CH 3 - KATHERINE

KATHERINE POV

"TRIGGER WARNING"—murder

There was no drumroll, no celestial light, no whisper from the stars when I opened my eyes.

Just the creak of old cardboards and the clink of ceramic as my dad pushed the door open with his hip, a tray balanced in his hands. The smell of bacon hit me, then coffee, then the warm sweetness of maple syrup and my favorite—cinnamon toast, slightly burnt, just the way I liked it.

"Morning, birthday girl," he said, and there was so much hope packed into those three words it made my chest ache.

I pushed myself up against the pillows and smiled, even if it didn't reach my eyes. "You didn't have to do all this."

"Come on, eighteen only comes once." He set the tray down on my lap, cued my hair gently. "I figured you might wake up feeling… different?"

I froze for half a beat. Not enough to be obvious, but just enough.

I didn't feel different. Not stronger. Not faster. No heat beneath my skin, no prickling in my bones, no wolf pacing under the surface the way everyone said it would be.

I shook my head.

His smile faltered for a heartbeat—just a sliver—but he caught it before I could fall completely. "Still early. You've got all day. She'll come when she's ready. I feel it in my bones, kiddo."

I nodded, because I couldn't rot words. I took a sip of the coffee to hide it.

We didn't talk about my mom. Not today. Not ever, really. But I knew he was thinking about her too. About what it meant if I didn't shift. About what they'd say if I didn't.

If I was just… human.

My stomach knotted.

He tried to keep things light after that. Said school was overrated and birthdays deserved hooky. I didn't argue. I couldn't stomach the idea of facing the curious looks, the whispers, the countdown that wasn't even subtle anymore. So we packed up the old pickup and drove out past the tree line, deep into pack land, where the snow lay undisturbed and the trees stood tall and quiet.

We ate sandwiches on a blanket we probably shouldn't have laid out in the snow, and we shed through hides cut in the frozen pond. My eyes went numb, and we laughed until we cried when Dad slipped and went sprawling backward into the powder.

He brought out a cake after. Chocolate and coconut. My favorite since I was nine. I couldn't even eat more than a bite, but I made the right noises, smiled at the candles, blew them out when he asked what I wished for.

I didn't wish for anything.

I was too afraid of jinxing it.

But the truth? Deep down, I wished I wasn't different. I wished I wouldn't fail.

I told him I wanted to spend the night alone. That just in case… nothing happened… I didn't want to see the disappointment in his eyes. I didn't want to break in front of him. I barely managed to keep it together in front of myself.

He didn't pit me on it. Just kissed my forehead and handed me the blanket from the truck and a airlight.

"Whatever happens," he said quietly, "I'm proud of you. You hear me, Katie?"

"Yeah," I said, voice thick. "I hear you."

I walked out alone, further than I'd ever gone before.

North ridge.

Just like Jonas said.

He hadn't meant it kindly. He'd said it with that sneer of his, with poison in every word.

You want to prove yourself? Do it where no one can help you.

I found the clearing—old, wide, surrounded by trees that clawed at the sky like twisted ribs. The snow was thinner here. The ground hard beneath my boots.

I spread out the blanket. Sat. Waited.

The sky shifted slowly from dusk to night, from lavender to deep indigo, until really the Moon crowned the treetops—full, silver, perfect.

My eyes curled into slits.

"Come on," I whispered. "Please."

I shut my eyes. Breathed. Tried to feel it.

My skin stayed cold. My body stayed the same.

Nothing stirred.

I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

When I opened my eyes again, the Moon was high and my cheeks were damp with tears I hadn't realized I'd shed.

That was it. The nail proof.

I wasn't one of them.

I was human. And it was okay. I could go in a human city and get a human degree, a job, all the package.

Even if I was an outsider in my father's bloodline.

I didn't scream. I didn't collapse.

I just sat there, frozen in place, as something inside me went still. Like the part of me that had held on—just in case—really gave up and sat down quietly to die.

And then—

A scent.

It hit me so suddenly I thought I'd imagined it.

Rich. Deep. Something like pine, like the rot bite of snowmelt in spring. Wild and raw and —

Familiar.

Too familiar.

Shi.t.

I scrambled to my feet just as Jonas stepped out from the trees like he'd been there all along.

His shirt was half-unbuttoned, clinging to him like it had no choice. His chest rose and fell too fast. His eyes glowed, deep red, locked on me with an intensity that scared me.

His wolf was there—right there under his skin, close enough I could feel it vibrating in the air.

And he looked—

Mad.

No, more than mad.

Unhinged.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I snapped.

He didn't answer.

His eyes tracked me like prey.

"Jonas," I said again, rmer this time. "Back off."

"You were supposed to shift," he said. His voice wasn't right. It was too rough. Not fully his.

"You followed me?"

"You were supposed to fuc king shift."

I took a step back.

"You don't get to—"

"You smell different."

That stopped me.

What?

He stepped closer. Slowly. Carefully. Like he was trying not to spook me. But every inch of his body screamed tension. His hands were clenched, jaw tight, eyes wild.

"You didn't smell like this before," he muttered, almost to himself. "It's stronger now."

"What are you talking about?"

His nostrils ared. "Mine."

The bottom dropped out of my stomach.

"No," I said immediately, shaking my head. "No, you're wrong."

Jonas snarled—actually snarled—and I saw it then. His control was hanging by a thread.

