



Chapter 20



The invitation arrives via email Thursday morning: *Quarterly Pack Gathering. Friday, 7pm. Fenris Estate. Attendance strongly encouraged for all ranking members and corporate affiliates.*

I stare at the formal language that really means *you will be there or explain why not.*

My phone rings immediately. Kieran.

"You're attending as our corporate legal consultant." Not a question.

"Both of us. United front."

"That's not going to fool anyone—"

"It's not meant to." His voice goes dark. "It's meant to make a statement. You're under Fenris protection. Anyone who has a problem with that can take it up with me."

He hangs up before I can argue.

Lysander calls thirty seconds later. "Wear something that makes a statement. You're walking in with both of us and the pack needs to see you're not ashamed."

"I'm not—"

"Good. Seven o'clock. Don't be late."

They've coordinated this. Planned it together despite their competition, because presenting a united front to the pack apparently supersedes their territorial bullshit.

Friday evening I stand in front of my mirror wearing the dress Rosalie picked—deep emerald that makes my skin glow, fitted but elegant. She'd taken one look at the invitation and gone into crisis mode.

"You need armor," she'd said. "The kind that makes them remember you chose to come back."

The emerald dress is definitely armor.

Kieran and Lysander pick me up together, both in formal suits that probably cost more than my monthly rent. The drive to the Fenris estate is silent, tense, both of them radiating protective aggression that makes the SUV feel smaller.

We pull up to the massive stone mansion and my stomach drops. Eight years since I've been here.

"Ready?" Lysander offers his arm.

Kieran's already out, moving to my other side. "We've got you."

I step out flanked by both Alpha heirs and arriving pack members go completely silent.

Inside is worse. The formal gathering hall holds maybe two hundred high-ranking pack members. Conversations die as we enter.

Then I see my parents.

They stand near the far wall, champagne flutes in hand, frozen mid-conversation. My mother's face goes white, then red with barely controlled rage. My father's expression shifts to cold calculation.

They can't make a scene here. Not in front of Alpha Magnus and the Fenris family. Not when I'm clearly under Alpha heir protection. But their hatred is palpable even across the crowded room.

I hold my head high and refuse to show weakness.

Kieran's hand settles possessively on my lower back, burning through the thin fabric. "Breathe."

"I'm fine."

"You're shaking."

I am. But not from fear—from something else. The room feels too loud, too bright. Conversations from across the space hit my ears like they're next to me.

"—that's her, the one who disappeared—" "—both Fenris heirs, how does she—"

Scents overwhelm me. Individual perfumes, colognes, wine spilled three tables over. My skin feels hypersensitive, the dress fabric almost painful.

"Thalia?" Lysander's moved closer. "You okay?"

"Fine. Just anxiety." I force a smile. "Being back here after eight years."

It has to be anxiety. Stress response to facing the pack that called me worthless, the family that threatened to kill my unborn children, the man whose engagement announcement made me flee.

The evening progresses in waves of overwhelming sensation. Kieran stays close, his presence constant. Lysander circulates but checks on me every few minutes.

Pack members watch with barely concealed fascination. Both Alpha heirs claiming the same woman.

Whispers follow me everywhere:

"Is she their mate? Both of them?"

"She was with them during heat, wasn't she?"

"I heard she had three children—whose are they?"

"The younger one's, obviously. Why else would he—"

"But the older one looks ready to kill anyone who gets too close—"

I'm nursing sparkling water, trying not to throw up from sensory overload when Lia makes her entrance.

She sweeps in wearing designer everything, that same superior smirk. Her eyes find me immediately.

She makes a beeline straight for me, voice carrying across conversations: "How brave of you to show your face here."

Every head turns. The room goes quiet.

"Lia." I keep my voice level. "You look well."

"I look well?" Her laugh is sharp. "That's what you lead with? After abandoning your family, disappearing for eight years, coming back with bastard children you're raising alone because no wolf would actually claim you?"

The words are designed to humiliate. To reduce me to that broken girl who fled.

Sensory overload makes my head pound but I force my voice steady.

"Careful, Lia."

"Careful?" She moves closer, emboldened by the audience. "Everyone should know what you are. A wolfless shame who spread her legs during heat and—"

Kieran moves so fast Lia doesn't finish.

He's between us in a heartbeat, his entire body radiating lethal threat. The temperature in the room drops ten degrees. High-ranking wolves near us actually step back.

"Touch her." His voice is death, Alpha command that makes even the strongest wolves flinch. "Speak to her. Look at her again."

Lia's gone pale, actually frightened.

"She's under my protection." Kieran's words carry to every corner of the silent room. "Mine. And if you threaten what's mine—" He doesn't finish but the promise hangs heavy. "I will end you. Completely. Do you understand?"

The pack has never seen him like this. The controlled CEO vanished, replaced by an Alpha who would kill without hesitation for what he claims.

Lia backs away, stumbling slightly. "Kieran, I didn't mean—"

"Get out of my sight."

She flees.

The room stays silent. Pack members stare at Kieran, at me, calculating new hierarchies and alliances. Alpha Magnus watches from across the room, expression unreadable.

I'm shaking—from the confrontation, from Lia's words, from the sensory overload that's getting worse by the minute. Everything is too loud, too bright, too much.

"I need air." The words come out strangled.

Lysander appears at my elbow. "This way."

He guides me through a side door into a quiet hallway. The reduction in stimulation is immediate relief but not enough. My skin still feels wrong, sounds still too sharp.

"You okay?" He keeps his voice soft, probably reading my distress.

"Everything's too much." I press my palms against cool stone wall. "Too loud, too bright. I can smell everything, hear everything. It's like my senses are—"

I stop. Can't finish that thought.

"Amplified?" Lysander finishes carefully. "Like they're stronger than they should be?"

I meet his eyes and see understanding there. "What's happening to me?"

"I think—" He hesitates. "Your wolf might be waking up. Sometimes it happens gradually. Heightened senses come first."

"I don't have a wolf. Twenty-seven years of being wolfless doesn't just—"

"Twenty-seven years of suppression might." His voice is gentle.

"Trauma, stress, survival mode. Sometimes wolves stay dormant until the person's ready. Until they feel safe enough to emerge."

The hallway tilts. A wolf. After all these years, after building an entire identity around being wolfless, after learning to survive without that connection.

"The mate bond might trigger it too," Lysander continues quietly.

"Being around potential mates, the kids showing Alpha traits. Your wolf recognizing what it wants."

I'm trying to process what he's saying—that after twenty-seven years of being wolfless, of building my entire identity around that absence, my

being wolfless, of building my entire identity around that absence, my wolf might actually exist—when Lysander's hand settles warm on my shoulder.

"Breathe," he says softly. "Whatever's happening, we'll figure it out."

The hallway feels safer than the crowded room but my senses are still overwhelmed. I can hear Kieran's voice in the gathering hall, can smell the expensive perfumes from here, can feel every thread of my dress.

"It's terrifying," I admit. "Not knowing what's happening to my own body."

"I know." His thumb traces small circles on my shoulder, grounding.

"But you're strong. You've survived worse than this."

I lean into his steadying presence, letting his calm wash over me. This is what he offers—not Kieran's consuming fire that would burn through the confusion, but gentle warmth that lets me breathe through it.

"Stay with me?" The words slip out before I can stop them. "Just for a minute. I can't go back in there yet."

"As long as you need." His voice is quiet promise.

But even as I stand there with Lysander's comfort surrounding me, it's Kieran's lethal protection echoing in my mind. The way he moved to shield me. The death in his voice when he promised to end anyone who threatened what's his.

Something inside me is definitely changing. And I'm not sure which brother I need more.

End *of*