

## Chapter 2: Birthday Party and Hidden Truths

### Chapter 2: Birthday Party and Hidden Truths

(Olivia's POV)

Ethan instinctively brushed off Cassandra's hand from around his arm, causing her expression to freeze. The gesture was quick, almost panicked.

"I'm also a friend of Sophie's. Is it strange that I'm here for her birthday party?" I smiled faintly at him, keeping my voice light despite the storm brewing inside me.

"No, I just thought you didn't like these kinds of gatherings, so I didn't tell you in advance," Ethan replied, his voice strained.

A wave of disdain washed over me. Did he really not tell me because of my supposed preferences, or was he hiding the fact he planned to bring someone else? The answer was painfully obvious.

Ethan's cold blue gaze swept the room as if silently demanding, "Who invited her here?"

I noticed Sophie avoiding his eyes with guilt, pretending it had nothing to do with her. So much for friendship.

The woman beside Ethan stepped forward with a bright smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Hello, you must be Olivia Winters. I'm Cassandra Evans. You've probably heard Ethan mention me, right?"

So, this was Ethan's rst love, the one who had left him heartbroken. Despite the suffocating pain in my chest—three years of genuine affection not easily erased—I masked my feelings well, lips curved in a polite greeting.

"Miss Evans, I've heard so much about you." The lie slipped easily from my lips. In truth, Ethan had barely mentioned her.

Cassandra smiled sweetly yet provocatively. "Has anyone told you we actually look alike?"

At those words, Ethan's face darkened instantly. The resemblance between us was his dirty little secret, the reason he'd approached me in the rst place. Now it was being laid bare for everyone to see.

I glanced mockingly at him, then smiled with innocent amber eyes at Cassandra. "Oh? Really? I don't think so—I'm prettier."

The room fell silent. Several people gasped softly. Wasn't I always the gentle, obedient type? The one who never talked back? The perfect, accommodating girlfriend? My wolf, Cora, purred with satisfaction at my newfound backbone.

Sophie hurried over, her face a mask of forced cheerfulness. "Let's not stand around! Come in, have some drinks!"

Cassandra forced a smile, suppressing her annoyance, and handed over her gift. "Happy birthday, Soph."

When Sophie unwrapped it, her eyes widened. "Wow, this is the pendant I've wanted for so long. Thank you, Cassandra."

Then she opened my gift bag, and her expression shifted to confusion. "Wow! Liv, you got me the same necklace!"

I watched as she held up two identical platinum wolf pendants, both gleaming under the party lights. What were the odds?

Suddenly, Victoria Reed, a woman in Sophie's circle who had always looked down on me, sneered loudly. "Must be fake. That platinum pendant costs more than ve thousand dollars. Olivia's just a little lawyer—how could she afford something like that?"

The room fell silent, judgmental eyes converging on me. Even Ethan's expression soured.

"If you're short on money, you could have told me. I could have helped with the gift...why would you—" He stopped himself, but the implication was clear to everyone.

Why would you give a fake? Though he couldn't nish the sentence, his meaning was unmistakable.

I met his gaze coldly. "Do you also think mine is fake, Ethan?"

He said nothing, tacitly admitting it. Three years together, and he still thought so little of me.

Sophie tried to smooth things over, her voice articially bright. "Of course it's not fake! We're good friends; she wouldn't do that. Don't be so harsh."

But from her eyes, I glimpsed disdain and suspicion. My heart chilled further. I had bought the expensive pendant to thank Sophie for past kindness—after all, when I'd arrived alone in Harbor City three years ago, cut off by my family for refusing the arranged marriage with Connor Rivers, Sophie had stood up for me when others ostracized me as an outsider without wealth or connections.

I once naively believed Sophie was truly different. How ridiculous.

Now that my father had restored my access to the family funds after my reluctant agreement to the family engagement with Connor, ve thousand dollars meant nothing to me. Yet no one believed my sincerity.

Ethan reached out to take the gift. "Give me the necklace. I'll buy a new birthday present for Soph to make up for this. Liv was just being thoughtless."

Sophie hesitated, caught between giving Ethan face and acknowledging the necklace as fake, which would embarrass me—and thus Ethan himself.

I folded my arms coolly. "Since he wants it, just give it to him."

Sophie reluctantly handed it over, avoiding my eyes.

Cassandra suddenly interjected, her voice dripping with false sympathy. "Don't blame Olivia. She meant well."

Ethan remained silent, face dark as the night sky. The tension in the room was suffocating.

Someone suggested playing drinking games to break the awkwardness. Cassandra joined in with a bright laugh, clearly eager to be the center of attention.

I, uninterested in their games, moved to a corner sofa and focused on my phone. After a pause, Ethan followed and sat beside me.

Without looking up, I continued playing on my phone as Ethan reprimanded me quietly.

"If you were short on money, you could have bought something cheaper instead of giving a fake. You know you embarrassed me in front of everyone, right?"

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, then xed him with a sharp amber stare. "How did I embarrass you? The receipt is in the bag. Want me to take you to the boutique to verify it?"

Startled, Ethan rummaged through the gift bag, nding the ocial invoice from Lunar Jewelers of Harbor City. His eyes widened as he realized the pendant was genuine.

His tone softened immediately. "Why didn't you just say you had the receipt?"

"Didn't feel like it," I replied coldly, returning to my game.

After a moment, he muttered an apology. "Sorry, I misunderstood you earlier."

I ignored him completely, focusing intently on my phone screen. Ethan fell silent, but from the corner of my eye, I could see his gaze drifting unconsciously to the crowd—more precisely, to Cassandra.

When I nished my game and looked up, I caught him staring at Cassandra, who was being coaxed into drinking wine by Sophie and Victoria. His eyes followed her every movement, lled with concern and something deeper.

Ethan initially restrained himself, but when Cassandra reached her fourth glass, he abruptly stood and strode over, snatching the wine from her hand.

"Your stomach's sensitive to alcohol. Are you trying to make yourself sick?" His voice was sharp with worry.

Everyone fell silent at his sudden outburst. Cassandra's cheeks ushed with anger and shyness. "Why do you care?"

"You're not drinking anymore," he said coldly, glaring at the others. "Try forcing her again and see what happens."

The crowd avoided his eyes, intimidated by Ethan's authority. No one dared challenge the Grey pack's future Alpha.

I watched this display with a mocking smile. Three years together, and he had never once shown such concern for my wellbeing. Yet here he was, publicly fussing over Cassandra after just days of her return.

As Cassandra tried to snatch back her glass, Ethan held it high out of reach. She lost her balance and stumbled into his arms. He instinctively steadied her with his other hand.

"Careful. After all these years, you still haven't improved your balance." His voice was soft, intimate, lled with shared history.

Cassandra, cheeks rosy, gazed up at him and pouted. "Ethan, you're really annoying."

Laughter and teasing erupted around them. The chemistry between them was undeniable, their connection obvious to everyone in the room.

Just as Ethan was about to respond, he unexpectedly met my icy, piercing gaze.