

Chapter 25: Unexpected Meeting

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Lorelei.

There was a time—so long ago now—that hearing her name would've made me smile.

Because once... she had made me smile.

I remembered it clearly—the first time I met her.

She was dressed in pretty clothes that smelled like expensive flowers but didn't hesitate to come to where I was.

She had snuck into the room where I was confined one afternoon, giggling like it was a great adventure. She brought toys and sweets, things I wasn't supposed to have—and we played.

I was happy.

I remember thinking, *Maybe she's my friend. Maybe she likes me.*

But then... her dog died.

Her favorite. A white, fluffy thing named Coco. He followed her everywhere.

And when they found him cold and poisoned near the garden, Lorelei's smile vanished.

I never saw her smile at me like that again—gentle, happy.

She blamed me.

And I couldn't blame her for thinking it was my fault.

I was known to be cursed, after all.

She didn't always bully me—no, she was smarter than that. It depended on her mood. If she were in a good one, she'd ignore me. Sometimes, I thought she even knew I took the things she threw away.

But other days... she'd whisper cruel things when no one was watching, bump into me in the halls, and laugh when I flinched.

Still, she never touched me—never hurt me physically.

Maybe even she feared the consequences of harming someone cursed.

But the ache she left behind... that was real.

And it ached more when I learned she had claimed the place I once believed was meant for me.

Kael's Luna. His mate.

I stepped closer to the curtain, breath catching, until I heard it.

Another voice.

One that made something cold and brittle crack inside me.

Kael.

My ex-mate.

The one who rejected me.

"See? There's a client here. You can shop outside, Lei. Or better yet, we go to another store—"

His voice was cut off.

And then—

"What's taking you so long? Are you having a hard time again?"

Darius.

I spun around heart racing. "No—wait—"

But it was too late.

The curtain moved.

It didn't open all the way, just a slight parting, but enough for him to see my face and to notice the panic written all over me.

His brows drew together. "What is it?"

His gaze dipped briefly, noticing the dress I wore. Then, without another word—

He yanked the curtain fully open.

No!

My breath fled my lungs.

And standing not far behind Darius—

Was Kael.

And beside him, clinging to his arm like a trophy—

Lorelei.

Her eyes met mine.

Widened.

And her lips curled into something sharp and cruel.

But the way she looked at Darius... I knew she already had an idea that I might be here.

Maybe she hadn't been sure.

Who would believe that I was here—fitting an expensive gown?

When I'd spent most of my life wearing my late mother's old clothes... or whatever Lorelei didn't like and threw in the trash.

My eyes met Kael's, and for a moment—just a moment—time paused.

My heart throbbed.

But not with the same ache it used to.

Not with longing.

Not with the pain of rejection.

It was dull now. Empty. Like a faded scar that no longer hurt but still reminded you it had once been deep.

Whatever I used to feel for him... was long gone.

He looked at me—eyes widening slightly, lips parting like he hadn't expected to see me here.

Not like this.

Not standing in silk and shimmer. Not beside the Lycan King, Darius Vane.

I dropped my gaze before I could read too much into his expression.

And that's when I felt it.

A touch—Darius's hand pressing lightly against the small of my back.

Not harsh. Not unkind.

But grounding.

And all at once, every thought of Kael and Lorelei vanished. They became background noise.

Because my entire focus snapped to him.

To Darius.

He stared at me, his expression still blank—impassive—but something flickered in his golden eyes.

A warning.

No... not just that.

Possession.

Like he was silently telling everyone in that room exactly who I belonged to.

And for some reason... my knees weakened.

"Just making sure you already zipped it up," he said, voice calm but firm, his gaze never leaving mine.

He wasn't just talking about the dress.

He was claiming me.

Right there.

In front of the mate who rejected me.

In front of the stepsister, who always looked at me like I didn't belong.

My breath hitched.

I should've moved. I should've stepped away.

But I didn't.

I couldn't.

"Elira?"

Lorelei's voice rang out—sweet, syrupy, too high-pitched to be genuine.

The weight of Darius's hand slowly fell from my back as I turned toward her.

She stood there, still clinging to Kael's arm, but her expression was the very image of feigned surprise. Her eyes sparkled, lips parted in soft shock as if she couldn't believe her own luck.

"I can't believe it's really you!" she gasped, stepping forward. "You look so... different!"

I said nothing.

She walked closer, dragging Kael, who never took his eyes off me. I felt it, though I didn't try to meet his gaze anymore.

