

My Sister 278

Chapter 278 JUST LOVE

KIERAN'S POV

The word 'mate' hung between us like a blade balanced on its tip.

I went rigid, my spine snapping straight as if my mother had pressed a thumb into a fresh cut. The water bottle groaned in my fist, plastic straining beneath my grip.

I didn't answer her right away.

Not because I didn't know what to say, but because everything I could say felt like a betrayal of Sera—of the promise I'd made her not to tell anyone about the bond until she was ready.

My mother watched me with a gaze too sharp to be fooled by silence. She had always been able to read the spaces between words, the hesitation before a breath.

Being raised by her meant learning early that omission was just another form of confession.

"You've denied far more convincingly in the past," she said, proving my point. "This time, you're not even trying."

I set the bottle down harder than necessary and turned away, pacing the length of the gym in restless strides.

The familiar space suddenly felt too small, walls pressing in till the air felt thin.

"I can't talk about it," I said at last. My voice sounded rougher than I intended. "Not yet."

"Honey," my mother murmured, her tone like when I was a child, and I scraped my knees bloody and refused to cry, "I've...I've known for a while now."

My steps faltered.

She sighed. "I just didn't want to admit what it meant."

She crossed the gym floor and sat on the edge of the bench in front of where I paced, folding her hands together in her lap.

For once, her poise slipped. A tremor ran through her, a hairline fracture in her perfect façade.

"I'm so sorry, Kieran," she whispered.

I stopped. Closed my eyes.

"I know I don't need to explain to you how it feels to have a child and care so much for him that everything else in the world pales in comparison to his happiness." She didn't wait for a response. The words had clearly been building for a long time.

"When the...events that led to your marriage occurred, I thought..." She swallowed. "You were young. Already carrying too much responsibility of a pack and a legacy. And then what happened happened, and I felt like you'd been trapped. Forced to bear yet another responsibility."

She inhaled sharply. "I loved Daniel the moment I held him. That never wavered. But Seraphina..." Her voice faltered. "I couldn't look at her without seeing a chain around your neck."

I opened my eyes and studied my mother. Her hands knotted in her lap, her eyes shining as she blinked hard, fighting to keep tears from spilling.

"When your father insisted you mark her," she continued, "I panicked. I fought him. I told him you deserved the freedom of choice. A way out if need be. One last door that hadn't been locked shut."

A sharp ache cinched my chest.

"I was so focused on you," she whispered. "On what I thought you were losing. I never stopped to ask what she was enduring."

Tears slid down her cheeks, unguarded and silent.

I moved immediately.

“Mother,” I said, crouching in front of her. “Stop.”

She shook her head. “That poor girl,” she whispered, her lips trembling. “I never stopped to consider how she must have felt—unable to take her rightful place as Luna, ostracized by her family on all sides.”

She sniffed. “If I had been less stubborn, if I’d guided you instead of resisting, maybe you wouldn’t have learned to resent her so much. Maybe you wouldn’t have withdrawn. Maybe you would have sensed the bond sooner, and you wouldn’t have spent a decade feeling trapped instead of enjoying the beauty of marriage.”

Her words hit too close to truths I’d only just begun to come to terms with over the past months.

I reached out and cupped her face gently, thumbs brushing away the tears tracking through her makeup.

“No, Mother,” I said firmly. “This is not on you.”

Disbelief flickered in her eyes.

"I made my choices," I went on. "Every cold word. Every inch of distance. Every time I chose control over unguarding." My throat burned. "I'm the reason Sera and I are here. Not you."

My mother tried to speak, but I continued, needing to say it aloud.

"Accepting your influence as a factor is a cowardly cop-out. I know what I've done. I know what it's cost her." My voice dropped. "What it's cost us."

Silence pressed in around us, heavy but honest.

"I deserve this," I said quietly. "The waiting. The uncertainty. The fear that she might not come back the same—or at all. It's nothing compared to what she carried alone for years."

My mother's shoulders shook once.

"You're punishing yourself," she said.

"I'm taking responsibility," I corrected gently. "There's a difference."

I leaned my forehead against hers briefly, grounding myself in the familiar scent of her.

"When Sera comes back," I said, pulling away just enough to meet my mother's eyes, "I'll respect her choice. Whatever it is."

Her breath caught.

"If she chooses me," I continued, "I'll spend the rest of my life atoning for my sins and making sure I'm worthy of her. If she doesn't..." I exhaled slowly. "Then I'll step back. Be Daniel's father. Be steady. Be present. And let her go."

The words tasted like ash, but they were true.

That was the price I had to pay for my sins.

I didn't know if it was possible to stop loving Sera. But it was possible to fulfill the promise I'd made. I'd make sure of it.

For a long moment, my mother said nothing. Then she reached up, cupping my cheek the way she had when I was a boy too proud to ask for comfort.

"You're not a little pup anymore," she murmured.

A small, wry smile tugged at my mouth. “No. I haven’t been in a long time.”

“And you’ll survive this,” she added.

“Yes.”

She straightened, wiping the last of her tears away with the back of her hand. “Regardless of what you say, I have some atoning of my own to do—if Sera will let me.”

Before I could respond, a sound echoed from upstairs—boots thudding against wood, a familiar rhythm I could recognize anywhere.

Daniel.

His training bag hit the floor with a dull thump moments later, followed by his voice calling out, “Dad?”

“In here,” I answered.

My mother squeezed my arm, then stood and smoothed her skirt.

Daniel appeared in the doorway, flushed and energized, hair damp with sweat.

“Hi!” he panted.

“There’s my little Alpha,” my mother said smoothly. She straightened, the last traces of vulnerability locking neatly back behind her Luna mask. “How was training?”

Daniel charged in. “Awesome,” he declared, toeing his shoes off and launching straight into an animated recounting.

“I almost took Theo down—he cheated, by the way—but I still landed the hit.” He beamed, clearly reliving it. “And Gavin said my footwork’s getting better.”

My mother listened with the same attentive composure she gave to council reports, nodding at the right moments and asking precise follow-ups that made Daniel straighten up with pride.

“That’s impressive,” she said warmly when he was done. “I’m so proud of you, darling.”

Daniel preened. “Thank you.”

My mother glanced at me, her eyes flickering with something soft and tangled, before she turned back to Daniel.

She smoothed a hand over his hair. "I'll let you two hang out," she said lightly.

As she passed me, she paused just long enough to murmur, "We'll talk more later."

Then she left us, her footsteps fading down the hall as Daniel flopped onto the bench with a contented sigh.

"So..." His gaze slightly narrowed into that eerie, assessing look as if he could sense the emotional tension in the air. "What's up, Dad?"

Instead of trying to divert, I pulled up my phone.

"I've got something to show you."

His brows lifted. "What?"

I opened the video of Sera again.

She filled the screen—laughing, leaping, alive in a way that felt like sunlight after a long winter.

Daniel leaned closer, eyes widening.

“That’s Mom?” he breathed.

I nodded.

The clip showed her saving the ball, laughing when she stumbled, high-fiving Corin with unselfconscious ease. Daniel laughed along, completely absorbed.

“She looks...” He searched for the word, then grinned. “Happy.”

“She does, doesn’t she?”

And wasn’t that the whole point? It didn’t matter who she was with. All that mattered was that she was happy.

“I’ve never seen her play sports before,” Daniel observed cheerfully.

“Neither have I,” I replied.

He glanced at me, then back at the screen. “I like seeing her like this.”

“So do I,” I said, my lips curving as our heads pressed together to watch the video.

For the first time since it first played, the throbbing in my chest wasn’t pain, or jealousy, or fear.

Just pride.

Just love.