silas came back then that would be bad news for Nolan and his pack, too. Was it possible Nolan wanted to use me to lure Silas into some kind of a trap?

The thought made me laugh, despite the bands of silver biting into my throat and wrists. Nolan was no match for Silas—few were—and if he was scheming to trap Silas, it was bound to blow up in his stupid face. I only hoped I would be there to see it.

I leaned my head back against the cement wall of the bunker with a sigh. Even if it was someone much better prepared than Nolan, the reality was, it was going to take more than one person to take down Silas. I closed my eyes. Especially now that he had the orb. And, as much as I hated to admit it, the best team I could think to assemble to defeat him was my brothers. Greyson and I were never going to be friends, but I knew he was a damn good fighter. And together with Colton, the three of us could defeat whatever fucking army Silas had assembled.

But then an odd cold crept in on me. I wasn’t going to be defeating anyone or anything as long as I was stuck here, shackled to the wall like a fucking animal. I was bait on a hook, ready to be handed over to Silas by smug-faced Nolan.

I looked around the dim bunker. It was a small space, with low ceilings, cement walls, and cheap vinyl floors. There were cans of food stacked in the far corner—wheat flour and black beans, mostly—next to a row of blue plastic barrels. Probably filled with water, from the looks of them. Nearer to me there was what looked like a workbench. The top was clear of tools, but there were slim drawers beneath it, and if I could reach it, I might be able to find a screwdriver or an awl I could use to pick the locks or break the chains. I strained hard against the chains, but they held fast, and I couldn’t reach the drawers. I dropped back, breathing hard, mad as hell. There *had* to be a way. I just had to think of something.

Looking around again, I thought of Cali. *My* Cali. I was always laughing at the way she approached life. She was so small and helpless and human—at least I’d thought initially—and it seemed like she always took the least logical approach available to her. But maybe that was what I needed right now. Cali logic.

I tried to channel her now, thinking of what ridiculous suggestion she might make to get out of this situation. I heard a tiny squeak from the corner and looked over to see a small rat emerge from a minuscule hole. The rat looked at me with its curious black eyes and I looked back, holding my breath, wondering if I could communicate with it. I tried to mind link, the way I did with regular wolves or when I was shifted with the rest of the pack.

*Bring me a screwdriver. Go to the tool bench and bring me a screwdriver.*

The rat’s eyes grew wide and, giving one more terrified squeak, it turned and disappeared back into its hole.

I leaned back against the wall again. I was going insane. Why had I thought I could communicate with a *rat*? I looked down at the bands encircling my wrists and wondered how strong they were. They were made with silver, which was dangerous for me, but also a relatively malleable metal. Maybe if I shifted, I’d be strong enough to break the cuffs. It was worth a shot, anyway. I stood up straight and shifted to my wolf form.

It immediately became clear that I’d made a huge mistake. The collar around my neck was too tight now—I couldn’t breathe. I gasped, trying to shift back, but the room was starting to spin. I fell to the ground, darkness rushing up to meet me.

\*\*\*\*

When I woke up, I was back in my human form, and breathing, though my neck was raw beneath the collar. I sat up, still feeling lightheaded, but at least I was alive. I looked at the bands around my wrists again. So the silver wouldn’t break, not even when I was in my wolf form. Well, fine then. The silver might not break, but I could.

I drew a deep breath. I knew that what I was about to do would blind me with pain, but I’d dealt with pain before. I got to my feet. There was enough give in the silver chains to allow me to turn to face the wall, and I gripped one arm with the opposite hand. I had to be very careful not to break the skin—the silver would poison me if it got into my bloodstream, and there was no Cali here to save me this time. I took another deep breath, gritted my teeth, and jerked with all my might. The pop that followed sounded like it came from a million miles away. There was a ringing in my ears and then my brain exploded with pain, every neuron screaming in agony.

But I breathed through it, pushing away the spinning sensation, fighting to stay conscious. I looked down at my hand. It was trembling now, limp and dislocated. The look of it made me feel sick to my stomach, but it had accomplished what I needed to accomplish: there was more give in the silver cuff to hopefully fit my hand through.

But was it enough?

The pain seared like fire as I used my other hand to move the damaged one around in the cuff. My heart pounded as—at last—I was able to slip my hand through the cuff. *Holy shit*. I was free.

Well, almost.

I took a moment—and another deep breath—then, with a growl, popped my wrist back into place. My hand felt better almost immediately, but I knew I still had to do the same with the other one. I made quick work of if, fighting through the mind-numbing agony, until both hands were free.

Dropping my head down and breathing deeply, I let myself take a moment to recover. My head was still spinning, and I had to keep my mind clear. When I felt better, I looked up. This was it. I took a step—or as much of a step as the cuffs around my ankles would allow. I strained against the collar around my neck and was *just* able—with the very *tips* of my fingers—to pull open the top drawer of the workbench. Its contents spilled out onto the yellowed vinyl floor with an ear-splitting clatter. I glanced up at the door, wondering if anyone had been left outside to guard the place, but I couldn’t worry about that now.

Using the shelf as a net, I pulled the tools closer, searching desperately until I found a small gauge screwdriver. I went to work on the collar at my throat first. I was worried about the raw skin beneath it and the silver seeping in. I had to pick the lock by feel alone, but I found the mechanism and worked the screwdriver through the complicated maze of levers until I heard a small click.

With a sigh of relief I pulled the collar off and went to work on the leg cuffs, first one, then the other, letting them clang to the ground as I finished. In a moment, I was free. I stood and stretched, savoring the movement, but just for a moment. There was more work to be done. I looked around at the mess on the ground for a weapon and spied a ball-peen hammer. The weight of it felt good in my hand as I hefted it and headed for the exit. I stopped for a moment, listening, but I didn’t hear anything, so I swung the door open.

But the bunker door must have been as thick as the walls because, though I hadn’t heard anything, Leroy was waiting just outside the door. And, as I opened it, he turned with a growl and charged toward me.

**Episode 742**

LOLA

Despite what I’d told Cali, I was still feeling a little woozy from shifting as I followed Jay into the vault, so I held his hand tightly. He was safe. He was Jay.

We walked down a set of stairs, our feet fumbling in the darkness. But it grew brighter and brighter as we descended. I began to look around, squinting at the sudden change.

“Holy shit,” I murmured, my eyes growing wide.

It was like the scene in *Aladdin* when he stumbled into the cave to find the genie’s lamp. All around us were shelves upon shelves stacked with all kinds of things. Books stacked teeteringly; scrolls wrapped in papery silks, faded and frayed with time; maps bound with scraps of leather; bundles of letters written in elaborate calligraphy, tied together with loops of faded silk ribbon.

Other shelves held stacks of gold bars and clusters of intricate porcelain statues. There were marble busts with proud, carved faces that were laden with elaborately jeweled necklaces, tiaras, and crowns, like the exquisite statuary was nothing more than storage for the jewelry. There were strange masks carved to look like faces. Some were twisted in pain or anger and were so realistic I shuddered, even as I drew closer to look at a group of them. “What the hell is this place?”

“The vault,” Jay said, and I gave him a playful smack. He looked around, his jaw tightening with tension. “Looks like quite a place.”

“This place is *insane*.” I was keeping my voice down, like I would in a normal library. My eye caught on a book that looked like it was bound in solid gold. The cover was studded with rubies. “Do you think we’re allowed to touch any of this stuff, or do you think it’s like when Aladdin grabs the lamp and the whole place goes to shit on him?”

“I really don’t know,” Jay said sharply, “but let’s play the odds and keep our hands to ourselves. Lola, no!” he snapped, and I reluctantly pulled my hand way from the book. “Take your own advice. Don’t touch anything. Remember why we’re here.”

“Right,” I said, giving my head a little shake. “Shifting. Needs fixing. Got it.”

“Where’s that call number Hypatia gave you?” Jay asked. We’d reached the bottom of the stairs and he was looking around at the cavernous room.

I dug the paper out of the pocket of my jeans and handed it over.

“HP7F45091Q. Then there are just a bunch of weird symbols.” Jay looked at the paper with a frown. “What the hell kind of system is this?”

I looked over his shoulder to glance at the number. “I have no idea, but something tells me Mr. Dewey Decimal had nothing to do with it.”

Jay looked up at me. “You do know that his last name wasn’t Decimal, right?”

I rolled my eyes. “Let’s just look around. Maybe we can just find it in the restricted section.”

Jay looked around the vast space. “Yeah, okay, if we can find where the restricted section is.” He reached out and took my hand, and together we walked deeper into the cavernous vault.

His hand felt good in mine, and I was comforted by his touch. Jay and I had been having our problems but, no matter what, he’d always been a steady force for me. I was glad he was at my side through this.

We passed a towering stack of moldering old books that had a distinctly musty smell. I glanced at the titles, but the gold embossing was in a language I didn’t recognize. I didn’t even recognize the characters of the language.

“Wait,” Jay said suddenly, pulling me to a stop.

“What?” I asked.

“There!” he said, grinning as he pointed.

I looked in the direction he was pointing toward and saw what had made him look so happy. There, right in front of us, was an arched doorway, and above it was a sign: “RESTRICTED”.

I surged forward, but Jay pulled me back.

“What are you doing?” I asked, confused, trying to shake free.

But Jay just grasped my hand tighter. “After what happened trying to even *get* to this vault, I’m not going to take any chances. Let’s just be a little cautious, okay?”

Though slightly reluctant, I nodded, and we moved slowly toward the archway. The space beyond it was dark. There was a smaller sign tacked to the side of the archway, and I looked it over.

“*A note to all patrons:*

*NOTHING can be removed from the restricted section. No books, papers, or artifacts.*”

I rolled my eyes. “Jesus,” I muttered under my breath.

“What?” Jay asked, looking over at me.

I nodded to the sign. “This place. Why are there so many freaking rules? I mean, a restricted section in a *vault*? Over the top much?”

He shrugged. Then, with a deep breath, he stuck out his arm across the arched entrance, reaching into the darkness.

We both held our breath, waiting, but nothing happened.

“I guess it’s okay?” I said.

“Wait here,” he said, then stepped across the threshold. Suddenly, the entire room was illuminated, revealing another huge space with even more shelves lining the walls, stacked with even more exotic artifacts.

“Whoa,” I breathed, as I stepped inside. “What *is* all this?”

“I don’t know,” Jay said, looking down at the paper again, “but the information we’re looking for about hybrids is going to be in a book. Let’s start looking around, see if we can make sense of the numbers.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said vaguely as he started searching, looking carefully at the spines of each book. But my eyes were everywhere but the books. There were sculptures and a vast array of paintings stacked against the wall, like a mad collector lived here. Jay was right, we *did* need to find that book, but I just couldn’t take my eyes off the seashells that looked like they’d been carved from diamonds, or the bowl made of what looked like obsidian, polished so smooth and so completely and utterly black it looked like a hole in the universe, like I could reach into it and through time and space.

My eyes were everywhere, skipping from one treasure to the next, but something made me stop in front of a nearly empty shelf. There was a sculpture sitting there—small, barely larger than a figurine—but for some reason I couldn’t explain, I couldn’t tear my eyes from it. The statue depicted a woman, standing tall and proud. Her chin had a regal tilt, and one delicate hand was placed across her chest, as though she was about to remove the cloth draped over her body. A naked man lay at her feet, looking up at her. His eyes were trained on her and his expression was unmistakable: he was enthralled by this woman. He had not tripped to fall at her feet—he had thrown himself there, to worship her.

I took a step closer, so I was practically nose to nose with the tiny statue. I—like the man at the woman’s feet—was mesmerized by her. There were jewels sparkling on her minuscule fingers, and the yellow metal shone in the warm light. I wondered if she was made of gold. I reached out to pick her up, but a hand wrapped around my arm and pulled me away.

“Don’t touch anything,” Jay hissed, glaring at me.

“I wasn’t going to,” I lied, shaking free of his grip. I pointed to the statue. “But isn’t that beautiful? I can’t take my eyes off it.”

Jay cast the statue an uninterested glance. “Yeah, it’s great. Listen Lola,” he said, heading down the row again, “I think I’m staring to make some sense of these numbers. You just can’t start by thinking you’re dealing with a logical sequencing system…”

As he moved away, I turned back to the statue. Who was this woman? Was she real, or just a figment of the artist’s imagination? My eyes traveled over the lines of her golden shoulders and down her arms. Maybe she was an ancient goddess. That would explain the gold and the jewels. I glanced over to make sure Jay had disappeared from view, then cautiously reached out for the statue.

The surface was smooth to the touch, but wasn’t cold, like I’d expected. Whether it was gold or not, it was metal of some kind, and metal was meant to be cold, but the statue was warm in my hand—almost like skin. I stared down, shocked, as the warmth of the small figure radiated through my fingertips. It moved through me, spreading though my whole body, filling me up. But as it moved, it changed from warmth to heat, and I started to burn. Suddenly, I was filled with scorching, incendiary desire. And I only had one thought in my head:

*Jay.*

I wanted Jay.

I looked around desperately, my heart pounding, my whole body thrumming with sudden, all-consuming desire. Wherever he was, whatever he was doing, he had to stop. I *had* to have him, *now*, or I’d burst into flames. I turned, ready to call for him—*scream* for him—but my breath caught in my throat. He was right behind me.

“Jay—”

But he didn’t let me finish. He silenced me, covering my mouth with a hungry kiss, and dragged me to the ground.

**Episode 743**

LOLA

Jay pressed me down beneath him, his hands under my shirt, moving along my ribs, then up to cup my breasts. I would have moaned with pleasure, but his lips were still crushed against mine, his tongue pushing its way through my lips, sliding past my teeth.

Every cell in my body felt alive with pure pleasure, and I rocked beneath him, my breath growing frantic with desire. Jay moved his mouth from mine, sliding his tongue in a long, hot trail from my lips along my jaw, stopping just below my ear. He flicked his tongue, setting my nerves on fire and I writhed beneath him.

“Oh god, yes!” I murmured. I could feel his erection against me, growing harder and harder against my thigh. I was wild with longing to touch him, but he was pressing down too hard. I arched up and rolled over the top of him, straddling him.

He grinned up at me and grabbed my hips, holding tight and pulling down, grinding me against him.

I closed my eyes and moaned, my pulse wild. The strong need for Jay had overtaken me, and I could think of nothing else. What was more important than Jay anyway? I ripped off my shirt and unbuttoned my pants as I circled my hips against him, desperate for pressure.

He reached for my breasts again, taking me fully in his hands, squeezing so hard it added pain to the pleasure. I whimpered and he rolled me over again, slamming me hard against the shelf where the statue stood, and ripped off my pants.

“Oh, fuck,” I moaned, panting with lust as he fumbled with the buttons of his own pants and kissed my neck. “Please, Jay. Now.”

“Baby,” he whispered, then buried himself inside of me so hard and so fast I gasped. The pleasure of it was so sharp, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, drawing him closer, wanting even more of him.

He closed his eyes as he pumped into me. “God, you feel so good around me.”

As I rocked with his rhythm, my head hit the shelf, but I couldn’t even think of moving—Jay’s touch was lighting me up inside in a way *nothing* ever had. It was like seeing new colors. Everything was fast and hard and rough, and I couldn’t get enough of it. “Never stop,” I breathed, gripping him harder, my mind barely working. “Never stop. *Please*.” I was begging now. I was so close but holding back. With one final, almost painful stroke, he pushed me over the edge. “Yes!” I gasped, my arms flailing out, grasping anything within reach. “*Yes!*”

Jay was shaking, pulsing within me as he reached his climax. He was banging me against the shelf, and the statue—knocked loose—fell down, hitting him in the head.

“Ow! Fuck!” Jay yelled, putting a hand to his head. “What the hell was that?” he looked at the statue, then around, like he’d just noticed where we were. “What the hell?” he asked, in wonder. “Did we just have sex in a vault?”

“I guess we did.” I laughed, panting, as Jay rolled off me.

He lay next to me, spread out like a starfish, breathing hard. “Wow.”

“That was—without question—the most *amazing* sex we’ve ever had.” I rolled up onto one elbow so I could look him in the eye. “Why have we never had sex in a library before? Is this my kink?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know what came over me. I was looking for that damn book and then…” He shook his head. “It was a like a switch just flipped. A sex switch.”

I giggled. “A sex switch.”

Jay grinned up at me. “Come on.” He got to his feet and pulled me up after him. I looked down and saw the statue at my feet. A gem from one of her tiny fingers had fallen loose. I picked up the statue and the minuscule gem and set the ruby back in its place. Then I frowned. The woman was smiling. Had she been smiling before? Had something made her happy? Was she the goddess of… *sex?*

I shook my head. It had to be my imagination playing tricks. Statues didn’t smile. I glanced at Jay, who was pulling on his jeans. I wondered if I should mention that I’d touched the statue before we’d… nearly *eaten each other alive*.

It was probably best not to say anything. He was so touchy.

But, as I pulled my clothes back on, I glanced around, wondering what other items in here had special powers. I was interested, but also kind of scared. This statue’s powers had left us smiling, but maybe I needed to listen to Jay’s advice and keep my hands to myself, before I found an artifact that didn’t work out so well.

“Put that back, Lola,” Jay said, pointing to the shelf. “We shouldn’t be touching anything. We need to find that book.”

I looked down at the statue in my hand, thinking about the fun we’d have if I brought this little lady home with me and put her next to my bed. But I put her back on her shelf. I was reluctant, but Jay was right. Though I could have *sworn* she gave me a tiny wink.

“Bring me a ladder, Lola! There’s one in the corner! I think I found the book!”

There was a rolling ladder tucked into a corner where two shelves met, and I rolled it toward Jay, trying to ignore all the statues I passed on the way.

He pointed to a shelf fifteen feet above us. “Okay, if I understand the coding system, the book we’re looking for should be up there.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, looking up doubtfully.

“Nope. But there’s only one way to find out.”

He mounted the ladder and I watched as he climbed. He reached the shelf and leaned over, searching with his free hand, holding tight to the ladder with the other. After a long moment he wrenched a book free, sending down a cascade of dust.

“Got it!”

“Great!” I called up, then sneezed as the dust settled on me.

He hurried back down the ladder—jumping down the last six rungs—and handed me the book. It was bound in brown leather and the front cover was engraved with an illustration of a very severe-looking woman and man. They were only illustrations, but both figures appeared to be aiming their piercing stares right at me in a very unnerving way. Around their heads were strange, spiky symbols. The pentagram was the only one that looked familiar.

Jay reached forward and wiped off the thick layer of dust, which revealed the book’s title: *Gifts of the Witches.*

He looked up at me. “Well, should we see what it has to say?”

“I guess,” I said, with a thrill of fear.

He led me to a table, which was covered with thick, old papers and half-drawn maps. There were star charts laid out across the top of the papers. It almost looked like someone had been working and had just gotten up for a moment, except that everything was covered in a layer of dust and cobwebs. Jay cleared the papers away, and I set the book down in the middle of the table.

I flipped it open to a random page. “Heart of rat queen, boiled. Newt’s tail. Stewed elderflower. Songbird liver…” I looked up at Jay. “What the hell is this? A recipe book?”

“I don’t know,” he said, frowning. He flipped to the front of the book and we both leaned forward. There was a handwritten note on the front page, written in a spiky, scratchy hand in faded reddish-brown ink. If I didn’t know better, I might have thought it was written in blood.

“*Proceed with caution. If used properly, the spells and potions held within will be gifts. If misused, they will be curses.*”

“All right,” I said, taking a deep breath. “So that’s just to scare people off.” I flipped to the very back. “Let’s find the index. There has to be something about hybrids.”

I skimmed my finger down the faded page, but there was no entry for hybrids*.*

“This book’s crazy old. We should try another word.”

“Like what?”

“Try *crossbreed*,” Jay suggested.

I flipped forward a couple of pages. “Nothing.”

“There has to be something,” he said, clearly annoyed. He stepped up next to me and started scanning himself, flipping pages. “Wait. There it is.”

“Where?” I asked, surprised.

Jay pointed. “*Mongrel*.”

I stared. “You have *got* to be fucking kidding me.”

“I know, but you have to remember, this book is hundreds of years old. We’re talking about another culture entirely. It’s what they would have called mixed species.”

“Still sucks,” I said flatly. That was what they thought about hybrid wolves back in the day? It stung.

“And look—there’s a subheading. *Werewolves*.”

My heart began to pound. “Page three hundred.” I flipped the pages. “Look!” I said excitedly, scanning the page. “There’s a spell! *For the inversion of the werewolf mongrel!*”

“Whoa,” Jay crowded close. “Really?”

“Right here!” I pointed. “What does it say? What do we need?”

Jay leaned close, reading through the passage, but I snatched up the book, ready to go. I looked down, ready to read, but then Jay put his hand over the page.

“Let’s just start by reading the instructions, okay?”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine.” I looked back down, reading to myself. “It says that this spell will resolve the clash between a werewolf and the human in mongrels.” I looked up. “So, that’s good. That’s what I want. A resolution. What are we waiting for?”

“*Stop*,” Jay said, staring intently down at the book. “Keep reading, Lola.”

“Why?” I asked, looking down. “What does it say?”

“It says that you will either be cured… or you could lose your wolf forever.” He looked up, his expression bleak. “You could become completely human.”

**Episode 744**

AVA

I could feel all the eyes in the kitchen on me. The girl—Violet—was staring at me—her expression confused. “You’re back already?” she asked again.

What the hell was she talking about? I had no idea how to answer her. And I couldn’t ask her what she meant—not in front of Greyson and Joss. I had to think fast, or this random girl was going to expose me and everything I’d been working for. I wasn’t ready. I still needed more time. The air in the kitchen was growing thick with tension. I needed to say something. *Anything*.

“I’m not here to give a travel itinerary,” I said. “There’s something far more important going on right now. Xavier is missing.”

Violet’s face dropped. “*What?*” she gasped. She looked to Greyson and Joss for confirmation, then back to me. “Oh my god. Where is he? Is he hurt? What’s going on?”

My mind was reeling, and I was scrambling, trying to think of answers vague enough to get her to shut up, but specific enough to keep her from asking about things I didn’t know about. But I was saved from saying anything at all when a phone started to ring.

Violet grabbed for the phone in her pocket, and—looking down at the screen—blushed. She looked up, flustered. “I-I have to take this. I’m sorry. I’ll be right—I’ll be back,” she stammered, and rushed from the room.

With a sigh, I leaned a hip against the kitchen counter. Well, she was gone—*whoever* she was. That was one less thing to worry about. Then Greyson cleared his throat. *Shit.* I’d forgotten about him.

“Vancouver Island?”

I turned around and met his questioning gaze.

“What’s Violet talking about? When were you on Vancouver Island?” he asked.

I ran a hand through my hair, stalling. I knew he was waiting for an explanation, but I had no idea what to say. The only thing I knew for sure about Cali was that she’d been in Minnesota at some point. I had no idea what would have taken her to Vancouver Island. I blew out a breath and, lacking any other possible way of explaining Violet’s question, went with a shrug. “Violet’s obviously confused about something. I’m here. In Oregon. Not Vancouver Island.” I shook my head. “I don’t know what she’s talking about.”

Greyson shot a look at Joss, but before either of them could say anything, I redirected the conversation back to more secure territory.

“But what about Xavier? He’s gone, Greyson. How are we going to find him? What are we going to do?” My heart had started to beat hard. My concern for Xavier wasn’t an act—I knew Xavier was furious with me, but I was truly worried about him. I had no idea what Nolan’s plan was. I could feel tears forming in the corners of my eyes. This wasn’t at all what I had expected.

Greyson looked at me for a long moment, studying me closely. I resisted every urge I had to squirm under his intense stare. Something told me Cali wouldn’t have squirmed, so neither would I. I was nervous as hell, but I had to keep it together. Violet had almost outed me, so it was more important than ever to stay calm. But it was hard. Greyson just looked so… *strange* when he looked at me. Like he was searching for something. He’d had that same look on his face after we’d kissed.

Unconsciously, I started rubbing the bracelet wrapped around my wrist.

“Greyson.” Joss’s voice broke the strange silence of the kitchen. Greyson tore his gaze away from mine and looked at her. “We need to talk. We have pack business to discuss.”

She gave me a sideways glance and I caught her meaning. Cali wasn’t a werewolf, so Joss didn’t trust her. That was too bad for Cali, but it suited me just fine. I welcomed the prospect of being left out of their conversation. I needed a moment alone to think.

Greyson looked over at me. “We’ll talk later, okay?”

“Sure,” I said, trying to look disappointed, but internally I sighed with relief as I watched Joss and Greyson stride out the back door.

I headed upstairs. I needed some time to think—to figure things out. And, after the day I’d had, a hot shower sounded like the best thing in the world. I paused at the top of the stairs when I heard a sharp peal of nervous laughter. I listened for a moment longer. There it was again. It was that girl from the kitchen—Violet. She was laughing—no, not laughing. She was *giggling*.

Despite the fear and tension knotting my shoulders, I smiled at the sound of it. It was something good. Whoever she was talking to, she was just getting to know them, but she had strong feelings for them. I could hear it in the lilt of her laughter. I shook my head as I walked toward my room. I hoped whoever it was would keep Violet occupied until I could figure out what to do about her.

Finally in the quiet of my room—of *Cali’s* room—I pushed the door shut. Then, as an added precaution, I flipped the lock. I couldn’t deal with any more surprise visitors. I dropped my head into my hands and rubbed my tired eyes. I knew I didn’t have time to feel overwhelmed, but I was coming perilously close.

“Get your shit together,” I whispered, giving my head a shake, and stepped toward the bathroom. I pulled off my shirt and tossed it to the floor. Angry, I turned my back on the mirror, determined to avoid looking at my reflection. I’d never asked for this face, and it was causing way too many problems.

I threw my clothes into the corner of the room and strode into the bathroom to flip on the shower. As I waited for the water to warm, my thoughts turned back to Xavier. I was scared. What had Nolan done? What was he planning to do?

I began to shiver as the possibilities spun through my mind. I closed my eyes, trying to stop the images, trying not to see Xavier caged, beaten… dead. I wished now that I had never agreed to help Nolan. But I hadn’t known. When he’d asked me to help him enact revenge on Xavier, I’d felt the scars at my neck and agreed. I hadn’t known what it would be like to see him again. What it would be like to kiss him and to hold him and to make love to him again. When I’d first stepped out of the mirror, I’d been exactly like Nolan—set on revenge.

But now… Now, I just wanted to see Xavier again.

Had Nolan already killed him? I thought about this for a moment. Something in my gut told me he hadn’t. I couldn’t explain it. I knew Nolan’s feelings about Xavier wouldn’t have changed. But if Xavier was dead, I felt like I would know, somehow. I was his mate. I would sense it.

*Wouldn’t I?*

Leaving the shower running, I strode back into the room as quickly as I could. I hated seeing myself in Cali’s body instead of my own. I reached for my phone on the bedside table. I dialed Nolan’s number. It rang only once before it went to voicemail. That made me nervous. He’d been so anxious to keep in touch before, but now that he had Xavier, he didn’t seem so concerned.

Nolan was my brother, and I loved him, but I didn’t trust him. Not when it came to Xavier.

I threw my phone back onto my bed and went back to the shower. I was cold now—the fear was freezing my bones—and I turned the hot water up as high as it would go. It seared my skin as I stepped in, but I withstood the pain and let the water run over me, warm me. I needed that heat inside me, where the fear was coldest. I closed my eyes and ducked my head beneath the water. I needed its help to forget. To forget everything.

The window in the bathroom was cracked open, and a sharp smell of pine came in with the cool breeze. I could feel its pull deep within me. I could always run, away from Nolan and Greyson and all the questions I couldn’t answer. It wasn’t too late. I could still get away.

But where would I go? What would I do? And if I did run—just disappeared without a trace—would I ever see Xavier again? Could I live with knowing he was out there but never seeing him?

I let the water run over me until it went cold, then I flipped the faucet off. I’d hoped that being alone would help me find some answers, but I was as lost as ever. I wiped water from my eyes and pulled the shower curtain open.

Then I stopped, frozen with fear, my mouth open in a silent scream.

Marlene—Xavier’s mother—was standing in the swirling steam, staring at me.

**Episode 745**

XAVIER

Before I could brace myself, Leroy came through the bunker door like a freight train and I took the full brunt of his driving force. We crashed back into the bunker, Leroy landing hard on top of me. I made a grab for him with one hand, tightening my grip on the hammer with the other, but pain shot through my wrists like daggers. They weren’t totally healed yet.

“*Fuck*,” I hissed, dropping the hammer.

It clattered to the ground and, noticing my hesitation, Leroy pressed his advantage. He grabbed hold of me as he stood, yanking me to my feet and throwing me against the workbench. I landed on the top shelf, hard enough that the entire structure collapsed beneath me. A hail of tools rained onto the vinyl floor as I crashed through the splintering plywood drawers. Leroy and I both scrambled to our feet, slipping and sliding on the spilled nails and screws that confettied the floor.

Leroy stepped aggressively toward me, fist raised, but slipped on the debris. He reached down to catch himself, and when he straightened, he was smiling and had a hacksaw in his hand. “Time to finish this, Xavier,” he snarled.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said, stepping back.

Leroy swung the handsaw—jagged edge toward me—but I ducked before it made contact. He’d over-swung, so I grabbed him before he could right himself and pulled him close, landing two kidney punches while he tried to recover his balance. The punches were hard and true, and though he elbowed his way out of my arms, he stumbled back, groaning in pain. Fuck, there was a reason he was Nolan’s Beta.

I advanced on him—I wanted to finish this as much as he did—but Leroy got his back to the wall and grabbed one of my discarded chains. He swung it at me—not to hit me, but to let it wrap around my neck. He could see he’d caught me off-guard with the move and grinned as he caught the other end of the chain. “Say night-night,” he sang, and yanked the chain tight, his face going red with the effort.

I landed another punch to his chest, then one to his jaw, but I was gasping for breath and could feel the chain starting to bite into my skin. The thing was solid silver, and I knew if it broke the skin, I was fucked.

There was only one thing to do. I closed my eyes and concentrated, and—with a bone-cracking snap—shifted and slammed my muscled wolf body into Leroy. The chain fell away as I crushed him against the wall, but a moment later, Leroy shifted too. He snarled and lunged, snapping at my throat.

The contents of the bunker went flying as we fought—cannisters of wheat and dried potato flakes were kicked across the room, and plastic barrels of water were punctured by ripping claws, soaking the ground. Fur flew and blood splattered on the concrete walls as we kicked and bit and ripped at each other, both trying to gain the upper hand in the cramped space.

With a snarl and a howl that echoed through the bunker, I flipped Leroy’s wolf over my shoulder and finally pinned him down at the base of one of the bunks. Blood was seeping from a cut near his eye and he whimpered as I pressed a paw against his chest, exposing this heart and throat. I could rip his throat out—end this now—but I hesitated. My fight wasn’t with Leroy. Leroy wasn’t the asshole who’d caged me, who’d brought me here, who’d called Silas to find me. Leroy was a pack member doing what his Alpha had told him to do. It went against my instincts, but there was no logical reason to kill him.

With a snarl of frustration, I pressed my paw into his throat, blocking his windpipe, pressing just hard enough to make him black out.

When Leroy’s eyes rolled back in his head, then closed, I stepped back. I shifted back to my human form, then pressed a finger to his throat. He was out cold, but he had a pulse, and he was still breathing. I stood, straightening with a groan of pain. Now that the adrenaline was ebbing away, everything fucking *throbbed*, my wrists most of all. I looked around at the mess of the bunker, then, thinking I might find a use for it along the way, grabbed the hammer I’d dropped. Turning my back on the unconscious wolf, I stumbled up the stairs, out of the bunker, and into the woods.

The night was black and the air was cold when I stepped out. I stood for a moment, breathing hard, and took stock; my wrists were tender, but they were functional and healing. The bites and bruises from Leroy would soon follow. I was aching, but I was fine. I ran a hand through my hair and looked around, weighing my options. I could hunt Nolan down—that option really appealed to me on a personal level—or I could head back to the pack house and warn Greyson and the others.

I knew what I *wanted* to do, but given the threat of Silas, I also knew what I *needed* to do. I needed to get back to the pack house. The pack needed to know about this. Greyson and Joss needed to know about this. They needed to be prepared.

The wind kicked up, creating a small tornado of pine needles at my feet. I glanced over my shoulder at the doorway to the bunker. I wondered if I should have killed Leroy. It felt wrong to walk away, leaving an enemy alive. But I thought about how upset Cali had been after I’d killed Tony. She’d been livid. Maybe she’d be pleased with me for showing mercy and restraint.

I shook my head and looked away, glancing around at the trees and the mountain. I wished there were more stars out. I needed to get my bearings. How had we gotten here? I tried to remember the direction Nolan had come from when we’d approached, but my thoughts were interrupted by the sound of an angry howl behind me.

Spinning around, I saw Leroy’s wolf charging toward me. Shit. This time I had time to prepare, and as he leapt toward me, I swung my hammer, striking him in the jaw, stunning him. He dropped heavily to the pine needle-carpeted ground.

*So much for mercy*, I thought grimly. Then I shifted and tore out his throat.

\*\*\*\*

Dragging Leroy’s lifeless form to the mouth of the bunker wasn’t strictly necessary, but I thought it might send a nice, clear message to Nolan when he got back. A “Don’t Fuck With Me” calling card.

Then, shifting to my human form, I started back toward the pack house. I knew I’d travel faster as a wolf, but I wasn’t healed, and I didn’t want to risk an injury. I moved as quickly as I could through the woods, anxious to get back, my thoughts spinning. All I could think about was Cali. Had Ava and Nolan done something to her? Some kind of dark magic? How had they found her? Was she okay? Where the fuck *was* she?

I slid down a small embankment. Wherever she was, I wondered if she was thinking of me as much as I was thinking of her. I *had* to find her. I was *going* to find her. I’d fought for her in the Fae world, and I was going to fight for her now.

As I climbed a series of switchbacks, my thoughts went back to Leroy. Maybe I shouldn’t have killed him so quickly. I didn’t regret my actions; I was just wondering if I should have asked him a couple of questions *before* I’d killed him. Maybe he could have told me where Nolan had gone. Or what he was up to. Or if they’d done something to Cali. But, I reasoned, shaking my head, it wasn’t like Leroy had given me much of a choice. I’d tried to leave him alive, but when he’d come after me like that, I’d had to kill or be killed.

My thoughts slid away as I climbed through a steep ravine. I thought about what I was going to tell Greyson when I saw him, about the questions he was probably going to ask. He would probably ask if I’d known about the connection between Nolan and Silas.

The answer was no, I hadn’t. I’d had no idea they were connected, or how it had happened. Maybe I should have seen it coming. Even when things with Ava and me had been good, I’d never liked Nolan. I’d always thought he was a meatball. So it made sense that he’d be dumb enough to align himself with someone like Silas.

And as for Ava—my blood ran like fire when I thought about her, and my aching hands curled into fists. I couldn’t wait to deal with her. But *this* time, she was going to stay dead.

**Episode 746**

My eyes went wide as dinner plates as I stared at Artemis. She wasn’t answering, which in and of itself was an answer. I couldn’t fucking believe it.

“*You kissed Greyson?*” I said. “Artemis, are you kidding me?”

Artemis looked calmly back at me. “No.”

“Holy shit! Tell me you’re kidding!”

She rolled her eyes. “Cali, calm yourself. It was no big deal—”

“*How can you say that?*” I exploded, my voice bouncing around the small, wood-paneled room. “Greyson is my *mate* and you’re my sister and you *kissed* him and now you’re telling me it was *no big deal?* How can you even say that?”

“Because it *wasn’t* a big deal,” she said, still calm. It was infuriating. She shook her head. “Nothing happened.”

“You *kissed* him!”

“Right,” she admitted. “Okay, that happened. But nothing else.”

“*When?*” I demanded. My face felt like it was on fire.

“When what?”

“Oh my god.” It felt like I was going to dissolve into a puddle of molten lava. “Stop stalling, Artemis! When did you kissGreyson?”

“Oh, that,” she said, like she’d forgotten what we were talking about. “It happened when we were in Portland. At the bar.”

“You kissed Greyson *at a bar?*” I was going to have a heart attack. My heart was definitely beating in a dangerously arrhythmic fashion. “What *else* happened?” My mind was spinning with the possibilities. Artemis—who was fucking beautiful and did I mention my sister—and Greyson, cuddled up in a cozy corner of a Portland bar, drinking, laughing, *kissing!* Why hadn’t Greyson told me about this?

I shook my head, answering my own question. Of course he hadn’t told me about this. Because he’d *kissed another woman!* Why would he tell me about it?

“Nothing,” Artemis said.

“What?” I snapped. I’d forgotten what I’d asked.

“*Nothing* else happened,” she said, still maddeningly calm.

“How can that be?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Neither of us liked it very much.”

“What are you talking about?”

She made a face, remembering. “It was kinda… weird. It’s like I was saying earlier, he’s hot, but I don’t really get why you’re so hung up on him. I don’t get what the big deal is about him.”

I stared at her, stunned. “Are you *kidding* me?”

“No. I’m not,” she said flatly. “As far as kisses go, I’ve had handshakes that were more arousing.”

“Okay, firstly, you’re out of your mind,” I snapped. “Greyson is a fucking great kisser. I don’t know where he learned to do that thing with his tongue—” I shook my head. Hopefully she didn’t even know about that. “But that doesn’t matter! That’s not important! Why did you kiss him?”

Artemis heaved a huge sigh. “We’d made it back to his apartment and I had taken a shower—which is *so* much fun, by the way—”

My head was spinning. Apartment? “*Get to the point faster!*”

“—and we’d gone to this bar and were having a drink—whiskey is really good—have you had it?”

“*Artemis!*”

“—and some guy with this weird clump of hair right on top of his head came over—”

“Like a man bun?”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “I thought you wanted me to get to the point?”

I ground my teeth. “Go on.”

She shrugged. “He was being really pushy and he wouldn’t leave me alone so Greyson pretended to be my boyfriend so the guy would leave. And then I tripped and we kissed. And that was it.”

I stared at her. “Are you *sure*,” I said, still feeling like the ground was shifting beneath my feet, “that there really is *nothing* for me to be worried about?”

Artemis laughed. “Trust me, Cali. There were *no* sparks. None. *At all*. Ask Greyson. He’ll tell you. It was like—nothing. Like when people do that thing where they slap flat hands. What’s that called?”

“A high-five,” I said distractedly.

“Right, a high-five. I love those.” Artemis looked at me. “Greyson is your mate, Cali. You know how he feels about you. You should know there’s nothing to worry about. Besides,” she said, smiling, “I’m your sister. I would never betray you.”

“But you didn’t know you were my sister until we got to Minnesota,” I pointed out.

She thought about that for a moment. “The point is,” she went on, “there’s nothing to worry about. Well, except for the fact that you’re dying.”

This surprised me into a stunned laugh. “Thanks,” I said, laughing a bit more. Artemis sure had a way about her.

We both looked over as Jay and Lola emerged from the darkness of the vault. Their clothes were dusty to say the least. I wondered how they’d managed to do that.

“Hey,” I said, walking toward them. “Any luck?”

“How long were we gone?” Lola asked, looking around. “Was it a while?”

“Oh,” I said, remembering how differently time moved here. I thought about it for a moment. “Maybe ten minutes?” I looked over at Artemis for confirmation and she nodded. “How did it feel for you?”

Lola flushed. “Um, the same.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Lola? What did you do?”

Lola’s cheeks flamed hotter. “Don’t worry about it. We got caught up in the moment. Time is weird here! We found the book! That’s what matters!”

“Did you?” I asked. “That’s great.”

Lola nodded. “There’s a spell that should help me, but Jay won’t let me use it,” she added, giving Jay a sidelong glance.

“Why not?” I asked Jay. “That’s kind of why we’re here, isn’t it?’

Jay looked aggrieved. “It’s a *witch’s* spell, Cali. We’re not witches. We don’t know anything about spells. Even the wording of the spell is confusing. What if something went wrong? Which it easily could.”

“You’re right,” I admitted. I bit my lip, worried. “So what do you think we should do?”

“I think we should bring the spell to Big Mac. Have her look at it. She might know how to approach it.”

“Where’s the book?” Artemis asked, walking forward. “I want to look at the spell.”

“Oh, there was a sign,” Lola said with a smirk. “No removing anything from the restricted section.”

“So what did you do?” I asked.

“I just snapped a picture of it on my phone,” Lola explained, pulling her phone out of a large pocket.

Artemis’s eyes went wide. “Whoa. Can I see it?”

Artemis was still very impressed with any kind of technology.

“Maybe later,” I said. “We should probably get going.”

Artemis’s eyes flicked down to the creeping veins on my neck. “That’s true. We need to get back to Hypatia so we can finish reading about *due destini* and figure out how to help you.” She turned toward the doorway. “Anyone remember how to get back?”

“I guess we’ll just go back the way we came,” I said, uncertainly. “I just hope we don’t run into any more of those shadow monster things.”

“We might, so keep your eyes open,” Artemis said. “This place is weird—we’d better be ready for anything.”

Unconsciously, I put my hand over my heart, remembering the pain I’d felt watching the shadow monsters fighting. It was the same pain I felt from the creeping curse veins. I took a deep breath as we walked through the darkened corridors. The sooner we got some answers, the better.

We walked quietly for a long time, less interested in the fantastical library this time, more concerned with getting back to Hypatia. Artemis was in the lead with Jay right behind her.

“Hey,” he said, pointing. “Look!”

We all looked where he was pointing and saw the chute where we’d been unceremoniously ejected. And just beyond its mouth was a set of sliding doors and a small illuminated sign that read “Elevator”.

We stared at that for a moment, all thinking of the traumatic ride we’d taken down the chute.

“Did anyone see that before?” I asked in a small voice.

Jay, Lola, and Artemis all shook their heads.

We piled into the warmly lit elevator and, without us pressing any buttons, the doors closed. Soft, lilting piano music played as we started our ascent.

The doors opened with a gentle ping and we stepped out, three feet in front of Hypatia’s desk. She didn’t look up.

“So,” she said, her eyes on the register on the desk in front of her, “you’re back.”

“Why didn’t you tell us there was an elevator?” I snapped, unable to keep the irritation out of my voice.

She looked up, peering at me coldly. “You never asked.”

I opened my mouth to respond to that, but Jay stepped forward and laid a hand on my arm.

“Maybe you should get back to reading Cassandra’s journal, Cali, now that we’re back.” He turned to Hypatia. “Could we take another look at that book we placed on reserve?”

With a long-suffering sigh, Hypatia reached for the journal, which sat at the very top of a tall stack of books, and handed it to me. “This book cannot leave the premises,” she reminded me.

“Got it,” I said. Artemis followed as I carried it to a nearby table.

Lola turned to Jay, and there was a wheedling note in her voice. “Come on, Jay. I want to see what will happen. Why can’t we just do the spell and see?”

“I told you why—”

“*Shhh*,” Hypatia hissed, her cold eyes flashing. “This is a library, not a debate hall.”

“Sorry,” Jay muttered. He turned back to Lola and said in a whisper, “I told you. We need a witch.”

“Well,” Hypatia cut in. Jay and Lola looked over and Hypatia raised her eyebrows. “*I’m* a witch.”

**Episode 747**

VIOLET

My mind was *reeling*. I still couldn’t believe that Charlie had called me. I was talking to him—I was literally in the middle of the call—but I still couldn’t believe it. I’d giggled like a loon when I’d answered.

I’d convinced myself that he hated me and that I’d completely freaked him out by mentioning mates. I’d been so sure that he’d never speak to me again. I mean, he’d basically told me to get lost when I’d found him on campus after Sandi had caught us together. When he’d texted, apologizing, I’d wanted to believe him, but texts were hard to interpret. There was no tone of voice to go on, no facial expression. I’d heard of relationships ending because of a misunderstood text.

But now he had *called!*

I was trying to be chill, and I tuned back in, listening to what he was saying:

“—I know it was a lame thing to do, trying to make things right between us with a text. I just panicked, I think. I didn’t trust myself…” he trailed off.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Um.” He was quiet for a moment. “I didn’t trust myself not to say something stupid.”

“*What?*” I gasped.

He laughed a little. “I get a little tongue-tied around you, Violet.”

“You’re joking,” I said, in disbelief.

He laughed again, harder this time. “Okay, I take it back. The truth is, I get *super* tongue-tied when you’re around.”

I felt my face heat with a blush, and thanked my lucky stars we weren’t FaceTiming. He didn’t need to see me do something so embarrassing.

“Um,” I said, trying to breathe past the pounding of my heart. “So, whatever happened with Sandi?”

Charlie was quiet.

*Shit*. “Was it awful?” I waited. “Charlie?” I looked down at my phone. *Call ended*. He’d hung up!

What the actual hell? He’d *hung up* on me? Just when I’d thought it was going so well!

I gripped my phone, ready to hurl it across the room, but then it started to buzz. I looked down in confusion.

“Holy shit,” I gasped. It was a *FaceTime* call. From Charlie!

Without giving it another thought I answered the call, and my own image popped up on the screen. I looked like a *ghoul!* In my dark bedroom, the light from the bathroom backlit me, making me look sick and tired and like I had bags under my eyes. My hands started to sweat. I hadn’t planned on him *seeing* me!

Before the call could connect, I pressed the little red *x* on my screen and rushed into my bathroom. I’d dropped my phone on my bed and I could hear it ringing as Charlie tried to call back, but I ignored it as I flipped my dark hair upside down, artfully tousling it, then slicked some mascara and the quickest winged liner I’d ever pulled off over my eyes. I dabbed a bit of tint onto my lips and my freckled cheekbones, then sprinted back into my bedroom. I snatched my still ringing phone off my bed and settled into a chair, flicking on the lamp next to my bed, which bathed me in warm, golden light.

*Then* I answered the FaceTime call.

“Hi,” I said, smiling casually, trying to pretend like I wasn’t breathing hard.

“Hey,” he said, smiling his crooked smile back at me. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest at the sight of it. He shook his black hair out of his eyes. “I wasn’t sure if you were going to pick up.”

“Sorry about that,” I said lightly. “I’m kind of in the middle of nowhere out here. The reception is a little wonky. I have to be in just the right spot in my room.”

“Oh.” He nodded. “For a second there I thought you were mad at me. I’m glad you picked up.”

“Yeah,” I said, staring at him. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was to see him. I gave my head a little shake. “Why did you want to FaceTime, anyway? Did you want to see what my room looks like?”

He smiled. “No—I mean, yeah, if you wanted to show me. But, that’s not why. I… I just wanted to see your face. It’s good to see you, Violet.”

“Yeah,” I breathed. “It’s good to see you, too.”

“It’s too hard to talk about this stuff without being able to look at you.” He shrugged. “It’d be better if you were here, but…”

I smiled, relaxing a little into my chair. I shifted my phone, angling it a tiny bit so the lamp light hit my cheekbones. “So, I was asking about Sandi. What happened there?”

Charlie’s smile slipped and he sighed. “Well, I didn’t really call to talk about her.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Why *did* you call?”

