



# Who Let The Wolves Out?

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** I came to Camp Lightring for a peaceful summer job. Instead, I got glitter explosions, werewolf dodgeball...  
...and Jason Fenwick.

Shirtless, cocky, and absolutely infuriating.

He howls at the moon. I color – code my clipboard.

We're co-counselors for the wildest group of magical kids this side of the lake, and somehow, he thinks we're a "team."

I think he's allergic to rules. And shirts. And personal space.

But the more chaos we survive – from enchanted arts & crafts to midnight wolf-walks — the harder it is to remember why I swore off monsters in the first place.

I came to forget my ex.

Instead I'm falling for the messiest, most maddening werewolf in the woods.

Read on for camp hijinks, enemies-to-lovers, forced proximity, glitter-related injuries, slow-burn kisses, and one snarly wolf who gives very good forehead touches. HEA guaranteed. Just don't touch the glitter drawer.

**Total Pages (Source):** 87

# Page 1

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## CHAPTER 1

### ALICE

The first thing I notice isn't the trees or the birdsong or the glistening lake I saw in the brochure. It's the heat.

Not just the summer sun—though that's definitely a thing, dripping sweat down my spine like it's got a vendetta—but the kind of heat that makes your brain fog up and your thighs stick together in the worst way. My floral sundress is too optimistic for this weather. The tote bag strapped across my chest is slowly carving a dent into my shoulder, and the clipboard in my hand is already damp from my palm.

Perfect. Just perfect.

I stare at the welcome sign, painted in swirling letters and glitter that's already peeling at the corners: Welcome to Camp Lighttring!

Below it, smaller text boasts: Where Every Camper Shines Bright!

I blow out a breath.

“Okay,” I murmur, adjusting the clip in my hair for the fourth time. “New start. No crying about cheating dirtbags. No thinking about Miranda. No regretting everything you've ever done.”

The camp director, Julie—bright-eyed and way too peppy for someone in charge of

children—had hugged me so hard I nearly lost a lung when I stepped off the shuttle. She handed me a counselor badge, a room assignment, and a map that looks more like a fantasy treasure scroll than anything practical.

I peer at it now, squinting.

“Cabin C... So, over the bridge, left at the toadstool garden, past the canoe racks—wait, what?”

There’s a sharp wolf-whistle to my right.

My stomach sinks. And then, promptly, my heart follows it into some deep, cold abyss.

He’s leaning against a post near the mess hall like he’s posing for a photoshoot that no one asked for. Shirtless. Muscles like he’s carved out of moonlight and ego. Scruffy beard. Wild, shaggy brown hair. A cocky grin stretched wide across his face like a billboard for trouble, party of one.

Werewolf.

Definitely werewolf. The scent is faint but there—the earthy musk of forest, iron, and something vaguely like bonfire smoke. I’ve read about it. My ex-boyfriend dabbled in paranormal theory, back before he dabbled in my best friend.

“Hey there, Barbie.” His voice is pure gravel and sunshine, deep and lazy. “You lost, or just admiring the view?”

I want the earth to open up. Just swallow me whole, please. “I—I’m not lost,” I say, immediately sounding like a preteen girl on her first day of debate club. “I’m looking for Cabin C.”

He grins. “You’re lookin’ at it.”

Of course I am.

I glance down at my clipboard like it holds the secrets of the universe. “Are you... Jason Fenwick?”

He pushes off the post with that animal grace that all shifters seem to have in stories, except this isn’t a story. This is me, real-life, stuck for eight weeks with a half-naked man who thinks he’s God’s gift to children’s programming.

“In the flesh,” he says, tossing an empty granola bar wrapper into a trash can with alarming accuracy. “And you must be Alice Rivers. My co-captain of chaos.”

“I prefer the term counselor,” I say, stiffly.

“Sure. But chaos is what we’re dealing with, sweetheart. Trust me.”

I don’t like the way he sayssweetheart. Like it’s a test I didn’t study for. I adjust my tote bag strap again.

He notices.

“Lighten up, Alice. It’s camp. Not a funeral.”

“I take my job seriously,” I say, chin tipping up instinctively.

## Page 2

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Jason leans in slightly, arms crossed, and his eyes—dark, unreadable—crinkle with mischief.

“Well, buckle up. The kids arrive in an hour, and we’ve got arts and crafts, dodgeball, and a scavenger hunt all packed into day one. Oh, and by the way... we’re the wild cabin.”

My face must betray the panic flaring in my chest because he laughs—a full, unrestrained belly laugh that echoes off the nearby trees.

I flinch.

“Great,” I say under my breath. “Just what I needed.”

Cabin C looks like it’s been assembled out of dreams and desperation. Pine wood siding. A crooked chimney. A porch swing that squeaks like it’s haunted.

Inside, there are two counselor bunks in the back, six camper bunks lining the walls, and a small kitchenette that smells like bubblegum and mildew. The air is heavy with forgotten sunscreen and the faint tang of werewolf sweat.

“This one’s yours,” Jason says, pointing to the bottom bunk by the window. He flops onto the top bunk like it’s his personal throne.

I gently place my bag down and smooth the blanket. “Thank you.”

He props one arm under his head and watches me with that lazy wolf’s grin. “So,

what's your deal?"

"My...deal?"

"You've got that whole 'runaway from heartbreak' energy. Did someone cheat on you? Owe you money? Marry your cousin?"

I whip around, scandalized. "That's none of your business!"

He shrugs. "Fair. But I'm not wrong, am I?"

I grit my teeth. "Look. I didn't come here to flirt or gossip or... whatever this is."

"You came here to teach kids how to braid friendship bracelets and not cry yourself to sleep. I get it." He pauses. "Kinda hot, honestly."

My cheeks flame. I pretend to rearrange my pillow.

"God, you're easy to rile up," he mutters, laughing again. "This is gonna be fun."

The orientation bell rings outside. Jason's already halfway out the door before I've found my sunscreen.

"We gotta wrangle the crew for the welcome circle," he calls over his shoulder. "You comin', Barbie?"

I take a deep breath. One. Two. Three.

"Yes. But stop calling me Barbie."

He smirks without looking back. "No promises."

We gather by the lake with a sea of squirming kids who look entirely too caffeinated for 10 a.m. Jason immediately launches into a dramatic introduction involving interpretive dance, a fake wolf howl, and pretending to faint when the kids boo him.

They love him.

I want to scream.

Instead, I clear my throat, stepping forward with my clipboard. “Group C, let’s form a line—alphabetical by last name, please!”

The kids groan.

Jason leans in. “You’re gonna have a heart attack before Thursday, counselor.”

I grip my pen like a sword. “And you’re going to give me one.”

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He winks. “Can’t wait.”

### CHAPTER 2

#### JASON

I’m watching Alice rearrange the same damn pillow for the third time, and I can’t help it—I laugh.

Not loud. Just enough for her shoulders to twitch like a spooked rabbit. She doesn’t look at me, though. Probably still trying to decide whether I’m a sex pest or a liability with muscles.

Honestly, I’m both. On Tuesdays.

“Y’know,” I say from my perch on the top bunk, hands behind my head, “you keep fluffin’ that thing like it insulted your grandma.”

She huffs. Quiet. Not dramatic enough for a real huff, more like a breath that got too ambitious. “I like things neat.”

No shit, sweetheart. She’s folded her hoodie. In July.

I stretch, making sure the bedframe creaks enough to remind her I’m still shirtless and absolutely the problem child she didn’t want to get paired with. “You know the kids are gonna obliterate that bed in about six hours, right?”



She finally looks up. Blue eyes, narrowed just slightly. “And you know we’re supposed to be setting a good example, right?”

I smirk. “I am. This is me in role model mode.”

Her silence says God help us all.

“Look,” I say, flipping over so I can peer down at her, “this whole clipboard-counselor act? It’s cute. Really. But this is Camp Lightning. These kids are monsters. Literally. You think Nolan the dragon shifter is gonna respect alphabetical lineups? The kid burned his name tag last year.”

She blinks. “Wait... like, on purpose?”

“No, Barbie, he sneezed fire.”

She flinches at the nickname again. Doesn’t correct me this time. That’s progress.

I drop down from the bunk and land like a damn superhero, just to mess with her. She startles again, pressing her lips into a tight little line.

“You’re jumpy,” I say, stepping a little too close. Not threatening close—just enough to make her uncomfortable in a way she doesn’t know how to label.

She crosses her arms. “You’re... large.”

I grin. “You should see me during a full moon.”

Her ears go pink.

I expected her to say something cutting or flustered or annoying, but she just shakes

her head and mutters something about “camp supplies” and heads for the door.

I watch her go, and damn if her walk isn’t pure first-grade teacher energy—clipped, focused, feet practically apologizing to the floor. But there’s something under it, too. Tightness in her shoulders. The kind of tension people carry when they’re running from something.

I know that tension. I lived in it for five years straight.

By the time I catch up to her near the rec field, she’s got a clipboard in one hand and a stopwatch in the other. Kids are bouncing around like chaos goblins on candy, and Alice is clearly trying not to lose it.

“Okay, Group C,” she calls out. “Let’s try our name game one more time! When I call your name, say one fun fact about yourself?—”

“Miss Alice,” one kid yells. “Jason said his fun fact was he can pick up raccoons with one hand!”

“That’s a fact,” I say, strolling in with a wave. “Just ask last year’s maintenance guy. Little bastard was stuck in the dining hall chimney.”

Alice shoots me a look. “Please don’t encourage animal wrangling as a counselor skill.”

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“Aw, come on. We’re tryin’ to inspire the youth. What says growth like raccoon diplomacy?”

The kids crack up. Alice pinches the bridge of her nose.

“Jason,” she says slowly, “I’m trying to run a structured activity.”

“Structure is overrated,” I mutter, but I throw her a wink. “But fine. I’ll behave. For now.”

“Good,” she says, even though she sounds more exhausted than reassured.

She tries again. “Nolan?”

The shy kid halfway behind a tree peeks out. “I can whistle through my claws.”

“That’s badass,” I tell him, which earns me a huge smile and a look from Alice like I just handed a kid a switchblade.

She doesn’t say anything. Just jots something on her clipboard like she’s filing a formal complaint to the Universe.

God, she’s fun.

Later, after lunch—which involved a ketchup packet explosion and a sentient blob of macaroni—I find her scrubbing a picnic table with military focus.

I lean against the edge and toss her a water bottle. “You always this tightly wound or is it just me?”

She looks up, startled. Takes the bottle, because she’s polite like that. “I like rules.”

“No kidding.”

“And order.”

“Sure.”

“And when people don’t make up weird facts about raccoons.”

“That one really got under your skin, huh?”

She sighs. “I’m just... not used to this. The noise. The chaos. The... shirtlessness.”

I laugh. Loud and unapologetic. “You’ll adjust. Camp’s kind of a living creature. You don’t manage it—you ride it till it spits you out.”

“That’s comforting,” she deadpans.

“You’ll survive. Probably.”

She glances up again, and for a second I see something flicker in her eyes. Not fear. Not anger. Just... curiosity.

It passes. She stands, wiping her hands on her khakis. “I’m going to organize the cabin supply bins before dinner.”

“Knock yourself out,” I say, watching her walk away.

She's a mess. A tightly-buttoned, rule-worshipping, clipboard-swinging mess.

And I'm gonna have a great time watching her unravel.

## CHAPTER 3

ALICE

I've been awake for exactly forty-two minutes and I'm already covered in glitter.

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There's a smear of it across my forearm, my cheek, and somehow in the part of my hair, despite having tied it into a ponytail with military precision. The craft cabin is... not what I expected. The supply bins are mostly unlabeled. The pipe cleaners are tangled with fishing line. Someone has taped a "Do Not Open: Goblin" sign on the cabinet under the sink, and I'm not sure if it's a joke or a genuine safety concern.

I press my clipboard to my chest and take a breath.

It's fine. This is what I'm good at. Structure. Calm. Order. I just need to lead with confidence and the kids will follow. That's what the counselor orientation video said. Kids respond to confident leadership.

I clear my throat. "Okay, Group C! Today we're making kindness jars."

The kids barely glance at me. One is already chewing on a glue stick. Another is drawing what appears to be a dragon peeing on a village. Jason—who is supposed to be helping—has pulled up a chair and is holding court with four boys, dramatically recounting what I hope is a fake story involving a centaur and a malfunctioning zipline.

I move toward him. "Jason. Could you—um—help me get them started on the jars?"

He flashes me a grin, wide and lazy. "They're just warming up. We'll jump in."

"Warming up looks a lot like chaos," I say under my breath.

Jason's chair creaks as he leans back, arms stretched behind his head like he's

sunbathing in the middle of a hurricane. “Chaos is the prelude to genius.”

I blink. “What?”

“Quote me,” he says, then winks at one of the kids who is now using glitter as war paint.

I try again. “Everyone! Let’s each take a mason jar and start writing down kind things you’ve done or noticed others doing. We’ll decorate the jars with stickers and ribbon, and at the end of the week we’ll read some aloud?—”

A crash.

Followed by cackling.

I whirl around just in time to see Tommy—a tiefling with goat horns and a disturbingly accurate evil laugh—knock over a bin of beads. They roll across the floor like they’re fleeing a sinking ship.

“Tommy,” I say, trying to channel authority, “Please pick those up.”

“Jason said dropping them was part of the bonding experience,” he chirps.

I whip my head toward Jason, eyes wide. “What?”

Jason shrugs, not even pretending to look sorry. “They’re building trust. Beads of trust.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“It is now.”

I close my eyes. Breathe. “Can you just—please—follow the plan?”

Jason kicks his legs up onto another chair. “You mean your laminated spreadsheet plan? The one where we pretend kids don’t want to eat paint and start fires?”

“They need structure,” I snap, louder than I meant to.

The room goes quiet for a half-second. Just long enough for it to sting.

Jason stands up slowly, rolling his shoulders. “They need to have fun. Loosen up, Barbie.”

I clench my jaw. “I already told you to stop calling me that.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Why? ‘Cause it’s not listed in your itinerary?”

There’s something about his tone—lazy, flippant—that makes the heat rise in my chest. It’s not just annoyance. It’s frustration laced with something sharper. Something that tastes like humiliation.

I slam my clipboard onto the table.



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The kids go dead silent.

“I didn’t come here for this,” I say, low and sharp. “I came to make a difference. To help. And you’re treating this like some joke!”

Jason blinks, then crosses his arms. “You think I don’t care about these kids?”

“You’re not acting like it!” My voice breaks just slightly at the end, and I hate that. Hate how raw I sound.

For a beat, he just stares at me.

“Wow.”

He turns and walks out of the cabin.

The screen door swings shut behind him with a thud.

I stand there, breathing hard, fists tight at my sides.

A bead rolls past my foot.

I don’t see him again until after dinner. I’m sitting on the dock, staring at the water, trying not to cry. The sun’s dipping low, painting the lake in streaks of gold and orange. A few kids are skipping rocks nearby. One of them laughs, and it cuts through the lump in my throat like a knife.

“Hey.”

His voice is quiet this time.

I stiffen but don't turn.

“Didn't mean to steamroll your whole schedule,” Jason says.

I still don't look at him. “Didn't mean to yell in front of the kids.”

He sits down beside me, legs stretched out, arms on his knees. For once, he's not smirking. Not pushing. Just there.

“You're not wrong,” he says after a moment. “They do need structure. You're good at that.”

I glance over, surprised.

He's looking at the water, not me. “I'm not used to planning stuff. I mostly... improvise.”

“You don't say,” I murmur.

That gets the ghost of a smile from him.

“I'm trying,” I say softly. “I know I'm not... exciting like you. But I'm trying.”

He tilts his head, finally meeting my eyes. “Who told you you're not exciting?”

I snort. “No one has to. I've always been the planner. The one who keeps it together. My friends used to call me ‘mom friend.’”

“Sexy.”

I roll my eyes, but I’m smiling a little.

He nudges my knee with his. “You’re more than that.”

I blink. “You don’t even know me.”

“I’ve seen the way you talk to the shy kids. The way you make lists with little hearts next to the supplies. You’re the reason they’ll remember this summer.”

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I don't know what to say to that. So I just sit there. Let it settle between us like warm air.

Then Jason adds, "You were right, y'know. About me not taking it seriously. I kinda forgot how much this place means to some people."

"You're good with them," I say. "Even if your methods are... confusing."

He laughs. "I'll take it."

We sit in silence for a while. The sun sinks lower. The lake ripples.

Then Jason stands, stretches, and offers me a hand.

"C'mon, counselor. Let's go reintroduce the beads of trust."

I stare at his hand. Then take it.

His fingers are calloused and warm.

My heart skips.

Just once.

But I feel it.

CHAPTER 4

JASON

If I had a nickel for every time someone face-planted into a mud puddle at Camp Lightning, I'd have... like, a dollar. Tops. But this one?

This one is special.

Because it's Alice.

Sweet, prim, clipboard-clutching Alice, who was just walking across the fire circle clearing like she owned the world—until her sandal caught on a root and gravity took the wheel.

And now?

Now she's sitting in the middle of a mud crater like a crime scene, one shoe flung off to God-knows-where, dress splattered, and this expression on her face like her brain just blue-screened.

And what do I do? Do I rush over to help? Offer a towel? Ask if she's okay?

Hell no.

I laugh.

Loudly.

Like, bend-over, tears-in-my-eyes kind of laugh. I don't mean to. I swear. But it's too perfect. She looks like a wet raccoon who just lost her 401k.

"Don't. Say. A word," she hisses, struggling to her feet.

Which is hilarious, because I was gonna say something helpful, like, “Hey, are you?—”

“I said don’t.”

So I shut my mouth.

Mostly.

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I watch her limp over to the lost sandal like it's betrayed her, pick it up with two fingers, and sigh so hard it shakes the pine trees.

Kids are still hollering behind us—Camp-wide Capture the Flag is in full swing—but I don't hear any of it. I'm too busy watching her swipe mud off her cheek with the kind of dignity only someone truly losing it would try to maintain.

"Okay," I finally say, trying to keep a straight face. "I know this is gonna sound insane... but that was kind of majestic."

She shoots me a glare that could drop a bear. "I slipped."

"I saw. You fell like a ballerina. Slow motion. It was beautiful. Honestly? Ten outta ten."

"I hate you."

"That's fair."

She turns and starts marching toward the cabin.

"Hey, wait—" I catch up easily. "Alice."

"What."

"I didn't mean to laugh." I pause. "Okay, I did, but not in a mean way."

She just keeps walking.

I reach out, gently tug her elbow. She freezes.

“Walk with me?”

She hesitates, shoulders still tight. But after a second, she nods. Barely.

I steer us toward the treeline, where the camp trail snakes into the woods. It’s quiet here. Crickets. The rustle of leaves. Distant kid-screams muffled by trees.

“You ever been in these woods?” I ask, trying to ease the tension.

“No.”

“Well, lucky for you, I’m a local expert. Grew up shiftin’ around here.”

“You grew up... shifting?”

“Yup.” I smirk. “Woke up one morning with fur in weird places. My mom cried. My dad bought me meat. Real bonding moment.”

Her lips twitch. She tries not to smile. Fails.

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” she says softly. “This world.”

“What, the monsters or the mud?”

“Both.”

We walk a little further. The trail dips into a clearing, dappled with sunlight and



framed by tall pines. I drop onto a log and gesture for her to join me.

She does, carefully, smoothing her ruined dress like it's still salvageable.

“You okay?” I ask after a beat.

“I’m fine.”

She’s not.

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“You’ve been on edge since you got here.”

She sighs. “I just... didn’t expect it to be so... loud. And messy. And unplannable.”

I chuckle. “That’s camp, sweetheart.”

She shoots me a look but doesn’t correct the nickname this time.

“I thought if I had enough structure, enough plans... I wouldn’t have to think about everything I left behind.”

There it is.

I don’t push. Just nod. “Yeah. Been there.”

She glances over. “You have?”

“Didn’t come here ‘cause I love crafts,” I say. “Came here ‘cause I didn’t know where the hell else to go.”

Silence again.

She whispers, “He cheated on me.”

My chest tightens. “Shit.”

“With my best friend.”

“Doubleshit.”

“I walked in on them. In my apartment. On my couch.”

I let out a low whistle. “And you didn’t burn the place down?”

“I thought about it.”

“Respect.”

She laughs—quiet, but real.

I reach over, flick a dried leaf from her shoulder. “You didn’t deserve that.”

She looks down. “I know. But I keep... acting like I did. Like if I was just more fun. Or spontaneous. Or exciting... maybe he wouldn’t have.”

“Sounds like he was a dick.”

“He was... charming.”

I snort. “Yeah, well. So’s poison ivy.”

She smiles at that. A little more this time. Her eyes meet mine, and there’s something in them that wasn’t there before.

Trust, maybe. Or the start of it.

“Thanks for the walk,” she says.

“Anytime. Seriously. We should do this again. Minus the mud.”

She gives me a shy smile. “Next time I fall, I expect at least some sympathy.”

“Oh, absolutely. I’ll cry real tears.”

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She stands, brushing her hands on her skirt. “You’re insufferable.”

“And yet... you’re still here.”

She doesn’t argue that.

We head back toward camp, shoulder to shoulder. Close. Easy.

Something’s shifting between us. Slowly. Quietly.

