

## Chapter 25 Stranger In The Woods

ELIANA.

The sun was out.

I was walking through the woods when I pulled out my phone to dial Denver. I found myself constantly looking over my shoulders in search of Blake. Our encounter earlier was somehow all I could think about.

A sigh escaped my lips as soon as my cabin came into sight. Only God knew how many miles I walked to get here. Beep. Beep.

Denver wasn't answering.

I called again tirelessly, and again until the line went through.

"Hello" But it wasn't his voice. "Who is this?" I asked. "Who is this?" He threw the question back at me.

"I need to speak to Denver. Tell him it's Eliana" I muttered and after a brief pause, the strange voice exclaimed. "Oh," He echoed. "Eliana." I could tell he knew me now but him, not so much.

"Give me a second" The sound of metal doors opening and closing echoed through the phone as I kept walking closer to the cabin. "Hello" I called out after some time. "Hello?" Until there was an answer.

"Denver" I heaved, folding my arms across my chest. called.

"What is it?" He sounded cold and almost out of breath. I batted my lashes during a moment of hesitation. "I ran into Blake" There was no need to serenade around the point so I just ripped off the bandaid.

"What?" He inquired.

"I ran into him. I had shifted in the forest and when I woke up, I thought it was you standing there. He was wearing exactly your face and your mannerisms and he brought me some fresh clothes," I couldn't go through the whole sentence without feeling paranoid.

The thought of our conversation left a chill sweeping down my spine.

"But I knew it wasn't you" I added.

"Did you say you finally shifted?" Denver cleared his throat and I swallowed a hard lump down mine. "Yeah" It was just as unbelievable as it was last night.

"But that's not the point" I shook my head.

"The point is I saw Blake and how on earth did he even make himself look like you?" I asked. "That's his ability...well, one of them" He replied.

"He can shape-shift, and not just into a werewolf but he can make himself look like someone or something else. It's just one of his games. Don't let him get to your head" Denver said.

But how exactly was that possible?

I drew close enough to the cabin that I mounted the front porch. And the line barred for a moment. "I asked him what he wanted, but he didn't answer me. He said once that he came here because of his family" I said.

Denver's breaths started to hitch and he was groaning like he was in agony. "That's a...That's a lie" He stuttered. "Are y—"

"Can we talk...Later?" He seared. I came to a halt with an arch between my brows. "Are you okay, Denver?" I asked. "You sound weird from over the phone—" "Yeah, ye..." And the line cut mid-sentence.

I held out my phone with confusion set in my eyes. "What was he even up to now?" I couldn't help but ask myself. And I was really about to dial him again but something else caught my attention.

"Help!" A voice called from behind. And I turned around to find a woman staggering towards the cabin. Her clothes were torn and she was bleeding from around her head. "Help!" Her knee grazed the ground.

I propelled myself forward.

She wasn't anyone I'd seen before and not many people came to this side of town. It seemed like she'd been on her feet for days and could barely carry herself. I crouched low to the ground and held her up.

"Hel..." Her voice suddenly stopped as I shook her in my arms. Her neck fell and her eyes closed. "No. No!" I yelled just before my Grandma came out of the front door and she looked to the ground.

"What's going on?" She was just as perplexed as I was. Because where exactly did this woman come from?

"Help me! We have to get her inside!" I lifted my gaze to my Nana and it was Ivan who came out next. As he lifted her out of my arms, I stood up with my brows furrowed. What just happened?

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"She's still asleep."

Ivan threw a look over his shoulders. I folded my arms across my chest, leaning against the wall. I couldn't take my eyes off the poor lady. She seemed to be roughly around my age too, or perhaps younger.

And she had wandered here in torn clothes and bruises all over her body. She was now laying in bed and I'd changed her into a gown I had around.

Mind you, I didn't know this woman or where she was coming from. I'd just seen her so hurt that I couldn't have turned away. It was a mystery that she was still alive. My eyes met with Ivan's.

"She IS still alive...right?" I questioned. He pulled away from his assessment before nodding his head. "I gave her some things that could help with the wounds especially and the pain. I don't know how long she'd be gone for but yes, she's still alive" He replied.

"Oh thank God" I clutched my chest.

"You said you saw her at the front of the house?" Nana inquired. I nodded. "It was very weird too. She called out to me, clearly she was in distress and needed my help. That was before she passed out" I added.

"And you haven't seen her around here?" I asked Nana this time. At least she'd been here far longer than I had. "No" She negated nonetheless before I turned to Ivan. "Not around the Pack too?" I asked.

"I would know a Blood Hound once I see one" He cleared his throat.

"And she's not one." I looked again down at her. Charcoal black hair that cascaded upon her shoulders. She had light freckles across her nose too which was a lot more visible when her face wasn't lined with dirt. And she had a tattoo, on the inside of her left wrist.

Of a serpent around some sort of stick. I inched closer to her, asking myself the million-dollar question—who exactly was this woman and how did she find her way here?

"I guess we'll have to wait until she wakes up" I broke out a sigh before turning around. "For now, I have to get back to the Pack before Jaxon asks of me" Ivan took his things and was headed out.

