

## Chapter 40

Kylan

My grip tightened on the wheelchair as I looked back at Violet, who had just gave me the coldest stare in existence. That little puppy had some nerve.

Of all the directions we could've gone, we had to pass by her family. Just perfect.

They all had looked down at their feet, clearly making it a point not to look our way. My gaze met Dylan's for a split second, and he greeted with a nod. I returned the gesture, acknowledging him.

Surprisingly enough, out of all the Bloodroses, even Hastings, he was the only one I could somewhat respect. He had earned that respect.

I didn't know the other Hastings, but I wasn't all that interested either. They were nothing, nobodies.

As we passed by, the king glanced back at them, stopping in his steps. Everyone stopped, waiting for the king as he released a low chuckle. Then he continued his pace.

What was so funny?

Did he expect everyone to bow down, kiss the ground he walked on? Probably. He had a way of making everyone feel small with just the simplest stare or chuckle. He would even do it to his own sons.

He was a selfish man. In his world, everything revolved around him. Even as we now made our way to the training hall, I already knew how it would turn out. Instead of caring about my achievements, he would most likely rant about his own during his prime time.

"Ky," Kayden looked up. I clenched my jaw, already knowing what was coming.

"Who was the girl?"

I didn't think it was possible, but my grip on the handles tightened even more. "What girl?" I asked, pretending to be oblivious.

Kayden wasn't stupid, far from it. He had always known me better than anyone, better than I even knew myself at times. There was no point in telling him that she was or wasn't my mate, because he already knew.

It wasn't surprising that he'd figured it out. We were born on the same day, same year—practically twins, connected in ways that went deeper than most could understand.

"For how long have you known?" Kayden questioned.

"Known what?" I said, playing dumb.

"You know what I mean," Kayden sighed softly. "For how long have you known that she's your mate?"

I didn't respond. I didn't have to. Kayden could read me like a book, and my silence was all the confirmation he needed.

"For that long?" he almost gasped, creating his own timeline inside his head. "Push me back. I want to meet her," he stated.

"No, you don't," I snapped, the words coming out harsher than I intended. "Trust me, you don't," I lowered my voice this time.

"Why not?"

"Because she's a stubborn, annoying puppy with a big mouth who doesn't respect anyone and thinks she's the only one on this planet," I growled, the words spilling out before I could stop them.

Kayden chuckled. "So, kind of like you."

I growled under my breath. "I'm not a puppy."

Kayden huffed. "Who cares that she's a werewolf? We're all shifters, Kylan. It's not that different."

I sighed, trying to suppress the anger bubbling up inside me. Just thinking about her made me want to punch a wall. "You don't get it, Kayden. It's not just about her being a werewolf."

Kayden didn't let it go. "We've got some werewolves in our family, you know," he reminded me. "Some Werecoyote hybrids, it's not unheard of."

"Yes," I grumbled. "From royal Alpha branches. Not someone like a Bloodrose."

Kayden hummed. "So she's a Bloodrose—probably an healer?"

Hearing he was ready to vouch for her, I regretted even bringing it up. "Exactly. A Bloodrose healer. They're not like us," I stated. "They live in one small village, keep to themselves...and she's too weak."

"Who cares about how weak she is if she's a healer from the Bloodrose?" Kayden pressed on, trying to convince me. "Do you really think she's unworthy?"

"It's not about worth," I tried to come up with any reason. "It's about...compatibility. We don't fit."

Kayden stayed quiet for a moment, thinking it over. "Or maybe you don't want her to fit."

I didn't answer.

I couldn't.

Because deep down, I knew he wasn't wrong. There was something else inside me that refused to accept her, even though every little thing pulled me toward her.

I was scared.

Scared of letting her in because if I did, everything I had built up to protect myself would come crashing down—and that was a risk I wasn't willing to take.

I could only protect so much, and the one thing I was determined to protect was my legacy—perhaps with a proper mate by my side. Mom went through hell, and nobody deserved to experience that kind of suffering.

Not even Puppy.

"You need to keep this between us. I haven't told anyone."

"Not even Nate?"

"No," I responded. "Not even Nate."

I hadn't told him because this was exactly what I wanted to avoid. People making up reasons about why I should accept her while someone of her status was clearly unacceptable.

"We'll get back to your mate," Kayden chuckled. "Now the other thing. Why are we fighting with Nate?"

I tightened my lips, hating this topic even more than the last one. "Nate and I are good."

Kayden snorted, not buying it. "Are you going to make it that difficult for me today?"

"That's funny. I was just about to ask you the same thing," I replied dryly, pushing him forward as we approached the training room.

Inside, the king was already inspecting every single piece of equipment. We were the only ones there because the king wanted absolute privacy. Fortunately, I also had a bit of privacy as Kayden had rolled towards Beta Jack and his family.

Somehow the equipments had received more attention from the king than I did today. That man had ignored me since he arrived, and I had not even received a greeting. Even Nate got a slight pat on the shoulder.

"James!" The king's voice rang out as Rochwall entered. Once again, his tone held more excitement than he had shown me the entire day. It was understandable since the two went way back.

Dad motioned for the guards to step aside, making his way toward Rochwall with a bright, rare smile.

Rochwall bowed. "Your majesty."

The king cracked a smile. "Why do people refuse to call me by my first name nowadays? Come on, we were on the same team."

Rochwall shrugged with a small, awkward laugh. Even I felt uncomfortable watching the exchange. Was the king really that oblivious? Did he not notice that people avoided him because they were scared, or because we all knew he was an absolute nutcase?

At least I was self-aware enough to know when I was being avoided.

"Y-Your son," Rochwall gulped, gesturing toward me as our eyes met. "You should be very proud of him. Same as last year, he's one of the best on the team, a worthy captain."

The king looked at me with an unreadable expression. For a moment, I thought he might actually acknowledge the praise, but his gaze hardened as it quickly returned to Rochwall.

"Well, that's what's expected of a crown prince, isn't it?" he spoke, dismissively. "I'm not impressed. Becoming captain is the easy part."

His words stung, but were not completely unexpected. I had heard it all before. A chuckle escaped from my lips.

"If that's the easy part," Rochwall said, "then why was I the captain and not you?"