

## Chapter 19

"You are freaking gorgeous." Fiona stared at me as if I was her next meal as she took a few steps away after finally finishing my look.

I had no idea these barbecues were so important; hence I didn't see the point in dressing up until she threw my flannel shirt aside and flung me in a dress-literally.

Then, my dear friend proceeded to do my hair and make-up, and an hour and a half later, I was all dressed up like I was going on a casual date. I didn't mind, though. The time we spent together getting ready was quite fun.

The evening came quicker than I anticipated.

I didn't even notice that the day had come to an end due to the amount of fun I'd been having with Fiona. I missed her over this past week, and today was just enough evidence that I needed to prioritise our friendship more.

With everything going on, I thought I was either too tired or anxious to hang out with anyone. I should've known better than to try and push Fiona away, even though I never intentionally tried.

Luckily for me, and thanks to Maxim, everyone was rested and ready for the barbecue because there wasn't a crazy lady screaming in the middle of the night last night.

"Thank you," I finally answered as I gave myself another glance. "I can't remember the last time I dressed up like this. It's fun."

I wore a blue bodycon dress that enhanced my curves more than I remembered having them. It was a little far off from the colour of my eyes and the streak in my hair, but it was right. It was straightened down my back, and the dress was paired with low silver stilettos. It was pretty casual, though.

Fiona scoffed at my statement. "You haven't gotten dressed up yet, missy. Wait until we have our annual gala."

"You guys have a gala?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Fiona giggled as she nodded.

"Yep. Every year."

"Let me guess," I mumbled, "this was Lukas's idea."

Instead of answering right away, Fiona smirked at me. "Getting to know the Alphas, I see. So, tell me, have you chosen one yet?"

"Oh my gosh, Fiona." I groaned in the agony of my now ruined mood. She quickly hushed me and tried to change the subject, but I could tell that she was still curious.

On the other hand, I had no idea what to do concerning the brothers. I hate that slowly, but inevitably, real life is catching up to me.

At that, the door was pushed open, and I was about to scold Leonardo for barging in when I remembered we were in their room. Fiona's clothes, make-up and accessories were all in here, so it only seemed suitable to get ready there.

"You guys look lovely," he mumbled as he kissed Fiona. But I had a feeling he meant to say Fiona looked lovely, since he barely spared me a glance. I wasn't offended, though. I knew it was a natural thing for mates.

The thought had me thinking. Maxim hadn't seen me this dolled up before. My stomach churned at the

anxiety of wondering whether or not he'd like it. Lukas, I knew would love it. He never had a problem with anything regarding me. But Maxim, as many people notice, is quite different.

"We have three minutes to meet the others downstairs," Leonardo said after he finished his meal of Fiona's lips. "It's bad enough that we had to wait on Fiona to get ready on these damn barbecue days. Now we have someone else to be slow with her." He paused a while as he gave me a playful glare. "Welcome to the family, Melissa."

I rolled my eyes with a chuckle as I followed behind them. I snuck away for a quick minute to go for my phone and purse in my room. Even though I had no one texting me or talking to me, I always seemed to find an undeniable need to always have my phone with me.

I assumed it was a generation thing.

Quickly, I made my way back to the staircase and literally dashed down it. I didn't want to be the cause of making everyone late, because according to Leonardo, I just doubled it.

I almost tripped over a step somehow as I rounded the corner of the enormous staircase that led to the foyer. I saw everyone already waiting and ready to leave. The sun shone directly on my face through the far window as I stopped at the top of the staircase. Its deep rays of orange and pink were beautiful as the sun slowly ducked behind the mountains.

Maxim's was the first head to turn at my arrival, and though Fiona and Leonard had already seen me, he and Lukas hadn't.

Our eyes met with great intensity. I felt drawn to him as he reached out to me involuntarily, admiring and appraising me in the most wonderful way. His eyes grew dark with lust, and his chest rose and fell faster. I knew because I could hear how much quicker his breathing became. He dug his fingers in his palms as he met my eyes again, this time with nothing but deep admiration and appreciation.

My heart soared at the sight.

Then it was Lukas, and his expression was just as I expected it to. It pleased me, but not as much as Maxim's.

"Whoa, Melissa. You look great," Lukas cheered from the bottom of the staircase. I chuckled lightly before meeting him there.

"So, don't I look good on other days?" I teased. The look on Maxim's face showed me he was not happy that Lukas and I shared this comfortable, teasing relationship, and I felt awful.