He looked up, catching my eyes. “I’m not sure how to explain it, Violet. But ever since you left, I feel like… like I’m missing something. I keep checking my pockets, looking for my phone or my keys or my wallet. It’s the weirdest thing.” He paused for a moment, looking at me hard. “It’s like you took a part of me with you when you left. Does that even make sense?”

*YES!* I wanted to scream. I was dying inside. *Dying*. My internal organs were snaking together, twisting themselves into knots. *Of course it makes sense, you idiot! We’re mates! That’s what it’s supposed to feel like! That’s the whole point!*

I had to press my lips together to keep from shouting this out. I remembered the way he’d stepped back from me the last time I’d mentioned that we were mates, and how freaked out he’d looked, so I knew I had to play this very carefully.

“Yeah,” I said evenly. “That makes perfect sense. You miss me. I miss you, too.”

Charlie narrowed his eyes, clearly thinking. “Yeah,” he said slowly, “I *do* miss you, Violet, but it’s more than that. Like, *way* more than that.” He shook his head, looking profoundly frustrated. “I’m terrible at explaining things. I wish we were together right now. If you were here or if I was there, I’d be able to explain it better.” He bit his lip and I nearly cried at the sight of it. “The truth is, I really wish you were here.”

“You do?” I asked quietly.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice rough. “Maybe the best thing to do is just to tell Sandi everything. Just get it all out in the open so she understands.” He nodded. “Yeah. That’s what I’m going to do. The sooner the better.”

“Charlie, I really don’t think—”

But I stopped, staring at my screen. He had ended the call.

My eyes went wide and I dialed his number with shaking fingers. He didn’t answer the FaceTime call, so I tried calling him normally. Still no answer. Then I texted him.

*Call me.*

He did not call me.

Oh my god. Did Charlie *really* not understand that you couldn’t just go around telling humans you were a werewolf? That that was a *very* quick way to get into a shit-ton of trouble? I *knew* I’d mentioned that to him at some point.

I dropped my head into my hands. Poor Charlie. He was still so confused about everything.

I looked up, suddenly decided. There was only one thing to do: I had to go back to Minnesota.

*Now.*

I sprang out of bed and grabbed the duffel bag I’d just unpacked. I pulled open my dresser drawer and scooped up the last of my clean clothes and tossed them in. I had to get to Charlie before he did something stupid, or dangerous, or stupidly dangerous.

Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I flung the window open and climbed out. There was a handy drainpipe just outside my window and I grabbed hold and rappelled down. When I hit the ground, I glanced back at the house. Most of the bedroom windows were lit with warm yellow lights, and for a moment I hesitated, wondering if I should tell someone I was leaving.

But then I shook my head. Who could I tell? Greyson? Joss? There was no way either of them would let me go. No, it was better to just go now and deal with explaining myself later. I slipped out of my clothes and shoved everything into my duffel, then slung it over my shoulder. I bounded across the lawn and toward the road. I knew I couldn’t stay on the road—too visible—so I slipped into the cover of the trees and headed west, in the general direction of the airport.

It felt good to run, even as a human, and I was just starting to get into a rhythm when I leapt across a small a stream and hit something coming down on the other side. I tumbled, landing with an embarrassing whimper, and turned around to see what I’d hit.

As I drew closer to the dark shape, a cloud moved, revealing the moon and lighting the path in front of me. I nearly screamed, but the sound died in my throat. I stood, frozen with fear, staring. And the empty, soulless eyes of the dead body stared back at me.

**Episode 748**

Leaving Cassandra’s journal open on the table, I hurried over to Hypatia’s desk where Lola was leaning, looking excited. “Hey,” I said, smiling and choosing my words *very* carefully. “It’s so cool that you’re a witch *and* a librarian.”

Hypatia gave me a small, condescending smile. “Of course it is.”

I wasn’t sure if Hypatia’s announcement that she was a witch was the best or the most unsettling news ever, but I really didn’t want to anger her, so I kept my tone light as I turned to Lola. “But, as the result of this spell could *really* affect your life, Lola, maybe you should give this some more thought before you move forward with it. You know, more than the *ten minutes* it took us to get back up here,” I added pointedly.

“Cali, I really don’t need a bunch of warnings—” Lola started, already rolling her eyes, but Jay cut in.

“She’s right, Lola,” he said. “Let’s just think this through.”

“Jay, can we not—”

“I love you, Lola,” Jay said softly, reaching for her hand. “I’m always going to be cautious when it comes to you. I know you’re always ready to power forward with everything, but I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Lola looked at him for a moment, then smiled and nodded. “Okay. I’ll think about it.” She leaned in to kiss him.

“*Hey!*” Hypatia rapped on her desk with a ruler. When we looked over, she pointed to a small sign propped up on the desk. “No Public Displays of Affection”.

“Of course,” Lola muttered.

Shaking my head, I headed back to Cassandra’s journal. Artemis looked up as I walked over and pushed the journal toward me. “It looks like this whole *due destini* thing was pretty hard on old Cassandra.”

“I’m sure it was,” I said, pulling the journal toward me as I sat. *That* I understood all too well. If anyone could relate to Cassandra’s struggle, it was me. I flipped the page and began to read.

*This night, I retire to my bedchamber in utter despair. Arion, who has been most anxious that I should choose him, came to me yesternoon and confessed that my indecision has caused him great distress. My heart broke for him, and I told him as much. But then he confessed something that has caused me the bitterest pain. He told me he was much ashamed, but that he had lain with someone else. I was shocked to hear of this. Shocked is not the word. He sought my forgiveness—begged for it, with tears coursing down his cheeks—but I was too overwhelmed, too angry, too confused to grant his request. I went to sleep weeping the bitterest of tears. This morning, I awoke with a blinding pain within my breast. When I removed my gown, there were dark threads visible in my skin, where my very heart beats. I wonder very much at this. This must be a physical sign of the inner anguish I feel. It pains me greatly, and even now, I lie here in bed, tormented by the ache of it. I do not know if I can endure this much longer. My agony is proving too powerful, and I can envision no relief. I would rather die than have to choose…*

Trembling, I stared at the faded, looped writing. The veins over my heart had appeared just as Cassandra’s had. The pain had been—and still was—just as she described it. *Agony*. And, just like her, I couldn’t sleep for thinking about it. So what could have triggered it?

Without thinking, I glanced over my shoulder at Artemis, who was sitting next to me. She had pulled another book toward her and was flipping through it, examining the brightly colored illustrations. Could it have been her kiss with Greyson that had started this? The kiss she’d told me not to worry about? The kiss she said had felt like a high-five?

But no, it couldn’t have been that. The kiss had happened in Portland, long before I’d gotten that strange feeling that there was something wrong with my connection to Greyson. If my curse had been triggered by that kiss, it would have happened long before Artemis came to Minnesota.

Besides, whatever had happened to start all this felt bigger than just a drunken kiss in a bar. I shook my head and looked back down at the yellowed pages of the journal.

Cassandra said Arion had confessed to “lying with someone else”. Which was old-time speak for hooking up. I let that sink in.

Then I closed my eyes, feeling faint. The realization of what this could mean made me feel sick to my stomach. Instinctively, my hand went to my heart. Even through the fabric of my shirt, I could feel the crawling, spidery veins protruding through my skin. I could feel blood pumping through them, but it seemed off-rhythm from my own heartbeat, almost as though they had a pulse of their own. If what had happened to Cassandra was happening to me—and it sure as hell felt like it was—then that meant either Xavier or Greyson had slept with someone else.

My head was swimming, and I wanted nothing more than to put my head down on the library table, close my eyes, and maybe just take a nap until all these terrible, horrible questions went away. But I knew I couldn’t do that. I knew I didn’t have much time, and so, with a deep, shuddering breath, I looked back down at Cassandra’s journal and flipped the page.

“The library is now closed.” Hypatia’s voice broke into my thoughts, sharp as snapping chalk. “Everyone must exit the library. Now.” She switched off the green library lamp on her desk.

“What?” I asked, looking up. “That can’t be! I still have a lot to read!”

Hypatia’s eyes narrowed. “The library is *closed*.”

I shook my head. “No, I can’t go yet. There’s still so much I need to know.”

“Yes, the quest for knowledge is never-ending. Now get out!” Hypatia snarled, coming out from behind her desk to turn off the lamps and chivvy us toward the exit.

“You don’t understand,” Lola growled, stepping in front of me as I drew back in my chair, clasping Cassandra’s journal to my chest. “Her life is at stake here.”

“What is one life?” Hypatia asked, her eyes growing wide. She held out her arms, gesturing at the vast library around her. “Look around you. Here we have hundreds of thousands of lives, millions of experiences. This library protects them all. And it is *closed*,” she finished, firmly. She stepped forward and turned off another lamp.

I stood and stepped around Lola, still clutching the ancient book. “Will you let me borrow this book?”

Hypatia pointed to her sign. “Not without a library card, young lady.”

“I promise I’ll bring it back. I *swear* I’ll return it,” I said earnestly.

“Yes, like I haven’t heard that a thousand times before,” Hypatia snapped. “Did you know,” she said, looking around at the group, “that this library has not lost one book since I became the librarian? Not *one single book*. Not a paperback, not a pamphlet. Nothing at all.”

“Of course not,” Lola mumbled. “You won’t let anyone touch anything.”

“*Please*,” I begged, the spidery veins over my heart beating hard. “I *need* this book.”

“If you are so desperate for it, you can come back tomorrow,” Hypatia snapped, reaching forward with her claw-like hand and snatching the book from my arms. “But not until two p.m. We open late tomorrow.” Then she turned back to her desk and shoved the journal into the middle of a towering pile of books.

Breathing hard, I glared at the crotchety librarian, but what could I do? I didn’t have a library card. And, rules were rules.

“When I tell you, take the book and run.”

I looked up at Artemis, who had appeared at my side. “*What?*”

Artemis didn’t look at me—she kept her eyes on Hypatia—but whispered the instructions again. “When I tell you, take the book and run like you mean it, okay?”

“You want me to *steal?* From a *library?*” I hissed back.

“Can we bring this one too?” Lola asked as she and Jay joined us. She reached into the waistband of her pants and pulled out a book. “I actually took this from the restricted section… Do you think she’ll be mad?”

“Lola?!” Jay and I hissed together.

“I couldn’t help it!” she said. “I need the spell and I thought maybe something in here could help you!”

“Okay, you two wait here.”

Artemis didn’t say anything else as she stepped in front of the desk and rang the little bell. Hypatia turned, looking annoyed, but before she could speak Artemis waved her hand and said in a calm, firm voice, “You’ve forgotten that we have special borrowing privileges.”

It took longer than it should have for me to get it, but I realized that Artemis was trying to use her powers of mind control on Hypatia. I had no idea if they worked on witches, and I held my breath, waiting.

Hypatia looked hazy and confused, so Artemis spoke again, using that same voice of calm assurance. “Have you forgotten about our special borrowing privileges?”

Hypatia blinked. “Borrowing privileges? Yes. You’re right. Take whatever you like. Special privileges. Of course.”

Artemis glanced over her shoulder at me. “Now! Run!”

I didn’t wait for her to tell me twice. I lunged for the journal, knocking over the entire pile of books, and sprinted for the door.

**Episode 749**

After all the shit we’d gone through in that terrifying library, the ferry back to Vancouver was a much needed reprieve. Between the smooth waters, the group of college dudes checking Artemis out, and the group of loud, excited children clustered near the railing, everything just seemed so… normal.

It was nice.

I glanced around to make sure no otherworldly creatures had followed me onto the ferry and then pulled Cassandra’s journal out of my jacket. “I can’t believe we stole books,” I whispered to Artemis. “Books from a *magical library*. Do you think there’s going to be some kind of weird karmic penalty for all of this?”

She shrugged. “I’m sure we’ll be fine. It can’t be any worse than the curse you’re already dealing with, right?”

“Comforting,” I deadpanned.

“We didn’t have a choice, Cali. Hypatia wasn’t going to yield, and you need that journal if you want to survive the next month.”

Well, when she put it that way… I almost would’ve said my sister cared about me.

“Hey, put that away,” I heard Jay say under his breath.

Lola waved him off as she snuggled closer to him. They’d been glued together since the library, and I had a sneaking suspicion that more had happened in the vault than they let on. “I just want to read about more that’s in here,” Lola replied.

I glanced over my shoulder and found them seated two rows behind us, arguing in what I could only assume was a failed whisper. Jay clutched the *Gifts of the Witches* book possessively against his chest while Lola’s fingers curled around the edges. I still couldn’t believe she’d stolen that book from the restricted section.

“I just want you to be careful,” Jay said, giving her a kiss on the top of her head. “And we can’t lose it. Can we please just wait and let Big Mac take a look?”

“She will,” Lola said. “I’m just gonna give it a quick skim first. I’ve been wanting some good reading material for a while now—”

“And you’re going to find it an ancient spell book?” Jay raised an eyebrow before he poked Lola in the side, sending her into a fit of giggles. “Just keep a tight hold on it.”

Good call. If we lost the spell book and someone picked it up, they’d have a lot of questions. Difficult questions about spell books were the last thing we needed.

Artemis watched them with only mild interest before turning back to me, her expression serious. “Do you know how this boat can move through the water so quickly?”

I blinked. I didn’t know what I’d expected her to ask, but questions about the relative mechanics of a ferry boat wasn't it.I strained my memory for anything about ferries that I’d learned over the years. There wasn’t a whole lot. “Um, I think there are propellers?”

She nodded solemnly. “And what are those?”

“Oh.” I thought fast. “You know the fan at Mom’s house back in Minnesota? The way it creates indoor wind? A propeller is like that, only it works underwater and helps push the boat forward. Or something like that.”

She nodded again. “I think I will go and discuss this more with the captain.” She stood and headed off toward the front of the boat. “This is horribly inefficient.”

“Have fun,” I called after her, though she was already gone.

That was the thing about Artemis—she never failed to find magic in the mundane.

“Lola, I’m not letting you read the book, so just give it up!” I heard Jay groan. I wasn’t going to be able to focus with these two bickering behind me. I tucked Cassandra’s journal back into my jacket and found a new seat toward the back of the ferry. We still had a while to go before we arrived back in Vancouver. It seemed as good a time as any to read more of Cassandra’s journal.

I thumbed to the last page I’d seen and started reading.

*Last night I lay with Symeon. While I have resisted doing so to this point, worried that it would only complicate the position I have found myself in, I could no longer deny the physical attraction between us. And how can I be expected choose one mate with whom I have lain, over the other with whom I have not? We met while the moon was high in the sky, away from the others. Symeon was eager to see me, his kisses consuming. I felt my resistance chipping away with every touch of his lips, and we lay down together in the grass.*

*His hands slipped beneath my skirt, and in no time at all I was bare to him. I felt shy, at first, lying in front of him and wearing nothing but moonlight. But Symeon eased all my worries—first with his sweet kisses, and then with nimble fingers that brought my body alive in ways I had thought only Arion was capable of producing.*

*Symeon divested himself of his own clothes, and then we were together as one, skin to skin and united in the most primal of ways. It was one of the most amazing experiences of my life, and my love for him only grew as we moved together beneath the moonlight. He kissed me until we reached our sweet end and pleasure tore my world asunder.*

*When we both fell onto our backs, exhausted, alive, I was struck by guilt. Not because I had betrayed Arion by lying with Symeon, but because I didn’t feel guilty about it. I am conflicted, but only because my choice is now more difficult. If I had hoped that lying with Symeon would make things clearer, my hopes fell short. I feel just as strongly about Symeon as I do about Arion. If I were never to do it again, not knowing him in every way would drive me to madness.*

I set the book down, my eyebrows hovering below my hairline. *Wow, Cassandra. You missed your calling as a romance writer. Talk about steamy stuff!*

A smile tugged at my lips. She’d clearly been deeply in love with Symeon to write about him like that. To want to leave a record of that very private moment between them. I knew that feeling…

My smile slipped, a frown slowly taking its place. I knew that feeling all too well. I had slept with Xavier tons of times, and just thinking about doing it again made my heart skip a beat and my lady parts sing. But I’d resisted sleeping with Greyson.

Lord knew, we’d both been tempted more than a few times. There were so many times I’d thought the desire between us would make me combust if he didn’t touch me and we didn’t finally seal the deal. And yet I had never slept with Greyson.

If I had slept with him when we’d spent all that time alone together in the Fae world, would things have been different now? Would he still have pretended not to remember our time together? Would he still have pushed me away and told me not to call him again?

Would he still have kissed Artemis? Artemis, who was beautiful and powerful and looked enough like me that maybe for Greyson it was the next best thing?

I knew on some level that I didn’t have any real reason to worry about Greyson and Artemis. She had made it clear that it hadn’t been a particularly special event for either of them, and I believed her. Artemis was here, wasn’t she? She’d come to help me trap Tony’s ghost and she’d stayed ever since. If she’d really wanted to be with Greyson, she probably would have gone back to Oregon. And it wasn’t like Greyson was trying to get in touch with her.

And yet I couldn’t help the jealousy that bubbled up. I’d felt it with Joss, too.

Maybe it didn’t have anything to do with Artemis or Joss so much as imagining my mate with anyone else.

If I had slept with Greyson, would I have felt like Cassandra? Would it have been as amazing as I’d always imagined it would be? Or would it just have made things worse *because* it was so amazing? At least if Greyson was bad at sex it might make one small facet of this decision just a little less impossible.

*But Greyson? Bad at sex? Yeah, right.*

I thumbed the edge of the journal, trying to distract myself from the thought of sex with Greyson. I was about to read some more, but then Jay’s voice broke through my focus.

“Lola! Stop! Close it!”

My head snapped up. Lola was turned away from Jay, holding the *Gifts of the Witches* book open against her chest. “Chill out! You’re freaking me out, Jay!” she cried. “I only read a little!”

She did *what?*

I tucked the journal back into my jacket and raced over to where Lola and Jay were fighting. “You read a spell?” I demanded, not even bothering to worry about being overheard by normal people.

“So what?” Lola shrugged. “Nothing happened.”

I glanced at the page Lola had propped open. It was a weather spell of some sort.

“It’s no big deal,” she insisted. “I’m not a witch. What can I do?”

Suddenly the moon overhead disappeared behind a cloud, and thunder boomed around us. Lightning flashed, illuminating the dark waters around us. The ferry rocked violently and I glanced over the railing and gasped.

A huge wave was barreling down on us.

**Episode 750**

AVA

The ghost of Xavier’s mother was standing in the shower with me.

Was I losing my mind? Because that seemed like the only possible explanation for how I could be standing in the shower and seeing the ghost of Marlene—my mate’s mother. The woman I’d murdered without hesitation. Because my pack had meant more to me than my mate, and it didn’t matter who stood in the way.

How was this even possible? I had to be seeing things. All this time I’d spent around Xavier and Nolan, hashing out the past—I was just seeing things. This was my imagination, and all the craziness of the last few days just running away with me.

I had to just be seeing things… Right?

I blinked. *Nope, still there.* I tried again, and still the apparition was moving slowly toward me. If I thought about it, I could still remember killing the woman in front of me. I could feel my teeth sinking into her flesh, her blood filling my mouth. I could still remember watching the light go out of her eyes, hearing her racing pulse suddenly slow and then stop altogether. If I thought hard enough, I could almost taste her blood.

I shook myself and shrank back against the shower wall. Of course this was happening when I was at my most vulnerable. Wait… Would Marlene’s ghost even recognize me as Ava? Or would she see Cali, like everyone else did?

“W-what are you doing here?” I demanded. “Get out. You don’t belong here.”

The steam obscured Marlene’s face for a terrifying string of seconds, but that chill never left the air, despite the heat of the shower. I knew she was still there, still watching me, even if I couldn’t fully see her.

“Ava…” Marlene’s disembodied voice was a study in contradictions—somehow soft and ephemeral, yet it echoed through the small space as if she was shouting at me. It didn’t even occur to me to be surprised that she didn’t see Cali when she looked at me.

“The dead cannot return to the world of the living without sacrifice,” she warned me. “You shouldn’t have come back.”

“I didn’t *ask* to come back,” I said. I wasn’t complaining about my second chance at life, necessarily, but it wasn’t like I’d planned to walk out of that mirror and have that witch change my face. It beat being a zombie, I supposed.

“It doesn’t matter,” Marlene said. “The die has been cast. The wheels are in motion, and there is no returning down the path you have already traveled.” Her voice grew in volume, filling the air around us and ringing in my ears. “You have upset the natural order and all who come in contact with you will pay the price. Including my son, Xavier.” Her expression turned mournful. “If you ever truly cared for him, you will leave.”

“What do you—” I began, but her face twisted in agony, so similar to the pain that had flashed across her features the day I’d taken her life. A waterfall of blood poured down the surface of her throat, and with a shriek that made my hair stand on end, she vanished.

I stood there long after Marlene’s ghost disappeared. The shower was hot on my skin, filling the air with a thick cloud of steam, but I barely felt it through the chill that had settled deep in my bones. I shivered, wrapping my arms tight around myself as I stared at the spot where the ghost had been.

What, exactly, had she meant by the wheels being set in motion? About not being able to go back? Whatever was happening now, whatever was *going* to happen, I didn’t want it. I’d never asked for it. And it didn’t seem fair that I—or anyone who came in contact with me—would be stuck with the consequences, if she was to be believed.

Of course, it would be crazy to believe her. To accept that I’d seen her at all. But somehow, I didn’t doubt the word of the woman I’d murdered. The prophetic words of a ghost appearing in front of me. With everything I’d seen lately, it seemed pretty damn par for the course, actually.

It wasn’t until my teeth started to chatter that I realized the water had gone cold, and I turned off the shower. I shivered, wrapping myself in a towel, and took an alternate route out of the shower. I didn’t want to step where Marlene had appeared. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

I wanted nothing more than to turn back time three minutes, to before Marlene had invaded my life. And, more than that, I wanted to disavow her, to believe that she wasn’t real and neither was her half-baked prophecy. Marlene was dead, after all. What did she know?

But I was once dead too, and nobody knew better than me that ghosts were real. Except, I was no longer a ghost. And I really, *really* wanted to keep it that way.

I approached the sink and wiped the condensation from the mirror. The face staring back at me looked haunted—pale skin, bluish lips, and wide, frightened eyes. And yet, it wasn’t my own. It was Cali’s.

My own face had seemed so terrifying to me when I’d first walked out of that mirror, but now I wanted it back so badly I couldn’t stand it. I hadn’t realized then what a luxury it was to look into a mirror and see your own face staring back. To live a life as your own person, and not some poor facsimile.

I remembered looking through the mirror at Big Mac’s house—when I’d been a ghost. But then I’d walked out of it as a living, breathing person. Why? Why had I gotten a second chance at life, when Marlene was stuck as a ghost?

She was my mate’s mother; I’d killed her knowing that. Knowing what it would do to Xavier, and I’d done it anyway. For my pack. For peace. But now… now I felt anything but peaceful. I couldn’t help but think what could have been if I hadn’t.

I tapped on the glass, touching the reflection of Cali’s face that was staring back at me. When I was a child, I’d heard all kinds of stories about mirrors—that they could serve as portals to other worlds, and that some vampires could see the portals. Some mirrors were even used to pass beyond the living world, and in others you could be trapped in between.

Before now, I’d never really thought about it much. Now… Now, I couldn’t stop thinking about it, trying to remember the myths I’d barely paid attention to, wishing I’d asked better questions of the people telling those stories.

Strange things were happening, things that—I knew, deep inside—had to do with the orb I’d heard talk of. How much was my second chance due to that, too?

I took in Cali’s face in the mirror again. Could I even call this a second chance? Being used like a pawn, wearing a face that wasn’t my own, pretending to be someone I wasn’t…

Someone Xavier loved.

Cali’s lips turned up in a snarl, and I drew my fist back and punched the mirror with all my might. Cracks spiderwebbed out, distorting the reflection before half of the mirror shattered, falling to the top of the vanity in sharp, broken pieces.

My knuckles were on fire, and I knew they had to be bleeding, but I didn’t care.

I wasn’t afraid anymore.

No, I was pissed off. I glanced down at my bracelet. I’d been forced to wear this, to pretend to be Cali, to ruin whatever chance I’d had with Xavier, whatever fleeting second chance I’d gotten to live my life—all because of that older man and that witch.

And because of Nolan. He was taking advantage of this situation, and he was using me. All to get back at Xavier and the Redwood pack. Was that why I had even fought for the Samara pack instead of my mate the first time around?

Marlene’s words echoed through my head, and a new chill slipped down my spine. If I stayed, Xavier would suffer. Hadn’t he already suffered enough? Hadn’t we all? And with Violet now questioning me, maybe even raising doubts in everyone’s minds about who I really was, maybe the best path for me was to run. To try to get away and put as much mileage as I could between myself and everyone here.

I rushed back into the bedroom, grabbed the first items of clothing I could find, and tugged them on. I needed to get some supplies, and then maybe I could wait until nightfall and sneak away. I could start a new life. Maybe I could even find someone to help me take the bracelet off.

My bloody knuckles slowly knitting back together, I’d started to pack a bag when I heard a commotion coming from downstairs.

Despite my better sense, I left the safety of my room and crept down the stairs. It would be best to find out what was going on. Whatever it was could affect my ability to escape unnoticed. I’d just take a peek, and if whatever was causing this racket didn’t concern me, then I’d sneak back up, finish packing, and get the hell out of dodge.

Greyson and Joss were in the entryway, talking to Xavier, who was naked and covered in blood.

*Fuck*.

Xavier’s eyes locked on mine. Panic, joy, and fear all collided as his face twisted into a vicious snarl. “She’s not Cali!”

**Episode 751**

VIOLET

Oh my god. There was a dead body. Lying on the ground, right in front of me.

I screamed and fell backward into the forest floor. My palms scraped against the hard ground, but I barely felt it. All I could think about was putting as much space as possible between myself and the body.

Its eyes seemed to follow me as I scrambled back, and I felt a chill run down my spine. The world tilted to the side for a moment, off-kilter yet centered on those lifeless, unseeing eyes. Oh god, I was going to vomit. My mouth filled with saliva, and that dizziness that always accompanied nausea washed over me.

*Don’t puke. Don’t—*

I gagged and then clenched my jaw. *Come on, Violet. You’re a werewolf, for crying out loud. You of all people should be used to death.*

And I was, in a way. Death had touched my life many times before—first when my parents had died, and then again when Lilac had been murdered. I was still haunted by his death, still staring down the face of that grief. But I’d never confronted death like *this*—alone, at night, in the woods.

Slowly, the initial shock wore off, and I came to understand that the body in front of me wasn’t going to attack me. It wasn’t going to do anything ever again. Except maybe decompose, or become a snack for an animal out here in the woods.

Trembling, I found my feet and stood up, glancing around. Who had done this? This person—maybe a hiker?—didn’t seem to have died of natural causes. There was a brutal, fatal tear in the man’s neck, and bite and claw marks on his torso, hands, and arms, like he’d been trying to fight off his attacker before his life had been taken. I recognized the marks on the man’s corpse, and I had no doubt that the hiker had been killed by a werewolf.

I glanced around, gulping. I was still pretty close to the pack house, and I didn’t think any of them would have randomly murdered a hiker. It had to have been a Rogue. Was the killer still here? Was the Rogue wolf watching me right now?

Shit, that was what did it. The hairs on the back of my neck began to rise, and my eyes darted around the forest, looking for the slightest indication that something was wrong. I knew the tiniest sign of a threat would have me shifting and sprinting away, putting as much distance between myself and the body as possible.

I took a deep breath. *Calm down, Violet. There’s nobody out here right now*. *You should probably make sure the person is actually dead.*

I glanced down at the body. Yeah, there was no way I was going to touch it to check for a pulse, and there was no denying the dead glaze in the hiker’s eyes. He was gone, of that much I was certain.

Another chill ran down my spine, and I wished I was already back in Minnesota with Charlie. He probably wouldn’t have been a ton of a help in this situation, if I was being honest with myself, but just having him nearby would’ve helped ease the terror coiling inside me.

Right now, it was just me and a dead body. A dead body that I knew nothing about. A dead body that wasn’t my problem to fix. I had more than enough problems of my own already. I slowly backed away from the body, half-convinced that if I moved too quickly or turned my back on it, it would suddenly spring to life.

Then I heard a sound, and I froze. A twig snapping, and the scuffle of feet over the ground.

Someone was coming.

I breathed slowly through my nose, trying to ignore the pounding in my chest, trying to hear, to sense, to catch the newcomer’s scent in the air. There was no use in running away like a scared rabbit before I learned anything about what had happened here, or what kind of threat the killer might present.

I peered through the trees, studiously ignoring the dead body stretched out on the ground in front of me. Suddenly, the normal sounds of the forest at night—owls and rodents and all kinds of nocturnal bugs—seemed to vanish, and the forest went deathly silent.

A twig snapped behind me, the sound deafening in a space otherwise devoid of sound. I turned to see something creeping slowly toward me. I couldn’t see it clearly, but I didn’t need to. Its scent hit me and I knew: it was a werewolf.

I broke into a run, shifting as I bounded away from the predator. I had no problem being a scared rabbit if it meant surviving to see the sunrise. Snarling sounds echoed behind me as the werewolf chased after me. Fueled by adrenaline and fear, I pushed myself harder, moving faster than I ever had in my life. I had to get away from this werewolf. Whoever he was, and whatever he wanted, I couldn’t let him catch me.

The chase continued over the span of several miles of forest, and I realized—dread slowly spilling into my stomach—that I couldn’t outrun him forever. No matter how far I ran, the werewolf would be able to catch my scent and track me down. How could I throw him off my trail?

The answer came three bounds later as I splashed into a stream. *Water! He won’t be able to track me if my scent gets washed away!*

I changed direction on a pivot and headed downstream, praying that my scent would be lost in the stream. I followed the water source for what felt like an eternity before finally leaping back onto dry land and pausing to listen. I couldn’t make out anything over the babbling rush of the stream.

Had I actually outrun that werewolf and shaken him loose? Or was he just watching me and waiting for an opportunity to attack? Toying with me, letting me think I’d escaped, just so his victory would be sweeter when he finally ripped my throat out?

I wasn’t like Xavier, or so many of the other members of my pack. I was fast, but I wasn’t as strong. I didn’t have that killer instinct, not like I did after Lilac died, but I would defend myself if I had to. I had no delusions of being able to totally fight the werewolf off. I’d seen enough to know he was huge and powerful. Outrunning him had been my best and only shot. I tried not to think about what would happen if he managed to track me.

No, I wasn’t going to die tonight. I was going to get out of this godforsaken forest, catch a plane back to Minnesota, and I was going to be reunited with my mate. I’d teach Charlie about being a werewolf and we’d figure out living arrangements and future plans along the way, and we were going to be *happy, dammit*.

I forced myself to remain perfectly still for a long, tense string of minutes. Still nothing but stream and the sounds of the forest. None of the silence that spoke of a predator in the vicinity, and certainly no movement from a gigantic werewolf. My plan must have worked.

I didn’t celebrate for long before racing off toward the road. But then I paused, hanging back just beyond the tree line. What if there were more Rogues, other werewolves who wanted to kill me? It probably wasn’t safe for me to travel alone all the way to the airport. Maybe I should get an Uber? At least then I wouldn’t be alone.

I shifted back to human, dug my clothes out of the bag strapped across my back, and quickly dressed on the side of the dark, quiet road. Then I dug through my bag for my phone—and came up empty. What happened to my phone? Had I left it by the body? Had I lost it when I’d been running for my life?

“Fuck,” I whispered. There was no way I was going back into the forest to find out. I’d just have to travel by myself and hope for the best. It was all I could do at this point.

I gripped the bottom of my T-shirt and was about to tug my clothes off again and stow them in the bag before shifting—I couldn’t afford to ruin any clothes right now, considering I hadn’t packed that much—when a pair of blinding headlights washed over me. A car was approaching, and it was slowing down as it got closer.

I slowly moved to the shoulder as the car stopped in front of me. The windows were dark, and I couldn’t see who was driving. Then the passenger side door swung open, and a deep voice called out, “Get inside.”

**Episode 752**

Oh, no. Oh, no no no no no…

I backed away from the railing, my eyes locked onto the enormous wave cresting right in front of the ferry.

The captain’s voice boomed through the loudspeakers. “Everyone, hold on!”

The boat began to lurch back and forth, along with my stomach. I groped for the nearest bit of railing and tried super hard not to vomit. *They never mentioned seasickness in* Titanic*!* *No, it was just Rose and Jack hanging for dear life while the boat tipped. There was no Rose accidentally throwing up in Jack’s mouth, or—*

*Not now, Cali!*

The boat rocked and I slid forward toward the railing. Jay grabbed onto a nearby hatch with one hand and looped his other arm around Lola to keep them both from flying off the deck and into the water. The other passengers nearby grabbed onto anything they could find. I finally hooked my arm around a bench before I could smack into the railing. My other hand wrapped tightly around my front, keeping the journal safe under my jacket.

I glanced around as the boat began to list the other way, pulling us all toward the opposite railing. Yeah, I was definitely gonna vomit all over this boat if the storm didn’t calm down soon.

Wait, where was Artemis?

Knowing her, she was probably riding the ferry like it was some kind of rogue sea beast, standing at the prow, her arms outstretched, and screaming that she was *queen of the world!* I hoped she was still with the captain. She’d be safe there, right? At least, safer than the rest of us.

And then the wave swooped down on the ferry, sending a torrent of ice-cold ocean water crashing onto the deck. “Holy mother of god!” I screamed, my teeth chattering. It was *cold!* The ferry continued to rock violently, no end to the storm in sight.

Oh god. Were we going to be swept into the sea? Was this how it was going to end? Not at the hands of a psychotic werewolf or a powerful Fae or even some ancient curse, but on a ferry outside of Vancouver in a freak storm caused by Lola and her apparently lethal curiosity?

I looked over at where Lola was clutching onto Jay with one hand, the other holding on to the spell book. “This is all your fault!” I screamed.

She couldn’t even hear me over the crashing waves.

I held tight to the journal, trying to protect it from the sea water as best as I could. I didn’t know much about preserving ancient manuscripts, but I had a feeling that Cassandra’s journal would end up as little more than wet pulp if I didn’t protect it. It might already be too late. I might have already lost the words of the only person in history who knew what I was going through.

*No!* I shook myself. No, the journal wasn’t ruined yet, and my fight wasn’t over yet either. After everything I’d been through, I wasn’t going to let everything come to an abrupt end here and now on this stupid ferry. No fucking way.

The boat rocked again, more water crashing onto the deck, and my foot slipped out from beneath me. I fell hard, even with my hand breaking free from the bench to catch my fall. Then I started sliding toward the railing.

“No, no, no!” I screeched, grasping blindly at the slick deck with one hand. I could see the ocean churning just beyond the railing, feet turning into mere inches as I careened toward my doom.

I caught one leg on the rail, trying desperately to stop myself from sliding right off the boat—

Then suddenly the ferry righted itself, the wave rolled past, and we were back on calm seas.

And I was lying on my back on the deck, soaked to the bone with frozen sea water, one leg stuck out across the railing.

“What. The. *Hell?*” I gasped out, trying to catch my breath and calm my racing heart.

It took a long string of seconds for me to pull myself up into a sitting position, and from there it took even longer for me to find my feet. My legs wobbled beneath me, threatening to buckle at any moment. I let out a long, deep breath then slowly stumbled over to the nearest bench and collapsed onto it.

*Wow, no puke. That’s a win*.

Nearby, the other passengers—the people who *weren’t* aware that the wave had been caused by Lola and her godawful judgment—laughed nervously with one another in that way that normal people did after being caught screaming bloody murder.

The captain’s voice came over the PA. “Ladies and gentlemen, apologies for the rough patch there. It came on quite suddenly, but it should be smooth sailing for the rest of the journey back to Vancouver.”

I made my way back over to Jay and Lola, just as he plucked the book out of her hands and tucked it firmly beneath his arm.

“Hey, give that back!” Lola demanded.

“You’ve lost your spell book privileges,” Jay informed her.

She crossed her arms with a huff. “I really don’t see how me reading that spell had anything to do with the freak wave.”

My jaw dropped. “Seriously, Lola? We’re hit with a freak wave not two minutes after you read some kind of weather spell, and you can’t see how the two are connected? That book is old as fuck.”

“Sometimes crazy things just happen.” She shrugged and turned to her mate. “You can trust me with the book, so just give it back, Jay!”

“One horrific incident is enough!” he snapped. I was more than a little inclined to agree.

Artemis bounded down from the bridge, her eyes alight with excitement. I noticed that, unlike the rest of us, she looked completely dry. “Wasn’t that amazing?” She grinned. “It was just like our last ferry ride.”

“Don’t remind me,” I grumbled.

“Fine!” Lola snarled. She turned and stomped off and, with a curse, Jay followed close behind her. I watched them go, shaking my head slowly. Things with Greyson and Xavier had never been worse, but I still didn’t envy Jay one bit.

“Have you found anything useful in the journal?” Artemis asked.

My cheeks heated as I recalled the passages that detailed Cassandra and Symeon’s… amorous encounter. I thought about telling the truth, and then an image of Artemis and Greyson kissing flashed through my head. “Um, I’m still reading,” I lied.

Artemis nodded. “I hope there’s something in the journal that can help you.”

I pulled the journal out of my jacket and sighed. By some miracle, it was relatively dry. “Thank god,” I breathed. “I would have hated to return a ruined book.”

Artemis cocked her head. “You’re really going to return it? To that witch?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I?”

She just shook her head and wandered over to one of the crew members. She was probably trying to learn more about the ship. More mundane magic.

I let out a sigh of relief and found a dry patch of bench. *Alone. Finally.* I set the journey on my lap, ready to pick up where I’d left off. My fingertips traced the front of the book. *How wild is it that a girl just like me once held this book and wrote all these words? Someone who knew exactly what I’m going through? If only we could talk to each other instead of me searching for answers in her journal…*

I flipped open the journal, ready to continue my research, when Jay plopped down on the seat next to me.

“Have you seen Lola?” he asked.

“I thought she was with you? Like, literally two minutes ago?” I asked, confused.

“She got mad at me for not letting her read more spells from that book—something about me not trusting her, which is absurd—and then someone asked if we were okay, and while I was trying to deal with that, she ran off.”

I glanced around. Where could Lola have run off to? The ferry was a pretty big boat, but it wasn’t *that* big. “Why don’t you check the deck, and I’ll go check the cabin?”

He nodded and headed off, and I backtracked to the entrance. I really wished Lola would stop getting so emotional. She was so volatile lately, and half the time she just acted like a spoiled child. I couldn’t help but wonder how much of her personality change was due to her shifting problem. The sooner we put that issue to bed, the better.

I stepped into the cabin, just as a cacophony of screams let loose outside. A flood of terrified passengers rushed past, pushing me further into the cabin.

“What’s going on?” I asked one of them, a harried-looking woman.

She rushed past me, too frightened to answer.

I was getting a bad feeling about this. I pushed through the crowd and headed toward the deck. A loud howl echoed through the air and someone screamed.

“Wolf!”

And there she was. Lola, in her wolf form, standing at the bow and howling into the wind.

**Episode 753**

GREYSON

“Xavier, what the hell are you talking about?”

My brother wasn’t making any sense. Not surprising, necessarily, seeing as how he looked like he’d been hit by a truck and then dragged ten miles. Still, I couldn’t remember ever seeing him like this, bloodied and bruised and screaming absolute nonsense.

His lips drew back in such a feral snarl, I was surprised he didn’t shift then and there in the foyer. “She’s not Cali!” he screamed, lurching forward. “She’s Ava!”

I was too shocked to respond. Fortunately, Joss grabbed him and pulled him back. It didn’t take much effort on her part; Xavier must have been in worse shape than he looked.

“Ava as in… your dead mate?” she asked. Her eyes shot from Xavier’s to mine, and her eyebrows lifted. I shrugged helplessly. I had no fucking clue what he was talking about either. As far as I knew, Ava was dead and buried—had been for a long time now.

And despite being the one who’d put Ava—his own mate—down, Xavier had managed to move on with Cali.

Cali, who he was now shrieking at. Cali, who Xavier looked like he was trying to murder with the force of his gaze alone. If Joss hadn’t stepped in front of him, I shuddered to imagine what kind of damage he could have done in this state.

Xavier shoved at Joss, trying to break free. “She’s lying! She’s Ava. She’s been lying for days!”

I knew better than most how prone Xavier was to explosive tempers, but this was different. This wasn’t anger or bloodlust. He was batshit crazy.

I glanced over at Cali, hoping she’d be able to bring some clarity to this shitshow. She hadn’t moved. She was pale and looked absolutely terrified. That gave me pause. Why would she be frightened of Xavier? Didn’t she love him? Didn’t she see him as her mate, or at least one of them?

With how beat up Xavier was, with how he’d been missing, how hard she’d worked to try to save him, why wasn't she rushing forward and trying to hug him? Why wasn’t she relieved that he’d found his way home after we’d been unable to free him? And why was she looking at him like a small animal caught in the gaze of a predator?

I shook myself. I didn’t want to be thinking any of these things, and there would be time for questions later. For now, we needed to put a pin in this. All of this commotion was going to upset the pack, to say nothing of Xavier barging in here looking like Carrie at the prom.

Xavier elbowed Joss hard in the gut and broke free of her hold. He lunged toward Cali, the promise of violence bright in his wild eyes. “I’m going to kill you,” he screamed. “And this time, I’ll make sure you stay down!”

I leapt for Xavier as Cali stumbled backward up the stairs. My body made contact with his and I tackled him to the floor, just inches away from Cali’s body. He fought and bucked beneath me, and I did my best to pin him down. “What the fuck is the matter with you?” I shouted. “What happened to you?”

He flipped around so he was facing me, still pinned to the floor, and I narrowly dodged his right hook.

“She—is—Ava!” He struggled beneath me. If he hadn’t already been so weak from whatever he’d been through, I knew I wouldn’t have been able to keep him pinned. “She’s working with Nolan and Silas!”

“You need to calm down.” I tried to keep my voice low and commanding without adding to his fervor. “You’re not making any sense.”

He snarled up at me. “You wouldn’t understand. Of course you don’t know the truth—you’re not Cali’s mate. I am!” He threw out a punch again, and this one hit home. I was knocked back, stars bursting in my vision.

Xavier took his chance. He slipped out from under me and leapt at Cali again. Her scream cut through the room. My head still pounding, I dove for Xavier.

I had to stop him. I couldn’t let him hurt Cali, but I didn’t want to kill him. We’d get to the bottom of this, but first Xavier needed to take a breather. I grabbed him by the shoulder as he reached for Cali, spun him around, and punched him so hard he went flying into the wall.

He slumped against the floor, out cold.

I let out a breath. “What the fuck was that about?”

Joss rushed up to me, giving me a once-over, and then looked over at Xavier. “What should we do with him?”

“Lock him in his room.” I slowly approached Cali, who was hunched against the wall eight steps up from the main floor. She still looked absolutely petrified. “Are you okay?”

She gulped, and then nodded. Her lower lip was trembling. “I-I don’t understand what’s wrong with him.”

“I’ll get to the bottom of it,” I said, forcing as much gentleness into my tone as possible. “Just go back to your room and lock the door, okay? And don’t let Xavier in, no matter what.”

“O-okay.” She nodded and scurried up the stairs, clearly terrified of being around when Xavier came to. I watched her disappear up the stairs with a frown. That was Cali—wasn’t it? Ava was dead—Xavier had made sure of that—and it wasn’t like Cali and Ava looked anything alike.

And yet… Xavier had a whole story I hadn’t heard yet. He’d obviously been through some shit, judging by the blood and bruises. And for some reason he believed that Cali was Ava, and that she was working with Nolan and Silas. He believed it so strongly that if Joss and I hadn’t been there to stop him, he could have made good on his threat and killed Cali.

I stepped outside, trying to make sense out of whatever the hell had just happened in the foyer. I looked out at the lake, running the possibilities through my mind. Obviously, Ava was dead, and I couldn’t understand how Xavier could think otherwise.

But we knew that Nolan and Silas were likely partnering up on something. Xavier going missing was proof of that. And Xavier had confirmed that theory, more or less, when he’d shown up looking like roadkill.

And then there were all the little doubts I’d been having about Cali lately. How, more and more, she just didn’t seem quite like herself.

They were based on intangible things, of course. Like how shitty I’d felt after we’d slept together. After all the time I’d spent getting to know her, wanting her, falling in love with her and with all those little quirks that made her so wonderful and infuriating and perfect, why then had sleeping with her felt so hollow? Like she was any other woman I’d brought home for a night?

And then there was my being unable to mind link with her. The way she’d actually listened to me when I’d told her to stay in the house. The confusion and panic on her face when Violet had mentioned Vancouver Island. The complete and utter fear she’d displayed when Xavier had tried to attack her. So many little instances in which she just hadn’t seemed herself, in which she hadn’t acted like the Cali I knew and loved.

But there were reasonable explanations for all of those things. Even the strange feeling I’d gotten after sex—I mean, it had been our first time together. Who knew how I’d have felt about it under different circumstances? I’d probably built it up so much in my mind over the past several weeks that I’d set myself up to fail.

The mind link problem *could* possibly be blamed on the fact that she was Fae and her magic was getting stronger. And as for her staying in the house, maybe, for once, she’d understood the danger if she got involved.

Besides, I *knew* Cali. I’d spent all that time with her in the Fae world. I should know her well enough to know when Cali was Cali, right?

And yet the doubt lingered. It had been festering for a while.

What about the Vancouver Island thing? How could I explain that one away? Maybe I could talk to Violet about it…

I headed up to her room, hoping she’d be able to shed some light on what was going on, but Violet’s room was empty. Where the hell had she gone off to?

*Great. One more thing to worry about*.

Joss walked up behind me. “I left him on his bed and locked the door from the outside. What are we going to do with him?”

I sighed and turned to face her. There was only one choice, really. “Until we figure out what’s going on, both Xavier and Cali need to be locked up with someone stationed outside each room. No one is leaving until we get to the bottom of this.”

**Episode 754**

VIOLET

I backed away from the car. It was still too dark to see inside the vehicle, and my stranger danger alarms were screaming. There was no way in hell I was about to jump into a car with a stranger in the middle of the night. Werewolf or not, this situation was exactly how girls like me ended up dead in a ditch.

“Come on, dear,” the man said, his deep voice gentle rather than reprimanding. “It’s not safe for you to be out here alone. Get in.”

*Yeah, but I’m pretty sure it’s not safe to get in your car either, creep.*

I couldn’t help but notice that he wasn’t actually *asking* me to get in his car. I didn’t know all that much about him, but I could already tell that he wasn’t in the practice of asking for things. He was telling me, commanding me like it was his right to do so and I was just some dumb girl on the side of the road who didn’t know any better. The whole situation made my hackles rise. Besides, I’d just escaped certain death. I wasn’t about to dive headfirst into a new dangerous situation.

“No, thanks,” I said, and started walking along the road.

“Wait!” He inched the car alongside me, the passenger door still wide open. “I understand that you have no reason to trust me. I get it, and you’re being very smart about this.”

I tensed. I could hear a *but* coming on…

“But do you really think you’ll be any safer out here?” he continued. “There’s no telling what kind of people or animals are out here at night.”

