

Chapter 6

Audriana POV:

When the check arrived, presented by the manager himself on a small, silver tray, I didn't hesitate. I reached out and placed my debit card on top of it before Caden could move.

"Since we're celebrating our new partnership," I said, my voice even and cool, "allow me."

It was a foolish gesture. The balance in that account was a pittance compared to what this meal must have cost. It would likely wipe me out. But it was a point of pride. I would not be the charity case, the destitute mate he had picked up in a hallway. I was his partner. And partners paid their own way.

The manager, David, froze for a fraction of a second. His eyes darted to Caden, a silent question in his gaze.

Caden gave a subtle, almost imperceptible nod. He leaned back in his seat, a silent observer to my small act of defiance, allowing me the dignity of the gesture. His acquiescence was, in its own way, more unnerving than an argument would have been.

Relieved, I murmured, "Excuse me for a moment," and slid out of the booth, heading for the ladies' room. I needed a second to splash cold water on my face, to stare at my own reflection and convince myself the woman looking back wasn't about to shatter into a million pieces.

The restroom was an opulent cavern of marble and gold. I stood at the sink, my hands gripping the cool edge of the counter, and took a deep breath. The reflection that stared back was pale and strained, her eyes shadowed with a pain so deep it felt ancient.

As I pushed open the heavy door to leave, the sound of hushed, excited whispers drifted from a seating area down the hall. A group of young, expensively dressed she-wolves were huddled over a phone.

"Can you believe it? So soon!" one of them squealed.

"Marcus Black just posted it himself. It's official!" said another. "Hailee Crosby! She's going to be the new Luna."

My blood turned to ice. I stopped in the shadows, my hand still on the door. My own phone felt heavy in my clutch. With numb fingers, I pulled it out and opened the pack's internal social network.

There it was. A joint statement from Marcus Black, Gabe's father, and my own grandfather. It was a flowery, nauseating piece of propaganda. It praised Hailee's "gentle spirit" and "unwavering

devotion to the pack." It spoke of a "natural, undeniable bond" between her and Gabe. It formally announced their intention to hold a binding ceremony at the next full moon.

And me? I wasn't mentioned. Not once. It was as if Audriana Sullivan had simply ceased to exist. I was an inconvenient memory, erased from the official record.

A wave of something cold and final washed over me. It wasn't sadness. It wasn't anger. It was a profound, chilling indifference. The last vestiges of loyalty, of affection, of belonging to the Blackwater Pack, withered and died in that moment. They had not just rejected me; they had unpersoned me.

I put my phone away. I straightened my dress. I lifted my chin. And I walked back to the booth with a spine made of steel.

When I returned, the server was just placing my debit card and the receipt back on the silver tray. He bowed his head respectfully.

"Everything is taken care of, Ms. Sullivan."

I slipped the card into my clutch without looking at the damage. "Thank you." I glanced at my watch. "It's getting late. I have an early start and some urgent files to review at the office."

It was a lie. I had nowhere to be but alone with my own thoughts, but I couldn't stay here, in this bubble of luxury, a moment longer.

Caden rose smoothly to his feet, grabbing his suit jacket from the back of the chair. He draped it over his arm with an easy grace.

"Of course," he said. "Ian will see you to your office."

He didn't offer to take me himself. He didn't press. He understood my need for distance, for the illusion of control. I was grateful for his tact.

"Thank you for dinner," I said, the words formal and stiff.

He simply nodded, his eyes holding mine for a long moment before I turned and walked away, following the silent waiter who led me to a different car, a discreet black sedan waiting to whisk me into the lonely New York night.

Caden POV:

I stood at the floor-to-ceiling window, watching the taillights of the sedan carrying Audriana disappear into the glittering tapestry of the city. She walked with her back straight, a queen in exile, wrapped in a brittle pride that was both admirable and infuriatingly vulnerable.

The door to the private dining room opened. David Price entered, his head bowed, holding a data slip as if it were a holy relic.

"Sir," he began, his voice trembling slightly. "As you instructed, the lady's card was not charged. The meal has been placed on your private account."

"Mm," I grunted, not turning from the window.

"And sir... the balance on her card... it would not have covered the cost of the wine."

My hand clenched into a fist at my side. So, her family had been swift. They had left her with nothing but pocket money, expecting her to come crawling back. They underestimated her. And they had no idea who they had just insulted.

I turned from the window, my face a mask of cold fury. I pulled out my phone and dialed Ian.

"She's on her way to the Sinclair Global building," I said, my voice low and dangerous. "Ensure she has unrestricted access. And have a temporary office prepared for her on the thirty-fifth floor. Move her files, her team-whatever she needs. I want her operational by morning. Then, I want a full workup on the Sullivan family's financials. Every holding, every debt, every partner. I want to know where every single dollar is hidden."

"Yes, sir," Ian's voice was calm, unflappable.

"And Ian," I continued, "arrange for a Centurion card. Unlimited. Tie it to my primary account."

"Under whose name, sir?"

"Hers, of course," I snapped. "But I don't want her to know it's from me. She has too much pride. Have The Onyx Room send it to her office tomorrow morning. Tell her she was the millionth customer. A prize. Something ridiculous. I don't care. Just get it done."

"It will be done, sir."

I hung up, the phone groaning in my grip. I could still feel the ghost of her on my skin, the scent of her fear and defiance. The mate bond, a thing I had long considered a political inconvenience, was now a roaring fire in my gut. It was a primal, possessive thing, and it demanded I protect what was mine.

They had made her feel cold. They had tried to leave her out in it.

I would make them pay. I would burn their entire world to the ground just to keep her warm.

I grabbed my jacket and strode out of the room, the air around me dropping several degrees. The hunt had begun.