Her gaze dipped briefly to the gown I wore, the shimmer catching her eye.

She smiled—just wide enough to show teeth.

"I didn't expect to see you in a place like this," she said, voice laced with sugar. "I mean, look at you! All dressed up like a princess."

"I thought I'd never see you again," Lorelei continued, her tone faltering just slightly—as though trying to sound emotional. "When you left... I was worried since I didn't hear any news from you even though you know my number or you could write me a letter."

Worried? Her number?

She took another step forward, releasing Kael's arm.

And before I could move away—before I could even process it—her arms wrapped around me.

She hugged me.

Tightly.

Too tightly.

I froze.

The scent of expensive perfume and artificial sweetness filled my nose.

My hands stayed at my sides.

She held me like we were long-lost sisters like she hadn't once laughed as I cried, hadn't whispered words that haunted me into the night.

"I missed you," she whispered beside my ear. "Really, I did."

Liar.

But I didn't say a word.

Because I knew what this was.

A show.

I forced a smile, swallowing down the discomfort in my throat.

"Lorelei... it's you," I said, finally finding my voice as I simply moved away from her.

She beamed. "I am! I'm so happy to see you again, Elira."

I nodded politely, keeping my hands at my sides while she looked around us—until her gaze landed on the man beside me.

Darius.

Her eyes lit up—not with recognition, but something far too familiar.

Admiration.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and took a subtle breath, straightening her posture before turning to him.

"Hi," she said, voice softening, trying too hard. "I wasn't able to introduce myself the last time you came to pick Elira up. It was so sudden and fast. I'm Lorelei."

She held out her hand—slender, manicured, practiced.

Darius didn't move.

He simply stared at her.

Unblinking. Cold.

The silence stretched longer than it should've.

Lorelei's smile faltered, and after a beat, she let out a shy, awkward laugh and pretended to fix a strand of hair behind her ear, brushing it back with a flick that said I'm still composed—even though she wasn't.

She turned to me, her gaze hard to read. Then, almost as if it were timed, her hand slid around Kael's arm.

And that's when I saw it again.

The ring.

The one Kael had given me when we were still... us.

My heart dropped—but not out of sadness. Not even betrayal.

Just... a final confirmation that nothing from before remained.

"So, wow," Lorelei said with a sweet laugh, flashing the ring, making sure I saw it again, "this is really unexpected. Don't you think so, Kael?"

I turned to him slowly, finally meeting his eyes.

He hadn't said a word.

But he was still staring at me.

His jaw clenched, his fists tightening at his sides. His gaze flicked down my figure—once, then up again—before shifting sharply toward Darius.

As if he was seeing something that didn't sit well with him.

Something he didn't like.

The tension crackled between them, silent and sharp.

"I'll take this gown," Darius said suddenly, his voice cutting through the silence like a blade. "And every piece of that... and that." He pointed—once, twice, three times—toward racks of gowns glittering under the boutique lights.

The woman who welcomed us blinked, stunned, but quickly recovered and smiled. "Y-Yes, of course, Sir."

My eyes widened. "Wait—Darius, I don't—"

But I didn't get to finish.

He grabbed my wrist—not harshly, but firmly enough to make my breath hitch—and pulled me back toward the fitting room.

With him.

The curtain fell closed behind us.

"W-What are you—" I started, panicking, my heart hammering in my chest.

He said nothing.

Instead, he moved behind me again and gently touched my shoulders.

Then I felt it.

The zipper tugging downward—slow, deliberate. The gown loosened along my spine, and my entire body froze.

My breath caught. My knees nearly buckled.

And then—

His breath.

Warm. Soft. Too close.

Right against my neck.

"D-Darius..." I whispered, my voice barely more than air.

"Change," he said, low and rough. "Now."

"I-I can't... Y-you're here—"

"And so?"

His voice was too calm. Too quiet.

Too dangerous.

I couldn't move. My hands trembled at my sides, fingers curling into fists as that familiar heat returned—uninvited and consuming.

Crawling beneath my skin like it had a mind of its own.

I waited for him to do something else. To say something more.

But instead... he stepped away.

In the mirror, I saw him.

His back turned to me now. Stiff. Guarded.

As if shielding me from the world outside the curtain.

"Now," he said again, his voice lower this time, almost growling. "Change... before—"

He muttered something else, but I couldn't hear it.

Maybe because all I could hear was the sound of my pulse thundering in my ears.

"...you regret it."



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