



Chapter 24



The forest clearing feels too quiet after everything. I'm wrapped in Kieran's jacket, still naked underneath, body aching from the violent shifts. The mate bond hums between us—constant, undeniable, louder than my thoughts.

Kieran's the first to break the silence. "We need to get you out of here. Lia's handled but there's cleanup to manage, and you need—"

He stops, looking at me like I'm made of glass about to shatter.

"You need time to process this."

Process. Like discovering I have a wolf after twenty-seven years, like nearly killing my sister, like having my body decide who I belong to without asking permission—like any of that can be processed in a night.

Lysander's been standing apart, giving us space, but he speaks now. "I'll take the kids to my place. Give you two time to sort this out properly."

The offer hangs in the air, generous and devastating. He's accepting it. Accepting us. Stepping aside for the bond that chose his brother instead of him.

My throat closes. "Lysander—"

"Don't." He cuts me off, gentle but firm. "The bond chose. You didn't get a say, neither did I. But the kids don't need to see you two figure this out." He manages a sad smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "They love me. They'll be fine for a night."

"More than fine," Kieran says quietly. His hand tightens on my shoulder

—gratitude and guilt tangled together. "Thank you."

Lysander holds my gaze for a long moment. I see everything he's not saying—the pain, the acceptance, the love that doesn't just disappear because biology chose differently. Then he shifts back to wolf form without another word and runs toward the school parking lot where the kids are still with their teachers.

The silence he leaves behind is heavy with everything unsaid.

Kieran helps me stand. My legs shake, body still adjusting to being human again after that violent first shift. He steadies me with hands that are careful despite their strength.

"Can you walk?"

"I think so."

We make it through the forest to where he parked—an SUV pulled off on a side road, hidden from view. He must have run here when the bond pulled him toward my distress, shifted and tracked me by scent.

The drive back to Seattle is quiet. He keeps one hand on my thigh while he drives, like he can't bear not touching me. The mate bond pulls tighter with every mile, thrumming under my skin, demanding acknowledgment.

My wolf—still so new, still strange—recognizes something fundamental. Home isn't a place. It's him. It's always been him.

"Where are we going?" I manage.

"My place." His voice is rough. "Yours feels too small for what's happening between us."

He's right. My apartment with its worn furniture and cramped rooms,

the space I built for myself and my children over eight years—it belongs to the woman I was before. The wolfless lawyer who survived alone.

That woman doesn't exist anymore.

His penthouse is exactly as I remember from last week—sleek, expensive, the kind of space that demands you be worthy of it. Floor-to-ceiling windows showcase Seattle's skyline. Everything sharp angles and clean lines.

I stand in his living room still wrapped in his jacket, suddenly aware that I'm naked underneath, that my body aches in places I forgot existed, that the mate bond is screaming at me to close the distance between us.

Our eyes meet and he goes completely still.

"You feel it." Not a question. His voice goes rough, drops an octave. "The mate bond."

I can't speak. Can only nod as everything in me recognizes him as MINE. Not just want or attraction or even love—something deeper, more fundamental. Like every cell in my body has been waiting twenty-seven years to find its matching half.

He moves closer, careful despite the intensity radiating off him. "I've felt it since we were kids. Didn't understand what it was, just knew I couldn't breathe right when you weren't near." His hand comes up, cups my face with shocking gentleness. "Lia twisted it, made me think it was obsession, made me believe wanting you meant something was wrong with me. But I knew. Deep down, I always knew."

His thumb traces my lower lip and the bond flares white-hot.

"You're my mate. My only. Always were."

The bond snaps fully into place and it's like the world tilts on its axis. Everything in me screams MINE—possessive, consuming, eternal.

I close the distance between us and he catches me, lifts me like I weigh nothing. His mouth crashes into mine, not gentle now, not careful. Just need compressed into desperation.

We don't make it to his bedroom. Barely make it to the couch before I'm pulling at his clothes, needing skin, needing contact, needing him.

His jacket—my only covering—hits the floor. His shirt follows. Our hands are everywhere, mapping, claiming, memorizing.

"Tell me you want this," he breathes against my throat. "Tell me you want me."

"I want you." The words tear out of me. "I've always wanted you, even when I hated you, even when I ran—"

He kisses me hard enough to bruise. "No more running. You're mine now. Mine."

The possessiveness should scare me. Instead it makes something in my chest crack open.

We're on the couch, him over me, skin against skin finally, and when he enters me the bond ignites. Not just physical pleasure—though that's there, overwhelming—but something deeper. The recognition that this is right, meant, destined.

He moves with desperate intensity, like he's trying to fuse us together permanently. My nails dig into his shoulders, leaving marks that match the ones his teeth make on my throat.

"Mine," he growls against my neck. "My mate. My only. Forever."

"Yes." I'm gasping, arching into him. "Yours. Always yours."

The orgasm hits like lightning—not just mine but his too, felt through the bond that connects us now. I feel his pleasure echo in my body, feel his satisfaction and possessive joy and absolute certainty.

Afterward, we're tangled together on his couch, breathing hard, covered in sweat and marks and the evidence of what just happened.

He traces something on my throat with careful fingers. "The mate mark. It's forming already."

I touch the spot and feel raised skin, still sensitive. "What does it look like?"

"Like a crescent moon." His voice holds awe. "White, like your wolf. Everyone will see it. Everyone will know you're claimed."

Claimed. The word should bother me. Should trigger every feminist instinct I have about bodily autonomy and choice.

Instead it makes the mate bond sing with satisfaction.

"No more running," he whispers, pulling me tighter against him. "You're mine now. Forever. And I'm never letting you go."

I should argue. Should point out that I'm still processing, still adjusting, still terrified of what this means for my carefully constructed independence.

But the mate bond hums between us—ancient, absolute, undeniable. Showing me what I've been running from since I was nineteen years old.

Home. Safety. The other half of my soul.

"Forever," I whisper back, and feel the bond settle into place like the

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End *of* *The* **Chapter**

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Comments

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Gifts

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