

Chapter 20

She scoffed, "That's it? No hello, no I missed you?" She slid onto the edge of his desk, crossing her legs slowly, deliberately. "You've barely spent any time with me since I got here."

"You know I've been working." He barely glanced up, shuffling a stack of reports so she wouldn't see the restless twitch in his fingers.

Her perfect, manicured nails tapped against the wood, a soft staccato. "You're always working. You think I don't notice you disappearing here night after night? Do you plan on sleeping in this office forever?"

Her tone sharpened, but there was a flicker of something else underneath—hurt, not just anger. She slid into his lap without warning, draping her arms around his shoulders as if daring him to push her away. Her lips grazed his jaw as she whispered, "Stop working for one night. Be with me."

Julian's hands caught her waist. He tried—really tried—to let her presence spark something. She shifted closer, her robe parting just enough that her thigh pressed bare against him. Her scent filled the space—roses—wrapping around him like a net.

Julian lowered a hand, fingers slipping beneath the thin fabric between her thighs. She sucked in a breath, lips parting as she arched against him. "Julian..." she whispered, hopeful.

Her breath hitched as his fingers moved against her, already finding her slick and eager for him. She shivered, her hips tilting forward, a soft moan

slipping past her lips. Her body still melted under his touch, still craved him with the same easy hunger it always had.

But for Julian, there was nothing. No spark of desire, no tightening heat in his gut. The wet heat under his hand should have driven him wild; should have hardened him instantly the way it used to. Instead, he felt detached, moving his fingers with remembered precision, as though performing a routine. Mechanical. Hollow. His wolf growled below the surface, offended by the pretense.

Elara gasped, grinding into his hand, but after a moment her pleasure faltered. Slowly, her lashes lifted, her eyes opening to search his face. The distance in him was impossible to miss.

"What's with you lately?" She whispered, a hint of frustration curling through the softness of her voice. "Do you not find me attractive anymore?"

"

His hand stilled, resting against her thigh, Elara's question lingering heavy between them. He looked up, meeting her eyes—bright, expectant, searching.

"Of course I find you attractive," he said, the words quiet. He brushed his thumb across her inner thigh as if to prove it.

Elara wasn't convinced, her eyes narrowing. "Are you fucking someone else?"

Julian drew in a long breath, "Don't be ridiculous."

Elara slid off his lap in one smooth motion, pulling her robe tight around

her body. "Well you sure as hell aren't fucking me. And I know you—you're not the type of man who goes without for very long."

Julian leaned back in his chair, already turning toward the papers on his desk. "I've got too much on my plate to entertain your dramatics tonight."

"Dra—dramatics?" She repeated, her voice rising, incredulous. She stood, hands on her hips. "You think this is dramatics? Wondering why my soon-to-be mate hasn't fucked me in weeks?"

He finally looked at her then, his gaze cool as steel. "I told you—I'm busy. My focus is on the pack. Not every moment of my life revolves around stroking your ego."

Her face hardened, a sharp flush climbing her cheeks. "Maybe if you spent half as much energy on me as you do on your damn ledgers, you wouldn't have to worry about my ego."

Julian didn't answer. He simply reached for the next file.

That silence was worse than any argument. Her lips curled into a sneer before she spun toward the door. "Unbelievable," she hissed, yanking it open.

The slam rattled the frame, her scent lingering like smoke after fire.

Julian dragged a hand down his face, the scrape of his palm against his jaw doing nothing to ease the taut coil in his chest. His collar felt suffocating, so he loosened it, tugging the top button of his shirt open until he could breathe again.

This should have been simple. Elara wanted him—always had. She was beautiful, desirable, the kind of woman any Alpha would claim proudly. Once, she'd been enough. More than enough.

But she had ruined him.

Not Elara. Not the endless stream of women before Elara.

Her. The woman who haunted him.

Kaelani.



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