*Yeah, because, “I’m dangerous, but not as dangerous as whatever else is out there,” is such a convincing argument.* I continued forward. “Just ignore him, just ignore him,” I muttered to myself. The sooner this guy gave up and drove away, the sooner I could shift and be on my way to the airport.

I kept walking and the strange man kept inching his car down the road parallel to me. He was lucky no other cars had passed by. With how slow he was going, he probably would have caused a terrible car accident.

A sudden sound from the forest caught my attention, and I froze mid-step. It sounded like someone was crashing through the trees and brush—running toward me. Could the werewolf have picked up my trail after all?

As if reading my mind, the man called from his car. “I think you know exactly what’s out there. Get in now, while you can.”

I grimaced. A werewolf in the woods or a creepy guy in a car? At least, if worst came to worst, I had a better chance of overpowering a human than fighting off another werewolf. God, I hoped I wasn’t making a terrible mistake.

I turned around and rushed into the car, slamming the door behind me. I watched through the window as something darted past us in the woods, too fast to make out. I’d missed it by mere seconds.

The car pulled away from the shoulder, and I looked over at my maybe-rescuer. The driver was an older man with greying hair on the sides of his dark hair. He was so tall his head almost brushed the ceiling of the vehicle, and the light from the car’s instrument panel cast him in an eerie red glow.

I gulped and clutched my bag tightly to my chest. Maybe I had made a big mistake after all.

“Where are you heading?” the man asked, glancing over at me while he drove.

He looked kind of familiar, and my gaze narrowed on his profile as I searched through my mind, trying to place him. Had I met him before? I was pretty sure that if I’d met him before I would have recognized his scent and the deep tone of his voice. But something in his face kind of reminded me of someone, though I couldn’t pinpoint who. Maybe it was the low-key scary vibe he put off, like he didn’t tolerate people who messed around.

Or maybe he just had one of those faces.

I cleared my throat. “I’m on my way to the airport.”

He caught me looking at him and smiled. It didn’t look like a nice smile. His eyes sparkled at me, and I fought the urge to look away. He wasn’t hurting me or threatening me. He hadn’t even locked the car doors. But still, I couldn’t help the feeling that between the huge, vicious werewolf and this creepy, if polite, stranger, I’d chosen wrong.

“Lucky for you,” he mused. “I’m heading in that direction. I’d be happy to drop you off.”

“Thank you,” I managed, my throat dry.

“Call me Isaiah,” he added. “And who do I have the pleasure of driving with tonight?”

I hesitated. Weren’t you supposed to not share personal information with strangers?

He hummed a disappointed sound at my silence and his eyes returned back to the road. “You’re safe with me, you know. As long as you’re in my car, I won’t let any harm come to you.”

It was stupid. I knew it was stupid, but I believed him. Even though that voice in the back of my head was screaming *Danger!*, I still found myself reassured by Isaiah’s deep, gentle voice. There was something magnetic about him. Something that made me feel more at ease than I had any right to feel in a situation like this one.

I forced a smile to my lips. “I’m Violet.”

He smiled back at me, a reward for my compliance. It didn’t seem like such a strange, off-putting smile anymore. “And what are you doing out here by yourself in the middle of the night, Violet? Hitchhiking?”

Oh, right. I didn’t have a cover story. I thought fast. “My friend’s car I was driving broke down, so I decided to walk the rest of the way.” As I said it, I realized how dumb and nonsensical it sounded, but it wasn’t like I was going to admit to being chased by a werewolf after stumbling across a dead body.

To my immense relief, Isaiah didn’t question my sad excuse for an explanation. “Where are you from?”

“Oh, around here,” I said vaguely.

He nodded. “I’m from around here too. I love this area, but there’s been a lot of trouble around here lately, hasn’t there? People say there has been an increase in animal attacks.” He let that sink in for a moment, though I wasn’t sure why. Did he suspect something about me? Or was he just trying to drive home his point? Did he even want me to reply? “You should be careful,” he finally added. “It was a good thing I came along, wasn’t it?”

“Um, yeah. Thanks.”

He glanced at me with a bemused smile. “Some people even say there are werewolves around these parts. Can you imagine that?”

I stifled a laugh. If he only knew. *I wonder how he’d respond if I shifted right here and now in front of him. It would probably give him a heart attack*. But I wouldn’t do that to him. First, there was the whole, “humans can’t ever find out the truth about us,” rule. And, despite my reservations and the generally weird energy he put off, I wouldn’t risk exposing werewolves.

I’d been so worried about my own safety since getting in his car, but I hadn’t really thought about the fact that I could just as easily present a danger to him. He hadn’t known anything about me when he’d picked me up. *I* could have been a scary murderer, but he’d still stopped to help me out.

I laughed. “I’ve heard there are ghosts and gremlins too.”

His eyes lingered on me for a moment, but he didn’t laugh at my joke. Instead, he nodded solemnly. “I’ve heard that too. Why are you headed to the airport? Are you visiting family?”

I blinked at the sudden subject change. “Oh, I have some friends in the Midwest.”

He nodded again, his eyes back on the road. “Forgive me for prying. You just seem a little young to be traveling alone at night. I imagine your family must be very worried about you.”

*Joke’s on you. I don’t have a family—not a “normal” one, at least.* But the answer stilled on the tip of my tongue, and unease spread through me. I really was alone, wasn’t I? I shook my head. “I’m almost an adult. I can do what I want.”

Isaiah laughed as he took the exit for the airport. “I shouldn’t be so nosy, but it’s not often that I get to talk to people your age.”

“It’s no problem.” Maybe he was right. I was kind of lucky that he’d come along—that, out of all the drivers willing to pick up a girl on the side of the road at night, I’d gotten someone easygoing and kind instead of a total creep.

Nope, wrong, Violet. That kind of thinking was how I was going to end up murdered. I just needed to make it to the airport.

He pulled up to the drop-off area, and I turned to face him. “Thank you for the ride.”

He looked at me, his eyes illuminated by the red lights. “Wait.”

I froze as he reached toward me.

**Episode 755**

Lola was in her wolf form. On the passenger-filled ferry back to Vancouver. Standing at the bow and howling into the wind like some kind of werewolf DiCaprio in a paranormal *Titanic* remake.

“What the fuck?” I gasped.

And then I yelped as more passengers shoved me aside in their haste to get away. I smacked hard into the wall and almost crumpled to the floor. *Nope, gotta stay upright. Don’t get trampled. Get up, Cali!*

I found my feet and raced toward Lola. *This is bad, even for her. What could she possibly be thinking? “Oh, the air feels so nice, I think I’m just gonna let my fur down”—*

“Cali!” Jay called to me, coming from the stern of the ship. He was beelining his way over to Lola, ready to grab her and pull her down. Then I noticed a young guy holding up his phone, recording the whole thing. He was one of the few people staying on deck to watch the Lola show.

“Fuck, Lola,” I groaned. “She is so going to owe me after this.”

We couldn’t risk this shitshow getting out, assuming it hadn’t gone viral already. I raced over to the guy and “accidentally” slammed into him. His phone slipped out of his hand and went tumbling over the railing.

“Oh my god!” I cried. “I’m so sorry.” I kept going, not bothering to listen to him cursing at me as I scrambled away.

By the time I made it to the bow, Jay had Lola by the scruff. “Stop it!” he screamed, clearly not in the mood to play the werewolf Rose to her werewolf Jack. “Shift back and knock this shit off!”

I’d never heard him speak to her like that, but if there was ever a time to lose your shit on your mate, it was when she’d shifted in front of tens—if not hundreds—of human witnesses, not for the first time. Honestly, I was ready to lose my shit at her too. I loved Lola like the sister I’d never had—at least before Artemis had come along—but I was so, SO tired of cleaning up her shifting messes. She wasn’t the only one here with problems! And if she could shift back and stop acting like a child for five seconds, I would have been all too happy to give her a much-needed heart to heart about this whole mess.

Lola, however, didn’t seem even a little bit interested in shifting back. Instead, she nipped Jay on the arm and broke away from his grip. She leapt into a lifeboat attached to the side of the ship and glowered at us, just daring us to join her in the tiny, probably unstable little boat that was most certainly not weight-rated for werewolves.

Artemis rushed over. “What’s going on over here?”

“What does it look like?” I snapped. “Lola’s lost her damn mind.”

Lola snarled and let out a low howl, eyeing us as we cornered her in the boat.

“Lola, please!” Jay cried. “We need to get you somewhere safe to shift back.”

My gaze snapped over to the worry etched into his face. “Wait, can she not shift back on her own?” Since when was *that* a thing? Had the spell book done something to her? And, if that were the case, where on this not-so-giant boat that was full of people would be considered “safe” enough for Lola to shift back without being caught?

I glanced around for a spot with a bit more privacy—and froze. All the passengers that had stayed on deck were watching us now, and a few brave souls had ventured back up after running for their lives. The crowd was growing, and all eyes were on us. “Shit,” I muttered, spinning back around. What were we going to do? I thought fast.

“Jay, I need you to lure Lola away so all these people won’t see her shift back. If you can get to the other side of the bridge, there’s a little alcove near the stairwell,” I said.

“Okay.” Jay nodded and turned his focus back to his mate. “Come on, Lola. We’re going to get you somewhere safe.”

Lola didn’t budge.

“Move your ass!” I hissed, reaching out and shoving her. To my immediate relief, it worked. Jay grabbed Lola by the scruff and pulled her toward the bridge. Hopefully they’d be able to dodge the other passengers long enough for Lola to shift back.

I turned back to Artemis. “What do we do about them?” I nodded my head at the passengers clustered around, some of them watching us with open curiosity, some looking lost and terrified, and some even watching Jay drag Lola away. How the hell were we going to get away with this?

Xavier and Greyson didn’t agree on all that much, but they had both always emphasized that regular humans couldn’t ever know about werewolves. That kind of knowledge was powerful, and it would put everyone—human and supernatural alike—in danger if word got out.

Artemis glanced around thoughtfully and then turned back to me. “There’s only one thing we can do: make them forget all about this.”

I blinked. Obviously that would be great, but it wasn’t really an option… Was it? “How are we supposed to do that?” I asked.

She gave me a pointed look. “My Fae magic.”

“Oh. But, wait, you’re going to do that to the entire ferry? Is that even possible?” And did we even want to risk what could happen if Artemis truly was that powerful, but things still went terribly wrong? Like, what if the captain forgot how to pilot the ferry and crashed it?

“I think it is,” she answered. “Possible, that is. I’m not going to erase their memories. I’m going to use mind control to tell them that what they saw never really happened.”

Yeah, that still sounded like an awful plan. Artemis had only just learned she had this power, and she’d hardly used it. I opened my mouth to argue, but she was already racing away, toward the bridge.

“Artemis, no!” I called, chasing after her. She was making her way to the captain’s area—the loudspeaker. Of course!

“Let me in,” Artemis snapped at the crew, and they stepped aside. Clearly, her powers were running the show. She grabbed the comm for the loudspeaker, took a deep breath, and began to talk into it.

“Hello, passengers. Apologies for the inconvenience. You’ve just seen a rather large bird land on the deck, but there’s no cause for alarm,” Artemis explained, weaving her power into every word. “The bird has flown away now, and the rest of our journey will be smooth and uneventful.”

I watched out the window as the passengers all glanced around, looking kind of confused, and then totally at ease once more. And then I watched Artemis set down the comm with a big grin. “What did I tell you? Problem solved.”

*Oh my god. She did that without even thinking twice. She really is scary powerful, isn’t she? And dangerous, in the wrong hands. Mom was right.*

But nobody was going after Jay and Lola. It really had worked.

I headed down to the deck to find Jay and Lola. Lola was back in her human form, thank god, and wrapped up in Jay’s coat.

“Can you find us some clothes?” Jay asked.

“Sure.” Artemis nodded. I hadn’t even heard her following me back down from the bridge. “I can probably talk one of the crew into lending me something.”

I clutched Cassandra’s journal. I couldn’t wait to get off this godforsaken boat before something else went wrong.

\*\*\*

A few hours later, Lola, Jay, Artemis, and I were finally in a rented car, heading from the airport to the pack house. I was exhausted in every possible way, and I knew I wasn’t alone. It was unbelievable that a trip to a library could be so challenging. Artemis had pulled her hood up and was dozing against the headrest. Lola had been quiet since she’d shifted back from her wolf form on the ferry, but I had a feeling she’d be out cold soon too.

I stayed awake out of solidarity for Jay, and also because my stomach was twisting tighter and tighter the closer we got to the pack house. I wanted to read more from Cassandra’s journal, to learn more about her experience as a *due destini* mate, but reading in the car always made me sick.

So all I could do was stare out the window and obsess about seeing Greyson and Xavier again after so long. Things were… utterly awful between us right now. Greyson wasn’t speaking to me. I’d told Xavier I needed space. And now I was dying from some curse… I blinked rapidly as tears burned my eyes.

Xavier and Greyson were my mates. They were the reason I’d set out on this journey to begin with. To find some answers. But, just like Cassandra, I wasn’t any closer to being able to choose between them, even though *not* choosing was how I’d ended up cursed and slowly dying in the first place, and with each mile that brought us closer to the house, I felt that noose tightening around my neck.

How was I going to explain any of this to them? That I had to choose one of them before Halloween or it might be too late—not just for me, but for all of us?

My fingers traced the edges of the journal. If I couldn’t read it, at least I could try to draw some strength from its pages. Maybe I’d be able to find some direction in Cassandra’s story—hopefully something that didn’t involve pulling my own heart out.

The car suddenly came to a stop, and I blinked, looking around. I didn’t recognize the house in front of me. Had we arrived already? Was this the new pack house?

Jay and Lola got out of the car, and I reached for the handle on the door and froze. I couldn’t bring myself to open it. Suddenly, all the torment Cassandra had faced echoed through my mind. How would Greyson and Xavier react to seeing me again? How will I feel when *I* saw them again?

Would I ever be able to choose?

Did I want to?

**Episode 756**

XAVIER

It felt like I’d been hit by a semi.

I slowly blinked my eyes open, and found myself back in my bedroom. My skin felt itchy and tight. I glanced down with a groan, even that small movement costing me. I was naked and there was… dried blood all over me. What the hell?

I was back in my bedroom, I realized. How had I gotten here? I glanced over at the window. It was dark outside, though I had no idea what time of night it was. I rolled over onto my side, wincing at the ache in my muscles. And then I realized the shower was running in my bathroom.

Who was in there? I slipped off my mattress and approached the bathroom, listening carefully. Whoever it was, I couldn’t hear them over the sound of the shower running. Slowly and cautiously, I opened the door.

Steam wrapped around me the moment I stepped into the bathroom, and it was difficult to make out the person in the shower. I batted the steam away and quietly approached the shower stall. As I got closer, I could just barely make out the silhouette of a woman beyond the shower door. I knew that silhouette—it was Cali. I knew it like I knew my own shadow. I could sense her, smell her. My mate.

I pressed my hand against the glass. “Cali.”

She didn’t respond, and I slowly dragged the shower door open. Her back faced me as she rinsed her hair. I paused, mesmerized by her smooth skin and the sight of the water trailing over her curves. I silently stepped into the shower and reached out, tentatively running a finger along her tiger stripes.

Cali paused and turned around. “Xavier?”

My hands slid down her sides as she turned to face me, finding a home on her hips. I pulled her into me, her wet breasts pressing against my chest, and pressed her against the shower wall.

She sighed and leaned in to kiss me. “I missed you so much.”

I drank her in with a low groan. This was everything I’d been missing—my mate pressed against me, the taste of her mouth on my tongue, her scent clinging to me. My hands slid up, over her curves, and gently cupped her breasts.

She pressed against me and I pulled away from her mouth, letting my lips travel down the hot column of her neck, nipping and sucking at her skin as I went. She let out a little gasp, and the sound went straight to my cock.

I thumbed at her nipples till they hardened and she was grinding against my thigh, desperate for release. One hand slid up her back and to the nape of her neck, fisting her hair and holding her in place while the other hand skimmed down and reached for her folds. She was hot and swollen and wet for me—and not with water.

It was all too easy to slip two fingers inside her, curling them just like I knew she loved and thumbing at her swollen clit.

“Who do you belong to?” I rasped in her ear while I slowly fucked her with my fingers.

“Y-you,” she moaned. Her hips moved in time with my hand, driving her closer and closer to release. “I belong to you, Xavier.”

I kissed her deeply, my hand curled tight in her hair as I devoured her. My other hand fingered her faster, my fingers curling and my wrist twisting just so.

She was going to come soon. I could tell. I could feel her slick muscles coiling tight around my fingers, could taste the desperation on her tongue as she moaned and whined and undulated against me.

I pressed my thumb against her clit just a little harder, giving her the pressure she needed, and she came around my fingers on a broken cry. She was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen, flushed cheeks, shining eyes, swollen lips…

“You’re so goddamn perfect,” I breathed.

She grinned up at me. “Just you wait.”

And then she dropped to her knees and, bracing herself with one hand on my thigh, her hot mouth—

I jolted awake, Cali’s name still on my lips.

I was back in my bedroom at the new pack house. Naked and covered in dried blood. My body ached, especially my wrists, but it didn’t compare to the throbbing pain in my jaw. What the…

Greyson.

He’d punched me in the jaw. He’d been trying to stop me from going after Ava. Ava, who was still wandering around the pack house, wearing Cali’s face. Fury coursed through me, and I sat upright with a snarl.

*That dead bitch. She planned all of this.*

And of course Greyson hadn’t believed a single thing I’d said. Of course he’d completely blown me off. For the first time in maybe ever, I didn’t blame him for not having my back. Why would he believe me when I’d come in beaten and bloodied, yelling about how Cali was actually my dead mate? If I hadn’t seen irrefutable proof myself, I probably wouldn’t have believed it either.

Besides, Greyson didn’t know Cali. Not like I did. He probably hadn’t even noticed all the little behaviors that proved Ava was in that body.

So where was the real Cali? *My* Cali. Was she in danger while I just sat here in my room doing nothing? Ava had said that Cali was fine, but I knew better than to trust the words of a dead woman. She clearly had nothing to gain by being honest with me.

I needed to make everyone see the truth. That Ava was walking around with Cali’s face.

But how could I convince the rest of the pack that she was Ava? She looked like Cali, sounded like Cali, and even smelled like her. On the surface, I wouldn’t blame everyone for thinking I was crazy. If I were in their shoes and heard everything I’d said when I’d finally escaped Nolan and made it back to the pack house, I would have assumed insanity too.

And if even if I somehow was able to convince the rest of the pack, Ava probably still had some tricks up her sleeve. There was no telling what kind of shit she might pull if she felt I was actually in danger of turning the pack against her.

I remembered how she’d looked earlier—like some small, terrified prey animal staring down a predator. God, I wanted nothing more than to be that predator, to rip her throat out all over again. This time I would enjoy it.

I stood up and began to pace around my bed, feeling more and more like a trapped animal with every passing moment.

Ava herself had admitted the truth to me. And now that I knew she wasn’t Cali, when I looked at her, Ava was all I could see. Plus, I’d seen her wolf. She was *alive*, somehow. It had to be my father and that damn orb.

If the pack didn’t believe me, that didn’t matter. I still had to stop Ava. I had to find out what had happened to the real Cali, if Ava had hurt her—

I blew out a long slow breath. *Don’t lose control now, Xavier*. *Think.*

I turned to the door. I wasn’t going to find anything out by staying in this bedroom. I turned the handle, but it wouldn’t budge. The door was locked.

I rolled my eyes. *As if that can really stop me*.

The situation wasn’t ideal, but I still had options. I could try to break the door down, but that would only draw attention. Knowing Greyson, he probably had someone watching my door, just waiting for me to demand to be let out.

It was what I would have done if I’d been in Greyson’s position. I sniffed at the door frame. There were at least two wolves stationed outside my door. Two was a piece of a cake. Greyson should have known better. I took a breath and stepped back, ready to tear the door off its hinges, when I heard a car door open and shut outside.

I rushed over to the window. There was a car parked in front of the house. Who was stopping by?

And then I saw her. Cali—no, it was Ava. Was she trying to run away?

Then I spotted Jay and Lola in the car. They were back? Since when? Were Jay and Lola trying to help Ava?

*They must not know the truth yet*. My lips pulled back into a snarl, and that blinding fury raced through me again. I couldn’t let Ava get away with tricking anyone any longer. And she sure as shit wasn’t getting away. Not this time. There was far too much at stake.

My anger erupted, and I shifted and crashed through the bedroom window to the ground floor below.

**Episode 757**

My fingers were wrapped around the handle on the car door, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to push the door open. How was I going I face Greyson and Xavier again after so long?

*It’s okay, Cali. First things first. Just get out of the car. You can figure out the rest after that*.

I could do this. I’d done so much crazy, scary shit. Opening a door and getting out of this car was nothing. I’d just put one foot in front of the other until I reached Xavier and Greyson, and then I’d tell them about the curse and whatever happened after that, I’d deal with it. I wasn’t here to choose a side, necessarily. Just to inform them that if I *didn’t* choose a side by Halloween, we’d probably all die. No big deal.

I took a deep breath and slowly pushed the door open. I was about to get out of the car when the sound of shattered glass cut through the air. I looked up, watching in confusion as Xavier’s wolf leapt from the upstairs window.

My eyes widened. That seemed… odd. The house did have stairs, right? Maybe he was just so excited to see me that he’d shifted?

The second Xavier hit the ground, he was sprinting toward me. For a split second, a small bubble of happiness welled up in my chest. He *was* excited to see me. Even after everything, he still wanted me—

And then I saw the look in his eyes. I’d seen it several times before, but never directed at me. It was a look that promised violence.

Xavier wasn’t coming to greet me. He was about to attack me.

I slammed the car door shut and locked it just seconds before his body made impact with the door, making the whole car rock on its wheels. I screamed and grabbed onto the steering wheel for dear life.

What was happening? Why was he trying to *hurt* me?

Xavier howled and snarled and scratched at the door, trying to break through. His eyes fixed on me, and a chill ran down my spine. He hated me. Utterly and completely.

It didn’t matter that Xavier was my mate. That he’d told me countless times how much he loved me. That look was pure, unadulterated hatred. It filled me with so much horror that I forgot to be afraid, and panic flooded in.

*How can he look at me like that? How could he try to attack me? Have I already lost him?* The questions spun on endlessly in my mind. I didn’t have an answer for any of them. All I knew for sure was that if that door hadn’t been blocking his way, Xavier would have already killed me.

A broken laugh crawled up my throat as I watched cracks spiderweb their way across the glass, a result of Xavier’s new strategy of throwing his full body weight at the car in an attempt to shatter my shield. Was this how the *due destini* would play out? Had I waited too long to make a decision? Were we all going to end our lives, like Cassandra and her two mates?

And then, with one final slam, the window shattered, spraying bits of broken glass all around me.

Xavier lunged for me, his teeth bared, and I cowered. Fear blocked out everything else, froze me in place, made me forget that I could fight back, that I had Fae magic at my disposal, maybe enough to hold my own against a pissed off werewolf.

Suddenly Jay’s arms looped around Xavier, pulling him back through the broken window. Xavier’s jaws snapped shut mere inches from my face, and his hot breath washed over me for a split second before Jay managed to yank him back out of the car. Lola was there with him, helping to pull Xavier back, and then Artemis jumped in too and it wasn’t long before she grabbed a garden hose and had it coiled tight around Xavier’s neck like her whip.

I was frozen, watching passively as my friends banded together in a desperate attempt to keep my mate from murdering me.

Still Xavier snarled, lunging for me again and again. I shook my head and let out a small, terrified sob.

Was I dreaming? Was this just some terrible nightmare fueled by my anxiety?

I wished it were.

But Xavier’s growls were too real, and his body crashing against the car had been too violent. There was still glass in my hair and on my clothes. This was no dream.

As Jay and the others continued to fight to restrain Xavier, the pack rushed out of the house, screaming at Xavier to stop attacking. They joined in on Jay, Lola, and Artemis’s efforts, and soon Xavier was fully subdued.

I still hadn’t moved a muscle.

Warm, gentle hands wrapped around my shoulders, and I flinched back. But it was only Artemis. She slowly pulled me out of the wrecked car, carefully brushing the bits of glass from my clothes and out of my hair. For a split second, I lurched back toward the car, the closest thing I had to safety, but Artemis pulled me into a hug and held me tight.

“I won’t let him touch you,” she promised.

I stared over her shoulder at Xavier. He was being held down by several pack members, struggling against them, but his eyes never left mine. They still promised blood and pain, and I felt hot tears sliding down my cheeks.

Then someone crossed in front of Xavier and blocked my view. Greyson. My other mate. Was he here to protect me?

We locked eyes for a moment. His expression was completely unreadable, but he didn’t seem interested in comforting me.

Artemis shifted to put her arm around me and lead me away from the car, toward Greyson. “Are you okay?” she asked me.

I tore my eyes away from Greyson to my sister. I didn’t realize my teeth were chattering until I tried to speak. “W-what d-did I d-do?”

I just didn’t understand why Xavier would attack me like this. Sure, we hadn’t been on the best of terms lately, but to attack me? I felt so lost, and Greyson’s cold welcome wasn’t helping.

“Why the fuck wasn’t anyone watching him?” Greyson snapped.

His voice sent chills down my spine, and it took me a moment to realize he wasn’t speaking to me. He’d barely acknowledged my presence.

“How did he even get this far?” Greyson continued.

Two pack members babbled about being posted outside Xavier’s room and how quiet he’d been before busting through the window.

Greyson held up a hand. “I don’t want to hear any more.”

What was going on here? What had happened while I’d been gone? None of this made sense. Xavier was a member of their pack. They were supposed to be working together to defeat Silas.

I took a tentative step toward him. Maybe if I talked to him, calmed him down, I could find out what was wrong—

That tiny step set him off again, and he snarled and growled and fought against his captors with fresh purpose.

Greyson stepped in front of me again. “Don’t get any closer.”

I lifted my gaze to his. I couldn’t place his tone or the look in his eyes. Was he… unhappy to see me?

“Why did you leave your room?” he demanded.

I blinked. What was he talking about? “I d—”

He cut me off. “I told you not to leave, Cali.”

I thought I heard a pleading note in his voice, but it just confused me more. I shook my head. “I don’t understand what’s going on. I just got here.”

Confusion flashed across his face. “What? This isn't the time for games.”

“What games?” My voice broke, and a fresh wave of tears filled my eyes. I looked from Greyson to Xavier, who was still a snarling, furious wolf. They were both watching me with the same fury, and I didn’t understand what I’d done to deserve it.

My breath hitched, and I tried like hell to keep the tears from running down my face. “What happened while I was away?” I asked.

Greyson scoffed. “What do you mean, while you were away?”

I shook my head. Why was he asking me that? He knew I’d been gone. Did he… Did he not believe me? Had the whole world gone mad?

“Greyson,” I tried again. “I’ve been in Minnesota this entire time—well, until we went to Vancouver Island. If this is because I haven’t contacted you, I only did that because you told me not to.”

“We just got back from Vancouver Island,” Lola added, looking at Greyson like he’d lost his mind. “What’s going on here?”

“Everyone stop talking!” Greyson snapped, holding his hands up.

This, for some reason, was my breaking point. I couldn’t just stand there and let him bully me—not without finding out what the hell was going on. “What’s wrong with Xavier?” I demanded. “What’s going on, Greyson?”

Greyson rounded on me so fast, I had to take a step back to avoid being bowled over. “Why are you lying?” he snapped. “We both know you’ve been here.”

I couldn’t breathe. There wasn’t enough air in the world to keep my lungs working when Greyson was looking at me like that, especially after Xavier had just tried to kill me. I tried to swallow, tried to breathe, tried to understand how I could possibly have been in two places at once—

A movement beyond Greyson’s shoulder caught my eye, and all the air slipped out of my lungs as I saw my own face staring back at me from the front door.

**Episode 758**

VIOLET

After my strange ride to the airport, the rest of my journey to Minnesota passed without incident. It was easy to buy a ticket for the next flight out, and there were plenty of things to keep me occupied in the airport while I waited for my flight. The last time I’d left the airport for Minnesota, I’d had Artemis with me and babysitting her had been a full-time job. It was nice to relax a bit and regroup before landing in Duluth.

Of course, once I did arrive in Duluth and made my way out of the airport, I started to regret rushing off without any kind of plan. I’d arrived in Minnesota, but I didn’t know where to go or how to get in contact with Charlie since I didn’t have my phone anymore. All I had was my backpack containing some clothes, toiletries, and my wallet.

After some brainstorming, I realized my best chance at finding Charlie was to head to his dorm. I hired one of the cabs waiting outside the airport and headed to the university. On the cab ride over, I couldn’t help but think of my last driver: Isaiah.

I’d been so freaked out when he’d reached for me in the car at the airport. All kinds of terrifying possibilities had passed through my mind: him driving off with me and kidnapping me, or hurting me somehow, or even simply refusing to let me out of his car.

But all he’d done was help me open the door, explaining that the handle stuck sometimes. He wasn’t someone to fear, and if the fact that he’d picked me up in the middle of the night and given me a ride to the airport didn’t prove that, then the kind and gentle way he’d opened the door for me and told me to stay safe did.

So why did I still feel so unsettled just thinking about that interaction? Even now, with several states between Isaiah and myself, the memory of last night had my wolf snarling and my instincts screaming at me like I’d recklessly put myself in danger or something.

It couldn’t be Isaiah’s fault. He was a man in the wrong place and wrong time, despite the creeper vibes. I must have felt that way because of the dead body, being chased by a werewolf in the dead of night, all the unresolved worry I still had about Charlie—you know, basically everything else about my life.

I paid the driver, got out of the cab, and managed to make my way to Charlie’s dorm room, only to find he wasn’t in.

*Now what?*

Should I wait around and hope he came back to his dorm soon? Or, wait. Could I pick up his scent? I circled around to the back of the building and within seconds I felt that rush I always got when I smelled him. Desire and affection and delicious anticipation at the thought of seeing my mate again.

I shifted and ran through the woods, following his scent. Every step closer to my mate made my heart pound with excitement.

Finally, we were going to be reunited.

We were going to be together, and this time I wasn’t going to let anything tear us apart.

The scent trail led me to the cliff we’d run to, the first night we’d gone out together as wolves. And there he was.

Charlie was sitting on the edge of the cliff, staring out at the stretch of land below. I paused to watch him, to drink him in before he realized I’d joined him. He was so handsome, so perfect, so *mine*.

He seemed lost in thought though, barely aware of his surroundings, and I sensed a sadness about him. His broad shoulders were slumped and curled forward, like he was bracing himself for something terrible. My heart ached to see him like that.

What could have caused him to look that way? Was it just the shock of being turned into a werewolf against his will? Was he mourning his old life, and all the possibilities he’d lost? I wanted to remind him of everything he’d gained by becoming a werewolf—like me, his mate—but I also knew that this couldn’t be easy, and it wasn’t fair to just assume he wouldn’t mourn his old life.

But I was certain that with time and patience and love, Charlie would come to understand how much joy was still available to him. He could still lead a full, happy life. With me.

I shifted back into my human form and stepped out of the woods. “Charlie,” I called softly as I approached.

He jolted upright and spun around. His eyes were wide as he looked up and down my naked form. I thought I saw some of his sadness lift as he took me in, and I smiled. *It’s okay, Charlie. Your mate is here now.*

His eyes finally lifted to my face and he let out a ragged breath. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too.” And I was. Despite the weird, scary journey, there was nowhere else I’d rather be than with my mate. I quickly dressed, all too aware of how he was watching me, and then sat down beside him. He reached for my hand, his fingers lacing with mine, and I let out a small gasp. What was going on? He never initiated contact like this. Was he finally ready to acknowledge our connection? Admittedly, I hadn’t exactly gone about it the best way when I’d told him we were mates, and I couldn’t totally blame him for his own poor reaction (though I’d be lying if I said I didn’t blame him a little). But after how poorly things had gone before, I’d thought for sure he’d want to keep his distance from me, not hold my hand.

“Ever since you left, I’ve just been so confused,” he began, his voice rough.

“What are you confused about?” I asked.

“Being a wolf, my life, my studies, my girlfriend…” He tore his eyes away from the skyline and looked at me. “You.”

Outwardly, I tried to remain calm and friendly, but inside I was popping party confetti and blowing through a kazoo. Yes! My mate had as good as admitted that he felt something for me! I squeezed his hand gently, all too eager to ask him more about his confusion where I was concerned, but he let go of my hand and picked up a bottle sitting on the ground next to him. He took a long drink and then offered it to me.

The strong, acrid scent hit my nose and I grimaced. I wasn’t exactly an experienced drinker, but I’d been around alcohol enough to know he wasn’t drinking beer. I didn’t want any of it. “What is it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Don’t know, don’t care. It helps, and that’s all that matters.”

My internal celebrations came to an abrupt halt. Maybe things were worse than I’d thought. “Charlie, why are you drinking out here by yourself?”

“It’s all I can do,” he said, as if that actually explained anything.

“I don’t understand.”

He sighed and then took another drink. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “When I get overwhelmed, I try to drown it all out. And since I’ve pretty much been nothing but overwhelmed ever since that wolf bit me, I’m drowning things out a lot. And then after you left, it got worse.” He let out a shaky breath. “It’s gotten bad, Violet.”

I braced myself. “How bad?”

He was quiet for a while before he finally answered. “I black out sometimes. And it terrifies me. I’ve never been much of a partier, but ever since I was attacked… Drinking is the only thing I can do to make all the crazy thoughts stop. But now I don't know what to do, Violet. My drinking has gotten worse. Maybe even dangerous.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “What happened?”

His eyes were brimming with tears, and his voice shook. “Things got out of hand. I’ve gone too far. I’m scared.”

I blew out a breath, trying to find some patience when all I wanted to do was grab him and shake him until some answers fell out. He was terrifying me with all this build-up, but more than that, it was killing me to see him like this. And I couldn’t help him until he told me what was wrong. “Did something happen?”

He nodded. “I… I drank again last night. A lot. And then I blacked out. When I woke up, I was in the woods.”

Relief rushed through me. This wasn’t so dangerous. This, I could handle. “Oh, well that’s all right. Werewolves often turn to the woods for comfort—”

He cut me off. “This was different. I was covered in blood. At first I thought I’d been hurt somehow, but there wasn't a scratch on me.” He squeezed my hand, his voice trembling. “Violet, I think I killed someone.”

**Episode 759**

I blinked up at… myself, feeling totally dumbstruck. Speechless. Shocked. Confused.

This was totally surreal.

Was I dreaming? Sure, I’d had weird dreams before. But *this?*

An evil twin? Xavier attacking me to the point where the whole pack had needed to restrain him? Greyson looking at me like he didn’t know what to believe? Like he couldn’t believe *me.*

My eyes darted around, clocking everyone else’s reactions. They were all pretty much the same. Everyone was slack-jawed and staring at me and the Other Me. Their eyes darted back and forth between us like we were playing tennis. Except we weren’t doing anything. We were just staring at each other.

I looked at Other Me and thought about the shadowy Cali I’d confronted in the library. Had she followed me here, somehow? Had she slipped past Hypatia and the gargoyles and managed to travel all the way here from Vancouver Island? That seemed unlikely.

Was she starting another fight in an attempt to gain power from it? Would she be towering over all of us soon, twice her size and ready to smash us to bits?

Was this because we’d stolen the books? Was this Hypatia’s revenge? If so, it seemed pretty extreme. Didn’t most libraries just fine you or something like that? I supposed most libraries weren’t weird, complicated mazes in graveyards run by witches who were real sticklers for the rules. Witches who had never lost a book and were looking to keep that record intact.

Xavier’s low growl drew me back to the present. He was staring at the other Cali, his lips pulled back to reveal his shiny white fangs. I swallowed roughly. I knew that the person he was looking at wasn’t me. But just seeing his wolf look at me with so much hatred… The violence of it hurt me. It was like being in a dream and witnessing my worst nightmare from outside my own body.

What if I couldn’t convince everyone that I was the real Cali? Would Xavier actually hurt me?

Almost like he’d heard me, Xavier attempted a lunge toward Other Me, fighting against everyone who was holding him down. He managed to rear up on his hind legs. He snarled as he struggled against our friends. He really wanted to hurt her.

Greyson held up a hand and everyone let him go. But Xavier stayed where he was—hackles raised, but not tearing anyone to shreds. I felt the faintest sense of relief. I wouldn’t have to see what it would look like if Xavier killed me in cold blood.

But my relief was short-lived.

I looked at my doppelgänger and studied her face. She was my exact double—her face, her eyes, even her hair. She even had that same stubborn cowlick in the back that never quite cooperated. Down to the freckle, she was… me.

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice coming out in a shaky squeak.

“I’m Cali,” she responded, crossing her arms over her chest, her expression combative. “Who are *you?*”

Had I lost my mind? I was having a conversation with myself.

But it wasn’t myself. *I* was myself! This bitch was someone else. Or some*thing* else.

Fear and annoyance mingled inside me as I stared at her. This clone had tried to steal my place in the Redwood pack. My makeshift family. The group of friends I’d risked my life to get in with. She’d stolen all my hard work, my sacrifice. And they had actually fallen for it. Was I that easy to imitate? Or did they just not care that much?

But, right there next to the petulant child in me who wanted to scream *“Can’t you see she’s copying me?”* was a bone-chilling kind of fear. Someone had to have wanted to do this to me. To them. Whatever their endgame was, whoever was actually the mastermind behind this… It couldn’t be good.

“No.” I shook my head, feeling crazy. “You’re not Cali. *I’m Cali*.”

“Do you have any proof?” the other girl spat at me. “Because I’ve been here the whole time. So who’s to say you’re not the fake?”

I stepped toward her, anger starting to take over. I was going to expose this bitch. How dared this person—this *thing*—try to take my life? And for what? What could she possibly want that I had?

“You guys can all see she’s an imposter, right?” I looked at the pack. “I wouldn’t wear my hair like that. With a little pouf? And with that bracelet? It’s *so* late two-thousands! You guys know I would never, right?”

Joss stepped forward, her eyes narrowing as she looked at me. I winced under her scrutiny. Joss wasn’t exactly my greatest ally, but she was smart enough to hear us both out first. Right?

But instead of speaking to me, she addressed Greyson.

“How are we supposed to know which one is the real Cali?”

I puffed my chest out, trying not to be offended. From their perspective, we were identical. Maybe this girl had studied me and had pulled off a pretty credible impression. It had to be a lot to have this dropped on them. But it was a lot for me, too.

“Who are you?” I asked the other Cali. “Really.”

“For the last time,” she ground out through gritted teeth, starting to get angry. “I’m Caliana Hart. Greyson, don’t you know that?”

I wondered if I sounded that whiny when I talked to him. She had her brows knit together and was doing full puppy-dog eyes at him. It kind of made me want to be sick. This couldn’t work on him, right?

Greyson looked at her. Then at me. Then back again. I could see the pain in his eyes. The tensing of his jaw. He was hurting. Like he knew it shouldn’t have been this difficult to find the real me. Like he felt foolish. And that wasn’t a way Greyson liked feeling.

“I—” He started speaking but cut himself off. It was clear he didn’t know what to say. And how could I blame him?

I could feel everyone’s eyes on the three of us. On the Alpha and the two Calis. But how could I convince them I was the right Cali? I looked at my pack. They were all wearing similar expressions of shock and disbelief, all searching for some information that might tip the scales.

Other Cali bit her lip and stared down at her shoes. Her shoulders were hunched in and even I felt bad for her for a second before I remembered she was a *lying bitch who had tried to STEAL MY IDENTITY.*

“Greyson,” she murmured, looking up at him, her eyes shining with tears. “After all our time together, do you really think I’m not who I say I am?”

After all their *what?* I suddenly felt jealousy pulse through me. What exactly had they been through together since this girl had taken my identity? Had they… Was this why I was in so much pain? Had something happened between the two of them to mess with our connection?

I felt even worse when I watched his expression harden into the mask he used when he didn’t want to talk. When he just wanted to be an Alpha. Whatever had happened, it made him feel vulnerable.

And that made me feel sick. Because I could sense it was something I wouldn’t enjoying finding out about.

“Greyson.” I could hear the desperation in my voice. “Can’t you tell? It’s me.”

“No,” the other Cali chimed in. “I already said that. I’m Cali! Greyson, you have to believe me. You know it’s me. You have to.”

“You know, it’s getting really hard to tell,” Lola piped up. “You both look exactly alike. It’s really freaky. What if you’re clones? What if we *all* have clones? Like, is there another Lola running around charming everyone with her good looks?”

“That’s not helping!” the other Cali and I cried out at the same time.

And for that second, even I was fooled. Had I somehow been split in two? One half of me here and one half there? Was this magic’s way of solving my *due destini* problem? Splitting me in two so that Greyson and Xavier would each have a mate?

But then I looked at Xavier’s wolf, and at Greyson’s face.

I still loved them both. This girl wasn’t some magical solution.

She was a fake-ass, deceptive snake who needed to be dealt with. She’d not only fooled Greyson, but the entire pack. And I couldn’t let her get away with it.

“You’re a lying bitch,” I spat at her. “That’s something we both know.”

I turned to Greyson, pleading with my eyes.

“Greyson,” I murmured, willing him to know me. To believe me.

*It’s me, Greyson,* I told him by opening up our mind link. *Who else would you call “love”?*

I watched him as his eyes widened in surprise. Would he believe me?

Or would he side with the imposter?

**Episode 760**

I looked at Greyson, desperate for him to believe me. To feel our bond as clearly as I could feel it. The tension in the air was thick enough to cut with a knife. We all watched Greyson as he tried to consider all the possibilities. His expression was unreadable.

But for once, we all knew exactly what Greyson was thinking, despite his best efforts to hide it. He was choosing who to believe.

I racked my brain for a way to prove it. Surely the other Cali couldn’t mind link with him. They weren’t mates. But maybe if she had Alpha blood, she could fake it? In which case, how could I prove I was the real me?

What else did I have? Just our memories. Just what I knew in my heart.

The heart I could feel pounding inside my chest as I watched him deliberate. He looked back and forth between us. Torn. I knew the feeling. But for once, I wasn’t the one in the middle.

For a moment, I wondered if this was what Xavier and Greyson felt all the time. The pain of watching the person you loved most being only half-sure that they wanted you. It was crushing. Because I was certain, *positive*, that Greyson wanted *me.* But I didn’t know how to prove it. I felt powerless and heartbroken and alone.

*Please*, I thought to myself. *He has to believe me. After everything we went through in the Fae world, he has to know me. He has to feel it. If we really are meant to be, he can’t possibly mistake me for someone else. Not when we’re both right in front of him.*

I thought about him laying me down on that moss, that night we’d been together in the Fae world. The fire he’d lit inside me with his touch. With his kiss. How intoxicating it had been to be alone, to have his full attention after all the hurried, rushed, secretive kisses. The kisses I’d convinced myself had to be attempts at manipulation.

But kissing him and being sure that it was what we both wanted… It was like that time I’d gone snorkeling with my parents when we’d won that trip to Hawaii when I was younger. We’d gone out on a boat and I’d strapped on my goggles and looked deep into the ocean. The shelf hadn’t even been in sight. Just blue.

That kind of depth, the endlessness of it… It was terrifying. But it was fascinating too. Being surrounded by infinite, crystal clear, sapphire water—it had mesmerized me. Captivated me. I’d never felt like that before. It had been a lot for a fourteen-year-old with braces and a deeply ugly tankini swimsuit to handle.

Of course, seconds later our tour guide had said that sharks tended to swim around that area and I had practically walked on water in my attempt to get back to the boat as soon as possible. My parents had laughed at me. They’d said I looked like a cartoon character come to life. But in spite of my embarrassment over how it had ended, I’d never forgotten it. That was what being with Greyson felt like—looking into the blue but refusing to blink. Something dangerous but worth being brave for. Because when it was good, there was nothing like it.

You couldn’t fake that feeling, could you? Other Me couldn’t make him feel that, right?

Greyson turned toward the other Cali, and I felt my heart start to break. Was he about to choose her? Did the way I felt about him actually mean nothing to him?

“You’re an imposter,” he spat at her.

I breathed a huge sigh of relief. He believed me! He’d chosen me!

“You’re not Caliana,” he continued. “You’re Ava.”

We all gasped—me included. I couldn’t believe it. *Ava?* Xavier’s former mate, Ava? The one who was supposed to be dead? Like… *dead* dead?

“Like I’ve been telling you!” I insisted loudly, wanting to assert myself and my identity for anyone who might be unsure.

But underneath the bravado, I was reeling. If this was really Ava, how had she managed to come back from the dead? And, even weirder, how had she shapeshifted into me? Was this a new power? The kind you got when you were resurrected?

“*Guys*,” she said pleadingly, her eyes growing desperate.

She took a step back, but the entire pack took one forward, boxing her in. Now that they knew who she really was, they were not going to treat it lightly. She’d infiltrated the pack, and that meant she was dangerous. They couldn’t let her go.

“Tell us the truth,” I shouted, anger still coursing through my veins. “Why are you doing this? And who are you, really?”

Ava smiled, and I felt sick to my stomach seeing it on my face. I knew my smile, but that wasn’t it. That was someone else’s smile. And it was cruel.

She held up her wrist, pointing at her cheesy gold bracelet. Had they seriously seen me wearing that and thought it was normal? No one had said anything? Not even as a friend? Like, “Hey, Cali, maybe stop wearing that ugly-ass bracelet? It’s barely gold—it’s practically brass”?

I knew that wasn’t the point of all this, but still.

“It’s some kind of witchcraft,” Ava said. “A witch named Demeter did this to me.”

I saw some of the others tense. Demeter? The name had to mean something to them. I wondered who she was. Well, she was obviously a witch, but *beyond* that. Also, did we really need another person to fight? We were kind of full up on adversaries as it was.

“I knew if you realized who I was, you’d turn on me.” She let her gaze flicker over to me. “It was easier to pretend to be you.”

She swallowed, hard. And for a second, I wondered what it must have been like for her. To be back with Xavier without being seen as an enemy. To get a chance to start over with a clean slate, right after being brought back to life. Was it possible she was just as freaked out as I was? Was she just a pawn in a more dangerous game?

But then her expression hardened and that cruel smile returned. She locked eyes with me, and I felt an intense desire to run.

“It wasn’t like it was that hard, either.” She sneered at me. “Not when you have Xavier and Greyson both eating out of the palm of your hand.”

I clenched my hands into fists. How dared she manipulate my friends? Of course they’d thought she was me! She looked just like me! And it wasn’t like we were all on the lookout for creepy-ass clones of me who were actually Xavier’s crazy ex-girlfriend.

“Well, looks like the jig is up,” I snarked right back. “We caught you. You’re done pretending to be me. And you’re definitely not going to insult my pack—or my mates.”

But Ava just laughed. “And what do you plan on doing about it?” she asked, her voice dripping with condescension.

I stepped forward, feeling my magic build inside me. My fingertips tingled with it. The anger inside me was growing. I knew exactly what I *wanted* to do about it.

But could I control my magic enough to make sure Ava was the only one who got hurt?

“I don’t know,” I admitted, still glaring at her. “But let me ask—was it worth it? Just to get found out?”

