

17 The Picnic

~Liam~

Josephine appeared mildly taken aback by my gesture, and I could empathise with her reaction. Going from a nervous and somewhat distant demeanour to intertwining our fingers was a stark contrast. Even I would have questioned my own behaviour. However, I wanted her to understand that I was perfectly fine, just trying to sort out my thoughts.

Gracefully, she withdrew her hand from mine, which brought a small chuckle to Alex. The way she did it was rather endearing, and it brought a smile to my face. Looking ahead, I noticed that Elaine and Oliver were giving me curious looks, as if sensing something was amiss.

Oliver couldn't resist asking, "What's going on between you and Joe?" I was at a loss for words, unsure of how to explain the situation to him.

"Why do you want to know?" I replied, and he averted his gaze. Glancing over to where the triplets were seated, I caught Jewels smiling at me, as though she had some insight. I hoped she hadn't figured anything out, as she was the least likely to keep things to herself among the sisters.

Upon arriving at the venue, I overheard Noah and Sebastien making phone calls to their friends from Mountain, inviting them to join us. I had hoped that our picnic would be more private, but judging by the setup, it appeared to be anything but that. Harper took on the role of the DJ, and as I watched her prepare, it became evident that the music would be quite loud. The triplets and Lilly were in charge of

refreshments, while others teamed up to help with the setup. I decided to partner with Josephine and assist her with the mats.

Noticing that Josephine seemed a bit uncomfortable around me, I thought it would be a good idea to strike up a conversation with her.

"May I speak with you, Joe?" I asked, and she looked at me with an expressionless face before nodding, indicating it was okay. "I am really sorry about my attitude lately. It's just that I have been dealing with a lot mentally," I said, and she nodded in understanding.

"I know. We all know. Hopefully, we will be successful and find Sophia, so you can get back to your serious and playful self," she replied, still maintaining her poker face. I couldn't quite read her emotions, unsure if she had truly forgiven me for my behaviour or if she was being sarcastic.

"Does that mean we are cool?" I asked curiously, seeking some clarity, and she nodded.

"We have always been cool, Li," she said, and with that, the conversation ended. Her responses were concise and to the point, leaving no room for further elaboration.

In complete silence, Josephine and I set up the mats, appearing as though we were being reluctantly forced to interact while everyone else laughed, joked, and formed pairs. Eventually, we ended up sitting separately, much to Alex's dismay. But what could I do when it seemed like Josephine was doing everything in her power to avoid me?

I regretted the comments we had made two years ago; I wish I could take them back. At the time, it felt like harmless fun, as she wasn't present, and we were just having a laugh. However, looking back



now, I realise how foolish and insensitive those remarks were. If we had refrained from discussing Josephine at all, she wouldn't be feeling uncomfortable and distant from me now. I couldn't help but feel like a complete jerk.

Justin didn't join us, leaving me with no one to talk to as everyone else was occupied with their dates and friends.

Finally, the guests my cousins invited arrived – four guys and a girl who appeared to be siblings, all with brown hair and brown eyes. They seemed delighted to be hanging out with our group, which was understandable since everyone there came from royalty and would hold positions of power in the future. It was natural for them to want to join in.

The girl, Kelcy, introduced herself and immediately took a keen interest in me, being quite flirtatious, which made me feel a bit uneasy. She always found a reason to be by my side, and I was trying my best to be polite and not outright ask her to leave me alone. Charlotte noticed what was going on and couldn't contain her laughter, which only added to my discomfort. Meanwhile, I glanced at my sister sitting by the jukebox, looking somewhat frustrated as Kelcy's brother, Josh, kept yapping and telling jokes that only he seemed to find amusing.

"Where the fuck did Sebastien and Noah find these people?" Harper linked me, voicing the very question that had been on my mind. We shared a laugh at that moment, both bewildered by the choice of guests.

"Hilarious, right?" Kelcy said, and I looked at her, feeling a bit confused. Unfortunately, I hadn't heard a word she had said, and my laugh mistakenly made it seem like I found her joke amusing. All evening, my gaze had been directed towards Josephine, and now,

Kelcy's other brother, Rob, was talking to her. Alex, my wolf, growled with jealousy, but I managed to keep myself in check. I knew I had no right to feel possessive or envious over Josephine's interactions with others.

"What if he convinces her to run away with him, and we never see her again, and she never finds out who we are?" Alex said, and I couldn't help but find it the most paranoid thing I've ever heard my wolf say. Alex was losing his shit, and it was making me incredibly uncomfortable.

