

## Chapter 55

“I need to know exactly what happened,” Jabari said, fully entering the room. Celeste’s eyes whipped from Jabari to me as she tried to follow the conversation.

“I – I don’t know. He must have gotten the pictures.” I wrung my fingers together.

“What pictures?” Celeste asked.

I imagined the first person I would ever talk about the pictures would be my mate but it turned out he’d fled the pack. I’d expected him to be angry. I expected him to feel betrayed, to be murderous. What I hadn’t factored in was the possibility of him hating me so much that he couldn’t stand to be in the same room as me long enough for a confrontation.

“How do I get in touch with him?” I asked Jabari, dodging Celeste’s question. “There has been a terrible misunderstanding and I need to clear things up fast.”

“I have a link with him as his Beta but he has shut me out.” Jabari pursed his lips, hands on his h\*\*s. He didn’t look the least bit pleased. “He also asked me to cancel the Mating Ceremony before he left.”

“Oh.” I sagged into my seat, all the energy zapping out of me, leaving me too stunned to speak.

“That good for nothing piece of poop!” Celeste exploded out of nowhere, startling me. Jabari and I turned to her with matching expressions of shock, horror, disbelief and everything in between.

“What does he mean by cancel the Mating Ceremony after he announced it?”

“Careful, that’s the Alpha you are talking about,” Jabari’s tone was hard as granite as he cautioned Celeste but his face – he looked like he was staring at a cute child.

“Well, he can suck my big toe. If anyone is to cancel the Ceremony, it should be Aysel. He left her when she obviously isn’t at a good place. What an Alpha he is!” She flipped her hair behind her shoulders, shot Jabari a wilting glare before turning to me with a calm look. “Have you had dinner?”

“I – what?” The force of her outburst and sudden change in attitude left me speechless.

It was always a sight to behold when Celeste got defensive and all her protectiveness came out full force. Her small voice and average stature would not intimidate anyone but she carried so much fire that when she got angry, she acted like a dragon ready to breathe fire. She spoke with the confidence of a warrior wolf and challenged anyone irrespective of size.

“I know you haven’t had dinner. You have lost a bit of weight and there’s not a drop of color on your skin.” She turned to Jabari with a pointed glare. He looked from me to her at an obvious loss. “Well? Will you get her dinner or have you seized being her Beta because her mate got cold feet?”

I wanted to tell her not to take out her anger on Jabari who was doing more than I expected, but I didn’t want to aggravate her further. The aura around her screamed danger, like a cornered animal about to lash out with all of their might.

“Ah – Yes, I will get someone to send dinner to her.” He turned briskly and left the suite, closing the door softly behind him.

My friend let out a breath and I chuckled at the relief that flooded her face. She'd even managed to fool me! I sobered up quickly when I remembered my life was quite literally falling apart right in front of me and I was partially to be blamed.

No, I wouldn't take any of the blame. I had been framed. Lucien and his cohorts would take all the blame because they caused this.

"Will you tell me what's happening?" I looked at my friend and she genuinely looked like she believed that I would not tell her.

"Did you send me a text to meet you at the Old Home yesterday?" I asked her instead.

It was too soon. The wound still too raw to poke at but if I sat quiet for even a second longer, the top would gloss over and it would be as if everything was fine while I rotted inside.

"No, I told you I lost my phone. I don't know how it happened but I must have thrown it while I was sleeping." Her brows furrowed like they did when she was confused. "Why would I even ask you to meet up at the Old Home? That place has been abandoned for decades; since my father was a boy. It's just fortunate it never collapsed on us when we were younger."

"Someone texted me with your phone and I thought you needed me."

"What – I – I don't understand." She pulled away. Well, that made two of us.

I too would like to know more. I was as confused as she was and the only person who would give me answers was the last person I wanted to see in this world. Not breathing anyway. I didn't want to see Lucien if he could still move.

"I got to the Old Home but that's all I can remember. Artemis tells me it was Lucien and his gang. I woke up in the basement and I was bleeding black b\*\*\*d from my nose." I paused.

I took a shaky breath to force myself to continue. It was this part – this knowledge that I could never fully wrap my head around. It was the wickedness that I never expected would be done to me. It wasn't something I could open my mouth and make myself say. Because it hurt. It made my heart beat faster, my palms sweat and my eyes sting.

Celeste had a hand over her mouth and her eyes blown to twice their normal sizes. They reddened in a second.

“I can't remember what happened but – but someone sent me pictures. And – I was naked with Lucien all over me.”

“No!” The horror in her voice reflected the horror in my guts. “He – he – Even she couldn't say the words and I felt a bit better knowing I wasn't overreacting. It was foolish to even think I may be overreacting in the first place.

“They sent the pictures and asked me to cancel my Ceremony and – I – I was so scared. I didn't know what to do.”

“I am so sorry that happened to you.” She grabbed my hand. “That boy.” She whispered to herself.

“I should have told Valens, shouldn't I?” I laughed at myself but not because I found anything funny about my situation.

“You were scared,” she reminded me.

I was more than scared. I was confused. Hurt. Betrayed.

“I should have told him but what if he didn't believe me?” I asked, continuing without waiting for a reply. “I deleted the pictures, threw my phone into the toilet and tried to pretend nothing happened. I tried to block out reality but it seems I can't outrun my bad luck. He must have seen the pictures and – and now – he's somewhere thinking I cheated on him with someone I can't even stand,” I rambled.

I stared vacantly into the distance.

“What do I do, Celeste? I have no idea what I’m supposed to do now.”

“First, you’ll eat then you’ll have Lucien and his gang locked up and then we’ll find your mate and everything will be back to normal.” So easy.

It sounded so simple. As if I could take three steps and those three things would be achieved but I knew better.

My stomach was in knots so I didn’t know if I would even be able to eat. I didn’t think I had the power to lock anyone up now that the Alpha seemed to have rejected me and where would I find Valens?

Someone knocked on the door and Celeste rose. She took her hands from mine and I felt the loss of warmth and a sudden biting cold that had nothing to do with the weather in the room.

She returned with a tray of food that she set before me. “Octavia sends her greetings.” I nodded absentmindedly. “You can’t stare at the food. You have to eat it.” Right. I had to eat to survive.

Nothing on the tray looked appetizing. In fact, the aroma from the food made me nauseous.

“I’m not really feeling this meal.”

“Oh ho!” Celeste exclaimed, pointing a finger at me as if she’d caught me doing something wrong. “Octavia said to tell you that she can bring you whatever you want if you don’t like this food. I didn’t understand at first but it seems you’ve been rejecting your food.” She looked at me like a disapproving mother would look at their erring child. “You have to eat something. You haven’t eaten all day.”

In the end, the only way to get Celeste to stop pestering me to eat was to actually eat. I kept telling her that the food wasn’t going down well because my stomach was in knots but she wouldn’t hear of it until I had eaten at least half of my plate.

I drank a glass of water and my stomach turned. Celeste watched as I rushed to the bathroom to throw up everything I'd just had. She held my hair while I threw up and sat with me on the bathroom floor while I cried.

“Get some rest. I will stay with you tonight and first thing tomorrow, we'll go to the hospital.”