



Chapter 0054

(James POV)

Have you ever watched an explosion occur in slow-motion? It can be quite interesting. Contrary to popular belief, most explosions do not occur at one time or in a single blast. Rather, most explosions are a series of smaller blasts that trigger other smaller blasts that in turn trigger larger and larger blasts. Because they are connected and occur close in time to one another, the combination of blasts are perceived as being one large and overwhelming occurrence.

Firework displays are perhaps the most visual and beautiful version of this. Firework shows usually start with the lighting of a single fuse or set of fuses, which trigger a coordinating series of explosions. Small explosions will start the show, sometimes fizzling out and creating the impression that nothing more will come. But then, as more fuses are lit and the show really gets going, the fireworks will become bigger, brighter, faster, and more jaw-dropping. 1

This, for lack of a better description, is essentially what happened when I began looking at Lily's pack file. This, for a lack of a better description, is how it felt when the life and world I thought I knew imploded.

Indeed, once my personal fireworks show began, all of the questions and memories that I had not been willing or ready

to confront suddenly attacked me all at once. They were vicious and unrelenting, unwilling to let me take time to process or breathe. It was almost as though they were playing a childish game of hide-and-seek and wanted to taunt me: "Ready or not, here we come!"

The firework display began even before I opened Lily's pack file, with my mother's story about Tyler. In retrospect, I should have known that Tyler's story was merely a warm-up for what was to come. However, surviving the past 26 years has required that I master the skill of denial, so perhaps I should not fault myself too much for missing it.

Either way, the second round of fireworks had a much slower start than the first round, but its resulting show was much, much grander. My mother lit the fuse for this second round unintentionally, when her eyes expressed relief that Nick could not remember Lily's birthday. My mother probably thought I missed the look in her eyes, but I did not.

Ironically, had it not been for my mother's bizarre look, I may not have realized that Lily's birthday held so much significance. In fact, had it not been for Dr. Hyder's warning and my mother's look, I may have missed the firework show all together.

My mother's subsequent attempt to discourage me from looking at Lily's file only confirmed my suspicions. By discouraging me, she effectively lit the second fuse.

Given my mindsight, it only took me a few moments to

realize that the contents of this file were going to change everything.

My mother must have seen the look in my eyes when I opened the file, because she immediately tried to take the file from me so that she could "help me" find what I needed in it. That, of course, was Clue # 3.

I was tired of dealing with my mother. Over her protests about "pack protocol" and what my father would say, I decided to take Lily's file and retreat to my room. I did not care about pack protocols; I needed space to go through the file and process what it all meant.

Once in my room, I locked the door and began to study the file. At first glance, it seemed completely normal. It had the typical contents: statistical information; medical records; school records; and photographs of Lily taken at key points in her life. It even had a section that noted her mating with me and the date of the rejection.

One of the first things that jumped out at me about the file was that there far too many medical records for someone Lily's age. The only medical records that are supposed go into a pack file are those documenting unusual birthmarks, severe or unusual injuries, and hospitalizations.

I quickly flipped through the records and noticed that Lily had been regularly treated for all sorts of serious injuries after she turned ten years old. There were a variety of explanations given for the injuries, but what was really

unusual was that Lily was usually by herself seeking treatment. As far as I could tell, her parents never took her to the hospital and never picked her up. I would have to remember to ask Dr. Miller about why that was later.

As I flipped through the medical records, a date on one of the records vaguely stood out to me, but I did not think much of it at first. I knew that the first date that I needed to pay attention to was Lily's birthday.

Once I found it, I was taken aback. It sort of saddened me to learn that Stephanie died on Lily's birthday. No wonder Lily's family had stopped celebrating Lily's birthday; they — along with me and everyone else in the pack — had been far too busy honoring Stephanie every year to even think about Lily.