“It was worth it to see the look on your face when I tell you…” She paused, clearly delighting in the way I leaned forward nervously. “I slept with Greyson.”

It felt like I’d been punched in the stomach. Like all the air in the world was gone.

Maybe she was just saying it to mess with me. To hurt me. To make me fuck up so she could get away.

But when I let myself look over at Greyson, hoping he’d look just as surprised as I did—or pissed, or that he’d laugh because Ava was getting desperate now that she was caught—I just saw that unreadable mask.

That explained the chest pain. The veins. Just like Cassandra.

But my crushing epiphany was interrupted by a growl.

Xavier’s wolf had stepped forward.

Right. Xavier. How was he feeling about all this? If that was really Ava, it meant that someone Xavier had killed was back. Someone he’d once loved. How could that possibly feel?

And how much had she managed to trick him?

Before anyone else could make a move, Xavier rushed toward Ava and leapt at her. Ava dodged the first strike, dropping down into a squat, lightning quick. She rounded on Xavier and kicked him, hard.

He flew back and I had the surreal experience of watching myself fight a werewolf. Except this time, I had the strength of one.

Everybody was crying out in surprise as Xavier lunged again, jaws wide. Ava dodged again, barely missing his attack. A few people around me started to shift so they could join the fight.

I tried to summon my magic again. But nothing happened. It was like my body wasn’t listening to me anymore. Like I was too stunned to do anything but watch.

I flexed my fingers, trying to focus on my breathing. Trying to summon anything that might help.

“Shit,” I muttered. I wanted to kick myself. Why couldn’t I get my magic to work? Why couldn’t just *one thing* be easy? I couldn’t even summon my magic to fight my evil fucking twin.

Joss’s voice pulled me from my self-flagellating. “She’s getting away!”

I watched Ava leap over the deck’s railing and out of the clutches of the Redwood pack. She shifted in midair and ran off into the woods.

She was gone.

**Episode 761**

GREYSON

I couldn’t bring myself to move. I felt almost paralyzed, which was something I’d never felt before. Especially not in the middle of a fight.

I watched Xavier’s wolf and a few others in the pack chase after Ava and disappear into the woods. I knew I should probably go too—it wasn’t wise for them to run off in such a small group, especially since the person they were running after had a magicked bracelet. She could even be working with Silas, if Xavier was right. But all I could do was watch.

Because I couldn’t go after them. Not when Cali was here and I needed to talk to her so badly. To explain what Ava had said.

That we’d slept together.

When I’d heard Cali’s words through the mind link and realized Ava was lying, I’d felt almost breathless. Practically drowning in emotion. Firstly, relief that the disconnect I’d felt with “Cali” hadn’t been indicative of anything wrong with our bond. But that relief had been quickly followed by guilt over betraying the real Cali. And self-loathing for being foolish enough to be tricked by Ava.

How could I have been so stupid?

How could I not have sensed instantly that Ava wasn’t the real Cali?

How could I have let things go so fucking far?

I looked at Cali. She was the one bit of stillness in all of this chaos. Hurt and confusion were both obvious on her face. She looked stricken, and it was fucking killing me. I had done that. I had let that happen. I’d let her get hurt. It had all happened underneath my nose.

I made a beeline for her, pushing through the various members of our pack running around like chickens with their heads cut off. I had to make this right. I had to go to her and hold her. The real her.

“Please let me explain,” I begged, reaching for her hand.

“Stay away from me.” She held her shaking hands out in front of her. Her voice matched them. She sounded small, alone, and scared.

And before I could say anything in response, she pushed past me and headed into the house. The spot she’d touched on my arm tingled with warmth, the same thing that always happened when Cali touched me. But this time I didn’t find it comforting. It felt like a scarlet letter. Proof that I’d fucked up. A punishment.

I turned to follow her. I had to resolve this. I had to make her understand. Cali meant too much for me to just do nothing.

But Joss, Mrs. Smith, and Big Mac all barred my entry into the house.

“Hold on,” Joss advised me. But I was barely listening. All I could think of was finding Cali. Talking to her. Making it right.

“There’s a good chance that all this business with Ava is because of Silas and the orb,” Mrs. Smith said, her expression grave.

“And hearing about that bracelet and the fact that Demeter gave it to her…” Big Mac blew out a big breath. “That’s not good news.”

“Do you think Ava running off could be a trap?” Joss asked. “Should we get out there and stop all the people who ran after her before it’s too late? We can’t risk decreasing our numbers right now.”

“I need you to deal with it,” I told her firmly. “I have to talk to Cali. The real Cali.”

“Greyson, this is your pack,” Joss reminded me, exasperated. I could feel that she was judging me for not being the leader I’d promised to be.

But I was sick of her attitude right now. There was barely a difference between her doing this and me doing it. She had to know that.

“And I told you to fucking deal with it,” I snapped. “So deal with it. It’s called delegating. And I won’t ask you again.”

I stormed past them all and into the house. I followed Cali’s scent through the house. Guilt snowballed in the pit of my stomach. I couldn’t believe I’d thought Ava was the real Cali. A dozen moments flooded through my mind. Glances that hadn’t been quite right. Words Cali would never have said. I’d thought she was just tired, spread too thin, struggling with the choice she had to make. But I should have known better.

Cali’s scent led me to a closed door. I knocked.

“Go away, Greyson!” she called out. Her voice sounded strangled, like she was trying not to cry.

I reached out to her through the mind link and felt her instantly. It was as easy as breathing. How had I not seen Ava’s inability to do this as a red flag?

*Please, I need to explain,* I told her through the mind link. *I can’t imagine how you’re feeling right now. But I want you to hear what happened from me, not her. Will you please let me do that?*

I waited, but all I received in return was silence.

I pressed my palm against the smooth wood of the door. It would be so easy to break it down. I wanted to. I curled my hand into a fist. I’d knock again. I couldn’t leave until she at least gave me a chance.

But then the door opened.

Cali’s face was streaked with tears. She looked up at me, her glare accusatory. But then she stepped aside, allowing me to come in. And, worst of all, she didn’t say a thing.

That hurt worse than a slap. Cali was free with her words. With her smiles. With her kindness. It was one of the things I adored most about her. It was like a superpower. She could give and give and give. I didn’t know how to do that, except when I was with her. She made me want to give her the world.

I stepped inside, my hands twitching at my sides because all I wanted to do was hold her. To make it right. Maybe if she could just feel how right it was when we were together…

“I’m listening,” she told me, her voice angry as she shut the door behind me.

I paused. How did you tell someone something like this?

“I’m sorry,” I started, figuring that was the most important thing to say. “I… I honestly had no idea that was Ava. Not until now. She had me completely fooled. I know that not recognizing that she wasn’t you… I know it’s a betrayal. And I’m ashamed of myself for betraying you. For hurting you. I’m really, really fucking sorry.”

Cali just stared at me, her lower lip trembling as if she was holding back tears. How could I have done this to her?

“Please say something, love,” I begged, my voice breaking on the last word. The word I’d reserved only for her.

“When we came back from the Fae world…” Her eyes were glistening with tears, and she fought to keep her voice even. “You rejected me. You told me never to call again. And now I come back here and find out you…”

Her voice trailed off. She couldn’t even say it, and I didn’t blame her one bit.

“Cali.” I looked up at the ceiling, feeling like complete and utter shit. “I was deceived. And I can’t imagine how that makes you feel. I know you’re dealing with the *due destini* stuff too, and having this happen on top of it… I just want you to know that I was dealing with it too. I *am* dealing with it. I thought we didn’t sleep together in the Fae world because of it. And I wanted you to figure things out on your own. So we could be together like that when you were ready. I shouldn’t have told you not to speak to me. I’m sorry for that, too.”

I looked back at her. I saw that her hands were bunched into fists, her jaw clenched. She was barely holding on, and I hated myself even more than I thought I could.

“But I never thought we wouldn’t end up together,” I told her. “I swear.”

Something in her relaxed. But it didn’t look like she was relieved. It was like she’d shoved every feeling aside and now there was just… nothing.

“But what changed?” she asked flatly.

“When you—when Ava—came back, I tried to stay away,” I said. “I tried to do what I’d planned to do and focus on the pack. To get into the stuff with us once we were all safe. But then I saw your face, even though it was her behind it. And I was overwhelmed with this need to be with you. I can’t even begin to explain how much I wanted you.”

Cali hiccupped and bit down on her lip to silence herself. I saw some color flush her cheeks and wondered if it was just my imagination or if she was blushing. That, I could work with.

“The truth is,” I continued. “Afterward… I think I knew.”

“Knew what?”

I swallowed.

“That something was off,” I answered. “I could sense it. And up until today, I thought the feeling was… rejection. That you’d made your choice and our mate connection was gone. That you’d chosen Xavier.”

Saying it aloud hurt more than it had any right to.

I took a step toward her, giving into the unbearable pull.

“Believe me, love,” I said. “If you chose Xavier over me now, it would kill me. But I would understand. What I’ve done is unforgivable. I’m a monster. And I don’t deserve you.”

Cali reached up and brushed something off my cheek. I felt wetness there and realized I must have started to cry.

“Don’t say that,” she whispered.

And then she looped her arms around my neck and pulled me close. Her lips crashed against mine and I brought my hands to her cheeks, determined to pour everything into the kiss. The adoration, the guilt, and the desire to worship her until she forgave me.

**Episode 762**

AVA

It’s not often you run for your life. I guess when you’re a werewolf, you do it more often. Kind of one of the costs of doing business.

As my paws pounded against the forest floor and my breaths grew ragged, I put everything I had toward outrunning the wolves on my heels. It felt like the entire world was closing in me. I’d been caught red-handed, face to face with the person I’d been trying to impersonate. And now it was all blowing up in my face.

I had to get as far away from Xavier as possible, or he would kill me.

Again.

I could sense him getting closer. I could feel him like I’d always been able to feel him. He was faster than me, he was stronger, and he was fueled by bloodthirsty rage. There was no way I could outrun him. So how could I get away?

I racked my brain, trying to sort through my admittedly limited options. I couldn’t outrun him, but I could hide somewhere.

Maybe I’d be able to face him in a fight if Nolan was with me? And where *was* my brother, by the way? If I could find him, maybe he’d help me. Back me up or help me disappear. But what were the odds of me finding him before Xavier caught up with me? Pretty fucking slim.

And where should I even run to? I could always go back to the house. But would Nolan even be there? When he’d taken Xavier away, he’d left it abandoned.

But it wasn’t like I had a lot of other options.

I could hear Xavier getting closer and closer, the wolves he’d brought with him following on his heels. I could hear their pants, their snarls, the twigs breaking beneath their paws. But more than that, I could smell them. And the acrid scent of their hate made my stomach twist.

I wasn’t going to get away.

I could try to take a stand and fight, but what chance would I actually have?

I slowed my pace, feeling resigned. I was overwhelmed by this sudden desire to just get it over with. I’d died once, and it hadn’t seemed to take. Maybe this death wouldn’t stick, either.

I turned around, and Xavier came into view. His pitch-black wolf was stalking me, like the dangerous predator he was.

Time stopped when we locked eyes. The sight of him was just as striking as it had always been. I saw him exhale steam… the air was so cold. It felt appropriate for the moment. The iciness of it all.

I reached out to him through our mind link. I wanted to reason with him. Maybe because of our history. Maybe because, in spite of it all, I really didn’t want to die again. But there was nothing there. Nothing for me to connect with. He’d closed himself off.

*This is it.*

*He’s going to kill me.*

*Again.*

He let out a deep growl and rushed toward me. Time seemed to slow. Every graceful bound he took was another moment I was still alive. I braced myself for the worst, prepared for everything to go black again.

But then I heard a loud metallic snapping sound, followed by Xavier’s agonizing, wailing howl.

When my vision caught up to what I’d heard, I realized what had happened. Xavier was caught in an animal trap. It had clenched down around one of his back legs. He lay on his belly, writhing in pain. Twisting and jerking, trying to get free. The trap must have been silver.

*Help him,* my subconscious ordered me. I wanted to spring forward, to do whatever I could to free him. But then I remembered—if I stopped to do that, the others would catch up to me and finish what he’d set out to do.

I let myself take one last look at him. He was so beautiful, even as he grimaced in pain.

*I’m sorry, Xavier,* I told him through the link, hoping he could hear me even if he didn’t want to respond. And then I took off.

His gut-twisting howls and yelps faded as I put more distance between us. It seemed odd that he’d gotten caught in a trap. Didn’t the Redwood pack own these woods? And if they didn’t… wouldn’t they at least be aware of places frequented by hunters? How had he managed to step on it instead of me? But, on the other hand, what kind of regular hunter used a silver trap?

But I couldn’t dwell. I had to get to Nolan. My brother owed me now that the jig was up. He’d taken Xavier away, which hadn’t been part of the plan. And now there was a target on my back.

I took a circuitous route back to Nolan’s house, hoping to lose anyone who might’ve kept following me. But once I got close, I smelled smoke—and not like a campfire. This was burning plastic, among other things. And then I saw it. The smoldering remains of Nolan’s house. It had burned to the ground.

What the hell?

I stopped and looked back the way I’d come. I couldn’t hear anything. I took a deep inhale, but the smell of the smoke masked too much. I couldn’t sense if anyone was still around me.

I shifted back into my human form and approached what remained of the Samara pack house. The place was almost entirely ash.

I walked around the perimeter, looking for signs of anything that could shed some light on this situation. Where was the pack? And who was that charred figure I could make out through the smoke? Was it Nolan? Had he returned to the house?

I raced over, my heart pounding. Could he have died? Had someone attacked him? I knelt by the body and forced myself to roll it over.

But it wasn’t him. It was Chris—another member of the pack. Had he done this? The house had been abandoned. It didn’t make sense for anyone to be there.

But my confusion was overshadowed by relief. Nolan was alive. But where was he? And who had done this?

A noise in the distance drew my attention. It had to be the Redwood pack, still on my tail. But now that the pack house was gone, where could I go? Would I be able to outrun them? Not if Xavier had made it out of the trap and begun to heal.

I was just about to shift back when I heard a car approaching.

That was weird. Who drove this deep into the woods? Was it Nolan? Was he coming to get me? Had he heard that the house had burnt down and was coming to assess the wreckage?

The passenger door swung open and I peered inside, suspicious of what I might find.

An older man was at the wheel. I recognized him instantly. It was the man who’d helped me. The one who’d told that witch to put the bracelet on me. The one who’d made me like this.

I felt rage start to pulse through my veins. He was the whole reason I was in this awful situation! If I hadn’t been put in this stupid body, then Nolan never could have made me participate in this crazy charade. Xavier wouldn’t have been trying to kill me.

I could have come to him as myself. I could have tried to be honest with him. To see what came of us actually talking as ourselves. But this man and his meddling witch had ruined my chances at that.

I wanted to shred him to pieces with my claws. To make him pay for what he’d done. To make him feel a fraction of the heartbreak and shame I was feeling right now.

“Hurry up and get in.” The man beckoned me to join him in the car. “That is, of course, assuming you don’t want to die. Do you?”

“You did this to me!” I cried, my words dripping with hatred. I had no interest in being in an enclosed space with the man who’d put me through all this.

“And I can help undo it,” he told me, holding a finger up. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? To go back to your old life, as your old self?”

It was what I wanted. But I sensed there would be a catch. Wasn’t there always?

“Why should I trust you?” I asked, crossing my arms.

“Because you’re running out of options,” he countered. “We can both hear what’s on your tail. Why not take your chances with me?”

His eyes never left mine. The passenger door was still open, the seat empty. Waiting for me. My eyes flicked down to it, then back up to him.

“You can take the bracelet off?” I asked, wanting to set some terms.

The man just nodded. He made no promises, but he was right—what better option did I have?

I hopped in the car, still feeling defensive. I glared at him, not wanting him to think for a second that I felt warm and fuzzy toward him.

“Who are you?” I asked.

The man smiled at me. It was meant to be friendly, but it reeked of self-satisfaction.

“You can call me Isaiah.”

**Episode 763**

I’d been furious with him a second ago. I’d felt like there was a chance our connection was completely severed. Undone by Ava’s deception.

But now I was kissing him. I was letting him tilt my face up by the chin so he could devour my lips more easily. So he could slide his tongue against mine and taste me.

I’d tried to resist. It wasn’t like the anger I’d felt moments ago had just disappeared. It was still there. It made me claw at his biceps, raking my fingernails down them hard enough to hurt. A dark part of me hoped it did.

How could he have believed Ava was me? He’d been so blissfully unaware of her scheme that he’d *slept* with her. But I knew that the magic had been strong, and that the resemblance had been uncanny. He’d absolutely thought she was me.

But none of that dulled the hurt I felt, or the betrayal that still stung.

But then my scratches made him growl against my lips. I felt that growl move through his chest, the one pressed against mine… It radiated through my whole body. How could I resist that pull? It was just too much.

Just a moment ago, I’d been ready to be rash. I’d been so angry I couldn’t see straight. I’d been composing the searing monologue I was going to use to banish him from my life forever—the one that told him everything that had ever happened between us was a mistake. Because if he was selfish enough to never notice my part in all this, to be unable to tell the difference between me and an imposter… *Well*, I’d been prepared to say, *I’m glad we never slept together. If you’re as selfish in bed as you are everywhere else, sex with you would probably suck.*

And yeah, I’d been working on better word choice. Something cutting. Something sophisticated. Something that would’ve left him feeling as embarrassed and ashamed as I was. Had been.

But now I couldn’t think of sending him away. When he pulled away from my mouth, I actually whined in protest. That was how much I couldn’t bear to be separated from him.

“Shh,” he whispered, soothing me. Like he knew exactly why I was distressed. He was promising me he wasn’t going anywhere. And then he put his lips on my neck and left a trail of white-hot, searing kisses from my jaw to my shoulder.

And yeah, the way his lips moved against my skin and the way his hands curled around my waist possessively was intoxicating. I was fully aware I was caught up in something. That we’d still have all the same problems once this was over. Problems we would need to deal with.

But I was also relieved. The way he held me, touched me, kissed me… It made me absolutely certain that he hadn’t rejected me. He hadn’t intentionally slept with someone else. I was still the one he wanted. Me.

I still didn’t understand why Ava had been sent to infiltrate the pack. Or if she’d even been sent here at all. Maybe it had been about getting revenge on Xavier, pure and simple—break his heart by pretending to be his mate and cheating on him. It had certainly worked.

But whatever Ava’s plan was, it didn’t matter now.

I was back and Greyson wanted me and I needed him. I let my hands roam over the wide expanse of his chest. God, he was big. I felt small in his arms, like I wasn’t allowed to worry about a thing. Like he’d do it all for me. I only had to *be*.

He pulled back to look at me, and I had to swallow the noise of protest I’d been about to make.

“Can you ever forgive me, love?” he asked, eyes burning with intensity.

I stared at the lips that had asked me the question. Then at his eyes, which seemed to be begging for forgiveness using some kind of irresistible siren song. It reminded me of our time in the Fae world. And that made me want to be close to him even more.

But what was I even meant to forgive him for? He’d been tricked into believing Ava was me. He hadn’t known.

I grabbed his shirt, clenching the fabric in my fist as I pulled him to me. I wanted the certainty I’d felt when he was kissing me. But Greyson leaned back, keeping our lips apart. He opened his mouth to say something, but I didn’t want to hear it. I didn’t want more words. I just wanted to feel him. So I snaked my hand around the back of his head and pulled him to me.

For a moment, I remembered what I’d read in Cassandra’s journal. Had she felt so strongly connected to Symeon when she’d chosen to sleep with him? The words she’d written certainly suggested it. I had related more than I wanted to admit to the way she talked about both men. And when I’d read that passage, I’d been internally screaming at her not to do it. Not to make things worse for herself.

But I just felt so connected to Greyson right now, Ava be damned. And yes, I’d felt that way with Xavier too. Cassandra said that she’d needed to sleep with both mates to help her *know*. Because how could she choose between them without seeing the full picture?

Was that what I should do?

I’d been holding back with Greyson, despite the desire I felt whenever I saw him, whenever he touched me. I’d never crossed this line with him. But should I finally sleep with him, despite the circumstances? Despite all the reasons not to?

Would knowing what it was like to be with him help me decide?

Was now not actually the worst time, but the *best* time?

Or was there never a best time? Every time I’d let myself start to go there, something had prevented us. But things were different now. Now, I didn’t have the luxury of time to figure things out. There was a ticking clock. I only had until Halloween.

Greyson sat on the bed and pulled me down on top of him until I was straddling his hips. He slid a hand under my shirt and traced the line of my back with just one finger. I gasped from the gentle friction and the way it made my skin tingle. I was desperate for more.

I was looking into the blue and I wanted to drown in it. I was swimming in him and I had no interest in air. I didn’t care if I ever breathed again.

Greyson gripped me by the hips and held me to him tightly. I could feel his hard cock flush against my core, and the sweet pressure of it made me moan with pleasure. What would it feel like inside me?

My chest heaved like I’d run a marathon. Greyson brought a hand to my cheek and I leaned into his touch. I felt weightless in his arms. The way he cradled my face so gently was completely at odds with the way he feasted on my mouth, sinking his teeth into my lower lip like I was a meal.

He lifted me and I gasped again. He chuckled, and again I felt the sound reverberate through my whole body. At this point, I was positive my panties were soaked. Would he like that? Like knowing what he did to me?

He tossed me onto the bed and tore off his shirt. He looked down at me, hungry. I must have looked the same as I took in his scarred, muscled torso. He was perfect. Every scratch, every mark only enhancing his beauty. It was like he’d been designed to entice me.

And how could I not give in?

“I’m ready,” I whispered, knowing he’d understand.

Greyson lowered his body onto mine and I delighted in the warm weight of him. He tilted my chin up and stroked the column of my throat with the backs of his fingers.

“I’m ready too,” he told me, his voice soft but urgent.

He let his hands linger on my face, like he was mapping it out. As if he couldn’t bear to forget a fraction of this moment. Of how it felt. Of how I felt.

But then he slowly moved his fingers down my neck, mapping every inch of me with his touch. I pushed my head back into the pillow, overwhelmed by the warm tingling sensations rolling through me.

I wrapped my legs around him, crossing them at the ankles behind his back. I let myself rock into him slowly. Just the feeling of him pressing into my thigh, hot and hard and insistent… It was enough to make my eyes roll back in my head.

Greyson groaned and started to make quick work of my shirt’s many buttons. With each one he undid, he found new places to touch, kiss, lick, and bite. But he stayed focused on my neck, like he was looking for just the right spot to make me fall apart. When he let his teeth dig into the smooth skin of my shoulder I cried out, pain and pleasure mingling into one urge.

The desire for more.

He paused, blowing on the mark he’d made, soothing it with cool air. But it felt like teasing.

I groaned, pushing my hips against his and grinding. If he was going to tease me, I’d tease right back.

Finally, he loosened the last button and crawled down my body, moving toward my breasts, which ached for his attention.

But then I felt a tightening, suffocating pain in my chest. The room spun and I felt lightheaded. Weak.

I cried out in pain and looked down just in time to see the black veins spread even further.

Greyson’s eyes widened. “Cali, what’s happening to you?”

**Episode 764**

VIOLET

I followed Charlie through the trees as he led me deeper into the woods. And while a moonlit stroll with my crush did sound romantic on paper, the fact that he was doing it to show me the exact spot where he’d woken up covered in blood and worried he’d killed someone… Well, that put a slight damper on things.

But I was trying to be optimistic. Charlie was a good guy. I could tell. And sweet lacrosse boys with lopsided smiles didn’t murder people in the woods. They just didn’t.

Almost like my mind was trying to prove me wrong, I remembered the body I’d found in the woods. Its cold, glassy, unseeing eyes were burned into my brain. As was the nausea that had immediately followed seeing it. What if Charlie had done that?

And that was when I realized my paranoia was spinning out of control. I’d found that body in *Oregon*, so it was pretty unlikely that Charlie had anything to do with it.

“Okay.” Charlie slowed down and turned to look over his shoulder, making me blush. “I think it was here.”

He stopped in a small grove of trees, with boulders littered everywhere. It occurred to me that it would probably suck to wake up here. It wasn’t the comfiest of spots. But then I remembered that wasn’t the point.

I looked around, inhaling deeply to see if I could pick up any scents. I really didn’t want to see another dead body, but I braced myself for the shock of it.

Charlie darted around, clearly full of nervous energy.

“Oh my god,” he murmured, circling a particularly large tree. “What if they had a family? Or worse, what if they didn’t and I’ve unintentionally committed the perfect crime? I guess neither is really worse, it just depends on how you think of it. But if I killed someone, there has to be evidence, right? And what if they track me down and I go to jail for a crime I can’t even remember committing?”

“Woah.” I rushed over to him, placing my hands on his shoulders to steady him. “Charlie. You need to calm down. We don’t know what you did or didn’t do. Let’s not freak out until we find out for sure.”

“Okay.” Charlie nodded, staring at me like I was a life preserver in open water. “That makes sense.”

“Good.” I smiled at him, hoping it would soothe him more—but also because he just made me want to smile, even when he was freaking out. “Are you sure this is the place? Because it kind of just seems like any old place in the woods. How do you recognize it?”

Charlie pointed to a tall tree with a heart and initials carved into its trunk.

*ML + MC*

“I remember waking up and seeing that,” he said. “So I’m pretty sure this is the place.”

He reached for my hands and pulled them to his chest, holding them tight. I took a step closer so I didn’t trip. I felt so aware of all the small details—the freckle he had on his cheekbone, how long his eyelashes were, the flecks of gold in his brown eyes…

“What if I’m a killer?” he asked, his voice full of misery.

“You might be,” I told him, even though it wasn’t what he wanted to hear. “But I doubt you actually killed anyone. It’s more than likely you attacked an animal, like a rabbit or a deer. Who would be wandering around this deep in the woods, anyway?”

“You really think so?” Charlie asked, hope flickering in his eyes like a tiny spark I wanted to nurture until it was a blazing fire.

“It happens more often than you’d think,” I assured him. “Plus, you said you’d been drinking. And you were confused, with good reason. You probably panicked and then assumed the worst. But that’s just because you’d never want to hurt anyone.”

“Oh.” Charlie nodded, clearly a bit stricken. “Well, I mean, I don’t love the idea that I randomly kill animals in fits of confused aggression. But it’s so much better than being a murderer.”

“You’re not a murderer,” I corrected immediately.

“But how do you *know?*” he asked, clearly desperate for a more concrete answer.

And he was right. I didn’t know—not really. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t sure.

“I can tell when I look at you,” I told him, smiling once again.

*He’s got too good a heart,* I thought to myself. *He’s not a killer at all.*

“Are you just saying that to make me feel better?” Charlie asked me, leaning forward in desperation. Obviously he didn’t see the effect he had on me—having his lips this close to mine made me want to melt. Just a little closer and…

“I’m not just saying it,” I insisted. “I swear. It’s the truth. I don’t think you killed anyone.”

He leaned even closer, pressing his forehead to mine and squeezing his eyes shut. For a few seconds, I was so still I thought my heart stopped beating. I didn’t want to ruin this. I wanted to memorize it. Commemorate it. Maybe come back and leave a plaque here:“Here Lies the Spot Where Charlie and Violet Touched Faces for the First Time”.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

And before I could tell him not to thank me—that I’d do anything for him, that there wasn’t a thing I wouldn’t help him with—he pulled back and clapped me on the shoulder.

“I’m so relieved.” He sighed. “And I really didn’t want to drag you into my problems, but I obviously needed your help.”

Even though he’d stepped back, his eyes still fascinated me. I felt giddy under his gaze, and I didn’t ever want it to stop.

“It’s okay,” I offered, barely holding it together.

And then we didn’t say anything at all—we just looked at each other for a second, and even that felt all consuming. Like nothing else could possibly matter in the light of this. Of him. Of who I was when I was with him. Of us.

“We should probably get back.” Charlie broke the silence after what felt like at least an entire minute.

The whole walk back, I found myself wishing Charlie would grab my hand. I even thought about taking matters into my own hands and grabbing his. Because friends could hold hands, right? Especially when one of them had just exonerated the other from a potential murder charge?

But the thought that he might pull away, that he might not want it and I’d have to live in that reality—the one where he knew I wanted to hold his hand but he didn’t want to hold mine—kept me from making the move.

If Lola were here, she’d probably tell me to go for it. But I just didn’t have the guts. And… I didn’t know how I’d handle the rejection. For now, this was enough. Walking together in the woods under the moon.

“So.” Charlie glanced over at me. “You never really explained why you came back.”

*Well, I was afraid you were going to tell your girlfriend about becoming a werewolf. And that’s like a “lock the vault and throw away the key” kind of secret. The kind you don’t tell anyone. Only people like Cali get an exemption to that rule. And she isn’t even human, as it turns out! And if Sandi were to get that privilege, it would mean you guys were going to be together forever, and knowing that would feel like sticking a red-hot poker right through my heart. So…*

“It’s possible I was worried about you,” I admitted, trying my best to play it cool. “Have you… talked to anyone about what happened?”

“Honestly?” Charlie swallowed roughly. “I didn’t know what to do. I really wanted someone to talk to. And I was going to tell Sandi—”

“Did you?” I interrupted, unable to keep the words from escaping my lips.

“Nah.” Charlie shook his head. “I don’t think she’d understand.”

I restrained myself from jumping for joy. Also from yelling *“I understand you!”* It didn’t feel like either option would really help my case in the long run.

“Is that fucked up?” Charlie asked me, his voice nervous. “Like, should I be able to tell my girlfriend everything? Isn’t that the whole point of having one?”

Oh man.

I tried to keep my expression neutral as I winced inside. That question would be a minefield for a normal friend, let alone Charlie.

I took a deep breath and tried to pretend he was just any other person I cared about. Because right now, I was his friend—even if I wanted more.

“Humans have a hard time understanding us,” I told him carefully. “Think about how you adjusted to your whole situation. How you’re *still* adjusting. It’s probably best if you don’t tell Sandi. I’m sorry if that’s not what you wanted to hear.”

Charlie said nothing. We walked the rest of the way to the dorm in silence. It wasn’t an icy silence—it was more thoughtful. But god, I wished I could hear every single thought in his gorgeous head.

We reached his dorm just as a girl in a hoodie came out. She nodded at Charlie and headed his way. But something was wrong. She looked worried.

“Hey, have you heard from Sandi recently?” she asked, her brows knit together in concern.

“No, why?” Charlie asked.

“She’s missing.”

**Episode 765**

XAVIER

Pain.

It was all my body could process.

Searing, blinding, white-hot pain.

My leg was caught in a bear trap. Its claws had ripped through my skin and cracked the bone clean in half. And there was no wriggling out of it.

Ava could have helped me. But instead, she ran, leaving me to die.

As furious as I was with her, I couldn’t exactly blame her. I would have killed her the second she’d let me go, torn her to pieces so there wasn’t enough of her to resurrect. I wanted her gone for good.

But even the desire to see Ava dead forever was fading in light of my current situation.

Pain radiating throughout my whole body, I shifted back to my human form and cried out at the way the trap dug deeper into my leg. I looked behind me and grabbed at the trap, trying desperately to get it to release my leg. But it wouldn’t budge.

The pain was getting worse. Every movement, no matter how minute, seemed to make the pain intensify. And each attempt at fixing it was weaker than the last. My strength was diminishing. How the hell was a bear trap this strong or this painful?

I blinked repeatedly, trying to make my eyes focus so I could examine the wound. My leg was mangled, almost shredded in places. But through the blood and skin and bone, I could see the silvery metal of the trap.

And that was when I realized. *Silver*. This wasn’t just an ordinary steel trap. The pain, the weakness, the way the forest was starting to waver around me… I’d been caught in a silver trap.

Could it have been set on purpose? If not, it was a really fucking weird coincidence.

As I tried to prop myself up on my good knee, my body begged me to rest. To recover enough of my strength so I could try again. I started to lower myself onto the ground. The muddy, leaf-covered ground, which seemed to be calling to me. But then I realized—if I lay down now, it could be for the last time.

And I’d lost Ava. That bitch had to pay for what she had done.

I couldn’t die before that happened.

My head began to spin. My arms shook underneath me as I tried to remain upright, but they were so weak, it felt like they were going to give out and leave me face down on the forest floor. Then I’d die here in the mud before anyone could find me.

But I couldn’t let that happen. I refused to just stay stuck here, letting the life drain out of me, all because I’d stepped in the wrong spot at the wrong time.

I gripped the sides of the trap as tightly as I could, but the trap was slick with blood and my hands kept sliding right off it. I tried to squeeze the metal, but my hands were so weak I could barely hold on. My vision was blurring and I was losing sight of my leg. It was morphing into colors and shapes.

I had to go by feel now.

I should never have run after Ava. That fucking snake.

I wished I’d stayed with Cali. The real Cali. My Cali. But I’d just felt this overwhelming need for revenge. It was like an itch I’d already started scratching before I’d realized I wasn’t supposed to. I wished I’d been able to fight off the urge.

Ava had killed my mother. She’d betrayed me. And then she’d had the balls to come back and impersonate Cali. She’d infiltrated the pack. Enticed me to confide in her. She’d slept with both me and Greyson. She’d played us against each other like total idiots.

I didn’t know how I’d explain any of it to Cali. That was, if I even lived long enough to get the chance.

I lay back and looked up at the trees. They started to spin, so I squeezed my eyes shut. I tried to picture Cali instead.

The first time she’d come to see me, she’d been all business. A woman on a mission. She’d been there to save her mother, and I’d admired her for it. She was fiercely loyal to her mother—and to Lola, who she’d been determined to protect from Colton and me.

But she’d been so innocent at the same time. Good enough to eat. Colton had picked her knowing she’d be perfect for me. Irresistibly sweet. Someone you couldn’t help but let in.

Had I ever thanked Colton for arranging it? For literally introducing me to my mate?

Probably not. I could be an ungrateful bastard.

I made a note to myself right there: *Xavier, if you live long enough to see your brother again, you should really tell him thank you. Among other things…*

Fuck.

My leg hurt so goddamn much. It was like a broken record in my mind, drowning out any and all dying thoughts.

*Leg pain. Leg pain. Leg pain. Cali. Leg pain. Leg pain. Leg pain. Keep breathing. Leg pain. Leg—*

But then I heard something else. Voices. Someone was coming. I tried to call out, but it came out as a wordless groan. Barely audible. My voice was too weak. I was too weak.

My eyes drifted shut again. I just wanted to sleep. Just for a little.

I heard Rishika’s wolf before I saw her. I opened my eyes just in time to see her throw her head back and howl. Was she signaling the others?

She shifted to human and knelt at my side, scanning my body to make sure I wasn’t wounded anywhere else.

“Xavier, are you okay?” she asked, sounding worried but firm, like she knew how to keep her head on her shoulders even when things were dire. “Stay with me. I need someone to help me remove the trap.”

I looked down at my legs, but I officially couldn’t see them anymore. Just colors and shapes I knew had to be the rest of me. I made out Jay’s kneeling form and felt a bit more relief flood me. My faithful friend, here till the end. I wasn’t dying alone. I wasn’t dying with a stranger. At least there was that.

I let out another moan of agony when Jay opened the jaws of the trap and lifted up my leg. My nerve endings screamed like I’d lit the whole thing on fire. Jay set my leg on the ground, but there was no relief. Everything hurt too much.

“Who did this?” another voice asked. Lola? No…

“It looks like silver.”

“T’is…” I tried to confirm, but it didn’t really come out right.

“Rishika, you need to bring him back to the pack house,” Joss—the voice was Joss!—ordered. “He needs help, and if we don’t hurry it’ll be too late.”

Jay and Rishika helped me to my feet. They supported me so I wouldn’t need to use my injured leg and I leaned on them, almost completely limp in their arms.

“What about Ava?” asked Sage—I think. “Are we going to let her get away?”

“No,” Joss answered fiercely. “Ravi and I will go after her. Everyone else, be careful. There could be more of these silver traps around. And we don’t know if they were planted on purpose.”

She and Ravi took off into the woods, shifting in midair as they ran. I felt jealousy swell inside my chest. I wanted to go with them so, so badly. I wanted to find Ava, sink my claws into her, and rip her fucking head off. I wanted to taste her blood and rejoice in her death.

“You ready, Xavier?” Rishika asked, bringing me back to the present.

“I’m fine,” I told her. “I really don’t need your he—”

But when I tried to take just one step, I nearly fainted from the pain. I collapsed into Rishika and Jay’s arms and my leg spasmed painfully.

“Dude, stop it!” Jay shouted at me. “Don’t try to be a fucking hero. You’ve been poisoned with silver and you need help. Cut the shit.”

“Listen—” I began, before immediately blacking out.

\*\*\*

When I came to, I was being carried into the pack house. I heard Mrs. Smith cry out in alarm.

“What happened?”

“Silver trap,” Rishika explained tersely. “We need to get him to his room so he can lie down.”

I was only half-conscious. I clenched my teeth, trying to whether the storm. Trying to breathe through the pain that shot through me with every step Jay and Rishika took. This shit hurt like hell.

A bedroom door opened. We were in the hall. Jay and Rishika paused and I opened my eyes to see why. What could possibly have stopped them?

And then I saw. Greyson, stripped down to his boxers, coming out of a bedroom with Cali—only wearing her bra and underwear—pressed against his chest.

**Episode 766**

JOSS

*Watch out for traps*, I ordered Ravi through mind link, adrenaline coursing through my veins. I had no interest in letting what had happened to Xavier happen to anyone else. When Rishika and Jay had carried him away, it had looked like he was on death’s doorstep.

My mind was already unspooling all the possibilities. If Xavier died, would we still stand a chance against Silas? Would Greyson grieve, becoming even more out of tune with the pack? Who would call Colton and tell him? Would Colton come back to fight Silas, or would this drive him away forever?

*I appreciate your concern*. Ravi gave me a playful nuzzle, his eyes alight. I could see that he was trying to bring me back to earth. *It’s nice to have a Luna who cares.*

I narrowed my eyes. *Don’t get cute*, I snapped, with barely any bite. I was actually thankful for the bit of levity. Planning was good, but I didn’t need to be planning for a future that didn’t exist yet. Right now, we just had to find Ava.

*Do you think Ava set the trap?* Ravi asked me. *Was her plan to lure one of us out here so we’d get silver poisoning?*

*Anything’s possible*, I admitted as we ran. *But it seems kind of far-fetched that Ava would pull off this whole scheme in the hope that Xavier would chase her through the woods and step in exactly that place… Someone else could’ve set that trap.*

But I didn’t like thinking about that. I hoped it *had* been Ava. That would be simple. It would give us only one enemy, for once.

But she was the enemy we were focusing on for now, so I let myself think about her. Her motivation was fairly baffling. Why disguise herself as Cali? I mean, it had definitely been the smartest way to sleep with both Xavier and Greyson. But I had to believe she had loftier goals.

It had definitely messed with the brothers’ heads. I understood now why she hadn’t heeded my advice from all the various talks we’d had since she’d arrived. The times I’d asked her to stay away. Maybe she’d just been trying to sow chaos.

If so, it was working.

*Let’s hurry*, I told Ravi. *Ava’s a threat to the pack.*

*And how do we deal with those?* Ravi asked.

*Go for the throat*, I told him, taking off in a sprint.

Ravi bounded alongside me as I followed Ava’s scent. I tried to move cautiously. It would be foolish to move at full speed right now. If there were more traps, we couldn’t afford to get stuck in one. I scanned the forest floor as we moved.

I could see Ravi out of the corner of my eye, and noticed that he was looking over at me far too often. He needed to keep his eyes on the ground. On where we were going.

He was just about to start pulling ahead of me when I saw a glint of silver in the scrub. I lurched to the side, tackling him to the ground before he could come to any harm.

“What the hell?” Ravi asked, shifting back.

I followed suit and glared at him.

“I told you to be careful!” I shouted.

“I *was* being careful,” Ravi insisted indignantly.

“Really?” I asked, grabbing a fallen branch off the ground and poking it into the brush, inches away from where Ravi had just been. Silver jaws sprung from out of nowhere, lightning fast, snapping down on the branch and breaking it in half.

Ravi’s eyes went wide. “Whoa,” he murmured, shocked and horrified.

I waved the broken branch in his face, feeling like the world’s strictest schoolteacher. “This could have been your leg,” I reminded him. “When I tell you to be careful, I mean it.”

We shifted back and continued forward, our pace just a bit slower than before. But I knew it was the smart thing to do—I’d barely noticed the trap myself.

Ravi followed me, just a step behind. I tried not to swell with satisfaction. He’d make a good Beta. But it wasn’t just that. I felt really… fond of him. I had since I’d met him. And part of me really wanted to explore that.

But I knew I couldn’t afford to care more about him than I already did. I had a pack to focus on. I was a Luna, like I’d always wanted to be. If there was one thing Xavier and Greyson’s obsession with Cali had proven, it was that caring about people made you vulnerable. And I couldn’t be vulnerable right now.

I caught a whiff of something else mixing with Ava’s scent. Blood. Human blood. It got stronger and stronger as we moved forward.

The source became apparent almost immediately. A dead body, propped up against a tree trunk. Its throat was torn and there were bite marks on its torso. Clearly a werewolf’s doing. Its dead eyes were staring blankly.

*What the hell is going on?* Ravi’s voice appeared in my head, through a mind link. I started at the sound of his voice in my head, but I guessed that was just what being in a pack was like. Maybe it was a Luna thing.

Either way, I didn’t have time to examine it right now.

Ravi looked around frantically. Like he expected to be attacked.

*The body is at least a day old,* I assured him. *Whoever did this is probably long gone.*

I wondered who would have killed someone in our woods. Sure, we were new to this exact spot, but this was largely Redwood territory. However, as much as I wanted answers, we didn’t have the time to play detective.

We had to keep going.

We moved forward, even though it felt like my worries were multiplying by the second. Bodies, traps… What was next? Were they all connected?

Then I caught a new scent. Smoke.

Soon enough, we came up on the charred remains of Nolan’s house. The Samara pack house had burned down. And there was another body inside.

*What the fuck?* Ravi asked, clearly starting to freak out. *Seriously, what the fuck is going on? First Cali is actually Ava, and then she runs off and Xavier gets caught in a silver bear trap chasing after her. We keep looking for her and find another trap just like it, which means they must be all over the woods. Then we find not one, but two dead bodies. And, oh yeah, don’t forget the burned down pack house!*

I glanced over at Ravi, whose hackles were raised.

*You okay?* I asked.

*I just don’t know how you can act like this is no big deal*,Ravi replied, his eyes fixed on the burnt skeleton of the house.

*I’ve seen some shit in my life*,I said, moving forward to examine the wreckage. *If I can’t handle this, then I don’t have any business being a Luna.*

Ravi shifted back to human and looked at me, clearly conflicted. “I get where you’re coming from,” he said, out loud this time. “But when is enough enough?”

That was when I knew this wasn’t just a garden variety freak out. Ravi was really going through something. I couldn’t catch Ava’s scent anywhere. It was completely overshadowed by the smoke. It was safe to say the trail had gone cold.

So I might as well give in to the part of me that longed to comfort him.

I shifted back too and we stood there in front of the smoldering remains of the house, naked.

“What do you mean?” I asked him.

“I’ve just… I’ve seen enough of the drama that goes on with this pack to know that a lot of it is just bullshit.” Ravi didn’t look at me, just kept his eyes on the ground. “This drama bullshit has nothing to do with being part of a pack. You have to know that.”

I took a deep breath, not liking the sound of this at all.

“I’ll admit,” I conceded, “things have been a little bit trying, lately.”

“All the coming and going,” Ravi continued, finally looking at me. “The never-ending cycle of enemies. The power struggles. Sometimes I wonder if I just got wrapped up in things with the Manus Cruentae when I pledged my loyalty to Greyson, and that’s all it ever was. Maybe I should have stayed Rogue.”

I felt blindsided by this. Not only was it shocking to hear that Ravi wanted to leave, but this was also the most intimate conversation we’d ever had. I was struck by the fact that he was confiding in me. Trusting me to keep his interests in mind, not just the pack’s.

“Do you honestly feel that way?” I asked him, worried. As Luna, I knew I should have been persuading him to stay. But as Ravi’s… something, I wanted what was best for him.

Ravi took a few steps closer to me, his eyes locking onto mine.

“What’s here for you, Joss?” he asked me, eyes burning. “Greyson isn’t in love with you. And if this turns into a war, you’re only going to become a pawn.”

He pressed his forehead against mine and cradled my face in his hands. I wanted to melt into him. To surrender. To be taken care of.

“Why don’t you just run away with me?” he said softly.

**Episode 767**

GREYSON

Cali was limp in my arms, and I did my best to support her head. To make sure it was cradled against my chest. I didn’t want to hurt her even more. But when I looked down at her, all I could see was the black veins spread out across her chest. She’d passed out immediately after the veins started to spread.

How had I not noticed them sooner? I’d been caught up in the moment, in the way she’d felt. The look in her eye. How connected I’d felt to her. And now I could be too late to save her.

I looked up and remembered the other shock to the system I’d just received—Rishika and Sage were helping carry an injured Xavier. His leg looked completely mangled, torn to shit. I gaped at them, unsure how to proceed.

“What the fuck is going on?” I asked them, perplexed.

“He was chasing after Ava and got caught in a silver bear trap,” Rishika explained in a rush.

As many times as I’d wanted to break something of Xavier’s myself, it was unnerving to actually see it done. I felt guilty for ever having wanted to see him in pain. Nothing about this felt good.

But Cali… She needed me too.

“Could it have been Ava?” I asked, aware of how shaken I sounded. “Maybe she led him right to it. Or maybe it’s Silas. Maybe the woods are full of traps, and he’s hoping to take enough of us out that we don’t stand a chance against him.”

Mrs. Smith reached the top of the stairs and gasped when she saw all of us standing there, holding two of our own, both limp and unconscious.

“What happened?” she cried, rushing over to help. I felt a bit of the weight disappear from my shoulders when I saw her. She could help. Did people with mothers feel this way when they saw them in a crisis? Was it just a trick of biology? Something to keep us from straying from the cave too soon?

But those were questions for another time.

Rishika and Sage took Xavier to his room so they could lay him down on the bed.

“Silver trap,” Rishika explained.

Mrs. Smith only nodded.

“Sage.” She looked at the younger girl. “Go get Big Mac, now.”

Sage took off, her marching orders clear. I felt stupid just standing there with Cali, but what else could I do?

“We can use Big Mac’s stash of Cali’s blood to help Xavier,” Mrs. Smith said, clearly thinking out loud. “Fae blood will reverse the effects of the silver.”

Then Mrs. Smith turned her gaze toward Cali. She stepped closer to examine the black veins that seemed to branch out from her heart. Almost as if that was the source of the problem.

*But who could find fault in Cali’s heart?* I asked myself. *It’s perfect.*

“What happened to her?” Mrs. Smith asked me, her voice concerned.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted, trying my best to keep it together. I’d be no use to anyone if I let myself fall apart. “But I think she needs a doctor.”

“Or a witch,” Mrs. Smith said.

Cali moaned softly and we both looked down at her. I thought she was trying to say something, but I couldn’t make out the words.

