

Chapter 39

"What did you say to my mother?" He demands, answering my question with one of his own. It appears he hasn't learned his lesson on commanding me just yet. "Aeliana," he repeats.

"Nothing," I say with an eyeroll.

His expression remains the same, cold, unsatisfied, and half-entertaining. "What did she say to you?" He asks yet again. It appears to be killing him that he doesn't know what she said to me.

I shrug, "It's private."

Kingston scoffs, his patience wearing thin. "Well, whatever it was, forget it. She doesn't speak for me, I —"

"Hate me?" I interrupt his sentence. "Yeah. I gathered."

He doesn't speak, neither denying nor affirming it, he simply watches me. "I know, you hate me," I swallow, trying to sound nonchalant about it, like it doesn't burn my skin to know that. "Your girlfriend hates me, the whole pack hates me, and your mother might be the only person who has an ounce of favour towards me. So I won't tell her to shut up when she's talking because it's disrespectful."

"Oh," he finally speaks. "You care about respect?"

"Yes. And I respect her." I slowly nod. "I will smile and nod at whatever she has to say about you, me, and the us that shall never be but don't think for a second that I'm deluded enough to picture it, or that I am interested in pursuing you. I don't like you either."

For a moment, something flashes in his gaze. Something deep and

haunting, but it doesn't linger enough for me to decipher it. "And I should care?"

"No," I shrug. "But you should stop conering me, you look an awful lot like a dead friend of mine and it's strange when you're around." I gulp, the ghost of my said friend staring down at me like he could sacrifice me for the greater good. "Now if you excuse me, I have seconds to count."

"What do you mean?"

I don't respond, my phone huzzes in my hand. Talk about saved by the bell. I force a smile, I'm not sure why but when I see the way Kingston's gaze hardens, I understand it. It's to mess with him.

"Who is calling you, Aeliana?"

It's my friend from Clinshore, another TA with whom I often hang out at the university but I don't tell him that—not explicitly.

Kingston wraps a hand around my wrist and pulls me into him, heat instantly pours into my skin. My knees nearly give out, but I stand strong—steady. I'm so close that I can hear the erratic pounding in his chest.

He smells so good, like pine and wood but there's something else, something that doesn't belong there.

Audrey.

I can scent her on him. "You stink," I tell him, scrunching up my nose. Her scent itself is a trigger for my anger, Lumi and I know no calm where she is concerned. I like to think that's the bond messing with me and not the dead crush that I used to have on him.

Kingston ignores my remark. "Who is calling you?" He repeats, this time

visibly twitching, as if it aches that he can't control every aspect of my life.

Oh, goddess. We are both miserably doomed. And if I didn't know better, I'd assume he were jealous.

"A friend," I smile, wiggling out of his grip. "You must be familiar with the word but not the actions that go with it," I tell him, sliding answer on the call before the ringing dies out. "Hello, Noah," I say, dashing past Kingston. I don't need to look to know he's fuming. And I might have confirmed everything Audrey planted in his head about my nonexistent lovers in Clinshore pack.

"Oh my goodness," Noah dramatically gasps on the other end. "She answers?"

"I'm sorry, Noah. Can I call you—"

"Later? No." She sighs, and I can picture her scowling at me the way she often used to when I forgot our plans. It's a face I'll never see again, and I can thank the all-knowing, godsend Alpha Kingston for it. "You won't. How are you? Where are you? Why haven't you been answering my calls? When do I see you?"

Too many questions and too little time. I chose only two to answer. "I'm good, and I'm still in Mooncrest," I tell her, ignoring the rest. I haven't answered her calls because I don't know how to stay in contact with her and not miss my life back in Clinshore. Noah is a huge part of my life, and I had to give that up.

"When are you coming back?" She asks, shuffling something in the background. Probably the huge binder that she carries everywhere. "I miss you." She sighs. I miss her too, she always made me feel less lonely.

"The bar gets pretty dull without you beside me."

"Yeah?" I swallow, a huge lump forming in my throat the longer I listen to her voice but somehow, listening to her makes me feel good. I feel so out of place here but in Clinshore? I have something—someone, I exist without the weight of the past or rumours. "Tell me more."

Thankfully, Noah doesn't notice how heavy my voice gets. "You won't believe what happened in the board meeting today, professor—"

"Umm, I have to go." I finally give in, I don't want to hear from the life I was forced to abandon, a life I built myself but might never return to. It's breaking me inside, and the mask is slowly falling. "Talk to you later, hun." 1

"Oh, okay." Noah promptly agrees. "Promise?"

"Cross my heart, stab a dagger through. Yes, I'll contact you."

"Love you, Aeli." She says, ending a call with an air kiss.

I drag myself up the hall to my room, my chest weighing heavily despite my not thinking of things that I shouldn't. I would do anything to go back there, if I somehow woke up on the day I got the wedding invite, or even on the flight to here, I would make it my mission to stay in Clinshore.

Nonetheless, as if smelling Audrey on Kingston wasn't enough, I walk past her too. I try to ignore her existence but when it finally clicks in that perfect little head of hers? She calls me. "Hello, Squeak." She says, invariably using that diminishing petname she and Sera found for me.

All because I wouldn't cry, when my mouth was stuffed with clothes that they would make me choke on. Instead, I squeaked, and it stuck. 1

Still, I've found a way to block that out, to not let it affect me in any way. "Have you gone deaf?" She asks, rushing towards me only to block my way and poke me. "Squeak?"

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