"You think I want this?" he growled. "You think I want you?"

"Then back off!" I shouted.

He did the opposite. Crossed the clearing in two steps and grabbed my arm—not hard enough to bruise, but enough to make me inch.

"You don't get to reject me," he said through gritted teeth.

"I already told you!," I spat. "Back in the chem lab, remember? I said it. I meant it."

"That was before you smelled like—like this."

His wolf was clawing through his skin now. I could see it—claws of red beneath his eyes, the twitch in his ngers, the low rumble in his chest.

I yanked my arm back and shoved him.

He didn't move much, but he let go.

"This is a mistake," I said, chest heaving. "Whatever the Moon Goddess is doing, it's wrong. It's cruel."

Jonas stood still for a second.

Then laughed—quiet, bitter, like he couldn't believe it either.

"I told myself if you didn't shift, it'd be over. I'd never have to deal with this sh.t again."

What the hell was he talking about? He treated me like garbage my whole life!

"Then let it be over," I said trying to steady my voice. "You don't want me. I sure as hell don't want you."

His eyes snapped to mine.

And then he moved.

Fast.

Too fast.

I didn't even get to step back before his hands were on my waist, his body pressing mine against the nearest tree trunk. The bark bit into my back through my coat, cold and sharp.

"Jonas—get off me—"

"You don't understand," he said, voice low and twisted and frantic. His face was too close, breath hot on my mouth, his eyes glowing, teeth too long now. His canines had dropped. His wolf was right there, just barely restrained. "I need you."

"No," I hissed. I struggled, but he was stronger. "Let. Me. Go."

"I got the perfect solution. You'll be my secret," he whispered. "No one has to know. I'll take a chosen mate, do what's expected—but you'll carry my hers."

Fu.cking delusional.

A wave of nausea slammed into me, rising fast and hard. I turned my head as a dry retch clawed its way up my throat.

"You're sick," I choked out. "A sick, f****d bastard."

He grinned. "You're mine. That scent doesn't lie. The Moon chose you. And I'm not letting you go."

I looked up at him, his face twisted in obsession, not love. Madness, not fate.

And for once, I was grateful.

Grateful I didn't feel the pull. Grateful I was human, whatever that meant now.

Because I didn't hesitate.

"Sorry to tell you but, it doesn't matter what you want. I, Katherine Hale, reject you, Jonas Hound, as my mate," I said, loud and clear, every word a dagger to his soul.

The effect was instant.

He inched like I'd driven a knife straight into his gut and twisted. His breath caught—sharp, ragged—like the air had been punched out of him. His hands dropped, hanging useless at his sides, and for a split second, the mask cracked.

I saw it.

The pain.

And Goddess did that feel good.

It wasn't clean or quiet. It was messy. Ugly. His face twisted like something inside him had just torn loose—like bones breaking, like skin ripping from the inside. His lips parted, but no sound came out. Just that hollow, shattered look in his eyes like the ground had opened up and swallowed him whole.

I almost giggled watching him in so much pain.

But then, rage crashed in.

Violent. Feral.

His features contorted, not just in anger but in something deeper—grief twisted into hatred, love curdled into poison. He looked like he was about to rip the world apart with his bare hands, and maybe he would've, if I'd let him live in that moment a second longer.

Uncontained. Unbridled. Unforgiving.

"You", he growled. "How dare you! I don't see pain in your eyes. Why don't I see it?! Are you a witch?! Answer me!"

"Because I don't feel it," I spat. "There's nothing between us. There never was."

His body trembled.

Something snapped.

He let out a guttural snarl—and then his claws came out.

Shining, sharp, and dripping with fury.

"Then You won't have anyone else," he said through clenched teeth. "If I can't have you—no one will."

Time slowed.

I tried to move. I opened my mouth to scream.

Too late.

His hand drove forward, claws extended, and I felt them tear through fabric, then ash.

Then my heart.

A sound I didn't recognize tore from my throat. Not a scream. Not a sob.

Just shock.

White-hot pain exploded in my chest, and my knees buckled as I sank against him, the world spinning wildly off its axis.

He held me up.

Watched my blood soak into the snow.

Watched the life drain from my eyes.

And then—he let me fall.

The cold hit me like a real insult. Snowflakes melted on my cheeks like tears that weren't mine.

The cold numbed me. The world around me blurred, fading into the distance like I was sinking into the deepest part of the ocean. I felt my pulse slow, my breath shallow. The edges of my vision blackened. The snow around me, red with my blood, felt more distant than ever.

I was dying.

And I knew it.

But then—

A roar.

A warmth that shouldn't have been there.

At rst, it was small. A wisp. But it spread, a sudden ame that ignited from within my chest, crawling down through my veins like liquid re.

No.

I couldn't even scream. The heat consumed me, curling up through my body, burning everything it touched. It was a re so intense it felt like it would tear me apart, like it was scraping away all the old parts of me—the human parts—burning them away to nothing.

I couldn't think. I couldn't feel.

And then, just as it reached my skull, my heart, the ames suddenly—stopped.

Everything went still. Silent. The cold that had once been so suffocating now seemed insignificant. I was still alive, but not the same.

My body felt… different.

New.

I opened my eyes.

Golden. Shining. Piercing.

And there, in the quiet of my mind, a voice whispered—low, almost teasing:

"Nice to nally meet you, Kitty Kat."