*It’s okay, love,* I tried to tell her through our mind link. *I’m going to make sure you’re safe.*

If she could hear me, I had no way of knowing. She just lay there in my arms, unresponsive. I didn’t understand what was happening to her. What if her life was in danger and I was just standing here, doing nothing but holding her and watching whatever this was take her away from me?

“Follow me,” Mrs. Smith ordered, like she could tell I was starting to lose it.

I laid Cali down next to Xavier as Big Mac walked into the bedroom. She rushed to the bed and looked at my brother first. I sat down next to Cali and held her to my chest, placing my hand over her heart so I could feel every time it beat. As long as it was still doing that, there was still time.

Big Mac examined Xavier’s wound.

“We’ll need Fae blood,” she murmured. “Fast.”

“Cali’s incapacitated,” Mrs. Smith pointed out. “Do you still have the vials of blood you took from her?”

“No,” Big Mac admitted grimly. “I used most of it to strengthen the cloaking spell on my house.”

I gritted my teeth. I didn’t understand.

“And why would that have been a good use for it?” I asked, well aware of how angry I sounded—and knowing that it wouldn’t help my case.

“Now isn’t the time for questions,” Big Mac said, “but Fae blood has many properties. One of which is healing.”

“Cali’s sick.” I tried to redirect her focus. “Look at the veins on her chest.”

“What if her blood, as it is right now, only makes Xavier’s condition worse?” Mrs. Smith asked, brows knitting together. “I don’t know, MacKenzie…”

I wasn’t sure, either.

I also didn’t want to think about what giving Cali’s blood to Xavier might do to their connection. As much as I wanted him to live because I knew that’s what she’d want, I didn’t want their bond growing any stronger.

“If we don’t do *something* soon, I won’t be able to save Xavier.” Big Mac’s gaze flitted between the two of them.

“Then let me die,” Xavier hissed, his eyes snapping open.

I wondered how much he’d heard. How long he’d been awake.

“I’m not taking her blood unless she’s awake to give permission,” Xavier insisted. “She never has a choice. I can’t take it from her right now. I won’t.”

“Shut up,” Big Mac snapped at him. “This isn’t worth dying over.”

I felt myself agreeing with her for once. Cali would want him to live. Our pack needed him to live.

“We’re in the middle of a war,” I reminded him fiercely. “I can’t have you dying before we face Silas. And you know Cali would want to help you.”

“Then it’s settled.” Big Mac reached for Cali’s wrist. But as she did, we all saw a black vein appear, moving its way down her arm to her wrist. Like her veins were filled with ink.

We all stared at it, dumbstruck.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked Mrs. Smith and Big Mac.

“I’m not sure,” Big Mac admitted, her eyes fixed on Cali’s arm. “But I need Fae blood to help your brother. It’s the only cure. I know that for sure.”

At that moment, Artemis pushed her way into the room. She cried out when she saw Cali and Xavier.

“What’s happening?” she asked, her voice hard—it didn’t match the tears filling up her eyes.

“What do you care?” I asked, not even sure why she was here. I really wasn’t in the mood to explain human emotions to her.

“She’s my sister,” Artemis spat at me. “And we get along better than you and your brother.”

Artemis looked ready to kill to save Cali. I saw in her the same impotent rage I saw in Xavier. The same feeling that made me desperate to do anything I could to save her.

“This has to be related to her being a *due destini* mate,” Artemis insisted.

Okay, now I had *more* questions.

“That’s nice dear,” Big Mac said, as delicately as she could. “But unless you can be of use, I’m going to need you to leave. In fact, I need everyone who isn’t injured or holding someone to get out of here.”

Sage and Rishika backed away, along with Mrs. Smith. But Artemis stayed right where she was.

Cali stirred ever so slightly, and I felt my heart ache. I had to save her. I couldn’t lose her like this. Not in my arms, and not at the same time as my brother… I couldn’t be the only one of us left, carrying all of our pain for the rest of my life.

“Fae blood,” I said as it hit me. “You need Fae blood to save Xavier?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying, isn’t it?” Big Mac growled back at me, clearly on her last nerve.

I looked up to Artemis. She was still in the exact same spot. Her fists clenched at her sides as her face grew pale. I’d told her not to tell anyone what she was. For her own safety.

Artemis looked away, and for a second I wondered if she was going to choose self-preservation. If she’d bolt to keep herself safe. If what I’d told her to make *my* life easier was going to bite all of us in the ass.

“Well, why didn’t you say so?” Artemis asked, stepping closer to the bed, her expression determined. “I’m Fae.”

Big Mac and Mrs. Smith gaped at her.

“How are you *here?*” Big Mac demanded.

“Do you have healing powers?” Mrs. Smith asked.

“Just take her blood already!” I snarled, knowing we didn’t have time to learn and share.

Artemis nodded. She pushed up her sleeve and offered Big Mac her arm. Big Mac scrambled for a syringe and drew some blood as quickly as she could. She then drizzled the blood over Xavier’s wound, careful to paint it all. We all watched with anticipation. I clung to Cali, hoping we weren’t too late.

Xavier moved suddenly and I thought he was about to spring up, healed. But instead, he began to jerk violently. He was convulsing.

Alarmed, Big Mac spun around and grabbed Artemis by the shoulders.

“Wait. Are you Light or Dark Fae?”

**Episode 768**

I felt myself drifting out of consciousness. Away from Greyson, even though I was trying to cling to him, to focus on him and stay here. Stay awake. Stay with him.

I wanted to go back to him, but I couldn’t find my way back. The only thing I could see was darkness.

I sat up and found myself in a small clearing in the woods, across from a beautiful woman in a flowing purple tunic. I was stunned by her platinum-blonde hair and flawless skin.

“Who are you?” I heard myself ask, but it was like I wasn’t even the one doing the talking. Everything felt so disconnected and surreal.

“I think you know,” she told me, raising a brow.

I looked at her harder. There *was* something about her beauty, her poise, and the sadness behind it all that seemed familiar.

And then I realized.

“You’re Cassandra.”

The woman smiled at me, her eyes knowing. I couldn’t believe I was sitting across from the one person who could possibly understand me. A million questions flooded my mind. I felt the weirdest urge to hug her. Like she was a friend I just hadn’t met yet. But I restrained myself because hello, consent still matters! Even when the object of your affections was like a thousand years old and a ghost or a vision from the past or whatever.

“Then you can help me,” I blurted out. “Look at my skin!”

I pulled the neck of my shirt over my shoulder, showing her the dark veins spiderwebbing out across my chest. They were covering almost all of my body at this point. I knew that couldn’t mean anything good. Did I have less time than I’d thought?

Cassandra’s smile faded as she took me in. Her brow wrinkled with concern and in that moment, I knew she knew exactly what it felt like. That she was speaking to me as someone who had been there.

“You must know you have a choice to make,” she told me, her tone solemn but gentle. “Have you made it?”

“I haven’t,” I admitted, hanging my head. “I don’t…”

I steeled myself for saying the thing I hadn’t told anyone yet. The thing I knew would make me sound weak and selfish and naïve. But if there was one person I could tell, it had to be her.

“I don’t want to choose.” I forced myself to actually say it. “Isn’t there something else? Another option?”

I looked up at her, pleading with my eyes. I knew that she wasn’t in charge, that she wasn’t the one forcing me to make the choice. She had no authority over what I could or couldn’t do, and begging her for this was pointless.

But she still reached out and put her hand over mine.

“I’m sorry to tell you this,” she started, “but I believe you already know it. There is no escaping *due destini*. It is both a gift and a curse. You have been given two great loves. Two other halves who can make you whole in different ways. You must decide who you want to be with, and who you want to become. If you don’t choose, you’ll lose both of them. And after that, you won’t be anyone at all. Just like me.”

As she said that, the ghostly images of two men appeared behind her.

Their faces were bloody and pale, the contrast alarming. I felt myself flinch, taken aback by the sight of them. Of what must have been the remnants of her two loves.

“You must decide,” she repeated, her voice grave.

And with that, all three of them vanished. I was alone.

I opened my eyes and I was no longer with Cassandra. I was in Greyson’s arms.

I heard a coughing noise next to me and felt my heart drop into my stomach. I turned to see Xavier convulsing on the bed, his muscles clenching as he shook. His eyes were wide with pain and alarm and confusion.

I tried to reach for him, but Greyson held me back, his arms curling around me protectively. I moaned as the pain in my chest made itself known. I saw a new black vein running down my arm all the way to the wrist. The curse had gotten worse.

But I couldn’t keep my eyes off Xavier. What had happened to him?

“Silver poisoning,” Greyson answered the question I hadn’t asked out loud. “He got caught in a trap while he was running after Ava.”

“This isn’t *my* fault,” Artemis said, glaring at Big Mac.

I tilted my head up, trying to get a better look at them, but I still felt so weak. It made my head spin to move.

“You should have asked me,” Artemis continued. “If you weren’t sure what kind of Fae blood to use, why did you take mine?”

“Put me down,” I murmured to Greyson, shoving at him with my weak arms. He released me but kept a steadying hand on me as I climbed off the bed, like he wasn’t sure I could walk on my own. Honestly, I wasn’t sure either.

I rushed to Xavier’s side, kneeling next to him on the other side of the bed. I heard Lola come in.

“Why is this happening?” she asked. “Why didn’t you guys use Cali’s blood? It worked before.”

“We were worried,” Mrs. Smith told her. “The veins on her arms… Whatever is causing them could adversely affect Xavier.”

“It’s the *due destini* curse,” Artemis told them, pointing at my chest.

“Is he going to die?” I asked Big Mac, not wanting to get into the curse now if I didn’t have to. Now didn’t seem like the time to hash that out.

Big Mac bit her lip as she looked down at me. She and I hadn’t always been friendly, but she was usually honest with me. In a cryptic kind of way.

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

Pain tore through me and I looked back at Xavier, placing my hand on his forehead to try to soothe him. I wanted to keep him still. Maybe I could do that.

“You need to take my blood,” I told Big Mac, not even looking at her. “It worked before. We all know it. And how much worse can it make things at this point? So take it. Now.”

I let myself look up at her for a second so she could see just how deadly serious I was. I wasn’t trying to open a dialogue. I was telling her how it was going to be.

To her credit, Big Mac didn’t fight me one bit.

“Okay.” She knelt down, pulling a syringe out of her bag. Then she jabbed it into my arm. The one without the dark vein.

“Just in case,” she murmured as she took what she needed. She turned to Greyson, who was watching us, his face a mask. He was clearly putting everything aside and doing what he needed to do. Just like he always did. “Hold his leg down while I apply the blood.”

She stood with the full syringe in hand and bent over so she could drizzle the blood all over Xavier’s torn up leg. She pursed her lips, concentrating as she made sure to cover the entire wound.

I held my breath. I reached out to Xavier through our mind link, but I couldn’t hear anything from his end. I hoped he could hear me.

*I’m here for you,* I told him. *I never, ever should have left you. I never should have let you go. I’m so, so sorry. But I’m here now. Come back to me.*

But all I heard in return was Cassandra’s voice from my dream. My mind echoed it back to me. It sounded hollow and watery, like it was coming from the bottom of a well.

*“You must decide.”*

Xavier’s eyes snapped open and his body stilled.

“It’s working!” I breathed, a smile breaking out on my face. Because it had to be working. He had to be okay.

Xavier looked around the room, a bit dazed. But finally, his eyes landed on me. And he broke out in a smile of his own. One that lit up his face and made me want to laugh. He was okay! He was back!

“I’m sorry for scaring you,” he told me gently. Like we were the only two people in the room.

“Don’t worry about that.” I shook my head. “How do you feel now?”

Xavier tried to push himself up so he could sit.

“My leg feels like hell.” He shrugged. “But on the whole, I feel a lot better.”

I looked over to Greyson, who offered me a half-smile. My heart sped up a bit at the sight of it, and I brought my hand to my chest. The memory of what had happened between the two of us… What had *almost* happened. What I’d wanted to do.

I wondered if the pain had been a result of that—because I’d gotten too close to deepening my conflict. To making my choice even harder.

I turned back to Xavier, not wanting to think about that right now. I wanted to make sure he was okay first.

But out of nowhere, he grabbed at his chest and grimaced. A low whine of pain escaped his lips, and I felt my heart leap into my throat. What now?

But then we all gasped when we saw what came next—black veins began to spread across Xavier’s chest.

**Episode 769**

The veins began to spread across Xavier’s chest, violently black and purple, like poison injected right into his heart.

*This is all my fault!* I thought, panicked. *My blood must’ve given him the curse! Could it kill him? Could it…*

I could barely finish my line of thinking without feeling like my heart was about to break in half. I would never be able to forgive myself if anything happened to him. I touched his shoulder, trying to comfort, but he hissed in pain, clutching at his chest.

“What—what’s happening?” Xavier rasped, looking at me like he was begging me to fix this. But what if I was the one who’d caused it?

“What’s going on with my brother?” Greyson asked Big Mac sharply.

She narrowed her eyes and glanced between the two brothers as I whispered, “It’s got to be the curse.”

Greyson turned to me, his jaw clenching. “Will someone just tell me what the hell this curse is?”

Big Mac shot me a look while Xavier groaned, leaning back into the mattress. I could tell that he was trying to power through the pain, but it was barely working. I felt like crying.

I had to give both men at least some sort of explanation.

“It has to do with *due destini*,” I said hesitantly, looking between them.

*And it won’t go away unless I make a choice*, I thought, my stomach clenching.

“Is that all?” Greyson pressed. But I didn’t want to explain how I had to choose between them—and do it by Halloween. I couldn’t say it right now, in front of everyone else, with the door wide open for the whole pack to hear. Not with Xavier hurting, not with all this madness going on.

“Breathe through it,” I told Xavier, trying to help him. Because I sure as fuck knew how painful it was to deal with those goddamn veins. “Try to breathe through the pain—in and out.”

He followed my instructions, staring into my eyes. His teeth were clenched, but a moment later, he seemed to be coping better. Thank *god*. When we were all certain that his chest wasn’t about to explode, Mrs. Smith spoke up.

“Is this the curse that Tefirna was talking about?” she asked Big Mac worriedly, gesturing at Xavier. “The blood bath on Halloween?”

Big Mac huffed. “First of all, it’s not Halloween today. And second, the disruption that Tefirna told us about was about the spirit world, not *due destini*.” She eyed me. “This is clearly a curse on Cali.”

*Ugh!* I bristled internally. *Throw me under the bus, why don’t you? This isn’t helping!*

It especially wasn’t helping because it ensured that Greyson’s full attention snapped to me. His silver eyes pinning me, he asked, “So what exactly is the curse? How do we break it?”

As I was scrambling for an answer, Xavier reached out to squeeze my hand. I almost jumped when I faced him. He swallowed roughly. “What’s happening, Cali?”

*Say something, Cali!* I screamed to myself on the inside. *Say something, ANYTHING!*

I had no fucking idea what to say, but then someone else piped up and saved me.

“The curse isn’t so simple,” Artemis said loudly, commanding the whole room’s attention. “You can’t blame Cali for this, it’s hurting her—”

“Nobody’s blaming Cali for anything,” Greyson said seriously. “Don’t try to twist things.”

“All I’m saying is that she needs our support,” Artemis declared, staring at Xavier. “Man up, Xavier. I can’t even begin to count how many times Cali’s been in pain because of you annoying brothers and I haven’t even known you very long!”

To my shock, Xavier was stunned into silence. Then he looked up at me. “Cali, I don’t blame you. Whatever this curse is—”

Artemis didn’t let him finish. “He’s a crybaby, and you’re supposed to be the Alpha.” She gestured at Greyson, all huffy. “Is *this* how you lead? Aren’t you supposed to protect your pack? Your mate? All I’m seeing is you acting like a whiny failwolf instead of a boss werewolf!”

I actually *heard* everyone’s jaw drop, mine included.

*Look at Artemis being a supportive older sister!* I thought wildly. *A bit too much there, but definitely effective.*

“I don’t need a fucking lecture from *you*, friendly neighborhood kidnapper,” Greyson scoffed, his tone full of scorn. “Done any bounties lately, Artemis? How does it feel knowing that you’ve made a living out of destroying the lives of others?”

Artemis gasped. I did too.

*Shots. Fired! SHOTS FIRED!*

I made a mental note to never get into a shit-talking match with Greyson. Before Artemis could fire something—I assumed—equally unpleasant back, I spoke up. “Okay, everyone, play nice! Xavier doesn’t need us yelling over his head.”

“I’m okay,” Xavier said gruffly. But his jaw was still clenched. The veins were still spreading on his chest like Ursula’s fucking tentacles, and my stomach lurched with worry.

“You’re not okay,” I said, trying to keep my tone even.

“It’ll take a lot more than this to kill me, Cali,” he mumbled, squeezing my hand. I brushed his hair back from his forehead while Greyson watched us. His gaze felt heavy, electrifying, and I couldn’t help but wonder how he was feeling right now, seeing me like this with Xavier.

But then Greyson turned to Big Mac. “What about the silver in my brother’s leg? Has that been taken care of?”

Big Mac frowned, eyeing Xavier. “Cali’s blood cancelled out the poisoning. Xavier should recover. As for the curse…” She stared at me, her gaze sharp. “I have some questions.”

A moan escaped Xavier again, and I shuddered. It felt like I was doing this to him. “I’m so sorry, Xavier,” I whispered. “I had no idea this would happen.”

As Xavier told me not to worry about it and everybody else started debating the curse and everything that was going on with Silas and Halloween, I couldn’t help the thoughts that kept coming at me from every direction.

*Is this happening to Xavier because I was about to sleep with Greyson? Did the curse know? Is this some kind of warning? If I sleep with Greyson, will Xavier die? Is this unfolding like it did with Cassandra? Are we all doomed to die if I don't choose?*

“Okay, everyone stop talking!” Big Mac declared. She turned to me, moving closer. “How long have you had these?” she asked, examining the black vein in my arm.

I breathed deeply. “They first appeared in Minnesota.”

“Do you know how this works?” Mrs. Smith asked Big Mac. “Can you break the curse?”

“This is beyond me,” Big Mac said, looking at every person in this room. “Artemis is right—it’s complicated. Cali was born with this.”

Xavier hissed again. Breathing through the pain wasn’t fucking working, and my head was pounding. “But can’t you do something to help Xavier?” I asked.

Big Mac nodded. “I can try to alleviate his discomfort. I’ll be right back.”

Pulling Mrs. Smith and Artemis from the room—who went away only after shooting a glare at Greyson—Big Mac said she’d have to check on her potion stash to see if she had anything to help Xavier. Xavier’s eyes were closed. He was still wincing with pain while Greyson loomed over us both. His features were dark with worry.

I looked between the two men, my heart hammering. I couldn’t help but think about Cassandra. Sleeping with both her mates had helped her realize that there was no ideal choice. So much so, that in the end, Cassandra hadn’t been able to choose at all. Would that happen to me, too?

But I hadn’t slept with Greyson, and I *already* couldn’t choose.

And I wasn’t Cassandra. I was living in a different time, and I had the knowledge that Cassandra’s journal had given me. I glanced at Xavier, almost flinching at the sight of the veins on his chest. He loved me, and those veins were the price he paid. But at least he and I had given our relationship a shot—we’d been together in every way possible, including physically.

Would having sex with Greyson be fair to Xavier?

Would *not* having sex with Greyson be fair to Greyson?

Shouldn’t I be evening the playing field?

And what about what *I* wanted? What *I* needed? What *I* thought was best for me?

What if being close with both my mates, in every possible way, was the best choice for me? It hadn’t worked for Cassandra, but I wasn’t Cassandra. I was Cali, and I couldn’t allow myself to fall into the trap of doubting myself.

I couldn’t keep doubting myself if I was supposed to make a choice.

I looked at Greyson, thinking about all the closeness I’d had with him, how much I’d learned about him during our time together in the Fae world, how he always listened to me and took my opinion to heart, even when we disagreed, even when we fought. I turned to Xavier—my first dive into werewolves, my first everything—feeling the connection I’d always share with him.

How could I choose between these two?

I was still holding onto Xavier’s hand when I took Greyson’s with the other.

“I’ve made my decision,” I whispered.

Xavier opened his eyes, staring at me with a puzzled look his face. “What?”

Greyson seemed to be holding his breath.

“There’s only one way out of this,” I said. “I need to be with both of you.”

**Episode 770**

JOSS

*Why don’t you just run away with me?*

Ravi’s words echoed in my head. He stared into my eyes, his warm palms cradling my face. The intensity of his gaze made me flinch away.

“Don’t do that,” I said, taking a step back.

“I just asked you a question,” Ravi said, arching an eyebrow. “What’s holding you here? What’s holding you back? You owe the Redwood pack nothing.”

Ravi was tall, muscular, imposing, and all those things—along with that same intensity that was pissing me off right now—were what had drawn me to him. He took a step forward, even though he knew he wasn’t supposed to keep pushing boundaries.

I was the Luna here. He needed to remember that.

“I don’t like your tone,” I said sharply. Recognizing the shift in my demeanor, he kept two feet between us. “You’re right—I might not need the Redwood pack, but the pack needs *me* right now,” I said. “They depend on their Luna, and nobody should be thinking about going Rogue at a time like this. Look around.” I gestured at Nolan’s burned down house. “This has Silas written all over it, and going Rogue will only make you more vulnerable. Or do you think you’re going to be safer confronting Silas and his followers by yourself?”

“I get all that,” he said calmly, “but you still haven’t really answered my question. And don’t tell me this is about the pack needing you. This isn’t your burden to carry. You’ve done more than enough to help. More than Greyson has. You have no obligation to a pack whose Alpha has no love for his Luna.”

Before I could speak, he added, “I may not fully know what my feelings are for you, but at least I’m not mates with someone else. Greyson’s parading Cali around in front of you, disrespecting you all the time.”

Did Ravi not realize that I didn’t give a shit about Greyson? I didn’t care who he was fucking as long as it didn’t create tension in the pack. Greyson’s disrespect had nothing to do with Cali, anyway, and everything to do with him not acknowledging or appreciating all my hard work.

I was under no obligation to explain any of this to Ravi, but I also didn’t like that there was a lot of truth to what he was saying.

“We’re not talking about this now. There are more pressing matters to attend to.” I pointed at the remains of the house, and the dead body. “I’m done wasting time—we’re supposed to be casing the place right now,” I said, turning my back on him. I was done with this conversation, and thankfully he understood.

And yet, even as we looked around for clues, his words stayed on repeat in my head.

*This isn’t your burden to carry. You’ve done more than enough to help. More than Greyson has.*

The truth could be so uncomfortable. Sometimes I preferred to ignore it, but—much like the putrid smell of the burning house—it wouldn’t go away. Ravi walked next to me, too close suddenly, and my skin felt itchy, prickly at the hint of contact. His warmth distracted me. I was about to tell him to stay back when I noticed a shadow taking form near the dead body.

My heart started pounding.

*Could it be Silas?*

Instantly, I turned to Ravi, ready to alert him. But then a figure materialized in the smoke, standing in the middle of the rubble. I flinched, because the last thing I needed was a fucking ghost right now, and Ravi gasped. It took a moment for me to recognize the figure—it was Violet’s brother, Lilac.

Young, dead Lilac. His death had been such a tragedy.

“What the fuck is that?” Ravi hissed. Seemed like he was pretty fed up with everything; it would’ve been funny if it weren’t so inconvenient.

“Be quiet!” I hissed back, grabbing his arm to keep him from walking over to the ghost.

Lilac’s ghost had to be here for a reason. But what could that be? The ghost seemed to look through me, past me and into the woods. And then, he pointed back in the direction we’d come from. Both Ravi and I turned to look, but there was nothing.

“Are we to go back?” I asked Lilac as gently as possible.

I didn’t want to piss off a ghost.

Lilac didn’t respond, though. He just kept pointing in that same direction.

“Right. Very helpful,” Ravi scoffed quietly. “We should get out of here anyway. This whole situation is creeping me out.”

I paused, looking at Lilac. Ghosts could be helpful… or deadly.

Could this be some kind of trap?

“How do I know I can trust you?” I asked the shadow.

Lilac smiled enigmatically and dissolved in a wisp of smoke and flame.

A beat of silence passed, which Ravi broke pretty easily.

“So that was fucked up,” he commented.

I was still processing Lilac’s appearance. He didn’t have any reason to harm me, or any of the Redwoods. He would want us to remain safe so we could protect his sister. That last thought helped me make my decision.

“We’re going to go back and search through the woods,” I told Ravi. “We must’ve missed something.”

Ravi eyed me, sighing. “I guess I can’t say no to that, can I?”

“No,” I deadpanned.

He sighed again. “Figures.”

He followed me into the woods, both of us avoiding the silver bear trap I’d found earlier.

“So do you have any idea what we’re looking for?” Ravi asked me. “Or will we just keep roaming aimlessly?”

“We’ll know it when we see it. Stop whining.”

I saw Ravi pout from the corner of my eye. I had to smother a smile—seeing such a big, powerful man react that way was beyond amusing. I had to force myself to ignore his antics and focus, and I managed it. We kept examining the space, travelling cautiously… And then the strong scent of smoke and blood invaded my nose.

I saw something on the ground.

A phone.

I wasn’t going to pick it up, but then I noticed the pink sparkly case—that was Violet’s phone. *Fuck*. A million questions popped into my head, along with a big serving of worry. That girl… When was she going to stop giving me mini heart attacks? Had she run away? Had she been attacked? Was the blood at the scene hers?

I felt my stomach twist at the thought.

I didn’t want anyone from the Redwood pack to get hurt, but especially not Violet.

I saw way too much of myself in her—or at least, myself as I used to be.

“This is Violet’s,” I said with certainty, picking up the phone.

“I knew I’d seen it somewhere,” Ravi said.

“She must have left a scent.”

He nodded, walking around. “She went this way,” he said a moment later.

We quickly followed Violet’s scent. It was present but barely noticeable, which meant that she’d moved swiftly through the area.

What had happened to make her run like that?

When we got closer to the road, Ravi spoke up again. “There’s something else.”

I could smell it as well, now. It was the scent of gasoline and wolf.

It was also where Violet’s scent stopped.

*Fuck*.

“Do you think she got into a car with someone?” I asked.

Ravi nodded seriously. “Seems like it.”

I huffed, shaking my head. “There’s got to be something more going on. Who does Violet even know outside of the Redwood pack? Did she hitchhike?”

In the distance, a convertible was driving toward us.

Not wanting to be seen, Ravi and I hurried back into the woods. Ravi looked around, taking a deep, nervous breath. “This is all giving me goosebumps.”

“Everything that’s happened here…” I said. “It all has to be connected, somehow. Why would Lilac’s ghost have appeared at the house if this had nothing to do with his sister?”

“That’s true…” Ravi said quietly. “But this whole detective thing is getting old, Joss. Am I wrong about that?”

I didn’t speak.

“You really should consider my offer,” Ravi added.

I took in his severe expression. The world was burning, and he was saying that running away was the best solution. I snorted bitterly. “This again?”

“Yes,” he said solemnly, before his expression and tone of voice shifted. They became softer now. Needier. “Please. Joss, I care about you…”

He took my hand in his. Unable to look away, I let him.

“This situation is only going to get messier and messier,” he said softly. “Eventually, it’s going to explode. You don’t need this bullshit. No matter what you say, you have no obligation to anyone. That’s Greyson’s issue to deal with. What you should think about is what *you* want. Just you.”

I stared into Ravi’s beautiful eyes, processing his words.

I had to wonder: what did I want, really?

It would be easier to run away with Ravi, that was true. But all of this—the house, Lilac’s ghost, and now Violet being missing… How could I leave everyone behind?

Ravi traced my cheek with the back of his hand. “Hey. I know that face. I know you need to think. My offer will stay on the table. Now, tomorrow… You name it, and I’m there. Got it?”

I frowned, confused now. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve got your back, Joss,” he said. “No matter what.”

For a moment, I felt overwhelmed. No one had ever said anything like this to me. Everyone kept depending on me, but I’d never felt like I could depend on anyone. I suddenly felt such a massive wave of gratitude toward him that it almost knocked me out.

“I don’t want to put any more pressure on you,” Ravi said, starting to babble, “and you don’t have to decide now, but I need you to know how I really feel about—”

I’d had enough of talking.

I’d had enough of thinking.

No matter what happened in the future, I wanted Ravi right now. *Right now*. Apparently, a supportive man was a major fucking turn-on for me. I grabbed him by the back of his neck, pulling him in for a hard kiss. He was momentarily shocked, but then he kissed me back with all his might, his powerful arms wrapping tightly around me. His touch was hot and hard, so good that a sneaky little question entered my mind…

*Should I leave the Redwood pack?*

**Episode 771**

GREYSON

Cali stared at me innocently with her beautiful big brown eyes. Surely, she hadn’t just said that she wanted to be banging both me and my brother. At the same time. Well, in separate fucking bedrooms and at separate times, I assumed and hoped.

Werewolves weren’t known for having many taboos, and lovers were shared from time to time if it was all sane and consensual, but that rarely happened. Wolves were territorial creatures, especially with their mates. And I didn’t know if I’d mentioned this little tidbit about myself recently, but I was the fucking Alpha.

I did not share.

Cali couldn’t have just suggested that Xavier and I share her, though… Right?

*Right*?

“You mean—you can’t be, you’re not…” I pressed my lips together, trying to keep my cool. Then, I smiled, as friendly as possible. “What are you saying right now? You need to be with both of us…”

“Like, date us?” Xavier asked her. His expression was blank. *Great*.

“I know how this must sound, but I promise it’s not just some weird *Bachelorette* fantasy of mine,” Cali said.

I frowned. “What bachelorette?”

Cali’s cheeks looked like they were on fire. “Forget that*.* The point is, I’ve thought about it long and hard, and I don't see any other way out of this situation.”

I felt cold sweat gather down my spine. Cali was being serious, and I hadn’t hated an idea this much in a really fucking long time. I’d literally been making out with her only moments ago, before all this curse shit had happened. The idea of her being with anyone else—let alone my own brother—made my blood boil. Especially with all three of us in the same house. I couldn’t think of anything worse than knowing that she would be with him after being with me.

Or vice versa.

I had to stop myself from literally punching through a wall.

“But there is a way to fix all this, Cali,” I told her, as calmly as possible. “You can choose me and be done with it.”

“Forget it,” Xavier spat, gritting his teeth through his discomfort. “Cali is *my* mate. Leave us alone. Shouldn’t you go do your Alpha thing, Greyson?”

I was about to tell Xavier that Cali and I had been about to go at it just ten minutes ago, before he’d started screaming like a weak little bitch, but I stopped myself. Cali wouldn’t like seeing Xavier upset. Unfortunately. And if I blew up, I could alienate Cali. My plan had always been to let her pick me, not to force her hand.

But this was seriously trying my patience.

“It’s not like I’m happy about any of this,” Cali whispered, looking between us miserably.

Unable to hold myself back, I scoffed. “Well, you’re not the only one. I definitely hate this idea more than you do.”

She flinched at the sharpness of my tone, but Xavier’s glare said that he was with me. For once, we agreed. The *irony*.

“Okay, you three,” Big Mac said, walking back into the room. She gestured at us. “Whatever’s going on right now, it’s time to stop. Everyone, go. I need to stay with Xavier.”

“Sounds good to me.” I tried to herd Cali out of the room, but of course she wouldn’t listen.

“I’m not leaving Xavier,” she told me, glowering. “I feel responsible for this. You should understand.”

I bit my tongue so hard I tasted blood. Literally, I fucking bit it. “*Fine*.”

I turned my back on them all, walking out the room. I couldn’t believe this was happening. How much longer would this torture go on? When would Cali just realize that she should be with me?

Even thinking that she needed to be indulging Xavier at the same time felt like a rejection to me. The sensation was so sharp and harsh that my whole body ached. The connection between us had returned—had never even been gone, really, Ava had just fucked it up—and now *this*.

My fury re-emerged as I thought about Ava. Once I got downstairs, Rishika seemed equally frustrated. “I’m sorry Ava got away,” she said.

“It’s not your fault,” I told her. But no matter what, I was disappointed.

I’d wanted to confront Ava. She had made a mess out of everything. She’d tricked both me and Xavier, sleeping with both, as if we were her little toys. I hadn’t felt this violated and used in a while. If ever. Who the fuck did this woman think she was, treating us like that? Tearing her to pieces would’ve been cathartic.

Then again, perhaps keeping Ava alive could also have its benefits. She was our only link to Silas.

“What happens next?” Rishika asked. “Halloween is coming up—if that witch Terfina is right, we need to prepare.”

I didn’t have the time for this. For any of it. Cali was upstairs with Xavier, and it was hard to focus on anything else. “Do what I ordered,” I said. “Keep training everyone.”

Rishika flinched at my harsh tone. “But what about Ava?”

“Just do what I said. I’ll deal with Ava.” I regretted lashing out, so I added, “Thanks for your hard work.”

“We’re with you,” Rishika said, heading off.

Instead of thinking about Ava, though, or dealing with my Alpha duties, I did my favorite thing, which was torture myself over Cali.

*She needs to be “seeing” us both.*

*Dating us.*

Fucking *us*.

After all we’d been through, she’d come up with another non-decision? Part of me wished that the silver had killed Xavier—then there would’ve been no decision to make. Besides, Xavier had left me in that zoo in the Fae world, hadn’t he? It would’ve served him right…

Then again, I didn’t want my younger brother to die, even if he *was* a horrible asshole. I wanted Cali to want *me*. I hated the idea of winning her by default, like she was a prize. I hated to think of her that way—she was so much more. This had to be her choice. But it was killing me to know that.

If the curse didn’t kill me, this limbo would.

Either way, survival was becoming harder by the second, and I hated this.

I needed to find out more about this fucking curse and break it myself.

The solution to this problem came when I saw Artemis on the front porch, crafting a bow. “Artemis—”

“Hello, Greyson,” she said casually. As if I was here for pleasantries.

“Yeah, hello,” I said quickly. “What is—”

“But you’re not here to say hello to me, are you?” Artemis smiled sweetly.

This Fae had a knack for getting on my nerves lately. “Obviously fucking not. Talk to me about the curse. What is Cali not telling me?”

Artemis’s cool demeanor shifted to something uncomfortable. It was a rare expression for her. She cleared her throat. “You should really talk to Cali about that.”

“Well, I’m asking *you*,” I snapped. “And I want an answer right now!”

Artemis raised an eyebrow at my outburst, looking up at me defiantly. “You’d better watch your tone, Greyson. I can hit a bullseye from fifty yards, and right now you are well within range.”

“You really wanna antagonize me right now?” I snapped, gesturing at the house. “You’re a Fae in a house of werewolves.”

Artemis shrugged. “You know better than anyone that I can deal with werewolves.”

My patience was running so thin, it was about to snap. “Artemis, I swear to fucking god—”

“Okay, *fine*,” she scoffed. “Maybe I should cut you some slack. I know you’re upset about my sister.”

I paused. “About that,” I said, sitting next to her. “Since when are you sisters?”

And then Artemis launched into a tale about Cali’s mom, Orla, having a Dark Fae husband who was really a good person—somehow, I doubted that—but who had died and blah-blah and now, here they all were, one big happy family.

Totally normal.

I thought back to the weird connection I’d felt with Artemis while we’d been in the Fae world, and even after that, when we’d hung out at the bar. I wondered if her being Cali’s sister was the reason why I’d felt drawn to her. It had to be.

“That’s all fine and dandy,” I drawled. “Now tell me about the curse.”

“Still not sure if I should,” Artemis said haughtily. “Maybe if you ask nicely.”

“You do realize that the only reason I haven’t killed you yet is because Cali would get mad?”

She smiled. “Oh, come on. We both know you love me. How about you give me your car? I bet that’ll jog my memory about the curse.”

I was so pissed off, there was probably steam coming out of my ears. “You can’t even drive!”

She made a scornful noise. “If humans and werewolves can do it, I’m sure I can too.”

“*Artemis*, I’m not fucking around here!”

“Okay, stop yelling,” she said, shoving my shoulder. “I guess I could tell you that the curse has to do with *due destini*. Cali can’t decide between you and Xavier, and the veins are a manifestation of that.”

Something clicked inside my brain.

And then Artemis frowned, examining my bare chest. “There’s one thing I don’t get, though. If it’s a curse linked to *due destini*, then why don’t you have the marks as well?”

**Episode 772**

JOSS

That first kiss became more, and before I knew it, I had Ravi pinned to the dirty forest floor, straddling his torso. We were both panting, his hands shaking as he grabbed my hips. He looked up at me with heavy-lidded eyes, his Adam’s apple bobbing when he gulped.

“What does my Luna want?” he rasped.

I shuddered at the question, my hand coming to wrap around his throat. It was wide and strong and gorgeous, like the rest of him.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d wanted a man so much.

I couldn’t remember if I’d ever wanted anyone like this, period.

“Make me feel good,” I said. It sounded like an order, but we both knew it was a plea. He surged upward, capturing my mouth with his again as he shifted my hips slowly backward, reaching to touch between my legs.

I moaned at the contact, twitching. I was so wet already, and he was victorious.

He was gorgeous.

“Do you want to come on my fingers first?” He kissed up my neck. “Or do you just need to get fucked?”

I really just wanted to get fucked.

I reached backward and grabbed him, felt how hard he was. He groaned against my shoulder, and at the same time, I shifted my hips, sliding down in one quick movement. We both shivered at the contact, and I loved it. I was loving every second. When I started riding him, he remained upright, urging my hips to move with his palms, his lips leaving mine only when we had to breathe. He rubbed and caressed me all over, biting at my shoulder the moment I came—the moment he felt me pulsate around him, crying out.

I was boneless now, but he was just getting started.

He flipped us over, moving over me until he was on top. I was sprawled on the ground, spread for him, and he sank back inside me with a satisfied groan.

“You feel so amazing,” he whispered against my mouth, looking deep into my eyes. I wrapped my arms and legs tighter around him, pulling him as close as he could get. “You always feel so fucking amazing...”

He felt amazing too.

His every thrust was sharp and fast, just like I needed it, and he angled his hips just right, giving me the right kind of friction. My body pounded with his every move. He kept going and going, and then he panted in my ear, “Can I come inside you?”

I was covered, so I nodded, and he kissed me and thrust hard enough to knock the breath out of me. I felt my whole body tighten, climbing toward pleasure once more after he changed the angle, hitting just the right spot inside. And then he shivered out his orgasm, shaking inside me. His fingers were intertwined with mine. His lips hovered over my own as we panted and looked into each other’s eyes, and maybe…

Maybe I could get used to this.

He rolled over on the ground, breathing heavily. I looked up at the purple dusky sky, twitching with the aftershocks. His hand was still in mine. When I turned to face him, I found him staring at me already, wearing a small smile.

And then, as if he’d heard my earlier thoughts, he murmured, “I could get used to this.”

\*\*\*\*

“My offer is still on the table,” Ravi said later after we’d cleaned up. “But I won’t pressure you. I’ll just stick by your side for now.” He reached out and gently removed a leaf from my hair.

My stomach did a weird little flip that I had to ignore. I had no certainty about anything right now.

“We should head back to the pack house,” I mumbled, clambering to my feet. “Maybe Violet’s turned up. And if not, Greyson needs to know that she’s missing.”

“Something that he probably should’ve noticed himself, but anyway,” Ravi said in a pointedly mild tone that carried a whole lot of meaning.

Shaking my head, I shifted, and he followed. Mindful of any potential traps, we started back toward the house. Every few minutes, I paused, sniffing the air to make sure we were good.

And then I sensed something.

I looked behind us, unable to shake the feeling that we were being followed. But I could hear nothing, smell nothing. Maybe I’d just been weirded out by Lilac’s ghost.

*All good?* Ravi asked me, via mind link.

*Yes. Let’s quicken our pace but still keep an eye out for traps*, I replied.

What felt like a while later, we finally reached the pack house. Thankfully, it was still standing—with the disturbingly quick way that everything evolved around here, I wouldn’t have been surprised to discover the world had exploded while Ravi and I had been away. Especially since both annoying Evers brothers were in tremendous form, what with Xavier going crazy and Greyson being a jerk. I didn’t care if acted like a jerk—what I couldn’t deal with was a dumbass. I hoped that his brain cells were functioning and he wasn’t just obsessing over Cali. Which—as annoying as I still found Cali to be occasionally, given all her rambling—I had to admit, wouldn’t have been her fault. As the Alpha, Greyson should’ve been able to keep his shit together.

This wasn’t Cali’s responsibility. It was Greyson’s.

“I’m heading upstairs for a shower,” Ravi said, arching an eyebrow. “You coming?”

“Not right now. Go ahead.”

He pouted. “You’re no fun.”

I scoffed. *Men*.

Speaking of men, I found Greyson alone on the back porch, sipping whiskey, brooding. *Not* being an alert Alpha.

This was just fucking *great*.

“Drink?” He offered to pour me one, but I declined. “I assume you had no luck with Ava?”

“No Ava,” I said. “Has Violet come back?”

Greyson eyed me. “Not that I know of. Why?”

I revealed Violet’s phone. “We found it by Nolan’s burned down house…” I paused. “We were led to it by Lilac’s ghost.”

Greyson downed the rest of his drink and poured another. “What a perfect night.”

I narrowed my eyes at his glass. “How much whiskey are you gonna have? Do you think it’s a good idea to get drunk right now?”

Greyson glared up at me. “Do you have a better idea?” he said, his voice sharp as a whip.

“Blacking the fuck out isn’t going to solve anything, Greyson,” I snapped back. “And we have a lot to solve. We need you sober and—”

“I’m the Alpha. You’re just my Luna,” Greyson barked. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

For a second, I froze.

The rage that sprung up inside me was so strong that it almost overwhelmed me. For the pack’s sake, I had to physically stop myself from calling our mighty Alpha an ungrateful little bitch. Shaking with fury, I ended up hissing, “You just have the title, Greyson, but you’ve been pretty close to useless lately. *I’m* the one who’s been leading the pack for a while now, and now—now you *dare* to talk to me like that? Fuck you!”

He just stood there, stunned. Probably because I’d never talked to him like this before.

And also because the asshole knew I was right.

I. Was. *Right.*

I stormed off. Whatever his personal issues were, Greyson wasn’t acting like an Alpha. He kept letting his emotions get in the way. And no matter how hard I tried—no matter how many results I produced—I always seemed to fall short of the respect a Luna was meant to command.

I busted my ass, and it felt like it didn’t even fucking matter.

“Hey,” Lola said, interrupting my thoughts. She blocked my way as I was about to head upstairs and scream into my fucking pillow. “You okay?”

Her question and searching eyes gave me pause.

I breathed deeply, fighting to calm myself down. “Yeah,” I managed. “I’m good.”

Jay and Sage walked up to me as well.

“Anything else you want us to do?” Jay asked.

He was asking *me*. Not Greyson.

For a moment, I took comfort in the realization that at least the pack was aware I was an important part of this operation. I’d grown to care for them, after all.

“Nothing else,” I told Jay. I looked around, at the rest of the guys sprawled over the living room, who seemed to be staring at me now as well. Waiting for commands. “You should all get to bed,” I said. “Get some rest.”

They nodded and said their goodnights. Lola squeezed my shoulder. Their behavior made me feel just a teensy bit better, but…

Was it enough?

Could it be enough for the future?

When I’d accepted the role of Luna, I hadn't signed up to carry the entire weight of the pack on my own. I hadn’t signed up for an ungrateful, distracted, drunk Alpha, either.

I was passing by the kitchen when I heard voices talking quietly. I peeked in and found Big Mac and Mrs. Smith huddled together under a throw blanket, drinking white chocolate mochas. I had to admit, they looked super cozy and cute. Big Mac looked up from where she was snuggled next to Mrs. Smith and spotted me.

“Something we can help you with?” she asked, clearly annoyed.

I took a deep breath. “Is it possible to remove a Luna mark?”

**Episode 773**

When I woke up the next morning, my whole body was aching. Next to me, Lola was snoring, and Jay was doing the same, only from a sleeping bag on the floor. Their snores were in sync, and my shipper’s heart went *aww!*

But then I remembered exactly why I was sleeping in Jay and Lola’s room, and my good mood deflated. It would’ve been beyond awkward to sleep in the same space as either Greyson or Xavier after what had gone down last night, but I didn’t want to be alone.

*How exactly did I get myself into this situation?* I thought, huffing. *Oh, right! It’s not my fault! It’s destiny’s! It gave me two boyfriends, but I couldn’t sleep with either one of them last night! HOW IS THAT FAIR?*

I scowled, checking my phone. Ugh, it was too early. Grunting softly, I traced my chest, because it felt like an elephant was sitting on it. Sitting up, I peeked under my shirt, and yup—the black veins were still there, like a harsh tattoo that wouldn’t go away. I bit my lower lip as I stared at my body, a memory from the night before flashing through my mind.

*Greyson’s hands on me…*

How far would we have taken things if we hadn’t been interrupted? I blushed at the thought. But a second later, the veins throbbed in warning.

I had to make a decision. Because the decision I’d already made—to consider dating both men—had upset both Greyson and Xavier. Had I been wrong to ask that of them, though? Couldn’t they see that it was the only way out of this?

Lola snored extremely loudly in agreement right then, startling me.

*Thank you, Lola! At least one person here validates my choices*, I thought to myself. Then I picked up Cassandra’s journal from the nightstand, weighing it in my hands. In that moment, all I could think about was what had happened when Cassandra had been with both men at the same time.

*Ugh!* This whole thing was just so hard to wrap my head around. Like, I got the logistics of it, but still it felt a little… taboo. Icky? Weird, definitely. I knew I’d been right to ask that of my mates, but I still felt guilty about it, somehow. I hated hurting them, but what was the alternative? Making my choice without having sex with Greyson? The playing field was not even.

But then a tiny, judge-y voice inside my head spoke up. *How convenient is it, though, that you’re like a real life supernatural* Bachelorette *who gets to date and fuck not one, but* two *gorgeous men*? *Poor you!*

I shushed the voice, because it was very, VERY rude! I hadn’t chosen to be a *due destini* mate, okay? I also hadn’t chosen to torture Greyson and Xavier, or myself. And I DEFINITELY hadn’t chosen these black veins that were threatening to swallow me whole. I knew that dating both Xavier and Greyson at the same time sounded fun in theory, but in practice it was going to be anything *but*.

But then the tiny judge-y voice piped up again. *Keep telling yourself that, you little hussy!*

Appalled and offended, I shushed the voice again and sat up in bed. Lola and Jay were still snoring, so I grabbed a throw blanket and the journal, sneaking quietly out of their room. Taking a deep breath, I moved quietly through the house and headed toward Xavier’s room. He was sleeping, thank god.

I watched him for a moment, watched his eyelashes flutter like he was seeing a bad dream, and I felt the urge to wake him. To make sure he was okay. To explain…

I wasn’t sure how to explain the black veins.

How could I explain something that I didn’t fully understand myself?

The one thing I was sure of was that he had the curse as well. But was it because of me, or some other reason? I hoped the answers could be found in Cassandra’s journal. I exited Xavier’s room and walked slowly through the quiet house. I had fuzzy socks on but no slippers, not wanting to wake anyone up.

