

Chapter 87

Skylar

I don't stop running until I'm deep in the forest. My legs shake from exhaustion, and my lungs burn from being deprived of oxygen. I need to rest, but my ears pick up on the sound of leaves being crunched underneath someone's boots. It puts me on high alert, and I growl until a figure steps out from behind the trees. It's Caleb, Irma's dad.

"Hello, Skylar," a small smile plays at the corners of his mouth as he raises his hands in a gesture of surrender, showing that he means no harm. "I didn't mean to frighten you, but Irma and Lola are worried about you. Are you okay? You ran out of the mansion quicker than lightning."

My heart clenches when I hear Caleb's soft voice. He is a great vampire dad who spoils both his wife and daughter-he would never hurt me. And yet...I can't stop shaking. But since Caleb can't tell what I'm thinking, I shape-shift back into a human. "D-Don't come any closer!" I sob. "I...I don't want anyone near me."

Concern washes over Caleb's face and I watch him reach for his backpack to take out a towel. "You must be freezing standing there naked," Caleb observes, preparing to toss the towel my way. I can tell he is genuinely worried about me, yet he won't approach me. He respects my space, just as he always has. I wet my lips.

"It's kind of cold..."

"Here," he throws me the towel, and I catch it.

"T-thanks...."

"You shouldn't be out here alone," Caleb continues earnestly, without a trace of judgment. He is so kind that he doesn't even mention my dramatic escape from Lucas' birthday party.

But I won't let myself forget. "I can't go back... "I sob. "I will be judged."

"Well, you can't stay here, Skylar. There are rogues in the forest," he says, holding out his hand with a soft smile. "Come on, let's get you home."

Those words make me panic even more, and before I know it, I blurt out the unthinkable, "I DON'T EVER WANT TO GO BACK TO THE ORPHANAGE!" My voice is so loud that birds fly up from the trees. Caleb looks shocked, too, staring at me with confusion written over his handsome features. Eventually, he

parts his lips as if to speak, but since I know he will just take me back to that hellish place. I turn around. "This is what they do there," I let the towel slip down to reveal my back and all the bruises. Not only do I get raped by a certain Alpha almost every night, but he pays the caregivers to look the other way. He has so much influence within the pack that no one questions him. And if I try to open my mouth and tell the caregivers his treatment is wrong? Well, that's when I get spanked. My body looks horrible because of it. Caleb gasps at the sight, but soon his eyes harden, and his fists clench as he takes in the array of bruises, each one a harsh reminder of the hell I've been living through.

"You shouldn't be subjected to this, Skylar," he walks forward and immediately wraps the towel around me, ensuring the cold doesn't bite into the freshly revealed wounds. "I had no idea they treated you that way. Who did this to you?"

I'm silent for a minute, just staring at the ground. I don't know if I should tell Caleb the truth. He is good friends with the Alpha who did this. They defeated Lucian together-everyone has heard the stories. 'You should tell him,' a voice whispers inside my head. 'Tell him that the former earth werewolf, Aron, raped you. Caleb will believe you.'

'No, he won't,' I growl back inwardly. I have no idea what mental illness I've managed to contract, but I'm arguing with myself now, 'Caleb knows Aron. He won't believe a pathetic street rat like me over him.'

‘But he might,’ the voice insists. ‘You’ll never know until you try.’

‘NO!’ I yell at the voice, and my voice is so strong and powerful that the other presence inside my head backs off in my mind. Good, it’s where it belongs.

“Skylar?” is forced into me. I look up at Caleb again. He is very tall and a man, something which frightens me, yet I dare to speak.

“I don’t want to talk about what happened. Please don’t force me to do that. I just...I just don’t want to go back to the orphanage.”

“Alright,” Caleb replies, his voice softening as he bends down to match my height better. His red eyes study me, forcing my gaze to the grass since my fear of men is making me unable to meet his intense gaze. “Can I ask one more thing?” he asks after what seems like an eternity. I don’t meet his eyes, but I give him a nod. “I won’t force you to tell me how you got those bruises, and neither will I read your mind, but I would feel terrible taking you back to a place where you feel unsafe. Would you prefer to stay with us instead?”

Shock seeps into my bones. Did I hear that correctly? I stare at Caleb, who continues talking. “My wife and I have decided to move away to Europe for a few years. We want to see the world and even though this might sound selfish, I know my daughter would have an easier time settling in if her best friend went

with us. And yes, I know you probably don't want to leave the pack--"

"I would," I interrupt him, forcing myself to meet his eyes. Their intensity is softened by compassion now. There's also a hint of surprise in them, but mostly, I see relief.

"Are you sure?" he asks, his voice almost mirroring my own quietness.

"I am," I reply. It's a simple sentence, but it holds a whole world of meaning. Leaving this place with Irma's family sounds like a dream come true, and even though I'm afraid of men, Caleb seems nice. I could see myself living under the same roof as him and maybe eventually, beginning to see him and Lola as my new adoptive parents. But maybe that's me hoping for too much? Regardless, I get teary-eyed just thinking about leaving this place and all the bad memories I've made here. Caleb, however, looks surprised at my firmness, but then he smiles.

"I'm glad," he says. His smile is genuine and warm, making me feel even more comfortable with my decision. "I'll arrange everything then. We leave the day after tomorrow." After that, he stands up and turns to leave, but before he can take a step, I reach out and grab his large hand in mine. He stares down at me, and before I know what I'm doing, I hug him tightly. He stiffens at first but slowly brings his large arms around me in a comforting embrace.

“Thank you,” I whisper into his broad chest, tears prickling at the corners of my eyes.

“I’m not sure what I did, but you’re welcome.” His awkwardness brings a smile to my face. Irma’s family is so kind and welcoming, and even though I usually dislike hugs from men, I am nothing but content at this moment. My life can only get better from here.