Chapter 236: Cheat On Him

Heat rushed into Aria's face so violently she wanted the floor to split open and swallow her whole.

Why did she have to do that? What the hell was wrong with her?

It didn't help that Rhydian had noticed too. But when Aria finally gathered enough courage to glance at him again, she stumbled upon something far worse.

Rhydian was staring at her. Except there was such smoldering intensity in his eyes that for one breathless second, they almost seemed to glow. Then Aria blinked, and it was gone.

His entire expression hardened as if a wall had slammed into place. His jaw locked, his features turned unreadable, and those eyes that had burned into hers only seconds ago refused to look her way again.

Strangely, disappointment washed over Aria. And that scared her even more. Why? None of this made any sense.

She liked Maverick. Hell, there was a mate bond between them. She'd chosen to give their relationship a chance because she genuinely wanted him, so why the hell did Rhydian affect her like this?

Was there really something wrong with her?

Aria hated even thinking about it. She didn't want to hurt Maverick. He'd already survived enough in his life without his own mate becoming another person who caused him pain. The thought made her stomach twist.

She wasn't that kind of person.

Aria didn't cheat. She didn't play with people's feelings. Yet here she was staring at another man while holding her boyfriend's hand and feeling things she had absolutely no business feeling.That was what frightened her.

As if the strange paralysis holding all three of them finally broke, Maverick tightened his fingers around hers. Rhydian's attention dropped to their intertwined hands, and his jaw worked once. Then he looked away and continued toward the office.

The passage was broad, but with both men approaching each other, it suddenly felt much narrower. Maverick kept Aria close to his side as they moved forward while Rhydian came from the opposite direction. For one ridiculous second, Aria considered squeezing herself against the wall just to avoid him.

Too late. Their shoulders brushed as they passed. Aria sucked in a sharp breath and stumbled to a halt.

Heat.

That was the only way she could describe it.

The contact lasted barely a second, yet something scorching shot from the point where their bodies touched and raced beneath her skin. It swept down her spine and through her limbs with startling speed, leaving every nerve in its path painfully awake. Then it vanished, but the sensation did not.

Maverick stopped immediately.

"Are you okay?" His gaze swept over her. "Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine," Aria answered far too quickly.

She didn't dare look back. Ogling Rhydian in front of Maverick had already been humiliating enough. She wasn't about to make matters worse by turning around to see whether the dragon had felt whatever the hell that was too.

She listened instead and Rhydian's footsteps continued steadily behind them. He hadn't stopped.

For some reason, that bothered her, which only irritated Aria more.

"Let's go." The frustration in her voice came out sharper than she'd intended.

Maverick looked like he wanted to say something. His mouth opened, but after studying her for a moment, he closed it again.

As selfish as it was, Aria was grateful.

Maverick wasn't stupid. He'd seen her reaction to Rhydian. Tonight wasn't even the first time. There had been the restroom, and now this. Just because he wasn't confronting her about it didn't mean he hadn't noticed.

But Aria wasn't ready for that conversation. Mostly because she didn't have an explanation to give him.

So she tightened her grip on his hand and started walking again, eager to put as much distance between herself and that office as possible.

She didn’t realize how quickly she was moving until Maverick easily matched her stride. Nor did she notice the deep frown pulling at her face or how much of her frustration must have been spilling through their bond.

"We can talk about this, you know." Maverick’s voice cut through the silence.

Fear immediately curled through her stomach.

Oh God, no.

Aria kept walking as though she hadn’t heard him. The turn leading into the fighting arena was just ahead. She could already hear the thunder of voices echoing through the passage, students shouting in anticipation. If she could just get there—

Maverick stopped. Their joined hands brought Aria up short before he gave a gentle tug and pulled her back against him. Her palms landed against his chest, and Aria kept her eyes there. She couldn’t look at him.

Maverick allowed that for all of two seconds before his fingers settled beneath her chin and gently tipped her face upward. Aria reluctantly met his eyes.