I was too overwhelmed to talk with anyone, which was a shocker on its own, because I usually loved talking. This curse was sucking my will to gossip and offer my unsolicited opinions, which were obviously extremely important to me. They were part of my legacy. This curse was messing with my boyfriends and my legacy!

*Fucking curse*, I thought, grumbling.

Glowering, I made a cup of green tea, adding a tablespoon of honey and some lemon because I was feeling feisty. Walking through the still-quiet house, I opened the front door and took a seat outside, on the front steps. The sun hadn’t risen yet, and the air was cold.

It kinda looked like the perfect murder scene, but not really. The porch’s light made everything bright and eerie, and there was something comforting about the atmosphere. I wrapped the blanket around myself tightly and opened the journal on my lap. I flinched when I saw the black vein poking out from my sleeve. It was only getting worse, and my heart hammered at the sight.

*I don’t want to die,* I thought. *I don’t deserve to die because of some damn wolf fuckery!*

I used to think that the human world was a mess, but the supernatural realm really was just one major death trap.

Sighing deeply, I settled the journal on my knees and began to read more of Cassandra’s pretty handwriting.

*My fate still undecided and my heart pained to the point of breaking, I needed guidance*. *I went to the elder priestess, who regretted that she could not advise me, but suggested I seek out the Oracle. I was afraid—the Oracle can guide, can see ahead into the different paths one might choose—but what if they all lead to the same fate? Could the Oracle help me decide who to choose? I didn’t know, but I had to find out.*

*When I arrived, the Oracle ordered me to sit and stare into her eyes, and she gazed at me as if she was reading my thoughts. She appeared to be but a child. Though her true age is unknown, some have claimed she is as old as the earth itself. The Oracle told me that she knew why I’d come. She grasped my hand, and as I trembled, she said that my heart could not beat for more than one.*

*I asked her, how am I to choose?*

*The Oracle grew agitated, said that destiny and death are intertwined—you cannot escape either one. I pondered this, asked what would happen if I didn't choose. The Oracle grew more agitated and said that I had no choice, that I must choose,* “or destiny will choose it for you, for you cannot run from your fate.”

*I was devastated.*

*It made me feel trapped, dragged down by a weight that I cannot escape. I asked the Oracle about Symeon and Arion—what will happen to the one I don’t choose? To this, the Oracle said only,* “if you choose one mate, you abandon the other*.*”

If you choose one mate, you abandon the other.

The words made my head and heart ache, because they were true. What would happen to Xavier if I chose Greyson? What would happen to Greyson if I chose Xavier? The idea of either of them dying because of me—like in the story—made me hate everything about this. Feeling Cassandra’s heartache as my own, I closed the book. I needed a break. The journal entry had ended there, but I was sure there were many more helpful things to read.

And no, I wasn’t talking about the raunchy but emotional sex scenes.

I wondered about the Oracle. Who was this person? If they were a person, anyway. Were they more of an entity? A deity? I leaned back against the steps, closing my eyes. I tried to imagine Cassandra walking up to the Oracle. I tried to picture the mystical scene, but all my imagination could conjure up was scenes from Greek mythology-based movies I’d seen over the years. I doubted that those were all that accurate.

There were so many things I didn’t understand.

First of all, why hadn’t Cassandra listened to the Oracle? I had no idea how things used to work back then, but I was pretty sure that when an all-seeing, never-aging oracle told you to do something, you did it. Cassandra had to have known that as well. So if the Oracle had told Cassandra to make a choice, why hadn’t she?

Why had Cassandra chosen neither Symeon nor Arion?

*Surely having one mate is better than the entire throuple dying a gruesome death! Am I right, or am I right?* I thought, frustrated. And then I heard a sound.

*Ugh*, great. Someone had woken up.

Sitting up straight, I opened my eyes. But instead of someone from the pack, I saw Nolan standing over me.

**Episode 774**

VIOLET

I woke up on a futon with Charlie’s arm wrapped around me. He had pulled me closer to him as we slept on our sides, and now our foreheads were almost touching.

I felt like I was about to die.

*DIE.*

I knew that Charlie wasn’t doing this on purpose, but the thrill of having him so close, breathing in his scent, seeing every freckle on his nose, it was just… too much. My heart felt like it was about to burst, and I couldn’t help but wonder: was touching me like this instinctual for him? Did his wolf recognize me?

Because my wolf was rejoicing—she was ecstatic, so happy to feel his tenderness.

My mind, though, burst my bubble when I remembered that we’d spent the entire night looking for Sandi. Charlie’s *girlfriend*. He’d tried calling her friends with no luck. He’d seemed so worried about her last night, which had been incredibly sweet… but super hurtful for me.

I had to remember, though, that Sandi hadn’t *done* anything to me. Not personally. If she was really missing, we needed to find her.

I kept pushing my feelings down—all that longing that I couldn’t help but feel for him—but they wouldn’t go away. My wolf was preening under his attention and closeness, mistaking it for acceptance, but I knew the truth.

I knew that Charlie, like he’d told me repeatedly, wasn’t ready for any of this.

For god’s sake, he still had a *girlfriend*!

Sniffling to fight down sudden tears, I tried to wriggle out of his arms. He stirred and then just pulled me right back in, his grip so hot and firm that I gasped. His nearness made me a little woozy, my throat drying up instantly. He nestled his face so, so, *so* close to mine, and my cheeks were aflame—only partly because of the heat coming off him.

The feel of him created all these bubbling, unprecedented emotions that I couldn’t control. I had no idea how to even begin to try. Our noses touched, and then Charlie nuzzled at my cheek, and before I could move, before I could even *breathe* again, Charlie’s soft lips found mine for a… *peck*.

A peck!

*Oh. My. GOD.*

I froze.

*He’s. Kissing. Me.*

He was kissing me!

*While he’s asleep! Oh no no no no no!*

I pushed him away in an instant, flinching. Inside me, desire and fear and apprehension were one. I was also just plain old confused about what was happening here, and what would happen next. Charlie’s eyes fluttered open. Slowly, he registered who was lying next to him, and he gasped.

“*Shit*,” he said in a raspy voice, pulling away from me. He looked shaken. “Sorry! I thought you were Sandi.”

His words were like a tiny needle that burst my bubble. Of course. What had I expected? He had a girlfriend. I had no claim over him.

At least not yet.

“It’s okay,” I said, covering up my sadness with a yawn. Charlie shook his head, looking like he was judging himself, which was too cute. *Damn it, Charlie! Stop being so cute!*

He got to his feet. “We need to keep looking for Sandi.”

I nodded, trying to play it cool. “Okay. So, um. Where should we start?”

He rubbed his face, exhaling sharply. “I don’t know. We covered so much ground last night. Nobody knows anything. I don’t understand why she hasn’t returned my calls and texts,” he said. “Do you think I… I *did* something to her?”

Did he kill her, he meant.

I didn’t know what to tell him about that. But no matter what, I needed to push my feelings aside, be selfless, and help my mate. As much as it pained my wolf, who was more of a petty little brat than I allowed myself to be, I had to do the decent thing.

Lilac would be proud.

“No, Charlie, I don’t think you hurt Sandi,” I said. “I don’t think you would ever.”

“I would die before I hurt her… but everything’s been so out of control.”

“I know, but I’m here to help, Charlie,” I said. “I know you didn’t hurt her.”

He looked dubious.

“Hey,” I said. “Let’s try something else. Do things werewolf style.”

His eyebrows arched up. “Do I wanna know what that means?”

I snorted. “I mean, maybe we can pick up her scent? Do some tracking.”

His expression changed from dubious to hopeful. “Thank you for helping me, Violet.”

“Of course,” I breathed.

“Let’s grab some lunch and then start searching, okay? My treat, of course. You’ve done some much already.”

My heart warmed from the sweetness of his tone.

*Oh, Charlie…*

\*\*\*\*

I had a coffee and scrambled eggs, and Charlie had a coffee and a sandwich that he barely touched. He kept checking his phone while I kept thinking that I definitely needed to get a new one. Who knew how many missed texts and calls I had from the pack by now? Hopefully not many. It wasn’t like they had nothing else to deal with at the moment.

As I was thinking about that, Charlie turned to face me. “How are the eggs?”

“Gone,” I said, gesturing at my empty plate.

He smiled. It seemed a little pained. Maybe confused? What was going on inside his head?

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We’ll find Sandi.”

“I’m not thinking about that right now,” he mumbled.

I squinted at him. “You’re not?”

“It’s just…” He cleared his throat, staring at his hands. He started folding and unfolding them. “It’s weird.” He glanced at me.

“What’s weird?” I asked carefully.

He paused. Then he took a sharp breath and blurted out, “When you went back to Oregon, I felt like I was missing something. Something important.”

The memory of his texts made me blush. He was blushing as well. I wasn’t sure where he was going with this, but I needed to let him finish. “Really?” I prompted.

He nodded. Then he glanced at me again. “But when you came back last night, I felt whole again. The thing is, even though Sandi is missing, I still feel whole…” He swallowed roughly, biting his lower lip before turning to me. His eyes were full of emotion. His voice was soft when he spoke. “Is that bad, Violet?”

My stomach flipped, butterflies bursting inside it.

*No, it’s not bad! It’s great because it proves that we’re mates!*

Of course, I couldn’t say that out loud. I didn’t want to spook him again. “Don’t worry about that right now,” I said instead.

He let out a chuckle, awkward and sheepish. “I can’t help it. I feel like such a shitty boyfriend.”

Charlie glanced at my lips, and I could have sworn my heart actually skipped a beat. Was he going to mention the kiss from this morning?

*Oh. My. God!*

“Look, Violet. I…” His phone vibrated, cutting him off. He looked down at the screen, and his whole face lit up. “It’s Sandi!”

Right. I was glad that she was alive, but also, couldn’t she have called, like, two minutes later? Charlie and I were having a moment here!

“Where have you been?” he asked, answering the phone. There was so much relief in his voice that I felt the crazy urge to grab his phone and smash it—as if that would take care of all things Sandi. Acting like the bigger person was really, really hard, and I couldn’t stop myself from scowling while Charlie kept talking to her.

His sentences were breathless as he kept repeating “but” and “I’m sorry”, and I had to wonder what all that was about. In the end, he sighed deeply. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll talk to you when you get back.”

And then he hung up.

I eyed him. “So what happened? Where is she?”

“She’s with her parents at their cabin,” Charlie said, grumbling. “The reception there sucks.”

I frowned. “But why didn't she tell you she was leaving?”

Charlie rubbed his forehead nervously. “She says she did tell me. I must have been too drunk to remember.”

I could see the shame and hurt plain as day on poor Charlie’s face. I took his hand as gently as possible, trying to comfort him. “You’ve had a lot to deal with, Charlie. Don’t judge yourself too harshly.”

He shook his head. “But what else don’t I remember?”

I paused, thinking back to the reason why I was here. To be with Charlie. To help him.

I had to help my mate.

“Let’s go back to the place where you thought you killed someone,” I said quietly. I didn’t want to draw attention from the other students. “Maybe we’ll find some clues that can help you remember there?”

Charlie gave me a small, hopeful smile. “You’d do that for me?”

“Of course,” I said. “Isn’t that what friends are for?”

Wasn’t that what *mates* were for?

\*\*\*\*

Charlie led me back to the spot in the woods where he thought he might have killed someone. It was absurd just to think that sentence, but that was just how the supernatural world worked. There was still nothing around the area, though. But before Charlie could get disappointed, I spoke up. “I can follow your scent and retrace your steps.”

He stared at me. “Wow.”

“What?”

“That’s a brilliant idea. You really are amazing.”

I had to hide my smile. Reaching out to take his hand, I moved forward, enjoying the warmth between us. Moving slowly, we eventually reached the bloody carcass of a raccoon. The stench made my stomach lurch.

“What’s that?” Charlie asked worriedly.

“A raccoon… that you might have killed,” I said, clearing my throat.

Charlie looked horrified.

“But hey!” I exclaimed. “At least it’s not a person! Try to see the upside, here!”

Charlie’s disgust turned into relief when he realized what I was saying. “Oh my god, you’re right! I’m not a murderer!”

I grinned—I loved to see him smile—but then I smelled something a few feet away.

I left Charlie jumping around, literally doing an adorable happy dance and talking about how lucky he was and how I’d saved his ass. Unable to ignore the new scent, I searched in the area behind us and then…

Under a fallen branch, I saw a torn up human arm.

**Episode 775**

LOLA

I woke up groggy and annoyed. I hated everything. The night before had sucked—so much drama. I used to find that exciting, but now I was just… tired.

I had no idea when I’d turned into my dads. Speaking of whom, I needed to check in with them at some point today while I “researched” Oregon colleges. It’d been the compromise for me to come back, but I wasn’t exactly in a position to start school or look at new ones.

I kind of had enough of my own shit going on.

Yawning, I stretched on the bed and noticed that Cali was already gone. I rolled over to see Jay snoring peacefully in the sleeping bag on the floor. He was adorable. Then I saw the spell book hanging out on the bedside table. I’d been reading through it all night—there was nothing about *due destini* to help Cali. I snuck another glance at Jay. I knew he didn’t really want me looking through this, but one little peek couldn’t hurt, right? I might’ve missed something.

I’d just opened the book when Jay started to stir. Scrambling, I shoved it back on the nightstand. Hopping up, I slid off the bed. I squeezed myself into the sleeping bag, cozying up to him. I hoped he hadn’t seen what I’d been doing.

“Good morning my love,” I said sweetly.

“Guh muffrin,” Jay said, burying his face in my neck.

Typical.

I laughed. “I said good morning.”

I couldn’t stop myself from leaning down and giving him a light kiss on the lips. His scent was delicious. He stirred at the contact, opening one eye, literally. Smiling, he wrapped his arm around me, pulling me closer.

The peck I gave him became a passionate kiss in seconds. His tongue brushed up against mine softly but deeply, with intent and purpose that made my stomach flip. His thumb traced my jawline as his other palm traced my hip. Breaking the kiss, I bit and kissed my way down his neck, and he choked out a laugh.

“Damn…” he said. “Remember the first day we saw this house?”

I faced him, smirking. “I think we were the ones to break in Mrs. Smith’s room.”

He grinned. “Maybe we should do that in every room in the house…”

“My sweet baby Jay. When did you become so devious?”

He laughed, pulling me in for another kiss before the hand on my hip moved to my ass, kneading, squeezing hard enough that I whimpered. I threw my leg over his torso, arching my hips closer to his. The intensity of his kiss and touch made goosebumps break out all over me, and there was something amazing about the familiarity of being with my mate. Of being with someone I loved, someone who could brush his mouth over my skin and groan at the taste and feel of me as if we hadn’t done this a million times before.

“I want you,” I rasped, pulling him on top of me. He grinned, panting, watching as I spread my legs for him. We started rubbing up against each other, creating the kind of fiction that had my breath catching, my skin turning damp. I kissed him, wrapping my thighs around him to get more pressure, and then—

We hit the bed and a book fell down, hitting Jay on the head.

“Ouch!” He rubbed his forehead. “What the hell?” he grumbled, confused. He eyed the book, and my stomach dropped. “Is that…” His eyes grew wide before he faced me. “Is that the spell book? Was it here with us the whole night? Were you reading it?!”

I shrugged, instantly ready to downplay it.

“Who cares?” I grabbed his shoulder, trying to pull him back for another kiss, but he stopped me. He moved backward, sitting up on his knees. His expression was torn between disbelief and shock. “Lola, answer me. Were you reading this?”

Oh, boy.

“Fine, I was. I couldn’t fall asleep so I did some light reading,” I said. “I wanted to find something that could help Cali. Happy now?”

“*No*,” he said tightly. “It’s not a book to read before you sleep, Lola. It’s a fucking spell book. You need to be careful.”

“No need to get all huffy, babe.”

Jay gave me a pointed look. “Remember what happened last time you used it? On the ferry?”

I opened my mouth and closed it, speechless at being called out like that.

“We’re supposed to use this to help with your shifting problem, Lola,” he said in a milder tone. “Not to play around in the middle of the night.”

I nodded, pressing my lips together. I just hadn’t been able to help myself, lately… My impulse control had become almost non-existent.

“I promise to stop fucking around with it,” I told Jay. “But can’t we talk about all that later?” I asked, moving closer to him again. I caressed his shoulder, hoping that he’d opt for sex rather than talking about shifting. “We were in the middle of something very, very important,” I whispered, biting his earlobe, “and then we got rudely interrupted by—”

“We’re not doing this right now, Lola,” he said sternly, grabbing my shoulders to move me away from him. I gasped. Since *when* did he turn me down?

“From this moment on, you are banned from reading the book,” he declared.

“Seriously?” I demanded.

“Yes. And you’re also banned…” He gestured at his body, standing up. He’d lost his pants earlier when we’d been grinding all up against each other, and I gulped at the sight of him. Especially when he gestured at himself and said, “You’re also banned from all *this*.”

I blinked at him. Then I choked on a surge of panic. “*What?*”

“You heard me,” he said, turning his back on me. Why was his back so hot? And his ass? Oh my god, this couldn’t be happening!

“You’re banning me from your body?” I almost shrieked. “Are you—have you lost your mind? We’re not having sex because I read a *book?*”

And they said that libraries promoted people’s well-being! What a bunch of bullshit.

“I’m currently off-limits, Lola. This isn’t a joke,” he said. But all I could think was that he *had* to be joking.

If he was joking, though, why had he just put his sweatpants back on?

“Well,” I scoffed, still not sure if he was kidding, “then you can’t have all *this*, either.” I pulled the sleeping bag away from my body and stood up. I was buck naked, and his eyes instantly fell on my bare body. I made a move toward him, swaying my hips.

“Lola…” His tone was a warning.

I ignored him, walking up to him and resting my hands on his shoulders. He stiffened at the contact, clearly affected. “Too bad I’ll have to finish off what we started on my own…” I took his hand, placing it against my stomach before starting to trail it downward. I nuzzled his cheek. “Feel how wet you’ve made me.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not going to give in.” Jay’s voice was strangled. But then he took a step back, away from me. *For real!*

I gaped at him, stunned.

“If you want the ban to end,” Jay continued, “then you need to give the book to Big Mac. Today.” He quickly put on his T-shirt. “And stop trying to tempt me, because it won’t work.”

I was still mildly shocked that he’d turned me down for real, but the fact that he *had* turned me down made me realize that he was being serious. Groaning, I fell back onto the bed, looking up the ceiling.

“Fine!” I huffed. “I’ll go talk to the witch.”

I was all grumpy on the outside, but on the inside, what I truly felt was worried. Hypatia had warned me that I could lose my wolf with this spell, and just thinking about that made it harder to breathe.

I frowned, punching the bed. He laughed. I eyed him, weighing my options before I spread my legs slightly. His gaze ping-ponged between my bare breasts and the spot between my thighs.

“Can you at least go down on me?” I asked. “*Please?*”

Jay went rigid before covering his eye with a groan. I could see the massive tent in the front of his sweatpants, so that was at least an ego boost. “Stop it, Lola!”

I huffed, cursing my luck.

\*\*\*\*

I made myself come very quickly—but also loudly—in the shower, just so Jay could hear and glare at me afterward. Suited him right. We then headed downstairs, the book secured tightly under my arm. I looked around for Cali, figuring she’d be somewhere. I had to tell her I’d had no luck so far with the *due destini*. But I couldn’t find Cali anywhere. What the heck? Had she gone out? But it was too early. Had she taken up jogging? No. Not Cali. Never gonna happen. She had to be around somewhere.

“Big Mac must not be up yet,” Jay said. “I’ll make us coffee.”

As Jay headed off to the kitchen, I saw Artemis coming inside. She looked like she’d been working out or running around in the forest. Whatever it was that Fae did. It was really striking, the resemblance she had to Cali, but older, slightly sharper edges to her.

I all but accosted her. “Hey Arty,” I said all cool and casual-like. “Have you seen Cali?”

“No, I haven’t seen her.” She pointed to the spell book. “What are you doing with that? Are you going to do that werewolf spell thing you wanted?”

I sighed. Wasn’t that the question? “I’m not sure yet.”

“Why not? It seems like the clear choice.”

I sighed again. If Artemis was anything, it was blunt. I didn’t know much else about her other than she was Cali’s sister and all. A fact I was still getting used to. Honestly, it made me jealous… It had always been me and Cali. She was my love-you-like-a-sister sister. And now she had a real one of those.

“It’s just a big decision,” I said.

Artemis shrugged. “I’m not a werewolf so I don’t really know much beyond what I’ve seen so far. What with all the shifting and the mates and the two mates.” She shook her head. “And the nakedness. It’s all kind of a lot to take in.”

“Well, the spell could mean I lose my wolf,” I said curtly.

That made her eyebrows shoot up. “So you wouldn’t be able to shift?”

I swallowed thickly. “It could be even worse. If the spell fails, I’d become human. No wolf at all.”

Artemis whistled. “That is a pretty big decision.”

“Yup,” I said, popping the P.

Just as I was about to go find Jay to save me from this awkward conversation, Artemis spoke again.

“So if you lost your wolf, what would that mean for the whole ‘mates’ thing?”

“Huh?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if the spell goes wrong and you turn human, would you still be mates with Jay?”

**Episode 776**

Nolan was looming over me, and he wasn’t killing me.

There was no attempt to murder, so I blinked in shock, instinctively clutching Cassandra’s book to my chest as if it could protect me. And then, when Nolan opened his mouth to speak to me, it wasn’t to curse or threaten. What he said instead was:

“Come on, we have to go.”

My eyes narrowed, because this man had to be off his rocker. Why would I ever go anywhere with him? We certainly wouldn’t be braiding each other’s hair and eating brunch together! I didn’t even know his zodiac sign—which probably wasn’t a good one, because he was a monster!

And yet he waved for me and headed toward the woods, clearly expecting me to follow.

*Great, just great! What the FUCK is happening right now? What is…*

I stopped that train of thought when realization struck me.

Did he think I was *Ava*?

What the hell were they up to?

For a tiny moment, I thought about running back into the house screaming, but Nolan was a werewolf. He could pounce on me before the scream left my lips. He was an evil asshole, but he was also Ava’s brother, and he thought I was Ava.

*He* thought *I* was Ava.

*Maybe if I play along*, I thought, *I’ll learn something about Ava, about everything that’s going on! And if not… Well, Nolan’s tried to kill me before.*

And this time, I had my Fae magic on my side. Also, if he wanted to kill me, he really needed to get in line—an ancient curse had already called dibs.

“We don’t have all day,” Nolan whisper-hissed at me.

*I’m coming, Mr. Bossy Pants! My GOD!* I said internally. Not out loud, of course. I was fairly sure that wouldn’t go over so well. I doubted Nolan enjoyed it when anyone talked back to him. Standing up slowly, I made sure the blanket was covering my wrist. If Nolan noticed that I wasn’t wearing the bracelet, he’d know I was the real Cali.

“For fuck’s sake, what’s taking you so long?” Nolan huffed, and I rushed toward him, praying that I wouldn’t trip on anything.

“I wanted to make sure that nobody was around,” I whispered. The answer seemed to appease him, thank god. He nodded and moved deeper into the woods, gesturing for me to follow. He looked around the area to make sure that we weren’t being tailed.

I realized that dear brother Nolan wasn’t really pissed off at me—the fake Ava—for taking too long to follow him. He must’ve been distressed already for another reason entirely—something had rattled his cage, and I wanted to find out what. I also wanted to figure out why and how Ava had managed to impersonate me for so long. Perhaps he could shed some light on that.

It was time for me to impersonate her.

*This is a great idea, Cali!* I told myself internally. *I mean, he might eat you, but it’s definitely a great idea in theory!*

My determination and self-praise started to chip way the further we got from the pack house. My werewolf boyfriends were pains in the ass most of the time, but I had to admit they would’ve been useful right about now.

“Where are we going?” I asked Nolan.

“I’m not sure,” he replied, continuing to fucking walk. “Everything backfired.”

*You don’t say!* I thought.

“Oh?” I said. “What do you mean by ‘everything,’ exactly?”

Nolan sighed. He seemed out of sorts, suddenly. Sad monster werewolf. “I never should have used you. I should have just been happy that you were back, but I was so angry with Xavier.”

Oh, good! We were getting somewhere.

“Then why *did* you use me?” I asked cautiously.

Nolan stayed silent for a brief moment. Then he said, “He burnt down the pack house.”

I frowned. “Who?”

Nolan’s jaw clenched, his anger seeping back in. “Silas. I thought I could bargain with him, but when I failed to deliver Xavier as I promised, he torched my home.”

I fought not to gape. I couldn’t show any shock, but the realization hit me like a ton of bricks. Nolan had been working with Silas all along?

“Maybe I can still make things right with Silas?” Nolan said out loud, drawing to a halt. *Finally*. He leaned against a tree, shaking his head. “He’s supposed to be my ally, and now…”

“Are you sure you want to do that?” I blurted, trying not to show my panic. “It doesn’t seem like working with Silas has helped you.”

Nolan offered me a sad smile. It was disturbing how human he looked. How hurt and harmless. But I couldn’t pity him. I *couldn’t*. This man had tortured Xavier. He kidnapped me once! I clenched my fingers on the sides of Cassandra’s journal, swallowing down my anger.

“I don’t have much choice but turning to Silas, Ava…” He stared at me. “But I need to know if you’re going to help me.”

Nolan looked like a puppy right now, but everybody knew that he was fucking Cujo on acid as a person, and a werewolf. I needed to get the fuck away from him, ASAP. Whatever his plan was, I couldn’t agree to help—at least not yet. I didn’t trust him, obviously, and if he found out I was the real Cali, he’d probably offer me to Silas on a platter. With my tears for garnish.

Then again, Nolan was a link to Silas.

Wouldn’t Greyson want to use that?

I had to help Greyson and the pack.

Despite my fear, I had to trap Nolan. But I also needed to buy more time. “I can’t go with you right now,” I said. “I’m expected back at the pack house. Maybe we can meet tonight?”

Nolan frowned, looking disappointed but hopeful. Hook, line, and sinker.

“Okay,” he said. “Meet me at the remains of our pack house at midnight.”

I nodded and then, as casually as possible, I got the fuck out of there.

\*\*\*\*

I felt like I was in a dream when I got back to the Redwood house. Had that really happened? Had I just gotten away from Nolan by the skin of my teeth? And now I had to meet him tonight! And he was working with *Silas?*

The developments were out of control!

*And I’m still* alive?

I was walking into the house, my heart pounding with adrenaline and leftover fear, when a tornado—a.k.a. Lola—struck. “Hey!” she said, looking annoyed. “Where you been? I was looking for you!”

“I took a walk,” I said, fighting not to show how affected I was by what had just happened. “I needed to clear my head.” I noticed the spell book on the kitchen table and my eyes widened. “I hope you haven’t been reading any more spells out loud.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry, Jay won’t let me. Starting today, he isn’t letting me do anything fun, and that includes sucking his—”

“Where did you go for your walk?” Jay asked me, cutting Lola off. I sensed a weird tension between them, but I ignored it for now. We had bigger issues to deal with. “You should really be careful out there right now.”

For once, Lola agreed with his caution. “He’s right. Next time bring one of us when you want to go for a walk, okay?”

“Sure,” I said nervously. “Gotta head to the bathroom. See you in a bit.”

When I slipped away, I did not go to the bathroom—I went looking for Greyson. I needed to tell him all about Nolan, and that he would be meeting “Ava”—a.k.a. me—tonight. I rounded the corner to his room just as he was coming out. He was shirtless, wearing just a pair of jeans, and the sight of him was breathtaking as ever. The moment we made eye contact, my stomach filled with butterflies.

Breathless, because I really couldn’t help it, I spoke first. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Greyson replied broodily. It looked like he hadn’t slept at all, but he also looked good enough to eat, which was a problem. We stared at each other for a beat too long, and I felt like I was vibrating. I also couldn’t stop staring at his mouth.

This was truly a groundbreaking non-conversation.

“I wanted to talk to you,” I finally managed. “Do you have a sec?”

Greyson moved closer to me. I swallowed thickly, clutching the book to my chest once more. My heart pounded underneath it with every step he took. He paused two feet away from me, staring into my eyes. “If this is about last night…” he said.

I held my breath, thoughts exploding inside my head.

*What is he going to say? What is happening right now? Why does he look like he wants to die, but also like he wants to pick me up and fuck me against the stair railing? Is railing sex as uncomfortable as it looks, or can one make it work? Is the way he’s looking at me the prelude to a confession? But WHAT kind of confession? Oh my GOD—*

My mind was reeling, but then Greyson spoke and everything stopped.

“I’m making your decision for you, Cali,” he said. “I’m not going to be part of this.”

**Episode 777**

VIOLET

“Hey, what’s going on?” Charlie asked me.

I was fighting not to start screaming, my eyes fixed on the arm. A second later, I heard him gasp. He’d seen it too.

“Oh. My. God,” he choked out. “I did it. I’m actually a killer.” He started dry-heaving, resting his hand on a tree to keep standing. “My chest is hurting, oh my god, I’m—I’m going to be sick!”

“Charlie, no!” I reached out to him, holding both his arms. “You didn’t do it. Please calm down—”

He kept dry-heaving, though he still managed to ask, “But how—how do you know?”

“This,” I said, gesturing at the severed arm, “doesn’t have your scent. There’s no way you could have killed someone without leaving your scent. Calm down for me, okay?”

Slowly, Charlie’s breathing evened out as he looked into my eyes. He seemed to be feeling better by the second. “I’m not a killer,” he finally said.

“You’re not,” I said firmly, squeezing his shoulder. He glanced at my hand on him, but then realization grew on his features. Along with newfound alarm. “But if I didn't do this, who did? Is there a serial killer on the loose?”

I shook my head, letting him go. I hated breaking the contact, but I needed to stay focused here, and Charlie’s beautiful, sad face wasn’t helping. “No serial killer. At least not a human one.” I sniffed the air. “This is the smell of another werewolf, only it’s kinda messed up—like someone was trying to mask it.”

Charlie stared at me, blinking. For a moment I thought he was having a stroke, but then he offered me a soft smile. I realized that the expression on his face was… amazement?

“Whoa,” he said. “You’re like a detective.”

I blushed at his praise. “It’s nothing. You try it.”

Charlie paused, sniffing the air. “All I can scent is the woods.”

I shook my head, snorting. “Honestly, you should be glad. It smells awful.” And the smell was getting worse by the minute. I wanted to get out of here. Poor Charlie was already way too freaked out, so I couldn’t tell him this, but not only was the severed arm gross and scary, something was really wrong here. Werewolves didn’t *do* this—they didn’t leave tracks, or body parts. They didn’t kill for no apparent reason. And where was the rest of the body?

I shuddered at the thought, and Charlie noticed. “Are you okay?” He flinched, then added, “Of course you’re not. I’m sorry, that was a dumb question, I—”

“No, it’s fine,” I said quickly. “We should just leave.”

He held out his phone nervously. “Shouldn’t I call the police?”

“No!” I almost shouted.

Charlie blinked at me. “But we found a dead…” He cringed. “*Arm*.”

I shook my head. “If this is the work of a werewolf, we do not want the police poking around.” I grabbed Charlie by the hand. “This is our secret for now. Okay?”

Charlie eyed my hand in his, but he didn’t pull away. He nodded. “Okay.”

He put his phone back in his pocket, and we got the hell out of there. The smell was making my stomach queasy. The further we got from the scene, the better I felt. The more I could take in Charlie’s sweet scent. The scent of my mate.

There was nothing more soothing.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said a few minutes later, breaking the comfortable silence.

I turned to him. He seemed nervous, but still so beautiful. “Really?” I asked. I sounded so hopeful that it was pathetic, but I couldn’t help myself.

“Of course,” he said. “Not only do I feel better, but I also trust you. This isn’t something I could ever discuss with Sandi, or with anyone, really—except you.”

I felt my lips stretch into a smile. This sounded… amazing. The intimacy, the closeness, the validation. This was how things were supposed to be between us. He kept talking about how good he felt around me, and I couldn’t help but hope and wonder: when would Charlie start to understand that we were mates?

Because I was now convinced that he was going to. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but someday he was going to wake up and realize that I was his mate and no other person would do.

We were literally meant to be together, and to me, there was something so comforting about that. About the idea of never being alone again. About the idea of being loved.

Could Charlie ever love me?

I hoped so hard for it that my heart felt like it was about to burst.

By the time we got back to the dorm, Charlie had calmed down. We walked in and he closed the door behind us. I took a seat at his desk, and he sat on his bed, taking a deep breath.

“So being a werewolf can be… complicated, huh?” he asked sheepishly.

I winced. “Yep. Are you feeling a little better?”

“I am,” he admitted. “But only thanks to you. How can I ever repay you?”

*Just love and adore me sooner rather than later, please!* I wanted to say, but I stopped myself.

I saw that his hands were shaking, and a pang of worry hit me. “You’re not—you’re not going to start drinking now, are you?” I asked reluctantly.

Charlie flinched. “No, I…” He shook his head bitterly. “I hate that I’ve made you think that, but I get what you mean.” He looked away, rubbing the back of his neck. “I have conditioning training. There’s no time to drink. And the truth is, I don’t want to drink…” He glanced up at me. His voice got lower. “Not when I know you’re around.”

There was a moment of silence between us as we stared at each other.

I had no idea what to do, so I just stood up abruptly. “So I gotta get going.”

He blinked, standing up from his bed in the same exact way. “Right, of course, uh…” He shuffled his feet toward me and cleared his throat. “I feel like I should… I mean…” He took a deep breath. I could tell he was giving himself a pep talk of some sort, because when he looked at me again, he seemed resolved. He stepped forward and wrapped me in a hug. “Thank you, Violet. For everything.”

My whole body felt like it was ready to explode at the contact.

The hug was way too sort, and when Charlie let go, I had to keep myself from letting out a whimper of protest.

“Everything, uh, everything will be okay,” I said, almost squeaking as I looked up at him.

He smiled. He was so sweet I could’ve died right then and there, *Jesus Christ*. “Let’s meet later,” he said. “How about that?”

I could only nod breathlessly.

\*\*\*\*

Still reeling from Charlie’s hug, I headed off campus. *But where should I go now?* Part of me wanted to go back to the scene of the crime, but the truth was, no matter what Charlie said, I wasn’t a detective. And the arm was gross. *Yuck*. I felt like I needed a shower, and definitely to never see it again.

After checking out the bus schedules, I decided to go to Cali and Lola’s apartment. It was only a short ride from campus, and—thank goodness—I still had the key. I wished I had my phone, though. I would’ve been able to call Xavier, ask him what to do. I was certain that he’d know how to deal with all this. He *was* sorta like a detective, at least more than I was.

I rode the bus to Lola and Cali’s apartment, happy with my choice. I hoped the girls had a landline so I could call everyone. I should’ve asked Charlie if I could use his phone, but now it was too late to go back. I’d feel embarrassed, after we’d ended our meet-up on such a high note. Smiling at the memory of the hug, I moved through the gate and headed toward the apartment’s entrance, but then I realized…

The door wasn’t locked.

It was broken.

*Shit.*

I felt the urge to flee, but I couldn’t hear any sounds coming from inside. Shaking, I slowly opened the door, ready to shift and attack if necessary. My eyes went wide at the catastrophe—it was like a bomb had gone off. The place had been ransacked. Everything was tipped over, emptied, trashed. The TV was still there, so it hadn’t been stolen. But what *had* been taken, then? What the heck was *happening*? Who would do this? And why? It wasn’t like either Cali or Lola were rolling in money. Seemed like a thief would’ve found someone with more to steal.

Still worried, I was starting to clean up the space when I found an old iPhone lying on the floor. Gingerly, I picked it up, surprised to see it. It was working, though. No lock screen. Heading toward the bathroom to see if there had been any damage done there, I called Xavier. It went straight to voicemail. I frowned. Where was he?

“It’s Violet,” I told the machine, starting to leave a message. “I’m in—”

I was about to finish my sentence when I faced the bathroom.

I dropped the phone.

In blood-red letters, the message on the mirror said one thing: “MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS.”

**Episode 778**

“I’m making your decision for you, Cali,” Greyson said. “I’m not going to be part of this.”

I took in his words, processing.

*Processing.*

*Processing.*

Still. Fucking. *Processing*.

And then the one thing I wanted to scream at him, at the top of my lungs, was: “*Excuse me?* After all this… HOW. DARE. YOU!”

On the outside, though, I kept my cool. For once. Because I didn’t need to wake up Xavier, even if he’d probably have been happy to watch me fight with his asshole of a brother.

Instead, I simply told Greyson, “No.”

He frowned, taken aback. “No?”

I narrowed my eyes at him, getting all up in his face. “That’s right, Mr. Alpha. *No*. You’re being selfish and doing that thing where you completely push me away and ignore my feelings in the matter!”

He sighed. Again!

“Cali, I’m not ignoring your feelings—”

“Yes, you are!” I whisper-huffed, poking his chest. “And you don’t get to do this again. At least this time it’s not over the phone, but I’m not letting you do it either way.”

Greyson stood there, staring at me. Wide-eyed. He rarely—if ever—was shocked by anything, so there was a part of me that was rejoicing. I didn’t give a fuck if I sounded petty or immature.

I was *right*.

He was *wrong*.

Or, at least, I was more right than he was.

“Do you understand how all this makes me feel, Cali?” His voice was low, cutting. He took a step closer, and I was surrounded by the scent of him—fresh linen. “I can’t stand the idea of you with him. *Ever*,” he said gruffly. “The thought of him even touching you makes me want to tear his head off. Or my own, so I can stop seeing it.”

“You really believe I’m having fun here, then? What do you think all this is like for *me?*” I snapped. “What do you think it’s been like for me all this time, Greyson? All the times that you’ve pushed me away included?”

He opened his mouth to say something, but I raised my hand in a “stop” motion.

“I’m not doing this right now,” I said. “Especially not while Xavier is sleeping down the hallway.”

Greyson’s expression became so thunderous I half-thought he was about to explode. “Right. It’s all about Xavier.”

I groaned, shaking my head. “Stop it, Greyson! We have bigger problems right now—I’m here to talk to you about Nolan!”

He stared at me for a moment, eyes narrowed. “We’re not talking about this here.”

He turned his back on me, so I assumed I was supposed to follow. And I did, because there was no way he was getting away right now. He led me back to his room, and…

I lost my train of thought, flushing in an instant. I couldn’t help but remember how differently last night could’ve gone.

*Bad Cali, no!* I thought, scolding myself. *Don’t think about that right now! Focus!*

I forced myself to get a grip. We had issues to discuss, and also Greyson was being an asshole, so I wouldn’t have been doing anything with him right now anyway. Even if he begged! Even if he got on his knees and looked up at me and begged me and then slid my panties off and asked to kiss my—

“Cali?” Greyson said. Startled, I turned to face him. He had put a shirt on while I’d been thinking things that I wasn’t supposed to be thinking. “What did you want to talk about?”

I glared at him, because I was frustrated with him. For various reasons. “I—”

“Wait,” he said, changing gears. He walked toward the door and closed it, then walked toward me again. He loomed over me, looking down, still so close that I could feel the heat of his body. *Ugh!*

I needed to fucking *focus* here, so I took a couple of steps away from him.

“Go ahead. What’s going on?” he asked. “What about Nolan?”

I wasn’t sure how Greyson would take the news, so I decided to blurt it all out at once, like pulling off a Band-Aid. We had no time to waste. “He just talked to me outside.”

The second my words sank in, Greyson was *furious*. “*What*?” he snapped, looking me up and down. “Did he hurt you? Did he threaten you? I’m going to—”

He was about to march out of the room to fight an enemy that had been gone for a while now when I blocked his way.

“Stop freaking out,” I declared, cutting him off. “He thinks I’m Ava.”

Greyson froze. He looked genuinely shocked by this information, so I took the opportunity to continue.

“I was able to hide the fact that I didn’t have the bracelet, and I talked to him, and he talked to me, and in the end…”

Greyson stared at me. “In the end?”

“I convinced him to meet with me tonight,” I said calmly.

Greyson gasped. “*What?*”

“He thinks he and I are going to run off together, away from all of this. To get Silas back on our side.”

Greyson stared at me, realization dawning. “So Xavier was telling the truth. They *are* working with our father.”

I nodded. “Or at least trying to.”

“What else did Nolan say?” Greyson asked, tilting his chin up.

“It sounds like he thinks Silas burned down the Samara pack house.”

Greyson’s eyes flashed. “If we can get to him, then we can neutralize and hold him for answers.”

“Exactly,” I said. “That’s what I thought too! Cool, right?”

Greyson didn’t speak. He just gazed at me so intensely, I had to fight a shiver. He looked me over from head to toe, as if he needed to figure out everything that could ever make me tick. His nostrils flared, and I had the wild, outrageous thought that he could actually scent how much he was affecting me right now—how much I wanted him, how much I wanted to grab him and kiss him and pull him close enough that neither of us were able to breathe.

I wanted to close all this goddamn distance, literal and metaphorical, between us.

I could barely fucking *stand it*.

“Well.” I cleared my throat awkwardly. “I guess… Good, then? Hope that was, um… helpful.”

I glanced at the bed behind Greyson without meaning to. And my awkwardness promptly got so massive, I could actually feel the weight of it on my shoulders.

*Greyson and I could have… Last night, on that bed, we could have—*

“Don’t worry, Cali,” Greyson muttered, interrupting my thoughts. “I won’t let Nolan hurt you. We’re going to take care of this.”

I paused, squinting at him and this new change in his demeanor. He didn’t seem mad anymore. Or overly intense. Did that mean we were okay? I itched to ask him, but I didn’t want to lose face and seem eager first.

“I just wanted you to know,” I said as casually as possible. “So I guess I’ll be going.”

… Even though part of me wanted to stay, to throw him on the bed and pick up where we’d left off.

*No, Cali, stop this madness!* I told myself, scolding once more. *Now’s not the best time!*

Would there ever be a good time, though? Probably not. Catastrophe seemed to hit us from every angle, all the time. But I wasn’t about to throw myself at Greyson. Especially not after he’d said that he wanted out earlier, before I’d mentioned Nolan. That whole idea had been absurd, anyway.

He wasn’t allowed to walk out on me.

He was supposed to love me, no matter what! Till literal death did us part!

Right?

*Oh, wow. This is all so healthy*, I thought sarcastically. *SO. HEALTHY!*

Taking a deep—and still-very awkward—breath, I was heading for the door when Greyson blocked my way. Looming again. That shouldn’t have been so sexy, but everything about him was sexy, and my brain was starting to turn into mush. We stared into each other’s eyes, the air between us so electrifying I couldn’t suppress my shudder this time.

He gently took my arm, his touch soft and gentle but still so powerful that a whimper left my throat. He heard it. He looked at me, glancing at my lips while biting his, the energy pouring off him so potent with raw need and magnetism that I was certain…

For a moment, I was certain that this was going to happen.

Greyson would kiss me.

Greyson would kiss me and touch me and love me and tell me everything I wanted to hear—that he could wait for me, that he could be patient for me, because he felt it in his heart that we were meant to be.

For a brief moment, I was certain that Greyson would finally give himself to me.

But then he broke eye contact.

He looked down at my arm and traced a finger along the black vein. “I don’t have these veins, Cali. I don’t have them, because you don’t love me.”

I stopped breathing.

Greyson looked haunted. He looked wounded and desperate, like he’d lost all hope. Like he’d never be whole again. His voice broke as he whispered, “The veins prove that you love Xavier more than me.”

**Episode 779**

XAVIER

Walking up felt like rising from the dead, and I blinked into the morning sunlight that was filtering into my room. I threw back the blankets with a groan and looked down—I was still naked and covered with dried blood and smeared mud from the night before. It was all over the sheets, too. Not a pretty sight. My body felt like it had been hit by a truck.

I hauled myself out of bed and stumbled to my feet, confused and achy. I was looking around the room, trying to piece together the events of the night before, when I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror over my dresser and stopped, staring in shock. *Fuck*. So it hadn’t been a dream.

The black veins snaking across my chest had faded somewhat, but I could still see them, and I traced my finger over them, following their path across my skin. Cali had them, too, I remembered. What the hell were they? I tore my eyes away from them and looked down at my leg. The dried blood made it look pretty gruesome, but when I flexed my foot, I could tell it was healing. *Fae blood*. Big Mac had given me Fae blood. That was what had healed me. The memories of the night before were coming back to me in jagged pieces, but I was sure it was Fae blood that had saved me. Cali’s blood. Again.

Everything was such a blur, and I rubbed my eyes, trying to remember what had happened the night before. The real Cali stepping out of the car, the look on her face when I’d sprinted at her, ready to kill. The Ava-Cali appearing on the steps of the pack house, confusing the hell out of everyone, then getting away, running into the woods. I had given chase—I hadn’t even thought about it, just raced after her. I’d been so intent on finding her and ripping her to fucking pieces. I’d almost caught her, too. And then—the trap. That silver bear trap. I’d thought it was the end, until Rishika had found me.

I closed my eyes, remembered her voice drifting to me in the middle of the haze of pain. Then Jay had been there, getting me free. After that, my memory got muddled. I’d been foggy because of the pain and the lethal effects of the silver, but I remembered that Big Mac had given me both Cali’s and Artemis’s blood to heal the wound. Because they were both Fae—*sisters,* I remembered, the word swimming into my memory. I shook my head. I was going to have to talk to Cali about that. *Sisters?* *Artemis?* When had she found out about that? How was that even possible?

There was just so much going on right now. Ava, Nolan, Silas, two Calis, silver traps in the woods, Cali’s new sister… I ran my hand through my hair so it stood up on end. What the hell else had I missed?

*Wait*. I looked up, suddenly, catching sight of my wide, startled eyes in the mirror. How had I forgotten? I’d had a nightmare. It must have been an effect of the silver. I’d dreamt that Cali and Greyson had been here—here, in my bedroom, barely dressed—while I’d been too sick to move, paralyzed because of the silver and the black veins. Everyone had been talking, and then Cali had taken my hand—*and Greyson’s*—and said she had decided to be with both of us.

I took a deep breath, then another, trying to shake off the disturbing feeling of the dream. Even now—wide awake—the thought of it made me feel both sick and furious. I’d felt that way in the dream, too, but I’d been too weak to do anything about it. It had been a fucking nightmare.

I gripped the dresser and gave my head a hard shake. “It was just a dream,” I muttered to myself. “Just a fucking dream.”

Annoyed with myself for feeling so unnerved, I pushed myself upright and hobbled to the bathroom to flip on the shower. This was bullshit. Dreams were for poets. All *I* wanted to do was wash off the blood and then go find Cali.

\*\*\*\*

*Hey bro. My twin sense tells me you’re brooding. Am I right?*

I smiled down at the text from Colton as I dried my hair with a towel.

*No more than usual. How are you, man? How’s Maya?*

I lobbed the wet towel back into the bathroom and tossed the phone onto my bed. Then I pulled open a dresser drawer, looking for clothes.

Colton’s reply came a moment later:

*Pain in my ass, as usual.* 🤪 *Speaking of nice asses, how’s Cali? You two get everything worked out?*

I yanked on a clean T-shirt with a frown. I knew it had just been a dream, but every time I thought about Cali, I got that shaken, unnerved feeling I’d had in the nightmare, and I had no idea how to reply to Colton. I pulled on my jeans and grabbed my phone, trying to decide what to say, but then I saw I had a new voicemail notification. I navigated over to look at it, but it was from a number I didn’t recognize.

