

# From Substitute To Queen

## Chapter 3: Why Are You Here?

I stared at the message, my pulse quickening. How had he found out so quickly? Dad must have contacted him immediately after our call.

Caelan was nine years older than me, and I'd known him since childhood. Back then, he was just the future king who visited our pack regularly. He'd always been protective, treating me like a precious little sister who needed constant watching over. I'd never been able to see him as anything more than that gentle, overbearing big brother figure – which had been part of why I'd run from the arranged marriage in the first place.

I typed back quickly: *"Caelan, don't come here. Let me handle things myself first."*

His response was immediate: *"You've had three years to 'handle things.' Time's up."*

As the Lycan King ruling over thirteen major pack territories, he was used to his orders being followed without question. At thirty-four, he'd held the crown for four years, and every Alpha in the region answered to him.

Most people were terrified of him, but I'd never been afraid. Caelan had always been indulgent with me, giving in to my unreasonable demands since we were children.

While everyone else addressed him as "Your Majesty," I'd never used the formal title. Dad had scolded me for it once, but Caelan just ruffled my hair and said I could call him by his name.

*"I'll come back on my own. I promise. Just give me a few days."*

A longer pause this time, then: *"Alright. If you need help, just say it. Goodnight, Sabi."*

That night, Darrell didn't come home. I lay awake staring at the ceiling, my wolf Esme restless beneath my skin. She'd never liked how Darrell treated us, always pushing me to be stronger, more assertive. Now she seemed pleased that we were finally leaving this mockery of a relationship behind.

The shrill ring of my phone dragged me from sleep. I fumbled for it on the nightstand, squinting at the caller ID. Emily Torres.

"Hello?" My voice came out hoarse.

"Sable! Thank god you picked up." Emily's voice carried a note of sadness I'd never heard before. "I'm having a farewell party tonight. I'm moving to Silver Creek tomorrow to start a new life with my mate."

I sat up straighter. "What? You're leaving?"

"Yeah, this is my last night with the pack." She paused. "Look, I know we don't hang out much, but you've always been kind to me. You never looked down on me for being just a regular pack member. Would you... would you come tonight? To send me off?"

The request caught me off guard. Emily was right – we'd never been close friends, but she'd never joined in when other pack members mocked my "orphan" status or whispered about how I didn't belong.

"Of course I'll come."

"Really? Thank you, Sable. It means more than you know."

After hanging up, I dragged myself to the bathroom. The house felt eerily quiet – Darrell's side of the bed was still empty, untouched since yesterday. He'd spent the night with Camila, probably making up for years of separation in the most intimate way possible.

I splashed cold water on my face, trying to wash away the mental images. *Stop torturing yourself.*

Tonight would be Emily's farewell party. I should get her a proper gift.

And for myself.

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I stood outside Cartier, my newly unfrozen bank card heavy in my wallet. Dad had reinstated my access to the Crawford pack funds the moment I'd called him.

For three years, I'd dressed like a mouse. Darrell's friends constantly made snide comments about how I "didn't look like Luna material." They weren't wrong – I'd been hiding, playing small, trying not to take up space.

*Fuck that.*

Inside the boutique, I selected a black cocktail dress that hugged every curve. The price tag made the saleswoman's eyes widen, but I didn't flinch.

"I'll also need shoes to match."

She led me to a locked display case. "These just arrived yesterday. Louboutin limited edition – only two pairs."

The shoes were stunning. Midnight blue with a subtle shimmer, they'd cost most people's annual salary.

"I'll take them."

As she wrapped my purchases, I wandered to the jewelry section. A delicate platinum bracelet caught my eye – perfect for Emily.

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The Hawthorne pack hall buzzed with conversation when I arrived. Crystal chandeliers cast warm light over the gathered wolves, all dressed in their finest. I'd beaten most of the crowd here.

Emily spotted me immediately and rushed over, her face lighting up.

"Sable! You look absolutely stunning." She pulled me into a tight hug.

I handed her the jewelry box. "A little something for your new adventure."

Her eyes filled with tears when she opened it. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

We chatted about her mate and new pack for a few minutes. The conversation felt easy, natural. For a moment, I almost forgot about the mess waiting for me at home.

Then the room fell silent.

I turned toward the entrance and felt my heart stop. Darrell stood in the doorway, his arm casually draped around a woman I recognized instantly.

Camila Ross.

She was beautiful in that effortless way some women possessed. Golden hair fell in perfect waves over her shoulders, and her emerald eyes sparkled as she whispered something in Darrell's ear. Her deep blue dress showcased her generous cleavage, and she moved with the confidence of someone who'd never doubted her place in the world.

But what made my blood freeze wasn't her beauty.

It was the shoes.

Identical blue Louboutin heels. The same limited edition pair I was wearing.

Darrell's eyes found mine across the room. His face went ashen, then flushed red. He jerked his arm away from Camila so quickly she stumbled.

"Sable." His voice cracked slightly. "What are you doing here? Who invited you?"

The panic in his tone was unmistakable. Around us, conversations resumed in hushed whispers.

I forced a bright smile. "It's Emily's farewell party and she's my friend – why wouldn't I come to support a friend?"

"You should have told me you were coming." His eyes darted between me and Camila. "I thought you didn't like these kinds of events."

*Translation: You weren't supposed to be here while I parade my real girlfriend around.*

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