



## Chapter 22



Wednesday afternoon bleeds into the kind of routine that makes you forget everything can shatter in seconds. I'm three hours deep into depositions when my phone starts vibrating across the conference table.

School's number. Once. Twice. Three times before I can grab it.

My stomach drops before I even answer.

"Ms. Blackwood." Principal Morrison's voice shakes with barely controlled panic. "Your sister showed up claiming family emergency. She tried to take your children from the classroom. Security stopped her but she has them in the parking lot now and won't listen. Please come immediately."

The phone slips from my fingers. Everything narrows to a single point: someone is taking my children.

I'm moving before conscious thought kicks in. Running through the office in heels that click too loud against marble, past associates who stare with open mouths. Don't care. Can't care. Someone tried to take my babies.

The elevator takes forever. I stab the button seventeen times like that'll make it faster, my breath coming too fast, chest too tight. When the doors finally open to the parking garage I'm already sprinting for my car.

Keys shake in my hand as I unlock it. The engine roars to life and I'm peeling out before my seatbelt clicks.

Portland is forty-five minutes on a good day. I make it in twenty-eight.

Every traffic law shatters beneath my desperation. Red lights blur past. Speed limits mean nothing. My knuckles go white on the wheel, my foot pressed to the floor. Other cars honk but the sound barely registers past the roaring in my ears.

My mind conjures horrors with each mile. My babies hurt. Scared. Taken somewhere I can't find them. Eight years keeping them safe, keeping them hidden, keeping them mine. And Lia—the sister who made my childhood hell, who orchestrated my torment, who drove me from the pack pregnant and alone—is trying to steal the only good things I've ever created.

My hands shake. My chest feels like it's caving in. Every maternal instinct I possess screams danger, threat, protect, protect, protect.

I screech into the school parking lot and time fractures.

Lia has Orion by the arm, her manicured fingers digging into his bicep hard enough to leave marks. She's dragging him toward her car—expensive, black, bought with pack money—while he tries to pull away. His face is white, eyes wide with fear he's trying to hide because he's seven and already learned to be brave.

Luna stumbles beside them, silent tears streaming down her cheeks. That's worse somehow—Luna who feels everything, who's probably drowning in Lia's malice and the security guards' confusion and Orion's terror.

Phoenix fights with everything she has. Screaming, kicking, using that unnatural strength to resist, her small body thrashing against Lia's grip.

"Let them GO!" I'm out of my car before it fully stops, door hanging open, engine still running.

Lia sees me. Her grip tightens on Orion and her voice carries across the

parking lot, deliberate and loud enough for the security guards to hear. "These children are Alpha heirs, aren't they?" She's performing now, playing to an audience. "Pack law says illegitimate powerful bloodlines belong with the pack, not some wolfless shame who abandoned her family!"

Security guards shift uncertainly, clearly unsure how to intervene in what looks like a family dispute. One reaches for his radio. Another moves closer but stops when Lia turns her glare on him.

"Mama!" Phoenix's scream cuts through everything else.

I'm running across the parking lot. Orion's face goes whiter. Luna's tears fall faster. My babies being dragged away by the woman who destroyed my childhood, who's now trying to destroy theirs.

Something inside me doesn't just break—it detonates.

The rage that floods through me isn't human. Can't be human. It's something ancient, feral, absolutely uncontrollable. Every cell in my body ignites with it. My vision goes red at the edges. My skin feels like it's burning from the inside out, like something massive is trying to claw its way through my bones.

"GET AWAY FROM MY CHILDREN."

The words tear from my throat but they come out wrong. Not words at all. A sound that makes everyone in the parking lot freeze—primal, inhuman, wrong.

It's a wolf's snarl.

Lia's eyes widen in shock. "You don't have a—"

Pain explodes through my entire body.

Every bone breaking. Reforming. Agony tearing through me in waves that make me scream except the scream morphs, changes, becomes something not human. My spine arches. My hands hit pavement but they're not hands anymore—paws, white-furred and clawed.

The world shifts. Colors mute but sharpen in strange ways. Scents hit me like physical things—my children's fear-sweat, Lia's expensive perfume mixing with her terror, the lingering exhaust from cars, everything amplified to overwhelming.

And through it all, one instinct screams louder than the agony tearing me apart:

Protect my cubs.

I don't understand what's happening. Don't fully process the white fur covering my body, the four legs beneath me, the way sounds assault my ears and scents choke my throat. I just know my babies are in danger and every instinct demands I eliminate the threat.

Now.

I lunge at Lia.

She screams as my weight drives her to the pavement. She releases Orion and Luna to try protecting herself but it's too late. My jaws close around her throat—not breaking skin yet, just holding, threatening. The wolf in me demands blood. Demands death for threatening cubs.

"Mama, no!" Phoenix's voice pierces through the rage but can't stop it.

I taste Lia's fear on my tongue. Smell it pouring off her in waves. Good. She should be afraid. Should know what it means to threaten what's mine.

Lia's screaming now, hands clawing at white fur, trying to push me away. Security guards back away in terror, radios forgotten. One of them is shouting something but the words don't register. The kids are yelling "Mama!" over and over but I can't stop, can't think past the rage consuming every rational thought.

My teeth dig deeper into Lia's shoulder. She struggles, sobbing, begging. "Please—Thalia—stop—"

I shake her like prey and something cracks—bone or cartilage, satisfying and final.

Two massive wolves explode into the parking lot.

One dark as midnight—bigger than me, built like violence itself, pure Alpha dominance radiating from every line of his body. One lighter brown, leaner but no less powerful, moving with predatory grace.

They don't attack me. They position themselves between me and Lia's broken form, forcing me back with Alpha presence that makes my wolf want to submit, want to show throat, want to acknowledge their dominance.

But the rage is stronger than submission. Stronger than instinct. I snarl at them, hackles raised, warning them away from my kill. Mine. My threat to eliminate. My right as a mother protecting her young.

The dark wolf shifts.

Bones crack, reform with sounds that should be sickening but aren't. Fur recedes. And suddenly Kieran stands there—naked and breathing hard, completely unbothered by his nudity or the blood on my muzzle or the way I'm still growling threats.

"Thalia." His voice cuts through the haze like a blade. "Stop. Look at

me."

I snarl again, teeth bared at him. He's between me and finishing this. Between me and making sure Lia never threatens my children again.

"She's not worth it." He moves closer, slowly, hands up in a gesture my wolf reads as non-threatening. "Your children are watching. They're terrified. They need you, not this."

The mention of my children makes the rage flicker. Just slightly. Just enough.

"Look at what you're doing." His voice stays firm but something gentle bleeds through. "Lia deserves punishment. But not like this. Not with your babies watching their mother become a monster."

But Lia's still there. Still breathing. Still a threat to my cubs.

The lighter brown wolf moves closer beside Kieran, positioning himself as backup. Both of them forming a wall between me and my kill, forcing me to acknowledge their combined Alpha presence.

I'm still in wolf form, still snarling, teeth stained red with Lia's blood. Every instinct screams to finish it, to eliminate the threat permanently so she can never come near my children again.

But Kieran's eyes hold mine—storm grey, steady, absolutely unafraid despite the monster I've become. "Stop, Thalia. She's not worth losing yourself over. Not worth losing your children's trust. They're safe now. You protected them. It's done."

His voice breaks through the rage. Just barely. Just enough.

She's still in wolf form, still snarling, but not actively killing anymore.

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