But it’s real.

We walk in silence for a few steps, the trees around us glowing with late afternoon light. Her fingers graze mine once—just barely—but enough to spark something low in my gut.

She doesn’t pull away.

I stop walking.

So does she.

“Alice,” I say, voice quieter than it’s been all day. “Can I tell you something?”

She blinks up at me, lips parted, breath a little unsteady. “Okay.”

“I like messes.”

She frowns slightly. “What?”

“Not like ‘glitter in your hair’ messes. I mean... people messes. Feeling things. Saying the wrong stuff. Working through it. You’re tryin’ so hard to hold it all in.”

She bites her lip. Nervous. Her cheeks are still flushed from earlier, but her eyes... her eyes are looking at my mouth.

I step closer.

“I think,” I say, brushing a mud-speck off her jaw with my thumb, “you might be the prettiest mess I’ve ever seen.”

Her breath catches.

I lean in.

Just inches now.

Close enough to smell the lavender from her shampoo. Close enough that I could kiss her if I just...

A sharp, distant sound cuts through the air.

A sob.

High-pitched.

A kid.

We both freeze.

Then she's moving—fast. “That came from the lake,” she says.

I'm already running.

## CHAPTER 5

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ALICE

We reach the lake just as the last echo of the sob disappears into the trees.

My breath's already tight in my chest—not from running, but from the feeling. That deep, rattling instinct something isn't right. Jason moves ahead of me in long, fast strides. Even in human form, there's something distinctly wolfish in how he scans the shoreline—alert, quiet, coiled.

“There,” he says, pointing.

Just past the canoes, huddled near the edge of the dock, is a boy. Small. Arms wrapped around his knees, head buried. His shirt's soaked, sticking to his back like he either fell in or sat down in the puddle without caring.

“Nolan,” I breathe, already moving.

I kneel beside him carefully, ignoring the wet soaking into my jeans. “Hey, sweetheart,” I say softly. “Are you hurt?”

He doesn't look at me.

Jason hovers behind me, breathing hard. He stays back, for once. Watching. Letting me lead.

My heart's hammering. I glance down and catch sight of Nolan's name tag, the edges torn, dangling by one corner. A little dragon head sticker half-scratched off.



“Can I sit here with you?” I ask.

Still nothing.

So I do anyway.

It’s quiet for a long time. Just the water lapping against the dock. Somewhere out in the woods, someone’s blowing a whistle. Probably a counselor trying to wrangle their group back for snack time.

I pretend I don’t hear it.

“I’ve had a hard day too,” I murmur, mostly to the lake. “Fell in a mud puddle. Everyone saw. I looked ridiculous.”

That earns a tiny sniff.

“I didn’t think it’d be like this,” I continue. “I thought I’d come here, help kids, make friendship bracelets, you know? And instead... it’s been hard. And messy. And loud.”

Another sniff. “They called me fake.”

I turn, gently. “Who did?”

He doesn’t answer, but I can guess.

The boys in his cabin. The ones Jason had to break up earlier when they started arguing over who got to be “the dragon” in dodgeball. The same ones who whispered and snickered every time Nolan walked a little slower. Every time he flinched at noise.

“They said I’m not a real shifter,” Nolan mumbles. “Cause I can’t do it. I try and try and nothing happens. I just get this buzzing in my chest and then it goes away.”

“Oh, Nolan.” I want to pull him into my arms, but I wait. Let him lead.

“I’ve never shifted. Not once. And my dad said... he said I should’ve by now.”

He sounds so small. So unsure. My heart cracks a little wider.

Jason moves closer, finally crouching down beside us.

“You know,” he says, voice low and gentle in a way I haven’t heard from him before, “I didn’t shift ‘til I was eleven.”

Nolan lifts his head slightly. Just enough to look at Jason from behind his curls.

“It’s true,” Jason says. “Full moon came, I thought I’d grow fur and claws and rip off the screen door like my brother did. But I just got itchy and fell asleep.”

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Nolan blinks. “Really?”

“Dead serious. My mom thought I was sick. Gave me herbal tea and put on Mozart.”

That gets a small laugh. Barely there. But it’s something.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Your body knows what it’s doing, Nolan. It’s not a race. You’re not broken.”

“They all think I am.”

“Well,” Jason says, leaning forward, “how ‘bout we prove ‘em wrong?”

Nolan looks at him. Hopeful. Scared. “How?”

“We show ‘em what youcando. Even if you’re not shifting yet. Doesn’t matter if you got wings or not—your strength’s still in there. We just gotta bring it out another way.”

Jason grins. And it’s arealgrin. Not the smug, alpha one he throws around like candy. This one’s soft. Honest.

“I got an idea,” he says, turning to me. “You game for a little obstacle course?”

I blink. “Like... now?”

“No. Tomorrow. Let’s build it tonight. Secret mission. Just for Group C. Nolan’s

gonna be our coach. Show the others how to get through it.”

Nolan sits up straighter. “Me?”

“You,” Jason says. “Cause I saw you today. You’ve got eyes like a scout. You watched the whole Capture the Flag game without flinching. Knew where everyone was.”

“I did,” Nolan whispers. “I even saw Miss Alice slip.”

I groan. “Of course you did.”

“But you didn’t cry,” he adds quickly. “You just got up.”

That makes me smile. “Thank you.”

Jason stands and offers Nolan his hand. “What do you say, champ? Want to show those punks what a real dragon does?”

Nolan hesitates.

Then takes it.

I blink hard. Blink fast. Because if I don’t, I’m going to cry.

Later that evening, while the kids are finishing dinner, Jason and I are dragging logs and rope into the woods like some weird bootcamp duo.

“Think this is gonna work?” I ask, brushing pine needles off my jeans.

“With you planning and me yelling?” he shrugs. “Yeah. We’re golden.”

We pause, both of us panting.

Jason leans on the log and glances at me. “You’re good with him. With all of them.”

I flush. “I just... I remember what it’s like. To feel wrong. Like everyone else has the manual and you’re just faking it.”

He nods. “Same.”

We’re quiet a moment.

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Then Jason says, “Thanks for not brushing me off earlier.”

I glance over. “You mean... the walk?”

He smiles. “And the almost-kiss.”

I go still.

He chuckles. “Yeah. I felt it too.”

I open my mouth, no words come out.

He shrugs, grabs another rope, and says, “It’s fine. We got time.”

As we finish anchoring the last rope between two trees, I take a breath. The sun’s dipped below the treetops now, and fireflies are starting to blink lazily across the clearing. The whole forest feels like it’s holding its breath, waiting.

I glance over at Jason. His hair’s a mess, there’s dirt smudged across his forearm, and his shirt’s got a tear in the collar. But he looks... steady. Centered. Like someone who knows how to hold space when it counts.

“You were really good with him,” I say softly.

He pauses mid-tug on the rope. “Nolan?”

I nod. “You didn’t push. Or talk over him. You just... listened. And then you gave

him something to believe in.”

Jason looks at me like he doesn’t quite know what to do with the compliment. He runs a hand through his hair, laughs once—low and sheepish.

“Yeah,” he mutters, eyes dropping. “Surprised me too.”

I smile. “Don’t be.”

He shrugs. “Wasn’t tryin’ to be some hero. I just... saw myself in him. I remember bein’ that age. All teeth and confusion. Wantin’ so bad to be part of somethin’ but not knowin’ how.”

There’s something raw in his voice. Something that makes me want to reach out and touch his arm, but I don’t.

Not yet.

“I think,” I say, choosing my words carefully, “he needed exactly what you gave him today.”

Jason lifts his eyes to mine. For once, there’s no smirk. No teasing. Just him.

“Thanks, Barbie,” he says.

I almost roll my eyes at the nickname—but there’s warmth in it this time. A softness.

“Get some sleep,” he adds. “Tomorrow we build a legend.”

## CHAPTER 6

JASON

I haven't built anything this rickety since my older brother dared me to turn a trampoline into a treehouse.

But damn if this doesn't feel better.

The logs are uneven. The rope bridge we strung up last night between the pine trunks sags a little in the middle. And the final "challenge"—a wheelbarrow race through the mud pit—is held together by nothing but duct tape, questionable knots, and my overwhelming confidence.

Still. It looks good.

Real good.



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“Alright, chaos gremlins,” I shout, hands on hips. “Gather ‘round! It’s Team Challenge Day, baby!”

Group C gathers at the edge of the woods. They’re hyped. I made sure of that. Told ‘em they were in for the most epic obstacle course this camp’s ever seen—and yes, I used the word epic. These kids eat that stuff up like it’s cereal.

Nolan’s standing next to me, all nerves and wide eyes. He’s got a little clipboard Alice let him borrow—only his has doodles of fireballs in the margins and a sticky note that says “Commander Nolan.”

He looks up at me. “Are you sure this is gonna work?”

“Not just sure,” I say, leaning down with a grin. “I’d bet my next steak on it.”

Nolan blinks. “You eat steaks?”

“Like most people eat air.”

He grins.

I clap a hand on his shoulder. “You run this. You tell ‘em how it’s done. You’re the boss.”

Nolan bites his lip. “What if they laugh?”

“They won’t.”

“And if they do?”

I grin. “Then you make ‘em eat their words—with extra glitter glue.”

That gets a full-on snort from him.

The kids line up. Nolan steps forward, clipboard shaking a little in his hands.

“Um,” he says, voice wobbly at first. “Welcome to the first annual... Dragon Gauntlet. You have to finish as a team. If you don’t help each other, you lose. There’s no winner unless you all make it to the end.”

Some of the kids groan. “Lame!” one of the older ones mutters.

“Shush,” another says. “This is cool.”

I grin.

Nolan takes a deep breath. “First challenge—get over the log wall without touching the red tape. If you touch the tape, you start over.”

And they’re off.

At first, it’s a mess.

A beautiful, chaotic mess.

Tommy the tiefling tries to vault the wall solo and falls flat on his butt. Nolan winces, but doesn’t flinch. He calls out, “You need to use the stump for a boost. You can’t do it alone!”

Tommy scowls, then grudgingly accepts help from a younger goblin kid with three arms.

The second challenge is the rope tunnel. I made it from old camping netting and probably too much enthusiasm. One girl gets her antlers stuck. Nolan's already crawling in after her, gently showing her how to twist sideways to make it through.

"Nice work, Commander," I call from the sidelines.

He beams.

We move through the gauntlet like that—kids scrambling, cheering, occasionally screaming in harmless panic. Every time something goes sideways, Nolan's the first to step in. Calm. Focused. It's like someone flipped a switch inside him overnight.

I stand there watching him boss around a twelve-year-old troll and my chest does this weird thing.

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It gets... tight.

Not in a bad way. Not like panic. More like... pride?

Shit.

Is this what it feels like to be useful?

The last challenge is the mud pit. Classic.

I rigged it with a few surprise geysers from the camp's busted irrigation system. It's basically a trap waiting to happen.

"Okay!" Nolan calls. "Everyone has to make it across in a wheelbarrow pair! You step in the mud, you have to start the whole challenge over!"

Chaos ensues.

Feet slip. Elbows flail. Someone screams dramatically when they land face-first.

Nolan watches it all with this intense, laser focus. He's tracking every move, calling out instructions like a general in battle.

And then one of the kids—Marcus, the goblin with a big mouth and no filter—gets stuck.

"I can't do it!" Marcus yells. "This is stupid! Nolan made it too hard!"

And just like that, the energy shifts.

Nolan freezes. Stares at the ground.

I step forward—but before I can say anything, he looks up.

“No it’s not,” he says, voice strong. “You’re just not listening.”

Suddenly, it happens.

It starts as a flicker behind his eyes. Then his skin shimmers like a mirage. His shoulders roll back, spine straightening. The air around him hums.

I smell it before I see it—embers and something sharp, like ozone.

Nolan lets out a breath—and then he shifts.

Right there. On the edge of the pit.

Not full dragon, but enough. Scales shimmer down his arms. His eyes glow gold. A tail flicks out behind him. Tiny wings unfurl just a little.

The kids gasp.

So do I.

Nolan blinks, shocked—but not scared. He looks down at himself, stunned.

Then grins.

“Oh my god,” he breathes. “I did it.”

The other kids cheer. Even Marcus.

I walk over, crouch in front of him. “How’s it feel, champ?”

Nolan laughs—sharp and joyful. “Like flying and fire and candy all at once.”

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“That’s the most dragon-ass answer I’ve ever heard,” I say, ruffling his hair. “You crushed it.”

His smile could power the whole damn camp.

Later, after the kids head to the showers and the adrenaline settles, I’m sitting on the cabin steps with a root beer and a weird ache in my chest.

Alice joins me.

She doesn’t say anything. Just sits beside me, our shoulders barely touching.

“I heard,” she says finally.

I glance over.

“He shifted,” I say. “It was... wild.”

She smiles. “I’m proud of him.”

I nod. “Me too.”

She looks at me for a long moment. “You’re good at this.”

“At root beer?”

“At mentoring.”

I shrug. “He just needed someone who didn’t talk down to him.”

She nudges me gently. “You’re better than you think, Jason.”

I stare out at the trees.

The ache in my chest spreads, but this time it’s warm.

Maybe this camp’s doing more than keepin’ me busy.

Maybe I found something here.

Hell... maybe I found me.

## CHAPTER 7

### ALICE

The forest is quieter this morning. Like it knows something changed.

I sit on the cabin porch steps with a mug of tea that’s long since gone cold, staring out at the obstacle course. Bits of rope still hang from the trees, and there’s a trail of glitter—of all things—leading from the mud pit to the bathhouse. Someone, I suspect, took the “legend” part of Dragon Gauntlet Day too literally and added sparkles to the “lava trench.”

But all I can really focus on is Nolan.

And Jason.

I didn’t see the actual shift. But I saw the aftermath. I saw Nolan walking back to the



cabin like he was three inches taller. Beaming. Surrounded by other kids who usually pretended he didn't exist.

And Jason? He just sat there grinning like he didn't even realize he'd changed a kid's life.

Or maybe... like it wasn't about him at all.

I blow gently into my tea, watching steam that isn't there.

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I'd come here with this idea in my head: that I'd meet people who were either too much or not enough. That monsters were charming and careless and beautiful in ways I couldn't competewith. That I'd need to prove myself again and again just to feel like I belonged.

But Jason didn't ask Nolan to prove anything.

He just... saw him.

It shouldn't surprise me anymore.

But it does.

Later, after breakfast cleanup, I find Nolan near the flagpole with two other campers. He's holding court, retelling his transformation story with all the dramatic flair of a campfire myth.

"...and then," he says, eyes wide, "Ifeltit. Like my chest was gonna burst. But instead of fire coming out of my nose or something—which, by the way, I totally thought would happen—I just... shifted."

The kids gasp. One of them claps. Another calls him "Commander Nolan" and he doesn't even blush. Henods.

I catch Jason watching the whole thing from across the field, arms crossed, sunglasses pushed up on his head. He meets my eyes for a moment—then grins and shrugs likeWelp, guess I made a dragon happen.

I don't smile back right away.

Instead, I walk over.

"Hey," I say, toeing the dirt with my sneaker.

"Hey," he replies, rocking back on his heels. "He's a beast now, huh?"

I nod. "You really helped him."

Jason gives a soft snort. "He did all the work. I just held the metaphorical flashlight."

"I don't think that's how flashlights work."

He grins. "Then I was the emotional duct tape."

That gets a quiet laugh from me. I glance back at Nolan. "He's... confident."

"He was already brave. Just didn't know it yet."

I look up at him. "How'd you know what he needed?"

Jason's mouth opens like he's gonna toss out something flippant. But then he just exhales.

"Because I needed it too. Once."

My throat tightens. I don't know what to say to that. But something about the way he says it—soft, unarmored—makes me feel like I'm seeing him clearly for the first time.

And it's not just the Jason who howls and flirts and makes kids climb walls. It's the one who remembers what it's like to be small. The one who sits in the mess of other people's pain without trying to fix it, just to prove they're not alone.

It's... disarming.

He reaches up to scratch the back of his neck. "I know I'm not exactly Mr. Stability. But... yesterday felt good. Real. Like maybe I'm not just coasting for once."

My voice is small. "You're not coasting."

Jason looks at me then—really looks.

And it does that thing again. That weird, nervous flutter under my ribs. The kind I haven't felt in... years, maybe. Not the warm, comfortable kind. The sharp, thrilling, dangerous kind.

"I've been thinking," I say quickly, before I can chicken out. "I might've been wrong about you."

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“Oh yeah?”

I nod. “You’re not just chaos.”

His grin spreads slow. “I mean, I am mostly chaos.”

“But there’s more.”

His eyes crinkle, and he steps just a little closer. “Careful, Barbie. Say one more nice thing and I’ll start thinkin’ you like me.”

I blush. Hard. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

The moment stretches between us—soft and electric.

And for once, I don’t look away.

That afternoon, we’re paired for the lakeside canoe activity.

I pretend not to notice how the kids keep giggling every time they see us in the same boat.

Jason pretends to not suck at paddling, but he 100% does.

“You’re steering us in circles,” I call, trying not to laugh.

“Correction,” he says, dramatically splashing water with his oar, “I’m creating a romantic atmosphere.”

“This isn’t The Notebook, Jason.”

“You say that, but you’re totally falling for me right now.”

“I’ve been hit in the face with three waves.”

“Nature’s way of slapping you into clarity.”

He grins so hard, it’s impossible not to smile back. And just like that, the ache in my chest feels... lighter.

Maybe I don’t have to keep guarding it so tightly.

Maybe, with Jason, I don’t have to guard it at all.

That evening, after the kids are tucked in—well, as much as nine-year-olds hopped up on s’mores can be—I find myself restocking the arts & crafts shed. It’s quiet. Peaceful. The kind of silence that lets you hear your own thoughts loud and clear.

Which is unfortunate, because my thoughts are all Jason.

And sure enough, just as I’m trying to jam a stubborn box of googly eyes onto a too-high shelf, the door creaks open behind me.

“Hey.”

I don’t turn around. “Don’t you have a tree to howl at?”

He snorts. “Tried. It’s full. Got bumped by a couple of squirrels.”

I shake my head, smiling even though I don’t want to.

Jason steps closer. Too close. His presence fills the small shed like warm static. I can feel him behind me even before he speaks again.

“You good?”

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“Fine.”

“You sure?” His voice drops, low and quiet. “‘Cause you’ve been looking at me all day like I’m a pop quiz you didn’t study for.”

I go still. My hands rest on the shelf, bracing.

He’s not touching me. But I swear I feel the heat of him at my back.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I whisper.

“With the googly eyes or with me?”

“Both.”

His breath is near my ear now. “You don’t have to know. Just... be here.”

I finally turn, slowly.

And we’re face to face.

Close.

Jason’s smile fades a little—not gone, just softened. His eyes dip to my mouth. I hold my breath.

I think he’s going to kiss me.



I think I'm going to let him.

Then a crash from outside makes us both flinch.

Kids laughing. Someone tripped over the fire pit wood pile again.

Jason groans. "I swear, these gremlins have sixth senses."

I exhale shakily. "Probably for romance. Like mosquitoes but more obnoxious."

He grins. "Later, then?"

I nod.

Heart hammering.

"Later."

## CHAPTER 8

### JASON

The day starts weird, which should've been my first clue.

I'm halfway through my first plate of pancakes—yes, first, don't judge me—and doing my usual rounds of yelling "No dodgeball before 9 a.m." when I spot someone new standing by the bulletin board.

She's hot.

I mean, objectively.

Tall, sleek, with these high cheekbones that look like they were crafted by elves and a sports bra that probably cost more than my entire wardrobe. She's scanning the announcements with this breezy confidence, like she's been here a hundred times.

I wander over, because... of course I do.

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“You lost, or just casing the place?”

She turns, flashing a smile like a toothpaste commercial. “Neither. Just checking out the setup before my lecture.”

“Guest speaker?” I ask.

She nods, offering her hand. “Melody. Survival and water filtration. I’m with the Cross-Biome Eco Collective.”

“Oh, fancy,” I say, shaking her hand. “Jason. Camp chaos coordinator.”

She laughs, light and easy. “Do I get a title too?”

I smirk. “Depends. You good with kids?”

“I used to be a teacher. Back in my human world days.”

That earns a half-laugh from me. “Welcome to the monster playground.”

She gives me this once-over—half curious, half playful. “You’re... not what I expected.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Ruggedly handsome and underqualified?”

She grins. “Something like that.”

I grin back. It's all casual. Light.

I feel it.

That weird pulse. Not in me—but around me.

Like the temperature dropped two degrees behind me.

I turn and see Alice.

Frozen. Mug in hand. Face gone ghost-white.

I follow her eyes—back to Melody.

Then it clicks.

Melody.

My stomach drops like I just hit the bottom of a rollercoaster.

Alice doesn't say a word. She just turns and walks out like something cracked open inside her.

And suddenly that cute, flirty little moment?

Feels like betrayal.

Even if I didn't know.

I catch up with her near the side of the art cabin. She's got both hands braced on the wall, head down like she's trying to breathe through a panic attack.

“Hey,” I say gently. “Alice.”

She doesn’t turn.

I don’t touch her. Not yet.

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“Talk to me,” I say. “Please.”

She swallows hard. “That’s Melody.”

My stomach twists. “Melody, like...?”