"You sure you'll be okay?" He darted his eyes to me. Once we were out, I closed the door behind me and nodded. The worst had already happened during the night so..."Yeah" Figured I had to speak for him to take my word for it. And then he tapped my shoulders before he left.

As soon as the door closed, I realized the sleep had already cleared from my eyes. I walked into the bright kitchen where Nana was already making breakfast.

"I can help with that" I took control of the eggs she was mixing and she flashed a smile at me. "You're not going to tell me how it went last night?" She asked. "Oh!" I'd almost forgotten what led me out in the first place. "Yeah, we were able to give him the serum" I said.

"You're awfully in a good mood it's making me question whether that's all that happened the whole night. And then you come back in the morning as well. Does it have anything to do with Denver?" My Grandma said in a sing-song voice. She wasn't even hiding how much she liked Denver.

Or at this point, I think she was just desperate to see me with someone.

She knew Elijah was his son and she wanted so badly for everyone to be a happy family. That makes the two of them.

It wasn't as if I didn't want that.

It was more of the question of whether Denver could give that.

A happy family. A happily ever after, that's if there was such a thing.

"No!" I cooed. "Well, we did kiss" I rolled my eyes to the back of my head as I whisked the eggs. "What?!" Nana exclaimed. Her cheeks were on fire. "But that's not all that happened." I heaved.

She paused whatever she was doing to look me dead in the eyes.

"I kinda also shifted yesterday too" I whispered. The cutlery fell out of her hands as she wheeled all the way around the kitchen counter. "No!"

She gasped. "Finally?" Her arms stretched around to wrap me for a hug.

And I nodded. "Finally." It was a genuinely happy moment that I had tried to tone down in my head. But every time I thought about last night, it was more and more unbelievable.

As a teen girl, this could've easily been the happiest day of my life. It would've meant the whole world to me. But I didn't exactly have a typical childhood.

"I'm so happy for you, Eliana. For the first time?" Nana gasped and I had no idea when the tears crept into my eyes. "How did it end? Was anyone there for you? Denver?" She pulled apart to ask but I shook my head.

"No, it was just me."

"Oh," Of course she knew he was my mate too. Nana was the only one who knew everything—that we were married once, that Elijah was his son, and the past rejection which was why I was reluctant to his whole deal.

Even if it meant taking down Jaxon, it was just that I wasn't sure I trusted him and most importantly so I never gave myself the chance to fall in love with him again.

Not with the man that shattered my heart all those years ago.

I could pretend like it didn't ever bother me but deep down, there were some days that struck and it struck hard. It never really leaves you, you know? Being hurt by someone you once loved so much.

"I know what you're about to say," I heaved. "About how magical it would've been if he were there. Denver and I, blah blah" I sniffled when her hands fell into mine and she squeezed them tenderly.

"No" Nana whispered.

"It was your moment, that's all that matters. That you came into your wolf at last. It's because you fought so hard and you never gave up. You had the toughest time growing up but look at you now,"

"You're a shifter" Nana grazed my cheeks and I chuckled softly. It was that big of a deal. "Isn't it one step closer to defeating Jaxon and saving the whole Pack?" She asked and I pressed my lips lightly together.

The image of my sick father flashed through my head and the gnarly thought of what he'd had to endure over the years. He may not have the best father but no one should have to go through such pain and misery.

"You're right" I whispered softly.

"That's exactly why I came back here—to take down Jaxon" The words formed on the tip of my lips as I gazed at my Nana. "The Pack has fallen apart. Everything my father fought for, everything he built has been ripped to shreds. This isn't just his home, it's mine also." I said.

"It's Elijah's, and from the way things are going, he might never get to know where he's truly from if Jaxon assumes the throne. It's not just about stopping him anymore. It's about stopping him before it's too late"

"And there are so many dark forces out there, powerful creatures. It's not going to be easy taking him down and I can't do it on my own. It's no use drawing it out. Denver proved to be helpful yesterday" I added and my Grandma's eyes grew open.

Perhaps, she knew what I was driving at.

I didn't even know until the epiphany hit me. The seriousness of everything. This was more than me alone. I needed someone. I need him.

"Denver." She whispered and I nodded with tears at the surface of my eyes. "I'm going to take him up on his offer—" "That would mean accepting that he's your mate, Eliana" Nana drew out the terms. But it hit me, how some things are needed to be done.

"It's not exactly my choice. The Moon Goddess put us together for a reason and what if it's this?" I said softly. "It's not about me only. It's about every Blood Hound, every life in this Pack including yours and my son's" I said.

"So yes, I'll do everything I have to if it means protecting that future and that legacy" I muttered. "Does he know yet...Does Denver know?" Nana asked. "Are you even sure about this?" A hard lump went down my throat at that moment.

"It's something I have to tell him to his face," I paused. "And yes. Yes, I'm sure about it now more than ever." And it wasn't just me talking at that moment, it was my wolf too. Aria, I'll call her that.

Aria, my wolf at last.