Was that the reason that Dr. Hyder told me that I should think about celebrating Lily's birthday? Because he felt bad that we had all focused on Stephanie instead of Lily every year? No... I knew Dr. Hyder's words meant more than that. He was not the sort of guy to care that much about a birthday.

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So what was he trying to tell me?

Memories of Lily's badly beaten and injured body flashed through my mind. Margie told us that Lily fell down the stairs. Given how badly injured she was, I would have expected Margie to get medical treatment for Lily. And that medical treatment would have been sort of thing that was documented in the file. Lily's file made mention of the rejection, so it was up to date.... but where was the report about her fall down the stairs?

After I flipped through the medical information and the associated photographs for a second time, I still found nothing. If there was no record, that means a doctor was not called. Why the Goddess would Margie have not called for a doctor after her daughter fell down the stairs?

The fireworks in my head started slowly getting louder.

Wait... That morning. MORNING. I first saw Lily at the waterfall very early that morning.

I checked Lily's birthdate again, and this time I focused on the birth year. I did some quick math to make sure I was right, and I was. I saw Lily at the waterfall on the morning of her 20th birthday.

Oh, my Goddess. The fireworks are now blazing high in the

sky.

Why had I not thought about this before? Given the timing, I was almost certainly Lily's first mate. Which meant that Lily was my first mate. Which also meant that Stephanie was never my destined mate, and that she was never destined to be my Luna.

How could that be? Was my whole life a lie?

Long-buried questions and memories suddenly flew through my head.

Everyone was so sure that Stephanie and I were mates, including Stephanie and I. But... why were we so sure? One thing I knew for certain was it was not something that originated with Stephanie, me, or either our wolves.

No, the idea that Stephanie and I were mates originated with my mother and Margie. The two of them told us from an early age that it was "clear" that Stephanie and I were in love. They did not say that once, or twice, but probably 1000 times.

When you are young and impressionable and hear something like that often enough, you begin to believe it. Is that what happened to us?

Memories continued to hit me as though I was standing in front of a freight train. I now remembered that every time that I did or said anything that was inconsistent with being in love with Stephanie, my mother and Margie intervened.

For example, in 8th grade, I wanted to take Lexi Laughlin to the winter dance. After Lexi agreed to go with me, my parents forced me to un-invite her. I had been angry and upset, but I was obedient back then and I agreed. My mother explained that she had "just been talking to Margie" and "they" thought it was better that I go with Stephanie to the dance. My mother said that they had seen how Stephanie and I looked at each other and it was "clear" that we were mates, and it would be unfair to other she-wolves to get their hopes up.

There were lots of examples of interventions like that. Another example was that my mother and Margie often told us that we had "so much in common," but ... did we really?

Now that I think about it, Stephanie and I actually had very little in common. The things that we thought we had in common were actually things that had been suggested or encouraged by our mothers. For example, I have always hated watching movies; I would much rather be outside doing something.

Yet, somehow my mother convinced me that I loved watching movies with Stephanie. We would do that together all the time. And yet, I have not watched a movie since the night that Stephanie died.

Back in the present, I heard knocking on my bedroom door. It is my mother and Nick. My mother seems worried. But it is too late. The fireworks are in full bloom right now.

Memories of that last night with Stephanie come flooding back to me. This time, in slow motion.

I flip back to the medical record that had vaguely stood out to me at the beginning. It was dated the night before Stephanie died. Lily had been hospitalized with severe injuries. She was released just after midnight. 1

I now felt like I could not breathe. I was suffocating.

Lily had been in the hospital with serious injuries the night before Stephanie died. She was released from the hospital shortly after midnight. But Stephanie received a text message from Lily shortly BEFORE midnight asking for help because she had gotten lost after meeting up with a boy in the woods.

We have now reached the grand finale of the fireworks show.

Stephanie did not let me see the text message from Lily that night, and she did not let me come with her. Lily was at the hospital; she was not lost in the woods needing rescue.

Stephanie lied to me. And Lily... Lily most likely had nothing to do with Stephanie's death. 5

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