THREE | I STILL BELIEVE

Luca

No matter how upset Gabby was, she was, at the very least, reasonable. So I figured that forty-eight hours would be enough time for her to wrap her head around what I'd done and be willing to talk about where we stood.

When I arrived at the house Friday night, I nervously waited on the front porch for her to answer my knocks and let me in; I hoped so much that this would be the night that we fixed things and got back to our happy place. But when she opened the door, and I saw all of the boxes full of stuff, my stuff, my heart dropped. She was moving me out.

"Thank you for knocking and waiting; I appreciate that," Gabby told me before she stepped aside and ushered me in. Just two days ago, this had been my home, but now I felt like a visitor, an unwelcome one at that.

"Is this happening? We're going our separate ways?" I asked, looking down at the box marked "Luca's Shoes," on the floor before me.

"I think it's for the best. Your curse makes it so hard for me to think straight when you're around, and that's not fair. I love you, but if I decide to forgive and forget, I want it to be because I see what our future can be and decide that it's something I can't live without. Just having you standing in front of me now is making me second guess my decision and question why I haven't already forgiven you, and again, that's not fair."

"You want me to leave, Princess?"

"Don't do that!"

"Do what? Ask a question?"

"Look at me like that, call me 'Princess,' smell the way you smell! You're not fighting fair, Luca, how do you not see that?"

"I can't control how I smell, just like you can't control the scent of honeysuckles you give off. And I'm looking at you like I love you and like I'm hurt that I hurt you. I don't know how else to look at you," I replied.

"This was a bad idea. I've packed all of your stuff, and someone will come to move it to the packhouse for you tomorrow. Your books are already in your office, and I made sure that they weren't damaged."

Gabby knew how much I loved to read, and the fact that she took special care when it came to my novels meant that she wasn't as done with me as she tried to let on. I wasn't here influencing her when she took the extra steps to look after the books; that was all her.

"I can't move out, not yet. Not until we talk about this some more. Please, Gabby. I'm so sorry that I broke your trust, and I know that it's going to take a miracle for me to gain it back. I believe in miracles, and I know you do too. What we have is worth fighting for, even if I'm the only one doing the fighting. I can't give up on us yet."

I cautiously reached out my hand and breathed a sigh of relief when this beautiful woman took pity on me and took it. It might have been too much, too soon, but I missed the feeling of having her in my arms, so I pulled Gabby towards me and caught her in a tight hug. The fingers of my left hand buried themselves in her hair, and I filled my lungs with her incredible scent.

With the placement of her head on my chest, I know she heard the pounding of my heart underneath. A simple hug from her brought me more excitement than the entire time I'd spent with Rachel, and I was an i***t for screwing things up.

"I never thought you'd do this to us, Luca. Never. And now, I don't know what to do or how to move forward. What do you do when your world stops spinning?" she asked, still wrapped in my arms.

"I don't know, sweetheart. But I'll never hurt you like this again; I'll regain your trust and get us back to where we were. I'll even wait ve years or ten years, as long as you want to mate and mark you. Just give me this one chance. I'm begging you."

Gabby removed herself from my embrace and took a step back, creating some distance between us.

"I don't know if you deserve another chance, but I know that I deserve to have my mate by my side forever. So, we'll start all over from the beginning, and we'll try dating. I can't tell you how long it's going to take for me to move on, so you're going to have to be patient, but I still believe in us, as stupid as that is."

My wolf, Jackson, howled with joy in my mind as I closed the gap between our bodies and kissed Gabby with everything I had. She wasn't expecting it, and neither was I, but I couldn't stop myself. The woman who held dominion over my every heartbeat still believed in what we could be. It seemed that my consistent prayers over the last two days had paid off.

"I said we're dating, Luca. You can't kiss a woman like that before you take her out for the first time," she looked up through her lashes and stated.

"I know, and I'm sorry, baby. You're just so beautiful, and I love you so much. Thank you for doing this, you've literally saved my life because I didn't think I could go on much longer without my girlfriend."