“My best friend,” she whispers. “The one.”

Oh.Shit.

“She’s the one who?—”

“Yeah.”

I rub a hand over my jaw. I want to rip something apart. A chair. A tree. Maybe a guest lecture schedule.

“Did you know she was coming?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I saw the schedule last week. It just said ‘survival expert.’ I didn’t even?—”

Her voice cracks and she cuts it off.

I step closer. “You don’t have to talk to her.”

“I can’t not. She’s here. She’s here.”

I've seen a lot of expressions on Alice's face over the last week—annoyance, amusement, surprise, reluctant admiration—but I've never seen this.

This tight, frozen version of her that looks like she's trying to hold every part of herself together with sheer willpower and a few strands of hair.

"You wanna leave for the day?" I ask. "Skip out. I'll handle the campers."

She finally looks at me, and there's something heartbreaking in her eyes. "I don't want to run."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"But it'd be easier, right? To run?"

I want to argue, but I get it. Running's my specialty. I've made a damn art of it. But seeing Alice like this—this brave, hurting version of her—it knocks the wind out of me.

"You're not her," I say quietly.

Alice frowns. "What?"

"You're not like her. I don't even know her, and I can already tell. She walked in like she's owed attention. You walk in trying to take up less space."

She lets out a breath. "Not exactly a compliment."

"It is," I say. "Because you care."

She leans against the wall, sliding down until she's sitting in the dirt. I sink down

next to her.

We're quiet for a minute.

Then she says, "It's been over a year. I shouldn't still feel this way."

"Grief doesn't follow calendars."

"I don't even know what I'm grieving anymore. The friendship? The betrayal? The fact that I didn't see it coming?"



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“All of it,” I say. “Probably all of it.”

Her fingers twist in her lap. “I thought I could come here and forget. Reset. But the second I saw her... it was like being back in that apartment. That moment. Everything just slammed into me again.”

I want to touch her. To pull her close and take it all away. But I don’t. Not yet.

“You don’t have to be okay right now,” I say. “You just have to breathe.”

She closes her eyes and nods.

Back in the mess hall, Melody is laughing with Julie like she’s never wrecked a life. I resist the urge to growl.

Literally.

Alice reappears eventually. Not smiling. But standing.

Strong in that quiet way she has.

I stick close for the rest of the morning.

No jokes. No teasing. Just presence.

Because maybe that’s what she needs more than anything right now.

Someone who stays.

## CHAPTER 9

ALICE

I avoid the mess hall all morning.

I lie and tell Julie I have inventory to check. I fake a phone call near the lake. I alphabetize paintbrushes in the art shed even though they weren't out of order.

Anything to not see her.

But Melody's laugh echoes anyway—light and lilting and so achingly familiar that it cuts through my chest like piano wire. It's like time hasn't passed at all. Like I'm still twenty-four and stupidly hopeful and oblivious to the storm brewing two feet from my own pillow.

I tell myself I'm being mature. That I don't owe her anything.

And then Jason finds me.

He stays quiet at first. Just stands there, arms crossed, watching me pretend the camp supply list is written in ancient runes.

"You hiding or strategizing?" he asks finally.

I stiffen. "Neither."

"Hmm." He leans on the doorframe. "Because it kinda looks like you're hiding."

I don't respond.

Jason pushes off the frame and steps inside. His presence fills the little shed instantly—loud and warm and too much in the way I've gotten used to liking.

“You don't have to talk to her,” he says gently. “But... I think you want to.”

I don't answer.

He moves closer, voice softer. “You're not scared of her. You're scared of what she might still mean to you.”

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That breaks something in me.

I press a hand to my stomach. “It’s easier to pretend she never existed.”

“But she did,” Jason says. “She mattered.”

I whisper, “She mattered too much.”

He doesn’t say anything.

Doesn’t have to.

Because he gets it. The ache of being hurt by someone who saw the inside of you—who held it in their hands and still let it shatter.

Jason steps closer. “Whatever happened... it doesn’t own you anymore.”

I shake my head. “She won’t care.”

“She might surprise you.”

I look up at him then. “And if she doesn’t?”

He shrugs. “Then I’ll be waiting outside ready to punch a guest lecturer.”

I let out a small, broken laugh. “Please don’t get banned from camp.”

Jason smiles. “No promises.”

I find Melody by the canoe racks.

She’s crouched, refastening a strap on her hiking boot, completely unaware that my heart is hammering against my ribs like a caged thing.

She stands just as I reach her.

And freezes.

Her smile falters. “Alice.”

Her voice. God. I forgot how soft it was when she wasn’t performing. It knocks the air right out of me.

I fold my arms across my chest. “Did you know I was here?”

“No,” she says quickly. “I swear. Julie reached out through the network. I had no idea until this morning. I?”

She stops. Studies me.

“You look good.”

I shrug. “Camp lighting’s flattering.”

She smiles at that. Hesitant.

There’s a long silence.

Then I say, “I’m not here to fight.”

Melody nods. “Me either.”

But I can’t stop the words from spilling out.

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“You were my best friend.”

Her eyes fill. “I know.”

“And you didn’t tell me. You didn’t even—God, Mel, you let me find out likethat.”

She flinches.

“I walked in,” I continue, voice trembling. “You knew I was coming back early. Youknew.And you still...”

“I messed up,” she whispers. “So badly.”

“You didn’t just mess up,” I snap. “You broke me. I didn’t just lose him—I lostyou.You were my person.”

Tears are falling now, hot and fast.

Melody’s lip wobbles. “I know. And I will regret it for the rest of my life.”

“I kept waiting for an apology. For something. And then when you didn’t call, I thought maybe I made it all up. Maybe it wasn’t real.”

“Itwasreal,” she says. “You were my best friend, Alice. And I was selfish. I was jealous. And when he started flirting with me,I didn’t push him away because... I wanted to feel wanted for once. And I hated myself for it.”

She's crying now too.

"I wanted to call," she says. "So many times. But I didn't deserve your forgiveness. So I convinced myself you didn't want to hear from me."

"I didn't," I whisper. "Not then."

"And now?"

I take a deep, shaky breath.

"I don't know."

We stand there, surrounded by silence and the faint lap of lake water.

And somehow, I don't feel like I'm drowning.

"I'm sorry," Melody says again. "Truly. I was awful. And if I could take it back, I would."

I nod slowly. "Thank you."

It's not a Band-Aid.

It's not forgiveness.

But it's something.

A piece of peace.

I find Jason later behind the cabin, sitting on the porch steps, peeling an orange with



his claws. Not even subtle about it.

He looks up. “So?”

I sit beside him. “We talked.”

“Yell or cry?”

“Mostly cry.”

He offers me half the orange.

I take it.

“So, what now?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” I say, curling my hands around the fruit. “But I don’t feel like running anymore.”

He bumps my shoulder with his.

“Good,” he says. “I like it when you stay.”

Jason doesn’t say anything else. He just peels the rest of the orange with deliberate, lazy care, like he’s letting me have the space to breathe. Like he knows I’m still untangling pieces of myself.

It’s quiet. The air’s thick with pine and humidity and... something else. That charged silence that hums between two people who’ve been dancing around something for days.

I eat the orange slice slowly. The citrus is sharp, sweet. It zings through my chest like a spark.

Jason glances sideways at me, eyes darker than usual. His knee brushes mine—intentional, this time.

“You okay?” he asks again, voice low.

“I think so.”

He shifts closer. “You’re tough, you know that?”

I smile, a little. “I’m tired of being tough.”

He reaches up and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. His fingers linger just a second too long.

My breath hitches.

We’re close now—really close.

His hand drops slowly, but his eyes stay on mine. “If I kissed you right now,” he says, voice barely above a whisper, “would you stop me?”

I open my mouth. Close it. My heart is thudding so loud I can hear it in my teeth.

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

He leans in just slightly—just enough that I can feel the warmth of his breath. “Then maybe I shouldn’t.”

I blink. “Why?”

“Because I want it to be when you know.”

He stands, slow and sure.

“Night, Barbie,” he says, with a grin that doesn’t quite hide how serious his eyes are.

And then he’s gone.

Leaving me breathless.

And maybe... just a little ready to know.

CHAPTER 10

JASON

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:51 pm*

It's talent show practice night, which means chaos is performing live and off-key.

The amphitheater looks like someone tossed a costume closet into a tornado. One kid's wearing two different tap shoes. Another has a plastic sword duct-taped to a fishing rod. There's a line of campers waiting to scream-sing sea shanties, and in the middle of it all is Alice—clutching her clipboard like it's a flotation device and she's lost at sea.

She's mouthing words to herself, quietly panicking in rhythm.

I hop up onto the stage. “Coach Rivers, status report?”

She startles. “Three missing. One in tears. Two arguing about spotlight cues. And Nolan is... attempting to breathe fire again.”

I glance toward the curtain.

Yep. Singed.

I lean in. “I mean, to be fair, it's pretty impressive for a twelve-year-old.”

Alice doesn't smile this time.

She exhales. Long. Measured.

“Do you ever just... feel like you're about to snap and nobody notices?”

My teasing fades.

I take a step closer. “I notice.”

She blinks.

And for a second, the noise fades. The curtain, the kids, the clutter. It’s just her—tired and overwhelmed and still holding the whole damn thing together by threads.

“Want me to take over for five minutes?” I ask. “I’ll tell ‘em the slug poem won the talent show early and cancel the rest.”

That gets a flicker of amusement. “You’d really lie to save my sanity?”

“Absolutely.”

“And you didn’t?”

Her voice lowers. “I can’t screw this up.”

I don’t know what I’m doing.

But I reach out. Not to take the clipboard. Just to rest a hand on her arm.

“You won’t.”

Alice stares at my hand. Doesn’t pull away. Just breathes.

And then, slowly, she nods.

The show rehearsal ends like a runaway train that somehow lands upright.

We corral the kids back to their bunks—sticky, glittery, exhausted. I promise Nolan I'll personally guard his tiny cardboard dragon wings with my life. He tells me they're "theatrically essential." I salute him.

Once they're gone, Alice and I collapse side by side in the grass just behind the stage. She lays back, staring up at the early stars. Her breath still comes a little fast.

I prop myself up on an elbow, watching her.

"You okay?" I ask.

“Surprisingly, yes.”

“I thought you were gonna combust.”

“I thought you were gonna start juggling to distract them.”

“I would’ve,” I say, “but my act involves interpretive shirtlessness and three flaming raccoons. Bit much for rehearsal.”

She snorts and claps a hand over her mouth. “Don’t make me laugh, I’ll cry.”

I watch her for a long moment, letting the quiet stretch.

And then, real low, I say, “You’re incredible, y’know.”

Alice stiffens slightly. “You don’t have to say that.”

“I’m not sayin’ it to be nice.”

She turns her head toward me. The soft light from the stage behind us glows in her hair, makes her eyes look almost gold.

“I’ve seen a lot of people fall apart under pressure,” I murmur. “But you? You hold it together. You show up. Even when you’re scared outta your mind.”

Her voice is just a whisper. “I am scared.”



“I know.”

“And I feel like I’m screwing everything up.”

“You’re not.”

“I’m not who they think I am.”

“That’s okay. I see who you really are.”

That hits her. I know it does. Her eyes widen just a bit, then she looks away like the truth of it is too much.

And that’s when it happens.

Her hand, resting in the grass between us, shifts.

Just enough that her fingers brush mine.

She doesn’t move them.

Neither do I.

My heart starts to race, but I keep my voice calm. “Alice.”

She meets my eyes.

There’s something raw in her gaze. Unspoken. Terrified. Hopeful.

I sit up slowly. Reach out.

I let my fingers trail up her wrist, gentle as moonlight.

She shivers.

“Are you cold?” I ask, voice low.

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She shakes her head.

So I move closer.

I don't rush it. I just lean in, slow and steady, until I'm close enough to see the freckles beneath her lashes.

Her breath catches.

Our noses almost touch.

"If I kissed you right now," I say, "would you stop me?"

She swallows. "No."

"Are you sure?"

She nods.

And I don't wait another second.

I kiss her.

And it's not gentle.

It's not soft and sweet like those almosts we've shared. It's hungry. Real. Like every damn second we've spent dancing around each other finally snapped and the music

came rushing in.

Her hands are in my hair. Mine at her waist. She melts into me like she's been waiting for this—needing this.

The kiss slows, eventually. Breath turns to silence again. I press my forehead to hers, eyes closed.

“That was...” I begin.

She exhales. “Yeah.”

I fall back into the grass beside her.

We don't say anything for a long while.

Just breathe.

She reaches for my hand again, and this time, laces our fingers tight.

And all I can think is: finally.

Her fingers tighten in mine, and for a few seconds, we just lie there, breathing each other in. The cicadas hum somewhere in the distance. The stars stretch above us like spilled sugar, and her hair's brushing my shoulder, soft as anything.

Then she shifts. Rolls onto her side, facing me.

I turn too, and suddenly we're eye to eye again. Closer this time.

There's something about her right now—barefaced and open and full of that quiet

strength—that hits harder than any punch I’ve ever taken.

She reaches up, fingertips brushing my jaw. Her thumb lingers on the corner of my mouth.

“I liked that,” she says, voice barely audible. “The kiss.”

“Good,” I murmur, “because I’m about to do it again.”

This one starts slower. A question.

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She answers it with a soft sigh, melting into me as our lips meet again.

And then it deepens.

I shift, rolling slightly to brace myself on one elbow so I don't crush her, but our bodies stay tangled. Her hands find the back of my head, pull me in tighter. Mine trace the curve of her waist, memorizing the way she shivers under my touch.

She tastes like orange and midnight.

When she breaks the kiss, she doesn't move far. Her forehead rests against mine, our breaths mingling.

"You drive me crazy," she whispers.

I grin against her lips. "Likewise."

She kisses me again—quicker this time, urgent—and I groan softly, sliding my hand up to cradle the back of her head.

I want to take my time. To savor every second of this.

But right now?

All I can do is kiss her like I've waited years.

And maybe I have.

We finally part again, gasping, grinning, tangled in each other like we've always belonged there.

"I'm scared," she says.

I brush a kiss to her temple. "Me too."

She nods. "Okay."

And just like that, we keep lying there, under the stars, hearts thudding, hands twined.

Not perfect.

But finally real.

## CHAPTER 11

### ALICE

I wake up in a tangle of blankets and thoughts I can't sort through.

The sunrise is barely creeping through the cabin windows, casting the softest kind of gold across the floorboards. Everything should feel calm, dreamy even. But all I can feel is pressure.

Jason kissed me.

And I kissed him back.

Twice.

I didn't just let it happen. I wanted it. Leaned into it. Let myself believe—just for a moment—that something real and warm and possibly dangerous could be mine.

And now?

Now I want to run so badly my bones ache.

I press my fingers against my lips like I can rewind time through skin.



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God, what was I thinking?

He was there. Present. Steady. Letting me fall apart without trying to fix me. And then that kiss under the stars—heat and quiet and safety, all wrapped up in his stupid warm hands."

And I believed him.

That's what terrifies me most.

I see him at breakfast.

He's leaning against the coffee machine like he's in a cologne ad—messy hair, crooked grin, and wearing that ridiculous tank top that says Camp DILF like it's a badge of honor. Someone must've given it to him as a joke, but he's made it his entire personality.

He spots me immediately.

His eyes light up.

And my stomach drops.

I duck my head and beeline toward the juice table like it's a lifeboat.

"Alice!" he calls out.

My hands fumble with the plastic cup. I nearly spill orange juice everywhere.

He strolls over, easy and confident, like we didn't just cross the line between friends and something terrifyingly real.

"Morning," he says, voice low and kind like he's checking the temperature of the air between us.

"Hey," I mumble.

"You sleep okay?"

"Yeah. Fine."

He tilts his head. "You sure? You kinda bailed after?—"

"I was tired," I cut in quickly. "Just needed sleep."

Jason pauses. His grin falters.

There it is. The first crack.

He's too perceptive for his own good.

"Right," he says. "Of course."

I force a smile. "Thanks for... last night. The show went well."

He's quiet for a beat too long. "It wasn't just about the show."

I pretend not to hear him. I turn to the nearest camper and ask if they're ready for

their nature hike like it's the most urgent question in the world.

Jason doesn't push.

He just backs away, slow, like he's realized I've set up a wall overnight and I'm daring him to climb it.

The hike is long and hot and exactly what I need to keep from unraveling.

I focus on the logistics. Counting kids. Water bottles. Trail markers. The way Lucy insists on picking up every pinecone and whispering secrets to them.

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But Jason is everywhere.

The last person in line. Making jokes. Keeping pace with the slower kids. Letting me pretend I don't see the way he keeps glancing up the trail, toward me.

I don't know what's wrong with me.

I should feel giddy. Hopeful. Warm.

But instead I feel exposed. Raw.

And when I feel raw, I shut down. That's just how I'm wired.

I've never been good at letting people see the whole of me.

Especially the messy parts.

Especially when they're the ones that matter.

Later, back at the cabins, I'm reorganizing craft supplies that don't need organizing when Jason finds me again.

He stands in the doorway.

Doesn't speak.

I keep my back to him, pretending the glitter drawer requires intense focus.

“Alice.”

I close my eyes.

“Can we talk?”

I nod. Barely.

He steps inside, slow.

“I don’t want to crowd you,” he says. “But I need to know if that kiss meant something to you. Because it meant alotto me.”

My throat tightens.

“It did,” I whisper.

“Then why are you shutting me out?”

I press my hands flat to the table. “Because itterrifiesme.”

Jason’s quiet.

“I’m not him.”

That hits harder than anything else could.

“I know,” I say. “But that doesn’t mean I know how to trust myself yet.”

I finally turn to look at him. His face is open, confused, maybe a little hurt.

“I felt...too muchlast night,” I say. “And when I feel that much, I panic. I start doubting if I’m seeing clearly or just projecting what Iwantto believe.”

He takes a step closer. “You don’t have to decide anything today.”

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“I don’t want to hurt you.”

He smiles, soft and sad. “Too late. But it’s okay. I’d rather know the real you than be fed a version that’s safe.”

My chest aches.

Jason exhales. “I’ll give you space. Just... don’t lie to me, alright?”

“I won’t.”

He nods once. Then leaves.

And I stand there in a cabin full of glitter, finally letting myself cry.

Later that evening, after the kids have been tucked in and the counselors are busy corralling leftover costumes and marshmallow debris, Julie pulls me aside.

She’s holding her clipboard—always—and wearing that bright, enthusiastic camp director smile that makes her look ten years younger than she probably is.

“Got a second?” she asks, her voice soft but purposeful.

I nod, brushing invisible lint off my sweater. “Sure.”

She leads me over to the porch steps outside the office. We sit. It’s quiet, save for a distant owl and the hum of tired generators.

“I’ve been watching you this session,” she says.

I shift awkwardly. “Oh?”

“You’re a natural, Alice. The way you handled the talent show. The fire drills. The way the kids look at you like you’re the one holding the stars together.”

My face goes hot. “That’s generous.”

She shakes her head. “It’s accurate. You’ve brought heart to this place. Structure, yes—but also grace. And patience. Things that don’t come with training manuals.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I just smile tightly.

Julie exhales and turns toward me fully. “We’re expanding next summer. More programs. More permanent positions. I’d like you to consider coming on full-time. Year-round staff, as the official activities coordinator. Paid.”

The word paid rings like a bell in my ears.

Full-time.

This place, every day. Not just for a few chaotic weeks.

It should be a no-brainer. It’s stability. Purpose. Kids who look up to me. A place where I matter.

But the weight in my chest doesn’t feel like certainty.

It feels like... fear.



Julie watches me for a moment, reading something in my silence.

“No rush,” she says kindly. “Think about it.”

I nod, throat tight. “I will.”

She pats my hand and disappears into the office, leaving me alone under the porch light, holding this shiny new offer like a stone I’m not sure how to carry.

## CHAPTER 12

## Page 33

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:51 pm*

JASON

I'm not spying.

Let's just get that clear.

I'm walking past the office—like a normal, shirtless man with a clipboard and a mission to track down the missing guitar tuner—when I hear Alice's voice drift through the cracked window.

I stop. Freeze, really.

It's her tone that gets me.

Quiet. Uncertain. A little frayed around the edges.

Julie's in there too. I hear her laugh softly. "No pressure, Alice. Just think about it."

"I am," Alice replies. "I just... I'm not sure. It's been a lot."

I lean in an inch. Just one.

Not spying.

Just... investigating.

Alice sighs. "This place means more to me than I thought it would. But that doesn't

automatically mean I belong here full-time.”

Something cold stirs in my chest.

Julie says something else—reassuring, soft. I can’t make out the words. Then footsteps, and I’m backing away like a guilty raccoon caught raiding the snack tent.

I duck behind the bulletin board just as the door swings open.

Alice walks out.

She doesn’t see me.

She’s fidgeting with the sleeve of her hoodie, biting the inside of her cheek.

And the cold in my chest goes from a stir to a throb.

She’s leaving.

Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow.

But she’s already pulling away.

I don’t talk to her during lunch.

I mean, I say hi. Smile. Keep the banter up with the kids.

But I don’t sit next to her.

Because if I do, I’ll say something stupid. Like “Don’t leave.” Or “Was that kiss just for fun?” Or worse—“Tell me it mattered.”