Probably spam.

*She’s fine*, I texted to Colton, keeping it vague. *Talk later. Gotta go.*

I went back to my voicemails to delete the message, but I stopped when I saw the number had a *218* area code. That was Minnesota. I frowned down at my phone. Who the hell was calling me from Minnesota?

“It’s Violet. I’m in—” Violet stopped speaking suddenly and screamed so loud I almost dropped my phone.

I stared down at the thing, waiting for more, but that was it. The message was over.

“What the *fuck?*” My mind was racing. What the hell had happened? Why was Violet calling me from fucking Minnesota, to start with? She was meant to be here, at the pack house. And what had happened to make her scream like that?

*Maybe it’s an old message*, I prayed as I fumbled with the buttons on my jeans. I pulled my door open and dashed down the hall, trying to remember which room was Violet’s. I yanked the door open and stared into the room.

Empty.

Maybe she was downstairs.

I’d just turned to check when Greyson’s door opened. He stepped out, followed by Cali.

They didn’t see me, so I stepped back into the shadows of the dim hall, watching them. Seeing her set off a chain reaction of memories—Cali telling me that she wanted to be with both Greyson and me; Cali holding my hand; Cali looking at me, pain in her eyes.

But that had just been just a nightmare… Hadn’t it?

I watched Greyson and Cali. They were both fully dressed this morning, and they weren’t touching, though Cali did look strangely flushed as she looked up at him. I didn’t like it. Not one bit.

I started walking toward them before I’d fully thought it through.

“We need to talk,” I snapped, looking at Greyson. I needed to tell him about Violet, but at my words, Cali looked up, her face going pale.

Greyson looked unbothered by my approach and gave me an assessing look. “You look better. How’s your leg?”

I didn’t answer.

“You’re up,” Cali said. There was an edge to her voice, but I couldn’t interpret it. “I was just about to check on you. I was worried about you after last night.”

I looked down at her. I was sure she had been. “I’m fine.”

“Even after my blood? They weren’t sure what the veins would do to you…” She said, looking desperately worried.

“I’m fine,” I said again.

She cared so much about me that she’d just slept with my fucking brother.

*Wait*. My heart pounded. *Had* she slept with Greyson?

“Yeah? Doesn’t seem to me that you were thinking about me at all,” I bit out. Cali flinched at the harsh sound of my voice, but I went on without giving her a chance to answer. “Violet isn’t in her room. Where is she?”

“Why?” Cali asked, frowning. “Is something wrong?”

“You tell me,” I said, holding out my phone.

I cued up the voicemail and Greyson and Cali listened to it. When they heard Violet scream, Cali’s face went white as a sheet.

“Oh my god,” she breathed. She looked up at me. “What happened to her?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“We have to find her,” Cali said in a rush. “Where could she be?” She looked terrified. Her whole body had started to shake with fear.

“I tried calling her back—” I started, then watched, dumbstruck, as Greyson put his arm around Cali’s shoulders, pulling her close, tucking her into his body.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay,” he said in a low, soothing voice. “We’ll find her, okay? We will.”

Cali took a deep, shuddering breath, letting herself be comforted by him, and nodded.

I narrowed my eyes, glaring at them. Maybe what I’d thought was a dream hadn’t been. Maybe I had seen Greyson all but naked with Cali in his arms. I was about to ask as much when my phone rang. I looked down at it and froze.

“Who is it?” Cali asked.

I looked up. It was the same number Violet had left a message from. “It’s Violet.”

**Episode 780**

VIOLET

“Hey,” I said, relieved as hell that Xavier had answered my FaceTime call. Just the sight of his face made me feel better, even though he looked worried and mad as hell.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“I’m in Minnesota,” I admitted. “At Cali and Lola’s old apartment.”

“What? *Why?*” he demanded, looking terrifyingly angry. “You’re supposed to be here! Why didn’t you tell anyone where you were going?!”

“Can I just tell you what’s going on here?” I asked, my heart beating hard.

He took a deep breath, obviously trying to get himself under control. “What’s going on?”

“So I came over to Cali’s apartment, and the door was open, and Xavier, the place has been ransacked.” I switched the camera so he could see the disaster zone.

“Oh my god.” That was Cali’s voice. “What the hell happened in there? Who could have done that?”

“Wait,” I said, my heart thudding in my chest. “It gets worse, actually.” I walked into the bathroom and flipped on the light. There was a collective gasp when Xavier and Cali saw the writing on the mirror.

“Okay, Violet.” Xavier’s voice was commanding, and I switched the camera back, so I was looking at him again. “You need to get out of there. Now.”

“Wait, Xavier. This isn’t the first time this has happened. Remember?” Cali said quietly. I could see her shoulder in the frame, but I couldn’t see her face. Her voice sounded scared.

“I remember,” Xavier said grimly, looking over at her.

I didn’t like the sound of that.

“You shouldn’t have left the pack house, Violet. Especially with no way for us to contact you.” That voice was Greyson’s, and he sounded pissed. “What are you even doing there? You need to get out of that apartment, now.”

Cali stepped into the camera’s frame. “Violet, go to my parents’ house. Tell my mom what happened. She’ll protect you from whoever did this. Go now, okay?”

I nodded. “Okay. I will. But I wanted to talk to you about what happened with Charlie, too. He’s really worried because he thinks—”

“Violet, you know I want to hear all about this. And Lola, too. But you need to get somewhere safe first, okay?” Cali said.

“Yeah. Get out of there!” Xavier snapped.

“Violet! Leave!” Greyson hollered, still off-screen.

“I promise we can talk about Charlie when you’re safe, okay?” Cali said. “Now go to my parents’!”

I didn’t love being screamed at by the three of them, but I was only too happy to get the hell out of that apartment. I didn’t think whoever had written that message on the mirror was still around, but the place was freaking me out, so I pulled the front door shut behind me.

“What do you think that message means?” I asked, heading toward the street.

Xavier glanced off-screen—probably at Greyson—then back at me, shaking his head. “I’m not sure.”

I bit my lip. “Do you think it has something to do with Silas?”

“Why?” Xavier asked sharply. “Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “I just have this… feeling. Not even a feeling, but a fear, maybe. That he’s tracked me here. All the way to Minnesota.”

Xavier looked away again, his mouth a grim line.

“There’s no way to know that,” Greyson’s voice said, the tone rational. “Not unless we were there to confirm it ourselves. And you’re not doing that, not by yourself. Just get to Cali’s parents’ house. Go straight there and let us know the moment you arrive.”

“Okay, I will,” I said. “I’m going to go. I have to call an Uber. I’ll call you when I get there.”

I ended the call before the three of them could yell at me any more and looked down at the phone. I was about to order a car, but then I stopped, thinking about Charlie.

He was at practice. Was he safe there? If this had anything to do with Silas, then there was no way to be safe anywhere. And what about the body in the woods? Was that connected to this? Was someone following us?

I bit my lip again as a sharp wind blew up, sending the leaves on the sidewalk scuttling around my feet. Had coming back to Minnesota been a mistake? Had I put Charlie in danger?

I was making myself crazy, asking questions I couldn’t answer. There was only one thing to do: I was going to stop by Charlie’s practice on the way to Cali’s house, just to make sure he was okay. I had to, anyway. I needed to tell him what had happened and what I’d found. I had to warn him. I also had to tell him I was going to Cali’s parents’ house, and that he could find me there.

Cali and Lola’s apartment was close to campus, so I didn’t bother calling a car. I set off, walking fast, my head filled with worst-case scenarios. Charlie was smart, but he didn’t know how dangerous the world could be. He was too trusting. Anything could happen. What if Silas was here? What if he kidnapped Charlie? What if he hurt Charlie or his family? What if…

I *had* to calm down. I had to. If I showed up to Charlie’s practice all freaked out, it would only freak Charlie out. He always noticed things like that. And he was already so upset and confused about everything. I took a deep breath as I got closer to campus. I needed to be strong and rational, even though I felt terrified and completely freaked out.

But… I’d told him everything was going to be okay. I’d promised him. What if it wasn’t? What if I couldn’t keep that promise? Charlie was everything to me, and I didn’t want to let him down. Especially not after he’d hugged me. And not just that hug—that *kiss*!

Everything about him felt so right. Touching him, hugging him, kissing him…

I reached the practice fields and looked around, searching for him. I spied his tall, muscular form in the distance and started toward him. He was standing, holding his lacrosse stick, talking to someone—probably a teammate. But, as I got closer, I narrowed my eyes. I recognized who that was. That wasn’t a teammate. That was Sandi!

My heart sank. Sandi was back from the cabin?

I stopped. I couldn’t talk to Charlie about anything that had just happened—not while Sandi was there.

I watched, horrified, as Charlie took Sandi’s hand. I swallowed hard and took a step back. I needed to get out of there. Just as I was about to turn, Charlie looked up and caught my eye. I froze for a moment as our gazes locked. Everything hurt.

Then, with a ragged breath, I spun on my heel and hurried back the way I’d come. I shouldn’t have come to campus at all. Greyson had told me to go straight to Tom and Orla’s, and that was what I should have done. They’d all been so adamant. This was all a mistake. What had I been thinking?

Tears threatened to spill down my cheeks as I blindly walked the streets to Cali’s parents’ house. It was a long walk, but I didn’t mind. It felt good to move—to pound my feet against the pavement.

I was such an idiot. Of course Charlie was still with Sandi! They hadn’t broken up. Charlie had always been crystal clear about how he saw me—as a *friend*, and nothing more.

A traitor tear fell down my cheek and I dashed it away with the heel of my hand. Charlie had always been clear. It was my own heart that was making things complicated. I had always wanted more than he was willing to give. So, I had to ask myself: was being friends with Charlie going to be enough for me? Could I handle *just* being friends?

I thought about it for another mile. The alternative was—what? Not having Charlie in my life? That wasn’t possible, so friends was going to have to be enough. At least for now.

As I rounded the corner to Cali’s street and the house came into view, I wiped the last tears from my eyes. They didn’t need to see me crying.

My phone rang and I reached for it, knowing it might be Xavier or Greyson calling to see where I was.

“Hi,” I said, trying to make my voice sound normal.

“Are you at my mom’s house?” Cali asked, her worried voice filling my ear.

“I’m just getting there now,” I said. “Calm down.”

“What’s taking you so long? I thought you were getting a car.”

“I decided I wanted to walk and not spend the money,” I said, leaving out the part about stopping by campus to see Charlie. I knew what Cali’s reaction to that would be, and I wasn’t in the mood to hear it.

“Violet,” Cali growled.

“I’m just walking up,” I assured her. “I’m at the driveway, and now I’m at the porch steps—hang on.”

“What?” Cali asked.

I didn’t answer. My heart was pounding and my mouth had gone dry as I looked down at my feet.

“What?” Cali asked again, her voice filled with fear. “Violet, what’s going on?”

“There’s blood on the steps, Cali,” I whispered.

“What?” Cali gasped.

I swallowed. “Lots of blood.”

**Episode 781**

“There’s so much blood, Cali,” Violet said.

“Oh god,” I murmured, my stomach clenching so tight I thought I was going to be sick. The last thing I expected when Violet called was that one of my parents might be hurt. Or worse. What could have had happened? My mind spun with the possibilities, every one of them terrible.

“The door isn’t shut all the way. It’s a little bit open, like at your apartment,” Violet whispered. “Should I go in? Cali?”

*Of course you should go in!* I wanted to shout. *Get in there and find out what happened to my parents!* But I took a breath, trying to think rationally. I did want to know what was going on—I *had* to know—but I didn’t want to endanger Violet.

“Wait,” I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking. “Maybe you should call the police first.” Or the MIB, I thought wildly. I looked around my room, wondering if I still had their number.

Violet gave a short, nervous laugh. “Cali, I don’t need the police. I’m a werewolf, remember? I’m going to go in, okay?”

I swallowed. “Okay. Just be super careful.” I held my breath, listening to Violet’s heavy breathing and the gentle creak as she pushed the door open. I could hear her soft footfalls on the wood floor.

“There’s more blood in here. Like a trail,” she said, her voice low.

My heart felt like it was beating out of my chest. “Oh god. Get out of there, Violet.”

“Hang on,” she whispered. “I can hear someone talking…”

My head was spinning, and I sat on the edge of my bed so I wouldn’t pass out. “Violet, don’t go see who it is. Just get out of there. Call the police. Do you hear me?” I gripped the footboard of my bed so tightly my knuckles turned white. Who was in my parents’ house? Where had the blood come from? I listened hard. Now I could hear Violet’s voice in the background.

“Cali?” a male voice came over the line on Violet’s phone.

“Dad?” I asked, my heart stuttering to a stop.

“Hey, pumpkin,” he said, his voice calm and steady, if slightly sheepish. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I just had a little accident with the weed whacker out front. It jammed up and I was trying to clear it and cut my hand.”

“Are you okay?” I asked breathlessly.

“I’m fine,” he said soothingly. “It’s no big deal. Your mom fixed me right up. Good thing she was here.”

He gave a little laugh and I felt the muscles in my shoulders unknotting. I knew that laugh. It was his way of saying not to worry.

“Here’s your mom. She wants to stay hi. Talk to you later.”

“Cali?”

“Hey, Mom,” I said, settling back onto my bed, feeling a lot better.

“Are you okay?” she asked nervously.

“Are you?” I asked.

“Oh, we’re fine,” she said lightly. “It’s just your dad.” She lowered her voice. “You know him—he thinks he’s so much handier than he is. Can you imagine? Trying to clear a jam without turning the thing off first?”

“Yeah.” I laughed, but the sound was brittle. “I was just scared. When Violet saw the blood… I’m just glad you’re both okay. I was worried.”

“We’re okay.” My mom paused, and it sounded like she was walking into another room. “So, sweetheart, why is Violet here? I thought she went back to Oregon.”

“She did. And then she left again.” I rolled my eyes. “Just ask her, she’ll explain. But will you keep an eye on her?”

“Of course we will,” my mom said.

“Like, *really* keep an eye on her. And be careful.”

“Caliana,” my mom said sharply. “Is everything all right? What’s happening?”

I sighed. “That’s a big question, Mom.” How would I even start? Silas, Ava, Greyson and Xavier, my secret meeting with Nolan… My head started to spin again, and I took a deep breath, trying to clear it.

“Cali, what’s going on?” my mom asked.

“I’ll tell you everything, Mom, I promise. But not right now. I have to go. I’ll talk to you later. Keep an eye on Violet, will you?”

“Of course, honey, but—”

“I love you, Mom. Talk later,” I said, and ended the call.

I fell back on my bed. I’d been stripping the sheets in my pack house room from Ava’s stay at *Chez Wolf-bear* when I decided to call Violet. This day was too damn much. What with Dad and then earlier when the *last* thing I would ever want had happened: being caught by Xavier coming out of Greyson’s room.

Greyson and I hadn’t been doing anything, of course—just talking—but Xavier had looked pissed as he walked over. His glare had made me feel like a misbehaving child. I closed my eyes, wishing I was somewhere else. I’d meant what I’d said, about wanting to explore things, but what was that going to mean? Exploring things *sounded* like a good plan, but trying to navigate what that was going to look like when we were all in the same house was going to be very, very complicated. Even if that house was gigantic.

I needed to find Lola to talk about this.

Getting up, I left the room only to find Xavier and Greyson still talking.

Fuck.

“How did she get away?” Xavier asked. His gaze flicked over to me, angry and fearful.

“How did who get away?” I asked, unable to stop myself from joining them.

“*You*,” Xavier said. “From *Nolan*. Care to explain this, Caliana?”

Double fuck.

“Nolan thought she was Ava,” Greyson said. He shrugged, but the movement was tense.

Xavier ran a hand through his hair. “That was fucking lucky,” he growled.

Greyson nodded. “You could say that. Ava’s impression of Cali was pretty spot on.”

Xavier looked down at me and I shivered, remembering the cold hatred in his eyes when he’d attacked me, thinking I was Ava.

“She told him she’d meet him later tonight,” Greyson said.

The expression in Xavier’s eyes was impossible to read as he gazed at me. After a moment he looked back up at Greyson, his eyes growing cold. “So I guess we’ve got an appointment with Nolan.”

“I guess so,” Greyson said evenly.

They were being as cool and defensive with each other as usual—maybe even more so.

“I have to go take care of something,” Greyson said. His eyes snapped to mine before he turned to leave.

Xavier was about to do the same when I said, “Hey.”

He tucked his hands under his armpits. “Hey.”

“Um, I just wanted to ask about something,” I said. “How did you... *know*?”

“Know what?” he asked.

God how was I supposed to ask this? “Uhh, that Ava wasn’t, well… me?”

I’d been wondering about it, but with everything going on… It was kind of a difficult thing to ask after Xavier had almost died.

Xavier shifted uncomfortably. “Cali…”

“Did you sleep with her?” I asked suddenly. “Is that how you knew?”

I couldn’t quite process what it would mean if he said yes. I’d forgiven Greyson, and should extend that same forgiveness to Xavier. But Ava was his *former mate*. What would that *mean*?

“I slept with her,” Xavier said after a moment.

“Oh—”

“—Cali,” he cut in. “I thought she was you.”

I sucked in a breath.

“I know.”

“She’ll pay for what she’s done,” he said. “Even if I have to kill her again.”

I gulped. How was I supposed to respond to that? To *any* of this?

“I’ll see you later,” I muttered, and headed back to my room, leaving Xavier behind. I needed a break. I needed to get away from all of this, needed a moment to think.

I shut my door and leaned against it with a sigh.

Fuck. What was I supposed to do?

*I don’t have these veins because you don’t love me.* That was what Greyson had said. My head pounded and my heart ached as I remembered the pain in his eyes when he’d said it. And I’d never answered his implied question—whether I still loved him. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. Of course I loved him.

That was the problem.

Because I loved Xavier, too.

And he’d slept with Ava. Both of my mates had. I couldn’t be mad at either of them, not justifiably so. We’d all been completely played.

And I still loved both of them so deeply it hurt.

It’s what I told the flower-bear in the Fae world and it was as true then as it was now. I just was having trouble admitting it. I didn’t want to know what would happen if I did.

I could have told Greyson the truth—that I did love him—but I didn’t want to feel forced into giving an answer. It was all so complicated. I put my hand over my heart. I couldn’t feel the veins beneath my fingers, but I knew they were there, snaking across my skin, infecting me with… *something*. The curse. All because I was a *due destini*.

Greyson had seen them—that was what had stopped us last night. And now he thought that because Xavier had them and he didn’t, it meant I didn’t love him as much. It was such a strange thing, that these ugly marks had come to signify something so beautiful and important. But, veins or not, I loved Greyson. I probably always had. And it broke my heart that he doubted that.

There was a knock at my door and seconds later, it opened and Lola popped her head in, beckoning me to come with her.

I gave her a confused look. “What’s up?” I asked. “I’m kind of drowning in my own misery here.”

“Come with me,” Lola said, beckoning me again. “There’s no time for pouting, Caliana Hart.”

I rolled my eyes. “Now?”

“Yes. Now.”

“I was just going to take a shower after I fully sanitize this bed.” I was only half-joking. “What’s so important?”

“Um, well…” Lola hesitated. I gave her a look. She’d come in guns blazing and now she wouldn’t even tell me?

I threw a pillow at her. “Tell me!”

“We’re having a meeting about the spell book,” she said. “How are your veins? The… curse?”

I put my hand on my chest. They were still there though, all black and veiny. I sighed, wishing they would just go away.

“Well, they’re still here,” I said.

“I tried to look in the book to find anything about *due destini*,” Lola said, twiddling her thumbs.

For a second, everything went still. “And?” I asked, sitting up straighter. “Did you find anything?”

Lola shook her head. “I’m sorry, Cali. I’m not a witch, and half of that book is gibberish to me…” She cleared her throat. “I promised Jay that I’d bring the book to Big Mac. She’s probably our only way of knowing what’s truly in there.”

Deflated, I nodded. Lola was probably right, but I shouldn’t get my hopes up. I needed to stop doing that.

“Do you want to come with me to see Big Mac?” Lola asked. There was an unease in her voice that concerned me.

“Yeah… What’s going on?” I asked. “Are you okay?”

Lola took a deep breath, looking uncharacteristically serious. “We’re going to do the werewolf inversion spell.”

**Episode 782**

LOLA

“Wow.” Cali got up from her bed in a hurry, making her way through the pile of sheets and pillows. She followed me out the door and into the hall. “Is that… Are you okay?”

“Well,” I said, “I’m a little nervous, I guess.” *A little nervous* was a massive understatement—my heart felt like it was going to pound out of my chest—but I was trying to keep it under control. “It’s not that I don’t trust Big Mac. But, I mean, she did take Jay’s eye, after all.”

Cali grimaced. “That’s true.”

We were quiet for a moment, and the house was quiet around us. The rest of the pack must have been in their rooms or outside, because there was no one else in sight. Where did they all go off to? I frowned. Maybe they were all off running as wolves…

“What if I lose my wolf completely because of this spell?” I asked quietly, as we started down the stairs. “That’s a possibility. I mean, it’s a freaking witch’s spell. *Anything* could happen. I could be stuck as an ordinary human for the rest of time. Or as a fucking wolf!”

“Hey, hey, calm down,” Cali said soothingly, though she was starting to look alarmed. “Just breathe, Lola, okay? Breathe.”

We stopped at the bottom of the stairs and just stood there for a moment, breathing in and out like we’d done in that yoga class we’d tried once.

I nodded, blowing out a breath. “I’m okay. I just freaked out for a second. But I’m okay.”

Cali didn’t look like she believed me. “It’s okay to be nervous about this, but these are questions you should be asking Big Mac, aren’t they?”

“Probably.” I took another breath. “*God*,” I exploded. “I don’t even see why I have to do this. What’s the big deal about all this anyway? So I like to shift? So I like to be a wolf? Big deal. Who cares?”

Cali stared at me in disbelief. “Um, you get stuck, Lola. Remember that? And your shifting has gotten out of control. It’s put you in danger more than once.”

I scoffed, rolling my eyes.

“The keg party, the ferry, my parents’ back yard,” Cali said, listing the times I’d shifted involuntarily on her fingers.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” I grumbled.

“It’s not safe for you,” Cali went on, her eyes growing wide. “You know it’s not. You could die. I know this spell is a risk, Lola, but wouldn’t you rather be a living, breathing human than a dead werewolf?”

I bit my lip but didn’t answer.

“And you’re forgetting how hard this has been on the rest of us,” she said, crossing her arms. “Have you looked at Jay lately? When was the last time that guy had a good night’s sleep? He’s so stressed about this. The rest of us feel that too—”

“God, don’t make me feel guilty about this, Cali,” I snapped, looking away.

“We care about you,” she said. “We want you to be safe. You know I love you like a sister, you dummy.”

I rubbed my eyes. “You’re probably right,” I said. “I mean, I know you are. But still…” I shook my head. “Anyway. What’s the deal with Greyson and Xavier?”

“What do you mean?” Cali asked, looking suddenly alarmed.

“I saw them a while ago.”

“What were they doing?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” I said. “That’s what was so weird. They were just talking. Like normal people. It was super disturbing to see them *not* trying to rip each other’s throats out.” I shivered. “Creeped me the hell out.”

Cali’s eyes shifted away from mine. “I don’t…” She shook her head. “Isn’t Big Mac waiting for us?”

I eyed her suspiciously. Cali was a terrible liar, and it was clear that she was evading my question, but I let it drop. I *had* seen Xavier and Greyson speaking civilly to each other, and I *did* think it was weird, but I didn’t really care what was going on with them. I’d only asked Cali about it because I was evading, too. The truth was, I was nervous and was desperate to talk about anything other than my shifting problems. But it didn’t matter. I could keep asking, but I knew—whatever was going on—that Cali wasn’t going to tell me what it was.

“Yeah, she’s waiting for us. I think she’s in the kitchen,” I said, and headed that way.

Big Mac was in the kitchen with Mrs. Smith, Jay, and the spell book.

That damn spell book.

As we climbed onto stools at the counter, Mrs. Smith smiled and pushed steaming mugs toward us. “White chocolate mochas, girls?”

“Thank you,’ Cali said gratefully, wrapping her hands around the cup.

I pulled my cup toward me and took a sip of the hot, sweet coffee. “Thanks,” I muttered. The heat from the drink kept my teeth from chattering with nerves as I looked at Big Mac, who was reading the book.

The witch looked up at us. “This book is…” She shook her head, like she was at a loss for words. “It’s filled with spells I’ve never even heard of.”

“That’s great,” Cali said. “But can it save Lola?”

“I don’t need *saving*,” I said quickly. “I could use a little help, maybe, but I don’t need to be saved, okay?”

Jay slipped his hand into mine and gave it a squeeze. The pressure was comforting, and I took a deep breath, trying to relax.

“It’s a powerful book,” Big Mac said quietly.

“Yeah?” Cali sounded interested. “Can we use it for anything else?”

“Can Jay get his eye back?” I asked.

“Maybe it can cure this?” Cali said, extending her arm and showing the black vein that snaked up the inside of her wrist.

“Can we use it to get rich?” I asked with a laugh.

Big Mac slammed the book shut, making us all jump.

She glared at us, her dark eyes flashing dangerously. “You don’t get it. This is not a joke.” She jabbed a finger at the book. “This is immensely powerful magic, not something to be laughed about. To be trifled with. You want to get rich? Get a job. Win the lottery.”

“MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith said, her quiet voice soothing. “Calm yourself.”

Big Mac’s gaze flickered up to Mrs. Smith, then back to us. When she spoke again her voice wasn’t quite so angry, though it was still stern. “You need to respect this magic, or the magic will turn against you.”

“Like when Lola read a spell and almost capsized the ferry?” Cali asked, with a sidelong glance at me.

Big Mac looked up, furious. “You read from this book?”

I shrugged. “A little. I didn’t know it was actually going to do anything.”

Big Mac glared. “Well, now you do. Don’t do it again.”

“Can we get back to Lola’s condition?” Jay said. “Can that werewolf inversion spell really help her?”

Big Mac opened the book again and looked the spell over. She muttered to herself, reading the instructions under her breath, her eyes scanning the cramped, scrawled writing on the age-spotted page.

I gripped my warm cup of coffee, my heart beating hard as I waited for her answer.

Finally, Big Mac looked up. “You have to understand that this inversion spell is very powerful magic. It’s complicated, and has ramifications you can’t possibly understand.”

I darted a glance at Jay, who was looking pale.

“And then,” Big Mac said, raising an eyebrow, “there is, of course, the question of payment.”

I was on my feet in an instant. “You’re not taking Jay’s other eye, witch!” I shouted, furious.

“Lola,” Jay said, taking my arm.

“She’s *not!*” I insisted, glaring at Big Mac.

But the witch waved an airy hand. “I have no use for another eye, girl.”

“Then what *do* you want?” Jay asked warily.

Big Mac thought for a moment. “I will accept a grimbargain.”

“What the hell is that?” I asked.

“It is where the debt is determined at some later time.”

“Like a tab?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

Big Mac sighed, irritated. “Think of it as an I.O.U.”

I looked up at Jay. “I don’t know…”

“What choice do we have?” he asked nervously.

My palms were starting to sweat. “None, I guess.” I turned back to Big Mac.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Since you’ve been looking through this book, I’ll assume you already know the risks. You could become a wolf. Or you could become fully human. Or,” she said with a shrug, “you could experience an outcome that we don’t even know about yet.”

“Do you think it could affect my mate bond with Jay?” I asked. Ever since Artemis had asked, the question had been bouncing around in my head.

“Honestly?” Big Mac asked. “I don’t know. It’s a potential risk.”

“You know I’ll love you,” Jay said, kissing my hand. “Always.”

I swallowed hard, but Jay gave my hand a reassuring squeeze and I nodded. “I know the risks. But I’m ready. Let’s do it.”

She gave me a long, penetrating look. “There’s one other thing you should consider, girl.”

“What?” I asked when she didn’t go on.

“Once you do this…” She shook her head slowly. “There’s no going back.”

**Episode 783**

AVA

Isaiah’s cabin in the woods was small—basically just one large room. “It’s rustic, isn’t it?” he’d said when I’d paused uncertainly in the doorway. “It won’t bite.”

It was small but clean, and smelled of pine and clean laundry. There was an old wood-burning stove in one corner with a shiny tin chimney that snaked upward to a small hole in the flat roof. There was a square table and four chairs that all looked handmade, and a rough-hewn sofa that hung low to the ground like a basset hound. There were wide, clean windows on all four walls and the floors were made from rough, wide planks.

I perched on the hard edge of the couch, as close as I could be to the door. Truth be told, I was anxious as hell. Isaiah was like his cabin—charming at first glance, but unsettling. There was just something a little off about him. A creepy vibe I couldn’t quite put my finger on. I looked down at the gold bracelet circling my wrist. I was only here because of this, and the sooner I got it off, the better.

“Do you think we could…” I held up my wrist, shaking it a little to get his attention.

He looked up from the stove. “All in good time,” he said with a small smile. “Let’s eat first. Aren’t you hungry?”

I *was* hungry, but I wanted the bracelet off more than I wanted to eat. It’s what he’d promised me, when he’d picked me up, so why were we taking our time? But there was something in his voice—something in the glint of his eye—that made me certain he wasn’t really asking me a question. We were going to eat first, and that was all there was to it.

“Why don’t you go get me some wood from the porch, Ava?” Isaiah said, his attention back on the small stove.

“Sure,” I murmured, standing. I walked outside, glad to get away from Isaiah, and looked out at the dark woods beyond the cabin. My thoughts went to Xavier. Was he out there, somewhere? Was he okay? I thought of the shout of pain he’d given as the bear trap had snapped shut on his leg. I flinched as the sound rang in my ears. He’d been running after me, and if he’d caught me, he would have killed me—I didn’t doubt that for a second. But *still*. Part of me wished I’d stayed to help him. I hated that I’d had to walk away like that, just when he’d needed me.

“Ava?”

Isaiah’s voice brought me back from my thoughts, and I grabbed an armful of wood from the tidy stack on the porch. “Here you go,” I said, dropping it into the wood box next to the stove.

“Thank you,” he said, and started to set a neat fire in the old stove.

Every move he made was careful and deliberate, and I watched him in silence for a moment.

“You’re probably wondering why I use an old appliance like this,” he said without looking up from his work. “After all, this is the twenty-first century, isn’t it?”

“I guess,” I said slowly. I wasn’t sure what kind of response he was looking for or why he was talking about it at all.

“Well, Ava, I’m a man of tradition. I believe there’s value in the simple things.” He peered up at me. “You ever hear the old expression ‘chop your own wood and it’ll warm you twice’?”

I shook my head.

He looked back down at the stove. “I think cooking food that you’ve hunted yourself in an old-fashioned stove like this can bring you closer to what you consume. Don’t you agree?”

“I guess,” I said. I wasn’t sure. But as I thought about it, I decided there was some truth in what he was saying. Unconsciously, I rubbed the bracelet again.

Isaiah’s eyes went to my wrist. “I did tell you there’s something we can do about that. And we will.”

“We? Who’s we?” I asked. I looked around the tiny cabin. “Who else is here?”

Isaiah smiled but didn’t answer.

I heard footsteps behind me and a chill spread through my body. I spun around and there, in the doorway of the cabin, was the witch with the golden arm. The one who’d put the bracelet on my wrist. She paused for just a moment on the threshold, then stepped across it, into the cabin.

Instinctively, I backed away. I hadn’t had my wits about me the first time we met; that’s how I’d ended up with this bracelet. I never liked being around witches. They made me nervous. The chill in the room hadn’t dissipated, though I could see the fire in the cookstove burning brightly, and I hugged myself tightly, shivering.

The witch stepped toward me, her dark eyes flashing beadily as she looked at me. “How did things go with Xavier Evers? What have you come to report?”

I took another step back, away from the woman. How did she know about Xavier? “Things went horribly,” I said. “He tried to kill me.”

The witch tossed back her head, laughing. Then she looked right at me, her eyes boring into mine. “But he didn’t manage it, did he? And what of his brother, Greyson?”

I swallowed hard, trying to appear more confident than I felt. I didn’t even know who these people were—I didn’t want to reveal everything I knew. Then I’d have no power at all. “He probably wants to kill me, too.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Isaiah said lightly. He was standing now, regarding me evenly. “Puts you in a bit of a bind, doesn’t it? Because I suspect you still have feelings for the younger one.”

I could feel my face flushing hot, but I didn’t answer. Had Nolan been talking to these two?

The witch’s smile grew into a grin. “Keep quiet if you want, girlie. The answer’s written all over your face.”

Angry now, I held up my wrist. “Take this curse off,” I snapped.

The witch’s eyes went to the bracelet, then to Isaiah, as if asking him for permission. He nodded once, and the witch turned back to me. She raised her hands, closed her eyes, and muttered under her breath for a long time. Then there was a surge of something that felt like a lightning storm had just passed over, and a sharp pain in my arm. With a clatter, the bracelet fell to the floor.

I stared down at the bracelet at my feet, then moved my gaze to my wrist. It looked… fine. There were small red indentions where the bracelet had dug into my skin, but otherwise I was unharmed. And as for the rest of me… I put my hand to face, but everything felt the same. I’d been expecting a feeling of transformation, but I hadn’t felt anything. Was I still trapped behind Cali’s face?

I looked at the witch. Was this just some kind of mind game? Was Isaiah in on it too? Nolan? If so, I’d shift and rip them all to shreds. My hands curled into fists and I could feel my heart start to pound.

“You can see what you’re after in there,” Isaiah said mildly, pointing to a small room off the main cabin.

Glancing over my shoulder, I hesitated. Maybe this was some kind of a trap. But I was bursting with curiosity, and it got the better of me. The room Isaiah had indicated turned out to be a small bedroom, with a tiny, wavy mirror hung on the far wall. And there, staring back, was *me*. I froze for a moment, then leaned closer to the mirror. I touched my face—*my* face. *My* nose, *my* chin, *my* cheeks, *my* eyes.

I was Ava again. I could feel it now.

I felt like *myself*.

I heard the shuffle of feet behind me, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from my reflection. Isaiah and the witch appeared behind me in the mirror.

“You’re a beautiful girl,” Isaiah said. “I’m not surprised you’re glad to have your own face back. I’m glad you’re pleased.”

“I am,” I whispered, my hands on my cheeks.

“And now, would you like Xavier back, too?” he asked.

My eyes went wide. “What?” I gasped.

“Xavier,” Isaiah said, his voice calm. “Would you like to get him to trust you again?”

The witch smiled. “You want him to be in love, don’t you? Of course you do, sweet girl. What girl wouldn’t?” she said, answering her own question.

I looked between them for a moment. They had both asked me questions—or rather, they’d both made statements framed as questions, but I suspected they weren’t actually asking me anything. “Yes,” I said, cautiously. “I want Xavier back. I do want him to trust me again. And yes, I do want him to love me.”

Isaiah smiled warmly, like I’d said all the right things. “Then we can make that happen for you, Ava.”

“You can?” I asked, my heart beating hard.

“Of course,” he said, with absolute certainty. “Just bring Xavier here to us.”

**Episode 784**

Something about the tone of Big Mac’s warning made my pulse race with fear. “What do you mean by that? That there’s no turning back?”

The witch gave a long-suffering sigh. “If I invoke this werewolf inversion spell, it cannot be undone. So whatever the outcome is—and no matter *what* the outcome is—it will be irreversible.” She pointed at the book. “There’s nothing in here or anywhere else that will give her back what she loses.”

I gave Lola a nervous glance, but she looked unconcerned.

“That’s fine,” she said. She reached forward and gave the book a little slap. “Let’s do this.”

“Lola!” I said, shocked at how cavalier she was being. “Let’s just think about it for a minute.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Cali. *You* were the one telling me to do this a minute ago.”

“And I’m not telling you *not* to do it now, I just want you to think through it first. Do you understand the risks?” I glanced at Jay. “Maybe there’s some other way we haven’t thought about? I just don’t know if an irreversible spell is the way to go.”

Jay looked worried. “There’s nothing that I know about. I’ve looked, talked to everyone I could think of.” He nodded at the spell book on the counter. “We went this route because we were desperate.”

I turned to look at the book, too. “Maybe we shouldn’t have gone to that damn library. These books seem like more trouble than they’re worth. I guess that’s what happens when you *steal* library books.”

Lola turned to Big Mac. “So? What are we waiting for? Let’s do this! Chop, chop!”

Big Mac glared at Lola. “Hold your horses, girl. In order for this spell to even have a chance at working, it must be cast during the horned moon.”

“What the hell is the horned moon?” I asked.

Big Mac gave me a withering look. “It’s the first crescent moon after the new moon.”

“Why does everything supernatural involve the moon?” I asked, exasperated. “Horned moon this, harvest moon that. Just *once* I’d like to see a spell that has to be cast at noon during spring break.”

“When’s the next horned moon?” Jay asked, a worried note in his voice.

“Ten days,” Mrs. Smith said quietly. “On Halloween.”

Lola dropped her head into her arms on the counter with a groan. “I’m tired of waiting,” she said, her voice muffled. “I just want to get this done already.”

“You’ll need that much time to collect the ingredients,” Big Mac said sharply. “I’ll give you a list.”

“So I’m guessing these ingredients probably aren’t things we’re going to be able to find at Whole Foods, right?” I asked.

Big Mac eyed me. “I wouldn’t think so.”

“Okay. We’ll get started on finding them as soon as you get us the list,” Jay said, grabbing Lola and pulling her to her feet. He towed us both out of the kitchen and into the hall.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Lola muttered, heading upstairs.

Jay watched her go, then turned to me. “Do you think we’re doing the right thing? For Lola?”

I shook my head. “I wish I knew for sure.” Jay looked pale, so I quickly added, “But let’s think about it. We have ten days to decide. We can always bail before Big Mac casts the spell.”

\*\*\*\*

It was dark when we left the pack house that evening. Joss, Artemis, Ravi, and Rishika were right behind me, and Sage and Zainab brought up the rear as we walked through the dark pine forest toward Nolan’s burned pack house. I led the way, flanked by Xavier and Greyson. I could feel the tension between them as we strode through the underbrush, and I hated it, because I knew I was the source. When they’d approached me before we’d left the pack house, I’d felt the pain over my heart intensifying. I didn’t have to look down to know the veins had spread.

I took a deep breath of sharp, cold air. When this was over—all this business with Nolan—I was going to dive into Cassandra’s journal. There *had* to be more information in there. A way to figure this out that didn’t end with abject tragedy.

An owl hooted behind me and I flinched, my heart racing. I was being stupid, I knew, but I was scared and edgy. I wished I could reach for Greyson and Xavier’s hands, but I knew that would only make things worse. Right now—for reasons I didn’t totally understand—my two mates were working together, and, scared as I was, I wasn’t going to do anything to upset that delicate balance.

“This is it,” Greyson said, coming to a stop in a large clearing. He looked around. “Okay, Ravi, Sage, Zainab—you three go north. Rishika, Artemis, Joss, you go south. Stake out a perimeter.”

The six of them nodded and disappeared into the darkness.

“Cali.” Xavier was at my side, his voice low. “Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

“What?” I asked.

Xavier glanced up at Greyson, who was watching the others space themselves out in the dark. “He’s taking a big risk, using you as bait with Nolan.”

I chewed my lip. He wasn’t wrong about the risk, but I had to question Xavier’s motives for asking me. Was he only worried about me, or was he also hoping to get me to doubt Greyson? As it happened, I actually had no doubts about Greyson.

“The whole thing was my idea,” I admitted. “So, yeah, I’m sure.”

Xavier looked at me for a moment, then nodded.

I said I was sure, but the truth was, I was growing less sure every moment. I was going to have to pretend to be Ava, and I had no idea how to do that. Apart from the fact that she was Xavier’s old mate, I knew nothing about her. What if Nolan realized I was the real Cali?

I swallowed hard as a wave of fear crashed over me, but I replayed Greyson’s plan in my head. We’d done just as he advised: we’d arrived early enough that pack could hide in the woods around the burned down house. I would pretend to be Ava, and when Nolan showed up, the pack would capture him.

It was going to be easy.

I yanked on the long sleeves of my fleece, bringing them down over my hands. I’d been sure to wear a jacket long enough to cover my wrists completely, to hide the fact that I wasn’t wearing Ava’s cheesy gold bracelet.

And, besides, I reminded myself, Nolan had already bought my act. He’d thought I was Ava when he’d seen me at the pack house. I took a deep breath. I was overthinking this. This was going to be fine. It was going to go as smooth as silk.

“Okay,” Greyson said, walking toward Xavier and me, “it’s time. Get into position. Nolan should be here any minute.”

Xavier nodded, then looked down at me, his eyes nearly crackling with intensity. “Don’t worry, Cali. I won’t let that meatball touch you.”

I nodded and he headed off, disappearing into the darkness.

“You’re being very brave, Cali.”

I looked over at Greyson, who was standing a few feet back from me. “Thanks.”

“The whole pack has your back. And no matter how you feel about me, I’ll always be there for you.”

I thought about this for a moment. He was questioning my feelings for him again, but did he mean that he’d be there for me in this moment, or… something else? “I know,” I said quietly. “And thank you.”

He started off into the darkness.

“Be careful,” I called after him impulsively.

He half-turned, a small smile on his face. “Don’t worry about me, Cali.” Then he disappeared into the dark.

My heart began to pound. I knew I wasn’t actually alone, but I felt it, standing by myself in the middle of the clearing. This was it—my moment had come. I turned, resolute, and walked toward the burned-out foundation of what used to be the Samara pack house. The acrid smell was still strong and, as a wind blew up, swirling the ash, it made me cough. That made my heart pound even more.

I stopped for a moment, taking deep breaths, trying to stay calm. Somewhere out there in the dark, my two mates were watching me, making sure I was safe. I let myself dwell on this thought for a moment, and it slowed the terrified beat of my heart and filled me with strength.

Then, out of the darkness on the far side of the house, a figure stepped toward me. As he walked closer, I could see that it was Nolan.

He smiled at me, the expression warm and relieved. “Hey. I’m glad you agreed to come.”

He still thought I was Ava. Thank god.

There was a rustle and I looked over. Behind him, four Samara pack members appeared from the darkness of the ruined house.

“Come on,” Nolan called, waving me toward him.

I hesitated. What was the plan here?

Nolan raised his eyebrows. “Ava, *come*. The sooner the better.”

Hoping to god the Redwood pack was ready, I took a deep breath. “I’m not going anywhere. You’re coming with me, Nolan.”

He looked at me, confused. “What the hell are you talking about, Ava?”

I took a step toward him, more confidently than I felt. “I’m not Ava.”

**Episode 785**

XAVIER

Nolan’s eyes grew wide with shock as he looked at Cali, then the expression turned to fury as realization dawned.

“That’s right,” she said, head held high. “I’m Cali.”

*Now!*

Greyson’s voice was in my head—everyone’s head—as he mind linked with the pack. He could do that, because he was the Alpha, and I fucking hated it. I didn’t want that bastard in my head. But I stepped out with the others, closing in on Nolan and the rest of the surprised Samara crew.

Nolan took a step back, but Rishika and Ravi closed ranks, blocking his way.

Greyson strode toward him. “If you don’t want to lose the rest of your pack, Nolan, you should come back to the Redwood pack house with us, nice and easy. You got it? Peacefully.” Greyson’s voice was even, but it was filled with unspoken threats.

Nolan looked at Greyson for a moment, then rounded on Cali, who took a step back, stumbling on a bit of rubble. “You betrayed me!”

“I’m not your sister,” she spat out. She yanked her sleeve up, showing Nolan her wrist, bare of the bracelet Ava had worn. “You only thought I was.”

Nolan swelled with rage, and I moved toward him. I didn’t like how all his anger was focused on Cali. The guy was an idiot, but he was desperate, and didn’t seem the type to just give up and come peacefully, whatever fantasy Greyson was entertaining. This whole thing might be Greyson’s plan, but Cali was the one who was really in danger. I’d sworn to her I wouldn’t let Nolan touch her, and I’d fucking meant it.

I moved forward, striding across the wreckage of the burned house, and stepped in front of Cali, blocking her from Nolan’s furious glare. “You’re going to want to back the fuck off, Nolan, if you want your head to stay attached to your neck.”

“Shut up!” Nolan spat, nearly senseless with rage.

“It’s over,” I ground out. “Look around. It’s over.”

Nolan didn’t look anywhere. His eyes bored into me. “You bastard! Is this your doing? Where’s Ava? What have you done with her? You already killed her once. Wasn’t that enough for you?”

*Back off, Xavier*, I told myself. *Protect Cali.*

I glanced around at the other members of the Redwood pack. They were moving closer, their eyes on Nolan. Everyone was on edge. Everyone was looking for an excuse to shift and attack.

I looked back at Nolan. “I don’t know where Ava is, and that’s too bad. I wish she were here—I’d like to finish her off, once and for all—”

This had the intended effect and Nolan lunged for me, his eyes wild with fury. He shifted as he moved, and all hell broke loose.

I moved to shift, the thought of biting Nolan’s head clean off making my mouth water, but—instead of shifting—nothing happened.

Nolan’s wolf slammed into me with bone-shattering force and knocked me to the ground. It took me a second to react, but I managed it, and fought back, grabbing for his foaming mouth to keep him from clamping his sharp teeth around my neck.

My chest started to ache—to burn—the way it had when I’d been poisoned by the silver from the bear trap. I looked at Nolan wildly—did he have silver on him? Or… was it those cursed veins?

Nolan surged again and I kicked right into his soft underside. He yelped in pain and I managed to fight him off, pinning him to the ground. But his wolf was pure muscle and he jumped to his feet again. Around us, I could hear the others fighting—there were growls and angry snarls and yelps of pain and triumphant howls. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Artemis holding out her hands, using some kind of power to throw one of the Samara pack members up into a pine tree. He hit a branch—which knocked him out—and fell heavily across a lower branch, leaving him stranded twenty feet in the air.

Focusing hard, I tried to shift again, but—again—*nothing* happened. What the fuck was going on? Nolan came at me again and all I could do was fight him off with my bare, human hands. I didn’t even have a fucking weapon.

Nolan swiped a paw across my face and the pain from the claws ripping into my flesh seared like fire, but ignoring it I barreled into him, focusing on his belly, which was his most vulnerable point. I punched as hard as I could, over and over. The rest of the pack was occupied elsewhere, and I knew I was fighting for my life.

Nolan was breathing hard but managed to knock me down and we rolled around on the ashen heap of the burned house, each trying to gain the upper hand. It was all I could do to keep him from snapping my neck with his lethally sharp teeth.

Then, from out of nowhere, Cali cast herself into the fray, throwing herself onto Nolan’s back. She clung on tight, beating at him with her fists, her eyes wild with fear and adrenaline.

“*Shift!*” she screamed at me. “What are you waiting for! Shift now! Defend yourself!”

I tried to mind link with her, explain what was happening, but—I couldn’t do that either. There was only silence when I reached out for her.

Something was wrong. Seriously, seriously wrong.