"Pause. I'm not your girlfriend. I thought I made that clear on Wednesday. I said we are dating, which means going out and spending time together. Besides 'mates,' we don't have a title; you have to earn that back."

"What? Who's ever heard of mates who weren't in a relationship? Boyfriend and girlfriend, fiancés, husband and wife, that's how it goes," I said.

"Maybe, but these are extenuating circumstances, and you put your d**k somewhere it didn't belong. Now we have to make adjustments, take it or leave it, Luca."

"This is crazy, Gabby. You're mine; the Moon Goddess made you for me and only me; what are you trying to prove here?"

"I'm not trying to prove anything. You already know that what you did was wrong and that it ruined what we had, and you also know that me being unmarked gives me the ability to leave if I wanted to. But I don't want to, at least not totally. I just need you to show me that you're worthy of me committing myself to you, that's all."

"I guess. Since we're only dating each other, I don't see what the big deal is for us to have a title, but whatever makes you happy, I'll do."

"I never said I was only dating you."

"What?!"

"Would you stop yelling? I have a headache," Gabby said as she walked into the kitchen.

"You're dating someone else, and I'm getting kicked out? How is that fair?" I asked when I followed behind.

"I'm not sleeping with Blaze, we had lunch. And dinner tomorrow. It was done after I broke things off with you, so I'm not doing anything wrong here."

"Blaze? Blaze?!" I shut down and charged out the back door of the cottage, heading straight for the packhouse. I didn't want to hear anymore and knew that if Gabby kept going, I was going to blow up.

"Did you know that the dragon had a thing for Gabby? What the f**k, Gio?! And now she's dating him?" I burst into Gio's office and exclaimed.

"What did you just say?"

"I said that Gabby is dating Blaze. He took her out for lunch this afternoon and asked her to dinner tomorrow. And she said yes! I'm going to f*****g murder him!"

"You've got a real situation on your hands. And to answer your first question, yes, I knew. Matt and I both did, but I didn't think he'd move so fast. That guy's timing is impeccable."

"Why didn't you ever say anything?!"

"What was the point? Gabby and you were blissfully in love, and Blaze was in a different state. You opened the door to let him walk in, so don't get pissy with me."

"What am I supposed to do? She's packed all of my stuff and has moved me out of our house. She refuses to be in a committed relationship with me until I prove I'm worthy of it, and she has the damn dragon sweet talking and wooing her left and right. What do I do?" I again asked.

"Prove that you're worthy seems like a good option to me. Gabby could have rejected you, but instead, she just took a step back, so let her. If you make too big of a deal about all this, you're going to push her farther away, and Blaze will be right there waiting to take her off your hands. You're used to getting everything you want handed to you, Luc, but you're going to have to work harder than you ever have for this relationship. Put in the work."

"Did I really screw things up that bad that she's already looking for someone else?"

"Are you serious? Yes! You did! Sleeping with someone other than your mate is not a small thing, it's major."

"But what does she even see in him? He's a dragon, and probably a d**k," I sat on the couch and said.

"Blaze is a dragon, so he's mysterious, he's not at all a d**k, he and Gabby share the experience from the Badlands, and if that's not enough, if you ever talk to him, you'll immediately understand. The guy has got the gift of gab, and it's impressive," Gio replied.

"So he's talking her into doing s**t she probably doesn't want to do. That has to be it."

"Do you think Gabby is some clueless, helpless, damsel in distress? She's not stupid, Gio, and if she's hanging out with Blaze, it's because she genuinely wants to. Maybe she wants to get another man's perspective, one who isn't so close to the situation like her dad or I would be. Don't worry so much about Blaze; worry about yourself. You may feel like you've got some competition with him throwing his hat in the ring, but don't look at it like that. Let him know that he's the one with the competition. You're a damn Stone, act like it, and go get your girl back."

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After I'd calmed down and took a shower, I headed back over to the cottage and again knocked on the door and waited for Gabby to answer.

"Are you done with your tantrum?" she asked when she opened the door.

"My mate is dating someone else. I think my reaction was warranted, given the circumstances. May I come in?"