I'm not built for this kind of vulnerability.

Give me a mud pit, a broken canoe, a kid shifting into a badger mid-talent show—I can handle that.

But this?

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Watching her smile like nothing's wrong when I'm trying not to unravel in front of thirty campers eating dinosaur nuggets?

Nah.

Can't do it.

After lunch, I find myself dragging a rake across the archery range. Not because it needs raking. But because I need something to do with my hands before I find myself ripping pinecones apart or accidentally shifting just to release tension.

"What'd that dirt ever do to you?" Julie's voice startles me.

I blink. Realize I've been stabbing the same patch of earth for ten minutes.

Julie walks over, sipping iced tea like it's a personality trait. "Everything okay?"

"Peachy," I mutter.

She tilts her head. "You've got the same look I did when my ex texted me 'Hope you're doing well' after ghosting me for four months."

I snort. "That's oddly specific."

"Because it's true."

I shake my head. "It's nothing."

Julie pauses. “Does this nothing have to do with a certain counselor whose name rhymes with ‘palace’?”

I don’t respond.

She nods slowly. “Thought so.”

I glance down at the rake. “She’s... amazing. And I think I’m falling.”

Julie grins. “You think?”

“I know. But I overheard her talking about not coming back next summer. And it felt like...”

“Like someone pulled the floor out from under you.”

“Exactly.”

She pats my arm. “Then maybe talk to her.”

I grip the rake tighter. “I don’t want to guilt her into staying. I want her to choose this. To choose me.”

Julie nods. “Then maybe let her.”

That night, I see her again.

She’s sitting on the dock alone, feet dangling above the water, hugging a clipboard like it can keep her from drifting off.

I stay back.

Because if I get any closer, I might ask her what we're doing. Where we're going.  
What that kiss meant.

And I'm not sure I'm ready for the answer.

So I just watch her from a distance, heart thudding, telling myself I can wait.

Even if it's killing me.

### CHAPTER 13

#### ALICE

I feel the shift before I see it.

It's like a storm that never hits—just hangs over you, low and heavy and electric. Jason's here, but he's not. He moves through the day like a reflection, all the same jokes and smirks, but something underneath is missing.

And it's my fault.

I keep catching him across the lawn, or at the end of a mess hall bench, or standing at the edge of a campfire circle. Every time, it's the same. He looks like he's waiting for something, but not from me anymore.

Because I already told him what I had to say.

I told him I was scared. That I didn't know how to trust myself. That maybe the kiss—the kisses—were too much too soon. And then I walked away.

And now?

Now he's walking too. Just in the opposite direction.

I'm supposed to be helping plan the end-of-session campfire sendoff with Julie, but I can't focus. The paper in front of me is blank. I've been staring at it for fifteen



minutes while pretending I'm sketching ideas.

Julie's in a back office, probably dealing with another report from Aisla or prepping for tomorrow's parent packets. I should be relieved that she's not hovering, but instead I just feel... untethered.

"Need help brainstorming?" a voice says behind me.

I flinch—too hard—and then Jason's there.

Holding a box of graham crackers.

He's not smiling like he used to. It's smaller now, like he's trying not to expect too much from me.

"Oh. Uh. Sure." I motion vaguely to the blank page. "I've got... absolutely nothing."

He nods once and sets the box down. "We could do the usual. Skits, songs, s'mores."

"Yeah."

A beat.

Silence blooms.

Then he clears his throat. "I'm making the fire that night. I got Nolan to help. He insists it be 'dragon approved.'"

I try to smile. "That sounds cute."

"Yeah."

Another pause.

I hate this. The awkward. The space. The way everything feels like it's been unplugged but we're still pretending the current's running.

He looks at the list again. Doesn't sit. Doesn't stay.

"Well. Let me know if you think of anything," he says.

And just like that, he's gone.

I stare at the graham cracker box and feel like crying.

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Later, I catch myself watching him from across the field.

He's tossing a frisbee with two campers, laughing at one's terrible throw, ruffling another's hair. His smile is real for them. The easy kind. The kind he used to give me.

And I know, in the pit of my stomach, that I'm the reason it's gone.

I'm the one who pulled away.

Because that's what I do.

Because being wanted is one thing. But being kept? That's terrifying.

How do I let someone stay? I've never done it. Not really. Not without bracing for them to leave first.

But Jason?

He stayed longer than anyone else.

And now I can't figure out how to stop pushing him away without feeling like I'm betraying some part of myself.

Dinner is worse.

I sit two seats down from him at the counselor table. He doesn't move closer. I don't either. The kids are loud, the food is terrible, and every sound feels too sharp, like the

air itself is trying to scratch at my skin.

He makes a joke about raccoons sneaking into the kitchen and everyone laughs.

Everyone except me.

He doesn't look at me once.

And I feel like I'm disappearing.

It's dark when I finally break.

The fireflies are out. The campers are in their bunks. Julie's in her office. The whole camp is tucked under a blanket of late summer heat and quiet tension.

I walk.

Down past the rec field. Around the cabins. Toward the lake.

I don't mean to find him, but I do.

He's sitting on the dock again. Like he always does when he needs to breathe.

The moon is hanging low. Not full yet, but close. His back is straight. His hands are in his lap. He looks like he's waiting.

But not for me.

Not anymore.

"Hey," I say, because I'm an idiot.

He glances over. “Hey.”

I sit beside him. Not too close.

The water ripples quietly beneath us.

“I saw you today,” I offer, because I don’t know what else to say. “With the frisbee.”

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“Yeah,” he says, his voice unreadable. “It was a good game.”

More silence.

I try again. “You’ve been good with the kids. All summer.”

“Thanks.”

It’s like we’re back at the beginning. Like nothing ever happened. Like we haven’t kissed, or talked about fear, or shared anything deeper than sunscreen.

I open my mouth—then close it.

Because whatever I want to say feels too messy.

And he doesn’t look like he wants messy from me anymore.

So I stand up.

He doesn’t stop me.

“Goodnight, Jason,” I whisper.

He nods.

And I walk away.

I'm halfway back to the cabin, heart a mess, when I hear a soft sniffle behind the arts shed.

I pause, listen. Another tiny sob.

I follow the sound, and there she is—Rubi. One of the youngest campers. Barely eight. Curled up on the grass beside the paint bins, clutching a friendship bracelet so tight it's cutting into her palm.

"Rubi?" I kneel gently. "Hey, what's going on?"

She doesn't answer at first. Just hiccups through tears.

I reach into my back pocket and pull out a tissue. "Here. It's okay."

She takes it, dabs her nose. "They said it's ugly," she whispers.

My heart breaks a little. "Who did?"

"Some of the older girls. They said my bracelet looks like spaghetti."

I bite back a smile. "Well, I lovespaghetti."

She doesn't laugh.

I sit next to her. "Let me see."

She hands it over—wobbly knots, mismatched colors, uneven ends. It's perfect.

"This," I say softly, "is made with heart. That's what matters."

She snuffles again. “You think so?”

“I know so.”

She leans against my side. Small. Warm. Quiet.



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“I don’t want to go home,” she murmurs. “I want to stay here forever.”

I stroke her hair. “Yeah. I know the feeling.”

She looks up at me. “Will you be here next year?”

My throat catches.

I open my mouth, but the answer won’t come.

“I hope you are,” Rubi says. “You make things feel... calm.”

I smile. It wobbles. “Thank you, Rubi.”

She squeezes my hand, then skips off, the bracelet swinging in her tiny fingers like it’s made of gold.

And I sit there in the grass, staring after her, heart full and tangled.

I want to take the job.

I want to stay.

But I don’t know if I can untangle the part of me that wants this place from the part of me that’s still breaking over Jason.

Because I’m not sure if staying would mean being brave.

Or just being stuck.

## CHAPTER 14

JASON

I'm up before the sun.

Not because I slept well—hell no. I was up half the night pacing the bunk, chewing on every word Zack dumped on me like a gossip grenade.

Aisla filed a report.

Security risk.

Werewolves have no place guiding children.

It shouldn't hurt. I've heard worse. My own uncle once told me I was better off as a lone wolf—less dangerous that way.

But here? At Lightring?

This was the first place that felt like maybe, just maybe, I wasn't the monster in the story.

And now I'm sitting here wondering if they're already writing me out of the ending.

I don't even eat breakfast. I slip out before the kitchen lights hum on. No tank top. No clipboard. Just me, bare-chested, bare-footed, running.

The woods are quiet in that thick, early way. Mist clings to the underbrush. My breath

puffs in clouds. My pulse roars in my ears like a warning bell.

I run faster.

My bones itch with change. It's too soon for the moon, but the pressure is there, like my wolf knows something's off. Like he's pacing just under my skin.

I let him rise—just a little.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:51 pm*

Eyes sharpen. Breath deepens. My stride stretches long and low, a rhythm I could lose myself in.

Because I need to lose myself.

Alice won't look me in the eye. And now the camp itself is turning into quicksand. And I'm not sure how to fight for something that's slipping through my hands from two sides.

So I run.

By the time I loop back, the sun's up and the campers are trickling toward the lake for paddleboard races. I skirt around them like a ghost, ducking behind the bathhouse, yanking on a sweatshirt.

I spend the morning cleaning out the supply shed even though no one asked me to. I organize the ropes, stack the trail guides, restock the fire starters. I scrub the goddamn floor.

Julie finds me mid-mop.

She leans in the doorway, arms crossed, one brow lifted. "You're nesting. That's never a good sign."

I grunt. "Just getting ahead."

She doesn't move.

I finally look up. “What?”

“You know what.”

My grip tightens on the mop handle. “No, Julie, I really don’t. Enlighten me.”

She sighs. “Aisla’s report. You heard?”

“Zack heard. Which means I heard.”

Julie’s expression softens. “I didn’t file it.”

“But you didn’t stop it either.”

She walks in slowly. “I haven’t submitted it to the board. It’s sitting in my inbox.”

I stare at her.

“I wanted to talk to you first,” she says. “See how you’re feeling. Hear your side.”

“There’s no side,” I snap. “I shift. I howl. I break a few lawn chairs every full moon. I’m not denying any of that.”

She gives me a long look. “And you also haven’t hurt a single camper. Not even close. You’ve taught them patience, teamwork, bravery—hell, Nolan’s already writing you into his comic book. As a hero.”

I blink.

That part gets me more than I want to admit.

“But,” I say, softer now, “people don’t write reports about heroes, do they?”

Julie exhales. “Aisla’s old-school. She sees liability where I see lived experience.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to be a symbol, Julie. I just want to be a damn counselor.”

“You are,” she says. “And a damn good one.”

I look away.

“Just... don’t run yet,” she says. “Give it a minute.”

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And then she's gone.

Leaving me in a spotless shed and a head full of chaos.

I spend the rest of the day avoiding Alice.

She's everywhere, though. Laughing with campers. Replacing paintbrushes. Sitting under the cedar tree with Rubi and her friendship bracelet empire.

I want to talk to her.

I want to tell her about the report. About how I'm scared I don't belong here. About how her silence feels like a door I don't have the key for anymore.

But instead, I nod when we pass.

Say nothing.

And keep walking.

That night, I walk the edge of the woods, just where the camp lights fade into wild. My limbs ache, but not from the run.

From holding myself back.

I sit on a fallen log and look up at the stars.

They used to feel like maps. Like they were pointing me somewhere.

Now they just feel... far.

Maybe Aisla's right.

Maybe I am a liability.

But if they push me out—if Alice stays silent—and if I go...

Who even notices I'm gone?

I'm still sitting on that log when I hear a soft rustle behind me—then a snuffle.

I turn.

Ferix. The little orc kid from Cabin B. Built like a baby linebacker with a heart the size of a thimble. He's got dirt on his cheek, a skinned knee, and that look—half pain, half shame.

He freezes when he sees me. Straightens up like he's trying to pretend he didn't just trip over a tree root and eat gravel.

"Hey, buddy," I say gently. "You alright?"

He shrugs. But he's blinking fast, like he's trying to force the tears back in.

I squat beside him. "That knee looks rough."

"S'fine," he mumbles. "I'm not crying."



“It’s okay if you are.”

He sniffs harder. “Orcs don’t cry. My cousin said it makes me a girl.”

I pause.

Then sit down beside him fully.

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“First of all,” I say, “crying doesn’t make you anything but alive. Second, girls are awesome. I’ve seen a centaur girl carry a canoe uphill and break up a fight without breaking a sweat.”

Ferix peeks at me. “Really?”

“Really. And if someone calls you weak for feeling stuff, that’s just ‘cause they’re too scared to feel anything themselves.”

He looks at his scraped knee. “Hurts.”

“I bet. Want me to clean it up?”

He nods.

I pull out my little field first aid pouch—because yes, I’m that guy now—and gently clean the cut. He hisses, but doesn’t cry. Just clenches his jaw and grips a stick like it’s a battle axe.

“You’re strong,” I say. “But not ‘cause you didn’t cry. You’re strong ‘cause you stayed. That’s the bravest thing you can do.”

He looks up at me with wide eyes. “Do you cry?”

“All the damn time,” I say with a wink. “Usually when they serve lentil stew.”

That gets a laugh. Just a small one.

But I'll take it.

After I get him back to his cabin, I walk the long way back to mine.

And I can't stop thinking about Ferix.

About Nolan.

About Rubi.

About how these kids—these messy, weird, magical little souls—have let me be part of their stories.

How they don't see a liability.

They see a counselor.

And yeah, maybe I'm a little dangerous. Maybe I howl too loud or break stuff when I lose control.

But I love this place.

I love these kids.

And if I have to fight to stay...

Then damn it, I will.

CHAPTER 15

ALICE

The archery tournament is supposed to be fun.

That's what Julie tells me as she hands me the clipboard, her tone way too cheerful for the storm brewing in my chest.

"Make a show of it!" she calls. "Announce the cabins like it's the Olympics!"

I nod and fake a grin. But my stomach's already in knots, and I haven't even seen him yet.

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Then I do.

Jason's across the field, barefoot in the dewy grass, his hoodie tied around his waist and his hair damp from the lake. He's helping Nolan adjust his bow, crouched beside him with that easy smile that melts most of the staff without even trying.

Except me. Not today.

He hasn't talked to me since the dock.

Since I left him in silence.

Since I tried to come back and he didn't let me.

I clutch the megaphone too hard. My fingers hurt.

"Alright campers!" I shout, trying to channel fake enthusiasm through real nerves. "Cabin B, you're up first. Let's see those mighty orc arms!"

Ferix lets out a triumphant whoop and charges forward, bow in hand. Nolan follows, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Jason doesn't even look my way.

The tournament rolls on.

Cabin after cabin, round after round. I keep score, call names, pretend my heart isn't

twisting every time I hear Jason laugh with someone who isn't me.

At one point, he does a slow-motion dive to retrieve a rogue arrow for Rubi. She bursts into giggles.

I smile too, but it feels wrong on my face.

“Good form, Rubi!” Jason says, ruffling her hair.

“She’s crushing it,” I call, trying—trying—to sound like me again.

Jason nods. Doesn’t say a word.

Doesn’t look up.

And suddenly, I’m cold, even in the summer sun.

Cabin C has a dramatic flair for their turn, with one kid wearing a paper crown and narrating every shot like it’s a war campaign.

I try to enjoy it. I do.

But every time I scan the field, Jason is there.

And neverwithme.

He’s like a light bulb flicked off. Same shape, same face—but no warmth.

After the final round, I call out, “Alright! That’s it for archery!” and hold up a very wrinkled piece of paper that says Tournament Winners – TBD.

The kids cheer anyway.

Jason starts gathering up the bows and placing them back in the equipment bin. One of the strings snaps while he's inspecting it, and he swears under his breath.

That's my moment.

I take a deep breath.

Walk toward him.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:51 pm*

He won't look at me.

That's the first thing I notice.

We're halfway through cleanup after the archery tournament—a chaotic mess of broken arrows, leftover snacks, and glitter somehow—and Jason is moving through it like a ghost. Joking with the kids, helping collect bows, but his eyes? They never once flick toward mine.

It's like I've turned into part of the background.

I tell myself I'm imagining it. That he's busy. Focused.

But when I call out, “Hey, could you grab the target tarp?” and he responds with a clipped “Yeah,” without even meeting my gaze, the weight in my chest sinks all the way to my stomach.

This isn't just distance.

This is something worse.

I find him near the shed later. Alone. Coiling ropes with the kind of intensity that makes it look personal.

My steps are slow, cautious. I feel like I'm tiptoeing into a storm that's already swallowed half the sky.



“Jason,” I say, voice soft.

He doesn’t stop working.

“Can we talk?”

He grunts. Not yes. Not no.

Just noise.

I step closer anyway. “I know I’ve been... complicated. I pulled away. I got scared. But I’m trying.”

He pauses for a beat.

Then goes right back to coiling.

“I’m trying to be better,” I continue. “To not run. I know I hurt you. But I never meant to?—”

“I don’t need a speech, Alice.”

I freeze.

The way he says my name, it doesn’t sound like mine anymore. It sounds like something heavy in his mouth. Like regret.

“I just wanted to?—”

He drops the rope and turns to face me, jaw tight. “To what? Explain again how you’re scared of me? Of this? You already did that, remember?”

I flinch. “That’s not fair?—”

“Isn’t it?”

His voice isn’t loud, but it cuts like wind on bare skin.

“I let you in,” he says, arms crossed. “Every messy part. And you looked at it and said, ‘Maybe later.’”

“I never said that,” I whisper.

“You didn’t have to. You walked away.”

“I came back!”

“Too late.”

That one stings. Deep.

He shakes his head and looks away, hands on his hips like he’s trying to hold himself in place.

“I thought what we had—” I start, but the words catch in my throat.

“Yeah,” he says, flat. “Me too.”

There’s a pause. Long and awful.

Then he picks up the rope again.

I stand there, heart cracking open in slow motion.

“Was it ever real?” I ask, and my voice breaks at the end.

He doesn't answer.

And the silence says everything.

I walk away.

I don't remember getting back to my cabin. Don't remember if anyone saw me or spoke or tried to stop me.

I just remember sitting on the floor, back against the door, hands shaking.

And feeling like I'd just lost something I hadn't even let myself believe I could keep.

## CHAPTER 16

### JASON

Something's wrong.

I know it before I hear Zak's footsteps pounding toward me through the soggy field, before the clouds crack with thunder overhead. The air's gone tight, heavy with pressure. The kind of pressure that sets my instincts snarling.

It's full moon tonight. I can feel her rising already. Clawing up my spine.

And then Zak appears, pale and panicked, yelling my name like he's already in trouble.

"Jason! Jason, man—we have a problem."

I drop the logs I've been stacking. "What kind of problem?"

Zak skids to a stop, panting. "Mira's missing."

Time stalls.

"What do you meanmissing?"

“She was with my group—we were doing the pond trail hike, the easy one. She said she had to go pee, so I let her duck off. I thought she was right behind us, but... she never showed back up.”

My jaw tightens. “You left a kid alone in the woods?”

Zak flinches. “I waited! I doubled back twice. I thought she was playing a joke or?—”

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I'm already walking.

Fast.

Toward the trailhead.

“Dude, where are you going?” he calls, hurrying after me.

“To find her.”

“I said I checked already?—”

I spin, fast enough that Zak stumbles to a halt. “You lost her.”

“She’s probably fine—just wandering. It’s not even raining yet?—”

“Not yet.” I growl it more than say it. “But it’s coming. And you left her in the woods. Alone. At dusk. On a full moon.”

Zak pales.

I feel the shift pulling at me, just beneath the surface.

Not now. I can’t let it out now.

I breathe. Focus.

“She could be scared. Hurt. You have any idea how far she could’ve gotten in twenty minutes?”

“I—I don’t know,” he mutters. “I thought?—”

“You didn’t think. You left her.”

He opens his mouth like he’s going to argue, but the look on my face must shut him up fast.

I turn back toward the woods. Strip off my hoodie and toss it to the grass.

“Stay with the rest of your cabin,” I snap. “Tell Julie.”

“Jason, wait—shouldn’t we go together? I can help?—”

“No.”

My voice cuts sharp through the air.

He backs off.

I don’t give him a second glance.

Because every second is ticking like thunder in my chest. My pulse is wild, my vision sharpening.

I can feel the woods calling.

She’s in there. Somewhere.

And I don't care what it takes?—

I'm going to find her.

The moon's pulling at my spine, creeping into my bones, and all I can think is that there's a kid out there—mycamper—alone in the woods, scared, stumbling around on legs she barely knows how to use.



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“I waited for her, I swear!” Zak babbles behind me. “She said she just had to pee, I thought she was behind us, I didn’t think she?—”

“Stop.” My voice is a growl. “Youlefther.”

He goes quiet, finally.

I tear off my hoodie and toss it aside. The heat from my body is already spiking. My skin prickles. I can feel the wolf scratching just beneath my ribs, begging for release under the full moon haze.

But I won’t shift. Not yet. Not until I know she’s safe.

Because if Mira sees me like that... I don’t know if I could forgive myself.

And if someone else does—someone like Aisla?

They’ll never let me near these kids again.

I crash into the woods, alone.

Mira’s scent is faint—sweet and briny like low tide, mixed with moss and sunscreen.

