

## Chapter 0081

(James POV)

"We have a lot to talk about, I think," Lily says.

"Understatement of the century," Luke links me.

"I... I have so many questions," I stammer out.

She nods. "That is why I am here, is it not?"

"Yes... no... I mean..."

Lily looks at me curiously. "You seem different."

"I feel different," I concede.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you different? Why are you here? Why did you want to see me? Before last night, the last time that you and I had a conversation was at Stephanie's memorial, and that was not exactly pleasant for either one of us."

I take a deep breath. I have so much to say... so much to make up for... and so much I want to know. I do not even know where to start.

"Start from the beginning," Luke encourages me.

"Stephanie's memorial... that was also your birthday. Your 20th birthday."

I watch Lily's face as I bring up her birthday. I can almost feel her heart stop and her breath catch. She looks at me sadly. "Yeah. Yeah, it was."

I wait to see if she is going to say anything else, but she does not.

"Lily, I am so very sorry. I blamed you and punished you for Stephanie's death... and I should not have. I was a fool."

Again, I watch Lily's face. She seems to be trying really hard to hold back tears.

"Why," she asks in a whisper.

"Why?" I repeat, not understanding what she is asking.

She stares at the ocean. "Why did you tell everyone that Stephanie's death was my fault? Why did you tell my parents that it was?"

I look down at my hands. I do not know what to say.

My silence is once again the wrong move. Lily turns to look at me. This time, tears are quickly running down her cheeks and her eyes are blazing with anger.

"All these years, James. All these years, I have been told that Stephanie's death was my fault. I have been bullied and abused because of it. I have been treated like trash by my own parents and by my brother. I was forced to fend for myself, sometimes going without meals. And yet, no one has ever been able to tell me why they think it was my fault, other than you told them that it was. I think I deserve to know why."

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(Lily POV)

I am embarrassed and angry that I am crying right now. This was not part of the plan. Not that I had a plan exactly, but crying was not part of whatever semblance of a plan that I did have. I never wanted James to see me cry, nor did I ever want him to know how much he had hurt me over the years.

"He needs to know," Rose links me. "And it is good for you. For us. You need to get this out. You have been holding on to the hurt for too long, Lily. Share your burdens with him. If you cannot lay the hurt and pain down at the feet of the male who caused it all, who can you share it with?"

"Brady?" I suggest, although I am not serious.

"No. Not Brady," Rose replies adamantly. "James. It is time we share these burdens with James. Our mate."

I do not want to fight with Rose right now. I love her and respect her, even if I think that she is letting the lingering mate bond impact her. 4

I wipe the tears from my eyes, and I wait for James to respond to my last question. He does not. Instead, he just looks at his hands. His silence makes me more and more angry.

I lash out at him again.

"How can you sit there silently and not respond to me? Don't you think I have the right to know? SIX YEARS,

James. SIX YEARS. During that time, NO ONE has ever asked me what happened that night. NO. ONE. And yet everyone has punished me as though I committed some heinous crime. AND I DO NOT EVEN KNOW WHAT CRIME I COMMITTED! I don't even know why people think I did something! Much less why me and not Sheila? Why did people blame ME? Was it just because I exist? Was my crime just being born? Did you make the whole thing up or did you really believe that I had something to do with it?"

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