Where the fuck was my wolf?

“*Xavier!*” Cali screamed as Nolan reared back, his mouth open.

I’d braced for the pain of his teeth puncturing my skin when, all around me, the ground began to shake. For a moment I thought it was an earthquake, but then there was a surge of electric energy and Nolan was blasted off me with the force of a rocket. He slammed into a charred pillar and slumped to the ground. A moment later, Joss pounced on him, holding him down. And it was a good thing, too, because even though he was limp, he began to stir feebly, trying to come after me again.

I sat up, sucking in great gulps of air, and looked around. What the *hell* had just happened? I looked up at Cali. She was standing, her own breath heaving, ash smeared across her face, and I realized what she’d just done. She had saved me from Nolan. He’d been about to rip out my throat, and Cali had used her Fae power to save my ass.

I was equally impressed and embarrassed about this realization. I hadn’t realized Cali’s powers were so strong. I didn’t even think she’d known, herself. But I still shouldn’t have needed her to help me.

Nolan was subdued beneath Joss’s angry hold and, around me, the Redwoods were gaining control over the Samaras. There were more of us, but the Samaras were angry and desperate and that made them difficult to restrain. But the pack was handling it. With one last angry yip, they got the Samaras under control.

Greyson lifted his head and howled, ending the fighting, then shifted back. One by one, the rest of the pack shifted as well. I looked around. Everyone looked dirty and bloody but relatively unhurt.

Greyson strode over. “Why didn’t you shift, Xavier?” he asked angrily. “What the hell were you thinking, trying to take on Nolan in human form? You could have been killed. What the hell?”

I stared at him but didn’t answer. He was right, but I had no idea what to say. I didn’t know why I couldn’t shift, but… My eyes traveled to Cali, who was still breathing hard, and still looking scared. When she met gaze, her eyes grew wide.

She had jumped on Nolan’s back. When she’d seen that I needed help, she’d sprinted into danger for me. My mind was spinning in a million different directions, but I let it rest on that thought for a moment. I glanced up at Greyson. I wanted to explain to him what Cali had done. How she’d come to my aid. Truth be told, I wanted to rub it in his face.

But there was a bigger question here—*why couldn’t I shift?*

Something was wrong. Seriously, seriously wrong. And until I figured out what it was, I didn’t want anyone to know about it. Especially Cali.

I got to my feet. When I looked at her, I could read the question in her eyes. She was wondering what everyone else was wondering: why hadn’t I shifted?

I didn’t know. But I couldn’t tell her that. How would she react?

I took a step back—away from her. Then another one. “Go back with the others, Cali.”

“What?” she asked, confused. She took a step forward, reaching for me.

I kept backing way. “I’ll meet you later.”

“Xavier!” she called after me, but I was already gone.

I sprinted out of the clearing and into the woods beyond. I didn’t answer her call, didn’t look back, because I was afraid of the truth: I hadn’t shifted because I hadn’t *been able* to shift.

Was I losing my wolf?

**Episode 786**

VIOLET

It was hard to not feel kind of envious of Cali’s life. Sitting outside in the autumn sunshine with her mom while she pulled weeds and turned her flower beds and got her garden ready for the winter just reminded me of everything I missed, not having my own family. Then Tom called us in for dinner and I ate quietly while they talked and laughed and joked. It was so nice to be with them, and somehow not awkward at all, even though they were practically strangers to me. They didn’t treat me like a stranger, and I didn’t feel like one.

“I’ll have you sleep in Cali’s room,” Orla said, as we finished our ice cream. “The sheets are clean and there should be a new toothbrush under the sink in her bathroom. Do you need anything else?”

“No, that’s fine. More than enough.” I smiled. I knew Orla wasn’t my mom, but it still felt nice to have someone looking out for me. I hadn’t had parents in a long time, and I’d forgotten what it felt like.

“Now, I don’t want you to even think of leaving the house tonight,” Orla said, her tone suddenly stern.

“Oh,” I said, surprised. “Okay.”

“You are here for your own protection,” she continued, “so you’ll just stay put.”

“Got that, young lady?” Tom asked, giving me a wink.

I laughed and nodded, but I was nervous. Because I was lying. I knew I needed to see Charlie. I needed to tell him about what I’d seen at the apartment.

As I went upstairs after dinner, I looked at the family photos lining the walls, laughing to myself to see Cali as a baby and an awkward teenager with unfortunate bangs. What had she been like as teenager, I wondered? I looked at her, smiling with her parents on a beach vacation, and wondered if she’d caused a lot of trouble.

I thought of the Cali I knew—she was really kind and thoughtful, but also stubborn as hell and really independent. I bet she’d caused *plenty* of trouble.

But I wasn’t used to rules, so I chilled in Cali’s room, half-reading a book from the stack on her nightstand, until I heard Tom and Orla come upstairs and go into their bedroom. I waited, listening for the sounds of them getting ready for bed to die away.

When I glanced at the clock on Cali’s desk, it was only midnight, though it felt like I’d been sitting in this room for days. But, the house was finally quiet, so I carefully opened the window and climbed out. There was a handy trellis under Cali’s window and I made my way down like a cat, landing softly on the ground, then I headed out of the yard, running toward campus.

I wish I could have texted Charlie to tell him what was going on, but I didn’t have his number memorized. Shockingly. But I’d come all the way to Minnesota so I could talk to him face-to-face anyway. Plus, I liked his face. A lot.

A tendril of guilt curled in me when I glanced back at the house as I rounded the corner. I didn’t like having to sneak out—or lying to Tom and Orla when they’d been nothing but nice—but I knew it was for the best. I had to tell Charlie what was going on. He had to know what I’d seen at the apartment. And I just hadn’t been able to bring myself to explain all that to Orla.

I knew she’d been sick and I didn’t want to upset her—not when I didn’t even know what was going on. I just didn’t want to make anything seem too alarming. Especially because that would make Tom and Orla watch me even more closely.

*It’ll be fine*, I assured myself as I sprinted toward campus. *I’ll get over there, talk to Charlie, then sneak back into the house. I’ll be so quiet, they won’t even know I was gone.*

When I made it to campus, I headed straight for the library. There were butterflies in my stomach as he emerged from the doors.

“Charlie!” I called, walking toward him.

He looked up at me, surprised. “Hey! Thanks for meeting me.” He wrapped me in a hug. “Is that okay? It’s pretty late.”

I laughed, a little giddy from the hug. “I’m a werewolf, Charlie. What kind of trouble could I get into?” Then I bit my lip, remembering what I’d come to tell him about.

“What?” Charlie asked, sensing the change in my mood. “What’s going on?’

“I saw something today,” I said slowly, “and I wanted to tell you about it.”

I told him about the state of Cali’s apartment and the terrifying message written in blood on the bathroom mirror.

“Wow,” Charlie said, his eyes wide. “What do you think is going on?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “I’ve talked to Cali and Xavier and everyone in the pack, and there seem to be some weird things happening. I think there might be a Rogue werewolf around.”

Charlie frowned. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“A Rogue is a werewolf without a pack,” I explained.

“Oh. So, like me?” Charlie asked.

I smiled. “Sort of. But, not all of them are as nice as you.”

Charlie thought about this for a moment. “Do you think this Rogue werewolf might have been the one who turned me?”

“Oh,” I said, surprised. “I hadn’t thought of that. Maybe.”

“Really?” Charlie asked.

“It’s possible.” I thought about this for a moment, intrigued by the idea. “We should talk about everything that happened that night you were bitten. Like, everything. No detail left out. No stone left unturned.” I looked around at the dark night. It was getting cold. “Could we go back to your dorm?”

I couldn’t be sure because it was so dark, but it looked like Charlie blushed. Then his phone buzzed and he looked like he’d seen a ghost. “Shit. I actually have to meet someone—a guy from my econ class. I totally forgot I promised him I’d give him my notes and he’s early.”

“Okay,” I said, shrugging. “I’ll walk you back, then.”

We were quiet as we started walking along the well-lit path. I swallowed. I wanted to ask him about that kiss we’d shared, but I wasn’t exactly sure how to bring it up. “Listen, Charlie, there was something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What?” he asked quickly, looking started.

I reached for his hand, suddenly hungry for a sense of connection, but he pulled his own hand back, almost jumping away from me. I stared at him, hurt and confused. Something was… off with him. He was my mate, so I knew something wasn’t right.

I folded my arms across my chest. He was hiding something from me, but I was too hurt—and too uncertain—to ask him about it.

“Let’s go this way,” Charlie said, pointing left. “I know a shortcut to the dorm.”

Without even bothering to look up, I went left, following his instructions. The route he’d pointed out was a rough path between two campus buildings. It was strewn with empty beer bottles, abandoned frisbees, and a thicket of trash that campus services had never bothered to clean up. I looked down as I stepped on a slice of old pizza. “This shortcut is crap,” I said, disgusted.

Charlie stopped short. “It’s not a shortcut,” he admitted, in a rush.

“What?” I asked, confused. “What are you talking about?”

He squirmed as we came to the open quad. “I’m not meeting a guy from my econ class. I’m supposed to meet Sandi, and I didn’t know how to tell you, so I wanted to go this way to stall for time.”

“What?” I gasped.

“I was hoping I’d be able to figure out something to say,” he said, sounding desperate.

“You lied to me?” I asked, my head spinning. “You lied so you could be with Sandi?”

Charlie looked miserable. “No, not on purpose. It was an omission!” We turned and stopped in front of his dorm. He sighed. “I’m so sorry Violet, I just didn’t know how to tell you. I promise I’ll make it up to you, but I have to go… Do you want me to walk you home? It’s late and—”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, cutting him off. “I’m a werewolf, aren’t I? Just go.”

Charlie opened his mouth, but said nothing else. Feeling numb, I watched as he walked up the steps of the dorm. Through the glass door of the well-lit building I could see a blonde figure waiting for him. She threw her arms around him as he entered.

Sandi.

My heart sank as I watched the scene unfold. Then, tears pricking the corners of my eyes, I turned on my heel and headed back in the direction we’d come. I kept my head down, not paying attention, and must have taken a wrong turn, because when I looked up, I wasn’t anywhere near the library. I was on another rough path, between another set of buildings that I didn’t recognize.

And there was something else. I sniffed the air. There was something there—a smell that seemed like it didn’t belong, though it was strangely familiar. Like I’d smelled it somewhere before.

Then I froze. I remembered where I’d smelled it before. It was the same smell I’d picked up when I’d found the bloodied arm in the woods, and the smell I’d encountered again in Cali’s destroyed apartment.

I whipped around, my eyes wide, looking in all directions. Then, from behind me, I heard a quiet rustle. I slowly turned around, and there, in front of me, was a Rogue. He was tall and lanky, his white skin sickly in the streetlights. He looked filthy and half-feral. His eyes were yellow and the pupils were tiny as he looked me up and down, the expression in them hungry. He licked his lips. “Haven’t you ever heard that girls shouldn’t walk alone at night?”

**Episode 787**

Chest heaving, I spun around, looking desperately through the darkness. “Xavier!” I called, but there was no response. Where the hell had he gone?

“Cali!” Artemis was making her way over to me, smiling. “Great job out there.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

She tipped her chin toward Nolan, who was still being restrained by Joss. “I saw what you did.” She nodded. “You had a decent handle on your powers. You did good.”

“A *decent handle?*” I asked, incredulous.

She shrugged, her smile stretching into a grin. “You were a little clunky there at the end. I would have knocked him out as well. You still have a ways to go.”

I rolled my eyes but didn’t argue back. That was just Artemis. Plus, she was right. My powers had worked for me when I’d needed them—thank god—and I could still feel the energy pulsing through me. They were still hard to fully control, but I was glad as hell that I’d been able to use them to help Xavier.

As I thought of him, I looked around again, my eyes straining to see into the dark trees, searching for him. Where had he gone? And why the hell had he run off like that? What had happened?

“It’s over, Nolan,” Greyson growled.

I looked over to see Greyson and Joss crouching over Nolan, binding his hands and his feet. The expression in Nolan’s eyes was terrifying—he looked almost unhinged, but Greyson and Joss didn’t look scared. They worked quickly and carefully, and as they moved, I caught a flash of something. I looked closer at Nolan as Greyson stepped out of the way. That flash had been the glint of silver.

Greyson stepped back, eyeing Nolan with disdain. “Look around. Your pack has left you.”

Nolan spat on the ground at Greyson’s feet. “There are more of us,” he snarled. “They’ll fight to get me back. You Redwoods had better watch your backs—”

“Oh, save it,” Joss interrupted, sounding annoyed. “You’re literally tied up at our feet, man. Maybe now’s not the time to be making threats.”

“It’s *you* who should be worried!” Nolan raged. “If my pack doesn’t come for me, Silas will.”

“You think Silas is going to come for you?” I snapped, fed up. I stepped forward and Nolan’s crazed eyes zeroed in on me. “You think he cares about you? You think he’s going to risk his ass for some washed up, meatball Alpha like you?”

Nolan snarled and snapped his teeth at me, surprising me enough that I jumped back.

“Get this thing out of here,” Greyson snapped at Joss and, grabbing me by the arm, pulled me away from Nolan and into the trees. “Hey,” he said, his voice gentler than it had been a second ago. “Are you okay, love? We’ve got Nolan, it’s over. You’re safe.”

“But Xavier—”

“Will come back,” Greyson said, tilting my chin up to look at him. “He will.”

I nodded. He was right, I knew that Xavier must have had a reason.

He didn’t speak as we walked back to the pack house, but he did keep his hand resting lightly on my waist, guiding me through the dark woods. At some point I slipped my hand into his, squeezing. He didn’t let go.

I sighed when the pack house came into view—partly with relief, partly with disappointment. I’d been hoping he’d talk to me on the walk back. About the simmering tension I could feel building between us. About the heat on my skin where he’d touched me.

We walked inside and, his hand still at the small of my back, Greyson led me upstairs and steered me into his room.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m checking that you’re okay,” he said, closing the door and turning to me. “*Without* the entire pack watching us.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised. “I’m okay.”

His eyes were intense. “I’m sorry Cali. That fight was… rough. I’m sorry you had to be there to see it.”

Truly I couldn’t shake the fight off of me. It’d been intense; it’d been a lot of things. And now Xavier was gone. Was it my fault?

I nodded, biting my lip. “It’s okay, Grey. It was my idea.”

He shook his head. “You don’t look okay.”

“I’m not,” I said, before I could stop myself. I couldn’t be with him here like this. This *close*. “I need… *something*, Greyson. I need control.”

“Control?” he asked, his brow furrowing.

“Everything’s so up in the air!” I said, pacing deeper into his bedroom. “And now Xavier’s gone—”

“Xavier’s an adult,” Greyson said evenly.

“But where *is* he?” I demanded. “Why did you let him leave?”

Greyson’s gaze was steady. “I can only tell him so many times to stay with the pack.”

I folded my arms across my chest, cold from the night air and the fear. “Maybe we should go after him.”

Greyson shook his head. “We can’t do that. Not now. Not when we have Nolan to watch. I don’t think Silas is going to come for him, but that threat is real, and we need all the people we can get so we’re a united front.”

“But what about—”

“We just have to hope that Xavier comes back,” Greyson said calmly.

I looked at him for a long moment. “Do you mean that?”

“What?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Do you really want Xavier to come back?”

Greyson’s light eyes flashed in the dim room. “He’s a member of this pack, Cali. More than that, he’s my brother,” he said quietly. “We need him if we’re going to beat Silas.”

I nodded, then turned to look out the window. But then I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror over Greyson’s dresser and took a step closer. “Good god,” I muttered. My face was streaked with ash from the charred remains of the house and my arms were covered with mud. Some of my hair, too.

I hurried into Greyson’s bathroom and turned on the water in the sink. I peeled off my ruined fleece pullover and started scrubbing the dirt on my hands and arms. As I worked, I found myself growing more and more frantic. My breathing became ragged as I closed my eyes, scrubbing the charcoal from my face, and I could feel tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. It was as if all the pressure and strain of the day had built up and was hitting me all at once. I leaned over the sink, panting, trying not to cry.

Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I knew without looking up that it was Greyson. His touch was so familiar—gentle but firm.

“It’s okay, Cali,” he said, his low voice wrapping around me. “Breathe for a second. Just breathe.”

I nodded, taking in big gulps of air.

“Just tell me what you need.”

I opened my eyes and met his gaze in the mirror.

*What did I need?*

His grey eyes were fixed intently on me. “What do you need?” he asked again, and the words hung in the air between us.

And that was when I knew: everything I needed was looking right back at me. I spun around. Greyson didn’t step back, so our bodies were a hair’s width apart. My heart was pounding so hard I was certain he could hear it, we were so close together.

Greyson looked down at me, his eyes liquid. His lips parted and I stared at the perfection of his bottom lip. I could practically feel it between my teeth. *What are you waiting for?* my brain screamed at me. I’d been waiting so long, but now… I didn’t want to wait anymore. And there was no reason to.

I leaned forward, reaching up on my tiptoes, and kissed him.

Greyson met me halfway, his lips crashing into mine, igniting me like a match touched to kindling. He tasted like salt and ash and his kiss was hungry with want, like he’d been waiting for me for years. He kissed me hard, deep, and with an urgency that stole my breath completely.

He slipped his arms around me and slid his hands beneath my ass, lifting me up and perching me on the counter so he could step closer to me, between my legs, pressing our bodies together. I hugged my legs around him as I reveled in exploring his strong shoulders. He slid his mouth down, along my jaw, flicking his tongue just behind my ear. I dropped my head back with a moan.

*Fuck*.

“If you want me to stop,” he said, his voice husky, “tell me now.”

“No,” I panted. “I don’t want you to stop.”

“Are you sure about this, love?” he asked. It sounded like he was having trouble catching his breath too.

I threaded my fingers through his hair and tugged, pulling up his head so I could look him right in the eye. “I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life,” I said.

With that, I leaned forward slowly, making him wait for my lips to meet his. The kiss started slow and grew more urgent by the second. His tongue slid against mine, his teeth biting down on my lips. It felt like he was going to eat me alive, and I wanted him to.

Greyson devoured me, consumed me, *possessed* me.

His slightest bit of stubble rubbed against me, scratching me raw, but I didn’t care. I was melting against him as his hands found their way beneath my shirt. One hand grabbed my hip, and the next moved its way up my spine, sending delicious shivers through me. One moment his fingers were whisper-soft against my skin, the next they were gripping me, digging into my flesh.

“Grey,” I gasped, desperate to have him closer. “I need more.”

With a guttural growl, he grabbed my tank top with both hands and ripped it in two, throwing the scraps of torn fabric to the ground. He popped the buttons of my jeans loose and I wriggled out of them. He stood for a moment, looking at me in nothing but my bra and panties. The old me would have felt completely self-conscious.

I wasn’t the old Caliana.

I got off the counter, his grey eyes looking like steel as he watched my every move. My heart beat in my chest, pounding against my ribcage as I took my bra off, letting it drop to the floor. Keeping eye contact with him, I slowly slipped my panties down my legs into a pool on the floor.

“Well?” I said.

Greyson didn’t hesitate as he picked me up and carried me into the shower.

**Episode 788**

The hot water steamed up the shower so quickly I could barely see, so I closed my eyes, allowing myself to just *feel* Greyson’s hands on me. He moved his hands across my skin, and it felt like I was turning to liquid beneath them. Maybe I swayed on my feet, or maybe he just he sensed me weakening, because he backed me up against the shower wall and pressed his body hard into mine.

“Stay with me, love,” he murmured, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I whispered back.

When I ran my hands up the sides of his thighs to his hips, he sucked in a sharp breath, then dropped his head to press his lips to mine. His kisses were all taking, like he was drawing something out of me. He was hungry for me, and I opened up to him—desperate to give him all he wanted.

The hot water was beating against his broad back and rolling down his shoulders, spilling onto me, but it was nothing compared to the heat pooling inside me. My whole body thrummed with desire as he pressed me against the tile wall, and I could feel his desire hardening even more against me.

“Turn around,” he said in my ear.

I obliged. Greyson pulled me flush against him, his arousal on my back, and sank us into the hot water. One moment he was holding me and the next he was lathering my body up with soap. I couldn’t contain my moan as he cupped my breasts.

“You like that, love?” he asked, rough in my ear.

“Y-yes.”

I moaned again as he squeezed. Reaching back, I tangled my fingers in his hair until I turned around, finding his lips. I needed to feel his mouth on mine.

“Do you feel like, if we don’t get to the bed really soon, the whole world is going to explode?” I gasped out, breaking away from his demanding kiss and speaking against his lips.

“Fuck,” he breathed. “*Yes*.”

After a half-hearted drying-off job, he slipped an arm beneath me and lifted me lightly into his arms. Keeping his lips on mine, he walked me into the darkened bedroom and set me down carefully on the bed.

Out of the water, I shivered. “Get over here and warm me up,” I said.

Greyson shook his head and paced around the bed.

“Grey?” I demanded, pushing myself up onto my forearms and watching him.

I was trying to be outraged, but my eyes scanned down his body, taking in the perfect architecture of his chest muscles, the way his waist winnowed down to achingly defined abs, and that goddamned v-shaped line just below said abs. Fuck.

I dropped my head back and closed my eyes. “If you don’t get over here, I’m going to finish before you even touch me,” I warned.

Greyson chuckled, but when I opened my eyes to look at him, his expression was so hungry he was nearly unrecognizable. His eyes were so dilated with lust they looked almost black, and they ranged up and down my body, so hungry and possessive I could nearly *feel* his gaze brushing my skin. “Oh, love, I’m going to take my time with you.”

“You are?” I asked in a small voice.

He nodded and climbed slowly onto the bed, eyeing me like prey. “When I take you, Cali, you’re going to remember everything I do to you.”

My eyes widened and my cheeks burned. I remembered when he’d spoken those words to me before.

“You’re going to blush under every touch of my lips,” he said, running a hand up my calf as he climbed onto the bed. “The feel of my hands on your skin is going to be burned into your memory.”

He was close now, and he stretched his massive frame until he was hovering just above me. I wanted him so much I could barely breathe. I wanted him to touch me. To feel the weight of him on me. But I couldn’t even reach for him. I was frozen, listening to him, watching his mouth—just above mine—form the words.

“When I take you, love, I want you to remember that you are—and will always be—*mine*.”

He paused, waiting. And, drawing in a ragged breath, I nodded.

“Yours,” I whispered, every inch of my skin on fire.

The smile he gave me was wolfish, and lasted only an instant before he dropped his mouth to mine, consuming me—*claiming* me. I was his, and his alone. Gasping, I couldn’t take it when his hands slid up my ribs and cupped my breasts again. He smiled, watching my desperation grow as he teased me. His thumbs rolling over my nipples, making them pucker into sharp nubs. When he dropped his head and took one in his mouth, I was gone. Completely unraveled.

“Greyson,” I moaned. His teeth grazed my nipple and I couldn’t take it any longer. How much time did he have to take?! “*Please*.”

“I love hearing my name on your tongue, love,” he murmured, and kissed his way up my chest. Everything he did—everything he touched—was too much, and I was sure I wasn’t going to withstand it. His hand dropped to the seam of my sex, his other hand cupping my breast.

His fingers hovered there. “Do you want me to, Cali?”

I nodded.

“Yeah?” he asked, hovering over my lips with his. “How bad?”

I dug my heels into the mattress as his fingers entered me. Moaning, I clung onto his shoulders as waves of pleasure started to roll through me. My hips moved to meet his hand; his breath hot on my neck.

Then, he was gone.

I was shaking, shivering, not even close to being satisfied when he kissed me. I took his bottom lip between my teeth, tracing my hands down his back, his chest, his shoulders. Greyson broke the kiss, his voice rough when he asked, “Should I get a condom?”

“Control,” I breathed out, my brain drunk on him. “Birth.”

I shook my head, pressing a finger to his lips. “I’m on the pill,” I said. “Now *please* stop teasing me.”

Greyson laughed before he kissed me again. Our bodies rocked against each other and my legs went weak when he reached between us. He pressed his erection against me and with a groan, he entered me, burying himself inside me.

“Too much?” he asked, though his voice was tight with restraint.

I shook my head, panting. I was so close to begging for more. I wrapped my legs around his back, drawing him further into me.

He dropped his head against my shoulder with another groan. “*Fuck*, *Cali*.” His voice sent shivers through me. “How do you feel this good, love? How is this possible?”

He braced his arms on either side of my head and I arched up to him, meeting him stroke for stroke, pain and pleasure mingling together in a way that nearly blinded me. I was still thrumming from his fingers. He felt amazing inside me, and I felt pleasure building deep in my belly.

Why in the *world* had I fucking put this off? I’d wasted so much time wondering how and when and if, when I could have been doing *this* with this man. But, biting my lip, I shook my head against the thought. This wasn’t the moment for self-recrimination.

I’d just lifted my arms to grasp the headboard and brace myself against the pressure of him when I caught sight of my inner arm. The black vein was fading. I stared at it, wondering if it could just be a trick of the dim light, but it wasn’t. I was sure of it. And, now that I thought of it, the pain in my chest was gone too. What did that mean?

I didn’t have time to think about it as he slipped his hand between us again, finding my bundle of nerves.

“Ohmygodohmygodohmygod,” I breathed, pleasure coursing through me, all thoughts of the veins forgotten.

“You can just call me Greyson, love,” he said, smirking.

I was going to say something snarky back, but just at that moment, Greyson changed his angle and my eyes rolled back. I’d never felt pleasure this intense and I swiveled my hips as he pumped, which made him moan, so I did it again.

I felt him start to shiver, and I knew he was close. I threaded my hands into his hair and pulled him roughly down, kissing him hard. He was coming apart in my hands, I could feel it, and I arched up, letting myself climax with him, fireworks exploding behind my eyes as I gasped and screamed and called out his name.

He was shattering beneath my hands, slamming me into the headboard, his breath ragged as he pulsed into me. “Cali,” he murmured, pressing soft kisses everywhere.

We kept up our rhythm for a moment longer, both basking in the afterglow of earth-shattering climaxes, then—slowly, slowly—we wound to a stop. He rolled off me and I just lay there, breathing hard, my head spinning like I was about to pass out, even though I was still lying down.

“*That*,” he said breathlessly, “was worth the wait.”

I breathed out a laugh and rolled toward him. It wasn’t enough. Even after all that, it still wasn’t enough. I still needed to be close to him, and I laid my head on his chest. He gave a contented sigh and tucked his arm around me, drawing me close to his body, both of us slick with sweat. He was as spent as I was.

He looked down at me, his eyes ranging over my face, taking me in for a moment. Then he leaned down and kissed me. This kiss was soft and gentle, a whisper across my lips. I was tired and felt so safe and warm, my eyelids drooped. They were dying to close, but I fought against it. I wanted to be here, with Greyson. I didn’t want to sacrifice any time to sleep.

I put my hand on his chest, where I could feel his heart pounding. I lay still for a long moment, listening to the steady beat as it wound its way back to a slower rhythm. I looked at the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, in and out. In and out.

“You’re wrong, you know.” I looked up, meeting his eyes.

He raised an eyebrow, but he said nothing.

I took a deep breath. “I love you, too.”

**Episode 789**

VIOLET

So this was how I was going to die. Not of old age, not while fighting the crazy Manus Cruentae or Silas, but at the hands of this rando Rogue werewolf.

I stared into the man’s wide, crazed eyes. God, he was tall—and terrifying. He towered over me to the point where I had to crane my neck to see his face.

Never in my life had I seen eyes like his—in humans, animals, or supernatural creatures. There was an unhinged quality to his gaze, like he could reach out and snap my neck and not feel an ounce of remorse, just as easily as he could run off and find someone else to hurt. Because that was the only thing I knew for certain: he wanted to hurt someone, something. And whenever he finally pounced on his prey, he would enjoy it.

I backed up. My instincts screamed at me to *run!*, but I knew better. He wanted a chase, wanted the thrill of the hunt. If I turned tail and ran, there would be no escaping him. Maybe if I stood my ground, or at least tried to, he wouldn’t attack me.

My back made contact with the tree behind me, its bark scratching my skin. Still, the man advanced, his lips splitting into a sinister feral grin. “These woods are dangerous, little girl. You never know what you’re going to run into.”

My mouth was dry as a bone, and I swallowed, trying to find my voice. “I-I-I was just m-meeting my boyfriend,” I said, even as the words made my heart sink. “He’s on his way over n-now. He’ll be here any minute.”

Despite the intention behind my words—to convince Mr. Tall, Rogue, and Murder-ey that I wasn’t going to be easy prey—I knew how weak I sounded. Hell, I couldn’t even convince myself that I wasn’t alone, much less a terrifying werewolf who could doubtlessly smell my fear.

Charlie wasn’t my boyfriend. He’d made that very clear. And there was no way he was coming to save me. Last I checked, he’d decided to stick to his human life—a life that didn’t include his werewolf mate. He was probably making nice with Sandi right about now.

Desperately, I tried to reach out to Charlie with my mind. Sure, I wasn’t at the top of his list of favorite people right now, but surely he didn’t want to see me eviscerated by a psychotic Rogue. Maybe it didn’t matter that I was his mate, but I hoped that by now I was his friend, too. That had to count for something, right? I couldn’t take this guy myself, but with Charlie at my side, he might view me as too much trouble to bother with.

*Charlie? Charlie, can you hear me? I need your help! Please! PLEASE, CHARLIE!*

There was no answer. I couldn’t get through. I didn’t want to think about what that meant.

The Rogue laughed, and the sound pulled goosebumps to the surface of my skin. “Oh no, little girl. I’ve been watching you.” He let those disgusting words sink in before continuing. “You’ve been spending quite a lot of time with my protégé, but he doesn’t seem all that interested, does he? Such a shame.”

Chills crawled down my spine as I imagined this monster watching Charlie and me in the woods. I felt sick, violated—and then realization struck. *Protégé*. This was the Rogue who’d attacked Charlie. The one who’d turned him into a werewolf.

And suddenly, I wasn’t afraid anymore. I was *furious*. My blood boiling, I pushed off the tree behind me and got up in *his* face. My finger jabbed into his chest, and I snarled. “What do you think you’re doing, running around and attacking humans, you fucking psychopath?”

“Such filthy words for such a sweet, young face.” He grinned again, showing off far too many teeth. “I think I’m enjoying myself. All you pack werewolves think you’re so civilized, but you’re pretending to be something you’re not. Werewolves are meant to dominate, to attack, to *kill*. You may have forgotten who you really are, but I haven’t. I’m simply taking what’s mine.”

I gaped and stumbled back, horrified. Good god, was this Rogue some kind of serial killer? It was one thing to lose control, to go feral, but this was something different. Something infinitely worse. I’d heard of wolves losing control before, but this unashamed bloodlust was new to me. Yes, werewolves were predators, but hunting humans… My stomach twisted. I couldn’t understand the impulse, could barely think about it without losing the contents of my stomach. How could he live with himself?

It was all too easy to imagine what it must have been like for his victims—being hunted down in the night, terrified, probably hurt, only to end up in the worst of circumstances when he was done playing with his food. I was mates with one of his victims, after all. And even though this monster was the reason I now had a mate, I couldn’t feel anything but revulsion toward him. Charlie had been innocent. He hadn’t deserved to be changed against his will.

Lilac had been innocent too, and he’d been attacked by a monster, unable to defend himself. Had he felt the same fear I did? Had he thought of me? Wondered if help would come? If someone would save him?

Nobody had come for him. Nobody had helped him in the fight for his life. And in the end, he’d become a victim too.

Another wave of fury rolled over me as I imagined my twin, the other half of my soul, facing down certain death against a soulless monster like the one in front of me. And I forgot to be afraid.

*This ends now*.

I straightened and stared into the Rogue’s dead eyes. “You’re not going to get away with this. I won’t let you.”

He snorted, then let out a deep belly laugh that set my teeth on edge. “Oh yeah, little one? You and what army?”

I stood strong even though I was alone, and there was no army coming to save me. And then, over the Rogue’s shoulder, I saw a familiar face and my blood ran cold.

*Lilac.*

I gasped. Had I conjured him somehow? His ghost was standing behind the Rogue, gesturing to me.

The Rogue noticed my focus shifting and turned around, obviously confused that I’d seen something more shocking than him.

Lilac motioned at me to run, but I was frozen in place, drinking in every last detail of his ghostly appearance. I didn’t know when or if I’d get to see him again. My chest grew tighter and tighter with each second I stared at him, my eyes burning and my lower lip quivering.

Lilac had come for me, trying to do what he could to help me. To save me.

“What the hell?” the Rogue muttered, staring at Lilac.

Then Lilac’s expression became pained, and his gestures intensified to the point where they looked violent. This was my chance, I realized. The only one I was going to get.

I shifted and bolted, bursting through the forest. The crashing in the woods behind me told me that the Rogue was giving chase. I pushed myself harder, my feet flying over the ground, but he was so much bigger, so much stronger. I wouldn’t be able to outrun him forever.

Already, the Rogue was eating up the lead Lilac had given me. I could hear his panting breath behind me, far too close. Oh god, this was how I was going to die. This was it. I’d come back here for Charlie and now he didn’t even want me and I was going to be murdered for my trouble. I would never see my mate or my friends or my pack ever again.

I dashed out of the woods and into a clearing surrounded by rocky bluffs. I spun around desperately, but no matter which way I pivoted, I was trapped. The Rogue slowed to a lope as he approached, leering. He knew as well as I did that here, in this clearing miles away from campus or any bit of civilization, no one was coming to save me.

With a snarl, I turned to face the Rogue head-on. If he was going to kill me, I wasn’t going to make it easy for him. Then I noticed Lilac behind the Rogue, and I froze. What was he doing here again? Had he…

Had he come to watch me die? To help me pass over to the other side and join him?

Taking advantage of my distraction, the Rogue pounced, his strong, lethal body flying toward me. I braced myself for the impact.

*I’m coming, Lilac. We’ll be together again very soon.*

And then Charlie’s wolf came shooting out of the trees and slammed into the Rogue.

**Episode 790**

XAVIER

I raced through the woods, gritting my teeth at how wrong it felt to be locked in my human body. My bare feet felt every twig and pebble, and branches scratched at my skin as I passed by. Never in my life had I wanted to shift into my wolf form more—to feel the wind racing through my fur as I moved effortlessly through the forest.

Something was wrong, terribly wrong. I could barely wrap my mind around it. The last time I’d been like this, trapped in my human body and cut off from half of my own self, had been after I’d killed Ava. My wolf had abandoned me… until Cali had come along. My new mate. My true mate.

But now Ava was back and my wolf was gone again. What did it mean? The timing couldn’t have been worse. We were only ten days away from Halloween, which was when Tefirna had predicted a huge bloodbath that could no doubt be traced back to my father. How was I going to be able to fight and protect Cali without my wolf? How could I take down Ava or Silas when I was locked in my useless human body?

*Ava*. Just thinking about her poured a new dose of fury into my veins. Despite her many efforts to explain herself, my rage had only grown since I’d found out the truth about her deception. Now she had betrayed me twice—first by killing my mother, and then by pretending to be Cali.

And it was my own damn fault that I’d been too blind to see the truth—that it had been Ava wearing Cali’s face and not Cali herself. I’d been so desperate to be with her, to believe in our future together, that I’d ignored everything else.

Maybe I deserved to lose my wolf. Maybe this was my punishment for sleeping with a woman who wasn’t Cali. I slowed to a walk.

Was that what was happening here? Had the *due destini* curse made me weak? Had it separated me from my wolf? Or was the whole situation actually some scheme of my father’s? If he had a witch powerful enough to bring Ava back to life and make her look like Cali, then maybe separating me from my wolf through some kind of dark magic wasn’t off the table.

Or… was this happening because of Ava? I hesitated to even think about it for too long, but I couldn’t ignore the connection there—killing her had separated me from my wolf the first time, and now that she was alive again, was it possible that my wolf saw Ava, and not Cali, as my true mate?

I shook my head. No, it couldn’t be that. Plus, this felt nothing like it had the first time I’d lost my wolf. After killing Ava, I’d been so emotionally shut down that I hadn’t even cared about what I’d lost. I hadn’t even tried any of the various dumb solutions Colton had kept throwing at me, like bathing myself in wolf blood and running through the woods beneath a full moon.

But now… Now, I’d do just about anything to get that piece of myself back as soon as possible. I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck, racking my brain for possible solutions. What was that thing Colton was always going on about? Some kind of hippy-dippy walkabout bullshit that was rumored to *reconnect* a troubled soul? Maybe I could start there. It wasn’t like I was any use to anyone like this.

I was wandering through the forest, mulling over my options, when I came upon the original Redwood pack house. I hadn’t realized my feet had carried me so far from home. And then I froze.

My mom was sitting on the front steps.

*It couldn’t be*. Emotion clogged my throat at the sight of her—the mother I’d lost, the one source of unconditional love in my life. It couldn’t really be her. She was clearly a ghost, and if I allowed myself to think logically, I knew that her appearance had more to do with the orb than me being in the middle of a crisis.

But I couldn’t deny that seeing my mom at such a low point in my life—when I’d never needed love and guidance more—cracked something open inside me. I felt hot tears running down my cheeks and let out a shuddering breath.

I’d missed her so much. More than I’d realized.

I slowly approached her, knowing that this was probably one of my father’s tricks—a trap, at the very least—but I couldn’t help myself. I had to see her again. I had to talk to her. I wasn’t going to miss this chance to reconnect with the mother I’d lost.

I stopped in front of her, our bodies only inches apart. She smiled softly and reached out a ghostly hand to touch my cheek. When her fingertips made contact with my skin, I didn’t feel anything, and the absence of her touch was more painful than any trap Silas could have set.

“Xavier,” she said quietly. “My son.”

“What are you doing here?” I forced myself to ask. I didn’t know yet if she was real, or if Silas had created some kind of horrifying mirage of my late mother, and until I knew the truth, I couldn’t let my guard down any further.

“I’m here to warn you. The Redwood pack is in grave danger.”

I nodded. “I know. From Silas. But how are you here?”

She shook her head. “That’s not important.” She paused for a moment, her eyes scanning over me, no doubt checking my appearance against some mental catalogue. It had been so long since we’d seen each other. Her eyes met mine and she continued. “I wanted to tell you that the most important thing right now is to remember that division between blood will only bring defeat.”

I stared at her, trying to parse out her words. Was she talking about Greyson? Or Colton being away, doing god only knew what with Maya? Then I frowned as her words sank in. What did she know about our division? She’d been dead for years; how could she know anything about my life right now?

This had to be one of Silas’s mindfucks.

“How are you here?” I asked again, pointedly this time. “Who brought you back?”

“Never underestimate a mother’s connection to her child,” she responded gently. “Especially a child who gave so much to protect her.”

Just like that, emotion clogged my throat once more. “Yeah, well, I didn’t protect you very well, did I?” I hadn’t been there for her when it had really mattered.

“None of that is important anymore. Just… remember the Titans, Xavier.”

“What!?” I’d never thought my mom was a fan of football films.

She smiled gently. “The younger generation, together, can defeat the tyrannical father.”

“Do you have to be so cryptic?” I huffed. “What are you talking about?”

But her outline was starting to flicker. I could already see through her—literally through her—to the porch behind her. I reached out before I could think about it. “Don’t leave me. There’s so much I wish I could have told you—I love you, Mom. I’m so sorry for everything that happened and—”

“Remember, Xavier. Open up to your brother. It’s the only thing that can save you.” She was getting even fainter. “Don’t close yourself off to those closest to you.”

“I will. I promise.” I still didn’t have the first idea what she meant, but what else could I really say? “I love you, Mom.”

“I love…”

She disappeared, and I felt more lost than ever. What had she been talking about? She must have meant teaming up with Colton, but he was off doing his own thing. And I sure as shit had never wanted to open up to Greyson less than I did now.

This had to all be some kind of trick from Silas, right? I wouldn’t have put it past him to fuck with my head like this before Halloween. He always had enjoyed playing with his food. I growled and kicked at the old, wooden steps.

“Xavier?” said a soft, hesitant voice behind me. I recognized it instantly. It was Ava, in her human form.

I whipped around, trying fruitlessly to shift, to attack, but of course I couldn’t. It was lucky for her, because I’d never wanted to kill another person more—especially after being maybe-visited by the ghost of my mom. One of the most important people in the world to me.

And now I was standing in front of the old pack house, staring at my mother’s murderer.

Ava held up her hands. “Just hear me out! I want to help you, Xavier. Please, trust me. Trust the bond we once had. I’m your only hope.”

**Episode 791**

VIOLET

I lunged back with a gasp as Charlie’s wolf slammed into the Rogue. Both were mere inches away from taking me down with them. My heart was beating against my ribs like a caged animal. *Charlie came for me!*

I didn’t hesitate to jump in and help Charlie. His attack on the Rogue had given him the element of surprise, and he had the Rogue pinned to the ground, his teeth deep in the other wolf’s flank. But I knew he wouldn’t keep the advantage for long.

I leapt onto the Rogue, too—right as he bucked Charlie off. My body slammed into the Rogue’s in a flurry of teeth and claws and snarls and growls. His claws scratched down my arm and I let out a yip of pain before dodging out of his way and sinking my teeth into his shoulder.

Charlie, clumsy and inexperienced in battle as he was, knocked into both of us when he rejoined the fray. I was torn away from the Rogue, but not without taking a bit of him with me. Charlie clawed and bit at any part of the Rogue he could reach. I circled around the two of them, waiting for an opening, growling and snarling at the Rogue as I moved.

The Rogue shoulder-checked Charlie and sent him tumbling back. I was ready to defend my mate, ready to step up and fight this monster who had cruelly ended so many lives and—hopefully—bring him to an end.

But to my immense shock, the Rogue let out one last snarl before turning tail and bounding off into the woods, disappearing in the trees. I never took my eyes off the tree line, though I heard Charlie climb to his feet and approach me. His nose brushed against my side, and then I heard his voice in my head.

*Are you okay?*

He lurched back before I could answer.

*Wait!* There was shock and, if I wasn’t mistaken, a slight thread of panic in his voice. *I’m not talking. Well, obviously I’m talking, but not with my human mouth. Can you hear me, Violet?*

*Yes!* I replied. If I’d been in my human form, I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep the smile off my face. Charlie had mind linked with me! He’d saved my life and now we were communicating like real mates!

I knew from the way he cocked his head that he’d heard me too, and when he shifted back to his human form, I did the same. Despite the shitty situation we were in, I couldn’t help but grin at him.

The mind link was a huge deal for mates—not that he would know that, or recognize its significance. But still… Did this mean that things weren’t quite so hopeless for us? That, despite Charlie’s reluctance to leave his human life behind, our mate bond was still healthy and strong?

We stared at each other, naked and panting after sprinting all the way out here and fighting for our lives. Was it just me, or was Charlie looking at me differently? There was something about his eyes, the weight of them as he looked me over, some strange combination of checking for harm and, possibly, checking *me* out that made my stomach flip-flop. Yes, there was definitely something more in his eyes than I’d ever noticed before.

His voice broke the silent spell between us.

“Did I just read your mind?” he asked. “Or, what, did *you* read *my* mind? Is this a werewolf thing?”

Oh boy. That wasn’t exactly a simple question, was it? He was starting with the big ones that I didn’t quite know how to answer. I grimaced inwardly. What did it say about me that I was prepared to talk about serial killer werewolves, but explaining a major aspect of the mating bond *with my actual mate* made me stumble?

I shook my head. “I promise I’ll explain everything, but we can’t stay here. It’s not safe. The Rogue could come back any minute—”

“You think he’d come back looking for more after we already fought him off once?” Charlie asked.

“I do. I think you jumping into the fray so suddenly was what did him in. It was the surprise more than anything else that gave us the upper hand. And now that he knows we’ve teamed up, he might be more prepared next time. We can’t trust that we’ll be able to run him off again so easily. He’s so fast and strong…” I sighed. “Not to mention like, certifiably insane. We need to get out of here and go somewhere safe while we still can.”

Charlie looked unnerved by this assessment, but he nodded. “Okay. Where to?”

I shifted and mind linked with him again, feeling a frisson of delight and excitement at the connection between us. It felt as easy as breathing, second nature. Mind linking with my mate was the most amazing thing I’d ever experienced. We were so close, so entwined—

He shifted and cocked his head at me. *You have a destination in mind?*

I shook off the giddiness. Right. Celebrate later, get to safety now. *Follow me*.

Together, we raced back to our spot overlooking the lake. It was far, far from where the Rogue had found us, and was a naturally elevated point in the area. I knew from scenting around the area that if the Rogue had ever found this place, it hadn’t been recently. This was safety—or the closest thing to it that we were going to find outside of a locked door back in civilization.

We both shifted back, and Charlie dove right in. “Uh, okay. So, this talking you’re doing in my brain… What the fuck is that?”

I stifled the laughter that bubbled up in my chest. I could see how the mind link might be off-putting, if you hadn’t been raised around werewolves. To me, mind linking with my mate was a milestone I’d always dreamed about—probably not unlike how so many human girls dreamed about their weddings.

Charlie, on the other hand, probably thought it was some kind of invasive telepathy magic or something, and I hesitated to respond. I wasn’t about to push the whole mate thing again since it had blown up in my face before, but I didn’t want to lie to him about something so important either.

Maybe the real answer could wait a little longer.

“How did you know where to find me?” I asked.

He frowned, and I expected him to push back against my deflection. Instead, he said, “It was the weirdest thing… When I was walking away after we said goodbye, on my way to go see Sandi, I got the oddest sensation—I just *knew* you were in danger.” He took a step toward me. “I didn’t know the specifics, or how or why, but I… I felt it in my body. In my bones. You needed help. Needed *me*. And even when I tried to shake it off, it still felt too urgent.” He took another step. He was standing right in front of me. All I had to do was lift my hand two inches and my fingers would brush against his. “I just had to turn around and head back into the woods. And then I shifted, and I just knew exactly where to go.”

My mouth went dry and all I could think about, all I could focus on, was his warm, naked body mere inches from mine. Heat rushed into my cheeks.

He noticed my eyes lingering and leaned in just slightly. “Is this normal?” he asked quietly. “Is this just how it is between werewolves who are in the same pack?”

I didn’t know how to answer that without ruining everything.

He took another step closer. I could feel his skin, a hair’s width away. His fingertips skimmed over my cheek. “There’s something about you, Violet. I don’t understand it, but I can’t control myself around you. I don’t *want* to control myself around you.”

Was this really happening? I looked him in the eyes. “I don’t want you to control yourself either.”

With a hungry groan, Charlie closed the space between us, cupped my face in his hands, and kissed me, his warm body pressing flush against mine. His mouth was gentle but insistent, his lips warm and firm and coaxing mine into responding.

I melted into the kiss, my hands sliding up his chest and linking behind his neck. This was everything I’d ever hoped for, more than I could have imagined.

Suddenly, he pulled back and my heart plummeted. He was going to choose Sandi again, I just knew it.

But the moment dragged on, and I realized there was no regret in his eyes. Instead, he was staring at me with something like wonder.

“Before you went back to Oregon, you told me… You told me that we were mates.”

I couldn’t even breathe. I stood there, frozen, waiting for him to say more. Was he finally accepting our connection?