Mercreatures aren’t made for hiking. She hates dry trails. I’ve seen her stumble down gravel paths like a baby deer, tripping over her own feet, apologizing every time.

Sheshouldn’t have been alone.

She shouldn't have been out here with someone who didn't know her pace, her needs.

I push through the branches, ducking under vines, scanning for prints. Anything.

"Mira!" I shout, voice echoing through the pines. "It's Jason!"

No response.

A gust of wind tears through the trees and the sky cracks again, loud and close.

The storm's rolling in fast now.

Thunder shakes the dirt under my boots. The humidity is choking. The trees are starting to sway like they know something I don't.

I move faster.

"MIRA!"

Nothing.

And then—a footprint.

Sort of.

Wobbly. Dragged.

She's been here. Slipping. Struggling.

My heart hammers.

“C’mon, peanut, gimme something.”

My claws want out. My muscles twitch. Iacheto shift, to run wild, to let instinct take over and sniff her out.

But I don’t.

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Because she might see me. And she's scared enough.

I shove through another thicket and scrape my arm, don't even flinch. The adrenaline's drowning everything but the need to find her.

She's not just a camper.

She's my camper.

These kids—damn, I didn't ask for them. I didn't come to this camp thinking I'd care this much.

But somewhere between Nolan's dragon-fire meltdowns, Rubi's spaghetti bracelets, and Ferix asking me if boys were allowed to cry—I fell for all of them.

I love them.

Every loud, magical, messy one.

And Mira?

She's the softest. The smallest. The kid who always sits closest during ghost stories and clings to the dock like she's trying not to float away.

And now she's lost. In the woods. On a storm night. With the moon above us.

I grit my teeth, panting. My body is hot, wild, close to breaking.

Not yet.

I can't shift.

Not until she's safe.

I press my forehead to a tree and breathe through the howl building in my throat.

"I'm coming, kid," I whisper.

No matter what.

I stumble down a slope slick with moss, chest heaving. Every inch of me burns. The pressure is unbearable now, thrumming through my jaw, my spine, down to my fingertips where the claws are starting to edge out.

And then I hear her.

"Alice."

No—not in my head. Real.

She crashes through the brush, flashlight in hand, eyes wide and wild.

"Jason?" she breathes. "I heard you yelling—what's going on?"

I freeze.

Every cell in my body goes still and then flares. Her scent—fresh and clean and sharp with fear—hits me like a drug.

And the moon—damn it, the moon is right there, pulling me open.

My voice comes out low and broken. “You shouldn’t be here.”

She steps closer. “What’s wrong?”

“I said don’t.” I stagger back, hand outstretched, trying to keep her away.

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But it's too late.

She sees it.

My eyes—already gone gold.

My teeth—lengthening in my mouth.

My skin—rippling with the shift I can't stop anymore.

Her face drains. “Oh my god...”

“Run,” I rasp. “Please.”

She doesn't move.

Just stares at me, terrified.

And then I fall to my knees, gasping, as the shift finally takes hold.

## CHAPTER 17

ALICE

“Jason?”

My voice cuts through the woods, small and shaky, nearly drowned out by the roar of

the wind through the trees. I clutch the flashlight like it's a lifeline, its beam bouncing wildly across the muddy trail as I stumble through the brush.

I heard him yelling.

I didn't think—I just ran toward it.

And now here I am, breathless, heart pounding like a drumline in my chest. The storm is breaking open above me, and I can feel it in my bones.

Then I see him.

He's on his knees, panting, body trembling like he's struggling to hold himself together with sheer will.

"Jason?" I whisper again.

He lifts his head.

And it's not his eyes I see.

Not really.

They glow gold, burning through the shadows.

He stares at me.

Not moving.

Not speaking.



I take a step closer.

And that's when he shouts—"You shouldn't be here."

The words crack like lightning.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:51 pm*

I freeze. “What’s happening?”

“Please,” he rasps. “Don’t.”

But it’s too late.

I see it. All of it.

His body convulses—violently. His back arches, fingers clawing at the dirt as his skin ripples, stretches, shifts.

His hands—no, paws—lengthen, bones twisting with sickening pops. His face contorts, jaw snapping forward, teeth elongating into fangs, ears pulling back, sharpening.

It’s horrifying.

And mesmerizing.

He gasps, a broken, inhuman sound that turns into a growl.

Fur erupts across his arms, shoulders, chest.

His shirt tears apart, useless against the beast blooming out of him.

And still I don’t move.

Because under the growl, under the horror, under all that monster, it's him.

It's still Jason.

I can feel it.

He stumbles to all fours, breath steaming in the air, snarling, barely able to hold still.

But he looks at me.

Right at me.

His eyes are the same.

Wild. Bright. His.

And I whisper, "Can you understand me?"

He doesn't nod.

But he doesn't bolt either.

"I—I heard you yelling. Zak said Mira's missing. I came to help."

Jason huffs. A low, sharp breath. He's obviously holding something back.

I keep talking, softly, like I'm calming a scared animal. "She can't walk well outside water. You know that. You know where she might go."

He growls again—softer this time.

His paws dig into the dirt.

“Jason...” I whisper, voice trembling. “Can you find her?”

He looks at me for one long second.

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And then he nods.

Just once.

Then he bolts into the trees—fluid, fast, more shadow than solid.

And I stand there in the storm-washed woods, blinking back tears I don't even understand.

Because I just watched the boy I think I might be falling for tear himself in two.

And all I could think was—I'm not scared of you.

Not even a little.

I should stay put.

That's what any reasonable person would do after watching a man become a wolf in front of them.

But I'm not reasonable.

Not when it comes to him.

I take off after him, flashlight beam bouncing off tree trunks and glinting off slick leaves. I follow the deep pawprints he leaves in the soft earth, the way they scatter through the underbrush like a trail laid just for me.

The woods are alive with stormlight and wind and the pounding of my heart.

And somewhere in all of it—Jason.

He doesn't run in a straight line.

He weaves. Stops. Circles back.

Tracking.

He's in full control, but there's nothing human about the way he moves now. It's wild. Fluid. Animal.

But not feral.

Not dangerous.

I can see the care in the way he navigates the terrain. The purpose in every low snarl, every twitch of his ears.

And watching him...

It terrifies me.

But it also sparks something else.

Something just as fierce.

He's beautiful like this.

Not in the way I thought beauty worked—not clean lines and tidy features. No,

Jason's beauty now is in the way he commands the woods, the way he bends but never breaks under the weight of what he is.

The storm flashes again, and for a split second, I see his silhouette ahead of me—ears raised, fur slick with rain, head high as he scans the clearing.

I duck behind a tree, breath stuck in my throat.

Because for that moment, he doesn't look like a boy I kissed under stars.

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He looks like something out of legend.

Something powerful.

And he's mine.

My heart stutters at the thought. At the truth of it.

Because I can't run anymore—not from him, not from this.

Not even from myself.

Jason pauses up ahead, hackles raised.

Then I see it—movement, high up in the limbs of a twisted old birch.

“Mira?” I breathe.

A small shape clings to the crook between two branches—mud-streaked, shivering, one boot missing, her hair plastered to her cheeks with rain.

“Mira! It's me!” I shout gently. “It's Alice, sweetie. You're okay.”

Her voice wobbles. “I saw... something. Something big.”

Jason takes a step forward, slowly, silently.



Mira lets out a terrified squeak and scrambles higher, limbs shaking.

“Shhh, it’s okay!” I rush beneath the tree and drop my flashlight, holding up both hands. “It’s just Jason. He’s here to help. I promise.”

She stares down at me, wide-eyed. “He’s a wolf.”

I nod, my voice soft but steady. “Yeah. But he’s still Jason. He wouldn’t hurt you. Not ever.”

Behind me, Jason takes one deliberate step back, head lowered, body still.

I glance at him. “Sit.”

He obeys, tail sweeping the forest floor, ears twitching in the rain.

Mira hesitates.

Slowly, she begins to climb down, one trembling limb at a time.

When she’s close enough, I reach up, pull her gently into my arms. She curls against me, soaked and sniffling.

“You came,” she whispers.

“Of course I did.”

Jason rises and steps closer. Mira stiffens—but doesn’t scream.

Instead, she looks down at him.

Then at me.

“You trust him?” she asks.

“With everything,” I say.

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Mira nods once. Tiny. Resolute.

“Okay.”

The three of us push back through the woods, me half-carrying Mira, Jason flanking us like a silent shadow.

By the time we reach the edge of camp, the rain is a full-on deluge, soaking through my jacket, Mira’s curls, even Jason’s thick fur.

Julie and Torack are at the edge of the mess hall porch, headlamps flashing, ponchos flapping in the wind. A cluster of staff huddles around them, maps in hand, shovels ready.

Julie spots us first.

“Oh mygod!”

She runs to us, ripping off her hood. “You found her!”

“She’s okay,” I say, handing Mira over into her arms. “Just scared. Twisted ankle, maybe.”

Torack steps up, gaze shifting from Mira to me to the wolf at my side.

And for a moment, nobody says anything.

Then Jason lets out a low, tired huff and steps back into the trees.

Disappearing before anyone else can get a closer look.

Julie squeezes my arm. “You good?”

I nod.

Even though my whole world just cracked wide open.

And I’m not sure it’ll ever fit back together the same way again.

## CHAPTER 18

### JASON

Sunrise stabs through my eyelids. I blink awake to moss pressing into my cheek and pine needles poking my bare ass. Again. My mouth tastes like wet dog and bad decisions.

"Naked in the woods. Classic Tuesday."

The cold air raises goosebumps as I dig through my emergency clothes cache—a hollow log stocked with sweatpants and a Camp Lightring hoodie that smells like laundry gone feral. My joints pop like bubble wrap when I stand. Transformation hangovers hit harder than tequila nights.

Memories crash through the fog—Mira's shivering form in the tree, Alice's flashlight beam trembling as she stood her ground against a monster. Against me. I’m sprinting toward staff housing before the second shoe drops.

Alice's cabin door flies open before I can knock. She's cross-armed in Hello Kitty pajamas, hair mashed flat on one side. The smell of instant cocoa hangs thick behind her.

"You look like a Yeti that lost a bar fight."

"Good morning to you too, Sunshine." I peer past her shoulder. "Mira's?—?"

"Julie's got her wrapped in like twelve blankets by the fire. Kid's already demanding extra pudding cups as 'trauma tax.'"

The vice around my ribs loosens. "And you? Last night was..."

"Insane? Soul-shredding?" She leans against the door frame, cocking her head. "Let's go with 'educational.' Turns out werewolf transformation videos on YouTube? Not HD enough."

I scratch my stubble. "Bet the comments section didn't mention the drool."

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"Or the naked woodland morning-after walks." Her smirk fades. "You stayed though. When I asked. Even as..."

"Course I did." The words come out gravel-rough. "Always will."

Her throat bobs. A beat stretches between us, taut as a tripwire.

She breaks it first—of course—with an eye roll. "Get in here before someone sees you. Your hoodie's inside-out."

I step into the cramped cabin, sidestepping a laundry pile that's 90% novelty camp t-shirts. She thrusts a chipped mug into my hands. It's hot enough to brand cattle.

"Thanks for the swamp water."

"Don't thank me yet—it's the powdered stuff from an envelope. Who knows how old." She flops onto her bunk, knees drawn up. "So. Wolf-you. Impressive sniffing skills. Ever think about careers in airport security?"

"Knew you'd make it weird." I sip the cocoa. It's 60% marshmallow fluff. Perfect.

"Guy becomes literal Big Bad Wolf and I'm the weird one?" She kicks my shin, toes poking through neon unicorn socks. "Please. Head counselor caught me sneaking back. Told her we were 'doing night survival training.' Now I'm teaching fire-building at noon."

"Want me to howl for dramatic effect?"

"Maybe I do." Alice's eyebrow arches, a challenge glinting in those blue eyes. The corner of her mouth twitches like she's already won.

"Oh, you're asking for it." I straighten up, rolling my shoulders like I'm warming up for a wrestling match. Her smirk falters for half a second, and that's all the encouragement I need. I tilt my head back, letting loose a howl that starts deep in my chest and ends somewhere between a campfire ballad and a wolf's midnight serenade. It's loud enough to rattle the windows.

She jolts, spilling cocoa on her unicorn socks. "Jason! Shutup!" She lunges at me, smacking my arm with the force of someone who's clearly never been in a fistfight. "You can't just—people are going to hear! Men aren't even supposed to be in here!"

Her voice wobbles, and then she snorts, doubling over with laughter. It's the kind of laugh that makes her eyes crinkle and her cheeks flush pink. My chest tightens.

I can't help it. I laugh too, the kind that starts in your gut and leaves you wheezing. We're a mess, both of us. Me in my inside-out hoodie, her covered in cocoa stains, and the cabin smelling like wet dog and cheap marshmallows.

Her hand lands on my shoulder for balance, and I glance down at her. She's close, close enough that I can see the faint freckles dusting her nose, the way her breath catches when our laughter fades into something else. Her laughter dies down, replaced by a quiet that feels like the woods at dusk—electric, waiting.

"Jason," she starts, but her voice falters.

"Yeah?" My voice drops low, rough around the edges.

She doesn't answer. Instead, her hand slides up to my neck, pulling me down to her level. Her lips meet mine, tentative at first, like she's testing the waters. I freeze for a

heartbeat, then kiss her back, slow and steady. The cocoa mug slips from her grip, thudding onto the floor, but neither of us care.

Her hands slide up my chest, fingers curling into the fabric of my hoodie, and I don't think—I act. I take her by the waist, backing her toward the bed with a low growl that's more human than wolf but carries the same intent. The mattress hits the back of her knees, and she tumbles onto it, her laughter hushed but wild in her eyes.

“You're in a hurry,” she teases, her voice breathless, but there's a flicker of something darker in her gaze. Something that matches the primal hunger clawing at me from the inside.

“You're not?” I yank the hoodie over my head, tossing it somewhere behind me. The sound it makes as it hits the floor is lost under the sound of her gasp when I lean over her, caging her in with my arms. Her hands are already working at the waistband of my sweats, and I don't stop her as my cock bobs free.

Her pajama top rides up as she shifts under me, and I take the opportunity to pull it off in one swift motion. Her skin is warm, flushed from the rush of it all, and I drag my mouth along the curve of her shoulder, down to her collarbone. She arches into me with a soft moan that goes straight to my gut.

“Jason,” she murmurs, her fingers tangling in my hair as I nip at her skin. “I want you.”

My hands slide down her sides, tugging at the waistband of her pajama bottoms until she lifts her hips, letting me strip them away. She's left in nothing but those ridiculous unicorn socks, and something about the contrast—the innocence of them against the way she's looking at me—makes me laugh, a low rumble in my chest.

“What?” she demands, her voice sharp even as she scrambles to pull me closer.



“Nothing.” I kiss her again, slower this time, letting her feel the weight of me as I settle between her legs. “Just you.”

Her hands roam my back, nails digging in as I press against her, and when I push my cock inside her, her breath hitches. She’s tight, warm, and the sound she makes—half gasp, half moan—sends a shiver down my spine. I freeze for a moment, letting her adjust, but she’s having none of it. She rocks her hips, urging me on, and I give in.

Our rhythm is frantic, desperate, like we’re trying to outrun the world outside this cabin. Her legs wrap around me, pulling me deeper, and I bury my face in the crook of her neck, inhaling the scent of her. Her breaths come in short, sharp gasps, and I can feel the tension building in her, mirroring my own.

“Jason,” she whispers, her voice breaking on my name. “Don’t stop.”

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I don't. I can't. Not when she's like this, writhing beneath me, her nails leaving marks on my skin. Not when the wolf in me is howling for more, for her, for this. I drive into her harder, faster, until she's clenching around me, her body shuddering as she comes undone. Her cry is muffled against my shoulder, and the sound of it almost pushes me over the edge.

Her hands grip my shoulders as I flip us, her laugh breaking into a gasp when she lands on top of me. Her hair falls like a curtain around us, blonde strands catching the sunlight filtering through the cabin window. She braces herself on my chest, her fingers splaying over my skin, and I can't help but grin up at her.

"You're in charge now," I tease, my voice rough as she adjusts, her knees pressing into the mattress on either side of my hips.

Her smirk is all confidence, but there's a flicker of something in her eyes—nerves, maybe, or anticipation. She shifts, and the friction makes my breath catch.

"You're not the only one with moves, wolf boy."

"Prove it," I challenge, my hands gripping her thighs.

She doesn't hesitate. She rocks her hips, slow at first, testing the angle, and I hiss through my teeth. Her laugh is breathless, her hands moving to my chest for balance.

I growl, my hands sliding up to her waist, any possible retort cut off by a moan as she sinks down onto me, taking my cock deeper. Her head tips back, the line of her throat exposed, and I can't resist sitting up, my mouth finding her skin. She tastes like salt

and sweat and something uniquely her, and the sound she makes when I bite down—soft, sharp—sends a jolt through me.

Her hands tangle in my hair, pulling me closer as she grinds against me, her rhythm faltering but no less intoxicating.

“Jason,” she breathes, her voice breaking, the tension coiling in her, her body tightening around me.

“That’s it,” I murmur against her skin, my hands moving to her hips, guiding her. “Let go.”

Her cry is muffled against my shoulder, her nails digging into my back as she comes undone. I hold her through it, my own release building with every shudder of her body. When she collapses against me, I let go, my hips snapping up as I follow her over the edge, my release flooding into her.

Her forehead rests against mine, her blue eyes soft and unfocused. “Told you,” she whispers, her voice a little smug, a little dazed.

I laugh, the sound low and rough. “Yeah, you did.”

## CHAPTER 19

### ALICE

Sunlight filters through the cabin window in soft, gold ribbons. The air smells like rain-damp wood and warm skin. I’m tangled in a blanket, my cheek pressed into a bare shoulder that feels like home and fire all at once.

Jason’s shoulder.

He's still asleep.

And I... I don't want to move.

Not even a little.

His arm is draped over my waist like he's afraid I might vanish. One leg slung lazily over mine. His breathing is deep, slow. The kind of breathing that means his guard is all the way down.

I close my eyes, letting it sink in.

Last night wasn't supposed to happen.

Not like that. Not after everything.

God, it did.

It was soft. Careful. Fierce. Kind. All the things I didn't know my body could still feel.

I shift slightly, not to move away—just to turn toward him more.

To see his face.

Even in sleep, his brow's furrowed, like he's not quite sure peace belongs to him.

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My fingers brush lightly across his chest, and he exhales, a low sound that makes my pulse skip.

I've never felt this safe.

That's the part that hits me hardest.

Not the sex—not the tenderness or the way his hands made me feel like I was made of glass and steel all at once—but this.

Theafter.

The not-alone part.

The quiet.

I always thought safety was something you earned through control. Through walls and distance. Through never needing anyone enough to get hurt.

But this?

This is safety.

His warmth.

His weight.

The way he stayed through the storm inside me and still looked at me like I was worth the wait.

Jason stirs.

His hand tightens at my waist, thumb brushing bare skin.

“Mornin’,” he mumbles, voice rough and half-buried in the pillow.

“Hi,” I whisper.

He cracks one eye open, and that sleepy grin—the one that always hits me like sunshine through fog—slides across his face.

“You’re still here,” he says softly, like he’s checking.

I nod, heart thudding.

“I’m glad,” he says. “Didn’t wanna wake up and think I dreamed it.”

“You didn’t.”

His brow furrows. “You okay?”

I nod again, slower. “I’m... good. I think.”

“You think?” he teases gently, nudging his nose against mine.

“I don’t know how to be this okay. It’s new.”

His hand cups my face, thumb tracing the base of my jaw. “You’re safe here.”

I close my eyes.

Those words—they undo me a little.

He must feel it. Because his lips brush my forehead, then my cheek, and finally, lightly, my mouth.

## Page 56

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:51 pm*

It's not hungry like last night.

It's reverent.

Like he's still asking for permission even though I'm already in his arms.

"I don't know what happens next," I whisper. "Like, after camp. After this."

"Then don't think about after yet," he says. "Just think about right now."

Right now.

His skin against mine.

The sound of birdsong through the trees.

The soft creak of the old bunk bed as we shift just enough to hold each other tighter.

Right now is enough.

More than enough.

By the time we make it to the mess hall, the camp is fully awake and buzzing with end-of-session energy. Kids are half-dressed, syrup is somehow onevery surface, and the waffle line is stretching halfway to the lake.

Jason and I walk in separately.



On purpose.

Because we agreed—on the walk over, while pretending not to look like we'd spent the night wrapped around each other likeroots—that it's better tonotmake it obvious. For the campers' sake. For the illusion of professionalism.

But of course, the universe has a sense of humor.

We're barely ten steps inside when Hazel—twelve, a tiny firecracker with a spellbook bigger than her head and a gaze that cuts deeper than truth serum—spots me.

She's at the center table with a group of Cabin E girls, holding court like the head of a coven, which is basically what she is.

Her eyes lock onto mine.

Then they drift to Jason, who's trying to look inconspicuous while pretending to care deeply about the cereal dispenser.

Hazel smirks.

"Ohhh," she sing-songs, voice carrying just enough to make my blood run cold. "Someone's in loooooove."

I freeze mid-step.

The whole table of girls erupts into giggles.

Jason chokes on his orange juice.

Hazel continues, smug as anything. “Honestly, Miss Alice, I didn’t peg you for the scruffy type.”