Even though I wouldn't admit it, I wanted so desperately to have a relationship with him like this too. As they say, you have to be friends first before being together.

I mean, not that I was sure that I'd be together with Maxim. That's crazy, right?

Right?

Well, it's also crazy to consider choosing my own mate's brother over him. But hey, that's just another day being Melissa.

My life story could make an entire book.

"Are we ready?" Maxim snapped. His voice was so sharp that it literally split the air in two. He even caught Lukas by surprise, which says a lot considering the man seemed to have six eyes.

"Um, yeah, sure. Sorry," I rambled out as I scrambled to the door. The others followed in suit in slow, long strides.

The cool evening breeze calmed me and cleared my mind. I believed I was being too selfish. I told myself that I'd give Maxim a chance to at least try, but I hadn't really given him much to work with. I tried with Lukas more than how I've tried with him, and I think a big part of that has to do with the fact that I feared if I got closer to Maxim, I'd forgive him for what he did to me.

And I know that doesn't seem like the worst thing in the world, but having a grudge against him was the only thing keeping me sane in this entire situation. I mean, come on. I'm mated to Maxim and sold to Lukas? Could this world drive me any crazier?

But even if I don't want to, forgiveness or some sort of moving on would be best. Whether I end up with Maxim or not, I'll still have to exist around him, and that means being in the same space as him without constantly wanting to cut his head off and feed it to my rabbit friends.

The very thought of not ending up with him almost sent me falling to the ground in grief. But I thought I'd make a big step and attempt the idea of trying to forgive him. He apologised, and he didn't seem like his 13-year-old self anymore. Well, in some cases.

I spotted him a few feet away, getting his car ready. Naturally, I'd go for Lukas's car, but I decided against it. So, instead of making the right, I made a left towards Maxim's car, where I slid behind the door to scare him.

"Boo!" I whispered. He didn't even flinch, as I expected.

"Now I'd really be a scaredy-cat if I fell for that trick," he mumbled without looking at me. He simply kept rummaging through his compartment. "Does Lukas need his screwdriver back? I'm looking for it," he added in a bored tone.

A part of me wanted to get mad and stomp away at his attitude. But a more wolfy part of me reminded me that he was upset about me and Lukas's interaction earlier.

"I don't know if he needs it," I told him. "I actually came to ask if I could travel with you." I felt like a two-year-old asking for a cookie. And as I said this, his head flew up so hard that he accidentally hit it on the roof of the car.

"Ow," he groaned.

"Oh my gosh, I'm sorry." I had no idea where it came from, but I suddenly had a crazy urge to care for his wound. I grabbed his head gently and directed it to my line of sight. So far, there was no bleeding or bruises. But I'd have to lick it to find out.

"Wait, I'm fine," Maxim said with a chuckle as he held my hand. I shook my head and snapped out of it. Embarrassment suddenly clouded me as I realised my position with my tongue stuck out and my fingers buried in his hair.

Anyone passing by would get the wrong impression.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled as I dropped my gaze and my hands. But Maxim quickly grabbed my hands again, and I saw one of his rare but beautiful smiles. It was actually worth the wait.

"Don't be," he said as he caressed my knuckle with his thumb. "I like that your wolf is just as responsive as mine."

I nodded. "She's embarrassing, but I gotta love her."

"Me too," he mumbled. My heart skipped a beat, but I pretended as if I didn't hear him.

"So, should we go?" I asked, almost shoving him away to hop in his car. He didn't say anything this time; he simply circled the car to meet me on the other side. I caught a glance of Lukas in the rear-view mirror, leaning against his car like a vogue model in his grey sweater and dark jeans and staring at us with an emotionless

expression.

I sighed. I can't make them both happy.

"So, what made you change your mind?" Maxim asked as he pulled out of the driveway.

I shrugged. "What makes you think I didn't want to go with you from the start?"

"Because you didn't."

"You don't know that," I defended.

"Oh, yes I do," he flung back. I huffed.

"Look, if you're gonna be difficult—"

"I'm not." He laughed at my reaction, and I saw that he was only doing it to get a rise out of me. It seemed like something Lukas would do, and with Lukas, I would've laughed and accepted his slightly goofy nature around me. But with Maxim, it felt strange. I didn't want him to think that he had to be like Lukas for me to like him.

But of course, I didn't say that.

We remained quiet for a while when he became serious again after not getting his desired reaction. I stayed silent, too, only because I didn't know what to say.

"So, I thought you should know. I talked to your brother today," he finally said out of the blue, but his statement confused me.

