

THE MOON AND HER SECRET

CHAPTER 14 NO.14

The lady sat in the station, nervously fiddling with her thumbs as she watched Hannah show Ray where the last known position of the child was. Lana offered the lady a warm drink which she gladly took with her shakily hands.

“What’s your name?” Lana asked, trying to calm herself from this urgent situation so she could get all the information she needed while Ray and Hannah dealt with connecting the other rangers for help.

It was not a new thing, people go missing in the forest all the time and most of the time, the rangers would easily find them. But this was the first time a child has gone missing ever since Lana started working here.

“Ellie,” she muttered. “Please, you have to help me...” she sobbed.

“We will but I need to ask you a few more questions, okay? Can you do that for me?” Lana asked. Ellie nodded. “What’s your child’s name?”

“Her name is Autumn, she’s 7-years-old. She was wearing a red beanie and a pink jacket and—”

“Breathe,” Lana reminded her.

She took a deep breath, her hands tightened around the ceramic mug. “I just looked away for a second and...I tried looking for her, that was when the kind girl over there found me. In my panic I cause her to drop her walkie-talkie when she tried to contact the station...I’m sorry.” She looked down, ashamed

of her hysteric behaviour.

Lana shook her head as she placed her hand over Ellie's. "You were worried for your daughter, it's normal to panic at times like this. But you can rest now, we'll find your daughter." Lana reassured.

Ellie looked up at Lana with teary eyes and smiled as she nodded. "Do you promise?" she asked, her voice cracked.

Lana hesitated to reply, knowing that the chances of find a small child in a vast forest with such little manpower was slim but looking at Ellie's tear-stained cheeks made her feel obligated to answer.

"I—" Lana started.

"Lana." Ray called her over, interrupting her mid-sentence.

Lana gave Ellie a final reassuring squeeze before turning to walk to Ray and Hannah. "The missing child is 7-year-old Autumn, last seen wearing a red beanie and pink jacket." She told the two the details she had learnt from the mother.

"Got it. But we have bigger problems now." Ray said, gesturing Lana to look at the map. "This was where Hannah said she was when she found the lady," he pointed.

Lana frowned. The location was particularly surrounded by x's. She glanced at Ray who was clearly thinking about the same thing as Lana. No matter the direction the child went, there was a high chance that she would encounter a

wild animal. "We need to go look for her now, Ray." Lana pressed.

"I agree." He said as he moved quickly to gather his tools. "Hannah, you stay here and get in touch with Jack and Taylor and the Sheriff's office. Pronto." He ordered.

"Got it!" Hannah huffed as she went towards the main radio.

Lana went to grab her stuff as well, hooking her walkie-talkie to her belt as she tested her flashlight for batteries. Ray went to the door and Lana rushed after him. They jogged towards the location Ellie said she last saw Autumn.

They did not have their trucks with them as Jack and Taylor took them to do the further rounds. In Lana's head, looking for a child by foot would take up too much time, especially since it was only Ray and her looking for the time being.

"It would be faster if we split up." Lana dared to proclaim.

"Are you insane? It's just the two of us out there in the middle of the night with potential threats. We should just stick together." Ray countered.

"We don't have much time right? We'll only be wasting time at this point." She argued.

Ray was silent, trying to weigh out the pros and cons of splitting up with Lana. This wasn't her first time aiding in looking for a missing person, he knew she has the mental clarity and steady composure to not panic under pressure but somehow he was feeling anxious. As though his gut was warning him against

agreeing to her terms. He glanced back at her, noticing the determination in her eyes and realized that even if he said no, Lana would disobey him either way.

“Fine, but you need to keep your walkie on the entire time. You have a bad habit of switching it off during crucial times.” He frowned.

“Yes sir,” Lana sighed. “And you better answer me when I call you, Ray. If you go M.I.A don’t blame me for anything.”

“I won’t! I promise.” He declared proudly.

“You better...” she repeated in whisper.

Ray noticed the change of Lana’s tonality but before he could question her about it, she took a sharp right, immediately disappearing from Ray’s sight as she was engulfed behind the cover of darkness.

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The sound of hooting owls and rhythmic chirps of the crickets echoed throughout the dark forest. The flashlight in Lana’s hand illuminated her path as she attempted to spot any trails left behind by the missing girl, Autumn. So far, Lana failed to even stop a single footprint.

The further Lana walked into the forest, the more uneasy she felt. Something did not feel right to her about the path she was following, it felt as though her instincts were telling her to turn back to where she came from instead of wasting her time looking around this area.

The deafening sound of the static from the walkie-talkie made Lana unconsciously reach for it. She held it close to her ear to listen.

“Lana? Do you copy? Over.” Hannah’s voice blasted through the walkie-talkie. Lana lowered the volume and brought the device to her lips to answer.

“I’m here. Over.” She replied as her eyes scanned around the area.

“Jack and Taylor checked in, they’re heading out to join the search. Sheriff is on his way with some of his people. What’s your status? Over.”

Lana looked around the area. There were no signs of footsteps, no disturbed bushes or broken branches. Lana was certain that not a single soul even came to this part of the forest except for her.

“Negative on the girl. I’m heading to a different spot. Over.” Lana informed Hannah as she jogged back to the starting spot. Radio silence from Hannah followed right after and Lana replaced her walkie-talkie back on her belt.

She wondered why Hannah did not response, could it be that Lana was in a spot with bad signal or maybe Hannah was preoccupied with someone else. Either way, Lana decided to follow her gut instinct to find the missing girl instead of spending her time roaming around in circles. Ever since she started working as a part-time ranger, she realized how reliable her instincts were in dire situations. But she could never tell Ray about it, knowing that he would start to lecture her about following procedures and how rules exist for a reason.

Lana won't deny those facts. She was not the type to purposely break the rules for no reason after all but this time she was sure she would be able to find the child, as though she could sense the child's presence.

Once she reached the starting spot, she ran straight ahead, pushing past branches and bushes away from her face. She could feel the fatigue building up, she could feel the burn in her lungs every time she inhaled sharply but she knew that this time she was getting closer to the Autumn. She stopped running, almost tripping over her own feet by her sudden action. She crouched down and pointed her flashlight to the ground. There were footprints and the size of the shoes were small—like a child's.

Lana was definitely getting close. She stood up and continued her search, ignoring her the fact that her lungs were threatening to collapse from her constant running. She followed the footprints carefully and soon she found herself at an opening in the middle of the forest. She looked up, eyeing the moon above that was accompanied by a plethora of glistening stars. She felt a sense of déjà vu hitting her. This spot was familiar to her but before she could wreck her brain to remember, her attention was drawn elsewhere.

From her peripheral she noticed movement. She swiftly turned to the source, shining the flashlight towards it. The hand that was holding the flashlight immediately dropped to her side when she spotted a pink jacket and red beanie. Autumn was there, laying on the grass ground in a curled position. Lana wanted to run up to the child to check if she was alright but she found herself frozen in her position as she held the gaze of the sapphire eyed wolf that was seated beside the child, silently watching Lana.

“...River?” she called out to the wolf.

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