“Hazel,” I hiss, cheeks flaming.

She shrugs. “Hey, I’m just reading your aura. It’s glowing pink. Like bubblegum. And lust.”

I want the earth to swallow me whole.

Jason raises his cup in mock salute without turning around. “Appreciate the feedback, Witchling.”

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Hazel grins, sharp and delighted. “Don’t hurt her, Wolf Boy. Or I’ll hex your eyebrows crooked for life.”

“Fair,” he says, coughing down a laugh.

I grab a tray and all but dive for the oatmeal station.

Jason slides in beside me a minute later, whispering, “You okay?”

“I think I just died.”

“Could be worse,” he says. “Could’ve been one of the were-teen boys.”

I side-eye him. “You’d maul them.”

“Damn right.”

I try not to smile.

But I do anyway.

Because somehow, even in a cafeteria full of chaos, surrounded by waffle syrup and witchy teenagers.

I feel like I belong.

Later that morning, we end up by the lake.

The sun's fully out now, chasing off the last of the storm's chill. The water sparkles in that way it only does after rain—like it's been scrubbed clean overnight.

The kids are splashing around, shrieking, diving, doing the kind of cannonballs that drench everything in a three-yard radius. Nolan's midair, arms pinwheeling, and Rubi is explaining breath-holding techniques to a very unimpressed Ferix.

On the floating dock, Ryder the lifeguard lounges like a Renaissance statue brought to life—hair slicked back, mirrored sunglasses on, scales catching the light with every lazy flick of his tail. He doesn't need a whistle. He just looks at the kids, and they behave.

Jason and I sit on a sun-warmed bench near the dock.

He doesn't say anything at first.

Just slides his fingers into mine like it's the most natural thing in the world.

And it is.

His thumb strokes the back of my hand.

It's nothing flashy. No kisses. No dramatic declarations.

Just this.

A shared stillness.

I let my head rest on his shoulder.

And for the first time in a very, very long time, I don't feel like I'm bracing for the

fall.

I just feel... okay.

More than okay.

Safe.

Seen.

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Held.

And as Rubi waves at us from the shallows, her bracelet-sleeved arms flailing, Jason squeezes my hand once.

“Yeah,” he says softly. “This right here? This is the good stuff.”

I nod, smiling into his shirt.

He’s right.

This is the good stuff.

## CHAPTER 20

### JASON

Torack clears his throat, and the entire mess hall falls into a half-hearted hush. It’s not fear—it’s just respect. Or obligation. Or maybe shared trauma from last year’s pixie infestation. Either way, the man’s got a presence.

He plants himself in front of the whiteboard with a stack of papers that looks like it’s about to crumble under its own bureaucratic weight.

“Alright,” he begins, voice like gravel and thunder. “We’ve got five days until camp’s out, and a hell of a lot to wrap up.”

I sigh and lean back in my chair.

My seat creaks. I creak.

Julie's already got a color-coded checklist in front of her and a clipboard that may or may not be sentient. Aisla's perched like a gargoyle two seats away, stone-faced and judging. Zak's chewing a pen cap like he's solving world hunger. Hazel is here for some reason even though she's twelve.

And across the circle of misery—Alice.

She's sitting with her ankles crossed neatly, hair pinned up in a way that makes the nape of her neck look dangerous, pencil in hand like this is her final exam.

God help me.

She looks up, catches me staring.

Smiles.

Not a big one. Just the kind that softens the air around her. The kind I feel in my ribs.

And just like that, I could sit through this meeting for eternity.

Bring on the spreadsheets. The composting policies. The sacred rites of toilet duty rotation.

I don't care.

Just keep her looking at me like that.

Torack drones on about check-out procedures, magical item returns, enchanted bunk deactivation.

My brain checks out. I doodle on the corner of my notes: a tiny wolf wearing sunglasses, holding a sign that says “Send Help.”

Julie catches me. Raises an eyebrow.

I grin and draw a second wolf with a tiny clipboard labeled Admin Beast.

Alice coughs softly behind her notepad—covering a laugh. Her eyes find mine again, a spark dancing in the edges.

Totally worth it.



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“Jason,” Torack barks.

I jolt. “Sir?”

“You’re on firewood prep for the final bonfire.”

I salute with my pen. “Permission to use axes responsibly.”

“Denied.”

Laughter ripples around the room.

He moves on, thank the gods.

Alice mouths, “Axes, really?” at me.

I shrug, smug. She rolls her eyes, but she’s still smiling.

Minutes tick by. Julie’s discussing the camper awards ceremony now, and I vaguely register someone bringing up the talent show finale—Hazel volunteers to emcee, obviously.

Meanwhile, I’m watching Alice tuck a loose curl behind her ear, totally unaware of the chaos she’s causing in my chest.

The room is warm, buzzing with low chatter and crinkling papers, but all I can focus on is how settled I feel.

Not bored.

Not restless.

Just... good.

Because she's here.

And she's looking at me like maybe I'm home.

Torack pauses, flipping to the last page on his clipboard. His eyes scan the room, one heavy brow raised.

"I've got one more announcement."

The mess hall quiets instantly.

He clears his throat. "I want to take a moment to recognize one of our own—someone who went above and beyond this week when things got dangerous."

I sit up straighter, suddenly alert.

"Mira's safe return," he says, voice booming but warm, "wasn't luck or timing. It was instinct, sacrifice, and someone who knew exactly what this camp needed in the moment."

My heart thumps once—hard.

Torack looks straight at me. "Jason Reed."

Every eye turns to me.

I blink. “Wait, what?”

Julie claps first. Then Zak. Then the whole room’s applauding, the noise rolling through the mess hall like thunder.

I sit there, stunned, like my brain short-circuited.

Torack continues. “This place isn’t just about marshmallows and monster dodgeball. It’s about trust. And when a camper was missing, scared, and vulnerable, Jason followed his instincts—alof them.”

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He glances toward the staff table. “He shifted. He tracked her. And he brought her back.”

My cheeks flush with heat.

He’s not just praising me—he’s praising the wolf.

Torack adds, “What he did reminded me why we trust our people to be who they are, not who we expect them to be.”

I swallow.

My throat’s tight.

Across the table, I catch Alice’s eyes.

She’s beaming.

And I let myself feel it.

Pride.

Not shame. Not the fear of losing control or not being human enough.

Just... proud.

I glance over at Aisla.

She's clapping, sure—but her face is tight, jaw clenched, like she just bit into something sour and can't spit it out.

I meet her eyes.

Hold her gaze.

And this time, she looks away first.

I lean back in my chair, arms crossed, trying not to grin like an idiot.

Because for once, I didn't have to fight to prove I belong here.

The whole damn room already knows it.

The meeting breaks up in a slow, scraping shuffle of folding chairs and half-finished checklists. I hang back, pretending to still be fascinated by the coffee urn while everyone files out.

Alice doesn't leave.

She circles around and catches my eye near the snack table, the edge of a smile playing at her lips.

"Hey," she says quietly.

"Hey." I rub the back of my neck. "That was... unexpected."

"You deserve it."

I shrug. "Still. Kinda surreal to hear Torack say 'Jason' and 'good decision' in the

same sentence.”

She steps closer, voice gentler now. “This camp cares about you, Jason. You’ve done more for these kids than most people even notice.”

I glance at the door, then back at her. “I didn’t think anyone saw it.”

“We did. I did.”

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She nudges her shoulder against mine. My breath catches.

I let the silence stretch between us, warm and steady.

Then I say it.

“I think I’ve got a future here.”

Alice turns toward me, brows lifting just slightly. “You mean that?”

I nod, slower this time. “Yeah. I mean it. For once, I don’t feel like I have to claw my way into a place I already love.”

Her eyes shimmer a little. She reaches for my hand, threads our fingers together.

“I’m glad,” she whispers.

I squeeze her hand once, then smile.

“Me too.”

## CHAPTER 21

### ALICE

I’ve been avoiding it all day.

Julie's office door.

It's like this looming, invisible checkpoint I keep walking around like some kind of nervous deer—casually strolling past, checking the staff bulletin like it might spontaneously explode, pretending I've just forgotten that I'm supposed to give her an answer.

Which is a lie.

I've been thinking about it non-stop.

The offer.

The one that's been rolling around in my brain since the night Mira went missing and Jason went full werewolf in front of me without a single ounce of shame.

A full-time job.

At Camp Lightring.

A life I never pictured, but now can't seem to unsee.

Still, I hesitate in the doorway like the floor might open up and swallow me whole.

Jason's voice echoes in my head from yesterday—"I think I've got a future here."

And I want that.

Ido.

But wanting something this much? That's the scary part.



I knock, once.

Julie looks up from behind a stack of attendance rosters, her glasses perched low on her nose like she's already seen through every layer of my soul.

"Hey, hon," she says, setting her pen down. "Come to make me wait another day?"

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I step inside, wringing my fingers together like a middle schooler with a confession note. “I, um. I’ve been thinking.”

She leans back, hands folded. “Go on.”

I take a breath. It feels like jumping off a dock in early June—bracing and sharp and right.

“I want to stay.”

Julie’s face softens instantly. “Yeah?”

I nod. “I mean—I’m terrified. But also... not? Which feels weird. But in a good way.”

She smiles, full and warm. “That’s how you know it matters.”

I laugh nervously. “I think this place is the first thing in a long time that’s felt like mine.”

Her smile doesn’t waver. “It is. And we’d be lucky to have you full-time, Alice. You’re a natural. The kids adore you, the staff respect you, and I’ve never seen anyone color-code a conflict resolution chart with that much finesse.”

I flush. “Thanks. I—I think I’m still figuring out how to belong.”

“You already do.”

The tears come before I can stop them.

Not the ugly kind. Just the kind that slip down your cheek when you finally breathe out something you've been holding too long.

Julie tosses me a tissue from the desk drawer. "That's the official welcome package."

I sniffle. "Thank you."

She stands, walks around the desk, and pulls me into a hug. It's brief, but grounding.

"You made the right call," she whispers. "You've got roots here. Let 'em grow."

And just like that—it's real.

I'm staying.

Not because I have nowhere else to go.

But because this time, I want to.

I linger a little as Julie moves to grab the formal paperwork from a side drawer, my fingers fidgeting with the hem of my shirt.

"Um," I say, too casual. "Are there... full-time housing options that... bunk two?"

Julie pauses mid-reach. Slowly turns to look at me, one perfectly arched eyebrow lifting.

"Two, huh?"

Heat flushes my cheeks immediately. “I mean—not like—it’s not—we’re not even technically?—”

She smirks, arms crossing. “Who’s the lucky guy? Wait. Don’t tell me. Let me guess.”

I open my mouth. Close it. Open it again.

Julie grins wider. “Scruffy. Shirt-averse. Howls at the moon?”

“I didn’t say that,” I mutter.

“You didn’t have to.”

She winks.

I try to disappear into my own shirt.

But she’s already turning back to the drawer, still smiling.

“I figured this might be coming. Actually,” she adds, flipping through a set of folders, “I’ve been planning to talk to Jason about a full-time role. Just hadn’t decided where he fits best yet.”

My head snaps up. “Really?”

Julie nods. “He’s got something rare. Heart. Leadership. An instinct for these kids that can’t be taught. I wasn’t gonna let that go to waste.”

Relief spreads through me, warm and golden.

“He really cares,” I whisper.

“I know,” she says, softly this time. “So do you. And yeah—we can make the housing work. You just let me know when both of you are ready to make it official.”

I nod, cheeks still warm, but smiling now.

Because everything’s starting to line up.

Not perfectly.

But honestly.

And that's even better.

The next morning, I get up early.

Not because I have to.

Because I want to.

The lake's misty, the air still cool, and the rec field is quiet. I stand there for a second, clipboard in hand, calendar tucked under my arm, just... breathing.

This is mine now.

Not in the possessive way.

But in the belonging way.

I head to the arts shed first, unlocking the door and flipping the lights on. The faint smell of paint, glitter, and dried glue hits me and, weirdly, it calms me. I arrange the brushes, refill the bead bins, pull the weekly roster off the wall and adjust it with a pink highlighter.

By the time the first few campers trickle in—early birds with sleepy faces and wild hair—I've got three activity stations prepped, music playing low from the enchanted speaker, and a goofy new sign that says MONSTER MACRAME – Weave or Be Weaved.

I guide Ferix to the clay table, help Mira pick out her yarn colors, and talk Rubi through knotting a bracelet with one hand while she holds her half-eaten muffin in the other.

They're loud and messy and full of energy.

And I'm not overwhelmed.

I'm anchored.

In the chaos. In the joy. In the squeals and the glitter spills and Nolan accidentally getting fabric paint on his ear.

Julie peeks in during mid-morning rotation, leans against the doorframe with a coffee in hand, watching for a beat before saying, "Looks like someone's in their element."

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I smile without hesitation. “Feels like it.”

She raises her cup. “Knew you had it in you.”

Then she disappears again, off to manage a scheduling conflict between the kitchen and the werebat night flight crew.

I look around the room, filled with laughter and glue and more color than the sunrise.

This is the job.

This is the life.

And for the first time in years I feel like I’m right where I’m meant to be.

## CHAPTER 22

### ALICE

The cabin is quiet, the kind of quiet that feels like a secret. The sun’s warm glow filters through the curtains, painting the room in soft gold. Jason’s sprawled on the couch, one arm draped lazily over the back, his boots kicked off by the door. He’s scrolling through something on his phone, but his attention’s half-hearted at best. I sit cross-legged next to him, a book in my lap, but I haven’t turned a page in ten minutes.

“You’re staring,” he says, not looking up.



“Am not.”

“You are. It’s weirdly intense. I can feel it.”

I toss the book onto the coffee table. “Maybe I’m just trying to figure out how you manage to look so... disheveled all the time.”

He glances up, smirking. “Disheveled? That’s your word of the day?”

“It’s accurate. You’re one step away from a leaf in your hair.”

He sets the phone down, turning to face me fully. “You saying I’m not a fashion icon?”

“I’m saying you look like you wrestled a bear and lost.”

He leans in, close enough that I can see the faint stubble shadowing his jaw. “Maybe I did.”

“Doubt it,” I say, my voice softer than I meant it to be.

He hums, his eyes dropping to my lips. “You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“Staring.”

“Oh, shut up.”

He doesn’t. Instead, he leans in, his hand brushing my cheek, and then his lips are on mine. It’s slow, easy, the kind of kiss that feels like coming home. His fingers tangle

in my hair, pulling me closer, and I forget to breathe.

When we break apart, he doesn't go far, his forehead resting against mine. "So," he murmurs, his voice low, "you finally figured out how to shut me up."

"Temporary fix," I say, my heart still racing.

He grins, lazy and warm. "Good thing I'm not going anywhere."

And then he kisses me again, and the world narrows to just this—the warmth of his hands, the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, and the feeling that, for once, everything's exactly where it's supposed to be.

He moves slow, deliberate, his hands sliding down my sides like he's memorizing the curve of me. The couch cushions sink under my weight as he lays me back, his eyes never leaving mine. There's that smirk, the one that makes my stomach flip, but it's softer now, almost tender.

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“You’re staring again,” he says, his voice low, teasing.

“Can’t help it,” I fire back, my breath hitching as his fingers hook into the waistband of my shorts. “You’re kind of hard to look away from.”

He laughs, a deep rumble that vibrates through me as he tugs my shorts and panties down, his hands brushing against my thighs. The cool air kisses my skin, but it’s nothing compared to the heat of his gaze.

And then his mouth is on me, and I’m done talking. His tongue is slow, deliberate against my folds, every flick and stroke sending shocks of pleasure up my spine. I bury my fingers in his hair, tugging lightly, and he hums against my clit, the vibration making my toes curl.

“Jason,” I breathe, my voice barely above a whisper.

He pulls back just enough to look up at me, his lips glistening. “Yeah?”

“Don’t stop.”

A grin spreads across his face, wicked and knowing. “Wasn’t planning on it.”

And then he’s back at it, his hands gripping my hips to keep me still as he works me over. My head falls back, the world narrowing to the sensation of his mouth on me, the soft sounds he makes, the way his fingers dig into my skin.

He shifts slightly, his tongue finding a rhythm that has me arching off the couch.

“Close,” I manage, my voice trembling.

He pulls back, his breath warm against my skin, and I whimper at the loss. His eyes lock on mine, dark and hungry, as he stands just long enough to shove his pants down. The sight of his cock, hard and ready, sends a shiver through me. He kneels back on the couch, his hands sliding up my thighs, and I can’t help but laugh, soft and breathless.

“What’s so funny?” he asks, his voice rough but amused.

“You,” I say, my fingers tracing the line of his jaw. “You’re always so... intense.”

“You love it,” he says, leaning in to kiss me, slow and deep. His hands grip my hips, pulling me closer, and I feel the heat of him against me. He breaks the kiss, his forehead resting against mine. “Ready?”

“Always,” I whisper, my heart pounding.

He slides his cock into me, slow and steady, and I gasp, my nails digging into his shoulders. He pauses, letting me adjust, his breath hot against my neck.

“Okay?” he murmurs.

“More than okay,” I say, my voice trembling.

He starts to move, each thrust deliberate, each one drawing a soft moan from my lips. His hands roam my body, mapping every curve, every inch of me. I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him closer, and he groans, his rhythm faltering for just a moment.

“You’re going to kill me,” he says, his voice strained.

“Not my fault you’re irresistible,” I tease, my fingers tangling in his hair.

He laughs, the sound low and warm, and then he’s kissing me again, his movements growing more urgent. I can feel the tension building, coiling tight in my stomach, and I cling to him, my breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

“Jason,” I whisper, my voice breaking.

“I’ve got you,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against my ear. “I’ve got you.”

And then I’m falling, the world dissolving into a haze of pleasure as he follows me over the edge, his body shuddering against mine. He collapses on top of me, and I wrap my arms around him, holding him close.

Jason’s hand slides down my stomach, his fingers brushing against me with a slow, deliberate teasing that makes my breath hitch. His head rests on my chest, his stubble scratching my skin, and I know that smirk is tugging at his lips before he even says anything.

“Still with me?” he murmurs, his voice rough and low, sending a shiver through me.

“Barely,” I say, my voice breathless, my fingers tangled in his hair. “You’re not exactly making it easy.”

He chuckles, the sound vibrating against me as his fingers circle, light and maddening. “Good. Didn’t think easy was your style.”

“You’re an ass,” I manage, my hips lifting off the couch, chasing his touch.

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“And yet here you are,” he says, his voice lazy, his fingers slipping inside me, curling just right. My back arches, a soft moan escaping my lips, and he hums, pleased with himself.

“Shut up,” I whisper, my nails digging into his shoulder.

“Make me,” he says, breathing heavy against me, his fingers moving faster now, pushing me closer to the edge.

I don’t have the words to retort, my body tensing, pleasure building and coiling tighter until it breaks, washing over me in waves. My breath comes in short, sharp gasps, my fingers tightening in his hair as I ride it out.

When it’s over, I collapse back onto the couch, my chest rising and falling as he pulls his hand away, his smirk widening.

“Told you,” he says, his voice smug.

“Told me what?” I say, my voice hazy, my limbs heavy.

“That you love it.”

I stick out my tongue, but I’m too spent to argue. He shifts, pulling me against his chest, his arms wrapping around me. His heartbeat is steady under my ear, his breathing slowing as he presses a kiss to the top of my head.

“Sleep,” he murmurs, his voice soft, almost tender.

I close my eyes, the warmth of him surrounding me, and let myself drift.

## CHAPTER 23

ALICE

Jason's hanging upside down from the rafters, grunting as he tries to pin a string of fairy lights to a rafter beam with nothing but stubbornness and the wrong size hammer.

"You sure you don't wanna wait for a ladder?" I call from below, holding a box of mason jars and trying not to sound too worried.

He grins—upside down, which is annoyingly cute. "Where's the fun in that?"

I shake my head and gently set the box down by the window, brushing sawdust off the windowsill. Our new shared cabin is still half-finished, with paint samples on the wall and a mysterious leftover cauldron in the closet that neither of us wants to claim.

But it sours.

I peek up again. "If you fall, I'm not sewing your ear back on."

"I heal fast," he mutters, then yelps as the light string slides off the nail. "Usually."

I can't help it—I laugh.

This is what nesting with a werewolf looks like.

Hammers. Bark-scented body spray. And fairy lights tangled in clawed hands.

And somehow, I feel completely at ease.

Jason's shirtless.

Again.

Because apparently, painting a cabin is a shirt-optional activity if you're a werewolf.

And I'm tryingreally hardnot to stare, even though he's currently rolling a mint green stripe across the wall like it owes him money.

"Careful," I say, laughing. "You're one swipe away from painting the window."

"Details," he mutters, but slows his roll slightly. "Besides, this color slaps."



## Page 67

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:52 pm*

I snort, dipping my own brush into a dusty rose that I insisted would “balance the vibe.”

“You said that about the lava lamp.”

“And I stand by it.”

I shake my head and step back, assessing our shared color choices. The left wall is forest green, the right is a warm honey wood, and now this one’s turning into a pastel mash-up of soft mint and pink.

It should be chaos.

But somehow... it works.

Just like us.

I crouch to open a crate of old camp décor, sifting through twinkle lights, enamel mugs, and a faded pennant that reads Camp Lightning 1996.