"You spoke to Logan? Why?"

"Relax, Melissa. I'm in charge of the trainers that are being sent to your old pack to help the warriors get stronger and the pack overall to protect itself," he explained.

"Oh. So, I guess you didn't talk about me, huh?"

"Actually..." he drawled, "He asked about you."

I literally laughed. "My brother asked about me? As if!"

Apparently, Maxim didn't understand my reaction. I then remembered that he didn't know that my brother hated me. They all knew that I never had it easy at home, and they knew it was a touchy subject for me, but they never knew why.

"Um, he did. He asked how you were doing."

Even though I was still shocked out of my mind, I was curious to know more. "Yeah?"

"I told him that I couldn't be so sure either, that you've had bad dreams. He said that's unusual for you."

As if he would know. He barely paid attention to me growing up.

"He also gave me this recipe that apparently helps wolves sleep or keeps them calm."

"Yamen and Brosquite," I mumbled. "He used to take it when he had traumas as a kid. You know, when our parents died. One week and he was out like a lamp each night."

"So, this stuff works?" Maxim asked in interest. It was cute.

"It does, but it is extremely rare and terribly hard to find. That's why I didn't even consider it," I told him with

a sigh.

"I'll get it for you."

I paused a while to look at him. "You're kidding?"

"You're my mate, Melissa. You're having a problem, and I want to help fix it."

I shrugged. "I'm just saying, it's a hard herb to find. But perhaps it's around here somewhere. This was the state my uncle found the ingredients for Logan."

"It's settled then." He sounded determined, and I knew there wasn't much I could say or do to talk him out of it. On the other hand, I didn't mind. Each day, a good night's rest seemed heavenly and not just for me.

"Well, I could just continue to sleep with you," I said in a teasing tone. His lips curled in a wicked smirk as I said this, and I had no idea where this sudden boldness came from.

"Whichever works," he shot back with a quick wink in my direction until he was suddenly serious again. "Whatever it takes. I hate to see you miserable."

I didn't like that the mood was shifting again. I liked him when he was being flirty. That was a new and unique trait of his.

Lukas teased, joked and pampered me, but he never boldly flirted with me like this before. He always thought I'd be uncomfortable, and he'd scare me off. If he did indeed flirt, it was masked in a joke.

"Are you getting soft on me, Alpha Maxim?" I teased as I playfully bumped his shoulder. Another rare smile graced his lips for a while until he answered.

"Oh no, what will I do now that the beautiful maiden has bewitched me and taken all my rigidity and strength? I guess I'll have to lock her away in my room and feed her Yamen to keep her asleep forever and ever."

I didn't even know I had been laughing so hard until my stomach began to hurt. And what I loved the most was that this was all-natural. It wasn't forced like the former conversation, making it much better and personal for him.

My eyes ran water as my laughter died down, and as odd as it was, I could hear Maxim purring at the sound of my laughter.

"You have a beautiful laugh," he eventually said with his smile still in place.

I swiped a teardrop from my eyes and snuggled in the seat as I made myself comfortable again.

"You just made me laugh the hardest in years." It wasn't until I said it out loud that I realized. That was the best laugh I'd had in years.

The last time, I was seventeen, and Logan had fallen headway in a birthday cake at a party we were invited to. I ran all the way home to my room to get that laughter out.

"Really?" he questioned. "My brother is quite a charmer, you know? He hasn't made you laugh like this?"

"Your brother is not you," I blurted out. That wasn't meant to leave my mouth, but it did, and I couldn't take it back.

I couldn't take it back because it was the truth. I could spend all my days, time and energy with Lukas, and I could admire his personality a hundred times over.

But the simple fact still remains that he isn't Maxim. And that's what I had been hiding from.

Of course, Maxim was pleased by this response, and I tried my best not to let it bother me. I glanced through the mirror again. They were all still behind us, with Lukas trailing slowly at a reasonable distance.

I sighed, yet I wasn't upset.

"Um, Melissa?" Maxim mumbled in a soft tone. His voice and expression were nervous, and this got me cautious.

"Yes?"

"May I...hold your hand the rest of the way?"

The packhouse was in sight, and surely we'd be there in less than three minutes. But I smiled and nodded yes.

I intertwined my fingers in his against the console area, and we both sighed in delight at the same time as he drove slowly towards the packhouse.

"By the way, you do look absolutely gorgeous tonight," he whispered, almost more to himself than to me.

Instead of answering, I leant my head against the window with a stupid smile on my face for the next one and a half minutes.



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