She turned around and walked into the kitchen, where she'd opened a bottle of wine and had worked her way through half of it. I knew that she'd have a raging headache the next day, and it was probably why she had one earlier, so I corked it and put it back in the cooler.

"I wasn't done with that, Luca."

"It's for the best, we both know it. What have you eaten today?"

"A patty melt from Celeste's and some grapes."

"Celeste's? You went out with Blaze to our favorite diner?" I asked, trying to contain my anger.

"Yes. It's casual enough to give off the friend vibe I was going for with great food. Where else would I go?"

"A trash heap seems like a better option, in my opinion," I mumbled while pulling food from the fridge.

"What are you making, and what makes you think I want you to make anything for me? I can take care of myself."

"I know you can, Princess. But this steak has been marinating for a few days and needs to be cooked before it goes bad. Is that alright?"

Of course, it was. Gabby loved red meat; she was a damn werewolf, she'd never turn down a steak.

"I see what you're doing. I want you to understand that," she replied as she reached around me and pulled out her wine again. Obviously, she was going to at least finish this bottle, so I just prepared myself for how she would feel in the morning.

Gabby returned to the table, and as she filled her glass, her phone rang with an incoming FaceTime call.

"No. This isn't uncomfortable at all," she quietly said before answering.

"Hello, darlin'. You havin' a good night?"

"It's getting better. How about you?" Gabby replied with a smile. Jackson growled deep in my chest, making her lift her eyes from the screen and look at me.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt your evening, I just wanted to see those beautiful eyes of yours one last time before the night ended," Blaze stated.

"For f**k's sake! Could you not talk to him with me standing right here? I don't want to hear this s**t," I yelled.

"Luca Stone, I guess that's you in the background. Sorry to intrude, man. How you doin' tonight?" he happily asked.

"Is this guy for real?"

"He's very friendly, so I'd say yeah, he's for real," Gabby sipped her wine and replied.

I couldn't believe this; I had to be trapped in an episode of The Twilight Zone. I picked up the steaks and walked out the back door to the grill. It wasn't hot, but I'd much rather sit out here and wait than inside hearing some other man flirt with my mate.

While I waited, I pulled out my phone and called Matt. If anyone could help with this, it would be him.

"You were supposed to call me yesterday morning. Did you think I forgot?" he asked when he answered.

"I know, and I'm sorry, but I've had a lot going on."

"I understand. How are you holding up? And how is Gabby?"

I filled him in on everything that had happened in the last two days, and when I saw Gabby toss her head back and laugh inside, I was ready to draw blood. I was supposed to be the only person to make her laugh like that.

"He's on the phone with her right now, and she's putty in his big scaly hands. It's bullshit," I said.

"It is, but it's better than the alternative. Gabby could have slipped back into that depression she was in after losing Marisol, or she could have rejected you. You didn't honestly expect her to forgive you immediately, so this isn't the worst outcome."

"She's mine, Matt! All I want to do is drive down there and challenge the guy, but I don't want to add any extra drama and stress to this already screwed up situation."

"Use this to your advantage, Luc. Blaze is making Gabby happy in a way she's not quite ready to let you yet. Once her heart heals, she'll be open to commitment again; you need to be patient."

"Why is he so f*****g likable?"

Matt laughed into the phone; he probably agreed, even if he didn't want to say it.

"It's just his personality; he's a friendly dude."

"So I've been told. What if I have to share? I don't know if I can."

"Then don't. There was a time I hated Tyson far more than you currently hate Blaze, and I thought I'd never be able to share my most sacred gift with him. But he made my Tesoro smile, and he made her happy, and to me, that was more important than the hate. And once I let it go, I learned that Tyson wasn't as bad as I'd made him out to be. He was the exact opposite and treated Taylor just as well as I did. If I could go back and do it all over again, I'd still choose the path where I share my wife. It's made our lives complete and given us four amazing kids to share. I wouldn't change a thing. But if that's not how you see your situation playing out, then say something. Staying quiet has already gotten you into trouble once, don't make the same mistake twice."