Jason leans over my shoulder, brushing paint off his fingers onto my arm—on purpose.

“Hey!” I swat at him, grinning.

“You looked too clean,” he says, all innocent.

“You’re a menace.”

“You love it.”

Unfortunately, I do.

By mid-afternoon, the place is a gorgeous mess. Paint splatters everywhere, including a pink splotch on Jason’s shoulder in the shape of a questionable heart. We’ve strung the fairy lights—with a ladder, thank god—and hung two mismatched tapestries to frame the bed.

We eat sandwiches on the floor, our knees knocking occasionally. I brush glitter off the pillow he’s leaning on.

“This feels... unreal,” I say softly.

Jason nods. “Like summer camp and a Pinterest board had a baby.”

“Exactly.”

We sit in the quiet for a beat.

Then he says, almost too casually, “Julie asked if I’d be open to taking the guidance counselor position next season.”

I blink. “Seriously?”

“Dead serious.” He sets the sandwich down on his knee. “Apparently she thinks I’ve got the right instincts for it.”

“You do,” I say, without hesitation.

He shrugs, suddenly unsure of himself. “It just... surprised me. People don’t usually look at me and think ‘trusted emotional support entity.’”

My heart squeezes.

“I do,” I say.

He looks at me. Really looks.

And whatever smartass comment was forming on his tongue just melts.

“Yeah?”

## Page 68

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:52 pm*

I nod, voice soft. “You’re patient. You listen. You care more than you let on. That’s what kids need. Not just rules or structure—they need to feel safe. And you do that.”

He’s quiet for a second.

Then he says, “I think I’m happy.”

It’s not loud.

It’s not dramatic.

Just honest.

Like the way his hand finds mine on the floor between us.

“I think I’m really, actually happy,” he says again, a little wonder in his voice.

My throat goes tight.

I lean my head on his shoulder, paint and all.

“Me too,” I whisper.

And somehow, in the chaos of dried glue, pastel walls, and our two stupid mugs sitting side-by-side on the window.

I realize we’ve made something real.

Later, we sit on the floor in the middle of the mess—paint cans, canvas bins, mismatched throw pillows stolen from the staff lounge—and eat sandwiches out of wax paper wrappers.

Jason's got paint on his forearm. There's glitter in his hair. He looks like the aftermath of a birthday party thrown by feral children.

And I love him so much it makes my chest ache.

He takes a bite of his sandwich, chews, then glances sideways at me like he's about to admit he burned down the kitchen.

"So," he says slowly, "Julie asked if I'd be open to taking the guidance counselor position next season."

I blink. "Seriously?"

"Dead serious." He sets the sandwich down on his knee. "Apparently she thinks I've got the right instincts for it."

"You do," I say instantly.

He shrugs. "It just... surprised me. People don't usually look at me and think 'trusted emotional support entity.'"

My heart squeezes.

"I do," I say.

He looks at me. Really looks.

And whatever smartass comment was forming on his tongue just melts.

“Yeah?”

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Then he says, “I think I’m happy.”

## Page 69

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:52 pm*

It's not loud.

It's not dramatic.

Just honest.

Like the way his hand finds mine on the floor between us.

"I think I'm really, actually happy," he says again, a little wonder in his voice.

My throat goes tight.

I lean my head on his shoulder, paint and all.

"Me too," I whisper.

Later, after the brushes are rinsed and the last string of lights finally stops sagging, I curl up on the cabin's only finished couch with my knees tucked under me and a warm cup of mint tea in my hands.

Jason's in the tiny kitchen nook, humming something tuneless as he stacks leftover sandwiches into a container with far more concentration than necessary.

The lamp glows soft in the corner. There's music playing low on the speaker—something dreamy and slow. Outside, crickets chirp and a soft breeze rustles through the pine just beyond the screened windows.

It's home.

I take a long sip of tea and just let myself sit in it.

The quiet.

The closeness.

The peace.

It's the kind of moment I used to think I didn't deserve. Too soft. Too safe. Too steady.

But now? It feels like breathing for the first time.

Jason glances over his shoulder. "You good, babe?"

I nod, smiling into my cup. "Yeah. Just... soaking this in."

He grins. "Pretty decent for two days' work and one minor glitter explosion."

"Feels like a real home."

"Damn right it does."

And it does.

It really, really does.

CHAPTER 24



JASON

I knock on Julie's office door with exactly the amount of confidence I don't have.

Which is none.

Zip.

## Page 70

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:52 pm*

Nada.

I've fought rogue kelpies. Survived Ferix's interpretive dodgeball phase. I've even shifted mid-storm while trying not to eat a tree. But somehow, pitching an idea to the camp director feels like walking into a dragon's den armed with a sticky note.

"Come in," she calls.

I step inside, holding a slightly wrinkled manila folder like it's a golden ticket.

Julie's at her desk, glasses halfway down her nose, scribbling something into a logbook like it owes her money. She looks up, eyebrows lifting.

"Jason. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I clear my throat. "I have... an idea."

"Oh?"

She gestures to the extra chair across from her.

I sit. Immediately lean forward. Fidget. Then stop fidgeting because it feels weirdly vulnerable.

"So," I begin, "you know how some of the kids come here and... they don't quite fit in? Not just socially, but magically. Like, they're still figuring out who they are."

Julie nods, her face unreadable but listening.

“I’ve been thinking,” I continue, “what if there was a program—like, a structured thing—for those campers? A mentorship thing. Focused on giving them one-on-one support. Not therapy, but like... community. Confidence-building. Skill development. Pairing them with counselors or older campers who’ve been through similar stuff.”

I glance at her, heart hammering.

She doesn’t interrupt. Just motions for me to go on.

“Nolan,” I say. “He’s the reason I thought of it. That kid came in terrified of his own skin, and now he’s writing comics about a dragon that doesn’t want to fight, just wants to be seen. That kind of transformation? That’s not luck. That’s what happens when someone gets seen. When they’re told it’s okay not to have it all figured out.”

Julie leans back, arms folded, and I can’t tell if she’s impressed or about to send me back to the firewood pile forever.

I push the folder across the desk toward her.

“I made a rough draft. Like... an outline. With bullet points.”

“You typed?” she asks, brows rising.

“Alicetyped. But I dictated.”

She cracks a smile.

I grin. “Look, I’m not saying I’m the poster child for emotional stability?—”

“Certainly not.”

“—but I know what it’s like to grow up scared of your own power. To wonder if you’re too much for the world. And if I can help even one of those kids feel a little less lost, then it’s worth a shot.”

Julie opens the folder, scans the page, taps a pen against the margin. Then she closes it, slowly, and looks at me.

“I like it.”

My breath catches.

“But,” she says, holding up a finger, “it has to go through the proper channels. I need to run it past the board, work with programming, figure out staffing. You’re still a camp counselor, not the director of New Emotional Horizons.”

“Yet,” I offer with a wink.

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She snorts. “Don’t push it, Wolf Boy.”

I lean back, a grin spreading across my face.

“So you think it’ll work?”

She nods once. “I think it can. And more importantly, I think you’re the right person to lead it.”

My chest goes tight.

Good tight.

Like my ribs just grew to make room for something bigger.

“Thanks, Julie,” I say.

She gestures to the door. “Now go help Zak with the lake obstacle course. He nearly drowned a witch this morning with the floating trampoline.”

I’m already halfway up. “On it.”

“And Jason?”

“Yeah?”

She smiles. “Good pitch.”

I walk out of that office ten feet taller.

Because for once, I didn't just belong here.

I built something here.

I find Alice in the art shed, perched on a stool in a cloud of yarn and glitter chaos, helping Rubi tie a bead necklace that looks suspiciously like a mini spell circle. She flashes me a quick smile but finishes tying off the cord before walking over to where I'm waiting by the door, folder still tucked under my arm.

"Okay," she says, brushing glitter off her hands. "You've got that face."

"What face?"

"That I did something brave but now I'm panicking about it face."

I grin. "Wow, called out."

She crosses her arms and tips her head. "Spill."

I hold out the folder. "I pitched it. To Julie."

She blinks. "Pitched what?"

"The mentorship program. For kids like Nolan."

Her expression shifts immediately—curious, open. She takes the folder gently and flips it open, skimming the first page.

"Wait—this is that idea? The one you were too shy to actually show her last week?"

“I wasn’t shy. I was... emotionally buffering.”

She smirks without looking up. “Uh-huh.”

I lean against the doorframe and try to sound casual. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while. How there are campers who don’t quite... find their place here right away. The ones who struggle with their powers or don’t have great support systems at home. The ones like Nolan, who show up half-terrified and full of doubt.”

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Alice's eyes soften, and she closes the folder slowly. "Go on."

I scratch my chin. "What if we had something just for them? A kind of safe group—mentors, maybe some older teens who've been through rough transitions—who could help. One-on-one stuff. Practical support, confidence-building, maybe some light magical training focused on empowerment, not just control."

Her mouth parts slightly. She says nothing, which—coming from Alice—is the equivalent of a stunned gasp.

I keep going, encouraged. "It wouldn't be therapy. Just a consistent place where the kids who feel weird or wrong or too much can go and be told, 'Hey, your weird is valid. You're not broken. You just need guidance.'"

Alice presses a hand to her chest, eyes bright. "Jason, this is... this is beautiful."

I blink. "You really think so?"

"Yes." Her voice wobbles just a little. "You're not just making space. You're building something that tells these kids they're worth investing in. You're showing them what you never got."

The words land so square in my chest I forget how to breathe for a second.

She steps closer, still holding the folder. "Did Julie say yes?"



“She said she needs to run it through the right channels. Talk to the board. Sort out staffing. But she liked it. Said she thinks I might be the one to lead it.”

“You are.” Alice is glowing now, eyes locked on mine like she’s seeing me even clearer than before. “Jason, this is so needed.”

I shrug, suddenly shy again. “I just... kept thinking about Nolan. About how much he changed once someone told him he could be himself without hiding. And it made me wonder how many other kids feel like they have to stuff their magic into a box just to survive.”

She nods, quiet for a moment. Then softly, “You know I want in, right?”

I blink. “What?”

“I want to help. Build it with you. Develop the curriculum. Pair the kids. Train the mentors. All of it. If you’ll let me.”

My throat gets tight.

“You’d do that?”

She steps in, brushing her fingers against mine. “Of course I would. This isn’t just your dream anymore.”

I stare at her—my Alice. Quiet, steady, brilliant Alice—and suddenly I don’t feel so overwhelmed by the weight of what I’m trying to build.

Because she’s in it with me.

And if we can give these kids even a fraction of what we’ve built together?

Then it's already worth it.

## CHAPTER 25

ALICE

The end-of-camp energy is like the last notes of a campfire song—sweet, slow, and a little bittersweet. Everything feels softer, like the trees themselves are sighing in rhythm with the kids as they run through their last cabin competitions and midnight prank wars.

I walk through the art shed with a clipboard in one hand and Rubi's latest glitter explosion drying in the other. Nolan's comic pages are pinned to the wall now, right above a crooked banner that says "YOU ARE MAGIC" in big, hand-painted letters.

And the wildest part?

I believe it.

Because something's shifted in me.

Like the last few weeks scraped away the parts that didn't fit anymore—fear, grief, all that leftover ache from the past—and left me with just...this.

## Page 73

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:52 pm*

A life that feels like mine.

I walk out toward the rec field where Jason's helping Ferix and two other campers stack wood for the bonfire. He's got a twig in his hair, a sunburn across one shoulder, and a grin like he knows something about the world nobody else does.

And I realize, I'm not thinking about Sam.

I'm not wondering what he's doing, who he's with, or if he's still posting perfect brunch photos with someone else's hand on his coffee mug.

I haven't thought about him in days.

Not with longing.

Not even with bitterness.

Just... nothing.

He's a shadow I walked through.

And Jason?

Jason is sunlight.

"Hey," he calls, waving me over. "Your dragon child's trying to set kindling on fire with his eyes again."

Nolan grins sheepishly and points at a twig. “It’s kind a working.”

Jason raises an eyebrow. “No burns, no foul.”

I shake my head, but my chest is warm as I cross the field and sit in the grass beside them.

Ferix leans into me. “Miss Alice, are you staying next summer?”

I glance at Jason, then back to the kid. “Yeah. I am.”

His face lights up. “Cool. We need someone to make the good slime.”

Jason snorts. “I knew it was about slime.”

But I don’t care what it’s about.

Because hearing that question—and answering it without hesitation—feels like a victory I didn’t know I was waiting for.

I’m staying.

Forme.

Not because I’m running.

But because I’ve found something worth holding onto.

That night, as the sky turns dusky and kids start gathering for the bonfire, I sneak into our cabin to grab my sweater. The one Jason says makes me look like a cozy hedgehog.

I spot my journal on the windowsill—half-filled, bent at the corners. A few weeks ago, it was all questions.

Who am I without him? What do I want?

Tonight, I don't have to write the answers.

I feel them.

## Page 74

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I pull the sweater over my head and catch a glimpse of myself in the little cracked mirror above the dresser.

And for once?

I look exactly how I feel.

Solid.

Settled.

Like I finally fit into my own skin.

Outside, the bonfire crackles and the stars begin to appear, one by one.

Jason's already there, kids orbiting around him like he's their personal gravity. His eyes find me in the crowd and soften instantly.

I take the spot next to him.

He doesn't say anything.

Just takes my hand.

And that's the moment I know—deep in my bones—I'm where I'm meant to be.

After the bonfire winds down and the last of the marshmallows have been incinerated

by overzealous campers, Jason and I sit on the steps of our new cabin, legs stretched out, the warm hum of embers still crackling across the lake.

He's got that faraway look—half content, half exhausted.

I lean into him gently, letting my head rest on his shoulder. “Hey.”

He turns, just a little. “Yeah?”

“I’ve been meaning to say something,” I murmur. “And I keep chickening out.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Alice I know.” His voice is teasing but soft.

I pull my knees up, arms wrapping around them. “I spent a long time feeling like I wasn’t enough.”

Jason goes still beside me, listening.

“I kept trying to be everything for someone who didn’t know what it meant to love someone fully. Sam... he cheated. More than once. And I let it make me feel like I wasn’t worth staying for.”

Jason’s jaw tenses, but he doesn’t speak.

“And then I came here,” I continue, voice shaking a little, “and met this obnoxiously shirtless werewolf who insisted on climbing trees without ladders and helping kids learn to be proud of themselves. And before I even realized it... I wasn’t looking backward anymore.”

He shifts, facing me now.

I meet his eyes. “You helped me move forward. Not by fixing me. Just... by being kind. By showing me how it feels like to be safe and seen.”

He exhales slowly, then cups my face gently with one hand. “You were never not enough, Alice. He just couldn’t see what was right in front of him.”

I close my eyes, letting the words settle.

And then I whisper, “I think I’m starting to see it now.”

His thumb brushes my cheek.

“You’re more than enough,” he says. “You’re everything.”



## Page 75

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:52 pm*

And with the firelight flickering in the distance and the stars finally coming out to play.

I believe him.

### CHAPTER 26

#### JASON

The mess hall's packed. Not like food-fight packed, but elbow-to-elbow, sticky-sweaty-summertime kind of packed. Every bench is crammed with campers, half the staff is hovering near the back wall sipping lemonade out of chipped enamel mugs, and Hazel—twelve-year-old witch and part-time social dictator—is center stage in a sequined cape, holding a wooden spoon like a microphone.

“Welcome,” she declares, “to the Camp Lightning End-of-Summer Talent Extravaganza!”

The kids erupt into cheers. Nolan lets out a dragon-roar that rattles the rafters. Rubi, somehow already wearing three different camp T-shirts at once, waves two handmade flags like she's about to lead a magical coup.

I'm standing stage right with a clipboard and a lopsided grin, half-playing emcee backup and half-babysitter to Ferix, who's dressed in what I think is supposed to be a Shakespearean cape made out of a bedsheet and duct tape.

Alice is across the room near the snack table, surrounded by kids and gently

separating a glitter spill from a bowl of popcorn. When our eyes meet, she gives me this smile—soft, proud, a little amused.

And yeah, I'd walk through fire just to keep seeing that look.

The first act is Nolan.

He marches onstage with a hand-drawn comic book tucked under his arm and a poster-sized page he unrolls for the crowd. The title says THE DAY THE DRAGON SAVED HIMSELF in jagged letters.

He clears his throat, and his voice shakes a little, but he plants his feet.

“This is a story about a dragon who didn't want to fight anymore. Who just wanted to build things. So he did.”

The room goes quiet.

He flips the first page.

And then the next.

By the end of the story, half the campers are leaning forward like it's a real-life bedtime tale and Rubi's actually crying into a marshmallow.

When he bows, the whole room claps like it's Broadway.

I step up beside him, squeeze his shoulder. “Nailed it, bud.”

He beams. “Did you see them? They listened.”

“Yeah, they did.”

Because you’re magic, kid.

You always were.

Next is a musical number from Cabin E, some weird fusion of kazoo and ukulele that somehow turns into a choreographed interpretive dance. Halfway through, a camper shifts into a tiny raccoon and just starts clapping with his paws.

Ryder, the merman lifeguard, heckles them with sea puns from the snack bar.

Ferix does his “orc monologue” next, which is mostly him yelling in faux-Shakespearean about honor and peanut butter sandwiches, but honestly? It slaps. The crowd goes wild.

When Rubi and two other campers perform a synchronized baton routine with glow sticks and minor levitation spells, Alice leans into me from where she’s now standing at my side and whispers, “I think I’m witnessing actual chaos magic.”

I whisper back, “It’s the Rubi effect. She’s the real head counselor here.”

She laughs, and the sound burrows under my ribs like a warm ember.

## Page 76

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:52 pm*

Just when I think we've made it through without incident—no surprise slime explosions, no unscheduled transformations—there's a loud bang from behind the stage curtain.

A puff of green smoke bursts out from the side exit.

Every head in the room swivels.

"Oh no," Alice mutters beside me, eyes already scanning the crowd.

I don't even need to ask.

I know that smell.

That's prank potion. Unfiltered.

I bolt toward the curtain just in time to see Levi—tiny, gremlin-like, and armed with a suspiciously dented cauldron—about to launch what looks like a balloon filled with shapeshifting mist into the crowd.

"Levi," I bark. "Don't you dare."

He freezes, hand mid-air, eyes wide like a deer caught in headlights—and also maybe high on fizzing mushroom extract.

"I was just gonna add a little chaos," he says, voice high and crackly.

“You were about to turn half the crowd into frogs.”

“Only temporarily!”

I don’t slow.

I grab the cauldron, pluck the balloon from his hand, and very calmly deposit both into the enchanted containment bin we keep for “Hazardous Hijinks”—thank you, Julie.

“Nice try, bud,” I say, crouching to his eye level. “But you pull a stunt like that again during someone else’s big moment? You’re cleaning the latrine and apologizing with interpretive dance.”

His eyes widen in horror. “You wouldn’t.”

“Ask Ferix. He still shudders at the memory.”

Levi gulps and nods.

Crisis averted.

I lead him back out into the crowd just as Alice rushes over, concern still in her eyes.

“He okay?”

“Yeah. Just hopped up on mischief and poor timing.”

She exhales and smiles. “You handled that like a pro.”

“I’ve leveled up. Counselor slash chaos negotiator.”

She laughs and grabs my hand.

The crowd's still buzzing, the energy of the show lingering like fireflies in the air.

And as Levi quietly slides back into the crowd under Hazel's watchful glare, I realize something else:

This is the job.

Not just the sparkle and applause.

## Page 77

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:52 pm*

It's the almost-disasters.

The close calls.

The choosing to stay steady when the chaos tries to tip the whole room.

I don't mind holding the line.

Not when it's for them.

The last act is a group number from the older campers—a mashup of magical illusions and emotional monologues set to an acoustic version of a pop song I pretend not to know.

They finish with glitter canons.

Literal. Glitter. Canons.

The whole front row gets sparkled.

Hazel claps her hands three times and shouts, "That concludes the 103rd Camp Lightring Talent Show!"

Thunderous applause.

Screaming.

A small raccoon gets hoisted like Simba.

And I'm standing there, sticky with sweat and glitter and maybe a little bit of awe, realizing, this is it.

This is what we do.

We take weird, wild, wonderful kids and we give them a stage.

We let them be loud.

We let them be seen.

And we never—ever—tell them they're too much.

Later, as we start helping the kids file out to evening snacks and firefly watching, Alice sidles up beside me, brushing some glitter out of my hair.

“Think we pulled it off?”

I grin. “Hazel might demand a director credit next year.”

“She's earned it.”

I reach for her hand, just for a second, and squeeze.

“They were amazing,” I say quietly.

She nods. “They really were.”

And just like that, surrounded by noise and color and the afterglow of a hundred tiny



triumphs.

This place is really me, somewhere I belong.

## CHAPTER 27

ALICE

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:52 pm*

I don't do surprises.

Not because I don't like them—but because they make me nervous. The planning. The what-ifs. The vulnerability of it all. But tonight? I want to give him something real.

Jason's spent weeks pouring himself into this camp. Into these kids. Into me.

And for once, I want to be the one who shows up.

