

CHAPTER 86

86 Ava: Missed Timing 86 Ava: Missed Timing The warmth of our linked fingers burn my skin with a thousand unspoken accusations that prickle at my conscience. “I didn’t stop looking. I had scouts in the area, keeping an eye on your father’s home as much as they could, but we’ve historically had a problem keeping any scouts alive in Blackwood territory. We escalated the issues we had, brought our problems to Council, trying to escalate the situation so we could infiltrate. It took a long time before we got the evidence we needed. I hated it, but I couldn’t risk a war with the Council without anything to back up my actions.” As Lucas recounts his efforts to find me, I can’t help but tune out, stressing over the secrets that I never felt were secrets at the time. Now, with this fragile peace between us—after he’s sacrificed in order to save me... It seems like a pretty f@cking shitty move to say nothing, no matter how innocent it was. I should tell him. I know I should. 86 Ava: Missed Timing But the words catch in my throat, tangled with a web of emotions I can’t seem to untangle. How will he react when he learns that I sought refuge from my heat with another alpha? Will he see it as a betrayal? A violation of our fated bond? When Selene and I spoke, it seemed so simple. He rejected me, so he has no right to be upset. Now? With his fingers linked through mine? With me, alive, here, in his territory? The thought of losing his trust, of shattering the fragile connection that’s blooming between us, fills me with dread. And yet, keeping secrets from him feels like a disservice to what he’s done for me. I take a deep breath, steeling my resolve. “Lucas, there’s something I need to tell you about-” His phone rings, the sudden sound shattering the moment like a rock through a glass window. Lucas frowns, glancing at the screen. “Shit. It’s Kellan. Hold on, Ava, I have to take this. I’ll be right back.” His hand squeezes mine in a casual intimacy that 11 22 C 86 Ava Missed Timing breaks my heart. I force a smile. “Of course. Go ahead.” As he steps away to answer the call, I can’t help but berate myself for taking too damn long. Stupid, stupid, stupid. This is going to end up being a cancer that ruins us. It isn’t hard. Hey, Lucas, I happen to have an insane heat and I kind of went crazy, and some alpha helped me out in hard times. See? Easy. Pulling my knees to my chest, I rest my forehead against them and breathe long, slow breaths as my abdomen protests the movement. Relax. You can do this. It won’t shatter everything. Lucas will understand. This isn’t going to be a repeat of the night of the Gala. He won’t think you’re disgusting. He won’t think you’re a cheater. You’ll still *www.novelm.com*

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e accepted for who you are. It’s okay, Ava. 327 BG Ava: Missed Timing Everything’s going to be fine. My anxiety lessens with repeated controlled breathing. I settle into the silence with my eyes closed, concentrating on the rhythm of oxygen filling my lungs, and the soft exhale each time. I wonder if my breath stinks. That would be embarrassing. I should brush them. The sensation of a hand brushing against my hair startles me out of my forced peace. At first, my body tenses, until it catches up to my brain and the welcome scent of campfire. I’m safe. It’s just Lucas. -Nothing’s going to happen to me here. Turning my head, I lean my cheek against my knees and glance up at Lucas. His face is so gentle that my heart aches, and I curse my past self for taking our connection so lightly. Granted, the man rejected me, and how was I supposed to know that he’d rescue me in the future... but shit would be a hell of a lot easier right now if I didn’t have to worry about telling him I’d naale lost my virginity to an alpha from a different naok 13 27 < 86 Ava Missed Timing An alpha who wants me to stay his mate. Who—has no idea I’m safe. Damn. I didn’t think about that. I should get a phone call in... after I let Lucas know of his existence. f@ck. I was not equipped for this level of romantic entanglement in my life. I am not prepared. Not trained. I haven’t read enough romance novels. I need to do some serious research on this. “Hey,” he murmurs, his brows furrowing with concern. I guess my panic is showing. “You okay?” I stare up at him. The sunlight beaming through the window haloes his dark hair, highlighting the gold in his eyes. He’s so beautiful it hurts. “Yeah. I’m okay.” My voice is a bit throaty, and I clear it with a little cough. “I was just giving myself a pep talk, because-” His phone rings again, the sound like a blade slicing through the moment, decapitating what courage I had managed to muster. Lucas glances at it with a torn expression. Indecision wars on his face before he sighs and leans down to pronoo Irion against my forehead in line aro a His 86 Ava: Missed Timing soft, the caress achingly tender. “Whatever it is that’s worrying you, we can talk about it. I promise. But I have to take care of something first.” I feel guilty at the relief that floods through me, but I nod and force a smile. “Go ahead. But... there’s something important we need to discuss when you get back.” “I’ll be here,” he assures me, his eyes serious as they hold mine. “We can get through anything, Ava. If you just give me a chance, I’ll make up for everything. Everything.” Emotion clogs my throat, strangling me with the intensity of it. Unable to speak, I simply nod. Lucas smiles, the curve of his lips gentle and -understanding. And then he’s turning, striding out of the room with a purposeful gait. I watch him go, my heart a tangled mess in my chest. The click of the door closing behind him is like a period at the end of a sentence. Alone again. I blow out a shaky breath and rub my hands over my face when I realize something. 86 Ava: Missed Timing My necklace. My ring. I grab at my fingers, which are naked. Then my neck, covered in bandages. Nothing. f@ck. f@ck! Every damn time I enter a hospital...