

## CH 9 - Amber

AMBER POV

Mrs. Henderson's patient smile burned into me as I nodded mechanically, pretending to reread the poem. The words danced on the page, mocking me as snickers rippled through the room. Aaron's laugh, low and smug, cut through the noise like a blade. I didn't dare look at him, but I could feel his gaze boring into me.

Why did this always happen? I wasn't stupid; I actually liked English class. But today, my brain had decided to take a vacation.

The bell nally rang, releasing me from my humiliation. I bolted from the classroom, keeping my head down to avoid Aaron's inevitable smirk.

In the hallway, Vic was waiting for me, leaning casually against my locker with her arms crossed.

"What took you so long?" she asked, falling into step beside me as I stuffed my books into my bag.

"Don't ask," I muttered.

Her eyebrow arched. "That bad, huh?"

"Mrs. Henderson asked me a question, I blanked, everyone laughed. The usual."

Vic rolled her eyes. "People suck. Especially Aaron. Did he say something?"

"Just laughed," I replied, slamming my locker shut.

"Ugh, what a jerk," Vic said, shaking her head. Then her expression brightened. "But hey, it's lunchtime. Let's go eat and forget about those idiots."

We made our way toward the cafeteria, the noise level rising as we approached. I scanned the hallway, my eyes darting to the faces in the crowd.

There was still no sign of Christian.

"Looking for someone?" Vic teased, catching my not-so-subtle glances.

"No," I said quickly, a little too quickly.

Her grin widened. "You totally are. Christian?"

"I'm just... I don't know. It's weird, I haven't seen him all day," I admitted, trying to sound casual. "And he hasn't texted me since yesterday morning."

Vic snorted. "Girl, you've got it bad."

"I do not," I retorted, my cheeks heating.

"You do. You're practically ready to storm the inrmary to check if he sprained his nger or something."

I frowned. "What if he did get hurt at practice? It's not that crazy to check on him."

Vic rolled her eyes. "Fine. After classes, we'll swing by the football eld. That way, you can stop acting like a worried mom and move on with your life."

"Guess so," I muttered.

"Now, come on." She grabbed my arm and dragged me toward the cafeteria.

The line for lunch was as endless as always, but Vic kept me distracted with her usual stream of gossip. By the time we nally got our trays, my mood had lifted a little.

Malcolm, Vic's prom date, had saved seats for us near the edge of the room—not too central, not too hidden. He waved us over, already seated with two of his friends, Wyatt and Ace.

Wyatt and Ace were decent guys. Unlike most of the jocks crowd, they didn't seem to nd joy in tormenting me. Maybe it was the future warrior thing—they were probably hardwired to protect people instead of tearing them down.

We settled into our seats, and I let myself relax. Wyatt, seated across from me, ashed a grin. I smiled back. Maybe I was nally mingling with guys our age. Finally!

Wyatt's grin widened as his eyes trailed down to my jeans, lingering a moment too long and making my skin prickle. "Damn, Amber. I didn't know you had a backside like that," he said, leaning back in his chair with a low chuckle. "Those jeans do all the work, huh?"

I froze, the fork halfway to my mouth, my cheeks heating to an infernal degree. Did he just —? Oh no, he didn't.

No way.

"Uh..." I stammered, dropping my gaze to my tray as if it held all the answers to life's humiliations. "So, um, are you ready for the warriors' trials next month?"

Smooth. Great save, Amber.

But Wyatt wasn't about to let me off the hook. "Yeah, I'm ready," he replied, his tone casual, though his eyes danced with mischief. "But you know, if I'd noticed that sooner, I might've asked you to prom instead of letting Christian scoop you up."

I blinked, my mouth falling open as the words registered. Was he... serious? My face burned hotter, and I struggled to respond.

"I, uh..."

Before I could nish, Wyatt's gaze shifted past me, and his face went pale, the color draining like water down a sink.

I turned instinctively, and my stomach plummeted.

Three sets of burning green eyes locked onto me. Alan, Alek, and Aaron stood a few feet away, their expressions a volatile mix of anger and something I couldn't quite place. Their presence sucked the air out of the cafeteria, and I felt like a mouse cornered by three wolves.

Perfect. Just perfect.

I braced myself, waiting for the inevitable snide comment. The kind they lived for. But it didn't come. They just stood there, stiff and furious, staring at me like I'd committed some mortal sin.

What the hell was their problem now? My very existence seemed to offend them. Maybe that was enough. Who knows?

"Baby!" Rose's obnoxiously high-pitched voice shattered the charged silence. She appeared behind Alan, practically draping herself over his arm. Her perfectly painted red lips twisted into a sugary-sweet smirk as her ery eyes landed on me.

"I saved you a seat," she purred, tugging on Alan's hand. He stood rm, ignoring her completely.

Annoyed, Rose's gaze snapped back to me, her smirk turning nasty. "Let the trash try to w\*\*\*e herself out," she sneered. "She doesn't have much choice if she wants a mate. Better start practicing now!"

Bitch.

I gripped the edge of the table so hard my knuckles turned white. Fury bubbled under my skin, but I shoved it down. Two days. Two more days, and I'd have my wolf. Then we'd see how bold Rose was with her insults.

Who was she to talk, anyway? Rose had been with half the pack before she even turned seventeen. Now she was parading around like a saint, hoping to become Alan's chosen mate.

Breathe in and breathe out.

"You know, Rose, your lines are getting old." Did I just say that? Goddess, why???

Rose's face twisted with rage. Oh, she was going to make me pay. Slowly and painfully, for sure.

Practically, I'm dead. They'll write on my grave: "Too mouthy for her own good" or something similar.

"Yes, brother," Aaron chimed in, his tone sharp as he clapped Wyatt on the back. "Let the nerd have her fun. See you at practice later, dude."

The three of them turned away, and Rose sent one last nasty look my way. I knew she was going to strike. I just didn't know when.

Damn me.

Wyatt swallowed hard, nodding slightly but avoiding their eyes. Rose tugged at Alan's arm again, and this time, he followed, Alek and Aaron close behind.

Rose's shrill voice carried as they walked away. "Violet and Daisy are bringing lunch for all of us. Isn't that sweet, babe?"

I let out a shaky breath, my hands still trembling.

Malcolm muttered under his breath, "Practice is gonna be savage this afternoon."

"Guess so," Ace added, looking paler than usual.

Wyatt didn't say a word. He just stood abruptly and muttered some excuse before hurrying out of the cafeteria.