So I sneak out right after dinner, clutching my little basket of half-burned tea candles and pilfered supplies from the mess hall. I already got a head start setting up while Jason was wrangling post-talent show cleanup. Hazel helped—her price was three extra s'mores and the promise not to tattle to the kitchen witches.

The dock's quiet when I arrive. The lake's like glass, moonlight painting the water in soft silver brushstrokes. The woods hum around me, full of frogsong and crickets and the occasional whoosh of something winged overhead. But it feels safe.

Our little world.

I lay out the blanket first—Jason's flannel one, the one he's claimed as "too manly to be plaid" but always smells like pine and his cologne.

Then the lanterns—tiny floating spheres, enchanted to flicker like fireflies. I borrowed them from the drama shed. Maybe stole. It's fine.

And finally, the food.

Okay, so it's not gourmet. But I packed it all myself. Grilled veggie skewers. A thermos of spiced cider. A jar of wild berry jam I got from the camp store and slathered onto still-warm biscuits like an actual domestic woodland creature.

And, of course, a s'mores kit—complete with handmade marshmallows I spent way too long trying to shape into hearts.

I sit on the end of the dock, fingers twisting nervously in my lap, waiting.

Jason shows up ten minutes later, barefoot and glowing with curiosity. He stops at the tree line, staring.

“Babe?”

I stand, suddenly awkward. “Surprise.”

He walks down the dock slowly, his eyes flicking over the blanket, the food, the candles.

“You did this?”

I nod, heart doing acrobatics in my chest. “I just... wanted to do something for you. For us. After everything.”

He doesn't say anything for a second.

Then he smiles. Soft and kind and Jason.

“You trying to make me cry?”

I laugh, suddenly light. “Maybe just a little.”

He drops down onto the blanket beside me and pulls me into a hug. His chin rests on my head.

“This is perfect.”

I breathe him in. “You’ve been doing so much—for the kids, for camp. I wanted to do something that was just for you. Something... slow.”

We settle in, side by side, feet dangling off the dock into the cool lake water.

Jason grabs a biscuit and takes a dramatic bite. “Okay, this is dangerously good.”

“Thank you. I may or may not have bribed the kitchen staff for their secret butter spell.”

His eyes widen. “No wonder it tastes like victory.”

## Page 79

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:52 pm*

The moon climbs higher, and we eat slowly, lazily, like the night's suspended just for us.

When we get to the s'mores, Jason tries to toast a marshmallow over a floating lantern, which definitely doesn't work. I light a tiny camp-safe flame in my palm—one of the only spells I've really mastered—and he roasts one with exaggerated reverence.

"This is how champions cook," he declares.

"I'm so honored to witness it."

We laugh until we're breathless. Then the silence comes—not awkward, not tense. Just full.

Full of stars.

Full of peace.

I take a sip of cider, eyes on the moon's reflection.

"I used to think romance had to be big," I whisper. "Grand gestures. Roses. Fancy dinners. But this? This is what I really wanted."

Jason's quiet for a second.

Then he says, "You know what I wanted?"

I glance at him.

“Someone who makes a dock picnic feel like the most important thing in the world.”

My heart stutters.

“I think I’m falling in love with you,” I whisper.

He turns toward me, eyes softer than I’ve ever seen them.

“I already fell.”

The stars are brighter now, like they’ve inched closer just to listen.

I rest my head against his shoulder, my voice small in the hush of the lake. “Can I tell you something kind of... scary?”

Jason’s arm wraps around me immediately, protective and gentle all at once. “Always.”

I swallow hard, the words catching like pebbles in my throat. “Even though I’m happy—really happy—I still get nervous sometimes. About... this. About us.”

He doesn’t move. Doesn’t flinch.

So I keep going.

“My last relationship... it was built on lies. I didn’t know how much until it all fell apart. And even now, even with you—someone I trust completely—there’s this little part of me that’s still bracing. Waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Jason's quiet for a second, just breathing next to me.

Then he gently shifts, turning so we're face to face in the moonlight. His hands cradle mine, rough thumbs brushing softly over my knuckles.

"Alice," he says, voice deep and sure, "I know you've been hurt. And I hate that. I hate that anyone made you feel like love is something you have to tiptoe around."

I blink back the sting in my eyes.

"I'm not perfect," he says, "but I'm yours. You've got my loyalty, my honesty—every stupid, stubborn, werewolffy part of me. You're not just some girl I care about. You're my mate. And that means something to me. It means everything."

He pauses, squeezing my hands.

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“I will always be true to you. Always. No games. No lies. No pulling away when things get hard. If you need time, I’ll wait. If you need space, I’ll give it. But I’m not going anywhere unless you tell me to.”

I’m crying now. Not sobbing—just tears, soft and unashamed.

I nod, voice caught. “I don’t want you to go.”

“Good,” he says, brushing my cheek with the back of his hand. “Because I already unpacked.”

I laugh through the tears, and he leans in, kissing me slow—like a vow.

Somehow, I don’t feel like I’m falling.

I feel like I’ve landed.

## CHAPTER 28

### JASON

I don’t usually do grand gestures.

I’m more of a “show up with snacks and bad jokes” kind of guy.

But for Alice?



I'll move heaven and pine trees if I have to.

So tonight, I do something big.

Not huge.

Just big enough to be hers.

I borrow half the solar jars from the nature shed and string them along the lakeside trail that leads from our cabin to the fire circle. Hazel catches me setting it up and mutters, "You owe me a week's worth of s'mores," before zipping off with a sparkle charm. I plant wildflowers around the tree where I first tried to climb shirtless in front of Alice and failed spectacularly. It felt poetic.

And then, when the last firefly jar is lit and the air smells like pine needles and cinnamon from the bonfire logs I dragged down just for ambiance.

I go get her.

"Close your eyes," I say, hands over her shoulders, guiding her down the moonlit path.

She giggles, which instantly makes my chest feel like it's gonna burst. "Is this where you propose a secret camp-wide glitter war?"

"Nope. Better."

"Better than glitter?" she teases.

"Infinitely."

When we round the last bend, I step in front of her and gently lift my hands away.

She opens her eyes.

And gasps.

The entire clearing glows. Lanterns float in the air. The trees shimmer with soft golden light. The lake glistens behind us, quiet and still.

“Oh... Jason,” she whispers.

I lead her to the center—our blanket, our mugs, and a basket with her favorite biscuits and peach jam.

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“It’s beautiful,” she says, voice cracking slightly.

“It’s for you.”

We sit.

She clutches the mug I hand her like she needs something to hold onto.

“I needed a way to say something,” I start, rubbing my arm. “Something big. But also real.”

She watches me with those soft, sea-glass eyes, and I swear I lose all sense of cool.

“You saved me, Alice.”

She blinks. “Jason?—”

“No, listen.” I shift so I’m fully facing her. “I was fine being the chaotic, mostly-shirtless wolf man at summer camp. But you—you—you made me want roots. You made me want more. And that scared the crap out of me.”

She laughs a little, tears already welling.

I swallow hard. “But I’m not scared anymore.”

I reach into the little basket and pull out something wrapped in linen. Slowly, I unwrap it.

A silver charm bracelet.

Nothing fancy. Just hand-carved wood and a single tiny wolf tooth inlaid with a crystal Alice gave me on our first night hike.

Her hand flies to her mouth.

“I love you, Alice. Full stop. No conditions. No take-backs.”

I take her hand, press the bracelet into her palm.

“And I want you to be my mate. My partner. The woman I howl for.”

She’s full-on crying now.

I pull her hand to my lips. “Will you?”

She doesn’t say anything.

She launches into me, wrapping her arms around my neck, kissing me so fiercely I forget how to breathe.

“Yes,” she whispers against my mouth. “Yes. A thousand times yes.”

We sit there for a long time, tangled together on the blanket in the glow of our little lakeside world. I’ve still got one more surprise tucked in my hoodie pocket, and my fingers brush against it as she curls into my side, cheeks still damp with happy tears.

“I, uh...” I clear my throat, suddenly nervous again. “So, shifters don’t really do rings. Traditionally, we kind of just... mark our mates in different ways.”

Alice lifts her head, blinking up at me. “Like with teeth?”

I cough. “I mean, sometimes. But that’s more of a private ritual.”

She snorts and buries her face in my chest. “Okay, okay. Go on.”

I pull the little pouch from my pocket and hand it to her.

She opens it carefully—and laughs.

“Oh my god.”

Inside is a ring.

Sort of.

It’s made of braided camp friendship cord, interwoven with copper wire, a little clear crystal nestled in the center like a promise. A leaf charm dangles delicately from one side.

“I raided the arts and crafts shed,” I say, a little sheepish. “Hazel said it’s a ‘soulbond aesthetic,’ whatever that means.”

Alice cradles it like it’s made of gold. “Jason. This is—this is perfect.”

“I know it’s not a real ring, but I figured... you’re human. It might mean something. And I wanted you to have it. From me.”

She slips it onto her finger like it belongs there. “It meanseverything.”

Her eyes meet mine. “You really made this?”

“Every glue-gun burn was worth it.”

She kisses me, sweet and slow.

“I love it. I loveyou.”

And as we sit beneath the stars, the soft sounds of the lake lapping at the shore, her hand in mine with that crooked, mismatched ring shining like a jewel?—

I know I've given her a piece of my soul.

And she's given me all of hers.

Later, after Alice's head has drifted to my shoulder and the night air turns cooler, I glance out over the lake, the trees, the crooked cabins lit dim with bedtime enchantments.

The wind shifts, carrying the faint sounds of laughter from the older kids down by the amphitheater. One of them shouts something about a raccoon stealing their cloak.

I smile.

And I realize—this camp?

This ridiculous, magical, chaotic patch of forest?

It's given me everything I never knew I wanted.

A place to belong.

A purpose.

A pack.

And her.

CHAPTER 29

ALICE

The camp is quieter today.

Not silent, just... softer. Like the trees are whispering instead of laughing. Like the wind knows it's time to say goodbye.

I'm standing on the rec field, my clipboard clasped to my chest, even though the schedule's already done. Checked. Re-checked. Highlighted. There's nothing else left to plan.



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We're here.

The last day.

Around me, kids are hauling duffel bags toward the bus loop. Ferix is dragging his with one hand and a smuggled jar of peanut butter in the other. Rubi's wearing three backpacks—one on her front like a shield. Nolan's tucked under the eaves of the crafts shed, sketching something furiously in his notebook, like he's trying to press the whole summer into paper before it's gone.

And me?

I feel like I'm balancing on the edge of something too big for my chest.

Jason walks up beside me, quiet, steady, like he always is when he knows I'm thinking too hard.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," I whisper back.

We watch the kids a moment longer.

Then he nods toward the amphitheater. "Closing ceremony's starting soon. You ready?"

I nod. But I don't move.

Because if I move, it means it's almost over.

And I'm not quite ready to let go.

The amphitheater is buzzing when we get there, but it's the kind of buzz you feel in your ribs. Not loud—just full. Full of emotion. Full of unsaid things.

Hazel's on stage, of course. Delivering a farewell speech like a seasoned politician.

"Next year," she declares, "I want a bigger potion shelf, less cabin curfews, and an ice cream golem. Make it happen."

The crowd laughs, and behind me, Julie's quietly wiping her glasses.

One by one, each cabin gives their goodbye. The youngest kids sing a song that dissolves halfway through into giggles. The werbat campers perform a synchronized swoop, wings flapping proudly. Nolan steps up and reads a short poem—soft, stumbling, but honest.

My throat tightens.

I glance around at the other counselors. Zak's dabbing at his eyes with a leaf. Ryder's actually smiling. Jason's standing still beside me, arms crossed, eyes glinting with something quiet and proud.

Then someone hands me the mic.

I blink. "Wait, me?"

Julie nods from the back row. "You're one of us now."

I step up on stage, hands trembling a little. The sun's angled low over the lake, catching in the trees, setting everything on fire with light.

"I..."

I clear my throat.

"I didn't know what I'd find here," I begin, voice a little too small for the amphitheater until it isn't. "Honestly, when I showed up this summer, I didn't even know who I was anymore."

A few kids nod. Julie tilts her head, watching me with kind eyes.

"I was hurting," I continue, swallowing thickly. "I was trying to outrun something that had broken me. And I thought if I just... stayed quiet enough, small enough, I could sneak through the world without getting hurt again."

My eyes flick to Jason for just a second. He's watching me like I hung the stars.

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“But something happened here. I started laughing again. And trusting. And I learned that being small doesn’t protect you. It just keeps you from seeing how big your heart can get.”

My throat catches. I keep going anyway.

“You all showed me what it means to grow. To mess up and try again. To be scared and still keep reaching out. And somewhere along the way... I realized I wasn’t just running from something.”

I pause, blinking fast.

“I was running towards something better.”

A soft hush fills the space.

I speak it just for me:

“Camp Lightning gave me a second chance.”

I don’t need to say more.

The silence wraps around us like a hug.

And I know, in that moment, that this isn’t just a job.

It’s home.

I hand the mic back and step down.

Jason's there waiting.

He doesn't say anything.

He just takes my hand.

After the ceremony, we help load the buses. There are tears. Hugs. Screams. Half a dozen last-minute confessions and two accidental love spells that Julie has to undo on the sidewalk.

Rubi clings to me, arms wrapped tight around my waist. "You'll still be here next year, right?"

"Absolutely," I say, brushing her curls back. "You couldn't get rid of me if you tried."

She grins, then runs to board the bus, waving through the window like she's trying to cast a summoning spell with her whole arm.

I turn to see Nolan hanging back. He's got his sketchbook under one arm and something behind his back.

"Hey," I say, crouching to his level.

He fidgets. Then thrusts a folded paper at me. "It's you. And Jason. As wolves."

I open it.

He's drawn us side by side under a full moon, fangs out, tails curled around each

other.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper.

He shrugs. “You looked happiest when you were with him.”

I fold the paper carefully, tucking it into my pocket like a treasure.

“Thanks, Nolan.”

He nods, then sprints to catch his cabinmates.

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As the last bus pulls away and the dust settles, I look around at the empty field.

It's quiet now.

Really quiet.

Jason walks up behind me, slips his arms around my waist.

"They're gonna be okay," he says.

"I know," I say softly. "But I'm gonna miss them."

He presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"Me too."

And as we stand there, the sun sinking into the trees and the wind whispering through the pines, I know we've built something worth missing.

## CHAPTER 30

### ALICE

The cabin smells like pine and fresh paint, the last of the spring air clinging to the open windows. I'm sprawled on the floor, a sea of schedules and colored post-its around me, my laptop balanced precariously on my knees. Jason's leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed, watching me like I'm the only thing in the room worth

looking at.

“You know,” he says, his voice warm and teasing, “if you keep obsessing over those schedules, they’re gonna start thinking you’re in love with them.”

I don’t look up. “Someone has to make sure the archery lesson doesn’t overlap with the werebat flight demo. Unless you want a bunch of kids with arrows stuck in their wings?”

He steps closer, his boots scuffing against the wood floor. “Pretty sure they’ve got better reflexes than that. Besides, you’ve been at this for hours. You’re gonna turn into a post-it note if you’re not careful.”

“Funny.” I finally glance up, squinting at him. “What do you want, Jason?”

“You.”

The word lands like a spark, quick and bright. He drops to his knees beside me, knocking a stack of papers out of the way like they’re nothing. His hands find my face, callused but gentle, tilting my chin up until I’m looking straight into those dark, endless eyes.

“You’ve been avoiding me all day,” he murmurs, his thumb brushing my cheek.

“I’ve been working all day,” I correct, though my voice falters when he leans in, his breath ragged against my lips.

“Same thing.”

I laugh, but it’s cut short when he kisses me, slow and deliberate, like he’s got all the time in the world. My hands find his shoulders, gripping the fabric of his flannel,



pulling him closer.

“Jason,” I mumble against his mouth, “I really need to finish this.”

“Later.” His lips trail down my jaw, his stubble rough against my skin.

“But—”

“Later,” he repeats, his teeth grazing my neck. I shiver in response.

I sigh, letting my laptop slide to the floor as he pushes me back, his frame pinning me gently against the wood. My fingers tangle in his hair, tugging just enough to make him growl, low and deep in his chest.

“You’re impossible,” I whisper.

“You love it.”

I do.

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His hands trail down my sides, pulling my shirt up just enough to expose my stomach. His lips follow, hot and insistent, and I arch into him, my breath hitching.

“Jason—”

“Shh.” He looks up, his eyes dark and hungry. “Just let me take care of you.”

I nod, because I can’t argue with that.

He sits back on his heels, his hands moving to the button of my jeans. I lift my hips, letting him slide them off, his fingers brushing my thighs like a promise.

“You’re too good at this,” I breathe, already feeling the heat pooling low in my stomach.

“Practice,” he says, grinning that crooked grin of his.

“Cheeky.”

“You love that too.”

He doesn’t wait for a response, his mouth finding my clit with a precision that makes my back arch off the floor. My hands grip his hair, tugging as he takes his time, slow and deliberate, like he’s savoring every second.

“Jason,” I gasp, my hips rocking against him.

He hums against me, the vibration sending sparks up my spine. His hands grip my thighs, holding me in place as he works me over with a patience that's maddening and perfect all at once.

The world narrows to the feel of his mouth, the warmth of his hands, the soft sounds he's pulling from me. And when I finally come, his name on my lips, he's there, holding me steady.

He sits back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, that damn grin still plastered across his face.

"See?" He says, leaning in to kiss me again, slow and sweet. "Better than schedules."

The warmth of his mouth still lingers on my skin as I try to sit up, my legs shaky beneath me. I reach for my laptop, the screen still glowing with unfinished schedules. "Okay, now I really need to?—"

"Nope." Jason's voice is low, a rumble that sends a jolt down my spine. His hands are on my hips before I can protest. "I'm not done with you yet."

I laugh, the sound breathless and light. "You're insatiable."

"Guilty." His lips brush the nape of my neck, his stubble scratching in that way that makes me squirm. "And you love it."

"Do I?" I tease, but my voice cracks when his hands slide up my sides, pushing my shirt up and over my head. The cool air hits my skin, but it's nothing compared to the heat of him pressed against my back.

"You do." His voice is a growl now, rough and possessive, and it sends a thrill through me. His hands grab my hips, turning me until I'm on my knees, the wood

floor cool beneath me.

He smirks, his hands sliding down to my waist, pulling me back until I'm flush against him.

"Now, stay still."

I bite my lip, my heart racing as he positions his cocks at my entrance, teasing me. His grips my hips, steadying me as he presses forward, slow and deliberate. I gasp, my fingers digging into the floor as he fills me, the stretch sending sparks up my spine.

"Jason," I breathe, my voice trembling.

"Shh." His hands move to my shoulders, pulling me back against him as he starts to move, each thrust deep and unhurried. "Just feel it."

I do. The rhythm of him, the way his hands grip me, the way his breath hitches against my neck—it's all I can focus on. My hands slide forward, bracing against the floor as he picks up the pace, his hips slamming into mine with a force that makes me cry out.

"That's it," he growls, his hands tightening on my hips. "Let go."

I do, my body arching as the pleasure builds, hot and overwhelming. His name spills from my lips, a broken chant as he drives into me, each thrust pushing me closer to the edge.

"Jason, I?—"

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“I’ve got you.” His voice is rough, his breath hot against my skin. “Come for me.”

And I do, the world shattering around me as I fall apart in his arms.

Jason slows, his hands smoothing up my back, fingers finding the curve of my shoulder blades. His breath is heavy against my neck, still warm, still steady, like he’s savoring every second.

“You okay?” he murmurs, his voice a low rumble that vibrates through me.

I nod, my forehead pressing against the cool wood floor. “Yeah. Just... keep going.”

He chuckles, the sound dark and a little smug. “Don’t have to tell me twice.”

He moves his cock again, slow at first, deliberate, like he’s mapping me out all over again. His hands slide down to my waist, gripping me tighter as he picks up the pace. The rhythm is steady, deep, and I feel the heat building low in my stomach already.

“You’re gonna make me come again, aren’t you?” I gasp, my fingers curling against the floor.

“That’s the plan.” His voice is rough, but there’s a lightness to it, like he’s enjoying this as much as I am.

His hands move to my hips, pulling me closer with each thrust. The friction is maddening, perfect, and I can’t help the moan that escapes me.

“Jason—”

“Shh,” he cuts me off, his lips brushing my shoulder. “Just let me take care of you.”

I let out a shaky breath, my body arching as he hits that spot inside me that makes everything else melt away. His hands tighten on my hips, and I know he’s close too, but he’s holding back, waiting for me.

“You’re close,” he says, his voice a low growl. “I can feel it.”

His hands slide up my back, fingers tangling in my hair as he pulls me upright, my back pressed against his chest. His lips find my neck, teeth grazing my skin as he murmurs, “Come for me, Alice.”

And I do, the world collapsing around me as I fall apart in his arms. He follows me over the edge, his grip on me tightening as he groans my name, low and rough and sweet.

We stay like that for a moment, his chest pressed against my back, his heart pounding against me. His hands smooth down my arms, and I lean into him, letting him take my weight.

“Told you I’d take care of you,” he murmurs, his voice lazy and satisfied.

I laugh, the sound soft and breathless. “Yeah, you did.”

He kisses the base of my neck, slow and lingering. “Good.”

We stay there, tangled together on the floor, the world outside forgotten for now.