Josephine's eyes met mine, and for a moment, I hoped she would come over to join me. However, she looked away and focused on Rob, who was clearly annoying her, but she maintained her polite demeanour. Meanwhile, Noah and Sebastien were hanging out with their friends Roger and Saul, who happened to be Kelcy's siblings too. Observing the situation, I realised that Rob, Josh, and Kelcy had likely tagged along to hang out with us because we were royalty. It wasn't uncommon for people to bring their relatives along to be part of our circle, which is why we had to be selective with our friends. Maya Rivers was all the groupie we needed.

While my gaze remained fixed on Josephine, I couldn't help but notice Rob reaching out to tuck her hair behind her ear, claiming to have helped her remove something that wasn't even there. Talking was one thing, but his touch felt like a step too far. She smiled and thanked him, but that was the breaking point for me. There was no way I could pretend to be calm about this situation any longer. I swiftly got up from my mat and made my way over to where Josephine was.

"May I have a word with you?" I asked, and she frowned, looking at me. Speaking to her in front of everyone was out of the question.

"Privately," I asserted without waiting for a response, and I gently took her hand, pulling her away from the picnic party. She seemed surprised, but she followed me. At that moment, I couldn't care less about everyone else watching us; Rob had clearly crossed the line, and I needed to get Josephine away from him.

As we walked further away, Josephine eventually came to a stop, and she looked at me with a hint of confusion.

"What was that about?" she asked, sounding a bit displeased.

"He was touching your hair," I replied, the words coming out thanks to Alex. He was becoming increasingly difficult to control, and I wasn't comfortable with it.

"So, what do you care?" she retorted, leaving me at a loss for words. Instead of responding verbally, I reached out to her. Though she flinched initially, she allowed me to touch her hand. I gently caressed her fingers as I looked into her eyes.

"I am sorry for whatever nonsense we spewed two years ago," I said, sincerely wanting to dissolve the animosity she felt towards me.

"We shouldn't have acted that way. You deserve better. Honestly, I think we were just jealous. You are intelligent, beautiful, and independent. Some guys might find that intimidating, you know. But I was wrong, and I apologise. I don't think you're a freak. In fact, you're pretty; everything about you is perfect, even your eyes, and I genuinely don't understand why you wouldn't use transparent lenses. As for the eyeliner, well..." I trailed off, knowing she was aware of my opinion on that matter.

"It's your choice of makeup, and if it makes you happy, then so be it.

But please, let's put an end to this friction between us. I'd really like to get to know the real Joe, not the defensive 'I-do-not-need-friends' version," I earnestly expressed, hoping my words wouldn't upset her. She looked away momentarily, and I feared I might have said something wrong. However, when she looked back at me and smiled, relief washed over me.

"Do you mind if I work on the Maguire case with you in Grizlo?" she asked, and the urge to pull her close and kiss her washed over me. I felt a primal desire to sink my teeth into her neck, but I fought to control my wolf, staying still. I wanted our connection to be genuine, not merely driven by our bond.

"I don't mind at all. Actually, my uncles made an excellent choice," I replied, and she beamed at me before furrowing her brows.

"Are you alright, Li?" she asked, looking intently into my eyes, and I wondered what had caught her attention.

"What's the matter? Alex keeps trying to emerge. Your eyes have been shifting from black to normal since we started talking," she observed, moving closer and placing her palm against my cheek.

"Your temperature is a bit high, too" she remarked, and I tried to play it off. She pulled her hand away, though I longed to catch it and keep it against my cheek, feeling its warmth. But I knew that would be too much, so I restrained myself.

I glanced back at the party and then back at her. "Do you want to go back there?" I asked, and she turned her head slightly, gazing in the direction of the party.

"With our cousin's social-climbing friends around?" she remarked, and we both burst into laughter because that was exactly what was

happening. Noah and Sebastien were always oblivious to such things, and I couldn't blame them.

"Nah," she said, signalling her disinterest in returning to the party. Then, she looked at me with a mischievous grin.

"It's a beautiful night, and the moon is high in the sky. Why don't we let our wolves run wild? Onyx would love that," she suggested, and it was an enticing idea. However, it left me with a dilemma of what Alex would do with Onyx running alongside him. Despite the risk, I knew I had to go along with it. I didn't want to upset Josephine again; she was tough, and I knew I wouldn't get off easily if I messed up again.

"Excellent idea," I replied, and she beamed at me.

We made our way down the mountain and into the woods, ready to shift into our wolf forms. I could sense that it would be a magnificent night because Alex was filled with overwhelming happiness.



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