"No matter what happens," he said, "never take your eyes away from me."

Something inside her squeezed painfully, and Aria let out an exhausted breath.

"It’s you I like," she confessed immediately. "Not him."

Then, as though saying it wasn’t enough, Aria rose onto her toes and kissed him. Hard.

Maverick barely had time to react before her arms went around his neck, but he responded without hesitation. His hands found her waist and he kissed her back with the same desperate intensity, pulling her closer until there was hardly any space left between them.

For several seconds, Aria poured everything she couldn’t explain into that kiss. Her choice. Her guilt. Her fear. How desperately she needed Maverick to understand that whatever the hell happened to her whenever Rhydian was around didn’t change what she felt for him.

But the kiss couldn’t quiet the confusion inside her and Aria broke away abruptly. Before Maverick could ask what was wrong, she buried her face against his chest. Then he felt the first tear soak through his shirt.

"I don’t know what’s gotten into me," she whispered, her voice cracking. "I swear, Maverick, I really like you."

Maverick froze. Then panic hit him.

Goddess, no. What the fuck had he done?

His mate was crying against his chest because he’d made her feel as though she had to prove she wanted him.

His mother would skin him alive.

Actually, no. Violet would first give him that horribly disappointed look that somehow hurt worse than physical violence, then skin him alive.

And his fathers?

Fuck.

Asher would probably ask him exactly what he’d said, dissect every word and explain precisely where he’d gone wrong, which was humiliating enough on its own. Griffin would simply tell him he was an idiot. Alaric would probably subject him to some form of electrical torture. Roman—

Maverick almost shuddered.

Roman would sit him down for an unending lecture about trust, insecurity and mate bonds before shoving one of his damned books into his hands and assigning him Chapters to read.

No.Absolutely not. His family could never hear about this. This incident was going to the grave with him.

"Hey. No, no, no, no." Maverick immediately wrapped both arms around her. "Please don’t cry, sweetheart."

Aria only pressed her face harder against his chest.

That made his panic considerably worse.

"Fuck, Aria." He stroked a hand over her hair, then down her back, unsure what would actually help. "I wasn’t accusing you of anything. Listen to me. I believe you. I trust you."

Aria shook her head. "No, you don’t understand—"

"You’re right. I don’t." Maverick pulled back enough to look at her. "But we’ll figure it out, okay? Together. Just please stop crying."

Perhaps it was the genuine fear in his eyes that finally got through to her. Which was ridiculous.He wasn’t the one who should be afraid. If anyone had done something wrong here, surely it was her.

So Aria nodded.

"Okay," she whispered.

Maverick released the breath he’d been holding. He cupped her face and gently wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs.

"You’re my mate," he murmured. "Nothing is going to change that."

Aria swallowed, still uncertain.

"Maybe when we finally complete the bond..." Maverick trailed off.

He didn’t need to finish. Aria understood perfectly.

Maybe that was the problem. She was human, and although the mate bond existed between them, it wasn’t complete. They hadn’t made love. Maverick hadn’t marked her. Perhaps once they did, whatever strange confusion had taken root inside her would finally settle.

Maybe then Rhydian wouldn’t affect her at all. Aria desperately hoped so.

"No matter how difficult it is to explain, always know that I would never blame or judge you for it."

Aria nodded like a child. She looked exhausted, and Maverick immediately noticed.

"If you don’t feel up to it anymore, you don’t have to stay for the fight. I’ll have Variant and Valerie take you back—"

"No, I’m good."

Aria had already promised she would be there for him, and she intended to keep her word. Besides, she wasn’t about to ruin Variant and Valerie’s night either. She knew how badly they wanted to see this fight.

Maverick studied her for another moment, making sure she meant it, before holding out his hand.

"Let’s go, then."

Aria slipped her smaller hand into his and allowed him to lead her toward the arena, where the roar of excited voices grew louder with every step.